By 9:00 a.m., she had broken a heel, lost her cell phone, and been the victim of a coffee catastrophe. By 9:30 a.m. she had “borrowed” the NSA mainframe. By 10:00 a.m., she was engaged to Oliver Queen. Really, it was all in a day’s work. Plotty, fluffy fun with a side dish of heart.

Part Nineteen: "Being Polite and Other Acts of War"
**Synopsis:** By 9:00 a.m., she had broken a heel, lost her cell phone, and been the victim of a coffee catastrophe. By 9:30 a.m. she had “borrowed” the NSA mainframe. By 10:00 a.m., she was engaged to Oliver Queen. Really, it was all in a day’s work.

**Rating:** This chapter is a T, though later chapters will venture into M territory

**Warnings:** None yet.

**Spoilers:** This story takes place in season 2, almost immediately following 2x6 "Keep Your Enemies Closer," so I'd say spoiler-wise, this is a safe one to read. LOL.

**Disclaimer:** We know this one by heart, right? All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. I am in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

**Author’s Notes:** I began this story in November 2013. I know--it was long ago. I’m finally nearing its completion, and someone (waves at emilyhotchner-olicy-bethyl from fanfiction.net) suggested I should post it here. This is my first Arrow fic, but I’m not new to the fanfic rodeo. I love to write and have been doing so for many years. There’s just something about Oliver and Felicity that absolutely grabs me. The chemistry, the potential—it’s all off the charts.

I have really enjoyed writing this, even if it’s a bit of a trope. I hope I’ve been able to give it a fresh spin and that you will enjoy reading it. If you so choose to review, I’d be most appreciative.

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**Part One: “Must've Been the Sexy Shoes”**

If Felicity Smoak had realized just what kind of Monday it was going to be, she might have called in sick. Her string of bad luck began with breaking the heel of her left shoe in the parking garage. The strappy shoe with the mile-high heel had been an impractical splurge. *Retail therapy*, her friend JoJo called it when she had visited Starling City over the weekend. *Nothing says ‘I’m going to walk right over you on my way to someone better’ than sexy shoes, Smoaky.*

If only all the world’s woes could be cured with sexy shoes. It wasn’t as easy as that. Never was. And there was the slight matter that wearing sexy shoes didn’t make a girl sexy. Felicity had tried that argument with JoJo, but when they walked out of the store with the new purchase, Felicity knew she’d lost.

Despite her prodding, JoJo was just what the doctor ordered to get Felicity out of her self-imposed funk. For the last nine months, her whole life revolved around Oliver Queen. *Embarrassingly so.* From the moment he sweet-talked her into hacking a stolen computer—replete with bullet holes—with nothing but a lame cover up story and a wink, Felicity had found herself drawn to him. It didn’t hurt that he was built like a Greek god and oozed charm. At that first meeting, her mouth had gone dry as she stammered and babbled; later, she would wish she could kick her own ass for acting like such a fool. But then she found herself wondering about him. What was a back-from-the-dead billionaire playboy doing with a bullet-riddled laptop? There was more to Oliver Queen than charisma, perfect teeth, and money.
And Felicity Smoak had always liked a mystery.

When she had described Oliver to JoJo, Felicity left out any mention of bullets—both the ones in the laptop and the one inflicted on him by his own mother. It had been interesting to find The Hood bleeding in the backseat of her car. She could’ve done without the bloodstains, but finally the contradiction known as Oliver Queen started to make sense to her.

Until he didn’t.

Though she didn’t always agree with Oliver’s choices, she could usually understand where he was coming from—at least until the Isabel Rochev fling. Yes, Isabel was attractive in that slinky as a cat way, but she was just…hateful, untrustworthy, and on The List. It really made no sense. How did that conversation go, anyway? “Hi, you’re a horrible person but hot in a black widow kind of way. I know you’re on my dead father’s list of evil doers, so let’s have sex.” Come on.

“Men don’t think their brains, Smoaky,” JoJo had told her over a pint of rocky road and a bag of Doritos. “That’s why God invented sexy shoes.”

Isabel Rochev must have a closetful. But as far as Felicity could tell, whatever happened in Moscow stayed in Moscow.

Not that it affected her one way or the other. She was done. Or at least, that was her mantra. Every time Oliver passed by her desk, his eyes lingering on her. I’m done. I’m done. Every time he stood behind her in the lair, hand on her chair. I’m done. I’m done. If she said it enough, maybe she’d eventually believe it herself.

In the two weeks since their return from Russia as backup for Digg, Felicity and Oliver had been cordial with one another, but that was the extent of their interaction. No more rides home, lunches at Big Belly Burger, or teasing. They had spoken little outside the confines of their jobs—coordinating his business schedule and his patrolling.

Truth was, he had thoroughly friend-zoned her. Not that there was anything wrong with friendship. Friendship, she liked. She could deal with that, but this felt exasperating and agonizing and just dishonest. She believed in Oliver, believed in his cause, believed he was a better man than he gave himself credit. What she couldn’t believe was he left her with nothing but trite platitudes. “Because of the life that I lead, I just think that it’s better to not be with someone that I could really care about.”

At first, it struck her as romantic, knowing she hadn’t imagined the connection between them. Then she had time to reflect—and time to get angry. He didn’t want to risk a romantic relationship with her? Fine. But she was living that same life with him, a double life, a life of danger. She put herself at risk—albeit in a different way from Oliver and Digg—but risk, nonetheless. How many times had she pushed herself through something she never thought she’d have the moxie to do? Walking into an illegal casino and counting cards with the intent of getting caught so she could plant a bug? Check. Setting herself up as bait for a deranged serial killer? Check. Jumping out of an airplane, risking life, limb, dignity, and her lunch? Check. Chancing a life of imprisonment through her continual hacking, when she was absolutely certain that orange was not the new black? Check. Check. And check.

And so she was done. So done with hoping.

She almost had herself believing it.

Almost.
The sexy shoes were supposed to be a symbol of her liberation. JoJo, who taught literature at CSU-Sacramento, was big on imagery. Felicity wondered what JoJo would have said if her friend had seen the heel break as soon as she stepped out of her Toyota sedan and into the Queen Consolidated parking garage. Probably something along the lines of, *You’re screwed, Smoaky*.

There wasn’t enough time to go home for a different pair of sensible shoes, but fortunately, she kept a pair of sneakers in her office. It wouldn’t look professional, but what was one more question to add to all those already being bandied about her qualifications for being Oliver’s personal assistant?

With newfound determination that she would conquer the world—or at least conquer Monday morning, Felicity stepped off the elevator at the top floor of the Queen Consolidated building, promptly lost her footing, and ran headlong into Isabel Rochev’s personal assistant, Casper van Pels, who paled when the coffee he was carrying spilled onto the white button-up blouse Felicity wore.

Once Felicity got over the sudden dousing of the hot liquid and pulled the material of the shirt away from her skin, it hurt far less. Her pride, however, had not remained intact.

“This is terrible,” the man muttered, his pallid face looking pained. For a brief instant, Felicity thought he was going to cry.

Not terribly comfortable with emotional breakdowns, she tried to reassure him. “I’m fine.”

“I’m not. Ms. Rochev is going to kill me, bring me back to life, and then kill me all over again.”

Felicity sighed as she rubbed a wet hand against her navy pencil skirt.

At least she was having a good hair day.

When Felicity finally rounded the corner toward her office, she could see Oliver closing one of the drawers and then…was he pacing? That was unusual.

“You’ve not been picking up your phone. What happened to you?” His voice was low, urgent.

“My heel broke in the parking garage and then there was the lava disguised as latte that spilled on me. Best. Morning. Ever.”

Her ironic tone made him quirk his lips into the slightest hint of a smile. He’d missed this, and she did it—made him smile—without even trying.

And then Oliver found himself studying her as her story sank in. *Wow*. Sexy shoes. They made her legs look like they went on forever—or made her right leg look that way. The other shoe was decidedly broken, as she’d indicated. His eyes continued their journey upward and lingered a moment too long on her wet blouse, the coffee spill having afforded him a generous glimpse of her lacy bra underneath the likely-to-be-ruined silk. He forced his gaze upward. “So that has you ignoring phone calls?”

“I’m fine, by the way, though my pride’s a little bruised,” she said sliding into her chair and booting up her computer. “Thanks for asking. Besides, my phone didn’t ring.” She looked into the small clutch she carried. “Crap. Where is it?”

He pressed a folder into her hands, his fingers brushing against her wrist ever-so-lightly as he leaned down and spoke in a hushed tone. “I need everything you can get on this guy, whatever channels it takes, and you need to be ready.”

“For?” she squeaked out.
But Oliver didn’t answer her; instead, she watched as he slipped on the mask he affected for outsiders. Felicity immediately saw the reason for the change. Isabel Rochev.

I’m done. I’m done.

But she could still feel the warmth of his breath against her ear, the caress of his hands.

She was so not done, but she needed to be.

She slipped off her sexy shoes and replaced them with her brightly colored Adidas sneakers. Her blouse, on the other hand, was likely a lost cause. She looked down and grimaced. She may as well have been in a wet t-shirt contest for as much coverage as the blouse offered.

But she didn’t have time to worry about that. Whatever was in the folder sounded urgent.

She opened it and found…not much. It was a small, glossy dossier obviously released by someone else’s PR department. A prominent photo of a middle aged man with brown hair, except for the graying of the temples, and unusually large, straight teeth, caught her attention. Underneath the photo, a caption: Frederick McMartin, President and CEO, the McMartin Group.

Corporate intrigue, here we come.

The more she researched, the more she found nothing. Oh, there were the press releases from the McMartin Group, but intrigue? What intrigue? The man came across as a saint with the charitable youth foundations he’d established. He’d made numerous trips overseas, even, in support of foreign orphanages. He and his wife had seven children, five of whom were adopted. The family looked like an advertisement for the United Colors of Benetton. All the while, his business acumen was nearly legendary—if you asked the McMartin Group’s public relations gurus, that is.

No one was that perfect. Oliver wanted her to turn over rocks? That, she could do. Cracking her knuckles, she took a deep breath before she began the process of breaking through a slew of firewalls and “borrowing” a secured government database or two.

“Something feminine but modest. Preferably silk. Size 4. And a brassiere, 34B.” Oliver hung up his phone. “My apologies. That was unavoidable.”

“You’re wasting my time, Oliver.” Isabel Rochev sat rigidly in the chair he had offered, while he leaned against his desk.

Oliver was halfway surprised she took the seat. He assumed that she had an unspoken rule about appearing submissive and would equate the difference in height as such. Then again, Isabel had managed to surprise him in a way that few people had, but he had no illusions about her. Keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer, as the old adage went.

“Did you read through the information I sent to you Friday afternoon?”

“Of course. That’s obviously why I’m here.”

And so he made his pitch. “A new technology that uses the body to self-regulate its temperature, all
through a bracelet. It’s innovative. The financial rewards could be exponential, not to mention the environmental benefits. Imagine no need for air conditioning.”

Isabel considered her words carefully. “It’s a fascinating concept, but there’s no proven viability. May I be frank with you?”

“I count on it,” he replied, his eyes focused on hers.

“Investors want a sure thing, not some incompetent trust fund baby who majored in skirt chasing at no fewer than four universities.” Oliver’s brows furrowed, and she raised her hand to still his protests. “And while you and I both know you aren’t incompetent, the investors don’t. You have to prove it to them.”

“Then I meet with them.”

“They’ve already met you…in the tabloids. I go by facts, figures, research. First step, know your investor. Even if this technology does show promise, how are you going to sell it to, say, Frederick McMartin of all people?”

“The idea will sell itself on its own merits.”

“You really have no idea how business works. It’s about building relationships. McMartin, he’s a family man.”

“I am aware.”

“With no interest in dealing with people he finds less than wholesome.”

“Then why does he deal with you?” Oliver asked, his left eyebrow shooting up.

The dour look on Isabel’s face transformed into a smile. “Because I am very persuasive.”

“I’m sure you are.” The words were innocuous enough, but the tone left little doubt of his meaning.

She looked at him the way one might try to pacify a child. “Don’t tell me you’re upset that we didn’t talk about it.”

“Not at all. It was enjoyable, but I don’t need to be cuddled either. We’ve both moved forward.” Oliver looked past Isabel’s shoulder toward Felicity. The sleek, glass design of the executive offices left little room for visual privacy, unless the electronic privacy glass feature was activated, which neither of them ever did. So while he couldn’t see what, precisely, Felicity was studying so intently on her computer thanks to a special screen accessory on her computer—a security measure they’d both agreed upon considering the nature of the other work she did for him—he could see the look of intense concentration as she worried her bottom lip with her teeth.

Isabel followed his line of sight: Oliver’s blond IT girl turned personal assistant who accessorized a deer-in-the-headlights-look with nearly every outfit. “She wasn’t happy with you.”

“No,” Oliver admitted. “She wasn’t.”

“I thought I had avoided getting into anything messy,” she mildly chastised him. “Though it looks as though your assistant can’t say the same.” The state of Ms. Smoak’s blouse was proof of that.

“She’s more to me than an assistant.”

Oliver watched as a deliveryman approached Felicity’s office. A few strokes on her keyboard—he
guessed she was surreptitiously closing out of whatever she was doing—and she gave her full
attention to the man. He could see the tilt of her head. Confusion over the delivery, no doubt.
Nevertheless, she signed for the box. She tried to tip him, but he refused. Once he was gone, Felicity
lifted the lid of the box, pushed aside some tissue, and pulled out a brassiere, which she promptly
returned to the container. Her fingers seemed to trace the contents before she pulled out a pale blue
blouse. She rose from her chair and looked toward Oliver before vacating her office—and taking the
box with her.

Isabel shook her head slightly. “So the rumors are true.”

“That depends on the rumor.”

“You’re sleeping with your assistant after all. It reeks of irresponsibility. You do realize that, don’t
you? Promoting someone who is heinously under qualified because of sexual favors? It’s this type of
behavior that alienates investors like McMartin and gets QC slapped with a sexual harassment
lawsuit.”

“Felicity is not a fling,” Oliver replied crisply.

“As much as you and I would like to believe QC has the same brand power it once enjoyed, we both
know that’s not true. And as much as I would like to believe I have the influence you do, my last
name isn’t Queen. You’re the face of this company now, and what you do—who you do—affects
the bottom line.”

“You want the bottom line?” Oliver noticed that Felicity had returned to her office, now wearing the
silk blouse and, he assumed, the dry lingerie. Her colorful sneakers were amiss in her otherwise
tasteful ensemble, but at least she was dry now and hopefully comfortable.

Of course, he was about to blow her comfort to hell.

He pressed a button on his phone, connecting their intercom system. “Felicity, would you join us?”

“Yes, Mr. Queen.”

She approached his door with wariness, he thought he detected. The presence of Isabel had her on
edge. At least, that’s what Oliver assumed, though with the distance between them the last two
weeks, for all he knew, he was the source of her discomfort. “Is there something you need Mr.
Queen? Ms. Rochev?” She reminded Oliver of a woman doing an impersonation of a flight
attendant: sunny but rehearsed.

Oliver closed the distance between them, his arm sliding around her waist. She felt tiny, tinier even
than he remembered. “Felicity, it’s time for us to come clean with Isabel.”

Be ready, he’d told her.

Improvising was so not her strong suit, she practically huffed to herself. She liked being prepared,
having everything planned out. She had always been that way from the time she was a small child,
carefully choosing her outfits for the entire school week, to setting aside pre-determined study
sessions. Even socializing had its allotted time slot.

But how was she supposed to think on her feet with his hand on her waist? It was warm, large, and
strong. And being close to him—he smelled incredible.

What were they talking about again?
Her teeth grazed her bottom lip nervously and she nodded slightly, “I agree. It’s time.”

About what, exactly, had she agreed? She’d let Oliver handle the details and hope she didn’t stumble over whatever he expected.

“Isabel, Felicity has done me the honor of agreeing to be my wife.”

And she wasn’t even wearing sexy shoes.
You Can't Order a Fiancée Like You Order a Taco

Chapter Notes

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The title of this chapter is inspired by a poem called “Valentine for Ernest Mann” by Naomi Shihab Nye. I’m generally not into poetry, but that one is both so deliciously funny and poignant, I can’t help but recommend it.

Part Two: You Can’t Order a Fiancée Like You Order a Taco

Until Felicity Smoak met Oliver Queen, she could count on one hand the number of times she had been surprised in her adult life. Incidentally, they were all unpleasant surprises, as opposed to the surprise of finding a twenty-dollar bill that she’d forgotten in her coat pocket or discovering she’d won a lifetime supply of Tootsie Roll Pops. No, the surprises in her life usually had more to do with utter mortification than satisfaction.

There was the time her friend JoJo set her up on a blind date with the promise, “You and Eli will hit it off. You have so much in common!” JoJo was right about that; she and Eli had grandparents in common. It turned out that perfect-for-her Eli was actually her first cousin, which would have been fine if she were Poe, one of the locals from Deliverance, or didn’t care whether her family tree branched out. They had been able to laugh about it, though it did make for a particularly awkward family reunion that year at the lake.

Then there was the time she had surprised herself, throwing caution to the wind and more shots down her throat than she could count, all because Jack Sommet said she couldn’t hold her liquor. It turned out Mr. Wrong was right about that. The next day she had awoken with an unfortunate hangover (which thankfully passed) coupled with an even more unfortunate tattoo (which didn’t pass). She still hadn’t told her mother about that one.

Perhaps even more horrifying than JoJo’s gleeful declaration of “Smoaky, you have a tramp stamp!” was when her Oma Miriam sent her a copy of Fifty Shades of Grey with particular pages dog-eared for her quick perusal. While her “inner goddess” did not flip over the novel, her stomach did turn a bit. She wondered what her straight-laced cousin Eli would say about their grandmother sending her erotica.

And…that was about it. Until she met Oliver, most days were like the ones before. She got up, did a jogging route around the neighborhood, got ready for work, averted computer meltdowns thus saving the business world as she knew it, went home or occasionally out with friends, and began the process all over again the next day.

Felicity’s life was not one of endless surprises, and for the most part, she was fine with that. She knew what to expect, took comfort in weighing probability in her mind. Still did, to some extent. In fact, if her life of crime (fighting) ever came to an end, and her reputation was in shreds, assuming she could avoid the big house, she was fairly certain she could fall back on being a Vegas odds-
maker. Better that than being a showgirl, something she knew without a doubt she did not have the coordination or general lack of inhibitions to do. It didn’t take a genius in probability to figure that out.

So, no, few surprises came Felicity’s way. Maybe it was because she played things safe, planned every aspect of her life meticulously.

Safe. That notion went out the door when Oliver walked through hers.

And she wouldn’t have it any other way.

Oliver was one of the few people who could surprise her. She admired this about him—usually. Now, as she stood in his office in what had to be the most awkward meeting ever, she stiffened. Her face grew hot, her heart slammed against her ribs, and the blood whooshed in her ears. She nearly thought she was having an out-of-body experience, minus the part about being dead or nearly dead, except she hadn’t actually gone anywhere and Oliver’s hand was still on her waist, the gliding of his fingers leaving a heat trail on the silken blouse he’d bought her after her earlier coffee catastrophe.

Surely she’d heard him wrong.

“Felicity has done me the honor of agreeing to be my wife.”

Since when?!? She tried to keep an impassive expression, but she also recognized she had never been much of a poker player. From the corner of her eye, she peered up at Oliver. The set of his jaw, the seriousness of his gaze. Wow. If she didn’t know better, she would say he was telling the truth. And then his eyes dropped, met hers, and with his other hand, he tenderly brushed a stray lock of hair that had fallen across her cheek.

“Be ready,” he had told her.

How in the heck was she supposed to be ready for that? They hadn’t even been on a date! The man at least owed her dinner and a movie, maybe some pie before she would agree to marry him. But no, they’d skipped through all the boring stuff like courtships and I-love-you’s and acrobatic sex and gone straight for the fake engagement. It was official. Somewhere along the way, her life had turned into a bad romantic comedy, minus the romance and the comedy. Surprise, surprise.

And she couldn’t shake the contradiction of his earlier words—the ones she had mulled over for longer than she cared to admit. How was she supposed to reconcile “I just think that it’s better to not be with someone that I could really care about” with “Felicity has done me the honor of agreeing to be my wife”? She had wanted so much for him to stop being emotionally shunted, to open his eyes and see the possibilities in front of him, to choose to truly see her. It was a cruel irony. Evidently, he had done just that and decided that he could be with her—at least as far as the outside world was concerned—because she wasn’t someone he could care about.

Ouch.

“When are you due?” Isabel’s voice cut through the thumping of Felicity’s heart. “Or claiming to be due?”

“We haven’t set a wedding date yet,” Felicity managed as she straightened her glasses, not fully hearing or comprehending the other woman’s question, only knowing that Isabel, with her cool gaze, was awaiting a response.

Oliver’s eyes narrowed. “Felicity’s not pregnant.”
Felicity thought. *For that to happen, we’d have to actually have sex.* Not that she hadn’t been curious, hypothetically speaking. Then again, with the way things stood, Isabel had a better chance of being Oliver’s Baby Mama, and Felicity was fairly certain the woman had the maternal instincts of a Tasmanian devil.

Isabel looked from Oliver to Felicity. “Then why would the two of you get married? You are the CEO and co-owner of Queen Consolidated. And you,” she said scouring Felicity with her stare, “are a personal assistant who doesn’t even make coffee.”

“No! Felicity is the best thing to ever happen to me. Better than I deserve,” Oliver said with conviction. Yes, he was very convincing—convincing enough to make Felicity’s stomach do somersaults, even though she knew better.

“And for the record, I do make coffee. Sometimes.” Her comments sounded childish in her own ears. “Just…not for you,” she added feebly staring coldly at the brunette.

Isabel folded her arms across her chest. “Is this an imprudent attempt to curry favor with the more conservative investors? This is perfectly amusing, but in all seriousness, Oliver, leave the investors to me.”

The condescension of the other woman’s tone irked Felicity. Despite the fact she halfway wanted to throttle Oliver herself, she couldn’t ignore the surge of protectiveness. “You underestimate Oliver’s abilities.”

“Oh, I’m quite aware of his abilities,” Isabel smirked. She turned her attention back to Oliver. “Don’t do anything foolish. I don’t want to have to clean up your mess.” With that, she sauntered from the room leaving Oliver and Felicity alone.

Felicity stepped away from his touch and turned to face him. “Why do you let her talk that way to you?”

From the tightness of his jaw, she could tell he didn’t like it either. “All the world’s a stage. We all have parts we play. I’m playing mine for the time being.”

“And now evidently I’m playing a part, too. You are totally exhausting me.” Her tone of disapproval was impossible to miss. “You do know you can’t order a fiancée like you order a taco, right? I mean, at some point, please tell me you learned that.”

He looked at her, his expression apologetic. “I tried to reach you this morning.”

“Still not a taco,” she protested as she pointed toward herself.

Despite her obvious anger, Oliver couldn’t help the lopsided smile that formed on his lips. Felicity surprised him. While he could depend on her, quite literally, with his life, he never quite knew what she was going to say. All he knew was that it would be a unique perspective and likely dizzying.

But she was a breath of fresh air in a life that had gone stale of hope. And when she’d smile at him, believe in him, he’d felt less like a monster and more like a man. A better man, what Oliver Queen should have been.

But Felicity wasn’t smiling now.

“Don’t,” she pursed her lips. “Don’t think you can smile at me and charm your way out of this.”

“I need your help.”
“Yes, you do,” she nodded. “Frequently.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t talk about it before I sprang this on you, but think of it as field work. You’re always saying you want to do more field work.”

“You want me to pretend to be your fiancée. That goes beyond field work, don’t you think? Have you actually thought this through?”

“If you agree, it will be for appearance’s sake. After a discreet amount of time has passed, we can end the engagement. No one gets hurt. You can be the dumper.”

Her eyes narrowed. “That was the proposal that everyone dreams of. Said no woman. Ever. What about your family? What about my family?”

“Felicity—”

“You had no right, Oliver,” she said quietly.

“I know, and you have every reason to be angry, but let me explain why I did it.”

“I already know what you’re going to say.”

His brows furrowed. “You do.”

“It’s life-or-death, for the greater good, dogs-and-cats-living-in-harmony important. Just…” her frown deepened, “I can’t. Not this.” She scrubbed her hand across her forehead. “I need a cigarette.”

“You don’t smoke.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m about to start because I need a new bad habit. This one’s getting old. And—” she glanced toward the reception area, “it looks like your ten o’clock meeting is here.”

With that, she hurried away to greet Oliver’s appointment.

Oliver couldn’t focus. If Mr. Westley noticed, the older man didn’t comment on it, so enthusiastic in his own account of Queen Consolidated’s Asian market ventures, his toupee had gone askew during his presentation. While Mr. Westley went through the quarterly expenditures report item by item, Oliver tried to soak in the information, only to find it didn’t quite capture his attention the way his view of Felicity did.

She sat at her desk, working away at her computer, but her head was bobbing and her lips moving. Was she talking to herself? Her back was ramrod straight, her left leg folded over her right.

There were two people in the world he unequivocally trusted, and trust was an invaluable commodity. But this wasn’t something Diggle could do for him. Hell, he had reservations asking Felicity for this. Digg had warned him against it, that they would find another way. With the way she reacted, Oliver had to agree that Digg was right, though he wasn’t likely to tell him so.

Even though Felicity had proven herself over and over to be a good friend, things between them had become complicated. If he’d just let himself go there, Felicity could be so much more than a friend. Oliver felt it in the air between them, in the tenderness of her looks when she didn’t realize he was watching. He didn’t want to be the one that extinguished the light in her eyes, the innocence. What did he have to offer her, or any woman, for that matter?

But he was definitely muddying the waters. He knew she cared, knew how unfair it was to ask her to
help him in this capacity. He also knew that if she accepted, he would have to keep himself in check. Touching her was too easy to start, too difficult to stop.

He watched with curiosity as she went to retrieve something from a drawer—and froze. She withdrew a small, velvet box and opened it before her mouth gaped slightly. She looked back at Oliver, saw that he was watching her, and quickly turned away closing the box.

“Do you have any questions, Mr. Queen?”

The direct address pulled Oliver from his observation. “No. I think that about covers it.”

He would have to look over the report at a later time when he wasn’t so distracted, though he didn’t tell Mr. Westley that.

And as the two men rose to shake hands, Oliver saw that Felicity was gone.

Only Oliver would leave what had to be a $150,000-plus emerald and baguette diamond ring set in platinum in the drawer of her desk, Felicity fumed. He must’ve been confident she would go along with him. How incredibly arrogant!

He should be confident, the voice of reason warred within her. You have willingly done whatever he has asked. Why should this be any different?

But somehow it was.

I’m done. I’m done. I’m done.

What a waste that he’d sprung for such a nice ring. Of course, in the grand scheme of things, the expense was a drop in the bucket to him. She hadn’t tried it on, certainly didn’t want to get attached to something that represented a sham, but she still had a hard time leaving it in her desk while she ran an intra-office errand. It made no sense.

She waited at the elevator and could hear the clicking of high heels behind her. The sound reminded her of her own questionable footwear.

“Excuse us, Casper,” Isabel instructed her lanky assistant.

“Yes, Ms. Rochev.”

Not this again.

Her back to Isabel, Felicity surreptitiously removed the ring from its box and slid it onto her finger before hiding the box under the papers she carried. And just as Oliver knew the correct size for the blouse and bra she wore, he evidently knew her ring size, as well. The gems sparkled on her slender finger, though she had to admit the ring weighed it down, and she wondered how difficult it would be to type with it on.

Getting ahead of yourself. She had to admit the ring was beautiful though, and the emeralds were a nice touch, a bit like a bona fide Oliver Queen nod and a wink.

The chime of the elevator sounded. Felicity boarded the lift with Isabel close behind. She pressed the numeral four and looked to Isabel who said, “Ground.”

Felicity pressed the G button on the elevator control panel and stared fixedly at their distorted reflections on the walls. Amazing how Isabel could still be stunning even in those circumstances.
“I don’t believe you and Oliver are being honest.”

And there it was. The first salvo.

“It doesn’t matter whether you believe it or not,” Felicity replied trying to keep her voice neutral but unable to hide the sharpness seeping out. Was she really going to do this? Play along?

“The ring is lovely. It will be the first of many gifts, as I’m sure you know. You will continue to be rewarded with such trinkets, particularly when a Queen man has cause to feel guilty. Did Oliver give you that ring because of our encounter?”

The elevator came to a halt at the fourteenth floor. The doors began to slide open. Upon seeing the man standing there waiting to board the elevator, Isabel coldly told him, “Take the next one,” and pushed the close door button.

“You can’t even pretend to be nice,” Felicity said as the elevator began to move again.

“I didn’t get ahead in business by being nice. I have to be shrewd, and as a woman, I have to work twice as hard for half the respect.” Isabel spoke with a practiced nonchalance that grated on Felicity’s nerves.

And suddenly she understood why Oliver didn’t react strongly to Isabel. Her provocation was part of a strategy, a way to gain information and leverage.

Without another word, Isabel pushed the emergency stop button.

Felicity rolled her eyes. You’ve got to be kidding me. “I need to go.”

“Not yet. I’m still trying to figure you out.”

“What does it matter?”

But Isabel circled around the blonde. “There are two types of women who marry into the Queen family. The golddigger who doesn’t care about her husband’s extra curricular activities, so long as she gets prestige, the designer garments and accoutrement, and lives a life of luxury. I have no use for such a woman. A woman should earn her way, yes? And then there is the woman who buries her head in the sand, who thinks she can tame a man, change his very nature. She is foolish, and she is weak. I have even less use for that woman.”

“And you’re going to tell me which I am,” Felicity stated blandly.

“It is not difficult to see. You know that Oliver was in my bed a mere two weeks ago. You were hurt. I could see it on your face at the hotel, I can see it now, and still you accepted his marriage proposal. Your truly laughable footwear suggests you aren’t a golddigger, so it’s obvious you’re a fool. And fools get what they deserve.” Isabel’s eyes ran over Felicity once more. “It’s a disappointment, really. Somehow I thought you were more.”

At that, she pressed the resume button.

It was another almost thirty minutes before Felicity made it back to the top floor. As soon as she stepped off the elevator, she saw Oliver walking down the hall toward her.

Not now.

She ducked into a nearby ladies room—though in actuality it should’ve been called rooms. The
anterior area was a lounge replete with plush sofas, decorative mirrors, and silk flowers, much more swanky than the restrooms on the lower floors of the building, though most of the executive offices had their own lavatories. She sank onto a sofa and took a deep breath.

She wished she were the type to wallow in misery; instead when she saw a problem, she tried to determine a solution. The whole morning, she had been so out of her element. How do you solve a problem like Oliver Queen?

And to top it off, the sofa was more comfortable than the one in her apartment. Maybe she could swap one out in the dead of night. There had to be some perks to being the owner and CEO’s pseudo fiancée, right?

She looked up as the door swung open.

*You’ve got to be kidding me,* she thought as she watched Oliver step inside and turn the lock on the door to prevent any unwelcome guests. She faintly hoped no one had any bathroom emergencies.

“I’ve always wondered what it looked like in here.” His words were casual, something Playboy Oliver would have said, but his expression was anything but casual. He wore the quiet intensity she had grown accustomed to.

“Boundaries?”

“You’re right to run the other direction. That would be the smartest thing you could do.”

She shrugged. “I know.”

And yet she made no move to leave.

He sat next to her on the sofa, his knee touching hers. She felt a jolt of electricity at the contact, wondered if he felt it, too, but immediately dismissed the notion.

Oliver was a man she could never have; he made that perfectly clear when they returned from Moscow and ever since. Still she was drawn to him, and ultimately, that was what made what he was asking her to do so incredibly difficult. He was wounded and complicated and dark. He’d done horrible things for the right reasons and lived with ghosts of the past breathing down his neck, as he tried to atone for his actions, for the sins of his father, his mother. Tried to atone for the 503 lives lost in the Glades, for Tommy, for failing to save them all. Sometimes she thought it was a wonder he could breathe at all, and she ached to relieve his burden and longed to reach out to him. But dammit, for all of his impressive skills, another area in which he excelled was he knew how to piss her off and make it look easy.

And there was his knee, so relaxed against her own. She could feel the warmth seep from him. Biology, simple biology. Pheromones. And there was the adrenaline. Yes, it all made perfect sense and none at all. Why him? Why couldn’t she just meet a nice, normal man who made her knees quiver?

And she knew why. She didn’t do normal anymore. The life of safety she used to embrace held little appeal. Not that she particularly wanted to be in danger, but she wanted to make a difference, and helping Oliver made a difference.

“My life is screwed up right now.”

“Yep,” she replied, the *p* in *yep* coming out with an exaggerated pop. “I know that, too. So what’s going on that we go from zero to sixty? And really, come to think of it, back to zero because the
sixty thing was just for show, right?”

Oliver blinked twice in rapid succession as he processed Felicity’s strange stream of consciousness. She deserved answers. “My father always taught me to keep my friends close but keep my enemies closer.”

“Sage advice.” Especially if your enemy looks like a cross between a ballerina and a fashion model.

“I’m trying to keep my family’s company together, to make it be a force for good in this city. A lot of people depend on QC for their livelihoods.”

“Including yours truly.” Felicity interjected raising her hand. His eyes fell on the ring, but he said nothing about it. “And Queen Consolidated helps to provide resources for our friend in green.”

Oliver leaned forward, his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped. “Isabel has been an enigma. She’s the variable I can’t account for in the equation.”

So you sought answers in her vagina, the least obvious place for answers, Felicity thought sullenly. “Look at you being all mathematical.”

But calling Isabel Rochev enigmatic was like calling the Pacific a puddle of water. Felicity knew this from experience from months ago when she researched the woman hell-bent on a hostile takeover of Queen Consolidated. What she found was startling. For all intents and purposes, Isabel Rochev didn’t exist before 1999. What little information Felicity had been able to dig up on her had been unimportant. It was unheard of for someone who had risen to such a level of prominence among the movers and shakers of world conglomerations to be so hidden, lacking even a public persona. An even bigger question mark was why Rochev’s name was on The List. With the other names, it took very little digging to uncover their nefarious deeds, but someone had gone to great lengths to cover Isabel’s past, both distant and recent, which begged the question why. If only there was a thread to pull, perhaps they could unravel the whole thing. So, yes, she understood why Oliver would be interested in getting close to Isabel. Didn’t mean she had to like it.

“Walter approached me recently. Over the last few weeks, a company by the name of Triglav Holdings has been quietly buying stock in Starling National Bank.”

“The bank that holds some of your family’s interests in Queen Consolidated,” Felicity followed.

“Triglav Holdings is mounting a takeover of the bank.”

“You think it’s Isabel?”

“She doesn’t have the financial resources personally, but Walter thinks she is involved. The company buying an interest in Starling National Bank is a dummy corporation for Stelmoor International.”

“Talk about persistence,” Felicity muttered.

“If Isabel is pulling strings to wrestle Queen Consolidated away from me, I have to be prepared with counter-moves. Find financing elsewhere. Walter has done everything he can to help, but it’s likely he will be forced out of SNB.”

“And I’m your countermove?” Felicity asked incredulously.

“You’re one of the few people in this world that I absolutely trust.”

“So what good does telling her we’re engaged do? Are you trying to piss her off? Make her reveal
“She’s been curious about us. She knows your background in IT, knows that you are an unusual choice to be an executive assistant, and knows that we spend a lot of time together outside of work. I needed to give her a reason why.”

“Everyone else just thinks we’re playing office, which is funny because no-way, no-how with those glass walls.” She laughed nervously.

“You know about that?” he asked.

“Well, yeah. I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“I’ve played up an image, partly to divert attention from what we do after hours, partly because it’s easier to hide in plain sight. But in doing so, the only reputation I have is one of a spoiled playboy who has never had to work for anything, who doesn’t value anything but his own pleasure.”

“So you need image rehab, and I’m it.”

“You’re approachable. Real. Decent. If a woman like you—a woman of substance—sees potential in me, there must be something there, right?”

And something in her chest tightened. She had always seen the potential in him, even when he apparently could not. Just as quickly as the thought came, she tried to brush off the swell of emotion. If they did this (how could she even consider it?), she couldn’t allow herself to become emotionally attached. Well, more attached.

“Either that or I’m after your money,” she joked humorlessly. “Because that’s what they’ll say.”

“And you’ll be you and show them the error of their ways, show them the beauty I see in you—inside and out.”

Felicity swallowed hard, needing to change the direction of the conversation. “Why didn’t you tell me about the bank? About your suspicions of Isabel?”

“I didn’t want to rub salt in your wounds.”

“I’m a big girl, Oliver. And I’m sure I could’ve helped you do something.”

“You can help me now.”

“Is that why you had me researching Frederick McMartin? The McMartin Group seems like it would be right up your alley if you’re wooing new investors.”

He nodded. “Except that Mr. McMartin isn’t a fan. He was a friend of my father’s, but the last time we saw each other, I acted like an ass. Hit on his daughter.” Oliver grimaced. “I guess I did more than hit on her.”

“That’s who we’re going to try to convince to invest in QC? An angry father? Because from everything I read about this guy, he takes his family very seriously.”

“It’s been seven years.”

Felicity thought of her own father and the way he stood by with a protective stance when she left the house on her first date. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure there’s no expiration date on angry fathers. Do you have something in mind?”
“McMartin is part-owner of the Starling City Rockets. They’re playing at home tonight. He has a private box. So does my family.”

“So you want to make a sales pitch at a hockey game?”

“I want to make contact. That’s all. Plant a seed.” He paused as he studied the woman next to him. “Do you like hockey?”

Decision time. She knew where this was going.

“Hockey? What’s there not to like? I mean, I don’t completely understand it, but that’s only because I haven’t…studied it.” She took a deep breath and looked down at her hand.

Oliver followed her line of sight. “The ring looks good on you.”

She cleared her throat. “The clothes are nice, too. Dry.”

“It was my pleasure.”

“Perfect fit. All of it. You really know my body. Well, not know it-know it. I mean, we’ve never had sex. I mean you’ve had sex, obviously. Lots of it. And I’ve had sex. Just not together. And… wow. I don’t know when to shut up. Well, I do, I just…” She squeezed her eyes shut and stopped abruptly before taking a deep breath. “I’ve got to stop doing that. Are you sure I’m the one for this job?”

His blue eyes twinkled with amusement. “Depends on whether you’re going to hide out in the bathroom all day.”

“Maybe. Wrong answer?”

He stood and held out his hand to her. Hesitantly, she took it. “So what do you say? Will you do me the honor of being my pretend fiancée? We could get…’she watched as his lips curled into a smile, “tacos for lunch to celebrate.”

Was Oliver Queen actually cracking a joke? It was a horrible joke, but for a man who looked like he used to smile all the time but had kicked the habit, Felicity couldn’t help but appreciate the attempt—and the surprise. She managed a smile of her own even as she shook her head. “Are you buying?”

“I think that can be arranged.”

“Hmmm. Just like our engagement.”

And so she accepted his marriage proposal in a bathroom.

But their real work was just beginning.
Like Pretty Woman Minus the Unsavory Prostitution

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the comments, the kudos, and the subscriptions. I really do appreciate them!

Maybe Oliver will start to redeem himself a bit with this one? LOL.

So I should warn you all that some of the details about Felicity's background that are mentioned in this chapter contradict what we've learned of her past on the show. When I was writing the early part of this story back when season 2 was airing, there were many pieces of her past that we simply were not privy to knowing at the time. Rather than change her backstory retroactively, I've chosen to keep this story intact as originally written.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part Three: “Like Pretty Woman Minus the Unsavory Prostitution”

She was nuts. Absolutely, certifiably insane. No, scratch that. Crazy people generally didn't know they were crazy. In her time as part of Team Arrow, that was one of the (many) things Felicity had picked up on, whether it was from dealing with Helena Bertinelli (hello daddy issues), Malcolm Merlyn (hello delusions of grandeur), or even the Dollmaker (hello fixation complex). That—and Starling City seemed to attract more than its share of strange ones.

So no, Felicity Smoak wasn’t technically crazy, but she sure was a glutton for punishment. Simple as that. And not simple at all. Her latest self-imposed punishment? Playing Pretty Woman—minus the whole unsavory prostitution angle—for Oliver. Not that she was in any way, shape, or form comparing herself to Julia Roberts. That woman had legs that went for miles, the gorgeous hair, and that smile.

That’s what he needed, a Julia Roberts type. She should call Oliver and tell him to find someone else. Surely there was a publicity-starved starlet out there who hoped to make the jump from the B-list to the A-list and who was far more qualified to pretend to be his fiancée. Yes, she should call him and beg off the whole ludicrous scheme, except she still couldn’t find her phone. She had been so sure it was in her car or maybe in her apartment, except it wasn’t. Her earlier search had proven pretty much a waste of time. In all the scurrying around after work trying to find her phone, clothes to wear to the hockey game, and even trying to catch a quick glimpse of her sanity, all she had managed to do was stub her toe from not watching where she was going and spill a half-full can of Dr. Pepper, which had been a beast to clean.

It was nerves. Anxiety. Butterflies in the stomach, which, when she stopped to think about it, was a gross thought, but she understood the fluttery sentiment. The increased adrenaline coupled with a lack of blood flow to the stomach triggered by a fight-or-flight response really did feel like butterflies—and she wanted to run, no doubt about it, outrun those butterflies, outrun Oliver. But now, this was more than butterflies in her stomach. This was full-on ‘if you even mention the word date, I will throw up on you’ worry. It would be so much easier if the inside of her head didn’t feel like a Ninja blender. There was just too much stuff piled up and mixed in; she couldn’t separate her lucid thoughts from the random ones.
And the whole thing was ridiculous. She hadn’t been this nervous on a date ever—not even when she started dating Mr. Wrong (whom she thought was Mr. Right at the time), and this wasn’t even a real date. She needed to toughen up. Who was she trying to impress? But this was Oliver, and in some ways, she had never been rational where he was concerned.

No. You’re done, remember? Her silent chastisement did little to quell her mini freak-out.

Felicity tried to imagine what JoJo would say if she were there. JoJo’s three most common pieces of advice were “Get a grip, Smoaky” (when she was in full-on panic mode); “Wear sexy shoes” (whenever a man was involved); and “Ditch the glasses” (pretty much every time they saw each other). In this instance, though, Felicity was quite certain JoJo’s sage advice would be “Tell Oliver Queen to fuck off.”

The thought brought the smallest smile to her lips. Not that she would ever say that to him. With her luck, she would mangle the expression and inadvertently turn the insult into an invitation. Pretty Woman, indeed.

This isn’t for Oliver, she reminded herself as she found her tall boots. It’s for the cause, the greater good. If Queen Consolidated gets taken over, Team Arrow will be seriously underfunded and undersupplied.

But if she were being completely honest, she would admit that there was no other man she would do this for, even if Oliver Queen had the propensity for royally pissing her off.

Great. You’re thinking in puns, she scolded herself. Maybe she was crazy, after all.

The sound of a rapping on her apartment door startled her. She glanced at the clock on the wall. 6:55. She told Oliver she would meet him downstairs at 7:00, so that left….crap.

“No, no, no. Now is not a good time for a kitty missile crisis, Mrs. Havisham,” Felicity muttered as she struggled to finish pulling on her right boot. Her elderly neighbor was an entirely different kind of crazy. Cat lady crazy. But she was harmless enough, probably lonely, so Felicity checked in on her from time to time and Mrs. Havisham called on Felicity to help gather a feline escapee at least once a week. The critters seemed to shoot out of the old woman’s apartment like missiles. It usually went without too much incident (if she could wrangle Oliver, she could surely wrangle a cat), but there was the one rather unfortunate time that Felicity discovered cat scratch fever was a real ailment and not just a Ted Nugent hit from the 1970s. “On my way!” she said more loudly. She looked down at the left boot still in her hand, and groaned, before opening the door.

On the other side stood Oliver, dressed casually in jeans, a gray Henley shirt, and a leather jacket. He held a retail bag, its corded handle dangling loosely from his fingers. And she felt the fluttering in her stomach all over again, a release of adrenaline that felt like butterflies.

Stop it! It’s not as though you haven’t seen a handsome man before. This handsome man, even, wearing much, much less. But this just felt different, even though it shouldn’t be different from any other fieldwork.

He studied her with a deliberate intensity that unnerved her further. “You shouldn’t open the door without first checking who it is.”

Well, hello to you, too.

“What are you doing here?” Felicity shifted from one foot to the other, made more awkward by the fact that she wore one boot and held the other in her hand.
“We have a date. Sort of.”

She stepped aside, a movement he took as an invitation, so he walked into the abode. “Yes, but you’re up here. I didn’t actually think you would come up to my apartment yourself.”

He took a deep breath, which Felicity noticed—mostly because she had become an expert Oliver reader—and she briefly wondered if the situation was as weird for him as it was for her.

“What kind of fiancé would I be if I didn’t escort you to the car?” he replied glibly.

“That sounds so much nicer than you making sure I didn’t climb out the fire escape.”

“Never crossed my mind. As I recall, you don’t like heights—or sweat.”

Immediately, Felicity’s thoughts leapt to Lian Yu. When she and Diggle went to find Oliver, she had the notion that getting him to return to Starling City would be like walking into a minefield—she just hadn’t expected a literal one. Oliver saved her that day (she had lost count how many times that made…pretty adventurous for a girl from Chico), and the first words from her mouth when they landed after he swung from the tree weren’t “thank you,” like most people would say. Nope. She just had to tell him he was sweaty, as if that was news to him. The experience wasn’t altogether unpleasant, though. There had been a moment—albeit brief—when he looked down at her, his body atop hers, and uttered, “Hi,” in a tone that seemed incredibly intimate and sent a shiver through her, despite the heat. Of course, it could have seemed intimate because of their physical proximity to one another. In the grand scheme of things, being pinned to the ground by Oliver was not so bad. She tried to wipe the memory.

Felicity pulled on the other boot, balancing on one leg and hopping slightly. She thought she might topple into Oliver, but she quickly recovered. “I’m working on that.”

“Looks like your closet exploded.”

She looked sheepishly at the piles of clothes draped over her sofa, cast on the floor, even over the flat-screen TV tucked in the corner of the room. “It kind of did before you sent over the Rockets shirt. I’d offer you a drink, but I’m not sure I can actually find the kitchen right now.” She exhaled loudly. “I hope I don’t screw this up for you tonight.”

“You’re going to be fine. Your job is to just be yourself.”

“You have met me, right?” Felicity considered herself a decent person, kind most of the time, and easy-going, but she was not particularly suave. On any given day, she suffered from foot-in-mouth disease. When she was little, her mom used to tell her that was her trade-off for being the smartest person in the room. Unfortunately, she then proceeded to repeat that at school, which didn’t win her friends and only served as another prime example of open-mouth, insert foot.

“I don’t want you to act like you’re anything you aren’t.”

“Except for being your fiancée,” she replied pointedly.

“There is that.” He glanced down at the bag he carried. “I brought you something.”

She gave him a sideways glance as he handed her the bag. “Should I be scared?”

His eyes shone with amusement. “This might qualify as a weapon.”

She opened the bag to find a shoebox inside, familiar. These were her sexy shoes. Not the exact
ones, she mentally corrected herself. The heels on these were fully intact. “Oh, these shoes are a weapon, all right.” She looked at him, perplexed. “Thank you. And please don’t take this the wrong way, but why?”

“I saw you had a mishap earlier.”

“One of about half a dozen, but what else is new?” She paused and added, “You don’t have to buy me things.”

“They’re just shoes.”

“And I like them. I do, but it’s not just the shoes.”

“The clothes? You’d rather wear coffee all day?” He wasn’t terse with her, exactly, but she could tell he didn’t understand her reticence to accept gifts from him.

“Of course not.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

She opened her mouth to launch into an explanation, thought better of it, and left the matter at, “Never mind.”

His eyes were taking in their surroundings, getting a better picture of what made her tick. The apartment was homage to brightness, light. The colorful walls—persimmon and turquoise—were unexpected. The sofa, from what could be seen, was a plush cream color. Photos and mementos, books and magazines covered nearly every surface that wasn’t obscured by her clothes.

Felicity wasn’t entirely sure she liked the scrutiny. Not that she had anything to hide, but this place seemed so separate from QC or the Arrow lair in the basement of Verdant. Having Oliver in her apartment felt like her worlds were colliding, and she wasn’t entirely sure how to reconcile one with the other.

“When I imagined you coming over here, I didn’t think it would look quite like this. The mess, I mean. Not that I’ve thought about you all that much. You being here. I mean, that would be ridiculous…” Oliver looked at her patiently waiting for her to work her way through her rambling. “Yeah. Um, back to the point of why it looks like this, I’ve never actually been to a hockey game, so I wasn’t really sure what to wear.”

“Casual.” His lips quirked as he noticed the cocktail dress lying across the back of the couch in what he assumed was the reject pile.

Felicity looked down at her skinny jeans and calf-height boots she had paired with the fitted long-sleeved shirt selected for her. The v-neck dipped a little low for her taste. “Yeah, this gave me something to go on. Thanks for that.” And it felt strange to thank him when only moments ago, she had been asking him not to buy her things.

“I tried to call.”

She groaned. “Still haven’t found my phone.”

“Did you try to ping it?”

She shot him her best, ‘You aren’t really asking me that, are you?’ look. Of course she had. Call it. Ping it. She had her tablet set up to alert her if anyone tried to use her phone, but with going to the
hockey game, she wouldn’t be around to monitor the activity. Fortunately, it was her personal phone and not a means to doing any Team Arrow work. Nevertheless, it bothered her as more than an inconvenience. She was always so careful with anything electronic. “It’s fallen off the face of the earth.”

“Or maybe we should look under your clothes.” He paused for a heartbeat and tilted his head in the direction of her covered over sofa. “The piles.” Seeing her gape slightly, he winked.

“Wow,” she mouthed turning away from him. “What happened to Mr. Tall, Green, and Brooding?” She moved some clothing items aside to retrieve her jacket.

“Just warming up the Oliver Queen public persona for the crowd.” His eyes swept over her. “By the way, you look really nice.”

“Thanks. That’s a step up from presentable. And you…clean up well.” Understatement, she thought. For all the many, many hours they spent together, she sometimes still found herself almost stunned by him. Of course, if he were Oliver of yesteryear, she doubted she would find him attractive. He had been spoiled, oversexed, tabloid fodder. Physical appearance only went so far. Jack Sommet had taught her that lesson long ago.

He took the jacket from her and held it so she could more easily slide her arms in the worn leather sleeves. “Before we go, we should talk about boundaries.” His hands lingered after he pulled the jacket up to her shoulders, though he caught himself, and quickly stepped back.

“Right.”

“What we’re doing has the potential to be complicated.”

“Oh, I think the potential has been met.” She still didn’t know what she was going to do if news of their ‘engagement’ moved from their private social circle to public domain. She couldn’t lie to her family, not about this, but she couldn’t very well tell them the whole truth either.

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“Too late,” she squeaked.

“Having second thoughts?”

“More like third or fourth, but I told you I would help. I’m not bailing out. What were you saying about boundaries and my discomfort?”

“I don’t want to cross any lines with you, so I need to know from you what I’m allowed to do when we’re a public couple.”

“What would you do with your girlfriends in public?”

He pursed his lips before truthfully answering, “I wasn’t always a gentleman.”

“Good news is that for Mr. McMartin’s sake, you need to be. You’ve got to show him you aren’t the same Oliver.”

“If we’re going to pull this off, we need to be convincing as a couple.”

“See. That’s what worries me. No one is going to believe that you would be engaged to me.”

“Why would you think that?”
“Because you’re one of People’s 50 Most Eligible Bachelors and I’m nobody. Well, I’m not nobody. I’m Felicity Smoak from Chico, California. I don’t ooze sex appeal. My family is respectable enough but not well connected.” She watched his expression cloud and tried to explain. “Seriously, my parents’ claim to fame is that their dog and Aaron Rodgers’s parents’ dog came from the same litter. I’m not an actress or model. And don’t even get me started on my singing voice.”

“Felicity?”

“Hmmm?”

“Assuming that I am completely superficial—which I haven’t exactly given the press reason to think otherwise—have you looked in the mirror lately?”

Five minutes ago when she was fighting with her hair. She still wasn’t quite sure whether she’d won the battle. It wasn’t that she thought she was ugly, but she was neither polished nor va-va-va-voom. “I assume that’s a rhetorical question.”

“I think everyone you meet tonight is going to take one look at you and wonder what a beautiful, intelligent woman like you is doing with a guy like me.”

Felicity shook her head. “You’re airing out Public Oliver. Go ahead and get some more practice saying that with a straight face.”

“I don’t need practice. Public Oliver would have called you hot.”

At that, she laughed, and nervously patted his shoulder as she joked. “Oh, I’m totally marrying you for the money. And the compliments.”

“And I thought it was for the shoes.” Without conscious thought, his hand went to hers, stilling her movement as their fingers tangled. “We never settled on boundaries.”

The warmth of his hand and the quiet intensity of his gaze sent a tremor through her. This was the same hand that drew back his bow with deadly precision, the same hand that she’d seen clenched into a fit more times than she could count. And yet he was so tender with her now, she almost ached. Boundaries? Oh, yes. She needed boundaries. Desperately.

“Am I allowed to hold your hand in public?” he asked.

She nodded before articulating, “Yes.” His thumb brushed across her palm. They weren’t in public, but they were still linked. The feeling was both foreign and natural.

“Hug you?”

She swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“Kiss you?” His words hung in the air, and it occurred to her that Oliver Queen had probably never had to ask permission to kiss a woman before.

She took a step back and gently tugged her hand from his grasp. She needed her wits about her, and if he stroked her hand any longer, it was entirely likely she was going to turn into a nonsensical mess, more so than usual. “A kiss…it means something to me. It’s just too personal.” Oh, God. Was she quoting Pretty Woman at him? Must’ve been the shoes. Oliver bought her shoes. And clothes. And a ridiculously expensive, several-years’-salary-for-her engagement ring for a marriage that wasn’t even going to happen. Did the Edward character ever buy Vivian shoes? He must have because of the different outfits and the jewelry and…She cringed slightly. Would Oliver recognize the reference?
“So, no. I’d rather you not kiss me on the lips for the benefit of putting on a show if it’s avoidable.”

He tilted his head ever so slightly as he considered her response. “Less complicated that way, too.”

She let out a breath she hadn’t even realized she been holding. They were actually going to do this. For all the panicking she’d been doing, it hadn’t seemed real until now.

“Oliver, people are going to ask questions about us. How did we meet? Where did we go on our first date? How did you propose?”

“At work when I had trouble with my laptop. Let’s see. Big Belly Burger to avoid detection. And when I proposed, I took you by surprise, but it’s private.” He rattled off the recitation with ease.

“I’ll say you took me by surprise.” She paused, “You do know people will think you proposed during sex, right? I mean, when you say it’s private…private means, you know, private.”

If she wanted a reaction, he didn’t give it to her. “You ready for this?”

“Ready or not.” She grabbed a small purse and the two headed out the door. While she was locking the apartment, she heard the door from the apartment next to her open.

“Hi, Mrs. Havisham,” Felicity greeted.

The gray-haired woman studied Oliver and then looked to the blonde. “Who’s this, Felicity?”

“This is my…Oliver.” Not a tough question to answer, but already she was faltering. Why couldn’t she say the word fiancé? That’s what they were going to be telling certain people, after all. Nevertheless, she couldn’t quite choke out the lie.

“Have I met you before?” the old woman asked, looking back at him admiringly.

“I don’t believe so. I must have one of those faces,” Oliver replied cordially.

“Very handsome. Don’t trust a man who is too handsome for his own good, dear,” she directed at Felicity. “No offense intended,” she added looking back at Oliver.

“I trust Oliver with my life,” Felicity replied simply.

“Did you see Mr. Whiskers out here?” Mrs. Havisham asked, abruptly changing the subject.

“No, we’ve been inside the apartment.”

“Oh my. Well. I hope he hasn’t wandered from home and gotten lost,” she replied rather pitifully.

“We’re on our way out, but I’ll keep an eye out for him,” Felicity assured her.

Once the couple made their way to the stairs, Oliver commented, “Havisham. That sounds familiar.”

“Great Expectations. Dickens. Ms. Havisham was jilted by her fiancé and never recovered. She wore her wedding gown from the day of her ill-fated wedding until it caught fire many years later. She groomed her young ward, Estella, to be cold-hearted and inflict the same kind of pain on a man as had been inflicted on her. Quite twisted.”

“Right. I remember now. Gwyneth Paltrow was hot in that movie.”

“I’ve not seen the movie,” Felicity replied as they turned the corner and took another flight.
They reached the front door to the building, and Oliver pulled it open for her. Ever the gentleman, unless she was a pre-island girlfriend, she added mentally.

“I’m parked out front.”

Sure enough, Felicity spotted the Mercedes SL-Roadster right away parallel parked along the sidewalk. She had never seen this particular vehicle before; Oliver usually either had his motorcycle or else Digg drove him to keep up their covers.

The soft top was up on the convertible; it was definitely not the right time of the year for driving top-down with careless abandon, but the car was stylish, nonetheless, and probably the most expensive vehicle she had ever seen parked in front of her apartment building. While she didn’t live in the Glades, the Penbrelle area of Starling City wasn’t exactly affluent either.

Oliver walked to the passenger side to open the door for her when Felicity heard a meow. She looked around but saw no sign of the feline. Oliver must have heard it, too, for he immediately scoured the area.

“Mr. Whiskers,” Felicity called out. She had never been to a hockey game—and at this rate, she never was going to get there. But there was something so pitiful about both the plaintive meow and Mrs. Havisham’s worry that wouldn’t let Felicity ignore the situation.

Meow.

“Up in the tree,” Oliver pointed.

Felicity went to the base and looked up. Definitely Mr. Whiskers. “What are you doing up there?” Talking to animals was a habit of hers, though at least she wasn’t crazy enough to expect an actual response. Yet.

Oliver was by her side almost immediately, assessing the situation. “He climbed up. He’ll climb back down.”

“But the building is closed. He could wander around, looking for home, and never find it.”

Oliver looked from her to the cat. Without another word, he began to climb the tree after the feline.

“What are you doing?” she practically yelped. “What if somebody sees you up there?”

“I spent five years on an island. Surely I can climb a tree without people being suspicious,” he replied as he shimmied along the branch that held the cat. Stretching his long frame, he grabbed the cat by the scruff of its neck to dislodge it from the branch.

“Be careful,” Felicity warned.

“I’ll be fine,” he dismissed.

“I meant with the cat,” she elucidated.

When he was low enough to the ground, Felicity took Mr. Whiskers from him and soothed the frightened cat. She was really more of a dog person. But still.

She heard Oliver drop to the concrete sidewalk, along with a rip.

He stood, reached behind himself, and squeezed his eyes shut. “Dammit.”
“Did you just do what I think you did?”

“You have any extra pants up there I can wear?”

“If you can fit into my pants, I will kill myself. Okay, not really.”

“Glad you clarified that. I was worried,” he replied crossly.

“Somebody’s in a bad mood. Really, Oliver, you have no sense of humor.”

“I do. Feeling a draft on my ass just isn’t funny.”

“Yes,” she replied trying her best to suppress a laugh but failing miserably, “it is. I thought this type of thing only happened to me. I will be right back, and then we’ll go somewhere and get you some less…drafty…pants,” she promised him and hurried back into the building with the animal.

Oliver was grateful for the hidden back entrance he’d installed at the foundry some time ago. Otherwise, he’d be walking through Verdant to get to the lair—and he was pretty certain his ripped jeans would’ve been on TMZ. Not that he was particularly inhibited when it came to his body, but perception mattered. The CEO of Queen Industries should not be appearing on TMZ or other gossip sites.

A few years ago, he hadn’t given pissing on a cop’s tires a second thought, until his ass was hauled to jail. Even then, it was an inconvenience for him and embarrassment for his family, but the incident had barely fazed him. That Oliver probably would’ve taken off the jeans and just gone around in boxers the whole night, encouraging others to strip down with him.

That Oliver was long gone—and he couldn’t help but think ‘good riddance.’ But he also knew the man who returned had his own demons, his own shortcomings. Same recipe, different flavor.

Of course, he could have used Felicity to cover his backside. Literally. Bodies tended to be close in Verdant; if she had her arms wrapped around his waist from behind, molded to him, following him through the crowd, no one would’ve been the wiser.

The thought was oddly appealing. The one thing Oliver had always been able to appreciate was the female form, and Felicity was certainly formed...

Snap out it. Keep this simple. Keep this clean.

Felicity was right. He did need to lighten up. He used to be able to laugh at himself. Hell, he used to just be able to laugh. But half the time he didn’t know if he was coming or going, everyone wanted something from him, and what he could give was never enough.

“It takes time,” Felicity had told him one day after a particularly brutal board meeting. “But you have good ideas, Oliver. You’re more than just a pretty face.” She had seemed to catch what she said and stammered, “Not that I think you’re pretty. Handsome. Manly. That’s more like it. But you’re more than what they see.”

He still wasn’t sure why she believed in him when, as far as he could tell, he had given her every reason not to believe in him.

Truth was, he had never wanted to be CEO. As a young man, the very thought was so far beyond the realms of possibility. As far as he was concerned, his dad was going to live forever. But with the Queen name in the mud, or at the very least, at the dry cleaner’s, he had no choice but to try to be the
man his father thought he could be.

And he didn’t feel equipped. Smiling was mechanical. Social niceties seemed so frivolous. But in order to do what mattered—what could make a difference—he had to tolerate the dog and pony show.

503. *Tommy*. That was on him. His failures. He couldn’t lose QC, too, lose the means to make amends for his transgressions.

Punching in the code to the basement, Oliver unlocked the heavy doors. Diggle sat in front of Felicity’s beloved trio of monitors; the burly man’s eyes followed Oliver as he walked by to retrieve another pair of jeans.

“What happened to you?”

“Came to the rescue of a cat.”

“Must’ve been some cat,” Diggle replied dryly. “You really going through with this?” His tone left little doubt as to his feelings. They had already been through this once. While Oliver respected Dig and trusted him with his life, there were things the other man just couldn’t understand.

“Yes.”

“It’s selfish.”

“I passed selfish a long time ago. I think I’ve reached egocentric by now. She says she can handle it.”

John shook his head and shifted in the chair. It creaked under his weight. “Her world’s about to blow up, and I don’t think she even knows it, but you—you know better.”

Oliver pulled on the intact jeans. “I’ll do everything I can to protect her.”

“Felicity’s not the only thing that needs your protection. Have you thought about how your little arrangement is going to change things around here?”

“We’ll do what we’ve always done,” Oliver replied simply.

“Except all eyes will be on the two of you, every step of the way.”

“I’m used to the limelight and dodging unwanted attention. Besides, this is only temporary. Felicity knows that.”

“You say Felicity does, but do you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You tell me. You two have been circling around each other for months.”

“We…haven’t.”

“She gets close, you push her away. Probably for the best. But then you pull her to you again. She deserves better than that.”

“She deserves better than me,” Oliver replied. “And when this is over, that’s what she’ll have.”
“You’re missing the big picture.”

“No, I’m seeing the big picture. If I lose my company, we lose this,” Oliver replied looking around them. “And if we lose this, we lose the city. And if we lose our city, then what’s the point?”

“So I’m a hockey virgin,” Felicity blurted when Oliver returned to the car.

Oliver coughed slightly at her word choice and looked across to the passenger side of the vehicle.

“I’ve never watched hockey. And by never, I mean, never ever. I mean I’ve heard the jokes about going to a fight and a hockey game breaking out. You didn’t exactly give me time to study up on it. I was going to Bing it while you were inside getting…coverage…but then I remembered I don’t have my phone.”

The line between his brows deepened. If she didn’t find her phone by tomorrow, they were going to need to get her another one. He didn’t like the thought of her being out of reach.

“Hockey is easy to pick up on,” he replied.

“But see, there are like, three things that terrify me. Well, more than that, but we don’t have all night for me to get to the point. Peanuts for obvious reasons. Ventriloquist dummies, specifically ventriloquist dummies that give wet willies. And not knowing what the heck is going on.”

Despite his sour mood, he couldn’t help the smile that crept up on him. He never knew what she was going to say. Felicity was baffling and endearing and refreshing, even if he was fairly certain she was about to have a freak-out.

“You’re afraid of ventriloquist dummies that give wet willies?” he asked incredulously. Of all the truly terrible things she had witnessed—things he had introduced into her life—that was what frightened her? “There’s no such thing.”

“Look, there are some really creepy movies that come on late at night and I have a really vivid imagination.” She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head slightly. “But that’s not the point. I’m supposed to help you, right?”

“Stop over thinking.”

“Come again?”

“I will teach you about hockey. I played when I was a kid.”

“Really?”

“Surprised?”

Actually, she was. From everything she had heard of the pre-island Oliver, he seemed too prissy to be a participant in a contact sport. Not that she would ever say that aloud. At least, she hoped she wouldn’t. Foot-in-mouth disease. Focus. “I thought hockey players didn’t have teeth, like that was a pre-requisite for playing, or something. You know. Play hockey, lose your teeth.”

“And amazingly, last time I checked, I have teeth.” He pressed the ignition switch, and the engine of the roadster roared to life.
“You have a really nice smile, Oliver. It’s a shame you don’t show it more often.”

Oliver chanced a glance at his companion, but her head was turned toward the passenger side window, and her blonde hair cascaded in waves to partially obscure her profile.

What was she thinking? He imagined she was running through what they were about to do, stressing over minutiae. Remembering names. Avoiding inadvertent insults. As far as he was concerned, Felicity didn’t have anything to worry about. She was going to endear herself to everyone she met, just by being herself.

He, on the other hand, could never be himself.

But if there were anyone he would want to be himself with, it would be her.

Digg was right.

He was selfish.

Chapter End Notes

Bonus points for you if you can spot the line from While You Were Sleeping, the fabulous 1995 (or was it 1996?) movie starring Sandra Bullock and Bill Pullman. :D
Chapter Notes

Here we are at Oliver and Felicity's first "date." This is one of my favorite chapters. Hope you guys will enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. :)

Part Four: Who Wants to Date a Dead Fish?

The Starling City Rockets were notoriously unpredictable. The local sports commentator Skip Masters often joked (in that punny way that newscasters gratingly do) that the fans never knew whether the team was going to crash and burn or whether they would be firing on all thrusters. However, the one predictable aspect of every Rockets game was that at the beginning of each home game, someone (pre-arranged, according to Oliver when Felicity later asked about it) threw a dead fish on the ice.

As Felicity Smoak sat in the Queen family’s private suite well above the activity of the rink below and saw the fish thrown onto the ice, she leaned forward wondering if her contact lenses were playing tricks on her. The act seemed somehow prophetic. After all, she was a fish out of water, completely out of her element, just as much as the dead fish on ice below. She frowned slightly, realizing how ridiculous the comparison was. Prophetic. Poetic. Pathetic.

And this is why your dating life is nonexistent. Who wants to date a dead fish?

A scantily clad ice girl skated onto the rink with a shovel and cleared the fish away, all with a million-watt smile. Felicity doubted she had any trouble meeting men.

“And what do you do for a living?”

“Why, I look cute and shovel things.”

Felicity looked to Oliver to see his reaction to the spectacle, but he was speaking with the suite attendant and was not paying attention to the action below.

She shifted in the plush leather seat. Being in the suite was odd; this wasn’t her lifestyle. It wasn’t that she was raised in a barn (more like a tree-lined middle class neighborhood, actually), but everything about the suite broadcast opulence.

The Queen suite seemed large, though Felicity didn’t really have anything with which to compare it, except maybe her living room. The smell of leather filled her nostrils, the upholstery from the overstuffed chairs and sofas, she realized. A wet bar made from gleaming teakwood adorned one wall. Already, a variety of snacks were set out on its surface, while bottles of various liquor—some more expensive than what she earned in a week’s time—were neatly arranged behind the bar on a shelf. A little alcohol to calm her frayed nerves was tempting, but the last thing she needed was to have her tongue loosened.

What was she doing here? She could be home, enjoying a much-needed break from the rigors of putting out Oliver’s fires, and binge watching Doctor Who on Netflix.
The whole day had been a surreal experience, now that she thought about it. Nothing said surreal like being fake-engaged to a playboy billionaire with a secret identity as a leather-wearing crime fighter. The leather was definitely more intimidating than, say, tights, though there was a certain curiosity she had regarding Oliver and tights…

She shook the thought from her head. *Mind out of the gutter. Don’t think of him that way. Again,* she mentally added.

Her mind was running away with her in so many directions at once.

No more freak-outs. *You can do this. You can. If you can survive various explosions, being attacked by a serial killer, manmade earthquakes, and Oliver’s murderous ex-girlfriend with impossibly perfect hair, surely you can survive a date pretending to be the fiancée of a man who alternately makes your mouth go dry and causes you to drool. And saving said man’s multi-billion dollar company? All in a day’s work, right?*

It really wasn’t so different from other dates, she reasoned, only Oliver was up front that he was using her, whereas other men she’d dated typically sprung it on her. And it wasn’t even a real date. Oliver had no romantic interest in her. That was loud and clear. She could have worn granny panties and neglected to shave her legs, and he would never know.

Watching the Zamboni machine resurface the ice of the rink, she was once again reminded just how little she knew about hockey. Football, she understood. Same with baseball and basketball. But it never even occurred to her to attend a hockey game, though the Rockets were certainly popular enough locally, even if they had yet to reach national prominence like the Detroit Red Wings or the New York Rangers. If anything, she avoided this part of town when the Rockets were playing. Too crowded.

Other than her own cross-country meets in high school, the only sporting event she had ever attended was part of a 49ers game with Mr. Wrong on a weekend getaway to San Francisco. That was until he kissed her and she quickly discovered she could no longer breathe. *That* put a damper on their plans. She might’ve hoped Jack would make her breathless by the end of the night, but she had something in mind other than severe anaphylactic shock causing her airways to constrict. In her brain-addled state of mind, she had marveled that it was her luck that she was allergic to him. It turned out he’d eaten peanuts shortly before meeting her for their date in the hotel lobby. Good times. In retrospect, maybe it was the universe telling her that Jack Sommet was not the one for her.

She never really felt like she was missing out, though, when it came to the live sports experience (or when it came to the Jack Sommet experience). She was content to watch the occasional NFL game to root for her hometown’s football hero, Aaron Rodgers, even if he did play for the Green Bay Packers.

So while being in a crowd never appealed to her, nor did struggling to find parking, coming to *this* game was a different experience. First, Oliver had reserved parking. There was no mad hunt for parking a mile away from the arena. Yes, there was a crowd outside the venue, but when he’d taken her hand, all of the trepidation fell away, as though it was only the two of them. He led her through the VIP entrance of the arena, and just as quickly as they could climb a flight of stairs, they were in the club level that housed the private suites.

And now she played the waiting game.

Waiting for a hockey game she didn’t understand to begin.

Waiting for a schmoozing game she *really* didn’t understand to begin.
Waiting for it all to be over so she could go home and stop pretending that all of these games were
her normal life.

She chanced a glance back at Oliver, but he looked to be in deep conversation with the suite
attendant. Were there really that many instructions to be given? She hoped Oliver wasn’t one of
those guys, like the rock stars who demanded that all the brown M&Ms be removed from the bowl.

Her attention quickly returned to the ice when music filled the arena. Guns N ‘Roses’ classic hit
“Rocket Queen” accompanied the emergence of the Rockets players onto the ice. Felicity fought a
smile, as she often did whenever she heard any mention of the name Queen. If she heard “God Save
the Queen,” she would probably have the same reaction.

To begin warm-ups, the players skated with the ferocity of steamrollers—and looked graceful doing
it. They glided across the ice with ease and practiced taking shots into the goal, quickly pivoted,
changed direction, and did it without once falling on their butts.

Impressive.

The warm-ups continued for several minutes while the announcer ran through a list of sponsors for
the event, where information kiosks were located, as well as citing the entertainment between
periods.

The music then shifted to Def Leppard’s “Rocket” as the high definition megatron showed the
starting six from the Starling City Rockets, amidst uproarious cheering of the masses. If it was that
loud in the suite, Felicity imagined it must have been practically deafening in the general admissions
seating. Just as quickly, the music changed again as graphics appeared on the megatron showing the
opening lineup of the Rockets’ opponents. As the announcer introduced each player from the San
Jose Sharks, “Rock and Roll” came over the loudspeaker and the crowd chanted in unison, “Hey,
you suck” as each opponent’s picture appeared. This was not what she expected, but the crowd
seemed to be experienced game-goers. When the last player from the Sharks was announced, the
crowd chanted, “He sucks, too.”

The bustle of the crowd below calmed briefly as an Army specialist who had just returned from a
tour of duty in Afghanistan beautifully sang the national anthem, though when the man reached the
climax of the song and the impossibly high notes it demanded, the crowd went wild.

And then it was game on. One player from each team met in the center of ice and faced off for
control of the puck. At least she knew what the object was called, but wasn’t Oliver supposed to be
teaching her how all of this worked?

Like clockwork, he appeared by her side, sliding into the seat next to her. He barely even glanced at
the action on the ice. “Are you hungry?”

She could eat pretty much always, but she tried to temper her enthusiasm. “A little. Everything
okay?” she asked as she turned to make sure the attendant was gone.

Her nervousness from earlier had not entirely dissipated. It wasn’t so much Oliver that made her
anxious now, as it was the fact that she was soon to be on display and everything was riding on her
performance, the futures of QC and Team Arrow. Social situations had never been her forte.
Retrieving information from a bullet laden computer or secret government agencies was far easier
than retrieving her dignity if she screwed this up. Not to mention, if she was supposed to be Oliver’s
image rehab, the last thing she wanted was for that image to be her wearing food.

“Just getting some intel. Steve’s supposed to let me know when McMartin shows.”
She assumed Steve was the name of the attendant.

“And then what?” Felicity asked. “We’re here in our own private world, and I’m guessing Mr. McMartin will be in his own private world, so…”

“So we pay our respects.”

“Invade,” she corrected.

“Same difference.”

“You have a really bad habit of showing up uninvited.”

At that, an eyebrow shot up. “It usually works out. Did with you.”

She groaned good-naturedly. “You are such a jackass.”

“And you like it.”

And he was right, though she wasn’t about to admit that to him. Oliver’s confidence—particularly because she often lacked her own—was alternately appealing and off-putting. This Oliver sounded more the way she imagined he must have sounded back in the day. Roguishly charming. Dripping with charisma.

“I never did get that blood out of the back seat of my car. I had to make up a cover story when my friend JoJo was in town visiting last weekend.”

“JoJo?” he questioned.

That was right. Oliver didn’t know about the visit. The two of them hadn’t exactly been covered up in bonding moments since Oliver had been covered up with Isabel two weeks earlier.

It still stung, but what right did she have to be angry about it? He had made no commitment to her at any point other than he would keep her safe. And it wasn’t as if he led a celibate life. There had been many women in his past. Many. Many. And there would be women in his future.

But Isabel Rochev? Of all the women in the world, that’s whom Oliver chose to scratch his itch? Every time Felicity saw Isabel, she couldn’t help but think that maybe if Isabel ate some of that expensive makeup she wore, she could be pretty on the inside. Felicity had occasionally seen Oliver with women of substance, like McKenna Hall. A woman like that—decent, smart, who didn’t see dollar signs when she looked at him—that was the type of woman Felicity wanted for Oliver. Not that he’d exactly asked her opinion.

Isabel had certainly been free with her opinion earlier, though. It had taken every ounce of self-control Felicity possessed to keep from reacting to the other woman’s sneering during their encounter in the elevator at Queen Consolidated. When their little charade was over, though, Felicity couldn’t wait to set the record straight. She was neither a fool nor a gold digger.

And she sure as hell wasn’t a pushover.

Part of the reason she had agreed to help Oliver was just to piss Isabel off, to show Ms. Rochev she wasn’t as smart as she thought. Of course, her main goal was protecting the Queen family’s interests in QC and by extension, continuing the access to the Applied Sciences Division of QC, as well as the financial shelter the company provided to Team Arrow. But knocking down Isabel a peg or two? That wouldn’t hurt Felicity’s feelings any.
She suddenly realized she’d been lost in thought and hadn’t responded to Oliver.

“Joanna,” Felicity clarified after a beat. “I’ve just always called her JoJo. Good thing my cover stories are better than yours.”

"Oh?"

“She thinks I took you home after you got into a bar brawl.”

“Did I at least win?” he asked rhetorically before standing and extending his hand to her. Puzzled, she hesitated before taking it. Oliver was awfully handsy tonight. First in her apartment, then walking into the arena, and now. Though as he pulled her up from her seat and his gaze lingered on her, she couldn’t quite remember why that was a bad thing.

_Wow. His eyelashes were long._

With her free hand, she nervously went to push her glasses up her nose, a habit of hers, only to find they weren’t there. Right. Contact lenses. Oliver broke into a smile, and she felt the light flutters in her stomach.

_Stupid biology._

_Don’t_, she reminded herself. _Don’t let down your guard. Don’t let yourself think this is in any way, shape, or form real._ She withdrew her hand but followed him as he walked to the bar.


_He arranged for heartburn._

“And no tacos,” he added wryly, though she could detect a hint of amusement shining in his blue eyes.

“That’s really thoughtful, but you didn’t have to go to so much trouble. I don’t strictly observe kosher rules. Pepperoni on pizza is pretty fabulous.”

“So all those times we ordered pizza late at night, we could have been eating pepperoni?” he asked passing her a plate.

She shrugged, “I thought you didn’t like it. And Digg, well, he’ll eat anything. But for the record, I do like it. A lot. Bacon, too. I mean, I don’t eat non-kosher foods in front of my family, which I guess makes me kind of phony now that I think about it…” she trailed off.

“We all have secrets from our families.”

“Some more so than others, but secrets aren’t always bad. Your secret keeps your family safe.”

“I don’t know that I’d call them safe. Malcolm Merlyn was blackmailing my mom and I didn’t even know it. Now she’s about to go on trial for her life. And Thea—she’s involved with someone who’s nothing but trouble.”

“You don’t seem to have a problem using Roy when it suits your purposes,” Felicity pointed out.

“He’s too much of a wild card. Thea needs someone safe.”

“Good thing she’s not listening to you,” Felicity practically snorted.
Oliver shot her a withering look. It was a patented glare that used to automatically make her knees quiver and still could on occasion, but for whatever reason, she felt emboldened tonight. Maybe it was because she knew he needed her. Where else would he find a fake fiancée on such short notice? Or maybe it was because she knew he needed a reality check. Too many people kowtowing to Oliver all the time—as her associates at QC often did—would only serve to make him insufferable, so she tried to counterbalance that when he felt strongly about a subject. “Oh no you don’t.”

“Don’t what?” he asked.

“Don’t give me the stink eye. Just because something is safe, that doesn’t mean it’s always the best choice. You taught me that.”

If they were having a staring contest, which was what it started to feel like to Felicity, she won when Oliver blinked.

The contemplative look that crossed his face worried her, though, more than if he’d been furious. Nine months ago, he’d put his trust in her and asked her to trust him in return when he revealed his double-life. She chose to save his life and not only keep his secret but help him using her own skill set. It wasn’t the safe choice—Oliver Queen could never be called safe—but it was the right thing, and she hadn’t looked back, hadn’t regretted stepping out of her ordinary life into one far more extraordinary and, yes, dangerous. Even when they clashed on his methods, she believed in his cause, believed in him.

She just wished she could take away his guilt. He didn’t say it, but she was certain he was quietly piling onto his handy-dandy guilt scale, no doubt developed by the mis-Applied Sciences Division of Queen Consolidated. “This was my choice, Oliver.”

He furrowed his brows as though questioning, “How did you know?” but he didn’t actually verbalize the thought.

She wanted to tell him that when let down his guard, he wasn’t that hard for her to read. But the man was already emotionally stunted. No need to make him even more emotionally unavailable.

“Look, I may not know your sister well, but I’ve seen enough of her to know that she’s smart, intuitive, and…” Felicity added with a smile, “something of a firecracker. Roy makes her happy and challenges her.”

“He’s one step up from a thug.”

She loaded raw veggies on her plate next to a hot dog. “He’s a survivor, and as far as I can tell, he works hard at Verdant to support himself, to make his own way. He doesn’t use Thea for her money.”

“They met when he stole her purse,” he reminded her with measured patience, which signaled to her that he was about to lose what little bit of that virtue he had left.

“He wants the city to be safe again, just like you do.”

“Not just like I do,” he groused.

She set her plate aside and touched his forearm. “Hey.” She tilted her head subtly, as though making a peace offering. “We can keep this up, or do you want to talk about something with less conflict? Less grrrr? You promised me you’d teach me about hockey, so let’s talk hockey.”

A few minutes later as the two sat side-by-side eating traditional game food (she did not add any
condiments onto her hot dog for fear of dripping them onto herself—though she didn’t tell him that was her reasoning—but with her luck, he would probably think she didn’t like ketchup or mustard), Felicity learned how ironic her request was. Hockey was, by its nature, a game of conflict. She was already familiar with the premise of the game, but the rules were foreign to her, as was the purpose behind the blue and red marks visible through the ice. Once Oliver explained the rules to her, she could see the strategy involved far more than skating around in circles carrying a big sticks and trying not to trip. She grimaced or uttered an “ouch” when a player would check an opponent and slam him into the Plexiglas, which struck her as unsportsmanlike but was apparently the norm in this game. She could’ve sworn she heard Oliver mutter under his breath about taking worse blows than that without protective padding. And the penalty box? That she found especially baffling. It was the NHL version of parenting. Grown man misbehaves? Just put him in time out.

When the left wing of the Rockets went into the penalty box after an illegal hit and the Sharks enjoyed a Powerplay, she commented, “In our next redesign of the foundry basement, I vote we install one of those.”

Playing along, he asked, “But who would be the ref?” He swiped a carrot stick off her plate.

Felicity glanced back at the player in the box who looked none too pleased and was jawing his frustration. “All I know is the man who has to sit with the guy in time out has the worst job ever. I will never complain again when you ask for coffee.”

Oliver leaned forward in his seat as the Sharks’ center approached the Rockets’ goal on the Powerplay. The player attempted a shot—and missed when it was deflected by the goalie.

Oliver did a fist pump in reaction.

Wow. That was not what she expected from Mr. Cool.

“So…hockey fan. Another secret identity, I take it.”

“Not as much anymore, but when I was a kid…” His voice trailed off, as though lost in his own memories. Realizing she was waiting for him to finish, he went on, “My dad used to bring me to the home games when he wasn’t too busy. Mom didn’t really care about hockey and Thea was too little, so it was just the two of us.” He paused. “And whatever business associates or employees Dad brought along.”

Oliver rarely spoke of his father except in the context of QC business or the path Robert Queen set him on to right his wrongs.

“And you played hockey as a kid.” Felicity tried to imagine a young, carefree Oliver and came up short. The man who sat next to her seemed like such an old soul most of the time.

“I wasn’t very good,” he admitted. “I was uncoordinated.”

That was hard to believe. Oliver’s every movement seemed so deliberate, so graceful. He was a man who knew his body, knew how to use it to its full effect.

“What about you?” he asked. “Did you play any sports?”

She fought back a gurgle of laughter. “I ran.”

“Track and field?”

“Cross country. I had to depend on others less that way. Team sports were never my thing. My
parents insisted that I do something athletic, and I agreed as it made me better rounded as a scholarship applicant.”

“And yet you’re a valuable member of a team now.”

“I live a life of irony,” she sighed. “And I’ve learned to play nice with others.”

“Mostly,” he teased. “You still run.”

“Every morning. How did you…?”

He tilted his head as his eyes dipped over her body, the flatness of her stomach, her toned thighs and calves.

Her cheeks suddenly felt very warm. “Right.”

“We should run together some morning,” he suggested.

She shook her head vehemently. “I don’t think so. I’ve seen you run.”

“Too fast for you?” he challenged.

“Too Parkour for me,” she retorted.

He threw her a crooked smile that suggested the matter wasn’t entirely closed, but he was willing to let it go for now.

His eyes returned to the game, but he continued the conversation. “You said your parents wanted you to play sports. So what about your family? What’s their story?”

“That’s the first time you’ve asked. Probably because you checked me out. My credentials. Checked out my credentials and background. Not checked me out checked me out.”

He looked back at her. “I did check you out.” And he winked.

Felicity took a gulp from her bottle of water and looked away.

“You rarely talk about them,” he persisted.

“My family is complicated, which is strange because they shouldn’t be. There are no dark skeletons in their past. Not that I’m suggesting your family has skeletons. I mean, we all have skeletons. Otherwise, our bodies would just flop all over the place, and our brains would end up in our spleen, which is a mystery in and of itself because what does a spleen even do, and…” She paused and shook her head, as though pushing a mental reset button. “I’ve really got to stop that.”

“My family has skeletons,” Oliver asserted. “They made their fortunes off the misfortune of others.”

“That’s not going to be your legacy.”

Oliver side-stepped the topic. “Why is your family complicated?”

“Why is any family complicated?” Felicity hedged. “Here’s the thing. My parents have put all their hopes and dreams into me. And have you ever been around Jewish mothers? You should meet mine. I specialize in IT; she specializes in guilt. She wants to know why I’m not settling down and having babies.”
“What do you tell her?”

“What I’m happy with the way things are.”

“Are you?”

His question sucked the wind from her as the conversation took a far more serious turn than she had anticipated. Both of her jobs required an enormous commitment, leaving little time for those things that used to seem so important but in retrospect weren’t (though she wished she still had time to go to Trivia Night with her friends from the IT Department). In the midst of those demanding jobs, she found unexpected friendships and a sense of purpose. So was she happy?

“Most of the time.” She reached over and snatched a nacho cheese laden chip from his plate, careful to not let the cheese drip. Turnabout was fair play. “What about you?”

He looked uncomfortable with the question but responded, “I’ll be happy when the city is cleaned up.”

“That’s no way to live.”

Her words were blunt but her tone soft. She could see the flickering of emotion in his eyes, but she couldn’t entirely decipher it.

“It just seems like things are getting worse, not better, and I’m trying to plug a hole in a dam by using a finger.”

She reached over and hooked her forefinger with his. “All the more reason to see the possibilities around you. Oliver, happiness isn’t something to be attained at some unknown point in the future. It’s something you have to find in the here and now. It’s the little things like hockey games and really good nacho cheese and buy one get one free. It’s spending time with people who are special to you and being able to let go long enough to laugh.”

“Felicity.”

“Yes?”

“I’m glad you think nacho cheese is a good thing because your sleeve is in my nacho cheese.”

She yelped and pulled back her arm. Sure enough, the orange, gooey, cheesy goodness was smeared on the sleeve of her leather jacket. She let out a half-groan, half-chuckle. “So much for being careful. I may as well have had the ketchup and mustard.”

He shot her a confused look but got up to retrieve a damp towel to wipe the garment.

Felicity stood and shrugged off the jacket. When she turned to look at him, he quickly turned his head, but she could see the gentle shaking of his body. Was he laughing? She was not particularly thrilled that she had done something embarrassing yet again, but maybe the outcome was worth it.

Oliver turned back around and had a straight face, except for the twitching of his lips. He took the jacket from her and gently rubbed the cheese off.

“Looks like you’re cleaning up all my messes today,” she chirped.

“God knows you’ve cleaned up enough of mine,” he replied holding the jacket out to her.

She took it from him, and as she did, their eyes locked onto one another, blue on blue. She caught a
glimpse of the man behind the affected mask and her breath caught within her. He was a man of flaws, of contradictions. Tragic and triumphant, scarred and beautiful, vulnerable and strong. Above all, he was a survivor and a hero. If only he could see himself the way she did, but that was something he would have to learn on his own.

He studied her a moment before asking, “Your mom wants you married off and having kids. Is that what you want? A family of your own?”

Was he worried about standing in her way of having a family? Never let it be said Oliver Queen was an undemanding boss, but he had yet to demand anything of her that she was unwilling to give. And at this point, she didn’t see where a husband and children could even fit into her existence. And then there was the small matter that now the bar was set very, very high for the next man to come along in her life.

Poor guy.

“I want to keep doing what I’m doing. I love my mom, but I’m not going to live my life for her. But down the road….way down the road, I can see myself getting married and having kids. Theoretically.”

“Any man would be lucky to have you, Felicity.” The rawness, the intensity of his tone, nearly made her drop the jacket.

The opening of the suite door interrupted the moment. “Mr. Queen,” a man, the earlier attendant, had appeared. “You asked to be notified when Mr. McMartin arrived. The younger Mr. McMartin is here, sir, but I don’t believe the elder Mr. McMartin will be in attendance tonight.”

“Thank you, Steve.”

“Is there anything else you need?” Steve asked.

“No,” Oliver replied. He looked to Felicity. “You?”

“No, thank you.”

At that, Steve nodded and exited the suite.

Felicity felt a mixture of relief and disappointment. “So this has been for nothing?”

“I wouldn’t say ‘nothing.’ I’m glad we got to do something together that didn’t involve business meetings, paperwork, or arrows. Besides,” Oliver added with a hint of a smile as he walked behind the bar and grabbed a bottle of Cristal, “we can still…invade.”

Oliver wasn’t kidding about invading—though he waited until the game was between periods. He reasoned that even if Frederick McMartin wasn’t present, there was nothing wrong with making contact with the family, as the McMartin Group was a family-run company. With the Cristal in one hand, and the other hand pressed against the small of Felicity’s back, he approached the owner’s suite like he, himself, owned the place. The security guard recognized him immediately and opened the door to allow the duo entrance.

The suite was much like the one Oliver and Felicity had just been in—leather and gleaming wood—except this one was full of people, some young, some old.
A sandy-haired man about Oliver’s age turned when the door opened. It took a moment for the man to register who his visitors were, but once he did, a broad grin spread across his face. “Look what the cat dragged in!”

Oliver plastered a smile on his face in response. “It was a bear, but in my defense, we were both really drunk at the time.”

The man clasped Oliver’s hand firmly and, if possible, his grin seemed to expand. “Good to see you, Ollie.”

“You, too.” Oliver looked to Felicity who stood by his side watching. “Felicity, this is Parker McMartin. He’s an old family friend. Parker, this is Felicity Smoak, my fiancée.”

Parker’s eyebrows shot up. “Your fiancée? It’s been awhile, Ollie. Didn’t realize just how long.” He took Felicity’s hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet the woman who finally domesticated Oliver Queen.”

“Likewise. Not that you domesticated Oliver. Or that you’re a woman. Likewise that it’s good to meet you. Which…I could have just left at…likewise.” Felicity grew flushed.

Parker laughed heartily and pressed his other hand over hers. “I like you.” He squeezed her hand before letting her go. He then turned to Oliver. “Where’d you find her?”

“Queen Consolidated. The IT Department. I had some trouble with a laptop. She fixed it for me.” A version of the truth was easiest to keep track of, after all.

“I’m really good with my hands,” Felicity offered, then paused. “That sounded a lot less dirty in my mind.”

Trying to smooth Felicity’s ruffled nerves, Oliver pulled her to him and pressed a quick, chaste kiss to her forehead. In response, she snuggled closer to his side, fitting perfectly under the crook of his arm, he noted. But when he felt her fingertips press lightly against his abdomen, he drew in a slight breath. She looked up at him and smiled nervously, oblivious to the effect she had on him.

Parker shook his head as he studied the couple. “You’re a keeper. I just didn’t think my old friend here would ever settle down.”

“I get that a lot,” she replied with a smile.

“So when’s the big day?”

“We…haven’t decided yet,” Felicity said as she and Oliver exchanged glances.

“I’d take her to the court house tomorrow if she’d let me. Less chance of her getting away.”

“You’ve kind of ruined all other men for me, silly.” Felicity chastised as she gently swatted his abdomen. She then turned her attention back to Parker. “It will be awhile. I’ve always wanted a big wedding. Besides, I think my mom would be heartbroken if she didn’t get to hover and fuss over the details.”

Oliver groaned jokingly. “Felicity really hates to disappoint her mother. Makes her feel guilty.”

“Well, Oliver,” said a curly-haired brunette who approached the trio, “I just hope your own mother is available for the nuptials. Maybe you should get married at the courthouse.”
“Claws in, Colleen,” Parker warned.

“I’m behaving. Mostly,” Colleen cooed in response before batting her eyes in faux innocence at Oliver. “I didn’t mean to sound so catty. I know it’s been a rough few months for Moira.”

“I’m confident my mother will be exonerated,” Oliver replied to the newcomer, keeping his tone neutral. The tightness in his jaw was impossible to miss from Felicity’s vantage point, however.

“Of course.” The brunette, about two inches taller than Felicity and armed with killer curves, stood before the blonde, studying her. “Colleen McMartin, Parker’s sister. Ollie and I are…old friends.”

“Felicity Smoak. And I can see why Oliver has made new friends.” As soon as the words slipped from her mouth, she wished she could take them back. “Oh,” she squeaked.

At that, Parker burst out laughing, and to Felicity’s surprise, so did Colleen. “I think I’m going to like you, Felicity Smoak,” Colleen finally managed.

“I can’t imagine why,” Felicity muttered.

“Oliver, we’re having a get-together at the house this Friday night,” Parker began. “You and Felicity should come.”

An in. They might not be making contact with Frederick McMartin himself, but this was a step in the right direction.

“Honey, are we busy on Friday?” Oliver asked looking at Felicity.

“I think we’re free,” Felicity replied, the opportunity not lost upon her, though she was still stunned at the turn of events.

“Good. Dinner’s at eight. I look forward to seeing you both.”

“I’m so sorry,” Felicity groaned when she and Oliver returned to the Queen family’s viewing suite.

“For what?” Oliver asked.

“I almost ruined things. Lucky for me Parker seems to think that everything is funny. I wonder how much he’d had to drink.”

“Parker is easy-going. Colleen is…”

“Just easy?” At that, Felicity slapped her hand across her mouth. “You should break up with me now. Like, right now. I can’t imagine that I am doing anything to help your cause. All I’m doing is embarrassing the both of us.”

“Hey, mission accomplished. You were perfect.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because you’re so guileless.”

Felicity did a double take. “Except that I’m not. I’m a lying liar. Thankfully my pants aren’t on fire.”
“If that old saying were true, I wouldn’t have any pants left to wear.” At that, Felicity’s eyebrow shot up, intrigued. “And you heard what Parker said. You’re a keeper.”

“You know, there are going to be a lot more questions about our wedding plans—plans that we don’t actually have.”

“We were doing fine.”

She crossed her arms. “Yeah, well, I was halfway afraid you were going to announce a taco bar at the reception, seeing as how I hate to disappoint my mom.”

Felicity was the one who mentioned her mother first, so why wouldn’t Mrs. Smoak be fair game? “Are you upset with me?” Oliver asked incredulously.

“Frequently, but right now, I’m just a little freaked out. Word is going to leak; I don’t know how we’ll keep it all quiet.”

He took a deep breath. “If you want out, say the word. I’ll find another way.”

She ran her hand through her hair. “There is no other way, and believe me, I’ve thought about it.”

“So have I.”

Walter had come through for him when all else had failed. With much of the Queen fortune tied up in investments and Queen Consolidated itself, Oliver didn’t have enough liquid assets to fully head off the hostile takeover, only to stalemate it. And now that the bank backing was likely to be rescinded, he was back to square one, or at least would be soon. He had investigated the possibility of surreptitiously purchasing controlling interest in the bank itself, but he ran into the same problem: that still required more liquid assets than he had. With his mother’s accounts frozen and Thea’s lack of interest in Queen Consolidated, he was running out of options. He had been working on building his own business reputation, but getting his father’s old friends to see him in a different light wasn’t easy, particularly in light of his history and divided attention.

“Isabel is on my father’s list.”

Felicity knew that already, knew that the list was a connect-the-dots for those who had in some way failed Starling City through greed and corruption. But she also knew Isabel was relatively young compared to others on the list and thus didn’t entirely fit the list’s profile. “Why?”

He pinched his lips together and shook his head slightly. “She’s shadowy. With the others, I could follow the breadcrumbs, uncover their corruption. With her, there’s nothing.”

“I have a theory.”

“Surprising,” he replied drily.

“You’re probably not going to like it, though.”

“Even more surprising.”

“Whatever this is with Isabel is personal, but it’s not about you. I think it has to do with your dad.”

“Felicity,” he began to protest.

“No,” she replied holding up her hand. “Hear me out. When I ran into her earlier today…”
“You ran into Isabel?”

“Well, more like she cornered me in the elevator—”

“You didn’t mention it to me.”

“I don’t tell you everything that happens to me or everything I think. There’s too much squirrel! going on.”

“Squirrel?”

“Right. You weren’t back yet when Up came out. You should watch it sometime. Good movie. Though I had a college professor that looked just like Mr. Fredericksen right down to the brown pants, bow tie, and tweed jacket, I mean, if a person can look like a cartoon character.”

“Felicity, focus.”

“Okay. So Isabel was being her delightful self. According to her, there are two types of women a Queen man marries: a goldigger or a fool. Because of my sneakers, she said I obviously wasn’t a goldigger, which left the fool. She thinks you cheated on me, and I’m an idiot for agreeing to marry you. Which, for the record, if we weren’t pretending, that would have been a deal breaker.”

“I’m sorry.”

Was he sorry Isabel cornered her or sorry he slept with her? Felicity wouldn’t tell him it was all right because it wasn’t. So she continued with her theorizing. “As Isabel spoke, it was as though she was personally offended that I would put myself in the position of playing the fool. And that got me thinking. Why would she care one way or the other? But she said kept referring to ‘a Queen man,’ as in a pattern of behavior. How many Queen men are there?”

“Just one.”

“One doesn’t constitute a pattern for an entire family. I don’t think that was a slip of the tongue.”

“My dad wasn’t a saint, but—”

“She’s beautiful, articulate, smart. She goes after what she wants. You didn’t resist. Why would he? Theoretically speaking, of course.” She swallowed hard. Was it tacky to accuse a dead man of having an affair with his son’s one-half hour stand? Probably. “So why was she on his list? And—”

“Could it help us to stop her now?” Oliver finished. And suddenly it made sense. His mother had warned him not to trust Isabel. He had dismissed her warning because of course he wouldn’t trust the woman leading the Stelmoor takeover attempt. But in the process, he’d overlooked something else. “I think my mother knows.”
Part Five: You Always Remember Your First Time (On TMZ)

It only took one day for Felicity’s semi-normal life to go up in flames.

Ironically, the day began with such promise. For once, she awoke before the screeching of her alarm clock, guaranteeing the darn thing would live to blare another day. After quickly using the bathroom, brushing her teeth, changing into running clothes (leggings and a moisture wicking long-sleeved shirt), and fighting an epic battle to pull her unruly bed-head hair back into a ponytail, Felicity was out the door for her morning run. The cool mid-November air was invigorating, if a bit too cool. In a few minutes, she’d be plenty warm though.

She stretched briefly on the stairs leading into her apartment building and prepared to lose herself in the music from her iPod. The sun was barely over the horizon, and it cast a rosy glow on the urban landscape. This was one of her favorite times of the day—before the world woke up and crazy happened.

In truth, she probably shouldn’t have been in such a good mood. Oliver had, once again, put her in an untenable position, this time by asking her to play the role of his fiancée. She didn’t think she’d ever get used to the curveballs he threw her, but she was at least getting pretty good at catching them. Not bad for a girl with questionable coordination.

Last night had actually been fun. She had thought being around Oliver would be difficult, especially playing the role of lovers after being so thoroughly friend zoned, but it had been surprisingly—well, she wouldn’t go so far as to say effortless—but it had felt natural to be by his side. More than anything, it was nice to be talking again about things other than work; she hadn’t realized just how much she had missed the ease of their friendship that had been lost—or at least on extended hiatus—since Russia.

The best part was that despite her rambling and insulting Colleen McMartin, she managed to make a favorable impression on the younger generation of McMarts. How was still a mystery to her, but Felicity was starting to feel confident that she would be able to help Oliver save his company. Team Arrow: 1. Isabel Rochev: 0.

Felicity made it only about half a block jogging before she caught something in her peripheral vision. It was unusual for anyone else to be out this early, but she realized she wasn’t alone, and whoever was there was catching up with her. Cautiously, she fingered the miniature container of pepper spray she carried on a plastic wrist chain similar to an old-fashioned telephone cord.

And just as she prepared to surprise her would-be assailant, Oliver fell into step with her. Her heart thumped in her chest, a sign of the adrenaline that had coursed through her body that now rushed in a wave of relief. She tugged the earbuds from her ears.

“What are you doing here?” She sounded less happy to see him than she felt.
“Getting ready to tune up my tractor before plowing the fields. You?”

“The same.” She paused for a moment and said, “That was you being sarcastic in response to an obvious question and not some weird code for…something, right?”

At that he chuckled. “Glad to see you have pepper spray.”

He did notice he’d scared her. Good. He shouldn’t be sneaking up on people anyway, well, except when he should. But he shouldn’t be sneaking up on her.

“I’m sure not going to be running around with a bow and arrow,” she replied.

“Right. Because what kind of person does something like that?”

It was her turn to chuckle. Oliver cracking a joke? She could grow to like that side of him. “You keep a good pace.”

“So do you.”

“I’m not used to running and talking,” she panted slightly. “Well, I’m used to running and I’m used to talking, just not at the same time.” They continued for another block before she added, “I usually run alone.”

“Thought we might change that up this morning.”

“You really don’t take no for an answer.”

“You said no to Parkour,” Oliver reminded her. “Not to me.”

“For the record, I’m not jumping over any obstacles unless my life depends on it.”

“It’s good for you to exercise different muscles. Challenge yourself.”

She scoffed at that. “The bruise I got on my thigh the last time I attempted anything remotely Parkour would suggest otherwise.”

Oliver looked at her, the question written all over his face. When did you try free running? He knew Felicity and Digg had trained together during the months he had returned to Lian Yu, when he’d been hiding from the destruction he’d left in the wake of his failures, in the wake of Tommy.

But he didn’t want to think about those five months.

Five months of hell, left with his demons and nothing else.

“I’m sorry I scared you. I would have called.”

“But my phone…Yeah, maybe on my lunch break I’ll head to the store and get another. It’s just the principle of the whole thing. I really wanted to find Betsy.”

Betsy? She named her phone Betsy?

“Don’t bother,” he replied digging into the pocket of his running pants and producing a sleek new phone.

He passed it off to her and her techno geek heart went pitter-patter. She had actually been eyeing the model on CNET, but it wasn’t supposed to be released for another month.
“This is…um, wow. Thank you, but you shouldn’t—”

He cut her off before she could finish her protest. “I need to be able to get in touch with you.”

“Of course.” Shiny. She liked shiny things, which either made her a raccoon trapped in a human’s body or very superficial in her estimation. “I don’t have any pockets.” The iPod was clipped to her waistband, and the key to her apartment was tied onto her running shoe. She supposed she could tuck the phone in her sports bra, but then it would get all sweaty and just…yuck.

Oliver responded by reaching over, taking the phone, and shoving the device back into his pocket for the time being. “In full disclosure, I planted a tracking device in this one. The power supply is independent from the phone itself.”

No more losing phones, theoretically. But the other aspect wasn’t lost on her. As long as she had her phone with her, Oliver or John would be able to locate her even if she couldn’t answer it. While this wasn’t something Felicity liked to think about, her association with Oliver—whether through his Oliver Queen persona or his Arrow persona—was inherently dangerous. Both had their share of enemies.

“Do you ever sleep?”

He looked surprised by her question.

“It’s just—you brought me home last night and then had to drive home yourself. I thought I got up early, but you’ve had time to get me a new phone that I don’t even know how you got hold of, install a tracking device—which is either really sweet or creepy, don’t know which—and meet me to go running.”

“That about covers it.”

“How do you even function?”

He considered her question. “You know how you don’t like crowds?” How did he know that? She’d never actually told him. “Sleep’s not really my thing.”

“You’ve just not been in the right bed.”

He chortled at her words.

“I mean, you’ve not been in a comfortable enough bed. My bed’s very comfortable.” Not making it better! “For sleeping,” she added hastily.

“Is that an invitation?” he teased.

“Absolutely not.”

She was sweaty, hot, from keeping up with him and talking at the same time as running. Today, he challenged her with a faster pace than her norm—but his words made her imagine another scenario where she’d be hot and sweaty, a scenario that didn’t involve running and did involve her bed with no sleep involved.

And it wouldn’t mean anything to him, she reminded herself, pushing the heady possibilities from her mind. He viewed sex so cavalierly, had been with so many women, and she would just be one in a long line. She wanted more than that for herself, wanted the emotional connection as well as the physical one. Of course, all of that was a moot point. Oliver wasn’t interested in her like that. He’d
made that perfectly clear after Moscow.

Seeing the frown lines etched between her eyes, Oliver silently cursed himself for obliquely teasing her about sex. The last thing he wanted to do was jeopardize their newfound truce, but he’d honestly thought she would stammer and launch into a ramble about mattress quality, not shut down entirely.

And it would all be a joke, just like it always was.

Only they weren’t back to where they’d been before. Sure, they’d actually enjoyed themselves the night before—and made a damn good team, too. But emotions, those were tricky, and he’d hurt her in Moscow, and she wasn’t ready to let go of that.

Maybe it was for the best.

When he had sat next to Isabel in that Moscow hotel lounge, vodka dulling certain senses and heightening others, all he could think was a beautiful woman wanted him with no strings attached. He was lonely and eager for a release, for a few moments of pleasure that he could snatch. Isabel didn’t see him with rose-colored glasses. She would never be disappointed in him because she would never allow herself to care enough to be disappointed. It seemed harmless and he’d certainly found the sex to be enjoyable.

It never occurred to him that Isabel might have ulterior motives.

And it never occurred to him that he would hurt Felicity.

Early on, Oliver knew Felicity was physically attracted to him. From her humorously inappropriate Freudian slips to the way he would catch her watching him in training, it was fairly plain, and he wasn’t above using her attraction to his advantage. He just never realized it went deeper than that for her, never dared hope it could, because he had nothing to offer her.

He was a man who had killed more people than he could count, who had at one point grown so accustomed to killing that he barely gave it a second thought. Now he questioned whether he was any better than the people on his father’s list.

He was also a man who couldn’t sleep through the night because every time he closed his eyes, he relived those things he’d rather forget.

There would be no happily ever after for him, no raising a family, no little league or hockey games.

And he figured he had an expiration date sooner than most.

Felicity was still so innocent in many ways. She had stared down evil, faced the worst in people, and yet she maintained her optimism.

And he would only disappoint her.

Felicity may have cast him in the role of hero, but one day she would look at him and realize he’d been the villain all along. His darkness would swallow her light.

And so it was easier to keep her at a distance than to close the expanse. It was for her own good. At least, that was what he had told himself, though he was beginning to recognize it may have been for his good, as well. She was the type of woman who would make him want that life of normalcy, of lazy Sunday afternoons in bed, movie nights with buttered popcorn, and “How was your day, honey” conversations.
But the distance hurt in ways he never imagined. The shared jokes, the simple touches, the way she provided a sounding board for his ideas—he found the loss of her companionship profound.

But as he reminded himself, it was kinder to be cruel, to put an end to any notion of a romantic relationship.

And then he’d gone and blown that to hell, asking her to play his lover, to put her reputation under scrutiny, her life on hold. Once again, he proved just how much he didn’t deserve her.

They continued in silence, an invisible barricade erected. Frustrated, Oliver found himself picking up his pace even more, attacking the pavement. He could hear her breathing more heavily, but even with her shorter legs, she kept up with him at least for a time.

Ahead, he could see the entrance to Muir Park, its low landscaping wall offering a hurdle and a challenge. “Come on,” he encouraged her before surging ahead.

“We agreed no Parkour, Oliver!” she grumbled when she saw him jump over a low wall.

“It’s just like jumping a hurdle on the track, not really even Parkour,” he replied running in place waiting for her.

“I told you I didn’t run track and field!” she protested as she continued running on the sidewalk.

Once she took off, he followed. “You’ve got this,” he encouraged running parallel to her on the other side of the wall.

She circled around to take the wall at a better angle and leaped over it, albeit awkwardly.

Her arms went up in the air in a girly imitation of Rocky Balboa after he climbed the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” Oliver asked.

“No one likes a gloater.” But she smiled as she said it, the earlier tension between them easing somewhat. “I could just as easily have fallen on my face.”

Her smile was infectious. He wasn’t sure how she did it, but she chased away the shadows. “I’ll have you scaling walls in no time.”

“More field work for me,” Felicity replied with a near breathless laugh as she stopped running and instead, bent over at the waist, and rested her hands against her thighs.

“I’ve created a monster.”

“Well, this monster needs to get back to her lair.”

“Turning back already?” he asked.

“It’s two-and-a-half miles back. Every morning when I hit the park, I know it’s time. I’ve got to get home and get ready for work. I don’t want to be late.”

“It’s not even 7:20.”

“All you have to do is shower and get dressed, maybe brood a bit, and ta-da, you look amazing. It takes me longer to get ready. Taming the hair is a feat in itself, and my boss hates when I’m late.”
“Your boss must be an absolute asshole.”

She raised an eyebrow. “He has his moments.”

The two made it back to Felicity’s apartment building, once again at a faster pace than she was accustomed to running, but maybe it had been a good thing. Oliver pushed her to do more than she thought she was capable. She might be paying for it later, but for now, she felt invigorated. She wasn’t sure if it was the runner’s high or the Oliver high.

“So I’ll see you in a little while,” she said by way of farewell as she knelt down and retrieved her apartment key from her shoestring.

“Wait. Where are you going?” he asked, his hand gently cradling her elbow after she stood and took the first of the concrete steps leading into her building.

“I’m not going to work like this. I’m going inside to get ready.”

“Felicity, I need a shower.”

“Yes, you do. So do I.”

“I brought a change of clothes in my car. I was hoping you wouldn’t mind if I…”

“You aren’t taking a shower in my apartment,” she replied bluntly. “I need to get ready, and I can’t if you’re…you know.” Naked.

Oliver watched as her teeth grazed her bottom lip. Her cheeks were rosy from the run, her face scrubbed of any makeup. He could make out a few tiny freckles on her nose.

She was stunning.

And he was being an idiot. Hadn’t he just been thinking of how he needed distance from her? Knowing and doing were two completely different beasts.

“I am presumptuous.” He dug her new phone from his pocket and pressed it into her hand. “Here. I’ll see you at the office.”

He turned to walk toward his car, but she stopped him. “Oliver, wait!” With some hesitation and an expression that suggested she was going to regret it, she added, “I get first dibs on the shower.”

“You won’t even know I’m there.”

Somehow she doubted that.

The only bathroom in Felicity’s apartment was en suite. After finishing her shower, she wrapped herself in a bathrobe before opening the door to her bedroom. She figured while Oliver was in the shower, she would get dressed. Per usual, she had her work clothes picked out for the week and all lined up in her closet, a holdover from when she was a child and chose her school clothes for an entire week at a time. It was probably a good thing because her apartment, while not the wreck it had been the night before when Oliver arrived to pick her up, was still doubling as her closet with all the outfits she had decided against wearing to the hockey game.

Her work outfit for the day, a Mondrian inspired cream, black, and royal blue colorblock sheath dress from Calvin Klein, was one of her newer purchases. When she worked IT in the bowels of the building, she could get away with button up shirts paired with sweater vests and khaki skirts. As the
CEO’s executive assistant, she had a more visible role and had to dress accordingly. It was like playing dress up, and a part of her enjoyed it at first, but there was always so much to think about. Accessorizing properly. Being an extension of her boss’s image. Tough when there was the part of her that also wanted to wear Vulcan ears her dad bought for her at a Star Trek convention.

She read an article online about dressing the part of EA, and it suggested fashionable but not too trendy; at least one sexy fashion statement but not sexy all over, as that broadcast desperation; and spring for a few expensive wardrobe pieces that could be utilized in various outfits (though she couldn’t be sure how seriously to take the article since the next article was a how-to guide for seducing him—whoever he is—and, as the article put it, “making his pickle get the most out of the tickle”).

She’d never be able to look at pickles the same way again. The food, that is.

She planned to pair the dress with a skinny black belt and the shoes Oliver bought for her. Modest but fashionable dress. Check. Sexy shoes. Eh, it would work as long as she didn’t break a heel this time.

Speaking of sexy, she could hear the splashes in the shower though the door was closed.

Once again, it struck her that Oliver was in her shower. Naked.

It was silly to get worked up over something as simple as a shower. A whole freaking wall and shower curtain separated them. It was as foolish as going, “Oh my goodness, under those clothes, he’s naked.” No duh. And being naked in the shower? That’s what people do in the shower. They get naked. Very, very naked.

Mind out of the gutter. And shower, she silently added.

Running her fingers along the fabric of her new dress, she quickly realized she would need to wear a slip under it. The cream material would look too transparent. She went to her lingerie drawer and pulled out a matching bra and panties set, along with an off-white slip that hit about mid-thigh, as she recalled from the last time she wore it.

Still hearing the water running, she slipped off her robe and slid the panties up her legs, followed by putting on the bra. She actually liked this bra; much more flattering than the uniboob of a sports bra. Subsequently, she pulled the slip over her head; the satin material skimmed over her slender body.

Next, she dug out nude stockings. She eyeballed the length of her dress and decided the stockings would work. The last thing she wanted was for the lace tops to peek out from the hem of her skirt.

She squirted lotion on her hands, rubbed the excess off on her legs, and pulled on the left stocking, careful not to snag it with her fingernails.

And suddenly she heard the water shut off. Crap. He took a fast shower. Felicity quickened her movements, trying to get the other stocking on without ripping it.

But the bathroom door opened.

Oliver drank her in, exhaling softly. Felicity sat on the edge of the bed, dressed only in a slip, her blonde hair still damp and tousled. Her right leg was outstretched, long, lean, and lithe. She adjusted a stocking, toying with the lace on her thigh before she tugged at the hem of her slip, trying to make the scant material longer.

He wondered what that leg would feel like hooked around his hip.
Oliver swallowed hard, willing his body not to betray him.

Her eyes widened slightly when she turned her head to look at him. He wore a towel—and she was fairly certain that was it. The fabric was slung around his waist, dangerously low, she thought. And wow. Water droplets ran down his chiseled torso until swallowed up by the towel. Her eyes dipped lower. She could faintly see the smattering of light brown hair under his belly button that ran downward in a trail and disappeared under the fabric.

She thought she detected some tenting down there.

Tantalizing.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you would still be getting dressed.”

“Clothes come off much faster than they go on.” As her brain caught up to her mouth, she shook her head slightly, mortified. “That’s why I’m not finished dressing.” It was bad enough to suffer from foot-in-mouth disease in a setting like the foundry basement, surrounded by equipment and Diggle and no chance of anything igniting between them. But with Oliver in her bedroom and neither one of them fully dressed, and with the yearning she felt settling into an ache, the words took on a new level of inappropriate. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I say the most ridiculous things around you. Good news is that my foot-in-mouth disease is not contagious.”

“Felicity—”

But she ignored him, avoiding his gaze as she stood and reached for her dress. “I’ll go put this on in the other room. Give you some privacy to get unnaked.” No, that wasn’t how she wanted to put it. She began to stammer more. “I mean, to get dressed.”

A few minutes later, Oliver emerged from Felicity’s bedroom, fully dressed and looking almost perfectly professional. His dark dress pants contrasted with the crisp whiteness of his button up shirt. A tie hung under the collar of his shirt, but he had yet to tie it. He draped his suit jacket on the back of her sofa.

“Felicity?” he called out.

“In the kitchen.”

He rounded the corner and could see her behind the counter. She had her dress on, but the back remained partially open, giving him a view of her creamy skin and peek of the mostly covered lingerie.

“The zipper’s stuck,” she said miserably. “Would you mind? I don’t want to break it.”

He closed the distance between them and stood behind her. Gently, he moved aside her long hair, placing it over her shoulder. His fingers brushed against her neck in the process, and she trembled ever so slightly. In examining the zipper, he could easily see the silky material of the slip had been caught. He worked to free it from the zipper and slowly slid the zipper the rest of the way up, careful not to snag her lingerie again.

“Thanks. I’m pretty sure the zipper was possessed by Satan,” she quipped, trying to keep the mood light. “And since the Winchesters aren’t here, you did in a pinch.”

He tried to follow her line of reasoning. Winchester was a type of rifle. What that had to do with zippers or Satan was lost on him. “Another pop culture reference?”
“Supernatural. The show’s been on the air for a long time, but it’s not as good as it used to be, so you’re not really missing out.”

“Are we okay?” he asked.

“We’re good. I need to go finish getting ready. Help yourself to coffee. There are some K-cups next to the machine and mugs on the tree. If you want some breakfast, I have cereal in the cupboard—but some of it’s stale, so you might want to try a bite first—and,” she reached into the frig and retrieved a bag of English muffins, “I like these toasted with a dollop of cottage cheese and applesauce. Sounds,” she motioned iffy with her hand, “but it’s good.”

He watched her nervously flit around the small kitchen. “You don’t have to take care of me.”

“Yeah, I do.” With that, she brushed past him and retreated into the bathroom. A moment later, he could hear her hair dryer.

“You smell.” John Diggle’s blunt assessment of Oliver had the younger man sniffing himself. “Like Felicity,” Digg clarified.

Oliver walked toward his desk past his hulking partner in crime fighting. To the outside observer, Diggle was Oliver’s subordinate, his hired muscle. They maintained that illusion at Queen Consolidated to avoid the inevitable questions.

Oliver had witnessed business associates look past Digg, dismiss him because of his perceived role. What they didn’t know was that Digg was a good judge of character.

Too bad John didn’t think of much of his character right now.

“Must be because I showered at her place this morning. Remind me I’ll need to keep some things there just in case so that I smell a little less...”

“Pretty?” Digg completed. “Please tell me you two didn’t.”

“Didn’t what?” Felicity piped in as she walked into the office and handed Oliver a tablet with his schedule for the day, as was their habit.

“You two crazy kids have fun last night?” Diggle asked.

Felicity’s eyes cut from Digg to Oliver, sensing the tension in the room. She imagined John wasn’t too thrilled with their plan and she’d be hearing about it later. “Well, now that I’m supposedly marrying Oliver for his money, he’s going to foot the bill for a penalty box for me. Not that I’ll be in it. It’ll be like my own personal time out box, and I get to be the ref.”

“We didn’t agree on that part,” Oliver said to her before turning his attention to Diggle. “Hockey gives her ideas.”

“Heaven forbid I get ideas,” Felicity drolled. “You should’ve come, John. It was fun.”

Digg wasn’t invited—and the lack of an invitation hadn’t been an oversight. Evidently Felicity didn’t realize that. But fun? It wouldn’t have been fun to watch the slow dance those two were doing around each other, not when he knew it would all blow up in their faces in the long run. He had made his thoughts clear to Oliver and would do the same with Felicity once they had some privacy.
But now wasn’t the time, so he played it off as a joke. “White men with sticks? For some reason, that doesn’t appeal to me.”

“Felicity, how’s my morning looking?” Oliver asked.

“Your schedule should be cued up on your tablet—if you’d bother to look. Horse,” she pointed to Oliver and then held up the tablet. “Water.”

Diggle cleared his throat loudly, trying to camouflage a chuckle.

Oliver tapped his fingers on the desk, distracted. “I need you to cancel my meetings.”

“Okay,” Felicity replied, perplexed. “And where should I say you’ve gone?”

Oliver stood and tugged at the hem of his suit jacket. “Prison.”

Felicity’s mouth hung open as he walked past her. “I can’t say that!”

The thirty-mile ride to Iron Heights Prison was one of the top three most uncomfortable rides Oliver Queen had ever experienced. Digg drove the Mercedes town car while Oliver sat in the back seat, papers spread out and laptop open. But every time Oliver looked up, he could see Digg’s eyes glance at the rear view mirror, and the man was pissed off.

Finally, Digg broke his silence. “What are you doing, Oliver?”

“Answering e-mails.”

“You know that’s not what I’m asking.”

“Are we going to do this now?” Oliver asked. When John didn’t reply, he added, “I guess we are.” He closed his laptop. “Before you take my head off, I didn’t sleep with Felicity. I’m not going to sleep with her. Not that she’s offering.”

“Why were you showering at her apartment?”

“She runs every morning. I had to make sure she would be okay, so I ran with her.”

“And this morning is different…”

“Because we appeared together in public last night.”

Diggle exhaled loudly in understanding. “Did you see any cameras?”

“No, but I couldn’t take that chance. If word leaks…”

“When word leaks,” Diggle corrected.

“I’ve got to protect her.”

An image of Felicity surrounded by reporters shouting questions at her, impeding her path, filtered into Diggle’s mind. He gripped the steering wheel more tightly. “You could’ve protected her by not dragging her into this scheme.”

Digg wasn’t telling Oliver anything he didn’t already know, and it certainly wasn’t something he wanted to hear, so he side-stepped. “You should’ve seen her last night. She was brilliant.”
“I wasn’t invited,” Digg reminded him, though it was hard to ignore the obvious pride in Oliver’s voice when he spoke of Felicity. He had to admit that he was curious, perhaps in that same way people are curious when they drive past a car crash or an arrest. “So, did she keep her cool when meeting with your big shots?”

“No, she lost her cool actually. Rambled about…I’m not even sure what. Then she insulted an ex-girlfriend of mine.”

“Right. Sounds brilliant,” Digg replied blandly.

“But she’s endearing.”

“That she is.” Diggle paused a beat. “You two look like you’ve made up.”

“We weren’t fighting.”

“Right,” Digg chuckled. “You’d have to be talking for that.”

“This will all be over soon, and things will get back to what passes for normal.”

Diggle shook his head. Oliver wasn’t lying to him; Oliver was lying to himself.

Iron Heights Prison had strict rules about visitation. Much to the consternation of the guard on desk duty in the front office, Oliver Queen was never a man who felt that rules applied to him.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Queen, but our policy is clear. Visitation is Wednesdays only, from 1:30-3:45 p.m. Today is only Tuesday.”

“This is important,” Oliver reiterated through the speaker/microphone combo located next to the bullet-proof glass window that allowed him to see the clerk with whom he communicated.

“I’m sure it is.”

“Then surely an exception can be made in this case.”

“You people think that just because you have—”

“He can go in with me.” Laurel Lance’s voice cut into the conversation as she walked up behind Oliver. The clicking of her heels on the tile floor was a familiar cadence, but as Oliver turned to look at her, he was struck by her noticeable thinness. Laurel had always been fit; now she looked almost frail.

“Are you sure, Ms. Lance?” the clerk asked.

“The D.A.’s office has no objection to Mr. Queen seeing his mother.”

The guard did not look particularly pleased as he pressed a button to temporarily unlock the door. “He,” pointing to Diggle, “will need to stay out here.”

Oliver looked back at John and shrugged. Diggle merely stood, hands clasped behind him, in a military at-ease stance.

Laurel walked through the door, briefcase in hand, her heels continuing their clicking on the tile
“Thank you, Laurel.” Talk about dumb luck—though his thoughts immediately went to what she was doing there. Shouldn’t Jean Loring, his mother’s attorney be present during questioning?

“I’m here to help her, Ollie,” she said, her voice low.

“How did you know what I was thinking?”

The corners of her mouth turned up, but the smile did not quite reach her eyes. “I used to be good at reading you.”

A guard led them outside a room where, though the window in the door, Oliver saw his mother waiting.

Laurel tentatively laid her hand on his arm but quickly removed it. “Whatever it is, I hope you can settle it in five minutes because that’s all the time you’ll have.”

“Laurel, there’s something I should tell you. Can we talk later?”

“With your mom’s case, I shouldn’t be seen talking to you even now. It looks—” she shook her head.

Oliver scrubbed his hand over his face. “Are you okay?”

Laurel had always been so strong, sure of herself, but she’d also been to hell and back. Oliver remembered all-too-well how she’d thrived when she had a vendetta and crumbled when she could no longer blame the vigilante—him—for what happened to Tommy.

Her stony eyes wavered. No, she wasn’t fine. She was prosecuting a case she had no business prosecuting. Most mornings, she had to remind herself to put one foot in front of the other.

“I’m fine.”

Her clipped tone let Oliver know that was all she would say. *I’m fine. I’m fine.*

Reluctantly, he turned his attention back to the woman waiting in the visitation room. Through the reinforced glass window on the door, Oliver could see Moira Queen handcuffed to the table in the room. The whole place was gray from the block walls, to the tile floor, and the stainless steel table. Even Moira’s normally luminescent skin had a gray pallor to it.

In he walked. He could hear the buzz of the door locking after him.

When Moira Queen saw Oliver enter through the door rather than Laurel, she sat up, her back ramrod straight. It wasn’t visiting day, unless she had somehow lost track of time, and the look of alarm filtered through her features immediately. “Is Thea okay?”

“Thea’s fine.” Oliver sat across from his mother and clasped her hands. They felt small and cold. Almost instantly, he moved to stand. “I’m going to get the guard to unchain you. This is unnecessary.”

But Moira clasped onto his hand and stilled his movement. “Don’t. It doesn’t matter.”

And so Oliver settled across from her, rubbing her hands, trying to warm them. “How are you, Mom?”
“Well, one day is pretty much the same as the next. I’m fine. But you’re not,” Moira said directly. “Tell me.”

Oliver considered sugar-coating it, framing his request in a plausible story. Now faced with his mother, he couldn’t quite find the words, so he got to the point. “I only have five minutes, and I need to know more about Isabel Rochev.”

Of all the things Moira Queen might have expected to hear from Oliver, that wasn’t one of them. “All you need to know about her is she can’t be trusted.”

“You’ve already told me that, but I need to know about her.”

Moira tilted her head in that knowing way. “Why are you asking about Isabel?”

“It was suggested to me that Dad knew her.”

Moira froze almost imperceptibly. “He did. Your father knew many people.” It was a diplomatic answer, a politician’s response, her way of answering a question and revealing nothing.

“Stellmoor is mounting a takeover of Starling National Bank.”

Moira’s eyes widened in understanding. “The financing.”

“Right. The financing.”

“You can’t let her gain control of QC.”

“I’m doing what I can to secure financing elsewhere.”

Moira took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. This is my fault. I should be helping you.”

“You can help. Anything you can tell me about Isabel would be useful.”

Moira considered her words carefully. “There’s the Isabel you see. Then there’s a layer just underneath that. You scratch the surface and you think you know her, but she’s something else entirely. Someone else entirely.”

“Mom, I need you to stop protecting me, stop protecting Dad. Whatever else there is, I need to know.”

The pleading in her son’s eyes pulled at her. “There’s nothing else I can say, Oliver. But telling me to stop protecting you? If it were in my power, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you or for your sister.”

He could tell from the set of her shoulders and the tilt of the chin that the matter was closed as far as she was concerned.

“There is one other thing.”

“Yes?” she questioned.

“I should warn you in case this goes public. You may hear about an engagement.”

Moira looked at her son questioningly and swallowed hard. “Walter’s engaged?”

“No. Not Walter.” He watched as relief washed over her features. “Reports may emerge that I’m
engaged.”

The relief was short-lived.

“And would these reports be correct?” Moira surveyed her son. His choice of words was certainly odd.

Oliver looked at her and pursed his lips together, saying nothing.

Through the years, Moira had noted the similarities between Oliver and his father. As a child, Oliver looked so much like Robert did as a boy. Then there were the shared mannerisms, or at least had been before Oliver was shipwrecked. The way they walked, the ease with which they laughed. Now her son’s reaction was nothing like Robert’s when Robert told his mother he was getting married; of course, Moira’s mother-in-law wasn’t in prison, either.

“I wasn’t aware you are seeing anyone exclusively.” She still wasn’t convinced that he was.

“Felicity Smoak is the name that might come up.”

“That name is familiar.”

“Felicity worked with Walter at QC. She helped me with a few computer issues, and we became friends. Now she and I work together. She was at the hospital after Walter’s rescue.”

“Yes, the young woman who brought flowers.” Moira tilted her head. “What are you doing, Oliver?”

“If you are asked, I need you to make supportive statements. Make clear that Felicity is a trusted friend, a person of integrity. You’re happy and you approve.”

“I’m not happy, and I don’t approve. I don’t know anything about this girl, and I don’t know with what you’ve become embroiled.” At Oliver’s exasperated look, she added, “Wipe that look from your face. You’ve been taking lessons from your sister. You have told me there might be reports of an engagement, not that you are actually engaged.”

“Felicity is my friend. She’s quirky and smart, compassionate and brave. She’s putting her life on hold to help me, to help our family’s company.”

“And attractive, as I recall. You care about her.”

“She’s my friend,” Oliver repeated, his voice softening.

“You and Laurel?” Moira asked.

Oliver shook his head. “Not for a long time.”

Moira managed a smile. “I would very much like to meet your friend.”

“Your dinner’s getting cold.” Felicity looked up at the salmon ladder as Oliver took the bar and propelled his body upward, another ring closer to the top.

“Yes, dear,” Oliver grunted, his physical exertion evident in the bulging of his muscles and the light sheen of sweat on his naked torso.
“It can wait,” she muttered to herself, appreciating the view.

Digg narrowed his eyes and shook his head. “Are you two trying to drive me crazy?”

“You’re just in a bad mood because Lyla is out of town,” Felicity teased.

“And that you didn’t get forks. You know I hate using chopsticks.”

“It’s because of your big man-hands.” Felicity reached into her purse and produced a cellophane wrapped fork. She tried to toss it Digg, but it went way off its target.

“What else do you keep in there?” Digg asked as he bent to pick it up.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Felicity took a bite of rice and turned back to her trio of monitors. “So with Mrs. Queen not really giving any new information to Oliver about Isabel, and public information being so scant about her, I think I have an idea of where we can find—”

Felicity’s new phone began ringing, and she jumped in surprise at the ringtone, the song “Shirt Skirt, Long Jacket,” which began to blare. She looked back up, “Seriously, Oliver?”

She looked at the screen and saw JoJo’s name. “Hold that thought.” She slid her finger across the phone’s touchscreen to answer the call. “Hey.”

“Smoaky, what is going on?” JoJo’s tone was one of near panic.

“I’m having dinner. Is everything okay?”

“You tell me.”

“I guess so?” What was going on with JoJo that she was in a tizzy?

“Unbelievable. We spent the weekend trying to exorcise him. I even fell off the ice cream wagon for you. And now you’re engaged to Oliver?”

Felicity swallowed hard. “Um, where exactly did you hear that?”

“It’s all over PEOPLE’s website.”

Cradling the phone with her shoulder, Felicity quickly typed in People Magazine’s website address. She was greeted with articles about Miley Cyrus’s latest antics (boring), the premiere of Catching Fire, and Prince George’s christening.

And then she saw it: Oliver Queen’s Rumored Fiancée Felicity Smoak: Five Things to Know. A picture of Oliver dressed in a tuxedo accompanied the headline.

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

Without waiting for her friend to respond, Felicity pressed ‘end call’ on the phone screen and sat stunned, looking at the headline on her computer monitor. Screwing up her courage, she clicked on the link and began to read.

**Oliver Queen’s Rumored Fiancée Felicity Smoak: Five Things to Know**

PEOPLE MAGAZINE ONLINE
One of America’s most eligible bachelors may now be off the market.

Oliver Queen, the former tabloid staple – who spent five years shipwrecked on a deserted island in the North China Sea but has since taken over the reins of his family’s multi-billion dollar company, Queen Consolidated – is rumored to be engaged to Felicity Smoak.

Smoak, 25, is an executive assistant at Queen Consolidated, and an insider tells PEOPLE she and Queen, 28, “are definitely seeing each other.” (Though a Smoak source says the two are strictly friends.)

In September 2012, Queen returned to Starling City five years after being presumed dead when his family’s yacht, the Queen’s Gambit, sank in a hurricane. He was the sole survivor of the ill-fated voyage that claimed the lives of his father, billionaire Robert Queen, as well as Sara Lance, sister of his former girlfriend, Laurel Lance, and the crew of the ship.

Since the heir’s return, the Queen family has endured struggles and scandals alike. Queen himself was arrested and accused of being a hooded vigilante before being proven innocent (we can’t make this stuff up, readers). His sister, Thea Queen, 19, narrowly escaped a jail sentence following her involvement in a DUI. His step-father, Walter Steele, 51, suffered a four-month long captivity at the hands of unknown assailants. Currently, Moira Queen, 50, Oliver’s mother, is preparing to stand trial for her alleged role in a terrorist plot that resulted in the deaths of more than five hundred residents of The Glades, a low-income Starling City borough.

A source close to the mogul confirms that Queen met Smoak last year when he asked the Queen Consolidated employee for computer advice. A friendship developed and, from there, romance blossomed. It is reported that the two recently vacationed together in Moscow where he proposed marriage. Here are five things to know about Oliver’s rumored future Queen, Felicity Smoak ...

1. She is smart. Very smart.
   Don’t let the job title of executive assistant fool you. Smoak attended Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) on a full academic scholarship and graduated summa cum laude in only three-and-a-half years. She was recruited by top tier companies across the nation, including Wayne Enterprises, but elected to work at Queen Consolidated to be closer to her family.

   While working in the IT division of Queen Consolidated, Smoak was credited with developing a utilities program coupled with hardware that cuts energy costs in QC’s manufacturing and office facilities by half without impacting productivity. The program has since been implemented in several government buildings across the state of California.

   We’re told that Smoak’s change in job position to executive assistant was at the request of Oliver Queen himself but that she still dabbles in IT work. “Mr. Queen is navigating through shark infested waters right now,” an unnamed employee told PEOPLE. “He needed someone by his side that he could trust implicitly. That person is Felicity. I think the relationship grew from that.”

2. She once dated Aaron Rodgers.
   Oliver Queen isn’t the first hottie that Smoak has dated. She now enjoys a close friendship with Aaron Rodgers, MVP quarterback of the Green Bay Packers, but a few years ago she was his main squeeze. Their connection goes back to location, location, location: both hail from Chico, California.
Smoak and Rodgers amicably parted ways in late 2006. “He’s a few years older than her, and they were at different points in their lives, so it didn’t work out. Felicity was just beginning college, and Aaron had already been drafted by the Green Bay Packers and was learning under the tutelage of Brett Favre,” said an unnamed source.

“I just think he’s a very special [person],” Smoak said of Rodgers.

One extra special reminder of their relationship still lives in Chico, a chocolate lab named Dexter (yes, after that Dexter). Says a close pal, “Aaron was buying a pup for his parents and couldn’t resist buying the dog’s sibling for Felicity.”

All’s well that ends well. While Smoak has moved on with Queen, the notoriously private Rodgers is rumored to be engaged to his longtime girlfriend, also from Chico.

3. She is Jewish.

With the holidays just around the corner, be prepared to say “Happy Hanukkah” rather than “Merry Christmas” to Smoak.

“Felicity’s family isn’t overly religious,” says a Smoak family insider, “but they take their Jewish heritage very seriously.”

Her great-grandparents emigrated from Germany to the United States shortly after Adolf Hitler assumed power following the death of German President Hindenburg in 1934.

Another family friend says, “Felicity had a pretty idyllic upbringing. Her father is a dentist, her mother an optometrist. They’ve always been very involved in Felicity’s life and pushed her to reach her full potential.”

Snagging a billionaire? Score one for the Smoaks.

*Mazel tov.*

4. She is not Oliver Queen’s typical conquest.

The Queen scion is perhaps known more for his rumored antics in the bedroom than the boardroom. A number of beauties have graced his arm over the years, from socialites like Colleen McMartin, to lingerie models like Patria Jorgensen, and even childhood friend, Laurel Lance, just to name a few. So what sets this 5’6” blonde-haired, blue-eyed stunner apart from the rest?

“Quite honestly, she’s a little nerdy,” laughs an insider. “Not the type of woman you’d expect Oliver Queen to marry. On the other hand, she is a knockout and doesn’t even know it.”

We’ve been told that Smoak prefers wearing glasses to contact lenses, has the tendency to get flustered in social situations, is a science fiction fan, and isn’t afraid to tell Oliver no. Maybe that goes back to being smart, *very* smart.

“She’s the quintessential good girl next door who fell for the bad boy.”

Only this good girl is smoking (or is that Smoaking?) hot.

5. She has a wild side.

Though Smoak has a reputation as a straight shooter, we’ve been told that she has a bit of a rebellious streak in her, as well.
“Felicity has a tattoo on her lower back that literally spells ‘trouble,’ as well as multiple piercings.” According to a friend of Smoak’s, the decision to get the tattoo was impulsive and fueled by an excess of alcohol. “She thought she could hold her liquor, but she’s a real lightweight,” the source added.

Maybe Felicity Smoak is Oliver Queen’s type, after all.

*Keep up with Oliver Queen in the pages of PEOPLE Magazine by subscribing now.*

Along with the article appeared three photographs. One was from their Tuesday morning run that screamed out to her, “Hello world, my name is Felicity Smoak, and I’m sweaty!”

The second picture was taken at the hockey game the night before. Evidently, one of the shooters present at the game noticed the two of them in the Queen suite and took the picture with a telescoping lens. In the photo, her hand was outstretched, her fingers tangled with Oliver’s, and the engagement ring was in full view. Felicity briefly wondered if anyone would notice that her sleeve was also in the nacho cheese on Oliver’s plate. Of course, if that wasn’t enough, PEOPLE magazine placed an inset, close-up photo of the engagement ring with an estimated price tag.

The last photograph was from the Rebuild the Glades charity gala. In it, Felicity was touching Oliver’s face—wiping away blood, as she recalled, covering for his Arrow activities. It was a gesture that came across as far more intimate than she ever intended.

“No, no, no, no…”

“Did you already find something?” Oliver asked dropping from the Salmon ladder. He grabbed a nearby towel and draped it around his neck.

“Oh, I found something all right. It’s bad. It’s really, really bad.”

She could feel the heat emanating from Oliver as he leaned over her shoulder to scan the article. Diggle stood on the other side of her and began to read, as well. As soon as he realized what the article was about, he shot Oliver his best, “I told you so” look before stepping back from the two of them.

“You dated Aaron Rodgers?” Oliver asked as he made it to the portion of the article about Felicity’s supposed old flame.

“Of course not. I’ve never even met him. They need better fact checkers. Everybody knows that Favre did not take Rodgers under his wing.”

“Right. Everyone,” Oliver deadpanned.

“All these so-called sources…” Felicity covered her mouth in horror. These were people who supposedly knew her, and they were speaking so freely with the press. Why would they?


Felicity groaned.

Oliver kept reading. “You have a tattoo?”
She shifted nervously in her chair. “Maybe.”

“That spells ‘trouble’?” Oliver continued.

“You have no idea how much. My family is going to think we’re really engaged, and they’re going to be so disappointed in me.”

Oliver shot her a look of annoyance.

“Not that you’re a disappointment. It would be the not telling them part. Of course, there hasn’t been anything to tell, but if I tell them that, there’s no telling how…”

“Felicity. Deep breath.”

“And I’m pretty sure my mom is going to flip out over the tattoo. She always said I couldn’t be buried in the family cemetery if I had a tattoo. But I guess of the two big shockers,” she held out her hands like a balancing scale, “I’m thinking the engagement will outweigh the tattoo.”

Oliver shook his head. Felicity was making him dizzy.

“If you have any other bad news, now might be a good time to spring it on her. Get it all over with at once,” Digg suggested.

Oliver squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath before saying quietly, “I’m sorry.”

“I could hack into PEOPLE’s servers. Do a little deley-delete.” Felicity wriggled her fingers in the air, as though eager to put them to good old-fashioned illegal use.

Before he had a chance to respond, Oliver’s cell phone buzzed with a new text message. He looked at the screen.

From Thea

sent 6:24 p.m.

WTF? Is there something you want to tell me?

A link followed the message.

Oliver clicked on the link, which opened his cell phone’s web browser to TMZ’s website. Without saying anything, Felicity grabbed the phone from his hand, pushed a couple of buttons, and the image on Oliver’s phone was mirrored on her computer monitors.

“Do you ever miss the old days when we could count on Oliver Queen for good clean family fun?” One of the TMZ reporters asked as an introduction to the segment.

The video cut to archived footage of Oliver walking down the street with two women—one on each arm. When the young Oliver saw the camera coming at them, he struck it, yelling out, “Get that [----]ing camera out of my [----]ing face.” Censors bleeped part of his words, but it was still obvious what he said.

“And who could forget the time he pissed on a cop’s tire?” the reporter asked.

Archival video showed Oliver with his back to the camera near a police squad car; the obvious sound of liquid hitting pavement could be heard on the shaky video.
The screen cut back to the reporter. “Within the last few hours, word has come out that Oliver Queen, once called the rich man’s Lindsay Lohan, is engaged.”

A “shocked” sound effect punctuated the news. The video then shifted to the bullpen of the TMZ headquarters. Numerous casually dressed TMZ paparazzi sat there discussing the situation.

“Poor girl,” said one woman, who looked to be in her mid-twenties.

A bearded man with oily hair added, “Not for long. When a man’s as rich as Oliver Queen, you can put up with a pissing match.”

“So I’m told that the lucky lady is executive assistant Felicity Smoak…” the reporter who introduced the segment was among those in the bullpen.

“Who?” asked another man with spiked hair, scoffing.

“Executive assistant? Isn’t that just a fancy way of saying secretary? Come on, is there anything more cliché than boinking your secretary?”

The female commentator took exception to the comment. “Give him a little credit. He may genuinely care about her.”

And the bullpen laughed uproariously.

An image of Felicity appeared on the screen from the Glades benefit gala. It was the same photo that appeared in PEOPLE magazine. “In all seriousnessness, she’s hot,” the spiky haired paparazzo opined. “She’s got this naughty schoolteacher vibe going on. I can dig it.”

The reporter added, “Sources say they have been inseparable for the last few months. Seems like Oliver’s attention span is longer than it used to be. Think it’ll last?”

“Depends on how good this Felicity Smoak is at turning a blind eye.”

The female laughed. “I thought you were going to say it depends on how good she is in bed.”

“I just think there’s more to this than we know. I’m going on baby bump watch,” the bearded man said.

“We’ll keep you posted with news as it happens. TMZ.”

The screen faded to the TMZ logo.

Oliver muttered something in Russian that Felicity was fairly certain translated to something she wouldn’t say in front of her grandmother, who was no shrinking violet.

“I’m thinking deleting the PEOPLE article isn’t going to help much at this point.”

“I’m sorry. That report was so disrespectful toward you.”

“And you,” Felicity replied. “Well, you know what they say. You never forget your first time…on TMZ.” She rubbed her hands on the skirt of her dress before standing.

“Felicity—”

She held up her hand to stop him. “I’ve got to call my parents before they hear it from someone else. You owe me big time. Penalty box big.”
Oliver and Diggle watched as she walked away from them and went into the bathroom, the only room she could get any privacy, as she always joked.

John looked to the younger man.

“Digg, don’t say it.”

Digg halfway snorted. “Doesn’t look like I have to say it. You got the message loud and clear. So what are you going to do now?”

Oliver took a deep breath and arched an eyebrow. “I’m going to turn Felicity into a Queen.”
Part Six: The (Semi) Truth is Out There

The toilet seat was up again. The perils of working with men, Felicity thought as she closed the seat and the lid and perched on top of the porcelain, arguably the only seat in the foundry basement with some privacy.

Of course, Oliver didn’t necessarily respect bathroom boundaries if yesterday was any indication. Felicity never would have thought he would follow her into the ladies room at Queen Consolidated and, certainly, she never expected a fake marriage proposal there. For a bathroom, the ladies room at QC was fairly grand. But as a location for a marriage proposal? Not so much. That was one (of many) details she planned to omit in her phone call to her parents. Yes, if they asked, they’d be getting the flowers, candy, and champagne version of the proposal, not the bathroom, tacos, and coffee catastrophe rendering.

The phone call. Her heart sped up at the thought.

It had to be done. It was inevitable, like taxes, death, and root touch-ups. But, really, all she could do was stare at the shiny, new phone. She had no idea at all how to approach what was sure to be one of the most awkward conversations of her life, right up there with the conversation she’d had after her mother found her stash of birth control.

Taking a deep breath, Felicity punched in her parents’ home phone number and waited anxiously. Seconds crept by, feeling more like hours, as she found her senses going into overdrive. The drip, drip, drip from the faucet and the lag between the dial tone and the call being connected served to heighten the tension that branched out like tendrils in her neck and across her shoulders.

“Hello?” The voice on the other end was simultaneously comforting and disconcerting.

“Hey, Mom. It’s me.”

“Elfie, what is going on with you? Did you get my message? Are you avoiding me? Of course you’re not avoiding me if you’re calling. Except you’re just now calling, and I’ve been trying to reach you.” Felicity could hear her mom on the other end stop and take a deep breath. “I’m rambling again. I just…what’s going on with you?”

“I have some really exciting news. I’m…engaged.” Felicity’s voice caught slightly as she tried to get out the word engaged. She had never been good at lying to her parents, particularly her mother. And now the words sounded strangled and foreign, not at all cheerful, which was what she had been going for.

It felt like a cruelty. A dishonest, selfish cruelty.

But what else was she supposed to do? She had naively thought her parents would never know; after
all, they didn’t run in the same social circle as Oliver’s friends and business associates, but word had leaked. She only briefly considered telling them the truth about the faux engagement, but if she told them that, she would have to explain why she would willingly pretend to be Oliver’s fiancée. Who does something like that anyway? That would lead to more questions about what exactly she does for Oliver. So logically, it was better for her parents to think she spent her nights in his bed than for them to know that she spent her nights aiding Starling City’s own vigilante.

“I wasn’t even aware you are seeing anyone.” Judith Smoak’s reaction was guarded.

She tried to keep the details as truthful as possible. “His name is Oliver. We’ve known each other for about a year.”

Felicity was met with a stunned silence.

Don’t cry. Don’t cry. Please don’t cry, Mom. I can’t do this if you cry.

When her mother recovered a few seconds later, Felicity could not detect tearfulness, only wariness. “So it is true, what they’re saying…”

“They’re saying a whole lot of things,” Felicity tried to joke, but the words fell humorlessly from her mouth. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“You and Oliver Queen?” Her mother sighed. “I just think you can do so much better.”

Felicity almost laughed. Almost. Only Judith Smoak would think a billionaire CEO with model looks and a chiseled body wasn’t good enough for her daughter. If only that writer from People Magazine could hear her mother’s reaction. ‘Score one for the Smoaks’? More like ‘Do not pass GO and do not collect $200 million.’

Felicity pulled off her glasses and rubbed her bleary eyes. “He’s not what you think.”

“He has a criminal record.”

“No convictions,” Felicity piped in.

“And a reputation.”

Felicity felt her face grow warm. Yes, Oliver had a reputation. Partly earned, partly crafted, largely fictionalized. It shouldn’t trouble her that her mother—to whom she was smack-dab in the middle of weaving an incredible falsehood—disapproved of Oliver. He wasn’t really her fiancé. In fact, Felicity figured Edward Snowden had a better chance of being nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize than she had at being in an actual romantic relationship with Oliver. Nevertheless, she bristled. “You don’t even know him! Oliver is a businessman. He’s successful. He cares about his community in ways you can’t possibly imagine. He loves his family and wants to honor his father’s legacy. Oliver’s generous to a fault and so brave and smart, even if he sucked at tenth grade Algebra, which in the grand scheme of things isn’t all that important. That is what you need to know about him. I don’t care what the tabloids say about him. These are the same tabloids that reported I dated Aaron Rodgers. Next week it’ll come out that I’m Elvis’s love child.”

Her mother tutted, “You are most certainly not Elvis’s love child.”

“I know. I’m too young.”

“You do love him.”
Felicity sucked in a breath. No, no, no. Not love. Definitely not love. Yes, there were certain qualities in him that she admired. His courage. His resourcefulness. His intelligence. His abs. But love? It had been a long time since she uttered the L-word to anyone other than a family member, and even longer since she meant it.

She was physically attracted to Oliver, probably more attracted to him than any other man she had ever met; who wouldn’t be? There were the obvious attributes: his sculpted body, those striking blue eyes, his perfect lips, that roguish smile complete with a dimple. He even had fabulous eyebrows. Not many men could say that. And then there was the way he carried himself, each move deliberate, fluid, with controlled strength.

That morning when he had been in her bedroom wearing nothing but a towel, part of her wished she could be brazen like some of the women he undoubtedly knew. Unless she had been completely imagining things (after all, an imagination was a terrible thing to waste), he had also been affected by her state of partial undress. If only she had more moxie, she would have marched over to him and asked, “Do you have an arrow under that towel, or are you just happy to see me?”

But that wasn’t her style, and she couldn’t love Oliver. She just couldn’t. That was a road that led absolutely nowhere, except for a few side excursions into heartbreak and a slew of ice cream pints. Besides, emotionally stunted men were overrated. Only sadists invited pain, and Felicity Smoak was no sadist. She didn’t even like splinters.

“I’ve never known anyone like him.” Felicity was surprised by the emotion in her own voice.

“You never told me you were seeing him socially, only that you are his employee.”

“Oliver’s life is complicated. He’s been in the public eye for so long, he deserves to have privacy. I certainly never wanted to be in the limelight.”

“So much privacy you couldn’t even tell your parents?”

“There wasn’t much to tell, but now there is, so I’m telling you now.”

“But I’m not hearing it from you first,” her mother pointed out. “So I have to ask. Did he impregnate you?”

She stared up at the exposed pipes in the high ceiling. “You can’t be serious.”

“Elfie…”

“Of course not.”

“Did you require he get checked for STDs before sleeping with him?”

“Mom, Oliver isn’t Patient Zero or Typhoid Mary. And I’m not discussing my sex life.”

Or lack thereof.

“He has a reputation, you know. And STDs can cause vision loss.”

Felicity groaned, “You are such an optometrist.”

And at that, Judith Smoak laughed despite the tension between them. “And you are my little surprise, but I still know when you’re rolling your eyes over the phone. I want you to tell me more…”

______________________________
John Diggle’s fist made contact with the punching bag resulting in a satisfactory thud. It wasn’t quite the same as having a sparring partner, but it kept him sharp, in shape, and helped pass the time.

When Oliver confided his secret identity to him more than a year ago, Diggle had thought the man was insane, perhaps certifiably, and that the island had broken him, turned him into little more than an animal playing at being civilized. Fast forward a year, Digg never dreamed that he would be in so deep, but there was something about Oliver that made him a believer, even if he hadn’t been at first.

As John took a break for a drink of water, he could hear Felicity’s muffled voice coming from the bathroom.

He wondered what made Felicity a believer. Was it only her desire to help find Walter Steele? It wasn’t something they had ever really talked about, but Digg suspected her initial participation in their little venture had more to do with a personal investment in the Queen scion than anything else.

But what the hell were they getting themselves into? Before Oliver left to find Thea, he had said he planned to turn Felicity into a Queen. Digg had pressed him for an explanation, but Oliver went into monosyllabic mode, only promising to protect Felicity from harm.

It reminded Digg of a dog chasing its own tail.

He returned to the bag, jabbing through another set of reps before leaving the training area and draping a towel around his neck. With water bottle in one hand and a TV remote in the other, he turned on the television mounted to the wall in search of college basketball while he waited for Felicity to rejoin him. He rarely had the chance to watch TV anymore and couldn’t for the life of him remember any of the ESPN channel numbers.

That was how he came upon a news report on one of the 24-hour business news cable networks.

“…could breathe new life into Queen Consolidated. It’s a signal that this is a new Oliver Queen, a more serious Oliver Queen.”

“I just think it goes to show how conservative the business world still is that this is even news. A man needs a trophy wife to be taken seriously.”

“I take exception to that.”

“Then you take exception with the system because that’s the way it is.”

“Predictions for 2014?"

“2013 has been a terrible year for Queen Consolidated between Walter Steele, the former CEO’s kidnapping and Moira Queen’s arrest. Stock prices took a tumble during the third quarter but have thus far stabilized in the fourth quarter. But in 2014, I look for Queen Consolidated to rebound. They’re on the cusp of developing some interesting new technologies. If the young CEO has stability in his personal life, right or wrong, it should give investors confidence and help the bottom line.”

“That’s it for the panel. But stayed tuned for Your Last Word when we return.”

That was when Diggle caught sight of Felicity. He was relieved to see her emerge from the bathroom without any sign of tears. He was never really sure what to say to crying women, after all, but she didn’t exactly look happy either.
As she walked past the mounted television on the wall of the lair, she reached up and pushed the off button. “It’s everywhere. Like a rash.” Subconsciously, she scratched her arm.

Diggle chuckled at that. He knew he shouldn’t have, but it came out before he could stop it. Felicity shot him a death glare, probably made less impressive because of the obstruction of her glasses, but he had the decency to shrug apologetically.

“At least in this report, I wasn’t branded the gold digging whore. Now I’m the trophy wife-to-be.”

“You’re moving up in the world.”

“If this is up, I’d hate to see what down is. Where’s Oliver?”

“With Thea doing damage control.” Digg had promised Oliver he would stay with Felicity, keep an eye on her, and make sure no one got to her.

“Damage control,” Felicity echoed. “I’m sure QC’s public relations department is cursing me right now.”

Diggle tilted his head and studied her. “I don’t know. It gives everyone something to talk about other than Mrs. Queen’s upcoming trial.”

“You think this media circus is actually helpful?”

“For some involved. Not for all.”

“Go ahead and say it,” Felicity said bracing herself.

“There’s still time to back out of this.”

“I can’t. I made a promise.”

Diggle swallowed hard and nodded. The promise was misguided in his opinion, but he understood the sentiment behind it. Felicity was one of the most honorable people he knew, but she was also a big-picture pragmatist. If meeting a goal meant bending conventions—and certain laws—she would do it. But she was also the most untarnished of the three of them; the last thing he wanted was to see Felicity become jaded.

His eyes followed her as she sat at her desk and pushed aside her barely-touched rice from dinner and set down her phone. “How did your folks take the news?”

She hesitated. Recounting the conversation with her mother wasn’t something that she particularly wanted to do. *Strange.* She always thought telling her parents she was engaged would be a happy occasion. Instead the conversation was uncomfortable, punctuated by the fact they felt she had been living this whole other life that she wasn’t willing to share with them. They had no idea how close they were to the truth—and how far away.

“I haven’t told them much. Just that they shouldn’t worry about me.”

Diggle half-snorted. “Right because that’s really going to make them stop worrying.” At her crestfallen look, he added, “They’re your parents. It’s their job to worry about you.”

“You’re worried, too, and that isn’t your job.”

Digg pulled a stool closer to her swivel chair and perched on it. “I don’t want to see you get hurt.”
She picked up a chopstick from the carton of rice and nervously toyed with it. “I’ll admit I was surprised a few minutes ago by the media’s take, but TMZ is gobbledygook, kind of like the canned beef chow mein at the grocery store. Just wrong. Who can take that seriously? And PEOPLE is…,” she smirked, “fluff. Not quite the hit piece that TMZ had but still wrong. At least they gave me a past with someone interesting and didn’t paint me as a blonde bimbo.”

“I’m not talking about the media hurting you.”

*Oliver.*

“I can handle it.”

“Something happened in Russia that had you and Oliver pretty much not talking for weeks. Then I turn around and the two of you are pretending to be engaged.”

Despite her best efforts to push it aside, she felt that sickening clench of her stomach at the thought of seeing Isabel Rochev leave Oliver’s room. “I know what I’m doing, and believe me, I have no illusions where Oliver is concerned.”

“Felicity.”

She met his eyes squarely. “Digg, I mean it. He is my friend; that’s it. I’m going to do whatever it takes to help him keep his company.”

“So you’re supposed to use your charms to convince reluctant investors that Oliver is the real deal? Lie to them to prove he’s trustworthy?”

“When you put it like that, it sounds so,” she shuddered, “skeevy. I’m choosing to think of it as another secret identity.”

“How many are you going to end up with?”

“However many it takes. Well, not Sybil worthy, but *this* identity wants answers about Isabel, and all we’ve got is a pile of questions.”

Diggle could sense the shift in the conversation. It was Felicity’s way of nicely telling him to take a hike. “Then let’s do some shoveling.”

Bodies moved to the pulsating music and lights in Verdant; Oliver had felt the vibrations earlier in the basement, but being in the midst of the thrumming bass gave him the sense that his own internal chronometer was being reset. The crowd was unusually thick for a relatively early hour on a Tuesday night.

Oliver sought the willowy figure of his sister, but she wasn’t immediately visible. He began to walk toward the bar to ask Marcos, the bar tender, where he could find his sister, when a woman approached him, stopping directly in his path.

He began to maneuver around her, but she shot out a hand, placing her palm flat against his chest. Oliver’s fleeting first impulse was to grab her hand, twist the arm, and gain leverage, but luckily he had developed a greater control over his fight-or-flight instincts since the island. This woman may have fancied herself dangerous with the short, slinky dress she wore, but hers wasn’t the type of
danger that threatened him. “Excuse me.”

“Such a waste.” She began to play with the buttons on his shirt. “I can’t wrap my mind around it. Oliver Queen. Engaged.”

“Do we know each other?” There was something vaguely familiar about the curvy redhead.

“We entertained each other very thoroughly. It was my rehearsal dinner. The coat closet at Maison Blanche. Needless to say, there was no wedding.”

And it came back to him. The frantic tugging of their clothes, the hushed laughter and moans, tearing open the condom packet and tearing apart her relationship. Not one of his finer moments, even if he did think her fiancé was an absolute dick.

“You were going to marry Max Fuller.” He paused trying to remember her name.

“Stephanie,” she supplied.

“Right. Stephanie. It’s been a long time.”

“Being on an island all by yourself for five years. Must have been lonely.” She reached for the lapel of his jacket, fingering the fabric. “When’s your rehearsal dinner? I can…return the favor. Help make up for lost time.” Stephanie slid her hand to his shirt and unfastened a button, briefly running her fingers on his chest before trailing her hand to the next button. Oliver caught her wrist and stilled her movements.

“I’m engaged.”

Stephanie looked at Oliver in mock confusion before she broke out into a wide, near-predatory grin. “So was I. Didn’t stop us before.”

“Beat it.” The no-nonsense voice of Thea Queen cut through the music and her brother’s tête-à-tête. The redhead wrinkled her nose as she studied the interloper before turning back to Oliver. “Is this your fiancée?”

“Ew. No.” Thea grimaced at the woman before reaching out and taking her brother’s hand. As she pulled Oliver aside, she huffed, “I can’t believe she didn’t know who I am.”

“I had it handled.”

“Maybe, but I expedited matters.”

“Always in a hurry, Speedy.”

“Don’t call me that,” she grumbled.

Oliver’s eyebrows shot up. Thea wasn’t going to make it easy for him to smooth things over. “Fair enough. I got your text.”

“Oh, really? It was hard to tell since you didn’t text me back. What the hell is going on with you?”

The press of the bodies around them felt less oppressive than the eyes on them. Of course. The looky-loos. Queen watchers. The get-a-life crowd. They were out in full force. “We should talk in the office.”
“Right. Wouldn’t want any more of your conquests to interrupt.”

“She wasn’t my conquest.”

Thea tilted her head knowingly.

“Recently,” Oliver added.

Thea closed the office door behind them and walked to the desk, trailing her fingers atop the wood before forcing herself to be still.

“So what? Did you get tired of the chase?”

“Aren’t you even going to ask if it’s true?”

“It’s TMZ. They get the details wrong but not the big story. So. Felicity Smoak? She sounds like an e-cigarette. Or a gold digger. Or both.” Thea crossed her arms. “I want to meet her.”

Oliver gritted his teeth. “Not until you can behave.”

“Behave? I’m not a petulant child. If anything, I’m the one who’s being sensible. Come on. Your secretary, Oliver? That is so tragically clichéd. I mean, she is your secretary, right?”

“Felicity is first and foremost my friend. She became my executive assistant as a favor to me.”

Thea outright laughed at that. “A favor? I’ll just bet.”

“Thea.”

“Oliver,” she mimicked his indignation. “I shouldn’t have to find out you’re getting married from a tabloid.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Really? You aren’t getting married or I didn’t find out from a tabloid?” She shook her head. “I’ve got to say, the ring on her finger looks real in the photo. And the look you two were giving each other at the hockey game?”

Outwardly, Oliver didn’t react to her words, but he couldn’t help but want to ask, ‘What look?’

Thea continued, “Why didn’t you say something? Is this where you’ve been disappearing? Snuggled up in a love nest somewhere?”

Oliver took a deep breath. “I need you to let this go for a few days. Let the storm calm.”

“Calm? Please. There’s no such thing around you. Does Felicity even know what she’s in for?”

Oliver pursed his lips but said nothing.

“That’s what I thought. What does Laurel say?”

“I haven’t talked with Laurel about it.” His eyes closed as he silently cursed. He had tried talking to her earlier in the day, and she had brushed him off citing a conflict of interest in his mother’s case.
It wasn’t all that long ago in the grand scheme of things that he stood before her in her apartment, bearing his soul while she looked on in anger that slowly ebbed. He had told Laurel she knew him better than anyone, that she was more important to him than anyone.

He had said what he wanted to be true, not what actually was.

Laurel didn’t know him, would never accept him. Now she felt like a familiar stranger, and the only thing between them was regret for hurting the other and regret for hurting Tommy.

He couldn’t even look at her as the one who got away anymore, but he still felt like he owed her something.

Thea studied her brother’s pained expression. “Well, maybe some good will come from this, after all.”

Oliver met her gaze. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re finally breaking the cycle.”

“The cycle?” he echoed.

“This ridiculous loop the two of you have been on for years.”

“We’ve not been...” Oliver began but thought better of it. “I’ll always care about what happens to her, but I’m not good for her.”

Thea made a strangled sound, halfway between a cough and a laugh. “More like she’s not good for you. I still can’t believe Laurel would actively prosecute Mom.”

“She’s doing what her bosses expect of her.”

“And that just makes it all okay? Why does she get a pass?”

“She’s trying to help Mom, too. The DA wanted to pursue the death penalty. Laurel talked him out of it.”

“What I know is that she can’t have it both ways. If she’s working to put Mom away, she’s against us. And for all her talk about betrayal, she knows a thing or two about it herself.”

“Cut her some slack. She cut you slack.” He spoke matter-of-factly, but he could tell Thea was not receptive—nor was she going to be receptive—to any defense of Laurel Lance.

“That was entirely different.” Thea rolled her eyes at her brother’s justification of his ex-girlfriend. “Does Felicity know how much you suck at relationships?”

His lips slightly quirked, he replied, “She knows.”

“Look, things have been hard for you. I know that. With Tommy,” she couldn’t bring herself to say the word ‘dying.’ Tommy’s death still slammed her in the chest. “With Mom in prison, Laurel being Laurel, the company in turmoil, I get it. I do. But an engagement? Ollie, don’t rush into anything.”

“I’m not rushing.”

“This has come out of nowhere! It makes no sense.”

“She makes my life better,” he said simply.
“Come again?”

“Felicity. She makes sense to me. She makes my life better.” The words came easily, perhaps more easily than they should have.

“How? Besides the obvious that, as your sister, I don’t want to hear about. Help me to understand.”

“Felicity… took me by surprise. Sometimes it seems like everybody wants something from me. Felicity wants things for me. She lightens the load. The day I met her, I never thought…” He faltered. Sometimes he wondered how different his life would be if he hadn’t gone to her office, if he had turned right instead of left. On that day, if he had realized how strong-willed she was, that version of himself—who trusted no one (half the time not even himself)—might have sought help elsewhere from a techie who wouldn’t ask questions.

And then where would he be?

Felicity’s computer skills were unparalleled. And while she would argue she worked with technology because she was not a people-person, he had come to rely on her, not just for her technical abilities but also for her friendship. In so many ways, she was the true north who helped to stabilize his moral compass when it was spinning out of control. She was the one who helped him to see the big picture, to see there were other ways of accomplishing his mission. Some days, he was convinced she and Diggle kept him sane. And they sure as hell kept him alive.

“How did you meet?”

“She worked in the IT department of Queen Consolidated. I needed help with a laptop.”

“You never were tech savvy.”

Oliver had to stifle a smile. He could hold his own in certain limited areas and had naively thought he could do it all when he first returned to Starling City, but Felicity left him in the dust with her skills.

“So what is it about her?”

She was beautiful and true, confident in her intelligence and abilities, but so unaware of how incredibly desirable she was. That morning, he had nearly come undone when he saw her on the bed, long leg outstretched, tugging on the stocking. The lace captured her slender thigh, but he imagined his hands taking the place of that lace, holding her. Teasing her. Would she be ticklish? Would she be timid? Would she be fierce?

In those moments, he wanted to know her. Every aspect of her.

Every curve.

Every hidden secret.

Every breath.

Every inch.

He had seen it in her eyes, too. That longing. She usually did a good job of keeping a lid on it, as did he, in his own estimation. Not so that morning. It had been difficult to play nice and keep his hands to himself, but he’d managed. They both had.

He doubted they would ever sleep together, ever know each other in that way. Too complicated.
But there was one thing above all that he did know about Felicity: he could count on her.

“I trust her with my life, Thea.”

Thea’s eyebrows shot up. *Trust.* It wasn’t a word Oliver used often, even more so since his return from the island. The light-hearted, open brother who left had been replaced by this guarded man. For Ollie to trust, that meant something. “I want to meet her. See for myself.”

“You actually have. Once. Briefly. When Walter was in the hospital.”

“That was Felicity?” Thea raised her eyebrows. “The blonde with the glasses?” Not Oliver’s usual type, though now that Thea thought about it, the girl had potential. She pulled up her phone and studied the picture from the hockey game. No glasses. Hair flowing in waves rather than pulled back in that severe ponytail. Dimples. Yes, that was Felicity.

*Potential met.*

“Is she pregnant?”

“No, of course not.”

At the hockey game, he had asked her if she ever thought about marriage and a family. She had told him no, that was something for the far future, but he could imagine her with a rounded belly, her hand rubbing it soothingly as she talked to the baby within, telling it stories of daring rescues in tech support. Maybe she would have that someday with someone who could give her the future she deserved.

“Then why marry her now?”

“Why not now?”

“For starters, you haven’t told me you love her.”

The buzzing of his cell phone interrupted them. “Excuse me.”

*From Felicity Smoak:*

sent 8:01 p.m.

FS: *Need a rescue?*

OQ: How did you know?

FS: *I have intimate knowledge of you.*

After the morning they’d had, that made Oliver exhale loudly.

OQ: Sounds kinky.

FS: *Ugh. Stupid auto-correct. I have intuition. Knowledge of you.*

OQ: How’s that new phone working out?

FS: *Jury’s out. Auto-correct may ruin the honeymoon.*

FS: *Phone honeymoon. Not our honeymoon.*

FS: *No honeymoon for us.*

Oliver smiled despite himself at her flurry of texts. He could almost hear her rambling, backtracking. Perhaps he shouldn’t have, but he couldn’t resist his response.
OQ: Where would you want to go?
FS: *Um.*
OQ: Anywhere in the world. Your choice.
FS: Are you still with your sister?

Damn. He’d scared her.

OQ: Yes.
FS: *It’s rude for you to be texting me when you’re with Thea.*
OQ: Thought you were rescuing me.
FS: *Fine. Tell her I need you.*
OQ: Do you?
FS: *That’s a loaded question.*
OQ: I’ll consider myself rescued.
FS: *We’ll see if you agree once you get back here.*

Oliver shoved his phone into his pocket. “Thea, I’ve got to go. Felicity needs me.”

Thea made a sound that veered dangerously into snorting territory. “I’m surprised you noticed I’m still here.”

He looked at her ruefully. “Felicity warned me I was being rude.”

“But you couldn’t help yourself. Was that a pre-arranged rescue text?”

“A rescue? Do I need rescuing?”

“I think you need to slow down.”

“She’s special.” He headed toward the door but stopped when he reached it. “If you’re contacted by the press…”

“Don’t worry. I’ll politely tell them to fuck off. Like I always do.”

“Thank you.”

“And Ollie,” Thea replied taking one step forward. “I meant what I said. I want to meet her. More than in passing this time.”

“I’ll set something up.”

“You better, or I will.”

“Belinda, Mr. Queen is not with me right now….No, I am not giving you the runaround….I understand. Work up a press release announcing the engagement…No, there is nothing else to announce. Just the engagement….Yes, I’m sure….I’ll have Mr. Queen look over it in the morning.”

Felicity pushed the END CALL button on her phone and groaned loudly when it immediately began to ring again. The number was one she did not recognize. She put the phone on silent.

She looked over at John, who sat watching her intently. Between the texting with Oliver and the phone calls, she wasn’t making much progress in their research on Isabel.

“There’s more speculation about the status of my womb than when my parents sat me down to talk about the birds and bees.”
“Sorry, Felicity.”

“What’s really bad is when my own mother jumps to that conclusion. I guess it’s the only thing that makes sense to everyone because Oliver and I don’t make sense.”

“He’d be the lucky one,” Digg stated bluntly.

“You have to say that. You’re my friend.”

“I’m his friend, too.”

“Don’t be too tough on him. I don’t know how he balances all the demands placed on him. I think I would crumble.”

The sound of footsteps on the metal staircase drew their attention. “Thanks for the rescue,” Oliver said to Felicity as he came into the opening of their headquarters and peeled off his suit jacket, placing it on the railing next to the tie he had discarded earlier.

“My pleasure. How’s Thea?”

“She’s…,” Oliver paused to choose his words carefully, “eager to get to know you.”

Felicity recognized that look. It was the one he affected when trying to be diplomatic or when handling people. Great. Oliver was handling her. Not exactly the type of handling she would have preferred, but … She shook her head.

“Mind out of the gutter.”

“She’s going to skewer me, isn’t she?” Felicity’s bottom lip caught between her teeth.

“She’s going to love you.”

“Until I break your heart,” she quipped. She then looked to John to explain, “I get to be the dumper.”

“And when exactly will that be?” Digg asked.

Felicity looked over to Oliver who met her gaze. “We haven’t worked that out yet.”

“No honeymoon in…you never did tell me where.” He winked at her. It was enough to make her ears burn.

“Venice,” she finally supplied, her eyes narrowing.

“I figured you for wine tasting in France,” he teased as he slid into a chair at his own worktable.

She tilted her head as she considered him. “I’m still holding out for the wine you promised me from that non-existent scavenger hunt. Hopefully you’re a better liar than you used to be because if you aren’t, we are never going to pull this off.”

“I think I can be convincing,” Oliver replied, his gaze intent on her. “So how did your talk go with your parents?”

“About like I thought. They’re expecting to meet you for a lovely round of Third Degree. They’ll call it a family dinner, make it seem innocent, but don’t be fooled. If I were Catholic and believed in Hell, it might just be the first ring.”

Oliver looked at her blankly.
“Dante’s *Inferno*,” she prompted.

He merely shrugged.

“Let me guess. You didn’t read that at any of your four colleges either.”

He broke into a smile. “With what you’re doing for me, the least I can do is attend a family dinner.”

“Do you really think this,” she gestured toward him and then back at herself, “will be going on long enough to put yourself through that character-building experience?”

Oliver had enough ‘character-building experiences’ to last him a lifetime, but if it would help Felicity to smooth things over with her parents, he was game. “They just want us to visit, right?”

“Well, that and they want to know am I pregnant? Are you willing to convert to Judaism? And Mom wants to know if you’re circumcised.” Felicity squeezed her eyes shut. “I could’ve left that part out.”

At that, Digg chortled. “Better you than me, man.”

Oliver grimaced.

Eager for a change of topic, Felicity continued. “So Belinda from the PR department is working on a statement for your approval. She will have it ready in the morning.”

“Nothing like a little spin doctoring first thing in the morning,” Oliver commented.

“I just would really, really like to know who tipped off the press about our...” she cleared her throat as she searched for the right word, “thing in the first place. I have to tell you. The spin I gave my parents and JoJo has me dizzy.”

“Do you think Isabel was the one who provided the tip off?” Digg asked.

Oliver shook his head. “What does she have to gain?”

“Distract you,” Digg suggested. “If you’ve got the press on your scent, leaves her an opportunity to solidify her plans at Starling National Bank with no interference.”

“I’d place my bet on Colleen.”

“Right. Your ‘old friend.’ I guess she wanted to see her name in *PEOPLE.*” Felicity cleared her throat. “I could’ve done without that honor.”

Oliver rolled his chair across the floor toward her, stopping next to her seat though his back was to the computers. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m okay, but I’ll be doing better once things get back to normal.”

Digg shot a pointed look at Oliver.

“And I think the way we get back to normal is by figuring out Isabel’s game. Last night, we discussed a theory,” she added.

Almost immediately, Oliver’s empathy for Felicity shifted to resistance. “Felicity, you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

“I prefer the expression ‘hacking into the wrong database.’ But I don’t think I’m wrong about this.
And FYI, the only one doing any barking now is you.”

“What theory?” Digg asked.

“I thought we agreed to table this discussion,” Oliver said pointedly.

“Well, it’s time to revisit,” she replied just as sharply.

“What theory?” Digg repeated.

“Felicity thinks Isabel had a relationship with my father.”

“But you don’t,” Diggle replied upon hearing the tone of Oliver’s voice.

“I know my father wasn’t the perfect husband and he sometimes strayed, but you’re going on something so random.”

“It’s not random. Subtle, yes. I think Isabel dropped her guard and revealed more than she intended.”

“Are you guys going to fill me in?” Digg asked.

“Yesterday after Oliver ‘proposed’ to me, Isabel confronted me in the elevator.”

Diggle furrowed his brows. “What’s it to her whether you and Oliver have something going on?”

Oliver’s eyes locked on Felicity’s, but she quickly looked away, suddenly very interested in her screensaver. “I slept with Isabel in Russia.”

“Why would you do that?” Digg watched as Felicity stiffened in her seat. That was the source of her falling out with Oliver, he realized. “You know what? Never mind. Dumb question.”

Felicity tapped her fingers on her computer desk. “So with this ‘engagement’ coming on the heels of that…encounter, Isabel is naturally suspicious. To make a long story less long but still unfortunately lengthy, she was quite clear that she believes the engagement is a ruse. According to her, I’m either a golddigger or an idiot. And then she eliminated golddigger because of my shoes, which I guess you didn’t really need to know. So she settled on fool, which, quite frankly, is really insulting because I know I’m not a fool, but she doesn’t, and she was so smug…” Felicity stopped her ramble.

“Anyhow, Isabel then complimented me on the ring and said that the Queen men use such ‘trinkets’ as a way of absolving their guilt. There’s only one Queen man, but she referred to more than one, so I extrapolated she must have known Oliver’s father…um…intimately.” The last part came out in a rush.

“You sure she won’t be boiling your bunny, Oliver?” Digg asked.

“We agreed it was casual. Isabel is definitely not clingy.”

Felicity groaned in frustration. “This takeover is personal to Isabel, but it’s not about wanting Oliver. Obviously, she doesn’t have to take over his company to get his attention.” Oliver’s jaw clenched at that, but Felicity wasn’t about to apologize even if he was wearing his best what-the-hell face. “It’s about wanting Queen Consolidated. Otherwise, she’d be on to the next company, but here she is, still gracing us with her presence.”

“You have a point there,” Digg acknowledged.

Felicity continued, “So you never did tell me how your visit with your mom went. Was she able to give you any background on Isabel? Maybe why she was on your father’s list?”
Oliver shook his head. “She was evasive.”

“Must run in the family,” Felicity muttered under her breath.

Oliver heard her clear as day but ignored it. “But I’m sure my mother knows more about Isabel than she’s saying. In her mind, I think she’s trying to protect Thea and me.”

Felicity tilted her head. “But you and your sister are both aware of your father’s extracurricular activities.”

“So it begs the question what is she protecting you from?” Diggle asked.

“It’s not my dad’s personal reputation she’s safeguarding,” Oliver said blandly as their words started to penetrate his defenses.

“Do you think it has something to do with illegal business dealings? Something that could undercut the company? Maybe Isabel was part of that,” Digg speculated.

Felicity shook her head slightly, not particularly confident with any of the theories they were throwing around. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but Isabel’s comments to me were not from the perspective of a business associate. They were from a woman bitter over a relationship. Maybe I am wrong. Maybe I’m right. But give me something more to go on so I can find out. Is there anything you can tell me about Isabel? Maybe something she said when we were in Moscow?”

Please tell me the two of you at least had a conversation before jumping in bed.

“She asked me why I want her to think I’m lazy and stupid when I’m not.” Oliver paused remembering the ice that thawed between them. Even if Isabel didn’t have the full understanding of the different roles he played, the masks he wore, it was oddly satisfying when she acknowledged she knew it was an act. Isabel had likened herself to him; they both wore a public face to hide their true selves. At the time, Oliver thought her harsh exterior was cultivated to survive in a cutthroat business climate and she equated openness with weakness. So when she began to open up, it had been flattering, even if they both recognized their dalliance would be nothing but pleasure fulfillment. “She said that we are alike. Driven. Intelligent.” He hesitated before he added, “Lonely.”

Felicity looked away as he spoke, a lump forming in her throat that she willed to go away.

“She told me very little about her background, but when I heard her speak Russian, she revealed she was born in Russia and raised in an orphanage until she was nine.”

“I should have guessed that from her accent.” Felicity’s mild sarcasm jarred somewhat in her own ears.

“Isabel said she worked for years to lose it, that it wasn’t easy to make friends in school when she sounded like Natasha.”

“She could always try the old tried and true method for making friends. Stop being a hateful bit—” Felicity caught herself and amended her word choice, “person.”

“What if ‘Natasha’ is more than a figure of speech?” Diggle suggested. “We’ve been looking for information about Isabel but maybe…”

“I’m on it. Rochev isn’t a particularly common name. If Isabel has obscured her past, I wonder how big the curtain is.” The two men looked at her blankly. “You know, ‘Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.’ In this case, woman. From The Wizard of Oz. Hiding his identity. Acting like
something he’s not. Oh good grief.”

“You said that with a straight face,” Diggle commented.

“Well, my more muscular half is rubbing off on me.”

“I just remember the flying monkeys,” Oliver added.

“They were creepy,” Felicity concurred. Her fingers glided over the keyboard. “So if I cross-reference Rochev and immigration, I get…Viktor and Irina Rochev.” Felicity adjusted her glasses as Oliver spun his chair around to see the computer monitors. “Viktor was born in 1950, Irina in 1952. Originally from Moscow. Defected from the Soviet Union to the United States in 1980. Viktor arrived in New York City as a guest lecturer at Columbia University to teach at an international economics symposium and never left. Incidentally, that’s the same year Isabel was born, according to her DMV records.” An image of Isabel’s driver’s license flashed on the left screen of Felicity’s trio of monitors. Despite the fact that she had not even the hint of a smile on her face, the woman looked flawless. “It’s not fair.”

“What isn’t?” Diggle asked.

“She’s photogenic even on her license. On mine, I look like an alien. Or like I’m drugged. Or maybe a drugged alien. Guess the camera’s too afraid of pissing her off to take a bad picture.”

“What else do you have on Viktor and Irina?” Oliver prompted. “Is Isabel connected to them?”

“Since they were defectors from Soviet Russia, you can bet the CIA and NSA kept tabs on these folks. Give me a couple of minutes to bypass their security protocols. I’ll need to piggyback…” her voice trailed off as she began hacking her way into supposedly secured databases. “Records show they settled in Jericho, New York, on the North Shore of Long Island. Irina was a homemaker. Viktor eventually began teaching at Nassau Community College.” She cycled through several documents and images. “Family…” she paused as she briefly skimmed information. “Looks like they adopted Irina’s niece Natasha Smirnov,” Felicity looked at Diggle meaningfully, “who didn’t arrive in the United States until May 1993. They also have a son, Kirill, born 2001.” Felicity did some mental calculations. “Not to second-guess another woman’s choices, but talk about a late-in-life child.”

“Can you look up information on Natasha?” Oliver asked.

“Seriously? That’s like asking me if I can initialize an array in C++.” Felicity entered a few keystrokes. “I’m hurt you even have to ask.”

Oliver leaned over Felicity’s shoulder and watched the monitors. “Natasha was thirteen when she came stateside. Isabel said she left the orphanage when she was nine. If Natasha and Isabel are one in the same, where was she for four years?”

A document with an image filled the screen. Felicity clicked on the image to enlarge it. A familiar visage popped up: a young Isabel Rochev. “Natasha Smirnov. Born July 29, 1980. This photo was taken for her passport. Wow. She looks…”

“Malnourished and scared,” Oliver finished.

“Yeah,” Felicity exhaled even as her stomach clenched. The girl’s cheeks were sunken in and her skin stretched tightly over her face. She did not smile in the photo; rather, her eyes had a haunted expression. It made Felicity wonder what she had seen—and alternately glad she had not witnessed it herself.
Odd. It was difficult to reconcile the Isabel Rochev she knew with this girl, not much older than a child.

On another screen, Felicity brought up Natasha’s passport documentation. “I’m a little fuzzy on my Cyrillic, but…” she stroked a few more keys, “much better.” She brought up the passport in an English translation. “Her address is listed in Mirny, Eastern Siberia, Russia.”

“Dammit,” Oliver uttered as he turned away.

“Does that mean something to you?” Digg asked.

“After the Soviet Union fell, Queen Industries invested in a diamond mine in Mirny. I was young, but I remember my father traveled there. He traveled a lot, but this was different.”

“Why?”

“He was an American industrialist traveling to a place that had been off limits. That was newsworthy at the time. But when he arrived, he found children working in the mine. They could do jobs that adults couldn’t, fit in smaller spaces. Needless to say, he put an end to the child labor.”

“Do you think Isabel worked in the mine?” Digg asked.

“It would explain those missing four years,” Oliver replied.

Felicity began a web search. Robert Queen + Mirny diamond mine. Multiple archived articles appeared in the search engine. Felicity clicked on one, a piece from The Starling City Register. The headline: Queen Seeks to Reunite Children with Families.

She clicked on the article, which featured a large photograph of the mining site.

“I recognize that picture,” Oliver commented.

Felicity studied the photo. A thirty-ish Robert Queen stood in the foreground, speaking with an unidentified Russian man. Felicity was struck by how much he reminded her of Oliver: similar profiles, similar postures. She tore her eyes from the elder Queen and examined the surroundings. The men stood before a wooden building. In the backdrop, uniformed men—she guessed they were police from the badges they wore—stood with a gathering of children.

She zoomed in on the picture and tried to sharpen its pixilated appearance. “Look in the background.”

Oliver exhaled. “It’s Isabel.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading!
**Chapter Notes**

I think you’ll find “The Making of a Queen” from the chapter title takes on a number of contexts here. This is a long chapter. I thought about breaking it up, but ultimately decided, despite its length, that it should remain intact because of the thematic undercurrent. Good grief. I sound like I’m taking myself too seriously.

Chico, California, gets honorable mention in here again. Why Chico as Felicity's hometown before we actually knew she was from Las Vegas? The answer actually goes back to the theory of where fictional Starling City is located (many suggest it is a coastal city in northern California…but ultimately since the show has put Starling City in several places on a U.S. map, it's anywhere we want it to be, right?). Chico is located in the northern third of California, making it close to a California-located Starling City but not too close, thus allowing for potential day trips with a 2 – 3 hour drive. Once again, I probably take geography too seriously. Also, I am familiar with Chico because my late uncle lived there. And Aaron Rodgers is from Chico, which is a happy coincidence (unless you hate the Green Bay Packers, that is...LOL).

If you are still reading this long A/N, I would be remiss if I didn’t once again thank all of you dear readers. Your words of encouragement, your theorizing, your reactions—all of them mean so much to me.

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**Part Seven: The Making of a Queen**

Three hours and several dried-up leads later, Felicity looked away from her monitors, took off her glasses, and rubbed her bleary eyes. There should be something more about Isabel Rochev, anything more beyond the past six years’ worth of Stelmoor press releases and photographs from various social galas (in which Isabel’s cool, disinterested gaze suggested she would rather be anywhere else), but there wasn’t.

She wondered who had scrubbed Isabel’s background. This person was skilled. As a matter of personal and professional pride, Felicity wanted to know whom she was up against.

But the good (and bad) thing about cyberspace was once something was out there, it was out there. It was just a matter of finding it. And something told her she would eventually pry those skeletons right out of Isabel’s likely sizeable closet. Mysteries needed to be solved. All she required was a virtual Rosetta stone and maybe some chocolate.

Felicity stretched, rolling her shoulders back to alleviate some of the tension. *Much better.* It was easy to lose track of time when she was busy, but periodically, her body reminded her that she needed to move around if she didn’t want to end up looking like Quasimodo’s tech-savvy little sister.

“Let me give you a ride home.” Oliver’s voice came from behind her, causing her to jump slightly in her seat. Diggle had gone home (maybe) an hour before, and Oliver had given her space long before
that. He’d been so quiet, she had almost forgotten he was there, except for the occasional sound of a task: sharpening arrows that were already sharp or the tapping of his fingers on a keyboard as he responded to the never-ending string of e-mails he received as Queen Consolidated’s CEO. To tell the truth, she wasn’t sure which version of Oliver she preferred if he was determined to be in a sucktastic mood: the quiet brooding type or the takes-things-out-on-a-punching-bag type.

She knew he would have preferred to work out some of his frustrations on Starling City’s worst. However, chatter amongst the various crime syndicates had been nonexistent the last few days. As far as Felicity was concerned, it was a welcome reprieve. Oliver, on the other hand, kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. She could understand where he was coming from, though she was secretly glad he wasn’t in harm’s way, at least for tonight. It was a bit like when she was a child and had play dates with her cousins. If they were too quiet, they were usually up to something, like dyeing the dog’s fur or digging up the flower garden looking for buried treasure that pirates(!) left in landlocked Chico.

“I’m fine to drive. I just need a few more minutes on this,” she replied distractedly.

She put her glasses back on and could see the weariness etched into his forehead, though she wondered if it was fatigue or if it had more to do with the emotional roller coaster of the night. They hadn’t found the proverbial smoking gun Felicity not-so-secretly thought they would uncover, though the connection was there between Robert Queen and Isabel Rochev. Of course, what the connection meant was a matter of interpretation. Was Isabel another face in the crowd of phantom children who had been neglected, tasked with dangerous work, and rescued by Robert? Or had there been a bond that continued once Isabel was a grown woman? Her desire to control Queen Consolidated was not coincidental, especially in light of her tenuous connection to its late founder and CEO.

One thing Felicity could not misinterpret from watching Oliver over the last year was that being Robert Queen’s son had its own burdens. People looked to Oliver more so than his sister as Robert Queen’s living legacy. Under the best of circumstances, expectations were cumbersome. But Oliver was expected to follow his father in business, in charity, as a leader in the community. And that was only what the public saw.

Felicity wasn’t entirely sure how she felt about this crusade with which Mr. Queen had tasked Oliver. On the one hand, it gave Oliver the drive to survive against all odds on Lian Yu, and maybe that was what his father was trying to do, imbue his son with strength, strength the young, pampered Oliver didn’t realize he possessed. On the other hand, that crusade virtually guaranteed that Oliver had no semblance of a normal life, and his mission could very well set him on the path for an early death.

And what was she doing? Whether it was her intention or not, she was dragging his father’s memory through the mud. Oliver should be able to remember his father in a positive way, not as a man who potentially invited the trouble of Isabel Rochev into their lives. Even if Oliver wasn’t one to wax poetic about his feelings, she knew he was torn between wanting to know his father’s connection to Isabel and wanting to protect his father’s memory.

Where was an easy button when you needed one?

This was why, theoretically, she liked computers better than people. If there was a problem, the solution could be easily found in recoding the software or in replacing one faulty piece of hardware with another undamaged piece. People weren’t so malleable and far more unpredictable.

“Felicity, it’s been a long day. This can wait until tomorrow.”
She nodded, realizing he was unlikely to leave before she did. And whether Oliver wanted to admit he needed rest, he did. As usual, he pushed himself too hard. “Okay.”

She gathered her carton of rice. “I should take out the trash. Day old Chinese food will have this place smelling ripe tomorrow night. And the next thing you know, we’ll be fighting off the neighborhood cats, and that never ends pretty.”

“You didn’t eat much,” he noted.

She shook her head slightly. “Not much of an appetite.”

Felicity thought he looked like he wanted to say something else. Instead he took the container of rice from her as he managed half a smile. “You close up here. I’ll take out the trash.”

A man who volunteers to take out the trash? “My ovaries,” she mumbled as he walked to the trashcan and tied the bag closed before removing it from the can.

“What was that?” he asked pausing at the stairs with the trash bag, but from the bemused look on his face, she was fairly certain he had heard.

“Nothing,” she piped before turning her attention to the computers. *I’ve got to get a filter.*

Oliver was back in less than five minutes. In the meantime, Felicity had secured her computers for the night; glanced at her phone that had been on silent the last few hours, the same phone which evidently had erupted with messages she (against her usual nature) ignored; and excavated her car keys from her purse, which in itself was a major ordeal considering whatever she was looking for invariably found its way to the bottom of the bag.

When he saw the keys in her hand, he frowned. “I had hoped you would let me drive you.”

“My driving record is impeccable.”

Oliver looked like a man far from satisfied. “I would feel better if you let me make sure you got in safely.”

“I’m totally over my whole drag racing phase,” she quipped. “Besides, my car…”

“Should be fine in the back lot. We can pick it up in the morning.” He grabbed his jacket and tie from the railing, pulled the suit jacket back on, and stuffed the tie into a pocket. He turned to see if she would follow.

“You are bossy.”

“So I’ve been told.”

Moments later, they had navigated through a back exit of the foundry.

She could still hear the music in the club as it mingled with the sounds of the city: voices, laughter, footsteps, passing vehicles on the nearby street. It was a night like most any other, with the exception being the air held a chill, a reminder that winter would soon be upon them.

And yet this night wasn’t like others. Oliver seemed reluctant to let her go, which was made even more apparent when he reached out, took her hand, and began leading her toward his car.

This again.
Why was it so important to him? Had he seen something when he went to the dumpster? Were they being watched? Followed?

“There’s something else. You’re worried.”

“Everything’s fine.”

“We’ve been working together—how long now?—and this is the first time you’ve insisted on taking me home, and I’m pretty sure it’s not because you think I’m cute. So don’t play this off like there isn’t a reason.”

“You’ve been publicly linked to me.”

“Right. A long time ago, Oliver.”

“But not as my fiancée.”

“And you’re concerned someone’s going to think I’m important to you? Use me to get to you?”

They stood next to his glossy Mercedes roadster, his hand still joined with hers.

“Felicity, you are important to me. You’d be better off if you weren’t.”

A shiver ran through her. She wasn’t sure if it was the cold air getting to her or Oliver himself. Regardless, he shrugged off his suit jacket and draped it around her slender shoulders. His hands lingered on her arms.

“Oliver, I’m a grown woman. I make my own choices. I chose to work with you—our day job, our night job.”

“Only after I roped you in.”

She laughed lightly at that. “I know how to slip ropes.”

He looked at her questioningly before he felt for the handle of the car door. He opened it for her, and she hesitated before finally getting in before he shut the door. The I-am-woman-hear-me-roar side of her probably should have told him that she was perfectly capable of opening and closing the car door herself not to mention driving herself, but the stays-up-late-watching-old-movies side of her appreciated the gesture. She watched as he walked around to the driver’s side, and a shiver ran through her all over again.

Oliver was a good man. He still had battles to fight with his proverbial inner demons—and she was confident that he would eventually win that war—but it gnawed at her that so many in the business community still viewed him as a vacuous, selfish person. If only they knew what he sacrificed for others. Any chance of normalcy—gone. A home, a family. He’d brushed that aside in favor of a lonely existence.

Lonely. She’d heard his hesitation as he’d said it earlier, and that one simple word, lonely, struck her as far more painful to hear than Oliver’s admission to Diggle that he’d slept with Isabel.

Lonely.

Everyone wants to feel that human connection. Everyone. That connection that lets a person know he really was here. He mattered to someone—if only for a time.

Oliver mattered to her.
The thought came thundering into her head, thundering into her heart, just as natural and involuntary as her heartbeat.

It wasn’t a new realization, but the intensity was enough to nearly take her breath away.

“You got quiet all of a sudden,” he commented as he started the engine and turned on the heat.

“Just thinking.”

“Do I want to know?”

Did he want to know how she longed to reach across the expanse that separated them, literally, figuratively, physically, emotionally? To what end?

Did he want to hear her clumsy proclamations of feelings for him? Surely not when the only thing that would accomplish would be to make things even tenser than they already were.

“Probably not.”

Mistaking her silence for something else, he blurted, “I shouldn’t…I shouldn’t have snapped at you tonight.”

“Barely noticed,” she replied with a smile, even as he looked more guilt-ridden by the pass she was giving him. “Hey, I understand. I do.”

“I forget sometimes that he was just a man. Flawed like everyone else.”

“Oliver, I would never intentionally dishonor your father.”

“I know.” He tilted his head, looking at her as though he wanted to say more before he refocused his attention on the road. They went a couple of minutes before either spoke again. “Sometimes when I walk into QC, I expect to see him.”

“Because you see his mark on the place.”

“He built Queen Consolidated from the ground up. He took chances, worked non-stop. He had a vision for QC and its place in Starling City. And I…” Oliver paused, “don’t know what the hell I’m doing. Not really. I never wanted to be CEO, and now I’m fighting to hold onto it.”

And now she understood why he had been so driven. For him, saving QC was more than a means to finance their nightly vigilante activities. Even though that was how he framed it when he sprung the ‘engagement’ on her, his motivations went deeper.

It was all about Oliver’s relationship with his father, wanting in some way to make him proud.

It was about staying connected to a man long dead.

Her heart hurt for him, though she doubted that was why he had confided in her. “Oliver, I never met your father, but I have to think that if he were here, he would be so…”

“Disappointed?”

Was that how he still viewed himself? A disappointment? A screw up? “Proud.” Her voice hitched slightly, and she fought to contain the surge of emotion she felt. “You and I haven’t always agreed on methods, but I admire what you’re doing for this city, and I believe in you. You have sacrificed more than any one man should have to, but whatever happens, you don’t have to go it alone.”
“Thank you,” he said quietly.

“You’re welcome.” She paused briefly before asking, “So what did you want?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said you never wanted to be CEO. So what did you want?”

He swallowed hard. “I don’t know. I guess I wanted…whatever felt good, the next thrill. I was a waste of skin.”

“Oliver…”

He glanced over at her, his brows furrowed. “You wouldn’t have liked me very much.”

“You’ve told me before that you weren’t much of a gentleman.”

“I wasn’t. Case in point, tonight I ran into someone I hadn’t seen in years. I couldn’t even remember her name. Just that I seduced her at her own wedding rehearsal dinner and thought nothing of it at the time. I did it to see if I could.”

Felicity sucked in a breath. “You’re right. I wouldn’t have liked you much, but you aren’t that person anymore. So why are you telling me this?”

“Just trying to disabuse you of any notions you have about my character. I’m still selfish,” he warned her.

“We all have a certain degree of selfishness. You think that working with you is something I do solely out of the goodness of my heart?”

“It’s not?” And there was genuine surprise in his voice, as though it had never occurred to him that she might have ulterior motives.

She picked at the side of her thumb, a nervous habit. “I was with someone. For a long time, actually. When we broke up, he told me that I am boring. I never take any chances, and because I always play it safe, nothing I do will ever matter.”

Oliver gripped the steering wheel. “What a dick.”

“Eh, he was right. What he said hurt, but I did always play it safe. Until I met you. And what we do—it matters, Oliver. And I like how that makes me feel. So selfishness? We all have it to some extent, but you are a good man. You can’t tell me otherwise because I have watched you. In totally a non-creepy, non stalker way.”

“This guy, he is an idiot. What does he do, anyway, that makes him think he is so much more exciting than you?”

“He’s a dentist.”

“Filling cavities and performing root canals. Truly scintillating,” he deadpanned.

“He works with my dad. I kind of think my dad is grooming him to take over the practice when he retires in a few years.”

“Does your dad know this guy is an idiot?”
“I doubt it. He has a blind spot where Jack is concerned. When we broke up, my dad barely spoke to me for weeks. And my mom, she went into mourning for the grandchildren she would never have.”

“Is that why you rarely go home?”

“Maybe that’s part of it. It’s complicated.”

“When I meet your parents…”

“You’re not going to meet my parents,” she interrupted. “I’m not going to do that to you.”

“When I meet your parents,” Oliver persisted, “I can’t wait to tell them how…amazing their daughter i

She felt tears sting her eyes and had to look away. Leaning her head against the supple leather seat, she watched the lights of the city as Oliver drove her home.

“You didn’t have to walk me to my door.”

“Yes, I did.” Oliver watched as she inserted her key into the deadbolt lock.

She turned the knob. “Do you…do you want to come in?”

It was late, nearing midnight, she estimated. That early morning jog was going to come awful early indeed, but things just didn’t seem finished, or perhaps there was a part of her that didn’t want them to be.

“I should go,” he replied, his eyes focused on hers. “But I’ll be back in the morning to pick you up. Are you going for a run?”

“If I can pull myself out of bed.”

“You shouldn’t go without Digg or me,” he told her bluntly. At the questioning look on her face, he added, “The phone calls are just the beginning. The press is being polite now. That won’t continue.”

“You thought I would come home to an apartment building surrounded by reporters.”

“Yeah,” he admitted ruefully.

“Maybe the public isn’t as interested in us as you thought.”

He looked unconvinced. “I should let you get some sleep.”

“Right. Goodnight.” She then realized she was still clutching his jacket. “Oh,” she squeaked before passing it to him. He took it with a quirking of his lips.

“Goodnight, Felicity.” He gently stroked her arm before turning away.

She pushed the door fully open and was met with light. Huh. Had she been in such a hurry that morning that she forgot to turn off the overhead light? She looked back to say something about it to Oliver, but the hallway was empty.

She was imagining things. Simple as that. Being around Oliver and Diggle who were always looking
for trouble had her doing the same. That morning had been unusual with Oliver surprising her on her run and then returning to her apartment with her to get ready for work. To say she had been distracted was an understatement, so the lights were probably just something that slipped past her.

She stepped out of her heels and dropped her purse on the couch. The answering machine on the end table was blinking with the number twenty-one. Insane. Did she even know twenty-one people?

She pressed play before she padded to the kitchen for a glass of water, all the while listening to the messages.

“Ms. Smoak, this is Collie Stappert from the KSTR news team. I’d like to offer my sincere congratulations on your engagement to Mr. Queen. I was hoping we could get together and talk. The world’s curious about you, Ms. Smoak. My number is 555-5225. I look forward to hearing from you.”

Beep.

“Smoaky, it’s JoJo. What the hell is going on? You aren’t picking up your cell, and I need to talk to you. You aren’t going to believe the things being said about you. Call me. Now.”

Beep.

“Elfie, it’s Mom. Your dad was at the K-Mart on Pillsbury Road this evening and ran into Mr. and Mrs. Wilkerson. They congratulated him on your upcoming wedding. He thought it was a mistake, but I’ve received several messages about this, some even from reporters. Call me.”

Beep.

“Felicity, it’s Jack. I know we haven’t talked much lately, but I just wanted to say how truly happy I am for you. You are…” His voice briefly trailed off before he added, “You deserve all the best.”

Beep.

“Ms. Smoak, this is Dirk Mathers from CNBC. We’re doing a piece on Mr. Queen and would like your input…”

Felicity walked to the answering machine and pushed the back button.

“Felicity, it’s Jack.” Her heart stuttered slightly at the familiar voice. “I know we haven’t talked much lately, but I just wanted to say how truly happy I am for you. You are…You deserve all the best.”

Beep.

She pressed the back button again.

“Felicity, it’s Jack. I know we haven’t talked much lately, but I just wanted to say…”

“Oh good grief,” Felicity groaned as she hit the stop button. “He was Mr. Wrong for a reason.”

She walked toward her bedroom. Odd. The door was closed, another detail that niggled at her. She always left it open. Could Oliver have closed the door behind him that morning?

Oh crap.

Suddenly, the bedroom door swung open and a body barreled through, pushing her off balance. Her
glass slipped from her hand and shattered on the floor as she fell backward into an end table, the corner of the table catching her in the lower back before she slid to the floor. Pain sliced through her even as she tried to gain her bearings.

The man—she’d caught sight of him enough to tell this—had run out the door. And nearly as soon as he had disappeared into the hallway, she could hear a loud thump followed by a thud.

She pulled herself off the floor, her body protesting every movement. Glass crunched around her, even as her feet found the water puddle and something sharp pricked the bottom of her right foot. Despite this, she hurried into the hallway to find her intruder on his stomach, his face pushed into the carpeting that, truth be told, probably hadn’t been thoroughly cleaned in years. Oliver was perched atop him, his knee in the middle of the man’s back, even as he secured the man’s arms in a hammerlock.

“What were you doing in Felicity Smoak’s apartment?” Oliver’s voice was low, dangerous. The harshness reminded her more of the way he sounded as Arrow than the Oliver she knew, even though he obviously wasn’t using a modulator to disguise his voice.

“I’m not saying anything,” the man replied defiantly.

In response, Oliver exerted pressure on the man’s arm, threatening to pull his shoulder from its socket.

“If you hurt her…”

“Oliver!” Felicity’s voice caught in her throat as she announced her presence, knowing all too well that her assailant was in danger if the line of questioning continued. She couldn’t let Oliver do something he would later regret, not for her.

Oliver looked up, meeting her eyes, and he relaxed his hold on the man so that he was still secured but no longer in pain. His hardened expression changed as relief swept through him. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “F-fine.”

The door across the hall opened. Mrs. Havisham stood in the aperture wearing her bathrobe, curlers in her gray hair, and carrying an umbrella. “Unhand him! The police are on their way!” She smacked the umbrella across Oliver’s back with, thankfully, very little force and an aim that likely would have had her walking the sobriety line if she had been out driving.

Nevertheless, the strike had to have stung, even if Oliver’s face betrayed no discomfort. The older woman started to bring down the umbrella again, even as Felicity was moving closer to her and yelling, “No!” With the element of surprise gone, Oliver caught the umbrella easily with one hand the second time around and wriggled it free from the old woman’s grip. He tossed the umbrella to Felicity.

“Go back inside, Mrs. Havisham,” Felicity instructed the older woman, now beyond the point of caring whether she sounded cranky.

Mrs. Havisham looked at the younger woman with a wide-eyed innocence and spoke calmly, as though explaining the situation to a child. “But dear, surely we can’t let your boyfriend continue his assault on your cousin. This isn’t the Jerry Springer Show.”

Her cousin?!!!
If the situation weren’t an utter violation of her privacy in the one place she considered her sanctuary, Felicity might almost find Mrs. Havisham’s lackadaisical reaction to Oliver pinning down What’s-His-Name humorous. Almost.

But her apartment had been invaded, who knew what this man did in there, her foot hurt, her back ached, and she was pissed off.

“That isn’t my cousin! He broke into my apartment.”

The older woman’s face blanched. “Oh. Dear me. I let him in with the spare key you gave me for emergencies.”

“Whatever he told you, it wasn’t an emergency,” Felicity replied, unable to keep the terseness out of her voice as she passed the umbrella back to her neighbor.

“Oh my.” The old woman turned to the man pinned to the floor. “You lied to me.”

Felicity touched the old woman’s arm. “I want you to go back inside.”

Mrs. Havisham gave one last apologetic look before she grabbed a cat that was coiled around her feet and went into the apartment.

Any of the tenderness Oliver may have felt upon seeing Felicity was unharmed was quickly replaced by rage. “You lied your way into her apartment. What did you want? Who are you working for? The Triad? Amos Borg?”

The man didn’t immediately respond. Oliver exerted more force, pushing his arm upward until the man squealed in pain. “The Tattler,” he finally spat out.

“He’s a reporter,” Felicity supplied. Still not one of the good guys but way above bloodthirsty stalker/killer.

In the distance she could hear the sound of sirens. The police must not be too far away, which whether the intruder realized it, was probably good news for him.

Oliver began to pat down the man with one hand, searching for anything he might have taken from Felicity’s apartment or anything that might provide a clue as to his intent. The man had nothing on him, not even identification or a cell phone.

“What were you doing in my fiancée’s apartment?” Oliver asked. When the man did not immediately reply, Oliver tightened his grip. “What were you trying to find?” he demanded again.

“Answers.”

“About what?” Oliver persisted. When once again the man remained tight-lipped, Oliver pulled on his arms, leveraging his shoulder.

A snap sounded that made Felicity’s stomach twist, followed by the man’s howl of pain and a string of expletives that ended with, “You dislocated my goddamn shoulder!”

“You’re lucky that’s all I’m doing to you,” Oliver replied, his voice devoid of anything resembling empathy for the other man’s pain.

Two police officers bounded up the steps, Quentin Lance and a man Felicity didn’t recognize, though the tag on his black uniform identified him as Raleigh.
“Get him off of me!” the man on the ground screamed when he saw the police.

“We’ve got this, Mr. Queen,” Officer Raleigh said firmly.

Oliver was loath to release the man into their custody, but he let go and stood, immediately moving to Felicity’s side.

She was stunned to find herself pulled her into an embrace. Hugging wasn’t really their thing, though as she found herself relaxing against him, feeling the reassurance that he silently provided as his fingers lightly grazed over the back of her neck, she knew this was something she could get used to.

Wow. He was solid and warm and…

No. Don’t. Don’t think like that. Don’t start to want this.

Absently, he brushed his lips across her forehead before resting his chin on top of her head. All the while he watched Raleigh secure the trespasser’s wrists behind his back.

“I’m okay,” she whispered, even as she could feel the hammering of his heart against her ear. “You came back.”

“Ms. Smoak, may I have a word?” Quentin Lance asked as he approached the duo. His eyes only briefly fell on Oliver but held a hint of disdain, a complete contrast to the sympathetic expression he gave Felicity.

“Of course, Detective Lance,” Felicity breathed out quickly, trying to still the quivering in her voice. She didn’t wear damsel-in-distress well.

“It’s ‘officer’ now, Ms. Smoak,” he corrected, though his tone was almost fond. “You all right?”

No. She was not all right. Some stranger had been in her apartment. With the way the man took off, he was probably more afraid of her than she was of him—though if she had listened to her instinct that something was amiss in her apartment, she sure as heck would’ve been scared enough for the both of them. Why would he even be there so late at night? It didn’t make sense. And what did he think he was going to find anyway? He had told Oliver ‘answers,’ but answers to what? How geeked out she kept her place? What brand of deodorant she preferred?

“Ms. Smoak?” Lance asked when she didn’t reply, pulling her from her mind trip.

“I’m fine.”

“So what happened?”

“That man tricked my neighbor into letting him into my apartment. I…I don’t know what he was after. When I arrived home, he must have been in my bedroom. I remember thinking it was strange that the light was on the living room, but I talked myself into believing I’d forgotten to turn it off because I was a little scattered this morning.”

“Because of me,” Oliver finished, sounding contrite.

At that, Lance raised an eyebrow.

“When I headed toward my bedroom, I saw the door was closed. I generally don’t close it unless company is coming over and there’s a huge mess in there, which come to think of it, there’s a mess in there right now, but I sure didn’t remember closing the door before I left.” She shook her head
slightly, realizing she was taking too long to get to the point. “I think I realized he was there about the same time he realized that I realized. Okay. That made no sense. But long story short, he rushed out and pushed past me.”

“And met up with you, I take it,” Lance said looking at Oliver. “You, uh, handled yourself. What were you doing here so late anyway?”

“I brought Felicity home.” Oliver breathed heavily as he watched Lance’s partner bring the intruder to his feet.

The man grimaced in pain. “I want to press charges against Oliver Queen for assault.”

Lance looked from Oliver to the perp. “It seems to me Mr. Queen merely detained you until help could arrive.”

“He tried to pull my arm off! I need a doctor!”

As Lance’s partner began reading the stranger his Miranda rights, Quentin turned to Felicity. “Mind if I have a look around inside?”

“I don’t think he took anything, but go ahead.”

Quentin went inside.

The entire ordeal with the intruder had probably only lasted ten minutes at the most, but it seemed infinitely longer. The pinch she felt in her foot worsened, to the point that she didn’t want to put any weight down on it. And now that her adrenaline was wearing off, the jolts of pain in her lower back came in waves, almost as if she had been stabbed there. Pointy devil furniture, that’s what she had.

Seeing the look on her face, Oliver smoothed hair that had fallen loose from her ponytail. The tenderness of his touch zapped her back to him. “You sure you’re all right?”

“I’ll be fine,” Felicity replied, her voice thin. She turned to go inside, trying to walk normally, but as soon as she put pressure on her right foot, a slight whimper escaped from her.

It was then that Oliver looked down, saw the way she gingerly held up her foot, as well as the torn stocking and the blood. “Felicity.” Without another word, he swept her off her feet, one arm under the backs of her legs and the other securing her upper back, carrying her inside the apartment to get her off her injured foot.

“Carrying me over the threshold? That’s supposed to come after the wedding.” Her weak joke did little to diffuse the concern etched on Oliver’s face.

He gently set her on the couch.

“You are hurt.”

“I’m fine. I dropped a glass when he startled me. I must’ve got a shard in my foot.”

“May I?” Oliver asked.

She nodded her assent.

He knelt in front of her, his hands gently reaching under the hem of her dress to find the lacy edge of her stocking. She twitched slightly as his fingers made contact with her thigh. This was oddly
similar to a dream she had once had about him, except that reverie didn’t involve intruders, Oliver’s ex-girlfriend’s father in the next room, or shards of glass stuck in her foot. Oh, and he may have used his teeth to remove her stocking rather than his hands.

Her face grew hot at the thought, even as she recognized that the reality—with all its downsides—was far better than the fantasy. She could feel the warmth emanate from Oliver in waves, feel his calloused fingertips against her sensitive flesh.

He hooked his fingers to pull the delicate fabric down her leg. As he made it closer to her foot, she hissed slightly as he removed it and examined her foot. “It doesn’t look like you’ll need stitches.”

“That’s good.”

“But we need to get this cleaned up.”

“First Aid kit is in the bathroom under the sink. Next to…” her feminine products. “You know what? I can get it.” She pulled herself up off the couch, standing on one foot and hopping toward the bedroom to make her way to the en suite bathroom. As she drew close to the bedroom, she could see the puddle of water and pieces of broken glass. She stopped abruptly to avoid stepping on the glass again but nearly lost her balance in the process.

“Let me,” he insisted as he steadied her wobbling. Without waiting for permission, he once again picked her up and gently deposited her on the couch.

“Caveman,” she fussied mildly.

Still leaning over her, he whispered in her ear, “You have no idea how civilized I am making myself be.”

Felicity wondered what he meant by that and was about to ask when Officer Lance stepped out of the bedroom.

“Looks like the perp pulled clothes out of your closet. Left them everywhere.”

“Oh, that was me,” Felicity admitted as she raised her hand. “I was looking for something to wear last night. I haven’t had a chance to pick everything up yet.”

Quentin shot her a look of surprise. “Anything seem amiss to you in here?”

“I’ve not had a chance to look,” she replied.

“Did he tell you anything?” Lance asked.

“No.” Felicity absently pushed her glasses up her nose.

“What about you, Oliver?”

“Just that he worked for The Tattler and was looking for answers.”

It was then that Quentin noticed the ring on Felicity’s finger. “He’s not the only one who wants answers. The two of you are…”

“Yes. Engaged,” Oliver spoke out.

Quentin’s brows furrowed. “That’s a surprise.”
“You have no idea,” Felicity murmured. “I mean, it’s recent. Very recent.”

“You might explain why a rag journalist would be here. Laurel’s had a few tail her, as well, both before and after your,” he cleared his throat, “fantastic voyage.”

“I’ll take care of Felicity,” Oliver promised.

“You do that,” Quentin responded grimly. He turned back to Felicity, “Your ‘visitor’ won’t be going anywhere tonight. It’s late, so if you’ll come down to the station in the morning to handle some follow up, I think we’re done for now. Just check things over here. Let me know if anything’s amiss.”

Felicity nodded.

Lance shook his head. “You know how to pick ‘em, Ms. Smoak.” With that, he left, closing the door after him.

Quentin Lance’s disapproval seemed to hang in the air. “Well, that was fun,” she said blandly.

Oliver said nothing, instead disappearing into the bedroom. Felicity shifted slightly on the couch, the pain in her back no longer quite as sharp. There would definitely be bruising, but she figured the guy who broke into her apartment was going to have a far worse time ahead of him.

A couple of minutes later, Oliver still wasn’t back. What was he doing in there anyway? Studying up on what brands of feminine products she used? God, she hoped he didn’t spot that old bottle of Head and Shoulders that she had never bothered to throw away.

When he finally emerged, he carried her first-aid kit, along with an electronic device in the palm of his hand. As he got closer and she could better see what it was, her eyes widened. “Is that a…”

“Phone tap. Yes.”

She reached for the landline phone on the table next to her and opened the receiver. Sure enough, she found an identical device. The techie in her was unimpressed. “I know I should be really bothered by this, but it’s so 1990s. If it were me trying to be all secret spy sneaky, I’d be hacking into cell phone calls, text messages, and e-mails.”

“Or leaving other listening or video devices to record our conversations.”

“Or to record us having sex,” Felicity added. She squeezed her eyes shut. “Wow. When I get tired, I have no filter. Well, tired or drunk, but I’m more likely to be tired than drunk. But just as likely to be mortified. For the record, I personally would not record sex. But you have to admit someone would pay money for that, so if there were video equipment, that might be a reason for it. Well, they’d pay to see you. Unless…do you already have a sex tape? Wait. Don’t answer that. I don’t want to know. I don’t need to know. So I’m not really what you would call top heavy, and I’m guessing from the disproportionate percentage of surgically enhanced women who appear in professional pornography, that’s something of a pre-requisite. It’s part of the male fantasy, which I soooo am not. Not that I sit around watching porn, studying up on male fantasies. I don’t because that would just be eww. Well, I shouldn’t judge. I mean, I guess that’s how they get samples at sperm banks or fertility clinics. A little happy ending for hopefully a happy ending. It’s just funny, the thought of someone recording what I’m doing or saying. I’m so vanilla. I mean, how would they market that? The playboy and the IT girl? No, wait. They think I’m your secretary. Okay. You can stop me anytime now.”

“You were on a roll. And the way I wanted to stop you would not meet your approval.” His guard was slipping, she realized, as his eyes dipped to her lips. “And for the record, there are no sex tapes.”
“That’s good to know,” she said gamely. “How did you know to come?” Immediately she backtrakced even as she felt herself flushing furiously. “I meant, how did you know to come back into the building to help me?”

“I could see an outline in the window. It definitely wasn’t your outline.” The words themselves were innocuous, but the appreciative tone in Oliver’s voice had Felicity’s stomach doing flip-flops. Stupid butterflies again. “It looked like he was trying to get it open to go out the fire escape and couldn’t.”

Felicity merely nodded, unwilling to trust herself to speak, as Oliver disinfected a set of tweezers.

“You’ve got some glass caught in your foot. I need to get it out.”

He turned on a table lamp to provide better light for the job and retrieved a chair from the kitchen that he subsequently placed in front of where she sat on the couch. He sat in the chair and gently drew her leg up and onto his thigh. Felicity squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to see what he was doing, though she could feel one hand firmly holding her ankle. She could vaguely sense the metal instrument poke at the bottom of her foot, followed by a prick of pain. Then she heard him set aside the tweezers and felt brave enough to open her eyes.

“This is going to sting,” he warned her.

She nodded, even as she fought back a hiss when he cleaned the wounds with an alcohol wipe. He lightly blew on the bottom of her foot, the combination of his breath and the evaporation of the alcohol tickling her. A giggle escaped her lips.

“You’re ticklish,” he commented. “Why did I never know that?”

“Probably because you don’t typically go around groping my feet.”

“You say that as though I grope other parts of you,” he said, reaching for a roll of medical tape and gauze from the first-aid kit.

“You are handsy.”

His brows furrowed in confusion.

“Not that I’m complaining,” she quickly added.

“What do you mean, ‘handsy’?”

“Forget I said anything.”

“No, I want to know.”

“Oliver, you touch me all the time. A squeeze on the shoulder, rubbing my arm, brushing my hair back with your fingers, more recently holding my hand. And now you’re sitting there massaging my calf.”

“I didn’t realize I was doing that.” He stilled his movements once she made him conscious of his actions.

“You can’t keep your hands off me, and I can’t stop spewing sexual innuendos around you,” she joked. “What a pair we make. HR would have us in sexual harassment training all day. Prevention training, that is. They wouldn’t have us training others how to sexually harass, but I guess that goes without saying. And…I…said it anyway.
He pressed gauze to the bottom of her foot and taped it into place. He was careful to avoid touching her wound, but the contact had her fighting the urge to giggle again.

“I think you should come home with me tonight.”

“Make that in training all week.”

But the frown on his face told her that while she was playing off his invitation as a joke, he wasn’t. “I need to know you’re safe. And this place…isn’t. It was too easy for that bastard to get in here.”

“It pisses me off that he was in here, but I think I scared him more than he scared me. And I don’t think he was trying to hurt me intentionally.”

“But the next person might.”

“There’s not going to be a ‘next person.’ Mrs. Havisham isn’t going to be fooled again.”

He stood and began to pace, needing some outlet for his nervous energy. “Even with the deadbolt, I could be in here in 30 seconds flat, key or no key. Someone who is trained just needs the will; he or she can find the way.”

She groaned. “Are you trying to scare me? Because, you know, finding a stranger in my home was creepy enough.”

“You don’t know what all’s out there.”

“Yes, I do.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I do,” she insisted. “Last I checked, I had front row tickets. Look, I appreciate that you want to keep me safe, but I’m not a porcelain doll, and you can’t bubble-wrap my world. Besides, if you did, I would just pop the bubbles because, you know, bubbles need to be popped.”

“Then I’ll stay here with you. Keep an eye on things.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’m sure it hasn’t escaped your notice that I’m having a tough time keeping this,” she pointed between herself and him, “sorted.” She grimaced. “And I have to keep it sorted, Oliver, because we aren’t going to be…” her voice trailed off.

He nodded. “Right. You get ready for bed. I’ll clean up the glass and water, then head out.”

“There’s no need. I can do it.”

“I don’t want you to get glass in your foot again,” he replied.

“Don’t bubble wrap me,” she warned.

“That guy wouldn’t have even been here if not for me. I put you in this situation, so let me clean up the damn mess.” He didn’t raise his voice, but the harshness of his words had an equally scathing effect. Felicity visibly flinched. “I’m sorry. You’re the last person I want to be a jerk to.”

“Not every bad thing that happens is your fault. Believe me, I have no trouble letting you know when I think it is.”

“But this was,” he replied, his voice softening.
And just as he’d done twice before, he scooped her up, this time off the couch. Instinctively, she
wrapped her arms around his shoulders, linking her hands behind his neck. She wasn’t often this
close to him, half a breath away, and it staggered her. In some unexpected way, she had become—if
not used to his physical appeal—then at least she had gotten to the point where she didn’t stare at him
slack-jawed. Usually. Now his mouth was inches from hers and his blue eyes were an ocean of
depth as they locked onto hers. The fringe of lashes around his eyes was sinfully long for a man.

*No wonder women didn’t stand a chance.*

Oliver carried her into her bedroom, out of danger from the broken glass but perhaps into a different
type of danger.

With one knee on her bed, he leaned down and placed her atop the covers. He lingered, his body
practically suspended over hers. With no forethought, Felicity raked her finger across his jaw line,
feeling the stubble beneath. He captured her hand with his own, leaned into it, and tenderly kissed
her soft fingertips.

Both of them froze. She could feel heat radiating from his body, feel the sudden intake of his breath
that mirrored her own reaction, see his eyes darken. The fluttery, ticklish sensation returned to her
stomach, even as heaviness formed in her breasts and an ache settled into her very core.

“She?”

It wasn’t a question. It wasn’t a statement. It was as though her name was velvet on his lips, and he
was announcing his intentions.

Sparks skittered through her. She wanted this. There were so many reasons she shouldn’t, but she
did.

She could breathe his breath, feel his heartbeat in sync with her own, and suddenly, he was off the
bed and across the room.

*What just happened?*

She sat up about to ask just that when Oliver uttered, “You should do what Lance said. Look
around. See if anything’s missing or out of place.”

“Oliver—”

He pressed his lips together, clearly unhappy. With himself? With her?

“I’m sorry.” With that, he turned and left the room.

With the late hour and bone-deep emotional exhaustion she felt, Felicity thought sleep would come
easily.

She was wrong.

Her mind wouldn’t quit replaying the events of the day. The explosion of media coverage on her
personal life. Balancing a pseudo-engagement while trying not to pile on the lies with her family.
Discovering bits and pieces of Isabel Rochev’s past. Finding a tabloid reporter in her apartment.
Oliver kissing her and subsequently acting as though she had the plague. But really, if he was going
to act like she had cooties or something, couldn’t she at least have gotten a full on, toe-curling kiss on the lips?

And then there was the persistent fear that gripped her. She thought she would be fine alone, but every noise she heard, she imagined it was someone else breaking into her apartment. Maybe she should have taken Oliver up on his offer to stay at the Queen mansion for the night. It wasn’t as though he was hurting for space over there.

Stupid pride.

Once, she had somewhat managed to drift into a fitful sleep, she briefly dreamed that TMZ was hosting its tabloid show from her bedroom and critiquing everything from her décor to her lingerie. She awoke when, in her dreams, one of the hosts poked at her back, finding that tender spot where she had hit the corner of the end table when the intruder pushed past her.

In actuality, she woke from her fleeting slumber because she was aching and uncomfortable. She turned on her side, the tank top she wore riding up her flat belly, until she tugged at it.

She could vaguely hear one of the neighborhood dogs barking, but her mind fixated on it to the point that she couldn’t put it from her mind.

Felicity finally reached for the lamp on her nightstand and turned it on. If she couldn’t sleep, then at least she could get her place looking presentable again.

She swung her legs out of bed when suddenly, her cell phone lit up on the dresser. With all the phone calls she had been receiving (and ignoring with the phone on silent), she almost didn’t look, but old habits died hard.

From Oliver Queen:

**sent 2:12 a.m.**

**OQ:** Why aren’t you sleeping? Everything okay?

How would he know that? Unless…

She walked to the window and looked out. Sure enough, his car was still parked below. He had never left.

*That man.*

**FS:** You’re outside.

**OQ:** In the car. Is everything okay?

**FS:** Go home. Get some rest.

**OQ:** Like you’re resting?

**FS:** Not the point and not cute.

**OQ:** Not trying to be.

**FS:** Why are you out there?

**OQ:** Keeping watch.

**FS:** You need sleep. Go home.

**OQ:** Can’t.

**FS:** Then come inside. You need sleep.

**FS:** I need you to take care of yourself.
When Felicity opened the door, Oliver nearly turned and went the other direction. She was glasses-free, and her face was scrubbed of makeup, allowing her natural rosiness to shine through. Her blonde hair fell over her shoulders in tousled waves, no longer held back by an elastic band. And then there were her pajamas. She wore tiny sleeping shorts with a 1’s and 0’s pattern on them that tied in a pink bow below her belly button, which he noticed for the first time had a piercing. Those shorts, which only served to showcase the length of her slender legs, combined with the form-fitting tank top, left little to his imagination.

She stepped aside so he could come in. “I’ll go get you a blanket and a pillow for the couch.”

Oliver saw two things when Felicity turned her back—the infamous tattoo just above her shapely derriere that had triggered his curiosity when he’d first heard about it courtesy of People magazine, of all sources; and a purple mottled blotch on her skin that peeked out from the hem of her tank top. She gave the scant top a tug, but it was too late. He’d seen the angry bruise.

He closed the distance between them, his fingers going to the hem of the tank and pulling it up.

“What happened?”

She stepped away from him. “No, we’re not doing this. It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not. Did this happen tonight?”

She looked over her shoulder and threw him a withering glare. “I have patched you up more times than I can count, times that I was scared you were going to die. This is just a booboo.”

She disappeared into her bedroom only to re-emerge less than a minute later with the promised pillow and blanket.

Oliver quirked an eyebrow when he saw the fleece blanket had a pattern of panda bears on it.

“It’s my favorite,” she said simply, almost daring him to comment on it.

“Thank you.”

“The couch isn’t much, but…”

There was a time when he never thought he’d see a couch again, let alone enjoy its comfort. “It’s fine.”

“Okay then. Goodnight, Oliver.”

He slipped off his shoes and settled on the sofa even as he heard her movements in her bedroom behind her closed door.

He unfolded the blanket and pulled it over him, finding that it smelled like her: sweetness and radiance with a hint of cherry. What would she have tasted like? He could imagine all too well, enough to make him suck in his breath and will his body to get under control.
Earlier when he had carried her into the bedroom, it really had started innocently. He had wanted to keep her off that foot, but when she wrapped her arms around his neck and looked at him with absolute adoration and a hint of lust as he set her down, the atmosphere changed. Yes, it began innocently; it ended with a raging hard-on. He wasn’t supposed to think of her that way; he had promised himself Felicity was off limits months ago. Too much hinged on their being able to work with one another, and Oliver knew all too well that his relationships tended to end badly, largely by his own doing.

From the time he was a little boy, it had been ingrained in him that as a Queen, he had to be careful. Too many people in the world would use him. Women would use him for his money, for the doors his name could open. Others would seek to harm him because of his family’s vast wealth, hence the constant presence of bodyguards.

Circumstances had seen to it that he no longer took those warnings as seriously on his own behalf. Certainly, he could handle the physical threats. If there was one good thing about being trapped in Purgatory, it was that the island forged a stronger man. And any naïveté he had regarding women was long since gone. Had been since he was on the receiving end of his first blowjob, only to have the girl ask him to buy her concert tickets to see Green Day after she was finished.

But Felicity didn’t have his jaded upbringing or a crucible that hardened her to the world. And now that the word was out, he didn’t know how he was going to keep her safe, especially with her being so reluctant to accept the measures he saw necessary.

This was not a problem he had foreseen when he had arrogantly told Diggle that he would make her into a Queen. Bringing her into the Queen fold, moving her into his home with its bevy of security, would certainly alleviate some of those concerns. Not that Felicity would go willingly, but it was something they should discuss in the light of day and the fact that their arrangement looked to be extended now that the world knew her as his fiancée.

For now, though, in the shadow of night, Oliver found himself drifting, hoping that tonight’s sleep would be dreamless.

Felicity felt positively voyeuristic as she lay in bed, the room dark except for the glow cast by her tablet. She had searched for Robert Queen on Google, and found herself poring through the images. Robert was certainly a handsome devil; Oliver bore more than a passing resemblance to his father, much more than Thea who, in Felicity’s opinion, looked like a younger version of Moira.

Her opinion was confirmed when she saw a photo Robert and Moira from a newspaper with the heading, “Queens Take Home New Prince.” Robert held an infant Oliver in his arms, beaming brightly at the newborn. Moira gazed at her husband with adoration. The image was a far cry from the bits and pieces she had heard about the Queens’ marriage.

Another photo featured Robert and a young Oliver on a small fishing boat—definitely not the Queen’s Gambit—with the two standing side by side, each holding up his catch for the day. The fish Oliver held seemed to be nearly as tall as he was. Of course, he was probably only about nine or ten in the picture, which looked to be from a charity fishing tournament. The look of absolute delight on the little boy’s face was enough to make Felicity smile. She could see glimpses of the man she knew in this little face, but there was an open innocence she had never seen in the grown Oliver.

Another photo featured Robert standing next to Oliver at maybe 16 or 17 years of age. They shared a similar coloring, from their sandy hair and blue eyes, to the same square, masculine chins and dimpled smiles. Oliver lacked the extreme chiseled physique in this photo, but he was clearly fit, no longer the scrawny little boy who went fishing with his father.
And that grin.

Not a care in the world.

So different from her Oliver, a man who played the role of Atlas, the man who carried the world on his shoulders.

_Her Oliver?_

He wasn’t _her_ Oliver.

He really, really wasn’t her Oliver.

As much as they were playing pretend, she couldn’t lose sight of that fact. Earlier that night, she almost had.

Isabel Rochev had called her a fraud, and in technical terms, the woman was correct.

Felicity’s stomach twisted at the thought of Isabel. On the one hand, she thought the woman had more in common with vipers than with the human race. On the other hand, she couldn’t help but wonder how much her upbringing had to do with the woman’s coldness.

But everything she’d been able to find out suggested that once Natasha—Isabel—came stateside, she had a good life. She excelled in school, despite the initial language barrier. Her aunt and uncle seemed to dote on her. She maintained contact with them and their son, her adoptive brother. In fact, from what Felicity had been able to glean, Isabel was listed as Kirill’s guardian in their estate plan should they die before he reached legal age.

So there had to be at least _some_ redeeming characteristics in the woman, even if Felicity couldn’t personally pick them out. Of course, she could admit to herself that she was more than somewhat biased where the businesswoman was concerned.

Viktor and Irina certainly were not typical parents. Taking in Isabel, waiting so long to have their own biological child. Felicity did some mental comparison calculations. When she was twelve, their son’s age, her parents were in their mid-thirties, while her grandparents were nearing sixty. Both Viktor and Irina were already past the sixty milestone.

Felicity certainly hoped no misfortunes befell the older Rochevs. If Kirill had to grow up with Isabel…Felicity fairly shuddered at the idea. But other women Isabel’s age had children in Kirill’s age range, so to the outside world, Isabel probably would look more like his mom than his own parents …

Felicity froze as a thought practically exploded in her brain.

No. That was crazy. That was 3:00 a.m., sleep deprivation crazy.

She set aside the tablet, even as her heart hammered in her chest.

No. Just leave it alone. Leave it alone.

But she couldn’t. If Oliver was Atlas, then she was Pandora.

Exhaling loudly, she picked up the tablet and entered Kirill Rochev, Jericho, New York in a search engine. A Facebook profile was the first listing to appear. She hesitated as her finger hovered over the link.
So I’m cyber-stalking a twelve-year-old.

And then she clicked on it.

She was met with a profile picture of an athletic looking boy in a baseball uniform. A mop of sandy-colored hair covered his head and his brown eyes shone brightly.

But it was his smile that made her pause.

She would have recognized that grin anywhere.
The Only Thing Missing was Oprah's Couch

Chapter Notes

Here's another long one. Things happen. :)

Part Eight: “The Only Thing Missing Was Oprah’s Couch”

The next morning, Felicity was pretty certain her neighbors were going to put a hit out on her.

It was a shame, really. She had always prided herself on being perfectly neighborly. She greeted them, even that grumpy Mr. Anderson who had a perpetual look of constipation on his face (though she figured constipation would be enough to make anyone grumpy). When the Lisinskis went out of town, Felicity was always the first person they called to water their plants or pick up their mail. She never played her music too loud because she knew Mrs. Green worked and slept odd hours. Nor did she ever have raucous parties. And perhaps most importantly, she’d also never turned her place into a meth lab. So really, she was an ideal neighbor except for one teensy detail. She was engaged to Oliver Queen: scion, CEO, philanthropist, vigilante, and media magnet.

As she looked out her bedroom window, she was amazed at the commotion on the street below, especially considering it was only a little after 6:00 a.m. News crews lined up and down the sidewalk with video cameras ready to roll as soon as she and Oliver made a move to leave the apartment. This was definitely another new experience, courtesy of Oliver Queen.

She vaguely remembered the media coverage when Oliver ‘returned from the dead,’ but to be honest, she wasn’t all that interested in the story. She had more important things to do with her time, like spending it with that cute barista from Verve Drip (she had never told him she thought the name of the coffee shop was just dreadful, but at least the coffee was good…and so was he). If Jack was Mr. Wrong, then Drew was Mr. Right Now for a glorious two-week rebound and a couple of relapses along the way. Felicity had never subscribed to JoJo’s philosophy that the best way to get over someone was to get under someone else until she met Drew, and then she understood.

Of course, her co-workers in the IT department talked about Oliver’s return, asked her how she thought he would affect the company. So then she maybe started to pay more attention to the media coverage, more so to be able to keep up with the watercooler conversations than from any actual interest in a vacuous playboy whom, she privately thought, looked just a little too good for having survived on a deserted island.

Little did she know.

Once she actually met Oliver in person, she was intrigued. The first shocker was that he wasn’t vacuous at all, though his lying skills left much to be desired. She figured so many ‘yes’ men had surrounded him in his life, he never had to develop that skill. Who would dare call him on a lie? The second surprise was that she was interested in him. Not romantically—though he was certainly handsome enough to make her palms sweat and her mouth go dry—but interested in the mystery of him. What was he really doing with a bullet-riddled laptop? And once she managed to get into the laptop? She had even more questions that combined corporate intrigue with Shakespearean drama. Ah yes, the good stuff.
And so she paid attention to the media coverage, which she finally noticed seemed to follow him constantly (though as she thought about this months later after discovering his other persona, he did a pretty darn good job of giving the reporters the slip considering his nocturnal activities). The reporters covered every minutiae of his life, from what restaurants he was spotted in, what he “noshed” on as they put it, who his companions were, what parties he attended, etc.

And, of course, they didn’t have a clue about the real Oliver.

Once the novelty of his resurrection wore off, the media coverage died down from an abject frenzy to a mere hullabaloo. Until Walter’s kidnapping, that is. That certainly renewed interest as the media spun the Queen family’s tragedies with truly ‘thought-provoking’ Kennedy-esque headlines like “Is the Queen Family Cursed?”

Then came Moira Queen’s role in the Undertaking, and the spotlight, once again, firmly shined on the Queen family. Except Oliver ducked out when he returned to Lian Yu for five months and, whether he realized it, Thea was the one who took the brunt of that coverage. Cool, collected Thea. Felicity kept tabs on Oliver’s little sister, and the young woman had moxie—and a penchant for waving at the cameras with her middle finger extended.

And now the sharks were circling again, certain they sniffed blood. In their view, if Oliver Queen married, that was a huge story in and of itself. If their relationship went up in flames, that would be an even bigger story. After all, who doesn’t love a good bit of gossip? The media builds only to tear down.

So Felicity stayed in the shower longer than usual, partly because she hoped the steam would awaken her senses, partly because she hoped the dark circles under her eyes would magically disappear, and partly because she wanted to avoid the circus outside at all costs.

When she was a little girl, she had dreamed of what it would be like to be famous. What kid doesn’t? Some children want to be singers, actors, or dancers. She wanted to be a famous astronaut—until she realized overcoming motion sickness would not be one of her personal victories. But as a child with an extremely vivid imagination, she pictured her life as the scene from *The Right Stuff*, where the astronauts walk in slow motion. *That* would be her. She used to even practice the slow motion walk with her cousin Eli. What a good sport.

In her mind’s eye, the reporters would ask her, “How does it feel to be the first girl to go to Mars?” And she would, of course, utter something ridiculously cool in response—as cool as an eleven year old could be. She wasn’t sure exactly what, but by golly, it was going to be cool. And then all her classmates would wish they had been nicer to her, and the boys would wish they had paid more attention, other than noting her glasses or gangly legs. Then the President would tap her to make public service announcements about the importance of staying in school and studying hard. Good times.

Now the reporters were probably going to ask her how it felt to be Oliver Queen’s fiancée because, obviously, to them, she had no identity outside of that (and come to think of it, Oliver’s identity—at least to the public—was inseparable from the Queen name). But really, what did they expect her to say? “Oh, yes. It’s a shame I’m engaged to Oliver Queen. He’s awful plain looking.” Or, “How do I feel about being engaged to Oliver Queen? Well, it kind of sucks.” *Of course not.*

No, she would offer platitudes because that was what was expected. And she would have to rely on her imagination because, like the pipe dream of being an astronaut, it was never truly going to happen with Oliver and her. He made that perfectly clear last night when he practically ran out of her room because the other dozen times he’d turned away from her just didn’t do the trick.
Oliver.

That was another reason to stay in the shower. He was in the other room, and while he was (admittedly) incredibly fun to look at, she really didn’t want to see him. Not this morning. Not with so many thoughts making her head feel like a Ninja blender had gone berserk in there. Gah.

First and foremost, she needed to tell Oliver what she’d found about Isabel—and by extension, about his father. But they just didn’t make greeting cards for “Congratulations. You have a half-brother you didn’t know about.” If they did, it would be right next to the “Our sincere condolences on sleeping with your half-brother’s mother” cards. But then those would be next to the “Get well from your almost-Oedipus complex soon.”

Oliver’s family dynamics made her family look normal, and that was saying something.

For as uncomfortable as that conversation was going to be for her, more than anything, she didn’t want to hurt him. Oliver was a brilliant actor, in her estimation. He had the capacity to show the world what he wanted it to see: a cool, self-assured man with more charm than he knew what to do with. But she had been around him enough to scratch that surface. The young man who left home on that ill-fated voyage—the man everybody who didn’t know better assumed he still was—had been broken down and remade into someone else entirely. For as much as Oliver appeared in control in his public persona, she knew that he doubted himself, much as he tended to doubt the motives of those around him. So yes, Oliver was a brilliant actor. Brilliant at hiding the changes in himself. Brilliant at keeping others at arm’s length.

Usually.

Even if he wasn’t ever going to be one of those men who wanted to sit down and talk about his feelings, he did lower his guard at times around Digg and around her. Not that she thought he told them everything; she knew he told them what he could, while storing away the rest in some imaginary vault he kept buried. But what she could glimpse in those moments of truth, in those moments when the mask was removed and layers were peeled back, made her wish she could lighten the burden he carried. All she knew was that Oliver felt deeply, he hurt deeply, and the new information she had about Robert Queen, Isabel, and their son—Oliver’s half brother—would add another layer of scarring to those scars that weren’t visible but nonetheless all too real.

She didn’t want to do that to him.

Once she had finally screwed up enough courage, she turned off the shower, toweled herself dry, put a new bandage on her foot, and pulled her outfit from the closet, a royal blue sheath dress that fell at her knees with a modest neckline that was saved from absolute blandness by a keyhole cutout. Shoes were going to be a problem, though.

For now, she shoved her feet into fluffy bunny slippers, a startling contrast to her sleek dress, especially considering when she walked, the bunny ears flapped.

When she left the solitude of her bedroom, she was surprised to see John was there. He immediately noticed the way she moved gingerly when she put her right foot down; that much was evident by the concern etched in his features. He laid a garment bag across the back of the sofa, which she assumed must be a fresh suit for Oliver, and closed the distance between them before planting a brotherly kiss on her temple. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“I don’t like seeing you hurt,” Diggle gently grumbled.
“Like I told Oliver last night, in the grand scheme of things, it’s just a booboo.”

“Any information on our visitor?” Oliver asked. He stood behind the kitchen counter, a glass of water in hand.

“Name’s Craig Banks. He does freelance work for The Tattler, though his managing editor categorically denies that he sent Banks here.”

Oliver’s eyes narrowed. “I wouldn’t have expected less. Plausible deniability.”

Felicity nervously ran her top teeth along her lip. “What I don’t understand is why he would be at my apartment so late. I mean, wouldn’t he think I’d be home or at least coming home?”

Diggle looked less than thrilled. “Evidently, he paid off one of the bouncers at Verdant to call him when you left. Your car is still in the parking lot.”

From the corner of her eyes, Felicity looked to Oliver, who clenched his fist and silently cursed. She was so incredibly glad to not be that bouncer. Not that she would be a bouncer, unless there was a trampoline involved. With safety netting. “So he thought he had all the time in the world—or at least the twenty minutes it would take me to drive back and forth. Okay. Fifteen, but only because I know short cuts, not because of speeding.” At the incredulous looks both men gave her, she shrugged her shoulders and said, “What? I don’t speed.”

“So all this trouble for a story,” Diggle commented. Felicity thought she heard an undercurrent of irritation in his voice. John wasn’t happy—and if she didn’t know better, his frustration was directed at Oliver.

Oliver’s eyes cut to Diggle, meeting the challenge in the other man’s tone. “Well, I’m sure he’s got one now.”

“Not the one he’d hoped for,” Felicity chirped and followed with a nervous laugh.

“Word is you put the hurt on him,” Diggle said with a raised brow.

“Not enough,” Oliver groused. “So we’re sure he has no known associations with any crime syndicates?”

“He’s a tabloid reporter, ergo he has unsavory associations. But is he working for any of Arrow’s enemies? Not that I’ve been able to uncover, but,” Diggle looked at Felicity, “you might give it a go when you get a chance.”

Felicity nodded. “Right.”

“You’ve got a whole fan club out there,” Diggle pointed out. “Wasn’t easy to get through the cameras.”

“He does,” Felicity pointed at Oliver. “They don’t really care about me.”

“They do now,” John corrected. “Want me to stick around? Make sure you can get out of here safely?”

“I’ve got it, Digg,” Oliver interrupted.

“You sure about that?” The tension filled the space between them.

“Yes, I’m sure.” Oliver’s teeth were clenched.
“I’ll see you a little later?” Felicity said, squeezing John’s hand, trying to smooth things over.

At that, Digg pursed his lips and offered a curt nod.

When Diggle made his exit and Oliver locked the door after him, he turned back around to see Felicity standing with her arms crossed. Never a good sign.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Digg was just bringing me something to wear.”

“No. You two were having the lamest pissing match I’ve ever seen. You’re all grrr at each other but trying not to let me see it.”

“Felicity.”

“Don’t ‘Felicity’ me. That’s not a denial. Is this because that dillhole reporter broke in here last night?”

“It’s because you got hurt. You got hurt, and it’s my fault. Diggle’s right to be pissed.” Oliver scrubbed a hand over his face, and she could see the exhaustion and guilt mingling on his features. “Do you mind if I take a shower?”

He began to walk past her, but she shot out a hand, stilling his movements. He looked down at her hand, firmly planted against his chest. He still wore yesterday’s button-up shirt, but somehow her fingers managed to find his bare skin as they slipped between the buttons. He fought the urge to pull her to him, to breathe her in, to let his hands begin an exploration of their own.

“Tell me something.”

“What?” he asked, his voice low.

She could feel the humming in his chest as he spoke.

“You really think this is your fault?”

His eyes narrowed. “Like you said, they wouldn’t be interested in you if not for me.”

She pulled her hand away from him as though the contact burned her. “You are so incredibly arrogant.”

“Excuse me? Those were your words, not mine.”

“You can’t control what other people do, Oliver.”

“I put you at risk!”

“No. That reporter made the choice to come in here. I made the choice to ignore the warning bells going off in my head. That’s not on you. You can control one person’s actions: your own.”

His eyes locked onto hers. “These days I’m barely doing that.” He swallowed hard as he reached out to touch her, thought better of it, and dropped his hand to his side. “If something happened to you...”

“I’m fine,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. “And you need a shower. Just let me get some stuff out of the bathroom first. A girl’s got to tame her hair, right?”
When the two left the apartment roughly a half-hour later, they immediately met reporters, cameras, and extendable microphones pressing toward them. Oliver clutched Felicity’s hand and led her down the front stairs, wanting to protect her from the onslaught. His pace was steady, though he was mindful of her shorter legs and her injured foot, the evidence of which was hidden under sensible flats she dug out of her closet, all the while grumbling that they were granny shoes.

But Felicity looked like anything but a granny. She was vibrant, a fact that seemed incredibly counterintuitive. She was going on how many hours of sleep?

This wasn’t what he’d wanted for her. As a younger man, he had sometimes enjoyed the cat and mouse games he played with the press and he’d used them to his advantage, particularly when he wanted to irk his parents or prove a point. Now he felt like he was on high alert, just waiting for one of the reporters to get too close, to push too hard.

Wordlessly, he released her hand and pulled her slender body toward him, needing more contact, needing to keep her safe. Instinctively, she rested her hand against his torso as the two moved in unison, presenting a united front. He allowed himself a glimpse of her face, thinking he might see fear reflected there. Instead, she offered him the smallest of smiles, as though reassuring him.

“When did you know you were in love, Mr. Queen?”

“When’s the wedding, Felicity?”

“Is it true you’re expecting your first child?”

“Show us the ring, Felicity!”

“Mr. Queen, how did you propose?”

Question after question hurled toward them, but neither said anything. When the duo reached Oliver’s car, he opened the passenger door for her and tried to quickly usher her inside, away from the prying eyes.

“Mr. Queen, Mr. Queen! What sets Felicity apart from other women?”

He was about to shut the door but hesitated when he heard that question. It wasn’t a particularly well-formed question and not even all that tactful. There was the undercurrent of why her when he had obviously been with so many different women. Whereas he had ignored every other question, this one he couldn’t resist. Odd, really.

“There is no comparison. Felicity is ... she’s everything. Intelligent. Beautiful. Funny. Compassionate. My best friend. And,” Oliver looked directly into the camera with a million-watt smile, “there is never a boring moment when she’s around. I’m better for knowing her.”

“You sound like a man very much in love.”

He easily fell into Oliver-before-the-cameras mode. “When you know, you know.”

“Thank you, Mr. Queen,” said the grateful reporter, undoubtedly pleased to have a career boost.

Oliver addressed all the gathered reporters and camera crews. “I have to go to work. As a show of good faith, why don’t you guys clear out, give the neighbors a chance to get in and out without ducking between cameras? Ms. Smoak and I will be issuing a formal announcement later today.” With that, Oliver closed Felicity’s door before walking around to the other side and getting into the driver’s seat.
He pressed the starter button, and the engine of the vehicle purred to life. In short order, they were away from the throng of reporters and headed into the melee of Starling City morning traffic. It was a few minutes later that he realized she was being uncharacteristically quiet. He expected she’d at least be bristling over the intrusiveness of some of the questions, but instead, she sat staring out the window and seemed to be mulling over something.

“You haven’t said anything since we left.”

“You told me not to say anything to the press. So what gives?” she asked shooting him a sideways look.

“What do you mean?”

“You never talk into the cameras like that when reporters are following you. It’s always, ‘No comment. No comment.’ So why now?”

“Are you upset with me?”

Felicity clicked her tongue, something he heard her do from time to time, usually when she was about to say something and then changed her mind. “I shouldn’t be. I mean, you did say nice things, though you probably laid it on a little thick.”

“You think I came across as insincere?” He was baffled by her response, unsure whether to laugh it off or feel wounded.

She looked at him and said pointedly, “I think that if there had been a couch, you would have jumped on it.”

He kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead. “You are making absolutely no sense.”

She removed her glasses and squeezed the bridge of her nose, stifling a yawn. “I get told that a lot. Tom Cruise. Katie Holmes. Oprah’s couch.”

“Right. I do remember that.”

And he did, mostly because it led to one of many fights with Laurel about the nature of their relationship. Laurel thought Tom Cruise’s proclamations were romantic; Oliver found Cruise putting his new relationship with Katie Holmes on display to be distasteful. Really? What guy does that; cedes power like that? But that was one of his and Laurel’s problems; Oliver was never one for grand declarations, and Laurel had certainly wanted one.

Felicity put her glasses back on. “For the record, I thought the Oprah’s couch thing was creepy back in the day. And we all know how that relationship turned out, so I think I was onto something.”

“And you think my talking about you was creepy? Did you want me to talk about the weather?”

“Not creepy. Just…never mind.”

“No, I want to hear what you think.”

She exhaled in a huff. “You looked directly into the camera and sent Jack Sommet a message.”

“Who?” he asked guilelessly.

But he knew exactly to whom she was referring. And yes, there was a part of him that relished the idea that the man would see Oliver’s declaration and regret what he’d given up. Felicity deserved
better than what’s-his-face.

“Mr. Wrong. The dentist.”

“The one who called you boring. And that has you upset?”

“I know logically that you have to paint a picture for the public if we’re going to pull this off and make it in any way, shape, or form believable, but…”

“But what?”

“The more we lie about what’s going on between us, the more we are going to hurt the people we love when this charade comes to an end.”

“You’re worried about hurting Jackass?” He sounded like a prick. He knew it, but he couldn’t quite help himself. Oliver had never met the man, and already, he hated him.

“No.” And the corners of her mouth twitched. She fought it until she couldn’t help the smile that broke out when he used his nickname for her ex.

A strange tightness gripped Oliver in his stomach. He loved to see her smile, and in those moments when he was the cause of her smiles, he could almost believe that he wasn’t the worst thing that had ever happened to her.

“I’m not worried about Jack.” She emphasized his correct name, but there was still an undercurrent of mirth in her tone.

“Look, I’m trying to demystify us. We cooperate but on our terms, and the paparazzi will have less incentive to chase you down.”

“I’m just worried about what it’s all going to look like when we’re done with the charade.”

“Already trying to get rid of me.”

His comment was lighthearted, but it may as well have fallen on deaf ears.

“Have you thought about how that’s going to work?” she asked.

“You’re going to break my heart, remember?”

“Right, I’m going to break your heart.” She sounded so humorless, so un-Felicity. There was a trace of something Oliver couldn’t readily identify, and it unnerved him.

“Hey, what’s this all about?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

But he understood. They were stumbling toward an ending that would have consequences beyond what they had discussed, beyond what they had initially planned. When they did finally end their ‘engagement,’ how would they be able to explain their continued working arrangement? Felicity could go back to the IT Department or perhaps to the Applied Sciences Division, but even then, she would be plagued by whispers. And if they were seen with one another? That would surely raise eyebrows. It would just seem unbelievable that two people who had broken off an engagement would continue to work together or see each other socially.

Oliver swallowed hard as a thought entered his mind. It would be an ideal time to extricate himself
from her life, to set her on a path that didn’t include violence or darkness or always having to look
over her shoulder. Felicity deserved a life of weekend brunches, wine tastings, lazy Sunday
afternoons in bed, cheesy romantic comedies, and bad karaoke. She deserved to fall in love with a
man who would allow himself to be tender enough to worship her, who wouldn’t wake in the middle
of the night terrified of the shadows from his past. She deserved a man who would rub her swollen
belly as they awaited the birth of their child and tell her she grew more beautiful with each passing
day.

“I know I didn’t seem appreciative last night, but thank you for…thank you for sticking around. And
for getting the glass out of my foot.” Felicity’s words pulled him from his thoughts.

Oliver felt ashamed—for wanting to let her go and for not wanting to let her go. He needed her in his
life; he wanted her. As his friend, his partner. And he wished he could be the man who could
dedicate his life to her—and her only. But he’d seen too much, done too much. He would never be
that guy, the one who could build a future with anyone, not when he could barely see past next
week.

But for now, sitting there with her, he wanted to pretend he wasn’t broken inside.

“And for not making fun of your panda blanket,” he added.

“Hey, that blanket is the epitome of awesomeness. You know the only thing that could make it
better?”

“What’s that?”

“If it had unicorns on it.” Her smile wavered slightly, and he couldn’t help but wonder what she was
thinking while alternately glad she didn’t know where his thoughts had led him.

If he were a good man, a better friend, he would warn her to get out while she was still unscathed.
But while Felicity made him want to be a better man, he wasn’t there quite yet. Even as a child,
spoiled and selfish were two words he knew people associated with him. He’d done little to prove his
naysayers wrong, and he wasn’t about to start now.

Leaving his left hand on the wheel, he reached out with his right hand, seeking her. Without
comment, she slid her hand into his, their fingers intertwining.

When the elevator doors opened on the executive level, Belinda Carlen awaited them. “Mr. Queen,
Ms. Smoak.”

Mrs. Carlen reminded Felicity of a slightly older version of her mother. Immediately, Felicity found
herself straightening her posture and sucking in her imaginary gut.

“Belinda,” Oliver greeted. “I’ve asked you to call me Oliver. We’ve certainly known each other long
enough.” He extended his hand, and the older woman shook it.

Yes, they had known each other, almost for as long as Oliver could remember. Belinda worked her
PR magic for Robert Queen from almost the beginning of his tenure as CEO. From time to time, she
assisted with the family’s public relations matters, most notably when Oliver was arrested after
urinating on a cop’s tires and more recently when he returned from the island.

“And I’m just Felicity.”

“Of course. Oliver. Felicity.” Belinda smiled in a measured way. Her job was all about control.
Controlling information, controlling images, and control began with her own reactions. “After we spoke last night, Felicity, I took it upon myself to draft a few potential press releases.”

“Let’s step into my office,” Oliver suggested.

The three entered the spacious office. Immediately, Belinda went to the rectangular glass table and set down her files.

“Could I get you some coffee?” Oliver offered.

Belinda raised an eyebrow that the CEO of the company offered beverages while his executive assistant stood by. “No, thank you.”

“Felicity?”

“I’m fine. I had some while you were in the shower.” At that, her cheeks reddened when she realized what she had said.

Belinda smiled. “You don’t have to be embarrassed. No one would expect that the two of you are,” she cleared her throat, “abstaining.”

“I think you have the wrong-,” Felicity began, but was cut off by Oliver who placed his forefinger across her lips.

“Belinda’s right. We have nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“This is going to work better if I can be completely honest with you. Honesty at times means bluntness. Unpleasantly so at times.”

Felicity nervously chewed her lip. “Is this the part where you tell me I need a root job? Because I really have been meaning to get around to it and have just been so busy with…things.”

Belinda couldn’t help but smile at Felicity’s prattling as she spread various press releases on the table. Yes, she had been curious about Felicity Smoak. Any woman who had Oliver Queen settling down must be unique indeed, but this young woman was not what she expected. First, there were her unexpected credentials. An MIT honors graduate who became an executive assistant and apparently didn’t serve coffee? Odd. But having actually met the young woman, Belinda found Felicity possessed an innocence she found refreshing. That would make her job so much easier. That—and the fact that she was attractive without being too obvious.

But it wasn’t even Felicity herself that surprised Belinda the most; it was Oliver’s reaction to Felicity. Belinda had always considered him a spoiled son of a bitch, spoiled to the point that she privately thought he was incapable of caring beyond what others could do for him. But that wasn’t the Oliver Queen she saw now. His features softened when he looked at Felicity. It wasn’t straight-up lust Belinda witnessed when Oliver looked at Felicity. It was adoration.

“Why don’t the two of you look over the potential press releases?”

The duo began to peruse them.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE.

Mr. Oliver Queen and Ms. Felicity Smoak proudly announce their engagement. Ms. Smoak, a 2009 graduate of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is the daughter of Drs. Benjamin and Judith Smoak of Chico, California. She currently works as an executive assistant at Queen Consolidated.
Mr. Queen, the son of the Moira Queen and the late Robert Queen, serves as CEO of Queen Consolidated.

During his tenure at Queen Consolidated, Mr. Queen has overseen the growth of the Applied Sciences division as he has taken the company in a bold new direction. Additionally, he has personally worked to make QC a stakeholder in the community through the establishment of various charitable ventures.

The couple plans to wed in the spring and will reside in Starling City.

“Obviously, we can tailor the date to your specifications,” Belinda explained.

“It has quite a spin,” Oliver commented.

“Well, it doesn’t make sense to remind the public that stock prices plummeted earlier in the year following the domestic terror incident in the Glades,” Belinda brusquely commented. “Or that your mother is currently awaiting trial for that.”

“Only one way for those stock prices to go,” Felicity remarked trying to cut the tension between Oliver and Belinda.

“If I may be frank, this marriage has the potential to be a stabilizing force in investors’ perceptions of the company. Are there any additions I should make note of?”

The way Belinda Carlen said ‘additions’ made Felicity bristle. She was polite but firm. “I told you last night that I am not expecting.”

“That’s good. For your image, anyway,” Belinda stated bluntly. “That means the public is less likely to perceive you as an opportunistic woman who used the oldest trick in the book to land a wealthy husband. And,” she looked to Oliver, “the fact you are going to the altar without a baby on board helps to counteract the playboy persona you’ve crafted over the years. It doesn’t help that you’re marrying your executive assistant, but the fact you,” she looked back at Felicity, “went to MIT suggests this isn’t merely a matter of hot and heavy office hanky-panky. You’re not just a dime a dozen throwaway blonde, roots notwithstanding.”

“Mrs. Carlen,” Oliver said sharply, reverting to formality. “It should go without saying that I do not appreciate your tone or your comments.”

“I’m on your side, Oliver,” Belinda replied. “And I’m just stating the obvious digs. Felicity is going to be painted as a gold digger, a kept woman who slept her way to the top. And you will be depicted as a man driven by lust. In the bedroom, lust is great fun. In the business world, it’s unpredictable, and the business world does not like what it cannot predict or control. These are rumors that have already circulated, so we need to get ahead of them. If you find my comments untenable, how will you deal with similar statements when they are coming from someone who doesn’t have your best interests at heart?”

Felicity looked to Oliver. “No offense, but if I were your ‘kept woman,’ I’d be driving a nicer car.”

“We actually should pick out something different for you to drive. Something with a bigger backseat.” At that, Belinda rolled her eyes as Felicity fought back a smile at what was obviously an inside joke. “More legroom,” Oliver clarified with mock innocence.

“Don’t you dare buy me a car!” Felicity replied, clapping his arm.

“Can we please take this seriously?” Belinda expelled a huff of air.
“Okay. So what’s next?” Felicity asked.

“We’ll need an engagement photo. Do you have anything appropriate?”

Oliver arched an eyebrow. “No. Only inappropriate photos.”

“Stop it,” Felicity chastised him. “We don’t have photos. Inappropriate or otherwise.”

“You two don’t have photos?” Belinda was taken aback.

“Not really. He’s camera shy. The perils of growing up with a camera in your face, I suppose.”

Belinda looked at him incredulously. “You didn’t seem so camera shy this morning.”

“I was trying to get the press out of Felicity’s neighborhood,” Oliver explained gritting his teeth.

“Let’s be honest. They won’t be out of Felicity’s neighborhood until Felicity is out of the neighborhood. Then, they’re going to follow you to wherever you move.”

At that, Belinda watched as Felicity’s smile fell. Oliver gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

“Can you clear an hour or two from your schedule this afternoon? If so, I can arrange a photographer so we can release photographic evidence that this is all very above board. No baby bumps. And neither of you appears to be drug-addled.” Belinda’s eyes swept up and down Felicity’s body. “Dress modestly but not like a prude. What you have on works, but a casual change of clothes to have on hand would be a good idea. Go with contact lenses, hair down. Right now with those glasses, you kind of have a sexy librarian vibe going on, and we don’t want the press picking up on that and making references to Oliver’s extensive sexual history. And you…” Belinda examined Oliver’s face, leaning closely and adjusting her own glasses as she did so, “could I interest you in a razor?”

“Do you get the feeling Belinda Carlen thinks we work for her rather than the other way around?” Oliver asked sullenly after the older woman had left.

“For the record, I like the scruff,” Felicity chirped as she ran her fingertips along his jaw. “But you were trying to provoke her.”

“I…wasn’t.”

“Right,” Felicity said knowingly, stifling a smile, as she gently patted his cheek before stepping back from him. They weren’t putting on a show anymore, so proximity was neither necessary nor appropriate.

But Oliver was still frowning.

“I recognize that look.”

“What look?”

“The guilt trip. Cancel it.”

“When I asked you to do this for me…”
“Roped me into it,” Felicity teased.

“I thought you said you knew how to slip ropes,” he reminded her.

“I did, didn’t I? Fine. So when you asked me to do this for you…”

“I didn’t realize how grand in scope it would become. I didn’t want you of all people to be dragged through the mud with me.”

“And you should realize that I’m not afraid to get my hands dirty. I don’t like getting dirt under my nails, which is why I could never be a gardener, at least without gloves, but…” her voice trailed off before she added, “I’m going to see this through. That doesn’t mean it’ll be easy. For either of us, actually.”

“What? No, I’m fine.”

She leaned against his desk, eager to take the weight off of her foot. “Have you talked with…with Laurel?” She almost didn’t want to know. Almost. “Seeing Detective…Officer Lance last night got me thinking. I know you care about her.”

“She’s an old friend.”

“She was more than your friend,” Felicity countered knowingly. “She’s The Laurel.”

‘The Laurel.’ Oliver bit back a humorless laugh at that description. For five years, he’d clung to his memories of her, wrapped them in a hazy cloak of perfection and hope through a tiny photograph she’d given him. In retrospect, he’d put Laurel on a pedestal to give himself a way to make it until the end of the day, to make it through the next hour, the next minute, when things became unbearable. But the real flesh and blood Laurel was far different from his idealized version, and it had taken him far too long to admit it.

“I tried to talk with her about it yesterday when I saw her at the prison. She said we shouldn’t be seen talking. It could compromise the case.”

*His mother’s case.* Felicity still wasn’t sure how she felt about Moira’s role in The Undertaking. Her eleventh hour confession and warning undoubtedly saved lives, but that was little comfort for the families of the 503 people who lost their lives. Maybe it wasn’t her place to judge. She didn’t actually know what Moira experienced, and Malcolm Merlyn was a sociopath, but Felicity couldn’t help but wonder if, in all the years leading up to The Undertaking, couldn’t Moira have done something more to thwart Merlyn? Moira Queen was certainly not a shrinking violet, so for her to use fear as a justification—it just rang hollow.

With that said, Felicity also didn’t understand how Laurel could have agreed to prosecute the case. Wasn’t there an inherent conflict of interest? At the very least, Laurel’s participation struck her as tasteless. At worst, she wondered if this was somehow Laurel’s way of punishing Oliver—as though he hadn’t been punished enough.

Not that she would tell him that.

“Will what we’re doing kill any chance you have with her?”

Oliver’s frown deepened. “I’m not looking for a chance with Laurel.”

“But if you had a chance with her, you would take it. Right?”
He shook his head. “No. We tried. Again.”

Felicity’s stomach knotted. “When?”

“Before the Undertaking.”

Felicity’s brows furrowed. She had thought that Laurel and Tommy were an item. So when did Oliver fit back into that picture?

“I thought it was going to be over. I thought I’d be hanging up the hood, going back to a normal life.”

“And that you could be with someone you really care about.”

He recognized his own words. “Felicity.”

She tried to brush aside the concern he voiced just by saying her name. “But then everything came apart. Merlyn’s redundancy plan.”

Oliver looked past Felicity toward the windows, not wanting to see her disappointment. “I told Laurel that she knew me better than anyone. I wanted that to be true, but I don’t think it is. And I don’t think Laurel and I will ever make it work.”

“Well, it is kind of a buzz kill when she’s gunning for your alter ego and prosecuting your mother.”

Oops. So much for not blabbing.

“I don’t blame her.”

That makes one of us.

Felicity stifled a yawn.

He tilted his head. “You ever get to sleep?”

“I’m pleading the Fifth.”

“Were you worried about the intruder?”

“My mind wouldn’t quit, and sometimes I really, really wish it would. There are things we need to talk about, but…” she caught sight of Isabel Rochev walking toward the office, giving off the appearance of a woman on a mission, “it’ll have to wait.”

Isabel did not knock as she entered Oliver’s office. It was as though it belonged to her. Heck, that was probably what she thought.

And the questions came swarming back to Felicity.

Was it a matter of revenge for Isabel? Was she a mother hellbent on securing her son’s legacy? Was this a way to punish Oliver because his father wouldn’t acknowledge their relationship? The fact that she likely had a prolonged sexual relationship with Robert Queen and later followed up by trysting with Oliver suggested there was something unhinged in the woman. Either that, or she really, really had the morals of an alley cat in heat.

Felicity still found herself doing a double take as she tried to process what she had discovered. Oliver had a half-brother, and this woman—this woman with the face of an angel and the heart of an evil kangaroo—was the boy’s mother. If Felicity thought her own mother sometimes lacked in general
understanding, she couldn’t quite imagine Isabel Rochev as a loving mother. No, she seemed more the sort who would eat her young.

“What are you staring at?” Isabel’s cool tone did not suggest any more annoyance than usual.

Crap. She’d been caught. “You. I-I mean, your lipstick. It’s such a lovely shade of…of beige.”

“If you two are done playing media darlings, Oliver and I have actual work to do. Why don’t you go make copies or do something far more suited to your talents?”

Oliver, who had remained quiet since Isabel’s appearance, intervened. “Isabel, that’s enough. My father maintained that every person—whether CEO or custodian—deserves to be treated with respect within these walls.”

“Right.” Isabel tilted her head knowingly. “And you follow in your father’s footsteps.”

Felicity nearly choked.

Thirty minutes later when Isabel left, Oliver found himself leaning against Felicity’s desk while she squinted at the computer monitor. She was tracking down information about Craig Banks.

“I think Banks is clean. Well, as clean as a tabloid reporter can be who was face planted into really dirty carpet last night. No funny financial transactions that can’t be explained away by his job. No associations with any known criminal organizations, though I did find out that in Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon, he’s only, like, three degrees away. Not that that matters.”

“Hey. What was that back there?”

She didn’t bother to pretend she didn’t know what he was talking about. “Just distracted.”

“Felicity.” He touched her arm, realized he was being handsy, thought about withdrawing, but held steady. “Whatever is going on, you can tell me.”

“I know. And I…I will. But now’s not the time or the place. Your 10:30 appointment is here. Security just buzzed him in, so he’ll be getting off the elevator any minute now. You really shouldn’t keep Mr. Glenmullen waiting.”

“I don’t care about that right now. I care about what’s going on with you.”

“You need to care about Mr. Glenmullen. He’s another potential investor. And maybe now that I’m wearing this,” she held up her hand and indicated the engagement ring, “Mr. Glenmullen will stop trying to play a rousing game of grab ass every time I see him.”

Oliver frowned. “He tries to grab your ass?”

“Now who’s distracted?” she retorted.

“Let me take you to lunch after this. Then we can get those photographs out of the way. It should give us the chance to talk about whatever it is…”

She took a deep breath and nodded.

They ate at a small mom-and-pop restaurant off the beaten path that specialized in Greek food. Oil painting reproductions of famous classical art works adorned the walls, likely giving the place a less
polished appearance than what the proprietors were hoping, but the spanakopita served there more than made of for the lack of ambiance, and Felicity was a fan of the nut-free baklava.

They kept the lunch conversation light, though Oliver found himself on more than one occasion wanting to press Felicity when a look of apprehension would flash across her face and she would worry her bright lips with her teeth. She held something back, the same thing that had been bothering her all day. But invariably, she would catch herself being too introspective and compensate by speaking animatedly about her grandmother or the latest tech news she’d heard. He, in turn, told her stories about Thea and the scrapes he and Tommy used to get into as kids.

“I’m glad you suggested this place,” Oliver commented as the two exited and began to walk down the street in blissful anonymity.

“It’s one of Starling City’s hidden gems.”

“How did you find it?” Oliver asked.

“A friend introduced me. His parents own the place.”

“A friend, hmm?”

“A friend.”

“Does this friend have a name?”

“Andreas, but he goes by Drew.”

“You’ve never mentioned him.”

“We’re more friends in passing now, but that’s probably for the best. Every time we see each other, we tend to…” her voice trailed off before she added, “You know what? That’s so not important.” When her phone began to ring, she didn’t even bother to hide the relief on her face.

Oliver noted she still had “Short Skirt / Long Jacket” as her ringtone. So much for her annoyance at the ringtone he’d chosen.

But Felicity’s words began to sink in, enough that he was more than reasonably certain that her friend Andreas, Drew, or whatever the hell he called himself was a friend with benefits. Logically, he knew she had to see other men, but what kind of guy would only want Felicity for sex? She was funny and brilliant and so incredibly giving.

Misinterpreting the look on his face, she apologized, “I should check. It might be Detective Lance.”

She pulled the phone from the small clutch she carried.

But it wasn’t a call from Quentin Lance. The name JACK SOMMET appeared on the screen. She clicked ignore on the touch screen and returned the phone to her bag but not before Oliver saw the identity of the caller.

“He still calls you?”

She stopped in her tracks. “Are we really going to do this?”

“Do what? I’m just making conversation.” But he had to bite his tongue and remind himself that despite their performance, he wasn’t really her fiancé. He had no say over whether she did or did not communicate with her ex or whether she had a fuck buddy.
The photography session would have tested the patience of a saint—and Oliver Queen was no saint. He didn’t see how people could model for a living. Everything the photographer told him to do felt so unnatural. When it came to women, Oliver had never had anyone choreograph moves for him.

“Put your hand on her waist.”

“Look into her eyes.”

“Kiss her.”

“No kissing,” Felicity wriggled away as she proverbially put her foot down. “No one wants to see that.”

But a part of Oliver was disappointed.

Later, as Belinda Carlen spread the photographs over a worktable in her office on the ninth floor of the QC building, she couldn’t help but smile. Of course, Oliver hadn’t taken her advice and shaved. She hadn’t actually expected him to, but looking at the photos, she saw it didn’t matter. “Aren’t you two photogenic?” she murmured to herself. “One of these days, you two are going to have ridiculously good looking offspring.

The older woman picked up a photo of the two standing. Felicity’s hand was splayed across Oliver’s chest, the engagement ring on full display, undoubtedly as per the instructions of the photographer. It was, after all, a typical pose for an engagement photo. Felicity looked up at Oliver and he down at her. “This one. Hmmm. I like the way the two of you look at each other. I feel almost voyeuristic. The ring is beautiful, but I’m not sure we want to reinforce the image of one-percenter.”

Belinda pushed that one aside.

“Now this one,” Belinda began as she pointed to a different image, “I really like.” In it, Oliver and Felicity faced one another, their fingers tangled. It would almost have looked like the beginning of a dance, except her ear was pressed against his heart. She peered at the camera, which had captured a dreamy expression. Oliver, in turn, rested his chin on the top of her head, his eyes closed almost as though he uttered a silent prayer. “This one makes me wonder what you were thinking. Both of you. And in a good way.”

The public relations expert moved the second photo to a different stack.

She pulled another photo. “Bland.” In it, the two stood with Felicity’s back to Oliver’s front. He had his arms around her waist. The muscles of his arms strained against the fabric of the expensive suit he wore, but other than that, there was nothing special about the picture. It was, in her opinion, the safest photo she had seen thus far, but it did little to capture either of their personalities. She put the photo aside in a third pile, not quite ready to reject it but not ready to run with it either.

But it was the next photograph that made Belinda nod approvingly. “This is the one.”

It was then that she became aware she wasn’t alone when, from the corner, of her eye, she saw movement. The trim figure of Isabel Rochev stood in the doorway of the office. Belinda had only spoken with the woman in passing, but she was all too aware of her. Years ago, rumors circulated about a relationship with Robert Queen. She reckoned at least a couple of her gray hairs could be
attributed to the young woman. Belinda had been instrumental in having those rumors squelched, but it hadn’t been easy.

“Can I help you, Ms. Rochev?”

Isabel surveyed the woman coolly. “I believe you can.” And she closed the door behind her.

Felicity watched the feed from the security camera she had hacked into on the docks. A number of shipping crates made the port a veritable maze. It had been a challenge to find the correct cameras, but once she learned the lay of the land, so the speak, she was good to go. “You’ve got two coming up behind you,” she warned Oliver.

“Acknowledged.”

The low tone enhanced by Oliver’s voice modulator would have been enough to make Felicity pee herself if she were one of the bad guys. But considering they had discussed his dry-cleaning or take out orders when he had the voice modulator on, he didn’t sound quite so threatening. All she knew was she was glad she wasn’t on his bad side.

Through her comm line, she could hear the grunts and thuds as Oliver handled the two would-be drug distributors.

“Patch through to the SCPD. Let them know they have a couple of presents waiting on them.”

“I’m on it,” Felicity replied. “And Oliver…come on home.”

Anytime Oliver went out into the field, Felicity was apprehensive. Until she met Sara Lance, she had never seen anyone with a comparable skill set to Oliver. Still, she worried. She and Digg both had patched him up enough times to know that what he did was inherently risky. If he were to zig when he should zag, that could be the end of him, and that wasn’t okay with her.

But this night, she knew an entirely different level and type of anxiety.

They had tried several times throughout the day to have a private conversation, but between making a statement at the police station about her intruder from the night before, meeting with Belinda Carlen, going through a photography session with a pushy photographer and a reticent Oliver, doing actual QC work, and now their Arrow after-hours job, it was difficult to make it happen.

All day, she had been agonizing over how to tell Oliver about his half-brother.

A half hour later when he returned, she was still trying to find the right words. Her eyes followed him as he put away his quiver and removed his hooded green leather jacket and gloves. He still wore the green grease paint around his eyes, which, without his hood, only served to make the paleness of his eyes stand out all the more.

“I should get you home,” he commented as he walked to the case, which housed his hood. “Tonight you need to get caught up on sleep. I’ll just finish getting cleaned up.”

She didn’t say anything in response, not trusting what words would come out. Instead, she looked back at her monitors which showed the police finishing up the case at the docks.

And then his hand was on her shoulder. She jumped slightly, so lost in her thoughts, she had neither seen nor heard his approach.
“Let’s talk. Something’s been bothering you all day.”

She swiveled in her chair to face him. “You’re right.” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “This isn’t easy.”

“No matter what you tell me, I’m not going to be angry with you.”

But still she hesitated. “I don’t want to hurt you, and I’m afraid this will, but if I don’t tell you, I’m worried Isabel will find some way to use this against you, and I—”

He knelt in front of her, and his hands went to her knees in a comforting gesture. “Hey. It’s okay. Whatever it is, I’ll understand,” he assured her.

*I’m crazy about you.*

She opened her mouth to speak, but the words she needed to say wouldn’t come out. “Wow. This is…” She squeezed her eyes shut.

“Hey,” he soothed as one hand went to cup her face. “If you can’t go through with our arrangement because of Jack or Drew or someone else, I’ll understand. The last thing I want to do is cause you pain. You’re too important to me.”

She exhaled as tears stung her eyes. As much as she willed herself to not turn into an emotional mess, she was losing that battle. Maybe it was the lack of sleep, the tenderness he was showing her, or perhaps it was the knowledge of what her message would do to him.

She felt a tear escape, only to be captured by the pad of his thumb as he wiped it away. Gently, he pressed a kiss to her wet cheek, tasting the salty tear. “Don’t cry,” he implored. Instinctively, she moved a little closer to him, leaning her forehead against his. Their lips were mere inches apart, close enough that she could breathe him in—the faint scent of the grease paint, the intoxicating scent that was Oliver himself, and the undercurrent of her bath soap. He inched closer to her mouth, as time seemed to be suspended between them.

Lightly, tentatively, his lips brushed against hers. The kiss was so soft, so brief, she wondered if she had imagined it. But the warmth that pooled in her belly let her know it hadn’t been her imagination.

“This isn’t about me.” She pulled back so she could meet his eyes, even as she struggled to get her emotions under control “It’s about your dad and Isabel.”

“What about them?”

“Last night I couldn’t sleep.”

“I know,” he replied with the hint of a smile. “I could hear you in your room.”

“Something nagged at me. Two things actually. Isabel’s motive for going after Queen Consolidated and the…the composition of her family. And the more I thought about it, the more I began to think those two things are somehow connected. She has a younger brother. *Much* younger.”

“Kyle?” Oliver asked trying to remember the boy’s name.

“Kirill,” Felicity corrected. “Only I don’t think Kirill is Isabel’s brother. I think he’s her son.”

Silence surrounded them, as the implications of what she said began to become clear.

Oliver stood and turned from her as he tried to process what she was saying. *No. It made no sense.*
Oliver remembered all too well the brunette’s slender body, her flawless toned stomach, and her absolute lack of any emotional attachment to anyone, as far as he could tell. When they’d slept together, their joining had been pleasurable, if not somewhat mechanical, but he had enjoyed her body. Her breasts had been pert, firm, and she had been so tight around him. In Oliver’s experience, it just wasn’t the body of a woman who had given birth. And of course, he had taken precautions to make certain Isabel would not be having *his* child.

Finally, Oliver replied, “Felicity, I’m pretty sure Isabel doesn’t have children.”

“She would have been young, about twenty or twenty-one, but I think…I think I’m right about this.”

“If that’s the case, why would she pass him off as her brother?”

“I don’t understand how she thinks, but I think I’m starting to get a better idea.”

“Felicity.”

“No, listen, Oliver, I saw a picture of him. Just…just look.” She reached for her tablet, which lay on her workstation. Her fingers slid across the screen to bring it back to life, and she clicked through a couple of webpages until she brought up a photo of Kirill Rochev.

Oliver turned to look, and when he did, he practically staggered back. “He looks like me. The way I did at that age.”
Part Nine: “The Ice Cream’s Good, but You Taste Better”

“Hey, buddy. You ready to go meet her?”

_The boy wrinkled his nose. “Her? I thought I was getting a little brother.”_

_His dad smiled broadly and squeezed his shoulder. “Between you and me, that’s what I thought, too. Looks like fate had other plans.”_

_Father and son walked down the hallway of the hospital, side by side, until they reached the entrance of a private room. Two guards stood on either side of the door looking very serious until they saw the duo approach._

_“Congratulations,” one of the guards said with a nod of his head, the look of solemnity softening to happiness. “She’s going to be a heartbreaker.”_

_“She already has quite a set of lungs on her,” his dad replied, pride evident in his tone. “She’s going to keep her mom and me on our toes.”_

_When they went inside, the boy saw his mom, her honey-colored hair falling in waves around her shoulders. She looked tired but so happy as she held the tiny bundle in her arms._

_“Go on,” his dad encouraged._

_With a smile, his mom patted the space next to her on the bed. The boy sat next to her and finally saw the tiny creature up close. She was perfect with downy hair, rosy cheeks, and a button nose._

_“This is Thea,” his mom introduced. “Thea, this is your big brother Oliver. He’s always going to love you and take care of you. He’s going to be the best big brother in the world.”_

_Oliver saw the resemblance immediately as he looked at the image of the boy on Felicity’s tablet. “He looks like me. The way I did at that age.”_

_A brother. He had a brother._

_Whose mother was Isabel Rochev._

_His stomach began to churn._

_He’d had regrets before. In his younger years, those regrets usually came after a bender. As he used to joke with Tommy that a few drinks too many could turn a six into a ten, and as a nice consolation prize, those drinks often included a hangover to boot._
He’d been with women that he actually liked who had disappointed him, either because they thought they would be the ones to tame him, as though he was a trainable stud, or because they were interested in the lifestyle, not his actual life. They were mostly nameless, faceless, now.

He regretted Laurel. That he hadn’t been a better boyfriend to her, that he’d not had the courage to break things off instead of their peculiar tug-of-war that pulled in Tommy, pulled in Sara, and ended with a downed boat and five years of regrets centered around false hopes because what else did he have?

He regretted Shado. She’d been his ally, his mentor, his comfort, and she died because he instinctively protected Sara. There should have been another way. It should have been him.

After the island, he had been more selective, sleeping with women he felt at least some emotional connection to. Even with Isabel—she called him on his bullshit, commiserated with him about keeping up appearances and shared loneliness, and he’d enjoyed their tryst knowing full well it was about physical release and they were not about to embark on the soulmate train—he’d at least felt a camaraderie with her.

But as soon as he’d seen the disappointment and hurt in Felicity’s eyes, he’d regretted Isabel. A few minutes of pleasure wasn’t worth that.

Now, the thought of what he’d done with Isabel made him ill on an entirely different level. He’d thought Isabel just wanted to fuck him. Now he knew she wanted to fuck with him. This was a new type of regret.

“I’m sorry, Oliver.” Felicity’s voice was sedate, devoid of its usual zest. But it was her eyes that got to him. Those blue eyes that housed a storm of emotion. Part of him wanted to reach out to her, to anchor himself to her, but he had the feeling he would only drown her if he tried.

“He’s twelve?”

“Yes.”

Oliver exhaled. “2001.” He had been sixteen, so wrapped up in his own life. The conversations he had with his father circled around school, how he needed a plan for his future, and about not walking the girl out the morning after in front of his little sister because it only made her ask questions that she was too young to know the answers to. They’d never discussed his father’s infidelities or problems in his parents’ marriage. “Did he know about Kirill?”

“I don’t know.”

He took the tablet from Felicity and stared into the boy’s face. He wore a baseball uniform; Oliver had always been more of a hockey fan himself. It was something he and his dad had in common. But this boy—his smile, his chin, his nose—Kirill was a Queen through and through. His eyes were different, though. Brown like his mother’s. Isabel’s. Except the boy’s eyes looked warm, happy. Isabel was anything but.

“I have a half-brother,” he uttered, more to himself than to her. “I never met him. I never knew. And I slept with his…with Isabel…”

The revulsion was overwhelming. It was one thing to hypothesize his father and Isabel had a relationship, quite another to see the proof.

What was Isabel’s game? Was their Russian rendezvous a mere curiosity to her? To see if the old adage ‘like father, like son’ held true in every sense of the word? Was it something else entirely? A
way to be with a dead man? Was it revenge because he was the so-called legitimate son while her child remained unacknowledged? Was the sex to make it hurt more when she wrested Queen Consolidated away from him and—what?—put it on a shiny platter for Kirill? Why pass him off as her brother?

Oliver shoved the tablet back into her hands and spun away, heading for the metal stairs.

“Wait! Where are you going?”

He looked back at her. “To find Isabel. To have this out once and for all.”

“You can’t go out like that.”

Oliver looked down and realized he was still wearing the green leather pants.

Felicity trailed after him, reached out with a clean cloth, and wiped at the green grease paint around his eyes. It would be so much more practical if he would get a mask made, but any time she mentioned it, he balked at the idea. Now she was glad for the paint; it slowed him down enough that maybe he would rethink this.

She managed to get most of it off before his restlessness got the better of him.

Oliver walked past her, grabbed a change of clothes and disappeared into the bathroom. She snatched her phone and texted John.

A minute later, she heard the sound of breaking glass, followed by a string of words she recognized as Russian. Though she couldn’t understand the words themselves, she understood the meaning behind them.

She opened the door and saw Oliver, still in partial Arrow attire, standing with his hand over the sink, blood dripping into the white porcelain bowl. Shards of what had been the mirror littered the area. “Oh my God.” She ran water over his hand before quickly grabbing a fresh hand towel from the cupboard to wrap around his injury.

He gritted his teeth and looked at her, as though waiting for her to reprimand him, but she didn’t. Instead, she led him to the medical table and silently began to pull first aid supplies from the storage cabinet. She removed the towel and began to disinfect the cuts on the knuckles of his right hand. The antiseptic stung, but he did not outwardly react, watching her instead. Her bright lips were pressed tightly, and she avoided eye contact.

“It was stupid,” he finally said.

“Yes, it was,” she concurred as she began to bandage the area. “I liked that mirror.”

But he knew it wasn’t about the mirror.

Guilt bubbled up in him. He’d worried her—probably scared her, too. This, after she was already in tears at the thought of telling him earlier. “I know it wasn’t easy to tell me.”

“I couldn’t run the risk of you finding out in the worst way possible from her.” The inflection in Felicity’s voice when she referred to Isabel was not something Oliver heard often. Felicity—who could generally see something good in nearly anyone—strongly disliked Isabel.

“It would have been worse coming from her,” he confirmed as he looked up at the ceiling before focusing on her again.
She could feel his eyes on her and finally met his gaze. “Promise me something. Slow down and think before you decide on anything.”

Slow down and think?!

Think about what?

Just another reminder that he didn’t know his father as well as he thought he did?

Just another reminder that he had screwed up yet again by thinking with his dick and not his brain?

The last thing he wanted to do was to slow down and think.

“No. What I need to do is find Isabel.”

“And say what exactly? Look, I get it. I do. What Isabel did to you was deceptive and…and…twisted and just plain gross. And I think psychologists would have a field day analyzing her, though if it makes you feel better, this type of thing is old news on Jerry Springer, but—”

“But I chose to sleep with her,” Oliver bluntly stated. He watched as Felicity cringed slightly. “I knew she was on the List. I knew she had been gunning for my family’s company. So I deserve what I get, right?”

Her eyes widened. “What? No! That’s not what I was going to say at all. I told you after it happened that you deserved better than her, and I meant it.”

“Felicity, if you knew the things I’ve done, you wouldn’t think that.”

Felicity swallowed hard. Five years on an island struggling to survive. Sometimes she let her mind go there, imagine what I must have been like for him. He left Starling City as a spoiled, pampered young man and returned hardened, scarred, and world-weary. She never knew ‘Ollie,’ so she didn’t exactly have a basis for comparison. But Oliver—him she respected, even admired, poor choices in women notwithstanding.

“It’s what you do now that matters. I know the man you are now. I even like you—most of the time. You know, when you aren’t asking me to get coffee or surprising me with fake engagements.” She managed a tiny uptick of her lips. “What I was going to say is that Isabel obviously has an agenda, but so do we. We’re going to secure your company; then we’re going to kick ass and take names.”

His hand throbbed—which was his own fault for losing control, lashing out when he saw his reflection, not liking what he saw.

His pride throbbed worse—partly from being played by Isabel but largely from the knowledge that his identity as Robert Queen’s only son—one of the few roles he wore with satisfaction—was built on a lie.

His dad had told Oliver he was his best hope, that he had to right his wrongs. Where did Kirill fit into all of this? And how the hell did his dad have a child with Isabel, a woman whose name appeared on the List?

And there stood Felicity with her plucky determination and blind faith, so sure this could be fixed.

So sure he could be fixed.

He wished he could be as sure.
“Thank you.”


Friends.

He’d kissed her. It wasn’t enough—and it was too much.

Little by little, Felicity had chipped away at the wall he’d erected between them. He needed to be stronger for her benefit because she didn’t know the type of man he was, but he was so tired of pretending the attraction was one-sided, tired of acting as though she didn’t matter. And so he’d given in. Briefly. She had tasted of hope and promise, mint and innocence.

He would destroy her. Not intentionally. Never intentionally.

But he was already halfway there, running down a hill at full speed, unable to still the movements that drove him into her orbit. With one little kiss, he’d set them in motion.

“About earlier. Before you told me about Kirill—”

Felicity lifted her hand. “You don’t have to say it.” The last thing she wanted was to hear a recap of why they would never work. It was a bit like watching an M. Night Shyamalan movie. Once you knew the surprise twist, why bother again? She’d been there and done that.

“I think I do.”

“No, you don’t,” she reiterated. “Honestly, I don’t need placating. I know I’m not your girlfriend. I’m just a girl you know who is good with computers and not so good with people.”

He was stunned to hear her self-assessment. “Felicity, you’re more than just a girl I know. You’re one of the most important people in the world to me. I thought you knew that.”

She expelled a breath she didn’t even realize she’d been holding. That was not what she expected him to say. She opened her mouth to say something, thought better of it, and instead let out a tiny growl of frustration.

“Did you just grrr at me?” he asked, eyebrows rising in surprise and amusement.

Her hands went to her hips. “Sometimes I don’t know whether to throw you to the kangaroos or just hug you. You make it so hard and so easy to care about you, and I’m just trying to keep a grip and not make an idiot of myself and not take it personally when you push me and pull me, but it’s agony and ecstasy. And I think that was the title of a Charlton Heston movie my mom made me watch about Michelangelo—the artist, not the Ninja Turtle—when she wanted me to take art lessons, but I never did take art lessons. Too messy. I don’t like messy. I like solutions to problems, answers to questions, not a free-for-all mess. Speaking of messy, a few minutes ago, you kissed me. That is messy. Oh, not slobbery messy, thank God. And I wanted you to kiss me even though this thing between us is complicated enough. Yes, I said it. We have a thing, whether you want to admit it or not. And the kiss was sweet and…and all too brief, and I couldn’t even get excited over it because there I was about to deliver axis shifting news—being a messenger sucks by the way—and I knew I was about to hurt you. And there you are. Hurt. Hurting. All manpain. So there. Yes. I did grrr at you.”

She grabbed the roll of bandages off the exam table and turned to put it back into the medical supply storage cabinet.
That was all it took for him to span the distance between them, invade her space. When she turned back around, she bumped right into him with a tiny yelp of surprise.

Oliver caught her elbow to steady her.

And both of them froze.

She could feel heat radiating from his body, but more than that, she saw the intensity in his eyes as those beautiful blues darkened. That fluttery, ticklish sensation returned to her stomach. She hated the butterflies. Hated that she couldn’t control her body’s reaction to him.

*But there was something utterly invigorating about being near Oliver.*

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Trying not to live with regret.”

She sucked in a breath. What did that even mean? Was he trying to bury his pain and using her to do it? Or was he saying he would regret it if he didn’t kiss her? Because the way he was looking at her, his eyes flitting to her lips, made her think that was where this was headed.

“For the record, we do have ‘a thing.’ I’m not sorry I kissed you. I should be, but I’m not. I *would* be sorry if I never kissed you properly.”

And suddenly he drew her closer, lowered his head, and kissed her. Thoroughly. Unlike the first kiss, this was neither subtle nor sweet. Felicity made a startled little sound in the back of her throat as his mouth covered hers, warm, extending an invitation.

_Come along with me_, he seemed to say.

_Yes._

He let go of her elbow, his fingers trailing up the soft skin of her arm, lingering on her shoulder, until he found the nape of her slender neck, that expanse of skin he had long wanted to touch.

She grabbed his arms, her fingers closing around the taut, corded muscles beneath his black long-sleeved shirt.

Felicity wasn’t sure if she meant to push him away or keep herself from falling on unsteady feet. But a part of her was already falling, fumbling toward ecstasy, toward an abyss of heat and yearning and delicious sensations as his lips moved over hers.

She had wondered what kissing him—truly kissing him—would be like. Now she knew. And that knowledge was powerful. He tasted the way she imagined, fiery and intoxicating, but the pleasure of reality far surpassed the vagueness of imagination, which was amazing, actually, because she had a _vivid_ imagination.

Her heart thundered in her head. What began as a kiss of exploration morphed into a deep, slow, bone-melting kiss. He angled his head and molded his mouth to hers, his fingers tangling in her hair.

The sound in her throat became a soft moan. She always thought it was such a cliché when she would read stories about the heroine being so overwhelmed with passion that her knees went weak. For the first time in her life, Felicity understood the sentiment. Her legs felt like jelly, which was so
odd because she suddenly felt stronger, more assured than she had ever felt before. She pressed closer to him, her breasts pillowed against the hard muscles of his chest. Oliver groaned at the contact, deepening the kiss, the stubble of his jaw abrading her skin. The thrust of his tongue against hers became hot and demanding, sent her senses spinning. Her Atlas. He thought he held the responsibility of the world on his shoulders, but she was the one he held in his arms.

And, yes, her knees felt weak, even as she welcomed the hungry pressure of his mouth, the rough velvet of his tongue. Oliver’s kiss was passionate and intense, dark and lovely, beyond anything she had ever experienced.

Her hands came up to his face, her palms moving over his stubbled cheeks, memorizing him with her touch as she had already memorized him with her eyes. Her fingers slid into his hair, her nails lightly scraping against his scalp, and she could feel a tremor run through his muscular body and the harsh groan that escaped from his lips in response. His arm fastened around her hips, drew her in tight against him. “Felicity,” he breathed against her mouth.

It was a warning.

It was a promise.

And she felt exactly how much he wanted her. Instinctively, she arched her hips, needing to bring him closer.

So close, not close enough.

Just a little closer.

_Just a little closer._

His movements went still. She felt his harsh breathing, heard him curse.

And he pulled away from her.

She looked up at him. What had just happened?

He stood staring down at her for a second, his eyes almost black, a muscle working in his jaw. The front of his leather pants looked incredibly tight. Unconsciously, she licked her lips, which elicited another groan from him.

“You are going to be the death of me,” he murmured.

It was then that Felicity heard the footsteps coming down the metal stairs. Diggle! She’d completely forgotten she had texted him when she was worried that Oliver was going to tear out of the lair and go after Isabel. She had been so focused on Oliver, she hadn’t even heard the quick buzz from the security system that indicated the lock on the door had been disengaged by a code.

“Everything okay down here?” Digg asked when he saw the two take a step away from each other.

Oliver reached for a nearby clipboard and held it strategically in front of himself. “Fine,” he replied. “I’m going to get changed.” He tried to force his voice to sound normal. Instead, it came out strained and gravely.

“I-I should clean up in there first,” Felicity stammered. “I don’t want you getting hurt. Again.”

Diggle crossed his arms. “You do that on patrol?”
Oliver cleared his throat. “I need to change now.”

“Right. Um, be careful in there.” She watched as he retreated to change out of what she could only imagine were uncomfortable pants and to get his body under control.

She didn’t have that luxury. Her face felt hot, her heart still hammered in her chest, and her legs still felt shaky. And she was left with a disapproving John Diggle. Oh, Oliver would be hearing about this later.

“Felicity.”

Just one word, her name, had her cringing. “Don’t, John. Don’t use that disappointed voice. You sound like my mom.”

At that, Diggle snorted. “That’s one I’ve not heard before. What are you doing?”

“It was just a kiss.”

“Just a kiss? I know you. There is no ‘just a kiss’ with you.”

What was she doing? Oliver may have been the one to initiate the kiss, but he was only reaching out to her because he was hurting, right?

Her phone chimed and she picked it up, eager for a distraction. “It’s an e-mail from Belinda Carlen.”

“Who?”

“QC resident publicity guru,” Felicity replied, bringing up the email on her computers instead of the smartphone.

“The one who last night was certain you were pregnant.”

“That’s the one. Turns out she’s not so bad.” She clicked on the link, and high-quality images filled the trio of monitors.

“Wow,” Diggle muttered.

But Felicity’s eyes were drawn to a photograph that Belinda tagged as her favorite. “I didn’t know Henri took a picture of this.”

And she couldn’t help the smile that tugged at her lips.

“The photographer is set up near the fountain,” Oliver informed her as they pulled into a parking space outside of Starling City Park.

Felicity exhaled when she saw the distance they would have to cover. Usually, she wouldn’t have balked, but as the day wore on, her foot became increasingly uncomfortable.

“Hop on.”

“What?”

“My back. I’ll carry you.”
“I’m fine to walk.”

“No, you’re not. You’ve already been on your feet too much today. Besides, you’re supposed to look happy to be around me. Doesn’t help when you’re grimacing in pain.”

“Well, you can be a pain in the…” she stopped as he looked at her expectantly. “I’m not riding on your back. You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“You weight what? About…” The stink eye Felicity gave him stopped his estimation of her weight. “I could just flip you over my shoulder.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

Oliver’s solid arms went around her, and she felt herself being hoisted off the ground, which he did with ease. She shouldn’t have been surprised, considering all the hours she had watched him exercise on the salmon ladder or pound on the tractor tire with a sledgehammer.

Her hands went to his shoulders to steady herself. “Okay! Okay! Put me down!” She slid down his front as he lowered her. He was ridiculously firm. “Piggyback ride it is.”

With a look of triumph, Oliver turned, and partially squatted so she could mount his back with greater ease. She yelped slightly when he straightened to his full height. Felicity tightened her arms around his shoulders. Meanwhile his hands went to her thighs, holding her legs close to his torso.

“Wow,” she muttered to herself as she felt the movement of his muscles and the warmth of his hands on her legs.

“What was that?” Oliver asked.

Felicity covered, “Wow. Things look different up here.”

“I don’t know why you were worried. I could carry you all day. You’re light as a feather.”

“That’s not what Jackass used to say,” she blurted.

At that, Oliver’s body shook with rare laughter.

“I can’t believe I called him that,” Felicity replied, his laughter spurring her own.

“I can. His loss is definitely my gain.”

She stiffened. “Oliver—”

“I know. But I still say I’m pretty damn lucky. I’m in your life. He’s not.”

Her hold on him tightened.

Oliver’s phone began to buzz. He picked it up, saw the picture on the screen, and sighed before sliding his finger across the screen to answer it.

“Laurel. Hi.”

“Is it true?” Laurel’s strained voice came over the other end.

He knew immediately what prompted the call. “Yes.”
“That’s great. Just great. Good for you, Oliver. There’s nothing like finding out because your co-worker points toward a television with a gleeful, ‘Hey, Lance, isn’t that the guy you used to date?’ Congratulations all around. Really, Oliver.”

His tone was apologetic. “I tried to tell you yesterday.”

“And I was worried about your mother’s case. But you should’ve found a way.”

There was no winning this. “I’m sorry you found out like that.”

“How long has this been going on? When you came to me at my apartment, were you already seeing her?”

“Of course not.”

“I find it hard to believe anything you say. Joke’s on me. As usual.”

“Laurel, don’t hang.” But he heard the click on the other end. “Dammit!” Oliver growled, gripping the phone tightly, though his first instinct was the throw it against the wall. But he one temper tantrum was more than enough; two would be pushing his quota and Felicity’s patience.

He finished changing; Laurel’s phone call certain expedited the calming down of his body, he noted wryly.

When Oliver emerged from the bathroom, Felicity was seated at her monitors. She tilted her head as she looked at him knowingly. “Maybe you should go check on her.”

Oliver’s brows furrowed. “How did you know?”

“Turns out the bathroom door doesn’t keep out much sound. I’ll have to file that away for future reference,” she mused.

Oliver returned the leather pants to their case. “The last thing we need is for reporters to get wind that I’m visiting my ex-girlfriend’s apartment. Besides, Laurel doesn’t want to see me.”

She tapped her fingers nervously on her armrest. “Somehow I think you could manage to avoid getting detected.”

He looked at her sideways. “Suppose I did. What’s the point? I’m engaged to you.”

“No, you’re not. Not really.” She smiled, though the smile didn’t fully reach her eyes. “I appreciate you don’t want to ‘cheat’ on me. My pride thanks you. Really it does. But I know she matters to you. You could tell her the truth. If you trust her, I mean.”

Oliver’s brows furrowed. “We’ve talked about this.”

“We have, but this is real now, not hypothetical. And obviously, she’s upset.”

And it seemed Laurel wasn’t the only one. Felicity’s tone reminded him of a woman who said “Fine” when it obviously wasn’t.

“Laurel’s not my responsibility. Not anymore. I’m going to take the motorcycle. Get some air.” He looked to John. “Will you make sure Felicity gets home safely?”
“Will do,” Diggle assured him with a nod.

“Is it okay if I fill John in on what I found out?”

And some of Oliver’s own frustration melted. It was so like Felicity to be concerned about his sense of privacy, even when she was obviously bothered by his reaction to Laurel’s call. “Of course.” He gave a perfunctory nod.

“And you’ll steer clear of Isabel?” she added.

At that question, Digg looked from Felicity to Oliver. They were speaking in shorthand that he didn’t know.

“I’ll steer clear,” he promised.

She turned to her monitors.

Oliver took his riding jacket off the coat hook, and looked back at her. Her elbow was propped on the arm of her chair, her hand supporting her chin, which he noticed appeared pinker than usual. He rubbed a hand against his own chin and felt the coarseness of his stubble. He had left his mark on her, he realized, and in a primal way, he was almost proud.

He pulled on the jacket, zipped it up, and walked to her workstation. It was then that he noticed the images that filled the screen from their earlier photo shoot.

“Belinda sent these a few minutes ago,” Felicity explained. “She wants to know our preferences, but it can wait until tomorrow.”

“I like this one,” he said, pointing to the impromptu photo the photographer took of her hitching a ride on his back. “We look happy together.” He rested his hand on her shoulder and squeezed it lightly before he turned and headed up the metal staircase.

When Digg heard the door close and the system’s chime indicate it was locked again, he turned to Felicity. “That was awkward.”

“You’d rather we bask in the afterglow?” she snapped. Realizing what she said, she shook her and quickly added, “There was no afterglow. None whatsoever. For that, we’d have to have sex. And there was no sex. None. And there won’t be. And I don’t know why I’m telling you this because you don’t need details of…okay. That’s even more awkward. Shutting up now.”

He pulled up a stool. “You think it was a good idea trying to send him to Laurel?”

“No. I should get ‘bad idea’ tattooed to my forehead.”

“It could match your other tattoo,” he joked.

“I really need to see about getting that removed,” she muttered. “I’m pretty sure next time I go home, my mom is going to throw a fit. Thanks a lot, People magazine.”

“So why’d you do it?” Digg asked, getting her focus back on track.

“Well, I’d had too much to drink and…”

“I meant Laurel.”

“Right. This thing Oliver and I are doing…’
“Fake engagement.”

“When you put it that way, it sounds so…eww.” She shuddered. “This plan we have to give Oliver a 
new image, it shouldn’t come at the expense of the people we love.”

“And you think Oliver loves Laurel?”

“Don’t you?” Her eyes went back to the images on the screen. Henri had really worked his magic; 
she could almost believe they captured the real deal. But she’d seen Oliver fall to pieces over Laurel 
too many times.

“What does Oliver say about it?”

“That she’s a friend. It didn’t work out with them.”

“Felicity, I don’t want to see you get pulled into this and get hurt.”

She sighed. This was what made John a good friend. He told her the truth, even when it wasn’t what 
she particularly wanted to hear. Then again, he knew firsthand the level of Oliver’s devotion to 
Laurel. At times like these, he still bore the burn marks. “I have a low threshold for pain. I don’t want 
to get hurt either. But it’s better to know now, right? So maybe Oliver goes over there tonight, he 
realizes he wants the Laurel. Maybe he goes over there tonight and is reminded of why they don’t 
work. Maybe he doesn’t go over there at all. I don’t know what’s going to happen. All I know is that 
if he has a chance to be happy, then he should take it.”

“What’s going on with you two?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t give me that. Is this pretending hitting a little too close to home?” Digg asked.

“You know I care about Oliver, but I don’t have any illusions.” Her tone was one of finality. The 
matter was closed, as far as she was concerned.

He nodded. “So what did you find out about Isabel?”

It was rare for Oliver to go to his father’s grave in the garden of the Queen Estate. First, it wasn’t 
really a grave. It was a hole in the ground with an empty coffin. It wasn’t even the place where 
Oliver felt closest to him, but he could appreciate the irony of seeing his father’s headstone next to 
his own. A part of him did die on that island. He wasn’t sure if it was the best or worst part of 
himself.

“I don’t know what to do.”

He tried to remember the advice his father used to give him about weighing actions and 
consequences. It seemed empty now.

“Things aren’t better in the city. Put one criminal away, two more pop up. I’m treading water. Moving and getting nowhere.”

It had seemed so obvious, so easy when he used his father’s list. Check off a name, be that much 
closer to restoring justice. But it wasn’t all black and white, and Starling City had bigger problems 
than a group of greedy one-percenters.
“Something’s coming. I don’t know what. Or maybe I’m just so used to the other shoe dropping, I’m looking for trouble.”

He sat, picking at a blade of grass.

“Isabel Rochev…what were we thinking?” Oliver shook his head in disgust. “She’s gunning for your company.”

Even still, he couldn’t quite refer to Queen Consolidated as his company. His legacy? Yes. But it would always be his father’s life work.

“Did you know I have a brother? He looks a hell of a lot like you.”

A brother. What was he even supposed to do with that information? How was he supposed to feel?

“And then there’s Felicity. I wish you could’ve met her. How do I describe her? She’s smart and sexy. She doesn’t know she’s sexy, but she does know she’s smart.” Oliver smiled thinking of her. “She’s the most genuine person I’ve ever met. I pulled her into my life, and I shouldn’t have. I don’t know how to love her and keep her safe.”

He allowed himself to mull over those words.

He loved Felicity.

He loved her.

He loved her.

“Any advice?”

The cool night air was silent.

Felicity had just finished sprucing up her apartment—mostly putting away clothes she had pulled out several nights ago—and getting ready for bed when her cell phone buzzed on the nightstand.

**From Oliver**

**sent 11:01 p.m.**

**OQ:** Are you home?

She flopped down on her bed, stomach down, and used her elbows to prop herself as she typed a response.

**FS:** Yes. John’s bunking with me tonight.

**FS:** He’s a big guy. I should’ve sprung for the king-size bed.

**OQ:** What?

Felicity smiled. She could just picture Oliver’s scowl.

**FS:** Relax. He brought me home, showed me how to work the new security system, and left.

**OQ:** Good.

**FS:** You’re glad I’m not rooming with Digg tonight?

**OQ:** I’m glad the security system is working…

**OQ:** And that you’re not sharing a bed with John tonight.
FS: He’s my friend.
OQ: I’m your friend, too.

True, but she generally didn’t go around kissing her friends.

FS: You should get some rest.
OQ: Would love to, but I can’t.
FS: I know it’s been a sucky day, but you-
OQ: I need your help.
OQ: I have mint chocolate chip ice cream. It must be eaten.
FS: You don’t fight fair.
OQ: Never claimed to.
FS: Where are you?
OQ: Outside your door in the hallway.

She slid off the bed, pushed her bare feet into her bunny slippers, and made her way to the front door. Remembering his admonishment earlier, she looked through the peephole to check that it was actually he.

“You were pretty confident I’d open the door.”

“Who can resist ice cream?” he replied as she stepped aside to allow him entrance. His eyes fell on her. She wore a tank top that didn’t quite cover her taut abdomen and long pajama pants with a printed pattern of…beavers?

Noticing him staring, she explained, “Tim the Beaver. It’s an MIT thing. So why mint chocolate chip?”

“Why not?”

She walked toward the kitchen, and he followed. “It’s my favorite, but how could you have known that?”

“I didn’t, but when we kissed, you tasted like mint. It put me in the mood…” his eyes twinkled wickedly, “for ice cream.”

“Where did you go tonight?” she asked, trying to keep her voice casual as she reached into the cabinet for two bowls.

“To talk to my dad. His gravestone.”

“That wasn’t what I expected,” she confessed. “Was it a good conversation?”

“It helped. You came up.” He shadowed her and reached out, his hand brushing her hair over one shoulder. He leaned down and pressed a trail of tiny kisses on the exposed flesh of her neck while his hands slid around her waist.

She did her best to ignore his nearness.

And failed miserably.

They stood like that for a moment as she ran her fingertips over the back of his hands and found herself practically melting into him.
You’re being an idiot, she scolded herself. This isn’t going to end well for you.

She wanted to ask what he told his father, but pushed that impulse aside even as she stepped away from his touch. “No wonder my ears were burning. Anywhere else?”

Oliver was disappointed when she disentangled herself from his hold. “The grocery store.” He opened a kitchen drawer and pulled out two spoons and an ice cream scooper. “I have a question for you. Why were you pushing me toward Laurel?”

That got her attention. “I…” She exhaled. “I wasn’t exactly.”

“Felicity.”

She sighed. “Maybe I was. To see what you’d do.”

“So you were testing me.”

She cringed. “Not testing you exactly. Just giving you an opportunity, I guess.”

“I don’t want to be with Laurel.”

“Right. Because of the life you lead, it’s better to not be with someone you care about. Etc. Etc.”

Dammit. Those words were coming back to haunt him yet again. “That’s not it. I don’t want to be with Laurel.”

“Oh.”

Oh? That’s all he got? Oh?

“Can you forget what I told when we got back from Russia? I was being an idiot.”

“Yes, you were.”

“Hey,” he protested good-naturedly. “You don’t have to agree with me!”

“I kept waiting for you to figure it out. And then I analyzed and overanalyzed your words. Once I had time to think about it, it kind of pissed me off.”

“I just want to keep you safe.”

“There is no such thing as safe. Haven’t we covered this already?”

“Right. Don’t bubble wrap you.”

“And you probably thought you were letting me down easy.”

“Actually, yeah.”

“Well, it wasn’t easy. It hurt. A lot.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not telling you this to make you feel bad or even for an apology, but things are changing kind of fast here. Last night you pulled away from me like I had bad breath or cooties or something.” She scooped the ice cream into the bowls she’d placed on the counter.
Despite the serious turn in their conversation, he couldn’t help the small smile that formed on his lips. “Your breath was fine.”

“Tonight you kissed me. And no complaints there because it was pretty fantastic. But now you’re here, and you brought ice cream and you’re being flirtatious, which I can’t decide if that’s awesome or really strange because I feel like I’m getting a little glimpse of…” she stopped herself. “You’ve had a bad day—”

“Which describes most of them,” Oliver interrupted trying to follow her shifting train of thought. “You’re making me dizzy.”

“I just think you need to be sure about our thing before this goes any further, and I don’t think you can be sure when I’ve kind of blown up your ideas about your family. So the best thing we can do is eat our ice cream before it melts.”

With that, she took her bowl and walked the short distance to the living room. Oliver followed her, settling on the couch next to her.

They sat in silence, eating their ice cream, until finally Felicity spoke up. “So this party at the McMartins’ is tomorrow night. Any words of advice or warning for me?”

“Just don’t be shocked if we don’t get a warm reception. Parker may have invited us, but his old man is not as forgiving. Whatever happens, don’t take it personally.”

“Oh, I don’t expect parties to actually be fun anymore.” At the baffled look on his face, she added, “Not because of you.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It seems like every party we go to, somebody ends up dead or kidnapped or with a bomb collar. No poison yet, so that’s good. And…I’ve just jinxed us.”

He shook his head in bemusement. “No one’s going to end up dead.”

She turned sideways on the sofa and drew her legs up beneath her. “Seriously, the Starling City Coroner’s office must absolutely hate it whenever there’s a society party or charity event. All I know is that there is no way I am going to wear red to this.”

“Is this another pop culture reference I don’t get?”

“Star Trek. The redshirts. Always the ones who got,” she sliced her finger across her throat and made a little kill sound.

“Well, for once, we’ll be attending as Oliver and Felicity, not as any other personas.”

Oliver fell silent, and his mood darkened, she noticed.

“What are you thinking?”

“McMartin knew my dad. They were good friends, occasional business associates. Scratched each other’s backs, I suppose. Frederick McMartin knows Isabel, but I wonder if he knew about her back then.” They needed his capital, but convincing McMartin to take a chance on him was going to be a tough sell. They needed some back up plans. “We’re running out of time.”

As though reading his thoughts, Felicity asked, “How did the meeting with Mr. Glenmullen go
“I may or may not have told him to keep his hands off your ass if he knows what’s good for him.”

“Oliver, you can’t go around threatening potential investors.”

“I won’t have him mistreating you. But I have a meeting with Yeardley Glenmullen next week, Peter Glenmullen’s brother.” She looked at him in some surprise. “Sorry. I didn’t put it on the calendar like you’ve asked me to do with meetings.”

“A million times.”

“Half a million times. The two have been feuding for years. I thought I might be able to use that to work up…something.”

“That’s really sad,” she said softly. “Not what you’re doing, but the fact they are at such odds with other.”

“Word is they haven’t even seen each other in nearly twenty years,” Oliver explained. “They even had separate funeral services for their mother when she passed away. And of course they went to court over who had the rights to her body.”

“Yikes.” Felicity swallowed hard. “I know it’s not the same, but I would give anything to see my brother again.”

“You have a brother?”

She reached over to the end table and picked up a framed photograph and passed it to Oliver. In it, he immediately recognized a younger Felicity standing next to a young man wearing a commencement gown and proudly beaming as he held up his diploma. His hair and eyes were dark—quite the opposite of hers.

“His name was Gabe. He was Dad’s son from his first marriage that, depending on whom you ask, ended either because his first wife was a vindictive bitch—that’s my mom’s take on it—or because they wanted different things in life. So Gabe spent alternate holidays and every summer with us. I thought he hung the moon.”

“What happened?” Oliver’s stomach knotted. He dreaded her answer.

“He died in a car accident when I was seventeen.” She stared straight ahead and stabbed at her ice cream. “I hated his driving. He used to quote Top Gun at me: ‘I feel the need…the need for speed.’ And I’d tell him Maverick and Goose were talking jets, not Jeep Wranglers. I loathe that movie now.”

“Felicity, I’m sorry.”

She set aside her bowl and reached for the picture. “I miss him. Some days are harder than others, but enough time has passed that I can think of him and smile. Not cry.” Despite her words, her eyes welled. “Except now, apparently. Figures,” she added with a weak smile.

“You don’t ever have to hide what you feel from me.”

She nodded. “I hope you know that goes both ways.” She returned the photo to its place on the table.

“I don’t know what to feel about Kirill.”
“That’s understandable. Your situation with him is far different from my family situation with Gabe. I knew Gabe for as long as I could remember. You’re a grown man finding out you have a very young brother.”

“It’s not just that. I liked being Robert Queen’s only son. It’s…,” he shook his head, “prideful.”

“You let it become your identity. Well, one of them.”

“I knew my dad cheated on my mother. More than once, actually. And it bothered me, but it also never seemed real. My mom would put on her public face, mostly for Thea’s sake, I think, and it was brushed under the rug. But Kirill is the proof.” He watched her reaction. “You think I’m a hypocrite to be upset with my dad when I did the same thing to Laurel.”

“I think that your feelings are your feelings, and no one has the right to tell you how you should feel. So now that you know about Kirill, what are you going to do?”

“Confirm his parentage. Secretly, of course.”

“And then?”

“Nothing for now. He’s a twelve-year-old kid being raised by Isabel’s family. I can’t swoop in and introduce myself as his brother. For all I know, the questions that I would raise would tear his world apart.”

“I wonder if Isabel will offer the same consideration to him.”

“Whatever happens between Isabel and myself, I need to make sure Kirill is protected. When he finds out—and sooner or later he will—he’s got to be equipped to handle it. He’s a part of my dad, just as much as I am, just as much as Thea is. I want to know him someday.”

“What about your mom? Thea?”

Oliver leaned his head back against the couch and closed his eyes. “I’m dreading that conversation. They need to know. I can’t let Isabel use Kirill against them, either.”

She took his empty bowl from his lap and set it on the coffee table. “You should get some rest. You don’t sleep enough.”

“I sleep too much,” he replied opening his eyes. The look of concern etched on her features set his heart pounding. “Hey. I’m okay. I am.”

He slid closer to her on the couch, leaning toward her. He worried her too much, he knew, and for whatever reason, she was the one person he didn’t want to worry about him.

His hand went to her hip and his fingers dipped under the hem of her tank top. Ever so lightly, he brushed his fingertips over her smooth skin. It was an act of intimacy, something a lover would do.

Felicity sucked in a breath. Her skin felt hot, even as goose bumps rose. Oliver urged her closer until she was in his lap. His hands worked to reposition her legs so that she straddled him. “Oliver…” She loved the sound of his name, but even more, she loved the way this felt. Pressed against him, she could feel his body reacting to her. Instinctively, she ground against him, needing more. “Oliver, we shouldn’t complicate…”

He wasn’t listening. He was too busy tracing her full lips with his fingertips. She was innocent in so many ways, but at that moment, he wanted to give her knowledge. He wanted to touch her, to take
her to bed and meld with her, to be with her. He wanted to warn her that his intentions weren't good, that she deserved much better than him, that he likely wouldn't get a happy ending.

He wanted to kiss her.

Her eyes fluttered. Oliver was rewriting everything she thought she knew about them, and their story alternately thrilled and scared her. They were a team at Queen Consolidated, a team in the foundry.

Was he to become her lover, too?

Her body ached for him. Could she trust him with her heart after he’d already broken it once? There wasn’t enough ice cream in the world if this went bad.

His hand moved away from her lips and rested at the nape of her neck.

She was his captive, but strangely, she didn't mind.

“I’m a selfish man, Felicity,” he said before taking possession of her lips.

She sighed. His lips were a combination of hot and cold. Hot from the natural heat that emanated from him, cold from the ice cream.

Gently, he sucked on her lower lip loosening her resolve, determined to gain full access to her mouth. She parted her lips, accepting him completely. His tongue delved into her mouth, rubbing against her own.

It scared him knowing that he could very easily get lost in the moment, lost in her.

“You taste so good,” he murmured as he pulled away slightly before plundering her mouth again. “So sweet.”

“It's the ice cream,” she managed.

The moment needed to end before they passed the point of no return. He pulled away from her, his eyes still fixed on her with an intensity that sent her heart racing. “The ice cream’s good, but you taste better.”

She leaned her forehead against his, their breaths still mingling. “I want this, Oliver, but we shouldn’t let ourselves get carried away.”

“Agreed,” he said reluctantly.

“So no more kissing,” she added before she lightly trailed her lips across his jaw.

He gripped her hips. “Starting tomorrow,” he negotiated.

She smiled before pressing her mouth against his.

Starting tomorrow.
Well, I know many of you were hoping for the Belinda/Isabel conversation, but I couldn’t get it to fit into this chapter without interrupting the flow. I promise you will find out what the two of them discussed.

I have to admit; this one was a bear to write. I really, really wanted to do these two justice. I hope I have.

As always, thanks for reading!
Part Ten: “What Happens in Russia Doesn’t Stay in Russia”

He was warm.

That was the first thought that entered Oliver’s mind as he opened his eyes. There’d been too many mornings when he’d woken cold. Perhaps a small part of him still expected to wake shivering on the hard ground only to discover his life away from the island was all a dream.

But this was no dream. His dreams were never this happy.

He was warm, and it was Felicity who warmed him.

At some point in the night, her legs had become tangled with his. Two of her fingers were tucked between the buttons on his shirt. And this—this—felt like home.

He watched her sleep, expelling tiny breaths. Felicity’s face was scrubbed clean of makeup, revealing the smattering of freckles across her nose. Her lips, devoid of their usual bright coloring, still looked plump and inviting. Her chin was pink, likely where his whiskers had rubbed against her sensitive skin. Her blonde hair, pulled free from its customary ponytail, curled slightly, he noticed.

She was easily the most beautiful sight he’d ever seen.

His heart slammed against his ribs, even as he could see the rising and falling of her chest as she slumbered. This was what he wanted every morning, even if he shouldn’t. This could be his life. An odd flutter in his stomach surprised him as the thought entered his mind. For so long, he had lived in denial. He couldn’t allow himself the luxury of thinking beyond the problem of the day or week. Now he couldn’t stop thinking of what could be. How could he do this, allow himself to think of a future with her when so often he had to fight against his baser instincts? He wasn’t a good man. He had used people his entire life, for a time killed without remorse, and there was no end in sight to his crusade to clean the corruption of his city. She couldn’t see it yet, but he was an iron ball locked around her ankles, dragging her to murky depths. And still, she wanted him, just as he wanted her.

And how he wanted her.

Sleeping on her side, the tank top she wore dipped slightly over her breasts, affording him a tantalizing view of her silken skin while still leaving plenty to the imagination. Already, he anticipated burying his face there, taking one pert breast in his mouth and lightly flicking his thumb over the other. He wanted to map her body, learn her reactions.

Just the errant thought of touching her made him respond. He’d been halfway aroused when he awoke; now he ached to be inside of her, his body calling for her, just as it had last night.
When he had brought her onto his lap the night before, her legs bracketing him, he had wanted nothing more than to press himself into her depths, especially as she gazed at him with such openness, trust, and undisguised longing.

But the night before, as their kisses had intensified and his hands began to wander, she stilled his movements. He looked at her questioningly, and she’d given him a reassuring, if nervous, smile.

“I want you. I can’t believe I just came out and said it, but it’s true. So there. I want you so much that I can’t see straight. Of course, that could be because I’m not wearing my glasses,” she added, chuckling slightly at her own nerves. “I mean, not that a woman would have to be blind to want you because you’re, well, not unfortunate looking.”

“Best compliment ever,” he joked, his eyes fixed on her. “You’re not ‘unfortunate looking,’ either.”

She buried her face in the crook of his neck, breathing in his scent, and the two simply held one another, enjoying the closeness that had started as a trickle but burst like floodwaters. Nevertheless, he had the impression that she was hiding from him, embarrassed even, though he couldn’t entirely understand why. “Hey. I-I want you, too.”

His heart stuttered with his words.

“Not just physically—though I do want that,” he added.

Felicity lifted her head and met his eyes. “I kind of noticed.” She shifted slightly and he knew she could feel his hardness against her center, though layers of clothing separated them. Unconsciously, her teeth grazed her bottom lip even as she let out the tiniest sigh.

He clutched her pajama pants clad thighs; it was his turn to still her movements, the delicious friction between them on the verge of making him forget he was supposed to be the type of man she would still respect in the morning.

“Sorry,” she whispered, realizing she was making self-control more difficult for him.

“I want you by my side. At the beginning of the day. At the end of the day. You are the one person who…,” he searched for the right words, “who gives me hope.”

A shadow crossed her features. “Oliver, don’t put me on a pedestal,” she gently pleaded. “Look, I want to be a good person, but that doesn’t make me unique. I’m not an angel or a saint. Well, of course I’m not a saint. Wrong religion. Not that I’m overly religious. Not that there’s anything wrong with being religious. I’m just really not. Which really isn’t the point.” She squeezed her eyes shut and silently counted down from three before opening them again. “There are so many good people around me: John. Detective Lance.” She traced his temple along his hairline finding a scar she’d never noticed before. “You are a good man.”

No, he wasn’t.

Couldn’t she see that his humanity hung by a thread? But how he wanted to be the man she believed him to be. “There’s so much about me that isn’t good. Felicity, there are things about me that you don’t know.”

She pressed her finger across his lips. “And when the time is right, you’ll tell me. Or not. But whatever you tell me isn’t going to change my mind about you.” Felicity spoke in that matter-of-fact, you-really-can’t-argue-with-me tone that Oliver knew all too well. It amused him sometimes, exasperated him at others, and tonight reminded him that nothing he said, short of a full rendering of the Life and Times of Oliver Queen would break her misplaced faith. And so he chose to live in
the moment and snatch happiness for however long he might have it. Trouble would come later. It always did.

Effortlessly, he captured her hand and pressed tiny kisses to her fingertips.

She sighed at the sensations coursing through her, and her eyes fluttered. “Odd how you can touch my fingertips but I feel it reverberate through my whole body.” Her eyes widened in horror. “And I just said that aloud. Crap.”

“It’s just me.”

At that, she giggled.

But at what, Oliver had no idea. “I missed something.”

“There is no ‘just’ you. You overwhelm me. When I’m near you, I feel like I’m riding downhill on a runaway roller coaster. It’s thrilling and terrifying all at the same time, but it feels so out of my control.”

“You want to put the brakes on.”

“Don’t you think we should?” she asked even as she ran her fingers lightly across his scalp. Seemingly to realize her actions went counter to her words, she added, “And I really should keep my hands to myself.” Though he noted she did not vacate his lap—for which he was grateful. “We’ve been around each other a lot this last week, pretending to be engaged, pretending that we’re this perfect couple. It’s easy to get caught up in the lie, make things feel real when they aren’t. And today—well, it’s been a long day. A tough day for you. Maybe this is just…”

She was giving him an out, a final exit before there was no turning back. “Don’t,” he warned her. “This…thing…between us, it’s been there from the start. You were the first person…the first…to make me smile again. I’d forgotten how to feel anything but this weight. I didn’t know then that you would become so important to me. All I knew was there you were. This. Tonight. Right now. It isn’t about a fake engagement, or scratching an itch, or being upset about finding out the truth about my father and Isabel. This is about me wanting you. I’m right there on that roller coaster with you.”

“I want to get this right. This feels too important to rush.”

“Then we’ll take it at your pace,” he reassured her. “I want to get this right, too.” His expression tender, a hint of a smile curled on his lips. “I want to learn everything about you, to know every part of you.”

She shrugged. “I’m not all that complicated.”

“Including why you don’t like kangaroos.”

“Well, now, that is complicated,” she teased. “What else do you intend to find out?”

“I want to know about your family, your favorite everything. I want to hear about JoJo and other friends I don’t know. I’m really curious as to why you have a tattoo,” his thumb brushed over the script on her lower back, “that spells trouble. Are you ticklish, and can I use that to my advantage? And I am really,” he gave her a quick peck on the lips, “really looking forward to finding out how you like to be touched.”

The truth was he’d never waited for anyone. Ever. For him, sex always happened in a flurry of touches, shedding clothes, little thought to consequences beyond preventing an unplanned
pregnancy. That was one of the lessons his father pounded into his head when he was old enough to hear it. *Enjoy, but never let yourself be trapped.* And Oliver certainly had enjoyed himself over the years, but he would wait until Felicity was ready.

He took a lock of her hair between his fingers and rubbed the end of it against her nose. Even in her sleep, he could see her reactions as she twitched her nose before bringing her hand up to swat at the offending sensation. His body shook with silent laughter. It was that motion which prompted her to open her eyes.

And she smiled to find that last night had been real, not a beautiful lie.

“Hi,” he said, his voice rough, but his eyes danced.

“Hi.” She liked seeing this side of him, momentarily carefree, cheerful. Real life would catch up with him soon, but how she wished they could stave it off for just a few more minutes. “How long have you been awake?” she asked, suppressing a yawn.

“A while.”

Worry lines creased her forehead. He reached out with his finger and began to rub them away. “Don’t. Worry. I slept better last night than I have in a long time. I just—I liked watching you dream.”

“You should’ve woken me sooner. I like reality better.”

So did he.

Waking up with her like this felt far more intimate than anything he’d ever experienced. And to think that was without sex. She had drifted off to sleep on the couch, and he had carried her to her room, intending to tuck her in and leave. Only she had stirred awake, slid her hand into his, and gently tugged on it. “*Stay*?”

One word.

*And that’s all it took.*

“What time is it?” she asked, the sleep still evident in her voice.

“A little past 6:30.”

“We stayed up too late last night,” she yawned. “Not that I’m complaining.” Being close to Oliver—just kissing him—had made her feel alive, as though every cell in her body was buzzing, hyper-aware. And Oliver hadn’t pushed her away this time. If anything, he was the one who had given chase. “Wow. You’re here.”

“You didn’t think I would be?”

“I thought you might talk yourself out of us.”

“Not a chance. I told you I’m a selfish man.”

She shifted in the bed and propped up on an elbow, still eye to eye with him. “And a more than capable negotiator.” She smiled remembering how he had negotiated the terms of their kissing. The agreement was that they would stop kissing to avoid too many complications—starting tomorrow. And on this new day, she suspected that would still be his response. They would stop—starting
“Oh? Only ‘more than capable’?”

“You drive a hard bargain.”

“Yes, I seem to recall being fairly persuasive.”

His fingers trailed along the length of her arm, making her face feel flushed all the while eliciting goosebumps on her skin. *Pheromones,* she reminded herself. But the truth of the matter was that she had never reacted to any other man the way she reacted to Oliver.

“I would like to renegotiate the terms of our agreement. *After* I brush my teeth.” She rolled out of bed and padded to the adjacent bathroom before he could kiss her. It was too early in this new aspect of their relationship for morning breath. *Or bedhead,* she silently added to herself when she caught her reflection in the mirror. *No fair. How could he look so incredibly perfect all the time?*

“You don’t happen to have an extra toothbrush, do you?” he asked as he watched her squeeze toothpaste onto her toothbrush.

She tilted her head in that knowing way of hers, reminding him of the first time they’d met. “Hello. Daughter of a dentist.” She stuck the toothbrush in her mouth and began brushing even as she knelt and withdrew a new toothbrush for him from under the sink. “As my dad would say, you can never have too many dental supplies,” she garbled.

Oliver opened the package and looked at the brush; printed on the handle was ‘Smoak and Sommet Family Dentistry,’ along with a phone number. “Sommet? You get a reminder of Jackass every day?” He frowned as he took the tube of toothpaste she offered.

Felicity shrugged before spitting into the sink and running water. “It’s just a toothbrush.” She returned the toothbrush to the decorative receptacle she kept next to the sink. Much better.

“I hate the thought of him hurting you.” *Or kissing you. Holding you.*

“I think things worked out just fine.” She leaned against the counter as she watched him brush his teeth. His tailored button up shirt was rumpled from sleeping in it. She had the feeling—though she had no first-hand evidence—that he typically did not sleep in his clothes but had the night before for her benefit. Or was that to her detriment? Because as her eyes drank him in, she couldn’t imagine what in the heck she was thinking the night before by being so skittish.

Mornings with Oliver were starting to become a habit, though this one felt different. Of course it did; things *were* different. They had been stuck in neutral for so long. Never would she have imagined last year when he sauntered into her tiny office at QC oozing charisma and ridiculous lies that he would become such an integral part of every aspect of her life. In the past, she had always liked to compartmentalize. Work stayed at work. Her personal life stayed personal. She never dated co-workers—though she’d had opportunities from time to time. She always, *always* did background checks on men who asked her out. Above all else, she played it safe.

Now she was breaking all of those unofficial rules. And Oliver—well, he was anything but safe, what with his dangerous double life, horrible lady killer reputation (not literal, thank Google), killer alter ego (reformed), and impossibly sculpted body. He challenged her, not in that ‘catch me if you can’ way, but to see the world differently, to see herself differently. She liked to think she did the same for him.

He reached around her and placed his toothbrush next to hers, leaning in as he did so, an invasion
into her space that was welcome and sent her pulse racing. She halfway thought he should carry a disclaimer, like those prescription drugs she saw advertised on television. Side effects may include rapid heartbeat, dry mouth, dizziness, and lust.

Her eyes lingered on the two brushes, side-by-side. If Oliver knew she was contemplating what it meant for him to have his own toothbrush at her place, he didn’t say anything. Instead, his hands wrapped around her waist and pulled her close, sandwiching her between the counter and his much larger body.

His voice was low, heated, as he leaned down and whispered in her ear, “You said something about renegotiating?”

“Well, we are trying to ward off a hostile takeover,” she said with a smile as his lips brushed against her bare shoulder. She shivered at his touch. Odd how a man who could double as her own personal furnace could elicit goosebumps.

“I’d argue this is a friendly takeover,” he replied between kisses as he trailed up her neck finding her pulse point.

“Very friendly,” she agreed as he gently tilted her head with his left hand, the calloused fingertips lightly ghosting along her jaw. And then his lips were on hers. The world around her seemed to fade away until there was only Oliver and the slow, back-and-forth rub of his mouth against hers. Firm pressure, a gentle pull.

Yes.

Oh yes.

A low-level current passed between them, a current that lingered even when Oliver broke the kiss and rested his forehead against hers. “Felicity,” he murmured, close enough she could almost feel the vibration of her name on his lips. She loved the way it sounded when he spoke—deep, almost growly—but more than that, she loved the way it reflected how she felt. Possessive. Heated. Desperate.

“More,” she managed, albeit somewhat inarticulately.

Closing the bit of distance between them without hesitation, Oliver took her mouth as if it was his to do with as he pleased, making it his own in a way that had Felicity’s hands rising of their own volition, her fingers curling into his tailored shirt, and a moan sliding free from her mouth and into his.

Seconds later, there was a breath between them—a soft wash of warmth and want, anticipation and retreat.

Oliver took half a step back and exhaled loudly, though he couldn’t bring himself to completely let her go. “You told me a few days ago that I’m handsy.” Those roughened hands had once again found their way under the hem of her tank top. He wasn’t being a perfect gentleman; the little circles he drew with his fingertips along the small of her back accentuated that point. Nevertheless, he managed to show some restraint.

“Terribly handsy.”

“I don’t know how I’m going to keep my hands off you,” he practically growled against her mouth.

“I can work with that.” She paused. “Figuratively speaking, of course. I mean, I can’t literally work
if you’re touching me. Or doing the salmon ladder. No concentration. Plus, you’re kind of big. You would impede my view of…” she cut herself off. “I’ve really got to stop doing that.”

He pressed a quick kiss to the top of her head. “Don’t stop being you.”

A few minutes later after taking turns in the bathroom, Felicity emerged with a towel around her wet hair and wrapped in her fluffy bathrobe. She noted Oliver’s appreciative gaze when he saw her and felt her cheeks grow warm. She knew Oliver could be an intense man; she just wasn’t accustomed to having that intensity trained upon her. Trying to quell the somersaults in her belly, she walked to the window.

“The looky-loos are probably out in full force again this morning,” she halfway groaned as she pulled at her window shade and peered out. Sure enough, she could see media types practically camped out on the sidewalk below. She let the shade fall closed and turned back to Oliver who had tucked in his shirt and was inordinately presentable. “They make me paranoid to even take out my trash. I keep thinking maybe they’ll discover I eat way too much takeout or find out what brand of deodorant I use or…or worse.”

“Could be.”

“You’re not helping.” She flopped down on her bed and was more than slightly tempted to pull the covers over her head and stay that way. Heck, maybe she could just walk around wearing a sheet over her head. Start a ghost fashion trend. No, with her luck, the tabloid media would probably accuse her of being a member of the KKK, which, when she thought of it, would be a first, considering she was Jewish. The KKK didn’t play well with Jews, even the blue eyed, blond haired ones. Well, her hair was dyed. “My brain,” she muttered at her rambling thoughts.

“What do you want me to say? Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean you’re crazy.”

And he sounded amused over the situation. Amused! Which, when she thought about it some more was better than drowning in guilt and manpain.

“Seriously, Oliver, if I don’t take out my trash soon, someone is going to bring in those blindfolded people for a Febreze commercial. And then those people will probably sell me out to TMZ. There’s got to be a way to make them go away.”

“Sure there is.”

At that, she perked up.

“Come stay with me at the house. If you’re not here, they’re not here. And I guarantee they won’t get past Queen security.”

“Right,” she laughed humorlessly. When she realized he wasn’t laughing along with her, her smile faded. “Oh, you were being serious.”

“Of course I am. Staying at my house wouldn’t be so awful, would it?”

“That place still scares me, but it’s really cute how you call your family’s castle a ‘house.’ Only thing missing is a moat.”

He shrugged. “I’ll have one installed just for you.”

“Throw in a dragon, and you’ve got yourself a deal.”
"You better be careful what you agree to because I know a guy—"

"I’m sure you do," she interrupted. "I just—I want us to do this right. Rushing to live together…"

"The house is big, Felicity."

"Your powers of understatement know no bounds."

"My point is you don’t have to stay in my room. You could have your own room. Hell, you could have your own wing. There’s no quid pro quo here. I just—I want you to be comfortable and not having to look over your shoulder or dodge reporters every time you leave home."

The ringing of his phone broke the moment. He turned to answer it, but Felicity only vaguely heard his end of the conversation. Her mind was swimming. Moving in with Oliver? That was just crazy. Maybe not to the outside world who thought them engaged, but in reality, what was happening between them was still so new. On the other hand, they were already spending almost all their time together.

"I’ve got to go," Oliver announced, interrupting her thoughts.

"Is everything okay?" Felicity asked.

"Fine. I’ve just got an impromptu early meeting with Belinda."

"In yesterday’s clothes?"

At that, he threw her a lop-sided smile. "I doubt she’ll mind, but have Digg bring me a change."

"And if you see Isabel…"

His smile immediately fell. "I won’t engage."

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"Were they aggressive this morning?" Felicity asked as she opened the door of her apartment to allow John inside.

Diggle crossed his arms, his massive muscles straining the fabric of his suit jacket. "Nothing I can’t handle."

"Right. Maybe if I pump iron, the press will leave me alone, too. What do you think?" she flexed her bicep, and Digg couldn’t help but chuckle. Felicity’s arms were toned but the muscle was definitely lacking in bulk. "So…coffee is made if you want to pour yourself some into a to-go cup. I’m going to run get my shoes."

She scurried past him as he walked toward her kitchen.

"How’s your foot feeling, by the way?" he called out to her.

"Better. The cut’s healing," she replied emerging from her bedroom carrying a strappy pair of high heels. "Let’s hope I have better luck with this pair than the ones I wore on Monday, which met a tragic, premature end."

She sat on the edge of the couch pulling them on as John retrieved a travel mug she’d left out for him next to the coffee pot. He reached into the cupboard for a sugar packet when he noticed two ice
cream bowls in the sink.

“You had company last night.” He thought he heard a little choked sound come from the living room. “If it had been just you…”

“I wouldn’t have needed a bowl. Just a spoon.” She walked into the kitchen, the heels giving her about three inches of additional height that she squandered by leaning on the island, her elbows supporting her. “Oliver was here.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. I mean, why wouldn’t it be?”

She spoke so nonchalantly Digg couldn’t help but probe. “So he didn’t go see Laurel to smooth things over with her?”

“Nope.” And just like that, Felicity’s affected casualness disappeared, replaced by a grin that spread over her features. It wasn’t that she disliked Laurel exactly; she didn’t know the woman well enough one way or the other. What Felicity did know was that she didn’t like the dynamic between Oliver and his ex-girlfriend, every interaction tinged with guilt and blame. It just seemed a toxic combination, like milk and orange Tang, and Oliver shouldered enough burdens without Laurel piling them on further. But yeah, Felicity wasn’t going to lie to herself and say it didn’t feel good knowing that Oliver had chosen her over The Laurel.

“I’ll be damned,” Digg marveled at her proud expression.

“You don’t have to act so shocked.”

“I’m not. Exactly.”

Felicity shot him an incredulous look, punctuated with a tut. “So you know how I said there wasn’t anything going on between Oliver and me but a fake engagement between friends?”

“Yep.”

“I’d like to amend that statement.”

“I don’t need to hear about your sex life,” Diggle replied, raising his hands.

“It wasn’t like that. I mean, it could have been, but we put on the brakes. Long day. Too much news. We did sleep together in my bed, though, which you didn’t really need to know.” Felicity stood straight, her hands covering her mouth.

Digg grimaced.

“My brain comes out with the worst way to say things.” She quickly added, “Sleeping. Not sleeping. Which when you think about it is a really odd euphemism, considering there’s no actual sleep going on. Or if there is, then someone’s doing something wrong. But we were sleeping, as in slumbering, dead to the world, having forty winks. Yeah.”

“Deep breath.”

“Right. I’m just happy. A little nervous, too, I guess.” Felicity watched her friend, his lips pressed into a tight line. “Come on. Can you please just be happy for us, too?”

“You know I care about you both.”
“I can hear you getting warmed up for a ‘but.’”

“Felicity, Oliver has a hell of a lot to work through.”

“I know. I wear glasses, not blinders.”

“You sure about that? A little over a year ago when Oliver returned from the island, he came back a killer. A hardened, take-no-prisoners killer. You’ve seen the scars on the surface, but have you thought about the ones you can’t see?”

“Of course I have. I know he’s seen and done things that I can’t even…but I also know that he has fought back from that place of darkness.”

“Doesn’t mean he’s in the light. And if you and Oliver don’t work out? What then?”

“We’ll figure it out.” Her vague response made her cringe slightly.

“The way Laurel Lance has figured it out?”

_Ouch._

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not Laurel. She had a raw deal dealt to her. I can empathize with her, but my life didn’t begin with Oliver and if we don’t make a go of it, it doesn’t end with him either. Okay, maybe the more interesting part of it did come about because of him because, let’s face it, working with a vigilante is far more exciting than straight-up tech support. The point is that what we do matters. My dedication to our cause isn’t contingent on whether Oliver buys me shoes or…or has a toothbrush next to mine…or leaves the toilet seat up. Which, by the way, both of you do that in the lair, no thank you very much.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Then put the lid down. I almost fell in the other day. With my luck, I would’ve got stuck, and you guys would’ve been out saving the city, and…”

“You’re deflecting.”

“I might get hurt, but John, you can’t bubble wrap me. Besides, maybe I’ll break _his_ heart. Or maybe…and here’s a crazy idea…maybe we’ll be happy. I don’t know, and neither do you, but I’m willing to find out because Oliver is worth it. He’s decent and kind-hearted and complicated and smart and…”

“Okay. I’ve got the idea. Just promise me you’ll be careful.”

“That’s my middle name. Well, it’s not, but you know what I mean.”

Digg exhaled loudly and nodded. “You ready to run the gauntlet?”

Some of Felicity’s tension drained out of her. “What do you think the questions will be today? Baby names?”

“This couldn’t wait?” Oliver asked by way of greeting when he saw Belinda Carlen waiting for him as he stepped off the executive elevator.

“No. I tried calling you last night, but you didn’t return any of my calls. Frankly, Oliver, you have to know that I have better things to do than to call you to chitchat, so your lack of availability is
Oliver gestured toward his office. “I was indisposed. You didn’t try Felicity?” He held the door open for the older woman, noting her sudden silence. He looked back at her, and noticed that she seemed to be searching for the right words. Not good.

“I thought it best that I not discuss this matter with her.” Belinda placed the leather briefcase she carried on Oliver’s desk, unlocked it, and withdrew a file folder. “It’s a sensitive matter that requires discretion.”

“In case I haven’t made it clear, I trust Felicity implicitly.” Oliver spoke evenly, but the hardness of his expression made it apparent to the older woman that he was not pleased that Felicity was being excluded from the conversation.

“And that trust is reciprocated?”

“Yes.” At the shake of the older woman’s head, Oliver’s brows furrowed. “What is this about?”

“I had a visitor yesterday evening. Isabel Rochev.”

“What did she want?”

“Other than wanting to drive me into an early retirement?”

Oliver cocked his head.

“Actually, it seems she is exceedingly suspicious of your relationship with Ms. Smoak. Ms. Rochev has a theory that your engagement is a drummed up PR stunt, one that could have dire consequences for the company during this…tenuous time. She approached me for confirmation of her suspicions.”

“You set her straight, I trust.”

“Ms. Rochev was quite insistent.” Belinda ran her fingers along the edge of the file folder. With some hesitation, she held out the folder toward the younger man.

Oliver’s stomach dropped when he lifted the cover of the folder. It was a photograph of him—along with Isabel—in his Moscow hotel room, their bodies entwined. Isabel’s face was obscured as she rode him, her back to the camera, but his face was quite visible.

Quickly, he closed the file folder.

How the hell had this happened? Just further proof that what had, at the time seemed spontaneous, was, in fact, seamlessly orchestrated. And the photos were—what?—an insurance policy? She must’ve had help. The hotel staff?

“Ms. Rochev said this was just over three weeks ago. Frankly, it’s none of my business what you do or…um…who you do. My job is to present this company in the best light possible, and as its CEO, that includes presenting you in the best light possible. But I have to tell you, this isn’t helpful.”

“No, you don’t.”

Oliver swiped his hand over his face, the bandage from last night still securely in place where Felicity had tended to his wounded hand.

Felicity.
This was going to hurt her. It was one thing to know they’d had other sexual partners. It was quite a
different thing to actually see it. Who’d have thought her joking about a sex tape would be so oddly
prophetic?

Oliver fought down the bile that threatened to rise. He felt physically ill from the abject disgust. It
wasn’t supposed to be anything other than a release, a few minutes of pleasure shared by two
consenting adults. Instead, he’d unwittingly bedded his father’s ex-mistress and the mother to his
half-brother, complete with visual aids.

When he screwed up, he did so royally.

Which would probably be the headline: “Queen’s Latest Screw Up Fit for a King.”

Taking on enemies as The Arrow seemed easy, so much more straightforward than navigating the
shark-infested waters of his existence as Oliver Queen.

“Obviously, that is not the only copy of the photograph in existence.”

Obviously.

Oliver tried to keep his expression impassive but failed miserably as he ground out the words, “So as
QC’s resident PR miracle worker, what do you recommend?”

“That you disabuse Ms. Smoak of any notions of your faithfulness, for starters. Prepare her for the
worst. I can coach her on how to respond to questions to hopefully minimize the damage.”

“Felicity knows about Isabel.”

Belinda’s gray eyebrows rose in surprise. “That’s something, at least. Ms. Rochev heavily suggested
that if your engagement with Ms. Smoak continues, the source of the photograph will indeed leak it.”

“Meaning *Isabel* will leak the photo.”

“She has not claimed ownership,” Belinda carefully explained.

“But I know Isabel.”

“Yes, and your knowledge of her has once again cast you in the role of Lothario, one you wore quite
aptly in the past.”

Oliver’s patience wore thin, and Belinda’s snark did little to diffuse the strain he felt. “Ms. Carlen,
you may find me personally objectionable, and that is your prerogative. But I am still the CEO, it is
my name on the building, and I would appreciate if as my employee, you would keep your personal
opinions to yourself.”

“Mr. Queen, I have never been a coddler. I am not a ‘yes’ woman. I am here because over the years,
your family has benefited from my expertise and the fact that I am willing to tell the truth bluntly,
regardless of whether it’s what someone wants to hear or how they want to hear it. I spin the truth for
the outside world but not within these walls.”

Oliver brought his fingers together, imagining nocking an arrow. “If she leaks the photograph, it’s
her reputation on the line, as well. The press won’t leave her unscathed.”

“That’s true. It will be a minor scandal for her, but she’s not the one who is engaged. I don’t have to
tell you that in the business world, trust is crucial. A man who betrays the woman he claims to love
doesn’t engender trust.”

“And I don’t have to tell you that the business world is full of hypocrites. What’s one more?”

“You’d better start practicing a more contrite response. If this gets out, no one is going to give you a pass, Oliver. I don’t have to tell you that investors have shown greater interest in QC since we announced your engagement. It has helped to humanize you, something that was needed in light of your mother’s upcoming trial, but more importantly, it’s a sign of stability.”

“So hypothetically, if I break off the engagement, I give the impression of instability. If I don’t break off the engagement and the photo is released, I give the impression of instability. Either way, Isabel wins.”

“But what does she win? Why would Isabel Rochev, who has every reason to want Queen Consolidated to be successful, want this to become public?”

“How well do you know Isabel Rochev?”

“Not well at all. Only by reputation.”

“I recently learned that Isabel had a relationship with my father.” At the lack of reaction from Belinda, Oliver added, “Which doesn’t surprise you in the least. You knew.”

“I’ve worked here many years.”

“What do you know about their relationship?”

“Enough to know that it wasn’t one-sided.” Belinda leaned against his desk. “When your father ended the relationship with some reluctance, he alluded to Ms. Rochev potentially using information that could cause harm to your family.”

“Did he say what?”

“No. We came up with a rather cutthroat media plan to discredit Ms. Rochev if it proved necessary, but it did not. Isabel cut off contact with Mr. Queen for several years, and it was never an issue. Until now.”

Oliver turned away, his mouth set in a tight line.

“If I am to help you, I need you to be honest with me about everything.”

Almost as if on cue, Oliver saw the elevator door open and Felicity emerge carrying a garment bag. She smiled brightly as he motioned for her to join Belinda and him.

Belinda continued, “Let’s start with what possessed you to pass off your executive assistant as your fiancée in the first place.”

Oliver squeezed the bridge of his nose. He could feel a headache coming on.

As Felicity opened the glass door, she noticed the somber expressions on the other’s faces. “What did I miss?”

“If I were Isabel,” Felicity paused and shuddered from her seat at Oliver’s desk. “Those are words I never thought I would utter. But if I were, where would I keep the, uh, evidence?”
“Felicity, I’m sorry.”

“That you have terrible taste in women? Well, present company excluded, of course. We’ve all been there. Remind me to tell you sometime about this lacrosse player I knew in college.”

“You’re okay?”

“Of course not. In fact, I am really starting to hate Isabel, and I don’t mean that as a figure of speech. Kind of like if a house fell on her Wizard of Oz style, I would probably gawk just a little bit…and there may or may not be clapping involved…okay, not the point. So obviously, you were a bit occupied and didn’t see a camera, so we don’t know if we’re dealing with a physical storage device, like an SD card, which likely has been backed up in various digital formats, on the cloud, you name it, or whether the photo was wirelessly transmitted and is solely digital. So if we want to keep this from becoming her Instagram profile pic, we’re going to have to start digging.”

“Instagram?”

“It pains me that you don’t know what that is. This may take awhile.”

“How long do we have?” Oliver asked Belinda.

“Twenty-four hours. Less now since I was unable to reach you last night.”

He shoved his hands into his pockets. “I think I should just ask for it back.”

Belinda choked back a snort. “From what you and Felicity have told me, Rochev’s angling for your company and has been for some time. What could you possibly say to convince her?”

“I could say please.”

“Oliver,” Felicity’s warning tone snapped his focus back to her.

“We’re reacting defensively, but we need to be taking the fight to her,” he replied through gritted teeth. “I’m not the only one with something to lose.”

“Please tell me you aren’t thinking what I think you’re thinking,” Felicity responded, her voice tinged with trepidation.

Oliver took a deep breath. “It’s time to arrange a family reunion.”
Part Eleven: "People in Glass Offices Shouldn't…"

"It's time to arrange a family reunion."

Oliver's words echoed in Felicity's ears until she could perceive little else. Belinda and Oliver continued their conversation, but Felicity was lost in her own remembrances. The sprawling, sterile office at QC faded away to Felicity's too small college dorm room.

"What you're doing isn't legal. You know that, right?"

"What's wrong, Jack? Worried that I'm going to get caught?" Felicity teased as she looked at him sideways, her computer in her lap. She could feel his fingertips tracing her spine even through the thick sweatshirt she had hastily thrown over her pajama cami. "I'm really, really good at not getting caught." She shifted on the twin-sized bed, moving closer to him while still cradling her laptop. With the pressing of her lips to his to emphasize each really, she left little doubts that the conversation topic had turned. She pulled away and added, "What good is it to have mad skills if I never use them?"

"We should put those mad skills to use."

"Now you're just trying to distract me."

He held up his hands as though in surrender. "You're the one who started it. Besides, I didn't fly across the country and pay your roommate to leave us alone only to watch you tinker with your computer."

"Tinker? No, no, no. I don't tinker. I stroke the keys."

Jack grinned broadly.

"That didn't sound quite right."

"I thought it sounded perfect," he replied nuzzling her neck.

"Seriously, this is important," she said as she gently pulled away. "Life or death important. Okay. Maybe not the death part of that expression. That's kind of not the point." She took a deep breath. "But this is my life. My mother has been no help, of course."

"Maybe she has her reasons for wanting to keep you away from him. You've had everything you've ever needed, which is more than a lot of folks can say. So why does it even matter at this point anyway?"

Felicity glared at him. "You know why it matters." She returned her attention to her computer screen.

"This isn't the first time you've hacked into a database?"

"Such an ugly word. I'm just visiting. Without permission," she replied distractedly. A few more clicks of the mouse and a decryption sequence later, and Felicity was staring at a DMV record. "Wow. I think that's him."
"What are you going to do?"

"I think it's time for a family reunion."

"A family reunion?" Belinda Carlen questioned. "Oliver, what aren't you telling me?"

"We—Felicity and I—have reason to believe that my father's dalliance with Isabel Rochev resulted in a child."

Belinda exhaled. She opened her mouth to speak, thought better of vocalizing her initial reaction, and instead said, "That was not something I expected to hear."

"His name is Kirill. He's being raised by Isabel's adoptive parents as their own."

"That certainly complicates matters." Belinda clicked her tongue repeatedly, a nervous tick that she had tried for years to abate.

Oliver's stomach churned. "That's putting it mildly."

"The way I see it," Belinda began, "we have several options available to us.

There's the modified come-to-Jesus method, in which you, Oliver, confess your shortcomings, admit that you had a brief relationship with Ms. Rochev during a breakup with Felicity, but assure the stockholders that you've worked through your issues. We'd, of course, need Felicity to stand by her man like a country song."

It's time to arrange a family reunion.

"There's the bait-and-switch method, in which we acknowledge the existence of the photograph but claim it was Photoshopped and the woman in the picture is actually Ms. Smoak." Belinda threw a glance at Felicity who said nothing. "I've never been more grateful for a fake fiancée in my entire professional life. Though usually it's been closeted gay men…"

"I've asked enough of Felicity," Oliver interjected. "I won't ask her to pretend that."

"Just as well. I'm not sure which of the two is more embarrassing, though certain 'celebrities' have certainly made sex tapes a cottage industry. You said you wanted to take the offensive. A woman like Isabel Rochev must have enemies, present company excluded. Given enough time, I should be able to find something to discredit her."

Oliver shook his head. "Time is one thing we don't seem to have, and Isabel has done an admirable job of whitewashing her background. Kirill may be our shot at neutralizing Isabel."

"Yes," Belinda replied, considering Oliver's line of thought. "That has potential to either work marvelously or marvelously backfire."

It's time to arrange a family reunion.

"What do you think, Felicity?" Oliver asked the uncharacteristically quiet blonde. "Felicity?"

Oliver's question shook her from her preoccupied thoughts. Felicity swallowed hard and tried to keep her voice steady. "Belinda, I need to speak with Oliver please. Alone."

"That's quite all right. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to attempt to beat water out of stones." With that, the older woman left the office.
Oliver's eyes fell on Felicity who sat stiffly, her normally smiling countenance marred by disappointment. "Don't," he warned her.

A huff of disbelief escaped her.

"Come on. Don't give me that look," Oliver reiterated.

"Oh, I'm going to give you the look," she replied as she stood and walked around the desk to face him. "Kirill is a twelve-year-old boy who may not even know that Isabel is his mother. You can't bring him into this."

"I'm banking on him not knowing."

"Last night you told me you would protect him, that you wouldn't let him become a pawn in this tug-of-war between you and Isabel."

"And I meant what I said," Oliver replied with measured words.

"So long as it's convenient?" she shot back.

"We are talking about my family's company! This place is my father's legacy, his life's work is in the brick and mortar and steel, and it's this company that makes it possible for us to do our night job!"

Felicity visibly flinched at Oliver's raised voice. He forced himself to calm. "I'm not going to let Isabel jeopardize that."

"You are so wrong! This...place...isn't your father's legacy. You are. You. Thea. And a little boy who has absolutely no idea of his role in any of it." She crossed her arms, hugging her own body. It was a protective stance he had seen her take only a handful of times, and it made her look even tinier than she already was. Did she feel as though she had to protect herself from him?

"Don't compound a mistake with another mistake," she entreated.

Oliver's eyes fell on the manila folder that, beneath its cover, housed the photographic evidence of his tryst with Isabel. His stomach twisted. "Sometimes I don't have the luxury of being a nice guy. I don't want to pull Kirill into any of this, but I need Isabel to believe that I will."

"Mutually assured destruction? She destroys your reputation and you destroy her family? Your family." She took a deep breath. "You always have a choice." Her chin trembled, and even through the glasses she wore, he could see the tears welling in her eyes. "I need some air."

"Felicity."

She shook her head. "Not now. You have a meeting at 9:00 with Julian Edenmiel from Applied Sciences. He's bringing the prototype of the Tempewrist." With that, she exited his office and headed past her reception area and on down the hall, passing Digg along the way.

Diggle strode into Oliver's office. "What was that about?"

"No offense, but you look awful."

Felicity turned from the Keurig in the break room at the sound of Casper van Pels's voice. Lovely. She couldn't even get a cup of coffee without running into a Rochev crony. She studied the tall, pasty young man's face, and did not see the gloating that she was expecting. "Right. Why would anyone take offense to that?"
"I'm sorry. That was a terrible thing to say. Is there something I can do?"

Felicity tilted her head questioningly. "Isabel let you off the leash long enough to show concern for someone other than her?"

At that, Casper's thin lips cracked a smile. "Today is a good day. Ms. Rochev was unexpectedly called out of town, which means today I get to breathe."

How convenient. Drop a bomb. Step back and let the dust settle. Perfect way to let Oliver stew. "She didn't mention anything to Oliver."

Casper colored slightly. "Sorry about that. I am supposed to contact Mr. Queen's office at…," he looked at his wristwatch, "9:15 a.m. to make notification."

Felicity managed a wry smile, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Consider the office notified."

"I know what you're thinking," Casper began.

"I'm thinking a lot of things. It's kind of a Ninja Blender up here. You'll have to be more specific."

"You're thinking that you should sound the alarm to Mr. Queen that Ms. Rochev is working on deals without his knowledge."

She's working on deals, all right. Photographic. Pornographic. Potentially seismographic. "If we're being honest with one another, that scenario isn't all that far-fetched."

"Between you and me, I don't think Ms. Rochev's absence is QC related. I took the call early. The man had a deep voice and stunning accent. Australian, if I had to guess. I could listen to that all day. And it sounded as though their dealings with one another are of a personal nature."

"I was starting to think she was more machine than woman."

"She can be quite animated when she lets down her guard," Casper assured Felicity. "But I can see how she may come across as mechanical."

"And just like that she was gone?" Felicity asked, trying to sound nonchalant. "That doesn't sound like Isabel."

"So maybe Ms. Rochev is human after all," Casper mused.

"It's the power of an accent. I swear I once bought a vacuum cleaner because the spokesman had an accent that could melt the M&Ms in my hand. And I really, really hate vacuuming."

"Australian accents are sexy."

"You know, Queen Consolidated has an office in Sydney."

"Dare to dream, right? I'll never see it. Personal assistants are a dime a dozen as Ms. Rochev reminds me every opportunity she gets. Though I guess you aren't exactly a dime a dozen to Mr. Queen," he replied eyeing her engagement ring. "Of course, Ms. Rochev's not really my type."

"Too grrr?"

"Too girl."

"There is that. Casper, I think we can help each other."
"I screwed up with Felicity."

Diggle shook his head, his lips pressed in a tight line as Oliver finished filling him in on the photo and subsequent disagreement over how to handle it. "Somehow I thought it would take longer."

"You give me too much credit," Oliver replied morosely. "I don't regret going to Russia, backing you up, but where Isabel is concerned, I knew better. I knew she didn't have my best interests at heart and still…I…" He swiped his hand over his face. "I hurt Felicity then. I hurt her just now. I hurt the people I care about. That's what I do. Maybe I should just accept that I'm not meant to have more than my mission."

"So that's it? You're just going to feel sorry for yourself rather than fight for what you want?"

"I'm not the nice guy, and that's what…a nice guy is what Felicity deserves. What I want is for her to be happy."

"Then we agree on something. She does deserve a nice guy, but for some reason she wants you. Look, Oliver, for more than a year, I've watched the two of you banter."

Oliver interrupted, "Did you really just use the word banter?"

"Flirt. Have eye sex. Whatever you want to call it. I've seen you make her laugh. And I've watched her put her foot in her mouth to the point of it being painful. And I've seen you smile. Genuinely. Not that fake smile you wear when you're being a self-absorbed…"

"I get it."

"I've seen you two go toe-to-toe. She's one of the few people who gets through that thick skull of yours."

"This was different. She looked…defeated. It isn't that I want to go out of my way to hurt Kirill, to blow apart his childhood. He's a kid, my…my half-brother. But if Isabel thinks I will, I can use that."

"I think you've lost sight of the bigger picture."

"No, I haven't. I can't approach situations like this one with Isabel with a 'we'll hug it out' mentality. Our objective is to do whatever it takes to save this city from the corruption that plagues it. That means we secure Queen Consolidated so we have the means to effect change."

"And to hell with whomever gets hurt in the process?"

"Do you think I wanted to put Felicity in this position?"

"I won't even pretend to understand what goes through your mind where she's concerned. You push her away, pull her to you. You brought her into this 'engagement' without discussing it with her first —real dick move, by the way—using the fact she cares about you and our cause against her. Sometimes you forget you're dealing with people—people with real feelings, who aren't chess pieces to be moved around. When you wear that hood, you stop seeing people. You see objectives. Nameless, faceless objectives. I understand that better than you know. Right now, you might be dressed like a," Diggle eyed yesterday's suit, "a rumpled version of Oliver Queen, CEO, but you're still wearing that hood. But you've got to decide. What kind of man are you going to be?"

When Oliver caught up with Felicity a few minutes later, he found her in the ladies' room lounge
area, tablet in hand.

She looked up when she saw him come in and adjusted her glasses. "How’d you find me?"

"The tracking app on your phone."

"If not for what we do after hours, I might find that more than mildly disturbing, but since you aren't carrying a lacrosse stick, I'll let it go."

"You've got to tell me that story sometime."

"Sometime," she replied rhetorically but didn't elaborate. "I'm in a bathroom. Did you consider that maybe I was busy?"

"That would have been awkward," Oliver acknowledged.

At that, Felicity's lips quirked. "You did see the sign on the door, right? Ladies."

"The sign on the side of the building trumps the sign on the door," he replied with a smile, hoping to defuse the tension with charm. She merely stared at him, reminding him that his patented Ollie-of-yesteryear moves had little effect on her. "Is the coast clear?"

"We're the only ones in here," Felicity confirmed.

"Good," he replied, turning and locking the anterior door. She huffed slightly when she saw that.

"Being here brings back memories. Last time we were in here, I proposed. Sort of. I think you called it the proposal that every woman dreams about." He shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Said no woman, ever." She tilted her head. "And then you offered to take me out for tacos."

He couldn't help the self-effacing smile that crept on his lips, despite the heaviness he felt. "I'll never live that down."

"I still stand by my premise that you can't order a fiancée like you order a taco. Unless your name is on the side of the building, evidently."

He sat next to her on the couch. "I'm sorry."

"I know. Believe me, I know. I'm trying really hard here to be a good sport, but I was never good with team sports."

"Felicity, you're the glue that holds our team together."

"No pressure or anything."

"I don't mean to pressure you. That's not what I want to do."

The earnestness of his voice made her heart clench. This wasn't what she wanted, to make Oliver feel worse than he already did. "You should be preparing for your meeting with Mr. Edenmiel, not in here coddling me."

"There's nothing more important right now than you."

"Don't. Please don't. I need my anger, Oliver. I need it so I can fix this. I need to fix this."
He shook his head. "It's not your job to fix this situation with Isabel. It's mine."

"But you said it yourself. We're a team."

"We are," he agreed. "In the beginning, I was going to do everything by myself. Now I—I depend on you more than is fair. I want to be a man that you can look at with admiration and trust, someone you can depend on, but I've not done a good job being that man. I'm sorry that what I did in Russia keeps coming back to hurt you. But even more than that, I'm sorry that I let myself lose sight of why we do what we do."

"Well, for a guy who's spent as much time as you have in a forest…"

"I should know what trees look like." He reached over and took her hand, his thumb brushing over her knuckles. "Sometimes I have to be reminded."

She took a deep breath. "We'll get through whatever Isabel or anyone else throws our way."

"But you are really upset with me, and I need to make this better. Felicity, you're the last person in the world I want to disappoint, and I think that's all I do."

"Not everything's about you." She paused and her eyes automatically widened in horror. "That sounded awful. I didn't mean that in a grrrr way. Just that I have a few issues of my own to work out, and with you talking about a family reunion, I may have been projecting a bit."

"What's going on? Maybe I can help."

She shook her head, as though trying to snap out of it. "It's over and done with. It just hits me sometimes, and when you were talking about using Kirill to get to Isabel…"

"I told you I wouldn't," Oliver interjected.

"I know what you said, but it just looked like when push was coming to shove…You've noticed that I don't talk about my family all that much, but I'm going to give you a crash course." She took a deep breath. "I was fifteen when I found out that Ben Smoak isn't my biological father."

Oliver's brows furrowed as he took in this new information about Felicity.

"My mom and dad got married when I was two, and he adopted me. I was too young to remember a time before him, and he's…a wonderful dad. He never made me feel like I wasn't his child, but the way I found out…"

"What happened?"

"Gabe and I had been arguing off and on all day. You know, regular brother/sister stuff. I annoyed him. He annoyed me. It was a rite of passage. One Saturday, I had a science project I preferred to work on, but I had to go to his soccer tournament instead. I complained. Loudly. Shocking, I know. And when his mom didn't show, I said something about her being a flake for missing his soccer game, which I really shouldn't have done, and he basically told me that at least he had a dad. Mine couldn't be bothered to stick around. As soon as he said it, he tried to backtrack, but I dragged the cat the rest of the way out of the bag. Gabe was older than me. He remembered what I couldn't."

"Felicity…"

"I'd had no idea. I mean, I knew my parents didn't get married until after I'd come along. My mom always seemed embarrassed about that, but in retrospect, I think she was worried I would start asking
questions and piece it all together. I knew I didn't really look like my dad, but I'd never even imagined…and that little bit of news sent me into a tailspin that in some ways, I don't think I've ever fully come out of. Why didn't my biological dad stick around? I thought maybe he didn't know about me, but when I started to ask questions…" her voice trailed off. "I'm a big believer in honesty, which I know seems counterintuitive considering our night job…and the fact the world thinks we're getting married when we're not. But in this case, the ends don't justify the means. If Kirill doesn't know, it's not right to tell him. Not to hurt Isabel. He'd be the one hurt, and you'd lose any chance of getting to know him in the future."

"You're right. I'll find another way."

"Thank you." The invisible weight on her shoulders seemed to lift.

"Did you ever try to find him, your biological father?"

Felicity cleared her throat. "You're going to be late for your meeting."

With that, Oliver knew the topic was off limits—for now. "I have a reputation to uphold."

"I thought you were trying on a new reputation."

"Point taken." He stood and straightened his suit jacket.

"And now I think it's time you try on a new suit. Or, you know, one that isn't yesterday's."

He hesitated at the door. "Are we…are we okay?"

"We will be—as soon as you get to your meeting on time. Because let's face it: an executive assistant only looks as good as her boss."

"You definitely make me look better than what I am. You coming?"

"Not yet. I'm following a lead," she replied holding up her tablet.

"In the restroom?"

"A girl used to be able to get some privacy in here. Maybe it's a wild goose chase. Maybe it's not. I'll know more soon."

"That's it?" Felicity asked an hour later as Oliver secured a sleek bracelet around her wrist. They were back in his office, he had changed into a fresh suit, and the manila folder was out of sight, if not out of mind.

His calloused fingertips lingered on the soft skin of her inner wrist momentarily before sliding away. "Looks more like a peace offering than something Applied Sciences would have put together, but this is it."

"How does it work?"

"It's working now, activates automatically. Theoretically. It should be alternately giving you pulses of heat or cold depending on what your body needs."

She looked at the bracelet with skepticism. "I don't actually feel it doing anything other than, you know, accessorizing me."
"Maybe you need something to react to." He closed the distance between them, his chest to her back, and leaned down to hum in her ear, "Truth or dare."

"Oliver."

"Humor me. Truth or dare."

"Truth."

She waited for him to ask her a question; instead, he remained silent. But she was all too conscious of him. With one hand, he trailed along the smooth lines of her abdomen, securing her against him. She sighed as she felt her body meld against his. He was tantalizingly male, hard planes and controlled strength. Awareness surged through her, as it always did when she was near him.

With his other hand, Oliver carefully pulled the ponytail holder from her hair, freeing it to fall in cascading waves of gold. He combed through it with his fingers, savoring the warmth of her and the tiny murmurs that escaped from her throat as he began massaging her scalp.

"The truth is the other morning when I came out of the shower and saw you pulling on your stockings, this was what I wanted. I wanted to bury my hands in your hair. I've wanted to do that so many times."

Felicity remembered the heated look and the way the towel he wore tented. "Is that all you wanted?"

"No," he replied as he brushed his lips against the curve of her neck. "I wanted to bury myself in your body."

She trembled even as her heart sped.

"I want you, Felicity. Does that bother you?"

"No…I mean, yes," she stammered. "What do you mean bother? There's bother, as in annoy. And then there's bother."

He gently turned her body, but kept her close.

So close.

Not close enough.

He cupped her face, his eyes intent on hers. She could feel his desire for her pressed against her belly. Her body felt warm, feverish even. And then suddenly she felt a cool pulse on her wrist.

"Oh," she squeaked looking down at her wrist. "I think it works just fine." And she suddenly became acutely aware of their surroundings and lack of privacy. It was amazing, really, how Oliver could make her forget everything. Too bad there wasn't some way to bottle that intangibility of his. It was better than any psychotropic drug, or so she imagined. "People in glass offices shouldn't…"

Felicity stepped back, caught sight of the pilfered hair elastic, and quickly smoothed her hair back into its sleek ponytail. "This bracelet could be the start of an absolute game changer."

Oliver wiped his hand across his face, his jaw clenched tightly as he fought to get his own body under control. "That's what I'm counting on." He took a deep breath and added, "Here's an interesting statistic."

"Hmm."
"What?"

"An interesting statistic. You're starting to sound very much like a CEO, Mr. Queen."

"Maybe it's time I start to take my role in this company more seriously. If I had, we wouldn't be in this position to start with."

"If we want to get technical about it, I'd say it has more to do with your moth—you know what? I'm all ears."

"In 2007, 87 percent of households in the U.S. used air conditioning. That's compared to roughly 11 percent of households in Brazil and only 2 percent in India. By 2025, booming nations are projected to account for one billion new customers for air conditioning worldwide. We're poised to use a devastating amount of energy to keep homes and offices comfortable, but why not just heat and cool our bodies instead? It's more practical."

"And as an added bonus, no more fighting over the thermostat in the lair."

"With the right backing, this could catapult QC not just into a new direction with applied technologies, but we could literally change the way the world uses its resources. And the best part is we're going to beat Isabel through smart business, not through her tactics."

"Speaking of...so this lead I was chasing down...I should back up a little bit. I ran into Casper van Pels. You know, Isabel's assistant. He mentioned to me that she was called out of town unexpectedly. It seemed personal to Casper, but who really knows. I mean, if it was personal, why not call her cell phone rather than an office line? But that made me curious. With as busy as Isabel must be, between housebreaking all her flying monkeys, corporate intrigue, and her affinity for amateur photography, who or what could make her drop everything?"

"And?"

"So I used a..." she began to explain the technical process but thought better of it, "used some magic of my own and accessed the phone records from Isabel's office. As best as I can tell time wise, she received a call from Spondeo Incorporated's switchboard. Not really a household name, but then I dug some more, and an actual name popped up. Edward Fyers."

"What?"

"He's the CEO of Spondeo. Not exactly a Fortune 500. Looks more like a dummy corporation, actually."

"That's impossible."

"Who is Edward Fyers? I feel like I should know that name." She was met with silence. "Oliver?"

But he looked lost in his own remembrances, a haunted expression that Felicity had seen him wear all too often. Finally, he ground out, "Fyers was on the island. The first man I ever killed with an arrow."

"Oh." She swallowed hard. "And you're sure he's...dead?"

"Quite."

"Do you believe in coincidence?" she asked.
Oliver's steely gaze was his only response.

"Yeah. I didn't think so."
Well, this chapter is massive. Crazy long. I probably could (maybe should?) have split it into a couple of chapters, but left it in one piece. I guess this is where reading stamina comes into play. LOL.

Anyhow, I'm nervous and excited about this chapter. I'd love to hear your thoughts if you so choose to review.

Part Twelve: "One Big Exercise in Murphy's Law"

"So we knew he wasn't on the island alone," Felicity began conversationally.

Diggle stood over Felicity's shoulder at her desk as she scrolled through the information she had accumulated on Spondeo Incorporated, all of which amounted to very little.

"I mean, he obviously didn't stab himself. Shoot himself. Burn himself. Tattoo himself. Which, when you think about it, Lian Yu doesn't really seem like it would have tattoo parlors."

"Felicity." As Diggle spoke her name, it held a warning and something more.

"Right. You know all about this Edward Fyers. I thought I was fine with not knowing, but when I see him lose himself in those years again, I'm...I'm not. I don't want you to violate Oliver's trust, but is there anything you can tell me?"

"Yeah. Fyers got what he deserved."

"That I never doubted. Even when Oliver was... you knowing the bad guys... he always had a code. Like Dexter. Only more 'you have failed this city' and less sociopath." She looked toward Oliver's office and could see from his body language that he was having a difficult time focusing on his 10:30 meeting with Mr. Westley. Though from the looks of the older man's animation as he spoke, she doubted Mr. Westley noticed Oliver's lack of attention.

"Hey. He'll be okay," Diggle assured her.

Felicity absently chewed on her bottom lip. "His day has just kind of sucked."

Diggle exhaled as he thought of what must be going through her mind. Of all the men Felicity could have chosen to care about, she picked the one who was undoubtedly the most complex of all.

"Yours, too, I take it."

"I'm fine, John. I should be in there running interference or something."

"You're doing what Oliver needs you to be doing."

The opening of Oliver's office door and the subsequent approach of Mr. Westley (and his lopsided toupee) toward Felicity's desk had her quickly pressing a button that restored the computer screen to something that looked far more appropriate for an executive assistant.
Congratulations again on your engagement, Ms. Smoak," the older man smiled warmly. "You're a lucky man, Mr. Queen."

Felicity smiled in response. "Thank you, Mr. Westley."

"The luckiest," Oliver replied, forcing a smile. As soon as Westley left on the executive elevator, Oliver turned to the duo, smile replaced by deep lines between his brows. "What do you have?"

Felicity restored the screen on her monitor. "Spondeo Incorporated was established in October 2012."

"The same month I returned."

"It's supposedly a venture capital firm, but I haven't found too many ventures or much capital for that matter."

"And Fyers?" Oliver asked.

"Is listed as the CEO, but he's a ghost." She cringed slightly. "Sorry. Poor choice of words. His paper trail didn't exist before October 2012. Even now it's spotty at best."

"So who is Isabel with? Can you track her location?"

"Just a…" Felicity's fingers flew over the keys of the computer. "Still trying to work my way through the security protocols. Luckily, Isabel's wireless provider uses CDMA with an RC4 encryption. That firewall's definitely not Smoak-proof. Huh. That sounded better in my head." With a few more clicks on the keyboard, she announced, "Okay. I got a ping on Isabel's phone. Looks like she's in…Coast City." Tapped into the phone's GPS, Felicity added, "More specifically, a warehouse in the wharf district."

Oliver loosened his tie. "Cancel my appointments for the rest of the day."

He began to walk toward the elevator, but Digg extended his hand and stilled Oliver's movements. "Hang on. We don't know what you're walking into."

"Diggle, there were two other people who knew Fyers was on the island. They're both dead. And now Fyers's name comes up connected with Isabel? I can't leave this alone."

Felicity stood. "John's right. You need to play this cool. Business as usual."

"Business as usual?" Oliver scoffed. "Isabel makes a play for my family's company. I think we've finally found a way that we might come out on top—and even that's still a long shot—and all of it may depend on a professional reputation that I don't have and a personal one that's about to be skewered if she releases those photos. And now she's connected to the island of all things?"

"She wants you to react, to make a mistake," Digg reasoned.

Oliver smiled humorlessly. "I've already crossed the point of no return there."

Felicity stood next to Diggle, impeding Oliver's path. "Enough. We have to prioritize. I get that you want to confront Isabel and demand answers. She owes them, but there will be time for you to go after Isabel when your company is secure. That means that for the rest of the day, you do your job as Oliver Queen, CEO. Keep getting the pieces of this deal in order and get ready to make the sales pitch of your life. And tonight, you will put on a happy face and pretend I'm amazing when we go to Mr. McMartin's party to make that pitch."
"I won't have to pretend," he replied quietly, his eyes seeking hers.

They held each other's gaze until Digg cleared his throat. "Look, I'll go to Coast City. See what I can see," he suggested. "It's the best solution. We get more than eye in the sky, and you do what you need to do here."

With pursed lips, Oliver nodded his assent.

"Keep a line open?" Felicity asked.

"Will do," Digg replied buttoning his suit jacket. "Send me those coordinates?"

"Will do," Felicity echoed.

Digg shot Felicity a 'better you than me' look before disappearing into the executive elevator.

With clenched fists, Oliver turned away from Felicity. "Nothing good ever came from that island."

Instinctively, she reached out, resting her hand on his forearm before trying to relax away his tension as she slid her hand downward, urging his tightened fingers apart. "That's not true. You did."

Oliver exhaled as he found himself intuitively turning toward her. "Felicity, why are you here?"

She tilted her head ever so slightly. "I work here."

He pressed his lips tightly together, and shook his head. "That's not what I meant."

"I know what you meant. I just think it's time for this pity party train to derail," she reached up and straightened his tie. "So here's what's going to happen. You are going to take me out to lunch the way a dutiful fiancé should. No tacos," she stipulated. "And we will let the photogs fuss over us and shout inappropriate questions about our reproductive plans all with smiles plastered on our faces."

She patted his chest. "Live the dream, Oliver."

"You have no idea how I wish it were that simple, but…"

"No buts. At the risk of sounding bossy—oh, that's not politically correct according to the last memo HR sent out. Well, they didn't actually use the words politically correct because that's not really politically correct anymore either. Gender sensitive, I think, is the preferred term. So ignore bossy. Let's try officious. Yes, officious sounds better. At the risk of sounding officious…”

But she never had the opportunity to finish her sentence because Oliver's lips were suddenly against hers, breathing her every breath. Hunggrily, he kissed her, tasted her, savored her, overwhelmed her. She felt desperation coil in his kiss, as though he was in a free fall without a safety line. Wrapping her arms around him, she was determined to catch him from that free fall, even if he might pull her over the edge with him. No, she wasn't a fan of heights, but this—this she could get used to.

*How had she gone twenty-five years without kisses like his?*

The sudden light pulse of cool air on her wrist elicited a giggle.

"If I'm making you laugh, I'm doing this wrong," he murmured against her lips.

"You're doing this very…" she punctuated her *very* with a kiss, "very…right. The Tempewrist works really well, by the way."

"Should make the sales pitch easier," he replied, which drew a smile from her. He leaned his
forehead down against hers, reluctant to fully let her go.

"A kiss is one way to get me to stop talking."

"Very effective," he agreed.

"Yes. Not that I'm complaining per se, but did you just kiss me to get me to shut up?"

"I kissed you because you are so damned kissable." His lips lingered near hers, though he didn't make contact again. "And if not now, then when?"

"We aren't on borrowed time," she whispered.

But Oliver's silence was deafening. He stepped back, and Felicity found herself huffing in disappointment—until she realized they weren't alone. Thea Queen tossed her hair lightly over her shoulder, her presence filling the office reception area, despite her small stature. Yep, muddied senses and glass offices so didn't mix.

"I didn't trust Oliver to set up an introduction. Looks like I was right to come in on my own."

"I haven't been avoiding you, Speedy," Oliver greeted his sister with a quick peck on the top of her head. "It's just been hectic."

"Right," she replied patting his arm. "Because if you were avoiding me, that would suggest you're hiding something. And from the fit of that dress," Thea commented, throwing Felicity a glance, "you're not hiding a baby bump."

"I'm just going to—" Felicity pointed in a non-distinct direction.

The brunette shook her head ruefully. "Wait. I'm sorry. I'm not putting my best foot forward. I'm Thea."

"I know." Felicity squeezed her eyes shut, silently cursing herself. "That you're Thea, I mean. Not that whole thing about not putting your best foot forward. Your feet are fine. Fabulous shoes, by the way. Jimmy Choo?"

Oliver moved to Felicity's side and slid his arm around her waist. "This is Felicity."

"Right. I'm Felicity. Which Oliver just said." She cringed slightly. "We met once before, more in passing. Walter's hospital room. Sort of an awkward moment. A bit like now actually."

Thea looked from Felicity to Oliver, incredulity written all over her face.

"Felicity and I were about to grab some lunch," Oliver commented.

"Funny. When I walked in, I thought you were about to grab her tonsils," Thea smirked.

"Care to join us?" Felicity asked. "For lunch," she quickly clarified.

Thea arched an eyebrow. "I wouldn't miss this for the world."

As the three settled in the back of the town car, Felicity found herself fidgeting with her thumbnail. Oliver reached over from beside her, clasping her hand in his before pressing a soft kiss to her temple. This was what a normal couple would do, right? But every touch from him still sent her senses into overdrive.
And then there was the part of her that wondered whether that tenderness was for Thea's benefit and if Oliver was pitching a different type of sale.

She needed a glass of wine. Or three.

Thea, who sat across from the duo, watched the silent interaction. "So I've been meaning to ask. How did Mom take the, ahem, good news?"

"I should warn you in case this goes public. You may hear about an engagement."

Moira looked at her son questioningly and swallowed hard. "Walter's engaged?"

"No. Not Walter." He watched as relief washed over her features. "Reports may emerge that I'm engaged."

The relief was short-lived.

"And would these reports be correct?"

Oliver looked at her and pursed his lips together, saying nothing.

"I wasn't aware you are seeing anyone exclusively," she continued.

"Felicity Smoak is the name that might come up."

Moira seemed to digest the name. "That name is familiar."

"Felicity worked with Walter at QC. She helped me with a few computer issues, and we became friends. Now she and I work together. She was at the hospital after Walter's rescue."

"Yes, the young woman who brought flowers." Moira tilted her head. "What are you doing, Oliver?"

"If you are asked, I need you to make supportive statements. Make clear that Felicity is a trusted friend, a person of integrity. You're happy and you approve."

"I'm not happy, and I don't approve. I don't know anything about this girl, and I don't know with what you've become embroiled." At Oliver's exasperated look, she added, "Wipe that look from your face. You've been taking lessons from your sister. You have told me there might be reports of an engagement, not that you are actually engaged."

"Felicity is my friend. She's quirky and smart, compassionate and brave. She's putting her life on hold to help me, to help our family's company."

"And attractive, as I recall. You care about her."

"She's..." Oliver searched for the right word, "supportive."

"What choice does she have? If she pisses you off, she can't nag you from Iron Heights," Thea huffed as she leaned back in the seat. "I would've loved to be a fly on the wall when she met you. I bet you never thought you'd be meeting your future mother-in-law in prison."

"Security at the prison has been tight, and our engagement is recent," Oliver began.

"So we've actually only met in passing," Felicity explained.

"Right. Walter's hospital room. Since you've kind of come out of nowhere and my mom can't
really go anywhere…"

And there it was.

Thea Queen was such a dynamo, it was easy to forget that she wasn't much more than a kid who had watched her known world crumble and morph more than once. And now this fake engagement tugged at whatever small amount of stability her house of cards rested upon.

Felicity’s heart dropped.

Oliver needed to tell her the truth. There were so many truths he couldn't tell his little sister, couldn't burden her with. But this one? This one, he could. Wouldn't that ease some of Thea's uncertainty with her role in her brother's life? So why didn't he?

"Mom's going to be fine," Oliver assured his sister. "You know that, right?"

"What I know is that she can't really take the moral higher ground when it comes to time spent in jail anymore. Domestic terrorism charges make driving under the influence of Vertigo seem kind of trivial." Thea eyed Felicity. "The Queen family's reputation isn't exactly what it used to be. Are you sure you know what you're in for?"

"I've always been more of a character girl myself," Felicity replied.

"Good thing she didn't know you a few years ago," Thea teased her brother.

It was a typical repartee between the two of them, but Oliver found himself falling back into protective brother stance rather than playing the role of the affronted brother. "Thea, did somebody say something to you?"

"Please. Somebody's always saying something. In one ear and out the other."

"I'm sorry. I should've been there."

"No. I like Greek food. Actually, I know that restaurant. Can you stomach Greek food again?" she asked Oliver when she saw his jaw tighten.

"Whatever you want is fine."

It wasn't the food that Oliver had a difficult time stomaching. It was the thought of going back to the restaurant where Felicity was known by name because she and the restaurant owners' son had some sort of understanding.

It was irrational for him to be jealous, to want to string up every man who had ever looked at her sideways, let alone touched her. But the thought of another man coming near her filled Oliver with a pang of possessiveness that twisted in his gut.

She was his.
Except she wasn't.

What were they exactly? Friends. Partners. Not quite lovers on the precipice of more.

More.

Was it even fair to want more? Hell no, but he still wanted her. Would his violence swallow her gentleness, his darkness drown her innocence?

Sensing his darkening mood, she pressed a tiny kiss to his jaw and whispered, "Live the dream." It was a gentle reminder to play his role as dutiful fiancé, but he wanted nothing more than to live the dream, transform it into reality.

Felicity rested her head on his shoulder but looked out the window, watching the traffic and the people on the sidewalks. Oliver couldn't help but watch her. She was stunning. Porcelain smoothness. Soft curves and underlying strength. Her skirt was modest when she stood, but when she sat—as she did next to him on the plush leather seats—it revealed those shapely legs. He could see the hint of the band of lace that held her stockings in place on her thighs. How easy it would be to slide his fingers under the edge of that lace, to draw her to him. How he wanted those legs wrapped around his waist, those curves under his hands only, her silkiness against his roughness.

Yes, he could easily live this dream. A life with Felicity. A real one, not this dog and pony show they were putting on for others' benefits. Mornings spent in bed, laughing, talking, making love. Working with her side by side. At the end of the day, feeling the warm give of her body and the tiny puffs of air that escaped from her as she slept. And maybe, someday, her belly would swell with a child they created together, who would grow up to be brilliant and decent and talkative—just like his or her mother.

"Walter likes you, by the way," Thea began, pulling Oliver from his thoughts.

"Oh, that's a relief," Felicity replied with a tense laugh as she lifted her head and turned to Thea. "With the whole British upper lip thing, it's sometimes kind of hard to tell."

"It can be intimidating," Thea agreed. "I remember one time he caught me sneaking in after curfew," she looked to her brother. "No judgment from you," she quickly warned. "And he lifted his chin ever so slightly and said, 'I'm very disappointed in you.'"

Felicity smiled at Thea's imitation of Walter's British accent.

"It actually bothered me," Thea admitted. "Not that I told him that. I have my own version of the stiff upper lip."

"Involving eye rolling and sarcasm?" Oliver teased.

"I make it work," Thea replied with a shrug. "But Felicity, Walter says you are smart, honest, and one of the reasons he came back to us."

Oliver's thumb brushed against the palm of Felicity's hand, moving back and forth in rhythm. Her bright pink lips parted at his motion. "She is all those things."

"In full disclosure, I also Googled you," Thea informed her.

"Eh. I've done that before."

"You Googled yourself?" Oliver asked.
"In recent days, it's been kind of hard not to. Curiosity. Cat. Wait." She shook her head slightly. "Wrong cliché."

"What did you find out?" Oliver asked, genuinely curious himself.

"The usual. I'm a golddigging whore with dark roots but an excellent GPA. Two out of three for accuracy." Felicity looked to Thea. "What did you find out?"

"Like you said," Thea replied with a grin. "There was one other thing that definitely wasn't like the others, buried, like ten pages in. SCPD brought you in for questioning once."

"Oh that. I was a material witness. Good times."

"They thought you were helping the Hood," Thea pressed.

"The Arrow," Felicity corrected Thea automatically, then froze. She willed herself not to look at Oliver.

"Come again?"

"I think that's his preferred name. I mean, not that I really know personally because Oliver keeps me so busy, I don't have time to do anything for anyone but him. At Queen Consolidated, that is. I'm way too vanilla for vigilantism. I don't like pointy things."

"But obviously not too vanilla for my brother."

Oliver coughed slightly; Thea smiled sweetly.

The car came to a stop. Reggie, the shiny-headed, broad-chested, pistol-packing driver, came around the back and opened the door after visually assessing their surroundings for any security threats. Felicity noted Oliver, also, was scanning their whereabouts.

The three entered the small mom-and-pop restaurant, the scent of authentic Greek cuisine wafting through the air.

"You're coming on a little strong," Oliver cautioned his sister, his voice low, as the hostess greeted Felicity by name. The young hostess began to lead the three to a booth, but Oliver gently tugged at Thea's arm, delaying her. "I'm serious. Be nice."

"Please. I'm a teddy bear."

"With sharp claws."

"I love you, but when it comes to women, you have no sense at all. Believe me, I'm doing you and her a favor."

"What you're doing is making her uncomfortable."

"If she can't handle me, how is she going to handle the scrutiny of everyone else? Being a Queen is a full time job in and of itself," Thea reasoned. "Come on. I'm famished."

Be yourself. Always be yourself, unless you can be a unicorn. Since you can't be a unicorn today, be yourself. Be yourself.

"So I heard you two met at QC." Thea spoke conversationally as she sat across from Oliver and
Felicity in a booth. Appetizers were spread before them on the table, but Felicity's appetite diminished the longer she spent under the microscope of the younger Queen.

Huh. She'd have to remember the Thea Queen diet plan.

"Oliver spilled a latte on his computer. I used to work in IT, so…"

"She came to my rescue," Oliver finished.

"That was rather clumsy of you, Ollie," Thea replied, her eyes narrowing. "And doesn't sound like you at all."

"You're right," Oliver responded. "That's not quite how it happened."

Felicity looked at Oliver in surprise. There was no way he was about to divulge the real reason he'd shown up in her office that first day, so what was he up to?

"I may have spilled the latte on the computer to give myself an excuse to meet a pretty girl."

It was a slick, Ollie-of-yesteryear answer. Felicity immediately stiffened, while Thea seemed satisfied, that story ringing far more true in her ears.

Of course it would. Because who would really believe that the same pampered boy who left Starling City on a yacht would return a man who would bring a bullet-riddled laptop to a woman, throw in some charm as currency, and expect her to buy his lies hook, line, and sinker?

Felicity's eyes narrowed as she shifted in the booth where she sat next to Oliver. "Really?" she smiled sweetly but blinked rapidly. "Because I never took you for the type of guy who had to make excuses to meet women."

His fingertips traced her shoulder in a leisurely pattern. "But you are different." He looked at Felicity intently; enough to make her cheeks redden. "You wouldn't have given me the time of day."

If she didn't know better, that would've convinced her. "Yes, it's a shame you're so ugly," she deadpanned.

"Or that his name is on the side of the building where you work," Thea interjected.

Her passive-aggressive comment earned a hissed, "Speedy!" from Oliver.

"I'm just saying."

"No, Oliver. It's all right." Felicity patted his thigh. Wow. Muscular. Breathe. "Thea, I know you don't have any reason to trust me. I'm just this stranger who has pretty much dropped into the middle of your brother's life. And I know it seems sudden." A week ago, she and Oliver were barely on speaking terms. Now they were blurring the lines of whatever their arrangement was. "Oh, I totally get the whole sudden thing. So it's okay that you don't trust me yet. Trust is earned and comes with time."

"Fair enough," Thea nodded. "And I will try to be open minded. For the record, I don't think a person's worth is based off how much money he or she has. Like you said earlier, it's about character. It's just that you two have, up until a few days ago, done a really good job of keeping your relationship under wraps. I literally had no idea you existed." She looked at Oliver. "All I knew is you were gone. A lot."
"You've been gone a lot, too," Oliver pointed out. "Roy."

"He's worth my time, and I'm worth his."

Oliver opened his mouth to respond, but at that moment, his cell phone began to buzz in his jacket pocket. "Working lunch," he apologized as he retrieved it. His expression hardened when he saw the name on the screen. "It's Lance." He pressed the answer button. "Detective. What can I do for you?"

"It's Officer, and I need to see you," came the gruff voice over the phone.

Oliver looked uneasily from Felicity to Thea. "I'm kind of in the middle of something."

"Look, I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

Given their history, no, Lance definitely wouldn't. Alarm skittered through Oliver's veins. "Is Laurel okay?"

"Can you meet in Smith Park, half an hour? I'll, uh, even throw in a hot dog."

"I'm actually at lunch with my sister and my...Felicity. Hold on." Oliver turned to Felicity. "What does my afternoon look like?"

Felicity quickly brought up Oliver's schedule on her phone. "We need to be back by 1:00. You have back-to-back meetings until 5:30. And then we have the McMartin party." She took a deep breath. That didn't leave time for much of anything else. "You should go now. See what he needs."

"I don't want to bail on you."

"We'll behave," Thea piped in.

"I can have the wait staff bag this up for you to have at the park," Felicity offered. "Or I can bring it back with me."

"Actually, I'm not really in the mood for Greek," Oliver admitted. He lifted the phone to his ear. "I'll take you up on that hot dog," Oliver told Lance. "See you in half an hour." He pressed the END button on the screen. "I'll leave Reggie here for the two of you and take a cab." He pulled out his wallet and withdrew crisp bills. "For lunch."

But Felicity pressed it back into his hands. "No, for the cab. I've got lunch covered."

"You don't like her," Thea observed once Oliver was gone.

"What?"

"Laurel. You don't like her. I saw the look on your face when Oliver said her name."

"I don't know Laurel. It's not really a matter of liking or disliking her."

"She was a big part of his life for a long time. It's got to be kind of hard to live with the ghosts, especially when he didn't even call you his fiancée on the phone with her father."

"For the record, Detective Lance knows Oliver and I are engaged. So does Laurel. It's not exactly a secret." Felicity hesitated as she broke up a pita into small pieces, none of which she ate. "I know what you're doing."

"Making conversation?"
"Pushing my buttons. Trying to at least. Quite frankly, it's rude and kind of mean, which I didn't take you for."

"I've been called worse than rude or mean. Today."

"Thea, Oliver's always going to be your brother, and you're always going to be one of the most important people in his life."

Thea's eyes narrowed. "You don't have to placate me. I know where I stand with Ollie. What I can't figure out is where you stand with him."

"I have no idea what you mean."

"You're not his usual type, but I can see the appeal. You kind of have a sexy librarian vibe going on with the glasses and the pink lipstick. I mean, I'm glad it's that vibe and not Catholic school girl because...ew."

"I'm Jewish, actually."

"Mazel tov. I get that my brother is attracted to you. He was incredibly hands-on with you on the ride over, and I'm pretty sure if I hadn't been in the car with the two of you, it would've been a far more eventful ride to the restaurant. Which I so did not need that image in my mind." Thea shuddered.

"The point is, people screw each other when they're attracted. They don't get married. Especially not my brother, who is just about the biggest commitment-phobe I've ever known. Just ask Laurel. So why you? Why would he suddenly decide he wants to marry you?"

Well, let's see. He doesn't want to marry me. Not really. There's this whole corporate takeover in the works that we're trying to avert so your family doesn't lose its company and Team Arrow doesn't lose its funding. And it's just a matter of principle that Isabel Rochev can't win because—not a surprise to me—she's really skeevy. And me? I'm just the resident good sport, taking one for the team because I'd look better in a wedding dress than Digg.

But, of course, Felicity couldn't tell Thea any of that. All she knew was that her heart pounded in her chest so loudly, she was halfway sure they could hear it three tables over, even with the unfortunate ambient music playing in the restaurant's background. A cool pulse spread on her wrist from the prototype she wore, attempting to combat what she was sure had to be at least the third deepest blush she'd ever had.

Why you?

It was a question Felicity had glossed over in her own mind because, frankly, she'd not allowed herself to entertain the whys. Doing so would be entertaining the possibility that she and Oliver could be and were a real thing. Until the night before, she never thought they would be more than partners in crime(fighting). And now, while they were certainly in exploration mode, they weren't yet in conquering-the-natives mode. The natives were just...restless.

But it wasn't really about Oliver, was it? The question was about his public image. Why would Oliver Queen marry Felicity Smoak? For the rocking sex they weren't having?

"Why not me?" Felicity shot back, her voice steely, borderline indignant. "I'm nice. Well, most of the time. I'm smart. Really smart, all of the time. I'm loyal, and if I could, I would tear apart anyone who would try to hurt Oliver. And..." she squeezed her eyes shut as she silently counted down from three. "I just described myself as a dog, minus the fur and fleas and questionable breath. This was a mistake." She began to reach for her clutch. "I'm going to take a cab back to work, and I think you
"Wait," Thea replied, reaching out her hand and stilling Felicity's movements. "I'm sorry. I am being a total bitch."

"Yeah. Kinda."

"Please don't go like this. Oliver warned me not to come on so strong. I should've listened. I know I'm coming off more as an interrogator than your future sister-in-law."

Felicity settled back in her seat. "If this is what Oliver wants, can't you try to be happy for him?"

"My life is one big exercise in Murphy's Law. Every time I'm happy, something happens to ruin it."

"So the solution is to never be happy about anything again? Makes perfect sense."

Thea toyed with a ceramic napkin ring, twisting it around her finger. "The first birthday after my dad and Ollie were lost on the Gambit, Tommy showed up. He knew I wasn't in the mood to celebrate. I told him that. At full volume. But he didn't listen. He had this party hat—one of those God-awful cones with the rubber bands—and stuck it on my head before dragging me out of the house. We went to the Starling City Animal Shelter, of all places, to volunteer. In retrospect, I think his 'volunteer' work may have been court-mandated community service, but it didn't matter. I played with the dogs and cats, and Tommy was doing these stupid voiceovers, pretending he was the animals. I actually laughed for the first time since we lost my dad and my brother. For a little while, I forgot I wasn't anyone's little sister or daddy's little girl anymore, and the laughter felt...so...good...until I realized at the end of the day that those animals still had no families and neither did I." Thea's expression softenend. "And now Tommy's gone, too."

Felicity swallowed hard remembering the days and months following her brother's death. She had wanted to scream every time she heard well-meaning expressions like 'He's in a better place' or 'He'll live on in our hearts.'

"And everyone has an opinion on how you should feel or react when all you can think is that there's a void that will never be filled. It's an ache without end, and now that he's gone, he's taken part of you with him."

"The best part of you. Yeah." Thea nodded in agreement. "Do you have siblings?"

Her question unintentionally stung.

"I did. Gabe. He died in a car accident when he was twenty-one."

"I'm...I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Sometimes it seems like so long ago, and sometimes it seems like yesterday. He was my big brother, and now I'm older than him, which is really weird. Sometimes I wonder what he would say if he were here with me now."

Thea smiled good-naturedly. "He'd probably tell you that your future sister-in-law is a complete and utter bitch."

"Yeah. Probably. But then I'd have to stick up for you because you're Oliver's sister, and I really want us to get along."

"Do you think Gabe would have liked Oliver?"
A soft smile curled on Felicity's lips. "He'd put Oliver through the wringer, but I'd like to think so. Oliver's a good man. Complicated but good. Gabe would see that."

"Believe me, I know how lucky I am that my brother came back to me. But if you had known him before...he was so easy to be around. I never wondered what he was thinking. He was the life of the party. And now, he just carries this weight on his shoulders that I can't even begin to understand. He even moves differently, like he's constantly on alert for something horrible to happen." Thea paused. "Except when he looks at you."

"How does he...how does he look at me?"

"Like a man in love." Thea exhaled as she worked through her thoughts aloud. "You don't keep looking for the old Oliver or hold who he was against him. That's why you...He doesn't have to live up to memories or expectations."

"That's not entirely true. I do have expectations of him. I guess they're just different."

"So why Oliver?"

"He gives me butterflies." Felicity paused, realizing how sophomoric her reasoning seemed. "I know that sounds ridiculous, but I had never known it."

"So it's just attraction?" Thea sounded almost disappointed.

"No, not just attraction, though I do think your brother is really, really hot. I mean attractive," Felicity backtracked. "It's tacky to call him hot in front of his sister, right?"

"You don't have to censor yourself on my account. Believe me when I say that, when it comes to Ollie, I've heard it all."

"Growing up, my friends would talk about feeling butterflies in the pits of their stomachs, and I couldn't relate. I thought it was nonsense. My nose was always in the books, I really wanted a scholarship—it was MIT or bust—and boys were a distraction. When I was seventeen, someone changed my mind. He made sense, and I thought he was it for me. We dated for six years, and I can count on one hand the number of times we argued. I mean, we had everything figured out, right down to the number of kids we were going to have and the neighborhood where we wanted to live in Chico."

"That sounds solid."

"It sounds boring."

"That, too," Thea acknowledged.

"Not once did I ever feel the butterflies. Jack was comfortable, safe. He's older than me. He had been my brother's best friend, there for as long as I can remember, but I never craved being around him or anyone else, really. Not until I met Oliver. There he was, standing in my office, and I sputtered like a fool. Shocking, I know."

At that, Thea smiled.

"I had heard of him, knew he was back from his...ordeal...but I never had any desire to meet him. The whole playboy thing isn't really my thing..." Felicity grimaced. "But there he was, and I felt the flutter. Pheromones with a shot of adrenaline, a little foot-in-mouth, and I was a goner. I was attracted to him for the obvious physical reasons, but the more I got to know him, the less I saw the
package. And by package, I mean his outside appearance, the way he presents himself to the world, not his package. I totally meant package in a non-sexual way because it would just be wrong to have that kind of conversation with you, Oliver's sister. Oh, why does my brain wander? Rewind. Rewind.”

"Do you always talk this much?"

"Sometimes more," Felicity confessed. "My wiring is a little…"

"Mad scientist?" Thea offered.

"Minus the villainous cackle and plot to take over the world. I mean, what kind of villain really stops and explains his motivation, thus giving the hero the chance to defeat him? So Hollywood. And I'm doing it again. Oliver is patient with me, well, most of the time, and I know it's not easy. But that's him. And now the butterflies aren't because he has amazing abs or incredibly perfect teeth. Sorry. Daughter of a dentist. I notice teeth. You have a beautiful smile, too, by the way. You guys won the genetic lottery."

She took a deep breath. "You wanted to know why Oliver. So here it is. Oliver's…special. I see it in the way he loves you and your mother, the way he cares about what happens to people he doesn't even know. It's in the way he wants to help this city recover. Thea, he's decent and smart, and he challenges me to be more and do more than I ever thought I could. We argue sometimes and it is entirely possible that we drive each other crazy, but I can't imagine a life without him in it. Like I said, he gives me butterflies."

"When's the wedding?"

"Oh, it's too soon for that!" Felicity lightly scoffed with wave of her hand. The weight of the engagement ring on her finger reminded her of the tale they'd woven. "What I meant was we're not in any hurry. We're enjoying the engagement for now."

"I wasn't sure what to expect with you," Thea confessed.

"Welcome to my life. I'm never really sure what to expect with me, either."

"What I mean is Oliver came to me at Verdant. Told me about you. Well, after I heard about it from TMZ."

Felicity cringed. "Sorry about that."

"Well, I'm sorry about what they said. They are kind of brutal to the uninitiated."

"If it makes you feel better, the engagement has been, oh, just about the biggest surprise to me, too."

"Oliver's not an easy man. For the record, I'd say that to his face. But when he talked about you that night, it wasn't with that guarded look he gets. He told me he trusts you with his life. Trusts you. And after the island, that's saying something." Thea swallowed hard. "I've seen the scars, and I don't know how he's here, but I'm so glad he made it home. And you know what? I'm glad you're here, too, Felicity."

"Queen." Quinton Lance nodded his head in greeting Oliver when the younger man approached him on the paved walkway in the park.

"Officer."
Quinton couldn't help but be struck that this Oliver wasn't the same man who left on the Queen's Gambit six years ago. He carried a weight that Quinton didn't want to know, shouldn't know if he wasn't being honest with himself. Not that he'd recognized that weight right away. He's been so clouded by rage, he'd done everything he could to make the younger man's life hell when Oliver had returned to Starling City. It tore at him that the pretentious rich boy should live when his Sara hadn't… but seeing Sara—even if he couldn't let others know she was still alive—made him realize that he'd been trying to exact justice in the most unjust of ways on someone who had been little more than a kid when he'd messed up.

Quinton passed Oliver a hot dog cradled in a cardboard boat. "How's Ms. Smoak doing after her unexpected guest the other night?" He was pleased for the young man that he had found love again. Felicity Smoak was certainly unique, a breath of fresh air. And the best part was her last name wasn't Lance.

"Better. I'm trying to convince her to move someplace more secure."

"I figured you'd have her packed up and moved to the big house." Lance took a bite of his own hot dog slathered in mustard and onions, then wiped at the corner of his mouth with his finger.

"Felicity's…independent. We're negotiating."

"I'm sure the neighbors would appreciate if the media circus left town. Don't know how you deal with that all the time."

"I manage."

_**Living through the lens of a camera.**_ Growing up, Oliver had not known any differently. Press coverage was something he expected, and though he was loath to admit it, as a teenager, he used public interest to obtain what he wanted from his parents. Once he gained access to his trust fund, he demonstrated far less discretion. After being away for five years, the press scrutiny was uncomfortable at best, damning at worst. But he'd quickly learned to use the Oliver Queen persona to his advantage, hiding in plain sight.

"You didn't ask me here to talk about Felicity," Oliver prodded.

The older man hesitated, looking more uncomfortable than usual. "It's Laurel. I was hoping you could talk to her."

This was an about-face from the man who was conveniently cleaning his Glock the first time Oliver came to the Lance house to pick up Laurel for a date. "We aren't exactly running in the same circles these days, unless you count the fact she's on the legal team that's prosecuting my mother."

"I'm worried about her. She's too much her father's daughter." Quinton stopped in his tracks and dropped his voice. "She had too much to drink the other night. Got pulled over. Managed to get the charges dropped out of professional courtesy, but…"

"You don't think this is isolated."

"She's having a tough time letting go of what happened last May. She's blaming herself for Tommy. Maybe now that she sees you're letting yourself move on…"

Oliver felt as though he'd been punched in the gut.

_**Letting yourself move on.**_
Was that what he was doing? Because no matter how many days passed, he carried the loss as a banner, a reminder of his shortcomings. He would always be a killer in Tommy's eyes, that impression frozen in time. There would be no redemption, no matter how he tried to make amends. He failed his city when he couldn't stop the Undertaking, but it hurt far worse to know he failed his friend.

And Laurel.

She would always remain one of his biggest regrets. It was difficult to reconcile the smiling, happy, confident girl he once knew with the angry, bitter woman she had become. And he'd contributed to that. Rather than admitting he wasn't ready to move in with her, he'd run off with her sister. In the years he was gone, he'd idealized the girl in the faded picture. Then when he returned to Starling, he interfered in Laurel's relationship with Tommy, trying to recapture something that died long ago in the middle of the North China Sea.

"I would do anything I could if I thought it would help, but I'm the last person Laurel wants to hear from right now."

"You carry weight with her."

"I'm her baggage."

Quinton considered Oliver's words and sighed. "You got any ideas? Cause I'm fresh out."

"Felicity, is that you?" A deep, slightly accented voice interrupted Felicity's thoughts.

*Small world.* Well, not really when she was dining in his parents' restaurant, she reminded herself. She looked up to see familiar, chocolate brown eyes framed by long, dark lashes and even more striking eyebrows. The tall, raven-haired man smiled broadly, his white teeth a contrast to the tan of his skin. His hair was longer than she remembered, curling around his ears.

"Drew. Hi."

He leaned down, and Felicity expected a kiss on the cheek. Instead, Drew's lips briefly brushed against hers in greeting.

"Oh," she squeaked.

"I'm glad to run into you," he added. "I see you're having the souvlaki." He eyed the other dishes on the table. "And the moussaka? I didn't think you liked that."

"I'm here with a friend. She's in the ladies room." Felicity eyed the paper bag he carried. "And let me guess. Gyros with tzatziki."

"There's nothing like manoula's gyros."

"You're lucky your mom is such a good cook. I'm pretty sure mine could burn water."

Drew chuckled heartily. "I remember. Thanksgiving pizza for the win. How is your family?"

That was a loaded question, though he had no way of knowing that. Based on the text messages she had received from her mother between patient appointments, she halfway expected Judith Smoak to show up on her doorstep for an intervention. Maybe she should take Oliver up on his offer to stay in the Queen Mansion. The only thing scarier than pushy reporters? Pushy mothers.
"They're...um...good."

"I haven't seen you around the coffee shop lately. You cheating on me with a new shop?" he joked.

"Work's kicking my tail." She didn't add that she had made it a point to avoid the shop for the last several months. As much as she had enjoyed their dating relationship while it lasted and the few subsequent hook ups, there was a reason they'd decided they were better off as friends in the first place.

"I can relate. I've been working almost around the clock this week. One of the baristas quit without notice. But look, I'd very much like to get together. Let off some steam. It's been too long. I'm just sorry I haven't texted back."

"Texted back?" Felicity questioned. "I'm not following."

"Your text."

"I didn't text you."

"Yes, you did. Sunday night."

"No, I promise I didn't."

"I have it right here," he replied with a grin as he pulled his cell phone from his back pocket. He pressed a few buttons before holding it out so she could see the screen.

**FS:** Feeling tense and missing you. Want to hook up?

"That doesn't even sound like me," Felicity furrowed her brows. It was definitely her phone number. "I would've asked you over for ice cream or cookies. You know, perfectly good euphemisms."

He looked chagrined as he shoved the phone back into his jeans pocket. "You were more direct than usual. To be honest, I kind of liked it."

Realization hit her. "JoJo visited last weekend. She has this whole theory that the best way to get over someone is to get under someone."

"We've tested that theory before," Drew chuckled.

"She must have sent it. I'm going to kill her. Well, not really, because it would be so foolish to say I was going to do it and then actually do it."

"It's not a complete waste. I have missed you. Maybe us running into each other today, maybe it's **pepromeno.** Destiny."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure it's not that. Drew, there's something I should tell you."

Thea's voice cut through the air. "Yes, she should tell you."

Don't panic. Don't panic. You didn't really say anything that incriminating. Well, technically nothing incriminating at all, minus that whole killing JoJo thing. Drew's an old friend. You just ran into each other. Never mind that he is occasionally more than a friend. Everyone has a past. Everyone has a past. Everyone has a past.
"Felicity's engaged to my brother, though from the looks of the two of you, it's kind of hard to tell at the moment."

Drew's eyes widened. "You're engaged? Felicity, that's...wow. Congratulations. Who's the lucky guy?"

Felicity cleared her throat. "His name is Oliver."

"Oliver? As in Oliver Queen, the man you work for?"

"That's the one," Thea replied, crossing her arms as she slid into the booth across from Felicity.

"Which makes you Thea Queen," Drew pieced together. "You're so much prettier in person than in your pictures."

"Thanks. I think. And you are?"

"Andreas Petropolous. I'm an old friend of Felicity's."

"Yeah. A friend. I gathered."

Sensing the disdain in the young heiress's tone, Drew turned his attention back to Felicity. "Really. Congratulations. I hope he knows what a special woman he's getting."

"Thanks. I try to remind him." She laughed nervously.

"I should get going. It was nice to meet you, Thea. And Felicity, don't be a stranger. Bring Oliver by the coffee house sometime."

"Sure. That sounds great." Right up there with a root canal, a girls' night out with Isabel Rochev, and being force-fed a bag of peanuts while being held captive in an enormous bee hive.

"See you around."

"That's ballsy," Thea sniffed as soon as Drew walked away.

"What do you mean?"

"So you have a fuck buddy on speed dial, and you're going to go on a double date with him and Oliver. You are definitely not vanilla."

Felicity winced. "Thea, it's not like that. I was trying to be polite, which maybe you should try sometime."

"Does he give you 'butterflies,' too?" Thea rolled her eyes. "Unbelievable."

Tears stung Felicity's eyes when she heard her own words being twisted into something ugly. She took a deep breath, willing the tears away, determined not to show weakness. "I had a life before I met Oliver, and I'm not going to apologize for that, just like I don't expect him to apologize for the life he led before we met."

"I couldn't care less how many partners you've had in the past. What I do care about is that you evidently still have at least one guy on the hook when you're supposed to be marrying my brother."

"I don't have anyone on the hook." Felicity watched the hard set of Thea's jaw. "This is all just a misunderstanding."
"I saw him kiss you," Thea persisted.

"Which I so did not ask him to do. It was unwelcome, and for the record, definitely tongue-less."

"Oh, then that makes everything okay." Thea was armed and dangerous with sarcasm.

Felicity wanted to scream in frustration. Evidently, in addition to ninja-like stealth and fabulous teeth, stubbornness was also a hereditary trait the Queen siblings shared. "Nothing I say is going to satisfy you," she realized. "I'm going to leave now before this gets uglier." She picked up the guest ticket to take to the register and gathered her clutch before sliding out of the booth.

"Do you even love Oliver?" Thea's question had Felicity stopping in her tracks. "I've not heard you say it even once."

Felicity looked over her shoulder, trying to rein in the flurry of emotions that had to be spelled across her features. Yes! With all my heart, yes. But she replied, "Those words are for him, not you."

The warehouse where John Diggle tracked Isabel Rochev was rather unremarkable, save for the ostentatious black Ferrari parked outside. Skulking about in broad daylight wasn't Diggle's preferred hobby, and the decided lack of activity at the warehouse and surrounding area seemed almost too good to be true.

John quickly made his way to a fire escape and pulled himself up. From here, he was less conspicuous to passers-by, and he could look through the windows that were too high for a ground-level view to try to spot Rochev.

He looked through a grimy window and could make out the form of a slender, dark-haired woman. Isabel, he quickly identified. A broad-shouldered dark haired man wearing a dark tank top and cargo pants accompanied her.

The two circled around one another, like prizefighters in the ring. It was an odd sight. Isabel weighed a buck five wet, he estimated. And this man looked solid.

When the man turned, Digg could see he his face was bearded. Even more conspicuous than that was one of his eyes was covered by a patch. Digg took a surveillance device from the inner pocket of his jacket, pressed a tiny receptor to the glass of the window and brought the other end to his ear.

The two resumed their sparring. Isabel took a blow that landed her flat on her back; John could hear her grunt at the landing. Surprisingly, she literally leapt back to her feet, her movement fluid and practiced. Her assailant charged again, and she used her speed to sidestep him, which only made him laugh with pleasure.

"It's not as fun when you hold back," she challenged him.

"I don't want to leave bruises," the man replied in a heavily accented voice. Australian? John questioned.

"How considerate of you," Isabel replied wryly as the two circled around one another. "I remember a time when you said bruises were the mark of a warrior."

"But not a CEO. You're forgetting who you are and who I am, Natasha. I want you to tell Oliver Queen that the photographs will not be released and that you've handled it. And then I want you to bury them."
Isabel abruptly ceased her defensive stance and stood ramrod straight. "I went through a hell of a lot of trouble to get those. Do you know how much it sickened me to seduce him?"

"Nobody asked you to do it," the man pointed out gruffly.

"I thought you wanted him destroyed."

"I want you to take his company, not compromise yourself in the process. Oliver Queen's personal destruction will be mine to exact."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I will crush his hope. Take away everything and everyone he holds dear. And after I have taken away every semblance of happiness, every semblance of light, I will crush him. The pawns of our little game are moving into place as we speak."
Felicity Smoak's life used to be so much simpler.

No fake engagements.

No angry, (sort-of) future sisters-in-law.

No tawdry photos hanging over her head like the sword of Damocles.

No excitement.

No making a difference.

No Oliver.

Oliver.

He had left the restaurant pretty quickly when he heard Officer Lance wanted to talk about Laurel. Felicity tried to bite back the jealousy that threatened to rear its ugly head. She was the one who had encouraged him to go; she couldn't damn him for what she'd insisted he do. Logical or not, Oliver felt a responsibility to his ex-girlfriend, partly because he'd been such an atrocious boyfriend back in the day and largely because of how things ended with her—and with Tommy.

Guilt, more than regret, was a powerful motivator. It was a pull, as natural as gravity itself. There was an old saying that you never forget your first love, and that was what Laurel was to Oliver, even if their current situation was messy. Felicity could relate. At one point in time, Jack Sommet had been everything to her. Even now with distance between them, she cared about what happened to him.

That didn't mean she had to like it.

Trying to push aside the swirl of emotions welling within her, Felicity pulled her phone from her small handbag, hoping she'd missed a message from John. She needed to focus on issues that had a solution, not the complexities of relationships and love—old and new.

Nothing from Digg.

They were running out of time. Pumping Casper for information had yielded something, a lead that surely wasn't coincidental, but would it pan out to be anything of substance? Who was masquerading as Edward Fyers, a man from Oliver's past on the island? What did he have to do with Isabel, and what was Isabel's endgame? Would stripping Queen Consolidated from Oliver at the risk of her own standing be worth it?

Felicity still hadn't seen the actual photos of Oliver with Isabel in his Russian hotel room; she'd thus far avoided them, knowing she would never be able to unsee them. Quite frankly, witnessing the smug expression on the brunette's face when she walked out of Oliver's room with the back of her dress still partially open had been enough. But for photographs of a much more sexual nature to actually be leaked for public consumption? It would ruin any chance Oliver had of salvaging his reputation—both personally and professionally.

To a smaller extent, she also wasn't thrilled with what this type of exposure would mean for her. If
She thought the media were behaving obnoxiously now, that would only intensify if they smelled a scandal. Maybe it was petty to worry about that when there were obviously more pressing matters, but from a pride standpoint, there was something exhilarating about being perceived as special enough to make Oliver Queen want to settle down. It would be significantly less exhilarating to be known as Oliver Queen's jilted fiancée.

No, she did not want country songs to be sung about her. She didn't even particularly like country music.

It would be so much easier if he were just plain Oliver, not Oliver Queen with all the complications and expectations—both good and bad—that came along with that persona.

And to top off the day's events, she had managed to alienate Thea with a special guest appearance from her ex-boyfriend.

The whole cab ride back to QC, Felicity struggled to keep it together, all of her thoughts a jumble. However, after the cabbie commented, "Aren't you that gal who's marrying the Queen fellow?" she knew she couldn't afford tears.

Then there were the photographers who were waiting in the plaza outside Queen Consolidated, hoping to catch a glimpse of the future Mrs. Oliver Queen.

"Felicity! Just a moment of your time please!"

"Ms. Smoak!"

"Felicity!"

It was surreal to hear her name called by people she didn't know. It was even stranger when they began the onslaught of personal questions.

"Is it true you were engaged to someone before Mr. Queen? Did you break up with your fiancé to become a Queen?"

Oliver had warned her not to say anything, not to encourage their questions, no matter how provocative they were, so she continued up the concrete steps toward the south side of the looming skyscraper.

"Felicity, is Oliver Queen marrying you to avoid a scandal? Are you pregnant with his lovechild?"

A camera was shoved in her face, poised to capture her reaction. Suddenly, a hand was moving it back. Felicity wasn't sure who was more surprised—her or the photographer.

"You will give Ms. Smoak space."

*Oliver.* His voice was low, dangerous sounding. It reminded her of the way he spoke as the Arrow, minus the voice modulator.

She felt his hand move around her waist and pull her close. Even through her clothing, she could feel his warmth, his strength. He was trying to shield her, make her less of a target.

When they reached the building, went through the security checkpoint, and were finally out of earshot of the photographers, Oliver asked in a voice that made clear his displeasure, "Where's Reggie? You're supposed to have protection."
"It's not his fault," she defended. "I left him at the restaurant with Thea. Kind of without saying anything to him."

Anger briefly flared in his eyes. "Why would you do that?"

She just pursed her lips and shook her head slightly.

The two walked to the executive elevator, which opened to the swipe of Oliver's key card. They went inside the polished metal box. When the doors closed and their floor number was pushed, Oliver bridged the distance between them, his hand tentatively reaching for hers. "I forgot to say hi," he greeted, his voice far more tender than before.

"Hi," she echoed. "You made it back in time for your meeting."

"Fifteen minutes early. A new record." His lips quirked; it made him look boyish.

"Impressive."

"And in time to ward off the paparazzi. What's going on? Why did you ditch Reggie?"

"You know that expression 'anything that can go wrong will go wrong'?"

"Yeah."

"Things went wrong at lunch. Horribly. I'm pretty sure your sister hates me."

"What? No. How could anyone hate you, let alone Thea?" Oliver laughed at Felicity's assertion, but his laughter quickly faded when he saw that Felicity wasn't laughing with him. He reached over to the wall panel and pushed the stop button, halting their progress to the upper floor. He then turned his full attention back to her.

"What's sad is I actually wanted her to like me. After a rough start, we were getting along. I even thought we'd come to some sort of understanding."

"So what happened?" he gently probed.

"Our understanding turned into a misunderstanding of epic proportions. Seriously, like Stay-Puff-Marshmallow-Man-Destroying-New-York-City big. Thea went to the ladies room, and while she was gone, my friend Drew showed up. He hit on me, but only because he thought I'd hit on him through a text message on Sunday night. Side note: I didn't. It must've been JoJo using my phone. And even if I had, the fact he didn't text me back for five days would've made that a no-go. Not that it would have been a go-go anyhow because I don't want to go there again. Not with him, anyway. I only want to go there with you." She shook her head as she looked down at the elevator floor, her cheeks coloring. "I can't believe I just said that. Why don't I have a filter?"

"Felicity," he gently ran his fingertips along her cheek, prompting her to look up at him. "I only want to go there with you, too."

"Hold onto me tight," she whispered.

Oliver drew her close, and she leaned into him, sinking into him as his arms enveloped her. He rubbed soothing circles on her back, even as she burrowed her hands under his suit jacket.

She could feel the vibration in his chest when he said, "I imagined you saying that under different circumstances."
Despite the heaviness she felt, she found herself on the verge of smiling. She recognized this as a conversation they'd had before, only in reverse. Come to think of it, that conversation had also involved an elevator—except they hadn't stayed in the elevator; they climbed up and then swung over the open elevator shaft.

Still holding onto him, she looked up. "Very platonic circumstances?" she asked, repeating the earlier conversation.

His lips quirked into a knowing smile as he looked down at her. "Not exactly. Sooo," Oliver began, drawing out the word, "what does seeing Drew have to do with Thea and marshmallows?"

Felicity took a deep breath and stepped away from Oliver, suddenly acutely aware of the confines of the elevator. "Thea overheard some of our conversation and thought I'd been cheating on you, which is kind of funny when you think about it because you and I—whatever this is, is so new."

"I'll talk to Thea. Straighten it out," Oliver assured her.

"Just don't be grumpy with her. She was defending your honor, being a good sister who is looking out for her brother."

Oliver grimaced. "She's one of the few who thinks I have any honor left to defend."

"And that's why I think you should tell her the truth about us."

His brows furrowed in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"That we," she replied holding up her hand to flash the engagement ring, "are a sham."

Oliver took a step back, his body rigid. "Is that what you think? That we're a sham?"

Felicity exhaled. Maybe it was a poor choice of words. Maybe…no she couldn't sugarcoat it. What they were doing had real consequences, and they couldn't continue to sweep those consequences under the proverbial rug. "Couldn't you see that she was upset over the engagement, an engagement that isn't even real? Not real. That's the definition of a sham, right?"

"She was upset because she doesn't know you."

"Well, she doesn't want to get to know me."

"That's too bad because what this is…it matters. Felicity, you matter to me."

"I know. And you matter to me, too, but Thea is smart. She knows that this doesn't ring true. When Lance called, you said, 'I'm with my sister and my…Felicity.'"

Oliver tried to follow her line of reasoning. "You are my Felicity."

"But you hesitated. Like you were going to say something else but changed your mind. She picked up on your reluctance to call me your fiancée."

"When we started this, it was supposed to be clean. Simple. No one would get hurt." He scrubbed his hand over his face. "I misjudged. It's not been clean or simple, and today, you've been hurt. And not for the first time."

"But I need you to know something. When I touch you, it's because I want to touch you. When I kiss you, it's because I want to kiss you. That's real. And one day soon, when I say the words, those will be real. Not tainted, not the echo of a business deal, and definitely not a sham."
"If you want me to tell Thea the truth about our arrangement and why we've told the world we're engaged, I will. The one thing I won't do is give you up. Not for Thea and not for Queen Consolidated."

Before she could react he tugged her forward and pressed his mouth against hers. Felicity's lashes lowered, and she met his kiss with a sigh of longing. His lips molded to hers and she moved closer, needing to feel something other than frustration, something other than worry. It amazed her how quickly she had become addicted to his touch, to his very nearness.

His arms came around her, his hands tangling in her hair, once again pulling the elastic tie that bound her hair into its typical ponytail. She breathed in, and he filled her senses with heat and yearning and the very taste of him. It was enough to entice, not enough to satisfy.

Oliver's tongue parted her lips, his kisses filled with ardor that kindled an ache deep inside her that only he could soothe. His velvety tongue mated with hers, imitating a dance as old as time itself. Give and take. Give and take. A wave of unsettling heat spread through her, flickering everywhere at once.

One hand moved down her neck, then lower to cup her right breast. It was sweet torment as his thumb stimulated her nipple to a tight peak.

Why had she wanted to take things slowly?

Her breath shuddered as she felt his hardness against her belly. Instinctively, she moved against him, eliciting a growl from deep in his throat. Her arms went around his neck, her fingers burying themselves in his short hair, all the while pulling him closer, closer, closer.

He broke from their kiss, his labored breathing matching hers as their eyes locked on one another. With suddenness, he lifted her, his hands cupping her backside as he pressed her against the wall. She wrapped her legs around his waist, reveling in the feel of his body aligned with hers. She rolled her hips against him, and he hissed in response.

Now that he had the wall for leverage, one hand began to wander around her hip, under her skirt, up her inner thigh, and finally skimmed across her flesh as he moved to the edge of her panties. She gasped when his fingers dipped beneath the lacy fabric, finding her wet heat. One long finger brushed against her core, the touch feather-light, titillating.

"I'm having a hard time taking it slow with you."

"I noticed your hard time," she murmured against his neck. She paused, hearing her own words aloud, and groaned. "That sounded far less cheesy in my head."

For his part, Oliver chuckled as he set her down though he couldn't bear to quite let her go just yet. He leaned down, his forehead resting against hers. "I want to bury myself in you. I want to make you feel everything I feel for you." His confession sent a thrill through her. "Our first time is not going to be a quickie in an elevator. If I'm going to behave, I need glass walls."

He moved away from her, pushing the button to resume the elevator. She spotted her elastic band on the floor, retrieved it, and she quickly pulled her hair back into a ponytail. She managed to straighten and smooth her clothes before the door opened. She hoped she looked none the worse for wear even if her legs felt unsteady and her heart still raced.

Oliver, on the other hand, was still sporting a raging hard on. Her eyes widened and her mouth went dry. Wow. Just wow. A strategically placed file folder and a boring meeting should cure him of that
soon, she hoped.

When they exited the elevator, he excused himself to the private washroom adjacent to his office. He emerged a few minutes later just in time for his 1:00 meeting. She noticed he looked considerably more relaxed and the front of his pants far less tight.

Sitting at her desk, she crossed her legs and clenched her thighs. Now if only she could get some relief from the aching she felt.

"Ms. Rochev is not as enthusiastic as you are about the Tempewrist, Mr. Queen."

"She will come around. Besides, I still have authority over the Applied Sciences division." Oliver met Felix Lancaster's gaze, staring the man down in a way that had the other visibly gulping.

Lancaster had been a fixture in QC for years, first as an intern in college and eventually working his way up to his current position as Director of Production Strategies. Seven years ago when Oliver would visit his father in that very office, he had the impression that Felix Lancaster merely humored him as a Robert Queen's wasteful, ne'er do well son. It still struck Oliver as odd to witness Felix's deferential reaction to him—and not just Felix, but other longtime employees, as well, minus Belinda Carlen, of course. Half the time, he felt like he was playing dress up. Oliver Queen, CEO, was just another disguise he wore and not one that was particularly well earned.

"There's no doubt that the Tempewrist could revolutionize the way we look at heating and cooling. At the very least, there'd be no more arguments about the thermostat," Felix laughed weakly. "But as...as equal partners, Ms. Rochev has equal authority on the funding for any project, and that includes those in Applied Sciences."

Oliver had a ready answer, though he wasn't accustomed to the give-and-take his father and later his mother had encouraged with his higher-up employees. "And that's why I'm looking at partnering with like-minded investors. If we can get this product into production, we will generate revenue, boost the market value of the company for our stockholders, and insure more jobs for skilled laborers. It's a win-win for QC and investors."

"Agreed," Lancaster said, albeit reluctantly.

"These are the mock-ups of the Tempewrist and resources put into the prototype. As you know, Ms. Smoak is currently testing the prototype, and preliminary tests are proving promising. So here's what I need from you. I need an estimate of what we'd be looking at for getting this in production. Timeline. Expenditures. When we might realize a profit."

"If we see a profit," countered Felix. "I don't have to tell you, Mr. Queen, that any new product is risky."

"I've had Tami Phillips working on a market analysis. The demand for environmentally conscientious methods of heating and cooling is out there. The emergence of India and China, not to mention places like Brazil, as major energy consumers makes this the right time."

"But this isn't exactly Queen Consolidated's m.o."

"My grandfather started QC as an industrial foundry. Steelworks. That was sixty years ago, and while we should never forget our origins, why have an Applied Sciences division if we aren't willing to move beyond our starting point?"

"I can have that analysis for you first thing Monday morning."
"Actually, I need it by the end of the day."

Felix took a deep breath, readying himself to protest, but stopped himself when he saw Oliver's steely gaze. "I'll do my best."

As Felix left Oliver's office, Oliver glanced at his cell phone. He'd placed it on silent mode but saw he had several missed calls from Thea. Based on what Felicity had told him, he could just imagine what his sister wanted to talk about. With a few minutes before his next meeting, he decided to face the inevitable head-on and returned his sister's calls.

"Were you ignoring me?" came Thea's voice on the other end after just one ring.

Great, she was on the offensive already. "I wasn't ignoring you. I was in a meeting."

"Right. Oliver Queen, CEO. Who'd have thought?"

"Let's cut to the chase. I know that lunch with Felicity didn't end on a positive note."

"Of course she's already poisoned the well."

Oliver could practically hear Thea rolling her eyes over the phone. "Felicity didn't poison the well."

"So you didn't get an earful of how awful I was to her? No crocodile tears?"

"Felicity didn't badmouth you, which is more than I can say for what you're doing. She was upset but only because she thinks she blew it with you. And yes, she told me about Drew showing up."

"Did she tell you they kissed? That they were making plans to hook up?"

They kissed? That he hadn't heard. He felt his gut twist uncomfortably as an unfamiliar surge of jealousy permeated through him. The thought of another man kissing her, touching her, made his skin crawl. But Felicity wasn't duplicitous, he reminded himself. She wasn't the way he used to be, always on the lookout for the next sexual escapade, the next thrill. "Speedy, they weren't making plans to hook up. I keep her way too busy for anyone but me."

"Okay, first off, eww. Gross euphemism. Second, you're only seeing what you want to see. There was definitely something there, and I don't like seeing my big brother getting played."

Oliver squeezed his eyes closed, feeling a headache building behind them. Maybe Felicity was right. Maybe he needed to tell his sister the truth about their quick 'engagement.'

"Thea, there are things we should talk about in person, not over the phone, but will you please just let this go for now? Felicity is...she's the most honest person I know."

"That doesn't say much for the company you keep."

"Thea!"

"All right. When? Do you want to swing by the club tonight?"

Plans for the party at the McMartin house came to the forefront of Oliver's mind. He didn't know how long they'd be there; all he knew was he'd be walking into the lion's den and taking Felicity along with him. "I...can't. Tomorrow? Brunch?"

"At Les Charles?"
"I was thinking someplace less public. Home."

"So you can yell at me?" Thea huffed.

Aggravation washed over him. "I'm not—" he broke off, remembering Felicity's words to not be grumpy with his sister. He softened his tone, "I'm not going to yell at you."

"Fine. Brunch at home."

With that, Oliver heard the other end of the phone go silent and his own phone beeped at him that the call was disconnected.

That could have gone better. On the other hand, it could have gone far worse. It was not Staypuff-Marshmallow-Man Destroying-New York City-terrible, as Felicity would put it.

He looked through the glass wall to where Felicity sat at her desk, busily working on, well, something, as she alternated between looking at her computer screen and the tablet by her side. She had pulled off her shoes, her legs were crossed, and she shook her right foot as though directing some sort of musical production with her toes. Warmth flooded him. She was something else. Why had it taken him so damn long to admit to himself that he wanted her?

If Thea was right, and this Drew guy did want Felicity, then he was out of luck because there was no way Oliver was going to let her go without a fight.

Getting the girl had always been so easy for him. Usually, he had her at, 'I'm Oliver Queen' and had never truly had to work at anything. Even his relationship with Laurel, in retrospect, was about her making herself available to him around his schedule and whims. It took being shipwrecked for him to realize just how much of a prick he'd been, how he'd kept Laurel on a leash but only lavished attention on her when it suited his mood.

Now he found himself wanting to woo Felicity—and he had no idea how exactly to go about that.

All he knew was that she was worth the effort.

Oliver walked to the door, opened it, and stuck out his head. "Any word from Diggle?"

Felicity’s teeth grazed her brightly colored lips as she turned to look at him. The small, unintentionally sexy gesture had him sucking in a breath and willing his body to calm down. He could imagine those sweet lips wrapped around him, or the perfect O they would form when he would finally make her orgasm.

His brain was not helping—and he'd already jacked off once to relieve the strain of their elevator ride when he'd not been able to get himself under control otherwise.

For her part, Felicity seemed blissfully unaware of his struggle. "No, I was hoping you'd heard something."

"Not yet." He tilted his head toward his office, indicating she should join him.

She slipped on her shoes, followed his lead, and entered the office so they could speak more privately before his next appointment arrived. They stood close for a moment, though neither made contact, before he put physical distance between them, settling in his chair behind his desk.

"Coast City is a good hour away at least," Oliver added. "Though with Digg's driving, maybe not that long."
"You're one to talk about fast driving," Felicity teased as she sat atop the desk, affording him a generous view of her shapely legs.

"Oh, only in emergencies," Oliver deadpanned all the while trying not to stare.

"How did it go with Felix?"

"I may have twisted his arm a little, metaphorically speaking, of course."

"Does he think the idea is viable?" Felicity asked, lifting her wrist and studying the sleek bracelet/prototype secured there.

Oliver reflexively tapped the top of his desk with his fingertips. "I think he's nervous about countermanding Isabel."

"And from the look on his face when he left, not so keen on countermanding you, either," Felicity pointed out. "You have him caught between a rock and a hard place."

Oliver considered her words and said, "I'm pretty sure he was thinking that all he has to do is stall. Ride the fence until he sees who comes out on top. I may have messed up that plan for him."

"What a shame." Her tone left little doubt that his sympathies were not with Felix Lancaster.

"I'll just be glad when this is over."

"But it won't be. No really." She shook her head slightly. "That sounded gloomy, I know. I just meant that with what you've found out about your dad, the fact you have a brother out there, it won't ever truly be finished with Isabel."

"The more I think about it, the more I just don't understand what she's trying to accomplish. She has to know that if she makes the photo public, she'll not remain anonymous. Would the board want to oust only me for something we both did?"

"I can still try to hack into Isabel's computer, maybe replace the photo file with a picture of…I don't know…bunnies or something," she said darkly. "But knowing that she likely has a redundancy plan in place, that's not a guaranteed fix."

He reached out and rested his hand on her arm. "I don't want you to see the photo," he said quietly.

"That makes two of us, but the reality of the situation is that in fewer than twelve hours, it may be out there for all the world to see."

Typical. It was a race against the clock. Could he secure enough funding for his project to raise capital to pay off the Starling National Bank note before Stellmoor owned it and Isabel Rochev had a controlling interest in QC? And all of that before Isabel busted his balls and discredited him both personally and professionally?

If the Ollie of yesteryear could see him now…

"There's something we're missing here. Something big."

It was then that Oliver noticed the elevator doors opening and John Diggle stepping out. The brawny man quickly made his way to the office.

"What did you find?" Oliver asked immediately.
"You're a popular guy," Diggle replied wryly.

A few minutes later after Diggle laid out for the duo what he had observed at the warehouse—Isabel sparring with a dark-haired man who was apparently Australian, missing an eye, and who had bragged about playing a game of chess using real people as his pawns to exact revenge—Felicity was the first to break the tense silence.

"On the bright side, it looks as though we don't need to worry about dirty pictures anymore. On the not-so-bright side, it looks like there's someone else out there who's not a fan."

"Someone else from the island?" Digg asked.

Felicity shuddered involuntarily. "What kind of people did you meet the five years you were away?"

"The kind I'd rather forget," Oliver drawled out.

"I have a hard time imagining Isabel physically fighting with anyone. Give me a giant burrito, let me sit on her, and I'm pretty sure I could break her in half. Not that I've considered it or anything," Felicity added hastily.

"She was skilled, and so was the man sparring with her," Diggle commented.

Felicity stood and began to pace. " Goes to show that you can't trust even a deceptive, power-hungry corporate raider-slash-baby mama to be what she seems."

"And the relationship between the two of them? Adversarial? Friendly?" Oliver asked.

"She seemed to be answerable to the man," Digg explained.

"Did she call him by name?" Oliver asked remaining seated, his body rigid.

"No, but there can't be that many one-eyed Australians out there."

Felicity perked up. "And if we narrow that down to one-eyed Australians who have a beef with you...such a weird saying. Like beef is a bad thing. Sorry. Squirrel."

Diggle looked grim and Felicity flustered, but Oliver couldn't focus on the conversation as the possibilities flooded his mind. He found himself breaking out into a sweat and his heart beating erratically. There was only one man he knew who fit the description Diggle provided, but that was impossible. They had once been as close as brothers, but Oliver had dealt the death knell.

Seeing the look on his face, Digg asked, "You okay, Oliver?"

"No," Oliver took a deep breath, trying to calm the storm inside. "Felicity, I need you to find out everything you can about a man named Slade Wilson."

"Was he on..." Felicity's voice trailed off.

"Yes."

"And he has reason to want revenge against you."

"Yes," came Oliver's clipped reply.

"Could you maybe give me more to go on than that?" Felicity pushed. "Full disclosure would be
awesome if not unprecedented."

Oliver shrank away from her gaze, stood, and walked closer to the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. He heard Diggle say something to Felicity, the other man's voice low, but his own mind was such a jumble, he couldn't quite piece it together. And he heard the clicking of Felicity's heels as she walked away.

"I've seen that look before," Diggle began after a moment, "in the mirror."

Oliver turned to look at his partner, who stood next to him, hands in his pocket. "What did you do about it?"

"Met the challenge as it came, one day at a time. How bad is it?"

"Bad." Oliver fell silent, *stayed* silent for what felt like an eternity as he tried to give voice to his thoughts. Finally, he continued, "I thought I was done with the island. I thought I could move on, make Starling better, and maybe even have a life outside of this. QC. The Arrow."

"You can," Digg assured him.

"I can't."

"Because you're worried this man is going to come after you?"

"No, I'm not worried for myself. If this man is who I think he is, he's going to come after everyone I love."


An image of a dark-haired man filled the screen. "Handsome devil," Felicity muttered. "I wonder if this is really the guy John saw." She looked toward Oliver's office and could see the two men were still deep in conversation. As soon as Digg left Oliver's office, she would have him verify whether this was the man meeting with Isabel.

It was difficult stepping aside when she knew that Oliver was obviously going through something, but as Digg pointed out, this was the way she could best help him for right now.

So she continued to scan her computer screen.

"Entered Australian Defence Force in 1988. Served in the 1st Intelligence Battalion." As she continued to scroll down the page on the computer, Felicity was met with huge blocks of text that were blacked out.

"And redacted. You've got to be kidding me." Oh, but there were ways around that. It would take more time, but Felicity wasn't afraid of a challenge.

"You should clear Oliver's schedule." Isabel's cutting voice made Felicity jump slightly in her seat. She had been so intent on what she was doing, she didn't hear or see the woman approach.

"And you should make more noise when you walk. I think you scared five years off my life."

"That would be an interesting skill," Isabel commented, her lips curling slightly so that her typical disinterested visage appeared as more of a grimace. "We should test it sometime."
Felicity's eyes narrowed. "I will see if Oliver is available to meet with you."

"Oh, he is." With that, Isabel walked past Felicity's desk and into Oliver's office. "A word with you, Oliver?"
Chapter Fourteen: "For the Love of Suspenders"

"A word with you, Oliver?"

Oliver and Diggle turned to see Isabel Rochev approach without invitation. Felicity was on the brunette's heels.

"Sorry. She just rushed past." Felicity pursed her lips in annoyance while making a walking motion with her fingers.

"It's okay. I'm glad we have this chance to talk." Oliver narrowed his eyes as he met Isabel's self-assured gaze. "Seems overdue, doesn't it?"

Isabel turned to Diggle and then to Felicity. "Are we to entertain the peanut gallery this afternoon?"

Diggle cleared his throat. "I'll let myself out." His words were what Isabel clearly expected of the man she thought to merely be Oliver Queen's bodyguard, but the look he shot Oliver said it all. Play it cool. As Digg walked past Felicity, he gently cupped her elbow, bringing her along with him as he exited the office.

Isabel surveyed Oliver, her features impassive like a china doll, all porcelain perfection and slender fragility—except Oliver knew that the surface rarely represented a person's mettle. Could Isabel Rochev, the same woman who had a long-ago clandestine affair with his father and later slept with him in Moscow, really be working with Slade Wilson? His stomach churned at the thought. It seemed impossible, too many what-ifs and coincidences, but he'd also seen enough in his twenty-eight years to prove that often times what seems and what is are two different beasts entirely.

But how? Impossible wasn't a strong enough word for what he'd experienced with the man who at one time he had called his brother. If he let his mind drift, Oliver could still feel Slade's grip on his throat, the other man's beefy fingers pressing in, blocking his air. More than that, Oliver could feel the rage wash around him, just as the water washed around them on the sinking freighter off the coast of Lian Yu, though he wasn't sure anymore whether it was Slade's rage or his own that encompassed them.

"What are you going to do, Kid? Stick me with a cure? It doesn't matter. I'll keep my promise. I'll take away everything and everyone you love. Sara was only the first. Only the first. Your sister, Laurel, your mother..."

Oliver buried the arrow in the other man's eye when he could have cured him of the effects of Mirakuru, embraced his own inner demons with tenderness and desperation and a tragic familiarity, and chiseled away at his humanity. Five years later, he was still trying to find that humanity among the shards of his soul.
And now those shards tore at him again.

If Isabel perceived his inner turmoil, she did not indicate it. Indeed, nothing seemed out of the ordinary where she was concerned.

"We need to talk. You are aware of the photographs." She sounded almost bored with the conversation that she, herself, had started.

Photographs. The woman was possibly conspiring with a man hell bent on destroying everyone and everything he held dear, and she wanted to talk about photographs that would have made him smugly crow about his prowess a few years ago.

Play it cool. Be strategic, not reactionary.

"Vividly," Oliver replied crisply, slipping into a mask of his own.

"Then you'll be pleased to know that I have managed to shelf them. The person who took them won't be releasing them for public consumption." Isabel spoke with a hint of pride, as though she had performed a minor miracle and wasn't somehow responsible for the photographs in the first place.

He played along. "Were there any demands?"

"No. So you are free to continue playing the role of doting fiancé. I trust this didn't cause too much of a rift between you and Ms. Smoak."

"Your concern is touching," Oliver replied drily. "Why the sudden change?"

She smirked ever so slightly, which transformed her countenance from disinterested china doll to wolf-like predator. "Surely you're familiar with the expression, 'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.'"

"Did you just compare yourself to a horse, Isabel?"

"As I recall, I'm the one who did the riding, which would make you the horse in our little tête-à-tête, would it not? I have to say, the photos make the encounter seem far more exciting than it really was."

Oliver shrugged off her intended insult. "I don't recall you complaining at the time."

"Nor did you. But," she eyed him up and down, "you're not really my type."

"See, I think I'm exactly your type."

"Don't flatter yourself. If not for your last name, you'd be lucky to find work as a valet."

"Right. My last name." Oliver retrieved a framed photograph from the drawer of his desk and set it on the polished mahogany top with a loud clack. Robert Queen's eyes—so like Oliver's own—seemed to stare out at the two from the frame.

Isabel's self-assured mask briefly wavered, replaced by a flash of grief that surprised Oliver before she regained her composure. "I enjoyed working with your father." The words were innocuous, but knowing that their interaction went far deeper, Oliver couldn't help but prod.

"It was roughly thirteen years ago when you were under him. He must have left quite an impression if you are going to all this trouble to try to steal his company."

"Are we back to this? The Stelmoor buyout fell through months ago." Her tone would have sounded
more disinterested only if she had tagged a yawn onto her words.

"The attempted hostile takeover, you mean," Oliver corrected. "Funny. Rumor is it's back on its feet. I figured you were the type to own your duplicity."

"Funny you of all people should speak of duplicity. I suppose neither of us is what we seem."

"That's the closest to honest you've been this entire conversation. Since we're being so honest with each other, let me be honest with you. My father didn't die when the *Queen's Gambit* sank." He leaned against his desk, arms crossed over his chest.

Isabel's brows furrowed. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because there are things you deserve to know. He made it on the life raft with me. We were together for days. We talked about choices, regrets. We talked about righting wrongs and the love he had for my mom and my sister." Oliver met her brown eyes. "You never came up, Isabel. In those last moments, you didn't matter."

He could see the gears turning, pulling her in different directions. She finally settled on, "How? How did he...?"

"And *that* is not something you deserve to know."

She huffed out a breath. "You're a bastard, and I'm going to enjoy taking Queen Consolidated from you."

"That's an improvement on the coy act."

"Oh, I'm done being coy. I'm done denying everything. I've done that for far too many years. So you know the truth about your father and me? Then you also know you will never be half the man your father was."

"It almost sounds as though you cared for him," Oliver nudged.

"You have no idea. How could you? The extent of your ability to care for someone beyond who you see in the mirror is...what...cheating on Laurel Lance? Wasn't it her sister on the yacht with you? And now you're playing games with your secretary? Using her to curry favor with the board and the public—a real Cinderella story. Only you couldn't manage to be faithful to her in Russia, assuming that your relationship with her is even real. So what do you know of love?"

"More than you, I imagine."

"You know nothing about me. Robert was the love of my life."

"And *you* were just one in a series of indiscretions. If he could see what you're doing now, he'd be disgusted by you."

"No! He loved me, and I loved him!" Isabel hissed.

Gone was Isabel's cool persona, replaced by anger, a loss of control. It was rare to see her emote or express anything other than disdain. Could he force her to play her hand and reveal more than she intended?

"And you showed your great love by sleeping with his son. Your brand of love is perverse."

"And your hypocrisy is on full display," she snapped. "Robert created Isabel Rochev from Natasha.
He took an orphaned girl, saw to her education, gave her opportunities, molded her into a woman he could love." Her slender fingers glided along the edge of the framed photo. "We planned a life together—a beautiful life—but he couldn't bear to leave you and your sister. It's so sad to me considering how undeserving you both are. If only he knew then what I know now."

"What is it you think you know?"

She laughed aloud, the sound jarring to Oliver's ears. "Secrets have a way of coming out. All in due time."

"So that's what this is all about? He chose his family over you, his mistress, so you make it your life's mission to destroy what he built?"

"Shall we talk about destroying what your father built?" She spat back. "Look around you. Your mother jeopardized this company through her complicity in that ill-advised attempt to destroy the Glades. You—who know absolutely nothing about business—seem to be under the misguided notion that a swagger, charming smile, and a few poorly constructed excuses are all it takes to grow a company. You make foolhardy decisions, know nothing of economics, and are inconsistent at best in terms of actually putting in an appearance at the office. I am trying to save this company, so get out of my damn way."

"Trying to save it?" Oliver repeated. "I think we both know that's not what you're doing. This is about your ego."

"My ego?" Isabel practically snorted.

"Yes, your ego. My father rejected you, and you wanted to hurt him, except you couldn't because he's dead. You tried to take his company, and you slept with me, which is a loud 'fuck you' to us both."

"That's the way you choose to see it."

"That's just one of your layers."

"One?"

"Did my father know about your son?"

His question was met with a stunned silence. Isabel took a deep breath and finally found her voice. "I underestimated you, which quite frankly isn't something I do that often. I won't make that mistake again. For the record, I'm not going to let go of this company, Oliver. No matter how many investors you call about ridiculous inventions. This company will be run by a Queen. My son."

"It's not going to happen."

"You'll be able to do little to stop it. You've got bigger problems than me." She took a step closer, as though going in for the kill. "I know you weren't on the island alone. For that matter, I know that you weren't on the island for the full five years. I know what that star on your chest signifies. I also know you currently have a rather creative outlet for your aggressions after hours."

"Then you also know what I'm capable of." His voice was low, dangerous.

"As long as you know I'm capable of more."
"Is this the guy you saw at the warehouse with Isabel?" Felicity asked indicating her computer screen to Diggle. The two sat in the reception area outside Oliver's executive officer—under protest, as far as Felicity was concerned.

"That's him," John confirmed as he studied the photo from Slade Wilson's Australian Air Defence service record.

"He's going to an awful lot of trouble to get revenge on Oliver. Coming back from the dead, partnering with Isabel…That sounds insane. Who actually does that? I mean, comes back from the dead? Besides, well…Oliver. And Sara." She looked through the glass wall, noting the obvious tension between the co-CEOs. "Come to think of it, partnering with Isabel sounds insane, too. She's so…Isabel. Huh. Mark that name off of the list of hypothetical names for future children."

Diggle merely raised an eyebrow.

"And she was actually getting in jabs with him?" Felicity asked with incredulity.

"She held her own."

"And here I thought she was taking her life into her hands every time she went outside. I mean, a strong gust of wind could knock her over." She forced herself to look away from Oliver's office. "The world is so big and yet not big at all. What do you think they're talking about in there?"

"Don't know, but I hope he's keeping his cool."

"What's the worst that could happen? Wait. Forget I said that. That's just asking for trouble, and the last thing we need is more trouble. We've got that aplenty. With a capital T. And I've got the tattoo to go right along with it."

"I know what you're doing."

"Babbling. Word vomit. Yeah, I know. It just comes out, and I can't seem to control it."

Diggle studied his friend, his kind eyes meeting hers. "It's okay to be worried. You wouldn't be human if you didn't worry."

"I'm sensing a but."

"Oliver is complicated. He's about three different people rolled into one, and those parts of himself are constantly at war with each other."

"I just see Oliver."

"Because you love him."

Felicity opened her mouth to protest but couldn't find the words.

Digg continued, "But you need to know that he may never be able to leave behind his past. Not many people would, and my guess," he added as he pointed to the computer screen, "is that even if he wanted to, his past isn't going to leave him behind."

"So you're saying I should worry."

Digg placed his hand on Felicity's shoulder. "What I'm saying is you should take care of yourself first."
"I thought we already worked this out," Felicity tilted her head disapprovingly and pulled away from her friend's touch.

"So did I, but it just seems that this ruse you two have going on is about to come to a natural end with the McMartin party tonight. Maybe it's time you both do a reality check."

"John, it's not a ruse anymore."

"Maybe it needs to be," he replied bluntly.

"Don't," she said softly.

"This Wilson guy, he wants to destroy everything Oliver loves."

The implication in Diggle's words was too much for her to entirely process. "That's typical bad guy talk. I'm pretty sure that if there was a handbook for villains, that would be in there right after 'take over the world' and 'kick two litters worth of puppies.'"

"You're not taking this seriously."

"You're wrong," Felicity contradicted. "I do take this seriously. If Slade Wilson's out there skulking in the shadows and wants to hurt Oliver, then I'm not going to make it easier for him. We're stronger as a team, and you should remember that."

The two fell into silence as she turned away from him and back to the computer, becoming absorbed in compiling more information on Slade. As she found snippets, she commented, "Evidently, after Wilson was declared legally dead, his widow married—the week after the death certificate was filed."

"Ouch," Diggle uttered.

"Double ouch if she only knew that he was still alive and well. Arguably maniacal, but well."

"So why not return to her? Was he trying to do the right thing? She found happiness, so let her be?"

"Whatever he has been doing for the last few years, it's been stealthy. Nothing to tip off anyone who may be looking that Wilson is still alive. So that means he must have used an alias. Edward Fyers?"

"It's a bit on the nose," Digg commented.

"But enough of a stretch that it's not a bullseye." She cringed. "Poor choice of words considering the one eye thing." She pointed to her own left eye awkwardly. "Okay. So we stopped looking at Fyers when Oliver mentioned Slade. Perhaps..." She keyed in some search parameters. "He's not such a ghost after all." Felicity's screen filled with financial information. "Slade Wilson, international man of mystery. Assuming he took on the identity of Fyers, he's been globetrotting. Markovia. Corto Maltese. Hong Kong. Russia."

"He gets around for a dead guy."

"Doing what?" Felicity muttered as her fingers practically flew across the keyboard. "I'm cross-referencing these dates with anything unusual reported on media sites and...oh, boy. How has the ISA not caught up with this guy? Or A.R.G.U.S.?"

Diggle's eyes widened as he read the headlines that filled up the screen.
A few minutes later, Isabel wordlessly sauntered through the reception area, looking too much like the cat that swallowed the canary for Felicity's taste. She put her thoughts on hold, eager to share what she and John found.

When she and Diggle ventured into Oliver's office, he was standing at the window looking at the city below. His shoulders were rigid, coiled with tension. With every fiber, Felicity wanted to reach out to him, but something told her it was better to let Oliver have his space.

"We have about ten minutes before your next appointment," she informed him.

"What did Isabel want?" Diggle asked.

"To let me know she handled the photograph situation," Oliver replied.

"How considerate," Felicity said drily.

"And that she knows who I am," Oliver added dourly.

"So does just about anyone who follows the tabloids, including my mom," Felicity replied, trying to make light of the situation but falling short when she saw his grim-even-for-Oliver expression. "Right. The other you."

"That complicates things," Diggle pointed out.

Oliver pursed his lips. "Does it? If she's working with Slade, she's probably known all along," he theorized.

"I ID'ed her partner. It is Slade Wilson," Diggle confirmed.

Oliver exhaled loudly.

"Why does he have it in for you?" Felicity queried.

Oliver's eyes were stormy. "It's a long story."

"Always is," Felicity muttered under her breath.

"This guy is bad news," Diggle began, though from Oliver's expression, he was fairly certain he was preaching to the choir. "He's been working as a mercenary. He calls himself Deathstroke."

"They never have cutesy names like Sir Kills-a-lot, do they?" Felicity asked as she pulled out her tablet and produced a grainy photo from a Markovian news agency's article, which she showed Oliver. "I've seen this mask before," she said softly. "Or one like it. On Lian Yu." She swallowed hard as she remembered her brief foray onto Oliver's island purgatory. The mask she had seen on the beach had an arrow through one of the eyes.

Oliver studied the photo before pressing the tablet back into Felicity's hands. Though he said nothing in response to it, his jaw twitched. "If Isabel's working with Slade, revealing my identity would need to have the maximum impact, cause the most damage. Somehow I don't think Slade plans to let the legal system deal with me."

Felicity tapped her fingers against the back of the tablet. "So Isabel's just blowing hot air."

"Trying to unnerve you," Diggle added.

"It's working." Oliver took a deep breath. "Which is what she wants."
"What do you want to do?" Felicity asked.

"We go forward. Act as though it's business as usual. We shouldn't do anything to tip them off that we know Slade is alive and acting behind the scenes."

"What can we do to help?" Diggle asked.

"Felicity, would you let Belinda know the photo will not be released?"

"Of course. That will make her happy. I'm pretty sure whatever QC is paying her, it's not enough."

Unable to fight the impulse any longer, she reached out and took his hand. She felt his hesitation before he intertwined his fingers with hers. "Hey. It's going to be fine. All of it."

Oliver nodded before he pressed his lips to her forehead. "We'll go to the McMartin party tonight, turn on the charm, and save my family's company."

"Yes, we will," she replied with a smile.

"Then we'll assess our next steps."

Her smile faltered slightly, but she left her concerns unspoken. Oliver's eyes followed her as she left and greeted his 2:00 p.m. appointment, who was just stepping off the elevator.

"You okay?" Diggle asked his friend, whose gaze was still trained on Felicity.

Oliver straightened his tie. "I have to be. I don't have time for anything else."

Diggle ambled to the glass door, crossing the expanse of the office in only a few long strides. Yet he paused before leaving. "When we brought her into this, we made a vow we would keep her safe."

"I remember." Oliver knew his identity as the Arrow could potentially put Felicity in danger. He never dreamed that his identity as Oliver Queen could prove far more treacherous for her.

"Are you willing to do what has to be done?"

"I'll do whatever it takes to make sure Slade doesn't hurt her."

Borrowed time.

The expression was not one Oliver had ever thought applied to himself. As a member of the Queen family, Oliver never borrowed anything. He bought what he wanted—sometimes *took* it was the more apt description. Yet as he stood outside of Felicity's apartment to pick her up for the dinner party, he finally understood the saying.

One way or another, his time with her would come to an end. Perhaps he would have to drive her away for her own good to keep her safe from Slade. As he stared at the door, he mused that she would be so pissed off at him if she knew those words went through his mind. *For her own good."

But Felicity was better than he would ever be. Better than even Diggle, and John was a good man. And because she was such a good person, she couldn't comprehend the darkness that existed, the lengths that some people would go.

He wouldn't—*couldn't*—play Russian roulette with her life. So if he had to be cruel in order to be kind, so be it.
It also occurred to him that even if he didn't push her away, she would pull away, for if he did what was necessary to keep her safe, he would not be the type of man that Felicity would be able to love. He would have to embrace that dark part of himself, channel the lethal killer who, at times, had taken pleasure in the kill. That willingness to kill—finally releasing those last vestiges of hesitation—was the only thing that had allowed him to defeat Slade the first time. He had made strides in leaving that part of himself behind. Becoming that man again could very well be akin to opening Pandora's box. Once opened, would he be able to cage the monster again?

Then there was the other possibility. His time with Felicity would come to an end because Slade would succeed in fulfilling his promise. Whatever Slade did would be slow, would be painful, and it would be poetic. Would Slade force him to choose between Felicity and someone else? Laurel perhaps? A repeat of Anthony Ivo's twisted game?

No, he would excise himself from her life before he let that happen.

Oliver was shaken from his thoughts when her door opened. He drew in a breath, staggered by the beauty that stood before him. She was life incarnate, he marveled. For all the death, all the gloom that surrounded him, Felicity was freshness, light.

"Oliver. Hi." She held the princess-cut bodice of her dark blue chiffon dress against herself, not entirely fastened. She had foregone glasses in favor of contact lenses, and her blonde hair was pulled up into a twist, though tendrils framed her face and slender neck.

His mouth went dry. She was easily the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

"You kept your word. You didn't wear red."

"It's an invitation for trouble, right? The redshirts never stick around for the whole episode, and I kind of want to see how this ends." Felicity stepped aside so he could enter the apartment.

His appreciative gaze followed her. "You look stunning."

She laughed good-naturedly, if not with a hint of embarrassment.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"I'm sorry. Thank you. I'm just not used to compliments—or at least not compliments about my appearance."

"What kind of idiots have you been dating?" Oliver scoffed as he closed the door behind him and secured the lock.

"The kind who obviously didn't flatter me."

"You think this is all flattery?" Oliver asked.

"I think," she began, "that I am really glad you're here. I need you," she paused a beat, "to help me with my dress. I can't quite reach." She turned her back to him but looked over her shoulder as Oliver deftly buttoned the tiny closures until the bodice hugged her slender torso. His hands lingered on the soft skin of her shoulders as he finished. "I'm counting on you to help me out of it later, too."

Oliver had to force down his arousal.

Did she realize what she was doing to him? If so, she didn't acknowledge it as she moved from his touch, scurrying around the small apartment to put on the finishing touches—her high-heeled shoes,
a simple pendant necklace, and the tempewrist prototype on her slender wrist.

"Are you ready for this?"

"Sure. What could go wrong?" she deadpanned.

Despite the heaviness he felt, he broke out into a smile.

"That's what I wanted to see," she said as she stepped closer to him and slid her hands under his suit jacket. "That and if you are wearing suspenders."

"Suspenders?" Oliver was baffled, though that reaction was quickly replaced by his reaction to the warmth of her touch.

"They're incredibly, incredibly attractive on you." She smiled as she found the much-desired article of clothing. Her thumbs played with the loops where his suspenders connected to his trousers.

"Suspenders are that good?"

"Mmmhmmm." She stood on her toes and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "Very," She pressed another tiny kiss against his lips, "very good."

"Felicity," he whispered before pulling her to himself. He could feel the give of her body, the way her soft curves seemed to mold against his harder frame. Without another word, his mouth collided with hers fervently, the soft give and take of lips and tongues exploring, promising. Desperation fueled by desire ignited within him, the need to be closer to her, to not have any barriers between them.

It was selfish of him.

Isabel was right about one thing: he was a bastard.

But as he heard the happy little moan escape from Felicity's throat, he couldn't bear to let her go. Borrowed time indeed. Was this the last time he would hold her, savor her heart beating against his, feel her exhale against his skin? Was tonight the final time she would tease him or reward him with that smile she reserved only for him?

So much wasted time. It didn't seem fair. Why had it taken him so long to see who had been there all along?

He felt his gut twist.

He wanted to etch every touch, every taste of her into his memory. Perhaps that could help him keep his demons at bay.

And more than anything, he never wanted to let her go.

Instinctively, he brought her against the door, capturing her in his embrace. Felicity certainly wasn't protesting as her hands slid under his jacket, pushing it off his shoulders.

Oliver trailed kisses along her jaw and down her slender neck, nuzzling her pulse point.

"Oh for the love of suspenders, that feels amazing."

That was all the encouragement he needed to lift her, running his hands under the flouncy skirt of her dress. She wrapped her legs around his waist and arched against him, the friction as she met his
arousal both delicious and frustrating as the longing between them reached a fevered pitch.

They were quickly approaching the point of no return. All it would take was a swift downward motion of his zipper, a tug at her delicate panties, and he could be inside her. Filling her. Stretching her. Spilling his seed within her warm depths. He practically growled at the thought.

Felicity seemed to recognize the precariousness of their situation. "Oh," she panted as she patted his shoulders signaling for him to release her. "The tempewrist is working."

It was a tangible reminder that they had a task ahead of them for the evening, one that would not be easy, especially if they lost focus.

Oliver ceased his movements, his own breathing labored. "We should try to..." his voice trailed off.

"We should," she agreed as he set her down. "I'm going to freshen up. You should, too." She ran the pad of her thumb over his bottom lip. "There's a strong possibility you're wearing more of my lipstick than I am."

She disappeared into her bedroom, but not before handing him a couple of tissues. "So you can take care of things." Her eyes widened. "And by things, I meant the lipstick, not your..." she cleared her throat. "Though if you need to do that—oh my. Okay. Please just forget that I opened my mouth and inserted my foot."

When she reappeared a few minutes later, she looked as put together as ever and her skin was less flushed.

In the meantime, Oliver had managed to get himself under control. "Felicity, about earlier, I'm sorry."

"Don't be," she quickly replied.

"But if I made you feel uncomfortable...or if I was moving too fast..."

"You made me feel many things, but uncomfortable isn't one of them," she said with a twinkle in her eyes. "We just can't afford to get sidetracked right now. For the record, I am really, really looking forward to getting sidetracked—full on detour to middle of nowhere—with you when the time comes."

*Time.*

It was a reminder of something he would not have with her.

The McMartin house was not a castle, a la the Queens' residence. However, *house* wasn't quite the right word for it, either. The palatial estate, reminiscent of a Southern plantation-style manor, was impressive, even by high society's standards.

Reggie, the driver who earlier in the day had taken Oliver, Felicity, and Thea on their ill-fated lunch excursion, pulled the towncar around the circular driveway and exited the vehicle to open the door for Felicity.

Once out of the car, Oliver offered his arm, and she took it, the two walking in together. The marble-laden foyer overlooked a two-story ballroom, where guests were already milling about. Felicity was about to head straight into the action, but Oliver dug in his heels.

"We wait here to be announced," he told her.
"Seriously?" she asked, taken aback. "Who does that?"

"The McMartins are big on formality."

"I thought this was just supposed to be a dinner party with a few friends," she whispered.

"Oh, it is," Oliver replied. "You should see some of the big soirees they hosted in the past."

The two moved to one side of the curving double staircase that led down to the ballroom. Oliver turned and quietly said something to the man standing near the alabaster railing.

"Mr. Oliver Queen and his fiancée, Ms. Felicity Smoak," the man announced a moment later.

The two descended the staircase together. When they neared the bottom of the stairs, Oliver stilled her movements and directed Felicity to smile at a photographer who waited to capture the moment.

The flashing lights from the camera had her temporarily blinded. "I think I blinked in the picture," she lamented as the two moved toward the gathering.

Parker McMartin caught sight of the couple and grabbed two glasses of champagne before making his way over to them. Immediately he pressed the alcohol on them. "I'm glad you're here, Ollie. Felicity." His eyes fell on her appreciatively. "You look dazzling."

"Thank you," she replied, glad to see a familiar face, even if it was Parker.

"A lot of the old gang is here tonight," Parker directed toward Oliver.

Felicity felt Oliver tense, but he maintained the smile on his face. "I guess we're having a reunion of sorts."

"Max Fuller is over at the bar," he pointed. "Laurel Lance is here tonight, too. She brought Sebastian Blood with her. He's an alderman, but there are rumors he is considering a mayoral run. Laurel always liked do-gooders."

"Then I'm not sure what she saw in me," Oliver replied glibly. "But I do know Alderman Blood. We're working together on a few projects."

Parker slapped Oliver's shoulder jovially. "God, I imagine that would be awkward, what with Laurel being your ex and the prosecutor on your mother's case. And now with them dating."

"I think we can behave," Oliver assured him.

"Does Oliver Queen ever really behave?" Parker asked Felicity almost conspiratorially.

"I do now," Oliver replied looking down at Felicity.

"And to think you used to be so fun," Parker jokingly bemoaned. "If you'll excuse me, I must welcome a few others. We will catch up later, I trust?"

"Count on it." Oliver assured him. "Well?" he asked turning to Felicity. "What do you think?"

"I'm wishing I'd worn red," she murmured.
Ollie Queen, This is Your Life

Chapter Notes

This one's a long one. Seriously long. You may want to get yourself a drink and pull up a seat.

Also, just a quick reminder that this story is set in season 2. I mention this because you will see a character's behavior be fairly out of keeping with what we saw in season 4. I don't want to spoil too much here, but I think you'll know who I'm talking about once you read the chapter.

Part Fifteen: "Ollie Queen, This is Your Life"

He was a fraud.

This was increasingly clear to Oliver as he and Felicity moved around the ballroom at the McMartin house, making small talk and biding their time, waiting for an opportunity to speak with Frederick McMartin himself.

Laughter and music filled the room. So many faces—some familiar, some not. He listened to anecdotes, told his own, and played his part perfectly. The other party guests thought he was like them: privileged, not a care in the world.

When they noshed on a squab appetizer and marveled over its succulence, they had no clue that the first time he had killed, it was a pigeon. He had watched the life drain from the small bird, and he felt shame. To be eating what little meat was on the bones of this once living creature, with his dirty fingers no less, only heightened the disgust that permeated his very marrow, even though he had eaten the delicacy more times than he could count at parties not unlike this one.

This was different.

It was his first kill.

*It would be far from the last.*

The kills became easier after that, but the obstacles for survival heightened.

He had survived hell. The funny thing about hell though? It never really ended.

But these partygoers? They had no idea the lengths he had gone through to achieve his goals in the past. When he needed answers, he coerced answers, piece by piece if necessary. When he needed silence, he ensured silence, and at times, that silence had been gained through permanent measures. They had no idea what he would do even now to keep the people he cared about safe, or what he would do to save his city.

But how was he going to do either if Slade Wilson was out there? Slade had been his teacher, his friend, his brother, and his enemy. The *mirakuru* morphed the man into someone Oliver barely recognized, someone touched by madness and contempt, perhaps even a touch of evil.
Walking around this room, Oliver couldn't help but think that these people had absolutely no clue the type of evil that existed in the world. And Oliver? He knew too much of it. He'd been part of that evil, lulled by the siren's call of ends justifying means. He still had to fight that baser instinct, to find another way.

Then he'd glance at Felicity and remember that goodness existed, as well, but it was precious. It had to be.

She'd warned him a few days ago not to bubble wrap her and not to put her on a pedestal. But how he wanted to keep her safe! He wanted more than her safety; he wanted a life with her, a life without worry, without violence. But how could he feasibly make it happen? That question was on a repeat loop in his mind.

Maybe a man like him wasn't meant to be with anyone.

His heart slammed in his chest when she caught him looking at her. Her bright lips curled into a smile, her dimples deepened, and he found himself pulled into her sphere. He wanted to be the man she believed he could be.

And for one more night, he would be that man.

The other partygoers looked at him and saw the Queen heir. Felicity saw a man who could be a hero. Oliver saw a fraud.

Felicity could recall a handful of instances when she felt so out of her element, she was speechless.

In her freshman year of college, she went against her mother's wishes and tracked down her biological father—first on the Internet and then in person—to a brownstone in New York City. She gathered her courage and modest overnight bag, took the train down from Boston one weekend, showed up at his doorstep, came face to face with him, and then...nothing.

Her father was handsome, just like in the pictures her mom had shown her years before, though there were now more lines around his eyes, and his curly hair had been cropped close to his head. He was holding a little boy in his arms, and a little girl peeked up at Felicity from behind his leg. So domestic, so unexpected.

She had stood there dumbfounded, unable to utter a word. All she could do was study him, study her half-siblings, looking for pieces of herself. He had a deep voice and a pleasant smile and asked if she was lost. It turns out, she was—just not in the way he imagined.

As far as she knew, he never realized her true identity, and she left without saying a word. She couldn't see how telling him who she was would benefit either of them. He had a life that did not include her, and she had a dad in Chico, California, a man who had raised her and loved her as his own, a man who had chosen to be her dad.

And yet there was some part of her that had hoped this stranger—who had evidently grown up enough to be a father after all—would somehow connect the dots, recognize her, see her.

It really sucked when she was old enough to realize that her own father hadn't wanted her.

She still hadn't found the voice to tell him who she was.

Then there was her brother's birthday—his first birthday after he died. It felt morbid to celebrate the day of Gabe's birth when they were enshrouded in grief from his death. Yet her parents insisted they
wanted to have a party and invite all of his friends; the house had been too quiet. To have laughter in the house again, to tell old stories, guffaw at old jokes—it was all very cathartic.

At the center of the celebration had been Jack. Felicity hadn't seen him since just after Gabe's funeral, but she had wondered about him periodically. Some part of her always wondered about him, from the time Gabe brought him home when they played middle school soccer together, to the hours spent tagging along with Gabe's group of friends at Bucks Lake in Plumas National Forest. Jack always went out of his way to make her feel like something more than his friend's annoying little sister.

The gathering in Gabe's memory ran late into the night, and her parents insisted Jack should stay overnight in Gabe's old room, as he had traveled from San Francisco where he attended college.

Jack had shown up in her room, instead. It started with a tentative knock on the door. He wanted to talk, which was fine with her. She had always enjoyed being around him. He was smart, cute, and sometimes when he threw her a lopsided smile, her heart quickened.

Talking turned to snuggling. Snuggling turned to teasing kisses. Kisses morphed to touching. The press of his body against hers seemed like it was happening to someone else. She was hesitant, uncertain of what to do, her mind racing, her pulse racing. This was out of her realm of experience.

She couldn't find her voice to tell him yes or no.

When he snuck out of her room in the wee hours of the morning before her parents woke, she was no longer a virgin.

At the time, it seemed sweet, comforting each other, finding solace in memories of days past and better days ahead. Now that she was older, she viewed it for what it was: awkward, painful, and the start of a relationship that never should have happened.

Then there was the aftermath of her breakup with Jack, years later. It was her first breakup. Her only real breakup.

She had already moved to Starling to work for Queen Consolidated. Jack had wanted her to move to Chico, but she couldn't see herself there. Not anymore. They tried long distance—they'd done the long distance thing all throughout her time at MIT and his time in dental school, and it had worked thus far—but Jack leveled with her.

You don't take chances. There's no passion. No excitement.

It didn't help that her own parents seemed to side with Jack in the breakup. Maybe it was because they saw him everyday. He had moved back to Chico and started working alongside her father by that point, and her mother—well, her mother saw her future grandchildren disappearing before her very eyes.

Judith Smoak had advice for her daughter. "You've got to spice things up. Win him back even if that means using sex to do it."

Felicity reminded her mother that ship had already sailed. Her mother had slowly nodded, pressed her lips together as though deep in thought, and subsequently shocked Felicity by wanting to discuss techniques to add zing to the bedroom.

Felicity thought her ears were going to bleed.

Her best friend JoJo's philosophy was 'The way to get over someone is to get under someone else.' Needless to say, JoJo had a very different piece of advice for Felicity: "Mow the yard and get back
That episode had turned into a (literally) painful lesson on the do's and don'ts of personal grooming and the evils of wax.

Malicious, cold wax. Why hadn't the bad guys figured out it was a perfect torture technique? Oh, but this cold wax was supposed to be better; at least, that was what the packaging said. No melting, no clumping. All she had to do was rub the strips together in her hands until they were warm, peel them apart, and press. Then the hair was supposed to come right off when she pulled the strip. Turns out she was the only person who had not seen the huge media barrage for *The 40-Year Old Virgin*. If she had, she would've known that waxing was the new self-flagellation.

Felicity was on the phone with JoJo when she yanked the strip from her bikini line; the name ‘Kelly Clarkson’ wasn't what fell from her lips.

To make matters worse, some of the wax had oozed when it met the warmth of her skin, and it had stuck. Her lady bits were sealed up by the world's weirdest chastity belt.

She couldn't find her voice to tell JoJo what was wrong. There were some things that even her best friend didn't need to know.

Felicity had also felt out of her element when she looked up from her work one day at Queen Consolidated and saw Oliver standing there. She had prided herself on not being the type of person to get starstruck. At least, if she were going to be starstruck, it wouldn't have been over tabloid fodder like Oliver Queen. Then she actually met him. Oliver was charismatic, charming, impossibly hot, and he was hiding something.

She had found her voice that day—and proceeded to babble.

Yet he kept coming back to her. She was good at what she did, and she knew it. That didn't make her arrogant, she frequently reminded herself. It made her self-aware. She had a knack for problem solving and sniffing out bullshit.

Now though? Forget feeling out of her element. She may as well have been off the periodic table. The bullshit, though? That was in full force and smelled like designer French perfume. At least, tonight it did.

Maybe it was because the contact she and Oliver hoped to make as this party mattered so much. Yet as of fifteen minutes into their arrival at the dinner party, they still had not caught sight of Frederick McMartin of the McMartin Group (and Angry Father, Unincorporated). Surely seven years of watching his daughter Colleen fraternize with other men would have softened his anger somewhat toward Oliver. Right?

Then there was the matter of as she and Oliver mingled around the room, she had little to contribute as some other guests discussed their latest yachting adventure off the coast of San Tropez or playing high stakes poker in a Monaco casino. Her personal favorite? The one gentleman who boasted about a racehorse he had purchased and the siring fees he would be able to charge once the horse retired. After all, nothing else said scintillating conversation better than discussing a horse's sperm output.

It was dull, vapid, and none of it mattered.

Yet for as out of her element as *she* felt, Oliver smoothly transitioned to the role of Queen scion. No one was a stranger to him, at least that was the way he acted. It made sense to her. Many of these people had attended parties at the Queen mansion thrown by his parents. Others were childhood
friends and acquaintances.

It was impressive and, okay, mildly disturbing to see how chameleon-like Oliver was. She better understood her own reaction to him the first day they met. He just had that special *something* that made people flock to him.

One person who wasn't particularly thrilled about Oliver's presence at the gathering was Laurel Lance. Felicity wasn't going to say anything aloud, but she wasn't particularly thrilled that Laurel was there, either, so the misgivings were mutual. A few times, Felicity had noticed Laurel giving them the side-eye. Though they kept their distance from Laurel, she and Oliver had come close enough to overhear her conversations.

"Yes, the trial will start within a few days," Felicity heard Laurel say to another partygoer.

"It must be a challenge to prosecute, considering the close relationship you've had with the Queen family over the years."

"I took an oath to ensure justice will be served. I'm committed to doing that for all the Glades victims."

For his part, Oliver had perfected the art of keeping his expression mostly impassive when his mother's trial was mentioned. Still, she knew it had to sting, especially with Laurel prosecuting the case.

"Still no sign of Mr. McMartin," Oliver said, pulling Felicity's thoughts away from Laurel and other guests.

"Maybe he likes to make an entrance," Felicity suggested. "Didn't you have a back-from-the-dead party at one point?"

"Tommy's idea completely," Oliver replied, wondering where she was going with her question.

"And you made your entrance to 'We Are the Champions'?"

Oliver had the good graces to look slightly embarrassed. It was…*excessive* and so easy to slip back into that persona. In the grand scheme of things, it wasn't that long ago when he was rescued from the island, and yet, it seemed like another lifetime ago. Returning to town, trying to give people the Ollie they remembered and expected, all the while maneuvering to deflect attention from any connection between him and the hooded vigilante he had become. What better alibi than to be seen at his back-from-the-dead party at the same time that the Hood targeted the first name on the List?

"Guilty as charged. Also, Tommy's doing." Oliver paused for a moment. "Wait. How did you know? Were you there?"

At that, she laughed, slightly offended. "Uh—no. Can you really see me as one of the groupies?"

Oliver's mind drifted to that night. The sea of women in tight, low-cut mini dresses and mile-high heels had certainly been eye candy, but he had been around that since hitting puberty. They were nothing special, one much like the next. He tried to picture Felicity in that mix, with the pulsating lights and music, the throng of bodies. Would he have even noticed her? Probably not. He'd been so consumed with balancing his role as playboy and delivering his own brand of justice to Adam Hunt. Plus, Laurel had been there, and in the first months after his return, he couldn't see past his need to reconnect with her and alternately push her away.

Exhibit A. He really did suck at relationships.
Felicity had proven to be one of the biggest surprises of his life. He hadn't expected he would meet someone like her, someone who didn't fawn over him despite her innuendo, couldn't imagine that she would become so important to him. It started like so many other interactions he'd had with people. She had something he needed, namely her expertise. Unlike others who tended to fit into a role he cast for them, he quickly found himself disarmed by, first her babbling, and then the little tilt of her head and press of her lips. He'd never had a woman nonverbally call him on his bullshit within two minutes of meeting him. She was attractive in a low-key way, but it was her personality that drew him first—her friendship with no strings attached, her quirky humor, her intelligence—not her physical assets, though he could admit to looking, okay staring, from time to time.

Though tonight—tonight—she looked absolutely luscious. He just wished he could fully enjoy being there with her, that he could revel in the feel of her hand on his arm, the warmth that spread through him whenever she would smile at him, mull the secret messages she sent with only her eyes. Instead, he scanned the room constantly, assessing the likelihood of threats. He searched for the familiar stocky build that he thought had been confined only to his nightmares, listened for a robust Australian accent, and calculated what items in the room could be repurposed as weapons if necessary.

She deserved better than a man who courted violence and death. What was he going to do about it? That twinkle—though—that twinkle in her eyes pulled him back to the conversation at hand. There would be time later when they were in private to talk about their next steps.

Oliver asked, "Then how did you know about the party?"

"I think the on-line article described it as 'an evening of would-be debauchery'. Well," she added with a raised brow, "there may have been debauchery after the police broke things up, but…yeah, after you came to my office, I may have researched you."

Oliver exhaled loudly, not sure whether to laugh or cringe. "Now that I know you, I'm surprised you would even talk to me."

"No judgment here," she protested. He looked at her knowingly, and she amended her response. "Okay. Maybe a little judgment, but curiosity won out over horror," Felicity replied matter-of-factly. "But now you make so much more sense to me than you used to."

At the time, it was imperative for Oliver to minimize the changes in himself. What kind of threat was Ollie Queen—unless the threat was to Starling City's tequila supply? People wouldn't connect him with the hooded vigilante going after the city's most corrupt, not when they perceived him as nothing but an idiotic hedonist. However, now that he needed to be taken seriously as a businessman, he recognized that he might have been too convincing. Though in all honesty, he would have a credibility problem in the business world, no matter what. It wasn't as though he spent five years working on his graduate studies or learning on the job. Still, the reputation of his youth was not an easy one to live down, especially as he looked around the room and saw so many people he had wronged in some way. "Now I'm wishing I hadn't resurrected Ollie Queen."

"You do know it's weird when you talk about yourself in third person, right?" she said, mostly in jest.

"Old habits. Sometimes I just feel disconnected." He saw her forehead crinkle slightly in concern and fought the urge to rub the crinkles away with his thumb. "My dad was so much better at all of this. Schmoozing. Making deals."

"You can be very persuasive."
Oliver looked at her, doubt still etching his features.

"You proposed in a bathroom, and yet I'm here, aren't I?" she replied. "Like I said, very persuasive."

At that, he grinned, and she followed suit. How could she do otherwise when his smile made her feel like she'd just climbed the highest mountain? It was breathtaking and took effort, but the payoff was so worth it, even if she was afraid of heights. When those little sparks of happiness reached his eyes, she could almost imagine them chasing away the demons that plagued him, if only for a moment.

They found themselves gravitating toward the dance floor. Though he was never much of a dancer, he craved that closeness with her.

"Are you okay to dance? Your foot..." He still wanted to tear the tabloid reporter apart, limb from limb. When the reporter broke into her apartment and knocked her down as he ran out, what Felicity classified as a 'booboo' was something Oliver classified as 'it never should have happened.' It wouldn't have happened if not for Oliver bringing a spotlight on his friend that he'd put on the spot. And that incident was so minor compared to what Slade Wilson would do to her. Surely by now, Slade knew all about Felicity, was formulating a plan for how to use her, hurt her.

Oliver would kill him first, finish the job he had started five years ago, or he would die trying.

Felicity's response interrupted his darkening thoughts, bringing him back to the here and now. "I would love to dance with you."

Truth was, she was grateful for an excuse to be held by him. What a whirlwind of a week it had been! Just one workweek, and her whole life changed. The previous weekend, JoJo was commiserating with her over multiple pints of ice cream. Her friend had even whipped out a homemade dartboard with Oliver's picture—an old one that JoJo said made him look like a serial killer—despite Felicity's protests that she wasn't angry enough to throw pointy objects. Their fake engagement brought to light what they had both kept under the surface. Whereas she would once have been skittish to be so close to him, now she craved that closeness that felt like second nature.

With one hand entwined with his, and the other on his shoulder, the two moved to the music. The music itself was generic, the type that seemed par for the course at the few uppercrust parties she had attended. They maintained a respectable distance from one another, but she found herself biting back a sigh when she felt his fingertips stroking the side of her waist, very subtly.

"You are such a tease," she grinned up at him, "and still very handsy."

"Ms. Smoak, I have no idea what on earth you mean," he grinned back, wishing he could prolong the illusion of normalcy.

"This is nice," she said.

"Nice?" he scoffed jokingly. "Just nice? You've become very jaded if you think this party is just nice. I've ruined you already."

"Not the party. I could do without stories of stock portfolios and horse semen. Okay. That's a sentence I never thought I'd say. But it's nice, being here with you."

"Just nice?" he repeated jokingly. "What would I have to do to make it better than nice?" he posed.

Her teeth grazed her bottom lip before she responded, "That's a conversation for later."

His eyebrows shot up. "Later?"
"Mmmhmmm."

Oliver exhaled loudly even as he pulled her closer. He leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Now who's being the tease?"

"Oliver? I thought that was you." Sebastian Blood greeted Oliver, interrupting their all too brief dance.

Oliver reluctantly released Felicity before turning to the other man. "It's good to see you, Sebastian," Oliver replied, clasping hands with the alderman in a firm handshake. "This is Felicity Smoak, my fiancée."

"Yes, I remember you from QC," Sebastian replied with a smile. "You looked at me directly and told me that you don't get coffee."

"Must've caught her on a bad day," Oliver said before pressing a quick kiss to her temple.

She threw him a warning look. "Good day. Bad day. It doesn't matter. I hope you didn't take offense because I don't actually get coffee for anyone. Not even this guy," Felicity replied resting her hand on his abdomen. Good Google. He was firm.

"It's fine. I could do with less caffeine," Sebastian admitted. "Gives me nightmares."

Oliver chuckled. "Seems like we're running into each other all the time now."

"I like these circumstances better than being shot at in the middle of the day," Blood replied, referring to an incident that happened a few weeks back when a criminal calling himself the Mayor attempted to set up shop in the Glades.

"Being shot at in the middle of the night isn't any better," Felicity chirped. The tips of her ears suddenly felt very hot. "Not that I know from personal experience. I mean, why would I?"

"Laurel thought it would be a good idea for us to come here tonight. Give me the chance to meet people, make contacts. I hope that doesn't make you feel uncomfortable."

Oliver didn't miss a beat. "Not at all. I'll always care about what happens to Laurel, but as you can see, my priorities are elsewhere. So rumor has it you're thinking of running for mayor," Oliver added casually.

"The thought has crossed my mind," Sebastian confessed.

Oliver nodded. "You could do a lot of good for this city. It needs someone like you, someone who will stand up in the light of day for what's right."

"You may have just written my first t.v. ad spot," Sebastian joked. "In all seriousness, I appreciate your support."

"Glad to give it. I'm not sure the Queen name carries the same weight it used to, but I'll do what I can." The two men shook hands in an understanding.

"There you are, Sebastian." Laurel appeared at his side and wound her hands around his arm. "Already making the rounds, looking for deep pockets. You should know Oliver's pockets aren't as deep as they used to be."

"Laurel," Sebastian gently chided.
She smiled a little too broadly. "I'm joking. Where's your sense of humor? If you're a politician, you'd better get used to being the butt of jokes."

"Same goes with lawyers, I hear," Oliver interjected. Felicity had to suppress a laugh.

"Those would be the ambulance-chasing variety," Laurel replied, her eyes narrowing. She looked to Felicity. "You must be Oliver's fiancée that everyone can't stop talking about. It's so nice to meet you, Felicia."

*Mean Girl 101.* How disappointing. For as much as Felicity had heard Laurel glorified in the time she knew Oliver, she didn't figure Oliver's ex-girlfriend to be so obvious in her snark.

Felicity fought to keep the terseness from her tone. "It's Felicity, actually, and we've met."

Laurel's hand went to her forehead. "I hope you'll forgive me if I don't remember. So much has happened these last few months." Her eyes fell on Oliver. "Seriously, Tommy would be thrilled for you and planning a bachelor party that would probably land you in the doghouse."

*Right. Because that would pave the path for him with you,* Felicity thought. She frowned at the unkind thought. Maybe it was the shared history that Laurel had with Oliver, or maybe it was Laurel's impossibly long, slender legs. Either way, Felicity suddenly felt like a watered down version of a mean girl, herself.

"Tommy would have loved Felicity," Oliver said, his expression wistful.

"That's something I don't understand. When did the two of you even have time to—you know what? Never mind. I don't want to know. So really, congratulations, Ollie. Felicia—oh sorry. Felicity. I hope the two of you will be very happy." She looked to Sebastian. "How are your dance moves?"

"Shall we find out?" he replied.

"That was awkward," Felicity murmured to Oliver as Laurel walked away with Sebastian Blood. "I guess we're about to find out if she's one of those people who's coordinated enough to dance when she's sauced. Oh, crap. Did I say that out loud?"

"I'm sorry."

"Okay. I'm going to stop you right there. I'm a big girl. I can handle jealous, likely inebriated ex-girlfriends."

"I wish you could know the Laurel that I knew growing up. She was…" his voice broke off.

"Don't," she said softly.

"Don't what?"

"I know that look. Don't blame yourself. If she's self-destructing, that's not on you."

"She's my friend. Or she was."

"But she's not your responsibility. When Laurel pulls herself together, it will be through her own determination, not because of anything you do or don't do."

"Has anyone ever told you you're very smart?"

She shrugged. "A time or two."
"And very beautiful?"

"A time or two," she repeated.

"No matter what happens tonight, I want you to know that—"

Wow. Someone's perfume was strong. The scent tickled Felicity's nose as she fought back a sneeze—unsuccessfully.

"Ollie Queen, as I live and breathe!" A slight Southern lilt stood out in a sea of uppercrust elocution.

Oliver turned, as did Felicity. The woman who addressed Oliver was middle-aged but had the telltale signs of trying to cling to her youth without too much obviousness. Her forehead was just a bit too smooth, her lips just a smidgen too full. She was stylishly dressed, as were all the guests, Felicity noticed, and she wore a strand of pearls around her neck.

"Mrs. Fuller," Oliver greeted. "It has been ages." The woman air kissed Oliver's cheek.

"Felicity," Oliver continued, "this is Zelda Fuller. Mrs. Fuller, my fiancée Felicity Smoak."

"Please, call me Zelda. You're not a little boy anymore!" She lightly protested. "Felicity," she said reaching out and taking the blonde's hand, "it is such a pleasure. I always knew it would take a special woman to get this fella to settle down."

Felicity found Mrs. Fuller's accent to be charming, though her eyes still watered from the perfume. How was this not affecting Oliver? But he seemed nonplussed.

"The pleasure is all mine," Felicity replied fighting the urge to rub her watering eyes.

"So. Inquiring minds want to know. When is the wedding?"

"We haven't set a date yet," Oliver said sliding a hand around Felicity's waist, his thumb rubbing back and forth.

"Such the pity." The woman's wrinkle-free forehead did not convey an expression that fit her words. Actually, it didn't convey any expression at all. "Though understandable with what your family is going through right now. Your poor mother." Zelda looked to Felicity and explained, "Moira is one of my oldest and dearest friends."

Something in the way that Oliver cocked his head and pursed his lips gave Felicity the impression that the woman was blowing hot air. However, his reaction was so subtle, she doubted the other woman noticed.

Felicity herself wondered how sympathetic Zelda, as well as the other partygoers who had commiserated with Oliver, actually were. Truth be told, she had a difficult time with the enigma of Moira Queen. What Moira did—the secrets she kept, the underhanded dealings—led to the deaths of 503 people. It was so senseless when she considered that Mrs. Queen had many opportunities along the way to alter her course, but she doggedly clung to the notion that the only way out was through.

On the flip side, Felicity knew that fear could be a powerful motivator, and this woman was Oliver's mother. With as insane as Malcolm Merlyn turned out to be, was it out of the realm of possibility that he would have gone through with his threats and harmed Oliver and his sister?

The last thing she wanted to see happen was for Moira to spend the remainder of her life in prison. That would devastate Oliver. Thea, too. And if she knew Oliver, he would find a way to blame his
mother's incarceration on himself—as if he needed anything else to add to his guilt pile. Conversely, Moira Queen had squarely earned any culpability she may have felt for the earthquake in the Glades.

Zelda continued, "It just goes to show that you never do know about people. I feel foolish now. I always liked Malcolm. My husband did quite a bit of business with him over the years, God rest his soul. But for your mother to lose Walter and her freedom all in one fell swoop, that's just a travesty."

"The loss of life is more tragic," Oliver asserted. Felicity looked up at Oliver, pride coursing through her. It would have been so much easier for him to agree with Mrs. Fuller and excuse his mother's role in what happened.

A voice commented from behind them, "Even if it is the Glades we're talking about."

Felicity felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end as she turned to look at the man who joined their trio. He was tall, traditionally handsome in a Ken-doll, perfect hair sort of way. If only he hadn't opened his mouth to show what an ugly human being he was. What a perfect match for Isabel. If her day job and night job fell through, Felicity always had a fall back. She could be a matchmaker for the malevolent. Who knows? Maybe that would even make them less nasty. Of course, if they teamed up, it might double the trouble. Then again, Isabel seemed to have a soft spot for Queen men, and Ken-doll wasn't a Queen.

Oh, her brain.

"Now Maximillian," Zelda tsked, "every life is precious, regardless of someone's pedigree."

"Right. Who would clean your house or cook your meals otherwise?" The handsome man kissed Zelda's cheek. "Hello, Mother."

"My makeup, darling," Zelda warned him as she patted his face affectionately. "Felicity, this is…"

"Max Fuller," the newcomer interrupted. Felicity was grateful he did not hold out his hand to shake hers because he reminded her of a snake in human form. Being around him made her feel icky, like she would need to be disinfected afterward. "Ollie and I go way back."

"We attended etiquette classes together," Oliver supplied.

Max sneered, "Yes, too bad you didn't have the good manners to remain dead."

Zelda looked chastened, even if her son did not. "Forgive him. He just…"

"Skipped a few classes," Oliver replied, glibly trying to smooth over the conversation and keep things light, though the hardness in his eyes was unmistakable. Oliver had never liked Max, even though their parents were friends. Time and distance had not tempered that dislike. Sleeping with Max's fiancée at the rehearsal dinner wasn't one of Oliver's finer moments, but on the other hand, it couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.

"I won't pretend to be happy that you're here," Max retorted. "Tell me, Oliver, how did you make it through the door without Frederick McMartin's security escorting you out? Impressive, considering you don't even have your partner in crime to run interference for you anymore. Such a shame Tommy's not here for you to hide behind, though I did see Laurel across the room."

Oliver smiled, humorlessly, "You sure talk a lot for a guy who doesn't have his three goons to hold me still so you can sucker punch me. Of course, you're also the guy who got his ass handed to him by a woman half his size."
Zelda sighed loudly, "I see the two of you are still quarreling like little boys. Pity."

"Oliver, he's not worth it," Felicity hissed, splaying her hand on his chest. The last thing they needed to have happen was to not even get an opportunity to make a pitch to Frederick McMartin because a pissed off Oliver sent Ken-doll to the hospital.

"Isn't this just perfect? Where do you find all these women to fight your battles? Maybe you could share. I shared with you—at my rehearsal dinner, no less. Isn't it only fitting that you should share with me?"

Felicity's fingers dug into Oliver, a silent entreaty to keep his cool. Max obviously was trying to bait him.

"If I were you, I would consider my next words very carefully."

"Oliver and I have no secrets," Felicity interjected, saying it with far more confidence than she felt. After all, Oliver's secrets had secrets. Yet from the connotation of the conversation, she could guess why they'd had their rift. "And just to be clear, I am not a prize to be shared in any way, shape, or form. Perhaps you should go back to etiquette class and learn how to not come across as a misogynistic Neanderthal, or at least how to hide those tendencies better."

Felicity's admonition slid off Max the way water would a duck's back. "You've got fire in your belly. I love it. Should be interesting, what with Oliver's frequent zipper malfunctions."

"Maximillian," Zelda scolded.

But Max merely grabbed an appetizer from a passing waiter's tray, stuffed it in his mouth, raised his eyebrows smugly, and left.

Zelda shook her head and looked at Oliver and Felicity, embarrassment coloring her features. "I really must apologize for him. I assure you. His father and I did not raise him in a barn."

"He has good reason to hate me." Oliver met Felicity's eyes, needing to reestablish contact with her. "You didn't deserve that, though." Oliver knew Felicity was well aware of his past—in theory—but having it blow up in her face? That was the last thing he wanted for either of them, especially since his poor choices with women had been on display far too much lately.

"No, you did not," Zelda agreed.

"I'm fine," Felicity replied. "What happened was a long time ago. It has no bearing on us."

"I assumed you would be furious with me," Oliver directed to Mrs. Fuller.

Zelda broke out into a wide smile. "Me? Gracious no. You saved me a boatload of money. I was goin' to try to 'encourage' Stephanie to leave—with some funds, you know. I could sniff out from the start that, bless her heart, she wasn't the woman for my Max. Your indiscretion with her circumvented that need. Really, despite what Maximilian said, it really is good to see you, Oliver."

She excused herself from the duo.

Felicity could see that Oliver's blood was still pumping as the older woman walked away.

"I wanted to shove his teeth down his throat," Oliver said, his voice low. "And I could have. It would've been so easy, too."
"Hello testosterone. And to think he believes you have problem with impulse control," she quipped.

"You've been introduced to the results of the man I used to be. You sure you don't want to run the other direction?"

"Don't."

The muscle in his jaw twitched. "I'm not so sure Ollie Queen was even the worst version of myself."

The clanging of a fork on crystal brought a hush to the crowd. Frederick McMartin stood atop the balcony that overlooked the ballroom, appearing similar to a king overseeing his subjects.

"Friends, Christine and I are so thrilled you could join us tonight for our little get together."

Felicity looked around her. There had to be at least seventy-five guests. She wondered what a large get together would look like to him.

"We recognize how wealthy we are—not with things, but with the people in our lives. Let us celebrate life, our friendships, and those special to us. Yet let us always be mindful that there are those who do not share the fortunes that we have. Let us remember our responsibilities, not just to ourselves but to our fellow man."

"Here, here," someone from the crowd said.

"If you will please, join us in the banquet hall."

Several round tables were decorated with elaborate settings in the banquet hall. Oliver and Felicity were seated with Parker, who joked about sitting in the back of the room so he wouldn't have to be on his best behavior. His parents sat on the opposite end of the banquet hall. Oliver noted that Zelda and Max Fuller were with them, as were their daughter Colleen and several of their younger children, who were dressed to the nines. An opportunity would present itself, but they would have to bide their time. Nothing good would come from approaching Frederick McMartin at that point.

An elegant dinner followed: seared scallops and baby spinach with a pomegranate glaze, coupled with buttermilk sage dinner rolls and ginger-pear galette. The food tasted as scrumptious as it looked, perfectly arranged on gold-rimmed plates.

As dinner came to a close, guests began to meander back to the ballroom to dance and drink. Oliver's phone vibrated in his jacket pocket.

"It's Thea," Oliver held out his phone. A text.

Thea:

911

Fear—the emotion that was becoming all too common—gripped him. What if something happened to her? What if Slade had made contact? Diggle had volunteered to watch over her that night—discretely, of course—but...

"You should make sure she's okay," Felicity said immediately.

Oliver hesitated, not wanting to leave Felicity alone. If Slade tried something, she stood a better chance with him by her side. But Thea. "Will you keep an eye on Felicity?" Oliver asked Parker,
earning him the stink eye from his pseudo fiancée.

"Of course," Parker agreed without hesitation.

"Excuse me," Oliver replied, not acknowledging that he was probably going to be in trouble with Felicity for treating her with kid gloves. Once he made his way to the hall, he dialed Thea's number. "Speedy, is everything okay?"

On the other end, his sister blurted a string of frustrations. "You've got to talk to Mom. She's...she's throwing her life away! Literally. Does she want to leave us? This is so ridiculous, I can't even..."

"What happened?"

"I spoke with Jean Loring about the upcoming trial, and she told me that Mom is refusing to testify on her own behalf. How will the jury understand why she helped Malcolm Merlyn if she doesn't take the stand?"

"I'll talk with her."

"This family is falling apart. Mom's going to end up on death row because she is suddenly convinced she shouldn't do anything to—you know—actually help herself. And you..." her voice trailed off.

"What about me?"

"Look, I don't want to argue with you about Felicity, but I'm telling you that something is off about her."

"Speedy, I'll check on Mom. And you and I, we're going to have a long talk about Felicity tomorrow morning. Just try not to worry."

It wasn't the crisis he'd feared, but it was bad enough.

Parker would be much more charming if he wasn't in love with himself, Felicity decided. As soon as Oliver left to call his sister, she was treated to a laundry list of Parker McMartin's Greatest Hits: Country Club Tennis Champion. Named one of Starling City's Hottest Bachelors. Grand Marshal of the upcoming Starling City Rockets-sponsored Christmas parade.

Why in the world would Oliver think Parker was the best babysitter for her? As if she even needed a babysitter! She knew Oliver was on edge because of Slade Wilson, but nothing had changed—except now they knew Slade was out there. Theoretically, that gave them a tactical advantage. But she also had a pretty good idea of how Oliver ticked. For as much as he was trying to downplay his concerns, she wouldn't be entirely surprised if he tried to distance himself from her and John, to just take himself out of the equation entirely. There was no way she was going to let him face this enemy alone, though, and she planned to tell him just that after the party.

Parker was in the middle of regaling her with a story about the cooking course he was taking with a private chef when a woman approached him, whispered in his ear, and he was suddenly on his feet. "Felicity, my apologies. Something has come up that cannot wait."

As he stood, Felicity saw exactly what that something was before he shielded his crotch area with his hands.

Felicity wasn't sure whether to be insulted or relieved as Parker hurried away with the young woman, going toward, what Felicity assumed was the family quarters. She stayed at the table for a
minute by herself waiting for Oliver, but the dining hall was definitely emptying out, and caterers were beginning to clear the dishes from some of the unoccupied tables.

It seemed like the thing to do was migrate back to the ballroom. Surely Oliver would know to look for her there.

When she returned, it was to the sea of faces she did not know, except for the few who were not particularly friendly. Was this evening a mistake? Obviously, Frederick McMartin wasn't going to accept an appointment with Oliver, so they had to find a way to make contact, but all Felicity wanted to do was fade into the wall.

"You've certainly landed the prize, haven't you? Anyway, it seems like it now." Laurel, glassy-eyed and speaking slightly louder than necessary, pulled Felicity from her thoughts.

Where had she come from? Huh. If a drunk Laurel Lance could sneak up on her, what could a mercenary like Slade Wilson do, if he were so inclined?

"Landed the prize?" *Stupid. Stupid.* Why did she engage in a conversation?! She screamed mentally.

"I keep hearing how smart you are. Don't act disingenuous." Laurel's eyes flashed with anger, even as the words were heavy on her tongue. "I'm talking about Ollie, of course."

"Oliver's not a prize. I mean, he is. He's wonderful. Just not my 'prize.'"

"Come on," Laurel settled next to Felicity as though they were old friends. "It's just us girls."

"Where's Sebastian?" Felicity asked.

"He left. Something needed his attention right away."

Felicity stifled a little snort. That seemed to be going around a lot lately.

"Where's your date?" Laurel asked.

"Phone call."

Laurel raised an eyebrow, as though she didn't fully believe Felicity's explanation of Oliver's whereabouts. "I'm glad we have this chance to talk."

"Here comes the interrogation," Felicity muttered under her breath.

"What's that?" Laurel asked.

"Nothing. You were saying?"

"You went from setting up Ollie's internet to being his secretary and now his fiancée."

"Executive assistant," Felicity enunciated.

"But knowing Ollie like I do, you play office. If it weren't so tragically cliché, it would be hilarious. You get to be Cinderella, and I…I'm alone. I have nothing left. Not even my dignity, it would seem."

"What about Sebastian?"

"Men and their games. Ollie plays office. Sebastian plays politics. Maybe I'll make a good political wife someday. At least on paper." Laurel grabbed another glass of wine from a passing waiter.
Felicity grimaced. "Are you sure that's a good idea?" If Laurel kept drinking, she'd fit right in with the Kennedys.

"I don't need you to be my life coach. You think you've got it all figured out, and you're thinking to yourself, 'Poor Laurel.' Right now you're blind to what's in front of you. He has a way of doing that. Just with a smile or the way his voice changes when he says your name, he can make you feel so incredibly special." Laurel looked lost in her memories, her expression softening only to grow hard once more. "But you're not. Just in this room...over there is Colleen McMartin. Her dad caught the two of them in...", she pointed toward French doors that led outside, "the swimming pool. In flagrante delicto. Oh, and at the bar is Max Fuller. Ollie slept with Max's fiancée at their wedding rehearsal dinner."

"I heard."

"I think it was for a bet with Tommy."

"Yes, very classy of them," Felicity said sarcastically. "You've made your point."

"See, I don't think I have. I saw Miranda Talbert here somewhere. Before Ollie and I dated, they nearly got kicked off a flight for holding a mile high club meeting in the plane lavatory."

"That's enough."

"Oh, but I'm not done counting, limiting the numbers to women who are actually represented here tonight. Of course, there's you. Then there's me. Oliver was my first. My only for a really long time, actually. I changed him, he used to tell me. I was on my way to a happily ever after—kind of like you are right now—when Ollie convinced my sister to sail away with him. And Sara died." She laughed humorlessly. "I hope you don't have a sister because it's really awkward when the man you think you're going to spend the rest of your life with is screwing her and then gets her killed."

Felicity swallowed hard. She'd met Sara, liked her. While Sara's existence wasn't her secret to tell, seeing Laurel still in such obvious pain over her sister's 'death' made her eyes sting. She would give anything to be able to see Gabe again; that wasn't an ache that ever completely subsided. She imagined it was the same for Laurel. Of course, that situation was far stickier. "Are you the same person you were six years ago?"

"Of course not."

"Neither is Oliver. You act as though you know him, but you don't. Not really."

"Funny you should mention that. Oliver would disagree, what with him coming to my apartment, declaring his love for me, and that I'm the one person who really knows him."

"And then the Undertaking happened."

"He told you about coming to see me?" Laurel looked genuinely surprised.

"He told me that the two of you tried again, but too much had happened."

"We slept together. Old time's sake. New beginning. I don't know. What I do know is Tommy saw his best friend with the woman he loved, and then he died the next day."

Felicity shuddered, and Laurel reached out to touch her forearm, ostensibly to comfort her. "I'm not trying to hurt you."
"No, you're trying to hurt Oliver, which is far worse," Felicity replied moving from the other woman's touch.

"Oliver can't help himself. Don't waste years of your life thinking you're going to change him."

It was then that Oliver approached them. He was visibly relieved to see Felicity. "Hey," he said before kissing Felicity's cheek. "I thought you were staying with Parker." He noticed the hard set of Felicity's eyes. "Is everything okay here?"

"Perfect," Laurel piped in. "Just filling in Felicity on what a friendly guy you've been."

"Laurel." The one word held a warning.

Laurel shook her head. "I should call it a night. I have a trial to prepare for."

"You've already held court tonight," Felicity replied darkly.

"Where's Sebastian?" Oliver asked.

Laurel ignored the question.

"He had to leave," Felicity supplied.

"How'd you get here tonight?" Oliver asked, touching Laurel's arm when she didn't immediately answer him.

"I drove," she replied, her voice harsh. Oliver could smell the alcohol on her breath.

"Let's call you a cab."

"I'm perfectly fine."

"No, you're not. I'm guessing in the morning you're going to be pretty hung over."

"That's rich. In the process of being arrested for public drunkenness, didn't you pee on a cop's tire?"

"I was a 21-year-old punk ass kid. You're not a kid anymore, Laurel, and you're not drinking because you're bored or partying too hard. You're drinking because it hurts."

Felicity walked away, feeling like an intruder on a private moment.

Well, shit.

Felicity was going one direction, Laurel another. If Laurel drove, she would likely hurt herself or others. The probability Slade would show up in the middle of the party to harm Felicity was slimmer. Much slimmer.

With reluctance, Oliver followed Laurel as she retrieved her coat and clutch from the valet. "Shall I bring your car around, Ms. Lance?"

"Yes." "No." Laurel and Oliver spoke simultaneously.

Laurel huffed in annoyance, but Oliver looked to the attendant. "Could you please give us a moment?"

The man backed off, much to Laurel's continued annoyance.
"Stop trying to be my hero. You're the last person I need feigning concern over something you don't need to be concerned about."

"I'm not feigning concern. I am concerned."

Laurel looked at him, doe-eyed and vulnerable. "You don't have the right. Not anymore."

"That's not how it works." He took the clutch from her hands and pulled out her car keys. "I'll send these over to you tomorrow, but for now, I'm calling you a cab, or I'm calling your dad. Your choice, but you're not driving tonight."

Alone in a room full of people. Felicity moved toward the bar, wanting something to drink other than the free-flowing wine and cocktails. If she'd been tempted to imbibe, Laurel's little alcohol-fueled fit was enough to dissuade her.

"Diet Coke, please," she told the man behind the bar when he inquired what she would like.

"You have the most amazing ass."

Evil Ken-doll.

She didn't look at Max as she responded, "Well, you know what they say. Takes an ass to know an ass."

He sidled next to her, leaning against the mahogany bar. "I like you. You've got a fire in your belly."

Was this one of his pick up lines? He'd told her that before. It sounded ridiculous then, and now she really wasn't in the mood. "What girl doesn't want to be compared to heartburn?" Felicity shot back.

"And a wicked sense of humor. I'm guessing there are other parts of you that can be wicked, as well. You can do so much better than Queen. You do know that, right?"

"Contrary to what you may be thinking, I don't view Oliver as a stepping stone to someone or something better. I'm in this for the long haul with him."

"But is he in it long term with you? Didn't I just see him walk out with Laurel Lance?" His blue eyes studied her. "I can see from your expression that it bothers you. You know the old saying once a cheater, always a cheater."

"What you can see is my annoyance with you. I'm not going to waste my time having this conversation with you," Felicity replied.

"Then let's not talk at all. There are other ways of communicating." He looked at her confidently before he added, "Meet me later."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"I saw the way you were looking at me earlier. You're intrigued."

"If by intrigued you mean disgusted, sure. We'll go with that."

"I know when a woman wants me. Besides, what do you think is going to happen with Oliver and Laurel? You think they're actually done with each other?"

She did believe they were over. Whatever they had in the past, Felicity honestly couldn't envision a
scenario where they reconciled as lovers. As it was, any friendship the two still shared was hanging on by a thread.

She needed some distance between herself and Max before she lost her temper entirely, but as she started to move, he moved with her. Normally, she would have lambasted him until that he was metaphorically neutered and later enjoyed some subtler Robin Hooding or tinkering with the No Fly List. That approach wasn't going to work. Sure, she wanted to help Oliver get Mr. McMartin's attention, but not because she threw her drink on Ken-doll, used her loud voice, or tried to emulate some of the jabs she'd seen Oliver and Diggle practice on each other.

Another approach was in order. Felicity took a deep breath. "Do you know the Harrington?"

Max smirked. "Yes."

"Go to the 26th floor. Be there at midnight."

"What room?"

"If you want me, you'll have to look for me."

"I'm going to make you forget his name."

"We'll see."

Felicity practically shuddered when Max walked away. Could someone get cooties just from a conversation? Whatever good deed Oliver was doing for Laurel, he was going to owe her for having to put up with Max Fuller.

From behind her, she heard the sound of clapping. She startled slightly. She had been so engrossed—emphasis on gross—with Ken-doll, she hadn't even realized that she had an audience.

Frederick McMartin.

She couldn't find her voice.
Chapter Notes

My deepest apologies for not individually thanking each of you who left comments on chapter 15 (yet). Real life has been insanely busy as I've been preparing for a new school year. I truly do appreciate your comments, though.

I suspect some of you are going to want to throttle Oliver as you read this one. Take it easy on him. LOL. He's having a tough day.

Chapter Sixteen: "All the Credit Goes to Menopause"

Felicity couldn't find her voice.

For about two seconds.

Then it came back, just in time for a full-on ramble. "Mr. McMartin!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here? Not that you shouldn't be here. This is your place…and your party. I mean, of course it is. Why wouldn't you be here listening in on my conversation? Not that I think you were purposely trying to eavesdrop. You don't know me, so why would you want to listen in? I'm Felicity, by the way. Felicity Smoak. I'm making a terrible first impression. It's my curse. I seem to do that a lot, but what you just heard…"

"Take a deep breath, Ms. Smoak," Frederick McMartin interrupted her, putting her out of her misery. "That conversation between you and Max was one of the most interesting brush-offs I've ever been privileged to witness."

Relief coursed through her. Thank Google he didn't believe she was seriously going to have an interlude with Max Fuller. After what happened with Thea in the restaurant, the last thing she needed was for yet someone else to think she was attempting to cheat on Oliver. And then there was the yuck factor. "Max's vocabulary doesn't extend past yes."

"I didn't hear all of the conversation, but that was the unfortunate impression I got."

Felicity's brows furrowed. "How did you know I was brushing him off?"

"There aren't twenty-six floors at the Harrington Hotel. I should know. I own it."

"Do you think sending him on a wild goose chase was too over the top?"

"It's a pity you couldn't have gotten him to start looking right away," Mr. McMartin chuckled.

"On a positive note, his mother is a charming woman."

"Yes, it's too bad charm isn't hereditary." He studied her, trying to place her. "Are you a friend of one my children?"

Oh frack. Where was Oliver? This was the perfect opportunity to make contact with Frederick McMartin, and Oliver was nowhere to be found—unless your name was Laurel Lance. "More like
acquaintances. I'm here with my fiancé, who is an old friend of Parker and Colleen."

"Oh? Who's the lucky fellow?"

"Oliver Queen."

Mr. McMartin's easygoing expression hardened, and an invisible wall immediately erected. "Felicity, you seem like a nice girl, and if one of my daughters were in this situation, I hope someone would warn her. Get out while you still can. Oliver Queen is not marriage material."

A middle-aged woman sidled up to Mr. McMartin. Her blond hair was pulled back into a loose bun, and her brown eyes were kind. "Neither were you when we met, Freddie, but here we are thirty-one years and seven children later."

His expression softened as he introduced his wife, clearly still smitten with her. "Felicity, this is my better half, Christine."

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. McMartin."

"Christine please," the older woman insisted. "We're all friends here, Felicity. And don't listen to my husband. He has a blind spot where certain people are concerned."

"For good reason," he harrumphed.

"But these are our guests," Christine gently chastised him. "And Felicity doesn't need to hear about youthful indiscretions."

Oh, but she'd heard all about them. Felicity wasn't sure which was worse: that Oliver had been such an entitled playboy or that his so-called friends were the ones throwing him under the bus.

"There you are." Felicity heard Oliver's voice before she actually saw him, and her heart thundered. This was it. This was his chance to save his family's company. Oliver pressed a quick kiss to Felicity's cheek before extending his hand to Frederick McMartin. "It's a lovely party. Thank you for having us tonight."

Mr. McMartin grudgingly took the proffered hand and shook it, though he squeezed Oliver's hand more tightly than decorum dictated. "Oliver Queen," he said in disbelief. "It seems like only yesterday I was kicking you out of here and warning you to never come back."

"With a shot gun in your hand, as I recall."

"That would be pretty convincing," Felicity chirped in. "For most people."

Christine laughed lightly before moving forward to air kiss Oliver's cheek. "I, for one, am glad you're here. It's been too long."

"Why are you here?"

"Freddie!" Christine scolded.

Oliver ignored the verbal jab, maintaining perfect suavity. "Felicity and I ran into Parker and Colleen the other night at the Rockets game."

Mr. McMartin had the manners to look chastened. "My apologies, Felicity. You seem like a perfectly lovely young woman. My quarrel is with Oliver, not with you."
All week, Oliver had doubted Frederick McMartin's willingness to let bygones be bygones. He wished he hadn't been right. "Other than seeing old friends, that's actually one of the reasons I wanted to come here tonight. My father always thought so highly of you, so I'm grateful for the chance to clear the air. I would like to apologize for my conduct. I knew how you felt about the type of relationship that was permitted under your roof. I should have shown more…restraint."

Mr. McMartin considered Oliver's words. "Never let it be said God doesn't have a sense of humor. I was a bit like you as a young man, and as I got older, I was determined to keep my own daughters away from my type. What's the old saying? Men use the promise of love to get sex. Women use the promise of sex to get love."

"I use coupons to get pizza," Felicity blurted then paused, appalled. "I said that out loud, didn't I? I have this…filter problem."

Mr. McMartin looked bemused. "But this, I want to hear."

She shook her head. "I saw that on a meme. It's true. I do use pizza coupons. The rest of it, though, I disagree with. Not everyone fits into a mold. Not all men lure women to bed with false declarations of love. Not all women need to hear declarations of love to have sex. Look at your daughter, for instance," Felicity replied.

Oliver studied Felicity, the alarm on his face indicating that he wasn't sure quite where she was going with this, but wherever it was heading did not look promising.

"Well, I mean, Colleen is vivacious and social and…" Promiscuous. Frack frack frackety frack frack. Back pedal. Back pedal!

"I think what Felicity is trying to say, Freddie, is don't be such a hypocrite," Christine intervened, seeing that whatever Felicity said about their daughter was not likely to smooth over the conversation. Felicity sent a silent look of 'thank you' to her, though she was surprised that Colleen's mother, of all people, would come to her rescue. "What happened was long ago. Besides, I seem to remember my father didn't approve of you, either."

Much to Felicity's surprise, Frederick McMartin seemed placated by his wife's words. "Fair enough."

Oliver reached over for Felicity's hand and squeezed it, quietly reassuring her. "Mr. McMartin, I would love to talk with you about some of QC's upcoming projects, some that I think could be mutually beneficial. I may not have the background that my father did…"

"Robert was one of a kind," Frederick interrupted, reminiscing. "I once saw him single-handedly avert a labor strike at the foundry because he knew the union leader's grandkid's name. It was all about the relationships. He could make a believer out of anyone."

Oliver nodded. "But I also know he sought your advice from time to time. I would appreciate if I could do the same."

"Oliver, you have resources available within your own company, even if having a co-CEO is a bit unconventional. Ms. Rochev has quite the business acumen."

McMartin was sidestepping him. Oliver could see it clearly. "We have different visions for the future of QC."

*That was putting it lightly.*

"Let me be frank. I don't see how getting into the middle of a civil war is beneficial to my company. I
wish you the best, Oliver. Robert would appreciate your gumption, and I think he'd be proud that you're giving it a go. If you'll excuse us, Christine and I have other guests we should greet."

Mrs. McMartin looked at the couple apologetically before walking away with her husband, hand-in-hand.

Oliver scrubbed his hand over his face. "Dammit. I blew it."

"Let's go talk outside," Felicity suggested when she glanced across the room and saw Max Fuller lift a glass as though in a salute to her.

Oliver hesitated. "It's cold out there, and your dress doesn't give you much protection from the elements."

She smiled. "I guess we'll put the Tempewrist to the test. C'mon."

The two walked through the French doors onto the terrace. The night air certainly had a bite to it; it was, after all, November. Oliver slipped off his suit jacket and draped it around her shoulders. "Julian Edemiel said that even though the Tempewrist will regulate your comfort level, you're still susceptible to exposure to the elements."

"So no snow skiing in my underwear then."

"That I'd like to see." Oliver managed a wary smile before exhaling loudly. "All of this has been for nothing."

"Hey. If at first you don't succeed…"

"Pay someone to do it for you," he finished.

"I'm pretty sure that's not how it goes," she replied as she reached out and tucked her thumbs under his suspenders.

"That's what I always did in the past. If something was hard, I just…" he trailed off.

"But you're not that guy anymore. You've done more, been through more challenges, than anyone I know. You've survived," she dipped her head before looking back up at him meaningfully, "and here you are."

"And here I am. Out of my depth. Trying to hold onto something that I'm not even sure I want."

"Isabel must have enemies. You don't act like her and not make them. We just have to find them. I think Belinda might be helpful in that regard."

"But in the meantime, Isabel's solidifying her position to take over QC. She's got Slade backing her. 'Spondeo.' Did you know that's Latin for I promise?"

"Oliver Queen, are you quoting Latin to me? If I'd known you could do that, I would've taken you to trivia night long ago—your lack of pop culture references notwithstanding."

"Courtesy of Google Translate. The name of the puppet company is…fitting, I suppose." He blew out a breath, the warm air meeting cold, making his breath visible. "What Mr. McMartin said has got me thinking. My father's success was all about the relationships. He's right. I don't have that with people."

"Maybe to get people to care about you as a leader in the company, you have to care a little more
about the company itself, not just as a means to an end." At her words, Oliver shifted uncomfortably, but she continued. "Let them see it's more than a vanity post."

"Is it really a vanity post when I end up looking like an idiot most of the time?"

"When you go in late in the morning or you're running late to a meeting, I understand why because I know you were out patrolling late the night before or doing something else to keep the city safe. The board members and the QC employees don't know that. They just assume it's a lack of commitment."

"And I can never tell them. I just have to get better at balancing. Of course, soon I might be out of a job." He pressed his lips together. "We need QC's resources."

"I know, and we'll find a way. We always do."

"You're blindly optimistic."

"It's not optimism when you've shown me over and over that anything is possible. I believe in you, Oliver. I just wish you could see yourself the way I do." She stood on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth, testing the water, trying to draw him from his doubts. She pulled back, looking at him with hope and the promise of so much more if he could just let himself go.

His breath hitched as her hands toyed with his suspenders, her fingers moving from his shoulders down the length of the material until they reached his waistband. Goosebumps peppered his skin from her gentle touch, and he ached to reach out to her. He shouldn't, for the more he touched her and the closer they became, the harder it would be to let her go. But she already had a hold over him, and he thirsted for her, the way a man in the desert thirsts for water.

Tentatively, he cradled her face—damning himself—his fingers caressing the tender skin of her neck, his thumb stroking her pulse point, the pulse of life. Her life. For as tenderly and deliberately as he stroked her, he had brutally and deliberately snapped the necks of others, not even waiting to feel that pulse of life ebb. If it meant saving her, he would do it all over again. She wanted him to inspire others, but to inspire, he needed to be better than the man he was. And if anything, he was going to have to become worse.

"Felicity, I want to be the man that you see, but I'm not."

"Huh. It's ironic. I've spent this evening listening to Parker McMartin and Max Fuller try to convince me of how awesome they are, and you're trying to convince me you aren't. For the record, I'm not buying it. Any of it."

I'm in love with you. I'm in love with you. Slade is going to destroy everyone I hold dear, and I'm in love with you. The thought played on a repeat loop in his brain.

Felicity turned from Oliver, breaking the contact. "So what did you mean when you said the name Spondeo was fitting? It means something to you."

"I am going to tell you. More than you ever wanted to know about me, probably, but not here."

It was then that they heard the sound of the terrace door closing and saw they were no longer alone. Christine McMartin came out, her heels clicking on the pavers. A sheen of sweat glistened on her lovely face, caught by the area solar lights.

"I'm sorry to intrude," Mrs. McMartin said when she saw the two of them. "I didn't realize anyone was out here."
"There's no need to apologize," Oliver replied, smoothly transitioning to his public self. Oh, those etiquette classes paid off. "We're the ones who are the guests here."

"Are you okay?" Felicity asked as she watched the other woman fan herself.

"It's just a little warm inside, that's all." She smiled wanly. "I hope you don't think this too forward of me, but Oliver, could I borrow Felicity for a few moments?"

Oliver looked to Felicity, who nodded slightly. "I'll meet you back inside?"

She reached out and squeezed his hand. It's going to be okay.

"Phew. This cool air was just what I needed," Christine McMartin said when Oliver went inside.

"Are you sure you're fine?"

Mrs. McMartin laughed. "Oh, it's just a hot flash. I'm going through the change of life."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

"It's fine. Unlike my husband, I don't stand on ceremony. Things are what they are. Though between the two of us, I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy."

"I can't imagine you would have any enemies, Mrs. McMartin."

"Please. It's Christine." The older woman corrected her gently.

"Right. Christine."

"I hope I am not overstepping my boundaries with you, but I just wanted to say, 'Hang in there.' I've been where you are. In the fishbowl."

"Feels more like a petri dish," Felicity quipped.

"I like that," Christine said with a smile. "I'm not from this social set either. When Freddie and I first went public, very few people were supportive of us. I was either branded a gold digger who was after his money and position, or else I was 'that poor girl who thinks she can tame a man like Frederick McMartin.' Sound familiar?"

"Excruciatingly."

"It'll pass as long as you hold your head high, keep your eyes open, and your ears closed."

"It's not easy," Felicity confessed.

"I know. Believe me, I know. For the record, when I see Oliver look at you and the adoration that's there, I can tell he's not the same young man he was years ago."

No, he wasn't the same. Not that Felicity knew firsthand, but everyone had been so "helpful" in introducing her to Ollie of yesteryear. It was obvious he was spoiled and hadn't a care in the world. But the Oliver she knew was incredibly flawed and haunted and cared too much and...Felicity bit her bottom lip. She loved him, and unless she was daft—which she was pretty certain her Mensa membership proved she wasn't—he loved her, too. But she couldn't shake the notion that he was trying to withdraw. Dammit. If he pulled some 'for your own good' crapola, Slade Wilson would be the least of his worries.
"People say the island changed him," Christine continued, "but I suspect you have something to do with the changes in him, as well." She fanned herself furiously. "Good lord, I am going to be an absolute mess when I get back inside. They always say that with age comes wisdom, but they don't tell you that with age come hot flashes!"

A lightbulb came on in Felicity's head. She'd been so wrapped up in Oliver, she nearly missed the obvious right in front of her. Tracing her fingers along the Tempewrist, she said, "I think I may have something that can help you with that."

When Felicity went back into the house, Oliver spotted her immediately. She could see the tension in his shoulders as he approached her. "Are you about ready to go?"

She removed his jacket and gave it back to him. "As much as I hate to cover up the suspenders," she muttered.

It was then that he noticed her bare wrist. "Where's the Tempewrist?"

"Hmmm. Must've left it somewhere," she replied nonchalantly.

"Felicity, it's a prototype. We need to go back outside and find it."

Oliver took a step toward the doors, but Felicity stilled his movements by placing her hands on his chest.

"Down boy. I know where it is. It's on Christine McMartin's wrist."

"Fe-lic-i-ty, what's going on?"

"I'm letting the Tempewrist sell itself." She tilted her head in the direction of Mr. and Mrs. McMartin who were huddled together talking. Christine was showing her husband the contraption. She had a broad smile on her face, and Frederick was nodding.

"You are extraordinary."

"All the credit goes to menopause." She stopped for a moment and considered her words. "Yet something else I never thought I would say. Oh look. They're coming this way."

Sure enough, the McMartins were crossing the ballroom, closing the distance between themselves and Oliver and Felicity.

"You're not leaving already, are you, Oliver?" Frederick McMartin asked, his tone friendly—a far cry from their earlier interaction.

Oliver looked to Felicity; her blue eyes were twinkling with mirth. "We don't have to if there's something you need."

Frederick patted Oliver's shoulder. "That conversation you wanted to have earlier? Let's go into my office and talk."

That would mean leaving Felicity alone again. Oliver's eyes darted around the room, looking for signs of potential trouble. As though sensing his hesitation, Christine offered, "Don't worry. I'll keep Felicity company."

Felicity smiled, "And I will enjoy your company." It was code for 'Go Oliver. I'll be fine.'
"Lead the way," Oliver said.

When Oliver and Frederick McMartin returned to the party a few minutes later, they both had smiles on their faces.

"Looks like they found some common ground," Christine said to Felicity. "I'm glad. This…what did you call it again?" she asked holding up her wrist.

"Tempewrist," Felicity replied.

"It's amazing," Christine enthused. "But more than that, I'm glad I had the chance to spend time with you."

"You've made me feel so welcome tonight."

"Hopefully things will improve for you in that regard. I know it isn't fair, but sometimes all it takes is one person to get the ball rolling."

"Everything okay?" Felicity asked as the men joined the ladies.

"Perfect," Oliver replied.

"I'll study your report when you e-mail it, but if the numbers hold up, I'd say Monday is going to be a banner day for us, Oliver."

"We'll talk then," Oliver said shaking Frederick's hand.

When Felicity and Oliver arrived at her apartment, he insisted on being the first inside to check out everything. No signs of intruders, though a few reporters were still camped outside the building. The high-tech security system also showed the only one who had come near her apartment door was Mrs. Havisham chasing after one of her cats.

Immediately upon entering her apartment, Felicity stepped out of her heels, which knocked a few inches from her height, and sighed. "Someone really should invent a comfortable high heeled shoe. Maybe you can get the Applied Science Division to tackle that one. It would be life. Altering."

She looked back at Oliver, who was still surveying their surroundings.

"There's probably a tabloid reporter or two hiding underneath the stacks of clothes in my bedroom."

Oliver knew she was teasing, but the thought of someone else in her apartment—someone far worse than a reporter—felt like a kick to his gut and all too real. He was torn between wanting to get her out of there to somewhere with more protection, even if it meant carrying her kicking and screaming, and changing the variables so that Slade Wilson and anyone else who wanted to destroy him would no longer consider harming Felicity as a viable way to do so. It was rare for him to feel so indecisive. There had been many occasions that if he had mulled his move, he would've been killed several times over. Logically, he knew what needed to be done to keep her safe, but his heart kept him in a limbo, trying to prolong the inevitable if only to have a few more minutes of hearing her laughter or basking in her warmth.

"You are a tough crowd tonight." She reached up and began pulling pins from her hair. "As fun as it is to be around you when you're brooding, I wouldn't be too heartbroken if you did something crazy like smiled." She shook her head, and her hair fell in waves over her bare shoulders and down her
back. She rubbed her scalp and muffled a little moan.

He exhaled and tried to muster a smile but couldn't quite. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"Oh, I think you could have." Felicity added with self-deprecation, "You do realize I about ruined everything, right?"

"You did have me worried for a millisecond there when you started to talk about Colleen," he admitted.

She groaned as she flopped down on the couch, tucking her feet under her. "You have to admit that whole thing about love and sex was just such a chauvinist comment. Especially considering…does he even know his own daughter?" She patted the cushion next to her, urging Oliver to sit.

He followed her guide, but Oliver didn't allow himself to relax into the cushions the way she did. "Frederick McMartin was never going to talk to me. He told me as much, but you changed his mind."

"I'd say Christine changed his mind—and the Applied Sciences Division. The Tempewrist is pretty amazing. I know we were thinking of its use on a global scale, how it could really spur a green initiative if people could control their own heating and cooling more efficiently. I never thought of niche clients like menopausal women."

"But it was the connection you were able to make with her. I never could have done that. I was ready to give up."

"You would've come up with something else." She studied him, could see the tension that remained in his shoulders and in his jaw. Reaching out, she placed her hand on his muscular thigh, squeezing it playfully. "Something finally went right. You should be happy about this."

"I am. I just…"

"You've been reluctant to leave my side all night. I know I'm pretty awesome and all but…" she tilted her head knowingly. "Talk to me."

Oliver fell silent, not sure where to even begin. Finally he admitted, "Everywhere I turn, I keep expecting to find Slade Wilson."

"Oh, Oliver. I know he's bad news, but we've dealt with some really shady people before and we'll deal with others after him. It's just—it's okay to let yourself be happy."

"Slade's not shady. He's—he's more than that. He's cunning. He's abnormally strong. He's determined." Oliver took her hand in his own. It was soft, so tiny compared to his rougher hand. Without thinking, he pressed a kiss against her wrist, feeling that pulse of life within her once again. His heart stuttered. "Felicity, I can't even begin to tell you how grateful I am for what you've done for me, for my family's company."

"Why do I think there's a but, and not the kind that looks good in green leather?"

He met her eyes. "I need you to walk away."

"Don't," she said softly.

"In the end, being with me is only—"
She pulled back. "Stop. Seriously just stop." Her eyes narrowed. "I never figured you to be the kind of guy who takes the easy way out. Not anymore."

He shook his head. "You think this is easy?"

Her voice grew in intensity. "I think that once again, rather than actually talking with me about what's going on and letting me make an informed decision, you've made a decision that involves me and excluded me from the process."

"When have I ever made a decision for you?"

"Does 'Felicity has done me the honor of agreeing to be my wife' ring a bell? You pulled me into this convoluted engagement scheme without my initial consent, but I rolled with the punches because that's what I do. But I'm not rolling with the punches now. You need to tell me why Slade Wilson has you of all people so scared of your own shadow that—"

A soft sound from Oliver—something between a huff of exasperation and a snort—interrupted Felicity's train of thought.

Her voice softened as she implored, "Talk to me."

He owed her that much. With a slight nod, Oliver took a deep breath and began.
Chapter Notes

I’m getting closer and closer to end of this tale. It may not seem like it’s ever going to be done, but it will—I promise. I hope this latest (overdue) installment finds you all healthy and happy. Happy holidays to you all!

Part Seventeen: The Island and the Ostrich

Coldness.

Even in the warmth of Felicity’s apartment, the coldness seeped into the very marrow of Oliver’s bones, greeting him like an old, unwelcome friend. He tried to keep it at bay, to push out the visceral reaction he had to Lian Yu whenever he attempted to translate emotion to thought to words. He wasn’t skilled at this. It was easier—better—to compartmentalize. But of all people, he owed this truth to Felicity, not because she kept a tally of debts but because she deserved to break free and live a life unencumbered by him.

“You’ve been to Lian Yu. You know it’s not a…not a kind place.”

Felicity nodded. Getting there had been difficult for her. Small, rickety aircraft were not her preferred mode of transportation. Being there—for even the short period of time she and Diggle were there—had nearly been deadly. “I remember.” And she did. She vividly recalled the odd click when she stepped on a mine. But then Oliver literally swooped from a tree to save her, and her heart swooped in the process. At the time, she thought it was the adrenaline coursing through her because she had narrowly avoided death, but in retrospect, there was more at play. It was the first time she had seen him in months, and she had missed him. He’d exiled himself to purgatory.

Looking at him now, it was obvious he was still trying to exile himself.

“When I first got to Lian Yu, it seemed like a mirage. I’d been drifting on a lifeboat for…I don’t know how long…with my father.” He saw the question in her eyes. “He was already dead.”

Felicity tried to piece together the gaps. “I assumed he had drowned.” When they’d first met, she’d even gone so far as to thoroughly put her foot in her mouth by talking very matter-of-factly about his father’s drowning.

It had been one in a series of lies he’d told. Sometimes lies were so much easier than the truth, even beautiful in comparison. When he had first returned to Starling City, he had offered little in the way of details about his survival and even less in the way of truth. At first, he didn’t see what good it could possibly do to tell Thea or his mother about the actual circumstances surrounding his father’s death. It would only hurt more; it would serve even less of a purpose to tell them of his father’s confession. “Provisions were low. He told me how he had failed the city, that he had hurt people, and I had to live to make it right. He shot himself so that I would live.” Oliver fell silent for a moment. Even after all the time that had passed, it was still difficult to wrap his mind around what had happened. Up to that point, he’d been protected from the horrors of the world. Felicity had warned John and him both against bubble wrapping her, but Oliver knew firsthand what it was like, only to have those protective bubbles popped.
His revelation brought a lump to her throat, and she felt as though she had been punched in the gut. Just hearing it was awful. But to experience it firsthand? She could only imagine how crushing it had been—and she knew that had only been the first of many, many hardships Oliver had endured. How does someone get past that?

“I had just buried my father when I met Yao Fei.”

Felicity could only nod. She had known for some time that Oliver hadn’t been alone, but she’d only been able to piece together fragments of stories, of events. But now Oliver methodically laid out those events, at first speaking in a detached way, as though they had happened to someone else.

He told Felicity of meeting Yao Fei’s arrow before meeting the man himself and how the man helped him to survive those first brutal days on Lian Yu, of his capture by Edward Fyers and the cruelty of a masked man he later discovered to be Billy Wintergreen, who along with Slade Wilson had been sent to the island to rescue Yao Fei. He told her of meeting Slade and nearly being killed by him before Slade decided he was worthy of survival, that it was Slade who taught him hand-to-hand combat, Slade who inspired him to be willing to do whatever was necessary to survive. And Oliver had. He killed for the first time.

Felicity noticed how Oliver’s voice softened as he spoke of Shado, Yao Fei’s daughter who was strong and capable and desperately trying to rescue her father only to watch him die. It was Shado who trained him to use the bow by making him slap water of all things, and it was Shado who eased the loneliness of the island. He spoke of the months that he, Slade, and Shado spent where one day was much like the next, until they saw a freighter off the coast of the island. Their hopes for rescue were dashed when they realized that the leader on the boat, Anthony Ivo, was nearly insane from his obsession with finding *mirakuru*, a World War II-era serum, rumored to give any man who survived taking it superhuman strength and healing. Oliver had been taken aboard the *Amazo* as prisoner, tortured so that Ivo could gain the location of the *mirakuru*. But that had proven to be a fateful imprisonment, for Oliver discovered Sara Lance had not died on the *Gambit*.

At that, Felicity’s eyes widened. So Oliver had known Sara survived before she returned, albeit briefly, to Starling, but he let her family believe she was dead?!? How many times had Oliver been blasted by Laurel or Quinton Lance for letting Sara die when she was alive all along? Her confusion must have shown because he added, “I made a promise to her. Sara wanted them to remember her as she had been. She didn’t want them to know she had suffered, and I really did believe her to be dead.”

Felicity nodded, even as her heart swelled all the more with admiration. Oliver would have scoffed if he’d known, tell her that her admiration was misplaced, but he had it nonetheless.

Oliver spoke of his uncertainty of whether to trust Sara as Ivo took Oliver and Sara to the island, intent on using Oliver to find the *mirakuru*. Trust was the most precious commodity they had on the island. People lived or died by trust.

It was the trust that Slade and Shado had in Oliver that led to their rescuing Sara and him, but Slade had been injured in an earlier blast, and those injuries were taking their toll—extremely painful, and death was only a matter of time. Oliver thought finding the serum before Ivo could and giving it to Slade would be his only chance for survival. They located the Japanese submarine that contained the *mirakuru*, and given the choice, Slade opted to take it, but not before confessing his love for Shado.

At first, Oliver thought he had killed his friend with the serum. He had little time to mourn, for Ivo and his men surrounded Oliver, Shado, and Sara. Ivo forced the three to their knees and commanded Oliver to choose a life: Shado or Sara. Oliver recounted how he begged Ivo to spare both women; he chose himself for death. Begged for it, even. As Ivo pointed the gun at Sara, he instinctively put
himself between Ivo and Sara, and Shado paid the price with her life.

And then Slade was there—as if out of nowhere—alive, stronger than ever, and filled with rage made more intense by the sight of Shado’s lifeless body. He killed Ivo’s men with his bare hands, but Ivo escaped.

“Slade was devastated. I knew he cared for Shado, but I didn’t realize how much. I probably didn’t want to see it. Shado and I were hurting him and didn’t even know it, and then she was gone. Sara warned me not to tell Slade what happened with Ivo, not to tell him about the choice. She was afraid of what he would do.”

Felicity had listened quietly throughout much of what he told her, soaking it in, but she found herself unable to remain silent. “What Ivo did to the three of you, it wasn’t a choice. It was a cruelty. What happened to Shado is not your fault; it’s Ivo’s fault.”

Oliver had replayed those moments so many times, in the quiet of night when he couldn’t sleep or in his dreams, considering what else he could have done. It was one of many moments he wished he could have back to do over. Dwelling on it was a fool’s errand, no doubt, but then he’d never claimed to be anything more than a fool. “I should’ve found another way. When Slade learned the truth later, it was a far worse betrayal. There’s a hell of a lot of things I should’ve handled differently.” His voice trailed off, and he looked lost in his thoughts, his memories. Felicity reached out and squeezed his hand, which startled him at first before he entwined his fingers with hers. “Slade wanted a way off the island, but more than that, he wanted revenge. We planned to take the freighter…”

Oliver told of the other prisoners; that the freighter was how he met Anatoly Knyazev. Upon seeing the recognition in Felicity’s eyes, he confirmed it was the same Anatoly who helped them in Russia a few weeks ago. Oliver promised he would free Anatoly and the other prisoners, and he did. Their plans for him to be ‘captured’ went off without a hitch, except Ivo dangled the truth of Shado’s death—or at least a version of it—in front of Slade, using it to what he thought would be his advantage. Instead Slade cut off Ivo’s hand—the hand that once wielded the gun used to kill Shado. Slade nearly killed Oliver with his bare hands, but imprisoned him instead, and etched a tattoo onto his back to serve as a reminder of his betrayal.

Felicity had seen the unfinished tattoo many times and had admired it. She had never dreamed that something so beautiful could be so ugly.

Oliver continued and told how Ivo became infected with gangrene and made a deal: he would give Oliver the location of a cure for mirakuru if Oliver would end his suffering.

He recalled the final battle on the freighter, of the water pouring in around them as he and Slade pummeled each other. Slade mocked him for his attempt to cure him, pronouncing that the mirakuru was not responsible for his hatred. With or without the mirakuru, he would have his revenge.

“All humanity left in Slade was gone. The bond we’d forged, gone. The mirakuru intensified his emotional instability, but I… I broke his trust. He lived to see me suffer. He made a promise to me that he would destroy me and that I would feel the suffering he felt by watching everyone I ever loved die. And I would know it was because of me.” Oliver pulled his hand from Felicity’s grasp. “I had the cure in my hand, Slade was trapped under a fallen bulkhead, and I chose to drive an arrow into his eye. I chose to kill him rather than save him.” He looked away, unable to meet her gaze. “I was washed off the freighter and didn’t see Slade after that. When I awoke again, I was in Hong Kong. I had three more years of hell before I decided to come back, but you need to know that sometimes—more often than I want to admit—I played the role of devil. I hurt people, killed people, in many instances without giving them a second thought. Felicity, I’m not a good man.”
Finally she understood why Oliver was so reluctant to trust anyone, to let people in. Why he wore so many masks beyond the Hood. Why his first instinct when he came back to Starling was to end the corruption in the city by way of a body count. Every person he had relied on had either died tragically or had betrayed him in some way, been twisted into someone he couldn’t recognize anymore. John had tried to warn her that Oliver may never be able to move past the island, but she wasn’t prepared to soak in, not just what he said, but also what went unsaid. As difficult as it was for him to open up and share what he did, she knew it was only the tip of the iceberg.

Tears spilled down Felicity’s cheeks. “Oliver.”

Just one word. His name. Because no words were adequate, no words could properly express the sorrow she felt in finally knowing. It wasn’t that she regretted knowing, but she ached for him, for the boy he had been, the man he had become. And she was stunned by his resilience, his drive to foster good despite living in an incredibly dark world, despite having seen the worst of humanity, despite heeding the call of the darkness himself. He inspired her to be more than she ever thought she could be, and this was true now more than ever. This better version of herself, this braver version that he’d helped her unlock, was not going to be tucked away.

She reached out and stroked his face, trying to draw him from his misery. He didn’t pull away as her fingertips trailed along his temple then lightly ran through his short-cropped hair before she dipped to the stubble of his jaw. She could feel the tension coming off him in waves even as he leaned into her touch. As she rested her palm along his neck and felt his erratic pulse, she shifted on the couch to get closer to him, close enough that she could lean her forehead against his. “I see you, Oliver. You. The flaws. The way you care about people. The way you want to make this place better for those who haven’t had advantages. The goodness that is inherent in you. I love you.” She hadn’t meant to say it, though she felt more truth in those three little words than she had ever felt before.

“Please don’t love me.” It was a whispered entreaty.

She pulled back and smiled ironically. “Too late.”

He stood, putting distance between them. She watched as he paced, reminiscent of a caged tiger as he moved about the small living space. Purposeful, barely contained, ready to pounce. “Felicity, I didn’t tell you all of this because I felt the sudden urge to take a trip down memory lane. I told you this to make you understand why you need to get as far away from me as you possibly can.”

“I know it wasn’t easy,” she acknowledged. “I know you didn’t want to talk about the island, and I appreciate you for trusting me with that. I know that trust is valuable, and it is earned, but please trust that my eyes are wide open, and I know what I want.”

Felicity swallowed hard, hoping against hope that he would be able to let down his guard.

*Her Atlas*. The burdens he carried on his strong shoulders would have been enough to fell a weaker person. Slade Wilson was more than a little scary, and she had a healthy appreciation for her fears, even if she had been willing to risk life, limb, and lunch from time to time. But it wasn’t often that she saw Oliver spooked. That was what made him so formidable on the streets. Nothing scared him because he had seen it all, been through it all.

And now he, of all people, was running scared. It was enough of a stumble that the world shifted on those shoulders, and it trembled more than any earthquake machine could cause.

“This isn’t about trust or want, Felicity. If it were, it would be so much easier. I want to be with you, so much that when you walk out of a room, I feel like the best part of me is going with you. But if we’re together, Slade will target you. That’s a guarantee. A fucking promise,” he spat out. “Slade
named his dummy corporation Spondeo. Latin for ‘I promise.’ He hasn’t forgiven. He hasn’t forgotten. He and Isabel have been colluding. The only thing we have going for us right now is he doesn’t know we’re aware of him. But if something happens to you because of me, because of the mistakes I made…I can’t live with that. I need you to be okay. I need you to be safe.”

“I want to be unsafe. With you. What makes you think that Slade would assume that just because we aren’t together, you don’t care anymore? From what you’ve told me, he knows you, Oliver. He knows that your emotions don’t turn off like a faucet. He’s also the one who taught you how to strategize; he’s going to see right through a conveniently timed breakup.” She stood, blocked his path, and added glibly, “Let’s face it. You’re stuck with me.”

“But I’ve learned a few things since I was around Slade, and I’ve gotten pretty good at wearing masks. We’ll orchestrate the perfect breakup. Maybe those pictures that Isabel has will come in handy after all.”

Felicity felt like she was going to vomit. That hurt. She didn’t believe Oliver said that to hurt her on purpose, but her heart clenched nonetheless. “What about the company?” The Cinderella story that the press were spinning had QC’s stock prices rebounding, which would only make it that much more difficult for Isabel to legitimately lead a takeover. Plus, they were thisclose to having funding from Frederick McMartin which would allow Oliver to buy out the loan from Starling National, provided they could get it through before Stoglov Holdings bought out the bank.

He scoffed, “I don’t care about the company if it’s a choice between it or keeping you safe. We will find a way to get you off Slade’s radar. If nothing else, you can leave Starling.”

“Are you kidding me?!?” Felicity huffed. “And do what? Go back to Chico and marry a dentist? That’ll really throw Slade off my scent unless he happens to pop in for dental care. Speaking of popping, maybe I’ll get started popping out those grandbabies that my mom guilts me over every chance she gets. Is that going to be your next order since you think you know what’s right for me?”

“Felicity.”

“No, Oliver. You don’t get to dictate what I do. My life. My choice.”

“Don’t you get it? If you don’t get away from me, you aren’t going to have any choices because you’ll be dead!”

“Supposing you’re right, which is an incredibly flawed premise by the way, how are you going to deal with Slade? Remove me from the equation and then what? If he’s still hellbent on revenge, he has plenty of people to choose from. Your sister. Your mom. I mean, if she gets out of prison. And then there’s Laurel. When you were on the island, I’m sure you told him all about her.”

Oliver took a deep breath. How was he going to keep them all safe? “I think we both know there’s only one way this can end. Either he’s dead or I am.”

“Oliver!”

“I can’t escape who I am!” Frustration poured from him. Did she think he took pleasure in it? That he was one of the psychopaths who reveled in the sticky heat of blood? Killing did not give him pleasure; it did nothing but widen the chasm within him. Even if he had been trying to do things differently, sometimes there was no option. “I’m going to finish what I started five years ago on that freighter. I’m not going to let Slade hurt the people I love!”

Felicity crossed her arms. “That would be my preference, too, but you’re arguing a false dichotomy.”
He looked at her sideways. “This isn’t Morton’s Fork.” At her look of surprise to the reference, he added, “I did show up for a few classes in college, and I have a good memory.”

“My point is you’re overlooking other possibilities. What about this cure?”

He shook his head. “It’s lost somewhere at the bottom of the North China Sea.”

“But maybe that nutjob Ivo’s research isn’t. If there’s a digital footprint, I can find it. All I need is a string to pull on.”

With that, she picked up her tablet from the coffee table, only for Oliver to gently remove it from her hands and set it back where it had been. “There’s no guarantee that even if you find the research the cure can be replicated. I don’t even know that it would have worked in the first place, and in the meantime, I can’t have you in harm’s way.”

“There’s never a guarantee in life, but that doesn’t mean we don’t try! Oliver, you have worked so hard to regain your humanity. Don’t let Slade win by destroying you through other means.”

“Then tell me how to fix this, Felicity! You have all the answers on how I should act, what I should do. You’re so certain of everything, so tell me how to fix this!”

His harsh words washed over her, making her wince. The Tempewrist prototype on her wrist let out a cool pulse. She took a deep breath and removed it from her slender wrist, setting it on the side table. And to think a few hours ago, her biggest worry was how to save QC. That—and how she was going to take the prototype away from Christine McMartin, who was basking in its hot-flash-counteracting glow. Those problems seemed comical now. Felicity didn’t have all the answers, but she did know one thing: there was no way in dial-up hell she was letting Oliver go it alone.

She quickly gathered herself, squared her shoulders, and closed the distance between them. “First off, stop trying to push me away. You may not realize this yet, but you should: my superpower is my stubbornness. That—and the remarkable ability to put my foot in my mouth at inopportune times, which I guess isn’t all that super, except it is helpful in breaking tension. Like right now.” At that, Oliver’s lips quirked ever so slightly despite himself. “I’ll take that as an acknowledgement of my amazing ability,” she said lightly before turning more staid. “But seriously, let me help you. Let John help you. You’ve talked about how you can’t let something happen to the people in your life. Newsflash, Oliver, the people in your life aren’t going to stand by and let something bad happen to you. If there’s not a cure, then there’s another way. You say that Slade knows how you think; he doesn’t know how John or I do. And this brain,” she pointed to her head, “is pretty dangerous.”

“It is,” he acknowledged. “I shouldn’t have brought you into this life. It’s not what I want for you.”

“But this—being by your side, helping you—is what I want for myself. One of these days, I don’t want to look back on my life and realize I haven’t lived.”

“I need you to live long enough so that you can look back on your life. I told you a while back that because of the life I lead, it’s better for me to not be with someone I really care about…”

“Oh good Google. Not this again.”

“Now more than ever, it’s true—I’m sorry, Felicity. This is the way it has to be. I thought I could be more. Honor Tommy. Right the wrongs of my family. It turns out I can’t be something other than what I am. Tommy said I was a killer; he was right, and Slade’s a reminder of that. All of this is happening because I failed to kill him.”

“No, it’s happening because you chose to kill him. Choose to save him instead.”
Her words hung in the air between them. When he didn’t respond, she turned away from him, hugging herself, not wanting him to see just how much the conversation had worn her down or how frustrated she was with both the situation and with him. Bullheaded man. It would have been so much easier if she didn’t love him. But she did. That didn’t mean she would stand idly by and watch him self-destruct.

The buzzing of Felicity’s cell phone on the table next to the Tempewrist caught her attention. Who would be calling her so late? Automatically, her eyes were drawn to the device. The name on the screen flashed: Max Fuller. How did he even get her number? Shouldn’t the fact that she was nowhere to be found at the Harrington be a hint? Unless he was one of those guys who couldn’t fathom that a woman wouldn’t want him. She hit the ignore button, but not before Oliver saw the name.

“Why would Fuller be calling you?”

“I’m guessing he wants to talk. When you were trying to stop Laurel from killing herself or others, he propositioned me, and I may have sent him on a wild goose chase.”

“A wild goose chase?”

“To the 26th floor of the Harrington Hotel.”

“But there are only twenty-five floors.” He paused a beat. “Hence the wild goose chase. Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“And what would you have done?” She asked rhetorically. “I took care of it in a way that didn’t get you arrested or us kicked out of the party.”

“It was disrespectful to you.”

“I’m pretty sure Max was more interested in getting back at you. But if you really want to talk about disrespect, you knew. This whole evening, I mean. You knew that you were going to try to cut me out of your life, and the whole evening, you played the role of dutiful fiancé, even when you didn’t have to, even when others weren’t in earshot. For as much of an ass as Max Fuller is, at least he didn’t pretend to be something he’s not with me.”

She was right. His own weakness, his need to be around her and to prolong those moments in her orbit—it was selfish. There was nothing he could say to defend that. He knew they were together on borrowed time, and he couldn’t bear to tell her that, so he basked in her light. “Of all people, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Kind of late for that,” Felicity replied bluntly.

Her cell phone buzzed again, but she didn’t bother looking at it. Max Fuller surely wasn’t that much of an idiot. Even he had to eventually give up.

“When this is over…”

“Don’t. Don’t dangle maybes in front of me.”

“I have to keep you safe. Please don’t hate me for that.”

“Oliver, I could never hate you. I don’t even blame you. I blame myself. I knew better. It’s always going to be something, Oliver, because a part of you hasn’t left that island.”
Felicity’s landline phone rang. Seriously? She let it go to voicemail.

“Felicity? Are you there? Pick up.”

Oh. That wasn’t Max Fuller. It was her dad. Felicity practically scampered to get to the phone. Her dad never called her this late. A slue of horrific possibilities ran through her mind.

“Dad. Hi. You’re up late.”

“You’re there. Oh thank goodness. You didn’t pick up your cell phone.”

“I’m sorry. What’s going on?” She tried not to sound alarmed, but it was difficult to keep the fear from her voice, especially when her dad didn’t engage in niceties. David Smoak was nothing, if not impeccably mannered.

“It’s bad, Felicity.” Felicity could hear the strain in her dad’s voice, as well as background road noises. It sounded like he was driving. “It’s Oma. She’s on her way to the hospital. We think she’s had a stroke.”

Felicity struggled to form words.

“Did you hear me?”

“I—I did. She going to Enloe?” Enloe Medical Center was the largest hospital in Chico and the immediate surrounding areas.

“Yes. Your mom rode in the ambulance with her. I’m following.”

Felicity started to mentally calculate. Chico was roughly three and a quarter hours away by car. This time of night, maybe not that long because traffic wouldn’t be as heavy. It would take her a few minutes to change out of the party clothes she still wore and throw her things into a bag, but she could be out of the apartment in under ten minutes, she figured. “I’ll be there in three hours.”

“Hurry.”

“I will. Bye.” Felicity hung up her landline.

“What happened?” Oliver asked.

“That was my dad. They think my grandmother had a stroke. Oma’s on her way to the hospital in Chico. I’ve got to go.”

“Of course. I’ll come with you.”

She shot him a look of disbelief mired with disappointment. “No, you won’t. Might as well pull off that bandaid, right?” She reached behind herself and began unbuttoning her dress as she walked toward her bedroom. She closed the door behind her once she reached her bedroom, and let the dress drop to a heap on the floor. Earlier in the night, she had teased Oliver about needing help out of it, but that had just been…she shook her head. No point in thinking of what ifs.

She quickly found a pair of jeans, a sweater, and shoes, which she pulled on. She secured her hair in a ponytail, threw another change of clothes into a bag, grabbed a few toiletries from the en suite bathroom, and was packed and ready to go except for a few odds and ends in her living room.

When she went back to the living room, she saw Oliver was finishing a phone call. “We’ll be there in ten minutes.”
“What was that about?” she asked. “I have to go to Chico. I can’t…”

“I know. It’ll take you more than three hours to drive there. It’s late. You’re worried. You’re tired.”

“I’ve been up late before. And worried too,” she replied as she grabbed her tablet from the coffee table, as well as her glasses, which she shoved into a case.

“What I’m trying to say is you’re taking the QC helicopter. It’ll get you to the hospital in under forty-five minutes.”

A few hours ago, she would have dropped her bags and thrown her arms around Oliver. Now, she kept her distance. “Thank you.”

“Hey,” he said resting his hand on her shoulder. “It’s going to be okay.”

She didn’t say anything, only nodded robotically.

Ten minutes later, they were on the roof of QC. A pilot was awaiting them, holding a leather knapsack. The pilot helped Felicity into the craft, and Oliver climbed in after her, taking the leather bag from the pilot.

“What are you doing?” she asked as he settled into the passenger seat next to her.

“Going with you.” As she started to protest, he added, “My helicopter.”

He was giving her whiplash. Hot. Cold. Warm. She was exhausted from it all. Actually, she was just plain exhausted. She put the headset on, more to drown out the noise of the craft than to better hear the pilot or Oliver, and closed her eyes. She wanted to drown out the world. She had turned into a freaking obstrich. Or at least a reasonable facsimile of the old myth about ostriches. Stick your head in the sand. Don’t look at the danger around you, and you won’t get hurt. She preferred to stay on terra firma, literally and figuratively. But they were lifting up, the city below them, leaving it behind. She could feel the swoop in her stomach, but she wasn’t sure if it was the flight, the thought of losing her grandmother, or the fact that Oliver was there.

Five hours ago, they were pawing each other in her apartment before the McMartin party. Thirty minutes ago, Oliver was telling her that she had to stay away from him for her own good. Now he was accompanying her to Chico. Oh, God. He would meet her parents. Was he going to play the doting fiancé, or would he be sowing the seeds of their “break up”? It was bad enough that to lie to them from a distance. Her mom, especially, had been so worried when she learned of their engagement. But lying to their faces, reinforcing the lie? This felt wrong in such an icky way and like the very last thing any of them needed with Oma Miriam so ill…

Oma. Her mother’s mother. Small in stature but larger than life. That’s how Felicity had always viewed her. Rambunctious was Judith Smoak’s word of choice. Felicity had the impression that her mom was embarrassed by Oma from time to time; they saw the world so differently. But for Felicity, her grandmother had been the one she had confided in growing up. When her mother refused to talk about Felicity’s biological father, it was Oma who filled in the gaps. It was Oma who had talked with her about birth control. Oma who had listened without judgment when Felicity admitted to tracking down her biological father. When her parents were lamenting the end of her relationship with Jack, it was Oma who cheered her on and made her promise to never settle for less than she deserved. And Felicity’s couldn’t forget that every time she saw her grandmother, Oma pushed dirty books to “spice up” her life. Logically, she knew her grandmother was getting on in years, but for as much life and death as Felicity dealt with, she had never considered Oma’s mortality—until now.
“Felicity?” Oliver’s voice came over the headset.

“What?” she asked wearily without opening her eyes.

“She’s going to be okay.”

“You keep saying that, but you don’t know,” she replied. “You don’t know anything about my family. It would have been better if you’d stayed behind.”

“I don’t know your parents. That’s true. But I do know they raised an amazing daughter.”

“Please don’t.”

“Let me be here for you.”

“Until Monday, right? Until Mr. McMartin comes through, and then it’s …” Felicity’s voice trailed off. This wasn’t a conversation for them to have in front of the pilot. Between the highs and lows of life with Oliver and her fears over losing her Oma Miriam, she was nearing her quota of what she could handle.

Sticking her head in the sand would be less suffocating.
Chapter Notes

Thanks to all of you who have stuck with this story. I really do appreciate each of you!

So...this one is a long chapter (9000+ words) and definitely earns the M rating. Yep. The story finally went there. However, the bulk of the chapter is not naughty and it features the long awaited meeting between Felicity's family and Oliver.

I hope you enjoy! Please let me know what you think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Eighteen: “Putting on a Show for Justin Timberlake”

Enloe Medical Center was a state of the art facility located in the heart of Chico, California. From the helipad, Felicity could gaze over and see the red tiled roof, indicative of the Spanish style architecture of the facility. It was an odd thing to focus on, she decided. And yet her hypersensitive attention to details was the only thing keeping her sane at the moment.

She hated the place.

It was here that her brother died after his accident. Technically, Gabriel was dead before he even arrived. Brain dead, they’d said. At another time under a different circumstance, that might have been the punch line to some bad joke between Gabe and her. He used to always tease her about being too smart for her own good, and she returned the favor by suggesting that he didn’t do as well in school because he was killing his brain cells by using his head to hit the soccer ball and that if he kept it up, they’d soon be declaring him brain dead.

“Brain dead” took on an entirely more ominous meaning when it was a doctor saying it.

Felicity didn’t like to think about how his body had been kept alive long enough to harvest his organs. It was what Gabe would’ve wanted. Logically she knew that. Yet it had still been difficult to watch her brother lying there, merely a shell, and to know what made him him was gone.

She shuddered to think of the same fate befalling her oma—that special something that completed her soul being gone and only a shell remaining. There were too many things left unsaid.

Oliver pulled her from her thoughts, even as he pulled her toward the warmth of his body, an arm around her, guiding her away from the chopper and toward the inside of the facility. Felicity wanted to curl into him but had to fight the instinct. It made no sense to seek solace in someone who wasn’t going to be there. She had become a liar—something that she didn’t admire—but she wasn’t going to compound that by lying to herself. His touches meant nothing.

And they meant everything.

It was a literal push-pull with him. A part of her was grateful for the support, even if she was so angry she couldn’t see straight.

She loved him for being there.
And she hated him for it, too.

They hurried into the building from the door on the roof, the warmth of the interior battling the cool November air for dominance and winning.

Oliver surveyed their surroundings, as always assessing the situation for potential threats. Knowing more specifically what he had endured on the island, she understood him better, that sense of precaution, even if she felt like in this instance it was misplaced. For as much of a strategist as Oliver suggested that Slade was, not even he could be manipulating them like pawns on a chessboard in this instance.

Felicity’s fear was far different from Oliver’s. What if oma…? Her throat constricted as tears stung her eyes.

No. She couldn’t let herself be ruled by her fears. It was the unknown really, and part of combating the churning of emotion meant meeting the unknown head-on with information.

A hospital administrator greeted them, her brown eyes looking amazingly wide awake for the time of night. The woman, a few years older than herself and attractive in a trim knee-length skirt and button-up blouse (with a few of the buttons noticeably left unbuttoned), practically fawned over Oliver. Whether the woman was basking in Oliver’s celebrity status or just the general magnetism he seemed to have with the straight female population, Felicity wasn’t sure and didn’t really care. All she knew was he must have pulled some strings in order for them to gain access to the hospital’s helipad, which the hospital typically only allowed for medical transport, and if that meant they had to deal with a lovelorn hospital administrator, then so be it. She needed to get to her family ASAP.

“My dad said he would text me Oma’s location.” Felicity pulled her cell phone from her pocket. “No texts. Just missed calls.” Which she hadn’t heard due to the noise within the helicopter. “No voicemails. I hope that doesn’t mean…”

“Hey. Don’t assume the worst,” Oliver cautioned her, his voice patient and reassuring.

“Ms. Smoak,” interjected the woman whose name had gone in one ear and out the other, “Mr. Queen is right. I am going to deliver you to your grandmother personally. After Mr. Queen contacted the hospital, I made it a priority to check on her. She has…” the woman chuckled, “quite a personality.”

When had Oliver had the time? She had packed for the trip in record time, and other than that, they’d been together. But more importantly, if the woman was commenting on Oma’s personality, then…

“She’s talking?”

“Loudly.”

“Sounds like someone else I know,” Oliver replied as he squeezed Felicity’s shoulder.

Some of the oppressive weight Felicity felt began to lift as a glimmer of cautious hope took hold within her. “Can you give me an update on her condition?”

“HIPAA rules don’t allow me to divulge any specifics without her consent, but the fact she’s speaking coherently is a good sign.” The woman’s eyes quickly moved to the engagement ring on Felicity’s finger before flickering back to Oliver’s face. For his part, Oliver was either unaware or—and Felicity found this more likely—ignoring the woman’s blatant interest.

Felicity let out a breath she hadn’t even realized she’d been holding, somewhere between a sigh of relief and a huff of exasperation.
“Let’s go see her,” Oliver suggested.

“Wait.” Felicity looked at the other woman. “Could you give us a minute or two?”

A shadow of annoyance crossed the woman’s face before she plastered on a pleasant smile.

“Certainly. Whenever you’re ready, I’ll be at your disposal on the other side of that door,” she said pointing to a large brown door with faux wood paneling. She walked to the door and looked over her shoulder before opening it and going through.

“I thought you’d be in a bigger hurry,” Oliver commented.

“Now that I know she’s okay, we need to talk.”

“Now?”

“You meeting my family was never part of the deal. Especially now.”

“I believe you said it would be like entering Dante’s first ring of hell. I know a little bit about going through hell.” Was he cracking a joke? When she didn’t bite, he added, “We never said I wouldn’t meet them.”

“You’re giving me whiplash, Oliver. Hot. Cold. Hot. Cold. Hot.” Incredibly hot. She couldn’t fault the hospital administrator when she herself still wasn’t immune to his good looks. And to think earlier in the evening, she thought they’d be on about round three of lovemaking instead of being at odds in a hospital in Chico. “Our situation is messy enough. What are my parents going to think when they see you?”

“They’re going to think that I am a man who knows their daughter is the best thing that ever happened to him. They’re going to know that I want what’s best for you.”

Felicity pressed her lips together and looked away from Oliver, focusing on a framed aerial photo of the hospital block, trying to process his words and her own reaction. She wasn’t sure whether to throttle him or just give him a big hug. “You can’t say things like that with one breath and push me away with the next.”

“I never said I am what is best for you.”

Yep. Throttling was looking like the better of the two options. “Just so we’re clear on that, I’m pretty sure that’s where my mom stands on the issue, as well. She’s not going to make this easy for you, and I’ve had enough drama tonight to last a lifetime.”

“I can handle irate mothers.”

“And you’re not listening to me. I’ve already lied to my parents thanks to this ridiculous ‘engagement.’ I don’t want to perpetuate that lie any more than I already have. Shockingly, I’m still not comfortable with lying, even if it seems that the language I’m speaking these days is Bullshit rather than English,” she ended with a ramble.

He processed her words, nodding, “Okay. You’re right. I’ll be here waiting.”

“What? Hanging out in the hallway? Or with what’s-her-face? I’m sure she’d be happy to keep you company.”

“If I were with someone, the only woman I’d want to be with is you.”
Felicity huffed out a breath. “Well, now we know where I learned my alternative to English. Thanks for the ride, Oliver. It’s been really great. I’ll see you back in Starling.”

Felicity stood at the entrance to her grandmother’s hospital room. The lights were dimmed, but with the glow of the equipment and the light coming from the hall, she would recognize the two figures in the room anytime. Mother and daughter. Her mom and her oma.

Judith Smoak sat in a chair next to the hospital bed, her usually perfectly coiffed blonde hair falling over her shoulders in tousled waves. She had her elbow on the arm of the chair, propping up her head. Her grandmother lay in the hospital bed, a wisp of a figure, her eyes closed but her chest rising and falling.

“Mom?” Felicity whispered.

Judith jerked to attention and rose to greet her daughter.

“Hi,” Felicity whispered as she was enveloped in a hug, suddenly feeling safer, better. Despite their ups and downs, there was nothing quite like her mom’s hugs.

“Elfie. You got here so fast.” Judith held her daughter tightly. “It’s been so long,” she added. “And you’re too thin. And you’re not wearing glasses. And…” Her mother stopped herself short. “It’s good to see you.”

“I got a ride on the QC helicopter,” Felicity explained. There wasn’t much to say to her mother’s other statements. It had been a long time since they had been together in the same room. It started by choice—distancing herself from the family after the breakup with Mr. Wrong. Honestly, her mom had a harder time letting go of the relationship than Felicity did. Judith had kept pressuring her to reach out to Jack, to come back to Chico. The more her mom pushed, the more she pulled away. And then her distance was a byproduct of the new life she’d built for herself. Working a full time job all day and as a crimefighter at night didn’t lend itself to mother-daughter shopping trips or days at the spa.

“I guess the helicopter’s one benefit to being engaged to Oliver Queen.” Her mother’s eyes fell on the ring on Felicity’s left hand. “Or two. Wow.”

But the last thing Felicity wanted to do was talk about Oliver. After all, what was there to say that wasn’t either an outright lie or the ghost of one? “How is she?”

“Your oma’s going to be fine. It was just hypoglycemia. Of all things.”

“Low blood sugar?” Felicity asked, relieved. From what she knew, that was easily treatable.

“It mimicked the symptoms of a stroke. I went to say goodnight to her, and she was on the floor, confused, unable to move the left side of her body.”

Felicity nodded. Her grandmother had moved in with her parents about a year ago. “You both must’ve been so scared.”

“It’s been quite a night,” her mother confirmed.

“Can you believe they wouldn’t give me my lipstick?” came a voice from across the room. The strength of Oma Miriam’s voice was in direct contrast to the hushed tones in which Felicity and Judith spoke.
“You’re awake,” Felicity said with a smile going immediately to her grandmother’s bedside. Her mother followed suit.

“And alive,” Miriam Rosenbaum quipped holding out her hands, reaching for Felicity. Felicity leaned down and kissed her grandmother’s cheek. “I need lipstick.”

“Ma, the nurses need to be able to see your lip color.” Felicity recognized her mom’s ‘I’m trying to be patient but I’m not quite there’ tone.

Miriam took issue with her daughter’s by-the-rules response. “To make sure I’m not dead? When I’m dead, I won’t care about my lip color. Until then…”

Felicity opened her purse and retrieved bright pink lipstick. Tenderly, she applied the lipcover to her grandmother’s mouth. “There. Beautiful as always.”

“Much better. I knew I could count on you.”

“Ma!” That was decidedly less than patient.

“I’m so happy to see you,” Oma said running her thumb over the palm of Felicity’s hand. “But you should be asleep in bed. Preferably with that hunk of a man you’re engaged to. Judith, why did you call Felicity and scare her to death?”

It technically wasn’t her mother who called, but neither Felicity nor Judith corrected her.

“Ma, we feared the worst. Times like this are when family should come together.”

“So you thought I was going to kick the bucket and Felicity’d want to drag herself out of bed when she could be wrapped up with her hunk? If I were going to die, I’d be good and dead. Might as well let her sleep. It was just a little low sugar, and you sound the alarms like Paul Revere.”

“Your face was drooping. You weren’t moving your left arm and leg. You were confused and had slurred speech. What else was I supposed to think besides stroke?”

Oma Miriam turned to Felicity. “Next time, I’m having that piece of pecan pie with dinner. I’m not going to worry about my girlish figure.”

At that, Felicity couldn’t help but grin as she squeezed her grandmother’s hand.

“Where’s Dad?” she asked her mom. “Did he go home?”

“No, he’s wandering around here somewhere,” her mother replied.

“He had to get away from the nagging,” Oma Miriam piped in.

“Ma!” Judith fussed. “I do not nag.”

“Says the woman who wouldn’t give me lipstick,” her oma replied.

“Did you bring Oliver with you?” Judith asked, turning to her daughter, ignoring her mother’s comment.

Felicity’s eyes narrowed. Smooth. Changing the subject. How was she going to answer that? Technically, Oliver brought himself and was possibly still somewhere in the hospital, unless he went back to Starling on the helicopter. She had been pretty dismissive of him, after all.
No. Knowing Oliver, he was still there somewhere. Keeping his distance but not too far off, still able to keep an eye on her.

“He flew in with me, but he thought it would be better to give our family some space."

“But our family is about to be his family,” Judith replied. “Theoretically. I mean, that’s what the newspapers say.”

“Mom.” “Judith.” Felicity and Oma Miriam spoke simultaneously.

“I’m just saying that it would be nice to meet him. That’s all. I can’t help but wonder why you’ve kept him away from us. Or why I had to find out you were getting married on the news.”

The hospital cafeteria was closed, the lights off in the expansive room. The only glow came from a vending machine with “COFFEE” illuminating its casing, though it was questionable as to whether it could truly be considered palatable coffee. Unfortunately, at this point, it looked like Oliver’s only option. As he choked down the first sip of the too-late and too-thick coffee from his Styrofoam cup, his cell phone vibrated with a text message.

2:01 a.m.

Thea: Seriously? You’re cancelling?

A series of angry emojis followed. He had texted her a few minutes ago, banking on her still being awake despite the lateness because of the hours she worked at Verdant. Friday night would be one of the busiest.

Their brunch for tomorrow morning—correction—later that morning, would have to be postponed. There was no way he would make it back. John would continue to keep an eye on Thea, and Oliver would keep a watch over Felicity, albeit from a distance.

He took a deep breath. He had so much to tell Thea, so many things that needed to be said, and so many things that needed to be omitted. But how could he? She’d know him to be a liar. Would she know him to be a monster, too? Would she hate him? Would it be better if she did? Maybe it would be enough for Slade. Maybe…

He pinched the bridge of his nose. At the rate he was going, he had done more harm than good in coming back.

2:01 a.m.

Oliver: Not cancelling. Raincheck. Family emergency in Chico. Felicity’s grandmother. Please don’t be mad.

2:02 a.m.

Thea: Too late.

2:02 a.m.

Oliver: Will call you as soon as I get back.
He waited. He saw that she had read the message, but she had not responded yet. After what seemed like an eternity, he decided she wasn’t going to answer.

2:04 a.m.

**Oliver:** *I will make this up to you. I promise.*

Was it a promise he couldn’t keep?

Oliver Queen wasn’t sure what was worse. Knowing Slade Wilson was going to hurt the people he loved if he got the opportunity, or knowing that he himself was the one who had succeeded in hurting Felicity and Thea both.

Felicity.

She was so close and so far away. The hurt and anger blazing in her eyes had been difficult to see, made even moreso by the fact that he was the one responsible.

At least this way she was still alive. Though if looks could kill, *he* would be lying on the floor.

He didn’t blame Felicity for being angry on top of being hurt. She was right. Hot. Cold. Push. Pull. His instinct—to support her and accompany her to Chico despite the looming expiration date of their relationship—was off target. It only muddied the waters more, made the situation more difficult.

But he was damned if he was going to make it easy for Slade to gain access to her.

Another presence brought Oliver from thoughts. The man was middle aged and didn’t look particularly threatening, though at this point, Oliver was well aware that looks often were deceiving.

The new arrival ambled to the coffee vending machine, considering his options and not looking pleased with any of them. His eyes cut over to Oliver. “Is it as bad as I think it is?”

“It might be engine oil,” Oliver replied, holding up the coffee cup for show, before taking another drink of the suspect liquid.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” the other man responded as he fished some change from his pocket. “You look like you could use something stronger than coffee. You lose your best friend or something?”

Oliver practically choked on the sip of hot liquid.

The man shook his head in horror. “Oh. Wait. We’re in a hospital. Not really the place for saying things like that. I’m sorry. Didn’t think that one through. It’s been a long day, and I have this tendancy to …” He pressed his thumb and fingers together repeatedly, the universal symbol for jabbering. “…when I’m tired.”

Oliver had the feeling the man wasn’t going to stop talking if he didn’t put him out of his misery. “It’s fine. We actually got good news.”

The older man picked up the Styrofoam cup that had just filled and sniffed its contents, hesitant to take a drink. “So did we.”

“That’s…good.”

An awkward silence fell between them. Ollie Queen was great at small talk—but mostly if that meant he’d score a beautiful woman in his bed. Oliver Queen not so much. Talking meant revealing.
He was drained physically, emotionally. The last thing he wanted was to make small talk with a stranger.

But the man continued to study him. “Do I…know you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Did you play in the Spring Outdoor Soccer League?”

“I’m not from here. I’m here with my…” Oliver hesitated. How could he describe what Felicity was to him? His friend? His fake fiancée? His hope? His lost cause? His kick in the ass? His everything? He settled on, “my girl. Her grandmother was brought in.”

Recognition was written all over the older man’s face. “Oh. Oh! You’re Oliver. Of course! I should have recognized you. You’re all over those magazines that my wife claims are ridiculous but reads anyway. Your girl is my girl. I mean,” he chuckled, “she’s my daughter. I’m Ben Smoak.”

The conversation and the man both suddenly made so much more sense. “You’re Felicity’s dad.” Oliver extended his hand, and the older man took it, shaking it enthusiastically.

“I’m really glad to meet you. It’s not everyday I meet a man who’s come back from the dead. Or, you know, the man who’s going to marry my daughter. Not something I ever thought I would say together.”

“Understandable.”

“I just have to know…your teeth are perfect. What did you do for dental care on that island?”

“Judith, Felicity didn’t come here to get the third degree,” Oma Miriam said sharply from her bed. “You treat her like this, no wonder she doesn’t visit more often.”

“Am I mistreating you?” Judith asked, flumoxed. “I’m just trying to understand what you’re thinking, what you’re going through, since you don’t ever really tell me anything anymore.”

“What I’m going through?” Felicity repeated numbly. There were so many directions she could go with that, none of which ended with her mother getting off her back.

“I just…I don’t even understand your employment situation, let alone the fact you’re engaged to a man that I have yet to meet. The newspapers are saying you’re Oliver’s assistant? When did this even happen? What happened to your career in information technology? And that $40,000 a year education you received at MIT?”

“For starters, I had a full academic scholarship, so don’t make it sound like I’ve led the family on the path of financial ruin. Secondly, my work with Oliver is…challenging.” It was hard to argue with the lack of correlation between her actual skills and the secretarial arts, but she wasn’t lying when she called working with Oliver challenging. She never knew what to expect, and she thrived on that. What they did together—beyond QC but even within QC itself—mattered to her. Navigating piranha-infested water was interesting to say the least. And when the piranha wore Prada? It gave her pleasure to foil Isabel Rochev’s plans.

“Oh, Judith. Get your head out of your ass,” Oma Miriam piped in. “I’ve seen pictures of Felicity’s Oliver. One look at him should tell you exactly why Felicity is willing to be his assistant. If I were a
few years younger, I’d be happy to assist him myself,” she added suggestively.

“Ma, that’s gross,” Judith scolded lightly.

“I’m old, not dead.”

“Look who I found in the cafeteria,” said a new voice entering the room.

Felicity and Judith turned to see Ben Smoak enter the hospital room with an almost sheepish looking Oliver trailing behind. Felicity caught Oliver’s eyes, and she tilted her head and pursed her lips as though to say, “Seriously?”

In response, he shrugged his shoulders. *Sorry not sorry.*

“Pumpkin,” Ben said as he closed the distance between himself and his daughter.

“I’ve missed you, Dad,” she said as she was enveloped in a hug. Even with her cheek against her dad’s heart, she couldn’t revel in the feeling of contentment, the feeling of home—not with Oliver standing a few feet away. No, he was supposed to be keeping his distance. Despite the fact that she’d told him she did not intend to introduce him to her family, he’d managed anyway. And knowing how skilled he was at escaping when necessary, there was only one thing she could conclude: Oliver didn’t want to escape.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us?” Judith asked her daughter.

Felicity cleared her throat. She was cornered. “Mom, this is Oliver. Oliver, this is my mom, Judith Smoak.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Smoak,” Oliver said politely extending his hand.

“Please call me my Judith,” she said shaking his hand very briefly and mechanically.

“Evidently, you’ve already met my dad,” Felicity said, a slight edge to her voice as she gently tugged Oliver to her grandmother’s bedside. “And this is my Oma Miriam. She’s the best of all of us.”

“You see why I love this one so much,” Oma Miriam said with a smile as she extended both hands. Oliver reached out and allowed his hand to be enveloped by the elderly lady’s smaller hands. “It’s so good to meet you, Oliver. The man who has captured my Felicity’s heart must be a very special man, indeed.”

“I’m so glad to meet you,” Oliver replied warmly.

“You can call me Oma.”

Judith cleared her throat. “So did the two of you start up your relationship before or after Felicity left her career path in technology to join your secretarial staff? And is that seriously the way you conduct business?”

“Here we go. The third degree. That took all of five seconds,” Felicity muttered with annoyance.

“Give your mother credit. It was more like ten,” Oma Miriam chirped.

“Judith,” Ben broke in, placing a hand on his wife’s shoulder. “Don’t you think it’s better to get to know Oliver before you interrogate him?”

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” Judith rationalized.
“Small talk. Interrogation. Same difference,” Felicity said sarcastically.

“If Oliver here is going to marry our only daughter, he won’t mind answering a few questions. It’ll give me peace of mind.”

“Of course,” Oliver agreed.

But Felicity’s dad intervened. “It’s late, and I’m sure Felicity and Oliver would like to get some rest, which is what we should do as well.” Ben looked to his daughter. “You and Oliver can stay in your room. The sheets are clean. There are fresh towels in the bathroom linen closet, and…”

“Oh good grief,” Judith interrupted, squirming from her husband’s touch.

“Dr. Smoak. Judith,” Oliver corrected. “I was away for a long time. Coming back—adjusting—was not easy. Felicity is…Felicity is remarkable. She helped me to see that there are good people still left. She’s helped me to become a better man than the idiot kid who was shipwrecked. She’s a testament to you and your family.”

At that, Ben smiled, but Judith’s expression remained impassive.

Oliver continued, “We were friends before anything else, and we’re friends above all else. Felicity is working with me as my assistant because there is simply no one else in the world that I trust more than I trust her. I understand how it must look to you, but at the office we are professional. I respect her too much to do otherwise.”

Felicity reached out and patted his cheek. “If you call this one being late for meetings professional.”

“But you’re helping me with that, too.” He looked at the others in the room to explain. “She just tells me the meetings are 15 minutes earlier than what they are. Then when I’m late, I’m actually arriving on time. Makes things run more smoothly.”

Oliver’s conciliatory statements did little to allay Judith Smoak’s concerns.

“If you understand how it must look to me, then you should know it looks like you’ve got some weird Christian Grey vibe going on. Damaged billionaire. Questionable influence on an impressionable young woman. You even came here in a helicopter of all things.” Judith turned to Felicity. “Please. Be honest with your mother, Elfie. You’re not his submissive, are you?”

“Whoa, Judith. This is too much information,” Ben interjected.

Despite everything, Oliver had to fight back a chortle. He had no idea who Christian Grey was, but Felicity as his submissive? She was the least submissive person he’d ever met.

Felicity ignored her mother’s ridiculous question and instead looked to her grandmother. “Why did you give her that book?”

“What book are we talking about?” Oliver asked, knowing that he was missing something.

“50 Shades of Smut,” Felicity hissed. At that, Oliver’s left eyebrow shot up.

“One of the literary greats,” Oma Miriam said with an ironic twinkle in her eyes.

Judith continued, “If you’re going to marry my daughter, I have more questions for you. Are you circumcised, Oliver? Do you intend to convert? What about the children you and Felicity will have?”

Felicity held up her hands. “Stop. Right now. Stop. And this is Exhibit A for why I don’t come home
more often. Throw Jack in the mix, and we can have open our own museum. Until you learn how to act normal or at least pretend, I--"

“I only want what’s best for you.”

“Why does everyone think they know what’s best for me and that I don’t? Trust that I’m a big girl and I can make my own decisions. Whether Oliver is in my life or isn’t—that’s my choice. And here’s one other thing,” Felicity added twining her arms around Oliver. She could feel the tension in his body. “Oliver has been a complete gentleman to you, despite receiving nothing but accusations and innuendo. That’s a testament to the kind of man he is.”

She could feel him ease up a bit.

“We should go check into a hotel or something,” she told him before she looked to her grandmother. “I’ll be back to see you in a few hours.”

Ben stepped forward. “C’mon, Pumpkin. Please stay at the house. Your mother will behave.”

“I’m right here,” Judith seethed.

“Then you tell her you’ll behave,” Ben prompted.

Felicity hesitated. She believed that her dad would try to keep her mom in check—he was the perfect balance to her high-strung antics—but no one could control Judith Smoak. Apparently, not even Judith Smoak.

“It’s okay,” Oliver assured Felicity, wanting to give her as much of an opportunity to be with her family as possible. There was more going on with the family dynamics than her mother’s hesitance to accept him, and perhaps if they had time to sort it out…

Ben shot a look of thanks to Oliver. “Do you still have a key?” her dad asked.

“Yes,” Felicity grudgingly responded.

“Then go home. Get some rest. We’ll be laughing about all of this in the morning.”

“It’s not that funny,” Felicity insisted as she rinsed off her toothbrush in the en suite bathroom of her childhood room.

Oliver leaned against the doorframe. “Felicity, you have a poster of Justin Timberlake with little hearts drawn on him. The only thing that would make this better would be if there were lipstick marks on it.”

She looked at him knowingly. “And if I went into your childhood bedroom, what do you suppose I would find there?”

“Probably dirty magazines,” he replied, stifling a yawn. “Hidden. Not plastered on the bathroom door. My mom would not have approved. Neither would Laurel.”

“I bet,” she replied drily. “I guess you’ve got something in common with Mr. Wrong. Jack used to make fun of that poster, too,” she replied as she walked past Oliver, their bodies briefly brushing. “I lost my virginity with the Justin poster watching us.”

Oliver grimaced.
“Hey. What happens in Chico, right?” She went to her overnight bag and searched for her pajamas.

She thought she heard him mutter ‘Damn Jackass’ under his breath.

“That was either very kinky or very awkward. And still you’ve kept up the poster.”

“I’m stubborn that way.” More like she hadn’t been home in ages—only very briefly after she finished MIT. “Where are my…?” She tossed the bag aside in annoyance.

“What?”

“I forgot pajamas.”

Oliver dug through his bag. He wasn’t the one to pack it, but he was fairly certain he would find pajamas there. Sure enough. He pulled out flannel pants and a t-shirt and handed them over to her.

“Just the shirt. Thanks,” she said, her fingers brushing against his as she took the white v-neck shirt from him. She turned her back to him and peeled off her sweater and removed her bra before pulling on the borrowed shirt. Just as she expected, Oliver’s too-large-for-her shirt provided plenty of coverage, length wise, though it did slip off her shoulder. She toed off her shoes and pulled off her jeans. When she turned back around, she realized he was watching her.

Self-consciously, Oliver turned away, having been caught staring.

“I know I can’t really stay on the couch without raising more questions, so I’ll just…uh…take the floor in here.”

“We’ve slept in the same bed before,” Felicity said wearily, pulling down the covers.

“Being in the same bed won’t change anything between us.”

She rolled her eyes. What did he think she was going to try to do? Seduce him with Justin Timberlake watching? “Don’t be a dick.”

Her grandmother’s long-forgotten words of wisdom suddenly came to the forefront of her mind.

“Felicity, it’s a funny thing about men. They’ve got their pros and their cons.”

“That’s true of anybody, Oma.”

“But it’s really true of men. Men’s greatest pro: their dicks. Men’s greatest con: they’re dicks.”

She smiled faintly at the memory. Oliver looked at her quizzically, but he said nothing in reply to her comment or to what must’ve seemed like an odd expression on her face.

Felicity turned off the table lamp next to the bed and climbed under the covers. The room was more shadows than light now, with the neighborhood streetlights providing an eerie orangish glow through the window blinds.

Taking that as a sign that their conversation was over, Oliver took off his pants and unbuttoned his shirt. She noticed he didn’t pull on the flannel pants. It figured. Oliver was used to sleeping in the nude. She should just be glad (disappointed?) that he had kept on his boxer briefs. As her eyes adjusted, she admired the play of light and shadows on his sculpted body.

He slipped into the bed next to her, taking pains not to invade her space, despite the fact that the bed was not spacious in the least.
“I’m sorry,” he said quietly as he stared at the ceiling.

She turned on her side and expelled a breath. “So am I. But if Slade Wilson didn’t give you second thoughts about us, I’m pretty sure my mom would do the trick.”

She said it so matter-of-factly that, despite the rollercoaster ride of the night, he couldn’t help but be amused by Felicity’s assessment of his first meeting with her mom. Judith Smoak was certainly an interesting woman.

Felicity continued, “Thank God you dodged that bullet, right? What if crazy runs in the family?”

He played along. “On the plus side, your mom looks really good for her age.”

From beside him, Felicity laughed softly, despite the aching in her heart. “Lucky for me you have a thing for sister duos instead of mother/daughter duos.”

Oliver deadpanned, “So you’re saying you think I have a shot with your mom?”

At that, she took her pillow and playfully smacked him with it. He stilled her movements by snatching the pillow from her with one hand and circling her forearm with the other hand.

Their eyes met, and an eternity passed in a second. It would be so easy to just meld into one another. One move from her, one from him. For a few minutes, they could leave behind the worries and bask in the warmth of the other. They could give into their longings. But they would be left with the same conundrum. Oliver believed Felicity wasn’t safe with him, and he wouldn’t continue to put her life in jeopardy for his own benefit.

Oliver seemed to realize the precariousness of the situation because he let go of her and tucked her pillow under his head.

“You’re not fighting fair,” she protested and tugged on her pillow, which was now securely under him.

“Hey, you started it.”

“And you actually cracked a joke.”

“I have been known to joke. Periodically.”

“Rarely,” she yawned.

“In my defense, it’s late. And you laughed.” He sat up and let her retrieve her pillow.

She fluffed the pillow before sinking back down onto it. “Sometimes you’ve got to laugh.”

Or you’ll cry.

Sleep should have come easily to him. He was going on being awake for nearly 24 hours straight, but as she lay next to him, her back turned, the thought kept echoing, How am I going to give her up?

Felicity had long since fallen asleep, her breathing even. In her sleep, she had drifted closer to him, her shapely rear pressed against him. The t-shirt she wore had ridden up, and her smooth legs tangled with his hairy ones. She stirred slightly, wiggling to get comfortable, her derriere rubbing against what was turning out to be a rather painful erection. He shifted to lessen the contact between their
bodies, partly to give himself some relief and partly because if he didn’t, he didn’t trust what he would do.

Even as angry as she was with him, she still had defended him to her mother and made an impassioned demand for her mother—and him—to respect her choices.

Felicity was strong.

*It was sexy as hell.*

He wasn’t trying to placate Judith when he told her that Felicity made him a better man. Was there a way to have it all—keep Felicity safe and be with her? Was she right? Was he playing right into what Slade would expect him to do? Or worse, was he actually making her less safe by pushing her away? Or was it just his selfishness that wanted to believe that, so he could justify being with her despite the risks?

*How am I going to give her up?*

Oliver had been, quite simply, understating to Felicity’s parents just the effect she had on him. She was the first person he saw as a person after coming home. She neither wanted nor expected anything from him. She didn’t go out of her way to fabricate excuses to be near him. She found a way into his heart without even trying. She was the greatest surprise of his life—the greatest gift.

And he was throwing it away.

*For her own good,* he reminded himself.

*How am I going to give her up?*

Even through her closed eyelids, Felicity could see the light. The east-facing room was bathed in the morning sun. Her eyes felt heavy as she tried to fight through the fatigue and open them. For that matter, her whole body felt heavy. The reason quickly became apparent.

Opening her bleary eyes, she recognized her childhood room, everything just as she’d left it except for one detail: she was sharing the bed with Oliver and was wrapped in his arms. He lay plastered against her, his knees tucked into the crook of hers, one strong arm supplementing the pillow under her head and the other draped over her torso, weighing her down. *So much for his supreme effort at keeping his distance the night before.* Sometime in their sleep, they must have gravitated toward one another.

Oliver’s large, calloused hand was possessively splayed over her abdomen. Felicity tried not to think about how incredibly right this felt, or how she could get used to waking up like this, and focused on extricating herself from his hold. Nothing good could come from this, not when the reality of the situation was that the clock was going tick-tock-boom on their arrangement. Then there would be no more fake engagement or real relationship, and she’d never look at a taco the same way again.

That didn’t mean she wouldn’t still do everything she could to help Oliver with his Slade situation—whether he wanted her help or not. Oliver might choose to shut her out through some misguided notion of keeping her safe, but that didn’t mean she was going to let him face this nemesis without giving him the best chance for survival. But how? She needed to think, but Oliver’s nearness had her brain cascading into a sea of jumbled thoughts and emotions.

She moved experimentally, thinking that if she shifted, he would pull away. Instead, as she tried to lift his hand, his arms flexed, and his hand gently exerted more pressure on her belly.
That didn’t work, but it sure felt good.

She could just straight-up wake him. Yes, if he became aware that he was wrapped around her, he’d let go faster than if she was a hot potato. Well, maybe not. Oliver seemed to invite pain.

On the other hand, Oliver seldom relaxed, and it had been a long night. So it was purely for unselfish reasons that she ceased her movements. It had absolutely nothing to do with wanting to prolong those moments of closeness, or the fact that she had so quickly become addicted to the feel of his skin against hers.

She thought of the promise she made herself. I won’t lie to myself. I won’t let myself believe this is even a possibility. She relaxed, willing wishes to become reality, allowing herself just five minutes. In five minutes’ time, she would stop lying to herself.

It was a beautiful lie that she allowed until she felt the tension seeping out of his arms and heard his breathing regulate again. Once she was sure he was still asleep, she subtly tried to move away again, but his reaction was the same as before.

Crazy. Even in his sleep, Oliver was a force to be reckoned with.

She sighed quietly and stilled her movements wondering what she should do. She absolutely, positively should not revel in the feel of the hot, muscled male flesh pressed up against her back, or the fact that Oliver wasn’t wearing anything more than a pair of boxer briefs, or the fact that his fingers had dipped slightly beneath the waistband of her tiny, silky panties.

She carefully laid her hand over his where it rested low on her stomach and gently tried to lift it. His hand quite unexpectedly curled around hers and she jumped in response to the touch.

“I’m sorry. I had no right. I just wanted to hold you.” His voice, still filled with the remnants of slumber and hoarse from the lack of use, rumbled in her ear. His hand briefly tightened around her smaller hand for a few seconds longer before he let her go and removed his arm from around her waist. He shifted away from her, giving her the space to leave. Now was her opportunity to escape. No harm. No foul. Dignity intact. They couldn’t be responsible for what they did in their sleep, but now that they were awake…

Felicity hesitated, impulsively turning around to face him. Her heart pounded as she saw his expression shift. Adoration. Longing. Resignation.

It didn’t have to be this way!

Against her better judgment, she reached out a hand to touch his stubbled jaw. His own hand lifted to trap her against the bristly surface of his skin. He turned his head slightly and brushed his lips against the tender flesh of her inner wrist.

Sparks skittered through her.

He felt it, too.

“If you don’t leave now, Felicity…” He left the rest of the desperately whispered warning unspoken, and Felicity closed her eyes briefly, trying to gather the strength to get up and walk away.

Instead, she found the strength to stay.

“What are you going to do, Oliver?” she challenged. She settled back on her pillow.
“Make you hate me,” he whispered as he moved closer, bracing himself on one elbow to look down at her.

“I will never hate you,” she replied without hesitation.

“I’m sorry, I have to do this.” Before she could react, his mouth found hers in an achingly sweet yet infinitely hungry kiss.

“So sorry,” he apologized again, when he lifted his mouth to stare down into her face tenderly before dropping to claim her lips again. His kiss was tender and beautiful and overwhelming to her senses.

Felicity met his kisses with an eagerness of her own. Her lips opened up and welcomed him in, and his tongue accepted the invitation, gently courting and coaxing hers. She shouldn’t want this, not with things so unsettled between them, but all reason left, replaced with yearning.

Was this a hello? Was it a goodbye? It didn’t matter. It just was.

Oliver’s hands moved down the slim column of her neck, to her shoulders, stroking the expanse of silky skin he encountered thanks to the too-large t-shirt she wore. Her heart thrummed when his lips followed his hands. She felt his hot, moist breath on her sensitive skin as he worked his way down, kissing every inch of available skin. She cried out softly when she felt his breath on one tautly beaded nipple through the thin material of her top. His mouth moved over the nipple, and he very deliberately breathed onto the bud through the cotton. The fabric sensuously abraded the sensitive peak, while his fingers fluttered up and down the small slope of her breast, circling, taunting but not quite touching the eager tip.

Felicity’s breath hitched as she wondered how he had gotten her so hot so fast. He glanced up into her face, over the small mound of the breast, and stared almost reverently. He hovered for an endless moment before bending his head and drawing the tight nub of her nipple, cotton and all, deeply into his hot, wet mouth. At the same time, he buried his free hand between her legs and found the other eager nubbin desperate for his touch through her silky underwear.

It happened quickly—like being jolted by a huge bolt of lightning—unexpected and powerful. She stifled a scream and arched off the bed as she climaxed with ferocious force. Her back bowed and she remained taut. It was as though time suspended, as the spasms went on and on. All the while, he drew her nipple deeper and deeper into his mouth. He had one hand cupped in the nape of her neck with the other still buried between her legs and kept them there even after she went completely boneless and collapsed back onto the bed. He lifted his head to chuckle hoarsely.

“Good morning, Beautiful,” he whispered as he gave her one final stroke with his long finger before moving his hand to rest on her heaving abdomen. She barely heard him over the thunderous crashing of her heart, the whooshing of the blood in her ears.

She could hardly move and she was only just vaguely aware of him dragging her top off and tossing it aside. He went back to work, kissing her skin, licking, sucking, and nipping. Felicity tried to regain her equilibrium, but it was an impossible task when Oliver was so determinedly keeping her off-kilter.

The man was patient and undemanding, and Felicity sighed dreamily, feeling ridiculously relaxed after her massive release, while his sweeping hands and loving mouth continued to do deliciously wicked things to her. Gradually, his relentless patience started to have an undeniable effect on her. Her nipples had beaded back into tight, hard peaks, and her breathing became more and more ragged as he kissed and caressed his way over her entire body. Her panties had long since disappeared, and she became sharply aware of that fact when his lips found their way to her flat stomach. His tongue
swirled in and around the indentation of her belly button, and she helplessly shifted her hips, encouraging him to move even lower. She was amazed by how quickly he had managed to get her aroused again after her earlier climax.

All thought fled her mind when his talented mouth found the moist core of her femininity, and she shuddered violently with every stroke of his tongue. The velvet of his tongue combined with the friction from his stubbled jaw had her practically breathless. She barely had time to brace herself before a second, even bigger climax had her crashing in the agony of ecstasy. He managed to still her thrusting hips between his large hands as he continued to lave her with his incredibly skilled tongue.

It was too much.

“Stop,” she whispered, unable to tolerate the overwhelming sensations any longer.

Oliver dragged himself up over her body and braced himself above her to stare down into her face. This was intense and so personal, and it probably shouldn’t have happened, but she couldn’t find it in her to regret it.

“Wow,” she whispered after her climactic shudders eventually stopped. “So…that happened. I can see now what all the fuss is about. You are…that was…” It was absolutely one-sided. Oliver had stroked her in a way that no one ever had before, and all she had done was lie there like a ragdoll. She needed to remedy that situation. “Thank you.” She lifted her head, peppering tiny kisses along his jaw, even as her hands explored his body. He moaned at the contact, the sound strangled and pained.

She glanced down between their bodies and noticed two things: his boxers were gone and the man was very, very aroused. She had imagined what Oliver would look like naked, but it was a prime example of her imagination not doing him justice. Her fingers skimmed along his abdomen and moved lower. He hissed when she closed around his shaft and groaned when she stroked his hard length languidly with one hand and lightly massaged his balls with the other.

“Felicity,” he hissed, gritting his teeth.

He dropped his hips, and she could feel him thrust his length, rubbing against her stomach. He had held back too long, she realized. He needed his own release, and he needed it hard and fast. She spread her legs and guided the tip of his erection against her slick heat, sliding it back and forth, earning moans of pleasure from them both, until he settled at her opening.

Still, he did not penetrate her. She lifted her hips, grinding against him. His tip entered her shallowly, and she cried out in frustration, wanting more of him, needing him to bury himself in her. “Please.”

He looked equally frustrated as he pulled back, breaking the contact between their lower bodies.

“No, we can’t,” he ground out when she tried to guide him to her again, “This isn’t a good idea.”

“Why not? I’m on birth control, and we both want this,” she breathed into his ear. “I need to feel you inside of me, Oliver.” She nipped at his bottom lip. “I want to make you forget that there’s a world that exists outside of this moment. Let me do that for you.”

“But when the moment is over, you will hate me.”

“No,” she denied, “I won’t.”

“It won’t change anything. You deserve better than a one-time fuck.”
“This doesn’t have to be one time.”

“The world is still out there, and it’s still not safe for you to be with me.” He moved off of her, settling beside her on the bed, his back to her.

She got on her knees behind him and traced a scar on his shoulder. It was the gunshot wound that he’d received at the hands of his own mother—the bullet that brought her fully into his world. “I’m not expecting white picket fences, Oliver, and I’m not going to hate you.”

He shifted to look at her. “A couple of days ago, you wanted to wait until we were more established in our relationship.”

“I thought we had all the time in the world,” she admitted. “Turns out you’re saying goodbye before we’ve really even said hello, even though I know that’s not what you really want.”

“You deserve more than a man who is always going to look over his shoulder—or worse, a man who can barely hold back the monster he is.”

“I deserve…I deserve. What about what you deserve? You’re not a monster, Oliver,” she asserted taking his hand and running her thumb back and forth along his palm. “You deserve happiness. You deserve to know and feel love.”

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I never meant for any of this to happen. I shouldn’t have touched you…not like that.”

“Do you see me complaining?” she retorted with a smile.

“I just..I wanted to hold you.”

“I know,” she assured, leaning her forehead against his. “It’s okay. We’re going to be okay.”

“No,” he whispered quietly. “No, it’s not. We’re not.” He vacillated for a moment before, with a groan of brutal self-denial, he dragged himself out of her reach and off the bed all in one swift movement. He stood at the side of the bed, gloriously naked and painfully aroused, to stare at her for a heartbeat before turning away and heading toward the en suite. Tears stung her eyes, and she wondered at the amount of self-control it must have taken for Oliver to get up and leave her.

Felicity watched the door close gently behind him and, an instant later, heard the shower running. She was tempted to join him in the shower, but she knew that he believed he had done the right thing. If she wanted people to respect her choices, she had to be willing to respect theirs, as well.

She swiped at the tears and spotted the t-shirt bunched into a wad at the foot of the bed. She pulled it on, despite the fact that it was still damp in the area over her left breast. She would wait for her turn in the bathroom; the last thing she wanted was to venture out into her parents’ house with her thighs slick, smelling of sex.

Her body still tingled, and her eyes fluttered closed at the memory of what Oliver’s fingers and tongue had accomplished.

Enough.

Her eyes opened, and the poster of Justin Timberlake stared back at her. With a grimace, Felicity peeled herself off the bed and walked to the door where it hung, her legs wobbly. “That was your last show, Justin,” she said to the poster as she tugged at it, finally pulling it from its place on the bathroom door.
The double-sided tape on the back left a sticky residue on the painted door. The poster was gone from the door but definitely not forgotten. Just like the island. Just like the people who hurt Oliver. Just like the people he had hurt. Oliver was still trying to deal with that sticky residue of his past, and he may never get cleaned up all the way.

That didn’t mean the door didn’t still work.

Felicity shook her head slightly—not enough sleep had her brain coming up with the goofiest analogies.

She didn’t know what was going to happen, but she did know this: she wasn’t going to beg Oliver to change his mind. The man was just as stubborn as she was. After Monday, she would give Oliver the distance he needed in order to deal with Slade Wilson.

But she had a few ideas of her own for how to deal with Slade Wilson.

In the meantime, she would just have to believe in him enough for the both of them.

Chapter End Notes

In the next chapter, Oliver will meet Jack(ass). It'll be interesting, though I'm not so sure Felicity would agree with that assessment. :) Stay tuned...
Being Polite and Other Acts of War

Chapter Notes

I'm still here! It has been a long time, but I have not abandoned this story. Thank you to all of you who have hung in there and encouraged me over the years.

For those of you who are relative newcomers to this story, I began it way back in season two of Arrow (and we are now on the cusp of the abbreviated season eight). For that reason, you will notice that certain aspects of the characters' backstories are different from what eventually was revealed on the show. That's because when I wrote this, those backstories had not yet been established, so I forged my own path. Rather than doing a retcon of this story, I have carried on.

So here we are . . . and All in a Day's Work continues . . .

If you're still reading, let me know. :)

Previously in All in a Day's Work: Oliver and Felicity were successful in enlisting Frederick McMartin's investment in QC, which should enable them to stave off Isabel's hostile takeover. Unfortunately, any celebrations were cut short with the realization that Slade Wilson is out there and determined to have his revenge. In an effort to keep Felicity safe, Oliver decided that she would be better off without him and broke off their burgeoning relationship. However, a family health crisis drew Felicity home to Chico, CA, with Oliver by her side.

Chapter Nineteen: Being Polite and Other Acts of War

There had been a number of times in Oliver's life that he wished he could crawl into a hole and avoid trouble. As a child, he was no stranger to it. When he was six, he had been told not to touch his father's model schooner. The shiny wood, the lifelike details etched into the delicate replica held his attention when he would go into his father's office. Look but don't touch. That was the warning. It sat on a pedestal, but he longed to play with it. One night, long after his bedtime, he was struck with the sudden notion to go to his father's office and play with it. No one would ever have to know. He would return it to the display when he was finished. He pulled his father's chair to the pedestal to climb upon it to reach the schooner. No sooner had he climbed up, the door to the office swung open, startling the boy. He lost his balance. Down he went—taking the model boat with him. Pieces flew across the room. Oliver awaited his father's fury, but it didn't come as expected. Instead, that was the moment when his father decided it was time to truly teach Oliver about sailing.

As a young man, he had been in trouble more times than he could count. Sometimes he embraced it—like when he screwed Sara behind Laurel's back over and over. He knew it was wrong, but Sara was fun and sexy and didn't have so damn many expectations of him. Other times he barely dodged trouble—like when Samantha Clayton came to him after their one-night stand. That one stood out to him because of the broken condom. Later, she stood out to him for another reason. He had tried to reassure Samantha that he was clean, and he was. He was always so careful, and this was the first time he'd had a condom malfunction. The chances that he had knocked her up were slim. Right? Sex had to happen at just the right time. But there she stood before him two months later. "I just thought
you should know," she whispered. He had been terrified at the prospect of being a father. He wasn't ready. He could barely be responsible for himself let alone a little life. Fate intervened when Samantha later informed him she had miscarried. He should have been relieved. He told his mother he was. It was for the best. But…he couldn't shake the feeling that things should have been different. He should have been different.

He changed.

Not by choice.

So many choices were taken away from him. For five years, he felt like a pawn in a sick game.

And now his past was coming back to haunt him again. Same song, different tune. As hard as it had been to pull away from Felicity—he'd never wanted anyone more in his entire life—he knew it had been the right thing to do. He also knew she wouldn't see it that way.

He turned off the shower water and reached for a towel. It had taken him a long time to get his body under control. He wanted to bury himself in her, to take the love and comfort and pleasure she offered. He had been so, so close to pressing inside her. Instead, he had pulled away and left her naked on the bed while he strained to get himself under control.

This was going to be awkward.

But surely she wasn't out there waiting.

But as he opened the bathroom door, he saw that was exactly where she was.

He gaze fell on her—she now wore the shirt she'd slept in the night before—and her cheeks reddened even as her eyes trailed his body.

"I didn't think you'd be out here. I'm just going to, uh, get some clothes."

"I don't really want to be here, but I smell like sex." She squeezed her eyes shut. "I think of the worst ways to say things, but I didn't really want to hang around the kitchen with my parents without a shower. That's why I'm out here making things more awkward than they already were, apparently."

"You don't have anything to feel awkward about. What happened between us is my fault. I got carried away, and that wasn't fair to you."

"You left before things could get finished. That wasn't fair to you," Felicity retorted.

The hunger in her eyes was evident. His body was already answering with its own response. Before he could stop himself, Oliver replied, "You are trouble."

"Like my tattoo says."

The air crackled between them.

Oliver desperately needed distance before he tore off the towel, pushed her back on the bed, and finished what they had started earlier.

It was then he noticed the blank space on the door where the peeping Tom/Justin Timberlake poster had been only a few minutes earlier. "What happened to the poster?"

She shrugged. "It was time for it to go."
"Are we okay?"

"We will be." She cleared her throat. "I'm going to take a shower, and we're going to pretend that this morning didn't happen. Otherwise, I'm not going to be able to look at you without wanting to… take a cold shower."

Oliver watched as she hurried into the bathroom, closing the door to the en suite behind her.

The aroma of coffee wafting through the house drew Oliver out of Felicity's childhood bedroom and on a journey of exploration. The Smoak family's home was certainly not anywhere near as grand as the house in which he grew up, but it felt more like a home. Pictures of Felicity through the years and a boy that Oliver assumed was her brother adorned various walls and tables. Books were plentiful. And these books looked like they were actually read, not merely put on display.

The house itself, while nice, was not overly large—not like the behemoth where Oliver grew up—and he had no trouble finding his way to the kitchen. There, he saw Ben Smoak sitting on a bar stool studying a large mug.

"I really shouldn't drink so much coffee," Felicity's father mused. "Stains the teeth, after all. But if that's my worst vice, I guess I'm doing okay." The older man slid off the stool. "Let me get you a cup." Without waiting for a response, Ben poured Oliver his own mug. "You take anything in it?"

"No, black is fine."

Ben pushed the mug to Oliver, who eagerly took a sip. "Much better than last night," Oliver declared remembering the sludge that passed as coffee in the hospital.

"No comparison," Ben agreed. He studied the man who was to be his son-in-law. "To be honest, I didn't figure you or Felicity would be awake yet. It was a long night."

Oliver glanced at the clock on the stove. It displayed the time—9:30 a.m. Not particularly early. "I'm used to keeping long hours."

"Surely you work some fun in there. Do you ever get out on the golf course?"

Golf. The thought alternately amused Oliver and made him feel a pang. "It's been years. My dad and I used to go occasionally, but it was usually with his business associates. Back then, that wasn't my idea of a good time."

"Sometimes life lessons happen when you don't even realize it. You should ask Felicity about our golf outings sometime."

"Felicity plays golf?" Oliver asked, genuinely surprised.

"Terrible player," Ben replied with a chuckle. "Doesn't have the patience for it. She's an excellent caddy though. So Queen Consolidated is quite a company. Did you learn business from your dad?"

"When I had the chance to learn the business from my dad, I wasn't interested. Back then, I shirked anything that resembled responsibility." Oliver studied the older man's face, expecting to see a father's judgment, but instead saw the curiosity he had so often seen in Felicity. "I've had to hit the ground running with QC. Trial and error. The good news is I can't make things much worse than they are right now, but business is looking up in no small part thanks to Felicity."

"What did she do?" Ben asked, the pride evident on his face.
"She's just herself, and people respond to that. Sometimes I think she has this special light that follows her around, shines just on her." Oliver paused and shook his head ruefully. "That sounded so…"

"Spoken like a man in love," Ben said with a smile. "I know times have been hard. I heard about your mom. I'm glad you've had Felicity's support. When things have been bad here, she's what's kept us going."

"Any word on how Oma Miriam is doing this morning?"

"Judith's actually gone to the hospital to pick her up. She's being released this morning."

"That's good news."

"Thought I'd get brunch going while we're waiting for them to get here. I don't suppose you know your way around the kitchen, do you?"

Oliver smiled. "You'd be surprised."

The two men fell into an easy camaraderie as Oliver pulled ingredients from the refrigerator for omelets. He was surprised to find pork sausage there.

"Felicity's going to be disappointed," Ben said. "We tried to bring her up observing tradition, but in recent years, we've started eating pork on occasion. We'll just put that back where she won't see it…"

Oliver shook his head. Felicity and her parents really needed to talk to each other more often. He set aside mushrooms and spinach and began to chop onions, peppers, and tomatoes.

The two fell into a companionable rhythm. A few minutes later, Felicity joined Oliver and her father in the kitchen. Freshly showered, her hair was still damp. "Need some help?" she asked as she watched the two men work around each other quite efficiently.

"No," her dad said quickly, well aware of his daughter's lack of culinary skills. "I mean, I think we've got things under control."

"Is Mom still sleeping?" she asked sliding onto a bar stool at the kitchen island.

"She's checking your grandma out of the hospital. They should be here any time—depending on how quickly the paperwork gets processed."

"It may be awhile," Felicity commented. "Go bureaucracy."

"Well, if anyone can get them to speed along the process, it's your mother," Ben replied. Almost as if on cue, they could hear the unlocking of the exterior mudroom door.

"Something smells good in here!" Oma Miriam's cheerful voice called out.

"Oliver is making omelets," Ben offered as his wife and mother-in-law came into the kitchen.

Felicity immediately slid off the barstool and went to her grandmother and put her arm around her, attempting to help her inside, though the older woman eschewed her efforts. "Can't wait to try them."

Judith saw her daughter's effort being gently rebuffed. "Don't bother. She's too stubborn to accept help."
Miriam sighed. "I'm an able-bodied, spry seventy. I've still got a few miles left in me."

Judith shrugged before she planted a kiss on her husband's cheek and rested her hand on his middle-age spread. "Oh, you're wearing the new shirt."

Ben chuckled as he looked at their daughter. "I never thought your mother would want me to shop at K-Mart for clothes. Then she saw that Adam Levine commercial."

"Now that's a nice Jewish boy," Oma Miriam said. "Very, very talented," she added with a waggle of her eyebrows.

"He's covered in tattoos," Judith replied with disdain.

"But you know you like them," Miriam winked at her daughter. Her attention then turned to their visitor. "Do you have any tattoos, Oliver?"

From the cooktop, Oliver had been watching the family dynamics wistfully. It was all so normal. Had has family ever been like this? "I…do."

"I don't see any," Oma Miriam challenged playfully. "But I imagine you have, right, Elfie?" she added, elbowing her granddaughter.

Felicity cleared her throat. "That's an awful lot of food," she said, glancing at the cinnamon rolls that her father was pulling from the wall oven. "You expecting the whole neighborhood?"

"It's Saturday. Jack's coming over to eat. Then we're going to play golf," Ben replied nonchalantly.

Judith shook her head slightly. "Not keeping the Sabbath."

"But it's golf," Ben protested.

"Just one big happy family. This won't be awkward at all," Oma Miriam said, almost gleefully. "Looks like you get to see who Felicity traded in for you, Oliver."

Ben froze, realization striking him. "I'm…sorry. I wasn't thinking. Clearly I should change those plans."

"Yes, clearly," Judith reiterated, exasperation tingeing her tone.

"Not on my account," Oliver interjected as he plated a mushroom, spinach, and cheese omelet. "I'm heading back to Starling City this morning. I have some pressing business that won't wait." He looked at Felicity wondering how she felt about her ex continuing to be a presence. "I think it's more important for Felicity to be comfortable."

"You're going back?" Felicity's voice held more surprise than she meant to display. "I mean, yes, you're going back." Of course he was going back. He had never planned to stay in Chico for the night, let alone put every problem on pause—and there were so many—to play house with her. Her posture stiffened. "I'm going to stick around a little longer. It would be a shame for me to come all this way and not see Jack. He's practically family."

Oliver's jaw clenched slightly at that, but his words were solicitous. "Stay as long as you need. I can send the chopper back for you."

Felicity shook her head. "There's no need. I'll find my own way back to Starling." Oliver looked at her questioningly, but she did not offer any additional information. He was scant on the details of his
plans? Two could play at that game. She cleared her throat. "I'm going to walk around outside, check
out the yard. Haven't seen it in the daylight in awhile."

"You don't want to the cinnamon rolls to get cold," her father admonished as he spread icing on the
warm pastries.

"I'll just be a minute or two. Start without me."

Oliver watched her go, and couldn't help but feel like the divide between them was growing. But that
was what he wanted, right? To keep her safe, it was going to take more than words. It was going to
take action, and part of that meant letting her go.

Fresh air.

It was amazing what a breath of fresh air could do to help in clearing her mind. She had been so
worried about her grandmother the night before, she couldn't think straight. Then Oliver had
blindsided her with a new version of his "because of the life I lead" speech.

But Felicity was determined to help him.

From everything Oliver had told her, Slade Wilson changed when he was given the *mirakuru*. He
had always been intense, but he became irrational, violent. The articles she had seen online about the
mercenary Deathstroke were frightening enough, and those were based on redacted reports, which
she had managed to access through some back door channels. The level of violence detailed in those
reports was truly stomach-turning. In some instances, human targets were literally torn limb from
limb. And for the police and military who did manage to encounter Deathstroke, it never ended well
for them. Though the reports did not know the reason, he was incredibly strong and even able to
withstand bullets at point-blank range to the point that he had barely reacted when engaged in a
firefight. That must've been a horrific realization for the men who encountered him, but considering
Slade Wilson had survived an arrow through the eye, Felicity could not say that she was surprised.

But if there were still a cure somewhere—or the formula for a cure—if they could find some way to
deliver the dose to Slade, wouldn't that neutralize his threat? Or at least put him on a more equal
footing with Oliver?

She shook her head slightly. It still seemed impossible, but what other choice did they have?

They were better as a team, true, but if Oliver wanted to keep her at arm's length, maybe it would
work to her advantage to allow that. Because knowing Oliver as she did, there was no way he would
agree to let her help him do what was becoming increasingly clear needed to be done.

It was then that Felicity saw a dark blue Volvo turning into her parent's driveway. *Jack*. Of course.
She watched as he cut the engine and stepped out, incredulity marking his features as he closed the
distance between them.

"Fliss!"

His old, childhood name for her was both comforting and belying of an intimacy that they no longer
shared. Of course, it also sounded incredibly similar to *floss*. A little on-the-nose for a dentist's former
paramour, now that she thought about it.

"Jack. Hi." They made an awkward, shuffling movement to hug in greeting. They were exes, but
they weren't unfriendly exes, after all. She just didn't particularly want to spend any more time with
him than necessary, a feeling that her parents did not share.

"I didn't know you were in town." They pulled away from one another, and Jack studied her appreciatively. "It's good to see you! You look amazing."

"I look like a mess," Felicity corrected, unconsciously running her hand over her tangle of drying hair, "but it's sweet of you to say."

Their eyes met, and she finally allowed herself to examine him more closely. He hadn't changed much. Jack was generically handsome in that bland, pleasant way, taller than her but not a walking mountain, physically fit but not buff. His eyes were neither brown nor green but seemed to vacillate somewhere in between. He had a healthy tan, probably from being on the golf course. His smile was, as expected, his best feature.

"I always did like your hair in curls." He started to reach for her blonde tresses, stopped himself, chuckled lightly, and said with self-deprecating honesty, "Well, that was uncomfortable. Let's see if I can make it less so. I didn't know you were going to be in town."

"I didn't either. It was last minute. We thought Oma had a stroke."

"Oh my God. Is she okay?"

"She's fine. It was a false alarm. She's already home, much to the relief of the hospital staff, I'm sure. She's a little..."

"Spunky."

"Yeah. That's a nice way to put it."

"Always the diplomat," Jack replied. "Did you come alone?"

Felicity looked back toward the house. "No. Um, Oliver's inside."

"Good," Jack nodded magnanimously. "I'm glad you didn't have to deal with Oma's health scare on your own. Congratulations to you on your engagement."

"You don't owe me any explanations. I'm truly happy for you. Oliver Queen—that's certainly a step up from marrying a dentist."

"You know I don't look at it that way, Jack," Felicity protested.

"I know, Fliss. And that's why you deserve the world."

"Do you have someone special?" Her words hung in the air. Even as she asked, she hoped he did have someone—for many reasons. Jack was her Mr. Wrong, but he would be another woman's Mr. Right. He had numerous good qualities, qualities she had not allowed herself to dwell on. And if nothing else, for selfish reasons, it would certainly help her if her mom didn't hold onto the hope that Felicity would be the future Mrs. Jack Sommet.

Jack looked slightly abashed. "No. No one special."

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not. You love it," he joked.
"Maybe a little," she confessed. "But I do want you to be happy, just like you want the same for me."

"Oliver makes you happy?"

It should have been an easy answer to a simple question, but the truth was, it was neither. Oliver brought her the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. He made her believe she could do and be anything in the world she set her mind to, but then he alternately sought to put a velvet rope around her. *Look but don't touch. Touch but don't take.* Her body still ached for him, but her heart—it ached even more, worse than when he had friend-zoned her after Russia. "There's no one in the world like him." That was as true as she could be.

"Speak of the devil," Jack said looking over Felicity's shoulder. Oliver had come out on the porch. Jack waved him over. The closer Oliver got, the more erratically Felicity's heart beat. There was a fire in his eyes, but just as quickly, she noticed that Oliver had slid into his public persona, affecting an impassive expression.

Oliver stood next to her, and though they did not touch, she could feel the heat emanating from him. "Oliver, this is Jack. Jack, Oliver."

Jack thrust out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Oliver." Oliver took it and squeezed.

"Likewise." And didn't let go.

Jack's brows shot up. "That's, uh, quite a grip you've got there."

Felicity elbowed Oliver, who, realizing he was still gripping the other man's hand, finally let go.

"I hope you're hungry," Oliver said conversationally, though his jaw was tight with each word. "There's a ton of food inside."

Jack smiled, his teeth even and white. "I remember the rule. Never come over . . . "

". . . without an appetite," Felicity and Jack finished together. They both chuckled slightly. "Old habits," Felicity added.

Oliver forced a smile. "Shall we?"

He started to turn to go back inside, but Felicity's stilled Oliver's movements. "Jack, you go on in. Oliver and I will be in shortly."

Once Jack had gone through the front door, Oliver uttered, "He is so polite." He said the last word as though he had tasted something rotten.

Felicity crossed her arms. "Yes, he is, which is more than I can say for you right now. You seriously did the hand-squeeze macho thing?"

Oliver had the decency to look properly chastised, even if the words that followed suggested otherwise. "I can't stand him."

"You are being ridiculous."

"He's seen you naked."

"If I hated every woman who has seen you naked . . . " She shook her head, not liking the direction the conversation was taking.
"You want me to act as though I liked seeing you out here with him?"

"Surely I don't have to remind you that you can't have it both ways, Oliver."

"I'm aware." His eyes darted to the house. "Don't look now, but we have an audience."

"Jack?" Felicity huffed even as she began to hug herself, a reaction to the cool November morning breeze. Without thinking, Oliver began to rub her arms trying to generate heat.

"No, he's too polite for that. Your mom is standing at the entry window. She just moved the curtain aside."

"Yep. That's totally my mom," Felicity said with an eye roll. "She can see us, not hear us. I'm sure she's filling in a conversation in her mind. I know this doesn't change anything between us, but . . . " She stood on her tip toes and pressed her lips against his before pulling back. Still a whisper's breath apart, she finished, "...if my mom wants a show, I think she should have one."

"This is dangerous territory for us," Oliver replied, leaning down, his forehead pressed against hers. And still, his arms wrapped around her, enveloping her in his warmth, even as his body molded to hers. Her legs became tangled with his, and he hissed when he felt her hands slide under the back of his shirt resting on his waist, skin on skin. "Felicity." Her name fell as a plea from his lips.

"I almost followed you into the shower this morning," she confessed. "But I decided that if I want you to respect my choices, I have to respect your choices, too."

"Sounds reasonable," he replied neutrally, though their closeness had him feeling anything but neutral.

"I have to know. What would you have done? If I had followed you . . . "

His hand dipped to her hip, and he pulled her more tightly against himself, the friction between their bodies sending sparks through them both. "If you had—I would have pushed you against the shower wall, wrapped your legs around my waist, and pounded into you." Her fingertips pressed into his back, and he hissed, even as she could feel his erection against her belly. "And you would grow to hate me."

"You keep saying that."

"Because it's true. I don't want to hurt you worse than I already have."

"And I don't always want to make the safest choices. If I did, I would be married to Jack." One of his large hands went to her face, cupping it. "And I can't live with myself if I am the cause of . . . " his voice trailed off. This was their impasse.

She brushed her lips against his and pulled away slightly. "When are you going back?"

"As soon as it's polite," he rolled his eyes at the word, "to say my goodbyes without causing you grief with your family. How about you? You sure you don't want me to send the chopper for you?"

She selected her words carefully, even as she planned her next steps. "I'm going to stay a little longer. Maybe I'll even caddy for my dad on the golf course. It's been a long time since I've been home. I think I needed this."

"Felicity, I . . . " he exhaled. "I wish things could be different, but I'm glad you were able to
reconnect with your family. This place – it's the tether that binds you to someplace safe, real."

Tears stung her eyes. Didn't he realize that home wasn't a place; it was a feeling. And she was bound to him.

"I know as soon as you leave here, things will change for us, but I need you to promise me that you'll be careful, Oliver."

"As careful as I can be." His lips brushed against hers in a ghost of a kiss, before he pulled back. "Ready for breakfast?"

"Yes," she replied with a smirk. "It will be great to catch up with Jack. Are you ready?" Her eyes drifted downward at his crotch.

He grimaced. "Is your mom still watching?"

Felicity shook her head. "No, I think we made the point we needed to make. Probably more than she could take."

Oliver exhaled. "I'll be in in a couple of minutes." When I get things under control.

True to his word, Oliver made a get away shortly after breakfast. Ben and Jack offered to drop him off at the regional airport on the way to the golf course, but Oliver declined. Almost as soon as he did, a car service showed outside the house.

Felicity excused herself to go to her childhood room, planning to pack for her own surreptitious return to Starling, but she was quickly distracted by the sight of her tablet and the conundrum at hand.

She racked her brain to remember everything Oliver had told her about the mirakuru. It was formulated during World War II by the Japanese. Anthony Ivo came to Lian Yu specifically to find it, and it was an obsession. A lump formed in her throat when she recounted what Oliver had told her about Shado, about the way Ivo needlessly killed her, all the while ensuring that Oliver took on the guilt for her death. Later, it was Ivo who turned an irrational Slade against Oliver, Ivo who set in motion all that was happening. For as monstrous as Slade sounded, Ivo was right there with him.

Felicity's fingers flew across the touchscreen of her tablet, wanting to find out more. Anthony Ivo, graduate of Columbia University Medical School. Never practiced medicine. Married to Jessica Eldridge in 1995. One child. Earned a Ph.D. in chemistry from Cal Tech and remained on faculty, researching. Had his medical license revoked in 2006 for unethical research practices and was denied tenure. Not a big shock there. Then . . . nothing. That was where the trail ended, except Felicity knew he had been in the North China Sea on a treasure hunt unlike any other. Oliver said that in the end, Ivo begged him to kill him, to end his suffering after blood poisoning set in when Slade cut off Ivo's hand.

The man had been so dogged in his determination to find the mirakuru—had murdered for it—but he also formulated a cure for it once he obtained access, though not before he used prisoners on the ship as his personal guinea pigs. It was that cure which Oliver chose not to use on Slade. What had Ivo been planning to do with the mirakuru? Regain his professional credibility? Sell it to the highest bidder? No, there had to be easier ways to do both. Then again, from what she had heard of Anthony Ivo, he didn't sound as though he was the epitome of mental health.

Felicity rubbed her eyes and sighed. She was missing something.
Maybe this called for a different approach. What else did she know about him? He was married—though she pitied the woman who would marry *that* guy.

She entered a search for Jessica Eldridge Ivo. Information was scarce. Married Anthony Ivo on June 4, 1995. One child, a son Arthur, born in October 1995. Worked as a nurse supporting her husband's academic endeavors until she fell ill in 2006 and was hospitalized. Their son went to stay with relatives—her sister and brother-in-law, it looked like—and Anthony disappeared. She regained her health, left Huntington Memorial Hospital in May 2008 after a nearly two-years stay, and resumed her life, moving to Central City.

Two years.

That must have been difficult. Why would her husband leave her to suffer alone and abandon their son when surely he would have needed his father most?

Within a few minutes, she had hacked into the hospital mainframe and scrolled through the directory. *So easy*, she thought. They needed to upgrade their security measures. Not that she was complaining.

Patient records: Jessica Ivo.

Felicity's eyes widened. The woman had been on death's door. Leukemia. Failed bone marrow transplant. She had remained hospitalized, kept in protective isolation since her white blood cells were not capable of fighting infection, and even the common cold could have killed her.

Then she'd experienced unexplained subconjunctival hemorrhages in both eyes.

Felicity grimaced when she saw the accompanying photograph. Blood coming out of the eyes? *Gruesome.*

According to the physician's records, Jessica had been agitated. Cortisol levels were unexpectedly high. So was her strength. She had gone from being unable to lift her head to tearing out of the protective isolation room where she was being kept.

And all traces of her cancer were gone. The doctors called her a miracle patient.

*Miracle.* *Mirakuru?*

Felicity's heart pounded. Was it possible? Before he died, had Ivo managed to somehow get *mirakuru* to his wife? Had her illness been what was driving him, what set him over the edge? When he asked Oliver for death in exchange for the cure, had he done so knowing that his wife would have the chance to live? But how? And if Jessica had been administered the *mirakuru*, did Jessica experience the same effects as Slade Wilson?

As far as Felicity knew, Deathstroke didn't have a She-hulk counterpart.

Felicity kept digging.

It looked as though Jessica Eldridge Ivo had maintained a quiet existence since she was released from the hospital. She took early retirement, moved to Central City where her son had been staying with family, and lived comfortably off a family inheritance. No signs of any trouble—not even a parking ticket.

A quick search turned up an address for Mrs. Ivo. 1545 N. Skymont Drive. Central City was about an hour-long train ride from Chico. Was it a fool's errand? Perhaps, but she was running out of options.
"Felicity? What are you doing in there?" Felicity nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard her mother call through the door.

She shoved her tablet in her overnight bag and opened the door. "Hey."

"You came all this way, and you've been holed up in there for the last thirty minutes. You aren't having second thoughts about Oliver, are you?"

"Mom."

"All right. Not another word. But just FYI, Jack is still single." Judith's eyes fell on the packed bag. "You're already packed?"

"I've got to go."

"Felicity Megan Smoak, you just got here."

"I know. And I'm sorry, but this is really, really important. I need to get to the train station."

"Fine." But her mother's tone suggested it was anything but fine.

"Please don't be upset. I wouldn't go if it weren't a matter of life or death."

"Yes, you would," her mother countered. "I'll get my keys for you. You can just leave the car at the station. Lock the keys inside. I'll have your father take me over there to pick it up when he gets back from his game."

"Mom—"

But Judith Smoak turned on her heels and walked away without another word.

Digg met Oliver at the airfield with the towncar.

"Felicity not come back with you?" Digg asked as Oliver put his bag in the trunk.

"She stayed in Chico to visit with her family."

"How's her grandmother doing?"

"She's fine. Full of personality. No sign of a stroke, just low blood sugar."

"That's good news. How'd it go with the parents?"

Despite everything, Oliver found his lips quirking in the slightest of smiles. "Felicity suddenly makes so much more sense to me." The two men got into the car and started to head toward the Foundry. "Find anything new?"

"I've had Lyla putting out the feelers. So far, nothing. Had a tail put on Isabel, but she's not left her apartment. And I've kept a personal watch on Thea. Everything's quiet."

Oliver nodded. "Thanks. I look for things to get louder on Monday."

"Why Monday?"

"Thanks to Felicity, Frederick McMartin is going to make his investment in QC official, and I'm going to pay off the loan that Starling National Bank holds. So even if Triglav succeeds in taking
"over the bank . . ."

"...They won't succeed in taking QC," Diggle finished.

"And I'm going to bounce Isabel out on her ass."

"She's co-CEO. You can't fire her."

"No, but the board can for corporate espionage, and we have enough of a trail now that we can do that. If Slade wants to take everything away from me, he's about to find out that I'm not going to make it easy for him or his allies."

"You're trying to force his hand," Diggle realized.

Oliver nodded.

"You know him. What's his next move?"

Oliver looked out his window, Starling City proper coming into view: the skyline, a hint of the waterfront. This was what his father, with his dying breath, had tasked him with protecting. He couldn't fail. To fail in that quest would be to fail his father. Slade knew all too well.

"Slade wants to destroy what I hold dear, and he wants it to hurt. Whatever he has planned won't be quick. The city. My family."

"Felicity. I don't know how to keep any of them safe."

"Ironically, your mom might be the safest of everyone." Diggle gripped the steering wheel. "All right. Let's take each one. City first. Where's the pain?"

"Hard to say. My mission has been to eradicate the festering corruption, to make Starling City a place where people can be safe again, where people can make an honest living. Whatever will impede that mission . . . but the possibilities are endless."

"Family?"

"There's the obvious. Killing them. Killing me. But that's too easy. He will want me to suffer first."

"There's physical pain, and then there's mental anguish," Diggle noted. "What would hurt most?"

"With Thea, if he wants to use her to get to me, tell her how our father died. Reveal that her brother is a monster. Take away every semblance of stability she has. Let those pieces fall into place. Then kill her. Make me watch."

"You've thought about this."

Oliver continued darkly. "Or maybe he'll take the people I love. Make me choose whose life to save. Thea or Felicity. He'll bring my torment around full circle in a ring of poetic justice."

"So how do we mitigate that?"

"I've got to give Thea a reason to leave. Send her someplace Slade would never expect."

"It won't be easy to convince her."

"She's stubborn," Oliver acknowledged.
"A family trait, I've noticed," Digg said with a raised brow. "And Felicity?"

"The best place she can be right now is away from here."

"But this is Felicity we're talking about."

"I have to take her off Slade's radar. Make him think Felicity means nothing to me." It had been so much easier to keep his distance before he realized his feelings. There's an old expression that a person falls in love slowly and then all at once. Oliver knew all too well how apt that was. Those little things about Felicity captivated him, piece by piece, adding up until he could no longer deny the truth.

It was ironic. They had spent the last week trying to sell the world on their relationship. A modern-day Cinderella story is how the media portrayed them, though if they were to go to the fairy tale route, Beauty and the Beast was probably more accurate. Now Oliver had to undo all of that, convince everyone that he was the same fickle playboy that thought he had always been.

"Wouldn't he expect you to break things off with her?"

"We have one advantage. Slade believes that I still think he's dead."

"You really think you can pull that off? I've seen the way you look at her."

"John, I have to. I've just got to hope once this is all over—if I'm still standing and I haven't destroyed whatever goodness she sees in me—that she'll . . . " His voice trailed off. "It's time to call in an old friend."

Felicity double-checked the brass numbers on the side of the single-story red brick home. 1545. How was she going to explain who she was and what she wanted? A little, 'Hey, you don't know me, but your brutally sadistic husband may have given you a magic serum, and I need some of that to stop a madman, please' didn't sound like the way to start things off on the right foot. Even if she did try to soften that with, 'Oh, and your fall display on your porch is lovely,' there just wasn't an easy way to have that conversation.

Her option for further procrastination was removed from her when the door swung open, and a petite red-headed woman with a fierce tone mirrored by a fierce expression asked, "May I help you?" The unspoken message was clear: leave me alone.

The woman must have seen her standing there on the porch. "I—I hope so. Are you Jessica?"

"I'm not buying anything."

"Oh, I'm not selling anything. Promise," Felicity nervously held her right hand up as though she were taking an oath.

The woman at the door looked world-weary in a been-there-done-that fashion. "If you're a researcher, I don't hold the cure for cancer. If you're a religious nut, I am not a modern miracle. And if you are a creditor, I don't know where Anthony is, and I have one more month until our divorce is finalized on the grounds of abandonment. So I can't imagine what I can do to help you."

"I'm not any of those things, but . . . " Felicity took a deep breath. "Oh, this went a lot differently in my head. I know it is kind of, well, creepy when someone you don't know shows up on your doorstep. I mean, it's a really dangerous world out there, but I'm not dangerous. Not that you have any way of knowing that because, hello, stranger here. Hence stranger danger. But stranger danger is
totally unnecessary in this case and -"

The other woman's eyes widened in recognition. "Oh my God. It's you."

Felicity turned to look behind her thinking someone else had arrived, but there was no one there. "Oh," she pointed to herself. "You meant me. Wait. You know me?"

"She said you would come. You're Felicity, aren't you?"

To be continued . . .

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