AU. Felicity Smoak has always wanted to make a difference in the world. Working as an analyst for a secret government agency like A.R.G.U.S. to defeat the world's deadliest criminals has given her life purpose. It's also the only way to uncover what really happened to her long lost love, Oliver Queen. When a risky mission puts Felicity in the field, she makes the ultimate discovery that will reveal the truth of her painful past and alter the course of her life forever.

Notes

Hey guys, so I'm super excited to be posting my new story! A special thank you to my friend Ashly these last few months for listening to all of my intense plotting and demanding more chapters from me. I hope you guys will enjoy this fic, as well. Here is the first chapter. Please read and tell me what you think!
The silence was the worst part. It was empty, awkward and, most of all, it was neither a yes nor a no. Felicity Smoak shifted in place as she awaited an answer. It had taken her months to build up the nerve to approach the director about working in the field. It had taken even longer (three years) to be seen as more than just a young, quirky, genius cyber-intelligence analyst.

Of course, Felicity was young, quirky, and a genius. She'd graduated from MIT at the age of nineteen with her master's degree in Cyber Security and Computer Science. As one of the top students in her class, she'd immediately been recruited by the government after graduation—A.R.G.U.S. (Advanced Research Group United Support) to be exact. A.R.G.U.S. was a secret agency formed to deal with major threats to national security. Terror threats, organized crime, and cyber espionage were just a few of the issues they dealt with on a daily basis.

Felicity couldn't accept her position at A.R.G.U.S. fast enough. She'd always wanted to do something big and meaningful with her life. Using her advanced intellect and tech skills to help protect her country and save innocent lives seemed like the perfect job. The opportunity to work with the best technology in the world was also another perk that her inner computer geek couldn't ignore.

The first couple of years had been amazing. Felicity had been placed with a great team of people, all with a unique set of skills. They'd become more like family than friends. It was sort of inevitable with the long hours, constant traveling, and secrecy that came with the job. There were also the high-
stakes, life-and-death situations they were constantly faced with. Knowing that they had each other's backs no matter what was the root of their success and what led them to become the most elite team in A.R.G.U.S. Felicity was proud of the work she'd accomplished with the team and, for a while, sitting behind a computer screen was all she ever wanted. It was where she felt safest. The most in control. The most useful.

Sometime within the last year, however, Felicity had begun to feel restless. With every mission, that nagging feeling in the pit of her stomach increased. Suddenly, it wasn't enough to just sit behind a desk and view the world through a computer screen. She wanted to leave A.R.G.U.S. headquarters or whatever base they were stationed in that month and go out and experience life. She wanted to be in the action instead of always on the sidelines looking up locations and digitally defacing criminals. Felicity knew that her physical ability could use some work, but she'd been training hard these last five months to make up for it. She just hoped it would be enough.

Felicity rolled her shoulders back and tried to stand tall as Amanda Waller, the director of A.R.G.U.S., scrutinized her. She was attractive with her sharp cheekbones, full lips, and flawless bronze skin. It was the last thing anyone would notice, though, when she exhibited her usual cold, calculating stare. It could send chills up even the most experienced agent's spine, and it's why most within their organization jumped to fall in line when she barked out an order. Waller was only in her thirties, and yet she'd risen quickly to a position of esteem and power. Felicity figured it was because she was known for getting results—most often by any means necessary. She also had no objections to cutting loose agents she deemed "too weak" in her eyes.

Waller didn't like Felicity, of that the blonde was certain. The director was all about control and discipline. She wore the same dark skirt and blazer with her hair pulled back in a bun every day. She only spoke when necessary and often in sharp, clipped sentences. Whatever she was feeling, it was often concealed by the stern expression on her face. If so much as a pencil was out of line on her desk, she would have to straighten it.

Felicity was the polar opposite. She was a big proponent of organized chaos. She always had a plan but also allowed herself room to change course or do what she felt was right at the time. Although Felicity usually wore her black-rimmed glasses and had her long blond hair pulled back in a conservative ponytail, she loved to dress up in bright colors and lipstick—pink especially. When she spoke, Felicity's mouth always moved too fast—though not fast enough for her mind—and the words just spilled out of her. Felicity tended to wear her heart on her sleeve and said too much when she got caught in her typical babble. Her workstation also had a tendency to be messy, since she was constantly rifling through files, tinkering with new tech, and looking for a pen.

It was surprising that Waller had even sought her out for recruitment considering that the woman seemed to just barely tolerate her. Even so, Felicity would never get her chance to do field work if she didn't at least ask. As the silence stretched on, Felicity looked over at her team leader and friend, Agent Lyla Michaels. Lyla wasn't much older than Waller. She had a natural beauty with her fair complexion, short brown hair, and pretty face.

Despite her often kind eyes, Lyla was not to be underestimated. She could be downright lethal when she needed to be. Lyla had served multiple tours in Afghanistan as part of the Special Forces division of the army. In addition to her skills in combat and battle strategy, Lyla was an expert marksman. She'd led the majority of their missions over the years and was never too high-ranking not to hear other people's ideas. She was tough but approachable, which Felicity had always appreciated. The same could not be said for Waller.

"Sir," Lyla said, using Waller's preferred moniker, after a couple more silent minutes.
"You are an analyst, Ms. Smoak," Waller finally stated. "You are not an agent. Therefore, there is no reason to put you in the field. Your skills can be put to better use elsewhere. Cyber security, intelligence, applied sciences...that is where you belong."

Felicity internally deflated. It was a long shot that Waller would say yes, but it was still disappointing all the same.

"Sir, if I may, we need Felicity on this mission," Lyla spoke up. "The group we'll be infiltrating is dangerous. And yes, it would normally make more sense to send a fully trained agent in. However, these criminals are also highly intelligent and I believe they will be able to sniff out one of our guys pretty quickly."

"I thought you would have more confidence in your team."

"I am confident in them," Lyla declared, "but we need someone who isn't as polished. Someone who appears genuinely innocent but knows enough to get the job done and protect herself. Plus, Felicity is the only one who can accurately count cards."

"You'd be willing to take responsibility for her performance?" Waller challenged.

"I've been training her myself these last several months. I have full confidence in her abilities," Lyla replied. "She is part of my team, and I always take responsibility for our performance—which you know has yet to be matched by anyone else in this agency. This instance is no different."

Lyla's faith in her touched Felicity—although she knew better than to start smiling like a sappy idiot in front of Waller. Felicity's face remained stoic, confident. She could do this.

After scrutinizing her further, Waller finally said, "All right. You get one chance, Ms. Smoak. Don't make me regret my decision."

"Thank you, Sir," Felicity replied, just barely able to keep the excitement out of her voice.

"Your team leaves for Moscow in first thing in the morning."

"Yes, Sir," Lyla acknowledged before they were dismissed.

"Thank you, Lyla, for what you said in there," Felicity said after they'd left Waller's office.

"You've been working hard, Felicity. And I'm a firm believer that everyone deserves to be given a chance," the brunette replied, touching her shoulder and smiling. "Now go home and get some rest before we leave at that God-awful hour."

Felicity laughed and nodded. "Will do." The women parted ways, and Felicity walked back to her desk. The others were already there waiting for her. Mei, Barry, Caitlin, and Curtis hovered around her desk trying to seem nonchalant but failing miserably. You'd never know they were some of the best agents in A.R.G.U.S.

"So, what'd Waller say?" Curtis was the first to ask. His six-foot-four frame—which most people would find intimidating—towered over her. Having worked closely with him the last couple of years, Felicity knew that Curtis was a gentle soul in a giant's body. He also happened to be a total nerd like her. It was why they worked so well together.

Felicity shushed him to keep his voice down, and he muttered a "sorry." Curtis worked in the Design Innovation division of the agency. He was assigned to their group to develop tech that would help them on missions. Similar to Felicity, Curtis rarely went in the field. He preferred to stay in the lab.
His engineering skills complemented Felicity's technical skills well, and he'd been dubbed "Mr. Terrific" by the team. It was Curtis's favorite word to use when he got excited about a new gadget.

"But seriously, what happened?" Caitlin quietly pressed. She swiped her long brown hair out of her face and looked eagerly at Felicity. Caitlin Snow was one of the sweetest people Felicity had ever met. She was also brilliant, which sometimes people mistook for coldness. Caitlin had a structured way of approaching things and tended to keep her emotions hidden. Before moving to Starling City —where A.R.G.U.S. headquarters was located—and becoming an agent, Caitlin was a doctor and bio-engineer at S.T.A.R. Labs in Central City. Now she worked in the field alongside the others, most often providing medical assistance when things got rough.

"Waller's going to let me do it," Felicity revealed. They all silently cheered.

Barry gave her a pat on the back. "That's awesome. We should do drinks and a karaoke night to celebrate your first mission—well, first field mission," he amended. His youthful smile and positive attitude could always be counted on to light up a room. He was also tall but was much thinner and more wiry than Curtis. Barry Allen hailed from Central City, as well. He'd been a crime scene investigator, specializing in criminal forensics, with the Central City Police Department. Now he put those skills to good use when investigating federal crime scenes.

"Drinks will have to wait, unfortunately, since we're leaving early in the morning," Mei cut in. She held up her phone to show them the message from Lyla. Mei Yao was primarily a field agent like Lyla. Her father had been a general in the People's Liberation Army of China, and so she'd learned to fight at a young age. Her long black hair accentuated her fair, delicate features, which most of their enemies underestimated. Mei's knowledge and skill in martial arts was unparalleled, and she'd disarmed countless men who never saw it coming. Originally, Mei had come to the U.S. to go to school. She was studying pre-law before she decided to join A.R.G.U.S. That background and her continued interest in the law, both domestic and international, came in handy when the team went on missions and had brushes with local authorities.

"I hope I can actually sleep tonight," Felicity muttered. "I know I should be nervous since it's my first field mission and all, but I'm not. I'm actually really excited. I still can't believe she said yes!"

"You better get some rest. You'll need it," Caitlin advised.

"I know, I know. I'll try." Felicity, at twenty two, was the youngest of the group. They all treated her like an equal, but that also didn't stop them from looking out for her. Felicity liked to think of them as the siblings she never had—at least when she was young. Her stepbrother had made up for that desire several years ago.

"Well, I better head out. The hubby starts to get worried when I am home too late," Curtis declared. "I doubt he's going to like that I'll be leaving so soon on top of that."

"Night," Felicity called after him. Caitlin and Barry followed. It didn't escape Felicity how closely they were standing next to each other as they walked. The two would never admit it, but there was something developing between them over these last few months. Waller's wrath was probably why they'd never act on it.

Mei hung back and pointed to a file on Felicity's desk. "That's all I was able to dig up. It's not much," she added before Felicity could get her hopes up.

"Anything you're able to find helps. You know that," the blonde replied.

"Are you sure you want to keep looking?"
Felicity challenged, not unkindly, "Have you stopped your search?"

"No, but my situation is different. My family was taken from me," Mei pointed out. "Yours it...it was a tragedy, but it was an accident. Nature taking its course. It's most likely that—"

"I know," Felicity interjected, not wanting to hear the logic behind it. Logic she was already well aware of and yet still refused to believe. "But that doesn't mean I can stop."

Mei nodded in understanding. Almost everyone on their team had lost someone they loved. But it was only Felicity and Mei who didn't have the answers they needed—or the closure. It's why Felicity had eventually confided in her after keeping her intentions a secret for so long. "You do hate mysteries."

"They need to be solved," Felicity acknowledged.

"Well, I'll leave you to it then. See you in the morning, Felicity. Congratulations again."

Felicity smiled back. "Thanks, Mei. Night." The blonde stared at the file in her hands but left it unopened. This was neither the time nor the place to look at it. It would have to wait until she got home. Felicity stayed another half hour to make sure everything was set up on her end for tomorrow. She tried to make it as simple as possible for Curtis to take over while she was in the field.

Eventually, Felicity shut off the light at her desk and grabbed her coat. Caitlin was right that she'd need rest, but Felicity knew she wouldn't be able to go straight to bed. Not when she had a file with new information to read.

Felicity had barely gotten inside her apartment when her doorbell rang. She frowned, not expecting any visitors tonight. Checking the small peek hole, she smiled at the sight of her best friend and opened the door.

"Sara, hey," Felicity greeted and let her in.

"Sorry to stop by so late. I tried texting you, but you never answered. My patrol wasn't too far from here, so I thought I'd make a quick visit." Sara was dressed in her Starling City Police uniform, and her cruiser was most likely parked outside. No doubt Felicity's neighbors were wondering if something was wrong and already had started gossiping.

"Oh, sorry," Felicity apologized and checked her phone. Sure enough, she had missed messages. "Work was crazy tonight, and I had to stay late. Would you like some tea?"

"That'd be great."

Felicity's eyes momentarily went to her purse. The file was practically burning a hole through it from the inside. But that would have to wait. She walked into the kitchen to get the tea started. "So, what's up?"

"I should be asking you," Sara replied. When Felicity stared at her blankly, she elaborated, "How did your date go the other night?"

"Oh, that," Felicity muttered and turned around to place the tea kettle on the stove.

"Don't tell me you didn't like this one either." Her best friend was already getting that tone of disbelief in her voice. "He was totally cute, and he had, like, the best job ever. I thought you tech junkies would for sure hit it off."
Felicity shuffled around the kitchen. "Just because we're both computer whizzes doesn't mean we're a match made in heaven. The guy was a complete narcissist. All he kept talking about was his job and all of his accomplishments. He barely let me speak and only asked me questions that could lead back to him talking for another ten minutes straight."

Sara sighed and folded her arms. "Okay. Fair enough, I guess. The next time—"

"Oh no," Felicity interjected. "There will be no next time. Not for a while."

"Felicity."

"Sara," she said while grabbing them mugs. "I appreciate your help in trying to revive my dating life, but I just can't deal with it right now." Felicity put the teabags in their mugs as she waited for the kettle to finally start whistling.

Sara was quiet for a moment before gently saying, "You've been saying that for five years, Felicity. I'm worried about you."

As annoying as Felicity found Sara's meddling in her love life, she knew that it came from a place of love. "Don't be. If I was curled up in a ball doing nothing with my life, then you could be worried. I've got great friends, family, and a job I love. I've been going on dates—maybe not as often as you and my mother would like—but I'm doing fine."

"Felicity, it's not the number of dates that concerns me. It's the fact that you haven't moved forward with any of them. Oliver wouldn't have wanted—"

"Don't, Sara," Felicity sharply interrupted her. "Just don't." It took a moment for the pain to pass. A pain that had lessened over the years but never fully disappeared. Felicity continued more calmly, "If I was truly interested in these men, I would move forward. But I can't fake it if I'm not feeling it, and I don't want to. It's not who I am." She poured the steaming water into their mugs and joined Sara at the table.

Sara placed her hand over Felicity's and gave it a squeeze. "I just want you to be happy."

"Most days, I am," Felicity answered honestly and meant it. There were a lot of things in her life she was grateful for. When the pain and loss did threaten to consume her, like a moment ago, she would think of them to gain strength. "What about you?"

Sara looked away. "That's different."

"Not really," Felicity said gently. "What happened, it's still—"

"I'm handling it."

"So basically you're going against orders and still digging," she surmised. "If you get caught—"

"That's my business."

"So you can worry about me, but I can't worry about you. That doesn't seem fair." Felicity leveled her with a look.

Sara sighed in acceptance. "Okay, I get it. You made your point."

"Just be careful," Felicity warned. She knew full well that there was nothing she could say to Sara to dissuade her from her vendetta. "Please."
"I will," she promised just as a call sounded on her radio. She was needed for a meeting at the precinct.

"Duty calls," Sara declared and stood up. She started tying her blond hair back in a ponytail. "I better go before the captain has my ass."

"Your father loves you," Felicity reminded her.

"Oh, he's great as a father. As a boss, he's one tough bastard. But then again, I appreciate him not going easy on me just because I'm his daughter."

Felicity walked her to the door. "Well, there you go. Now you're looking on the bright side."

"By the way, call your brother. Tommy's been trying to reach you, too. He's going to pick us up tomorrow night in the limo."

"Oh, shoot. I forgot that it's the grand opening of Verdant," she muttered. That was the name of the nightclub he'd worked to build over the last year. "I can't go. I'm leaving early tomorrow morning for a business trip."

"Ugh, seriously? You know Tommy is going to be disappointed if you're not there. Can't you get out of it?"

"No. My boss is counting on me."

"Where are you going?"

"London. There is an international tech conference I need to attend." Felicity hated lying, especially to her best friend, but it was a necessary part of her job. She couldn't tell Sara where she was really going or what she would be doing there. All of her loved ones thought she worked for a high-profile tech company. It was for their safety as much as it was for Felicity's.

"Sounds boring."

"Not for a computer geek like me."

"Well, the fact that it's in London is cool. You should do a pub crawl while you're there," Sara joked as she stepped out on the front stoop. "You'll probably meet a hunky Brit."

Felicity placed her hand on her hip. The other was on the door. "I thought you were done matchmaking?"

"Overseas doesn't count. At the very least you owe yourself a weekend to meet a hot guy with an accent and engage in some crazy, no-strings-attached sex. I mean, it has been a while and—"

"Goodnight, Sara," Felicity exclaimed and slammed the door. They were so not having that conversation. She could hear her friend laughing on the other side before she left.

Shaking her head, Felicity smiled to herself. Sara had always been the wild one of the two of them. Instead of it being an issue, their differences actually provided a nice complement to their friendship. After putting away their mugs and tidying the kitchen, Felicity went to her bag to retrieve the file Mei had given her. She read it over and felt her heart sink. Despite Mei's warning that it wasn't much, Felicity had still been hoping that what appeared like useless facts to Mei would mean something more to her. It was, instead, yet another dead end.
Sighing, Felicity stood and walked into her bedroom. She pushed aside the clothes in her closet to reveal the safe in the back. Felicity punched in the code and added the file to the rest of the secret pile stored inside. Before closing it, she grabbed her gun. She'd gotten it around the time Lyla started training her. Felicity had never liked guns but learning to use one had been necessary if she wanted to do more field work. She placed the gun in her suitcase with the rest of her things before getting ready for bed.

Slipping under the covers, Felicity looked up at the ceiling and thought about tomorrow. She knew that the situation they were heading into was no walk in the park. This time Felicity wouldn't be standing outside the glass house, looking in on everyone. She would be inside and actively taking part in the mission. She just hoped she didn't shatter it all to pieces. Not that her role in this mission was more dangerous than anything else they'd faced. In fact, it was probably one of the easier jobs they would be doing. Felicity had to start somewhere, and this role was perfect for her.

It was more than the mere excitement she'd expressed to Lyla. It was a feeling she'd had ever since Waller had assigned them this mission. Felicity couldn't exactly put her finger on it, but she'd had this strange feeling for weeks that this was the right time to move forward. That she had to be on the inside of this mission, even if it was just this once. With a little shake of her head, Felicity tried to clear her jumbled thoughts and get a hold over her emotions. Caitlin was right; she needed her rest. Felicity leaned over to turn off her bedside lamp and snuggled back into bed. Whatever she faced tomorrow, she could handle it. Felicity was ready.

"Are you ready?"

Felicity nodded and smoothed her hands down her gown. "I think so."

"Tell me the plan again," Lyla requested.

Felicity, fidgeting while Curtis fitted the earpiece, recited, "The plan is for me to get caught counting cards in an underground Russian casino filled with hardened criminals. When I get my 'friendly' warning from Anatoly Knyazev—the leader of the Russian mafia, a.k.a. the Bratva—I am to place a bug on his office computer that will hopefully give me access to hack in and gain intelligence on the illegal weapons he's been selling on the Black Market."

"Right," Lyla confirmed.

Felicity added as a nervous afterthought, "That is assuming I get the friendly warning and not a bullet." Despite her anticipation leading up to this mission, she'd be crazy not to worry about the consequences of it going seriously wrong.

"Hey, you don't have to do this," Lyla said, offering her a way out.

"Yes, I do. I want to," Felicity assured her and took a deep breath to release some tension. She was perfectly capable of doing this, and Felicity was determined not to let the team down.

"Okay. Knyazev is known for his weakness for beautiful women. If I thought that would be the end result, you wouldn't be going in at all. Just in case, Mei, Barry, and Caitlin will be stationed throughout the casino. They've been instructed to keep their distance so no one gets suspicious, but they will be nearby to help if you run into trouble. They've already integrated themselves at the casino."

"Got it."
"I'll give you a couple of minutes to yourself before you head out." Lyla gave her a small, encouraging smile as she handed her the gun to put in the hidden holster attached to her thigh. "Good luck, Felicity."

"Knock 'em dead," Curtis added. "Well, not dead dead. I'm really hoping you don't have to shoot anyone. That would suck but—"

"I know what you mean," Felicity interrupted. He would keep babbling if she didn't stop him. Felicity had the exact same problem when she got nervous—except her babbles usually included an unintended sexual innuendo. "Thanks."

When she was finally alone, Felicity looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her long blonde hair was curled and swept to the side with sparkly pins. It was an elegant look but mostly served as a way to hide her earpiece. She wore a long, sleeveless pink gown with an open back and slit that ended a little bit above her knee. For makeup, she did a smoky eye to accentuate her blue eyes—sans glasses—and bright pink lipstick. Thankfully, she'd gotten more sleep on the ridiculously long flight over so she didn't look as affected by the time difference. The entire look was beautiful, and Felicity wished she had other occasions to dress like this aside from trying to stop a mafia boss from arms dealing.

"You can do this, Smoak," she said to her reflection. After making sure her gun was secure, she left the hotel room and went down to meet the driver they'd hired for her. He held the door open for Felicity, and she sat in the back. The casino was only ten minutes away.

Felicity had to walk down a dark alley, which was as creepy as it was always portrayed in TV shows and movies, and came to the front entrance. Two burly-looking Russian guards greeted her with stern expressions. Felicity didn't speak Russian but had learned enough to get her by in preparation for the mission. She recognized the Russian word for "password" and answered in their native tongue. They let her pass but not without exchanging a look to each other. They must've known she was American, since her accent wasn't authentic.

Once inside, Felicity took in her surroundings. The others had already explained to them the setup and security present when they'd first entered. Felicity saw the various card tables, bar, and lounge area. It was much more crowded than she'd expected, but it was a Friday night. Barry and Caitlin, ironically pretending to be a married couple, sat at the bar and ate dinner. Felicity couldn't see Mei but knew she was at one of the card tables not far from the lounge.

"Felicity, can you hear me?" Curtis said in her ear.

"Yes."

"We'll be with you the whole time."

"Thanks. It feels really good having you inside me." She stopped short and mentally kicked herself. "And by 'you' I mean your voice. And by 'me' I mean my ear. I am going to stop talking right now." Felicity could see Caitlin and Barry chuckling at the bar and wanted to die of embarrassment.

Curtis was also laughing. "If I wasn't gay, I'd almost think you were coming on to me."

"Go towards the back of the casino," Lyla cut in, getting them all back on track. "Pick a Black Jack table that looks sparse."

"Okay," Felicity muttered and did as instructed. As much as she hated the stale, smoky smell of the casino, Felicity took a few deep breaths as she got into character. There were only a couple of people sitting down. They were speaking in Russian to each other but then switched to English when
addressing the dealer. There were lots of patrons from different countries, and English was used as a universal language that everyone could understand.

Felicity opened her clutch purse and pulled out a stack of rubles. "One stack of high society please." The dealer paused for a moment as the others whispered next to her. Felicity stared confidently back at him. "Perhaps I should go to another table," she said impatiently when he still hadn't moved.

The man seemed to come out of his stupor and took the money in exchange for the stack of chips. A minute later, Felicity was placing her bet as she began keeping track of the deck. She eased into her winnings, not wanting to move too fast. It would look even more suspicious if she was caught too early and too easily. Slowly but surely, her winnings increased. A small crowd had even started to gather.

Felicity was vaguely aware of the people parting off to the side as she placed her next bet on the table. Someone was moving through the crowd and, for a second, she thought she'd finally been made.

"That's a rather bold bet," said a deep, husky voice. "You must be feeling lucky."

It sounded both foreign and intensely familiar, sending a shiver Felicity's spine. She was getting a weird sense of déjà vu. That voice...she hadn't heard it in years, except for in her dreams. It had to be her imagination running wild now. The adrenaline pumping through her veins was messing with her.

"Mr. Knyazev," the dealer acknowledged. His voice sounded reverent, and he nodded his head in submission.

Felicity's mind must've been playing tricks on her. It was the leader of the Russian mafia behind her and not a ghost from her past. She hadn't expected him to come to her in this situation, but she would play along and adapt. Taking a deep breath, Felicity centered herself and twisted in her seat to look over at him. Seconds later, the air whooshed right out of her and she gasped.

"Oliver?" This wasn't right. It was impossible. Unthinkable. Inconceivable. There was no way the young man in front of her could possibly be the Russian mob boss she'd been sent there to deceive. There was no way he could have the same handsome face as the boy she'd once loved. That boy was dead. He'd been lost to her five years ago. No one—not even Felicity after years of constant digging—had been able to find him.

And yet, there he was, standing right in front of her and looking better than ever. Felicity felt like she might faint.
Felicity's mind was spinning as she tried to grasp the situation. She felt like she'd stepped into the *Twilight Zone*. Based on the stunned look on Oliver's face, he must be experiencing the same shock. The only difference was that she had a legitimate excuse to think that he was dead all of these years, whereas Felicity had been where she always was. If Oliver had been alive, why hadn't he told someone? Why hadn't he sought her out? Why was he here right at this moment, of all times? Maybe he had a doppelganger? Did doppelgangers even exist?

Taking a few deep breaths to clear her mind, Felicity tackled the next biggest issue. The dealer had addressed Oliver as "Mr. Knyazev." It was even more confusing, because Felicity knew for a fact that Anatoly Knyazev was a man in his fifties with dark hair and a beard. Oliver did have brown hair and more scruff on his face, but he had to be in his late twenties now. He was by no means an old Russian mobster—unless he was suffering from amnesia after so many years lost at sea, but that was the oldest cliché in the book. There had to be another reason. Felicity felt a headache coming on and wished that she'd put that order in for a red wine earlier. She needed a good drink to calm her anxiety, which was at an all-time high at the moment.

The crowd parted once more and a tall, thin brunette came up beside him. She wore a long black gown and an expensive diamond necklace. "Oliver, darling, what's going on?" she questioned. Her soft voice contrasted the sharp, calculating look in her eyes. She had the appearance of a model, but Felicity got the feeling that she was more than just a pretty face. The brunette looked between the two of them before setting her gaze on Felicity—a look of disdain marring her classic features. This woman was definitely not someone to be trifled with.

Felicity also noted that the woman had called him Oliver. He was at least going by his first name, so that ruled out the amnesia and doppelganger theories.

"Who's Oliver?" Curtis suddenly spoke in her ear.

"It's gotta be Anatoly's nephew," Lyla said. Their voices were like a shock to Felicity's system, and she mentally latched onto them to help ground her.

"Huh?" Curtis sounded confused.

"What?" Felicity breathed.

"I wasn't talking to you," the brunette briskly answered, thinking Felicity's question was directed at her. It would've annoyed Felicity if she wasn't still so confused.

"Oliver Knyazev is Anatoly's nephew. He rarely makes appearances, and nobody has been able to get a glimpse of him in years."
Felicity had heard that Anatoly had a nephew, but she never would've assumed that he and the once-famous Oliver Queen were the same person. She never would've had a reason to. He was every bit a criminal like his infamous uncle and, as Lyla mentioned, there was no picture of him to accompany his profile in the A.R.G.U.S. database. So any facial recognition searches she'd run in an attempt to find Oliver wouldn't have picked it up.

"I was speaking to Mr. Knyazev," Felicity replied, finally finding her voice. As insane as this turn of events was, she had a mission to complete. Felicity needed to regain control—fast. Her voice came out stronger the second time. "He was commenting on the bet I'd placed."

The woman cut her eyes back to Oliver and placed a hand on his arm. Felicity did her best not to zero in on the gesture, though she felt her teeth subtly grinding together. "Is something wrong?"

The shock had disappeared from his features and was replaced with a cool mask. He cleared his throat and spoke, "Everything is fine, Isabel. I was just curious about the woman with all of the luck tonight."

Felicity, ignoring the weight in the pit of her stomach, mustered a charming smile. "Well, you found me." There was an infinitesimal tick in his jaw. Her words had affected him.

"Do you two know each other?" Isabel questioned. She didn't sound happy at the prospect, but that didn't surprise Felicity. The woman had been catty from the moment she walked up.

"No. I'm Oliver Knyazev," he said and held out his hand. His eyes bore into hers. To anyone else, it might look like he was trying to intimidate her. But Felicity had always been able to silently read him, and five years of separation with the presumption of death didn't change that. He was warning her to play along.

Felicity tentatively took his hand, and her whole body felt a jolt at the contact. It was then that she remembered the alias she'd chosen and found herself hesitating. She couldn't change it or else her team would be confused. They'd think that something was wrong, and she couldn't have that. Oliver watched, waiting patiently, until she replied, "Megan Queen."

His eyes widened slightly and his hand tightened over hers, but his expression remained neutral. "It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Queen."

"I'm not married," she replied, giving him the answer he was discretely fishing for. "You can call me Megan."

Isabel, clearly done with being ignored, spoke to Oliver in Russian. To Felicity's surprise, he answered her back flawlessly. The blonde mentally added it to her ever-growing list of questions.

"Mr. Knyazev?" the dealer questioned and gestured to the table.

"Please, continue," Oliver instructed and went to sit a few seats over from Felicity. The table curved, which meant that they were automatically facing each other. "In fact, deal me in on the next round."

Felicity revealed her cards and heard applause moments later when she won the hand. Isabel went to stand by Oliver's side. She stared straight at Felicity as she put a hand on his shoulder. Felicity looked away, ignoring the pang in her heart, and tried to regain her focus counting. She could feel Oliver's eyes on her as they played hand after hand. Every now and then she found herself meeting his gaze. She ignored the questioning look there. He must've caught on to her cheating. Felicity stuck to the plan and progressively became bolder with her winnings. It would happen anytime now, but maybe a good push would hurry it up. She didn't know how much longer she could sit there and not
freak out about this new revelation with Oliver.

Felicity slid all of her winnings forward. This would certainly seal the deal. There were murmurs around her.

"Are you sure, miss?" the dealer questioned in his heavy Russian accent.

"Positive," Felicity answered with a confident grin. "I'm feeling lucky."

The dealer looked to Oliver. Isabel whispered something to him. She scowled a second later when Oliver nodded for him to proceed. The dealer revealed another card and announced Felicity's "Black Jack."

"Yes," she cheered along with the rest of the crowd and clapped excitedly. Just as she'd predicted, Felicity felt a tap on her shoulder. A large man in a black suit stood behind her. "Can I help you?"

"I'm going to need you to come with me, miss." His accent was also very thick.

"*Here we go,*" Lyla muttered.

Felicity coolly glanced away and sipped on her water. "Is something wrong?"

"Get up," he growled. "Now."

"Oh, well, since you asked so nicely," Felicity sarcastically replied and stood.

Oliver halted them before they could leave. "Where are you taking her?"

"Anatoly would like to speak with her."

"I'll come with you."

"Your presence isn't necessary," the guard informed him. "Your uncle would like to handle her himself."

The guard's choice of words put Felicity further on edge, but she pressed on. "Please lead the way, gentlemen. I don't have all night."

A few other security men joined them. As they started to walk toward a hallway at the very back of the casino, Felicity couldn't help but sneak one last look at Oliver. He stood rigid in his spot, watching them.

"Oh look, there's the bathroom. I should've known the office would be down the hall and to the right of the bathroom," Felicity muttered. Whatever happened, she wanted the team to be able to reach her as quickly as possible.

"Mr. Knyazev," the guard in charge called as he shoved her into the office.

"There's no need to be so rough with me," Felicity scolded. "You haven't even told me what I've done wrong."

"The young lady is right." A thin, dark-haired man of medium height stood up from behind his desk. He didn't look much different than the picture in his profile. Anatoly gestured to the seat in front of his desk. "My apologies, miss. Sometimes my men get carried away."

Felicity sat down and fiddled with her purse in her lap. She discreetly grabbed the bug. To the men,
it would look like a nervous gesture.

Anatoly eyed her closely before asking, "What's your name?"

"Megan."

"What brings a beautiful American girl like you, Megan, to Moscow? Or more specifically, my underground casino."

"I was traveling with some friends."

"Are any here with you?"

Felicity shook her head. "No. This isn't really their scene. They're a little on the boring side, to be honest."

"And you like adventure?"

"You could say that," she replied with a shrug.

"Megan, do you know where the American term eighty-sixed comes from?"

"Uh, yes, it happens I do. It's from prohibition. There was an illegal casino—not like this one," she was quick to correct. She lifted her hand and gestured as she continued, "It was located at 86 Bedford St. in New York and, gah, I'm just going to stop talking." She pulled her hand back from the computer, where she'd stealthily slipped the bug amongst the wiring in the back.

"Now it means to ban someone. Someone who's cheating. You're eighty-sixed. Leave your chips and go."

"Okay," Felicity said, relieved, and started to stand. "Thanks. Thank you."

"Of course, I might be willing to let you keep your chips if you stay and have a drink with me."

Anatoly reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a very expensive bottle of vodka. He grinned invitingly at her. "What do you say?"

Doing shots with the leader of the Bratva was not what she'd expected on this mission. Of course, she hadn't exactly expected to run into her dead ex-boyfriend either. "Thank you for the offer, but my friends are probably waiting for me," Felicity politely declined.

Anatoly's grin faltered. He did not look at all pleased by her refusal. He most definitely thought she could be bought with some poker chips and alcohol. "That's a shame. You Americans are always in such a rush."

Felicity shrugged as if to say "oh well" and turned for the door. The men blocked her way, putting her on alert.

"Megan, there is one more thing." He stood up and walked over to her as one of the men pulled a black device out of his pocket. "You see, the thing about card counters is that sometimes they work with a partner." The device went off near her ear, and Anatoly reached for her earpiece. He held it up before throwing it on the ground and stomping on it. "I think your friends may be much closer than you have led me to believe." Anatoly took a step toward her just as the office door opened.

Oliver walked in with a stern expression on his face. "Uncle," he greeted.

Despite the fact that the man in front of her was practically a stranger now, Felicity couldn't help but
feel relieved by his presence. She wanted to pull away from these large, intimidating men and stand by his side.

"Oliver, did you need something?"

"I saw her at the card table and thought you might like some assistance in dealing with her."

Anatoly chuckled. "I am more than capable of handling a little American girl. Her friends are who I need you to find."

"I'll get you the information like I always do. Let me work on her," Oliver demanded, holding his "uncle's" gaze. He didn't look like he would take no for an answer.

Anatoly studied Oliver quietly before smirking. "Ah, I see. Very well. I will leave her in your capable hands, Oliver."

Felicity tried to keep her expression tense and not breathe a sigh of relief to be getting away from the sinister mob boss. Oliver took her by the arm, and she felt goose bumps form on her skin. She was led out of the office and farther down the hall. At one point, Oliver was barking out orders in Russian to the guards. They headed off in the opposite direction.

"What are you doing?" Oliver questioned when she reached into her purse. His hold tightened on her.

"I need to check my phone."

He took it out of her hands. "You can't call anyone, Felicity."

The sound of her name on his lips made her heart flutter. "I wasn't going to make a call. I was going to send a text that I'm all right and disable the GPS," Felicity informed him. "Unless you'd like us to be interrupted?" The team was no doubt worried after her earpiece had gotten destroyed, and they would come for her. If Felicity had been with anyone else, she would've been praying to be rescued. With Oliver, she was praying that they would have enough time.

Oliver handed her the phone. "I need to read it before you send it."

"Okay." Felicity typed her message quickly and showed it to Oliver.

"It's in code."

"It just means that I'm fine. I am going to be fine, right?" she questioned, eyeing him carefully. This was Oliver. He would never hurt her. Then again, he'd never disappeared for almost five years only to turn up in the Russian mafia. Who knows what he'd experienced or had to do to become Anatoly's "nephew"?

He demanded, "How do I know you're not setting us up?"

This new version of Oliver was much more paranoid. She'd have to add that to her mental list. "I guess you'll just have to trust me."

"Send it," Oliver muttered and led her around another bend. Finally, they stopped in front of another door and walked into a different office. Felicity assumed it was Oliver's.

He shut the door behind them and locked it. "Who are you working for?"

"Really? We haven't seen each other in years because you've been 'dead' and you want to know
about my supposed partner?” she questioned, incredulous.

"Actually, no. I don't," Oliver gruffly declared. He stood absolutely still with his hands by his sides, rubbing his fingers together. He watched her for minutes, silently searching. For what, Felicity didn't know. The only proof of his internal struggle was reflected in the intensity of his gaze.

Felicity didn't breathe in anticipation of his next move. Her heart thumped in her chest, making the adrenaline course through her veins. Her entire body was on alert. What exactly was Oliver going to do with her? Would he interrogate her for information? Would it hurt? His earlier comment to Anatoly told her that he'd done this before, but to what degree? The Bratva wasn't known for being merciful. Would she have the strength to fight him if it did come to that? Felicity's mind was a dizzying mess of "what ifs" as she stared at the man she once loved. Or still loved, depending on who he was at the moment. Was he Oliver Queen or Oliver Knyazev?

A decision was made. Felicity saw the moment it happened. The storm in his eyes cleared, and his stare became razor sharp. He stood straighter and his hands stilled. The tension-filled silence reached its peak before Oliver was closing the distance between them. He was so quick, Felicity barely had time to react. Before she knew it, Oliver had grabbed her waist, pulled her taut against him, and claimed her lips.

An involuntary moan escaped her. The sound vibrated between them before being swallowed up by his seeking mouth. Felicity didn't hesitate to oblige and dropped her purse so she could wrap her arms around his neck. Their kisses were hot, passionate, and full of need. Felicity knew there were so many questions she should be asking him right now, but she just didn't care. They could wait. This was a moment she never thought she would have with Oliver again. She deserved to take this time with him.

"You can't be real," he murmured against her lips and held onto her tighter.

"I am real." Felicity felt her back hit the door and arched into him. Her hands clutched at his suit jacket in an effort to bring him closer. They were already flush against each other, but it still didn't feel close enough. "I thought you were dead. Why aren't you dead?" She quickly broke away from him. "Not that I want you to be dead. I didn't mean it like that. I just meant that I've been in complete shock ever since I saw you and my mind is a jumbled mess, and I'm pretty sure I've already had a few minor heart attacks tonight but—"

Oliver chuckled and cut her off with another kiss. Softer this time. "You always did babble when you were nervous."

Felicity placed a hand on his cheek and looked at him. Really looked at him. Oliver had always been the most handsome man she'd ever seen, and that continued to be true. His brown hair was cut shorter. His strong, square jaw that used to be freshly shaved now had stubble, making him appear tougher and more mature. Felicity had to admit that she loved the rough sensation of it against her sensitive fingers. Finally, she looked into Oliver's eyes. They were still a piercing blue, but they appeared more guarded and even a bit sad.

Oliver was taking her in, as well. His hand slid up from Felicity's waist to trace the angles and curves of her face. Eventually, his hands tangled in her hair. He seemed to be fascinated by her blond locks. "You look so different. It took a moment for me to recognize you."

"Good different or bad different?"

"I always loved your dark hair, but this seems more like you." He brushed his thumb along her cheekbone. "I could never forget those eyes." He rested his forehead against hers and breathed her
in. "You're even more beautiful than I remember."

She melted into him and asked quietly, "Oliver, what happened to you?"

He shook his head and went back to kissing her. It was like they couldn't stay away from each other's mouths for long. Then again, five years was long enough. "We don't have enough time for that. How much trouble are you in?"

His tongue traced the seam of her lips, and she opened her mouth for him. "I'm not in trouble," she absently replied. Her senses were on overload. How had she survived without this? Without him for so long?

"I saw you counting the cards, Felicity." He sucked on her bottom lip. "You're working with someone, and whoever it is isn't going to be happy that you came out empty handed. If you tell me who it is, I can protect you."

"I'm fine, Oliver. Now shut up and kiss me," she teasingly ordered and silenced him with another deep kiss. Felicity knew time was running out for them. He quietly groaned into her mouth as his hands ran along the exposed skin of her back. They rested in the curve of her waist before drifting lower. She felt his calloused hand along her thigh and gasped when he took hold of her leg through the slit in her dress, hitching it over his hip.

"You don't seem fine." That was probably because his hands and mouth were all over her, turning her insides to jelly. Felicity didn't even bother responding. She clung to him and let herself drown in his kisses. This had to be a dream.

The hand that gripped her thigh slid back and forth along her smooth skin before sliding in between them. Felicity's eyes practically rolled into the back of her head at the sensation. Unfortunately, she realized too late what he was really going for. Oliver had her gun out of the holster and in his hand. Felicity tore her lips from his and reached for it, but he was too damn tall and held it out of reach. "Oliver, give me the gun back."

"If you're perfectly safe, why do you need this, Felicity?"

"That's my business."

He didn't look the least bit convinced. "Who are you working for?"

Felicity huffed and pushed him away. "I can't tell you that, Oliver."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't," she exclaimed. "And even if I did tell you, you couldn't go back and tell your 'Uncle Anatoly'—which I am still very confused about, by the way."

"The Felicity Smoak I knew would never get involved in illegal activity."

"Neither would Oliver Queen," Felicity countered. "And yet you seem to be doing pretty well for yourself as a Russian mobster's nephew. You've really managed to flesh out your rap sheet while you were dead."

"And how exactly would you know that?" Oliver pointed out, eyeing her warily.

"I just do!" Felicity retorted as her hand shot out to strike him in the ribs. His reflexes were quicker,
and he caught her hand. She attempted another maneuver, which he also blocked. He managed to get both of her arms pinned over her head in a matter of seconds. So much for all of that training she'd done with Lyla. Oliver made it seem like mere child's play. His advanced skill was both frustrating and extremely hot. "I'm not going to tell you anything, so you can either torture me or let me go."

"I would never torture you, Felicity." He seemed offended by the suggestion.

"That depends. Are you Oliver Queen, the man I loved? Or are you Oliver Knyazev, a violent member of the Bratva?" Felicity struggled against him. "Which Oliver am I dealing with exactly? I'd really like to know."

Oliver released her arms and handed her back the gun. Felicity returned it to the holster and picked up her purse before nodding toward the door. Their time was up. "How do I get out of here?" When Oliver didn't reply, she said, "Either you tell me or I start wandering around in places I probably shouldn't be. I don't think Anatoly would approve of that option."

"I'll show you," he grumbled and led the way. Oliver took her out the back and into an alley. "If you keep going straight, you'll get to the main road. No one will bother you."

"Thanks." They stood awkwardly across from each other. It was amazing how one minute they'd been all over each other like the couple they once were and the next were acting like complete strangers.

"Are you going to disappear again?" Felicity questioned, her voice barely louder than a whisper. Her body started to tremble from the frigid cold air. Her wrap was inside and lost to her at this point. Felicity stared at the ground, wrapping her arms around herself for warmth, not sure she could handle seeing the faraway look in his eyes.

"No," Oliver answered.

She nodded, still not meeting his gaze. Oliver placed his hand under her chin and lifted her eyes back to him. "You don't need to fear me, Felicity." His gaze was beseeching and intense.

"There's more than one way to torture someone, Oliver. I'm leaving Moscow tomorrow."

"What hotel are you staying at?"

Felicity told him the hotel, and he nodded. "I'll find you, and we'll talk."

"You promise?" She had to hear him say it. Felicity wouldn't be able to walk away without knowing that she would see him again.

"I promise." As if to seal the deal, he shrugged off his tux jacket and placed it over her bare shoulders. It practically engulfed her smaller frame, and she could feel the heat left over inside from his body.

"You can't be seen."

"It won't be a problem."

Felicity bit her lip before bringing her hand to his face. "I really am glad you're alive."

He kissed the inside of her palm, never looking away. "That makes two of us."

It took everything inside of Felicity to turn from him then and walk away. She wasn't planning on
going straight back to the hotel. She knew the team was probably worried about her, but she needed some time to herself before she faced them. Felicity's entire world had been turned upside down in a matter of minutes. She had a lot to think about.

As expected, no sooner had Felicity returned to the group—after a quick detour to her room to hide Oliver's jacket—did the questions start. They wanted to know what had happened and where she'd been. They'd been looking all over for her until Lyla called them back. Felicity told them part of the truth. During her walk, she'd come up with a story to cover the rest.

"How did you get away from the nephew?" Barry questioned.

"He's not much different from his pig of an uncle," Felicity answered. "He likes women, and he underestimated me. I used one of the maneuvers Lyla taught me. He wasn't expecting it, and it gave me the opportunity to get out of there."

"By the way, how did you recognize him if there's no photographic record of him?" Curtis inquired.

"What?" Felicity replied.

"When you first said his name, you sounded surprised but also like you knew him."

His inquiry made Felicity nervous, but she forced a casual smile. "It wasn't that big a deal," she downplayed it. "I turned around expecting to see a middle-aged Russian mob boss and saw a young man instead. The dealer had identified him by his last name, so it wasn't that big of a leap."

"What did he look like?" Mei joined in from her spot on the couch. Felicity's feet were killing her, but she was too wired to actually sit down. Caitlin was next to her while Curtis hovered near the computer equipment.

"You didn't see him?" She was the only one who would've, which had made Felicity nervous.

"You put on quite the show. I couldn't see through the crowd."

Some of Felicity's worry eased. If Mei had recognized him, it'd be all over.

"No one has been able to get eyes on him. Waller will be pleased. This is just the break we needed," Lyla declared. "Felicity, we need a detailed description."

The idea of Waller going after Oliver immediately sent Felicity back into a panic, and her protective instincts kicked in. She didn't want anyone engaging him. Not until she had a chance to talk to him and find out what the hell had happened to him all of these years. Felicity proceeded to give them a description, but it wasn't entirely accurate. She described someone with a bigger nose and longer, darker hair. She also changed his eye color. With each lie she told, Felicity felt more like a traitor. The reason their team worked so well was because they trusted and respected one another. Lying to them now was a breach of that trust, and yet Felicity still did it. Once again, Oliver had become the exception for her.

"I'm glad you're all right," Lyla told Felicity afterward. "You did well tonight."

"Thanks for giving me the chance," the blonde said as another wave of guilt hit her. "At least I was able to successfully bug Anatoly's computer. Now we'll get all the information we need."
"Um, about that..." Curtis trailed off as he typed on the computer.

Lyla's head whipped in his direction. "What is it?"

"I can't get a signal on the bug," Curtis stated.

"What do you mean?" Lyla replied. "It's not transmitting at all?"

Curtis shook his head. "It was working until about an hour ago. It's like it's been deactivated or something. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get much before it went dark."

Lyla cursed under her breath as Felicity tensed. All that for nothing. Well, not nothing. She may have failed the mission, but she did find the long-lost Oliver Queen. Then again, no one else knew that

"I'm sorry, Lyla."

"It's not your fault, Felicity. You did your part."

"It's probably a malfunction," Curtis reassured her. "I told Waller the new bug prototype might not be ready. She insisted on using it. Oh God, she's totally going to have my head."

"You warned her, man," Barry told him. "I don't see how she can fault you for that."

"I'll talk to Waller and see how she wants to proceed. What's important is that you all got out of there safely." She gave Felicity a nod. "Right now it's best if we get some sleep. We'll figure out how to proceed in the morning."

They all shuffled out of Lyla's room and headed back to their own.

"So, how did your first field mission feel?" Caitlin asked her as they walked down the corridor.

Thinking back on everything that had happened tonight—excluding the fact that the damn device wasn't working and she'd almost been tortured by a mob boss—Felicity smiled. "It felt great."

"Good work, Jane Bond," Barry teased.

Felicity nudged him, laughing, and said goodnight when she made it to her room. She was grateful for the single. It was one of the perks of being the point person for a mission. The others had to double up.

As soon as the door shut behind her, Felicity slid off her heels. Her feet were killing her at this point. Her eyes sought out the black suit jacket resting on the chair. Every time her mind questioned what she'd seen tonight, the jacket brought it back to reality. She ran her hands over it again in reassurance. Oliver was alive. Her heart sped up at the thought.

Needing to relax and take some time to process everything, she reached for the strap of her dress to get undressed. She'd barely slid it down before she noticed a figure move out of the corner of her eye. With a surprised yelp, Felicity pulled out her gun.

"It's just me," Oliver said, coming out of the shadows.

Felicity took a much-needed breath and lowered her gun. "I could've killed you, Oliver."

"I'm not that easy to kill," he stated with a confident smirk.
"Clearly," Felicity mumbled as her heart started racing for an entirely different reason. *He's alive,* repeated in her head.

"I told you I'd find you." The husky timber of his voice sent a shiver up Felicity's spine.

"I know. I just didn't expect you so soon."

"I can leave if you—"

"No," Felicity was quick to interrupt. "Stay just...need a sec. It's been a long night. I think I'm still in shock."

"That makes two of us."

Unlike their first reunion tonight, they kept their distance as they quietly surveyed each other. The questions they both had couldn't be put off any longer. The Oliver in front of her was a version of the man she once knew and yet a stranger all at once. Felicity wasn't sure where to begin.

Finally, she spoke. "What happened to the Queen's Gambit? Where have you been the last five years?"

"I'll answer what I can, but then you have to tell me what you're really doing here."

"Like I told Anatoly, I'm visiting Russia with friends."

"Yes, but you lied to him," Oliver replied and reached into his pocket. He pulled out the bug she'd placed on Anatoly's computer earlier, making her gasp. "Maybe you can explain to me when exactly you started working for the U.S. government, Felicity."

"How did you—" She stopped herself and bit her lip. This night was getting crazier by the second, but Felicity did know one thing for sure: there was no going back now.
Thank you guys so much for the reviews and kudos! I'm thrilled you're enjoying the story so far. The flashbacks of how Olicity met and eventually get together start this chapter. You'll also get some insight into where Oliver's head and heart are at. Happy reading, and let me know what you think!

May 17, 2007

There was a trail of eyes following him. It was always this way when Oliver entered Queen Consolidated. The only difference now being that he was older and more aware of it. It wasn't difficult to imagine what people were thinking when they saw him. He was the handsome, privileged heir to the Queen legacy. The company whose halls he walked had been in his family for generations and eventually would be under Oliver's control someday—that is when he finally got his act together. Everyone had an opinion of him, and most often it wasn't favorable.

Despite his family's distinguished standing in the world, Oliver Queen had built quite the reputation as a billionaire party boy. His transgressions had started out small. He skipped class and pulled the fire alarm a few times in middle school. In high school, he got suspended for drinking and then got suspended again for being found in a very compromising situation in the janitor's closet with one of his female classmates. Not to mention, there were the three colleges he'd been kicked out of for frequently not showing up to class and that one time he'd thrown a rave that ended in a massive brawl. The bad behavior continued on from there: fights with the paparazzi, stealing a taxi, peeing on a cop, and the DUI. As his parents worked hard to build their legacy, Oliver worked just as hard undermining it.

It wasn't on purpose, of course. There was a time when he was young that visiting QC with his dad had been an exciting adventure. Oliver would sit in his father's giant chair and pretend to answer the phone or sign documents. He was "the boss" for a day and even got to meet people in the different departments, who would then fuss over him. The best part was when his dad would take him to the company cafeteria. They made the best root beer floats. Although soda and junk food were mostly frowned upon at home, Oliver could have as much as he wanted when visiting QC. It was Oliver and his dad's little secret.

Oliver remembered vividly the day that had all changed. The day when visiting QC and confidently walking the halls had revealed itself to be more of a burden than a birthright. Oliver was supposed to spend the day with his father, but something had come up that required his immediate attention. As a result, Robert Queen had to spend most of his time in individual meetings with people. Oliver had to stay outside the office with the secretary. To keep busy, Oliver had brought his handheld Nintendo and was playing a game with the sound turned down low. The secretary had stepped out to grab some coffee, and so Oliver thought it was the perfect time to show his father his high score. After all, Oliver met new people every time he visited the office. His father wouldn't mind. The woman sitting across from him would be impressed, too, by Oliver's great gaming skills. He quietly opened the door.

"But I just got back from maternity leave. We were going to buy a house for us and the baby..."
"I understand that this is difficult," Robert had said.

Oliver paused at his father's grave tone.

"Mr. Queen, please. Please don't close our division," the young woman had pleaded. "We're working on some new projects. I know we can get our numbers up again."

"Nancy, I'm sorry. It's what's best for the company. I'm going to have to let you go."

Nancy was silent for a moment. Then: "I'm sorry, too, Mr. Queen." Her voice hitched at the end, and she stood up. When she faced Oliver, he saw the tears starting to form in her eyes.

"Oliver, what are you doing in here?" his father had questioned, finally noticing him.

Oliver had replied, "Is everything okay?"

"It's fine, son."

Nancy didn't answer. She couldn't as tears spilled down her face. With a low sob, she'd rushed past Oliver and exited the office. When Oliver had asked his father about the incident later, he'd dismissed it as "business as usual." However, the grim, unreceptive looks they'd gotten while walking to the cafeteria that day had worried Oliver. While his father was getting their lunch, Oliver overheard a conversation a few tables over. One of the divisions was being eliminated. It was in that moment Oliver learned that "business as usual" actually meant the laying off of over a hundred employees. The anger and sadness he'd heard in their voices was overwhelming.

It was worse the rest of the day having to see people nervously enter his father's office and looking distraught leaving. It was then that Oliver decided "business as usual" wasn't something he wanted to inherit. And yet, the pressure for him to fit the Queen mold increased as he got older. Now at twenty-two years old—his birthday had been only yesterday—a visit to QC was a last resort.

Oliver had gone to his father's office first. He wouldn't hear the end of it if he didn't stop in and his father found out about his impromptu appearance at QC later. Robert's friend and the CFO, Walter Steele, had been in the office. They'd made small talk for a couple of minutes before Oliver had told them the reason for his visit. His computer was messed up, and he needed help from the IT department.

"One of the interns can help you," Walter informed him. "She fixed something for me the other day that had my own team completely stumped. We recruited her from MIT—very promising talent. Felicity Smoak is her name."

"My assistant can look up where she is," Robert added.

"Thanks," Oliver said and had almost made it out of the office before Walter halted him. He exchanged a look with Robert before asking if Oliver could stop by his office before he left. The three of them would go to lunch to discuss a unique opportunity for him. Despite the dread forming in the pit of his stomach, Oliver forced a polite smile on his face and said he'd return.

He then went in search of Felicity Smoak. She was on the eighteenth floor. After walking through a maze of cubicles, Oliver finally found her. Her back was to him as she rifled through some files. The light from the nearby windows shined on her dark form. She had long, straight black hair pulled partially back, wore a black dress, and even had black fingernails. Either black was her favorite color or she was going for some kind of Goth look. Shaking his head, Oliver dismissed it. People in the IT department were usually weird geeks anyway.
Oliver cleared his throat to get her attention. "Felicity Smoak?"

The young woman abruptly swirled around in her chair, and Oliver's breath caught. He'd been right about the Goth look but hadn't been prepared for the full view. Felicity didn't look like the stereotypical drab or depressed person in black. Up close, Felicity Smoak was beautiful. The dark black eyeliner that would look overkill on anyone else actually made her bluish-gray eyes stand out. Her violet lipstick did the same for her lips and was a stark contrast to her light skin and the red pen she just happened to have in her mouth. He also noticed a few subtle purple strands intermixed with her dark locks. Her look was edgy and mysterious, and it instantly intrigued him.

Finally, he found his voice. "Hi, I'm Oliver Queen."

Felicity, looking slightly flustered, pulled the pen out of her mouth. "Of course...I know who you are. You're Mr. Queen."

"Oh, no. Call me Oliver," he told her. "Mr. Queen is my father."

"Right, but you're his son—which technically still makes you Mr. Queen. Not the same Mr. Queen, but a totally different Mr. Queen. Not that I'm trying to correct you or tell you who you are," she added hastily. "I barely know you, although I have watched a few stories on TMZ. Not that TMZ is an accurate portrayal of anyone. I only watch it when I'm bored or if I think someone on it is cute. But I didn't watch it because you're cute. I just happened to be watching it and the story changed and there you were. I'm not trying to hit on you, by the way. I just have the awful tendency to babble, which will end in three, two, one." She took a much-needed breath.

Oliver bit back an amused smile and placed his laptop on her desk. "I'm having issues with my computer, and I was told you're the person to come and see. I was at my coffee shop surfing the web, and I spilt a latte on it."

"Really?" she questioned with a hint of disbelief.

"Yeah."

"Because it smells like beer," Felicity pointed out and tilted her head at him. She was definitely not believing the latte excuse.

Oliver grinned and admitted, "Okay, it wasn't actually a latte. My friend threw a party for my birthday yesterday, and things got a little crazy."

She nodded and pushed her glasses up her nose. "Ah, I see."

"If you could try and salvage any of my files, I'd really appreciate it."

"I can try." Felicity nodded to the spare seat near her cubicle. Oliver pulled it up as Felicity hooked the laptop up to her computer. "If you show me what you need, I can upload them to my computer and then put them on a USB flash drive for you. Consider it a belated birthday present."

"That'd be great," he replied, breaking out his most charming grin.

In between sorting through files, Oliver found himself stealing glances at Felicity. At one point, their hands had collided as they both reached to point something out on the screen. Oliver's skin tingled where they'd touched, and she'd met his gaze. The air between them felt unexpectedly charged. She had to be feeling it, too. Their eyes held for a moment before Felicity hastily looked away—the slight redness forming on her cheeks not escaping him.
“It might take a while to upload,” Felicity informed him after they'd gone through everything “If you have other stuff to do, I can call you when it's finished.”

The words were out of Oliver's mouth before he could think about them. "Do you have a break coming up?"

The question appeared to catch her by surprise. "Um, I was going to get lunch in the cafeteria but —" She was interrupted by the ringing of his cell phone.

Oliver pulled out his phone. It was his dad calling. He pressed a button to silence it before putting it back in his pocket. "How about I buy you lunch? It's the least I can do for you helping me." Oliver knew his father would be furious with him later for blowing him off, but he didn't care. For some reason, Oliver didn't want to leave Felicity yet.

Felicity stared at him in shock. "Oh, uh, I actually have this project I was—" Her stomach gurgled loudly before she could finish. Felicity flushed in embarrassment. "Sorry. I've usually eaten by now, but I was trying to finish a project and decided to work through lunch. My stomach isn't usually so loud except for when I'm starving—which I am. Not like starving because I don't eat. I actually do eat a lot. Well not a lot but enough to stay healthy. It's just been a long day already, and I'm kinda stressed and—"

"Felicity, I'm taking you to lunch," Oliver declared and stood up. "You're not going to say no to the belated birthday boy, are you?"

She looked at him quizzically for a moment, as if he was some kind of puzzle that needed to be solved. "That would be nice," she finally replied and followed suit.

His eyes couldn't help but travel down the length of her. Her plain black dress wasn't tight but somehow still managed to outline the curves of her body. The multi-looped black belt cinched the fabric at her waist. Oliver took in her toned legs and actually smiled upon seeing the black and white panda-bear flats on her feet. They were quirky and oddly cute at the same time—just like her. They also showcased the dramatic difference in height between them. Felicity tilted her head back to look up at him.

"Do you like root beer floats?"

"I love anything that involves ice cream. Why?" she curiously asked.

"QC makes the best root beer floats in Starling. I've seen to it personally over the years." He held out his hand to help her around the chair. "Ready?"

Felicity stared at his hand before smiling shyly and placing her smaller one in his. The tingling sensation returned in full force where she touched. "Lead the way."

The sharp knock on his office door broke Oliver out of the memory. His mind had been somewhere else ever since he'd seen Felicity tonight. When one of Anatoly's men had approached him about a card counter, Oliver resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He wasn't even supposed to be in the casino tonight, and the thought of having to deal with the typical low-life thug who believed he was smarter than the system irked him. He expected to pull the guy aside, make a few threats about what happens when trying to steal from the Bratva—possibly breaking a finger or two for emphasis—and be on his way. Nothing could've prepared Oliver for what he saw once the crowd parted.
It had been nearly five years since he'd last seen Felicity. Five years since their last kiss. Five years of dreams that replayed every memory over and over again regardless of the pain it brought him. Felicity was supposed to be in Starling City, happy and living a normal life. That's what Oliver would tell himself whenever he had a moment of weakness. Then tonight, there she was with her blond hair in her bright pink dress. At first Oliver had thought he'd been hallucinating. He'd imagined her reentering his life so many times, it was hard to know what was a dream and what was reality. But for once, she was real. Felicity had looked so different and yet was exactly the same in some odd way.

Looks, however, could be deceiving. The proof of it was in Oliver's hand. The Felicity he knew would never be in some underground casino in Russia of all places. She wouldn't be counting cards or foolish enough to get caught doing it. She sure as hell didn't know that Oliver had been alive all these years. There had to be some other reason, because she had wanted to get caught. He'd investigated Anatoly's office once he left, searching it inch by inch.

That's when Oliver had found the small bug on the back of the computer. It was an advanced piece of technology and expensive, costing more than some people made in a year. There were many lessons Oliver had learned in the last five years, and one of them was how to identify threats. This device was definitely created by the U.S. government, although it was impossible to pinpoint the exact agency. If Anatoly had known, Felicity never would've gotten out of that office alive. The thought made Oliver sick.

Someone knocked on his door again with more force. After placing the bug inside his pants pocket, Oliver called the person inside. It was Isabel, and he suppressed a groan. He did not feel like dealing with her on his best days, and he certainly didn't want to deal with her now.

"I was wondering where you disappeared to," she said.

"Anatoly had a job for me."

"Anything interesting?"

"Nothing you need to know about."

Isabel gave him one of her calculating smiles before walking around the desk towards him. "It hurts me that you still can't trust me, Oliver," she said. "We're supposed to be partners."

"We play our parts, Isabel, and that's it."

She slid her finger against the hard wooden surface. "And what part were we playing last night?" she murmured with heated eyes.

Ignoring the question, Oliver said, "I have a lot of work to do, Isabel."

The brunette was undeterred. She leaned against the desk in front of him. "You said that last night, as well."

"Then you know that I mean it double tonight," he brusquely retorted, feeling more and more uncomfortable by her proximity.

She placed her hands on his shoulders and started massaging them. "You're so tense. Let me help with that."

Oliver stood abruptly and pulled her hands off of him. He couldn't stand her touch. Not when the memory of Felicity's hands and lips were still branded on his skin from the hour before. He didn't
want anything erasing that. It was all he had to convince himself that she was real and not some figment of his imagination. "Not tonight, Isabel. I mean it."

Isabel scrutinized him closely before her eyes narrowed. "It's that blonde," she challenged. "You've been acting weird ever since you saw her. Was Anatoly generous tonight? Is that it? Did he let you get your fill of her after he was finished?"

Her taunting words made Oliver's insides twist and his fists clench at his sides. The thought of Felicity being passed around like some object enraged him. Still, Oliver had a part to play—now more than ever. "She tried to steal from us, and I did my job. That's it," he coolly replied.

The brunette watched him before smiling smugly. "Then I'll leave my door unlocked for you tonight."

"Don't bother. I already told you it's not happening."

"And yet you always come back," Isabel countered while sliding a hand down his chest. She whispered into his ear, "I'll be waiting."

It wasn't until she'd left that Oliver was able to take a breath. Isabel could play up her seductress role all she wanted, but Oliver would not go to her tonight. He had no reason to give in to that weakness. He'd promised Felicity that he would find her, and that's exactly what he was going to do. Just as he started to leave the office, his cell phone rang. The name flashing across the screen gave him pause, but Oliver still refused to answer. He would take whatever reprimand he'd receive later. Nothing and no one would stop him from seeking Felicity out.

Oliver shut off his phone and proceeded to his car. His driver/bodyguard—as the outside world knew him—was already there waiting for him. John Diggle was a tall, dark-skinned man with a strong, sturdy build. He'd spent years serving in Special Forces in the U.S. Army. His experience made him both honorable and lethal. Many had questioned how someone of his background and stature had ended up working for their criminal organization. Diggle wasn't that different from the rest of them. Circumstances in his life had arisen that he couldn't control, and so he'd been driven to do desperate things. It was because of that sacrifice that Oliver knew Diggle was one of the few people he could trust.

Diggle held the door open for him before walking around to sit in the driver's seat. When Oliver gave him the name of the hotel, Diggle paused. " Didn't you get the orders? We have to report to —"

"I know, and I'm not going," Oliver interjected.

"You have to go, Oliver. You know what will happen if you don't show up. They'll take it as a sign of disrespect."

"Which is why you're going to take my place. Make my apologies for me, and let them know that I'm chasing down a lead. You're more than capable of sitting in during my absence."

Diggle looked like he wanted to argue further but decided to shut his mouth. He drove the rest of the way to the hotel in silence before parking in front of the main entrance. He got out to open Oliver's door and said, "You look fine, by the way. No need to keep primping."

Oliver abruptly stopped adjusting his shirt and running a hand through his hair. Ignoring the minor jab, he said, "Don't wait up."

Diggle quirked an eyebrow. "What kind of lead is this exactly?"
"No need to worry, Dig. I can handle it," Oliver replied, dodging the question.

Never one to shy away from calling him on his bs, Diggle shot back, "The way you 'handled' her earlier?" At Oliver's questioning stare, he elaborated, "I saw you let her get away with counting cards in the casino before Anatoly took her. I also saw you sneak her out the back. Who is she, Oliver?"

"Let it go, Dig," Oliver warned. Although he trusted Diggle, this was one secret Oliver needed to keep to himself. He made sure Diggle had left completely before heading into the hotel. It didn't take much to find out what room Felicity was staying in. There was nothing money couldn't buy in Russia.

Oliver did a careful sweep of the area to make sure it was clear before using the keycard he'd bribed from the manager to open the door. The room was spacious with a large king-sized bed, small seating area, and bathroom off to the side. Felicity's suitcase lay at the foot of the bed. Clothes spilled out the sides—as if she'd been rifling through them earlier—and a few pairs of heels were scattered across the floor. He found the fact that she was still a bit messy oddly comforting. The suit jacket he'd given her hung off one of the chairs. He also checked the room to make sure there were no more bugs like the one he'd discovered earlier. Afterward, Oliver turned off the lights and waited in the darkness for Felicity to return.

So many questions were running through his mind. They immediately scattered when he heard distant voices and the door opening. He backed more into the shadows when she turned on the lights, needing a moment to collect himself and just take her in. He'd been so preoccupied with masking his emotions and protecting her from Anatoly and the others earlier that he hadn't gotten a chance to take a step back and admire her.

Felicity was still in her pink gown, and he watched as she immediately slipped off her heels and removed her jewelry. Her beautiful face looked tired and weary, which was expected after the night she just had. Oliver continued to watch in fascination as she walked over to his jacket and ran her hands over it with a thoughtful expression on her face. How he wished he was wearing it in that moment. The memory of their passionate exchange earlier hit him full force. When Felicity started to slide the strap of her dress off, Oliver's breath caught. A hunger he hadn't felt in years sprang to life, urging him to step forward and remove the fabric that had separated them earlier.

Oliver came out of the shadows before she could continue. If he saw any more of her, he knew the self-control and discipline he'd worked so hard to build would snap. He'd already succumbed to it earlier tonight in his office. That couldn't happen again. Not when they still had so much to discuss.

Felicity suddenly let out a surprised yelp and reached for the gun in her holster. She pointed it in his direction.

"It's just me," Oliver reassured her.

Felicity exhaled and lowered it. "I could've killed you, Oliver."

Oliver couldn't help but smirk at the idea. Although she had some training, it was obvious that she wasn't that practiced. He could've disarmed her in seconds, with or without the gun pointed at him. "I'm not that easy to kill."

"Clearly," Felicity mumbled and set the gun aside, still looking a bit flabbergasted at his sudden appearance.

"I told you I'd find you."
"I know. I just didn't expect you so soon."

He paused. "I can leave if you—"

"No," Felicity was quick to interrupt. "Stay I just...need a sec. It's been a long night. I think I'm still in shock."

Oliver couldn't agree more. "That makes two of us."

As badly as Oliver wanted to cross the distance between them, he stayed back. He needed to keep a clear head. Felicity seemed to be doing the same. She was rooted in her spot across the room as they took the other in.

Finally, she spoke. "What happened to the Queen's Gambit? Where have you been the last five years?"

It was as he'd expected. "I'll answer what I can, but then you have to tell me what you're really doing here."

"Like I told Anatoly, I'm visiting Russia with friends."

"Yes, but you lied to him," Oliver replied and reached into his pocket. He pulled out the bug she'd placed on Anatoly's computer earlier, making her gasp. "Maybe you can explain to me when exactly you started working for the U.S. government, Felicity."

"How did you—" She stopped herself and bit her lip.

Oliver explained, "You're too smart to get caught the way you did. Which made me wonder why you possibly would want to place yourself in harm's way with someone as dangerous as Anatoly Knyazev. So I searched the office and found this."

"That doesn't mean I put it there or that I'm some government agent," Felicity replied. "That could be anything. For all you know, there could be a mole in your organization."

"In my line of work, I know what spyware looks like."

"Of course you do, because apparently you're a criminal now," she shot back.

Oliver didn't even flinch. He knew exactly what he was. He had no choice but to accept it a long time ago. Pressing on, he said, "You're not an agent. Your fighting skills are too rudimentary for that."

He wasn't wrong, but Felicity still felt a flicker of annoyance. "Gee, thanks," she muttered.

"Which means you must be some kind of intelligence operative. Whoever you're working for was banking on your inexperience in the field to throw us off. You wanted to look like some amateur card counter. You may have fooled Anatoly, but I know you, Felicity. You can't fool me."

"How can you know me? Truly? It's been five years, Oliver. I'm not the girl you once knew. You have no idea what I've been through."

"Maybe so, but I do know you were in over your head tonight. I saw the fear in your eyes as soon as I walked into the room."

"I was holding my own," Felicity defended.
"Your cover was about to be blown. Do you know how much danger you were in? What Anatoly would've done to you to make you talk if I hadn't intervened?" Oliver retorted. "He would've killed you, especially if your backup had come barging in guns blazing. I'm assuming that's who you were texting earlier. Was that them I heard you talking to in the hallway minutes ago?"

"You don't get to pass judgment on me, Oliver. I am not the bad guy here. I did what I had to tonight to save lives. But you...if Anatoly is such a dangerous man, what are you doing working with him?" Felicity challenged, marching right up to him. "Why didn't you ever come to me? How could you possibly keep this a secret and allow me to go on thinking that you were dead? Why should I be honest with you when you've been lying to me all this time? When I—" Her voice faltered as the raw emotion threatened to overtake her. Felicity took a deep breath to regain control. She said more quietly, "When I found out you were dead, I was devastated."

Oliver's expression softened at hearing the pain in her voice. It was a pain he knew all too well. "Felicity..."

A tear escaped her eyes. "Why didn't you want to come back to me?"

He reached a hand out to wipe it away as more started to fall. Her eyes closed, and she inhaled a shaky breath. "I wanted to. Every day," he murmured. "I didn't have a choice."

She opened her eyes. "Was the accident even real?"

"Yes."

"What about your family?"

"Sit down, Felicity." He motioned to the couch, and she took a seat. Oliver left a little bit of space between them, but not as much as before. Taking a minute, he collected his thoughts. Oliver didn't like to think about that night on his family's yacht in the South China Sea. He may have physically survived, but it was the night something inside of him had died. All of the pain and misery he'd suffered since then could be traced back to that one event that had changed the course of his life forever.

Noticing his hesitance, Felicity murmured, "Whatever happened, you can tell me."

"You know there was a storm."

She nodded. "Yes. The media said it was so bad that the wreckage was most likely at the bottom of the ocean. Almost no chance of survivors. Nothing was ever found."

"The storm was bad," Oliver confirmed, "but we thought we could weather through it. The ship swayed from the choppy water, and then the lights started to flicker on and off. I was sitting with my mom in the living room, talking, when the boat tipped. We both went flying across the room. The couch landed on top of me. My mother was feet away. There was a loud ripping sound of metal, and suddenly it was like half the room had opened. Gravity took hold, and my mother started to slide down through the opening. She called out to me. I tried to reach for her, but I couldn't get to her in time."

Hearing the slight break in his voice, Felicity reached out for his hand. Oliver seemed surprised at first by the contact but wove their fingers together, accepting the comfort she was offering him.

Oliver pressed on, "She was pulled under the water. I don't remember what happened after that. There was so much water coming in, and the ship had shifted again. I just remember being thrown a second time and somehow ending up in the water myself. I broke the surface and heard my dad..."
calling me. He and another crew member were in a life raft. I tried to go back in the water to look for my mom, but he wouldn't let me. He said she was already gone."

Felicity swallowed back tears. "So your dad did survive," she commented.

"He survived the wreckage, yes. But we were drifting for what felt like days and..." Oliver paused, struggling with how much he should tell her. She already looked so upset, and he decided to spare her the gory details. "He didn't make it."

"I don't understand. How could he survive the ship going down but not in the raft with you?"

"He just didn't," was all Oliver would say.

Seeing that he wasn't going to elaborate, she questioned, "What about the other crew member?"

"He died, too."

She squeezed his hand. "So you were alone." It was as she'd feared.

"I drifted for a while longer until I saw the island. Lian Yu is what it was called. It means purgatory."

He paused. "I was there for a long time."

"But then how did you get off of the island? Where does Anatoly and the Bratva come in?"

"I wasn't alone on the island," Oliver revealed. "There were others—most of them dangerous. In order to survive, I had to make alliances."

"Let me guess, Anatoly was one of them." Felicity shook her head. "God, this sounds like The Hunger Games."

"What's that?"

"It's...nevermind," Felicity said. His lack of ability to identify pop culture references was the least of her worries right now. "Then what happened?"

"It was after the only other two people I could trust on the island were killed. I had no choice but to accept Anatoly's offer to join him. He taught me to fight and when his reinforcements came, I left the island with him."

"So you joined the Bratva, and your new identity was as his 'nephew,'" she surmised. Felicity's mind was spinning with all of this new information.

Oliver didn't deny it, but he didn't elaborate either. As badly as he wanted to tell Felicity the whole truth, it was too much of a risk. He held back and simply explained, "The allegiance I swore, it can't be broken. It wouldn't just mean my death, but the deaths of anyone I ever cared about." He looked her in the eye. "I couldn't lose anyone else, Felicity."

He couldn't risk losing her was what he meant. Felicity stared at their joined hands as the grief threatened to consume her. She used her other hand to wipe away the tears that had started to form, once again. For years she had imagined so many scenarios in her head, but nothing even came close to what he was telling her. Nothing that could've prepared her for this. Oliver was alive, but his survival had come at a price. A price she and everyone else who loved him unknowingly had to pay.

"You shouldn't have been alone," Felicity replied softly. "I've thought about it a lot. If only I'd—"

Oliver didn't let her finish. He wouldn't even let her go down that line of thought. "No," he forcefully
replied. "There was nothing you or anyone else could've done."

Felicity disagreed, but she didn't push it. "Have you always been here in Russia?"

"No. I try not to stay in one place for too long. Being Anatoly's nephew, I have responsibilities that require a lot of travel. It's for the best, I've found."

"So after tonight, you'll just disappear again," she muttered solemnly. "Like some kind of ghost." She laughed but there was no humor in it. "Ironic." The blonde abruptly let go of his hand and stood up, needing to put some distance between them to process it all.

"I told you my story. Now it's your turn," Oliver declared. "Felicity, why did you bug Anatoly's office?"

"You would probably know better than me, wouldn't you? Why should I even tell you? You'll just go back and warn him. After all, you swore your allegiance to him. That makes you the enemy," she replied dejectedly.

Oliver stood up and spun her around to face him. "I'm not your enemy. I'm trying to protect you. Who are you working for?" When she remained silent, he added, "You can trust me."

"Not even my family and friends know what I do. If I tell you, it'll make me a traitor." She sighed and shook her head. "It probably won't even matter after tonight. You found the bug, and now the entire mission is a bust. I'll never be trusted with anything like this again." So much for her first field mission. Her disappearing and then the device "malfunctioning" would not look good. Waller was going to have her head. Failure was failure, regardless of the circumstances.

"Let me help you. At least tell me what you were looking for."

"You're really going to help us?" she asked in disbelief. "I took an oath, too, Oliver." A part of her wanted so badly to trust him, because it was Oliver. Yet, her years of training were telling her to keep her mouth shut.

"No, I'm going to help you," he answered in a deep voice. His piercing blue eyes bore into hers. "I said you can trust me. Let me prove it, Felicity."

Felicity closed her eyes and bit her lip as the two sides of herself warred with each other. Oliver's forehead touched hers, and she sighed softly. Felicity really hoped she didn't live to regret this. She met his intense gaze. "Your uncle is orchestrating an arms deal that's about to go down sometime within the next 24 hours. If the rebels in the region get their hands on those weapons, all hell will break loose." She watched him carefully. "I need to stop it."

"I'll take care of it," Oliver murmured, running his fingers along the soft, bare skin of her arms.

"What does that mean?" Goose bumps formed on her flesh. He didn't ask for any other details, which meant he must be involved or at least aware of it. Felicity wasn't sure how to process that.

He remained vague but reassured her, "I'll get you what you need."

"I suppose you have to leave now."

He shook his head, causing his nose to brush hers. "Not yet."

Unable to keep her hands by her side any longer, Felicity slid them up his chest and felt the hard muscle underneath his shirt. "What about your girlfriend?"
"Who?"

"That woman you were with tonight." There was no masking the irritation in her voice. That woman had rubbed Felicity the wrong way the minute she'd appeared, and it wasn't only because she was there with Oliver.

Oliver smirked, her obvious jealousy amusing him. "She's not my girlfriend. I put up with her because she's influential in the Bratva." His expression turned serious. "She's nothing to me." He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss against Felicity's neck.

She gasped and shifted her head to the side to give him more access as he left a trail of light kisses down to her shoulder. Meanwhile, his hands glided from the curve of her waist to her back. They slid slowly up the naked skin before drawing her flush against him. Unexpectedly, Sara's advice about finding a hot guy with an accent to sleep with rang in Felicity's mind. She smiled to herself. Oliver was still as handsome as ever, and his accent while speaking Russian earlier had been flawless. Felicity was never the type to hook up with a total stranger, but this wasn't a stranger. This was Oliver, and he was everything.

"I've missed you so much," Felicity breathed, clinging to him.

Oliver drew back to look at her and placed a tender hand to her cheek. "I've missed you, too, sweetheart."

The endearment—the one he'd always used especially for her—made her heart melt. Tonight was all about taking chances for Felicity. There was no bigger gamble than trusting Oliver but just like with the cards tonight, she could read every emotion on his face. It was a look she knew all too well. A look she never thought she'd ever see again. A look she knew without a doubt she was mirroring in return.

The decision was made. To anyone else it would seem wrong, dangerous, and even reckless. But Felicity didn't care. She wanted this. She wanted him. This would probably be their one and only chance, and she was all in.

Without taking her eyes off of him, Felicity reached for the straps of her dress and started to pull them down. Oliver's eyes widened slightly in surprise before his hands joined hers. The fabric pooled at her feet on the floor. In just her underwear, Felicity expected Oliver's gaze to travel hungrily down the length of her body. Instead, his eyes remained connected to hers. It was intimate and intense, doing more to set her body on fire than if he'd actually touched her.

Without looking away, Felicity started to unbutton his white dress shirt. Before she could push the fabric aside, his hands halted her. Felicity stared at Oliver questioningly.

"I..." he trailed off, struggling to find the right words. "I might not be exactly as you remembered."

Felicity frowned in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Oliver watched her for a moment longer before finding the courage to remove his shirt completely. It was one thing for him to allude to some of the trauma he'd endured, but her seeing it firsthand would be completely different. Oliver knew he was probably being ridiculous, because Felicity had never been superficial or judgmental. Plenty of others had seen him shirtless, whether it was during vigorous training sessions or the occasional meaningless hook-up. But none of those people mattered like Felicity.

Felicity let her gaze travel down the length of him and held back a gasp. Oliver's body had always
been perfection. The hard, defined lines of muscle used to make her palms tingle and her knees weak. His body was still amazing—probably even more so now that he was older and stronger—but it wasn't his broad shoulders or washboard abs that made her pause. Felicity's eyes immediately honed in on the marks—a combination of tattoos and scars. One star-like tattoo, which she recognized as the symbol of the Bratva, was on his left pectoral muscle. Lower, on this right, were Chinese symbols along the side of his stomach.

They didn't concern her as much as the various scars. There was a patch of skin on his right pectoral muscle that looked like a healed burn mark. Underneath the Bratva tattoo there were slashes as if from claws. A little below that was a long, red line going horizontally across the top of his abs. There were also a few smaller scars here and there, and Felicity was almost afraid to see what might mar his back. Her disgust had absolutely nothing to do with his appearance and everything to do with the pain he'd obviously endured for each of them.

"What happened to you?" Felicity quietly questioned as she traced the long scar across his abs. The tears resurfaced, unbidden. Not only had Oliver been alone all these years, but he'd been hurt—over and over again. Her heart broke for him.

Oliver's muscles twitched beneath her fingers. "Nothing you can't heal."

Felicity pressed kisses to the scars just below his Bratva tattoo before looking up at him. Meanwhile, her fingers traced the other scars to commit them to memory.

"Don't cry," he murmured, cupping her face. "I'm here and I'm fine."

Felicity threw her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. She couldn't keep the torrent of emotions suppressed any longer. Finally learning the truth about Oliver was both too much and not enough all at once. Oliver enveloped her in his arms and held onto her tightly as she cried. His hand buried itself in her hair, sending the tiny pins that kept it to the side scattering.

"I'm fine. You were with me the whole time, Felicity," Oliver soothed. He couldn't stand to see her so torn up, and he kissed the top of her hair and the sides of her face. The sensation of their bare chests pressed against each other awakened the hunger he'd started to feel earlier. After a few minutes, Felicity's lips were moving along his neck. Her heavy breathing matched his, and he started to sense the same urgency in her movements as her hands started to explore the muscles of his back.

Oliver used the hand in her hair to tip her head back and capture her lips. Felicity moaned loudly and let her body succumb to his touch. Within seconds, he bent down and scooped her up in his arms. Without breaking their kiss, Oliver walked over to the bed and placed her in the center. Felicity guided him on top of her and pulled him close, loving the way his large form covered her completely and pressed her into the mattress.

Working his way down her body, Oliver felt like his senses were on overload. So many nights he'd dreamed of being with Felicity like this again. The taste and feel of her haunting him. Her body was as amazing as ever. Felicity was soft to the touch, but her maturity had made her curves and figure more pronounced. As Oliver nipped at the tender flesh of her stomach, his hands slid down to grip her round ass. It had been one of his favorite parts of her, and not much had changed over the years. Oliver groaned against her abdomen at the feel of it.

Winding her hands through Oliver's hair, Felicity directed him back up her body. She bit her lip at the way his scruff was brushing against her flesh, sending delicious shivers throughout her body. It was a good change, she'd decided. Seconds later, she arched against him when he took one of her sensitive nubs into his mouth.
Finally, his lips returned to hers in a passionate kiss. Felicity clung to him, needing to be closer. It wasn't enough. After five years of thinking he was gone forever, it would never be enough. She needed to be connected to him in every way possible. Felicity's hands found his belt buckle and started to undo it. Oliver's fingers hooked around her panties to remove them before helping her shed the rest of his clothing.

After securing the proper protection, Oliver lay on top of her. Felicity lifted her thighs to his hips, welcoming him. For a couple of minutes, they just stayed there silently and took the other in. One of his fingers stroked along her cheek as hers played with the hair at the nape of his neck.

Oliver brushed his nose against Felicity's and murmured her name. There was a question he'd wanted to ask all night and couldn't put off any longer. He both craved and feared the answer.

"What?" she replied, reading the intensity and longing in his gaze.

"Earlier tonight...why did you use my name? When you didn't...I thought that..." To this day, he couldn't say it.

Felicity offered him a small, genuine smile before bringing her hand to his face. She kissed him tenderly. "Because I never stopped loving you," she whispered against his lips.

Hearing her say the words made Oliver's last strand of self-control snap. An intense heat and desire to possess her completely filled him. Oliver deepened the kiss and entered her slowly, purposefully. They both groaned, aching for more. He'd spent years denying himself the one thing he'd always wanted. Now that she was right in front of him, he wouldn't hold back any longer.

Oliver wasted no time moving within her, and Felicity was eager to follow his rhythm. He filled her completely. With every thrust, he chased away a piece of the emptiness that had taken hold of her in his absence. Felicity clung tightly to him and arched against him as he buried his head in her neck. She trailed her fingernails down his spine and felt Oliver utter her name against her skin.

Her fingers sought out the scars on his back she hadn't yet seen. Felicity traced the angry caress, as if she could absorb some of the pain he'd endured and actually heal the wounds. Oliver worked his way to the other side of her neck before reclaiming her mouth. His tongue teased her bottom lip before delving inside to explore further. Felicity could feel the coil deep within her tightening as he drove her pleasure higher.

Felicity was close to unraveling, Oliver could feel it. He didn't know how much longer he'd be able to hold on himself. The way Felicity was purposefully seeking out his scars was almost his undoing. No one had ever touched him as intimately. She'd been the only one before the accident to soothe him, and now was no different. Every loving swipe of her fingers erased part of the darkness and numbness he'd embraced in order to survive. Felicity actually made Oliver feel alive. Gripping one of her thighs, Oliver shifted his angle to go deeper inside of her. He needed to be closer. Needed to feel all of her.

"Oliver," Felicity breathed at the new sensation and held onto his shoulders. He was everywhere, and yet she couldn't get enough. Felicity kissed him hungrily and pressed herself more firmly into him. Her body was starting to tremble. It had been so long since she'd felt like this that she briefly wondered if she could explode from an overload of ecstasy. His name spilled from her lips in a desperate pant as she met his gaze.

"Felicity," he chanted back, his movements becoming more frenetic.

After several more powerful thrusts, Felicity felt the coil snap and her walls contract around him. An
intense pleasure washed over her, consuming her entire body, and she clung to Oliver as she rode it out. Her undoing was his, and Oliver followed seconds later. He kept his eyes on her, never breaking contact as they came together.

Neither moved right away and were content to stay in each other's arms. When Oliver started placing light kisses on her cheeks and forehead, Felicity couldn't help but smile at his tenderness. Eventually she directed him to her mouth and kissed him softly. Oliver then rolled onto his back and pulled Felicity against his chest. She settled into him as his arms wrapped around her.

They lay there quietly, enjoying the moment and closeness they still craved. Felicity lazily ran her fingers along his Bratva tattoo while his hand stroked her spine. Her eyes ventured to the clock on the nightstand, and the pleasure-induced haze started to clear. The smile on her lips faltered as reality began to set in.

Oliver felt her body tense. "Felicity?"

"I have to leave tomorrow," Felicity whispered solemnly. "I don't want to let you go again."

Oliver's arms tightened around her, as if protecting her from some invisible force. This was exactly what he'd feared most. The thought of turning his back on her now felt more painful than any of the scars that had been inflicted on his body over the years. Oliver closed his eyes and buried his face in her hair, trying to hold on a bit longer as the darkness threatened to consume him yet again.
Tell It to My Heart

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys so much for your comments and kudos last chapter! I know you're all super curious about Olicity's backstory and what exactly they're both involved in presently. Still lots to unravel! Hope you enjoy this next chapter and let me know what you think!

May 19, 2007

Felicity had never seen anything so over the top in her life—and that was saying something for a girl who'd grown up in Las Vegas. She stood on the large, expansive lawn of the Merlyn manor with the man-made lake and perfectly green and manicured grass. The vastness had been overwhelming in its natural state. It was hard to believe that so much land could be attached to one property. Now the majority of that lawn was occupied by an elaborate setup and a never-ending stream of important yet unknown guests.

A large dance floor was set up in the middle. The pattern of the wood reminded Felicity of a life-size chess board—the pieces dancing on top to the live band also varying in significance and just as calculating. Surrounding the dance floor were three huge, white party tents that were probably also rented by the circus at one point. The left side had an elaborate food station and bar with a ten-foot champagne fountain in the center. A few feet over, not quite as big, was a white and pink multi-tiered wedding cake. Printed on each layer to make up one big picture was a photograph of the happy couple on their wedding day.

The middle tent covered endless rows of tables and chairs. Guests could sit and eat at long tables with bright pink flower and feather centerpieces. A few of the guests had to push them over so that the long feathers wouldn't dip into their plates. The tent on the right was the most rowdy. There were supposedly fun wedding games and party favors, including a table dedicated entirely to sparkly tiaras that were up for grabs. As if all of that wasn't enough, the huge hedges spread throughout the yard were all trimmed to take on the form of the happy couple in various poses. Felicity was half tempted to swipe a glass of champagne from the fountain when she passed by one that had the male bush dipping the female in a grand kiss. Could it be any more ostentatious?

Felicity supposed she shouldn't have been surprised when it came to her mother. Nothing about Donna Smoak was demure. She had been obsessed with princesses since she was a little girl, and this overdue wedding reception reflected just that. Felicity understood why her mother went all out. Donna's life, unfortunately, had been anything but a fairy tale. Her mother's story was a common tragedy. She'd fallen in love, gotten married, and had a baby all before her twenty-first birthday. The guy came in and out of her life, unable to fully commit, until he decided to officially up and leave. The only good-bye had been the divorce papers she'd been served less than a month later.

For years her mother worked at the casinos to put food on the table and provide for a child single-handedly. Times were tough more often than not, and Felicity did her best not to pity the fact that her mother couldn't afford to get her some of the same clothes or toys her classmates had. They had enough to get by, and that was the norm in their lives. So it made sense that after years of struggling and a string of good-for-nothing boyfriends that Donna Smoak would want to celebrate the fact that
she'd finally found her "Prince Charming." It didn't make the situation any less awkward or the setup any less embarrassing, but Felicity was trying to be supportive.

It was unreal thinking about how they'd gotten to this point. Felicity had been finishing up her sophomore year at MIT and had casually mentioned to her mother that she was looking for a summer internship with a tech company. Donna had been upset and pleaded with her to come home to Vegas so they could spend some time together. Despite her mother being a bit more insistent than usual, Felicity had dismissed it.

Then she got the call about a summer internship at Merlyn Global in the IT division. It was odd, since she'd originally applied to Queen Consolidated but hadn't heard anything back. Felicity did the interview via Skype and found out that she'd gotten the position. She'd been so excited at first. Spending the summer in a big city like Starling at one of the top companies in the world was an amazing opportunity.

Felicity had been in the library at MIT studying for one of her finals when her mother had dropped the bomb on her. Donna had called and at first Felicity had sent her to voicemail. Donna, like most mothers, had the tendency to call at the most inconvenient times. The following text messages in all caps with the heart-eye emojis were excessive—even for her mother—and so Felicity had snuck into the back of the book stacks to call her.

Her mother had answered in seconds and before Felicity could even get out a "What's up, Mom?" Donna had started gushing about how she'd met the most amazing man, instantly fell in love, and had tied the knot in a whirlwind wedding.

Despite being in the back of the library, Felicity was pretty sure everyone could hear her sharp gasp and choked response. Felicity found herself even more stunned when her mother said that it was to Malcolm Merlyn. He was the CEO of Merlyn Global and one of the wealthiest men in the world. Felicity had to admit that Malcolm was definitely a step up from her mother's past relationships, but that didn't make the news any easier to swallow. It didn't take long for Felicity to put the pieces together and realize why exactly Merlyn Global had sought her out for an internship. Although she was completely confident in her tech skills, it was nepotism that had gotten her the job. By the time her mother had mentioned that she would also have a new stepbrother, Felicity was a disappointed and confused pile of goo on the floor.

Needing time to process, Felicity had told her mother she had class and would call her later. It was probably an hour that she sat on the floor in the library as she tried to come to grips with a new reality. Her mother had managed to turn her entire world upside down in a matter of minutes, and Felicity wasn't sure whether to be more angry or hurt that her mother didn't think it was necessary to discuss any of this with her beforehand.

The next day, when Queen Consolidated finally did get in touch with her about its internship program, Felicity was even more eager to interview. And when she was offered the position, Felicity immediately accepted. QC had been her first choice, since it was one of the best companies in the world with its cutting-edge research and technology. Her supervisor would be the director of the cyber security division, which was the exact division Felicity had been hoping to work in. Being able to call up Merlyn Global and reject its offer had been an added bonus.

Her mother hadn't been happy about it and tried to use one of her guilt trips. "But Malcolm was so excited to have you at MG! It would give you a chance to get to know each other better." Felicity wouldn't budge and had explained to her mother that while she appreciated the offer, she wanted to earn what she got.

A week later, after finals were over, Felicity found herself in Starling standing outside of her new,
ridiculously gigantic home. Her mother had opened the door squealing in excitement and had pulled her into a hug. Malcolm and his son Tommy stood behind her in the foyer to greet Felicity. Her new stepfather had smiled and welcomed her graciously into his home—now her new home. Despite the warm greeting, Felicity couldn't quite shake the feeling that there was something a little off about him. She assumed that underneath that charming smile, he was irritated that she'd rebuffed his offer. Nevertheless, Felicity had faked a smile and thanked him before turning to Tommy.

Felicity didn't know what to expect from Tommy. She'd read all about his transgressions in the tabloids. His reputation as a handsome, spoiled playboy had Felicity bracing herself for the worst. After her terrible break-up with her boyfriend Cooper and that creepy lacrosse player who wouldn't leave her alone, Felicity didn't know if she could handle dealing with another slimy, egotistical male who thought he was God's gift to women. Tommy, much to her surprise and relief, had been polite and genuinely kind during that first meeting. Felicity got the sense that he was just as wary of her as she was of him. When their parents started kissing and the same uneasy look formed on his face, Felicity realized she wasn't alone in her discomfort of the entire situation.

Tommy had then offered to give Felicity a tour of the house. It gave them the chance to break the ice and talk without their parents' watchful gazes on them. Not wanting to beat around the bush, they immediately acknowledged the awkwardness and insanity of their current situation. Eventually, they started chatting about normal things like school and their favorite videogames—something Tommy had not expected her to know much about. Despite their long list of differences, they actually got along pretty well. Tommy also took it upon himself to show Felicity around Starling in the following days, which gave them a chance to get to know each other better. Tommy was definitely charming and a ladies man, but he was kind, funny, and respectful of Felicity. She'd always secretly wanted a sibling and had to admit that Tommy would probably be a cool big brother.

Besides Tommy, the only other silver lining had been her internship. It was the perfect distraction for Felicity as she tried to adjust to the many changes in her life. The Merlyn mansion was beautiful but seemed cold and much too big to feel like an actual home. Felicity relished leaving it every day to work at QC. It kept her sane.

Despite it only being two weeks, her internship was everything she'd hoped it would be. Felicity loved that she got to work on actual projects and sit in on meetings. When her supervisor realized how good she actually was, Felicity got to take on a bit more responsibility. She was starting to get crazy busy but didn't mind. Felicity loved challenging herself. The biggest surprise, however, hadn't been being called into the CFO's office to fix a problem that had stumped even his best technicians. It had been a visit from Oliver Queen.

They were bound to meet at some point, since she knew that he was Tommy's best friend. But Felicity hadn't expected the encounter so soon. Like with Tommy, Felicity was aware of what the media said about him. Oliver was also known for being a spoiled, rich playboy, yet Felicity was willing to give him a chance, too. Even more surprising than their meeting was her initial reaction to him. Felicity knew he was good looking—it was hard to find a bad angle in any of the paparazzi photos—but she hadn't been prepared for the magnetizing presence that went along with that handsome face. It's what prompted one of her epic rambles.

Felicity had watched the surprise and amusement play over Oliver's face as the words tumbled out of her. By the time she'd managed to get a hold of herself, Felicity had wanted to crawl under her desk and hide in embarrassment. She'd become her worst nightmare. She'd become one of those teenage girls that got all flustered and tongue-tied at the sight of a cute boy. No, not cute. Oliver was more than cute. He was downright sexy. At seventeen, no one would fault Felicity for acting like the adolescent that she was.
But Felicity was supposed to be a genius and more mature for her age. She wasn't supposed to stupidly point out to Oliver that he was cute. The guy didn't need to be told he was handsome. The jerk already knew it. His boyish grin when admitting that it was beer he'd spill on his laptop and not a latte had the desired effect and totally made her weak in the knees. Not that Felicity had shown it. And although she'd searched for a reason not to like him and maintain some dignity, Oliver hadn't been a jerk to her at all that day. In fact, Oliver had been kind and gracious of her help. He'd also been remarkably intense. It had been difficult to concentrate afterward with him sitting right next to her, watching as she worked to retrieve the files.

When their hands accidentally touched, the air had grown thick between them. Felicity found herself getting lost in those sharp, mesmerizing blue eyes of his. They barely knew each other and yet she felt like he could see inside of her. His stare made the butterflies in her stomach flutter to life. She'd almost been looking forward to a quiet lunch in solitude; she needed to get a hold of herself before he came back for the files. Then Oliver had asked Felicity to lunch, and her stupid stomach had betrayed her. There was no backing out and what was daunting was that she didn't want to deny him. She wanted more of that intensity masked behind light banter.

The moment she had taken Oliver's hand, Felicity felt something shift inside her. There was no defining it; it was simply a feeling that her world was once again about to be turned upside down. She'd felt his eyes travel the length of her body, which she couldn't fault him for because she was doing the exact same thing to him. He towered over her, making her feel small and oddly comforted at the same time.

They'd gone to lunch, and Felicity had done her best to ignore the looks they were getting. It made sense that Oliver would attract attention, since his family owned the company. It wasn't long, however, before everyone else seemed to fade away as they became completely wrapped up in their own conversation. It had been fun and casual on the surface, but the intensity had never wavered. A part of Felicity felt guilty for not telling Oliver her connection to Tommy as he talked about him. Although she knew Tommy had told Oliver about his father getting married and mentioned having a new stepsister, he hadn't gone much more into detail. They'd both agreed to keep her identity under wraps until the wedding reception. They already had pressure from their parents to get to know each other, and Felicity wasn't used to so much attention on her. They didn't want everyone questioning them and trying to force something. When they hung out in public, there was no pressure or extra attention and that's how they preferred it.

That finally came to an end today. Heads turned as Felicity made her way through the crowd. She knew exactly what they were thinking. Not only were they questioning why someone as distinguished as Malcolm Merlyn would marry a waitress from Vegas, they were also wondering what was up with his awkward Goth of a stepdaughter.

"Who wears all black clothing and dark lipstick to a wedding reception?" one woman had whispered. Of course, that same woman had pasted a sweet, fake smile on her face when she noticed Felicity nearby. She wasn't the only one, and no amount of polite smiles that Felicity was offered were enough to mask the inherent snobbery.

"I heard they met in a topless lounge..."

"Did you open the invitation? What a mess! I had glitter in my hair for three days..."

"I still can't believe Malcolm married that woman. She's the complete opposite of Rebecca. Totally classless."

"They probably eloped because she's pregnant."
"She doesn't look pregnant in that dress. It can barely fit her..."

While Malcolm's guests gossiped, her mother's guests were busy gushing over the giant diamond wedding ring, the extravagant mansion, and the ridiculous champagne fountain. This was in between asking Donna if she knew of any other handsome billionaires she could set them up with. Feeling a migraine coming on, Felicity wanted nothing more than to sneak off to her room and lock the door. The battle for social hierarchy at this party was making her more irritated by the second.

Despite her efforts, Felicity did feel out of place. She'd never been that close to any of her mother's friends, nor had she grown up with a silver spoon in her mouth like Malcolm's. Her mother seemed oblivious to what was going on and mentioning it would only hurt her feelings. Felicity may not have agreed with her mother's decision to rush into this marriage, but that didn't mean she deserved to be ridiculed by a bunch of haughty snobs either. The only reason Felicity hadn't snuck off yet was because she knew Oliver would be arriving soon. Her eagerness to see him had nothing to do with the fact that she couldn't stop thinking about him since his visit to QC a few days ago. He also wasn't the reason she spent an extra hour in front of the mirror picking out her nicest short, black lace dress—or so she told herself. It was silly but aside from Tommy, Oliver was the only other person she really knew at this party.

Felicity hoped that Oliver wouldn't be mad that she hadn't told him who she really was. Maybe it would be better if she sought out Tommy first and let him do the explaining. He didn't seem to be near the food, so she checked near the dance floor.

"Who's the bride again?" asked a young blonde to her friend.

The brunette beside her pointed over to Felicity's mom, who was by the fountain guzzling down another glass of champagne. "That would be her. Her name is Donna. Not exactly the kind of woman I pictured Tommy's dad marrying."

Felicity should've kept walking instead of darting behind one of the life-sized, sculptured shrubs. She knew where this conversation would probably go, but she couldn't help herself. Most of the comments she'd overheard had been from older guests. These two girls were around her age and apparently friends of Tommy. Felicity had seen them arrive earlier and thought about approaching them but had chickened out at the last second.

The blonde was pretty and had straight hair and bangs that framed her face nicely. She wore a strapless, purple dress and high silver heels. The brunette looked more like a model with her defined cheekbones and long curly hair. Her sleeveless orange dress clung to her skinny frame.

"She's a little rough around the edges compared to this crowd," the blonde acknowledged, "but she seems cool. You never know how opposites can attract. Plus, she's extremely hot. Can you blame the guy?"

"I'm sure those looks come at a price. In fact, I'd be willing to bet her attraction is tied to the other billions of reasons right in the bank."

"Laurel," the girl scolded, laughing.

"Oh, like you weren't thinking it, Sara," Laurel teasingly shot back. "I hope Malcolm had her sign a prenup."

There was a spark of recognition as Felicity remembered all the times Tommy had mentioned someone named Laurel. She was supposedly one of his closest friends and a really fun and genuine person. She'd grown up with him and Oliver. The way Tommy constantly talked about her had
Felicity thinking he might have a bit of a crush. She could see why. Laurel was certainly beautiful. And Sara, if she remembered correctly, was Laurel's younger sister by a couple of years.

Sara shook her head. "Spoken like a future lawyer."

“What? I'm just saying," Laurel replied. "It's not that far-fetched. It happens all the time. These gold diggers pick a target and—"

Felicity frowned. She was officially starting to question the "genuine" part of Tommy's description.

"Stop before someone hears you," Sara interjected. "Besides, I think Tommy having a new stepsister is way more interesting. I heard she's, like, seventeen and already going to MIT. She's like this super genius or something. I bet Malcolm loves that."

"Poor Tommy. His father is already so hard on him."

"Maybe it'll be good for him. Then he won't be so reckless."

"Says the girl voted Miss Best Wet T-Shirt at SCU."

Sara shrugged unabashedly. "What? I had to beat out twenty other girls. It was quite an accomplishment. Do you know how cold it was that night? My nipples could've cut glass."

Laurel, looking like she was trying to suppress a smile, rolled her eyes. "Just don't let dad find out. He'll flip."

"The only way he'll find out is if you tell on me. And if you tattle on me, then I might just have to tell dad about your slumber party the other night with—"

"You wouldn't," Laurel gasped.

"Silence for silence," Sara declared and smiled triumphantly when Laurel agreed. "And while we're on the subject, since when are you two hooking up again? I thought you had broken up."

"We're not broken up," the brunette answered, slightly defensive. "We're just taking a break."

"Which still includes hooking up?"

Laurel shrugged nonchalantly. "Occasionally."

"And are you allowed to see other people during this 'break'?" Sara responded, making air quotes.

"No. We both agreed to remain faithful to each other while we figure things out."

The blonde corrected, "You mean while he figures things out."

Laurel sighed loudly. "Jeez, Sara, what's with the third degree?"

"Look, I'm sorry, but this is, like, the third time you guys have broken up. It's hard to keep track. Not to mention, he's the one who initiated it this time."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"All I'm saying is it seems different. Usually you're the one ready to call it quits when he screws up. Not the other way around."
"I didn't screw up, Sara. We both have our reasons for needing space, and it's none of your business anyway."

"Fine. I won't say another word. Have all the 'space' you want," she muttered and held her hands up in surrender.

"Whatever. Can we get back to my original point?" she retorted. "As I was saying, Tommy barely knows his new stepsister. And MIT isn't cheap to attend. She could also need the money—"

"Oh my God, Laurel, will you drop the gold digger theory?" Sara chided, annoyed. "When did you become such a snob? Our parents aren't rich either."

"That's not the point. I just don't want Tommy to get hurt, because his father is having a mid-life crisis. Besides, did you see what she was wearing?"

"Yes. I totally want her dress, but I so don't have the ass for it. I wonder if she can give me some workout tips."

Felicity placed a hand over her mouth to keep herself from laughing out loud. She was really starting to like Sara. Laurel, on the other hand, not so much...

Laurel wasn't amused. "She looks like the missing member of the Addams family with all that black."

The smile slipped from Felicity's face. Okay, she officially didn't like Laurel. While she appreciated that the girl seemed to be looking out for Tommy, it didn't make her words any less cruel. Laurel's comments weren't that much different than the odd looks Felicity had been receiving all day. And yet, the words stung more harshly.

"It's called Goth."

"Whatever. I just have this weird feeling about her."

Sara sighed and shook her head at her sister. "Seriously, Laurel, you really can be such a snob sometimes."

Having heard enough, Felicity disappeared into the crowd. Forget about finding Tommy or waiting for Oliver. Felicity wanted to leave the party and be alone. She didn't fit in here and never would.

Felicity almost made it into the house when her mother headed her off.

"Where are you going, sweetie?"

"I think there's a stain on my dress. I was going to the bathroom to check it."

"Let me see. Where?"

Groaning internally, Felicity pointed to a random spot on her dress. "There."

"You're fine. I don't see anything. But you might want to rearrange the hem." She started tugging on the fabric. "I know how fond you are of black, but I really wish you could've worn some color—at least for today."

"Mom, stop," Felicity retorted and pushed her hands away.

"What? Oh, wait, your hair is a little messy." Felicity's embarrassment reached a new level when her mother ran her hands through the strands "There we go. Do you want a tiara? I think it would look so cute—"
"Mom, can you stop?" Felicity snapped. "I'm not five."

"All right. Sorry." She held up her hands. "I was just trying to help. You want to look nice when you meet Tommy's friends."

"Huh?"

Donna looked past her and waved. When Felicity turned around, she spotted Tommy over to the side. The two sisters, Sara and Laurel, were with him. And so was Oliver. He'd finally arrived. Felicity saw the spark of recognition in Oliver's eyes and felt her heart skip a beat.

"Well, don't just stand here. Go say hi," Donna said and gave her an encouraging push in their direction.

"Mom," Felicity hissed but it was useless. She couldn't not walk over there now. Tamping her annoyance at her mother and excitement at seeing Oliver again, Felicity tried to appear casual. "Hey," she greeted Tommy and stood awkwardly beside him.

"Felicity, I'd like you to meet my friends," Tommy stated. "This is my best friend Oliver, Laurel, and her sister Sara. Guys, this is my new stepsister Felicity Smoak."

"Hi, it's nice to meet you." Felicity shook each of their hands and resisted the urge to squeeze Laurel's with a little extra force for her earlier insults.

"It's nice to see you again, Felicity." Oliver's expression was quizzical. He was no doubt trying to figure out why she didn't tell him who she really was.

Tommy grinned. "You've already met?"

"Oliver stopped by QC the other day. He needed some help with his laptop." From the corner of her eye, Felicity noticed Laurel's frown as she looked back and forth between them. It was then that Felicity realized she and Oliver were still shaking hands. The spark was back, causing her skin to heat where he touched her. She was the first to let go.

"Oh, the beer. Right. Sorry again about that, man."

"No worries, Tommy," Oliver replied, still not looking away from her. "Felicity was able to salvage everything I needed. You were right. She's really smart."

"Sorry I didn't mention that I knew Tommy," Felicity apologized. It was probably best to get the truth out now. "We were sort of trying to keep it quiet for as long as possible."

"Keep what quiet?" Laurel inquired.

"It's not every day your parents randomly call you to tell you they've eloped in Vegas. Well, my mom has told me about other crazy couples eloping in Vegas because it's Vegas. She especially knows all of the celebrity dirt. It happens all the time. Not to say that my mom and Malcolm are crazy. Okay, maybe a little crazy since they barely know each other. But there was the wedding news and then the 'you've got a big brother now' bombshell. Plus moving to Starling and starting at QC and—"

"Basically, we both needed time to adjust," Tommy cut in.

"Right. What he said." Felicity had never been more thankful for the interruption. "I think I need some champagne from the fountain."
"Aren't you underage?" he pointed out, though his tone was more teasing than stern.

"Yes, but at least I won't get drunk and destroy a piece of perfectly good technology," Felicity retorted. "Do you know how much that laptop was worth?"

"You're cute," Sara laughed. "So, Felicity, how do you like Starling? It must be the total opposite of Vegas."

"It's definitely not as hot, which is a nice change," Felicity answered. "And I really like the fact that there isn't an Elvis chapel around every corner." They all laughed at that.

"I've been trying to take Felicity around the city and show her the best spots. You like sushi, right?" Tommy asked her.

"Oh, I love it," Felicity enthused.

"Ollie, we should take her to that new place tonight. I hear everyone's been raving about it."

Oliver nodded. "Yeah, we could—"

"Actually, Oliver and I already have plans tonight," Laurel interjected.

He frowned at her. "We do?"

"Yeah, we had that thing we had to do."

"What thing?"

"That thing," Laurel emphasized and gave him a pointed look.

Felicity's brow crinkled in confusion as she watched the exchange. Laurel was being weirdly cryptic while Oliver stared back with a blank look. A moment passed before her words seemed to click.

"Oh, right. That thing," he muttered.

"Yeah," she said with an alluring smile.

Felicity's stomach dropped as realization dawned on her. Oliver was the guy Laurel had been talking about earlier. Tommy had never mentioned that the two were involved. He'd only ever referred to them as his friends. Now that Felicity knew to look for it, she could see the unspoken intimacy between them. The pair was standing close together, with Laurel leaning into Oliver ever so slightly. The look in her eyes, which he met, was coy yet smoldering.

"Felicity felt like a complete fool. Of course Oliver would have a girlfriend. Well, not technically a girlfriend since they were on a "break." But he was clearly involved and thus unavailable. He was Oliver Queen, after all. So what if he stopped by her cubicle for help the other day and they'd shared a few moments? Looking back on it, he'd never hinted at anything more. Felicity's little infatuation was simply due to her annoying teenage hormones. And to think she'd been so excited to see him today. Had she really expected anything to happen between them if they hung out again?

She wanted to be angry with Tommy for leaving out that very important detail, but it wasn't his fault. If his friends were broken up, she could understand why he wouldn't mention their involvement right off the bat. Although she and Tommy were sort-of siblings now, that didn't automatically mean they were obligated to share everything. It wasn't like she'd been that forthcoming about meeting Oliver—or her initial attraction to him. That kind of closeness and trust would take time to build.
Nevertheless, Felicity's earlier desire to flee the party had become acute. She didn't want to know what "the thing" was, but she had a pretty good idea. Felicity suddenly felt queasy. "We can do sushi another time," she told Tommy. Food was the last thing on her mind at the moment.

"Or you can do the mysterious 'thing' another time," Tommy declared and made quotes in the air. He obviously didn't know what was going on, but Sara's tiny smirk showed that she did.

"Actually, maybe we can reschedule," Oliver said, pulling away from Laurel. He looked to Felicity, but she couldn't meet his eyes.

"Awesome," Tommy enthused just as Laurel scolded, "Oliver."

"Laurel, it's not that big a deal. We can have..." He paused and seemed to be searching for the right words. "Mexican another night."

Laurel narrowed her eyes and placed her hands on her hips. "But you promised me tonight."

"Guys, it doesn't have to be sushi tonight. We can totally do Mexican instead," Tommy piped in, to which Sara snickered.

Well, this took a turn, Felicity thought. She didn't know whether she wanted to laugh or throw up as they argued about their "thing" in code.

As the pair continued to go back and forth, Felicity nervously whispered to Tommy, "Do you think we should leave them alone?"

"They'll be done in a minute. Don't worry. They're always like this," Tommy murmured back.

"Always," added Sara with a big grin. She was clearly amused by the drama.

"It's not about that, Oliver. It's about saying one thing and then doing another."

"Well, maybe I'm just not hungry," Oliver shot back.

"Well, I—"

"Laurel, we're at a party," Oliver interrupted before she could go off again. "Now really isn't the time for this."

"Fine," Laurel huffed. "But for the record, I'm not hungry either anymore."

"So no dinner then," Tommy mumbled under his breath.

Felicity tried not to stare at the opposing couple despite the palpable tension in the air. The urge to babble something to fill the silence hit her, and she bit her lip to keep quiet. When she finally raised her head, she noticed Oliver watching her. Felicity felt her face get unnaturally hot.

"Tommy, I can go with you and Felicity tonight," Sara finally spoke up. "I've been seriously craving some spicy tuna."

"Great," Tommy eagerly replied. "We'll pick you up at seven."

"So, Felicity, you like Sushi and technology and come from Vegas," Laurel said. Her voice, thankfully, sounded calmer than it had moments ago. "Is there anything else we should know about you?"
Felicity was slightly caught off guard by her sudden interest and answered, "Um...I like to read—and build the occasional super computer."

"Cool," Sara commented. "I can't even get my iTunes to sync up correctly. Hey, do you know how to fix that?"

"Building computers," Laurel continued. "Wow, that's different—and pricey."

"What do you mean?" Felicity replied, sensing some kind of setup.

"It just seems like you have expensive taste," Laurel said casually. "You don't have to worry about being new. I'm sure you'll fit right in with Tommy's crowd now that you're a Merlyn."

"My mom may have changed her last name, but I haven't. And what exactly are you implying?" Felicity pressed. "Wait, let me guess. You, like everyone else, think my mom and I are after Malcolm's money."

"I wasn't—"

Felicity didn't give her a chance to continue. She'd been hearing this stupid gossip all day, and she'd had enough. Laurel was the last straw. "For your information, my mom worked sixty-hour weeks in six-inch heels just so that I would have a shot at going to a good school. It's why I was able to eventually earn a full scholarship to MIT. Just because we're not rich doesn't automatically mean we're desperate for money or that you and everyone else I've had to listen to today has the right to judge us."

"Felicity, no one is judging you," Oliver cut in and gave Laurel a look.

"Oliver's right," Tommy agreed. "I know your mom is a good person. Too good for my dad, if I'm being honest. Who cares what these people think? My dad's friends are a bunch of assholes anyway. It's why Oliver and I always used to steal their food and booze before taking off from our parents' parties."

"And Laurel didn't mean to sound so harsh. She's a future lawyer, so she questions everything. Right, sis?" Sara jumped in and nudged her sister.

Laurel at least had the decency to look slightly embarrassed. "Right. I'm sorry, Felicity. Sometimes I get a bit carried away. It's nothing personal."

"Sure." Felicity's tone was dismissive, but Laurel's words from earlier still stung. Despite the remorseful act she was putting on, Felicity knew Laurel had said what she'd truly been thinking. Felicity couldn't help but add, "We're pretty normal. It's not like we're from the Addams family or anything like that."

Both Laurel and Sara's eyes widened as Tommy and Oliver looked on in confusion between them. Laurel was the first to look away, and Felicity felt a surge of satisfaction at having put her to shame.

"Hey, kids, are you having fun?" Donna interrupted. Malcolm was by her side with his arm wrapped around her. Felicity hadn't even noticed them walk up. "I've been dreaming about this day all my life. Well, aside from the my actual wedding day. I just knew the champagne fountain would be a hit!"

Tommy raised his flute. "It was a good call, Donna."

"Are you kids doing anything after the party tonight?" Malcolm questioned.
"We're taking Felicity out to dinner," Tommy answered.

"Oh, that's so nice. Maybe we should all go as a family," Donna suggested.

"I think it's just going to be the kids, sweetie," Malcolm said to her. "Besides, we'll be busy. I booked us the honeymoon suite at the Essex hotel for a few nights."

"Oh my God, really? Aw, honey, that's so romantic!" Donna pulled him in for a passionate kiss.

Felicity and Tommy exchanged nauseated looks. Their parents looked like a couple of horny teenagers. When the newlyweds did finally pull away, Donna turned to Felicity. "Be sure to bring your fake ID, honey, in case you want to go to a few clubs later."

"Mom," Felicity exclaimed.

"What? There's no need to be embarrassed." She said to the others, "It really is so hard for her being in college and being so young. She's so mature, and she shouldn't have to miss out on any fun just because she's a genius. Right?"

"Mom, please stop," Felicity practically begged.

"Oh, there's Gwen," Donna suddenly exclaimed.

"Friend of yours?" Malcolm questioned.

"More like a frenemy. We used to work together until she married some investment banker. The entire week before she left Caesar's Palace she wouldn't stop bragging."

"I can ask her to leave if she's unwelcome."

"Oh, no need. I invited her,"

Malcolm smirked. "So the invite was a form of payback?"

"Maybe just a little bit," Donna said with a sheepish shrug.

"Let's go say hi," he declared with a devious grin, which also had Donna beaming.

"See you kids later. And don't be shy to try out the dance floor. You're much too young to just be standing around and talking," the bubbly blonde called over her shoulder.

After they'd left, Felicity placed her head in her hands. "I have to go die now."

"Line forms behind me." Tommy downed the rest of his champagne and patted her back in solidarity. He really did have the big brother part down so far.

"She's right." Laurel leaned into Oliver. "Let's dance."

He shook his head. "Laurel, you know I don't dance."

"Come on, just this once. For me?" Her smile was sweet but her stare told a different story. Felicity assumed that Laurel wanted to get him alone to talk.

That nauseating feeling was forming in the pit of Felicity's stomach all over again. Looking away from the couple, Felicity happened to notice movement near the back doors of the mansion. Her whole body tensed when she saw who was standing there.
Tommy must’ve noticed her stiffen because he asked, "What's the matter?"

Felicity quickly excused herself, mustering the calmest smile she could, and marched towards the tall, blond figure. She couldn't believe he'd actually come here. As she walked away, Felicity was vaguely aware of Oliver asking if that was her boyfriend.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Felicity demanded before taking him by the arm and leading him into the house.

She glanced one last time over her shoulder and saw that Laurel had finally dragged Oliver onto the dance floor. As if he could sense her eyes on him, Oliver looked in Felicity's direction. Their eyes locked for what must've been a moment but felt like a lifetime. If she didn't know any better, it almost appeared as if he wanted to follow her.

"Who's that?"

The spell was broken, and Felicity finally looked away. She didn't answer. There was no reason to.

Tiny beams of light cut through the darkness of the room. One beam, in particular, was shining directly onto Felicity's face. She squeezed her eyes tighter to block out the light, but it was no use. It was too bright. Shifting positions, she opened her eyes and blinked a few times to get her bearings.

Felicity was tangled in a mass of sheets and shivered as the cold air hit her back. Her very naked back. In fact, she wasn't wearing clothes at all. It took a moment for the early-morning fog in her brain to clear. She was in Russia on a mission that had taken a very unexpected turn. Felicity's mind was a jumble of images—playing cards, Russian mobsters, and Oliver. He was alive and posing as Anatoly's nephew. After vaguely explaining what had happened to him when the Queen's Gambit had gone down, they'd spent the night together. The memory of passionate kisses and intimate touches made goose bumps form on her skin.

Felicity sat up suddenly and looked at the empty spot next to her. Her eyes searched the room; she was alone. Her gown was still in a heap on the floor, but Oliver's clothes and suit jacket were gone. Maybe I imagined it, she thought. There were times she missed Oliver so much that she'd dreamed him next to her, only to wake up alone and disappointed in the dark. The stress of the mission could've exhausted her to the point that her mind was playing tricks on her.

Placing a hand on her head, Felicity sighed. She couldn't have imagined it. Her body was sore in the best way possible, and that was because of him. God, she'd missed him. Disappointment threatened to take hold of her in his absence, but Felicity refused to give in. Oliver was alive, and that's all that mattered. Of course it would've been nice if he'd actually said good-bye to her before leaving. There was still so much that had been left unsaid between them. Staring at his side of the bed a second time, Felicity noticed a small piece of paper on his pillow. She unfolded it and read the written message.

Felicity,

I'm sorry I had to leave without saying goodbye. In truth, I'm not sure I'd have been able to walk away with you watching. And I couldn't take the chance that someone would find us together. There are access codes below. Use them to get into the Bratva's hidden network and complete your mission. You have ten hours before they become invalid.

No matter what happens, you should know that last night was one of the best of my life. All
I've wanted these past five years is to see you again and last night was more than I could've dreamed. Please don't try to look for me. It's not safe and I couldn't bear it if anything ever happened to you. Take care of yourself. Maybe we'll meet again one day...

—O

Felicity read the note three more times as she furiously wiped away the tears falling from her eyes. She knew why he had to leave, but that didn't make it hurt any less. Finally, she'd learned the truth only to lose him all over again. There was no promise that Oliver would come back to her. All that he'd given her was a giant dangling maybe.

Getting out of bed, Felicity grabbed her bathrobe and laptop. She sat at the small table by her window and began typing. Just as he'd promised, Oliver had given Felicity the access codes to hack into the Bratva network and get the exact coordinates of the arms deal. She was just about to text Curtis when she noticed a text from Sara. She wanted to know if Felicity had found a cute guy to hook up with last night. Her best friend had obviously meant it as a joke. Unfortunately, it hit too close to home and Felicity felt herself fighting off another wave of tears. She didn't have time to wallow when that arms deal would be going down in a matter of hours.

A knock sounded on her door, making Felicity jump. She clutched her bathrobe and walked to the door, a mixture of excitement and dread forming a knot in her stomach. It wouldn't be Oliver. The reason why he'd left her had been because he didn't want to get caught. He wouldn't risk that by returning now. Regardless, Felicity found herself praying that he'd changed his mind and come back. She checked the peek hole and saw Barry.

Forcing a smile onto her face, she answered the door. "Hey, Barry, what's up?"

"We're meeting in Lyla's room in five minutes."

"Oh, good. I have some—"

"Waller's video conferencing in," Barry interrupted.

Felicity felt her stomach drop. "What? Why?" When he didn't answer right away, she surmised, "Because of me."

"Like Lyla said last night, it wasn't your fault. You did your part. You weren't in control of the tech."

Felicity sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "This day just keeps getting better."

"Hey, are you okay?" Barry questioned, concerned. "You look like you've been crying."

"Why would you say that?" Felicity replied calmly, trying to keep it together.

"It's just that your eyes look a little red."

"I was up late trying to hack into the Bratva network. I think I've found the information we need."

"Really? You got in?" Barry excitedly replied. "That's awesome. You probably saved the mission. Waller can't stay mad after that."

Felicity was sure Waller would have a look of disdain on her face when she saw them even if the bug had worked. She wasn't big on giving compliments. A job well done was usually rewarded with a dismissal and another assignment.
"Let me get dressed, and I'll join you guys in a few minutes."

"See you in there," Barry said with a nod before leaving.

Felicity quickly got dressed in a pair of black pants, a turtleneck, and boots. After dragging the brush through her unruly hair—while attempting not to think about how it was Oliver's hands running through it all night that got it that way—she put it up in her usual ponytail. Everyone was already in Lyla's room when Felicity arrived. As expected, Waller was on the computer screen and did not look pleased.

"Miss Smoak, thank you for finally joining us," Waller derisively stated. "I thought you'd gone missing again like last night."

"I was gone only for a short time. Eventually I was able to get away from Anatoly's nephew," Felicity answered.

"If only the bug you'd planted had been as successful," she challenged.

"It was in position, Sir," Lyla spoke up. "As I explained last night, the tech itself was faulty. But thanks to Felicity, we were able to get a description of Anatoly's infamous nephew. We'll upload it to the database as soon as we return home."

Felicity's stomach twisted with guilt as she listened to Lyla repeat her lie. But what was done was done. All Felicity could do now was keep a straight face and make sure she didn't let the team down a second time.

Waller eyed Felicity before muttering, "How fortunate. And yet you are no closer to completing the task I had originally sent you there for, which is putting a stop to this arms deal."

"I can try and access the bug remotely once more," Curtis offered. "Maybe I can reboot it and—"

"Actually, I spent the night hacking into the Bratva's network and finally got in this morning," Felicity cut in. "I know exactly when and where the arms deal is going down today. We should have no trouble intercepting it. Everyone but Barry looked at her in shock.

"Agent Michaels, why was I not immediately informed of this change in information?" Waller demanded.

Lyla glanced briefly at Felicity, who was quick to come to her defense, "The information was confirmed mere minutes ago. I was on my way to update Agent Michaels now."

"Well, Miss Smoak, it seems you've managed to prove yet again why you are much more valuable to me in front of a computer screen."

Felicity didn't miss the meaning behind Waller's words. The opportunity to do any more field work had been revoked. If Felicity wasn't already overwhelmed by the whole Oliver situation, then she probably would've felt worse about it.

Waller turned her hard stare to Lyla. "Agent Michaels, prep your team and head out. I want official confirmation as soon as you have those weapons."

"Yes, Sir," Lyla responded. When the video feed was finally cut, Lyla breathed a sigh of relief with the rest of them. "That could've gone much worse. Good work, Felicity."

"How the heck did you manage to get in?" Curtis inquired. "I've been trying all night and gotten
"It's complicated, but I have my ways," the blonde said.

"Since when are you such a badass?" he teased.

Felicity managed a grin. "Since always."

"All right, suit up," Lyla said to the team. "Curtis, we need details about the location so we know exactly what we're walking into. Felicity, stay on the comms with us and keep an eye on any additional threats during the exchange."

"On it," Curtis stated and took a seat in front of the work station. He held out the chair next to him for Felicity while the others bustled around the room to prepare. "I guess some things never change," he mumbled.

Felicity sat in front of her computer, feeling the weight of Oliver's absence, and nodded dejectedly in agreement. She was essentially right back where she started. As much as it hurt to go back to the status quo, Felicity would endure it all again. Oliver had been right. No matter what happened, Felicity would always treasure their night together. Not only was she able to spend the night in the arms of the man she loved, but her team would be able to complete their mission because of him. Felicity couldn't ask for anything more.
Harder to Breathe

Chapter Notes

Once again, thank you guys for your comments and kudos! I love reading your reactions. Glad you guys are enjoying the new and improved Merlyn-Smoak family. I always wished we'd gotten to see more interaction between Felicity and Tommy on the show. So I really enjoyed writing the scenes in this chapter. Please read and let me know what you think!

February 14, 2012

"Okay, spill."

"Spill what?"

"Why you've been moping around for the last few weeks."

Felicity met her stepbrother's probing stare with an obstinate one of her own. "I have not been moping."

"Uh, yes you have. Your brow is crinkling as we speak," Tommy countered and pointed at her face. "It always crinkles when you're worked up about something."

She raised her hand to smooth it out. "It is not!"

He wasn't buying it for a second. "Felicity," he demanded.

Felicity stabbed at her dumplings and let out a sigh. This was not how she'd imagined their conversation going when Tommy had initially invited her out to lunch. They'd both been busy over the last couple of weeks. Tommy was running his new club while Felicity was investigating a new threat for A.R.G.U.S. That didn't leave them much sibling bonding time, and so she'd jumped at the chance to meet up. It wasn't often that she got much down time during the day.

"I'm just...dealing with some stuff," the blonde replied.

"Is it work? Because I thought things were going well. You're always traveling for tech conferences, and there was that possible promotion."

Felicity bit her lip and moved her food around her plate. There was only so much she could share with her family and friends. Calling her chance to work in the field a promotion was as close to the truth as Felicity could get. "Yeah, the promotion didn't exactly pan out." Waller had been true to her word. Felicity was, once again, stuck behind a computer screen.

Tommy gave her a sympathetic look. "Aw, Felicity, I'm sorry. Did your boss say why?"

She shrugged like it was no big deal. "She decided that my current job is a better use of my skills."

"You know, you could always work for Merlyn Global."
Shaking her head, Felicity replied, "Tommy, I want to earn my position. Not get it because I'm family. If anyone understands that, it should be you."

"That's not what I meant. What I'm trying to say is you have options. My father has been trying to recruit you for years. He'd jump at the chance to hire you. Even Walter has made offers."

"It can be a bit frustrating at times, but I love my job, Tommy. I don't want to leave." The real source of her frustration was being unable to locate Oliver. Although he'd told her not to try and find him, there was no way Felicity could let him disappear again. Unfortunately, Oliver really was like a ghost. No matter how many leads she followed, she simply couldn't find him.

"Well, something is bothering you," he persisted.

"Maybe it's just this time of year," Felicity mumbled. "I hate Valentine's Day. Can't wait until this day is finally over."

"What happened with that tech guy Sara had set you up with?"

"That was a month ago, and he was a jerk."

"So you'll try again."

Felicity shook her head. If only Tommy knew how much more complicated her life had become recently. But like with most things in her life, she couldn't share that with him either. "As I said, my head needs to be at work right now. A lot is expected of me." She added, "What about you? You've been working a lot lately. Do you have any plans for tonight?" Noticing the way Tommy immediately stiffened, her own concerns for him were confirmed.

"The club, which I just opened and you have yet to visit, is having a couples night," Tommy stated. "So I'll be working."

"I promise I'll drop by when I can." It wasn't that Felicity wasn't proud of Tommy or didn't support him for finally taking the initiative and building something for himself. It had been one of the best decisions he'd made in a long time. Felicity just didn't know if she could handle going out and partying like she didn't have a care in the world—like her heart hadn't been aching for the last month.

"I'll make sure you and Sara get VIP passes. She says she's going to drag you out of your apartment sooner or later," Tommy declared in his usual charming, carefree tone. "I told her I'd help."

Felicity knew he was putting up a front. She wasn't the only one suffering and trying to deflect. Leaning across the table, she asked, "How are you doing, Tommy? Really."

Her stepbrother's smile faltered. The mouthful of food he was about to take was placed back on his plate. "I'm okay. Or I'm trying to be. It's kind of hard with all of these stupid Cupid hearts and giant talking teddy bears everywhere," he attempted to joke before sobering. "Every morning I get up and remind myself to breathe. Then I see something as simple as a Snoopy with a heart-shaped box of chocolates and the wind is knocked out of me all over again."

"Is that what I think it is?"

She bit her lip and nodded. "Yeah, I do."

Tommy was quiet for a moment, frowning with indecision. Finally, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, black velvet box. He placed it on the table between them.

"Is that what I think it is?"
Taking a shaky breath, he nodded. "I never told anyone about this, but I was going to propose to Laurel. I had it all planned out. From the candles and rose petals all the way down to the chocolate soufflé that I was going to attempt to make for her and place it in."

Felicity reached for the box and hesitated. "Can I?" With a nod from Tommy, she opened the box to find a large round-cut diamond ring. On each side of the platinum band were a series of smaller diamonds. The ring sparkled in the room's natural light. "It's beautiful," Felicity commented. "I'm sorry that she—I'm sorry that things didn't work out. You’ve been carrying this around all this time?"

Tommy nodded and then shrugged. "Life isn't always fair, is it?"

"No, it's not," Felicity agreed.

A loud shriek suddenly broke them out of their intense conversation. Their waitress, a youthful-looking brunette, was smiling with glee. "Oh my God, how romantic! Congratulations!"

The pair stared at her in utter confusion before realization dawned on them. Confusion transformed to mortified panic as the young woman jumped to the wrong conclusion. "Oh, no! This isn't—I mean we're not—" Felicity tried to say.

"Carl," the young woman called loudly to another server, capturing the attention of other diners. More people looked over. "Get the champagne. We've got an engagement in the house to celebrate! I love Valentine's Day!" Seconds later, the entire restaurant broke out in applause.

"Tommy," Felicity hissed. She could feel her face turning red from all of the misplaced attention. "Do something!"

Tommy placed his hand over his mouth, looking embarrassed while trying not to laugh at the absurdity of the situation. "If this makes the papers, we are going to have a lot of explaining to do."

Felicity stared at him for a moment before the corner of her mouth twitched. The situation was insane and wrong on so many levels, but it was also kind of funny. She couldn't help but laugh along with him. "Should I announce that my answer is no before or after we get the free champagne?"

Smirking, Tommy replied, "Definitely after."

It had started snowing by the time Felicity returned to A.R.G.U.S. headquarters that afternoon. She hurried into the building, shivering, and pulled out her employee ID. To anyone who first walked in, it would appear like any other office building. There was a front desk and security checkpoints to go through. However, if they ventured farther, they would find a couple of sets of armed guards in combat gear near the elevators. Before she could even get on, Felicity had to place her thumb over the keypad for fingerprint scanning to be granted access. The light turned green, and she stepped inside.

A.R.G.U.S. headquarters was a tall building, but Felicity rarely went up. The command center was located underground in the basement, along with her and the other computer analysts' work stations. If there was an attack on the building for whatever reason, they would be safe and still operational from below.

There was a stack of folders on her desk from this morning that she needed to finish going through. Lyla had asked Felicity to look into the digital trail of some incidents that had been occurring around the world and see if they were a viable threat. The project was highly classified, so Felicity wasn't
privy to any more detail than that. She was about halfway through before meeting Tommy for lunch. It would most definitely take her the rest of the day and possibly into the night to finish.

Felicity was in the middle of unbuttoning her coat when she saw that her desk was covered in something else other than paper and spare gadgets. A large bouquet of roses lay across it. She stopped short and stared in surprise. Glancing around, she noticed her coworkers smiling and watching her with interest. Apparently, the universe thought making her the center of attention today was hilarious.

"So, are those from Tommy?" Mei questioned.

"We heard congratulations may be in order," Caitlin added. "Where's the ring?"

Felicity turned to the two grinning women and groaned in frustration. "Oh my God! How the heck did you hear about that? Does everyone in Starling know?" She could feel a migraine coming on. It wouldn't be long before her mother was calling her up. Felicity had been single for so long, she was pretty sure Donna wouldn't care at this point that she was supposedly engaged to her stepbrother. "Tommy did not propose to me! The waitress just got confused. And he's my brother so that's totally gross."

"Relax. Jordan from Intelligence happened to be at the same restaurant this afternoon. He saw the whole thing go down. He said your mortified faces were hilarious," Mei laughed.

"Glad my epic embarrassment has been a source of entertainment for you guys," Felicity grumbled as she threw her coat over her chair.

"We're actually more curious about who sent you the flowers," Caitlin stated. "They arrived about an hour ago."

"I have no clue," Felicity replied and searched for some type of card. She found it toward the back of the bouquet and opened it.

_I will wait for you till dawn even if it is the darkest night._

Felicity's breath caught in her throat as she read the card. Her mind and heart raced. This couldn't be what she thought it was, could it? She reread the typed words on the card. Was it more than an anonymous endearment? Was there some kind of hidden meaning?

"Well, what does it say?" Caitlin pressed.

"Oh, um...just the usual 'Will you be my Valentine?' from a secret admirer," Felicity answered.

Mei rolled her eyes. "Cliché and vague much?"

Caitlin elbowed her in the side. "I think it's sweet. I would love a secret admirer."

"Who has a secret admirer?" Barry cut in. He eyed Felicity's desk. "Nevermind. Nice flowers, Felicity."

"Uh, thanks. Although I have no idea who could've sent them," she replied, trying to play it cool. Meanwhile, her thoughts were running wild.

"Maybe Sara set you up with someone new," Mei suggested.

"I doubt it. I told her I was done for a while after the last guy."
"Ooh, I know," Caitlin interjected. "Who's that guy we have a contract with? The one who helps with the prototypes for our tech and weapons? Tall, dark, handsome, and slightly geeky..."

"Ray Palmer," Felicity answered.

"That's the one. Every time he has a meeting with Waller he drops by to talk to you."

"No way. Everything we talk about is work related. He's not interested in me like that."

"Felicity, I've seen the way his eyes light up when he speaks to you. The guy is smitten."

"Ray's eyes always get wide when he's excited about something. It's kind of his thing," Felicity explained.

"Oh, I totally know how we can solve this," Barry exclaimed. "I'll dust the card for prints and run them through a few databases. Maybe I can get a match."

"No," Felicity was quick to object. They all stared at her curiously. "Look, I appreciate the effort to uncover my potential mystery man, but it's not that big a deal. Secret admirer or not, I plan on being home tonight in my pajamas, binging on mint chocolate chip ice cream and Doctor Who."

"Sounds like the perfect Valentine's Day to me," Mei agreed. "Secret admirers are overrated and a bit creepy."

Caitlin shook her head and mumbled, "And you guys say I'm the cold one."

"To be fair, your last name is Snow. But what have you got planned?"

"Nothing really, but I also don't feel like staying in the apartment. My roommate's got a date coming over, so I need to make myself scarce."

"There's this bar not too far from here that is having a single's karaoke night. I was going to check it out if you'd like to join me. Not that I'm asking you out on a date or anything," Barry was quick to clarify. "I just figured if you're not busy and don't feel like being totally alone, we could check it out together. Platonically. As friends. You know, since it's for singles. And we're both single. Obviously."

Felicity and Mei exchanged amused looks as Barry became flustered. Even Caitlin looked a little flushed.

"Actually, that sounds fun. I have to warn you, though, that I'm a terrible singer."

"Noted. So, um, should we meet around seven?"

The brunette nodded shyly. "Seven works for me."

"Cool. Great. So I'll see you later."

"Right."

Remembering that Felicity and Mei were also standing there, Barry said to them, "You're both welcomed to join if you change your minds."

"I don't know about Felicity and her stalker, but I'm good. Thanks," Mei answered.

"Secret admirer," the blonde automatically corrected.
"Whatever," she teased. "I've got to hit the gym. See you guys tomorrow."

"I've got to get back to the lab, too." With a nod to Felicity and another smile to Barry, Caitlin left.

"If you change your mind about the fingerprint thing, let me know," Barry offered once more.

"I'm good but thanks." Felicity sat at her desk and read the card a couple more times. Afterward, she dove into her pile of files. She needed to get through them, so she could be home at a decent hour tonight. Whatever would be waiting for her, Felicity had to be ready.

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**June 1, 2007**

"I can't believe Oliver lives here." Felicity stood outside the Queen mansion and gazed up in awe at the beautiful, regal structure. The light, grayish-brown brick made it look more like a castle than a home for a mere family of four. Felicity half expected a moat to surround it and a drawbridge to lower in order for them to enter.

It was even bigger than the Merlyn manor, which seemed utterly impossible. Felicity had been living there for almost a month now, and she still got lost in that place. It was probably because she wasn't too keen on exploring it. Between not wanting to catch her mother and Malcolm in another compromising position and the fact that the place creeped her out, Felicity decided to stick to certain areas.

"Pretty cool, isn't it?"

"It's amazing." Her sense of awe immediately turned to unease. Felicity looked down at the clothes she was wearing and started to second guess herself. When Tommy had invited her to movie night with him and Oliver, she'd assumed that they were going to the theater. Felicity had thrown on a pair of her ripped black jeans and a dark red halter top with her signature black combat boots. If Felicity had known that movie night was actually at Oliver's house—and that said house looked like it was fit for a literal queen—she would've worn something a little bit nicer.

Tommy led the way to the front door, which was also large and intimidating. "I hope you like action movies with lots of explosions."

"You mean we're not watching Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants?" Felicity mock pouted.

Tommy chuckled. "There's a thought. Blake Lively is seriously hot."

"Are you sure this is okay? I don't want to intrude."

"It's fine. Oliver and I have movie night all of the time. Laurel and Sara usually join in, too."

Felicity stopped in her tracks. "Laurel's coming?" Sara she could totally handle. In fact, they'd started texting and hanging out ever since the party. As great as Tommy was, Felicity was also glad to have a female friend a little bit closer in age.

The opposite was true for Laurel. Felicity hadn't seen her since their awkward and tense exchange at the party, and she preferred it that way. In fact, Felicity had also successfully managed to avoid Oliver. It wasn't necessarily on purpose. He and Tommy were always doing their "guy thing" and going out to clubs or sports events. It was probably for the best. The more distance Felicity put between herself and Oliver, the less likely she would be inclined to think about him. Even after she'd
learned that he had a sort-of girlfriend, Felicity couldn’t stop the stupid daydreams that would enter her mind or squelch the hope that he’d stop by QC again with some silly computer problem. Felicity needed to accept the fact that he would probably be getting back together soon with Laurel and that even if he didn’t—although everyone was sure it would happen—she probably wasn’t his type anyway.

"Actually, she’s taking a summer class to prep for the LSATs. I think she’s got a study group tonight."

"Oh, too bad," Felicity commented, not sounding all that sad.

"I know you two got off to a rocky start, but she still feels really bad about that," Tommy spoke up. "The next time we all hang out, I’m sure it'll be better, Felicity. I promise."

Felicity wasn’t so sure, but she smiled in acceptance for Tommy’s sake. "By the way, Sara has a date tonight."

"Oh. Then I guess it'll be just you, me, and Oliver. By the way, watch the popcorn. Oliver always ends up eating it all."

This time Felicity's smile was genuine. "I'll be on the lookout."

Tommy rang the doorbell. As they waited, Felicity felt the nervous excitement coursing through her body. If the outside of the house was extravagant, she could only image the inside. Plus, she’d be seeing Oliver...

He's off limits. He's off limits. He's off limits, Felicity chanted in her head.

The door opened to reveal a short woman with dark hair. Her eyes brightened when she saw Tommy and she affectionately patted his cheek. "It's good to see you again, Mr. Tommy." Her accent sounded Russian. "Mr. Oliver will be right down." She looked at Felicity curiously.

"Raisa, this is my new stepsister Felicity," Tommy introduced. "Felicity, Raisa here makes the best chocolate chip cookies in Starling City. I used to sneak into the kitchen to steal extras to bring home."

"I used to let you," Raisa joked. "He thought he was quite clever. It's nice to meet you, Miss Felicity. Can I get you anything?"

"It's nice to meet you, too," Felicity politely replied. "I'm fine. Thank you."

"Tommy!" exclaimed a young, female voice. Of the two staircases that were located on either side of the doorway, it was coming from the left. A girl with light brown hair in pigtails stood at the top. The dress she wore was bright and floral. She couldn't be more than thirteen years old.

"Hey, Speedy."

Felicity figured it had to be a nickname, and she soon learned why. The girl raced down the stairs in record time to jump into his outstretched arms. This had to be Oliver's little sister Thea. He'd mentioned her briefly that day at QC.

"How's camp been treating you?"

"It's so much fun. I got to ride my horse today and teach her a new trick."
"That's awesome," Tommy enthused. "Where's Oliver?"

"Ollie's upstairs taking a shower," Thea told him. "Hope you brought snacks. He takes forever."

Felicity couldn't help but snort. "Oliver prims?"

Thea, finally noticing Felicity, smiled. "You must be Felicity."

"That would be correct," Felicity confirmed.

"I could tell because of all the black. I heard you really like that color."

"Uh...thanks." Felicity didn't think Thea meant anything negative by her comment, but it left her feeling even more out of place. She'd probably heard it from her parents or other guests at the wedding reception.

Thea squinted at her. "Is that a nose ring?"

Instinctively, Felicity's hand flew up to touch the small gold ring. "Yup." She braced herself for another comment that would most likely reflect the public opinion on that, too. The only times she didn't have it were at QC and her mother's party.

"That's so cool," Thea complimented. "Where'd you get it done? Does it hurt? Do you have any others?"

"In Vegas, not that much, and yes if you count my ears," Felicity automatically answered.

"Ollie, isn't her nose ring so cool? Do you think Mom will let me get one?"

Felicity hadn't even noticed Oliver coming down the stairs. His hair was a little wet and when he got closer, there was the faint, spicy smell of his shampoo mixed with clean soap wafting towards her. Why did he have to smell so damn good? In that moment, Felicity decided there was no way she was sitting next to him as they watched the movie. She would be too distracted by his scent.

"Yeah, it is pretty cool," Oliver acknowledged, meeting Felicity's stare for a moment before quickly looking away. "But there's no way Mom will agree."

"Ugh, I never get to do anything fun," Thea whined.

"Didn't you just finish telling me how awesome camp is?" Tommy pointed out.

"Yes, but I'd be so much more popular if I had a nose ring," the petite brunette lamented.

Oliver grinned and nudged his sister. "Maybe when you're eighteen, Speedy."

"That's forever from now."

"They sell fake ones," Felicity interjected.

"What? They do? Where?" Thea rushed out.

"Where they sell everything—online."

"Cool! I'm going to look them up right now," Thea exclaimed. "Thanks, Felicity."

Felicity looked at Oliver and Tommy when they started chuckling. "What?"
"Thea's actually going to get one of those and start wearing it," Tommy answered.

"So?"

"So my mom is going to flip," Oliver added, grinning in amusement. "I can't wait to see the look on her face."

"Oh," Felicity responded. "Frack." She didn't know much about Moira Queen. What she did notice at the wedding reception was how proper she looked. From her designer navy blue dress to the confident way she carried herself, Moira exuded poise and elegance. The woman probably wouldn't be caught dead with a piercing on any other part of her body other than her ear, and that most likely also extended to her daughter.

"It's not that big a deal. Thea is always looking for something new to try," Oliver assured her. He gestured to an entryway straight ahead. "Should we start movie night? I just ordered the pizza, so it'll probably be about a half hour before it gets here."

"Do you have popcorn?" Tommy inquired.

"Of course."

"Then lead the way, buddy."

They entered the living room, which was just as extravagant as the foyer. The room had a Victorian look with sophisticated fabric couches, old paintings, and crystal figurines scattered about. Behind the main couch, in a glass case, was a large model boat. The only modern looking object was the large flat screen TV and sound system mounted to the wall.

It took about ten minutes for them to decide on a movie. Much to Felicity's amusement, it was Oliver and Tommy who couldn't agree. The disagreement was settled by a coin toss—real mature—which had Oliver shouting in triumph and Tommy sulking like a two year old. Oliver hadn't even pushed play when Tommy's cell phone went off.

"Oh, I have to take this," Tommy said. "Can you give me a few minutes?"

The room was silent after Tommy left, except for the steady ticking of the nearby grandfather clock. Felicity shifted on the couch and searched for something to say. She hated awkward silences. "So what kind of pizza did you get?" she blurted out. Smooth.

"Two pepperoni and two buffalo chicken," Oliver answered.

"Good choices." Felicity's stomach was doing somersaults. She didn't know if she was more hungry or nervous—it was probably both—but she needed something to do. Felicity reached for the bowl of popcorn, only to quickly pull her hand back when it brushed Oliver's. "Sorry."

"No. Go ahead," he insisted.

"Are you sure?"

Oliver nodded. "You're my guest."

"Thanks." Felicity placed the bowl in her lap and took a handful. "I guess it's a good thing I got it first. Tommy says you hog the popcorn."

Oliver's eyes narrowed at that. "Huh. What else has Tommy been telling you about me?"
Felicity shrugged. "Nothing...much."

"That's encouraging," he chuckled.

"He's only told me what I've asked." Felicity instantly regretted her choice of words.

Oliver's eyebrow quirked up as an impish grin formed on his handsome face. He moved closer on the couch, filling part of the space Tommy had occupied, and took the bowl to place it between them. He grabbed a handful of popcorn. "Oh? And what have you asked?"

Feeling like she had nothing to hide behind because he'd taken the bowl away, Felicity innocently tilted her head and lifted her shoulders. "Just things here and there." She was being purposely vague. Felicity couldn't very well tell Oliver that she'd casually asked after the party how long he and Laurel had dated (two years) and if Tommy thought it was serious (yes). "Like...like..." There were plenty of less awkward things she'd asked, but none were coming to mind. Finally, she replied, "Like how the two of you can possibly end up in the tabloids so many times in one week. What was up with that crazy party last weekend?"

Oliver took the bait and dropped his penetrating gaze. Smirking, he replied, "It's a gift. The party was a lot of fun, too—at least until the cops showed up. And by cops, I mean Laurel's dad."

"Oh, right. He's a detective," Felicity said. She remembered Sara mentioning that one of the times they'd hung out. "Seems kind of odd, though, that he'd show up for a house party."

"He only did it because it was me. He doesn't really like me."

"That's got to be...awkward."

"You have no idea. One time I went to shut the door to Laurel's bedroom, and he threatened to tase me."

Felicity laughed and blurted out, "If I ever had a guy in my room, I'm pretty sure my mom would shut the door herself." She bit her lip in embarrassment at the admission. Panicking, Felicity tried to explain, "Not that I haven't had a guy ever in my room. I mean, I'm in college and obviously I have guy friends who've been in my dorm room. And there was my now ex-boyfriend Cooper. Not that I was sleeping with him. I mean, he wanted to. He's a guy so of course he'd want to but he, like, really wanted to and it got to a point that—I'm just going to stop talking now."

Felicity wanted to bang her head against the nearest wall. Her mouth always got away from her, but why did she have to say the absolute most humiliating things in front of Oliver? Why didn't she just come right out and tell him she was a virgin? Not that she was ashamed of it, but it was still personal and not something she would usually share with a person she barely knows.

The amusement that had been on Oliver's face moments before disappeared when he said, "He sounds like a jerk."

Felicity huffed, "He was."

"Was he that guy I saw you with at the party?" She thought she detected a slight edge to his tone but dismissed it as yet another concoction of her imagination.

Felicity's brow furrowed in confusion for a moment before her body tensed at his words. She shook her head. "Um, no." For once, she didn't feel the urge to ramble.

When Oliver realized she wasn't going to elaborate, he continued, "Well, I would've invited you to
my party but Tommy didn't think it was a good idea."

Felicity bit her lip and looked down at the popcorn bowl between them. "Oh."

"It wasn't anything against you. To be fair, I wouldn't want my younger sister there either. Laurel
wouldn't let Sara come, although that didn't stop her from sneaking in later on."

So that was the party Sara had been trying to convince her to go to last week, Felicity thought. She'd
already put in a long week at QC and was trying to work on her entry for a big IT competition, so
she'd passed on the invite. "While I really don't like people making decisions for me, I get it. Big
parties aren't really my thing anyway."

"Tommy seems really protective of you. The only other person I've known him to be that way with is
Thea," Oliver explained.

"Honestly, it's actually kind of nice," Felicity admitted. "With my dad gone and being an only child, I
never really had that."

"Did he pass away?"

"Uh, no," Felicity murmured, trying to ignore the wave of pain she felt every time she talked about
it. "He left when I was really young."

"I'm sorry." Oliver looked like he wanted to say something else but decided against it. "Well, you
can come to our next party once we get settled into our apartment."

"Apartment?" she muttered. "Oh, are you and Laurel back together?" This was exactly why she
needed to cast Oliver from her mind. While Felicity was having outlandish fantasies, Laurel and
Oliver were actually taking their relationship to the next level.

His eyes narrowed quizzically. "No. Me and Tommy."

Felicity gaped at him, equally perplexed. "Tommy?"

"Yeah. What? Did someone tell you I was moving in with Laurel?"

Frack, Felicity thought. She wasn't sure what was going on, but she got the feeling she'd really
stepped in it this time. "Um..."

"Felicity, who said that?" Oliver demanded, his large form looming over her.

"Look, I don't want to cause any drama," she rushed out. "Maybe I misheard."

He wasn't letting up and leveled her with one of his intense looks. The kind that was equally
smoldering and intimidating and most likely to turn her into a babbling mess. "Felicity."

"Laurel might have mentioned something to Sara that you were considering it after you got back
together," she relented and was quick to add, "But you did not hear it from me."

Oliver was silent for a moment and stared at the frozen TV screen. He ran a hand through his hair
and sighed before looking back at her. His expression softened. "Thanks for telling me. Don't worry.
I'm not going to say anything."

"Tommy never mentioned that he was moving out." Felicity felt a small wave of panic hit her. She
really liked Tommy. Even though he wasn't always around the mansion, she felt comforted to know
that he was nearby.
"It's just for the summer. We're looking into a couple of places, so it's still early. He probably wanted to wait until it was a sure thing."

"I guess that makes sense." Felicity wasn't able to completely disguise the disappointment in her tone. "Can't say I blame him for wanting to move out." She'd get her own place if she could afford it.

"I take it you don't like living at the mansion either?"

She shrugged. "I don't want to sound ungrateful. It's beautiful, and Malcolm's been very generous. It's just not..."

"Home?" Oliver finished for her.

She met his gaze. "Yeah."

"Do you miss Las Vegas?"

"That never really felt like home either," she revealed and forced a smile. "Maybe one day I'll find it."

"Hey," Oliver murmured and placed his hand over hers on the couch, "you're always welcomed to come over and hang out with us. Okay?"

Felicity didn't know whether she was more surprised by the invitation or his touch, but both brought a real smile to her face. "Thanks." That simple offer meant more to her than he would ever know. They sat in silence for a couple of minutes, neither looking nor pulling away.

Then: "How come you're not wearing your glasses?"

Blinking out of her daze, Felicity's eyes widened at the unexpected question. "Oh, I only wear them when I'm working. IT is a pretty male-dominated industry, and I find they help people take me more seriously. I know they make me look a little nerdy," she sheepishly mumbled.

"Actually, I think they suit you."

Felicity hadn't been expecting that. "You do?"

He kept his eyes on her, with a hint of a charming grin. "Yeah, I do. Plus, nerds are kind of in nowadays."

Laughing, Felicity rolled her eyes at him. "Well, that's a relief," she mock teased.

Oliver chuckled along with her when his thumb started to trace small circles into her skin. The simple touch radiated throughout her entire body. Felicity became hyperaware of how close he really was. If it wasn't for the bowl between them, their thighs probably would've been brushing against each other.

He's off limits, he's off limits, he's off limits, the chant began. But it did nothing to chase away the warmth his touch was instilling into her body. Did Oliver know what he was doing to her? Did he feel that pull again, too? Was Felicity completely losing control of her emotions and assuming something that wasn't actually there? Was she a terrible person for not stopping this?

"Sorry about that, guys," Tommy's voice rang out from the entryway. On instinct, they quickly pulled their hands back and shifted away from each other on the couch. Felicity felt the loss of Oliver's touch instantly. "On the bright side, the pizza is finally here."
Felicity couldn't speak and took a moment to breathe, attempting to release the growing tension inside of her. Despite her better judgment, she sneaked one more glance at Oliver. He stared straight back and answered, "Good. I'm starved."

*I'm an idiot*, Felicity berated herself. She should've been lounging on the couch in her pajamas. Her hair would've been up in a messy bun, and she'd have a pint of mint chocolate chip ice cream in her lap while reciting every line from her favorite show. That had been the plan tonight.

The plan was not to rush home to get ready for her "secret admirer." For all Felicity knew, the flowers could've been delivered to the wrong person. There was no name on the card, after all. Yet, there she sat in her living room practically in the middle of the night with a bunch of lit candles, wearing a tight red dress, all alone. Not to mention that she had to get up early and work tomorrow.

With a frustrated groan, Felicity plopped her head back on the couch. "What is wrong with me?" She looked at the card again and read over the words carefully. Maybe the message didn't literally mean her mystery man would arrive at dawn. Maybe it was simply a metaphor for "admiring" her from afar with the "darkness" representing the secrecy of it all. She'd gone over it a hundred times in her head and still she had nothing to show for it.

"That's it," Felicity declared and stood up. It had been a long day, and she was tired and cranky. Mystery man be damned. She was going to go out of that uncomfortable dress to put on her pajamas before finally collapsing into bed. "I hate Valentine's Day," she grumbled while blowing out the last of the candles. Despite her protests, she'd become just like all the other hopeless saps buying into the manufactured holiday.

Even worse was that she'd somehow fed the delusion that the flowers were actually from Oliver and not most likely some random guy from the office. Yes, the note was mysterious. Yes, it was typed and left unsigned. No, it wasn't from Oliver. No matter how much Felicity ached for him, she had to stop obsessing over the situation. He was alive and they'd shared an amazing night together, but Oliver had been clear in his last note that that's all they could have. Valentine's Day was not "one day." It wasn't even in the vicinity of "one day." She worked for A.R.G.U.S., and Oliver belonged to the Bratva. It was a very wrong and dangerous combination, which he had obviously already figured out.

After Felicity washed her face, pulled her hair back and dressed in her pajamas, she ventured into the kitchen. She was stressing herself out, and the best way to calm down was to have some mint chocolate chip ice cream. It was a little late to get chip-faced, but she didn't care. Comfort food was a necessity at this point.

She was just about to raise the spoon to her mouth when she heard a rustling sound by the window. Months ago it would've totally freaked her out. In fact, she was so scared one time that she'd called Sara in the middle of the night to come check it out. The rustling wasn't because of an intruder or some creepy peeping Tom. It was actually her neighbor's cat, who loved making loud noises while on the prowl and being a general pain in the ass in the middle of the night.

Felicity sat at the kitchen table and managed to eat a few mouthfuls of ice cream before a knock sounded on her door. She let out an exasperated sigh. Along with the cat, her neighbor really had no concept of time and manners. If Mrs. Ferdinand was desperate to find her little fur ball, she had no qualms about knocking on Felicity's door whenever she felt like it.

Not ready to part with the ice cream just yet, Felicity picked it up with a groan and walked toward
the front door. "Mrs. Ferdinand," she called while eating another mouthful and reaching for the door. "It's the middle of the night, and I already told you I haven't see your caaaat—"

Felicity's eyes widened in total shock as the spoon fell from her mouth and the ice cream dropped to the floor. She'd been expecting a short, little old lady wearing an ugly knit sweater and the largest pair of glasses Felicity had ever seen. Instead, filling up her entire doorway, stood a tall man in a snow-coated leather jacket and jeans with a Starling City Rockets baseball cap. It shadowed his face, but Felicity would recognize that strong, scruffy jaw anywhere. He lifted his head to look at her, revealing piercing blue eyes and a charming smile that still made her go weak in the knees.

"Hi, Felicity," Oliver murmured in that deep, husky tone of his.

Felicity shivered, but it had nothing to do with the cold from outside. She continued to stare. So she hadn't been crazy. It was Oliver. He had actually come. At the realization, the words slipped out: "Frack me."
Hey guys, I can't believe it's already finale week! I'm not quite sure I'm ready, and I'm not even going to try to guess what will happen. It's been an awesome week personally for me as a fan. As I'm sure you guys know, the cast was in NYC this week. I coincidentally had an interview across the street from the CW Upfronts and got to see Grant, Brandon, and Caity on their way out. The next day I randomly passed Victor Garber while walking to dinner with a friend. And then yesterday I got to see Stephen serving up pizza. So I'm pretty much on superhero overload! Lol!

Thank you guys for taking the time to comment and leave kudos last chapter. So glad you're enjoying the flashbacks as the present unfolds. Happy reading!

June 6, 2007

"Frack," Felicity cursed under her breath when she almost tripped over another stack of boxes. Tommy and Oliver's apartment was in shambles but that was to be expected when first moving in. She, along with Laurel, had spent the morning helping them to get settled and unpack.

The loft they'd gotten was amazing. It had a full kitchen and lots of open space for the living room, including two fireplaces built into the walls on either side. An entire wall of windows lined the back of the room with a set of doors that led to the balcony. The view of the city was breathtaking, and Felicity could only imagine how much more amazing it would be at night.

A long staircase to the right of the front door led to the upstairs and a set of bedrooms. She'd watched Oliver and Tommy debating over who should get the master when Laurel finally chimed in. Of course she said it should be Oliver—the hint being he'd need more space for when she stayed overnight. Oliver was quick to agree and placed an arm around Laurel, pulling her into his side. Felicity had looked away then, not sure why she felt a sudden pang in her stomach at the sight. Reconciliation was obviously in their future.

Despite that moment and the general tediousness of unpacking, Felicity actually had fun. Tommy had ordered pizza while Oliver popped open some beers—and a root beer for Felicity. It was a bonding experience of sorts as she helped them unpack their lives and build a new home. The only time it had been a bit awkward was when she was left alone with Laurel. They had made small talk as they organized things in the kitchen and living room, but it was hard to find much in common. Felicity couldn't help but remember how standoffish the brunette had been at her mom's party, and the strain between them was evident.

"Whoa, careful," Oliver cautioned and reached out to steady her.

The feeling of his fingers brushing the sliver of skin that was exposed from her crop top sent a shiver up her spine. Instinctively, Felicity's hands shot out to grip his biceps to support herself. They were so big, she couldn't even wrap her fingers fully around them. She resisted the urge to squeeze one
and see if it was as hard as it looked. "Sorry, I've always been a bit of a klutz."

He continued to hold her. "You good?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said with a shy smile.

"I think that's the last of it," Tommy declared while carrying another stack of boxes. The pair immediately separated as Laurel walked back into the room behind him. "Although, I can't seem to find the rest of the beer I bought earlier."

"Your new apartment is in shambles and you're worried about beer?" Laurel joked.

"Hell yes. How else are we going to have a killer housewarming party this weekend?"

"I say let's focus on getting rid of all of these boxes before we worry about booze."

"The downstairs is mostly done," Felicity chimed in. "Anything else you need help with?"

"I think that's it. We can handle our rooms."

"It's still a little bare in here." Laurel walked over to Oliver and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Ollie, we should go to the store this week and get some stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Like pictures or a rug. Anything to cozy this place up a bit."

"It's a bachelor pad, Laurel. It's supposed to look like this," Oliver countered and readjusted his backwards Starling City Rockets cap. His black t-shirt stretched with the flex of his muscles. Felicity forced herself to look away. The last thing she needed was Laurel catching her ogling Oliver.

"Besides," Tommy interjected, "we already have the decor covered. We're getting a foosball table."

"Right. Because that's a priority."

"You know it," Tommy joked and bumped fists with Oliver.

Laurel rolled her eyes. "Fine, I will go to the store myself."

"Laurel, it's our apartment and we just moved in. We'll handle it," Oliver stated somewhat curtly, pulling away from her to tackle the boxes that Tommy had just brought in.

"Felicity, what do you think?" Tommy asked her.

Felicity shrugged and tried to look busy. She didn't want to get in the middle of the sudden tension that had enveloped the room. Oliver seemed to be studiously sorting through items while Laurel watched with her arms folded. "I guess it depends what kind of theme you're going for. I mean, the loft is amazing in and of itself. But if you want to do something more, you've got several days before the party to decide."

Tommy turned to Laurel. "Tell ya what, Lance. Since Ollie here obviously isn't the Martha Stewart type, I'll go with you tomorrow and see what we can come up with. Deal?"

The brunette shot another look to Oliver, but his back remained turned. Finally, after taking in Tommy's eager grin, she said, "That sounds nice, Tommy. Call me when you're free. I'll catch you guys later. I've got to get home. We're doing our big Lance family dinner tonight, and I'm supposed
to help my dad cook." She called to Oliver, "You're welcomed to join us later, Ollie."

"Thanks, Laurel, but I should really stay in and sort through all of this. My parents want to stop by
tomorrow to see the place. My mom is already kind of freaked that I moved out and if she sees it a
mess, she's going to give me another lecture about living on my own and the meaning of
responsibility. But thanks for all of your help today. Text me later if you want." He gave her a quick
kiss on the cheek.


Felicity gave her a small wave and felt the strain leave her own body at the brunette's departure.

"What time are your parents coming?" Tommy asked.

"I don't know. Sometime in the evening," Oliver replied.

"You could probably make the Lance family dinner," Tommy knowingly pointed out.

"Probably. But then that means I have to sit through another one of her dad's interrogations about
what I'm doing with my life—which will be even worse since we're not technically together at the
moment."

"You better fix that soon, man. Otherwise I gave up that master bedroom way too easily."

"Well, Detective Lance leaving his gun on the table isn't exactly going to help things."

Tommy chuckled. "Seriously?"

"Seriously. Besides, Laurel is a terrible cook."

"Then I say good call, buddy," Tommy declared and patted his back. "Do you mind if I head out for
a bit? I've got some preparations to make for our party."

"No. Do what you gotta do. Just try not to go overboard."

"You know me, Ollie. Go big or go home." Tommy called to Felicity, "Want to come with? I can
drop you off back at the mansion."

Felicity really didn't feel like going back to the Merlyn mansion. Her mother was on a redecorating
spree of her own, and Felicity was trying to stay out of her way. It wouldn't be long until she
suggested a makeover for Felicity. Just the other day she'd questioned why all of Felicity's clothes
were so "dark and depressing." Definitely not the style of dress her mother thought would attract
eligible boys. "Actually, I don't mind staying and helping some more." She glanced uncertainly at
Oliver.

With a slight nod of understanding, Oliver said, "We're good here, Tommy. I'll take her home later if
you're not back."

"Thanks, Ollie. And thanks for helping out on your day off, Felicity. The guest room is yours if you
ever need it. Like when our parents decide they want to have sex again in the—"

"Tommy Merlyn, don't you dare finish that sentence," Felicity warned. It would take years of therapy
to get that mental image erased from her brain. Tommy laughed loudly before heading out. Felicity
shook her head and said to Oliver, "Maybe you should've let me fall. I might've banged my head and
lost that particular memory."
"So I take it Malcolm and your mom are very...affectionate," he commented, not even hiding his smirk.

"That's one word for it," Felicity sarcastically mumbled.

"Look at it this way, at least you know your mom is happy. My parents only show affection when they're at corporate or public events. Most of the time it feels like a cold front is in our house."

"Is that why you wanted to move in with Tommy for the summer?" she questioned.

Oliver met her gaze for a moment before looking away. "It's part of it," he casually answered.

Sensing that he didn't want to continue down that line of conversation, Felicity started babbling about random things. Like whether the study that found out double-stuffed Oreos weren't actually doubled-stuffed was true. Oliver totally believed they had more cream filling while Felicity argued that science didn't lie. Once they'd finally stopped debating and laughing at the utter absurdity of it, they both realized that they were hungry again.

"No more pizza," Oliver declared.

"We could order Chinese."

Looking around at the still disorganized loft, Oliver shook his head. "Let's go out. There's this place I go to sometimes when I want to disappear for a while. It's underrated, but it's good."

"Okay." After moving around all day and lugging boxes, Felicity was so hungry she was game for anything.

Oliver locked the door behind them as Felicity went to get the elevator. They made their way through the lobby, all the while with Felicity trying to guess the type of place Oliver was taking her. He was being super tight-lipped about it, which automatically piqued her interest. Felicity was about to go through the revolving doors when she stopped dead in her tracks. Oliver, not expecting the sudden halt, crashed into her from behind.

"Felicity?" he questioned but she stayed motionless. "Felicity, what's the matter?"

Frozen in place, Felicity stared at the tall blond guy standing out on the sidewalk. He watched her back intensely, also unmoving. The last time she'd seen him had been outside Queen Consolidated a week ago. He'd been waiting for her. After her threat to go to the police, Felicity had thought he'd finally gotten the message to leave her alone. Apparently, it still wasn't enough.

"Hey, isn't that that guy you know?"

"Yeah."

Oliver frowned. "What's he doing here? Did you guys have plans you forgot about or something?"

Felicity shook her head. "No." She inwardly cringed at the tremble in her voice.

"Felicity," Oliver said, forcing her to face him. "What is going on? Are you all right? Who is that guy?"

She wasn't sure why her body had started to shake in that moment. Felicity had been dealing with this for weeks and had managed to keep it together. Maybe it was that he was popping up in more places more frequently or the concern that was etched across Oliver's face but a deep feeling of
dread filled her. What would it take for him to finally leave her alone?

"Felicity," Oliver demanded, giving her a gentle shake to snap her out of it. "Talk to me."

Blinking a few times, she was finally able to focus on the man in front of her. "His name is Jason. He's a lacrosse player at MIT."

"He's a friend?" he replied, trying to piece it together.

"No. He's..." Felicity hesitated, debating how much to tell him. She didn't want to drag Oliver into her problems, but clearly dealing with this on her own wasn't working. Her fear was real, and she needed to let someone in before it consumed her. "I met him once at a party just before I moved to Starling. We talked and flirted, and I liked him so I gave him my number. He started texting me hours later. It was so many texts. Too many. It kind of freaked me out, so I backed off. When he didn't stop, I hacked into his phone and erased my number. Then I totally blocked him. I thought he'd get the message that I wasn't interested but then he would park outside my dorm room and just wait. I confronted him and told him to leave me alone. I thought that was it but then I saw him at my mom's party and then he showed up at QC and now he's here and—"

"Felicity, hey, relax," Oliver cut in mid-babble. He placed his hands on her shoulders. "Take a deep breath." Meeting his eyes, she did as he said and breathed in. "Good. Now, does your mom or Tommy know about this?"

She shook her head. "No. I haven't told anyone. I thought I could handle it and told him last week that I would go to the police. But that's it." Felicity wiped at a stray tear before it could fall. She was scared but refused to cry anywhere near that psycho.

Oliver took a step closer and cupped her face. "Okay, the important thing is that you're safe. Stay here, and I'll handle it."

"What are you going to do, Oliver?" she whispered, seeing the sudden shift in his expression. The concern he'd shown seconds prior hardened into something cold and fierce.

His voice was low and menacing when he answered. "He and I are going to have a little chat."

Rage was a new emotion for Oliver. There were plenty of times in his life when he'd been angry. When he'd let his temper get the best of him and lashed out. One annoying member of the paparazzi who'd been harassing him and a date a few years ago came to mind. The guy really was asking for it and so Oliver, in his drunken state at the time, had taken a swing at him. Of course the press sided with the reporter and made Oliver look like the bad guy. But even then, he'd never been so angry that he was seeing red. Not like he was now.

The tall, gangly lacrosse player—or Jason as Felicity had called him—stood outside the building with a determined stare as Oliver approached. Of all the explanations that had played in Oliver's mind about the mystery guy he’d seen with Felicity, stalker had never even been in the realm of possibilities. It baffled him that she would keep something like this to herself—especially if she was as scared as she seemed—but now that she'd confided in him, Oliver was going to make sure this creep never bothered Felicity again. The fact that this guy had followed Felicity all the way across the country just to harass her awoke a sort of primal, protective instinct inside of Oliver. An instinct he felt compelled to unleash.

"You don't belong here," Oliver called to the guy. There was no need to beat around the bush.
Jason barely spared Oliver a glance. Instead, his eyes were focused behind him. "I'm here to see Felicity."

"As she's told you many times before, she doesn't want to see you."

"So she's talked about me." He smiled. "I knew it."

"You know nothing. You're not welcomed here."

"I want to hear it from her."

Oliver stepped into the guy's line of sight, blocking his view of Felicity. "You're not getting anywhere near her ever again. Now get the hell out of here before I call the cops."

Jason smirked. "I doubt the cops would come if you called. Even if they did, you've had so many run-ins with them, they'd probably take my side. I know all about you, Oliver Queen. You're not even worthy to be in the same room as my girl, let alone touch her."

"You're right," Oliver said with a deadly calm. "Forget the cops." Within seconds, he'd grabbed Jason by the collar and slammed him against the nearest parked car. The guy might've been a bit taller, but Oliver had a stronger build. Jason struggled to break from his hold with no success.

"Go ahead and hit me," Jason taunted when his efforts proved futile. "The media will love that."

"If you know as much about me as you claim, then you know that I don't have to lay one finger on you to make you suffer. My family has a lot of money. Money that we use to employ our own personal security team. All it takes is a phone call, and one of our highly-trained, former military bodyguards will end you. No questions asked. We have the resources to make things disappear. That includes people." Oliver looked him square in the eye. "You'll wish I'd called the cops."

Jason swallowed hard. "But Felicity—"

"Is no longer your concern. You don't text her. You don't call her. And you sure as hell don't follow her here or when she's back at school. If I find out you've so much as looked in her direction again, you're history," Oliver threatened, barely holding back the fury coursing through his veins. "You leave my girl alone. Do we have an understanding?"

Jason tried to appear calm, but there was no missing the tremors coursing through him. He knew that Oliver wasn't bluffing. "Yes."

He yanked him forward before slamming him back again. "Yes what?" Oliver demanded, his voice low.

"Yes, I'll leave her alone," he grunted, sounding pained. No doubt he'd have some bruises on him after their encounter. The guy was lucky he'd be walking away at all.

"Good. Glad we had this talk." Oliver released him and took a step back. "Now get the fuck out of my city."

Jason's gaze started to drift behind Oliver again, but he caught himself when Oliver took another intimidating step forward. He rubbed at his neck where Oliver had held him and nodded before taking off down the street. Oliver waited until Jason was out of sight before he went back into the building.

"Problem solved."
"For a minute there, I thought you might punch him," Felicity commented. She was still on edge but didn't appear as shaken up as before.

"I was tempted."

"What did you say to finally make him leave?"

"I said 'please.'" he quipped, then became serious. "Trust me, Felicity, he won't bother you again if he knows what's good for him."

"You didn't have to do that but thanks."

"Tommy would've done the same. Your mom or Malcolm, too, I'm sure. Why didn't you tell them?"

Felicity looked away and shrugged. "I don't know. I'm used to handling things on my own, I guess."

"Promise me you won't keep something like that a secret again. Even if you don't think you can go to your mom or Tommy, you'll come to me."

"Oliver," she started to protest.

He lifted her chin so she was looking him in the eyes. "Promise me that you'll come to me, Felicity."

"Why do you care?" the words came tumbling out. They were incredulous yet vulnerable.

Oliver wasn't sure he had an answer. He'd never gone out of his way for anyone he'd known in such a short time before. He settled on a version of the truth. "If some guy wouldn't leave my little sister alone, I would want someone to step in for her."

Felicity was silent for a moment, watching him. Finally, she nodded. "I promise."

His thumb lightly caressed the underside of her chin before releasing her. "Okay, let's go."

It felt weird to be back in Starling. The city had changed so much over the last five years. There was more graffiti and homeless people wandering the streets. That included some of the parts that had been considered more upscale. It wasn't like Oliver didn't pay attention to the news every once in a while to keep track of things, but it was different watching it on TV and then seeing it firsthand.

Oliver was at least relieved to know that Felicity lived in one of the safer areas. Pennytown was, thankfully, far away from The Glades—where Oliver had just been. He'd managed to convince Anatoly that it was time he pay a visit to the Starling City chapter of the Bratva. Anatoly had been concerned and even a little surprised at first. Oliver had never had an interest in going to Starling before. Since Oliver Queen was still presumed dead, Starling was the last place he should visit. However, Oliver was able to use his powers of persuasion and reminded Anatoly that their operations in Starling couldn't afford to take another hit. The SCPD had already intercepted two of their illegal shipments. A third would cost them dearly.

In the end, Anatoly's greed and impatience had won out. Oliver's presence in Starling would be a necessary warning to his comrades that further mistakes wouldn't be tolerated. As difficult as it was getting Anatoly to agree, it was twice as hard to dodge Diggle. He always followed Oliver, whether it be on business or a mission. Diggle didn't understand why Oliver suddenly wanted to go alone. Oliver couldn't very well admit that his entire plan was simply a ruse so that he could sneak off and
see Felicity. He had to be much more creative, which was why he'd purposely injured Diggle while they were sparring. A sprained ankle wasn't anything serious, but it would limit Diggle's mobility and usefulness in the field. Oliver felt terrible playing it off as an accident, but it was the only way.

Oliver checked his watch and ramped up the engine on his Ducati. He should've been at Felicity's hours ago. A motorcycle wasn't the best vehicle to be driving in a snowstorm, but it was best for protecting his anonymity. It didn't require another driver, and the helmet hid his face. He hoped that the flowers and note he'd sent were enough to give her a clue to his visit. Oliver didn't want to completely catch her off guard. It also seemed like a nice gesture considering it was Valentine's Day.

It did occur to him that Felicity might already have plans. The thought of her with someone else caused a knot to form in the pit of his stomach. Oliver knew he had no right to complain, but it tormented him just the same. Regardless, it was no worse than not being able to see her at all these last few weeks. He'd deal with the issue of her being involved with someone else if and when the time came.

Finally, Oliver made it to Felicity's street. It was a nice, neat looking residential area. He found her apartment building but didn't want to park his bike directly in front of it. The less evidence that something was out of the ordinary the better. Felicity's apartment was on the bottom floor, which luckily was surrounded by tall shrubs. Oliver wheeled his bike behind the bushes and left it underneath her window. Her curtains were shut, but he could see that her lights were still on. Oliver took off his helmet and replaced it with his Starling City Rockets baseball cap. He grabbed his small travel bag and placed the cover over his bike. He then wiped away the path he'd made in the snow before heading for her front door.

Oliver closed his eyes and took a deep breath. She was all he could think about, but what if she didn't want to see him? What if she was mad that he'd left her in the hotel room alone with just a note? What if she didn't want him to stay and cast him back out in the cold?

Shaking his head, Oliver pushed aside his doubts. They weren't doing him any good now. He'd made it this far, and Felicity was obviously still awake because she'd understood the note—unless she was up because someone else was over. That last thought made his fists clench. He needed to get a grip. It was now or never. Before he could lose his nerve, Oliver knocked on her door. There was a shuffling noise and footsteps.

"Mrs. Ferdinand," came her muffled voice. Goose bumps that had nothing to do with the cold formed on Oliver's skin. The door started to open. "It's the middle of the night, and I already told you I haven't see your caaaat—"

Something dropped to the ground. It looked like a spoon and a pint of ice cream. His eyes followed the length of her body—from her pink toes all the way up to her golden hair. Felicity's glasses were off, and she stared at him with wide eyes. Oliver couldn't help but smile as he took in her comfy tank top and pajama pants with the Russian nesting dolls pattern all over them.

"Hi, Felicity," he said.

"Frack me," she blurted out.

He stared at her, confused. "Excuse me?"

She blinked rapidly and opened her mouth several times before shutting it. Then, without warning, Felicity reached out and smacked him hard in the chest.

"Ow," Oliver muttered more from shock than actual pain. "What was that for?"
"You big jerk!" Felicity exclaimed. "You wrote me that letter, and I thought I'd never see you again." She whacked him a second time. "How could you just leave me like that without saying good-bye?"

"Felicity, I—" he started to say as her hand shot out once more. Oliver was expecting another hit but was even more surprised when she gripped his jacket and pulled him into a bone-crushing hug.

She clung to him as if he might disappear again. "But I'm so glad you're here."

Oliver wrapped his free arm around her and held on just as tightly. "Me, too." All of the longing and anguish he'd felt these past weeks being separated from her instantly vanished. Having Felicity in his arms again, Oliver finally felt like he was home.
I hope everyone had a great holiday weekend. Thanks so much for your reviews and kudos! I know many of you are eager for the Olicity present-day reunion. You'll get a little bit more of that, but the majority will be a continuation of the flashback. Next chapter you'll get full present day, so don't worry! ;) Happy reading and let me know what you think!

Felicity didn't know how long she and Oliver stood there in her doorway holding each other. She was still trying to process that he was actually in Starling. It seemed like the last place he would (or should) ever visit, and yet she was thrilled that her instincts had been correct.

"Does this mean I can actually come inside, or should I build a snow fort in the front yard?" Oliver murmured, breaking the silence.

"Oh, sorry," Felicity muttered and stepped aside.

"I believe this is yours," he said after bending down and picking up her spoon and the pint of ice cream.

She smiled shyly. "Uh, thanks. I'm just going to..." Felicity motioned to the kitchen and went to throw the ice cream back in the freezer. "There's a hook by the door to hang your coat on. I guess the snow has really picked up."

"Yeah. It's pretty bad out there." Oliver took off his coat and hat and set down his bag.

"I didn't think you were coming. I mean, I wasn't even sure if it was you." Felicity gestured to the flowers in the vase on her coffee table.

"It was the only safe way for me to contact you. I hoped you would understand."

"Well, a bouquet of flowers sent to my office in the middle of the day may be safe, but it's not exactly subtle—or your style."

"I did it on purpose. I figured if your coworkers thought you were seeing someone, it wouldn't seem strange if you were unavailable for a couple of days. In our line of work, it's not like our absences will go unnoticed."

"You certainly piqued their curiosity. I had to convince them not to dust for prints."

Oliver smirked. "They wouldn't have found anything. I'm good at staying off the radar."

"I've noticed," Felicity muttered and bit her lip. Her frustration and sadness at not being able to track him down these last few weeks were showing. His words seemed to click then. "Wait, you said a couple of days. Are you—does that mean you'll be in town?" She tried not to sound too hopeful but eyed his duffle bag by the door regardless.
"I'm here on business," he stated. Before the disappointment could set in, Oliver added, "At least that's what I told Anatoly to convince him to let me come. I didn't technically have to send you flowers to let you know I was coming, but I wanted to. It is Valentine's Day, after all."

Felicity's heart skipped a beat at his revelation. "They are beautiful."

He took a step forward, his gaze boring into her. "So are you."

Felicity felt her face get hot and tugged at her tank top. "When I imagined seeing you again, I definitely wasn't in my pajamas. I mean, I'm not implying that I was naked—although it's not anything you haven't seen before." A deep blush colored her cheeks. "I was wearing clothes. In fact, I had on this amazing red dress that I've had forever but never really had an excuse to wear. Then I changed because I was clearly losing my mind and had totally jumped to the wrong conclusion. Just because I wanted it to be you didn't mean it would be you. And I usually hate Valentine's Day anyway, but somehow I still got sucked into the high expectations with the candles and wine and it was just this big spiral and—"

Oliver quickly closed the distance between them and placed a hand on her shoulder to silence her. All it took was one admiring look to let her know that he would find her beautiful no matter what she wore.

"Why did you decide to come, Oliver?" she finally whispered. "In your letter, you said—"

"I know what I said, Felicity, but..." Oliver nodded over to the couch. "Maybe we should sit." He gently pulled her down next to him. "Felicity, when I wrote that letter, I honestly wasn't sure if I would be able to see you again. I didn't want to give you false hope and end up hurting you even more. I never intended for you to know about me, because I knew it would turn your life upside down."

"So what changed?" Her heart pounded as she waited for his answer with bated breath.

He took a moment before saying, "Felicity, I didn't just stay away from you all of these years to keep you safe. It was also because I knew if I ever saw you again, it would be impossible for me to walk away. And I was right, because not a day has gone by since our night together that I haven't thought of you. I realize I have no right to show up in your life again and will understand if you're angry and want me to leave but—"

Felicity didn't give him a chance to finish. Closing the distance between them, she silenced Oliver with an amorous kiss. "I could never be mad at you for coming home to me," she said and stroked his cheek. "This is what I wanted."

"It's only for a couple of days," Oliver reminded her.

"I know. Which is why we should make the most of them." Leaning in, she captured his lips once more in a soft caress. Felicity still couldn't believe that Oliver was actually there in Starling City and sitting in her living room, no less.

Oliver took hold of her hands and brushed his nose against hers. "So you really did all of this for me?"

"Yes," she breathed, both in response to his question and the way his touch was sending tingles throughout her body. Detecting the wonder and a hint of disbelief in his voice, Felicity asked, "Why wouldn't I?"

Oliver paused and drew back to look at her. "I thought perhaps you might already have plans. It's
been a while, and you even said that you weren't sure who the flowers were from. You could've decided to move on."

An amused grin tugged at the corner of Felicity's mouth. "Is that your not-so-subtle way of asking me if I'm seeing someone?"

He shrugged but didn't deny it. "Are you?"

"Yes, because the first thing I want to do after learning that my long-lost boyfriend is alive is to start dating other guys," she quipped.

Although her answer brought him a sense of relief, Oliver couldn't quite quell his curiosity. "Who else could the flowers have been from then?"

"No one that matters," Felicity assured him, rubbing his shoulders. "So why don't you open the wine while I get the matches? Now that you're finally here, we can officially celebrate."

With a nod, Oliver did as Felicity instructed. He poured them a couple of glasses of red wine while Felicity re-lit the candles.

"I'll go change—"

Oliver caught her hand before she could leave. "No, don't. I like you like this."

"In my pajamas?"

"Especially in your pajamas," he replied with a grin and handed her a glass.

"What should we toast to?"

Oliver was quiet for a moment before suggesting, "To second chances."

Smiling, Felicity clinked their glasses. "To second chances."

"This is where you're taking me?" Felicity questioned as she stood outside what looked like a tiny hole-in-the-wall pub. The bright, glowing sign above read "O'Connor's Irish Pub & Brewery."

"Yup," Oliver confirmed with a wide grin. "I told you it's a bit underrated. Were you expecting some kind of overpriced, yuppie restaurant where you'd need a microscope to see the food?"

Felicity smiled. "Pretty much, yeah."

"For once, I'm glad to disappoint." He noticed Felicity frown slightly at the dig he'd made at himself but pressed on, "Patches has some of the best food in the city."

The brunette's eyebrow quirked up. "Patches?"

"It's a nickname. You'll see why." Oliver held the door open and ushered her inside.

Although there wasn't much traffic on the street outside, the pub was hopping. The bar and most of the tables were filled. Despite it being a small space, Felicity was surprised to see a couple of pool tables and a dart board tucked away in the back. While she was taking it all in, Oliver had gone to the hostess. She smiled brightly at him and said something with a wink to make him laugh. She had
the most beautiful shade of copper hair Felicity had ever seen. Combined with her bright green eyes and porcelain skin, there was no denying her very appealing Irish heritage. Felicity wondered if it wasn't just the food that constantly drew Oliver to this place.

"Right this way, Oliver," the hostess proclaimed and led them to a booth toward the back and along the wall.

Felicity took the seat facing toward the back of the pub. She thanked the woman when she handed her the menu.

"I'm Sandra, by the way," the woman introduced herself. "My father owns this place. And you are?"

"Felicity."

"It's nice to finally meet you, Felicity. I've been telling Oliver for ages to bring his girlfriend around."

"Oh, I'm not his girlfriend. I'm..." Felicity trailed off, not quite knowing what she was to him. Could she say she was a friend? Did they know each other well enough to call it that? Identifying herself as an acquaintance or his best friend's stepsister seemed even more awkward.

"Felicity is a friend," Oliver answered for her.

Sandra eyed Oliver curiously before saying, "Welcome, Felicity. What can I get you to drink? We've got some traditional stouts and lagers. Or maybe you'd like a sweeter kind of ale."

Felicity quickly looked over the drink menu. "I'll have the Magners Irish cider." She didn't drink often but after her almost encounter with Jason, Felicity needed something slightly stronger than water. Sandra asked for her ID. Felicity pulled the fake one—courtesy of her mom—out and gave it to her. It thankfully passed inspection, because Sandra handed it back and had moved on to take Oliver's drink order.

"What?" Felicity asked Oliver once Sandra had left. He was grinning, obviously amused by something.

"Look at you being a rebel and ordering a beer," he teased.

Felicity rolled her eyes. "It's hard cider. There's barely enough alcohol in that to get me buzzed. Besides, you are definitely not one to judge, mister. Didn't you get arrested a few years back for peeing on a cop while you were drunk?"

"Luckily, I was so drunk I don't actually remember doing that," he quipped.

"How convenient."

"You're right. I'm not exactly the poster boy for responsible behavior. But I won't tell if you won't," Oliver replied and opened up his menu.

"Deal. So what's good here?"

"Everything."

"Oh, that helps," she laughed while perusing her options. Sandra came back moments later with their drinks and took their order. Felicity had decided on the traditional fish and chips while Oliver kept up with his beer theme. He ordered the steak and Guinness pie.

Oliver held up his beer bottle. "To finally getting out from under the boxes today."
"Cheers to that." Felicity clinked her bottle against his.

"Thanks for helping. I know it's not exactly the most interesting way to spend a day."

"Oddly enough, I had fun. And Tommy's been really good to me since I've moved to Starling. I figured I'd return the favor."

"We needed the extra pair of hands."

"Since your parents are visiting tomorrow?"

"Yeah," he grudgingly sighed.

"I'm not sure I get it entirely. I mean, you've lived away from home for college. Why don't they want you to get a place of your own over the summer?"

Oliver hesitated for a moment before answering. "Do you remember that day I visited you at QC?"

She nodded. "Well, I was supposed to meet up with my dad and Walter Steele afterward."

Felicity took a sip of her drink. "Judging by the broody look on your face, I'm assuming it didn't go all that well."

"Your assumption would be correct. They wanted to talk me into taking an opening in QC's Associates Program."

"Isn't that the one where you sort of rotate through different departments to get a feel for what they do?"

"That's the one," Oliver replied and took a swig of his beer. "My dad wants me to enroll in that over the summer. Ever since I told him no, it's been tense at home."

"Maybe I'm missing something here, but why wouldn't you do it?" she questioned. "Aren't you going to be running QC someday?"

"That's what my parents want from me. They have this vision of me graduating school and then taking my rightful place in the company as the heir to the Queen legacy."

"Sounds like a lot of pressure."

"It is. It's been hanging over my head since birth. The older I get, the more set in stone my future becomes."

"Not necessarily. Your parents can't make you want something. It's not only unfair, but it's unrealistic. You should be able to explore other options and see what's right for you," Felicity declared. "What exactly is it that you want?"

"I honestly don't know. But it doesn't help my case that I've been booted out of so many schools."

"Well, you've got a year left to figure it out. You're almost done," she said in an attempt to be optimistic.

"Actually, I got kicked out of my last school, too," Oliver admitted. "My parents don't know yet."

"Ah, well, forget everything I just said," Felicity murmured and took another swig of her ale.

Oliver spun the cap of his beer. Talking about his lack of direction in life always put him on edge.
"Basically, I'm totally screwed."

"Who else knows?"

"Just Tommy. He's the only other person who gets it."

Felicity wasn't sure if her next question was going to stoke the fire, but she was genuinely curious. "What about Laurel? You've known each other for a while, right? What does she have to say about all of this?"

"We've been friends forever but dating is different. There are so many more expectations. It's why we're on a break. I know how she is. She's already got our whole future planned out while I can barely make plans past next week. Sometimes I just feel like she sees what she wants to see. The last time I got expelled I happened to have had mono that semester. Laurel blamed it on that and thought that I'd fallen too far behind to catch up."

Felicity already knew the answer but asked anyway, "Did you?"

"I did have mono, but that wasn't the reason. I fell behind because I just didn't care enough to go to class."

"At least you're honest," she muttered.

Oliver quirked an eyebrow. "Do I detect a hint of disapproval?"

"No, I—well, yes but—" Felicity shook her head and shut her mouth.

"Tell me."

"It's none of my business."

"No, I want to know what you think," Oliver pressed. He could see how hard she was trying to hold back, which piqued his interest even more. "If you have something to say to me, Felicity, then say it."

"Fine," she relented. "I get where you're coming from, Oliver, about the pressure your family puts on you. Lord knows my mom has her moments. But I also think your parents have a point. There are so many people in this world who would kill to be in your position. To have the opportunities that are just handed to you. Maybe you feel like giving in to your parents' or Laurel's demands means you're settling. But I think just sitting back and letting everything be handed to you with no regard for the sacrifices that were made to give you those things is a form of settling, too. In fact, it's more than settling. It's a cop-out, Oliver. Because despite what you say, I think you really do care. I think you care so much that the thought of trying and failing is a bigger risk than never trying at all. But you can't give up and accept things, Oliver."

"If I had accepted my life, I would've resigned myself to the fact that I'd be a cocktail waitress in Vegas like my mother. I never would've tried in school. I never would've excelled in the gifted program. I never would've had the confidence to skip high school and apply to MIT, much less move across the country at such a young age to attend one of the most prestigious colleges in the world. I never would've busted my butt to earn my scholarships that are paying for me to get the best education that I can. And I never would've put the skills I've learned to the test by accepting the internship at QC. It's not easy and I'm not perfect, but I at least have to try. I owe that to myself. Nothing worthwhile ever comes easy. Until you finally step up and take some responsibility for your future, nothing is ever going to matter."

Felicity took a much needed breath when she was finished. She really hadn't meant to go off on
Oliver like that. In her frustration to get him to see the truth, the words had started pouring out. There was no denying that Oliver could be spoiled, selfish, and unreliable. She'd seen and heard as much not only from the media, but from his friends and family, too, over these past weeks. Oliver himself had even admitted that he didn't always make the best choices. It was easy to see why so many had the tendency to just write him off and accept him for face value.

Felicity, however, could sense that there was more to him under the surface. She'd seen glimpses of the kind, caring man Oliver could be. Opening up about his parents' strained marriage and the pressure he felt to live up to the Queen family name showed an intuitiveness to the situations unfolding around him. If she'd needed further proof, this afternoon when he'd confronted Jason had confirmed it. Oliver had picked up on her unease instantly and wouldn't let up until she told him the truth.

He'd been genuinely concerned about her safety and well-being. Felicity watched, somewhat in shock, as Oliver had grabbed Jason and slammed him against that parked car like he was nothing more than a rag doll. As cliché as it sounded, he'd swooped in like some knight in shining armor and handled the situation. No one had ever protected her so fiercely before. Even after he'd chased Jason off, Oliver wouldn't let the issue drop. He'd made Felicity promise that she would come to him if she had any more problems. She knew he wouldn't hesitate to step in then either. Still, it wasn't something she could read into too much. Like Oliver had said, he would've done the same for Thea.

"Wow," Oliver said after a moment of stunned silence. "I don't think anyone has ever been so brutally honest with me."

Maybe she'd said too much. "I didn't mean—" Felicity began when he interrupted.

"It's actually kind of refreshing. And you're right," he acknowledged. "I've got a lot to consider. Thanks, Felicity."

She accepted his thanks with a nod and quickly changed the subject. "So how did you find this place if it's so far off your usual radar?"

Oliver took a swig of his beer and shook his head, looking a little embarrassed. "A friend of mine last year threw a party in a nearby warehouse. I was already drunk but then Laurel and I had gotten into a big fight. I got even more wasted and wandered off. I was stumbling through the back alley when some guys approached me. They asked me the time. Even though I was drunk, I knew I was in trouble. If it wasn't for Patches taking out the garbage right then, they probably would've jumped me. But he's a big guy, so he scared them off. Then he took me inside and he and Sandra helped sober me up. Sandra's fiancé Nick, who's the cook here, drove me home afterward."

"Wow, that was really nice of them," Felicity commented, ignoring the small pang of delight she got upon learning that Sandra was already spoken for.

"They're good people," Oliver agreed. "Whenever something is bothering me or I feel like I need a break, I come here. It's the one place nothing is expected of me. I can just be."

The question as to why he was sharing this place with her was on the tip of Felicity's tongue. She held it back and, instead, decided to reveal a piece of herself in return. "I can make my own rules. Solve any problem. If there's nothing else I can fix in my life, at least I can fix that."

Their eyes met and held in the intensity of the moment. It wasn't until Sandra showed up with their food that the spell was broken. Felicity, feeling Oliver's eyes still on her, took the first bite of her meal.
“So, what do you think?” he asked.

Felicity grinned. "You were right. This food is amazing."

"That does happen on occasion," Oliver joked. He kept the mood light as they ate. Afterward, they ended up in the back playing a game of pool. Much to his astonishment, Felicity was actually good. She’d already beaten him twice.

"No way you’ll make that shot," Oliver declared.

"She probably will," said a guy sitting at a nearby table. A pretty blonde sat with him. They looked to be in their late twenties and thoroughly entertained by the show Oliver and Felicity were putting on.

It was Felicity’s turn to smirk confidently. "Watch me."

That was exactly the problem. Oliver couldn’t stop watching her the entire time. The way she handled the stick with confidence. The way she would bend over the table, causing her shapely butt to stick out as her crop top rode up. Oliver was lucky he could concentrate long enough to make any of his shots.

"Oh, come on," Oliver exclaimed, laughing, when she won for a third time.

"And that's game," the brunette triumphantly declared.

"Told you," the guy said as he and the blonde stood up.

"Just be thankful you managed to get such a hot date," the woman said with a wink as they passed by.

"Actually, we're just friends," Felicity called after them.

Ignoring them, Oliver grumbled, "I think my pool balls were rigged."

"Oh, please. There is nothing wrong with your balls. You just don't know how to use them properly," Felicity argued and then flushed even darker when she realized what she’d said. "Ugh, why do I even bother talking sometimes?"

Oliver laughed even harder before stepping into her personal space and teasing, "If you think you can handle them, be my guest."

Felicity's cheeks burned and she sputtered, "I cannot believe you just said that."

His smirk was unapologetic. "It was too good to resist."

She rolled her eyes and put the stick down. "What I meant to say was it's simple laws of physics."

"Well, I barely passed Algebra."

"I know. You got a C-." He gave her a questioning look. "If it's on the Internet, I can find it."

Shaking his head, Oliver led her over to the dartboard. "New game."

Felicity groaned. "Crap. I actually do suck at this."

"Then it's perfect," Oliver quipped and handed her the darts. "Ladies first."
Her eyes narrowed at him before she threw the first dart. It barely hit the outer edge of the board. "Happy now?" she grumbled.

Oliver took his position and beamed when his dart hit the bullseye. "Lucky shot."

"I don't know whether to be nervous or impressed."

"Impressed. Try again. You just need to get a feel for it."

Felicity made a few more pitiful attempts, but her darts never even came close to the center. They were all over the board. She sighed, "All right, Queen. You win this one."

"New game. This time, I'll help you. Come here." He ushered her to stand in front of him and turned her to face the board, once again. "You don't want to use your whole body to throw. It's just your arm."

Felicity inhaled a sharp breath when Oliver's hand landed on her hip. She knew the gesture was only to keep in her place, but that did nothing to stop the butterflies from throwing a party inside her stomach. His chest brushed her back as he took her hand holding the dart. The heat radiating off of his body mixed with the sweet, musky scent of his cologne was making her lightheaded. Get a grip, Felicity, she scolded herself. Pay attention!

Oliver's large hand enveloped hers and brought it up. "Draw your elbow back. Don't keep it straight. You actually want it to go up a little as you throw," he instructed in a low voice. Oliver guided her arm forward. "At this point you already would've released the dart, but you have to see the movement through. Don't stop. Ready?"

"See it through. Don't stop," Felicity repeated. "Got it." She followed his lead and released the dart. It was the closest shot she'd gotten to the center, but still not close enough.

"That was better. Let's try it again." They did a couple more practice throws with Oliver directing her movements before she did it on her own. "I still suck," she declared when she took a wide shot.

"You're focusing too much on the dart," he informed her. "Keep your eye on the target. That's what you want. Your arm will follow. Trust that."

"Don't stop," she murmured when he took her hand again. Oliver looked down and locked his gaze onto hers. They were so close and he was so much bigger that his entire body enveloped her. His hand tightened ever so slightly over hers. "Like you said," she quickly added.

"Right," he murmured. "I'll tell you when to release. Okay?"

Not trusting her voice, Felicity nodded. They both returned their attention to the board. He moved her arm a couple of times to practice getting in sync before he told her to let go. The dart sailed through the air and hit dead in the center.

"Oh," Felicity gasped in surprise. She smiled up at Oliver. "I actually did it."

Oliver beamed back at her. "Told you."

"Nice shot. You make quite the team," someone commented from behind them. It was a tall, beefy, older guy with reddish brown hair. Despite the roughness of his voice, he had a kind face. He also wore a jean vest that was covered in colorful patches with various phrases and pictures. Obviously, that's how he'd earned his nickname. "It's good to see you, Oliver. It's been a while." He placed two new drinks for them on the nearby table. "How are things? You back from school for the summer?"
Oliver discretely moved away from Felicity and answered. "Yeah. I'm good."

"Keeping out of trouble?"

"Mostly," he joked. Noticing Patches's curious stare, he introduced, "This is Felicity Smoak. She just moved to Starling recently, so I had to take her to the best place in the city."

"Damn right," Patches agreed and held out his hand for her to shake. "Nice to meet you, Felicity. Call me Patches. Everyone does."

"It's nice to meet you, too."

"I own this place so holler if you need anything. Any friend of Oliver's is a friend of mine."

"Thank you," she replied. Oliver had been right about Patches. His size definitely made him look intimidating, but there was a kindness to his words.

"Don't be a stranger, boy," Patches told Oliver and patted his shoulder. "Anyway, I'll let you get back to your date."

Their eyes widened, and they stood speechless while Patches headed over to the bar. After another moment of awkward silence, Oliver finally spoke, "We'll try one more game. Then I'll take you home."

"Okay," Felicity agreed.

She did her best to focus on the target like Oliver had taught her, but it was difficult to concentrate after Patches's comment. Why did everyone think they were on a date tonight? It was the twenty-first century, so the concept of a guy and girl hanging out together simply as friends wasn't that far-fetched. It wasn't like she and Oliver were all over each other—with the exception of him teaching her how to throw a dart. That touching had been necessary and was besides the point.

Felicity stepped up to take her turn. As she released the dart, another perplexing thought occurred to her. Even more unsettling than Patches's comment about their "date" was the fact that neither she nor Oliver had made the effort to deny it.
Hey guys! So since it's the first week of hellatus, I decided to be extra nice and give you another update. Thanks for your comments last chapter. So glad you're loving the flashbacks! Lord knows I was bored to tears this season with the ones on the show (bring on S5 Bratva!). I think you'll enjoy this next chapter. It's all Olicity, and you'll get more insight into the depth of their feelings. Happy reading, and let me know what you think!

"Oh, come on. You can't be serious," Oliver laughed.

Felicity covered her face in embarrassment and reaffirmed, "I am totally serious. I just about died."

"You and Tommy engaged," he mused. "I've officially heard it all."

"I swear I was waiting for it to hit the media. What a mess that would've been." Felicity had just finished telling Oliver about the confused waitress at the restaurant earlier. She didn't know how the topic had come up in their casual conversation, but she was glad he found it so amusing. The Oliver she'd met in Russia had seemed so tense and guarded—like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. This Oliver who could relax and laugh while they talked about everything and nothing was more like the one she'd known years ago.

"It probably would've sold a lot of papers."

"Our parents would've flipped. Well, maybe not my mom. She'd just be glad that I wasn't single anymore. But Malcolm definitely wouldn't have been amused. Tommy and I wouldn't hear the end of it." Oliver, suddenly, became very still as his smile dimmed. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," he answered while swirling the wine around in his glass. "I was just wondering about Tommy. How is he? Did he ever end up working for Malcolm?"

It was more of a loaded question than Oliver knew, and Felicity wasn't quite sure how much to reveal. She tried to keep her voice steady as she relayed the basics. "Tommy is good. He opened a new club in The Glades called Verdant. He got the idea about a year ago when Malcolm threatened to cut him off if he didn't join Merlyn Global. By the time Malcolm had canceled his credit cards, Tommy already had backers for the club and construction was underway. I haven't had a chance to go yet, but I hear it's great."

"Good for him," Oliver stated. He was relieved to hear that Tommy managed to get out from under Malcolm's thumb.

"I'm really proud of him," Felicity said. "It didn't seem like it at the time, but it was one of the best things to ever happen to him."

"I'm assuming the other best thing is the woman he's going to propose to."

Felicity bit her lip and stared at her wine. "Yeah."
"Who is she?" he inquired. It didn't take long for him to pick up on her unease. "Felicity, you're being uncharacteristically quiet. Come on, it can't be that bad."

"It's Laurel," she revealed.

Oliver's eyes widened at that. "Tommy and Laurel...wow. When did that start?"

She watched him carefully. "They started dating a few years after you were gone."

Oliver nodded. He probably shouldn't be so surprised. There were times he thought Tommy might've had a crush on Laurel, but he was so self-involved back then that he never took it seriously. Tommy was his best friend. He never had a reason not to trust him—not that Oliver would ever hold it against him. He wasn't exactly known for being an upstanding boyfriend back then. "Felicity, it's okay," Oliver said, misinterpreting her apprehension for insecurity. Laurel had always been a touchy subject between them. He took her hand in his. "I had let go of Laurel long before I left on the Queen's Gambit. You know that, right?"

"I know."

"I'm glad they have each other," he assured her. "They deserve to be happy, especially Laurel." He met Felicity's intent gaze and knew she understood.

Despite Oliver's reassurance, Felicity continued to feel torn. It wasn't that she doubted his feelings for her where Laurel was concerned. It was that she hadn't told him all of the details. Their conversation had been light and casual as they sat curled up on the couch facing each other. Telling Oliver the truth now would turn his entire world upside down again, and Felicity wasn't sure she could do that to him right now. Coming back to Starling was already a huge step for him, she knew.

"Is there something else?" Oliver inquired when she remained quiet.

"Tommy and Laurel...they, um...well, Laurel is..." It was on the tip of her tongue. At the last second, Felicity lost her nerve and blurted out, "They still live in the loft."

Oliver looked genuinely surprised. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. It's meant a lot to Tommy. It was his first step toward independence, and the last place he shared with his best friend. He never could give it up," she revealed, feeling all the more guilty for bending the truth. But she was firm in her decision. She would wait for the right time to tell him about Laurel.

Despite the pang in his heart at her words, Oliver couldn't help but grin. "Remember our first party there?"

Pushing her internal struggle aside, Felicity focused on the present. Nothing was going to taint her time with Oliver. "Oh, I remember—though I'll be shocked if you still do," she teased.

Oliver narrowed his eyes in challenge. "Why would you say that?"

"Oh, I don't know," she innocently replied. "Probably because you were so drunk that night."

"I wasn't completely wasted the entire party. You know that." He leveled her with one of his intense looks.

Felicity could feel the shift in the air immediately. It sent a jolt of heat through her as she met his gaze. "If you weren't drunk, then why did you let Max Fuller get to you?" she retorted. Max had
been a long-time rival of Oliver's. At the time, she'd never known why they didn't get along—just that they butted heads almost every time they were in the same room. Oliver knew that Max was there at the beginning of the party, but it wasn't until later that they were at odds.

"You know why." When she didn't reply, Oliver moved closer and said, "He was trying to make a move on you."

"No, he wasn't. We were just talking," she contradicted, though that didn't stop her from leaning in to him.

"Yes, he was. You don't dance with a girl all night and then lean in close and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear if you're not interested in her." His hand mimicked his words before resting in the curve of her neck.

Felicity's breath hitched while her skin tingled where he touched. "You were jealous."

"Of course I was," Oliver murmured huskily. "Why else do you think I punched him?"

They were so close that their noses brushed when she shook her head. The invisible pull between them intensified and ignited a spark that was quickly spreading throughout her body, heading straight for her core. "Because you couldn't stand seeing his hands on me?"

"Yes."

"Because you wanted them to be yours?" she whispered before boldly guiding his hand lower, to her breast.

He swiped his thumb over the center, making it harden, before cupping her fully once more. His pulse spiked at her low moan. "Yes," Oliver practically growled. He was barely keeping himself in check.

Felicity licked her lips, and his eyes followed the movement. "Just so you know, I wanted them to be yours, too." Not able to stand it another minute, Felicity slammed her lips onto his. The force pushed Oliver back against the couch, and she quickly took advantage. Hitching her leg over him, Felicity straddled his hips as they devoured each other's mouths.

His head was tilted back on the couch while his hand reached to release her hair from its elastic. Her golden locks formed a curtain around their faces. Encircling her completely, his arms pulled her flush against him. The tip of Felicity's tongue teased his bottom lip before delving inside. Oliver groaned as she deepened the kiss and ran her hands through his hair.

"Felicity," Oliver panted between kisses. His hands traveled up her curves and along her back.

She made a small sound in reply as she kissed behind his ear and flicked her tongue against the sensitive lobe. Felicity smiled against his skin when she felt him shiver in response.

"Felicity," he repeated and drew back. "Are you sure?"

"What do you mean?" she questioned, fighting through the haze of desire threatening to consumer her.

"You should know I didn't come here with any expectations. I just needed to see you." He gently stroked her cheek.

She frowned in confusion, feeling her heart sink. "You don't want to be with me?"
"Of course I do, sweetheart, but that doesn't matter," he said in a soft voice. "I know I hurt you by leaving that note the last time. If you're not ready, we don't have to do anything tonight."

Felicity's heart melted at his concern. "Thank you, Oliver." She pressed a loving kiss to his lips before resting against his forehead. "But I'm sure. I've felt that constant ache, too, and I need this. I need you."

"So you don't regret—" He was silenced with another kiss.

"There is nothing in Russia that I regret," she reassured him. "I got to be with you again and was able to complete my mission. Thanks for the access codes, by the way."

He smirked. "It was really hard to keep a straight face when Anatoly told me about the guns being intercepted. He was pissed, but it was worth it."

"I bet. As long as he didn't know it was you, that's all I was worried about."

"He didn't. I can take care of myself," Oliver declared with a brush of his lips. "But enough about me. Now that I'm in Starling, all that matters is taking care of you." The dark, hungry look in his eyes set her whole body on fire.

A breathy sigh escaped Felicity when his mouth trailed down her chin. Naturally, her head fell back to give him more access. He nipped at the crook of her neck, eliciting another soft moan, before smoothing it over with his tongue. Catching his face in her hands, Felicity directed him to her mouth once more. The kiss was deeper and even more passionate now that Oliver wasn't holding back. Suddenly, there was far too much clothing separating them.

Felicity broke away long enough to raise her hands above her head. Oliver wasted no time lifting her tank top and casting it aside. His sweater quickly followed, and then it was just skin on skin. The heat from his body felt like a furnace, and she clung to Oliver in an effort to chase away the chill in the room.

The lower he traveled the greater her need became. His hands slid along her bare back and held her steady as he kissed between her breasts. An involuntary whimper tore from her when he finally took one in his mouth. Felicity's fingers scraped along his scalp, holding him close, as he lavished her. Meanwhile, her hips, seeking relief, began grinding on top of his growing hardness. His hands then slid down to grip her backside and press her more firmly against him as he moved with her.

"Where's your bedroom?" Oliver demanded minutes later. If they didn't move soon, he was going to have to take her right there on the couch.

Reluctantly, Felicity broke their kiss and stood. She took Oliver by the hand and led him down the short hallway to her bedroom. It was mostly dark with only a dim amount of light from the streetlamp outside peeking through the curtains. She stopped at the foot of her bed and turned to face him. Her hands ran along the hard muscles of his stomach and chest before gripping his strong shoulders. Standing on her tiptoes, Felicity kissed him deeply and then stepped back. She pushed her bottoms down, giving him a moment to admire her, and climbed on the bed.

Oliver's low, hoarse groan brought a confident grin to her face. Felicity reached the center of the bed and sat there watching him—daring him with that seductive look in her eyes to cross the distance and reclaim what had always been his. If one heated look from him could actually set her body on fire, she would've been nothing but ashes by now.

Oliver couldn't undo his jeans fast enough. Felicity was teasing him by sitting there with her legs
partially closed, as if they weren't more than willing to open and welcome him. Her lip between her teeth wasn't a sign of hesitation like earlier. It was an invitation to bite it himself and swallow her screams as he drove her to the brink. This time they weren't beholden to any secret agencies or missions. It was just the two of them, and Oliver was more than ready to make up for lost time.

Felicity watched as Oliver tossed aside the rest of his clothes. The silhouette of his strong, hard muscles in the darkness made her breath catch. Instinctively, her thighs rubbed together in anticipation. She was relieved he once again had brought protection because with the way her love life had been going, she sure didn't need to have anything on hand. Felicity's heart began pounding in her chest when the mattress finally dipped under his weight.

Within seconds, Oliver was hovering over her. He claimed her lips with a primal, ardent kiss as he pushed her knees apart and guided her down on the mattress. Oliver settled on top of her. Although he was careful not to crush her with his full weight, Felicity was still pinned to the bed. She kissed him harder, loving the way his much larger body completely covered her smaller one.

Oliver's hands glided across her soft skin, getting reacquainted with every beautiful, intoxicating curve. She bit his lip when he slipped a digit inside of her and moaned at how ready she was for him. There was no hesitation this time. He joined them in one quick thrust that left them both panting and yearning for more.

Unlike last time, slow and steady wasn't the rhythm. Being separated for weeks after getting a taste of the other left them desperate and wanting as they sought to fill that emptiness. Oliver's fast, sharp movements shook Felicity's entire body, and she rose up to meet him every time. A visceral heat radiated from her core and spread down to her toes, making them curl. As Oliver buried his face in her neck, her fingers sought out his scars. She recognized them as a part of him now and traced them along with the muscles of his back. Her hands caressed his shoulders and up his neck to his face when he returned to kissing her.

The kiss was all-consuming as their tongues battled for dominance. Suddenly, Oliver grabbed her hands and slid them over her head. It made him press her harder into the bed, and Felicity tightened her legs around him to gain some leverage. His name spilled from her lips over and over again, both in protest and encouragement. Felicity's senses were overwhelmed as he took her body higher, not letting up. She squeezed his hands in an effort to hold onto something.

Oliver broke the kiss for some much-needed air and found himself transfixed by Felicity. Her hair was spread out across the pillow. Her eyes were shut and her mouth, swollen from his kisses, was open in ecstasy. She looked wild and free and breathtakingly beautiful, and it was all because of what he was doing to her. As if she could sense his thoughts, Felicity's eyes opened and locked on his. They stared at one another, mesmerized, as they sought their release together.

Intertwining their fingers, Oliver brought their hands down by her head. As badly as he wanted to run his fingers through Felicity's hair and caress her face, he couldn't let go. As badly as he wanted to close his eyes and kiss Felicity senseless, he couldn't look away. Oliver didn't know how much time had passed with them staring and squeezing each other's hands, but eventually he felt Felicity's body tremble beneath him as her orgasm washed over her. Oliver wasn't far behind. His body shuddered as she clung to him, and they rode it out together.

Once he managed to catch his breath, Oliver finally leaned down to kiss Felicity. She released one of his hands and cupped his jaw as they got lost in the kiss. The other she kept firmly in his grip, not ready to let go just yet.
"You should get some sleep."

"I'm not tired."

"Yes, you are," Oliver said with a grin. "You've got your sleepy voice."

"I do not," Felicity protested and snuggled more into his embrace. She sighed in contentment as his fingers slid up and down her naked back.

"It's okay if you're tired. You had a long night."

Felicity didn't have to look up to see the satisfied smirk on his face. She could hear it in his voice. "Well, I did have a very enthusiastic houseguest."

"Only because you were such a gracious host," he teased back.

The sun was just starting to peek through the darkened sky, bringing forth the dawn. Felicity and Oliver had lost all concept of time—and sleep—last night as they got lost in each other over and over again. Even now as they lay together, entangled, with their bodies completely spent and still humming from their lovemaking, there was no telling where one ended and the other began.

"I should email Lyla," Felicity begrudgingly muttered and raised herself up on her elbows. She reached over Oliver for her phone on the nightstand.

"Who's Lyla?" he curiously questioned.

"My boss. I have to let her know I'll be taking a sick day. What?" she asked upon seeing the contemplative expression on his face.

"Nothing." He grinned. "There is something going around." Oliver watched as Felicity's face adorably scrunched in concentration as she wrote her message. Meanwhile, his fingers continued to dance along her soft, bare skin. It was impossible to stop touching her.

"All this snow hasn't helped. The flu is a serious concern. The most common symptoms are fatigue and a fever," Felicity declared and tossed her phone on the nightstand. "Now that you mentioned it, I am very tired." She settled back on top of Oliver. "And really, really hot."

He smirked and kissed her. "Yes, you are."

"I still can't believe you're here," she whispered, taking in every detail of his face.

"Me neither."

"Tell me something. Anything," Felicity requested, desperate to know more about him. Although it was easy for them to pick right back up where they'd left off in Russia, there were still so many missing pieces of the puzzle.

"What do you want to know?"

Felicity hesitated, then asked, "Did you ever come close to reaching out to me?"

Oliver was silent, pensive. Then: "Yes, once." He shifted onto his side and propped his head up with his arm. Felicity stayed close, resting her head on the pillow, and waited for him to continue. "It was a few months after I first got off the island and joined the Bratva. Their methods of training can be brutal—both mentally and physically. The guy who was training me, they called him камень. It means Stone. He very rarely expressed any kind of emotion. Even when you looked into his eyes, it
was like they were empty.

"It had been a long day of sparring. The man they'd assigned to me, he'd joined two years before me. We shared a room, and eventually I learned that wasn't all we shared. His reason for joining was different than mine, but the conditions were the same. It was a lack of choice. When we trained, he would beat the crap out of me like he was supposed to. But I could tell that he was holding back. So could Stone.

"I barely had anything when I got off the island. It was just the clothes on my back, a small booklet that had belonged to my father, and a picture of you. I used to look at it every night and promise myself that if I could just make it through one more day, then that was one more day I was closer to returning to you. That day, I noticed that Stone had left his phone behind. I pocketed it when no one was looking and went back to the room.

"I thought about calling the authorities, but there was nothing they could do for me. I was in so deep that they couldn't get to me. If so much as a rumor had slipped out that I was alive, I probably would be dead. Besides, I didn't know how long it would be before Stone noticed his phone missing. There was only one voice I really needed to hear. So I grabbed your picture and dialed your number."

Felicity's breath caught in her throat at his revelation. Placing a hand on his chest and feeling Oliver's quickened heart, she waited for him to continue.

"You answered on the third ring," he said. "I couldn't say anything at first. I froze at the sound of your voice, unable to comprehend that it was really you. The relief was overwhelming. Then you started babbling about how it was rude and creepy for a person to call another person and remain silent. All I could do was breathe to keep from losing it right then. You could at least hear that, and you called me a perv."

Felicity laughed softly through the tears that had started to fall. She didn't remember that call. She'd had so many random calls over the years that they all simply blended together, never to be thought of again. The knowledge now that it was Oliver reaching out to her one of the times and she'd been so flippant in her response pained her.

"Not talking was killing me. I knew it was stupid and impulsive at the time, but I had to say something. I just needed you to hear me, even if you didn't understand. I started to say something in Russian when John, my roommate, came in. He yanked the phone out of my hands and cut the call. He also spotted your picture, putting the pieces together. He'd been chastising me for weeks about letting myself get distracted by the past. So he tore up your picture for good measure, and he reported me to Stone."

Felicity exhaled sharply and brought her hand to the underside of his jaw. "How could he do that to you?"

"He was protecting me."

"By turning you in?"

"Yes." He placed his hand over hers, stroking the back of it with his thumb. "If I'd been caught by Stone, it would've been much worse. John didn't tell me at the time, but I found out after that he'd erased your number before returning it. He told Stone that he caught me before I could call anyone. It hit me then just how reckless my actions had been. Not for myself but for you. If they'd known it was you I'd been calling and sought you out..." His eyes closed in anguish, and he kissed the inside of her palm. "I never would've forgiven myself. I accepted my punishment afterward, knowing I'd deserved it for putting you in danger like that. And because Stone was such a bastard, he punished
John, too, just to add to my guilt."

"When you say punished, do you mean…?" Her eyes drifted to the various scars on his body. Oliver kissed her hand once more before sliding it down to the long gash above his abdomen. Her fingers traced it reverently. "You still didn't deserve this."

His free hand wiped away the streaks of tears on her face. "I would endure anything if it meant keeping you safe."

Felicity, moved beyond words, leaned up and kissed him. It wasn't like their earlier kisses that were filled with heat and passion. This one was slow but intense. Sad but hopeful. A thank you and a promise.

Oliver drew her into him once more and laid back. "You really should get some sleep."

"I don't want to waste our time together with sleep." If there was anything Felicity had learned from what Oliver had just said, every moment they took for themselves was precious. She yawned despite herself and blinked stubbornly to keep her eyes open. "I'm going to shut my eyes, and then you'll be gone."

Oliver's hand still in her hair. "I told you I'm not going anywhere, Felicity. Not this time."

"You said you were here on business."

"But I'm all yours for two days."

"I didn't realize criminal organizations gave time off for Valentine's Day," she quipped. "Are you saying that the Bratva are really just a bunch of misunderstood hopeless romantics?"

"Basically."

Felicity lifted her head to look at him. "You promise?" she asked, becoming serious.

Oliver frowned. "That we're hopeless romantics?"

"No," she replied and lightly smacked his shoulder. "Do you promise that even if you might have to leave, you'll say good-bye before you go?"

Oliver brought his hand to her face and drew her in close. Sealing it with a kiss, he said, "I promise."
Happy Tuesday, everyone! Your responses and kudos to the last chapter were all so awesome. Thank you! I know there's lots of speculation about Laurel and what exactly lies ahead for Olicity in both the past and present. Obviously I can't give anything away just yet, but I can say we're just barely scratching the surface at the moment. Lots more love and angst headed your way as the story unfolds. This chapter is all flashback. Let me know what you think!

June 9, 2007

Emerging from the bathroom, Felicity paused and held out her hands. "What do you think?"

Sara eyed her up and down before nodding in approval. "Ooh, I love it! So hot."

"You really think so?" Felicity went to stand in front of the full-length mirror. It had taken her a solid two hours that afternoon to find the perfect outfit for Tommy and Oliver's housewarming party tonight. Eventually, she'd settled on a long-sleeve lace crop top, black skirt, and black lace-up heels.

"Totally. Some guys get really turned on by the whole screw-the-world-I'm-a-sexy-badass-Goth thing. And trust me, there will be plenty of hot guys there tonight. Tommy and Oliver's parties are the best."

Felicity plopped on the bed with a sigh. "Guys are the last thing on my mind right now." There was only one guy she couldn't stop thinking about. Sara probably didn't need to know that, though, since it happened to be her sister's boyfriend.

"Felicity, we're on summer break. It's, like, the perfect time for a fling."

"I don't know. I've got my internship at QC. Plus, I'm researching tech for this big competition I'm entering."

"Doesn't mean you can't have any fun." Sara held up two bottles of nail polish. "Black or purple? Purple it is!"

"Um, excuse you," Felicity laughed. "You didn't even give me a chance to answer."

"Because I totally know you were going to choose black," the blonde replied. "Doesn't hurt to change it up a bit."

"I happen to like black, thank you very much."

"Yes, it's as dark as your soul. I get it," Sara teased and sat down on the edge. "Now give me your hand."

With a dramatic sigh, Felicity stretched out her hands and wiggled her fingers for Sara. "Ugh, fine. Anyone ever tell you that you're bossy?" she joked back.
The blonde shrugged unapologetically. "It's part of my charm."

"Just keep telling yourself that."

"So, seeing as though you're family now, do you know what Tommy has planned for tonight?"

Felicity shook her head and grinned. "It still feels so weird hearing that. All I know is that it involves lots of alcohol."

"Sounds good to me. I learned how to make this new drink. It's called—"

"Sara," Laurel interrupted as she came barging into the room. "Have you seen my black halter top?" She placed her hands on her hips as she took in Sara's outfit. "So that's where it went. I thought I told you to ask me before you borrow my stuff."

"Sorry. You haven't worn it in a while. I didn't think you'd miss it."

"Well, I need it."

"So do I."

"I'm going to Oliver's party tonight," she retorted.

Sara handed the nail polish to Felicity before standing up to face her sister. "I know. So am I."

"Since when?"

"Since I was invited."

Laurel folded her arms. "By who?"

"Tommy and Oliver invited Felicity, and then Felicity invited me," Sara replied. "And before you say anything, you're not the boss of me. I have just as much a right to be there as you do."

Laurel shot Felicity a look that made her want to disappear into the mattress. She didn't think it'd be that big a deal inviting Sara to come. Felicity stared between the two. As an only child, she'd always wanted a sibling—especially a sister. Watching Laurel and Sara face off was actually making her glad she hadn't gotten her wish.


"Why? Can't you find something else?"

"It's the sexiest black top I own."

"And that matters because...?" Sara prompted, still not getting it.

"Because it's Oliver's party, and he's been really into black lately."

Felicity's head snapped up at that, causing the nail brush to go askew. Did she hear Laurel right? Quickly, she dismissed the thought. This stupid, unrealistic infatuation with Oliver was making Felicity's imagination run wild. Laurel was gorgeous and would look great in any color—black especially.

Laurel held out her hand for the top. With a roll of her eyes, Sara—who was definitely not the shy type—pulled it over her head and tossed it to Laurel.
"Now I have to start all over again with my outfit."

Laurel replied, "No, you don't." She walked over to the closet and started searching through it. "Try this." She grabbed a heart-shaped purple corset top. "This will go perfectly with your skin tone."

Sara held it against her chest and looked in the mirror. "I forgot I had this. Felicity, what do you think?"

"It's really cute," Felicity agreed.

The blonde smiled at her sister before slipping the shirt on. "Thanks, Laurel."

"Sure. I still wish you weren't going, but you're right. You're an adult now. You can do what you want."

"You don't have to be nervous," Sara said to her sister.

Felicity frowned in confusion. Laurel looked more annoyed than nervous. She wondered how Sara had picked up on that before realizing it was probably sisterly intuition.

"I know. It's just that tonight is really important." She took a seat on the edge of the bed. "Oliver and I are still in limbo, and so many of our friends are going to be there. And then I ran into Jean yesterday—"

"Jean the Machine?" Sara questioned while suppressing a laugh.

"That's the one."

"Um, question," Felicity interjected. "What's with the nickname? Is this Jean a cyborg or something?"

"Not technically. She's actually smart like you. Well, not quite as smart since you're a genius but you get what I mean."

"She's basically you without a personality," Laurel explained. "She's sort of cold and blunt."

"Exactly," Sara agreed. "Like a machine. How she has a boyfriend, I will never know."

"That's besides the point. What matters is she told me Ryan just asked her to move in with him the other day."

Sara's eyes widened in understanding. "Oh, got it."

Once again, Felicity had no clue what was going on. Apparently, siblings also had their own form of communication. She didn't speak Lance. "Got what?"

"Jean and Ryan are taking the next step in their relationship." To make her point, Sara elaborated, "They started dating months after Laurel and Oliver."

It took a moment for Sara's words to click. "Oh," Felicity replied. "I get it...bummer."

"Yeah," Laurel sighed. "I mean, it's great that Oliver finally moved out of the mansion. I just wish it was with me instead of Tommy. It wasn't like we hadn't discussed it."

"You know how guys are—especially guys like Oliver," Sara said while looking herself over in the mirror.
“What do you mean ‘guys like Oliver’?” Laurel replied, a bit defensive.

Sara faced her sister. "Well, he's been a party boy for years. It might be a while before he's ready to settle down—if ever."

"Oliver loves me, Sara."

"I'm not saying he doesn't. I like Oliver, but the fact is we both know about ten girls that he’s slept with. Not to mention that he's been kicked out of school three times already and then he was the one to propose this latest 'break' and—"

"Oh my God," Laurel exclaimed and stood up. "Sort of the pot calling the kettle black, don’t you think? How many frat guys have you dated, Sara?"

"That's different. We were just fooling around. I wasn't planning my dream wedding to one of them like you are with Oliver."

"You don't get it. You've never been in a serious relationship."

"If you're so sure you're going to end up with Oliver, then why are you so worried about what your friends will think of him moving in with Tommy instead of you?" Sara countered.

"Don't twist my words around. I was just venting. It doesn't mean things won't ever get better between me and Oliver. He is maturing, and it's not only because he's living on his own. If he wasn’t serious about turning his life around, he wouldn't have accepted a spot in the Associates Program at QC."

Felicity unthinkingly blurted, "He took the offer?" She had no idea that Oliver had decided to move forward with that. They'd been texting a little this week, but it was mostly about Tommy and the party. Felicity wondered why he didn't mention it to her.

Laurel turned to look at her. "How did you know about that?"

"Oh, well, I'm interning there," she was quick to say. "I hear things...sometimes."

Laurel continued as if Felicity hadn't spoken. "Sara, why can't you just be happy for me?"

"I wasn't trying to be a bitch," Sara defended.

"The title of your autobiography," Laurel sarcastically replied and headed for the door. "I have to finish getting ready. See you tonight." She slammed it shut behind her.

Sara let out a frustrated groan and looked to Felicity. "Okay, honestly, was I being a bitch just now?"

It took a second for Felicity to realize that Sara was speaking to her. She was still stuck on the fact that Oliver had actually listened to her and decided to make a change. "Honestly, I think you were trying to be a good sister."

"I'm sorry you had to see that." Sara moved around the room as she finished getting ready. "My sister gets a little crazy when it comes to Oliver. She sees what she wants to see—not that I blame her. He's a good guy deep down. He can be very charming. Plus, he's a devastatingly handsome billionaire. That doesn't hurt."

The slightly wistful quality to Sara's tone ignited Felicity's curiosity. "Kind of sounds like you want to
date him," she joked.

"I did actually. I had a huge crush on him long before he and Laurel started dating."

That caught Felicity by surprise. "Did Laurel know?"

Sara was silent for a moment. "Yeah, she did. Tommy was holding one of his infamous parties. I knew Oliver was going to be there, so I snuck out to see him. By the time I found him, the cops had already come to break it up." The blonde met her gaze. "Laurel was the one who tipped off my dad."

Felicity's jaw nearly dropped. "She did it on purpose?"

"I was grounded for weeks. By the time I wasn't, she and Oliver were already dating."

"So how did you get over it? Get over him?" Felicity tried to sound casual, despite the fact that her heart was in her throat. She and Sara had more in common than she thought.

"Time. Distance. Frat boys," she quipped before sobering. "The truth is, despite all of their constant drama, Laurel and Oliver always find their way back to each other. There's no coming between that, you know?"

Felicity put the lid on the nail polish and set it aside. She answered softly, "I'm beginning to see that."

The party was in full swing by the time Felicity and Sara arrived at the loft. According to Sara, it was never cool to show up too early—even if you were related to one of the hosts. Bodies filled the once wide open space downstairs from wall to wall. The lights were turned down low, and a disco ball had been mounted on one of the large beams. The DJ booth was set up by the windows. A crowd was dancing in the center. Another large group, which included Tommy and Oliver, were standing in the kitchen. It had been transformed into a full bar area with a young, handsome guy serving partygoers.

Felicity linked arms with Sara, and they pushed their way through the crowd. "Tommy," she called over the music to get his attention.

"Felicity, hey!" Tommy greeted a little too enthusiastically. He pulled her into a bear hug. "You're here. Hey, everyone, she's here!"

"Is he drunk?" Felicity whispered to Sara.

"Either that or he's well on his way," she commented with a laugh. "They've probably already done a few rounds of shots."

"Everyone, this is Felicity. Felicity, this is everyone," Tommy introduced before snapping his fingers at the bartender. The few people that were actually paying attention nodded at them. "Tony, shots all around."

Sara gave Felicity an "I told you so" look.

"Who are you again?" said the tall, beautiful redhead by Tommy's side. Her arm was draped over his shoulders as she sized up Felicity. By the condescending look on her face, it was obvious she didn't find Felicity that much of a threat.
“Felicity is Tommy's stepsister,” another familiar male voice interjected. Felicity looked over to see Oliver by the bartender. She tried to ignore how hot and muscular he looked in his dark blue t-shirt and jeans. Laurel was glued to his side and talking to another beautiful dark-skinned girl. "And this is Laurel's sister Sara."

A guy of medium height rocking long, surfer-dude hair shouted, "Yo, Sara, you're looking good, girl."

"Oh my God, Garret, is that you?" Sara replied. "You look so different!" She went to talk to him just as Tommy handed out shots.

Tommy said to Felicity as he handed her a shot glass, "This probably makes me the worst brother in the world, but what the hell? Live a little. He raised his glass. "All right, everyone, to newfound freedom and the party that never ends."

The group shouted in agreement and clinked their glasses before knocking back their shots. Felicity nearly choked on the hot, sharp aftertaste of the tequila. Within seconds, Tommy was already ordering another round. Felicity wasn't sure she could stand another one so soon. Just as she was trying to figure out what the heck to do with her shot without looking like the odd person out, Oliver was suddenly beside her and snatching it out of her hand. He downed it himself.

Felicity sent him a grateful smile. "Thanks."

"No problem. I need to catch up to Tommy anyway," he joked.

"I was just thinking he should slow down."

"He'll be all right."

Stepping closer to him—the music was so loud it was difficult to hear—Felicity mentioned, "I heard congratulations are in order."

Oliver looked around at the apartment. "This place is pretty great, right?"

"I didn't mean the loft. I meant about your new summer job at QC. Now you can have root beer floats every day."

Oliver looked taken aback. "Who told you?"

"Laurel mentioned it."

"Oh." A disappointed look formed on his face.

Felicity frowned in confusion. "Unless you aren't happy about it."

"No, it's not that." He rubbed the back of his neck, looking oddly self-conscious. She had yet to see him look anything other than confident. "I was actually hoping to surprise you on Monday."

Felicity couldn't help but smile. "Well, I think it's great that you're giving it a try. And I can still act surprised if that helps," she offered and nodded to the shot glass. "A few more of those and I might just forget I heard it at all."

Oliver grinned. "A few more of these, and you'll end up passed out on Tommy's bed before he does."

"You're probably right. I suppose I should be the responsible sibling tonight. I can't expect him to carry me up the stairs if he's seeing two of them." Felicity caught sight of Tommy grinding on the
dance floor with the redhead. Seconds later they were making out. "Besides, it looks like he might already have some company tonight."

"In that case, you're welcomed to my room."

Felicity scoffed. "The last thing you want is me in your bed. Then where would you be?" She'd meant it as a joke, but the laughter died in her throat at the intense way he was looking at her. Their eyes met and held and, for a moment, Felicity swore the music and conversations around them faded away.

"I'd be on the couch—obviously," Oliver added in a casual voice, although his eyes seemed to be saying the opposite.

The room suddenly felt like it was over a hundred degrees. "Obviously," Felicity agreed. She needed to get a hold of herself. They were surrounded by people—among them Laurel. If she and Oliver stared at each other any longer, people would start to get the wrong idea. Felicity looked away first and said resolutely, "But I'm sure Laurel already has dibs—as she should."

As if she'd heard her name, Laurel approached them. She threw her arms around Oliver's neck. It seemed the alcohol was getting to her, too, because Laurel didn't look that steady on her feet. "Ollie, come on. We're doing body shots." Laurel leaned in close and said seductively, "I have the perfect spot for you to lick..."

Felicity's heart clenched. "I guess that's my cue..." she trailed off, avoiding his gaze altogether now. She needed to leave before she had one of her babbling fits.

Spotting Sara on the dance floor with Garret and a couple of others, Felicity decided to join them. They welcomed her into the circle, and she got lost in the music. Only a couple of times did she allow her eyes to drift to the bar. Both times Felicity regretted it. She really did not need to see Oliver licking salt off of Laurel's flat stomach, nor the make-out session that followed. Why didn't they just cut the crap and get back together already?

Felicity ended up dancing with a tall, handsome stranger. His brown hair was a bit long but suited his strong jaw well. He had some great moves. She'd never actually been dipped before, and it was as fun as it looked. Felicity didn't know who he was, and she didn't care. This was just the distraction she needed.

"Wow, MIT." The guy Felicity had been dancing with, Max Fuller, whistled. "That's awesome."

At some point, they'd taken a break from dancing and started talking. Max had asked her about school and although Felicity answered, she didn't mention her age. The whole conversation would change after that, and for once Felicity simply wanted to fit in. She was a normal girl at a normal party.

"Yeah, I love it," Felicity replied. "What about you?"

"I go to Starling City University," he answered. "I'm majoring in business. I'd like to open my own nightclub someday."

"Cool," Felicity commented. "What would you call it?"

"I don't know. I was thinking maybe something like Chaos or Poison."
"They're certainly edgy."

"Which do you like better?"

"I'm gonna go with Poison."

"Good choice." He moved a bit closer to her. "I was leaning towards that myself."

Felicity smiled and said, "Great minds think alike." She finished her drink and set it aside. "Do you want to dance some more?"

"Maybe in a bit. I'm enjoying talking to you more. That okay?"

A blush colored her cheeks. "Yeah, I love to talk."

"I've noticed."

Felicity couldn't help but flinch. "Sorry about babbling earlier. I do it all the time and I know—"

"No need to apologize. I think it's cute."

"You do?" Her eyebrows lifted in surprise.

Max nodded, causing a strand of his brown hair to flop in his eyes. He really was good-looking. Maybe not as good-looking as another certain brown-haired someone, but she wasn't going to think about that. "I think it's worse when you're hanging out and have nothing to say to each other. Don't you think?"

"Yeah, definitely," Felicity agreed.

"Do you mind holding tight for a sec? I'm just gonna run to the bathroom real quick."

"Sure. I need to grab another drink at the bar anyway."

"I'll meet you there," Max promised before making his way through the crowd.

Felicity did the same as she walked back to the bar. It took a couple of minutes for the bartender to get to her, since he was so busy. Felicity ordered another soda and tapped her fingers against the counter as she waited.

"Another shot, Oliver?" the bartender questioned as he handed Felicity her drink.

"Sure. Why not?"

Felicity turned and nearly bumped into Oliver, he was so close. She hadn't even realized he'd been behind her. More guests had arrived, which made any free space a rare commodity. "Hey," she greeted.

"Hey," Oliver replied. His usually bright, clear eyes appeared muddled—no doubt from all the alcohol he'd consumed since she'd last seen him an hour ago. The booze, however, did nothing to diminish his penetrating stare. "You look great tonight. Did I tell you that earlier?"

Felicity gawked back, slightly stunned. "Um, no. You didn't."

That charming grin of his appeared. "Well, you do."
"Uh, thanks, Oliver." Searching for something to say, and trying very hard not to read too much into the compliment, she added, "The party seems to be a hit."

"Yeah. It's a good thing I paid off the manager downstairs. Pretty sure we'd have been caught by now for having too many people."

"Plus all the noise."

Oliver smirked. "That too."

"Here you go," interrupted the bartender, sliding the shot forward. "You want one?"

"No thanks. I'm good," Felicity answered.

"Don't forget the salt and lime." He pushed them towards Oliver. "Should I clear the bar again to make room?"

"Make room for what?" she questioned, confused.

"So he can do the shot off of you."

Felicity's eyes widened. "Oh, no. I'm not—he's not—that won't be necessary."

"She's right," Oliver agreed. "No need to clear the bar. We can do it like this."

She didn't know how it was possible, but Felicity's eyes grew bigger. "What?"

"Kidding," Oliver replied.

"Oh. Right," she muttered, flustered. Felicity was definitely not the type to climb up on a bar, lift up her shirt, and let a guy lather her in spit and salt just so he could knock back a shot. Although, she'd be a complete liar if she said the image of Oliver hovering over her before pressing his mouth to her skin didn't make her entire body thrum with excitement.

"Standard neck, then?" the bartender suggested.

"I think those girls over there need you," Felicity pointed out and was relieved when he went to them. The guy was obsessed with body shots and his suggestions were so not helpful. Felicity was having a hard time even looking at Oliver at the moment.

"Have you ever tried it?"

Her head snapped up at that. "What? Body shots?" He nodded. "Yeah...no. Never."

"It's not that complicated."

"I gathered that when I saw you with Laurel earlier," she said a little more sharply than she'd intended. "Where is she, by the way?"

Oliver remained unruffled. "Bathroom. She's been gone for a bit. I think there's a line."

Well, that explained why Max was taking so long. "Makes sense."

"So, want to try it?"

"You're serious?" Felicity couldn't tell if she was more shocked, excited, or appalled. It was
probably all three. She glanced around to see if anyone was watching them. They were surrounded by nameless faces—the majority of which were wrapped up in their own drinking games and conversations.

"Unless you plan on trying it with Max later? That was who you were talking to before, right?" His tone was nonchalant, but Felicity could've sworn she'd detected an underling edge.

"You know Max?" She shook her head. "Of course you probably know Max. It's your party."

"It's just a game," Oliver continued lightly. His eyes were still glazed from the alcohol, but he seemed more alert. "No big deal." His hand reached forward and brushed her long, dark strands back, exposing the right side of her neck. She shivered at the feel of his fingertips. "You in?"

"Okay," Felicity agreed before she could really think about it. It was like her mouth had taken on a mind of its own.

Oliver took a step closer and turned her so that her back was against the bar. He towered over her, his large form shielding her from the rest of the room. Their chests brushed against each other, and it sent an unexpected surge of pleasure through Felicity. His hand wound itself in her hair and gently tilted her head to the side, exposing her neck for him.

Felicity could barely breathe as Oliver lowered his head. She felt his hot breath first against her exposed skin. Then his tongue was on her, tracing a wet line that blazed like fire from the crook of her neck to her pulse point. Felicity's eyes closed as her body instinctively leaned into him.

Her eyes remained shut when he drew back ever so slightly. The soft sound of sprinkling followed. The salt granules were so small that Felicity should have barely felt them. In her hyper-aware state, she could feel each speck sticking to her wet skin. Her entire body quivered in anticipation of what came next.

Oliver leaned in again, and her hand landed on his chest. Felicity felt the pounding rhythm of his heart. Her own was racing. How had this happened? Every sense was heightened. Every part of her body was trembling. And yet, Felicity felt as if she was being pulled outside of herself at the same time.

Finally, Oliver's lips touched the crook of her neck. His tongue flicked against her sensitive skin before his mouth closed over the spot, sucking gently. Felicity's hand fisted in his shirt as she fought to keep some semblance of composure. Of all the ridiculous daydreams she'd had about Oliver lately, what she'd imagined had never come close to this.

Oliver continued up her neck, licking and sucking on each new patch of skin. At some point, he'd enveloped her in his arms so that she was flush against him. It was hot and intimate. Too intimate for such a setting even though he was shielding her from wandering eyes. But Felicity didn't push him away. She unknowingly clung tighter as her body shook, coursing with a carnal energy that she couldn't possibly release.

By the time Oliver reached her pulse point, his ministrations felt more like kisses. He groaned low in his throat, which vibrated against her neck, and pressed one last caress of his lips into her flesh. The loss was instant when he pulled away. He reached behind her before tossing his head back to take the shot. When Oliver's gaze returned, it was dark and heady.

Felicity swallowed despite her now dry mouth and reached for the lime. She hesitated. When everyone else had been doing body shots, the people they were doing it off of had the lime slice in their mouths. Felicity couldn't do that. She and Oliver were already teetering on the edge of
something strong and dangerous.

Instead, Felicity brought the lime up to his mouth. Oliver's heavy-lidded eyes never left hers as he bit the slice. Her wild imagination told her that he'd wished it was her he could consume. The action caused her fingers to brush his lips, and she licked her own in response. Felicity cleared her throat in an attempt to find her voice. "I guess the game is over," she murmured.

Oliver watched her silently. Some of the heat had cleared from his eyes but his gaze remained smoldering. "For now."

It always amazed Oliver how a perfectly awesome party could quickly turn to crap. He had no logical reason to feel that way. His and Tommy's party had gone off without a hitch. Oliver had paid off the night manager to keep him from calling the cops in case of the noise or if guests got rowdy. Everyone was loving the DJ, and the bartender was keeping everyone loose and liquored up. Surrounded by close friends and enthusiastic partygoers in the loft that he and Tommy had leased as their first step toward independence, Oliver should've felt like he was having the time of his life.

Instead, he'd only spiraled. Oliver should've been more than satisfied doing body shots off of his sexy maybe-girlfriend. Laurel liked to have fun, but it was rare that she got that wild. Tonight had been the perfect blend of lust and tequila, and Oliver hadn't planned on letting a good time go to waste.

Nevertheless, in between shots, he'd watched in silent fury as Felicity danced with that douche bag Max Fuller. Of all the guys at the party, it just had to be Max. They'd only tolerated each other over the years, because they ran in the same circle of friends. Oliver eventually made the situation worse, so now Max hated his guts even more. It wasn't something Oliver could necessarily blame him for, but that didn't make Max any better. And it sure as hell didn't make him worthy of Felicity.

Oliver had noticed Felicity the moment she'd walked in. Her dark hair and painted lips stood out in the crowd. As he took in her outfit, he had to remind himself not to stare too long at her bare legs or the small sliver of her midriff showing. But he'd been so flustered and full of tequila that Oliver hadn't thought twice about making that bedroom comment to her. He was lucky no one else had heard, because Laurel would've been pissed if it had gotten back to her.

The right thing to do would've been to avoid Felicity afterward. The more distance between them, the better. However, Oliver wasn't exactly known for making the best decisions—especially when he was drunk. With Laurel gone, he'd watched and waited for Felicity to be alone. When Max finally walked away, Oliver had seized the opportunity. He'd ordered another shot—which he really didn't need—as an excuse to be near her.

Oliver had been so wrapped up in Felicity that the bartender's words hadn't registered at first. It was Felicity's bewildered reaction that had clued him in. Oliver didn't fault the guy for the assumption, since body shots had been the main activity of the night. He'd even been amused at first by Felicity's reaction. But amusement had quickly transformed to intrigue the more he thought about it.

The truth was Oliver hadn't been able to stop thinking about Felicity ever since he'd first met her at QC. In the beginning, he'd told himself that it was basic attraction. Felicity was stunning with a unique mix of qualities. She was young and intelligent. Kind and edgy. Quirky and mysterious. Oliver had never met anyone quite like her, so it made sense that he'd be intrigued.

Finding out that she was Tommy's younger stepsister should've been enough to dispel any inappropriate thoughts. There were a few, but they were harmless. Oliver could handle it—until he
got to know her. With each new encounter, the mystery that was Felicity Smoak began to unravel. But still Oliver wasn't satisfied. He wanted to know more. There were even a couple times he'd thought about sabotaging his new laptop just so he'd have an excuse to go see her.

It was so unlike him. Oliver didn't need an excuse to do anything. If he wanted something, he took it. Plain and simple. Felicity, though, was different. She was more innocent than the majority of girls he was used to but in other ways she was stronger. Although Felicity was an attentive listener, she wasn't afraid to call him out on his crap. And Oliver respected that.

That respect didn't necessarily stop him from imagining what it would be like to have her, but it did keep him from really pursuing it. He'd never hesitated before, Oliver wasn't proud of it, but it wouldn't be the first time he'd stepped out on Laurel. He didn't know why it kept happening, since he did love Laurel. He truly didn't want to hurt her. Despite their break—which didn't really feel that much like one since they continued to spend time together and occasionally hook up—he knew they would probably get back together at some point, regardless of their issues being fully worked out. They always did. It was inevitable.

Oliver could tell that Laurel was doing everything she could to maintain their connection while he "figured things out." He hadn't been lying when he told her he needed time to get his shit together. Laurel had only agreed, because she believed it would result in him being fully committed to her vision of their life together. There were times when Oliver thought about caving and just giving her what she wanted. They would be together, settled and happy. He could give her that. But each time Oliver picked up the phone to tell Laurel, he hesitated. Because even though Oliver knew Laurel would be happy, it was impossible to envision himself that way.

It was in those moments of confusion and dissatisfaction that Oliver's thoughts strayed to Felicity. There was no logical reason for it. He hadn't known her for that long, and they were complete opposites. But somehow, in those brief moments they'd shared, Oliver had felt some kind of deeper connection. He found himself opening up to her and telling her things that not even his friends could drag out of him. He found himself wanting to keep the secrets she'd shared with him in return. And those looks and touches that would have been so calculating with anyone else, they were totally natural with her. It was like his body just reacted when she was around.

That was exactly what had happened at the bar. As soon as the bartender mentioned body shots and Felicity, Oliver's mind was gone. Not to mention his inhibitions with all the alcohol he'd already consumed. Oliver's mouth had watered in anticipation of tasting her. He could feel the tremble coursing through her body as he held her close. Feel her small hand gripping his shirt like her life depended on it. Felicity's skin was soft, sweet and already a little salty—most likely from all the dancing earlier. Even after Oliver had licked off the trail of real salt, he couldn't resist giving her one last caress of his lips. He'd wanted to kiss her fingers so badly when she passed him the lime but knew that would've been pushing it. The desire he'd seen shining in her eyes was also curbed by a layer of doubt.

Oliver had just taken a step back from her when Max approached them. Their greeting was cold, which Felicity immediately picked up on. Then Max had focused on Felicity and whisked her away across the room.

Now Oliver stood on the other side of the room, nursing another beer, while watching Felicity and Max flirt by the windows. Max was tall and towered over Felicity. Oliver wondered if she looked that small every time he stood next to her. They were huddling closer than was necessary in order to hear each other over the music. Tommy certainly wouldn't approve if he was sober enough to see what was going on. Unfortunately, his best friend was hell bent on drowning his sorrows with women and booze after the tense call with his father earlier.
"So what'd you do to piss off my sister this time?"

Oliver hadn't even noticed Sara sidle up next to him. "Why do you always assume I did something?"

"Because you're a man," she cheekily replied.

"Laurel had too much to drink and was getting a bit carried away." When she'd returned from the bathroom, Laurel had been all over him. Normally Oliver would've been up for it, but it was impossible to keep an eye on Felicity with her distracting him. Frustrated, Laurel had stomped off with her friend Joanna after Oliver had pushed her away.

"And how many drinks have you had tonight?"

"Not enough," Oliver muttered while watching Felicity laugh at something Max had said. She pushed at his chest, and he caught her hand. Oliver's grip on his beer bottle tightened.

Sara followed his line of sight and giggled. "So much for guys being the last thing on her mind."

He glanced over at Sara. "What?"

"Nothing," Sara answered with a shake of her head. "No need to worry, Ollie. I'm sure it's harmless."

"Why would I worry?" Oliver responded, his tone bordering on defensive.

"Well, she's talking to Max Fuller. I thought you guys, like, hated each other's guts or something."

"We do. He's a total asshat, which is why I'm surprised she's even wasting her breath on him."

"He's not that bad. Plus, Felicity is smart enough not to fall for his crap. She's just having some fun."

"I doubt Tommy would approve."

"Then I guess it's a good thing that Tommy isn't the boss of her. Just because he's her brother now doesn't mean he gets to dictate what she can do and who she can do it with. That includes you," Sara added and poked him in the chest.

"She's only seventeen, Sara." Oliver was well aware of the hypocrisy of his words as they left his mouth. His mouth that had been sucking on her skin just thirty minutes ago.

"And a genius. But so what? You and Tommy combined are still not as mature as her," Sara teased. "Age doesn't matter."

Oliver chugged some more of his beer. His head was already feeling foggy from all the shots earlier, but he didn't care. He needed to dull the frustration somehow.

Sara nudged him and pointed to the top of the stairs where Laurel stood with her friend. "Go apologize to my sister, Ollie. She'll already be in a pissy mood with her hangover tomorrow. Fighting with you will only make it worse. You know you'll have to do it sooner or later." She grabbed his beer and finished it off before making her way back to the dance floor.

Oliver tossed the empty bottle she'd given him into the trash. He knew that Sara was right. The longer he made Laurel wait for his apology, the longer she would take to accept it. Regardless, his eyes fixed on Felicity once again. How could she possibly carry on a conversation with that creep for so long?
To hell with it, Oliver told himself. Sara was right. Felicity could make her own decisions. He was about to head for the stairs when he noticed Max's hand brush her cheek. It moved along her skin until coming up to slide a wayward piece of Felicity's hair behind her ear. That's it. Oliver knew exactly where that was headed, and he'd seen enough. Without a second thought, Oliver marched over to them and planted himself between Max and Felicity.

"Oliver—" Felicity started to protest.

"You know, Max, I was thinking. It's strange that you're here," Oliver folded his arms and widened his stance. "I don't recall you being invited."

"Well, we do have the same friends," Max replied, taking on the same defensive position. "Where they go, I follow."

"You sound like a dog."

"Takes one to know one," he shot back with a glare.

Felicity sidestepped Oliver so she could face them both. "Is there a problem here?"

Almost immediately, Max's expression changed. He smiled charmingly at Felicity. "It's fine. Oliver and I just have a bit of unfinished business, but this is hardly the place or time. Why don't we get some air on the balcony? You can finish telling me all about—"

"She is not going anywhere with you."

"Um, excuse me," Felicity cut in sharply, "but I am right here and can speak for myself, Oliver."

"Exactly. We're all adults here, Oliver," Max declared and placed his arm around Felicity. "She's free to make her own choices, and right now she's talking to me."

Oliver's temper skyrocketed and cut through the drunken haze in his mind. The rage almost matched what he'd felt when confronting Jason. "She's not an adult. She's seventeen," Oliver retorted and pulled her away from him.

Felicity shook them both off and snapped, "Hey, I'm not some rope in a tug of war."

Max proceeded as if she hadn't spoken and narrowed his eyes at Oliver. "Close enough. Besides, we weren't doing anything wrong. You're the one who's making her uncomfortable right now."

"What is going on?" Felicity demanded, glancing between the two. She eyed Oliver more closely. "Are you drunk?"

"I'm fine," Oliver declared without taking his eyes off of Max. He was aware of the looks they were getting from the people around them, but he didn't care.

"You don't look too steady on your feet there, Queen. Maybe you should go sit down."

Oliver didn't back down. "Like hell. She's Tommy's little sister. She's off limits."

"Hey!" Felicity protested.

"If Tommy has a problem, then he should take it up with me," Max declared. "Are you fighting his battles for him, too, now?"

"Stay away from her, Max."
"Or what? I can do whatever the hell I want."

"I'm still right here, guys," Felicity interrupted, exasperated, with her hands on her hips.

Oliver took a menacing step forward. "You don't want to find out." He stared down Max and smirked when he swallowed hard. The guy was all talk and no action. Everyone knew that.

"Unbelievable," Felicity muttered and threw her hands up in irritation. She pushed past them both and disappeared into the crowd.

"Now look what you did," Max said when she was out of earshot. "She may be Tommy's new stepsister, but I doubt that's why you're so worked up. You hitting that already, Queen? Preying on unsuspecting girls is your thing, right?" He was trying to act tough again.

"Shut up, Max."

He continued, "I wouldn't blame you. I've seen the pictures of her mother in the papers. The resemblance isn't obvious, but I wonder how much of that hot body Felicity inherited. You know what they say, like mother like daughter. If she's as young and naive as you're making her seem, it shouldn't take long to find out—"

Oliver's fist connected with Max's face before he could finish. Max fell back into the crowd and clutched his bloody nose. The jackass could say whatever he wanted about Oliver, but no way was he getting away with disrespecting Felicity. She didn't deserve that.

Max was back up in seconds and charging at Oliver. The pure anger he felt mixed with the alcohol erased the last of Oliver's control. He met Max halfway and tackled him onto the ground. Oliver took a hit to his right eye that was definitely going to leave a bruise. A few more blows were exchanged before Tommy was pulling Oliver off of Max.

"I don't know what the hell is going on—" Tommy began.

"He's psychotic," Max interrupted.

"Get the hell out, Fuller," Oliver ordered.

"I was just talking to your stepsister and he lost his shit, man," Max stated. "I'm—"

Oliver knew his best friend would have his back as he watched Tommy's confusion immediately shift to outrage. "You heard him. Get out. You're not welcomed in our place and especially not near my sister," he declared.

"Fine, I'll go," Max growled, both from the physical pain and that of his bruised ego. "But I'm not the only one who's leaving."

Turning his head, Oliver saw Felicity barreling her way through the crowd until she rushed out the front door. Sara wasn't far behind her.

Max smirked smugly. "Nice work, Romeo."
Something smelled fantastic. No sooner had Felicity opened her eyes did her stomach growl. She glanced at the alarm clock on her nightstand and saw that it was late afternoon. Not having eaten since yesterday, combined with the long yet very satisfying sleepless night with Oliver, it made sense that Felicity was starving. She could hear the faint sound of him shuffling around the kitchen, which sparked her curiosity.

Yawning, Felicity got out of the empty bed and searched for something to wear. She settled on a long, comfy pajama sweater and boy-short panties. Before heading into the kitchen, she took a couple of minutes in the bathroom to freshen up. Her hair was an absolute mess that needed to be tamed immediately. After putting it up in a neat ponytail, she dabbed a light balm on her lips. Felicity also quickly checked her phone while fetching her slippers. She had a couple of missed messages from Sara, one from Tommy, and another from Caitlin. Caitlin's in particular made her smile. In addition to hoping that Felicity was feeling better, she mentioned that singles karaoke night with Barry had been a lot of fun. Felicity shot off a quick message to each of them. She always had her phone on her and if she didn't say something, they'd automatically be suspicious. She couldn't chance anyone dropping by and interrupting her time with Oliver.

Felicity quietly walked down the hall and peeked into the kitchen. The sight before her instantly made her weak in the knees. The kitchen table had two place settings, which also featured one of her roses from the bouquet in a small vase. The coffee pot was already set and almost finished brewing. Felicity could feel her body's craving for a hot, steaming cup of coffee but also feared that the caffeine would wake her from this dream. There was no other way to describe the scene of Oliver, shirtless and in sweatpants, standing at her mostly unused stove alternating between flipping pancakes and omelets. She didn't know where he was hiding the bacon, but Felicity could definitely smell it.

"I hope you're hungry," Oliver said without turning around. Of course he would be able to sense her presence.

"I'm starving," she answered and came to stand next to him. "You actually made all of this?"

He got the bacon out of the microwave before removing a batch of pancakes from the small griddle. "You sound surprised," he said and poured more batter.

"Honestly, I am. I thought the only things you knew how to make were cereal and a bloody Mary for those pesky hangovers."

Chuckling, Oliver finally turned to face her. "I might have picked up a few new skills over the years —cooking being one of them."

"I'm impressed. Are those...?"

"Double chocolate chip pancakes—your favorite," he supplied. "Yup."

A sudden wave of emotion hit Felicity, and she blinked back tears. She couldn't believe that he'd remembered her favorite breakfast food, let alone that he was making it especially for her. It wasn't that monumental in the grand scheme of things. Oliver actually being alive and standing in her apartment was already everything. Nevertheless, the gesture pulled at her heartstrings.
"Felicity, are you okay?" Oliver questioned at her silence.

With a huge, beaming smile, she replied, "I'm perfect." Felicity, throwing her arms around his neck, stood on her toes and kissed him. Oliver's arm wound around her to bring her closer, and she couldn't help the contented sigh that escaped. Unfortunately, a second later, her stomach decided to grumble again.

Oliver drew back slightly. "I really should feed you."

She rubbed her nose affectionately against his. "Yes, you should."

He kissed her once more and smiled. "Just one question."

"Yes, I want pancakes, an omelet, and bacon. Oh, and coffee. I really, really need coffee."

He laughed. "I know that. I was going to ask if you're wearing lip gloss."

Felicity frowned at his comment. "It's a balm. Why?"

"As good as you taste, I knew that the strawberry flavor had to be coming from somewhere," he teased.

"Well, since someone was kissing me senseless last night, I figured I'd do my part and keep them hydrated," she quipped while running her fingers along his naked collarbone.

"Smart thinking," Oliver stated and leaned in. "Because I am nowhere near done with those lips." He kissed her and playfully nipped at her bottom lip. His hand slowly trailed along her curves. "Or the rest of you." It had been difficult to tear himself away from her earlier, but basic human needs had called. Plus, he'd wanted to do something nice for her.

Oliver had awoken disoriented but content with Felicity wrapped snuggly around him. He gave himself a couple of minutes to stay and simply watch her. He memorized the lines of her face, looking so calm and innocent in sleep. The sleek, golden sheen of her curls against the pillow. The soft, tiny curves of her body resting comfortably against his much larger form. It was those kind of moments that he would need to carry with him when it was time to leave again.

"You better not be," she moaned. "But can we eat first?" Felicity pulled back and giggled at his mockingly exasperated expression. "Because I'm still hungry."

Oliver shook his head in amusement. "Sit down and I'll make you a plate."

"Yes," she cheered and rubbed her hands together. Felicity couldn't remember the last time she'd had her favorite pancakes. While Oliver finished cooking and made their plates, Felicity poured them both orange juice and coffee.

"No cream or sugar," Oliver told her.

Felicity paused with the creamer and raised an eyebrow. "Huh, that's also new."

He shrugged. "Meals on the island weren't exactly bursting with flavor. I guess I got a little too used to it."

Ignoring the sad pang in her gut at the mention of the island, Felicity cheerfully responded, "Black coffee. Got it."

They sat down at the table and started eating. Trying to be neat and ladylike was totally out of the
question for Felicity. It was like her hunger only increased after the first bite of food. She finished in
record time and even got up for seconds. Oliver wasn't kidding about being a good cook. The last
time Felicity had tried to make an omelet, the entire bottom had been burned.

"Good thing I made extra," Oliver commented as they cleaned up afterward. "You probably
would've stabbed me with your fork for the last piece of bacon."

"When it comes to food, all bets are off, buddy," she told him while placing the last plate in the
dishwasher. Felicity started it up and washed her hands. When she turned back to Oliver, he was
leaning against the archway. He quietly stared into the living room with his arms folded. "What are
you looking at?"

"You've got a great place here, Felicity."

She was surprised by the comment. "What?"

"I didn't get a chance to really take it in last night, but your apartment is nice and homey."

Felicity walked over to him. "Thanks. I like to think so. My mom insisted on helping me decorate. If
she'd gotten her way, the entire place would be pink and I'd be stuck with some hideous naked
sculpture."

Oliver chuckled at that. "Your mom always did have unique taste."

"I love pink, but enough is enough," she joked. "What?" He was looking at her with an amused
smile.

"You love color now," he simply stated.

"Well, the Goth look was just so '07," she said dramatically, causing him to laugh. "Not my most
stylish years."

"I don't know. I thought the black made you look sexy and mysterious."

"Am I not sexy and mysterious anymore now that I'm in living color?" she teased him.

Oliver slid his fingers through her blond locks and offered one of his charming smiles. "You look
beautiful either way."

Felicity couldn't help but blush at the compliment. "Enough about me. What about you?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, where's your place? What's it like?" When he hesitated, Felicity added, "I mean, you don't
have to tell me where it is—although that would be nice. If it's some top secret Bratva thing, I
understand." She tried to appear casual. There was nothing more she wanted than to know where
Oliver spent most of his days. For so long Felicity had searched for answers, but she also didn't want
to push him.

"If I had a home, I probably wouldn't be able to tell you. So I guess it's good that I don't."

Frowning, Felicity placed a hand on his arm. "What do you mean you don't have a home?"

"In my line of work," Oliver said carefully, "putting down roots isn't an option."

"But you have a place of your own, right? Somewhere to go in your off time," she said.
"Like I said before, I don't stay in one place for too long." Sensing her despair from his answer, Oliver placed his hands on her hips and drew her forward.

Felicity's hands landed on his bare chest, but her attention was on his duffle bag that was still by the door. "So that's it?" She nodded over to it. "That's your entire life in there."

"More or less depending on the business I'm conducting." Oliver cupped her face so she was looking at him. His voice was soothing. "Don't be upset, Felicity. It's better this way. Really."

That certainly explained why she couldn't track him down. He was never in one place long enough to leave behind a trail. "It's not fair," she murmured. The joy and contentment she'd felt ever since he'd walked through her door last night wavered.

"Life usually isn't, which is why we should make the most of the chances we do have." Oliver rested his forehead against hers. "I'm here with you now. Let's make it count."

Winding her arms around his neck, Felicity pulled him down and captured his lips. Oliver groaned at the sudden onslaught of her demanding mouth but didn't hesitate to match her fiery kisses. Felicity's body molded to his as her hands wound through his hair and traced the defined muscles of his back. She kissed a trail down his neck and shivered at the way his scruff scraped against her raw skin.

It wasn't enough. She needed more of him. Even after everything they'd done last night, her body was still craving him. The need was fiercer as she thought about Oliver's constant wandering. He might not have a home anymore, but he had roots. Long ago they'd grown, intertwining with hers, and taken hold of both their hearts.

Breaking their kiss, Felicity grabbed one of the hands that was currently on her butt and led Oliver forward. He sidled up behind her and kissed her neck as they moved. "The bedroom is that way," he drawled against her skin.

Her eyes closed momentarily at his ministrations. "We've already christened the bedroom," Felicity replied, breathless. She pushed him onto the couch and pulled her shirt off. The cold air against her sensitive skin along with the frenzied look in Oliver's eyes made her nipples harden. She dropped her panties as well before straddling him.

Oliver caressed the smooth, naked skin of her back. His blazing touch was a sharp contrast to the chill in the room, and it raised her flesh. "I thought that only counted when you first move into an apartment." He buried his face in her chest, nipping and sucking on her breasts.

With her head thrown back, Felicity arched into him. Her fingers ran through his hair, spurring him on. "Since you w-weren't here when I d-id," she stuttered, trying desperately to remain at least somewhat coherent, "I'm willing to make an exception." His hand dipped lower between them and she keened at his intimate touch against her sex. The other traveled back up her body and grabbed at her ponytail. He tipped her head back and kissed his way up her neck.

"You've always been the exception, Felicity," he huskily murmured, branding the words into her skin, before swallowing her moans with his mouth.

Felicity traced the hard, jagged lines of his chest down to his abs. The muscles seemed to jump at every teasing caress of her fingers. When they slid under the waistband of his sweats, his hips bucked. She clamped down on his fingers then, too, causing him to groan. "So have you," she whispered into his ear and flicked her tongue against the lobe. "I love you."

She let out a whimper of protest when the fingers that had been pushing her to the brink hitched,
only to then suddenly slide out of her. The emptiness was acute. Oliver stilled her own hands and then met her confused gaze. "I want you." His voice was thick and heady.

Felicity didn't need to be told twice. After helping Oliver to remove his sweats and secure protection, Felicity leaned him back into the couch. She started to sink down on top of him, causing them both to gasp, and only made it halfway before lifting back up. Her body was so on edge from his earlier strokes that she knew her orgasm wouldn't be far off. That didn't mean she couldn't at least tease him a bit beforehand. He'd certainly done his part to wind her up. Felicity ran her hand along his scruff and up into his hair while pecking at his lips.

"Felicity," Oliver growled—half exasperated, half pleading—when she refused to take him all the way in yet again. He was barely keeping himself in check.

Felicity rubbed her nose against his. "What?" she innocently replied.

"You know what."

"Is that your deep, tough Bratva voice?" Felicity traced his tattoo.

"You want Bratva?" Oliver challenged with a wicked glint in his eye. She was so close, and he was already so hard. This teasing was killing him, and she damn well knew it. All it would take is one swift movement to bury himself deep inside her wet heat.

"I want you. I don't care how." Felicity caressed his jaw, her tiny smirk giving her away.

Oliver closed the gap between them and muttered against her lips, "As you wish..." He then gripped her hips tightly and thrusted hard between her legs.

Felicity gasped loudly as she slammed down on top of him, taking him in completely, and barely had a chance to respond before he was pumping inside of her. His kisses matched his thrusts—relentless, demanding, and devouring. All she could do was cling to him in an effort to find some stability during the rough, pleasure-filled onslaught. It didn't take long for him to push her over the edge.

Felicity came apart in his arms, burying her head in his shoulder, but Oliver didn't stop. He was determined, driving the coil in her lower abdomen to again tighten and her inner walls to flex around him with each powerful thrust. It was hard for her to stay upright as the erotic current running through her turned her limbs to jelly. As if he could read her mind, Oliver pinned Felicity down on the couch. He draped over her and placed the majority of his weight on his forearms. The extra leverage allowed him to change the angle and drive into her more forcefully. She cried out, chanting his name. He went deeper, hitting her in the exact spot he knew would bring her to the point of no return.

If she didn't know Oliver, the intense, almost feral look in his eyes would've frightened her. It was that same look he'd had in Anatoly's office when trying to convince him that he could carry out her punishment. It was a look that could do unspeakable things if necessary. His Bratva tattoo, marking his membership in one of the most powerful and lethal organizations in the world, gleamed with sweat. It rubbed against Felicity's equally slick skin as he took her over and over again. She felt the tremor in his large, strong body. Oliver was barely hanging on. Felicity didn't know where she found the strength, but her legs hitched higher and tightened around him—urging him to finish this dangerous game they'd started.

Oliver felt as if he was in a trance. The sound of Felicity's cries was like throwing gasoline on a fire. His body burned as he mindlessly moved on top of her, filling her to the hilt, his muscles straining to maintain the frenzied pace he'd set. He wanted her. He wanted her so much he ached, but he'd been
careful with her up until now. Oliver had kept his darker side in check. He wanted to be the man she remembered and loved. The man who didn't live in the darkness. The man who didn't have blood on his hands. The man who didn't keep secrets that would forever change the way she looked at him. Most of all, he wanted to be her Oliver again.

Oliver had turned wild and selfish in that moment, taking everything Felicity was offering as she writhed beneath him. She was light and goodness, and he wanted all of it. He wanted all of her. Even as the monster within him reared its ugly head—a monster she had unknowingly unleashed—Oliver couldn't stop. It was all-consuming, and it wouldn't be satisfied until it devoured her completely. His arms wrapped around her, drawing her flush against him and guiding her movements. Their bodies clashed together, each demanding more.

They were so close together, Felicity couldn't tell where he stopped and she began. She'd gotten lost in Oliver many times before, but this was different. His tight grip on her was more than lust-filled passion. It was a raw, desperate hunger that instinctively had her arching into him. Whatever it was he sought from her, Felicity wanted him to have it. Oliver buried his face in her neck, the sound of his grunts muffled while he pounded into her. She felt his teeth sink into her flesh as his body shuddered on top of her, finally finding his release. Her own nails dug into his back at the sharp pain, and the coil deep inside her core exploded more powerfully than before. A kaleidoscope of color flashed before her eyes.

Minutes later they were still panting, neither able to move. Felicity's body relaxed, thrumming with the after-effects of their lovemaking, while his shook. Her brow scrunched in concern, sensing that it was more than just physical for him. Naturally, her hand found the back of his neck. She stroked it lightly to soothe him. Felicity didn't know what was running through Oliver's mind, but he needed her. It was evident in the way he stayed wrapped around her, clinging as if she might suddenly slip through his fingers before he was ready to let go.

"Oliver." Her voice was barely a whisper. Finally, he stilled and lifted his head to look at her. The dark, haunted expression in his eyes was gone. It was replaced by the kindness and love she'd always remembered, though a hint of sadness remained. He rested his forehead against hers and sighed heavily. That one gesture told her everything she needed to know.

Felicity caressed his jaw in an attempt to wipe away the tension. "When you're tired of being Bratva, you can always come home to me," she uttered softly.

Oliver kissed her forehead and looked down at her. "I thought I already did."

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**June 11, 2007**

It was not even nine o'clock yet, and Felicity was already on her third cup of coffee. She had a long day ahead of her at the office and decided to get in early. Her supervisor had dropped a pile of files on her desk on Friday for a project. It would take her all day to sort through it, and it was due by Wednesday. In order to function this Monday morning, coffee was a must.

Felicity's face scrunched at the bitter taste. She definitely needed to add another packet of sugar. Opening her desk drawer, Felicity sighed when she realized she'd run out. She'd have to get up and go to the pantry to get some more. She begrudgingly stood, stretched her muscles, and walked down the hall. Her mind was already forming a game plan for how to tackle this latest project. Felicity had been so wrapped up in her thoughts that she hadn't noticed the tall figure standing by her cubicle until it was too late.

*Her whole body froze at the sight of Oliver. Felicity had almost forgotten that he was starting at QC*
today. She hadn’t seen him since the party Saturday night and had refused to answer any of his calls or texts. Felicity had spoken with Tommy, who tried to tell her that Oliver felt bad about what had happened. He also made it known that while the fight had gotten out of hand, Oliver had been looking out for her just like he would. Apparently, Tommy agreed that Max was a jerk.

While Felicity appreciated Tommy’s concern, she made sure to tell him that she was perfectly capable of making her own judgments about people. Just because she was younger than them, that didn’t mean she wasn’t entitled to the same level of respect. It was up to her whether she required anyone’s protection. Tommy said that he understood and urged her to talk to Oliver one final time. She was still upset with Oliver—for reasons she couldn’t fully share with Tommy—but said she’d think about it.

Oliver stood pensively by her cubicle with his hands in his pockets. He was always so confident and charming that it was slightly unnerving to see such a serious expression on his face. He actually looked nervous. "Felicity," he said when she approached. Her name on his lips was quiet but beseeching.

She pushed her glasses higher up her nose and unconsciously gripped her coffee cup tighter. "Oliver."

"Can we talk?"

Before she could speak, her supervisor came through the door. He was dressed in his usual corduroy pants, button-up shirt, and sweater vest. Felicity didn’t know how he could wear such warm clothes in the summer. Mr. Henson was of medium height with a thin, lanky build. She wondered if his lack of body fat made him more susceptible to the AC in the building, which was always blasting. "Morning, Felicity," he greeted. "Hope you had a good weekend. I’ve got another set of files to give you. Why don’t you stop in my office in about fifteen minutes?"

"Sure, no problem," she answered.

His gaze drifted over to Oliver before widening. Mr. Henson paused, his posture instantly straightening, and said in a more formal voice, "Mr. Queen, good morning. Is there something I can help you with?"

"No, that's okay," Oliver replied, easily slipping into his usual carefree persona. "Felicity helped fix my computer before, and I just have a couple more questions for her."

"Oh, all right then. Take your time. Felicity, I'll be in my office when you're ready."

Felicity nodded to Mr. Henson and offered a polite smile. "I won't be long."

Oliver waited until he entered his office. He opened his mouth to speak when a few more people made their way to their cubicles. Their curious eyes landed on the tense pair. "Is there somewhere we can go?" Oliver questioned. He’d been thinking about what he wanted to say to Felicity all weekend, and it wasn’t something that could be done in front of an audience.

The brunette hesitated for a moment and then said, "Follow me." She led Oliver down the hall to a small conference room. Felicity usually sat facing the windows in meetings, because it offered a great view of the Starling City Bay.

Oliver watched as Felicity crossed the room and stood by the windows. The early morning light shined on her sleek black hair and gave her pale skin a creamy glow. Her arms were folded as she leaned against the window. Her petite figure was more pronounced in her form-fitting black pants,
plaid black blouse, and heels. The ponytail holding back her hair accentuated her delicate neck, which inadvertently made him think about the taste of her skin. It was one of the reasons they were there in the first place, and he cast it from his mind.

Oliver stayed on the opposite side of the table, sensing that she wanted to keep some distance between them. "Felicity." Her name rolled off his tongue in a serious, almost reverent timber. "I wanted to say that I'm sorry about what happened at the party."

"There were a few things that happened. You might want to be more specific."

She wasn't going to make this easy on him. Oliver didn't blame her, nor did he expect anything less. "I'm sorry for picking a fight with Max and for putting you in the middle. We've never really gotten along, and usually I just ignore him."

"So why didn't you?"

"I saw him making a move on you, and I was worried. He can be a real tool."

Felicity pushed off the window and folded her arms. "Oliver, I hate to break it to you, but the only tool at that party was you. Whether Max is in fact a jerk or not, it doesn't matter. He was being nice to me, and I'm perfectly capable of judging someone's character on my own."

"You don't know him like I do, Felicity. He was only being nice, because he wanted in your pants. Why else do you think he had his hands all over you all night?"

Felicity's temper flared, and she gripped the chair in front of her for support. "We were dancing, Oliver. Dancing requires touching. It's hardly the scandal you're making it out to be."

"It wasn't just the dancing," he stubbornly replied.

"Well, so what if he had been touching me? I don't need you swooping in to 'defend my honor' like some pathetic damsel in distress," Felicity retorted, making air quotes with her fingers. "Is that what I am to you, Oliver? Am I just some stupid, naive child?"

"What?" he retorted, totally taken aback.

"When you confronted Max, you said I wasn't an adult. That I was only seventeen and that I was off limits because I'm Tommy's little sister."

"Well, you are."

Felicity groaned in frustration and threw her hands up. "Yes, I know that, Oliver. But the way you said it completely infantilized me. You made me sound like some little kid completely unable to make her own decisions. Yes, I'm younger than all of you. Yes, I'm Tommy's stepsister. But I am not some gullible, helpless teenager who isn't allowed or can't handle talking to someone of the opposite sex. I have dated and since I'm in college, most of the guys have been older than me—my ex-boyfriend Cooper being one of them. But if I wanted to flirt with Max and we ended up making out that night, then that would've been my choice. And there would be nothing wrong or shameful about it."

"Felicity—"

"And furthermore, how is dancing or having a conversation with Max any worse than doing body shots with you? Because if you ask me, I think you licking salt off my neck and knocking back shots is a way more compromising position. What do you think Tommy or Laurel would've thought if they'd seen that?" she challenged and felt a surge of satisfaction at his flinch. "I'm not some little toy
you can play with whenever you feel like it, Oliver. You can't have it both ways. I'm either mature enough to hang out with you guys and be taken seriously or I'm not. And if you think I'm not, then let's just end it here and now. You guys can do your thing the rest of the summer, and I'll do mine."

Felicity took a moment to catch her breath after her rant while Oliver stared back, stunned. She was so sick of being underestimated. All her life she'd been made to feel like an outsider. Whether it was her father walking out on their family or the kids at school who picked on her for being too nerdy, Felicity always felt like she wasn't enough. It was why she pushed herself so hard and went to MIT. Why she built up her walls and kept everyone at arm's length. Why she shrouded herself in black and lost herself for hours on her computer.

While Felicity did have a few friends from MIT that she kept in contact with, none of them were that close to her. Meeting Tommy and being welcomed into his circle of friends had been unexpected for Felicity. Even more unexpected were the moments she'd shared with Oliver. The way he spoke to her and touched her sometimes, Felicity could've sworn he'd seen past her dark and quirky facade. He'd opened up to her, too, and she'd thought that it meant he saw her as an equal. A part of her understood where he was coming from and why that protective instinct would be there, but it didn't make the truth of how he really viewed her hurt any less.

Oliver watched as Felicity turned away from him and felt a knot form in the pit of his stomach. He knew that Felicity had been upset, but he didn't know how deeply he'd wounded her. The worst part was that none of her assumptions about why he'd behaved the way he did were true. He'd intended to apologize and make things right between them. Instead, he'd only made the situation worse.

Walking around the table, Oliver went to join her by the window. "Felicity," he said softly. She wouldn't look at him. "I don't think you're a kid or some kind of toy. The night of the party, Sara said that you're more mature than Tommy and I combined and she's right. The way I reacted the other night wasn't a reflection of you."

She still wouldn't face him, so he continued, "The truth is, even though you're too good for Max, it wasn't just him. I would've reacted the same way if it had been any other guy there that night."

"If you were so worried about me being underage, why did you bother inviting me?" she questioned. "Which, for the record, my eighteenth birthday is less than six months away."

Oliver ran an agitated hand through his hair. He wasn't explaining this correctly at all. Translating his thoughts into actual words had never been his strong suit—not when it really mattered. "Felicity, your age isn't the issue. I'm sure some of the people there that night were even younger than you. I just used it as an excuse, because it was the only thing I could think of to discourage Max from pursuing you. It's not like I could tell him how amazing you are, because it would've made him want you even more."

Did he just call her amazing? Focus, Felicity told herself. Oliver still hadn't given her a reason as to why he'd embarrassed her so thoroughly. "Why should it matter to you whether he wants me or not?" she murmured.

Oliver hesitated, debating how much he should reveal. As strong as Felicity was trying to appear, the hurt was written all over her face. It wouldn't have been the first time he'd caused an innocent girl pain. Over the years, Oliver had left a string of broken hearts across Starling City without so much as a second thought. But with Felicity, it was different. The very thought of her believing a lie, especially one that played on her insecurities of not fitting in, formed knots in his stomach. She deserved the truth. "It shouldn't matter, Felicity, but it does."

Something in his voice caught her attention, and Felicity finally turned to face him. He'd taken a step
closer to her. The silent, meaningful look on his handsome face conveyed more than he could possibly say. "Oliver," Felicity softly replied, afraid that speaking any louder would burst the intimate bubble they found themselves in, "you're not making any sense."

He lessened the gap between them. "Max was running his mouth about you when you walked away. The only reason he did it was because he knew it would get to me. And he was right. I lost it, and I hit him. I know it was wrong, and I'm sorry that I upset you. But I'd do it again—for you," Oliver declared. "Do you understand?"

"You were drunk, Oliver," Felicity said to convince herself as much as him. "You weren't thinking—"

"Felicity." His tone was deep, husky. "I wasn't that drunk."

She looked away from him, trying to collect her thoughts. He couldn't possibly be saying what she thought he was saying, could he? "So the whole body shot thing..." she trailed off, a little breathlessly. "That wasn't...you actually wanted..." It was impossible to say it out loud. It was too unthinkable. She settled with, "You said it was just a game."

Oliver took another step forward, towering over her. There was barely an inch of space between them. The air crackled with an invisible, charged energy. His cobalt eyes, sharp and insatiable, pinned her where she stood. "I lied." Raising his hand, Oliver ran his thumb along Felicity's neck. It was the exact line he'd traced with his mouth a couple of days ago. "Do you want me to stop?"

Felicity's eyes fluttered closed for a second at his touch. His warm fingers rubbing against her sensitive flesh ignited the spark all over again. The heat rose and spread throughout her entire body, burning away the uncertainty that had been plaguing her for weeks. Oliver was just as attracted to her as she was to him. Felicity's heart felt like it might beat right out of her chest at the realization. "No."

Oliver couldn't take his eyes off of her. The mixture of wonder and desire reflecting back at him was intoxicating. Felicity was unlike anyone he'd ever met. They'd only known each other a month, but the times they were together—though not as frequent—had been meaningful. The connection had been there between them from the start, and he knew they'd only scratched the surface.

"Oliver, what are we doing?" Felicity whispered.

With a minute shake of his head, he answered just as quietly, "I don't know." He traced another intimate line along her flesh.

She bit her lip. His eyes darkened, and it sent a thrill through her. This was unreal, Felicity couldn't help but think. Moments ago she'd been convinced that Oliver saw her as nothing more than his best friend's younger stepsister. Now they were standing almost chest to chest, exchanging heated looks and words with hidden meanings. Their foreheads touched, and her eyes closed completely.

"So, am I forgiven?"

Not trusting her voice, Felicity nodded in response. Her body thrummed where he touched. She could smell the sweet musk of his cologne. Hear his quick breaths before she felt them on her face. If she moved a bit closer, would Oliver's lips be there to greet hers? How would they feel? Everything about him seemed so strong and confident. Would they glide over hers with the same power and possessiveness? Or would they be more sensual, more tender?

As if sensing her train of thought, Oliver tilted her chin up. She would soon find out. Felicity licked
her lips in anticipation. A part of her had been dreaming this ever since she'd met him that first day at QC. It was ironic that this was happening here, now. They had come full circle.

Oliver's nose brushed hers, and she placed a tentative hand on his chest. His heart was beating just as fast. He was so close. Felicity could feel Oliver all around her. This had been one of her fantasies as she eagerly awaited him at her mother's wedding reception. They would meet again. They would talk and maybe flirt, both feeling that invisible tether between them tightening. Maybe in that romantic, though over the top, setting the pull would become too much. Then they would kiss.

That dream had been dashed, unfortunately, the moment Felicity learned about Laurel. Laurel, she thought and it felt like she'd been doused with an ice cold bucket of water. Oliver had barely grazed her lips before Felicity turned her head. His mouth touched her cheek instead, and her body shivered despite her inner turmoil. Keeping her eyes on the city, wishing she was anywhere but there, Felicity gently pushed at his chest and drew back.

"Felicity." She could hear the question and bewilderment in his voice.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she finally faced him. "Laurel," she simply said, and he'd tensed.

"We're not—we're on a break," Oliver replied, though it lacked conviction. With one word, Felicity had put an end to them before they could even begin. Oliver couldn't comprehend how he'd gone from feeling so hopeful one moment to so forlorn in the next.

"But you're going to get back together. Why else would you promise not to see anyone else?" Felicity reasoned. "You've known Laurel most of your life. You've built a relationship with her. Would you really be willing to risk that for someone you hardly know?"

I didn't know there'd be you, he wanted to say. But at the same time, Felicity had a point. Whatever this was between he and Felicity, it was all new. Of course Oliver would be intrigued by her. The older he got, the more there was expected of him from both his parents and Laurel. Felicity was different and exciting and offered a freedom he craved. Was that the true nature of their connection? Or was it that odd, intense feeling that ached in the center of his chest? That feeling of almost falling and not caring where he landed, as long as he was doing it with her. Because that feeling was just as scary as it was thrilling.

His silence was answer enough. Felicity sighed and moved to leave. "I'll see you around, Oliver."
Her words did not match the finality of her tone. This was good-bye.

Oliver caught her hand as she passed, halting her. "Felicity, this can't be it."

"It has to be, Oliver. Whether you're official or not, you're with Laurel. It wouldn't be right if I came between that. I'm not that kind of person. And you love her, right?"

"I know you're not. And yes, I love Laurel. But we're on a break, because I need to figure things out. I have no clue what I want to do with my life, but I do know that I'm here at QC today because of you. You're the one who convinced me to take a chance." Oliver's hand tightened around hers. "I don't know what this is, but I do know two things. The first is that I like talking to you and spending time with you. Even if we're just friends, I can't give that up. I won't."

Felicity stared, transfixed by the underlying emotion of his declaration. "And the second thing?"

"You need me just as much as I need you." His blue orbs bore into hers, sending the message home. "You are not alone, Felicity, and you shouldn't have to be."

Her breath hitched as his words hit her like a tidal wave. Oliver knew she put up walls. He knew she
was retreating behind them. He also knew how desperately she needed him to climb them anyway. Based on his determined expression, Oliver was ready to do just that.

A part of Felicity warned her that even mere friendship with Oliver Queen could end in heartache. Basic attraction wasn't something that could simply be turned off. It would take a conscious effort by both of them. The other, more vocal part told her that it was well worth the effort. That anyone who would go out of his way to defend her from creeps like Jason or Max deserved a chance. Yes, she'd been hurt in the past. But Felicity realized if she didn't move forward now, she ran the risk of her heart hardening completely. Somehow that seemed like an even worse fate.

Lightly clearing her throat, Felicity replied, "So, friends, huh? You and me?"

"Yeah, friends," Oliver repeated, his voice hopeful.

"You do realize this means no more body shots," she joked to ease the tension.

Oliver chuckled and breathed his own sigh of relief. This wasn't the end. It was the beginning. "No more body shots," he agreed. "But root beer floats are perfectly acceptable. Are you free for lunch around one?"

"One works for me. Lucky for you, I haven't picked a lunch buddy yet."

He grinned and squeezed her hand. "Well, it looks like I started just in time."

Felicity's mind wandered as it drifted between wakefulness and sleep. Her body was content but spent as she lay wrapped in Oliver's muscular arms. They'd eventually made it back into the bedroom—the sleep they'd lost the night before catching up to them. He'd slid under the covers behind her, and Felicity snuggled further into him and the blankets. Her back rested against his broad chest with her head tucked comfortably beneath his chin. The cocoon of protection and warmth he offered gave Felicity a feeling of contentment she hadn't experienced in the longest time.

She didn't dare look at the clock. Their time was surely winnowing down and worrying about it would only ruin the moment. So Felicity laid there and let the steady rhythm of his heart, beating in time with hers, lull her to sleep. She was on the precipice of letting go when a shrill ring pierced the quiet room. Oliver swore softly under his breath and quickly pulled away to answer it. Felicity stayed absolutely still, listening.

"Yeah," Oliver answered, gruff but low. Any trace of the tenderness he'd been exhibiting toward her moments prior was gone. He was silent, and most likely tense, as he listened to whoever was speaking. Felicity could hear the other voice, but she couldn't understand it. "I debriefed them and inspected it myself. There shouldn't be any more issues."

More talking.

"They know what will happen if they fail again. I'll see to their punishment personally..." His voice was deep and menacing. Felicity had never heard him sound so cold. This was Bratva Oliver in full force. Would he actually hurt someone? How would he do it? She remembered the glimpse she'd seen of his darker side this afternoon, and it made her shiver despite being tucked under the blankets. "No, I can't at the moment...It doesn't matter where I am. I said I would handle it and I will..."

Whatever Oliver said next was lost to her as he switched to Russian. Hearing him speak the language with such ease and surety was jarring to Felicity. These last twenty-four hours had been spent
together, cut off from the outside world, in a tiny bubble of their own making. There were some obvious differences in him—which was to be expected—but there had also been traces of the Oliver she knew years ago.

It was difficult to recognize that Oliver now with that steely edge to his voice. He might've been speaking in a different language, but even Felicity could tell that the conversation had taken a serious turn. For what felt like the thousandth time in the last month, Felicity considered what exactly Oliver had gotten himself into and how he'd been able to maintain that status over the years. One didn't rise through the ranks of such an organization by being merciful. Which version of Oliver, she questioned, best represented the man he'd become?

Furthermore, how was she supposed to handle it? Oliver wasn't the only one who'd changed. Felicity was a part of A.R.G.U.S., and it was her job to protect the country from such threats. That's exactly what she'd been doing, after all, when they'd first reunited. Whatever Oliver was discussing was obviously illegal. What did it say about Felicity if she was willing to overlook the oath that she'd taken for the sake of following her heart? She felt a headache forming just thinking about it.

Finally, Oliver cut the call and returned to bed. He drew her back into his embrace and even as the doubts swirled through Felicity's mind, she let him. Her instinct was still to trust him. Unlike his coarse voice moments before, his hands were as gentle as they'd always been.

"Is everything okay?" she yawned in an attempt to sound as if she'd just woken.

"Everything is fine, sweetheart." He pressed a chaste kiss to her bare shoulder, in the crook of her neck, and finished at the crown of her head. "Go back to sleep."

Felicity's arms rested atop his, pressing her to him more tightly. She didn't have any answers to the questions piling up in her head. All Felicity knew was that there was no right or wrong in that moment. She was with Oliver, and she loved him. That was enough for now.
Love on the Brain

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you guys for taking the time to review and leave kudos! Hope you enjoy this next chapter. We'll be delving deeper into A.R.G.U.S. Please read and review!

April 10, 2012

Sipping her coffee, Felicity entered the conference room just in time for the morning debriefing. Curtis, Barry, and Caitlin were already inside. The guys were leaning over a box of pastries, discussing who should get the only double chocolate chip muffin. Curtis claimed that he'd gone to the gym earlier that morning, and therefore the muffin should be his reward. Barry countered that since the muffin was full of carbs, eating it would defeat the purpose of working out. Caitlin, meanwhile, was watching the pair in silent amusement.

Felicity placed her things on the table beside Curtis. She then leaned over and swiped the muffin in question from the box. Curtis and Barry's heads swiveled in her direction, bewildered. Caitlin laughed out loud.

"Hey, that's my muffin," Curtis exclaimed.

"You mean mine, but I agree. Hey," Barry scolded. He attempted a stern expression, but on his youthful face it looked more like a pout.

She shrugged innocently before taking a bite. "You snooze you lose, boys."

Bummed, Barry muttered to himself, "I really need to learn to be faster."

"Or maybe someone should buy more than one double chocolate chip muffin." Curtis stared pointedly at Caitlin.

"Hey, I was lucky to get that," the brunette replied. "The bakery was really busy this morning, and that was the last one."

"I call dibs on the chocolate croissant." Mei tossed a pile of files next to the box before swiping her own breakfast. "Everyone grab a file. Lyla will be in in a few."

"Everything all right?" Felicity questioned. It wasn't like Lyla to be late for meetings.

"Waller needed to see her."

"That's got to be the worst way to start the morning," Curtis commented and picked at his apple Danish.

"Watch it," Caitlin warned. "You know Waller sometimes likes to review the internal surveillance footage. She hears you say that, and she might put you on one of those solitary missions in the middle of nowhere with crappy food and no cable."
"It would still probably be better than that time in Corto Maltese." Curtis shuddered at the memory.

"I didn't mind it," Mei spoke up. "The beaches were amazing."

"I didn't really notice. I was too busy puking my guts out in med bay the entire time. Food poisoning is officially the worst."

Barry, who'd still been contemplating his breakfast choice, finally grabbed the other Danish. "I told you not to get the fish tacos from that truck. It didn't look sanitary."

"Well, it's not like there were many other places around to get food during that stakeout."

"I don't know about the food, but the whole no cable thing wouldn't matter," Felicity added. "If there's network access, which there would be, Curtis could easily rewire the system in no-man's land and log into Netflix."

"Which is way better than cable because no commercials," Curtis stated matter of factly.

"I need to learn how to do that," Mei declared while flipping through her file.

Felicity did the same in between taking bites of her delicious muffin. She took a look at the documents in the file. The reports and maps provided outlined several international incidents over the last few months. Incidents that Felicity had steadily been investigating. They ranged from black market dealings to high-profile hostage situations. The only common thread, Felicity had discovered, was the exchange or theft of certain high-powered pieces of tech.

Minutes later, Lyla walked into the room. Her short brown hair was pulled back, which usually meant serious business was going on. "Morning, everyone," she greeted and dimmed the lights on her way in. The overhead projector was clicked on and warmed up as she took her spot at the head of the table. "We've got a lot to cover. But first, someone pass me a muffin."

"There's no chocolate. Felicity ate it," Curtis announced.

"Tattletale," Felicity said under her breath and nudged Curtis. He nudged her back.

"I'm more of a blueberry person myself," Lyla declared and took a muffin from the box. She popped a piece into her mouth before fiddling around on the laptop in front of her. A large map covered the projection screen. Colored dots were strewn across it. "I just spoke with Waller, and it seems we have a situation. Our assignment has changed, so disregard the folders in front of you. We will no longer be concerning ourselves with the shadow tech situation."

"Shadow tech," Curtis beamed. "I came up with that term. You know, because it's the Black Market and all the shady things that have gone down—" At Lyla's bland look, he quickly said, "Which is definitely not important at the moment."

"As I was saying, shadow tech is out. We have a more pressing matter that needs our attention. In recent months, a few A.R.G.U.S. sites have been breached. The highlighted areas are their locations."

"These aren't actual bases, are they?" Mei inquired. "These locations are pretty remote."

"No, not bases. It was two disaster bunkers and a safe house," Lyla answered.

"Basically, a cache of weapons and supplies for agents out in the field or in immediate danger," Barry surmised. "When you say they were breached, do you mean that they were infiltrated and
"Yes. A majority of the supplies kept in these facilities was stolen."

"Okay, I get that this is a problem but I'm confused as to why Waller wants us to investigate this instead of the shadow tech," Caitlin spoke up. "It seems kind of inconsequential compared to illegal arms deals and missing tech."

"This is why." Lyla changed the image on the screen, and Felicity couldn't hold back her gasp. Several pictures showed A.R.G.U.S. agents lying in pools of their own blood. Aside from being dead, the only other commonality was the arrows sticking out of their bodies. They all remained silent, taking in the tragedy.

Finally, Curtis said, "What's with the arrows? Isn't that a bit archaic?"

"Arrows can do more damage than a bullet," Mei stated, studying the images carefully.

"Hey, wasn't there another incident involving arrows here in Starling a couple of months back?" Caitlin questioned. "A.R.G.U.S. has disaster bunkers here, too. I've used the one on the edge of The Glades before when we had that shootout with the Triad. Maybe there is a connection. The archer could've been staking out locations for his or her next target."

Barry bobbed his head in acknowledgment. "It's a definite possibility. Although the SCPD reported that the archer had actually stopped a woman from being mugged and assaulted on the street. The arrows hit the perps, and she was able to get away. I don't think she ever saw who did it, but I'll double check."

"The arrows were green," Curtis joined in. "I distinctly remembered that. Made me think of when I'd play Robin Hood as a kid. Of course, my arrows were nothing more than sticks with tiny suction cups. They barely stuck to anything and were super unreliable. I used to superglue tacks on the end, which the kids in my neighborhood did not appreciate. My mother freaked and took it away from me after that."

"I can work a contact at the SCPD and try to get one of the arrows," Barry suggested and made a note on his pad.

"Archery is a skill that requires patience and precision." Mei's eyes remained glued to the images. They almost looked haunted as she spoke. "It's deliberate, and many times an arrow's design is a reflection of the archer's preference."

"It could be the killer's calling card," Lyla agreed. "Curtis, Barry, Waller wants you to run forensics on the arrows. Compare them with the one from the SCPD. Caitlin, you'll need to review the coroner's reports and conduct an autopsy on the latest bodies. The most recent attack happened yesterday. The evidence and bodies are in transit to A.R.G.U.S. headquarters as we speak. They should arrive within the hour. Mei, you are to review the security footage with Felicity. The two of you need to figure out how they knew to target these sites in the first place and breach our defenses. I'll need progress reports later this afternoon to present to Waller. Everyone clear on their assignments?"

They all nodded their assent and were dismissed to begin their investigation.

"So, your desk or mine?" Felicity asked Mei as they left the conference room. She tried to keep her voice light, despite the heaviness of the assignment. Given the dangerous nature of their work, it wasn't uncommon to hear about such casualties. That didn't make it any easier, though. "I'm thinking
mine, since I'll probably be the one working the footage on the computer and retracing the digital trail. You can—" She stopped talking when she realized that Mei wasn't paying attention. "Hey, Mei, are you okay?"

"Huh?" she replied, snapping out of it. "Oh, yeah. I'm fine."

"You sure? You seemed a little off in there."

"The way those agents were killed was surprising."

"You had some good insights about archery," Felicity pointed out. She sensed that Mei was more affected by this development than she was letting on, but Felicity kept her tone casual. "Have you ever tried it before?"

"No. Not me. She kept her eyes forward as they walked. "Someone else that I used to know."

Knowing how tight-lipped Mei was about her past, Felicity didn't push it. The blonde knew better than anyone what it was like to keep the deepest parts of her heart hidden. It was even more important now that she knew Oliver was alive. The mere thought of him automatically made her heart race. It had been almost two months since he'd come to Starling. They'd spent two amazing days together before he had to leave again.

Oliver had left in the middle of the night to ensure that no one would notice him. They'd stood in her doorway, clutching each other and savoring their final moments. Oliver had kissed her over and over again—like a man who knew it would be his last meal for a while and was determined to devour every last morsel while he could. Felicity had been just as ravenous, kissing him with everything inside of her.

Eventually, their time had run out. Oliver left but not without promising to return. He didn't tell her when. He couldn't. All he said was that he'd be with her again when he was sure it was safe. It was bittersweet as the anguish of letting him go mixed with the hope of being reunited. It was that hope that Felicity clung to each and every day. It kept a smile on her face and put a spring in her step. She missed Oliver terribly, but she was strangely happy at the same time. Love was complicated like that.

"So my desk?" Felicity asked Mei, refocusing on the task ahead of them. They had a lot to do and not that much time to do it in.

"Your desk," Mei agreed. "I'll get us some more coffee."

Felicity nodded her head in approval. "We're gonna need it."

Felicity could feel the vibrations of the loud, pumping music even before she entered Verdant. The line to get in went down the street and wrapped around the block. Although the air was still a bit crisp for spring, not many people wore coats. Felicity assumed it was because no one wanted to cover up their stylish outfits. Not to mention having to carry the coat around once they got inside. That had certainly been Sara's reasoning. Shivering in the cool night air, Felicity followed Sara to the front of the line. People were staring at them as they passed by.

"The line is back that way," a young woman in ridiculously high heels called to them. She didn't look too steady on her feet, either because she couldn't walk in them or she was already drunk.

Sara smirked confidently and kept walking. "We're VIP." They reached the bouncer at the front of
the line. He was tall with a wide, muscular frame that resembled a linebacker. Felicity didn't know who would want to mess with him, because a hit from that guy looked like it could put a person in the hospital. It was probably why Tommy hired him in the first place. "Hey, Bobby," she greeted.

"Sara," Bobby acknowledged. "You here to have fun tonight or catch another Vertigo-pushing dirt bag?"

"I'm wearing my good heels, so definitely fun."

"For being so small, you sure do pack a punch. I didn't even have to rough the guy up before you took him down." He sounded impressed and a little flirty.

Sara beamed back. "All part of my strategy. Plus, I'm just awesome like that."

"Is your friend a cop, too?"

"No. Actually, Felicity is Tommy's sister."

"Oh, Ms. Smoak," he said in recognition. "I've been told you'd show up eventually." He reached behind him and grabbed a couple of lanyards. "Here are your VIP passes, and your drinks are on the house tonight."

"Wow, I should bring you with me more often." Sara teasingly nudged her.

"You told me you always get VIP," Felicity pointed out.

"I do, but I don't always get free drinks." She motioned to the entrance. "Let's go raid the bar. See ya later, Bobby."

Felicity paused in the entrance of the crowded club taking it in. The space was wide and open. It had a factory type look with steel beams and modern art on the walls. The dance floor was in the middle of the room with tables and couches surrounding it. The bar was set further back and had two sets of stairs on either side that led to a second level.

Sara led the way to the bar and ordered them a couple of shots, claiming they needed to "loosen up." While Sara chatted with the bartender, who also seemed familiar with her, Felicity tugged at her dress. It was sleeveless and bright purple with a hem that ended a couple of inches above her knees. The strip of mesh fabric along her waist and on her chest, exposing patches of skin, gave it more of a sultry look.

Whipping her phone out of her gold purse, Felicity texted Tommy to let him know that she was there. His reply was instantaneous, his excitement obvious. He'd been dying for Felicity to see his new club, and she felt a regretful pang at having waited so long to visit. Tommy said he'd join them in a couple of minutes, and Felicity would make sure to tell him how great the club turned out.

"Here you go." Sara handed Felicity the shot. "To finally getting your smoakin' hot butt out of your apartment on a Friday night and having fun with your best friend."

With an amused roll of her eyes, Felicity clinked their glasses and knocked back the shot. Her face scrunched up as the smooth, biting liquid burned down her throat. She reached for the lime wedge to chase the strong taste. "Well, I definitely feel loose now—or like I might sprout hair on my chest," she joked.

"Another shot of the good stuff, Marissa."
"Sara," Felicity warned. "I don't want to be wasted before the night even begins."

"One more won't kill us. Besides, we'll probably burn it off on the dance floor in no time."

Before they could lift their shot glasses a second time, Felicity saw Tommy making his way over. "You made it," he enthused and hugged her. "What do you think?"

"This place is amazing, Tommy," Felicity complimented. "I can't believe you did all of this. Well, I can believe it but what I mean is that you really pulled it off. I'm so proud of you."

Tommy's smile lit up his entire face. "Thanks, Felicity. It means a lot." He eyed their shot glasses. "I see the party has already started with you two. Marissa, pour me one, too."

"Now you're talking, Merlyn," Sara cheered.

Tommy raised his glass, and they followed suit. "To hard work paying off—and to proving our parents wrong once and for all." Although his tone was teasing, Felicity knew his words held a deeper meaning. Malcolm still wasn't that supportive of Tommy's venture, which meant Felicity's presence here (as a member of his family) meant even more to him.

"Cheers," they chorused and took their shots.

"Let me show you the VIP area. I've got my own spot—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Merlyn, can I talk to you for a second?" a young man interrupted. He wore all black and was a little on the short side but had a very handsome face. He had to be either in his late teens or early twenties.

"What is it, Roy?"

"One of the vendors is on the phone. He says he won't send another case, and it's our problem if we lost the one he already shipped."

Tommy rolled his eyes in annoyance. "That man is the biggest pain in my ass. Tell him I'm coming—but leave out the pain-in-the-ass part," he added.

The corner of Roy's mouth twitched, as if he was fighting a grin. "Will do."

"It's fun being the big boss, isn't it?" Sara noted.

"I'm sorry. I'll catch up to you guys after. The roped off area in the VIP room is for my special guests. You can sit there."

"Take your time. We're not going anywhere," Felicity told him.

Sara interjected, "Except maybe the dance floor."

"All right. I'll be back. So glad you could come, Felicity," he said and he gave his arm an affectionate squeeze. He took off toward another staircase to the right of the dance floor. It must lead to his office.

Sara clapped her hands and rubbed them together. "So, you feel like sitting for a while or should we get straight to the dancing?"

"The DJ is awesome, so dancing gets my vote," a female voice interjected.
"Oh my gosh," Felicity exclaimed when she turned to find Mei and Caitlin behind her. "What are you guys doing here?"

"Well, we were stuck in the office working way past a decent hour and decided that we'd earned a night of fun. And I remember you mentioning that Verdant was your brother's club, so I suggested to Mei that we check it out," Caitlin explained.

"We would've invited you, but we knew you had plans with a friend tonight. So we didn't want to bother you. But here you are."

"Great minds think alike," Felicity declared before turning to Sara. "Sara, this is Mei and Caitlin. They work with me at Brighton Tech."

"Oh, so you do have co-workers," Sara kidded. "In all the years you've been working there, I'm not sure you've ever mentioned anyone by name."

Felicity felt a twinge of guilt. She told very few stories about her work life and even less about her coworkers. Most of the time, Felicity would start talking technical to purposely turn people off from that line of questioning.

"To be fair, we're really not all that interesting," Mei said. "But you must be Sara, right?"

"Sara Lance, yes." The blonde shook both women's hands. "It's nice to meet you."

Caitlin replied, "Likewise. Do you ladies mind if we join you?"

Felicity looked to Sara, who shook her head. "Not at all. We were just about to order drinks and hit the dance floor."

"Or maybe we should do the reverse," Caitlin suggested. "Less chances of spilling that way."

Sara shrugged. "Works for me."

The group of four headed onto the dance floor. It took a couple of minutes for Felicity to find her rhythm. She was already loose as the alcohol from the shots they'd done flowed through her veins. The women formed a small circle, talking and laughing as they moved to the pulsing beat. A couple of guys nearby started dancing with them. Eventually they zeroed in on Sara and Mei, who didn't hesitate to pull the guys closer. Felicity and Caitlin smiled at each other in solidarity, preferring to dance with each other rather than some random guys.

Looking around the dance floor, Felicity saw a lot more people pairing up. Her mind automatically went to Oliver. She wondered what he was doing and if he was thinking about her in that moment. The fantasy evolved from there. Felicity tried to imagine what he'd be doing right now if he were at Verdant.

Oliver didn't like to dance and would most likely be standing at the bar, watching her. She'd feel the weight of his stare and make it worth his while. Maybe, eventually, she'd coax him onto the dance floor. Or maybe they would go sit in a corner somewhere. He'd draw her into his side and run his fingers along her bare skin—making her shiver despite the heat in the club—all the while whispering how sexy she looked and how he couldn't wait to take her home. She'd whisper back "Why wait?" and he'd get that charged, heavy-lidded look in his eye. Then he'd take her hand, pull her up, and lead her down one of the corridors.

Maybe they'd find an empty room or supply closet. Oliver would lock the door behind them and have her pinned to the hard surface in seconds. Their breaths would mingle as his hands traced her
curves. Her hands would be clutching his shoulders while her body arched against him. He'd be so close, she could feel the heat radiating from his lips. Felicity would close her eyes, savoring it, and tilt her head back.

Oliver would lean in, brush his nose against hers, and hover there. Pain and pleasure would mix as Felicity waited for him to close the gap. But he wouldn't do it. Oliver, like always, would only go so far. He'd remain a breath away, and it'd be up to Felicity to take what they both wanted. Felicity would wait a few seconds, too. A few scorching seconds that would feel like torturous minutes before throwing caution to the wind. She'd grip Oliver's shoulders, stand on her tiptoes, and crash her lips on his—

Felicity was jarred back to the present when she felt someone bump into her from behind. The dance floor had gotten more crowded as the night went on. She felt hot and flushed as beads of sweat rolled down her back, but it wasn't from all the gyrating bodies. It took a minute for the fantasy to fade and reality to set back in. The dance floor was a sauna, and a cold drink was suddenly a necessity.

Getting Caitlin's attention, she pointed to the bar and the brunette nodded. Sara and Mei noticed them leaving and followed, despite their dance partners' protests. They ordered drinks and then made their way to the VIP area. The difference in ambiance was immediate. It wasn't as crowded or as loud on the second level. The VIP members seemed slightly more sophisticated as they stood in groups talking and sipping on their drinks. Felicity located Tommy's special booth, and they took a seat.

Mei slipped off her shoes. "It's the twenty-first century. You'd think by now someone would've perfected making heels that don't kill your feet halfway through the night."

"I use those special padded inserts," Caitlin said. "They work wonders."

"Still not as comfortable as my combat boots."

Felicity, trying to remain in the moment with her friends and not let her mind wander, agreed. "Nothing will ever be as comfortable as your combat boots."

"You should ask Curtis to design you some. If he was able to upgrade the subatomic particle accelerator in less than a week, then I bet he could figure out a way to fix your shoes."

"Who's Curtis and what the heck is a subatomic particle accelerator?" Sara cut in.

Felicity, Mei, and Caitlin exchanged a look. Finally, Felicity answered, "Curtis is a guy from work. He does R&D with different types of tech." Recognizing Sara's intrigued expression—the one she usually got when playing matchmaker—Felicity was quick to add, "He's gay and married."

Sara grinned at her and shrugged innocently. "I didn't say anything."

"I knew what you were thinking."

"So, Mei, Caitlin, what are your jobs?"

Mei and Caitlin answered with their cover stories before quickly shifting the focus back to Sara. This whole evening felt surreal as Felicity's secret life overlapped with her public one—not to mention the heated thoughts that involved her other secret life. Was it possible to lead a triple life? Felicity took a large sip of her drink and mentally brushed aside her confusion for the time being.

Tommy joined them minutes later. "I see you're finally off the dance floor."

Felicity made the introductions and pushed over so Tommy could sit next to her. His excitement to
meet her coworkers was on par with Sara's. The group chatted for a bit before separate conversations formed. Tommy and Mei somehow got into a debate about what is considered authentic sushi while the others were content laughing and people watching. After a little while, Felicity excused herself to go to the bathroom. There was a line, which was to be expected on such a busy night. It was on her way back to the table afterward that she heard someone calling her name. Felicity turned to see a familiar tall, dark-haired man approaching. "Ray?" She had to lean her head back to look at him, since he towered over her.

"Hey, I thought that was you." For a man in his early thirties, it was surprising how young and child-like he looked when grinning. It lit up his handsome face. "It's been a while, so I thought I'd come say hi."

"It's good to see you. How have you been?"

"Busy but good. You?"

"Pretty much the same."

"Well, you look great. Not that you don't always look great when I see you. But that dress is, uh, wow," he complimented. "And that color with your skin tone it...it works."

"Oh," Felicity said in surprise. "Thanks, Ray." If she didn't know any better, she'd almost think that he was blushing.

"Sure." He shifted and shoved his hands in his pockets. "By the way, Waller commissioned me for another project. So I'll be in the office next week, and I was wondering if you'd like to get lunch that day."

"Lunch?" Felicity repeated.

"Yeah. I need your input and I figured it'd be a nice change from the dreary conference room."

"Lunch would be nice, but I don't know how much we'll be able to discuss in a public place."

"It's not that kind of project," he assured her. "So what do you say?" He got that eager, wide-eyed look that often appeared when he was excited about something.

Felicity didn't know why she suddenly felt nervous. This was Ray. She dealt with him all of the time. "Um, I probably can but let me check my schedule. Waller's got me working with Mei on something important, and I'll be in the lab a lot next week, too, assisting Oliver with another project."

"Oliver?" Ray frowned. "I'm not familiar with him. Is he a new analyst?"

Felicity's entire body froze. Her heart was in her throat from the unexpected slip. "Curtis," she hastily corrected. "I mean Curtis."

"Oh, okay. Who's Oliver then?"

"He's no one. Don't mind me. I had some shots earlier plus a margarita, so I'm all over the place tonight. I'm not implying that I'm drunk or anything, because I'm not. Maybe buzzed. Well, definitely buzzed," she babbled. "But it was a slip of the tongue. Definitely not someone I know or someone who even exists. Although there are plenty Olivers in the world—just not any I personally know."

Felicity inwardly cursed at how ridiculous she sounded.

Ray chuckled good-naturedly. "It's okay, Felicity. You're supposed to be out having fun anyway—
not talking about work with me. I'll give you a call this week. Sound good?"

Mustering a smile, Felicity bobbed her head in agreement. She didn't trust her wayward mouth right now. A deep breath was needed before Felicity returned to the group. She sat down but didn't join in the conversation, which had switched from sushi to the best musical groups of all time. Felicity couldn't grasp how she'd accidentally said Oliver instead of Curtis, especially in a casual conversation.

Luckily, Ray didn't know much about her past or life outside of work. He wouldn't have picked up on the slip like Sara or Mei would have. It had to be the alcohol. Felicity was too "loosened up." Oliver had been on her mind earlier, and the dulling of her inhibitions was making her vulnerable. Felicity couldn't afford another lapse in judgment like that. What if some other detail more revealing than his name came spilling out? How would she explain her way out of that? This whole leading a triple life thing was way more complicated than she thought.

Felicity didn't touch her drink for the rest of the night.
Staring at the clock, Felicity began typing faster. She needed to finish the incident report. Oliver would be dropping by her cubicle any minute for lunch. It had become their daily ritual. One she looked forward to a little too much, but it was a nice break in her normally busy day. Felicity's eyes scanned the information to make sure it was accurate. With a satisfied nod, she deemed it complete.

"Yes," she mumbled to herself as she fist-pumped the air.

"What are you so excited about?" Oliver came to lean against her cubicle. He was grinning in amusement watching her.

"Just finishing up an assignment that was taking me forever. I'll be done in a sec. Just need to send this to my supervisor."

"Take your time. The cafeteria isn't going anywhere."

Felicity sent him a grateful smile before turning back to the screen. She was aware of Oliver pulling up a chair and sitting down as he waited. It took a concerted effort to focus on the task at hand. He fiddled with his phone while she typed, but every few seconds Felicity could feel his eyes on her.

"And...I'm done," Felicity announced after pushing the SEND button.

"Good. I'm starved." Oliver put his phone away and stood up.

"Legal working you hard today?"

"You have no idea. If I have to stare at one more contract, I think my eyes are going to fall out of my head."

"So I guess you can safely rule out becoming a lawyer someday," Felicity teased as she straightened up her desk. She didn't want to come back to a big mess of papers after lunch.

"I'll leave the legal stuff to Laurel," he muttered.

"How's Laurel doing in her LSATs prep class?" A few days ago, this type of question would've been charged and awkward. But since their talk and agreement to be just friends—along with the routine and familiarity of seeing each other every day—they'd fallen into a more comfortable form of camaraderie.

"She's doing okay, I guess. I haven't spoken to her much this week. She got an internship at CNRI, and they're keeping her pretty busy."

Felicity snorted. "So much for summer break. It's our one time to slack off, and we're all working."

"Almost all of us," Oliver stated. "Tommy and Sara are having enough fun for all of us combined."

"That's true. I don't know where the heck they went, but I got a drunk text from Sara last night."

"Tommy came home right when I was getting up this morning. Said he missed his wing man before passing out on the couch. At least I think that's what he said. It was difficult to understand through the slurring."
"He probably has the worst hangover today."

"Definitely."

"You totally wished you'd gone with them, don't you?" she surmised with a knowing smile.

"Oh yeah." He smirked. "But I'll make up for it tonight."

"He's going out again?" Felicity questioned, surprised.

"He'll sleep it off today and be ready for round two tonight. Trust me."

Felicity playfully rolled her eyes. She would never understand why getting drunk out of one's mind and acting like an idiot was so much fun. Not to mention the puking that most likely came after. All she could seem to think about was all the brain cells she'd be wasting.

"To each his own, I guess," she muttered and checked her email. Her boss had sent her a new message. "What the heck did I do with my pen?" She searched her desk and felt Oliver's hand in her hair. Felicity looked up at him curiously to find the pen in his hand.

"It was in your hair."

"Oh, right." She added another item to her to-do list before finally standing up. She reached for her purse. "Okay, now I'm ready."

Before she could take a step out of her cubicle, Felicity heard a high-pitched screech. She and Oliver frowned at each other before seeking out the source of the noise. Other heads in nearby cubicles also turned. Felicity felt her insides plummet. "Mom?"

The older woman, wearing a skin-tight, short blue dress, came around the corner. Her long blond hair was down in waves and bounced along with the rest of her body in excitement. "So this is where you work? It looks so official!"

"Mom, what are you doing here?"

"I haven't seen that much of you since the move, and I miss my baby girl. You're either here or out with your new friends, so I thought I'd surprise you. Surprise!"

"Oh, it's a surprise all right," she responded with a strained smile.

"And, Oliver, it's so nice to see you again. Were you always this tall and handsome?"

"Mom!" Felicity exclaimed. Her embarrassment doubled.

"It's good to see you again, Mrs. Merlyn." He shook her hand.

"Please, call me Donna. Felicity didn't mention that you worked together. Although I guess it makes sense since this is your family's company. It must be so fun being the boss!"

Unlike Felicity, Oliver seemed highly bemused by her mother's antics. "We don't actually work together. We just meet up for lunch."

Donna's entire face lit up at that. "You do?" She sent Felicity a smile of approval. "Well, isn't that just lovely? I'm so glad Felicity is making so many new friends."
"Mom," the brunette tried again, with no avail.

"Well, we're certainly glad to have her here—at QC and in our little group." Oliver smirked at the glare Felicity was sending his way. He was enjoying her discomfort a little too much. "I know Tommy has enjoyed showing her around the city."

"Tommy is such a sweet boy. I wish he was around more, though. In fact, would you mind telling him when you see him that we're having a family dinner at the manor on Sunday?" Donna requested. "It's something I've always wanted to do but didn't make much sense when it was just Felicity and me. Now that our family has grown, it's the perfect time to start."

"I'll let him know."

"I have a wonderful idea. Why don't you join us?"

"Mom, no, that's a terrible idea," Felicity interjected.

"Why not?"

"Yeah, why not?" Oliver added. His tone held a friendly challenge.

"Because..." Felicity trailed off, trying to come up with a legitimate excuse. "Because it's a family dinner, and I'm sure Oliver has better things to do." She didn't think she could handle an entire meal with her mother gushing over Oliver and telling who knows what kind of embarrassing stories all night.

"Oh, nonsense. From what I've heard, Tommy and Oliver are more like brothers than best friends. Aren't you, Oliver?"

"We are," Oliver confirmed. "I also happen to be free that day." He fought a grin as Felicity's glare transformed into a full-on death stare.

Her mother beamed in triumph. "You see, Felicity. It's settled. Oliver would love to join us for dinner. It starts at six, hon."

"Looking forward to it. Will you be cooking?"

"Oh, God no!" Donna laughed. "I'm terrible in the kitchen. A quality that Felicity has unfortunately inherited from me. But I just hired a new chef who is supposed to be fabulous. So make sure to come hungry."

"I will," Oliver promised.

"Would you like to join us for lunch?"

"I don't want to intrude."

"It's no intrusion. I'm the one that interrupted your lunch plans," Donna assured him. "Besides, it will give us a chance to get to know each other better before Sunday."

"Okay, I'd love to join you."

Felicity stared between the two, feeling totally helpless. She didn't know how it happened, but this entire situation had gotten out of control.

"Perfect," Donna enthused before frowning at her daughter. "Felicity, sweetie, what's the matter?"
You've got Mr. Square-Bear-Face."

"Mr. Square Bear?"

"It was Felicity's favorite toy growing up. She was devastated when she lost him and had this gloomy look on her face. She still gets that look when something is bothering her," Donna explained. "What's the matter, sweetie? Are you feeling all right?" She lowered her voice. "Is it that time of the month again?"

Felicity officially wanted the floor to open up and swallow her whole. Was it possible to die from humiliation? How had her day taken such a disastrous turn?

"You know what, why don't I take a rain check?" Oliver suddenly spoke up. "I just remembered that I'm supposed to check in with my father before his meeting later. He's probably waiting for me."

Donna sulked. "Oh, that's too bad. You sure you can't come for a little bit?"

"I wish I could, but I can't." He placed his hand on the base of Felicity's spine and gave her an encouraging squeeze. "Felicity, go with your mom. I'll catch up with you later."

Felicity looked over at Oliver in surprise and saw understanding shining back at her. He'd picked up on her growing unease and was bowing out. She gave him a grateful smile. "Okay."

Donna's glum expression was gone as she watched the two intently. Felicity was all too familiar with that knowing look. She could practically see the wheels turning in her mother's head as Oliver said good-bye and again promised to be at dinner on Sunday. Felicity and her mother stared after him.

"I like him," Donna declared.

It was the first and probably the only thing they would agree on that day. Me too.

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May 6, 2012

The light clanging of utensils on plates was all that could be heard in the otherwise silent dining room. Sunday dinners at the Merlyn manor were almost nonexistent these days, but Donna had insisted the entire family get together. Just because Felicity and Tommy were all grown up, she'd chided, didn't mean that she didn't miss them.

The family of four sat at the long, elaborately-decorated mahogany table. In the middle was a large centerpiece of purple, yellow, and orange flowers. Two long, light purple candles were set into the arrangement. They sat at the table end closest to the fireplace. Despite the warm spring weather, the fire was roaring.

Each person had a violet and gold damasqne placemat on which the fancy dinner plates had been set. They were only on the first course, which was a creamy lobster bisque, and already there was obvious tension in the room. Felicity sat next to her mother on the right side of the table while Tommy and Thea sat to the left. The seat at the head was empty, and Felicity noticed her mother gazing at it in agitation every few seconds.

"Thea, honey, why don't you tell Felicity and Tommy about your graduation party?" Donna suggested, finally breaking the silence. "Thea."
The young brunette's head popped up with a baffled, "What?" Felicity knew Thea's phone was most likely in her lap and that she'd been distracted texting friends.

"Your graduation party," Donna repeated. "Tell them about it."

"Oh, um, it's going to be great. We met with the party planner today." Thea's eyes brightened as she launched into her explanation of the theme and all of the decorating that would need to be done. The excitement in her voice was evident as she spoke. It was hard to believe that she was already eighteen and would soon be graduating from high school.

Felicity still remembered the first time she'd met Thea. The tall, skinny twelve-year-old had come bounding down the stairs in the Queen mansion with her hair in pigtails. She'd been so excited to see Tommy and curious to learn more about Felicity. Her fascination with Felicity's nose ring was still something they joked about, since Thea had gotten hers pierced on her sixteenth birthday. Donna had gone with her to provide parental consent, which Malcolm later pitched a fit about. The man had a very old-school way of thinking, Felicity had learned over the years, and didn't like any nontraditional forms of self-expression—especially involving his own children. Felicity could only imagine now how much her Goth look must've driven him crazy back when he and her mother had first married.

Thea had joined their family shortly after the news broke that the Queen's Gambit had sunk, and there were no survivors. She'd been left behind with Raisa, because she'd broken her leg while horseback riding at camp. With Thea's already unsteady balance, Moira was worried the natural movements of the boat might make it difficult for her to get around onboard. The last thing Thea needed was to fall and worsen her injury. That one simple decision had literally saved the young girl's life, but it couldn't save her from the excruciating pain of losing her entire family in one day. As much as it tore Felicity up inside to lose Oliver, she knew that it was a thousand times worse for Thea.

Tommy, the closest person Thea had to family left, had gone with Malcolm to tell her about the Queen's will. Guardianship was supposed to pass to Oliver in the unlikely event that both her parents passed away. But with Oliver also gone, guardianship then fell to their long-time friend Malcolm. He was in charge of her well-being and ensuring that most of the Queen assets were preserved until Thea's twenty-first birthday. Although she did get access to her trust fund when she turned eighteen this past January.

The day she'd officially come to live with them, Thea had put up a brave front. She didn't cry, but she did cling to Tommy's side. Malcolm and Donna had done their best to make the young girl feel comfortable in their home over the years, but it was a process. Thea barely spoke for the first few months and refused to wear anything other than black. In a way, it was as if Felicity and Thea had switched places. When she lost Oliver, Felicity decided she was done with the Goth look. It wasn't who she really was—something she'd come to realize while being with Oliver.

It took even longer for Thea to snap out of that phase. Donna didn't fuss over Thea's wardrobe like she had Felicity's. She'd understood it was part of the grieving process and let her be. Felicity couldn't help but feel a twinge of resentment that her mother had never been as understanding of her own inner struggle over the years. Nevertheless, her mother had always meant well and it was something Felicity had to learn to let go of.

There was no trace of the black-clothed, grieving Thea Queen now. She wore an expensive pink blazer with a white top and skinny jeans. Her long, curly brown hair fell over her shoulders. Her eyes, lighter and a bit more bluish-green than her brother's, were alight with enthusiasm as she talked about her multi-layered graduation cake. This young girl, who'd once been so overcome by grief,
actually looked happy and normal.

It didn't mean the pain of her loss was gone completely. Every month for the last five years Thea visited her family's graves. She'd once told Felicity that talking to them and telling them about her life made her feel connected to them still. Wherever they were, she wanted them to know that she was okay. Thea was braver than Felicity in that way. Felicity was only able to bring herself to Oliver's grave a couple of times. Talking to a cold slab of stone marking an empty grave made the loss too real. It left Felicity with a hollow, restless feeling inside each time. She preferred to remember Oliver as he was, and the empty grave only served as a reminder that the truth of what had happened to him and the Queen's Gambit had never been uncovered.

A wave of guilt washed over Felicity in that moment. Although Thea had become a part of their family, she knew there was nothing the young girl would want more than to share the milestone of her graduation with her parents and Oliver. Her parents were long gone, but Oliver was alive. He'd asked about Thea briefly when he'd come to Starling for Valentine's Day. It was a simple question. All Oliver wanted to know was that she was okay. Felicity got the sense that anything more would've been too painful for him. She assured Oliver that she was. That they'd taken her in and cared for her all of these years. He seemed satisfied and let the subject drop.

Such a revelation would change Thea's entire world. Knowing her brother was alive and asking about her would heal her in a way time couldn't. But all Felicity could do was sit there and remain silent. It was too dangerous for Thea to know the truth about Oliver. And so the young girl would have to live with a pain that Felicity was finally freed from. Knots formed in Felicity's stomach. It wasn't fair.

"Sounds really cool. When am I getting my invite?" Tommy asked after she was finished.

"That depends," Thea impishly replied.

"On what?"

"On whether you can convince Donna and Malcolm to buy me a car for my graduation." She looked pointedly at Donna.

Donna shook her head, laughing. "Thea, your hints are about as subtle as a gun."

"My dad still holding out?" Tommy surmised.

"Yes," Thea huffed. "Which is totally unfair because both you and Ollie got cars for your birthdays when you turned sixteen. I'm actually an adult now and will be going off to college in the fall. I should have a car."

"That's true. But Tommy could back it out of the driveway without hitting a tree." Malcolm walked smoothly into the room and took his seat. He shook out his napkin before dropping it on his lap. He placed his hands on the table and grinned at Thea. "Although I do recall Oliver taking the paint off the side of Robert's Maserati. It would seem bad driving skills are an inherited Queen trait."

"It wasn't my fault. That tree came out of nowhere," Thea muttered with a huff and spooned her soup.

"Yes, tricky things trees are. One never knows when they'll pick up their roots and move next," Malcolm quipped.

"Well, you could buy it yourself," Felicity suggested, "since you have your trust fund now." Malcolm sent Felicity a stern look. Refusing to be intimidated, she stared pointedly back. "What?
"She does."

"Yeah, I know. But it's way more fun if it's a gift. My friends would flip if they saw it at my party with a big bow on top."

"It is more of a thrill," Tommy agreed.

"If you think she should have it, son, why don't you get it for her?"

Tommy passed his empty soup bowl to the maid. "I would, but not everyone has a trust fund these days." His voice was light, but his body was tense.

"I thought the nightclub was doing well."

"It is." Tommy grinned at Thea. "Thea knows all of the best bands and DJs. The last group we had brought in our biggest crowd ever."

Thea beamed with pride. "I've got great connections."

"That you do."

"But the profit is still not up to par?" Merlyn challenged.

"Malcolm," Donna said, disapproval coloring her tone.

This was why family dinners were avoided like the plague. It was almost impossible for Malcolm and Tommy to get through a meal without butting heads the entire night. Felicity felt bad for her brother. It was usually Malcolm doing the baiting.

There was a moment of silence as the servants brought out the main course. It was prime rib with risotto and mashed potatoes. Felicity noticed her mother taking a few more sips of wine before starting on her food.

Malcolm barely spared his wife a glance and cut into his meal. "Felicity, how's work at Brighton Tech?"

"It's good."

"Any interesting projects?"

"Um, a few," she vaguely answered.

"You know, in all the years you've worked there, I don't think I've ever visited the place. It must be truly something else if they've managed to hold onto you." He spoke to the rest of the family. "I can't tell you how many times I tried to recruit this girl into the family business. But she always refuses."

"Smart girl," Tommy said under his breath. Felicity took a sip of wine to hide her smile.

"I think I should stop by sometime this week," Malcolm continued. "Merlyn Global is always looking for new partners with our R&D."

"Oh, that's okay. You don't have to. The company is really strict about that kind of thing."

"Don't I know it," Donna snorted. "Every time I surprise her for lunch, I can't even make it past the front desk. What is it exactly that you do there, honey?"
Felicity took a sip of her water. The room suddenly felt warm. "Cyber security mostly."

"And that means no visitors?"

"Yes. Well, sort of. We work with the government sometimes, so it makes the higher-ups more paranoid. Don't want to piss off Uncle Sam, right?" she joked and fidgeted in her seat at everyone's curious stares.

Malcolm smiled. He probably meant it to be reassuring, but all it did was fill Felicity with an odd sense of unease. "Another time perhaps."

"Her co-workers seem nice enough," Tommy interjected. "You should bring them by the club again."

"Yes, because I'd love to hear round two of your Beach Boys versus Beatles debate," Felicity teased.

"Hey, the Beach Boys don't get enough credit," Tommy defended. "They were America's band, and they had it right. California girls are the best."

"Because you've always been so picky when it comes to women," Thea playfully quipped.

"The Beatles were international icons. There's no comparison. Everyone knows that," Malcolm corrected.

"I always had such a crush on Paul McCartney," Donna joined in. "What a hunk."

Thea shook her head at Felicity. "You've done it now."

Tommy turned back to the Felicity. "Tell Mei I'm ready to debate any time, any place."

Felicity could've pointed out that Caitlin had also been in on the debate and taken the side of the Beatles, but she let it slide. There was no need to make Tommy start questioning such details at the moment. Felicity was just glad that he'd been so engaged in the conversation at the time. Ever since what happened with Laurel, genuine smiles were hard to come by on his face.

The rest of dinner was spent in polite conversation, which was a relief. Dessert had just been served when Felicity's phone vibrated in her purse. It was a text from Lyla to check in as soon as possible. That usually meant that something was going down, and Felicity had to report to A.R.G.U.S.

"Felicity, honey, is something the matter?" her mother questioned.

Felicity's head snapped up to find them all staring. She quickly schooled her features. "It's work. I've got to go in and take care of something."

Donna frowned. "On a Sunday night?"

"Let me guess. Uncle Sam?" Malcolm said with a probing look.

Ignoring the question, Felicity tossed her napkin aside and stood. "It's really important, otherwise I would stay. Thanks for dinner."

"But, Felicity—" her mother protested.

"I'll call you tomorrow, Mom." It was the only way to appease her for now. She waved good-bye to the rest of the family and promised to take Thea shopping to find a dress for her party.
As she was walking out the door, Felicity heard her mother's strained voice a second time. "Malcolm, where are you going?"

"It's almost eight. Another one of my associates is expecting a call from me."

"But you were already on the phone before dinner." Donna sounded beyond miffed.

"It'll only be a few minutes," he stated.

"If it's a quick call, then it can certainly wait until after we're finished eating."

"Donna, darling—"

"Don't you darling me, Malcolm—"

Felicity hurried down the hall, more eager to face whatever danger A.R.G.U.S. was in rather than watch her mom and Malcolm fight. She felt bad for Tommy and Thea. Their escape wouldn't be so easy.

When Felicity was in her car, she dialed Lyla's number. Lyla answered on the second ring and proceeded to give Felicity detailed instructions. Afterward, Felicity hung up and started driving to the rendezvous point. There was no time to waste.

Felicity let out a huff of frustration as she readjusted the black mask over her face. "I don't think my eye holes line up properly. Is anyone else having this problem?"

"Don't be nervous," Barry reassured her.

Yanking the mask off of her head, Felicity turned to face the mini computer station set up in the back of the van. She pressed play on camera footage taken from an A.R.G.U.S. base in Monument Point, just twenty minutes outside of Starling. There was shouting and gunshots as camouflaged figures invaded the base. It lasted for only a couple of minutes before the cameras went down.

Felicity pointed to the screen. "This is what we're heading into."

"Not you and Curtis," Lyla corrected. "You're to stay in the van and be overwatch. We got word just before communications went down that the attackers are still inside. It seems they're not just looting the base. They're looking for something."

"We're almost there," Curtis called from the driver's seat.

"Masks on and guns loaded," Lyla ordered.

Barry, Caitlin, and Mei finished checking their gear and weapons as Curtis brought the van to a stop. It was in a wooded area about twenty feet from the base.

Felicity started typing away on her computer. "I think we have a problem."

Mei groaned. "Already?"

"The base is on lockdown, and I can't undo it through our network. Something is blocking my commands."
"So we can't get in at all?" Caitlin questioned.

"I'll need to access the security box and jerry-rig the lock manually."

Barry nodded. "Where's the box? And please don't say near the front door, because we at least know they've got men stationed outside."

Mei grabbed a pair of night vision goggles and stared out through the windshield. "It's two guys in front and two in the back that I can see. Though nothing we can't handle."

"The issue is that they'll be alerted to our presence," Caitlin stated. "We lose the element of surprise."

"There is a dummy panel at the front. The actual security panel is hidden at the back of the base," Felicity informed them.

"All right, Felicity, looks like you'll be needing that mask after all. Barry, hand her a kevlar vest, too," Lyla ordered. "Caitlin, Barry, and I will do a sweep of the perimeter to get a better idea of what we're working with. Mei, you're with Felicity."

"Terrific. I'll man the van," Curtis announced and then laughed. "Hey, that rhymed. It wasn't on purpose. I was just—never mind." He became serious after Lyla's stern look and went to take Felicity's spot at the computers. "Overwatch is ready. Felicity, if you can reboot the cameras, that'd be helpful."

"Got it." Felicity arranged her mask over her face—it still felt weird and disheveled but seeing was all that mattered—and put on a vest. The A.R.G.U.S. symbol of the small black and red circle with the sideways V was located on the front of the vest. She fidgeted under the extra weight but knew that it was necessary. Finally, she readied her gun and grabbed her tablet. "I'm ready."

"Let's move out." Lyla opened the van doors in the back, and they filed out.

Felicity followed Mei's lead as they used the shadows to conceal their approach of the base. The large, looming metal structure looked impenetrable, but it was nothing more than an illusion. The closer they got to it, the more they could hear the faint sounds of gunfire inside.

The first armed figure they came across, Mei took out quickly and quietly. The next one she shot, and he crumpled to the ground. "Where is this thing?" she whispered.

Whipping out her tablet, Felicity took the lead. She pulled up the blueprints of the base and guided Mei to the appropriate section. Mei stood guard while Felicity felt around for the panel. After removing it, Felicity wasted no time hooking up her tablet and fiddling with the wiring.

"If we take out any more men, the shooters are going to know we're here. How's the panel coming?" Lyla said through the comm.

"Almost got it," Felicity answered as her nimble fingers worked their magic.

"Infrared is showing at least fifteen active bodies in the base," Curtis cut in. "There are at least ten guards and fifteen agents stationed here at a time." His voice turned somber. "I can't tell how many of the remaining are ours or theirs."

Felicity couldn't even think about the loss of life that A.R.G.U.S. had most likely suffered. All that mattered was making sure the remaining agents were saved. Sweat dripped down her brow as she rearranged the last set of wires. "Okay, I overrode the security system. All entrances should be unlocked."
Lyla instructed, "We're going in from the side. Find the entrance in the back. Felicity, Mei, head for the command center. I want the network and cameras back under our control ASAP."

"Copy that," Mei responded and went to the heavy metal door closest to them. "You ready, Smoak?"

Felicity clipped her tablet to her belt and gripped her gun. Adrenaline flowed through her veins, building upon her nervous excitement. Despite Waller's orders, it looked like Felicity was needed in the field after all. She grinned in triumph. "As I'll ever be."

Mei made a couple of silent gestures with her hands, to which Felicity nodded that she understood. The moment they opened the door, the harsh echo of gunshots assaulted them. They were coming from various corridors.

"Which way?" Mei asked.

"Go to the right," Felicity said and continued to give out instructions. The series of corridors led to an open area with multiple levels of metal walkways. The command center was at the top.

"We've taken out three more intruders so far. How are you guys doing?" Barry checked in.

"We're getting there." To Mei, Felicity asked, "Do we take the elevator or the stairs?"

"The elevator is more direct, but they might be expecting us. The stairs will take longer, plus we'll be exposed."

"What I wouldn't give for teleportation powers right now," Felicity muttered.

Mei snorted. "Invisibility all the way. These assholes literally wouldn't see me coming." She sighed. "We need to get in there, so let's go to the elevator."

"What if they're waiting to shoot us when the doors open? Hold on." Felicity comm-ed Curtis and asked him to check the infrared reading coming from Command. He reported only two bodies.

Mei's lips curved into a confident smile. "No sweat." They went back into the corridor they'd come from and headed for the elevator. Just when they'd turned the corner, they saw two men standing at the opening. They fired first, and the two women hid back behind the wall.

Mei counted off and when their enemies' guns no longer sounded, both she and Felicity rounded the corner and took aim. The intruders were also wearing kevlar and so the pair targeted the shooters' extremities. They advanced on the men when they were down. Felicity kicked the first guy in the head to knock him out while Mei delivered a punch to the other guy.

Before Felicity could push the button, Mei halted her. "Don't. Give me a boost."

The blonde frowned in confusion. "What?"

"Give me a boost," she repeated.

Felicity did as she said and bent down with her hands interlocked. Mei stepped on top and reached for the ceiling of the elevator as Felicity helped propel her up. Grabbing onto a panel, Mei pushed it aside.

"Please don't tell me we're climbing a cable, because no amount of strength training with Lyla has made me ready for that." Suddenly, Felicity had flashbacks to gym class. She hated when her teacher used to make her climb the stupid rope in front of the entire class. Not only did she not have any
upper body strength at that age, but she was also afraid of heights—a fear she still possessed.

"No climbing the cables. But we do have to ride on top."

"Yeah, that doesn't make me feel better," she nervously muttered.

Mei dropped back down to the ground and offered Felicity the boost this time. Begrudgingly, Felicity reached for the edge of the square hole and lifted herself into the elevator shaft. I can't believe I'm doing this, replayed over in her head.

"Hold on tight," Mei called up to her.

"Wait, why am I up here while you're down there?" Felicity demanded, panicked.

"I'm coming." Mei pushed the button for the command center, and the elevator jerked upward. She used the railing along the wall to propel herself toward the opening this time.

Felicity let out a yelp that was luckily disguised by the loud racket of the metal box being pulled up by the cables. She grabbed onto a piece of equipment bolted to the top and closed her eyes, counting to ten. It's just like a theme park ride. No big deal. This isn't Tower of Terror. God, I hate Tower of Terror! What if this thing plummets? What if we go to another floor first and more attackers come in? What if we overshoot Command and I get squished between the elevator and the roof?

Something brushed Felicity's arm. She opened her eyes to see Mei next to her. "Don't worry, Felicity. We'll be fine." Mei had a soft voice but the tone wasn't necessarily soothing. She was a very matter-of-fact person, which her tenor usually reflected. She was trying her best to at least reassure Felicity. Something the blonde truly appreciated.

There was a loud ping, signaling that they'd reached their floor. Mei pressed her finger to her lips. There were voices as the doors opened below.

"Go check it out," Felicity heard someone say.

A person wearing a dark mask, black goggles, and camo stood at the entrance of the elevator. He glanced around and stepped fully inside before looking up. That's when Mei, sleek as a cat, jumped down on him. She got in a few good hits and suddenly grabbed the guy and spun him around.

Seconds later, Felicity knew why. Mei had used him as a human shield as the other person in the room opened fire. Mei raised her gun and fired back. Felicity heard a thud.

Tossing the dead man aside, Mei motioned for Felicity to join her. Felicity lowered herself onto the ground. Her landing wasn't as smooth as Mei's, and she nearly gagged at the blood she'd gotten on her gloves from gripping the floor for support. Stepping over the lifeless form on the floor and ignoring the trail of bloody footprints her shoes were also leaving, Felicity tossed her ruined gloves aside and went to the main computer.

Mei touched the comm in her ear. "We're in the command center."

"We found a few more of our agents, but they're injured. Caitlin is trying to tend to them, but we're currently under fire," Lyla reported. "Curtis, call for more backup."

"Copy that."

"Felicity, are the cameras back up yet? We need you to do overwatch from in there."

"They're back up now, and I'm currently zeroing in on your position." She raised her fist in the air in
triumph when the camera focused. She also made sure to disable the elevator to keep anyone else
from using it. "Okay...you've got three shooters about thirty feet ahead of you. They're hiding behind
that tall stack of crates."

"Now might be a good time to use one of those fancy grenades I rigged up for you," Curtis
interjected.

"Mr. Terrific, you read my mind," Barry exclaimed and reached into his utility belt. He pulled the pin
and let it fly. The shooters barely had time to react before it exploded. Loose limbs and chunks of
wood scattered.

Felicity felt queasy. After all the missions they’d been on, she thought she would've been slightly
more used to the sight of blood and body parts by now. Brushing it aside, she tried to locate any
additional agents who might need assistance. Felicity had just finished giving the locations when the
side door to the command center exploded open.

Two more intruders entered through the blasted hole. The first thing Felicity noticed was their size.
She couldn't see their faces, but their builds looked larger than any of the men they’d faced thus far—
especially the man on the left. He looked like a giant. Felicity was lucky if she could reach his chest
he was so tall.

Mei cursed under her breath but her voice remained steely calm. "Hello, boys. Lost?"

"Women," the giant one stated. The voice sounded distorted. He was probably using a modulator.
Unlike the other attackers, these two didn't come any closer. In fact, it looked as if they were
hesitating.

"So, are you stupid, sexist, or both?" Mei retorted as she got into her fighting stance. She looked like
a black panther ready to pounce on her prey.

"We're not alone," Felicity whispered into her comm. She kept her eyes on the intruders while she
continued to type. The network needed to be locked down again to ensure that it wasn't hacked a
second time.

"You back there," the other man called. "Stop what you're doing." He took a step forward.

Mei stepped in front of her. "You don't give the orders around here."

"We're under fire again," Lyla replied. "We'll try to make our way toward you, but hang tight."

"Curtis, we're going to need medics," Caitlin added. "There's something wrong with a few of the
agents. They've been shot, but it's like their bodies are having a reaction to something else."

Felicity began to type faster. She was transmitting as much information as she could to Curtis about
what was going on inside the base. She had a minute before the system fully locked.

"Now," one of the men ordered.

Felicity reached for her gun and spun around. She'd barely raised it before it was knocked out of her
hand. A large form loomed over her, blocking her view of Mei. But she could hear the other
woman's grunts as she fought off the giant. Felicity sprang into action and executed a few of the
maneuvers Lyla had shown her. The man blocked every one of them with brute force. She would
most assuredly have bruises where he touched her.

A loud yelp escaped her when Felicity felt herself being slammed against the hard surface. With his
hand on her neck, the man slid her across the long desk and used her body to knock the equipment off. Felicity struggled against his firm grip. He wasn't totally cutting off her oxygen supply, but it was enough to make her gasp as her body fought against the assault. Her hands scrambled for something, anything that could be used as a weapon. She managed to grab a pencil, but what good would that do? The man's gear was covering any vulnerable areas. She tried to stab his hand, but he was too quick. He snapped it in the blink of an eye, and it was the first time that night that Felicity felt true fear. He could do the same to her neck, and she wouldn't be strong enough to stop him.

"Felicity," Mei called to her.

Suddenly, the man above her stilled. Felicity felt his other hand go to her neck, and she struggled uselessly against him. Was this it? Was he going to choke the life out of her? The other hand, instead of wrapping around her neck, gripped the edge of the mask and yanked it off of her face. She heard him heave a sharp breath before his hands let go of her completely. Taking the opportunity, Felicity kicked out at him and he flew backward without any resistance.

Glancing at Mei, Felicity noticed her locked in a deadly embrace with the other man. He was attempting to lower her into submission, but Mei wasn't going down without a fight. If her senses weren't so heightened right then, Felicity would've completely missed the tiny red dot moving up Mei's back. Panic set in as Felicity's head whipped toward the glass windows looking out at the inside of the base. She had no idea where it was coming from, but she knew what it meant. Mei shoved the attacker back for the moment and stood, ready to dish out another blow.

"Mei," Felicity called, trying to get her attention. The other woman didn't turn. She couldn't. "No!" She raced toward her friend and was vaguely aware of glass shattering behind her. Felicity pushed Mei to the side and screamed as the hot, searing pain ripped through her shoulder. The exact spot where her kevlar didn't reach.

"No!" someone else shouted as Felicity went down.

"Felicity," Mei yelled. That split-second distraction was all it took for the attacker to get the drop on her. Mei fell unconscious to the ground.

The blonde couldn't tell if she was shouting more from the pain or the fact that her friend was probably hurt, but it blurred together all the same. Felicity curled up on her side as the heat from the wound spread throughout her body. She felt dizzy and shaky, with sweat beading on her forehead. What the hell was happening to her? She knew getting shot was supposed to hurt, but she'd never known it to be like this.

Caitlin's words from before suddenly clicked. The other agents were having strange reactions, too. What did it mean? Was it not a bullet she'd been hit with?

"Damn it," a loud male voice cursed. "Call him off. Now! Or I swear to God I'll kill him myself."

"Calm down."

"Do it!"

A shadow loomed over Felicity. It was hard to make out which man it was as her vision blurred. "Get the hell away from me," she gritted out while fighting the disorienting haze. If she'd ever done drugs, she imagined it would feel something like this. Her mind was spinning, and she was seeing patterns of strange colors. "You hurt my friend."

"She's going to be fine."
Whatever was in her system must be causing hallucinations, because it sounded like this man was trying to soothe her. "You're lying." He turned her over, causing her to hiss in pain. "Don't touch me."

"I need to see the wound." She whimpered when he touched it. "We have to get the bullet out of her."

"It's not the bullet that's the problem. It's the poison." There was a pause. "Is that who I think it is?"

Poison? These men were poison. "Don't touch me," Felicity repeated, but the words came out garbled. She was so hot. She wanted to take the stupid, useless vest off. The added weight was making her feel like she was suffocating. "I can't breathe," she panted and pulled at it. "I can't breathe."

"We can't stay here. They'll have called for more backup."

The man ignored his companion. "Help me get this off of her."

"Please. Get it off," she pleaded. As soon as she felt hands on her, Felicity was back to demanding that they not touch her. The vest was removed, and she was able to breathe a bit easier. Felicity glanced to the side at her unmoving friend and teammate. She was spinning in Felicity's vision as she reached out to her. "Mei," she cried. Felicity had to get to her. She had to help her.

"The herbs. That's the only thing that will save her. We need to get her out of here."

"How are we going to explain this?"

"I don't give a fuck how we do it. I'm not leaving her," the man closest to her growled.

The room spun again as sweat dripped down the sides of her face. She felt droplets along her back and between her breasts. "So hot..."

"I'll carry her. You cover us."

"No." Her voice was weak as her body thrashed despite the pain. "No."

She felt something gently brush her forehead before strong hands were lifting her off of the ground. At least Felicity thought she was off of the ground. The room was tilted at an odd angle, and it was hard to tell which way was up through her spinning vision. The last time she'd been carried like this had been with Oliver. He'd picked her up and brought her into the bedroom after falling asleep on the couch. The thought filled her with both joy and despair. How she wished he was here right now. He would know what to do. He would take care of her.

"Oliver," she mumbled.

The person holding her stiffened. "What?"

"I want Oliver," she incoherently sobbed.

His grip on her tightened but not painfully—protectively. "Just hold on. You're going to be all right."

"So hot...it hurts." Felicity felt herself slipping in and out of consciousness. She could feel pain, but it didn't quite feel like her body belonged to her. She was swirling and drifting inside her own mind. She was inside the compound. Then in darkness. More voices and the roar of an engine as fire burned in her veins.
"Just hold on. I've got you, sweetheart."

Nothing was making sense. Absolutely nothing.
Thank you guys for your reviews and kudos! It was really fun reading your specs. I hope everyone had a great holiday weekend. I know you're super eager for this chapter after what happened in the last one. You'll get more answers and probably have about twenty more questions. Lol! Enjoy and please review!

May 8, 2012

Something was being forced into her mouth. Felicity turned her head away and pressed her lips together. It was difficult to see anything through her hazy vision. She had no idea where she was or who she was with. Her body was in a perpetual state of searing hot pain. There was a strong grip on her face, and suddenly her mouth was forced open. She choked on a pungent, chunky liquid.

"You have to drink."

She shook her head and spit it back up.

"Drink," the deep voice repeated. It sounded vaguely familiar but was distorted by the blood Felicity could hear pumping in her ears.

"That's not going to work." This voice was harsher but higher. A woman. "You have to force it." There was another set of hands on her. They were soft but handled her roughly.

"Don't. She'll drink it."

"We don't have time to coax her into it."

"She's right," came another voice. It was deeper than the first. How many people were in the room? Why were they trying to save her? What would they do to her if they did?

"Do you want her to die?" demanded the woman.

An agitated but conceding sigh followed. "Fine. Do it."

The strange liquid filled her throat a third time before her mouth was forced shut. This time, Felicity's nose was also plugged. Her lungs gasped for air.

"Swallow it," the first voice pleaded. "Come on. You have to."

Felicity fought as long as she could before her natural reflexes kicked in. She swallowed, and her mouth was finally freed. She inhaled a much-needed breath, coughing violently.

"Again."

It happened three more times with Felicity fighting it before she needed to take a breath. Finally, the hands released her.
"Good. You did good. You're going to be fine."

Something cool and wet was pressed to her feverish forehead. It felt good. Within minutes, the fire emanating from the wound in her shoulder and spreading throughout her body lessened slightly. The relief was minute but welcomed.

"We need to get the bullet out now or she won't last," said the woman.

"It's going to hurt. We should put her under completely. Her body needs the rest," suggested the other voice.

"Do it."

Felicity whimpered in response. She wasn't completely aware of her surroundings but understood enough. Already Felicity felt lost inside herself. She didn't want to be pulled deeper into the dark abyss.

"You're going to be fine." Felicity felt the cool, wet sensation on her forehead again. "I promise."

Her vision disappeared completely after that as her mind drifted off. Felicity didn't know how much time had passed, but the next thing she heard was a strange, steady beeping. Counting the beeps and following their rhythm, Felicity found her way out of the darkness.

Heaviness. It was the first sensation she felt. Everything about Felicity, from her limbs to her eyelids, felt heavy. She counted the beeps again as she regained feeling in her body. Her fingers were the first to break from the spell. They twitched, and the tingling sensation continued to spread. There was still a dull, numb feeling to her movements but at least she was regaining some control. Finally, Felicity opened her eyes.

The ceiling was white and paneled. To the right, in the corner, was a brownish-yellow spot. It must be some kind of leak. The rest of the room was just as plain—white paint on the walls and white tile on the floor. Even the sheets covering her limp body were white.

The beeping grew louder and quickened slightly, capturing her attention. Felicity turned her head to the left and saw the heart monitor. There was also an IV in her hand. Her skin and muscles ached when she clenched her fist, causing a small gasp to escape her.

There was the sound of shuffling before movement near the window caught her attention. Felicity's body stiffened as she looked to find the source. Mei had sprung up from her chair and was approaching Felicity. Her skin, which already starkly contrasted with her dark hair, looked pale.

"Thank God you're awake."

"Where am I?" she croaked. Her voice was dry and coarse from disuse.

"Med bay at A.R.G.U.S headquarters. They've been monitoring you and waiting for you to wake up," she explained. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"We were on a mission in Monument Point," Felicity recalled. Some of the fog in her mind was lifting. "The base was under attack. We broke into the command center. We fought those guys and then I..." Felicity paused before reaching her hand to touch her right shoulder. There was a raw, throbbing feeling.

"Took a bullet for me," Mei finished for her. "I don't know whether to kill you or kiss you, Smoak, for doing such a reckless thing."
"Well, since I saved you, I think I'd prefer the kiss," Felicity joked.

Mei gave her a grateful smile. "It was badass for sure. Thank you."

"I'm glad you're okay. I saw you lying on the floor before—" Felicity's words were cut short as another piece of the memory fell into place. "How did I get here?"

"That's what I would like to know," interrupted a stoic voice. Waller stood in the doorway with her arms crossed. Behind her was Lyla, somehow looking both relieved and worried at the same time. "We need the room, Agent Yao."

"Okay." Mei turned back to Felicity. "I'll let the others know you're awake. We've been taking turns sitting with you."

Felicity smiled. "Thanks."

Mei wasn't the affectionate type, but she made an exception and leaned down to gently hug Felicity. "I owe you one."

A nurse followed Waller and Lyla into the room after Mei left. She checked Felicity's vitals and asked her a few follow-up questions. After determining that Felicity was stable and could be released later that day, she also left. Felicity fought the urge to fidget. It would only irritate her wound and give Waller the satisfaction of knowing she was nervous. It wasn't that Felicity had anything to hide from Waller. She just wasn't sure she could share what she didn't know herself.

"Agent Yao and the others have already submitted their reports to Agent Michaels and myself about what happened the other night. I'd like to hear your side of things," Waller directed, getting right down to business.

Her words took Felicity by surprise. "The other night? How long was I out?"

"You were gone a full twenty-four hours, Ms. Smoak. Disappeared without a trace before you were deposited at our doorstep."

Felicity opened her mouth to speak but words failed her.

Lyla elaborated, "A taxi dropped you off here. We questioned the driver, but he didn't know who hired him. He wasn't able to see the man's face who was carrying you. He said he just accepted the call and was paid a lot of money to ensure that you arrived here safely."

"It seems you have a guardian angel, Ms. Smoak," Waller commented. "Curious that it is among one of our enemies."

"Look, I don't know who took me or why," she said honestly. "I never saw their faces, and it was even worse after I was shot. My body had this terrible reaction, and I heard them talking about some kind of poison—"

"The two men who you fought in the command center?" Lyla interrupted to clarify.

"Yes."

"The poison is called Curare. It's a neuro-toxin. The bullets were laced with them," Waller stated as she casually strolled back and forth at the foot of Felicity's bed. "That type of poison used as a weapon is the M.O. of a hired gun called Deadshot."
"Never heard of him. Caitlin mentioned that other agents were having similar reactions."

"All of the agents who were shot with the Curare-laced bullets are dead," she revealed and paused, watching her closely.

Felicity stared at her, horrified. "What?"

"By the time our medical team arrived on the scene and figured it out, it was too late for them."

"Oh my God..."

"But since you weren't there and are still alive, I had your blood tested. The results showed that it was some kind of plant-based herb in your system. However, there was no known match in our databases to identify it."

"I have no clue what it was that cured me," Felicity replied—though she was certainly thankful that it had. She proceeded to tell them everything she did know. She mentioned the fight leading up to her being shot and how the attackers had argued about saving her. The small snippets of conversation she did understand while they treated her were also included. "I assure you that I have just as many questions myself about what happened," Felicity said when she was finished.

"The real question is what makes you so special that you're worth saving by our enemy, Ms. Smoak," Waller stated bluntly, "while the rest of our agents were left to die."

Felicity was just as baffled. She had no idea what would make her attacker suddenly switch from trying to kill her to trying to save her. There were times when she was under the influence of the poison that her situation had been harsh and scary as she was forced to consume God knows what kind of concoction. But there were also times of tenderness in the way she was touched and the words of comfort she was given. It was by far the weirdest situation Felicity had ever been in—aside from coming face to face with her supposedly dead ex-boyfriend in Russia. She couldn't even fully bring herself to acknowledge her saviors, since they had left so many others behind to suffer.

"I don't know, Sir," Felicity answered truthfully.

Waller's eyes looked almost black compared to the brightness of the room. The smile that graced her face was anything but comforting. "Well, we'll just have to find out now won't we?"

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June 15, 2007

After a long day at the office, all Oliver wanted to do when he got home was change into a pair of sweatpants and the comfiest t-shirt he owned. Oliver's head felt like it was going to pop from all of the legal jargon he'd had to deal with today, and the tie that felt more like a noose around his neck hadn't been helping. It would most definitely be the first thing to go and already it hung loosely.

"Hey, what the heck happened to you?" Tommy questioned as soon as he walked through the door. "You look exhausted."

"That's because I am," Oliver declared and immediately threw his suit jacket and tie over the back of the couch.

"And that, my friend, is why I avoid being an adult at all costs," his best friend joked. "What do you say to a night of fun and debauchery at The Vault? It's Ladies Night, so the place will be packed with
hot women ready for a good time. They've got those private VIP rooms..." Tommy wriggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Oliver chuckled and shook his head. "I don't know."

"Unless you have plans with Laurel already."

"Not tonight."

"You know, I thought she'd be over all the time since we got our new place. I haven't seen her since the party."

"She was kind of pissed about the fight with Max."

"Why?" Tommy questioned, genuinely perplexed. "Did you tell her that you were just sticking up for Felicity?"

"Yes. But she said that Felicity seemed to like Max and that I was being an ass, because Felicity is perfectly capable of taking care of herself."

"Sounds like what Felicity said to me," his best friend muttered. "They must all talk to each other."

"Of course they do. It's not just that, though." Oliver walked over to the foosball table and twisted one of the handles. "I've been at QC, and Laurel's been pretty busy with her class and internship at CNRI."

Tommy went on the other side of the table. He dropped the ball into the slot, and they started playing. "Are you sure that's all it is?"

"What else could it be?"

"Well, being busy has never stopped the two of you from 'getting busy.' Or break-ups for that matter," Tommy stated as he scored a goal. "So what gives? You've got that mopey look on your face."

Oliver suddenly felt on edge, which never happened with Tommy. He was Oliver's best friend and could be trusted with anything. Not when it concerns Felicity, said a voice in the back of Oliver's mind. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place, since he needed advice but highly doubted Tommy would be willing to give it if he knew it related to his stepsister.

Oliver blocked Tommy's next shot and replied casually, "What if I said it was something else?"

"Something else?" Tommy repeated with a probing look.

Sighing, Oliver conceded, "Someone else."

"Jenna, and no, no, and no," Oliver answered, glaring.

"So who then?"

"The who isn't important."
"Is it a dude? Because I'd be totally cool with it," Tommy teased him. "We might just need to re-establish some ground rules around the apartment. I can't have you ogling my sexy physique every time I'm shirtless."

Rolling his eyes, Oliver practically growled, "Can you be serious for two seconds?"

Tommy held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, sorry. Continue."

"This girl," he emphasized with a pointed look, "she's different. I've never met anyone quite like her. She's smart and witty and beautiful, and she really listens to me. I feel like I can talk to her about almost anything."

"Have you slept with her?"

"No," Oliver answered and punctuated it with a goal shot.

"But you want to sleep with her."

Oliver tried to tamper down his annoyance. He couldn't fault Tommy for his bluntness, since he didn't actually know the whole story. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't, but it's not like that with her. Our connection...it's deeper. We really get each other." Oliver couldn't help but think about Felicity's reaction to her mom visiting the office earlier that day. As fun as it was seeing Felicity get all flustered over her mom gushing over him, he could tell that the three of them all having lunch was too overwhelming for her. So he'd made up an excuse to get out of it, and Felicity had rewarded him with that kind smile of hers. "I've never—" Oliver hesitated. It felt more real saying it out loud, but he needed his best friend to understand. He needed to admit it to himself, too. "I've never felt like this before."

Tommy stopped mid-play and stared across from him, quiet and curious. Finally: "Are you saying you love her?"

The question knocked the wind out of Oliver. It would be crazy if he said yes. Even though they'd been spending more time together, Oliver had only known Felicity for about a month. There was so much he was still learning about her, and she about him. Regardless, there was a feeling. Something deep inside him that caused his heart to race freely when she was near and falter dreadfully when she wasn't.

Oliver hesitated and took a breath. He couldn't keep the truth to himself and let it continue to wreak havoc in his mind. "No. I don't know," he stammered. "I guess what I'm saying is that it's possible."

His best friend's eyes widened at that. "It's stronger than what you feel for Laurel?"

Shaking his head, Oliver ran his hands over his face in frustration. "I don't know. I love Laurel. We've been friends forever and dating for almost two years. But then we had that fight about our future before the semester ended, and I said I needed a break to figure things out. She made me promise that we'd not see anyone else, and I agreed to appease her. I think a part of me knew we'd probably get back together like always, so what was the big deal? But then I met"—Oliver just barely caught himself before he could say Felicity's name—"this other girl, and I can't get her out of my head, Tommy."

It scared the living shit out of Oliver how often Felicity consumed his thoughts. How strong the pull constantly was whenever they were in the same room. Being in the public eye had taught Oliver how to conceal his emotions from others long ago, and Felicity and his desire for her was a true test of that skill.
“I’m not trying to be an ass, but since when has that ever stopped you?” Tommy was swift to clarify. “Look, man, you know I don’t judge. I’ve never had a girlfriend for longer than a couple of months, because I’m the same way. And I know that you’ve stepped out on Laurel before. Hell, sometimes it was my fault for dragging you out and getting you into those situations. But if it’s never bothered you while you were together, then doing it again while you’re on a break isn’t that bad.”

"It's really complicated," Oliver sighed. "But this other girl is aware of Laurel. She's not the type of person to sneak around. She's better than that. Better than I probably deserve honestly." He remembered his conversation with Felicity mere days ago. They'd almost given in to the undeniable attraction between them and kissed before she'd turned her head and reminded him of Laurel. Reminded him of everything that could be ruined between Laurel and him if he crossed that line.

Felicity also made it very clear that if he chose to go down such a destructive path, it wouldn't be because of her. And Oliver admired her all the more for it. Suggesting they try and be friends was the only way for Oliver to be respectful of Felicity's wishes while also keeping her close without all of the added pressure. But even though Oliver was a great pretender, it didn't make his feelings or the guilt over them any less real. After years of reckless and selfish behavior, Oliver suddenly felt like he'd grown a conscience overnight. And having a conscience sucked.

"Oliver, I may not know this girl but I know you. If she means anything to you at all, then you owe it to yourself to take this time and figure it out. And this probably sounds weird, but you owe it to Laurel, too. If you do decide to get back together and move forward with her, you can't have any doubts this time. She deserves better, too." Tommy leveled him with a look. Despite being Oliver's best friend, Tommy was also close to Laurel and Oliver appreciated him looking out for her, too.

Oliver nodded in understanding. "Thanks, man."

"Sure." Tommy placed his hands back on the rods. An roguish grin lit up his face. "But just because we had this little heart to heart, don't think I'm going to go easy on you." Chuckling, Oliver retorted, "You're going down, Merlyn."

"Bring it."

"By the way, I saw Felicity today at QC. Donna came to visit her and wanted me to tell you she's hosting a family dinner on Sunday."

"I'm assuming that family dinner means my father will actually be there. Looking forward to it," he drawled unenthusiastically.

"Donna invited me, too." Tommy perked up at that and practically pleaded, "Please tell me you already accepted. Don't make me suffer alone, Ollie."

After Felicity's reaction today, Oliver thought about not going. He didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable, especially since she'd already admitted to feeling out of place in her new home. Donna was sure to be her outgoing, bubbly self on Sunday—embarrassing Felicity nonstop. But Oliver couldn't exactly deny his best friend after he'd given him the exact advice he'd needed. Besides, it was yet another opportunity to spend time with Felicity. And if Oliver was going to figure out what it was he felt towards her, then any opportunity to spend time together couldn't be wasted.

Oliver blocked Tommy's attempted score and spun his players to make the winning goal. He laughed triumphantly in response to Tommy's loud curse. "Don't worry. I'll be there."
There was no one emotion reflecting in the six pairs of eyes staring back at him. Anger, curiosity, and disappointment seethed from each and every one of them. The only pair of eyes that would've mattered, however, were not there. The large chair in the center of the table remained empty. It was ridiculous that a session like this had been convened. But if the council wanted to make a big production out of this, then fine. Oliver would play along. He stood up straight with his hands behind his back, his head held high. If they were expecting him to apologize and beg for their mercy, it would be a long wait.

"Oliver," Anatoly began. "You know why you are here, do you not?"

"'No, Sir, I don't," he lied smoothly.

Anatoly's eyes narrowed. "Your mission was to infiltrate the A.R.G.U.S. bunker and retrieve the items we requested." He was purposefully vague, since there was a small audience behind him, as well. Not everyone was privy to the details of the mission. Oliver could feel Diggle and Helena's stares in particular boring holes into the back of his head. Diggle, his partner, wanted to be there next to him, but Oliver refused to let him take the fall for his decision. If there was to be a punishment, then Oliver would take it on himself.

"All of the items were retrieved except for one," Oliver reported. "We determined it is not at that location."

"We were informed that you took something that was not on our agenda."

Oliver knew exactly who'd done the informing and wished he'd taken the time to put a bullet in his head. He was the reason Oliver was in this mess in the first place. But time wasn't something Felicity had a lot of the other night. Hence, why Oliver was standing there having to answer for his actions now.

"It was to further our agenda, I assure you."

"And what were you hoping to gain by taking that female agent?" asked the man to Anatoly's right. Slade's voice was coarse and deep, with an Australian accent. The lascivious curl of his mouth suggested he already knew the answer.

"She was by far the weakest of the agents we'd fought, and she was injured." His voice remained emotionless despite the internal anguish it brought him. "I thought we might be able to get some information out of her once she was stabilized."

"Did she give you anything useful?" said China White, the only woman seated at the table. Her long white hair, the source of her nickname, was a stark contrast to her youthful face.

"No, she did not. She was too far gone from the Curare." Again, his voice gave away nothing.

"So you endangered the mission for nothing," Slade stated harshly. "You could've led them right to us—"

"Removing her tracker was the first thing I did," Oliver interrupted with a hint of irritation. Slade's criticism and bias against him were typical. "My training over the years has not been for nothing."

Anatoly remained composed. "Where is she now?"

"Where she can't be found." The implication was clear.
Anatoly looked away for a moment. He did not want to be doing this, Oliver could tell. But his hand had been forced. "You are a great soldier, Oliver. One of our best. And soon you will be ready to take your place here with us. But disobedience cannot be tolerated from anyone. We must decide on a punishment."

Several suggestions were made, each one more painful than the last. Oliver continued to stand with his back straight and his face blank. Whatever they decided to do to him, it would be worth it in the end—as long as Felicity was safe.

"Actually, that won't be necessary," said the man on the opposite end of the table. He'd been quiet until now and stood so that his voice could be heard over the current discussion. "Oliver was acting on specific orders."

"From who?" Slade demanded.

"From the only person who matters," Malcolm Merlyn retorted, which caused everyone to swiftly shut their mouths. An eerie stillness settled over the room. "He was under strict orders to not divulge this to anyone, which is why he has so patiently stood here while you all pontificate and dole out an undeserving punishment."

Oliver barely managed to hide his shock at Malcolm's false explanation. There was no specific order or hidden agenda. Even more perplexing was why Malcolm would make up such a thing and defend him. What was he looking to get out of it? Oliver could count on his hands the number of conversations—bordering on arguments—he'd had with Malcolm over the last few years. He'd quickly discovered that Malcolm couldn't be trusted, which made his guardianship over Thea all the more infuriating. The only reason Oliver went along with it was because he was technically dead and no one else would be able to protect his sister from the looming danger that led to the Gambit and his parents' demise. There was not much else he was allowed to know about her and after a while Oliver stopped asking. The separation was already terrible without constantly adding salt in his wounds.

The middle-aged man, Frank Bertinelli, next to Malcolm huffed, "And you didn't think this information was pertinent before this session was called?"

"It's not my fault you're all so chatty. It's impossible to get a word in once you get going." He grinned smugly. "Nevertheless, everyone is free to go."

Everyone seemed to either deflate or relax after that. Everyone except Oliver. Malcolm motioned for him to remain. Shooting a quick look to Dig to let him know he was okay, Oliver waited until the entire room had filed out before approaching Malcolm.

"You're surprised, no doubt," Malcolm stated. "You're welcome, Oliver."

"While it was a noble gesture, you never do anything out of the goodness of your heart. What do you want, Malcolm?"

"It's not what I want. It's what he wants." Oliver remained silent, waiting, his attention piqued. "Your assignment has changed. I know that it was my stepdaughter you saved last night. And I know that it's not exactly information you've been getting from her lately." His hinting smirk made Oliver's blood boil.

He was already shaking his head. "I don't—"

"Save it, Oliver. I know exactly what she's involved in and with whom. So does he. That little story you cooked up was good but even if it had been true, interrogating her would not yield the kind of
results we want. We'd have to get much more creative. That's where you come in."

A sense of dread filled him. "What do you want?"

"You're going to get the information we need out of her in that charming way of yours. A burden I'm sure you'll be more than happy to bear."

"No," Oliver forcefully replied. "I won't do it. I won't use her like that."

"Careful, Oliver. Saying such things might make one question where your true loyalty lies." Malcolm's gaze was severe. "This time you will follow orders or it won't be the council that you have to answer to."

"I don't give a damn what you do to me."

"Who said anything about punishing you?"

Oliver's entire body stiffened. He felt like he was balancing on the edge of a knife as he said in a low, threatening voice, "If any harm comes to her, I will burn this entire operation to the ground." He stared down Malcolm, letting him know that he meant every damn word.

"Oh, Felicity won't be harmed. The same, however, cannot be said for those she cares about. It would be a shame if something were to happen to the people closest to her. She just got you back, after all. Any more losses would simply be devastating." His voice dripped with malice. "You can't possibly protect them all. How will you live with yourself if you know you're the cause of such pain? How will you be able to face her?"

"You wouldn't dare. Three of the people closest to her are your own family."

"You have no idea what I'm capable of, Oliver," Malcolm responded cryptically.

Oliver's jaw clenched. Malcolm had him, and the bastard knew it. "You're a monster."

"We're monsters," he corrected. "Never forget that."
So wow, your responses last chapter were awesome to read! Thank you guys for commenting and leaving kudos. I know it was pretty shocking with the reveal of Malcolm and Oliver's new assignment. Don't worry if you're confused. Not all the puzzle pieces have been put together yet. This chapter has lots of Olicity, and you'll see how this new development affects their relationship.

Also, I was recently interviewed by @Fiacresgirl for her "Profiling the Pen" series on Tumblr. I answer all sorts of questions about my writing process and the awesomeness of Olicity. You can find the link on my twitter (@Bindy_417). So feel free to check it out!

May 18, 2012

It was nearly eight o'clock on a Friday night, and Felicity sat typing away at her desk. She had a lot of work to catch up on since being forced to take the previous week off. Per Caitlin's recommendation, Felicity needed the time to let her body fully heal. Being shot, poisoned, and briefly kidnapped weren't things someone could easily bounce back from. Despite Felicity's protests that she was tougher than she looked, Lyla wouldn't let her return to work until Caitlin cleared her.

Felicity had finally gotten cleared a couple of days ago, and now she was trying desperately to catch up. She'd done as much as she could at home on her tablet but without full access to A.R.G.U.S.'s internal databases, her findings were limited. Although her to-do list was overwhelming, it felt good to be working instead of lying in a bed all day. So many questions about what had happened in Monument Point had been swirling around in her head since then.

The video feed had been cut a second time when she was taken. Since there was no way to get eyes on her abductors, Felicity gathered what she could from the reports filed by the other agents who were attacked. All of the intruders wore the same uniform, which made it impossible to distinguish them from one another. Finally, Felicity decided to compare the attack to the raids on other A.R.G.U.S. disaster bunkers.

Monument Point was distinctly different and not just because it was the first base to be hit. There had been more intruders present than initially projected, and they had used bullets instead of arrows. But what was most interesting wasn't necessarily the attack on the base itself. It was the local news outlets in Monument Point that had reported sightings of an unknown man in a hood wielding a bow and arrow. He'd taken down quite a few criminals over the last couple of days. Felicity read the description of the arrows, which were green. They appeared to be similar to the ones used in Starling months ago.

Upon further research, Felicity found that Starling City and Monument Point weren't the only places to have sightings of an emerald archer. The reports were scattered across the country. A few even occurred overseas in places like Europe, China, and Corto Maltese. The articles were short and lacked any real detail, which was probably why they had stayed below the radar. No one would notice a pattern unless they were deliberately looking for it. These were the acts of a ghost-like
vigilante and under any other circumstances, Felicity would think this person was a guardian angel to those in need.

But despite such acts of heroism, what disturbed Felicity was that many of these instances had occurred not far from places where arms deals and shadow tech thefts had occurred. In Felicity's line of work, such connections were not considered coincidences. Barry had managed to get ahold of an arrow and analyze it, but there was no way to trace its origin. The arrow was custom made, and so Felicity was right back at square one—except now she had even more unanswered questions.

With an annoyed huff, Felicity shoved a few strands of liquorish into her mouth. Her work station was a mess of candy, chips, and energy drinks as she worked tirelessly to get answers. She was so caught up in her research that she barely heard the throat clearing behind her.

"What are you still doing here?" Curtis inquired.

"Finishing up some work," Felicity answered. "I assume you had the same idea."

"Yes, but I'm not the one who should be taking it easy."

"It's been over a week, Curtis, and Caitlin said I'm fine."

Curtis came around the desk to face her. "If you've mixed as much food and energy drinks as I think you have, I very much doubt that. You look tired."

"Gee, thanks."

"I didn't mean it as an insult. Merely as an observation." He folded his arms and challenged, "How much sleep have you gotten this week?"

"Enough," Felicity replied. She didn't want to admit that her nights had been restless. Every time she closed her eyes she relived getting shot and the terrible burning in her veins. Voices she couldn't understand or recognize haunted her dreams.

"Felicity." His voice was full of disapproval.

The blonde countered, "Shouldn't you be going home to the hubby right now?"

"Actually, I was going to leave you a note. I'm working on this new piece of technology, and I could use your help."

"Could've emailed me. It would've been faster." And spared her another lecture, Felicity couldn't help thinking. Everyone was treating her with kid gloves. While she appreciated their concern, it was also highly frustrating.

"Yes, but it requires a higher level of security clearance. Clearance you don't have, and I didn't want to put it in an email."

Finally, Felicity tore her eyes away from her computer to look at him. "Really? Why come to me then?"

"Because you're my techie twin, and you'll have the answer. Waller's being particularly paranoid about who's in the know. But I seriously need the help, and I trust you. How much do you know about creating an algorithm with Fourier protocols?"

It didn't surprise Felicity that Waller was excluding her from projects. That woman could hold a
grudge like nobody's business. Felicity wondered what it was about her that got under Waller's skin. "Depends on what you're asking. I'll have to see the initial coding specs to get a better idea. I might have to tamper with the security footage in the lab, though, if I'm going to help you against orders." Then again, Waller could not like her because Felicity had no qualms about breaking the rules every now and then.

"Terrific!" Curtis grinned. "I knew I came to the right woman, because I was seriously sweating telling Waller this was beyond my capabilities. You know how she feels about excuses, and I'd really rather not be on the receiving end of her wrath."

"I get it. Give me a few minutes." Felicity needed to take a break. Maybe helping Curtis solve his problem would spark some inspiration in solving hers.

"You sure you're up for it tonight? I don't want to mess up any of your plans."

The only plans Felicity had were to veg out in front of the couch and binge on Netflix. That would inevitably lead to another sleepless night, which she was not looking forward to. Maybe if she worked late and got herself tired enough, she could sleep through the night.

"No, let's do it."

Once she programmed the video feed to play on a loop—making it appear as if Curtis had gone home for the night—Felicity and Curtis went to the lab. He showed Felicity the project he was working on, and she listened in both fascination and concern.

"Is Waller sure she wants to do this? This can be really dangerous if it's tampered with."

Curtis shrugged. "It's supposed to be preventative but orders are orders."

Felicity didn't like Waller's plan, but Curtis had a point. They'd started brainstorming not long after. Before Felicity knew it, it was almost ten o'clock.

Yawning, Curtis said, "It's late. We can finish this on Monday. Don't want to do the wrong thing and blow up the building."

"Waller would definitely not like that."

"Thanks for your help, Felicity."

"You're welcome." Felicity stopped by her desk to make sure the surveillance video in the lab went back to normal. She shut her computers down and grabbed her purse and tablet before heading out. The drive back to her apartment felt longer than usual, which was probably because she was actually tired now.

By the time Felicity pulled into her parking spot on the street, she couldn't wait to get inside, change into her pajamas, and collapse in bed. She let out a low curse when her key got stuck in the lock. It had been so finicky lately. Jiggling the knob, the lock finally came undone. She turned it and pushed the door open. After shutting it behind her, Felicity flicked on the lights and let out a surprised yelp at finding Oliver sitting on her couch.

She put her hand to her chest while trying to take a calming breath. "Oh my God, Oliver," Felicity breathed. "You scared me half to death."

He moved to stand. "Sorry. I thought if you came home to the lights on it'd freak you out even more."
"How did you even get in?"

"I'm in the Russian mob. Picking locks is one of the first things we learn."

"Of course it is." Felicity dropped her things on her dining room table and took him in. Oliver was wearing a black t-shirt and jeans that hugged him in all the right places. Suddenly, her heart was beating erratically for an entirely different reason. "You're here," she commented, stating the obvious.

"Yeah."

There was far too much space between them as Oliver stood rooted in his spot. Felicity stared at him curiously, vaguely wondering why he hadn't swept her up in his arms already and kissed her. If he wasn't going to come to her, then she was going to him. Felicity crossed the room and wasted no time throwing her arms around him.

Standing on her tiptoes, Felicity peppered his face with enthusiastic kisses. "Oh my God, I've missed you," she mumbled. Her entire body tingled at the feel of his scruff rubbing against the soft skin of her face. She finally landed on his lips but pulled back seconds later when he was unresponsive. "Oliver, what's the matter?" He was quiet as her eyes sought his, trying to decipher the peculiar distance in their depths. "Oliver?"

He appeared to snap out of it upon hearing the worry in her voice and offered her a reassuring smile. "Nothing." Oliver placed his hands on her arms and rubbed them gently. "I wasn't sure I'd be able to make it here. It feels like it's been forever."

"I know what you mean," she said softly and brought her hand to his face. "It has been."

Oliver's eyes traveled the length of her body. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, why?"

He hesitated before saying, "You look tired. Are you feeling okay?"

Felicity almost flinched. It was the third time today she'd heard that. Apparently, she hadn't done a very good job of hiding the dark circles under her eyes. "It was a long week, and then I worked late tonight. But I'm fine." Felicity couldn't necessarily tell Oliver about what happened at Monument Point and even if she could, there was no reason to make him worry about it right now. Their time together was about them.

His hand tentatively touched her cheek. "You're sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Her fingers stroked his jawline, trying to ease the tension she could still see on his face. "Now can you kiss me?"

With a slight nod, Oliver leaned down and touched his lips to hers. The kiss was warm, soft, and languid. Felicity could feel it all the way down to her toes, and naturally moved so that she was pressed fully against him. Her entire body tingled with the urge to lose herself in his arms. Oliver's own body started to relax when her other hand caressed the hard, bunched muscles of his back.

Felicity breathed a contented sigh when Oliver's arms finally encircled her. All of the stress of Monument Point and anxiety from a lack of answers melted away in that moment. With Oliver, she was safe. With Oliver, she was home.

He emitted a low groan when they finally broke apart. "I missed you, too," Oliver whispered, their
foreheads touching.

"How much time do you have?"

"The weekend. Are you free?"

"Well, I was supposed to go shopping with my mom and Thea tomorrow for a dress for her graduation. But it should only take a couple of hours." They were supposed to go last week, but Felicity had canceled. She couldn't try on dresses with them when she still had dark bruises on her body. Felicity hated the idea of not being with Oliver when he was in town, but Thea would no doubt be disappointed again if she canceled.

"Can you reschedule?"

Felicity hesitated. "Well, I suppose I could but…"

"I have a surprise for you."

She perked up at that. "Really? What is it?"

"You'll need to pack."

"Are we going somewhere?" She looked to the doorway where his bag should be. "Where's your stuff?"

"In the car. It's parked down the street." He rubbed her shoulders, looking hopeful. "So, can you come?"

"Ooh, are we going on a road trip in the morning?"

"Sorta. But we're not leaving in the morning. We're going tonight," he told her. "You can sleep in the car on the way there."

"Where are we going?" Before he could dodge the question again, she pointed out, "I can't pack accordingly, Oliver, if I don't know where."

"Let's just say it's someplace with a lot of sun."

Felicity was officially intrigued and was practically bouncing in his arms in excitement. The fatigue she felt earlier was completely gone as her mind already started thinking up destinations. "I'll text Thea tomorrow and tell her I'm still not feeling well. Felicity felt bad for not going with Thea, but she couldn't pass up the chance to be with Oliver. It had been about three months since she'd seen him last, and who knew when their next opportunity to spend time together would be. Felicity would tell Thea to send pictures instead. That way Felicity could see what she was trying on and give feedback.

"When is she graduating?"

"In a few weeks," Felicity replied. "Plus, she and my mom have a big party planned. So Thea's basically freaking out about every little detail, which includes her dresses and—" Felicity abruptly stopped talking when she felt Oliver tense. It was probably hard enough to know his little sister was graduating and that he couldn't be there to see for himself without her babbling about it. Felicity could be so clueless sometimes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Felicity, it's okay," Oliver assured her. "It's not you."
Felicity started rubbing his back again, since it seemed to calm him. "What I meant to say is that, yes, I'll go wherever you want to take me. Okay?"

He nodded and kissed her forehead. "Okay."

"Just give me fifteen minutes." Felicity pecked his lips before sprinting towards her room. Spending the entire weekend with Oliver in some sunny mystery location sounded like sheer heaven after the dreadful couple of weeks she'd had. Aside from Thea's impending graduation, Felicity got the sense that something else was bothering Oliver. She didn't know what it was, but Felicity would do everything she could to take his mind off of it. The sooner she packed, the sooner they'd be on their way.

The sun was starting to peek over the horizon when Felicity opened her eyes. She hadn't meant to fall asleep, but the rhythmic lull of the car couldn't be resisted. Felicity had never ridden in a Porsche before, though she shouldn't have been surprised that Oliver had one. Working for the Bratva had to have some benefits, which also explained its dark tinted windows. It took Felicity a moment to realize that her seat had been pushed back. Oliver must've done it so that she was comfortable.

She mumbled sleepily, "Where are we?"

"Coast City."

Perking up at that, Felicity repositioned her seat and stared out the windshield at the stunning ocean looming ahead of them. She'd never been to Coast City, but she'd heard that it was usually warm, sunny, and beautiful. Felicity couldn't help but agree as they drove down a strip of expensive beach houses. Their lawns were a lush green with an array of flowers decorating the perimeters. Every twenty feet or so were giant palm trees.

Eventually, they came to stop at one of the smaller, though no less elaborate, houses. The long, windy driveway was made of tan cobblestone. Felicity saw more palm trees and flowers decorating the front lawn. The house itself was a light mauve color with a brown tiled roof. Windows were set in either side of the tall arched entryway. The door was also made of glass.

Oliver parked the car in front and turned off the engine. "We're here."

Felicity's eyes widened as her mouth dropped open in shock. "This is where we're staying."

"Yup," he stated with a satisfied grin.

"Is it yours?" Oliver had said before that he didn't have an actual home, but that didn't necessarily mean he had nothing. The guy had to sleep somewhere.

"It's a friend's."

Her heart sank a little at that, but she brushed it off. "Nice friend," Felicity murmured as they got out. The air was warm but not quite hot yet, since it was still early morning. The sweet smell of flowers mixed with the salty aroma of the nearby sea made her smile. Although she loved the bustle of the city in Starling, this was a beautiful and refreshing reprieve.

Oliver retrieved their bags from the trunk before unlocking the front door. He let Felicity go inside first. She walked down the short, white-walled hallway that led into the wide living room. Pausing, Felicity stared in awe. The walls were also white, but the crown moldings and floor were made of
wood. There was a set of couches to the left that faced the built-in, wooden entertainment center. A big screen hung on the wall in the middle. To the right was a long, glass dining room table with cushioned wooden chairs.

Beyond that, and what was most impressive, was a wall made entirely of windows. Felicity crossed the room and looked out. There was a back porch that led to the grassy yard. A stone fire pit was located to the left, and the built-in swimming pool was on the right. Inside the pool, slightly raised, was a square Jacuzzi. A hammock also hung from two palm trees. Both sides of the property were sectioned off by a white fence, but it was short and see-through in the back so that the view of the beach and ocean wasn't obstructed. There was a small gate that led to the sandy beach.

She looked back at Oliver and saw him disappearing down another corridor. If it was anyone but him, Felicity wouldn't have been able to tear herself away from the amazing scenery and follow. She passed by the counter sectioning off the full, all white kitchen. He'd gone into the master bedroom, which also had a wall of windows that were on the side of the pool. Oliver placed their things at the foot of the king-sized, four-poster bed.

He drew her into his arms. "So, what do you think?"

"It's amazing, Oliver. It feels like we're in a whole different world."

"That was the idea—not that I don't love your apartment. But I figured it might be nice to get away from Starling for a couple of days."

Beaming up at him, she said, "You thought right." Felicity met him halfway, feeling a smile tugging at her lips as she kissed him.

"I have something for you."

"Shouldn't I be the one giving you presents?" When he frowned, she elaborated, "It was your birthday a couple of days ago."

He stared at her, slightly shocked. "You remembered."

She giggled and pecked his lips, "Of course I did. I got you something."

"I don't need anything," Oliver said with a shake of his head. "You're more than enough." He stroked her cheek and kissed her lips before reaching into his duffel bag. He pulled out a cell phone and held it out to her. "This is for you."

Felicity stared at it in confusion. "Um, you shouldn't have?"

With an amused smirk, he explained, "It's a burner phone that can't be traced. I have one, too. I programmed my number inside so that you can reach me whenever you need me."

"You mean we can actually talk when you're away now?" Felicity looked at the phone as if he'd given her a diamond ring. These past few months of not only being separated from Oliver but not being able to talk to him at all had felt like torture. This was exactly what she'd needed.

"We'll still have to be careful, but yes," Oliver answered.

"This is perfect. Thank you."

"If you need something or if you're"—he hesitated—"if you're in trouble, promise me you'll call me. Okay?"
His words were steady, but Felicity detected an undercurrent of urgency in his voice that had her frowning. "Why would I be in trouble?"

It took him a moment to respond. "We're both in a dangerous line of work, Felicity. Look what happened in Russia and what could've happened if I hadn't been there."

"You're not responsible for me, Oliver," she told him. "I can take care of myself." Her voice held with that last statement, even though Felicity felt a little bit like a fake after what had happened to her at Monument Point. But she couldn't have him worrying about her while he was trying to survive in the Bratva.

"I know that. But just in case, I want you to call me." Oliver was not backing down on this as his eyes bore into hers. His hold on her tightened. "Promise me."

Felicity didn't remember much from her abduction with the Curare in her system, but she was vaguely aware of her need for Oliver in that moment. The thought of him was the only thing to break through her drugged haze as she fought against the men who took her. "I promise." She slid her hands up his chest to his cheeks and drew him forward. It was time to relieve some of that stress.

"So, Mr. Queen, now that you've brought me to the secret location, what exactly do you plan on doing with me?"

"I've got a few ideas," he replied in a low, husky voice.

Felicity gave him a flirty smile, dragging her hands back down his torso. They slid under the hem of his shirt before tracing the outline of his abs. Oliver's eyes darkened. "Such as?" she coaxed. Her mouth hovered near his.

Without breaking her gaze, he reached between them and started to undo the buttons on her cardigan. Her body involuntarily shivered as he slipped it off her shoulders to reveal her white flowered sundress underneath. Felicity lifted her head higher in anticipation when he started to lean in. His eyes drifted down, taking her in, when Oliver unexpectedly tensed and drew back.

"What's the matter?" Felicity stared at him, puzzled, until she realized what had claimed his attention. She looked down as well, seeing part of the mostly faded bruises that were on the bottom of her neck and extended to her collarbone.

"Felicity," he whispered and took a step back.

"It looks worse than it is, Oliver. I swear," she assured him.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "What happened?"

Felicity wanted to kick herself for forgetting about her injuries. She'd been so caught up in being with Oliver again that she hadn't thought what would happen if he saw them. Now Felicity realized it couldn't be avoided. When they made love, Oliver would undoubtedly see her healing bullet wound, too. "I was on a mission last week, and I was injured."

"Injured how?" His jaw was already clenching.

She sighed as she tried to figure out the best way to tell him the truth. "Don't freak out, but I was shot." She quickly added, "It was only in the back of my shoulder, and it happened while saving a team member's life. The doctors said luckily it wasn't deep and that I'll have a small scar, but I'll be fine." There was no need to mention the poisoned bullet or her abduction. Oliver already had a troubled look on his face, and it would only make him worry more.
Oliver watched her carefully for a few seconds before uttering, "I'm sorry." His voice was deep and hoarse.

"Hey, it's not your fault." She closed the distance he'd put between them.

Her words of comfort appeared to have the opposite effect. Oliver was even more on edge as he shook his head. "I don't know what I was—" he faltered. "I shouldn't have brought you here. You should be at home resting. You were tired earlier—"

"I'm not tired anymore. I slept in the car, remember?" Felicity took hold of his face and forced Oliver to look at her. "I should've told you before, but it slipped my mind because I really am fine. I'm healing."

"Does it hurt?"

"Not as much anymore. Look, I love you for being so concerned about me but trust me when I say being here with you is the best medicine. I need this, and I need you." She gently stroked his cheek with her fingers. "So can we please move on from this and start enjoying our weekend together?"

He didn't relax completely, but he did lean into her touch. "I had the entire day planned for us."

"Perfect." She smiled encouragingly and brushed her lips affectionately against his. It was typical of Oliver to take on the pain of those he loved, but Felicity refused to let him waste their precious time together brooding about events he couldn't control. "So what are we doing first?"

The day had passed by faster than Oliver expected. They'd done everything he'd planned, despite his multiple offers to Felicity to return to the beach house and let her rest. Oliver had been somewhat ambitious in his plans when he'd first decided to take Felicity to Coast City. His original intent had been to get her out of Starling and away from Malcolm's prying eyes. Her stepfather knew more than Oliver could've ever anticipated, and the thought of spending time with Felicity under such scrutiny made him uneasy. Over a week later and the ramifications of his new assignment still left Oliver reeling.

And it all began with his mistake in Monument Point. Oliver knew there was no way he could've possibly known that the woman he was fighting was Felicity. He knew that she worked for a government agency, but he had no logical way of knowing she was with A.R.G.U.S. It was a twisted kind of irony that of all their enemies, Felicity was with their number one. Watching her fight for her life against that Curare, after he'd been the one to put her in such a vulnerable state, only exacerbated his sickening guilt and worry. Dig and Helena had tried to talk Oliver into getting some rest when Felicity was stable, but he'd refused to leave her side. Having to stay away from her last week—he knew abducting her would probably put her under a period of surveillance from A.R.G.U.S. afterward—had been literal hell.

Oliver had thought about giving Felicity more time to heal before whisking her away to Coast City, but he didn't think he could make it another week without seeing her. He'd come as soon as he deemed it safe. The relief to see for himself that she was okay was at war with the self-hatred he felt for being the one to put her in danger. From the moment Felicity had to put her cardigan back on so that she could hide her injuries from the public, the self-hatred had started to win again. It felt wrong for Oliver to touch her knowing that anything Felicity said or did would give him comfort he didn't deserve. If they were left alone to their own devices, they'd already be tangled between the sheets in the master bedroom. It was why Oliver kept them busy most of the day. He'd kept his Starling City
Rockets hat on the entire time. Even though Oliver Queen was presumed dead, he didn't want to chance anyone getting too good a look at him. Felicity couldn't help teasing him about his "disguise" and how little it did to actually hide how handsome he was.

They'd had breakfast at a small, cozy café before heading over to the boardwalk. There were numerous shops to peruse and some street performances to watch. At one point they'd found a great spot to sit and watch the surfers catching waves from the morning tide. When it was time for lunch, they'd gotten takeout from Coast City Pizza—"the best in the west" as it was known. They'd brought it back to the beach house and had lunch before deciding to use the heated pool. The ocean at this time of year would still be too cold to swim in comfortably. Felicity, showing off her amazing curves in a hot pink bikini, had settled on a float to get some sun while Oliver swam laps to work out his frustration. She'd called him over when he was done and had nodded flirtatiously over to the Jacuzzi.

Oliver had let her lead him into the hot, bubbling water. They sat enjoying the massaging jets and talked for a bit. Then Felicity was in his lap kissing him, and Oliver had felt his resolve waver. They'd made out in the hot tub for Oliver didn't know how long before he'd felt Felicity's hand slide into his swim trunks. Oliver jolted at the contact and stilled her movements. Felicity had stared at him, baffled, as he quickly made up some excuse about needing to take a shower and get dinner started before it got too late.

The shower Oliver took had been short and cold, but it did the trick. When he got out, Oliver had noticed Felicity through the window. She was sitting on a lounge chair on the lawn with a towel wrapped around her, watching the ocean. He'd wondered what was going on in that beautiful head of hers as he made his way into the kitchen.

A short while later, he'd heard her come in the backdoor and walk toward the bedroom. Her phone rang at some point, which she answered. Oliver couldn't make out exactly who it was but thought he'd heard her say the name "Ray." He guiltily filed it away for later in his mind and got back to preparing dinner. Felicity had joined him in the kitchen after she'd also showered and gotten redressed. Her wet hair was already curling as it dried. She'd helped him finish up dinner, and he'd poured them a glass of wine while they waited for the chicken cordon bleu to be done.

They'd eaten at the large dining room table that Felicity had set. She wasn't as talkative as she'd been earlier, and he'd worried that he'd worn her out too much. But then Felicity had suggested a walk on the beach, to which Oliver agreed. He wasn't sure how much longer he could keep them out of the bedroom. Anything he could do to prolong it was good as he tried to sort out the utter chaos in his head.

They'd walked hand in hand down the shore until they'd reached an area that had more grass than sand. They were now lying on the grass and looking up at a perfect view of the night sky. Felicity was quietly pointing out constellations that Oliver attempted to follow.

"How do you know so much about stars?" he asked.

"I really wanted to go to space camp as a child."

He smirked. "I didn't know you were into astronomy."

"Well, I didn't want you to think I was a total geek when we started dating," she joked.

"Don't worry. I already knew it the moment I met you." Oliver laughed when she smacked his chest. "So what else did they teach you at space camp?"

"Nothing. I didn't actually get to go. My mom didn't tell me at the time, but she couldn't afford it. I
was so upset that I locked myself in my room for three days."

"If Tommy or I had known, we probably would've signed you up," he joked.

"I was so stubborn back then that I probably wouldn't have gone but secretly would've been dying to." Felicity sighed. "It wasn't just that I liked space. The week that camp was supposed to occur was around the time my dad had left. It would've been three years since it happened, and I couldn't bear to watch my mom moping around and hiding her tears."

"Felicity," Oliver murmured and reached for her hand.

The blonde turned toward him and forced a smile. "It was a long time ago. It shouldn't matter anymore."

He squeezed her hand. "But it's okay if it does. He was your father, and you deserved better."

She shrugged nonchalantly, but Oliver could see that his words had struck a chord in her. "It's just hard when someone who's supposed to love you unconditionally betrays you."

Oliver's muscles tightened, and a lump formed in his throat. He glanced up at the stars, wanting to make a wish that things were different but knowing it was pointless. There was no easy out for the horrible situation he found himself in.

Felicity propped herself up on her elbow. "Oliver, are you all right?"

He couldn't look at her. "I'm fine." His response was hollow even to his own ears.

Scooting closer, Felicity placed her hand on his chest and drew invisible circles. Her fingers created a blazing trail that he could feel regardless of the fabric between them. His entire body was taut like a rope being pulled in a tug of war. On one side there was Felicity and on the other there was the allegiance he'd sworn.

Felicity watched Oliver carefully as she continued to touch him. He'd closed his eyes and if it weren't for the tension emanating from his body, she would've thought he was enjoying it. He always had before, and it was further proof that something was really wrong.

Despite spending the entire day together, Felicity sensed an unseen distance between them. Oliver's kisses and caresses were affectionate but hesitant. And when Felicity tried to get more intimate with him in the hot tub, Oliver had all but sprinted into the house. It was starting to feed the doubts in her mind. Doubts that although they'd been able to pick up where they'd left off after so many years, there was a side of Oliver that was an absolute stranger to her. A side she couldn't completely read. A side she wasn't sure she should trust.

When her touch did little to soothe him, Felicity sat up with a frustrated huff. "It's getting late. We should probably head back to the—" She felt the softest touch on her shoulder—right over the pattern of stitches.

Oliver had opened his eyes when he felt Felicity pull away. He knew his behavior seemed off to her, and she was starting to lose her patience. Oliver was going to try and offer some kind of explanation when he came face to face with her bullet wound. Felicity had worn her cardigan for most of the day and had kept it covered and out of the water while in the pool. This was the first time Oliver had seen her injury in over a week, and the stitches marring her otherwise perfect skin were a harsh reminder of what could've been.

Sitting up, Oliver ran his fingers over the wound again and noticed a shiver course through her.
"You were really brave," he said so quietly it was almost swept away by the ocean breeze.

"I tried." She paused before admitting just as softly, "But I don't know if I've ever been so scared." Felicity leaned into his touch, seeking comfort. "I've had dreams about it. The first peaceful night I had was actually last night in the car—when I was with you."

It felt like Oliver had been punched in the gut. The irony that he was both the cause and relief of her pain wasn't lost on him. But he didn't move away. Oliver slid his hand up the back of her neck and under her hair. He gently pressed his lips to her wound before kissing a trail upward.

Felicity let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. His arms slid around her waist from behind and brought her into him. Felicity automatically leaned back and shifted her head to the side to give him more access. His hot mouth and scruff scraping against the delicate skin of her neck sent a jolt of pleasure to her core. Her breasts felt heavy with her increasing breaths as the unfulfilled desire she'd experienced all day came back with a vengeance.

Turning her in his arms, Oliver claimed her lips and swallowed the string of moans at the contact. He lowered Felicity to the ground, and she went willingly. Her hold on him was tight and fierce like she thought he might pull away again. She reached for the hem of his shirt while he tugged the straps of her sundress down. His shirt was cast aside, along with her bra, before he lowered his mouth and took one of the hard, sensitive nubs into his mouth.

Felicity couldn't contain the whimper that tore from her throat. She'd been starving for his touch all day and now that she had it, her senses were on overload. Oliver did the same to her other breast, sucking and biting until she was almost writhing underneath him. Craving more, she reached for the button of his jeans but didn't get far. Oliver caught her hands and pinned them to the ground. His muscles flexed and his entire length pressed into her, rubbing against her center as his tongue mimicked the action in her mouth.

Sucking on his bottom lip and biting it, Felicity panted his name. Her hips gyrated beneath his in an effort to get more friction, and he groaned deep in his chest. "Oliver," she said in between kisses. "Make love to me."

The blood in his veins sizzled at her request, making him even harder. There was nothing Oliver wanted more in that moment than to remove the rest of their clothing and bury himself deep inside her. To forget everything that was wrong in the world and lose himself in her. Felicity loved him. She wanted him. She would make it all better—which was exactly why he couldn't be with her. This wasn't about him and his needs. They were made obsolete the moment he agreed to Malcolm's orders. This was about Felicity and what she deserved.

Felicity felt Oliver let go of her hands before kissing a trail across her body. He paid special attention to her fading bruises. His kisses were light and almost reverent. As he worked his way down, Oliver lifted the hem of her dress. His tongue traced patterns into the skin of her flat stomach, his scruff rubbing her deliciously every time, before being smoothed over by his soft lips. Meanwhile, his hands stroked her thighs, reaching higher and higher until they met in the center. Her entire body arched off the ground as he caressed her through the thin fabric.

Seeing Felicity start to unravel from his ministrations was like setting fire to gasoline. There was no stopping the burning, primal desire to take her to the brink. To make her come so hard that her mind blanked and all of her fears faded away. This was the only way he could give her what she wanted.

Felicity opened her eyes and was ready to protest when she felt Oliver sit up. She didn't think she could handle it if he pulled away from her again. The need for him was so strong that every nerve ending in her body felt like it was vibrating. Felicity relaxed slightly when Oliver reached for her.
hips and slowly started to drag the fabric of her panties down her legs. Her muscles were taut for an entirely different reason as she waited for his next move.

Without taking his eyes off of her, Oliver bent down to kiss along the inside of her thigh. Felicity practically keened when he nipped at an extremely sensitive patch of skin before doing the same to her other leg. Her core throbbed as his mouth lavished her everywhere except where she needed him.

"Oliver," Felicity choked, desperate and wanting.

Oliver moved closer and lifted her legs so that they were resting on top of his shoulders. She was fully exposed to him, feeling the cool air on her sex. Felicity bit her lip when she noticed him watching her. The only light came from the moon above, and it was just enough for her to make out the dark, hungry look in his eyes. A thrilling shiver coursed through her in anticipation. Then his head was between the apex of her thighs, making her head fall back and breath catch.

The first taste of Felicity had Oliver spiraling. The intimacy he'd been avoiding all day with her had come in full force, and it was intoxicating. His tongue made slow work of circling her entrance before delving inside. Oliver repeated it a few more times before flicking the small bundle of nerves. Felicity's hips naturally bucked at the sensation, and he tightened his hold on her hips to keep her from squirming around too much. Her low moans were growing louder by the minute, and Oliver couldn't help but feel a sense of pride that he was the cause. He knew he should probably be worried that someone would overhear, but they were in a desolate part of the beach and hadn't seen anyone pass by in quite some time. Even if someone did pass by, Oliver doubted he'd notice or care. All he could focus on was the way her legs dug into his shoulders while her hips moved in time with his mouth.

Felicity could feel her pleasure going higher and higher as Oliver lavished her. Her core pulsated against his hot, demanding mouth. It made the coil inside her twist tighter. Felicity's hands scrambled for purchase on anything to help ground her. Finally, her right hand settled on his head, tugging on his short hair, while the other gripped the grassy sand. There was probably an indentation in her lip already from biting down on it so hard.

"Right there," she whimpered when Oliver discovered a particularly tender spot. As if she wasn't already in danger of falling over the edge, Felicity felt his finger penetrating her folds. Her eyes quickly shot open at the sensation, and Felicity inhaled sharply at the sight above her. The stars shone brightly in the sky and, from her angle, it looked like Felicity was right up there with them. It was like she was caught between worlds. A part of her felt like it was floating from the pleasure Oliver was giving her, even while he kept her close to him on the ground. It was no different than how she felt with him every day. Only he had the ability to make her feel free and centered at the same time.

Another long finger slipped inside of her, stretching her and thrusting with more force. Her inner walls gripped them as her body shuddered from the building sensation of his mouth on her sensitive nub. Felicity continued to look up at the stars, sensing that it wouldn't be long before Oliver made her explode like the supernovas she used to read about. This was a thousand times better than space camp.

With a twist of his fingers and flick of his tongue, Oliver felt Felicity finally shatter against him. He lapped her up, savoring the moment and letting her ride it out fully. Her body eventually stilled. Oliver hovered over her, unmoving, as she attempted to catch her breath. Felicity looked utterly ravaged with her sundress hanging loosely against her mostly exposed, flushed skin. It sent a jolt of pride through Oliver even though his own body ached with an unfulfilled need.

Once she'd calmed down, Felicity sat up to his level, wound her arms around his neck, and lifted her
chin to kiss him. "That was amazing."

Oliver cupped her face and kept her close for a moment longer, deepening the kiss. "Yeah?"

"Mmm hmm." She rubbed his shoulders and then traced the hard lines of his torso. There was a mischievous glint in her eye. "Now it's your turn."

"I'm fine," he muttered dismissively.

Felicity nodded to the obvious bulge in his jeans. "I highly doubt that, Mr. Queen." She seductively licked her lips, no doubt tasting her own essence from his lips. "Let me return the favor."

Before she could reach for him, Oliver stood abruptly. "It's late. We should head back to the beach house.” He grabbed his shirt and waited for Felicity to also get redressed. He couldn't look at her, knowing that a hurt expression had most likely replaced her smile. In the span of a few minutes, he'd managed to ruin it all yet again.
Hey guys, thanks so much for your comments and kudos last chapter! Basically, everyone just wants to smack Oliver for not telling Felicity the truth. Lol! Then again, there would be no show if he didn't keep secrets and take everything on himself. While it seems like he should just tell her, he has valid reasons not to that will eventually come to light.

Just to let you guys know, this is going to be a long fic. I usually try to keep my stories around 30 chapters, but I already know it'll be much longer. So it's more of a marathon than a sprint when it comes to all of the mysteries unfolding. Also, these next few chapters are going to be very angst-y. There's a lot of history and secrets still between them that have been bubbling under the surface, and it's all going to come to a head. This fic won't be all darkness all the time, but realistically Olicity is in a tough spot. I promise it'll be worth it, though!

Felicity entered the beach house and marched toward the master bedroom without a second glance behind her. She was aware of Oliver trailing her but couldn't face him right now. Not with the anger and frustration mixing in her veins, overpowering any remnants of the sheer ecstasy he'd given her moments before. If anything, Felicity felt even more dissatisfied and it stoked the fire burning inside of her. She grabbed a few pieces of spare clothing lying about and tossed them into her bag.

"Felicity, what are you doing?" Oliver sounded slightly panicked.

*Good,* Felicity thought. She shouldn't be the only one on edge and confused today. "I'm moving to the guest room."

"Why?"

Felicity scoffed, "I thought it was obvious." Without looking at him, she moved to go around him. "I'll set my alarm so we can leave early in the morning."

"But we still have another whole day." Oliver blocked her path. "Felicity, you don't have to—"

"Before you even finish that sentence, yes, I do. I don't know what the hell is going on, Oliver, but I can't be near you right now. Not if you're going to keep hiding things from me."

"What?" His face remained neutral and his body still. The only sign that her words were affecting him was in the nervous twitch of his fingers rubbing together at his sides. "I'm not hiding anything."

"Something is going on with you. You've been acting weird ever since you showed up in my apartment," Felicity argued. "You've been hesitant to touch me all day and when I try and touch you, you completely freak out and dodge me. Why bother whisking me away on a romantic weekend if you don't even want to be with me?"

"Of course I want to be with you."
"Could've fooled me."

"Really?" he shot back. "Because it was less than ten minutes ago that I had you practically screaming my name on the beach."

"It was also less than ten minutes ago that you completely drew away from me, which is about the third time today that I've tried to be intimate with you." She glared defiantly. "Three strikes and you're out, Oliver." She started walking down the hall with Oliver hot on her tail.

"This isn't a game, Felicity," he called after her.

"Isn't it?" Felicity whipped around and stared into his eyes, searching. There was fire there, but it was being masked by something else that she couldn't quite pinpoint. Her frustration mounted, and suddenly Felicity didn't give a damn whether Oliver told her the truth or not. She just wanted to wind him up as much as he'd been doing to her all day. "Fine. One more chance."

Without looking away, Felicity boldly lifted her dress over her head and tossed it aside. She stood before Oliver in nothing but her bra and panties, waiting expectantly. "I'm right here, Oliver. If you want me, take me."

His gaze raked over her, darkening. The only other signs that she was getting to him were his shallow breaths and the persistent bulge in his jeans. But still Oliver made no move. Reaching out to grip the back of his neck, Felicity pulled his head down into a fierce kiss. As she attacked his lips, her other hand slid down his body to cup him through his jeans. Oliver groaned low in his throat, though his hands remained at his sides.

By the time Felicity drew back, they were both panting. The tension between them could be cut with a knife. Felicity didn't know whether she wanted to kick him or kiss him again, and it seemed Oliver wasn't faring much better. "That's what I thought," she declared.

Felicity attempted to leave a second time but didn't get far when Oliver gripped her wrist. He tugged her back towards him so they were face to face. It was like a game of chicken, neither one wanting to be the first to look away. Oliver's self-control was hanging on by a thin thread. As she attacked his lips again, her other hand slide down his body to cup him through his jeans. Oliver groaned low in his throat, though his hands remained at his sides.

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This was his Felicity. No matter what Oliver's damn orders were, she was nobody's but his. Not Anatoly's. Not Malcolm's. And certainly not their bastard of a leader's. Beyond Felicity's current bluster, and all of his attempts to keep her safe, deep down Oliver's rejection was hurting her. Oliver would probably hate himself in the morning for being so weak but right now he didn't care. He didn't want to spend the night alone, thinking about all the ways he'd fucked up. He didn't want Felicity to spend the night alone, questioning herself for his odd behavior. If there was one skill Oliver had mastered on the island, it was the ability to compartmentalize his warring emotions. Without a second thought, Oliver cast it all aside and focused on nothing but his craving for Felicity.

Grabbing her by the hips, Oliver had her pinned against the wall in seconds. He took off his shirt, desperate to feel skin on skin. Felicity had barely managed a squeak of surprise before their mouths collided. Her kisses were just as wild and her hands just as ambitious. This time when she went for the button of his jeans, Oliver didn't stop her. He helped her yank them down until he was left only in his boxers. Reaching down, Oliver gripped her thighs and hoisted her up in his arms. Felicity immediately wrapped her legs around his waist and dug her nails into his back when he pressed his hard length against her center.
"Is this what you want?" he growled into her neck, thrusting against her bundle of nerves.

"Oliver…" She barely managed to speak. "I want you inside me." There was nothing soft or demure about her words. They were a command, not a request.

"That makes two of us," he grunted and walked them back into the bedroom. Oliver made sure to flick off the lights, since the majority of their back wall was made of windows. The silver moonlight mixed with the soft, artificial lights emanating from the pool outside. Oliver was sure they'd be able to hear the ocean if it weren't for their loud moans and heavy breathing.

Felicity removed the rest of her garments while Oliver tore the square foil he'd grabbed from his wallet on the nightstand. He then settled between her parted legs and wasted no time entering her. Oliver had only managed a couple of shallow thrusts before Felicity shifted, and he unexpectedly ended up on his back. She widened her stance, taking him in fully, and he groaned as her walls stretched before clenching tightly around him. Felicity rocked her hips forcefully on top of him, reminding Oliver of the rhythm of the waves before they broke against the shore. He rested his hands in the curves of her waist for support as she guided their movements.

Oliver watched her for a few minutes, mesmerized by the way her tiny form could wield such power and control over his much larger body. A body that for the last five years had been forged into a weapon. A weapon he would gladly use if it meant protecting her. But it wasn't protection that she was seeking right now. It was a release as she continued to take every inch of him inside of her. Oliver thrusted up as Felicity came down, and the impact each time left them overwhelmed with the desire to collide until they were one.

He met her halfway when she finally leaned down to kiss him. Her long blond hair formed a curtain around their faces. Running his hands up the smooth skin of her back, Oliver pressed Felicity more firmly against him. He couldn't get enough of her now that he wasn't denying himself of her touch. Although her hands were hungrily roaming his muscles, she slowed to stroke the area above his heart. It had always been her silent way of acknowledging just how much she loved him. Even now when she was furious with him, she didn't deny the connection they shared.

Oliver's left hand slid along her arm until he was covering her hand, keeping it on his chest. "I don't deserve you," he whispered so quietly he thought for sure she wouldn't hear him.

Her eyes snapped open regardless. Oliver wasn't sure what she was looking for, but Felicity must've found it. The anger he'd seen reflecting in her eyes softened. "Yes, you do." She sounded confident, determined.

Oliver shook his head. "Felicity—"

She kissed him deeply. "Did you save me in Russia?"

"Yes," he answered against her lips.

"Did you give me the access codes?" Her nails dug into his Bratva tattoo, silently staking her claim.

"Yes."

"Did you stay away for my protection all these years?"

"Yes," he groaned as she loosened her legs to sink further down on top of him before clutching him tightly.

"Would you leave the Bratva if you could?"
"Yes." He tightened his hold on her in return as she stripped away his defenses. His guilt and self-hatred, Felicity was having none of it. Her body continued to writhe on top of him, demanding more. Demanding him. Oliver didn't think there was anything he would deny her in that moment.

Felicity drew back enough to meet his gaze. "Are you still trying to protect me?"

"Yes," Oliver replied without hesitation. He was so close. She was, too.

Felicity pressed a firm hand to his cheek. "Then that is everything I need to know." She leaned forward to claim his mouth and Oliver let her, along with the rest of him. There was no choice to make.

_June 18, 2007_

_It was the worst Monday in the history of Mondays. Everything that could go wrong had. Add a nice dose of family drama on top of it, and Oliver felt utterly wiped by the time he got home. Despite his fatigue, Oliver had gone straight to the gym located on the top floor in their apartment building. His workout had been more intense than usual, but he'd had a lot of frustration to burn off._

_When he got back to the loft, he'd placed an order for dinner and took a quick shower. The boxed mac and cheese Tommy had made the other day was already gone, and Oliver wasn't about to go rummaging in their cupboards. His skills in the kitchen were severely lacking. Even if he did attempt to cook something, Oliver's mind was way too preoccupied to get it right._

_He was done and dressed by the time the doorbell rang. Oliver ran his hands through his wet hair and went to answer the door. The delivery guy from Oliver's favorite Mexican restaurant stood next to Laurel, who happened to be carrying a pizza box. Oliver stared curiously between the two._

_Laurel smiled and said, "Technically, I did get here ten seconds before this guy."_  

_Oliver pulled out his cash to pay the delivery guy and nodded for Laurel to come inside. "Keep the change."_  

_"Gracias," the man replied and handed over the bag of food._

_Oliver closed the door and turned to Laurel. "This is a surprise."_  

_"I know. Tommy told me how hard you've been working, and so I thought it might be fun if we hung out. It's been a while." Laurel held up the pizza box. "Dinner and a movie?"_  

_"Not that I'm not glad to see you, but I thought you were still mad about my fight with Max."_  

_Laurel sighed. "I was only really mad because I know you're better than that. But I talked to Tommy and had some time to think about it. Felicity is Tommy's sister and since you and Tommy are practically family, it's like she's your sister too now. So I get why a jerk like Max taking an interest in her upset you."_  

_Oliver's jaw clenched as he tamped down a wave of revulsion. Nothing about his growing feelings for Felicity were sisterly. But as badly as he wanted to refute the comparison, it would only fuel more questions from Laurel. He swiftly changed the subject, "What kind of pizza did you bring?"_  

_The brunette smiled, apparently relieved that they'd put their latest disagreement behind them. "A_
mushroom and olive pizza from Mario's. What did you get?"

"Tacos, homemade chips, and guacamole from El Centro."

"Ooh, nice choice." She suggested, "We could live dangerously and have a bit of both."

Oliver hadn't necessarily been in the mood for company. He'd been relieved when Tommy texted that he probably wouldn't be home tonight if his date went well. The unexpected and tense situation Oliver had found himself in at lunch wouldn't stop replaying in his mind. But he couldn't send Laurel away; that would be rude. Besides, maybe hanging out with Laurel would do him some good. They'd known each other forever. Since she was so familiar with his parents, she would probably know how to handle the situation Oliver found himself in.

"Let's do it," Oliver replied and headed into the kitchen. He got them plates while Laurel unpacked the food. Despite her chipper attitude when he'd first answered the door, Laurel was unexpectedly quiet. Her brow was furrowed as she absentmindedly stared out the large windows at the city. "Hey," he gently called to her. "Are you okay?"

Laurel smiled back, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Yeah. I just had a long day."

"Mondays suck," Oliver agreed. Crossing the small distance between them, Laurel threw her arms around him and pulled him in for a hug. Oliver was surprised at first but swiftly recovered. He wrapped his arms around Laurel, giving her whatever comfort she was obviously seeking.

"I'm really glad I'm here with you." Her voice sounded muffled against his chest. "I've missed you."

"Are you sure you're okay?" he repeated. She was clutching him as if she was afraid he might slip through her fingers. "Did something happen?"

"My dad and I had a disagreement."

"Nothing unusual about that," Oliver commented. Although Laurel and her father were close, it didn't stop them from butting heads quite frequently. They were both too stubborn for their own good. Their fights were typically about Laurel's relationship with Oliver, since her father didn't approve of him.

"It was different this time."

Oliver frowned, unsure of what to say without having all of the details. "Did you try talking to your mom?" While Quentin Lance was stubborn and more conservative, his wife Dinah was something of a free spirit. They naturally balanced each other out.

Laurel scoffed under her breath. "She's the last person I feel like talking to." She tilted her head back to look up at him. "Let's just forget it. No need to ruin our night with talk of my parents."

"But you're okay?"

She nodded and smiled. This time it did reach her eyes. "I am now."

They filled their plates and went into the living room. Since Laurel was obviously having just as rough a night, Oliver let her pick out the movie. He tried not to groan when she chose The Notebook and snuggled into his side. This was starting to feel more like a date than friends simply hanging out, but he went along with it for her sake. His mind was too preoccupied anyway to really focus on the movie.
About a half hour into it, Oliver stood up. He was feeling antsy and on edge with Laurel clinging to him, which had never really happened before. This was Laurel. Whether they were together or not, they'd always felt comfortable around each other.

"Where are you going?"

"I need another soda." It wasn't a total lie, but Oliver did need some space for a couple of minutes. "You want anything else?"

"No, I'm stuffed."

"Well, you did eat half of the pizza," he joked.

Laurel gasped in mock offense. "Hey, I was starving. I was on my feet all day at CNRI retrieving and organizing case files. What did you do, mister?"

Oliver washed the grease from the pizza off of his hands in the sink before opening the fridge. "I was going over financial reports with Accounting."

"Not exactly strenuous work."

"But it does require a lot of brain power," Oliver defended.

Laurel grinned widely. "You'll be CEO before you know it." As soon as he'd retaken his seat, she was scooting in next to him again. "I'm really proud of you, Ollie. I know you fell behind a little bit because of changing schools so often, but I really think this is the right path for you. All of these changes—you at QC and me heading to law school—it sort of makes you excited for the future, doesn't it?"

Oliver knew that Laurel's sentiments were meant to be encouraging and hopeful, but all they did was make him feel even more stressed. The last thing he needed today was more pressure about the importance of his future. It's all his parents had talked about at lunch that afternoon, and it was really nothing more than a way to avoid talking about an even more pressing issue.

"Are you all right?" Laurel asked when he remained silent. "As cute as you are when you're mopey, you can tell me if something is bothering you. It goes both ways, you know?"

"I'm not mopey," he automatically replied.

"Mopey is your default, Ollie." She stroked his cheek affectionately. "It's part of your smoldering charm."

Oliver managed a small grin. "I do have smoldering charm."

"But you're more than your usual mopey," Laurel pointed out. "What's up?"

"It's about my parents," he started to say, but the rest of the words got stuck in his throat. It wasn't that Oliver didn't think Laurel would be a good listener. Besides Tommy, on the rare occasion that Oliver decided to open up, she was the only other person he could talk to—that is until recently. If Laurel was dealing with her own parental issues, he couldn't dump his on top of her, too. Oliver wasn't even sure if he could fully say what he needed to with Laurel—not without her interpreting it a certain way. He didn't need another headache.

With a dismissive shake of his head and a charming smile, Oliver told Laurel that he didn't want to ruin their night with talk of his parents either. Laurel didn't push the issue, for which he was
thankful. They went back to watching the movie. She sighed at the romantic parts while Oliver lost himself in his troubled thoughts. At some point, Laurel had fallen asleep. Oliver got up and laid her gently across the couch before throwing a blanket over her.

He then walked out onto the balcony and shut the door behind him. The humidity the city had experienced over the weekend had lessened, giving way to a warm breeze. Oliver took his phone out of his pocket and fiddled with it for a few minutes. It was late, and she was probably asleep, too, but the urge to hear her voice was almost overwhelming. With a low curse, Oliver dialed her number and waited with baited breath for her to answer.

"Hello?" Felicity answered after the third ring.

"Oliver closed his eyes, wondering how that one, simple word coming from her soft voice could already bring him such relief. "Hey, it's Oliver. I didn't wake you, did I? I know it's late."

"No. I was actually up reading."

"You're such a nerd," he teased good-naturedly.

"Please tell me you didn't call me this late just to insult me," she shot back in jest.

He couldn't resist pushing her buttons a little more. "What are you wearing?"

"Oliver!" she exclaimed. He could picture the pink flush that was most likely tinging her cheeks. "This also better not be a booty call, or I may just have to go to HR tomorrow."

"It's not," Oliver assured her when he finally stopped laughing. "I didn't get to see you today and I"—he became serious—"needed to talk to you."

"And this couldn't wait until lunch tomorrow?"

"I didn't want to talk about it at work."

"Is everything okay?" Her light tone shifted to concern. "Did things not go well with your parents?"

Oliver had texted her this morning to let her know he wouldn't be able to go with her to the cafeteria, since his parents wanted to have lunch with him. It amazed him how, with very little detail, she was able to hone in on the exact issue that was bothering him. "Not really."

"What happened?"

"It was the usual. They were talking about how great it is that I'm working at QC for the summer and how they can transition me into the company after I complete my last semester in the fall. That is if I don't go to business school first for my MBA. The entire conversation was about me, and yet I didn't get a chance to really say anything."

"I'm sorry," Felicity commented, sympathetic.

"That wasn't even the worst part," he revealed. "I told them I got kicked out of school."

"Oh," she said knowingly. "I can only imagine how well that went over."

"Yeah, it didn't. But that's still not the worst part. It's why I said it."

"I know you were trying to wait for the right time. Although, there probably never is a right time for something like that."
Oliver continued, tensing as he imagined it yet again, "My mom stopped by my desk first before we went to my dad's office. When we got there, his secretary was gone but he wasn't alone."

"What do you mean?"

"He was flirting with some woman who was sitting on his desk. I think she works in Publicity. It looked like they were going over some papers in her hand, but who talks business like that?"

"Did he notice you right away? What did your mom do?"

"I don't know whether I'm more shocked by his behavior or hers. Her face was totally blank when she cleared her throat to get their attention. My dad, of course, moved away from the woman immediately but he was grinning like it was no big deal. Like he hadn't just been caught flirting with a woman half his age by his wife and son."

"What did the woman do?"

"She practically ran out of the office. Then my mom walked over to my dad and kissed him on the cheek. Kissed him on the cheek!" Oliver heatedly exclaimed. "It was like nothing was wrong, and suddenly we were off to lunch and talking about our family's future. I mean, I know my parents aren't the most affectionate couple but I had no idea things were that bad between them."

"Well, maybe it's not that bad. Maybe it was just flirting. It doesn't necessarily mean your dad is having an affair."

"Maybe so, but it couldn't have been the first time if they both could brush an incident like that off without blinking. My mom didn't even look shocked. That's not normal, Felicity."

She sighed. "God, Oliver, I'm sorry."

"They seemed so much happier when Thea and I were younger. They used to tell us stories about how they met, and it seemed like they really did love each other. But they haven't looked that content in a long time, and it makes me wonder why they're still together. Is it the money? Is it the company? Are they settling for each other because of me and Thea? Am I just supposed to pretend, too?" he ranted. "I couldn't stand sitting there today, watching them lie so easily. I wanted a reaction out of them—anything. So I told them I'd been kicked out of school again. At least their anger and disappointment had been real."

"I honestly wish I had an answer for you, Oliver," Felicity tentatively replied, "but I don't know your parents. What I do know is that whatever is going on between them, it's not your fault or your responsibility to fix it. They make their own choices, just like you need to make yours." She added, "I'm sure they love you and Thea very much. How could they not?"

"I guess it's sort of a given considering they're our parents."

"The situation might not be ideal, but it's probably the one certainty you do have. Not everyone is so lucky."

Oliver heard the shift in her voice instantly. The pain she was describing wasn't in reference to him. "Do you mean your father?" he cautiously questioned. It had always been a sensitive topic for her.

"Yeah," she said in a low voice. "I never really had any type of stability as a child. My father and I were more alike, because we were both good at tinkering with computers. But he was always in and out of our lives. The last time he was home, it was not long after my birthday—which he'd missed. He had a delivery of cupcakes sent to my class, and I remember being so excited. Because it meant
that despite everything, he really did care."

"Her voice was calm but heavy. Oliver remained silent and let Felicity tell her story. He already knew Felicity's relationship with her father didn't have a happy ending, but he wondered how such a positive event like the one she was describing could possibly go wrong. He didn't have to wait long for an answer.

"I took one bite and my throat started to close up. That's only ever happened with nuts, which I'm allergic to. It was so unexpected, because they looked like normal cupcakes and you would think my father would know something like that. I was terrified, and it was worse when my teacher couldn't find my EpiPen. The nurse had some for other children, but she couldn't use theirs on me—which my mother later gave them hell for. The paramedics almost didn't make it in time, and my father never did come to the hospital. In fact, I never saw him again after that."

"Felicity," Oliver murmured, horrified that she'd had to endure something so traumatic at such a young age.

"I'm not telling you this out of pity, Oliver, but perspective. I understand that your parents are really hard on you about the future, but at least they want to be a part of it together in some capacity. So maybe keep that in mind," she suggested.

"I'm sorry about your father, Felicity," Oliver said after a moment of silence had passed. "You deserved better."

"Thank you, Oliver," she replied in a soft, genuine voice.

"His eyes drifted to the living room, where Laurel was still fast asleep. "Even if their intentions are good, I don't want to become my parents, Felicity. I don't want to settle for what's easy or expected of me, only to regret it later."

"Then don't. You always have a choice, Oliver."

Oliver turned away from the windows and faced the city once more. "Felicity, what do you say we go to O'Connor's after work tomorrow? It's been a while." It was the one place they could spend time alone together and talk without any interruptions.

"Sure." He could hear the smile in her voice. "It's a date. Well, not a date date. It's a date among friends. Like a platonic, friendly dinner date." She huffed in frustration. "I don't know why I bother speaking sometimes."

He chuckled in response. "I like your babbles. They keep things interesting."

"You're probably the only one who thinks that," she said and yawned at the end.

"It's late. I'll let you get to sleep. Thanks for listening."

"Any time. Goodnight, Oliver."

"Goodnight, Felicity."

Biting her lip, Felicity watched as Oliver opened up his birthday present. They were back in her apartment and sitting on her couch in the living room after having dinner. They'd spent the majority
of their day in Coast City before hitting the road in the late afternoon. Oliver wanted to make sure that Felicity got home at a decent hour, since she had to work the next day.

Thankfully, the tension that had been building between them all weekend finally dissipated. When they were making love, Oliver had finally let Felicity see a glimpse of what was bothering him. Oliver's role in the Bratva was still a mystery to her but based on the way he'd been all tied up in knots yesterday, all of the secrecy was starting to take a toll. It broke Felicity's heart when Oliver said he didn't deserve her, because she could see it in his eyes that he fully believed it. He wasn't a saint—that much she knew—but there was still a light inside of Oliver. Now that they had found each other again, Felicity would fight like hell to make sure it wasn't extinguished by the darkness that must constantly surround him.

This morning, Felicity had woken up first and watched him. Oliver looked so young and peaceful in his sleep. He was the complete opposite of the tortured, pensive man she'd seen yesterday. Felicity had remained snuggled into his side until he'd woken up. Oliver had smiled sleepily upon seeing her and kissed her forehead. And just like that, they were back to normal. For that Felicity was relieved. The last thing she wanted was for them to be at odds before Oliver left again.

"Do you like it?" Felicity asked with a shy smile. "I figured you'd want something small and practical if you're always traveling. It's engraved, too."

Oliver removed the simple but sophisticated stainless steel watch from the case and looked on the bottom. It read: **Oliver, Remember I'm with you every step of the way, you're here in my heart each and every day. With Love, F.S.**

"I know it's kind of cheesy, but I mean every word." She stroked his cheek.

"It's perfect, Felicity." Oliver fastened it on his wrist and leaned in to kiss her lips. "Thank you, sweetheart. I love it."

"It's also useful in counting down the minutes until you can visit again," she teased.

Oliver buried his hand in her hair. "Trust me, I've already started."

Felicity looked down where their hands were interlaced. "I hate when you have to leave."

"Me too." His finger brushed her temple. "But you have the phone I gave you. So we're not completely cut off from each other anymore."

They sat there kissing and cuddling for a few more minutes before Oliver said it was time for him to leave. He got up to use the bathroom while Felicity sunk back into the couch. Whenever Oliver left, it always felt like he was taking a piece of her heart with him. Unfortunately, Felicity was used to the constant ache his absence caused. Oliver was right that the phone he'd given her would be good for them. It was a connection that she craved.

Her eyes traveled to the coffee table where their phones lay side by side. A soft ping alerted to her that Oliver had yet another message. It had been pretty consistent for the last couple of minutes, and she wondered who it was that was so determined to get a hold of him. Glancing between the closed bathroom door and Oliver's phone, Felicity felt her curiosity clawing at her. It was unnerving how desperate she was for any kind of insight into his life outside of the little world they'd created when together. Not to mention that it'd be a total invasion of his privacy.

Yet, the A.R.G.U.S. analyst inside of her demanded answers. Surely one little peek couldn't do any harm, Felicity reasoned. A tiny voice in the back of her mind warned her that this wasn't a good idea,
but she leaned forward to pick up his phone anyway. It wasn't locked, which was good because she could get right in but bad because it meant that Oliver trusted her enough not to feel the need to do it.

Most of his alerts were missed text messages. There were a few unknown numbers, but the majority were from someone named Dig. He—she assumed it was a he—wanted to know when Oliver would be back from Coast City. There were some "developments" that they needed to discuss. That made Felicity pause. Oliver was always stressing how important it was that they stay safe and not raise suspicion from both their respective organizations. However, he told this Dig person exactly where he'd be this weekend. Oliver must really trust him, she reasoned, if he felt comfortable giving him their location.

Thinking of trust, Felicity felt a wave of guilt hit her. Who was she kidding? Going through his phone was wrong. If she wanted to know something about Oliver, she should ask him. It was as simple as that. Felicity went to put the phone back on the coffee table when it pinged again. The name that popped up on the screen made Felicity pause. Isabel. Why was that name so familiar?

Ignoring the voice of reason screaming for her to stop while she still could, Felicity opened up the message.

Isabel: Going to be at the next meeting. Maybe we can have a nightcap after…my bed misses you.

Felicity swallowed the bile rising in her throat. Before she could absorb the message, another one followed.

Isabel: I'll even do that thing you like…

If the words didn't make Felicity want to puke, then the lingerie-clad picture that accompanied it certainly did. Now she knew why the name seemed so familiar. Isabel was the woman who'd been with Oliver at the casino in Russia. The one Felicity had flat out questioned him about, and he'd told her meant nothing to him. Now that Felicity thought about it, she'd asked Oliver if Isabel was his girlfriend. He'd said no, but that obviously hadn't stopped him from sleeping with her.

Felicity closed the message and dropped the phone on the table as if it had burned her. There had to be a reasonable explanation for this. Maybe Oliver had been sleeping with Isabel before but wasn't anymore—not that it made Felicity feel that much better. Because it still meant that at one point he was actually sleeping with that stuck-up bitch with the model-esque looks. They were intimate enough for her to know "that thing he liked." And what exactly did Oliver do for her in return? Felicity shuddered at the very thought.

The little bit Oliver had told Felicity about his life since the accident painted a bleak picture. He described his five years away as hell, and Felicity naturally—and probably naively—had overlooked the prospect of there being other women in his life. But if Oliver had ended his involvement with Isabel, then why was she sending racy pictures of herself? Was this the real reason why he'd been acting weird all weekend and pushing her away? The timing was suspect, and Felicity didn't believe
She didn't get the chance to ponder it much further when the bathroom door opened. Oliver walked back into the living room to retrieve his phone before putting on his leather coat. "You okay?"

"Huh?"

"You look pale," Oliver pointed out, concerned. "Are you tired?"

"Um, no," Felicity absently mumbled as she tried to set her head straight. Should she confront him now or give herself some time to calm down? If only she could think clearly.

"Still, you should get to bed early. You're still healing." He held out his hand to pull her up from the couch. For a brief second, Felicity hesitated. Oliver frowned but didn't say anything when she let him take her hand and followed him to the door. "Be careful out there, okay? No more risky missions if you can avoid them." His cupped her neck and let his thumb stroke the underside of her jaw. "I don't know what I'd do if something ever happened to you."

Felicity stared up into his bright, smoldering blue eyes. Oliver loved her. There was not much she could be sure of in this world, but she could be sure of that. He wouldn't be constantly worried about her safety and risking his own life to see her if he didn't. Leaning up, Felicity lightly brushed her lips against his. "I love you," she declared with as much fervor as she could muster. Felicity looked at Oliver expectantly, waiting for him to say it back. She needed him to say it back and silence the doubts that were growing louder in her mind.

"I'll call you soon," was all he said in return. Oliver kissed her lips and her forehead one last time. The ache Felicity felt watching him walk away was worse than ever before. He wasn't taking a piece of her heart with him this time. No, it stayed with her—heavy and on the verge of shattering.
Beautiful Liar

Chapter Notes

Wow, what a weekend! I don’t know about you guys, but I'm still trying to process all of the goodness from SDCC and the vexing new boyfriend drama (it is a struggle to remain chill, but I'm refusing to freak out until the episode airs). The cast has been killing it lately! Thanks for your comments and kudos last chapter. I hope you enjoy this next one, although I'll understand if you're flipping over more metaphorical tables afterward. As I said last time, Olicity has a lot to work through and this arc is really important in defining their relationship going forward. You'll see Felicity processing and facing it head on this chapter. Leave a comment and let me know what you think!

May 21, 2012

Isabel Rochev was more than some leggy model lookalike with a bad attitude. Clicking through her profile in the A.R.G.U.S. database, Felicity read her entire life story. Isabel had practically grown up as Bratva royalty. She'd been born in Moscow to Kuzma Ivanov, who was rumored to be the Sovietnik, the right-hand man and advisor, to the Bratva head. At the age of nine, her father was killed in a shootout from a deal gone wrong. Since her mother had died in childbirth, Isabel was then adopted by the Rochevs—a Russian-American family with influential ties in the Bratva.

After attending private school, Isabel went on to college to study business. She was hired by Stellmoor International not long after graduation and eventually worked her way up to become Vice President of Acquisitions of the company's Russian subsidiaries. Isabel had been living in Moscow ever since. Though it wasn't confirmed, Isabel was suspected of using her influence at Stellmoor to run side operations that would benefit the Bratva. There were numerous pictures of her attending galas in which Anatoly Knyazev was present. With Oliver pretending to be Anatoly's nephew, it made sense that he would have to work closely with Isabel. For how long, Felicity couldn't know but it must've been years.

Felicity thought back to that night in the casino. Isabel had been right behind Oliver when he'd first showed up. She'd even called him "darling." If Oliver hadn't run into Felicity, would he have spent the night with Isabel instead? Despite swearing that Isabel was nothing to him, Oliver still had to play a part. How far was he willing to take it? That thought alone turned her stomach.

Felicity's mind ran rampant with different scenarios. Maybe Oliver did love her, but what if he was still sleeping with Isabel to ensure that no one caught on to his visits to Starling? Oliver had been acting weird and distant all weekend with Felicity. It couldn't just be a coincidence that Isabel was sending him flirty texts and racy pictures around the same time. It would explain why Oliver had been dodging her every time she'd tried to be intimate with him. It would also explain why he'd felt so undeserving of her while they were making love.

Love, Felicity thought. Did Oliver love her? He had five years ago, but so much had changed since then. Felicity could no longer deny the differences between this Oliver and the one she'd lost. It made her wonder who she really loved. Was she in love with Oliver now, or was it the memory of who he
used to be? Was Oliver facing the same dilemma? Felicity questioned if his visits to Starling were really because he wanted to see her or if they were nothing more than a desperate attempt for him to recapture a piece of his past. A way to feel better about himself in spite of the dark life he'd chosen.

Felicity's instinct was to believe that Oliver loved her. The way he looked at her, touched her, and kissed her with equal parts passion and tenderness often left her breathless. Yes, the sex was amazing. It had always been that way between them, but it wasn't just physical. When they made love, it felt like they were connected in every way possible. Like Oliver could see into her soul and she into his, and nothing else mattered. They were utterly vulnerable in many ways, and yet somehow they were able to draw strength from each other. At least that's how Felicity had felt.

Regardless of all the intense intimate moments they'd shared, there was one fact that Felicity couldn't deny. Oliver had never said he loved her. It wasn't only last night when they'd said good-bye. Felicity replayed every memory and declaration in her head and even though Oliver may have alluded to his feelings for her, he never said it directly. She'd been so swept up in her own feelings and the excitement of having him back in her life that she'd automatically assumed that he felt the same way. The realization that he might not was devastating.

"Hey, Felicity, I've got the latest forensic reports from the recent safe house raid. Do you think you can create some kind of algorithm to pinpoint anomalies for each attack site?" Barry questioned.

"Hey, you okay? You look like someone kicked your puppy or something."

Felicity gave herself a mental shake. As badly as she wished she was home in bed, buried under her covers, she had a job to do. A job that required her full concentration. Lives literally depended on it. "Uh, yeah. I'm fine. I just haven't reached my ideal level of caffeine to function this early on a Monday."

Barry chuckled. "I hear ya. I could grab you a cup if you want."

"No, it's okay. I can get it myself."

"It's no trouble. I'll be back in a flash."

Felicity nodded at the reports. "Why do you need me to search for anomalies?"

"Oh, uh, I've been thinking that maybe we've been going about this the wrong way. We've been trying to predict the next likely attack based on the similarities of each incident. It might be worth noting some of the differences. There could be a pattern to what we're not seeing, if that makes sense."

"Actually, I think that's a great idea." Felicity placed them on the one tidy area of her desk.

"Cool. What's up with the cold fish?"

"Huh?" she replied, confused.

Barry motioned to her computer. "Isabel Rochev's profile. I swear she looks like one of the most miserable people on the planet."

Felicity shook her head and quickly clicked out of it. "Oh, it's nothing. I just wanted to recheck some of the details from our Moscow mission."

"You think it's connected to the A.R.G.U.S. attacks?"

"Not necessarily. Something about it felt hinky to me. Thought I'd check it out. It was nothing,
though."

"Well, if you need help, let me know," Barry offered. "I'll get you that coffee."

Felicity smiled at him. Barry really was the sweetest. She'd thought he was cute the first time she met him. With his casual sneakers and jeans and boyish grin, Barry wasn't at all how she'd pictured an A.R.G.U.S. agent to look. Felicity could admit now that she had a small crush on him those first few months but dating co-workers, especially in their line of work, was frowned upon. It probably would've only ended in heartbreak anyway, and Felicity would've lost out on a great friend. She'd never truly been able to open her heart to anyone—not since Oliver.

Felicity instantly regretted going down that line of thinking. Grabbing one of the forensic reports, she decided to bury herself in her work. It was the only thing that could help her now. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Barry place the cup of coffee on her desk. Felicity muttered a quick "thanks" and took a large gulp. It was going to be a long day.

"You know, when I asked if you wanted to get lunch, I assumed you'd actually eat."

Felicity, who had been playing with a French fry, looked up at her best friend. "What?"

"Okay, tell me what's wrong," Sara demanded.

"Nothing's wrong," Felicity lied. She'd been working all morning designing a program to analyze the forensic reports that Barry had given her. When Sara had called and asked if she'd like to meet at the Big Belly Burger not far from her office, Felicity had immediately agreed. They'd both been busy lately and were due for some girl time. Plus, Felicity was beginning to feel like a zombie after the amount of coding she'd completed.

Sara smiled, unconvinced. "Oh please, you've got that crinkle between your eyebrows. Something is up. Either you tell me willingly or I might just have to take you down to the station."

Felicity playfully narrowed her eyes and pointed at her. "You have absolutely no grounds to bring me in, Officer Lance. Don't make me call my lawyer."

"I have reasonable suspicion that you are violating Best Friend Code 353, which states that if you won't tell me what's wrong I can employ any and all measures to make you spill your guts."

Laughing, the blonde shook her head. "Wow. Nice manipulation of the law there."

Sara shrugged. "Before I was a cop, I had the 'bad girl' thing down to a science. But seriously, what's up with you?"

Felicity paused, trying to decide what to tell her. She obviously couldn't tell Sara the whole truth. However, this thing with Oliver had her all wound up in knots. It would be nice to get another woman's perspective. "Okay," Felicity sighed. "There is something I have to tell you. Do you remember that business trip I went on in January?"

"The one to London? Yeah."

"Well, I actually met someone while I was there."

Sara's eyes lit up. "Seriously? You met a guy in London and you didn't tell me!" she lightly scolded. "What's he like? What's his name? Does he live there permanently or—"
Felicity held up her hand to halt her questions. "He does live there, but he also travels a lot. We've been... we've been kind of seeing each other on and off since then."

"So you're dating?"

It felt strange putting a label on what she and Oliver were doing exactly but for the purpose of this conversation, it fit. "Yes, I guess you could say that."

Sara leaned in and said more quietly, "Are you sleeping with him?"

Felicity felt herself turning red. "Sara," she chided.

The blonde's eyes were as big as saucers. "Oh my God, you are!" she exclaimed. "Holy crap. It must be serious. It's about time! You have to tell me everything."

"Look, that's not what's important. Something happened yesterday that has me questioning everything."

"Which I want to hear all about, but I'm not sure I'll be able to help if I don't know anything about this guy."

Sara had a point there, unfortunately. Reworking the details, Felicity told Sara as much as she could about Oliver (who she renamed Aaron) and the time they'd spent together. Of course Sara wanted even more detail than Felicity was giving, but she made her best friend understand that this relationship was new and she didn't want to reveal too much. Finally, Felicity got to the part about looking at Oliver's phone and finding Isabel's message.

"Wow, Felicity, I didn't think you had it in you to snoop," Sara commented.

"I know I shouldn't have done it," Felicity huffed, "but he can be really private sometimes and I was curious. I should've known it would come back to bite me in the ass."

"If you really want answers, all I need is his last name to do a background check."

"That won't be necessary."

Sara held up her hands. "I'm just putting the offer out there. But Aaron told you before that this woman meant nothing to him?"

"Yeah, and now I don't know what to think. I mean, I do think he cares about me. But we also never said that we were exclusive. Can I really be mad at him?"

"Hell yes you can," Sara answered. "If you care about him and he seems to care about you—whether or not you're official—it doesn't give him the right to string you along. Lying is lying."

"I don't exactly know if he still is hooking up with her. He could've ended it," Felicity reasoned. "But if he'd been upfront about it, why is this woman sending him pictures of herself?"

"It's one of two options: either he's a liar or she's a psycho who can't take no for an answer," Sara declared. "Whatever the reason, you need to confront him about this."

"I don't know when he'll be in town again," Felicity lamented. "I'd like to have this conversation with him face to face." She wanted to look into Oliver's eyes when she questioned him. She needed to see his reaction for herself.

"If he can't meet up with you soon, then I say screw it. Confront him over the phone. You're not
going to let this gnaw away at you while you wait for him to clear his schedule," Sara advised. "You owe it to yourself to get the truth."

Felicity knew Sara was right. Her best friend wasn't saying anything she hadn't already thought about, but it helped to have that support behind her. "I'll call him tonight," Felicity decided.

"Good."

Biting her lip, Felicity couldn't help but picture the worst-case scenario. "Sara, what if he's still going with that woman?"

"Then he doesn't deserve you." Sara placed her hand over Felicity's. "I'll also be more than happy to kick his ass for you."

Felicity managed a small smile. "Not if I kick his first."

Sara grinned proudly. "That a girl. Now eat your burger. Don't want to lose that great ass of yours. How else will you make that boy suffer?"

"Good point," Felicity laughed. Although she was dreading calling Oliver tonight, opening up to her best friend and joking around helped to lessen the burden. There was nothing worse than feeling like she was alone.

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**June 22, 2007**

"Ah, boom! Come to mama!" Felicity cheered as she reached across the table to collect the small pile of poker chips.

*Tommy cursed and threw down his cards. "Unbelievable."

"Wow, Felicity, you are on fire," Thea complimented, impressed. "Although I wouldn't expect anything less from a Vegas girl."

*Grinning in triumph, Felicity gleefully replied, "Another round of poker anyone?"

*Tommy looked to Oliver, who also appeared glum by yet another loss. "Why did I invite her over again?"

"Because Thea was also spending the night, and you decided that it would be fun if we had a sibling slumber party," Felicity answered. She shook her head, playfully adding, "And you say I'm the teenager."

At first, Felicity had been hesitant. The last time she'd been to an actual sleepover had been in the fifth grade, and that was only with girls. Not that staying over in her stepbrother's loft was a big deal. She'd visited plenty of times, and there was a guestroom. It wasn't so much being around Tommy all night that got her nervous but being around Oliver. They already were spending a lot of time together, both at work and outside of it. On days they didn't see each other, they would text constantly. There was also Oliver's late-night call days ago.

Despite all that, there was something intimate about staying the night over someone's house—especially when that someone was none other than the handsomely charming Oliver Queen. Felicity wasn't delusional enough to believe anything would happen between them. They were just friends, after all. But the idea of possibly seeing Oliver shuffling around in his pajamas, and he in hers, looking all comfy yet sexy before bed brought on a major case of the butterflies. Knowing that she
was being ridiculous, Felicity dismissed her overactive hormones and told Tommy she'd come. There were way too many things on her mind this week, and she needed a reprieve. Plus, any excuse not to stay at the manor was welcomed.

They'd ordered pizza earlier and had gotten in a few games of foosball. The two pairs of siblings had faced off. Unfortunately for Tommy, foosball wasn't Felicity's strong suit. That's when she'd suggested poker; she was good at almost any game involving cards. Felicity had gone easy on them all at first before her wins became more frequent. Now she was the one with the huge pile of chips.

"To be fair, I've never had a sibling," Tommy defended. "And the only slumber parties I've been to were either with Oliver as kids or some very attractive supermodels. I remember this one time—"

"I think they get the picture, Tommy," Oliver cut in and nodded to Thea.

The young brunette scoffed. "Oh please. I know all about both of your reputations. I'm not five."

Oliver narrowed his eyes at his baby sister but kept quiet. Probably because there was no way to counter what she was saying. Felicity bit back a smile. Thea had been holding her own all night with those two, which made sense since she'd known them her whole life. Felicity hoped that one day she'd be completely at ease in her new role, too.

"Kids today," Tommy sighed and shook his head. "No respect."

Thea folded her arms indignantly. "I am not a kid. I am practically a teenager."

"Yeah, and she has the fake nose ring to prove it," Oliver joked, sharing a smirk with his best friend.

Thea automatically touched it to make sure it was properly in place. After seeing Felicity's weeks ago, Thea had indeed begged her mother to let her get one. Oliver had been proven right when Moira refused, which is when Thea had taken Felicity's advice and bought a fake one. Felicity hadn't stepped foot in the Queen mansion since then, and part of the reason was to avoid Moira's wrath. She was sure the distinguished matriarch was none too happy with her young daughter sporting something so "tasteless."

Felicity shuffled the deck and was about to deal the cards when Oliver halted her. "No more poker for me. If I don't quit now, I'll probably lose my shirt."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Felicity teased before she could even think about what she was saying.

Oliver pressed his lips together, clearly trying not to smile. Although his eyes told a completely different story, and she involuntarily flushed. Felicity had never actually seen Oliver shirtless, but she had a very vivid imagination. The way his white t-shirt clung to him even now hinted at the layers of defined, hard muscle underneath.

"That's an entirely different game," he replied. His gaze was filled with mirth.

Tommy chuckled. "And way more fun. When you're old enough and preferably not with family," he swiftly added and sent both Thea and Felicity stern looks.

"You're getting really good at that big-brother glare, Tommy," Thea told him.

"Thanks. I've been practicing."

"Anyway, I'm gonna spare my eyes and pass on that," Thea declared and stood up. "In fact, I'm
getting kind of tired. Ollie, are you sure it's okay if I take your room?"

Oliver nodded. "Sure. I'll be fine on the couch."

After cleaning up the cards, poker chips, and plates from their pizza, they all went their separate ways to get ready for bed. Tommy's room and the guest room shared a bathroom, and he was nice enough to let Felicity use it first. The guest room was plain with mauve-colored walls, a simple queen-sized bed, dresser, and nightstand. There was also a small closet with sliding doors. Felicity dug through her small duffel bag to grab her pajama shorts and tank top. She changed before getting into bed. The sheets were cold, especially since Tommy and Oliver had the AC blasting. The humidity in the air these last few nights had been wicked.

Despite her tiredness from a long week, Felicity only managed to sleep for a half hour before she was wide awake. Her mind drifted to the multiple projects she was working on at QC and her own personal one for the IT competition she'd be entering in the fall. Felicity was still working tirelessly through the kinks of her entry. She'd been up late every night this week coding. When it became obvious that she wasn't going to fall back asleep anytime soon, Felicity threw back the covers, grabbed her MIT sweatshirt, and put her hair up in a messy bun. The only thing that would help right now is a warm glass of milk.

As she descended the stairs, Felicity heard the soft sound of voices. She thought it was Tommy and Oliver talking until she noticed the flashing glare of the TV. Felicity looked to the couch, which had a couple of sheets on top for a makeshift bed, and saw that it was empty. She continued into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator to grab the milk.

"Can't sleep?"

Felicity let out a low yelp upon shutting the door and seeing Oliver on the other side. If it wasn't for his quick reflexes, the milk that slipped from her hands would've splattered on the floor. She put her hand to her heart. "Oh my God, Oliver, you scared the crap out of me."

He shrugged. "Sorry."

"Where did you even come from?" He gestured to the bathroom off to the side. "Oh," Felicity mumbled, feeling sheepish. A second later, she felt her face flush for an entirely different reason. Her lack of heels made her level with Oliver's chest. His chest which was completely shirtless. Felicity had never been close to anyone so fit. Then again, the only person she could really compare him to was Cooper. Even that wasn't much of a comparison. Oliver was Greek god level hot while Cooper had resembled more of a cute scarecrow.

"You okay?" Oliver questioned at her speechlessness. He glanced at the milk in his hands. "Thirsty?"

Felicity cleared her throat and gave herself a mental shake. Get it together, Smoak, she scolded. "Um, I couldn't sleep." Thankfully, her voice actually sounded normal—unlike the rest of her body that was going haywire. She'd never seen Oliver in sweatpants and damn, he looked good. Focus. "Warm milk usually helps."

Oliver handed her the milk before reaching into the cupboard to get her a glass. He was silent as she poured the milk and placed the glass in the microwave. All the while, she felt his eyes following her.
Unable to take the charged silence, she asked, "I gather you couldn't sleep either. What were you watching?"

"There's a Friday Night Lights marathon on."

"Is that the one about football?"

"Sort of. There's a lot more going on."

"I haven't really watched it but considering how I love sexy shirtless men, I probably should." Her eyes widened at the implication. "And by men I mean Taylor Kitsch. He's got that tall, broody bad boy thing going on." She got another eyeful of Oliver, who was grinning in that amused way of his, and was swift to clarify, "That's not to say that I'm into bad boys—or just guys who are tall and broody. My ex-boyfriend Cooper wasn't really that tall. He wasn't really broody either. Actually, he was kind of cocky. Brilliant but cocky. Not a good combination." She was saved by the beeping sound of the microwave.

"Come on," Oliver said once she'd grabbed her milk. He led her over to the couch and turned off the TV. "Why don't you tell me what's bothering you?"

Felicity sat down next to him and lifted her feet on the couch. "It's really nothing. Just things in my head."

"Well, something has had you stressed out more than usual for most of the week." She stared at him quizzically and he elaborated, "Felicity, we're friends. I pay attention. You're going to have a permanent wrinkle between your eyebrows if you keep crinkling it like that."

Her hand automatically went to the exact spot he was referring to, and she silently cursed that he was right. The crinkle was there even now. With a sigh, Felicity admitted, "Okay, yes. I've been more stressed than usual lately. There's this National Information Technology competition in the fall, and I've been working on my entry for it. I have to complete a prospectus to be reviewed by a few professors before I can seriously move forward—although I've already started some of the coding. It's due by the end of next week, and it can't be anything less than perfect."

"This might be a stupid question, but is there anything I can do to help?"

"Short of learning code and force feeding me junk food and Red Bull to keep me awake, probably not," Felicity replied. "But thanks anyway. The only reason I'm not still holed up in my room is because I decided to give myself a break tonight."

"Well, I'm glad you did. It is the summer. You should be having fun and relaxing when you can."

Oliver reached for her legs and draped them over his lap, so she could spread out and get more comfortable.

Felicity nearly choked on her milk upon feeling his large, strong hands against her bare skin. Her entire body thrummed as his fingers gently ran up and down the sides of her calves. It was a casual, friendly gesture that she was trying her hardest not to read too much into.

"Besides," he added, "I know whatever you come up with will be great. You've already impressed so many people at QC."

"Really?" Her interest piqued. "What have you heard?"

"I'm pretty sure you're at the top of Walter's recruitment list for when you graduate."
"Good to know."

Felicity placed the glass of milk on the side table behind her and sunk back into the couch. While Oliver's touch set her nerves ablaze, it was also incredibly soothing.

"And not only are you a genius, but you're also extremely savvy. Remind me to bring you to my next poker night with the guys. I could use your card counting skills."

"Oliver, are you accusing me of cheating?" Felicity replied, feigning offense.

"Oh, I'm not accusing you. I know for a fact you were counting cards," Oliver declared.

"And how is that?"

"Like I said, I pay attention. You get this sharp look in your pretty eyes when you're working out a problem."

Felicity felt the breath whoosh out of her, but Oliver wasn't looking at her. His focus remained on her legs and the invisible patterns he was drawing into her skin. "You didn't say anything," she mumbled. If she spoke any louder, Felicity feared she would hear the underlying quiver in her voice.

Oliver shrugged and continued his ministrations. "Maybe I wanted you to win."

She didn't ask why. Something told her that if she did, the answer might shatter the delicate balance they'd finally reached in their friendship. Felicity also knew that she should probably get up and go back to the guest room right now. She shouldn't be lying down on Oliver's makeshift bed and enjoying his touch as much as she was. She shouldn't be fantasizing about reaching out in return to stroke the hard lines of his torso. But it just felt so damn good when she was with him.

Oliver turned the TV on in the silence that followed with the volume on low. She only watched for a few minutes before her eyes had shut. The gentle tug of sleepiness combined with his touch were lulling her. Felicity wasn't sure how much time had passed before she'd drifted off. Later, she was vaguely aware of Oliver lifting her and carrying her up the stairs. He placed her in bed and drew the covers over her. A warm, light pressure on her forehead followed. It was so quick that Felicity was sure that she'd dreamed it.

Felicity was a bundle of nerves as she stared at the phone Oliver had given her. All day she'd been thinking about what she wanted to say. She'd actually received a few texts from Oliver that afternoon. He said that he missed her and asked if she was feeling okay. Normally, receiving such messages from him would've made her giddy and warmed her heart. Instead, they only increased her confusion and anxiety.

Taking a deep breath, Felicity picked up the phone. She couldn't keep stalling. Sara was right that she needed to confront Oliver. If she put it off any longer, she'd go crazy. Felicity had already let her mind spin out of control today, wondering if Oliver had attended his mysterious meeting with Isabel. Did they go back to her place afterward? Was she doing that "thing he liked" right now? The thought made Felicity sick.

Before she could chicken out, Felicity hit the only number programmed into the phone and waited for him to answer. It only took a few rings before she heard his voice. Felicity closed her eyes, wishing that it was butterflies in her stomach instead of knots right now. The whole point of Oliver giving her the phone was so they could stay connected, and yet she hadn't felt this distant from him since she thought he was dead.

"Hey, sweetheart," he greeted in that deep, sexy voice of his. Oliver sounded happy to hear from her, which gutted Felicity even more. "You okay? I tried texting you earlier."
"I had a busy day at work," she answered. "What about you? Anything going on?"

"Just the usual."

"The usual being arms deals, smuggling, and taking down card counters in casinos?" she tried to joke. Felicity was wound so tight, her muscles ached.

Oliver chuckled, though it was a little strained. "You could say that. I'm glad you called. I needed to hear your voice."

"Uncle Anatoly giving you a hard time?"

"Not exactly."

Felicity closed her eyes, steeling herself. "There was someone else you work with a lot, right? Isabel I think it was."

There was a brief pause before he spoke again. "Only when it's necessary."

"Like that night in Moscow. She was your date."

"Just for appearance's sake."

"She called you 'darling.' And if she's as influential in the Bratva as you said she is, then you must cross paths pretty often. Tell me, is she usually your date when you meet up with the other mobsters to go over your shady dealings or is it only on special occasions?" It was impossible the hide the hurt and sarcasm any longer. The tumult of emotions she'd been suppressing all day were bubbling to the surface.

"Felicity, why are you suddenly so interested in Isabel?" The confusion was evident in his voice. "Are you sure everything is okay?"

"Actually, no it's not. Are you sleeping with Isabel?" Felicity asked outright. There really was no way to ease into this conversation, and she wanted answers. She started pacing the length of the living room.

"What?" Oliver questioned back, sounding genuinely incredulous. "No."

"Have you slept with her in the past?"

"Felicity, where is this coming from?"

"That's not an answer, Oliver."

"Felicity," he sternly responded.

If he was going to play dumb, then fine. She'd refresh his memory. "I'm all out of skanky lingerie, so it's not like I can send you any pictures of myself when you're away. But maybe you should tell me that thing you like that Isabel is so willing to do for you. That way I'll know next time you pop by Starling for a quick fuck."

Oliver let out a low curse. "You went through my phone." It wasn't a question but a statement. "Felicity, how could you do that?"

"Look, Oliver, spare me the lecture about what an invasion of privacy it was. I know it was wrong and that I shouldn't have done it, but it doesn't change what I saw."
"Felicity, I swear it's not what you think."

"Unless you're thinking that I'm thinking you're sleeping with her, because why else would she be texting you half-naked pictures and talking about your mystery sex fetish?"

"I know you're upset."

"I am way beyond upset, Oliver," Felicity exclaimed.

"Felicity, I told you I'm not sleeping with her. You have to believe me."

"I believe the word you're leaving out is anymore. Although that's become questionable considering your strange behavior last weekend. I mean, why bother whisking me away on a romantic weekend if you're going to spend the entire time pulling away from me? I had to practically strip down and throw myself at you to get you to make love to me, which I am now regretting because obviously I was a total fool."

"Felicity—"

"Not to mention that you said you don't deserve me, which obviously means you were feeling guilty about something. Then the next day you're sexting with Isabel, and only an idiot would think that's a coincidence."

"I wasn't sexting with her," he denied.

Felicity, however, wasn't finished. "And I since I am anything but an idiot, that leaves only one of two logical scenarios: either you're lying to me about your relationship with her or you're using me and what we used to have to recapture some semblance of your former self."

"That's ridiculous. Felicity, you know me."

"Don't you see, Oliver, that's just it. I don't know you. Not anymore," she explained, fighting back tears. "I was so overwhelmingly caught up in the fact that I have you back that I've been ignoring everything else. It's been almost five years, Oliver. We're different people who lead very different lives. All I really know for sure is that seventeen-year-old me once fell in love with twenty-two-year-old you, and years later we still have great sex. The rest is a total mystery, and I've been so desperate to reconnect with you—to get even the smallest glimpse into your life now—that I actually resorted to snooping through your phone."

Oliver was completely silent. Felicity wasn't sure if she was glad he was listening to her or upset that he wasn't trying to argue. There was only one more thing she had to say, and his response could either heal her or break her completely. "You've never said you still love me," she said more softly.

His response was just as quiet. "What?"

"You never tell me that you love me, Oliver." Her voice shook, betraying her pain. "I realized it today. Whenever I say it to you, you either kiss me or say something else to get around it."

"Felicity..."

"How am I supposed to trust you at all when you can't even say the words?"

"Felicity, I..."

A few tears escaped as she waited for him to respond. A sob was building in the base of her throat,
but Felicity bit her lip to keep quiet. The only sound over the phone was of their low, labored breathing. Unable to take the silence after another minute passed, she spoke and her voice broke. "Oliver, do you love me?"

"I'm sorry," he breathed, sounding tortured. "I can't..."

Although he couldn't see her, Felicity nodded and swallowed the lump in her throat. He truly was lost to her. There was only one thing left to do. "Good-bye, Oliver," she whispered and cut the call.

Felicity dropped the phone on the coffee table and sunk down on the couch. Sitting forward, she placed her head in her hands and let the tears she'd been keeping at bay flow freely. She didn't know how it was possible, but her heart felt both heavy and empty. To finally get Oliver back only to learn that she'd never really had him at all brought on a pain so acute it was almost crippling. It made her wish she'd never gone to Moscow. Never learned that Oliver was alive. Never gave herself to him so willingly. The harsh truth was that Felicity had been closer to Oliver when he was dead, and now the memory of what they used to be was also gone forever.
Holy frack, you guys! I was so blown away by your amazing comments and kudos last chapter. Thank you all so much for your praise and feedback! I was relieved that the majority of you didn't automatically hate Oliver and want to hear his side of things. But it's also understandable why some of you do, because Felicity laid her heart on the line and is really hurting now. You'll see more of the fallout this chapter, and I hope you'll take the time to let me know what you think.

Also, I recently joined Tumblr (bindy417.tumblr.com) if you'd like to check it out. My ask box is open if you guys have questions (nothing too spoilery!). Knowing how much you guys love the flashbacks, I actually posted a little preview photo of FB Olicity there if you'd like to check it out.

May 22, 2012

Two hours of sleep. That was all Felicity was operating on. After her talk with Oliver last night, she'd ended up in bed crying. Sobs wracked her entire body as she clung to her pillow like a lifeline. Eventually she'd drifted off to sleep, but she was restless and tossed and turned the entire time. Felicity, the exhaustion overwhelming her, had barely been able to open her eyes when her alarm beeped. She probably should've taken a sick day. With the terrible way she was feeling, it was certainly warranted.

Although a part of her wanted nothing more than to curl up under her blankets and never come out, the other part of her refused to let Oliver dictate her life any longer. She'd already spent close to five years thinking he was dead and mourning his loss. These last five months were a different kind of torture. They were filled with love, hope, and longing—which turned out to be the biggest lie of all.

Sitting at her desk with a pounding headache, Felicity took a couple of Tylenol as she desperately tried to focus on her work. The team had a meeting this morning, and she'd tried her best to appear normal. Despite her efforts, she got the feeling the others had noticed that something was off with her—though they had the decency not to push her on it. Mei did try to catch her eye at one point, but Felicity pretended to be absorbed in the file in front of her.

The anguish was the worst in the quiet moments. Her mind would automatically drift to Oliver. His "I can't" would echo in her head, and her heart would clench. Her breaths would become short and labored, and she'd have to close her eyes and count backwards from ten to regain control. She'd just calmed herself from another episode when Waller's assistant called. Waller wanted to see Felicity in her office, and the thought of facing her in her current state sent Felicity into another tailspin.

Ten, nine, eight, she began to count as she walked toward the elevators. Felicity had counted backwards four more times before she finally reached Waller's office. Waller's assistant nodded upon seeing her and told her to go on in. With another deep breath, Felicity crossed the threshold. Her stress level was at an all-time high, but she could not let Waller see that. She'd pounce on that kind of weakness. Felicity promised herself that she'd go home and cry into a pint of mint chip ice cream...
later, just as long as she made it through this impromptu meeting unscathed.

"Miss Smoak," Waller greeted in a bland voice without looking up. She was reading a file in her hands. "Take a seat."

Felicity did as instructed and folded her hands in her lap. She squeezed them tightly as she braced herself for whatever Waller was going to lay on her. Normally, it was Lyla who reported to Waller on a regular basis. Felicity very rarely had contact with her, and that was the way she preferred it.

"Is everything all right, Sir?" Felicity questioned. Thankfully, her voice sounded relatively calm despite her frayed nerves.

"As I'm sure you're aware, the world is becoming a far more dangerous place. Our main concern at A.R.G.U.S. is finding out who is attacking our strongholds and why. From what Agent Michaels tells me, you're working some leads but no closer to determining the culprit."

"I've been creating programs with special algorithms to identify any patterns or strange anomalies from the forensic reports Barry completed."

"And what are the results?"

Felicity shifted in her seat. "The data is still being sorted, but I should have a full report within a day or two."

"I would like to remind you, Miss Smoak, that every day we don't have answers is another day we risk losing more of our agents and resources."

"Yes, Sir, I understand," Felicity replied. "I'm working as fast as I can."

Waller leaned forward in her seat. "Good. We need answers. Until then, we also need to ensure that our agency remains a priority to our own government. With so many bunkers depleted, it requires more funding. Fortunately for us, Ray Palmer has friends in many high places. He's agreed to host a dinner tonight with some officials who have pull."

"Well, that's nice of him..." Felicity trailed off, not knowing what else to say. She didn't understand what exactly any of this had to do with her.

"I suggested that it might be helpful to take along one of our operatives. Someone who is both intelligent and innovative. Someone whose expertise far surpass anyone else's in their field and is living proof that this organization is already looking to the future," Waller explained.

Felicity's eyes widened at Waller's implication. All this time she'd thought Waller hated her. Maybe that was still true, but Felicity could care less about that. All Felicity really wanted was to be respected for her skills and acknowledged for her contributions to the organization. Many of the database algorithms and security protocols put in place were Felicity's creation. She might not be the best field agent, but she'd proven far more useful in other ways.

Waller's smile was cold. "Of course I suggested that Mr. Palmer take Curtis Holt with him. His tech designs have truly been unparalleled. These government officials get a kick out of anything resembling a gadget straight out of a Bond movie."

Felicity instantly deflated as she attempted to keep a straight face. As if she wasn't already feeling terrible today, Waller just had to plunge the knife in and twist. "Curtis is brilliant," Felicity agreed. "But with all due respect, Sir, I'm not sure why you needed to see me then."
"I called you in here, Miss Smoak, because although I suggested Mr. Holt be Mr. Palmer's guest, he specifically requested you instead."

Felicity couldn't help but fidget under Waller's scrutinizing gaze. "Oh," was all she managed to say.

"I've agreed to let you accompany him. It seems he's taken a liking to you, and we very much value his collaboration with our efforts," she stated. "However, I want to be clear when I say that you will be attending this dinner with him in nothing more than a professional capacity. In these dangerous times, we can't afford unnecessary distractions."

"Sir, there is nothing going on with Ra—Mr. Palmer and myself," Felicity assured her. "We've been nothing but professional."

"I'm glad to hear it," Waller said, although her expression remained stoic. "Feelings are a weakness, Miss Smoak. There are people in this world who deal only in extremes. It'd be naïve to think that anything but extreme measures will stop them. Sometimes bravery isn't enough. Sometimes the world requires us to be bold, no matter the personal cost. It's when we let our hearts dictate our actions that we truly meet our limits."

"I do not have feelings for Mr. Palmer," Felicity reiterated. "And I am perfectly capable of setting aside my emotions to complete the mission at hand."

Waller reached for a folder off to the side. "After the incident at Monument Point, I pulled your file and reviewed your psych evaluation from when you were first recruited to A.R.G.U.S. I found the results of your personality test especially interesting. There are four dimensions to one's personality: energy, perception, values, and lifestyle. Do you want to know which of these dimensions you scored highest in?"

"I'm sure you'll tell me either way," she tried to joke. As expected, it fell flat.

"You placed highest in the values category and were identified primarily as a feeler, Felicity. Despite your advanced intelligence, you value empathy, compassion, and cooperation. You are more likely to act on your ideals and engage in emotion rather than actual logic," Waller stated. "I don't understand what this has to do with me attending a dinner with Mr. Palmer."

Waller continued, "You look tired, Miss Smoak. Tell me, have you been sleeping since the incident? Have any memories from that night resurfaced?"

Felicity's palms felt clammy. When did this turn into an interrogation? "I'm fine," she lied. It was true that she'd been having trouble sleeping after the incident, but that had gotten better with Oliver. Unfortunately, after their conversation, Oliver became the new source of her insomnia.

"The reason I ask is because I'd like to know what you told your captors while under the influence of Curare. Since then, two more disaster bunkers have been raided."

"Sir, these attacks began before I was even taken. And Curare doesn't make a person compliant. If anything, the pain makes it more difficult to remain coherent," Felicity defended. "Either way, I would never willingly give up such valuable information to the enemy."

"Regardless, I have reminded Agent Michaels that you are not to be in the field. Your natural tendency toward compassion and inability to control your emotions is too much of a risk. It's because of that weakness that you ended up with a bullet in your back in the first place."

Felicity felt her anger stir. She didn't care if Waller was the boss or not. There was no way she would
be made to feel guilty for saving a team member's life. "Mei could've been killed if I hadn't pushed her out of the way. She's one of your best agents. I would think you'd want to keep her at all costs."

"I do value Agent Yao. But what would've happened if those intruders had hacked into the system a second time? The next task force of agents would've also been walking into a trap with the attackers at the helm. They'd be going in blind and disadvantaged, and you wouldn't have been there to reverse it."

"Which is why I locked down the system before engaging them. That, of course, was the logical thing to do," Felicity fired back.

"Miss Smoak, that is two incidents now where a mission has been compromised. Where unnecessary time and resources were depleted because you got yourself into a vulnerable situation. I do not advise going for a third," Waller warned, her tone harsh. "Tonight's dinner isn't really a mission, but you will treat it as such. You will do whatever Mr. Palmer needs in order to seal the deal with these officials. If you disappoint me again, you will find yourself removed from Agent Michaels's team completely and, if you're lucky, relegated to above ground serving as nothing more than an IT girl to our cover Brighton Tech. Do I make myself clear?"

Felicity opened her mouth to argue but quickly shut it when Waller's eyes flared. There was only one answer Waller was looking for. Anything else would simply push her over the edge. "Yes, Sir," the blonde managed to reply despite the lump in her throat. Her entire body was shaking, and her eyes stung from the stress of holding back tears.

"My assistant will email you the details for tonight. You are dismissed, Miss Smoak."

Eager to get the hell out of there, Felicity stood and bolted out of Waller's office. She took the elevator back down to her floor but didn't return to her desk. She went straight to the ladies room and shut herself inside before the first wave of tears began to fall. As the weight of Waller's threat sunk in, Felicity's head and heart battled to make sense of what had just happened. Felicity had always considered herself a vital part of Lyla's team, but clearly Waller didn't think her skills were good enough if she was threatening to remove her. Just like with Oliver, Felicity had completely misjudged the situation. She placed a hand over her mouth to muffle a sob. Once again, she was unwanted. It was the story of her life.

June 25, 2007

Glancing around the occupied conference room, Felicity ran her hands down her dress to remove any stray wrinkles. She knew she should've ironed the damn thing this morning, but her alarm clock hadn't gone off and she was pressed for time. It was hard to believe that she was even there right now. The Applied Sciences division was set to unveil a new cutting-edge prototype that would transform the technological landscape forever. It had been super top secret, and even the audience for the big reveal was limited. Only a handful of employees and select members of the media were allowed to attend.

It was over the weekend that Felicity had talked Oliver's ear off about what it could possibly be—no company was without its gossip, after all—and how amazing it would feel to be in the room when it was revealed. The mysteriously gleeful smile on his face this morning should've been her first clue that he had something up his sleeve. Felicity's jaw had dropped when Oliver revealed his father expected him to attend and that he'd pulled some strings to get her in, too. Felicity launched herself at him in an attack hug, not caring that people were probably staring. When her excited babble had finally stopped, Oliver joked that he probably needed her with him anyway to explain all of the technical jargon they were sure to hear.
"Don't be nervous," Oliver said in a low voice.

"I'm a lot nervous. Do you think anyone knows I'm not supposed to be here?" There were so many important people in the room. Felicity felt out of place, and it was causing a mini freak-out.

"Of course you're supposed to be here. Your name is on the list."

"Because you put it there," Felicity whispered back. "What if they realize I'm a lowly intern and throw me out?"

"No one is going to—"

"Miss Smoak?" said a British voice.

Felicity flinched. "Too late." She and Oliver turned to see Walter Steele approaching them. Even more daunting was that Oliver's father was right beside him. "It was nice knowing you."

Oliver bit back a grin and shook his head at her. "You're fine. Trust me." He placed a hand on her lower back and drew her forward with him. "Walter. Dad," he greeted.

"Oliver, glad you could make it, son." Robert clapped him on the back. "And on time. Who's your friend?"

"This is Felicity Smoak."

"Ah, yes, Felicity. I've been hearing so much about you I feel like I should know you by now." He held out his hand. "Robert Queen."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Queen. Love your company. And your son." If it were physically possible, Felicity would've swallowed her tongue in that moment. Even Oliver's eyes had widened, and his grip on her back tightened. She scrambled to fix her gigantic blunder. "I mean not like that. I just meant that the company is great and so is Oliver. Not that I'm 'in love' with him, because we're friends. Just friends. As in totally platonic."

Robert chuckled in surprise. "I know what you meant."

"Sorry. I tend to babble when I'm nervous. And considering I probably shouldn't be here, my brain is on the fritz. In fact, I should probably just go."

Oliver's grip on her remained firm, preventing her from bolting. "Felicity is interning in the IT division and loves anything tech related. I thought she might like to see the presentation today."

"That's perfectly fine," Walter replied in reassurance. "Since Miss Smoak is at the top of our recruiting list, I think it would be a great opportunity for her to see where the company is headed."

"I agree," Robert chimed in. "No doubt Malcolm is using his time at home to sway you to Merlyn Global. He may be a good friend of mine but business is business. QC is always looking to attract promising talent like yours, Miss Smoak."

Felicity smiled shyly. It was one of the best compliments she ever could've gotten. "Thank you."

A young woman in a short black skirt and blouse approached them. "Mr. Queen, would you like to take your place at the podium? We're about to begin."

"Of course." He turned back to Oliver and Felicity. "We can talk more afterward. Miss Ambers, please see to it that my son and Miss Smoak get a seat towards the front."
The pretty redhead responded with a beaming smile. "Yes, Mr. Queen."

Felicity wouldn't have thought anything of it if she hadn't noticed the way Oliver's jaw had clenched. He was tense as they followed Miss Ambers to their seats. Once they were settled, Felicity leaned over and whispered, "Are you okay?"

He sighed heavily before leaning in to murmur, "That was the woman I saw with my dad the other day."

Her eyes immediately sought out the redhead. The woman was standing next to Oliver's father. It wasn't too close, but she did seem rather comfortable in his presence. Watching as she handed him some notecards, Felicity also noticed the woman discretely brush her hand against his arm. Felicity looked at Oliver and saw him subtly shaking his head. His hands were positioned in his lap with his fingers brushing together—a habit much like her babbling, only more subdued.

Without a second thought, Felicity reached out to take his left hand in hers. She positioned it so their clasped hands fell in the space between their seats, where their legs had previously been touching. Not wanting any wandering eyes in the room to notice the gesture, Felicity used the informational booklet Miss Ambers had given them to cleverly cover it.

Oliver looked down at her and, for a few seconds, the rest of the room faded away. He squeezed her hand, silently thanking her for the support she was so freely giving. Felicity responded with a small, knowing smile before rubbing her thumb along his knuckles. His fingers felt a little rough, sending a shiver up her spine from the way they grazed her sensitive skin. Slowly the tension in his body eased. By the time Robert Queen began the presentation, Oliver outwardly looked like his charming, carefree self. The only sign of his inner turmoil remained in the way he clung to her, and so Felicity absently continued her soothing strokes as she listened.

Unfortunately, there was no way to avoid the separation necessary to applaud the unveiling of QC's first quantum processor prototype. Felicity immediately felt the loss of Oliver's touch but plastered a smile on her face just the same. It really was a remarkable invention that surely would give QC an edge over its competitors. Felicity's fingers itched to touch what would be the inevitable future of super-computing. Either that or her nerves were still sparking from Oliver.

The applause had begun to die down when the double doors off to the side burst open. Three masked men dressed in black military garb barged in. Screams echoed in the room at the sight of the automatic rifles in their hands. The few security men who'd been guarding the room tried to engage them but were immediately shot. The gunmen then trained their rifles on the crowd and shouted for everyone to get down and shut up. The gunman at the forefront went straight for the podium.

"Robert Queen"—he raised his firearm and pointed it right at the CEO's heart—"you have failed this city."

"Well, I think tonight was a success. Thanks for your help."

Felicity took a seat next to Ray at the bar. They'd just finished having dinner with Ray's government contacts. She'd worn a purple, sleeveless dress with black heels and simple, elegant jewelry. Felicity's hair was down and curled, giving her a softer look. Her glasses she kept, however, since they were a physical manifestation of her professionalism and intelligence. When she'd first opened the door to Ray, his face had immediately brightened. The blush that had colored her face when he told her she looked beautiful was short-lived when she remembered how much was riding on her performance tonight. Waller's threat hung like a sword above her head, and Felicity tried her hardest not to let her anxiety show.
Ray drove them to the restaurant, all the while easily making conversation. For that, Felicity was thankful. She didn't feel like her usual talkative self. They arrived not long before their dinner guests. It was three men and one woman. Despite the friendly conversation that had ensued, this was primarily a business dinner. They'd all made small talk with Ray periodically bringing up A.R.G.U.S. The shift in conversation was subtle and always related to how A.R.G.U.S.'s initiatives would benefit them, which was the genius of his approach. Ray was smooth, charming, and persuasively unassuming in his pitch. Felicity followed his lead, and she thought she did a pretty good job of outlining some of the projects (non-classified) she was working on. She didn't know for sure if they'd sealed the deal and gotten A.R.G.U.S. the additional funding it'd need, but Ray's optimism was a good sign.

To say she was relieved that it was over was an understatement. When Ray had suggested they get a drink at the bar afterward, Felicity was surprisingly in agreement. She'd been more than ready to go home the entire night but the thought of returning to an empty apartment, where she'd be alone with nothing but her worries, was suddenly daunting. If anything, she deserved to have at least one drink.

"No problem. I'm glad I could help." Felicity sipped her red wine. "I just hoped some of my tech talk wasn't too over the top."

"On the contrary, it was fascinating. I have three PhDs and even I knew I'd never be able to accomplish what you're doing for A.R.G.U.S.," he complimented her. "You really sold it."

"Although, if you'd taken Curtis, he probably would've brought a couple of his fancy inventions," she stated, remembering Waller's earlier comment.

"True," Ray acknowledged while giving his wine glass a swirl. "Curtis is very innovative. But from what I understand, it's your coding and advanced knowledge of computing that gets many of those inventions to function as good as they do. Plus, you're amazing with security protocols. Do you know how many hacks on A.R.G.U.S. a day your specialized firewall has thwarted?"

"I believe it averages one million attempted hacks a month," Felicity said with a shrug. "Give or take. Of course, these hackers can never quite figure out whose system it is they're hacking. They just follow the trail from our interactions with other agencies."

"You're basically the reason A.R.G.U.S. can remain in the shadows and do what it does best."

"It wasn't only me. The cybersecurity team helped." He gave her a disbelieving look, and Felicity admitted, "But I was the architect."

Ray held up his glass. "Cheers to that."

Felicity clinked her glass against his and smiled. She'd never been cocky about her abilities, but it felt wonderful to hear Ray talking about her accomplishments. The way Waller had been speaking to her lately made it seem like she was more of a liability to A.R.G.U.S. than an asset. Deep down a part of her knew that it was Waller's way—results through intimidation. But when so much negativity gets thrown at a person, it can be difficult not to start to believe it.

"Thank you, Ray," Felicity replied.

"Seems like it's something you need to hear."

Her brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I could be totally wrong, but I've always gotten the impression you and Waller aren't exactly BFFs."
"Well, she is the big boss," Felicity stated. "And she's not really the warm and fuzzy type anyway. Results are what she values, not feelings."

"Oh, that I know," Ray chuckled. "But what I mean is there seems to be an underlying tension. She didn't look happy when I said I wanted you to accompany me tonight. Not that she ever does look happy—in fact, she looks downright miserable on a good day—but she looked more put out than usual. And I couldn't help but notice that you haven't been as chatty as you usually are."

"Didn't you just say I really sold it tonight?" she questioned.

"You did, but those people tonight don't know you, Felicity. We've been working together long enough for me to tell that that special spark of yours was missing."

Felicity's chest felt tight. Ray was a good guy, and she was touched by his kindness. Nevertheless, the ache in her chest throbbed at the realization that she wished it was someone else asking about her well-being. Someone with soulful blue eyes that used to pierce her at her core before healing the wounds with a deep, abiding love stronger than anything she'd ever known. Not only was that love lost to her, but now it was the primary source of her suffering. It was tearing her up from the inside out and leaving her even more vulnerable to people like Waller who sought to bring her down further. There was only one other person in Felicity's life who'd ever made her feel so raw and exposed. The memory of that betrayal coupled with this latest loss triggered a self-doubt so intrinsic that it was almost paralyzing.

"Felicity, you can trust me," he said when she hesitated.

Ray scrutinized her as if he was solving one of his equations. "I'm getting the sense that whatever is bothering you is of the male variety. Am I right?" He took her silence as acquiescence. "I didn't know you were seeing anyone."

"It's...complicated. Quite frankly, I'm not sure what we were. But whatever it was, it's over now. He's gone." She took a long sip of wine, finishing off her glass. "I don't really want to talk about it."

"What do you want then?"

Like she'd been doing all day, Felicity mentally pushed the pain and anger deep down inside of her. It would come back with a vengeance later, but right now it was necessary. "I could use another drink." Felicity already felt a tiny buzz. The alcohol made her head spacey and dulled her nerves, which was a welcomed reprieve.

With a sympathetic smile, Ray called the bartender over and ordered Felicity a second glass of wine. He then launched into a story about the bug collection he had in college. Felicity scrunched up her nose at the mention of spiders and cockroaches (she hated anything creepy crawly) but didn't stop him. It was just the distraction she needed. She'd even laughed when he told her about the time one spider wasn't quite dead and jumped at his date.

Felicity was borderline drunk by the time she finished her second wine. If only Waller could see her now, she thought. Getting buzzed on missions was definitely frowned upon. It was when Felicity had almost fallen off of her chair laughing that Ray announced it was probably time to take her home. Like a perfect gentleman, he'd offered Felicity his arm for support. He'd gotten the car door for her and even walked her up to her doorstep to make sure she got inside all right.
After fetching her keys from her purse, Felicity shrugged off his suit jacket—it had gotten chilly outside—and handed it back to him. "Thank you for tonight, Ray."

"Thank you," he responded and reached out for her just as she'd turned to the door. "If you change your mind and decide you do need to talk to someone, you can always call me. I've lost someone I cared about, too, so I know what it's like."

"I appreciate that, Ray. And I'm sorry," she added, placing a comforting hand on his arm.

"Also, if things do become too strained with Waller and you think you need a change, I know someone else who'd hire you in a second." He pointed to himself with wide eyes and a goofy grin. He had to be the most handsome dork Felicity had ever met. "And I'm saying that purely based on your skills and not just because I like you."

Felicity laughed softly and patted his arm. "I like you, too, Ray."

His expression turned serious. "Truthfully, I like you a lot, Felicity. I have for a while now."

It took a second for her to catch on to his meaning. "Oh." Felicity's eyebrows must've ridden to her hairline in shock. "Wow."

"I'm not expecting anything," he was swift to reassure her. "No pressure. I just wanted you to know there is at least one guy out there who sees how amazing you are. And if you want to give me a chance, when you're ready, I'll be waiting."

For a second, Felicity thought the alcohol was playing tricks on her. But as Ray stood before her unmoving and unwavering in his hope, she knew it was real. He meant it all. Felicity didn't know what to say to that. There was nothing she could say, and so she silently stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. With one small, grateful smile, Felicity bid him goodnight and turned her key in the lock. The exhaustion was catching up with the alcohol she consumed, and nothing was more appealing than collapsing in her comfy bed. With any luck, she'd be too tired to think let alone cry tonight.

Throwing her keys on the side table, Felicity slipped out of her heels and flicked on the lights. She nearly jumped out of her skin upon seeing the dark figure sitting on her couch. "Holy frack!" Felicity exclaimed and blinked a few times to make sure what she was seeing was real. If this was an alcohol-induced hallucination, she was going to be really pissed. "Oliver, what are you doing here?"

There was almost a predatory quality to his movements as he got up to face her. His bunched shoulders and clenched jaw were enough to tell her he was on edge. His eyes, sharp and penetrating, pinned her where she stood. When Oliver did finally speak, it was practically a growl. "We need to talk."
Okay guys, this is it! The chapter you've all been waiting for. It's been my favorite to write thus far, and I hope you guys enjoy it. It's super important and emotional for Olicity. As always, thanks for your comments and continued support. I look forward to reading your feedback!

Standing rooted in her spot by the door, Felicity fought the haze of disbelief permeating her mind. She had not expected to see Oliver so soon—or ever again really. But there he stood, a handsome boulder of hard, bulging muscle in her living room. It felt like his looming presence filled up the entire space, and Felicity found herself gripping the door handle behind her for support.

"How nice of you to break into my apartment again." Her voice sounded shockingly calm considering the chaos of emotions that were running rampant throughout her entire body. "I should really think about getting an alarm. Although it's not like I actually expected to see you again."

"We need to talk, Felicity," Oliver repeated.

"Yeah, I got that. Unfortunately, it's late and I'm all talked out. You can go the same way you came in." Felicity walked into the kitchen to get a glass of water. Not that she needed it to sober up, since Oliver's impromptu visit was enough to kill her buzz.

"I'm sorry if I put a damper on your date." He didn't sound sorry at all.

Felicity scoffed at the absurdity of his comment but also refused to deny it. Who did he think he was showing up in her apartment unannounced with that judgmental tone? How could he even look her in the eye right now after everything he'd said to her last night? "I guess it's a good thing I didn't invite him in," she nonchalantly replied. "Next time perhaps."

Her little dig had the desired effect. Oliver's eyes narrowed as his hands balled into fists by his sides. Felicity knew she was baiting him, and she didn't care. Her sarcasm and anger were all she had right now. The raw pain she'd buried deep inside her strained against the invisible wall she'd constructed around her heart.

"Was he one of your possible admirers from Valentine's Day?"

"So what if he was?" Felicity countered. "Are you really going to stand there and act like you haven't done worse? Tell me, Oliver, was that condom you magically had during our night together in Moscow originally intended for Isabel?" The disturbing thought had hit her last night while she laid awake in bed. It was the type of thought that once it entered the mind, there was no way of getting rid of it. It just played on a torturous loop.

"Damn it, Felicity," Oliver cursed under his breath and ran his hands over his face. "I didn't come here to fight with you. I hated the way we left things on the phone, and I thought if I came here we could talk it out like adults."

"You said you didn't love me, Oliver. The mere fact that I haven't thrown this glass I'm holding at
your head yet seems pretty mature on my part." She folded her arms in an attempt to keep herself together. "What is there to talk out?"

"I never said I didn't love you."

"It was strongly implied."

"Felicity, I was completely blindsided when you called," Oliver defended. "I had a lot more to say, and I'm not always good with words. I needed to be here to look you in the eye when I said it. I swear to God if I knew you'd run off with Ray Palmer the next day, I would've—"

That caught her attention. "How do you know Ray?"

"I'm not completely clueless to events of the outside world. Also, Anatoly has one of his smart watches," he begrudgingly muttered.

Groaning in frustration, Felicity shook her head and set the glass aside. "I didn't run off with Ray. It wasn't a date. It was a work dinner."

"Sure, because work dinners always end with a guy admitting that he likes you and you kissing his cheek."

"Eavesdrop much?"

"I couldn't not hear you two through the door."

"But you made sure to watch us, though, right?" Felicity challenged, not buying his explanation for a second. "And the kiss was nothing. Not that I have to explain myself to you, because I haven't done anything wrong. It's not like I've been sleeping with him. Although if I had been, we're not exclusive so in your world that wouldn't have been a big deal either."

Coming around the couch, Oliver crossed the room so he was toe to toe with her. She tried to take a step back, but he closed the distance. With her heels off, he towered over her. "It's a good thing he didn't lay a hand on you, because I can't promise that I wouldn't have broken his neck if he had," Oliver threatened, completely losing his composure. The mere thought of Felicity and Ray together was enough to drive him mad with jealously. It was a stark contrast to how he'd felt on his way back to Starling.

After he'd gotten over the shock of Felicity confronting him about Isabel, Oliver had planned what he was going to say down to the last word. It had to be perfect this time. He'd heard her heart breaking over the phone, and it had hit him like a ton of bricks how much he'd royally screwed up with her. The finality of her good-bye as she hung up on him had haunted him the entire way there.

Unfortunately, everything he'd planned to say flew right out of his head when he saw her come home with Palmer in tow. The confession and her little kiss had him seeing red. Felicity was always so open and honest about her feelings for him that it never even occurred to Oliver that there might be someone else waiting in the wings to claim her. It had clicked then that Palmer was the same guy who had called Felicity over the weekend. She said that they'd gone out for work tonight, but what was the guy's excuse for reaching out to her on a Saturday? Oliver's imagination ran horribly rampant with this new piece of information. If he clamped his jaw any tighter, his teeth would probably shatter.

"Do threats like that actually work in the Bratva? Do you resort to murder now when you can't get your own way?" Felicity retorted, not backing down. "I hate to break it to you, Oliver, but just because we've fucked a few times doesn't mean you own me."
His temper flared at that. "What we have is more than just fucking, Felicity, and you know it."

"Actually, I don't. You disappear for months at a time and then show up whenever you feel like it. From what you've told me about your partnership with Isabel, it sounds pretty much the same."

Seething, Oliver reached out to grip her shoulders and yanked her towards him. They were so close her exasperated breaths mingled with his own. "Don't you ever compare yourself to her," he ground out. "Isabel is one of the coldest, most ruthless, and manipulative people I have ever met. You are nothing alike."

"So you're just physically attracted to her then? Can't say I blame you. You are a guy and she is incredibly photogenic, hence the half-naked pictures," she snapped back and fought against his strong grasp. He wouldn't budge.

"I told you the truth last night, Felicity. I haven't been sleeping with Isabel. Not since you've come back into my life. Even before that it wasn't that common of an occurrence, because I can't stand her."

Felicity rolled her eyes. Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "Of course, now it all makes sense."

"The only reason I went with Isabel or anyone else was because they meant nothing to me. There was no chance of romantic hassles or emotions with any of them," Oliver explained, willing Felicity to understand. His tone softened. "Not like with you and me. We were separated for years, Felicity. I didn't think I was ever coming home. I had to force myself to move on or I wouldn't have survived. Just as I'm sure you moved on after you thought I was dead. You think it doesn't eat me up inside imagining all the other guys you've been with since then?"

Felicity swallowed hard and closed her eyes. Her stomach was in knots, and her heart pounded erratically as she fought to keep the lid on her emotions. The more Oliver spoke the more they strained against her defenses. Forcefully, she drew herself back from him. "Follow me. I have something to show you."

Without waiting for a response, Felicity walked down the hall and into the bedroom. She headed for the closet and pushed aside her clothes to access the safe in the wall. The weight of Oliver's gaze behind her was practically burning a hole in her neck. She reached inside, grabbed the thick manila folder, and turned to face him. "You want a list of all the guys I've been with since you?"

She held the folder out to him, and Oliver eyed it with trepidation. "Felicity, I don't—"

"Take it, Oliver," she ordered and forced it into his hands.

A slight tremor coursed through Oliver as held onto the unwanted folder. It was thick and had some weight to it. Oliver wasn't sure what to think, but the sense of dread of what could possibly be inside overwhelmed him. Had she run background checks on all of the guys she'd been with? The documents inside couldn't conceivably be an actual list.

"Open it."

Felicity's face remained blank, but her shallow breaths and the crinkle between her eyebrows told him she was just as nervous as him. Oliver hesitated a couple more seconds before finally opening the folder. He read over the first page and frowned, utterly confused. Oliver flipped through a few more pages, and his mind spun. "What is all this?"

"It's every single investigative report about what happened to the Queen's Gambit that I could find. Projections of what could've happened to the survivors—if there could even be survivors. More
reports about odd occurrences in that area and relevant sightings of people who matched your
description," Felicity explained. "I didn't take my current job just because I wanted to try and be a
hero. I could've done good work at QC or Merlyn Global, too, if I wanted to. No, what sealed the
deal for me were the unlimited resources I'd have at my disposal to find out what really happened to
you. Maybe it was foolish of me to think that I could find the truth. That maybe I'd actually find you
and be able to save you and bring you home where you belonged.

"This was my focus for the last five years. So you won't find a list of men I've been with since you,
Oliver, because that list doesn't exist. I'm not saying I didn't try to move on and date, because I did.
But I was never serious with any of them. I never let myself get close to anyone, and so I never slept
with anyone. It wasn't because I was naïve enough to think you were actually alive," she declared,
fighting back tears. "It was because I already knew what it was like to be so deeply and hopelessly in
love with someone that they actually become a part of your soul. And when you've already
experienced a love as profound as that and lose it so tragically, it's almost impossible to settle for
anything less."

Oliver gripped the folder tighter, his hands shaking from what she'd revealed. "Felicity—" his voice
cracked as he took a step toward her.

"Nuh uh." She shook her head and moved away from him. There was so much that Felicity needed
to say. Five years worth of pain, anger, and devastation that were magnified by the events of the last
five months and culminated from their horrible conversation the night before. If he touched her in
that special way of his, the emotional dam would break and she'd never get any of it out. "You have
no idea what I went through when I thought you were dead. I realize I wasn't literally stuck in
purgatory like you, but I was in my own hell."

Felicity took a moment to center herself before continuing, "When I was a little girl, I hated myself. I
thought I was broken. That no one could or ever would love me. It's the only way a child can grow
up when their father abandons them. I didn't know what was wrong with me. What I could've done
to make him leave at a time when I needed him the most. I promised myself that I would never let
someone hold that much power over me ever again.

"And then you happened. You walked into my life, and you changed everything. I was fully aware
of your reputation, and I was prepared to just write you off as my stepbrother's handsome but
spoiled, womanizing best friend. But then you looked at me, and I'm not even sure what happened.
The world just shifted when we connected, and all I knew is that you saw me. Everything that I used
to keep people at a distance—the dark clothes, the sarcasm, and the sharp intellect—you embraced. It
wasn't always perfect, but you were always there for me. You opened my heart in a way that I didn't
even know was possible, and I loved you all the more for it.

"I've always regretted the choice I made before you left. Because if I'd stuck to the plan, then maybe
I could've been with you. I know it's insane to think that, but a part of me has always asked 'what if?'
If I was on the Queen's Gambit, maybe I could've done something to ensure that the systems hadn't
failed. Maybe you could've avoided the storm altogether. And if not, then at least we'd have been
together."

"Felicity, no," Oliver interrupted. "You can't think that. There was nothing you could've done and
never once, no matter how desperately I missed you, did I ever wish that you had been there with
me. The only comfort I had was knowing that you were home, alive and safe and living your life."

"Starling was never my home," she retorted. "You were, Oliver, and I let you down. It's why I
joined my agency, and now I'm failing that, too."

"What do you mean?" He took a tentative step towards her and was partially relieved that she didn't
take a step back.

"I lied for you, Oliver. My agency has wanted to get eyes on you for a long time, and I gave them a false description. I broke the oath I took and my team's unwavering trust in me to protect you. Even though at times I'm not entirely sure I know who you are anymore. And the worst part is that I would do it again! Because when it comes to you, I don't think clearly." She scoffed and ran a hand through her hair. "I can't believe she was right."

"Who was right?" He took another step closer.

"My boss's boss threatened me today. She thinks I'm a liability, because apparently at my core I value emotion and compassion more than logic and strategy."

"What do you mean she threatened you?" Oliver's tone took on a hard, protective edge. His fists clenched at his sides. He was only a couple of feet away from her now.

"I mean, after my disappearance in Moscow and another recent incident, she's lost what little trust she ever had in me. So I might be removed from my team. She's been known to terminate agents for a lot less, and I'm pretty sure I'd be gone by now if I wasn't her best analyst."

"Well, she's wrong. Dead wrong," Oliver vehemently objected. "I know what you're capable of, Felicity, and she'd be a fool to let you go. Your kindness and compassion are not your weakness. If anything, they are your strength. It's why I fell in love with you all those years ago. You were my light in the darkness, and you still are now."

"Don't say that," she heatedly retorted. Noticing how close he was, Felicity moved more towards the door. Her bedroom was starting to feel small and suffocating in wake of everything she'd revealed.

"Why not?"

"Because it's not real, Oliver!" she exclaimed, choking back the unshed tears stinging her eyes. All of the feelings she'd pushed deep down inside of her today were clawing their way to the surface. "I have no idea what this is, but I can't do it anymore. Maybe you loved me once upon a time, but that is clearly not the case now. We live in two different worlds, and I refuse to be nothing more than your trip down memory lane."

"After everything I've said and done, that's really what you think of me? You actually think I'd risk both our lives by coming here to relive our glory days?"

"Oliver, we were foolish to think that we could just pick up where we left off and there'd be no repercussions. No matter how badly we wish we could go back, we are not the young couple in love that we once were."

"I know that."

"No, you don't," Felicity argued. "Because if you really knew me now, then you'd know that I need you to leave. I need you to stop showing up here and doing nice things for me. I need you to stop looking at me and touching me like it is still love that binds us. I need you to turn around, walk out that door, and never look back. Because as awful as it was thinking you were dead, knowing that your feelings have changed is worse, Oliver. It's so much worse, because you're right here and I still can't have you. So please...leave." Her eyes watered, and her body trembled with anguish at the request. Her mind screamed for him to spare her and leave while her heart pounded with the intense desire that he stay and fight. The only physical indication that she was being torn apart from the inside out was the hot, wet tear that coursed down her cheek.
When Felicity cringed at his attempt to wipe it away, Oliver felt something inside him break along with her. He'd done this by not being honest with her in the only way he could. After all these years of her searching and holding on to what they'd had, he'd ultimately made her doubt if it was all worth it. Not even his worst scar had wounded him as badly as the devastated look she was giving him.

"Felicity, don't ask me to say that I don't love you." Before she could protest, Oliver reached out and took her delicate face in his much larger hands. He pressed his lips to hers in a firm yet gentle kiss. They stood frozen, suspended in time as their connection roared to life despite the sorrow of their circumstance threatening to overwhelm them. Oliver drew back only enough to speak. "Do you know why I haven't said the words?"

Felicity, slightly dazed, remained silent while listening.

"Because if say the words, then it makes it real. The people that I love…they always get hurt, Felicity. I watched my mother slip away from me on the Gambit. I watched my father take his own life on the raft so the rest of the food and water could be mine. I watched the two people on the island, my friends, who taught me to survive get murdered right in front of me. I watched my now partner take multiple beatings for me when I first stepped out of line in the Bratva," Oliver listed. "On some level, I know that not all of this is my fault. But still I can't help but think that all of these people suffered so that I could live. When I think of anything like that happening to you, Felicity, because of your connection to me, I can't breathe. I honestly don't know what would become of me if I were to lose you again.

"You said that you don't always know who I am, and you're right. If you knew some of the things I've done and the sacrifices I had to make, I'm afraid you'd never look at me with those hopeful, trusting blue eyes again. I'm not entirely sure I know who I am either, but I do know two things. The first is that I will do whatever, whatever it takes to keep you safe."

"And the second thing?" she breathed after a beat.

Oliver stroked her cheek with his thumb, his blue orbs penetrating. He had to push past all of the the fear and loss and tell her the truth. He would lose her anyways if he didn't. "The second thing is that I have never loved anyone else more in my life than I have loved you. I've never stopped, and I've never resented the choice you made. I knew something must've happened that day and that you were probably scared. But I see you now, Felicity, just as clearly as I saw you back then. You've grown into a strong, kind, genuine, smart, beautiful young woman, and I couldn't be more proud of you."

He swiped at the trail of tears running down her face at his declaration. Dropping his forehead to hers, he murmured, "I love you, Felicity…I love you. I'm sorry that I let you doubt that for even a second."

"Oliver," Felicity whispered. After a long, emotional moment, she threw her arms around his neck. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He held her tightly while she buried her face in his chest, sobbing. The dam had finally broken as the flood of emotion consumed her. Felicity's biggest regret over the years had been to let the sad, broken little girl inside of her feed her doubts. One fleeting moment of doubt was all it took to change her life forever. It had shaken her belief in Oliver then just like it was trying to do again now.

The secrets and Isabel situation were valid reasons to question his intentions, but there had also been so many good things he'd done for her. Oliver wasn't always the best with words. Felicity had learned early on in their relationship that it was his actions that counted. It was a relief to know that every intense look, tender caress, and searing kiss over the course of the last five months had been a silent declaration of his true feelings.

However, when there were so many other things left unsaid between them, hearing the actual words
had become necessary. For the first time in months, Felicity truly felt like she and Oliver were fully connected. She surrendered to his strong embrace, letting him support her as she released the tension from her body with each fresh wave of tears. One of his hands rested against her neck, buried under her hair, while the other soothingly rubbed her back. Felicity drew strength from his solid presence. Every time his lips brushed her forehead she felt a piece of her heart fall back into place.

"I love you, too," she sniffled sometime later. "And I'm sorry I went through your phone. I just want us to be close again."

"I know. Me, too." Oliver leaned back to look at her. "I'm sorry I hurt you. Balancing you and the Bratva is new to me, but I promise that you have nothing to worry about with Isabel or anyone else. I deleted her message as soon as I saw it, Felicity. I swear."

Taking a shaky breath, Felicity nodded. Her anxiety hadn't completely quelled, but she was starting to feel better. Her eyes closed when his hand tangled in her hair.

"It's late. You should get to bed," he coaxed. "You look exhausted."

"That's because I barely slept last night." She opened her eyes to see a mixture of guilt and concern on his face. Biting her lip, Felicity fiddled with the fabric of his shirt. "Oliver," she said quietly, tentatively. "Could you stay tonight? Just to sleep." Since they'd reunited, there hadn't been one night they'd spent together that they hadn't made love. Their talk tonight had settled a lot of issues between them, but Felicity still felt raw from her insecurities. She wasn't quite ready to be with him in that way right now; it was a different kind of intimacy she craved.

With a soft peck on her cheek, Oliver nodded and released her. Felicity retreated to the bathroom to change out of her dress and get ready for bed. It felt good to wash her face and remove the traces of her mini breakdown. After changing into pajama shorts and her comfy MIT sweatshirt, Felicity exited the bathroom. Oliver was laying on top of her bed, fully clothed.

Frowning, she said, "You can get comfortable."

"I didn't know if..." he trailed off. Her firm expression sent a clear message. While he removed his t-shirt and jeans, Felicity slid under the covers. She shivered from the cool sheets and immediately snuggled up next to Oliver once he'd joined her. As always, his body felt like a living furnace.

They lay on their sides, facing each other, so close that they were sharing a pillow. Their legs tangled together, and she was thankful that he didn't protest when her cold feet pressed into his calves. Her left hand was tucked under her chin while the other rested above his heart. Oliver draped an arm over her waist, embracing her in a cocoon of warmth and security.

He was first to break the silence. "There's something else I have to tell you. Once I do, we never have to speak of it again."

There was a swirl of unease in her gut, and she braced herself. Whatever it was he had to say, Felicity wanted to hear it. Even if it was painful, she wanted the truth. "Okay."

"There was a girl with me on the island." Feeling her tense ever so slightly, Oliver ran his hand up her curves to caress the side of her face. "She was there with her father. They were the ones who found me first and taught me to survive. In a way, they'd become like family and we'd gotten close. She knew all about you and used to scold me whenever she caught me staring at your picture. On the island, letting ourselves get wrapped up in anything from home was a distraction."

Oliver took a deep breath, needing it to get the rest of the story out. "I wasn't completely unaware of
her feelings for me. It's hard not to get attached when you're constantly in life-threatening situations and only have each other to depend on. I cared for her, too." Felicity's face remained blank. He could tell that she was trying not to react. The only indication of her struggle was how hard she was biting her bottom lip. Oliver reached out to caress it and coax it out from between her teeth. "Something could've happened if I let it; some nights the loneliness was harder to resist than others. But I never acted on it, because I loved you and I was determined to make it home to you. I was yours, and that was it.

"I held onto you and the hope that I would make it home for almost three years. It wasn't until I was fully immersed in the Bratva that I slept with another woman," he explained. The strain in his voice was evident. "And it was only because I saw no way out. I had to let that hope go. I had to let you go. It didn't mean that I stopped loving you. You were already too much a part of me for that, but I had to lock that part away. I couldn't let anyone see that side of me, because it would be considered a weakness to be exploited. I don't want to hurt you, Felicity, but I want you to know the truth. I need you to know that I wasn't jumping into bed with anyone else the first chance I got." His thumb traced the underside of her delicate jaw. "No matter what, I've always been yours. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Felicity whispered. The truth did hurt, but it wasn't as bad as the spiral of scenarios she'd been dreaming up last night. She was admittedly relieved to know that the majority of the time he'd been away he'd been faithful to her. The rest she may not like, but she understood. Still, Felicity couldn't stop herself from asking, "How many?"

He'd been leaning in, about to kiss her, when he paused. "What?"

"How many women were there?"

"I don't think—"

She leveled him with a look. "If you don't tell me, then I'll probably end up thinking the worst."

This was not the turn Oliver had been expecting this conversation to take. He really didn't want to get into it, but he knew Felicity. She wouldn't let up until she got the information she wanted out of him. "Let's just say less than a handful," he answered, his discomfort obvious.

Not as bad as she'd originally thought. It was a minor relief. "But most often Isabel?" When she saw him doing that nervous, shifty thing with his eyes, Felicity had her answer.

"No," he admitted. Oliver's chest felt tight. Training in the Bratva was a breeze compared to this conversation.

Felicity's grip over his heart constricted. She didn't know whether to be relieved that Isabel wasn't his go-to girl or anxious that there was someone else out there who knew him just as intimately.

Regardless, Felicity put up a mental block in her mind. She couldn't go down that line of thought. It'd be never ending, and it didn't matter now anyway. It was time to let it go. But first: "You know, I'm still gonna need to know about that 'thing you like.' That's valuable intel, mister." The corner of her mouth quirked up, letting him know that she was joking.

Oliver breathed a sigh of relief. If Felicity was cracking jokes, especially about an awkward topic like this, it meant that she'd ultimately forgiven him. Grinning in return, Oliver drew Felicity tight against him. His tone was deep and gruff. "That thing I like is you." Her breasts heaved against his chest, and her eyes darkened. "And since she can never be you, Isabel has no damn clue what she's talking about." Their noses brushed before he claimed her lips in a slow but scorching kiss.

Felicity let out a soft mewl before melting against him. The tip of his tongue teased the seam of her
lips. Tilting her head and opening her mouth, she let him deepen it. Oliver didn't push it further, and for that Felicity was grateful. The hand not touching his chest traveled around his broad shoulder and slid through his short hair. She let her fingernails lightly graze his scalp, causing a low rumble in his chest. When they finally broke apart, they were both breathless.

"So, I'm going to assume that night in Moscow was the best sex you've had in years," she teased him.

He chuckled. "Assume away."

"Better than before the island?" she toyed with him.

Smirking, Oliver replied, "Even better than that time you slapped me."

Felicity laughed out loud at that. "Well, you did kind of deserve it."

"I did. Oddly enough, it made me want you even more," he admitted, smirking.

She gave him a playful smack for good measure. "What about when we first said 'I love you'?"

He became serious. "Nothing beats that." Oliver closed the gap between them once more. Not stopping at her lips, he pressed soft kisses all over her face. The prickle of his scruff against her skin set her ablaze. In between each caress Oliver whispered how much he loved her. Felicity closed her eyes and let the affection wash over her. Each quiet but amorous declaration breathed new life into her. Piece by piece she could feel her heart becoming whole—no longer broken but swelling with love for him. There was still one more matter they needed to discuss, however, before she could fully make that leap of faith.

Rubbing his muscular chest, Felicity reluctantly questioned, "Oliver, what are we going to do about all the secrets still between us?" Her stared at her, confused, so she elaborated. "You're sworn to the Bratva, and I'm with my agency. The two obviously don't mix."

"It's not like we haven't kept secrets before," Oliver pointed out.

"That was different. We never kept them from each other. Oliver..." She paused to work up her courage. "It scares me what I'm willing to do or overlook for you."

With a huff, Oliver admitted, "It scares me, too, sweetheart." His new assignment was proof enough of that. Oliver hated it with every fiber of his being, and yet he was backed into a corner. Her salvation was ultimately wrapped up in his betrayal. It was a horrendous choice but a choice nonetheless, and he would bear the burden. The less she knew about his world, the safer she would be.

"So..." she helplessly trailed off.

He met her beseeching gaze with a steady one of his own. "I think we just need to accept the fact that we can't tell each other everything. All we can really do is trust in our love and believe that whatever it is that we do, it's to protect the other." It was all that he had to offer.

With a feather-light kiss, she agreed. "Okay." Seconds later, an involuntary yawn escaped her. Her exhaustion was becoming bone deep and could only be held off for so long.

"All right, you need to get some sleep," Oliver ordered.

"Yes, dad," she chided and turned over so her back was pressing against his chest.
Oliver's arms wound around her from behind. He hadn't gotten much sleep either last night. "Don't make me spank you," he mumbled, causing her to giggle.

"Next time," Felicity sleepily flirted. He kissed the crook of her neck, which had her sighing in contentment. She'd only be getting a few more hours of sleep tonight, but that didn't matter. With Oliver by her side, Felicity was confident she could handle anything.
"Robert Queen, you have failed this city."

Oliver stared in horror as the lead gunman pointed his rifle at his father. The entire room was so quiet one could hear a pin drop. It was a sharp contrast from the shouts and screams mere moments before. The other two gunman faced the crowd, scanning the room with their rifles as well as their masked eyes. Like everyone else, Oliver was crouched down on the floor and trying not to make any sudden movements. Felicity was right next to him, and he reached out to take her hand again. She was trembling, and he gave it a supportive squeeze.

"It's okay," Robert stated evenly to the crowd. He held up his hands in submission. "It's okay, everyone. Just stay calm."

"I wouldn't be giving them false hope if I were you, Mr. Queen. Then again, lying is what you're good at," the leader accused.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

The gunman scoffed. "Someone you thought you could fool. Someone you thought you could silence." He reached up to pull his mask off. The man, appearing to be in his early to mid-thirties, had black hair and defined features.

There was a spark of recognition in Robert's eyes, "Mark? Mark Scheffer?"

"So you do remember me." The man grinned manically. "You seem surprised to see me here. I don't know why, since I designed this processor you're so quick to take credit for. Did you actually think I wouldn't be here for the unveiling?"

"Well, you did leave the company." So the gunman was a former QC employee—and a disgruntled one at that. This explained how he must've been able to get through security and make it to the top floor. The man was familiar with their security measures and layout.

"Only because I was forced to leave!" Mark shouted. "I found out what my design was really going to be used for. Allowing Uncle Sam to violate our privacy and spy on us isn't what this country is about. And when I spoke my mind and opposed it, you got rid of me."

"You attacked a fellow employee and tried to steal from the company," Robert replied matter of factly. Oliver didn't know how his father was keeping it together. Didn't he know that challenging this guy could set him off?

Mark growled, "It's not stealing when it's my design. All I want is justice and to expose you for the greedy fraud you are."

"Mark—" Robert began but was interrupted.

"Shrapnel. I go by Shrapnel now. Want to know why?" He continued on before Robert could speak, "It seems I have quite the affinity for building bombs. Seeing as though I'd lost my job, I've had more
than enough time to pick up a new hobby. You might even get to see my new skill in action, depending on how cooperative you are."

"What do you mean?"

Mark unzipped his vest to show off the wire and explosives strapped to his torso underneath. There were distressed cries among the hostages. Oliver's breath caught as Felicity gasped next to him. "I want the quantum chip that's in the processor. Without that, this thing is nothing more than a fancy box of useless wires. And since it's so top secret, I know you wouldn't be stupid enough to have it actually inside this thing right now. It's too much of a risk to have it out in the open," Mark explained. "Get me the chip and no one has to get hurt."

"And if I don't give it to you?" Robert questioned. "Would you really kill yourself along with all of these innocent people?"

"That chip was my life's work. Without it I have nothing. If I lose my life, it's only fair you and the rest of your pathetic followers lose theirs, too." Mark turned to look at the crowd. "So where's my good friend Henry? Now that he has my job, he should have no trouble retrieving it."

"Henry's away on vacation this week," Robert informed him. "I can get it for you. If you let me—"

"You're not going anywhere," Mark retorted.

"You can come with me."

"And lose my leverage over this crowd? I wasn't born yesterday, Mr. Queen. If we're alone, you might be stupid enough to try and be a hero. The only way this goes smoothly is if lives are hanging in the balance. So you better think long and hard about who you can trust to retrieve it." Mark's hand grazed over the trigger. "You never know when one of my fingers might slip."

It was then that Robert glanced at Oliver. There was a momentary look of sadness before Oliver noticed his father's eyes harden. The Queen patriarch had made a decision. "My son knows where it is. The chip is protected by a biometric lock. He's got access. He can get in and retrieve it."

Oliver stared at his father in shock. What was he talking about? Oliver hadn't even known what the quantum processor was before today, let alone where the chip was being kept. "Dad?" he questioned.

"It's okay, son. You can do it." Robert gave him another pointed look. That's when it dawned on Oliver. His father was lying on purpose. He had no intention of giving the chip to their captor. He just wanted to make sure Oliver could leave and get to safety. His father didn't care if he or the rest of the hostages were sacrificed in the process. Oliver wasn't sure if his father putting him first was something to be admired or abhorred.

Mark turned around and motioned with his gun for Oliver to stand. "Better do what daddy says, rich boy."

Oliver felt Felicity's grip on his hand tighten before he released her and stood. His mind raced as he stared at the barrel of the gun. "I can get you the chip, but it might take some time," he stated.

"You have one hour before we start shooting hostages." At Oliver's confused stare, Mark elaborated, "Although I'm willing to blow myself up, it isn't exactly my first choice. There are more than enough people here who can die before me. They'll suffer so badly they'd wished I'd already hit the detonator. If you take too long, it'll be their blood on your hands. And if you fail completely, well... you can say good-bye to daddy dearest and all of QC's most important executives. Your family's
company will be ruined. Do you understand, or do I have to speak slower? I know you party boys aren't always the sharpest tools in the shed."

Casting aside his aggravation at the insult to his intelligence, Oliver nodded in agreement. But his mind didn't stop there. He was also vaguely aware of Felicity still crouched on the floor by his feet. His protective instincts flared. There was no way he could leave her behind in the clutches of a madman. Suddenly, an idea formed. "I have clearance to retrieve the chip, but the security measures are extensive. I've never done it alone. If something goes wrong, I could be locked out and you'll get nothing. Henry may be away, but his assistant is more than capable. She can bypass the protocols if something goes wrong."

"Then I suggest you find her quickly," Mark ordered. "We don't have time for games of hide and seek."

"Actually, she's right here." Oliver glanced down at Felicity. She was looking up at him, a mixture of utter confusion and horror at being put on the spot. He held out his hand for her to take, his meaningful look saying more than words ever could. Felicity let him pull her up, and Oliver angled his body so that he was partially blocking her.

"I can do it," Felicity spoke up. Her voice sounded strong despite the tremors Oliver knew must be running through her. "We'll get the chip within the hour."

Mark sneered, "So what are you waiting for? Go." He patted the trigger in his pocket and cocked his gun. The threat was clear and intimidating, as intended. "Clock's a ticking."

As soon as the elevator doors closed, Felicity let out the shaky breath she’d been holding. She’d been on the verge of a freak-out ever since that crazy Shrapnel guy had revealed the homemade bomb strapped to him. Oliver saying that she was Henry's assistant and could help retrieve the chip was almost enough to make her lose her mind completely. Thankfully, she'd kept it together until now. Being away from the room and the gun pointed at her gave her a chance to think and process. The whole thing felt like some kind of nightmare.

Oliver pushed the buttons for the executive floor and the lobby before turning to her. "Are you okay?"

She began pacing the tiny space. "No would be an understatement. I can't believe this is happening. And I can't believe you told that whack-a-doo I'm Henry's assistant! Why would you—"

"It was the only way to get you out of there," Oliver informed her. "I wasn't going to leave you behind, Felicity."

Pausing, Felicity turned to face him. "So you don't actually need me to hack anything?"

"What I need is for you to be safe." The brunette gaped at him, awestruck, before launching herself at him. Oliver, slightly surprised by the sudden attack-hug, wrapped his arms around her and held her close. "I couldn't take the chance that I would fail and you'd be one of his victims. There was no choice to make."

"Thank you," Felicity whispered and clutched him tighter. The non-platonic feelings she'd tried to bury these last several weeks overwhelmed her. If she wasn't already falling head over heels for the guy, his actions mere moments ago certainly would've sealed her fate. Felicity's heart swelled, unbidden, and for a moment she let it.
The intimate moment ended far too quickly as the elevator dinged, signaling they'd reached the executive floor. Reluctantly, Oliver released her. "Take the elevator down to the lobby. By now I'm sure the remaining security in the building has already contacted the SCPD. Tell them what's going on. They need to know what they're up against."

Before Shrapnel allowed them to leave, he'd also threatened to start shooting if the authorities got anywhere near the conference room. He'd looked like he wanted to send one of his guys with them, but there were too many people in the room. Felicity doubted anyone would even attempt to take Shrapnel or his partner out with that bomb attached to him. It was too big a risk, but apparently Shrapnel still worried that he could be overpowered without both his henchman present.

"Wait, what about you?" Felicity halted him. "Are you sure the chip is in your father's office?"

"I don't know."

She frowned. "But your dad said you had access. How can you not know—" She abruptly stopped talking as the realization set in. "He was lying, too, wasn't he?"

With a solemn nod, Oliver confirmed, "Yes. He lied to save me just like I lied to save you."

"Oliver, how the heck are you supposed to find something you know nothing about and have no access to? What are you going to do when the hour deadline comes around?" Felicity demanded. "Your father just put everyone in that room even more at risk."

"I don't know. I haven't thought that far ahead. All I know is that I have to at least try and get that chip. I'm not going to leave my father to die." Oliver released his hold on the elevator doors. "I'll text you if I find something."

Before the doors could close completely, Felicity's hand shot out to intercept them. No way was she letting him out of her sight and accepting this lack of a plan. Not when she had the very skills that could help him. "I'm staying with you."

"Felicity," Oliver began to protest.

"If you're not leaving, I'm not leaving," she adamantly declared. "You can inform the SCPD of the situation while I dig through your father's computer. Even if you can locate the chip, that tech is proprietary. There's no way you'd be able to get through security protocols on your own, especially if your father is lying about your access. Although, he could've granted it to you without your knowledge."

"I doubt it. I didn't know about the quantum processor."

"True, but you're his son. You might have more clearance around here than even you realize. Either way, you need me, Oliver," Felicity declared.

"You really think you'll be able to hack into the system?"

"I've been working with my supervisor on upgrading the various internal networks. I understand the setup and safeguards, which means I know what to look for. Plus if I can get into the FBI database, then QC should be no sweat."

Oliver, stunned, followed Felicity into his father's office. "You've hacked into the FBI's network?"

She paused at his father's desk and turned to face him. "Is that judgment I'm hearing?"
Grinning, Oliver replied, "No. Pride." He continued to be in awe of Felicity and her abilities. In fact, he found her advanced intelligence downright sexy. Being turned on by a woman's mind rather than just her body was a first for Oliver. What was she doing to him?

Felicity beamed back at him, her cheeks flushing at the compliment. "It was one time and on a dare from Cooper. The point is I'm with you on this. We can't leave everyone there to die. This is worth a shot."

Oliver smiled gratefully back at her, amazed by her strength and determination, and whipped out his cell phone. "I'll call Detective Lance." He still had Laurel's father's number from that one time he'd called Oliver to warn him what would happen if any funny business went on during their group ski trip. Detective Lance was a tough man, but he was good at his job. Contacting him directly was the best way to make sure the SCPD got the information they needed.

Felicity also had her phone out and set a timer. "We've got forty-five minutes before Shrapnel makes good on his threat. Let's make them count." Pushing aside her own personal stress and anxiety for the moment, Felicity focused on the computer in front of her. She needed her full concentration if she was going to pull this off in time.

With a determined nod, Oliver told her, "Do what you gotta do."

The food was almost done cooking, and the dining room table was set. Hearing the key in the door lock, Oliver quickly lit the two long candles he'd placed in the center. Felicity, looking tired but not as much as the day before, walked in and paused.

She smiled in delight. "What is all this?"

Oliver came around the table to greet her. "I thought my girlfriend could use a decent meal after a long day of work," he explained and kissed her cheek. After the emotionally charged night they'd had, Oliver wanted to do something special for Felicity. She'd gone to work while he stayed at the apartment. Despite the insistent texts from Dig, Oliver didn't have to leave until later on tonight.

In the meantime, Oliver had watched some TV and tidied up Felicity's apartment. She had the habit of leaving things strewn about instead of putting them away. He wasn't completely familiar with where everything went, but at least it looked neater. It also gave him the perfect excuse to snoop around. He didn't find anything A.R.G.U.S. related lying about—not that he'd expected it. Felicity was far too clever and cautious. The safe in her closet was probably the place to look, but Oliver didn't have the device he'd need to crack into it. Oliver had to find something soon; Malcolm had been breathing down his neck lately.

Staring at the safe, Oliver had automatically thought about the file Felicity had shown him last night. He couldn't believe the amount of digging she'd done all these years just to find him. Oliver knew that she would mourn him, but never had he expected her to hold on so strongly to what they had. When she revealed that she hadn't even slept with anyone else, Oliver was equally filled with pride and shame. The primal, possessive man that had always loved her fiercely reveled with pride in the knowledge that she'd unknowingly remained loyal to him. His darker self, the one he'd let take control these last couple of years especially, drowned in shame and self-hatred at not having shown the same restraint. Then again, Felicity had always been better than him. That, at least, hadn't changed.

There was a spark in Felicity's eyes, no doubt from him officially calling her his girlfriend. "You
thought right." She looked him over and laughed. "Nice apron. The pink polka dots suit you."

"Real men wear pink. Besides," he added, "I was desperate and this was all you had." Oliver had meant to take it off before she returned, but he'd been so caught up in making everything perfect that he'd forgotten. Untying the knot, he pulled the apron off and tossed it aside.

Felicity dropped her purse and keys onto the side table. "Something smells good."

"You're just in time." Oliver took her hand and guided her to the kitchen. "I need a taste tester."

"Well, I'm all yours now."

The comment was innocent and yet his heart skipped a beat. They stopped at the stove where Oliver grabbed the wooden spoon. He stirred the tomato sauce before scooping some up. He blew on it gently to cool it down and held it out for her to try. "Let me know if it needs anything else."

Felicity took the mouthful and closed her eyes upon tasting it. "Mmm," she groaned. "That's actually kinda perfect."

"Really?"

She giggled at his hopeful look. "You are so cute in chef mode," Felicity teased and leaned up to kiss him. Tasting his sauce on her lips made Oliver's blood heat, and he quickly had to quell the fantasy of using her as his dinner plate.

Seconds later, the oven timer went off. The meatballs were done. With the pasta already cooked and strained, dinner was finally ready. Felicity watched him totally in awe and wondered aloud how he'd managed to make anything so delicious. Her refrigerator had been pretty bare. Oliver informed her that he'd ordered some groceries earlier and assured her that none of her neighbors had seen.

While Oliver made their plates, Felicity got a couple of wine glasses for the bottle he'd opened. They chatted casually as they moved about the kitchen. It was so normal and domestic, and they settled into it so easily that it almost felt like they'd been doing it for years. Oliver felt a pang in his gut at the realization that this probably would've been their life if he hadn't gotten on the Gambit.

They went into her small, makeshift dining room. He asked her about work as they ate and sipped their wine, wanting to know if she'd had a better day than yesterday. Felicity appeared much calmer and more like her confident self when she answered. She'd resolved a major software bug that had been throwing her agency's system into disarray. Oliver made sure to point out that A.R.G.U.S.—though he'd refrained from saying the actual name—was lucky to have her. She'd grinned, but it hadn't quite reached her eyes. Felicity was obviously still worried about her position in the agency after the warning she'd gotten, and the curiosity about who her boss could be continued to gnaw at him.

Seeing as though A.R.G.U.S. was his organization's top enemy, Oliver was familiar with some of the chain of command. He just wished she'd given him a name so he could do some digging of his own. He obviously knew about Ray Palmer. There was also the time Felicity had briefly mentioned Lyla, which was a whole different issue in and of itself. Diggle had nearly obliterated the sparring dummy that night when Oliver had mentioned her to him.

After dinner, they had another glass of wine while waiting for dessert. Felicity had initially protested that she was too full but quickly changed her tune when Oliver said it was brownies. Felicity's eyes immediately lit up—she was never the type to pass up chocolate—and had practically sprinted to the kitchen when the oven timer went off.
"You know, it's probably good that you're not here twenty-four-seven," Felicity commented as she finished up her second brownie. Instead of eating at the table, they'd ended up in the living room on the couch. "If you cooked like this every night, I'd probably be fat."

Oliver chuckled and sipped his wine, enjoying seeing Felicity getting drunk off wine and food. Her cheeks were tinged pink, her irises were dilated, and her voice had progressively gotten more excitable as the night wore on. Felicity was even more of a ball of babbling sunshine when she was buzzed. "All part of my plan. And now you have leftovers for the rest of the week."

She patted his knee. "Thank you."

"I also packed your lunch for tomorrow."

Grinning, she gawked at him in disbelief. "Seriously, who are you?"

Oliver brought his hand to her cheek, meeting her gaze. "Someone who loves you very, very much." Based on the emotional expression on Felicity's face, it was just as freeing for her to hear the words as it was for Oliver to finally say them. He would say them as many times as she needed to hear them. There would be no doubts this time.

"I love you, too." Felicity leaned over to kiss him. "I wish you didn't have to leave tonight."

"Me neither," he sighed and enveloped her more snuggly in his embrace.

"Thank you for sneaking away to come here. I know it's not easy."

"I'll always find a way if you need me. That's why I gave you the phone. Just make sure you actually respond to my texts this time or else I'll be the one lying awake at night worrying."

"I will," Felicity promised him and sealed it with another kiss. "By the way, about last night, I'm sorry if I made you think that you're not a good person."

He shook his head. "Felicity—"

"I've been thinking about it all day, Oliver, and I have to say this," she stated firmly. "It's true that I don't know everything about you anymore or all of the sacrifices that you've had to make. But just because you've had to live in darkness, it doesn't mean that's who you are. There's always been this light inside of you. You wouldn't be here, let alone loving me and helping me the way that you do, if it wasn't still a part of you. When you're away, you should hold onto that. Can you do that for me?"

Their foreheads touched. "You know if it's you asking, I'll do it." He brushed his nose affectionately against hers before claiming her lips. "God, I love you."

"You better," she teased and nibbled on his bottom lip.

Oliver slanted his mouth over hers, kissing Felicity more fully—a mixture of chocolate, wine and something that was just so her overwhelming his senses. "So we're really going to do this? You and me?"

"You and me," Felicity happily confirmed when she finally had to come up for air. He chuckled seconds later when she excused herself to the bathroom, stating that the wine was getting to her.

Oliver took a moment to enjoy his own high that they were officially together. He didn't know how it was possible, but he'd fallen even more in love with Felicity. No matter what they were going through, she always gave as much back as she took. That's why what Oliver was about to do next
Walking inside the dark and deserted Queen mansion, Oliver felt like he'd entered a time capsule. The barrage of memories hit him hard in the open and ornate entryway. White sheets were tossed over the furniture, no doubt to preserve everything in its place. There was a little bit of dust along the banister but for the most part the space seemed clean. Oliver wondered if it was Malcolm or Thea who made sure someone came to maintain the mansion and grounds. Of all the places to meet, Oliver didn't understand why Malcolm had chosen the mansion. If it was some kind of joke, he wasn't laughing.

It was almost cruel to be standing in what was once his home and knowing that he couldn't return. It was almost as heartbreaking as spending time with Felicity and then having to leave her over and over again.

There was a dull light coming from the living room. Oliver walked cautiously toward it. Years of training and narrowly escaping danger made it impossible for him to not be on his guard, even in a place he'd once called home. Oliver found Malcolm sitting in the living room, leaning comfortably against the couch and drinking scotch like he owned the place. Perhaps he did seeing as though Thea wouldn't get her full inheritance until her twenty-first birthday. That thought alone was enough to make Oliver's blood boil.

Upon his arrival, Malcolm poured a second glass and offered it to Oliver. "Late as usual," Malcolm commented and smirked. "I'm assuming my stepdaughter had something to do with that."

Oliver, refusing to answer, gave Malcolm a dry look while taking a sip of his scotch.

"I'm sure this will be a short meeting, since you're obviously so chatty tonight," he remarked. "So I guess it's right down to business then. What have you got for me?"

Reluctantly, Oliver reached into his pocket and grabbed the flash drive. "Next week A.R.G.U.S. will be transporting a chemical bomb to its base in Markovia. If that facility is equipped to store a weapon..."
"It might also contain the weapon we're looking for," Malcolm finished. "Good work. He'll be pleased. Anything else?"

Oliver hesitated for a moment. There was something that Felicity had said earlier that he was still trying to figure out. Seeing as though Malcolm knew so much about A.R.G.U.S. already, he'd probably be the one to ask. On the other hand, Oliver didn't want to unintentionally give away anything else. He'd already combed through the data Felicity's phone had retrieved. No way would he turn everything over to Malcolm. The plan was to give him and their leader just enough to keep them satisfied and Felicity safe.

Malcolm, sensing his uncertainty, stated, "Speak now or forever hold your peace, Oliver."

As much as Oliver hated revealing anything to Malcolm, it was probably best to ask him directly. If Oliver got caught asking the wrong people questions, it would look even worse. "Have you heard of anyone in A.R.G.U.S. known as The Wall?"

The glass in Malcolm's hand paused halfway to his lips. He looked over at Oliver with sharp eyes. "Yes."

"Who is it?" Oliver prodded.

"It's the not-so-friendly nickname for Amanda Waller. She's the director of A.R.G.U.S. Not only is she the first female director, but she's also the youngest to head the agency. Believe me when I tell you it takes a special kind of ruthlessness to rise through the ranks that fast." Malcolm watched him carefully. "Felicity works directly with her, doesn't she? I mean, why else would you take a sudden interest?"

"She may have mentioned her in passing. Nothing more," Oliver clarified, already regretting saying anything.

"As much as you may loathe using Felicity for information, I'm doing you a favor, Oliver. If she is in fact working directly with Amanda Waller, then you need to be keeping a closer eye on her."

"Why? You think Waller's dangerous?"

"Oh, I know she is."

"Even to her own agents?"

"There is nothing that woman wouldn't do to keep her power," Malcolm informed him. "And that includes sacrificing one of her own if necessary. Now I don't know what exactly Felicity does for A.R.G.U.S., but we both know she's brilliant. Maybe too brilliant for her own good…"

"You're saying Waller could see her as a threat if she's not careful."

Finishing off his drink, Malcolm leveled Oliver with a grave look. "No. I'm saying she probably already does."

A sense of dread formed in the pit of Oliver's stomach. He knew Malcolm could very well be screwing with him. Honesty was not the man's strong suit, and he'd probably say anything to ensure that Oliver followed orders regarding Felicity. However, it was Felicity's own words that had him wound in knots. She'd said so herself that she'd been threatened by a higher-up in the agency. Maybe just this once, Malcolm's warning actually had some merit.
Chapter End Notes

What did you guys think? Let me know in the comments. They're always appreciated! Also, I've been doing a lot of fun Olicity and MerSmoak sibling FB edits for this story. You can find them on my twitter and Tumblr pages. I've got a few more coming up if you want to check them out.
Happy Friday, guys! No, you are not hallucinating. I decided to do another surprise update this week. Enjoy!

June 8, 2012

Felicity sat up straight in her seat and searched the long line of students waiting to head up to the stage. It was graduation day at Starling City Prep. The boys wore black robes while the girls wore red, showing off the official school colors. Felicity sat between Tommy and her mom with her camera phone at the ready. She wanted to capture the perfect picture of Thea getting her diploma.

"I see her," Tommy said. "Her row hasn't gotten up yet."

In an effort to avoid a cramp in her arm, Felicity put her phone down. She looked to where Tommy was pointing and made sure to keep an eye on Thea for when her row was up. "I can't believe she's graduating," Felicity commented. It was a Friday afternoon, and Felicity had taken a half day so that she could attend the ceremony. Thea was family, and there was no way Felicity could miss such a huge moment in her life. Luckily, things at work had been good over the last few days. There were no screw-ups or run-ins with Waller. Overall, it was a successful week.

Tommy shook his head. "Me neither. It's insane. I still remember the days I'd go over to the Queen mansion and Thea would beg me and Oliver for piggyback rides."

"She's all grown up now," Felicity stated.

"Her parents and Oliver would've been so proud of her," Tommy murmured.

Felicity felt a pang in her heart. Oliver was really the one who should be here for Thea today. She knew how much Oliver loved his sister and how upsetting it probably was that he couldn't be a part of one of the most important moments of her life. It was why Felicity was determined to get some great pictures. Even if Oliver couldn't be here himself, Felicity would be sure to capture every moment.

"Yes, they would've," Felicity replied as her spare phone pinged softly. It was no doubt another text from Oliver. Although it was tough to be separated again for weeks at a time, the ability to send him a text or call and hear his voice had vastly improved their situation. They were still very cautious, but they were more connected than they'd ever been.

Felicity checked the message Oliver sent: Might be able to meet u next wknd. Keep u posted.

She smiled and responded: If u can't come to SC, I can come to u. Or meet somewhere neutral.

I'll think about it…and u.

Her heart skipped a beat at the prospect of them getting together again soon. She also couldn't help but giggle at his last message and the heart-eye emoji he'd added at the end of it. If someone had told
her Oliver Queen would actually be sending her any type of message involving actual heart symbols, Felicity would've told them they were crazy. For all she knew, he was in some big Bratva meeting with Anatoly looking all stoic and tough while actually sending sappy text messages.

"What's with the goofy grin?" Tommy inquired.

Felicity's head snapped up at his question. "Huh? Oh, nothing," she quickly covered.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, just a text from a friend." Felicity hated how easy lying had come to her, but it was part of her job. She had to be able to hide information when necessary.

"Must be some friend to make you blush like that."

"I am not blushing," she denied.

Tommy smirked, unconvinced. "Hate to break it to you, sis, but you're not exactly a master of deception. There's something different about you."

"Yes, they're called contact lenses," she joked and pointed to her glasses-free face.

Tommy wasn't deterred. "You know what I mean. I don't know how to explain it."

With a guffaw, Felicity answered, "Tommy, it's nothing major. Work has been better, and I've been hanging out with friends. Plus, it's almost summer. Everyone is in a good mood with this gorgeous weather we've been having." It was true that most things in her life had been going well. There hadn't been any more incidents at A.R.G.U.S.—at least none that she was involved in. Felicity had actually opened up to both Lyla and Mei about her last meeting with Waller. Surprisingly, it had been Oliver who'd suggested that she reach out to someone she trusted at work. He said it couldn't hurt to have others on her side if things did go south again, and Felicity had agreed that it was a smart idea.

The most recent issue the agency was investigating had been a couple of weeks ago. A chemical weapon was intercepted while being delivered to the Markovia base. The transporters' identities were also stolen, and the intruders got in and completely looted the place. There were a couple of casualties, but luckily the majority of agents were unharmed. The agents that hadn't made it were taken down with black arrows like the few times before.

Felicity had been working closely with Curtis lately to follow any cyber leads. The algorithm she'd created to study patterns in anomalies among the prior attacks had found that the bunkers and bases targeted were actually operating on a more advanced security system. There were complex safeguards that controlled not only access in and out of the facilities but to various sectors inside. Each safeguard was unique and would require a higher level of clearance. The duo had been working on a list of bunkers and bases with the same varying security protocols and the probability they'd be targeted. Mei, Barry, and Caitlin were responsible for analyzing and creating countermeasures to protect against further attacks. Felicity felt the familiar itch to be back in the office and helping the team to work on the problem, but another look at Thea in her graduation gown quelled it. There was more to life than just work.

"It's not that," Tommy stated adamantly. "The last time we hung out you were almost giddy happy. There was this glow about you, which seems even more pronounced now. Something is going on."

"I'm with Tommy, honey," Donna interjected. "You are different. Are you seeing someone?"
Great, now her mother was getting involved. "Mom," Felicity groaned, really not liking where this conversation was going.

Unfortunately, her mother was too perceptive for her own good sometimes. Donna might seem like a ditzy blonde, but she was extremely insightful. "Oh my God, you are!" she practically squealed. If it weren't for the loud procession and music drowning her out, it would've been much more embarrassing. "You have to tell me everything. His name, where you two met, how handsome he is, what he does for a living—"

"Mom, slow down," Felicity interjected. "You're babbling worse than me right now." Hearing Tommy chuckling next to her, Felicity turned and glared. "You are not helping."

"And I'm not going to." He grinned impishly. "I want answers just as badly as she does."

"I'm sorry, baby, I'm just so excited. You don't open up to me, hon. I have to force your feelings out of you sometimes like a…" A wave of emotion crossed her beautiful face. "Like a pistachio."

Felicity shook her head in confusion. "What?"

Donna took a deep breath and thankfully managed to stop bouncing in her seat before declaring, "All right. I'm calm. Now spill."

"This isn't the time or the place. We're here for Thea, remember?"

"There's like a gazillion kids ahead of her before she makes it to the stage," Tommy pointed out.

"We have plenty of time," Donna enthusiastically agreed.

Malcolm leaned forward, so that he could see past Donna. "I also wouldn't mind hearing more about your new gentleman caller."

The blonde's jaw was nearly on the ground. She couldn't remember the last time her family had taken such a unanimous interest in her love life. She didn't know whether to be touched or offended by their over-excitement. Was it really that big a deal that she was dating again?

"Fine," Felicity relented. "As long as you never use the words 'gentleman caller' ever again." She knew dodging their questions was futile at this point. However, she couldn't not answer either. It would only make them more curious. She told them the same—albeit shorter and less drama filled—story she'd told Sara. Donna was thoroughly disappointed when she learned that "Aaron" traveled a lot, and she wouldn't be able to meet him right away. Of course Malcolm insisted on seeing a picture of him. Tommy stared in disbelief when Felicity told them he wasn't the selfie or social media type.

"Seems odd that you don't have one picture," Malcolm commented. He had that calculating look in his eyes that he sometimes got. It was a hidden intelligence that gave her the impression he knew more than he was actually saying. It always set Felicity on edge, but she remained firm.

"He's very private."

Tommy's brow scrunched in concern. "But you have met him in person, right? He's not some guy you met online, because that whole catfish thing is totally real and—"

"Yes, I've met him," Felicity assured him. "He is a real person."

"This is fabulous! All I've wanted is for you to be happy, honey. You are happy, right?" her mother made sure. "I know you don't like it when I fuss, but you'll always be my little princess and you
"Yes, I'm very happy." Felicity's smile, this time, was genuine. There was no way to hide the fullness she finally felt in her heart now that she had Oliver back. "He's wonderful. In a million different ways."

Malcolm chuckled and patted Donna's knee. "She sounds totally gone to me, sweetie."

"When he is in town, let me know. I'd really like to meet him. I promise I won't make any overprotective threats—at least not while you're in earshot," Tommy added with a wink.

Blushing from the attention, Felicity nodded to the stage. "Oh look, Thea's row is next." It was a relief when the focus was off of her. Felicity got some really great pictures of Thea accepting her diploma. They cheered as loud as they could, which allowed Thea to find them in the crowd. She gave them a wave, and Tommy let out a high-pitched whistle for good measure.

Afterward, they took more pictures as a family and of Thea with her friends outside of the convention center and near the bay. Felicity didn't think she could get any more emotional until her mother reached into her purse and pulled out a small picture frame. She handed it to Thea, whose eyes immediately started to water.

"I thought a part of them should be here today." The older woman rubbed the young brunette's shoulder. "They would be so proud of you, Thea."

"Thank you, Donna," Thea softly replied with a hug. After wiping at her moist eyes, the brunette motioned for them to take another picture. This time she was holding up a photo of her parents and brother alongside her diploma.

Felicity exchanged an emotional look with Tommy, who'd pulled her into his side, before taking a few more pictures. Malcolm appeared oddly expressionless, but Felicity didn't pay him much attention. It was a deeply thoughtful gesture on her mom's part, and Felicity could see just how much it meant to Thea. Even though they'd accepted Thea into their family years ago, they'd all, Donna especially, had been conscious not to erase her heritage as a Queen.

Once they were done taking pictures, they'd gone out for a celebratory dinner. Throughout the meal, Felicity wrestled with whether or not to send some of the pictures of Thea's graduation to Oliver. She knew how badly he wanted to be there for her, but she also knew that the topic of his sister was sensitive. One of the toughest aspects of his current situation was staying in the shadows and not being a part of her life.

They all returned to the Merlyn manor to go over the finishing touches of Thea's graduation party tomorrow night. Felicity managed to sneak away for a moment. After looking through the pictures, Felicity decided that Oliver deserved to see them. He should know that he was still an important part of Thea's life regardless of the circumstances. Felicity only sent two photos, not wanting to overwhelm him. The first was of Thea on stage getting her diploma. The second was her posing outside with it and the Queen family portrait.

"Felicity," she heard Thea call her from the other room. Her mother and Tommy's loud chatter followed.

"Coming," Felicity called. She put away her phone and brandished a smile. Her family was waiting.

Glancing over the top of the computer monitor, Felicity watched Oliver pace as he talked on the phone with Detective Lance. His voice was low, which she assumed was so he wouldn't distract her.
while she worked. Felicity's fingers continued to type furiously on the keyboard. She'd managed to bypass Robert Queen's passwords to access confidential files and was currently running a search for anything pertaining to the chip. While that was running, Felicity had also gotten into QC's internal network to look up Mark Scheffer's record. She had been instructed by Oliver to send that along to Detective Lance. The authorities and hostage negotiator would need it to build a suitable profile as they figured out the best way to handle the situation.

"I understand," Felicity heard Oliver say before he cut the call. He sighed loudly, running his hand over his face, before rejoining her at his father's desk. "Any luck?"

"We're dealing with a serious whack-a-doo," she informed him. "Scheffer was one of QC's top engineers before suffering a nervous breakdown about five months ago."

Oliver leaned over her to get a better look at the screen. "Do you know what happened?"

"He was sent to a psychologist to be evaluated. Apparently, his wife had left him last year. She'd had an affair, and he was forced to pay alimony despite her indiscretion. Scheffer resented the government after that and started following anti-government militia groups online," Felicity explained. "He also started going off on anti-government tangents at work that made a lot of people uncomfortable. When he found out that QC was negotiating a deal to supply a few federal agencies with the quantum processor, he completely flipped. He attacked another engineer and had to be escorted from the building. Scheffer was formally fired later that day."

"And now he's back to get even," Oliver muttered dejectedly. "I can't believe he got past security."

"As a former employee, it was probably easy. He knows this place inside and out and was aware of what weaknesses to exploit."

"What about the chip?" he questioned and checked his watch. "We only have fifteen more minutes, Felicity."

"Damn it," Felicity cursed in frustration. "I found the product profile, but there's no record of the chip being stored in any of the innovation labs or inventory rooms. When I try to look up the location, all that's indicated is 'North Star' whatever that means."

Oliver felt a sort of déjà vu. "North Star," he repeated. He'd definitely heard it before and wracked his brain. "Oh my God, I know where it is. Come on." Taking her hand, Oliver hauled Felicity up from the desk and led her back to the elevators.

"Oliver, where are we going?" she asked and hurried to keep up.

"The R&D lab on twenty-fifth. There's a modern sculpture hanging on the wall that's been there for years." As soon as the elevator doors opened, Oliver was hurriedly pushing the button to be on their way. "I couldn't figure it out as a kid, and my father said it was an interpretation of Polaris."

"Also known as the North Star," Felicity surmised. She hoped Oliver was right, because time was running out. This was their only viable lead. Needing to keep herself calm and centered, Felicity focused on his hand that was still holding hers. Oliver had been astonishingly levelheaded throughout all of this, and she drew strength from that.

The short elevator ride felt like forever. As soon as the doors opened, Oliver was already towing her along behind him. He took his employee ID out of his pocket and swiped it. The lab door unlocked, and they rushed inside. The sculpture wasn't that far away from the door.

Felicity questioned, "Do you think something is behind it or the sculpture itself is holding the chip?"
"I don't know." Releasing her hand, Oliver felt along the wall. There was a slight crack behind the sculpture, as well as a digital keypad so small it was barely noticeable. "There's definitely something here," he told Felicity and gently took the sculpture off the wall.

"Do you have any idea what the password might be?"

He shook his head. "Not really. I might have a few guesses, but that's it. We've got fifteen minutes, Felicity."

Felicity scanned the various work stations and equipment on them. One station in particular caught her eye, and an idea started to form. She rushed over to the table and grabbed what she'd need.

Oliver, having no idea what she was up to, questioned, "What is that?"

"An electromagnetic wave generator and battery tender," she excitedly informed him. "I can force a restart and reset the password to something of our choosing." Oliver silently watched as Felicity rushed to rig it up. He let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding when it worked and the wall opened up to reveal a bunch of gadgets behind a glass case. Felicity pointed to the top shelf. "That's the chip right there."

Oliver swore when he saw that there was another security key pad they needed to get through—except this one was odd. There were no buttons. "Can you reset this one, too?" They didn't have time to play around.

"No. This is more complicated. It's a bio scanner."

"So what do we do?"

"You," she emphasized, "are going to place your hand on it. You're a Queen. Your father might not have been lying about your clearance."

It was worth a shot. They had too much to lose if Oliver didn't try. With only a slight hesitation, Oliver placed his hand on the scanner. The screen came to life and began analyzing his hand print. Seconds later, ACCESS GRANTED appeared on the screen and the wall of glass slid open.

"Oh my God, it worked," Oliver muttered in shock as Felicity bounced excitedly next to him. He shook his head to clear it before reaching up to take the chip.

"Careful," Felicity cautioned. "It's very delicate."

Oliver found a small, clear plastic box on the nearest table to put it in. He then carefully pocketed it and headed back toward the elevator. "Seven minutes to spare."

"We make a pretty good team," Felicity remarked. They weren't totally in the clear yet but having the actual chip in hand brought some relief.

"Yeah, we do," he placed his hand on her arm. "Thank you, Felicity. I couldn't have done this without you."

"Don't thank me just yet. We still have to bring it to that psycho." Although Shrapnel promised to let everyone go if he got the chip, he was still a literal ticking time bomb. There was no guarantee that he wouldn't hurt anyone out of spite regardless.

"Actually, I'll be bringing it back," Oliver declared while pushing the down button. "You're taking the elevator to the lobby. The SCPD have started to infiltrate the building where they can. Detective
Lance is expecting you."

"What? Oliver, no," Felicity began to protest. "We've come this far. I'm not leaving you."

"Felicity, you've done more than enough. Now you have to leave. I need you out of here," he said forcefully, his expression firm.

The fear she'd felt at having to face their captor again doubled at the thought of letting Oliver go off to confront him alone. "But—"

"We don't have time to argue. Please, Felicity," Oliver pleaded. "The SCPD has a plan. Even if they didn't, my father is in there. So I need to go back but not you. You can get out." He leaned in close and brought his hand up to cup her cheek. "I can't do what I have to do if I'm worried about your safety. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Felicity whispered while blinking back tears. It felt like someone was tearing her heart out. Her eyes momentarily closed when he brushed his thumb along her cheekbone. "Oliver, please be careful."

"I will."

Felicity's eyes searched his. She could see the determination, as well as the sliver of fear, for what he had to do next reflecting back at her. There was no time for him to explain Detective Lance's plan to her, but she had to hope that it was the best option that would keep Oliver and everyone else safe. Nevertheless, there was no way to completely eradicate her own panic about leaving him. What if something did go wrong and this was the last time they'd see each other?

Before Felicity realized what she was doing, she leaned up on her tiptoes and closed the small gap between them. Oliver stood absolutely still, probably just as shocked at her actions as she was. The kiss only lasted for a couple of seconds, but it was enough to make her entire body tremble with emotion.

Felicity had barely started to pull away when Oliver's hands unexpectedly gripped her waist and drew her flush against him. Her gasp was silenced by his mouth on hers. Oliver's lips were softer than she'd expected—like two pillow mountains both tender and resilient as they consumed her. Instinctively, Felicity threw her arms around his neck to bring him closer. The dreamlike quality of the moment was only offset by the urgency as they fiercely sought the connection they'd otherwise been trying so hard to deny.

The second kiss ended as quickly as it started when the elevator finally pinged and the doors slid open. Oliver tore himself away from her with a little more force than was necessary. She would've been hurt if not for the storm raging in his brilliant blue eyes. He cupped her face one last time, looking over her features as if to commit them to memory. Then he silently guided her into the elevator and pushed the button for the lobby.

It was impossible to keep the tears at bay as Felicity watched the elevator doors close, separating him from her completely. It was a physical pain deep in her gut, and all too soon she'd reached the bottom floor. As Oliver had said, the SCPD was already down there. After verifying her identity, they escorted her out of the building and to Detective Lance. He asked if she was okay and for any other details she could provide him about the situation they were facing. Felicity, in turn, asked him what exactly he expected Oliver to do. The detective expertly dodged the question and motioned behind him. A large crowd of media and bystanders had gathered outside of the perimeter set up by the police and SWAT team. On the edge of the police tape stood her mother, Tommy, and Laurel.
They shouted her name, and she went to them. Her mother wasted no time enveloping her into a bone-crushing hug. "Oh, my beautiful girl. You're safe! I came as soon as I heard. I'm so relieved you're okay, baby."

"Where's Oliver?" another female voice demanded. It was Moira Queen. It came as no surprise to Felicity that she was on the inside of the police tape. QC was her family's company, which probably allowed her to be much more involved in the events unfolding. Despite the obvious concern in her tone, she looked completely composed. "Detective Lance informed me that he'd gotten out."

"He did, but Mr. Queen is with the other hostages," Felicity explained. "Oliver refused to leave without his father."

"How did you escape then?" Tommy asked.

"Oliver promised to get the bomber what he wanted and told him he needed my help," she said while trying to wipe away the tears continuing to fall. "He saved my life."

"Thank God he did," Donna murmured and gave the young brunette another squeeze.

"If he goes back empty-handed without that chip..." Moira muttered.

"He's not. We got it."

The Queen matriarch's head snapped in her direction. "You did? How? That level of security—"

"We took care of it." Her voice came out much stronger than she actually felt.

"Of course you did," Donna proudly proclaimed. "My girl's a genius."

"What exactly does Oliver think he can do against two gunmen and a bomber?" Laurel interjected.

Felicity shrugged, feeling sick once again at having to let him go alone. "All he told me was that the SCPD had a plan."

"He should've gone with you. Robert would've understood." Moira glanced at Detective Lance shrewdly. "I want to know exactly what it is my son was talked into doing."

The older woman never got the chance to find out. The sound of gunfire echoed from above, and then there was a loud, fiery explosion. It shook the entire area, and people started screaming as broken glass and burning debris began to fall. Felicity looked up to see smoke and flames emanating from the top floor, and her entire body filled with terror. Shrapnel had detonated his bomb.
In Another Life

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you all so much for your comments and kudos! Also a big thank you to those of you who reached out and tagged me for Fanfic Writers' Appreciation Day! It means a lot. I hope you guys enjoy this chapter. It's got lots of Olicity goodies in it. Let me know what you think!

June 15, 2012

Oliver left the council meeting as stoically as he'd entered. It had taken great effort to sit quietly and not check his watch every few minutes. Each member had given an update that felt twice as long as usual. It was probably due to the steady progression of the plan, which no one actually knew in full. Everyone had their parts to play, and each facet had to be in place if it was going to succeed. Oliver presented the intel he'd received. As Malcolm had promised, no one knew the source nor felt compelled to ask. All they knew was that Oliver was under special orders from the leader himself.

He'd nearly made it out of the compound when he heard someone call out his name. The sound of her voice made Oliver curse under his breath. He'd expertly managed to dodge Isabel for most of the week that she'd been in town until now. Begrudgingly, Oliver turned to face her. "What do you want?"

"Well, hello to you, too," Isabel drawled in her signature cool voice. She was dressed in a sleek black pantsuit with black heels. Her displeasure with him was evident by her folded arms and the stern expression on her face.

Undeterred, Oliver replied, "I have somewhere to be, Isabel, and I'm running late."

"You've been avoiding me."

"I've been busy."

"In case you've forgotten, you still have responsibilities with the Bratva," Isabel reminded him. "Anatoly tasked me to inspect our current holdings in the various chapters, and he expects you to accompany me."

"Fine," Oliver huffed, impatient. He needed to get on the road now if he was going to meet Felicity on time. "When?"

"I'm visiting our associates in Hub City tomorrow afternoon."

Oliver was on alert at the mention of Hub City. It was the same place Felicity had asked him to meet her. It could be a mere coincidence, but Oliver had learned not to overlook anything over the years. "Why Hub City?"

"Anatoly said it would be the most convenient location for you this weekend," Isabel answered, looking none too pleased that her schedule was being dictated because of him.
"Why would he say that?" Oliver made sure to keep a straight face despite the trepidation he felt. He had never mentioned to Anatoly that he was traveling to Hub City.

Isabel watched him carefully, no doubt looking for any signs of weakness, and said, "Since you're operating under special orders, Anatoly checked with Malcolm. He said you'd be there."

Oliver bit back a curse. He hadn't wanted to tell Malcolm about Hub City in the first place, but he hadn't had a choice. Status reports were mandatory to keep track of his progress. Not providing the information would have dire consequences. "Fine. Where am I meeting you?"

"In your hotel." She smiled like a cat about to capture a mouse. "I'll be staying there, as well."

Well, this situation was progressively getting worse. He couldn't believe that Malcolm would tell Isabel where he was staying, especially since Oliver planned to be with Felicity the entire time. Isabel would most definitely recognize Felicity if she saw her and know that something was up. How could Malcolm put his own stepdaughter in danger like that? They were going to have a serious talk the next time they met, and Oliver was going to try very hard not to put an arrow in the careless bastard's eye.

Isabel leaned in close. Her voice was low and seductive as she looked up at him through her long lashes. "We should do drinks tonight and catch up." Her finger trailed along the open collar of his shirt. "In fact, we should have them in your room and save ourselves a step."

Oliver, just barely hiding his disgust, swiped her hand away and took a step back. "I've already got plans," he informed her evenly. "Besides, this is business, Isabel. Nothing more."

She was quick to mask the anger from his rejection. Her dark eyes smoldered again. "Business and pleasure have always gone hand in hand with us."

Oliver wanted to point out that "pleasure" was a really loose term when it applied to them but knew better than to provoke her. Isabel could get vindictive, and he wouldn't risk any type of retaliation with Felicity so close by. With a resolute shake of his head, Oliver declared. "Not anymore." He turned his back on her and left the compound. Diggle was waiting out front with the car.

Unfortunately, Isabel was hot on his heels. With a glance at who was in the backseat, her eyes narrowed. "Busy, huh?" she reiterated in an acerbic tone. "Is this why you've been ignoring me lately?" She glared at the redhead, who just smiled smugly back at her through the window. "Are you back to fucking Helena now?"

"So what if I am?" Oliver countered. If Isabel believed the lie, then maybe it would get her off of his back. He continued before she could protest further. "Spare me the jilted lover act, Isabel. We both know you wouldn't give a damn if not for my looming ascension to the council." Oliver knew he was nothing more than an opportunity for her to elevate her status in the organization and seize more power.

"Maybe so," Isabel admitted. "But that doesn't change the fact that I'm the one you need by your side. Helena may have fire but deep down you know she's nothing more than a wounded little girl seeking her father's approval. You need a grown woman who knows strategy and will show no mercy to your enemies. It's the only way you'll be taken seriously."

"I don't need anyone," Oliver forcefully snapped, even as an image of Felicity flashed into his mind. "We'll meet in the hotel lobby at two. Until then, stay out of my way." He turned his back on Isabel before she could reply and swiftly took his seat next to Helena.
"What was that about?" Helena questioned as Diggle began to drive.

His anger still simmering, Oliver sighed, "Just Isabel being Isabel."

"So a ruthless psychotic bitch then," Helena surmised.

"Pretty much."

Sensing he needed a subject change, the redhead inquired, "Did you learn anything new during the council meeting today?"

"Nothing that can help us pinpoint what exactly we're preparing for, no." Oliver shifted in his seat and flinched. They'd gone on another raid last night. A.R.G.U.S. had been beefing up its security measures even more as of late, and Oliver had the bruises to prove it. He wasn't looking forward to Felicity seeing them, because he hated upsetting her. Although their late-night calls and constant texts had made their separation more bearable, Oliver knew she would never stop worrying about him. "You guys dig up anything with those leads?"

"No," Diggle answered. "Either they don't know or they're too scared, but no one is talking."

"Which isn't all that surprising," Helena grumbled.

"We just have to keep trying." Oliver rubbed his temple. He could feel a headache coming on. "Something has to slip eventually. By the way, Dig, there's been a change of plans. I need you to book a hotel room in Hub City."

Diggle glanced in the rearview mirror at Oliver. "What for?"

"Menage a troi?" said the redhead with a sardonic lift of her brow.

Oliver rolled his eyes. "No. Anatoly wants Isabel and I to meet with our Bratva associates there tomorrow. Malcolm told her the damn hotel, so she'll be staying there, too. I need you to cover for me if Isabel comes looking."


Ignoring her teasing, Oliver silently pleaded with his partner. Dig nodded in agreement with an exasperated huff. "You owe me though."

Oliver wasn't totally relieved, but the majority of his worry dissipated. "I know. Thank you."

"Now that that's settled," Helena instructed, "Dig, drop me off at Giovanni's. I have a dinner date with another one of my father's chauvinistic clients."

It was then that Oliver noticed her fancy dress and accentuated makeup. He'd been so engrossed in the Felicity/Isabel situation that he'd completely overlooked her attire. No wonder Isabel had bristled so visibly. She must've thought he and Helena were going on a date tonight.

"Who's your father trying to swindle now?"

"I don't know. Some construction guys on the big man's orders," Helena muttered. "No getting out of it. I'll be glad when it's over."

Oliver's phone buzzed. Sure enough, it was Felicity saying that she'd arrived at the hotel and inquiring about where he was. He told her to get settled in the room, and he'd be there as soon as he could.
"Let me guess, Juliet is wondering where you are right now," Helena tsked. "You're losing your touch, Romeo."

"I wasn't expecting the meeting to run so long. And I told you to stop calling us that."

Helena shrugged, unfazed. "Star-crossed lovers fighting to be together in spite of their warring agencies? Seems highly appropriate to me. Right, Dig?"

Diggle remained quiet, but Oliver could see his hands tightening on the steering wheel at the comparison. It was yet another misfortune they had in common.

"They also died," Oliver pointed out.

They arrived at the restaurant. Helena glared at the ornate building and played with the silver cross hanging from around her neck. She leveled Oliver with a dark, somber look before getting out. "Some fates are worse than death. Remember that."

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Cursing under his breath, Oliver arrived at the Ostrander Hotel over an hour late. He told Diggle to text him his room number after he was checked in. Felicity had already messaged Oliver their room number earlier, and so he had headed straight for the elevators. He'd found room 1141 rather easily, since it wasn't that far down the hall.

Oliver took a moment to calm himself before knocking. He didn't want Felicity to pick up on any tension. She deserved to have his full attention. Letting go of his earlier frustrations from the council meeting and Isabel, Oliver was surprised by the small strand of nervousness he felt. It could've been from the knowledge that Isabel and some of her Bratva goons were in the same hotel as Felicity, but he quickly dismissed it. His nerves had nothing to do with Isabel and everything to do with Felicity herself. Despite being in constant contact, it had been a few weeks since they'd actually seen each other and had that talk about their relationship. Being officially together again made this latest rendezvous somehow feel different and more significant.

Taking off his baseball cap and tucking it in his overnight bag, Oliver knocked on the door. His nervous energy spiked at the sound of her approaching footsteps. After fiddling with the lock, the door opened. A beaming smile greeted him from the inside, which Oliver felt compelled to match.

"Hi," she said, managing to sound both eager and breathless.

"Hi," Oliver replied, taking her in. Felicity stood barefoot in the doorway wearing a pale pink silk bathrobe. Her glasses were off and her blond hair cascaded elegantly over her shoulders. She had on minimal makeup, though her lips were tinged an enticing berry pink. "I'm sorry I'm late."

"It's okay." She stepped aside to let him in, and Oliver paused. The hotel room she'd booked wasn't a room at all. It was an actual suite with ornate paneling and wallpaper. They stood in the foyer that branched off into two separate rooms. Oliver saw a couch and coffee table in the living room to the left. To the right, he could just barely make out the edge of a bed and French doors that led to a balcony overlooking the city.

"I planned to leave earlier, but I got held up." He leaned down to kiss her cheek once the door was closed.

"Really, it's fine," Felicity reassured him. "It gave me a chance to settle in."
His gaze couldn't help but linger on her bathrobe. He could see the outline of her breasts and pert nipples through the thin fabric. The opening at the chest dipped low and showed more exposed skin. Oliver swallowed hard, his body immediately reacting to the realization that Felicity probably had nothing on underneath. "I can see that."

She flushed at his comment before sidling up to him. Her smile was a mixture of confidence and coyness. "Do you want the grand tour?"

With his free hand, Oliver gripped the lapels of her bathrobe and drew her forward. His fingers were already itching to touch her. Oliver left a lingering peck on her lips. "Sure."

Felicity took his hand and quickly showed him the living room. They then made their way into the master bedroom. The plush, king-sized bed faced the balcony doors. A chaise lounge and small Victorian-style table were next to it. There was a large closet on the left side of the room and a fancy dresser by the bathroom to the right. Oliver thought he heard the faint sound of music emanating from somewhere and scrutinized the space further.

"So, what do you think?"

Oliver dropped his travel bag by the closet. "It's great. I wasn't expecting anything so elaborate. Don't take this the wrong way, but how'd you manage to afford this?" While he appreciated the gesture, Oliver didn't want Felicity wasting her hard-earned money on him—especially when he was perfectly fine with the simpler things in life.

"Actually, it's free. My agency keeps a standing reservation at this hotel for very important assets." She caressed his chest and looked up at him through her long lashes. "It wasn't being used this weekend, and so I booked it for us," she explained. "And before you get all growly and panicked, I've already hacked into the security cameras in this place. My facial recognition software is scrubbing anyone in the video feed that looks remotely like us. It'll look like a glitch in the system if anyone ever reviews the footage."

Oliver slid his fingers along her back. Feeling no ridges underneath, Oliver knew for sure that Felicity was naked beneath that robe. His girl didn't waste any time, and it served to turn him on even more. "Did I ever tell you how sexy you are when you're being a rebel hacker?"

"Not recently," she teased back, glowing at the compliment. "Come on, I'll show you the bathroom."

He traced the delicate curve of her spine and huskily replied, "I'm good in here." Felicity was so small compared to him and yet she thrummed with more live energy than he probably experienced in years. Whenever Oliver was with her, it was like a switch inside him had been flipped. She was a shock to his system, and his worries minutes before were cast aside. All he could see, all he wanted, was her.

Felicity gave him a puckish grin before tugging him towards the bathroom anyway. "I really think you'll want to see this."

The soft music he'd heard got louder as they entered the dimly lit bathroom. Like the rest of the suite, it was lavish and spacious. The sink counters were marble, and the tiles along the floor and walls had fancy gold patterns. There was a large glass shower that could easily fit more than two people, but it was the giant tub where Oliver's eyes lingered.

There were a couple of small steps that led up to the marble tub built into the wall. It was already filled and full of bubbles. The space around it was set up with small lit candles. There was also a couple of glasses of wine and a fruit and cheese plate off to the side. The music seemed to be coming...
from some control on the wall above it.

"So what do you think?" Felicity cuddled up against his arm and leaned her chin on his shoulder, looking up at him.

"I think this is the best room yet," he quipped. "But you didn't need to do all of this for me."

"Nonsense. I wanted to," the blonde asserted. Felicity had gotten to the room a little earlier than she'd told Oliver to meet her so that she could set up. She was actually relieved when he'd told her he was running late. It was important that everything was perfect. In a way, meeting at the hotel felt like their first reunion all over again. Except this time there was no uncertainty plaguing them. It felt like a fresh start. They could finally just be them. "You're always spoiling me. I think my boyfriend deserves a little surprise in return."

Oliver slid his arm around her waist and turned into her. "You have no idea how good it is to hear you say that."

"What? Boyfriend?" Her hand caressed his cheek while the other rested over his heart. Standing on her tiptoes, Felicity pressed a whisper of a kiss against his lips. "Not as good as actually saying it." She motioned to the tub and tugged on his jacket. "Let's test out those jets. You look like you've had a long day."

That was an understatement, and so Oliver followed her cue. He started to get undressed. As he'd predicted, Felicity immediately noticed the bruises on his torso and gasped. "Oliver—"

"It looks a lot worse than it is," he interjected and gave her an encouraging squeeze. "I promise."

Knowing Felicity, she was probably bursting with questions about how exactly he'd gotten those bruises. She stayed silent, though, and nodded in response. They'd agreed to overlook that part of their lives when they were together, but Oliver didn't miss the way she worriedly gnawed on her bottom lip. He reached out to remove it and smooth it over with his thumb. Felicity's eyes darkened from the intimate gesture. Not stopping, he reached lower to the knot at her waist. Without looking away, Oliver pulled until it came undone. Oliver took another step forward, invading what was left of Felicity's personal space, and slid the silky material apart and down her body.

Felicity couldn't seem to catch her breath as she stood open and bare before Oliver. He hungrily took her in before leaning down to claim her mouth. Instinctively, her body melted into him. A wanton moan, deep in her throat, escaped when his muscular arms enveloped her. Oliver's skin was already hot and a little sweaty from the steam in the bathroom, and she clung to him in an effort to feed her own fire burning inside of her.

His lips ventured to her neck, and she gave a little mewl of protest when his hands left her. Felicity quickly realized it was to undo his jeans. Her fingers dug into his shoulders when he found that spot along her pulse point. Oliver had barely gotten his jeans unzipped and pulled down before she was rubbing herself up against him like one of those feral cats.

Oliver groaned into her skin as his hand possessively cupped her backside. He yanked her up into his arms and flush against his growing erection. Felicity panted his name against his ear and shifted so that her center was rubbing along his shaft. Nothing but the thin fabric of his boxers separated them, and already they were soaked from her. She kissed him fervently, and Oliver's tongue delved seductively inside—a preview of what was to come.

"Oliver, honey, if we don't stop," Felicity muttered absently, still grinding on top of him, "we're never going to make it in that bath."
Oliver bobbed his head in agreement and sucked on the tip of her tongue that had slid into his mouth. "Once I'm inside you, I'm not going to stop for the rest of the night."

*Oh the promises,* she mused and had to forcibly yank herself away from him. As badly as Felicity wanted Oliver to take her right now, she really had put a lot of effort into making this romantic moment for them. With one last chaste kiss, Felicity wiggled out of his embrace and quickly headed for the tub. If he got his hands on her again before she hit the water, it'd be all over.

Felicity grabbed the hair tie by her glass of wine and proceeded to put her hair up in a bun. She then sunk into the hot water and soothing bubbles, for which her aroused body was grateful. "You coming?"

"Not yet," she heard him grumble and bit back a giggle. Oliver looked like a petulant child who'd been about to devour his favorite cookie before it was swiped out of his hand. He tossed his boxers aside and joined Felicity in the bath. The hot water instantly eased his sore muscles as he fought to get his body back under control.

Felicity started to move to the opposite end of the tub when Oliver tugged her toward him. She let out a mild protest, not wanting to lean on his bruises. Oliver assured her that it was fine as he positioned her between his legs. Felicity leaned back to rest against his chest with her head tucked into the crook of his neck. Despite the unfulfilled sexual energy still coursing between them, not touching each other at all would be worse. His presence made her feel protected but free.

With a clink of their glasses, they sipped their wine and settled comfortably into each other. Oliver nearly groaned out loud when Felicity turned on the jets. His muscles had felt taut for days, and the force of the bubbles unwound the knots nicely. Of course, having Felicity back in his arms was also a relief. He wound his arms around her torso, pressed a kiss to her temple, and closed his eyes. Finally, he could relax.

It was minutes later that she eventually broke the silence. "God, I love cheese."

Oliver's eyes snapped open. "What?" he chuckled at her random outburst.

"Cheese. I love it," Felicity declared while reaching for a few more squares and some grapes. She was a lot hungrier than she'd initially thought, and she loved the taste of them with the wine. Popping a piece of cheddar into her mouth, Felicity continued, "Did you know that it's actually physically addictive? There's this protein called casein that it's made with and it acts like an opiate when you digest…"

Grinning, Oliver listened to her ramble about the addictive power of cheese. Felicity was so adorable when she was being a total geek. "Do I get any cheese?" he interrupted. The plate was more near her than him.

"Well, I suppose I could share," she teased with a dramatic sigh. "You know, since I love you and all."

"That's very generous of you," Oliver agreed and leaned forward to eat the square she held out for him. He took the opportunity to playfully nibble on her finger, eliciting a delighted shriek.

"Oliver!"

"What? I couldn't resist. I have a smoaked cheese addiction."

She laughed. "Clever. Look at you cracking a joke."
"It has been known to happen from time to time."

They were quiet for a moment, and Felicity sighed in contentment. "This is nice, isn't it? Being together and happy."

"Yeah," Oliver agreed. "I'd almost forgotten what it's like."

Felicity ran her fingers along his forearm and tentatively replied, "You haven't exactly been bursting with happy stories." Oliver's various scars and his lack of a permanent home were evidence enough.

"Not since before the Gambit…when I was with you." Oliver pressed his lips to her shoulder. "Despite everything that went on back then, I was the happiest I'd ever been."

"Me, too." Felicity noticed his hand on the edge of the tub. Oliver was rubbing his fingers together in that pensive way of his. Reaching out, she took hold of them. "I know we can't go back, but do you ever think about where we'd be if you hadn't gone on the Gambit?"

"Yes. Probably more than I should've."

"So where would we be right now?" she asked curiously while playing with his fingers and tracing a pattern in the palm of his hand.

Oliver was hesitant to speak at first. Just like with telling Felicity he loved her, Oliver had never voiced what he'd once wanted out of their future in fear of losing it. Then again, that part of their lives was already lost. "I think we'd be right where we are now. Same hotel. Same setup. Same cheese addiction," he lightly joked, making her laugh softly. "But we wouldn't have just snuck off because of work. We'd probably be celebrating."

"Celebrating what?"

"An anniversary."

"But our anniversary of when we got together isn't in June," Felicity absently pointed out. She stared at their flirting hands. Oliver's was so much bigger and rougher against hers. Felicity loved the contrast and how they were a perfect fit regardless.

His voice lowered. "It wouldn't be when we first got together."

Her hand paused in its ministrations. "What do you mean? If it wasn't that, then what else would we be…?" Felicity's mind worked overtime to translate what he was saying. Her eyes widened and she shifted a bit to the side to look up at him. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Looking at her intently, Oliver nodded. "You seem surprised. It's not like we'd never talked about it."

"I know we talked about a future together but…wait, what are we talking about? Because I've got about five different scenarios in my head, and the one I'm jumping to might not be it and I don't want to assume something that's not—"

Oliver intertwined their left hands and held them up. He couldn't believe they were talking about this. Now that he'd started, he couldn't stop. There wasn't much he could give her in this life, but he could at least give her the dream of what could've been. "If I'd never gone on the Gambit and things had progressed between us like I thought they might, then there most definitely would be a ring on your finger right now."

Felicity felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her. Her head spun as she stared at their hands
and tried to imagine what it would look like. "Holy frack," she whispered. Despite the utter shock she was experiencing, she was desperate to hear more. "When would you have…?" She was having an extremely hard time forming coherent sentences.

"Definitely after you graduated from MIT. I probably would've waited a year or two for us to get settled somewhere first."

"We'd be in Starling," Felicity said with surety, finally finding her voice and joining in on the game of "what if." "I never told you this, but I kinda loved the idea of working at QC with you. Of course if you didn't want to work for your family's company, I would've supported that, too. I know how much the expectation of that bothered you."

"It did bother me—until you. I wasn't sure if I could do it, but you made me feel like I could. It was strange because I was with Laurel for two years and every time she mentioned our future and me as CEO, I panicked. Actually, I didn't just panic. I acted out and became the worst version of myself. Then I met you. You definitely weren't part of the plan, and yet I could see a future with you so clearly. Even better, you didn't try to make me into something I wasn't. There was a freedom with you I never had before. It was one of the many reasons I fell in love with you."

"So we'd be engaged," Felicity murmured almost wistfully as he placed a few affectionate kisses along her neck. After everything that had happened with her father and Cooper, her younger self hadn't been sure if she ever wanted to get married. There was no doubt in her mind that, over time, Oliver would've changed that. Unfortunately, it took years of being without him for her to reach the same conclusion.

Oliver smiled against her skin. "Actually, if we followed the current timeline, we'd already be married."

She quirked an eyebrow. "Oh really? So a short engagement?"

"Mm hmm," he confidently confirmed. Oliver wrapped his other arm around her and brought her more firmly against him while kissing a trail back up her neck. Felicity shifted to give him better access, which he took full advantage of. "I wouldn't have been able to wait that long."

"Why do I get the feeling you've already picked out a theme and venue?" she joked, though it came out breathy from all his kisses.

"That would be all you. You'd have whatever you want. Although I'm sure our moms and Thea would've had plenty of ideas."

Felicity groaned at that, which also could've been a result of the way Oliver was sucking on the spot behind her ear. "Oh no, mister, you would not get to just show up. If I had to suffer our mothers, so would you."

He chuckled, "Fair enough."

"So working together at QC, then engaged, and married…sounds like the perfect life," she hummed and turned her face so their lips grazed.

"Almost perfect," Oliver quietly replied and fixed her with another intense look. At her inquisitive stare, he elaborated, "It would probably be a few more years before we had kids."

Felicity nearly choked on her response. "Kids? Nuh uh, no way. I'm way too young to have kids." She loved children but the thought of being a mom so young hadn't crossed her mind—then or now. The fact that this was something Oliver had actually thought about melted her heart and terrified her
all at the same time.

He grinned in amusement at her flabbergasted reaction. "Like I said, it'd be a few years. Plenty of time to convince you for a little girl," he jested and pecked her lips.

She was even more shocked. Seriously, how much wine had she drank tonight? She had to be imagining this. "A girl?"

"Yup. A girl with your curly blond hair and smile."

"Well, hypothetically—because I am totally not saying I'm going along with this—maybe I want a boy with your eyes and dimples."

"You also have dimples," he was quick to point out.

"But I like yours better."

Oliver laughed out loud and shook his head. "Whatever you want."

"I think it's what Mother Nature wants, Oliver, and we should really stop talking about this," Felicity warned. "No need to give her any ideas."

"Then I guess it's a good thing this is all hypothetical," he told her. "You didn't technically say yes to my proposal anyway."

Joking aside, there was something in Oliver's voice that gave her pause. They'd been wistfully dreaming and teasing each other over what could've been. It had been reassuring of the depth of their feelings for each other—until now. Glancing up at him, the somber, uncertain look in Oliver's eyes had returned. There was an underlying truth to everything they'd shared, and she wondered if her last objection had unsettled him.

Felicity flipped over so that she could look directly at him. Gripping his shoulders, she pulled herself up so they were more level. "I love you." Leaving no room for doubts, she sealed it with a kiss and said, "If you asked me, I would say yes."

Not missing how she'd actually phrased it in the present tense, Oliver felt the depth of Felicity's declaration all the way down to his bones. It wasn't good for either of them to dwell too long on what might've been; those memories were for another lifetime. Nevertheless, hearing from Felicity that there was still a chance that they could get even a piece of that happiness was enough to give him hope.

"I think we should dry off," Oliver huskily replied. Felicity was pressed so tightly against him that she no doubt felt his growing arousal. He didn't think there'd be any stopping this time. It wasn't just want. It was a fierce need that left his body throbbing.

Felicity, feeling her own desire spark to life, eagerly agreed and shut off the jets. She grabbed a set of towels for them as they got out of the tub. They'd barely used them before their damp bodies collided. Felicity moaned loudly as Oliver ravaged her mouth. His hard muscles were rubbing deliciously against her pebbled breasts as the unsated passion from earlier exploded between them.

Oliver reached for Felicity's hair tie, and the golden locks fell in delicate waves around her face and over her shoulders. They reminded Oliver of sunshine and his fingertips yearned to bury themselves in the silky strands. Secure in his grip, Oliver walked Felicity back until they'd reached his pile of clothes on the bathroom floor. She let out a hushed whimper in protest when he broke away to grab his jeans. He dug into his pocket in search of his wallet. All the while, Felicity was grinding up
against him enticingly and leaving open-mouthed kisses along his chest.

More than a little distracted, Oliver finally managed to get his hands on the small square foil inside. "Got it." He then leaned down, placing his arm under her knees, and swept her up in his arms. Felicity clung to him, smiling against his lips.

Oliver walked her over to the large king-sized bed and gently placed her down in the center. Her hold on him tightened for a moment as her lips moved fervently against his. It was like she couldn't get enough of him, and it was a struggle he knew all too well himself. Felicity moved with him as he pulled back until finally her hold was broken. He chuckled low in his throat at her eagerness. "One sec, baby. Then I'm all yours." He went to tear the foil when he felt her small, soft hand halting him.

Felicity was up on her knees at the edge of the bed in an effort to meet his eyes, though he still had a few inches over her. Oliver stared curiously back at her, and her body was screaming at the pause. Clenching her thighs together to alleviate some of the ache, Felicity took a steadying breath. It was one thing to indulge a thought in her head and a complete other to actually say it out loud. A small tremor ran through her body as her nerves kicked in. She wasn't entirely sure what Oliver's response would be.

"What is it?" Oliver questioned. Felicity was back to biting her lip, but something was different. He could sense that she was nervous, but it wasn't an anxious nervous. To his surprise, Felicity actually looked somewhat shy. "Are you okay?" He put his free hand in the curve of her waist.

"I'm fine," she was quick to answer. "I just…um…" Felicity let out another exhale before glancing up at him. "You know how the last time I said I wanted us to be close." She eyed their naked bodies and actually blushed. "Well, obviously we're already close. I meant the other close—like emotionally."

"Yeah," he responded, at a total loss for where she was taking this.

"Okay, so I've been thinking about it a lot and—well, the thing is—" she stuttered. Felicity ordered herself to get it together before he started looking at her like she was insane. "I've only ever slept with you and we were always so careful, which was definitely a good thing, and I know you haven't only slept with me so maybe this isn't new for you but I just thought that maybe we could try it but if you—"

He cupped her cheek to calm her. "Felicity, sweetheart, just tell me what you want," he tenderly yet firmly interjected.

"I don't want to use this," the blonde said and shook his hand with the condom in it. Felicity wanted to kick herself. Why the hell couldn't she say it outright? She was a grown woman. There was no need to be embarrassed to say it—although if he rejected her then she'd admittedly feel downright mortified.

"The condom?"

Felicity nodded. "I'm not saying no protection, because that would be totally insane. I'm on birth control, too, because we sure as hell don't need any more surprises in our lives. But I love you, and I feel like I'm ready for that kind of intimacy with you. We already have to keep secrets, and I don't want anything else between us. Does that sound crazy?" Oliver's eyebrows were nearly to his hairline. "Oh my God, you do think I'm crazy. Forget it. It was stupid. I don't know what I was—"

She didn't get a chance to finish her anxious rant. Oliver leaned down to seize her lips in a tender, earth-shattering kiss that actually made her weak in the knees. "Nothing about you is stupid,
Felicity," Oliver murmured once they broke apart. "And I might be more"—he searched for the right word—"experienced" but I've never done that either. I've always been thoroughly cautious, and I've gotten tested just in case and I'm fine. The only person I would want to be with like that is you. I only trust you."

Relief flooded her. "Really?"

"Yes, of course. I love you." He grazed her lips, all the while looking at her with those sultry, piercing blue eyes. "Which selfishly makes me want all of you."

Felicity met his smoldering stare with one of her own. "It's not selfish if you're taking what's always been yours." She swallowed his deep groan with another string of enticing kisses. Reaching for the square foil in his hand, Felicity tossed it aside and began to guide him down on the bed with her. The need to feel connected to Oliver in every way possible had become a physical longing.

Their frenzied kisses from moments ago became languid but no less intense. To say Oliver was shocked by her request would be an understatement. It wasn't because he hadn't thought about it himself. He loved Felicity and he would never pressure her into something, but there was also an instinctive, possessive part of him that wanted to claim her on a carnal level. That wanted to feel what she was really like, because no one else had. That wanted to leave a piece of himself inside of her even after they had to go their separate ways. Knowing that Felicity felt that same desperate need for him was sexy as hell and almost made him lose it right then and there.

Wrapped in each other's arms, they stayed kneeling on the bed kissing for long minutes. Every inch of Felicity was on fire, but they took their time to savor the moment and each other. The feeling of his erection pressed against her stomach and what was to come increased her own arousal. Her walls naturally contracted in anticipation as his hands roamed her body. Hers did the same while her mind spun. Oliver drove her absolutely crazy, and it was the only time in her life Felicity relished not being in control.

Slowly and without breaking their kiss, Oliver eased Felicity into the mattress and tugged her beneath him. He settled on top of her, feeling an incredible sense of contentment mixed with restlessness. Being with Felicity was like coming home, but he wasn't quite there yet. Only when he made love to her, joining them completely, would he be at peace.

Both their lips were red and swollen when they finally took a breath. Their desperate pants mingled, and their bodies trembled. They'd held off long enough. Foreheads touching, eyes locked, Oliver positioned himself at her entrance. Felicity pressed a delicate hand to his cheek and nodded, spurring him on with an alluring smile. It was all the assent Oliver needed to take that next, final step between them.

Their sharp, heady moans echoed in the room as Oliver filled her inch by inch. The hot slickness of her walls pulling him in and tightening, as always fitting him perfectly, had him burying his face in her neck. This was it. Them. Just them. The new sensation already had his spine tingling as he began to move.

Felicity met his every thrust. The bare, skin on skin, connection was reinforced everywhere they touched. Oliver throttled like a livewire inside of her, his imposing size and sheer force of movement all the more enhanced. Their kisses were passionate and visceral but remained unhurried. Felicity gripped his shoulders, lifting her hips, surrendering her body, her heart, her soul, her everything to him all the while claiming his in return.

Oliver groaned as she arched more fully into him, and he pressed back harder. There were a lot things he wished he could change. A lot of things he'd done wrong in his life and would probably
end up paying for. But Felicity wasn't one of them. He didn't know how he'd managed to get such a smart, kind, and beautiful woman like her to love him. He would probably never know. But if he even had a chance at glimpsing heaven, she was it.

"I love you, Felicity. I've always loved you," he murmured against her lips. It was the first time since they'd reunited that he'd said that to her while in the throes of passion, and it wouldn't be the last. She deserved more. So much more than what he'd been giving her.

The buildup of heightened pleasure and emotion swirled inside of her, taking Felicity to the edge. "I love you, too, Oliver." She broke the kiss to look up at him. His crystal blue eyes were dark with a love and desire she didn't think she could even describe. "You're it for me."

"No matter what happens, I'm no one's but yours," Oliver grunted, quickening their pace. "Do you understand?" Felicity nodded absently, but he didn't think she had fully grasped the meaning or urgency behind his words. He didn't care. More than anything, he just needed to say it. Her head was thrown back against the pillows as she sought the release only he could give her.

Several more deep, powerful thrusts later and they both cried out. Their bodies hitched in climax as his essence spilled inside of her. Oliver's hold on her was like a vice grip, and Felicity gripped him just as tightly. They writhed together until there was nothing left, and they were both spent.

"Was that enough of a yes for you?" Felicity huffed teasingly, referencing their earlier conversation. Oliver was still on top of her with his weight a little more than she was used to bearing. And yet, she felt absolutely no urge to move. She'd stay like that forever with him if she could.

Oliver choked out a laugh—only she could turn such an intense moment into something amusing—and leaned down to kiss her. "It's a start."
Thank you to everyone who took the time to comment and leave kudos last chapter! Also, I've started working on another Olicity fic titled *Caught in the Rapture*. You can view the summary and cover art on my Tumblr. I'll be posting the first chapter sometime this week if you want to keep an eye out. Happy reading!

Grinning widely, Felicity watched in amusement at the way Oliver's eyes drifted closed. He was laying on his stomach with his arms wrapped around his pillow. A low hum rumbled from deep in his chest as her hand stroked along his bare, muscular back. Felicity, curled up beside him, was careful of his bruises. Thankfully, her touch seemed to be soothing him more than anything.

"Oliver, if you're tired, we can just go to sleep."

"I'm not tired."

"Your eyes are closed."

"They're resting."

She shook her head, laughing softly, and brought her hand up over his shoulder. Felicity caressed along the back of his neck before sliding her fingertips through his hair. Oliver let out another quiet groan. After a second satisfying round of intense lovemaking, they'd settled under the covers and talked for a bit. The longer she stroked his skin, she noticed, the more relaxed he became. The tension usually visible in his bunched muscles and taut jaw eased.

"If you're not falling asleep, then what did I just say?" she challenged matter-of-factly.

Oliver shrugged and muttered, "Something about your crazy cat lady neighbor and how annoying she is." He opened one eye. "Was I right?"

"Maybe," Felicity reluctantly admitted, earning a chortle from him. In a way, she felt just like Mrs. Ferdinand—except instead of an actual cat, she had Oliver. His strong body along with his lazy posture as he leaned into her touch made him look like a giant, purring jungle cat ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. He was like putty in her hands.

"Well, since this is clearly boring you, what else do you want to talk about?" Felicity questioned.

Oliver, finally meeting her stare, hesitated before saying, "What's been going on at home? How is... how is Thea doing?"

It was a topic Felicity usually avoided unless he asked. After sending Oliver the pictures of Thea's graduation last week, he'd simply thanked her and that's all that was said about it. His question now was a surprise, but she was more than happy to fill in the blanks.

"She's doing really well. I hung out with her the other day. She's enrolled in Starling City University..."
for the fall, so I was helping her pick out some classes."

"What's her major?"

"PR with a focus in event planning. She's been helping Tommy book bands for Verdant and coming up with some fun themed nights. Thea's got a real knack for it, and Tommy's been grateful for the help," Felicity explained. "Thea's going to take a couple of business courses in the fall, too. She might do a minor in that. Since she'll be inheriting her shares of the company in a few years, I think she wants to be prepared."

"Makes sense," he commented. "Who's been watching over her assets? Is Malcolm involved?"

Oliver had always been curious about how much control Malcolm really had over what remained of his family's legacy.

"Malcolm oversees the Queen manor and some other properties and investments. The company, however, was left in Walter Steele's control."

"Good." Oliver felt the tiniest bit of relief hearing that. He wouldn't have put it past Malcolm to try and take over QC and merge it with Merlyn Global if he had the chance. The man was all about absorbing as much power as he could get his hands on. Walter, a better friend to his parents than Malcolm ever was, had always had a deep appreciation for QC and wouldn't let anyone destroy what Oliver's family had built.

"You know she'd give all of that up in a heartbeat if it meant getting you back, right?" Felicity rubbed his shoulder. "She loves you."

"She was so young when the Gambit went down…" Oliver trailed off. "Sometimes it's hard not to wonder how much she really remembers about me or my parents. When you sent me that picture from her graduation, I…” He shook his head, unable to finish the thought. "I'm just glad she's got you, Tommy, and your mom."

"And Malcolm," Felicity added.

"Right. And Malcolm," he forced out.

"Not to be morose, but she visits your graves once a month. She likes to talk to all of you. Tell you what she's been doing. She hasn't forgotten her roots," Felicity reassured him. Oliver's smile didn't quite reach his eyes, but Felicity could tell that she'd eased some of his worry.

"Anything else I should know about?"

"She's dating someone new, I think." The blonde couldn't help but giggle at the way Oliver rolled his eyes. The protective big brother instinct was still alive and well, at least. "My mom's been trying to get her to spill, but Thea's staying quiet. My guess is because of Malcolm. He gets a little too overprotective sometimes. But Tommy said she's been hanging out a lot with this young guy who works for him at Verdant. Could be him."

That caught Oliver's attention, though he didn't say anything to Felicity. He simply filed that tidbit away in his mind for later. "What about Tommy?" he questioned, changing the subject. "Have he and Laurel set a date yet for the wedding?"

Felicity's hand paused, and her body tensed. She'd been dreading this conversation for months. There was no putting it off any longer. Oliver needed to know, and she just hoped that he would forgive her for not speaking up sooner.
Picking up on her unease almost immediately, Oliver asked, "What's the matter?"

"I have to tell you something," she tentatively replied. "It's…it's going to be difficult to hear and I…I don't want you to hate me."

"Hate you?" he responded, bewildered by the concept. "Why would I hate you, Felicity?"

"Not necessarily hate me but hate the fact that I didn't mention it sooner. I was going to say something when you first came back, but that was already such a big thing for you. And I know how hard it is sometimes for you to hear about how much things have changed. I didn't want to make it worse and ruin our time together so I just didn't say it. But I can't not say it now so—"

"Hey." Oliver lifted his head and touched her shoulder to halt her anxious babble. "It's okay. Just say it, Felicity."

"Tommy and Laurel aren't engaged. The truth is he never even got a chance to propose." Felicity took a breath, but it did nothing to calm her nerves. "Laurel she…Laurel's gone, Oliver."

"Gone?" Oliver replied, unable to shake the sense of foreboding. "Like she moved away or…" He couldn't possibly finish the thought.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Felicity continued, "She was killed over a year ago."

Oliver felt his heart stop and he sat up. He tried to wrap his mind around what she was saying, but it wasn't processing. Laurel dead? He shook his head. That couldn't be. "What? How?"

Felicity momentarily closed her eyes, then sat up along with him. The worst part was yet to come. "She was murdered, Oliver. Laurel took a job with CNRI after law school, and a lot of the cases she took on required going after some really powerful people. They were lowlifes, but they were well connected. Laurel was interviewing a client at Iron Heights. There was a prison riot while she was there and…she'd been attacked. Sara had been on duty that night and was called to the scene…by the time she found her, it was too late." The devastated look on Oliver's face mirrored Tommy's when he found out the news, and it broke her heart all over again. She reached out for him and felt the sharp sting of rejection when he pulled away.

Without looking at her, Oliver threw back the covers and stood. "I need a few minutes." He grabbed a pair of boxers from his duffel before throwing open the French doors and going out on the balcony. Felicity doubted the fresh air would do much to alleviate the pain he was feeling, but she could understand his need for it.

Felicity sunk back in the sheets with a heavy sigh. As badly as she wanted to go to him, she stayed where she was and gave him space to process. She checked her phone quickly. There were a couple of emails from work but nothing pressing. After about ten minutes of sitting in bed while Oliver stood frozen out on the balcony, Felicity finally got up. Instead of rifling through her own bag, Felicity spotted a t-shirt hanging out of Oliver's duffel. She grabbed that and slipped it over her head. The loose fabric hung from her smaller frame like a nightgown, but it was comfy.

She was about to head out onto the balcony when she noticed something on the ground. Felicity bent over to pick it up and felt her throat get tight. It was the old photograph of her that Oliver had had with him when the Gambit went down. It was frayed at the edges and some of the pieces, from when it had been ripped apart by his so-called friend John, were scraped and jagged beneath the tape.
Felicity had thought he'd lost it forever, and she felt an unexpected swell of emotion that he'd salvaged it anyway. Blinking the unshed tears away, she tucked it back into his bag and joined him on the balcony.

"I'm sorry, Oliver," Felicity mumbled, leaving several inches of space between them.

He was quiet for a moment. Then: "It's not your fault."

"I know, but I probably should've told you sooner. It wasn't my intention to blindside you."

Oliver, still looking out over Hub City, shrugged. "There never really is a good time to tell someone their ex-girlfriend is dead." His knuckles had turned white from gripping the railing. "Did they find out who did it?"

"The inmate was already serving a life sentence. Sara was convinced that someone put him up to it."

Finally, Oliver glanced at her. "Why would she think that?"

"When Sara was clearing out Laurel's apartment, she found files from a case she'd been secretly working on. It was high profile and pretty open and shut—or so everyone thought," Felicity explained. "A man named Peter Declan was charged with killing his wife in cold blood while their young daughter slept in the next room. He was on death row and days away from being executed. Apparently, Laurel thought he'd been framed. His wife Camille worked for Brodeur Chemical, and Declan claimed she'd told a supervisor that the company was illegally dumping toxic waste into The Glades. They'd fought about her blowing the whistle and going public with the information. The next day he'd woken up to find her dead. The supervisor denied her ever coming to him, and so everyone thought Declan was lying to cover his tracks. Laurel had been at the prison visiting with him, trying to find a way to stay his execution, when the riot broke out. Declan had been killed, too."

"So they were silenced," Oliver gritted out.

"That's what Sara's been trying to prove. She's been after Jason Brodeur ever since. I tried to use my resources at the agency to help her, but I was stonewalled by my superiors," she said in frustration. "Even if I was able to find anything, I'm not sure how I could have given it to Sara without blowing my cover."
"What about Detective Lance? Surely he'd want justice just as much as Sara."

"It's Captain Lance now," she informed him, "and he wants to get the son of a bitch more than anyone else, but he can only do so much within the law. He warned Sara about bending the rules. I think he's terrified she'll get herself killed, too, in the process. A few months after it happened, there was an incident. She confronted Brodeur, and it got physical. Brodeur tried to press charges and get her fired, but Captain Lance worked it out so Sara was suspended from the force for a couple of months instead. It hasn't stopped her, though. She's just gotten better at hiding it from her father and even Tommy."

"God, Tommy must've been devastated," Oliver muttered. The news of Laurel's death gutted him, and he wished more than anything he could've been there for his best friend. For years it had been Oliver, Tommy, and Laurel against the world. Oliver thought he'd been the only one to suffer all these years, but it turned out that none of them had had an easy life since.

"Yeah," Felicity mumbled. "If Tommy wasn't working on constructing Verdant, I'm not sure how he would've coped. Laurel had encouraged him to pursue it, and finishing it became his sole mission." She remembered the nights she'd stayed at Tommy's apartment while he worked late on floor plans and emailed vendors. Sometimes he'd be angry and fighting against the grief and exhaustion while other times he sat quietly, simply needing Felicity's presence for reassurance. He'd tried pushing Felicity away at first, and she'd given him his space, but she refused to let him drown in his sorrow alone. She'd tried to do the same for Sara, too. "It was hard on all of us." Felicity had never been close with Laurel, but it was another loss in her life all the same. She'd mourned in her own way, as well.

Oliver, still recovering from the shock, didn't know what he would've done if he'd been in Tommy's shoes. The mere thought of something happening to Felicity was enough to drive Oliver insane. Even more disconcerting was that, similar to Laurel, there were powerful people threatening Felicity. In fact, they were in the hotel at this very moment. The space Oliver had craved dissipated. The inches between them were suddenly too much, and he instinctively reached out for Felicity. He needed to touch her again to make sure she was real.

Felicity folded into his embrace willingly. She wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face in his chest. "I really am sorry, baby."

Oliver placed a few kisses on her forehead and rubbed her back. "Do you still go out into the field?"

"No, I told you I'm not allowed anymore."

"You still need to be careful."

"I could say the same to you," Felicity replied and touched one of his bruises.

"I can hold my own. You should see the other guy," he muttered, half-joking. "But seriously, those government agencies can be just as ruthless. You should keep your eyes open."

Felicity looked up at him. "How would you know?"

"Because I've seen things."

"I trust my team, Oliver," she told him. "We're like family."

Oliver countered, "What about the superior who threatened you? Can you trust her?"

Felicity didn't have an answer—or at least an answer that she felt like sharing at the moment. In some
ways, Waller was brutally predictable in her discipline. But there were times when looking into her cold, sharp eyes that it was impossible to know her true motives. Hence, why almost everyone in the agency held a healthy dose of fear and respect when following orders. In an effort to get off the topic, Felicity reminded him, "We agreed not to talk about work." She caressed his jaw and said more softly, "I'm not Laurel, Oliver."

"No, you're not," he whispered huskily in agreement before kissing her. Within seconds, he'd lifted Felicity up into his arms and carried her back to bed.

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**June 26, 2007**

It was late in the evening, and the hospital halls felt cold and empty. Felicity, wanting to make sure she was in the right place, looked at the text message she'd gotten from Thea. The younger Queen said that Oliver was on the third floor in room 311. Felicity had wanted to visit him earlier, but only family had been allowed in and he wasn't answering his phone. There was nothing left for Felicity to do but go home, take a long shower, and try to get some rest. She dozed off for about an hour before her nightmare had woken her up. Instead of Shrapnel wearing the bomb, it had been Oliver. She'd tried to get to him, but it was too late. Oliver was gone. Shaken, Felicity knew she wouldn't be able to calm down until she actually saw that he was all right for herself. Her mother had been fussing over her the entire day, and it was only now that Felicity had managed to sneak out of the house unnoticed.

Thankfully, her nightmare was not how the situation had actually played out. She learned from Sara, who'd learned from Laurel, who'd questioned their dad, that Oliver was supposed to get Shrapnel closer to the windows. There were sharp shooters in the adjacent building, and they needed a clear trajectory to make the shot. No one believed that the psycho was just going to get the chip and leave without hurting more people. Shrapnel had been shot in the head, and that's when his partners had opened fire in return.

Oliver and most of the others had managed to get out of the room while the shootout continued. The authorities said one of the wounded gunmen, in a last-ditch effort to do some damage, crawled over to Shrapnel and got his hands on the trigger. The force of the explosion blew up the entire conference room and adjacent offices. Although the hostages hadn't been in the exact spot of the explosion, they were still close enough to be injured by the force of it and falling debris. According to Malcolm, who'd checked in with Moira, Robert had a broken arm and some cuts on his legs. Oliver suffered a concussion, which is why the doctors and his mother insisted he stay overnight at Starling General.

Shivering, Felicity wished she'd brought her black hoodie with her. The weather had been more humid than usual lately, and so the AC in the hospital was blasting. Her black acid-washed jeans and sleeveless tank top weren't offering much reprieve. Finally, Felicity made it to Oliver's room. Visiting hours were long past over, but she'd managed to sneak by the nurse's station undetected. She reached for the door and opened it slowly. Felicity assumed he would be asleep and was surprised to find Oliver wide awake watching TV.

The pensive expression on his face changed as soon as he saw her. "Hey," Oliver greeted with an encouraging smile.

"Hi," Felicity replied while hesitantly standing in the doorway. "Um, I didn't expect you to be awake. I thought I'd just pop in real quick and make sure you were okay. I tried to see you earlier, but they told me only family was allowed in."
"I'm glad you did. I wanted to check on you, too, but my mom took my phone and well..." He gestured to the room. "I've been a little stuck."

"Oh, okay. Well, I'm fine," Felicity reassured him, aware that her fidgeting was probably telling a different story. "So I'll just go and let you—"

"You don't have to go," Oliver was quick to reply. "Stay. I could use the company."

"You're sure?"

"Positive. I hate hospitals." With a smirk, he teased, "Now get in here before the nurses catch you and throw you out."

Felicity slipped inside and shut the door quietly behind her. The sound of the TV caught her attention, and she looked up to see that the incident at QC was the current headline. She'd stayed away from anything news related all day. Having lived through the ordeal was enough. To her surprise, the headline sliding across the screen mostly had to do with Oliver and how he'd helped the SCPD.

"Looks like you're a hero," Felicity commented.

"I only did what I was told."

"Because you decided to stay and help everyone."

Oliver shrugged like it was no big deal. "I had help. You've been mentioned a few times but never by name. It's mostly 'unidentified intern.'"

"I asked not to be identified. Since I'm still a minor, they had to comply." At Oliver's questioning stare, she elaborated, "I don't like being the center of attention. It makes me nervous." She walked a little closer and stopped at the foot of his bed. "How are you feeling? Do you need anything?"

"Aside from a killer headache and some bruises, I'm okay."

"When I heard the bomb go off and saw the explosion"—she swallowed the lump in her throat—"I thought that...I was afraid that you..."

"It was close," Oliver admitted.

This wasn't new information but hearing him acknowledge his near death was enough to make her insides twist into uncomfortable knots. Felicity wasn't sure what came over her, but she suddenly found herself crossing the distance and launching herself at Oliver. She was careful not to throw her weight onto him too forcefully. Wrapping her arms as gently as she could around him, she brought him close and buried her face in his neck. She wouldn't believe he was truly okay until she touched him herself.

Oliver didn't hesitate to pull her closer, enveloping her fully into his comforting embrace. "It's okay. I'm okay," he quietly soothed.

"Thank you for not dying," she murmured, breathing him in. There was the faint smell of smoke and a scent that was purely Oliver.

"Thank you for not being stubborn and leaving when I told you to," he mumbled back.

"I'm not stubborn," she argued, though it was half-hearted.
Oliver chuckled against her. "I think you just proved my point." He rubbed at her arms. "My God, you're freezing."

"It's so humid outside I didn't think I'd need my jacket." The cold air wasn't the only reason for her goose bumps, but Felicity didn't mention that.

Releasing her, Oliver scooted over as much as he could to make room and drew back the blanket. "Get in."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"You're cold, aren't you?" he gently replied. "Get in."

Felicity glanced uneasily at the door. "What if someone—"

"Felicity," Oliver interrupted her with a patient smile. "It's late. I'm not expecting any visitors. It's fine."

"But the nurses—"

"Will have to go through me," he joked and patted the space beside him. "Now get your adorable butt under the covers."

"How hard exactly did you bang your head?" Looking down to hide the tinge coloring her cheeks, Felicity slid under the blanket next to Oliver. She was not going to think about the fact she'd have to lay up against him for there to be enough room to fit nor that he might not have anything on underneath his hospital gown. As casually as she could, Felicity leaned into his side and rested her head against his shoulder.

"Am I hurting you?" she murmured, suppressing a shiver as her breasts brushed against his torso. Not since the night Oliver had done those body shots off of her neck had she been this physically close to him. In fact, their position now was a hundred times more intimate.

"No," he replied in a thick voice and instinctively pulled her tighter against him. Apparently, she wasn't the only one seeking comfort and reassurance.

They were silent for a few minutes. Nothing but the sound of their steady breathing and the occasional creak of the bed when one of them shifted could be heard.

Eventually, Felicity spoke up, "Did you see them take the bomber out?"

He tensed ever so slightly. "Yes."

"I'm sorry." Her free hand rubbed his shoulder. "I'm here if you want to talk about it."

"Thanks," Oliver replied but didn't say anything more. She didn't push either.

Another minute passed. "Oliver?"

"Yeah?"

"About the, uh...about the kiss." This was probably the worst time to bring it up, especially with them sandwiched together on his bed, but she hadn't been able to stop thinking about it. Felicity kept her eyes focused on his chest and the pattern of his hospital gown. "We were both under a lot of stress with trying to get the chip and then you going to confront that psycho. I wasn't thinking when I kissed you, and I'm sure it was the same for you. It was impulsive—not to say it wasn't great because
it was—but it doesn't have to mean anything." She took a deep breath. "It didn't mean anything, right?"

Oliver didn't answer right away, which only served to make her more nervous. Maybe she really shouldn't have brought it up. Why couldn't she ever just stop talking and let things lie? Her thoughts were a messy, frenzied spiral until she felt the warm press of his lips against her forehead. Her entire body tingled as her heart began to pound in her chest.

"Of course it did," he replied in a deep, husky voice.

Felicity didn't know how it was possible, but she nestled herself further into him. For once, she didn't feel the urge to babble. There was no need. For now she was content to lay right there with him in the hospital bed, in a sort of content limbo. The exhaustion that had been evading her hit her full force, and her eyes started to close. Felicity suspected because it was the first time all day she truly felt at peace. A small voice in the back of her mind whispered that she should probably get up and go home, but it was physically impossible to tear herself away from him. Oliver's strong grip on her indicated that he wasn't willing to let go either.

They drifted off to sleep, so wrapped up in each other that neither heard the door open nor felt the pair of eyes silently scrutinizing them. With a low sigh, the stunned figure closed the door, turned away, and walked back down the hall.

With a soft moan, Felicity's heavy-lidded eyes opened as she was drawn out of her restful sleep. Unable to avoid the bright sunlight shining through the French doors, she burrowed further into the pillows. The remnants of exhaustion and haze of sleep threatened to pull her under again until she became aware of the empty spot beside her.

Lifting her head, Felicity glanced around looking for Oliver. She breathed a sigh of relief when she heard the faint sound of the shower running. A part of her still hated waking up without him, but at least he was nearby. Felicity checked the clock on the nightstand. It was almost noon. She wasn't surprised she'd slept so late, considering that they'd been up most of the night. A shower was probably just what she needed to wake up fully. The fact that Oliver was already inside of it was a definite bonus.

Felicity smiled mischievously while throwing aside the covers. She was past the point of fighting the constant desire that he awakened in her. The mere thought of Oliver touching her did more to turn her on than any of her would-be suitors over the years. She'd only taken a few steps toward the bathroom when she heard a knock on the door. Felicity's head whipped around in surprise. She tensed when she realized that must've been what had initially woken her up.

Glancing between the bathroom and the door, Felicity felt a sense of panic. The "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door was supposed to prevent any unwanted visitors. Although, maybe Oliver had ordered room service for them. Felicity was hungry since she'd slept through breakfast. The knock came again, more persistent. With her bathrobe still on the floor in the bathroom, Felicity grabbed her glasses on the nightstand and quickly bolted for her overnight bag. She grabbed some undergarments before sliding on a pair of jeans and a tank top.

She made her way to the foyer and checked the peek hole in the door. A tall, dark-skinned man in a leather jacket stood outside. Definitely not room service, Felicity thought. She contemplated getting Oliver, but what could he do? If this guy was another A.R.G.U.S. agent, then seeing Oliver would be the worst thing that could happen. Then again, she'd set an alert on her phone in case her facial
recognition software, which pulled from an internal database, identified anyone from A.R.G.U.S. in the building. Felicity cursed after checking her phone and seeing that it didn't pick up anything. This guy most likely wasn't from A.R.G.U.S., which meant he was either from another agency or possibly even a threat to whoever had been in this room last undercover.

Not taking any chances, Felicity grabbed her gun from her bag and shut the bedroom door behind her in case Oliver came out of the bathroom anytime soon. She took a moment to collected herself before finally opening the door. The chain lock was left in place to ensure that he couldn't barge his way in if he was a danger.

Felicity leaned against the door and hid the gun behind her back. "Can I help you?" she questioned. The guy was even larger and more intimidating up close. His biceps were bigger than her head. Suddenly the chain lock seemed pointless. With those bulging muscles, the guy could probably break it with one good push on the door. He held a couple of Big Belly Burger bags in one hand and a cardboard tray of shakes in the other, which did nothing to put her at ease. How many movies had she seen where the bad guys whip out their guns from takeout bags?

His eyes scanned her top to bottom, almost in assessment. The stern expression she'd seen on his face moments before softened. "You must be Felicity." His voice was deep and gruff.

The blonde stared back at him warily. "I'm sorry, do I know you?" she responded, neither confirming nor denying it.

"No. Although I feel like I know you. I'm a friend of Oliver's," he stated outright.

"He asked me to come. And bring some lunch." He held up the bags, and the delicious aroma of burgers and fries wafted her way. "Is he around?" He tried to peer past her, but Felicity wouldn't budge. She was even more on edge. If this guy knew Oliver, then he was most likely Bratva. And why wouldn't Oliver tell her that someone was dropping by? He'd have to know how freaked out she'd be to have some guy randomly show up at their hotel room. What if this guy had followed him and was actually an enemy?

"I'm sorry, but I don't know anyone by that name," she lied. "Maybe you should try another room." She went to shut the door, but his foot shot out to halt it.

Whatever he saw on her face made him pause. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"I'm not scared," she blurted out. Thankfully, her voice sounded stronger than she actually felt. Much to her annoyance, he laughed at that. "He was right—brave and stubborn. I can assure you, Felicity, you won't need that glock you're hiding. I'm John."

Felicity wasn't sure if she was more shocked that he knew she was packing heat or that she was finally meeting the man Oliver had spoken so highly of. This was the man who'd helped train Oliver in the Bratva—assuming it was the same guy and not some other random John. Still, she didn't make a move to unlock the door. "Can you hold on a—"

The bedroom door opened then to reveal Oliver. If Felicity wasn't so stunned and confused by the entire situation, she would've taken a moment to ogle the sight of him shirtless and in jeans. He must've changed quickly, because there were still some water droplets on his chest.

"It's okay, Felicity," Oliver reassured her. "I asked John to come." He cut a look at his friend through the small opening. "Granted, not this soon. You're lucky I caught your message."
"Change of plans." John briefly glanced at Felicity before continuing. "You-know-who came looking for you early. I told her you'd gone for a run."

Oliver cursed under his breath. "Okay. I'll be ready in a few minutes." He went to unlock the door when Felicity halted him.

"Wait, Oliver," Felicity demanded, "what is going on? Who's looking for you?"

"Give us a minute, John," Oliver told his partner, who simply nodded in understanding. He shut the door and addressed Felicity. "Remember how I was late last night? Well, something came up. It turns out I have to accompany Isabel on some Bratva business not too far from here. It'll only be a couple of hours at most."

Her stomach dropped at the mention of that vile woman. "She's in the hotel?" the blonde exclaimed. "How did she know you'd be here?"

"Sneaking away this weekend wasn't as easy as I'd hoped. I had to tell Anatoly I'd be in Hub City, and that's when I got roped into the whole thing."

Placing her hands on her hips, Felicity replied, "And why didn't you tell me any of this last night?"

"Because last night was about us, and I didn't want to ruin that. I know you can't stand her—not that I blame you—but would you really have been able to relax if you knew she was here?"

He kind of had a point, although Felicity wasn't in the mood to admit it. "What about John? He said you asked him to come."

"He was my cover for the night in case Isabel tried to stop by my room." Felicity's grip instinctively tightened on the gun. She might've forgiven Oliver, but that didn't mean she'd lost the urge to take on Isabel. The manipulative bitch was still clearly after her man. "I asked John to stay with you while I'm gone." Anticipating her objection, Oliver was quick to elaborate, "Isabel doesn't often travel alone, and I was worried she or one of her associates from Russia might spot you in the off chance you left the room. No one should know I'm in here with you but even then I'd rather be safe about it. John knows the risks and who to avoid."

"Except I don't know John, Oliver," Felicity countered. "You expect me to stay in the room with some strange guy who you told me basically ripped up my picture years ago? That is the same guy, right? Doesn't he hate me? What if he poisoned that food?"

Oliver couldn't help but roll his eyes, biting back an amused grin at her melodramatic paranoia. "He doesn't hate you, and he definitely did not poison your food." She scoffed in disbelief. "He doesn't, Felicity. He knows what you mean to me. He's my partner, and I trust him. I would never leave him with you otherwise." Oliver placed his hands on her shoulders. "You trust me, right?"

With a roll of her eyes, Felicity huffed, "Yes." While she appreciated Oliver's concern for her safety, she wasn't exactly jumping for joy at this new development.

"So you can trust him, too. It's only for a couple of hours," he repeated in an encouraging tone. "I'll be back before you know it. Besides, I've always wanted the two most important people in my life to meet. It's long overdue, don't you think?"

"Fine," Felicity reluctantly relented. Oliver knew he had her anyway. A part of her was insanely eager to uncover yet another mystery of Oliver's new life. "I guess you can let him in."

Oliver eyed the gun in her hand. "You don't need the glock, sweetheart."
"I'd like to keep it if it's all the same to you," Felicity retorted. Despite Oliver's reassurance, she still didn't feel totally comfortable with this arrangement.

The corner of Oliver's mouth twitched as he fought back a smile. That was his Felicity—stubborn and fierce to her very core. It was quite the turn on. Oliver dreaded having to leave her. He'd much rather take her into the bedroom and have his way with her again. He affectionately pecked her on the lips before going to open the door.

John entered the foyer. His large form filled up a lot of the space. "Everything all good now?" he questioned and glanced between them. Like Oliver, John noticed the gun in her hand and appeared to be disguising his amusement.

"It's fine," Oliver answered, wrapping his arm around Felicity and bringing her forward. "John, this is my girlfriend Felicity. Felicity, this is my partner John."

John held out his hand. "It's nice to finally meet you, Felicity."

It completely engulfed her smaller one as she shook it. "You, too."

Without a doubt, this was the weirdest romantic weekend Felicity had ever been on.
Happy Tuesday! I hope everyone enjoyed their holiday weekend. So this chapter has Delicity and flashbacks. Let me know what you think in the comments. I love hearing from you guys. Thanks!

Awkward. That was the only accurate description for what Felicity felt at the moment. While Oliver finished getting ready, Felicity silently led John into the living room. She sat on one couch while he sat on the single seat across from her. The chair looked way too small for his large, hulking form. The coffee table was between them, which is where John deposited the food. Felicity placed her gun down on the end table.

"This one is yours," John said and pushed one of the bags toward her. "Extra pickles and a mint chip shake, right?"

"How'd you know that?"

He simply answered, "Oliver."

"Right," Felicity muttered and tentatively accepted the bag.

"I promise no poison," he said with a knowing smirk. He must've heard her arguing with Oliver through the door.

"Well, that's a relief," Felicity casually replied. The delicious aroma of burgers and fries made her stomach grumble. She was much hungrier than she thought and ripped into the bag. Sure enough, her Double Belly Burger had extra pickles and was smothered in their secret sauce. There was also a hefty container of fries. Hell, even if it was poisoned, at least she would die happy and full.

They started to eat in silence. A few minutes later, Oliver's heavy footsteps could be heard headed their way. "That smells good." He was fully dressed in his jeans and a navy, button-downed shirt. The sleeves were rolled up, showing off his muscular forearms. He looked casual yet sexy, and Felicity tried not to bristle at the thought of Isabel coming to the same conclusion.

"Got you one, too," John informed him.

"I'll take it with me." He leaned down to grab the bag and give Felicity a quick kiss.

"Be careful," she told him, stroking his cheek.

"Always." Oliver gave her another affectionate peck and stared at them both. "Play nice." Something passed between him and John, and then he was out the door.

Felicity shoved a couple of fries in her mouth. If there was ever a time for comfort food, this was it. Watching her boyfriend leave to conduct nefarious business dealings with some slut who wanted in his pants was not easy.

"He'll be fine," John assured her, picking up on her unease. "He does this all the time."
"I know. That's partly what worries me."

"You don't approve," It wasn't a question. "Must be difficult being with him and knowing what he's involved in." He took a sip of his own shake. "What would your agency say?"

Felicity was somewhat surprised at first that John knew the truth about her affiliations. But Oliver said this man was his partner and he trusted him. It made sense that Oliver would confide in John, and it wasn't like Oliver knew anything more about who she was working for. Her cover hadn't been compromised. "They'd probably hall him in and lock him up. Maybe even blackmail him if he didn't give us insider information," she stated. "It would probably be painful. They"—Waller—"don't shy away from torture." The mere thought of Waller getting her hands on Oliver made it hard to swallow her bite of burger.

"What about you?"

"I'd probably be treated the same way. Maybe worse. Traitors—not that I am one but that's how they'd see me—are made an example of."

"Seems like an awful big risk for you. Why do it?" Despite their casual tones, Felicity recognized this conversation for what it was—a standoff. John wanted to know her intentions with Oliver, because he didn't trust her motives either.

Felicity met his probing gaze head on. "I've loved Oliver since I was seventeen years old. I was loyal to him long before I joined my agency, and that hasn't changed. I already lost him once, and I'll be damned if I let it happen again." She fixed John with a challenging look of her own. "What's your story?"

"That depends. How much has Oliver told you?"

"Not much. Just that you joined the Bratva two years before he did. You were his roommate and assigned with helping to train him," Felicity recounted. "When he tried to call me once, you turned him in which earned you both a beating."

John cleared his throat. "Sounds about right."

"You also tore up my picture," she added, unable to hide her disapproval.

"I did," he acknowledged without remorse.

She felt compelled to say, "He taped it back together."

"I know."

Felicity swirled her straw around in her shake. "Oliver admires you. I can tell. He also mentioned that you were forced to join the Bratva."

"That's right." John looked away then, and she watched curiously as his thumb stroked the ring finger of his left hand.

"What happened?"

John went quiet, keeping his eyes down. He seemed to be fighting his own internal battle, and Felicity had no doubt his body was marred with the corresponding scars similar to Oliver's.

"You don't have to tell me," she said eventually. "I didn't mean to pry."
"I had a younger brother," John began once he'd collected himself. "His name was Andy. We didn't have a father growing up, and so I always took it upon myself to look out for him. He got into a lot of trouble as a kid and it only got worse as he got older. I joined the army straight out of high school, so I wasn't always around to keep him in line. I was gone for years.

"But when I got back, he'd met his future wife. They were having a baby, and it seemed like Andy was finally getting his life together. I had a wife, too. We met while on tour in Afghanistan. It was tough for us when we returned state-side. We both had a purpose in the army, and it's difficult to keep that fire burning when there's no more war to fight. But we were trying to make it work.

"Andy had gone into personal security protecting—though mostly babysitting—rich trust fund brats. You know, kind of like Oliver," he joked, which earned a small smile from Felicity. "He got me a job, too, and things seemed good for a while. Then I found out Andy was back to his old ways. Only now he was dealing drugs and stealing and reselling illegal firearms to the wrong kinds of people. He screwed up a deal, trying to take more of a cut for himself, and his handlers found out."

"He double-crossed the Bratva," she surmised.

"Yeah. They were going to kill him, and so I intervened. Most people think there isn't honor amongst thieves, but there is. It's a code of sorts. Cruel and brutal but not something you mess with nonetheless. The only way they would spare Andy was if I took his place. I wasn't a criminal, but they saw that I had honor. I was a man of my word and would do what was expected of me as long as my brother was unharmed. And so I traded my life for his."

Felicity glanced at his ring-less finger. "What about your wife?"

"She begged me not to do it. Tried to convince me there was another way, but I knew there wasn't. Despite her connections, I knew my brother was as good as dead if I didn't take the deal. I left in the middle of the night. That was the last time I ever saw her. I've been with the Bratva ever since." He pulled aside the collar of his shirt to show her his tattoo. It was an exact replica of Oliver's. "It wasn't enough to save Andy, though. He got into trouble again a year later. Only that time I wasn't there to bail him out, and he was killed."

"I'm sorry." Her sympathy for him was genuine. Felicity's eyes watered, but she kept the tears at bay. She got the feeling John would prefer her restraint.

He shrugged and declared, "I accepted my fate a long time ago."

"What about Oliver?" she inquired. "Why protect him?"

"I guess he reminded me a little bit of Andy. He was a young man trapped with no way out. But unlike my brother, the darkness in Oliver wasn't of his own making. He did what he had to to survive. He had a good heart despite everything and although I was tough on him, I knew I was the only one who could help him hold on to that through everything."

"I'm glad you did," Felicity stated.

"Yeah, well, it wasn't all me. Most of it was you and that damn picture," he joked, making her laugh softly. "I tore up the picture, because you were a distraction that would get him killed. He had to come to terms with his situation, and he did. But Oliver never fully let you go. Obviously."

The blonde shifted on the couch and hesitated before asking, "What do you think of us together now?"

John's expression turned serious. "Oliver will probably kill me for saying this, but I refused to lie to
him when he asked me and I refuse to lie to you now. I think you're both playing with fire," he explained, his brown eyes dark and solemn. "And eventually you're going to get burned."

Felicity felt her stomach drop and shook her head. "Not if we're careful. I would never let anything happen to him, and he would never let anything happen to me."

The older man sighed heavily. "You're up against forces neither of you can control, and the truth always has a way of coming out."

"Would the truth be so bad?" she replied. "He's not Oliver Knyazev. He's Oliver Queen. Maybe that could work to our advantage. Have you ever thought of—"

"Whatever it is you're thinking, stop. There is no out for him, Felicity," John retorted. "You said so yourself that your agency wouldn't be so forgiving. Neither would the Bratva. The sooner you both accept that, the safer you'll both be."

"So I'm just supposed to what?" Felicity challenged. "Let him go all over again and abandon him to this nightmare?" Every cell in her body protested against such a thought.

"In an ideal world, yes. But we both know you won't. Even if you tried to let him go now, you know Oliver wouldn't give up that easily. He'd follow you into hell if he had to, and what worries me most is that he may just end up there."

Felicity met his hard gaze with a steely one of her own. "Don't think for one second that I wouldn't do the same for him."

"Oh, I have no doubt, Felicity. Because the heart wants what it wants, right?" He looked at her as if he already knew the answer.

Felicity was never one to disappoint. "Right."

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_June 30, 2007_

"Crap," Felicity muttered while sprinting off of the elevator. She was supposed to be at the loft by seven o'clock to meet the others. Her alarm hadn't gone off this morning, and so she'd scrambled to get ready. Luckily, she'd done most of her packing yesterday. The rest of the night up until the wee hours of the morning were spent working on her tech project. She was still waiting on the proposal approval from her professors, but she figured getting a jump on the coding couldn't hurt.

Felicity knocked on the door and waited. She could hear the sound of loud voices on the other side.

"Coming," someone shouted. It ended up being Sara who answered. "Hey, you made it. We were about to send a search party."

"Yeah, sorry," Felicity sheepishly replied and readjusted her glasses. She hadn't had time to put in her contacts. "I overslept. But I'm here and ready to go."

Sara looked her over and smiled. "Are you actually wearing color?"

"Just purple shorts," Felicity replied with a shrug. "It's not that big a deal." Everything else she had on was still black, including her new wedged sandals. The shorts weren't usually her style, but her mother had bought them and was so excited for her to wear them. Felicity had to admit they were
"Looks good on you." Sara stepped aside to let her in. "Felicity is here," she announced.

Laurel was in the kitchen packing drinks and snacks into a cooler. "Hey, Felicity," she greeted.

"Hi, Laurel. Where are Tommy and Oliver?"

"Finishing packing. You know men. Everything is always last minute."

"I'll have you know we were trying to secure all of the fireworks," Tommy interjected as Oliver trailed him down the stairs carrying a large suitcase. "Don't want any explosions before the main event."

After the craziness at QC earlier in the week, Tommy had proposed that they all go away for the Fourth of July. His father owned a cabin by a lake in Ivy Town. It was a quaint little town about three hours north of Starling City. He thought it would be the perfect way for them to relax and escape all of their recent troubles.

"Well, that's reassuring," Sara commented. She sat at the kitchen counter fixing her makeup.

"Do you guys need help with anything else?" Felicity offered.

Tommy shook his head. "Now that you're here, we're all set. You okay? You look tired?"

"Long night," she answered. "Which is why I was late. Sorry."

"You're fine, Felicity," Oliver told her. "Tommy here didn't exactly get up on time either."

"You know I'm not a morning person."

"Then why exactly did we have to get up so damn early?" Sara grumbled.

"To beat the weekend traffic. Duh."

Oliver offered, "I'll start taking some of the stuff down."

"You can take the cooler." Laurel handed it over with a kiss on the cheek. "I packed your favorites, baby."

Felicity had to look away. As excited as she was to be going with the group, a part of her was also dreading it. Ever since that night in the hospital, she'd barely seen Oliver. They were both given some time off from QC after the incident, and the one time she'd visited the loft Laurel had been there. According to Tommy, Laurel had been fussing over Oliver nonstop since he'd been released. Felicity and Oliver had still texted but neither mentioned the kiss nor what it meant again. It was probably just as well.

"Oh, I almost forgot my other bag in your room from last night. I'll be right back."

So Laurel was back to sleeping over. Fantastic. Felicity started to panic. How the hell was she supposed to stay under the same roof as Oliver and Laurel knowing that they were hooking up? A couple of weeks ago she might've been able to handle it. But after what they went through together at QC and that kiss, it was like a punch in the gut.

"Felicity, can you grab the other end of this case?" Oliver asked her. She figured he'd only chosen her since Tommy's hands were already full and Sara had announced she needed to pee again before
hitting the road.

She forced a smile and with a casual "sure" followed them out the door. Tommy had rented a SUV, so they'd have enough room for the drive. He dropped the bags by the trunk and left to get the rest while Oliver and Felicity loaded it up. Felicity helped him fit everything accordingly as best she could without meeting Oliver's eyes. As she was about to leave and go back inside, she felt his hand on her arm halting her.

"Felicity, wait. About what Laurel said—"

"You don't owe me any explanations, Oliver." She attempted to wriggle out of his grasp but against his strong hold, it was useless. "I should help Tommy—"

"She just showed up with her bags last night and announced she was staying over. Nothing happened. We fell asleep watching a movie. There's no reason to get upset."

"I'm not upset," she retorted with a little too much force.

He took a step closer, invading her personal space, and cupped her cheek. Felicity's eyes momentarily closed of their own volition. "I've missed you. I can't stop thinking about you and that kiss," he huskily murmured. The air practically whooshed out of her lungs at the feeling of his finger tracing her bottom lip. "Have you been thinking about me?"

Meeting his gaze, she whispered, "Every day." Before she could say anything else, they were interrupted by approaching laughter. Oliver dropped his hand and stepped away from her. It took an actual shake of her head to fight through the charged haze his touch had created in her mind.

"I call shotgun!" Sara exclaimed and sprinted to the front passenger seat. At Oliver's protest, she retorted, "Snooze you lose, Ollie."

"Sorry, buddy, those are the rules," Tommy said while placing the last of their stuff in the trunk.

"It's not really losing if we get to sit together," Laurel beamed and patted Oliver's chest with a flirtatious smile. Her voice dropped, but Felicity could still hear. "Might be kind of cozy."

Oliver sent Laurel a placating smile before looking over her head at Felicity. This was perfect. Now she would be stuck in the back watching her head at Felicity. This was perfect. Now she would be stuck in the back watching Laurel cuddle up to him. Would she ever catch a break? Felicity quickly got into the SUV and chose the seat behind Tommy. While reaching into her purse to grab her book, she felt Oliver slide into the seat next to her. She stared back at him in surprise, unsure if this arrangement was the best idea. His broad frame filled up the backseat, which left him sandwiched between her and Laurel. Felicity and Oliver would be touching, however casually, the whole way to Ivy Town with his on-again-off-again girlfriend right there.

"Everybody ready?" Tommy questioned once they were all buckled in. "Good! Let's get this party started." He turned on the radio and some rap song started playing. Felicity couldn't help but roll her eyes at her stepbrother's terrible taste in music.

Meanwhile, Oliver shifted to get comfortable and ended up brushing their knees together. The contact instantly made her bare skin tingle. This was going to be a long ride.

The chatter in the car was low. The first hour on the road was spent blasting music and cracking jokes. They stopped for a bathroom break and to get some coffee. Despite Felicity getting the largest
size coffee she could, she still fell asleep halfway through the trip. Oliver had been talking with
Tommy about the Starling City Rockets and whether they'd make it to the playoffs this year when he
felt something soft hit his left shoulder. Felicity's head had fallen against him. Oliver had sunk lower
in the seat so Felicity could lie more comfortably against him. If Laurel wasn't right next to him, he
might've chanced putting an arm around her to bring her closer.

Laurel, who'd been texting on her phone, had looked over and raised an eyebrow. "I guess she
really was tired."

Sara had turned around in her seat. "Let her sleep. She's been working on some project for school
nonstop. I told her to at least relax with her time off from QC but nope. The girl is a machine."

"Well, I'm going to make sure she has some fun this week if it kills me," Tommy announced. "That
incident at QC wasn't easy on her either. Right, Ollie?"

"Right," he quietly agreed.

"Which is exactly why we need this trip," Laurel had declared and cuddled up to him on his other
side. "We're all so glad you're both okay."

The media firestorm following the QC hostage crisis was an explosion all on its own. The company
and his family's own personal PR team had been bombarded with requests for statements and
interviews about the incident. Extra security had been placed outside of Oliver's apartment those first
few days, since reporters were eager to catch any glimpse they could of him. The media, however,
lost interest quickly as another tragedy occurred across town. The number of reporters outside
dwindled until there was almost no one. He'd checked this morning to make sure. The last thing they
needed on this trip was to be followed to the cabin by paparazzi.

Being away from the city and in the car with his best friends should've put Oliver at ease. But as he
sat in the back with Felicity on one side and Laurel on the other, he felt conflicted. His past and his
present were once again pulling at him, demanding him to pick a future. He hadn't been lying to
Felicity when he told her this morning that he couldn't stop thinking about their kiss. Whenever he
thought about the horrible events of that day, the memory of their moment together was sometimes
the only thing that calmed him. The best night of sleep he'd had since was when she'd stayed with
him in the hospital. Waking up next to her the following morning had brought him a sense of peace
he hadn't expected.

But then there was Laurel. She'd been visiting the loft constantly to make sure he was all right and
getting enough rest. Oliver knew how shaken she'd been by the prospect of losing him, and he had to
admit that the familiarity he had with Laurel was comforting. He let her fuss over him, because it
made her feel like she was helping. And when Laurel wasn't over, it was his mother or Thea—his
father was mostly confined to the mansion with his broken leg and bruises. Needless to say, Oliver
was itching to get the hell out of Starling City. The fresh air and time away would do him some
good.

Sara, who had her bare feet up on the dashboard, questioned, "Are we there yet? My ass is officially
numb."

"Ten more minutes," Tommy announced as they drove through the small town. The streets and
shops looked so clean and calm—a stark contrast to the cluttered and crazed Starling City. They
drove through a couple of neighborhoods of perfect houses with trimmed, green lawns.

"It's so beautiful," Laurel commented and squeezed Oliver. "Looks like the perfect place to settle
down, huh?"
The car suddenly felt stifling as he nodded at a beaming Laurel. Absentmindedly, his hand reached for Felicity and took hold of her wrist that was squished between them. The feel of her steady pulse against his fingers seemed to calm him. At his touch, she sighed and unconsciously burrowed more into him.

A few minutes later, they were following a narrow road into the woods. They passed a few cabins, each one larger than the last. Finally, they parked in front of the biggest of them all. The tall wooden structure resembled a lodge more than a cabin.

"Whoa, I forgot how humongous it was," Laurel mumbled.

"The inside must be gorgeous," Sara commented. It was her first time being there.

"It's not so bad, as long as stuffed animal heads on the walls don't freak you out," Tommy replied. He turned off the car and got out to stretch. "Let's get the stuff. And hey, the fireworks didn't explode. Go us!"

As the others got out to stretch their legs, Oliver hung back to wake up Felicity. He whispered her name a few times and gently patted her leg until her eyes fluttered open. "We're here," Oliver told her.

"Hmm?" It took a few seconds for his words to register, and she abruptly sat up. "Oh my gosh, when did I fall asleep? Frack!"—she wiped at her mouth—"I didn't drool on you, did I?"

Chuckling, Oliver replied, "No."

"Sorry I fell asleep on you."

"It's fine. I like you sleeping on me," he murmured so only she could hear. With a quick squeeze of her knee, Oliver got out of the car. He couldn't keep the satisfied grin off of his face at the way her cheeks had reddened.

It was a moment longer before she actually got out of the car to help the rest of them unload. Oliver watched her stare in awe at the enormous cabin. The inside was even fancier. The foyer led into the large, high-ceiling living room with a tall wall of windows. They provided the perfect view of the large lake directly behind the house. The set of plush, brown leather couches and plaid recliners were located in the center of the room in front of the ginormous stone fireplace that was built up to the ceiling. Bolted toward the top were a trio of stuffed ducks. On either side of that were bookcases.

The full kitchen and island counter were to the right, with the long dining table and chairs against the back wall of windows. As Tommy had mentioned, various animal heads were mounted along different walls. The sliding glass doors led to the back porch, which was made of stone and had its own fire pit area.

"I guess we know what happened to Bambi's mother," Felicity muttered.

"More like him and his entire family," Sara added with a look of disgust.

"I warned you," Tommy interjected. "Among my father's favorite hobbies, hunting is at the top." He didn't look much happier about it.

Tommy gave them a brief tour of the downstairs. Pointing up at the balcony overlooking the living room, he informed them they'd have their choice of bedrooms—excluding the master (which was Malcolm's) and Tommy's room.
Oliver took the one right next to Tommy's, which was usually his when their fathers would take them there for the weekend. It looked exactly the same and brought a smile to Oliver's face. He was just about to walk inside when he noticed someone out of the corner of his eye. Laurel stood with her bags in hand, looking at him expectantly.

"Hey, did you need help with something?" he asked her.

"Possibly." She smiled flirtatiously. "It's the first time we've been away from the city in a while and sleeping in the same place."

"Okay..." he trailed off, not getting it.

Laurel rolled her eyes. "Really, Ollie?" she teased. "Do I have to spell it out?" She nodded toward the bedroom.

"Oh," Oliver said in realization. "You want to bunk up."

"Among other things," she hinted. "Come on, Ollie, don't act like you haven't thought about it. It's been over a month since we've had sex and if I know you, which I do, you've been feeling it as badly as I have. And with everything that's happened"—her voice sounded thick with emotion—"we shouldn't take anything for granted. We need this."

Laurel was partially right. Oliver had been feeling pent up more than usual lately, but he couldn't tell her the truth. That a certain other young brunette had been the star of his fantasies lately. That the mere thought of one kiss from her turned him on more right now than the prospect of a week-long sex marathon with his sort-of girlfriend. No, that definitely wouldn't go over well.

Instead, he replied, "I know what you mean, Laurel, but I can't. At least not right now."

That was clearly not the answer she'd been expecting and she recoiled from him as if he'd pushed her. "Why not?" Hurt and confusion were written all over her face.

"I still don't feel one-hundred percent after the incident, and I'm already not getting enough sleep as it is."

"Oh," she replied. "Well, we don't have to do anything if you're not up to it. But maybe if I was with you, you'd feel more comfortable and—"

"I toss and turn in my sleep, and I don't want to hurt you," Oliver explained. He was a restless sleeper, but it was nowhere near as bad as he was making it sound. "We can still hang out and have fun this week," he tried to reassure her. "But at night I just need to be alone."

"You seemed fine last night," she quietly pointed out.

"That's because I stayed awake most of the night after you fell asleep." He was a grade-A prick for lying, but that didn't stop the words from pouring out. "It's not you. You've been great coming over and making sure I'm okay. But this is what I need. Just for now. Okay?"

She looked disappointed but nodded. "Okay. I understand."

"Thank you, Laurel." He kissed her cheek, which brought a tiny smile to her face. A few doors down, Oliver noticed Felicity watching them. She quickly looked away when their eyes met and darted into her own room. Oliver wondered how much of their conversation she'd actually heard.

"I better go call dibs on a room," Laurel said, regaining his attention. "See you later, Ollie."
"Later," he called after her and went inside. He shut the door behind him and banged his head against it. This supposedly relaxing trip was getting more complicated by the minute.
Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your feedback last chapter! This next one is all flashbacks. I know many of you are frustrated with past Oliver. A lot is about to go down in Ivy Town, although this chapter is more fun and light. Being around both Felicity and Laurel at the same time will have Oliver seriously questioning things and having to make a decision. There will be another complication that pops up in this chapter, too. Keep in mind, he's still Ollie. Quite frankly, the boy needs to get his shit together. So it'll be an evolution. But I hope you enjoy some of the fluff in this one before we get to the big drama. Let me know what you think in the comments!

July 1, 2007

The house was loud and boisterous as everyone sat in the living room talking and catching up. Their group had settled into the cabin yesterday and spent the day hanging out and relaxing. It was great to be away from the city. Felicity loved the stillness of the woods and found herself sitting outside on the balcony last night and breathing in the wildlife for a while. She'd always been a city girl—growing up in Las Vegas, moving to Boston for college, and now living in Starling—so Ivy Town was a welcomed change.

The others had joined her outside, and they sat and talked for hours. A fire pit was built into the stone terrace off of the living room. They'd gathered around roasting food and marshmallows. Being away from the city also allowed the stars to shine bright in the sky. Felicity pointed out a couple of constellations. There was way more she could show and tell them, but she held back. She didn't want to look like a total nerd.

Late this morning, some of Tommy and Oliver's friends had showed up. There were multiple cabins in the area nearby like this one. Most were inhabited by people they knew growing up. Apparently, a fancy cabin in Ivy Town was a trend among the Starling City one percenters. It was two guys and two girls. Felicity finally met Jean and Ryan. She remembered them from the conversation with Laurel and Sara a few weeks ago. The couple had been dating almost as long as Laurel and Oliver and were now living together. If it still bothered Laurel, she didn't show it. Sara hadn't been kidding about Jean "The Machine." The girl had flaming red hair but not the personality to match it. Jean was nice enough but definitely came off stiff. She had a dry humor and serious way of speaking that took some getting used to. Ryan, who looked much shorter when standing next to the others guys, seemed more social and easygoing.

The other guy with them was Carter Bowen. Felicity had heard all about him from Tommy and Oliver before he arrived. According to them, Carter was every parent's "wet dream." After making an "ew" face, she asked them to explain. That's when the tangent started, which left Felicity, Sara, and Laurel laughing so hard their sides hurt.

"Carter Bowen is the perfect son," Tommy began in Malcolm's voice.

Oliver impersonated his mother. "Carter Bowen just won the national chess championship. Carter Bowen is anchoring the debate team."
"Oliver, Carter got accepted to Harvard and Princeton," Tommy sarcastically exclaimed.

"That, Tommy, is because Carter got a perfect score on his SATs."

"Now how did he manage to study and cure cancer?"

It was barely a few minutes after Felicity met Carter that she saw what Tommy and Oliver had been talking about. The guy was friendly, but there was a definite air of pretentiousness that surrounded him. He'd honed in on Laurel and started talking about how he was eager to begin medical school at Harvard in the fall. Carter wanted to be a neurosurgeon, and it was when he listed some of the technical things he'd be studying that Felicity saw the conversation for what it was—a chance to brag. Eventually he asked Laurel about applying to law school, and Felicity got the sense that Carter was the type to gravitate toward anyone else who he viewed was on a similar path to success. The guy was definitely an opportunist.

The girl who'd accompanied them was Jean's best friend Samantha Clayton. She was a junior at SCU and had been in a couple of classes with Tommy. Samantha, however, gravitated toward Oliver as soon as she walked in the door. It wasn't hard to see that she was interested in him. She was practically fawning over him and wouldn't shut up about how brave he was for facing the bomber at QC. Felicity wasn't the only one to notice the exchange. Sara had rolled her eyes, and Laurel had been watching the pair like a hawk as they talked on the couch. Felicity hated to admit it, but the pretty, flirtatious brunette was getting on her nerves, too. Who would've thought she and Laurel would have something in common?

Ever since Oliver's conversation with Laurel last night—which Felicity had caught the end of—things had been a bit tense between the two. They'd sat next to each other at dinner and around the fire pit, but something was off. Tommy and Sara noticed, too. Of course no one would dare mention it. Felicity hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but she couldn't deny the almost giddy feeling she got upon hearing Oliver turn down Laurel. His gorgeous, model-esque, sorta-girlfriend was practically throwing herself at him, and yet Oliver had refused. Felicity was trying not to read too much into it, but she knew it was because of her. Hell, Oliver had straight up told her he couldn't stop thinking about her and that kiss. The conversation in that hall and look he sent her afterward was further proof that he'd meant what he said.

The group had been chatting for about a half hour before Tommy announced that the guys planned on taking the boat out and fishing on the giant lake nearby. The girls decided to stay behind and tan on the beach. Felicity, feeling a little nervous, approached Tommy off to the side.

"Would it be weird if I went with you guys?" she asked him.

Tommy, though surprised, was open to the idea. "No. Why would it be weird?"

With a shy shrug, she explained, "I've never actually been fishing before. I never really had a dad or brother to take me. It would be fun to try it." To lighten the mood, since Tommy was giving her that charming yet sympathetic look of his, she jokingly added, "But I don't want to put a damper your sausage fest."

It had the desired effect. Tommy threw his head back and laughed loudly, which had everyone staring at them. Felicity bit her lip, feeling her cheeks flush. "You are the best," he declared, shaking his head and throwing an arm around her shoulders. "And I am going to make sure you catch the biggest fish. Mark my words."

Oliver approached them. "What's so funny?"
"Nothing," Felicity was quick to answer before Tommy could.

"Felicity is coming fishing with us. It's her first time."

Grinning, Oliver said, "Yeah, you definitely should join us. If I have to talk to Carter the whole time I might just strangle myself with my fishing line."

"I should probably warn you guys that I hate anything creepy crawly," Felicity stated. "Which means I am not touching any worms."

Tommy chuckled and squeezed her shoulders. "We have some fake bait you can use or one of us can put them on for you. But you might want to change. Don't wear anything you don't want to get dirty."

"Also bring a hat. The sun can be really strong this time of day," Oliver added.

"Okay. Give me a few minutes to change," Felicity told them.

"We have to change, too," Tommy said. "We'll meet down by the dock in the back."

Felicity rushed to her room to get changed. She decided to wear her bathing suit underneath her clothes just in case she got wet. Also, being in the sun for a couple of hours was the perfect opportunity to get a tan. Felicity threw on her black cut-off shorts and a forest green tank top over her black crocheted bikini. The humidity had made her hair curl, and so she pulled it back in a high ponytail. After packing a bag with a few other things she thought she might need, Felicity slipped on her sandals and went down to the docks. The guys were there waiting for her.

"Got everything you need?" Oliver questioned. Of course he looked as handsome as ever in his swim trunks and tight white t-shirt that perfectly showed off his biceps. His baseball cap and aviator sunglasses also highlighted his chiseled face.

"Mostly. I forgot to pack a hat."

"I've got something." Tommy, who was prepping the boat and supplies with Carter, reached into a compartment and threw her a cap. It was a green BassPro Shops hat, which actually matched her shirt perfectly. She readjusted the size, since whoever wore it beforehand was much bigger than her.

"Hey, Felicity, there you are," Sara called to her. She and the other girls were already laid out on their towels on the shore. "We were wondering what happened to you. I saved you a spot." She patted the empty sand beside her.

"Thanks but I'm going fishing with the guys."

Sara pulled down her sunglasses and grinned. "The city girl conquering the great outdoors. Nice! I expect you to catch dinner."

Felicity laughed and shook her head. "We'll see. I don't even know how to cast."

"We're going to give her a crash course," Oliver declared.

"Hey, Oliver, got room for one more?" Samantha interjected and started to stand. "I've never been fishing. Maybe you can teach me, too."

Felicity inwardly groaned as Laurel, who'd been lying back on her towel with her eyes closed, suddenly sat up. If looks could kill, Samantha would be toast. "Well, maybe we should all go,"
Laurel suggested a little too sharply. Samantha glanced over at her, also annoyed. Felicity half expected them to sprout claws and pounce at each other. There was a definite battle for Oliver going on, and she got the feeling this wasn't the first time they'd faced off. There was some history there for sure. Though she couldn't see his eyes, Felicity got the sense that Oliver wasn't exactly enjoying the attention. He looked to Tommy and something silent passed between them. With a discrete nod, her stepbrother turned back to the others. "Sorry, ladies, but we're already at capacity with Felicity. Next time."

"What kind of boat is this?" Felicity questioned while taking Tommy's hand. He helped her scale the gap between the boat and the dock. It was a decent sized blue and gray boat with a wide silver bottom and white seats. The seats were mostly grouped together. One chair was at the steering wheel and the rest formed a L-shaped couch behind it. A small table was bolted to the floor between them. Felicity assumed this was to allow more space at the front and back of the boat to stand and fish.

"It's a pontoon boat. They're mostly known as party boats, but this one is designed more for fishing," he explained and showed her a couple of the luxury features. There was a built-in stereo and refrigerator, plus plenty of cup holders. They'd already cracked open a few bottles of beer. The canopy was left off; but Tommy said he could put it up if she got too hot later.

Felicity sat between Oliver and Ryan as Tommy and Carter finished undocking. A few minutes later, they were ready to go. Tommy revved the engine, and Felicity waved to Sara. Tommy waited until they were in deeper water before picking up speed. Felicity loved the wind blowing through her hair and the way the boat bounced when cutting across the waves generated from the other boats on the lake. She'd never felt anything like it. There were quite a few jet and water skiers. Tommy waved to a couple before taking them to a part of the lake that was quieter and not too far from some trees and rock formations. Oliver explained that fish preferred areas with more cover and weeds to hide. The boat was still in the sun, though, which Felicity was glad about. She desperately needed some color this summer.

"We're in about ten feet of water," Tommy announced. "We'll try our luck here first. This is usually the best spot."

Felicity hung back while the guys got the boat anchored and unloaded the poles and tackle boxes. Her phone vibrated in her bag, and Felicity took the opportunity to text her mom back. Donna wanted to know if she was having a good time and if there were any cute boys there. Felicity automatically glanced over at Oliver and almost started drooling.

Oliver had taken his shirt off so that he was only dressed in his bathing suit. It hung low on his hips showing off part of the defined V of his pelvis. Glancing at the other guys, Felicity realized they'd all taken off their shirts. Seemed like she wasn't the only one wanting to get some color. She was surrounded by bulging muscles. Even if she didn't catch anything, Felicity had to admit the eye candy was a win anyway.

Taking off her hat and reaching for the hem of her tank top, Felicity followed suit. She didn't even have to look over to know that Oliver's eyes were on her. His stare was almost like a physical caress, and she attempted not to fidget under its intensity. Reaching into her bag, she grabbed her sunscreen. Felicity applied as much as she could but her back was hard to reach.

A throat cleared behind her. "Need some help?" Oliver offered.

Felicity wasn't sure if it was the sun or Oliver's sudden proximity that was causing her body to heat up so quickly, but she had a feeling it was the latter. "Thanks." She handed him the bottle and turned around. The moment his hands touched her bare skin, her own gripped the railing tightly in front of
her. Oliver started rubbing at the base of her spine and worked his way up. His touch was like a shock to her system, and Felicity was grateful that she’d left her sunglasses on. Felicity's closed eyes and bitten lip surely would've made the others pause.

Thankfully, nothing about the gesture seemed amiss because Oliver was talking casually with the others about who was using which fishing poles and bait. The only indication that he was just as affected was how his fingers lingered a few seconds too long over the knot of her bikini top. Felicity couldn't help but imagine him pulling it loose. By the time Oliver reached her shoulders and the back of her neck, he was kneading her muscles in a way that almost had her purring.

"When you're done with our little China doll, your magic fingers are rubbing me down next, buddy," Tommy joked, approaching them.

Felicity turned, which regrettably caused Oliver to lose his grip on her, and placed her hands on her hips. "Don't be sexist, Merlyn. I am not a damn doll."

He shrugged unapologetically. "Hey, I was trying to be nice. You're pretty but you're pale, Smoak. I thought Casper would sound more insulting."

Felicity lowered her sunglasses so he could see her glare. He could be such a butthead, which she assumed was typical behavior of an older brother. She wouldn't dare admit that she enjoyed the teasing. Tommy chuckled and handed her a purple and black fishing pole. It was a tad smaller in size than some of the others. "Here, you can use this. It'll give you a better grip, since it's designed for a woman. It was my mom's."

"Oh, wow," Felicity commented. "Are you sure this is okay?" Tommy's mother meant the world to him. Allowing her to use something of his mother's was no small gesture on his part.

"Yeah. She'd say it deserves to be put to good use. She caught a lot of fish with this." Tommy guided her toward the back of the boat. He spent a few minutes teaching her how to work the pole and cast out the line. Felicity did a couple of practice casts before Tommy decided she no longer needed his instruction. Since the real worms grossed her out, Tommy used fake bait on her hook.

When Tommy went to set up his own pole, Oliver took his place. "Don't reel it in too fast," he instructed and placed a bottled water for her in the nearby cup holder. "You want the fish to have a chance at catching it."

"How long does it usually take to get a nibble?" she inquired.

"Depends on if they're hungry. Could be minutes or hours. It's all about patience."

With her nose scrunched in disgust, Felicity watched as Oliver baited his hook with a worm. "Does that really hurt them?"

Oliver shrugged. "Maybe. Then again, being torn apart by a bird probably sucks more."

"As opposed to being stabbed and drowned?" she countered.

"It all pretty much sucks," he joked.

Felicity shook her head at him and focused on recasting her line. They stood side by side in comfortable silence for a few minutes while Tommy talked with Ryan and Carter at the front.

"Oh," Oliver muttered and started to reel his back in. He pulled the pole back, and Felicity noticed the way it was tipping forward. Something was tugging at the other end.
"Oh my God, do you have something?" Felicity asked.

"I think so." Oliver reeled faster before the fish emerged with a splash. It dangled from the hook flopping back and forth. It was somewhat small with silver, brown, and green coloring.

"Ollie, what you got?" Tommy called to him.

"It's a bluegill."

"Not too shabby," Ryan commented.

"How are you going to get the hook out?" Felicity questioned.

Oliver caught the pliers Tommy tossed to him. Felicity watched with a mixture of unease and fascination as Oliver gently pried the hook from the fish's mouth. He then tossed the little guy back into the water. "FYI, live bait works better than the fake worms."

Felicity drew her line in and got excited when she felt a tug of her own. She reeled faster and huffed in frustration when she saw that she'd hooked a bunch of gross weeds. "Damn it."

"Sure you don't want to try a real worm?" he coaxed.

"No. I'm good." Within the next hour, almost all of the guys had at least one catch. Felicity cursed their live bait each time. She couldn't be the only one left out. When Oliver got his second catch, Felicity finally caved. "Ugh, fine!" she exclaimed. "Give me a stupid, disgusting worm."

Oliver smirked and reached into the plastic bin. He grabbed a fat, squirming worm, which made her cringe and want to take a step back. Felicity didn't care if she was a hundred times bigger than it, like Tommy had pointed out, because it still gave her the creeps.

"You've got a literal worm buffet on your hook. That should at least give you a bite," he told her.

Tommy, who'd joined them in the back, said, "Getting nothing and wanting to snap your pole in half is all part of the experience."

"I can't not catch anything my first time out. This better work," Felicity grumbled. The next big catch was most definitely going to be hers.

Oliver was seriously considering throwing Carter overboard. The second Felicity told him that she was only seventeen and attending MIT, Oliver knew their little bubble of comradery had been burst. He'd found another overachiever and, like with Laurel earlier, Carter thought the best way to connect with someone was to casually start bragging about his endless list of accomplishments. It had initially been satisfying to hear Felicity best him by talking about skipping high school and earning her bachelor and master's degrees in IT and Cyber Security at the same time. But it had backfired, and now Carter stood between them at the back of the boat continuing to chat her up. Felicity, of course, was polite and listened to Carter drone on and on without complaint.

Oliver had been trying to tune out Carter so much that he almost didn't realize that the other guy had asked him a question. Looking up from the water, Oliver replied, "What?"

"Word is you're a hero now—at least that's what I've been hearing on the news and from Samantha. She wouldn't shut up about it the whole way here, by the way," Carter commented. "I can't believe
you faced off against a terrorist, Oliver."

"More like a disgruntled employee," he corrected.

Carter scoffed. "I'd say he was more than disgruntled. I don't know if I would've been able to go back in there knowing some nut with a vendetta had a bomb strapped to him."

"Well, when your family and a bunch of innocent people's lives are on the line, you'd be surprised what you're willing to do."

"And you probably thought getting a summer job at QC would be your biggest worry," he said, nudging him. It was typical Carter to try and throw him down any way he could. He turned to Felicity and continued, "Oliver could write a book on how to dodge working in the family business. Remember that time you got caught at that charity event with a board member's daughter?"

Irritation flared within Oliver. He was this close to tossing the d-bag into the lake if he didn't shut up. Felicity, though he could tell she was listening, focused on her fishing pole. A small knot of tangled string had formed, which she was trying to get out. "Not really," Oliver answered coolly and went to help her. She willingly handed it over.

"You were pretty wasted."

"Actually, I think that was me," Tommy interjected. "Or was I with her sister? Anyway, we've all done stupid stuff."

"That's the damn truth," Ryan grumbled. "Before Jean, I was a total ass."

"You still are," Tommy teased him.

"But a committed ass," Ryan was quick to clarify. "Seriously, though, you graduate and then suddenly you're an adult. Then the next thing you know, you're having an intense conversation about your future and you have to either commit or cut 'em loose."

"Obviously you chose the first," Carter stated. "How is domestic life with Jean?"

"It's good. It's comfortable. Also puts off the issue of marriage for a while longer," he explained and took a long swig of beer.

Tommy frowned. "I thought you were crazy about Jean. You don't think you'll get married?"

"We probably will but, shit, I'm only twenty-three. I'm nowhere near ready for that. We're both starting our careers. No need to move to suburbia and buy a minivan just yet."

"You're right. Career comes first," Carter agreed. "You'll never make something of yourself if you're too tied down. If she loves you, she'll wait. It's what women do."

Oliver noticed Felicity discretely roll her eyes. She clearly thought Carter was full of crap but chose not to say anything. Oliver was glad she could see right through him—not that he doubted she wouldn't.

"What about you, Oliver?" Ryan asked. "You and Laurel have been dating longer than me and Jean. If Laurel is anything like Jean, she must be getting impatient."

He handed Felicity back her pole. Their hands brushed for a second, and he almost lost his train of thought. "Laurel and I are figuring things out."
"Which means?" Carter prompted.

"It means we're figuring things out," Oliver repeated curtly. He was most definitely not getting into his issues with Laurel with these guys—especially with Felicity right next to him.

"I'm trying to get this insanely hot actress to come to our party on the Fourth. That's the extent of my commitment right now," Tommy declared, chuckling. Leave it to his best friend to get him out of an awkward conversation.

"What about you, Felicity?" Ryan inquired. "Are you seeing anyone?"

"Not right now."

"Eh, she's got plenty of time." Carter sent her a patronizing grin. "You're practically a baby."

Oliver felt Felicity stiffen next to him. Nothing drove her crazier than being dismissed because of her age. He saw the moment her eyes sparked with annoyance. Felicity looked like she was about to say something when her attention was jerked toward her pole.

"Holy frack," she gasped and started reeling it in. "I think I got something." She tugged on it some more and exclaimed, "Oh, I definitely have something."

"Do it quick but easy," Oliver instructed. "You don't want to lose it."

Felicity was leaning over the edge pulling with all her might. "Damn, this thing is strong. I don't think I can hold it. There are no weird creatures in this water, right? Because it feels like I've got the Loch Ness Monster on the line."

The guys laughed and Tommy reassured her, "No monsters in these waters. At least that we know of."

Oliver, seeing how much she was struggling, came up behind Felicity. He wrapped his arms around her and placed his hand over hers on the handle. He let her continue to reel, only offering some leverage so she wouldn't lose it. Felicity was right that the tug on the pole was strong. It was very difficult to ignore the brushing of bare skin and the way her small form folded perfectly into him. And he thought rubbing the lotion on her earlier was tempting.

Tommy stood next to them holding a fishing net as her catch was dragged from the water. "Holy crap, you caught a bass!" he announced and held out the net to bring it in. "That sucker has got to be a couple of pounds." His best friend was right. It was by far the biggest catch they'd had so far.

"Oh my gosh, really?" Felicity was beaming and excitedly jumping up and down. "Yes! Finally!"

"We definitely need a picture of this," Tommy declared and pulled out his phone. "Ollie, show her how to hold it."

Felicity was already shaking her head. "No, I can't touch it."

"Yes, you can. Hold it by the mouth. It won't hurt you. Trust me." It was flopping around in the net, but Oliver managed to get a good grip on it.

"Ew, it's slimy," Felicity exclaimed when her fingers touched it.

"You're doing great. Hold it tight like that," Oliver encouraged. He didn't know who was amusing him more. Despite her obvious excitement, Felicity's nose was adorably scrunched in disgust as she
held her fish. Meanwhile, Tommy was snapping away on his phone like a proud big brother. Oliver got a picture of them together, too, to commemorate the moment. They both looked so happy—like actual siblings.

“All right, put him back in before he dies,” Felicity ordered. “That hook must hurt.”

“You don’t want to keep him?” Carter suggested.

“No, that would be cruel. He belongs in the water with his fish friends. Maybe he'll even meet a nice lady bass and have tons of baby bass. Gotta keep the circle of life going.”

“Very thoughtful of you,” Oliver teased and nudged her.

“You know, only if he wants to commit,” she mumbled so only he could hear.

Oliver chuckled and tugged affectionately on her ponytail. Felicity poking fun at Carter, along with that bikini top showing off her smooth, creamy skin—he hadn't been able to get his eyes off of her the entire time—made her that much sexier. Oliver replied just as quietly. "Maybe he does.”
Hello lovely readers! Thanks so much for your comments and kudos (over 800 now!). Past and present are going to merge this chapter, and you'll get more of Olicity's backstory and see how it's affecting them in the current timeline. This flashback is a turning point for them, as well. The chapter title "Right Love, Wrong Time" is based on a song by Anuhea if you want to check it out. I think it perfectly encapsulates what Olicity is facing in both timelines. Please read and let me know what you think!

September 7, 2012

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this movie."

"Tommy, who are you kidding?" Thea countered. "This movie has guns and beauty queens. You know you love it."

Felicity nodded in agreement. "Plus, Miss Congeniality is a classic. Who doesn't love Sandra Bullock?" She reached for the bowl of popcorn and settled into the couch. It was Friday, and Felicity couldn't be more relieved. It had been another grueling week at work.

The raids on the A.R.G.U.S. bunkers had ceased in the last month, but that didn't mean the world stopped being a dangerous place. They'd been given another assignment that required the team to travel to Havenrock for a couple of days. Felicity wasn't sure if she'd be back in time for today. Most often she spent the anniversary of the Gambit's demise with Tommy and Thea. Every year they'd visit the graveyard together. It helped knowing they still had each other despite everything they'd lost.

Felicity hadn't been able to go with them this morning, since she hadn't returned to Starling until late in the afternoon. She was relieved in a way. She'd always hated visiting Oliver's grave before, but it would be even weirder to do so now. No doubt Tommy would've gone off to see Laurel's as well, which would've left her and Thea alone. Felicity wasn't sure if she could handle standing back and watching as Thea paid her respects to her lost family. The guilt Felicity felt about keeping Oliver a secret was always worst around her.

After work, Felicity had met Tommy and Thea for dinner. They'd then gone back to Tommy's loft to watch movies and hang out. A low-key Friday night was what they all needed. Tommy had let Thea pick the movie. He always grumbled if they chose something too girlie, but Felicity knew he secretly loved it. The guy was a romantic at heart.

"True," Tommy conceded and popped a few M&Ms into his mouth. "That Miss Rhode Island is pretty hot, too. I wouldn't mind seeing her in those red panties."

"Ew!" Thea laughed and threw some popcorn at him.

"Hey, watch it, Speedy. I don't want to be cleaning kernels out of my couch," he jokingly scolded.
"It won't be you. It'll be your maid."

"Well, I don't want her to think I'm a pig."

Thea smirked. "Trust me, she already knows."

"Guys, I can't hear the TV," Felicity shushed them.

"I'm surprised you're even paying attention," the young brunette commented. "You've been checking your phone every five minutes. Waiting for Aaron to call?" Thea wiggled her eyebrows.

The blonde shrugged. "Maybe." Felicity had wanted to get in touch with Oliver all day, but she never had a free moment. She sent him a couple of texts, and he said that he'd call her later.

Tommy's cell chimed, and he groaned. "All this talking about phones and now look what you did." He read the message and sighed. "It's the club. There's a problem with a vendor. I have to go and handle it."

"Seriously?" Thea questioned. "Can't someone else do it?"

"The guy is a dick, and I'm the only one he'll negotiate with."

Felicity undid her ponytail to fix the stray hairs that had gotten loose and asked, "Why don't you get someone new if he's such a jerk?"

"Because he gives me the best price. If I want to keep turning a reasonable profit, I need him."

Tommy stood and made his way to the door. "You're both welcome to stay as long as you like. Take one of the guests rooms for the night if you want. I can make omelets in the morning."

Thea smiled. "Tempting."

"And don't worry, I'll make sure to tell Roy 'hi' for you," he added with a wink. Tommy, chuckling, was out the door just in time to dodge the pillow Thea had thrown at him.

"Oh, so it's Roy, huh? That's the guy you've been hanging out with?" Felicity questioned teasingly. "He's cute. Nice work, Thea."

Thea sighed and grabbed another pillow to put over her face. Her "yes" was muffled.

Felicity's brow furrowed at Thea's reaction. "What's the matter?"

"Ugh, nothing," Thea sighed. "I was just trying to keep it a secret for a bit longer."

"Why?"

Thea hesitated and appeared to be choosing her words carefully. "Roy isn't like the other guys I've dated. He's a little more…rough around the edges. He lives in The Glades, and he used to be into some bad stuff. But he's not like that anymore," she was quick to say. "He's managed to turn his life around since working at Verdant."

"Well, that's good. And Roy seemed nice enough when I first met him. Why did you feel like you couldn't tell us?"

"I wasn't actually worried about you guys or Donna for that matter. You know how Malcolm is. He can be way too overprotective. I swear he thinks he's my actual father sometimes. It's annoying," Thea huffed. "The idea of me with Roy would make his head explode."
Felicity bobbed her head in agreement. Malcolm would not be pleased. He took his guardianship over Thea very seriously, and only wanted the best for her. It wasn't a bad thing, but Felicity could understand the discomfort Thea felt. Malcolm wasn't Felicity's real father either, and they'd never gotten close. In fact, Malcolm wasn't even close to Tommy who was his own flesh and blood. Felicity often wondered how her mother had fallen for him all those years ago. More often than not she got the feeling Malcolm's mind was always somewhere else. There was this cold and distant quality to his personality that she could never quite shake.

"Keeping secrets can be hard."

Thea commented, "Sounds like you're talking from experience."

"I just mean that you're really private about your new boyfriend. It's been months, and we still haven't met him."

"It's complicated."

"Don't take this the wrong way, Felicity, but it's always complicated with you." Before Felicity could respond, Thea elaborated, "Sorry, I guess that came out kind of bad. But what I mean is that you always seem so secretive. You're constantly traveling for a job that you never really talk about, and Tommy said he only ever got to meet your co-workers once. Now you've got a mystery boyfriend who you also rarely talk about and never bring around to meet us. Not even Sara, who's your best friend, has met him. It's just odd. I mean, do you not trust us or something?" The hurt in her voice was evident. "I know we're not actually related, but Tommy is like my second brother. And I kind of always thought of us as sisters in a way, too."

"Thea, no, please don't think that." Felicity grabbed the remote control to turn off the movie so they could talk. They'd missed a chunk of it anyway. "We are family. The reason I don't talk about some of the things going on in my life isn't because of you guys. My job is really important. So important that I'm legally obligated not to talk about it."

"Because of the government contracts?"

"Yes." It was as much of the truth as she could reveal. Felicity couldn't let Thea go on thinking that she didn't want to purposefully talk to her.

"Oh, okay," she mumbled in understanding. "But what about Aaron?"

"His job is similar. Because his work is classified, he isn't always that eager to meet new people." Again, part of the truth. Oliver's work was classified, despite it being of an illegal nature.

"Wow, that's got to be rough."

"It's not easy," Felicity confirmed. "Nothing worthwhile ever is."

The corner of Thea's mouth twitched and she teased, "So what can we talk about then?"

Felicity was quiet for a moment, contemplating. "There is one secret I've been keeping all these years that I haven't told you. It has to do with Oliver and today."

"Let me guess, the Gambit didn't actually sink five years ago and he's off on an island somewhere spearing fish and talking to volleyballs," she tried to joke. Her smile didn't meet her eyes, though.
That hit a little too close to the mark, but Felicity cleared her throat and continued. "No. It's something that happened before the Gambit went down. Oliver and I...we were close."

"I know. You guys were friends." Thea shifted in her seat.

"Yes, but it was more than that." Felicity took a deep breath to center herself. "We were actually dating."

Thea's mouth formed a surprised "oh." She shook her head as if to clear it. "You and Ollie dating? How did I not know about this? Did anyone else know?"

"We kept it a secret. We started out as friends, but it just got to a point where we couldn't fight it anymore. Our situation was really complicated back then, and so we thought it best to keep it between us for a while. Then the Queen's Gambit went down and I just...I didn't feel right saying anything at that point."

"Why wouldn't it be right?" Thea questioned before realization dawned on her. "Laurel. You didn't want her to find out."

"They were on a break but then some things happened and...anyway, I loved Oliver. A lot. We loved each other. But Laurel had known him longer, and everyone always assumed they'd end up together. She was publicly grieving and with Oliver gone...it didn't feel right," Felicity repeated.

"So what if they had a history? You were his girlfriend. You loved him and were mourning him, too," Thea pointed out. "I could see you were just as devastated. Now I know why going to his grave was so hard for you."

"It wasn't how I wanted to remember him." Felicity, feeling her eyes water, shrugged. Even though she had Oliver now, it didn't make recounting the past any less painful. "I knew he loved me. That was all I really needed."

"So you kept this to yourself all this time?"

"My mom knew. Plus Tommy and Sara eventually."

"And they were okay with it?"

"Yes and no. That's an even longer story. I think a part of it, too, was wanting to protect what Oliver and I had. I was so young at the time...I didn't want any unnecessary drama or to hear people's opinions about what we were supposed to be. I just wanted to keep the part of him I had close to me, if that makes sense."

"Sure. So why tell me now?" Thea inquired.

"Because I think you're old enough now to know how I really feel about your brother. And because I know what it's like to love someone but have to keep it a secret," she stated, feeling the weight of that secret bearing down on her yet again. "So if you do want to talk about Roy, I'm here for you. No matter what. Okay?"

"Thanks, Felicity." Thea smiled and leaned in to give her a hug. "I'm sorry you had to hide how you felt all this time. You should know that you made my brother really happy. I didn't know what it was, but I could see the change in him before he left. Not many people knew the real him. Ollie could be super broody for a party boy."

Felicity laughed in agreement. "Yeah. I noticed."
"He seemed lighter somehow with you. If that makes sense."

"It does."

"So you don't know if things will work out with Aaron?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you said how you 'feel' about my brother. As in present tense," Thea pointed out.

"Oh," Felicity bit her lip, inwardly cursing her slip of the tongue. Thea had always been very perceptive. "I, uh, didn't realize I'd said that."

"It's okay if you still love him. I get it. It can be hard to move forward when you're still clinging to the past. Trust me." She placed her hand over Felicity's. "But it's also okay to move on. You've got to live your life, you know? Ollie would want you to be happy."

"Don't worry. I am. Promise." Felicity sent her a grateful smile and squeezed her hand. "The same applies to you, so tell me all about you and Roy. How did you initially meet?"

Thea laughed nervously and looked away. "Oh, man. You're not going to believe it, and if Malcolm knew he'd freak."

Felicity quirked an eyebrow and lightly smacked her shoulder. "Okay, you have to tell me now." The fact that Thea looked so flustered automatically told Felicity how much she cared for the guy. Felicity leaned in, eager to hear more.

"Okay," Thea relented, "so it all began when Roy tried to steal my purse…"

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**July 2, 2007**

*It was the middle of the night, and Oliver was surprised to find the lights already on in the kitchen. Sleep was evading him, and so he'd decided to watch some TV downstairs. Not sure he wanted any company at the moment, Oliver silently peered around the corner to see who else was up. A huge grin formed on his face when he saw Felicity sitting up on the counter. She had a cookie in one hand and a glass of milk in the other.*

"So you're the cookie thief," he declared, keeping his voice low, and entered the kitchen.

Felicity looked over in surprise before smiling sheepishly. "To be fair, I originally came down to make some warm milk. It's not my fault Tommy left the package out after dinner."

*Oliver came to stand beside her. With her sitting on the counter, they were practically eye level. He accepted the cookie she held out to him and took a bite. 'Couldn't sleep either, huh?"*

"Not really," Felicity said with a shake of her head. "'Then again, it probably has something to do with the massive stuffed deer head that hangs on the wall over my bed. Feels like that thing is watching me." She shivered just thinking about it.

*Oliver offered, 'I can take it down for you.'*

"Really? It looks like it's mounted to the wall."
"It is, but I can still take it down. Tommy and I did the same thing."

"Thanks." She bumped her shoulder against his. "So why are you up?"

"Long day."

"Shouldn't you be tired then?" she pointed out.

"I should, but I feel restless. I don't know…" Oliver trailed off. He finished his cookie and took the offered milk she'd been drinking. It was a casual, friendly gesture that also spoke of an underlying intimacy.

"Anything I can do to help?" Oliver turned to Felicity and found her grinning in amusement.

"Nice milk mustache," she teased. Before he could respond, she'd already reached out to wipe it away from his mouth. Her touch sent a shock through his system.

"Nice jammies," Oliver countered, his voice naturally lower, and playfully tugged on the hem of her shirt. Felicity wore a gray tank top with a cartoon cat face on it and matching shorts. Her hair was down in loose waves, and her face was fresh and clean of makeup. It made her look younger but no less stunning. Her skin also glowed from the tan she'd gotten on the boat earlier.

"Thank you. They're very comfy," she confidently quipped.

Oliver gave her hem another tug and smirked. "I'll bet."

Her bright blue eyes darkened, and she held his gaze. The charge in the air between them was palpable. Oliver had been feeling it all day, which was problematic considering they were constantly surrounded by other people. The house was even more chaotic since Carter and the others had stayed until after dinner. Now that he had Felicity all to himself, Oliver couldn't resist wanting to be close to her.

"Do you want to come up to my room?" Mere seconds after she said it, she flinched and looked away. "Oh God, sorry. I didn't mean for it to come out sounding like that. I just meant that it's late—or early depending on how you look at it—and that stupid deer is still up there and—"

"Felicity," Oliver interrupted her nervous ramble, "I know what you meant." His smile was reassuring, which calmed her. Unthinkingly, Oliver reached out to help her off of the counter. He held her against him a few seconds longer than he probably should have, but Felicity made no move to let go right away either.

Eventually they both came to their senses and broke apart. After putting away the milk and cookies, Felicity led him up to her room. His eyes instantly gravitated to her rounded backside as he followed her up the stairs. She really did have a great ass, and his hands itched to touch it. Oliver had to remind himself that they were just friends, and it took a concerted effort to keep himself in check.

Their steps were quiet down the hall to her room. Neither one had to point out how awkward and suspicious it would be if they were caught entering her room together in the middle of the night. Felicity shut the door behind him and observed Oliver climbing onto her bed to reach that stupid deer head. His muscles strained against his white t-shirt, and she was reminded of how glorious they'd looked uncovered on the boat earlier that day. How his expert fingers had rubbed the lotion into her skin. How he'd enveloped her in his arms and offered his strength when her catch was too big to reel in herself. For what felt like the hundredth time that night, Felicity was completely spiraling at the thought of him.
"Got it," Oliver proclaimed, interrupting her heated musings. He stepped off the bed and brought the mount over to the closet, putting it inside and shutting the door. "Creepy dead deer effectively removed."

"Thanks."

"Sure."

They stood across from each other, simultaneously wanting to say everything and nothing at all. Clearing her throat, Felicity casually asked, "Are you going to sleep now?"

Shaking his head, Oliver replied, "Probably not. I might go back downstairs and watch some TV."

"You're welcomed to stay here and hang out if you want," Felicity said. "I'm not that tired either."

"You sure?" Oliver replied, trying not to sound as eager as he felt.

"Yeah. We haven't gotten a chance to spend much time together lately—alone."

Oliver's heart skipped a beat at that. "No, we haven't. But it's also really hard to get Carter to shut up."

Felicity couldn't help but smile at the edge she heard in Oliver's voice. He hated Carter, but she'd noticed that it was more apparent when the other guy had shown some interest in her. Felicity had listened politely despite being bored to tears. She now knew why Oliver and Tommy couldn't stand him. The guy was almost too perfect to the point that he came off as snobbish and fake. Despite the fact that Carter had spent so much time chatting with her on the boat, Felicity knew she wasn't his type and that it was really Laurel that he was interested in. Carter had focused on her for the rest of the night, and Felicity couldn't help but feel relieved by the reprieve.

"Or Samantha," Felicity countered. If Oliver was annoyed with Carter's interest in Laurel, he didn't show it. In fact, Tommy seemed more bothered by it than he did. Her stepbrother had joined them on the couch after a while. With Tommy preoccupying Carter, Laurel had more chances to glare over at Oliver and Samantha. The outgoing brunette had latched onto him almost as soon as they'd gotten back. Oliver placated her, but Felicity could tell he was uncomfortable by her not-so-subtle flirting.

Meanwhile, Felicity and Sara had talked with Ryan and Jean at the kitchen table. They were all in silent agreement to stay out of the unfolding drama. Only once did Sara seem to tense, and it was when Jean had asked about her mom. Dinah Lance worked at SCU as a professor of classic literature. Jean, who'd been on her way to meet her graduate advisor, had spotted her rushing across the quad on campus. Sara had stiffly answered that her mother was really busy lately teaching summer classes and left it at that.

"No argument there," Oliver agreed, loving the irritation she was trying to mask.

The pair ended up sitting on Felicity's bed, talking quietly. After a while, they'd gotten more comfortable. Felicity laid on her back with her feet up and resting on the headboard. Oliver's head was right beside hers but with his long limbs partially hanging off the end of the bed. They were so close their cheeks were almost touching. At some point, Oliver's hand had started playing with her hair that was fanned out over the mattress.

Oliver, once again, couldn't help complimenting Felicity's catch that afternoon, to which Felicity couldn't contain her pride or excitement. "Largest catch of the day," he reminded her.
"I know. Not too shabby for my first fishing trip. Thank you for helping me. I don't know if I would've been able to hold it by myself."

"Sure. Knowing Carter, he probably would've stepped right in and then taken credit."

"Well, I am 'practically a baby' so of course I would've needed his help," she added with a roll of her eyes.

"You are not a baby, Felicity," Oliver told her while running his hands through her silky strands. "Don't listen to Carter. He's an idiot."

"Do you think he was right about what he told Ryan?"

"What do you mean?"

"That commitment and settling down is impossible." Aside from the fishing, which she enjoyed greatly, hanging out with the guys today had given Felicity some real insight into the male psyche. She knew they were probably holding back somewhat given her presence, but she'd heard enough to confirm some of her worst fears.

Noticing the troubled undertone to her voice, Oliver replied carefully, "That's not quite what he said."

"But it was implied."

"He didn't mean it wasn't ever a possibility," Oliver clarified. "I think what he meant, despite sounding like a total jackass, was that we're all just starting out and trying to figure out what we want." He couldn't believe he was somewhat defending Carter, but it was less for his benefit and more to reassure Felicity. "No matter what Ryan says, I do think he and Jean will get married eventually. Right now, though, work is his priority. But Carter and Ryan have always been more focused on their reputations. It's different for everyone."

"So, sometimes, the person you're with can be the priority?"

"Yes."

Felicity hesitated before asking, "Has it ever been for you?"

Oliver's hand paused mid-stroke, taken off guard by her question. "No," he admitted, not wanting to lie to her but feeling ashamed by the ugly truth regardless. His numerous girlfriends, Laurel included, had never come first for him. Not even his reputation as a Queen had been all that important. Anything that Oliver did do, it was eventually to benefit himself in some shallow and conceited way. "But that can change...with the right person."

Their heads turned simultaneously, and their eyes locked. Everything and nothing was being said in that moment. Needing to touch her, Oliver's hand resumed its ministrations and traveled up to her face. His fingers brushed her cheek gently, causing Felicity's eyes to briefly close.

When they reopened, the struggle in them was clear. "I don't know." Felicity spoke so softly her voice was almost a whisper. "Listening to you guys today... I was reminded of my father. He made my mom and I lots of promises, too, before abandoning us. I don't remember much, but I remember how much it hurt when he left. Oliver, I don't think I could take losing someone that important to me again."

There was no missing the true meaning behind her words. "Hey," Oliver murmured. "Not every guy
is him, Felicity." He moved closer, causing their noses to brush. "You're not going to lose me."

Her eyes glistened, full of emotion. "But I almost did when that bomb went off. Plus, there's Laurel. She clearly still loves you, and you obviously care for her, too, so—"

Felicity never got to finish. Her words turned into a surprised gasp when Oliver bridged the small gap between them and kissed her. It felt both odd and erotic considering their opposing positions. Oliver's nose bumped against her chin as he took hold of her bottom lip. Felicity's tongue instinctively followed to taste him, and she quietly moaned as he sucked both into his mouth.

After a couple more strokes, Oliver shifted his head to the side. He deepened the kiss and started to sit up. Felicity did the same and, without breaking contact, reached out for him. She clutched his shoulders, needing to be closer. Oliver reciprocated and wound his arms around her waist to draw her tightly against him. He supported her weight, and Felicity willingly melted into his embrace. A low, husky growl emitted from deep in his throat when they were chest to chest.

Oliver couldn't believe that he was actually kissing Felicity again. Unlike the last time, there was no sense of danger or urgency. No prying eyes or chance of interruption. He allowed himself to enjoy the feeling of her in his arms and the sensation of her mouth moving in time with his. Oliver had been denying himself this, her, for so long. Kissing Felicity was as much of a relief as it was a craving to devour her completely.

Whimpering against the onslaught of his ravenous kisses, Felicity ran her fingers through Oliver's short brown locks. She breathed in some much needed air when he released her lips and trailed down the side of her neck. At the angle they were sitting, Felicity was practically cradled in his arms. This had to be a dream, she told herself. She and Oliver were friends. He was her stepbrother's best friend. Oliver was older, more experienced, and could have any other girl he wanted. It was unthinkable that he was there in her room, holding her and kissing her like a man who'd been denied food and water for too long.

Her body trembled from the fire and passion that burned between them. But as unthinkable as it seemed, it had always been there under the surface just waiting to be released. Felicity felt her body arch against him as he sucked on her pulse point. It would most definitely leave a mark, and yet she held him to her and urged him on.

"Oliver." Felicity's sigh turned into a moan when he recaptured her lips in a scorching kiss. Her lips felt thoroughly used and swollen, and still they sought more.

"Felicity," Oliver quietly panted, somehow managing to hold her even tighter without hurting her.

Despite their lust-filled haze, Felicity was vaguely aware of the creek of footsteps in the hallway. Oliver must've heard it at the same time, because they both froze and pulled back to listen. The relief of the footsteps passing Felicity's door and continuing on was short-lived. Oliver's room was only a few doors down, and they heard a soft knock coming in that direction.

"Do you think it's Tommy?" Felicity whispered.

The look of dread on Oliver's face was answer enough. "No." There was another soft string of knocks, and the sound of a door creaking open. Oliver cursed under his breath. "It's Laurel." He was sure of it. No one else would have a reason to seek him out in the middle of the night. He felt a mixture of panic and annoyance seeing as though he'd more or less told her they wouldn't be shacking up.

The mention of Laurel was like an ice cold bucket of water being poured over Felicity. She'd let
herself get so swept up in Oliver that she totally forgot about why they'd been fighting their attraction in the first place. Taking in their compromising position, Felicity felt the guilt wash over her. She moved to pull away, but Oliver was having none of it. He held her firmly to him as he listened to Laurel’s retreating footsteps.

"Oliver, let me go," Felicity murmured, keeping her voice as low as possible. "We shouldn't have started this."

Finally, his head whipped down to look at her. "What? No."

"No? Seriously? Do you know how screwed we are? She just found your room empty in the middle of the night. You don't think that's suspicious?"

"Yeah, for me. Not for you. She'd never suspect you."

"Right, of course not. Who would expect you to be with the Gothic 'baby' of the group," Felicity huffed, trying to mask with sarcasm the hurt that she most definitely wasn’t his type. She made another attempt to break away from him, but her efforts were futile. Oliver was much too strong—not to mention stubborn.

"You know that wasn't what I meant," Oliver replied.

"Doesn't make it any less true. Now let me go before we get into even more trouble," she retorted.

He smirked. "I like getting in trouble with you." With her cat pajamas and soft, warm curves, Felicity reminded Oliver of a squirming kitten as she attempted to wriggle out of his embrace. He wouldn't let her go that easily. Not this time. "You're quirky and beautiful and fiery, and you drive me absolutely crazy."

The butterflies in her stomach fluttered. "Oh no, mister. Don't you dare try to be charming right now," Felicity warned, both loving and hating that sexy smile of his.

"Felicity, it really doesn't matter because I probably wouldn't have been in bed anyway. You saw how I couldn't sleep. I've been like that for the past week."

That made her pause. "You have?"

"Yeah," he said more seriously. "The last time I got any real rest was with you in the hospital."

She watched him intently for a moment before admitting, "Me, too." Felicity sighed in frustration. "But that doesn't make this right, Oliver. How is it okay for me to be here with you when Laurel is down the hall and—"

"Felicity, this has nothing to do with Laurel," Oliver cut her off, getting equally exasperated. It was even harder trying to keep this conversation at a whisper. He cupped the side of her face and made her focus on him. He needed Felicity to really listen. "Laurel and I are not together right now, and I'm here with you because I want to be. This is between you and me. It's as much my choice as it is yours. So what do you want?"

"But—" she began to protest.

"Felicity," he interjected, his gaze beseeching. "What do you want?"

Her eyes drifted to Oliver's lips. They, too, were red and swollen from their kisses. The urge to lean in and do it all over again unfurled and ignited every nerve within her. When she met Oliver's stare
again, it had darkened. He was no doubt thinking the same heated thoughts. "I want you to stay," Felicity murmured with her heart hammering in her chest. She thought admitting how much she wanted him would increase her guilt, but it was unexpectedly freeing. "Stay," she implored and clutched him tighter.

Oliver leaned forward and brushed her lips in a light caress. "Then I will."

Oliver took a sip of his coffee, attempting to suppress another yawn, and was heading back to his car when his cell phone rang. Sure enough it was Felicity. They usually spoke at night, although this time was a bit later than normal. "Hey, sweetheart," he greeted. "I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to call. I got stuck in a meeting."

After speaking with Anatoly—which was more like listening to him complain about how much men and money he'd lost over the past year—Oliver had met up with Diggle. The raids on A.R.G.U.S. had ceased these last few months, but that didn't mean they didn't need to talk strategy. He'd gotten new data from Felicity's phone when he'd visited Starling a couple of weeks ago and had been trying to sort through what they could use. Malcolm would be asking for a new report soon, and it was imperative that Oliver saw everything before he did.

"Can you talk now?"

"Sure. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I had dinner with Tommy and Thea, and we hung out for a bit. I'm back home now." The explanation was casual enough, but Oliver could detect the underlying emotion. "They'd gone to the cemetery today. You know what today is, right? What am I saying? Of course you know what today is. You lived it," she babbled. "I probably shouldn't have brought it up."

"Hey, no. Felicity, if something is bothering you, I want you to tell me."

"I talked to Thea," she revealed. "I told her about us. Not now us but then us. After all these years of keeping it a secret, I thought she should know. I hope that's okay..."

"Felicity, that's fine," he said gently, sensing her nervousness at his reaction. "She's my sister, and I know you two are close. If anyone deserves the truth, it's her."

"We talked a little bit about what happened after the Gambit went down and it...I don't know. It brought up all of this stuff for me," she sighed heavily. "It probably shouldn't be an issue since you're actually alive. Then again, Thea and Tommy don't know that. But I do so it's weird, and I guess I'm feeling guilty and—"

He could sense a nervous rant coming on. "Felicity, honey, breathe," Oliver instructed. She did as he said and took a couple of loud breaths. "Good."

"I'm sorry. I don't even know why I'm still so upset about this," she lamented.

"Just because you know the truth and we're together now doesn't erase the pain of that day or everything you've felt since. Trust me. We all lost something when the Gambit went down. Something we'll probably never get back," he said more quietly.

Oliver had been fully aware that today marked five years since the Queen's Gambit sank. Every year he felt the almost suffocating weight of his losses. His mother had drowned. His father had taken his own life. Felicity, Thea, Tommy, Laurel, Sara...he thought he'd never see them again. The greatest casualty of all, though, had been Oliver Queen. Oliver had never exactly been innocent or
completely carefree, but there had been an underlying sense of safety and normalcy that had been inherent in his life. What took a lifetime to build was gone in seconds in the face of tragedy. The person he was before the Gambit went down was gone and never coming back.

He continued, "Someone on the island once told me that love is the most powerful emotion. Good or bad, it stays with you. Healing takes time."

"I love you," Felicity said fiercely.

Oliver turned away from the somewhat crowded street and paused. He'd unknowingly stopped in front of a jewelry store. The expensive, shiny pieces gleamed in their lighted displays. "I love you, too."

"I feel better. I think I just needed to hear your voice." She added more quietly, "I miss you so much when you're gone—and that's on a good day."

He knew exactly what she meant, and his heart clenched in agreement. "I'm actually on my way to you now." Glancing at the displays, one piece in particular caught his eye.

"You're in Starling?" she questioned, immediately perking up.

"I've got about another hour, maybe two, before I'm there. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to come, but I needed to see you. Thought it'd be a nice surprise. We've spent this day apart long enough, don't you think?" He stared in fascination at the ring in the window. It was beautiful and unique and just so her.

"You won't get in trouble? Not that I'm complaining," she rushed out, "but you were here not too long ago. I don't want you risking your safety because of me."

"I like getting in trouble with you," Oliver jokingly replied. Her response was a mixture of a scoff and a laugh. The phrase had practically been their motto when they first started dating, and it was still true now. "It's all worked out. Don't worry," he assured her.

"Good. Come home. I'll be waiting," Felicity promised, already sounding more like her usual self.

Oliver stood rooted in his spot after cutting the call. Come home. She was his home. Oliver wasn't quite sure what he was imagining, but it wasn't rational. It was unthinkable and impulsive and yet as he'd spoken to Felicity, something had clicked. Checking his watch, which had been the present she'd given him, Oliver determined that he had enough time for a short detour. Even if he didn't, he probably wouldn't have been able to leave anyway. It was like the ring was calling to him. Unable to resist, Oliver pocketed his phone and went inside the shop.
Thank you guys for your comments and continued support for this story! There's an important arc coming up in the present timeline, and you're going to see some explosive moments in the flashbacks. Let me know what you think!

September 8, 2012

The pillow did nothing to muffle her moans. With her eyes scrunched shut and her hips angled up and back, Felicity felt the force of every single thrust radiate throughout her entire body. Oliver lay on top of her, his muscular chest rubbing against her back, moving in and out at a pace that had her toes curling. His head was buried in her neck, kissing and sucking on every patch of skin within his reach.

Felicity had woken up to a trail of light kisses up her naked spine. Her eyelids had been heavy, and her limbs were still sore from their previous night of passion. But as soon as she registered Oliver's lips on her, the fire was reignited. There was nothing Felicity loved more than waking up with him. If she closed her eyes and wished hard enough, she could almost imagine that this had always been their life. That this was one of countless mornings in which they'd woken up together and content to be wrapped around each other. That they had all the time in the world to stay in bed and kiss and tease before succumbing to their endless sexual desire.

"Felicity," she heard Oliver groan against her flesh, now slick from their writhing bodies. "Fuck, you feel so good, sweetheart."

Turning her head and reaching behind her, Felicity wove her fingers through Oliver's short hair and brought his face to hers. The kiss was sloppy, since neither had stopped their frantic movements, but intense. She arched into him on a thrust, allowing Oliver to venture deeper inside of her, causing another bout of moans.

It was impossible to catch her breath. "Oliver, right there…ohhhh, right there…d-don't stop," she panted, desperate for him to take her to the edge. To make her his. This new angle had him touching her in places that left her entire body trembling. The bed wasn't faring much better as the headboard repeatedly knocked into the wall.

Oliver thrust forward before retreating over and over. Deeper. Harder. Faster. Relentless. Felicity buried her head in the pillow once more, unable to keep herself up during the passionate onslaught. She was barely holding on. Oliver's wild, possessive movements told her he was close, too.

Their slick skin slapping together echoed in the room. It mingled with her chants of his name, spurring him on, growing louder by the second. It was barely seven o'clock in the morning, and Felicity didn't give a damn if her neighbors heard. She was too far gone to care. When Oliver's hand slipped between her body and the bed, venturing lower to rub her sensitive bundle of nerves, Felicity was nearly screaming. So close. So close.

His other hand drifted to her thigh and spread her leg wider, opening her up even more to him. Her body bended to his will. He was the only one she'd willingly surrender to. She let him take whatever
he wanted and demanded the same in return. Oliver left a hot, wet trail of kisses against the back of her neck and shoulders.

"You're mine, Felicity. Only mine." The words were branded against her skin. Her core tightened at his claim. She loved possessive Oliver and felt his want and need for her with every fiber of her being.

She whimpered, "Only yours. Always." He was buried so deep inside of her, piercing her at her center, it almost felt like they'd fused together. Another whimper escaped when he withdrew. Her walls automatically clenched at the loss. Oliver wasted no time pushing back into her, hitting that magic spot and squeezing her nub, sending her into oblivion as her orgasm washed over her.

Oliver's hips continued to pump into her while his own body jerked. She felt more of his weight on top of her, though he was careful not to squish her. Felicity moved with him until the end, allowing him to fill her completely. They were both shaking when their limbs finally gave out.

Despite her mewl of protest, Oliver withdrew and collapsed on his back next to her. Felicity followed suit and stared up at the ceiling, feeling spent yet entirely satiated.

"Holy frack," she panted while trying to catch her breath. "That was…"

"Yeah," Oliver mumbled.

"I don't think I can feel my legs."

Oliver glanced over at her and smirked proudly. "You're welcome."

Felicity rolled her eyes and swatted his chest. "Smug, sexy bastard," she muttered, laughing despite herself.

"You love it," he teased and rolled over so that he was partially on top of her. Oliver leaned down to give her a proper kiss.

Naturally, Felicity wound her arms around his neck to keep him close. "Feel free to wake me up like that any time," she murmured in between kisses.

"Noted." He ran his hand through her long, tousled blond locks.

Felicity sighed in contentment. "How about we stay like this for the rest of the day?" She had absolutely no desire to leave him or her bed. It was like sheer heaven, especially after the stress of yesterday.

"Fine by me. Or I could make us breakfast in bed," Oliver suggested.

"Okay, correction, I'll stay like this. You can get your sexy butt into the kitchen, mister."

Chuckling, Oliver replied, "Give me ten more minutes." He drew her more snugly into his side and rested his head back on the pillow against hers. "You wore me out."

"You're welcome," she retorted and kissed the underside of his jaw.

It didn't take long for either of them to drift back to sleep. Unfortunately, the peace and quiet didn't last long. Felicity, half-asleep, groaned when she heard knocking on her front door. "What the…"

Oliver was instantly up and alert. "Expecting company?"
"Definitely not." She reached for her phone on the nightstand but didn't see any messages. Sighing, Felicity said, "It's probably Mrs. Ferdinand looking for her stupid cat. I swear I'm going to murder that woman one of these days."

"I know a few good places to hide the body." At her raised eyebrow, he added, "Kidding."

Felicity wasn't entirely sure that was untrue but let it slide for the moment. Begrudgingly, she got out of bed, reached for her glasses, and put on her bathrobe. The knocking became more insistent. Someone called out her name, and Felicity automatically froze. It sounded like Sara.

"Not a peep," Felicity warned Oliver, though it was unnecessary, before closing the bedroom door and walking down the hall.

"Coming," Felicity called back while taking a few deep breaths. She had to be calm and act natural. She couldn't let Sara notice how on edge she actually was. Finally, Felicity reached the door and opened it. What she saw stopped her in her tracks.

Sara stood on her doorstep wearing a black hoodie and jeans. The hair peeking out from her hood looked wet and stringy, as if she'd been swimming. Nothing else was too out of the ordinary except for her posture. Sara was somewhat hunched forward and seemed to be favoring her left leg.

Frowning, Felicity said, "Hey, I wasn't expecting you. Is everything okay?"

"You have to promise you're not going to freak out."

"Why would I..." she trailed off when Sara finally looked up at her. Felicity put her hand to her mouth. "Oh my God, Sara, your face. What happened?" Her friend had a black eye, bruises along her jaw, and a split lip.

Sara glanced around nervously. "Can I come inside?"

"Of course." Felicity stepped aside and ushered her in. She told her to take a seat on the couch while she went into the kitchen to grab an ice pack. "Put that on your eye while I get the first-aid kit." She hurried toward the small hallway bathroom and noticed her bedroom door slightly ajar. No doubt Oliver was curious about all of the commotion, but she couldn't worry about what he must be thinking right now.

Felicity sat down next to her best friend on the couch. "Sara, what happened?" she demanded while taking out the supplies she'd need from the box. "Who did this to you?"

"Sorry I had to bother you so early. I was undercover investigating a case when things went south. I was made and had to fight my way out of there," Sara explained. "Your apartment is closer than mine. I think I sprained my ankle, too."

"You didn't have any backup? Where was McKenna?" She was Sara's partner on the force. Felicity had met her a couple of times. McKenna was a nice person and seemed to be loyal and level-headed. She was a good balance to Sara's fire and impulsiveness.

"She wasn't with me."

Felicity, who'd been dabbing antiseptic on Sara's wounds, paused in her ministrations. "You went on an undercover assignment alone?" When Sara didn't answer right away, Felicity's suspicions were confirmed. "Sara, if you're hurt, why didn't you go to the ER?"

The jig was up, and the blonde knew it. "Look, I know what you're thinking," Sara tried to reason.
"You weren't on an official assignment, were you?" Felicity guessed. "You were trying to go after Brodeur alone again."

"Felicity, I think I know where he's been dumping the toxic waste in The Glades. If I can catch one of those guys in the act, maybe I can offer him a deal and get him to talk. All I need is one person to admit that there was a cover-up, and I can bring the bastard in for questioning. His entire alibi will unravel, and I'll have him."

"Clearly, his guys weren't all that talkative," Felicity pointed out. She pressed the cotton swab against Sara's busted lip. "Does this hurt?"

Sara flinched. "It stings."

"Good. Because you're lucky you weren't killed going off on your own again like that. You can't keep doing this, Sara. Do you think Laurel would want to see you like this?"

"Laurel would understand," she fiercely retorted. "She always fought for justice as a lawyer. I'm a cop, and this is how I do my job."

"As a cop, you should know that there are certain protocols in place to ensure you don't get beaten to a pulp. You probably need to see a doctor."

"If I go to the ER, then word will get back to my dad," Sara explained, frustrated. "I'll make an appointment Monday with my personal doctor but until then, I need you, Felicity. If anyone asks, we were at a boxing class last night and I was a little too eager to try a match. I volunteered to face one of the guys in training and got my ass handed to me."

"Sara," Felicity warned, not liking her friend's idea one bit.

"Felicity, please," she begged. "Please don't tell anyone the truth. If my dad finds out I've gone rogue again, I'll be off the force for good this time. You know he's been itching for an excuse to keep me out of all this. He thinks he's protecting me."

"Newsflash, Sara, you do need protection," Felicity snapped, losing the last strand of her patience. "You're my best friend, and I've lost enough people in my life already. You, too. You can't keep taking these risks. You are all your dad has left. It would literally destroy him if something happened to you. Just like it would destroy me."

"That man murdered my sister, Felicity!" Sara exclaimed. "He needs to pay for what he did."

"And he will. You will find some way to make it right, but not like this."

"How? The system is broken no matter what my father says. If he could get at Brodeur by doing everything by the book, don't you think he would've had him by now?" Sara challenged. "Not only is Brodeur well-protected by his goons, but he knows all of the legal loopholes. The only way that son of a bitch gets brought down is if I play by the same rules."

Felicity shook her head and let out an exasperated sigh. She could try to convince Sara what she was doing was wrong until she was blue in the face, and it wouldn't make a damn difference. Her friend was much too stubborn to see reason. "You're not going to stop, are you?"

Sara met her gaze head on, regretful but determined. "How many times have we had this conversation? You know I can't, Felicity."

At a loss for anything else to say, Felicity reached for the gauze and handed it to Sara. "You should
wrap your ankle. I can drive you home. You didn't bring your car, right?"

"No." She shook her head. "I couldn't use it. Didn't want anything that would trace back to me if I was caught."

"Your ankle looks swollen, too. I'll get you another ice pack and then get dressed. Just rest, okay?"

Sara nodded wordlessly and sank back into the couch. Felicity put Sara's foot on the coffee table and placed the bag of ice on top. She then returned to her bedroom. Oliver was dressed in a pair of jeans, standing stoically near the door. Felicity shut it behind her and approached him. "How much did you hear?"

"Everything. You okay?" he quietly questioned. His voice was barely above a whisper.

Felicity leaned into him and rested her head against his chest. "I'm afraid she's going to get herself killed one of these days. What do I do?"

"For right now, get dressed, take her home, and make sure she gets some rest," Oliver advised, wrapping her up in a comforting embrace. "We can deal with the rest later."

"So much for a lazy Saturday," she murmured, finally pulling away.

Oliver kissed her temple. "It's okay. Sara needs you. Go. I'll still be here when you get back."

Nodding, Felicity stood on her tiptoes to give him a quick peck on the lips. As confusing and stressful as it was having Oliver here with Sara in the next room, Felicity was thankful for the support Oliver was offering. It felt good not to be alone for once in her struggles.

Felicity got dressed quickly, not wanting to give Sara a reason to get up and come looking for her. She told Oliver it would probably be less than an hour before she was back. He promised to make her favorite pancakes for when she returned, which made her smile. With one more quick kiss, Felicity rejoined Sara in the living room and helped her out to the car.

It wasn't until Oliver heard the front door shut and lock that he pulled out his phone. It only took a few seconds before Diggle answered. Oliver wasted no time getting down to business. "Dig, our timetable has moved up. How quickly can you get to Starling City?"

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**July 4, 2007**

*The vibrations of the loud, blaring music and rhythmic, dancing bodies had the very foundation of the cabin shaking. In true Tommy Merlyn form, what had started out as a simple Fourth of July party had turned into a mini rave. Oliver had no idea who half of the people were, nor did he care. There was only one person he couldn't take his eyes off of in the crowd.*

*Felicity stood in the kitchen with Sara. Her long, dark, wavy locks cascaded down her back. She wasn't as scantily clad as the majority of girls at the party. She wore a black and gray t-shirt with the American flag on it and a pair of black leather leggings that left little to the imagination. He'd been staring at her perfectly rounded backside all night, and it took everything inside of Oliver to keep from pulling her into an abandoned room and kissing her senseless.*

*The other night in her room still felt totally surreal to Oliver. He couldn't believe that they'd kissed again, much less made out. It was a relief to finally act on his feelings for her. It was an even greater*
relief when Felicity asked him to stay with her. They'd kissed a bit more before finally settling under the covers and sleeping. Oliver couldn't remember the last time, if ever, he'd been in bed with a girl and only slept. Of course, he'd made sure to get up early the next morning. The last thing either of them needed was for him to get caught leaving her room.

Felicity was still a bit apprehensive to move forward because of the whole Laurel situation, but she seemed to be coming around. Unfortunately, they hadn't had much time together since then. Oliver had been hanging out with Tommy and the guys helping to get ready for the party. Meanwhile, Felicity was mostly with Sara. The two had a mini slumber party in Sara's room last night, so sneaking time with Felicity was impossible.

The only benefit to being so busy was having a legitimate excuse to avoid Laurel. She'd been watching him closely ever since she'd discovered his room empty the other night. Oliver saw the suspicion in her eyes every time they were in the same room together, and he was not looking forward to the moment she finally worked up the courage to confront him.

Carter had kept her preoccupied for most of the party, and Oliver had to admit for once he was grateful. Oliver kept an eye on Laurel, though, since she was drinking pretty heavily tonight. She was clearly drunk as she swayed on her feet, laughing at something Carter said. If it weren't for the glance she sent Oliver in that moment, he wouldn't have thought twice about it. But as the night wore on, with Laurel cozying up to Carter in between shooting Oliver looks, it became glaringly obvious that the brunette was trying to make him jealous.

Looking away, Oliver finished off his third beer and casually went over to Felicity. He'd stayed away from her long enough tonight. He caught the tail end of her telling Sara to slow down, but the blonde knocked back another shot anyway.

"Okay, moooom," Sara drawled, giggling as if Felicity had said the funniest thing in the world.

"Sara, seriously, you're gonna make yourself sick," Felicity tried again.

"It's Independence Day. Therefore, I am exercising my rights as an American. Give me liquor or give me death!" she declared, slurring, which earned a bunch of cheers from the crowd around them.

Rolling her eyes, Felicity moved away from Sara and more toward Oliver. She took a sip from her own cup. Oliver assumed it was soda. Felicity wasn't much of a drinker, he'd learned.

"I give her an hour, two tops, before she's got her head in the toilet," Oliver murmured to the brunette.

"And guess who will be holding her hair?" Felicity replied before pointing to herself. "Good times."

She looked past Oliver and frowned. "Is Laurel okay? She doesn't seem to be faring much better either."

Oliver glanced over his shoulder, to which Laurel quickly looked away from where she'd been staring at him. "She's fine."

"You sure?"

"She's trying to bait me with Carter. Trust me, she's not that far gone yet."

"Maybe you should go talk to her."

"Then I'd have to stop talking to you." He nodded toward the tequila. "Ready for another round of
"body shots?" With a smoldering smile, he offered, "I'll even let you do it off of me this time."

Blushing and flustered, Felicity shook her head. "Now you're really asking for trouble."

Oliver leaned forward and said under his breath, "I like getting in trouble with you."

She started to smile before looking behind him. Laurel's eyes were burning holes into his back.

He tugged on the hem of her shirt to regain her attention. "Hey, what do you say we—"

"Oliver! There you are," Samantha exclaimed. "I've been looking all over for you." She didn't look that steady on her feet and her words came out garbled. If she wasn't drunk already, she was well on her way.

Suppressing a groan, Oliver replied, "You found me."

She sidled up next to him and tugged on his arm. "Let's dance."

"I don't dance," he immediately answered.

"Don't worry. I'll teach you. It's easy." She sent him a tempting smile. "All you really have to do is stand there while I do all of the work."

Normally, Oliver would have the perfect comeback. He'd be just as charming and flirty in return before suggesting that he and Samantha find a spot that was much more private to hang out in—most likely his room. It wouldn't take much to get her in bed with him. Now Oliver couldn't be more uninterested or uncomfortable. Worst of all, the expression on Felicity's face was a combination of annoyance and disgust.

"Maybe later," he placated. "I was actually in the middle of a conversation with Felicity."

Samantha frowned in confusion. "Felicity who?"

"Me," Felicity spoke up, causing Samantha to finally acknowledge her presence.

"Oh. Who are you again?"

"Tommy's stepsister."

"Oh, right. The geeky Goth." The other girl eyed her up and down. "Don't know how I missed that one. Don't you get sick of wearing black all the time?"

Oliver, not liking Samantha's cattiness one bit, opened his mouth to say something when Felicity beat him to the punch. "Not really. It's sorta like your love of wearing shorts that barely cover your ass."

Samantha's eyes widened in shock before she was on the defensive. "Excuse me?"

Oliver shifted so that he was partially blocking Felicity. "All right, let's just—"

There was loud, shrill laughter behind them and clapping. Laurel walked toward them, her steps a little unsteady, with her eyes on Samantha. "No need to get so defensive, Sammy. Felicity isn't exactly wrong, is she?"

Samantha rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. You're just jealous."
The two women were toe to toe. Laurel folded her arms and scoffed, "Jealous of what?"

"Jealous that Oliver has options other than you. You can't stand that he's not sitting in a corner
pining for you," she retorted. "It's over, Laurel. Let's call your 'break' with Oliver what it really is—a
'breakup.' It's obvious despite what you keep telling everyone."

Laurel stepped forward into her personal space. "You know absolutely nothing about my
relationship with Oliver. And if you know what's good for you, Sam, you'll back off. You think no one
has noticed how pathetic it is that you've been throwing yourself at him since you got here?"

"Oliver seems to like it," she countered, smirking.

Laurel, in her drunken state, whipped her head towards Oliver accusingly. "Laurel, nothing is going
on with Samantha and me," Oliver denied. "I swear."

She didn't look completely convinced. "Is that why you weren't in your room the other night? Were
you with her?" she demanded.

Sensing the rising drama, a small crowd had started to gather around them. Oliver was so not in the
mood to have this discussion right here in front of everyone. He couldn't help looking to Felicity,
who sent him a sympathetic look.

"No. I was having trouble sleeping so I went for a walk."

"To Samantha's cabin."

"No!" he repeated. "Laurel, she's just saying that to get a rise out of you."

"Ollie, don't lie to me."

"Laurel, are you okay?" Carter interjected. Oliver hadn't even noticed him walk up. "Maybe you
need some fresh air——"

"Back off, Carter, this is none of your business," Laurel snapped, hardly sparing him a glance.

"Here comes another fight. Told you they were over," Samantha said to him.

Oliver just barely managed to catch Laurel before she pounced on Samantha. The string of
obscenities coming out of her mouth was most definitely alcohol induced. Oliver rarely saw Laurel
so unhinged, and he was regretting now not stepping in and making her slow down with the
drinking.

"What the hell are you laughing at?" Sara spoke up. None of them had seen her come around to get
in Samantha's face. "You think it's funny trying to start shit between my sister and her boyfriend?
You actually think Oliver is going to leave her for your scheming, skanky ass?"

"You're seriously calling me a skank? I wasn't the one making the rounds at the fraternity house at
SCU." Samantha wasn't backing down. "And I didn't have to do much to interfere, did I? Your sister
is already a train wreck."

It was Sara who struck first. She slapped Samantha hard across the face. The brunette clutched her
reddening cheek, shocked, before lunging at Sara. The chant "Fight! Fight! Fight!" broke out in the
crowd as everyone watched the pair scratching and pulling at each other's hair.

"Damn it, Oliver, let me go!" Laurel demanded.
Oliver tightened his hold on Laurel, who was straining against him. She wanted to join the brawl and defend her sister. He shouted at Carter to help break it up just as he heard Felicity calling to Tommy. His best friend pushed his way through the crowd and paused for a second, stunned by the scene in front of him, before helping Carter to separate them. Tommy got a firm grasp on Sara and yanked her off of Samantha, who’d been shielding her face from Sara’s assault.

"What the hell?" Tommy exclaimed. "I was just outside checking on the fireworks, but it seems they are already going off in here."

"Keep an eye on them," Oliver ordered before dragging Laurel away from the crowd. She hadn’t stopped struggling, and so he hefted her over his shoulder and carried her upstairs. Laurel continued to shout at him, but he didn’t put her down until they’d reached her bedroom. "Laurel, what the hell is going on with you?"

"What is going on with me?" she spat. "What the hell is going on with you? Are you fucking Samantha behind my back?"

Oliver’s last shred of patience disappeared. "For the last time, Laurel, I've never even touched Samantha."

"Just like you haven't touched me since we got here."

"Laurel, you're drunk. Sleep it off, and we'll talk in the morning." He turned to leave, but she rushed to block the door.

"No, I want to talk now. You owe me an explanation, Oliver. Why are you dodging me and missing from your bed in the middle of the night?"

"What are you doing coming to my bedroom when I specifically told you that wasn't going to happen?" he countered.

"Is this really about what happened at QC? Because I find it really hard to believe that after almost dying, you wouldn't want to be with the person you love. If anything, you should be embracing life. You should want to be with me."

"It's always about you, Laurel, isn't it? What you want. What you feel. What you think I want and feel," Oliver heatedly retorted. "You're right. I did almost die. So did my father and Felicity and everyone else who was in that building that day. You have no idea what it was like knowing that one wrong move could cost everyone their lives. That's not something I can just turn off. Hell, do you know why I didn't offer to help Tommy with the fireworks later tonight? Because I can't bear being near any type of explosion right now."

"Oliver—"

"So excuse me if I can't just shake it off and need some time to myself to process. It's not like I could do that with you in my face all week."

A wave of hurt flashed across her face, and her eyes watered. "I was trying to be a good girlfriend and be supportive."

"And I appreciate that, but we can't keep being in denial about our situation. We are not together, Laurel. I am not your boyfriend right now. So you need to give me the space I'm asking for."

"You don't want me." It was more of a statement than a question. "Why don't you just come right out and say it, Oliver?"
"That's not what I'm saying."

"Yes, it is. You said we should stop being in denial. So just say it, Oliver. Tell me the damn truth. You don't want me," she stated, her voice quivering. She was on the verge of tears.

"I care about you, Laurel. I always will but..." Oliver steeled himself. He didn't want to hurt her, but she was right. He had to speak the truth. "I'm not sure this is working for either of us anymore."

"Fine." Laurel glanced away as the first of her tears began to fall. "It's fine. You can have your freedom." When she looked back at him, there was fire in her eyes. "Go back downstairs and do whatever you want. Fuck Samantha for all I care," she replied harshly. "You have my blessing."

This was not how Oliver had envisioned their conversation. He hadn't intended to make her even more upset. "Laurel—"

"Since we're not together, maybe I'll even hook up with Carter. He was looking pretty hot tonight. He's been wanting to get in my pants this entire trip. And if you don't want me then..." She shrugged, her grin smug and challenging.

Laurel was hurt and still very drunk. Oliver knew that she was lashing out and baiting him as a result. He sighed, "Laurel, please don't be like this—"

"We're not dating anymore, like you said. So I can do whatever I damn well please. And you...you can get the hell out." When he didn't move, her anger flared. "Go, Oliver!" she shouted. "Get out! Leave me the hell alone!"

A tension-filled silence passed between them before Oliver finally turned for the door. There was nothing more he could say to her with both their emotions running high. "I'm sorry, Laurel," Oliver murmured and quietly slipped out.

Felicity followed the small, hidden path in the woods by the cabin. She'd seen Oliver heading in that direction moments before. Despite the eerie feeling of being in the woods alone at night, Felicity pushed forward. She used her phone as a flashlight and clutched it tightly while trying to avoid any protruding vegetation or creepy critters. The smart thing would have been to change out of her heels before venturing off into the woods, but then she'd never find Oliver out there in the dark.

"Oliver," she tentatively called in the silence. He couldn't have had that much of a head start. "Oliver."

A twig snapped off to the left, and Felicity nearly jumped out of her skin. She whipped around in that direction, using her flashlight to find the source. There was no movement or any other sounds. A shiver ran up her spine; she felt like someone was watching her. Her thoughts were conflicted as she debated continuing on to find Oliver or going back to the cabin and waiting for him to return. Felicity turned back to the path and yelped when she bumped into a hard body.

"Hey, it's me," Oliver reassured her, taking hold of her shoulders. "Felicity, it's me."

She shined her light on him, momentarily blinding him, just to be sure. "Oliver, oh my God. You move like a ninja! A little warning would've been nice."

"Sorry," he replied. "I didn't mean to scare you. What are you doing in the woods anyway?"
"I saw you head this way. And even though I know you're never supposed to enter the Forbidden Forest alone, I wanted to check on you. See if you were okay after everything..." she trailed off, concerned. Felicity could barely make out his features now that she'd lowered her light, but it was enough to see that he was far from being okay.

Oliver didn't say anything at first. He watched her for a few seconds before raising his hand to her cheek. Stroking it with his thumb, Oliver leaned down to graze her lips. Felicity hesitated at first. After everything that had just happened, this was the last reaction she'd expected from him. Nevertheless, when he coaxed her mouth open, Felicity let Oliver deepen the kiss. His arm wound around her waist to bring her closer. The passion that had been on pause from the constant distractions over the last couple of days roared back to life. There was also a hint of desperation as he clung to her like a lifeline.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she questioned, breathless, when they finally broke apart.

"Come on, I want to show you something," Oliver released her and took her hand.

He started to lead her forward when she nearly tripped. Her heel had gotten caught in the dirt.

"Frack! Sorry," she mumbled. "These aren't exactly hiking shoes." Before she realized what was happening, Felicity was up off the ground and in Oliver's arms. "Whoa, you're really strong," she said without thinking. Her arms automatically wound around his neck for added support.

The corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smirk before he started walking. It seemed like the path was veering uphill, which probably put even more strain on his muscles. Regardless, Oliver continued to silently carry her for a few minutes until they reached an opening in the trees. There was a set of steep rocks that overlooked the lake. Oliver led Felicity forward before they were standing near the edge. She gripped him tighter when she noticed the large distance between the rocks and the water.

"Oliver, I should probably mention that I'm afraid of heights."

He gently set her down and kept a firm grip on her hand. "Don't worry. I've got you. I used to come here all the time as a kid. It's safe."

Felicity stared dubiously at the edge but followed Oliver's lead. He sat with his feet hanging over the edge while she sat Indian style next to him. Wrapping her arms around his bicep, she clung to his side. Once she felt a little more secure, Felicity was finally able to take in the spectacular view. The full moon shone from above and reflected off of the dark water. There were lights in the distance from other cabins that were probably having Fourth of July celebrations of their own.

"Wow, it's beautiful over here," she commented.

"Yeah, it is," he murmured.

The husky tenor of his voice caused her to look at him, only to find him staring back. "Oliver," she whispered. He started to lean down, but she drew back before he could reach her lips. "Seriously, talk to me. What's going on? I was helping Sara in her room when we heard you and Laurel arguing."

"We had a fight, and we both said some things." He looked out at the water, sighing, before meeting her eyes. "But I don't want to talk about her. Not when I'm with you."

Biting her lip, Felicity said, "Maybe we should, since it's my fault you were fighting in the first place. You weren't in your room because you were with me. We were kissing and then we slept together—well, not slept as in sex but slept as in—"
“Felicity, we've already been over this,” Oliver interjected. “It was my choice, too. And what was said between Laurel and I tonight really wasn't just because of you. We've had issues long before I ever knew you.”

“I don’t want to make it worse. It shouldn't be like this. I should be stronger. More in control,” Felicity lamented, feeling that familiar wave of self-doubt. "I never let myself get like this."

"Like what?"

"Like getting so swept up in a guy that I don't care about the consequences. Oliver, there are a hundred ways this could blow up in our faces, and the worst part is that I'm not sure I even want to fight it anymore," Felicity admitted. She'd been feeling conflicted ever since the other night. When they were together, everything felt so amazing and right. But when they were apart, her conscience would take over and whisper how terrible it was to be sneaking around and lying to the people they cared about. To people who also cared about and trusted in them. Lately, though, it was her strong and growing feelings for Oliver that were starting to tip the scale.

"Felicity, do you know what my first instinct was after fighting with Laurel? It was to come and talk to you,” he revealed.

“But you didn't come to me,” she pointed out.

"Because there was enough drama tonight without dragging you into it again. You deserve better than that," Oliver huffed and leaned his forehead against hers. "You're not the only one fighting a losing battle. I'm sick of pretending that there isn't something more between us."

"So what do we do?" Felicity murmured and rested her chin against his shoulder. The tips of their noses brushed gently together.

"Do you honestly think we can go back to being just friends?" The intense, heated look in his eyes told her his answer.

Felicity thought back to QC and the other night. The mere memory of those kisses had her head spinning. Not to mention the intense attraction she was feeling right now being so close to him. The line they'd drawn had clearly been crossed. "No."

"Then we should give this a chance. See where it leads us. What do you think?" He swiped away a strand of hair the wind had blown in her face.

With every erratic beat of her heart, Felicity felt that pull towards Oliver building. They were so close she could smell the sweet musk of his aftershave. Feel his breath on her face and lips as they hovered over hers. Felicity's entire body tingled with the anticipation of another kiss. She'd never felt such a guttural want or need with anyone else she'd dated. It was like a physical craving with Oliver. One she no longer wanted to deny.

"I think you should kiss me."

Not needing to be told twice, Oliver closed the small gap between them and claimed her mouth. Much like the other night, the drama from earlier forgotten, they lost themselves in each other. Felicity clutched Oliver's shirt in her fist in an effort to bring him closer. He slid his arms around her waist in return, and she folded into him.

Sometime later, in between frenzied kisses, Felicity said, "We should probably head back soon. We're going to miss Tommy's fireworks."
Oliver tightened his hold on her. She felt his smirk against her lips. "Trust me, we don’t need them."
Felicity could barely recognize Verdant. Tommy had gone all out with the Halloween decorations for the club's big Fright Night event. He'd chosen the haunted mansion look. Creepy portraits hung on the walls with eyes that followed patrons' every move. The staff were dressed like zombie butlers and maids. There were a few automated statues that would come to life when people walked by. In one section, an eerie little ghoul on a swing would pop out of the shadows. Felicity had already seen a few people freak out and spill their drinks. The glow-in-the-dark spider webbing scattered throughout the club was also a nice touch.

It was a little past eight o'clock, and the club was already filling up. The line outside was down the block as people waited to get in. Felicity led the group to the bar where she was supposed to meet Tommy. She'd come straight from work with Mei, Barry, Caitlin, and Curtis. They'd been working so hard lately that they could all use a night of fun. Getting dressed in their costumes at A.R.G.U.S. had been a feat. It was just their luck that Waller had dropped by their department to speak with Lyla. She'd raised an eyebrow at them but remained silent. It wasn't until they were all out of the building that they dared to laugh.

"Ooh, is that a drink with brains in it?" Curtis questioned, staring at the glass in the hand of a tall, furry werewolf. "I want one of those." He was dressed up like a Jedi and even brought his very own homemade lightsaber. Being an innovative genius made it impossible for him to buy the cheap plastic ones from the store.

Barry, dressed as Austin Powers, made it to the bar first. They looked over the drink menu, which had a list of specialty cocktails to commemorate the occasion. He placed their orders while Felicity tried to spot Tommy in the sea of costumes.

Caitlin tapped her on the shoulder. "Here's your drink, Felicity."

"Thanks." Felicity took a sip of her Morg-a-rita. There was a red sticky substance along the rim of the glass that looked like blood. It tasted sweet like strawberries.

"Careful with this," Barry warned Caitlin as he passed her the red Vampire Punch. "Don't want to get this on your dress." She wore a light blue silky gown and white fur wrap, resembling the Old Hollywood starlets. Her hair was also styled in traditional curls that made her look stunning. Felicity had noticed Barry sneaking looks at her a few times already tonight.

"I got it," Caitlin replied with a shy, grateful smile.

Felicity and Mei exchanged knowing glances. Barry and Caitlin, they'd noticed, had been a little more smitten with each other lately. Caitlin had mentioned in passing that they'd been hanging out more. Unbeknownst to Barry and Caitlin, this led to Felicity, Mei, and Curtis placing bets on when the two would actually take the plunge and get together. Felicity's money was on December, and she was going to make damn sure there was some mistletoe in the office. A little incentive never hurt anyone.

"Felicity," she heard someone call her name. Tommy, although it was difficult to recognize him at
first, finally emerged from the crowd. He was dressed like the Joker in a purple pinstripe suit with a yellow shirt. His hair was green, and his face was painted white with red lips. "Wow, bro, you went all out this year," she complimented.

"Like it?" He did a dramatic turn for her.

"You look awesome. Did you do the makeup all by yourself."

"Yup. Thank God for YouTube or I would've been a total mess," he joked while taking in her costume. "Sailor Moon?"

"Of course," Felicity replied and struck a pose. It had taken her forever to find the perfect dress. Sailor Moon was one of her favorite characters growing up, and this year she decided to finally live her dream. Her dress had a blue skirt and white top with a blue collar and red bow. Her red leather boots would probably be killing her feet later, but they would be so worth it. She also had the matching Sailor Moon blond wig to complete the ensemble.

"Adorable," he chuckled, hugging her. "I see you guys already got drinks."

Felicity did a quick introduction, since he'd never met Barry or Curtis. Afterward, Tommy greeted Caitlin and Mei.

"Wow, Mei, you look great." She was dressed as an Amazon warrior in brown leather pants and a plated bodice. Her fake sword hung at her side. Mei's costume didn't reveal too much skin, but it was great for showing off her fit figure. Tommy looked a little awestruck.

"So do you," she replied, smiling. "Want to dance?"

Tommy, surprised, recovered quickly and nodded. "Uh, sure." He started to follow Mei but halted for a second. "Oh, Felicity, do you know what time Sara is coming? I tried texting her earlier, but she hasn't gotten back to me."

"I don't know. I haven't talked to her since yesterday. I'll try and get her." She motioned for him to follow Mei. "Go dance. I got it."

"Wow," Curtis commented. "When did that start?"

Felicity pressed SEND on the text to Sara and followed Curtis's line of sight. He was watching Mei and Tommy dance. "I introduced them several months back. Why?"

"They seem to be really vibing on each other. And you know how Mei is—all business all the time."

Felicity watched them closely. "You think there's something there?" It had seemed like Tommy and Mei had hit it off that first time they met, but they hadn't seen each other since and neither of them had mentioned anything. Now that Felicity was watching them, there did appear to be a spark.

"Definitely."

Felicity smiled. Whatever it was, it was good for Tommy. He wasn't as closed off since Laurel had died, but she had rarely seen him express interest in any other women.

"Seems like they have the right idea. Caitlin, baby, care to join me on the dance floor for a little 'Monster Mash'?" Barry asked in his best Austin Powers voice.

"Why, yes, Mr. Powers. I'd love to," she answered, sounding as elegant and sophisticated as she
looked. Caitlin took his offered hand, and they also ventured onto the dance floor.

"Are we sure those ghoulish cocktails aren't actually love potions?" Curtis joked.

"I know, right?" Felicity giggled. "Well, if we can't beat 'em, join 'em. Want to dance, Master Holt, or are you waiting for the handsome hubby?"

"My Han Solo is going to be a little late, so lead the way, Sailor," he said with a salute.

Laughing, they joined their friends on the dance floor. It was an interesting experience dancing with Curtis, because he was so tall. He was even taller than Oliver, though she'd be lucky if she could get that stubborn man to dance. He hated it, which she knew was because he wasn't actually that good at it. But it was adorable to watch him try when she could talk him into it.

Felicity wondered what Oliver was doing tonight. He said he had some business to take care of, so he couldn't call. It was probably just as well, since she was going to be out late at the club anyway. They would all probably be dead tired tomorrow at work, but it was nice to get out together and destress. In their line of work, they didn't have much down time.

Her phone vibrated. Expecting a text from Sara, Felicity was surprised to see that it was a message from her mom. Felicity's eyes widened when she read that her mother was actually at the club. "What the…" Glancing around, she caught her mother on the edge of the dance floor. When the older woman's eyes honed in on her, she proceeded to wave and jump up and down. Judging by her mother's skimpy costume, that didn't look like the best idea. "Oh dear God."

Noticing her distress, Curtis questioned, "Everything okay?"

Donna pushed her way through the gyrating bodies and threw herself at Felicity. "Oh, baby, you look so cute!" she enthused. "I remember when you were little and you wanted me to do your hair like Sailor Moon every day." She ran her hands over the wig. "Even though the other kids teased you, you didn't care."

"Mom," Felicity interrupted, fighting back a wave of mortification, "what the heck are you doing here? And what the heck are you wearing? You look like a porn star."

"Ooh, do I really look that good?" Donna beamed. "Although I was going more for Elle Woods from *Legally Blonde*."

"Mom, Elle Woods is a lawyer. Not a scantily clad pink bunny." Her mother's costume left little to the imagination. The light, silky strapless pink body suit was tight with a row of feathers along her pushed-up cleavage. Her legs were clad in matching fishnets, and she wore a pair of six-inch white heels. Her bunny ears were attached to her hair, which was down and wavy. Felicity saw all the guys nearby drooling while the women glared with jealousy.

Shaking her head, she said, "Not uh. She was dressed like a bunny when she went to that Harvard party."

"Fine. Whatever," Felicity sighed. Decoding her mother's logic was not worth the effort. "But seriously, why are you here?"

"I wanted to come and support Tommy. I've been trying to get Malcolm to visit Verdant for months now, but you know how pigheaded he can be. I finally said 'screw it' and decided to come with some girlfriends. Who needs a man to have fun, right? And when Tommy said you'd be here, too, I thought it'd be a nice surprise. Girls night!" she cheered.
"Tommy knew?" Oh, he was so dead. "Mom, I came here with my own friends."

"So? The more the merrier I always say. Is this one of them?" Donna turned to Curtis. "Hi, I'm Donna Merlyn. I'm Felicity's mom."

"Curtis Holt. I work with Felicity. It's an absolute pleasure to meet you. I can see where Felicity got her, uh…" he paused, glancing between them and searching for any kind of similarity. It was not an easy task. "Blond hair," he finally finished.

Donna laughed and said in a stage whisper, "Well, she dyes it actually." Curtis's brow lifted, and Felicity rolled her eyes.

Tommy said something to Mei excusing himself and walked over. "Hi, Donna. You look amazing. Glad you could come."

"Thanks, hon. You make such a handsome clown."

"Actually, I'm the Joker. You know, like from Batman," he said.

"Is that the superhero with the black pointy ears?"

Felicity heard Curtis snort next to her, and she nudged him.

"Uh…yeah, kinda." Tommy searched behind her somewhat begrudgingly. "Is my dad here?"

"No. I'm sorry, hon."

He shrugged like it was no big deal, but both women knew it was yet another blow. "His loss. Which means I have to make sure you have the best night ever. Let's get you a drink."

"Lead the way. My friends are already at the bar," she told him.

"Felicity, you coming?" Tommy questioned.

Felicity looked to Curtis, uncertain. He reassured her, "My husband actually just got here. We'll join you in a bit."

"Looks like I am," Felicity announced. When her mother's back was turned, she socked Tommy in the arm.

"Ow!" he exclaimed, although it was drowned out by the loud music. "What was that for?"

"That's for not telling me you invited my mother." She gave him another smack. "And that's for the embarrassment I am sure to experience in front of my friends."

"She's my mother, too—technically. It'll be fine, Felicity."

"Sure, okay." She casually added, "You know how she loves to tell stories. I just hope she doesn't tell Mei about that time you ran out of toilet paper, and she caught you sneaking out of the bathroom with your pants down trying to swipe some from the hallway closet. You couldn't look her in the eye after that for a month."

Tommy's eyes had widened in horror. "She wouldn't."

"Tommy, hon, where's the bathroom in this place?" Donna called over her shoulder. She waited for them to catch up.
"Right down that hall," he instructed.

"Great." Donna tugged at her cottontail. "I need to readjust my thong. It's doing its job a little too well if you know what I mean. Order me something good at the bar, will you?"

"Sure, Donna. I got you." Tommy turned to Felicity with a worried frown. "We're so screwed."

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**July 5, 2007**

Shivering in the cool morning air, Felicity rolled over toward the big warm teddy bear at her back. She snuggled more into the blankets and reached out to pull it against her. Expecting to feel something comfy and plush, Felicity was surprised when her arm wrapped around something much harder. Her eyes sprang open, and she found herself staring into another set of crystal blue orbs.

"Oh," she quietly gasped as the events of the night before came rushing back to her. Kissing. She remembered lots and lots of kissing. After her talk with Oliver, the pair had missed the fireworks and decided to stay by the lake instead.

It had certainly felt like Independence Day for Felicity. After weeks of denying her connection with Oliver, it was liberating to finally give in to their chemistry. The drama of the night had faded away, and it was just them. It also didn't hurt that Oliver was an amazing kisser.

When it started to get a little too chilly by the lake, they decided to head back to the cabin. It was while they were walking that Oliver told her he and Laurel had decided to call it quits. They were no longer bound to each other, and he was free to do as he pleased. Felicity knew he'd said it to ease any residual guilt she might be feeling about them moving forward. With that in mind, Felicity had shyly asked Oliver if he wanted to stay in her room last night. Despite how heated things had gotten down by the lake, they'd laid quietly side by side in her bed. Oliver had taken her hand and played with her fingers, no doubt trying to process everything that had happened in the span of a few hours. Felicity had rested her head on his shoulder and done the same. Sometime later, they'd fallen asleep.

"Hey," Oliver murmured, his voice heavy and coarse from sleep.

"Hi," she whispered back coyly. "Sorry if I hit you."

"Sorry if I startled you."

Felicity shook her head. "It's fine. I forgot for a sec that you were here. I thought you were a teddy bear or something."

Oliver grinned in amusement. "Do you normally sleep with one?"

Flushing, she responded, "No. I had this weird dream that I—you know what, nevermind. It's not important."

He ran his finger down her bare arm. "You've got goose bumps. Are you cold?"

His touch had her skin tingling. "Not anymore." Oliver's eyes darkened at that. "You are like a big teddy bear. Although, you're more muscle than stuffing. Not that I've thought a lot about it—the stuffing I mean. The muscles I'll totally admit to thinking about because, well, they're always just right there and if you're wearing a t-shirt you can't exactly blame a girl for looking. Feel free to stop me at any time, by the way."
"Not a chance," he teased, chuckling.

Felicity groaned and buried her face in his shoulder. "Ugh, my stupid mouth."

Oliver placed his hand under her chin and tipped it up. "I happen to love your mouth." He traced the outline of her lips before he leaned down for a kiss. "A lot," he muttered and deepened it.

Felicity couldn't help the quiet moan that escaped when his tongue teased hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck to bring him closer. Her entire body was humming against his with every kiss and caress of his hands along her curves. When he started sucking on her neck, her toes practically curled.

Felicity caught a glimpse of the clock on the nightstand. Frack. It was later in the morning than she'd thought. "Oliver," she breathed. "M-maybe we shouldn't do this right now. Everyone's going to be up soon."

"You locked the door, right?" he said against her skin.

"Yeah."

"Then we should be fine."

Her head spun from his kisses. They were like a drug, silencing her inhibitions and making her crave more. Felicity clung to Oliver as he rolled over on top of her. He was careful not to squish her, but that didn't stop Felicity from trying to press her body more firmly into his. Her hands ran down his back until they reached the hem of his t-shirt. Unable to resist, her hand slid underneath. She swallowed his groan when she came into contact with his hot, smooth skin.

Wanting more—she remembered exactly how amazing he'd looked shirtless on the boat the other day—Felicity reached for the hem again and yanked it up. Oliver drew back enough to get the shirt over his head before he reclaimed her lips in a scorching kiss. The taut, defined muscles of his back flexed against her fingertips. The feel of him was even more amazing and somewhat overwhelming. Oliver was by far the sexiest guy she'd ever been involved with, and it was a little scary how easily she found herself getting lost in him.

Conscious that any kind of loud noise might bring them curious and unwanted company, Felicity bit down hard on her lip at the feel of his growing and—if she wasn't mistaken—sizable hardness against her thigh. Her own excitement increased, though not without a small sliver of anxiety. Oliver was undeniably more experienced than her when it involved getting physical—not that she thought they would get that far while in a cabin filled with their friends who could interrupt them at any moment. The mere fact, nevertheless, that she already wanted to test the boundaries with him was very new to Felicity.

Oliver's hand traveled up the side of her waist to her shoulder. She shivered as he slid the strap of her tank top aside and left open-mouth kisses along her bare shoulder and down to her collarbone. Her fingers slid through his hair, holding him to her while arching her body up. The hand he had tangled in her own hair glided down her back. There seemed to be a moment of hesitation, as if Oliver was waiting for her to object, before it ventured lower to cup her backside. Their hushed moans mingled and were silenced by their joined lips. It didn't take long for Felicity to realize that Oliver had a special fascination with her butt. While his other hand roamed, the left one remained kneading her flesh through her shorts.

The gesture pressed their hips more closely together. Still it wasn't enough. With a little maneuvering, Felicity managed to slide her leg out from under Oliver and hook it over his hip. His
body jerked against hers at the more intimate contact.

"Felicity." He tore away from her lips, panting. "You are making this really hard for me."

"Isn't that the idea?" she teased.

Oliver managed a half-smile and groaned. "I'm at least trying to be somewhat of a gentleman. We keep this up and I might never leave this room."

"Promise?" She affectionately pecked his lips. "Besides, you started it by grabbing my ass."

"Well, can you blame me? You do have an amazing ass," he jokingly mumbled and gave it another squeeze for good measure. "I've been admiring it for weeks."

Giggling, she smacked his shoulder. "So much for being a gentleman."

Oliver ran a hand along her bare shoulder and cupped her face. "You don't know the half of it." Their noses brushed. "You drive me absolutely crazy, Felicity."

"Me too," Felicity said, rubbing his broad shoulders. Nothing more needed to be said. The pair simply lay there, tangled together, unable to look away. Her heart had already been pounding in her chest from their mini-makeout session, but this was different. The way Oliver was gazing into her eyes, as if nothing else in the world existed beyond her, was completely new. No one she'd dated, not even Cooper, had been so attentive. Felicity and Oliver were so wrapped up in each other that they'd barely heard the approaching footsteps and subsequent knock on the door.

"Felicity, are you awake?" Tommy tentatively called.

She looked to the door as the feeling of panic burst their intimate little bubble. Oliver, also tense, nodded for her to speak. After softly clearing her throat, Felicity called back in the calmest voice she could muster. "Yeah. What's up?"

"Do you have a sec?"

Felicity looked to Oliver, unsure. He started to get up and pointed to the closet. It was the only conceivable place he could hide aside from under the bed—no way his large form could fit in that tiny space. Oliver made sure to grab his t-shirt while Felicity went for her bathrobe.

"Uh, sure. One minute." When Oliver was successfully hidden, she unlocked the door and opened it. "Hey. I thought for sure you wouldn't be up until at least noon after last night," she kidded, trying to keep her tone light. Not staring at the closet was also a challenge.

"This hangover is definitely a bitch, that's for sure," he grumbled. "You doing okay?"

"Uh, yeah. Why?"

"You look a little flushed." He motioned to her face.

"Oh, um, yeah," she quickly replied, searching for some kind of excuse. It's not like she could admit to getting all hot and heavy with his best friend mere moments ago. "I made the mistake of turning the AC down in here last night, so I'm a little overheated." Needing to change the subject quickly, she asked, "What's up?"

"Would it be okay with you if we left today instead of tomorrow? I just spoke with Laurel. Apparently she and Oliver had a huge fight last night, and she wants to leave early."
"I heard," she muttered. "That's fine with me." To say the mood in the house today would be tense would be an understatement. Felicity was a terrible liar and being around Laurel after basically hooking up with Oliver last night was a dilemma Felicity wanted to avoid.

"Thanks. Oliver is M.I.A. again but if I know him, he probably wants some space, too."

"Sure. What time are we leaving?"

"If I can track him down, do you think you can be ready in an hour? We can grab some lunch on the road."

"Good idea. Full mouths can't really talk, right?" she attempted to joke.

Tommy sighed and shook his head. "It's still going to be the most awkward car ride from hell. Laurel is going to sit up front with me. You'll probably be in the back in the middle this time. Not sure Sara wants to be around him either right now. So prepare yourself."

"Thanks for the heads up," she told him.

Just as Tommy turned to leave, Felicity heard something fall in the closet. Of course she wasn't lucky enough for Tommy not to have heard it. She silently cursed Oliver as her stepbrother paused. "What was that?"

"Oh, uh, nothing. I mean, I'm sure it was nothing," she rushed out. "There was some stuff stacked on the top shelf in there. Looked like it was teetering over the edge the other day."

"I think there's a box of old pictures in there. It's probably a mess. I'll help you clean it up."

"No!" Felicity practically shouted and stepped in front of him. Tommy frowned, confused by her outburst. "I mean, don't worry about it. I've got it. The important thing is you find Oliver right now, so we can leave. I doubt Laurel has that much patience today."

Tommy scrutinized her for a few more seconds before nodding in agreement. "She doesn't. Her hangover is a hundred times worse than mine. Sara's too. I'll do one more sweep for Oliver. The idiot left his phone in his room so if you bump into him before me, can you let him know?"

"Sure."

"Also, would you mind giving him a heads up about Laurel? You don't have to go into great detail, but he should know what's going on."

"Will do."

"Thanks." Tommy patted her arm. "I know you didn't sign up for all of this drama. Oliver and Laurel are always like this. One week they're fighting, the next they're back together. You kinda get used to it."

"Doesn't exactly sound healthy," she couldn't help but comment.

Tommy shrugged nonchalantly, though the look on his face was strained. "Can't help who you love, right?"

Felicity merely nodded, her mind working overtime. "He's gone," she said when Tommy finally left. Oliver came out of the closet and walked over to her. "That was close. I better go."
"Yeah."

Sensing her discomfort from Tommy's words, Oliver leaned forward to kiss her forehead. "I will deal with Laurel. Don't give it another thought, all right?" He stroked her cheek.

Taking a deep breath, choosing to trust him, Felicity nodded. "Okay." After one more quick kiss, he left and Felicity went to pack. The holiday was most definitely over.

Sipping on drinks and surrounded by friends, Felicity was really enjoying her night out. After another hour of dancing, the group had ended up in the VIP section in Tommy's special seating area. Her mother hadn't been shy about joining them at first, but eventually she and her friends found their own set of couches. Felicity suspected they wanted to be able to complain about their husbands without worrying about who else was listening.

It was in the middle of Curtis's impersonation of Waller—which nearly had Felicity spitting out her drink from laughing so hard—that she spotted Thea. She was dressed like a Greek goddess and holding Roy's hand while moving through the crowd toward them. Felicity stood up to greet her with Tommy in tow.

"Hey, I didn't know you'd be here tonight," Felicity said and pulled her into a hug. "You look amazing."

"Thanks. I was at a party on campus with some friends, but it sucked. So I decided to come visit Roy and you guys."

"Hi, Roy," Felicity greeted. "How are you?"

"Good," he answered with a polite smile. Felicity couldn't be sure, but she got the impression that Roy was more subdued than usual around them. It had to be intimidating dating your boss's stepsister.

"You off the clock?" Tommy questioned.

"Yes, sir," Roy was quick to reply.

Felicity rolled her eyes at her stepbrother. It looked like she'd been right about the intimidation part.

"Tommy," Thea warned.

He held up his hands in mock surrender. "Kidding." He pointed at himself. "The Joker. Get it?"

"Ha ha," the young brunette deadpanned. She turned back to Felicity. "I love your costume, too. Those earrings are gorgeous." She leaned in close to get a better look. "Are those real diamonds?" Leave it to Thea to pick out such a detail. Then again, one of her greatest talents was shopping.

"Yes. They were a birthday gift." It was exactly one week since Felicity celebrated her twenty-third birthday. Oliver hadn't been able to get away to see her and so he'd made sure to send her gift and call her that night when she opened it. The platinum diamond earrings were of medium size and sparkled in almost any light. Felicity hadn't expected to get anything so exquisite. Oliver had sounded relieved when she couldn't stop gushing over them.

"They're beautiful. Did Aaron give them to you?" she guessed.

"Yes."
"It's the least he could do after missing your big birthday dinner," Tommy commented. He was still miffed that "Aaron" hadn't made an appearance. It was getting more and more difficult making excuses for why her boyfriend was always unavailable.

"Hey, is that Donna over there?" Thea questioned. Felicity couldn't have been more grateful for the subject change.

"Yes. She's having a girls night," Felicity informed her.

"Wow, that costume...she looks hot. I'm surprised Malcolm let her leave the mansion," she joked. "If I were a dude, I'd be all over that."

Tommy snorted derisively. "Please, my dad would have to pay attention to something other than himself to notice."

"Okay, none of that tonight," Felicity cut in. "We're here to have fun, and you could use another drink." They went back to the group, and Felicity introduced Thea and Roy to everyone. It was weird for Felicity to see her two worlds once again colliding, but she was glad for it. She had so many secrets to keep that it felt good to have one night where none of that mattered and she could just have fun with everyone she cared about—or almost everyone.

Sometime later, Felicity spotted Sara. She was dressed in her SCPD uniform. Felicity called to her and waved her over. Sara cut through the crowd. Her movements were quick and harsh, which immediately told Felicity something was wrong. Her suspicions were confirmed by the stern expression on her best friend's face.

"Sara!" Tommy exclaimed. "You finally made it. What's with the uniform? The whole point of Halloween is to be something other than yourself."

"Well, that won't be a problem. Thanks to Felicity, after tonight, I'll have no need to wear it."

Frowning in confusion, Felicity replied, "What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb," she snapped. "You know exactly what you did."

Felicity glanced at the others, though it was pointless considering they didn't know anything either. "Sara, seriously, I have no idea what you're talking about."

She scoffed in disbelief but answered anyway, "I'm talking about you breaking your promise and ratting me out to my father. He found out I was still investigating Brodeur, and now I've been suspended from the force indefinitely. How could you, Felicity? You know I was closing in on him, and I trusted you!"

Felicity was totally taken aback. Standing, she said, "Sara, I swear I didn't go to your father. I wouldn't do that."

"Someone tipped him off and I know it wasn't anyone on the force, because I'm damn good at covering my tracks." She folded her arms in a defensive stance. "So that leaves only you."

"But it wasn't me. There's no conceivable way that your father found out through me unless..." she trailed off. Her mind whirred as realization dawned on her. Felicity glanced at Tommy, who'd gotten uncharacteristically quiet these last couple of minutes. "You didn't..."

With a loud sigh, Tommy stood up next to her and faced Sara. "Felicity's right. It wasn't her, Sara. It was me. I went to your father."
Sara stared between the two of them. Hurt and betrayal flashed in her eyes when she met Felicity's gaze again. "You told Tommy?"

Shooting a disapproving look at Tommy, Felicity replied, "I'm sorry, but I was worried about you. You haven't been yourself lately, and I know half the time you're lying to me about where you've been and what you've been doing." Felicity hadn't intended to tell Tommy anything, but she'd been on edge ever since Sara canceled on her birthday dinner. Her best friend had been so distracted and withdrawn lately. Felicity knew it was her obsession with catching Brodeur that was the cause. She'd seen that fierce, determined look in Sara's eyes the morning she'd showed up hurt at her apartment. If anything, the incident had only fueled Sara's need for revenge.

When Tommy expressed the same concerns over Sara that night, Felicity couldn't lie. She needed someone to confide in and give her a fresh perspective on how to handle the situation. Oliver had been a great source of support, but he didn't know everything that had gone on when Laurel died. Tommy saw the full picture, because he'd lived it, too.

"That wasn't your secret to tell," Sara accused.

"Don't blame this on Felicity. She swore me to secrecy, and I broke that promise. And guess what? I'd do it again because if you're not going to give a damn about your life, then I sure as hell will. Laurel would never have wanted this for you."

"Laurel cared about justice, which is exactly what I'm trying to get for her," Sara argued.

"And look where she ended up," Tommy angrily retorted. "She's dead, because she didn't know when to back off. Learn from her mistakes, Sara, before it's too late for you, too."

"You know what I've learned? That doing things by the book doesn't always work," she declared. "The system is rigged, and it's the damn criminals who end up profiting. Maybe that green vigilante has it right."

That caught Felicity's attention. "What green vigilante?"

"There's been a few sightings of some guy in a green hood wielding a bow and arrow in The Glades. At first we thought it was a joke with Halloween coming up and all. You know, someone pulling a prank and acting like a modern-day Robin Hood. But he's strung up a bunch of criminals this week, including some men associated with Brodeur. His arrows are no joke. He's got training."

"Has he killed anyone?" Mei interjected. The entire group was listening intently now.

"No, but they were badly beaten. Not that I'll complain. They were some of the worst gang bangers we've dealt with. Repeat offenders. Again, using the law for their benefit."

Taking note of all the eyes on them, Felicity suggested, "Maybe we should go talk somewhere more private about this."

"No," Sara said. "We're done here."

"Sara, please," Felicity pleaded as she turned to leave.

"Sara, don't go," Tommy added. "We're just trying to keep you safe."

"I said we're done," the blonde snapped harshly. "From now on, leave me alone. The both of you. You've done enough damage." Turning her back on them, she proceeded to storm out of the club.
"Damn it," Tommy cursed under his breath. "Why does she have to be so damn stubborn? She's just like Laurel."

"You shouldn't have gone to Lance, Tommy," Felicity told him, unable to hide her anger that he'd gone behind her back and done such a thing. "Now she trusts no one and who knows what trouble she'll get herself into without that badge to at least keep her in line?"

"She'll come around. She just needs some time to cool off."

Felicity wasn't so sure about that, but she didn't say anything. Tommy might not be sorry that he'd gone to Captain Lance, but she could see the guilt over how upset Sara was surfacing. Before she could say anything else, Mei gestured off to the side. Felicity left Thea to talk to Tommy and joined Mei in a more private corner.

"Felicity, we need to catch this hood guy," she declared. "This is the break in the investigation we've been waiting for. We'll have to move fast before he disappears again."

"I know," Felicity agreed. "I'm already on it."

Chapter End Notes

So Felicity's team is going to track down The Hood. What do you guys think? Let me know in the comments!
As always, I appreciate you guys taking the time to comment on this story. Over 900 kudos and counting, which is awesome! I hope you enjoy this next chapter and will let me know what you think. Thanks!

November 2, 2012

"You sure you want to do this?"

"We need more information."

"A few arrows in the right places would probably do the trick."

"The only thing that will accomplish is making a mess. If we want him to talk, he needs the proper incentive."

"But a train. Really?" Diggle replied, folding his arms. "Seems a bit dramatic."

Oliver smirked. "Exactly." He looked at the man on the ground and pulled up his hood when he heard him groan. The tranquilizer dart must be wearing off, which meant he was finally coming to. Oliver checked his watch to make sure they were still on schedule.

The large, burly, middle-aged man rolled over and groaned again. Slowly his eyes opened, and he blinked in confusion. "What the hell?" he growled and sat up. He didn't get very far before the handcuff yanked on his wrist. Oliver watched as the man looked down to see himself attached to the train tracks. "What is this? Who are you? Let me go!" He yanked on the cuffs, but his actions were futile. He wasn't going anywhere.

Oliver stepped forward from the shadows. He kept his bow by his side. "Bryan Salazar, you have failed this city."

Salazar scrutinized him from head to toe before he scoffed. "Who the fuck are you supposed to be? Robin Hood?"

"You're Jason Brodeur's right-hand man, which means you know all of his dirty dealings. In fact, I'd be willing to bet that you're his accomplice in covering up most of them," Oliver stated, his voice low and gruff. It took weeks of recon to pinpoint that Salazar was one of Brodeur's most trusted lackeys. He officially headed up Brodeur's security team, but Oliver and Diggle had followed him enough times to catch him in the act of some shady dealings. "When did he give you the order to have Laurel Lance and Peter Declan killed?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Laurel Lance had files that Peter Declan's wife had put together before her death for her supervisor. Files that proved Brodeur Chemical was dumping toxic waste in The Glades. Lance was killed before she could find the smoking gun tying Brodeur to the murder of Declan's wife instead."
"Brodeur has better things to do than worry about some delusional lawyer grasping at straws and a nutcase who popped off his own wife. Prison riots happen. It was nothing more than being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Oliver took a menacing step forward and roughly yanked the man up by his tie. The handcuff only let him go so far, and Salazar grunted from the strain. "The prisoner who killed them lived with your family as a foster child for two years."

"You can't know that. Those records are sealed."

"Not to me they're not," Oliver growled. "You had the connections, which means you set it up. Admit that Brodeur gave you the order."

"We lost touch years ago."

"Not according to prison phone records." Oliver tightened his hold on Salazar's neck. "You are going to confess to orchestrating the murder at Brodeur's request."

"You're crazy," he spat. "I'm not confessing to anything."

"It's time you either tell me the truth and confess"—a train whistle sounded in the distance—"or it's time for the ten-fifteen train to Bloodhaven."

Salazar's eyes widened as Oliver turned his head. A faint light was emerging in the darkness. "I can't."

"Wrong answer."

"If I confess, I'm a dead man."

"You're a dead man if you don't confess," Oliver harshly pointed out. He released Salazar and stepped back from the tracks. They were starting to rumble from the approaching train. "Did Brodeur order you to have Laurel Lance and Peter Declan murdered?"

The train was turning the corner, getting closer, almost at full speed. The whistle blew once more, piercing the silent night. "Shit!" Salazar swore and frantically tugged at his restraint. "Shit! Let me go, you crazy son of a bitch!"

"Not until you give me what I want. Were you ordered by Brodeur to have Lance and Declan killed?" Oliver shouted. "You've got less than a minute before you're in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Fuck! Fine! Brodeur gave me the order to contact Harrison," Salazar exclaimed.

"When?" Oliver demanded.

"I-I don't know. T-the day Lance tried to go before a judge to get D-Declan's execution postponed, I think," he stuttered. The train was less than fifty feet from them now.

There was more. There had to be. Harrison was already in prison for life, but his living conditions weren't horrible. He'd ended up in solitary and with more restrictions after the incident. "What was in it for Harrison?"

"He owed me a favor. P-please," Salazar begged over the deafening screech of the speeding train, "let me go!"
"A favor isn't worth rotting in solitary confinement for the rest of his life. What was he given to take the fall?"

Salazar cursed before confessing, "Harrison has a daughter. He made Brodeur set up a trust for her in exchange to kill Lance and Declan. He did it through one of his fake companies with an offshore account. It's virtually untraceable."

"Then it's too bad for you, because I need a trail. Something to track it down. Less than thirty seconds," Oliver warned. The blaring whistle was deafening.

"There's a safe in Brodeur's office behind a portrait of his mother. He keeps all of his important documents there. The company is called Tempest, LLC. Get your hands on that, and you might be able to trace it." Salazar shielded his eyes from the bright light on the front of the locomotive. "That's all I know. Now please! Let me go! PLEASE!"

Oliver raised his bow and released the arrow to sever the chain of the handcuffs. Salazar scrambled away from the tracks, barely missing being run over. He didn't get much farther before Oliver punched him in the head to knock him out.

"That was cutting it close," Diggle said next to him. "You're a little scary sometimes, you know that?"

Oliver ignored him and said, "We need to get that file from Brodeur's office."

Diggle nodded in agreement. "Already on it."

Oliver quietly made his way up the fire escape until he reached the fourth floor. He checked the window and wasn't surprised to find it locked. It took less than a minute to break it. Oliver carefully opened the window and climbed inside. The living room was spacious and had a homey feel. There was a fireplace in the center of a room and mantle covered with framed pictures. Oliver resisted the urge to go over to them and focused on the mission at hand.

He took in his surroundings, trying to figure out the best way to handle the situation. Breaking into someone's house, especially a cop's, was asking for trouble right off the bat. Oliver had barely taken a step toward the foyer when he heard a low creek in the floor and a click. His bow was up and at the ready, pointed at the doorway. Sara emerged from the shadows with a gun in her hand. Her hair and pajamas were rumpled from sleep. It was oddly comforting to note that she didn't look all that different from the young woman he'd known years ago.

"You have five seconds to put down the weapon, Robin Hood, before I put you six feet under in Sherwood Forest," Sara warned.

"I'm not Robin Hood," Oliver ground out, his voice sounding much deeper from the modulator. It was seriously starting to get on his nerves the way the media kept making that comparison. "And I'm not going to hurt you, Officer Lance." Oliver carefully lowered his bow and held up his hand.

"Then what the hell are you doing breaking into my home in the middle of the night and pointing that thing at me?" she demanded.

"Sorry, habit. But I need to talk to you," Oliver explained. "I have information that you want."

"You don't know me. You have no idea what I want. And even if you did, whatever it is, I'm
probably the last person you should be coming to. If you'd done your homework, you'd know that I've been suspended from the police force."

Oliver did know that Sara was suspended. He'd spoken on the phone with Felicity last night, and she'd told him everything that happened at Verdant. She'd been really upset and was even more worried about her best friend. It was yet another reason why Oliver needed to do this. Without his help, Sara would most certainly get herself into more trouble going after Brodeur—especially now that she was a loose cannon without her badge.

"For trying to do the right thing and bring your sister's killer to justice," he stated. "So far you've been blocked at every turn by both Brodeur and the police. I can help with that."

That got her attention. "How?"

Oliver nodded to the gun. "Want to put that down first?"

Sara hesitated for a moment before finally lowering her firearm. She didn't relax completely, but it was an improvement. "Talk."

Carefully, Oliver pulled out the folder. He placed it on the ground and slid it to Sara. "I had a little chat with Bryan Salazar earlier tonight."

"Salazar," Sara repeated as she bent down to pick up the folder. "He's one of Brodeur's men."

"I know. With some persuading, he led me to that folder. Brodeur set up a fake company to hide his dirty dealings. It turns out he used a shell company called Tempest to pay off Harrison. The money came from an offshore account and was used to set up a trust for Harrison's young daughter."

"Oh my God," Sara muttered as she scanned through the documents. "This is it. This is exactly what I need to bring that son of a bitch down."

"The only problem is going to be tying Brodeur to Tempest. The digital trail is buried, but it's there if you know where to look. You'll need someone with extremely advanced IT skills to uncover it."

"There's this tech guy at the station who—"

"No, not him. You need someone you can trust. You need to give this information to Felicity Smoak."

Sara's head snapped up at that. "How do you know about Felicity?" she questioned, suspicious.

"Like you said, I needed to do my homework and I did. Convince her to help you. She's the only one who can." He added more seriously, "But you can't tell her you got this from me. You can't tell anyone."

"Why are you doing this?" Sara inquired. "What's in it for you?"

"What happened to your sister…she didn't deserve that. She was a good person, and it's time her killer paid for his crimes."

He saw Sara scrutinizing him in the moonlight. Luckily, it wouldn't be enough for her to get a good look at him. "Sounds like you cared about her. Did you know her?"

"There are many people I care about in this city," Oliver stated, dodging the question.

"You've been causing quite a stir lately. The SCPD doesn't condone vigilantism. They're looking for
"...they wouldn't be the first."

"Well, they won't hear anything about you from me. Be careful out there—what exactly is your
name? Now that I know it's not Robin Hood," she replied with a hint of teasing.

"Arrow," Oliver replied after a moment. "Just call me the Arrow."

"Well, Arrow, thanks for this. I guess it's a good thing I didn't shoot you," she said.

"Likewise," he muttered.

"What do I do if I need to get in touch with you again?"

"You won't," he told her. "But I'll be around." With a final nod, Oliver went out through the window
and disappeared into the night.

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**July 7, 2007**

*It was impossible for Oliver to wipe the grin off of his face as he entered the apartment. Despite the
drama that had occurred earlier in the week, the last two days had been quiet and amazing. He'd
spent most of his time with Felicity. Yesterday they'd eaten at O'Connor's for dinner before going to
the movies. Oliver still had no idea what the film was about, since he and Felicity had taken
advantage of the darkness and mostly empty theater. There weren't many places they could get away
with kissing in public.*

*Today they'd gone to the park. It was a beautiful, sunny day. The temperature had been warm, but a
comfortable breeze kept them from feeling too overheated. They found a nice shady spot in the grass
to sit. Oliver ended up laying on his back with Felicity's head on his stomach. He rested one arm on
her waist while the other stroked her long, dark locks. They talked for hours. Felicity told him all
about growing up in Las Vegas and what it was like moving away at such a young age to attend
MIT. Oliver told her about his happy childhood living in the Queen mansion and then what it was
like to grow up with so many expectations placed on him. Felicity had asked him about some of the
trouble he'd gotten into over the years. Oliver didn't shy away from his past or explaining how his
rebellious years were nothing more than an attempt to find some type of solace that always seemed
to elude him.*

*After a while, they'd both dozed off. It wasn't until late in the afternoon that Oliver woke up. He let
Felicity sleep a little longer, since he knew she'd gone back to working on her IT project this week.
She'd seemed relaxed all afternoon with him, but Oliver could tell that she was fighting her fatigue.
When he dropped her off back at the mansion, he made her promise to actually get some sleep
tonight. They were both headed back to work at QC on Monday, and Felicity needed all of the
downtime she could get.*

*Oliver shut the door behind him and looked at his best friend curiously. He was sitting on the couch,
leaning over the coffee table. There were a bunch of photographs strewn across it.*

"What's all this?" Oliver questioned.

"Photos from our trip to Ivy Town," he explained. "I always say I'm going to get them printed, but I
never do. Finally got my ass to the printer today, though. These are too good to pass up." Tommy
held up a picture of him and Felicity when she'd caught her first fish.

"Nice," Oliver commented while looking through the pile. Anyone who glanced at these photographs would see a close group of friends laughing and smiling as they enjoyed their vacation together. There was no sign of the tension that had been bubbling under the surface between him and Laurel nor the drama with Samantha and Carter.

As if Tommy could read his mind, his best friend said, "Still haven't talked to Laurel, huh?"

"Nope."

"It's been a couple of days. I thought for sure you'd both have cooled down by now."

Oliver shook his head. "Unfortunately, it's more complicated than that, Tommy."

"It's you and Laurel. When isn't it complicated?" Tommy appeared to hesitate, contemplating. Finally, he spoke up, "Ollie, maybe you should check in on her."

"I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Look, I promised her I wouldn't say anything to you but I have to. She's not doing too well, Ollie."

"What do you mean?" he asked, concerned.

"I saw her earlier today, and she's a mess. Tommy gestured to Oliver. "And you, well...you look fine. Better than fine even."

"Tommy, Laurel and I said all we had to say at the cabin. What we need right now is some time away from each other."

His best friend scrutinized him closely. A moment later, realization seemed to dawn on him. "It's that other girl, isn't it? The one you told me about before. Did something happen with her?"

There was no point in denying it so Oliver admitted, "Yeah, something did. We're letting what's between us develop. Seeing where it leads us." He was swift to add, "Which is exactly what you told me to do, if you remember."

"I remember but before you and Laurel had ever dated, you guys were friends," Tommy reminded him. "I guess I'm just surprised you're not more concerned."

"Tommy, what am I supposed to do? I can't control how Laurel feels. We each said our piece and that was it."

"Oliver, when was the last time you talked to Laurel? Really talked to her," he stated. "I don't think it's just this thing with you that's bothering her. She's been somewhat off for a while now. Sara, too. You saw how much they were both drinking the night of the party."

"So why don't you find out what it is? You've obviously been spending more time with her than I have," Oliver countered.

"I've tried, but she won't tell me. Besides, I'm not the one Laurel loves. That would be you," Tommy snapped. Sighing, he ran a hand through his hair. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm not trying to make you feel bad. Whatever it is you have with that other girl, I understand. But Laurel has always been there for us. There for you. I just don't want you to completely write her off. Okay?"

"Okay," Oliver said with a curt nod.
“Okay,” Tommy repeated and stood up. “It's getting late, and I have a date tonight. Don't wait up.”

Oliver watched his friend retreat to his room before staring back at the photos strewn across the table. He picked up one of him and Laurel. They were sitting in the sand by the lake after a day spent swimming and getting some sun. Although Laurel was smiling, Oliver could tell that it didn't quite reach her eyes. He exhaled loudly. Was Tommy right? Was there something else going on with her that he didn't know about?

He cast the picture aside and paused when another one caught his eye. It was one of the smaller, pocket-sized photos. One evening they'd all gone for a walk by the lake. The setting sun had been a breathtaking mixture of orange, pink, and purple. It had reflected off of the water, also turning it colors. Tommy had gotten a great shot of Felicity. Her hair had been down and wavy, since it was impossible, she said, to keep it straight in the humidity. There was a coy smile on her face as she posed for the camera with the colorful sky and lake behind her. Somehow she managed to look both stunning and down to earth at the same time. Oliver stared at it for a couple of minutes as he churned over what Tommy had just said.

Finally, Oliver reached for his wallet and put the photo of Felicity inside. He then stood and made his way to the door. He would pay Laurel a short visit just to check on her. It was the least he could do.

Felicity sat anxiously at the corner table of her favorite coffee shop. It had already been a long night but when she'd gotten the call from Sara to meet her, she couldn't resist. No matter how stressed and frustrated she was from a night of unsuccessful vigilante hunting. Felicity had been tapping into the police scanners the last couple of nights in hope of getting a lead on the mystery archer, who the team had taken to nicknaming The Hood.

They'd almost had him cornered tonight, but he was far more skilled than they'd anticipated. Barry, being the fastest runner, had caught up and engaged The Hood first. Felicity watched in dismay as The Hood took him down in less than a minute. Barry ended up on the ground nursing a bloody nose and a sprained knee. Curtis and Caitlin took him on at once, which resulted in Curtis being thrown in a dumpster and Caitlin strung up with some kind of cable from a special arrow he'd shot off.

Mei had taken an alternate route to head him off. Felicity had been guiding her movements as she
tracked The Hood with A.R.G.U.S.'s special satellite. Although Mei put up a pretty good fight, eventually The Hood got the drop on her. He'd shot her gun right out of her hand before engaging in hand-to-hand combat. Mei was holding her own until the The Hood yanked her mask over her eyes. Then Mei was on the ground and also strung up with a cable he'd shot at her.

Lyla had never managed to catch up, since she'd been trying to subdue another masked man. He also managed to escape, and Felicity didn't envy Lyla having to report it back to Waller. Their debriefing afterward had been tense as it became clear that they were vastly under-prepared to engage him. The Hood wasn't some average guy trying to play a masked crusader. He had military training as well as street-fighting skills. He was strategic, and he was lethal. Combined with his advanced archery skills, it was all the more likely that he might be involved somehow in the A.R.G.U.S. attacks. Going forward, they would never underestimate him again.

Felicity was still trying to work out the best way to turn the tables on him when she noticed Sara. With a hesitant smile, Felicity waved her over. She'd tried calling Sara over the last couple of days, but her best friend refused to answer. Felicity didn't necessarily blame her; telling Tommy had been a mistake. Her job on the force meant so much to Sara, especially after Laurel's death. Taking that away from her would only cause her to spiral more.

"Hey, I'm glad you called," Felicity said when the blonde took the seat across from her.

"I'm not here to talk about us or what you did."

Taken aback by her curt tone, Felicity replied, "Then why did you call?"

"I need your help with something. Since you've taken away all of my resources, I figured you owed me one."

This was not how Felicity had expected this conversation to go. Ignoring the minor jab, Felicity asked, "Sara, what are you talking about?"

She produced a folder from her bag and slid it across the table. "I have the smoking gun to pin Brodeur to Laurel's murder."

Felicity flipped through the documents, frowning. "Where did you get these?"

"That's not important. What matters is that they're useless unless it can be proven that Brodeur paid off Harrison to kill Laurel and Declan. I know that Tempest company belongs to him, but there is nothing in that document that states it outright. The offshore accounts associated with it are his, too."

"Why come to me?"

"You went to MIT, Felicity, and work for a prominent tech company. If anyone can uncover the digital trail and finally nail that scumbag, it's you," Sara explained.

"It's nice to know our little talk the other night really resonated," she sarcastically mumbled. It was as she'd feared. Sara was even more desperate in her vendetta.

"Felicity, you know no matter what you say, I'm never letting this go. This is the break in the case I've been waiting for over a year. If we crack this, it's over for that son of a bitch. My father will have enough to arrest him, and I might even get my job back. Hell, my life back. You said you don't want me to get hurt. If I do this on my own, I probably will." She met her gaze beseechingly.

"Please, Felicity. Help me finish this."

"What you're asking me to do is illegal." It was hardly a concern for Felicity, since the resources to
conduct this kind of investigation were right at her fingertips. Nevertheless, she felt the need to voice it anyway. If she agreed to this too easily, it would look odd.

"I know. No one has to know you helped me. The digital trail is all I need."

Closing the folder and putting it in her purse, Felicity replied, "Okay. I'm in. But I need time, Sara. Until then, you have to promise me you will back off from Brodeur. I'm serious." She gave her a stern look. "It could compromise everything if he's tipped off to what we're doing. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Promise me," Felicity demanded while looking her in the eye.

"Fine, I promise," Sara stated. "I'll let you take it from here."

With a final nod, Felicity stood to leave. Sara's request was yet another weight on her shoulders—one she would willingly bare—and what she really needed now was to go home and destress. Maybe she'd call Oliver. He'd been unavailable the last couple of days. It wasn't anything new. There were times when it was too dangerous for him to make contact, and she understood that. After the night she just had, though, hearing his voice would be a welcomed relief.

"Sara," Felicity said tentatively. "Thank you for trusting me with this. I really am sorry you lost your job. I'm going to make this right."

Sara bobbed her head but remained quiet. Her gaze was on a couple of sugar packets she was playing with. Knowing there was nothing more she could say, Felicity left the coffee shop and headed home.
Hey guys, so I hope you enjoy this next chapter. It's filled with a lot of great Olicity moments, which I think we all need right now. It was one of my favorite chapters to write. Please read and let me know what you think!

December 31, 2012

Twirling around in front of the floor-length mirror, Felicity gave herself one last perusal before deeming that she was ready. She was wearing a tight red, medium-length dress that fell at her knees. The top had geometric cutouts that circled her neck and exposed part of her shoulders. She paired it with silver-stoned heels and the diamond earrings Oliver had gotten her for her birthday. The right side of her hair had been pulled back in a braid while the left remained wavy and draped over her face. Everything about her appearance was sultry but elegant.

Felicity felt like a giddy teenager dressing up for a big date with a cute boy. In many ways, it was exactly like that. Oliver would be by to pick her up any minute. It had been almost four months since they'd last seen each other, and her body was humming with anticipation. He wouldn't say where they were going tonight, but it didn't matter to Felicity. As long as she could ring in the new year with the man she loved, she would be happy.

A knock sounded on the door, and her excitement soared. Felicity brushed her hands over her dress one more time quickly before going to answer it. As soon as she opened the door, she was hit by a gust of frigid cold air. There had been a huge snowstorm several days ago, and the temperature had stayed below freezing ever since. Goose bumps formed on her arms, but Felicity knew it had nothing to do with the cold.

"Hi, sweetheart," Oliver greeted with a beaming grin that mirrored her own.

"Oliver," she replied before pulling him inside. Felicity swiftly shut the door to keep out any more cold air.

"Am I allowed to kiss you?" he teased while drawing her into his arms. She experienced a little shiver, since the fabric of his coat was still cool. "Don't want to go against doctor's orders."

Laughing quietly, she replied, "Yes, I'm fine now. All better." Oliver's busy schedule wasn't the only reason they'd been apart for so long. He'd wanted to visit her at least once during the holidays, but Felicity had caught a nasty strain of the flu a few weeks ago. When Oliver offered to come and take care of her, Felicity refused. She felt like death warmed over, and she didn't want to infect him, too. Oliver's life was dangerous enough, and he needed his strength. If it wasn't for her mother staying over to take care of her—and celebrate Hanukkah from her bedside—Felicity had a feeling Oliver would've come to her regardless of her warning.

"Good." Oliver leaned down to kiss her, letting out a soft groan when their lips touched.

Felicity wrapped her arms around his neck to bring him closer. An overwhelming feeling of love and relief filled her. Being with Oliver always felt like coming home.
"You look beautiful," he complimented when they finally drew back. "I love you in red."

She smiled and gave him another peck on the lips. "I know." Since his coat was on, Felicity couldn't really see Oliver's clothes. But she could tell that he was wearing a suit, because his white collar and the top part of his tie were peeking out. He'd clearly shaved for tonight, too; his usual scruff was much shorter. He looked both sexy and adorable with his reddened cheeks from the cold.

"It's a shame no one else will get to see how stunning you look." He caressed her cheek. "Are you ready to go?"

"So I assume we're not going out to dinner," Felicity said. "Will you tell me now where we're going?"

"Being seen in public with a supposed to be dead man might be a little too conspicuous," Oliver stated.

"True." She played with the hairs at the nape of his neck. "So where are we going then?"

"It's a surprise."

Felicity let out a dramatic but teasing groan. "You and your surprises, Queen."

"You'll love it. Hopefully," he added with a chuckle. Although Oliver meant it as a joke, Felicity could tell that he seemed a bit nervous about whatever it was he had planned.

"You could take me to a Bratva meeting right now, and I wouldn't care." Brushing her nose against his in an Eskimo kiss, she reassured him, "I love every moment I'm with you, no matter where we are."

"Ditto," he whispered against her lips.

Afterward, Oliver took her coat from the rack and held it out for her. Felicity grabbed her purse and held Oliver's hand to the car. He had the Porsche again, but this time he'd parked directly in front of her apartment. Felicity was grateful, because she really didn't want to be out in the cold any longer than necessary. Oliver, like a perfect gentleman, opened the door for her. Felicity slid inside, where it was nice and toasty. He mentioned that the drive was only twenty minutes, which piqued her curiosity.

Felicity admired the beautiful holiday lights decorating the city as he drove. Oliver seemed to be taking side streets to avoid any of the heavy traffic associated with the New Year's Eve events throughout the city. She asked if John was doing anything special tonight. Oliver said his partner had the night to himself and was probably in front of the TV with a beer right now watching ESPN.

Felicity felt a twinge of sadness at that, but he and Oliver had already spent Christmas together. According to Oliver, Anatoly always had a big party that they attended. She hated that Oliver couldn't be with her or his family, but she also was somewhat relieved he hadn't been alone—even if he was with a bunch of criminals.

Oliver then asked about Thea and Tommy. She explained that Thea and her boyfriend had gone with friends to a party. Tommy was at Verdant making sure his sold-out New Year's Eve bash went smoothly.

"Sucks that he has to work tonight," Oliver commented.

"Actually, it won't be all work. He invited a friend of mine as his date." Felicity hadn't been surprised when Mei approached her last week and asked if it was okay. Tommy had done the same. Ever since
Halloween, Mei and Tommy had discreetly been spending more time together. Felicity never meddled but knew it must be progressing, since they'd both come to her separately about it. Although they didn't need Felicity's permission to move forward, she appreciated that Mei and Tommy were conscious of the boundaries between her work and personal life. Felicity, of course, told them to go for it. She knew all too well how life was too short not to seize an opportunity to be happy.

Hesitating, Oliver asked, "And Sara?"

Felicity automatically tensed. "I don't know. We haven't spoken in weeks."

After Sara had given Felicity the folder of information about Brodeur's supposed shell companies, Felicity spent a week checking into every lead. It had taken another week for her to hack into the bank accounts and trace the activity. The transactions were convoluted but once she isolated the digital trail, Felicity was able to follow it back to Brodeur. Most importantly, she'd found the link between Brodeur and Harrison. The money had been funneled from Brodeur Chemical to a bunch of other companies before being deposited in the offshore account. The payments Harrison's wife was receiving from that account were small and spread out, which was a clever way of not drawing suspicion.

The look on Sara's face when Felicity had given her the information was one of pure joy and relief. Sara had thanked her profusely and gone to her father the very next day. Although being suspended prevented Sara from making the arrest, Captain Lance did allow her to be there when Brodeur was taken into custody. Finally, Sara's vendetta had been resolved and Felicity fully expected to get her best friend back.

What Felicity hadn't anticipated was the revelation that Sara had been working with The Hood. Bryan Salazar had been the first clue. The Hood had been targeting various criminals in Starling for several weeks, which included some of Brodeur's men. Salazar ending up in the hospital in a coma after being shot with a poisoned arrow wasn't that out of the ordinary. Days after Brodeur was arrested, Salazar finally came to. He was questioned by the police, who were also planning on arresting him once he was well enough to be discharged from the hospital. In Salazar's statement, he maintained that he'd been tortured by The Hood and forced to implicate himself and Brodeur with false charges. The evidence, luckily, showed that Salazar was lying about his lack of involvement.

After that, Sara had been questioned by her father about where she had gotten the lead. Sara refused to name her source despite the fact that all signs pointed towards The Hood. Her silence was probably why Sara wasn't reinstated to the force despite solving the case. Felicity's team was still pursuing the dangerous vigilante, and so Felicity had confronted Sara, too, when the information had been leaked by the media. Again, Sara lied and no amount of coaxing would get her to tell the truth. Felicity had left Sara's apartment more frustrated than ever with her best friend, and the two hadn't spoken since.

"She's your best friend, and it is the holidays," Oliver commented. "Maybe you should reach out to her again."

"Oliver, I told you about where she got the info to bring down Brodeur. She'd been lying for weeks about what she was up to, and then she lied straight to my face again about working with that vigilante."

Oliver's hands momentarily tightened on the steering wheel. He then replied, "I get it, but she's not the only one keeping secrets." He gave her a pointed look. "You have to lie every day about your job. Not to mention me."

"That's different," Felicity replied. "I don't have a choice." It was a futile response, she knew. Her
harping on Sara about lying was like the pot calling the kettle black.

"We always have a choice, Felicity. It might not always be a good one, but we do."

"I called her on Christmas, but she never picked up," Felicity somberly admitted. "She's probably still upset that I confided in Tommy. Her father never reversed the suspension."

Oliver reached out for her hand and brought it to his lips. "I'm sure it's not you. Sara has been after Brodeur for so long, she's probably feeling a sense of loss once again now that it's over. As satisfying as it was for her to finally put him away, it still doesn't bring Laurel back. She probably has some residual grief to work through. What's important is that you were there when she needed you. Sara won't forget that. Trust me."

"You're actually pretty wise, you know that?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. "I have my moments."

Felicity squeezed his hand and laid her head on his shoulder, which wasn't difficult to do in such a small car. They spent the rest of the drive in comfortable silence. She squinted into the darkness as Oliver got off the highway and started heading toward the outskirts of the city. A few of the landmarks looked familiar, and it wasn't long before her mind started to put the pieces together.

"Oh my God," Felicity muttered and sat up when they drove through the tall, wide open gate. The driveway was long and thankfully shoveled. The ornate, gigantic stone structure of the Queen mansion loomed in the moonlight. Felicity was hit by a rush of memories as they got closer. "Oliver…"

"Surprise."

Being in the Queen mansion, Felicity felt like she'd traveled back in time. She'd only visited it a couple of times before the Gambit had gone down, and she hadn't been back since. There was never really a need to return. Felicity shouldn't have been surprised to see it so well maintained. Malcolm would ensure that the property was pristine for when Thea finally got her full inheritance. Of all the places Felicity thought Oliver would take her tonight, this was definitely not it.

He'd told her to stay in the living room for a few minutes while he finished setting up whatever surprise he had in store. All but one of the couches in the living room didn't have a white cover on it. Felicity remembered the time she and Tommy had come over for movie night with Oliver. Sitting in the exact spot she was now, Felicity blushed as she recalled the babbling fit in which she'd accidentally admitted to Oliver that she was a virgin. The amused smirk on his face during that conversation had forever been seared into her memory. The night he'd changed that was also vividly branded in her mind, which instantly made her cheeks redden even after all these years.

Thankfully, Oliver didn't leave her alone too long with her thoughts. She heard his footsteps and stood up when he entered the room. He'd finally taken off his jacket, giving her the opportunity to admire him in his suit and tie. He looked so damn sexy that it had her heating up all over again. "All set?"

"Yup." He paused, taking her in. "You okay?"

"Yeah, why?" she casually replied.

"You look a bit flushed. In fact, your cheeks match your dress," he teased.
"It's nothing," she quickly dismissed and pointed to her head. "Just things in here."

"I was worried about it being too cold in here since the heat is never on, but if you're hot—"

"No, I'm fine. Promise." Felicity smiled and gave his tie a playful tug. "Now what is it you want to show me? You know how much mysteries bug me."

"Follow me." He took her hand and led her further into the house. As they passed the kitchen, she smelled a combination of different yet delicious scents that had her stomach rumbling. She loved when Oliver cooked for her and the idea of him zipping around the kitchen all day like some sort of master chef filled her with both love and amusement.

"We're not eating in the dining room?" Felicity commented as they bypassed that as well.

"Nope."

Eventually, they made it to the back of the house. Oliver opened a door and ushered her into the solarium. Felicity immediately stopped in her tracks, breathless from the beautiful sight before her. The entire room was made out of glass, which gave them the perfect view of the starry night sky. Candles were scattered throughout the room, giving it a soft, warm glow. To the left was a small seating area of couches. To the right, in the furthest corner, an elegant table for two was set up along the wall of windows. A couple of longer, lit candlesticks and rose petals decorated the surface. There were also two covered plates and glasses of wine.

It was the center of the room, however, that held Felicity's attention. There was a makeshift bed on the floor with an ornate red and gold comforter and pillows. Oliver must've gotten the mattress from one of the rooms upstairs. How he'd managed to do that and lived to tell the tale, she'd never know. Soft music also played in the background. The amount of thought and detail he'd put into everything had her eyes tearing up.

"Oliver, this is so beautiful," she whispered.

"Well, it was around this time last year that our reunion took place in a shady, underground Russian casino surrounded by criminals. Now that we're together, I thought we deserved to ring in the new year with less danger and a lot more romance. Plus, there's supposed to be a meteor shower tonight," he explained. "We'll have the perfect view in here."

Felicity turned into him. "You are amazing," she murmured against his lips. "Truly."

Wrapping his arms around her waist, Oliver felt a rush of relief. He'd spent the entire week getting everything ready for tonight—with a little help from Dig when necessary. Oliver wanted to give Felicity something intimate and meaningful. So often they had to stay in her apartment or travel out of town to keep anyone from learning of their relationship. At least here, they could stay in Starling and be themselves without the worry and fear of being interrupted. It was also a nice way of reconnecting with their roots as a couple.

"Good call with the bed," she teased. "Because you are definitely getting lucky after this."

Chuckling, he replied, "Well, my initial thought was we could lay down and watch the meteor shower. I want you to be comfortable."

"Mm hm, sure…"

"Getting lucky was really just a bonus," he quipped, smirking. "Are you hungry?"
"I'm starving," Felicity replied. The heated look her in eyes told him it was for more than just food.

Oliver pecked her lips and then forced himself to pull away. If he kept kissing her, it wouldn't be long before he threw her down on the bed and had his way with her. It had been far too long since they'd seen each other, and his body couldn't help but react to the way Felicity's red dress hugged every single curve of her amazing figure. Before he could act on the impulse, Oliver led Felicity over to the table. He held out her chair for her and carefully pushed it back in once she was seated.

"So what are we having?" she inquired.

Lifting the lid off of the plate, Oliver revealed veal Parmesan and pasta smothered in cheese and homemade tomato sauce. He also uncovered a small basket of breadsticks. "I know how you love Italian."

"Oh wow, this looks delicious." Her stomach grumbled in anticipation. Felicity was grateful she'd chosen a red dress, because there was a good chance some of the sauce would end up on her by the end of the meal.

Oliver took his seat across from her and reached for his wine glass. Felicity did the same. "What should we toast to?"

"To us," Felicity declared. "To finding our way back to each other and sharing a year of more love and happiness than I thought would ever be possible."

Smiling, Oliver clinked their glasses. "And many more."

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July 7, 2007

Taking a deep breath, Oliver knocked on the door and waited for someone to answer. He really hoped that Detective Lance was working a late shift. Laurel's father detested him on a good day, and Oliver was sure that even cooperating in a hostage situation wasn't enough to change the older man's opinion of him. Thankfully, it was Sara who opened the door.

"Wow, I didn't expect you to be dropping by," Sara declared. She sounded casual but not completely without an undertone of sarcasm.

"I came to talk to Laurel. Is she home?"

"She is, but I'm not entirely sure she'll want to talk to you. She's been really upset since your fight."

"I know, which is why I came to check on her. Please, Sara," he pleaded.

With a relenting sigh, Sara stepped aside to let him in. "She's in her room. My mom's out and my dad's on duty. When you guys make up, try not to have sex anywhere I might sit."

Rolling his eyes, Oliver said, "It's not like that. You don't have to go."

"I have a date," Sara declared and gestured to her mini skirt and halter top. "Later, Ollie."

"Have fun. Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Oliver tried to joke.

Sara smirked. "That's not much."

Shaking his head, Oliver closed the door behind her and headed towards Laurel's room. He couldn't put his finger on it, but for some reason the house seemed different. It had been a while since Oliver
had visited. He could've sworn there had been more pictures around and noticed some bare spots. Maybe they were redecorating. Laurel's mom was always thinking up some new project to try. He heard the feint sound of music coming from down the hall. When he got closer, he recognized it as Adele's new album. That right there already told him she was in pretty rough shape. Oliver knocked on her door and waited.

"Come in," Laurel called.

Oliver opened the door to find the brunette sitting on her bed. She was flipping through a photo album. Upon closer inspection, Oliver noticed it contained family pictures of Laurel and Sara when they were little kids. With her preoccupied, Oliver used the moment to take her in. Laurel's eyes were red-rimmed with dark circles underneath. She looked a little thinner than usual. Her face was clean of makeup and her hair was up in a messy bun on top of her head.

"What is it Sara?" she asked without looking up.

Oliver cleared his throat before saying, "Hey."

Laurel's head whipped up. "Oliver?" she exclaimed, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"It's been a couple of days since our talk at the cabin. I wanted to check in on you."

She stared at him skeptically. "Did Tommy put you up to this?"

"No," he lied. "I was worried about you." The latter was true. "I tried texting you earlier, but you didn't respond."

"Well, seeing as though you broke up with me, I'm sure you can understand why." She slammed the photo album shut and stood with her arms crossed. "I'm giving you space. You know, like you wanted. How's Samantha?"

Obviously, she wasn't going to make this easy on him. Oliver shook his head. "I wouldn't know. I told you nothing was going on with her."

"Well, as you can see, I'm fine. So you can go now," she replied stiffly.

"Long before we dated, Laurel, we were friends," Oliver pointed out.

"What? So now you give a damn about me?"

Oliver silently cursed his best friend. He knew this would be a bad idea. "I've never stopped caring about you."

"Well, you've got a hell of a way of showing it," Laurel countered.

"I know you're upset."

"You don't know a damn thing," Laurel spit out. "If you did, you wouldn't be constantly pushing me away."

"Laurel, that's not—" He made a move toward her but stopped when she backed away.

"Save it, Oliver," Laurel interjected. "I got the message the other night. In fact, I get it every day. Run. Run away from Laurel. Run as fast as you can."

"Laurel, come on. That's not true," Oliver tried to reason with her.
"You are unbelievable," she suddenly burst out. "You come here trying to act like my knight in shining armor when mere days ago you made it very clear that you want nothing to do with me. God, you are so self-centered. You act as if you're the only one with problems. When are you going to grow up?"

"That's not fair," Oliver felt his patience starting to wane but kept it together. "I came here as a friend to talk to you, but that doesn't give you the right to take whatever is bothering you out on me."

Laurel scoffed. "And you haven't been doing the same to me? I realize I wasn't in a physical explosion like you, but that doesn't mean I don't know what it's like to have my life falling to pieces. Honestly, Oliver, do you think you are the only one going through a hard time? Poor little billionaire. It really is so hard having loving parents who want nothing but the best for you. God forbid you actually try to live up to someone's expectations. You can barely take care of yourself, so how could you possibly give a damn about what I've been dealing with lately?"

Oliver stared at Laurel, dumbfounded. He'd never seen her so angry or heard her spouting such vitriol. As badly as he wanted to snap back at her, his concern outweighed his pride. "Laurel, this isn't you. Seriously, what's wrong? Talk to me."

Laurel wiped at her eyes, which had started to tear up, and shook her head. "It doesn't matter. Even if I could tell you, I don't want to. You want to know why?" She didn't give him a chance to answer. "Because I don't trust you, Oliver."

"Laurel—"

"No, we're done, Ollie. I meant what I said the other night, and I know you did, too. There's no coming back from it. Not this time." She stomped toward the door and yanked it open. "I trust you can find your own way out. After all, turning your back on people is your specialty."

Her words were like a punch to Oliver's gut, but he didn't put up a fight. There was no point. The damage between them, apparently, had already been done. Silently, Oliver left and walked over to his car. A car that his parents had bought him last year when he'd totaled the one given to him on his birthday months before. Was Laurel right? Was he nothing more than a spoiled trust fund brat incapable of putting others ahead of himself when it really mattered?

Oliver got in the car and revved the engine. He started driving home to the loft but impulsively decided to take a different route. The entire time Laurel's harsh words gnawed at his insides. Before Oliver fully realized what he'd done, he was pulling onto the side road that ran along the back of the Merlyn manor. He punched in the security code to the hidden gate that he and Tommy always used to sneak in and out undetected. Once he was through, Oliver cut across the vast lawn until he got to the guest wing where Felicity's room was located. He glanced at the trellis, hoping that it had held up after all these years, and started to climb.

"So, are you ready for dessert?"

Felicity automatically clutched her stomach. She had eaten way more than she'd intended during dinner, and she blamed it on the fact that her boyfriend was too good of a cook. "Definitely not. I am almost disgustingly full." Although she couldn't help asking, "What have you got?"

"A Death By Chocolate cake…from O'Connor's," he added with a knowing smile.

Her eyes widened at that, and it wasn't just because it was her favorite dessert. "You went to O'Connor's?" she questioned, shocked.
"Actually, I had John pick it up for me." Oliver asked, curious, "Do you still go there?" If they ever could've gone on a normal date without his identity being an issue, that would've been the first place Oliver took her. It used to be their special place.

"It's been over a year, but it wasn't that often. After you were gone, I only really went if I was feeling nostalgic." Despite the sadness in her voice, she offered Oliver a genuine smile. "I have missed that cake, though."

Chuckling, Oliver agreed, "Me, too. And the Guinness pie."

"Next time you're back in Starling, I'll get us takeout," Felicity promised and squeezed his hand.

"I wish I could take you there." He played with her fingers. "In fact, I wish I could take you a lot of places."

"You took me here, and it's amazing."

"You know what I mean." Oliver grew quiet for a moment, lost in his own thoughts.

Felicity knew that look on Oliver's face. It was the dejected expression he got just before throwing himself a pity party. Not wanting the mood of their romantic evening to be ruined, Felicity stood up and tugged on his hand. A slow song she loved had come on and she asked, "Will you dance with me?"

That seemed to snap him out of his stupor. "Felicity, you know I don't dance."

"Please? I love this song, and I want you to dance with me. Plus, I need to move to work off some of this food," she joked. "Literally all you have to do is hold me while we sway."

Oliver sighed dramatically but grinned despite his protests. "Fine. Only because it's you asking."

Felicity clapped her hands in excitement and yanked him up to join her. They moved more toward the center of the room where there was more space. Felicity wound her arms around Oliver's neck as he placed his hands on her waist. Their foreheads touched as they gently moved side to side.

"See, this isn't so bad," she murmured while running her fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck. Their noses brushed, and Felicity let the music wash over her as she leaned into Oliver's strong embrace.

"You are so beautiful." Oliver couldn't take his eyes off of Felicity. The natural glow of her skin and sparkle in her stunning blue eyes in the candlelight took his breath away. He encircled his arms around her fully to bring her closer. "How did I get so lucky?"

"It helps that you're incredibly hot," she jokingly retorted. Halfway through dinner, Oliver had taken off his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves. The way his dress shirt tightened against his bulging muscles at times, combined with that charming smile, was making her more flushed than the wine. Oliver was so damn handsome that it was almost hard to look at him and believe he was really hers. Every once in a while, Felicity needed to silence the tiny voice of doubt in the back of her head reminding her that there was no way the nerdy introvert from Vegas could get the guy. The truth was she did, and he loved her just as much as she loved him. "But seriously, I'm the one who's lucky. You're always spoiling me."

"You deserve it," Oliver declared, his gaze piercing. "You deserve to be treated like a queen, Felicity."
His words sent a shiver up her spine and goose bumps on her skin. She tightened her hold on him. "Oliver…"

"Speaking of, I have your Hanukkah present." Unlike her birthday gift, he needed to give this one to her in person. Oliver reached into his pocket.

Felicity paused at the sight of the small, black velvet box. It couldn't be another pair of earrings, since he’d already gotten her that for her birthday. It definitely wasn't a necklace or a bracelet either, which left…she could barely think the word. Felicity's heart started pounding. Is this why he’d called her a queen? Was Oliver leading up to this?

"Open it," Oliver instructed

Steeling herself, Felicity took a calming breath through her nose. A slight tremor ran through her hands as she opened the delicate box. Relief and disappointment were instantaneous when she observed the small, gold, heart-shaped locket. It was delicate and elegant with tiny diamonds outlining the edges and a rose imprinted in the center.

"Wow," she commented as her logical mind attempted to catch up with her wild imagination.

"Look on the back."

She flipped the heart over and read the inscription engraved on the back. "Forever and Always."

"Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful. Thank you," she said absently.

Oliver scrutinized her for a couple of seconds. "Are you sure?" Felicity seemed a little distracted as she gawked at her gift. Oliver couldn't tell if it was good because she loved it and was surprised or bad because she hated it and didn't know how to tell him.

Felicity gave herself a mental shake. She needed to get a grip before Oliver realized the source of her confusion. With a beaming smile, she replied, "Yes, I love it. It's perfect." Leaning up on her tiptoes, she kissed him lovingly. "Will you put it on me?"

"Of course." Oliver took the locket out of the box and went to fasten it around her neck. He then turned her to face him once more. "Gorgeous."

Felicity, blushing, let him envelop her in his arms again. "All that's left is a bracelet and a ring, and I'll be totally blinged out." She kidded, "People are going to start thinking I'm dating a sugar daddy if you keep this up."

Oliver clutched her left hand that he was holding. Felicity had no idea how close to the truth she actually was. The ring he'd bought one night on an impulse was still sitting in his overnight bag. As badly as he wanted to give it to her, it wasn't the right time. It was nowhere near the right time with all of the danger still threatening them. It was for someday. A day that gave him a hope he thought he'd lost long ago. A day Oliver was doing everything in his power to make sure they had. It was why he'd been working so hard lately with Dig and Helena to track down their own leads and complete the mission. Their freedom was impossible and worth nothing without a bargaining chip.

Felicity let out a little gasp of surprise as Oliver suddenly swooped down and claimed her lips in a searing kiss. She responded immediately and clung to him tightly, needing to erase the sense of longing she felt taking root in her heart. Oliver was amazing, and they were lucky to get even these stolen moments together. Anything more simply wasn't feasible right now. And yet, her mind
continued to dream.

For a few seconds, Felicity let herself imagine that this was their house. That Oliver had actually made good on his promise of putting a ring on her finger. That they both had normal jobs that allowed them to come home every night to each other and talk about their days. She imagined that these last few weeks were spent celebrating the holidays openly with their family and friends and that tonight was finally their chance to be alone and away from all the craziness. They were just a normal couple with all of the time in the world.

"I love you so much, you know that?" Felicity muttered against his lips. "I'm crazy about you." She felt his passionate kisses all the way down to her toes.

"I'm crazy about you, too." Oliver buried his hand in her hair while the other supported her weight as she leaned into him. "The way you make me feel…it's the best part of my life."

Felicity was two seconds away from dragging him over to the bed when his watch beeped. Begrudgingly tearing her lips away, she breathlessly questioned, "What's that?"

"I set a timer for when the meteor shower was supposed to begin."

"What time is it?" she asked curiously. Normally, she'd be at some party with either Tommy or Sara watching the countdown and the ball drop in Time Square—which always felt odd considering they were three hours behind the east coast.

"We have another hour until midnight. Hold on a sec." He went to dim the overhead lights further, so nothing but the soft glow of the candles filled the room. It gave them a better view of the night sky. Oliver then took Felicity's hand and brought her over to the wall of windows.

Leaning her back against his chest, they quietly watched. "Oh, I see it," she exclaimed. She pointed at the faint streaks across the sky.

Oliver murmured against her ear, "Make a wish."

Closing her eyes, Felicity clutched his hand and did just that. She wasn't always sure she believed in fate, but there was no other explanation for how she and Oliver had managed to find their way back to each other. With that in mind, she made her wish with the hope that it might actually come true.

Oliver kissed Felicity's temple and breathed in her sweet, floral scent. Although it was a peaceful moment, the silence between them was charged. Oliver was highly aware of every single curve of Felicity's body brushing up against his. His fingers started lightly caressing her abdomen as he placed soft kisses against her neck.

"It was a good idea coming here," she quietly commented, moving her head to the side to give him more access. "Best surprise ever."

Oliver sucked on the sensitive patch of skin behind her ear, making her moan. "I'm glad you think so." He gently bit on her lobe when she fingers slid through his hair to hold him to her.

"I have a surprise for you, too. Remember when you stubbornly made me promise not to get you a Christmas gift."

Her flustered undertone made him smirk. "Yes."

"Well, I did it anyway," she triumphantly declared before turning in his arms to face him.
"Of course you did," Oliver huffed in amusement and shook his head at her. "I told you, sweetheart, all I want is you."

"First of all, I think you've been listening to a little bit too much Mariah Carey," Felicity teased and affectionately pecked his lips. "Second, there's no need to get all grrr Oliver on me."

"Grrr?" Oliver questioned, grinning in amusement.

"Yes, grrr," the blonde confirmed. "You know, that little growl you get when you're being all serious and stubborn. It's as frustrating as it is sexy, honey."

"I do not growl," he replied in his low, raspy voice.

"Uh, you just did," Felicity pointed out, giggling. "Lucky for you, it's sexy right now." She lifted her hand to caress his cheek. "Anyway, my point is that you said you wanted me for Christmas and that's exactly what you're going to get."

He frowned, not understanding. "What?"

Felicity lowered her other hand and enticingly rubbed his chest. "Your present is underneath my dress." She added in a sultry whisper, her mouth gliding over his without fully touching, "If you want to unwrap it now."

Oliver's eyes widened as his eyebrow quirked up. The only semi-coherent response he could come up with was "oh."

"Or we can wait until after dessert," she said more casually and nipped at his bottom lip for good measure. "It's up to you."

Stroking her shoulders, Oliver huskily replied, "Oh, something is definitely up." His hands slid to her back, massaging the delicate curve of her muscles and enjoying the way she trembled under this touch.

"So dessert then?" she kidded back, laughing softly at the exasperatingly sexy pout he was giving her.

"The only way I'm having dessert right now is if I'm eating it off of you." His hands lowered down to cup her round, ample ass. He brought her tighter against him, letting her feel his growing hardness. She gasped against his mouth. "But that might get a little too messy. I'd rather unwrap my gift..." He brought his thumb up to trace the outline of her red lips. He didn't know what kind of lipstick she used to get it to stay on. All he did know was that he wanted it smeared all over the both of them at some point tonight. Slowly he circled her lips, causing her eyes to shut at the sensation. "Play with it for a while."

Oliver's impassioned promise along with his thick, raspy voice set Felicity's body ablaze. Her lips were swollen and tingling from his touch. Naturally, her mouth parted and she moaned when his thumb slipped inside. She licked the tip of his finger and made him groan in return.

Slowly, Felicity opened her heavy-lidded eyes. They locked with Oliver's. They were wide, intense blue oceans, hinting at a storm that would surely consume her. Felicity, having been without him for so long, wanted nothing more now than to lose herself in Oliver. Seconds later, Felicity raised her arms over head in a silent invitation.

Oliver drew back enough to look at her and let his hands glide down Felicity's body. He caressed her round, pert breasts and flat stomach before taking hold of the hem. Oliver admired the smoothness of
her thighs as he slid it back up. His body thumped at the sight of the skin-tight, red lace negligee she had on underneath. The mesh over her stomach and breasts was more transparent, leaving very little to the imagination.

“What do you think?” Felicity murmured, fidgeting ever so slightly under his roaming gaze. Excitement and nervousness battled within her. It wasn’t that she was insecure about her body—she had good and bad days like any other woman—but this was the first time she’d actually bought slinky lingerie with the intention of arousing her boyfriend. Although Oliver always made Felicity feel confident and beautiful when they were together, the bombshell act wasn’t something she usually played up. She was an awkward, babbling nerd at her core and most days she was okay with that. Now, however, it was making her a tad bit unsure of herself, which was so not the plan.

Oliver hungrily took her in, feeling his erection harden to the point of being painful. His mind was a haze of lust and desire, and he unconsciously licked his lips in anticipation of tasting her. It wasn’t until Felicity shifted again in his arms and bit her lip that he picked up on her unease. Leaning down, Oliver pressed a tender kiss to her forehead. “I think you’re the sexiest”—he kissed her eyelids—“most beautiful”—then down to her nose—“woman I have ever seen.” He finished at her lips, kissing her deeply.

Blushing, Felicity smiled and whispered, “That’s a really good answer.”

“Because it’s the truth.” He ran his fingers through her golden, silky strands while placing soft kisses against her neck. The heat and passion still burned within Oliver, but he forced himself to slow down. To take his time with her. Their moments together were precious, and he wanted Felicity to feel loved and cherished more than anything else. There was plenty of time to ravage her later.

Felicity leaned back against the window, her eyes closed, as Oliver kissed his way down her body. She hissed in pleasure, feeling a jolt to her core, when he sucked her nipple into his mouth and bit it through the thin fabric. Oliver worked his way down until he was on his knees in front of her. Her hands tangled in his hair as he nipped at her lower abdomen, getting dangerously close to the apex of her thighs. For a second she thought he might bury his head between them, but he unexpectedly urged her to turn around.

The cool glass felt good against her burning skin, but she found no purchase. Her fingers curled into themselves and dug into the palm of her hand as Oliver sucked on the back of her thighs. Felicity’s legs buckled when she felt his tongue in the crook of her knee, and almost immediately his hands came up to firmly grip her hips in support. Seconds later, a combination of a moan and a laugh tore from her throat when she felt his teeth sink into her backside.

“Hey,” she half-heartedly protested. “That’s sensitive.”

Chuckling, Oliver did it again to the other side for good measure. She squirmed despite his strong grip. “It’s not my fault you’re so irresistible.” He kissed the spot he’d bit to soothe it before continuing on up her back.

When he was finally level behind her, Felicity reached back in relief to hold him. She needed something to anchor her. Another series of moans tore from her lips as he sucked on her pulse point and expertly kneaded her breasts. The ache between her thighs intensified, spiking when he felt his teeth sink into her backside. Unable to stand it anymore, Felicity quickly turned around to face him and yanked at his tie. She threw it to the side and started on the buttons of his shirt. He swallowed her whimper when his bare chest finally touched hers.

Meanwhile, Oliver reached for his belt buckle. He discarded his pants and boxers in record time before sliding his hands under her negligee once more. He brushed her thong aside and ran his
fingers against Felicity's slick folds. She was already so wet and ready for him. When her thighs automatically clamped on his hand, he gripped her strongly and lifted her into his arms, forcing her to open up for him. He pressed her harder against the glass, spreading her legs with his hips, and slipped his fingers inside.

Felicity, clutching Oliver's shoulders, moved against his hand. He wasn't even really inside her yet, and she was already a writhing mess. She bit his bottom lip, hard, and reached between them. Felicity gripped him at his base, causing Oliver's hips to instinctively jerk forward. Her strokes were torturously slow, purposefully building him up without offering any real satisfaction.

"Felicity," Oliver growled into her mouth, both a protest and a plea. His body was going haywire, on edge and ready to snap if he didn't get more. He needed to feel all of her. By the way Felicity was desperately clenching his fingers, he knew she wasn't satisfied either. He removed his fingers, making her whimper. The loss didn't last long. Without a second thought, Oliver ripped the tiny scrap of cloth away, pushed her hand aside, and thrust deeply inside her.

Nearly whacking her head on the glass, Felicity threw her head back and called out his name. Her hands clawed at Oliver's back as he proceeded to pump into her. The delicious pressure of being sandwiched between the glass and his strong, muscular frame had her seeing stars. Unfortunately, with every powerful thrust, the hard surface became more uncomfortable than arousing. She was going to have bruises if they kept up this pace. She mentioned her discomfort to Oliver. At first, Felicity thought he was so caught up in his lustful haze that he hadn't heard. But then his hold on her tightened and he was moving them away from the window and towards the bed.

Felicity expected him to lay her down and was surprised when he turned and lowered them down backwards. His strength at being able to support her weight in one swift motion never ceased to amaze her. Oliver didn't fall onto the bed completely and instead stayed upright, holding her close. Felicity sunk down into his lap, straddling him, and attempted to resume their rhythm. One of Oliver's hands cupped the back of her neck, under her hair, while the other landed on her backside to help guide their movements.

When she drew back enough to look at him, she noticed that her lipstick had smeared all over his lips, marking him. She smiled and stroked his jaw. His eyes opened seconds later, and he stared back at her curiously.

"What?" he panted.

"Nothing," she replied. "I just love you." Her words broke off in a gasp when he lifted his hips on her downward thrust, allowing him to pierce her at the hilt. Her hands slid against his slick skin. God, it turned her on so much when he was all hot and sweaty—especially because of her. She was vaguely aware of the radio in the background. The music was replaced with someone speaking, and Felicity thought she heard numbers being counted down.

Oliver grinned against her lips. "I love you, too." He kissed the base of her throat down to the locket he gave her. "Forever and always." Needing to feel more of her naked skin against him, Oliver slid the straps of the negligee aside and pulled it down enough to lavish the tops of her breasts. Felicity arched against him, her fingers tugging at his hair, and urged him on. Her thighs were starting to burn from both the pleasure and exertion of riding him, but she pushed forward chasing her release. Sensing it, Oliver quickened his movements and rocked his hips up powerfully into her. Soon he was the main force driving them, and they reached their climax together.

They continued to move in the aftershocks before finally falling back on the mattress, spent. Felicity landed on top of him, their frenzied pants mingling as they reveled in their high. When Felicity felt some semblance of control return, she said, "Talk about starting off the new year with a bang."
"Huh?" Oliver frowned before chuckling in understanding. He could hear the cheers over the radio. It was already past midnight.

Felicity was practically glowing as she gazed down at him. "Happy New Year, Oliver."

Oliver lifted his head and brushed her lips in a soft caress. "Happy New Year, Felicity."
Happy Tuesday, everyone! I'm thrilled you guys loved the Olicity moments last chapter! Thank you for your comments and kudos. Basically, it was the calm before the storm. For those of you craving more answers and action, these next few chapters are what everything up until now has been building towards. I'm so excited to get to this part of the story in both the past and present timelines. This chapter starts the domino effect, and I'm curious to hear your thoughts. Please read and let me know what you think!

January 30, 2013

Checking her watch, Felicity cursed under her breath and rushed toward the restaurant. She was supposed to meet her mother for lunch twenty minutes ago but had gotten held up at work. She had a new project and when she got into her zone like that, it was so easy to lose track of time. Luckily, the Mexican restaurant wasn't that far from her office.

Felicity greeted the hostess and followed the woman to a table towards the back of the restaurant. The smell of chips and fresh guacamole were making her stomach rumble. She'd been starving all morning. It was a welcomed relief considering yesterday she hadn't felt hungry at all. The extra hours she'd been pulling at the office lately were starting to catch up with her. Felicity's eyes had been drooping at her desk last night, and she'd gone home with a headache. Only two more days until the weekend, and then she could rest. Until then, Felicity hoped she didn't get a relapse of the flu. There was already a new bug floating around the office.

"Here you are, miss," the hostess declared and gestured to the table.

Expecting to see her mother, Felicity stopped short, dumbfounded, at the sight of Malcolm instead. He'd been checking his phone before looking up and smiling at her. "Hello, Felicity."

"Oh. Uh, hi, Malcolm," she greeted and glanced around. "Did you come here with my mom?"

"Actually, your mom couldn't make it. Her spa session ran longer than expected, and so I offered to join you. I hope that's all right."

Felicity smiled politely and took the seat across from him. "Sure." The hostess handed her the menu and left them alone. The blonde wasn't quite sure what to say. She couldn't remember the last time, if ever, she'd spent time alone with Malcolm. They'd never been close.

"Have you eaten here before?" Felicity shook her head. "Well, you're in for a treat. They make the best guacamole in Starling. I took the liberty of ordering some for us already." He gestured to the bowl before taking a chip for himself.

Felicity followed suit and chewed contemplatively, trying to process this new development. What the heck could she possibly talk about with Malcolm for the next hour? She was relieved when the waiter showed up to get their drink order.
"They have great margaritas," Malcolm informed her.

"Oh, that's okay. I probably shouldn't since I have to go back to work," she replied. "I'll just have a diet Coke, thanks."

The waiter inquired, "Do you know what you'd like to order? An appetizer perhaps?"

Felicity said she needed a few more minutes to decide. When the waiter left, she focused on her menu. Many of the options seemed delicious. They should be for such high prices. There was a small authentic Mexican restaurant that she and Sara used to frequent not far from Felicity's apartment. The food was amazing, and the best part was it didn't break their bank accounts. Unfortunately, they hadn't been there in a while. Not only was Felicity working a lot, but Sara still wasn't talking to her. Felicity hated this rift between them and was contemplating taking Oliver's advice to reach out again.

"So how's work? Busy day?" Malcolm inquired.

"Yes. Sorry I was late. I got caught up in a project."

"Anything interesting?"

"Not really. Just boring technical stuff," she answered, evading the question. "How are things at Merlyn Global?"

"Hectic," Malcolm stated while grabbing his napkin and placing it across his lap. "It's always like that after the holidays. Everyone trying to get back into the swing of things. I'm sure you're experiencing the same thing at Brighton."

"Yup. Happens every year." Felicity wasn't sure what it was about the holidays, but there was always a spike in illegal activity right after. Was the holiday break the same for criminals? Did they come back afterward feeling all refreshed and ready to cause more mayhem in the world? "How was your New Year's? Your mom said you spent it with Aaron. I trust you two had a good time."

Felicity shifted ever so slightly in her seat. Malcolm's question was innocent enough and yet she got the strange feeling that there was more to it. "Yes, it was great." She tried very hard not to think about what an amazing time they had.

They'd stayed in the makeshift bed all night, even while eating the chocolate cake Oliver had gotten. Things got very heated and messy after that. Felicity refused to let herself remember the way Oliver had licked off the chocolate frosting that had eventually ended up on various parts of her body. There was no need to start blushing like a teenager in front of her stepfather. That would be way too awkward.

"That's a beautiful locket. Did he give you that?"

Her hand automatically went to her chest to clutch the piece of jewelry. "Oh, yes. It was my Hanukkah present."

"It's lovely. He's got good taste." Malcolm's smile was casual, but his eyes looked calculating. Felicity got that uneasy feeling again. "Have you put any pictures inside yet?"

"Not yet. I'm still deciding." She really wanted to put a picture of her and Oliver inside, but that wouldn't be a good idea. Someone would surely want to see, and then their secret would be out. Even if she put an old photo of them inside, it would create another set of questions she couldn't
The waiter returned to take their order. Afterward, Felicity listened to Malcolm talk about a new acquisition that Merlyn Global was planning to make. Felicity was relieved by the change of subject and listened intently. The small tech company Malcolm was circling had made a lot of progress in applied sciences. Some of the inventions they were working on had not been attempted anywhere else.

"Sounds like a great find," Felicity commented as their waiter put their food in front of them. "Thank you." The burrito she'd ordered was much bigger than she'd expected. She'd probably be taking leftovers back to the office. Nevertheless, she was starving and dug in.

"It really is. These types of inventions would really benefit certain industries. The military, for instance, would probably be very interested in what they had to offer," Malcolm explained. "I was thinking, since your company has government contracts, maybe you might have some suggestions. Or a few contacts perhaps."

Felicity almost choked on her food. "What?"

"I'd like to know if there's interest before I snatch it up."

"Oh, I don't know how helpful I'd be. I work on some projects, but I'm not the one communicating with the decision-makers," Felicity deflected. "Besides, I thought you were well-connected. You're friends with a few senators, right?"

"Yes, but they're not always reliable. Everything comes with a price." Malcolm rubbed his fingers together suggestively. "They're getting their pockets filled from everyone. Even had a couple come to me for help when they got in too deep with some shady characters."

Felicity frowned in confusion. "Why would they come to you?"

"I've always been, shall I say, resourceful. My nickname in business school was The Magician," he chuckled at the memory. "Whatever the problem was, I could always make it disappear."

"You don't mean…" Felicity cleared her throat and continued, "You haven't done anything illegal, right?"

"No, of course not. There are many loopholes in the system. I simply uncover the ones that will benefit me and my company the most. Everyone does it, Felicity," Malcolm casually explained. Felicity wasn't entirely convinced. "And does my mom know about this hidden talent of yours?" If there was one thing her mother couldn't stand, it was dishonesty. She'd gotten enough of that from Felicity's father over the years.

"I love your mother. She's an amazing woman, but we both know business isn't her strong suit. Everything I do is to ensure she's taken care of. That you're all taken care of." He added resolutely, "You're my family, and I always protect my family."

"Why are you telling me this?" Felicity asked bluntly. Malcolm wanted something else. She could sense it.

"We've never spent much time together, Felicity. I realize that, and I'm sorry. But it has recently come to my attention that Brighton Tech plays a bigger role in our national security than it lets on."

There was a sharp, knowing look in his eyes. "I was making some inquiries about leads with a close friend of mine, and he mentioned that he'd attended a dinner last year with Ray Palmer. Much to my
surprise, he mentioned your name as well." When she opened her mouth to speak, he was swift to add, "Don't worry. No intimate details of the dinner were discussed. He was more or less pointing me in the appropriate direction." He picked up his drink and swirled the liquid around in his glass. "I have to say everything about you makes so much more sense. The constant business trips. The dodged questions about your job. Why we've never met Aaron."

Felicity's stomach was in knots. She couldn't believe that someone had outed her and to her stepfather no less. She had to nip this in the bud. Throw him off the trail. "Malcolm, look, it's not—"

"You don't have to worry, Felicity. I'm not going to ask you for any specifics, and I have no intention of telling anyone else—including your mother. It'll be our little secret," Malcolm reassured her. "I was simply hoping you could let me know if any opportunities arise that may be advantageous. As I said, I want to know that I'm making a solid investment with this acquisition. That's all."

"You're probably overestimating my influence," she told him.

"I doubt it. I hear Ray Palmer speaks very highly of you."

"Still, I can't make any promises," she warned and leveled him with a stern look of her own. Malcolm was clearly used to getting what he wanted, but she wasn't one of his little pawns. Felicity would make him think that she would try, but it was really just a way to buy herself time to wriggle out of this unexpected mess she found herself in. As if she didn't have enough to worry about.

"Whatever you can do, I'd appreciate it. And the same goes for me. If you ever need anything, don't hesitate to ask. Like I said, I always take care of family."

Malcolm's words were no doubt meant to be comforting, but all they did was fill her with an intense sense of unease. Felicity looked down at her plate of food and felt her stomach lurch. She wasn't hungry anymore.

"Felicity, you all right?"

The blonde was jolted out of her troubled thoughts and almost knocked over the can of ginger ale on her desk. She looked up to find Barry and Mei watching her in concern. "What?"

"You all right?" Barry repeated. "You look like you might hurl."

Felicity shook her head and sighed. She felt like she might hurl. Ever since her talk with Malcolm at the restaurant, Felicity had been in a tizzy. A part of her wanted to call Ray and tell him that one of his "good friends" in the government had blabbed to Malcolm. But then Ray would be pissed, and it'd create a big mess that would probably get back to Waller and Malcolm. The last thing Felicity needed was to alert Waller to Malcolm's poking around, thereby giving the woman another reason to hate her. "I'm sure it's nothing."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you really don't look so good. You seem a little pale," Mei pointed out. "Did you see Curtis today?"

"No. Why?" Felicity replied, frowning.

"Stay away from his lab unless absolutely necessary. He caught that virus that's going around. Poor guy's sick as a dog and coughing everywhere," Barry informed her. "I think he even has a fever."
Mei added, "His lab is practically a petri dish of germs."

"Then he should go home."

"Try telling him that when he's got deadlines," Barry stated. "I think Caitlin's force feeding him cold medicine as we speak."

"Thanks for the heads up, but I'm pretty sure all I'm suffering from right now is a little indigestion. Had a bad burrito at lunch," Felicity said. "So what's up?"

"Since The Hood trail went cold again, Lyla gave us another temporary assignment."

"It's more like a side project," Mei interjected.

"What is it?"

Barry handed her a folder. "Curtis, Mei, and I are heading to Central City for a couple of weeks to sort through one of the warehouses. We need to check on the inventory there and make sure the facility is secure."

"O-kay," Felicity mumbled as she looked over the papers in the folder. It was one long list of serialized items. "What do you need from me?"

"Not everything was catalogued properly, and some of the newer additions may be missing."

"That's on top of the archaic system they've got," Mei stated. "It loads slower than molasses."

"The system needs to be up to date, and these items need to be digitized. As you can see, there's no descriptions for them so we'll have to verify them once we're there. It'll make it much easier for Curtis and I to take inventory and crosscheck."

"How did they let it get this bad?"

Mei shrugged. "The agents there don't have to answer to anyone that often. They probably got a little too comfortable and lazy."

"I can work something up. But why is Lyla sending you guys?" Felicity questioned. "No offense, but this seems like grunt work that the newer recruits could handle."

"Some of the items stored there are sensitive," Barry explained.

"Sensitive?"

"More like dangerous," Mei spoke up. "With A.R.G.U.S. still on high alert from the attacks, Lyla thought it best to send in people she can trust."

"Are they worried there's a leak from the inside?"

"I don't know, but the attacks have been highly strategic. I don't think Waller is ruling anything out."

"Okay. I'll get started on this first thing tomorrow. I have something else I have to finish up today."

"Thanks, Felicity. You'll be saving Curtis and I a big headache."

"And Mei."
"Oh, I'm not searching through crates. I'm evaluating the security measures—thank God," Mei muttered.

"Lucky," Barry grumbled and checked his watch. "Crap, I'm late for a meeting. I'll see you guys later."

Felicity turned back to her computer. A wave of vertigo hit her when she looked at the screen. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, feeling like she was on the verge of a migraine.

Mei reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Seriously, Felicity, are you okay? Maybe you should ask Lyla if you can work from home the rest of the day if you're not well."

"Probably just a mild case of food poisoning," she tried to joke.

"I can call Tommy to come pick you up."

Felicity turned and narrowed her eyes. "Just because you and Tommy are an item now does not mean you get to pull the big brother card on me," she warned.

Mei held her hands up in surrender. "Hey, down girl. I was just trying to be helpful."

"Ugh, I know. Sorry," Felicity huffed apologetically. "I'm just having an off day."

"Go see Caitlin if it gets bad. I'm sure she could give you something so you can hang in there."

"Maybe I will," Felicity replied—although she highly doubted there was anything Caitlin could prescribe to get rid of her unease about Malcolm. Felicity placed her hands over her face and took a minute to collect herself. Why was nothing in life ever easy?

July 7, 2007

Felicity stared at the evaluation in her hand and felt a fresh wave of tears sting her eyes. After all of her hard work, she couldn't believe that this was happening. She grabbed a tissue from her nightstand, lifted her glasses, and blotted at her eyes. So much for waterproof mascara. She blew her nose and then reached for another tissue.

Her phone pinged. It was probably another text from Tommy asking if she wanted to hang out. His date tonight had canceled, and he wanted to know if Felicity felt like going out on the town instead. She had yet to answer him. All Felicity wanted was to be left alone.

Felicity's head was swollen and pounding from all of her crying. She was so preoccupied that she almost didn't hear the rustling sound coming from her balcony. Pausing, she quieted and strained to hear. The sound came again.

"What the heck?" she whispered to herself. There was a nice cool breeze tonight, so she'd left the doors open. The sun was almost completely faded from the sky, and she could see a few stars beginning to appear.

Tentatively, Felicity got up off of her bed and walked toward the balcony. There was more rustling. It was most likely a bird, but she felt the need to check regardless. With her luck, it'd be some dangerous cat burglar. Then again, wasn't the whole point of being a cat burglar that the thief was really quiet?
Felicity shook her head to clear it. Her mind was a tangled mess tonight. Once outside, she leaned over the balcony to take a peek. Felicity let out a loud yelp when she saw a large figure clinging to her trellis. "Holy frack! Hey, stop where you are! We've got security. They've got guns. If you come any closer, you're toast, buddy," she warned.

"Felicity," came a grunt.

She squinted and leaned further over the side to get a better look. "Oliver? What the heck are you doing?"

"Trying not to die. It's been a while since I've done this." He was almost to the top.

"Oh my God," Felicity muttered and reached out to help him over the railing. "Are you crazy?"

There wasn't much she could do to support his weight and she huffed, "Gosh, you're heavy. Is this really all muscle?"

"Certainly seems like it," he declared and batted away any stray leaves that clung to his clothes.

"You know you could've just called me and came through the front door, right?"

"I didn't want anyone to know I was here," he finally looked up at her, and his brow instantly furrowed. "Are you okay? Have you been crying?"

"No," she replied a little too quickly and defensively. "My contacts were bothering me."

Oliver scrutinized her more closely. He didn't look at all convinced by her explanation. She must look like a wreck. Felicity attempted to turn away from him, but Oliver reached out for her.

"Hey, Felicity." He gripped her arm and gently pulled her back. "Fe-li-ci-ty," Oliver stressed. "What is going on with you?" She opened her mouth to deny it, but he beat her to the punch. "Don't say nothing. The truth please."

"I just got some bad news. That's all."

"What kind of bad news? Is it about your family?"

The brunette bit her lip and shook her head. A few tears spilled over, and she sighed in frustration. She hated crying in front of people, and she especially didn't want Oliver to see her like this. Felicity went back into her room to grab another tissue and then plopped onto the couch in the small seating area across from the fireplace. When she’d first moved into this room, Felicity had thought it was much too extravagant. Since then it had grown on her. She liked the extra space and privacy she got in the guest wing.

"Remember that prospectus I had to turn in to qualify for that IT competition." He took a seat beside her and urged her to continue. "Well, one of the professors—the most important one really—basically tore my idea apart and is considering nominating someone else to take my place."

"Who?"

"Some other guy," Felicity said with a flick of her hand. "Myron Forest. He's actually Cooper's roommate. Always acts like a big shot around campus."

"Why would he choose that guy over you?"

"It could be that he's a sexist asshole playing favorites—Myron's his 'protégé.' Or it's that Myron's
"That's bullshit."

"Tell me about it."

"So he's not even going to give you the opportunity to try? You said there were other professors. What do they think? Does he overrule them?"

"No. They've actually approved me to move forward with my entry."

Oliver's brow furrowed. "Maybe I'm not understanding this correctly, but what's the problem? The jerk was obviously overruled, and you got the go-ahead. You should be celebrating."

"It's not that simple, Oliver," Felicity lamented. "Professor Rathmus is a big deal. Not having his support looks bad."

"So screw him," Oliver declared and rested a comforting hand on her shoulder. "You're brilliant, Felicity. If you know you can do this project and make it work, do it. Prove that bastard wrong. He's just one person." With his other hand, Oliver reached up to wipe away the moisture from her cheeks.

"You're right," she mumbled. "I know you're right."

"So what's really bothering you?" he knowingly questioned.

She stared back at him in awe. It gave her goose bumps the way Oliver could read her so easily now. Felicity wondered when exactly their connection had shifted and deepened. It was definitely before their trip to Ivy Town, but it had also strengthened since then.

Felicity looked away, unable to meet his stare as she replied, "What that professor said... it just reminds me that I've never been good enough. When I read his words, I hear my father's voice in my head. It makes no sense, though, because my father never said anything of the sort before he left." She snorted. "God, you must be so sick of hearing about my daddy issues. I'm sorry."

"Hey," Oliver interjected. He reached for her chin and forced her to look at him. "Don't you ever apologize for what you're feeling. Okay? We all have issues to deal with, Felicity. You shouldn't keep it bottled up. Trust me," he muttered. "I'm the poster child for acting out. All everyone sees when they look at me is a selfish, spoiled trust fund brat."

"That's not true."

"Yes, it is." He hesitated before admitting, "At least that's what Laurel thinks."

Felicity tried not to tense up too much at the mention of Laurel. It was still a sensitive subject even though she and Oliver had agreed to explore what was going on between them. There was a lot of history there, and Laurel was always a shadow in the background. "When did she say that?"

"Tonight. I wasn't planning on seeing her, but Tommy mentioned that she wasn't doing so well. We'd been friends before we dated so I figured why not go and check on her," he explained. He let out a heavy sigh and rubbed his hands over his face. "Big mistake. We got into an even worse fight than before. I doubt we can even try to be friends. We're done."

Felicity wasn't sure what to say. Would it be weird to say she was sorry? That would imply that it was her fault. Felicity didn't think it was all because of her, since Oliver and Laurel seemed to have
problems long before her. Then again, her connection with Oliver probably didn't help. Was it selfish that she felt relieved?

"I don't know what to say," Felicity admitted after a silent moment.

"You don't have to say anything. Laurel said plenty tonight," he griped.

"Do you...do you want to talk about it?" she questioned hesitantly, awkwardly.

"I thought I did. It's why I came to you but now not so much."

Felicity scooted closer to him on the couch and rested her chin on his shoulder. Oliver didn't have to say anything else. She'd already gotten the gist of what Laurel must've said to him. It was also bothering Oliver more than he was letting on, if his clenched jaw and twitching fingers were any indication.

This time, Felicity reached up to turn his head towards her. She kept her hand on his jaw, loving the way Oliver's five o'clock shadow made her fingers tingle. "Any man who would risk his life to save me and a room full of people from a psycho with a bomb is far from spoiled or selfish. You had every reason and every right to run, but you didn't. That makes you a hero in my book, Oliver."

"You saved my life, too. You were right there by my side when things got tough. If I'd gone back empty-handed, I would've died along with everyone else. You helped me get that chip. You were brilliant and brave, and you should remember that the next time your idiot professor doubts you."

Oliver tenderly cupped her cheek and leaned in to gently graze his lips against hers. "How can you not know how amazing you are, Felicity?"

Closing the gap, Felicity pressed her lips to his. Oliver responded immediately and wrapped his arm around Felicity's waist to bring her closer. She opened her mouth for him and moaned when his tongue delved inside. His kisses were always like a drug, but this was different. Instead of that empty craving for more, there was a part of her, deep down inside, that felt like she was being pieced back together. Like the closer she got to Oliver, the more she felt herself becoming whole. Felicity had never felt anything like it before. The emotions swirling inside of her were strong, undeniable, and just so right.

Her lips chased his when he broke away. The separation didn't last long. Oliver took the opportunity to carefully remove her glasses and set them aside. It was probably a good idea considering things were getting pretty heated between them. He took possession of her lips again and kissed her more thoroughly now that her glasses were out of the way. Their gasps mingled together as they desperately tried to bring each other closer. It still wasn't close enough.

In one swift motion, Felicity got up on her knees on the couch. She swung her leg over him and settled into his lap. Oliver groaned against her neck, his hands making fists in her shirt when their lower bodies aligned. Felicity threw her head back when Oliver sucked on a particularly sensitive patch of skin. It pushed her body further into his, and she felt the outline of his hardening erection through his jeans. It rubbed against Felicity's center, which was covered by a thin pair of shorts.

Felicity reached between them for the hem of Oliver's shirt. He helped her lift it over his head. She left open-mouth kisses along his broad shoulders while her hands stroked the hard muscles of his torso. Oliver similarly caressed her curves. His hand slipped under her t-shirt but didn't venture much further up. Felicity could tell that Oliver was holding back. While it gave her butterflies to think that former playboy Oliver Queen was treating her with such reverence, it also frustrated Felicity to be handled with kid gloves. She wanted so much more with him.
Oliver groaned in protest when Felicity nibbled his bottom lip and then pulled away. He tried to follow her, but she pushed him back into the couch. His eyes snapped open to look at her, a mixture of desire and confusion. Breathing heavily, Felicity met Oliver's heated gaze for a moment. Her entire body was thrumming with tension and excitement. All for him. Felicity made her choice in that moment. Without a second thought, she lifted her own shirt over her head before crashing her lips back to his.

February 6, 2013

Felicity searched through the pile of files on her desk. She hadn't looked at herself in the mirror since this morning, but she didn't doubt that strands of hair were probably sticking out of her ponytail. Combined with the dark circles under her eyes from the lack of sleep she'd been getting, she probably looked like a tired ball of stress.

"I just had it. Sorry," Felicity said to Evelyn. The short brunette was a new recruit to the Cyber Intelligence division that Felicity had taken under her wing.

"That's okay, Miss Smoak. I can wait."

"I told you to call me Felicity."

"Right. Sorry, Miss Smoak. I mean Felicity," she quickly stammered. Evelyn was so new she still had a wide-eyed innocence quality about her. It was refreshing compared to the stern, stressed looks that other employees wore—which was exactly how she most likely looked today. Then again, there was always a crisis somewhere.

"Ah, here it is!" Felicity exclaimed and handed it to her. "You did a really good job on this, by the way."

"Really?" she replied, eyes brightening. "Thank you, Felicity."

"Since half of our team is away in Central City this week, I've got another project I could use some help with. Are you free tomorrow morning to go over it?"

"Sure. I'm free as a bird."

"Hey, Felicity," Caitlin greeted as she approached. "Evelyn."

"Dr. Snow," Evelyn replied.

"Felicity, not sure if you saw my email. Do you have some time to meet before you leave today?" Caitlin inquired.

"Oh, right. I meant to email you back. Sorry, I've been all over the place today. I think I can…" the blonde distractedly replied as she scrolled through her calendar. "Evelyn, I'm putting you in at nine-thirty tomorrow. Sound good?"

Evelyn eagerly nodded. "Yup. Looking forward to it. I can bring us coffee. Not that crappy one from the breakroom but the good stuff from Starbucks down the street."

"That would be helpful," Felicity said gratefully. "We're going to need it."
"Actually, you might want to cut down on the coffee," Caitlin interjected.

Felicity stared at Caitlin as if she'd lost her mind. "Why on earth would I want to do that?" Coffee was pretty much the only thing keeping her upright at the moment.

"I can explain it later when we meet. I got your…" she trailed off and shot a wary look at Evelyn.

Picking up on the fact that whatever Caitlin had to say was for her ears alone, Felicity dismissed Evelyn and gave her teammate her full attention. "Okay, what's up?"

"I finally got your tests results back yesterday. Sorry it took so long. The entire lab was backed up."

"That's all right. I'm actually feeling much better than when you examined me last week." When she couldn't seem to shake her symptoms, Felicity had taken Mei's advice and gone to Caitlin to get checked out. The constant fatigue and migraines were making it really difficult to concentrate at work. Even Curtis had been out for a few days after he could no longer fight off his cold.

"Good. That's good," Caitlin replied, though her smile was strained. In fact, her whole body appeared tense.

Frowning, Felicity asked, "Are you sure? Is something wrong? Please don't tell me I have another virus. Although if I do, can you please just put me back on antibiotics? I really don't want to try and fight this off again. I'm seriously sick of being sick."

"Don't worry. You're perfectly healthy," Caitlin reassured her.

"Oh." The blonde breathed a sigh of relief. "Good."

"I can explain when we meet later."

Now Felicity was really confused. "Well, if everything is fine, why do we need to meet?"

Caitlin glanced around at the crowded work station and shook her head dismissively. "Um, you know me. Just standard post-examination procedure. I like to be thorough."

"Uh, okay. I might be able to swing by at four-thirty. But seriously, Caitlin, if you look this nervous telling me I'm healthy, maybe we need to work on your bedside manner," Felicity joked.

"Right." The brunette smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Good, you're both here," Lyla interrupted. To any bystander, Lyla's brusque walk would look like the typical gait of any agent in charge. Time was always precious. Felicity and Caitlin, however, had worked with Lyla long enough to know that her hurried steps and stern stare meant that something was wrong. "We have a situation," she said so low that both women needed to lean in to fully hear her.

"What's going on?" Felicity inquired.

"There was another attack," Lyla murmured. This information was obviously being kept under wraps, which was why she was trying so hard to keep her expression in check. "It happened at the warehouse in Central City. There was a shootout and an explosion."

Felicity and Caitlin shared horrified looks. "Oh my God, are they okay?"

"Where are Barry and the others? Were they hurt?" Caitlin pressed.
"Curtis and Mei have minor injuries. Barry…he wasn't so lucky. They're rushing him to CC General as we speak. We need to go. Now."
Wow, over a thousand kudos! Thank you guys so much and for your comments. I loved reading your reactions to the previous chapter. This is another significant one and, as you can tell by the title, features a few conversations that have been a long time coming. There is no flashback in this chapter, but the next flashback will pick up right where it left off. So don't worry, you'll learn exactly how hot and heavy past Olicity are about to get.

Happy reading, and let me know what you think in the comments!

February 15, 2013

Felicity should've felt relaxed taking the day off from work. She should've felt content lying in bed with Oliver as he placed lazy, loving kisses along her skin. He came over late last night so they could spend another Valentine's Day together. They'd spent the night tangled in the sheets and wrapped in each other's arms. For a while it was great to lose herself in him. Felicity's mind had quieted, and the constant stress and anxiety plaguing her had ebbed long enough to give her some reprieve.

Now, as she lay idly in bed, her worries grew louder. They were glaring, in fact. Staring up at the plain white ceiling, her mind was a mess of words and explanations she couldn't make sense of. She focused on breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth. It did little to help. Felicity was freaking out.

Oliver traveled lower. When he reached her stomach, she nearly jumped. Her hands instinctively went to his hair, ready to pull him away. Felicity caught herself in time and managed to only wriggle slightly. Oliver would probably think it was nothing more than her being ticklish. His lips skimmed her flat abdomen, every now and then leaning in to kiss it more thoroughly. Felicity's heart thumped in her chest as the swell of emotion threatened to consume her at the sight. She swallowed the lump in her throat and blinked back tears. God, how was she going to tell him? She was still having trouble believing it herself. Caitlin must've asked five times if she was okay when she first broke the news. Felicity had been in a complete state of shock then.

"What's the matter?" Oliver murmured as he made his way back up.

"Hmm?" she replied, distracted.

"Something is on your mind." He braced his arms on either side of her, letting his hands frame her face to play with her hair. "Tell me what's bothering you."

"I'm fine." It was hollow to even her own ears.

"You do realize whenever you say that, it usually means the opposite, right?" he lightly joked. Oliver kissed her forehead and then her cheek. "You can tell me anything. You know that, sweetheart."

Felicity clung to him and closed her eyes. "I love you." She felt him watching her, no doubt filled with more concern than before.
"I love you, too." He grazed her lips. "Talk to me."

Finally, she opened her eyes. "Do you ever think about running away?"

"What?"

"Running away," she repeated. "Leaving everything behind and starting over. Somewhere where no one knows you. Where it's calm and peaceful and safe."

"I don't know. Maybe…sometimes. Is that what you're thinking about?"

Felicity shrugged. "Maybe."

"What brought this on?" His finger soothingly caressed her temple. She gave another shrug and bit her lip. "Is everything okay at work?"

"Not really," she admitted. "Some of my team members were injured recently. One was even in a coma for a week. He could've died." It had been the week from hell as they all anxiously waited for Barry to wake up. Caitlin, especially, was on edge. She refused to leave Barry's side, citing that she wanted to keep an eye on his condition herself. She'd been sleeping at the hospital most nights. Lyla hadn't objected. Barry was in good hands, and no one wanted him waking up alone.

An emotion Felicity couldn't quite decipher flitted across Oliver's face. Then: "I'm sorry he was hurt." He sounded sincere, bordering on regretful. "How is he?"

"He's still in the hospital, but he's doing better. It might take some time, but he's expected to make a full recovery. No permanent brain damage, thankfully."

"Good. I'm glad he's okay."

"It just got me thinking how life is too short, you know? Especially when we do what we do." Felicity sighed. "You just never know."

Oliver studied her closely. "You're not thinking of leaving the agency, are you?" When she hesitated answering, he said, "I thought you loved your job."

"I do," Felicity confirmed. "I do love it. The sense of purpose and helping people…nothing else comes close to that."

"Right."

"But I want to have a life, too."

"You do have a life, Felicity," Oliver encouraged. "You've got a great life. You've got your family and your friends who love and care about you. Nothing is more important than that. Running away and starting over may seem like the ultimate fantasy, but that's all it is. It's an illusion. Trust me. Not having people in your life who truly know you isn't always freeing. Sometimes it's a burden."

"Is that how you feel?" she questioned and rubbed his shoulder. "What do you want, Oliver?"

"I already have what I want. I'm right here," Oliver murmured, leaning down, "with you." He kissed her softly.

"But you're not always here," Felicity pointed out.

"Which is why every second counts." He deepened the kiss and sunk into her, his hands traveling
along her curves. When they reached her sensitive breasts, circling and tugging at her pebbled nipples, she whimpered loudly.

Felicity felt her hunger for him flare to life once again. Oliver was the only one who could ground her when she was feeling so on edge—oddly even when he was the source of her turmoil. She wrapped her legs around him to bring him closer, desperately needing that comfort and strength. "Do you ever want more?"

"Yes," he breathed against her neck. She arched into him. "I always want more with you."

Sliding her hands into his hair, Felicity dragged his mouth back to hers. "Oliver," she moaned, feeling him hardening against her. "There's something I have to tell you." Another whimper tore from her throat when he teased her folds.

"What?" Oliver ground out huskily. He'd latched onto her bottom lip, sucking it between his own before biting it enticingly.

Felicity's heart hammered in her chest, both from his ministrations and the words that were on the tip of her tongue. Words that would change both their lives forever. "I, um…I…" Could she tell him? Should she do it now? What would his reaction be? Oliver was clearly distracted at the moment, and she had no idea how he would react. What if he was upset? Angry? What if he didn't want her touching him? She didn't think her body could stand the rejection right now. Felicity was so wound up she felt like she might pop if she didn't get some relief. Worst of all, she was scared and unconsciously clung to him more tightly.

Pressing his hips into hers, Oliver joined them slowly. Felicity's mind blanked for a second, overcome with the sensation of him stretching and vibrating inside of her. No, this definitely wasn't the right time. She needed this. She needed them as they were just a little while longer. Once the truth was out, there'd be no turning back. She wasn't ready. Not yet.

"You what?" he whispered when she didn't respond.

"Nothing," Felicity whimpered and lifted her hips to take more of him in. He groaned against her. "I want you…I just want you, Oliver."

He started moving inside of her. "You have me."

She hoped that was true.

Felicity ran the comb through her wet hair to get out any stray knots. Oliver was probably wondering why her "quick shower" was taking her so long, but she needed the time to herself to think. Now that he wasn't right next to her, her nerves had come back with a vengeance. She felt sick, and it was almost impossible to tell if it was because of her condition or the prospect of telling him. It was probably both.

With a sigh, knowing she couldn't stall any longer, Felicity left the bathroom to put on her comfy plaid pajama bottoms and thermal top. She then made her way into the kitchen. Oliver stood by the refrigerator, shirtless and in jeans. Her momentary admiration of his amazing muscles was cut short by the smell of leftovers. True to her word, they'd ordered from O'Connor's the previous night. Her stomach seized at the sight of the food, and she swallowed hard.

"Hey, I was just about to come check on you. You hungry?" Oliver asked.

She answered, "Um, only a little. I'll have the rest of the soup."
"That's it?"

"For now." She got the table set while he worked on reheating their dinner.

"Felicity, are you feeling okay?"

Her head whipped back to look at him. "What? Why?" She cursed her anxious reaction. She seriously needed to get a grip and calm down.

"You weren't that hungry last night either."

"I know. I haven't had much of an appetite lately. It's probably just stress with everything going on."

"Still, you need to eat," he said, concerned.

"I do," Felicity reassured him. She crossed the room and wove her arms around his waist. "I'll have the soup and maybe pick at whatever you're having." Standing on her tiptoes, she kissed him. "Okay?"

"Okay," he responded and tugged her closer. "Do you want wine tonight?"

Felicity nuzzled his nose as she shook her head. "No, I'll pass. Lately it's been giving me headaches," she lied.

"Is that why you're going to the doctor?"

"What?" She froze.

"I heard someone leave a message from the doctor's office earlier on the answering machine. You were in the bathroom."

Her panic spiked. "What did they say?"

"Just confirming your appointment for Monday."

Felicity let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "Oh, okay." Noticing Oliver's concern yet again, she explained, "It's my yearly checkup." She rolled her eyes for emphasis. "Figured I'd get it over with now."

Oliver nodded, seeming to accept her explanation. He kissed her cheek as the microwave beeped. The food was ready, and they sat down at the table to eat. Their conversation was casual, for which Felicity was thankful because she was so distracted. After they finished eating, they settled on the couch to watch a movie. Felicity only made it through the first ten minutes before she paused it.

"Felicity, what—"

"Can we talk?" she blurted out.

"Um…I guess," Oliver said with a shrug, looking perplexed. "Right now?"

"Yes. Now," Felicity replied while ringing her hands together. No matter how many times she turned this conversation over in her head, she wouldn't get the answers she needed until she came right out and said it. "Oliver, what are we doing?"

His brow furrowed in confusion. "Well, we were watching a movie but—"
"No. I mean, what are we doing?" She gestured between the two of them. "As in you and me. What are we to each other?"

"Felicity," Oliver said, totally caught by surprise. "What are you talking about? We're together. You're my girlfriend."

"I know, but where do you see this going? You said you wanted more. I need to know how much more." Felicity lifted her leg onto the couch and wrapped her arm around it. She needed something to hold onto as the nervous energy coursed through her. "What do you picture when you think of our future?"

"I don't know..." Oliver trailed off. "To be honest, I can't really think that far ahead."

"Try."

"Felicity," Oliver said tentatively, "is this about earlier? Because it's normal when someone close to you gets hurt to start questioning—"

"No, this has nothing to do with that," Felicity interjected. "Oliver, this is about us. This is about our future and what we both want from it. We've been together for a year now, and we've never really talked about what we're going to do long-term."

"There's not much we can do, Felicity. As long as we keep being careful—"

"But that's just it, Oliver. I don't know if I want to keep doing this. All of the lying and sneaking around...it's no way to live."

"You want out." His voice sounded calm but strained. He swallowed hard. "Is that what you're saying?"

Felicity felt her insides twist at the dejected look on his face. It was almost like he was expecting this kind of outcome and had resigned himself to it. "No. I'm saying the opposite." Felicity shifted closer to him on the couch and took his hand. "I love you, Oliver. I always have and I always will, which is why I'm saying that I want in."

"I don't understand."

"Just hear me out, okay? You're with the Bratva, and I know that it's dangerous. I do. My agency has dealt with these organizations for years. Hell, it's how you and I found each other again. I took that assignment in Moscow, and now here we are," Felicity explained and squeezed his hand for emphasis. "The resources I have at my disposal are unlimited and if we work together, I know that we can find a way to get you out."

"How?" he questioned, skeptical.

"We've made deals before with informants. If you give us valuable intel, I think I can convince my superiors to grant you immunity in exchange. It's not like you joined the Bratva of your own free will. Everyone knows about the Gambit sinking, and we can use that to our advantage. You were under duress when you swore your allegiance. Essentially, you've been held hostage."

"That doesn't excuse everything I've done, Felicity. I didn't always have a gun to my head forcing me to make the wrong choices," Oliver countered. "And let's say you can strike a deal for me, the Bratva will put a price on my head as soon as they learn I've betrayed them."

"They don't have to find out anything. We have ways of getting you in the clear. And even if there is
an issue, it's why we have you go public immediately and get the media on your side."

"The media?" Oliver was already shaking his head and stood up. "Felicity, no. I can't—"

"Think about it, Oliver. You returning from the dead after five years will cause a media frenzy. With that kind of intense public scrutiny, the Bratva would be crazy to try anything. It'd be too risky."

"The Bratva are known for being cold and calculating. Anatoly can be a very patient man, especially if it looks like his own family betrayed him. He wouldn't let that stand. He couldn't. It would be a sign of weakness and call into question both his power and his reputation."

"He won't get the chance. Not if you help us take him down. We can eliminate the threat altogether."

"They won't just come after me, Felicity," he argued. "They'll come after you and Thea and anyone else I care about."

"I can take care of myself, Oliver," Felicity declared, standing and placing her hands on her hips. "And my team would help, too. This is what we do. We keep people safe."

"No."

"No?" Felicity replied, dumbfounded by his obstinacy. "Not 'let's discuss it further' or 'I'll think about it.' You've dug in your heels and it's just no?"

"That's right," Oliver firmly repeated. "No."

"Please tell me you're joking," Felicity retorted. "Because I am having a really hard time understanding how you can so easily dismiss what may be your only chance at freedom. At getting your life back. In case you've forgotten, Oliver, your last name isn't Knyazev. It's Queen."

Oliver gritted out, "I'm well aware of that, Felicity."

"So what do you expect to happen, Oliver? How exactly do you see this love story of ours playing out?"

"I don't know, Felicity," Oliver suddenly shouted. "I don't think a lot about the future, because my life isn't my own anymore. For the last five years, I've had to become something else. Someone else. I don't know if I ever can be the person I once was, and I sure as hell am not going to figure it out in a single night."

"I'm not saying we have to figure everything out tonight, Oliver. All I want is to talk about it. All I want is some hope and reassurance that you want to fight for a future with me as badly as I want to fight for one with you. Because as sexy and exciting and mysterious as our secret rendezvous can be, they're also dangerous and difficult and exhausting," she exclaimed, not backing down. "How is constantly lying and sneaking around fair to either of us? How is it safe? As careful as we are, Oliver, the truth always has a way of coming out."

"Don't you think I know that?" he exploded, making her flinch. Regret flashed across his face, and he took a moment to rein in his anger and collect himself. Oliver cupped her cheek and said more softly, "Don't you think I want to give you everything? I love you, Felicity. I do, but let's be realistic. There is no happy ending, and we're kidding ourselves if we think everything will work out just like that. This life I've chosen, it only ends one way."

"So that's it? You're just going to spend the rest of your life hiding in the Bratva," she accused, her eyes welling, "letting it chip away at pieces of your soul until you're either completely lost or dead."
"I'm sorry, Oliver, but I can't accept that." She stepped away, causing his hand to drop. "You are not a machine. You're a human being, and you have just as much of a right to hope and dream as the rest of us. If there's one thing I've learned after everything I've been through, it's that life is precious. And I want so much more to mine than this."

"Felicity…" Oliver pleaded. Before he could say anything else, a knock sounded on the door.

Both they're heads whipped in that direction, and they froze. Felicity didn't know who it could possibly be, since it was late and she wasn't expecting company. She quickly checked her phone but didn't see any missed messages.

Felicity, wiping at her eyes, said, "Better hide." The sadness and frustration were evident in her tone. She went to check the peek hole and quickly called Oliver back. "It's for you."

"What?"

Felicity opened the door to reveal John standing in the doorway. He glanced between the two of them, quickly sensing the tension in the room. "Am I interrupting something?"

Ignoring the question and getting straight to the point, Oliver replied, "What's going on, John?"

"You obviously haven't checked your phone. We've got a situation. Anatoly needs you to take care of it. Now," John stressed.

Oliver hesitated for a second and looked to Felicity. She kept a straight face, the dam of despair threatening to consume her. Unshed tears stung at her eyes. It was one thing to cry in front of Oliver, but she'd be damned if she let John see her so rattled. He'd already made it pretty clear that he didn't approve of her relationship with Oliver.

"You should go," Felicity stated. "Duty calls."

Oliver reluctantly nodded and walked down the hall to her room. Felicity gestured for John to come in. It was too cold to keep him waiting outside. After offering to get him a drink, which he declined, she joined Oliver in her room. He was searching through his bag for a shirt. Felicity thought she caught sight of some kind of black device before Oliver ruffled some more things around. He ended up choosing a black sweater.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," Oliver promised.

"Don't bother." At his bewildered expression, she said more composed, "I think you should go now, Oliver. We both need to cool down and think about things. Take some time to figure out what it is we want."

"Felicity, I don't want to leave with things like this between us," he stated. "We have the rest of the weekend to—"

"I need some time, Oliver," Felicity stressed, leaving no room for argument.

Oliver was quiet for a moment, pensive, before bobbing his head in acquiescence. "Okay," he muttered and placed the rest of his things in his bag. He tossed it over his shoulder and headed for the door. "I'll call you soon." Oliver placed a quick, and somewhat hesitant, kiss on her cheek before joining John.

Only when she was sure they'd both gone did Felicity finally let the rest of her tears fall.
Oliver nearly obliterated the punching bag. It spun wildly on the chain before he took another swing. More mindless punches followed despite the fact that his hands were throbbing. Eventually, he switched to the training dummy. Oliver let his quick movements be guided by muscle memory. His mind was too busy replaying his argument with Felicity to concentrate on any type of routine. All the while, he could feel Dig's eyes burning a hole in his back.

"Waiting until I finish before giving me the lecture?" he called to his friend.

Dig approached him. "Not really. I'd have to know what's going on before I could say anything about it."

"It's really not that complicated," Oliver huffed. "Felicity wants more than I can give her. We fought. She's upset. Now I don't know what to do."

"When you say she wants more, that means…?"

With one last jab, Oliver socked the dummy and turned to Dig. He glanced around the training room to make sure they were alone. After taking care of business, he'd gone down there to blow off some steam. "She wants me to leave the Bratva," he said, keeping his voice low. "She's convinced she can get me some kind of deal with A.R.G.U.S. if I agree to become an informant."

"There's an idea," Diggle muttered.

"Oh, it gets better. She wants me to go to the media. She thinks if I 'come back from the dead,' the public scrutiny would be enough to keep me safe."

Diggle quirked an eyebrow. "She's clever. I'll give her that. It might've worked, too, if it was just the Bratva we're dealing with."

"I know." He sighed loudly. "You can say 'I told you so' now."

"Quite frankly, I'm surprised it's taken her this long to give you an ultimatum."

"You think that's what it was?"

"Isn't it? If she wants more, then I'm assuming she's tired of all the lies and secrecy. Everyone reaches a breaking point, Oliver."

Oliver rubbed his hands over his face. He'd been totally caught off guard by the conversation. Their situation wasn't ideal, but he'd thought they were at least in it together. It worried him that he hadn't even picked up on Felicity's growing frustration at all. When they'd spent New Year's together, Felicity had seemed really happy. What had changed? She said it had nothing to do with her friend getting hurt, but it had to be that. Even worse was that it was his fault. He'd been at the warehouse. He'd caused the explosion in an attempt to get the leverage they'd need. How could Oliver fix her unhappiness when he was the primary source on so many levels?

"Maybe if she knew the truth—"

"Oliver, don't even go there," Diggle warned.

"What else can I do, Diggle?" Oliver snapped. "I'm going to lose her if I don't do something. I hate lying to her." He punched the dummy, hard. "I hate the fact that one minute I'm acting like the perfect boyfriend and the next I'm stabbing her in the back! Haven't I sacrificed enough over the years? How much more are these bastards going to take from me?"
"They can take a hell of a lot more, I can promise you that," he retorted. "Oliver, I know what you're going through—"

"No, you don't, Dig. You chose to walk away from your life. Me, I never had a choice. The moment my parents aligned themselves with these bastards, they threw my future away. I almost died on that ship, on the island, in training...and now I'm going to lose any future I could have had with Felicity. My life is always the cost, and I don't think I'm willing to pay it this time."

"You're still standing here, Oliver. You still have time," Diggle told him. "Yes, it sucks that you have to report to Merlyn but you and I both know that without that information, you have absolutely no chance at freedom. You have no way of gaining the upper hand."

"Maybe I should just tell Felicity the truth. She said the truth always has a way of coming out, which you've even said yourself. She wants to help anyway, and I'm sure she could do a much better job of finding what we need."

"That's assuming she still wants to talk to you after you tell her what you've been doing. Broken trust is not easily mended, Oliver, and we don't have the time to let your little lover's spat play out. But let's say you do tell her, and Felicity does decide to help," Dig proposed. "The moment she agrees, she's an accomplice. Sleeping with the enemy is one thing but conspiring with you and deliberately acting against orders could get her locked up. And that's not even considering our side. Malcolm finds out she knows, and he has an in. He won't need you anymore, and he'll threaten her directly. You won't be able to protect her from that."

"What if we made a deal with A.R.G.U.S.?" Oliver suggested. "We could use their resources."

"I don't trust Malcolm Merlyn, but he might not be wrong about Waller."

"You know about Waller?" he questioned. This was the first he'd heard of her from Diggle.

His partner paused before continuing, "Before I left, I'd worked on some missions with Lyla. One of them went south and instead of sending in an extraction team to get the rest of our guys, Waller left them behind to die. These were good men and soldiers who could always be counted on in a crisis. And just like that, whether it was at the hands of the terrorists or the drone strike she sent in afterward, they were expendable. If she can do that to her own people, just imagine what she would do to us."

"Why didn't you ever say anything, Dig?" Oliver demanded. "You knew Felicity could be in danger all this time and you—"

"I don't know what Felicity's circumstances are, Oliver. But if she's working with Lyla like we think, then I didn't see the need to worry you. Lyla is not Waller. She looks out for her people," he explained. "My point is that right now Felicity not knowing is in her best interest. The more people we get involved before we have anything concrete, the more dangerous it is for us all. There are too many variables that we can't control."

Muttering under his breath, Oliver shook his head and walked toward the sink at the back of the room. Unfortunately, Diggle was right. All of the reasons he'd just cited were the same ones Oliver had told himself months ago. No matter how many different ways he tried to rationalize telling her, the risk to Felicity's safety and their own lives was always too high. Control was key in this situation.

Oliver turned on the sink and let the hot water wash the blood off of his hands. He got the soap and rubbed it into his cuts, not caring about the sharp sting. In fact, he welcomed the pain. He sensed Diggle behind him. "She thinks I'm unwilling to fight for her," Oliver muttered, "and I let her.
There's a part of me that belongs to her and a part that belongs to this vendetta that I need to settle. I
don't know how to reconcile the two, Dig."

"You're not alone, man."

Oliver stared down at the bloody water sinking in the drain. "I can't lose her again, Dig. I won't
survive it. Not this time."

"We'll figure it out." He placed his hand on Oliver's shoulder. "I promise."

Felicity rushed around her apartment in a tizzy. She'd overslept her alarm clock and would be late
for work if she didn't get her butt out the door soon. Unfortunately, she couldn't seem to find her phone.
The one from Oliver was, of course, tucked safely in her purse. That one she really didn't need at the
moment. He'd called the other day as promised, but she hadn't answered. Instead, Felicity had sent a
vague text. He would worry otherwise, and the last thing she needed was him coming to her
apartment. She was serious about needing space. She had some huge decisions to make, and she
needed more time to figure out how to handle everything.

She'd just knelt on the floor to check under the couch when her doorbell rang. Felicity groaned. If it
was Mrs. Ferdinand again, she was going to kill her and her annoying cat. She rushed to the door
and was surprised to find Mei on the other side. "Oh," she gasped. "Hey, Mei. What are you doing
here? Is Tommy with you?"

"No, it's just me. I texted you a few minutes ago, but I never got a response."

"That's because I can't seem to find my phone. Hence, why I'm probably going to be late to the
office. That and I overslept. It's already turning out to be a great Monday," she babbled. "Do you
want to come in while I look?"

"Sure, thanks."

"So what's up? Did Lyla send you over to get me for a special assignment or something?"

"There is a special assignment. Lyla, however, doesn't actually know I'm here and we should
probably keep it that way."

"Ooh, top secret," Felicity joked while reaching inside the couch. "Sounds interesting."

"I'm not one to beat around the bush, so I'm just going to come right out with it. I know about you
and Oliver Queen."

The blonde paused in her search and looked at Mei. "Hate to break it to you, Mei, but that's not
really top secret," she casually replied. "You've been helping me search for him for the last couple of
years now."

"Which is why I'm curious when and how exactly you eventually found him," she stated and held up
her hand to halt whatever excuse Felicity was about to drum up. "I know that he's alive and that
you've been spending time with him. I also know that he's involved in a very dark and dangerous
organization that is hell bent on destroying us. What I'm still trying to figure out is how much you
know about the man you once loved and your involvement in his current agenda."

"Mei," Felicity said, trying very hard to remain calm. This was bad. *Really bad.* Panic filled her at an
alarming rate. "I can explain."
"You better because you're either his accomplice or his target," Mei declared. Her stern expression softened a bit, "And if it is the latter, Felicity, then you're in for a very rude awakening."
Felicity's heart was beating so hard she could hear the blood pumping in her ears. She felt dizzy and nauseated as she stared back at Mei, who was scrutinizing her just as closely. This whole situation was so surreal, Felicity half expected it to be some kind of dream. One she would wake up from any moment.

"We should sit down for this," Mei advised and walked over to the couch. The blonde sat down next to her and folded her hands in her lap to prevent them from shaking. Mei then reached into her bag and took out a folder. Leaning forward, Mei placed an assortment of photographs on the coffee table. Some were a little grainy, which Felicity recognized as either security footage or satellite surveillance, but they were clear enough to recognize Oliver and John. One of the photos was taken a few days ago, showing Oliver and John leaving her apartment.

"You've been spying on me?" she muttered.

"Actually, no, we weren't. We've been tracking this man for years now"—Mei pointed at John —"He's been off the grid until recently. Lyla had a hunch and ran facial recognition. We've tracked him all over Starling. One of the hits we got was last Friday when he came here. As you can imagine, we were shocked to learn you know him."

"I don't really know him. I've only met him a couple of times through Oliver," she said.

"Yet another unexpected revelation. Oliver Queen is alive, and he's been busy. I spent the weekend running his face through our satellite. Want to know what I found?" Mei didn't give her a chance to answer. "On a hunch, I cross-checked it with the areas in which A.R.G.U.S. bunkers or bases have been hit. Felicity, I placed him near six of the ten sites shortly before the attacks."

"What?" Felicity exclaimed, shocked. "No. That can't be right. The attackers were 'ghosts.' Unidentifiable without records. Oliver isn't one of them."

"He's 'dead,' isn't he?" Mei pointed out.

"I know, but he's not some mercenary or whatever they are. He's Bratva. There's been no indication that the Russian mafia is tied to this. It's not their style." Felicity's thoughts were running wild. She couldn't believe this. None of it made sense.
"Is that what he told you? When did you first come into contact with him, Felicity?"

Felicity hesitated. As always, her first instinct was to protect Oliver. If she told Mei who he really was, then it could put him in more danger. On the other hand, there was obviously more to his story than what he'd shared with her. Not telling Mei would make Felicity look even guiltier of espionage and treason. "I saw him for the first time during our mission in Moscow."

Surprise flitted across Mei's face. Whatever her teammate had been expecting to hear, it wasn't that. "You said he's Bratva. Was he in the casino?" Felicity silently watched as Mei worked out the details. Realization struck. "Oliver Knyazev…he's Anatoly's nephew. The description you gave…"

"I lied," Felicity admitted, ashamed. "I know it was wrong, but I was freaking out. I nearly passed out when I saw him first walk up. I didn't know if he was a ghost or a doppelganger or if I was just going crazy. I had to find out the truth myself first."

"You disappeared for a while that night. We thought you'd been hurt or taken. You were with him." It wasn't a question.

"I really was in trouble. I was taken to Anatoly as planned, and he found my earpiece. Before he could do anything else, Oliver came in. He told Anatoly he'd deal with me, and he got me out of there and to safety."

"You weren't questioned or interrogated?"

"Not really." An image of Oliver pinning her to the door and kissing her senseless flashed into her mind. Felicity cast it aside. "He didn't know who I was working for, and he was afraid I'd be in trouble for losing the money at the Black Jack table. He later found the bug I put in Anatoly's office. He removed it, which was why Curtis couldn't get it to work."

"But you still managed to get into the Bratva's internal network and get the intel we needed," Mei replied.

"Oliver gave me the access codes."

"He gave you the access codes," Mei repeated in disbelief. "Just like that. Did you sleep with him?"

Felicity's face felt hot at how close to the mark Mei actually was—though her assumption wasn't entirely accurate. "It wasn't like that," she retorted. "He didn't want me to get in trouble, and so he gave me a way in to find out what we needed. That's it."

"It could've been a setup, Felicity. Did you tell him you were A.R.G.U.S.?"

"No, of course not! He assumed I was with some type of government agency, but I never told him anything about who I work for or what we do. And I knew it wasn't a setup. As far as he knew, I was going to be in the field with the rest of you. Oliver would never put me in danger like that, and I certainly wouldn't put you all in harm's way either," Felicity argued. "Look, I get that this looks really, really bad. Quite frankly, I'd be skeptical and demanding answers, too. But aside from being with the man I love, I haven't broken the oath that I took. I would never betray A.R.G.U.S., Mei. You guys are like my family."

"He's a criminal, Felicity."

"He didn't have a choice." Mei was already shaking her head, and Felicity continued forcefully, "Please just hear me out. You of all people know how hard it's been to find out anything about the Gambit. It did go down because of the storm, and Oliver was the only survivor. His parents, the
crew…they all died." Felicity proceeded to tell Mei about how Oliver washed up on the island. How he wasn't alone and the dangers—that she knew of—that he faced before being forced to join the Bratva. "He's been trapped ever since. But he wants out. I know he does, but he's terrified of what they'll do to me and everyone else he cares about if he tries to leave. I told him if he came forward and worked with A.R.G.U.S. that we could help him. I just need more time to convince him."

Mei let out a solemn sigh and shook her head. "Felicity, I understand how badly you want to believe that, but it's just not true. He doesn't want out."

"You don't know that. You don't know him." The pitying look Mei was giving her made Felicity's stomach turn.

"Oliver isn't just in the Bratva. It's much bigger than that. The attacks on A.R.G.U.S.," Mei began, "there's more to them than you or the others know. Waller has been keeping it under wraps for a while now, because it's so dangerous. The information is highly classified, and Lyla is one of the few who knows the truth. A few months ago, she and Waller agreed that I should be brought in on it, too."

Felicity swallowed hard as the feeling of foreboding expanded inside of her. Her whole body was tense, and the shaking in her hands hadn't lessened. "What's the connection to Oliver?"

Mei pointed to a picture of Oliver's partner. "This man is John Diggle, and he's a member of a secret terrorist organization named H.I.V.E.—short for The Hierarchy of International Vengeance and Elimination."

Felicity's heart lurched. "What? No," she replied. "That can't be right. He's in the Bratva with Oliver."

"The Bratva and a few other crime organizations have been directly linked to H.I.V.E. The arms deals, shadow tech thefts, and hostage situations, we believe they're all somewhat in service to H.I.V.E.," Mei explained. "This includes the attacks on A.R.G.U.S."

"So how do you know John's H.I.V.E.? What's the link?" Felicity inquired. "Is he—is he the leader or something?"

"No. The leader of H.I.V.E. is rumored to be a man named Damien Darhk. He's thought to be as ruthless as he is clever. We have no idea what he looks like, because he has a knack for avoiding security feeds. As for John, Lyla confirmed his involvement in the organization herself." Mei paused, seeming to brace herself, before revealing, "John Diggle used to be her husband."

Felicity's jaw dropped in shock. "Her husband?" she repeated, unable to fully wrap her head around it. "But…that…" She thought back to John's story about how he'd gotten involved with the Bratva. "He once told me he'd left a wife behind before joining the Bratva. He said she had connections," Felicity thought out loud.

"It was Lyla. She said John's brother was involved with H.I.V.E. and crossed them. John took his place so that he would be spared."

"Oh my God." Felicity placed her hand over her mouth. It suddenly made sense. She remembered the time she'd sneaked a peek at Oliver's phone. She hadn't seen John's name in his text messages, but she had seen them from someone called "Dig." The pieces suddenly fell into place, and they were painting an ugly picture. "Oliver said that John trained him in the Bratva."

"It's probably the arm they work with, but it's still H.I.V.E. Do you remember when we were
hunting down The Hood and Lyla seemed shaken afterward?" Felicity bobbed her head. "The man she fought was masked, but she said she'd know John's style anywhere. She was right." Mei took out more pictures from the folder that almost made Felicity fall off of the couch in shock. John's mask was off, but that wasn't what knocked the wind out of her. What left her breathless was Oliver standing next to him in the alley with his green hood pulled down and a bow in his hand.

"Oh frack," Felicity whispered and grabbed the picture to get a closer look. The green grease paint covering Oliver's eyes did little to hide his defined features.

"As you know, some of our agents in the attacks were killed with arrows. And that's not all. Felicity, I also identified him near Monument Point," Mei stated.

"Monument Point," she gasped.

Mei was watching her closely. "You didn't know?"

"No, I—he couldn't have…" Felicity had officially fallen down the rabbit hole, and the truth was jarring.

She'd never understood why the man who'd attacked her that night would suddenly stop and then rescue her. If what Mei said was true, then it was Oliver. It had to be. The moment Mei had said her name, he'd pulled off her mask and let her go. Then she'd gotten shot. He'd taken her, cared for her, and returned her to A.R.G.U.S. where she'd be safe. Her mind followed the trail of events. The romantic trip to Coast City…the phone in case of emergencies…his hesitance to touch her…the guilt she could so obviously see on his face when they made love…it was all because of what he'd done to her.

Her thoughts didn't stop there as the truth continued to unravel. The Hood had gone after Brodeur and his men. Felicity recalled her night with Oliver in Hub City when she'd told him about Laurel. He'd also been in her apartment when Sara had come to her after another unsuccessful attempt at going after Brodeur. The Hood had been taking down so many other criminals in Starling that Felicity had overlooked the connection. Now it was glaringly obvious why The Hood had gone after Salazar and brought the information directly to Sara. He'd been helping her get justice for Laurel.

"H.I.V.E.'s attacks have been strategic. Too strategic. Waller suspects we might have a leak or even a mole. Now that we know about Oliver and you, well…it's too much of a coincidence."

"Waller thinks I'm a mole?" Panic morphed into fear. Waller already couldn't stand her. There was no telling what she would do to Felicity if she thought her a traitor. For all she knew, a contingent of agents could be on their way to collect her right now. Felicity would probably end up in one of the dark and creepy interrogation rooms with that hideous, bright white light she hated shining into her eyes.

"Waller doesn't know about you. Not yet," Mei informed her. "Lyla asked me to quietly investigate before she goes to her. She wanted to be sure. Neither of us wanted to believe that you could do something like this."

"I didn't. I haven't. Mei, please, you have to believe me," Felicity pleaded. "I'm not a traitor."

"We scrubbed your computer and found no traces of tampering but…"

"But what?"

"There was an anomaly that was almost overlooked—evidence of classified information being discretely transferred but the destination was unclear. You're the best IT and cyber intelligence
operative at the agency for a reason."

"What? No, that's impossible. I never transferred anything," Felicity denied and gave her a skeptical look. "Why are you telling me all of this anyway? If it's classified and you think I'm involved, you giving me the heads up puts the entire investigation in jeopardy."

Mei was quiet for a moment. Then: "When you took a bullet for me, I told you that I owed you one. I came here to help you because, despite the mounting evidence, I honestly don't think you sold us out. If you were involved, you would've been better off letting me die. You could've pretended they forced you to unlock the system to get what they wanted. There wouldn't have been any witnesses to say otherwise. But the system stayed locked, and our backup was able to make it in safely. Curare is deadly and taking a hit like that immediately left you incapacitated. If you were working with Oliver, you wouldn't have put your own mission or life at risk like that. I just needed you to confirm it."

Felicity gave Mei a grateful look before she was overwhelmed with worry. "Waller already might think it's me. She was suspicious of me after that night, and I couldn't tell her much. The Curare had me so drugged out I barely remembered anything."

"If Waller thought it was you, you'd already be in a cell," Mei replied. "Trust me."

"Well, that's reassuring," Felicity sarcastically muttered. She let out a heavy breath and ran a hand over her head. "Mei, are you sure it was specifically my work computer that was targeted? I didn't tell Oliver anything, and it's not like I bring anything from the office back home with me."

Everything she had in her safe was from her investigation into the Gambit. That wouldn't be much use to him if it was information he was looking for.

"Think, Felicity. There has to be something. Could he have gotten some clue from your home computer or phone? You've logged in to your email from here before, right?"

"He wouldn't have been able to break the encryption on my laptop or my phone. The encryption is advanced, and they're always locked and protected…" she trailed off as her mind worked overtime. Something about what she'd just said gave her pause.

Sensing she was on to something, Mei urged, "What is it?"

"The phone." Felicity stood abruptly and walked over to her purse. She pulled out the phone Oliver had given her and took a seat at the dining room table.

Mei followed suit. "He gave you that?"

"It was after Monument Point. Oliver said he wanted me to have it in case I ever needed to get in touch with him."

"I'm assuming it's untraceable."

Felicity nodded and proceeded to take the phone apart. She had a small travel-sized tool kit that she always carried in her purse. Having such an unpredictable job meant always being prepared. Mei watched quietly and let her work. Felicity's hands were surprisingly steady as she took the phone apart piece by piece. She silently prayed that her hunch was wrong. Despite everything Mei had told her, she wanted so badly to believe that Oliver couldn't do something like this. Not to her. Unfortunately, she found what she was looking for.

"Oh frack," Felicity breathed.

Mei leaned in to get a closer look. "What is that?"
The blonde carefully held up the tiny piece of tech. "It's an incredibly advanced forensic extraction device. Basically, it can suck out and decrypt the data from any nearby devices, recently deleted data included."

Mei was confused. "So how did it work on your work computer but not your other devices?"

"It's really complicated, but I unknowingly took this into A.R.G.U.S. with me. This tech can function as a Trojan and mimic code to trick an internal system into thinking it's part of the proximate device. The encryption on my other devices have added layers of security, because they are usually used for external access. We automatically assume something like this might happen." Felicity felt sick. She always had the phone with her, which meant that Oliver must've been privy to almost everything she'd been working on. That was the anomaly that Mei had discovered in her computer.

"Can it transmit the data to another server or some sort of cloud-based data storage?"

"It could, but I don't think that's what this one does," she answered while looking over the design. "I think there's a corresponding device that it connects to and collects the data."

"Shit," Mei cursed under her breath. Felicity couldn't help but agree. She placed her head in her hands as her stomach turned. "God, I'm so stupid." She had never even inspected the phone, because she'd trusted Oliver so completely. She didn't know about the Bratva, H.I.V.E., and all of this other crap going on. How would she ever have come to such an outrageous conclusion? Yes, Oliver had secrets but so did she. Never would she have imagined just how entangled their lives actually were.

Oliver, however, had known all this time. Maybe even long before. He could've been watching her and waiting for an opportunity to come back into her life. Was Russia the setup, or did that come after? If he knew she was specifically A.R.G.U.S., he probably wouldn't have given her the access codes that night in Moscow. It had to have been Monument Point, she reasoned, since he'd been so shocked that it was her he was fighting. It was after that that he'd given her the phone, too. Her mind whirled as she tried to process this new revelation. All of the time they spent together and the intimate moments they shared, were they all in service to H.I.V.E.? Felicity's stomach turned again, and a wave of nausea hit her. It felt like the world was tilting as bile rose in her throat. She brought her hand to her mouth.

"Are you okay?"

Felicity barely got a chance to answer before she was running to the bathroom. The small breakfast she'd had made another appearance as she emptied the contents of her stomach into the toilet. She continued to wretch even after there was nothing left, her entire body jerking in painful spasms. Felicity sensed Mei next to her and seconds later felt the other woman's hand gently rubbing her back. Tears burned at Felicity's eyes. She didn't know when she'd started crying.

When her stomach finally settled, Felicity sat back. Mei had a damp cloth ready and pressed it to her sweaty forehead before wiping at her mouth. Felicity could do nothing but sit there in a daze. The world was blurry, both from her lack of glasses and the abundance of tears. She didn't know how much time passed, but eventually Mei helped her stand and guided her back into the living room. The brunette made her lie down while she went to make her some tea, saying it would help soothe her upset stomach. Felicity closed her eyes and listened to Mei shuffle around the kitchen.

"Here," Mei said moments later and handed her the steaming mug. "Feel better?"

Felicity had sat up to drink. The hot tea was like a shock to her system and did, in fact, settle her
stomach somewhat. After everything she'd just learned, Felicity didn't expect the knots to unravel completely anytime soon. She caught Mei’s intense, somber stare drift down briefly to her stomach.

"You know, don't you?" Felicity whispered, finally meeting her gaze. Mei gave a slight nod. "And Lyla?" Another nod. "Of course she does. One of the stipulations when we first signed on is that our medical records can be subject to review. Can't have weak agents, right? Too much of a liability. Unless you heard it from Caitlin."

"No, Caitlin didn't say anything. I looked at the file myself," Mei told her. "Have you told Oliver yet?"

Felicity sighed. "I was going to, but then we got into a big fight—about our future no less. It didn't exactly seem like the right time for 'And oh, by the way, honey, I'm pregnant.'"

"I'm sorry."

"Don't. Please. I'm the one who should be apologizing. It is my fault, after all, that we've lost agents and so many more were hurt—including you, Curtis, and Barry." She took a shaky breath. "God, Barry could've died."

"He didn't."

"But he could've. It could've happened to any one of you out there, and it was all because of me."

"Felicity, don't. You didn't know." Felicity opened her mouth to protest. "I'm not sugar coating it for you. Yes, this is really bad and trusting your ex-boyfriend despite knowing he's involved in organized crime was poor judgment. But this isn't all your fault, Felicity. This is on Oliver, too. He's the one who lied to you and betrayed you."

"That's the thing. I keep asking myself how much of it was a lie. My mind keeps going over all of the stuff you told me. The constant secrets and lies. The connection to the horrible attacks and the casualties that resulted from them. Everything points to Oliver betraying me," Felicity explained in frustration. She accepted a tissue from Mei and dabbed at her damp eyes. Her other hand clutched her locket as she spoke. "But then my heart is telling me the opposite. Every fiber of my being says that he loves me. That he would never willingly hurt me. He's already saved me twice from the Bratva/H.I.V.E. or whoever the hell else he works for. He's saved people as The Hood and helped Sara put away her sister's killer. That doesn't mean he's totally lost, right?"

"What about the agents he put arrows into?"

"Maybe it wasn't him. Mei, you know about archery. You said yourself that the design of the arrow is unique to every archer. The arrows Oliver used as The Hood were different from those that were used on the agents. And you saw Oliver at Monument Point. He had a gun, not a bow. There could be another archer out there."

"They were made from the same metal, Felicity, which is what furthered our theory that they were linked. Whether there is another archer doesn't matter. Oliver was still a part of those attacks. He still killed our colleagues, whether it was with the information he took or with the gun in his hand."

Felicity rested her head back against the couch and looked up at the ceiling. Mei had a point. There was no right or easy answer in any of this. "So what happens now? Are you going to take me in?"

"No. I'm leaving it up to you."

"What?" Felicity's head snapped up to look at Mei.
"It's not just yourself you have to think about anymore, Felicity." Mei shot a look to her stomach. "Your pregnancy is another reason why Lyla is stalling telling Waller. If Waller finds out that you're the leak—even unknowingly—and pregnant with Oliver's child, she'll see you as just another weapon in her arsenal. She'll use you and that baby however she sees fit, which will most likely include setting up Oliver and luring him in for capture and then torture. Will you be able to handle that?"

Felicity's hold on her locket tightened and she shook her head. "I am not letting this baby or myself be used as some kind of pawn. Not again."

"Then you need to figure out what you want to do and do it fast." Mei placed a hand on her shoulder and met her gaze. "For both your sakes."

Chewing on her bottom lip, Felicity paced outside Sara's door for a good fifteen minutes before she finally worked up the courage to knock. She couldn't stand to be cooped up in her apartment any longer. After Mei left, Felicity had emailed Lyla and said that she was taking a sick day. Lyla's response was so casual that Felicity almost believed everything was normal and her conversation with Mei hadn't happened. Unfortunately, the nightmare she currently found herself in wasn't something she could wake up from.

Felicity had been a bundle of nerves all morning. Her morning sickness mixed with incessant worrying had caused a couple more trips to the bathroom. She felt weak, shaky and, worst of all, isolated. Unable to stand being in the apartment alone anymore, she'd left on an impulse and ended up at Sara's place. Felicity had no idea what she was going to say. She didn't even expect that Sara would be able to help her. All Felicity knew was that she needed to see her best friend.

There were footsteps and the sound of the lock being undone. Seconds later, Sara opened the door. Felicity knew she must look like a wreck, because Sara did a double take at the sight of her. "Is everything all right?" Sara immediately questioned.

Felicity opened her mouth to say that she was fine but, as usual, her mouth and brain weren't always on the same page. "I'm pregnant," she unexpectedly blurted out. Within seconds, Felicity felt the hot tears streaming down her face. Clearly there was no controlling her mess of emotions today.

Sara's eyes widened in shock before she was reaching out for Felicity. "Come here," she said and drew her into a tight embrace.

Felicity clutched Sara tightly, silently crying on her shoulder and taking what comfort she could. They stayed like that for a couple of minutes before Sara ushered her inside. "Can I get you anything? You look kind of pale. Do you need tea or maybe some crackers? Pregnant women are always eating crackers, right?"

"I've already had tea, and I'm not hungry," Felicity mumbled. "Even if I was, I doubt I could keep anything down right now."

"Here, sit down." Sara guided Felicity into the living room and sat her down on the couch. She grabbed a couple of tissues from the box on the side table and handed them to her. "I'll be right back."

Felicity dabbed at her eyes while trying to take deep breaths. She knew she needed to calm down. So much stress couldn't be good for her or the baby. A couple of minutes later, Sara returned with a glass of amber liquid and, despite Felicity's protests about not wanting food, a small plate of saltine crackers.
"It's ginger ale" Sara told her. "Have a couple of sips. It'll help settle your stomach."

Taking her best friend's advice, Felicity sipped the cool liquid. Unlike earlier, her stomach didn't sour at the taste of it. She did feel slightly better, which was promising. Felicity took a couple more sips. "Thank you," she said afterward. "I'm really sorry to show up here like this and blurt it out like that. I just...I really needed a friend."

"Don't even apologize," Sara stated and placed a reassuring hand on her back. "Whatever's happened, I'm always here for you."

Felicity sent her a grateful smile, already feeling some relief no matter how minimal.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I do but...is it okay if we just sit for a minute?" She needed some time to get her thoughts together.

"Sure. We can sit for as long as you like," Sara encouraged.

"Thanks," Felicity whispered and took Sara's offered hand. They sat side by side in silence with Sara waiting patiently, though the concern remained in her best friend's eyes. When she felt a little better, Felicity tentatively nibbled on a cracker. Regardless of the intense nausea she'd experienced earlier, she could feel that her body needed some kind of sustenance. Felicity finished the cracker and breathed a sigh of relief when minutes later her body felt somewhat more stable. It helped to focus her mind, as well. "I'm not sure how to begin."

"You could start with how far along you are," Sara suggested.

"Roughly eight weeks," Felicity answered. "I only found out last week. It was unexpected, to say the least."

The moment Caitlin had told her she was pregnant would stay with Felicity for the rest of her life. Caitlin had seemed on edge beforehand, which totally wasn't like her. She was usually so calm and clear-headed even in the direst of emergencies. When she finally came out with it, Felicity's entire body had frozen in shock. It took Caitlin repeating it a couple of times before the words actually made sense. Felicity, baffled, had asked Caitlin how the hell it was even possible—especially since she was so responsible with taking her birth control. Caitlin had then reminded her that she'd been on antibiotics when she had the flu, which could've tampered with its effectiveness. Felicity still couldn't wrap her head around it, because she'd specifically checked with her doctor to make sure she was in the clear. Apparently, Mother Nature thought differently.

"I'm assuming you haven't told Aaron yet," Sara replied before getting a thoughtful look on her face. "Unless you did and he doesn't—"

"I didn't tell him," Felicity interrupted. "I was going to but it...it wasn't the right time."

"Having had a few scares myself over the years, I can only imagine what you must be going through. But there's still hope. If he's a good guy and loves you like you've said, then there's no reason to think he won't be there for you," Sara stated. "Give him a chance before you let yourself get this upset."

"Sara," Felicity cautiously began, "telling him isn't an option."

She stared back at her, frowning. "Why not? Did you guys break up or something?"

"Not exactly." Felicity closed her eyes and ran a hand over her hair. The battle between telling Sara
the truth or feeding her more lies raged on inside. Keeping secrets is what brought her to this moment in the first place. The mere thought of burying the truth once more weighed heavily on her heart. Felicity took a deep breath. "Sara, Aaron's not the father. I mean, he is the father but Aaron isn't exactly Aaron. That's not his real name."

"I don't understand."

Burying her head in her hands, Felicity lamented, "I shouldn't tell you. I can't tell you. It's not safe, and it wouldn't be fair to drag you into all of this. But you're my best friend, and you should know who I really am. I want you to know the real me. You deserve the truth."

"What do you mean?" Sara tugged at her hands so she could see Felicity's face. "Felicity, you're not making any sense and, to be honest, you're kind of freaking me out. Whatever it is, just tell me. I can handle it."

Felicity stared anxiously at her friend, to which Sara gave her a resolute nod to continue. In a split second, Felicity's decision was made. "Oliver didn't die on the Queen's Gambit, Sara. He's alive," she revealed, "and he's the father."

Sara, stunned, opened her mouth to speak but abruptly shut it. She repeated the action a couple more times before managing to reply, "Explain that sentence."

So Felicity did. She explained everything from the beginning. Without getting into too much detail, she told Sara the basics about her real job at A.R.G.U.S. and how she'd been trying to find Oliver. She recounted their reunion and proceeded to describe the events that led all the way up to their fight mere days ago. She then finished with Mei's visit earlier and the predicament she now found herself in. Sara had mostly remained silent while Felicity spoke and continued not to say anything minutes after she'd finished. The other blonde looked utterly flabbergasted.

Sara opened her mouth a couple of times before the words finally came out. "So basically when I was talking to the Arrow or Hood as you call him, that was actually Oliver?"

"Yes."

"Holy shit," Sara mumbled, dazed.

"I know."

"He helped me get Brodeur."

"I know."

"But he's also been spying on you to bring back information to your enemy."

"Yes."

"And he's the father of your baby."

"Yup," Felicity drawled, remaining patient as Sara processed everything.

"And you're also a spy yourself. Like an honest to God government spy."

"Well, I'm a cyber intelligence analyst if you want to be accurate," Felicity corrected. "But yes, espionage is part of the job."

"Holy shit," Sara repeated.
"I'm sorry I lied to you," Felicity apologized. "As much as I love my job, the absolute worst part is not being able to share any of it with my loved ones."

"And I thought lying about taking down Brodeur sucked." Sara let out a low whistle. "You win."

"So on a scale of one to ten, how pissed are you right now?" she apprehensively inquired. It felt like her heart was in her throat as she waited for Sara to share her thoughts.

"Actually, I get it," Sara answered, seeming to amaze even herself. "I'm an offi—well, I was an officer of the law. I understand the need for secrecy involving cases. I just feel bad that I've given you such a hard time lately."

"You didn't know," Felicity objected.

"But even so, we're best friends, Felicity." She sighed and looked at a photo on the coffee table. It was of her and Laurel when they were kids, playing with their pet canary. "I owe you the truth, too," Sara declared. "As amazing as it felt to finally put Brodeur away once and for all, the satisfaction didn't last long. He was gone, but so was my sister—and my career. I thought bringing him down would take the pain away, but all it really did was delay it for a while. The grief hit me all over again in full force, and I wasn't ready for that."

"I thought you were still mad at me because I told Tommy," Felicity admitted. "It's my fault you're off the force."

"No, it's mine. It took me some time to realize that. The truth is you did me a favor. I'm not sure I'm cut out for it anymore. Maybe I never was. Playing by the rules has always been my father, but not me. Not when it means innocent people being at the mercy of criminals who can roam free," Sara explained, solemn. "The truth is I've unfairly ignored you, because I've been too caught up in my own suffering. I'm sorry about that, and I'm here now."

Felicity smiled and squeezed her hand. "Thank you."

"So do you know what you're going to do?"

"I don't know…maybe," Felicity responded. "None of my options are ideal."

"And you're sure you want to keep it? No judgment," Sara swiftly added.

"Yes," Felicity said firmly, her hand protectively going to her stomach. She might not fully be ready to be a mom, but she was extremely averse to the suggestion of terminating the pregnancy or giving up the baby. "I'm keeping it." Regardless of the intense hurt and anger she was feeling towards Oliver at the moment, this was a life they'd created together. Beneath all of the secrets and lies, there was love between them at some point. This baby was living proof of that even as Felicity's world started to crumble.

"What are you going to do about Oliver? You said you can't tell him, but you really only have one of two choices, Felicity. Either you confront him and give him a chance to explain or turn him over to the agency," Sara pointed out.

Felicity clutched at the locket around her neck and bit her lip, hard. Eventually, she said, "I don't think I could turn him in. I love him too much to sell him out, which is utterly ridiculous because he's the one who betrayed me." She let out a heavy sigh. "The fact that I can't trust him is also why I can't confront him. How will I know what he's telling me is the truth this time? I don't know much anymore, but one thing I do know for sure is that he'll never let me go if he finds out about this baby. Anyone who gets close to him is automatically in danger, and I can't take that chance. I can't drag an
innocent child into this mess. I won't."

"Then it seems you have your answer." Sara met her gaze and gave her a reassuring smile. "Just know that whatever you decide, I've got your back."

"Thanks." Felicity let go of the locket and patted Sara's hand. She knew exactly what she had to do now and prayed that she had the courage to see it through.

Using her key to unlock the back door, Felicity slipped silently into the mansion. It was almost nine o'clock, which meant that not many of the servants would be roaming around. Her mother, however, would be a different story. After spending years working the nightshift in the Vegas lounges and casinos, Donna continued to be a night owl. Some evenings she liked to curl up in the living room in front of a fire, drink wine, and watch romantic comedies. If her mom spotted her, it would be all over for Felicity for sure.

Thankfully, she made it to Malcolm's study without being spotted. Felicity took a moment to collect herself before knocking on the door. He called for her to come in. "Hey," Felicity greeted. "Thanks for letting me come over so late."

Malcolm gestured for her to take the seat in front of his desk. "You did say it was urgent. I hope everything is all right. Either way, I'm always here if you need me, Felicity," he stated. "So what can I help you with?"

"First, I need to make sure that whatever we discuss will remain between us. It's really important. It involves the agency," she stressed.

He sat up a bit straighter at the mention of the agency. "Of course."

"That includes my mother," Felicity added sternly. "She can't be brought into this. It's too dangerous."

"You have my word, Felicity," Malcolm reassured her. "I will keep our conversation in the strictest confidence."

Felicity held his stare until she was satisfied that he understood the gravity of the situation. "Okay. When we had lunch a couple of weeks ago, you mentioned that you had a knack for making things disappear."

Her stepfather's quirked brow signaled that his interest was definitely piqued. "That's right."

"Can you do the same for people?"

"I don't know if I understand," he said, his brow furrowing.

Felicity absentmindedly placed her hand on her stomach and steeled herself for what came next. "I need you to help me disappear from Starling City."
Locked Out of Heaven

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

July 7, 2007

Oliver couldn't get enough of Felicity as she bit his bottom lip enticingly. All too soon, she pulled away and he groaned in protest. Oliver tried to follow her, needing more of her intoxicating kisses, when she unexpectedly pushed him back into the couch. For a second, Oliver worried that he'd been too aggressive with her. It was easy to forget that Felicity was younger and less experienced than the other girls he'd been with—especially since she was usually so receptive to him. Oliver still tried to rein in his basic needs, which was why his body was currently taut with tension. As badly as he wanted Felicity, what she wanted and was comfortable with mattered more. It was a novel concept for a former playboy.

Oliver sent her a questioning look as she bit her lip. Felicity was clearly thinking about something. Seconds later, the crinkle between her brow disappeared and her eyes filled with determination. Without breaking eye contact, Felicity reached to pull off her shirt and revealed a black lace bra underneath. She then closed the gap between them and sucked enticingly on his lips. Oliver's mouth opened in surprise, and Felicity took full advantage. Her tantalizing tongue along with the feel of her bare skin brushing against his caused him to groan loudly.

Clutching her tighter, Oliver left open-mouth kisses along the side of her neck. She inhaled sharply when he bit the juncture of her neck and shoulder and smoothed it over with his tongue. He then traced her collarbone before moving lower. Felicity's hand wound in his hair when he nipped at the tops of her breasts. Meanwhile, his hands traveled up her waist and along the soft skin of her back. His fingers flirted with the clasp of her bra.

Before he really lost control, Oliver tore his mouth away and cupped her cheek. He made sure that she was looking at him. "Felicity?" he questioned, unable to mask the huskiness of his voice.

"It's okay," she whispered and touched their foreheads together. "I want you to." Felicity played with the hairs at the nape of Oliver's neck, breathing him in.

Her entire body was on fire as she yearned for more of his touch. The farthest she'd gotten with Cooper had been to let him feel her under her shirt. It had been fun fooling around at the time, but it had also been somewhat awkward. Felicity remembered feeling self-conscious as he fumbled with her bra and smooshed her breasts with his greedy hands—especially since she could sense all the while that he still wasn't satisfied.

Oliver was the total opposite. His touches were impassioned yet reverent. He didn't just seek her curves but learned them. That's how he knew running his fingers up her spine would tickle as much as it tingled. Felicity squirmed while also arching into him. Oliver smirked up at her before kissing the underside of her jaw. He knew exactly how to turn her on, but it didn't feel like a game to see how far he could get. It seemed like he genuinely wanted to make sure she felt good.

Slowly, Oliver unclasped her bra. He reached for the straps and proceeded to pull them down over her shoulders and arms. Felicity drew back enough to let him. Goose bumps formed on her skin from the light caress. Casting the bra aside, Oliver brought his hands to the curve of Felicity's waist. He held her before him for a few seconds, drinking her in. Her breasts were small but supple, colored like peaches and cream since they weren't tan like the rest of her body. Her nipples, pink
and pebbled, stood erect in arousal.

Felicity fidgeted from his intense stare. The confidence she’d felt moments before wavered and suddenly she blurted out, "I know I'm not like the supermodels you're used to. My left breast is totally bigger than the right and I—"

Oliver shook his head and silenced her with a kiss. "You're perfect." He kissed her until her body eased against his once more. A shiver traveled up her spine when his hands glided up her stomach and cupped her breasts. "You feel perfect," he murmured against her lips. She whimpered in pleasure as his thumbs proceeded to circle the sensitive nubs.

She let out a mewl of protest when he broke the kiss. It was followed by a moan as Oliver kissed his way down her chest. She clutched the strong, hard muscles of his back to anchor herself. Her entire body trembled in anticipation as he buried his face in her breasts. When his mouth finally enveloped her nipple, giving it a gentle tug and flick of this tongue, a loud groan tore from her throat. Her fingers dug into his scalp, keeping him close, as she leaned into him and urged him on.

Oliver lost himself in the haze of passion and lust as it clouded his mind. Nothing existed but Felicity and the way his name spilled from her lips in encouragement. Oliver didn't know when her hips had started to grind on top of him, but he returned it in kind. His hand slid down to her backside, cupping her fully and drawing her more firmly against him. He fought to catch his breath even as he lavished her other breast with equal attention.

"O-Oliver," Felicity stuttered in a hoarse voice. He could hear the fervor of her tone. Feel the desperate desire for release as she continued to relentlessly grind on his painfully hard shaft.

Tugging on his hair, she forced his mouth back to hers. The kiss was frenzied and rough, causing their teeth to gnash together from the intensity of it. She was so close. He could sense it as her movements became more erratic. One hand went to the back of her neck to keep her in place while the other took hold of her breast once again.

"I've got you," he growled lowly and massaged the center. He circled the nub over and over until she was writhing wantonly against him. Finally, he pinched it between his fingers while biting down on her bottom lip. Oliver swallowed the cry that followed and encircled her body as Felicity slumped against him.

Felicity buried her face in Oliver's neck as she tried to regain control of her breathing. Her heart continued to pound as the aftershock of her orgasm spread through her. A light sheen of sweat coated his skin. There was something so sexy and masculine about Oliver when he was sweaty that it just made her want to kiss every inch of him. Felicity settled for pressing a soft kiss to his shoulder, tasting the hint of saltiness.

"You okay?" Oliver asked after another silent moment. He buried his hand in her hair, gently stroking the strands and keeping her close.

"I'm great," Felicity answered and slowly leaned back to look at him. "I, um…I've never felt that before." She glanced away shyly, feeling her face flush.

Oliver brushed some of her hair aside and caressed her cheek. "I'm not sure I've ever felt that either."

"But I didn't do anything to you," she blurted out and shut her eyes in embarrassment.

He chuckled and shook his head at her in amusement before sobering. "You've already done more
February 20, 2013

Something was wrong. Oliver could feel it. It had been a few days since he'd heard from Felicity and even more since he'd actually seen her. After their disastrous conversation last week, he'd respected her need for some space. He hated the idea of leaving her when they were fighting, but she'd been right that they needed some time to cool off and think about things.

The separation now, though, was slowly driving him insane. Even worse was that he'd sent her a text the other day just to check in, and she hadn't responded back. At first Oliver thought that she could still be mad. The second time he texted her, he said he just wanted to hear from her and make sure she was okay. After the third unanswered text and a phone call, Oliver was feeling somewhat panicked. It wasn't like Felicity not to answer him at all, especially since he knew how worried she would get if the roles were reversed. Oliver didn't think she'd ignore him out of spite no matter how upset she was.

Oliver had left in the middle of a negotiation to drive to Starling. He'd originally told Diggle to stay behind, but his partner refused. If there was trouble, Diggle wanted to be his backup. Oliver spotted Felicity's red mini cooper parked outside next to the curb. It was early in the morning, so Felicity wouldn't have left for work yet. Diggle pulled up behind it and said he'd do a sweep of the area. Meanwhile, Oliver went to the front door.

Although he had a key that Felicity had given him, Oliver knocked gently on the door first. There was no answer, nor did he hear any movement inside. His worry returned. Maybe she's away on a mission, he told himself. She might not have needed her car if she was traveling with her team. But then why wouldn't she at least let him know she'd be going dark for a while? Something's not right, he repeated to himself.

Oliver reached into his pocket and pulled out the key. The door opened easily, and he flicked on the lights. The apartment didn't look any different. Everything was in its place, excluding her winter coat and boots that she usually kept by the door. Maybe she really was away, and he'd just overreacted. It could be that Felicity was more upset by their fight than he'd initially thought. He'd been obsessing over it himself, trying to figure out what to do.

Despite Dig's warning, Oliver had considered telling Felicity the whole truth about what he was doing and who exactly he was working for. Unfortunately, every scenario he imagined ended with Felicity either cutting him out of her life forever or deciding to help but ending up dead in the crossfire. Whatever the outcome, Oliver knew he'd be devastated if he were to lose her. Instead, Oliver settled on telling her a version of the truth. He'd give her the hope she needed for a future together without getting too much into the details. It was the most he could offer at the moment. He'd been planning to visit this weekend, so they could talk.

Oliver made his way to the bedroom. He would check the entire apartment to be sure. She could easily be in the bathroom getting ready and not have heard him. That scenario was quickly shot to hell as he was greeted by more stillness. Oliver only made it a few steps into the bedroom when he saw it on the bed. The cellphone he'd given her lay in pieces next to a slip of paper. Among the parts, clearly in the center, was the extraction tech. Oliver's heart was in his throat as he approached and reached for the note.
Dear Oliver,

This is the hardest letter that I will ever have to write. By the time you read it, I will already be gone. I wish it didn’t have to be this way, but you left me no choice. I once considered our love my greatest strength. Unfortunately, it’s become my greatest weakness. I wish I could look you in the eye and say this, but I don’t trust myself when it comes to you. Worst of all, I don’t trust you either.

The truth behind your lies has been revealed to me. I know about HIV, and you using me to further its nefarious agenda. I never thought anything could break my heart more than when I lost you on the Gambit, but you’ve proven me wrong. This betrayal has shattered me, and I still am not sure what to believe.

All I do know is that love is about inclusion. It’s about leaning on your partner when things get complicated. I see now that you don’t know how to do that. Maybe you do love me. If you did this to protect me like you always promised, then you clearly don’t trust me enough to let me in. And if you don’t love me, then I was clearly the fool. Whatever the reason, it’s over.

I’ve always loved you. More than you could possibly ever know. But now I finally need to let you go. Please don’t try and look for me, because you won’t find me. Goodbye, Oliver. I hope you enjoy your new life.

Felicity

P.S. I found this old photo while packing. I meant to give it to you before I went back to MIT and kept it all these years. I don’t need it now. It seems forever and always was a lot shorter than we expected.

Oliver stared at the note in shock. He read it over two more times, unable to completely comprehend what it meant. At some point, his hand started to shake. Felicity knew. She knew everything he’d done, and she’d left. This betrayal has shattered me... But now I finally need to let you go... the words echoed in his head, twisting his insides. Bile rose in his throat as unshed tears stung his eyes. This had to be a nightmare. After everything he’d been through, Oliver was no stranger to dark dreams. The worst ones were about losing the ones he loved, which most often starred Felicity.

He shook his head, forcing himself to snap out of it. Oliver had to wake up. He was going to wake up, and everything would be fine. The crippling pain in his chest would fade away, and he’d make this right. Felicity wasn’t lost to him, not yet. There was still time to talk to her and tell her the truth. Oliver would tell her everything and make sure she understood that it was all because he loved her.
He would never lie to her again. He would give her everything she wanted and more as long as it meant that he got to keep her in his life.

Looking down at the old photograph in his hand, Oliver felt the agony as if someone had stabbed him with a sword and twisted. She'd signed it "Forever and Always, Love Felicity" with a lipstick mark from her kiss that had since faded. They'd been so young, happy, and in love in that picture. They had their whole future ahead of them.

Oliver remembered the moment it was taken. His mother had invited the Merlys over for brunch. Thea had been happily snapping away with her new camera that she'd gotten for a photography class she was taking at camp. She kept making everyone try different poses. He'd been sitting on the couch with Felicity, trying to act casual and not stare at his beautiful (secret) girlfriend, when Thea cornered them. Accusing them of looking too stiff, she kept having them move closer and closer together to get the perfect shot. When Felicity was right next to him, he'd whispered something in her ear to make her laugh. Oliver had never seen the picture, but apparently Felicity had asked Thea for it. His sister had captured the moment perfectly, and it was hard to believe no one had figured out what was going on between them then. Anyone staring at it now would clearly be able to see the love there.

Oliver rubbed a shaky hand over his face. He didn't turn around when he sensed Diggle's presence behind him. He needed a moment to get himself together. He couldn't lose it just yet. He still had to figure this out.

"She's gone," Oliver said after a silent moment.

"I know," replied a female voice. It wasn't Felicity but sounded eerily familiar. A sense of déjà vu hit him, and he whipped around to find the source.

Oliver nearly lost his balance and ended up on the bed. If he wasn't sure this was a dream before, the ghost standing before him now had him convinced. The young, pretty Asian woman with raven black hair and a calm expression tore at his already fragile heart. "Shado," he said in a strangled whisper.

The ghost reeled back, just as shocked, and scrutinized him shrewdly. "How do you know my sister?" she demanded.

"Sister?" Oliver choked out, getting more confused by the second.

"I'm Mei. Shado was my twin sister. She's been missing along with my father for years." She added accusingly, "Felicity never mentioned that you knew her."

It took a few seconds for Oliver to process this new development. Too much was coming at him at once. Her name sounded vaguely familiar. Then it hit him. Mei was the name Felicity had shouted when she'd been shot at Monument Point. This was the team member that she'd saved. "Shado was a close friend. I cared about her. She never told me she had a twin sister, though, and I never mentioned Shado by name to Felicity..." he trailed off, continuing to stare at her like she was a ghost. The resemblance was remarkable yet jarring. So was the fact that his and Felicity's lives were far more interconnected than he'd thought.

Noticing that he was looking behind her, Mei knowingly declared, "Your partner can't help you. He's too busy having an unexpected reunion with his wife."

"Lyla's with you?"
Mei nodded curtly. "We've been keeping an eye on this place ever since Felicity fled."

Oliver swallowed the growing lump in his throat. "What do you mean she fled?" he growled.

She motioned to the letter in his hand. "You know exactly what I'm talking about. How do you think she found out you're working for H.I.V.E.? She got wind the leak in A.R.G.U.S. was traced back to her and left before we could bring her in for questioning. You're the reason she's been branded a traitor."

"It wasn't her fault. She didn't know what I was doing," Oliver was quick to defend Felicity. Some of the shock was wearing off, allowing his survival instincts to kick back in. He saw Mei tense, noticing how he'd taken on a more defensive stance.

"My superiors don't care. What's done is done, and they want answers." Her stare was penetrating. "And so do I." Oliver knew she was referring to her sister and father. He understood Mei's need for answers and was even sympathetic to it, but there was no way he could let A.R.G.U.S. capture him.

"I don't want to hurt you, Mei, but you're not taking me in," Oliver warned.

"I can try," Mei replied, matching the steel of his voice. It was the same stubborn tone Shado used to use with him when she was angry. God, he still couldn't believe that he was talking to her sister. "But I think you'll want to hear me out before you make a run for it."

"And why is that?"

"Because there may be a way for you to make it up to Felicity. Even if you do find her, you and I both know she won't listen to a word you have to say." Oliver was about to protest but she pressed on. "Think about it, Oliver. It would've been much easier and probably safer for her to seek refuge with you, but she didn't. She chose to leave you in the dark, too, and venture out on her own. You're the last person she trusts."

Mei didn't say anything Oliver didn't already know, and yet it felt like another punch to the gut. Felicity was a forgiving person by nature, but it was different this time. He knew exactly what Felicity was thinking. Wherever she was, Felicity was probably already blaming herself for trusting him—which meant that she believed the attacks on A.R.G.U.S. and the casualties that resulted were her fault. No amount of apologizing and telling her how much he loved her would ever be able to make up for that.

Oliver met Mei's expectant look head on, not dropping his guard for a second. "You have two minutes."

"No way."

"I'm telling you it's the same guy."

"It's not. I will bet you twenty bucks it's not."

Felicity smirked. It was like taking candy from a baby. "You have a deal, Queen. Look it up." She sat up from where she was sprawled out next to Oliver and waited patiently while he whipped out his phone.

After their heated makeout session earlier, they'd moved to the bed. Felicity, sensing the residual sexual tension between them, had fully expected Oliver to pounce on her a second time and finish what they'd started. The hungry look in his eyes and the bulge in his jeans were enough of an
indication that he wanted to. Instead, he'd simply handed her his shirt to wear, laid next to her, and started talking about casual topics like a new movie he wanted to see and how annoying it was that Tommy seemed incapable of turning on the dishwasher.

Their current debate was about the actor who voiced Aladdin. Felicity had told Oliver that it was the same guy who played Steve on Full House. Oliver had argued that it was some other guy that Felicity had never heard of. She knew the moment he found the answer, because Oliver's entire expression fell.

"Did you look it up?" Felicity expectantly questioned, attempting to keep a straight face.

"Hold on. I need a second source to verify—"

"Oh my God, Oliver," she interrupted, "just admit I'm right!"

He rolled his eyes and sulked. "I really thought it was that other guy."

"You owe me twenty bucks. Pay up, buddy," she laughingly teased and held out her hand.

Oliver begrudgingly sat up and reached for his wallet. He pulled out the twenty-dollar bill and handed it to her. "I don't know why I bet against you. You are a genius."

"And don't you forget it," she joked while taking the money. "A pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Queen." She moved to put it on her nightstand when she noticed that something else had fallen from his wallet and onto the bed.

Oliver saw it, too, and quickly reached to pick it up. Felicity, however, grabbed it first. She was utterly surprised to see that it was a picture of her from the trip to Ivy Town. Glancing up at Oliver inquisitively, she questioned, "Where did you get this?"

"Um, Tommy had a bunch of photos printed today and was going through them," Oliver answered awkwardly, which was a rarity for him.

"Oh," she mumbled. "So were you… did Tommy want you to give it to me?"

"Not exactly. I, uh, actually took it from the pile without him knowing."

She opened her mouth a couple of times to reply but nothing came out. Her shock intensified, along with the blush she felt coloring her cheeks. "Then why do you have it?" Felicity responded, feeling flustered.

Oliver shrugged as he searched for a logical explanation. He hadn't planned on Felicity knowing that he'd taken her picture. He was pretty embarrassed now that she'd seen it, especially since he'd swiped it on an impulse. "It's a really great picture of you and...and I wanted it," he finished lamely. What the hell was wrong with him? Oliver never got nervous like this around girls. Then again, Felicity wasn't just any girl to him.

She stared at it silently for a moment, contemplating. "You really think it looks good?"

He ran his finger lightly against her cheek. "I think you look beautiful, Felicity." Oliver then leaned in and placed a soft kiss on her lips.

"Then you should keep it," Felicity said and handed it back to him. She closed the distance between them for another kiss. This one was longer, deeper as she wrapped her arms around his neck. His skin felt warm and smooth to her touch, and the desire from earlier sparked back to life.
"Felicity," Oliver muttered against her lips. He started to move back, but her hold on him tightened. She kissed him thoroughly, making Oliver groan deep in his throat before his own hands were on her. "We shouldn't," he protested despite gripping her hips and dragging her up against him.

"Why not?" she challenged, nibbling on his lip.

"Because"—another hoarse moan—"I don't think I'll be able to stop myself this time."

"Maybe I don't want you to," she said and gasped when his hands ventured under her shirt to rub her back.

Oliver forcibly tore himself away from her then, breaking the kiss. "Felicity—"

"No, listen to me, Oliver," she interrupted. "I'm not some little porcelain doll that you have to worry about breaking."

"I know that."

"Then why do you keep holding back?" she countered. "Is it my age? Do you think I'm too young or —"

"No, it's not that," Oliver denied. "I mean, yes, you're younger so I don't want to push you into anything. But it's more than that."

Felicity waited anxiously as he gathered his thoughts. She would give anything to know what Oliver was thinking right now. Despite his hesitation, he hadn't moved away from her. Felicity took that as a good sign, at least.

"I really like you, Felicity," Oliver finally declared. "A lot."

"Okay..." Her heart had started thumping in her chest and butterflies formed in her stomach. Felicity, however, kept her expression neutral.

"So I don't want to screw this up." His history with girls in the past was pretty much a train wreck—Laurel especially. The pull toward Felicity was strong. Stronger than anything he'd ever felt before. Ever since he'd met Felicity, Oliver felt like he was standing on the edge of a cliff. And God help him, he wanted to jump. The desire to get lost in her was scary and intense. As badly as he wanted her, there was also a part of him that feared who he'd be after the fall.

"You won't," Felicity murmured. "I'll let you in on a little secret." She gave him a warm, reassuring smile. "I like you a lot, too."

Oliver, overwhelmed by the emotion he could see in her eyes, slowly drew her toward him for a tender kiss. Felicity immediately responded and wrapped her arms around his shoulders once more. It amazed him how she was small enough to fit entirely in his embrace while also being strong enough to demand more. Oliver obliged and slanted his mouth over hers to deepen the kiss while also lowering her gently onto the bed. They stayed like that for a while, with their mouths connecting over and over as their hands explored.

Felicity settled into the mattress, enjoying the way Oliver's weight pressed down on her. She felt warm, safe, and cocooned as he lavished her with kisses. This time when his hand reached for the bottom of her shirt, he didn't hesitate to drag it up and over her head. Their moans mingled when skin met skin. Unlike earlier, this position allowed every hard angle of his torso to touch her soft curves.
With his hands on her hips to keep her in place, Oliver started to mouth his way down her body. She arched against him when his tongue circled her belly button before sucking on the sensitive patch of skin. Her body nearly jumped when he nipped at her hip seconds later and kissed along the top of her shorts. Meanwhile, his thumbs dipped below the band to caress her pelvis before sliding around to cup her backside fully. Felicity gasped at the sensation, and goose bumps formed on her skin. Gripping his hair, she spurred him on while becoming a writhing mess beneath him.

When she felt him abruptly pull back, Felicity's eyes shot open. "Oliver," she huffed in protest. Not again, she thought as he climbed back up her body and hovered over her. Every part of her was on fire, yearning for more and building to a physical ache when it didn't come. "Don't stop."

Oliver took hold of her face, forcing her to meet his eyes. "Are you sure?"

Staring back, Felicity made herself think through the passionate haze. The decision she made in this moment would stay with her forever. Was this really what she wanted? Was she ready to take such a huge step? Was Oliver the right guy? This wasn't at all how she'd planned on spending her night. It wasn't like Felicity hadn't thought about sleeping with Oliver before now. With his amazing body and that charming smile, what girl's mind wouldn't go there? But those were nothing more than harmless fantasies. This was real, and there would be no take-backs. Everything would change.

"Felicity," he coaxed.

"Is it what you want?"

"I'm asking you," he said with a shake of his head, refusing to answer. Oliver's body was more than ready to go, but this wasn't about him. Felicity was clearly working it out in her head. Although Oliver had always wanted Felicity, he'd meant what he said before. He didn't want to screw this up, and pressuring her to do something she wasn't ready for would most definitely be a dick move.

Felicity thought she'd been fairly bold earlier, but now she found herself feeling shy and awkward. Oliver's concern, though, was touching. Everything about the way he treated her made her feel special. She loved the way he often gave her his full attention when they talked. She loved the feeling of his eyes on her when he thought she wasn't looking. She loved that he was so protective and always watching out for her. She loved that he listened so intently and tried to make her feel better when she was upset. She loved that he sought her out and opened up to her when he was upset in return. She loved when he called her beautiful—a compliment she didn't hear very often—and actually made her believe that it was true. She loved all of it. She loved him, Felicity realized.

"Yes," she finally answered while running her fingers over his shoulder and down his bicep. She kept going until her hand covered his on her face. "I'm sure. Oliver, I want you to be my first…"

Her declaration sent a jolt of charged heat through Oliver's body. No matter how many times he'd thought about it, he still couldn't believe this was actually happening. Even more surprising was the fact that he was nervous, too.

"I mean, if you want to." She was quick to elaborate, "This is my decision either way, but you've been hesitant so if you're really not into it—"

He had to stop her right there. "Felicity," Oliver cut her off. His stare was smoldering. "If I didn't care about you so damn much, I would've dragged you to my room back when we did those body shots."

Felicity couldn't help but laugh. "I don't know how, but that actually kinda made sense."
"I want you," he stated bluntly and dipped his head to lightly and teasingly caress her lips.

"I have no clue what I'm doing," she replied a little nervously. "What if I'm bad at it?"

"Not possible." He kissed her affectionately. "But I've got you. Do you trust me?"

"Yes," she said against his lips. "Do you have something?"

Oliver nodded and slid his other arm under her to bring her closer. She opened her mouth for him, allowing his tongue to slide forward to caress hers. He kissed her for a few minutes, helping her to relax against him. Felicity wasn't exactly tense, but there was a slight tremor coursing through her. He buried his face in her neck, finding the sensitive spot under her chin that he knew would make her shiver in a good way. Oliver felt a surge of satisfaction when it had the desired effect. Without stopping his ministrations, Oliver undid his jeans and managed to wriggle them off. He left his boxers on for the moment, intent on easing Felicity into what came next. He kissed the indent between her breasts while hooking his fingers into her shorts. He slowly lowered them down, and she lifted her hips to help him remove them more easily.

Felicity moaned when Oliver sunk back on top of her, feeling the outline of his length pressing against her center through the thin fabric of their underwear. Already feeling so hot and aroused, Felicity wondered how the hell she was going to withstand anything more. Her body quivered with a need to fill the emptiness that was intensifying in her core. Her hands greedily slid down his chest to his hard abs, marveling at his amazing body. His groan vibrated against the nipple he'd taken into his mouth, heightening her pleasure.

She stroked his abs a couple more times before sliding her hands back up his body. Felicity rubbed his strong shoulders, relishing the hard muscle. Oliver peppered her skin with kisses and nipped at her lips, causing her body to arch more readily against his. The friction of their naked flesh rubbing together tantalized every inch of her skin. The tremor coursing through her intensified when Oliver skinned his fingers along the sides of her panties and began to slide them down.

Whimpering in protest when he broke her hold, Felicity watched Oliver sit back on his haunches as he dragged the thin scrap of cloth down her thighs. He parted her legs and placed them on either side of his hips, exposing her completely to him. Felicity squirmed a little, naturally feeling self-conscious since this was the first time she'd ever let anyone see her so intimately. Despite the low light from her bedside lamp and the moon outside, she watched Oliver's eyes darken as he took her in.

He met her gaze and, without looking away, Oliver lifted her left leg to kiss the inside arch of her foot. His lips traced a line up the back of her calf. Felicity gripped the bed sheets when he sucked on the spot behind her knee, continuing up to her inner thigh. He stopped just shy of her center and repeated the action on her right leg. By the time he was finished, Felicity was already panting and moaning loudly with her head thrown back on the bed. It was a good thing her mom and Malcolm were at some charity auction tonight, because she would've been afraid they'd hear her even on the other side of the mansion.

Oliver, sensing that Felicity had had enough touching and teasing, removed his boxers and reached for the protection he always had in his wallet. He couldn't get enough of Felicity's soft, curvy figure. She was by no means fat, but she also wasn't as skinny as the other women he'd been with. Oliver couldn't wait to dig his fingers into her ample thighs as he buried himself deep inside of her. His erection had grown painfully hard, to the point that he had to take a couple of deep breaths to keep himself somewhat under control. He'd have to take his time and be gentle with her—at least at first.

Felicity's eyes widened at the sight of him. Before she could stop herself, she questioned, "Are you
going to fit?" She quickly slapped a hand over her mouth and scrunched her eyes closed, wishing she could sink into the mattress. She couldn't believe she'd actually said that out loud.

Oliver chuckled and shook his head in amusement. In true Felicity fashion, there was absolutely no filter. "We'll go slow," he promised and draped himself on top of her once again. He pried her hand away from her mouth, pecking her lips before moving up to her closed eyelids.

Slowly and shyly, Felicity opened her eyes to stare up at him. This was really happening. She was actually lying naked in bed with Oliver Queen. His large form covered her completely, allowing her to feel every minute ripple of his muscles. The tip of him was right against her sex, teasing her folds and making her ache for more. Ache for him.

He rested his forehead against her, so the tips of their noses brushed affectionately. "Ready?" Oliver cupped her cheek and ran his thumb over the seam of her lips, committing every line of her face in this moment to memory. Her crystal blue eyes were filled with nervous excitement, as well as something deeper that he couldn't quite decipher.

"Yes," she breathed, already clutching his back to prepare herself.

Oliver left a whisper of a kiss against her mouth as he gently pressed into her. Felicity gasped at the feel of him penetrating her folds and entering her. True to his word, Oliver went slowly but that didn't stop the discomfort. Felicity whimpered when he got about halfway, and her body automatically tensed from the pain. Her hand reached for his on her face, needing something to hold.

Oliver instantly paused and watched Felicity intently. Her face was scrunched, and he hated that he was the one hurting her. "You okay? Try to relax," Oliver coaxed, allowing her to interlace their fingers. He held onto her hand and kissed her forehead. Closing his eyes, he resisted the urge to push the rest of the way in. She was so damn tight, and the pressure mixed with pleasure had his body rioting.

"I'm okay. I just need a minute," Felicity muttered, already feeling a thin sheen of sweat forming on her body. Oliver continued to leave soft kisses along her forehead, down her face, and under her jaw. She could tell that he was trying to comfort her. Eventually, she nodded for him to continue and bit her lip when he filled her to the hilt.

Oliver took a moment to let their bodies adjust to the new sensation. Her walls pulsed around him, fitting him perfectly. Felicity was breathing heavily into the side of his neck while squeezing his hand and clutching his back. Winding an arm under her to keep her close and offer more support, Oliver withdrew slowly and thrust gently forward. Felicity's body went taut again from the shock of the new sensation, but she didn't tell him to stop. She followed his lead as he began to move within her. Her fingernails dug into his hard muscles. When her thighs eventually rose to his hips and her body arched more freely against him, Oliver knew that her pain was starting to turn to pleasure.

Felicity let out a low moan as the soreness subsided and was overshadowed by an explosion of erotic sensation. With every thrust, she felt Oliver pushing her limits—stretching and molding her to him all the while sending hot, vibrant waves of arousal straight to her core. It formed a coil low in her abdomen that wound tighter and tighter—ten times more intense than the one she'd felt a little while ago. All concept of time was lost to her as she got caught up in the passionate haze.

"Damn, you feel so good," Oliver groaned against the column of her throat. He needed to make this last. He was seeing stars as he thoroughly explored every inch of her tight, wet heat. He kept their pace steady, despite the way Felicity enticingly clenched her thighs around him and dug her heels into his backside. She lifted off the bed, crying into his mouth, when he hit a particularly sensitive
spot. Releasing her hand, Oliver wound his fingers into her dark locks and tilted her head so that he could kiss her more intimately. The tingle in his spine expanded.

Felicity's usually sharp mind felt like it was made of mush as Oliver overwhelmed her senses. The smell of his cologne mixed with his sweat. The taste of his mouth. The sound of his labored breathing and low grunts. The feeling of their slick bodies writhing in unison while their hips connected over and over again. And most intensely, the way his eyes captured hers in a single, meaningful moment of profound trust and passion. The love Felicity had been suppressing grew and swelled inside her chest as she gave everything to the man above her.

Oliver was back at the edge of the cliff, feeling like he was about to fall. It was unnerving how easy it was to lose himself in Felicity. He didn't know when he'd given her such power over him. When he'd had sex with girls he liked in the past, Oliver was still able to maintain some degree of separation and control over his emotions. As he sought release with Felicity, Oliver realized that control was gone. There was no separating himself from her physically or emotionally as they stayed wrapped in each other's arms. A small thread of panic formed inside of him, but he cast it aside for now.

"Oliver," Felicity muttered while running her hands up and down his back. The defined muscles rippled under her touch. "I-I think I'm close."

"Me, too," he breathed against her ear before taking the lobe into his mouth. Felicity moved her head to the side to give him more access, and he took advantage of the tender patch of skin behind her ear. Her fingernails scratched at his scalp alluringly.

"Kiss me," Felicity demanded. Both their lips were red and swollen from devouring each other but neither could stop. She needed that connection with him.

The arm he had under her glided down her spine to cup her backside on a more forceful thrust. Her entire body shuddered from it, and Oliver swallowed her cries before gripping her thigh. He hiked it up higher as he continued to move in and out of her at a more frenzied pace. Felicity responded immediately, her hips lifting off of the bed to meet his. She was like a livewire beneath him, shocking his system and rebooting it so it was difficult to remember anything that came before.

Felicity gripped Oliver's shoulders when she felt his hand that was kneading her breast dip lower between them. It skirted over her stomach and kept going until it found the sensitive bundle of nerves. Her hips bucked when he started massaging it, and she was shocked that her body could feel even more pleasure coursing through it. It hummed beneath her skin, seeking a way out until finally it did. The coil didn't just snap, it exploded as her walls contracted around him. If she didn't have him as an anchor, Felicity could've sworn she would've floated away.

Her walls contracting around him, causing them to tighten further around his shaft, had Oliver following seconds later. His entire body seized and let go as they rode the waves of their climax together. Although their hips had finally stilled, he couldn't stop kissing her. They tried to catch their breath in between, neither wanting to break the intimate bubble they'd formed.

"What?" he whispered when he felt her smiling against him.

Felicity broke the kiss but stayed close enough so that they still brushed his when she spoke. "I'm glad it was you."

He brushed his fingers along her pink, flushed cheeks. He took in her dark hair that was spread across the pillow, making her look wild and beautiful, and his heart clenched. "Me, too."
Waiting in the shadows, Oliver strained to hear any sign of movement. It had been a while since he'd sneaked into the Merlyn mansion, and it was oddly comforting to know that the strategy had remained the same. He felt like a caged animal inside of Malcolm's study as he contemplated how to get answers out of him. Malcolm would probably be pissed when he found out, but that's not what mattered right now.

Finally, he heard heavy footsteps walking down the hall. The door to the study opened, and Malcolm paused in the doorway. "You can come out, Oliver," he knowingly declared. Oliver obliged, since there was no reason to keep up the pretense. "Have you been waiting long?"

"Long enough," he said testily.

Malcolm's brow lifted inquisitively before shutting the door and locking it. "Good thing you have experience being a ghost, otherwise my wife would've been in for quite the surprise."

"Have you heard from Felicity recently?" he questioned, getting straight to the point.

"No," Malcolm replied. "Not since I had lunch with her a couple of weeks ago."

Oliver looked at him skeptically. "Since when do the two of you go on lunch dates?"

"Donna had to cancel and so I offered to step in," he shrugged like it was no big deal. "We went for Mexican and had a lovely time. Is there something wrong with having a little father/daughter time?"

"That's the last you heard from her? What about Donna?" he pressed. "Has Felicity called her?"

"Oliver, is there something you'd like to tell me?" Malcolm questioned with a frown. "I'm getting the sense that something is wrong."

Oliver sighed in frustration and rubbed his hands over his face. "Felicity's gone."

"I don't understand."

"She left me a note. She knows I'm working with H.I.V.E. and found the tech I put in her phone. A.R.G.U.S. knows, too, and they're convinced she's an accomplice. She fled Starling, but they're hunting her," Oliver explained in a strained voice. "We have to get to her first."

"Don't worry, son. We'll find her."

Malcolm put a hand on his shoulder, which Oliver shook off. The older man looked unfazed.

"This is all your fault," Oliver accused, pointing his finger at him. "You put her in danger by having me spy on her, and now I can't even help her because she doesn't trust me."

"I have to follow orders, too, Oliver," Malcolm replied. "It's what Darhk wanted."

"Screw Darhk!" he exploded, not giving a damn if anyone heard him. "She's your family. She comes first. If anything happens to her—"

"It won't. Felicity is smarter and more resourceful than the two of us combined. She can handle herself, Oliver."

"But if they find her—" he growled.

"They won't, because we'll get to her first. She'll probably check in with her mother or Tommy at some point. When she does, we'll be ready."
"This is between you and me," Oliver warned and stared down Malcolm. If looks could kill, the older man would already be dead. "H.I.V.E. is not to be involved. Do you understand? If she's seen as a liability, he'll kill her. And if something happens to her, then I'm coming for you."

Malcolm smiled pleasantly, though it still had a disturbing quality to it. "I have to say, Oliver, your devotion to her is quite touching. I can only imagine how challenging this is for you."

Oliver glared back, unmoved by his attempt at cordiality.

"We won't let anything happen," Malcolm promised in a calming voice. All it did was further grate on Oliver's nerves. "I realize that this is a trying time, but there is some good news."

"What?" he gritted out.

"You might not want to hear this, but Darhk's been impressed with how well you've followed orders. Therefore, he's finally approved your ascension to the council. He believes you're ready to take your father's place." Malcolm reached into his pocket and held out a small pin. It had a H surrounded by honeycomb symbols. It was the pin all members wore while the council was in session.

Oliver took the pin and clenched it in his hand. He felt the sharp sting of the needle in his palm. "You're right. I don't want to hear it."

Chapter End Notes

Okay guys, what did you think? Do you hate Malcolm even more now? Wondering what's next for Olicity in both timelines? This chapter concludes Part 1 of this story. Part 2 is going to be very interesting. Still so much more to learn, and I'll give you a little hint about what to expect next chapter. There will be a time jump...looking forward to your comments!
Hey guys, thank you so much for your comments and kudos last chapter! We are now starting Part 2 of this fic. As I said last chapter, there is a time jump. We're diving right into it head on, and I'm just so thrilled to get to this part of the story. If you go on my Tumblr, I also posted pics of a pregnant Felicity so you can get a glimpse of her new life and the time in between. There will be edits of her and the baby coming, as well. So keep an eye out for that.

I really hope you guys enjoy this chapter. Please read and let me know what you think! Also a Happy Thanksgiving to my fellow Americans celebrating this week!

PART 2

March 12, 2014

It was the first warm, sunny day in over a week, and Felicity decided to take full advantage. She was sick of being trapped inside the house after the endless rain they'd just experienced. The winter had also been particularly bad, so the sudden change in weather was a welcomed relief. She could finish up her newest IT project later when Sara came home. Right now, all of Felicity's attention was on the small, squirming, blue-eyed baby boy in front of her.

He was on his back on the blanket she'd laid out in the backyard. His big blue eyes were wide and staring up at her in anticipation. When he gurgled, his little chubby legs flailing, she knew that he
was getting impatient. He was a constant ball of energy, which meant that Felicity had her hands full more often than not. She didn't mind in the least.

Leaning forward so that she was hovering over him, Felicity covered her face. She waited a few seconds before opening her hands and shouting, " Peek-a-boo! " His high-pitched squeal in excitement tugged at her heart. Felicity loved that she could make him laugh now. It was by far the best sound in the world. She did it a few more times and even leaned down to blow a raspberry on his belly. He went wild at that and screeched again.

The dog’s head popped up from where he was resting under a nearby tree. He looked over at them curiously. When he realized that Connor's sounds were playful and not from pain, he was content to go back to his nap. Felicity hadn't wanted to get a dog at first; it had been all Sara's idea. They already had their hands full taking care of an infant, and Felicity thought a dog would be yet another strain on their already sleep-deprived selves.

But then Sara had come home just before Christmas with a young golden lab in tow, talking about how he’d been abandoned, overstayed his time at the shelter, and would be put down if someone didn't take him soon. Felicity had to admit that he was a beautiful dog, and one look at those sad, brown eyes had her huffing in surrender. Sara was responsible for training him, but Felicity's biggest concern had been how he behaved around the baby. Thankfully, Lucky —Sara thought it was fitting considering how she'd rescued him in the nick of time—was a gentle dog. He ended up being protective of Connor especially and would often growl if someone they didn't know approached him.

Felicity continued their game of peek-a-boo. "Where's Mommy?" she cooed. Connor reached out to touch her face. He was in that stage where his tiny fingers reached for almost anything. Then, when he got his hands on it, right into his mouth it went. Felicity was constantly sterilizing everything because of it, to which Sara said she was probably going overboard. When Felicity had been pregnant, she'd spent a lot of time observing other mothers with their kids. Some of them looked totally frazzled as they fussed over every little thing their child did. Felicity promised herself she wouldn't get that crazy, but that had been shot to hell when Connor did finally come along. Excessive worrying, apparently, was a common companion to a first-time mom.

Her cell phone started ringing. Seeing that it was her mother, Felicity let out a groan. She knew exactly how this conversation was going to turn out. If she didn't answer, though, it'd be worse. She reached for Connor and put him under his play gym. The mat was shaped like a yellow car and had a bunch of plastic and plush toys that hung overhead. They would keep him good and entertained for a little while. She'd barely had him positioned before he was already reaching for them.

"Hi, Mom," Felicity finally answered.

"Felicity, honey, I'm glad I was able to get a hold of you."

"Is everything okay?"

"It's perfect. I wanted to run an idea by you. I was talking to our travel agent the other day..."

Here we go, Felicity thought.

"And she says there's this great deal going on right now for a luxury cruise to the Bahamas. There are only a couple of suites left but if we give her an answer by the end of the day, she could probably —"

"Mom, I can't go on a cruise right now."
"Sweetie, you can't work 24/7. You need to have fun and be with your family. It's been over a year since we've last seen you, and this cruise would be so much fun. Tommy has a new manager at the club who can take over for the week, and Thea's got spring break coming up. She agreed to cancel her plans and come with us if you said yes."

"What about Malcolm?" Felicity had wished he'd called and given her the heads up about this one. Although it wouldn't entirely be his fault if he couldn't discourage her mother from one of her big ideas. Donna Merlyn was a force to be reckoned with when she set her mind to something.

Her mother sighed heavily. "Your stepfather has been a little too preoccupied with work lately. Seems you two have that in common, so he can't come."

"Mom, I'm in the middle of consulting on a huge project. I can't just take a vacation right now."

"Can't you at least ask? I miss you, baby. You won't even let me come and visit you in Boston."

"Mom, I told you when I got my promotion that I'd be traveling a lot."

"Well, you need to take a break sometime. You'll burn yourself out if you don't. Please, baby?"

Her mother was laying the guilt on thick. Felicity closed her eyes and took a breath. "I'll ask my boss," she placated her. "But no promises." It was the only way to get her off of her back.

Donna squealed on the other line. "Thank you! I need to know by tonight."

Connor made a loud noise when he reached the mini stuffed octopus hanging over his head. It squeaked when he squeezed it.

"What's that sound?" He gurgled again. "Is that a baby there with you?"

"It's my neighbor's kid. I'm babysitting him." A wave of guilt settled in the pit of her stomach at the lie.

"Again? Can't she afford a nanny or something? Not that I don't love babies," Donna added. "You should send a picture! I'd love to see the little guy you spend so much time with."

That was totally out of the question. One look at Connor and her mother would see the striking resemblance. There was also no telling who could be monitoring Donna's phone. Felicity was always very careful to cover her tracks when she reached out to her family. All it would take is one mistake, and this life they'd built would be in jeopardy. Felicity mumbled some excuse about her neighbor being strict about that stuff and how she had to go because the baby needed a diaper change. When she finally cut the call, Felicity collapsed onto the blanket with a huff.

Soft panting sounded near her ear, and she felt Lucky nuzzling her. Felicity gave him a couple of affectionate pats before sitting up. She let Connor play for a few more minutes and then scooped him up. She needed to get the mail, feed him, and then set him down for his afternoon nap. Connor's face scrunched in protest, and he whined.

"Aw, don't cry, baby." Felicity lifted him in the air and brought him down to her face. She did it a few more times before showering him with kisses.

Connor was smiling again, and Felicity was relieved to avoid a crying fit. He wasn't a constant crier but when he did, her baby boy sure did have a set of lungs. Just in case, she grabbed his favorite stuffed animal. It was a plush yellow duckling they'd named Sir Quackers, and it was almost the same size as him. Connor especially loved sleeping with it in his crib, which had led to a solid hour
of crying the previous night when neither she nor Sara could find it.

Felicity stood with Connor and adjusted his sweater to make sure his back was fully covered. Despite the warmer temperature today, there was still a chill in the air to remind them spring hadn't arrived just yet. Connor burrowed into her neck. With Sir Quackers tucked under his arm, his hand buried itself in her hair. He loved to feel her curls and squeeze them in his tiny fist. Occasionally he gave them a painful tug, which she was trying to teach him not to do. Felicity ran her own hand over his soft, wispy brown hair as they walked to the front of the house. Lucky, naturally, trailed alongside them.

There wasn't too much mail today—a couple of department store ads, a monthly bill, and a small package from Merlyn Global. It had to be the processor she'd been waiting for. Connor reached for the mail, but she kept it away. No way was he putting any of that disgusting stuff in his mouth. Felicity had almost made it free and clear when she heard someone call out her name. She silently cursed under her breath.

"Megan, wait!" shouted Laura Hoffman. She was Felicity's annoying neighbor across the street. Laura was nice but nosy. She just had this way of grating on someone's nerves without realizing it. Sara usually had much more patience dealing with her than Felicity.

"Hi, Laura," Felicity replied in her most polite voice. "Nice day, isn't it?"

"It's beautiful out," Laura agreed. "It's about time we got some good weather." As usual, the middle-aged woman honed right in on Connor. "Oh gosh, you are so adorable. Hi, Connor. Can you say hi?"

Unlike Felicity when she was a baby, Connor wasn't shy. He loved people and adored any extra attention that he got. He stared back at Laura but didn't crack his usual smile. Apparently, he didn't feel like dealing with Laura at the moment either. He truly was her son.

"He's getting so big. I still remember the day you first brought him home. He's got to be about five months now, right?"

"Almost six," Felicity answered.

"Enjoy it while you can. They grow up so fast." She eyed Felicity. "I see you're still breastfeeding him. That's really the best thing. Breastfed babies get so many more nutritional benefits."

Only Laura wouldn't have a qualm about staring and commenting on a nursing mother's boobs. Felicity nodded, mildly annoyed, as she scanned the seemingly perfect suburban neighborhood. An unexpected chill went up her spine that had nothing to do with the temperature. She didn't know why, but she got the strangest feeling that they were being watched. "Right," she mumbled.

"Oh, and tell that cousin of yours I found the recipe for mac and cheese in the slow cooker. She was asking me about it the other day, and I couldn't for the life of me remember what I did with it. My kids have been driving me nuts lately. I'm lucky I can remember anything." Laura was obsessed with her stupid slow cooker and had given one to her and Sara as a housewarming gift. That woman could talk for hours extolling its usefulness.

"I'll let her know," Felicity said as the odd feeling passed. It was probably just her usual paranoia flaring to life.

"It's so simple." She declared with a flick of her hand, "Even a non-cooker like you could do it."

"Then it must really be something." Felicity's cheeks were beginning to get sore from forcing a smile.
She glanced back at her house, a.k.a. her salvation, and said, "Look, Laura—"

"Oh, what a beautiful locket you have on," she suddenly complimented. Felicity looked down to see that Connor was playing with it. "Where did you get it?"

Felicity hesitated before saying, "It was a gift." Her voice sounded more somber than she'd intended. Laura, of course, picked up on her tone instantly. "From Connor's father?"

They were so not having that conversation. "Laura, you know, I'd love to chat but I really have to feed him and put him down for his nap," she rushed out and already started turning towards the house.

"Oh, of course. I understand. We'll talk again soon."

"Come on, Lucky," Felicity commanded. They were almost to the front door.

"Bye, Connor," Laura called after them.

Felicity waved politely before slamming the door and rolling her eyes. She'd already reached her limit of the day with that woman. After setting the mail on the side table in the foyer, Felicity went upstairs to Connor's room. She sat in the rocking chair to feed him. When he was done, she gently rocked him back and forth. The soothing, swaying motion put him out like a light.

When he was sound asleep, Felicity placed him in his crib with Sir Quackers. Her heart swelled with love watching him. He was still the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. It was in the still, quiet moments when she watched him that she was struck by how much Connor looked like his father. Connor had the same peaceful vulnerability he got while sleeping. Unconsciously, Felicity's hand went to the locket that hung around her neck. The ache in her heart she'd mostly managed to ignore flared up fiercely, once again. She closed her eyes and took a breath. The past was behind her. With her new life and responsibilities, it was imperative that she kept moving forward.

Felicity tenderly stroked Connor's head and turned on the baby monitor before leaving. She'd just shut his door when the house phone rang. Felicity rushed to pick it up, not wanting it to disrupt Connor's nap. He'd be cranky the rest of the day if he didn't get his sleep.

"Hello?" Felicity answered. There was no response. "Is anyone there?" The line remained silent. She checked the caller ID but saw that it was blank. The call cut out after a few seconds. The creepy feeling returned.

Heading downstairs to the study, Felicity needed to be sure and opened her computer. She checked the security system she had in place. Nothing looked amiss, and there were no warnings that any of her correspondence had been traced. Felicity leaned back in her chair and sighed. She was probably sleep deprived. A nap would do her good, but she wouldn't be able to rest feeling so on edge. She might as well work and got up to retrieve the package from Merlyn Global. Her report on the prototype processor was due by the end of the week to the R&D director, and any quiet moments she did have could not be wasted if she was going to keep up her side of the bargain with Malcolm.

Although she'd been desperate when first going to Malcolm for help disappearing, Felicity hadn't felt comfortable taking the money he'd offered her. He tried to explain that they were family and she should take it, but Felicity was adamant that they have an equal exchange in their agreement. She didn't want to feel like she would owe him more than she already did. The deal they'd struck was that as long as she was consulting and developing tech for his company, under her alias "Megan Kuttler," he would help keep her hidden and provide her with financial compensation. Nothing too
extravagant, but a good enough salary that she and Sara could rent the beautiful house they lived in now. Their arrangement had worked well thus far. The only detail she'd kept from him was Connor. Malcolm understood the importance of keeping her mother in the dark about the threat from A.R.G.U.S., but Felicity wasn't sure he'd be okay with her keeping the baby away from the family. Not to mention the questions he'd be asking about the father, and Felicity just couldn't discuss all of that with him. It would open Pandora's Box, and she was nowhere near ready for that yet.

"So CJ's finally asleep," Sara announced as she walked into the kitchen.

Felicity was putting the last of the dishes in the dishwasher. "Good. Thanks, Sara."

"No problem. I missed the little guy. I'd much rather spend the night with him than doing security sweeps."

"Rough day at work?" Sara had gotten a job as a security guard at a local corporation. She didn't particularly like it, but the money wasn't bad. Every little bit helped.

"Not only is my manager a hard ass, but he's a stupid hard ass. Tried telling him why one of the protocols was incorrect and he got all butt hurt about it. Now I'm working the nightshift Friday."

"I can always hack the work schedule if you want," Felicity joked while she wiped down the kitchen counter.

Sara laughed and shook her head. "No, that's okay. But I appreciate the offer. What did you and CJ do today?"

"The weather was so nice that we played outside for a little bit. Also ran into Laura."

"Bet you loved that," Sara quipped while filling Lucky's bowl with food. He was already trying to push past her to eat.

With a roll of her eyes, Felicity replied, "She said to let you know she found the mac and cheese recipe for the slow cooker."

Sara chuckled again. "Oh, good. I was starting to get worried."

"She also not-so-subtly asked about Connor's father again."

Sara crossed her arms and leaned against the counter. "Gotta give her points for persistence. What was her tactic this time?"

Felicity kept her eyes on the stain she was trying to remove from their white countertop when she said, "She saw Connor playing with my locket."

"I noticed that you were wearing it today, too. Why is that?" She was attempting to sound casual. When Felicity didn't answer right away, she continued, "Could it be that you miss him?"

"Sara," Felicity warned.

"It's okay if you do," she said tentatively. "You loved him and—"

"And he betrayed me. That's all there is to it," the blonde cut in. "Since when are you all of a sudden on his side?"
"I'm not on his side, Felicity," Sara objected. "What I am is worried about you. It's been over a year since we've come to Ivy Town, and we're no closer to figuring out what we're going to do long-term. Tommy texted me today asking if I'd talked to you recently and practically begged me to convince you about the cruise with your family."

Felicity threw the dishcloth over the faucet and washed her hands. "Well, I already texted my mother that I can't go."

"Felicity, your family isn't stupid. They can sense that something isn't right. Maybe you should go just this once. I could take some time off work and watch CJ while you—"

She was quick to reply, "No, absolutely not." The mere thought of leaving her baby filled her with extreme anxiety.

A flash of hurt crossed Sara's face and she muttered, "I would keep him safe. You know that."

Felicity's expression was sympathetic. "Sara, this isn't about you. I know you would protect Connor with your life. But the reality of the situation is that my son and I are being hunted by not one but two secret organizations. Quite frankly, we're lucky we've managed to stay off the radar this long. They're no doubt keeping an eye on my family and if I'm spotted with them, it's all over. They'll take me in for sure."

Sara walked over to the fridge and grabbed a beer. Felicity watched her enviously. She sure could use some red wine right about now. Technically, there were safe ways to drink alcohol while breastfeeding, but Felicity had read the studies about some of the effects it could have on the baby's development. She, personally, didn't want to chance it.

Felicity chose her next words carefully. "Sara, you have no idea how grateful I am that you've been by my side through all of this. As amazing as Connor is, this has also been one of the hardest times in my life. Your help and support have meant the world to me."

"But," Sara knowingly interjected.

"I think we've built a pretty great life here, but this isn't your fight. You don't have to stay. So if you feel like you want to go home to Starling or explore other things, I would understand. The last thing I want is for Connor and I to hold you back."

Sara put aside her beer and leveled her friend with a fierce look. "Felicity, I love you but if I ever hear you talk about you and Connor like you're a burden to me ever again, I am going to kick that fabulous ass of yours into next week," she declared. "Just because we're pretending to be family doesn't mean it's not true. And just like a real family, we look out for each other. It was my choice to come with you, and it's my choice to stay. But as perfect as this life and place seems, it's incomplete. As long as we have to keep looking over our shoulder, never trusting anyone, it's not really living. Getting caught isn't my only fear for you. It's letting the years pass by as you miss out on your real life, and it's only going to get tougher as Connor gets older."

"You think I don't know that?" Felicity countered. "It's my biggest fear, too, but what choice do I have right now? I'd rather live a lie together safe with my baby than put him in danger or, God forbid, have him taken away from me. I can't lose him, too, Sara." Her eyes watered. "It would kill me."

Sara crossed the distance and pulled Felicity into a hug. "I know that," she soothed. "But sooner or later, we have to face this. That's all I'm trying to say."
Felicity clung tightly to her best friend as a few tears slipped from her eyes. She didn't want to fully break down and cry, because she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to stop. *Keep moving forward.* That was her motto.

"I just need a little more time," Felicity whispered.

Patting her back, Sara replied, "Okay."

The house phone rang just as they started to pull away. "I'll get it," Felicity mumbled and wiped at her eyes. She lifted it to her ear. "Hello?" No one responded, but the line was definitely open.

"Hello?" The caller ID once again failed to list a source. "Who the hell is this? If you have something to say, then say it. Otherwise, don't call back here again." She slammed the phone down. That creepy feeling returned.

Sara looked concerned. "What was that about?" she asked as Lucky abruptly lifted his head from his food. He glanced toward the sliding glass door and trotted over.

Felicity watched him inquisitively. "That's the second time today that someone called but didn't say anything."

"Did you trace it?"

"I couldn't find the source. But I checked the security system. Nothing was flagged." She watched Sara intently. "What's that look for?"

"I got the same kind of call the other day. Didn't really think anything of it at the time but…"

"You think it's more serious?"

"I don't know. But can we really afford to overlook things like this?"

Sara had a point there. With a nod, Felicity stated, "I'll run a more comprehensive trace and see—" She didn't even get to finish her thought before Lucky growled under his breath and started barking like crazy. Seconds later, the alarm in the house went off. Sharing a horrified look, the two women sprinted into action. Sara went for the bottom drawer in the island to retrieve a gun while Felicity grabbed her tablet and pulled up the security feed. For it to go off like that, someone must've tried to tamper with the power source.

"Oh God," Felicity exclaimed.

"How many?" Sara knowingly questioned, clicking off the gun's safety. The dog was still going crazy, growling and scratching at the glass.

"Three in the back, two in the front."

"Go upstairs with Connor. I'll handle things down here."

Felicity glanced at the hallway that led to the staircase. Her instincts were screaming for her to go with Connor, but she also didn't want to lead the danger directly to him. "Sara, I can't leave you down here alone and outnumbered."

"Yes, you can. I'm a cop, remember? This is what I do. Go upstairs and protect your son," she ordered.

There was no time to argue. "Be careful," Felicity replied.
"You, too."

Felicity hugged her quickly and flicked off the lights as she made her way to the stairs. With her cell phone in hand, Felicity dialed Malcolm's number as she went straight for the linen closet in the hallway upstairs. She cursed under her breath when he didn't answer but left a quick message, so he'd know what was going on. Felicity put it on vibrate before digging under a pile of towels for a gun. They'd stashed a bunch throughout the house for situations just like this.

There was a cacophony of sounds all at once. Felicity had just managed to turn off the blaring alarm from her phone—she didn't want any of her neighbors to come investigating and get hurt—when glass shattered downstairs. It sounded like they'd broken through the back doors. Gunshots followed and intermingled with Lucky's aggressive barking. There was pounding on the front door until it burst open with a violent *thud*. Connor started crying soon after, his loud wails echoing down the hall. Felicity hunkered down behind the wooden dresser in the hallway that was right outside his door. It gave her the perfect cover as she watched the stairs, her gun aimed and loaded.

More shots were fired, followed by the sound of a struggle with broken glass and smashed furniture. Sara was probably trying to pick off each intruder one by one. Lucky's barking was louder, like he was closer. Felicity realized that he must be at the bottom of the stairs, guarding the way to Connor. She felt a surge of affection for that dog and made a mental note to thank Sara later for talking her into getting him—assuming they had a later. Felicity shook away her doubts. That kind of thinking was nothing more than a distraction.

Someone grunted and more furniture broke. Another gun went off and an ominous *thud* resulted. All that could be heard afterward were heavy boots and Lucky's growls. *They got Sara*, Felicity realized. A chill went up her spine when Lucky yelped and then whimpered. He was also silent. Felicity's terror and concern only lasted a second. She was alone now, and her protective instincts flared. Felicity let the determination and rage fill her as she cocked her gun. She'd never killed anyone before, but her hand remained steady. Boots pounded on the stairs, getting closer, and mingled with Connor's distant cries. Whoever these bastards were didn't matter. They weren't getting anywhere near her son. As soon as Felicity saw the first masked intruder sprinting toward the top, she fired without hesitation.

July 8, 2007

The sun was barely poking over the tops of the trees outside when Oliver awoke. He was lying on his stomach, facing the window, but he wasn't alone. He felt a slight weight on his back. It took a few seconds for him to realize where he was and who he was with. Slowly and carefully, Oliver turned over so that he was facing Felicity. She was still sound asleep with her dark hair fanned across the pillow.

Oliver watched her silently for a few minutes. She looked so young and beautiful in the early morning light. The same overwhelming feeling of emotion swept over him like it did last night. Except instead of teetering over the edge of an unforeseen cliff, Oliver felt like he was already in a free fall. He wasn't sure what to make of it, seeing as though he'd never felt like that before. It was new, intense, and scary as hell.

Needing to get a grip and feel more like himself, Oliver quietly slipped out of bed and searched for his clothes. When he was fully dressed, he looked between Felicity and the balcony. Should he wake her before he left or just let her sleep? Oliver didn't know what exactly he was feeling but quickly realized what a jerk move it would be if he did just take off without telling her. He sat on the side of
the bed and leaned over to kiss her cheek. After a few more affectionate kisses, Felicity shifted in bed and slowly opened her eyes.

"Oliver?" she questioned, her voice laden with sleep and confusion.

"Hey," he murmured and caressed her cheek. "How are you feeling?"

It took a moment for her to answer. Felicity was almost as disoriented as he'd been when he first woke up. "Sore but good. Really good," she added with a shy smile.

"Good," he muttered and kissed her lips.

Noticing that he was fully dressed, Felicity asked, "Are you leaving?"

"Yeah. I figured I better go while it's still early. Don't want your mom or Malcolm to catch me sneaking out." He added, "Plus, I have to get back to the loft and get ready for brunch with my parents."

"You sure?" Felicity stroked his arm. "We still have some time if you want to stay. My mom and Malcolm won't be up for a while yet." She skimmed his lips enticingly.

A part of him really wanted to stay, but that panic he'd pushed aside last night flared back to life. "I really have to go."

"Oh," she commented softly and drew back. "Okay." Judging by her disappointed tone, she was anything but okay with it.

"I'll call you first chance I get later."

"Oliver," she halted him before he could get up. "Everything is okay, right? You're not regretting last night?"

Oliver watched her gnaw anxiously on her bottom lip. He brushed his thumb over to release it before kissing it himself. "No." That much was true. As odd as he was feeling, Oliver found that he didn't regret anything that had happened between them. "You were perfect." Almost too perfect, he added to himself. "I'll call you later. Promise."

That seemed to placate her and she nodded in understanding. "Have fun at brunch," she teased, knowing how much he must actually dread it.

Oliver smirked. "I'll try. I'll mostly be thinking of you the whole time, though."

"Good," she kidded and released him with one last kiss.

Heading for the balcony, Oliver chanced one more look at her. The sight of her naked in bed almost had him going back if not for the unnatural weight on his chest. He needed to get a damn grip. This was Felicity. He'd always felt so comfortable around her. Why had that suddenly changed, especially since he'd been dreaming about this very moment for weeks now?

Oliver climbed over the railing and onto the trellis. The closer he got to the bottom, the more his stress eased. It was only when he was in his car and out of sight from the mansion that he finally breathed a full sigh of relief.
Oliver let out a sigh of relief when the video conference call was over. The stoic expression he'd put on for Darhk and the other council members left his face, replaced with a weary frown. He sat with Malcolm and Dig in the living room of Malcolm's cabin in the woods of Ivy Town. The other men reporting to Malcolm, meanwhile, surveyed the perimeter. Malcolm, with Darhk's permission, had requested Oliver and Dig's presence yesterday but had yet to say why they were specifically needed.

"You look tired," Malcolm commented.

"I didn't get much sleep last night," Oliver grumbled.

"I probably should've waited to give you those leads. I should've known you'd be pouring over them until the early hours of the morning."

"You know I won't stop until I find her."

Malcolm got up to pour himself a glass of scotch. "You might not want to hear this, but perhaps you should accept the fact that Felicity simply doesn't want to be found." He poured two more, one for Oliver and the other for Dig.

"You're right. I don't," Oliver curtly replied and knocked back his drink. He could feel Dig's weighted stare on him, as well. "But if that were true, she wouldn't continue to contact her mother, Tommy, or Thea."

"They're her family, but not even they know her true location. Donna can never get her to spill anything. As a former A.R.G.U.S. operative, my stepdaughter has a knack for covering her tracks. You know better than anyone what she's capable of."

"So the new tracer hasn't worked?"

"Not since the last time you asked me," Malcolm answered. "Look on the bright side, Oliver. At least A.R.G.U.S. hasn't gotten to her either."

"'Yet' you mean." Oliver finished off his drink and stood up. "I'm heading to bed early, since I'm assuming there's a reason you made us come here."

"Wise decision."

Oliver waited for him to elaborate, but Malcolm remained smugly silent. He hated when the older man got that scheming look. Nodding at Dig, who declared that he wanted to get another workout in before bed, Oliver went upstairs to his room. He was flooded with memories as he walked the halls. The last time he'd been there was the Fourth of July shortly after the attack on QC. Despite the drama that went down, Oliver mostly thought back on those days with fondness. It was the place everything had changed for him and Felicity. As usual when his mind drifted to her, the loss hit him like a punch in the gut.

After getting ready for bed, Oliver settled in and pulled out the old picture that Felicity had left him. He'd stared at it every night since she disappeared. Oliver knew it wasn't healthy—Dig had practically threatened to tear that one up, too, if he didn't snap out of it—but it was the only link he had to Felicity. That and the letter she wrote, which was much more painful. Oliver only reread that when he was feeling particularly self-loathing.

His long day catching up with him, Oliver had started drifting off to sleep when there was an urgent knock on his door. Dig barged in before he could even sit up, and one look at his face made it clear something was very wrong.
"Get dressed in your gear. We have to leave right now. Malcolm's orders."

"What the hell's going on?" Oliver demanded, the haze of drowsiness not totally gone. "And since when do you willingly take orders from Malcolm?"

"Since I knew you would want to hear this. It's about Felicity."

Oliver was immediately awake and upright. "What about her?"

"Malcolm finally got a trace on her and knows her location. It's right here in Ivy Town."

"What?" Oliver exclaimed. How the hell was that even possible? Was it fate that they just happened to be in the same town as her when this information was revealed? Oliver was already calling bullshit on that. Malcolm must've known and this was the mysterious business he'd brought them there for. That son of a bitch had a hell of a lot of explaining to do.

"She's in danger, Oliver. Malcolm says we have to go now."

Casting aside his outrage and frustration, Oliver decided his interrogation of Malcolm would have to wait. What was important was finding Felicity and bringing her home. Oliver rushed to his suitcase to get his gear and weapons. "All right." He was ready and armed to the hilt. "Let's go."
Chapter Notes

Happy Tuesday, lovely readers! I know you're super anxious for this chapter, and thanks so much for your comments and kudos. Some of your are Team Felicity while others are Team Oliver. Then there's the group that feels for both. So interesting to read your thoughts, because the situation Olicity is in is all gray. Also, it warms my heart that you guys love Connor (and Lucky!). A lot of stuff going on this chapter. The big mystery being will Oliver make it in time and finally learn about Connor? Buckle up, everyone, because it's so on! And don't forget to let me know what you think in the comments!

Oliver stared out the window of the van at the row of perfect suburban homes. Though there were minor variations among them, most of the houses looked almost exactly the same. Every lawn looked neat and up-kept, much nicer than any others he'd seen after such a bad winter. There were minivans in many of the driveways and children's toys in a few of the front yards. The street and sidewalks were clean and clear of the cracks or potholes that would be found almost anywhere else. Overall, the neighborhood seemed quiet, peaceful, and safe. It was like a live snapshot of the quintessential American dream, and Oliver was almost surprised that he didn't see an actual white picket fence anywhere in sight.

"You're sure this is where Felicity is?" Oliver questioned, bracing himself in his seat as the van sped down the street. He hadn't known what to expect, but this definitely wasn't it. Felicity was a city girl at heart, and it was hard to believe that she would choose to settle in such a place—especially since it was only a few hours away from Starling. All the time Oliver had spent searching for her, and it turned out she hadn't gone that far at all.

"Positive," Malcolm declared from the front passenger's seat.

Oliver exchanged a suspicious look with Dig. Something wasn't right about this. "So all of a sudden the tracer just started working?"

"Technology can be a finicky thing," he replied while directing the driver to take another turn.

"And it showed that she was in Ivy Town," Dig spoke up.

"Where we also just happened to be," Oliver added, barely concealing the anger he could feel rising up in him.

"We're almost there," Malcolm announced. He instructed everyone to be ready. They didn't know what they would be walking into.

"Malcolm," Oliver growled, demanding his attention. "How long have you known she was here?"

"Oliver, now is not the time."

"How long?" he shouted.
Malcolm shifted in his seat to face him. His expression was infuriatingly calm. "I've always known where she is. She needed to leave Starling in a hurry and came to me for help. As you said, she's family. I took care of my own."

Oliver was seeing red. It took every last ounce of restraint not to reach out and strangle him. "Why the hell didn't you tell me when I came to you?"

"Felicity wasn't just running from A.R.G.U.S. She was running from you, too, after your betrayal. She needed time."

"**My betrayal,**" Oliver gritted out. "You left me no fucking choice. Everything that has happened has been because of you, you deceitful son of a bitch!"

"There are bigger things in play here that you couldn't possibly—"

"Don't you dare try to act like the noble hero right now, Malcolm. You are not anyone's savior," Oliver snarled. "You're the villain." He automatically reached for his gun and pointed it at Malcolm's head. "I should do the world a favor and kill you right here and now."

Dig and the other men in the van were quick to raise their own weapons. One wrong move, and it could all result in one big, bloody mess. Malcolm told the driver to pull over. They were all at a complete standstill.

"I'm the only one who knows Felicity's location. You kill me, and you won't find her in time. It'll be too late," Malcolm explained.

"Too late for what?" Oliver demanded. "Exactly what kind of danger is she in, Malcolm?"

Malcolm gestured to his pocket, indicating that he was reaching for his phone. He pushed a button and accessed his voicemail.

"Malcolm!" came Felicity's panicked voice. Gunfire and glass shattering could be heard in the background. "They've found us, and we're under attack. I don't know if it's A.R.G.U.S. or someone else, but Sara and I are trying to hold them off. If you don't hear from us that we're safe, I need you to contact Tommy's girlfriend, Mei Yao. I can't explain why, but she's the only one you can trust. Tell her everything, Malcolm! She'll know what to do. Oh, God—" The call cut.

The rage that had previously been making Oliver's body shake swiftly turned to terror. He lowered his gun and glared at Malcolm. "Drive. *Now.*" They were nowhere near finished, but that could wait. It had to.

"Go," Malcolm ordered the driver as the others finally lowered their weapons.

Oliver looked to his partner. Dig nodded, letting him know that whatever they were about to face, he had his back. They sped down another street before pulling up in front of a gray house in a cul-de-sac. Oliver instantly noticed that the nearby street lamps were out. The entire end of the street was in darkness. Other than that, the house looked like any other on the block.

"We don't have much time. Someone in the area already called the cops," Malcolm informed them. "I've managed to intercept it but in a place like this, disturbances won't go unnoticed for long. Whoever's inside, we take them out quick and quietly. Got it?"

Before Malcolm had even finished, Oliver was already out of the van. Diggle was by his side and silently pointed to the front door. It was closed but broken. Someone had definitely forced entry.
They went around the back, which was in even worse shape. The sliding glass doors were broken and open. Malcom's men flanked their back as they quietly crept into the house. The inside was a wreck. Broken glass and what used to probably be a kitchen table were in pieces on the floor. Among the wood was an unconscious and bloody masked body. There was another pool of blood by the entryway that belonged to a second fallen intruder.

Oliver listened carefully for any other sounds in the house, but it was eerily silent. He watched his step, just in case there were more intruders lurking. He hoped that Felicity and Sara had gotten out but if they hadn't, he didn't want to startle them either. Oliver, Diggle, and Malcolm went to the living room while a couple of the other guys went down another hallway. There were two more bodies on the floor—one with long blond hair.

Felicity. Oliver's heart stopped for a moment until Malcolm flicked on the light. The blonde turned out to be Sara. Relief was brief as a wave of shame and concern followed. Oliver would never want anything bad to happen to Sara either and, from the bruises, it looked like she'd put up a hell of a fight.

Dig knelt down to check her pulse. "She's alive. Her pulse is low, but it's there." He pulled out a tiny sliver dart from her neck. "Looks like she was sedated."

"Not even the dog was spared," Malcolm added, standing over what appeared to be a yellow lab and tsking. There was a silver dart sticking out from his fur, too. "And you think I'm a villain?"

Rolling his eyes, Oliver ignored the asinine comment. "He was blocking the stairs," he stated. It was confirmed by the crumpled form on the middle landing of the staircase. Oliver investigated further. "Right in the heart. Judging by the way he fell, it had to come from the top."

Felicity, he thought. If she hadn't gotten away, that's where she had to be.

"I'll cover you," Malcolm said.

"No, Dig will. You stay down here," Oliver retorted. His partner followed him carefully up the stairs, their guns at the ready. Just before reaching the top, Oliver called out, "Felicity."

"You sure that's wise?" Dig whispered.

"If she thinks we're more intruders, she might shoot first. I don't want to scare her. Besides, she'll know it's okay when she hears my voice."

"No offense, man, but she might shoot anyway," Dig commented. At Oliver's glare, he said, "Sorry, but it's true. For all she knows, these men could be from H.I.V.E. on your orders."

Oliver hated it, but Diggle was right. Felicity would have no reason to trust him. They climbed the rest of the way, and his heart stopped for a second time. Felicity was almost to the end of the hall, sprawled out on the floor. There was another body not too far from her, but Oliver only had eyes for Felicity. He ran to her side and checked her over. Like Sara, she'd been shot with a dart and sedated. Blood trickled down from a cut on her head but, other than that, she seemed to be okay.

"She didn't go down easily. This one's dead, too. Shot at close range," Dig reported. "She all right?"

Oliver felt a surge of pride. That was his Felicity. A fighter until the end. He wiped away some of the blood with his sleeve and tentatively touched her cheek. It was soft and warm, just like he remembered. "She seems to be." It had been so long…everything about the moment felt surreal.

"Whoever these guys were, they were sent to retrieve them. Not kill them. Might be A.R.G.U.S.,"
Dig muttered, not looking too pleased by the prospect.

Seconds later, the sound of a gun going off downstairs broke through Oliver's daze. Both he and Diggle jumped to attention. There was either a straggler or someone had woken up, because there wasn't a big commotion that followed.

"I'll check out the other rooms, see if—" Dig was cut off by a high-pitched cry.

Both their heads whipped towards the door in front of them. The sound was coming from in there and was growing louder.

"That sounds like a…" Dig trailed off. He looked at Oliver before finishing his thought. "It sounds like a baby."

Oliver looked between Felicity and the door, his mind on the edge of comprehending something but unable to make the final leap. He had to be imagining it. The thought was too inconceivable. But one look at an equally bewildered Diggle told him it was very real.

"Oliver," Diggle muttered, spurring him on.

As if in a daze, Oliver reached for the door handle. He opened it carefully, and the cry was amplified. Despite the small lamp on in the corner of the room, Oliver reached to turn on the overhead lights. It felt like the wind had been knocked out of him as he took in the light blue nursery. His eyes, for whatever reason, honed in on the little yellow duckling wallpaper bordering the walls before landing on the crib. Oliver's entire body shook as he crossed the room, walking towards it.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Oliver leaned over and looked inside. A small baby with brilliant blue eyes lay inside. They were full of tears, and his face was red. It looked as if he'd been crying for a while, and his tiny limbs flailed with the exertion.

"Oh my God," Oliver breathed, feeling like his entire world had been flipped upside down.

"Not the first meeting Felicity probably had in mind for the two of you, but nothing in life is perfect," said Malcolm casually from behind him. "But better late than never, I always say."

Oliver numbly kept his gaze on the baby. Despite still being unable to process it, he couldn't tear his eyes away. "What?"

"I realize it's quite a shock," Malcolm continued, not sounding surprised at all himself. In fact, his tone seemed pleasant. "Nevertheless, congratulations, Oliver. You're a father."

"I-I didn't know," Oliver absently muttered and looked at Diggle. His partner's expression was stunned but sympathetic. "She didn't tell me…"

"Yes, well, I hate to ruin the moment but there'll be plenty of time for that later. Right now, we need to get them out of here. It's not safe. So which one are you taking?"

He finally turned to face Malcolm. "What?"

"Will you be carrying Felicity or your son?" Malcolm questioned while checking his watch. "Clock's ticking, Oliver."

Oliver's eyes narrowed as only one emotion cut through the numbness that had taken over. His body shook with unbridled rage at the man before him. The man who had not only cost him Felicity, but also an entirely new life he had never even known about. Without thinking, Oliver's fist flew
Oliver couldn't stop staring. It was a physical impossibility. Even as he paced a few steps back and forth, his eyes were on the baby. His baby. A son. The shock wasn't as severe as before, but Oliver's mind continued to run wild. Now that they were all safe, he finally had a chance to stop and think.

They'd gathered as much as they could before leaving the house in Ivy Town. Malcolm, after recovering from Oliver's right hook, had his men collect any important electronic devices and personal effects—photos especially—that they could find. Felicity and Sara were obviously prepared for a situation that might've required them to flee at a moment's notice, because Dig found suitcases in their closets already packed. There had also been a bag in the baby's room with essentials, which was helpful. Not having been around a baby since Thea—and back then he'd only been a kid—Oliver wasn't sure what they should bring.

He'd asked Diggle if he could take care of the baby. Diggle had been really close to his young nephew before joining H.I.V.E., and he knew how to handle children—or so Oliver told himself. When Diggle prompted him to at least pick the baby up, Oliver tried but found himself unable to touch him. After the hell he'd endured over the last several years, there were very few things in this world that scared Oliver. The possibility of doing something wrong and accidentally hurting the baby terrified him. Even scarier was the knowledge that if Oliver did pick him up and let himself feel every single emotion he'd been keeping at bay, he might not ever be able to let him go.

Instead, Oliver had grabbed Felicity while one of the other guys had taken Sara. Malcolm knew enough to stay the hell out of the way as they quickly loaded up the van. It was much more crowded with the new additions. The baby's carrier needed its own spot, which ended up being between him and Diggle. Oliver had positioned Felicity on his lap while Sara was on Dig's. The dog was in the very back with the other men. According to one of Malcolm's men, they'd all been doused with a very strong sedative that would keep them unconscious for at least a few hours.

Malcolm had suggested they go back to his cabin in the woods, but Oliver vetoed that idea immediately. Whatever last shred of trust he'd had in that man was officially gone. Oliver had then called his own men and ordered them to wait at the Queen mansion. With it unoccupied, there was no risk of anyone seeing them and it would be much easier to control the security. Being a council member himself meant that Oliver no longer needed to follow Malcolm's orders, and this time they were most definitely going to do things Oliver's way.

The baby had cried for the first hour before finally settling down. It could've been from the lull of the car or sheer exhaustion, but he'd quieted and clutched the duck stuffed animal that Dig had grabbed from his crib. Seeing him hold it tightly in his tiny hands, almost like a lifeline, had tore at something deep inside Oliver. He'd then looked down at Felicity, who even in sleep had that worried crinkle in her brow. The familiar smell of her shampoo and the way her body folded perfectly into his had his heart pounding. Having her in his arms again felt like coming home. Oliver had held onto her tighter and soaked it all in, knowing that he probably might not get the chance again. He didn't know how she would feel when she woke up. He didn't even know how he would feel.

When they'd arrived at the mansion, an unconscious Felicity had been placed in his bed while Sara had been put in Thea's old room. The baby hadn't been in that deep a sleep, because he'd woken up as soon as they started to get out of the van. Dig had thought he might be hungry and had taken him to the kitchen to prepare a bottle. Thankfully, his partner had been smart enough to check the fridge for some pre-made bottles before they left Ivy Town. When he was finished, Dig had brought him up to the room and left him with Oliver.

"She'll probably want to see him when she first wakes up," Dig had said. Oliver nodded, knowing
that his friend was also subtly giving him some time alone with the baby, too.

Oliver's emotions were embroiled in an all-out tug of war. Relief, happiness, anger, frustration, confusion, fear, and sadness…the whole spectrum of emotions was running through him as he glanced back and forth between Felicity and the baby. He kept thinking about the last time he'd seen her before she left. It was a little over a year ago when they'd had that awful fight. Felicity had been talking about running away and wanted to know if he saw a future for them. Oliver had been so confused at the time, because he'd thought Felicity had been happy.

Now it all made sense. She must've been pregnant then. He remembered her loss of appetite and the way she'd deftly avoided drinking wine. Oliver had also thought he'd sensed an edge and desperation in her lovemaking that night, which he later dismissed as stress from her co-workers getting hurt in that warehouse explosion in Central City. Doing the math, it meant that they'd conceived on New Year's Eve. Felicity must've been due around September, which meant the baby was somewhere between five and seven months old. He looked tiny, regardless.

Oliver's thoughts were confirmed by the framed collage of photographs he held in his hand. He'd seen Malcolm's men take it from Felicity's house in Ivy Town. Before bringing Felicity upstairs to his bedroom, Oliver had asked one of his men to retrieve it. It was like a photographic timeline of everything he'd missed. There were two photos of Felicity smiling with her swollen, pregnant belly. One was of her holding their son in the hospital after delivery, looking tired but happy. Another picture was of her and the baby lying together on the bed. The largest photo appeared to be taken maybe a couple of weeks later. Felicity's hair was shorter and wavy, and she looked stunning with her dark berry lipstick. She was cradling the newborn lovingly against her. The final photo had to be the most recent, since it was about how the baby looked now. He had big blue eyes, chubby dimpled cheeks, and Felicity's pert little nose. A thin layer of wispy brown hair was on his round head.
Right now, the baby's pouty pink lips were alternating between biting his own hand and the stuffed duck's beak. His little feet and miniature toes stuck out from his onesie pajamas and the blanket that had been placed over him. Every now and then he'd make a soft gurgling noise. Tears stung Oliver's eyes as a lump formed in his throat. Besides Felicity, their son was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Oliver approached his desk, where the baby carrier rested, and stood so he was directly in front of him. His son's eyes honed in on him immediately, naturally curious. Oliver mustered a smile, which earned him an incoherent babble. Still clutching his duck, the baby reached out with his free hand towards Oliver. With a shaky breath, Oliver lifted his hand in return. His son latched onto his pointy finger and squeezed. The baby tried to bring it to his mouth, but Oliver made sure to hold back. He gave it a playful little wriggle, which earned him an actual smile. Oliver felt his entire world flip, once again, and wiped at his cheek where an actual tear had fallen. This was his son. They were having a moment…and he didn't even know his name.

Her entire body felt heavy. It was like being trapped underwater. Felicity could see and feel the
surface but couldn't get to it. Slowly but surely she regained some control over her body, and the darkness faded. She let out a soft groan and shifted in bed. Odd, Felicity didn't remember going to bed. The last thing she remembered was standing in the kitchen and talking to Sara. Her best friend had just gotten Connor settled in for the night and—Connor!

The events of the evening came flooding back. The alarm. The masked men. The gunfire. Connor crying. The men charging toward Felicity and her pulling the trigger. Felicity bolted upright in bed and took in her surroundings, disoriented. What the hell? Was she still dreaming? It looked as if she were in the Queen mansion—in Oliver's old room to be exact.

A figure moved out of the corner of her eye and stood at the foot of the bed. It was Oliver. He looked pretty much the same since she'd seen him last. Handsome, chiseled features and a strong, muscular build. His hair was maybe a little shorter, but his blue eyes were as intense and attentive as ever. Felicity briefly wondered for a few more seconds if she was dreaming but then realized her head wouldn't be pounding so hard if she were. She reached up to touch the tender spot, which was bandaged, and winced.

"You had a cut on your head. I took care of it," he told her.

Felicity gave it a little shake to clear the fog, which really wasn't a good idea. She winced again before getting to what was most important. "Where's Connor? Where's my son?" she demanded, unable to keep the tremor out of her voice. "Is he okay?"

"Connor," Oliver repeated softly, as if trying it out.

"Oliver," Felicity stressed. She threw back the blankets and attempted to stand when a wave of dizziness hit her. Oliver was by her side in an instant, keeping her from toppling over and guiding her back to the bed.

"Don't get up just yet. You've been through a lot. You should rest for a bit."

"I can't rest," Felicity stubbornly replied. She closed her eyes in an effort to stave off the nausea. "I need to find my son." When it finally passed, she opened her eyes and blinked through the tears that had started to form. "Please."

"He's fine, Felicity," Oliver reassured her. "He's right here. Just stay put, and I'll bring him to you."

Felicity followed Oliver's every step as he walked over to his desk. It was then that she noticed Connor's carrier sitting on top. She saw his feet flail in that impatient way of his when he'd been sitting in one spot for too long. Oliver picked up the carrier and brought it over to the bed. Felicity was already reaching for Connor before Oliver had fully put it down.

"Oh my God, hi, baby," she cooed and picked him up. Connor's eyes brightened at the sight of her. Letting go of his duck, Connor made a soft squeak and eagerly reached out for her in response. Felicity hugged him tightly to her chest and kissed his head, unable to stop the low sob that came out from having him safe and sound in her arms. "You're okay. Everything's okay. Mommy's got you," she soothed, though it was more for herself than him. Connor seemed relatively calm compared to the frightened wails she'd heard from him earlier.

Wiping away some of her tears so she could see, Felicity held him out to give him the once over. There were no visible injuries, and he appeared to be moving and functioning normally. The only sign that he'd been crying for a while was the flush in his cheeks. Felicity kissed them both before enfolding him in her arms again. She had to actively remind herself not to squeeze him too tightly or she'd squish him.
"Both you and Sara did an amazing job protecting him. No one got to him," Oliver spoke up.

Felicity jumped a bit, having forgotten that Oliver was still in the room. She'd been all wrapped up in making sure Connor was okay. Now that her son was safely in her arms, Felicity returned her attention to Oliver. He'd been watching them quietly the entire time. His eyes looked a little glassy, and the way he was rubbing his fingers together at his sides told her he was nervous.

"Where's Sara?"

"She’s in Thea's room. She hasn't woken up yet," he answered. "Your dog is in there, too."

"What happened? Who were those men?" she questioned, scrutinizing him. "Were they yours? Were they H.I.V.E.?"

The tick in his jaw only lasted for a second, but it was enough to show that he was upset by the assumption. "We don't know who they were, but they weren't H.I.V.E. If I'd have found you, Felicity, I would've come by myself. Not send a bunch of hired guns."

Her brain was on overload as she tried to put the pieces together. "How did you find me?"

"Malcolm." Oliver said his name like a curse, and his expression hardened.

"Malcolm?" Her brow furrowed. "I don't understand."

"He's H.I.V.E."

"Excuse me?" Felicity had to have heard wrong. "No. That's impossible. He can't be H.I.V.E. He helped me. He hid me from you and A.R.G.U.S. Why would he—"

"That's what I'd like to know. He lied to me, too," Oliver said curtly. "About a lot of things, apparently." He glanced briefly at Connor, his expression softening for a second. "But make no mistake, he's been a part of H.I.V.E. for years."

Felicity's headache was getting worse by the minute. Connor fidgeting in her arms reclaimed her attention. He used his hands to push away from her chest. It looked like he was trying to turn around. She repositioned him and watched as he shifted his focus to Oliver. Connor stared in utter fascination at him, making Felicity wonder what exactly had transpired between them while she was unconscious. Had Oliver held him? Played with him? Had they bonded in some way? Since Connor was mostly around her and Sara, she was curious to know what his reaction had been to a strong male presence—who also happened to be his father, no less.

Despite her headache, the rest of Felicity felt solid and she moved to stand. Oliver took a step forward, probably worried she might sway again, but stopped when he saw her tense up. Connor, though he was playing with the hair in her ponytail, continued to gaze at Oliver. All the baby books she'd read said he was entering a phase where he would be fascinated by details, including people's faces. Felicity wondered if it was mere curiosity or some deeper, instinctive bond between father and son. Either way, it made Felicity's heart involuntarily flutter.

She quietly cleared her throat. "Why did you bring us here?"

"Because you'll be safe. No one will think to look for you here, and we can control the security."

"You mean safe with a bunch of criminals who work for a terrorist organization. Forgive me if that doesn't exactly put my mind at ease," she replied, unable to keep the sarcasm out of her voice.
"I would never hurt you, Felicity," he declared. "Or my son." His voice was a mixture of anguish and anger.

She retorted, "You already did, Oliver."

"I had a right to know I fathered a child, Felicity," he gritted out.

"A right you lost the moment you betrayed me by lying and using me for information," she snapped, raising her voice. Connor began to whine and fidgeted again. Felicity patted his back and swayed with him in her arms. She could sense they were on the verge of a screaming match and dialed it back. As furious as she was, she didn't want to yell in front of the baby. Felicity had gotten enough of that from her own parents during her childhood.

She took a breath to calm herself. "Did you bring any of his other stuff with you? I need to change him."

"Yeah." He led her over to the desk where the baby bag was on the floor. "What do you need?"

Felicity hesitated for a moment. Was Oliver actually going to help her? She thought about telling him she could do it herself, but Connor was getting restless and she needed two hands to grasp him firmly. With a sigh, Felicity said, "There's a small, folded mat inside. I need that, a diaper, wipes, and some powder."

Oliver unfolded the mat before placing the rest of the items on the desk where she could reach them. He then took a couple of steps back to give her some space. The silence in the room was heavy. Felicity kept her focus on Connor despite feeling the intensity of Oliver's stare. Connor, meanwhile, had gone back to watching Oliver. He let out a babble of noises and reached out his hand in Oliver's direction.

Although it appeared as if Oliver wanted nothing more than to cross the short distance between them, he stood firmly in place. He looked to Felicity, and their eyes locked as he silently asked for permission. Regardless of their current circumstances and the tension between them, she appreciated his restraint and respect of her role as a mother. Felicity gave a small nod. Her heart skipped a beat seconds later when Connor's tiny hand wrapped around Oliver's much larger finger. It was a small gesture that brought on a big wave of emotion. Needing to collect herself, Felicity went back to the task at hand. When she lifted him back up, Connor finally let go.

"What time is it? He probably needs a feeding, too."

"It's past one. But Diggle—John," he corrected, "gave him a bottle a little while ago."

Felicity was surprised at that. "Where did you get the milk?"

"You had bottles in your fridge."

"Oh," she commented, somewhat impressed that they'd been so prepared. There was another part of his answer that confused her. "Why John?" The way Oliver was staring longingly at Connor, Felicity thought for sure he'd have been the one to take the lead.

"He's really good with kids. The last baby I held was Thea and..." He shrugged uncomfortably. "I didn't want to do something wrong and hurt him."

The words were out of Felicity's mouth before she could even think about them. "Would you like to? Hold him, I mean."
Oliver was quiet and contemplative. Finally, he answered, "I probably shouldn't. At least not right now."

Felicity was surprised by the disappointment she felt and studied Oliver carefully. The strained look on his face told a different story, but she didn't push it. "Okay."

The moment was interrupted by shouting. It sounded like it came from another room. When it was followed by the dog barking, she knew Sara and Lucky must finally be awake.

"I'll get Sara," Oliver told her. "You can all stay in my room for the night if you want. We'll talk more in the morning."

There was no use arguing seeing as though they were still in danger and really had nowhere else to go. "All right," Felicity agreed. She needed some time to herself to process everything and come up with a new game plan. Plus, getting Connor settled again was going to be difficult. He was wide awake and getting antsy. He'd had a long night and was in a strange place. On top of not getting enough sleep, he was probably going to be really cranky in the morning.

"Is there anything else you need?"

Felicity took a look around the room and shook her head. "No. We're okay for now." She frowned when Oliver's eyes lowered and sharpened. Following his line of sight, Felicity saw what he'd honed in on. Connor had pulled the locket out of her shirt and was playing with it.

Their eyes locked for a few short but intense seconds. Felicity was the first to look away. Of course on one of the rare days she decided to wear it, Oliver just happened to barge back into her life and notice it. It was just her luck.

"My security team is guarding the property and the mansion. You'll be safe here. Nobody's getting in." The fact that no one would be able to get out was also strongly implied. Oliver was almost out the door when Felicity called to him.

"Thank you for taking care of him when I couldn't." There was still so much she and Oliver needed to discuss, and it was not a conversation that Felicity was looking forward to. But the mere thought of what could've happened to her baby tonight if Oliver—assuming he was telling the truth and not involved—hadn't shown up and gotten them out of there had Felicity holding Connor a little bit tighter.

Oliver smiled, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "You're welcome."
Happy Tuesday, lovely readers! As always, thank you for your comments and kudos. I loved reading your thoughts about Oliver finally meeting Connor and Olicity being reunited. This is a major chapter, in which some pretty big bombshells are about to be dropped. Many of you are eager for the Olicity talk. Next chapter is dedicated to that entirely, and that conversation will be even more important after what is revealed in this one. So let me know what you guys think, and happy reading!

March 13, 2014

Connor wouldn't stop crying. From the moment he'd woken up this morning, he'd been fussy. He'd only nursed for a short time before pulling away and wailing. Not even Sara making funny duck noises with Sir Quackers was helping to calm him. Pacing the length of the bedroom, Felicity patted his back and rocked him gently. Lucky, sensing Connor's distress, had taken to following their movements himself.

"I don't know what they shot us with, but I have the world's worst hangover," Sara grumbled and rubbed her head. She didn't have to say that Connor's crying wasn't helping, because it was clearly implied. Felicity couldn't disagree. Her head was pounding, as well.

There was a knock on the door, and Sara went to answer it. Oliver stood in the doorway, looking composed but hesitant.

"Hey, is everything okay?" His eyes automatically sought out Felicity and Connor by the window.

"Besides being shot at and held hostage, we're totally fine," Sara muttered dryly.

Lucky, who'd been wary of everyone since he'd awoken, barked and growled at Oliver for good measure. He was in protective mode, staying right in front of Felicity and Connor.

Oliver, unfazed, addressed Felicity. "Is he all right? He's been crying for a while."

Felicity wondered if Oliver had been hovering outside their door or if Connor's cries were loud enough to be heard throughout the house. They'd mostly been left alone since last night, not that Felicity was complaining. She and Sara needed time to themselves to figure out their situation.

"He's been through a lot within the last twenty-four hours. His routine has been disrupted, and this isn't our house," Felicity explained. "He can sense something isn't right."

"Maybe it'll help to get out of this room. You can come downstairs for breakfast if you like," he offered. "We've got double chocolate chip pancakes."

Her favorite. Felicity swallowed the lump in her throat. She didn't know what game Oliver was playing, but she refused to be duped by his nice act. It's how he'd fooled her before.
"Fine," she said curtly. "Sara, can you grab Sir Quackers and the carrier?"

"Sir Quackers?" Oliver questioned.

"It's CJ's favorite stuffed animal," Sara answered. "You did at least one thing right in bringing it with you."

Ignoring the last part of her comment, Oliver replied, "CJ?"

"Yes. It's a nickname. Short for Connor Jonas."

There was a crack in Oliver's composure. Although the shocked realization that she'd given Connor his middle name only lasted for a second, it was enough to put Felicity further on edge. She wasn't ready for this. Too much was happening, and it was all completely out of her control. Taking a deep breath, she clutched her son and focused on him. He was still crying and reassuring him was all that mattered. It was all she could handle.

"It's okay, baby," she soothed him. Felicity reached for the diaper bag, but Oliver got to it first.

"I'll take it," he said.

Lucky growled again, not liking Oliver's proximity. Felicity hushed him while Sara took hold of his collar to settle him. They followed Oliver out of the bedroom and down the hallway. Even if he weren't there to guide them, Felicity would've been able to find her way to the kitchen without a problem. The closer they got, the stronger the scent of coffee and pancakes became. Her stomach growled in response.

The change of scenery and movement seemed to be helping Connor, because his wails started to taper off. Curiosity was taking over. His wide, damp eyes took in their new surroundings. Felicity was doing the same and felt a sense of dread overtake her at the sight of all the armed men spread throughout the mansion. Connor let out a low, garbled moan as he twisted in her arms. Felicity shifted him more towards her hip to balance him and let him look around more freely.

"I love what you've done with the place," Sara said as they passed the dining room. The table and chairs were all covered in sheets.

"I haven't been here in over a year," Oliver responded and shot a look to Felicity. "If I'd known we'd be having guests, then I would've had the place prepared."

Felicity remembered the last time they were at the Queen mansion all too well. That night had been burned into her mind, and the heat in her cheeks flared. Even if she had forgotten, Connor would serve as a glaring reminder. It seemed Oliver was having the same thought as he sneaked a peek at their son.

They turned the corner and heard the soft echo of dishes clanging along with quiet chatter. The first person Felicity noticed was John, since it was impossible to miss his large, bulging frame. He'd been in the middle of making a plate of food for himself. A short, older woman with salt and pepper hair was at the sink scrubbing pans. Recognition sparked.

"Raisa," Felicity muttered.

"Hello, Miss Felicity," she greeted with a warm smile. "It has been too long."

"You're H.I.V.E., too?"
"She's Bratva," Oliver gently corrected.

That completely took her by surprise. "You knew Oliver was alive all this time?"

"Only the last couple of years," the Russian woman stated. She grinned at Oliver. "It brought great joy to my heart to know that Mr. Oliver was okay." All Felicity could do was nod as she processed this new information. "It brought me even greater joy when Mr. Oliver called me last night and told me about you. I came right away." She turned her attention to Connor, beaming with pride. "You have a beautiful son."

Felicity, still trying to work through her shock, replied, "Thank you."

"You must be hungry. Mr. Oliver said that you had a long night." Raisa gestured to the island covered with food. "What would you like?"

"Thank you. I can get it myself."

"You have your hands full," Raisa pointed out as Connor squirmed in Felicity's grasp. "Unless you would like me to hold him while you eat."

"No," Felicity was quick to answer and clutched him tighter. "I've got him."

Raisa smiled knowingly before making a plate for Felicity.

"Who are you?" Sara said to John.

"John Diggle," he introduced himself. "I'm Oliver's partner. It's good to see you again, Felicity."

"Hi. I, uh, heard you helped out with Connor last night. Um, thanks for that," Felicity finished awkwardly. The entire situation felt surreal.

Despite his stoic expression, sympathy shined in his eyes. "You're welcome."

The awkwardness only increased as they all got their food and sat at the round, wooden table. Raisa, meanwhile, got a plate of scraps to feed Lucky. Felicity sat with Connor in her lap as she ate with her free hand. She'd given him a toy to keep him occupied, but he threw it on the floor after a few minutes. Oliver bent down to pick it up and was about to hand it back when she halted him.

"It has to be washed if it fell on the floor. He'll put it in his mouth."

"I'll do it," Raisa offered before he could answer.

Oliver somewhat sheepishly handed it over and went back to eating his breakfast. Connor, making playful noises, threw the toy down two more times after. John brushed his hand over his mouth, trying to hide an amused grin as he exchanged a look with Oliver.

"Don't bother," Sara told Raisa before she could reach for it. "We're onto you now, CJ," she teased and tickled his belly. Connor viewed it as a game now and would only keep doing it. Sara got another toy from the diaper bag. This one had an attachment that Felicity could slip over her wrist to prevent him from flinging it to the ground. Aside from the rattling sound Connor made with his new toy, silence descended upon the room again.

"Not to put a damper on this scintillating breakfast conversation," Sara remarked a few minutes later, "but we deserve some answers after what happened last night. Who were those men that drugged us?"
"We're still trying to figure that out. The local police were called about the disturbance, and they have the bodies now," John stated. "We didn't really have time to search them thoroughly."

"Why not?" Felicity inquired.

"We tried to clear the house as much as we could of personal items in the short time that we had before the authorities showed up," Oliver explained.

"What do they think happened to us?"

"They think you were in the Witness Protection Program and that the details of what happened are classified."

"And how did you manage to convince them of that?" Sara cut in.

"Some of our associates are very good at impersonating federal agents. They took care of it."

Felicity glanced at Sara, who didn't look all that pleased either about H.I.V.E.'s influence. "Fantastic," she sarcastically muttered. "Was it you or Malcolm who organized that?" Her tone was tinged with anger.

Felicity still couldn't believe that Malcolm was a part of H.I.V.E. She'd trusted him with their safety all this time. He was even married to her mother for God's sake. That alone was enough to have Felicity seeing red. There was obviously more to the story, because there was no way this connection was coincidental. What else had Oliver not told her?

"I took care of it," said a smooth, cool voice. Malcolm had entered the kitchen wearing one of his signature suits. He would've looked like his usual sharp and composed self if not for the large, swelled black eye. Did he get that last night from fighting the men who'd invaded her home? Felicity didn't really care. All she wanted were answers.

"You lied to me," Felicity accused. There was no sense in easing into the topic. They were way past niceties.

"I knew you would probably be angry when you found out," Malcolm said. "But it was for your protection, I assure you."

"You are not the boss of me. None of you are," she stressed and shot a glare at Oliver. "I am the one who decides whether or not I need someone's protection."

"You did have a choice, and you chose to come to me when you were in trouble," Malcolm reminded her.

"Which I sure as hell wouldn't have done if I knew you were working for the enemy. What was the point of all of this?" Felicity demanded.

"It is not my story to tell, but you will know the truth soon enough. Both of you," he announced, including Oliver in that. "I've merely been following orders."

"Whose orders?"

"And what do you mean we'll both learn the truth?" Oliver stood, his voice on the edge of a growl. When the older man didn't answer, he warned, "So help me God, Malcolm, if you don't want another black eye—"
Felicity found herself baffled, once again. Why had Oliver given Malcolm a black eye? She vaguely remembered Oliver saying last night that Malcolm had been lying to him, too. It didn't seem to make sense, since they were supposed to be on the same side.

"If you'll both accompany me to the living room, we can sort all of this out."

Glancing down at Connor, Felicity hesitated. As badly as she wanted answers, anxiety filled her at the thought of letting him out of her sight. It wasn't just her protective motherly instincts taking over. It was also the fact that he was her anchor. Connor kept her grounded and focused even as everything else fell apart around her.

"Damien Darhk does not like to be kept waiting," Malcolm added when neither of them made a move to leave.

"Darhk's here?" Oliver retorted, sounding even more perplexed than she felt.

"The more time we waste, the longer it will take to get the answers you seek. Shall we?" He gestured to the door. The pleasant expression on his face did not match the steel in his voice.

"I'll take him," Sara told Felicity and held her hands out for Connor.

Felicity kissed the crown of his head before reluctantly handing him over. She then stood with Oliver to follow Malcolm. As they walked, Felicity noticed Oliver brushing his fingers together at his sides. He, too, was unsettled by this, and she didn't know whether to be reassured that she wasn't in this alone or frightened that he didn't know what to expect from his own leader.

Two men stood guard outside the doorway. Their masks and uniforms resembled the attackers she'd fought while protecting the A.R.G.U.S. bunkers. These had to be Damien Darhk's infamous ghosts. When they entered the living room, a tall, lone figure in black stood facing the window. His bleach blond hair was cut short and styled. His suit appeared expensive and fit his lean form perfectly. He looked like a typical businessman and not some terrorist who could invoke such fear and chaos.

"Damien, they're here," Malcolm announced.

"Thank you, Malcolm," Darhk spoke. "I've waited for this moment a long time."

A weird sense of déjà vu hit Felicity when she heard the man's voice, and a chill ran through her. The heavy silence stretched on before Darhk finally turned to face them. Felicity felt as if she'd been sucker punched as all of the air whooshed out of her lungs. This couldn't be right. She had to be having a hallucination or some other residual side effect from the drugs she'd been hit with last night. Any other alternative was simply unthinkable. Felicity swayed on her feet.

"Felicity," Oliver murmured, his voice full of worry. She couldn't even bring herself to spare him a glance. Her eyes were glued to Darhk.

Darhk grinned when he saw the recognition in her gaze. "Hello, honey."

"Dad…"
"No. This isn't right," Felicity stuttered. "You can't be Damien Darhk, because you're Noah Smoak. You were a computer programmer at the casino in Vegas. It's where you met Mom. You wore glasses and sweater vests every day and built computers with me in the living room of our small house."

"Felicity—" Darhk attempted to cut in.

"You might have been selfish and undependable, but you weren't some evil mastermind of a terrorist organization." She shook her head and whipped around to face Oliver. "Did you know about this?"

The accusation and betrayal were raw in her voice.

"No," Oliver quickly replied, his tone adamant. "I swear to you, Felicity, I had no idea." His eyes pleaded with her to believe him. There was very little Oliver had known about Darhk over the years aside from him being the leader of H.I.V.E., and it wasn't like Felicity had shown him any pictures of her father where he would have a point of reference. His world had been turned upside down as much as hers by this new revelation.

"It's true, Felicity. Oliver didn't know," Darhk confirmed. His demeanor was calm and his tone light. It was as if he'd merely been talking about the weather.

"You married my mother," Felicity said to Malcolm, "and yet you work for my father. What the hell is going on?"

"You'll have your answers," Darhk assured her. "The truth is I've wanted to bring you into the fold for some time now. But with you working for A.R.G.U.S. and under Amanda's thumb, I had to be careful. Bide my time." He gestured to the couches. "Perhaps it'd be best if we all took a seat. There is much to discuss."

"I don't want to have a seat," Felicity gritted out. She was furious, and Oliver noticed her hands shaking ever so slightly. The crinkle between her eyebrows was going to be permanent if she strained much harder.

"Please, honey. It'll be best for what I'm about to tell you. You, too, Oliver." Darhk raised his hand and motioned for someone to enter.

Raisa carried in a tray of tea and some scones. Both Oliver and Felicity reluctantly took a seat on the couch, though neither reached for the refreshments. Oliver couldn't stop glancing at Felicity to get her reaction. This had to be overwhelming after everything she'd been through last night. He wanted so badly to close the gap between them and take her hand, but he knew she'd reject him.

Darhk took the single chair at the head of the small seating space while Malcolm sat on the couch across from them.

"All right, I'm sitting. Now talk," Felicity ordered.

Darhk smirked, no doubt amused by her directness. "I'm sure your mother made up some elaborate story about why I left when you were young. She always did have a flare for the dramatic," he joked and poured himself some tea.

"She said you'd gotten involved with some shady people and were wanted by the police," Felicity responded. "Obviously, she wasn't wrong."

"Your mother was always perceptive, and she sensed that I was more than what I seemed. But that's not why I left." Felicity looked like she had another sarcastic retort on the tip of her tongue when Darhk said, "I left because my ties with H.I.V.E. and trying to have a life with you and your mother
"proved to be too dangerous. My presence alone would make you a target."

"For what?"

"I was recruited to H.I.V.E. when I was twenty to develop tech," Darhk began. "It was a few years later that I met your mother. I still remember that day. I was in a meeting with some of my associates when she appeared. She was our waitress. Her uniform was tacky and her heels too high to logically balance herself let alone trays of food. But she was young, beautiful, and bright-eyed. I'd never met anyone like her. We were both smitten right from the start. We were married in less than a year. Then a few years after that, we had you. You were so beautiful when you were first born. Our pride and joy. It was around that time I asked to become more involved in H.I.V.E. Take on more responsibilities. I wanted to give you and your mother a good life. My predecessor was looking to retire and was seeking his replacement. Eventually, he chose me."

"How exactly was committing criminal acts supposed to give us a better life?" Felicity challenged.

"H.I.V.E. was used as nothing more than an elite service for high-contract con jobs and assassinations. We were only out for ourselves. When I took over, that changed. The underground criminal network was being destroyed by pointless mob wars, and many innocent people were caught in the crossfire. That's when I established the Council of Seven and invited the heads of each major organization to join our cause—with a few exceptions here and there. Malcolm and Robert Queen were among them."

This much Oliver knew, although it didn't make hearing it again any less upsetting. He'd been furious and in denial when he first learned the truth of his parents' involvement in H.I.V.E. For so long, he'd refused to believe it. Robert and Moira Queen were known as some of the wealthiest people in the world. Their legacy was establishing a company that employed thousands and heralded technological advances that would change the world. There was also their philanthropic work and numerous charities they'd established to help the less fortunate. Being a part of H.I.V.E. and its dark agenda had gone against the kind, loving parents he'd known growing up.

"Are you trying to say that you're some kind of peace broker?" Felicity asked in disbelief. "Because all of the A.R.G.U.S. agents your men killed would probably disagree with you on that. And you"—she looked to Malcolm—"you support this twisted logic?"

"My wife Rebecca was murdered by a street thug in The Glades. She was leaving her clinic. A clinic she'd established to help those degenerates, and the only thanks she got was being killed in cold blood for it," Malcolm seethed. "Starling City was one of the cities most affected by this war, and the crime was out of control. H.I.V.E. came in and got everyone back in line. And those that didn't follow...they rightly suffered the same fate as my wife."

"But you're still part of the problem," Felicity countered. "You lie and cheat and steal and kill. There is no honor in that."

"And you think A.R.G.U.S. is any better?" Malcolm retorted. "Everyone has an agenda. We're just more upfront about ours."

"A.R.G.U.S. was established to fight evil in the world and protect the innocent."

"While I admire your idealism, Felicity, it's wholly misplaced. A.R.G.U.S. was created by a bunch of corrupt politicians in the government under the guise of protecting the country from major threats. It does not undertake missions because it's the right thing to do. There is always an underlying agenda, whether it be money or power, that controls its hand."
Felicity refused to back down. "And you've done nothing but lie to me for years, so obviously I think you're full of crap."

"There is more to the story," Darhk declared. Unlike Malcolm, he'd managed to retain his cool demeanor. "You were aggressively recruited by A.R.G.U.S. after your graduation from MIT, were you not?"

"Yes."

"What made you decide to join?"

Felicity hesitated for a moment, her eyes briefly cutting in Oliver's direction. "Because I wanted to make a difference," she stated resolutely.

The hint of a knowing smirk crossed Darhk's face as he looked between her and Oliver. He sobered a moment later. "You've always been a clever girl, Felicity. Now that you know who I am and our history with A.R.G.U.S., do you honestly believe that was a coincidence?"

Her face was scrunched in concentration as she worked through what Darhk was saying. "Are you implying that they recruited me because they knew I'm your daughter?"

"It's not an implication but the truth. Amanda Waller has been after me for years," Darhk explained. "She's always known the best way to target me has been through my family, which is why she attempted to have you killed when you were a little girl."

Oliver's entire body stiffened at that, and Felicity wasn't faring much better either.

"What are you talking about?" Felicity replied, a small tremor in her voice.

"I'm sure you remember the time cupcakes were delivered to your school for your seventh birthday. There ended up being peanuts in them. Your EpiPen had gone missing, and you were rushed to the hospital," Darhk recounted. "That delivery was never from me. You might've thought at the time that I'd forgotten such an important detail like your nut allergy, but that wasn't the case. I would never do anything so careless as to cause you harm."

"That was Waller? But why—how—she wasn't a part of A.R.G.U.S. back then," Felicity stammered in confusion.

"No. She was a part of H.I.V.E."

Oliver felt his blood run cold. The shocking and unexpected revelation was like a punch to his gut. For once Malcolm, and even Diggle, had been right about Waller. She was far more dangerous than they'd known.

"What?" Felicity exclaimed.

"She joined H.I.V.E. only a few years after me. Before that she'd belonged to another group called Shadowspire, a bunch of U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers who'd gone rogue overseas. Amanda was fierce and brilliant, and we worked closely together for a while," he explained, not without a hint of admiration. "But we later became rivals when our former leader was looking for his successor. She never got over the fact that I was chosen over her, and so she sought her revenge with you."

"I don't understand. If she wanted me dead, why not try again? Why recruit me?" Felicity questioned in rapid succession. "And why would you abandon us if the threat was so great?"
"I knew others like Waller would view you and your mother as a weakness, so I decided it best that I leave. However, I never stopped watching over the both of you and made sure you were protected. Amanda immediately switched sides and joined A.R.G.U.S. out of spite, bringing them information about H.I.V.E. to sweeten the deal. When she quickly started rising through the ranks, I knew you and your mother needed more protection than me keeping an eye on you from the shadows. So I asked Malcolm to step in."

"Oh my God," Felicity breathed and turned to Malcolm. "So that's the real reason why you married my mom?" The utter disgust was written all over her face. "These were your orders. To make her believe you loved her."

"Yes, at first it was nothing more than for her protection," Malcolm admitted. "But a lot has changed over the years, and I've grown to care for her deeply. I never intended to love anyone again after my wife died. It was an unexpected surprise."

"You're perverse. The both of you," Felicity admonished before shifting her attention to Oliver. "Is that what happened with us, too? Did my father or your parents put you up to it all those years ago?" The unbridled anger in her voice moments ago shifted to devastation as she scrutinized him. Her eyes watered. "Has all of this been one big lie?"

Oliver swallowed the bile rising in his own throat. He couldn't for a moment let Felicity think that what they had wasn't real. He'd already lost her once because of Malcolm and Darhk. Their sins were not his. Refusing to let everything he and Felicity had ever been to each other be wiped away in mere moments, Oliver reinforced, "No. I swear to God, Felicity, I never knew any of this. I didn't even know about my parents until after the Gambit went down. I know I've betrayed you but any. But if you were ever going to believe me about anything, please believe me about this. I fell in love with you. No one had to order me to see how amazing you are." He shot a defiant glare to both Malcolm and Darhk before silently willing her to trust him. Felicity stared back, a storm raging in her eyes and threatening to spill over.

"Touching," Darhk interrupted. "And also true. You and Oliver were not something I'd anticipated. I'll admit at first I didn't approve. Oliver had quite the colorful past with women, and of course I didn't want my little girl getting her heart broken. Oliver has proven dedicated, though. There's nothing he wouldn't do for you, Felicity. Isn't that right, Oliver?"

Oliver's fists tightened by his sides. He wanted to wipe the satisfied smile off of Darhk's face. The bastard was actually gloating about using Felicity to keep him in line. "You want to talk about heartbreak," Oliver fired back. His tone was low and coarse. "Maybe you should've thought twice before you sabotaged the Gambit and tried to kill me and my parents."

Felicity sucked in a sharp breath next to him. "Oliver," she murmured. "You said it was an accident because of the storm."

"That's what I thought at first until I learned the truth. I didn't—I didn't know how to tell you without dragging you into all of this." It was taking all of Oliver's willpower to keep his fury in check. He'd played his part of the good soldier these last few years. If he lost control completely, it would ruin the façade he'd worked so hard to perfect.

"Did you do that?" Felicity demanded of her father. "Did you plan their deaths? Did you put Oliver in danger knowing full well how I felt about him?"

"Felicity," Darhk said gently.

She continued, "Not only did I lose him for five years, but that could've been me. I was supposed to
be on the Gambit with him."

"And I'm thankful every day that you weren't." Darhk said to Oliver, "I wasn't the one who sabotaged the Gambit, but I can understand why you would think that. It was Amanda. She started going after my council members in retaliation and to weaken the organization. Unfortunately, your parents were among the casualties."

The anger that had been boiling over gave way to bewilderment as Oliver tried to process Darhk's admission. The room seemed to tilt as his head spun. Blood rushed in his ears. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Oliver didn't know if he even had any coherent words. Darhk was as dishonest, if not more, than Malcolm. He had to be lying about the circumstances surrounding his parents' deaths. This was probably all a ruse to get Felicity to trust them. If not, then Oliver had made yet another crucial mistake.

"No." His voice was hoarse but hard.

"You've had your suspicions about Amanda and revealed as much to Malcolm. If she had no qualms about trying to take out my daughter as a child, then surely you can see how murdering you and your family would be inconsequential."

"Why are you just telling me this now?" Oliver ground out.

"I confess that I let you make the assumption until your loyalty was assured. We didn't exactly get off to the best start, now did we?" he alluded.

"You didn't answer my previous question," Felicity cut in. Oliver was thankful for the distraction, since the rising tension between him and Darhk could be cut with a knife. "Why would Waller recruit me and keep me around all of these years?"

"Waller takes pleasure in manipulating her enemies. Recruiting you to work for her at A.R.G.U.S. and using you to unknowingly help destroy me must've brought her great satisfaction. She knew full well I couldn't come out of the shadows and reveal myself to you just yet. It's for that exact reason she let you play an active role in that Moscow mission. She knows I'm allied with Anatoly and the Bratva, and she took the opportunity to dangle you in front of me," Darhk explained. "When my associates confirmed that you were headed to Russia, I made sure Oliver would be there. I knew he would keep you safe in case you got into trouble or Waller tried to double cross you."

"That wasn't the only reason," Oliver called him out. "You knew that once we found each other again, you'd have an in with her."

Felicity stared back and forth between the two, obviously trying to discern who was speaking the truth. She looked as overwhelmed as Oliver felt.

"It's not quite as diabolical as you're making it sound. I'm simply a man who's waited a long time to be reunited with his family. And we are all family now, aren't we? Not only do you hold my daughter's heart, Oliver, but you're also the father of my grandson."

At the mention of their son on his lips, Oliver felt something dark and primal rise within him. He'd always been similarly protective of Felicity, but this was different. More intense. His body shook with fear, tension, and a fierce instinct to lash out and eliminate the threat. Felicity was still but alert next to him, as well—not that he'd expect anything less. She'd already demonstrated last night that there was nothing she wouldn't do to keep their son safe. Regardless of the pain she'd caused him, he loved her all the more for it.
Darhk seemed mildly amused by their responses rather than intimidated. His grin overtook his face and he said to Felicity, "This reunion would've taken place much sooner had it not been for your pregnancy. When Malcolm informed me that you'd come to him in a panic and needed to leave Starling City, I thought it best to give you space. It's been so long since you were a baby, but I remember how big of an adjustment period it was when you first arrived. I wanted to give you that time with your son."

"I never told Malcolm I was pregnant," Felicity replied curtly. "But I suppose it's no surprise that you know, since you've been spying on me all of this time."

"Protecting you," Malcolm corrected.

"Lying," Oliver reinforced and glared at Malcolm. He had the urge to lunge across the coffee table and pummel him some more.

"Can't say I blame you for giving Malcolm here a black eye when you found out the truth," Darhk said to Oliver. "You must understand, however, that I asked him to put my daughter's needs before yours."

"How ironic that you were acting as a father while denying me the same right," Oliver retorted.

Darhk ignored the remark and proceeded, "I would love to finally see my grandson. Connor, is it?"

"He's taking a nap right now. He's had a long night," Felicity declared in a hard voice. The intent was clear. She did not want Darhk anywhere near the baby, regardless of their family ties. Oliver couldn't agree more but remained silent. The warning would mean more coming from Felicity than him.

There was a flash of irritation in Darhk's eyes, but it faded quickly. The easy, benevolent smile was back on his face, though Oliver doubted he was fooling anyone with his loving father act.

"Of course," Darhk replied. "Next time."

"What exactly do you want from me?" Felicity insisted.

"I told you, sweetheart—"

"Don't you dare call me that," she angrily objected. "In fact, you can stop with the fatherly endearments altogether. You can't just abandon me, and then show up years later cheerfully revealing that you're the leader of some evil organization while claiming you always wanted us to be a family. Maybe it really sucked for you that I worked for A.R.G.U.S. all those years but if there's one thing I've learned from Waller while bringing down delusional madmen, it's that nothing comes without a price. So I'll ask again, what do you want from me?"

"I told you, hon—" he caught himself just as Felicity's eyes narrowed. "I told you, Felicity, that I've waited a long time to be a part of your life. I know you won't forgive me overnight, but I want to make it up to you. Give you a chance to create your own legacy."

Felicity was unconvinced. "You want me to work for you."

"No, I want you to work with me. And Oliver and Malcolm, too. We are all in this together. We can't let Amanda win because if she gets her way, we'll all be dead." Darhk's expression was open, hopeful, and full of fatherly concern. Anyone who didn't know the real him would be unable to see past his charm. Unable to suspect that there was some ulterior motive rather than the desire to ensure all of their safety from a dangerous foe. "Think of your son."
Her anger flared. "Don't bring my son into this."

"He's already involved. The attack on your home last night was proof of that. If we hadn't intervened, Amanda would already have you both in her clutches."


"No. But she has other resources. Perhaps she feared your former team would be too sympathetic to do what needed to be done. Malcolm informed me that you are still friendly with his son's girlfriend, who we know is an A.R.G.U.S. agent. Just like John Diggle's former wife, who you also worked with."

Physically bristling but sounding firm, Felicity replied, "I haven't had contact with any of them since I left Starling City. So you leave them out of this."

Darhk scrutinized her intently before nodding in agreement. "Done. You have my word they will not be harmed."

"We'll see," she stated and stood up. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've heard enough. I need some time to think."

"Of course," Darhk easily agreed and watched her retreating form. When Oliver got up to follow her, Darhk halted him. "Oliver, stick around a few more minutes. We have some business to discuss…”
Felicity stood in front of the window in Oliver's room, looking numbly out at the large expanse of lawn that had seen better days. The grass was watered down and soggy after all of the rain lately. The sky was gray and overcast, forecasting another rainstorm making its way in. Felicity's mind felt as dark and foggy as the sky. She didn't know what to process first. Last night had been shocking enough without adding the unexpected reunion with her father this afternoon.

After seventeen years of no communication, he'd barged back into her life like a bull in a China closet. Not only was he the leader of a terrorist organization hell bent on destroying her former agency, but it turned out the leader of that agency also happened to be working for the bad guys back in the day. The extreme coldness and contempt that Felicity had felt from Waller had always baffled her. To discover that it was a hatred that ran deeper, that she'd been working for the very woman who'd not only tried to kill her as a child but actually succeeded in killing Oliver's parents, it completely turned Felicity's world upside down. And if Darhk was to be believed, the intruders last night were yet another attempt by Waller to capture her and do God knows what in revenge. The goose bumps that had formed on her skin an hour ago wouldn't leave her.

And that wasn't the only bomb her father had dropped on her. What was just as bad was learning that Darhk had been spying on her and had sent Malcolm, one of his top stooges, to infiltrate their family. To lie to them all under the guise of protecting them. The deceit didn't stop there, though. Already falling down the rabbit hole, Felicity's hurt and anger were inflamed when she learned that Oliver had been involved in the scheme. He'd sworn to her that he didn't know the part about Damien Darhk being her father, and she was inclined to believe him. But this wouldn't be the first time he'd lied to get on her good side. Felicity didn't know what was truth and what was lies anymore.

Taking care of Connor and getting him settled down for a nap had been a good distraction at first. Focusing on him while quietly recounting to Sara what she'd learned was the only way to keep from totally freaking out. When Connor had fallen asleep, Felicity had said she needed some time to herself to think. Understanding, but being unable to really leave the room, Sara had curled up next to Connor on the bed and dozed off a little while ago. Both women were still feeling the effects of those tranquilizers, as well as Lucky who was asleep at Sara's feet.
Felicity placed her hand on her chest in an effort to feel her heavy breaths and heartbeat. To ground herself to this place and this moment. She wasn't dreaming or in some alternate universe. This was all actually happening. Her chest constricted and she closed her eyes, concentrating on her steady breathing once more.

What the hell was she going to do? How was she going to get herself out of this one? Even though she hadn't been lying about severing communication with Mei and the rest of the team, Felicity had still maintained hope that they might be allies if she did find herself in a really dangerous situation. Did Lyla and Mei know about Waller's sordid past with H.I.V.E.? Were they in danger, too, or did it not matter now that Waller had switched sides? If Mei and Lyla did know that Felicity was connected to Darhk, she didn't think they would've let her escape Starling City the first time. But that didn't mean they hadn't learned the truth since then. If Waller sensed they might be hesitant to carry out orders against her, she probably would've told them about Felicity's true connection to Darhk. Felicity wouldn't put it past her to even insinuate that she'd been a double agent all this time working with Oliver to benefit H.I.V.E.

God, she'd never asked for any of this and yet she was already in so deep. A soft knock came at the door. Shaking herself out of her stupor, Felicity quickly went to answer it. She prayed it wasn't Darhk. She didn't think she could deal with him again so soon, and she definitely didn't want him anywhere near her son at the moment.

"Oliver," she murmured. The relief didn't last long. This was another situation Felicity wasn't sure she was ready to handle just yet.

"We need to talk," Oliver stated gently yet firmly. Despite the levelness of his voice, his body was stiff with tension. Oliver had been both anticipating and dreading this moment for over a year.

"Connor's taking a nap."

His eyes flicked to the bed to see the baby tucked under the duvet. The stuffed duck was next to him, as well as a set of pillows on either side. Oliver swallowed the lump in his throat at the sight of him finally sleeping peacefully. "Then it's the perfect time."

Felicity stared back at Connor and Sara and sighed. She couldn't put this off any longer. "Fine. But not here."

Oliver led her a few doors down to a dark room. She was relieved to see that it was the miniature library and sitting room instead of one of the other bedrooms. That would've made this conversation even more awkward. Oliver opened the curtains to let more light in, but it wasn't much with the crappy weather. The couches were covered yet the room looked clean and free of any dust.

As Oliver removed one of the covers, Felicity blurted out, "Did you really not know Darhk was my father?"

"No, I had no idea." He rubbed his hand over his eyes, feeling even more exhausted than the night before. "Apparently, I wasn't told a lot of things," he griped. The anger that had been festering inside of him ever since Malcolm revealed that he knew where Felicity was all of this time was threatening to bubble over. He clenched his hands at his sides in an effort to keep it at bay.

"Not exactly fun to be lied to, is it?" Felicity remarked. Before he could respond, she pressed on, "But that's what you do. You lie. I'd ask you why you didn't tell me about Malcolm, especially since he's married to my mother and a part of our family, but you lied about your own affiliations, as well. You're not even really Bratva. You're H.I.V.E. Was anything you told me about the Gambit sinking and ending up on Lian Yu real?"
"Yes, it was real. I might not have told you all of the details, but I didn't lie about that."

"An omission is still a lie, Oliver," Felicity countered.

Oliver took a seat on the couch and gestured for her to join him. Felicity sat down on the opposite end. He went on to explain, "The Gambit busted apart, and my mom drowned at sea like I told you. My dad, another crew member, and myself did make it to the life raft. What I didn't tell you was that there wasn't enough food and water for all three of us. We drifted for a while, and I was pretty out of it. I don't know how my father had gotten the gun or why he had it on him..." He paused to build up his nerve. Oliver had never wanted Felicity to know about the horrors he'd faced. To know how truly damaged he was. But he'd also learned the hard way what happened when he wasn't completely honest with her. "He shot the other guy with us and started ranting about how he wasn't the man I thought he was. He told me to survive and to right his wrongs. Then he turned the gun on himself."

Felicity inhaled a shaky breath, sickened by the revelation. Robert Queen had survived the Gambit only to then kill himself in front of his son. Oliver was putting up a brave front, but he was clearly still affected while recounting the story. Felicity felt an overwhelming urge to cross the distance between them and comfort him before she caught herself.

"It turned out that Lian Yu was H.I.V.E. territory," Oliver continued. "It's mostly remote, but there's a compound there. It's where Darhk has his new recruits train. I was found by a man named Yao Fei."

For a second, Felicity thought she'd misheard him. "Yao Fei?" That was the name of Mei's missing father.

"Yes," Oliver confirmed, knowing exactly why Felicity had that look of shocked recognition on her face. "He'd been a general in the Chinese army and was kidnapped and brought there by the Triad. Darhk had wanted to recruit him for some reason, and so they'd also brought along his daughter for leverage in case the pitch didn't stick. Yao Fei escaped, but his daughter Shado wasn't so lucky. In return for teaching me how to fight and survive, I promised Yao Fei I'd help him get her back. He needed someone on his side. We did rescue her and hid on the island for over a year.

"One of Darhk's associates and now a council member, Slade Wilson, had been an ally of Yao Fei before the island. He was part of Australian Secret Intelligence Service and had infiltrated the island to rescue him. Somewhere along the way, Darhk turned him and he betrayed Yao Fei. Slade had been in love with Shado and was trying to get Yao Fei to join them through her. He never liked me, because he knew Shado favored me. She was killed right before we were captured the final time. The bullet that Slade meant for me, she took it. He's hated me ever since."

"Is that when you joined H.I.V.E.?" Felicity inquired. "What about Anatoly? You said he was on the island, too. Where does he fit in?"

"It turned out my parents were headed to China for a Council meeting under the guise of QC business. When the other members heard of the Gambit sinking, they all convened on Lian Yu. The Bratva has been aligned with H.I.V.E. for almost two decades. Anatoly apparently challenged Darhk, and he had him locked up in the compound to prove a point. He got out when we broke out Shado. It's how he learned about me and who I was. Eventually he got back into Darhk's good graces and when he found out I was going to be brought in on H.I.V.E., he offered to take me under his wing in the Bratva. Said he respected my father and he owed him. That's when I learned of my parents' involvement."

"What happened to Yao Fei?"
"Overcome with grief over Shado, he attacked Slade. But we were outnumbered and apparently Darhk had decided that Yao Fei was no longer necessary. He was executed on the spot."

Oliver's past on the island was so much worse than Felicity had ever imagined. Her heart ached for him and for Mei, who'd for so long been trying to find out what happened to her family. Felicity once again felt the urge to reach out and take his hand but tamped it down. It was then she noticed the red markings and torn skin on his knuckles.

"What happened?" At first Oliver was confused before he realized what she was referring to.

He smirked but the humor didn't reach his eyes. "The wall accidentally ran into my fist." After getting new orders from Darhk, Oliver had retreated to his father's study to be alone. There was so much to think about, and the fury had overwhelmed him. He'd have to get the gaping hole in the wall repaired after his guys were finished with their other construction project in the mansion. "I didn't know about your connection to Darhk. All these years I thought this was happening because of my parents and Malcolm. And when I wouldn't fall in line right away, Darhk made me believe that the Gambit sinking was because of their wavering loyalty.

"Malcolm already had custody of my sister, and I was so worried all of these years that they'd find out about you, too. Then Monument Point happened. I had no idea you were with A.R.G.U.S. I had no idea it was you I was fighting that night. Not that I would've killed you anyway. Because John and I know Lyla is A.R.G.U.S., we're both careful when dealing with female agents. We only use enough force to disarm. But then you were shot, poisoned, and…it would've been my fault." The sheer terror of almost losing her that night still stayed with him. The memory combined with the fear he'd been battling over the last year as he sought to find her was all-consuming. Oliver wanted to reach out for Felicity and feel that she was real, but he knew better. He'd be lucky if Felicity ever let him touch her again.

Felicity bit her lip. "I put the pieces together after Mei told me about you. For so long I couldn't figure out why you backed off of me and then saved me afterward. That's why you were acting so strangely in Coast City, too, wasn't it?" She'd thought his odd behavior had been about Isabel at the time. Her assumption hadn't even been close. His hoarse, pained whisper that he didn't deserve her as they made love that night took on a whole new meaning.

"I needed to see you and make sure you were all right but yes. The guilt became too much around you." Oliver explained, "After I returned you to A.R.G.U.S. was when Malcolm revealed Darhk knew about you and gave me the order to get information from you. I thought they made the connection through our intel."

"So you agreed and gave me the phone. That way you could copy the data from my computer at A.R.G.U.S. without me getting suspicious," Felicity curtly surmised.

"I wanted you to have the phone anyway, so that you could get a hold of me when you needed me. I didn't know how many other bases you'd be at, and I was worried."

"But not worried about the other agents you were so freely killing?"

"I spared life when I could."

"The arrows in those agents' chests suggest otherwise," she countered.

Oliver was blindsided by that. "What?"

"I know you were The Hood. Mei showed me surveillance photos of you with John on the streets."
Shaking his head, Oliver replied, "I never used arrows when infiltrating the A.R.G.U.S. bases. That was Malcolm. The Hood…he has nothing to do with H.I.V.E."

Felicity shifted on the couch. Her gaze was probing. "Enlighten me then."

"I haven't had much control over my life these last five years. The things I've done…they can never be erased. I needed to find some kind of balance. One night in Moscow, I had to get out of the casino and get away from everything. I found some thug in an alley attacking a woman, and I stopped him. It was the most like myself I'd felt in years. Finally, I could use my skills for something good, and so I started going out almost every night. I didn't want anyone to find out, so I concealed my identity with the hood. It belonged to Yao Fei, and I knew he'd be proud of that."

"Did Malcolm teach you archery? I've only ever seen you with a gun."

"Yao Fei and Shado taught me how to shoot. We didn't always have access to guns when we were on the run on the island, and so I developed a talent for archery. A bow and arrow require not only precision but patience and restraint. If anything, I needed more of that in my life."

"That's why we were able to track you to the areas near the bases that were attacked."

"It was my penance," Oliver confirmed. "Although I wasn't present for all of the attacks."

"You think that absolves you for what you did?" Felicity challenged. "If you hate H.I.V.E. as much as you claim and you knew I was A.R.G.U.S., why would you not tell me all of this? Was all of your talk about loving and trusting in each other just a ploy to get what you wanted? How much of our time together was real, and how much of it was you carrying out orders?"

"I have always loved you, Felicity," Oliver fiercely replied. "I might not have told you everything, but what I did share with you was the truth. You were always my top priority. Everything I did was to keep you safe."

"Oh, don't give me that crap, Oliver." Felicity stood up in frustration. "If it was really about my safety, you would've told me. Leaving me in the dark was leaving me unprotected."

"I refused the order to spy on you at first, but Malcolm and Darhk weren't going to take no for an answer. Malcolm didn't threaten to harm you directly, which I thought at the time was because he knew he'd lose all control over me if he did. So he threatened to retaliate against the people closest to you."

"Again, all the more reason you should have told me!" she heatedly retorted. "You knew I was A.R.G.U.S. and that I had resources, Oliver. I could've helped you. That's what couples do. They face the danger together. They're stronger together. If you claim to love me as much as you do, then you would've trusted me."

"It was never about not trusting you. I know now it was wrong to lie to you, but at the time it's what I thought was best. Maybe it was selfish, but I have lost enough people in my life, Felicity, and I was not going to have you get mixed up in my plans—especially if I failed."

"What plans?"

"I didn't hand all of the information I got from you to Malcolm. It was only enough to make it seem like we were getting closer to obtaining the target. I chose locations that would result in the least number of casualties but still seemed like probable holding facilities."

"Holding facilities for what? We knew weapons and supplies were being taken. What we couldn't
"The attacks on different bases and bunkers were intended to weaken A.R.G.U.S., but there was —is," he corrected, "a bigger agenda. Darhk doesn't want you to know this yet, but he wants to get his hands on something called Rubicon."

Felicity knew exactly what Oliver was referring to and tried not to react. "What's Rubicon?" she said evenly.

Oliver studied her intently. "It's some kind of weapon. For all of his talk about trust and loyalty, he isn't big on telling me or the other council members all of the details. I was just supposed to supply them with the data so they could root it out. Dig and I, along with some of our allies, were trying to find it first so we could use it as leverage. We were going to set up Darhk and H.I.V.E. with a decoy but keep the real prototype in case we failed."

"Again, why the hell didn't you tell me any of this?" Her voice rose. "If you failed, everyone we cared about still could've been targeted in retaliation. My team at A.R.G.U.S., Waller excluded, are good people and could've been killed. The last time we spoke, I offered you a way out. If you'd have joined our side—"

"There was no guarantee someone like Waller would've kept her promise, and now we know for sure she's corrupt. She almost killed both of us once, Felicity. She did succeed in killing my parents, if Darhk is to be believed. We would've been playing into her hands, too."

Felicity argued, "But you didn't know that back then!"

"What I did know was that I couldn't let you become a liar, too. I couldn't let you become a knowing accomplice in case we were caught."

"A lot of good that did me," Felicity scoffed. "I was still branded a traitor when the leak was traced back to me."

"But you had plausible deniability. Being left in the dark also kept Malcolm from going to you directly," Oliver explained, willing her to understand. "If I did tell you and he got wind of that, he would've asked much worse of you. Having to go through me limited his control and influence over the situation and you."

"That was not your decision to make. And I hate to burst your protective bubble, Oliver, but Malcolm did seek me out. A couple of weeks before our big fight, we had lunch and he casually mentioned that he'd learned Brighton Tech was a cover for the agency."

"What?" Oliver growled. This day was getting worse by the second.

"He had a cover story. Said he was looking to buy a new tech company to gain some military contracts. He wanted my opinion on the deal and promised to keep my affiliations a secret. It's why I went to him when I knew A.R.G.U.S. was coming for me," Felicity stated and gave him a pointed look. "Obviously I wouldn't have done so, if you'd actually been truthful with me."

Oliver felt his fists tightening by his sides. He was half tempted to march back downstairs and finish Malcolm off completely. "If you did know about Malcolm, would you have been able to act like everything was okay? You wouldn't have tried to warn your mom?"

"I was an A.R.G.U.S. operative, Oliver." Felicity crossed the distance, staring him down. "I've had to keep a lot of secrets from my family over the years"—she poked his chest—"which also includes you. I would've done whatever was necessary to protect my family and you. If you actually had faith
in me instead of labeling me as some damsel in distress, you would've been honest."

His anger flared. "You want to talk about honesty, Felicity. Why didn't you tell me you were pregnant?" Oliver demanded. "That was why we had our whole fight about our future, wasn't it? You wanted to see what I was going to say before giving me all of the facts."

Felicity crossed her arms over her chest, needing a barrier between him and his accusations. She took a step back from his looming form. "The difference, Oliver, was that I wasn't trying to be deceitful. I was still shocked myself, and I was working up the courage to tell you. I was scared of how you would react," she admitted.

"How many times have I told you I love you? How many times have I told you I would do anything for you? Hell, I even told you I wanted to have kids with you someday," Oliver exclaimed, nearly shouting. "You talk about having faith in each other, and yet you denied me the chance to do right by you."

Felicity's eyes narrowed at that. She was so furious her body began to shake. "So you wouldn't have 'done right by me' otherwise? What you're really saying is that you would've kept lying if I hadn't found out. That you needed some sort of incentive, like my pregnancy, in order to choose me. Well guess what, Oliver?" she shouted. "That's not good enough for me! I wasn't trying to trap you. I didn't want to be your obligation."

He closed the distance between them and stood toe to toe with her. "You were never an obligation to me, Felicity!"

"You said that you weren't thinking about the future, Oliver," Felicity replied, feeling the pain of that day all over again. "You said there was no happy ending!"

"Yeah, and I was a total idiot because I was lying. I needed more time to find Rubicon, and you kept talking about informant deals and going to the media. I said I wanted to give you everything, which I meant, but I was nowhere near close to being able to. I lied to avoid giving you false hope, and it was wrong. I've regretted it every damn day since I read your letter," Oliver declared, "and I'm sorry."

Felicity was about to argue when she saw him reach into his pocket. The retort died on her lips at the sight of the small, black velvet box. She inhaled a sharp, shaky breath when he opened it to reveal a ring. The large, princess cut diamond sparkled along with the smaller surrounding diamonds in the elegant band. "Oliver..." she trailed off, feeling her eyes sting with unshed tears.

"I bought this months before that day," Oliver began. His tone was quieter but still raw. His heart pounded erratically in his chest at her equally emotional reaction. "Every time I doubted my mission or felt the guilt of keeping secrets from you about to suffocate me, I thought of giving it to you. Because we would never get that day unless I was successful, and I couldn't fail you. I couldn't fail our families. I needed that hope of a life with you or else I honestly don't know what the hell I'm fighting for anymore. I was going to try and tell you some of it that day I showed up at your apartment to find you gone. I was going to tell you that I love you. That you were right, and we should fight for each other. I know now that even that gesture was flawed, but I swear to God, Felicity, if you told me you were pregnant I would've told you everything."

"Don't say that, Oliver," she mumbled. "You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. Because I kept thinking I had more time to find Rubicon. You being pregnant would've changed everything. I would've had to find another way, because I would not have wanted our child to be born with a threat like that hanging over our heads."
"So it's all my fault," she replied, tense.

"No, that's not what I'm saying," he was quick to correct. Why did he have to be so terrible at explaining himself? He heaved a frustrated sigh. "What I mean is I deserved to have all of the facts and be a part of the decision. He's my child, too."

"Oliver, do you even realize how hypocritical you sound right now?" Felicity shot back. She turned away from him, walking around the couch toward the window, to get a hold over her emotions and collect her thoughts. "You only deserve what you earn, and what you did cost us both everything. I didn't just leave Starling City on a whim. I left because you left me no choice. I left because you compromised my position at A.R.G.U.S. while also destroying any trust I did have in you. For the first time in a year, I actually felt like you were my enemy."

Oliver felt his insides twist at that. Shaking his head, he replied, "Felicity, we agreed that we couldn't tell each other everything. We agreed that we would trust each other to do what was best to protect—"

"But you weren't protecting me, Oliver!" She whipped around to face him. "Lying clearly was not what was best for me, and maybe I am partly to blame for that. I foolishly thought deep down that I could somehow free you and that you would come home. But you had to be the one to decide that. You had to be the one to fight for it, and you ran. Maybe not physically, but emotionally you cut me out."

"Felicity—"

"Do you think I wanted Connor to grow up like me without a father? Do you think it was an easy decision for me to leave my home and my family? To not be able to at least share it with them and get the support I needed in fear that you would find me? Because I did fear you, Oliver," Felicity declared. She noticed him flinch at that. "Regardless of all the years that passed and you being Bratva, I had always thought I knew the real you. I had always thought I knew what was in your heart. But it turned out I didn't know you at all. You were a total stranger, and it made me question everything.

"So, yes, I ran and I won't apologize for that. I did what any good mother would do, and I protected my child. I put him first because if I had let myself fall into that dark hole you created, I'm not sure I would've even been able to get out of bed in the morning. I had to stay strong and healthy for him, because there was no room for mistakes. Every day I got dressed, I ate, I worked, I ran errands, I chatted with the neighbors, and I made a home with Sara's help. I played my part perfectly, and yet almost every night I cried myself to sleep. Because despite everything, I still felt like something was missing. Even as I hated you I still needed you. Every craving, every ultrasound, every kick, every back ache, every Lamaze class, every false contraction...you should've been right there with me," she lamented as her voice cracked with emotion.

"I was in labor with Connor for eight hours. Sara was helping me do my breathing, and yet all I could hear was your voice in my head. I heard it the entire time I was pushing. I was so exhausted that I felt like I couldn't go on, but you told me to so I did. Then I heard Connor's first cries, and you were gone. I held that beautiful, tiny baby in my arms that was so visibly the best of both of us. He had your eyes"—she wiped at the tears that were now freely falling—"my nose, our dimples, and I loved him completely. My entire universe shifted in that moment, and I started crying all over again because I didn't know how the happiest, most earth-shattering moment in my entire life could also be my saddest."

"Felicity..." Oliver choked out. He couldn't get enough air to form words.
"So don't you dare try to play the victim, Oliver Queen," Felicity sobbed, "because I am not the reason you weren't there. You did this to us, and I'll be damned if I let you or my monster of a father try and suck us back into your dark world."

Oliver could feel tears burning his own eyes. He stood frozen, paralyzed by overwhelming grief. Not since he'd watched his parents' lives slip away before him had he felt such pain. The shock that had been keeping his emotions locked up ever since last night was long gone. The schism in his heart from when he'd discovered that Felicity had disappeared broke wide open.

When the door slammed behind Felicity, Oliver's legs gave out and he sunk onto the couch. He placed his head in his hands. She thought him as bad as her father, and maybe she was right. Hadn't Darhk lied to his family and manipulated them under the guise of protecting them? Would Connor grow up the same way as Felicity did, thinking he wasn't enough because his father wasn't a part of his life? Should Oliver even fight to be? As upset as he was that Felicity never told him the truth, Oliver also knew she was right. It was his lies that ruined everything they'd worked so hard to build between them.

The woman he loved and now mother of his child not only hated him, but she'd feared him. Oliver's entire body shook with the force of his silent sobs. All this time he'd thought he was swimming in darkness, trying to stay afloat by undermining Darhk and going out as The Arrow. The self-hatred rose up so swiftly inside of Oliver that he felt like he didn't belong to his body. Everything about this moment had become surreal, but somehow he was struck by one glaring, absolute truth. He wasn't swimming in darkness anymore; he was drowning in it.
**Free Falling**

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year, everyone! Hope you enjoyed your holidays, and thank you all for your lovely comments/kudos and being so patient while I took a little break. Just to let you know, I'll be updating this fic every other week or so from here on out. Between real life obligations and also writing *Caught in the Rapture*, I've decided to space out the updates a little more. I can't say enough, though, how excited I am to be getting back to this fic. So many more things to come for Olicity and baby Connor!

I hope you like this next chapter, although you might be cursing me at the end. Lol! This fic is tagged under angst for a reason. Flashbacks will be resuming, and I've mentioned before that past Oliver still has some Ollie in him that he needs to overcome. So I hope you guys will keep that in mind as you read. I'll explain more in the end note but enough of my babbling...on to the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

March 16, 2014

It felt good to be outside instead of cooped up in the mansion. The incessant rain over the last few days made it impossible to venture out. Combined with the fact that she was technically on house arrest, Felicity was starting to feel more than a little stir crazy. Even now as she walked the expanse of what used to be the gardens of the Queen mansion, Felicity was aware of the armed security guards along the perimeter. They didn't have to be directly looking at her for Felicity to know that they were watching her closely.

Felicity pushed Connor's carriage along another path. Although she'd only seen Oliver in passing around the mansion a couple of days after their fight, he'd made sure that she, Connor, and Sara had everything they'd needed. Somehow his men had managed to get their clothes and most of Connor's things from their home in Ivy Town.

Unlike a few days ago, the weather had once again cooled. Felicity made sure that Connor was bundled up in his jacket and hat and tucked under a blanket. His little cheeks were flushed but that was mostly from the exertion of playing with the toys dangling above him. Connor wasn't as agitated as he'd been when they first arrived, but the mansion was still unfamiliar to him. Felicity was trying to surround him with as many recognizable things as she could to help him to adjust—not that she intended to stay at the mansion for very long. Felicity's first priority was figuring out a way to get them the hell out of there.

"Hey," Sara called out. With Lucky's leash in hand, she caught up to them. "I didn't bring a doggie bag. Maybe if we're lucky, one of Oliver's guards will step in the big pile he just did."

Felicity laughed out loud at that. "Well, that's one way to exact your revenge."

"It's the little things in life," Sara joked back. Her voice lowered. "So now can you tell me this plan of yours?"
Since she wouldn't put it past her father or Oliver to bug the house, Felicity told Sara they needed to talk somewhere they wouldn't be overheard. "I'm not even sure I can call it a plan yet," Felicity mumbled. "What I need to do is get in touch with Mei."

"Mei from A.R.G.U.S.? Are you sure that's such a good idea? If your fath—Darhk," she quickly corrected at Felicity's annoyed look, "is to be believed, Waller's already got her claws into her. How do you know she can be trusted?"

"She protected me from Waller and let me escape with Connor the first time."

"Yeah, because she owed you one. But it's been over a year, Felicity. Waller would've had plenty of time to turn her against you since then."

"I know what you're saying," Felicity acknowledged, "but I'm not talking about trusting her blindly. I just need some time with her to assess the situation and see if she could still be an ally. I doubt she knows about Waller's sordid past. Either way, it'll be good to know where I stand with her and A.R.G.U.S."

"So how are you planning on getting in touch with her?" Sara questioned. "You gonna steal a phone or something?"

They hadn't been given any of their devices back yet. Oliver knew giving her any piece of technology was the equivalent of handing Felicity a gun.

"That's step one. I need the phone just long enough to call my mom."

"Okay, now I'm confused."

"I'm not going to tell her what's going on. All I'm going to say is that I'm in town for a little bit, and I'd like to see everyone. Knowing my mother, it'll take all of ten seconds to organize a family dinner at the Merlyn manor," Felicity explained. "No way will Malcolm be able to get me out of that one. My mother will have a fit if I don't show up and think something is wrong."

"You do share the same stubborn determination," Sara teased and nudged her.

"Then I'm going to call Tommy," Felicity went on. "Tell him about the dinner and encourage him to bring Mei with him."

A knowing grin formed on Sara's face. "They've been dating for a while now. It wouldn't look suspicious at all for Tommy to bring his girlfriend who was also your former co-worker to see you."

"Exactly. If I can get her alone at some point, then I can tell her some of what's going on and feel her out. Maybe A.R.G.U.S. will make a move. Maybe not. Either way, we disrupt H.I.V.E.'s plan of keeping our presence here a secret."

"We run the risk of ending up in their crosshairs if something goes down."

"We're already in as deep as we can get," Felicity muttered. "Evil father vs. killer ex-boss, remember?" Sighing, Felicity said, "I'm sorry for dragging you into this, Sara."

"Hey, don't apologize. I told you a long time ago I would always have your back." Sara placed her arm around her shoulder and gave her a squeeze. "I have no intention of losing another sister."

"Thanks." They continued hugging and walking along. Felicity's smile turned into a laugh. "Do you think this is why our neighbors thought we were a lesbian couple when we first moved in?"
Sara threw her head back and laughed. "Oh my God, that was great."

"I still can't believe you hit on Janine down the street."

"I did more than that."

Felicity's eyes widened. "Seriously? Sara, she was married!"

Shrugging, Sara stated with a satisfied grin on her face, "Maybe so, but Gabe wasn't getting the job done. I'll tell you that."

"You are so bad," Felicity playfully admonished as they approached the mansion. "So, you think you can use some of those stealth skills to get me a phone?"

"I've got it covered," Sara assured her.

No sooner had they entered the mansion did the pair run into Oliver and John. Both their faces were slick with sweat and portions of their shirts were soaked and clinging to their bodies. They must've been in the private gym training. In his casual clothes, Oliver looked even more muscular than when she'd seen him before she left Starling City. He'd obviously upped his workout routine since then. It took every ounce of willpower for Felicity not to gawk at him and ignore the surge of heat zinging through her body at the sight of him.

"Hi," Oliver tentatively greeted.

Felicity's response was equally strained. "Hi."

A moment of awkward silence passed until Lucky let out a low growl. He still hadn't warmed to either Oliver or Dig. Sara shushed him and petted his head.

"I didn't know the gym was open," Sara spoke up, for which Felicity was grateful.

"Yeah. You're welcomed to use it if you like."

"I will."

Another bout of awkward silence followed. It was finally broken when Connor made a noise and started kicking at the blanket over him. Felicity went to remove it along with his hat and coat. It was much warmer in the house.

After a quick look at Connor, Oliver said, "Felicity, do you have a minute?"

Felicity paused, unsure what to say. She couldn't avoid Oliver forever, but she also didn't think she could handle another intense conversation so soon. A part of her was still angry with herself for the way she totally broke down in front of him the other day. She'd meant to stay calm and composed, but a year's worth of pain, anger, and sadness could no longer be suppressed. The raw emotion had completely overwhelmed her.

"Actually, I was on my way upstairs to feed him."

"Good. Because that's where we need to go." He stared at her expectantly.

With a quiet sigh, Felicity nodded and picked up Connor. Sara mumbled something about finding Lucky's chew toy, but the meaningful look she gave Felicity hinted that she would be on the prowl for the perfect phone to steal. John also made himself scarce as Felicity followed Oliver to the staircase. They walked silently to their wing—the only sounds coming from Connor as he happily
played with the toy in his hands. It was already covered in spit from him shoving it in his mouth. Oliver kept looking over at him every few seconds, his expression unreadable.

Felicity headed toward her bedroom, which had previously been Thea's. After her fight with Oliver, she didn't want to keep staying in his room. It was too weird and personal. Oliver, of course, had moved into it afterward. Sara was in another guest room a few doors down.

"Over here," Oliver directed her and pointed to the closed door across the hall.

Frowning curiously, she followed him. There had been men in and out of that room for the last few days. It was under some type of construction, along with a few other parts of the mansion, because Felicity had heard hammering and tools constantly being shuffled around.

"What's in here?"

Oliver didn't say anything and instead opened the door. He walked inside and flicked on the light before stepping aside for Felicity to enter. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of the nursery. It looked just like Connor's room back in Ivy Town, including the blue and yellow duckling wallpaper. His crib, the rocking chair, changing table, and his toys, some new, were all in their designated spots. Even the pictures on the wall were the same.

"Oliver…" Completely taken off guard, Felicity was speechless.

"You mentioned the other day that he was having a difficult time adjusting. I know Connor has been sleeping with you in your room, but I thought this would help. I had the baby monitor and camera installed, too," Oliver added. "So we can keep an eye on him."

"Not your men—" she began, slightly panicked.

"No," he reassured her. "Just you and me."

Felicity nodded, placated. "Okay."

"I've only given Dig and Raisa permission to be near him, if that's okay with you."

"I'm okay with that," she agreed. Raisa, despite her Bratva ties, was a very kind woman and John had proven himself by taking care of Connor when Felicity had been knocked out.

Connor made a sound and shifted in her arms. He held his toy out for Oliver.

Oliver's voice instantly softened, as did the expression on his face. "Is this for me?"

Felicity watched the exchange as Oliver, tentatively, took it and started teasing him with it. Connor, always eager to play, shrieked and reached for the toy again. His dimpled grin lit up his entire face, simultaneously warming her heart and making it ache.

"He seems like a very happy baby," Oliver commented, never taking his eyes off of him. He let Connor grip the toy for a few seconds before pulling it back. Felicity tightened her hold on him as he leaned forward in an attempt to go after it.

"He is," Felicity confirmed.

"I'm glad he got that from you." He sounded relieved.

The comment tugged at something deep inside her, but Felicity brushed it aside. "He's very active. Loves to play and meet new people. He's got a set of lungs, though."
The corner of his mouth quirked up. "I've noticed." After handing Connor back his toy, Oliver finally met her gaze with a piercing one of his own. "He's beautiful, Felicity."

There was that tug again. Her heart raced. "Thank you," she murmured and then gestured to the nursery. "For all of this."

"You're welcome."

"Since you went through all this trouble, I'm assuming this means we won't be allowed to leave anytime soon."

Oliver's posture immediately stiffened. "It's not safe, Felicity."

"So I've been told."

"You were attacked the other night and almost abducted."

"I know that, Oliver. But you also can't keep us trapped here forever."

"It's not forever, and I'm not trying to trap you. I'm trying to protect you," he countered.

"As usual, we differ on the best way to do that. What else did my fath—Darhk”—she caught herself just in time—"order you to do?"

"It doesn't matter. My top priority right now is you, Connor, and Sara. He might not want you to leave, but he doesn't control what goes on in this house. I'm doing everything I can to make sure you're all comfortable," Oliver explained.

"As long as we're being kept here against our will and surrounded by a bunch of Bratva and H.I.V.E. goons, we're not going to be comfortable, Oliver."

"And if you are allowed to leave then what?" Oliver challenged. "I know you, Felicity. You'll try to shake the security detail and run off again with my son."

"Oh, so now he's your son?" Felicity remarked. She kept her voice level but the tiniest tremble belied the undercurrent of exasperation. "You've barely been around him since we got here. You won't even hold him."

"I'm just doing what you said. You don't want me infecting him with my darkness, remember?" Oliver edgily shot back. "I am, after all, just like your father, right?" He was angry but the kicked puppy expression on his face and way he was rubbing his fingers together at his sides told Felicity that he was hurt more than anything.

She opened her mouth to object but nothing came out. That was basically what she'd told him, and she still wasn't sure whether that was true or not. Oliver said he was protecting them, and the nursery was a nice gesture, but whose side was he on this week? At one point, Felicity would've trusted her heart and sworn that Oliver had her back. But as long as Darhk was in control and pulling the strings, Felicity didn't think she could silence the doubts. If Oliver had lied to her and betrayed her once in some misguided attempt to save her, he could do it again.

Connor patted her chest and pulled at her shirt, calling her attention back to him. "I need to feed him," Felicity said dismissively.

Any trace of emotion was gone, and Oliver was as hard as stone again. "Let me know if you require anything else," he replied brusquely before walking out.
Felicity sighed and sat in the rocking chair to nurse. Connor settled in much easier now, already feeling at home in the replica of his room. Felicity envied his innocence, wishing so badly in that moment that she could forget everything and do the same.

**July 8, 2007**

Mere seconds after ringing the doorbell, Oliver was being pulled into the Queen mansion and enveloped in a tight embrace from his mother. "Hey, Mom," he greeted, somewhat taken aback. She must've been waiting by the door in order to answer it so quickly.

"Oh, my beautiful boy. I've missed you."

"Mom, it's only been a week," Oliver chuckled and patted her back. "Everything okay?"

Moira placed her hand on his face and looked at him. "Of course. I'm sorry, Oliver. I guess I'm still shaken from what happened at QC. Then you went away on the trip and... you can't blame a mother for worrying."

"I'm fine, Mom," Oliver reassured her. "How's Dad?"

"Bored," Robert interjected as he hobbled into the foyer on crutches.

His mother tsked under her breath. "Your father really is the worst patient. If not for the doctor's orders that he get some rest, he would be rejoining you in the office tomorrow."

"I've rested enough, Moira," his father grumbled, sounding an awful lot like a petulant child. Oliver bit back a grin. "We've got work to do if we're going to get the stock prices back up."

She flitted her hand at him dismissively. "The company will be fine. I'm going to the office and meeting up with Walter tomorrow to discuss our options." His father opened his mouth to protest when she added, "You can video conference in, of course. The beauty of modern technology is that you don't have to leave your home to be useful."

Robert was somewhat placated, though he couldn't suppress one last grumble. Shaking his head, he turned to his son. "Oliver, how are you doing, son?" He also hugged him and slapped his back. "Save any more people while you were away in Ivy Town?"

"No. Thankfully, Ivy Town is much too boring for that."

"Well, you're still the hero here," Moira told him. "Which is why we wanted to celebrate. I've instructed Raisa to make all of your favorites for brunch today."

Oliver didn't know what had come over his parents. They'd doted on him a lot over the years—at times he wasn't sure he even deserved it—but this was different. They actually looked... proud of him. Genuinely proud. Oliver wasn't prepared for the way it made him feel. There was an unfamiliar sense of contentedness that washed over him, helping to dissolve some of the anguish he'd felt from his conversation with Laurel yesterday. She'd accused him of failing—or worse, not even trying—to live up to his parents' expectations. This was the one time that she was actually wrong.

Unused to this type of praise, Oliver deflected and asked, "Where's Speedy?"

"Right here. You're late as usual, Ollie. I'm starving," his little sister griped.
"Thea," Moira gently scolded.

"What? I am. If you give him too many compliments, it'll go straight to his already oversized head," she joked. Seconds later, she shrieked in protest when he affectionately ruffled her hair. "Ollie!"

Moira's expression was a cross between a frown and a grin at their childish behavior. "All right you two. Let's all go into the dining room before the food gets cold."

Raisa had prepared a feast fit for a king—or Queen rather. There was so much food, and it all smelled delicious. He really hadn't been expecting this. "Wow, you could feed half the city with all of this."

"I instructed Raisa to make extra. I thought you and Tommy would like some leftovers."

"You thought right," Oliver told his mother. Tommy would be thrilled.

Their conversation while eating was pleasant. Oliver couldn't remember the last time they'd all been together and talking like a normal family. They laughed at some joke Thea had learned at camp and later on again when his father was being a difficult patient. He didn't want any more pain meds when Raisa brought them to him. His mother warned that if he didn't take them, then she'd start crushing them up in his food like they do with dogs.

"Speaking of, when can we get a puppy?" Thea interjected.

Moira replied, "Thea, we are still recovering from the time you brought home that stray cat."

"He was cute."

"He was filthy and mean," Moira pointed out.

"Then we'll make sure to get a clean and cute puppy this time."

Moira appeared as if she was about to object when Robert interrupted. "We'll think about it," he promised her, exchanging a look with his wife.

"Keep working on them," Oliver whispered to his sister. "Eventually they'll cave."

"I know," Thea murmured confidently. "I'll have that puppy before the summer is over."

"What are you two whispering about over there?" Moira inquired.

"Nothing," they answered simultaneously. Of course, that only made their mother more suspicious.

"Oliver," Robert spoke up, "your mother and I wanted to run something by you."

The forkful of eggs that had been heading toward Oliver's mouth paused in mid-air. It was never a good thing when his parents got "ideas" concerning him. "What?"

"We were thinking of holding some kind of ceremony or event at QC to honor your bravery. Maybe even invite the press. It would be a great way to boost morale and show that we're moving forward."

"Like a PR stunt?" he asked, feeling uneasy.

"No, of course not," his mother denied. "Sweetheart, we are so proud of you and we think it's only right that we acknowledge that."
"Then why do you need the press there?"

"They don't have to be if you don't want," his father said and took a sip of his coffee. "But some of the press was involved in the hostage crisis that day, so we thought it would be good to include them."

Oliver wasn't sure what to think. As much as he wanted his parents' praise, he felt weird about them making a big event out of a tragedy. He was well aware that the PR team at QC was in crisis mode since that day. The reports of Oliver and the SCPD saving the day were interspersed with speculation and criticism about QC's new quantum processor and the failure in adequate security.

Another thought occurred to Oliver. "Well, if you're going to honor me, then you should also do the same for Felicity," he told them. "I wouldn't have been able to do it without her."

"Felicity refused to be identified by the press," his mother reminded him.

Oliver wasn't accepting that, especially since he knew his mother wasn't that keen on Felicity. The evidence was on Thea's face as she readjusted her fake nose ring. "Have you asked her?"

"We should," Robert agreed with his son. "She seemed like a lovely girl when I met her. Clearly, she's brilliant. I'll have Walter call her in to the office tomorrow to discuss it."

After brunch, they all went out on the terrace. The weather was sunny but not overly humid, which made having dessert outside a nice change of scenery. Oliver got a text from Felicity at some point asking if he wanted to meet up later. His usual desire for her swirled with another weird sense of panic. He texted her back and said that he was spending the rest of the day with his sister. Thea had been surprised when Oliver suggested afterward that they hang out. They hadn't been as close since he moved out—not that Oliver was always home anyway when he was living at the mansion. His mother suggested that he stay the night and go into QC with her in the morning. Oliver agreed, latching onto any excuse not to go back to the loft. He didn't know how he'd feel if Felicity showed up or if Tommy questioned where he'd been last night. Oliver needed some time away to think.

Later that evening, he and Thea ended up in the living room watching movies and binging on snacks. In the middle of their movie marathon, Oliver got another text. He fully expected it to be from either Felicity or Tommy but was surprised when it was from Laurel. She said that she needed to talk to him and that it was important. Remembering how distraught she'd been the night before, Oliver told her to come to the Queen mansion. It was the only place they would have some semblance of privacy, and he was curious about what more she could possibly have to say after their massive fight.

A half hour later, the doorbell rang and Raisa let Laurel in. She brought her to the living room, and Oliver immediately took in her appearance. Unlike last night, Laurel was calmer and more put together. She wore jeans and a t-shirt, full makeup, and had her hair down and wavy. Oliver would think she was her normal self if he didn't know any better.

"Laurel, hey," Thea greeted in surprise. "I didn't know you were coming over."

"Sorry to interrupt."

"No, it's fine. We were just having a movie marathon if you want to join us," Oliver offered.

Laurel smiled. It wasn't as bright as usual but it was genuine. "I'd like that." She took a seat next to Oliver and accepted the bag of gummy worms Thea passed to her.

Aside from a few glib comments about the events on screen, they watched the rest in silence. Both he
and Laurel were tense, but it didn't seem to be the result of residual anger. It was born of awkwardness and uncertainty.

"Well, I think I've had enough for the night," Thea announced and stood up, stretching. "I'll give you two some alone time." She shot a sympathetic look to her brother. She must've picked up on some of the tension. Thea was way too observant for her own good sometimes.

"Night, Speedy," Oliver called after her. He glanced back at Laurel, who was coyly staring at her hands. Unused to seeing her so subdued, Oliver knew that this was probably going to be another tough conversation. "I was surprised to hear from you."

"I know."

"What did you want to talk about?"

Finally looking up, Laurel asked, "Do you think we can go to your room first?" Noticing his hesitation, she explained, "What I have to say, I'd like to keep private."

"Sure." Oliver led the way upstairs, sneaking peeks at the brunette every few seconds. Laurel looked even more nervous than before. He shut the door behind them and waited for her to begin.

Taking a breath, Laurel declared, "I owe you an apology." Oliver did a double take. He definitely hadn't been expecting that. "I know we've been having problems lately, and I think part of the reason is that I haven't been completely honest with you."

Oliver took a seat on his bed and patted the spot beside him for her to sit. "What's going on?"

She came right out with it. "My parents are getting a divorce."

"Oh, wow," he said in shock. "I'm so sorry, Laurel." Even though he didn't get along with Laurel's father, Oliver still secretly admired him. He had a tough exterior, but there was nothing he wouldn't do for his wife and daughters. Quentin and Dinah had always seemed so loving around each other, and Oliver could admit that he envied their "picture perfect" family. Apparently, appearances were deceiving.

"Everything seemed fine. They fought sometimes, but it was nothing out of the ordinary. My dad would still make my mom's favorite dinner, and she would rub his shoulders when he had a hard day at work," Laurel recounted. "Then, out of the blue, my mom asks my dad for a divorce. She completely blindsided him. Sara and I could sense something was wrong, but he didn't tell us right away. I think he was trying to talk my mom out of it."

"Did she say why?"

"She met someone else. Some other professor at SCU. I don't know how long the affair has been going on, but she moved out of the house last month and has been shacking up with him ever since," she explained, barely disguising her anger. "My father started drinking, and it's turned into a problem."

"Laurel..." He reached for her hand and was relieved when she actually accepted it.

"He's at the bar most nights." Her voice shook, and she swiped at a few stray tears. "Sara and I have been taking turns bringing him home. I had to call into work the other day and say he was sick. He was so hungover he couldn't even get out of bed."

"Was he drunk the day of the explosion?" There was nothing that seemed out of the ordinary to
Oliver when he’d been talking to him on the phone. Detective Lance sounded coherent when giving Oliver instructions to help take out the bombers.

"He wasn't drunk, but he was hungover. Didn't stop him from going back for more that night, though," she said bitterly.

"Why didn't you tell me any of this?"

"Because I was ashamed, and you never seemed to notice anything was wrong with me. You wanted to take a break, and I didn't want to force you into anything. I thought maybe you were going through something like my mom, but unlike her you at least were being honest about it. I didn't want you to completely cut me out, so I agreed." Laurel continued, "But then I felt you pulling away as things were getting worse at home and...I don't know. The more I couldn't control what was going on with my parents the more I clung to what I had with you. Everything came to a head in Ivy Town, and I know I was projecting my insecurities on you. I should've believed that you wouldn't go with Samantha. Like you said, you were dealing with your own issues from the explosion."

Oliver felt a tsunami of guilt. He might not have been with Samantha, but he had hooked up with Felicity. A part of him knew he still wouldn't have been able to resist her. The pull was too damn strong after their kiss. But if Laurel had told him what was going on, maybe he could've been more attentive and supportive of her. She deserved that much after all of the years they'd been friends.

"You weren't wrong last night," Oliver admitted. "I am selfish and out of touch—"

Laurel was shaking her head. "No, I was out of line. I can't expect honesty from you and then not give it in return. I was feeling sorry for myself, and I wrongfully took it out on you—especially since you were doing what I'd hoped for all along. You came to check on me and see if I was okay, and I threw it back in your face. I'm sorry, Oliver," she apologized.

The guilt only increased, because Oliver hadn't actually noticed what was going on. He'd been in a blissful bubble with Felicity ever since Ivy Town. It was Tommy who'd told him about Laurel and urged him to go to her. Oliver sighed quietly to himself. "I owe you an apology, too. I haven't been a good boyfriend or friend to you. That's totally on me."

Laurel squeezed his hand. "Thanks, Ollie."

"If you do need anything, let me know. Okay?"

Tears still spilled from her eyes, but she smiled gratefully and wound her arms around his neck. Sensing how much she needed the support, Oliver drew her closer and rubbed her back. Laurel clung to him tightly and buried her head in his neck. They stayed like that for a few minutes. It felt good to finally come to an understanding with Laurel. Just like older, happier times.

As they pulled away, Laurel paused and looked up at him. Her glassy brown eyes took him in before drifting down to his lips. She raised her hand to his face, and Oliver closed his eyes. The anxiety he’d been feeling all day lessened at Laurel's touch. The free fall he’d been in seemed to stop, and his mind quieted at the comfort and familiarity she gave him. The first touch of her lips was a shock, and he stiffened for a second.

"Oliver," Laurel murmured, barely above a whisper. "You said if I need anything to tell you."

He opened his eyes, instantly recognizing the desire staring back at him. "Yeah."

"I don't want to lose you," she breathed, her voice cracking. "I want to try and be us again." Before he could respond, Laurel pressed her lips more firmly to his.
Oliver didn't know what was happening. He didn't know what he was feeling or why he started kissing Laurel back. All he did know was that he needed to feel like himself again. He needed to be in control. And most importantly, he needed to stop falling.

Chapter End Notes

Are you guys cursing yet? Not to sound too much like Stephen Amell after 5x09, but I did want to let you guys know that Lauriver only kiss in that last scene. I know some readers might be upset by it, but Olicity are not perfect in this fic. And although we know that FB Olicity dated and loved each other very much, they both had to work at it then, too. I've always wanted to explore the toxicity of the Lauriver relationship, and part of Oliver's challenge in the flashbacks is recognizing and breaking that cycle of behavior. But if you guys still want to be mad and throw things at him, I wouldn't blame you. I wanted to slap him upside the head while writing it, too! Looking forward to your comments, even if they are just to rage. ;)
Thank you guys for your comments. Last chapter was a tough one, and I want you guys to know that I truly take your feedback to heart. I had replied to a few of your comments (which you're welcomed to read), but there is something in general I'd like to clarify about the flashbacks. I'd mentioned in the last author's note that exploring Lauriver's toxicity was an element of this fic, and I can see how some readers interpreted that to mean that Oliver would possibly be going between Laurel and Felicity in the flashbacks to come. That's absolutely not the case and the opposite of what I was trying to communicate. There won't be a love triangle. All of the Lauriver interactions in Part 1 of this fic was that exploration and what Oliver is experiencing now is really his defining moment to change. The flashback in this chapter, especially, and those upcoming shine a light on that.

To those readers who say they're "done" with this story and aren't willing to see how it plays out, all I can say is thank you for your time. To those readers who are eager to continue on the journey, I'm thrilled to have you. I think the writers on the show frequently gloss over a lot of the hard conversations that Olicity should be having. Writing this part of the story where Olicity (in both timelines) are put to the test and finally having to work through their fears/flaws to become stronger individuals and find their way back to each other is what's most exciting for me.

Also, just another reminder that I'm spacing out updates for this fic to every other Tuesday. It gives me much-needed writing/editing time as I bounce between this fic and Caught in the Rapture. Other than that, happy reading!

March 17, 2014

Oliver's jaw was so tense that he was in serious danger of chipping a tooth. His day had already been going horribly. He'd almost missed a conference call with Anatoly this morning, who'd wanted answers as to why Oliver wasn't available to deal with his associates when he was in Starling City. Although Oliver had become a council member, he was still considered part of the Bratva. His explanation that Darhk had him on another important assignment did not go over well. Oliver tried not to take the Russian curses that followed personally, since he got the feeling they were really directed toward Darhk and not him. There had been some unrest within the council lately, but that was the least of Oliver's problems at the moment.

Malcolm continued to be his biggest problem, and a call from him was never good. These last couple of days the older man had wisely kept his distance. No doubt he could sense how badly Oliver wanted to give him that matching black eye after all of the crap he'd pulled. If Oliver thought he could get away with it, he'd have done far worse. After picking up the phone, Oliver had braced himself for more orders about Felicity. What he hadn't expected was to hear a very peeved Malcolm grumbling about Felicity somehow getting a hold of Donna and organizing a family dinner that night.
"She's up to something, Oliver," Malcolm had raged. "Figure out what and put a stop to it."

Unfortunately for Malcolm, all his years of being a council member and assassin for H.I.V.E. did nothing to prepare him for an excited and determined Donna Merlyn who would do anything and everything for a chance to see her daughter.

Saying he'd handle it, Oliver had slammed down the phone and scrubbed his hands over his face. He could feel Dig and Helena's eyes scrutinizing him.

"That bad, huh?" Helena spoke up.

"What did he want now?" Dig added.

"Felicity somehow got hold of a phone and called her mother this morning. They're planning a family dinner for tonight that she's set to attend," Oliver explained.

Helena smirked. "She's resourceful. I'll give her that."

Dig folded his arms, pensive. "You think she's planning on telling her the truth? From what you told me, she wasn't all that thrilled about Malcolm's intentions with her mom."

"I don't think so—at least not yet. Felicity is smarter than that."

"Tommy then?" Helena suggested.

"There's not much either of them or Thea could do if Felicity told them. It would put them in the crosshairs, and I know Felicity. She wouldn't do that to them unless she knew for sure they'd be safe," Oliver thought aloud. "Felicity is too in the dark right now to take that chance."

"So you haven't told her about... everything?" Helena hinted. Oliver frequently had the rooms checked for bugs and recording devices, since he wouldn't put it past Darhk or Malcolm to be spying on them. The study was deemed safe, but they were all still cautious with their words.

Oliver let out a heavy sigh and shook his head. "Not yet. I had every intention of telling her, but then Darhk told us about Waller. Just saying her name made his fists tighten. "Now I'm not sure what to do or who to really trust. We could've been played yet again. Plus, there's Connor. He was unexpected...he changes things." Oliver swallowed the lump in his throat at the thought of his son. He had a son. Oliver was a father. Days later and he was still trying to wrap his head around it.

"I still can't believe you knocked her up, and that she ran off with the baby," Helena commented. "She really did a number on you, Romeo."

"Helena," Oliver snapped, glaring.

"What? It's true. I know that you feel guilty for lying to her and all of that, but her taking off with your baby isn't much better."

"She was protecting him," Oliver defended even as the resentment he'd been pushing deep down flared to life for a second.

"I read the letter—"

"Don't you mean stole?" Oliver reminded her. He'd always kept Felicity's letter with him and refused to let either Dig or Helena read it. It was too personal and something he thought should stay private between him and Felicity. Then one day it had gone missing, and he'd panicked. Later, when Oliver
had found out Helena had been the one to take it, he'd been furious.

"Borrowed. As I explained a hundred times before apologizing," she stressed, "I thought there could've been a lead in there you missed, since you clearly weren't in the right state of mind to think objectively."

Helena let out a frustrated huff and then straightened up to face off with him. "Anyway, as I was trying to say, Felicity also ran to protect herself," she continued to argue. "You have a right to be pissed about that, Oliver. Who knows how long she was going to stay on the run and keep Connor from you. You might not have ever——"

"I can't get into that right now," Oliver growled as he rose and rounded the desk. "We have to deal with the matter at hand." Casting his tumultuous emotions aside, he looked to his partner. "Dig, what do you think?"

"Well, since Malcolm doesn't want her to go, maybe she actually should," Diggle replied. "She obviously can't bring Connor with her, and she's with that baby almost every second of the day. Felicity barely lets him out of her sight. If she's willing to leave him for a couple of hours, then this must be important."

Felicity had always been a strong woman, but her maternal instincts were a sight to behold. Whatever pain and frustration Oliver felt about her keeping Connor away from him, he couldn't help but admire how fiercely she protected their son. Oliver's interactions with Connor may have been limited, but he'd felt the subtle shift inside himself. The need to protect the ones he loved had been a driving force inside of Oliver for most of his life. But with Connor, it wasn't just a desire. It was an innate instinct he felt all the way down to his bones.

"She was A.R.G.U.S.," Helena pointed out. "No way she plans on sitting back and letting Darhk call the shots. If Felicity is smart, which you say she is, then this dinner isn't just about a family reunion. It'd be safer for them, in fact, if she stayed away like she's been doing. So why make contact now?"

"Somehow she got access to a phone here," Diggle said. "Maybe a computer is her next goal."

"But the end goal would have to be contacting someone," Helena pointed out. "She wouldn't contact A.R.G.U.S. after what she learned about Waller, would she?"

"She trusted her team. That much we do know," Oliver stated, remembering the distressed message she'd left Malcolm when she'd been in Ivy Town. Although he could tell Felicity the truth about everything now, the problem was she probably wouldn't believe him. There had to be another way to get through to her. Taking a moment to ponder it over, Oliver finally made a decision. "Dig, get Felicity please."

A curious look crossed Dig's face before he left. Helena remained skeptical. "What are you thinking, Oliver?"

"Trust me," he said and straightened up when Dig returned with Felicity in tow. The blonde did not look happy to be summoned, to say the least. She noticed Helena off to the side, and her step faltered for a second. It was so quick no one else would notice, but neither Dig nor Helena knew her like him. Encountering another unfamiliar face would put Felicity further on edge. However, since Helena was one of his allies, it was time the two met.

Quickly looking away from Helena, Felicity addressed him, "You wanted to see me."
"I just got off the phone with Malcolm."

Her face betrayed nothing. "Oh?"

As expected, she wasn't going to give away any information willingly. "Apparently, your mom is going all out for your big family dinner. She's very excited to see you." Felicity lifted her chin in defiance, clearly expecting him to object. "Make sure you inform Raisa that there will be one less place setting tonight." He gave her a bold look of his own.

Her eyes flashed with astonishment before quickly recovering. "I will. Is that all?"

"Where'd you get the phone?"

Felicity shrugged nonchalantly. "It was just lying around."

"Where is it now?" Another innocent shrug but the subtle bite of her lip told him the truth. His eyes narrowed as they continued to face off. "Hand it over, please."

"I don't have it."

"I'll search you if I have to," Oliver warned, "and I won't be a gentleman about it." He'd closed the distance between them, standing toe to toe with her, which is how he noticed the way Felicity's eyes flicked down to his lips. Oliver felt his heart skip a beat as she took a shallow breath. The tension in the air could be cut with a knife. "Last chance." His voice came out deeper than intended, and he held out his hand.

The flecks of blue in her eyes burned like the center of a flame. She seemed tempted to call his bluff, but he wasn't bluffing. Felicity knew him better than anyone else in return, and so she begrudgingly reached into the neckline of her sweater. It was impossible for him not to notice the new abundance of cleavage she had, courtesy of being a nursing mother. An unexpected jolt of heat went straight to Oliver's groin. Felicity was as beautiful as she was infuriating.

She shoved the phone into his hand with an irritated huff. "Satisfied, or do we now commence with the strip search?" the blonde gibed. Felicity attempted to stand taller, but she still just barely reached his chin in her flats.

Helena snorted at the exchange, earning a scowl from Felicity.

"Who's she?" Felicity suddenly demanded.

"Helena Bertinelli, reluctant daughter to Italian mob boss, H.I.V.E. council member, and all-around scumbag Frank Bertinelli. Oh, and I'm Oliver's former lover," she answered with a nod and an impudent smirk. "But don't worry, we're just friends without the benefits now."

"Helena," Oliver rebuked. His temper flared when she smiled at him, unperturbed. Diggle brushed a hand over his face, hiding a slight grimace.

Meanwhile, Felicity visibly stiffened as she glanced between them.

"It was brief and a very long time ago," Oliver was quick to explain.

"It's really none of my business," Felicity stated, though the hurt she was straining to hide said otherwise.

"Helena is an ally. She actually helped me give you the cure for the Curare the night you got shot at
Monument Point," he explained, but it seemed to do little to assuage Felicity's uneasiness.

Oliver inwardly cursed. He couldn't catch a damn break. Helena would be lucky if he didn't strangle her after this.

"Um, well...thanks for that, I guess. I need to get ready for tonight," Felicity blurted out and turned to leave.

Oliver halted her. "Diggle will drive you and stay on the grounds until you're ready to leave. Malcolm has already informed his men that you are not to leave the manor alone. He'll be keeping a close eye on you." He walked around to his desk and opened a drawer. He took out a burner phone and held it out for her. "Take this."

"What kind of tech did you put in this one?" she smartly questioned.

"It's got a tracker."

"So you can keep tabs on me."

"So I can keep you safe until we know who can be trusted."

"I'm not even sure I can completely trust you," Felicity shot back.

"I know, which is why I'm hoping that by letting you go tonight—despite Darhk's orders to keep you here—you'll see that I'm not your enemy. That I'm on your side. I won't keep you from seeing your family if you wish it, Felicity, but I doubt that's the only reason you're going. I know that you would never do or reveal anything that would put our families or our son in danger. So whatever you have planned, be careful."

Felicity studied him carefully. Oliver could practically see the wheels turning in her mind as she considered his words. She bit her lip again at his meaningful look. She was still unsure, but she was listening. "I will," she murmured.

Seizing the opportunity, Oliver added, "If you happen to see or talk to an old friend, it would be polite to ask about how she's going green." Diggle and Helena exchanged glances out of the corner of his eye, but Oliver kept his focus on Felicity.

"Green?" she slowly repeated.

"Green," Oliver confirmed and left it at that. With the crease still between her brow, Felicity left to go get ready.

"You did the right thing," Diggle assured him with a pat on the back. "I'll make sure she doesn't get into too much trouble." He then left to make sure the proper security measures for the car and the drive over were in place.

When they were alone, Oliver glowered at Helena. "What the hell were you thinking saying that to Felicity?"

"You weren't going to mention it?" she challenged and fake pouted. "Aw, I'm heartbroken."

"Helena," he gritted out, "it's hard enough getting her to trust me right now—as you clearly saw. You just made it worse."

"Actually, I made her jealous."
"She was hurt."

"Same thing. The point is she was feeling something," Helena countered, "which was evident in that intense, angry eye-sex session I just watched." The corners of her mouth turned up in a smug grin. "You're welcome."

Now Oliver was really lost. "What? How on earth is that supposed to help me?"

"You forget that I've seen you at your worst, Oliver. Guilt and self-hatred have been your constant companions for years now, just like they've been mine. But unlike me, the person you love the most is still alive. Despite all the lies and deception, I saw you healing when you were with Felicity. Her leaving was a setback, but you continued to have hope that you could find her and make it right."

"What's your point, Helena?" he snapped impatiently. Oliver wasn't in the mood for a heart-to-heart, even if Helena was hitting the mark.

"My point is now you've found her, but that hope is gone. You're letting that dark voice of doubt in the back of your mind convince you that you've already lost her. You haven't or else she wouldn't have given me that death glare a few moments ago," Helena explained. "She might be hurting and up to her elbows in denial right now, but Felicity still cares about you. Don't let her shut you out again."

"Helena, you know what is waiting for me after all of this is over," Oliver solemnly reminded.

"Which proves my point that time is precious. So stop torturing yourself and actually be the man you want to be. Don't waste this opportunity. Fight for her and your family, Romeo."

Her words hit him like a ton of bricks, but all he could say was, "I hate it when you call me that."

"I'm still right," Helena retorted, "and you know it. Unless the name really does suit you, and you'd rather be a whiny, lovesick fool who's content with giving up and keeling over when things get tough. Hell, I'm sure Malcolm would happily supply the poison—"

"You've made your point," Oliver interrupted. Not everyone could take Helena's brutal honesty, but it was one of the qualities Oliver admired most about her. Besides Dig, she was the only other person who wouldn't lie to him.

"Good. Glad we had this talk," she declared with confident satisfaction. "I'll also remind you that with Felicity going out tonight, it's the perfect time to bond with that baby of yours."

"Sara's probably watching him. I doubt she'll—"

"You're his father," Helena interjected forcefully. "If you want to be with your son, you can. It's your right, Oliver."

He slowly nodded while rubbing his fingers together at his sides, releasing the tension he'd been feeling moments ago. His nerves weren't totally gone, because the thought of spending time alone with Connor still terrified him. What if Connor didn't like him and started crying? What if Oliver did something wrong? What would Felicity think of him then?

"Don't overthink it," Helena encouraged. "Just do it."

"Time is precious," Oliver repeated her words, testing them out and feeling the full weight of their truth. He was done wasting it.
"Thank you," Felicity said, slightly taken aback, as John held open the car door for her. She slid into the backseat of the town car. It was black with tinted windows, although she doubted anyone would be able to see inside anyway now that the sun had almost completely set.

John came around the front to the driver's seat. Within seconds, they were on their way. Turning around in her seat, Felicity glanced at the mansion shrinking behind them. Even though she trusted Sara, she couldn't shake the anxiety she felt at being separated from Connor. It increased with every mile they put between them and the mansion.

"Connor will be all right," John commented.

Felicity let out a small sigh. "Am I that transparent?"

"You remind me of my sister-in-law when she first had her son," he reminisced. "Every little sound or cry Carly was right there making sure he was okay. She didn't want to miss a second. Made herself sick worrying sometimes." He shook his head. "Took her a while to realize that there was no wrong way of doing things. She was a good mom naturally. Carly just had to trust her instincts more."

"I know the feeling. But to be fair, she never had to leave him behind in a house filled with a bunch of criminals." Too bad Sara wasn't given a phone. Then Felicity could at least text her throughout the night to check in.

He paused before saying, "You including Oliver in that?"


"That's true," John acknowledged. "But we both know where his heart lies."

"I don't know anything anymore," she muttered and had to look away. John's eyes were a little too omniscient. "Besides, Oliver seems to have all of his bases covered with Helena." Felicity had already been wary upon first seeing the brunette, but Helena's dig about her past with Oliver had made it worse. Now Felicity's thoughts were even more scattered.

"Helena can be a little...blunt to put it mildly," he offered. "But them being just friends is the truth. She's become very protective of Oliver over the years, because she understands what it's like to lose the one person she loved most in the world. And in case you're questioning that now, which I suspect you are, that person for Oliver is you, Felicity. It's always been you."

John's statement wasn't unfamiliar to her. Oliver had told Felicity as much in the past when they were together. She thought back to the night a little less than two years ago when she and Oliver had had that big fight after she'd seen the text from Isabel on his phone. He'd showed up on her doorstep to explain. It had been difficult at first, but it was probably the most honest conversation they'd had at the time. Oliver didn't talk much about the years he was away, but he'd opened up that night. He'd said that he'd held onto being Oliver Queen and the intention of coming home to her for almost three years until he was forced into the Bratva-or H.I.V.E. as she now knew.

It was only when Oliver had lost his hope and finally resigned himself to that life permanently that he'd started seeing other women. He'd professed that he'd never loved anyone in his life more than her but that to survive, he'd had to lock his heart away and try to move on. While it had hurt at the time to hear, Felicity had also valued his honesty. It was that honesty and the genuine love and remorse she'd seen gleaming in Oliver's eyes that led her to forgive him then. While Felicity couldn't bring herself to regret that decision even now, finding out Helena was not only one of those few women but still a close friend was definitely jarring.
"Well, he sure has a hell of a way of showing it," she murmured and fiddled with her hands in her lap.

"You finally know the truth and why Oliver did what he did." John added, "You're just not ready to accept it."

"I think I'm a better judge of how I'm feeling than you. Just because we've met a few times doesn't mean that you know me. Oliver lied to me, John. He put my entire world in danger, including our son's life, because he didn't trust me."

John was quiet for a moment as he drove onto the highway. Then: "I'm not going to say that it wasn't a mistake, because I'm partly to blame. Oliver wanted to tell you the truth, and I discouraged it. I thought it was too big of a risk to get you involved, and maybe that was because I was projecting my own situation on him. I made the same mistake with Lyla."

Felicity observed him in the rearview mirror. His concentration was on the road, but his frown had nothing to do with the horrible traffic. "Oliver is his own person. If he wanted to tell me that badly, he could've."

"Just like you could've told him that you were pregnant." Sensing her retort, he promptly continued, "I understand to an extent why you didn't. But at the very least, you could've confronted him when you did learn the truth about H.I.V.E. You didn't, Felicity. You chose to run, and you lied to him through omission. Do you remember what you told me in Hub City?" He didn't give her the chance to answer. "You said that you've loved Oliver since you were seventeen. That you were loyal to him long before ever joining A.R.G.U.S. and that there is nothing you wouldn't do for him. I didn't know you that well then, but I believed you. You meant it."

"I did," Felicity admitted, feeling a sharp ache in her heart at the memory and blinking back the moisture prickling her eyes, "but everything is different now, John."

"Is it?" he challenged, not unkindly. "What was the name of the place you and Oliver used to go to when you were dating? It was O'Connor's, right?" John didn't stop there. "Connor's first name is as interesting as his middle one. You chose Jonas, after his father no doubt. Ivy Town is also a very curious place to settle down. It's only about three hours away from Starling City, so not exactly the ideal hiding spot for someone who truly wants to run. I know about your history with Oliver there, as well."

"John—"

"All I'm saying is that actions speak louder than words sometimes, and your choices are speaking volumes, Felicity," Diggle told her. "But putting that aside, no one is denying that Oliver screwed up. Though his actions may have been misguided, his intent was to protect you at any cost. When you left, Felicity, he was devastated and he's spent the last year trying to make it right."

"Make it right how?"

"That's not my story to tell, but you'll find out soon enough," John said. "What I'm trying to get at is you both have the opportunity to do things differently this time around. And now with Connor… there is even more at stake. Oliver won't say it, but he's afraid you're going to disappear with that baby again." He met her worried stare with a solemn one of his own. "And he's not the only one." He shrugged and looked away.

Felicity shifted in her seat and glanced out the window, her mind descending into utter chaos as it battled with the emotions inside her chest. Oliver had always spoken very highly of John. He'd said
his partner didn’t talk often—not that Oliver was a chatty Kathy either—but that John was a keen observer. He could read people easily and pick out details that others missed. Oliver hadn’t been wrong, since John had just stripped her bare in a matter of minutes.

This was not the state of mind Felicity had hoped to be in when she saw her family for the first time in over a year. Yes, she loved and missed them terribly. This reunion was a long time coming. But she had a mission of her own, and this opportunity couldn’t be wasted. There was one thing she could agree with John on and it was that she had to do things right this time. And that meant Felicity had to keep a clear head if she was going to discover the truth for herself.

Taking a moment to collect herself, she cleared her throat and said, "Maybe you should just focus on the road."

John did as she asked and the rest of the drive was spent in silence. Now if only her mind would follow.

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July 10, 2007

Oliver sat in the back corner booth at O’Connor’s and checked his phone for what must’ve been the twentieth time. He’d been waiting for almost an hour and still there was no sign of Felicity. His stomach had already been in knots, his nerves getting the best of him. He’d taken the last two days off at QC, which his parents had been less than thrilled about. Walter had somehow managed to convince Felicity to be a part of the ceremony to honor their efforts on the day of the hostage crisis, and his parents were eager to get preparations for the event underway. But Oliver hadn’t been able to focus on work. Not after what he’d done.

Felicity had texted him multiple times on Sunday, but the last message Oliver had never answered. She hadn't reached out at all yesterday, and he knew she must've figured out by now that something was off with him. She must've felt so hurt and confused by his actions—or lack thereof. Oliver half-expected (and kind of hoped) that she'd march over to the loft and call him out on it, but she never came. A part of him was relieved, though, because he needed the time to get a handle on everything he was feeling.

Oliver hadn’t known why he was so anxious after spending the night with Felicity. He hadn’t known why after weeks of being so drawn to her and finally getting to be with her, he’d felt like he was in some kind of weird free fall—fighting for control against emotions he couldn’t discern. When Laurel finally told him what was going on with her, Oliver had genuinely felt bad for her. Lord knows his parents weren’t perfect, and he could sympathize with her family struggles. Oliver also knew he hadn’t been much better considering he’d totally missed what was really going on with her all this time. In trying to make it right and be there for her as a friend, somehow the lines had blurred between them once again.

While Laurel's familiar touch had been a mild comfort and given him some reprieve from the anxiety he’d been feeling, the kiss they'd shared was anything but. It was so much worse than the lack of control he’d been feeling. The intimacy Laurel was trying to reestablish between them didn't just feel empty, it felt completely and utterly wrong. Almost instantly Oliver knew that the kiss was a mistake, and it took only seconds for him to pull away. He'd almost fallen off of the bed with how hard he'd jerked his body back.

Laurel had stared at him in dazed confusion, obviously wondering why he wasn’t drawing her closer and laying her on the bed as he’d done countless times before. Because that's what they did. No matter how bad the fight or what new ways they’d learned to disappoint or hurt each other, they always ended up right back at that point. But the truth was there was no going back. Not this time,
because his heart didn't belong to Laurel. And it didn't belong to him either anymore. It belonged to Felicity.

While it was still scary to be feeling such an intense emotion, the relief of actually recognizing it was immense. It gave Oliver the courage he’d lacked so many times before to finally tell Laurel that there was no reconciliation for them as a couple. She’d been upset, angry, and cried some more. It tore Oliver up inside to be hurting Laurel when she was already in such pain, but he knew it would be better for them both in the long run. They weren’t what each other needed, and it was finally time to let go.

Oliver certainly had. That night he'd dreamed of Felicity and their night together. The way she had looked and felt was permanently seared into his mind. He was bombarded by vivid memories of the soft yet heated looks she gave him as her hands roamed along his back, every now and then digging into his flesh when he found the right spot to satisfy her. Beyond the pleasure, he remembered his overwhelming need for her and how amazingly trusting she’d been of him despite how nervous she was. How they’d melded together, making it almost impossible for him to know where he ended and she began. It was staggering and, in those fleeting moments, Oliver realized he’d never been happier. He'd never felt more grateful or alive.

When Oliver awoke alone in an empty bed the next day, the ache of missing her and fear that he’d never get to see her beautiful smile again were almost suffocating. What he had with Felicity was real, meaningful, and so unlike anything he'd ever felt before. When Oliver realized the only thing scarier than finally letting go would be to lose her, he knew exactly what he had to do. Oliver had to talk to her and tell her the truth about everything. Felicity had always been open and honest with him, and she deserved the same in return.

Having taken the last couple of days to get his head in line with his heart, Oliver had asked her to meet him tonight. QC wasn't private enough, and there was no need to start more gossip at the office. The loft was out, since they couldn't chance Tommy interrupting. Oliver considered showing up at her room again but decided it would be too intrusive, especially since it was where everything had changed between them. Emotions would already be running high, and they needed a place to talk where they could both feel comfortable. O'Connor's seemed like the best option. It had once been Oliver's own private hideout but along the way it had actually become theirs.

Instead of sending a text, Oliver had sent Felicity a bouquet of roses with a thoughtful note. As he'd sat in the booth at the restaurant, he'd gone over the words he wanted to say at least a hundred times in his head. Oliver knew that he not only had to tell her the truth, but that he needed to get this right if she were ever to trust him again. Old habits were hard to break and, unfortunately, words were never his strong suit.

"Still no sign of Felicity?" Sandra asked, concerned.

Oliver checked the time again. "She's probably busy finishing up at work."

"Maybe you should call her," Sandra suggested. "Make sure she got your message."

He hesitated before finally taking the advice. It only rang a couple of times and then switched to voicemail. That could mean only one thing: she'd rejected his call. Oliver didn't leave a message and cursed under his breath. It'd been over an hour, and it was safe to assume that Felicity wasn't coming. Oliver stood up and left some money on the table for the drinks he'd ordered. Sandra gave him a sympathetic look on the way out, which really only made him feel worse.

Instead of going home, Oliver decided to stop at QC first. Most of the office would be empty by now, but sometimes Felicity worked late. He’d also get the chance to make sure that she’d gotten the
flowers he'd sent. He'd driven well over the speed limit to get there quicker. The security guard at the front desk nodded as he passed, and Oliver made a beeline to the elevators. The floor that Felicity worked on was somewhat dark, since the overhead lights were turned off. A few cubicles were lit up from smaller lamps as the employees staying late worked quietly.

Oliver turned the corner and found Felicity's cubicle dark and empty. She'd already left for the night. He searched her desk and didn't see any sign of the roses he'd sent to her earlier. Oliver frowned. Maybe she did get them but had taken them home with her so she could change. She could've gotten held up. Or maybe, and most likely, she'd never received them and that's why she'd stood him up. Oliver would have to call the flower shop and give them a piece of his mind if that was the case. Letting out a frustrated breath, Oliver was about to leave when something underneath Felicity's desk caught his eye. It was her trash bin, but that wasn't what brought him up short. Hanging out the side of it was a drooping rose with missing petals.

Crouching down, Oliver saw that she'd shoved the entire bouquet in the garbage. The note was missing, but there was a ripped piece of paper on the floor that he was willing to guess was a remnant of it. Oliver ran a hand over his face and sighed. It was as he'd feared, and he cursed under his breath—furious with himself. In true Oliver Queen fashion, he'd taken one of the best things to happen to him and spectacularly fucked it up.

It took about five minutes of standing in front of the nursery door for Oliver to finally work up the nerve to walk in. Sara was already inside. She stood at the changing table with Connor. He was squirming and smiling as Sara made funny faces at him. At the sound of the door opening, she whirled around.

The amused grin disappeared from her face the moment she saw him. "Do you want something?" she asked in a clipped voice.

Clearing his throat, Oliver replied, "Yes. I want to watch Connor for the night."

Sara's eyebrows were nearly to her hairline, and Oliver didn't know whether to be insulted by the fact that she found his request baffling.

"I can't let you do that."

"You're not 'letting' me do anything," Oliver stated calmly but forcefully. He glanced at Connor, who had grabbed a small bottle of lotion next to him and was playing with it. The fear from before rose up again, but so did an intense longing to close the gap between them. "I'm not asking, Sara. I need time with my son."

The blonde studied him intently, then said, "Did you discuss this with Felicity?"

"Felicity isn't here." Before she could reject him again, Oliver pressed, "Sara, I've been denied time with him long enough."

"You gonna have your thugs lock me in my room for the rest of the night if I don't agree?" she challenged.

"I could, but I won't. I'd prefer it if you actually helped me and told me what to do." Despite the forcefulness of his tone, Oliver's eyes were pleading.

Relief flooded him before his nerves took over. It was amazing how a simple task with Connor was a hundred times more daunting to Oliver than the Bratva training that could've killed him years ago. Oliver went to stand at the end of the changing table when Sara halted him.

"I wouldn't stand there if I were you unless you want a bath," she warned. Sara moved over a few steps to let him get in next to her. She walked him through the process. It was simple enough.

When Connor started wriggling too much, Oliver took hold of his feet like Sara had suggested. Both his tiny feet could fit in Oliver's one hand, and the contact was like a jolt to his system. Connor's skin was so soft and smooth—such a contrast to Oliver's coarse hands. As Sara had warned, Connor peed right when Oliver was about to wipe him. She'd suggested leaving the diaper on top of him as long as possible, which had been a good idea. Connor peered up at them, and Oliver wondered if babies could be smug at that age. His son looked somewhat pleased with himself—a hint of a grin on his face.

"He got me once. Think he enjoys it," she said, voicing Oliver's same thought. "It's like target practice for this little rascal." She tickled his belly, earning a silly gurgle from him.

Oliver made fast work of cleaning him up and getting a new diaper on him. He couldn't help but feel a sense of pride. It was the smallest of victories but not even his first time successfully shooting an arrow came close to this sense of accomplishment.

"Not bad. Don't let it go to your head," Sara commented, amused by his reaction. "He's gotta be fed. Think you can handle a few minutes alone with him while I heat up his bottle?"

"Yeah, I got him."

She moved to leave then halted. "By the way, I never got the chance to thank you for helping me bring down Brodeur," she told him. "If Laurel were here, she'd say thank you, too."

He was taken aback by her words but also touched that she would even bring it up. Although he never expected a thank you—it wasn't part of the job when you lived your life in the shadows—it was nice to hear. "You're welcome. I wish I could've done more. When Felicity first told me about Laurel…I'm so sorry, Sara. I loved her, too."

"I know you did. But you chose Felicity," Sara mentioned. "I only know what Felicity told me years ago, and I always wondered why, Ollie. Why her and not my sister?" She didn't sound mean or accusing but genuinely curious.

It was difficult to describe how much Felicity had meant to him back then. In all the ways that mattered, Oliver wasn't sure anything had ever really changed. "With Felicity…there was just something about her. She understood me in a way no one else ever had before. She challenged me, but she also listened. Her own goodness made me want to be a better man, and I loved her for it," Oliver finished simply. "I'm sure Laurel found something similar with Tommy if they were going to get married. I have no doubt he would've given her everything I couldn't."

"He did," Sara murmured after a moment. Hiding her grief and regaining her composure, she told Oliver to watch Connor (warning glare included) and then left to get his bottle.

Now that they were alone, Oliver turned back to Connor. He'd reached for the lotion bottle again that Sara had taken away when he tried to put it in his mouth. Oliver set it aside again and watched in fascination as Connor maneuvered to go after it. He didn't get very far, crying "bah bah" as he strained to reach it. There were many more things for him to grab, though.
Oliver, after a few seconds of hesitation and building up his nerve, carefully lifted Connor up into his arms. He was as light as a feather and seemed even smaller in Oliver's much larger embrace. Immediately, Connor reached for his face. His little hands explored his scruff, fascinated by the new sensation. Leaning forward, Connor bumped noses with him and patted his cheeks. Oliver blinked back the moisture pooling in his eyes as his heart swelled in his chest. Love, joy, longing, pride, and protectiveness swirled within him and left him stunned completely. Even if he'd felt ready for this moment before, it wouldn't have mattered. Nothing could've prepared him for this.

For the first time, Oliver knew exactly what Felicity had meant when she said her universe had shifted. Oliver had thought he'd felt something similar when learning about Connor's existence, but it was so much more intense than that. His universe didn't just shift. It exploded as the scattered pieces of light touched and rebuilt even the dark recesses of his very soul. It was as remarkable as it was humbling.

Oliver kissed his son's forehead, unable to stop the single tear that rolled down his cheek. He and Felicity had created this. For all of the pain they put each other through in the last year, their baby was living proof of the deep, selfless love they'd shared. Connor was everything he'd ever wanted, and Oliver clutched him tighter. No matter what happened, he was never letting go.
All in the Family

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, thank you for your comments and kudos! I'm so excited about the chapter for this week, because it's pretty significant in setting up the rest of the story. A big thank you to Agentsassydirewolf for assisting with edits. Happy reading!

The moment John pulled up in front of Merlyn manor, Felicity's entire body thrummed with nervous energy. She couldn't believe she was actually going to see her family. It had been far too long. Despite managing to regain some semblance of control over her emotions after her chat with John, they were in an upheaval again as soon as she got out of the car and walked toward the front door.

Her mother had been so excited on the phone, but Felicity wasn't sure what to expect from Tommy or Thea. When she'd called Tommy, he'd been happy to learn she was in town but she'd sensed some underlying frustration. Malcolm, however, was going to be the toughest one to face. According to Oliver, Malcolm was furious that Felicity had managed to organize this family dinner. No doubt he'd be even more pissed that Oliver actually let her go. The older man would be keeping a close eye on her, which she'd expected. Felicity, personally, would've preferred to never see him again. Tonight she'd just have to channel every ounce of her willpower not to give him a matching black eye to go along with the one Oliver laid on him.

Felicity tugged at the hem of her dress and ran a hand through her hair, wanting to look as put together as possible. The dress she'd chosen was dark blue and peplum style so that it hid her curvier figure; she was still working on losing the last few pounds of baby weight. A part of Felicity had an irrational fear that her family would take one look at her and be able to see everything she'd endured in the last year. And what was most frustrating and somewhat frightening was how badly she wanted to share it with them.

"I won't accompany you inside, but I'll be around. My number is programmed in your phone," John informed her.

"Okay," she acknowledged and waited until he disappeared into the shadows before ringing the bell. The door opened within seconds, and her mother let out a high-pitched squeal. "Felicity! Finally, my beautiful girl!" Felicity found herself being yanked inside and drawn into a bone-crushing hug. It was a good thing she'd pumped milk for Connor before she left, because Felicity was almost positive that Donna would've squeezed it all out of her otherwise. She'd worn her special padded bra just in case—not needing any accidents that would surely spark a slew of questions she couldn't answer.

Felicity, inhaling her mother's floral scent, squeezed back just as tightly. Her homesickness and how much she'd missed her mother's embrace hit her in full force. "Hi, Mom. Don't cry," she said upon hearing Donna sniffle. They were words she needed to follow herself, because Felicity's own eyes had started to burn with unshed tears.

"I'm just so happy you're home, my beautiful girl," Donna blubbed.
"Me, too." Felicity rubbed her mom's back. Not much had changed. Donna was still beautiful with her long blond hair and slim figure. The dress she wore was designer and showed more skin than some other women her age would be comfortable wearing. Her sky-high heels made her taller than Felicity, so she had to look up slightly when her mother did finally pull away.

"Can I get in on the action?" Thea interjected.

Her mother had her so distracted that Felicity hadn't noticed the young brunette standing off to the side. Instead of letting Felicity go, Donna held out an arm for her to join their hug. Thea laughed and happily accepted the invitation. By the time they broke apart, they were all misty-eyed.

"Wow, Thea, you look fabulous. That haircut really does suit you," Felicity complimented. A couple of months ago, Thea had decided to cut her long wavy hair into a short and sleek bob. It complimented her face and willowy figure perfectly.

"Thank you. I see you went a little shorter, too."

"Felicity, hon, give Hannah your coat," her mother instructed.

As Felicity undid the buttons, she questioned, "Where's Tommy?"

"He said he's running a bit late," Thea answered.

Felicity's momentary panic that he wasn't coming was abated. As great as it was to see her family, she still had a mission to accomplish tonight—a mission that required Tommy and a certain guest.

She handed her coat over to Hannah, the maid, just as her mother gasped. "What?"

"Felicity, honey, you look"—Donna eyed her chest—"wow. Did you get a boob job?"

"Mom!" Felicity exclaimed in shock and crossed her arms over her chest.

"What?" Donna replied, unabashed. "It's nothing to be ashamed about if you did. I think it looks great on you, sweetie. Men love a little extra cleavage."

Thea snorted at Donna's lack of tact but didn't look like she disagreed.

Felicity had tried to choose a dress that wasn't low-cut but, apparently, there really was no way of hiding her much fuller bust. "No, I did not have a boob job. It's this new bra I'm trying out."

"It's pretty good," Thea observed, impressed. "What brand is it, because I could definitely use a boost." She glanced down in annoyance at her much smaller chest.

Felicity, who could feel her cheeks turning redder by the second, was saved from answering when Malcolm entered the foyer. She tried not to scowl in disgust at the sight of him as her fury flared. The man was a snake, and she would be sure to remember that in the coming days.

"Felicity, it's so nice to have you back."

"Malcolm," she acknowledged somewhat stiffly and made no move to go and greet him. He also knew better than to get anywhere near her. It was wise, though Felicity couldn't resist messing with him. "Oh wow, what happened to your eye?"

Malcolm smiled calmly, but she could tell that he was bristling ever so slightly. "An accident with my sparring partner at the gym."
"That looks really terrible," Felicity pointed out. "I bet it must've hurt. Looks like your partner packs a mean punch." Her grin was sweet but smug.

"That's what I said," Donna agreed and touched his shoulder. "Really, honey, just a little bit of makeup would cover that right up."

"I'm fine, darling. No need to worry," Malcolm reassured and kissed her cheek, all the while staring directly at Felicity. It was a silent warning to remember her place.

Felicity's appetite was squandered by his clear challenge. The urge to take a swipe at him bubbled up instead. She bit her lip to tamp it down; this evening was going to be long and torturous for sure.

"Let's all head to the dining room. The chef says dinner is almost ready. We can wait for Tommy in there," Malcolm said and began to lead them down the hall.

Felicity tried not to react when she saw Malcolm's hand on her mother's lower back. Maybe Oliver had a point before. If she had known about Malcolm's role in H.I.V.E., would she have been able to sit on the truth for so long? It'd only been a few minutes into the evening and watching her kind, innocent mother being played by that snake of a man was bringing Felicity's level of disgust to new heights.

They took their usual seats at the table. Malcolm at the head with Donna to his right and Felicity next to her. Thea sat across from them. The servants brought out a couple of appetizers they could nibble on while they waited for Tommy.

Felicity, needing to keep a lid on her emotions, started a conversation with Thea. She asked about school and Roy, and both seemed to be going well. Donna had just interrupted to ask Felicity about her job when it was announced Tommy had arrived. They turned in their seats to see him enter.

Felicity automatically glanced behind her stepbrother but didn't see any sign of Mei. Her heart sunk. Tommy had promised that he'd bring her. Plastering a smile on her face, which wasn't completely fake since she did miss her stepbrother, Felicity got up to hug him.

"I knew you couldn't stay away forever," Tommy said while embracing her.

"I didn't want to," she replied.

Drawing back, Tommy took her in. "You look different."

"I did shorten my hair."

"No, it's not that." He observed her closely, and Felicity resisted fidgeting under the scrutiny. Her cheeks reddened when he, too, paused in surprise at her cleavage. Perhaps duct tape would've been a good idea tonight.

"I think you look great," a soft but firm voice interrupted.

Mei appeared in the doorway. She wore a simple but elegant black dress. Her makeup was minimal on her already pretty face, and her hair was longer. Felicity was filled with both relief and excitement at the sight of her former teammate.

"Mei, it's so good to see you," Felicity greeted pleasantly, all the while fighting her nerves. They had to tread carefully. She'd already noticed Malcolm's shrewd stare when Mei had walked in. While fending him off, Felicity would also have to make sure that Mei hadn't been compromised by Waller either.
"I hope it's all right that I'm joining your dinner. When Tommy told me Felicity was back in town, I couldn't pass up the chance to see her." Mei had most definitely understood her message, just like Felicity had hoped. The plan was still a go. An expert at putting on an innocent act, Mei looked serene, humble, and sweet.

"Of course," Donna spoke up. "You are always welcome here." She called to a servant to have another place set for Mei.

Mei smiled thankfully while accepting Felicity's hug. "How's that new job treating you?" she said just loud enough for everyone to hear. It wouldn't be good if they started whispering two minutes after she came through the door. Malcolm had to already know that Mei was A.R.G.U.S. If he hadn't learned it from the information Oliver had been taking from her, then Felicity's voicemail from Ivy Town certainly would've clued him in. Regardless, at some point, Felicity and Mei would need to find a moment to slip away so they could talk seriously.

"It's good. I'm always surprised by the new people I meet. Lots to learn, too. You know how that can be," she casually answered. "How are things at the office?"

"Busy. A lot of changes." Mei said more quietly, for Felicity's ears only, "Feels like I'm up against a wall sometimes."

Felicity's brow rose, immediately picking up on Mei's double meaning. She was hinting at something concerning Amanda Waller. Whether it was a warning or threat remained to be seen. Felicity was determined to get her alone tonight at some point.

Malcolm cleared his throat loudly. "Why don't you take your seats and we can start on dinner?"

"I asked for something very fun and special tonight," Donna announced. "As you all know, today is St. Patrick's Day. In addition to being lucky enough to have Felicity back home with us, most of the people in this family have at least some Irish descent. So I asked that the chef make us some traditional dishes. Oh, and we've got green beer. I've always wanted to try green beer," Donna enthused and nudged Felicity.

"Is it supposed to taste different than regular beer?" Thea laughed.

"I thought it was just dye," Tommy said.

"It is, but that doesn't make it any less fun."

"I'll pass. Thanks," Felicity told the butler as he came around with the pitcher of green, frothing liquid.

"Oh, Felicity, you have to try it," Donna urged.

"I haven't been drinking much lately, so I'm good," she politely declined. "I'll have some sparkling water if you have it." She noticed Mei also discretely turn down the alcohol. Felicity suspected the brunette wanted to keep a clear head tonight.

They all settled into casual conversation as the first course was served. Donna was filling in Felicity about some of the latest gossip traveling around the city. Some high-powered couple had just broke up, and the mayor had been caught in a sex scandal the week before. It was never a dull moment in Starling—that hadn't changed, at least.

"So, Felicity, how did you finally manage to get some time off to visit?" Tommy interjected when her mother had momentarily stopped to take a breath.
"I just finished a really big project, so I requested some much overdue vacation time," Felicity answered.

"Do you need a place to stay? You can have the guest room in the loft," Tommy offered.

"Actually, I'm already staying with Sara."

His eyes widened in surprise. "Sara's back in town, too?"

"Yeah. I guess she finally got tired of traipsing around Europe," Felicity joked.

"There's no place like home," Mei commented.

"That's true." Donna beamed and patted Felicity's hand. "How long will you be in Starling City? We need to have a girls' day. I can book us a room at the spa this week if you're all free."

"Definitely for the week," Felicity answered and glanced over at Malcolm. Mei was watching her with interest as well. "After that, I'm not sure."

"I'll call the spa tomorrow and see what times are available. Mei, that includes you, too."

"Thank you, Donna. I'll see how my schedule looks."

"Would Sara like to come?" Donna asked Felicity.

"I'll let her know." Felicity doubted Sara would want to go and answer a bunch of questions about a trip she didn't actually take. Plus, someone she trusted had to stay behind with Connor.

Thinking of her baby boy, Felicity was hit with a fierce sense of longing and anxiety. She hoped that Connor was okay. Getting him into a routine in the mansion was key to keeping him calm in the new environment. Being away from him without a way to check in tore at something inside of her, which was followed by an intense sense of regret that she couldn't have brought him with her tonight. Connor was a member of this family and deserved to experience everything that went along with that. Her mother probably would've snatched him out of her arms as soon as Felicity walked through the door and not let go all night. Donna loved babies, and Connor would have owned her heart from the first second she saw him. Tommy and Thea, too, probably wouldn't have been able to get enough of him.

Someone called her name, and it took a second for Felicity to focus back on the present. It was her mother, who repeated her question about if Felicity had met any cute guys in the days since they'd spoken. If arranged marriages still happened, Felicity was sure Donna would have already found a whole slew of guys for her to choose from now that she was back in town.

"No one of importance," she responded.

"What about Aaron?" Malcolm spoke to her for the first time since they'd been seated. "You two seemed serious for a while. Have you seen him at all recently?" He took a long sip of his beer. What was he playing at?

"No."

"What is he up to?" There was an undertone of suspicion masked in nonchalant curiosity. Had Oliver gotten in trouble for letting her come tonight? He'd said that he was disobeying orders by doing so. Was Malcolm trying to discern if Oliver was in on her plan, too?
"I don't know," Felicity casually replied. "Last I heard his boss was a bit of a tyrant." She stared Malcolm down. "I never quite knew what was going on with him. Hence why we broke up."

Malcolm wasn't done. "So no lingering feelings at all between the two of you?"

"He made his choice. And so did I," Felicity retorted, leaving no room for argument. The older man was looking for weaknesses to exploit. She refused to give him one.

Malcolm smiled sympathetically, but Felicity wasn't fooled. "That's a shame."

Tommy took the opportunity to jump into the conversation and thankfully started telling a funny story about something that happened at the club. The rest of their dinner consisted of casual conversation, with Felicity doing her best to ignore Malcolm while trying to catch Mei's eye. The pair exchanged a few loaded looks, but it was impossible to communicate anything without it seeming odd to the others. When Donna announced that they would be having dessert in the parlor, Felicity was relieved. The change in setting would allow her to inconspicuously chat with Mei.

But once they settled onto the various couches—Malcolm and Tommy had ended up near each other and held a stiff conversation—Felicity's mother proved to be a challenge. Donna continued to babble on and on about everything Felicity had missed while she was away. Although Felicity understood that her mother was excited and wanted to include her, Donna was making it very difficult for Felicity to get a moment with Mei alone.

The butler finally arrived with coffee and dessert. It was just as Felicity was about to take a sip of her decaf coffee that a thought occurred to her. Tilting the cup more than necessary, she braced herself as the hot liquid spilled on her dress.

"Felicity!" her mother exclaimed in concern. "Honey, are you okay?"

Felicity didn't have to force a gasp. She would probably have a slight burn but didn't care. It was worth it. "I'm okay. I'm so sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to make a mess."

Thea grabbed a couple of napkins and helped her pat at the large wet spot on her lap. "You'll have to get that out before it stains."

"I'll just run to the bathroom real quick," Felicity stated. As she got up, Felicity locked eyes with her former teammate. Mei gave an imperceptible nod.

Felicity hurried down the hall to the bathroom. She shut the door behind her but didn't lock it. Leaning against the counter with her hands folded, she waited anxiously. Sure enough, Mei entered moments later. This time the door was definitely locked.

"We don't have much time. Told the others I knew a good trick to help with the stain," Mei informed her.

"Does it involve going green?" Felicity questioned, watching the other woman closely. Oliver had given her very specific instructions earlier in case she "ran into an old friend." Had he known this was her plan all along? Felicity's trust in him may have been broken, but that didn't change the fact that Oliver never said anything without purpose.

Recognition immediately sparked in Mei's eyes, and it seemed as if the guard she'd had up until now lowered. "So you didn't come out of hiding on your own. Oliver finally found you." She mumbled to herself, "At least I know why he missed his last check-in."

Felicity stared back at her totally perplexed. "What do you mean check-in? You've been speaking
Now Mei was the one confused. "He didn't tell you? I just assumed—"

Making sure to keep her voice low, Felicity replied, "Oliver found us in hiding days ago. We were attacked by a group of masked men with guns, although they were armed with tranquilizers instead of bullets."

"You and Oliver were attacked or—"

"No, Oliver hadn't found us yet. It was me, Sara, and my son," Felicity explained. "I'd called Malcolm at the time, because he was the one who originally helped me escape Starling. I've been working for him through an alias in exchange for the resources to stay in hiding."

"Working for Merlyn Global or H.I.V.E.?" Mei questioned bluntly.

"Merlyn Global. I didn't know that Malcolm was H.I.V.E. until just a few days ago. I called him when we were being attacked and told him that if he didn't hear from us, then to reach out to you. I've probably compromised you, and I'm so sorry, Mei."

"You didn't. Malcolm's known about me for a while. He's evil, but he's not stupid enough to make a move on me—at least not yet."

"It was the information Oliver took from me that revealed you, wasn't it?" Felicity inferred.

"It wasn't just that, but that doesn't matter now."

Despite Mei's dismissal, it was all the confirmation Felicity needed to bring forth a massive wave of guilt. She eyed her former teammate curiously. "How did you find out about Malcolm?"

"We'll get to that in a minute. First, finish your story. Do you know who sent those guys after you?"

"I was told that it was Waller."

"Can't be. Waller would've sent us if she knew. We were the ones tasked with finding you."

Shaking her head, Felicity said, "There's so much more going on than any of us ever knew. But for now, Mei, I'm in trouble. We really don't have time to go into the details, but H.I.V.E. has been keeping us under lock and key the last few days. I had to sneak a call to my mom tonight just so I could have an excuse to come here."

"Where are you being kept?"

Felicity hesitated. She'd always trusted Mei but after learning what she had about Waller, she knew it was imperative that she proceed with caution. No one could fully be trusted at the moment. As badly as she wanted out of the mansion, Felicity didn't think it was wise to reveal that just yet.

"We're mostly safe with Oliver for now, but I'm worried about what Darhk has planned. I learned some information you need to know—"

"You've had contact with Darhk?" she quietly exclaimed.

Felicity sighed heavily. She couldn't get into that twisted history either yet, and a part of her was worried Mei would not believe her after learning her true connection to the evil mastermind. Felicity had to play it smart. "Mei, he told me that Waller isn't who we think she is. He said that Waller used to be a part of H.I.V.E. years ago but switched sides when she was passed over for a leadership
position within the organization."

"That's...that can't be. Waller, she..." Mei frowned in contemplation at this new information. "Do you have any definitive proof?"

"No," Felicity admitted. "He could be lying, but I don't think he is. We've all had some concerns at one time or another about her methods. Maybe she isn't so ruthless and calculating because A.R.G.U.S. made her that way. Maybe it's because she actually learned it from H.I.V.E."

"I have to look into this." Mei was resolute, but Felicity also detected a shadow of doubt in her eyes. It wasn't directed at her, making Felicity wonder if Waller had done even more questionable things since she left to cause it.

"I know you do, and it's why I convinced my mom to set up this dinner. I had to tell you as soon as possible."

"Does Oliver know this, too?"

"Yes. He found out the same time I did. But I still don't understand how you've had contact with him," Felicity huffed in frustration.

"Felicity," Mei began, her voice so low that Felicity had to strain to hear it, "Oliver's been working as an informant for A.R.G.U.S. to help dismantle H.I.V.E."

"What?" She cringed at the loudness of her voice and said more quietly, "For how long?"

"Over a year. I confronted him when he came looking for you in your apartment. It wasn't long after you'd fled."

Felicity's mind was spinning with this new information. "How did you convince him?" Considering Oliver's complete shock upon first learning about Connor, she could assume that Mei had never told him about her pregnancy.

"It didn't take much. He made a deal. Promised to work with us in exchange that all of the charges against you be dropped. He was adamant about it. That's why it can't be A.R.G.U.S. that attacked you," Mei reasoned. "Felicity, Oliver got you immunity. You're a free woman."

July 11, 2007

Queen Consolidated was the last place Felicity wanted to be that morning. If she could've gotten away with not coming into work at all this week, she would've. Her emotions had been in a continuous state of upheaval ever since her night with Oliver. It was unnerving how she'd gone from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows in a matter of days.

After Felicity slept with Oliver, she'd been feeling so optimistic and even giddy. All day Sunday she'd been zoning out on him, flashing back to every intimate moment they'd shared. She'd still feel his hands and lips on her naked skin. There'd also been a dull ache in her muscles as she went about the motions of her day.

The smile on her face must've been obvious, because her mother had commented on it at breakfast. Felicity felt like a part deep inside of her that she'd long kept guarded had finally awakened and sprung to life. She'd felt lighter and freer, which heightened all of her senses. Colors looked brighter. Food tasted better. Her heart felt fuller. Every now and then she would start humming while doing the most mundane of tasks. Felicity couldn't help laughing at herself, since she'd been behaving like...
one of those cheesy girls in the rom-coms her mother always made her sit through. But for once Felicity could understand them. She’d been filled with the most wonderful sense of hope even as she’d longed to be with Oliver again. It had to be what love felt like.

Felicity had eagerly kept checking her phone to see if Oliver texted her. She’d been disappointed when he had to leave early and then couldn’t meet up later, but she understood that he’d made his family a promise. She did do some work on her IT project to pass the time, though she made little progress with her distraction. The happy bubble she’d been in most of the day had started to thin as the hours passed, and she’d received no other messages from him.

She’d tried not to read too much into it. The last thing Felicity wanted to turn into was one of those clingy girls who just sat around and lamented over a boy not texting them. But that’s exactly what happened into the night when no more messages came. Felicity started getting an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach, because Oliver almost always answered her back quickly. After wrestling with herself for over an hour, she decided to send one more text to Oliver to make sure he was okay.

The panic became full-blown when no response came back. Felicity’s phone was the first thing she’d checked Monday morning, and the disappointment was overwhelming when it was only Sara who’d texted her. That day Felicity had gone to work earlier than usual. It was her first day back at QC since the hostage crisis and although she’d declined to be identified on the news, it seemed many of the employees knew of her involvement. Their admiring looks and compliments had her nearly sprinting to her cubicle out of shy embarrassment at the sudden attention.

Felicity’s morning passed by quickly—and with still no message from Oliver—since her supervisor had entrusted her with a bunch of new and really important projects. The expectations on her were so much higher now, which was as exciting as it was intimidating. But Felicity was eager for both the challenge and distraction. After lunch was when she’d gotten a call from Walter Steele to come to his office. Felicity wasn’t sure what to expect, and she’d been a ball of awkward nerves upon sitting across from him at his desk.

It turned out that the Queens wanted to hold a special ceremony honoring both Oliver and her for their bravery. Felicity was completely taken aback, and the prospect of so much attention had her quickly trying to get out of it. Mr. Steele was having none of it and had insisted that she deserved to be recognized. When she’d asked if Oliver had accepted and found out that he had, it eased some of her worry.

Of course, Felicity couldn’t resist asking where Oliver was. Mr. Steele’s slight hesitation before answering that Oliver had taken a personal day only increased her worry. Had brunch not gone well with his parents? Was he sick? Had something happened with one of his family members? Felicity had texted Tommy to find out, but he hadn’t answered back right away either. By the time Felicity got out of work, she was ready to head over to the loft when Sara had shown up. They’d made plans the day before to hang out and grab dinner, which she’d totally forgotten about in her haste for answers about Oliver being MIA.

When Felicity had taken the first bite of her meal, the taste hadn’t registered. She was so worried as she attempted to listen to Sara talking about the latest guy she was dating. Unable to keep silent for long, Felicity had interrupted Sara to ask if she’d heard from Oliver at all. It was then that Sara had dropped the bombshell on her.

"He’s probably playing hooky with Laurel now that they’re back together."

Felicity had almost choked on her food as her stomach revolted. She had to have misheard. "What? Are you serious?"
"Maybe 'back together' is not entirely accurate, but they're probably off banging like rabbits somewhere. Think Oliver was staying at his parents' mansion for the night, because Laurel headed over there. She did the walk of shame tiptoeing into the house this morning." Sara snorted. "Typical. Not that I'm judging her for getting her freak on. I've been there more times than I can count, but I'm so over the drama fest that is her and Oliver."

"So they're sleeping together again? You know that for sure?" Felicity had pressed, feeling sick.

"I didn't ask for all the gory details, but it's not hard to put two and two together." Sara had frowned at her. "Hey, you okay? You look kind of pale."

Felicity couldn't answer right away. Not with her heart shattering into a million pieces as the hurt and betrayal had taken hold, squandering the love and hope she'd begun to let herself feel. She'd thought back to the previous morning and how Oliver had acted. He'd told her that he didn't regret what happened between them, but it was so obvious that something was off when Oliver had practically sprinted out of Felicity's room. At the time, she'd wanted so badly to believe him that she'd ignored the uneasy feeling in her gut. Felicity had learned at an early age how trust and promises were fleeting, and what Sara had told her just confirmed that.

If Felicity had meant anything to Oliver, then he wouldn't have run off and screwed Laurel the first chance he got. It really shouldn't have surprised Felicity. Oliver wasn't known as a billionaire playboy for nothing. Even while with Laurel he'd been able to maintain his bad boy reputation. That didn't happen by being a perfectly loving and loyal boyfriend. For someone so smart, Felicity had been a fool to think that she and Oliver had actually shared a deeper connection. It was the biggest cliché ever to expect that she'd be the one girl of God knows how many who'd mattered. Unfortunately, just because her brain was aware of this flaw in her logic, it didn't make it any easier on her heart. A part of her, much larger than she'd like to admit, still yearned for him.

It's why she hadn't sought Oliver out any further. In spite of her fury, Felicity had been humiliated enough. Maybe that made her a total coward, but she couldn't handle facing him. She couldn't handle watching another guy she'd given her heart to stomp on it and walk away. Felicity needed time and space to get her head together. As always, she could only rely on herself to pick up the broken pieces.

The large, beautiful bouquet of flowers she'd received yesterday afternoon had only confirmed her decision. It was the typical apology gift, complete with a note asking her to meet him at O'Connor's that night. Felicity had found herself becoming angrier that Oliver thought it was okay to completely ignore her over the last couple of days and then just send a bouquet to magically clean up his mess. And what exactly was he going to tell her at the restaurant? Did he want to meet in public to ensure that she wouldn't start yelling at him when he revealed that he was back together with Laurel?

Felicity had taken a hard pass on that one. She'd give Oliver the silent treatment just like he'd done to her. Let him feel what it was like to be ignored and brushed aside.

Felicity had ripped up the note and threw it in the garbage. The only reason why she didn't immediately shove the flowers in there, too, was because some of her co-workers had noticed them already. Felicity hadn't wanted to start any office gossip, so she left the bouquet on her desk and told anyone who asked that it was from someone who'd been grateful for her help in the QC attack. That seemed to appease their curiosity. Having to stare at the roses—by far the most beautiful gift she'd ever received—for the rest of the day was torture as she buried herself in work. Once most of the office had left for the evening, Felicity finally shoved them in the trash with great satisfaction. She'd then packed up her things and promptly left.

About an hour after the time Oliver had asked to meet, he'd finally called. Felicity's heart had raced
upon seeing his number flash on her screen. It only lasted for a couple of seconds before the pain returned, so she’d rejected it. Oliver hadn't left a message, and Felicity couldn't decide if that was good or bad. She'd turned her phone off completely afterward—not wanting to hear from him or anyone else. Crying herself into a restless sleep last night, Felicity had wondered how it was possible to be so furious with someone and then miss them so desperately at the same time.

Getting out of bed had been an even bigger challenge this morning. Felicity's eyes were red and puffy. The cool cloth she'd placed over them helped a little bit with the swelling before she'd done her makeup. Since Felicity's hours at the office had changed, today would be the last day this week she worked at QC. She was looking forward to the break, so she could focus on her own tech project for the IT competition. When everything else went to shit in her life, computers were the only thing that brought her some relief and comfort. The only thing she could rely on not to make her hope one minute and then feel shunned the next.

Felicity had finished her very large, even by her standards, cup of coffee before she even got to the office. Quickly, she realized she’d need more if she were going to function effectively the rest of the day. Felicity considered making a quick stop at the coffee shop across the street. The line, though, was already out the door. She’d just have to settle for what was in the break room. Felicity entered QC’s lobby and greeted the man, Phil, at the front desk. A couple of coworkers got on the elevator with her, and they chatted on the way up to their floor.

As Felicity rounded the corner to her cubicle, she was already going through her to-do list for the day. She was so lost in her own thoughts that she hadn't even bothered to look where she was going. She bumped into a hard body, which was followed by a groan and the faint spray of hot liquid. Startled, Felicity looked up in time to see the large coffee Oliver held in his hands pour down the front of his white, buttoned-down dress shirt.

"Oh my God," Felicity exclaimed and dropped her bag. The grimace on Oliver's face clearly showed that he was in pain. In fact, he didn't look well at all. His hair was mussed, and the dark circles under his eyes were more pronounced against his paler than usual skin. "Are you okay?"

"I'll live," he muttered while trying to keep the scalding wet spot from touching his skin.

"Hold on." Felicity grabbed a few of the napkins she always kept at her desk and dabbed at the stain. "I'm sorry. I didn't even see you."

"It's okay. I turned around kind of quick when I heard you. I should've been more careful." He added, "Although it's not like I didn't deserve it."

Her head shot up at that. There was a different kind of pain in Oliver's eyes now, and suddenly Felicity remembered herself. She dropped her hands from him and took a step back. She said in a clipped tone, "You should go to the bathroom and clean that up before it sets."

"Yeah, okay," he muttered.

Felicity reached for her bag and walked into her cubicle. There was a second cup of coffee resting on her desk. It was from the coffee shop across the street.

"Light cream and three sugars," Oliver offered. "That's how you like it, right?"

She nodded, unable to look at him. Her emotions were all over the place.

"I'm gonna go get this stain out. Then I'll be back."

"Don't bother," Felicity replied as she set aside the coffee and started up her computer. "I have a lot
"I saw the flowers yesterday," he said and kept his voice low. "I know you're upset with me, and you have every right to be. I don't blame you for not showing up. But, Felicity, we really do need to talk. There's a lot of things I have to say to you and apologize for, and I hope that you'll hear me out."

"It's not necessary," Felicity retorted. "I already know you're back together with Laurel so if you don't mind, I'd rather skip the whole 'I think you're a great person but it's not going to work out' conversation. Have a nice life together, see you never."

"What? Felicity, who told you that?" Oliver demanded.

"Doesn't matter. The point is I know, and the only thing I want to do right now is get to work so—"

He reached for her arm and turned her around to face him. "Felicity, I don't know what you've heard but I'm not back with Laurel."

Felicity yanked her arm away from him. "Back together or sleeping together...does it really make a damn difference?" she heatedly whispered and glanced around the office to make sure they weren't being watched or overheard. "You hooked up with Laurel the day after we slept together, Oliver. I'd say this conversation was over before it even started. In fact, it seems pretty straightforward to me. Your mini-breakup was nothing more than an opportunity to get into my pants without the guilt of you cheating on your girlfriend with your best friend's stepsister. And now that you're back together with the love of your life, all is right in the world and everything is forgotten—me included."

"That's not true."

"Which part?"

"All of it. That's not what you are to me. I haven't forgotten you, Felicity." He said more quietly, "I never could. If anything, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you or our night together. The truth is the only thing that has ever felt right to me is you."

Felicity scoffed under her breath and shook her head. "I'm not falling for that again, Oliver. So you can take your pretty words and charming smile and use them on some other stupid little naive fool, because nothing will ever happen between us again." Felicity was furious, which normally she would prefer to the sadness that had been eating away at her from the inside. But facing Oliver and putting her fears into actual words was making her see so much red that she was borderline crying. Being so close to him again after everything they'd shared and knowing it was all a lie was too much. It was like her heart was breaking all over again, and she forced the tears back. She refused to cry in the office or in front of him.

"Felicity, look at me," Oliver pleaded. "Please, look at me." Swallowing the lump in her throat, she lifted her head. He appeared equally as upset but also determined. "I did not sleep with Laurel."

"But—"

"I didn't," he reiterated, his blue eyes blazing. "I'm not saying that I didn't screw up either and I promise I will tell you everything, but not here. Can you please come to the loft tonight so we can actually talk?"

Felicity folded her arms and bit her lip. She didn't know what to think. As she scrutinized the strained yet passionate expression on Oliver's face, her gut told her that he wasn't lying about not sleeping with Laurel. But then why the hell had Laurel made it seem that way to Sara? And what exactly did Oliver mean by saying that he'd still screwed up? Did he and Laurel almost sleep together, or was
he referring to the way he'd avoided Felicity the last couple of days? Whatever it was, and no matter how much it hurt, Felicity realized that she needed to get to the truth and say her piece to him, as well. She owed herself that much.

"Fine," she conceded.

He seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. "I can drive us."

"I'll take a cab. I have a lot on my plate today, and I might be running late." It was a total lie, but he didn't call her on it.

"All right. I'll see you later then." He watched her for a moment longer, holding her gaze, before gesturing to his shirt. "I better go take care of this."

Felicity nodded and turned away. When she finally heard Oliver's footsteps retreating, she sunk into her seat and placed her head in her hands. She had an awful lot to think about until tonight.

It was past eleven when Felicity returned to the Queen mansion. She'd wanted to leave right after speaking with Mei, but that would look both rude and suspicious. Malcolm had already been casting them a dubious eye when they came back in the room declaring that the stain had been successfully removed. Besides, Felicity needed to take advantage of what time she could with her family. The rest of the evening they'd spent catching up.

Her mother had recently gotten involved with a charity to help the struggling families of Starling and was excited to be walking in the fashion show to raise funds. Thea was still head over heels for Roy and had been speaking with Walter Steele recently about doing an internship with QC this summer. Tommy's club was number one in the city and, to Felicity's surprise, he and Mei had decided to move in together. She noted that her stepbrother still wasn't as enthusiastic as her mom or Thea when he talked to her. Felicity got the sense that he was frustrated with her, and she couldn't blame him. He'd been the most vocal about her coming home to visit Starling or him visiting her wherever she was. Felicity had constantly dodged him, and it pained her that there was a strain between them now—especially since her situation was too precarious to resolve it just yet.

One thing they were united in now, though, was their disdain for Malcolm. Tommy hadn't gotten along with his father since he was a kid, and it had only gotten worse over the years. Felicity finally experienced it firsthand, and she would be dealing with the consequences of underestimating him in the months—maybe even years, God help her—to come. There was one other person she'd underestimated, and she'd thought him no better than Malcolm these last several days. Mei hadn't been able to give Felicity all of the details about Oliver's deal with A.R.G.U.S. since they'd been strapped for time, but it was enough to flip Felicity's world upside down all over again.

She didn't know where Oliver was in the mansion. It was late, but Felicity doubted he'd be in bed at this time anyway. Sometimes she heard him walking the halls in the middle of the night. Sleep, even in the year they'd spent together, hadn't always come easy to him. She would check on Connor first before she went in search of Oliver. This new information wasn't something she could sit on until morning.

Turning the knob to the nursery, Felicity quietly opened the door so as not to wake the baby. What she saw in the dimly lit room had the air whooshing out of her lungs. Her heart skipped a beat, and her throat got tight. Felicity had to blink a few times to make sure she wasn't hallucinating. She wouldn't put it past Malcolm to poison her dinner at this point. But the scene before her was, in fact, real.
Oliver sat in the rocking chair by the crib holding Connor in his arms. Their son looked so amazingly tiny against Oliver's large frame. Sound asleep, Connor was wrapped in a small blanket with Sir Quackers resting next to him on Oliver's lap. Felicity placed a hand to her mouth to keep quiet as she took a moment to watch them. So many nights she'd dreamed of a scene like this, only to awaken feeling alone and mourning the loss of the life she and Connor could've had. Oliver continued to stare down at the baby, his awed expression also showing some tiredness. How long had they been like this? Where was Sara?

As if he could read her mind, Oliver quietly spoke, "I gave Sara the night off. Hope that's okay." He still hadn't taken his eyes off the small bundle in his arms. "I wanted some time with him." Felicity walked further into the room and leaned against the crib. "Took a while to get him settled down. Think he missed you."

Oliver finally glanced up and their eyes locked. She could see the trepidation in his gaze at her reaction as much as he could probably see the questions she had for him.

"He looks comfortable," she said barely above a whisper. Although she'd been dying to hold Connor all night, she made no move to take the baby from him. Oliver seemed to visibly ease at that. "I spoke with Mei."

He nodded as if he'd expected it. "Did she say anything interesting?"

"A lot of things actually."

With one more wistful glance at Connor, Oliver stood up and brought him over to the crib. He kissed the crown of his head and gently placed the baby inside, careful not to wake him. Felicity felt her heart constrict in her chest yet again. Bending down, she ran her fingers gently over Connor's small wisps of hair and leaned down to kiss his cheek. She then silently locked the side of the crib in place and turned toward Oliver.

Felicity kept her voice low. "Oliver, why didn't you just tell me you were working with A.R.G.U.S. when I first came here?"

Oliver sighed and rubbed a hand along his jaw. He seemed so exhausted but was pushing through it. "I was going to tell you that morning. Then Darhk showed up, and we found out he was your father and that Waller had really killed my parents. I could barely process it all. I set out to do the right thing, only to end up working for the woman responsible for my parents' deaths." He shook his head, looking as lost as she'd ever seen him. "And you were clearly overwhelmed. I feared if I told you right then that you'd think I was trying to manipulate you, too. I didn't think you would believe me. We were both really upset that day and said some things..." he trailed off regretfully.

Felicity felt the familiar sting at the memory of that fight that was only mere days ago. A year's worth of pain, anger, and frustration they'd both buried had finally been brought to the surface. While it had felt like spraying lemon juice on their wounds, it at least forced them to be honest and opened the door for this conversation now. Felicity wanted the truth more than anything else and listened intently as Oliver continued.

"Anyway, I thought it best to give you some space while I figured out what to do. I wanted to have another plan in place before I told you but... it's been a struggle. When Malcolm told me about you calling your mom, I had a hunch you might be reaching out to Mei. She told me that she was the one who'd given you the heads up about A.R.G.U.S. coming after you, and I heard your voicemail to Malcolm. Clearly, you still thought she could be an ally. So I let you go tonight so you could hear the truth from someone you actually trusted."
"She told me it wasn't long after I'd left that you made a deal. She said you got all the charges against me dropped."

He held her stare. "I did. I wouldn't accept anything less. I made that deal for you"—he glanced at their son in the crib—"and, unknowingly, for Connor. I knew there was nothing I could ever do to make up for the trust I broke with you, but I had to at least try. Bringing you home was never just about me. I've made a lot of mistakes, Felicity, but this I could make right. All I've ever wanted is for you to be safe and happy and if there was any way to for me to give that back to you, no matter what, I was going to do it."

Blinking back tears, Felicity crossed the small distance between them and threw her arms around him. Oliver was taken aback at first. In truth, so was she. Felicity had been moving before she could really think about it but now that she was in Oliver's arms, Felicity held onto him tightly. Oliver recovered quickly and encircled her waist, holding her to him as he released a shuddering breath.

"Thank you," she whispered, a tiny quiver underlying her voice.

"You don't have to thank me," he murmured. "It's what I should've done from the beginning."

While Felicity was overjoyed and greatly relieved by this revelation, there was also something nagging at her. An uneasiness she couldn't shake. *No matter what, I was going to do it*, she repeated in her mind. Oliver said what she would be getting out of the deal but made no mention of himself. Felicity might not know all of the details about the events going on around her, but she did know A.R.G.U.S. and how it operated. She did know Waller and the sacrifices she often demanded of the people at her mercy. So Felicity drew back and asked, "What about you?" Her suspicions were confirmed the second she saw his jaw tense. "Oliver, what else does Waller want from you?"

He looked past her, his eyes haunted. "Once this is all over, I'll belong to A.R.G.U.S."

"What do you mean you'll belong to it?"

"I'll be an operative of sorts. I don't know all of the details yet, but I'll be part of some unit called Task Force X. Whatever missions Waller"—her name came out like a curse—"gives me, I have to complete."

"So risking your life and giving her valuable intel wasn't enough," Felicity muttered, unable to completely hide the anger she could feel building. It wasn't necessarily directed at Oliver, but the dire situation they once again found themselves in. She folded her arms and took a step back. "She basically made you trade your life for mine."

"This isn't your fault. It's not like I'm innocent, Felicity. I didn't just hurt you when I gave Malcolm that information. Those agents that were in the bunkers and bases we attacked, some of them died. Their blood is on my hands."

"I know, but you didn't act alone," she reasoned. "And you were under duress…" Felicity had experienced firsthand tonight what it was like to have Malcolm breathing down her neck and analyzing her every move—all the while baiting Felicity with her own mother's safety. She could only imagine what it must've been like for Oliver to have both Malcolm and Darhk constantly exerting their power over him for years while threatening everyone he cared about.

"But I did give H.I.V.E. the intel it needed. This is all on me, and now I have to pay the price."

"So you're just going to work for Waller now? Oliver, she killed your parents. She was the one who started all of this. You can't just turn yourself over to her," Felicity protested.
"I do have to change my strategy. Figure out who I can really trust since Waller is compromised, too. I won't follow her blindly, but I also can't renege on this deal, Felicity. Not if it puts both you and Connor in danger again. There's no choice to make," he insisted fiercely.

Felicity fought the chaos in her head as she stared at Oliver. The familiar urge to trust him rose up something fierce inside of her. She could see that Oliver meant what he said, but there was also a tiny voice in the back of her head reminding her what happened the last time she'd let her guard down. He was as stubborn as ever and still hell-bent on putting himself at the mercy of their enemies to ensure that she and Connor made it out of this unscathed. However, nothing about their situation was black and white. And unlike last time, Oliver was actually opening up and letting her in on it. That was progress, at least.

Looking down at Connor, Felicity felt the battle rage within her. As strong as the temptation was to do this alone, she knew she couldn't. She might not have wanted to hear what John had to say earlier tonight, but perhaps he was right. This was her and Oliver's chance to do things differently. Protecting Connor was what mattered most and in order to do that, they'd need to work together. They'd need to trust each other, no matter how difficult that might be at first.

"Mei said you failed to check in recently," Felicity began. "We'll need to come up with a new plan quick, so Waller doesn't know we've figured her out. Mei said the men who attacked me can't be A.R.G.U.S. because of the deal you made. I told her about Waller's past in H.I.V.E., but she doesn't know the full story about me and Darhk. While I think she's open to listening, she needs proof that Waller is compromised. Lyla and the others will be the same way, and we'll need their help to take Waller down along with Darhk."

"We?" Oliver questioned, the tiniest hint of hope in his voice.

"Yes, we," she confirmed. "We're both in this mess, because we've naively let ourselves be pawns in their sick game. I say it's time we took control of our lives and turned the tables on these bastards completely. What do you think?"

"I think I never want to get on your bad side again," Oliver said with a small smirk.

"No more lies," Felicity stressed, staring him down. "I want to know everything that's going on."

Oliver immediately sobered. "I'll never lie to you again, Felicity. I promise. Full disclosure from here on out." He paused and seemed to steel himself before continuing, "But I need you to promise me something in return. I need you to promise that you're not going to run and take Connor away from me again. I don't know what's going to happen when all of this is over, but I do know that I need time with my son while I have it—whether it's you and me doing it together, which I would prefer, or just a little bit on my own every day. I can't miss anything else. Connor is my child to love and protect, too, and I want the chance to be his father."

Felicity was as profoundly moved by Oliver's declaration as she was panicked. It was no simple promise, especially in light of everything she'd learned tonight. Letting Oliver get deeper involved in their lives would be a monumental change with many unforeseen consequences. Although she had Sara to help her over the last year, Felicity was always the one who made the final decision when it came to Connor's well-being. Oliver saying he wanted the chance to be a father, no matter how much or little time they had, would decisively alter the dynamics of their little family.

But Felicity knew all too well what it was like to grow up without a dad. The doubt and fear that anyone would ever choose to love her and stay by her side had been a constant battle all these years. The most memorable times in her life, when she felt the happiest and most secure, were when she was with Oliver. The broken pieces of her heart that would've cut and kept away anyone else, he'd
embraced and helped her put back together. Felicity once told Oliver that she loved him because he'd opened her heart in a way that she didn't know was possible. She didn't know if she could fully trust him again like before, but she did feel that familiar pull in her heart now. Looking into his eyes and seeing the longing and determination reflecting back at her, Felicity could feel the pieces he'd broken want to come together.

Her head, on the other hand, was telling her that this probably wasn't a good idea when their futures were so uncertain. What if Felicity let Oliver in and he hurt her again? What if Connor got really attached to him and something bad happened? On the other hand, Felicity was in danger herself and it was just as important that her son be surrounded by as many people who loved him as possible. How could she deny her own child a chance to be loved and protected by his father when it was exactly what she'd craved growing up?

For all of Oliver's faults, the one thing Felicity knew for sure in her bones was that he'd make a great dad. She'd heard it in the way he'd once spoken about them having a family. She'd seen it in the way Oliver had been so careful and hesitant at first to touch Connor in fear that he'd do something wrong. She'd witnessed it yesterday when Oliver had shown her the nursery he'd meticulously had recreated. She'd observed it moments ago when he'd gently been rocking Connor to sleep. She'd believed it when Oliver was so willing to uphold a deal with an enemy he had every right to challenge, but wouldn't just so he could keep them safe. And she'd felt it down to her very soul now as he practically pleaded with her for the chance to raise their son by her side.

Maybe her heart and her mind weren't as disconnected as Felicity had thought. The dangerous world they lived in meant they had to take opportunities when they came. All wasn't forgiven and forgotten between her and Oliver, but this would be a start. Felicity realized she had to take one last leap of faith, and she prayed to God she wouldn't come to regret it later.

"Okay," she eventually agreed. "I promise."

Chapter End Notes

So what do you guys think? Let me know in the comments! Next chapter is titled "Hungry Hearts" and will be a full flashback. Past Olicity has a lot to talk about.
July 11, 2007

Felicity was stalling. It was the end of the work day, and she still hadn't left the office. She'd taken her time finishing up a project, rechecking her email, and tidying her desk before she'd run out of excuses to stay. Although she'd promised Oliver earlier that she would stop by the loft so they could talk, she didn't feel the need to rush right over. Her emotions were in an upheaval after what Oliver had told her, and she'd analyzed every minute detail of the conversation a thousand times already that day.

Knowing that she probably would never be completely ready for whatever happened between them next, Felicity took a deep breath and grabbed her purse to leave. She hailed a cab and was on her way. The entire ride she rehearsed what she wanted to say to Oliver in her head. Whatever truths he was about to reveal to her, Felicity had some of her own she needed to share with him.

It didn't take long for the cab to pull up in front of the expensive high-rise of luxury apartments. Felicity paid the driver and hesitated for a couple more seconds before finally walking into the lobby. The manager at the front desk recognized her and let Felicity go right on up. There were quite a few people on the elevator, since it was a busy time with residents coming home from work. She was one of the last people to get off and walked briskly down the hall.

Just before she reached the door, Felicity released her ponytail. It was giving her a headache. She ran her hand through her hair to straighten it out and then huffed in irritation at herself. So what if her hair wasn't perfect? She didn't have to impress Oliver. He was lucky that she'd even agreed to show up. Straightening her spine and lifting her chin, Felicity steeled herself before knocking on the door.

Oliver answered it almost immediately, looking relieved. Obviously, he was worried she'd stand him up again. "Hey, I'm glad you came."

"I told you I would," Felicity replied in a monotone.

He stepped aside to let her pass. The instant she did, the delicious scent of Chinese food reached her nose. A bunch of takeout cartons littered the dining room table, along with two place settings.

Taken aback, she questioned, "What is this?"

"I thought you might be hungry after work," Oliver explained. "And I know you love Chinese. I even got extra of those dumplings you like."

"I thought we were going to talk."
"We are. I just figured we could eat while we did." He watched her intently. "Is that okay?"

"Um, yeah...I guess. You can eat if you want. I'm not really hungry," Felicity told him. Normally, she would eat when stressed but her appetite had been close to non-existent these last few days. It was just another sign of how badly this situation with Oliver had hurt her. "Where's Tommy?"

"He hasn't been around as much this week. Think he's got a date tonight, so he probably won't be back until later—if at all," Oliver explained. "We shouldn't be interrupted."

"Good," Felicity commented and fiddled with her hands. The last thing she and Oliver needed was for Tommy to walk in and hear them talking about their night together. She walked around the couch and placed her purse down before taking a seat. "I guess we should just do this. Talk, I mean," she was quick to clarify. "I wasn't implying we'd be doing anything else on the couch."

Oliver bit back a grin at her nervous babbling tinged in innuendo. It was typical Felicity, but he understood how serious this moment was and needed to stay focused. To say he was nervous himself would be an understatement. He already knew he'd royally screwed up but actually seeing this morning the hurt and pain he'd caused her firsthand hit him even harder. Oliver had made a lot of bad choices in his young life, but there was nothing he regretted more than betraying Felicity's trust in him.

He'd been completely blindsided by the fact that she knew about his meeting with Laurel. It wasn't something Oliver had planned to hide, but the situation was worsened by Felicity thinking he'd actually gone so far as to sleep with Laurel. His mind had spun all day with scenarios about how she'd been led to believe that and was convinced that they were back together. What sucked, ultimately, was that he couldn't blame her for thinking it. Oliver had given her no reason to believe otherwise, and his stomach had been in his throat as the fear of losing Felicity tightened its grip on him.

Tonight, however, he was determined to make things right. For the first time in his life, Oliver was going to bare his soul regardless of the result. He owed that to Felicity and himself. Taking a seat on the couch adjacent to hers, Oliver sat diagonally across from her and made sure he left some space between them. He didn't want to seem like he was crowding her but was close enough that he could still meet her gaze and pick up on her facial cues. And right now, Oliver could tell that Felicity was very nervous and on edge.

She was the first to break the charged silence. "You said you were going to tell me everything, Oliver. I'm here now, and I'm listening. So tell me what really happened with Laurel."

Oliver took a steadying breath and began, "Before we get into that, I need tell you why I left the morning after our night together."

"You mean why you ran," Felicity corrected, making him grimace.

"Yeah." There was no use denying it. "The truth is that ever since we took that step, I've been feeling really anxious. And it was so jarring because I've never felt like that when I'm with you, Felicity. It's usually been the opposite. I love spending time with you and talking to you. I've told you things that I've never shared with anyone else—including Tommy and Laurel—and it was because I trusted you and your opinion.

"I mean, I never would've even considered working at QC this summer if not for you. Living up to my parents' expectations is something I've battled and mostly failed at doing all my life. I thought doing what they wanted meant giving in, but you taught me that I always have a choice. You taught me that I can't just settle and accept things. You taught me that sometimes you have to push through
and take a chance even if it scares you."

"That's all well and good, Oliver, but that still doesn't tell me why us having sex sent you running for the hills these past few days," Felicity retorted. "Maybe sex doesn't mean anything to you, but it matters to me. You knew it was my first time that night and how much it meant to me. I thought what we shared was real and everything you're saying right now sounds like it should've brought us closer, but it obviously had the opposite effect on you."

"You're right that sex usually doesn't mean that much to me. I've never tried to hide my past with women from you, and I won't now. The truth is even if I like someone, I'm still able to separate myself from her emotionally and always be in control of myself. Sex is just sex. But with you"—he held her gaze—"there was no control. I didn't take being your first lightly. I wanted that connection with you, and I wanted you to feel special because you are. What I didn't expect was for it to be a first for me, too, because it was more than just sex that night. We made love, and I lost myself in that—in you—and it really just scared the hell out of me. Even worse was that I didn't understand why at first, and that's why I left the next morning. I was so in awe of you, Felicity, I couldn't think straight. I felt like I was in this free-fall and I just needed time to sort it all out."

Felicity looked away from Oliver, overwhelmed by what he was telling her. A part of her was relieved and even touched to learn that she'd affected him so profoundly. Because that night it truly had felt like they were making love. But at the same time, the fact that he didn't think he could just talk to her and run away like he'd always done before concerned her.

"I understand being scared of your feelings, Oliver. This isn't easy for me either. I'm scared, too, and I really wish you'd just been honest with me at the time. Because how the hell am I supposed to trust what you're saying now when I know something happened with Laurel right after? I mean, were you even going to tell me about it—whatever 'it' is—or were you going to avoid that, too?"

"No, I was going to tell you. We've always been honest with each other, Felicity, and I don't want to start lying and keeping secrets from you now."

"Well, we can at least agree on that," Felicity muttered. "You said you didn't sleep with Laurel, which isn't what I heard. So what really happened?"

"First, can you at least tell me who told you and what exactly you heard?" Oliver requested. He had to know all the details, so he could properly address her concerns. And he was more than a little curious just who the hell had told her such a thing and why.

"Laurel told Sara, and Sara told me."

Oliver frowned. "Laurel specifically told Sara that we had sex?"

"She didn't come right out and say you guys had sex, but Sara said Laurel had gone over to your parents' house the night before. Then she caught her doing the walk of shame the next morning, and Laurel didn't deny that that's where she was coming from. So, Sara naturally assumed you'd hooked up."

"How did the topic even come up?"

"I asked Sara if she'd heard from you, because I was worried when you didn't text or call me back." Felicity shot him a pointed frown and was glad he at least had the decency to look guilty. She pressed on, "That's when she mentioned what happened."

"I have no clue where Laurel was later that night, but it wasn't with me. If you don't believe me, you
can ask Thea next time you see her. She happened to be in the hallway when Laurel left all upset after I told her we were done for good."

"So then why would Laurel let Sara believe that?"

"I don't know. Maybe she lied to save face or Sara got it wrong completely."

"So you're saying nothing happened? You two just talked when she came over and she left upset?"

"We didn't sleep together but," he hesitated and shifted uncomfortably, "we did kiss. Well, she kissed me and I kissed her back for a few seconds, but that's as far as it went. I stopped it right then. I swear."

Felicity felt her insides twist. Even though what happened with Laurel wasn't as bad as she'd originally thought, the truth still hurt. "Why would you kiss Laurel at all? Was spending the night with me and actually having real feelings that awful?" Fighting back the tears forming in her eyes, Felicity challenged, "Or was I too blind to see that you've been playing me all along?"

"No," Oliver vehemently denied. "Felicity"—he reached for her hand but she pulled it back—"I haven't been playing you, and I hate that I made you think that. This isn't about anything you've done, because you've been amazing. This is about me. Laurel was the only serious girlfriend I ever had. We'd always been friends and had a connection. That all changed when we started dating. At first it was great, and then slowly it wasn't. We fell into this pattern of blowing up at each other and then just getting back together like it never even happened. We never really talked about the cause of it beyond the surface. For the past two years, it's all I've known."

"When Laurel came over on Sunday, she said she wanted to apologize for how she went off on me. It turns out her parents are getting divorced, and the whole situation has been a mess." Oliver wasn't sure how much more to say. He knew Felicity would never go and blab Laurel's business, but he also didn't want to say anything else Laurel had told him in confidence. Her mother's affair and father's drinking were private matters. Sara was Felicity's friend, too, and she should have the opportunity to tell Felicity the details when she was ready. Oliver continued, "I was just trying to be supportive after all the crap that went down between us, but somehow the signals got crossed. Laurel said she wanted to make things work between us again, and then she kissed me."

"So it was all her?" Felicity retorted. "None of it's on you for leading her on all of this time."

"No, I'm not saying that. I know I fucked up. I should've ended things with her a while ago—especially when you came along, because the truth is I've been drawn to you since the moment I met you. I haven't been able to stop thinking about you, Felicity, and it's only gotten stronger the closer we've gotten. Like I said, I didn't know how to handle everything I was feeling and I just got overwhelmed."

"So what are you saying? You kissed Laurel because what you feel for me is too much?" Felicity demanded. "You're right, Oliver. That is fucked up." No longer able to sit in one place, she stood and went around the couch toward the windows to put some more distance between them. "I am not Laurel, Oliver. Maybe she'll put up with this crap, but I won't. This is overwhelming for me too, but you didn't see me running off with anyone else. Do you think it was easy for me to move forward with you with the fear of her always being this shadow in the background? It took everything inside of me not to listen to the doubts I've been battling all of my life."

As deeply as Felicity cared for Oliver, she knew that nothing would've happened between them if he hadn't promised her it was over with Laurel. She might not like Laurel or get along with her, but Felicity had respected that the two had a history and tried to fight the growing connection she felt...
with Oliver. Felicity also didn't want to put her own heart on the line and have it shattered if there was a chance of Oliver and Laurel reconciling—which is exactly what Sara had led her to believe.

The night Oliver had come to Felicity, everything had changed. He'd been so adamant that he and Laurel were done, and so Felicity had actually let her heart feel everything she'd been fighting. The support he'd given her when she was at her most vulnerable was all it took for her defenses to come crashing down, and she let herself fall completely in love with him.

Ignoring the growing ache in her heart, Felicity pushed forward. "You don't seem to know what you want and I...I can't just wait for you to figure out that it's not me and let you break my heart any more than you already have."

Her broken plea gutted him, and he also stood. "Felicity, I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you. But I can't let you think, for even one second, that I don't want you because that'd be a lie," Oliver declared. "When I kissed Laurel—"

"I don't want to hear the details," she bit out.

"I know, but you need to." He closed some of the distance between them. "I'll admit that when I was with Laurel, I was already feeling confused and the fact that she was familiar eased that somewhat. Because just like all the other times before, I knew exactly what to expect from her. I might not like the life she and my parents have mapped out for me, but I know how to play that role when I need to. And when I'm in control like that, there's no risk of getting hurt. There was no risk of losing myself. But when Laurel and I actually kissed, it felt so damn wrong, Felicity. Everything in me just reacted, and then all I could think about was how she wasn't you. How she'd never be you. Of course I immediately realized it was a huge mistake and felt even guiltier after that, which is why I didn't call you back right away. I started questioning what I'd done and if I even deserved to be with you because of it. I'd worried that maybe we moved too fast the other night or I'd taken advantage of you—"

"Oliver," Felicity swiftly interjected, "it was just as much my choice to be with you as it was yours."

"I know. I get that, but you are younger than me"—she opened her mouth to protest and he quickly clarified—"and I'm not saying you're less mature, because you're probably more mature than me even on your worst day." He gave her a small, teasing smile. "Regardless of that, my point is it doesn't make me any less protective of you—even if the one I have to protect you from is myself. Because I don't want to be that type of person anymore. Meeting you and getting close to you made me realize that a relationship shouldn't be about biding my time until the next fight. For the first time ever, I realized that I deserved better. It's impossible to know what you've been missing until it's right in front of you" He took a much-needed breath and confessed, "You're changing my entire world, Felicity, and even though a part of me is terrified of letting you down, there's an even larger part that's terrified of losing you. All my life I've wanted for nothing. Now all I really want is the chance to be with you."

A tear escaped from the corner of Felicity's eye and rolled down her cheek. "Or maybe you only want me now because you can't have me," she solemnly murmured.

Oliver moved to stand before her. Only a few inches separated them now. He inhaled the sweet, familiar scent of her perfume and it somewhat eased his nerves. Tentatively, he reached up to wipe away the tear. Felicity inhaled sharply at the contact but didn't pull away. He pressed his forehead to hers and softly replied, "I have had you, Felicity. The night we made love was amazing, but it wasn't enough. It's never enough with us, and I know you feel it, too."

"Oliver..." Felicity mumbled and fist her hands in his shirt. His face was so close to hers that their
breaths mingled. She closed her eyes as she fought the aching pull in her heart urging her to close the distance between them. It would be so easy to get lost in him again, and Felicity was ashamed by how badly she wanted to surrender to that desire. "We're kidding ourselves here. I am not yours, and you are not mine." She opened her eyes to look at him, and the intensity of his gaze made her heart skip a beat.

"You're wrong. There's a reason Laurel couldn't reach my heart the other night and that's because it's already with you." He took hold of her hand and placed it directly over his heart. She must've felt it pounding beneath her palm. "And because I know the type of person you are, I know the reason you gave me the honor of being your first was because yours is with me, too."

Felicity could say she wasn't his, but Oliver knew better. He'd been her first and, as Felicity had pointed out mere moments ago, that was no small thing to her. She'd made a choice to give all of herself to him, and he'd made a choice to take what she was offering. He'd needed that connection with her, and it made his blood boil to think that her ass of an ex-boyfriend or any of the other losers sniffing around her could've taken that part of her. Maybe it made him a complete Neanderthal, but Oliver didn't care. He was the only man familiar with every intimate curve of her body and the sounds she made as he worshiped it. She was his completely, just as the hold she'd developed over Oliver's heart made him hers completely. There was no stopping it now. It was too late for the both of them.

"I told Laurel maybe eventually we can get back to being friends, but that as a couple we are completely over. And that it's probably best for us both right now not to see each other for a while. No more doubts. No more going back. I didn't mention you, because it's your decision too. But I swear to God, Felicity, if you want me to call her right now and tell her about us I will. I'll tell anyone you want me to."

Felicity's silence seemed to last forever. Tears continued to spill down her cheeks, and Oliver gently wiped them away. Finally, he murmured, "Felicity, please talk to me. Please tell me I haven't lost you." She shook her head, and Oliver felt something inside him crack. He'd waited too long. Pushed her too far. It was over before it ever started. He moved to pull away when her hold on him tightened. He stared down at her curiously. "Felicity—"

She opened her eyes, her expression torn. "You know everything I've been through, and I've told you before that I can't lose anyone else so important to me again. I need to be able to trust you, Oliver, but how am I supposed to do that knowing you feel so unsure of yourself with me? I don't want you to be scared of me. I want you to trust me, too, in spite of that and know that I'll support you in anything as long as you're honest and faithful to me. Because if I give you a second chance and you doubt yourself and pull away again—"

"You can trust me." Oliver's lips ghosted over hers as his hand slid down her back and drew her fully into his embrace.

Felicity gasped at how despite the fact that Oliver towered over her, every inch of him lined up perfectly with every inch of her. It felt like they were two puzzle pieces finally sliding home after all the wrong ones had been ruled out. He gently caressed her cheek and leaned in ever so slightly. When Felicity remained still, her heart thumping wildly in her chest, he closed the short distance between them. The first gentle brush of his lips sent a tremor through her. The kiss that followed was slow, deep, and full of promise. One of the things she'd always noticed about Oliver when he was with her versus other people was his focus and tenderness. When Oliver finally drew back, she saw that familiar attentiveness as his cerulean eyes pierced her.

"Felicity, I don't ever want to be the guy that hurts you again. I'm not your father or Cooper or
anyone else who's abandoned you, because I'm standing here and I'm telling you that I'm choosing you. I'm all in and if you give me a second chance, I swear I'll spend every day proving it to you,” Oliver vowed. He shook his head, trying to find the right words and work through the frustration of his own verbal limitations. “I probably didn't explain it right before, but I didn't mean to imply that I'm lost when I'm with you. It might have seemed like that at first because I've never felt like this before but when I finally realized what I was feeling, it was actually the opposite. I meant it when I said you're the only thing that's ever felt right to me.”

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because it's not that I'm losing myself in you. It's that I'm finally finding myself. I want to be the man you deserve, Felicity, because you're worth it. You make me feel like I'm worth it, too, and I..."

Felicity clung to him tightly, her insides trembling in anticipation. She could feel that they were on the edge of something big and meaningful that would change them both forever. "You what?" she gently coaxed.

"I'm falling in love with you all the more for it." She stared up at him, utterly floored and speechless. Oliver assured her, "You don't have to say it back if you're not ready. I get that this is probably a lot to take in right now, but I just had to say it to you once. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Felicity breathed. She was still partially in shock from Oliver's declaration. Before any of the recent drama had happened, she'd known Oliver had cared about her but hadn't assumed that he'd fallen just as hard as her. It was almost unthinkable considering how very different they were. And yet, despite everything, their hearts were the same.

Her mind made up, she slid her fingers into his hair and crushed her mouth to his. Oliver wasn't exactly an open book, but that didn't mean she couldn't read him. He'd meant every word as he stood in front of her, desperate to earn back her trust. Although Felicity was still raw from the hurt he'd caused her, it didn't mean she wasn't willing to at least meet him halfway. This was all new to her, too. If Oliver truly was falling in love with her and was willing to fight for them, which is all she'd ever really wanted, then so was she.

Oliver groaned in relief that he'd finally gotten through to Felicity. She hadn't said she loved him back, but he'd meant what he said. He didn't expect her to put herself out there like that with him yet after what he'd done. Getting a second chance with her was enough for now.

"Just so you know," Felicity said when they finally broke apart, panting, "this is really hard for me, but I forgive you because I believe in you. I don't want the past to dictate our future, and I'm glad you were honest with me now. You've come a long way from the guy who first came to my cubicle lying about his beer-soaked laptop." She flashed a teasing smile.

"To be fair, I confessed then, too," Oliver pointed out. "You saw right through me."

"You bet I did."

Their noses brushed. "I love when you're all smart and snarky."

"Yeah, well, you saw through that, too. Hence why I couldn't resist your offer for lunch and root beer floats that first day."

"I was right about the root beer floats."

"You were," Felicity acknowledged. "But it was more than that. You were the first person to ever compliment me on my glasses and not make me feel weird for wearing black. You always tried to
include me in the group and respected my intellect. You've protected me from stalkers, bombers, and even snobs like Carter Bowen."

"God, I hate that guy," Oliver muttered.

"Which one?"

"All of them, actually. Although I still wish I'd roughed up Jason a little more. You haven't heard from him, right?" Felicity hadn't really mentioned her stalker since that day, so he'd assumed everything was fine. But she could also be fiercely independent, and he just had to make sure she wasn't trying to deal with the guy on her own. If Oliver saw him again, he'd probably snap the guy's neck.

"No. You scared him pretty good," she reassured and rubbed Oliver's shoulder. His protective instincts were flaring, which warmed her heart all over again.

"Good."

"What I'm trying to say though is you accepting me has made me feel more confident and actually want to open up. I've shared things with you—especially about my dad—that I haven't told anyone else either. I feel like I'm finally finding myself in you, too," Felicity declared and brought her hand to his face.

"I'm glad, because I think you're amazing, Felicity." He pecked her lips and held her gaze. "To be honest, I'm not sure what the hell I was even doing before you came along."

"Me neither." She blushed and reclaimed his lips. "Also, going forward"—more kisses—"these lips belong to me, buddy," the brunette declared and gave him a teasing but stern look. "If you're going to be kissing anyone, even when you're totally freaking out, it's going to be me. Got it?"

"I don't really expect any more mini-gargantuan freak-outs but I agree. I'm totally yours," Oliver murmured huskily, which earned him another kiss. He groaned deep in his throat when Felicity ran her tongue along the bottom of his lip before capturing it between her teeth. "You know, you are sexy as hell when you're possessive."

Felicity smirked against his mouth, loving the way Oliver let her take control. He surrendered to her completely, and she reveled in it. This was not how she'd thought her day would go. Felicity had started out feeling so hurt and betrayed, and was ending it feeling happier and more hopeful than she'd been in a long time.

"One other thing…"

"What?"

She stared at him seriously for a moment before giving him an adorably dimpled grin. "Can I have all the dumplings you ordered? Because I'm kind of starving now."

Oliver chuckled and gave her waist an affectionate squeeze. He held her gaze and promised, "You can have anything you want, sweetheart."

The endearment took Felicity by surprise at first but ended up causing an even bigger smile to light up her face. "I like the sound of that."
Dinner seemed to pass by in a blur. Although Oliver and Felicity had talked everything out, they
were still shy around each other at first. It took a few minutes to find their natural rhythm again, but
eventually they settled in. There was quite a bit to catch up on in the days they'd been apart. Felicity
told Oliver about returning to QC and her new responsibilities. They'd also talked about the
ceremony his parents were planning. He understood that Felicity, despite agreeing, remained wary
of it. The truth was Oliver didn't think his parents' intentions were as honorable as they'd let on.
However, PR stunt or not, he promised to stay by her side.

After dinner, they moved out onto the balcony. The temperature had cooled significantly from earlier
in the day. There was a slight breeze and dark clouds rolling in. The air felt charged and had a dewy
smell, but neither cared. They wanted to enjoy the fresh air and breathtaking view of the city for as
long as they could before the storm rolled in.

Felicity stood wrapped in Oliver's strong embrace with her head on his chest as they stared out at
the bustling city. They talked casually on and off for a bit longer before surrendering to a
comfortable silence. Despite still having some decisions to make—such as how and when they would
tell everyone about them—the pair put it off for a bit and just enjoyed the peaceful time they had
together. It was what they needed more than anything else in that moment.

Letting out a sigh of pure contentment, Felicity let her thoughts linger over the way Oliver held onto
her so tightly. She soaked up his affections as he played with the strands of her hair and continuously
brushed his lips across her forehead. Meanwhile, she trailed her own fingers along his back. The
tension she'd seen in him earlier, probably because he was so nervous, had eased. He was leaning
right back into her, gaining strength from her in return.

"It's getting late," Oliver murmured after some time. "If you're getting tired, I can drive you home.
You had a long day."

She snuggled more into him. "Just a few more minutes."

"No rush. I'm perfectly fine staying like this all night," he joked and kissed the top of her head. Oliver
continued to be in disbelief that Felicity had forgiven him. He had to remind himself not to squeeze
her too tightly to make sure she was real. Guys like him rarely got the dream girl or the sense of
contentment from being with her. After days of emotional turmoil, Oliver also felt a sense of peace in
being able to make Felicity feel relaxed and cherished. He still had a lot to make up for.

Giggling, Felicity replied, "I know what you mean." She lifted her head, and he took the invitation to
kiss her.

"I'm really glad you came tonight, Felicity."

"Me, too." She wound an arm around his neck and stood on her tiptoes to meet his lips more fully.
Felicity had kicked off her work heels a while ago, which put her barely level with the middle of
Oliver's chest. He was so damn tall, and she loved it.

Felicity let out a little squeal of delight when Oliver hoisted her up against him, lifting her feet right
off of the ground. He was completely supporting her weight with just his arms, and the show of
strength made her shiver. They were so wrapped up in each other that neither felt the first rain drops
as they began to fall. Within seconds, the downpour started and thunder rumbled in the sky.

Moving quickly, Oliver simply shifted her to get his arm under her legs. He swept Felicity off of her
feet completely and then ran them inside before they got even more drenched. The entire sky flashed
with lightning and the thunder crashed even louder.
"Holy frack," she exclaimed. "Maybe being on the balcony of a metal high-rise with a storm approaching wasn't our best idea."

"Hold on. The rain's coming in." Oliver let her down and went to close the balcony doors.

Meanwhile, Felicity went over to the couch and grabbed the throw blanket to dry off. She wasn't completely soaked, but pretty close to it. She rubbed the blanket over her hair and body as much as she could before passing it to Oliver.

"Thanks. If you want, we could wait it out for a bit. I'd rather not drive in this. The visibility doesn't seem too good. We could watch a movie until it clears up." Thunder cracked a third time. It felt as if the building shook from the sound, and the lights in the loft flickered. "Or not..."

Felicity scrolled through the weather app on her phone. "The radar doesn't look good either. You don't have to take me home. I'll just text my mom and say I'm staying for the night. If that's okay?" she questioned coyly and bit her lip.

Oliver tried not to stare too intensely at her perfect mouth. "Yeah, sure. I can make up the guest bedroom for you."

"Right," she replied, trying not to show her disappointment. It was actually very respectful of him not to just assume that she would stay with him in his room. He probably thought she'd want to take things slower now, and it was probably for the best anyway. Felicity should really take some time to be alone and process everything that had happened tonight. They'd need to have another talk in the morning. "That'd be good. I might need to borrow something to sleep in." The charge between them at the request felt as electric as the storm outside. The lights flickered again. "And a flashlight if you have one."

Oliver, not trusting his voice, nodded and went to search under the kitchen sink. He found the spare flashlight and grabbed some candles to use in his own room in case he needed them. Afterward, he led Felicity upstairs. He gave her a T-shirt of his to wear and put a fresh pair of sheets on the guest bed, all the while trying not to think about Felicity in said T-shirt and little else.

"Thanks, um, so I'll see you in the morning then," Felicity said and gnawed on her bottom lip. Oliver's hair was all damp and tousled, and his wet shirt clung to the outline of his muscles. He looked like a handsome, shipwrecked prince.

"Yeah. If you need anything else, let me know. I'll keep my door open." His gaze lingered on her longer than necessary. It took another clap of thunder to make him snap out of it. "Goodnight, Felicity."

"Goodnight, Oliver." When he shut the door behind him, Felicity leaned back against it and shut her eyes. She really needed to get control over her hormones. "Frack." Shaking her head, she quickly peeled off her damp clothes and changed into Oliver's T-shirt. Pressing the fabric to her nose, Felicity inhaled the clean, spicy scent that was just so him. This was definitely not going to help Felicity get herself under control.

Putting her phone on the nightstand and setting her clothes out to dry, she hopped into bed and pulled the covers up. The lights went out seconds later, leaving Felicity in darkness. She didn't bother with the flashlight. Too many thoughts were circling in her head for sleep to come, so she stared up at the darkened ceiling. Felicity mentally replayed everything that had happened tonight.

What Oliver had said about Sara and Laurel's parents had finally sunk in, and Felicity truly sympathized with their plight having gone through her own parents' divorce. She still wasn't thrilled
about Laurel making a move on Oliver, but it's not like she could blame the other girl. She hadn't known. However, Felicity was concerned about Laurel lying to Sara about her situation with Oliver. Did that mean Laurel was in denial and not giving up? How would she react when she learned that Oliver had moved on with Felicity? It seemed like Laurel had their entire future planned out, and that probably wasn't something she'd let go of so easily. What about Sara for that matter? Laurel was her sister and even though she was always complaining about Laurel and Oliver's toxic relationship, would she consider it a betrayal that Felicity had won Oliver's heart?

Tommy was Felicity's next concern. Oliver had been right that he was going to be out for the night, but what would happen when her stepbrother returned to learn that she and his best friend were now dating? Would he be happy for them or upset that something had been going on under his nose all of this time? Felicity blew out a labored breath. Why did everything have to be so damn complicated?

Her mind went back to Oliver. He'd finally let her see into the deepest part of him, and she was just as in awe as he'd professed to be of her. It seemed so unthinkable that he'd admitted to falling in love with her tonight, but that's exactly what had happened. Clinging desperately to that truth, Felicity threw the covers aside and padded down the hall to Oliver's room.

True to his word, Oliver had kept the door open. Aside from the occasional flash of lightning, the only other light came from a few lit candles on his nightstand. He wasn't in bed but sitting towards the end at the foot of it staring out at the window. The wind continued to howl as rain pattered against the glass. He was shirtless and in a pair of pajama pants. Felicity watched him silently for a moment longer before entering the room.

Hearing her footsteps, he turned to look at her over his shoulder. "Hey," he softly greeted, "everything okay?"

Felicity didn't answer right away as she came around the bed to stand in front of Oliver. She noticed the way his eyes heatedly raked her over top to bottom, lingering on her bare legs. Without a word, she took his face in her hands and leaned down to place a tender kiss on his lips. He immediately responded but made no move to touch her. His body was completely still while their lips brushed over and over again. When she finally pulled away, Oliver stared up at her with a mixture of hunger and astonishment.

He cleared his throat, though his voice still came out hoarse. "Felicity, what—"

"I've fallen in love with you, too," she confessed and slid her hands down to grip his bare shoulders. His skin was warm and smooth. "I didn't want to wait until morning to tell you."

Oliver sucked in a breath, and his eyes widened. He was at a loss for words as he stared up at Felicity. Her crystal blue eyes glowed with fervor and affection. Where her hands rested on his skin, Oliver felt a tingling sensation that quickly spread throughout his body. "I'm glad you didn't," he huskily replied. "But I thought…I didn't want you to think you had to—"

"I know I don't have to, but I want to. Just like I want to spend the night in here with you." The heat in her gaze suggested that she was talking about doing more than just sleep. She stood practically in between his legs, looming over him. Her scent filled his nostrils and, combined with the feeling of her so warm and close, was utterly dizzying.

"I'm willing to wait for you if you want to take it slow. You know that, right?" Oliver replied, needing to make sure. He really hadn't expected to spend the night with her. He'd thought that Felicity might need some time to work up to that level of intimacy again with him, and he'd been willing to accept that. It was why he was so surprised to find her standing in front of him half-dressed with a wanton
"I know that, and I appreciate it more than you can possibly know," Felicity told him. "But I've missed you and I just..." She struggled to find the right words, which was frustrating since usually she couldn't stop them from flowing out of her mouth. "It's like you said earlier about our first time together. You needed that connection with me. Well, now I need to feel it again with you. Everything you told me tonight was great but...these past few days I haven't been able to stop picturing how you left and—"

Felicity didn't have to finish. Oliver knew exactly what she needed from him, and he reached forward to take hold of her hips. He drew her down onto his lap so she was straddling him. The moment his lips touched hers, she moaned and threw her arms around him. Their mouths were hot and demanding as they eagerly sought to claim each other once more. Arching against him, Felicity tilted her head to the side to give him better access to her neck.

She keened when Oliver ran his tongue over her pulse point before sucking on it. He knew it was her weak spot and used it to make her melt in his arms. It had the desired effect, because her legs were trembling as they clench around his thighs. Oliver responded by sliding his hands down her body to cup her backside. Felicity smiled at the way he groaned against her skin, knowing that her well-rounded ass was his own weakness. He slid her closer so that she was directly on top of his growing hardness. Despite the layers of fabric between them, Felicity felt him pressing against her core and bit her lip at the delicious friction it created. She moved her hips in time with his and gripped his shoulders for leverage.

He was kissing the other side of her neck now, but it wasn't enough. Oliver had been right when he said it was never enough with them. There was a growing emptiness inside Felicity that only he could fill. Sensing her need, Oliver took hold of the hem of her shirt and lifted it over her head. She gasped his name when their bare torsos finally met. Oliver kissed her passionately once more as his hands rose from the curve of her hips to her breasts. He palmed them in his hands, massaging the sensitive nubs with his fingers before his mouth traveled down to do the same.

Felicity cried out at the sensation and arched against him. Her fingers clung to his hair, keeping him close, as the ache between her thighs intensified. As amazing as their first time together had been, this was so much more intense now. Her mind and body had been overwhelmed as she tried to process the shock and excitement of the new sensations he’d elicited from her then. This time around, Felicity knew exactly what to expect and she relished it. Feeling his hold on her waist tighten, Felicity had barely realized that Oliver was flipping her until her back hit the mattress. His body was huge compared to hers, and Felicity loved the way she sank into the bed with him covering her completely.

Oliver made his way down her body and nipped at the soft, creamy skin of her flat stomach. He smiled against her skin as she squirmed, wanting him closer and trying to absorb the hypersensitivity. He licked a trail around her belly button while hooking his fingers on either side of her panties. They ended up on the floor with her shirt.

Unable to stay away from her mouth for long, Oliver returned to kissing her and slid his hand down to feel the slickness between her thighs. Felicity was more than ready for him, and she bit his lip when he slipped a digit inside. He felt her hands against his chest, leaving a trail of fire as they dipped lower. She stroked his abs a few times before her fingers were undoing his pants. Oliver could already feel the difference in her from the last time they'd been together. Felicity had been much more hesitant and shyer with her body, letting Oliver mostly take the lead. Now she was wordlessly but confidently telling him what she wanted, and he loved every second of it. Oliver helped her remove his pajama bottoms before quickly going to the drawer in his nightstand to grab
Once he was ready, Felicity expected Oliver to drape himself on top of her. Instead, he slipped his hands behind her back and lifted her up onto his lap. She quietly squealed in surprise and spread her legs to straddle him again as he sat back. One of his hands wound into her dark hair as the other stroked her bare back.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered when their foreheads touched. The contrast of her long black hair against her porcelain skin, along with the vivid blue expressiveness of her eyes, had him mesmerized. This was everything he'd dreamed about these last few days, and it's why he decided to try this position with her. He wanted her as close as possible, so he could see every little expression she made and feel her totally enveloped in his embrace. He didn't want to share her, not even with the mattress.

"Thank you," she said quietly and kissed him.

Her reply made Oliver's heart clench in his chest. That Felicity actually felt the need to thank him for the compliment—like it was a statement and not a fact that she was beautiful—gutted him. Had no one really ever told her that she was beautiful besides him? If what she'd said earlier about him being the first one to compliment her glasses and accept her dark goth look was any indication, then yes. Felicity did tend to hide how much of a knockout she was with that image—something Oliver realized was probably tied to her issues with her mom and so people would pay more attention to her mind than anything else. But still, how could she not know?

Then he recalled her age. Despite her genius intellect and being wise beyond her years, Felicity was still young. She was only seventeen and just starting out in life—not that he was that much older, but Oliver certainly had more experience under his belt. Nonetheless, most of her experiences with men thus far involved being abandoned. Of course she might doubt herself, doubt him, and it was why Oliver couldn't fuck this up again. If he wanted her trust, he'd have to earn it. And that started now by showing her just how special she was to him.

"I've missed you, too, and there's nowhere else I'd rather be than right here"—he caressed her cheek—"with you." Oliver urged her face closer and kissed her tenderly as he directed her hips. She sank slowly down on top of him, and he felt her wet heat parting to accept him. The intimate connection made them both moan and they clung to each other, taking a minute to breathe through the intensity of it.

"Damn, you're still so tight," Oliver said, both turned on and slightly concerned. "Are you okay?"

Felicity nodded and tried to relax her muscles as she adjusted to him. That emptiness she'd felt earlier was gone and replaced with the overwhelming fullness she'd craved. "I'm perfect," she told him and kissed him once more. There was nothing as satisfying as being so close to him. Her tongue teased his as she slowly started to move on top of him. Oliver let her take the lead, only keeping his hand on her hip for support.

Holding onto him tightly, Felicity kept a steady pace with his guidance. When they weren't staring into each other's eyes, their mouths and tongues mimicked their lower bodies. Oliver would coax her tongue out of her mouth and into his before swiping his lips over it. It was hot, instinctive, and guttural. She broke away from his lips to kiss his cheek. She kissed down to his neck and across his broad shoulders. Just as she bit at the underside of his jaw, she brought her hips down on him as he thrust up with more force. It sent a shockwave of pleasure through Felicity's body and she found herself seeking it out again.

"Oliver tangled his hands in her hair and tugged her head back so that he could kiss her neck."
Felicity arched against him, all the while meeting his steady thrusts. He needed to explore every inch of her. He needed to really make her his, and she seemed just as eager to surrender to him.

Felicity tightened her arms around Oliver's shoulders as she rode him, lifting before spreading her legs wider and letting him go deeper. Her breathing was labored, and she gasped out his name when he leaned her back further to take her breast in his mouth. He sucked hard as she came down forcefully on top of him, allowing him to fill her to the hilt. Felicity felt the winding coil inside of her constrict even more. Seconds later he hit her in exactly the right spot, and she shot forward. Oliver moved with her, capturing her mouth as he fell backward on the mattress. Her body was trembling on top of him like a live wire ready to explode, and her hips set a demanding pace seeking release.

Oliver obliged, feeling his own urgency to let go, and changed their angle to capture that sweet spot again. The sound of their moans and the smacking of skin echoed in the room. Every time he would thrust up, she would clamp down, as if refusing to let him go. Oliver practically growled into her mouth and gripped her hips for more leverage.

She was so close and yet what she wanted kept eluding her. "Oliver," Felicity whimpered into his mouth, and he understood.

He flipped her over in seconds and took hold of her thighs as they desperately clutched his waist. Her nails dug into his back while Oliver proceeded to slam into her. This was so unlike their first time. That had been slow, tentative, and amazing, but this felt just as mind-blowing to Felicity. It felt like her heart was expanding in her chest as Oliver drove the pleasure in her body higher. She followed the frenzied, powerful rhythm he'd set, giving him whatever he wanted and taking it in return.

Finally, she opened her eyes to see him watching her and struggled to breathe all over again. The way he was looking at her...it wasn't just that he could see inside to her soul but that he accepted it. It was the same way she felt about him. Oliver was far from perfect. In fact, he was one of the most flawed people she had ever met. But it wasn't because he didn't care. It was that he cared too much and the rare instances that he let it show—like the way he was staring into her eyes now, as if she was his whole world—were the most beautiful to her.

"Let go, sweetheart," he coaxed. His voice was soft and gentle—so unlike the way his body was moving above hers.

The loving endearment was her undoing, and Felicity did just that. The coil deep inside of her exploded as she rode wave after wave of intense pleasure. Her body shook and she tightened her hold on him, determined to make him follow.

Her hand on his face and his name pouring from her lips in ecstasy, along with the way her already tight walls contracted around him, made Oliver shudder and fall over the edge with her. He didn't stop moving until there was absolutely nothing left. Burying his face in her neck and trying to catch his breath, Oliver collapsed against Felicity. His entire body was shaking and spent, and he didn't think he'd ever been so undone after climaxing.

"Oliver," Felicity called to get his attention. He wasn't the only one left reeling, since she was panting and trembling, as well. He lifted his head and looked down at her. "Does it always feel like this?"

"No," Oliver answered honestly after a moment, watching her intently. He brought his hand to her face and wiped away the damp strands of hair that had covered her eyes. "Just with you." He leaned down to kiss her, and it was then that Oliver knew for sure. He was completely and irrevocably in love with Felicity Smoak.
March 20, 2014

Oliver was sitting at his desk rubbing his hands over his face when he heard the door to the study creak open. He'd texted Felicity as soon as he'd gotten off the phone with Darhk. Although he was expecting her to come to his study so they could talk, he hadn't expected Connor to be with her. She held the baby in one arm and a tote bag in the other.

"You didn't have to rush," Oliver told her. "If you were in the middle of something with the baby—"

"We were just about to do tummy time," Felicity interrupted while patting Connor's back. He was constantly shifting in her arms as he curiously looked about the room. "But he can do that anywhere. Might as well kill two birds with one stone while we talk. Is that okay?"

Until a few days ago, Oliver had never known there was such a thing as tummy time. Apparently, babies around Connor's age needed to be placed on their stomachs so they could build up the muscles in their head, neck, and shoulders. It also prevented the back of the baby's head from getting a flat spot from laying down so much—at least that's what the baby book Felicity had lent him said. Oliver had been skimming through it the last few days. It was actually quite overwhelming how much he needed to know. Oliver tried not to seem so out of his depth in front of Felicity, but there really was no fooling her. Felicity, thankfully, had been patient with him and given explanations for everything as he watched her care for their son.

Oliver had been serious when he told Felicity he wanted to help her and spend time with Connor every day. It had been somewhat awkward and strained at first, like most things with them nowadays. He could see how hard it was for Felicity to relinquish some of her control to him, but they'd formed a tentative routine. Felicity handled the feedings (for obvious reasons) while Oliver had taken on diaper duty. He also got Connor settled down for his afternoon naps. Felicity handled the baby at night, but Oliver liked to stand in the doorway and watch her read or rock their son to sleep. Quiet, subtle moments like that were the ones that hit Oliver the hardest. Living in his family's mansion while raising their child together was a glimpse of the future he'd always wanted. A future he still wasn't sure he could ever have.

Not wanting to put himself in a solemn mood, Oliver cast his worries about that aside and focused on the present. He moved some chairs and small tables to create more open space before taking the bag from Felicity. Oliver grabbed the plush green blanket inside and laid it out on the floor. Felicity sat down with Connor and placed him on his stomach. Afterward, she pulled out some of his favorite toys and put them within reaching distance. Among them was Sir Quackers, which Connor did not like to be parted from for long. The baby wasn't fully crawling just yet, but he was strong and able to
pull himself along when he wanted to move.

The pair was silent for a couple of minutes as they watched Connor flail his limbs and reach for his toys. He let out little huffs of breath as he commando crawled toward a stuffed blue octopus. It had a different toy on each tentacle. Connor seemed to favor the rattler, because it made the most noise. He shrieked in delight every time he shook it. Oliver couldn't help but smile. Looking over at Felicity, he saw a similar expression on her face. As if she could sense his gaze on her, she looked up and their eyes locked. Despite the seriousness of the situation they were about to discuss, they shared a moment of understanding and pride in watching their son play so happily and innocently.

Oliver briefly wondered if these moments affected Felicity as strongly as they'd been affecting him. The pair had mostly kept their distance up until Felicity learned the truth. Now that they'd agreed to work together and try co-parenting, they were constantly around each other. After more than a year of being separated, Oliver couldn't help but react to her presence. Whether Felicity was handing the baby to him or going over specs for the new equipment she'd need, her proximity caused Oliver's heart to beat faster while aching with the need to be closer. His skin, especially, would tingle all over with awareness.

Things had certainly been different between them since she found out that he'd been working with A.R.G.U.S. While Felicity was still somewhat guarded, she listened intently and with an open mind when Oliver told her about Darhk's orders to monitor her and persuade her to join H.I.V.E. Oliver had also filled her in on A.R.G.U.S. and the type of intel he'd been supplying to Mei and the team. Felicity, in turn, had told him about her involvement in Rubicon and the digital safeguards she'd had in place while she was on the run. Although the pair was on the same page and she'd willingly agreed to stay, security around the mansion remained tight. They still didn't know who the armed men were that came after her in Ivy Town. Felicity may have been granted immunity by A.R.G.U.S., but Waller's agenda remained a mystery. They couldn't take any chances until the real threat was rooted out.

"So what did you say to Darhk?" Felicity finally questioned, breaking the moment. "Did he agree?"

Nodding, Oliver replied, "Yes, he agreed that you've had enough time to settle in. He wants to start integrating you into H.I.V.E. I'm to take you to the headquarters tomorrow, and he'll show you around."

Felicity sighed in relief upon hearing that Darhk had taken the bait to let her visit H.I.V.E. She needed to learn more about what they were dealing with. Oliver had filled in most of the blanks but, as they'd quickly learned from their conversation with Darhk and Malcolm the previous week, there was probably a lot more information they weren't privy to. Felicity would let Darhk think she was open to the idea of taking down Waller. It wasn't that far-fetched considering she now knew the woman had tried to kill her as a child and had succeeded in killing Oliver's parents. Felicity wanted to reveal the truth of Waller's deceit, but she didn't necessarily want to burn down A.R.G.U.S. in its entirety to do it. The agency still did a lot of good work despite Waller's reign of terror over it. That's why she needed some concrete proof for her upcoming meeting with Mei.

"I have to blindfold you on the ride over, though. Darhk's hopeful that you can be persuaded to join the cause, but he's naturally suspicious—especially if Malcolm told him about dinner the other night."

Felicity paused in shaking a toy in front of Connor and muttered, "Lovely." It was an annoying precaution, but it really didn't matter. Oliver knew the location to Darhk's hideaway, which he'd already given to A.R.G.U.S. months ago so they could start surveillance. The blindfold would merely help maintain the optics.
"Did you get into a lot of trouble for letting me go?"

"No more than usual. Darhk was pissed at first, but I told him I needed to gain your trust. Because he thinks it'll work to his advantage tomorrow, he let it slide."

"How understanding of him," Felicity sarcastically replied.

"There were a couple of other things." Oliver glanced down at their son and gently brushed a hand over his head. "Darhk requested that we bring Connor. He wants to see him."

"No," Felicity immediately objected. "We are not bringing him to a dangerous compound with all our enemies—"

"I know," Oliver cut in. "I already told him we wouldn't. I was adamant about that, and he understood when I pointed out that it could be dangerous to reveal Connor to the other council members. Although he's brought 'peace' among the crime families by establishing the council, there are a lot of egos involved. Knowledge that Darhk has not only a daughter of his own but a young grandson is something that could be used against him. He doesn't want a repeat of what happened with Waller years ago, which brings me to the third condition. I happen to agree with this, but in the end it's your choice. You will be presented to the council but not as just another potential operative."

Oliver braced himself before revealing, "You'll be my fiancee, as well."

Felicity's eyes widened. She couldn't have heard him correctly. "What? Explain that sentence."

"The role that Darhk expects you to play in bringing down A.R.G.U.S. is no small thing. He already has a couple of hackers, but they're not getting results. Their job is at the center of Darhk's entire mission and bringing you in from the outside requires trust and credibility. Your connection to Malcolm is good but since I'm both a council member and a part of the Bratva, being tied to me will secure your safety and reputation within H.I.V.E. Any push-back you could face would easily be overruled by my status."

Felicity wasn't sure what to say as she stared back at him in stunned silence. What did eventually come out of her mouth was unexpected. "Won't it look weird if you're with me and not Helena?"

She wanted to slap herself upside the head. Felicity couldn't believe she'd just said that.

Oliver was stunned. Maybe Helena hadn't been totally off the mark in saying Felicity was jealous. He tried not to read too much into it, though. He'd only set himself up for disappointment if he did. "Helena was never my girlfriend and anything romantic that did exist between us is long over, like I told you before," he explained while holding her gaze.

Felicity shrugged nonchalantly. "I only brought it up to make sure it was believable."

The crinkle in her brow told Oliver the opposite was true, but he didn't call her on it. "So you're agreeing?" he pressed.

"We said we were going to work together." Felicity wasn't totally comfortable with this new development, but she would do what was necessary to carry out their mission. "If this is what we have to do, then fine."

"It'll be believable." Oliver added quietly, "How I feel about you is the one thing I'll never have to fake."

Her head snapped up at that, and he stared back for a few seconds before reaching for Connor. Felicity watched as Oliver raised the baby up in the air a couple of times, earning excited shrieks, before bringing him back down. The change in Oliver's demeanor was instantaneous. The frowns
that had marred his face moments ago vanished as he grinned at their son. Connor reached for
Oliver's face as his legs flailed. He seemed to be fascinated by the sensation of Oliver's scruff, which
he was always touching. She'd noticed Oliver had been keeping it shorter, probably so it wasn't too
scratchy against the baby's sensitive skin.

Tamping down the flood of emotion she could feel beating against the walls she kept around her
heart, Felicity changed the subject. "Did my equipment come in yet? I need to get it all set up on our
end."

"It's coming tonight."

"What about your men? If they see you getting those packages and report it to Darhk or Malcolm—"

"They won't see it. When the mansion was built in the early 1900s by my great grandfather, a series
of hidden passageways was included in the layout underneath. The Queen empire he was building
through his business earned him a lot of enemies. He wanted a safe and quick way out of the house if
someone ever did come after him or his family. Dig will bring everything in that way, and Sara has
offered to help him."

"I never knew that," Felicity commented, impressed. She had always thought the Queen mansion
looked cool, and secret passageways only added to her admiration of it. Her inner nerd would love to
go exploring.

"Tommy and I used them all the time to sneak in and out. I'll show you later," Oliver said. "Just in
case…" He held Connor against his chest and finally met her stare.

Understanding passed between them. Oliver wanted her and Connor to have an escape route if they
ever did find themselves in serious danger again, and he wasn't there to help them. Felicity's heart
clenched at the prospect of such a scenario; she sincerely hoped it would never come to that.
Unfortunately, they were playing with fire. And when playing with fire, one always had to prepare
to be burned.

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Smiling into Oliver's skin, Felicity kissed along his chest and up to his neck. Her dark hair formed a
curtain around them when she ran her lips across his forehead and along his cheeks. Emitting a low
grown, Oliver drew her up higher on his chest. Her body lay atop his, every one of her soft curves in
line with his hard edges. They hadn't been able to stop touching each other even after the intense
make-up sex they'd just had.

The storm outside had mostly passed. Only some clouds and light rain remained. The power had yet
to come back on, but Felicity didn't mind. The candles gave the room a soft, romantic glow. Oliver
slid his hands up the curve of her back to cup her face. He tilted it to the side and exposed her neck
to him. Leaning up, his lips latched onto her skin. Felicity gasped when he found her sweet spot and
began sucking on it.

"O-Oliver," she said in a mildly scolding tone, "you're going to leave a mark."

"Maybe I want to," he rumbled. His teeth scraped her sensitive flesh before smoothing it over with
his tongue.

Felicity's body had gone slack as she leaned into him. Her words came out in a breathy whisper.
"Now who's being possessive?"

In one swift motion, Oliver flipped them over and settled on top of her. He reclaimed her lips in a
passionate kiss that made Felicity moan and cling to him tighter. Her hands squeezed his biceps
before gliding up to his broad shoulders and then his neck. Her touch was electric as a hot, frenzied energy spread throughout Oliver’s body. A part of him felt utterly happy and content while the other part wanted to devour Felicity and make her his all over again. Instead of the anxiety he'd felt after their first time together, Oliver now freely embraced all of the emotions swirling inside of him. He loved Felicity; he truly did.

Felicity mewled against his mouth. "So many muscles."

Oliver broke away, grinning in amusement. "What?"

Her eyes popped open. "Oh God, did I say that out loud?"

"Yup."

She groaned softly, her skin getting flushed—although that could’ve been from all of the kissing. "I really need to stop doing that."

Oliver chuckled. "It's one of your most endearing qualities. Just like my muscles," he couldn't help teasing her.

Felicity rolled her eyes but was unable to resist a smile. "Well, you can't really blame me for being so attracted to my boyfriend." She playfully squeezed his biceps again before wrapping her arms around him.

"Boyfriend?" Oliver nuzzled her nose. "I like the sound of that." He pecked her lips affectionately. "I like it a lot."

"So no more second thoughts?" Unlike last time, Oliver was still in bed with her and lavishing her in kisses and caresses. But still Felicity needed the reassurance.

"Of course not. In case you haven't noticed, I'm kind of crazy about my girlfriend," he said in between kisses.

Felicity was beaming. "You're right. It does sound amazing."

"Now we just have to figure out how to tell everyone." Oliver felt Felicity tense slightly beneath him. The crinkle between her brow and the way she was biting her lip made him frown. "What's wrong?"

Felicity gave him a small smile, impressed by how easily he could read her. She kissed him again, unsure how to phrase what she was thinking. "Maybe we should hold off on telling everyone."

Oliver, caught off guard, replied, "Why? Are you worried about Laurel? Because that's over, and I can handle—"

"No, it's not Laurel. I mean, it's not just her. It's Tommy, Sara, my mom, and your parents—I'm pretty sure your mother hates me, by the way."

"She doesn't hate you."

"Well, she doesn't like me."

Oliver couldn’t exactly deny Felicity's claim, because he did think that his mother hadn't yet warmed to her. But that didn't mean they couldn't get along. "Felicity, she doesn't know you. You two only met a couple of times. When we do that ceremony at QC, you can actually talk to her and—"

"QC is my biggest concern. Oliver, everyone is going to think we're sleeping together," Felicity
lamented.

"Felicity"—he eyed their naked bodies—"we are sleeping together."

"I know, but they'll think we've been doing it right along. I don't want anyone to think my success is based on sleeping with the boss's son."

Now was probably not the time to tell Felicity that some employees at QC sensed their closeness and already thought there was something going on between them. One of the other interns a few weeks ago had been trying to flirt with him and when he didn't respond, she straight up asked him if he was dating "that goth girl from IT." He hadn't liked her tone one bit. Oliver denied it, but his response definitely couldn't have been considered polite.

Felicity carried on, "And we're so different. People will probably wonder why you're with me."

"Why wouldn't I be with you?" he gently challenged. "You're smart, beautiful, and genuine. If anything, everyone will probably be questioning why someone as brilliant as you is with a screw-up like me. I know I have a…colorful past. I've made a lot of mistakes and if it makes you uncomfortable being associated with that, I understand—"

The dejected look on his face tore at her heart. "Oliver, no," Felicity quickly interrupted. "You may not be perfect, but none of us are. Besides,"—she ran her hand through his hair—"I think that perception has changed after the hostage crisis. You let everyone see how big and courageous your heart it is. I won't let anyone tell me otherwise. It's just that the paparazzi and the idea of all that attention makes me nervous."

"So you're not ashamed of me?" he murmured, searching her eyes for any sign of doubt. He wouldn't hold it against her if Felicity did feel that way. He hadn't exactly put his best foot forward recently, which he was trying to make up for now.

"No. That's not what I'm saying at all." She took his face between her hands. "I'm not ashamed to be with you. I may not have known you as long as some other people, but I see the real you. And that's the man I've been in awe of since the first day we met. Okay?" She willed him to believe her.

"Okay," he murmured, relieved.

Felicity tenderly pressed her lips to his. "I'm not saying we never come out and tell everyone," she clarified. "I'm just saying maybe we hold off for a bit. Let's take some time for ourselves and enjoy being with each other. Find our footing first. Then we can tell everyone when we're ready."

He was silent for a moment, contemplating her suggestion. "I think you're right," he finally conceded.

She breathed a sigh of relief. "You do?"

At first, Oliver had been opposed to her idea of keeping their relationship a secret. He didn't want to hide how he felt about Felicity, but she'd brought up some valid points. The paparazzi in Starling could be brutal, and he didn't want to do anything to take away from her now stellar reputation at QC. The press might not go negative at first since he and Felicity had saved everyone from that hostage crisis, but it would increase public interest. The media would most likely be all over them.

The more he thought about it, Oliver also wasn't sure how happy Tommy would be about this development. His best friend had easily slipped into the big brother role where Felicity was
concerned, and Tommy could very well be pissed that Oliver hadn't told him the girl he'd been crushing on was his stepsister. Then there was Sara. She was Laurel's sister and both his and Felicity's close friend. What would she think of him dumping Laurel and going with Felicity? For that matter, how the heck would Laurel react? She had to be in ten different kinds of pain already from their breakup on top of her parents' divorce. Even though Oliver knew he had every right to move on with Felicity, he also didn't want to seem unnecessarily cruel. And if Felicity felt she needed some time to adjust, he certainly wasn't going to push her into anything before she was ready. There was literally so much drama awaiting them that taking time to make themselves strong as a couple actually did seem like the best decision.

"Yes, let's wait. I've lived so much of my life in the public eye, and it's always done way more harm than good."

"So you're really okay with us dating in secret for now?" Felicity made sure. It was important that they were united on this.

"Yes," Oliver agreed wholeheartedly. He slid his arms beneath her and grazed her lips. "Besides, having you all to myself might have its advantages..."

"I like the way you think, Mr. Queen," Felicity flirtatiously replied and nipped at his mouth. She pushed her breasts up into his chest, earning a sexy groan from him. "Now that you have me, what do you plan on doing with me?" She ran her fingernails lightly over his back, enjoying the way his muscles flexed, and wrapped her legs around him.

No longer able to resist, Oliver closed the gap and kissed her deeply. "Everything."

Felicity pressed the dress in her hand against her body and looked in the mirror. She turned left and right, trying to figure out if she liked it or not. What exactly did one wear when visiting an evil lair? Maybe she was making too big a deal about this but being a cyber-intelligence analyst meant that she was mostly behind her computer screen during missions. Should she wear a dress if she was playing the role of Oliver's fiancée? Or should she wear pants in case things went south? Although it wasn't like she didn't know how to handle herself in a dress. That mission in Moscow she'd worn an evening gown with a very high slit and heels. A slit that had given Oliver the perfect opportunity to slide his hand up her—Felicity immediately stopped that train of thought. Nothing of the sort would be happening like that today. This was purely business.

"Not that one," Sara interjected. "You look like a librarian."

"There is nothing wrong with librarians," Felicity remarked. "In fact, they are very stylish these days."

"Well, in that dress, you look like a librarian that's never gotten laid."

Felicity rolled her eyes and groaned before throwing the dress with the rest of the pile on the bed. "Not that far off," she muttered to herself.

The last time she'd had sex felt like forever ago—probably because it was. The night Connor was conceived and all the ways Oliver had driven her to the brink was especially memorable, and she was cursing herself as images from that night flashed in her mind. Felicity really needed to get a grip and stop thinking about all of her sexcapades with Oliver lately. Yes, he was still hot as hell. She'd admit that, because it was the same as saying the sky was blue. And yes, she found him especially sexy when she saw him interacting with their son recently. But no matter how her body reacted to him, her head and her heart just couldn't go there.
Marching back into the closet, Felicity changed into a green, knee-length dress with a thin black belt and bow stitched into the waist. She grabbed a matching pair of black heels before walking back out.

"Much better," Sara approved.

Felicity looked into the mirror and instantly agreed. The dress was pretty but also looked professional—not that she was trying to impress a bunch of criminals. "What do you think, Connor?" Felicity questioned.

She turned to where he was on the floor with Sara and Lucky. Connor was sitting in his little Jumperoo activity center that Oliver had bought for him the other day. It kept him upright and occupied with a bunch of different toys attached. Watching Oliver and John try to put it together had actually been quite hilarious. They kept rereading the directions in frustration and trying to sort through the numerous pieces. Oliver had muttered several words in Russian which, if Felicity had to guess, were probably curses. Despite the horror of putting the set together, Connor really loved it. He constantly jumped up and down—though his version of jumping was really more of a bobbing since he couldn't walk yet—and grabbed at the various animal shapes. It looked like a mini rainforest. Connor especially liked the dangling monkey and colorful toucan. He looked up for a second at the sound of his name before going back to biting the monkey.

"CJ thinks you look great," Sara replied with a wink and rubbed Lucky's belly as he rolled over.

"Mm hm," Felicity muttered and started fiddling with her hair. "Up or down? I feel like female villains usually wear it down or slicked back. Although I'm not a fan of the wet look on myself. Or maybe I should do my normal ponytail—"

"Are you more nervous about H.I.V.E., Darhk, or the fact that you're going as Oliver's fiancée?" Sara knowingly questioned.

Felicity frowned at her best friend. "None of the above," she responded. "I'm ready. I'm simply trying to get into character while I go over the plan in my head."

"Well, if you want to truly play the part of the doting fiancée, I say leave your hair down and wear your locket. It'll be a nice touch."

Taking Sara's suggestion, Felicity left her hair alone and went to retrieve her locket. She stared at it and the inscription on the back before finally putting it on. It was odd how the feeling of it against her chest seemed to anchor her. She ran her hand over it before dropping it quickly. Felicity then went into the bathroom and started to fix her makeup, ignoring how jittery she felt.

Standing in the doorway, Sara asked, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes…no…I don't know…" Felicity admitted and placed her hands on the counter. "I'm anxious about seeing Darhk. He's a monster, but he is technically my father. I don't know what else about my past he's going to reveal when he sees me or if he'll see right through my bluff."

"If you could handle that bitch Waller when she was out to get you at A.R.G.U.S., then you can handle your father. If he's as desperate for your help as Oliver said, you can use that to your advantage. You gave the tech to Oliver, right?"

"Not yet. I haven't seen him since this morning. Which I'm not sure is good or bad. I mean, I did need some space today to get my head right. But then what happens if we get there and it's so obvious we're lying about everything? Damn it, where did I put that eyeliner?" Felicity complained while searching through her makeup bag.
"I think you'll fall into step as needed. Besides, a person would have to be blind not to see the connection between the two of you."

Felicity stared back at her friend in the mirror. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Sara leveled her with an honest look. "You know exactly what I mean. But if you need to hear me say it, Felicity, I will. You're still in lo—"

"Don't," she quickly cut her off. "I can't deal with that right now."

Her best friend held up a hand to tell her she was backing off. "Okay, I get it. But look at it this way, it's just one afternoon."

Felicity had finally found her eyeliner and finished retouching it when a knock sounded on the door. Lucky sat up and started barking. Sara went to open it, and Felicity heard Oliver's deep voice speaking with her. She came out of the bathroom to see Oliver approaching Connor and Lucky growling lowly at him. Oliver was scowling back. The two still weren't on the friendliest of terms.

"That's enough, Lucky," Sara scolded him. "Quiet." Lucky eyed Oliver a moment longer before finally following Sara out of the room. She had to take hold of his collar when he kept looking back to see what Oliver was doing. Sara shut the door behind her to give them some privacy.

Connor's attention was finally torn away from his toys, and his eyes brightened at the sight of Oliver. Over the last few days, Oliver had become Connor's new favorite playmate. Oliver, who usually looked so stoic and tense, completely changed when he was around the baby. These moments with their son were the only times Felicity saw a real smile appear on his face, and he didn't hold back when they were interacting. Connor had his full attention. The baby held out the mini monkey for him, and Oliver crouched down to take it.

"What's this?" Oliver said to him. "Is this a monkey? Can you say 'monkey'?

Of course Connor responded with baby gibberish while he reached for it again. When Oliver went to hand it back to him, Connor let it go and held his arms out. He wanted to be picked up. Oliver immediately obliged and scooped him up before turning to her.

"You look nice," Oliver complimented her, snapping her out of the daze she was in while watching them.

"Thank you. You look good, too." He looked better than good. Oliver wore a gray suit with a few of the top buttons undone on his white shirt. His scruff seemed particularly attractive on his strong jaw, and his hair was styled but tousled. His blue eyes were bright and piercing as they continued to run the length of her. She wasn't the only one enjoying the view, apparently.

Felicity ran her hands down her dress self-consciously. It fit, but it was a bit snugger than she was used to. She really needed to lose those last few pounds of baby weight. Crossing the distance, she came to stand in front of them. "Is everything all set?"

It took a few seconds for him to respond. "Uh, yeah. We're ready to go. Do you have the tech you want me to plant?"

"Yes." She grabbed it from her purse and handed it to him. A curious Connor tried to intercept it, but Felicity took hold of his hand. "You have to plant it in the mainframe."

"I know. I memorized the diagram you drew me." Since Felicity didn't have the kind of access that Oliver had around the compound, and she'd be busy with Darhk, he had to be the one to plant the
spyware. Being that technology wasn't exactly his specialty, she'd given him very specific instructions on what to look for and how to set it up.

"Right. Good," she awkwardly mumbled. "So, um, do you want to blindfold me now or later?" Felicity wanted to kick herself. "Sorry, uh, I didn't mean for that to sound so sexual. I know it's not a sex thing. It came out wrong. Sex is like the farthest thing from my mind right now." She cringed as her babble continued. "Especially with you standing there holding our baby. Definitely not good to rant about sex in front of him. I shouldn't even be saying the word, because what if he picks it up and says it later? God, I'm the worst mother ever—"

"Well, sex is how he got here," Oliver jokingly interjected, making her jaw drop in shock. He wasn't even trying to hide his amusement or the suggestive smirk that followed. When she still didn't say anything, he added, "It's fine, Felicity. I know what you meant, and I doubt Connor will remember."

Her cheeks were turning red. She could feel it. "Right," was all Felicity could manage to say. She needed to change the subject fast. "So, should we go?"

"I have something I need to give you, too, first." He held out Connor for her to take while he dug into his pocket. Their son started playing with her necklace, and she barely caught it before he put it in his mouth.

"No, baby," Felicity gently told him and shook her head. She was trying to teach him to associate meaning with words. Connor went for her hair instead. He was probably messing it up, but she let him. It soothed him, and she felt bad that they'd be leaving him in a few minutes. It tore at something deep inside her every time they were separated. Felicity left a few kisses on his soft cheeks as she swayed with him in her arms.

"Felicity," Oliver said to get her attention. He held out his hand to reveal a pear-shaped, platinum, light yellow diamond ring.

"Oh, wow," she breathed. It was breathtaking as it shined in the light.

"It was my mother's. You needed a ring for today so…" he trailed off.

Felicity stared up at him curiously. She'd totally forgotten about having a ring. While the one he'd presented her with was beautiful, she couldn't help but think about the other one he'd shown her last week. As badly as she wanted to ask why he wasn't using the real engagement ring he'd wanted to give her, Felicity kept quiet. Oliver didn't do anything without a reason, and it was probably something they couldn't afford to get into at the moment.

She was about to take the ring from him but realized it wasn't an option while she held Connor. As understanding dawned on her that he'd have to put it on her, Felicity felt her heart start to race. Oliver must've been thinking the same thing, because he looked equally as affected by the prospect. Without a word, Felicity held out her left hand. There was a subtle tremble that she was trying to hide. Oliver took hold of it, and his touch made every nerve in her body vibrate. Felicity watched in bewildered fascination as he slid the ring onto her finger. Since Felicity had slimmer fingers than Moira, it was a teeny bit loose. But it wasn't so obvious that anyone would really notice.

Feeling Oliver's gaze on her, she glanced up. Felicity's heart was now pounding in her chest as sensation radiated from where he still held her hand. She was startled when she felt another slight pressure over her chest and realized Connor was trying to suck on her locket again. Oliver took it out of his grasp but didn't release it right away. He was staring at it and then at her. As if she wasn't already overwhelmed, Connor placed his hand over Oliver's to try and get it back. Oliver towered over them, standing so close that they were almost right up against his chest. His eyes saying what he
wouldn't dare speak. Felicity could only imagine how they would look to anyone who walked in on
the moment.

Like a family, she thought wistfully. What could've been.

Fear and a stronger emotion she dare not name rose up in her something fierce, followed by a feeling
of vertigo. Felicity's control was slipping, and she abruptly took a step back. Oliver released his hold
on her as a flash of hurt crossed his face. Seconds later, his mask was back on.

"I'll bring Connor to Sara and then we can go," Felicity mumbled and practically bolted from the
room. She took a much-needed breath to clear her head.

After handing Connor off to Sara quickly—she could tell that Sara sensed something was off about
her—Felicity circled back to grab her purse and made her way downstairs. She kept trying to breathe
and get control over her emotions. When Raisa passed by, Felicity returned a greeting and smiled
politely. Oliver was in the foyer waiting for her with his hands in his pockets. Felicity wished she
could do the same, since her hands were still shaking ever so slightly.

"I'm ready," Felicity declared with more confidence than she felt. She grabbed her coat and followed
Oliver out the front door and to the town car in the driveway. John had the blindfold in his hand, and
she didn't object to him being the one to put it on her. While Felicity had been annoyed yesterday
that she'd have to wear it, it brought a sense of relief to her now. It would give her a chance to block
out everything on the way over while she got her head back in the game. The mission came first.
John helped her into the backseat, and she felt it dip when Oliver got in on the other side.

Although she was in darkness and had a brief reprieve from everything around her, it wasn't enough.
Felicity still felt Oliver's eyes on her the entire way there.

Chapter End Notes

What did you guys think? Let me know in the comments. Next chapter is titled
"H.I.V.E."
Chapter Notes

As always, thanks so much for your comments and kudos! Finally, this chapter you'll get an in-depth look at H.I.V.E. and see some of the dynamics. Happy reading!

The car pulled up in front of what would appear to a clueless observer as a dilapidated old factory on the outskirts of The Glades. Broken windows and falling pieces of wood were scattered about. What used to be a great expanse of lawn was nothing but dry and dead grass. No one would suspect the actual danger that lurked beneath such a façade.

"Are we here, or did we get stuck at another red light?" Felicity questioned. Her voice was steady, but the way she kept biting her lip told Oliver she was nervous.

He hadn't been able to take his eyes off of her for the entire ride. Too many thoughts plagued him about what had transpired less than an hour ago. Despite trying to convince himself that pretending to be engaged would be no big deal, Oliver quickly realized the fault in his logic—or the lack thereof. Nothing about his relationship with Felicity was simple, and he knew she was feeling anxious about it, too. Although her blindfold sex rant had been amusing and typical Felicity, it didn't change the fact that the insane attraction was still there between them. If anything, heading into danger only heightened it.

Oliver thought that holding Connor would've made him feel more fatherly in that moment, but it was just the opposite. Remembering exactly how their son had been conceived and picturing Felicity carrying his child inside of her filled him with a sense of pride and possessiveness so strong he nearly reached for her then. Unfortunately, that wasn't their relationship anymore and so he held himself back. Oliver's heated reply was nothing more than a joke before he'd dismissed it. But still, the intense blush remaining in Felicity's cheeks told him she was just as affected.

The charged tension between them hadn't disappeared afterward, only shifted. The moment he'd slid his mother's ring on her finger while she held their son had proved that. Oliver had noticed the tremble in Felicity's hand as he attempted to mask his own. He couldn't even count the number of times he'd fantasized about such a moment, though it was under much better circumstances and involved a different ring entirely. Oliver would've thought living part of his fantasy would satisfy some of the longing, but it only increased it. As if he wasn't already losing it, watching his son take hold of the locket Oliver had given her and feeling his little hands over his own was almost his undoing. They were standing so close with Connor between them and, for a brief moment, all was right. The two most important people in the world stood before him, safe and protected, and he naively let himself believe that they were a family.

Oliver recognized the exact moment it became too much for Felicity. Her stunning, expressive blue eyes had gone from ardent to aghast before she swiftly pulled away from him. The loss was instant, and the deep ache he felt in his heart every minute of every day returned. Before he could torture himself over it, Oliver had reminded himself of the mission that lay ahead. They couldn't afford any more tension or awkwardness between them, and so he'd spent the drive to the compound burying all of his emotions. All that mattered now was planting the tech Felicity had given him and making sure
Darhk and the others believed he'd convinced her to give H.I.V.E. a chance.

"We're here," Oliver announced. He caught her hand just before she could remove the blindfold. Felicity took a sharp breath at the contact just as a jolt of heat ran through his own body. "You can't take it off until we're inside."

"Oh."

"I'll guide you," he informed her.

"Right," Felicity mumbled. "Okay." She was trying to sound casual, but the shakiness of her voice exposed her struggle. Being unable to take in her surroundings was unnerving for her.

Oliver opened the door and instructed, "Slide over toward me."

Following the deep lull of his voice, Felicity did as she was told. She let out another soft exclamation when she bumped into Oliver. "Sorry."

"It's all right." Felicity was at the edge of the seat. Her hands felt around her, trying to gauge the opening and how to get her body through without banging her head or any other part of her body. Oliver gently took hold of her ankles and guided her legs out the door. Her skin was soft and smooth, as always, and he barely managed to stop his mind from calling up all the times he'd run his hands over her flesh so intimately. Felicity, likewise, was silent but there was a pink tinge to her cheeks.

"Give me your hands." Oliver clutched her small hands in his larger ones and guided Felicity out of the car. He was careful that she didn't hit her head on the top and brought her over to the side so that Diggle could shut the door.

Oliver guided her hands to his arm and told her to hold onto him. He led her toward the building and walked her up the stairs, all the while she clutched him tightly for support. Once they were inside, he reluctantly let her go and took the blindfold off of her. Felicity blinked a few times to let her eyes adjust. They were in a small, beaten-down office that led into an equally dilapidated hallway.

"The base is underground. The elevator is this way," Oliver explained and continued on. Felicity stayed close behind him while Diggle brought up the rear. After a series of twists and turns, they came to the elevator doors. They didn't look to be in much better shape with the rusted metal and chipped paint.

"Is it safe?" she questioned and shivered from the cool draft and overall feeling of creepiness. Felicity's eyes were moving nonstop as she warily took it all in.

Diggle nodded while Oliver pushed the up and down buttons numerous times. There was a special sequence to it that served as a passcode. The doors opened to reveal the bright, shiny, and state-of-the-art interior. There were a bunch of buttons inside. Although they were numbered, there were also strange symbols next to them that Felicity couldn't decipher as she squinted at them curiously.

Oliver put his hand against the scanning screen above the numbers. Once his identity was confirmed, he pushed the number seven. "Hold on," he cautioned.

"Why?" she questioned just as it started to descend with a jolt. Instinctively, Felicity reached for Oliver's shoulder while her other hand gripped the wall behind her. "This is even faster than A.R.G.U.S.'s, and I always thought that one felt like the Tower of Terror."

Oliver caught Dig's eye, and the pair smirked in amusement at her reaction before glancing straight
ahead. The doors opened to reveal a large, dark steel hallway with an arch of blue lights built into the walls and ceiling spanning every ten feet or so. The floor was made of black linoleum with honeycomb shapes embedded into it.

"A little on the nose, isn't it?" Felicity murmured.

"Darhk's office is this way," Oliver instructed and offered his hand once again.

Felicity paused for a moment before taking it. There were prying eyes all over the compound, meaning they had to play their parts every second. And right now, her main role was to be Oliver's doting, genius fiancée—which just so happened to require more touching.

"You sure you're ready for this?" he whispered to her. Despite knowing that this was coming, Felicity appeared somewhat jittery. He gave her hand a comforting squeeze.

Finally, she nodded and replied, "Lead the way."

"I've got to go check in. I'll catch up with you both later," Diggle stated, giving Oliver a meaningful stare, before heading in the opposite direction. It was his job to take out the security feed in the mainframe, so Oliver could sneak in there later undetected.

Afterward, Oliver led Felicity down a series of corridors. The farther they walked, the more crowded the halls became. He nodded to a few people, who then proceeded to stare at Felicity in curiosity. The pair didn't stop until they reached a wide, high-ceilinged room. The lights hanging overhead were also in the shape of a honeycomb. The far walls were lined with various TV screens, and desks with computers were situated underneath. There was a long, rectangular table in the center of the room and a seating area with couches near the staircase on the left. A few people stood above on a small platform. They'd been speaking quietly until noticing the couple's arrival. The others in the room didn't stop their tasks completely, but they did bear the same inquisitive expressions.

Off to the side on the right, there was a dark wall of glass with a door in it. Toward the top was yet another honeycomb symbol, which made Felicity frown.

"Is something wrong?" Oliver murmured to her.

"No. I'm just trying to figure out if my father has some kind of weird obsession with bees I never knew about or if all the symbols are just organizational ego," she quipped.

The corner of his mouth twitched. "It's the latter. This is the command center, and that's Darhk's office. Hence all of the obnoxious decorating," he whispered conspiratorially. Oliver checked his watch. "We're a little early, though."

"We aren't going to knock?" she questioned when Oliver led her over to the couches.

"He'll come out when he's ready. If the door is closed, he doesn't want to be disturbed."

They sat side by side in silence for a few minutes. After taking in the entire room, Felicity quietly said, "When I was a kid, my father would disappear into the garage to work. My mom used to always tell me not to bother him then, too, when he was doing his projects. Of course, since I hated mysteries, I would sneak in there anyway to see what he was building. He always let me stay and help. Eventually he moved most of his things into the living room, much to my mother's annoyance, and we would work on the computers there together."

"Sounds like fun," he commented.
"It was. I loved every minute of it." She added nostalgically, "It's one of the few good memories I have of him."

"Then you should hold on to it."

"I'm not sure I can." Felicity glanced around the room again. "After all of this, so much of what I thought I knew is tainted now…"

Oliver hated seeing the somber look on Felicity's face. He still remembered all of the talks they'd had about her father when they were friends and then started dating. So many of her insecurities were due to being abandoned by that bastard as a child. The times he had to break through those walls to reach her heart were countless. And now he found himself having to do it all over again because of the situation Darhk had put them in. Oliver knew all too well how the truth could wreak havoc on one's mind. Felicity had had even less time than him to process it all.

"I understand," Oliver murmured. "My father was no saint either. He was a part of this, too." He saw movement out of the corner of his eye, along with the other curious stares in the room. Oliver knew it was time he and Felicity start acting like the couple they were pretending to be if this was going to work. He raised his hand to Felicity's cheek, and her breath caught. Her eyes closed for a few seconds before reopening. A combination of shock and longing reflected back at him.

Oliver leaned in so that his mouth grazed her ear. He felt her shiver against him and ignored his own goose bumps that had formed from her reaction. "We're being watched," he whispered.

Felicity stiffened before recovering quickly. She placed one hand on his chest and the other over his wrist. "Who?" She drew back enough to brush her nose against his. It was affectionate and unexpected and sent a jolt of heat through Oliver. This is all part of the plan, he reminded himself. She's just playing along.

"Your father and Anatoly are headed this way. Just follow my lead," Oliver told her and rubbed his thumb along her cheek.

"Okay…" Her voice quavered.

"I know this is hard but if anyone can pull this off, it's you, sweetheart," Oliver whispered, hoping to put her at ease. He was going to leave it at that but couldn't resist. Their closeness and hands on each other were making it hard to think straight, and he allowed himself one moment of weakness. He kissed her cheek, lingering there for a second, and then pulled away.

Oliver cleared his throat. "Damien. Anatoly," he greeted the men standing only several feet away.

Darhk grinned, glancing between them, pleased. "We didn't mean to interrupt."

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting your new friend, Oliver," Anatoly spoke up. He was confused but intrigued as he eyed Felicity.

Oliver stood and drew Felicity into his side before walking over to the pair. "Anatoly, I'd like to introduce you to my fiancée, Felicity Smoak."

Anatoly's eyebrows were nearly to his hairline. "Fiancée?" he repeated in his thick Russian accent.

"Yes. Felicity, this is Anatoly."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Felicity said and held out her hand.
His curiosity appearing to morph to suspicion, the older man frowned as he shook her hand. "Have we met before? You look very familiar."

"I don't believe so," Felicity lied easily. She smiled pleasantly as Anatoly struggled to place her. Her glasses and time were working against his memory of their encounter in Moscow.

"Felicity is also Malcolm's stepdaughter," Oliver added for good measure. He could already see the wheels turning in Anatoly's head as he assessed whether Felicity was a new threat. The Pakhan did not like to be kept out of the loop on such things. As predicted, tying Felicity to Malcolm gave her another layer of protection.

"Well then, congratulations, my boy," Anatoly declared, seeming to dismiss his sudden case of déjà vu. "We should have a drink to toast." Despite his smile, Anatoly's underlying message was clear. He wanted to have a talk with Oliver in private about this new development. No doubt he wanted to know why his "nephew" had kept such an important detail from him.

"Of course."

"By all means, take that drink now if you want," Darhk encouraged. "I have some business to attend to with Ms. Smoak anyway."

"Is there a new development in our operation that I'm not aware of?" Anatoly casually inquired.

"Nothing to worry about, my friend," Darhk said and patted him on the back. "You'll find out soon enough at the council meeting later today." He motioned to his office. "Shall we, Ms. Smoak?"

"Yes. I've been looking forward to our meeting all week," she commented, earning an amused smirk from her father. She then turned to Oliver and gave him a beaming smile. "I'll meet up with you later, honey." Standing on her tiptoes, Felicity quickly kissed his cheek to give their audience the full effect.

Oliver gave her an encouraging squeeze and watched as Felicity disappeared into Darhk's office. As he closed the door, Darhk sent Oliver a nod of approval. Swallowing the bile rising in his throat at having to leave Felicity alone with that monster, Oliver managed a curt nod back. Felicity may be nervous, but she was strong. He had no doubt she could handle her father.

Meanwhile, Anatoly continued to stare skeptically between the two. Before his uncle could open his mouth, Oliver rushed out, "Anatoly, I'm going to have to take a rain check on that drink. I have an urgent matter to attend to. Please excuse me."

Before the older man could reply, Oliver turned on his heels and walked briskly out of the room. He'd probably pay for rushing out on Anatoly later, but it was necessary. His window of time to plant the tech was limited, and there wasn't a moment to waste.

Felicity walked into Darhk's office and was surprised to see it mostly bare aside from a few pieces of modern artwork. This is different, she thought, since her father's work space years ago had always been cluttered. Darhk's desk was made of glass and in pristine order. Only a small stack of papers and his laptop lay on the surface. The door clicked behind her, and Felicity tensed at the feeling of being trapped in the room.

"You look very pretty today," Darhk complimented, offering her a warm smile.

It threw Felicity off for a second. "Oh, um, thank you."
"Would you like anything to drink? I can have some coffee or tea brought to us—"

"I'm not thirsty," Felicity interrupted.

"Then have a seat. Please," he offered. To her surprise, instead of going to sit behind his desk, Darhk sat in the chair beside hers. Before she could say anything, he inquired, "How have you and Connor been settling in?"

Hearing her son's name on his lips was unnerving, but Felicity kept a straight face. "Okay. It was hard for him at first, but Oliver made him a nursery just like he had in Ivy Town. So he's more comfortable now."

"Good," he said, pleased. "And what about you?"

"I'm...adjusting," Felicity replied. "There's a lot to process." She couldn't sound like she was completely fine, which she wasn't, or else it would seem weird to Darhk. Doing a complete one-eighty would be suspicious.

"I apologize if you are feeling overwhelmed. It was never my intention. I'd hoped to ease you into this at some point, but unfortunately time isn't on our side."

"You still haven't told me what it is you want from me."

"I only want the chance to talk to you. It's been so long, honey, and I'm sure that you must have as many questions as I do."

Although it grated on her, Felicity didn't object to him calling her "honey" again. She had to pick and choose her battles wisely. "You've been watching me all these years. I doubt there isn't much you don't know."

"It's true I've been kept informed of your dealings, but no one but you knows what goes on inside that brilliant, beautiful head of yours. You've grown into quite the accomplished young woman," Darhk complimented. "I was so proud when I learned you got into MIT."

"You were?"

"Of course. I knew you were meant for great things when you started helping me build my computers. You were like a little sponge, absorbing everything I taught you. My favorite moment was always when those baby blues of yours would light up when you solved a problem."

"I, um, I was just talking about that with Oliver a few minutes ago. Those were some of my favorite memories, too." Felicity ignored the pang in her gut that he'd actually remembered.

Darhk smiled. "I'm glad. Do you plan to do the same with Connor?"

"He's only six months. We're more focused on shapes and sounds right now."

"It's never too early to stimulate their minds. They're like lumps of clay. You can mold them into anything you want."

"Unlike when they're older and are less easily manipulated," Felicity remarked, unable to resist.

"You're still angry about the past," he observed.

You're damn right I am, Felicity thought. "Is that surprising?" she said more calmly than she felt. "You left us while I was in the hospital recovering from anaphylactic shock."
"I'm sorry about that, honey. I told you what really happened—"

"But I didn't know that then. I was just a kid. Do you know how many times I heard Mom crying in her room after you served her with divorce papers? You might as well have sent them to me, too, because that's how it felt. I thought something was wrong with me. I thought if I couldn't make you love me, then how would anyone else be able to? And now seeing this"—she gestured to the command center outside—"I still wonder if you ever did."

"Felicity, I loved both you and your mother very much. But as I said, it wasn't safe—a concept that I believe you are very familiar with." When she frowned in confusion, he explained, "You did the same thing with your own son."

"I did not abandon my child."

"No, but you did abandon Oliver." Before she could protest, he continued, "You loved him, but it wasn't enough. You were logical in putting yourself first. You thought Oliver was a danger to you and Connor, and you got out of Starling just like I left Vegas to keep you safe."

Felicity shook her head, insisting, "It's not the same." You were the real threat, her mind screamed.

"You were faced with a devastating choice, but you made it. You are my daughter. We're cut from the same cloth, Felicity, because we always choose to listen to our minds over our hearts. You mentioned that you were supposed to be on the Gambit with Oliver, but you weren't. From what I know about the two of you, you loved him and wanted to be with him. So why didn't you go?" he challenged. She didn't get the chance to answer. "I'm willing to bet it's the same reason you took Connor and ran. You had doubts and, in your mind, the risk to your heart, your safety, or both was too great."

"I am not you," Felicity objected.

She fought to keep her emotions in check but internally they were in an uproar. A slight tremble overtook her body as the outrage and anguish battled within her. Darhk's assumption that she'd abandoned Oliver for selfish reasons pierced something deep inside of her, making her feel sick and hollow. This was exactly what she'd feared when talking with Darhk. That he'd bring up the past and throw it in her face as a means to try and manipulate her. And worst of all, it only took about ten minutes to already cloud her mind with fresh doubt.

"I know it will take time for you to fully understand the good intentions I had behind some of my more questionable decisions, but time isn't something we have right now. The truth is that an even greater threat is coming for us, Felicity. We've talked about this briefly, but Amanda Waller won't stop until she's taken out all of us. Which is why I need you to tell me about Rubicon? Is it operational?"

Felicity shifted in her seat and sat up straighter. "I've never heard of it."

"You are a terrible liar, Felicity," Darhk declared. He didn't seem angry but amused. "You have that same look on your face the time you stole my electronics collection to build your own super computer. I wanted to be furious, but you were so clever and determined. Progress always takes sacrifice in one form or another."

"I've about had my fill of sacrifice," Felicity replied.

"All the more reason to help me. Help us." He gestured outside. "Rubicon in the hands of someone like Waller, who is obsessed with her vendetta against me and my family, is dangerous. Oliver said
you finally understood that."

"I do. I could never be loyal to a woman who tried to kill me. Who tried to kill Oliver and did succeed in killing his parents. Who nearly tried to capture me and my son. But you're not exactly innocent either, and I'd like to know what exactly your intentions are with such a weapon."

He grinned like a Cheshire cat. "So you do know what it is."

The time to play coy was past. Steeling herself, Felicity admitted, "Yes. I helped to create it, in fact, which is why I think our little father/daughter reunion was such a priority." Her knowledge and involvement in Rubicon was her trump card, and she needed to gain the upper hand in this conversation.

"So did I," her father revealed. "I developed the initial code for it, but Waller took all the data with her and destroyed the rest when she left. I tried to start from scratch, but I never could get back what I lost." Her father's eyes darkened from the memory.

"What were you trying to develop with it?"

"A master key of sorts for computers. Something that could break through even the highest level encryptions. Amanda is far from tech savvy, which is another reason you were recruited by her. You're even smarter than me, Felicity, and she knew she'd need you to finish my work."

*Just like you need me now, too, to finish yours,* Felicity thought. There was something else she wasn't telling Darhk. It was Curtis who'd been tasked with developing Rubicon initially. When he'd struggled with it, since computers and coding weren't his primary skill, he'd come to Felicity. She remembered that night vividly. She remembered questioning if they should even be trying to develop such tech.

Rubicon was a cyber weapon created in the event that a government/military system, particularly those relating to missiles and launch codes, was hacked and compromised. Rubicon was supposed to be a countermeasure that could override the infected system and stop it before any real damage could be done. The problem was that it could also be reverse engineered as a weapon against their own systems to infiltrate and corrupt commands.

Her worry then was what would happen if it fell into the wrong hands, and she'd been right considering Darhk was after it all these years. Waller still had no idea that Felicity had worked on Rubicon. Either she didn't trust Felicity not to someday take it to Darhk or she feared that Felicity would be one of the few who could destroy it.

"What do you want with Rubicon?" Felicity repeated. "Access to weapons?"

"Weapons I've got thanks to my associates on the council and our raids on the A.R.G.U.S. bases. What I want is information. Knowledge is power, and I'll be able to learn whatever I want with Rubicon without risking more of my men. I'll always be one step ahead of everyone, and I can take out Amanda once and for all. H.I.V.E will finally be able to flourish...it'll be unstoppable."

The crazed, power hungry look in Darhk's icy blue eyes put her on edge. Felicity wanted to shout that he could take his evil plan and shove it. That she preferred the years of not knowing who or what he was to knowing the devastating truth now. It turned out those years she'd thought he'd abandoned her were actually blessing in disguise. Instead, Felicity bit her lip to keep her recriminations locked inside. She couldn't show him how much she despised him. She couldn't make him angry when so much was at stake and everyone she loved was at his mercy.
Finally, Darhk remembered himself and smiled at her. The look in his eyes was still frenzied, but his expression was affectionate. He was trying to lull her into a false sense of security yet again. "Surely now you can see, honey, how important this is for our family."

"I see a lot of things more clearly now," Felicity murmured.

"Then I hope you can see the bright future ahead," Darhk said.

"You speak as if I've already agreed."

"Haven't you? Your son, my grandson, is in danger. Are you not going to do everything in your power to keep him safe?"

Felicity bristled like a mama grizzly being poked with a stick, which was essentially what Darhk was doing to her. Her hands tightened to fists in her lap. Her stare was hard. "If you are trying to seal the deal, then you should know that using my son as a bargaining chip is not the way to do it."

"Whether you like it or not, Felicity, he's a part of this family and this world. I would hate to see anything happen to him."

Her blood ran cold but her eyes blazed. "You better not be threatening him." She barely recognized her own voice. It was low and dangerous. The kind of tone Oliver got when he was in protective mode. He'd probably be proud if he could hear her now.

"Of course I'm not. You and Connor are my own blood. I would never do anything to harm either of you," Darhk assured her. Then his eyes narrowed, and his next words came out steady but severe, "Oliver, on the other hand, is always facing danger. In our line of work, you never know when a situation can go belly-up."

Felicity's heart faltered as her nails dug into the palm of her hands. The not-so-veiled threat hung heavy in the air between them. "Oliver and I aren't together anymore," she tried to brush it off.

"That may be true, but a love like that never dies. It's why you never sold him out to A.R.G.U.S. when you found out the truth, even if it meant saving yourself. It's why you keep him at arm's length now, even though every look I've seen between the two of you says otherwise. And who can blame you? He was your first love and now the father of your child," Darhk remarked. "Naturally, you would do anything you could to protect him, too."

"Oliver is strong and smart and brave all on his own," she declared with a fierceness to rival his underlying cruelty.

"But not invincible," he reminded her.

"Is this how you repay his loyalty to you?" Felicity challenged. "By threatening his life?" How could she be related to such a monster? How had Darhk been able to fool both her and her mother for years about the evil lying beneath the brilliant yet mundane exterior that was Noah Smoak?

Darhk chuckled but there was no humor in it. "Loyalty is a fickle thing. It's not given on a whim. It belongs to whoever and whatever it is you love the most. For Oliver, that's you. And based on the blistering and slightly panicked look you're giving me right now, I'd say that he means the same to you. You're my daughter and I love you, but I'm no fool. We all have a mission to complete here, Felicity."

She swallowed the bile rising in her throat. Darhk was trying to intimidate her with his power and influence, but she refused to let him get away with such threats. Despite his hubris, Darhk needed her
more than she needed him.

"If you truly know what Oliver is to me, then it would be foolish to threaten his life. I've already lost him twice because of you." Her voice was steady, assertive. "You are wrong that he is not blood. His blood also runs in Connor's veins, and I will not let you take my baby's father from him. I will help you fight against Waller, because I recognize her as a real threat. But if you harm any member of my family, Oliver included, you lose me. And after I'm done with Waller, I will make it my personal mission to burn your entire world to ashes. Do we have an understanding, Dad?"

Darhk stared at her for a long moment. There was a combination of emotions in his eyes: surprise, anger, concern but, most importantly, respect. When Felicity refused to be the first to look away, he admiringly remarked, "You really are my daughter, aren't you? I've always believed there are people in this world, Felicity, who deal only in extremes. And that it'd be naïve to think that anything but extreme measures would stop them. Sometimes the world requires us to be bold, no matter what the personal cost."

A tiny part of Felicity had hoped that maybe Darhk was lying about Waller's involvement in H.I.V.E. Now she knew for sure it was true. "Waller said something similar once."

"She learned it from me."

"The lesson clearly stuck with me as well," Felicity asserted.

Darhk smirked in satisfaction. "Well, now that we're on the same page, let me show you around. There's a lot you need to be caught up on."

_July 25, 2007_

_It had been a half hour since the ceremony concluded and the endless photos were taken. Every time Felicity blinked, she continued to see spots in front of her eyes. Tonight was the big event that the Queens had organized to honor her and Oliver for their courageous efforts during the QC hostage crisis. Some of the most important people in the city had been invited, including the mayor. He said a few words during the ceremony, which was followed by Robert Queen's big speech. His journey to the podium on crutches was the perfect photo-op for the media to generate interest and sympathy. Moira had been the one to hand them their plaques. Then the press had swarmed the small, makeshift stage and Felicity had yet to have a relaxing moment since."

_It was mostly Oliver who'd helped her stay in control of her nerves. As promised, he'd sat next to her throughout the entire ceremony and had taken a spot beside her for pictures afterward. They held their plaques between them while being sandwiched between his parents. Then came a few photos with the mayor, her mother and Malcolm, and some other important people. Oliver never gave up his place beside her. His arm around her shoulders, which was necessary for the photos, and the subtle squeezes he gave her were both comforting and electrifying. So many eyes were on them that Felicity thought for sure someone would've noticed the way her body reacted to his proximity or the way his eyes would linger on her for a few extra seconds. To say that Felicity was overwhelmed would be an understatement."

"Can I get a picture with you now, or do I have to wait in line?" Tommy asked, approaching her afterward.

_Felicity smiled and let her stepbrother pull her into a hug. "I'd definitely prefer you to the handsy mayor," she whispered, only half joking because she could've sworn she'd felt his hand drift over her butt as the photographer took the picture._
"Yeah, he's a creep. Want me to beat him up for you?" he quietly teased.

Felicity giggled and pretended to think about it. "Maybe later."

"Hey, guys," Sara greeted. The blonde smiled happily while sipping on a glass of champagne. When a waiter approached with a new platter of hors d'oeuvres, she reached out to take a couple.

"I see you're enjoying the free food and drink," Tommy commented.

"You bet I am," she replied and shoved a cocktail weenie in her mouth for good measure.

"Where's Laurel tonight?"

Felicity stiffened ever so slightly at the mention of Oliver's ex before relaxing. She wasn't going to let herself get worked up over that drama again, especially since she and Oliver had had a long talk about it. He and Laurel were finally done, and there was nothing for Felicity to feel guilty about. She had to remind herself of that.

"She said she had to work late at CNRI. Not that I think she'd want to be here even if she didn't have to. Did you hear she and Oliver are 'officially over' again?"

Tommy sipped his wine and tried to joke, "Nothing new about that." His smile didn't quite reach his eyes, though, and he fidgeted a bit.

Felicity was pulled from her observation when Sara asked to see her award. She showed them her plaque, and they commented on how official it looked. Tommy even made a joke about how it weighed half as much as Felicity. Oliver joined them moments later, and Felicity actively had to prevent a smile from overtaking her face. He stood across from her between Tommy and Sara, keeping a respectable distance.

As the trio talked about another attendee that Felicity didn't know, her eyes scanned the room. Felicity had never been to such an elaborate, formal event before. It was held in the lobby of the QC building, which had more than enough space to accommodate the caterers, bartenders, and guests. The decorations were minimal but elegant. The women sparkled in their dresses and jewels, while the men looked stately and handsome in their expensive suits.

Her eyes scanned the crowd and took in the sea of unfamiliar faces. Unfortunately for Felicity, it was impossible for her to blend in with them tonight. Everyone was constantly turning to get a look at her or coming up and introducing themselves. It was very surreal. Her mother, of course, was loving it and talking to anyone and everyone while gushing about her brave daughter. Felicity could hear her bubbly laugh from several feet away.

Moira Queen was the exact opposite. Although she obviously thrived in this setting, she appeared more regal and subdued as she spoke pleasantly with the guests. Thea was by her side, who couldn't look more bored. Felicity smiled to herself, understanding exactly how the young girl felt. At one point, the Queen matriarch caught sight of Felicity and studied her curiously. They'd exchanged only minimal pleasantries before the start of the ceremony. Despite Oliver trying to strike up a conversation between them, it was mostly Robert who'd made small talk. As she'd told Oliver, his mother didn't seem to care for her all that much. Felicity tried not to squirm under the older woman's intent gaze now and breathed a sigh of relief when she finally looked away.

"You okay?" Oliver questioned.

Felicity nearly jumped out of her skin from how close he sounded. It was then that she realized it was just the two of them. "Where did Tommy and Sara go?" She'd been so distracted by Moira's
probing stare that she hadn't even noticed they'd left.

"They needed a refill on their drinks." He added, "You probably didn't hear, but Tommy wanted to know if you'll be crashing at the loft tonight."

"I didn't bring a change of clothes." The heated look he gave her clearly said that she wouldn't need them if she did stay over. Felicity had to glance down to hide her blush. "I don't know. What if we get caught?"

"We won't."

"What if he hears something?" she questioned, mortified at the mere thought of such a scenario. Every time she'd been at the loft this week with Oliver, Tommy usually wasn't home. Lucky for them, her stepbrother had a very active dating life.

"We'll be quiet."

"Easier said than done," Felicity muttered, remembering the way Oliver had her chanting his name just the other night when his head had been buried between her thighs. She'd been so wrapped up in all the new sensations he was pulling from her body that she didn't even realize how loud she'd gotten.

Oliver smirked. He was probably thinking about it, too. "Or I can come over to the mansion," he murmured. "Either way, I need to be with you tonight—even if all we do is cuddle." He gave her a teasing smile.

Being together as a couple had opened up a whole new world for them, and Felicity knew she'd never been happier. She never would've pegged Oliver Queen for the cuddling type either. But it turned out that he was a very attentive and affectionate boyfriend. He'd made good on his promise to show her how much he cared every day. They got coffee together each morning and had lunch each afternoon—though that ritual wasn't anything new so nobody was really suspicious about them spending time together. The pair also texted throughout the day. Sometimes they were super flirty and other times they'd be encouraging each other as they faced a tough day or new assignments in their prospective internships. Oliver, especially, was still very much trying to figure out what his niche was in the company.

Nights were different and totally theirs. They'd go to O'Connor's for dinner or take walks in the park. Occasionally, they'd make plans with Tommy and Sara. While they did want to spend time with their friends, Oliver and Felicity also knew they couldn't be spotted around town always alone together. They had to vary it. The nights they couldn't meet up at all, they'd make sure to talk on the phone before bed. Felicity loved hearing Oliver's voice. It soothed her when she had to sleep alone.

"Well, if all you want to do is cuddle, that can be arranged," she jokingly murmured. "My toes get awfully cold at night without you."

He chuckled quietly. "You know how earlier I said you look pretty in that dress?" Oliver glanced around the room as he spoke, obviously trying not to let his eyes so blatantly linger on her. They were in a less crowded part of the lobby but since this event was all about honoring them, nothing they did went unnoticed.

"Yes." Her skin was tingling everywhere from the sultry tone his voice had taken on.

"I lied." His voice dropped even lower. "You look gorgeous, sweetheart."

Goose bumps broke out across Felicity's skin. She never thought she'd be the type to like such a
sappy, romantic endearment. But it didn't sound sappy when Oliver said it. The first time he'd said it had been so tender. Then the second time, when they were making love, it had been so profound that she came apart within seconds. Every time Oliver said it to her since then, in the soft and affectionate tone he only ever used with her, it melted her insides.

He was still looking away from her, pretending to eye the crowd. "And if it weren't for your one rule about QC and all these people here right now, I would've already dragged you to one of the elevators so we could find an empty office, and I could show you just how much I admire you in that dress. I guarantee I'd warm up more than just your toes."

Felicity's fingers tightened on her plaque as a surge of heat shot straight to her core. Her boyfriend—she still got giddy when she thought about that fact—sure knew how to get her worked up into a frenzy. She suddenly cursed her own rule about them not fooling around at all at QC. It was where they worked and filled with way too many gossiping employees that could catch them at any time. But two could play that game.

She bit her lip and leaned closer to his ear, careful not to touch him so they would look like nothing more than two friends trying to have a conversation over the loud chatter in the room. "You can warm me up at the mansion tonight. I don't want to have to be that quiet." She heard his low growl and was about to saunter away when another voice interrupted.

"You two make quite the team." The pair startled at the sight of Malcolm. He stood before them in a crisp black suit and bow tie. There was a glass of champagne in his hand, and he took a sip all the while never losing his pleasant grin. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

Oliver was the first to recover. "It's no interruption at all. Felicity was just telling me how the AC in here has been bothering her all night."

"Well then, Oliver, I hope you offered the girl your jacket," Malcolm suggested. "If she's cold, it's the gentlemanly thing to do."

"Oh, that's okay," Felicity tried to say. "It's not that bad."

"No, here." Knowing Malcolm wouldn't let it drop, Oliver slid off his jacket and put it on Felicity's shoulders. She was engulfed by the much larger material, her nostrils filling with the delicious scent of him.

"Thank you," Felicity politely murmured. With his jacket off, she had a full view of Oliver's suspenders underneath. She didn't know how he could look even sexier and more debonair in his formal wear, but he did. If not for Malcolm and the crowd, she just might've broken her rule and pulled Oliver by the suspenders into an empty office to have her way with him. Felicity took a deep breath to stave off a blush from her heated thoughts.

"As I was saying, you two make quite the team. You must really trust each other to work so well together in an emergency situation like the hostage crisis. Tommy adores you, Felicity, but I must say I was surprised to learn you and Oliver had gotten so close." He took another sip of his champagne.

Felicity didn't know why, but she got an odd feeling that Malcolm's comments weren't as nonchalant as he was making them out to be. Then again, he'd always made her uneasy to some degree. She casually replied, "Actually, the first time I met Oliver was at QC. His computer was broken, and I helped him with it. I guess you could say we've been good friends ever since."

"So I guess it's like you've got two older brothers now, huh?" There was that subtle, probing look
Hiding the repulsion at Oliver being referred to as her "older brother" took a concerted effort on Felicity's part. "I'm grateful for everyone I've met since moving to Starling," she neutrally replied.

"That's good. Hopefully, you'll stay in touch after you return to MIT. The summer will be over, and you'll be saying good-bye before you know it."

"It wouldn't be good-bye forever, since Felicity is family now," Oliver pointed out. His statement made her heart skip a beat, but her elation didn't last long. He sounded calm, but Felicity noticed the tension in Oliver's shoulders. Something about what Malcolm said had bothered him. She wanted so badly to take his hand but held back.

Malcolm smirked and nodded his head in agreement. "Indeed, she is." He finished off his champagne and handed the glass to a passing waiter. "If you'll excuse me, I see a former colleague I must speak with. Congratulations again, you two."

"Thank you," Felicity said while Oliver was strangely quiet. When Malcolm was out of earshot, she whispered, "Hey, you okay?"

"Um, yeah. He...nevermind. It's not important." He managed a smile and said, "I just really want to kiss you right now."

"I want to kiss you, too. Later," she promised with a flirty wink. Felicity felt relieved when his smile widened, looking more at ease. Mission accomplished. Let Oliver think about that for the rest of the night.

If looks could kill, then Felicity was sure that she'd have at least two sets of holes in the back of her skull. She could feel the burning stares from the two hackers that her father employed behind her. One was a woman who looked almost similar to Felicity. She had long blond hair and large black glasses, although her personality was more abrasive. She instantly came off as a defensive know-it-all when Darhk introduced them. Her name was Brie Larvan, but her codename was the Bug-Eyed Bandit. She'd once worked for a company called Mercury labs where she was a mechanical engineer. The woman had a weird obsession with bees, which made her involvement in H.I.V.E. easy to understand.

The other man was named James Gryffon. He went by the codename The Calculator. He was a quiet but cunning sort of person. James was very particular about his workstation and nearly had a fit when Darhk said that Felicity would need to use it to do some work for him. Everything had its place and if something shifted even the tiniest bit, he'd spring forward to fix it. Felicity stuck to Brie's system more often as she worked.

Darhk wanted Felicity to show Brie and James how to infiltrate A.R.G.U.S.'s internal network. They'd only been able to get inside a few times for a couple of minutes before being booted out. Felicity bit back a smile, knowing that it was the advanced security system she'd designed giving them so much trouble. It was over an hour ago that Darhk had given her the brief tour of H.I.V.E. before bringing her back to the command center. Felicity thought Oliver was supposed to meet back up with them, but he never showed. Darhk's warning earlier filled her with worry, and Felicity had to remind herself that he wouldn't do anything to harm Oliver right now. He'd lose any leverage he had over her if he did try something so soon. Oliver must've been held up planting the tech she needed in the mainframe and hoped that he hadn't run into too much trouble.

When Felicity had informed Darhk that she would attempt to get into the A.R.G.U.S. system but
wouldn’t teach his hackers how, there had been major protests from both Brie and James. She’d
given Darhk a stern look, letting him know that she wasn’t going to freely share her skills with his
people. This was a game of power and strategy, and this was the most valuable hand that Felicity had
to play. Darhk had agreed, and Brie and James were ordered to give her some time and space at the
workstation. Hence, the murderous looks they kept sending her as they anxiously hovered nearby.

Felicity did end up getting into the A.R.G.U.S. network, but she wasn’t looking for Rubicon like
Darhk wanted. She kept one window up to make it look like she was but with the other she
discretely started breaking down H.I.V.E.’s archive encryption to find what she needed. She checked
the system again and breathed a sigh of relief when the tech Oliver implanted was active. Darhk’s
hackers would never even know it was there unless they were actively looking for it. Even then,
Felicity expertly covered her tracks.

When she finally found what she was searching for, Felicity resisted the urge to pump her fist up in
excitement. Quickly, she gathered what she needed and saved it remotely so she could access it later
at the mansion from her own computer. She returned to the A.R.G.U.S. interface afterward and
poked around a bit. She had to give Darhk something to appease him, which made her insides churn.
Is this how Oliver felt when he’d been threatened? Did he constantly worry that giving none or the
wrong kind of information could hurt the ones he loved? Did he feel guilty turning over something,
no matter how minor, that could inevitably get people killed?

Felicity knew the answer was yes. He’d said as much to her about a week ago. He’d meticulously
gone through the information he’d gotten from her to find the most useful intel with the least amount
of causalities. That was exactly what Felicity had to do now. A small tremor ran through her fingers
as she hesitated for a moment.

"Everything all right?" came a soft but deep, familiar voice behind her.

Some of the tension left Felicity's body as Oliver approached, and she involuntarily breathed a sigh
of relief. She looked up at him, studying his handsome and pensive face. Thankfully, he looked
completely fine and unharmed. His eyes did the same, making sure that she was okay in the time
they’d been separated.

Felicity cleared her throat. "Um, yes…" Her fingers faltered over the keys again.

Oliver glanced between her and the screen. "You've got that crease between your eyebrows. What's
going on?" he knowingly questioned.

Felicity instantly reached up to smooth her furrowed brow, but it was really no use. She spoke barely
above a whisper, sensing Brie and James inching closer. "Darhk expects me to give him something."
She stared solemnly at the screen. Since she hadn't been a part of A.R.G.U.S. in over a year, it was
difficult to judge what information she could give to him without there being devastating
repercussions.

"Does she need some help?" Brie smugly called from her spot several feet away. "If she can't get in
—"

"She's got it." Oliver added unabashedly. "She's the best." He then put his hand on Felicity's
shoulder and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Look up the code word 'Bastille.'"

"Why?"

"Because it's a false trail to Rubicon," he murmured. "Lyla told Dig about it just the other day.
They'll be ready at that facility if H.I.V.E. makes a move."
"But won't—"

"Trust me," Oliver said and gave her a meaningful look.

Nodding, Felicity did as he said. She got the information and put it on a USB drive before pushing away from the workstation.

"What have you got?" Brie demanded, no longer able to stay away. James was right beside her.

"I have a lead on Rubicon," Felicity told them. "I need to give this to Darhk."

"I can do that."

James reached for it, but Felicity pulled it away. "No, I'll give it to him," she insisted, not missing the annoyed glances shared between James and Brie, and turned to Oliver. "Where is he?"

"There is a council meeting I have to attend in several minutes. He'll be there, too," Oliver stated. "It's why I came to get you."

"Okay, let's go." She reached for Oliver's hand and grasped it tighter than was probably necessary, not missing the curious look he gave her afterward. Regardless, Oliver interlaced their fingers and led her out of the command center. "Was everything okay with Anatoly?"

"We didn't get a chance to speak. I told him I had some business to attend to. Is the device working?" he changed the subject, saying that last part softly under his breath.

"Yes," Felicity whispered. "It's working perfectly."

"Good," he mumbled, sounding relieved.

"Is there anything else I should know about this meeting?"

"Just keep your eyes and ears open," Oliver told her.

They entered another large, rectangular room. It had a long table in the center with one chair at the head and three on each side. Most of them were already filled, including Darhk's. Malcolm was seated beside him on the right. His shrewd gaze was on them instantly. TV screens also lined the walls. A crowd of about twenty people or so gathered at the opposite end. Most of the faces were unrecognizable to Felicity as she scanned them. She noticed John first and then tensed at the sight of Helena beside him. She still didn't care for the mouthy brunette.

Felicity froze entirely when she recognized another pretty yet ruthless face in the crowd. Isabel Rochev stood on the opposite side, staring daggers as she took in Felicity and Oliver's joined hands. While Anatoly had seemed to be battling a sense of déjà vu earlier, it was obvious that Isabel recognized Felicity instantly. This was sure to be interesting.

"How many girlfriends do you have exactly?" Felicity muttered sarcastically under her breath.

Oliver at least had the decency to look uncomfortable as he brought her over to John. A nod of understanding passed between the two men. "Stay here with Dig," Oliver instructed. "The meeting shouldn't be longer than about twenty minutes or so today." After a quick caress of her cheek, Oliver went to sit between Anatoly and Malcolm. The small but affectionate gesture between her and Oliver didn't go unnoticed. Another dark-haired man with a beard and an eye patch sitting on Darhk's left watched intently. He looked mean and dangerous, and Felicity almost took a step closer to John. She saw Chien Na Wei, also known as China White and the head of the Chinese Triad,
sitting on his other side. Frank Bertonelli was next to her on the end.

Finally, her gaze landed on Darhk. He appeared calm and almost regal as he sat at the head of the table in his black suit with his folded hands. He gave Felicity a subtle nod before calling the room to order.

"The Council of Seven is convened and the meeting may begin," Darhk announced. He turned to the man with the eye patch. "Slade, what is your progress?"

So that's Slade, she thought. Oliver did say he'd been on the council. She also didn't forget that this man had tried to kill Oliver years ago when he'd resisted joining H.I.V.E. Instead, Slade had inadvertently killed Mei's sister Shado, who'd taken the bullet to save Oliver. Felicity wondered if Oliver had told Mei this and filed the question away for later.

Each member of the council took a turn speaking. Their conversation was difficult to follow, since they used a lot of inside jargon and code words to talk about whatever their assignments were. Felicity did recognize the names of certain locations that were hotspots for criminal activity—Corto Maltese was one of them—and mysterious projects that were underway. Malcolm spoke the longest. It was evident that Darhk depended on him the most, since he'd been put in charge of so many operations. Felicity shouldn't have been surprised since it was Malcolm that he'd tasked with keeping an eye on her and her mother. A.R.G.U.S. was mentioned a few times, but it was nothing of consequence.

"Last but certainly not least. Oliver," Darhk called when the others had finished. "What can you report?"

The reason no one else had much to say about A.R.G.U.S., she realized, was because it was Oliver's primary responsibility. He spoke with confidence and authority about the intelligence his men had gathered about certain bases and transports that would be made in the coming weeks. He also mentioned the information that Felicity had found and passed the USB toward him. Darhk shifted his eyes to Felicity, giving her an approving bob of his head.

"Very good," Darhk announced. "Anatoly, I want your men on this one."

"My men would, of course, be honored to be of service but they are still regrouping from the last mission you sent them on. There were heavier casualties sustained than expected," Anatoly stated. "We are in the process of recruiting to rebuild our numbers."

"Pull some of your men off of the smuggling ring, then. Their skills of deception will be more useful in this situation anyway."

"It would be bad for business if I did," Anatoly replied. "Perhaps Frank could lend some of his men for the job."

"My men are in the middle of helping me secure a deal I've been working toward for the last five years," Bertinelli declared. "The others are already spread out guarding our strongholds. I don't have any men to spare."

"Our Bratva strongholds are just as important as yours," Anatoly challenged.

"Damien has requested your services," he countered. "My organization has nothing to do with this. So don't think you're fooling anyone by trying to pass it off on us."

The two men argued back and forth before Darhk intervened. He ordered that the Bratva handle the situation and that the Triad would be the ones to assist. China White agreed with a straight face,
making it impossible to gauge her reaction to being dragged into such a task.

"Now that that's settled," Darhk said, "There is an announcement that I believe will end this council meeting on a more pleasant note. We have a brilliant new operative who will be a most valuable asset to the cyber division of our organization. Her name is Felicity Smoak. Felicity, will you step forward please."

Although she'd been anticipating this, Felicity still felt her nerves kick in. She left her spot beside John and went closer to the table, taking a few steadying breaths to center herself. Felicity wasn't as shy as she used to be in front of crowds, but this was much worse considering everyone in the room was some kind of dangerous criminal. Their probing stares were like unwanted caresses.

"In addition to being Malcolm's stepdaughter, she is also…" Darhk trailed off, pretending to catch himself. It was an innocent gesture that looked odd coming from a man who'd basically threatened her "fiancé" only a couple of hours ago. "Actually, Oliver, why don't you tell everyone?"

Felicity noticed the minute softening of Oliver's expression as he stood to join her. His voice also lost its previous sternness and shifted to a gentler tone. "Felicity is also my fiancée," Oliver announced and wrapped his arm around her waist, drawing her into his side. Felicity willingly clung to him. Despite the intense scrutiny from the others, his strong presence and protective hold helped ground her. She smiled up at him and tried to look like the happiest woman in the world standing next to the man she loved. Oliver did the same but was unable to completely hide the sadness she saw just below the surface.

There was a silent pause before soft applause broke out. Darhk stood while clapping his hands and offered them congratulations. After making sure that everyone knew to welcome Felicity into H.I.V.E., the council meeting ended. A few people approached them to offer well wishes while others just left without a word. Felicity would've preferred if Isabel had done the same instead of heading straight for them.

"Congratuations, Oliver," Isabel stated with a strained smile. Her pursed lips looked like she'd been sucking on a lemon. "Felicity, is it? You look awfully familiar. Have we met before?"

"I don't recall," Felicity answered.

"Have you ever been to Moscow?"

Yup, Isabel definitely remembered her. "Occasionally."

"Is that where the two of you first met?" She scrutinized them sharply.

"You could say that." Felicity purposely kept her answers vague, which she knew Isabel found irritating.

"Do you enjoy playing poker, Felicity? Perhaps you'd like to visit one of our casinos in Starling while you're in town." She smiled cattily. "You seem like the type who puts up a good bluff."

"Depends on the hand I've been dealt. Lucky for me, Oliver always knows how to read me," Felicity commented and beamed up at him.

"Always have, always will," he said. It wasn't the affectionate squeeze that took Felicity's breath away but the yearning in his piercing blue eyes. "Our two families were always close, so it worked out perfectly."

"How sweet." Isabel's tone made it sound like the opposite. "Welcome to H.I.V.E., Felicity."
Although you should know that marrying Oliver also makes you Bratva as well," Isabel remarked. "If you ever need any advice about settling into your duties as a woman in the brotherhood, let me know. It's not an easy life, and I would be happy to help with the transition. You wouldn't want to start off on the wrong foot, now would you?"

Oliver stiffened beside Felicity, his hold on her tightening. "We appreciate your concern, Isabel, but I've got her," he said with more force behind his words. "I will decide when and how she is introduced to the Bratva." He left no room for argument. "Excuse us."

He steered Felicity away from the vindictive brunette and told John to get the car. Helena was over to the side talking to her father, and Felicity was relieved when she kept her distance. There were only so many unpleasant and awkward encounters Felicity could handle in a day, and she was quickly approaching her limit.

"We're going back to the mansion, right?" she whispered to him.

"Yes, we've done our part for now."

Darhk and Malcolm were watching them several feet away. Her father's icy eyes honed in on her before shifting to Oliver—a silent reminder of his warning. Felicity didn't know it was possible, but her muscles clenched even tighter. She stared defiantly right back, reminding him of her own threat.

"Is everything okay?" Oliver murmured in her ear.

"Huh?"

"That crease is back and you're trembling."

"I am?" she replied, not even realizing that her body had begun to shake.

"If it's Isabel, you don't have to worry—"

"It's not her."

Oliver looked to Darhk, who was now engrossed in his conversation with Malcolm. He didn't say anything further, but he probably knew that her father was the source of her current anguish. His hand brushed gently against the curve of her spine. "Come on. Let's go."

Felicity didn't have to be told twice. The farther away she got from this wretched place and these horrible people, the clearer she would be able to think. She'd thought she could enter this world and keep her emotions locked away, but maybe it was a false confidence. Nothing was affecting her like she thought it would, and that scared Felicity more than she wanted to admit. She held tightly to Oliver, and he let her. Never once did he let go as he guided her safely out of the literal hive of death and destruction. He was the calm in the middle of her storm right now, and somehow that was the biggest surprise of them all.
March 22, 2014

With tired eyes and an aching head, Felicity checked her watch and was surprised to find it was well past midnight. She'd spent the latter part of the day at her new computer workstation in the hidden safe room located behind the bookcase in Oliver's study. The stairs led down into the steel and concrete fortified unit. The bare gray walls and dark linoleum floor didn't exactly give it a homey vibe, but it would get the job done in an emergency.

The square room was twenty feet in length and width. To the left by the stairs was a small carpeted seating area with two futons that could be made into beds. Another bunk bed could also be pulled down from the wall. Next to that was a small kitchen unit. A separate door led to a tiny bathroom. Along the opposite wall were storage units for supplies and weapons. The Queens had a very impressive gun collection, though that was no surprise considering his parents' involvement in shady organizations.

The farthest wall to the right was where all the security monitors were mounted and fed into the mansion's main security system. Beneath that was where Felicity's desk and row of computers were set up. The advantage of the safe room was that it had its own generator and protected Wi-Fi connection, so it wouldn't be easily detected or affected by anything that might happen in the house. Felicity, with the occasional help of Sara and John, had been working tirelessly the last couple of days to get her station up and running.

As soon as they'd gotten back from the H.I.V.E. headquarters, Felicity had remotely accessed the spyware she'd had Oliver plant in the mainframe earlier that day. She'd practically cheered out loud upon discovering it working successfully. Now she would have unlimited access to H.I.V.E.'s networks without Darhk or his drones being the wiser. With no time to waste, Felicity immediately accessed the information she'd stowed away on her private server and began to dig deeper for more dirt on Waller. She needed to know how much of Darhk's story was true, and it was impossible to do a thorough investigation with his goons breathing down her neck. Felicity required as much evidence as possible in order to get Mei and the team to trust her claims.

Like with any other intel mission, Felicity totally lost all concept of time and place while she was hacking. It was when her head had almost hit the desk that she realized she needed to quit for the night and get some rest. If only she could still drink copious amounts of coffee to boost her energy and stay awake. But it was probably for the best that she couldn't. If she showed up at the spa tomorrow with her eyes all red and bloodshot, her mother and Thea would surely think that something was wrong.

Felicity fully intended to collapse onto her bed without a second thought, but Connor's restless cries
brought her up short. Now that he had his nursery, he'd been pretty good recently about sleeping
through the night. Apparently, that couldn't last forever. She quickened her steps to get to him and
found Oliver already there. He was in pajama pants and a T-shirt with his hair looking slightly
disheveled. Connor must've woken him up, and he paced the length of the room with the baby in his
arms in an attempt to soothe him.

"Everything okay?" Felicity questioned when Connor's cries reached an ear-splitting pitch.

"Felicity, hey," Oliver said, the overwhelming relief evident in his voice. "I'm glad you're here. I
wasn't sure if I should come and get you. I didn't want to interrupt you if you were still working."

"I'm done for the night," she told him. "Is he all right?"

"I don't know what's wrong. He's been fed and changed. It was hard getting him to sleep at first, but
then he settled down. Now he won't stop crying no matter what I do."

"It could be nothing. Sometimes he just gets like that. Connor," Felicity called his name. She spoke
loudly but gently so he could hear her. "Connor, baby, what's the matter?"

At the sound of her voice, his head whipped in her direction. He squirmed in Oliver's arms and
reached for her. Oliver quickly obliged and let Felicity take him. She wrapped their son in her arms
and kept muttering soothing words while patting his back. It was a couple more minutes before he
finally started to quiet down.

Oliver watched in amazement as Connor calmed. His tiny hands clutched Felicity's shirt, and he
clung to her with his face tucked into her neck. Clearly, he'd been missing her. It was a feeling he
and his son shared, because that desperate ache for her was all too familiar to Oliver as well.

"Guess he just wanted his mom," Oliver commented.

Felicity kissed Connor as a wave of guilt hit her. Oliver and Sara had promised to care for him while
she worked, but Felicity still should've taken a break to check on him. It wasn't like the old days
when she could disappear into the cyber world for hours at a time. Even if she had been worried
about Darhk's threats and been determined in her hunt for information, she was a mom now before
anything else.

"I should've put him to bed like I always do," she mumbled regretfully.

Recognizing the worried crinkle between her brows, Oliver reassured her, "You had a lot to do
before tomorrow. It's okay if you needed some time to yourself, Felicity."

He watched as she pressed her lips to Connor's head and closed her eyes, not looking appeased in
the least. This was about more than the baby. Something was off about Felicity. Oliver had sensed it
the moment they'd been reunited after her talk with Darhk, and she'd been tense the entire way home.
When Felicity had wanted to get to work right away on finding the information they needed, Oliver
hadn't objected. Time was a luxury they didn't have, and it was important that Felicity be able to
focus on her part of their plan. Plus, he would never pass up a chance to spend more time with his
son.

While Felicity was working in the safe room, Oliver had been feeding Connor and discussing
security with Sara and Diggle for tomorrow. Donna had gone ahead and planned a girls’ day at the
spa, and it would be the first unsecured location that Felicity and Sara would be going to since their
discovery in Ivy Town. Oliver wanted to make sure they were safe and that whoever had sent those
men to attack them wouldn't get another opportunity to do it again. A small, inconspicuous security
detail led by Dig would be following them.

Sara, being a former cop, could easily protect Felicity while they were in the spa. Despite the seriousness of the situation, Sara seemed to be excited about getting out of the mansion and enjoying a day of pampering. Although Oliver's security would no longer prevent her from leaving, the only times Sara really ventured outside of the mansion was when she was helping Dig enact their plan. She was a loyal friend and a damn good fighter, and Oliver was thankful that Sara was sticking around. It also didn't hurt that she was familiar with Connor, so Oliver could ask her for advice while Felicity was busy. He was still learning his son's preferences and the meanings of his different noises. However, now that Felicity was trusting Oliver more with Connor, that meant Sara didn't have to babysit as often—not that she wasn't happy to do it, since she adored her nephew.

"Did you find what we need?" Oliver questioned after another moment of silence passed.

"Yes, I got more than I thought I would. I just hope it's enough to convince them. We really need Mei, Lyla, and the rest of the team on our side."

"I did my check-in with her on the phone the other day. She sounded different."

"Good different or bad different?"

"She sounded curious mostly. Wanted to know what we'd found out about Waller's involvement in H.I.V.E."

"Did you tell her about your parents?"

Oliver shook his head. "No. I was worried if I told her something like that without presenting her with the proof first, she'd think I have an ulterior agenda in helping them. I can't afford to have the team lose its trust in me or word to get back to Waller."

"If it's okay with you, I'll feel the situation out tomorrow when I show her the evidence and tell her then."

Nodding in agreement, he replied, "I'm okay with that. You've known her longer than me anyway."

"I just wish I didn't have to leave him again for most of the day tomorrow," Felicity muttered and continued to rub Connor's back. His breathing had evened out, and his eyes were getting heavy.

"During the day he seems okay with me, Sara, and even Raisa. I think it's at night he gets really restless without you."

Felicity felt her heart stutter at the longing in Oliver's tone. She didn't get the feeling he'd meant it as some kind of double meaning. He was staring at Connor while he said it, but she couldn't shake the emotions it stirred within her. When Oliver's eyes finally did meet hers, they were intense but somber.

"I'll keep him close in the morning before I leave. He's had the bottle mostly today, too, so he probably misses nursing. It's our special time together, and he needs that." Felicity needed it, too, but that went without saying.

"You're an amazing mom. You know that, right?"

Felicity felt her cheeks warm from the compliment. She attempted to joke, "I try."

Oliver remained serious, staring at her with a combination of awe and pride. "You are, Felicity. And
even if you can't be with Connor all the time, you're still taking care of him. It's why we're doing all of this—so he's safe." He knew how difficult it was for Felicity to step aside at times and accept help with their son, even when it was absolutely necessary. Oliver didn't want her to feel guilty when everything she was doing was actually to protect Connor in the long run.

"I know," she quietly sighed. It was too dangerous taking him from the mansion, and she couldn't risk anyone she might know spotting her with the baby. That would open up Pandora's Box and complicate their situation even more.

"Besides, separation anxiety is normal at this stage." She quirked an eyebrow at him. "I read it in the baby book."

Felicity let out a little laugh, grinning up at him. "I must say, I'm impressed you've become quite the bookworm."

"I do read occasionally. I, um"—he rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously—"might've read all the Harry Potter books in the time I was away. Well, it was mostly during my Bratva training," he amended.

Her eyes widened and she questioned in surprise, "You did? Why?"

"Because I knew they were your favorite books and I...I missed you," Oliver revealed. "Plus, I knew Diggle was going to kick my ass if I kept staring at your taped-up picture all day—although I outsmarted him and cleverly used it as a bookmark anyway."

Felicity felt like the breath had been knocked out of her. Oliver had been so tight-lipped when they were together about his time away. And when she'd thought he'd been using her in service to H.I.V.E., Felicity had convinced herself that all of his declarations and promises to her were nothing more than a means to an end. Now that she knew the truth about him, Felicity couldn't help but feel the full emotional effect of his admission. She was awed, touched, and even a little sad at the reminder of him having to endure such hardship alone.

She lightly cleared the lump that had formed in her throat and pointed out, "Did you like it? You were kind of like The Boy Who Lived."

"I did like it actually. Hermione also reminded me of you—genius intellect and brilliantly scary when challenged," he teased.

With an amused grin, Felicity retorted, "And now we're battling Voldemort. Who says life doesn't imitate art?"

Oliver chuckled along with her. Then he got serious again. "Speaking of Voldemort, what did Darhk say to upset you? And don't try to deny it, Felicity," he interjected before she could protest. "I know you, and that crinkle between your eyebrows never lies. Did he say something about Connor?"

Felicity wasn't easily rattled but if anything would leave her so badly shaken, it'd have to be something involving their son. Oliver had a similar reaction when Darhk had wanted them to bring the baby to the compound. He was usually a "good soldier," but he'd pushed back hard on that order.

Felicity hesitated, unsure of how much she wanted to tell him. She didn't want to lie, but she also felt like she was still trying to understand what had happened herself. Felicity didn't think she could get into Darhk's mind game of claiming how alike they were, though there was one piece of the conversation that Oliver needed to be aware of.

Finally, she explained, "My father gave me the whole spiel about being family and finding Rubicon
to keep us safe. At first I thought he was threatening Connor if I didn't cooperate”—she noticed Oliver tense and his eyes harden—"but it wasn't against him. The threat was…the threat was against you."

"Me?" He didn't seem all that surprised, which actually worried Felicity all the more.

"He said that you're not invincible and insinuated that something could happen to you if I didn't do what he wanted."

"Don't let him get to you. It's nothing I haven't heard before," Oliver said with a shrug in an attempt to placate her. The threat against him didn't bother him as much as the fact that Darhk was trying to manipulate Felicity through him. This was exactly what he'd been trying to protect her from. "Power through fear is how he operates."

"Oliver, he meant it," she stressed.

"Felicity, I already know to watch my back and be careful. I've got this handled, and I promise you and Connor will be safe while I get things set up on my end—"

"Oliver," Felicity said firmly. "I'm not worried about you protecting us. I'm worried about who's protecting you. Which is exactly why I told Darhk I'd burn his world to ashes if he even thought about taking action against you."

His chest constricted as he witnessed the fire in Felicity's eyes. He was so used to that fire being directed at him recently that being the cause of it now stunned him. "Well, that's an effective bluff," he replied, trying not to read too much into it.

"It wasn't a bluff," she declared. "Darhk tried to say that you aren't part of this family, because you're not blood but he's wrong." She stepped forward so they were toe to toe. She then took hold of his hand and placed it on Connor's back, covering it with her own. "We made this family, and Connor is our son. He needs us both, which means whatever happens to you, it happens to me."

"Felicity…" he trailed off, not knowing what to say. Not knowing if he could say anything.

"I need you to remember that as we move forward with everything, because it's in your nature to sacrifice yourself for the ones you love. And as I told Darhk, I've had about enough of that. I can't lose you again…I won't." She squeezed his hand and held his gaze, making sure he understood exactly what she was saying. "Don't fight to die, Oliver…fight to live. Can you do that for me? For us?"

Oliver felt like his entire world had tilted as his heart pounded in his chest. Felicity had told him before that she needed to be able to trust him and, in that moment, he realized it was about more than just telling her the truth. For the last six years, Oliver felt as if he'd been biding his time on this earth. Always making decisions that would ultimately protect others but not himself. For he and Felicity to move forward, for him to truly be the father that Connor deserved, Oliver had to embrace the hope he'd had to save them and fight just as hard for himself.

With his free hand, Oliver gently took hold of Felicity's arm. He drew her all the way against him so their foreheads touched and Connor was pressed between them. It wasn't hard to get lost in her beautiful, determined blue eyes. His voice was thick with emotion as he made good on his promise to be honest with her. "You know if it's you asking, I'll do it."

A spa day was probably the best idea her mother had ever had. Felicity, accompanied by Sara with Dig's team following at a distance, had met up with her mother, Thea, and Mei at the Evergreen Day
Spa. Although she'd been intent on her mission and was running through what she needed to say to Mei, Felicity had quickly realized that it could all wait. It wasn't like she'd be able to have a private discussion with Mei and show her the evidence with her mother and Thea around. So, Felicity had settled in for the time being and just enjoyed some much-needed relaxation.

The amazing massage she'd gotten was almost enough to have Felicity moaning as the masseur worked out all of the stress-induced knots in her back. The guy had really strong, nimble hands, and Felicity tried not to fantasize that they were Oliver's touching her instead. Despite the dangerous situation they were in and the issues that still needed to be worked out between them, Felicity couldn't help feeling like her seventeen-year-old self all over again. She just couldn't get Oliver out of her head, and her body was highly aware of him whenever they were in the same room. Seeing him interact with their son, especially, made Felicity's heart swell and the tender sentiments she'd kept buried soar to the surface. In fact, Oliver was probably playing with Connor this very minute.

After their massages, the five of them spent some time in the "tranquility room." There was a little fountain and ceramic, heated lounges they could lie back on as soft music played in the background. The warmth was pure heaven, and Felicity actually fell asleep for a bit. When she awoke, the others were sipping champagne and Sara was telling them about her "trip to Europe." Her friend provided even more detail than Felicity had expected. Mei actually looked impressed, since she was fully aware that the story was a cover. That was followed by manicures, pedicures, and a nice lunch in the spa's bistro.

By the end of the day, both Felicity's mind and body felt completely at ease. It was nice to forget about her problems and act like a normal human being enjoying the company of her family and friends. The welcomed reprieve, unfortunately, didn't last long. When Donna had asked if she wanted to go shopping with her afterward, Felicity declined and said she'd already promised to go over to the loft so Mei could show her the new design and she could see Tommy. At her mother's pout, Felicity had promised they'd go shopping another time. Thea, thankfully, had told Donna she would go with her today.

Sara, knowing that Felicity needed to talk to Mei alone, had decided to pay her father a visit. She wasn't thrilled that a couple of John's men would be following her—she was a former cop fully capable of defending herself—but she understood the necessity and went along with it. Felicity had gone in Mei's car for the drive over. The brunette kept looking in the rearview mirror, obviously aware of John following them, and Felicity gave her a conciliatory shrug. John and the two men with him at least knew not to follow them into the building. Felicity could take it from there.

"Wow, Mei, this looks really nice," Felicity complimented as she glanced around.

The loft hadn't changed that drastically, but it did have a warmer and homier feel to it. The oriental rugs, floral paintings, and plants by the windows were a clear representation of Mei's heritage and really complemented the modern architecture. Framed pictures of Mei and Tommy were scattered throughout the room. Even though Felicity had known that the two were serious for some time now, it was a bit of a shock to actually see how close they'd gotten. The pair looked so happy and normal. The last time Felicity had seen her stepbrother had been content when he was with Laurel. Even Mei, she'd noticed today, had a lightness about her that had never been there before. Although Felicity was happy for them, she couldn't help but also feel a little envious.

"Thank you. I've still got some boxes to unpack upstairs, but I'm mostly settled in. Can I get you something to drink? Water or tea?" she offered.

"Tea would be nice. Thanks," Mei moved about the kitchen as Felicity took a seat at the island.

"When will Tommy be home?"
"Probably in a couple of hours. He had a lot of work to catch up on at the club. Verdant is doing so well he's thinking of expanding. Maybe opening a restaurant more in the heart of the city to attract a higher clientele. He's really excited about it."

Tommy hadn't mentioned that on the phone or at their family dinner. It wasn't like him not to share something like that with her, and Felicity felt a subtle pang in her gut. The strain she'd sensed forming between them was very real. Unfortunately, it was the least of Felicity's problems right now.

"How's the rest of the team doing?" She often wondered about the others, hoping they were okay while also missing them terribly. Despite Waller, they had always been one of the reasons Felicity loved working for A.R.G.U.S. so much.

"Pretty good. Curtis and Paul just celebrated their third anniversary and are actually talking about adopting."

Felicity smiled. "Good for them."

"And Caitlin and Barry are engaged," Mei revealed with a satisfied smirk.

"Oh my God, are you serious?" she excitedly exclaimed. The pair had been dancing around each other for years. Hearing that they were dating would've been amazing enough but the fact that they were engaged had Felicity beaming. "Wow! When did they actually get together?"

Mei answered, "They started dating not too long after the incident in Central City. Caitlin was by Barry's side throughout his whole recovery. It took a good conk on the head to knock some sense into him and ask her out. But they only got engaged last month. The wedding will probably be sometime next year."

Felicity's enthusiasm dimmed a bit at the reminder of the warehouse explosion. It had left Barry in a coma for days before he finally woke up. She remembered how concerned she'd been for him and the overwhelming guilt that followed after learning Oliver's probable involvement. After all, if it wasn't for the information he'd gotten from her, H.I.V.E. wouldn't have known to target it. The last time they'd been together before she'd learned the truth and fled, Felicity had seen the regret—though she hadn't been aware of its cause—on Oliver's face as she talked about the injuries her team had suffered. Felicity was still upset that he'd put himself at the mercy of A.R.G.U.S. to protect her, but she did understand and admire his need to make amends.

"And Waller's okay with them being together?" It was hard for Felicity to believe Waller would accept such a relationship, since it was well known throughout the agency that she would either separate or dismiss any operatives that got too personal on the job.

"She wasn't thrilled at first, but Lyla went to bat for them. Said they were important to the success of our team, especially after you'd left. Waller allowed it as long as it didn't interfere with their work, and Barry and Caitlin have made good on their promise. There wasn't much Waller could object to after that."

"Well, I'm glad things worked out for them." At least something good had come out of their twisted situation. "And Lyla?"

"She's stressed. As you probably already know, it's been an intense battle against H.I.V.E. Oliver and Diggle have been a huge help in protecting our strongholds, but we've still taken some hits. They don't know everything Darhk has up his sleeve, unfortunately."

"He's a snake, along with Malcolm," Felicity declared. She was dreading telling Mei her real
connection to Darhk, but her former teammate needed to know. It wasn't something Felicity could or should hide if they were going to trust each other and possibly work together.

Mei stared back at her, obviously curious to know more about how Felicity had contact with the evil mastermind. "Very true. Lucky for Lyla, she's got Dig to help her work off her frustrations."

Felicity's eyebrows shot to her hairline. "So they're…?"

"I'm not entirely sure how far it's gone. Lyla hasn't admitted to anything, but she once called him on speaker when I was with her. Last time I checked, 'Hey, sexy' was not a typical greeting used by an informant to his handler." Mei smirked and shrugged.

"No, not really." That was also completely unexpected. Felicity was starting to wonder if there was something in the water in Starling to get everyone so twitterpated. It would definitely explain her own uncontrollable desires around Oliver lately. "And does Waller know about this, too?"

Mei shook her head. "No. She'd definitely object and have someone else handle Dig. Lyla only managed to convince Waller because she said their history together could be used to our advantage. Lyla's professional like always, but you can tell from watching them interact that there's a lot of feelings still there."

"So Lyla is handling John, which means you got Oliver," Felicity surmised.

"Right," Mei confirmed. "And speaking of, what about you?" She went to retrieve the whistling teapot. "You said you had a son."

"I did. His name is Connor." She pulled out her phone to show Mei a picture she'd taken of him the other day. Instead of his usual nap in the nursery, Felicity had found him in Oliver's room. The two had fallen asleep with Connor tucked securely in Oliver's arms on the large bed. A couple of toys were scattered about. They'd both looked so peaceful that she couldn't resist capturing the moment. Felicity could feel herself getting choked up looking at it even now.

Mei seemed astounded at first, although Felicity figured it had more to do with Oliver in the picture than Connor. "Wow. He's so adorable," Mei complimented. "Congratulations, Felicity."

Smiling, she responded, "Thank you, Mei. And not just now but for before when you warned me about the investigation. I'm sure my leaving did a lot of damage, and I never meant to put you or the others in that position. My leaving wasn't so much about me but making sure Connor could be born in a place where he was safe. And I'll honestly never stop being grateful for the time you gave us."

Mei slid a hot, steaming mug of tea toward her. "You're welcome. I'm glad that you're both all right."

"I know you didn't tell Oliver about the baby, but did you tell Waller?"

She paused before confirming, "We did. Lyla, Caitlin, and I were all torn about it, but we had to do our jobs in the end and disclose everything."

Felicity figured Waller must've known but hearing it for certain caused a sinking, twisted feeling in her stomach. "I understand," she mumbled. "But I'm surprised she didn't order you to tell Oliver. Seems like the kind of information she'd leverage to her benefit."

"Waller and Lyla discussed it for a while, and they both worried that telling Oliver he had a child out there would have him be too distracted with finding you rather than gathering intelligence against H.I.V.E. We needed him focused on his end of the deal—not that he ever did let up in his search for you. He..." Mei hesitated, as if unsure to continue. "He loves you very much."
Staring down at the steaming mug warming her hands, Felicity mumbled, "I know he does." She let out a deep sigh and added somberly, "That's never really been the issue, though."

"He seems to be adjusting to fatherhood quite well," she mentioned, referring to the picture.

"It was rocky at first, mostly because of the tension between us. I wasn't sure if I could trust him. But once I learned the truth, I was more willing to give him a chance. He's actually kind of wonderful with Connor," she thoughtfully admitted. "In a million different ways."

"Does that mean you're back together? I swear I'm not trying to pry," Mei clarified. "It's just that as his handler, I kind of need to know where his head is at right now—especially since he sounded a little off during his check-in this week. The intel he gave us wasn't as in-depth as it usually is. Waller's been breathing down my neck about it, and I can only stall for so long. Not to mention there's the bomb you dropped on me about Waller once being a part of H.I.V.E. I checked with Lyla, and she said she's never so much as heard a rumor about anything like that. Even my own digging didn't turn up anything."

"That's why I'm here and not Oliver," Felicity informed her. "Waller's vendetta against H.I.V.E. and Darhk is personal, and it involves me directly."

"You?" Mei frowned. "I don't understand."

"There's a reason Waller has always held a grudge against me all these years, and it has nothing to do with 'tough love' or her challenging me to rise to my true potential." Felicity gripped her mug tighter to keep her hands from trembling. She was so nervous. "The day after Oliver found me was the first time in years I came face to face with Darhk."

"What do you mean by years?"

"I didn't always know him as Damien Darhk. I only ever knew him by his alias…Noah Smoak," she revealed.

Mei's eyes were as wide as saucers when she finally processed what Felicity was saying. "Holy shit. He's your father? How is that even possible? Did Oliver know?"

"No, Oliver had no idea. We found out at the same time. I think Darhk kept the connection a secret from the both of us for the same reason that Waller did. It was much easier for Oliver and I to be manipulated and question the other side," Felicity explained. "I was only seven years old when my father, Darhk, abandoned me and my mom, and that's the last I'd seen or heard from him until now. And I understand if this information may make you further question my loyalties, but I'm telling you this in the spirit of full disclosure. Because I never was nor will I ever be allied with him, and I need you to believe me when I say I have nothing to hide."

Felicity then told Mei everything she'd learned about Waller, Darhk, and Malcolm, as well as parts of her own memory that seemed relevant. Afterward, she showed Mei the evidence she'd gathered about Waller's past. Her former teammate gawked at the H.I.V.E. operative profile that Waller had thought she'd erased before leaving the organization. Apparently, Waller wasn't aware of the backup print archives that had been kept and later rescanned into the digital database. It listed all of Waller's shady history with questionable military groups, and the missions she'd completed for H.I.V.E. over the years. Felicity also was able to hack into A.R.G.U.S.'s classified archives to retrieve Waller's personnel file, which noted her change in allegiance and the specs for Rubicon that she'd brought with her to seal the deal.

Mei held up a grainy picture taken from security cameras, showing a slightly younger Waller on a
dock. "What's this?"

"That's Waller at the Starling City docks hours before the Queen's Gambit departed and eventually sank. You can check the time stamp."

"Oh my God, Felicity," Mei breathed in disbelief. "All these years you were searching to find out what happened and it turns out you—we were working for the actual killer. Did she know you were supposed to be on the Queen's Gambit that day?"

"I don't know," Felicity answered. "She'd been keeping an eye on me for a long time, so she probably knew about me and Oliver. She could've."

"So instead of trying to take you out again, she recruited you…" The brunette looked troubled, which is exactly how Felicity felt actually putting all of the pieces together.

"We've always known how calculating Waller is, but I never could've imagined something like this. I never knew she was at the center of it," Felicity replied. "For the last five years, Oliver thought Darhk was behind everything. My father let him believe Robert and Moira's loyalties had been in question, which was why Oliver was afraid to leave. Not knowing my connection to Darhk, he thought he was protecting me and the rest of our family members."

"And now Waller's made him swear his allegiance to A.R.G.U.S.," Mei stated, putting the rest of the pieces together.

"Yes. Which is why I need to know the terms of Oliver's deal. He said he was going to be working for some special unit in A.R.G.U.S. called Task Force X."

"That's right," Mei cautiously confirmed. "It's a new unit that Waller wants to try out. She believes Oliver is skilled enough to head it up. He'll be tasked with any high-profile missions that Waller deems necessary."

"What does that mean?" Felicity sensed the other woman's unease on the topic and pressed, "Mei, what aren't you telling me?"

"There's another unofficial name for Task Force X. It's mostly referred to as the Suicide Squad."

"Why is that?" Felicity prodded, even as a deep sense of dread was forming in the pit of her stomach.

"Because most of these missions are almost impossible to complete without sustaining casualties. The Suicide Squad is purposefully made up of criminals with very unique and useful sets of skills. They have what it takes to get the job done, but they're not absolutely necessary to the agency."

"But they're criminals," she pointed out. "How do you know they'll follow orders and not take off the first chance they get? Or double-cross the agency?"

"There's a failsafe." Mei looked even more uncomfortable as she said, "A chip with tracking capabilities is inserted into their heads. We always know where they are but also, if they step out of line, we have the ability to terminate."

Felicity wrung her hands together as the anger in her roared to life with this information. "It's a kill chip," she surmised. "These people are expendable is what you're saying. Their lives don't matter. Mei, how can you be okay with this?"

"It's not as bad as it sounds. Instead of rotting in a cell, these criminals actually have the chance to do something good for their country. And if they follow orders and can prove they've reformed, they
have a shot at eventually earning their freedom."

"Who wouldn't follow orders with the threat of death planted inside their head?" Felicity retorted. "And if this program is so great, why the hell didn't you guys tell Oliver the truth about it before he agreed to it?"

"Waller told us not to—"

She scoffed and stood up, unable to sit in place any longer as the anger bubbled up. "Waller is a murderer and a criminal herself. She has no right to play with people's lives, and she certainly has no moral authority over Oliver after destroying his! Did Lyla offer John the same deal too? Is she okay with this?"

"John won't be a part of the squad."

"Why not?" Felicity demanded, indignant. "Because Lyla was able to pull strings for the man she loved?"

"Because his cooperation bought his own freedom. With Oliver, the agency refused to exonerate the both of you. The damage done to our bunkers and the loss of agents couldn't go unpunished. One of you had to face the consequences, and Oliver chose to take full responsibility," Mei informed her.

"I won't argue that he's made mistakes, Mei, but it's not entirely his fault. Darhk and Waller have been playing him—hell, all of us—at every turn. Oliver doesn't deserve to have a kill chip inside his head for that." It was just last night that Felicity had told him to fight to live. She wanted him to have hope, and she could tell that he was listening to her. But now she'd learned that Oliver was unknowingly and quite literally fighting to die. Because if Waller got her way and H.I.V.E. was defeated, Oliver would belong to a different agency that would force him into compliance and allow him to be killed as long as the mission got done. It made her sick.

Mei stood up and approached Felicity. The brunette's expression was solemn and regretful. "For the record, I don't think he deserves it either—especially in light of this new information. I've gotten to know Oliver pretty well over the last year as his handler, and I can see why you cared for him so deeply all these years. He's got a good heart." She paused, contemplating, before asking, "Were you aware that he knew my father and sister?"

"He spoke of them briefly when we were together but never by name. It wasn't until last week that he told me everything. I'd guess you gave him quite a shock when he first saw you," Felicity replied.

"I did. He looked like he'd seen a ghost. Oliver told me what happened with my father and Shado. While my heart breaks that they suffered so much, I'm also finally free in a way. The uncertainty was worse than anything all these years, which I know you understand," Mei said. "Oliver finally gave me the answers I'd been searching for, and I will forever be grateful for how he tried to save my family. At least I know they're in a better place. But this mission is also personal for me now, too. Slade Wilson betrayed my family, and I will make sure that son of a bitch pays if it's the last thing I do. Oliver and I are united in that."

"So what are we going to do about Waller and Oliver's situation?" Felicity challenged. "You saw the evidence. We can't let Waller have him. She shouldn't even be running A.R.G.U.S. with what she's done."

"I agree that her actions are inexcusable. Maybe she did change her loyalties but, like you said, she's obviously got a personal agenda wrapped up in this. For now, I need Oliver to keep acting like everything is fine and giving me information. I've been stalling Waller, but she'll sense something is
wrong soon. Whatever he's feeling right now, he has to keep up his end of the deal."

"He knows that," Felicity responded. "And he will. But he needs to be able to trust you in return."

"I agree, which is why I'm going to bring the information to Lyla and the team. We'll see how best to proceed. Meanwhile, you and Oliver need to have clear heads and do what's necessary to keep Darhk's trust. It'd also probably be best if you didn't tell Oliver about Task Force X."

"Mei, I can't lie to him," she objected. There was no way in good conscience that Felicity could sit on this information. They'd agreed to be honest with each other, and Oliver had every right to know what he was getting into—especially if he'd been double-crossed yet again.

"I'm not telling you to lie. Just asking that you hold off on it. Like I said, clear heads," she stressed. "The last thing we need is Oliver going after Waller guns blazing."

"And what's to stop Waller from doing the same in return?" Felicity contested. "Someone still sent a bunch of mercenaries to attack me and my family. Darhk wants Rubicon, but what is Waller's endgame once she takes him out?"

"One step at a time," Mei told her. "We'll figure this out."

She pointed out, "Assuming Lyla and the others believe us." Crossing her arms, Felicity felt anything but appeased. She'd always had faith in the team over the years, but even now that wasn't enough. There were too many players each with their own agenda. Felicity wanted to trust Mei but as long as Waller was calling the shots, she and Oliver had to proceed with caution.

"Felicity—"

"I'll give the team forty-eight hours to review the evidence and make a decision. Then I need to officially know where you stand with Waller." She met Mei's serious gaze with a determined one of her own. "I've always loved being a part of the team. You guys have been like family. I don't want that to change but the fact of the matter is I have a different family now. One that takes precedence over the agency. This isn't about money or power for us, Mei. This is about protecting our son—along with Tommy, Thea, Sara, and my mom. And as long as Waller is in power, too, she threatens all of us. Because just like Darhk, she's proven she has no limits and that's dangerous."

"I understand that."

"Do you?" Felicity glanced around the room, a disturbing thought occurring to her. "Mei, why did you decide to move forward with Tommy?"

That caught the other woman off guard. "What?"

"How long have you known about Malcolm and H.I.V.E.? Has Waller asked you to get close to my stepbrother for information?" She kept going, "If Waller had concerns about Lyla and Diggle, then why is she okay with you dating and now living with the son of the enemy? Do you really love Tommy, or is he an assignment?"

Mei had been composed throughout most of their conversation, but a flare of anger flashed in her eyes. "I love Tommy. I fell for him long before I ever knew about Malcolm. And when I did learn the truth, I told Waller whatever was necessary to keep her from interfering in our relationship. Yes, I've been keeping an eye on him but it's not for the sake of an assignment. I'm protecting the man I love just like you are, Felicity," she declared. "I want us to be clear on that. I may work for Waller, but I am not her mindless drone. If I was, you'd never have gotten out of Starling. You trusted me before, so I'm asking you to please trust me now."
Felicity rubbed her hands over her hair and sighed in frustration. "I didn't mean to offend you," she murmured. "I just...I'm worried about everyone—you included. I don't want to trust the wrong people and make the same mistakes again."

Mei's expression was sympathetic. "I know. Me, too."

"So much for a relaxing spa day." She rubbed her neck and stretched it. The knots in her muscles made it feel like the massage she'd gotten hadn't even happened.

"Yeah," the brunette agreed. The corner of her mouth quirked up. The former teammates' eyes met and held as they silently came to an understanding.

"I should go," Felicity announced and went to grab her purse and coat. She'd said all she could to Mei, and it was enough for one day. "Tell Tommy I'll call him soon."

"I will. I'm meeting with Lyla and the others later tonight," she informed her.

Felicity nodded and said, "Good. You have my number." All the blonde could do now was wait.

With one final wave, Felicity left the apartment and made her way downstairs. The fresh air was a welcomed change, and she inhaled deeply to clear her mind. The car hadn't moved from its spot out front. Without waiting for John to get out and open the door, Felicity hurriedly got in. She just wanted to go back to the mansion and see her baby boy. At least with him she didn't have to pretend. Felicity didn't know what the hell she was going to tell Oliver. He deserved to know about the task force, but she also didn't want to put any more stress on him until Mei got in touch with her. The last thing Felicity wanted was to take away his hope so soon after she'd tried to give it back to him.

"John, we can head back to the mansion now," Felicity announced as she plopped into the backseat. "I want to—" Her words were cut off the moment she felt something hard jammed into the side of her ribs. Glancing to her left, Felicity was shocked to find a bulky blond man in a suit sitting next to her. He had tattoos going up his neck and a couple of small marks under his eye.

Quickly, she looked to the front. John was in the driver's seat, but there was another large, intimidating man next to him also with a gun. The way John's hands were fisted on the steering wheel told her he was barely restraining himself. "It's going to be okay, Felicity," he tried to reassure her. Their eyes met in the rearview mirror, and she instantly saw the remorse staring back at her. She wondered where the other guards were.

"What's going on?" Felicity managed to keep her voice even despite the very real panic spreading throughout her body.

"Good afternoon, Miss Smoak," the man in the front passenger's seat greeted with a heavy Russian accent. Instantly, she knew they were Bratva. This day was clearly turning to shit at an alarming rate. "My boss would like to have word with you."

"Does Anatoly always have people he'd like to chat with held at gunpoint?" she replied. "Because it's not exactly the politest introduction." She glared at the man jamming the gun into her side. The man in front gave a subtle nod to his companion, and he eased the weapon back.

"Anatoly did not send us."

"Then who?"

He ignored her question and addressed John, cocking the gun. "Let's go for drive, brother."
Felicity glanced over at the clock on the wall and sighed. It had been at least twenty minutes since she'd been escorted through the Bratva's covert casino and left tied to a chair in one of the back rooms. Because it was the middle of the day, the place was mostly empty aside from the guards scattered throughout. It was an odd sight for Felicity, who'd grown up around many such boisterous establishments because of her mother's job.

The entire drive over John had been arguing in Russian with their captor. Although the guy next to her had lowered his weapon, the man in the front didn't ease up once. He must've known that John would take him out the first chance he got. John had protested again at the casino when he saw that she'd be separated from him. There were even more rough-looking men in the building, and he was vastly outnumbered. Before leaving her, he'd promised to get to the bottom of all this.

The room Felicity found herself in was medium-sized and dimly lit with a strong smell of cigar smoke in the air. It seemed to be some kind of VIP room with leather couches and low tables scattered about. On the left side was a bar and a small area for a few round dining tables and chairs. Felicity sat at the table farthest back in the room with her hands zip tied to the back of the chair. Tugging against them only made them tighter. Her wrists were already beginning to feel sore from the pressure.

Worst of all, Felicity still had no idea who'd taken her. The Bratva thug said it wasn't Anatoly, which made no sense. She couldn't imagine anyone else daring to kidnap the fiancée of Oliver Knyazev. His standing in both Bratva and H.I.V.E. was so high-ranking it would be suicide to attempt such a ploy. If John couldn't talk sense into these people, her only other hope was that Oliver would try to call at some point and realize something was wrong when she didn't answer. He could easily track her phone. It had been left in her purse (which also had her gun) in the car, but he'd recognize the location regardless.

Several more minutes passed before the door finally opened. A cold and stern-looking Isabel entered the room. She was dressed in a tight black dress and heels that enhanced her tall, thin physique. A folder was tucked under her arm.

Felicity's eyes immediately narrowed. "You're behind this?" she demanded.

"I thought it was time we had a little chat—woman to woman. It's long overdue, wouldn't you say, Felicity? Or should I call you Megan?" Isabel stood on the opposite side of the table, staring down at the fuming blonde. "I thought bringing you here would be best. It should feel like old times. I know how much you love casinos."

It was another subtle dig about Moscow. Despite being restrained and looked down upon, Felicity lifted her chin and replied, "If it's conversation you wanted, all you had to do was ask. You didn't have to order your thugs to kidnap me and hold me and my bodyguard at gunpoint. You have to know Oliver is going to be furious when he finds out about this."

"If my suspicions are confirmed, then he'll be thanking me soon enough."

"And what exactly is it you're suspicious of?"
"That you're a spy."

Felicity didn't dare react. She kept a straight face and met Isabel's gaze with a defiant one of her own. "And who am I supposed to be working for?"

"That's what I need to figure out," Isabel said coolly and placed the folder down on the table. It was followed by her gun. Felicity tried not to look intimidated. "Now that I know your true identity, I decided to do a little digging."

Fisting her hands, Felicity braced herself for whatever it was that Isabel uncovered. She desperately hoped this was all a ruse so Isabel could get the real information she wanted. The smug look on the brunette's face, however, was troubling.

"That night in Moscow, you and Oliver said you didn't know each other. That was a lie. In fact, you two have an interesting history. You knew Oliver long before he ever joined the Bratva."

"It's no secret that my mother has been married to Malcolm Merlyn for the last seven years, and I'm his stepdaughter. Darhk said as much, and the Merlyns and the Queens have always been close. My stepbrother was Oliver's best friend so, yes, we already knew each other."

"I suspect it was much more than that." Isabel glided into the chair across from Felicity and decisively crossed her legs. She was ready to do battle. "When I first remembered that you used his real last name as your alias, I thought it might've been to get his attention. You were clearly trying to get caught counting cards that night, and I couldn't for the life of me understand why Oliver was letting you get away with it. Now I know why."

Isabel grabbed several pieces of paper from inside the folder and slid them across the table for Felicity to see. They were printed news articles from various Starling City publications about her and Oliver dating back to 2007. A couple were about the QC hostage crisis and their rescue efforts. Another showed her, Oliver, and his parents posing with the mayor after their honoring ceremony. The last one was a gossip column write-up. A big picture of her and Oliver sharing a quick kiss at a baseball game on the Jumbotron was featured on top with a headline reading "Sparks Fly Between Smoak and Queen at Rockets Game." Felicity didn't need to read the rest to know it was speculation about whether she and Oliver could've sparked up a romance after experiencing such a traumatic ordeal together. She remembered vividly how much frustration that moment had caused them afterward as they struggled to keep their relationship a secret.

"You were involved even back then, weren't you?" Isabel questioned.

"Yes, we were privately dating," Felicity stated. There was no use denying it. In fact, it felt good to admit it—even if it was to someone as vile as Isabel.

"It's surprising how someone as rich, handsome, and clean-cut as Oliver fell for you back then. You had such humble origins and a unique look. You were lucky he was able to recognize you in the casino even with the dye job. It got his attention, at least." Isabel's twisted, haughty smirk clearly communicated that she thought Felicity wasn't worthy of him then or now.

"Actually, Oliver loved my dark hair back then. He thought my goth look gave me a mysterious edge."

"It seems he has a thing for brunettes," she smugly replied.

Felicity, unruffled, countered, "Or just me, since I am the one with the ring on my finger."

There was a minute twitch of Isabel's lips, though her cool expression remained unchanged. "Not
entirely true. My men noticed it missing when they restrained you. Trouble in paradise already?"

"I had a spa day. Since I was going to have to take it off anyway, I left it at home. Wouldn't want to lose a priceless heirloom. It was Oliver's mother's." Having enough of this frivolous standoff, Felicity added, "Oliver and I being engaged is hardly incriminating. I don't see how that proves your crazy theory that I'm a spy."

"Ah, but here's where it gets really interesting. You went straight to work for Brighton Tech right after you graduated from MIT and stayed there for a few years. We all know that Brighton Tech is a cover for A.R.G.U.S. and, coincidentally, the day after your appearance in Moscow one of our most lucrative arms deals fell through. A.R.G.U.S. agents intercepted us and destroyed everything. Oliver told me the night before that he'd punished you on Anatoly's orders, but that was another lie. So, either you played him or he helped you. And since you're together now, I'm assuming it's the latter."

"You're accusing Oliver of betraying the Bratva to help me, an A.R.G.U.S. spy?" Felicity challenged. Isabel may be a bitch, but she was intelligent. That was exactly what had happened, but Felicity couldn't let her go on believing that. Isabel would most certainly tell Anatoly and cause more problems for them.

"That is one scenario."

Thankfully, Felicity was prepared for this kind of questioning. She and Oliver had come up with a cover story after Darhk ordered she be presented to the council. Someone was bound to check into her background sooner or later. "Well, hate to break it to you, but this one is flawed. I was working undercover at A.R.G.U.S. for H.I.V.E. Malcolm is my stepfather, so it's not that big a leap to think I'd join the cause. But if I somehow was working for the other side, why would I marry Oliver and tie myself to him? Furthermore, why would he marry me if he knew I was the enemy that night?" Felicity retorted. "The answer is we wouldn't be together. The truth is Oliver and I are on the same side, and our orders come from Darhk himself. You have no authority to question us, and you're putting our mission in jeopardy by holding me here." Blaming the inconsistencies of her and Oliver's association on Darhk was the only logical way to throw Isabel off their trail.

"I thought you might say something like that, which brings me to my second theory," Isabel declared. "You're telling the truth about being placed with A.R.G.U.S. as a mole. In an effort to maintain your cover, you went along with their mission to intercept us and gave them information they could use at our expense. The Bratva was sold out as a ploy."

"As I said before, our mission is above your paygrade. I don't have to tell you anything."

"You're a liar," Isabel accused. "And the brotherhood Oliver swore an oath to serve was betrayed."

"It's not betrayal. The Bratva is a part of H.I.V.E., which happens to take precedence."

"It's convenient that you should admit that, because I do have one last theory," Isabel told her. "This one I am much more inclined to believe."

"Go ahead. I could use a good laugh," Felicity sarcastically remarked.

Isabel folded her arms, maintaining her stern stance. "Everyone knows that Malcolm Merlyn is Damien Darhk's lapdog. Since you're a part of his family, I wouldn't put it past him to use you and your history to get to Oliver. Darhk has been excessively demanding lately about how much money and resources the Bratva must commit to his cause. We know that our operations and finances are being monitored. It would be typical of him and Merlyn to keep tabs on us through you via Oliver. Why else would Oliver be specifically assigned to handle A.R.G.U.S. intel when he ascended to the
"council?" She answered, "It conveniently paired him with you, thereby allowing you an 'in' with him so you could report back everything you learned of our dealings to Darhk."

Isabel's frustration was the first crack in the ice queen's exterior, which piqued Felicity's interest. "Are you always this paranoid or is this just good, old-fashioned jealousy?"


"My loyalty is to Oliver." That was true enough. "There are no secrets between us. If you're having issues within the Bratva, take it up with him. Just let me go." She tugged at her restraints once more. "Whatever it was you were hoping to achieve by bringing me here, you failed. There is no elaborate conspiracy against the Bratva." The two women glared at each other.

"You are hiding something. I know it," Isabel insisted. "The Bratva is my family, and it is very likely that Anatoly will make Oliver pakhan someday. Therefore, I will not stand by and watch as some little two-faced impostor infiltrates our ranks and ascends to the highest level of esteem."

"Again, something you could've spoken to Oliver about instead of abducting me," Felicity pointed out. "Why go through all of this effort? You have to know this won't help you get through to him. If anything, he'll be furious."

"He left me no choice," Isabel snapped back.

Felicity studied the other woman silently, finding another crack in the facade. Isabel's lips were pursed together as if she'd sucked on a lemon. Her body was stiff as a board while her dark brown eyes shot daggers. Suddenly, it all clicked.

"It is jealousy, isn't it?"

Isabel's eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"You just said that Anatoly will most likely make Oliver pakhan someday. That the Bratva is your family and by exposing me as a double-crosser, Oliver would be thanking you. Meaning he'll get rid of me, so you can swoop in and take my place by his side. This is a brotherhood, after all. Your power doesn't come from you, but the men you are connected to. Being the wife of the pakhan and a council member will give you more than enough authority," Felicity explained. "This little stunt isn't about the well-being of the Bratva but trying to secure your place in it. You can try and act all noble, but you're nothing more than a conniving, gold-digging snake."

"No, I'm a strong, powerful woman all on my own. I know how to get what I want, and I usually do. Oliver recognized that, which is why he always ended up back in my bed. We were sleeping together in Moscow. Did he tell you that, or did he conveniently leave out the details of our passionate affair?" Isabel taunted, grinning.

Felicity refused to be rattled. She knew exactly what transpired between Oliver and Isabel, and it was anything but passionate. It was time to finally put this bitch in her place. "Yes, he told me. But you weren't together that night or any other after. I know, because Oliver was with me. You know what else he told me?" She didn't give her the chance to answer. "That he's always been mine, and he could never have a future with you or anyone else because none of you were me. He's never stopped loving me and just like every other cliché of a woman scorned, you're bitter because Oliver wants nothing to do with you. But instead of bowing out gracefully, you've decided to throw a tantrum to get his attention. A very elaborate but stupid tantrum by having me kidnapped. It's pathetic and desperate and will only make him resent you further."
Isabel sat across from Felicity silent but fuming. Her hand twitched by the gun, the threat perpetuated by the murderous look in her eyes. Felicity knew she'd gained the upper hand and should've just shut her mouth, but she couldn't resist.

"Maybe you should've tried sending a pic in red lingerie. He prefers that to black. Not that he doesn't appreciate black," she freely rambled. "I used to wear a lot of it when we first started dating and, like I said, he always found my goth look hot. Then again, maybe it's not the color so much as the person wearing it. Because for the record, that 'thing he likes' is me."

Felicity had barely finished her sentence before Isabel was lunging out of her seat. She heard the slap before actually feeling the harsh sting. Her cheek throbbing, Felicity clenched her hands to suppress the urge to touch the red handprint no doubt forming on her skin. Her restraints were tight enough.

Once the initial shock wore off, Felicity glowered at Isabel. "When Oliver comes for me, you're going to regret that."

"Not as much as you'll regret revealing what you actually mean to him." Isabel picked up the gun, pointed it at Felicity's head, and cocked it. "Let's see how far lover boy can bend before he breaks, shall we?"

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August 2, 2007

*The only thing hotter to Oliver than seeing Felicity in one of his t-shirts was seeing her in one of his baseball jerseys. Sports were not her thing, he knew, but Oliver couldn't be happier that Tommy had suggested Felicity come along to the Rockets game with them. When his best friend had found out that Felicity had never been to a baseball game before, he'd insisted that it was an experience everyone should have and that she should tag along with them and their dads. Oliver's father had more than enough tickets, since he bought the entire row behind the dugout. The extra seats were usually in case he wanted to bring special guests or allow prospective business partners to take their families as a perk.*

Oliver, not wanting to seem too eager, had casually agreed to the idea and suggested that Thea come along, as well. His sister wasn't usually as interested in the game so much as the experience, which made her the perfect companion for Felicity. Oliver didn't want her to feel left out or bored when they got into their heavy sports talk. Also, he was long overdue to spend some time with his sister this summer. Thea had been so excited when he asked her, and it had worked out perfectly. She and Felicity were chatting and laughing while sharing a large bucket of chicken tenders and fries. Even their sodas looked larger than them. For such small girls, they sure could pack the food in.

"Hey, get your own!" Thea had chided when he and Tommy reached over for a few fries.

"Speedy, what did Mom tell you about sharing?" Oliver jokingly challenged. "You've got enough food there to feed a Third World country."

"So do you. Besides, Mom's not here and I'm hungry," she sassily replied.

"How about we make a deal?" Felicity interjected. "We'll give you some fries if you guys give us some of your super loaded nachos." She quirked her eyebrow in challenge, looking every bit as feisty as his sister. The difference, though, was with Thea he'd be more likely to engage in a battle of wits while with Felicity it'd be a battle of lips.
Smirking, Oliver gazed back at his girlfriend. Her dark hair was up in a ponytail, which made her red painted lips all the more prominent. She’d done it to match the red and black of the Rockets jersey, but he was in awe by how beautiful she looked in the color. It was a challenge not to stare and get lost in thoughts of kissing her senseless. Oliver made a mental note to tell her just how much he loved the red on her later. The crazy attraction between them was also why he chose to sit on the end with Tommy between them. The temptation to flirt and touch her would be somewhat curbed. His father and Malcolm, meanwhile, sat on the other side of Thea.

His sister spoke up, "And I want a bite of your chili dog."

"I don't know. I'm fine with sharing nachos, but the chili dog is a step too far for me," Tommy played along, his tone grave.

Thea folded her arms and stared Tommy down while Felicity protectively clutched their bucket of food. "Take it or leave it, Merlyn," the tiny brunette challenged.

"One small bite," Tommy finally conceded.

They made the agreed upon trade. When Oliver handed Felicity the nachos, their hands brushed. They caught each other's eye for a few seconds before quickly looking away. Robert and Malcolm watched the exchange between them all in amusement, chuckling.

"Look at the four of you making deals. We'll make CEOs out of you yet," Malcolm joked.

"Nicely done, ladies," Robert complimented and gave his daughter's arm a squeeze.

Thea beamed and took a satisfied bite of the chili dog.

"That was a big bite. I'm getting another one," Tommy teasingly grumbled when she handed it back to him.

While Thea was reaching for the nachos, she frowned. "Hey, Ollie, what happened to your face on the side?" his sister commented. "It's kinda red."

He discreetly glanced at Felicity, who was biting her lip while staring innocently into her bucket of fried goodness, before answering, "Little mishap at the gym." He felt bad lying to his sister. Then again, Oliver couldn't very well tell her that Felicity had accidentally slapped him this morning while he'd been mercilessly tickling her.

He’d found a particularly vulnerable spot and, before either of them knew it, her hand had gone up and connected with his face in an effort to push him away. The mark looked worse than the hit had felt, but Oliver still played it up. Felicity had been apologetic, which led to lots of comforting and eventually heated kisses to make it up to him. In the end, it had turned into a very good morning for the both of them.

Inning after inning passed with the Rockets taking the lead. After a while, Felicity announced she needed to use the bathroom. Oliver was just about to make the same claim—maybe they could find a dark corner and sneak a kiss—when Thea said she had to go, too. That was followed by Tommy stating the same and wanting to grab another chili dog. Oliver went with them to stretch his legs.

He casually sidled up to Felicity as they walked and felt the smallest sense of relief when their fingers brushed. If not for their decision to keep their relationship a secret for now, he would’ve put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her into his side. Felicity gave him a small smile before returning her attention to Thea. They split up in pairs to head to their respective restrooms.
Afterward, Tommy got into the long line at the concession stand. Thea joined him, claiming she wanted to try a churro next. When he asked where Felicity was, Thea said she’d returned to their seats. The line was barely moving and since there was nothing Oliver could really do to speed up the wait, he left his sister with his best friend and went back to their section.

To Oliver’s surprise, Felicity was in Thea’s seat and talking to his father. He should’ve probably sat in his own seat, but he impulsively plopped next to her. His father smiled at him in between listening intently to Felicity. She was talking about her major at MIT. It seemed Robert was interested in knowing more about her particular program and her future plans. He also asked her about the Cambridge area and casually mentioned that QC had one of its offices not too far from there. Leave it to his father to turn a casual baseball game into a subtle recruitment pitch.

Robert also told Felicity about some of his favorite restaurants to visit while there, and she started sharing some of her own in return. Although Oliver and Felicity had talked before about her life at MIT, it was interesting to hear the different stories she was telling his dad. It unexpectedly hit Oliver then that his girlfriend had a completely separate life across the country that he wasn’t a part of. A life she would be returning to in a little over a month.

Now was definitely not the time to worry about that, and so he focused on the sight of Felicity getting along so well with his father. It brought Oliver a great sense of pride. Robert had seemed to like Felicity even before the hostage crisis, but he was smitten with her even more now. When Oliver and Felicity did eventually reveal their relationship, he was certain his father would be fully supportive. His mother, on the other hand, was going to take some work. For some reason, she still hadn’t warmed to Felicity. Even at the award ceremony, he’d sensed the tension between his mother and girlfriend. It was something Oliver sought to fix soon no matter what.

"Well, Felicity, it certainly sounds like you’re getting an amazing education while having a great college experience. Be sure to enjoy every minute of it. Time goes by fast," Robert told her.

"Thank you. I will."

"And do you have a special someone back at school?" he inquired.

"Oh, um…n-no," Felicity stuttered, caught off guard. Her head shifted ever so slightly in Oliver's direction, as if her instinct was to look at him, but she stayed facing his father. "Not really."

"I find that hard to believe," Malcolm commented. "Don't you, Oliver?" He stared at him expectantly.

"Not necessarily," Oliver glanced briefly at Felicity. "There's nothing wrong with waiting to find the right person."

"A very wise philosophy. Not one that you and Tommy ever followed," the older man joked. "I swear you two single-handedly kept the tabloids in business these last few years with all the trouble you got into. You had different girls out with you every night."

Oliver's mild annoyance was quickly becoming aggravation. He wanted to strangle Malcolm for bringing up his wild past in front of Felicity. It wasn't that Oliver thought she would suddenly change her mind about him. Felicity was well aware of what he used to be like and thankfully saw past all that. What sucked was being underestimated when he was trying so hard to put it all behind him.

He kept his voice even. "That was before. I've changed." His eyes quickly flicked down to Felicity, who gave him a small but encouraging smile. That was all he needed to be put back at ease. As long as she believed in him, he didn't give a damn what Malcolm or anyone else thought.
"Right, of course," Malcolm easily agreed. "No doubt Laurel's influence. It must be getting serious with her. Finishing your degree in Starling is probably the best course. That way you can be closer to her while still working at QC."

"Actually, Laurel and I broke up." With a frown, he asked, "And who said I was going to SCU or staying at QC?" Oliver turned to his father, who had a slightly guilty look on his face.

"It was merely a suggestion, since you won't be returning to your last school," Robert said. "It's important to plan for the future, Oliver. You have responsibilities here."

Oliver gritted his teeth to keep from saying something he would regret. He didn't want to have this argument with his father again, especially right here. Oliver was stressing enough about it on his own. He felt a light touch on his arm and looked down at Felicity. But she wasn't facing him. She was talking to his father and Malcolm.

"I think Oliver will be great at whatever he decides to do." She patted his arm. "Figuring it all out and enjoying the experience while you do is what it's all about, right?" She had them there.

"Right," Robert eventually agreed. He observed them both, and Oliver wondered if his father suspected something was going on. If he did, he didn't say anything. Instead, he merely gave Felicity one of his charming smiles before returning his attention to the game. The opposing team had just scored another run, and the sound of booing filled the stadium.

When he was sure his father and Malcolm's attentions were fixed on the game, Oliver mouthed a silent "thank you" to Felicity. She squeezed his arm before dropping her hand. After a couple of minutes, Tommy and Thea returned with more snacks. Felicity was about to move so Thea could have her seat back, but the wispy brunette said she could stay there. It would be easier for her and Tommy to share their food if they were right next to each other.

For the rest of the game, they all shared in light banter while cheering and booing along with the crowd. The tension between Oliver and his father had settled for the time being. The night hadn't been completely tarnished, but he did still feel a little on edge. Felicity must've sensed it, because she kept sneaking glances at him.

"Oh, look!" Thea suddenly exclaimed and pointed at the jumbo screen. "It's the kissing cam. I love when they do that."

The cameras focused on various couples, who then proceeded to share in a sweet or steamy kiss. The crowd cheered for each. It was when the camera ultimately fixated on him and Felicity, however, that it turned from fun to problematic.

"Oh my God, you guys, you're on," Thea laughed.

"Frack," Felicity muttered, barley disguising the panic in her voice. Her eyes were wide as a blush began to color her cheeks.

If it weren't for them trying to keep a low profile, Oliver would've definitely given the crowd a show and kissed his girlfriend until she was breathless. But that wasn't an option unless they were ready to tell everyone, which they weren't. Oliver already knew this moment would get some media attention later. Both he and Felicity shook their heads at the cameraman, but he stayed on them. There was no getting out of it, especially with the crowd chanting, "KISS, KISS, KISS…"

"Maybe you should give the people what they want," Tommy called to them. He jokingly added, "No tongue though, Oliver. Keep it classy with my sister!"
"Come on, you two," Thea urged. "You can't leave them hanging. It's the kissing cam!"

His father and Malcolm didn't say anything, though both appeared highly amused watching the drama play out.

Refusing to kiss was causing a bigger commotion, so Oliver looked to Felicity for permission to go ahead. She'd come to the same realization and silently agreed. They leaned toward each other, much to the delight of the crowd. The floral scent of her perfume invaded his senses while his lips tingled in anticipation. Oliver's fingers itched with the urge to take hold of Felicity's face, but he kept them in his lap. The temptation to kiss her for real and show everyone in the stadium and Starling, for that matter, that she was his was too great.

Felicity did place her hand in the crook of his neck for some support. The simple touch of her fingers against his bare skin sent a jolt of heat through him. Swiftly, Oliver closed the distance and landed a kiss on the corner of her mouth. She grazed his cheek with her own perfectly red lips, which he was still dying to taste, and he suppressed a shiver. Clapping and catcalls ensued as he held there for a few seconds longer and pulled away.

"Now that wasn't so bad, was it?" his sister teased them afterward.

The camera was finally off of them, but Oliver didn't feel relieved. His troubles were much bigger than a televised kiss. Everything between he and Felicity felt so right, while the rest of his life was still an utter mess. Oliver hated to agree with his father, but Robert might've had a point. Not tonight, but soon he would have to really sit down and figure out his future. Because until he did, he and Felicity would never be able to truly move forward and out of the shadows.

Oliver couldn't have wiped the smile off of his face if he tried. He'd learned quickly that it was utterly impossible anytime that he was around his son. Amazingly, Connor looked just as happy as Oliver felt. He placed a small blanket over Connor's face for a couple of seconds before swiftly pulling it away. His son's loud, joyous laughter immediately followed as his tiny limbs flailed. Connor loved games in which he was teased and surprised.

Sitting only a couple of feet away, Lucky rested on the corner of the blanket watching them. The plan was for him to stay in Sara's room while she and Felicity were off at the spa. But when Oliver had gone to check on Connor after his late morning nap—which gave Felicity the perfect opportunity to slip away—he'd heard the dog whining. Lucky wasn't Oliver's biggest fan, nor vice versa, since the dog still didn't trust his intentions with Connor. Oliver, however, felt kind of bad that Lucky would be cooped up for most of the day while Sara and Felicity were gone. Since Oliver would be caring for Connor in their absence, he figured it might be a good time to bond with the canine through his son. Maybe if Lucky saw Oliver interact with Connor more often, he'd back off—though Oliver did have to admit he admired the dog's loyalty to the baby.

So, he'd cautiously let the dog loose. There was a bit of the usual growling as Lucky followed Oliver into Connor's nursery. He was by Oliver and Connor's side every second. Thankfully, the hostility did subside throughout the day. The plan seemed to work as he observed father and son lovingly interacting. At one point, Lucky even dozed off completely. It was some much-needed progress that Oliver attributed to a small victory.

Checking the clock, Oliver realized it was time for Connor's afternoon feeding. He scooped the baby up in his arms and headed down the hall toward the kitchen with Lucky, unsurprisingly, on his heels. Connor squirmed at first and reached for Oliver's face. He didn't understand why their game had
stopped. The baby patted at Oliver's cheeks and let out a pleading cry.

"You still want to play, huh, buddy?" he soothed. Swooping down, Oliver surprised him by kissing Connor's reddened cheeks in rapid succession before blowing a small raspberry against his son's neck. Connor giggled, loving it, and squirmed some more. Oliver tightened his grip to keep the baby secure while entering the kitchen.

Raisa was already at the counter with Connor's bottle in hand. "Mr. Oliver, you are right on time."

"Oh, good," Oliver replied. "Thank you, Raisa." He'd told her on numerous occasions that she didn't have to stop whatever work she was doing and go through the trouble for him. Oliver was perfectly capable now of readying his son's bottle, but Raisa was usually a step ahead of him anyway. He just accepted it now.

"Of course. You and Connor looked like you were having so much fun. I had hoped to save you the trip and effort without interruption," she told him.

"We were having fun." Connor caught sight of the bottle and reached out a hand. Now that they'd stopped playing, he was becoming aware of his hunger. Oliver patted his back soothingly as he took the bottle from Raisa. "It's coming, buddy. I promise."

"He is as patient as his father," she observed with a knowing smile.

Oliver chuckled. "If by 'patient' you mean hates waiting, then you're right." He shifted Connor so he was laying in his arms and guided the bottle to his son's eager mouth. The ease with which Oliver maneuvered Connor surprised even himself. He couldn't believe that less than a week ago he'd been afraid to hold Connor, and now he was handling him as if he'd been doing it for months.

"That is exactly what I meant," Raisa joked. She returned to the island where she was chopping up vegetables and seasoning them. "You were the same as a baby. Always knew what you wanted and would not be silent or sit still until you got it."

"Which I usually did," Oliver recalled. His parents had started letting him have his way from the earliest he could remember. "Except, occasionally, with you."

"I wanted to ensure you had some manners."

"I did—sometimes. Though probably not often enough," he chortled and took a seat at the island.

"You were a good boy."

"Raisa," Oliver lightly chided, "I think we both know I wasn't."

"But you had a good heart," the older woman amended. "A trait your son will no doubt inherit."

"If he gets it from anyone, it'll be Felicity. She's always been the best of both of us."

"You do not give yourself enough credit," the older woman replied. "You would do anything for family, and now you are protecting yours without question. There is honor in that. Your parents, if they were here, would be proud." She glanced at Connor. "This was their fondest wish for you."

Her words caused a bittersweet pang in his heart. "Raisa, did you always know what they were involved in?"

She was silent for a moment. "I've worked for your family for a very long time. Your parents weren't
always aligned with H.I.V.E., although your father did have Bratva ties. It is how I came to work in your household. Your father was a successful businessman and dealt with all kinds of people.”

Oliver sighed. "No matter how many times I turn it over in my head, I can't understand how they could be a part of something like this. How they could put me and Thea in danger like they did…” His eyes landed on Connor, who lay content in his arms as he finished his bottle. "I don't want any of this for my son."

"Your parents loved you, but they were not perfect." Raisa placed the vegetables on a baking pan. "They made mistakes. They put their trust in the wrong people and, over time, were led astray."

Oliver, unfortunately, found himself caught up in their mess. "I guess history really does repeat itself."

"No. You did not make the same mistake," she told him. "You have always known deep down who you can trust. Mr. Diggle and Miss Helena have been good allies and friends. Even Anatoly, who I know you are sometimes wary of, will come to your aid if you need it. And now you have Miss Felicity back…she is the key, I think." The look Raisa gave him clearly insinuated that she was talking about more than just the mission.

"She's everything," Oliver murmured and stared at his son. "Connor, too."

"Then you must make sure to show them that every day."

"Believe me, I'm trying."

Raisa smiled in approval and went back to her task of preparing dinner for later that night. When Connor was finished with his bottle, Oliver set it aside and raised him up on his shoulder to burp him. It was also time for his nap. Wanting to hold him for a while longer, Oliver stood up to return to the living room. That's when he noticed Lucky sitting at the end of the island, wagging his tail and practically drooling. Raisa was preparing chicken cordon bleu for dinner later, and the delicious smell of meat must be tempting him.

When her back was turned, Oliver swiped some of the cold cuts. He knew he shouldn't be sneaking Lucky food, but Oliver needed all the bonus points he could get. Lucky followed him out of the kitchen and into the living room. Oliver tossed them to the ground, and Lucky descended on them. He gobbled them up in seconds and glanced at Oliver looking for more scraps.

"Later. If you're good," Oliver muttered and sat with Connor on the couch. He continued to burp him and got a blanket to cover him as he lulled him. His little breaths evened out, and soon he was sound asleep.

Just as Oliver leaned down to kiss his forehead, the doorbell rang. Lucky, who had also been dozing off on the floor, woke abruptly and turned his head toward the offending noise. Oliver frowned, since it wasn't like just anyone could approach the mansion unannounced. His security was supposed to alert him. Seeing as they didn't, that meant the visitor could be only one of two people—and neither option was good. Oliver stayed in the living room and listened carefully while Raisa went to answer the door.

"Mr. Darhk," Raisa politely greeted.

Oliver cursed under his breath. What the hell was he doing here?

"Hello, Raisa. Is Oliver home?" Despite the question, the man already must've known otherwise he wouldn't have bothered with the trip.
"Yes. Please come in. I will fetch Mr. Oliver for you."

"No need. We'll just save a step, and I can follow you."

"Very well," Raisa reluctantly responded. Darhk's comment was more of an understated demand than a request.

Oliver listened to their approaching footsteps and braced himself. Lucky also was up on all fours, standing between them and the archway.

"Mr. Oliver, Mr. Darhk is here to see you," Raisa announced. Her expression was apologetic.

He gave her a subtle nod to let her know he understood her predicament. Darhk entered the room without hesitation. He was dressed in his usual sharp and crisp black suit. The moment he spotted Oliver and the baby, his eyes brightened.

"Well, isn't this touching," Darhk observed them. "I can't tell you how long I've waited to meet my grandson. It seems I've arrived just on time." He took a few steps forward and halted when Lucky emitted a low growl.

Oliver didn't bother to scold the canine—not that he thought Lucky would obey him. He and the dog might not be best buds yet, but for once they were on the same side. Oliver would never discourage Lucky protecting his son from danger, especially where Darhk was concerned.

"Actually, Raisa was about to bring him upstairs to the nursery," Oliver declared. He moved to stand when Darhk halted him.

"That won't be necessary. I don't plan on disturbing you. I just wanted us to have a quick chat."

Darhk walked past a suspicious Lucky and took a seat on the accent chair to the left of the couch.

"Mr. Darhk, would you like a drink or something to eat?" Raisa offered.

"Some iced tea would be nice."

"Mr. Oliver?"

"The same will be fine, Raisa, thank you." She nodded before disappearing to the kitchen. Oliver swiftly shifted his attention to Darhk. "I didn't know that you'd be stopping by today. Is everything all right?"

Darhk didn't answer right away. His eyes were glued to the tiny bundle in Oliver's arms. "Everything is fine. Like I said, I just wanted us to talk."

"You could've called," Oliver pointed out.

"Does my presence here bother you?" he replied with an inquisitive yet probing stare.

Oliver didn't give anything away. "Of course not. I'm just surprised that you would go through the trouble when you usually just call. Felicity actually isn't here at the moment."

"Ah, yes. She's with her mother at the spa." At Oliver's curious look, Darhk said, "Malcolm told me that Donna wouldn't stop going on about it. She's missed Felicity terribly—an emotion I've experienced for far too long myself." He glanced at Connor once more. "He's a handsome boy. I'd say he looks more like you than Felicity. Much tinier in person than the pictures, too."

Oliver clamped his jaw shut. The only reason Darhk even knew what Connor looked like was
because he'd tasked Malcolm with surveilling Felicity while she was in Ivy Town. The knowledge that this man had seen Connor even before Oliver ever had still made his blood boil.

"Has the adjustment period been difficult?" Darhk questioned. "Taking care of an infant can be a mighty task, especially for someone like you who hasn't had much experience with children."

He tried not to bristle at the condescending comment. "It was a little intimidating at first, but I'm a quick study. Felicity has been teaching me a lot."

"Good. And I don't doubt that you've been returning the favor. She did good work the other day at H.I.V.E."

"She's the best," Oliver stated.

"She is. I always knew she was destined for greatness."

Raisa reentered the living room carrying a tray of iced tea and some cookies. She placed them on the coffee table. Before she could leave, Oliver called her over. He handed Connor to her and quickly directed her to bring him to the nursery. Having his son in the same room with Darhk was putting Oliver on edge, and he needed a clear head to deal with whatever fresh hell was about to face him next. Darhk, thankfully, didn't object this time, because Oliver was ready to push back. Lucky also followed Raisa but not before casting one last guarded stare at the strange visitor. Oliver made a mental note to sneak the dog some more meat later as a reward.

Needing to move the conversation along, Oliver asked, "What did you want to discuss? Is it about Felicity?"

"No. Actually, it's about you"—he grabbed a glass of iced tea and took a sip—"and your future in H.I.V.E."

"Oh?" Oliver sat up straighter and forced his body to relax into the couch, subtly showing Darhk that he wasn't intimidated by the subject matter. "Is there another assignment? Do you need me to take on more responsibility with gathering A.R.G.U.S. intel?"

"No, nothing like that. You've already excelled in your mission." Darhk stared at him quietly, searching. Then: "Oliver, would you say that you're happy?"

That caught him off guard completely. "Excuse me?"

"Are you happy?" He added, "And be honest now."

Oliver honestly didn't know what Darhk expected him to say. He settled for answering, "As happy as I can be."

Darhk nodded, though it was more to himself. "It's as I thought."

"What is?" he questioned.

"With Felicity finally back in both of our lives, not to mention Connor, much has changed. I can only imagine how it must feel to be staying in your childhood home with the two of them. It wouldn't be unreasonable for you to fantasize about what it would be like to build a life here together for real."

"I can assure you that your concern isn't necessary," Oliver told him. He didn't like Darhk talking about their future, especially since the bastard was the reason he and Felicity never got to live that life. "You have more important matters to think on. We're getting closer to discovering the location
of Rubicon with each passing day."

"Oh, I have no doubt we will find it. Felicity will see to that. But I'm talking about after our mission is complete. You've been a good soldier these last couple of years and have completed your transition to the council seamlessly," Darhk remarked. "I think you've earned what I'm about to propose."

"Which is?" Oliver prompted, wishing the other man would stop grandstanding and just get to the damn point.

"Once the storm passes, I think it's time for you to finally come out of the shadows. You no longer have to be Oliver Knyazev. You can reclaim your family's legacy and return to being Oliver Queen."

Oliver blinked at Darhk, wondering if he'd heard him correctly. Was the man actually offering Oliver the chance to return to his old life? There was definitely an angle Darhk was working. But damn it, if the prospect didn't still make his heart race. After a moment of silence, he replied, "As long as Felicity cooperates until then, right?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do," Oliver insisted and stared him down. "Didn't you just tell Felicity the other day that I was expendable if she didn't follow through in delivering Rubicon?"

It was Darhk's turn to look surprised. "She told you that, did she?"

"Yes. You wanted me to gain her trust back, and that's exactly what I'm doing. Working together to take down Waller while co-parenting with Connor has given us some common ground again. We've gotten close because of it, and she's started confiding in me more," Oliver explained to him.

He didn't doubt that Darhk wouldn't make good on his threat to Oliver's life if he believed it would keep Felicity in line. That's why it was crucial that Oliver tie himself closely with Felicity. Darhk had to be reminded of his and Felicity's connection and how badly he needed that in with his daughter.

"Well, since you know the truth, then I guess I can be perfectly honest now." Oliver doubted that. Darhk was clearly about to change his approach. He listened intently. "Not long after I made that comment to Felicity, I realized how wrong it was. I'm regrettably more used to dealing with mob bosses and thugs than my own daughter. Gaining her loyalty through fear was insensitive of me and unfair to you. You're one of my best operatives and, if you don't mind me getting a little ahead of myself, most likely my future son-in-law. I can't afford to lose either of you, and I realize it's unfair to expect you both to remain in the shadows while trying to raise my grandson. By you becoming Oliver Queen again, we all win."

"But I'd still be an operative for H.I.V.E.," Oliver assumed.

"Of course, though I won't have you sent on as many assignments. You'll have your own network of men here, bigger than you have now, to command for that. But it's the best of both worlds, Oliver. You'll even get to see your sister and Tommy again. No doubt you've missed them, and Connor can grow up with family around. You'll be able to have everything with him that I was denied with Felicity. Family," he emphasized. "That's what's most important."

The ache in Oliver's heart was acute, because Darhk was offering him everything he'd ever wanted. However, Oliver knew the intent behind it wasn't as straightforward as it appeared. He would still have to remain loyal to H.I.V.E. and answer to Darhk when called upon. Not to mention the kind of influence the man may try to have over Connor as he grew older.
Despite the numerous vengeful thoughts running through Oliver's head, he plastered an intrigued grin on his face and told Darhk, "I'll discuss it with Felicity. It's her choice, too."

"Of course. It's why I came to you first, Oliver. I'm probably not her favorite person right now. Like you, Felicity and I still have a lot to work out between us."

"Understood." Oliver's cell phone rang, and he quickly reached into his pocket. It was Felicity calling. "Will you excuse me for a moment? I have to take this."

"Go right ahead." Darhk sat back and sipped his iced tea.

Oliver had been hoping that he'd leave now that their conversation was over, but he wasn't that lucky. He stood up and answered, "Hey, you on your way home now?"

"Actually, there's been a change of plans."

His blood went cold at the sound of the soft, derisive voice that definitely didn't belong to Felicity. He gritted out, "Isabel…"

Chapter End Notes

**Hope you all enjoyed the chapter! I can't believe it's been a year since I first posted this story. Thank you all so much for sticking with me and taking the time to leave comments and kudos. Get ready for some fiercely protective Oliver next chapter! The Bratva captain will be taking over. ;)**
Payback and Propositions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oliver must've broken a dozen laws as he sped on his Ducati and weaved in and out of traffic. He didn't give a damn; all he could focus on was Felicity. When he'd heard Isabel's voice instead of Felicity's on the phone, his heart had nearly stopped. It made no sense to Oliver. He'd barely spoken to Isabel in months, so it seemed extreme that she would do such a thing as kidnapping Felicity and holding her hostage. When he'd demanded to know why Isabel had taken her, all she would say was that Felicity owed the Bratva some answers. Oliver had tried to explain that Felicity had no part in whatever ludicrous plot Isabel was referring to, but it was no use.

"I want to talk to her," he'd ordered. He had to hear her voice and make sure it wasn't a ruse.

Isabel had put Felicity on the phone only briefly. "Oliver?" Felicity had said. She was mostly calm, but he'd still heard the underlying distress.

"It's okay." He'd made sure his voice was strong but comforting. "I'm coming to get you, sweetheart. Don't worry."

"Oliver, be careful. She—"

"Isn't that sweet?" Isabel had sarcastically interjected. "Come alone to the casino in South End. Be here in less than thirty minutes, Oliver, otherwise I can't promise your precious Felicity will be returned in the exact way she was found."

"Isabel, I swear to God if you hurt her—" She'd cut the call before Oliver could even finish. The fury rose up in him so fiercely, he'd nearly crushed the phone in his hand.

Darhk had been watching him the whole time listening in. Upon hearing that his daughter had been taken, his eyes had blazed and he'd declared he'd go with Oliver to retrieve Felicity. Oliver had strongly refused and argued that he could handle the Bratva and Isabel. He didn't want the situation to escalate, and Felicity to accidentally get caught in the crosshairs. The Bratva was very touchy about outsiders invading their territory and that included Darhk and his soldiers. In order to save Felicity, he had to embody his persona as Anatoly's nephew. The brotherhood both feared and revered him, which would work to his advantage.

On the way over, he'd tried calling Diggle. His partner didn't answer. It was as Oliver expected. Isabel must've had him taken care of, too, because no way would Felicity be in his situation if Dig could protect her. Oliver let out a string of curses under his breath. Their focus had been on protecting her from Waller and her goons, but he never could've anticipated his own side going after her. On the drive over, Oliver did his best to tamp down the icy cold fear that threatened to consume him. He couldn't think about how scared Felicity must be or what Isabel could be doing to her. He had to focus on his plan to get to her and how to deal with Isabel when he did.

His Ducati came to a screeching halt in front of the inconspicuous building. Oliver removed his helmet and hopped off his bike. His gun, which was loaded with tranquilizers was already in his hand. Since this was the brotherhood he was dealing with, he couldn't shoot and kill them without more serious ramifications resulting. He did, however, have his usual fully-loaded glock on him just in case. The front door was guarded by two burly men. Oliver stoically strode toward them.
"Mr. Knyazev," the oldest of the pair greeted. "We've been informed to—" He didn't get to finish. Oliver had struck quicker than the guy could react and knocked him out. The other man swiftly followed. He wasn't going to chance these men coming to Isabel's aid.

Oliver whipped out his phone and glanced at the tracking app. He already knew that Felicity's phone wasn't with her, since the signal was directing him to his car parked several feet away. Diggle, though, should be just on the other side of the doors. Oliver entered the casino cautiously. Only a few sets of overhead lights were on, leaving the rest of the place in darkness.

"Oliver," Dig called.

His eyes scanned the room before finding Diggle sitting at a blackjack table. A guard stood nearby. In his peripheral vision, Oliver spotted three more armed men. He approached his partner all the while keeping an eye on the suspicious Russians.

"Diggle, what the hell happened?" Oliver demanded.

"When I was waiting for Felicity at the loft, Viktor and Abram showed up. That area is Bratva territory, so I didn't think anything of it at first. By the time I realized something was off and they'd taken out the others, they'd already pulled a gun on me and forced me to take Felicity here. I'm sorry, Oliver," Diggle apologized. "I thought about fighting back, but it was too close a call. I didn't want to chance Felicity getting hurt."

"It's not your fault, Dig. You couldn't have known your own brothers would betray you," Oliver replied, raising his voice so the other men could hear. They bristled at the accusation. He glanced at the man closest to him. He was short but stout. "You really think it's wise to point that gun at me, Mikhail?"

"I apologize, Mr. Knyazev, but we are under strict orders," Mikhail answered. His weapon remained fixed on Oliver.

He growled back, "Since when do you obey Isabel over me? I'm a captain and nephew to the pahkan. I outrank her. Therefore, you do as I say." His gaze swept over the room. "And I'm ordering you all to stand down. Now."

"Isabel has permission from the pahkan himself. We must obey."

"What?" Oliver gritted out. "Anatoly cleared this?"

Mikhail shifted somewhat nervously under Oliver's fierce glare. "That is all I know. Please hand over your gun. You are not to be armed when I take you to her."

Oliver shot a look to his partner, who subtly shook his head. Despite their silence, they were able to communicate perfectly. It was something they'd mastered after years of working together. "I'm not doing anything until I speak with Anatoly." He raised his phone as if to make a call and used the action to distract from the shot he took at another nearby guard.

Diggle took his cue to overpower Mikhail. He'd subdued him in seconds and grabbed hold of his weapon. He and Oliver crouched down behind the table as more shots rang out. The gun Dig had was loaded with real bullets. He aimed at the other men, trying to draw them out so Oliver could use the tranqs on them. When the room was clear, they headed for the hallway leading to the back rooms.

"Do you know where they're keeping her?"
"Think it's the VIP room."

It was confirmed when Oliver saw another set of armed guards standing outside the door. Having heard the commotion, they were ready for the pair and opened fire. Oliver and Diggle ducked out of the hall into two empty rooms on opposite sides. They were at a standstill, unable to get closer without being directly in the line of fire. The Russian men called out for them to surrender, and nobody had to get hurt. Reaching into his pocket, Oliver pulled out a flash grenade. He showed Diggle, who nodded his agreement.

Oliver pulled the pin and tossed it down the hallway. Within seconds, it exploded in a shock of blinding light. Sparks flew and smoke filled the hallway, obscuring the men's vision and giving Oliver and Diggle the perfect opportunity to take out their opponents. He grabbed the largest of the three and let Diggle handle the other two.

After landing a few punches, Oliver kicked the man in the chest toward the door. The Russian went flying through, causing splintered wood to fly and a gaping hole in its wake. The guy was out cold, and Oliver stepped over him while replacing the tranq gun with his glock. Isabel had to see that he meant business, and a tranq gun wasn't going to cut it.

His eyes scanned the room and instantly found Felicity. She was strapped to a chair with Viktor standing over her. He held a gun in each hand. One pointed at them while the other rested against the blonde's temple. Abram was on the other side of Felicity, his assault rifle trained on the pair, with Isabel standing back behind them both. Her arms were crossed, and she stood tall with a smugly confident expression on her face.

"Hello, Oliver. Glad you could join us," Isabel calmly greeted.

"Isabel," he contemptuously growled.

"Took you long enough. Did my men outside give you a hard time?" she casually replied. "I do hope you didn't harm any of them permanently. The brotherhood's resources are strained as it is."

Oliver ignored her and addressed Viktor. "We're here now. You can take the gun off of her."

Felicity mostly looked unharmed aside from the restraints and a red mark on the side of her face. Someone had obviously hit her, and Oliver felt his rage increase tenfold. She didn't say anything to Oliver and simply stared back. Felicity looked relieved by his presence, but her fear was far from relinquished upon seeing him facing the barrel of a gun. She bit her lip as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"You shoot your own for this woman?" Viktor challenged in disgust.

"They're not dead. Simply taking a nap," Oliver replied. "Stand down."

"I cannot do that."

"That is my future wife you are threatening. If you don't get that damn gun off of her, I will not be inclined to show you the same mercy that I showed your comrades. In fact, I will take you down in the most painful way possible, Viktor. That I promise you," he steadily, though dangerously, warned.

Viktor tightened his grip on his gun. "No."

"Easy, Oliver. Wouldn't want Viktor's finger to slip on the trigger," the brunette cautioned him.
"Isabel, what the hell is the matter with you? Have you lost your fucking mind? Let her go," Oliver commanded, "and we'll talk whatever this is out. I guarantee your problem is with me, not with her."

"You know, I don't think I've ever seen you this rattled. It seems I've finally broken through that stone-cold façade of yours."

"Don't push me, Isabel," Oliver threatened.

"Lower your weapons, and we can get down to business." Upon their hesitation, she ordered, "Do it now."

Oliver exchanged a look with Diggle. If it weren't for Viktor threatening Felicity, they might've taken their chances. But it was too big a risk. They were outgunned for the moment, and so they begrudgingly lowered their weapons.

"Much better. Take a seat, gentlemen."

"We prefer to stand," Oliver snapped back. "Now start talking. What is this all about?"

Felicity had thought she'd seen every side of Oliver but, apparently, she was wrong. She'd seen him angry and protective before, though nothing compared to the fury rolling off of him now. He looked like he wanted to charge forward and snap Isabel's neck as she went through all of her theories again. Oliver was denying each, but Felicity had tuned it all out. All of her attention was on the cold metal of the gun against her skin. One pull of the trigger and her life would be over. She'd never see her family or friends again. She'd never see her son again. Connor would be left motherless and maybe even orphaned if something happened to Oliver, too. She couldn't let that happen. Felicity didn't know how they were going to get out of this, but she had faith in Oliver and her own resolve. They would get through this somehow. They had to.

"All I want is the truth, Oliver. Who is she really working for?" Isabel exclaimed, finally losing her patience.

"She's with H.I.V.E. You heard Darhk make the announcement, and you obviously know our history together. What more is needed?" Oliver snarled in return.

"She is not the only one in question here. Your loyalty to the Bratva is on the line. She was obviously spying on us in Moscow and interfered in our arms deal. If she's as important to Darhk as you say, then she must've gotten orders from him. Which means he either does not trust the Bratva or thinks we are dispensable. Why did you not expose her from the get-go?" Isabel challenged.

Oliver let out a frustrated sigh and shook his head. "Isabel, you seem to think that you are more important than you are. You've forgotten your place and if it wasn't for these two thugs and their guns, you would have absolutely no authority right now. Do you even realize what you've done? Threatening a council member is a serious offense. I could have you executed for this."

"This is not about H.I.V.E. This is Bratva business, and Anatoly made us partners. Therefore, I have every right to find out whether you've been compromised or are double-dealing with Darhk behind our backs." She haughtily continued, "Besides, Anatoly as our pahkan and a council member gave me his blessing to investigate you once I reminded him of Felicity's alias."

"Investigate?" Oliver replied. Felicity could see him turning the word over in his head before realization struck him. "I see. Maybe that's true, but I doubt he would've okayed any further action."

"Viktor said earlier that Anatoly didn't send them," John spoke up and glared at her captors. "So who's lying now?"
"I'm asking the questions!" Isabel shrilled, which just confirmed to Felicity her earlier suspicions that the woman had gone rogue.

"Oliver, don't listen to her," Felicity rushed out. "She's just pissed you dumped her and wants me out of the way so she can be your Russian trophy wife."

"Silence!"

"That's enough," Viktor added and pressed the gun harder against her skull.

"Go to hell," Felicity gritted out.

She noticed movement in her peripheral vision and cringed upon seeing Viktor's hand come up. He was going to strike her, but the blow never came. Something small flew out of Oliver's free hand and struck Viktor in the arm. The mobster cried out before Oliver was charging toward him. Shots rang out, and Felicity screamed as she saw one whiz by Oliver's side. There was a tear in his leather jacket and blood started to drip out, but he didn't stop his pursuit. Abram was firing in the opposite direction, trying to hit John who'd managed to duck behind the bar.

When Oliver reached Viktor, the impact knocked into her chair and Felicity was thrown sideways. She fell hard on her right side and whimpered. The pain was a secondary concern as she watched Oliver exchange blows with the large, angry Russian mobster. Viktor's left arm was hanging limply by his side as he tried to fight off Oliver, who was so ferocious and quick it was almost hard to register all of his movements properly.

Eventually, Oliver overpowered Viktor and threw his unconscious body off to the side. Oliver's gaze swept the room until he spotted Isabel. She was using the current distraction to slink toward the door and escape. Oliver headed her off, and the pair struggled. He blocked most of her strikes before capturing Isabel's arm and twisting it behind her. She cried out as he proceeded to slam her face-down on a nearby table. Isabel struggled against him, but it was no use. Oliver's grip was too strong.

Despite the pain in her side, Felicity tried to listen to what Oliver and Isabel were saying. They were arguing in Russian. Whatever Isabel said incensed Oliver. He tightened his hold on her and growled a reply that sounded menacing even in another language. Felicity's attention was so caught up in watching them that she jumped when a pair of hands landed on her.

"It's okay. It's only me," John reassured her. He must've taken out Abram.

Felicity breathed a sigh of relief when she heard him whip out the knife and proceed to cut the zip ties binding her.

"Are you all right?"

"I think so," she answered. "What are they saying?"

Regardless of her vulnerable position, Isabel was shouting at Oliver and trying to kick out at him. He yelled back and twisted her arm harder.

"It's honestly better if you don't know. Trust me," John muttered. "There you go."

Felicity finally felt her hands release, and she breathed a sigh of relief. The muscles in her arms felt stiff and sore from being bound for so long. Her wrists were red and swollen, and her body was shaky. John moved the chair away from her and helped Felicity to sit up.

He advised, "Take it easy for a minute."
She did just that but couldn't help staring at Oliver worriedly. He was still bleeding from his wound. "Oliver," she called to him. He didn't hear her at first. Felicity spoke louder, and the urgency in her voice finally broke through his enraged haze.

"Diggle," Oliver said and gestured to Isabel.

John took his cue and went to keep Isabel restrained while Oliver knelt down before Felicity. "Hey, sweetheart, it's all right," he comforted her. "You're safe." He wiped away a few tears she hadn't even realized had fallen.

Felicity wanted nothing more than to throw her arms around Oliver and clutch him tightly. But she didn't want to hurt him with his wound, so she held back. "Oliver, you were shot," Felicity pointed out and attempted to draw his jacket open to get a look at the damage.

"It's nothing. It's just a graze," he reassured. "Are you all right?" His thumb gently brushed against her swollen left cheek. He must've known Isabel laid hands on her, because she saw anger once again flare in his eyes.

"Mostly," Felicity answered. "I just want to go home."

"We're leaving now."

"What about Isabel?" she asked.

"If you kill me, not even Darhk will be able to save you from Anatoly," the brunette spit out.

Right then, Oliver's cell phone rang. "Speak of the devil," he muttered upon seeing Anatoly's name flash across his screen. Oliver accepted the call and put it on speaker.

"Oliver, where are you? I received very a distressing call from Damien moments ago."

"Then you already know where I am," Oliver retorted, not even feigning politeness. He helped Felicity stand and tucked her into his uninjured side. She leaned against him, drawing strength and comfort from his embrace.

"I am on my way over now. We will discuss what happened over drinks like civilized men when I arrive."

"There was nothing civilized about this," he pushed back, "and I'm not staying. Both my fiancée and I are injured, and I'm getting her the hell out of here to safety."

"I will call in the doctor. You have my word that no harm will come to either of you. But please, Oliver, we must talk," he insisted.

"Isabel said you let her investigate me. How the hell could you allow this? If you had concerns, you should've come to me. She had no right to abduct Felicity and hold a gun to her head," he angrily retorted.

"I am sorry for that. I did not give her permission to harm your Felicity in any way. She got carried away."

"That's an understatement," he griped.

"But I do know that your woman is not who she says she is. I have concerns, and you have been avoiding me. You spend too much time with Damien and Malcolm these days and forget your
brothers in the Bratva," he replied contemptuously, revealing his own frustration. "You told them you were engaged and never even came to me, your pahkan. Surely, you see how disrespectful that was—after everything I have done for you."

"I don't need your permission, Anatoly, or theirs. It was my choice."

"I understand you have history with Felicity. But it is obvious she clouds your judgment. You lied and disobeyed my order in Moscow for her. So, yes, I am concerned about what is really going on with my favorite nephew."

"I was protecting what was mine then, and I'm doing it again now."

Their eyes met, and she felt Oliver's hold on her tighten. A shiver ran up Felicity's spine at his possessive declaration, but his stare told a different story. Regardless of the alpha male bluster he was giving Anatoly, Oliver was silently and tenderly communicating to her that she would always be his priority. Felicity slid her hand up further over his chest and rested it over his heart. She could feel it racing beneath her palm.

"Oliver, what have you done to Isabel in your rage?" Anatoly questioned, concerned.

"She's still alive if that's what you're asking—even though I'd have every right to put a bullet in her head for what she's done today," He swiftly added, "You created this mess, so I expect you to keep her in line. But you should know that I won't be so merciful if she comes after mine again."

"Oliver—"

He cut the call and addressed John. "We need to get out of here. Put her in lock-up. She can wait in there until Anatoly arrives."

"What's that?" Felicity interjected

"The Bratva has a few cells down the hall. It's for unruly patrons or cheats since calling the SCPD isn't an option."

"Oh," she muttered.

Oliver picked up on her disappointment at such a lackluster punishment and gave her a comforting squeeze. "Dig, careful not to misplace the keys," he added.

John smirked, understanding. "Right. There's no telling how long she'd be stuck in that cramped, dirty cell. It'd be terrible. Definitely don't want that."

Isabel was seething as John hauled her up. "First Helena and now this one," she sneered. "You never could think with the right head, could you, Oliver?"

He opened his mouth to issue a retort, but Felicity quickly detached herself from him and approached Isabel. "Hey, pumpkin," she called.

Once Isabel turned toward her, Felicity's fist came flying up and connected forcefully with the brunette's face. If it weren't for John holding onto her, Isabel would've been on the floor. She was going to have one hell of a bruise—much worse than the one she'd given to Felicity. The blonde grinned from ear to ear in satisfaction. Although her already sore hand was burning from the additional pain, it was totally worth it.
Oliver sat on Felicity's bed pretending to read his car magazine. His mind was a swirl of tumultuous thoughts as he worked up the nerve to talk to her. At first he didn't want to disturb his girlfriend. Felicity had needed to work on her entry for the IT competition, and he'd promised to give her space to concentrate on her task.

Felicity sat at the end of the bed with her laptop and a bunch of papers scattered around her. They were intermixed with junk food wrappers and a now empty box of pizza. Felicity had insisted she needed snacks to focus and stay awake into the night. It was almost midnight now, which meant she'd been at it for a few hours. Oliver didn't mind that she was preoccupied. One of his favorite things about dating Felicity was that simply being near her was enough sometimes. They didn't have to talk or touch for him to feel content, and it seemed Felicity felt the same.

His girlfriend looked adorable totally engrossed in her task. Felicity was in her pajamas, which was a simple tank top and shorts. Her dark hair was up in a messy bun with a red pen sticking through it. She'd pull it out when she needed to write something down. Felicity was also wearing her glasses and frequently pushed them back up her nose as she worked. Without removing her eyes from the computer, she reached out for another string of licorice. She popped it into her mouth, chewing on the end, as she typed at a rapid pace.

Oliver wished he had her level of focus right now. He wished he could disappear into his car magazine and quiet the excitement and doubt battling within him. The issue he needed to talk to her about had been plaguing him for a couple of weeks, finally culminating over the last couple of days. Having finally made a decision about his future, it was time to get her input. Oliver wasn't sure what Felicity might say in response, but he was trying not to psych himself out too much. He didn't want to pressure her or get his own hopes up.

After a few minutes, Felicity let out a sigh and tilted her head back. She rubbed the back of her neck and stretched out her muscles. They must be aching from being hunched over her computer for hours. It was time, he realized. Oliver tossed his magazine aside and crawled toward her. The moment his hands touched her shoulders and began kneading them, she moaned.

"Oh my God, that feels good," she muttered and leaned more into him.

"You've been working for hours. You need a break."

Felicity hummed in agreement. The more he worked out the knots in her muscles, the more relaxed she became.

"That better?"

"Almost." She reached an arm behind her to pull him down.

Oliver met her lips halfway in an affectionate kiss. He could taste the sweet remnants of licorice on her tongue and playfully bit her lip. She giggled, and the sound vibrated through him.

"If you're still hungry, there might be some pizza..." her teasing words trailed off when she saw the empty box. "Frack. Did we really eat all of it?"

"I had a few slices. You had most of it."

Felicity blinked in confusion. "I did?" She was in such a haze working on her project, she didn't even remember doing that. Also taking in the empty wrappers, she muttered, "Well, I'm going to be fat and bloated tomorrow."
"You're not fat," Oliver immediately replied. "You're perfect." He pecked her lips once more.

"Not true at all, but I'm glad you think so," Felicity joked, feeling her cheeks warm at the compliment. "I miss you."

His eyebrow quirked. "I'm right here, sweetheart."

"I know, but I was in coding mode. Now I feel like I'm coming out of a trance," she quipped, causing him to chuckle. "Sorry I was such boring company tonight."

"Hey, you said you had work to do. It's totally fine. Besides, I love being with you no matter what we're doing."

"Aw," she murmured and beamed up at him. Her boyfriend had the uncanny ability to turn her into emotional goo at times. "So, what were you doing? Thinking of getting a new car?" She eyed his magazine.

"Mostly thinking but not about cars."

"Then what?"

"There's something I need to talk to you about."

The nervous undertone to his voice made her frown. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes. It's nothing bad. At least I don't think it is," he added. "I'm hoping it can be a good thing, but you might feel differently. I don't know so—"

"Oliver, honey," she interjected, "I'm usually the one who babbles." Felicity shifted on the bed so that she was facing him directly. Bringing her hand to his cheek, she said, "Just talk to me. Whatever it is, we'll figure it out together."

Oliver kissed the inside of her palm. "I was hoping you'd say that." He interlaced their fingers and took a much-needed breath before continuing. "It's about school in the fall and my future in general. My father has been on my case about it and even Malcolm's been mentioning it, which means my dad has probably been complaining to him, too."

"You're talking about what happened at the game the other day?"

"Yeah. And that's my dad's version of subtle," he muttered dejectedly.

"Well, are you worried about finishing your degree?"

"No—well, maybe a little," Oliver admitted. "But that's not what's been bothering me. Mostly I can't stop thinking about you leaving to go back to MIT."

Felicity squeezed his hand. "I know. I've been thinking about it, too. Or maybe trying not to is more accurate," she corrected. They only had a little over a month left to spend together before she headed back to school, and the summer had already seemed to fly by. Every time she tried to imagine saying good-bye to Oliver, it felt like a knife to her heart.

Oliver realized this was his chance. He took a deep breath to center himself. "Felicity, what would you think about me joining you in Boston?"

"You mean to visit or—"
"No, to finish my degree."

"I thought you were going to SCU?"

"I'm supposed to, if my parents have their way, but that can change. I've been looking into a few schools that are close to MIT, but I don't want to pursue anything unless you're okay with it," Oliver explained. "I don't want you to feel overwhelmed or like I'm encroaching on your life out there."

Felicity started back at him, a little shocked, and questioned, "Is moving to Boston what you want, or what you think I want?"

"Honestly, aside from finishing up my degree, I'm not entirely sure what my future will hold. But what I do know, with absolute certainty, is that I love you and want to be with you while I'm figuring it out." He brought his hand to her face and stroked her cheek, holding her gaze for a long moment. "So, what do you think?"

Her eyes watered at his declaration, and she threw her arms around him. "Yes, of course I would love for you to join me in Boston." Felicity grazed his lips. "I love you, too. So much." It felt amazing to officially hear and say the words. "Nothing would make me happier."

Relief and joy swept through Oliver, although he still couldn't quite believe it. "Really?"

Felicity nodded and swiped her thumb along the underside of his jaw. Their noses nuzzled, and she was practically beaming against his lips. "I love every moment that I'm with you, no matter where we are." She kissed him lovingly. "You've changed everything, and I can't imagine being parted from you. It hurts just thinking about it."

"I know what you mean," Oliver murmured, claiming her lips in an even more passionate kiss. "God, I love you." It wouldn't be the last time he told her that tonight. In fact, he was only just beginning. The words that would've scared Oliver several weeks ago now gave him the most wonderful sense of freedom. He also loved the affect they had on Felicity, since she held onto him tighter and couldn't stop smiling against his mouth.

"What colleges were you thinking about?" Felicity inquired in between kisses. "We should make a list and—"

Oliver chuckled. His genius girlfriend's mind was always going a mile a minute. He covered her mouth more fully to silence her while he reached for the elastic in her hair. After a gentle tug, her dark locks were freed and he buried his hands in the silky strands. "There's plenty of time for research later, sweetheart," he told her.

Goose bumps broke out on Felicity's flesh when he trailed his hand down the middle of her spine and gripped the hem of her shirt. He slid it back up and over her head. She let out a soft moan when their bare chests met. Oliver's skin already felt so hot, and she shivered as his warmth began to seep into her.

"You're probably right," she breathed and gripped his strong, broad shoulders.

He removed her glasses and carefully set them aside before kissing her more deeply. In one quick motion, clearly showcasing his strength, Oliver flipped them over so she was lying in the center of the bed. They stayed like that for several minutes, feeling the sexual tension building between them but also wanting to take their time to love and explore together. With a plan for their future in place, they knew they had all the time in the world.
Placing her hand in a bowl of ice water, Felicity let out a sharp groan. Her hand was still throbbing from hitting Isabel. "See, this is why I usually leave the punching to you guys," she muttered.

Felicity, Oliver, and John had returned to the Queen mansion several minutes ago. They all had wounds that needed to be iced and tended to. Oliver had it the worst, though. His gunshot wound was just a graze, but it had been bleeding a fair amount and required stitches. Despite the squeamishness she felt at seeing John threading the needle through Oliver's bare flesh, Felicity couldn't keep her eyes averted for long. Her chaotic mind needed to see that he was okay in order to be reassured.

Oliver must've shared a similar desire, because he was staring right back. He'd asked her a few times if she was okay and had felt a couple of tender areas to check for more serious injuries. Aside from the bruises and some swelling, Felicity was mostly all right. She tried to flex her fingers and hissed from the pain, which drew his scrutiny once again.

"It was a memorable punch," Oliver replied, offering her a small but proud grin. "Just keep it iced for a bit. It'll help."

"Does that hurt?" Felicity questioned.

Oliver glanced down and watched as John finished stitching him up. "Not as bad as some things." It hurt but even without the anesthetic, he'd experienced pain much worse than this before.

His primary concern was for Felicity. Her fist wasn't the only battered part of her body. The red handprint on her cheek from Isabel striking her was fully formed and sent a renewed rage through Oliver. He couldn't kill Isabel without causing some serious drama in the Bratva but a shot in her kneecap could've gotten his message across just fine. Oliver had always known she was ruthless but never expected her to challenge him in such a manner. He was glad they'd left the casino when they did, because there was no telling what Oliver would've said or done to Anatoly when he arrived. He wasn't thinking straight at all.

Diggle placed a bandage over Oliver's tended wound. "That should do it."

"Thanks, Dig." Oliver replied and slipped his shirt back on. His look conveyed that it was for more than just the patch-up. He knew his partner felt guilty for allowing Felicity and himself to be overpowered, but Oliver didn't blame him. They hadn't known the Bratva would be an issue on top of all their other enemies. And Dig had more than made up for it by having his back when he'd stormed the casino. Now that they knew the full extent of the threat from the Bratva, they'd be more prepared in the future.

Dig nodded. "I've tightened security, but I'm going to do a sweep just to make sure we're covered. You two need anything else before I go?"

"I'm okay. Thank you again, John," Felicity added.

"No need to thank me. I'm just glad you're all right, Felicity. I promise it won't ever happen again."

"It might," she said honestly, causing both men's eyes to widen. While she understood that John was trying to reassure her, it would be naïve to assume a similar situation wouldn't occur when the level of danger they faced was so high. "Although I certainly hope it doesn't. Either way, I'm confident you'll have my back, John." The tension had been high when she'd first gotten into the car with those armed Bratva thugs. But John, despite the anger she could see simmering below the surface, had kept the situation calm. He'd also freed her and stayed by her side while Oliver dealt with Isabel.
"I do. And my friends call me Dig."

Understanding passed between them and she nodded, offering a friendly smile. "Dig," she repeated.

He returned her smile and left the kitchen. When Felicity glanced back at Oliver, she expected to see a look of approval on his face that she and Dig had finally reached common ground. His expression was pensive and tense. A moment later, he stepped away from the island and went to the freezer. He got a small ice pack and gingerly pressed it against her cheek. His eyes were haunted and penetrating.

"Oliver, are you sure you're—" The words died in her throat when he reached out a hand and gently stroked her cheek in a feather-light touch.

"I'm so sorry," he muttered, looking pained. "All I do is keep hurting you."

"You didn't do this," Felicity swiftly denied. "It was Isabel and Anatoly."

"It's my fault," he asserted. "Because of my past actions and mistakes. I don't know what the hell I was ever thinking with Isabel…" He mumbled that last part more to himself.

Oliver had always known Isabel was a snake and yet he'd bedded her anyway. He'd done so many terrible things, it seemed logical that that was the kind of woman he deserved. A woman who was cold and devious, because she'd learned to harden her heart just like him. A part of Oliver knew he'd regret it someday, but he had never thought Felicity would be the one to suffer for his serious lack of judgment. He'd rather Isabel pulled the trigger on him than dare to even point the gun at Felicity.

"I can't necessarily argue with you on the Isabel thing. It wasn't your most shining moment. Of all the women over the age of consent in Russia, why you decided to go with her—"

"I plead temporary insanity," he interjected, his tone regretful. "I'm sorry."

Felicity was silent for a moment, watching him. Finally, she declared, "While I appreciate and would normally relish an Oliver Queen apology, this wasn't your fault."

"What? Of course it is."

"No, it's not," she objected.

"Don't do that," Oliver murmured, his voice strained.

"Do what?"

"Make excuses for me. I don't deserve it."

"I'm not making excuses," Felicity retorted. "I just don't want you taking the blame for other people's actions. My involvement with A.R.G.U.S. and that mission played a role in it, too. The reason they are questioning you now is because you helped me."

"There was no choice to make," he stated. "I would do it again."

"I know you would. Just like I would make the same choice to protect your identity from A.R.G.U.S. again," Felicity revealed. "Besides, Isabel might've been a woman scorned but it ended up being about so much more than that. There is some serious tension brewing between the Bratva and H.I.V.E. You heard what Anatoly said on the phone, and Isabel made similar accusations to us both. If the Bratva is feeling taken advantage of by Darhk, then I'm willing to bet maybe some of the
other crime families are, too. We can use this."

"How?"

"I'm not sure yet. We might need to do some more digging, but at least we got something out of this ordeal." Oliver didn't look totally convinced, but Felicity knew it was because the guilt was eating away at him. She hopped off the stool to stand toe to toe with him. Raising her good hand, she cupped his jaw and forced him to meet her gaze. "My father put us in the middle of this mess. You saved me."

"Felicity—"

"You saved me," she asserted. "I won't deny that I was scared, but never for one second did I think you wouldn't get me out of there." She caressed his cheek, causing his eyes to momentarily close. "I was right to trust you."

Felicity would never forget the moment Oliver had come through the door. He'd used one of the men he'd been fighting to actually break through it. She'd seen glimpses of Bratva Oliver, but Felicity had never seen him actually fight—excluding that one time she'd unknowingly fought him. He was strong, fierce, and unyielding like some kind of warrior. It was actually extremely sexy now that she thought about it, and his presence had broken through some of the fear despite the gun being held to her head.

"I wanted to kill her. I wanted to kill all of them for hurting you," he admitted hoarsely. He swiped a finger along her reddened cheek and took her swollen hand in his. Oliver knew he shouldn't be touching Felicity so liberally, but he couldn't help it. He was shaken and needed to feel her and prove to himself that she was with him and safe. There would be no way to easily forget what had happened today. If anything, it just reinforced the very real danger they were facing every day now.

"But you didn't." It wasn't a challenge. Felicity actually sounded proud of his restraint.

"It was my right to protect you, but it would've put us all in more danger if I'd taken their lives."

"I understand." Felicity felt a slight tremor coursing through him while gazing into his tortured eyes. "They hurt you, too," she quietly pointed out, and the look she gave him implied that it was more than just physical.

Oliver heaved a shaky breath before abruptly pulling her fully into his embrace. Felicity went willingly and wrapped her arms around him, careful not to lean into his wound. He buried his face in her neck and let out a low groan when her fingers started to run through his hair. She needed to feel that he was real, too. They stayed like that for a few silent, charged minutes.

When Oliver finally drew back, something that had been said earlier occurred to her. "Oliver, did you tell Darhk about what happened?" Felicity questioned. "Anatoly mentioned he got a call from him."

"Darhk was here. Isabel's call interrupted our discussion." He felt her immediately tense. He was quick to reassure her, "I wouldn't let him near Connor. Raisa took him back to the nursery while we spoke."

Only a little of the tension inside her body was quelled. A visit from Darhk could never mean anything good. "What did he want?"

"He had a proposition for me—for us," he corrected. "Basically, he doesn't want me in the shadows anymore. He offered to let me be Oliver Queen again."
"You always were Oliver Queen," she retorted.

"Technically, I've been dead. And now he thinks I should be...un-dead. It's complicated," Oliver sighed. It was an important new development they should talk about, but he just didn't have the energy right now to get into it. When he expressed as much to Felicity, she agreed to discuss it tomorrow and let it drop. "How did it go with Mei today?"

Felicity didn't think it was possible for her muscles to be wound any tighter, but they were. "I told Mei everything and gave her the evidence. In forty-eight hours, we'll know whether they're willing to work with us or not."

Oliver watched her closely and noticed how Felicity was having trouble holding is gaze. The crinkle between her eyebrows was back. " Anything else?"

She paused, struggling with whether to tell Oliver the rest of the information she'd learned from Mei about the Suicide Squad. Making a decision, she replied, "Yes, but it can wait for now." Oliver already looked stressed after what happened today. She couldn't add to his burdens.

"You're sure you're all right?"

"Yeah. I just need to get out of these clothes." Felicity bit her lip upon realizing how sexually charged her words had sounded. When Oliver's eyes didn't dark and instead maintained their concern, it was obvious he was still reeling from the day's events. "You know what always makes me feel better after a long day?"

"What?"

"Hugs from Connor. And I'd say his dad definitely needs one." She offered him an encouraging smile.

Oliver nearly felt the breath whoosh out of him upon hearing Felicity call him Connor's dad. It was the first time she'd ever said it directly. The warmth of her words chased away some of the chill residing in his bones. "Okay," he murmured. "Just as long as his mom joins us."

Felicity ignored the way her heart skipped a beat. "I will. I just need a shower first."

"I'll let Raisa know we're ready for dinner soon, too. Dig's probably hungry, and Sara is on her way."

"Does she know what happened?"

"Dig texted her a little while ago. Of course, she was worried sick. It'll be a miracle if she doesn't get a speeding ticket on her way back here," he wryly remarked.

"Right." Felicity had forgotten that they were still holding onto each other and awkwardly extricated herself from Oliver's embrace. After the disaster of a day they'd all had, having dinner together sounded really nice. She needed a bit of normalcy—and to hold her precious baby boy for a few hours at the very least. "I'll be quick, too, then."

"I'll be waiting,"

Chapter End Notes
As always, thank you all for taking the time to comment and leave kudos! Next chapter is titled "Talking Body" and will be a flashback.
Okay, guys, last chapter you got protective Bratva Oliver. Get ready for some sexy jealous Oliver in this one! As always, thank you so much for taking the time to comment and leave kudos. I love hearing from you all! Hope this chapter satisfies your Olicity craving as we begin hiatus. Enjoy!

August 10, 2007

Observing his reflection, Oliver finished shaving and washed the cream off of his face. He felt along his jaw to make sure that he hadn't missed any spots and was satisfied with the smooth result. He then ran his fingers through his slightly damp hair to get it back in place. Reaching for his hair dryer, he was just about to turn it on when there was a knock on the bathroom door. Excitement spiked in his veins at the possibility of it being Felicity. Maybe she wanted to sneak in a few minutes to themselves before their busy night began.

"Come in," Oliver called. He tried not to let his disappointment show when he saw that it was Tommy.

His best friend entered with his hands covering his eyes and dramatically asked, "You're not naked, are you?"

Oliver tightened the knot of the towel that hung around his waist and assured his friend that it was safe. "What's up?" Tommy was already fully dressed for their night out. He had on dark jeans, a light gray shirt, and sporty leather jacket.

"You need to stop going to the gym so much," his best friend commented.

He frowned. "Why?"

"Because your eight-pack is making my measly six look bad."

Oliver chuckled and shook his head. "Or you could just join me more often," he suggested.

"Nah. Too much work," Tommy jokingly dismissed.

"So, did you come in here to admire my abs or what?" Oliver teased back.

"They are impressive but no. I checked in on Felicity and Sara. They need a little more time. And judging by your half-naked appearance, I'd say the same goes for you."

"I'm almost done. Just got to finish my hair and get dressed." He'd already picked out his outfit—a black button down shirt and khakis.

Tommy smirked and quipped, "There's another half hour."

"Hey, I'm not that bad."
"You're a primper."

"Don't think I haven't noticed you checking yourself out in my mirror since you came in here," Oliver shot back. "You're as bad as me."

"Whatever," Tommy chuckled. "Don't forget we have a bit of a drive ahead of us. You and Felicity are so scandalous we have to leave the city to have a night out."

"Let's not forget who encouraged that whole kiss cam incident," Oliver reminded him. He turned the hair dryer on low, so he could finish getting ready but also hear his friend.

Ever since the baseball game, every gossip rag in town had been speculating that he and Felicity were dating. Dodging the paparazzi on a regular basis was a challenge, which only proved how much worse it would be if their suspicions were confirmed. It was why they'd decided to go to a club in Cove City tonight instead. They weren't as well-known there and wouldn't have to worry about pictures of their group ending up in the headlines the following morning.

"Hey, I didn't want the crowd to riot from disappointment," he teased. "Although, it is kinda insane how much of a stir you two have caused considering."

Oliver shut off the dryer and looked at his friend in the mirror. "Considering what?"

"Yes, you're you and Felicity is just... she's Felicity."

"Meaning?" It was a challenge to sound casual, especially since Tommy's tone seemed so dismissive.

"Come on, Ollie, you have to admit it's ridiculous that you and Felicity are being paired up. You're so different. Not to mention the age gap."

"Our differences haven't stopped us from being friends. And the age gap isn't that big," he pointed out. Again, Oliver needed to conceal his irritation.

"I know. I'm talking about dating. It's..." He was searching for some kind of explanation before shaking his head. "Nevermind. The paparazzi is crazy anyway."

"Yeah, crazy," Oliver muttered stiffly. It wasn't Tommy's fault that he didn't know the truth, but it was also disheartening to hear his best friend scoff so easily at the idea.

"You know what could probably make all this gossip disappear? Finally revealing that mystery girl you've been dating. You are still dating her, right?"

He reached for his cologne in an effort to keep himself occupied. He didn't want Tommy to notice how uncomfortable this topic was making him. "Yes."

"Maybe you should invite her out with us tonight. It'd be great to finally meet her. We could go to a club in Starling instead and finally put the rumors of you and Felicity to rest. They can't be easy for your girl to hear either."

"We're not ready for that yet," he objected.

"Why not?"

"Because, Tommy," Oliver said in exasperation, "I'm not going to use the woman I love like that just to appease the media." He reached for his brush and started combing his hair with a little too much
It took a minute to realize that his friend hadn't responded. When Oliver glanced at him, Tommy was staring back in astonishment. "You love her?"

"Huh?"

"You just said 'the woman I love,'" he quoted back. "The last time I asked you about her, you said you didn't know. But now you do?"

There was no use denying it. Oliver did love Felicity and even if he couldn't reveal her identity just yet, he could at least acknowledge his feelings for her. "Yes, I do."

Tommy pressed, "Love or in love?"

"I'm in love with her," he stated, holding his best friend's gaze.

"What about Laurel?"

"What about her?" Oliver retorted. This time, he did let his irritation come through. "We broke up, Tommy. It's over. Why do you keep bringing her up?"

"Because I've known the both of you for years, Oliver, and this always happens. You break up, and then get back together. I need to know if you're actually serious this time."

"I am serious. This is different. How many of those other times have I said I'm in love? None," he defended. "And what's it to you anyway? Did Laurel put you up to this?"

"No!" Tommy denied. "You're my best friend, Oliver, so sue me for being curious about what's going on with you. I've noticed the changes, and I'm not saying they're bad. In fact, you seem really happy and that's great. But you're way more secretive lately, and I have to wonder why."

"What about you?" Oliver retorted. "You haven't exactly been as forthcoming either. I haven't seen you bring any of your dates back to the loft, and you don't tell me who you're seeing or where you're going. And you used to tell me everything—probably with a little too much detail."

A flash of emotion, looking strangely like guilt, flitted across Tommy's face before disappearing again. "Well, why should I share anything with you if you won't share anything with me?" his best friend challenged.

Oliver scrubbed his hand over his face in frustration. This could go on all night if he let it. Sighing, he replied, "Look, Tommy, I'm sorry. But you have to let me have this one for now. I promise to eventually tell you everything once it's all figured out. It's just...it's complicated. Don't let this ruin our night before it starts." He hated hiding the truth from his best friend, but Oliver knew it was for the best. Until he knew which school he'd be attending in the fall and his plans to move to Boston were finalized, he and Felicity had decided that maintaining their privacy was necessary.

Tommy crossed his arms with a huff, staring him down, before finally easing up. "Fine," he agreed. "I won't press you again on the mystery girl until you're ready to tell me."

"He nodded his head in thanks. "I have to finish getting dressed. Unless you need a few more minutes to ogle my abs."

The comment had the intended affect and broke the tension. Tommy rolled his eyes but smirked despite himself. "Smug bastard. You owe me shots tonight."
“Deal.”

Once Tommy left, Oliver finished getting dressed. He rolled the sleeves up on his shirt to give it a more casual look. He then joined Tommy in the living room to wait for the girls to finish up in the guest room. Since they were making a night of it, it made more sense for them all to leave from and later return to the same place—especially since Tommy hired a driver for the night.

The pair watched some game highlights on the TV when they finally heard the door to the guest room open. The clack of heels rang out in the apartment as the girls walked along the landing and descended down the stairs. When Oliver glanced up, he instantly felt his mouth go dry. Felicity was wearing a tight, short black dress that perfectly showed off her tanned and toned legs. The dress was sleeveless with two sets of straps revealing her shoulders. Part of it was also cut out on the sides along her waist. Oliver’s eyes were glued to Felicity the entire time.

“Okay, I know Felicity isn’t actually my sister, but is it wrong that I think she looks hot in that dress?” Tommy mumbled to him.

Oliver felt an unexpected, red hot jolt of irritation at Tommy’s comment. He caught himself and quickly schooled his features, trying to remember that this was his best friend. Tommy’s comment was innocent and certainly not wrong. Felicity did look hot. Her dark locks fell perfectly in waves along her shoulders. Her eyes were all done up with makeup, and her lips were painted a bright red.

“Judging by your drooling, I’d say we did good tonight,” Sara declared and nudged Felicity. The blonde was dressed in black leather pants and a halter top with similar makeup.

“You look…” Oliver let his eyes roam over Felicity again before finally meeting her expectant stare. She bit her lip coyly, blushing, and he nearly moaned. If it weren’t for Tommy and Sara, Oliver would’ve already pulled her into his arms and kissed her senseless. She looked absolutely stunning. Clearing his throat and making sure to glance at Sara, Oliver continued, “You both look great.”

“Maybe too great. We’ll probably have to beat the guys away with a stick tonight,” Tommy joked.

“Don’t you dare, Merlyn. Felicity and I are looking fabulous for a reason. We are going to attract all the hotties and have some real fun,” Sara announced.

Oliver felt another intense wave of annoyance at the thought of Felicity being surrounded by a bunch of guys. Knowing Sara, combined with that sexy dress, that’s exactly what would happen. But it’s not like Oliver could object without it looking suspicious.

“I doubt it’ll be that dramatic,” Felicity dismissed. “I don’t need to attract all the hotties. Just one will do.” So quickly the others would’ve missed it, her eyes flicked over to Oliver.

His temperature spiked as a certain part of his anatomy twitched in his trousers. Before he did or said something that would really get him and Felicity in trouble, he reminded them of their ride waiting. They allowed the girls to go ahead of them, which was a huge mistake. Oliver nearly choked on his tongue when he saw that the back of Felicity’s dress was mostly open, exposing almost all of her skin. His fingers itched to touch her as his shaft lurched yet again with arousal.

When Felicity coyly peeked over her shoulder and gave him a flirty wink, he knew this night would be nothing short of torture.

Felicity’s body was extremely overheated, and it had absolutely nothing to do with the overcrowded
club. It wasn't that she and Sara were on the dance floor swaying to some bass-thumping techno song. It wasn't that they were surrounded by a bunch of eager guys competing to get their attention. The burning sensation in her cheeks and flush of her skin had nothing to do with any of that and everything to do with her boyfriend's piercing stare from across the dance floor.

From the moment she'd left Oliver's side, Felicity had felt his hungry eyes on her as if he'd actually reached out and touched her. Of course, he'd done no such thing and managed to keep his hands to himself. She'd observed the tightness in his body the entire ride over to the club as he suppressed whatever urges she evoked in him. Felicity would be lying if she didn't admit her own body was taut and humming with similar sexual tension.

The dress she wore did its job a little too well. When Tommy suggested they were all due for a fun night out, Felicity had wanted to choose something sexy and edgy. Something outside her comfort zone that would completely blow her boyfriend's mind hold his attention, since they wouldn't exactly be able to act like a couple. In fact, Felicity was fully prepared to endure watching her boyfriend being approached by all sorts of women tonight. Oliver was young, handsome, and clearly rich. No one here would easily identify him—given that they weren't in Starling City—but the car they'd pulled up in, the wad of cash given to the bouncer at the door, and endless flow of drinks would attract plenty of eager and opportunistic females to his side. And that's exactly what happened.

Oliver currently stood over by the bar with Tommy. A group of scantily-clad women surrounded them. They smiled, batted their pretty eyes, and laughed at everything the pair said. A few even dared to place their hands on their arms or chests. Although Felicity had been prepared for it and wasn't normally the jealous type, she still felt the fierce urge to march over there, push all those bitches out of the way, and kiss Oliver so passionately there would be no question that he was hers.

Instead, Felicity remained rooted in her spot on the dance floor. The only satisfaction she did have was that every time she did sneak a glance over at Oliver, he was already looking in her direction. He'd been speechless and in awe when he'd first seen her outfit, and that attraction only seemed to intensify as the night wore on. Apparently, she wasn't the only one feeling a flare of possessiveness.

Felicity had turned a lot of other heads with her outfit, and it wasn't long before she and Sara were approached by multiple guys wanting to join in on the action. She didn't turn them down and danced casually. But since the dance floor was so packed, it was impossible not to have her body brush against theirs. And when some guy did put his hands on her to bring her closer, she was highly aware of Oliver's formidable stare the entire time. It was so intense even Sara had taken notice.

"Jeez, what's up with Oliver?" she'd shouted to Felicity over the music.

"Huh?"

"He's been watching us like a hawk. The guy has barely blinked."

"He's probably just following Tommy's lead. You know how protective they both can get."

"Well, Ollie needs to lighten up. Or maybe we should just give him a better show," Sara had teased and pulled Felicity toward her. They danced together, and the guys around them went wild.

Tommy eventually pulled a tall, sexy blonde onto the dance floor. She proceeded to rub up against him and while Tommy looked into it, Felicity also noticed him sneaking a few peeks at his phone. Was he expecting another message from his recent flavor of the month? He'd been on his phone texting someone most of the drive over. Felicity stared curiously for a few more seconds before dismissing it. It would be impossible to keep up with her stepbrother's demanding social life.
Eventually, Felicity let Sara know that she was in need of a drink and heading to the bar. Sara nodded, never once breaking the rhythm she’d found with her newest boy toy. He was only a few inches taller than her but cute and solidly built. One of Felicity’s admirers offered to accompany her to the bar. He’d been getting a little handsy and despite telling him that she was perfectly capable of getting her own drink, he’d insisted and followed her.

Oliver managed to break away from his hoard of admirers and meet her. "You okay?"

“Yeah, I just need a drink.” Felicity fanned her face. "It's hot in here."

"What do you want?"

"It's okay, man, I got it," her admirer cut in.

"Who are you?" Oliver gruffly questioned, not even trying to hide his annoyance.

"David," the guy introduced and held out a hand. He was just as tall as Oliver but not as built. Regardless, the guy tried to hold his own under Oliver's unrelenting glare. "Felicity and I just met on the dance floor. And you are?"

"Oh, Oliver is my..." Felicity trailed off, her mind drawing a sudden blank. She’d been ready to say boyfriend and was a little more than distracted by the staring contest going on between the two.

"I'm her stepbrother's best friend," Oliver answered. He still hadn't looked away.

"Nice to meet you," David coolly replied, though Felicity didn't miss the way he shook out his hand once Oliver finally let go. "That's a strong grip you got."

"I work out."

"Me, too. How much you bench?"

Oliver opened his mouth to answer when Felicity interjected, "I need a drink." She already knew where this pissing contest was headed and wanted to end it quickly. "David, how about I catch up with you a little later? I just need to chat with Oliver for a couple of minutes."

David seemed reluctant to leave but eventually took the hint. "Uh, sure. You owe me another dance."

Felicity smiled politely and turned for the bar. She felt Oliver right behind her. Lifting a hand, Felicity waved to get the bartender's attention. She cursed her lack of height when he didn't notice and busily took a bunch more orders for the others around them.

"I'll get him," Oliver offered. "What do you want?"

Despite having her fake ID on her, Felicity didn't want any alcohol tonight. "Diet Coke is fine."

Oliver easily called the bartender over and put in the order. He also got another beer for himself. Seconds later, Felicity felt his hand discretely trailing down the length of her bare back. Her eyes closed from the delicious sensation.

Looking up at him, Felicity saw that Oliver's pupils were slightly dilated and his eyes clouded. The shots he'd done with Tommy earlier must've taken effect. "Are you drunk?" she asked him outright, her voice breathier than she'd intended.

"Not yet. But if I have to watch Devon"—she reminded him it was David, but he didn't seem to care
—"with his hands all over you again, it won't be much longer."

"You've made a few lady friends yourself tonight," Felicity pointed out. She looked past Oliver and saw the flirty redhead—who'd obnoxiously had her body draped all over her boyfriend moments ago—and her group of friends watching them with interest.

He turned her around to face him. "I don't need any more friends. I want my girlfriend," he lowly rumbled.

Felicity bit her lip as the heat already scorching her body rose up higher. "You shouldn't look at me like that. People might get the wrong idea about us." Her tone was lightly scolding but teeming with excitement.

His eyes blatantly and intensely roamed up her curves before holding her gaze. "Then you should've worn a different dress, sweetheart."

The clinking of glasses on the countertop broke the spell. Felicity took large gulps of her soda to stave off the feverish desire she felt consuming her.

"I was thinking of exploring the upper level." He pointed to the stairs and balcony area above. "Want to join me?" His voice was thick, his eyes eager.

The second level was darker but no less crowded. It was the perfect place to disappear and remain unseen for a while. Felicity looked to the dance floor and was relieved to see both Tommy and Sara distracted by their new acquaintances. If she and Oliver were going to sneak away, now was their chance.

With a sultry smile, Felicity replied, "Lead the way."

Oliver held on tightly to Felicity's hand as he led her through the darkened room. The upper level had more of a VIP vibe with plenty of plush couches and tables. There was another small dance floor in the corner and a bar nearby. Despite that the space was wider for walking around, it was no less chaotic. Oliver's eyes scanned the room for shadowed, secluded corners. He settled on the furthest balcony from the stairs near the side wall. They didn't step onto the balcony fully. Instead, Oliver guided Felicity toward the large, dark curtain. With their black clothes, they blended right in.

His free hand sought her waist, and he pulled her against him. "Finally," Oliver muttered before swallowing her gasp with his lips.

Felicity eagerly kissed him back while wrapping her arm around his shoulder. "You should've joined me on the dance floor."

"You know I don't dance," he mumbled into her skin.

She tilted her head to give him better access to her neck. "Dancing equals touching. Nobody would've thought twice about it. Then you wouldn't have had to watch me with those other guys."

Oliver let out a low growl and lightly bit the juncture of her neck and shoulder. Felicity shivered from the sensation of his teeth sinking into her flesh while his hand cupped her backside. It was both carnal and possessive. "You know, you're kind of hot when you're jealous," she panted. His arousal pressed firmly into her stomach, which made the ache between her own legs intensify.
"And you're sexy as hell in this dress." Oliver pressed his body more firmly into hers and prided himself on eliciting another moan.

"I wore it for you." Felicity sucked on his bottom lip and nipped at it enticingly. "Only you."

He cursed under his breath and buried his head in the crook of her neck in an effort to grasp at whatever small thread of self-control he had left. They were mostly hidden in their little spot, but anyone could still walk up and see them if they dared to really look. That wouldn't do at all.

Sensing the tension rippling through Oliver's body beneath her fingertips, Felicity whispered, "You okay?"

"Yeah, I just..." Their foreheads touched. "I want you so bad right now." Oliver's entire body was in an upheaval. He'd felt turned on from the first moment he'd seen Felicity walk down the stairs in the loft.

That damn black dress hugged her curves and highlighted his favorite parts of her body so perfectly that he had considered dancing with her, despite his denial. Oliver, however, knew that'd be a mistake. Even the simplest of touches would've set him over the edge, and he didn't think he'd be able to keep himself in check. He felt like a man possessed.

"So do I." Felicity caressed the hairs at the nape of his neck and glanced around. "There must be someplace we can go."

Oliver shook his head. "Tommy and Sara will be wondering where we are. I just need a minute."

The strained look on her boyfriend's face and tautness of his body told Felicity he needed more than a minute. In truth, so did she. Oliver looked especially handsome tonight; combined with seeing all the women clawing at him earlier and being unable to actually do anything about it, Felicity felt herself in desperate need of reminding that he was hers.

"Oliver." The urgency in her voice got his attention. "I won't be able to sneak into your room tonight. It's now or never."

Felicity's mind raced to come up with a plan. She considered dragging Oliver outside and telling their driver to get lost for a while, but she wouldn't put it past Tommy or Sara to come looking for them at the car. Not to mention, there was the issue of the driver possibly blabbing to the tabloids about their suspicious behavior and outing them. The bathrooms (too crowded) and alleyway (too exposed) were also both out, which she'd hurriedly explained to him.

Oliver exhaled in frustration. Felicity had a point. Sara would be staying with her in the guest room and would surely notice her absence. And their options of where they could sneak off to in the club were disturbingly limited. The thought of not having Felicity at all tonight, especially looking as gorgeous as she did, brought Oliver physical pain. His eyes frantically searched the room and spotted a door across the way marked EMPLOYEES ONLY. An idea started to form in his head.

"Stay here a minute," Oliver told Felicity before rushing off toward the bar.

Felicity shuddered at the loss of his touch. Her frown transformed into a curious squint upon seeing Oliver walk behind the bar. The bartender put a hand out to halt him. Oliver cut him off and whispered something in his ear. She then watched as her boyfriend reached into his pocket and slipped something into the other man's hand. The bartender paused for a moment, staring at the object, before nodding. He handed something to Oliver, who then made his way back to her.

"What was that all about?" Felicity questioned.
"Come on," was all he said. He discarded their drinks and took her hand, proceeding to drag her toward the door marked for employees.

"Oliver, we can't go in there," she exclaimed.

He ignored her protests and led her through the door. They were in another unknown corridor, but that didn't stop Oliver. He pulled her along to the very end, where another door was marked STORAGE.

"What are you—" Her words died when she saw him whip out a key to unlock it. "Did you get that from the bartender?"

"Yup."

"How?" Felicity questioned despite already knowing the answer. The exchange must've been cash for the key.

"I'm very persuasive," Oliver absently muttered and jerked the door open. He yanked Felicity inside and slammed it shut behind them. With a quick turn of the lock, the door was re-secured.

The storage room was medium-sized but looked smaller from all of the shelving and clutter. A set of barred windows lined the very back. Oliver, after doing a cursory glance, switched off the main lights. The moonlight from outside provided a soft enough glow for him to navigate, and he retook Felicity's hand. He led her down the center aisle and veered off to the right. The bartender, after he'd slipped him a few Benjamins, had assured Oliver they wouldn't be bothered as long as he had the key. Still, Oliver didn't want to take any chances and led Felicity further away from the door to give them some extra privacy.

"Are you sure we can be here?" she asked, still skittish.

"I took care of it. We've got a little time before my good friend at the bar needs his key back." Oliver spun her around and backed Felicity up against the wall. "Don't worry."

"What about cameras?" Her eyes searched the ceiling, but it was impossible to get a clear view in the darkness.

"There aren't any."

"But—"

He cut off her words with a quick yet passionate kiss. "It's fine. Trust me, sweetheart. It's just us."

With his assurances, Felicity let go of her worries and nodded. Her tiny clutch dropped to the floor, and she wound her arms around Oliver's neck. "Okay." She became aware of the heat from his body and the pressure of him pinning her to the wall. Their breaths mingled as his lips hovered over hers. "You're a genius," she teased.

Oliver smirked and grazed her lips. "No, just motivated." Finally, without a would-be audience, he let his hands freely roam her body like he'd fantasized about doing all night. He traced her curves and let his fingers linger over the areas of exposed flesh.

Felicity wasn't wasting time either. She started to undo the buttons of his shirt and pulled it off completely. Her small, eager hands only managed to get in a few strokes of his flesh before Oliver unexpectedly turned her around to face the wall. His hand buried itself in her hair, brushing it aside, before his lips attached to the base of her neck. Gasping, Felicity clawed helplessly at the wall
searching for purchase when he traveled further down.

"Damn it, Felicity," Oliver groaned deep in his throat as he licked and kissed a path down her exposed, tender back. "Have I mentioned how much I fucking love you in this dress?" He was careful only to use the lightest brush of his teeth, not wanting to leave any obvious markings. Goose bumps had broken out on Felicity's flesh, and he prided himself on being the cause. She let out a soft mewl when he kissed the indent at the base of her spine.

"A few times," she answered wryly. Her breath hitched when his hands stroked her thighs before slipping under the hem to cup her ass. He was met with bare flesh, and they both groaned from the contact. As Oliver kneaded her backside, Felicity felt a weak tremble in her knees.

Needing to feel more of him, Felicity eventually pushed off of the wall and turned around. The sight of Oliver kneeling before her, shirtless and aroused, had her stomach doing somersaults. The tremble in her knees spread up to her thighs and core. Her entire body was calling out for him; she rested her hands along his shoulders and gave him a gentle tug upward.

"Oliver." His name came out low, husky, and urgent.

Without looking away, Oliver kissed a line up the center of her body. His hands followed along her sides, his fingers tracing invisible patterns with every touch. He bit at her breast and caused her already pebbled peaks to harden further. Another moan tore from her throat when his much larger hands enveloped them completely. Her nails dug into his flesh as he squeezed and massaged the mounds. His lips finished their crusade up her body, latching onto her pulse point for a moment, before finally reclaiming her mouth.

Oliver ravaged her lips while pressing his rock-hard erection against her. Felicity raised her leg to hitch on his hip and ground her pelvis against him in return as her hands roamed over his muscles. She kissed along his jaw, down to his collarbone and across to his shoulder. She wasn't as hesitant about biting him, since his shirt would cover any marks she left. Oliver's hand buried in her thick, dark locks urged her on. He loved her claiming him. It sent a charge throughout his entire body, and everything inside of him wanted to do the same.

He gripped her thigh for a moment longer before sliding his hand back under the hem of her dress. His fingers felt along her sex, finding her panties already soaked through. She shuddered from his ministrations, and he knew she was more than ready. Oliver hooked his fingers under the sides of her thong and proceeded to yank it down her legs. Felicity stepped out of it without a second thought and hurriedly reached for the button on his pants. She undid that and the zipper in record time, then plunged her hand inside his boxers to take hold of him. Instinctively, he thrust into her hand while she stroked him—his groans disappearing into her greedy, demanding mouth. He devoured her beautifully red and swollen lips in return.

After a couple more thrusts, he stilled her movements. Any more of that and this would be over before they started. "I need to be inside you," he growled and reached into his pocket for the square foil.

Afterward, he pulled his pants and boxers down the rest of the way and stepped between her parted legs. Oliver grabbed hold of her backside and hefted her up into his arms. Felicity's legs immediately locked around him, and they both moaned at the feel of his hard shaft pressing against her warm center.

"Aren't you going to take my dress off?" Felicity panted when she felt the tip of him at her entrance. She clutched at his hot, taut muscles, loving the way they supported her while simultaneously pinning her to the wall. She wanted to feel his bare, sweaty skin gliding against her own.
Oliver hungrily eyed her dress before locking eyes with her. Smirking, he growled, "Not a chance." He then plunged forcefully inside of her.

They cried out at the sensation of him filling her completely, and he didn't waste time moving in and out of her tight heat. Felicity's entire body vibrated as every thrust brought on a new wave of white hot pleasure. She threw her head back and closed her eyes, taking each thrust in stride. They'd gone at it fast and rough before, but she couldn't help thinking that this was different. They'd never had sex in a public place brought on by such a frantic, carnal urgency. She barely registered her back thumping repeatedly up against the wall as he drove relentlessly into her.

Oliver throbbed inside of Felicity, piercing her tight wet heat while she dug her stylish gold heels into his ass. With his head buried in her neck, he chanted her name. Oliver had never considered himself the jealous type, and yet he couldn't seem to chase away the frustration he felt from having to watch every single other guy in the club covet and touch his girlfriend while he had to idly watch. He pressed her harder into the wall, spreading her open further, and crouched before using the extra force to sink even deeper into her—filling her at the hilt and claiming her with abandon.

Felicity sensed the change in Oliver. His thrusts became all the more vigorous and furious. She tried to match his pace but found it difficult to keep up with the frenzy of kisses and constant motion. She vaguely wondered if she'd be able to walk afterward with how hard he was pounding into her but quickly dismissed it. He felt so fucking fantastic that she frankly didn't care if he turned her legs into Jell-O.

"Say you're mine." Oliver's voice was so low and rough that she almost didn't hear him over the pants and grunts.

"I'm yours."

"Again," he demanded.

"I'm yours," Felicity repeated as the tension in her core wound tighter.

"Again."

Felicity repeated it several more times, each declaration sounding more confident than the last. Eventually, she dug her hands into his hair and tugged his face back so that he was looking at her. There was the usual lust and desire reflecting in his eyes, but Felicity also noticed a possessiveness, bordering on uncertainty, that she'd never seen before.

Her arms tightened around his shoulders as she kissed him with everything inside of her. "I love you, Oliver," she proclaimed. "Forever and always, I'm yours."

He keened into her mouth, which was followed by several more powerful thrusts until he came. The tension that had been consuming him snapped as he drove into her, his body shuddering with mind-numbing pleasure and relief. Felicity fell over the edge with him, colors bursting behind her eyelids, while her inner walls clenched around him. They succumbed to a sated oblivion together and continued kissing long after their bodies had stilled, drawing the moment out for as long as they could. Only when air became a necessity did they finally part.

They remained wrapped in each other's arms, breathing each other in, before Oliver reluctantly placed Felicity on the ground. He held onto her for a moment longer when her legs wobbled. Afterward, they quickly got redressed and tried to make themselves look somewhat presentable. Felicity was able to redo her lipstick, but her hair didn't seem to want to cooperate. Oliver had messed it up good, and she grinned seeing that Oliver had the same problem. Finally, they resolved
themselves to the fact that they were as presentable as could be and moved to the door.

Just before unlocking it, Oliver's hand on her wrist halted her. He turned her back around to face him. "I love you, too. Forever and always," he whispered, his gaze piercing.

Felicity didn't need to say anything. She simply smiled and leaned up to press a soft, tender kiss to her boyfriend's lips. They left the storage room afterward. When Oliver went to hand back the key to the smirking bartender, Felicity tried not to completely turn into a cherry. It was impossible, though, as she felt the heat flood her cheeks. They weaved through the crowd until Felicity heard someone calling her name.

"There you are," Sara exclaimed. "Tommy and I have been looking all over for you. Didn't you see our texts?" She looked between the pair before her eyes slid down to their joined hands.

Felicity inwardly cursed. She didn't even remember grabbing on to Oliver. It was like second nature at this point. They quickly let go of each other. "Sorry, I had to go to the bathroom and then we ended up wandering around. We got separated a couple of times ourselves."

"Couldn't hear my phone over the music," Oliver added. "Is everything okay?" He held his breath as the blonde continued to stare at them curiously. A part of his mind was still back in that storage room with Felicity. It was a shock to be in the crowd and facing their friend after such an intimate moment.

"Yeah," Sara replied. "we just wanted you guys to know we got a table."

"Great. My feet are really starting to hurt," Felicity declared. Again, she fought a blush because it wasn't exactly her feet that were aching. Her entire body was still thrumming from the mind-blowing orgasm her boyfriend had just given her. Despite the awkwardness of the situation, Felicity felt oddly giddy.

"Come on, it's this way," Sara said. "Don't get lost."

Oliver and Felicity exchanged a nervous yet flirty look behind her back. It had been a close call, but it was totally worth it.
Happy Tuesday, everyone! Thanks so much for your awesome comments and kudos last chapter. I’m thrilled you loved the Olicity sexy times. ;) Many of you have been hoping for more Olicity and Connor moments, too. This chapter will most definitely give you all the family feels. I’ve had it planned for months, and I was so excited to finally get to write it. Hope you enjoy!

April 9, 2014

Sinking back in her chair, Felicity blew out a tired breath and rubbed at her strained eyes. She’d been up since six o’clock that morning getting materials ready for the video conference call they had with Lyla and the team. Now that they were working together, it was important for them all to check in and keep each other up to date on their progress. Felicity would have preferred to meet with them in person, but it was too dangerous. Their entire operation would be in jeopardy if they were seen together.

Lyla and the others had agreed to keep tabs on Waller while covertly investigating her. Thankfully, the information that Felicity had given Mei to pass on had convinced the group that their own leader could be part of the growing threat. Meanwhile, Felicity was continuing to monitor H.I.V.E.’s internal network in an effort to anticipate her father's next moves. He remained steadfast in his mission to find Rubicon. Curtis had set up fake digital trails for Felicity to follow, so that it would seem like she was still cooperating with H.I.V.E. Unfortunately, not even Lyla knew where Rubicon was actually hidden. Waller wasn’t telling anyone.

A soft gurgling sound pulled Felicity's attention down to the little bundle resting inside the baby sling she wore across her chest. Even though Connor was an agreeable baby and loved spending time with Oliver and the others, he still got anxious if Felicity stayed away for too long. Felicity felt the same and with so much of her time spent inside the "lair"—as they now referred to the secret panic room below Oliver's study—she needed a way to keep Connor close while she worked.

Felicity checked the clock and saw that it was almost ten. She'd done enough for one morning.

Just as she was about to stand, her phone buzzed on the desk. It was Tommy calling. She’d barely spoken to him since the dinner at the manor. Glancing from her phone to Connor, Felicity made sure he was settled before answering. Explaining away a crying baby would not be easy.

"Hey, Tommy," Felicity greeted in a chipper voice.

"Hey," he replied, sounding surprised. "It's you."

She laughed. "Of course it's me. Who else would it be?"

"It's just that I'm so used to getting your voicemail that I wasn't expecting you to pick up."

"Well, then today is your lucky day," she joked.
"Are you still in town?"

She frowned but kept her tone light. "Uh, yes. I was able to extend my vacation time."

"Great," he exclaimed. "Because I just bought this new place in the city, and I was hoping you'd come by to see it."

"Are you moving out of the loft?"

"No. It's for the new restaurant I'm going to open. The place needs some fixing up, but it's the perfect space. And I figured if you were still around, you might like to give me some input. I've got a design firm coming later in the week, and I'm getting all the ideas I can now."

"Oh, that sounds awesome," Felicity replied. She remembered Mei mentioning the project to her when she'd visited the loft and how badly she'd felt that Tommy hadn't said anything to her himself. Now, though, he seemed eager to include her. Maybe the tension she'd felt building between them wasn't as bad as she'd thought. It was probably normal given that she'd been away for so long.

"So you'll stop by later?"

Felicity hesitated. She hadn't ventured out of the mansion since the Isabel incident. Being cooped up for weeks hadn't been as unbearable as before. It was necessary for her to recover and feel safe again while Oliver figured out their new situation with the Bratva.

"Felicity," Tommy prompted when she hadn't answered.

Felicity closed her eyes and dreaded his response to her next words. "Um, I'd like to. Just let me check my schedule." What she really needed to do was check with Oliver and Diggle. Felicity so badly wanted to spend time with Tommy, but leaving the mansion would require the proper security measures so they didn't have another incident—assuming Oliver didn't argue against her going entirely.

"Do you already have plans?"

"I have a conference call later."

"I thought you were on vacation." He sounded a little suspicious. Then again, that could be her own paranoia kicking in.

"I am, but I still have to check in remotely for my job," she quickly explained. "Can I text you in a little bit and let you know? Maybe I can rework something."

He was slow to reply. "Okay. Yeah, let me know. I could pick you up, too, if you want. You're still staying with Sara, right?"

"No," she blurted before quickly correcting her tone. "I mean, yes. I am staying with Sara. But you don't have to come and get me. It's fine. I can meet you at the place if you give me the address. I don't want to hold you up."

"It's no trouble," Tommy insisted.

"Tommy, you're already in the city. There's no need to go out of your way to come and get me."

Sara's apartment was in Pennytown, outside the main city and not far from Felicity's previous place. But the real problem was that no one would be there if Tommy showed up, since it was just a cover. "I'll be fine."
Connor reached up and started playing with her necklace. He hummed softly as his fingers gripped it. Felicity bit her lip, knowing she needed to get off the phone quickly. It probably wouldn't be long before he got excited and started babbling. Like mother like son.

"If you're sure..."

"Positive. I'll text you, okay?" she promised.

"All right."

"Bye, Tommy."

"Bye, Felicity."

Felicity sighed and stared down at her son. "Your daddy is so not going to like this."

Connor was still focused on her necklace. He was starting to yank on it. Felicity handed him Sir Quackers to distract him before he broke it. "But you know what?" she cooed to him. "I think someone has been such a good boy this morning, he's earned bath time. Do you want bath time?"

The baby smiled again, which had more to do with Felicity's tender voice and grin than his understanding of what she was saying. Making sure that Connor had a hold of Sir Quackers, Felicity stood and headed for the stairs.

"Let's see if Daddy wants to help." Felicity opened the door and stepped out from behind the bookcase. She secured the door behind her and left the empty study. "Maybe he'll be more likely to agree when you melt him with your sudsy cuteness."

"Miss Felicity," Raisa greeted her in the hall. Her eyes brightened when looking at Connor. "How is the little prince”—that was her new nickname for him—"this morning?"

Felicity beamed. "Very good, although he's in need of a bath. I was actually just about to go find Oliver to see if he'd like to help. Do you know where he is?"

"I think Mr. Oliver would like that very much. He is in the gym with Mr. Diggle and Miss Sara."

"Thank you."

"Would you like me to get him?" Raisa offered.

"Um, no. That's okay. I'll just pop in and get him myself," Felicity replied. She knew the three often trained together but had never seen it firsthand. She was curious.

"All right. But I shall get everything ready for you."

She thanked Raisa again before continuing on to the gym. On the way over, Felicity picked Connor up from the sling and held him against her chest. He liked to take in his surroundings as she walked. The moment Felicity opened the door to the at-home gym, she heard grunts and a clashing sound. Over by the windows, on the training mats, Oliver stood facing off against Sara and Diggle. All three held wooden staffs in their hands.

The swiftness and power in their movements was impressive, but it was Oliver who drew her eye. He had his shirt off, and his chest glistened with sweat. With each maneuver, his muscles tightened and then flexed. "Oh frack," Felicity breathlessly exhaled.

Connor fidgeted in her arms in an effort to follow the source of the noise. He looked at the trio in
fascination.

She gulped as the fight continued. How she missed seeing Oliver shirtless and sweaty. The last time she'd seen his bare chest was when Diggle tended to his wound weeks ago. The graze in his side was mostly healed and the stitches removed, though a minor scar remained. Felicity hated that he would have another mark on his body, especially since he'd gotten it while trying to save her. But she knew if she voiced such an opinion, he would aggressively refute her guilt.

Connor reached out a hand and she spoke sweetly to him, "Do you see Aunt Sara and Uncle Dig? Or do you want Daddy?" It felt kind of surreal referring to Oliver as "Daddy" but the more time they spent co-parenting, the more right it felt that Connor know who his father was. Oliver was amazing with their son and had earned the recognition.

Sara swiped her staff nearly hitting Oliver in the head before he expertly dodged it. Felicity swallowed the lump in her throat while trying to keep her mind from thinking about all the times she'd been tangled up in those strong, gleaming muscles of his. "And that, Connor, is the reason you are here today. So hot…" Her eyes widened when she realized what she said. "Oh frack, I didn't mean hot. I meant not. As in I am not affected at all…" She was clearly trying to convince herself rather than her son and sighed in frustration, "Please, don't ever repeat Mommy. It's our little secret. Okay?"

The baby innocently stared up at her. He was much too young to understand what she'd said, but Felicity felt embarrassed by it all the same. Connor glanced back at the trio before suddenly gurgling gibberish and squealing. He then clutched Sir Quackers and bit at the stuffed duck's beak. His youthful, high-pitched voice carried across the gym, and Felicity saw Oliver pause for a second and turn his head at the sound. Apparently, the distraction was a second too long because Diggle managed to hit him with the staff and swipe his legs out from under him. Oliver landed flat on his back on the mats with a thud.

Felicity gasped and rushed over. "Oh my gosh, are you okay? I am so sorry. We didn't mean to interrupt."

Oliver sat up with a grunt but didn't look mad. "It's okay," he panted.

"Should you be sparring if you just had your stitches out?" She eyed Dig disapprovingly after the blow he'd landed.

"I'm fine," Oliver reassured her.

"He really is. You should see the bruise he gave me an hour ago. You finally helped us beat him," Sara joked.

"You okay, man?" Diggle questioned, despite the satisfied grin on his face. He held out a hand to help him up.

Oliver easily stood to his feet and nodded. "I'm more surprised than hurt. Took you long enough," he teased, earning eye rolls from both Dig and Sara. "Everything all right?" he asked Felicity, watching her curiously.

"Oh, yes. Everything is set later for our call."

And I need to talk to you about Tommy, she thought but refrained. Felicity wanted to talk alone, without Sara and Dig. She didn't want it to be three against one if they all agreed it was too dangerous for her to go see Tommy.
Instead she said, "I was just going to give Connor a bath and I thought maybe you'd like to help. Unless you're busy, which you clearly are." She eyed the staff in his hands. "So, nevermind then. We'll go and we can maybe talk after—"

"No," Oliver abruptly interrupted. "I'll help—if you want me to."

She replied, "I do. Only if you want to, though. You don't have to."

"I do—want to, I mean. I love helping out with him."

"Good, great..." Out of the corner of her eye, Felicity noticed Sara and Dig shoot each other amused grins. She felt her cheeks burn. The charged politeness that was usually in the air between her and Oliver was awkward enough without an audience.

"Are you giving him a bath right now?"

"Yes, Raisa is getting it ready while I came to get you."

"Okay. One sec." Oliver handed the staff to Dig before grabbing a towel to dry the sweat off of his body. He took a sip of his water bottle and then put his gray t-shirt back on—much to Felicity's disappointment.

Meanwhile, Sara came up to say hi to Connor. He brightened at the attention from his aunt and giggled when she tickled his side.

"You gonna warn him about bath time?" Sara teasingly whispered to Felicity.

She smirked. "I'll ease him into it."

"No mercy," Sara joked and said to Oliver, "Good luck." He frowned before following Felicity out of the gym.

Dig and Sara could be heard resuming their session afterward. Felicity was glad that the two had gotten friendly. Now that Oliver was helping with Connor, Sara had more free time on her hands. She sensed that Dig also appreciated having backup when dealing with the guards stationed around the mansion. With all of their enemies, and the strain that had recently developed between Oliver and Anatoly, they couldn't be too careful.

"Can I hold him?" Oliver questioned as they exited the gym.

"Sure." Felicity handed Connor over to him. She stretched out her arms, which were cramped from being hunched over the computer all morning while occasionally cradling the baby.

Their son smiled as soon as he was in Oliver's embrace. He loved having his dad's affections, especially when Oliver would playfully lift him into the air. Padded footsteps charged at them, and Felicity glanced up in time to see Lucky running down the hall. He must've heard the baby's happy squealing. He jumped up on Oliver, who then proceeded to pet him as well. Felicity was impressed that the two had managed to bury the hatchet. Lucky nuzzled her legs next, and she stroked his fur in greeting.

"We're not going upstairs?" Oliver questioned.

Felicity paused in the doorway of the kitchen. "No. This sink is bigger."

"Miss Felicity, everything is cleaned and ready," Raisa informed her. A set of towels and baby soap
were on the counter, along with bath toys and a change of clothes for afterward. The water continued
to run from the faucet and fill the wide, square sink. "The water should be the right temperature, but
you may want to check it again."

"I will. Thank you, Raisa."

The older woman nodded. "Of course." She took in the sight of Oliver talking to Connor, coos of
"my beautiful boy" filling the room, and the two women shared a heartfelt look. "Let me know if
you need anything else," Raisa told her before leaving.

Felicity hated to interrupt the father-son bonding moment but informed Oliver, "Make sure you really
hold onto him."

"Why?"

"Connor," Felicity called as she went over to the sink and tested the water temperature. The baby
followed the sound of her voice. Within seconds of seeing the water filling the sink, Connor was
babbling and squirming.

Oliver held the baby tight as he leaned forward, reaching out for the water. Sir Quackers was on the
floor, forgotten. Connor's breaths came out in soft, excited puffs. "I take it he enjoys bath time." He
repositioned his son so that he was wrapped in his arms and facing the sink. The closer they got, the
more his limbs flailed.

"He loves the water," Felicity told Oliver while adding the bubble bath and mixing it in.

"Definitely didn't get that from me," he muttered. Then again, Oliver hadn't always been wary of
water. Surviving a sinking yacht was enough to change anyone's former outlook.

An image of the video Felicity had shown him of Waller leaving the Gambit after her sabotage
flashed into his mind. She'd been hesitant to show it to him, clearly worried that it would cause him
more pain, but it had made Oliver feel vindicated in his revenge. Although Darhk swore he wasn't
involved, his promises meant nothing after all of the lies he'd been telling for years. Oliver still
needed to see the evidence for himself.

As painful as it was to watch, the tape and truth it revealed had also brought him some respite.
Finally, he had answers. What he did with that information going forward was a new form of torture.
Just thinking about Waller and the loyalty she'd made him swear to A.R.G.U.S. knowing full well
she intended to wipe out his entire family—and almost did—brought on a bout of rage and despair so
intense it nearly knocked the breath out of him. Oliver quickly tamped it down, however, refusing to
let the darkness taint what should be a happy moment with his son and Felicity. He could worry
about that later.

"Put him on the counter." She laid out a towel and undressed Connor. Meanwhile, Oliver attempted
to hold him still. Connor kept trying to roll over toward the sink. His babbles were turning into
impatient whines. "By the way," she said while starting to undo the buttons of her blouse, "he loves
to splash. You might want to take your shirt off if you don't want to end up soaked."

A different kind of heat rose up in him this time. Despite his best efforts, Oliver couldn't help the way
his eyes tracked the path of Felicity's fingers as she undid each button on her own shirt. She had a
white lace tank top on underneath that showed off her ample cleavage. He devoured the sight of her
bare, creamy skin. Felicity tightened her ponytail and then removed her glasses, setting them aside.

When she finally looked up at him, their eyes locked. Felicity was beautiful with or without her
glasses, but there was something softer and more intimate about staring into her eyes without the
minor barrier. Her eyes were a bright, vibrant blue with the ability to see right through him. Oliver
swore in that moment she could recognize the intense want and longing he usually tried to keep
concealed. And for a second, Oliver thought he saw the same emotions reflecting back at him.

Connor cried out again, thus breaking the spell. The pair quickly looked away from each other and
focused on the task at hand. The sink was mostly filled, and so Felicity shut off the water. After
confirming that the temperature was warm and comfortable, she picked up Connor and started to
ease him into the water. She'd barely gotten his little feet submerged before he started kicking. Water
and bubbles splashed up, wetting them both.

Oliver was chuckling. "You weren't kidding." He reached for the hem of his shirt and lifted it over
his head.

As if watching him fight shirtless wasn't enough torture, Felicity quickly averted her eyes before she
started gawking again. It would be way too easy to get distracted by those rippling muscles so close.
Instead, she focused on the baby. "Connor," Felicity lightly scolded and laughed. "I swear he enjoys
making a mess."

Connor was biting his fingers and smiling as she lowered him further. Not once did he stop fidgeting.

"That streak of mischief, I'm afraid, he does get from me," Oliver admitted, not without a little hint of
pride. He loved that his son was so small but so full of personality. It made him seem so beautiful,
happy, and healthy—everything Oliver would want for him.

"God help us then," Felicity joked.

Once fully submerged and seated, she handed Connor his bath toys. It helped reduce some of the
splashing but not by much. The baby tried to grasp the bubbles and shrieked when they wouldn't
stay in his hands. He held out the ruined bubbles to Oliver, who scooped up another batch to give to
him. Connor then smashed them onto his face, trying to bite them, causing both Oliver and Felicity to
laugh.

"This is okay for his eyes, right?"

"Yeah. It's gentle and won't bother him," Felicity replied, although she did wipe the soap away from
his mouth.

For a few minutes, they quietly stared while Connor splashed and played. It was a content silence. At
least until Felicity had one of her typical babbling fits.

"So, you look good," she blurted out. "I meant before—when you were in the gym training. I wasn't
implying that I was checking you out. Although I did have to technically check you out—I mean
look at you to notice that. Anyway, I just wanted to make sure that you were okay and fully healed." She
swallowed back the rest of the words threatening to pour out of her wayward mouth.

Oliver gave her a dimpled grin in return. "I appreciate your concern. But I really am okay, Felicity."

"Good."

"And are you okay?" He elaborated, "Aside from Connor, I know you've been very focused on the
mission."

"Well, we have a lot to do in a short amount of time," Felicity replied. She busied herself with taking
the small, soft bath sponge and washing Connor.
Oliver held him steady and upright with a hand on his back. "True. But I also know you, Felicity. When you're upset, you throw yourself into your work," Oliver pointed out. The Isabel incident had brought them closer and more time was spent together, whether it involved taking care of Connor or working with Mei and the others. With less barriers between them, Oliver was much more attuned to Felicity's emotions; he sensed that beyond the abduction, something else was gnawing at her.

"I'm…" She thought about saying she was fine, but that would be a lie. The face-off with Isabel had affected her, and the stress wasn't only compounded by her efforts to bring down H.I.V.E. There was also the matter of Oliver being forced to join Task Force X. Felicity had yet to work up the nerve to tell him what it really entailed, partly because she wanted to see if there was a way to get him out of it. No solutions, unfortunately, had been found as of yet.

Instead, Felicity vaguely replied, "I'm hanging in there. Are you and Anatoly still not talking?"

"Not at the moment." They both needed some time to cool off after the incident. Oliver also had a feeling that Anatoly may have been keeping his distance because of Darhk.

Although Felicity's identity as his daughter remained a secret, it wouldn't be unlike Darhk to threaten anyone who put his operation in jeopardy. Felicity was known to be a key piece now. Oliver hated that she was getting in deeper with H.I.V.E. His instinct was always to shield her from the danger to protect her. But in this case, associating with Darhk and earning his favor was necessary in that effort. Oliver knew that Darhk had covered for Felicity's A.R.G.U.S. mission in Moscow with the Bratva.

Felicity bit her lip, obviously trying to hide her concern as she tended to Connor.

"Isabel has been suspended from operations and sent back to Russia," he informed her. "The rest of the Bratva have also kept their distance. Anatoly is no saint, but he is a man of honor within the brotherhood. He won't let anyone else come after you, and I can handle him when the time comes."

Though her worry remained, Felicity chose to let the matter drop. If Oliver promised he'd deal with it, then she was going to trust him on that. "That's a relief to hear," she commented. "So if I, say, wanted to leave the mansion for a little while… it wouldn't be as dangerous as before, right?"

Oliver, who'd been playing with Connor, shot his head up. "Leave the mansion," he repeated. "And go where?"

"Tommy called me a little while ago. He wants me to go into the city and check out the place he just bought for his new restaurant."

"Felicity," Oliver warned.

"I know what you're going to say, and I don't necessarily disagree," she stated. "We will always have to be careful. But I can't stay cooped up here living in fear. I have to leave the mansion eventually, and I think I'm ready now. Besides, I miss Tommy. I can sense us growing apart and taking him up on his invitation would be a nice gesture." She beseechingly glanced up at Oliver. She didn't technically need his permission, but she did need his help.

He was quiet and pensive before begrudgingly agreeing. "Fine. But I'm going with you."

"What? Oliver, you can't. You're not supposed to be seen—"

"Dig will drive you while I follow on my Ducati. I'll keep my helmet on while I'm out," he assured her, "but I am not letting you out of my sight when you leave this house." His voice softened. "Do you understand?"
His expression was imploring. She nodded, feeling her heart skip a beat at his protectiveness. "Yes."

They held each other’s gazes for a moment longer before finally looking away. Felicity, ignoring the subtle tremor coursing through her, got the baby shampoo and lathered it into Connor’s soft wisps of hair. He looked so adorable with suds all over his head. Felicity laughed out loud when Oliver shaped it so the strands were standing up. Connor looked like a little rocker. She wondered if he would have potential as a drummer considering the way he was slapping the water every which way. The front of her top was almost completely soaked.

Oliver chuckled along with her. "I used to do this to Thea all the time. It'll look better when he grows more hair, though."

Connor, oblivious to his new look, played with his toys. He kept pushing them under the water and was totally amused that they kept popping back up. When Oliver squirted him with one, Connor shrieked in delight.

"He looks so cute. I need a picture," Felicity declared and went to grab her phone off the island. It was already so full of baby pictures, she was sure her storage space was diminishing by the second. But she just didn’t care. She didn't want to miss any of these moments.

While her back was turned, Oliver helped Connor hold the toy. He waited a couple of seconds before guiding his tiny hands to squeeze it. Water shot out of the rubber starfish and hit the exposed skin of Felicity’s back. The blonde whipped around suddenly with her hands on her hips.

"Did you just squirt me?"

Oliver smirked. "It slipped. We would never purposefully squirt Mommy. Right, Connor?"

Connor glanced up at him innocently, still clutching the toy.

Felicity's heart jolted in her chest hearing Oliver refer to her as "Mommy." It was so normal and yet so full of meaning. She'd never grow tired of hearing it. Resisting a smile, Felicity simply raised her eyebrow in suspicion. When she turned back around to fiddle with her phone again, another faint squirt of water hit her.

"Oh, you are so asking for it, buddy," Felicity warned.

"All him."

"Seriously, you're going to blame our six-month-old son?" she challenged, fighting back another grin.

Oliver shrugged. "You know how babies are."

"You are incorrigible."

"And you look really good wet."

Felicity's eyebrows shot to her hairline as the blush spread. She had not been expecting that or the utterly sexy, teasing grin that followed from him. The phone nearly slipped from her hand. Her mind blanked for a second, forgetting what she'd been about to do, and was instead filled with images of the two of them in a lot more water with a lot less clothing.

Now was so not the time for that kind of fantasy, and Felicity quickly shook it from her thoughts. Glancing away from the intensity of his stare, she clutched the phone tighter and took a couple of
pictures of Connor. She thought about taking one of them all together, too, but her shirt was pretty soaked through and her face was most likely cherry red. Not to mention that Oliver still had that mischievous glint in his eye. Felicity wasn't sure she'd be able to explain that picture if she showed it to anyone.

Minutes later, the pair was huddled together. Felicity felt the heat radiating off Oliver's body as he gently eased Connor backward and further into the water. She'd grabbed the spray nozzle on the sink and rinsed the shampoo off of his head. Oliver was talking to Connor, his voice soft and warm, in an attempt to hold his attention. His little hands wanted to grab the spray nozzle from Felicity, and he was fidgeting in the process. Eventually, he started to play with Oliver instead. He pretended to bite at Connor's reaching fingers, earning high-pitched squeals and splashing kicks.

"Done," Felicity announced. After they were finished, and Oliver righted Connor, an impish thought occurred to her. So quickly he barely had time to react, Felicity turned the nozzle on Oliver and sprayed him.

"Oops, it slipped." He gaped back at her, flabbergasted and soaked, as she beamed. "Don't worry. You look good wet." Despite her teasing, it was the truth. It was a challenge not to watch as the water droplets ran down the defined, muscular lines of his torso.

Before he could actually react and her mind could start fantasizing again, Felicity announced that bath time was over. She grabbed a towel and warned Oliver, "Prepare your ears. It's going to get loud."

He frowned, still in a slight daze from the stunt Felicity had just pulled, as he lifted Connor up and out of the water. Within seconds, their son's face contorted and he started to cry. Lucky had risen from his spot on the floor and was pacing. He barked a couple of times. Felicity wrapped the towel around Connor as Oliver cradled him into his chest.

"Does he do this a lot?"

"Yes," Felicity confirmed and let the water drain. She had to raise her voice to be heard over Connor's sobs. "He gets very upset." She patted Lucky's head when he rubbed against her legs and barked again at Oliver and Connor. "Lucky doesn't like to see him cry either."

"Hey, it's okay, buddy," Oliver tried to soothe their son while Felicity used the towel to dry him.

Afterward, he placed Connor down onto the counter to get him dressed. It was somewhat of a challenge with him still wailing.

Using the towel to dry himself off as well—he didn't want to get Connor's new clothes damp—Oliver picked the baby up again and rubbed his back. He muttered comforting words and mostly got him calmed down by the time Felicity had finished cleaning up the sink area. She grabbed Sir Quackers and held him out to Connor, who clutched him tightly. His final cries began to taper off.

"That's better," she murmured and ran her fingers through his hair to comb it. Felicity then wiped the tear tracks off his reddened cheeks. "There's our handsome little munchkin again."

Oliver grinned and leaned in to kiss Connor's cheek. Felicity must've had the same idea, because she also leaned forward. They got him from both sides, with Felicity lightly tickling his belly. Connor huffed before finally giving them a smile. They showered him with a few more affectionate kisses when he suddenly squirmed away. Before Oliver even realized what was happening, his mouth had accidentally brushed Felicity's.
They both froze at the contact, their gazes locking. His breath caught, and he became very aware of their proximity and her hand that had ended up on his chest. Her eyes were wide and bright. Oliver expected Felicity to move away, but she didn't. Instead, her hand curled over his heart—like she always used to do. There was no way she couldn't feel it thumping in his chest.

"Felicity," he murmured, barely above a whisper.

Felicity felt the invisible pull between them tighten. Her own heart was beating just as fast. Standing so close, she inhaled the familiar scent of his cologne mixed with sweat from his workout earlier. She tilted her chin up, allowing their mouths to meet in a whisper of a kiss.

Instinctively, Oliver responded. His lips glided above hers in a feather-light touch. As badly as he wanted to close his eyes, he found that he couldn't look away from her. Felicity seemed so open and vulnerable, and a part of him feared the moment breaking if he did. A few more delicate swipes, with her mouth moving in time beneath his, occurred before Connor bumped his face into theirs.

They pulled back, and Oliver held his breath—waiting for the accompanying look of regret. It never came. Felicity's eyes flicked to Connor briefly before a small, flushed smile formed on her face. Oliver found himself grinning in return. Before he could reach out and draw her against him fully, they were interrupted by the arrival of Diggle and Sara. The pair was laughing and rubbing the sweat off their bodies with towels.

"Oh," Sara exclaimed once she finally took in the scene.

Diggle suddenly got quiet, too, and stood observing them.

"We just finished training and wanted to get some more water," she explained. Her brow quirked at Felicity in question.

Felicity took a step back from Oliver, feeling the flare of embarrassment spread throughout her body. She could only imagine how their position must've looked. She certainly was having a lot of thoughts about it now herself. "We, um, we just finished giving Connor his bath." She placed the hand that had been on Oliver onto the baby in an effort to ground herself and keep from fidgeting. "It's fine."

"We can give you guys a moment if—" Diggle began

"That won't be necessary," Felicity quickly spoke up. "I need to bring him up to the nursery now anyway."

Felicity held out her hands for Connor. Oliver passed him to her and, regardless of the situation's awkwardness, was relieved that she still seemed to be blushing instead of getting that crease between her brow when she was upset. With the arrival of Dig and Sara, he worried that the reality of what had just happened would make her second-guess it. Oliver couldn't read her mind, but he thought he saw a glimmer of hope. The same hope that was also starting to bud within him.

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**August 14, 2007**

*People stood at attention when Oliver passed. A series of nods and "good afternoon, Mr. Queen" followed. Oliver returned the greetings politely as he made his way to his father's office. He'd been in the middle of working on a marketing plan—which was his new department placement—when he'd gotten a call from Robert's executive assistant. When he'd asked Melissa what it was regarding, she'd*
said she didn't know.

Although Oliver wasn't sure what to expect, he did have a few guesses. The marketing plan was for the expansion of the Applied Sciences division. It would be venturing into more medical research, and Marketing was tasked with creating the best way to present the initiative to the media and public. A new wing was being built in the lab downtown, and Oliver wouldn't be surprised if his parents wanted him to attend another ribbon cutting ceremony with them once it was completed.

Oliver took the elevator to the executive floor. He walked through the double doors to the waiting room and found Melissa's desk empty. Glancing through the glass walls, Oliver noticed his father sitting with Malcolm in the small seating area in his office. They looked to be in deep conversation. The door was open, allowing him to hear.

"So let me get this straight, first he's against it but now it's suddenly okay?" Robert asked.

Malcolm shrugged. "He's begun to have a change of heart."

"We both know that if Damien has one, it's the size of a pea," he replied, scoffing. "He wants something else."

"He's worried about her getting hurt. You can't say his concern isn't warranted." Malcolm gave him a pointed look.

"So what has changed?"

"He thinks their relationship could prove useful."

Robert stared at his friend curiously. "He wants to bring her in?"

"Not yet. She's still too young. But with everything going on, we need to keep her close. This way she's not alone. It's protection for the both of them."

"If you remember, I was adamant that my family be left out of this when I signed on."

"Circumstances change. It may best for everyone if Oliver knew."

Oliver frowned at the mention of his name. He had no clue what his father and Malcolm were discussing, but it sounded eerily cryptic. What could his father be involved in that he couldn't tell his family about? And why did Oliver have to get involved? He probably shouldn't have been surprised by this, considering he already knew his father had a few secrets—one being a young, attractive redhead in Publicity.

"Something big is coming, and we have to be ready. We all have skin in the game, Robert, whether we like it or not. Remember that," Malcolm replied.

Robert looked more concerned than before. Looking away from Malcolm, he noticed Oliver standing outside the office. He stood quickly and hobbled with his still healing leg to the door.

"Oliver, son, I didn't realize you were already here," he commented. "Usually you're at least five minutes late."

"For you to want to see me in the middle of the day, I figured it was important. So, here I am," Oliver declared and glanced at Malcolm. The other man had also stood. "Will Mr. Merlyn be joining us?"
"No. I must be getting back to the office," Malcolm stated. "It's good to see you, Oliver. Please give my regards to my son. I rarely see Tommy these days."

Tommy's avoidance of his father was no coincidence, but Oliver thought that was best left unsaid. "I will," he replied instead.

Once they were alone, Robert's demeanor immediately relaxed. He returned to his desk and beckoned Oliver to take the seat across from it. "How is your new assignment going?"

"Good," Oliver answered, scrutinizing his father. Despite Robert's pleasant expression and casual posture, something still seemed off.

"Marketing is treating you well?"

"Considering I'm part of the family who owns this company, do you really think they'd treat me otherwise?" he quipped in return.

Robert grinned. "No, I suppose not."

"Did you want to check up on me, or is there something else?" Oliver inquired. "What was Malcolm talking about before?"

"How much of our conversation did you hear?" His voice sounded casual, but his eyes were sharp.

"Barely anything," he replied with a probing expression. "Only the last few minutes. Are you going to tell me what you and Malcolm were discussing that I don't know about?"

"We have a…" He paused, contemplating. "Business venture in the works. It's nothing you need worry about now. I have a different reason for wanting to speak with you. I got a call from Jack Worthington this morning. He's an old buddy of mine and the dean of admissions at Northeastern University."

A sinking feeling formed in the pit of Oliver's stomach as the realization of what this meeting was really about started to reveal itself. He cleared his throat and nonchalantly asked, "What did he want?"

"He was informed by one of his staffers that you'd inquired about enrollment for this fall," Robert said. "As soon as he heard that you might be interested in attending the university, he reached out to me personally to offer assistance in the admission process. Imagine my initial shock, especially since we'd agreed you'd be attending SCU."

"We didn't agree. You and Mom just assumed I'd go there," Oliver objected. He wanted to kick himself. He should've known better than to think he could've gotten away with something as simple as an inquiry. His family's name and money were coveted by many universities. In hindsight, he probably should've used an alias.

Robert questioned, "Is Northeastern the only school you've contacted?"

"No. But you probably already know that, too."

"Are you only looking in Boston?"

Once again, Oliver thought his father already knew the answer. He responded anyway. "Yes."

"Why there?"
"Why not?" Oliver countered. "It's a historic and well-respected city."

"Oliver," Robert warned. "What is going on?"

He sighed, trying to figure out how not to completely reveal his true motivations. "I don't want to go to SCU in the fall, Dad. I want to get out of Starling and the state completely. Go somewhere new where my name won't automatically draw a media frenzy."

"Why Boston?" his father pressed.

The best lies were rooted in truth. Oliver explained, "Besides what I just told you, it's also where Felicity goes to school. I'll at least have one friend already there that I trust."

Robert studied him intently. "You two seem much closer since the incident."

Oliver shrugged and kept a straight face. "Life-threatening situations tend to do that. I haven't exactly made the best choices in friends over the last few years—"

"I'll say," Robert interjected. "It took a whole year to clear up that incident at the frat house with campus police when you were a freshman."

"But," Oliver continued, "Felicity is different. She is smart, kind, and school is really important to her. I think she'll help keep me focused."

"She's a good girl with a bright future," Robert acknowledged. He leveled his son with a look. "Very pretty, too, despite all that black she wears."

Oliver bit his tongue to prevent a retort. Defending Felicity would make him seem too touchy, and his father would be even more suspicious.

Robert folded his arms and sat back. "Oliver, if this is some ploy to get close to her just so you can sleep with her, there are plenty of other girls—"

"No," Oliver practically growled. This time, he couldn't keep quiet. "It's not like that, Dad. Felicity is not just some random girl, and this isn't a scheme. This is about me forging my own path and not being defined by my past, which is exactly what will happen if I stay here in Starling. I want a fresh start, and Boston will give me that. This is my decision."

They stared each other down. This was one choice that Oliver wouldn't let his parents take away from him. He refused to give in and willed his father to understand. Finally, Robert broke and eased up.

"You're absolutely sure this is what you want?" he pressed.

"It's not just what I want. It's what I need." It was the honest truth.

Relenting, Robert declared, "I'll see what I can do."

"Really?" Oliver replied hopefully. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. I have to talk this over with your mother. She's not going to like this."

"It's my decision," Oliver repeated.

"I know. But it'll still take some convincing."
"Oh my God, just say it!" Felicity exclaimed.

Sara stared back at her innocence. "Say what?"

"Whatever it is on the tip of your tongue that's causing that smirk." The pair headed towards the lair. Their video conference with Lyla and the team was in fifteen minutes.

"Okay, fine. When Dig and I walked in earlier, were you and Oliver about to kiss?"

"That's…none of your business," Felicity dodged. In truth, she'd been avoiding Sara because she knew she'd be faced with this exact question.

Sara snorted and teased, "I see you playing coy, Felicity, but your blush is all the answer I need."

Felicity rolled her eyes and for once kept her mouth shut. She had to focus on the meeting right now. Besides, she wasn't sure there was anything she could say about the kiss. Not until she had more time to reflect on it herself. Felicity didn't regret it; she knew that for sure. And judging by the hopeful look Oliver had been giving her earlier, he didn't either. But where they went from there was still a mystery.

The closer they got to the study, the larger the butterflies in her stomach became. It was only a couple of hours ago that she'd seen Oliver, and yet she felt giddy to be in his presence again. That had to account for something, right? They entered the study, and her anticipation immediately died. Felicity stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of Helena. The brunette stood between Oliver and Dig in deep discussion. There was a frown on Oliver's face, and Dig had his arms tautly folded.

"What's going on?" Felicity inquired. She really wanted to ask what the hell Helena was doing there but figured she should be civil.

"Helena has some news for us," Oliver explained.

"She couldn't just call," Sara muttered under her breath.

Felicity bit her lip to keep from smirking. At least she wasn't the only one who didn't care for the other woman.

"Felicity, Sara," Helena greeted. "Nice to see you again."

The blonde forced a nod and asked, "What's the news?"

"I know who attacked you in Ivy Town," she declared. "My father was in a rage last night when he went to call his best contractor for a hit job. The guy refused to work with him, because the men he sent out on the last job turned up dead. It was supposed to be a simple kidnapping in the suburbs, but the targets were armed and fought back. I heard him yelling on the phone at Malcolm, since he was the one who hired them."

"So it was a setup," Sara said to Felicity. "Damn straight we fought back."

"No doubt requested by my father," Felicity concluded. "He needed a way to turn me against A.R.G.U.S. and to make H.I.V.E. look like my only option." Her stomach roiled. She shouldn't be surprised, considering Darhk had lied more times than she could count over the years to manipulate
It didn't make the deceit any less infuriating, though.

"Maybe this is a good thing. It means Waller may still not be aware of you," Dig suggested.

Felicity shook her head. "We can ask Lyla if she's heard anything, but Waller probably knows I'm back in Starling. I doubt she'd say anything to the team, though, if she's got her own agenda."

"Either way, we remain just as cautious," Oliver stated. "Thank you for letting us know, Helena."

She nodded. "You should also know my father and Anatoly have been conducting a lot of secret meetings this past week. Despite the united front Darhk presents with the council, I don't think everyone is completely satisfied with his leadership."

Diggle checked his watch. "Oliver, it's almost time."

"Helena, thank you," Oliver said to her.

She nodded. "I better go. Good luck with your top-secret meeting."

"Or you could stay," Oliver suggested, "and share the information yourself. You're a part of this, too."

Helena discreetly glanced at Felicity and shook her head. "Better not. I don't always play well with others."

*That's an understatement,* Felicity thought.

"I'll call you if I hear anything else," Helena told him.

After she left, the group descended into the lair. Everyone sat around Felicity's computer station as she set up the secured connection. Within minutes, Lyla and the team appeared onscreen in another remote location. They couldn't conduct this call anywhere near A.R.G.U.S. Nostalgia and eagerness blossomed within Felicity at the sight of them. She'd mostly been communicating with Mei and Curtis these past weeks, and this was the first time she was finally seeing everyone.

"Felicity, it's so great to see you!" Barry was the first to say. His familiar puppy-dog smile lit up his entire face. "Oliver, Dig, Sara," he greeted the others.

"Finally!" Curtis piped in. "It's been forever."

Felicity's smile was beaming. "It's good to see you guys, too. I've missed you all. Congrats on the engagement, by the way. I'm so happy for you."

Caitlin smiled shyly and held up her left hand to show off her ring. It was small but elegant. "Thank you. I'm glad you're okay, Felicity. How are you doing?" she questioned with kind eyes. "Mei informed us of everything that has happened since you left. I was so relieved to hear you and your baby are safe. Congrats to you, too, by the way. And Oliver," she added timidly.

"I wish I'd known sooner but thanks," Oliver responded. He didn't sound rude but was curt.

Felicity knew the dig wasn't necessarily directed at her but felt a wave of guilt anyway. It was her decision to leave that spurred all of this and ultimately allowed Lyla and Mei to use it to their advantage. Felicity didn't blame Oliver for being upset by their deceit after everything he'd agreed to reveal and do in return. The fact that Waller was revealed as his parents' killer made it even worse.

There was a moment of tense awkwardness that could be felt despite the distance. Swallowing the
lump in her throat, Felicity thanked them for their kind words. She hadn't expected the team to be this welcoming towards her or to feel this emotional herself. Facing them all now, it dredged up so many of her regrets.

"I...I'm really glad that we're working together again," she started. "I'm sorry about everything that happened after I left. If I hurt any of you, it wasn't my intention."

"Knowing that you'd been lying to us," Curtis spoke up, "it did hurt. But we also understand now that there was more at play and you felt you were protecting your family. Honestly, I've watched episodes of *Scandal* that were less complicated than the situation you're in. I mean, who would've guessed that your father runs H.I.V.E. and that Waller used to be a part of it? Not to mention Waller being behind the Queen's Gambit sinking and then Malcolm and your mom—"

"Curtis," Mei warned as he continued to babble.

Felicity tensed. It wasn't that Curtis was saying anything she didn't already know. It was just that hearing it said aloud by someone not directly connected made it seem even more screwed up.

"Sorry. But seriously, talk about plot twist!" he exclaimed.

Felicity glanced quickly at Oliver, who already had concerned eyes on her. "It was quite a shock, I assure you."

Lyla interjected, "We've all had to make a lot of tough choices over the past year. It seems we were operating under a false illusion. But what's important is we know the truth now and can make it right—together."

Felicity sent her a grateful smile, though it was a little forced. The truth wasn't completely revealed. Oliver still didn't know about what A.R.G.U.S. wanted to do with him regarding Task Force X, and now was certainly not the time to mention it. "Yes, we can," Felicity acknowledged and prayed she was right.

"So, what have you got for us?" Mei inquired.

"We have an update on who attacked Felicity in Ivy Town," Oliver announced. He then repeated the information that Helena had given them.

"Even though it wasn't Waller, that doesn't mean she isn't interested in finding Felicity again," Barry reasoned afterward. "If she's been keeping her intentions secret all this time, she's got to have something else up her sleeve."

"I've been doing some digging into Waller's communications," Curtis said. "I didn't get as far as I'd hoped past the encryption, but she's been in contact with a man named Jeremy Joyner. I looked him up. He's ex-army and the leader of Shadowspire."

"I'm familiar with him. We served a tour together in Afghanistan," Dig revealed. "I never particularly liked him, even before I knew about his shady dealings."

"She was a part of his group before H.I.V.E.," Felicity replied. "Makes sense she would keep in contact. Waller was never one to let a potential ally go to waste."

"Yes. They could be aiding her on the side. Felicity, maybe you could pick up where I left off," Curtis suggested.

She was already nodding, eager to do more digging later. "Give me everything you have so far, and
I'll take it from there. Has there been anything else suspicious?"

Lyla replied, "Not suspicious, but Waller has been out for the last few days."

"Don't tell me she actually took a vacation," Dig commented.

"No. She had a minor medical procedure done. Said she couldn't put it off any longer. She'll be back tomorrow. Anything new with Darhk or the Bratva?"

Oliver and Dig began their ritual report. When relevant, Felicity followed up with her own insights from hacking into H.I.V.E.'s system. Both groups agreed to carry on with their current actions until they got additional intel that was concrete. The right opportunity to make a move would present itself; they just had to be patient.

"I think that about covers it," Lyla concluded some time later. "Does anyone have anything else they'd like to discuss?"

"It's not worth a discussion, but I should let you know I'll be venturing into the city later."

"Since when?" asked Sara, speaking up for the first time.

Dig agreed, "I must've missed the memo, too."

"Tommy invited me to check out the space for his new restaurant. I said I'd have to check my schedule, but I want to go." Sara opened her mouth to protest, but Felicity interrupted, "You don't have to worry. Oliver and Dig will be coming with me."

"I'll come, too."

"Actually, I was hoping you would stay here with Connor. Aside from me, he's most familiar with you." She also gave Sara a look suggesting he'd be safest with her while they were all away.

"When did Tommy invite you?" Mei's face was scrunched in a curious frown. "He didn't mention it to me at all."

"He called me this morning. Why? Is something wrong?"

The pensive look remained on Mei's pretty face for another minute before she seemed to dismiss it. "Nothing. I'm glad you're going to see him. He misses you."

"Do you need backup?" Barry offered. "I could help."

"We've got it handled this time," Oliver assured him. "Besides, we can't take the chance of you being seen with us."

"I have one request," Curtis declared before both groups signed off. "Can we see the baby? Mei said he's adorable. And as you know, Paul and I are trying to adopt so—"

"Curtis," Caitlin lightly scolded.

"What? We were all just talking the other day about wanting to see him. You included."

"Only if she wants to," the brunette stressed.

Felicity smiled, feeling elated at the idea. So much of her life had to remain hidden—Connor included—that the prospect of introducing him to her friends and teammates was liberating in a way.
Remembering that it wasn't only her decision, Felicity looked to Oliver.

"I'll go get him," Oliver said and got up.

The two groups chatted casually as they waited for him to return. It didn't take long, and Felicity felt her mood brighten at the sound of Connor's typical babbling. Oliver moved to hand him to her, but she shook her head and motioned for him to retake his seat. Seeing as though he still felt hurt—not that she blamed him—by being the last to know about their son, Felicity wanted Oliver to be the one to show him off.

"Aw," the others chorused upon finally seeing him. Oliver sat with Connor in his lap and turned so the baby to faced the camera. "Everyone, this is Connor Jonas."

"Wow, that duck is as big as him!" Barry laughed.

"He's so cute and small," Caitlin gushed.

Felicity reached over to stroke Connor's head and fix his wisps of hair sticking up. "Connor, can you say 'hi' to everyone?" she said in a sweet voice. Lifting his hand, she made him wave.

"He's just terrific," Curtis complimented, looking like the epitome of heart eyes. "You two sure know how to make a beautiful baby!"

Felicity's cheeks flamed. Sara laughed, which turned into a cough when Felicity glared at her. Dig seemed intent on Lyla. Oliver, meanwhile, was beaming with pride as Connor gawked at the screen.

"Told you he was adorable," Mei stated.

"I'm glad he's safe, and we'll do everything we can to keep him that way," Lyla promised. "Congratulations again."

Felicity thanked them and moved to cut the video feed. But not before hearing Caitlin mutter "I want one" and seeing the look of utter panic on Barry's face. Dig and Sara were both chuckling.

"I think they're in love. Better watch out Curtis or Caitlin doesn't take your baby," Sara joked. "Your cuteness strikes again, CJ. I have a feeling you'll be a heartbreaker someday just like your dad."

Oliver held him close and patted his back. "No. He'll be better than me." Connor was already the purest part of him, and he'd fight like hell to make sure none of the darkness they faced ever touched him. "I know it."
August 24, 2007

Checking his watch, Oliver rushed into the main lobby of his apartment building. He tugged at his tie to loosen it and cursed at how late he was to meet Felicity. It was date night, and he'd planned to return to the loft and change before she arrived. He had a surprise for her and wanted to make sure she didn't find it laying on his desk in his room. Unfortunately, his father had wanted him to attend a meeting that had gone on longer than expected. Since it involved potential investors, Oliver couldn't leave without appearing rude.

His phone rang seconds later. Unsurprisingly, it was Felicity. "Hey, sweetheart," he answered. "Sorry I'm late. I was held up at the office."

There was some scuffling before she replied, "Where are you now?"

He frowned at the sound of her low, panicked tone. "I'm in the building at the elevator. I'll be up in a minute. Why are you whispering? Is something wrong?"

"My mom is here."

He stopped short at that. "In the loft?"

"Yes!"

"Why?"

"She insisted on coming into the city with me. She's supposed to meet Malcolm for dinner but said she wanted to stop by and see Tommy's apartment first."

"Is Tommy home?"

"He was for a few minutes, but then he got a call and left."

"Okay. Maybe I'm missing something, but what's so wrong with that?"

"What's wrong is this entire visit was a ruse! Oliver, she knows about us! She said she's known for weeks after she caught you on the security feed sneaking across the lawn to my room. She blindsided me with it after Tommy left," she babbled. "Now she wants to talk to you and I'm freaking out and —"

"Felicity, it's gonna be okay. Take a breath," Oliver advised even as he felt his own nerves kicking in. So much for thinking he was stealthy enough to avoid Malcolm's security cameras. Either Oliver had gotten sloppy in his haste to see Felicity or the system was upgraded.

Regardless, it was ridiculous to be so wound up considering he already knew Donna and had spoken to her a several times. She seemed to like him and often commented on how handsome he was—much to Felicity's embarrassment. Talking with her now that she knew the truth shouldn't be such a big deal, and yet it was. Just because Donna had a general fondness for him didn't mean she'd automatically be okay with him dating her daughter.
"She's going to gush all over you, and I'm going to die of embarrassment," Felicity lamented. "I just know it. And then you're going to realize what the hell you've gotten yourself into and break up with me—"

Oliver couldn't help chuckling, which his girlfriend didn't find at all amusing. She huffed in annoyance. "You're going to be fine. I love you, and we are definitely not breaking up. I think this is a good thing. We need someone on our side when the truth comes out."

Felicity muttered something under her breath that he couldn't quite catch, although it sounded like "frack the truth."

"I'm at the door," he said quietly. "Where are you now?"

"I'm in the living room. My mom is in the bathroom freshening up."

The front door suddenly opened, and Felicity stood on the other side with her phone still raised to her ear. Oliver stopped short, but it had nothing to do with her adorable pout. He eyed her from top to bottom, admiring the navy blue and red floral summer dress that clung to her curves. With her hair up in a ponytail, more of her shoulders and chest were exposed. Felicity also wore strappy heels that did wonders for her legs.

"Wow," he breathed in awe.

Felicity flushed and shuffled under his heated gaze. "I, um, had this in the back of my closet and… well, I thought I'd give it a try." She tugged at the hem.

He licked his lips at the sight of her rose-colored lipstick. Maybe they should skip going out tonight and stay in. He had a few ideas about how to compliment her properly. Oliver was just about to yank her against him when a loud squeal interrupted the moment.

Oliver had barely made it through the threshold before Donna was flinging herself at him. She hugged Oliver tightly as she bounced in excitement. "Oliver, hon, it's so good to see you again. Let me look at you." Her eyes perused him, and he suddenly wished he hadn't ruined his tie. "Yup, still a hottie. It's no wonder Felicity is so smitten. You are by far the cutest boy she's ever dated. Not that Felicity has dated all that much."

"Mom," Felicity warned. Already her cheeks were turning red.

"Thank you, Mrs. Merlyn. It's good to see you, too."

"Oliver, how many times have I told you to call me Donna? That goes double now that we're practically family."

Felicity's eyes widened. "Mom, it's not like we're married," she muttered, exasperated.

"What? Our families are very close, and he is your stepbrother's best friend. Plus, you never know," she hinted.

Oliver watched as his girlfriend swayed where she stood. She looked thoroughly frustrated and uncomfortable. He reached out and pulled Felicity into his side, which elicited a pleased sigh from her mother.

"It means a lot to have your approval, Donna. Felicity and I have been waiting for the right time to tell everyone."
"You're worried about Tommy and your parents, I assume."

"They might not be as enthusiastic," Oliver reluctantly confirmed.

"And what if they're not?" she inquired. Despite Donna's friendly demeanor, Oliver sensed her mama bear instincts were surfacing. Beneath her smile belied a serious question.

Oliver glanced down at Felicity to see her biting her lip. He gave her a squeeze and looked her in the eyes. "I love Felicity, and I do not intend to let other people's opinions come between us."

Felicity smiled back at him and reached up to kiss his cheek. Meanwhile, Donna glanced intently between the pair. She nodded her head as if he'd confirmed her thought.

"That's good to hear," she stated.

A few more minutes passed with them making polite conversation. Felicity, however, remained wound tight. Oliver did his best to calm her, rubbing invisible circles into her back, while Donna went on about the loft and how the view was probably why Felicity always stayed over. Felicity almost choked when her mother then proceeded to wink at Oliver.

"Mom, don't you have to meet Malcolm?" she reminded.

With a wave of her hand, her mother dismissed, "I told him I'd be a few minutes late."

"Well, we have plans too..."

"Right, it's your date night. Maybe you should go freshen up, sweetie. You have this smudge on your face." Donna pointed to a spot on Felicity's face, though Oliver couldn't visibly see that anything was wrong.

Felicity's hand went to her face—if she got any redder, she'd match her dress—and quickly excused herself.

"Finally, we're alone," Donna sighed. "I didn't want to say this in front of my daughter because, as you can see, I've already embarrassed her enough tonight in her opinion. But I wanted to thank you, Oliver."

"Thank me?"

"Yes. I can't remember the last time I've seen Felicity so happy. I'm sure she's told you about her father." Oliver nodded. "Noah leaving was very hard on her—the both of us actually. Felicity is brilliant, but she retreated too much into herself afterward. I haven't been able to reach her. That brilliant mind of hers has been her safety net for too long," Donna explained. "With you, I can tell that she's become freer and more confident. She's been wearing more color lately, too. Have you noticed?"

Oliver thought back on it and he supposed he did notice Felicity mixing up her wardrobe a little bit more. "Somewhat. She still likes wearing black—although tonight is different. I don't mind either way."

"The dress she chose tonight was not my doing. I've tried for years to get her to wear it," Donna told him, "and now she's picked it out on her own. She's always been a beautiful girl, and now she's starting to come out of her shell and see that for herself. So, thank you."

Donna couldn't possibly know the impact her words had on him. Oliver always felt like it was
Felicity who'd changed him for the better, and it was humbling to know he'd had the same effect on her. "You raised her and convinced her to come to Starling. I probably wouldn't have met her otherwise. So, thank you," Oliver replied.

"You love her very much." It wasn't a question.

"I do."

"She's going back to MIT soon."

"I know."

"What about you?"

Oliver smiled then. "That's actually why I'm taking her out tonight. I have a surprise for her." He glanced to make sure Felicity wasn't out of the bathroom yet. "Can you keep a secret?"

Donna nodded enthusiastically, and he told her the surprise he had in store for Felicity. The older blonde was ecstatic.

"That's wonderful, Oliver! She's going to be so thrilled. My lips are sealed," Donna promised.

"I've been dying to tell her all day."

"Although, and I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but I should probably fulfill my motherly duty and mention that if you end up hurting my daughter in any way, I will have to kill you," she declared. "I'm joking, of course—mostly."

Oliver did not doubt the veiled warning. "I understand, but I'm not going to hurt her. I'll always protect her."

"You certainly did a fine job of that at QC, so I believe you." She gave Oliver another hug.

"What did I miss?" Felicity interrupted. "And why are you hugging?"

"Oh, Oliver and I were just catching up. Is that the time? I should get going." Donna went to hug her daughter good-bye, too. "Felicity, sweetie, have fun. I'll see you at home later. Or perhaps tomorrow if you're planning on staying here tonight."

"Uh, probably," she replied, confused. She was at a total loss of what was going on.

She addressed the both of them, "You're both responsible young adults, but I'll remind you to be careful. Remember, no glove no love!"

"Mom!" Felicity exclaimed.

"And, Oliver, feel free to use the front door next time you visit the manor." With a wink, she was gone.

Felicity covered her face with her hands and sunk against the kitchen island. "Yup, definitely dead from embarrassment."

"I'm glad we're walking, because I am way too full," Felicity muttered as she rubbed her
temperamental stomach. She probably shouldn't have ordered herself a piece of cake after the sizeable dinner she'd eaten. Usually, she and Oliver shared because O'Connor's portions were so big, but tonight she'd felt famished. Her eyes, unfortunately, were bigger than her stomach.

Oliver squeezed her hand. "You didn't have to finish it."

"I know," she grumbled.

"But you were stress eating," he guessed.

Felicity reluctantly replied, "Maybe."

"Your mom really wasn't that bad," Oliver said with a knowing grin.

She groaned at that. "What did she say to you while I was in the bathroom? And don't think I'm not aware she sent me away on purpose."

"Nothing much. She's mostly just happy that you're happy."

"And?" she prompted.

Oliver smirked. "And she might've threatened to kill me if I hurt you."

"Ugh, lovely," Felicity grumbled.

"She's just looking out for you."

They continued walking along the path, taking in the spectacular lighted displays at the Starling City Botanical Garden. The trees and nearby displays were lined with lights that complemented the multi-colored mix of vegetation. It was so whimsical it was like walking through Wonderland. Felicity hadn't known what to expect when Oliver suggested they visit. She never would've taken him for the kind of guy who'd frequent such a place. Then again, he was a constant surprise.

"This is so amazing," Felicity commented.

"I took Thea here a lot when she was small. She loved all the lights at night."

Felicity smiled as they walked across a small bridge to enter into another section. There weren't a ton of other patrons, but she and Oliver had taken precautions to avoid being recognized. He had on his Rockets baseball cap while Felicity wore her glasses.

"I can see why," she replied in awe. "It's beautiful."

"You're beautiful," he complimented.

Felicity's cheeks colored. "You already told me that tonight."

Oliver grinned and wrapped his arm around her waist. "Well, I had to say it again."

"I'm glad you like the dress."

"As long as you like it, that's what matters."

"What do you mean?"

"Black is usually your color. But lately I've noticed you've been mixing it up more."
With a shrug, she said, "I guess I have." Felicity studied her boyfriend. "Did my mom say something about that tonight, too?" She'd noticed the way her mother's eyes had lit up when seeing her in the dress.

"Yes, but I've also noticed it—although maybe not as consciously until she pointed it out."

Felicity replied, "She's probably hoping I'm over my goth phase."

"Are you?" Oliver questioned. "I only bring it up, because I want you to know it makes no difference to me. I love you in black or color. So whatever you want to do, it's your decision. You don't have to change for me."

They stopped walking and ended up in front of a small waterfall. They were so close, they felt the drops of water spray onto their skin. Felicity shivered, though it had more to do with Oliver than the cool breeze mixing with the mist.

Standing on her tiptoes, she placed a soft kiss to his lips. "You have no idea how much that means to me." Her hand stroked along his jaw. "I am changing somewhat. You make me want try new things and be braver. I don't like to be the center of attention and this dress"—she tugged at the hem—"it's not subtle. I never even looked twice at it before, but I thought it would be fun to give it a shot tonight."

"And you like it?"

"Yes. I like it a lot," Felicity admitted.

She'd noticed the admiring looks she'd been getting while wearing it. For so long she'd wanted to be nothing more than a face in the crowd. Black was neutral and alleviated some of the awkwardness and anxiety she'd felt inside growing up. It forced people to focus on her rather than her appearance—something she'd seen her mother constantly fall victim to over the years. Now, however, Felicity wasn't sure she wanted to blend in so much anymore. Oliver was so bold and confident; it was impossible to miss him in a crowd. It was partly why she was so in awe of him when they'd first met.

Felicity found herself wanting to stand out in a similar way. It was another side to herself she hadn't considered before Oliver. He made her feel beautiful and feminine; surprisingly, it was a part she wanted to further explore.

"Especially when you look at me like that," she added. Oliver's gaze sent a shot of heat all the way down to her toes.

"Before you know it, you'll be dying your hair blond," he teased in a husky voice.

"In your dreams, buddy. Let's not push it," Felicity giggled back. "But I am willing to switch to red as my permanent lip color." Her lips hovered over his mouth. "I know how much you like that."

He groaned lowly in response. "I love you in red."

The corner of her mouth quirked and she laughed softly again. "See, I'm a good girlfriend. I can compromise."

"You're the best," he corrected. Despite the people walking past, he leaned in once more to kiss her. It was quick but meaningful. He then tugged her forward and led her up the path. "Come on," Oliver directed.

There was a quieter area that not as many people visited. It would give them privacy, which was
needed for what he was about to tell her. Oliver couldn't wait any longer to share his news with her. After a few twists and turns, they arrived at the small, wooden gazebo that looked out over a pond covered in waterlilies. The gazebo was also decorated in small, twinkling white lights.

"We shouldn't be disturbed here." He took off his cap and tossed it on the bench before trying to fix his hair. His efforts had more to do with nerves than vanity. Not that he didn't think Felicity would be excited about his news, but it was important and would definitely signify taking their relationship—and even his future—to the next level.

"You okay?" Felicity questioned. "Usually I'm the fidgety one."

Oliver took a breath. "I have something for you." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out the letter.

"What's this?"

"Open it."

Felicity did just that. She unfolded the paper, her eyes instantly lighting up as she read line by line. "Oliver, oh my God...this is an acceptance letter to Harvard." She grinned from ear to ear. "You got into Harvard! You'll be right near me at MIT!"

"Well, my parents' money got me in," he muttered. "My academic record isn't the best. But it was the only way they would support me going away for school again instead of SCU. I'm going to finish my degree and work toward a MBA at the Business School."

Her smile dimmed as she asked, "Is that what you want?"

"I know I want to be with you and finish my degree," he answered honestly. "I'm not sure about the MBA yet, but I figure I can deal with that and my parents later. I just...I want to earn it on my own."

"You can, and you will," Felicity encouraged. The dejected look on Oliver's face despite the good news tore at her heart. The Queen legacy weighed on him, and she knew how much he wanted to carve his own path in spite of it. "Hey,"—she forced him to look at her—"just because your parents got you into the school doesn't mean you can't make the most of the opportunity. You can work to belong there. I love you, and I believe in you."

Oliver leaned his forehead against hers. "Thanks."

"Also, I'm an excellent study buddy," she joked, kissing him. "I'll show right up at your dorm with flashcards if you need me."

Oliver chuckled, feeling better. "Thanks. But I'm actually not living in the dorms."

"You're not?"

He shook his head. "No. We have a penthouse near our building out there in Boston."

"Of course you do," she muttered.

"My dad wanted me there, but I said no. I think I want something smaller and closer to campus. I need to focus."

"That makes sense."

"I might've found a place. It's smaller than even the loft, but it seems homey. I wanted you to take a
look at it, too, since you'll probably be my most frequent visitor," he explained while rubbing her back.

Felicity got goose bumps. "You really want my opinion?" she replied, somewhat shocked but also excited.

"Yes. It's important that you feel comfortable there, too." He took a breath, preparing to reveal his true intention—and hoping to God she didn't get too overwhelmed by it. "I was also thinking that, you know, if you liked it, then maybe you'd like a drawer."

"A drawer," Felicity repeated as if it was a completely new word.

"For your stuff—when you stay over," Oliver elaborated, his heart pounding. "To make it easier. If you want to..." At her silence, he was quick to add, "If it's too much or too fast, I understand. I just thought—"

Oliver Queen, her boyfriend, wanted her to have a drawer at his place. A drawer. Felicity didn't let him finish. She threw her arms completely around his neck and silenced him with an adoring kiss. Oliver enveloped her in a bear hug and lifted her feet off of the ground, holding her close.

"Yes, yes, yes...I want a drawer," she exclaimed in between peppering his mouth and face with kisses.

Oliver chuckled at her enthusiasm. "Then that settles it. The drawer is yours—assuming you like the apartment."

"I'm sure I'll love it. Just like I love you."

"I love you, too, sweetheart." He placed her feet back down on the ground but continued to hold her tightly. "So much."

Felicity gazed up into his eyes as her heart swelled with love and hope for a future that was suddenly taking shape before them. "We're really doing this, aren't we?" she whispered.

Oliver's smile was beaming. "We really are."

Looking out the windshield, Felicity caught sight of the Ducati zooming a few cars ahead. Dig pressed his hand to his ear and murmured his confirmation of whatever Oliver said in the comms. Most likely he'd told Dig that the area was clear. Instead of the security team, Oliver thought it best they handle taking her to see Tommy alone. It was much easier to maneuver and remain inconspicuous without an entourage.

Felicity preferred it that way. She trusted Oliver and Dig to protect her. Mostly she was just eager to get out of the mansion and see Tommy. Sara, of course, remained behind to watch Connor for the evening. When Dig pulled up in front of the site of Tommy's new restaurant, she noticed Oliver parked farther up. He remained on his bike with his helmet on, but Felicity knew he was scanning the area for threats.

"Keep your phone on you," Diggle advised. "You remember the code to text if you're in trouble?"

"Of course, I did make it up," Felicity pointed out, not unkindly. Dig was just being overly cautious after what happened the last time, and so she indulged him. "Not that I think I'll need it. It's just
Sensing another warning coming, she replied, "I promise to be vigilant at all times." Felicity glanced at Oliver again and saw his bike empty. No sign of him on the sidewalk either. He was probably already lurking in the shadows. "I'm not sure how long I'll be, but I'll text you when I'm about to leave."

"We'll be waiting." He nodded to himself. "Oliver says it's clear, by the way."

Offering him a grateful smile, Felicity got out of the car. Dig waited another moment before driving off. Following Oliver's lead, he was going to park away from the building so his presence wasn't so obvious. She walked toward the front entrance, which was surrounded by construction tape and plastic tarps. Before she could even knock, Tommy appeared.

"Hey, sis," he greeted with a hug and kiss on the cheek. "Glad you could meet me."

"Of course. I'm really excited to see the place," Felicity told him. "Mei had mentioned you were thinking about doing this. Plus, I wanted to catch up with you."

"Same here. So, you ready to take a tour?" Tommy offered.

"Yes, please." Felicity let him lead the way inside.

"Careful where you step," he advised. "It's still a work in progress."

The ceiling was low but the space wide. Tools were spread out everywhere on the concrete floor, along with crates. A couple of spots were roped off because of the obvious holes in the floor. The frame of a long bar was off to the left with shelving.

"What kind of restaurant will this be?"

"It'll be a hibachi and sushi bar."

"You do love your sushi," Felicity teased.

Tommy chuckled. "I do. I was thinking a really fancy greeting area with lots of oriental plants and probably a fountain or two on either side."

"That'll be nice."

He led her further into the room, showing her each section and explaining his vision. Felicity enjoyed seeing how excited he was about his new project. She asked questions in between and offered some suggestions.

"At the back wall, one of the decorators suggested a natural curtain like a waterfall."

"You mean with real water?"

"Yeah. I want guests to feel like they've entered a completely different world for a little while. What do you think?" He sat down on one of the crates and gestured for Felicity to join him.

"Honestly, it seems awesome," she replied. "You've clearly planned it out well. What's the timeline? When will it open?"
"I'm hoping by the end of the year assuming the permits are ready in time to begin construction. There will be a grand opening, of course."

"Obviously," Felicity acknowledged.

"You'll have to come—assuming you're still around then. It's hard to keep track of you these days." The comment seemed innocent, though Tommy's stare was probing.

Felicity tensed slightly but easily replied, "Well, you know how my job is."

"Sure. I get the impression from Mei that Brighton Tech can be intense. Very high standards. She works late a lot. Not to mention the constant conferences she must attend."

"It was the same for me when I was in the office," she stated.

"Then you got your promotion." Felicity placed her hands in her lap to keep from fidgeting and nodded. "And transferred to Boston."

"That's right," she confirmed.

"But you still have to travel a lot."

"It's the bulk of what I do." An uneasy feeling formed in her gut.

"It must be nice to be in Starling for a while to catch up with everyone. Sara's probably happy to be home, too. It's convenient that she returned in time to offer you a place to stay."

The knot wound tighter. "When she found out I was coming home, she decided it was a good time for her, as well. My mom's spa day was a great way for us all to reconnect."

Tommy chuckled and scratched his chin. "Sure, sure. It's funny, though, because I was under the impression you had headed back to Boston not long after."

"Well, I told you I was taking some time off," she reminded him.

"I know that. But, you see, I stopped by Sara's apartment the next day and you weren't there. Neither was she. In fact, the landlord said he hadn't seen Sara in over a year. Said he wasn't aware of her being back in town. The apartment has remained untouched, and he'd never even heard of you."

"Oh frack. Now Felicity was really on alert. Red flags went up in her mind despite the grin she forced. "That's strange."

"You know what's stranger?" He didn't give her a chance to answer. "The apartment you were renting in Boston is empty. That landlord said you paid the rent on time every month, but you never moved in. Said he didn't even know what you looked like. The P.O. Box you had was left unchecked, too, according to a sweet young post office employee."

"Tommy—" Felicity tried to interrupt, the panic setting in. This was not good at all.

"Since you said you'd been transferred for work, Brighton Tech was the next call. Imagine my shock to find out that your employment had been terminated over a year ago. Not only that but your bank account and credit cards went unused."

"Have you been investigating me?" Felicity demanded. How the heck would he know about her finances?
"You were completely off the grid, Felicity, and I was worried. So, yes, I hired a private investigator to look into it these past few weeks. According to him, besides the false trail you set up, you and Sara completely vanished without a trace. He can't even figure out where exactly you're both staying in Starling."

"Tommy, please let me explain."

"Oh, I want you to explain," he retorted. "From the beginning, because I've had my suspicions for a while that something has been going on. It was just never so blatant as it is now."

"Who else have you talked to about this?" Felicity needed to know exactly how much had been shared.

"No one. Not even Mei—although I'm starting to wonder about her, too. How was it she didn't know you'd left the company? Is she in on this charade, too?"

This was bad. Really bad. Felicity's mind spun with explanations she could give, and yet nothing seemed good enough. She was still in shock that her own brother had hired a private investigator to look into her life. What could she say to explain all of this away? Should she cover it up? Felicity was so sick and tired of lying, but how could she tell Tommy the truth without first consulting Oliver and Mei? Not to mention the danger it would put him in.

"Felicity, what is going on?" Tommy pressed. "Are you in some kind of legal trouble? Is that why Sara is in on it?"

"Tommy, I…I can't believe you had me investigated." She stood up in frustration. "Why didn't you just come directly to me?" Who the hell knew what this private investigator was going to do now, too? It was another unknown quantity with the ability to wreak havoc.

"Why didn't you just tell me the truth?" he countered. "What are you hiding?"

"Tommy, it's not that simple."

He stood up to face her. "Nothing is simple with you. In fact, I'd say this is par for the course."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that this wouldn't be the first time you've hid things from me. You lied about you and Oliver, too."

"Are you seriously going to throw that in my face right now? That was a long time ago, and you knew why we kept it a secret. You weren't exactly Mr. Honesty back then either," Felicity reminded him.

"It's relevant now, because I don't think you ever broke that habit. I'm not stupid, Felicity. And neither is your mom or Thea. You don't think we've noticed how secretive you are? How you keep certain details about your life to yourself? You've been this way for years, and I didn't think to truly question it until now. You were serious with that guy Aaron for a year and not only did we not meet him, we never even saw a damn photo!" Tommy exclaimed. "The only reason I didn't push it was because Thea said you told her about you and Aaron working for the government. Something about you both needing to keep a low profile because of legal obligations. Was that a lie?"

"No, it wasn't," she answered.

"So, what, are you like some government spy or something? Is that why you went off the grid?"
"Damn it," Felicity cursed under her breath. "Tommy, I want to tell you everything. I really do. But this…it's so much bigger than me and I…" She was at a loss for words, a rarity for her. "I don't want you to be involved. I want to keep you safe."

"Safe from what?" Some of his anger dissipated, and he stared back at her with growing concern. He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Are you in danger? Felicity, please tell me. Whatever is going on, I can help you."

Shaking her head, Felicity's eyes watered. She had not expected this tonight. All she wanted was to spend a normal night catching up with her brother. She didn't need to bring another person into her already chaotic world. She felt herself spinning out of control and unable to stop it. "Tommy, please listen to me. You need to let this go."

"Felicity—"

"Please," she begged. "I don't want to lie to you, but I also can't tell you what you want to know right now. Please just trust me on this. Let it go."

Tommy was quiet for a moment as their eyes locked. Hers were pleading while he stared back with intense uncertainty and disappointment. Finally, he said, "I guess that's the problem. You're my sister and I love you but…I can't trust you, Felicity. You're..." He hesitated before finally coming out with it. "You're a liar."

His words were like a dagger to her heart. "Tommy..." Felicity's voice broke.

"Prove me wrong," he implored, looking just as wounded and vulnerable. "For once, tell me the truth."

The heavy silence that followed spoke volumes. Tommy was the first to look away and take a step back. He cleared his throat and said, "I have paperwork to look over. You know the way out."

Taking a shaky breath, Felicity didn't linger or continue to plea with him after his dismissal. There was nothing else she could possibly say. The strain she'd been feeling between her and Tommy had finally cracked, and the chasm it left inside flooded her heart with despair. Brushing away the tears, Felicity messaged Dig and he was waiting curbside as promised.

Her appearance had him immediately concerned. "Are you okay?"

Not trusting her voice, Felicity nodded and got inside. Dig closed the door after her and got in the front seat. Lowering her head, Felicity tried to hide the fresh wave of tears that came spilling out.

"I don't know, man, but she's crying," she heard him whisper. Dig turned and said in a gentle voice. "Felicity, take my comm. Oliver wants to talk to you."

The blonde shook her head. She couldn't speak and just barely managed a "please take me home" through her quiet sobs.

Dig hesitated but put the earpiece back in. "She can't talk right now," he started the engine and pulled out from the curb. "I don't know," Diggle muttered. "Wait until we get back, okay?"

Oliver was probably freaking out, but Felicity couldn't help that. She could only deal with one issue at a time, and right now her conversation with Tommy was taking precedence. She removed her glasses and just barely noticed through her blurred vision that Dig was holding a tissue out to her. She took it and dabbed at her eyes. Unfortunately, Felicity was too devastated to be embarrassed about getting emotional in front of Dig.
The only sounds in the car was her crying and his occasional use of the blinker until he said, "Oliver, I think we have a problem. Someone is following us."

Felicity's head snapped up. "What?"

"I don't think so either."

"You don't think what?" she interjected, regretting not accepting the comm Oliver wanted her to wear earlier. She hadn't wanted anyone in her head while talking with Tommy, but now she was missing their conversation.

"The car doesn't look like A.R.G.U.S. or H.I.V.E."

"Bratva?" Felicity interjected.

"No. Looks like something an undercover detective would drive."

"Oh God, Tommy," Felicity breathed as the realization hit.

"It's not Tommy," Dig said with certainty.

"I know, but Tommy hired a private investigator. It's probably him." Perhaps Tommy didn't just invite her to meet him tonight to get the truth. He probably had the guy waiting for her to leave if he didn't. After all, Tommy had admitted he couldn't figure out where in Starling she was staying. It was the perfect setup for her to be tracked.

"Excuse me, he did what?" Diggle replied and huffed in annoyance. "Oliver, I'm not gonna be able to hear her if you keep growling in my ear."

"I'll explain when we get home but for now just try to lose him," Felicity instructed. "He wants to know where I'm going, and we can't let that happen."

"You get that…? Oliver's on it."

Felicity heard the motorcycle roar in the distance and turned her head. Oliver was suddenly weaving in and out of traffic and got in front of a black, unmarked car. The car jerked as it braked to avoid hitting him. Diggle then gunned it and also continued to weave in and out of traffic.

"Hold on," he warned her while taking a few sharp turns.

Felicity was jostled in the backseat, but it had little effect on her already scrambled brain. Nothing should surprise her at this point, but the disbelief about what happened was setting in anyway. How had she gotten to this point? Was there no reprieve?

"We lost him," Dig announced.

"Lost" was a word Felicity understood all too well. Every time she felt like she was gaining something back, she lost something or someone else. Today it was Tommy; what would tomorrow bring? Who would manipulate or abandon her next? Where would it end?

Felicity leaned forward and placed her head in her hands. Worst of all, she was losing herself piece by piece as all of the pain and lies bore down on her. Her heart was heavy and she feared, before long, the weight would shatter it beyond repair.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, guys! Please let me know what you think in the comments. Next chapter will be titled "Say I Am" and will be mostly present-day Olicity. ;}
April 10, 2014

Sitting on the study floor, Oliver watched as Connor batted around and chewed on his toys. He was a little ball of energy this morning. His occasional shriek when Oliver pretended to steal his toys before giving them back made it difficult to talk business, but Oliver had long since mastered the art of multitasking. Sara perched on the couch while Dig stood off to the side. Lucky lay beside the blanket on the floor keeping his usual lookout.

"So, what did you find out?" Oliver questioned.

"The private investigator is Markus Pope. He doesn't like to advertise, but that's just because he's so good."

"We broke into his office but couldn't find much. He's got his files locked up in some kind of safe behind the bookshelf in his office. It's very high-tech. We'll need a special device to crack it," Sara explained.

Oliver was still having difficulty wrapping his head around the fact that Tommy hired a private investigator to look into Felicity and tail her. Tommy didn't know what exactly had been going on for the last year, but he was suspicious enough to know that it wasn't normal. As Diggle always said, the truth has a way of revealing itself—and it seemed his former best friend was in hot pursuit of it.

"We need to move quickly before this guy digs any deeper," Dig advised.

"What about Mei?" the blonde interjected. "She's A.R.G.U.S. and Tommy's her boyfriend. Maybe she's the one who can get him under control."

"I doubt it. I talked to Mei last night. She and Tommy had a big fight after he confronted her about Felicity leaving Brighton. He took off and checked into a hotel," Oliver explained.

"He's a loose cannon right now." Dig added, "All the more reason to have Felicity rig something up and deal with it ourselves. We need to know everything this guy has and destroy it."

"I don't know," he muttered. "Felicity is...she might not be up for it."

Sara looked as concerned as Oliver felt. "Have you seen her at all this morning?"

"She fed Connor before going right back down into the lair. Said she was chasing a new lead on Waller's Shadowspire connection."
They were all silent, knowing full well that Felicity's reinvigorated work ethic was merely her way of coping with last night's revelation. It tore Oliver up inside to see Felicity so upset when they'd arrived back at the mansion. He'd tried to offer her comfort; for a couple of minutes, she sank into his embrace. But when he tried to talk to her about what happened, she'd abruptly pushed him away and muttered about having more work to do.

"Was she up all night?" Dig asked.

Oliver sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I think so. Raisa brought her breakfast this morning, but she said Felicity barely acknowledged her. She was totally absorbed in whatever she was doing."

"Maybe I should go talk to her," Sara suggested. "See if I can—where's Connor?"

Oliver's head whipped around to the spot where his son had been playing, which was now empty. Lucky was gone too. "What the...he was just here a second ago. Connor?" Oliver called. He didn't actually expect an answer from his six-month-old, but he hoped his voice might spur some kind of reaction out of him. "Connor?"

The trio glanced sheepishly at each other—since they'd all been completely unaware—and began to search the study. When they determined that he wasn't hiding under anything, Oliver rushed out into the hall. His heart was in his throat until he spotted Connor crawling down the other end. Lucky was right next to him.

"Connor," Oliver shouted and practically sprinted to catch him. He scooped up his son. "Oh my God, don't you ever scare me like that again!"

The baby happily gurgled like it was some kind of game and patted his dad's cheeks.

"Well, we're the worst operatives and babysitters ever," Sara commented. "Way to go all stealth on us, CJ. And you, Lucky, what were you thinking not warning us? I thought you were supposed to be a good guard dog?" Lucky barked and rubbed himself against her legs. She rolled her eyes and patted his head. "More like partners in crime, I guess."

"Probably time to start baby proofing now that little man's learned to crawl."

"Hey, you did crawl, didn't you?" Oliver cooed at his son. "My boy's crawling."

"And making pretty good time too," Sara joked.

Oliver laughed, filled with joy that he'd actually gotten to witness one of his son's firsts. It felt amazing to be part of the moment—even if temporarily misplacing his baby didn't exactly paint his parenting skills in the best light. Then again, he was a work in progress.

"Felicity has to see this," Oliver declared. "Can you take him for a sec while I get her?" He fully intended to coax Felicity out of the lair for this one. Maybe seeing their son crawl for the first time would lift her spirits. She needed some good news.

"Sure. Come here, you little troublemaker," Sara teased. He hugged his aunt as she kissed his cheek. "You're lucky you're so cute."

Oliver chuckled before heading back toward the study. His body thrummed with excitement as he punched in the code to reveal the lair door and trotted down the stairs. "Hey, Felicity, guess what Connor just—" He was interrupted by a loud crash.

Rushing down the rest of the steps, Oliver took in the sight before him and paused. The lair was
darker than usual, and papers were strewn across the floor. A few sparks flashed from near the computer. It took only seconds to notice that the keyboard had been ripped from it. There was a mark on the wall, where it probably had been thrown, and fractured pieces below.

The mess, however, wasn't what troubled him. It was seeing Felicity bent over in her chair, her head in her hands, as loud sobs wracked her entire body. This was nothing like last night; it was beyond crying. It had to be for Felicity to actually break her own equipment. An aura of pain and despair surrounded her, and it made his own protective instincts flare to life.

Unable to stand it a second longer, Oliver immediately crossed the distance. "Felicity," he tentatively said. Her head snapped up in surprise before she launched herself at him. Oliver caught her easily and wrapped her up in his embrace. Unlike last night, Felicity didn't pull away. She just held on tighter. Even if she tried, Oliver wasn't about to let her go. Not this time.

Felicity shook like a leaf in his arms. Her head buried in his neck, Oliver felt her hot, wet tears against his skin. "It's okay, sweetheart. I've got you," he murmured into her hair.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she kept sobbing.

"It's okay. Just let it out." Oliver's eyes watered as his own heart broke to see the woman he loved so shattered. He suspected Felicity had been holding all of this in for far longer than last night. He was anxious to get to the bottom of it. To fix whatever was causing her so much pain. But Oliver also knew he had to remain patient. Felicity needed the release before she could calm down.

"I'm tired, Oliver," she wept while clinging to him. "I'm just so tired."

"I know you are," he soothed. "And whatever it is that's bothering you, you're not alone. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

For some reason, that only made her cry harder. She didn't let go, though, and he was now supporting most of her weight. There wasn't much he could do beyond holding her and whispering words of comfort in her ear. So that's just what Oliver did. They stayed that way for he didn't know how long.

Eventually, Felicity's sobs lessened. Oliver rubbed her back and placed a gentle kiss against her temple. Felicity let out a breath and shivered at the contact. When he started to pull away, she wouldn't let him. Her hand cupped his jaw, and she turned his head toward her. Felicity's eyes were red, and her cheeks were stained with tears. Her breaths had become shallow, and he felt her chest heaving against his own.

They were so close, their noses rubbed together. "I've missed you," she whispered.

"I've missed you too," he huskily replied.

The shift in the air between them was instant. It became thick and electrified. Oliver shut his eyes when Felicity's lips grazed his, giving him a whisper of a kiss—much like the one they'd shared yesterday. His heart thumped erratically in his chest at the sensation and what it could mean. Felicity leaned in again, bolder this time, and kissed him fully. Oliver instantly responded and angled his head to deepen it.

Felicity let out a low moan and opened her mouth wider for him. His tongue caressed her bottom lip before delving inside. It felt surreal to be kissing her again, and he resisted the urge to pinch himself to make sure it wasn't just one of his dreams. He raised a hand to her cheek and wiped away the moisture while their mouths caressed in a passionate yet familiar rhythm.
Oliver was in serious danger of losing himself in the kiss. In her. Felicity, as usual, completely overwhelmed his senses. After more than a year of separation, his body trembled with need. Felicity's hands traced the hard muscles of his back and toyed with the hem of his shirt. It would be so easy yank it over his head and cast it aside. He wanted to do the same to hers before walking her over to the desk and hoisting her up on it. Just the thought of Felicity underneath him with her legs wrapped around his waist was enough to make him lose it right then.

Regrettably, there were sparks still flying from where she'd yanked the keyboard out of the system. Also on the desk was an untouched plate of food Raisa had given her. And while their kisses were hot and fevered, there was no ignoring the salty taste of her lips and skin from the many tears she'd just cried.

Oliver pulled away then. Felicity mewled in protest and tried to follow. Cupping her face, he halted her but didn't draw back any farther. They remained like that for a moment—their noses and lips hovering as their breaths mingled. Finally, their eyes opened.

"Kiss me," Felicity whispered. The way she was looking at him, with love, intensity, and a hint of wonder, was almost enough to make him give in to her request. For so long, he'd feared never getting to this moment with her. Oliver didn't want to ruin it, but there was also something more pressing that needed to be addressed.

"You have no idea how much I want to." His thumb stroked her cheek. "But you're clearly upset, sweetheart. Tell me what's wrong."

As expected, her expression dropped. "I told you last night about Tommy," she mumbled. Her quick glance away convinced him of the opposite. She was dodging him.

"You said you wanted honesty from me," Oliver murmured. "It goes both ways, Felicity. I don't doubt that what happened with Tommy hurt you deeply, but it seems something else has been on your mind. You've had a permanent crinkle between your brow for weeks now."

Her eyes, once again, gleamed with unshed tears. "I can't lose you."

Although the statement caused his heart to skip a beat in elation, it also left him confused. "Other than the crazy danger we're currently facing, what else has you so worried?"

Felicity took a shaky breath. "That day I went to the spa, before those Bratva thugs picked me up, I met with Mei."

A rush of fury swept through Oliver at the memory of Isabel's plot to kidnap Felicity. He pushed it down—now was not the time. "Yes, I remember," he replied with forced calm.

"We talked about Task Force X."

"Oh." Now they were getting somewhere. "The deal I made with Waller, is that what's been bothering you?"

She nodded and bit her lip. "We need to take her out, Oliver. She's just as dangerous as Darhk, if not more considering she has government resources at her disposal. The immunity deal you struck for me is another trap."

Oliver sighed, "I know it's not ideal. And of course I don't trust Waller, especially after learning she sabotaged the Gambit. But I had to—"

"I know you had to strike a deal, but it's so much worse than you thought. Waller double-crossed
you yet again. Task Force X goes by another name. It's called the Suicide Squad, Oliver," Felicity revealed in a rush. "They're going to send you on impossible missions with criminals. Missions with guaranteed casualty risks, because sacrificing your lives is a better alternative than endangering other A.R.G.U.S. operatives."

Oliver, when he agreed to the deal, wasn't naïve enough to think that Waller would go easy on him once he joined the agency. He expected to be put in dangerous situations. Hearing the truth from Felicity, however, who looked both sick and furious by the prospect, was sobering. "Oh."

"It gets worse," she warned. "Mei told me there's a fail-safe in case you or the others step out of line. They've designed some sort of kill chip with tracking that will go in your head. You step out of line, and you're terminated. It's not a shot at redemption, Oliver, like you thought. It's a death sentence." The tears were sliding freely down her face now. "Mei wanted me to hold off on telling you, because she was worried you'd go after Waller before they could investigate her further. I was livid when I found out and was going to tell you, but then everything happened with Isabel and Anatoly. You were fending off both Darhk and the Bratva, and I just didn't want to burden you even more.

"I thought I could do some digging on my own and come up with a solution before I told you. I wanted to get something on Waller to blackmail her or remove her from her position. But the Shadowspire information Curtis gave me amounted to nothing, and I got so frustrated. Now Tommy hates me, and there's a private investigator involved. Everyone I love is getting hurt because of me and my evil father, and it's all my fault—" she sobbed.

Oliver didn't even know how to begin to process everything that Felicity had just revealed. He didn't think he could hate Waller any more than he already did, although that was something he could deal with on his own when he had time to think. His main concern right now was Felicity. He'd seen her upset when he first brought her there from Ivy Town, but he knew she'd reached her breaking point after last night. She was going to make herself sick if she kept this up.

"Hey, what's happening is not your fault," he replied.

"Yes, it is."

"No, it's not," Oliver almost growled. He wasn't necessarily mad at her, but he was frustrated by her insistence that she was to blame for this mess they found themselves in.

"What are you doing?" she questioned when he walked over to the computer monitors. He then proceeded to shut the entire system down.

"No more investigating for today—not that I think you'll be able to do much after the smackdown you gave this thing," he added, examining the ripped wires. "Regardless, you need a break."

"But I—"

"You need to have a decent meal and a nice long bath. Maybe even a nap," Oliver suggested. "Actually, never mind maybe. You definitely need a nap. And once you've done that, you can spend some time with our son. Who, I'm both thrilled and terrified to report, has just learned to crawl."

That brought Felicity up short. "What? Connor's crawling?"

"Yes, that's originally what I came down to tell you."

Despite her weepy appearance, Felicity actually smiled. "Oh my God…"

Oliver placed his arm around her shoulders. "I know. Now let's get you out of here and upstairs
where you can relax." Felicity's phone dinged, but he swiped it before she could look at it. "No talking with the team or anyone else either."

"Oliver, I can't just turn it off."

"Yes, you can. It's actually really easy," he declared before proceeding to shut it off.

"But, but, what about you? What about what I just told you?"

"We can talk about all this later," he promised. "I have some things to take care of today, but I'll be back later to pick you up."

"Pick me up?" she questioned, perplexed. "Are we going somewhere?"

"If everything goes according to plan, then yes," Oliver declared as the wheels in his head started turning.

"And what, may I ask, is the plan?" she prodded as they ascended the stairs.

"That's top-secret information on a need-to-know basis," he replied with a teasing smirk.

"No offense, Oliver, but I don't know if I can handle any more surprises at the moment."

"You'll love this one. Trust me."

Rocking gently in the chair, Felicity held Connor and hummed a soft lullaby. He was out like a light, having fallen asleep not too long after feeding. She wasn't surprised considering he'd expended so much energy crawling today. Oliver had been right that it was both an exciting and terrifying sight. Their baby boy was strong and quick like his father but curious like his mother. Connor didn't want to stay on the blanket they laid out for him. He wanted to explore now that he was mobile. Felicity suggested it was time they got him a playpen so he could move around without them having a heart attack and worrying about him wandering off.

She kissed his forehead and sighed. When focusing on Connor, it was much easier for Felicity to forget the other troubled thoughts plaguing her mind. She'd thought working through the night would help release some of the anxiety and turmoil roiling within her. No way could she sleep with Tommy's words on an infinite loop in her mind. But when hours' worth of hacking into Waller's communications amounted to nothing, everything hit her all at once.

That harsh, nagging voice in the back of her mind was suddenly shouting that she was a failure and a liar. That she couldn't do anything right. That all her efforts now were nothing more than a selfish attempt at redemption for all the mistakes she'd made. It was like everything came crashing down on her at once, and there was no stopping the overload of emotion. Felicity had felt so dejected and alone.

And then she wasn't. As if she'd called to him, Oliver was unexpectedly there and holding her. Felicity had clung to him with everything inside of her. He was her safe harbor in the storm. Even after she'd told him the truth about Task Force X, his main focus had been to take care of her. Oliver ensured that she got a proper meal and had asked Raisa to look after Connor while she got some rest. Although he didn't come out and say it—most likely to avoid upsetting her again—Felicity got the sense Sara and Diggle were busy trying to handle the Tommy situation.
She couldn't think too much about it. Oliver was right that she needed a break. Her bath had done wonders to release the tension in her muscles, and she'd managed to doze off in the warm water for a little while. Afterward, Felicity had taken a long nap in bed that lasted most of the afternoon.

She woke up feeling refreshed and found a note on her nightstand. Oliver must've crept in to leave it. He told her they'd be having a late dinner out and to dress somewhat warm. Felicity had no idea where he would be taking her, since it wasn't like Oliver could be seen in public. The prospect of leaving the mansion and getting some fresh air, nevertheless, filled her with anticipation. There were also ginormous butterflies wreaking havoc in her stomach whenever her mind wandered, which was a lot, to their heated kisses earlier.

Just like when they'd been giving Connor his bath the day before, the attraction between them sparked and she felt an invisible pull toward Oliver. This kiss wasn't cautious. It had been hot, deep, and a little desperate. But, despite the upsetting circumstances, there was an undeniable sense of finally returning home. When Felicity had said she missed him, it wasn't a statement made in the heat of the moment. It was the truth. Although, since they didn't have much of a chance to talk, she wasn't sure Oliver knew that. He was the one to put on the brakes, because he thought she was too upset to be thinking clearly.

Oliver had promised they would talk later, which was another reason for Felicity's nerves. They'd been so focused on their mission and taking care of Connor these past weeks that much of the underlying emotional issues between them had gone unresolved. Felicity had a feeling that this was exactly what Oliver wanted to address tonight. She was a little scared but knew it was time. Obviously, burying herself in work was not going to make her anguish go away. Felicity needed to face their problems, and him, head on.

There was a creak in the floorboards, and her head snapped to the doorway. Oliver, dressed in jeans and a leather jacket, entered the nursery. He grinned and murmured, "My mom used to sing that lullaby to Thea and me when we were little."

"I learned it from you." She elaborated, "I heard you humming it to him the other day before his nap, and he seemed to like it."

Oliver looked pleased. "He asleep?"

"Yeah," she replied in a low voice. "He had an exciting day."

"Me and him both," Oliver muttered with a half-smile. He met her at the crib and placed a kiss on his son's head before she lowered him inside.

Felicity covered Connor with the blanket and placed Sir Quackers next to him. Lucky, who'd snapped awake upon Oliver's arrival, plopped back down and started lightly snoring. The pair was quiet for a moment, just watching him.

"God, he really is perfect," Oliver murmured.

The awe in his voice brought a smile to her face. "Yeah, he is," she agreed.

Their eyes met and held for another moment. The butterflies in Felicity's stomach went crazy, and she couldn't wait any longer. "Where are we going tonight?"

His sexy dimples deepened as he fought a roguish grin. "You'll see soon enough. Is that sweater warm enough?"

Felicity, distracted by how damn handsome he was, took a few seconds to answer. "I think so. Are
we going to be outside or something?"

"You should take a jacket."

She narrowed her eyes in suspicion but agreed to grab a jacket from her room. On the way out, Oliver turned on the baby monitor and said he'd already alerted Raisa that they'd be leaving. After slipping into her suede jacket, he led them downstairs. Felicity didn't know what came over her when, without thinking, her hand reached for his. Oliver glanced at her in surprise but didn't hesitate to interlace their fingers.

It was probably a good idea to hold onto Oliver anyway, because he needed to guide her through one of the hidden passages underground. "So we're not followed," he told her. With their long list of enemies, it was smart to take the most inconspicuous way out of the mansion.

They exited into a small garage area. Oliver released her to pull the covering off of what turned out to be his motorcycle. Even in the low light, the sleek, red Ducati gleamed.

"This is what we're riding?" she questioned.

With a bob of his head, Oliver handed her the smaller of the two helmets. "This okay?"

She beamed back at him. "I've always wanted to ride on a motorcycle—even though it also slightly terrifies me."

"There's nothing to be afraid of. I know how to handle it well."

"I've noticed," Felicity blurted out and instantly blushed.

Oliver smirked before helping her to put on the helmet. Her breath hitched when his fingers adjusted the strap under her chin and grazed her skin. He then helped her mount the bike. There was something kind of erotic about straddling such a powerful piece of machinery, especially with him guiding her movements. Oliver quickly followed suit in front of her and put on his full helmet, which covered his entire face from view.

"Hold on to me tight, Felicity," he instructed.

Not needing to be told twice, because she'd be more than happy to oblige, Felicity scooted forward. Her thighs clutched at his while wrapping her arms around his waist. When Oliver was assured that she was secure, he roared the engine to life. The loud rip startled her, and she clung tighter to Oliver. After it simmered down, he opened the garage and quietly drove out to a back road she hadn't known existed.

Oliver opened up the throttle once they hit the main freeway. Since it was so dark, there wasn't much for Felicity to see. There was only the sky above with a crescent moon and countless twinkling stars. Combined with the wind in her hair and freedom of the open road, she felt exhilarated. The road appeared to go on forever until they reached the northern part of the city. Oliver expertly weaved in and out of traffic before pulling up to a large, secluded building made mostly of steel and glass.

"Oh my God," Felicity exclaimed but doubted he'd heard over the rumble of the engine.

The parking lot was almost completely empty, but Oliver still parked in an inconspicuous spot. He took off his helmet and glanced over his shoulder. "Surprised?"

"Yes, but how can we be here? Isn't it closed?"
"Nothing is ever closed with the right price," he declared while dismounting the bike. It must've been a hefty sum to pull this off, she was sure.

Oliver helped Felicity down, and she was glad to get rid of the helmet. While he quickly scanned the area—it was nearly impossible to turn those protective instincts off—Felicity discretely fixed her hair and readjusted her outfit. She stopped fidgeting just as Oliver focused back on her. He held out his hand, and the butterflies fluttered in her stomach again. Instead of the front entrance, Oliver led her to a gated area off to the side. Before Felicity could ask how they were going to get in, she watched as he pulled out a key.

"Where did you get that?"

"The manager. It was part of my terms when I requested renting it for the night."

"He didn't recognize you, did he?"

"He never saw me. Diggle met with him on my behalf."

"Good."

Felicity followed Oliver through the gate. They walked along the narrow path, bypassing the main building, and reached the entrance to the Starling City Botanical Garden. A myriad of memories hit her all at once, and she couldn't help smiling.

"I haven't been here in forever. The first and only time was with you," she commented, recognizing the same nostalgia reflecting in his eyes.

"Me neither. I thought it might be nice to get out of the mansion and get some fresh air. It's private and peaceful here," he said with a shrug. "And we can talk freely."

Felicity bit her lip as Oliver guided her through the entrance. Her breath caught seeing all the decorative lights on. It was like reentering Wonderland. She clutched his hand as they walked along the path and took in the vegetation and glowing displays. One section had an entire array of flowers and trees lit in varying colors.

"Connor would love this. I forgot how beautiful it is."

"Yeah," Oliver murmured, though he wasn't looking at the exhibit. The weight of his stare made her shiver. "Are you cold?"

"I'll be all right." She hoped that was true. Being here with him again, feeling that overwhelming pull, was bringing so many emotions to the surface. It was like the years had been erased. Felicity felt like her teenage self, simply in awe of the boy she loved. Her eyes drifted down to Oliver's lips, remembering the touch and taste of him earlier.

He must've noticed her blush, because his dimples appeared with his charming grin. Oliver tugged on her arm. "Come on. There's something I want to show you."

Oliver was relieved that Felicity liked his surprise. He'd been nervous that with everything she'd been going through lately, taking her to a place from their past might upset her again. Since this was Starling and he was currently presumed dead, there weren't many options for a night out. This place had always seemed serene to him, and so he'd taken a chance that it might lift her spirits. There was much they still needed to discuss but an escape, no matter how brief, would do them both some good.
Although the sights were breathtaking, they were no match for Felicity herself. Her golden, wavy hair looked beautiful blowing in the light breeze. Despite it being spring, the air remained a little crisp. Felicity said she wasn't cold. Nevertheless, possibly without realizing, she huddled closer to him. She was almost leaning on his arm as they walked, and he resisted the urge to wrap her up in his embrace entirely. They were almost at the desired spot anyway.

"Oh my gosh," Felicity muttered when the familiar gazebo came into view. It was also lit up and overlooking the pond, which had dozens of floating and glowing waterlilies.

"Cool, right? I figured we could eat over here."

Her head snapped up in surprise. "There's food too?"

"Just a little something for us to snack on. Are you hungry? You promised you'd eat today."

"Yes, Dad," Felicity teased, "I did eat. But I am still hungry."

"That did sound pretty dad-ish, didn't it?" he chuckled.

"Connor works fast." She bumped his shoulder.

Oliver snorted. "He crawls pretty fast too. I might need to increase my jogging speed just to keep up with him."

"I might actually have to join you," she playfully lamented. "Wait until he starts walking."

"I look forward to seeing it—if I can," he quietly added.

Felicity felt a pang in her heart as the lightness of the moment ended, and they were reminded why they were really there. They were quiet while approaching the gazebo. She could picture the last time they'd been in this spot so clearly. Oliver had told her that he'd be going to Harvard and getting his own place. A place where he expected her to stay so often that she could even have her own drawer. Felicity remembered being so happy she thought she might burst back then. Their future looked long and bright.

There were many differences this time. One of them being the beautiful spread set up on a cozy blanket. The platters of food were spread out, along with a small scattering of tiny flowers. It was like a mini botanical picnic. Although chained off, the small opening in the gazebo railing allowed a mostly unobstructed view of the water.

She took a seat on the blanket. "Is that champagne?"

"Sparkling cider," Oliver answered and followed suit. "Since you can't really drink."

"God, I miss red wine," Felicity sighed. She could use a bit of liquid courage right now.

"I bet. No wine, unfortunately, but we do have cheese."

"I love cheese."

He smirked and popped the top on the cider. "I remember."

"Thank you," Felicity said while accepting a glass of the non-alcoholic bubbly. She proceeded to fill her plate with cheese and other goodies. "This will probably put the baby weight I finally lost right back on, but oh well." Her usual way of coping with stress was to eat. But lately, the stress had felt so overwhelming it had the opposite effect and squandered her appetite.
"You look great," Oliver reassured her.

Felicity shoved a piece of cheese in her mouth to distract from her warming cheeks. "So, this feels more like a date than a serious talk," she unexpectedly blurted, almost making herself choke. Where the hell had that come from?

"I guess it does," he admitted with a nervous laugh, "although my intention was more about lifting your mood than making a move."

"And I appreciate that. The mood thing and not the move. Not that I would be opposed if you made a move—especially since I was the one who kissed you earlier. And yesterday, for that matter. So, really, I'm the culprit," she babbled. "I probably shouldn't have pounced on you like that now that I think about it, and I'm sorry—"

"Don't apologize," Oliver swiftly interrupted. "Please. You didn't do anything that I didn't already want."

"I find that hard to believe—not that you didn't want it at that moment but just that you could still want me in general."

He frowned, not understanding. "Why would you say that?"

"Because it's true. After everything I've done and knowing who I really am…you shouldn't want me at all."

Oliver thought he got the gist of her meaning now and tried very hard to stay calm. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "And who exactly do you think you are?"

"Come on, Oliver, you already know. I'm Damien Darhk's spawn. I'm the reason all this crap is happening and you and the others are caught in an evil tug-of-war."

Oliver had to put his glass down before he broke it. "You are not anyone's 'spawn,' Felicity. And as I said earlier, this is not your fault. Darhk may be your father, but you are in no way responsible for his actions—especially since you didn't even know the truth about him until a few weeks ago."

"But I was used, Oliver—by him and by Waller."

"So was I."

"Because of your connection to me," she argued.

"No, because my parents made the wrong choice and stupidly followed Malcolm into the lion's den. Their sins are not your burdens to bear," he explained.

"They're not yours either," Felicity countered.

"I have sinned, Felicity. You were right when you said there's darkness in me. I've made so many excuses over the years that I convinced myself I did what I had to do. Then the first legitimate chance I had to make it right, I turned my back on the truth. I lied to you and created this whole mess. As much as it hurt to know I'd been cut out of Connor's life and missed my own son's birth, I can't place it all on you. If you hate me, it's because of my own doing."

The brokenness of his voice was like a punch to her gut. Guilt and shamed filled her. "I don't hate you, Oliver. I…" she took a breath, fighting back a swell of grief. "I never should've said that to you. When you first brought me back here and I found out about Darhk, I was so scared and angry I
couldn't see straight. I was going through one of the most painful moments of my life, and I hurt you
to protect myself."

"It was a lot to take in. I can understand why he made you feel—"

Felicity shook her head, feeling the sting of unshed tears. "No, I wasn't protecting myself from
Darhk. I was protecting myself from you. Learning who my father is…it was a shock, I'll admit. But
learning you were a part of that and worrying that you might still be lying to me for him…it broke
my heart all over again. I've never hated you, even before I knew you made the deal with
A.R.G.U.S., which was the problem. The truth is I've loved you with everything inside of me, and
there is nothing Darhk or Waller could've done to hurt me more than to take you—or what I thought
I had with you—away from me. I thought they had in that moment, and I lashed out and I'm sorry.
I'm so sorry." She reached for his hand and was relieved when he took it.

"Were you ever going to come back?" The question had tortured Oliver for weeks, but it never
seemed like the right time to bring it up. "Was I ever going to know about my son?" He reached into
his pocket and pulled out a worn piece of paper. The recognition of her letter sparkled in Felicity's
eyes. "Because it seemed like you weren't."

"You still have that? I thought you would've burned it."

Oliver shook his head. "No. It was the last thing I had of you. I used to read it at night and remind
myself of why I had to keep searching for you. Of why I had to make it right," he explained. "You
had said you always loved me, and I needed to hold on to that."

"When I left…" Felicity paused to collect her thoughts. "I was hurt but mostly concerned with
protecting the baby. He needed to be born in a place where we both were safe. At the time, it was
too big a risk if I trusted the wrong side. My capture would've put him in danger, and I couldn't lose
him, too, if things went south," she stated. "But I also knew that I couldn't hide forever. The night we
were attacked, Sara had pointed out that my family was getting restless with my absence and that it
was only going to get worse as Connor got older. I missed them too…and you—a lot. Ivy Town
seemed 'perfect,' but it was never home. I didn't want our son to grow up never knowing his family,
but I also needed time to figure out how to handle all of this while keeping him safe."

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "I get it."

"Now that I know the truth, I'm sorry for not talking to you after Mei told me about H.I.V.E."
Felicity wiped away a stray tear that fell. "You should've known, and you have no idea how much I
regret taking him away from you."

"You have no idea how much I regret giving you a reason to," He squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry,
too, sweetheart."

"I know," she acknowledged. "I always thought you'd be a great dad, and you are. Connor adores
you, Oliver."

"I took my cue from his amazing mom," he complimented. "Although, at first, I swear I nearly
passed out from shock when I walked into the nursery and saw him. It was like my mind had left my
body."

"I should've been awake to introduce you," Felicity lightly teased.

Oliver smiled before getting serious again. "You protected him. It all seems to come so naturally to
you. I wonder, though, if it's what you really want. I know you love Connor," he was quick to
clarify, "but the last time we talked about having a family, it was pretty obvious you were nowhere near ready for kids—not that I didn't understand. Our situation even then wasn't exactly ideal."

She studied him carefully. "You don't actually feel guilty for getting me pregnant, do you?"

"Yes," he confessed while focusing on a spot on the blanket. "You didn't ask for this, and I—"

"Hey, look at me." Felicity scooted closer to him so they were eye to eye. "First of all, it takes two to tango, buddy. I'm not sure if you remember that night but—"

"Of course I remember it," he said, his voice taking on a husky tenor. "It was one of the best nights of my life."

There was no stopping the memory of Oliver pinning her against the solarium windows while admiring his Christmas present in the form of a red, lace negligee. Or how he'd carried her to the bed and held tight to her hips as she rocked on top of him. Then, later, when they'd decided to eat their dessert in bed and ended up smearing frosting all over the other and lapping it up. He'd taken her again and again in an effort to make up for their many months of separation.

"Mine too," she declared. "So you have nothing to feel guilty about, because I happily enjoyed ringing in the New Year with the man I loved. I got pregnant because of us. And second, yes, I wasn't ready for kids at the time. But from the moment I found out I was pregnant, I loved our baby. Not having him or giving him up was never an option. I didn't know how to be a mom or if I even could, but I was damn well going to try." Felicity held his gaze, making sure he knew she meant her next words with every fiber of her being. "Connor is the most beautiful gift you've ever given me, Oliver. He opened my heart just like you did, so please never think for a second that he isn't exactly what I want."

He felt as if the breath had been knocked out of him at Felicity's declaration. Seeing the love, pride, and gratefulness shining in her eyes was stunning. "Well, you did say you wanted a son. So I did something right," he tried to joke.

"He looks just like you, especially when he's sleeping. He made me miss you so much, sometimes it was hard to breathe," Felicity confessed.

"I think a lot about the last time we were together," Oliver replied after a moment. "I remember us lying in bed. You squirmed when I kissed your stomach, and it kind of blows my mind now that I was with him without even realizing it."

Felicity offered him a comforting smile. "You were."

"But I also can't stop thinking about our awful fight afterward." His voice hitched, and he paused to recollect himself. "All you wanted was for me to acknowledge that we had a future together, and I shut you out. I can't stop thinking about how if I'd been honest and just let myself believe in what I wanted and gave you hope, that you would've told me and this would all be different."

"I think a lot about that too," she murmured. "Although for me it's the opposite. Maybe if I'd have come right out and told you I was pregnant, it would've given you a reason to hope and trust in me."

"I should've comforted you," Oliver said. "I should've told you I loved you until my voice gave out. I should've given you the ring that had been sitting in my bag for months. Our life together, that's all I've ever wanted, Felicity." The first hot, wet tear slid down his cheek. He went to wipe it away, but Felicity beat him to it.

"I know," she soothed and caressed his cheek. "There are a lot of things we should've done, but we
can't change any of that. All we have is now."

Their foreheads touched, and he closed his eyes. "I don't even have that. I didn't know about the Suicide Squad but even if I did, I probably would've made the deal anyway. I wasn't going to let you take the fall for me with Waller."

"I won't let her do this. Even if I have to use my father to take her down, I will. She doesn't get to win this time."

"Felicity—"

"And don't you dare try to talk me out of it, Oliver Jonas Queen. You are going to be there when our son starts to walk and for every moment after."

"I absolutely want those moments, but I'm worried about you, Felicity," he declared. "I don't want you to lose yourself. I don't want you to sacrifice your soul to save mine."

"Oliver, I'm not—"

"Felicity," he interrupted, "you just said you were Darhk's spawn. Obviously, finding out that he's your father and working with him—even if it is just to use him—is weighing on you. Just like I know lying to our families has been weighing on you long before what happened with Tommy last night." Oliver placed a comforting hand on her back and was relieved when she relaxed into him. "Talk to me, sweetheart."

She took a shaky breath. "I was wrong to say that you're just like my father, because you're not. If anyone is like him, it's me."

"How?" Oliver inquired. He wanted to hear her reasoning before automatically refuting it. She'd be less likely to listen to him if she didn't feel she'd been heard.

"When I talked to Darhk at H.I.V.E., he pointed out that I didn't listen to my heart. I ignored it and left you and everyone else behind. Just like he left my mom and me. I did what I thought was best, and I didn't care who I hurt in the process."

"Felicity," he tentatively replied. "It's not the same."

"Tommy said I was a liar, and he's right," she said. "How am I any different by assuming that I was right in taking the choice away from all of you?"

"You mean like I took the choice away from you?" Oliver pointed out. "You were right to be angry with me. Hell, I'm angry with myself. But what I don't fully understand is why you're questioning that now."

"I don't know everything that has happened to you in the years you've been away, but these past weeks I've seen firsthand what you've been up against—and I suspect it's only a fraction of the horrors you've endured. Do I wish you'd have told me? Yes. But I also can't turn a blind eye to the sacrifices that you've made," Felicity explained. "Whether it was staying in QC to take out that bomber years ago or using yourself as a human shield now for me and our family with Darhk and Waller, you've always tried to do what was right—no matter the personal cost.

"It's one of the many reasons why I fell in love with you. So, how can I be any different? I have seen the toll this has taken on you, and I refuse to keep letting it happen. You no longer should have to bear this burden alone, Oliver. I'm a part of this, too, and how am I not a hypocrite if I don't follow my heart this time and make it right?"
"You're not a hypocrite," Oliver refuted. "You were kept in the dark by all of us, Felicity. If I had told you everything, can you honestly say that you would've still gone to Ivy Town?"

"That's not the point."

"That's exactly the point," he argued, unable to keep from growling this time. "The main reason you left was because you thought you were protecting Connor and keeping your family safe."

"But it wasn't just about them, Oliver. Don't you get it?" Felicity drew back and stood up. Needing space, she walked over to the railing and looked out at the glowing water. "I was protecting myself too. I was—I am— a failure."

Shaking his head, he replied, "That's not true."

"It absolutely is true. I failed my team by allowing classified information to be stolen and used against them. I failed my family by always keeping them at arm's length and living a double life; now Tommy hates me. I failed you by not trusting in you like I always have and then running off—which means that I also failed Connor by not letting him have a father and ultimately putting him in harm's way by believing Malcolm. I failed this country, because I'm the one who helped Curtis create Rubicon—a lethal weapon that both Waller and my father are fighting over," she declared, her voice hitching over a sob. "Now, assuming we can bring down H.I.V.E., our family is about to be ripped apart again if you join Task Force X."

Oliver also stood. "Felicity—"

"This is my legacy: lies, destruction, and despair," she cried. "And it seems the harder I try to fight it, the deeper in it I get and the more I screw it all up. So, yes, I do feel like my father and a hypocrite. He's crazy as all hell, but he believes he's doing the right thing. I thought I was, too, but clearly I was wrong."

"Felicity," he tried again. She backed away as he approached, and he stopped just a foot shy of her. "Don't, please. I don't deserve your comfort. I don't deserve your love," she whimpered, unable to catch her breath. It felt like a giant boulder was on her chest. Felicity was crying so hard she could barely see straight.

Oliver watched her for a few torturous seconds before deciding that he'd heard enough. Ignoring her plea, he crossed the distance and pulled her into his arms for the second time that day. Unlike earlier, she tried to push him away, but he was done letting her go.

Never again. Each sob was like a dagger to Oliver's heart, yet his embrace remained a vise-grip.

He leaned down and said gently in her ear, "It's okay that you feel like this, sweetheart. You've kept all of this bottled up for way too long. You need to let yourself feel it." Rubbing her back and stroking her hair, he continued, "But I'll be damned if I let you believe it. You want to know what the difference between you and Darhk is?"

His hand slid between them and rested on her heart, feeling the staccato beat beneath his palm. "It's this, baby. It's your heart. You have the biggest and purest heart of anyone I've ever known, Felicity. You help people because you genuinely care about them. You're not seeking money or power. You put love and family and friendship over everything else," he said.

Although her head remained buried in his neck, Felicity had quieted. Oliver knew that she was listening.

"You once told me that you grew up feeling broken. That you didn't think anyone could love you.
Don't listen to that voice, because it's wrong. A weaker person would've let that anger consume them. It could've made you selfish, bitter, and closed off but it didn't. You're the exact opposite, in fact. You're strong, selfless, and compassionate—and that's your legacy.

"I saw the light in you the moment I met you; it's why I fell in love with you seven years ago. It's why I've never stopped loving you and why I'm so grateful that you're the mother of my child. I don't know what's going to happen with Darhk or Waller, but I know in my bones that the answer isn't to let them in your head or become like them. You'll figure this out in your own way. We both will," he amended and cupped her face, "because this isn't just about revenge or justice. Not too long ago you reminded me that I have something worth fighting for, and I'm going to do the same for you. We have something to fight for, and it's each other. It's our son. It's our friends and our family." Oliver gently tilted her head back so he could meet her eyes. They were red and a little puffy but clearly focused on him. "You are not in this alone, Felicity," he promised, "and I believe in you."

Hearing Oliver's declaration and seeing the love shining in his eyes, she felt the weight on her chest lift. His words covered her like a blanket, stifling the self-doubt and filling the cold emptiness inside with tender warmth. She clutched him tighter as they gazed into each other's eyes. "Thank you," Felicity murmured. He nodded, remaining silent and holding her stare. His words weren't enough to completely heal her overnight, that would still take time, but they did give her the moral support she needed.

Felicity laid her hand over his heart in return, and Oliver's eyes closed. He took a shuddering breath. He, too, was overcome by the sentiment if his racing pulse was any indication. "There's something else that bears reminding," she declared and waited for his eyes to open. "I don't believe that you are darkness, Oliver. Whatever you had to go through, those experiences made you the man you are today. And I love him—I love you—more than I can ever express." Her eyes watered once again, though she managed to press on. "I've never stopped. Yesterday, when we were giving Connor a bath and kissed, it was so simple but it meant everything to me. That moment and so many others we've shared these past weeks have felt right. It scared me at first to trust you again, because nothing about our lives right now is stable. There's still a part of me that fears losing everything." She took a deep breath and put it all on the line. "But it's worth the risk because a life together, being partners and a real family with Connor, is what I truly want."

Oliver was again tempted to pinch himself to make sure this wasn't a dream. A similar scene played out in his head most nights, and it was highly possible that he was back at the mansion sound asleep and torturing himself. But then he felt the gentle caress of Felicity's fingers along his jaw. Smelled the sweet floral scent of her perfume. Took in the way she bit her lip in nervous anticipation. This was real, she was there, and she wanted him. "God, Felicity," he breathed, "you have no idea how much it means to me that you're willing to give us another chance."

Although Oliver looked relieved, there was still tension in his body. His jaw was taut against her hand. "But?" she prompted, now on edge again herself. "But I have to be honest with you, because I don't want to let you down or hurt you again."

A small, nervous tremor ran through her, but Felicity didn't say anything more. It was Oliver's turn to lay his cards on the table. "Felicity, as incredibly happy as I would be with you and Connor, I won't be able to forget everything that's happened to me. Like you said, those experiences have made me who I am. I'll
always carry them with me."

She tenderly replied, "I know that, Oliver. I wouldn't expect you to bury the past, and I don't think you should."

Oliver sighed, struggling to get his full point across. He drew back from her in an effort to clear his head. Turning toward the water, he inhaled the fresh air. "I get that. But what I mean is I don't know if I'll ever be able to share all of it with you. Not to imply that I don't trust you, because I do. I just… ugh" He shook his head, frustrated.

"You're not sure when or if you'll be ready to talk about it," she surmised.

"Yes," he said with a nod. "When I look back on it, it just seems so overwhelming and impossible to convey it all. It'll take time and probably too much patience on your part, but I don't want you to think it's you. And I guess I'm afraid that if I do tell you something, then you won't see me the same way."

"Maybe we should start with how you think I see you. Or how you see yourself." Felicity sidled up and cuddled his arm.

Oliver shrugged. "I don't know who I am. Maybe that's the problem."

"Can I tell you who I see?" He nodded for her to go ahead. As she spoke, Felicity rubbed his back and felt his muscles ripple against her palm. "I sometimes see glimpses of the charming, confident, and vulnerable boy I loved at seventeen. Most often, though, I see a strong, loving, brave, selfless, and sometimes growly"—she offered him a playful smile—"man who would move heaven and earth to protect the people closest to him. I also see a gentle and devoted father when you're with our son. Watching the two of you together makes me so happy."

"You both make me happy too," he muttered, though his tone still sounded broody.

She cupped his face and turned him to look at her. "I may hate mysteries and think they should be solved, but that's not what you are to me, Oliver. I would never pressure you to talk if you're not ready. I hope someday you can talk to me about what you've been through, and I promise to listen without judgment. But what honestly matters right now is that your heart is open to me. If something is wrong, I need you to talk to me and lean on me instead of shutting me out. And I have to do the same with you. We need to be in this together, all the way."

Oliver shifted so that he was facing her completely. He rested an arm on the railing and reached out to pull her into him. Felicity snuggled into his side and laid her head against his chest. They were quiet looking out at the calm water.

Finally, he admitted, "I feel like a coward. Ever since the Gambit went down, I've let myself fall into so many traps. When I eventually gave in and joined H.I.V.E. via the Bratva, I convinced myself that I was still fighting by surviving. But what I was really doing was sacrificing little pieces of my soul until I felt like I had nothing left."

Felicity didn't react. Sensing there was more, she simply held on to Oliver and listened—needing to show him that she could handle whatever he chose to tell her.

"Not too long after my training with the Bratva ended, I was sent on my first official mission. I had to face a guy named Kovar. He was a big, mean son of a bitch that Anatoly wanted taken out. I screwed up part of the plan, was separated from Dig, and got myself caught. I was thrown in a prison and tortured," Oliver recited. He felt Felicity tense against him ever so slightly—the only indication
she was upset by his revelation—but she otherwise stayed quiet.

"Kovar wasn't a normal mobster thug. After the torture, he didn't just put a poor bastard out of his misery. He got off on making him suffer. I was injected with some kind of special serum. It messes with the mind and makes you see and feel painful memories. Sometimes it physically hurts, and other times it's a pain so deep inside you you think you're suffocating or going insane. The drug just gets worse until it finally kills you—if you don't decide to do it yourself first.

"That's why Kovar leaves a pistol in the cell. You get one shot to end it, and he gets the satisfaction of knowing that he finally broke you. I saw a lot of things in the hours that passed." His eyes stung as he recounted the conversation with his father and promising that he could have all the food and water as long as he didn't pull the trigger. He mentioned begging for the lives of Shado and Yao Fei, too, and not being able to save them. "The last person I saw was you," Oliver finally revealed. "You were crying that I'd broken all my promises. That I'd left you to go off to Boston alone. Then you were yelling that I could've gotten you killed, too, if you'd followed me on the Gambit. I think I must've blacked out for a while. When I came to, I saw you lying dead on the ground as if you'd drowned…and I couldn't breathe. It was too much. The pain swallowed me whole, and I couldn't take it another second."

"What did you do?" She could barely form the words past the lump in her throat. "Oliver?" It was impossible to tell which of them was trembling. No words were necessary; she already knew the answer.

"There wasn't a bullet," Oliver said after a moment. His voice cracked as the memory washed over him—the anger, disappointment, and shame resurfacing. "The entire ordeal ended up not even being real. It was a sick test for H.I.V.E. to measure our toughness and reveal our weaknesses. Your father must've known he'd hit the jackpot with me when he saw that tape—though I didn't know it then. Dig talked to me after, and I was reminded that I needed to let you go before someone caught on and decided to use you against me.

"So, I did. I became Oliver Knyazev and threw myself into my new life. Dig didn't stop watching me, though. I think he was worried the test had messed with my head, and he was right. I found myself still wishing the bullet had been real. I was in a dark place, and I'm still ashamed of it. It wasn't long after that I first met Helena. I know you don't like her, but she helped me a lot back then. She gave me a pull-no-punches talk and told me to stop feeling sorry for myself. She said that at least you were alive, whereas her own father had murdered her fiancé in cold blood. Her love was dead, mine was still alive, and I needed to pull myself together. I knew she was right at the time, but a huge part of me still wishes I hadn't let go. That I had fought harder to remain Oliver Queen."

He looked down at Felicity. She hadn't made a sound, but tears were streaming down her cheeks. His own internal dam broke, and his eyes burned.

"Felicity…"

"Was that the only time you thought about taking your life?" she questioned.

He bowed his head and shook it. "There was another time," he revealed barely above a whisper. "I didn't act on it, though. It was the night I saved that woman in the alley outside the casino. Saving her saved something in me, and that's how the Arrow got started. I felt I had some control and a purpose after that."

"What about when I left?" Her bottom lip trembled.

"No," Oliver immediately denied. "Don't even go there, sweetheart. The reason it got so dark for me
those times was because I didn't feel like I had hope. That changed when you came back into my life. Even when you were gone, I held onto the hope that I could fix what I broke between us."

She threw her arms around his neck and whimpered. "God, Oliver, promise me you'll never do that. I couldn't bear it. You're not a coward for living! That's what gives you strength!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you, Felicity," he soothed. "My point is that I used to not care about my future. I didn't have enough fight left in me to care beyond survival. I don't feel that way anymore, sweetheart. You asked me to fight to live for you and Connor, and I am. But what's changed is that for the first time in I don't know how long, I'm also fighting for myself."

"Oliver," Felicity whispered before taking his face in her hands. She kissed his lips, tasting the salt from their mingling tears. Although she was relieved that he finally saw the light at the end of the tunnel, she remained shaken by his story and what could've been. She gripped him tighter, needing to be closer.

Sensing her desperation, Oliver hoisted her up into his arms. Felicity moaned into his mouth, and he was eager to swallow the wordless plea as their kiss went from gentle to impassioned. She sucked on his bottom lip before peppering kisses all along his face. Each was heartfelt, but there was also no mistaking the hunger beneath the surface. After their talk, it was even stronger now than it had been this morning.

Without thinking, Oliver walked Felicity back over to the blanket. The moment her toes touched the ground and he released her, she started yanking off her jacket and shirt. He did the same, groaning when her bare skin pressed against his chest. His hands, eager to explore, ran down the soft, smooth curve of her back. Felicity shivered as goose bumps formed beneath his fingertips.

"Are you cold?" Oliver questioned. It felt like his skin was on fire, personally, but the night air was cool. Without her clothes, Felicity had to be feeling a chill.

"Yes and no," she murmured against his lips. Her skin prickled with heat from the erotic sensation of Oliver's touch, although she was also aware of the cold. She didn't care; he'd completely overwhelmed her senses.

Enfolding Felicity in his embrace, offering her his own warmth, Oliver deepened the kiss. Her mouth opened to him, and he wasted no time delving inside. He tasted the sparkling cider from earlier on her tongue, sweet and delicious. Felicity shivered a second time and as much as he wanted to believe it was all because of him, Oliver knew it was the cold.

She whimpered when he tore his lips away. "Oliver," she pleaded.

"I think there's an extra blanket." He'd requested one in case they decided to stay late and the temperature dropped lower. "Hold on one sec."

She held back a protest because as soon as Oliver moved away from her, she started to shiver. An extra blanket couldn't hurt. While he reached under one of the benches, Felicity dropped onto the other blanket and brushed their food and drinks aside to make room. The pretty flowers, she decided, could stay. Removing her glasses, Felicity carefully placed them on the cheese platter. They'd be safe there and at the ready when she stole a few more squares later.

"Here," Oliver said and draped the second blanket over her shoulders. He rubbed her arms and back to generate some heat.

"You know, I'd probably be a lot warmer if you kissed me," she hinted with a flirty grin.
Oliver smirked and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

Felicity giggled, "Not exactly what I meant."

"I'd be more than happy to kiss you, sweetheart, as long as this is what you really want." He needed to make sure they were on the exact same page this time. It was so easy for them to get swept up in the moment with emotions running so high.

She smiled, touched by how attentive he was to her. She shifted up onto her knees, getting level with him, and tossed the blanket around them both. Wrapping her arms around his neck, Felicity brushed their noses together in an Eskimo kiss. "I want to be with you," she murmured with a light caress of her lips. "I love you."

"I love you too." Oliver closed the gap and claimed her mouth once more.

"Please tell me you have something with you." She kissed down the side of his neck and along his broad shoulder. "Because as much as I love Connor, I just got my body back and he does not need a sibling so soon."

Chuckling, he replied, "I love him, too, but a daughter might be nice. Two is a good even number of kids, don't you think?"

"Do not even joke about your super sperm, mister."

Oliver snorted. "Super sperm?"

"Yes, super sperm. I underestimated it once but never again," Felicity declared with a resolute nod.

Oliver laughed in amusement but also with pride that she thought so highly of his prowess. It was probably a caveman-like reaction, but he couldn't help it. Felicity was his love and the mother of his child. That pride fueled a possessiveness to take her and make her his yet again.

"I do have something." His reply was husky, and she gasped when he nipped at her bottom lip. "Honestly, I never took the condoms we were gonna use out of my wallet. Not that I expected this when I first found you or tonight, for that matter, but it was kind of like the letter. Throwing them away made the separation feel permanent." Her breath hitched a second time when he mouthed his way down her neck, licking and sucking on sensitive patches of skin.

"What about the expiration date?" she questioned, somewhat distracted by his ministrations.

Oliver reluctantly broke away from her and reached into the pocket of his jeans for his wallet. He quickly pulled out the square foil to check. "We got two years left on these. We're good," he said in relief.

"Thank God," Felicity breathed and reclaimed his lips. Her body surely would've revolted if they had to stop.

Oliver met her frenzied kisses before returning to the path his mouth had begun to trace down her body. He stopped just shy of her breasts, taking in their increased voluptuousness. His mouth watered, though he hesitated. If she was breastfeeding, did that mean she was more sensitive? Would it be weird for her if he put his mouth on the same place his son fed?

Sensing his hesitation, Felicity reached back to unhook her bra. She slid it down and blushed at the sight of Oliver's intense stare. This was one change he most definitely approved of. She kissed him before guiding his head down. "It's okay," she whispered. Her breasts felt hard and heavy, awaiting
his attention.

He paused for a few more seconds before leaning in. The first tentative flick of his tongue sent a jolt of pleasure between her thighs. Since her breasts were so sensitive, the feeling was magnified. A loud keen tore from Felicity's lips when he did take the pert, pink nub all the way in and tenderly sucked. He did the same to the other breast.

When droplets of milk instinctively puckered out from the overwhelming stimulation, Felicity didn't even have time to be embarrassed. Oliver lapped up her sustenance, licking his lips with a wanton groan before leaning in again. It was unexpectedly sensual and erotic. Her fingers clenched in his hair as her body naturally tilted forward, offering him more. He lavished her breasts before kissing his way back up her chest, and she was putty in his hands.

Felicity caressed his torso, taking in the hot, hard muscle she'd always admired but had been denied for too long. She pressed her chest against his, seeking contact and warmth. Her hands slid lower to undo his belt. Another moan escaped her as Oliver kneaded her backside and drew her hips against his. He was already so hard.

They made quick work of removing the rest of their clothes. Felicity lay back on the blanket while Oliver retrieved the condom. As soon as he was ready, she welcomed him into her arms and encircled his hips with her thighs. They both hissed when he brushed along her core, but Oliver didn't enter right away. He held himself still as he hovered above her, his hands framing her face.

Oliver slid his fingers through Felicity's golden curls while gazing into her eyes. The familiarity of their naked bodies pressed intimately together, like puzzle pieces reunited, brought him a sense of calm. Yet, his body thrummed with sizzling tension and nervous anticipation at what this would mean for them going forward.

Leaning down, he grazed her lips before slanting his mouth fully over hers. A soft hum of encouragement reverberated from deep in her throat. Felicity gripped his biceps for leverage to lift her head and deepen the kiss. It was a long, wet, amorous joining of their lips—as if they were trying to rediscover and reclaim what had been lost within the past year in those mere seconds.

He traced the curve of her hips. "God, sweetheart, you feel even better than I remember," he groaned into her mouth. "You're perfect."

Felicity bit his lip when she felt the tip of his shaft rub along her swollen sex and up to her sensitive peak. Her body arched, craving more contact, as she gasped his name. It was a sweet kind of hell to be lying beneath him, feeling his strength and affections, but not be fully connected. There was a deep ache in her core as the emptiness intensified. She'd been without him long enough.

"I've missed you every second of every day, Oliver," she breathed.

He broke the kiss and pulled back just enough to look at her. Her lips were swollen from his kisses and her face red from the scraping of his scruff. He brushed his fingers along the outline of her mouth and down her chin. When she smiled, his thumb pressed into the adorable dimple in her cheek. "You are my always, Felicity," he murmured, "and I just want the chance to be yours."

Although Oliver sounded hopeful, his vibrant blue eyes were clouded. Felicity knew in that moment he wanted to promise her everything but was hesitating because of his uncertain future. She dragged her nails up the back of his neck before cupping his jaw, placing a kiss there before trailing up to his nose. She kissed his cheeks and eyelids. Finally, she reached his forehead and stayed there. She murmured against his skin. "I'm not going anywhere, baby, and neither are you. We'll have our forever and always. I promise."
"Felicity, you can't know—"

She silenced him with an ardent kiss. "A.R.G.U.S. can't have you, because you're already mine. And I protect what's mine," she possessively declared. "But we don't have to figure that out now." She thrust her hips up toward him, and they both gasped as his erection slid between her folds. "Now you take what's yours."

Oliver wasn't even inside her, and already he couldn't catch his breath. Protective Felicity was sexy as hell. Her love and devotion washed over him and had his body trembling with need. She was his, and Oliver couldn't wait a second longer to prove it. His hand on her thigh traveled inward toward her center. He stroked her, eliciting a sharp moan. His fingers relished her slickness and eagerness to accept him.

He positioned himself at her entrance and paused as a thought occurred to him. "Is there anything I should know or do?"

"What?" she panted, clearly confused and fighting through a haze of ecstasy.

"Are you all healed? You know, down there," he questioned, feeling awkward and out of his element. The baby books she'd given him were all about caring for an infant and didn't mention anything about the mother's body or sex after birth. "I don't want to hurt you."

Felicity, touched by his concern, smile adoringly up at him. "Yes, I'm healed. But maybe we should go slow now that you mention it."

She'd been so caught up in Oliver she hadn't really thought about what it would feel like to have sex again. Even though she'd had more than enough time to heal, her body was different in certain ways. A tiny feeling of self-consciousness sprang up. What if she was too different and didn't enjoy it? What if he didn't like her body and was disappointed?

"Don't start worrying," Oliver soothed and kissed the crinkle forming between her brows. He knew instantly that she'd started over-thinking it. "You're beautiful, and I love you. That's all that matters."

Felicity took a deep breath and clutched his shoulders. "Okay."

Oliver spent the next few minutes just simply kissing and caressing her. She tried to focus on him and the pleasurable tension taking over from his ministrations. Once again, her body started to react based on instinct. The emptiness and need had to be satisfied.

Taking hold of her hand, Oliver threaded their fingers. The other slid under her body, clutching her backside. He eased himself forward with a gentle thrust, slowly entering her inch by inch. Sheathed in her familiar heat, a low growl erupted from his chest.

Felicity's mouth hung open for a few seconds in a silent gasp as Oliver moved inside her. Her body eagerly accommodated him as her legs widened to allow him more access. Her walls contracted around his hard length, sending spasms of pure bliss and heat through her core.

"Are you okay?" he questioned. "I can stop if you need me to." The offer was strained, as he was clearly holding back. But she knew without a doubt that's exactly what he'd do if she wished it.

Felicity shook her head. "No, don't stop," she requested. "You feel amazing."

"You're trembling," he huskily pointed out.

She dug her fingernails into his back, and he groaned while impulsively thrusting his hips. "It feels
different but a good different. It's more intense," she explained. He was everywhere—on top of her, inside of her, surrounding her completely. "H-how do I feel?"

Oliver nipped at her lips and snapped his hips forward until he buried himself fully inside her. Their moans reverberated between them. "You feel fucking fantastic," he practically growled.

"So, you still desire me?" she questioned in a timid voice.

He let out another growl, though this one was in protest of her doubt. Easing back, Oliver pulled out of her before thrusting back in. He did it again and again, each time eliciting a rousing mewl from Felicity. "There is no one I desire more," he ground out. "I'd spend the rest of my life buried between your legs if I could—worshiping what's mine."

Felicity whimpered, the combination of his impassioned words and possessive thrusts tightening the coil in her core. Taking both of her hands in his, Oliver slid them above her head. It allowed his body to sink further into her. Felicity's chest smashed against his, and the delicious friction set her nipples ablate. Her thighs tightened around his waist, using his body as leverage to lift her hips and take all of him in. It still wasn't enough, so she dug her heels into his backside to urge him on.

Oliver couldn't get enough. Now that there was no need for restraint anymore between them, he let a year's worth of pent-up longing and desire guide his movements. Oliver kissed every square inch of her flesh within reach. He squeezed Felicity's hands and swallowed her screams as he drove into her. She was still hot, tight, and insatiable. Every time he started to retreat, she would clench her muscles around him. Those few seconds were a tortured oblivion, making his departure that much shorter and his return that much quicker.

Felicity was vaguely aware of Oliver's grunts echoing in the still night air. It was a good thing they had the place to themselves or else they would've caused quite the disturbance. It was surreal to be in this place. They'd once planned a future here; now, seven years later, they were fortifying it again.

Needing to touch him, Felicity detangled their hands and wrapped her arms around him. She bit into Oliver's shoulder, hungry for his flesh, before smoothing it over with her tongue. He was slick from the constant rhythm and grind of their bodies—the chill from earlier long gone. The all-consuming fire blazed between them. She was so close.

Oliver sensed it in the frantic jerk of Felicity's hips. She was wrapped so tightly around him and moaning so loudly it was obvious she was on the brink. He cupped her ample breasts and circled the pink buds several times. When he finally pinched them between his fingers, Felicity shuddered and cried out. Oliver repeated the action, though this time he used his mouth and the edges of his teeth in his erotic assault.

Felicity felt an explosion of salacious heat spread as her body shattered. She pulled at Oliver's hair while her entire form pulsed with pleasure. A kaleidoscope of color and light danced across her vision—for all she knew, it could've been the displays on the water blurring as she reeled from the tantalizing aftershocks of her orgasm.

Oliver felt Felicity come apart beneath him and managed a few more powerful thrusts before he succumbed to his release. He pierced her to the hilt, riding out the pleasurable waves and basking in the undeniable love he felt for this woman. They were a tangled, sweaty mess of limbs afterward. Oliver buried his face in her neck as he attempted to catch his breath. Felicity barely moved and was content to rub along his back.

They remained that way for a minute or two before Oliver lifted his head, kissed her forehead, and finally rolled onto his side. Felicity immediately snuggled into his welcoming arms. They were quiet,
content to just enjoy the peace and love they felt in that moment. Every so often, the pair shared kisses and tender touches.

Sometime later, unfortunately, reality set in. Felicity finally asked, "What do you think we should do about Tommy?"

Oliver stared into her beautiful and saddened eyes. "What do you want to do?" he replied, although he already knew the answer.

"I want to tell him," she declared. "My mom and Thea too. If we're going to do this"—she placed her hand on his heart—"we have to do it right this time and be honest. No more secrets. It's too dangerous, and they deserve the truth. Plus, we're better than that. We need to start living in the light. They should know that you're alive, we're still in love, and we have a son who is also their family."

Felicity gnawed on her lip and slid her hand to his face, waiting for an answer. This was no small decision. It was probably one of the biggest and most emotional ones they'd have to make. She also knew what this meant for him. It would be another major step in him fighting to regain his life as Oliver Queen.

As his emotions roiled, Oliver kissed the palm of Felicity's hand before seeking her lips. He needed that extra burst of strength and support she was always so willing to give. This decision brought him great joy while simultaneously scaring the ever-living shit out of him.

"We should tell them. It's time."
Happy Holidays, everyone! As always, your comments and kudos last chapter are so appreciated. Special thank you to SassySnow1988 for her copyediting and feedback. This chapter is a flashback, and we're very close to coming full circle with the past. Enjoy!

September 5, 2007

Sitting on the couch, Felicity lay against Oliver's chest and snuggled up in his strong embrace. They'd both had a long day at the office and had been looking forward to returning to the loft and enjoying a relaxing evening together. With Tommy out to dinner, they were able to order pizza and pop in a movie. Oliver wanted to watch Top Gun. It didn't matter that much to Felicity; she was merely content to be in his arms.

She sighed when Oliver's hand started playing with the strands of hair in her ponytail. Every now and then he'd also drop a tender kiss on the top of her head. Felicity was so comfortable that she eventually began to doze off. That was until Oliver's cell phone rang, jolting her awake.

"Sorry," he muttered and leaned forward to grab it off of the coffee table. "It's my mom."

Felicity immediately tensed. The Queen matriarch still made her nervous. Every encounter they'd ever had had been cold and tense.

"Hey, Mom, what's up?" Oliver greeted. Within seconds, he was alert and moved to stand. "What? Is she okay? Do you need me at the hospital?"

Felicity moved to pause the movie and stand, too, but Oliver held out his hand to halt her. He motioned to the balcony and went outside to continue his conversation. Felicity huffed in frustration. She didn't care about the movie. She wanted to know what was going on. It must've been Thea in the hospital. That was the only person who would put both Oliver and his mother in a tizzy.

She stood and started pacing in the living room. If the situation probably wasn't so serious, she might've laughed at the fact that Oliver was doing the same on the balcony as he listened to what Moira had to say. The more time they spent together, Felicity noticed, the more they seemed to mimic each other's mannerisms. Watching Oliver carefully, he didn't look as concerned anymore. His scrunch up brow showed his confusion and maybe even a little exasperation.

Now what was Moira telling him?

Felicity swore she was about to wear a hole into the floor when Oliver finally got off of the phone. She immediately joined him on the balcony. "What's going on? Is Thea okay?"

"How did you know?"

"It's not that hard to put the pieces together."
He shook his head to focus. "Right. Thea had an accident at camp, but she's okay. The horse she was riding got spooked and she was thrown. She broke her leg. My mom's with her at the emergency room right now."

"Oh my God," Felicity muttered and rested a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Oliver, I'm sorry. Do you want to go down to the emergency room to be with her?"

"My mom said the doctor is examining her and running a few tests to make sure there's no head injury, too. She said there's not much I can do right now, but I'll probably head over to the mansion when she gets home."

"Of course." Felicity rubbed his back. "I'm sure she'll want to see you."

"Jeez, what the hell is it about this summer? First my dad breaks his leg and I get a concussion because of the bomber, and now Thea has an accident. It's the opposite leg but still," he grumbled and ran a hand through his hair. "Did one of us walk under a ladder and not realize it?"

"It's not bad luck. Shit happens," Felicity said with a shrug.

Despite his agitation over the situation, the corner of his mouth twitched. "I suppose you're right."

"Besides, this summer wasn't all bad. We found each other, didn't we?" she reminded him.

That earned her a genuine grin, and he turned to face her completely. "We did." His arms wound around her waist, and he pulled her close. Their lips grazed in a tender kiss.

"What else did your mom say? You looked a little exasperated."

"Apparently, she and my father are taking a business trip to China in a couple of days. Something came up, and they wanted me and Thea to join them. They're taking the yacht, so I guess they figured it'd be a nice family trip before school starts. Now that Thea's hurt, she's gonna stay with Raisa. But my mom still wants me to come."

"Oh. How long would you be gone?" She tried not to show her disappointment with his leaving.

"The entire trip will last two weeks. I told my mom I have school, but she's adamant that I join them. She said I can stay for a portion of the trip and take an early flight back in time for school." He sighed, "I don't want to go, but she always gets nostalgic before I leave. She wants us to spend some time together."

"Well, that sounds...nice," Felicity forced out. She hated the idea of being parted from Oliver, but she would never tell him to bail on his family.

Completely taking her by surprise, he declared, "I want you to come with me."

"What?"

"I don't want to leave you, and you've said you always wanted to travel the world. Not to mention, it'd be a good time to tell my parents about us and they can finally get to know you. It's a win-win situation all around."

Felicity's eyes were as wide as saucers. "Oliver, I'm not sure being trapped on a boat surrounded by the ocean with no escape is the best time to tell your parents about us," she replied.

He frowned. "Why would you need to escape?"
"Because your mother hates me, and do you know how many stories there are about people going missing out in the open sea?"

Now it was Oliver's eyes that widened. "Felicity, you don't think my mother would actually throw you overboard, do you?"

"No. I-I mean, I don't know. She just...she doesn't like me, Oliver," she finished in a small voice.

He lifted her chin, so he could hold her gaze. "As I told you before, she doesn't know you, sweetheart. This is the perfect opportunity for the two of you to get past that awkwardness and find some common ground. Because when she realizes how amazing you are, she'll love you just like I do." Oliver stroked her cheek. "This is important to me. Please say you'll come."

His piercing blue eyes were filled with such love and hope that they tugged at her heart. But she was still hesitant. "Oliver, I can't afford a plane ticket from China," she explained, "and I don't feel comfortable taking Malcolm's money."

"I'll pay for it."

"Or yours," Felicity added before looking toward the living room. She thought she'd heard a noise but saw nothing out of place. She focused back on her boyfriend.

"Felicity, you're my guest. I'm inviting you on this trip; therefore, I'm paying," Oliver stated.

"But—"

He took hold of her face, his thumb caressing her cheek. "I admire how independent you are but, as a boyfriend, sometimes I'm going to want to spoil you. And I hope that you'll let me do things like this for you once in a while. I love you, and you make me so happy."

"And I appreciate that." She bit her lip and admitted, "I just...I don't want your parents thinking I'm a gold digger."

"You're the complete opposite. Felicity, I didn't act alone that day against the bomber. You saved those lives and my father's life, too, with your intelligence. My mother knows that. She just doesn't do well with change. I promise you have nothing to worry about, and you should be proud of your accomplishments. Because I sure as hell am."

"You believe in me that much?"

"Always have, always will," he promised. "You, Felicity Smoak, are going to change the world someday. I know it."

She blinked back tears. It still amazed her the amount of faith Oliver had in her. "And you'll be right by my side. I love you," she murmured, kissing his lips. "Thank you."

"When we get back, we should tell everyone else," he said in between kisses. "I don't want to hide anymore."

She moaned as his tongue teased her bottom lip before sucking it into his mouth. "Okay," she agreed. Despite how overwhelmed the thought continued to make her, her love for Oliver was stronger. Deep down, she wanted everyone to know that they belonged to each other.

"I've still got some time before I have to visit Thea," he hinted.
Felicity smiled against his lips. "Let's go upstairs." He groaned when she ran her fingers through his hair, letting her nails scratch his scalp.

Without a moment's hesitation, Oliver hoisted her up into his arms. She naturally wrapped herself around him. "Hold on to me tight," he huskily instructed.

"Forever and always."

Staring between her duffel bag and the pile of clothes on her bed, Felicity let out a frustrated sigh. What does one bring to wear on a yacht when meeting one's boyfriend's parents for the "first time"—especially when said boyfriend's mother already doesn't like you? Despite the bursts of color she'd been wearing lately, most of her clothes were still black. And there was no mistaking that Moira Queen did not care for her wardrobe choice—or the nose ring that Thea now mimicked.

Felicity had told her mom she'd be going on the Queen's Gambit to spend time with Oliver and get to know his parents before they left for school the following week. Her mother was excited for her and offered to go shopping yesterday. Although Donna might've introduced Felicity to more color, there was a high chance the outfits she picked out wouldn't be entirely appropriate either. Her mother had never been averse to showing too much skin. The flashier the outfit the better in her mind.

It was a little over an hour before Felicity had to meet Oliver down by the docks. She was going to take a cab, but Donna convinced her to let one of Malcolm's drivers take her in the town car. Now if only she could figure out what the hell to pack. Felicity knew there was no one outfit she could wear to make Moira like her. She was thinking too much; then again, it was probably her nerves kicking in.

"Frack," she cursed. If she was late to the boat, that wouldn't look good either. A knock sounded on the door. It was probably her mother to check on her. At this point, Felicity wouldn't be opposed to a little help. She just needed to get her stuff together already. "Come in...oh, Tommy, hey. What are you doing here?"

He stood stiffly in the doorway. "Do you have a minute?"

Felicity glanced at the pile once more. "Um, sure," she said while internally cursing. In her haste to get ready, she'd totally forgotten about Tommy—even Sara for that matter. They'd be wondering where she was. Felicity couldn't say school because, after their mini trip, she and Oliver would be flying back into Starling to get the last of their things together.

Perhaps she should tell Tommy the truth now. However, that was something she and Oliver had decided to do together. Strength in numbers and a united front was the key. But she didn't want to lie to Tommy's face either. He'd be way more annoyed when she got back and told him the real story.

"Don't go," he said.

Felicity was so wrapped up in her internal dilemma, she almost thought she'd imagined it. "What?"

"I know about you and Oliver," he stated bluntly. "I know he invited you on the Gambit."

There was no use denying it. Although she was relieved, the stern expression on her stepbrother's face did not look promising. Felicity gulped and managed to choke out, "H-how? When did you find out?"
"The other night. I came home early and saw you both on the balcony," he explained.

She bit her lip. So she hadn't been hearing things that night. That sound in the living room must've been Tommy. The fact that he hadn't made his presence known, however, was a cause for concern. Frowning, she questioned, "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Seemed to be getting pretty hot and heavy between you. I didn't want to interrupt," Tommy answered, the disapproval in his tone clear. "When I saw him carry you up to his bedroom, I didn't feel like sticking around. I'm sure you can understand."

Felicity's cheeks flamed. Seeing her and Oliver going at each other in a passionate haze was definitely not how she wanted her stepbrother to find out about them. "Um, we were just...um, have you talked to Oliver at all?" God, she wished he was here. He'd have a much better read on Tommy than she did right now.

"No. In between getting over my shock, I've been debating which one of you I should come to first."

"And you chose me," she assumed.

"You're smarter than Oliver. More logical. If I can talk some sense into one of you, it'd be you, Felicity." He finally walked into the room and shut the door behind him.

She shook her head in confusion, already feeling a knot of dread take form in the pit of her stomach. "Talk sense into me? Why?"

"It's not going to last between you and Oliver. He's been my best friend since we were kids. I love him like a brother, but I know how he is. You're going to go on the Gambit with him, he's going to sweep you off your feet, and you're going to think you're in love with him. Then when you get back, he's going to distance himself from you. You'll go back to school, and he'll stay here," Tommy explained, "and go on living his life. And you'll be heartbroken."

His words were like a punch to the gut, but she stood firm. "How much of our conversation did you hear the other night?" He obviously had eavesdropped if he knew about Oliver inviting her on the yacht. "You must've heard him tell me he loves me. You must also know that I'm already in love with him, too."

Tommy crossed his arms and studied her. "How long has this been going on? Although I think I have an idea."

"Honestly, we've felt a connection ever since that first day he stopped by my cubicle for help with his computer. But nothing actually happened until after the incident at QC."

"Who started it?" he demanded.

Felicity crossed her arms and gave him a determined gaze of her own. "I did. I was terrified of leaving him in QC. I thought I'd never see him again, so I kissed him. After that, we really couldn't fight it anymore."

"And what about Laurel?"

"They were broken up, Tommy."

"Laurel didn't seem to feel that way," he argued.

"It's not up to Oliver to control her feelings. He ended it with her not once but twice."
"Is that what he told you?"

"It's what I know. And why does it sound like you're trying to make me out to be the other woman in this scenario?" Felicity heatedly challenged.

"Because Laurel's been a friend to you—"

"She wasn't exactly welcoming at first," she argued. "Also, just because we're somewhat friendly around the rest of you, it doesn't make us automatic besties. I don't owe her anything, Tommy, and neither does Oliver. He and I are both adults. We love each other and decided we want to be together. It's honestly no one else's business."

"Is that why you decided to lie to everyone? You know who lies when they know they're doing something wrong? Children. You're not an adult," Tommy pointed out. "You're only seventeen, Felicity. Oliver is four years older than you. You don't know what you want, and the truth is he should've known better."

It took a concerted effort to keep her temper in check. Tommy knew how much she hated being treated like a child, and here he was essentially calling her one. "Age is just a number. I'm more mature than an average seventeen-year-old. Hell, I'm more mature than you. But if you want to get technical, I'm going to be eighteen in a couple of months. Problem solved."

"Felicity—"

"I can understand why you'd be upset that we didn't tell you. It wasn't because we were ashamed of our relationship or felt like we were in the wrong. Oliver wanted to tell you and everyone else, but I asked him to wait. I wanted us to have time together, to become stronger as a couple, without the media and everyone else giving us their two cents." She gave him a pointed look. "I'm going on the Gambit, because Oliver wants his parents to get to know me. We were going to tell everyone as soon as we returned."

"Where does Donna think you're going?"

"My mom knows about us, and she's fine with it. She's my parent, Tommy, not you," Felicity retorted. She didn't appreciate how judgmental he was being, especially since he wasn't exactly a saint either.

"So Oliver invited you on a romantic weekend? What about when you go back to school? What then?"

She hesitated. Oliver was supposed to be the one to tell Tommy about his plans. But it was obviously too late for that now, so she replied, "Oliver is coming to Boston with me."

"He's going to Starling City University," Tommy refuted.

"No, he's going to Harvard to finish his degree."

"Harvard," he scoffed.

Felicity placed her hands on her hips and snapped back, "It's true. He showed me the acceptance letter, and he has his apartment all lined up."

Tommy chuckled without humor. "Oh, I don't doubt that. I'm sure Oliver thinks he wants to follow you to Boston and go to Harvard. But the reality is he's been kicked out of three schools. Just like the reality is he bounces from girl to girl before eventually ending up back with Laurel."
"This is different," she retorted.

"Every girl thinks she's the exception to the rule, but she never is."

Felicity scrutinized Tommy. The friendly, carefree stepbrother she'd come to love was nowhere in sight. The man who stood before her was patronizing and cynical; it hurt her more than she was willing to let on. "Why are you being like this? Oliver is your best friend, and yet you're completely trashing him."

"Just because we've known each other forever does not mean that he gets a pass for making a move on you. If anything, the years we've spent together work against him. He's done some shady shit in the past, but what kind of friend lies about sleeping with his best friend's much younger stepsister?"

"What kind of best friend won't acknowledge how he and I feel about each other and instead passes judgment?" she shot back. "You're not a saint either, Tommy. You're with a different girl every week. You're gone all hours of the day and night. You do not get to claim the high ground here."

"I'm not saying that I'm better than Oliver, because I'm not. But you are," Tommy emphasized. "It's not just Laurel wanting to get back together with him. It's Moira's opinion, too, you have to worry about. She's practically a second mother to me, and I can tell you there's no way she's going to just accept that Oliver is with you."

"So I'm too good for Oliver but not by his mother's standards?" she spat. "Thanks so much for the vote of confidence, Tommy." That was exactly what Felicity had been stressing over, and Tommy voicing that concern made her insides clench. Something else also caught her attention. "And what do you mean Laurel wants him back? Have you spoken to her?"

"Yes. We were friends before she and Oliver ever dated, so we still hang out once in a while. She's not over him," he said, not without a hint of bitterness in his voice. "I know for a fact she's going over to the docks right now to talk to him before he leaves."

"How did she know to find him there?" Her eyes narrowed. "Let me guess, you helpfully told her."

"It wouldn't matter whether I told her or not. They always end up back together in the end. You're just too new at this to know that. Don't go, Felicity," Tommy implored. "Save yourself the heartache and end it while you still can. It won't hurt as bad in the long run if it's your choice."

She'd heard enough. "Get out," Felicity ordered.

"Felicity—"

"You've made your point, Tommy, now please leave. I can't hear any more and, quite frankly, I can't bear to be around someone who thinks so little of me. I thought you were my friend."

"I am."

"Well, you have a terrible way of showing it," she snapped. "Go."

Tommy hesitated, looking like he wanted to say something else. Her glare firmly put an end to that, and he left without another word. As soon as the door closed behind him, Felicity sunk down on the bed. Her mind was a jumbled mess of turmoil and doubt. Every single insecurity and doubt she had about this trip roared to life with a vengeance now that Tommy had shined a brutal light upon them.

But it wasn't just Moira she had to worry about now. Apparently, Laurel still wasn't over Oliver. How many times would Oliver have to deny her before she moved on? Or was Tommy right that
Oliver only thought he wanted to go to Boston but would later come to regret it—inevitably returning home to both Starling City and Laurel when it all fell apart? Where would Felicity be then?

Heartbroken, her mind answered.

"No. No. He loves me," she said aloud while reaching for her phone on the nightstand. Tommy couldn't possibly understand the depth of her and Oliver's feelings or what they had. He was probably just pissed and lashing out because they hadn't told him.

Needing to hear Oliver's voice—it was probably the only thing that would calm her right now—Felicity dialed his number. It rang several times before going to voicemail. She tried again but nothing. It wasn't like him not to pick up. Was he talking to Laurel right now and distracted? What did the brunette think she could possibly say to him at his point to get him back? Would she be successful in changing his mind?

Felicity angrily brushed aside a stray tear and stood up, pacing the length of her room. Her day wasn't supposed to turn out like this. She was supposed to have the usual jitters about spending time with her boyfriend's parents, but inevitably she'd be with Oliver and he'd find the right words to put her at ease. Yet, everything that Tommy said triggered a perfect storm of fear. All her insecurities were rearing their ugly head, and she was suddenly questioning everything all over again.

Why the hell wasn't Oliver picking up his phone?!

Felicity glanced at the clock; she didn't have much time. If she was going to make it to the docks, she'd have to leave soon. But she didn't feel the same urgency she had earlier staring at her messy bed of clothes. She bit down hard on her lip and placed a hand over her constricted chest. She had to make a decision, and fast, before it was too late.

"Isn't there any other route you can take?" Felicity questioned the driver. She sat anxiously in the backseat of Malcolm's town car, her heart racing miles faster than the traffic they were currently stuck in.

"I'm sorry, Miss Smoak, but it's gridlocked. Looks like some sort of accident ahead. The next exit isn't for another couple of miles."

"Frack," she cursed under her breath. If they had left at the intended time, then they probably could've avoided this mess.

Tommy's visit followed by crippling self-doubt had thrown her schedule off completely. By the time Felicity had regained her senses, she was so late she'd just started throwing things into her bag—not caring that everything would be unorganized and wrinkled. Yanking her phone out, she was just about to call Oliver again when she saw that she'd already missed a message from him.

Stupid cell service, she lamented when she saw that the signal strength was low in that area. Felicity quickly accessed her voicemail to listen before she lost reception completely.

"Sweetheart," his deep voice greeted, "sorry I missed your calls earlier. I was a little held up. I'm at the dock right now. My parents want to cast off soon, but I'm trying to stall them. I hope everything is okay. You're hardly ever late. You didn't leave a message, and you were supposed to be here by now. Maybe you're on your way…call me as soon as you get this." He paused and added, "I love you, Felicity…alright, see you soon." Despite the steadiness of his voice, his tone sounded strained.
He must be worried something had happened.

Why the hell did she listen to Tommy? Even if Laurel did show up at the docks to talk to Oliver, it was obvious he was still dead set on sailing away with Felicity. She felt ashamed for doubting his resolve.

Felicity quickly dialed his number and felt her stomach clench when it went straight to voicemail. What if Oliver wasn't able to stall, and the Gambit had already left? That was the most likely explanation. She closed her eyes and bit her lip to keep from cursing.

After the beep, she began to speak, "Hey, honey, I am so, so, so sorry for being late. I promise I'm on my way. I…I got held up, too, earlier and now I'm stuck in this horrific traffic jam. It's a long story, and I will definitely explain once we're together. Just know that I'm fine, and I love you, too. If you can stall a little longer, that'd be helpful. I'm trying to get to you as fast as I can. I love you—which I know I already said but the way I figure, you can never say it enough, right?" Felicity babbled. "Anyway, I'm coming. So just hang in there a little longer, my love. Bye…"

It was almost another hour before they were off of the highway and pulling up to the dock where the Queen's Gambit was anchored. Felicity barely waited for the car to stop before she was opening the door to get out.

"Miss Smoak," the driver warned.

She ignored him, squeaking out a quick thanks, and clutched her bag tightly in her hands before running down the dock. "No!" she exclaimed in a breathless huff once she reached the end. "No, no, no!"

The Queen's Gambit was already gone. Covering her eyes to block out the bright beams of the sun, Felicity searched the horizon. The yacht wasn't even in sight. Her eyes stung with unshed tears while she struggled to regain her breath. She imagined Oliver pacing where she stood now, anxiously waiting for her and wondering if she'd changed her mind or was in an accident. Either way, he'd be confused and upset.

Out on the open sea, his phone wouldn't work. And it's not like she knew how to get in touch with the boat. Even if she could, his parents would really think she was crazy. Not exactly the kind of impression she wanted to make. Felicity would just have to wait until Oliver got in touch with her. Dropping her bag, she plopped down on top of it and placed her head in her hands. She'd really messed things up good this time.

Chapter End Notes

So, what'd you guys think? Don't worry, you will be getting Oliver's side of the flashbacks, too. I probably won't be able to update before the new year (if I did, it'd honestly be a Christmas miracle!), so I'm wishing everyone a wonderful holiday season and Happy New Year!
Hello, lovely readers! Thanks so much for your continued comments and kudos. I'm so thrilled to be posting a new chapter, especially since it's one I've been dying to write for the longest time. It's another game changer. Big thank you to SassySnow1988 for lending her editing skills and a suggestion of a particularly hilarious line for Tommy! Happy reading!

April 13, 2014

It was physically impossible for Oliver to take his eyes off of his family. Felicity lay wrapped up in his embrace with her golden curls splayed out across the pillow. Resting on her chest was Connor, also sound asleep. There had been a terrible rainstorm last night. Thunder had cracked the sky and the wind had howled. Connor had cried nonstop, obviously frightened by the chaos outside. Since it was unlikely he'd fall back asleep on his own, Felicity had brought the baby into Oliver's—now their—bedroom. Connor rested with his head over Felicity's heart and cradled under Oliver's arm, completely nestled between their chests. She'd hummed a familiar lullaby to drown out the storm while Oliver rubbed his back. Eventually, Connor's crying had tapered off. The storm continued to rage outside, but he'd calmed in their warm, protective little cocoon.

A part of Oliver was almost convinced he was still dreaming. He'd certainly never thought he'd ever get to have precious moments like this. His fingers absently wandered into Felicity's hair, and he stroked the silky strands while he counted the adorable little freckles on her nose. His lips followed, pressing the softest of kisses against her beautiful skin.

A moment later, when he'd lightly kissed her eyelids, she let out a small sigh. She shifted ever so slightly in his arms, and he knew she was awake. Felicity lifted her chin, and Oliver took the silent invitation to kiss her lips. He free hand traveled up his arm, her touch giving him goose bumps as their mouths moved in perfect synchronicity.

"Good morning," he murmured, pulling away just enough to gaze into her dazzling blue eyes.

"Morning," she greeted in an adorably groggy voice before checking on Connor. She pressed a kiss to the top of his head. "You'd think we were the ones who kept him up most of the night."

Chuckling quietly and rubbing soft circles into his son's tiny back, Oliver replied, "Can't blame him for sleeping in. He's laying on the best pillow ever."

Felicity hummed at the compliment. "Well, he's also got the best blanket. You're always so warm at night." She pushed her feet between his legs.

"Damn, how is it your toes are always so cold?" Despite the shock of her chilly limbs, he locked his legs over her feet to give her some of his heat.

"Lucky for me, I have my favorite human space heater back," she teased and pecked his lips. "Let's
just stay like this all day."

"You read my mind," he mumbled. "Although eventually we will have to get up if we're gonna be ready on time."

"Yeah," Felicity sighed as a crinkle formed between her brows.

Oliver knowingly asked, "Are you nervous?"

"Yes," she admitted. "Are you?"

"Yes," he agreed.

They'd already experienced so many changes, and their world was about to drastically shift yet again.

It'd been a couple of days since they'd decided to tell their family the truth about what had been going on these past several years. It was probably an understatement to say that Oliver was nervous. He felt like he was teetering on the edge of a cliff. There was no going back; he would have to jump and pray that he made it to the other side.

He and Felicity had wanted to wait until they'd defeated Darhk and Waller, but the situation had become too dangerous to keep their family in the dark any longer—not to mention the complication of Tommy and his private investigator. But more than that, he and Felicity were done lying. The burden of their secrets was too much to bear. They weren't just ready for a new start with each other but with their family, too. Making the same mistakes again wasn't an option. They owed it to themselves and their son to be better.

"I just..." Oliver paused, trying to find the right words. "It's been such a long time, and I worry I won't be who they expect me to be. I'm worried I'll disappoint them."

"We've all changed over the years. And after everything you've been through, it's to be expected that you're different. But they're going to be so happy to have you back," Felicity reassured him, reaching out to gently caress his scruffy jaw. "Just like I am. It'll mean the world to Thea, especially."

"You know me better than anyone else, and you're unbelievably patient. What if they aren't like you? What if they can't understand why I never reached out?"

"Honestly, I'll probably be the one they're most mad at," Felicity confessed. The little worried crinkle between her brows deepened. "You were stuck in hell, Oliver. There wasn't much you could do. I'm the one who's been lying to them all these years about my job. I didn't tell them when we reconnected or about being pregnant. Tommy's already upset with me. I can only imagine what he'll think when we tell him what's really going on. Or how my mom is going to react when she learns about Malcolm and my dad." She glanced down at Connor. "But mostly I'm worried about him. No matter how angry they are with me, I hope they can accept Connor. He's innocent in all of this."

"That's the one thing I don't doubt," Oliver said and pressed a comforting kiss to her palm. "Whatever they may feel about us, I know they wouldn't hold it against him. It's impossible not to fall immediately in love with Connor."

"That's true. He already has us wrapped around his tiny finger," she jokingly replied.

He stroked Connor's soft, round cheek and his heart swelled when their son smiled in his sleep. Oliver kissed him before returning his attention to Felicity. Her blue eyes were glassy, an ocean of tears ready to fall. But she didn't exactly appear sad.
"Talk to me, sweetheart," he implored.

"I love you, and I love Connor. You're both everything to me. So let's just promise that whatever happens today this”—she gestured between them—"is all that really matters."

He reached up to wipe away the moisture on her cheek and kissed the wet trail. "You're both everything to me, too, and I promise that we'll get through this together. We're a team." He kissed her lips. "I love you so much. Nothing will change that."

They kissed until Connor stirred. He let out a tiny yawn before his sleepy eyes opened.

"Hey, morning, munchkin," Felicity greeted in a soft voice. She kissed the crown of his head and patted his back.

Connor lifted his head and took them in. When Oliver tickled his chin, Connor let out a breathless laugh and smiled again. Within seconds, he was wide awake and squirming. His little hands reached for Felicity's chest and tugged at the strap of her nightgown.

"Someone's hungry," she giggled as he made gibberish pleas.

"Can't say I blame him. I want the same thing when I first wake up," Oliver chuckled. That earned him a smack on the arm, but it was worth the blush that colored Felicity's cheeks. "How about you stay here and feed him while I make us breakfast in bed?"

Felicity sat up and positioned Connor to nurse. "That sounds wonderful."

He watched them for a minute, in awe of the connection between mother and baby. Oliver no longer felt like an outsider looking in. He shared that familial connection with them, too, and it was the best feeling in the world. With a final kiss to them both, he got up and grabbed his robe to head down to the kitchen. They surely had a long day ahead, but they were going to take advantage of the calm and quiet moments when they came. These, after all, were the moments worth fighting for.

Gnawing on her lower lip, Felicity contemplated for the hundredth time that day what she was going to say to her family. A quick glance at the clock told her they'd be arriving any minute now—assuming Sara and Mei were able to coax them to the Queen mansion. Felicity had called her mom and Thea this morning and said she had something important to tell them. Since Tommy currently wasn't speaking to her, Mei—who agreed it was time to tell Tommy about her involvement, too, or else risk losing him—promised to convince him to come.

Felicity and Oliver—along with input from Sara and Dig—had decided the meeting needed to be last-minute. They couldn't risk Donna or Thea telling Malcolm or anyone else where they were going if they had advanced warning. Not to mention Tommy, who would probably call his snooping private detective. Felicity just hoped they wouldn't make too much of a fuss when Sara and Mei led them through the underground tunnels of the mansion. The risk was too great if they were seen entering the main gates. Oliver trusted his men, but they couldn't take any chances that someone would report the suspicious activity back to Darhk or Malcolm. This was too important.

When Felicity heard voices in the hallway, she sprang from her seat. Out of habit, she pushed her glasses back up her nose and fiddled with her ponytail. Her entire body vibrated with nervous energy, and she hoped she could keep it together long enough to explain herself. She feared the words would just burst forth, and she'd inevitably say something wrong or spew it out in a babbling mess of incoherency.
"I haven't been here in years," Donna's approaching voice echoed through the hall. "Was it really necessary to take the tunnels? Felicity didn't mention anything about creepy tunnels. I think I still feel a spider web somewhere on my back. I hate spiders!"

"How come I never knew about the tunnels?" Thea added. "And why are the coverings off of the furniture and paintings? Did Malcolm say he was going to reopen the manor?"

Tommy piped in, "If Felicity has nothing to hide, what's with all the secrecy?"

"Who said Felicity was hiding anything?" Donna replied. "She just said she had something important to tell us."

"Why here, though?" Thea's voice was solemn—being in her childhood home probably brought back memories, and not all of them pleasant.

Finally, the trio entered the living room with Sara and Mei in tow. Facing them, Felicity's heart raced. How she wished Oliver could be by her side right now! But they'd agreed to ease their family into the truth. The sight of Oliver would shock them, and they'd be in a complete tizzy. Felicity had a few things she needed to say first.

"Thank you all for coming." Her gaze lingered on Tommy, who looked to be fastidiously scrutinizing her. His suspicions were undoubtedly at an all-time high now.

"Felicity, honey, what is going on?" her mother questioned.

"And why are we in my family's house?"

"Is this where you've been staying?" Tommy rightly assumed.

"Yes, I've been staying here at the mansion since my return. And I promise to explain everything," she quickly stated before they could bombard her with more questions.

"Everything?" Tommy repeated with a probing stare.

"Yes, everything," Felicity emphasized.

Thea frowned and glanced between them. "I am so confused."

"Me too," Donna agreed.

"Please have a seat," Felicity directed.

When they hesitated, Sara and Mei came forward to do as she asked. That prompted the trio to follow. Donna and Thea sat together on the long couch. Tommy took the single chair, notably keeping his distance from Mei, who was on the loveseat next to Sara. Felicity had asked them beforehand to remain in the room, since they were both involved in what Felicity was about to reveal. Also, she could use the added support. Dig, though out of sight, stood outside in the foyer to make sure none of the guards passed through and overheard.

Felicity remained standing. She took a deep breath before beginning. "I asked you all to come here today because there's something you need to know about me. I'm sure you've all noticed over time that I'm very private about certain aspects of my life. Actually, secretive is probably a better word. Because I have been keeping secrets from you—all of you—for a few years now."

Donna's confusion morphed to concern. "What kind of secrets? Hon, you're being awfully cryptic,
and I have to say it's really freaking me out."

"Me, too," Thea said. "Are you all right? Are you in trouble or something?"

"Yes and no." Felicity took another much-needed deep breath. Her heart raced again, and a slight
tremor ran through her. Her voice, thankfully, remained steady. "I don't work for Brighton Tech. I
mean, I did work for Brighton Tech but Bright Tech isn't actually Brighton Tech. It was just a cover
for my real job."

"Our real job," Mei spoke up.

For the first time, Tommy acknowledged Mei. "Which is?"

"We work—or I used to work—for a secret government agency called A.R.G.U.S. I was a cyber-
intelligence analyst, and I was part of the leading team in the agency with Mei," Felicity revealed.

"I'm still an agent," the brunette informed them.

"So you're like…James Bond or something?" Thea asked. "Do you guys go on missions and catch
bad guys?" To Felicity's surprise, she actually sounded intrigued by the prospect.

"Yes, that's basically what we did. Our agency and missions are classified. That's why I couldn't
exactly tell you guys too much about my job or coworkers. It's also why you couldn't get into the
building to visit me."

"When I was traveling for 'tech conferences,' I was usually involved in some kind of
operation overseas. I didn't want to lie to you guys, but it's always been part of the job—both for
your safety and mine."

"So is that why you haven't been around this past year?" Donna inquired. "Were you on another
mission? Have you ever been shot at? Gosh, I thought my baby was just some techie genius. Now I
find out she's a super spy…"

"I'm not a super spy, Mom—"

"No wonder you covered your tracks so easily," Tommy muttered. His hard expression had softened
as he clearly tried to process this revelation. "Markus suspected whoever helped you was either
government trained or a criminal mastermind."

"Who's Markus?"

"The private investigator he hired to track me," Felicity answered while staring down her
stepbrother.

"You hired a private investigator to spy on Felicity!" Thea exclaimed.

Donna was just as outraged. "And you didn't even tell us!"

Tommy at least had the decency to look somewhat embarrassed. "As she just said herself, she was
keeping secrets from us. I was concerned about her, and clearly my suspicions were right," he
defended before turning to Felicity. "Would you honestly be telling us all of this right now if I hadn't
done it?" He directed his challenge to Mei, too, but she let Felicity respond.

"Not right away," the blonde admitted.

"See!"
"But I was going to tell you when the time was right. It just so happens that it came sooner rather than later. There's more to the story, though."

"How much more?"

"A lot." Now came the real bombshell, she thought. Felicity squeezed her fingers together to calm the tremors and continued, "You see, I was recruited by the agency right out of college. I agreed to work for the government because I wanted to do something big and important in my life. I wanted to help people."

"Nothing wrong with that. It's really kind of awesome when you think about it," Thea reassured her. "Have you ever needed to shoot a gun?"

"Don't answer that," Donna interjected. "If I know you have to handle weapons, I'm just going to worry about you even more than I already do."

"I did most of the shooting," Mei explained. "Felicity handled computers and comms for us."

That seemed to calm Donna. "Oh, good."

Felicity sent Mei a nod of thanks.

"Do you have a gun in our apartment?" Tommy asked Mei.

"Several," she admitted. "I have to be armed at all times."

His eyes widened. "Where?"

"Guys, Felicity isn't done," Thea reminded them.

The blonde pressed on, "As I was saying, a big part of my decision to join was to help people. But I also had another motive. Working for the government meant I'd have unlimited resources at my disposal. Resources I could use to investigate something we'd all been wanting to know the answer to for a very long time."

Thea was the first one to put the pieces together. "You wanted to find out what happened to Oliver and my parents."

Felicity nodded. "The truth is I never stopped loving Oliver, and I've never been good at letting mysteries go. I at least had to try. For almost five years I dug up all I could about what happened to the Gambit. Mei helped, too."

"You did?" Tommy asked his girlfriend, his expression softening ever so slightly.

"I told you about my father and sister. I knew what Felicity was going through. We tried to help each other."

"Felicity…” Donna trailed off. For once, words escaped her. But her eyes were beaming with pride.

"Did you ever find out the truth?" Thea pressed. Despite the eagerness of her voice, her intense blue eyes were filled with trepidation. Felicity recognized the source, having experienced it many times herself: hope mixed with fear of disappointment. "Did you find them? Are they…” She couldn't bring herself to finish.

She met Thea's penetrating stare and declared, "I found Oliver. He's alive."
Oliver rolled up the sleeves of his dark gray, V-neck sweater. It felt like a thousand degrees in the foyer where he stood, listening as Felicity began telling their family about her real job at A.R.G.U.S. Her voice was composed, but he knew firsthand how incredibly anxious she was on the inside. Oliver thought his emotions had been tumultuous this morning, but now that he was so close to being reunited with his family, it felt like he was having some sort of out of body experience.

His palms sweated and his mind had trouble processing. At times, all he could focus on was the sound of Felicity’s voice as the words went in one ear and out the other. He’d never dared to get this close to Thea before, and yet just a single wall separated them now. Every time she spoke, his heart soared before thudding erratically in his chest. Oliver's stomach was in knots, and he couldn't stop himself from imagining a myriad of scenarios for how potentially well or disastrous this might actually go.

Felicity was right when she said they'd be thrilled to have him back. But it was difficult to shake the fear of their expectations; Oliver was no longer the brother or best friend they remembered. When he and Felicity shared the rest of the story, what would they think of him?

"Breathe, man," instructed a deep voice behind him.

Forgetting Dig’s presence, Oliver startled. Then he took a few breaths, because he really did need them after the rest of his limited oxygen supply had whooshed out.

"You deserve this," Dig encouraged and placed a hand on his shoulder. "It's finally time."

"Thanks," he replied, hoping his tone conveyed that it was for more than just this moment.

Felicity’s voice pulled his attention back to the living room. "I found Oliver. He's alive."

They were silent for a few seconds. Then Thea, Tommy, and Donna all started talking and asking questions at once. Felicity did her best to quiet them before calling for Oliver.

"He's here?" Tommy asked.

Utter silence followed as Oliver approached the living room. This was it. A moment seven years in the making—when his dream of returning home to his family would finally come true. He paused in the doorway, taking one last second to center himself, and crossed the threshold.

"Holy shit, he is here," his best friend muttered.

Donna gasped and held her hands over her mouth while staring in wonder.

Immediately, Oliver's eyes honed in on his sister. Thea. She stood, allowing Oliver to see how much she'd grown over the years. Her brown hair was shorter and her face more mature, but her frame was still small and willowy. From what Felicity had told him, he had no doubt her fiery spirit and pure heart also remained.

"Hey, sis," he greeted thickly, breaking the silence. He stood next to Felicity, unsure of whether to approach his sister or give her more time to process.

"Ollie," Thea whispered, and then made the decision for him. She crossed the short distance and threw herself into his arms. He caught her and hugged her so tightly, there was no telling where he ended and she began. "I knew you were alive. I knew it! I missed you so much." Her hot tears soaked his neck, and he suddenly became aware of his own.
Oliver looked to Felicity, who was also overcome with emotion. She kept her distance to allow them their moment. "You were with me the entire time, Speedy," he murmured to his sister, rubbing her back as she clung to him.

He kissed her hair and cheek and drew away to get a better look at her. "You're all grown up." He affectionately tapped her nose. "Nice nose ring."

"I told you I'd eventually get a real one," Thea teased, wiping at her tears.

"You look beautiful, Thea," Oliver said more seriously. "Mom and Dad would be in awe of you, too."

She frowned. "So they're not…?"

Oliver shook his head. "I'm sorry."

Her eyes watered again, but she managed a smile. "Well, I'm so thankful to have you back, Ollie."

Afterward, she addressed Felicity. "And thank you for never giving up on finding him."

When Thea released him to also give Felicity a hug, Tommy stepped up. "Buddy…" he trailed off. Not knowing what to do at first, they shook hands—which then turned into a bear hug with them chuckling at how ridiculously formal they were being.

"It's so good to have you back. We missed you, brother."

"I missed you all, too."

"Oh, Oliver, honey," Donna squealed. "Welcome home." She gave him a hug and kiss on the cheek before taking his face between her hands. "Gosh, you're even more ruggedly handsome now. The scruff really works for you."

"Mom," Felicity warned.

Oliver laughed and reached for Felicity. He gave her a soft, quick kiss that had Donna sighing. It felt so unbelievably freeing to take a moment with her while their family and friends watched. He left his arm around her waist, not ready to let her go anytime soon.

"Sara, aren't you going to—" Tommy said and gestured to Oliver.

She cut him off, "We already had our little reunion a while ago."

"You did? When? You have to tell us everything, Ollie," Thea declared. "Where you were, what you were doing, how Felicity found you…"

"We will," Oliver assured his sister. "There's still a lot you don't know." He exchanged a loaded look with Felicity. "We should probably take a seat first, though."

Oliver sat between Felicity and Thea on the larger couch. It seemed neither woman was ready to let him go—Felicity held one hand while Thea clutched his arm—and he was completely fine with that.

Felicity listened as Oliver recounted the night the Queen's Gambit went down. While he spoke, her free hand rubbed his back. She remembered how difficult it was for him to tell her this story. It was probably more so retelling it to Thea, who had no idea about her parents. Felicity noticed that Oliver didn't mention anything about Robert making it onto the raft and taking his own life. He probably didn't want to upset Thea with such a disturbing detail, which she understood. The young brunette
already shed plenty of tears while hearing about that night and Oliver's journey to the island.

"So were you on the island this entire time?" Tommy spoke up. He added to Felicity, "How were you eventually able to track him down?"

Now came the hard and complicated part.

"Actually, even though I was always looking for Oliver, I didn't find him. I mean, technically, I found him by accident. Or, rather, he found me," she nervously babbled.

Donna, clearly confused, replied, "Huh?"

After an encouraging hand squeeze from Oliver, she tried again. "Mei and our team were on a mission in Moscow a couple of years ago. I was in a casino purposefully trying to get caught counting cards, so I'd be taken to the owner. He was involved in some shady dealings that we had to stop. My cover was almost blown, but Oliver stepped in and saved me."

"So how did you get from Lian Yu to Russia?" Tommy inquired.

Thea was even more unsettled by that revelation. "You said this was two years ago. So you got off the island and didn't come home?" She looked to Felicity and demanded, "You knew he was alive this long and didn't say anything?"

"Can we go back to the part where you were purposely trying to be captured by evil Russians or whatever?" Donna asked. She whirled on Mei. "And how could you let her do that alone?"

Mei hadn't expected such a question and was taken aback.

"Mom, the team was there covering me," Felicity stated—coming to Mei's rescue—before Donna really started freaking out.

Oliver went on, "It wasn't like *Castaway*. I wasn't alone on the island. There were dangerous people there. People that I later found out Mom and Dad were also connected to. Lian Yu was a base for an organization called H.I.V.E."

Explaining H.I.V.E. and his situation on the island was met with even more questions from their family. Oliver figured it would be a long process, and it took almost an hour to catch them up on his parents' involvement and the Bratva connection—and even then he'd scratched only the surface of the truth. Felicity let him do most of the talking on this. Even though she didn't have much to say, her touch grounded him and offered silent support.

"I can't believe this. How could Mom and Dad be involved in something like this?" Thea lamented. "It's like we never knew them at all."

"They made a lot of mistakes," Oliver agreed. "They saw Starling City descending into chaos with crime and corruption—some of it they were involved in themselves—and were convinced that H.I.V.E., led by Damien Darhk, could get everyone back in line. Before Dad died, he told me he wanted me to right his wrongs. I think they were already in too deep when they realized what a grave mistake they made."

Not buying his explanation, she retorted. "Who 'convinced' them? They were adults and should've known right from wrong."

Felicity decided it was her turn to step in. She met Thea and Tommy's intense stares before focusing on her mother. She would most definitely take this the hardest. "Malcolm got involved with H.I.V.E.
and brought them in. He's still a part of the organization." She was quick to say, "Mom, I swear I didn't know about Malcolm until just a few weeks ago."

Donna turned pale. She opened her mouth to speak a couple of times but abruptly closed it. Although Tommy and Thea appeared livid by this revelation, they didn't say anything either—sensing Donna needed a moment. Finally her mother said, "I knew it. I didn't know what it was, but I just had this horrible feeling that something was off lately. All the odd hours, calls, and business trips. I thought maybe Malcolm was having an affair. When I confronted him, he dismissed it. Said I was watching too many soap operas and reality TV."

"Mom," Felicity said, her tone full of sympathy. She'd had no idea her mother had any suspicions at all about Malcolm, or that they had marital problems. Apparently, Felicity wasn't the only one keeping secrets about her relationship.

Donna shook her head. "I wish it was an affair. That would've been better than this."

A knot formed in the pit of Felicity's stomach. "Mom, there's something else." She took her mother's hand, and Donna instinctively squeezed back. "It wasn't by chance that you met and married Malcolm. He was ordered to seek you—seek us out. Damien Darhk, the man Oliver just told you about, I met recently and I recognized him. His alias was Noah Smoak. It's Dad."

"What?" Donna gasped, her grip turning vise-like.

"He was a member of H.I.V.E. before taking it over. That's when he left us, and I've learned that he's been keeping tabs on us ever since. He has a long list of enemies, and he eventually asked Malcolm to marry you to 'keep us safe.' The same person responsible for the Gambit sinking was also going to target us."

Tommy laughed, but it was completely devoid of humor. "I always knew my father was a bastard," he muttered in disgust. "I just didn't realize how much."

"I thought it was the storm that made the Gambit sink. You're saying it was sabotaged?" Thea cut in.

Felicity kept her attention on Donna. Her mother's eyes were glassy as she stared ahead, lost in her own thoughts. "Mom, I am so sorry. Are you all right?"

"It's not your fault, sweetie," she eventually said, although she sounded distracted. "I need a minute, I think." Donna didn't leave the room, but she stood up and walked over to the large windows.

Felicity's anger at both Darhk and Malcolm reignited. She hated seeing her mother in pain. The depth of betrayal Donna must be feeling was all too familiar to Felicity.

Oliver pulled her into his side, and she clung to him. "It's not you. You did the right thing telling her," he whispered into her ear. "She just needs to process."

The blonde nodded and wiped at the few tears that had fallen. Oliver took over the conversation yet again, and she was thankful for the reprieve.

Picking up where Felicity left off, Oliver filled Tommy and Thea in on the backstory with Amanda Waller. He recounted how—without going into the gory details—he and Felicity were reunited after Moscow and the events that unfolded. He explained about Malcolm wanting him to spy on Felicity for information and spending his nights as The Arrow to atone for the sins he'd committed while in service to H.I.V.E.

That's when Sara jumped in and told them about him helping to take down Brodeur. Shock overtook
Tommy once again as he listened intently. The deep creases in his forehead revealed his efforts to absorb all of the information. But gratitude shined from his eyes as well.

Oliver recounted the rest—from Mei telling Felicity about H.I.V.E. and her leaving to what they'd recently learned about Waller's revenge. Donna, at one point, returned to her seat next to Felicity. She didn't speak much but reached for her daughter's hand. Despite her heavy silence, Donna's gesture and silent support of her daughter brought some relief. Felicity also suspected her mother needed the support in return.

"Damn, this is some serious James Bond versus Spectre shit," Tommy said with a whistle. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. "That explains why we never met Aaron, though. He was you."

Oliver nodded. "You should know that Felicity desperately wanted to tell you guys about me"—he squeezed her shoulder—"but I asked her not to. She was respecting my decision."

"But why, Ollie?" Thea replied. "Why take all this on yourself? We could've helped you instead of letting all these wasted years go by."

"These people are dangerous, Thea. They're killers," he stressed. "I didn't want to bring you into this. I wanted to be out of H.I.V.E. and free and clear of the Bratva before I came home—assuming it was ever possible."

She pointed out, somewhat dejectedly, "You trusted Felicity. You still went to her even before Malcolm and Darhk made you spy on her."

"Felicity was trained and backed by A.R.G.U.S. She could handle herself," he stated matter-of-factly. Then his voice softened. "But I also didn't expect her to come back into my life. I'm glad she did, though, because I probably wouldn't be here right now with all of you if it wasn't for the fact that I couldn't let her go." The pair shared a loving look. "I'd resigned myself to my fate, but she believed in me and urged me to keep fighting to get my life back. I tried to protect her, too, and I was wrong in not telling her the truth. I won't do that to her or any of you again." Oliver patted Thea's hand and reassured her, "Despite how everything unfolded, it doesn't mean I didn't miss you any less either, Speedy."

That last comment seemed to placate Thea, and she offered Oliver a timid smile.

"We've both made mistakes," Felicity spoke up. "We don't want to repeat the past, and we hope that you can forgive us—although we'll understand if it takes some time. Please just know that all we've ever wanted is to keep you safe."

"And we'll continue to do so, no matter what it takes," Oliver stated.

It was difficult to get a read on the trio, especially since they all seemed to be in various states of shock and working through everything they'd just learned. However, Felicity took it as a good sign that no yelling or stomping out of the room had occurred. Although there was still one last significant piece of the puzzle they had yet to share.

"How can we help?" Tommy asked after a moment of silence passed.

Felicity, taken aback, replied, "What do you mean?"

"Now that we know what's going on, you can let us in on the plan," Thea stated. "We're grateful that you've protected us, but we're not going to let you guys keep doing this on your own."

At Felicity's shake of her head, Donna piped up, "It's not just your fight anymore, sweetie. It's ours,
too. If Malcolm and your deadbeat father think they can get away with manipulating us for their evil agenda, they've got another thing coming." She raised her chin in defiance.

"We appreciate that, but—" Oliver began.

"Don't you dare say it's too dangerous, Ollie," Thea interrupted. "After what you've told us, it's always been that way. We're just more aware of it now. Waller and all these other psychos need to be stopped."

"We're not fighters like you," Tommy amended, "but we can be your eyes and ears if Malcolm doesn't suspect us. Just like what Mei's doing with Waller now."

"Felicity, honey, why are you crying?" Donna suddenly asked her daughter.

Oliver tightened his hold on her and murmured, "You okay, sweetheart?"

The tears she'd been holding back throughout this entire emotional conversation came in full force now. Sniffling, Felicity wiped at her wet cheeks. "Sorry. I'm okay," she reassured them all. "I just…I didn't expect this. I thought you'd be furious and hate me for lying."

Donna ran her fingers soothingly through Felicity's ponytail. "We could never hate you, and why would we? You are not responsible for Noah—Darhk's actions. I'll probably never get a good night's sleep again knowing what you do for a living, but I couldn't be more proud of you"—she smiled at Oliver—"both of you for how you've fought back."

"We're not happy about all the lies, but we understand what you're up against," Tommy agreed.

"My mom used to always say there's nothing more important than family, and she was right about that, at least. We're family," Thea declared, "and families stick together."

"Thank you for saying that." Oliver smiled at his sister and nodded to the others. Afterward, he shared a silent agreement with Felicity that it was time to tell them their final secret. He still felt the tension in her entire body and ran his hand along her back. His touch seemed to calm her at least a little bit.

"There's one last thing we have to tell you," Felicity announced, "and it'll change everything."

"Even more than what you already told us?" Tommy incredulously questioned.

"I'm still trying to wrap my head around Dr. Evil and Number Two," Thea muttered.

The blonde smiled at the quip, which wasn't all that far off, before becoming serious once more. "There was another reason why I left Starling and stayed away."

"You said you were worried about Waller and didn't know what side Ollie was on."

"True, but that's not the main reason I left." Felicity exchanged looks with Sara and Mei, who both gave her encouraging nods. Oliver, meanwhile, kept rubbing gentle circles into the small of her back. "If I was wrong about who to trust, I could've been captured or worse. I couldn't risk it because…" She took a deep yet shaky breath. "I was pregnant."

"What?" Donna exclaimed.

"I thought I had the flu at the time, but I was pregnant. When I got checked by one of our coworkers who's a doctor, she told me. Mei found out, and that's why she defied orders and warned me that
A.R.G.U.S. was after me. I confided in Sara, and that's also why I asked her to come with me to Ivy Town. I was scared and didn't want to be pregnant and alone."

"I'm glad you did tell me," Sara spoke up. "You did so much for me. It's the least I could do for you. Plus, I'm a cop. No way was I going to let my best friend face all that in her condition."

"My God, I can't believe this," Donna mumbled and wiped at her own tears. "You had a baby, and I wasn't there. I'm a grandma, and I had no idea."

"Mom, I'm so sorry," Felicity apologized for what felt like the hundredth time. "I must sound like a broken record by now, but it doesn't make my remorse any less true. You have to know that my decision wasn't about not trusting any of you, it was about protecting the baby no matter what. I couldn't let A.R.G.U.S. or H.I.V.E. have even the slightest clue of where I was or what I was doing. And if they thought you knew, they could've targeted you."

"Waller had you all under surveillance in case Felicity slipped up," Mei confirmed. "If Oliver hadn't made a deal to help us, I'm not sure what she would've done to draw Felicity out."

"Is that why we were together?" Tommy sounded more dejected than angry.

Mei held his stare and replied, "No. I'm with you because I love you. You're not an assignment."

"You lied to me."

"I was protecting you."

"That seems to be the primary excuse today," he bitterly retorted.

"Doesn't mean it's not true," she defended.

"This is too much," Donna suddenly sighed.

"Mom—"

"This isn't right, and I'm not blaming you. I'm just so heartbroken," she cried, "that it's gotten to this point. That all the lies you told to keep us safe are causing so much pain now. That my daughter had to hide her own child from us and go through a pregnancy and birth mostly alone."

"So if you only told Sara and Mei and didn't meet up with Oliver again until recently then…" Thea frowned as she worked out the details. "You kept the pregnancy from my brother, too."

"Yes, I did," Felicity tentatively answered. She noticed the anger building in the other woman's eyes and braced herself. "I thought I was doing what was best at the time."

Thea glared at her. "You didn't tell him or try to question him at all. You've loved him all this time and yet the one time he needed you to believe in him, you just left and took his baby with you? How could you?!"

"Thea," Oliver warned but was interrupted by Donna.

"As a single mother, I've been there. I know exactly what it's like to feel betrayed by the man you love. When a child is involved, there is nothing a mother won't do to protect it. I won't deny that I'm upset, too, but Felicity did what she had to do," Donna defended.

"But Ollie didn't betray her. If she was pregnant, she owed it to him and the baby to find out the truth. If she had, then she wouldn't have had to run and we might've all been together sooner," the
petite brunette argued. Felicity confessed in a small voice, "That will always be my greatest regret."

"Whether Felicity told me right away or not, we'd still be in this mess, Thea," Oliver declared, keeping his voice calm and even.

Thea stood up and folded her arms, glaring down at her brother. "You missed the birth of your own child because of what she did, Oliver. How can you be defending her right now?"

Oliver stood up to face her. "Whatever you're feeling, I assure you that I've already felt a hundred times over. Felicity and I both had reasons for what we did, and we've acknowledged our mutual mistakes. We've worked through all of this in the past weeks and have forgiven each other."

With her eyes glistening, Thea huffed out, "Well, it might take me a little longer."

A heavy silence fell over the room. Oliver understood his sister's—and Tommy and Donna's, for that matter—anger. Although he believed Thea really was upset over Felicity hiding her pregnancy, he also got the sense she was overwhelmed by everything and lashing out. She needed someone to blame, and Felicity served that purpose. That didn't mean, however, that he would just let her take it all out on his girlfriend.

"Take the time you need but just know that she's the reason our child has remained safe. She's made sacrifices, too," he stressed.

Tommy, who'd fallen silent, finally spoke. "Can we at least see our niece or nephew?"

Donna's mood instantly brightened. "Yes! Is the baby here? Can we please see him or her? Is it a girl or a boy?" she fired off in rapid succession.

"It's a boy," Felicity revealed. "His name is Connor."

Donna squealed. "Oh my God, I have a grandson! And your bigger boobs totally make sense now. You're breastfeeding, right?"

Felicity flushed. "Mom!"

"What? Breastfeeding is one of the most natural experiences in the world. I tried breastfeeding you, but you had issues latching on." She said to the others, "You see, if the nipple—"

A chorus of uncomfortable groans echoed in the room.

Tommy muttered, "I never thought I'd hear the word 'nipple' and be less turned on in my life…"

"Sweetheart, why don't you go get Connor?" Oliver suggested before Donna could get into the gory details. Tommy already looked pale. Also, it would allow Felicity to leave for a few minutes, and he sensed she needed time to recollect herself. "He's with Raisa in the nursery," he told the others.

"Raisa?" Thea repeated. "As in our Raisa?"

Felicity stood and gave Oliver a grateful look. She knew he was giving her a momentary reprieve, and it filled her with relief. Despite anticipating her family's shock and anger, it still hurt that Thea thought the worst of her. Felicity, however, forced a smile when Oliver kissed her cheek and then quickly left the room.

"You all right?" Dig asked when she passed by. He reached for a tissue on the side table and handed
it to her.

A mirror hung over it, and Felicity caught sight of her appearance. Her eyes were red and a little puffy. Tear tracks also stained her cheeks. "Frack, I'm a mess."

"It's a lot to deal with at once." He cleared his throat and added, "Not to eavesdrop or anything, but I heard some of what happened in there. You're handling it like a champ."

"Thanks, Dig." She quickly freshened up before saying, "I better get Connor. I know my mom and if she has to wait any longer, she'll burst."

"My eardrums might, too." He made a show of rubbing his ear. "I think I've figured out where Connor's volume comes from."

She giggled. "Me too."

Felicity proceeded to the nursery. Raisa sat with Connor on the floor as he played with his toys and crawled around. She took a moment to simply watch them and calm down. Dig's reassurance had helped, and she reminded herself that the worst part was over.

"Is it time?" Raisa questioned.

"It is." Felicity rubbed Lucky's head when he approached her. Connor finally noticed her and smiled while crawling to her. It was such a simple gesture, and yet it meant so much to see her son light up in her presence. No matter what the others thought, she just had to repeat to herself that her son was happy and healthy despite the chaos unfolding around him.

Felicity picked him up, giving him a loving squeeze before showering him with kisses. Once again, she was grateful Oliver let her take a moment. She definitely needed it.

"Here, take this." Raisa handed her Sir Quackers. "It might be a lot for him with so many people downstairs."

"You're welcome to join us, Raisa," Felicity offered. "I'm sure Thea would love to see you."

"I would love to see her, too, but I can wait. Go be with your family."

With a deep breath, Felicity ventured back downstairs. She clutched Connor tightly in her arms, drawing strength from her little munchkin. Lucky, of course, followed closely. Felicity heard her mother's impatient voice from the foyer, and Dig looked like he was trying not to laugh.

"This is it," she whispered. Connor, meanwhile, played with her hair and tried to speak—which just came out as adorable nonsense.

"Oh my God, I think I heard him!" Donna exclaimed.

After pressing her lips to her son's head once more, Felicity reentered the living room. Donna squealed in excitement when she saw them. Connor whipped around to stare at her and also let out a playful screech. He thought it was a game and kept mimicking Donna.

"Look, he likes me!"

"Mom," Felicity warned, "can you tone it down? He has little ears, and we're going to go deaf between the two of you."

Donna lowered her volume but continued to gush over him. "Look how adorable he is! I just knew
I'd have beautiful grandbabies!"

"You guys got a dog, too?" Thea questioned and bent down to pet a cautiously sniffing Lucky.

"Jeez, not only is my best friend back from the dead but now he's gone full nuclear family on me," Tommy joked. "What's next?" Shaking his head, he amended, "You know what? Save it until after I've had a strong drink."

Felicity watched Oliver kiss the baby's head in almost the exact same spot she had earlier. He then wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled them both into his side. It brought yet another wave of calm that she needed.

"Okay, everyone, this is our son, Connor Jonas Queen," Felicity announced.

She shot a quick look to Oliver, whose head had snapped back in her direction when she used the baby's full name. They hadn't discussed Connor's last name, and there really was no need in her opinion. She might've given their baby a different name as an alias in Ivy Town, but he was a Queen through and through.

Felicity smiled up at Oliver when he gave her a loving squeeze and continued in a tender tone, "Connor, this is your family, and they're really excited to see you. Meet your grandma and your Auntie Thea and Uncle Tommy." She pointed at each person, and they waved at him to claim his attention. "And you already know Auntie Sara and Mei."

"Wow, he's so…" Thea's eyes shined with tears. "God, he's seriously the cutest baby I've ever seen."

"Look how alert he is," Tommy observed. "He just waved at me! He's not shy at all."

Felicity said, "He loves people."

"Definitely didn't get that from Oliver," Thea teasingly muttered.

"Can I hold him?" Donna didn't wait for an answer and already made a beeline for Connor. "Come to Grandma, baby."

The older woman swiped him from Felicity's arms so fast, the younger blonde barely registered what happened. She was simply left with Sir Quackers and a chuckling Oliver next to her. Thea moved next to Donna and started cooing at her nephew.

"I guess my babysitting competition just got real," Sara joked.

While the women fussed over Connor, Tommy approached Felicity. Much to her surprise, he reached out and drew her into a hug. "Congratulations," he whispered into her ear.

"For what?" she couldn't help asking.

"You've always loved Oliver, and you have him back along with the baby. I'm happy for you."

"Thank you," she hugged him fiercely back, "and I really am sorry."

"I know you are."

"Are we okay?" She pulled away to look at him.

"I still need some time to wrap my head around all of this." He briefly glanced over at Mei, who was talking with Sara on the couch while trying to subtly check out Tommy in return. "But, yes, we're
okay. And you don't have to worry about the detective anymore. I'll call him off."

"Thanks."

"Glad to have you back, too, man," Tommy said to Oliver and gave him another hug. "But now you have another problem to deal with."

Oliver frowned. "What's that?"

"Donna is never giving you guys that baby back."

Donna bounced Connor on her hip while they both made silly noises at each other. Meanwhile, Lucky lay on his back as Thea rubbed his belly. They were quite the sight.

Felicity smiled and leaned into Oliver's side, feeling an overwhelming sense of relief—which was a miracle in and of itself after the roller coaster of emotions she'd been on all day. Tommy wasn't wrong about Donna. It would take the Jaws of Life to pry Connor away from her mother, but it was a small price to pay to see a smile on her face after the day they'd all had. They deserved to take this moment. Their family finally knew the truth, and the fallout was only just beginning.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so their secrets are finally out! Let me know what you guys think in the comments. Next chapter everyone will continue to deal with the aftermath. Another flashback you've been waiting for will occur as well.
Hey guys, I'm so happy to finally be posting again. Thank you so much for your comments and kudos (over 2,000--woohoo)! With this chapter, I had originally intended to pick up where the present left off and include flashbacks. But when I actually started writing the flashbacks, I realized they were too important to bury in the drama of the present and deserved a chapter all their own. These have been a long time coming, and quite a few of your burning questions will be answered. Special thanks to SassySnow1988 for her supremely helpful editorial feedback.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

September 7, 2007

The crisp breeze drifting off the bay was a welcome relief against Oliver's burning skin. Though it was only the first week in September, there was a chill in the air that hadn't been there before. Summer was fading out as fall crept in. Oliver rubbed his hands together to release some of the extra tension. Meanwhile, his eyes darted between the yacht being prepped for departure and the busy street beyond the dock.

A few times his mother had watched him from above deck and called for him to come aboard. Oliver had declined and made a show of helping his dad and the crew. It was better to keep himself busy than to pace back and forth—kind of like he was doing now. Felicity would be arriving soon to join them on their voyage to China. She'd never been on a yacht before or to Asia, and he was excited to share these new experiences with her. But mostly, he couldn't wait to come clean to his parents and finally introduce Felicity as his girlfriend.

He was nervous, too. His parents, like everyone else, had always assumed that he and Laurel would end up together. Oliver worried they wouldn't see that what he had with Felicity was the real deal. He wanted so badly for his parents and Felicity to get along on this trip. His father was already a fan but as Oliver sneaked peeks of his mother's rather serious expression up on deck, he wasn't exactly sure how she'd take the news. However she reacted, he would just have to make it clear that he loved Felicity and emphasize the positive impact she'd had on him these last few months and would have on him in their future.

Checking his watch, Oliver let out a labored sigh. Felicity must be running late; she was supposed to meet him five minutes ago. His father said they'd be ready to cast off soon, and Oliver wasn't sure how long he could stall. Should he come right out and say that he was waiting for his girlfriend? Or should he keep it vague and say it was a friend? He'd hoped to get Felicity onboard and settled in first before they sat down to tell his parents.

Crossing his arms, Oliver felt like he might come out of his skin if Felicity didn't show soon. Then, finally, a taxi pulled up and parked along the street. A smile tugged at his lips until he realized the brunette who arrived wasn't the one he'd been expecting.

Laurel, his mind supplied. What the hell is she doing here?
He watched in confusion as she approached. A part of him felt the instinctive urge to bolt, though his feet remained glued to the wooden planks beneath his sneakers.

She was the first to speak. "Hi, Ollie."

He cleared his throat. "Hey."

"You're probably wondering what I'm doing here." Although she spoke in a steady voice, her hand shook as it jerkily tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Tommy said that you were going on a trip with your parents and I...I really needed to talk to you before you left."

"Uh, sure," he replied, totally confused and a little more than worried. It must be important if she'd chased him down to the docks.

"We have a lot of history together, obviously, and I know what you said the last time that we”—she hesitated, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot—"got close in your room. But I can't help feeling like since that night that things between us are still unresolved."

"In what way?" Oliver questioned. He thought he'd made it pretty clear that night that they were over.

"I guess so much is changing so fast that it's hard to keep up."

That he could agree with. "Yeah."

"I really hate the way things are between us now, Ollie. You were one of my best friends for so long. Now we can barely speak to each other without it turning awkward."

Like right now, he couldn't help thinking.

"I know," he agreed. "But it's like you said, things have changed."

"Right. See the thing is...well...I've sort of been seeing someone," she blurted out.

Oliver's eyes widened. His ex was just full of surprises today. "Oh. Well, that's good. I'm happy for you, Laurel." When she didn't look any less relieved by that, he said, "But it doesn't seem like that's what you were hoping to hear."

"No. Maybe. I don't know." Laurel shook her head. "A part of me wants to move forward, and yet here I am talking to you."

His phone vibrated in his pocket, and Oliver knew it must be Felicity calling. As badly as he wanted to answer it, first he had to deal with Laurel. What if Felicity was on her way and saw them talking and got upset? What if Laurel saw Felicity arrive and got upset? He really didn't want any unnecessary drama to unfold right in front of his parents and spoil him introducing the woman he loved.

"Laurel, what exactly do you want from me?" Oliver asked frankly, though not unkindly. There was no use tiptoeing around the situation. "You don't exactly need my permission to move on."

"I know I don't need your permission," she replied in a frustrated huff. "even though the guy is someone you know." Laurel eyed him carefully, searching for some kind of reaction.

His phone vibrated in his pocket yet again, and he felt his patience wane. "Okay...so, what? You want me to guess? You want me to demand to know who it is?"
Her chin went up a fraction as she challenged, "You're not curious at all?"

"Honestly, no, I'm not." Okay, so maybe he was a tiny bit curious. But not enough to demand an answer that would no doubt lead to an argument, and definitely not enough to prolong this when Felicity could arrive any moment. "It's your life, Laurel. It's your choice to be with whoever you want."

"What if my heart is still telling me that person is you?" She hurriedly pressed on when he took an automatic step back. "Just hear me out. I got into law school—several, actually. I've been trying to decide where I want to go. The deadlines are almost up. One of them is SCU. I thought it might be nice to stay close to home, especially if you'll be here, too. We've never really been in the same place at the same time for school these last few years, and I think that was part of the problem. That's why we've always been so disconnected."

"Laurel—"

"If we can just start over, then I truly believe that—"

"Laurel, I'm moving to Boston," Oliver interrupted firmly.

She paled. "What?"

"After this trip, I'm moving to Boston and finishing my degree at Harvard."

"But Tommy said you were going to SCU."

"That's because I haven't told him yet. I've been trying to get everything in order first on my end. I was going to tell him when I got back."

"Why Harvard? You said were tired of your parents shipping you off to Ivy League schools," Laurel pointed out.

"I did say that, but now I've finally got my priorities straight. Harvard is a good school, and it's near the QC in Boston. My dad would like me to continue to learn about the company."

Oliver paused, considering if he should reveal the main reason why he was moving. He wasn't entirely sure how Laurel would react, but he was also sick and tired of hiding his true feelings. Laurel would find out the truth soon enough anyway. He declared, "Plus, I'll be with Felicity."

"What does Felicity have to do with…?" Laurel trailed off. With the realization, her entire body jerked back as if he'd dealt her a physical blow.

A heavy silence fell between them. The brunette's gaze was somber yet penetrating, but Oliver held steady. A few minor shakes of her head made known her utter disbelief.

"I saw that Kissing Cam story in the tabloids. I thought it was just the media trying to make you two into a couple," she said barely above a whisper. "Is it serious?"

"Yes."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Officially, about a month." Oliver could explain that he and Felicity had grown close long before that, but he figured it was best to keep his answers simple. He didn't want to get into the nitty gritty details with Laurel, or else they'd be stuck on that dock all afternoon going back and forth.
“You've only been together a month, and suddenly you're moving across the country for her?” she replied in disbelief.

“She's a big part of it, but I'm doing it for myself, too.”

“Is it because you two were in that hostage situation together? Are you sure it's not a delayed reaction to some near-death experience thing—”

“I love her,” Oliver interjected, his tone full of conviction.

Another bout of heavy silence descended. He sensed a multitude of questions piling up on the tip of his ex-girlfriend's tongue. But every time she opened her mouth to speak, she'd abruptly close it again. Then: "Were you ever going to tell me? Or were you just gonna sail off into the sunset, never to be seen again?"

"Felicity is coming on the trip with my parents and me.” Hopefully, he silently added to himself. "We planned on telling everyone else when we got back, including Tommy."

The brunette raked a hand through her hair, and it shook even worse than before. "I should go."

"Are you okay?” Laurel had been tense when she first arrived, and she didn't seem to be faring much better now. She looked on the verge of tears.

"I'm fine. I needed to see you and talk this out, and I did,” she declared, more to herself than him. "Good luck with everything, Ollie."

"You, too. I'm really glad you got into law school. I know you'll do great wherever you go. Take care of yourself, okay?” He tried to catch her gaze, but she refused to meet his eyes. "And I really do hope things with this new guy work out, too. You deserve to be happy, Laurel."

Despite all of the change Oliver was experiencing, he knew it was ten times more dramatic for Laurel. It wasn't just about him; her family was still in turmoil, too. When she finally looked up, he sensed that her attention was already elsewhere.

He hugged her gently and was surprised how tightly she held onto him back. After a quick kiss to his cheek, Laurel broke away and hurried back to her cab. She looked to be fleeing rather than walking, and he worried that he'd caused her additional pain. There was no sugarcoating the truth, though. Laurel glanced back only for a moment as the cab drove away, a trail of the tears she'd held in before now gleaming on her cheeks.

His father shouted his name, announcing they were about to cast off. Oliver checked his phone. Felicity had called multiple times but oddly hadn't left any messages. His heart sank from her continued absence, his concern multiplying.

Oliver rubbed a hand over his face. This day wasn't going at all like he'd planned.

"Felicity, where are you?"

She hadn't come.

Oliver waited and waited at the dock, making excuse after excuse to get his parents to delay their voyage. He'd even tried calling Felicity back and leaving a voicemail but there was no response. His
mother had eventually requested him on deck to help her with something, and the next thing he knew they were sailing off.

Oliver wondered if his mother had distracted him on purpose. She hadn't been thrilled when he said he'd invited a friend along. Hours later, Oliver was still fuming. He hoped that Felicity got his message at some point and realized that he hadn't intentionally left her behind. His own phone was useless now with absolutely no signal since they were so far out to sea.

To make matters worse, it looked like they were heading into a storm. The sea raged against the yacht, rocking it roughly back and forth. Oliver eventually left his cabin to grab a beer from the galley. There was nothing else to do, and he was wound so tight he could use a drink. On the way back to his cabin, his mother called out to him. She sat on the couch in the saloon with a book in hand.

"Not right now, Mom," Oliver growled.

"I need to speak with you," Moira insisted, her curt tone leaving no room for argument.

With a sigh, he joined her in the saloon. As he passed a side table, he poised his beer on the edge and used it to pop the cap. His mother pursed her lips in disapproval, and he felt a small thrill of satisfaction.

"Oliver," she scolded.

"Mother." He took a long swig and plopped onto the couch.

"I was going to ask if you're okay, but you're clearly still moping."

"Whatever gave you that impression?" Oliver realized he was being childish and petty, but he just didn't care. His day was already ruined. Not much else could make it worse.

"Honey, I realize that you're disappointed that your friend stood you up—"

"She didn't stand me up. We left without her."

"If she wanted to come, then she would've been on time or at least left you a message," his mother pointed out. "It's just as well. This trip is supposed to be for us as a family. Your father and I have something to discuss with you, and Felicity probably would've felt out of place anyway."

Oliver's head snapped up at that. "How did you know it was Felicity?"

"Yes, but..." He frowned, utterly confused. "How did you know? Did Dad tell you?" Although he'd never come right out and told his father that he was dating Felicity, Oliver got the distinct impression that his father was already aware of their connection. He'd dropped enough hints recently.

"No. Actually, I told him," Moira stated. "I've known since the incident at QC. I stopped by the hospital late that night to check on you and found you and Felicity curled up in your bed."

"Oh." When Felicity had visited him that night, he'd been so relaxed that he swiftly drifted off to sleep. He hadn't even heard his mother come in. "But you never said anything."

"I didn't think it was that serious. I figured you'd both been through a traumatic ordeal," Moira
explained and put her book aside. "However, when your father told me you wanted to go to school in Boston instead, I realized I'd underestimated your attachment to her."

"It's not an attachment, Mom. I love her," Oliver declared. "In fact, the whole point of her coming on this trip was so that we could tell you and Dad, and you'd get to know her better."

"It was a very sweet gesture, honey"—she affectionately patted his knee—"but I know enough already."

Oliver might've been able to believe her show of sympathy if it wasn't for the sharp lines in her brow and beneath her eyes as her gaze narrowed. Felicity had lamented for weeks that his mother didn't like her, and Oliver had assured her that the two of them spending time together was the solution. Seeing the disapproval firsthand on his mother's face now, Oliver realized that his girlfriend had been right.

"So that's it? You're not even going to give her a chance?" Oliver shot back. "Mom, you've seen for yourself how smart and capable she is. She's a good person."

"I don't doubt that. I'm not denying Felicity's accomplishments or her character. I just worry that you may be rushing into something that you're not ready for. She's only been in town for a few months, Oliver. How much do you really know about this girl? And I emphasize girl. She's barely an adult, what makes you think that given time she won't outgrow you?"

Oliver felt like he'd been sucker punched. He'd always had a special bond with his mother, but the harsh woman in front of him right now was a complete stranger.

"If you think our being together is such a bad idea, then why did you help get me into Harvard?" he challenged when he could finally get his mouth working again.

"Your father placed the call before discussing it with me."

That was news to Oliver, since his father had specifically said that he'd need to discuss it with Moira before moving forward. Was everything his father said a lie these days? How many more secrets was he keeping?

His mother added, "I was worried you'd leave that much sooner if I objected to your acceptance."

"Isn't that what you're doing now?"

"I wanted you on this trip so that we could discuss it without any distractions."

More like so I can't escape, he thought to himself. Felicity was two for two.

"There are things you don't know, Oliver, and I believe you deserve to make an informed decision once you do. You need to be made aware of the consequences should things not work out between you and Felicity."

The boat jostled heavily to the left, almost causing Oliver to slide into his mother on the couch. He'd barely caught his beer from falling off of the table. Seconds later, a loud crack of thunder pierced the sky. The storm raging outside, however, was no match for the one building inside the ship.

"What consequences?" Oliver retorted, completely baffled by his mother's explanation. He was well aware of her protective instincts, but her cryptic talk seemed a little dramatic even for her. "Besides being brilliant, Felicity is the most down-to-earth person I've ever met. She doesn't have an agenda. She's the real deal, Mom, and I'm not changing my mind on this. I won't give her up no matter what
"That's how you feel, but what about her? Are you sure she hasn't already given up on you?" Moira countered. "Her absence is a clear indication that she's having second thoughts."

"She's not—" he began to argue when his mother interrupted.

"Felicity is much younger than you, Oliver. While I don't doubt your feelings for her, I worry that you're putting her on a pedestal and betting your entire future on a teenage girl who may think she's in love today but may decide she wants something completely different tomorrow."

Oliver gripped the couch, both to release the exasperated tension inside of him and keep himself steady as the boat jerked back and forth. His mother was wrong. He'd experienced enough meaningless flings and tumultuous relationships to know that the love he shared with Felicity was true. She was his calm in any storm that life could throw at him. Even if she, for whatever reason, had been too nervous to join him on the trip and had changed her mind, he wouldn't give up on her. And given how things had gone, he couldn't blame her for bailing out on the Spanish Inquisition here. As soon as the yacht docked, he'd call her and set straight any of her lingering fears. Then he'd hop on a plane back to Starling, tie up loose ends, and they'd be on their way to Boston together start a new chapter in their lives.

He opened his mouth to tell his mother as much when the lights suddenly flickered. Oliver lost all sense of gravity as the entire room tilted. His mother's high-pitched scream pierced his ears as he flew through the air and landed against the wall. Loud crashes followed from the furniture tipping over and sliding with the violent motions of the boat. He'd barely had time to catch his breath when the couch landed on top of him.

"Oliver!" his mother shouted. Her crumpled form lay a few feet away. She tried to get up but the boat jerked sideways again. A sense of vertigo overtook him, and his head spun. "Oliver, sweetheart, are you all right?"

Her next words never reached him. Oliver's ears rang from another shrill boom of thunder. Except it wasn't thunder, he realized, when the floor began to crack down the middle of the room. It split in two, and water flooded the space between.

With wide, frightened eyes, Moira rushed to scramble away from the break while Oliver attempted to heave the couch off of himself.

"Mom," he called to her, "hold on!"

The boat dipped forward, causing Moira to slide toward the opening. She frantically clawed at the carpet in search of anything to grip and slow her descent. "Oliver!"

"Mom, I'm coming!" Pushing through the pain and lightheadedness, Oliver strained to free himself. Calling upon every last ounce of strength and adrenaline, he heaved the couch to the side and wriggled himself free.

"Oliver," his mother screamed as gravity took hold.

Clutching a light fixture bolted to the wall to secure himself, Oliver reached out his free hand. "Take my hand, Mom!"

She whimpered as tears stained her cheeks. Her voice quivered. "Oliver."

The bottom half of the room sank further, and the water rose up.
He stretched himself as far as his wingspan allowed. "Mom, take my hand," he repeated.

Moira strained to reach him. Their fingers brushed as their eyes locked. Almost there. She was so close, and yet still out of reach. Another ear-splitting clamor signaled the rest of the yacht tearing away and the floor supporting her slanting. His usually strong, calm, and composed mother stared back at him in absolute terror. "Oliver…I love you."

"Mom, no!" he hollered, helplessly watching as the black, churning depths sucked her under.

His face felt wet, his tears mixing with the spray of tumultuous waves warning that he was next. Oliver didn't know whether to hold on or let go to attempt to find his mother. It'd become so dark he could barely see a few feet in front of him.

Oliver kept shouting until his voice was raw and his muscles trembled from the stress of trying to hold himself above water. That is until the boat buckled, and he found himself submerged in the brutally cold depths. The violent, salty water filled his mouth and lungs, drowning out his cries for help. Darkness enveloped him, making it impossible to locate the surface.

Knowing that this moment could very well be his last, Oliver saw a face appear before him. Fair skin, dark hair, pouty lips, and vivid blue eyes clouded his vision. He reached for the angel before him, praying she'd take him away from this nightmare.

"Felicity," he choked out and surrendered himself to the bottomless abyss.

"Mom, I really don't want to," Felicity whined as her mother tugged her by the hand into the living room.

"It'll be good for you."

"I'm not in the mood to do a movie night."

"Well, I'm not in the mood to let you wither away in your room for hours on end. You've been sulking all day. I get that you're upset you missed the boat with Oliver, honey, but it's not the end of the world. He'll eventually get your message, and you can explain to him what happened. I'm sure he'll understand."

"Yeah, right," Felicity grumbled under her breath. As far as her mother knew, she'd missed the boat because she'd gotten caught in traffic. Felicity didn't feel like going into the whole complicated mess with Tommy yet. Her mother would most certainly interfere, and she couldn't deal with her meddling on top of everything else.

As for Oliver, Felicity didn't think he'd gotten her message; otherwise, he would've waited for her. Which meant that he was probably on the Queen's Gambit right now upset and trying to figure out why she'd stood him up at the docks yesterday. Even if he understood, how was she going to break the news about Tommy finding out about them? How could she explain her reaction in a way that didn't make him question her commitment to him and their relationship?

She'd had an odd feeling all day, besides. An intuitive sense of foreboding that felt beyond her usual worries. No matter what she did, she couldn't shake it.

"While I pick out the movie, how about you get together some snacks in the kitchen? There's still a pint of mint chip left if you want it." Donna nudged her. "Go on."
Resistance was futile, she realized. "Fine," Felicity relented, "but no rom-coms."

"But they're the best—"

"No," the young brunette insisted. If she was going to humor her mother, then she needed to forget about her current dilemma. A movie about a couple getting into a bunch of outlandish romantic entanglements for drama's sake only to end up happily ever after would not help with that.

Felicity entered the kitchen and searched through the cabinets for the popcorn. She read the directions before placing it in the microwave. While it popped, she rummaged through the freezer looking for the pint of mint chip her mother had promised her.

Her teeth began to chatter as she searched with no avail. With her head still in the freezer, she just barely heard the door to the kitchen open.

"Hey, Mom," she called. "I don't see the mint chip, and I can't sit through a movie without my number one snack." It figured; nothing was going her way today.

She reached to push aside the pint of fudge brownie. "Do you know where it is?" If they couldn't find it, maybe she could use that as a final "get out of jail free" card.

Silence.

"Mom?" Felicity questioned again. When there was still no answer, she pulled her head out of the freezer and felt her body go as rigid as the ice-covered items she'd just been searching through. "Tommy?"

Her stepbrother stood in the doorway, much like he'd done the day before. Although unlike the last time, there was no anger or disappointment reflecting back in his eyes. In fact, he looked downright miserable. His skin was pale and his black hair disheveled. There were dark circles under his eyes, and the corners of his mouth were turned down in a sad frown.

Another awkward moment passed before he lamentably announced, "I'm an asshole."

"Normally I'd disagree, but…" she trailed off, letting her unspoken acquiescence hang in the air between them.

"I'm sorry for what I said to you. I didn't mean it, and I was out of line. As shocking as it was to learn the truth about you and Oliver, that wasn't the main reason I was upset."

She blinked in surprise at his apology. Her curiosity piqued, she inquired, "What was it then?"

"I'm in love with Laurel." His eyes darted to the floor, his face contorting in shame. "We, uh…we've sort of been sleeping together for the past month."

"Oh," Felicity muttered, her eyebrows shooting up to her hairline. Of all the possible confessions, she'd never have expected this. And yet, she wasn't necessarily stunned by the revelation either.

Felicity had suspected for a while that Tommy might have feelings for Laurel. The spark in his eyes when she entered the room or his attentiveness to her needs had not gone unnoticed these past few months. Felicity did not, however, foresee him acting on those feelings. Suddenly, his outburst and anger toward Oliver made sense—as did the guilt and remorse he was currently exhibiting.

"But I'm pretty sure that's over now."
Without a word, Felicity opened the utensil drawer and grabbed two spoons. She offered one to Tommy before opening the fudge brownie ice cream. "Seems like you could use this just as much as me."

He took the spoon and gave her a shaky, albeit thankful smile in return.

"Why don't you start from the beginning?" Felicity suggested. Her stepbrother looked as if he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, and she recognized the need to unload part of that burden.

Tommy hesitated, contemplating. When he finally opened his mouth to speak, Donna interrupted. "Felicity!" she shouted from the living room.

"Frack, movie night," she remembered.

"What?" Tommy replied.

"I'll take care of my mom. Just give me a sec."

"Felicity, get in here!" Donna hollered. The mild annoyance at her mother's command faded when she caught the panicked edge to her tone. Donna shouted for her again, sounding frantic. "Get in here quick! There's something about Oliver on TV."

That also got Tommy's attention and the two hurried to the living room, their ice cream and spoons forgotten. They entered the room just as Donna cranked up the volume. A picture of the Queen's Gambit flashed on the screen as the anchorwoman, Bethany Snow, reported on a horrific storm and an unanswered distress call that had since disappeared.

"Oh my God," Donna gasped.

Felicity barely heard anything after that. It was like her mind had disconnected from her body. Disbelief and fear built up within her, making her limbs tremble before numbness set in. She vaguely heard someone calling her name, but she couldn't tear her eyes away. One hand covered her mouth while the other held onto her heart as it thumped erratically in her chest.

The image switched to a photo of Oliver and his parents—one of the more recent ones taken at the event to honor their act of bravery at QC—and something inside of her cracked. How could he be gone? She'd just been with him the other day. Just heard his voice telling her he loved her. Not long ago she'd been packing her bag to board the very same yacht. Was Oliver still trapped in the storm? Was he okay? Was he with his parents?

She didn't know exactly when her knees had given out or when she'd started crying. One minute Felicity was standing in front of the TV and the next she'd crumbled to the floor. Two strong arms shot out to catch her before she hit it too hard. Within seconds her mother crouched next to her as Tommy encircled her into his arms. They tried uttering reassurances, saying that it was too early to assume anything. That everything would be all right. It could've just been the weather or a mechanical malfunction; that didn't mean the boat was wrecked.

But there was no drowning out the dire report that all communication attempts had failed. No unseeing the glaring headline "MISSING" posted beneath the picture of the Queens. And no ignoring the all-consuming despair as the ominous feeling that had plagued her most of the day completely swallowed her whole.

Oliver was gone.
If you're not a mess of feels by now, I'm sure you guys have more questions about the aftermath of the Gambit. Fear not, we will definitely be returning to the present next chapter. Oliver and Tommy will finally get their chance to talk about the past, because there's a lot of unresolved issues and feelings between them. Please let me know what you think in the comments. Your feedback is always appreciated! :}
Heart-to-Heart

Chapter Notes

Hello, lovely readers! Thank you for your comments, kudos, and patience in between updates. I'm thrilled to be posting again, and a shout-out to SassySnow1988 for assisting with editing. As promised, this chapter will continue to deal with the aftermath of Olicity telling their family the truth about them. Enjoy!

Oliver chuckled watching his son squeal with delight as Thea bounced him on her lap. He resisted the urge to pinch himself several times today just to make sure this all was, in fact, real. Most of the day had been quite hectic after he and Felicity had told their family the truth about their lives these last couple of years. Donna, Thea, and Tommy were bursting with more questions about H.I.V.E. and A.R.G.U.S., which he and Felicity had tried to answer as best they could.

It was decided that everyone would stay overnight at the mansion, since there was still much to discuss. They'd all had dinner a short while ago before going their separate ways. Felicity had needed to talk to her mother, who was still reeling from the revelation that her marriage to Malcolm was perpetrated by her ex-husband. Tommy had shuffled off with Mei to discuss the status of their relationship, probably taking her to the guest room he'd used when sleeping over as a kid. Oliver had taken Connor—more like prised him out of Donna's hands, actually, since Felicity thought her mother incapable of any serious talk with an adorable baby around—and Thea to the solarium to watch the sunset.

Only a light hue of orange at the horizon remained in the mostly darkened sky. For the last hour, Oliver had asked Thea about her life. She briefly told him about school and Roy before asking about their parents and his time on Lian Yu. It was a struggle to reveal even a fraction of what he'd been through—his desire to bond with his sister warring with his need to protect her from the shame of his past.

Connor, thankfully, served as a buffer. In a moment of awkwardness, he would claim Thea's attention and give Oliver time to sort through his thoughts before answering. Connor was highly amused by his Auntie Thea, which came as no surprise to Oliver. Thea always had such a warm and loving soul, and his son ate the attention right up. Seeing them bond so easily made Oliver's heart ache in the best way.

"I think someone wants his dad," Thea said when Connor started squirming and reaching for him.

Oliver checked his watch before cradling his son in his arms. He handed him Sir Quackers and a pacifier to calm him. "He always gets antsy at this time, especially if Felicity isn't around. She usually feeds him before putting him down for bed."

"He's not used to you yet?" Thea questioned.

"Connor likes his routine. I put him down in the afternoon for his nap, and Felicity handles bedtime. Although I help out then, too."
"Well, he'd probably be used to you, too, if you'd been involved from the beginning," she grumbled, hardly masking her disapproval.

Oliver let out a low sigh. He'd hoped that after a few hours to absorb everything, Thea would have come to realize that what had happened over a year ago wasn't all Felicity's doing. It seemed she hadn't relinquished any of her anger at all. Then again, in addition to her kind heart, his sister had also inherited that signature Queen stubbornness.

"Thea," he gently admonished.

"Ollie," she defiantly retorted.

"I really wish you'd try to cut Felicity some slack."

"Why should I?"

"Because you know the truth of what happened. You know what I did, and what we were both up against. You should be just as angry with me for the part I played in delaying our reunion."

"Yeah, well, it's kind of hard to stay angry at my brother who up until a few hours ago I thought was dead," she muttered. "I never thought I'd see you again, and now here you are. You were in hell, so it makes sense that you weren't thinking straight. But Felicity…" The brunette shook her head and sighed.

"Thea, Felicity told me how close the two of you have become in my absence. I'd hate to see you at odds now because of me."

"Yes, we're close. We're practically sisters—which is why it cuts so much deeper. She's been here and saw what I went through when I lost you and Mom and Dad. Ollie, the last time Felicity visited your grave with Tommy and me on the anniversary of your death, she knew full well that you were alive at the time. When I was worried about my relationship with Roy and what Malcolm would think, she told me about you guys keeping your relationship a secret years ago. I appreciated her confiding in me and opening up, because I knew she truly understood how painful it was to lose you. I didn't feel so alone in my grief. But it was a lie, because she was still harboring secrets."

"It didn't mean she wasn't still hurting deeply, Thea. I remember that day. Felicity called me all upset. She hated lying to you guys. It was eating her up inside, and that was on me. I wasn't ready to come home, and she was respecting my wishes even though her instincts were saying the opposite," Oliver explained.

"If her instincts are so on point, then why not let you be a part of your son's life? Why not let any of us help her?" she retorted in frustration. "I thought I knew Felicity, just like I thought I knew our parents. What am I supposed to do with the knowledge that Mom and Dad joined an evil organization thinking that it was the right thing? It's insane! I've mourned them all these years, and yet they're the reason we're in this mess. I'm angry, but am I allowed to be since they're dead?"

Making sure Connor was secure in his arm, Oliver reached out to touch his sister's shoulder. "Speedy, you can feel however you want. I certainly have my fair share of unresolved anger where Mom and Dad are concerned." He took a deep breath to center himself as the tumult of emotions threatened to overwhelm him. "Minutes before the Gambit sank, Mom and I were fighting. "She knew Felicity was Darhk's daughter. She didn't want you to get involved."
"Yes, I think so. Dad seemed okay with it, because he could see how much Felicity meant to me. I assume he thought it would gain them favor with Darhk, too. Mom, on the other hand, probably worried that we'd break up, and Darhk would punish me or even them in retaliation. When I think back on it, I'm conflicted. I'm still furious that they lied to me, but I also know that Mom and I fought because she was protective. Mom would do anything for us, because she loved us. That I never doubted." He glanced down at Connor. "Having my own son, I understand why she was so scared for me and would do or say anything to keep me safe. Felicity was faced with a similar choice, and she chose to protect Connor. How she went about it might not have been the ideal choice and, believe me, it hurt.

"But she's owned up to her mistakes, and so have I. I lied to her and manipulated her, too, and convinced myself it was necessary because it was for her protection. She had no idea what was happening and neither of us was aware of her father pulling the strings. Mom and Dad never got the chance to fix things, and Felicity and I don't want history to repeat itself. We don't want to carry these secrets around anymore. We both love you, Speedy, and we're not perfect, but we're trying our best to fix this and be worthy of your trust again."

Thea was silent for a long time and glanced at Connor, who'd started squirming in his arms.

A soft knock cut through the heavy silence. Tommy stood in the doorway. "Hey, am I interrupting?"

Thea spoke first. "No, it's okay."

Connor pulled out his pacifier and let out a loud wail. Oliver rested him against his chest and patted his back.

"Is he all right?" Tommy questioned, concerned.

"He's just cranky because he's hungry. I need to find Felicity."

"Last I saw, she and Donna were in the living room. If it's a bad time, we can talk later," he said. "I can wait."

Oliver nodded and stood. "Just give me a few min—"

"I can take Connor to Felicity," Thea volunteered.

He stared at his sister in surprise. "You sure?"

"Yeah. I guess I can share you," she attempted to joke. "You two have a lot to catch up on."

"You're okay bringing him to Felicity?" he double checked. Despite their talk, Oliver wasn't quite sure where his sister's head was at now in regard to Felicity. And he didn't want to risk Thea unloading on Felicity after an already stressful day when he was too far away to moderate the damage.

The petite brunette nodded. "You trust me, I trust you. Right?"

Oliver felt some of the tension in his body ease. His sister didn't appear as stubborn as she'd been moments ago. He didn't think Thea's animosity toward the situation was completely wiped away, but at least she seemed more open. Oliver reluctantly—as his fatherly instincts told him to keep him close—handed over a crying Connor. Thea wrapped her nephew in her embrace and muttered soothing words on her way out the door.

"It's okay, little one, we're gonna find your mom," she cooed.
That brought a small smile to Oliver's face. When he finally glanced at Tommy, he noticed that his friend was already staring at him intently. He didn't look shocked or upset. The expression on his friend's face was pure awe and admiration.

"I still can't believe you're a father."

Oliver chuckled. "Me neither."

"It's pretty cool, though."

"It's the best feeling in the world—you know, when you're not scared out of your mind and worrying about every little thing."

Tommy laughed quietly. "Sounds about right. I imagine it's even more stressful, though, considering what's going on."

"How you holding up?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that? You did just come back from the dead, after all. Didn't I tell you I always hated yachts?"

"You did, and you were right—as much as I hate to admit it," Oliver jested.

"I usually am."

"Did you and Mei talk?"

"Yes." He paused. "It's complicated."

Oliver bobbed his head in understanding. He knew firsthand just how raw and messy emotions could get when the truth was revealed. As shocked as Oliver had been to learn Felicity worked for a secret government agency, it wasn't impossible to process considering what he was involved in. But for Tommy, who'd never knowingly been a part of such a dangerous and secretive life, it had to be turning his world upside down.

"You know, all these years I'd hoped that you were somehow still alive and trying to make it back home. There were a million things I promised myself I would say to you if you ever did come back."

"Me too."

"I don't know how much Felicity told you about what happened before or after the Gambit went down, but—"

"She told me a little." He elaborated, "Felicity said how much she regretted letting me sail off alone. She thought I'd died never knowing how she really felt about me and that she could've helped when the ship went down." He rubbed a hand over his face and stared out the wall of windows. The moon now glowed high in the sky like a beacon. "I told her I understood, and I'm glad she never came. Otherwise she could've suffered a similar fate or, worse, been killed. For so long I tried to protect her—all of you, really."

Tommy's eyes were downcast as he shook his head. "I'm so sorry you went through all of this alone. And I'm even sorrier for the part I played in making her have doubts about your relationship," he apologized. "I'm the reason Felicity never showed up to the Gambit."

"You saved her life."
"I didn't know that at the time. What I did was still pretty shitty, and I do regret what went down beforehand." Tommy took a deep breath and crossed his arms. "I was pissed when I found out that you and Felicity were sneaking around behind my back. I went to her that day and told her that you'd eventually hurt her. That it was only a matter of time before you went back to Laurel. I made her question your intentions and her ability to fit into our world, and it's been eating away at me ever since."

Any flare of anger Oliver might've felt at his best friend's interference in his relationship was immediately dashed in the face of Tommy's obvious guilt, and his own admittance that his track record back then when it came to relationships was hardly worthy of trust.

"I owe you an apology, too," Oliver spoke up. He met his best friend's gaze and held it. "I'm sorry that I didn't tell you I had feelings for Felicity. I was worried about your reaction and—"

"You weren't wrong about my reaction," Tommy pointed out with a smile that was more of a wince. "But you're my best friend and if I'd been honest with you from the start, maybe all of this could've been avoided. If it had just been basic attraction between Felicity and me, I swear I wouldn't have pursued her. I wouldn't have put our friendship in jeopardy like that. I just…" His words faltered as he became overcome with emotion. "I loved her sooo much. Felicity changed everything. I honestly felt like I was becoming a better man just by being with her, and she still makes me feel that way now. She's the love of my life, Tommy."

His best friend reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "I appreciate that, man. Believe it or not, I never actually doubted your love for Felicity. I knew it was real before I ever found out she was your mystery girl. I saw the changes in you. You were secretive, but you were genuinely happy and also protective as hell when I'd try to bring her up. I'd never seen you act like that before. Honestly, I was a dick because I was jealous."

"Jealous?" Oliver repeated, brows furrowed.

"You weren't the only one keeping secrets. I'm assuming Felicity told you that Laurel and I were engaged."

"She did. I'm so sorry that you lost her, Tommy. When Felicity told me what happened, I was devastated. I loved her, too—maybe not in the way she wanted or deserved back then, but I never stopped caring for her. I wanted her to have the same happiness that I found."

"Thank you for bringing her killer to justice. You saved Sara's life, too. She was obsessed to the point of recklessness, and we were all worried she'd suffer the same fate taking on Brodeur."

"Felicity told me. Wearing the hood, I at least get to do some good. I was happy to help. I owed that to Laurel."

"You're a hero as far as I'm concerned," Tommy declared.

Oliver felt his throat tighten at the conviction in his friend's words. He wanted so badly to be worthy of that title. Even though he probably wasn't there yet, he accepted the sentiment.

His best friend continued, "Anyway, as I was saying before, I was jealous back then. I wasn't totally honest either about the woman I was seeing."

"You were with Laurel," Oliver surmised.

Tommy's brows rose. "How'd you—never mind. Of course you knew. After Felicity told you—"
"Felicity told me you guys were engaged, but Laurel was the one who told me originally."

"Laurel?" he replied, bewildered.

"She came to talk to me before I left on the Gambit. She said she was seeing someone—someone I knew. When Felicity told me about the two of you, it didn't take long for me to figure it out," Oliver explained. "In case it's not already obvious, I'm glad that you guys had each other."

"When her parents divorced and you guys broke up, she was in a pretty bad spot emotionally. I'd always had a crush on her but never made a move because you're my best friend. I wouldn't betray you like that. When you guys were officially over and she turned to me for comfort, we started hooking up and I realized that it was more than that. I truly loved her, but she wasn't ready then. When I said I wanted more, she was scared and conflicted. Laurel said she had to talk to you, and I realized I was an idiot thinking I could win her heart. You two always went back to each other. We got into this huge fight. Then learning that you'd moved on to Felicity and had been lying—when I was also still feeling guilty for going behind your back—just sent me into a tailspin. I was hurting, and that's why I said what I did to Felicity.

"Laurel never told me you guys had talked. Once news of the Gambit broke, I couldn't get through to her. It was all too much. She barely acknowledged me and went off to law school in California. It wasn't until she got back that she came to me and said she was sorry. She said she did love me and was ready for something real. I'd never stopped loving her, and it was like a dream come true. I felt like I'd finally gotten the girl."

"You did."

"And then I lost her yet again," he said in a tight voice. "I was in a really dark place for a while. If Felicity hadn't been there for me, I don't know what I would've done."

Oliver nodded. "Felicity always has a way of helping you see the light in the darkness."

"Laurel was the love of my life. I didn't think I'd ever be able to move on, or that it wouldn't somehow be disrespectful to her memory if I did," Tommy stated. "Then I met Mei, and she took me by complete surprise. I love her, but she's been keeping secrets, too. Now I don't know what to think. How am I supposed to believe she's with me for me and not for her mission?"

"Felicity and I have faced the same issue, so I get it. For what it's worth, I do believe Mei loves you. The work we do, it's dangerous and, at times, really lonely. Felicity noticed a difference in Mei after she met you, and I can say that I've seen her loyalty to you firsthand while working with her. It'll take time, but I think you can work it out. I hope you can," he added, resting a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "If she means that much to you, don't give up. In spite of all this crap going on with Malcolm and Darhk, I've never been as happy as I am with Felicity and Connor right now. Love is worth fighting for."

"Oliver Queen giving me useful relationship advice. From playboy to the playpen. Times have certainly changed," his best friend teased.

"Take advantage of my newfound and hard-won wisdom." He slapped Tommy on the shoulder. "I'm happy to help, buddy."

"I will. Although I must warn you, just because I support you and my sister and you could probably destroy me with your crazy ninja skills, doesn't mean I won't kick your ass if you hurt her again."

Oliver took the warning in stride. "I want nothing more than to make her happy—but noted."
"And I remember how we used to tell each other *everything* about our past relationships, but I'd really appreciate it if you spared me the gory details with Felicity. There are some things I just never need to know about you and my sister. As far as I'm concerned, she got pregnant through immaculate conception."

"Actually, Connor was conceived in this very room, not too far from where you're standing," Oliver replied, fighting back a smile.

Tommy's eyes widened in horror, and he jumped from his spot.

"Now you're exactly where it happened."

His best friend cursed under his breath, causing Oliver to laugh outright. It felt good to joke around like old times. "Yes, that's exactly the kind of TMI I'm talking about. Also, I'm never coming in this room again."

"I can't make that promise."

Tommy shuddered. "That's it. I'm out."

Handing her mother another tissue, Felicity sat quietly and listened as her mother went on another rant about her ex-husband and Malcolm. One minute she was livid and the next her tirade would cause her to break down into tears. Felicity's heart broke for her mother. Not that long ago she'd been in a similar situation, having thought that the man she loved had used and betrayed her. She knew now that while Oliver's choices had been misguided, he'd never stopped loving her and had done everything he could to make amends. Her mother, however, did not get to experience the same peace of mind.

Donna's world had been utterly destroyed. It was bad enough that Darhk had fed her lies when they were first married, but to learn that he'd been keeping an eye on them all this time and even ordered one of his henchman to marry her, it was the biggest mind-fuck of all. Donna had thought she'd finally found her prince charming, and he'd been nothing but an evil dragon all along. To make matters worse, Malcolm had texted her a little while ago asking where she was. It took a lot of convincing on Felicity's part to prevent her mother from calling him back and unleashing her fury. After listening to reason—it was imperative that Malcolm and Darhk thought they still had all the power—Donna had lied and said she was having a girl's night with one of her friends.

With her mother's head on her shoulder, Felicity hugged her and rubbed her back. Despite their differences over the years, her mother had always been there for her when she truly needed a shoulder to cry on. Felicity eagerly and whole-heartedly returned the favor.

She glanced at the clock a while later and realized it was Connor's feeding time. When Donna quieted, she offered, "Mom, would you like Raisa to make you some tea? Or you could take a nice hot bath in one of the guest rooms." Her mother loved bubble baths when she was feeling down.

"A bath would be nice," she muttered. "Although I'd rather have wine than tea."

"I have to get Connor, but Raisa can help—" She was cut off by a baby's cry as Thea entered the living room.

"There you are. Oliver said he gets fed at this time." Thea was trying to comfort Connor, but he just cried harder.
Donna pouted. "Poor baby. Do you need me to stay and help?"

Felicity accepted him from Thea, and he clung to her. She placed a couple of kisses on his head and sat back down. "It's okay, Mom, I've got him. He just needs to nurse." She started lifting up her shirt and undoing her bra.

Thea immediately averted her eyes. "Oh, whoa. We'll give you some privacy."

"It's okay, Thea, it's just a breast," Donna replied. "We're all women here. Breastfeeding is the most natural thing in the world."

Before becoming a mother, Felicity probably would've felt self-conscious casually whipping out her breast even in front of her mother or Thea. But with Connor so hungry and distressed, her entire focus was on meeting his needs. The baby latched on within seconds and quieted as he nursed. Once Connor settled, she repositioned her shirt to cover most of herself just in case Tommy or Dig walked in.

Donna dabbed at her eyes with the tissue. "Aw, my baby feeding her baby...I think I'm going to cry again."

"Are you all right?" Thea asked in concern.

"No," Donna blubbered and blew her nose. "I could use that wine and bubble bath right about now." She turned to her daughter. "Unless you need me?"

"We're good, Mom."

Excusing herself, Donna grabbed the entire tissue box and went in search of Raisa. Thea didn't move and, instead, stood awkwardly by the couch.

"How long has she been like that?"

"Most of the evening. Connor helped distract her for a while, but she's got a lot to think about."

"I know what that's like," the brunette mumbled. "She must want to kill Malcolm and Darhk as badly as I do right now."

"Line forms behind me," Felicity stated.

Thea shuffled her feet. "Well, um, I'll just leave and let you—"

"Where's Oliver?" she rushed out, not wanting Thea to go just yet.

"He's in the solarium talking to Tommy."

"Did you guys have a chance to catch up?" Felicity fought her natural instinct to blurt out and call attention to the rift between them. She sucked at small talk when there was so much obvious tension.

"He told me about our parents and some of what he went through." Thea glanced down at her feet. "And he asked me to cut you some slack."

"Oh." Another awkward silence descended. Felicity shifted her focus to Connor, not knowing what else to say. It was typical of Oliver to try and protect her—though it was hard to gauge Thea's current mood. She didn't want to say the wrong thing and anger her even more.

"Look, I get how complicated this all is," Thea began. "And I know this wasn't all your fault. It
just…it hurts that you kept this stuff from me, you know? That you trusted Sara with the truth but not me. It's not just about Oliver. I would've wanted to be there for you, too, during your pregnancy."

"I'm sorry that I hurt you," Felicity apologized. "That wasn't my intention. I wanted to include you so badly. Keeping my baby a secret from all of you, it was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do in my life. There was just so much at stake, and I couldn't risk you all getting involved and possibly hurt. Not before I had a plan to fix this. What I wanted and needed at the time…it had to come second to protecting Connor."

"I'll never agree with what you did—or my thick-headed brother for that matter. But thank you for keeping my nephew safe. It's going to take some time for me to work through all this." The brunette paused, seeming to gather her thoughts, and then said, "You're still my sister, and I love you. That won't ever change. Whatever you need now, I'm here and ready to help."

Felicity blinked back tears. "Thank you." They were all going to need time to heal, though it was difficult considering they weren't out of the woods yet. Their enemies continued to blackmail and conspire against them. But being able to at least come to an understanding and band together was a step in the right direction.

"Now that we're being honest, tell me the truth about Oliver and A.R.G.U.S. Will we really get him back after all of this is over? If we don't take that bitch Waller down, will he be stuck serving under our parents' killer?" Her voice shook with anger. This time, though, it wasn't directed at Felicity.

"I promise you that I'm doing everything I can to ensure that doesn't happen. We lost him once." Felicity looked down at her son, feeling her determination strengthen. No way in hell was she letting Connor repeat her past and grow up fatherless. "I won't let anyone take him away from us again," she vowed.

"Good to know where your loyalties lie," interrupted a deep, accented voice.

The two women whipped their heads toward the doorway. Anatoly stood barely ten feet away with a calculating look on his face. When his eyes drifted down to Connor, Felicity instinctively clutched her baby tighter. Her mind raced with questions, unable to believe that the Russian Bratva leader was in their home. Did Darhk send him? How the hell had he gotten past the guards? Could she yell for Oliver before he turned his gun on them? What if Oliver and the others were already being held at gunpoint?

The older man smirked and said, "This just got very interesting."

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**November 19, 2007**

*Returning to Starling City was as painful as Felicity had thought it'd be—times a thousand. For months she'd been consumed by worry and grief over Oliver's disappearance. Ever since that fateful night when the Queen's yacht went missing, she'd prayed tirelessly for her love's safe return. The authorities claimed to be doing everything they could to search for the Queen's Gambit, yet they found nothing. With each new failed attempt, the hole in Felicity's heart widened and her hope faltered.*

*Not trusting their search efforts, she'd tried hacking a few government databases to learn if there was any information being withheld. A couple of times she'd almost been caught, and what she did find proved useless. Oliver couldn't be gone. He just couldn't. He was so strong and brave. How*
could he survive a gunman's attack and a bomb only to be lost at sea months later? It didn't seem right. It wasn't fair. In fact, it was downright cruel of the universe to allow such a tragedy to occur.

The only way Felicity had been able to go to Boston and continue with classes without completely falling apart was because she'd been sure Oliver would turn up. Thea said that the Gambit had life rafts with supplies, so there was a chance her family had escaped the sinking boat. They could be drifting aimlessly at sea waiting for rescue. Or perhaps they'd drifted ashore on an obscure island somewhere, but had no way of communicating their location. Thea wasn't ready to give up on them either.

Now, after only three months of searching, the authorities had sealed the Queen's fate and officially declared the Gambit lost and all those aboard deceased. Felicity had literally gotten sick to her stomach when she'd heard the news. Hours before she'd been awarded second place in the National Information Technology Competition. As her biggest supporter, she knew Oliver would be so proud and vowed to share it with him when he was found. However, she’d ended the night dry heaving in the toilet and crying in an empty bathtub.

Felicity thought the worst thing someone could do to her was leave by choice. It's what her father had done years ago. She quickly found out death was so much worse. There was no closure or hope for a future; death felt oddly unfinished and final. She didn't want to believe it, but the world continued to move forward whether she was ready or not.

Malcolm chose for the funeral to be held days before Thanksgiving. Although her mother said it was too morbid around the holidays, he insisted that his former friends would want their loved ones to be at peace sooner rather than later. It wasn't healthy for Thea, who'd fallen into a deep depression after the announcement. Felicity was originally supposed to return to Starling City the day before the holiday but arrived sooner to attend the funeral.

It was a massive service with many important people paying their respects. She'd mostly stayed beside Tommy, who with her mom and Malcolm were trying to be strong for Thea. Felicity cried along with everyone else, but still kept a tight lid on her emotions. Besides her mother and Tommy, no one else knew what she and Oliver had been to each other. It would look odd if she cried as hysterically as she felt inside, and she didn't want to invite any further scrutiny.

Laurel and Sara had shown up with their father, as well. Felicity swallowed the bile that rose in her throat when people consoled Laurel. Many still thought she was his girlfriend and that they'd been planning to marry someday. Tommy had watched Laurel from afar the entire time with a lovesick expression on his face. Tommy and Felicity clung to each other, seeking comfort for the pain they shared.

It wasn't until she was home and in the privacy of her own room that Felicity finally let her emotions overtake her. The tears wouldn't stop as she glanced at a picture she'd planned to give Oliver of them together. She'd signed it: "Forever and always. Love, Felicity" with an imprint of a kiss. Distracted and wrapped up in her grief, Felicity barely heard the knock on her bedroom door.

She rushed to hide the photo and tried, unsuccessfully, to wipe away the evidence of her tears. "Come in," she called.

The door opened and Sara walked in. "Hey."

"Hey," Felicity replied, somewhat surprised. They'd kept in touch and texted all the time since Felicity returned to MIT but hadn't really been able to reconnect in person during the commotion of the funeral.
"We didn't get to talk earlier, and I wanted to check on you. I hope that's all right." Her eyes searched Felicity's face, most likely taking in her smeared mascara and red, puffy eyes. Sara's face was somewhat red and splotchy, so she must've been crying, too, at some point.

"Sure. I'm glad to see you."

"Me too. Today was rough, to say the least."

"Are you okay? Of course you're not okay," Felicity rushed out. "One of your childhood friends just died. I just meant—"

Sara interrupted, "I know what you meant. I'm hanging in there. To be honest, though, I'm more concerned with how you're doing."

"I'm hanging in there," Felicity replied, borrowing her friend's phrase even though nothing could be further from the truth. "I didn't know Oliver as long as you, but we became really good friends."

"It doesn't matter how long you've known somebody. What matters is how you felt about that person." Sara paused before saying, "If you care about Oliver half as much as I think you do, then my guess is you're hurting pretty badly right now."

The brunette frowned, curious about her friend's cryptic phrasing. "What?"

Sitting on the edge of the bed, the blonde replied, "I don't want to overwhelm you or anything, but you don't have to lie to me. I know you and Oliver were more than just friends."

Felicity continued to gawk at her friend in disbelief. "How do you know? Did Tommy tell you?"

"Tommy knows?"

"Um, yeah. You didn't find out from Tommy?" Now she was really confused.

"I figured it out that night we all went to that club in Cove City. You wore that sexy black dress, and Oliver couldn't take his eyes off of you. He was practically drooling," Sara explained with a small smile. "You seemed pretty aware of him, too."

"You could tell from a look?"

"Actually, I knew for sure after you both disappeared and I found you holding hands while basking in your post-sex afterglow." Felicity's mouth dropped open, and Sara laughed. "I have uncanny radar for that kind of thing. Plus, you both looked like a wild mess."

"Oh my God," Felicity groaned and covered her face with her hands.

"Honestly, though, I kind of thought you and Oliver had a connection the first time I met you at your mom and Malcolm's wedding reception. There was this vibe between you, but I dismissed it because you never mentioned anything and you acted like normal friends afterward."

With a nod, Felicity confirmed, "There was a spark from the beginning. We tried to stay friends, but everything changed after the crisis at QC. We just couldn't fight it anymore."

"So it was more than just sex."

"Yes. We loved each other very much," the brunette murmured. "Oliver was supposed to return with me to Boston. He had an apartment lined up and enrolled in Harvard to finish his degree. Everything was set."
Okay, whoa. I thought you guys were casually dating and fooling around, but you were, like, serious serious." Sara's eyebrows were practically to her hairline. "You actually convinced Ollie to go to Harvard? Damn, he really did love you."

Felicity managed to crack a smile. "Oliver had been looking into a few universities near MIT, and his parents wanted Harvard. As long as he could come to Boston with me, he was willing to meet them halfway." She swallowed the lump in her throat as a fresh batch of unshed tears stung her eyes. "I was supposed to be on the Gambit with him. Oliver wanted his parents to get to know me on the trip before we headed off to Boston. We were going to tell you and everyone else when we got back."

"If you guys were that serious, I'd ask why you felt the need to keep it a secret for so long." Felicity opened her mouth to reply, but Sara pressed on, "You don't have to explain, because I can probably take a guess. My sister flipping out, Tommy freaking out, the media firestorm, Moira going mama bear"—she ticked each one off on her fingers—"did I leave anything out?"

"No, that about covers it. In fact, you're so accurate it's a little scary. Were you a fortune teller in a past life?"

The blonde shrugged. "Well, we've all been friends a long time. After a while, you learn the patterns. It's not that hard to predict how certain people will react. Although not gonna lie, my mind is still blown about you and Oliver—in a good way, though," she clarified.

Felicity shifted on the bed and met her friend's gaze. "I really wanted to tell you sooner, Sara, but I'll admit I was nervous. Laurel is your sister, and I would totally understand if you were pissed at me on her behalf."

"They were already broken up," Sara reminded her. "Laurel and Oliver were awful together anyway. So much drama. Whatever love they did have for each other, it wasn't enough to make them work as a couple. I tried to tell my sister that, but she never listened."

"She wanted to get back together with him, though."

"Then she shouldn't have slept with Tommy."

"You know about Laurel and Tommy?" she retorted, once again shocked by how in-the-know Sara seemed to be.

"Like I said, drama." The blonde smirked. "You all suck at keeping secrets."

Felicity still couldn't quite believe how cool Sara was being about everything. "So you're really not mad at me? Why didn't you call me out on it when you found out?"

Closing the distance between them, Sara threw her arm around Felicity's shoulders and pulled her into a hug. "No, I'm not mad. We all have secrets, and I figured you'd tell me when you were ready. And I wasn't going to push you after the news about the Gambit broke, because I figured you had enough to deal with. If you say you guys were in love and wanted to wait before telling everyone, I can respect that. Life's too short to sweat the small stuff, you know?"

"Yeah." Wiping away a few stray tears, Felicity muttered, "God, I miss him so much, Sara. There are times it hits me that he's gone and never coming back, and I swear I can't breathe. I wasn't even sure I could make it through the service today. I just had to keep it all inside and pretend that I lost a friend and not the actual love of my life."

Sara squeezed her gently. "I'm so sorry. If it's that important to you, you could still tell people that
you and Oliver were dating."

She shook her head. "No, I can't."

"If you're keeping quiet just because of Laurel, you don't have to. She's hurting, but so are the rest of us."

"It's not just her. What Oliver and I had was so real and special, and I don't want to ruin that just to get needless recognition. The media will be all over me, and everyone will scrutinize what we were and pity me. They'll question why I'm coming forward now. I just want to remember and cherish the time we did have together. I knew and loved the real Oliver, and that's honestly enough for me."

"Well, if it helps, you don't have to pretend with me anymore. I loved Oliver, too, and I'm here for you whenever."

"Thanks. Me too." Felicity returned Sara's hug before reaching for her nightstand. "I'm actually glad you're here. I could use your help with something." She handed the small box over to her.

"Blond hair dye, huh? Is this your way of saying I need to touch up my roots?" she joked.

"No, it's not for you. It's for me." Sara gave her a questioning look. "Oliver brought so much light and color into my life. He taught me that I don't have to hide who I am, and that it's okay to take risks. Despite the pain of losing him, all this darkness"—she lifted up a black strand of hair and tugged at her dress—"doesn't feel like me anymore. It's time for a change. I owe it to him and myself."

"Blonde ambition," Sara responded with a beaming smile. "I like it. I can also confirm from years of experience that we blondes do, in fact, have more fun."

"Then let's do it." Felicity stood up, inhaled an invigorating breath of air, and held her head high. "I'm ready."
Hey, guys, thank you all for being so patient for this update. I know it's been a while, but I hope what happens in this chapter makes up for it. I'm planning for this fic to be about 60 chapters total, so we're coming to the tail end of it. I look forward to your comments. Enjoy!

As soon as Oliver heard Lucky's wild barking, he knew something was wrong. He shared a glance with Tommy before they bolted out of the solarium and ran down the hall. Connor's cries mingled with the dog's growls, and Oliver quickened his pace. Finally he found the source of the chaos: Anatoly stood in the doorway of the living room, taking in Felicity—who held a distraught Connor tightly to her chest—and Thea.

Shit, he cursed to himself. There would be no talking his way out of this development.

Oliver noticed the gun in Anatoly's hand and, without a second thought, he charged at him. He slammed him up against the nearby wall, pinning him by the neck and forcing his hand with the gun down.

"What the hell are you doing here, Anatoly?"

"There is much you have been hiding from me. I came to talk to you man to man," he replied, his voice strained from Oliver's tight hold. "I want you to look me in the eye and tell me you did not betray your oath to the brotherhood."

"What are you talking about?"

"Isabel," he replied with fire in his eyes.

"What's going on?" Dig questioned. He was accompanied by Mei and Sara, who were also armed and pointing their weapons at Anatoly.

Oliver kept his focus on Anatoly. "What has she done now?"

"She's dead."

His eyes widened in shock. "What?" He hadn't been in contact with Anatoly or anyone in the Bratva after Felicity's abduction, so this was news to him.

"She was killed in a car accident."

"I didn't know. I'm sorry for your loss." It was difficult to muster sympathy. After what Isabel had put him and Felicity through, she wouldn't be missed. But it was different for Anatoly. He'd always had a soft spot for Isabel; she could be cold and vindictive but she'd been loyal and served him well.

"It was a hit and run. She was targeted. Someone wanted her dead, and he succeeded."

"And you think it was me," Oliver surmised.
"As I said, I want to hear the truth from your own lips. Tell me you did not give the order to get your revenge."

He met Anatoly's gaze, unflinching. "I did not give the order."

Anatoly's eyes shifted over to Felicity, who was trying to listen while comforting Connor. "You swear on the life of your child," he challenged.

Oliver bristled, his protective instincts flaring. "Felicity, take the baby upstairs and stay there. Tommy, Thea, go with her."

"What, Ollie, no—" Thea began to protest.

"I'm not leaving you," Felicity also objected.

"Please." He gave her a pointed, pleading look. Connor's presence and Anatoly's not-so-veiled threat weren't helping him to keep his composure or think straight. What he really wanted to do was crush Anatoly's windpipe and neutralize the threat to his family altogether.

As if Anatoly could hear the murderous thoughts in Oliver's mind, he said, "My men are waiting for me on the outside. If I do not contact them within the hour, they have orders to attack."

"How did you get in?" Oliver demanded. If there had been a disturbance or someone missing at his post, his men would've reported it.

"Your father revealed a few of this mansion's secrets to me years ago."

The tunnels, he realized. "Dig."

"On it," his partner replied and took off to check the hidden entrances. Mei went along with him.

Sara, meanwhile, ushered the others toward the foyer. Felicity lagged behind a moment longer, silently urging Oliver to be careful, before disappearing with Connor up the stairs.

"I am waiting for your answer."

"Do not bring my son into this," Oliver said, his tone taking on a threatening edge. "I swear on my honor as a brother that I did not have a hand in Isabel's death."

Anatoly stared at him long and hard. He must've believed the truth and conviction in Oliver's words, because his glare softened. "Do you know who could have done this?"

"Yes." There was no reason to lie anymore. The Russian had already seen too much. "We can discuss this in the study. If I release you, do you promise to put away the gun?"

Anatoly nodded and, once released, slid the gun back into the holster beneath his suit jacket. Oliver led the way to the study, keeping pace with the older man. He didn't feel comfortable turning his back to him just yet.

"I used to meet your father in here for meetings quite often," he commented and took one of the seats across from the desk. Oliver leaned against the front of the desk and crossed his arms. "Now you, too, are a father. Your renewed loyalty to H.I.V.E. makes more sense."

"My loyalty is to my family, first and foremost."

"Your blood," he assumed.
"Yes." Oliver walked over to the table of liquor bottles and poured them both some vodka. It was a small gesture that would go a long way with Anatoly.

The man nodded his thanks and took a long sip. "All those years ago, on the island, I hoped it would not come to this."

"Come to what?"

"Being at Darhk's mercy. I knew then the Bratva would suffer at his hands and here we are—our men dying, our resources squandered, all for that bastard's greed."

"You're not just talking about Isabel." Although his pain over Isabel's death was clearly raw, the resentment ran deeper.

"The Bratva used to be one of the most powerful and feared organizations in the world. Now we are nothing more than a joke to our enemies—seen as mere lapdogs awaiting the next command from our master." He scoffed. "It's disgraceful."

"If Darhk heard you speaking this way, he'd probably kill you—or at the very least send you back to Lian Yu for insubordination and treason," Oliver pointed out.

"You will not tell him."

He wasn't wrong, but Oliver asked anyway, "How do you know that?"

"You did not get permission from the council to bring your sister in, nor did you reveal that you and Felicity have a child." Before Oliver could interrupt, Anatoly added, "Moments ago, I heard Felicity and your sister speaking of a deal you made with Waller. They do not want you to go through with it. I sense this is not part of your cover and something Darhk has no knowledge of."

This was worse than Oliver thought. If Anatoly used this information against him, their entire plan could be blown.

"I am relieved to know the truth," he revealed, swirling the clear liquid around in his glass. "It changes things."

"What do you want?"

"I have no intention of outing you, if that is your concern. I want us to be honest and work together. But first, I must know, who ordered the hit on Isabel?"

"I can't say for sure but most likely Darhk—as punishment for Felicity's abduction."

Anatoly sat in calculated silence. "Merlyn is Felicity's stepfather. You think Darhk would waste his precious time with grievances between council members?"

Oliver wrestled with what to say next. Anatoly already knew more than he should, but he didn't know that Felicity was actually Darhk's daughter. If the Russian mobster had it out for Darhk and wanted to strike him back in revenge, Felicity would yet again be in the crosshairs. The truth would paint an even bigger target on her back. Although he and Anatoly seemed to be aligned against Darhk, Oliver had no way of knowing how far Anatoly would go to reclaim the Bratva's independence from H.I.V.E.

Just then, the door to the study opened. They both startled, alert and ready for whatever new threat presented itself. Felicity walked inside with Dig on her heels.
"I told you to stay upstairs," Oliver said.

"I agreed to take the baby up, not leave you alone down here." The fierce look in her eyes brokered no argument. She wasn't going anywhere. How could she be so sexy and utterly frustrating at the same time?

Oliver looked to Dig, who reported, "The tunnels are clear for now."

"I am a man of my word," Anatoly interjected. "My men will not move until I tell them."

Felicity stood by his side, while Dig stayed by the door. "What did we miss?"

"Oliver and I were just about to discuss how our grievances against Darhk might be mutually beneficial."

She looked to Oliver for confirmation. "You were right about the rising tension between the Bratva and H.I.V.E.," he whispered into her ear.

"Huh." The little scrunch between her eyebrows formed, a sign that her brilliant mind was already thinking up a strategy.

"You do not wear your ring," Anatoly observed.

She glanced down at her bare left hand and shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "It's nothing to be concerned about."

The older man persisted. "What is your situation?"

"Why do you want to know? I thought you wanted to discuss Darhk."

"I do. But for us to have a legitimate conversation, I need to know everything that is going on. Oliver said Darhk ordered Isabel's murder, and I want to know why he has taken such an interest in you. I want to know why you announced your engagement to the council but didn't say a word about your child."

"We need a minute." Felicity tugged on Oliver's sleeve and led him over toward the bookshelves where they couldn't be overheard. "How much did you tell him about us?"

"Hardly anything. The choice to reveal your true identity is yours, Felicity."

"Do you think we can really trust him?"

"Anatoly may be a criminal but when he gives his word, he honors it." She was silent for a moment. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking we need him. We can't do this on our own. My father's power comes from his allies and his resources. Take those away, and we have a real opportunity to weaken him. That starts with exploiting the cracks in the council. We'll need Anatoly's help if we're going to keep Rubicon out of Darhk's hands."

"I agree."

With one last meaningful look, they returned to Anatoly.

"Well, what is your decision?"
"First, I want your word that whatever we tell you doesn't leave this room," she stated. "We're not in this for the money or the power. Our only concern is the safety of our family. If you double cross us, Isabel's 'accident' will seem like child's play compared to the havoc I will wreak on your life—and all it takes is a few keystrokes."

Oliver worried how Anatoly would react to Felicity's blatant threat. Isabel was a touchy subject, and the pakhan wouldn't take kindly to being backed into a corner like a wounded animal. Thankfully, Anatoly didn't look offended. If anything, he actually looked impressed.

"You would make an excellent Bratva wife," he said in admiration. "You have chosen well, Oliver."

"Pretty sure she chose me, but you're not wrong." He grinned at his girlfriend, full of love and pride.

"You have my word as pakhan that I mean you and your family no harm. Although, I must tell you, there are others who would be interested in knowing your allegiances have shifted. I am not the only council member who would be willing to ally with you."

Felicity and Oliver took the seats across from Anatoly. They had much to discuss.

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Once Connor was sound asleep in his crib, Felicity tiptoed out of his room and crossed the hall, eager to collapse into her own bed. It had been another long day. After making an agreement and forming a plan with Anatoly, she and Oliver had been working even deeper in the shadows. Felicity continued her hunt for Rubicon and created a special encryption to ensure their communications between Anatoly and their A.R.G.U.S. team remained safe. If there was so much as a whisper back to Darhk that his own council members were plotting against him, they'd all be as good as dead.

Time was of the essence, but these delicate matters couldn't be rushed. Every piece had to be perfectly in place.

Donna, Tommy, and Thea, despite their newfound knowledge, returned to their normal daily routines as well. It was imperative that nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Given that they now knew the truth, however, they'd also become Oliver and Felicity's eyes and ears—especially Donna, who'd been keeping them apprised of Malcolm's comings and goings. Felicity knew just how difficult it was for her mother to return to the Merlyn mansion after everything that had been revealed. She wished she could shield her mother from any further pain, but Donna was a strong woman and determined to use her own inner turmoil to service the greater good, which absolutely involved taking down her bastard husbands.

Entering their bedroom, Felicity paused at the sight of Oliver. He was dressed in nothing more than a pair of sweatpants, lying on the bed with a notebook in his hand. He didn't look tense or even that tired. To her surprise and relief, he looked calm—amused, even.

"What've you got there?" she asked and made her way toward the bed.

"Found an old journal of mine from when I was a kid."

"Really?" She climbed on top of the bed. "I didn't take you for the journaling type."

"Well, it was more like a spy journal," he amended. "Got the idea after watching *Harriet the Spy.*"

Felicity chuckled. "Great movie. Did you make any keen observations?"

"Tommy and I conducted some missions, with our new walkie talkies I might add. Our biggest
mystery was where Raisa hid the double chocolate chip cookies." He let out an exaggerated sigh. "Unfortunately, she was a worthy adversary. When we thought that we'd finally found them, she changed the hiding spot again."

Felicity snuggled up next to Oliver and smiled while reading his messy handwriting lamenting about the failed spy mission. "A troublemaker even then. We're in for it if Connor takes after you."

"Or you, Miss I-Can-Totally-Hack-the-FBI-in-Under-Ten-Minutes."

"We are quite the pair."

Oliver leaned in to kiss her lips. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Me neither."

"I love you."

"I love you, too." Felicity bit her lip, her thoughts traveling back to the conversation with Anatoly a couple of days ago. One moment in particular had stuck with her, and it'd been nearly impossible to get it out of her head since. It was rather ridiculous considering everything else that was going on. Though, considering that time wasn't a luxury they had nowadays, maybe there was a reason she couldn't so easily dismiss it.

"Talk to me, sweetheart." Oliver knew her too well.

"Do you remember the other day when Anatoly asked about my ring and our situation?" He nodded. "Do you think he thought it was odd that we aren't actually engaged?"

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "I think he was just trying to gauge our loyalty to each other—to make sure we wouldn't waver in our mission. In the grand scheme of things, though, our relationship status is the least of Anatoly's concerns." Oliver studied her carefully. "Why?"

Felicity chewed on her bottom lip once more and looked down at her fidgeting hands. Never mind butterflies, it felt like pterodactyls were swarming in her stomach.

"Do you find our situation odd?" he asked, as if reading her mind.

Taking a deep breath, Felicity leaned over him to open the drawer of the nightstand. She dug around until her hand reached the back and she grasped the small velvet box. Oliver watched her with rapt attention. "I was looking for something yesterday, and I stumbled across this." Felicity hadn't opened it, but she already knew what was inside—and the promise it held.

Oliver sat up and she followed, their eyes unable to look away from the other. "Felicity—" His voice hitched; he seemed at a loss for words.

"Were you ever planning on giving this to me?"

"Someday," he answered. "When the time is right and I have a chance to plan the perfect—"

"Timing has never been our strong suit," she murmured.

"Sweetheart, what are you saying?"

"It's not so much a statement as it is a question." Felicity couldn't believe what she was about to do. The moment felt surreal and so unlike anything she'd ever imagined, and yet so completely right. "No matter what life throws at us, I believe our love can conquer anything. My greatest fear in life is
losing you, and these last few weeks—and these past few days especially—have made me realize that life and family are precious. I love you, and I don't want to wait for a 'perfect day' that might never come." She took another much-needed breath. "So, I guess what I'm asking is: Oliver Jonas Queen, will you marry me?"

His breath hitched, and he reached out to stroke her face, his eyes glassy. "There is nothing I want more, but what about Waller and my deal with A.R.G.U.S? If you tie yourself to me—"

"Oliver, you're the love of my life and the father of my son. We are already bound together in all the ways that matter. We'd just be making it official. Besides"—the corner of her mouth quirked up —"you heard what Anatoly said. I'd make an excellent Bratva wife."

"You'd make an amazing wife period," he replied, though he still appeared plagued with worry.

"We're at our strongest together, remember?" Felicity placed her hand over his heart and murmured, "Forever and always."

The hand cupping her face tugged her forward. Oliver kissed her lovingly and whispered against her lips, "Yes."

"Yes as in you agree with what I said, or yes as in you'll marry me?" she replied, making absolutely sure she'd heard him correctly and wasn't hallucinating.

"Both." He reached for the box in her hand and opened it. The elegant princess-cut diamond ring was even more beautiful than she remembered. He slid it onto her finger—a perfect fit.

"Yes, I would love to marry you, Felicity Megan Smoak. This isn't exactly how I pictured it happening—"

Her cheeks flushed. "Sorry if I stole your thunder."

He chuckled and said, "I'm glad you did. I've wanted this for so long, but I didn't want to push you if you weren't ready."

"Oh, I'm sooo ready," she replied with a beaming smile.

Oliver, who was grinning like a young boy on Christmas morning, interlaced their fingers. He turned her hand so the ring caught the light and kissed her palm. He then leaned in to capture her lips and moaned when she immediately deepened the kiss.

"How soon do you want to get married?" he questioned, breathless.

"As soon as possible," Felicity answered and sank back into the mattress, pulling him on top of her. There was no telling how their situation would change after facing Darhk and challenging Waller, but right now, amid all the chaos, everyone they loved was relatively safe and once again a part of their lives. They might not get a better opportunity than this.

"I'll talk to Dig." He brushed aside the strap of her nightgown and kissed along her shoulder. "He got ordained as a minister to marry his brother and his fiancee years ago."

Felicity held up her hand and sighed whimsically. "It's so huge."

Oliver nipped at the underside of her chin and pressed himself further into her. "Thank you."

She busted out laughing. "I was talking about the ring, baby."
He pulled back with wide eyes. His face reddened. Was Oliver actually blushing in embarrassment? "Oh."

Another bout of giggles erupted from her as she moved her hand to stroke his face. "Not that your manhood isn't also impressive," she added teasingly.

"Mm hm," he grumbled.

She peppered his pouting lips with kisses. "I just meant that the ring is beautiful and so much more me. Although, truth be told, I don't even care about the bling. All I care about is you."

That earned another grin from Oliver as he brushed their noses together and reclaimed her mouth. Felicity moaned and wrapped herself tightly around him. She felt so completely free and happy in that moment that all of her constant worries simply faded away. It was an odd feeling at first, but she quickly reminded herself that she deserved to savor the moment with Oliver. They'd waited seven years to finally start building a life together; the rest of the world could wait a few hours.

"Oh, honey, you look so beautiful," Donna complimented, teary-eyed.

"You really think so?" Felicity replied. She twirled while looking in the mirror at her white lace wedding dress. It was classic and elegant; the perfect choice. She ran her hands down the form-fitting bodice and looked for any creases that might need to be straightened in her train. The floral lace met in the back behind her neck and her lower waist, leaving most of her back exposed.

Felicity had originally planned on wearing whatever white dress she could get at the nearest department store, but her mother—once she'd stopped screeching in delight after hearing about the engagement—insisted that she get a proper wedding dress. Felicity had been afraid too much planning would jinx it, considering their track record over the years, but Donna convinced Felicity that she deserved it after everything she'd been through. Her mother had immediately booked an appointment at a bridal boutique, and they'd taken painstaking measures to ensure that their plans remained under the radar—a surprise visit from either Malcolm or Darhk would completely ruin everything. Thea and Sara, as her maids of honor, had also gone with them to help Felicity pick out a dress.

"I've waited so long for this day. Although I imagined a much bigger venue and a rabbi."

"Mom."

"Not to mention a bridal shower and bachelorette party."

"Mom, I know," the blonde interjected, trying to remain patient. It wasn't the first time this week she'd heard her mother lament about the lack of preparations. Regardless of H.I.V.E. and A.R.G.U.S., Donna was definitely a go-big-or-go-home type of woman. She didn't expect anything less for her daughter's wedding. "Maybe eventually we can do that. But for right now, Oliver and I just want to be married. That's what's important."

"Oh all right," Donna conceded with a pout.

Felicity turned back toward the mirror to check on her makeup and hair. She went with light pink colors for her eyes and lips. Her hair was swept up in a beautifully intricate updo. Upon noticing her mother's unusual silence, Felicity looked over her shoulder to find tears streaming down Donna's cheeks. "Mom, you okay?"
"I know I've been Momzilla these last couple days, but I really am so thrilled I can be here with you for this. I don't want to miss anything else."

Felicity smiled and gave mother a hug. "I'm glad you're here, too."

"Are you nervous?"

"I'm nervous that if I don't get to Oliver fast enough it'll never happen," she joked.

Donna laughed through her tears. "I wasn't nervous for either of my weddings, although looking back now I should've been terrified."

"Mom, you didn't know." Felicity squeezed Donna's hand.

"You know I always believed in true love," she muttered. "All I wanted was a happy ending with my prince, and it turned me into a damned fool. After your father, when I met Malcolm, I thought I'd finally found the one man who wouldn't lie to me." Her voice caught on a sob.

"Hey, what happened isn't your fault. You had no idea who Darhk or Malcolm really were," she tried to soothe her.

"Did I? There were times I sensed something was off, but I never looked beyond that. I didn't want to see." Before Felicity could say anything, Donna waved her off. "I'm sorry. This is your big day, honey. I didn't mean to make it about me and my problems."

"I'm here anytime you need me. Okay?"

"I know, and I appreciate that." Donna ran her hand through Felicity's hair. "I'm just so glad that you have Oliver."

"Me too. So much in our lives is uncertain right now, but I know that I love him with all of my heart." She paused before working up the courage to voice the one tiny doubt that still worried her: "Mom, do you think that's enough? With everything we're facing, do you think love is enough to get us through this?"

"Felicity, you and Oliver are one of those couples everyone wants to believe in. You've already made it this far despite all of the obstacles that have been thrown at you, and you keep fighting together. Now you have the most beautiful baby boy to remind you of that love for the rest of your lives. I see that love every time you and Oliver are around Connor. And when I see something that beautiful and that rare, it reminds me that true love does exist. I don't know if I'll ever find it, but it's comforting to know it's out there. Trust me, if you hold onto that, it'll see you through anything."

"You'll be happy one day, too, Mom." Felicity dabbed at the moisture she felt pooling in her eyes. "I'll make sure of it.

Donna sniffled and wiped away her remaining tears. "Okay, enough of this. It's depressing, and today is supposed to be the happiest—or one of the happiest—days of your life." She ushered Felicity to sit at the vanity. "Let's fix your makeup."

Minutes later, Felicity looked fresh-faced and glowing. A knock sounded on the door before Thea and Sara walked in wearing their matching pink—or "dusty pink" as Donna called it—dresses. Connor, dressed in his little tuxedo t-shirt and pants, bounced on Thea's hip. Lucky trailed behind.

"Everything is all set," Sara announced. "Now, as your maids of honor, we just need to give you your something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue."
Felicity smiled, happy with her choice to make Sara and Thea co-maids of honor. It couldn't have been any other way. Sara was Felicity's best friend and had done so much for her and Connor that Felicity couldn't imagine not choosing her; but Thea was also family, and it would hurt her feelings yet again if she were not given a significant role in the big day. Having them share the title and duties felt right. Not to mention, when they put their minds together, the two women were quite efficient in taking care of all the details for the ceremony and mini reception afterward in such a short time—with Donna's input, of course. Felicity didn't really care about the venue or decorations; all she cared about was meeting Oliver at the "alter."

"I'll borrow this little munchkin," Felicity cooed and picked up her son. "He looks so handsome in his little outfit." She nuzzled their noses together. "Yes he does." Connor smiled and reached for her locket to play with.

"Well, your something borrowed is that platinum heart bracelet since it's mine," Thea piped up.

"Your engagement ring can technically count as something new," Sara said, "since Oliver did just give it to you."

"Your something blue is this garter." Thea took back Connor so Felicity could slide it on.

"And your something old," Donna spoke up, "is this jeweled hair comb. It belonged to my grandmother before she passed it down to me."

"Oh, it's beautiful," Felicity complimented, admiring the way its stones sparkled in the light. Her mother helped to place it in her hair. "I think that's it."

"Showtime," her soon-to-be sister-in-law declared. She wore a genuine smile, which was a welcomed change from the tension that still hung between them at times. "We don't want to be late. My brother is nervous as it is."

"What does he have to be nervous about?" the blonde questioned, a tinge of panic coloring her own voice. Was Oliver getting cold feet? Did he think they were moving too fast and should wait like he originally planned?

With a roll of her eyes, Thea replied, "Ollie is worried you'll change your mind and leave him at the alter. Never mind the fact that you proposed to him and are already his baby mama."

Felicity couldn't help but smile in relief. That sounded exactly like her Oliver. Besides his killer archery skills, his second super power was most definitely brooding. "Then we better not keep my fiance waiting."

"Dude, you need to chill," Tommy muttered under his breath, causing Dig to smirk. "She's coming."

Oliver checked his watch. "We were supposed to start at six o'clock."

"It's only been five minutes. Besides, Felicity's already stuck with you for life. You took care of that when you knocked her up," he joked and nudged him.

He glared at his best friend.
"Okay, sorry. Jeez. Just trying to lighten the mood here."

"Tommy, in his not so articulate way, is right," Dig said. "Everything is fine. You know how women are. The ladies are probably just making sure Felicity looks perfect." At that, his eyes strayed over to Lyla. She sat with Mei, Caitlin, Barry, and Curtis, who'd all thankfully been able to sneak away from the office to attend, in the small row of chairs that had been set up in the solarium. Raisa stood off to the side putting the finishing touches on the buffet table and dining table for afterward.

Their options of where to conduct the wedding ceremony were limited, but Oliver thought the solarium was actually the best spot. The glass walls gave a beautiful view of the mansion's expansive grounds as well as the sun setting in the multi-colored sky. Thea and Donna did a beautiful job of decorating the entire room with white and pink floral garlands and candles. There was also the fact that this room had a special meaning for him and Felicity. That night on New Year's Eve when they'd conceived Connor was one of the happiest of his life. It was only fitting that they officially be joined as husband and wife in this room, too. Tommy's obvious discomfort and avoidance of that particular spot was a humorous bonus.

Oliver noticed movement out of the corner of his eye. Donna nodded her head at him to get ready, and Tommy took his cue to turn on the stereo. The soft classical melody helped to set the mood, and Oliver made sure to tug on his tux and stand up straight. Curtis, who'd volunteered to serve as videographer, got into position and started to record.

Sara walked down the makeshift aisle first, followed by Thea. He let out a hearty laugh upon seeing the small decorated wagon she pulled with Connor sitting inside, who was accompanied by his constant companion, Sir Quackers (even the duck wore a bow tie for the special occasion). The sign on the wagon read, Daddy, here comes Mommy. The rings were placed on a pillow tied on top of Lucky's collar, who dutifully walked beside Connor's wagon. A chorus of awwws followed. His son ate up the attention, smiling big for the camera when Curtis called his name.

"Connor looks especially dapper in his baby tux. He might look even more handsome than you," Tommy teased.

"You might be right," Oliver replied, grinning from ear to ear. For the thousandth time, he wondered how it was possible to love his son any more than he already did. He waved to Connor and was rewarded with a delighted shriek. Oliver made a note to keep the wagon handy, as his son clearly loved riding in it.

When the quartet made it to the end of the aisle, Oliver picked up Connor and shared a tender moment with him before passing him to Thea. Sara, meanwhile, grabbed hold of Lucky's collar and released the rings. She handed one to Tommy and took her position with Thea off to the left. Oliver felt Felicity's presence before he saw her. It was an awareness that sent a tingle up his spine and his heart pounding. He turned toward the doorway and felt his breath catch. Felicity looked absolutely stunning in her wedding gown. Despite the veil covering her face, he could clearly see her beaming smile and sparkling blue eyes. His own eyes started to water as he reminded himself to breathe. His eyes remained riveted on her as she walked toward him with Donna by her side—each step felt like it lasted for an eternity. Then, finally, Felicity stood directly in front of him. Donna hugged him, fighting back her own tears, and gave him her daughter's hand.

Oliver's throat felt tight as his emotions overwhelmed him. His hands enveloped Felicity's, and she gave him a reassuring squeeze back. Despite that they'd been staying in his old house for these past weeks, it hadn't felt like home until this very moment. Dig, smiling between the two of them, began his opening remarks. It was difficult for Oliver to concentrate as he admired his quite literally blushing bride.
I love you, he mouthed to her.

I love you, too, she silently replied.

"And now the vows, Oliver," Dig prompted.

Oliver took a deep breath and said, "Felicity, I've thought long and hard about my vows. It honestly feels like I've been writing them forever. There are so many things I've wanted to say to you—that I should've said to you all these years—and yet none of my declarations would ever be enough. The simple truth is you're the very best part of me, sweetheart. I'm a better human being”—his voice cracked—"just because I've loved you. You are the one who lights my way, and you've restored in me something I never thought I could feel again: hope. You shaped my past, you healed my present, and you have without a doubt claimed my future. I promise to love and protect you, and Connor, forever and always."

Felicity released his hand for a brief moment to wipe away a stray tear. She looked as overcome with love as he felt.

"Felicity," Dig said.

"Okay," she muttered, mostly to herself. She obviously needed a few seconds to get her thoughts in order. Her grip on him tightened as she finally looked up to meet his gaze. "Oliver, from the very beginning, you inspired me. You taught me to be more confident and brave and trusting—not just with other people but with myself. I've told you this before, but I don't care because it's worth repeating: you opened my heart in a way no one ever has. Our love has given my life meaning; it has given me purpose. It hasn't always been easy, but our love has given us a joy that no one can ever take away from us. You and Connor are worth living for. You're worth fighting for. And I will always, always, always, love you."

A few sniffles could be heard from their family and friends, but Oliver didn't dare look away from Felicity. Not until Connor started talking his baby gibberish, which had them all laughing through their tears.

"We know, little man," Dig said. "Do you have the rings?"

Tommy and Sara stepped forward to hand them over.

Oliver and Felicity slid the rings on each other's fingers, and the anticipation built between them. They were almost there.

"Do you, Oliver Jonas Queen, take Felicity Megan Smoak to be your lawfully wedded wife, to love, to honor, and to cherish?"

He answered without hesitation. "I do."

"Do you, Felicity Megan Smoak, take Oliver Jonas Queen to be your lawfully wedded husband, to love, to honor, and to cherish?"

"I do," she declared, practically bouncing on her heels.

"Then I now pronounce you husband and wife. Please, kiss your bride."

Oliver didn't have to be told twice. He lifted Felicity's veil, cupped her face, and kissed her deeply. His now wife threw her arms around his neck to bring him closer, and Oliver was vaguely aware of the clapping and whistling all around them. When they finally pulled away, both unable to stop a
stream of happy tears, they reached for Connor and included him in the moment. Afterward, they were bombarded with congratulations from their family and friends. Raisa had already sprung into action and was ready to serve for the reception.

The music changed to an upbeat tempo as everyone filled their plates and sat down for dinner. Toasts were made and stories were shared. Felicity even let Connor try a small lick of frosting after they cut the cake. Their son must've inherited his mother's sweet tooth, because he kept reaching for Felicity's plate wanting more. Later, with the moon and stars shining overhead, he and Felicity shared a dance. The others eventually joined them—including Tommy and Mei. Thea happily danced with her nephew while Curtis dipped and twirled Donna. Caitlin could be heard sharing ideas with Barry for their own upcoming ceremony as they methodically swayed back and forth—Barry wasn't exactly light on his dancing feet.

"You know, I was never the little girl who dreamed of her wedding, but I have to say this was the perfect evening," Felicity murmured against Oliver's lips.

"You deserve all of it and more, Mrs. Queen."

"Aw, you're the first person to call me that. It's so weird. Not that being your wife is weird—that's the best feeling in the world. Just taking your name is weird because, like, Mrs. Queen was kind of your mom and she never really liked me. But now it's me. Never mind. I'm ruining the moment. I'm just going to stop talking," she said and snapped her mouth shut.

"Do you feel comfortable taking my family name? Because if it's too weird, I'll understand."

"I could hyphenate."

"You could. I love you no matter what you choose, sweetheart."

"But hyphenating is kind of a pain to write out," she thought out loud. "Plus, it's confusing. Do people call me Mrs. Smoak-Queen or Mrs. Queen?"

Oliver shrugged, biting back a smile while he watched his wife ruminate.

"Felicity Smoak Queen, no hyphen. That's what I want," she finally declared.

"Then that's what it'll be."

She stroked his cheek and nuzzled his nose. "I'm so happy."

"Me, too." He tenderly kissed her lips, feeling like this magical night was as close to heaven as he could ever get. "In case I haven't said it enough, you look beautiful."

"You've said it so many times I think I've lost count. But I could hear it again," she teased. "You look pretty dashing yourself." She fiddled with his bow tie.

"Thank you, but I think Connor may have upstaged me." They both looked over at their son who was now being cooed over by Donna.

"You're probably right." She smiled. "I love that he looks so much like you."

"But with your cute little nose." He kissed the tip of her nose and clutched his wife tighter. He never wanted this moment or night to end.

"Um, Oliver, Felicity, I hate to interrupt but something has come up," Lyla interjected with a stiff
expression. Dig, who stood beside her, looked just as tense.

"Oh God, I think I jinxed it," Felicity muttered.

"You and me both," he added before turning to Lyla and Dig. "What's up?" No use beating around the bush.

"Waller went off the grid an hour ago. We need to report back to A.R.G.U.S; lockdown protocol has been initiated."

"What's lockdown protocol?"

Felicity and Lyla exchanged knowing looks. "It means Waller has most likely been abducted, and all assets may be compromised. Protocol requires us all to report back to the home base and buckle down until she can be located and retrieved."

Just then, Oliver's phone rang. "It's Anatoly." He answered on the third ring. The others watched him carefully as he listened to Anatoly speak in rapid Russian. When Oliver finally hung up, all eyes were on him. "Darhk has Waller…and Rubicon."
Hey, guys! Thank you all for your comments and kudos last chapter, and your patience all these months. This chapter was a challenge. It took a long time to write and went through multiple revisions. Shout-out to SassySnow1988 for reading the first draft and giving me the constructive feedback that I needed to make it better. There are not many chapters left in this fic, so it's important that I make these remaining ones count.

I’d also like to give a second shout-out to an anon on my Tumblr who asked if we were going to see the flashback featured in this chapter. My original outline didn’t include it, but the suggestion was so wonderful and made a lot of sense for the story. Getting real-time feedback from you guys is one of the cool things about fanfic, and I’m grateful for those of you who are so engaged in this fic and the characters’ journeys.

I hope this was worth the wait. Please read and let me know what you think!

April 29, 2009

Shoving another pile of pamphlets into her tote bag, Felicity continued to peruse the job fair. The best tech companies from around the world had come to recruit the new graduating class of MIT. It was as exciting as it was overwhelming. So many possible paths lay before her. Felicity had talked to countless recruiters today about the cutting-edge tech they were working on and how she could be a part of it. The few recruiters who seemed to pay more attention to her male classmates and treated her like an afterthought were already crossed off her list. It was hard enough to make it in the tech world as a woman without a company already telegraphing she would be a second-class citizen from the very beginning.

Felicity's steps slowed when she passed by the Queen Consolidated booth for the third time. She'd noticed it as soon as she’d entered the large hall—and it wasn't just because of the massive sign and setup. One of the displays featured a portrait of the Queen family. It was silly, but Felicity swore she felt Oliver's brilliant blue eyes following her the entire time. The heavy ache that resided in her heart every day expanded, nearly stealing her breath. God, she still missed Oliver so much. If he could see her now, he probably wouldn't recognize her with the blond hair and glasses.

There'd been no breaks in the case since the Gambit disappeared. No new clues or evidence that the Queens were still alive. The world had accepted the tragedy and moved on. Felicity wished it were that simple for her. The lack of evidence didn't discourage her. If anything, it fueled her desire to keep searching. Mysteries were meant to be solved; and as along as Oliver's whereabouts remained a mystery, she had hope that maybe, just maybe, he would return to her someday.

Despite all of the great pitches she'd listened to, none of the prospects each company had to offer seemed like enough. None could satisfy her need for answers and the desire to do something big and important with her life. If Felicity returned to Starling City jobless, she knew her mother and
Malcolm would yet again try to convince her to work at Merlyn Global. Walter Steele, now CEO of QC, was also in the process of recruiting her. As much as Felicity admired him and the company, she didn’t know if she could handle working there long-term. While it would make her feel closer to Oliver, she feared it would put her in an even deeper emotional rut. Though her heart would always remain with Oliver, she had to at least try to move forward.

Scanning the back row, Felicity spotted the Brighton Tech booth. Its setup wasn’t as grand as some of the others, but a fair amount of students stood talking with representatives. With one last glance at the QC booth, she approached Brighton Tech. Numerous pamphlets and papers were spread out on the table detailing Brighton Tech’s accomplishments and innovation initiatives. So far, Felicity didn't notice anything different than the last ten companies she'd seen.

About to move on to the next booth, the call of “Ms. Smoak” had her halting in her tracks. She came face to face with a well-dressed African American woman, who had to be in either her late twenties or early thirties. Her dark hair was pulled back in a tight bun, and she wore minimal makeup on her pretty face—except for the dark berry shade of her lipstick.

"How do you know my name?" Felicity questioned in surprise.

"It's on your name tag."


"Leaving so soon?"

"Oh, um, I took a few pamphlets to read later. There are a lot of companies here, and I'm trying to get to them all—" she started to babble.

"But no one has sparked your interest just yet."

"Not really. I mean, uh, Brighton Tech does seem great. As I said, there are just so many choices—"

"Why don't you join me in the back? We can have a more detailed discussion about your future there."

It sounded more like an order than a request. Not interested in a sales pitch, Felicity grappled for an excuse to leave. That is until she saw her ex, Cooper, approach the booth. He wore that smug smirk of his while chatting up the recruiter. Felicity's eyes narrowed; he obviously still thought he was better than her. She'd show him.

"Yes, I would love to join you in the back and discuss my future at Brighton Tech," Felicity said, much louder than was actually necessary.

She sent Cooper a satisfied smile of her own before following the woman behind the curtain. The small room, which was nothing more than four curtains boxing them in, had a makeshift table and two chairs. Felicity took the seat opposite the woman, cursing herself for letting Cooper get under her skin. Who knew how long she'd have to be there listening to the recruiter drone on about her company.

"You have an impressive background, Ms. Smoak," the woman began. "A 170 IQ and building computers since you were seven years old. Now one of the youngest graduates at MIT and top of your class, with a master's degree in cybersecurity and computer science. Not to mention winning second place in the National Information Technology Competition. You were able to help diffuse a hostage situation by hacking into Queen Consolidated’s security system and have hacked the FBI
"Whoa, I have never hacked the FBI. W-why would you think I hacked the FBI?" she rushed out. "Everyone knows that's illegal." She let out a nervous laugh.

The woman smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. They were hard and calculating. "It's only illegal if you get caught."

"Look, I don't know how you know so much about me—"

"I do my homework on the people I want to recruit into my organization. No need to panic, Ms. Smoak. Your secret is safe with me. It's the exact reason why I sought you out."

"But I walked up to your booth."

Another knowing smile touched the woman's red lips. "As you'll come to learn, Brighton Tech is not like these other IT companies. We are in a very specific, highly-classified line of work, and we require the brightest minds in the country with similar talents and discretion. I think you'd be a perfect addition."

"What exactly do you do?" Felicity asked, unsure if she was more wigged out or intrigued.

"Nothing we can put in a promotional pamphlet. If you joined our organization, you'd not only have cutting-edge technology and unlimited resources at your disposal but also the opportunity to put your unique talents to use for the greater good. You could provide safety and security to millions of people all over the world."

Felicity's eyes widened; she was definitely leaning toward intrigued now. "How?"

The woman slid a business card across the table. It had an address and a single symbol on it—a horizontal V inside of a circle, colored red, white, and black—looking nothing like the logo she'd seen on the banner outside. "You wouldn't believe me until I showed you. When you return to Starling City after graduation, stop by our headquarters there. Hand them this card. They'll know what to do." She stood up and held open the curtain, signaling the end of their chat.

Felicity, feeling dazed and confused, followed suit. "I didn't catch your name."

"That's because I didn't give it."

The Brighton Tech building looked much bigger than the pictures online. In some ways, it resembled QC with its towering steel structure and glistening windows. It'd been a few days since Felicity returned after graduation. As predicted, Malcolm and her mother were trying to convince her to work at Merlyn Global every chance they got. Tommy was enjoying her plight a little too much—relieved that for once his father's laser focus on the future wasn't directed on him. Last night she'd gotten so fed up, she stayed over at Tommy's loft.

Felicity hadn't intended on going into Oliver's room. Although Tommy said he hadn't changed anything, it was still a shock to walk inside and see everything just as Oliver had left it. So many memories came flooding back, especially the late nights of pillow talk and lovemaking. A myriad of emotions—love, loss, and loneliness—hit Felicity like a ton of bricks, and then suddenly she was crying. She laid curled up on Oliver's bed, with her face buried in the pillow she desperately clutched, his scent wrapping around her like the arms she never stopped missing.
All these years she'd wished there was some way to learn what happened. She couldn't keep going on this way, missing him terribly and not getting any closer to the answers that could put her mind at ease. That would release her from this emotional limbo. Although a couple of weeks had passed since meeting with that strange Brighton Tech recruiter, the encounter had remained at the forefront of Felicity's mind.

She'd done her research on Brighton Tech since then but hadn't discovered anything out of the ordinary. Stranger still was the symbol on the woman's business card. That was even harder to trace. Her initial searches proved futile until she hacked her way onto the Dark Web. The symbol stood for an organization named A.R.G.U.S.—apparently a top-secret government agency. The recruiter's cryptic pitch and refusal to give her name had suddenly made a lot more sense. Felicity wasn't sure how she'd feel working for a government entity that frequented in the shadows, but she had to admit a part of her was intrigued. The bit about cutting-edge technology and unlimited resources was a hacker's dream. One visit to the headquarters to learn more couldn't hurt, she'd decided.

Doing as she was instructed, Felicity presented the business card at the front desk. The receptionist wasted no time calling over a guard, who escorted her through security and led her to a hallway with a single elevator. The guard placed his hand on a sensor, confirming his identity, before another set of buttons were revealed. He pressed a button for the lower level.

"That's a fancy system you got there," Felicity commented, trying to fill in the awkward silence.

The guard barely spared her a look, keeping his eyes straight ahead. Felicity couldn't stop fiddling with her hands. What if she'd been wrong about what A.R.G.U.S. really was? Why didn't she tell someone where she was going? What if after she saw the inside of this place, she wouldn't be allowed to leave? She felt a sheen of sweat forming on her forehead, as the air on the elevator became stifling.

Finally, the elevator dinged and the metal doors opened. The same recruiter from before stood on the other side.

"Good to see you again, Ms. Smoak." She stepped aside and ushered her forward.

Eager to be out of the small, confining space, Felicity rushed out. "Likewise." Her eyes rapidly surveyed the room. There were multiple sections of workers blocked off by glass walls. Most of them were at a computer. A few large television screens were mounted on the walls with what looked like satellite images. "So this is A.R.G.U.S.," she muttered.

With a satisfied smile, the woman said, "I knew you would figure it out."

"Well, congrats, you got me here. Now can you tell me who you are?"

"I'm Amanda Waller. I'm the director of A.R.G.U.S." She gestured to a pretty woman with short, light brown hair standing a couple of feet behind her. "This is Special Agent Lyla Michaels."

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Smoak," Lyla greeted with a nod.

"You too." Glancing between the two women, Felicity added, "Not to be rude or anything, but why exactly am I here? Why not just tell me who you are and what A.R.G.U.S. does?"

"Seeing is believing, Ms. Smoak." Director Waller gestured for her to follow. They walked into one of the glass rooms.

No one looked up as Director Waller entered, but Felicity noticed everyone sit up a little straighter in
their chairs. It was obvious the woman had a commanding presence, which was emphasized by her confident gait and perfect posture. Her observation was short-lived when Felicity got a good look at the equipment.

"Oh frack," she muttered. "That computer is running an XK-50 processor. That's not even supposed to exist yet." She stared at it longingly. "I want one."

She glanced to the right and another computer caught her eye. "Wait, is that the Satellite Frequency Communicator TX-5-0?" She looked to the woman operating it. "Can I touch it? I know that sounds a little weird and creepy, but I've never seen one in real life." She reached out to touch it before the woman could reply.

"That's classified equipment, Ms. Smoak," Director Waller snapped, interrupting her ogling.

Felicity immediately pulled her hand back. "You must feel pretty powerful—knowing everything about everyone. Not 'powerful' in an evil-dictator-Stalin kind of way but 'powerful' in more of a knowledge-is-power kind of way."

"Knowledge is power," the director replied. "If you decide to accept my offer to join A.R.G.U.S., you can be just as...knowledgeable."

"I'm sorry, I think I misheard you. Did you just say you want me to join A.R.G.U.S?" she sputtered.

Special Agent Michaels is in need of a new cybersecurity analyst for her team. You're one of the brightest minds at MIT in your field, and you clearly have a knack for uncovering the truth. With all of our technology and resources at your disposal, I think you'd be an invaluable asset."

Felicity's eyes widened as her mind raced to take in the magnitude of Director Waller's offer: a secret government agency wanted to recruit her. An agency with cutting-edge technology that the rest of the world didn't know existed yet. It was like the plot of a spy novel.

While a tempting offer, Felicity had to curb her enthusiasm. She needed more information before signing the top-secret dotted line. "What would I have to do? What exactly is A.R.G.U.S.'s mission?"

This time, Special Agent Michaels answered. "A.R.G.U.S. is a special ops division and research group of the U.S. government. Our mission is to prevent any terrorist threats and capture the perpetrators without alarming the general public. We don't do this job for the praise or notoriety. We do it because we want to protect our country and save innocent lives. If you're as intelligent and resourceful as Director Waller says you are, then I have no doubt you'll help us take down a lot more bad guys and save a lot more people."

Felicity took a much-needed breath while absorbing Special Agent Michaels's explanation. Wasn't this exactly what she wanted? To do something important with her life and make a real difference? She looked to the satellite images up on the screens showing maps of the world. Her eyes locked on Asia and the bordering sea. Somewhere out there were clues to Oliver's disappearance—or even Oliver himself. With A.R.G.U.S.'s reach and resources, she could find the truth where other government agencies had failed. This job was everything she'd dreamed of and more.

"How soon can I start?" Felicity asked.

Director Waller grinned, looking like a cat who'd caught the canary. "We can discuss the specifics of the job in my office. But you should know, Ms. Smoak, that this job comes with secrets. Our work is highly classified. As far as your family and friends will know, you work for Brighton Tech. They can never know the truth about our organization. Do you understand what I'm saying?"
Although Felicity hated the idea of lying to the most important people in her life, she knew it was for their own good. It was really no different than any other government official like politicians and law enforcement who were tasked with keeping sensitive information confidential. "Yes, I understand."

"There are serious consequences for anyone who reneges on this promise. Some would even call it treason."

"I'm no traitor. I want to help my country." And find Oliver. "Count me in."

April 14, 2014

The wedding reception had been nice while it lasted. Unfortunately, Felicity had thought her new husband would be removing her wedding dress that night in the heat of passion and not because they had to hurry to her father's evil lair.

Starling City, known for its countless lights shining like stars in the night, had gone completely dark. The blackened skyscrapers were a blind maze for street-goers, traffic systems failed, and tech was rendered useless. It was a full-on blackout. It didn't take long for unrest to erupt throughout the city, causing countless accidents and mass looting. If not for Oliver's Ducati—and its sleek ability to weave in and out of the chaos—they might not have ever made it to H.I.V.E. headquarters.

Her father had called minutes after Anatoly contacted Oliver to give him the heads-up about Waller. He'd been less forthcoming than the Russian mobster—his excuse for them reporting to H.I.V.E. so late simply that he had something of the utmost importance to share with them that couldn't be divulged over the phone. Felicity hated being away from Connor and the others in a time of crisis, but she had to believe they could at least handle a power outage. H.I.V.E. had a backup generator, although it only powered the bare minimum of functions in the compound.

The dim lights in Darhk's office cast shadows along the angles of his face, as if revealing the monster that lurked beneath his calm façade. He truly looked like his namesake.

"Well, we're here—during a blackout no less," Felicity said, taking the seat across from Darhk's desk. "I don't like being away from Connor. What's so important that you called us in so late?"

"We have Waller in custody," Darhk replied, his eyes a little too probing for Felicity's liking. She and Oliver feigned surprise.

"How did you manage that?" Oliver asked.

"We have our ways. But let's just say Amanda got a little too complacent in her role. Now she's paying for it."

Felicity shifted in her seat. Her father still had that curious expression. "What are you going to do now that you have her?"

"Is there something you two would like to tell me?"

Taken aback by the odd question, Felicity looked to Oliver. Panic filled her. Had her father figured them out, or did someone rat on them? How much did he know? How fast could they get out of there? Where could they go—
"Your rings," her father's voice interrupted her frenzied thoughts.

"Oh," she muttered, relieved—and a little surprised he'd managed to notice them in the low lighting.

"You got married and didn't think to invite your father?" Darhk continued, "I would've loved to walk my little girl down the aisle and give her away."

_I was never yours to give away_, Felicity thought to herself. Instead she said, "We were tired of waiting all these years and just decided to elope."

"It was really spur of the moment," Oliver added and took hold of her hand.

They'd totally forgotten about their rings, but Felicity didn't care that her father knew they were married. Even if she had remembered, she wouldn't have taken her ring off. She would never hide her feelings for Oliver again.

"I'll throw you a reception when this is all over. It's the least I can do." Darhk grinned. "Welcome to the family, Oliver."

"Thank you, sir."

"Please, you can call me Dad when we're in private."

"Yes, sir—er, Dad," he quickly corrected.

Felicity resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Her father was so full of it. "Maybe we can get back to Waller," she suggested. "Where is she being held?"

"That's on a need-to-know basis. Your priority right now is hacking into Rubicon." Her father's grin was as close to giddy as she'd ever seen it. "Finally, after all these years, our mission is almost complete. Brie and James have already started cracking into Rubicon, but they've hit a few snags."

"Which are?" the blonde prompted.

"This blackout for one. Rubicon is a powerful cyberweapon. They must've triggered something with the power grid when they first started. It's taking more time than we have. With Waller missing, A.R.G.U.S. will be on full alert."

"How were you able to locate Rubicon?" Oliver asked. "Did Waller give up the location?"

"She didn't have to. It was in her possession the entire time; a microchip buried under her very own skin." He scoffed and shook his head. "It was quite clever, actually, but she couldn't keep it a secret forever."

Having the program implanted into her did sound like something Waller would do.

"Oliver, why don't you escort your new wife to join Brie and James? There's no time to waste."

Felicity wished she could've enjoyed hearing herself referred to as Oliver's wife, but considering it came out of her father's mouth before ordering her to hack a dangerous cyberweapon, it left her feeling cold. She couldn't go through with this. Unlocking Rubicon for her monster of a father would not just put them in danger, but the entire world. She couldn't give him any more power; not before their plan went into effect.

"I need to speak with Waller first," she rushed out.
"Felicity, I told you—"

"Please. This woman targeted my family. She almost killed Oliver; she did kill his family. She manipulated me all of these years and put my baby in danger. I need to face her and put this all behind me before I can do anything else." She gave him a pleading look; the same one when she was a little girl and begged him for another piece of chocolate as they worked on his latest computer design.

"Slade is in the middle of interrogating her," he finally said. "You can see her after he's finished. But remember she'll say anything to get her way…anything."

The detainment area was as one would expect: dark, dreary, and unsettlingly sterile. Felicity clutched Oliver's hand like a lifeline. She'd mentally rehearsed this moment hundreds of times since she fled Starling; yet her mind alternated between going blank one moment and scattered thoughts the next as they approached Waller's cell.

**Focus**, she told herself. There was more at stake than just confronting her tormentor. Her hands clenched by her sides as she resisted the urge to grip the small device that lay hidden in her pocket.

The guards nodded at Oliver as they approached the cell all the way at the end of the narrow corridor. Felicity paused a few feet away, taking a moment to collect herself as she eyed Waller. Her former boss sat ramrod straight on the makeshift bed—which resembled more of a haphazard cot. Her tight bun, normally so pristine, was messy and askew. She'd shirked off her blazer, exposing her white blouse—it was crumpled and stained with drops of blood. Felicity wondered how much of it was attributed to her abduction or Slade's interrogation.

As if she could sense her presence, Waller turned her head and met Felicity's contemptuous gaze with one of her own. The haughty upward tilt of her chin had Felicity's eyes narrowing. Even being in a cell didn't stop the woman from acting like her superior.

Oliver squeezed Felicity's hand, bringing her back to herself. He whispered in her ear, "I've got your back no matter what."

She smiled her thanks, the tension in her husband's shoulders giving away the anger that brewed beneath his stoic exterior. Waller had killed his parents, and almost him too. The murderous bitch had a lot of pain and suffering to answer for.

"I wondered if you would pay me a visit," Waller said.

"And miss a chance to see you behind bars? Never," Felicity quipped.

The woman's dark, calculating eyes flitted toward Oliver. "The love birds reunited. I must say, I never understood what you saw in each other back then. You're such polar opposites. But seeing you together now, I think I get the appeal." She eyed their hands. "It seems you've made it official."

"Why?" Felicity demanded, refusing to let Waller control the conversation. "Why go through so much trouble all of these years to manipulate us? Whatever our parents were involved in, we were innocents."

Her former superior scoffed. "You were never innocent, Ms. Smoak. You've been a thorn in my side since day one."
"My father told me you did all of this because he became the leader of H.I.V.E. and not you," Felicity replied. "You went to A.R.G.U.S. and had a chance to do good. You even made it up to director; why hold on to a dead-end fantasy?"

"I guess your father didn't tell you the whole story. Typical…"

"What is the whole story then?" Oliver challenged.

"Damien and I weren't always bitter rivals. For a long time, we were lovers," Waller revealed. Felicity shared a bewildered look with Oliver. "What?" she choked out.

"Working all those missions together made us close. He tried to fight it—using your mother and you as an excuse—but eventually he couldn't deny the attraction between us."

Could it be true? The thought of her father and Waller as a couple, having a secret affair, nauseated her. Darhk had said that Waller would say anything to get her way, but Felicity's instincts told her not to dismiss the woman's claims so quickly. A woman scorned would certainly explain the level of hatred Waller had exhibited toward Darhk and their families all these years. Considering all of the other sins her father committed, this revelation wasn't all that shocking.

"I told him how dangerous it was to try and have a normal life in our line of work. But he wouldn't listen."

"So, what, all of this just because you're a jilted lover?" Felicity retorted.

"No," Waller snapped. "That's what your father wanted you and everyone else to believe. I devoted everything to the H.I.V.E. mission. I had no family obligations and was ruthless in the field. I deserved to be H.I.V.E.'s new leader, because I always got the job done no matter what the cost. But because I was a woman sleeping with another agent, somehow that made me weak and 'easily influenced by my emotions.' Yet your father's ability to lead a double life somehow made him the opposite: strong and steadfast. To prove my point, I sent a demonstration to show your father just how vulnerable he really was. Unfortunately he's stubborn, and all it did was make him dig his heels in as the new leader. He left you and not the organization."

"The cupcakes," Felicity muttered, remembering how Darhk explained the contaminated batch had been delivered to her school in his name. Darhk had outright admitted that incident had shaken him; it's why he'd decided to abandon his family.

"Just like your father, you're a tough one to kill. He would be expecting another attempt, and so I bided my time. I thought the Queen's Gambit would work—take out you and the Queens all at once—but you evaded my plan once again."

"You killed my parents and almost killed me," Oliver said through gritted teeth. "You put me right into Darhk's hands."

"A mistake I realized too late," Waller replied, unruffled. She looked to Felicity. "After you escaped my second attempt, I knew I'd need a different approach. Having you work for me against your father was a much sweeter act of revenge. If I'd known Oliver had survived the wreck and joined up with H.I.V.E. and the Bratva, I wouldn't have let you on that Moscow mission to begin with. That was the moment I lost my hold on you."

Felicity seethed. "You may have been my boss, but you never had control over me."

"Why was that the moment?" Oliver interjected.
"Because love knows no loyalty. When you came back into her life, Felicity's allegiance to A.R.G.U.S., to me, shifted to you. You clearly would do anything for each other—a weakness that allowed me to later ensnare you."

"And how did that work out for you?" he retorted, staring pointedly at the bars.

"Did he tell you about the deal he made with me?" she asked Felicity.

"Yes, and it won't stick."

"Your unending hope is a weakness, Ms. Smoak. If I didn't consider Oliver an asset, then I would've told Slade all about Oliver's compromised allegiance to H.I.V.E."

"You're not exactly in a position to exert power over anyone at the moment."

"You underestimate me, Ms. Smoak. That was your father's mistake too." Waller responded with a mysteriously smug grin.

Felicity glared challengingly at Waller, who appeared much too calm under the current circumstances. "We'll see about that."

The clink of ceramic on glass startled Felicity, breaking through the haze of her "hack-a-thon" as she dubbed it. Much to her annoyance, she'd been working with Brie and James to regain control of Rubicon. It'd been hours since the city had gone dark, and so far, no such luck in reversing it.

"Thought you could use the extra fuel," Oliver said.

Felicity rubbed her eyes before taking a sip. The hot, caffeinated liquid, with extra sugar, was just what she needed.

"You know me so well."

"Of course I do." He grinned at her, causing the pronounced dimple in his right cheek to appear.

Reaching up, Felicity snagged the collar of his shirt and pulled him down to meet her lips.

James snickered as Brie mumbled, "Barf."

Felicity glared at their profiles.

Ignoring them, Oliver asked, "Do you have a minute?"

"We're kind of in the middle of something," Brie scolded.

"It's important," he added, giving Felicity a look.

"If you're as smart as you think you are, then you can handle a couple of minutes without me," Felicity stated.

"Ooh," James taunted under his breath.

Brie threw him a dirty look. Felicity didn't wait for the bug-eyed blonde's retort. She sprang up, with her coffee in hand, and followed Oliver to a private corner.
"What's up? Is Connor okay?"

"I'm sure he's fine. Using the A.R.G.U.S. satellite, Mei got a message to me. They're close to locking onto Rubicon's signal. We have to be ready."

Felicity sucked in a breath. Their plan was about to be put into action.

"I have something to tell you, too." She lowered her voice. "That chip isn't Rubicon."

"What?"

"I helped code the real Rubicon. This one is slightly different."

"So there are two."

"More like this one is a designer knock-off. We're basically working with a Walmart version instead of Chanel. But make no mistake," she rushed out, "this one can still do loads of damage."

"Why would Waller do that?" Oliver muttered, then answered his own question. "Unless it's a decoy."

"She said we shouldn't underestimate her. She wanted to get caught," Felicity concluded. "That's why Mei and the team are getting some kind of trail to follow—"

James cursed. "It shut me out again!"

"Crap. It's doing something," Brie announced.

The screens tuned to the local news—which was nothing more than a black screen all this time—and flickered. Suddenly, the H.I.V.E. symbol appeared. Darhk came out of his office to watch, followed by Anatoly, Malcolm, and Slade.

Movement in the command center halted. All eyes were glued to the screen.

"Citizens of Starling City," said a voice sounding just like Darhk's. "Judgment has been rendered against this city. Your light has been snuffed out, and this is what comes next—a new life lived on your knees, that can be ended with a simple push of a button...unless you agree to our demands. We expect $50 million to be paid to us within twenty-four hours. Your light will be restored, but a word of caution: you are now part of the H.I.V.E." Darhk appeared onscreen—though he looked quite a bit younger than now; it must've been older footage—warning, "Go against us, and we will attack."

After the message finished, the image turned into a split screen. Multiple locations around the city appeared on the camera feed: City Hall, a popular nightclub in the Glades, the Starling City bridge, and Merlyn Global.

Merlyn frowned. "What the—"

Seconds later, the different locations were rocked by explosions. Flames rose up and debris flew before the screens returned to black.

Felicity rushed to her computer and pulled up the city's grid.

"What happened?" Oliver questioned.

"Isn't it obvious? It's a setup. She planted explosions and framed us," Merlyn retorted.
"Those weren't bombs. They were power surges," Felicity corrected. Bile rose in her throat. She hoped there were minimal casualties but in such high-profile places, she feared the worst.

"I don't understand," Brie exclaimed while viciously pressing at the keys beneath her fingers. "How did it do that? I thought this was used primarily for decryptions?"

"It's not Rubicon, you fool," Darhk said from over her shoulder, his fists tightening with the revelation.

"What?" James chimed in.

"My guess is Waller allowed herself to be caught. The chip you removed from her is a decoy," Felicity explained. "She's framing H.I.V.E."

"How long before A.R.G.U.S. locks on to the signal of origin?" Slade questioned.

The security alarm blared, signaling a breach in the base.

"They already have. We have incoming," Felicity replied and shot a look to Oliver. He sent her a discreet nod back.

"That bitch!" Darhk cursed. "Call in all of our agents and anyone the Council can spare. We're not going down without a fight."

"What about Waller? Should we move her."

"No, gather your men. I'll handle Amanda," he said in contempt before storming out of the room. Slade and Merlyn—who looked as shaken as Felicity had ever seen him—followed right after, while Anatoly and Oliver hung back. It was just them and Felicity with the two hackers as everyone else scrambled to prepare against the incoming attack.

"I should've stopped it," Felicity muttered to herself.

"You didn't know that was going to happen. This isn't your fault," Oliver reassured and touched her shoulder.

"I have to destroy this thing before it hurts anyone else."

"If anyone can, it's you." He kissed the crown of her head and gave her space to work.

Oliver went off in search of Darhk. With A.R.G.U.S. on the way, he couldn't afford to let him slip through his fingers. Oliver eventually found the H.I.V.E. leader clinging to the bars of Waller's cell, as if he could rip them open with his bare hands and anger alone. But Darhk knew better than to let the beast out of the cage.

"I should have killed you when I had the chance," he seethed.

"You're a pitiful slave to your own ego," Waller taunted. "You always were a step behind."

"H.I.V.E. will never be yours! I brought this organization to greatness. The Council will only follow me."

Waller laughed, staring back at Darhk with a victorious glint in her dark eyes—clearly relishing in
her triumph. "You think I still want to run this sorry excuse for an organization? There is no real 
power here. Why do you think I went to A.R.G.U.S? I have access to the greatest weapons and 
technology in the world—and soon, when I bring your head on a platter to my superiors, I'll be a 
patriot. They'll reward me with the keys to the kingdom."

"A dead woman is what you are." Darhk whipped out his gun and pointed it between the bars, right 
at Waller's head. "See you in hell, Amanda."

"You first."

It happened so quickly, Oliver barely had time to register the unexpected explosion that landed him 
on the floor. His ears rung as his head spun in circles. He choked on the heavy smoke that polluted 
the air. He struggled for breath, until finally succumbing to the darkness.

"Come on, come on, come on," Felicity chanted as her fingers glided furiously across the keyboard. 
The blackout had been just the beginning of the siege. Now the city was being terrorized by 
electronic devices short-circuiting and malfunctioning. People were getting electrocuted—some even 
killed—by elevators, computers, medical devices, and malfunctioning traffic lights. Every eighteen 
minutes there seemed to be a new casualty, according to her calculations.

"Something is wrong," James muttered, mostly to himself.

"What isn't?" Brie sarcastically replied.

"Security cameras are down in the cell block."

Felicity pulled up the camera feed—or lack thereof.

"Maybe it's just a fluke. Everything has been going haywire since we got this stupid thing." Brie 
glared at the offending fake Rubicon on her desk.

"Oliver," Felicity said into the comms. "Oliver, do you copy?" When nothing but static came back as 
a reply, she accessed his tracker. Her stomach dropped upon seeing that he was in Waller's cell 
block. She needed to get to him, but she also couldn't leave her station.

Gunfire sounded in the distance.

"A.R.G.U.S. is inside, and I can't access any of our usual defenses," Brie said, panicked.

"Where the hell is Darhk?" James exclaimed. "You don't think he'd abandon us, do you?"

That's exactly what her father would do, Felicity wanted to say, but pressed her lips shut instead.
The gunfire got closer.

"We have to get out of here," James declared.

"What about Rubicon?" Brie replied.

"To hell with it! It's over. A.R.G.U.S. is right on the other side of that door, and I'm not going to wait 
around like some lackey to be—"

His tirade was interrupted by a large blast. The doors exploded off their hinges, and Mei and the 
team came charging in. James reached into his drawer and pulled out a gun. Before he could raise it 
on her friends, Felicity reached for the stun gun in her pocket. Acting quickly, she pointed it at James 
and watched him drop to the floor, convulsing in spasms.
"I knew you were a spy! I told Darhk not to trust you—" Brie started to rant. She didn't get that far when Mei came forward and knocked her out cold. She would have one hell of a bump on her head when she woke up later.

"Thanks. She's really annoying."

Mei smirked. "My pleasure. You okay?"

"I am now."

The others secured the command center before regrouping.

"The city is going nuts," Curtis said. "We need to get that Rubicon wannabe under control."

"You know it's not the real one too? What am I saying? Of course you do, you helped develop it," Felicity said, answering her own question.

"Where's Oliver?" Barry questioned.

"In the cell block where Waller is being held. But the cameras are down. I have to go check on him," she said. "Where's Lyla?"

"With John," Caitlin answered. "She's searching for Waller."

"I can take you to Waller. She planned this entire attack. She wanted that program to terrorize the city to frame Darhk. As badly as I want my father to go down, we can't let her get away with this."

"We won't," Mei reassured her.

"I can stay behind here to make sure no other issues arise," Curtis volunteered

"You'll need this," Mei said and handed Felicity a bullet-proof vest. "Anatoly and Bertonelli held up their end of the bargain, but it's still a war zone out there."

With her vest in place and a tablet in hand, Felicity declared, "Let's go." She needed to find her husband.

H.I.V.E. headquarters was in shambles—nothing but a cacophony of gunfire and violence. Felicity stayed behind Mei, who wielded her gun like it was one of her own limbs. As promised, members of the Bratva and Bertonelli crime families battled alongside A.R.G.U.S. agents to take down her father's own personal army. It was a betrayal the others never saw coming.

The team headed straight for the cells. The lights above flickered and sparked. The closer they got to Waller's cell, the stronger the sense of foreboding became.

To Felicity's horror, the door to Waller's cell was open. Well, not open; more like blown clear through. Had other A.R.G.U.S. agents already gotten to her?

"She's gone. Damn it," Felicity swore. They needed her in custody.

"Okay, let's all fan out. She couldn't have gotten far." The others split up in opposite directions as Felicity examined the damaged cell further. Where was Oliver? She was practically right on top of his signal.

The lights flickered bright for a few seconds, illuminating the inside of the cell. It was then Felicity noticed the smear of blood on the concrete floor and two motionless figures inside. Her hands flew to
her mouth when she noticed the familiar patch of bleach blond hair above cold, and now empty, blue eyes.

Darhk, he was dead…

Felicity wasn’t sure what to feel. A normal daughter would be devastated or grief-stricken over a normal father. But Darhk was never that, and all Felicity could seem to register was the profound sense of relief that her father was gone from their lives forever.

Her eyes drifted to the second body on the floor, and her heart stopped. Even without the quiver of arrows strapped to his back, she’d recognize his strong, sturdy form. Felicity ran to her husband's side and rolled him toward her.

"Oliver," she called to him, touching his face. "Oliver, honey, can you hear me? Wake up!"

Caitlin came over and checked his vitals. "His pulse is strong. He's just knocked out. Probably from the blast." Her friend paused, then said, "Darhk…he's gone." She offered Felicity a sympathetic look. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

"I'm not," the blonde replied before returning her attention to who really mattered, her husband. Felicity held Oliver's hand, praying that at any moment his beautiful blue eyes would open.

What must've been mere minutes felt like years, until his eyelids finally fluttered.

"Oliver," Felicity called to him, kissing the back of his hand.

Oliver blinked a few times before focusing on her face. "Felicity…"

"I'm here."

His disorientation seemed to disappear. Felicity saw the spark of remembrance the moment it flared in his eyes.

"Waller, she escaped," he blurted out.

"We know. The others are looking for her right now." Felicity and Caitlin helped him to stand. "God, you're heavy. Is this really all muscle?"

Despite his soreness and battered state, Oliver cracked a smile. "You already know the answer to that."

Felicity blushed while Caitlin tried not to laugh.

"I think he's going to be just fine," the brunette declared, "although he should get checked out for a concussion just in case."

"I have to go find Anatoly and make sure he and his men took care of Darhk's guards."

"The ones we don't have in custody are dead," Mei interjected. "Still no sign of Waller, though. Any idea where she could be?"

"Everything went black after the explosion."

"We should get back to Curtis and see how he's doing," Barry suggested.

"Most of the compound is secure," Mei stated. "Lyla wants us to report in too."
Despite his assurances that he was fine, Felicity held onto Oliver as they walked back toward the command center.

"I thought I'd lost you," she murmured to him.

"I told you, I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart." He gave her a squeeze and leaned down for a tender kiss on the lips.

In the command center, Lyla and Dig stood behind Curtis, looking over his shoulder.

"The city should be back up and running in several hours. But there is a lot to scrub and reboot here," he reported.

"You should help him," Oliver murmured to Felicity.

She hesitated. Curtis could certainly use her help, but she also didn't want to leave Oliver with his injury.

"I'm fine," he added knowingly. "Caitlin can take me to medical bay in the building here and check on me."

"I guess…"

"The city needs you more right now."

"I love you," she replied, her voice low but full of emotion.

"I love you, too." Felicity kissed him tenderly before letting Caitlin lead him away.

The moment Felicity finished disarming the fake Rubicon and restoring the city's systems to order, she headed straight for medical bay. It'd been a couple of hours since she'd seen her husband; if she didn't find out how he was doing, she'd lose it.

Med bay was bustling with injured A.R.G.U.S. agents. Only a few Bratva and Bertonelli men remained behind—those that were too wounded to make an escape. The rest knew better than to stick around, despite the tentative truce with A.R.G.U.S.

Felicity scanned the beds until her eyes landed on Oliver. He laid all the way down the end of the row. His eyes were closed, which created a pang of worry within her. The blonde rushed to his side and reached out for him.

The moment their skin touched, his eyes popped open.

"You're all right," she said in relief.

"I am. Just a minor head injury. No concussion but I'll have a hell of a headache for a while," he quipped. "Did you save the city?"

She cradled his cheek. "We did."

"Then I guess our work here is done. We can finally go home."

"In a few more minutes," Lyla interjected. "We have the other members of the Council of Seven in
custody—except for Anatoly and Bertonelli, of course. But Merlyn is missing."

Oliver cursed under his breath.

"We also have Waller in custody. Right now she thinks we're following hostage retrieval protocol and debriefing her."

"You can't let her out of custody," Felicity urged.

"We might have to. We have nothing to tie her to this attack. Without sufficient evidence, it looks like she really was the victim, kidnapped and tortured for Rubicon. She's been acting the part the moment she was discovered by our agents."

"I was afraid of this, so I came prepared." Felicity reached into her pocket for the flash drive. "It's all right here—from the assassination of the Queens to her plot to frame H.I.V.E. for the destruction of Starling City."

"You got evidence?"

"Better. A direct confession." She handed the flash drive over to Lyla.

"Good work—the both of you."

"We only hope it pays off," she replied with a pointed nod toward Oliver.

"I'll do everything I can to ensure his pardon."

"Until then, you're free to go," Caitlin interjected, joining them. "Just no riding the Ducati home."

"Dig can drive us back," Oliver said, sitting up. Felicity helped him to stand, and together they walked the ravaged corridors of H.I.V.E. They found Dig and borrowed an A.R.G.U.S. van to get home. The entire way, Oliver and Felicity held each other, tired yet elated that their plan had worked.

Jolting awake, Oliver glanced around the darkened bedroom. An odd, prickly sensation spread throughout his body, putting him on alert. He studied the shadows of the room, not detecting any danger. And yet, the feeling of foreboding remained.

Felicity was sound asleep, tucked into his side. Oliver glanced over her shoulder at the clock on the nightstand. It was blank, as if unplugged. Careful not to jostle his wife, he sat up and reached for the lamp switch. His frown deepened when it wouldn't turn on.

Had the power gone out again? Maybe there were still some bugs in the system that had to be worked out. Fumbling around on the nightstand, he grabbed the baby monitor. It, too, seemed to be disabled—which was odd since it was battery powered.

Careful not to disturb Felicity, Oliver padded across the hall to Connor's room. Their son was used to sleeping with a night light; if he woke in the dark, he'd probably be scared. Navigating the minefield of toys on the floor in Connor's nursery was difficult. Aside from stepping on a small building block—and letting out a silent string of curses—Oliver made it to the crib mostly unscathed.

He reached into the crib for his son and felt his blood run cold when his fingers wrapped around a pile of blankets. His hands slid along the crib, checking to make sure Connor hadn't rolled in his sleep.
Nothing—the crib was empty.

His eyes having adjusted to the darkness, Oliver noticed that Lucky's bed was also empty. That dog followed Connor practically everywhere. Perhaps Connor had been fussy, and Donna or Sara had come to comfort him. The others knew he and Felicity were exhausted after the last couple of days they'd had. He'd go check their rooms.

Before he'd even turned around, Oliver felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Seconds later, the baby monitor crackled to life.

"Hello, Oliver." Waller's cold, calculating voice alone would've been enough to set him on edge. But when he heard the soft gurgle of his son in the background, his entire body hardened like stone. "You know, your son looks just like you."

"I swear to God, if you harm so much as one hair on his head—"

"You are in no position to be issuing threats."

Oliver closed his eyes, trying to remain calm and measured despite the gut-wrenching fear and fury coursing through him. He didn't know how Waller had escaped A.R.G.U.S. custody but that wasn't important. All that mattered was his son's safety.

"What do you want?"

"The only thing I have left…revenge."

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