Pride & Prejudice & Vigilantes

by SecretNerdPrincess

Summary

Oliver Queen and Felicity Smoak star as the Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet for the 21st century. Quentin Lance and Donna Smoak have their hands full with four daughters and one wayward son. When Felicity Smoak, bartender and IT genius, meets Oliver Queen the night of the Starling City’s Bartender’s Ball, her life changes forever. But will she ever get past his arrogance and conceit? Can he ever look past her lower class upbringing and pretty face?

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Notes

As the story progresses you’ll notice that some things have been altered from Pride and Prejudice as well as Arrow. I’m keeping with the spirit of Jane Austen’s original tale, though the story itself has been updated. For Arrow, I’m ignoring the back story between Oliver, Laurel, and Sara, just so you know. Oliver never dated Laurel. He never cheated on her with Sara. This makes me happy. This will be an Olicity story all the way.
Chapter One

Felicity grabbed the bus tub and began cleaning up the lukewarm, half-filled glasses, the horizontal beer bottles, and the plastic cups of water people promised to consume, left sweating and still full. Her stepsister, Laurel, wiped the scarred mahogany bar while Sara and Lydia gossiped about the frat boys who’d come into Bennet’s Bar & Grill that evening. Neither of them found the energy to help with anything more than the sweeping of a broom, or a half-hearted swipe of a rag over the same twelve inches of any one table. Their mother encouraged them in their silliness, as well as their laziness, by sipping a gin and tonic and lecturing on their marriage prospects, rather than lifting a finger to help.

“And you know girls,” Donna Smoak imparted her female wisdom, “many of those young men come from money. You must catch them young.”

“For a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife,” Felicity interrupted her mother’s match-making.

“Be as high and mighty as you like Felicity Smoak, but imagine this: Quentin gets shot in the line of duty, and then what happens? Mr. Palmer immediately demands the balance of the loan,” her mother’s disdain for the man quite evident in her voice. “We are, all of us, one step away from being thrown out on the street.”

The slurping of her gin and tonic echoed over the juke box left playing while they cleaned up for the night. She waggled her glass in the direction of Laurel who obliged her with what their mother liked to refer to as a ‘freshie.’ Her blond hair long since weighed down by the hair spray she applied hours earlier, her four-inch heels sitting tipped over on the top of the end of the bar. Donna Smoak was beautiful, but exhausted by a life that had been anything but kind to her.

Her drink refilled, she sipped and barreled on with her plans. “Oh and girls, did you know that Tommy Merlyn himself has purchased a bar right here in the Glades. He’s called it Verdant and it will be opening by month’s end. With him being in the neighborhood, there is no reason you shouldn’t come into contact with him.” She spun around in her barstool to face her other daughters. “In fact, I shouldn’t be surprised if he attended the Bartender’s Ball tomorrow evening. All the owners of the most popular nightclubs attend, so you must all look your best.”

Lydia and Sara giggled, practiced fluttering their eyelids, and adjusted their padded push-up bras. “That’s it girls, use your assets. Use your assets.” The romantic Donna Smoak, folks, that’s my mom.

Felicity rolled her eyes and joined Laurel washing the glassware before putting it away. “As if any of us stand a chance with the likes of Mr. Merlyn’s son,” Felicity joked to her sister. “Well, you maybe, since you are by far the very prettiest of all of us. Always gorgeous Laurel. For me, I would just be happy to find someone to take me just as I am, a lowly bartender and IT girl.”

Laurel sighed, “Felicity, you know you’re only here for mom. If she didn’t need our help keeping the bar running, I’d be in law school, and you’d be working in Silicon Valley. But it would be nice to forget about the worries of the bar, the debts hanging over us…” she let the thought drift away as they both fell silent, caught in the uncertainties that lay ahead.

Laurel never held anything against her stepmother, Quentin loved her far too much for that, but both of them lamented, at one time or another, their lot in life. Nor had she ever treated Felicity as anything other than full-blooded sister. They were both still young enough when their parents
married that they grew up the best of friends. Sara, only months older than Lydia, found Felicity’s little sister an eager playmate and willing princess-in-training. The youngest of all of them, their brother Roy…well, unfortunately none of them were quite sure where he was at the moment. He turned eighteen and hit the road.

Donna roused from her daydream of handsome princes on large white steeds throwing handfuls of money as they rode to the rescue. “Oh, but if your father should die, Mr. Palmer would evict us before the grass could grow over Quentin’s grave.”

“I assure you, Donna, you have nothing to fear.” Her mother’s face brightened at her father’s entrance, and she pranced over to him, bare feet and all, placing a big kiss on his lips.

“You know I just worry, Quentin. I couldn’t bear to lose you.”

Quentin’s eyes crinkled down at her, “You have nothing to fear from Mr. Palmer, my dear. I will always be your knight in shining armor.”

Felicity felt certain that if she ever met Ray Palmer she would have a few choice words to say to him. Beginning with Frak and ending with You. True, they had fallen behind on their payments, but her family had owned this bar for the last hundred years. When Felicity and Lydia’s bio-dad absconded with the family savings, leaving them close to penniless, her mother mortgaged the house to keep Bennet’s afloat. Four daughters and a son in need of food and clothing didn’t help matters in the least. It was the reason that Felicity came home to work with her family rather than seek out a job in her field. She’d meant it to be temporary, but five years had passed and she’d settled into the daily routine of Starling City.

Her mother’s shrill voice interrupted her dark train of thought, “Don’t forget Felicity, I expect you to be on your very best behavior for the party tomorrow. You’ll hurt your sisters’ chances otherwise. No babbling and none of your nerdy tech talk that nobody understands. I’ll have none of it.”

Felicity hid her smirk, but replied obediently, “Yes, mother.” She might not like all of Donna’s machinations, but she did the best she could after Felicity’s bio-dad left. She didn’t want to make her mother’s life any harder by arguing.

Quentin looked at his wife, confused, “What is this about Lissie misbehaving? She’s the only one of my beautiful daughters with any sense in her head,” he paused and gazed at Laurel with affection. “Well, Laurel is quite intelligent though she’s a romantic at heart. Always believing the best about everyone, that’s my Laurel. Lissie’s head might be floating in a cloud of data, but her feet are firmly planted on the concrete.”

All the ladies laughed at the family joke. They all knew Quentin loved all his daughters, as well as his wayward son, but Felicity and Laurel worried about Lydia and Sara. They watched out for their two younger sisters, praying that their naivety wouldn’t get them into much trouble.

“Tommy Merlyn plans on opening a bar here in the Glades, and you know what that means,” she raised her face to him, a gleam in her eye. Her father shook his head, still confused at his wife’s plans. She sighed, “Oh Quentin, you must know I plan on having him marry one of the girls.”

“However do you plan on manipulating that situation?” He asked, teasing her.

She placed a quick kiss on his cheek and sashayed back to her drink at the bar. “I have my ways, Quentin. I have my ways.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” he chuckled and began flipping the chairs onto the tables.
The rest of the clean-up passed quickly enough; Laurel finished up at the bar while Felicity counted down the money and closed it up in the safe for the night.

“Are all my ladies ready?” Quentin asked. Nodding, they all headed out to his black Durango parked in the small lot at the side of the bar. They drove home through the potholed streets of the Glades to their small cape cod tucked at the bottom of a dead end street. It wasn’t the best part of the Glades, but it wasn’t the worst. The neighbors were friendly, and they looked out for one another. Pots of marigolds sat on porches, and boxes of petunias hung from windowsills, though the paint had chipped and faded with the passing years.

The night of the party the sisters dressed excitedly. Even Felicity looked forward to the evening out. Lydia, in a bright yellow mini dress and strappy matching heels, and Sara, in neon pink hot sequined shorts with black boots that ended just over her knees, rushed out of their rooms and down the stairs.

Sara called up to her sisters, “Come on you two! You know the free booze only lasts until eleven. Besides, I want to get a good table by the bar. Better to scope out the scene.”

Felicity heard Laurel’s voice from down the hall, “Sara, we will not have a repeat of last year when we practically had to carry you out of the bar.”

“I’m not twenty-one anymore,” Sara whined. “Mom! Tell Laurel to give it up. Just because she wouldn’t know how to flirt even if they gave her a manual is no reason for her to take out her shyness on me.”

“Laurel, be nice to your sister!” Her mother’s clipped voice echoed up to Felicity’s room where she finished one last curl. “Felicity, hurry up! It’s not as if you’ll actually make an effort to meet any men.”

Felicity knew her mother believed she’d be terminally single, but she wouldn’t just settle for some man with a pretty face and an endless bank account. There was more to life than finding a man. Of course she wanted to fall in love, but she planned on having a career of her own if the bar ever started making money again.

She joined Laurel in the hallway. Her sister looked stunning as usual in a short, black, swishy cocktail dress. Felicity decided on her favorite gold dress, short yet elegant it hugged her curves in just the right way. She left her hair down, curls cascading over her bare shoulders. No, she wasn’t wearing hot pink sequined shorts, but she felt pretty just the same.

The arrived at Poison, the club owned by Max Fuller, before too many people had arrived and claimed a high-top table as home base. Sara and Lydia zipped a beeline to the shiny glass-topped bar, promising to bring back drinks for Felicity and Laurel—as long as they stayed put. Her parents wandered off to find people they actually knew, leaving Felicity to let her eyes wander over the room. Strobe lights, colored lights, and the pounding bass battered her senses; Poison wasn’t really her kind of club. She preferred a quieter space where she could actually engage in conversation without screaming.

Sara and Lydia dropped off two caramel apple martinis and dissolved into the dancing crowd. She and Laurel waited for the alcohol to kick in, and relaxed into the evening. Not her usual style, still she was determined to enjoy herself. It’s very rare that they went anywhere together, since the bar always needed staffing. Being in the bar industry made the Bartender’s Ball like a holiday for them: their St. Patrick’s day, Fourth of July, Halloween, and New Year’s all rolled into one. Not to mention, another chance for her mother to marry off her daughters to the first millionaire owner who wandered into their sphere.
Glancing away from her two younger sisters on the dance floor, she noticed her techie friend, Caitlyn Snow, heading towards her.

Felicity greeted her with a hug. “I didn’t expect to see you here. You got yourself outta the restaurant industry with that job at Star Labs. Thought you’d be back in Central City, far away from this madhouse.”

Caitlyn chuckled, “A girl’s gotta walk away from her computer sometimes, Felicity. I’m back home for a visit with the family. Not to mention, take a look around: hotties to the left and right. I’m here to get my dance on. And so are you Felicity Smoak. Life isn’t all codes and hacking. Speaking of which, I’m picking up a cocktail, and then I’m dragging both of you away from the safety of this table.”

Good to her promise, ten minutes later the three of them found themselves in the middle of the partying crowd. Felicity enjoyed herself immensely, but they took a break to catch their breaths while Laurel refilled their drinks just in time for the infamous Tommy Merlyn to make an entrance. When Laurel rejoined them, Caitlyn gave them the skinny on the trio that entered.

“The one on the left you know, Tommy Merlyn. The woman next to him is his sister, Isabel.”

Felicity narrowed her eyes, “She’s got a sort of rat-face look about her, doesn’t she.” Caitlyn and Laurel laughed as she continued, “but is that Oliver Queen? Mr. I was lost on an island for five years?”

“The one and only,” Caitlyn replied. “Destined to take over Queen Consolidated, sooner rather than later, if his mother has anything to say about it. Worth more money than we’ll make in all three of our lifetimes combined.”

Felicity didn’t doubt that, taking in his grey Armani suit, Tommy’s sleek black one, and Isabel’s blue couture dress. Oliver, Tommy, and Isabel headed straight for the bar, standing only ten feet away from the three ladies. Felicity studied the prodigal son as his eyes took in the entire room. They met hers, momentarily, and a crinkle appeared between his eyebrows.

“He doesn’t look very enthused to be here,” Felicity mused. “His eyes seem sad, though his smile seems plastered on well enough.”

“Doesn’t seem to matter since he’s got enough money to buy himself happiness,” came Caitlyn’s quick response.

“Money isn’t everything,” Felicity sighed. Every single person she knew seemed obsessed with the rich and famous. “There’s more to life—”

“Than money,” Laurel interrupted. “Yes, we all know this, Felicity, but not everyone is as cerebral as you.” Thankfully, their parents interrupted, joining the group, along with the rest of the sisters.

“There he is. Mr. Moneybags himself, Tommy Merlyn.” Donna let her gaze trail down the length of his body, approvingly. “Not hard on the eyes either, is he?”

“I’m standing right here, wife,” Quentin chided her.

She snuggled up to him, “Oh, you know I’m not thinking of me. Our girls, on the other hand,” she sipped her drink cranberry and vodka, “the idea they might have a man to take care of them.”

He stopped her impending rant with a kiss, and Felicity smiled, right before she noticed the three millionaires heading in their direction. Her mother turned to adjust the outfits of Laurel, Sara, and
Lydia, but Felicity batted her hands away when they came near.

Donna crossed her arms over her chest. “You are absolutely hopeless, Felicity. Whatever am I gonna do with you?” Luckily, before she could list Felicity’s detractions, the group joined them.

Her mother leapt into action, “Mr. Merlyn, so nice of you to join us.”

“Of course, Miss…” Tommy waited for her answer, flirtatious.

Quentin rescued her mother from her ensuing giggles, “This is my wife, Donna Smoak, and these are my daughters,” he pointed to each of them in turn, “Laurel, Felicity, Sara, and Lydia. We however, have met before, young man,” his cop mask falling over his face.

“Ah yes, Detective Lance. The last time we met, if I recall correctly, we did so under less than auspicious circumstances,” he held his hand out for Quentin to grasp. “I hope you don’t hold my youthful indiscretions against me.”

Donna bubbled gaily, “Oh, never mind that. We’ve all done things in our youth that we might not want to admit to—well except for Felicity. She can always be counted on to do the right thing. And my Laurel is just about as good as they come, pretty too,” her hint, blatant.

Good Lord, her mother really loved to embarrass her. Felicity laid her hand on her mother’s arm to silence her without being obvious about it. Unfortunately, Oliver Queen’s gaze missed nothing.

“And you are?” She asked inclining her head to the overly handsome man she couldn’t help but notice.

He simply nodded. “Oliver Queen.” He looked away, as if she were a gnat to swat, not a flesh and blood human being.

“Ignore Ollie, Felicity,” Tommy joked, “he’s got issues. I think he forgot how to speak to women while stranded on that island,” his tone meant to lighten the situation, but Felicity saw hurt flash across Oliver’s face. It gave her a moment of pause.

“Tommy,” he growled in warning.

Tommy went ahead and took his own advice, ignoring Oliver in favor of introducing his sister. “This is my sister Isabel, home from her time in Russia.”

Isabel appeared unimpressed with the group in front of her, but Felicity wanted to put her best foot forward. She knew the importance of making a good impression, even if Ollie—no, no way could she ever call him Ollie—Oliver didn’t.

“Nice to meet you, Isabel. What were you doing in Russia?” Felicity had a hard time keeping her eyes off of Oliver, but Isabel noted her glimpses.

“Family business. You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you, Ms. Smoak,” her reply haughty as she ran her fingers down Oliver’s sleeve.

So that’s how it’s going to be. Felicity could handle the snobby woman; she’d had plenty of practice with the old money families in Boston. “Yes, I am well equipped to handle many situations, not the least of which is supporting my family when they need it.”

Oliver raised a single eyebrow, and turned fully away from her. Whatever. Who needs to interact with too handsome for his own good self?
“Detective Lance—“

“Please, call me Quentin, Tommy. We’re not officer and criminal right now,” the twinkle in his eyes made it obvious that he wasn’t looking to offend.

Tommy’s smile changed his face from good-looking to stunning. Laurel definitely noticed.

“I’d wonder if you’d mind if I borrowed Laurel for a dance or two?” Her sister blushed at his perusal. Felicity only hoped he was kind enough for her sister. She may be younger than her sister, but she was very protective of Laurel.

“Be my guest, but keep your hands where I can see them,” her father’s tone less jovial than before.

Felicity’s body warmed, a feeling she wasn’t entirely comfortable with, as she studied the jawline on Oliver Queen.

It really was too bad he was such a cocky bad boy. She’d heard the stories. She knew he racked up points with every blond, brunette, and redhead in the city. Though, after five years away, she reckoned there’d be plenty of new willing partners for him to corrupt. She knew one thing for certain, she’d never be one of his conquests, face of a Greek god or not.

Tommy crossed the few steps to his friend, far enough that he thought no one listened. “Oliver, come on, man. Ask one of the other girls to dance. Your face looks as if you need to take a shit. Seriously, I can’t have you standing around like a scowling statue. Look,” he tried to glance surreptitiously, but failed, “Felicity is quite pretty.”

Felicity didn’t think he knew she could hear his response, at least she certainly hoped not, since she expected he’d have better manners than his rude retort indicated.

“Laurel Lance is about the only one of those women even worth our time. Her sister, alas, she’s pretty enough, but looks like she doesn’t possess a brain to enhance her shallow attractions. Go, enjoy Laurel. Leave me alone.”

With that, he stalked away leaving Felicity with her mouth dropped like one of those creepy amusement park funhouse clown entrances like in Grease.

Of all the snobby, snotty, self-involved, narcissistic…Shallow? Look who’s talking, frat boy.

Caitlyn interrupted her internal diatribe. “Never mind him, Felicity. You’re absolutely correct. Shallow, self-absorbed, frat boy. You’re so much better than that.”

“Oh. So I said that aloud. Crap. My filter usually works much better than that.” Not really, she though as Caitlyn grabbed her hand and dragged her back out onto the dance floor. Felicity couldn’t shake the feeling that somewhere Oliver Queen watched. Though, as she scanned the room in search of him, he was nowhere to be found.

Eventually Caitlyn tired, and they moved back to the table, the party quieting enough that they could converse semi-easily. The topic eventually turned to technical jargon, and Caitlyn’s job at Star Labs. She liked her work and the people surrounding her. So engrossed in their conversation, Felicity had no warning when Oliver, Tommy, and Laurel rejoined them.

“You know a little something about computers, Felicity?”

“Gah! Oliver! Don’t do that.” Felicity felt flustered enough around him without him also sneaking up on her. Oliver seemed amused, though she refused to give him an ounce of credit that didn’t
“Well…” Frak, he still waited for her answer. She found that stare of his completely unnerving.

“Yes,” she replied, her voice snarky, “I do know a little something about computers, Oliver.”

A look crossed his face Felicity couldn’t decipher. “I have a laptop I’m having some trouble with, would you mind taking a look at it for me?”

Was he asking her for help? “Me? Pretty face, none too bright? Are you sure you meant to ask me? I might spill a latte on it.” The look he wore now? That one she understood. It was shock. Shock and awe: the way Felicity Smoak offended Oliver Queen, millionaire and playboy. Well, served him right. “And at that, folks, I’ll be heading home for the evening.”

Laurel’s face told her everything she needed to know. “Don’t worry, Laur, I’ll just catch a cab since Mom and Dad left with Sara and Lydia earlier.” Her sisters had been well on their way to wasted and her father ensured they headed home, instead of having another round of shots.

“Are you sure, Lissie?” Felicity could tell Laurel wanted to stay a little longer to spend time with Tommy.

She turned to the decent human being in the group surrounding their table. “Tommy, I’m gonna take the gamble that you aren’t a psycho,” she smiled so he’d know she wasn’t serious. “Would you mind making sure my sister gets home safe?”

“It would be my absolute pleasure. Would you like me to hail you a cab?” Tommy pulled his arm from around Laurel’s waist with the intention of helping her out.

She waved him off, “No, it’s really not necessary. I’m quite capable of getting myself home. But thank you, I appreciate the offer.” She nodded to the group, hugging Laurel and Caitlyn, and dragging a promise from Caitlyn to visit again soon.

She knew that Oliver’s observation never left her as she walked out to the curb intent on catching a cab and heading straight home. But the night was comfortable, and she quite enjoyed the freedom, so decided she’d walk part of the way, clear her head a bit. Maybe not the smartest move, but her father ensured she took self-defense classes, and she’d stick to the main roads, so she wasn’t too worried.

Until she realized it was far too late for her to be walking alone. She turned on her heel, and reversed back the way she came. Staying in the lights, she slipped a furtive hand in her pocket, grasping her cell phone in one hand, her keys looped over the fingers of the other. Stay alert. Stay focused. A scuffle sounded behind her, and she quickened her pace. Two more blocks. A trash can clattered down an alleyway as she crossed the street. Though shivers rippled over her, she felt safe. No explanation, she just did. Movement caught her peripheral vision and disappeared.

Finally a cab turned the corner just ahead, the light atop its frame shining brilliantly against the encroaching night. The hand that clutched her cell phone raised and the car pulled forward, beckoning her inward. Her breath whoosheed out of her as she slammed the door shut.

But as they drove away, Felicity glanced up to see a man in a hood melting into the shadows.
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Oliver Queen and Felicity Smoak star as the Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet for the 21st century. Quentin Lance and Donna Smoak have their hands full with four daughters and one wayward son. When Felicity Smoak, bartender and IT genius, meets Oliver Queen the night of the Starling City’s Bartender’s Ball, her life changes forever. But will she ever get past his arrogance and conceit? Can he ever look past her lower class upbringing and pretty face?

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Chapter Notes

A/N I am not a tech genius, unlike Felicity Smoak. I used what little tech knowledge I do have, but tried not to get too specific. LOL. If you are a techie genius, please forgive me if it’s not as technically specific as it might have been. And, you know, suggest a website I might use for research.

Felicity danced between tables to the song *Shut Up and Dance* as she set out the condiments for the day. She never minded opening the bar since it meant she could crank up the jukebox and just go about her business without the outside world infiltrating. Laurel worked in the kitchen prepping food and would join her in a couple hours when the lunch crowd started to shuffle in, but until then Felicity enjoyed the alone time it allowed her.

Busy rocking out to the music, Felicity didn’t hear the knock on the door, so she jumped when she looked up, shocked to see Oliver Queen standing behind her and eyeing her with a smirk on his face.

“Holy heck! Don’t sneak up on a girl holding a bottle of ketchup,” she waved the bottle in the general direction of his tailored suit illustrating her point. “Maybe the cap is loose. It might not end well for you, Mr. Queen.”

“Call me Oliver, please. Mr. Queen was my father.” Sadness flickered through his eyes.

As usual, Felicity’s mouth spoke before her brain processed. “Oh yes, he drowned, but you didn’t, which means you can stand there and listen to me babble. Which I’m going to stop doing in 3… 2…1,” Felicity took a deep breath and started over, “What brings you to this neck of the neighborhood, Oliver? Are you lost?”

Oliver Queen unnerved her; they weren’t friends, but there he stood, in her bar. Did he not remember insulting her a few weeks ago? More than likely not. He’d probably forgotten all about
it two seconds after the words left his mouth. She was beneath him and she’d do well to remember that. Not that she actually thought she was beneath him, but social status being what it was ensured that he definitely did.

“I think you might remember me mentioning I was having trouble with my laptop?” He waited; she said nothing. “Um, so I wondered if you might take a look at it.”

She tilted her head left and then right. “Looks like a laptop alright. Score one for Oliver Queen.” Sarcasm: her best defense against overly handsome men with ridiculously blue eyes.

He gave her a look of amusement and a small smile that softened his entire face spread across. “Fair enough. Felicity Smoak, would you mind checking my laptop to figure out what’s wrong with it?”

“Don’t you have an IT department that could do that?” She asked, suspicious.

Oliver shuffled his feet from side to side, his hand clutching the laptop like a lifeline. “Well… um…yes, but…well I thought…” Felicity absolutely adored uncomfortable Oliver. It put them on equal footing. “Truthfully, I think you’re probably a million times better at this stuff than anyone we have at QC. So will you?”

He extended the laptop while Felicity finished with the last of the condiments. She waved her hand towards to the bar. “Cop a squat. You want something to drink? It shouldn’t take me long to suss out the issue.”

Oliver’s gaze took in the bar warily.

Just who did he think he was anyway? Oh yes, the most incredible Oliver Queen. “Oh goodness gracious. The place is old, Oliver, not a festering pool of plague. But whatever, stand there if you prefer. Though if you’re worried about the bar itself, you probably don’t want a drink; the glass might be rimmed with Ebola.”

Oliver huffed out an exasperated sigh. He finally sat down and placed the laptop in front of the bar stool on his right. “You know very little about me Ms. Smoak, so I’d appreciate it if you dropped the sarcasm.”

“I’m sure you’d appreciate a great many things, Mr. Queen, but as I am not your employee and I am doing you a favor, I’ll keep the sarcasm and take a thank you as the cherry on top.” She stood there, hands on her hips, waiting to see what he’d decide. It made no never mind to her if he didn’t want her to fix his laptop; she had other things to do.

Oliver appeared flustered, as if no one ever questioned his bad manners. “Thank you, Ms. Smoak, for your help. And if you wouldn’t mind, I’ll take a root beer—without the Ebola, though, if possible,” he said, his intoxicating smile inching back onto his face.

Felicity poured him the soda and placed it in front of him, coming back from around the bar and sitting next to Oliver. She opened the computer and booted it up. Silence enveloped the two of them. Felicity had no idea what to say to the man sitting next to her now that she wasn’t simply responding snarkily to his ego.

So, she relied on her sarcasm once again. “Not much for small talk I see.” She glanced at him out of her peripheral vision.

Little crinkles appeared between his eyebrows. “I’m not very good at it, I must admit,” he paused as if searching for something more to say.
Felicity took pity on the man. “How’s Tommy’s new club coming along?”

“Oh, so he’s Tommy, but I’m Mr. Queen, eh?” Oliver joked, but his tone held something Felicity couldn’t place.

“Well he didn’t insult me the first time we met,” Felicity replied as she tinkered about in the brains of his computer.

Oliver opened his mouth, undoubtedly to give her some harsh retort, but evidently thought better of it. “It’s coming along. We’re set for our grand opening on Friday. We’re actually partners in it, so I’ve been helping him, but we’re having a bit of trouble finding good bartenders. Seems all the people we’ve had apply are more interested in hanging out with me and Tommy than in actually doing any work.”

Of course, that was the moment Felicity’s mom decided to enter the room. She’d probably noticed the moment Oliver entered the bar and been eavesdropping through the crack in the swinging doors. “Oh! You need a bartender? I’m sure Laurel would be happy to fill in until you can find someone more reliable.”

“Mom,” Felicity tried to stop Donna from thrusting Laurel into the lives of Tommy and Oliver. “Don’t you think that we should ask—”

“Don’t interrupt me when I’m speaking to Mr. Queen, Felicity. Your sister will be happy to help out, I’m sure of it.” Her mother yelled back into the kitchen, “LAUREL!”

Felicity wanted to die of embarrassment, but since that wasn’t an option, she decided to focus on the laptop in front of her.

Oliver remembered his manners this time. “Oh Mrs. Smoak, that isn’t necessary. I’m sure Tommy and I’ll figure something out. I’d hate to take Laurel away from your business.”

“Nonsense. Laurel!” her mother called back again. “We can definitely spare her, can’t we, Felicity?”

Her mother gave her the look she used when she wanted the girls to comply with whatever she said. In her head, she informed her mother that if Tommy Merlyn wanted to see her sister, he knew where to find her. But she didn’t.

“It’s really not a big deal. I can cover for her, no problem.” Felicity really didn’t think the bar could do without Laurel’s assistance, but her sister would probably enjoy a change of scenery and Felicity didn’t mind the extra work if it made Laurel happy. Plus, her mother wouldn’t let it go if Felicity told Oliver the truth: the bar only survived because everyone in the family pitched in to help, some more than others of course, but maybe Sara and Lydia could pick up some of the slack caused by Laurel’s absence.

Laurel pushed through the doors into the bar proper. “Yes, mom, what’s up?”

“You’re going to go to Verdant and help Mr. Merlyn. He needs a bartender.”

Laurel blushed furiously, whether from embarrassment or from thinking about spending time with Tommy on the regular, Felicity was unsure.

Laurel’s silent response went disregarded as her mother continued, “That is, of course, if it would be of help to the two of you, Mr. Queen.”

Felicity could’ve sworn her mother batted her eyelashes at Oliver. He didn’t seem to notice, thank
goodness. “That would be lovely Mrs. Smoak. Both Tommy and I appreciate the help.”

He never took his eyes off Felicity despite the fact that he spoke to Donna. It seemed as if he knew that Felicity would be the one put out by this, not her mother. But that couldn’t be possible, could it? Oliver Queen was far too self-involved to even consider that Laurel leaving the bar even for a day or two would be far more work for Felicity. He was probably simply wondering how much longer it would be until Felicity had his laptop fixed.

Felicity hurried to reassure him, though she wasn’t sure why. “It seems you’ve got some spyware on your hard drive, Oliver. There’s a few things that seem concerning, so I’ll need to take this home to really be able to dig into it. I can just give it to Laurel to bring back to you when I’m finished. Would that be okay?”

“Of course, that wouldn’t be a problem at all.” Was that a look of disappointment that crossed his face? Felicity refused to believe that as Oliver continued, “I appreciate you taking the time to fix it for me.”

“It’s really no problem at all. I actually enjoy putting my knowledge to good use. But I’d suggest in the future that you not visit sketchy websites. One of them probably attached spyware when you clicked on the wrong link.” Felicity knew people inadvertently visited websites that inserted malware into their computer’s programming without ever knowing all the time.

Oliver stood, fidgeting with the line of his suit. “Well, I guess I’ll be going now. Laurel, if you want to come by tomorrow night, we’ll get you all set up and into the system. Until then, Mrs. Smoak, thank you very much. Felicity, you as well. Laurel, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Laurel looked as if she was about to respond to him, but her mother beat her to the punch. “Of course, Mr. Queen. No need to thank us. We’re just doing what any good neighbor would. And we are neighbors now that you’re working with Mr. Merlyn on Verdant.”

He beamed one those amazing smiles at her mother and then faced her. Shivers raced down her spine. Felicity reminded herself that he was an egotistical millionaire and that it would never do to fall for him, despite how handsome he was. Handsome didn’t account for his personality. Though he had been on an island for five years, maybe he was having trouble adapting. Stop, Felicity! She wasn’t Laurel. She knew how cruel people could be and she refused to be blindsided by a pretty face. She loved her sister dearly, but Laurel believed the best of everyone.

“Good day, Mr. Queen.” Felicity managed to squeak out a response despite her body’s betrayal of her common sense.

“Please, call me Oliver,” he replied, turned, and walked out the door before Felicity could even formulate a response.

She inhaled deeply, closing up Oliver’s laptop, and then turned to her mother. “Just what do you think you’re doing?”

“Whatever do you mean, Felicity?” Her mother asked, feigning ignorance.

“Drop the act, Mom. You know very well I mean throwing Laurel to the wolves.” Even if Laurel did want to see Tommy again, her mother needed to realize that shoving Laurel at him wasn’t the way to go about it.

Donna’s face hardened. “I may have given up on your chances ever finding a husband, but Laurel is much more malleable. Of course, if she had her way, she’d simply wait until he called her, no matter how long it took.”
“Mother,” Laurel began, “Tommy has been very busy with his club opening. I knew that when we exchanged numbers at the Ball.”

“And just how long were you going to wait, young lady? Until he forgot about you? No. You need to keep yourself at the forefront of his thoughts.”

Felicity went to respond, but Laurel held up her hand to stop the frustration Felicity felt that was about to boil over. Her sister sighed, “Mom. I’m happy for this opportunity, there’s no doubt about that, but if Tommy wanted to see me again, he would get in touch with me. You didn’t need to throw me at him as if I’m a piece of meat just waiting to be devoured.”

Her mother simply crossed her arms and plopped down into one of the bar stools. Acting hurt, she responded, “Well, I’m just trying to do what’s best for you, Laurel. You know I want so much more for you than this life.”

Felicity’s temper surfaced again. “If that were true, you’d be figuring out a way for her to attend law school, not looking for the first available millionaire.”

Donna drooped in her chair and lamented, “Oh if only your brother were here. But that good for nothing ran off and left us all when the family needed him most.” Felicity half expected to see the back of her mother’s hand against her forehead.

Laurel jumped to their little brother’s defense. “Mom, you don’t know that. None of us are sure where Roy is, for all we know he could have straightened his life out and is simply embarrassed to come home.”

“We’ll never know, will we? He could be dead in a potter’s grave somewhere. Oh my poor Roy, if only he’d been the good boy he was when he was little.”

“Mom,” Felicity started to correct her mother’s defeatist attitude, but realized it was better to just drop it. Instead, she said, “Listen, we need to finish getting ready to open. We’ll have to table this for another day.”

Donna’s face brightened and she bounced out of her seat. “Oh, of course, I’d better go get ready.”

Her idea of getting ready no doubt meant another pair of four-inch heels and a short dress that showed off every curve and the length of her perfectly toned legs. Felicity never understood how her mom worked in those shoes, she much preferred a comfortable pair of sneakers, but for all her faults her mother really did work hard to keep the bar running. And if she could do that in stilettos, more power to her.

The next week went smoother than Felicity imagined it would, Lydia didn’t help much, but Sara really rose to the occasion. Maybe they’d been underestimating Sara all this time. She was still flirtatious and shallow, but once the family needed her, she didn’t shirk her responsibilities. It was an interesting turn of events.

Tommy offered Laurel use of an apartment in the building right next door to Verdant that he also owned. Eventually they’d be rented out to employees, but for now, Laurel stayed there instead of coming home at four or five in the morning. Felicity missed her, but she understood. She barely felt comfortable taking a cab home that late at night when even five minutes alone on the street could turn deadly. Especially after what happened after the Ball, the feeling of being stalked stuck with her. Luckily, Bennet’s closed at eleven during the week; they only stayed open until two on the weekends and then they were closed all day on Sundays. Being a family run business, there was no way they could operate seven days a week and not all suffer nervous breakdowns.
She approached Sara about her keeping an eye on things during the hours between lunch and dinner. The bar would be slow during those times and Sara would only be expected to wait on the few customers who wandered in for an early happy hour, or stayed for a long lunch.

The tables had been cleared and only Old Man Don sat at the bar sipping his ginger brandy on the rocks. Donna situated herself at a table with an old tattered romance novel, her mother’s ‘guilty pleasure’ though Felicity wasn’t sure how much guilt she felt reading them. Sara returned from taking the last load of dishes to the kitchen to wash and walked around the bar to pour herself a soda.

“Hey, Sara, I’ve got a favor to ask you.”

Sara stopped filling her glass and looked at Felicity. “Yeah? What’s up?”

“Well I was thinking of stopping by and seeing how Laurel’s adjusting to Verdant.” Laurel had called Saturday afternoon to say that the opening had been a success, but she hadn’t had much time to talk since she was do in for her shift and she needed to get ready.

“Didn’t you just talk to her on Saturday? Like two days ago?”

“Yes, but I want to see her and I also need to drop off Mr. Queen’s laptop.” What she’d found on his hard drive had been concerning and required an actual conversation with the man. It wasn’t something she could trust Laurel to explain properly given that her sister knew only the basics about computers. She’d rather not meet Oliver in person again, but she had little choice.

“Sure, no problem. In fact, mom and I can handle it here if you wanted to hang out for a while. It’s Monday, so we probably won’t even get that busy.” Sara leaned onto the bar between them. “You need a break anyway.”

“She’s right Felicity,” Donna chimed in, “it'll do you good to go out and socialize. And wear your black dress that I bought you with the cutout sides.”

“Mom, I’m just going to visit Laurel and drop off the laptop, not trying to seduce the man.” Her mother seriously had a one-track mind.

“You’ll wear the black dress or you won’t go at all. I’ll send Sara in your place,” she threatened. “Who knows, Sara might drop the laptop on the way and then you’ll have to go work at Verdant to buy Mr. Queen a new laptop.”

Sara looked put out at the insinuation that she couldn’t be trusted with the task, but Felicity worried more about what would happen if they allowed Sara to go to Verdant by herself. Stuck with no good decision left to her, Felicity agreed. “Alright, but you have to promise to call me if you guys get busy, Sara.”

Sara held up her fingers in some weird mash-up between Boy Scouts and Vulcan honor. “Deal! Besides, it’s about time you guys started trusting me to do more to help the family.”

Felicity was kinda shocked that her sister actually wanted more responsibility at all. Sara seemed happy to simply skate by on the least amount of work possible. Maybe Laurel helping Tommy was the best thing to happen to them.

“Stop looking at me like I’ve grown a second head, Felicity. And get out of here before I change my mind.” She winked at Felicity and began straightening up behind the bar.

She didn’t argue any further, kissing her mother on the cheek and heading out to ride home on
Charlie, her red moped. She had absolutely no intention of wearing the dress her mother suggested, especially since she intended to drive Charlie down to Verdant and riding a scooter in a dress that barely covered her butt wasn’t the best idea.

Instead, she chose a pair of skinny jeans and a red sparkly tank top. She touched up her make-up and fixed her ponytail, though she wasn’t sure why she was going to such lengths. She told herself that at least this way when her mother saw she hadn’t worn the dress, she couldn’t be too mad since she still looked pretty good. She double-checked her appearance and stuffed Oliver’s laptop into her messenger bag, grabbing a jacket and flying out the door.

It didn’t take long to get to Verdant, and after removing her helmet and parking Charlie, she stopped to see if her sister was at the apartment. Receiving no answer, she walked next door to the club and rang the bell to the right of the door. Maybe she should have called first, but if no one answered, she could always call Laurel then. She wanted to surprise her sister with the visit.

A minute or so passed before the door opened and a large man with a buzz cut, an imposing manner, and a mess of tattoos greeted her.

“We open at six, sweetheart. Come back then.”

He started to close the door in her face. “No, I’m sorry, I’m Laurel’s sister, Felicity. I just wanted to come and see her, if that’s okay. Oh! And I’ve got Mr. Queen’s laptop that I need to return to him.” She started to reach into her bag, but Mr. Crew Cut stiffened his posture, so she removed her hands and let them rest at her side.

The bouncer’s deep brown eyes bore into hers. “You don’t look like his normal type.” He reached to the side and pulled down a clipboard. “What did you say your name was?”

Felicity fumed, “Felicity Smoak, and I’m not interested in Mr. Queen other than helping him out with his laptop. And like I said, I’m mostly here to see my sister, Laurel. She bartends here.”

“I know who Laurel is, but you aren’t on the list and you’ll have to wait while I get clearance for you to be here.”

He slammed the door in her face and Felicity was left standing on the landing outside Verdant. She tried to calm herself, realizing the bouncer was only doing his job, but she didn’t appreciate the insinuation that there was something going on between her and his boss. Felicity adjusted the strap of her messenger bag and switched her helmet to the other hand. Leaning her back against the railing, she tried to wait patiently and failed.

Behind her, she heard the rumble of a motorcycle and she turned to face the rider as they dismounted. Surprisingly, it was Oliver, looking sexy as all get out in a tight grey t-shirt and jeans.

“Felicity,” Oliver called to her as he walked closer. “What are you doing here?”

She lifted her messenger bag. “I came to visit Laurel and return your laptop.”

“Oh. I thought you were just going to give it to Laurel.” His gaze scoured her from head to toe and the shivers he seemed to invoke in her were back with a vengeance.

She cleared her thoughts and responded, “That was the intention, but I found something on your laptop that I thought you’d like to know about. Laurel wouldn’t have the first idea how to explain it to you. She has a brilliant mind, but she’s not exactly a tech genius.” Felicity left off the words like me since she felt that her skills spoke for themselves.

“Of course, of course. But why are you waiting outside?” Oliver looked like his eyes searched the
area for danger despite the fact that it was two in the afternoon.

Felicity smiled. “Tattooed buzz-cut boy wouldn’t let me in. Said he had to get clearance for me to go inside the sacred shrine.”

“I didn’t even think to add your name to the list. I apologize; I’ll make sure you’re added so you can come whenever you feel like it.” He moved past her to unlock the door and held it open for her.

She walked in while trying to avoid any kind of physical contact, knowing that it wouldn’t end well for her. Or maybe it would, but she wasn’t that kind of girl. She didn’t have a problem with women who enjoyed sex, hating the double standard that made men studs and women sluts, but one-night stands weren’t something she enjoyed.

The interior of the club sported all chrome with white space age looking tables and chairs. They didn’t look very comfortable, but then again most people wouldn’t come here to sit and have a nice conversation, they came to dance. The overhead fluorescents lit the space during the day, but Felicity bet the lighting was much darker for the evening hours. It never helped to see those you were hitting on in full light. The darkness left more to the imagination—or not.

“I’ll go grab Laurel, why don’t you take a seat. Do you want a drink?” Oliver slipped behind the bar, fitting easily with the shelves of liquor. “I make a mean martini.”

Felicity laughed her ass off; she couldn’t help it. Oliver Queen serving her a drink. Her mother would consider this a win even if Felicity were the one doing the winning. Donna’d probably also have their wedding invitations engraved before she got back home.

“I really shouldn’t. I’ve got Charlie—I mean my scooter—damn, did I really just admit that I named my scooter Charlie? Out loud?”

Oliver joined in her laughter. It warmed her from the inside until her embarrassed blush subsided. And the man who put it there was looking at her as if he wanted much more than to make her a drink. Felicity figured she must be wrong. Absolutely and completely wrong.

To break the tension, and the fierce gaze between them, Felicity removed his laptop from her bag.

“So, I’ve got good news and bad news. What do you want first?”

She raised her eyes from the computer she booted up when she heard the telltale sound of a shaker filled with ice and liquor.

Felicity wavered between annoyance that he’d taken it upon himself to make a drink she hadn’t asked for, and happiness that she had an excuse to hang out with him. She wasn’t sure she wanted to even admit the answer to herself, so she stuck to annoyance.

“Do you have a problem understanding the word no?”

Oliver stopped mid-shake. “I—uh—well…truthfully?” He placed the shaker on the bar top in front of him. “My mother ingrained in me the necessity of offering drinks to people. All the friends of my parents drink martinis so it’s my go to drink. Would you prefer a soda? Coffee? Although our coffee isn’t very good since it’s bar coffee. We only ever serve it to drunks when we’re trying to get them out of here.”

“You know that doesn’t actually work, right?”

Oliver appeared puzzled. “Really?”
“Really. Gives the drunk a boost, but doesn’t really help. You’re better off giving them water, food, and calling them a cab. Nothing sobers people up better than good old-fashioned time.”

“Huh. I had no idea.”

“True story. But apparently no one’s ever tried to sober you up.”

Oliver scrubbed a hand through his sandy blond hair. “No, not really.” He seemed embarrassed this time.

“That’s okay, most bartenders don’t even realize it.”

“So, good news or bad news, right,” Oliver said, trying to get them back on track. “I’ll take the good news first. It never outlives the bad news, which usually ends up demanding far more of my attention than I intended.”

Felicity tried not to smile. “I got the spyware off your hard drive.”

“Well that doesn’t sound so bad. What’s the worst you could tell me? I need to cancel all the credit cards? I hardly use them anyway.”

That little tidbit of information surprised Felicity, but she focused. “Someone’s been watching your every move.”

Oliver froze in place for several seconds before finishing the martini, stabbing three olives violently, and placing it in front of her on top of a cocktail napkin. His eyes glazed over and he said nothing.

Felicity reached for the drink and sipped it. It felt wrong not to. “Mr. Queen?” She paused, waiting for a reaction, any reaction. “Oliver?”

“Felicity. Yes, you were saying. Someone is watching me? Why would anyone want to do that?” He asked the question, but Felicity could tell it was a cover for something or someone. She’d bet dimes to dollars that Oliver knew exactly who’d been spying on him.

“Yeah, someone was. I’d imagine it was your money or your notoriety. Who knows which? I removed it though and installed new anti-virus software. You really should have that since you are you, you know...” Felicity wasn’t sure what to say anymore. Something was going on with Oliver, but she had no idea what. “Are you okay, Oliver? Do we need to contact the police? I can call my father if you’d like.”

“No, no. It’s not necessary. You said you removed it?”

“Yes, of course, but Oliver—”

“Thank you, Felicity. I appreciate your help.” Oliver gave her the brush off.

Felicity was the one confused now. “But Oliver, if someone was spying on you through your computer, and let me tell you, that was a complicated bit of code. It appeared they had live video feeds—”

Oliver cut her off again. “Thank you for your help, Felicity. But you need to drop it. I’m sure it was just an old friend playing a prank.”

Oliver’s anger surfaced, but Felicity didn’t back down. “Oliver, seriously, friends don’t play pranks like this.”
“Drop it, Felicity. I'll send a check to Bennet’s.”

“Oliver, you’re scaring me. I’m not worried about the money, but now I am most certainly worried about you.”

“No need. Everything’s fine. Thank you for your help.” He nodded to her and turned on his heel, exiting the bar. “I’ll find Laurel and send her your way. Drink’s on the house. And I’ll put your name on the list. You can come and go as you please this way. No cover charge. Stay as long as you like. Whatever you want is on my tab, I’ll make sure Frank—buzz-cut tattooed boy—makes sure you get home. I’ll drop your scooter tomorrow; just leave your keys at the bar. Have a good evening.”

With that, Oliver disappeared into the bowels of the club and Felicity was left alone, waiting for Laurel and sipping her, admittedly, very delicious martini.
Felicity worried as Oliver stalked away, leaving her awash in confusion. Unfortunately, this seemed to be a common occurrence with the man, vacillating between swoon worthy and jerkface. She’d no idea how to deal with the intense, overly muscled man. His brush-off troubled the blonde as she waited for Laurel to join her at the bar. Losing herself in the cocktail before her, she contemplated the puzzle that was Oliver Queen, while reminding herself that he only asked for her help in fixing his laptop. They probably wouldn’t even interact very much with each other after this. Besides Laurel’s interest in Tommy, they shared very little in common.

A door in the back opened and Felicity glanced up expecting to see Laurel when she found herself facing a much less welcome person: Isabel.

“Oh. Ms. Smoak. Oliver didn’t mention you, but your presence explains his mood.” The other woman peered down her nose at Felicity’s outfit. The red sparkly top she loved so much apparently deemed beneath Isabel’s designer label ensemble.

Her gaze stalled over Felicity’s helmet, sitting on the barstool beside her. “Don’t tell me you ride?”

“I do,” Felicity replied evenly, moving it to the chair on the other side, leaving the seat open. Isabel cringed in repugnance, “Oh my, it must be just awful to drive yourself.”

Oh for frak’s sake. Felicity laughed at the ridiculous woman. “You can’t be serious, Isabel. You have no idea what you’re missing.” Biting back any further retort, she ignored the pinch-faced woman’s snide insult.“It is lovely to see you again, Isabel. I hope you’re settling back into life in Starling City without any issues.”

The brunette lowered herself into the chair next to Felicity and sighed. “I can’t understand why in the world my brother would stay in this hole rather than travel the world. There is absolutely no culture in this godforsaken place.”

Laurel pushed out of the door to the back just then, carrying an armload of glassware and saving Felicity from an angry defense of Starling City. It may not be much, but it was home.

“Felicity! Oliver said you were here.” Laurel transferred the weight of the glasses to the counter beneath the bar and the sisters embraced.

Isabel squirmed, noticeably bothered by their open affection. “Well, I’ll just leave you to that then. It’s been a pleasure as always, Ms. Smoak.” Standing quickly, she turned as the front door opened and a large, handsome man with arms the size of a keg of beer entered.

“Oh Mr. Diggle,” Isabel called, scurrying across the floor towards him. “Please, do be a dear and
give me a ride to the manor. It’ll take forever for my driver to arrive, and I feel a deep and immediate desire to shop. It’ll be quicker to meet him after I change rather than waiting here.”

A replica of a smile appeared on his face, “Of course, I’d be happy to drive you, Ms. Merlyn.” His eyes skittered in the direction of the back of the club for an instant before he turned and reopened the door for his temporary charge.

Felicity jerked her thumb in the direction the exiting pair, and asked, “So…how’s that going?”

“She’s not so bad once you get to know her,” Laurel put away the pint glasses. “I’ll admit she’s a bit tough to take at first.”

Between chuckles, Felicity responded, “That’s a bit of an understatement if I ever heard one. But I came here to get the skinny on you. So, how are you liking Tommy—I mean, how are you liking it here?”

Laurel swiped a towel at her little sister. “Oh stop teasing me.” Leaning down she confided, “He’s just about the sweetest man you ever met, Lissie.”

“And…” she waved her hand indicating she needed more information. “Does he like you?”

Her sister blushed fiercely and reached across the bar, squeezing Felicity’s hand. “I think so. I really do.”

As if hearing their conversation, the man in question called out from the office above the bar, “Laur, do you need anything?”

“Laur?” Felicity pushed the martini to the side and rested her chin in her hands, blinking up.

“Hush it now,” she responded, narrowing her eyes in warning. “I’m fine, Tommy,”

He stepped out onto the small metal landing despite her answer. “Are you sure? I’d be happy—” Noticing Laurel wasn’t alone, he hurried down the stairs. “Oh! Hey Felicity. Come to visit your sister? Make sure we’re treating her alright?”

Greeting her with a quick kiss on the cheek, the man’s enthusiasm warmed her. “Nah, I had no doubts on that front, Tommy.”

The nice Merlyn sibling slipped behind the bar, helping Laurel set up for the evening. “Your sister has been such an amazing help. Please thank your parents for me. I don’t know how we’d ever have opened on time without her.” He beamed at Laurel, obviously smitten. “If she weren’t so determined on law school, I’d have to try and steal her from you.”

“It wouldn’t be stealing if she said yes.” Felicity liked the man even more knowing that he supported her sister going back to school and that they’d gotten close enough to discuss her dreams.

“I’ll just leave you two alone, though I do hope you’ll hang out, Felicity. We’re trying out a new DJ and I’d love your opinion on him.”

“It appears that I have the night off, and Oliver graciously offered to ensure I have a ride home, so it’s a deal.” She tilted her martini in Tommy’s direction.

Straightening, he inquired after his friend. “I’ve been looking for him. Where’d he go?”

“He headed towards the back door last I saw him,” Laurel pointed towards the back and Tommy
uttered a quick goodbye before moving in that direction, leaving Felicity alone to question her big sister about her love life.

~*~

Oliver glanced over his shoulder to check that Isabel hadn’t followed and then punched in the code to the basement of Verdant. A soft hiss escaped as the door closed behind him and he stormed down the stairs to the room he used as home base for his nightly activities. Tossing his jacket over the metal table and setting the laptop on top of it, he bee-lined to the ancient computer system. Fingers deftly ran over every surface searching for bugs. *If Felicity were here*—he stopped the thought in its tracks. No matter how beautiful and intelligent she might be, he could never bring her into his life. Either of them. She’d never fit in at the mansion; his mother would probably devour her as an appetizer. And she was far too innocent for the vigilante life.

The sassy IT girl caught his eye the first night they met, and he hadn’t stopped thinking about her since. Running into her at Verdant unexpectedly brightened his day. Finding a miniature camera at the bottom edge of the monitor, he removed and crushed it beneath his boot heel. He would not think of the blonde-haired nerdy temptress. Felicity Smoak was far more trouble than she was worth.

Finding four more bugs scattered about the dark and dingy room, three of which he destroyed, Oliver stiffened his resolve, banishing her brilliant smile and perfectly lipsticked mouth from his memory. It wouldn’t do to be thinking of kissing her when god knew who intended to harm the city next. Someone had obviously been watching him, though he had no idea where to begin that search. No one beyond him and Dig had entered the Foundry since he adopted the space as his second home. It was the only place he felt comfortable anymore.

The fact that he’d had no idea about the breech bothered him immensely. Whoever spied on him must have been watching since he began protecting the city after returning from the island. The video feeds were already in place before he set up the system. More concerning, however, was the idea that he’d unwittingly brought Felicity into the middle of this new unknown risk.

Once satisfied that he’d uncovered the last of the cameras, he placed the remaining one in a wooden box and shoved it into a small drawer of the metal cabinet. Finished with the task, he stripped off his t-shirt and stormed over to the salmon ladder, grabbing the rung and beginning a grueling workout as he ran through the list of potential threats. Frustrated with the realization he had too many names and that none of them rose to the top as a contender, the echo of metal clanging against metal filled the room. Physical exertion wasn’t working tonight. After an hour of beating up on his equipment, he flipped on his computer and tapped into the security feed from Verdant.

Cycling through the cameras, he found her. Still sitting at the bar, relaxed and head bobbing to the thrum of the bass, she appeared to be having a good time. Oliver wished that he could occupy the empty stool next to her, but he contented himself with observing. The Vigilante knew he was damaged and dangerous. Felicity Smoak, a vibrant ray of sunshine, belonged nowhere near such darkness. To bring her into his life felt like sacrilege. Despite his best intentions, he couldn’t help but think she’d be an asset on his team though. He imagined her bouncing ponytail as she used her tech expertise to help him save the city.

Shaking his head at the errant thought, he glanced at the time, surprised to realize that Dig hadn’t already joined him for the evening. Their partnership was still new, but once the older man agreed to aid him in his mission to right his father’s wrongs, he’d been loyal. Finding a text indicating Dig had been roped into driving Isabel home, Oliver discovered he had time to kill before his partner returned to the club. In the time it took for him to respond, a tall dark-haired man seated himself on the stool next to Felicity that Oliver had silently claimed as his. Before he could argue with
himself, he was pulling a spare grey t-shirt over his head, throwing on his leather jacket, and already halfway up the stairs.

By the time he made it to the main floor, he found the charming blonde slow dancing with the mystery man. Why in the fuck was the DJ playing a love song? Jealousy he didn’t understand burned through his veins. Oliver stayed in the shadows where he belonged as someone else wrapped their arms around the amazing woman, never feeling more like the Vigilante. She deserved a normal life with a healthy man. Not a broken anti-hero destined to die defending his city.

He watched as they parted and she sashayed back to the bar, a smile spread wide across her lips. He tried to keep himself from going to her, and failed. At his appearance, the radiance of her smile disappeared, saddening him as he slid into his place at her side.

Seated next to her, the stoic man realized he had no idea what to say. “Can I buy you a drink,” he asked, shuddering at his worst attempt to strike up a conversation with a woman since he was a teenager.

She jiggled her full drink, “Already full. Besides, it’s not like you’d actually have to pay for it anyway, considering you own the place. I imagine you get whatever you want whenever you want it Mr. Sexypants.”

Oliver felt hope surface as her face flushed a deep red.

“Not that I’ve noticed the sexy in your pants—I mean noticed you’re sexy—not noticed—oh god, I’m going to stop talking now.” Felicity buried her face in her palms, groaning.

He found her inappropriate babbling refreshing. Her blonde ponytail dangled down along her chin and he wanted to thread his fingers through the silken lengths. “Please, let me take you somewhere else then and actually buy you a drink.”

Her gorgeous blue eyes refocused on him and her head turned, flipping her hair to the other side, out of reach. “Why on earth would I do that after you charged out of here earlier like the hounds of hell chased after you? What is wrong with you anyway? Someone spying on you seems like it should definitely be a concern, but you…” She huffed out an exasperated breath. “You make my head spin.”

Tension swept over him. He had no idea why her disdain affected him so much, and he muttered a fumbled apology, stumbling over his words. “I’m so sorry, Felicity. I…I guess I didn’t take the news well.”

She studied his face, unnerving him, before finally blessing him with a full, easy smile. “It’s alright, I’m feeling gracious tonight,” she replied, eyes twinkling. “All is forgiven. Just don’t do it again, m’kay?”

She reached out to lay her hand over his, and her touch settled him. Oliver’s gaze skittered down to their joined hands, and then immediately regretted drawing her attention to them when she realized what she’d done and withdrew the soft feel of her skin. His fingers fell to his side, twitching from the absence.

Felicity fidgeted, twirling her drink straw and looking everywhere but at him, as an awkward silence fell between them. “I really should call it a night. One more drink and I’ll be tipsy. Need a keep a clear head since I work in the morning, ya know.” Finally, she looked up and their eyes met. “Would you mind asking Frank if he has time to run me home?”
He knew he should do what he’d originally intended and have the bouncer escort her to her house, already becoming dangerously attracted to her sunny optimism and quick wit. Instead, he ignored his better judgment, unwilling to part with her just yet. “How many have you had?”

Her eyes narrowed, suspicious. “Why?”

_Damn it._ Why couldn’t the blonde make even one thing easy on him? “Humor me.”

She popped off her barstool, winking at him. “Enough that I shouldn’t drive, but not enough to fall into bed with you.” He wished he were a better man; that he could pursue this woman who brought light into his life.

“Then grab your gear.” Oliver stretched out his hand to her, already addicted to the feel of her after one innocuous touch.

“*I did say not* fall into bed with you, didn’t I?” she asked, clutching her helmet as a shield between them. “Words have a tendency to tumble out of my mouth, so I want to make sure we’re on the same page.”

He almost laughed, a rare occurrence in his world lately. “I assure you; you most definitely spurned my supposed advances.” _Much to my chagrin._

Her red messenger bag wound over her shoulders, her fingers wrapping around the strap instead of his hand. “Well, as long as that’s clear. Lead the way, Mr. Queen.”

His empty fingers curled in on themselves, but he refused to let her rebuff deter him. He wasn’t falling for her, only offering her a ride home anyway. He couldn’t afford to let her get too close. After this ride home, he’d be able to forget her utterly kissable lips.

Holding the door open, he placed his hand on the small of her back without thinking. She startled, but then relaxed into his touch. That is until they approached his black Ducati Diavel Titanium, the one item he’d splurged on when he returned from the island. Some nights he just rode, feeling the freedom of the road and the wind when this life overwhelmed him.

“You’re chariot, milady,” he quipped, pretending a calm he didn’t feel. His heart stopped as she stiffened and he wondered why she was frightened.

“I could go back and ask Frank,” he began, but didn’t really want to finish the offer.

Luckily, she rose to the occasion, throwing back her shoulders in defiance. “Why would I want to do that?”

“If you’re afraid,” he teased.

Felicity scoffed, freeing her hair from its constraint, and tugging on her helmet. Oliver sucked in a breath as the strands tumbled over her shoulders.

He gathered himself and straddled the bike, pulling on his own helmet and reaching out one last time for her hand. He told himself it didn’t matter if she took it, she’d be out of his life soon enough. But when she fitted her smaller hand into his, he held on long enough to tuck it under his jacket across his waist.

“Hold onto me tightly,” he said, smiling as her other arm banded around him. The secret desire to say that to her under less platonic circumstances rushed through him as his bike rumbled to life. One ride. He’d allow himself this one ride before leaving her to her safe and happy life.
But as he roared out of his parking spot, and Felicity wrapped her lithe body around him, he knew that it would be easier said than done.

~*~

The wind screamed around them as Felicity tightened her hold on Oliver. A feeling of safety enveloped her, and even though he broke several laws, she’d never felt so alive. He might baffle her, but she felt drawn to the man nonetheless. The world whizzed by and she pressed her body against his, reveling in the hard expanse of his abs under her palms. She knew he took the long way to her house, but she couldn’t find it in herself to care when her body flooded with need feeling his thighs tense in response to the curves. It really was too bad he was such an arrogant prick most of the time.

She forced the memory of their earlier interactions to the surface; remembering the way he’d dismissed her so easily. Maybe she proven her intelligence to him, but she’d never be more than a distraction for a man like Oliver Queen. But right now, soaring through the night, Felicity could easily be swept away into a world where millionaires fell in love with IT girls; where they could simply be a man and a woman, free to live and love without the demands of society.

He slowed the bike as they pulled onto her street, and she wondered briefly how he knew where she lived. That thought slipped away when he removed his helmet and turned to her, his eyes alight with a fire she’d never seen in them before.

She eased off the back of the motorcycle, unsnapping her chinstrap and letting her gaze roam his face. He seemed more relaxed, at one with the night surrounding them.

“As promised, Ms. Smoak.” He slid indecently from his seat, hanging his helmet over the edge of a handle and crooked his arm.

Felicity found herself once more speechless, lost in the endless ocean of his blue eyes, and wary as to what came next. But the desire to touch him superseded any doubts and she slipped her arm through his, running her fingertips over the butter soft black leather.

“This really isn’t necessary, Oliver,” she managed to say despite her pounding heart.

He almost smiled at her, and suddenly she felt it her life’s mission to bring joy to the man’s face.

“It’s really no trouble. I’d be remiss if I didn’t walk you safely to your door.”

Felicity steadied her breathing; he was only being a gentleman, probably trying to make up for his earlier behavior. Still, she couldn’t banish the desire to know what it would be like to be kissed by this decadent man. They walked up the stairs and stopped in front of her door. Felicity reluctantly removed her arm from his, searching in her messenger bag for her keys. When she looked back up at him, she was shocked to discover what looked like longing in his eyes. Even more so when warmth spread throughout her limbs in response. She could not fall for Oliver Queen. That situation had disaster written all over it.

“You’ve done your good deed for the evening, sir, and I thank you for the ride home.” Keep it platonic, Smoak.

She held her hand out for him to shake and his eyes flared in response. The blonde didn’t understand the look he gave her, but when he took her hand, turning it over and placing a gentle kiss on her palm instead of simply shaking it, Felicity knew that forgetting about Oliver Queen would be harder than she ever imagined.

Too soon, he broke away. “I’ll have your Charlie back to you in the morning before you leave for
“It’s really not necessary,” she responded while at the same time separating her moped’s key from the others. “My dad can just bring me by after lunch, if you have better things to do.”

“I always have better things to do,” he replied, but took the key from her anyway.

And with that, the spell woven between them shattered.

~*~

“Thank you again, Mr. Queen, for the ride home. I really appreciate it.” Her smile fell from her lips, and the openness he’d felt only moments before dissipated.

Oliver watched sadly as her body went rigid and he realized his error, but she was gone before he had the chance to say what he really meant. He might have better things to do, but nothing he’d rather do.

Trudging back to his Ducati, he berated himself for his inability to speak without offending her. He didn’t understand it; he’d never had a problem seducing women before. Why should it be so difficult to speak to this one enticing woman?

As he seated himself back on the bike, his gaze was drawn to a single light that flicked on, beaming out into the night. He watched, his stomach dropping, as Felicity paced her room, arms flailing, obviously involved in a one-sided argument. He told himself it was better this way, better if she despised him.

He sighed, pulling his helmet on and revving the engine. Right before he flipped his visor down, preparing to pull away from the intoxicating and frustrating woman, Oliver glanced up and watched as Felicity gazed down at the street where he idled. His heart thumped heavy in his chest as she slid her curtains closed. The Vigilante tore off, needing to put as much as distance between him and the promise of light that was Felicity Smoak.
The smell of hot dogs and hamburgers suffused the air of the backyard. Sara and Lydia splashed in the kiddie pool set up in the corner with Nyssa, Sara’s friend from her brief bout with community college, and Jeanie, a girl Lydia knew from high school. Her father, sporting the black “King of the Grill” apron they’d given him years ago, leaned back to pull his wife against him and land a soft peck on her lips. Felicity and Caitlyn reclined on adjacent plastic lawn chairs, wiggling their toes in the sunshine. The Lance/Smoak brood always ate family dinner together on Sundays, but the end of the summer picnic in the backyard was Felicity’s favorite.

This year’s picnic boasted two special guests though: Tommy Merlyn and Ray Palmer. Quentin insisted that Laurel bring her new boyfriend home officially, but no one had any idea why Mr. Palmer called her father and asked for a friendly get-together. Quentin explained that the man who held the loan wanted to speak with him about something, but not what. Only that the conversation in question needed to happen in person.

Why it had to happen when her dad was grilling in the backyard was anybody’s guess.

Felicity leaned over to her best friend, “Psst, I’m really glad you could make it today. I know how busy you are.”

Caitlyn tipped up her sunglasses. “Of course, I wouldn’t miss the picnic for the world.”

“We’re here,” Laurel called as Tommy opened the back gate.

Felicity jumped up and ran over to embrace her sister. Sure, she’d seen her after she’d fixed Oliver’s laptop, but for two girls used to seeing each other daily, even a week seemed an eternity, let alone the three that it had been.

She turned to Tommy, “Good to see you again.” He and Laurel had grown close quickly, working together did that, but seeing the smile the man brought to the brunette’s face made her love him just a little bit herself.

Felicity watched as Laurel walked with Tommy, their fingers intertwined, over to where Quentin flipped burgers and pretended stoicism and nonchalance: typical dad responses that warmed her and made her feel like maybe, just maybe, everything would turn out for the best in their lives.

“Tommy Merlyn, aren’t you just as handsome as ever,” her mother flirted.

He winked and kissed her cheek. “Donna, are you sure you’re not Laurel’s sister?”

“Oh you…” pushing him away, her mother giggled, “just go get yourself a drink, before I steal you away.”

Seeing Tommy reminded Felicity of the insufferable Oliver Queen. She’d let her guard down with him, climbing onto the back of his motorcycle, her hands feeling the flex of his muscles beneath his t-shirt. He’d been kind for a moment and she’d thought there might be something between them. Alas, the egotistical quadra-zillionaire couldn’t keep up the charade for long. The prince turned right back into a frog. Felicity only wished that forgetting about him were as easy.

Before she could settle back into her sun-soaked spot on the lawn, their second guest arrived. The chattering of her family died as Ray Palmer stood, impeccably and ridiculously dressed in a suit and tie. Quentin disentangled himself from Donna and crossed the space, hand outstretched in greeting.
“Mr. Palmer, welcome.”

Brushing invisible lint from his jacket before taking her father’s hand, the other bane of Felicity’s existence droned, “I thank you for your hospitality, Mr. Lance.”

“Quentin, please.” Her father gestured for the uncomfortable man causing such unease to take a seat at one of the picnic tables.

“And a pleasure, Mr. Lance.” The square-jawed man nodded, choosing instead to stand awkwardly beside the grill.

Introductions finished, Felicity offered their guest a beer, just a domestic, nothing he’d probably ever drank before in his life. She enjoyed a good craft beer every now and again, but their family dinners weren’t fancy. A good old-fashioned lager suited them just fine.

Sara and Lydia went back to lounging in the tiny plastic pool and hanging out with their friends. Ray might be handsome, but apparently, not being a frat boy worked as a disadvantage with them. The afternoon went along without a hitch. Mr. Palmer even eventually loosened up, though whether that was due to the beer or the fact that he removed his jacket and tie, Felicity wasn’t sure.

She watched as he pulled her father aside, the stiffening of Quentin’s posture the only indication that he didn’t approve of whatever the rich man suggested. In the end, Quentin shrugged and nodded, giving his agreement to the proposition. When Ray wandered over to strike up a conversation, Felicity bolted and joined her father, leaving Caitlyn alone to suffer Ray’s ego.

“What was that all about?” She asked, her inquisitiveness getting the best of her.

He smirked, “You wouldn’t believe it if I told you.” Felicity glared, her father evidently enjoying her impatience. “He wants to woo one of you in return for promising never to demand the balance of the loan, instead allowing us to take as long as we must to repay it. So what do you think of that?”

“I think it’s one of the most ridiculous things I’ve ever heard. What is this, 1813? Can women still be purchased for the price of a dowry? You turned him down, I’m certain.”

“Nope,” he replied, surprising her. “I told him to go right ahead and try. It’ll be entertaining, if nothing else. And if by some random snowball’s chance in hell, one of you falls in love with him, who am I to stop the man from helping the family he’d marry into. Besides, I imagine you’ll be the object of his affection. Laurel and Tommy are already halfway to the altar, if your mother has anything to say about it, and unlike Sara and Lydia, who might be persuaded by a pretty face and deep pockets, you have a good head on your shoulders. I don’t see you falling for a man simply for the money in his bank accounts.”

Felicity responded with a glint of mischief. “Well, I suppose he can try, but it’s doubtful he’ll get very far.”

“That’s my Lissie, always up for a challenge.” He laughed, wrapping his arm around her and kissing the top of her head. “Now, go on. Go make it known that you aren’t such easy prey.”

The blonde crossed the yard to rescue Caitlyn from the odious man’s conversation.

“How have you been amusing my dearest friend, Mr. Palmer?” Felicity sat on the bench next to her, picking up a chip and nibbling on it.

“We were discussing the new technology my company, Star Labs, is in the process of developing. You know that Caitlyn works for me.” She nodded and he looked her over. “Though it really was
“a brilliant stroke of genius on my part, I’d hate to bore you with the details.”

“Why would you think I’d be bored by that?” Felicity knew the answer, but she wanted to force the man to verbalize it.

“I prefer to stick to conversations everyone can take part in.” He scooted closer to her. “Why don’t you tell me about the new menu your family intends to release for the fall.”

*Of all the ridiculous…* Felicity stifled her groan and ignored the man. “So Caitlyn, what’re you working on? We haven’t had a chance to discuss it.”

Caitlyn grinned knowingly. “We’ve been working with nanotechnology, attempting to miniaturize medical equipment for less invasive surgery procedures.”

“I presume you’ve been producing plasmonic nanoparticle sensors.”

Caitlyn nodded. “Of course, but we’re stuck on the noise and stability issue.”

“You’ve run into the false electron detection problem,” she looked to her friend for confirmation.

“Yes,” her friend sighed, “And when working within the human body, precision in real time is a necessity.”

“Obviously.” Felicity loved when the smug look dropped from Ray’s face, turning into confusion. She turned to address him, putting distance between them. “Don’t feel bad, you’re not the first to underestimate me, Mr. Palmer.”

He schooled his features into a less offensive mask. “I apologize, Miss Smoak. I should have realized that any friend of Caitlyn’s would not be an ignoramus.”

“You’d be better served to stop judging people at all, sir. A person’s job does not reflect their intelligence. And their intelligence does not negate the fact that they are people and deserve respect,” Felicity reined herself in. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t lecture, but I can’t help it sometimes.”

“It is understandable. Might I suggest you continue to school me on my deficiencies over dinner later this week? I’m in town until next Sunday and I’m sure I could get us reservations at Table Salt. The owner owes me a favor.”

Oliver Queen saved her from answering.

~*~

He paused at the side of the house; hearing the happy voices mingling, pop music playing in the background, the sounds of a life he was unable to live. What right did he have to interrupt such a familial celebration? No longer lighthearted Oliver, he’d changed into the Vigilante, the Hood; a man more akin to the nighttime than the bright sun of a family picnic.

Fingering the micro camera from the Foundry, he reconsidered the idea to ask her to look at it for him. After debating with himself for weeks, and absolutely no luck determining its origin, he finally gave in. If anyone could trace it back to the owner, it was the beautiful and brilliant Felicity Smoak.

When Laurel invited him to the family picnic initially, he’d turned her down thinking her sister wouldn’t care for him to interrupt her day off. But he needed her to check out the bug and if he was being honest, he wanted to see her again. Maybe he’d make a better impression this time; he’d have to be careful with his words.
Oliver listened as Ray Palmer, oh yes he knew the obnoxious man from various functions, insulted Felicity. It required every ounce of willpower he possessed to keep from rushing in and defending her. Somehow, he knew she wouldn’t appreciate that. Especially given the fact he’d done the exact same thing to her the first time they’d met.

That thought more than anything that kept him frozen. Hearing the blonde IT genius completely disregard the pompous prick released a sliver of a smile that lasted until Ray freaking Palmer asked Felicity out on a date. The decision seemed easy then. His fingers slid the bug back into his jeans’ pocket and lifted the latch on the gate.

“Hello…” His glance flickered over her before finding Tommy and Laurel. “I hope it’s okay I showed up.”

Laurel walked over, welcoming him. “Oliver. I’m so glad you decided to come after all. Dad won’t mind.”

“The more millionaires the merrier,” Donna answered for her husband. “You are more than welcome to our little get together.”

“Definitely. Good to see you again, Oliver.” Quentin Lance waved a spatula in his direction. “Beer’s in the blue cooler, soda and water in the red. Help yourself. Food’ll be ready soon.”

Oliver, never comfortable with a cordial greeting, on constant watch for enemies, yearned for this effortlessness, the camaraderie of the group, including Donna Smoak’s obvious attempts to catch a husband for her daughters. Even Tommy fit in easily. Everyone did but Ray Palmer, he noticed. That pleased him. And yet…if Quentin knew about his alter-ego, he wondered if that would be a plus or a minus in the officer’s playbook. The detective worked with the Vigilante, but it was a guarded truce at best.

“Thank you, Detective Lance.” He tried to imagine Moira eating dinner at a picnic table.

Felicity’s father broke him from his musing. “I’m off the clock, call me Quentin. Dear god, you all are making me feel like an old man with all the Misters and Detectives being thrown around today. Now get a beer, young whippersnapper and go play with the kids in the yard.”

The man chuckled at his own joke, his wife joining in, and turned back to the grill. Laurel and Tommy dragged him over to the table where the Felicity and her brunette friend sat.

“Oliver,” Felicity’s greeting frosty, “I’m not sure if you remember my friend Caitlyn, you met—”

“Oh yes, I’m sorry—the night of the bartender’s ball, correct?” He really wanted to make a good impression for once; remembering her friend would be a good start. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“And you too, Oliver.” Her smile was nice, but nothing like the shine of Felicity’s. His eyes flicked to her, praying she didn’t notice, hoping she would.

“Oliver,” Ray Palmer’s stuffy voice interrupted his trying to think of something normal to say to the beautiful blonde. When did he start having problems talking to women?

Bringing his attention to the man speaking, he replied evenly, gripping the man’s hand too tightly. “Ray, the last time I saw you we were at the charity auction for Autism Awareness. How’ve you been?”

“Well, thank you. I hear you and Tommy opened a nightclub in the Glades. How quaint. One would think with your education—oh, I’m sorry, that’s right. You dropped out of four colleges
didn’t you? I, however, went to Yale and graduated top of my class.” The man had the audacity to
wrap an arm around Felicity’s waist as if staking a claim for him to see.

And there went his calm. Felicity squirmed her way out of his grip and—surprisingly—came to
his rescue before he detached Ray’s head from his body.

“Holy frakballs, Mr. Palmer, did we not just have a conversation?” Oliver watched as she leveled
a glare at the cocky asshat. Then she held her hand out to him, which he hesitated to take worried
that his darkness might infect her somehow. She wiggled her fingers in his direction, encouraging.
“Come on, let’s go get some food.”

~*~

Oliver Queen stared as if she were the last drink of water in a desert, the mirage of a dying man.
She didn’t know what he went through on the island, but only his eyes betrayed the depths he
kept secret. Defending the man was the last thing she expected to do. She didn’t like Ray Palmer,
but Oliver Queen was a big boy. He could stand up for himself.

And she didn’t like him, she reminded herself.

But she saw the hurt that flickered across his eyes at Ray’s insensitive words and the anger that
followed, though she didn’t understand it. When she reached out her hand, she wondered how
long it’d been since anyone had been truly kind to him. People wanted things from the millionaire:
money, influence, a foot in the door.

Something clicked into place when he wrapped his fingers around hers. Tugging him over to the
grill, she fixed them burgers and hot dogs.

“How do you like yours?” She asked, and when he didn’t answer, she noticed him studying her.
“Everything okay?”

His ice blue eyes refocused. “Yeah, fine. Just zoned out a bit. Ketchup and relish, if you have it.”
“Yuppers. Dad’s finest.” She spooned on a generous helping over the ketchup.

He raised an eyebrow. “You’re dad makes relish? My dad barely made it to dinner on time.”

He tried to laugh, but it was forced, and Felicity could tell, tinged with regret. Rather than push
him, she grabbed his plate and set it across from hers, handing him plastic silverware.

“Eat up. They’re best when their hot.” Oliver Queen could be a dick, but who knew how many
layers hid underneath his exterior dick. He certainly bore further examination, the scientist in her
reasoned as they ate in silence.

He looked good, relaxed, sitting there amiably among her friends and family, almost as if he
belonged there in his t-shirt, jeans, and boots. They talked about nothing and everything: celebrity
weddings, technical advances, the state of the Glades, and finally the Vigilante.

Sara offered her astute opinion, “Who runs around in green leather anyway? I mean, sexy sure,
but leather’s so 1997.”

Felicity piped up. “Well, I don’t care what he wears. He’s making a difference in this city. That’s
all that matters to me.” Oliver’s eyes flicked in her direction, but she couldn’t tell what his look
meant.

“Seriously, Felicity?” Laurel asked her, surprised. “Do you really think that? No one should take
the law into their own hands, no matter how well-intentioned.”

Caitlyn quipped, “Okay, Miss Lawyer. Show of hands, who’s shocked by her statement?” Her best friend raised her hand, which was joined by several others.

“And what do you think, Ms. Snow?” Ray asked.

Caitlyn grinned. “I’m with Felicity.”

“He’s a hero in my opinion, for what it’s worth.” She finished the thought, knowing the Vigilante did the kind of work many weren’t brave enough to even consider.

“But he’s killing people,” Tommy argued.

“Not anymore.” She tracked the Vigilante, trying to figure out his identity, but she’d had no luck yet. “He stopped killing a while back. Obviously something changed for him.”

Tommy leaned back, surprised, and considered the new information. Her dad seemed much less enthused with her knowledge.

“And how do you know so much about him, young lady?” The detective questioned, his tone obviously concerned.

She took a deep breath, disagreeing with her father could go poorly and it was too nice of a day for a fight. To admit to him that she was monitoring the Vigilante meant courting disaster. Instead, she gave him the partial truth. “We keep either news or sports on at the bar for most of the day, dad. I pay attention.”

“As long as that’s all it is. I don’t want you involved. I respect the Vigilante, but your sister’s right, he is breaking the law. I don’t want my daughter wrapped up in anything illegal.”

As usual, her father’s proclamation ended any further discussion, and they all fell back onto safer topics. While her mom dropped hints about grandchildren, Felicity took the time to observe the man sitting across from her. She’d stolen glances during their debate about the Vigilante, and when her father spoke of respecting the man, Oliver seemed relieved for some reason.

“I have another technical favor to ask,” He interrupted her train of thought, his words tentative.

“And here I was beginning to think my days as Oliver Queen’s personal computer geek were coming to an end.” His eyes crinkled in amusement. If he ever truly smiled, Felicity would be a goner.

Reaching in his pocket he pulled something out and waited until she extended her hand. Feeling the tiny object he placed in her palm, she lifted it up to examine it.

He explained, “I need to know where the signal originates.”

“This is a bug, Oliver, what…how…where did you get this?”

He fidgeted and Felicity could tell he was about to lie to her. She waited. “A friend devised a scavenger hunt. If I locate the signal, I get the next clue.”

Cocking her head at him, she pretended to believe his ridiculous story. One day she’d get to the truth. “Oh really, a scavenger hunt? What’s the prize for winning?”

“A case of Lafite Rothschild 1982. And one of those bottles is yours if you help me trace the
location. Deal?”

Damn him for offering a deal she couldn’t refuse. “I love wine, so yes, definitely. I’m in. I’ll have the info for you by tomorrow or Tuesday at the latest. That okay?”

“Sure. What’s your number?”

Her face and mind went blank. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Um, your phone number? I thought—”

She rattled off her number, which he saved in his phone and directly after, hers began to ring.

“Now, you’ve got mine. Just call me when you have something for me.”

She had no idea what to say, Oliver Queen had just given her his phone number. Only so she could play techie for him, but still. With her knowledge, she could totally stalk him if she wanted.

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll use my knowledge for evil?”

His face turned serious. “No, you aren’t like that. I can tell.”

Mr. Intriguing made another appearance. “How do you know?”

Silence reigned between them for several moments, until Felicity doubted he’d answer. When he finally broke the quiet, his answer shocked her.

“I’ve known evil. You aren’t it.” He stared down at the wood grain of the old picnic table.

She didn’t know what to say. Instead, she reached over and took his hand, an offer of human comfort.

His fingers tightened around hers, but he didn’t lift his gaze when he continued, “If only I were a different man, Felicity Smoak. In another life—” he choked on his words. “But we don’t live another life, we live this one.”

“Oliver?” But he was already shuttering away whatever memory gripped him. His hand retreated, leaving hers cold without his warmth.

The Oliver Queen the magazines knew grinned cockily at her, but it was just a façade and didn’t reach further than the surface. “Never mind me. Just get a bit maudlin from time to time. It’s nothing. I promised Tommy I’d look in on the club tonight. Time for me to go.”

He stood and Felicity felt sadness flitter through her, trying desperately to regroup after the intense turn in their conversation.

Stifling the confusing feelings, she asked him, quiet and unsure, “Are you sure you have to leave, it seems like you’re having a good time.”

“I am, but unfortunately, I’ve got work to do, no matter how quaint it is to some people.” Oliver winked and began saying his goodbyes. He thanked her parents and then turned back to her.

“Thank you for a lovely day, Felicity.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll be in touch when I have information.”

He squeezed her shoulder and left the back yard. Felicity followed and watched over the fence as he strode away.
Oliver walked away feeling stronger than he had in a while. Felicity’s family was a breath of fresh air, allowing him to forget his five years away and the damage it’d done to him. He revved the engine of his Ducati, pulling on his helmet, and glanced in the mirror to see Felicity watching him as he left. Only allowing himself a brief moment of happiness, he refocused and drove away, heading towards the club.

He hadn’t lied to her, he really had told Tommy he’d take care of things tonight, but after Quentin complimented him, albeit the other him, he’d felt a dangerous swell of pride. Like for the first time, he might be doing something right. He couldn’t wait to slip into the suit tonight and protect his city. But that protection came at the price of his heart.

Arriving at Verdant, he checked in with the staff, relieved that no one needed anything. Dig already waited for him when he took the stairs down into the foundry two at a time.

“You seem in a good mood today, which is, well, odd if I’m being frank. I’m used to broody Oliver.” Diggle scrutinized him. “You saw Felicity again, didn’t you? Man, I told you about that. It’s one thing involving me—a combat trained veteran—in your mission, quite another to take an innocent girl and—”

The Vigilante cut his friend off. “Listen, I’m not bringing her into this. But she’s our best option of figuring out just who the hell is onto us. Once it’s done, I swear I’ll walk away.”

Oliver knew better, of course he did. As much as he wished he could pursue a relationship with her, he knew she was better off with a man like Ray Palmer. Didn’t mean it didn’t burn in his gut. But the idea that she thought him a hero would keep him going, long after he’d said his last goodbye to her.

No matter what, goodbye wouldn’t mean he would ever leave her unprotected. Whether she knew it or not, Felicity Smoak had her own personal hero.
Donna’s hands disappeared into the sudsy water, “You will go out to dinner with Mr. Palmer tonight and I’ll hear no arguments about it, Felicity Smoak.”

“I absolutely will not go anywhere with that pompous asshole, let alone shave my legs to listen to him spout off about how great he is for five courses.” She took the dripping plate from her mother’s hand and dried it, setting it in the cabinet to the left of the sink.

“He’s rich. He’s handsome. And he’s willing to help this family, which I can see you aren’t willing to do,” she said, glaring at her daughter. “Besides, I’ve already accepted for you.”

“You what?” Felicity yelped and froze in place, almost dropping the glass she held. “I know you did not just tell me that you set me up on a date.”

Donna looked up from washing the dishes, her face set as if she’d prepared in advance for this quarrel. “I did. We discussed it at the picnic. For once in your life you will do as you’re told.”

Angry tears threatened. “I’ve always done what’s expected of me.” Felicity never had to be asked because she simply did it, knowing what would make her parents’ life easier. This was a step too far.

“Then I expect you to do this. Quite the opportunity…” The older blonde looked at her askance. “It’s not as if you have any other prospects.”

A flash of blue eyes skittered across her memory. Shoving that aside, she answered, “Whether I have any other prospects is not the issue. I don’t like the man.”

“May you learn that liking a man isn’t always the best reason to date them, Felicity.” Her mother’s hands searched the water for any silverware she might have missed. “I got lucky with Quentin, but there aren’t many men like him.”

She tugged the dishtowel through the handle of the refrigerator and turned. “Mom, I won’t go and you can’t force me.”

“Maybe I can’t, but your father certainly can.” The sound of the draining sink filled the silence. “Quentin!”

Felicity prayed that her father wouldn’t force the issue. She didn’t think he would, but then, he loved Donna fiercely. He might agree simply to placate her. She heard him moving around downstairs in the family room.

“Coming,” he called up the short stairwell.

When he joined them in the kitchen, Donna wasted no time. “Tell your daughter that she will go on the date I arranged for her.”

Her dad looked confused. “What date? I’m sure Lissie is happy to do whatever you ask of her.”

Her eyes pleaded with him. “She wants me to go to dinner with Ray Palmer. I can’t—I won’t.”

“Is that so?” Quentin chuckled, and then schooled his features to the seriousness of the situation. “Donna, you can’t have thought that she would say yes. The man is an abominable bore.”
Hope bubbled up inside her. “See mom, even dad knows this is a bad idea.”

“Oh, I didn’t say that.” His eyes twinkled down at her. “I find that I would love to be a fly on the wall for your date.”

His wife’s face turned a shade matching her vibrant lipstick. “Do not encourage her. You know what a headstrong girl she is, Quentin. Now tell her that she must accept or else…”

“Oh, I didn’t say that.” His eyes twinkled down at her. “I find that I would love to be a fly on the wall for your date.”

His wife’s face turned a shade matching her vibrant lipstick. “Do not encourage her. You know what a headstrong girl she is, Quentin. Now tell her that she must accept or else…”

“Or else what?” Felicity challenged.

Her mother crossed her arms over her chest, fixing her daughter with her best parental stare. “Or else I will never speak to you again.”

“Fat chance of that,” she muttered under her breath. She loved her mother, but sometimes her meddling tested the bounds of her patience.

“Lissie,” her father warned. Her lips clamped together. “Is it worth upsetting your mother to turn down this date? It’s only one meal. Maybe you’ll discover you like the man.”

She retorted, “That will absolutely never happen. You didn’t hear the way he spoke to me.”

Quentin studied her face, waiting to see if she would expound on that statement. When she refused, he nodded and sighed. “Well then, young lady, it seems you have a choice to make. Your mother will never speak to you again if you don’t go on this date, and I will never speak to you again if you do.”

Relief flooded her entire body. She should’ve known she could count on her dad.

“Thank you!” Felicity rose up on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek before fleeing the room. Grabbing her backpack, jacket, and helmet, she ran out the front door. Her mother’s offended voice could be heard the entire way out to her moped. The engine didn’t rev like a certain Ducati, but she zipped away from the curb and away from the most ridiculous pair-up her mother could’ve ever conceived.

She drove aimlessly for an hour before remembering she needed to give Oliver the information mined from the micro camera. Hanging a left at the next corner, Felicity headed back in the direction of Verdant. Since Sara’d taken over bartending on Mondays, she’d been able to grab a little freedom for herself. After the picnic yesterday, the tech genius spent the entire evening into the wee hours of the morning tracing the signal to its origin. Maybe there might have been a distraction or two when the programs she’d set up to track the Vigilante dinged their alert, but the pictures downloaded off the city’s cameras only showed his back. One day she’d discover his identity.

Stopping at a gas station, she retrieved her phone and sent Oliver a quick text asking if he was free to meet. Moments later his response confirmed that he was available and Felicity calmed her sudden nerves. The grey overcast sky seemed at odds with her excitement, but the blonde reminded herself that the man wasn’t interested in her for anything other than her brain. Not that that bothered her, she considered her brain her best feature, but she had a strange desire to know what it would be like to kiss him.

Shaking her head of the random thought, Felicity pulled back into traffic and obeyed the speed limit despite remembering how fantastic it felt to ride on the back of his motorcycle, screaming through the night. Hands tightened on her moped handles instead of a six-pack of abs, cool wind pressed against her instead of the heat of his body. She really needed to get a grip. Oliver wasn’t a Disney Prince and she wasn’t Cinderella.
Her thoughts drove her all the way to the club where she parked and stiffened her shoulders. Who knew which Oliver would meet her today?

Frank guarded the door again, greeting her. “Ms. Smoak. Good to see you again. I wanted to apologize for my behavior the last time you were here.”

Taken aback, Felicity accepted his apology. “No worries, you were just doing your job, right? I’m sure there are tons of girls trying to get a sneak peek inside the domain of Merlyn and Queen.”

The bouncer smiled. “You have no idea.” He held open the door for her and she entered the sacred space.

~*~

“I really don’t think you should go and talk to this girl, Oliver.” Dig watched as his partner puttered around the room pretending his mind wasn’t occupied by the video screen showing the woman who’d just arrived. “Let me go and get the information for you.”

Oliver shrugged on the grey suit coat draped over the office chair in front of the ancient computer system. “You worry far too much, Diggle. Felicity Smoak is safe from the likes of me.”

“Then why did you wear a suit to the club today?” Arms like tree trunks bulged as the man crossed them and leaned against the metal table watching his friend.

The Vigilante grumbled. “I felt like it.” Even he knew that was one of his lamest excuses to date. “Besides, it’ll draw too much attention to you. Remember, you’re supposed to be my black driver.”

“Fair enough, man, but be careful. You need to keep her at arm’s length. Asking for her help is one thing, quite another to go riding off into the night with her.”

Oliver growled. “Trust me when I say the woman is not interested in anything I have to offer.”

Dig moved to his side, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Just because she’s not interested, doesn’t mean that you aren’t.”

He shrugged off his friend’s well-meaning attempt at advice, but he wasn’t saying anything Oliver hadn’t figured out himself. After driving Felicity home, he’d succeeded in not going to see her again for weeks. Every single day had been a challenge and he’d spent more time on the streets, only coming back to the Foundry when exhaustion demanded it.

“Oliver—”

The scarred and broken man slammed his fists on the metal table, the sound echoing through the space. “I get it, Dig. Who I am—No, what I am, is not conducive to any relationship, let alone one with a highly intelligent and innocent woman like Felicity. She has a loving family and a bright future and I’d be a fool to pull her into our world. Can we just drop it?”

He lived with his faults every day and didn’t need to be reminded that he deserved nothing good in this life. There were too many chances for his numerous enemies to use any perceived weakness against him. Yesterday, at her family’s picnic, Oliver almost confessed everything to Felicity. When she admitted she thought the Vigilante a hero…well it took all his willpower not to drag her into his arms and thank her for the belief.

Dig nodded and moved to the training mat. “Just looking out for you…” He left the rest unsaid.
Felicity waved to the petite woman with jet-black hair setting up the bar. “Hi. I’m Felicity. I’m supposed to be meeting Oliver.”

Before the bartender could respond, he strode into the club, wearing a suit. Felicity swallowed through the zings of heat shooting through her veins.

“Felicity!” Playboy smile plastered across his face, he greeted her, moving his hand to just below her backpack, guiding her to a table away from the bar.

Felicity shivered at his touch, but the smile was a disappointment. It meant distant Oliver was in charge today. “Hey, I hope I’m not interrupting you.”

“Of course not, I appreciate your help on this.” He pulled out one of the high-top chairs for her and she shrugged off her backpack. He sat as far away from her as the table would allow.

“What’ve you got for me?”

Collecting her thoughts, she dug into one of the pockets of her bag. “This…” she held up the bug, “is not good news, Oliver.”

Setting the camera between them, she studied his face and watched as mental gates slammed down. “I told you, it’s a scavenger hunt.”

“Yes you did. But just because that’s what you told me doesn’t mean I believe you.” Oliver opened his mouth; Felicity cut him off. “Whatever lie you’re about to concoct, don’t. I have no intention of prying into your personal life. I don’t know what you’re playing at, but it’s dangerous.”

A hollow and brittle laugh spilled out of him. “That’s just ridiculous. Whatever could I be involved with that’s dangerous?”

Felicity ignored the deflection. “I followed the trail of this signal as it bounced all over the city. When I finally pinned down the origin, the address was an overgrown vacant lot on the east side of the Glades. The signal then disappeared two seconds after I located it. Between this and the spyware,” two things she knew were connected, “I’m coming to the conclusion that someone really is stalking you.”

“Thanks for the information, and being so quick about finding it. If you’ll just give me the address, I’ll take care of it from here.” Oliver fidgeted as she scribbled down the location, holding it out to him, but not releasing it. “You really don’t need to worry about me, Felicity. I just have very interesting friends, that’s all.”

Reluctantly, she let go of the paper and reached out to him. “Let me help you, please. Not only am I the best hacker in the tri-state area, but my dad’s a cop.” Felicity could’ve sworn he stopped himself from touching her outstretched hand.

“No, absolutely not,” Oliver barked at her. She caught the immediate regret that surfaced in his eyes. “Sorry. It’ll invalidate the game, which isn’t quite legal, as you might imagine.”

Swinging her bag over her shoulder, she stifled her worry. “Alright. Just remember, you’ve got my number and I’m more than willing to help.”

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary,” he replied, the walls erected firmly between them. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to work.”
Felicity huffed out an exasperated breath. “You are one of the most infuriating men I’ve ever met.”

“That’s nice.” And with that, Oliver Queen stormed away.

_What a trying day_, she thought making her way out to where she’d parked Charlie. Her watch revealed that it was early evening, far too early for her to go home quite yet. Instead, she headed to her favorite used bookstore. More and more certain Oliver had found himself in trouble she browsed the aisles, not paying a lick of attention to any of the titles she lifted from the shelves. Her frustration and dislike of his arrogant side warred with the memory of him sitting at a picnic table with her. She had to let this go, let him go. Just because he’d shown an ounce of kindness, a time or two, didn’t mean he wasn’t a jerk.

She simply didn’t have time for that. Bennet’s Bar looked like it might be on the upward climb, and hopefully she could start searching for a job in her field. Who knows, maybe she’d apply to work in the tech division at Queen Consolidated. It’s not like she’d ever see Oliver there since as far as she knew he hadn’t given in to his mother’s wishes yet. She reshelved another book she hadn’t bothered to peruse. Maybe once Laurel finished with Verdant they could sit down with their parents and talk about hiring a part-timer or two. She knew it was selfish, but she wanted her own life. Loving her parents and giving up her dreams forever were two different things.

Her stomach rumbled and Felicity decided that even though she wasn’t going on a date with Ray Palmer, she could still take herself out for dinner. It might be Big Belly Burger instead of Table Salt, but who cared. She picked out a couple urban fantasy novels—her guilty pleasure—she’d been meaning to read and headed to her favorite burger joint. After settling into a booth and ordering from her server Carly, the blonde chose one of her purchases and lost herself in post-apocalyptic Atlanta. The story gripped her enough that when a man walked up to her table, she didn’t notice.

“Felicity Smoak.” Her head whipped up and she froze mid-bite when she realized who stood in front of her. “I am not a man who gets turned down.” He slid into the bench seat across from her.

“What the hell are you doing here, Ray?” Panic made her posture rigid. Her gaze flicked to take in the darkened sky. Night had fallen.

He smirked at her, acting as if he exhibited normal behavior. “You aren’t the only one with tech skills. I simply pinged your cell phone. And low and behold, I find you eating dinner alone. How lucky for me.”

Appetite gone, she caught her server’s eye. “That’s not luck, that’s stalking.” She shoved her book into her bag and grabbed her wallet. When Carly approached, Felicity handed over her card. Ray attempted to pull out his wallet, but one glare stopped his motion.

“Are you really leaving? Come on, I meant no harm.” His cajoling tone needled her, as if it the whole thing were just a big joke. “Give me a chance, you might actually like me.”

“Doubtful,” she paused, clutching her backpack. “I presume you got the message I didn’t want to go out with you.”

He nodded, “I did, and got an earful from your mother for my pains. Mrs. Smoak is quite put out that you turned me down. I just don’t understand it.” He shrugged, honestly confused. “Why wouldn’t you want to go out with me? I figured you were just playing hard to get. You know, making me want to chase you.”

“No, some women might play games, but I certainly don’t.” Felicity signed her credit card slip,
sliding her card back into her wallet, and stood to leave. “Good night, Mr. Palmer.”

He rose as she walked away and followed, rushing out the closing door behind her. “You can’t be serious right now.”

“I am very serious. Let me be clear, I am not interested in going out with you, now or ever.” She turned on her heel.

Ray grabbed her elbow, spinning her back around. “You don’t have to try so hard, I already like you. You know what kind of life I can offer. Give up this pretension; it doesn’t suit you. Tell me who else is going to be willing to date a simple bartender from the Glades, no matter how pretty her face.”

Felicity’s heart began to pound when he wouldn’t release her. Her free hand reached into her jacket pocket, slowly retrieving her pepper spray. She didn’t want to use it on the billionaire, already seeing the headlines tomorrow—‘Glades Bartender Attacks Pillar of Central City’—That wouldn’t go over well.

“You should release me now.” Ray let her go as if he’d been burned by her caustic tone. She took a step away from him and felt herself breathe easier. “Let me explain something to you. In case you ever intend to date another woman, when she tells you no, she’s not being cute, or coy, or playing hard to get, she means it. Your only response is to walk away. If for some ungodly reason she changes her mind, she will initiate contact. Though why any sane woman would find an arrogant, pushy, stalker like you attractive is beyond me.”

He retreated a few steps, putting even more distance between them. “Well, I…well, I…”

“I think the response you’re looking for is: I understand and apologize for my boorish behavior.”

“No one has ever spoken to me so bluntly.” His face took on a look as if he were just a lost little boy, uncertain as to why he was being scolded.

Felicity wouldn’t let it faze her. “An unfortunate oversight, in my opinion. Men like you seem to think the world is simply there for the taking. It is not.”

Shock lined his face at her words. “My gravest apologies, Miss Smoak, I did not think. I’ll just be going. Have a good evening.” He turned brusquely to leave.

Felicity watched every step he took until his driver opened the door of his black BMW and Ray slid inside without a glance behind.

~*~

If stumbling upon Felicity’s moped parked near Big Belly Burger seemed a twist of fate, then seeing her exit the restaurant with Ray Palmer hot on her heels had been fate’s punch to his gut. He wanted to see her happy, but he didn’t want that conceited prick anywhere near her. When it became apparent she wasn’t with him willingly, the Vigilante almost let loose a zip line arrow and swooped down to snap his neck. Anger surged through his body when the man placed his hand on her. If it hadn’t been completely obvious that she had the situation under control, he might have lost his tenuous grasp on his temper.

He debated following and putting the fear of God into the asshole until she broke down in tears, hunched over the seat of Charlie. Within seconds, he came down the fire escape and crossed the street to her, slowing the closer he got. He hadn’t been stalking her, but he had stayed when he knew she was there, and Felicity had been scared enough for one night.
“Are you all right?” His voice modulator deepened his words and the tear-streaked woman startled. “Hey, hey, hey…it’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you.”

She began laughing hysterically. “Isn’t this just the topper on the cake? Rescued by the Vigilante. Well, not exactly rescued since I’d already handled everything, but of course the night I meet you, I’m sobbing my face off in residual terror.” She scrubbed at her eyes, smearing the light make-up she wore.

Oliver thought she looked more beautiful than ever. He repeated his question. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. Yes, I’m fine.” Felicity took in big gulps of air, attempting to calm herself. “See? All better.”

Tears still streamed down her cheeks and the Vigilante reached out with his gloved hand to wipe them away. Far too close to her, he ducked his head, hiding beneath the shadow of his hood.

“Who are you?” She raised her blue eyes searching for his.

He backed away, his fingers rubbing together from the absence of touching her. “No one.”

She reached for him, but dropped her hand when he took a step back. “Thank you, no one.”

“No need. As you said, you’d already taken care of the situation.” Oliver needed to extricate himself. He felt the urge to take her into his arms and protect her from the entire world. He reminded himself that bringing her closer would put her in more danger. He locked away the feelings that threatened to overwhelm him.

The Vigilante watched as she stiffened her shoulders, her face haunted. “You don’t know how quickly something like that can turn bad.”

He growled, tightened his grip on his bow. “Who? When?” He would kill whoever touched her, terrified her so much that the fear still lived inside her.

“It was a long time ago. He can’t hurt me anymore,” her words a whispered mantra. “I need to go. And I’m sure you need to get out of the light. Anyone could see you here.”

He couldn’t tell her he feared only her light. “You okay to drive?” He gestured to her waiting moped.

“Yes, I’m alright.” She reached up and touched his cheek, but made no move to unmask him. A deeply buried part of him wished she would. He didn’t want to hide from her. “Thank you. Now, go be the hero I know you are.”

She pulled on her helmet, and climbed onto Charlie. Her words clung to him. He notched an arrow and released it, feeling the claw catch on the roof above.

“Be safe.” He released the lever and soared up to the building. Standing on the edge, outlined only by the moon, she raised her hand in goodbye to him. He watched her drive away. One more patrol and then he would check to make sure she made it home safe.

When he turned, he came face to face with a young man in a red hoodie, a gun pointed at his chest.

“What are you doing with my sister?”
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!