The Color of Love

by Crimson1

Summary

Len gave up on love a long time ago. In the aftermath of the Oculus explosion, when an old flame comes back to haunt him, he just wants something normal to distract him from it all. He never expected that two of his favorite things—a heist and the Scarlet Speedster—could end with him drowning in the very emotion he spurned.

OR Rainbow Raider strikes again – Len gets hit with LOVE.

Notes

Set post-season 2 of Flash and season 1 of Legends, only Flashpoint didn’t happen and Len did not die from the Oculus explosion. Rating will likely go up. More people and tags will be added as the story progresses. Both Len and Barry suffer from PTSD in various ways, hence that tag.

A big thank you to RedHead for talks on how Len is almost never the one hit with sex pollen or Raider’s emotional spectrum. It’s usually Barry. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, but it inspired me to return to one of my old ideas about Len getting hit with LOVE. Also, her current fic, Got A Melancholic Temperament (that's what they said to me), is AMAZING as a Len de-aged fic and has inspired me further simply by being so good. Go read it! We have pretty much all the same headcanons about these boys, so you know…great minds think alike.

Also a nod to simplicity and their fic Love Me, where BARRY is hit by love, just from a different meta. My fic is a very different take on this trope, but I love that fic so much, I
can’t pretend as if it hasn’t affected me and inspired me too, so definitely check that one out.

A big thank you to faded-dreams-and-blue-jeans for helping beta chapter 1, since I was all neurotic about getting it just right. Your comments and advice are forever invaluable and so helpful.

And a big thank you to everyone on Tumblr who helped me decide on the direction to go with this fic. I know some of you were hoping I’d set it more recently, but I really think this will be the better story in the long run, and depending on how the seasons play out, I might have a second fic I can write from that other idea I’d been playing with.

ENJOY!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Len twisted the silver ring around his pinky finger, staring at the way it reflected the light.

Normal life—past, present, and an unknown future—wasn’t supposed to feel like limbo. Hazard of time travel, he supposed. Or maybe because, for a moment, he’d lived an eternity all at once.

He was early for this meeting, had to be to better map the exits, plan a strategy, have three different ways to escape if things went south. He had the cold gun but no goggles so he wouldn’t play his hand too early. Instead of his parka or his lighter jacket, he’d worn a trench coat to better hide the gun. She’d expect him to be armed though. She’d be prepared too.

Alexa.

Whenever Len told the story of The Alexa Job, he always made it sound like a place—it wasn’t. The job had been here in Central City at the very warehouse he was in now. It wasn’t used for anything anymore, abandoned, empty and dank, but twenty years ago it had been the main hub for transporting fenced goods out of the city. He and Mick called what happened here ‘The Alexa Job’ because everything that had gone wrong about that heist had been her doing.

Maybe Len wasn’t thinking clearly, agreeing to meet her at all. He hadn’t seen her since that night, since she betrayed them. He’d sensed something was wrong going in, aborted the job and forced Mick out with him before things got bad, but oh, how they could have gone bad, and it had all been her design.

She’d called him last night—he still didn’t know how she got his number, but at least it was his ‘work’ line and not his personal one. He’d answered, and like a damn fool, he’d listened to her, agreed to meet her here alone. He should kill her outright after what she did, save himself the trouble, but that wasn’t supposed to be who he was anymore. He didn’t want to be like that anymore. Not unless he had to be.

When the Oculus blew, Len figured it would be over in a blinding bright flash of pain and then he’d find peace. The blinding flash and the pain were right, but peace didn’t come as quickly. The Time Masters were eradicated, but Len had been at the center, touching the inner workings of the machine itself. Time couldn’t be erased, and that was where he existed for his moment of eternity, in a cocoon of time, never-ending.

Put things in perspective but twisted his thinking. Had him second guessing himself, standing in this warehouse, waiting.

The part he couldn’t wrap his mind around was how after the explosion it had felt endless but also like no time passed at all. One moment he was sneering in the Time Masters’ faces, “There are no strings on me,” and the next he was gulping for air, waking up on the Waverider with the Legends all around him. If he hadn’t been so out of it, shaking and disoriented, he imagined Mick would have slugged him for what he’d done. But there he was, alive somehow, and Savage had been defeated.

The crew had returned to the Vanishing Point after taking Savage out, and Gideon picked up on life signs in the debris. In what remained of the glowing green wellspring of energy and time, Len had been safe and alive in stasis. Raymond was able to extract him in the Atom suit.

“I don’t know how you managed it, Mr. Snart,” Rip told him once he was alert. “Well done.”
Mick was safe. Everyone was safe. And that bastard Savage was dead. Len had done good. Not just well. He’d done something good, maybe for the first time in his life, and it felt…addictive. Just like he’d feared.

Damn Flash. Damn that kid for making Len wonder if he could be more. Now he didn’t want to stop, like it had been when he first started thieving and found that glorious rhythm. But even heists and one-upmanship had grown stale over the years, that’s why the appearance of The Flash had meant so much to him. The chance to be fulfilled again.

Back then, he’d never expected that the challenge of outdoing a superhero and bringing the gang back together with Mick and Lisa at his side would pale in comparison to playing hero himself with a real team.

That’s why he’d had to leave.

“You wanna ditch, we’ll ditch,” Mick had said. He hadn’t punched Len once he recovered, but he had thrown the pinky ring in Len’s face, shoved the cold gun at him, and told him he better not try any shit like that ever again. Len had refrained from responding with, “Pot—kettle.”

Instead, he said, “Just me, Mick. Just for a while. You stay with the team.”

“Fuck that,” Mick growled. “This was s’pposed to be a temporary gig. Savage is six feet under. Even the little birdies flew the coop,” he said about Kendra and Carter. “We’re done.”

A year ago, hell, a month ago, Len would have agreed. “There are other missions. We wiped out the only protection the timestream has.”

“Snart—”

“You really want to leave it up to Raymond to save our asses if another megalomaniac like Savage comes along? They need someone like us on the team to set them straight.”

“So stay,” Mick erupted with that familiar fire in his eyes, getting right in Len’s face. “You wanna play hero so bad, you do it.”

Mick didn’t understand. Len had died. Had and hadn’t, and it all twisted up in his head, and he needed a break. Maybe Mick was the only one who could understand being unmade like that, but talking things out wasn’t their bag.

“I’m not talking forever here, Mick, but we’re months past when we thought we’d be home,” Len said. “I have to see Lisa. Need a few weeks to sort things out. If you’re that miserable by then, we’ll call it quits—together. If not, I’ll come back.”

“Like ya came back when ya left me to die?”

Emotion choked in Len’s throat like it had when he first realized he might lose Mick, when he’d been forced to leave him behind, when he’d seen him under that damn mask as Kronos, and when he’d recognized that it was either Mick or him at the Oculus, and it couldn’t be Mick—not again.

Maybe that’s what heroing really was—the grief, not the rush. Maybe that’s why Flash’s brow had been so strained at Christmas, why the kid always had so much moisture in his eyes when he talked about goodness and doing the right thing.

For what it was worth, Mick cringed, subtly, enough that only Len would have recognized the regret he felt for saying that. But it wasn’t untrue.
“I’ll come back,” Len said again.


But as much as Len expected Mick to walk off the ship, he didn’t. He stayed. Maybe it had something to do with the way Raymond smiled at him, patted his back, and called him, “Buddy,” that reminded Mick he had more on that ship than just an old friend who’d let him down.

Len had touched the ring then too, as he watched his shipmates from the hallway that led onto the bridge, feeling the cool metal back on his finger. He was all up in his head, ready to leave like the Hawks had left, when Sara caught him off guard. The Oculus had messed with him if anyone could sneak up on him like that, even if she was former League of Assassins.

“A few weeks?” she said, coming around from behind him.

Len jerked his head to the side to watch her. “Eavesdropping now, are we?”

“I’m sure.”

The playful banter between them always dropped away because she chose to drop it. Len almost never initiated the shift into something serious. The softness in her expression, in her eyes, reminded him how young she was, and how lucky she was that her youth meant she had many more years ahead of her to live a better life after leaving her past behind.

“You did something amazing back there, Leonard,” she said. “Heroic, even. You’re allowed to take a break. We’ll be here when you’re ready to come back.”

“We?” He raised an eyebrow, pulling his bravado on tight because that was safer to rely on than hope. “Or you?”

She glanced away and the huff that left her, the sigh that meant she didn’t quite know what to say, said enough on its own. The kiss had been a nice gesture, but it had been goodbye more than interest. Maybe in another life. Maybe when he came back, if… But Leonard Snart didn’t deal in ‘maybes’ and ‘ifs’; he dealt in absolutes, in what he could have and take and win.

That wasn’t Sara Lance.

“Take care of yourself, Leonard. We might even miss you while you’re gone,” she said.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” he grinned back at her—the last words he spoke to anyone on the ship before he walked back into 2016.

Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. What the hell was he doing now? Mick would have smacked him upside the head for being such a fool.

Len felt Alexa long before she crossed the threshold into the building. He still knew the rhythm of her gait, the presence that followed her like a heavy cloak. He’d always been able to sense when something was wrong, but he hadn’t been able to sense the truth about her, how she’d been swindling him for months, until it was too late. He’d been blinded by what he thought was...love. A mistake he never made again.

“Hello, Leo.”
Len’s gut clenched.

“It’s good to see you.”

He turned around slowly. He hadn’t faced her sooner because he knew she didn’t have any weapons drawn. No backup either. As he finished his pivot and saw her, he had to admit that twenty years hadn’t done her any disservice.

Alexa Marcos was a knockout. 5’7, long auburn hair, green eyes, slender and sultry and wicked. She had to be around forty-eight by now and she carried every year like an added brand of power, only something to increase her beauty because what she’d once lacked in experience she had in spades to match her ambitions. She was dangerous. Len couldn’t forget that.

“I don’t go by that name anymore,” he said. He’d tried to ditch it when he was a teenager. Mick always called him Snart or Lenny, but when Alexa called him Leo, it hadn’t felt tainted like it had when his father said it. After her, he never let anyone call him that again.

“Pity,” she said, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth with slow consideration as she neared him, wearing a burgundy dress, simple and classy, with a grey wool coat. “I always liked that nickname.”

“Somehow it lost its appeal,” he smiled with an obvious sneer. “What do you want, Alexa? Been a long time.”

“It has.” She stopped when they were an arm’s reach apart. If she’d gotten any closer, Len would have backed away. “Heard you’d gone soft lately. Had to see for myself if it was true. The theatrics were so much fun to watch on the news, Captain. What changed?”

Someone had been talking and it wasn’t Mick or Lisa. Mardon? “Nothing changed. Been busy elsewhere. Soft isn’t part of my repertoire.”

The pale green of Alexa’s eyes traveled slowly down his body, “I remember,” then flicked back to his face. “How’s Mickey?”

Len twitched to clench his fists but he couldn’t let her get to him. “Better off without you around.”

She smiled, an almost laugh escaping her lips as she looked down with a flutter of her lashes. In a single gesture, it was twenty years ago. She hadn’t changed at all. But Len had. He wouldn’t fall for her tricks again. “You know, you boys could have proposed a joint effort and we might have avoided that little spat between you two.”

Len erupted in a bitter laugh—unbelievable. “You still would have screwed us over for the job.”

“True, but it would have been more fun.” The sinister twist to her lips returned like it always did. Once Len had found it alluring. “You’re not still sore about that, are you?”

“I’ll ask again.” He stared her down unflinching. He wasn’t some wide-eyed kid in his twenties anymore. “What do you want?”

The guile dropped from her expression with a sigh of disappointment. “I’m planning a job in the city.”

“Of course you are.” Len rolled his eyes with mocking disdain and lack of surprise. “Should have stayed clear of Central, Alexa. This is the home of The Flash now. Doubt you’re up for handling the likes of him.”
“So I heard. I have some contingency plans for the Scarlet Speedster, don’t you worry.”

Did she really? Or did she only think she did like most of the people who tried to take on The Flash?

“But this is your territory, Leo,” she took a single step closer to him, making him fight back a wince, “so I wanted to come clean, let you know ahead of time to make sure there were no hard feelings and no toes stepped on. Tomorrow night. Tiffany’s on 5th. 8 o’clock after closing. They’re having a 20th anniversary celebration for the store. Got me all nostalgic when I heard about some of the impressive pieces they had flown in for the occasion. The type of thing that would have been run through this place back in the day.” She glanced around the empty warehouse. “And you remember how I like anything shiny.”

Yes, he did. Len also knew about the celebration happening at the Central City Tiffany’s. It was an impressive store, almost as big as the one in Gotham, and had some of the finest security too. Still, Len likely would have considered the job himself if he’d had time to plan since getting back from his trip through time.

“You getting your hands dirty?” he asked.

“I don’t go for that anymore. I have a man for the job. Several, in fact.”

“I bet you do.”

Alex smiled. “Just wanted you to know. Although…you could go in on it with me? For old time’s sake?”

She might even mean that; Captain Cold would be quite the asset after all. She wouldn’t snub her nose at his gun or his skills. Not that it mattered. He smiled back at her without any twist of friendliness. “I’ll pass.”

“Well,” she shrugged, returning to her sweet, almost innocent, ‘no hard feelings’ façade, “just wanted to extend the courtesy. Maybe you really are out of the game. I hear you’ve been playing footsie with The Flash since you both donned your costumes. Is it more than cat and mouse? Some say you know his real name. Bet he’s pretty under that mask. Just your type, wasn’t it?”

A flare of emotion Len wasn’t used to letting go unchecked warred within him. Twenty years ago, still young and relying on his father’s cred since he didn’t have enough of his own, Len hadn’t been able to risk being open about his sexuality. It was the 90s, and he was surrounded by criminals and set-in-their-ways mob families. But he’d come to terms with how people caught his attention rather than a single gender or trait, and Alexa had pegged him so easily, caught all the looks he thought he was keeping veiled when he noticed a pretty face in the crowd that wasn’t on a woman.

She played it off as jealousy when she first started to con him into her bed, but it was an angle, power she held over him even before he fell for her lies. If she’d outed him to any of the families back then…

“I do hope you only came here for a business proposal,” Len said, “because if this is meant to be a social call, you’re going to be sorely disappointed.” He yearned to reveal the cold gun. But no. Only if she made a move. Len was calm. He was in control here.

Alexa backed up a step and raised her hands in seeming apology, but when her eyes glanced down his body again, she grinned and let her hands drop. “Aw, Leo, you still wear the ring I got you?”
Another restrained flinch. He didn’t know why he’d worn it. He didn’t have any attachment to her, it wasn’t about her, but deep down he’d wanted her to see it.

She remembered full well what had happened with that ring. Mick had given it to her first, then she’d given it to Len to start a fight between them. She’d been conning them both, sleeping with them both. It was only after the heist that they realized how badly they’d been played.

Mick hadn’t been upset with Len once they learned the truth, he’d just shoved the ring at him, said, “You take it. Shoulda given it to you anyway. Least you’d have kept it.”

“So sentimental?” Alexa asked.

“Something like that.” Len stepped toward her, getting in close, on his terms, so she’d know he wasn’t intimidated. He owned this city. She was lucky he was letting her walk away.

He shouldn’t. He should kill her. Even only a year ago, he would have—drawn his gun and iced her on the spot.

If you’re out…you’re out.

“Let people turn tail and they’ll come back to bite you from the other end. Corpses can’t plan a double-cross.”

Lewis had beaten that into Len early but especially hard after The Alexa Job, even though he’d had nothing to do with it.

“You get caught being stupid, who does that put the heat on, huh? Me. Shoulda just killed the bitch.” He was still a cop then, dirty and sloppy and far stupider than Len would ever be. But maybe Len had been stupider than he wanted to admit, because he could have tried to track Alexa down but he never did. Now she was here.

That was the last time he ever let his father touch him—the sharp punch Len hadn’t dodged in time, a vicious kick, then another, before Len managed to roll away—yet still he’d listened to Lewis and never let someone walk away from him again.

Not until The Flash came around.

Maybe Len was going soft. He’d left the Legends to figure that out and here he was, facing an old enemy and finding himself unable to pull the trigger when it had been reflex against his father. Plenty of people and circumstances were to blame for his change of heart—for growing one or discovering he still had one, whichever it might be. But Alexa was right about one thing. It all started with The Flash and Len wasn’t ready to sever that tie just yet.

“This ring is my reminder not to fall for the same con ever again,” he told her. Because love was a con—always. Love wasn’t in the cards for someone like him even if he did want more from life. Maybe redemption wasn’t in the cards either, but tonight wasn’t the night he wanted to find out.

“Have a nice evening, Leo.” Alexa started to back away again, to walk away and leave him be. She’d taken a gamble that he wouldn’t shoot her on sight…and she’d won. “Say hello to Mickey sometime for me, will you? He was always such a doll.”

Wicked. And she still had to have the last word.

Len stood alone in the warehouse for several minutes. He took the usual precautions when he left and made certain that Alexa had gone on ahead. Watched every corner in anticipation of an
ambush. Walked for blocks and blocks in zigzags and circles to throw off any tails. Until finally he returned to where he’d parked his bike and headed off.

He should have gone straight home or to a safe house to think, get his bearings, plan, but he found himself in a quiet residential neighborhood instead in front of a house with a familiar porch. His subconscious had betrayed him and brought him down a street he didn’t belong in, all because Alexa had to go and mention the Scarlet Speedster.

The lights were on inside the house and all of Team Flash was gathered. Probably celebrating the defeat of Zoom.

Len had wanted distraction when he got home from the Waverider, after checking in on Lisa and getting his assets in order. Lisa had been upset with him, to be sure, but she was quick to forgive once Len explained that being gone for so long had not been his intention. He might have left out the part about being dead for a few days, but they’d come to terms.

After that he’d looked into what he’d missed while he was gone and learned all about Zoom. He’d known a little from before he left with the Legends, but he hadn’t realized how dangerous the speedster was, how difficult an adversary for The Flash until he read about Henry Allen’s death.

When Len was finally caught up on current events, he’d considered going to STAR Labs to…not to offer his assistance, but to at least make sure the team wasn’t floundering in the dark. Maybe they could use a nudge, his particular brand of motivation. But then, only yesterday Len had seen the news about an impressive light show that proved The Flash had taken Zoom down just like every other villain he’d ever faced.

Watching the team now, the gathering didn’t look much like a celebration in the end. Before long, Len saw Barry head for the door, so he parked more discreetly around the block out of sight. He could still see the porch from that vantage point, but he should have just left. Why hadn’t he left?

Barry came out and sat on the steps looking as lost and as lonely as Len had ever seen him. And young—so young. Too young for the burdens and pain he carried.

But that was life. Couldn’t be helped. Shouldn’t be pitied. Barry was like Len; he wouldn’t want pity. A kind ear maybe, which his friends could provide, but sympathy and pity just made the wounds feel deeper. Len knew that only too well.

They’d both lost their fathers now, but it was a very different kind of loss.

Barry had taken the cold gun from Len’s hands so gently the night he killed Lewis. Talked so quietly. Stared with such compassion in his eyes, but not pity. He’d looked like he wanted to touch Len’s shoulder, but he refrained, and Len was so grateful for that because he would have flinched and he hated showing that kind of weakness.

It wasn’t self-defense. It wasn’t an accident. Len had wanted to kill his father and he wasn’t sorry. He’d broken his deal with The Flash by doing so, and if that meant prison, he wouldn’t fight. He’d stay and let the cops drag him away in cuffs.

Len had seen the conflict in Barry’s eyes then. How he wanted to offer to whisk Len out of there, but he couldn’t, because it wasn’t ‘right’, but nothing about that night was right. Nothing about a father planting a bomb in his own child’s head could ever be right.

Still, Barry stayed. Sat down next to Len and stayed with him, neither of them talking, just the buzz of the electronics in the room and the still body of Lewis a few feet away, until the cops showed
up. That Barry even cared…

Cared enough to visit Len in prison and tell him there was good in him.

Len took a sharp breath as he watched Barry sitting on the porch. He was building verses in his head again about something he couldn’t catch and could certainly never have.

The Flash had been the first addiction Len couldn’t shake—besides thieving maybe—long before he knew Barry Allen or tried his hand at heroism. An endearing smile and persona that lit up Len’s dark life, leaving him wondering, dangerous as that might be, about something sweet and soft and normal.

But no, that wasn’t The Flash, that was just Barry. Barry was the one who sent Len’s heart racing faster than his feet, even more than he’d felt around Alexa as a stupid kid or chasing new dreams and a kindred soul on the Waverider. Barry had believed in Len before there was anything worth putting faith in.

Iris came out of the house to join Barry on the steps. They talked, easy and intimate. Finally, she leaned toward Barry like she was hoping for something more than hushed words—a kiss? But Barry pulled away, looked even sadder now, and spoke hasty words that left Miss West nodding in understanding but with tears filling her eyes.

Eventually, they went inside, Barry first, then Iris a heartbeat later after wiping the wetness from her face. Barry was so broken, he’d given up on love just like Len had.

Why was Len even here? To warn Barry about Alexa’s heist? Kid would get the wrong idea. Think Len was at his beck and call now, that he’d been right about the good in him and that…that could only lead to disappointment.

Len needed something familiar to shake off the emptiness he’d been feeling, and seeing Alexa had only made it worse. He needed a rush of adrenaline. A challenge. A job. Now he had one. He’d case the heist himself, keep a good distance, but then, if The Flash showed up on his own tomorrow night, maybe Captain Cold could take advantage of the situation.

It wasn’t cruel after what Len had just witnessed on the front steps of the West house. Barry would want the distraction just like Len did. He’d probably even enjoy it, something normal after facing a monster like Zoom.

Len needed to call Mi—

He reached for the ring as he remembered that Mick wasn’t around to be called. And he couldn’t call Lisa. He didn’t want her anywhere near Alexa. They’d only met a few times, but Lisa had been a kid then. She’d idolized a gorgeous older woman who seemed to have all the answers. Len didn’t want those parts of his life to ever cross again.

He’d have to do this one alone. But he knew his Scarlet Speedster. Barry would show. And by playing the hero, he’d give Len exactly the disruption he needed to steal this job for himself.

XXXXX

The Central City Tiffany’s had been wrapped up in a giant bow for its twentieth anniversary, which amounted to well-thought out signage wrapped around the storefront windows that allowed anyone inside to easily see out but made it harder for patrons on the street to see in. Therefore, enticing them that much more to check out the jewelry on display, advertised along that big silver bow.
It also made a heist that much easier to pull off because once the shop closed, passersby on the street would have no idea what was going on inside, cops included.

Tiffany’s had security of course, including a couple extras for the event. Three guards during the night; one per floor. There were five exits; main and emergency on floor one, a single exit on floor two that led to the ground floor, with escalators inside that in some ways made an additional exit, and two exits aside from the escalator on floor three, one that led down and one up to the roof.

Alexa had done her homework. She’d even positioned a man on the roof across the street, since an aerial view was the only way to see inside. Len knew that because the lookout was currently unconscious at his feet.

Old school radios were how the lookout communicated to the team. Len could fake a few affirmative grunts to get by before he made his move, watching from the best viewpoint.

After eight o’clock, when the heist began to go down, he counted six men entering the different floors all at once. At a glance, he could tell that one per floor knew what they were doing and one per floor was fodder. If someone got caught or iced, it just meant more to divvy up between those who made it.

Alexa had been planning this job for weeks, months, probably while Len was MIA, which might have been on purpose. Had she known the moment he was back in town and that’s the real reason she came calling? Len had to wonder. Alexa could have all sorts of connections after twenty years.

Some of the men were sloppy, but a couple were good, more experienced than the few eager to please youngsters she’d tapped for the job. They all wore masks, but Len could tell which of them were new to the life and which had been part of the show before. Weapons were mixed too. Couple .38s, couple sawed-offs, one .44, and one semiautomatic. Everyone but the kid with the semi had an extra piece or blade on their person—and he was definitely a kid. Probably chose the weapon himself, thinking it was a shield more than a gun. Amateurs.

Len had to bide his time, wait for the right moment, let one of the greener kids make a mistake that would bring The Flash to the rescue, but when he saw the three pairs of armed men closing in on each of the guards, he fought down a gnawing pang in his stomach, something new that had only just started to grow there.

Because of Sara. And Jax. And Raymond. Even Rip. Even Mick.

And Barry.

The guard on the second floor dropped after a quick pistol-whip to the head. Down for the count and left to continue breathing. Good. Alexa would have told them to only open fire if they had no choice, because no silencers were truly silent and enough gunfire could bring trouble.

The guard on the third floor saw the goons approaching, shouted, got shot in the arm for his efforts, but was knocked out like the first—bleeding but still alive. Good…good…

But the guard on the first floor wasn’t as lucky. He saw the goons too, fired a lucky shot hitting Mr. Semi in the shoulder, which knocked him over but wouldn’t do any lasting damage. Meanwhile, Sawed Off #1 blasted the guard dead center in the chest.

Shit. The distance gave the man better odds than most, might have spread out the spray and avoided any going in too deep. He could make it—if he got help quick. But the alarms hadn’t tripped yet. Flash might not be on his way. The goons would take their time and…damn it. Damn
Len threw the binoculars down that he’d stolen from the lookout and made a break for it down the fire escape. At least the guard was on the first floor. Len already had a plan of entry through the back exit down the alley where the goons would have broken in first. But that alarm would be disabled and Len needed to set one off. He’d have to choose another way in.

Maybe the smart answer wasn’t the right one for once. The street cameras would ID him easy if he paused too long in plain view, but he had a timetable to keep and he could hit two birds with one stone by making a grand entrance.

Showmanship it was.

Len fired from the middle of the street, reveling in the glorious hum of the cold gun as it whirred higher and higher pitched until it blasted out the main windows and that pretty, silver bow into so many glittering snowflakes. He had all his old gear on tonight. He’d missed the parka. Ditched it for something more utilitarian during his trek through time, but he’d donned it tonight.

Alarms split the evening air—finally—and the few people on the streets scattered. Len walked in across the shards of glass and frozen debris like he owned the place. Even beneath his ski-mask, Mr. Semi looked like he’d soiled himself when he got a look at who’d just crashed the party.

“Normally I’d say something like—and no one invited me?” Len grinned before he blasted the ceiling above the heads of the two men, shattering the sprinklers and causing a brief if very cold and uncomfortable spray of water to pour down on them. “This time I was invited, I just snubbed the hostess. And I’m afraid all that glitters is coming home with me.”

Len fired again to make sure the goons took cover. The wounded guard was straight ahead, lying on his back, shirt already stained dark. Len might have to go through the goons to get to him. So be it.

The jewelry cases were waist high, but a few of the twentieth anniversary displays were taller. Len pivoted to hide behind one before the goons could pop up after him, so when they did, they faltered wondering where he’d gone. He knew response times for every large target in Central City. Tiffany’s would take seven minutes for any cruisers leaving the precinct this time of night, less than five if any were already nearby. But Barry could be here from STAR Labs in under forty-five seconds.

Len started to count. He couldn’t wait this out. He’d have to fire again to keep the goons occupied.

“Where are you going?!” a panicked voice called.

Len risked a glance. Sawed Off #1 was racing up the escalator, leaving Mr. Semi to fend for himself. He knew what a liability the kid was.

Taking advantage of Semi’s distraction, Len whipped around the taller display and fired at the case the kid was standing behind, startiling him with frozen glass flying up toward his face. Then Len pushed into a direct sprint, leapt over a case in his way, darted around the one he’d destroyed, and knocked the kid’s lights out before he even had time to raise his rifle.

Len was almost grateful that the goon with the shotgun had fled. He didn’t have much time though; Sawed Off would be back with his four friends. The highest priced items were downstairs and they couldn’t make a clean getaway from the roof.

Fifteen more seconds and Flash would be here—if he’d heard the call soon enough.
Dropping down beside the fallen guard, Len inspected the wound. He’d been right; distance meant the pellets were spread out, more like quarter to half inch-deep pockmarks than a giant hole in the man’s chest. He was unconscious from the shock, which was both good and bad—he couldn’t ID Len but he was also in a sorry state.

Barry wouldn’t have time to stop the goons if he was busy rushing someone to the emergency room. Len fished for the man’s cellphone and dialed 911.

“Downtown Tiffany’s. Bottom floor. Robbery in progress. Shotgun wound to the chest. Need ambulance now.” He set the phone beside the man and kept the call live. He could hear dispatch on the other end trying to get him to say more.

After pulling the display cloth from a nearby case, he wrapped it around the man’s midsection once, tight as he could, then bolted for the escalator just as he saw a streak of red and yellow flash by outside. Hopefully Barry would take the hint when he found the guard and his cell phone and leave him for the paramedics.

Len reached the second floor to find it quiet—not a good sign. They were either readying an ambush or they did have some way off the roof. By now they knew their lookout was down for the count but if they were smart, they wouldn’t dare leave empty-handed. Alexa wouldn’t tolerate that.

A crash to Len’s right. He turned to look and backed up behind a larger display case at the same time. Probably the other rookie. There had been two for sure, two pros, one somewhere in between, and one he hadn’t quite gotten a read on, which likely meant pro as well.

He took a slow breath and listened. The sirens made it impossible to hear the faint shift of breathing, but Len didn’t rely solely on his ears. He could feel them.

Five men left but only two were on this floor—the rookie and the mid man. The pros had gone ahead. They knew something Len didn’t.

What was on the third floor?

Come on, Barry, Len thought as he waited for one of them to make a move. Rookie was coming up fast on his right. Wait…wait…

Len whipped his gun to the side, striking the man in the face. He groaned at his nose likely being broken but he wasn’t out. He’d nearly dropped his gun though, so Len had no trouble kneeing him between the ribs. A gasp and he went down. Len kicked the gun away—a shotgun, and Mid Man had one of the .38s.

Sweeping his cold gun up as he kicked Rookie unconscious, Len had Mid Man in his crosshairs before the goon could fire.

“Betcha I’m faster,” Len said, and as if he’d been in on the joke, Barry’s lightning streak zipped into view and he had the man flipped and pinned against a case in seconds. Len leapt into action for the escalator leading up. “Thanks for the assist, Flash!” he shouted and took two steps at a time, knowing he wouldn’t have long before Barry gave chase.

“Snart!”

Len ignored him. He’d ruined the heist for Alexa but the goons could still get away with something worthwhile. He wanted them all in custody with several priceless trinkets in his own pockets before this was over.
Two of the remaining goons were in sight when he reached the third floor, standing by the largest display case yet cutting into the shatterproof glass that held an intricate diamond and ruby necklace on loan from the Smithsonian—for show not for sale. Now Len remembered; that display should have been downstairs but it must have been moved up here. Alexa had every detail figured out.

One of the goons was doing the cutting, the other keeping a lookout for Len, probably the guy from the first floor. Len lucked out and came into their range of view just as the lookout glanced aside at his partner.

“Need a hand, fellas?” Len said before he blasted the case, causing them to duck and cover. Now all he’d need to do was tap the glass and the whole thing would crumble, but the same was true for either of the goons, and they didn’t go down as easily as the rookies had.

Len raced forward but already both men had rolled out of view, biding their time and lining their shots well-hidden behind smaller cases. Rather than run up to the iced display and give them their shot, Len dropped behind a case of his own a few feet from the prize, hiding him from view of the escalator. He waited. Listened. The men didn’t give themselves away, but Len could feel them moving, closing in on him, and all he needed was for Barry to be his predictable self.

*Whoosh.* The smell of ozone. A surprised gasp from one of the goons. *Good boy, Barry.*

Len kept low as he went for the frosted case, waiting for gunfire before he tapped it. The gunfire rang out and Len shattered the case, which practically dropped the necklace into his waiting hands. He just needed to keep his senses alert for the third and final man.

The door to roof access was ahead on Len’s left. It was already open, blocking him from seeing up the stairs or if anyone was waiting in the wings. He had to get to the last man before he escaped.

“Hey, wait!” Barry’s voice called after him again when Len sprinted for the door.

He didn’t bother glancing back. He knew Barry could dodge any bullets flying at him and would likely protect *him* from any stray gunfire too. All Len had to do was run, and for once, the fastest man alive couldn’t catch him because he had to subdue the men who actually knew what they were doing.

Save one. The last one—the enigma Len hadn’t been able to peg.

Len felt the man coming down the stairs before he reached the door. He slowed his strides, shoved the necklace into the pocket of his parka, and readied his gun as he waited. He could scare the man up the stairs or risk a shot at his legs. Barry could make sure he got help.

But when Len timed his dart around the door to the exact moment when the goon reached the bottom, he didn’t find a masked man. It *was* the last goon, but he’d torn his mask away and Len recognized his face instantly.

*Bivolo.*

Len tried to fire but he was paralyzed, caught in the intense stare of those glowing *red* eyes. Nausea surged up in his throat and his vision blurred with dizziness. His knees gave out and he gasped as he collapsed, enduring a rush of such intense *feeling*, he would swear he couldn’t breathe. *Fuck.*

“This was what Bivolo did?“ the man said, his voice seeming too distant but still hovering above him. “I never thanked you properly for helping me escape The Flash and friends. Problem is,” the cold gun was wrenched from Len’s grasp and he couldn’t clutch after it, couldn’t fight back, “I
don’t like owing anyone so…you just enjoy the ride, huh? I gotta do what I was paid for.”

He pressed a boot to Len’s chest and pushed, toppling him over easily. Len tried to clear his vision, tried to reach out and stop Bivolo from whatever he was about to do, but he couldn’t focus his thoughts or his emotions, let alone his eyes.

What was this feeling? Rage, like he’d read about? The red eyes… But it didn’t feel like rage. It was encompassing and so **hot**—hot as if Len’s chest was on fire.

He rolled over and tried to push up onto his knees, blinking past the effects of Bivolo’s power to see what was happening. Barry should have taken down the goons by now, and it looked like he had, like he’d just barely finished disarming them near the wall to Len’s right before Bivolo appeared to change the rules.

Barry saw him, knew the man’s face just like Len did, and damn the idiot, he panicked, didn’t know what to do, wasn’t thinking clearly, because he **closed his eyes**. And Bivolo opened fire with Len’s gun.

“Ba—” Len choked on the name because he couldn’t say it, not here, not with Bivolo so close, but he also choked from the pain. The strangest **pain** ripped through his chest and he couldn’t place it. He only knew he had to do everything in his power to banish it.

The pain quelled when he saw that Barry hadn’t been frozen. Bivolo hadn’t centered the blast on Barry’s chest but had fired at his arm, throwing it back to freeze against the wall. Barry’s eyes sprang open, but by then Bivolo was already firing a second blast at Barry’s other arm. He was pinned like a slave shackled in a dungeon, completely at Bivolo’s mercy. And the mercy of the other two goons, who were picking themselves up from where Barry had thrown them when he removed them of their guns.

Len’s vision started to clear. He needed…he needed **something** he couldn’t name and he needed it now—**now**.

“Move. Snart’ll be on his feet soon. You two play nice now, Flash.” Bivolo headed back toward Len with the other men in tow, while Barry glanced Len’s way looking honestly terrified.

The same pain ripped through Len’s chest again.

“The others?” one of the goons asked.

“Leave ‘em,” his partner said, and Bivolo grunted agreement.

Len…knew those voices.

Just as he thought he might have the strength to lunge at Bivolo for his cold gun, the meta tossed the weapon in front of him. Len’s moment of confusion cost him, because one goon kicked him in the side and the other stole the necklace from his pocket.

Len wanted to fight them but they headed up the stairs for—a helicopter, Len could hear it now; Alexa had spared no expense. But as he reclaimed his gun and looked up to see Barry trapped against the wall, gritting his teeth at the sting of cold around his hands and upper arms, Len’s vision cleared completely and the goons were forgotten.

All at once, he knew what he needed to banish the pain, because only one thing could ever make him whole again. How had he been so blind that he hadn’t realized until now?
What he needed…

All he needed…

Was Barry.

Barry was such an idiot. *He was such an idiot.*

It was only a robbery. He thought it would be easy, maybe even fun, so he’d turned off his comms. He’d just wanted to lose himself in something familiar without the chatter of Cisco and Caitlin in his ear. Now his arms were frozen to the wall and *Captain Cold* was two seconds from icing him head to toe in a Bivolo-induced rage.

Though given Barry’s life lately, he shouldn’t be surprised that even a mundane Flash call had turned out like this.

“Snart?” Barry called with obvious trepidation. “Whatever you think you’re feeling right now, it isn’t real. It’s just Bivolo’s powers. You don’t want to shoot me.”

He didn’t, right? Sure, he’d thwarted Barry somewhat downstairs and had gone for the big ticket item to steal for himself, but at least he wasn’t in cahoots with Bivolo. It had also obviously been Snart who patched up the guard downstairs and called an ambulance.

Barry had been confused at first, but then excited when he realized Snart was here. He hadn’t seen the man since Christmas. All he knew was that Snart was off with Stein and Jax and their other friends traveling through time to save the world. Barry had been itching to rub that in Snart’s face.

Okay, so maybe Snart wasn’t fully reformed if he was stealing again, but Barry had still been right about him. And now he was going to freeze for it.

Snart was on his feet, cold gun in hand, walking slowly toward Barry with a frightening intensity in his expression, and Barry had no way to call for help or to turn on the thermal dampeners. He tried to vibrate his arms to either warm up the ice or shatter it, maybe phase himself free, but he was too cold. He just ended up shivering.

“Snart, please…you don’t want to do this,” Barry said as the man got closer and closer, lifted the gun toward him and then…placed it in its holster. “Snart?” The look in his eyes was unsettling, like he wanted to eat Barry alive.

He wasn’t so enraged that he wanted to *eat Barry alive,* was he?

Snart kept staring at Barry’s face, into his eyes. He glanced briefly at each of Barry’s frozen arms with a cringe of…sympathy? Then he looked Barry in the eyes again with that penetrating single-mindedness growing tenfold. He was so close now, inches away from Barry and moving closer. He reached for Barry’s face with his gloved hands and just…held it.

“S-Snart?”

“*Barry,*” Snart echoed him, breathless like he was in awe. “I will never let anyone hurt you again,” he said and swooped in to kiss Barry deep.

TBC...
Love drunk

Chapter Summary

Snart can't get enough of Barry. Touching him. Professing his undying devotion. Barry just wishes his life could be normal for once, especially since Snart acting like this makes him blush like a teenager. At least it's a distraction from all the things Barry wishes he could forget.

Chapter Notes

I'm speechless. I have never had such an amazing response to a first chapter before. You guys are just...*sniffles*. THANK YOU!

I will do my best to post weekly. So without further ado - here's chapter 2!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I will never let anyone hurt you again.

The phrase would have given Barry pause, especially coming from Leonard Snart—if he wasn’t more distracted by having the man’s tongue in his mouth, smooth and wet and probing so expertly deep that Barry’s mind went blank and he responded before he realized what he was doing.

Oh God, what was he doing? Snart was kissing him! Snart’s tongue was in his mouth!

“S-Snart!” Barry sputtered, twisting his head to the side to escape the unexpected and unwanted kiss. “Stop! Why—why would you—”

“Barry,” Snart said with the same concentrated yearning that had been in his voice before. “I’ve wanted to touch you for so long.” His hands still held Barry’s face and one stroked at the exposed skin of his cheek. His eyes when Barry looked at him again in embarrassed, blushing surprise flickered behind his goggles from storm-cloud blue to glowing red.

Bivolo had affected him but not with rage. He must have expanded his manipulation of the emotional spectrum since Barry last faced him. The color was the same but it was easy to guess what other emotions might be involved when Snart’s fingers toyed at the zipper to Barry’s suit like he wanted to open it up right there and—

“Snart, listen to me, you—ah!” Barry tried to speak but cut off with a hiss as the ice encasing his arms started to freeze deeper into his skin through the suit—cold, so cold.

“I need to get you out of here,” Snart said, more sensibly, thank God, as he craned his ear to listen over the alarms still blaring through the building. The police had arrived. They’d focus on the injured guard first, but it wouldn’t take them long to rush upstairs, especially if they’d seen the helicopter Barry heard leaving the roof. Snart’s eyes snapped back to him. “How do I warm the suit?”
“Uhh…” Barry’s face still felt hot remembering the way Snart’s tongue—no, he couldn’t get distracted, even if Snart was looking at him like he was the only thing that mattered in the universe. Barry’s arms were still iced, and for the moment, Snart was thinking rationally enough to recognize the situation they were in. “The thermal dampeners work remotely. I need Cisco to turn them on from the Labs.”

“So call him.”

“My comms are off.”

“Didn’t see me as a threat, huh?” he smirked, and it would have been a common expression, the subtle tease, the condescension, but there was an edge of something else in his eyes, filled with fondness and heat. And not the kind of heat Barry needed.

“We’ll discuss you returning to old habits later. The switch for the comms is on the right lightning bolt.” He turned his head so Snart could get to it. Thankfully, the man reached up to do as requested. “But listen to me—Bivolo’s powers are affecting you. I need you to fight them until we can get you back to the Labs for Cisco and Caitlin to counter it.”

“I feel fine, Scarlet. But I do like the way you worry about me.”

Urg. And Scarlet? Since when did Snart call him that? “Snart…”

“There.” Snart flipped the comms on and Barry heard the joyous sound of static echo in his ears.

“Cisco!” he called. He hoped his team hadn’t left for the night after he bolted out of STAR Labs to answer the robbery call, saying he had things covered on his own. “Please, Cisco, if you’re there, pick up the comms…”

And quickly, because Snart had pulled his goggles down and removed his gloves to tuck them into his parka. He reached for Barry’s face again and the chill in his touch from using the cold gun made Barry shiver. At least that sensation was pleasant compared to the sting in his arms. Then Snart’s fingers found the zipper again.

“Snart, focus.”

“I am focused.” He sucked his bottom lip in between his teeth and Barry was reminded of the night in the woods when he first faced Snart with his cowl down. Snart had looked at him like that then too, working out how to get the best possible deal out of knowing the Flash’s identity. Barry preferred when the only allure Snart saw in him was business. “If Cisco doesn’t answer, we’ll need to find other ways to warm you up.” He started to draw the zipper down.

“Snart.”

“Barry, is that you? What’s going on?” Cisco’s voice rang over the comms. “Did you say ‘Snart’? Is he the one robbing Tiffany’s? I thought he was—”

“Turn on the thermal dampeners, Cisco!”

“He iced you? What a dick! I thought we were cool. Don’t ever tell him I said that.”

“Cisco!”

“I’m doing it, relax.”
Barry tried to take the advice to heart but his whole body was tense—from the cold that was making his arms numb and from Snart’s slow descent of the zipper to his suit. He only drew it down to about mid-chest before he stopped but it still made Barry’s gut tighten, not knowing what the man might do while under the influence.

A cool hand slid inside the parted fabric, holding flat over Barry’s chest as if to feel the rapid-fire beat of his heart. Snart’s other hand returned to Barry’s cheek, then drifted down to hold his neck as he drew closer again, penetrating Barry with his stare. “You are so beautiful. Remarkable. You have no idea what you do to me.”

Barry had a little idea. Only not at all little. Shit, please let that be the cold gun, he thought as Snart plastered his body against him, hand moving deeper into the suit, thumbing lightly at a nipple while his mouth returned to claim Barry’s lips.

Snart’s tongue slid past his own again—God, this was going to be awkward when the thief returned to his senses. But at least the contact felt warm now, so warm, shooting heat all the way into Barry’s limbs…

The dampeners! They were kicking in.

“Barry, can you feel that?” Cisco returned.

He whimpered with the instinct to respond and just how much he could feel at the moment.

“Barry?”

It was harder to struggle out of the kiss this time with how Snart held the back of his neck. When Snart finally pulled away, he immediately bent to kiss the crook of Barry’s neck. There was way more heat rushing through Barry’s body than from just the dampeners. No one had touched him since—wow, Patty.

“Barry!” Cisco shouted.

“I—”

“You even smell amazing,” Snart said before he licked along the taut tendon.

“Was that Snart?” Cisco came over the comms again in abject horror. “Dude, what is going on?”

“He was whammied by Bivolo!” Barry fumbled to explain as Snart began sucking possessive marks into his skin and burying his nose in the hairs at Barry’s nape with contented groans. The hand inside the suit drifted lower, drawing the zipper down further. Why were the dampeners taking so long?!

“That doesn’t sound like anger. I don’t want to think about what that sounds like.”

Barry growled because this wasn’t funny. Snart didn’t know what he was doing! “Snart, stop. Cisco’s warming the suit. We need to leave,” he said, but Snart either didn’t hear him or no longer cared.

A few more seconds and Barry’s arms would be free, which was good for more than just his freedom from Snart because the police sounded like they had reached the second floor.

“Snart, please.” Barry didn’t mean to sound so needy but his skin had been extra sensitive ever since the lightning and he was particularly sensitive along his neck. He didn’t realize how much
he’d missed having someone touch him outside of friendship or a fight.

“What is he doing to you?” Cisco asked with such a clear sneer in his voice, Barry could vividly picture it.

“It isn’t rage, okay? It’s infatuation or…lust or something.”

“Seriously? And he froze you?”

“Bivolo used the cold gun on me. Snart was just trying to help. Sort of. If he can keep his hands to himself! Stop that!” Barry tried to lurch forward; he was almost free.

Snart pulled his mouth from Barry’s neck but his hand remained inside the suit. His lips hovered in front of Barry, shiny and red, with his pupils dilated twice their normal size. “I want to take care of you, Barry. You’ve done so much for me and all I’ve ever done is hurt you.”

The honesty at the core of that made Barry’s insides roil. Snart would hate to admit something like that; he’d never mean it.

Trailing deeper inside the suit, his fingers hit the edge of Barry’s underwear and finally the thermal dampeners thawed the last of the ice. Barry wrenched his arms forward and held Snart out in front of him at a safer distance.

“Stop. You’re not thinking straight.”

Snart smirked, looking drunk on emotion. He relaxed under Barry’s touch rather than stiffening the way Barry was used to. “Newsflash, Scarlet. I never think straight.”

Wait, really?

“Wait, really?” Cisco repeated Barry’s internal monologue. “Do you think that’s true or just the Prism powers talking?”

“Cisco. Get ready for us. Make sure Caitlin knows what’s going on.” Barry zipped his suit while keeping one hand on Snart’s chest to hold him at a distance. “We’ll be there as soon as possible.”

“Please, Barry.” Snart looked as though being denied skin contact physically hurt him. “Don’t you understand how much I love you?”

Barry’s eyes widened in shock—it was just the powers talking, just the powers.

“Did he say—”

The police were coming up the escalator. Snart looked back, then returned his eyes to Barry as they both spoke in unison, “We have to go.”

“Yes. We do,” Barry said with a roll of his eyes, glad that occasionally Snart still had some sense left. He pulled the man close and took off before Snart could say anything else as mortifying as the ‘L’ word.

Barry held Snart in a bridal carry. He always flashed people away like that, it was just easier. Usually, it was over so quickly, the people being whisked away didn’t even realize what had happened. Or if they did, they were too startled to do anything about it.

Snart had been flashed away once before—when Barry brought him to the woods. It had been a long enough journey out of the city—longer than most for The Flash anyway—that Snart had to
have realized how he was being held, not that he’d said anything, other than joking about getting a ride home.

Having Snart in that position now, Barry had a hold of him that he hoped would keep the man from being as handsy as he’d been at the start of this.

“You’re so pretty, Scarlet,” he said, unconcerned with the whirlwind rushing around them as Barry ran.

“Stop talking.” At this rate, Barry feared the flush to his cheeks might be permanent. He just had to get Snart back to STAR Labs where Cisco and Caitlin could fix this.

“But I love you,” he said again, so casually and yet so heartfelt, Barry would have believed it if he didn’t know better. “I love everything about you. Your smile. Your eyes. Your hair…” He reached for it before frowning at the cowl still in place. “I wanna run my fingers through it. Bet you’d like that.”

Barry did like that—when other people did it. He’d certainly never thought about Leonard Snart doing such a thing. Though the man did have hypnotic hands, with long, elegant fingers. Barry wasn’t blind.

Taking a corner too sharply, he nearly tripped, which would have been disastrous while carrying Snart. He had to concentrate.

“Please shut up,” he said more forcefully. It should not take this long to get to STAR Labs, but 45 seconds felt like minutes on end with Snart clinging to him and pulling down the edge of his cowl to kiss his neck. “Stop that!”

“Please,” Cisco reiterated, though he couldn’t see or feel the way Snart’s tongue had darted out along Barry’s jaw. Snart was so close to Barry, even the wet noises his mouth was making were being picked up by the comms.

“You have no idea, kid, the things I’d do for you if you were mine.”

“Snart…”

“Urg,” Cisco groaned. “Barry, are you almost here?”

“Ten seconds…”

“So many things.” Snart went on, undeterred by Barry trying to pull away, resisting him, “I want to peel you out of that suit. Touch you until you shiver. Cook for you.”

“What?” Barry skidded to a stop inside the Labs and nearly dropped Snart, hanging on tightly to keep the man from flying out of his arms, and ended up with them nose to nose as Snart snuggled against him.


“Urg,” Cisco said again, only this time he was in the same room with them. “This is too much, dude.”

Barry concurred and would have dropped Snart to the floor if he didn’t seriously feel for the man right now. Snart would hate everything about this once he was back to normal, though Barry had to
admit, he was a little curious about the man’s culinary talents. Snart was so precise about everything he did, he was probably an excellent baker.

Instead of dropping him, he set Snart down carefully but had to extract his arms with a little more force since Snart clung to his neck. “I’m trying to help you, Snart. You have to listen to me.”

“Call me Len. Or Lenny. Whatever you want.” He looked practically possessed with how he tried to remain in Barry’s orbit. Barry held his wrists between them.

“If Bivolo hit him with love,” Cisco said as he stayed back by the main terminal, “maybe I don’t want to get too close…”

“Cisco.” Barry glared at him.

“Okay, okay.” He inched toward them, keeping a wary eye on Snart. “Caitlin went to grab the portable Rainbow Reversal Beam. I thought Snart was traveling through time?”

“Standing right here, Ramon,” Snart said with his usual drawl back in place. In that moment, he would have seemed entirely normal if he wasn’t trying to get Barry to hold his hands instead of his wrists.

Cisco came closer since it appeared Snart wasn’t about to profess his love for him. “Well, you aren’t exactly thinking rationally right now, are you, Cold? What are you doing back in town?”

“That expression was more familiar, the evasive glance away and tightness to Snart’s lips. “Savage was taken care of. Figured I deserved a vacation.”

“So you thought you’d rob a jewelry store?” Barry balked at him. He tugged his hands away and pressed his palms to Snart’s chest instead, holding him at bay like he had in Tiffany’s. “Or were you actually there to help?”

“Can’t it be both?” Snart’s love-struck expression, when it lost some of its terrifying intensity, was actually sort of sweet—a kinder smile on his face, all the lines in his forehead smoothed out. His eyes were so blue.

“Not usually,” Cisco snorted.

Barry snapped back to attention. He could not get caught up in the way Snart looked at him. He didn’t think anyone had ever looked at him with so much… He didn’t want to think about it.

“Thank you for saving the guard,” he said. “That man will likely pull through because of you. You didn’t used to care so much.” He dropped his arms and at last Snart didn’t try to reconnect.

“Always had a rule about not killing cops or security unless absolutely necessary.” Snart gave a half shrug. “Any exceptions were rarely intentional, especially with civilians.”

The derailed train was certainly intentional, but Snart had assumed Barry would be fast enough to save everyone, and he was. Before the diamond heist, Snart had gambled that he’d be fast enough to save the theater usher too. “Oh.”

“You believed in me assuming I enjoyed collateral damage?” Snart stepped into Barry’s space again, and even though he didn’t touch him, there was something intimate about the way he tilted his head and glanced down Barry’s body in a gesture that Barry was starting to recognize he did a lot—even before this fiasco with Bivolo.

The thermal dampeners must be giving off residual heat, because Barry was entirely too warm all
of a sudden. “I didn’t think you enjoyed—”

“Oh!” Caitlin’s voice exclaimed with a note of surprise as she entered the Cortex.

Barry turned to look at her and realized how close he and Snart had become and how startled Cisco looked watching them. They were just standing there; why did Barry’s friends have expressions like they’d caught him and his nemesis with their pants down?

He should not conjure images like that after all the ways Snart had tried to ‘warm him up’ earlier.

“Is that the Reverse Rainbow thingy?” he asked, sidling away from Snart. The device looked like an industrial flashlight with a top handle and alternating red and yellow lights inside.


“At least you admit my name was better this time,” Caitlin smiled in regards to Bivolo’s nickname as the Rainbow Raider. In private Cisco still called him Prism. He was a bit of a sore loser.

Caitlin entered fully with the same watchful eye on Snart as Cisco, heels clicking on the flooring as she came closer bearing the flashlight. If Snart was bothered by having so many distrusting glances thrown at him, he didn’t say anything.

Barry nearly jumped out of his skin when he turned to look at Snart again and saw how close he’d gotten. How had the man crept up so silently? Barry gently pushed him away and glanced imploringly at Caitlin. “Will you dose him already? He’s going to ice me after this as it is.”

“I would never hurt you,” Snart said, clutching at the sleeve of Barry’s suit. Barry was ready to growl at him to be left alone, this is serious, but when their gazes met, grief marred Snart’s face in place of affection. “Never again, Barry. I promise. I’m so sorry I ever did.”

Barry wanted to believe that, but he couldn’t believe anything when Bivolo’s powers were involved. “Caitlin,” he beseeched his friend.

“Hey, Snart!” she called, and when Snart turned to her, she blasted him with the rays of multicolored lights just like they’d used to free Barry from Bivolo’s rage, and how Barry’s lightning had helped so many others around Central City.

Snart’s tight grip fell away from Barry’s sleeve. He stumbled back, blinking rapidly, hand reaching up to press to his temple. Barry wanted to push the cowl from his face finally, but maybe he better keep it on in case Snart wanted to fight. Caitlin and Cisco had the same thought because they both backed away ready to duck and cover.

When Snart cringed and shook his head, Barry risked the question, “Feel better?”

Snart squeezed his eyes shut, but as soon as he looked at Barry, serious, steady...he smiled in adoration. “So concerned? That’s part of why I love you, Scarlet.”

Shit. “It didn’t work. Why didn’t it work?” He turned to Caitlin for answers but she merely looked at the flashlight in confusion. “Cisco?” Barry tried next.

“I don’t know, man,” Cisco held up his hands, “it’s the same principle as the larger version. It should work fine. Maybe dose him again?”

“Please don—” Snart started to say but Caitlin had already tilted the flashlight toward him and blasted out another burst of red and yellow light. Snart groaned and took a hostile step toward her
but he had to stop to blink the spots from his eyes. “Stop doing that,” he said more like his usual self.

Cisco peered at his face as he inched closer. “Still think you’re in love with Barry?”

“Of course I’m in love with him,” Snart snarled Cisco’s direction as though that was a ridiculous question. Barry’s stomach flipped when the man spun to face him and the scowl on his face dropped away to reveal a warm smile like someone being reunited with their long lost…love. “You can’t erase this, Barry. I know how I feel. I love you.”

The knife Zoom had lodged in Barry’s chest—no, that Thawne had put their first—twisted deeper. No one Barry wanted to hear say those words ever did. Now someone was saying it who he knew didn’t mean it.

“You don’t love me.” Barry clenched his fists and leaned into Snart’s space. “Bivolo is affecting you. His powers make you feel emotions you don’t mean. We thought he could only instill rage, but that’s obviously changed.”

“You think I’m hypnotized?” Snart raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“Yes.”

The thief’s expression softened and he looked so different like that, it was…jarring. “Barry, this feeling isn’t fake or fabricated. Nobody cons me into what I want. I want you. I love you.”

“You don’t.”

“How can I prove it?” He spread his arms. “I’ll do anything for you. Anything.”

“Don’t say that.” Barry’s nails would have dug into his palms if he wasn’t wearing gloves. “You would never say something like that, to anyone. You’d literally do anything I asked? That’s crazy. That isn’t you.”

“Do you think I mean I’d jump out the window if you asked me to?” Snart made a face that at least had more of his chiding, teasing nature to it. “I’m not suicidal. If you asked me to do something I honestly wasn’t interested in, I wouldn’t. But you’d never do that, Barry. You can’t imagine the things you could ask of me that I would say yes to.”

“Please don’t list them out,” Cisco broke in, pulling Barry from the passionate look in Snart’s eyes. His friends had congregated together a few feet away from them, the useless flashlight held limply in Caitlin’s hands.

“Let me prove my love for you,” Snart pleaded, “please.”

“Stop it.” Every time he said something like that, it just made Barry angrier. “You think you mean these things. You don’t. I know how powerful Bivolo’s influence can feel, but it’s not real.”

“Barry,” Caitlin passed the flashlight to Cisco and moved to get between Barry and Snart. “Arguing about this isn’t going to get us anywhere. Right now all Snart knows is how he feels, and to him it feels real. We need to figure out what’s different about this version of Raider’s powers. Okay?”

Barry let out a heavy breath. He hadn’t meant to get so worked up. It just sat so sourly in his stomach—Snart of all people, who always had a plan and was always in control, had been reduced to the most vulnerable state a person could be in, all directed at Barry. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”
He relaxed beneath Caitlin’s patient stare and drew the cowl from his face to take in a deeper, fuller breath. “We need to focus on fixing this.”

With a nod and supportive squeeze of Barry’s arm, Caitlin turned to Snart. All her shields and professionalism slid into place as she stood taller. “I think you can at least agree, Snart, that if you were hypnotized, you’d want that taken care of so you could return to being in your right mind again. Will you cooperate so we can help you?”

Snart raised a challenging eyebrow once more, but he wasn’t skeptical of their good intentions, only whether or not they had anything to fix. As far as he knew, what he was feeling was entirely the truth. “I’ll play nice. What are you proposing?”

“Remove any excess equipment—parka, gloves, gun—and come with me to the med room.”

“The gun stays with me.” Snart held up a finger. “I’ll set it aside but I want it within eyesight.”

“What are you going to do if we make you unhappy?” Barry scoffed at him. “Ice all of us?”

A pained grimace overtook Snart’s face as if it truly hurt to see Barry disappointed in him, but he didn’t simply give in to Barry’s whims. At least that meant he wasn’t entirely without free will. “I don’t want Cisco getting it into his head to run off with it.”

“It’s my gun,” Cisco pointed the flashlight at him with a menacing jab.

“Possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

“You stole it!”

“I didn’t steal it. I acquired it after the fact. I had nothing to do with the actual theft.”

“You are unbelievable.”

“Cisco,” Barry intervened. He got his friend to back down before turning to his nemesis, who looked eager whenever Barry was near him. He wanted to touch again, Barry could tell. “Look, I don’t want to take advantage of you saying you’d do anything I ask, but can you at least promise me that as long as we keep our hands off the gun, you will too?”

Snart deflated with a furrow of his brow but a conceding nod of his head. “Of course.”

“Thank you.” Barry looked to Cisco again, who was not pleased—the cold gun was still a sore spot for him—but he relented with a dramatic sigh and Snart followed Caitlin into the med room.

Barry took the opportunity to change. By the time Snart was down to his sweater, thermal pants, and boots, sitting on the edge of the med bed, Barry was dressed in his STAR Labs sweats, watching from the doorway.

Snart kept seeking him out and every time their eyes met, he smiled with that rare softness. A real smile did far too many favors for the man. Barry had to fight down the flutters in his belly. He was just lonely, and Snart had run his hands and lips over his skin with ease and familiarity like he knew every way to make Barry shudder.

Barry had thought about those hands, those lips, that voice, but only in the solitude of his room, usually after a fight with him, late at night, too tired to sleep. There was never any seriousness to his...crush. It was like falling for a teacher, always knowing it couldn’t, wouldn’t, shouldn’t work out. Never planning to pursue anything either because it would be crazy and wrong and weird.
Snart was just an attractive, commanding older man, who tended to put a lot of focus on Barry. And even though that had turned out terrible in several ways—for Caitlin and Cisco in particular—it was still flattering, especially after their encounters stopped being brutal or cruel, and started being...something else.

“You look good in blue, Barry,” Snart said, watching Barry from the bed as if Caitlin wasn’t fussing around him, poking and prodding. “And here I thought red was your color. Or maybe you just look good in everything.”

“Stay still,” Caitlin ordered. The man had kidnapped her once, but that did nothing to deter her authoritative manner when he was her patient. He even listened rather than rail back at her.

“If you devolve into cheesy pick-up lines, I’m going home and leaving you here,” Barry said, despite Snart’s watchful eye and constant flattery making his face feel hot.

“Always did like looking at you,” Snart said. “You never noticed? Probably figured I was searching for angles. Well I was, just not always to get the upper hand,” he grinned.

Barry huffed a laugh and ducked his head, but the flush of embarrassment wasn’t the only problem. If Snart actually meant some of these things, it wasn’t exactly good. “Nice to know the only reason you didn’t kill me all those times is because you wanted to get into my pants,” he said with a little more bite than intended.

“It wasn’t like that.” Snart’s humor fell away, leaving him raw and grief-stricken in a way that was far more unsettling than his looks of devotion. “You are beautiful, Scarlet, how could anyone not want you? But your body isn’t all I want. I—”

“All done,” Caitlin said, talking loudly to speak over Snart and save them another declaration, though Barry wasn’t sure how he felt about any of this anymore. Nerves, anger, and inappropriate desire all twisted up inside him into something bitter. “I’d like to get a PET scan at the machine over there to confirm a few things. It’s not as invasive as what would be done at a hospital, but it will show me want’s happening in your brain, and then we can...see where we’re at.”

That didn’t comfort Barry. It sounded like she didn’t have any leads yet. Great. “I better call Joe, see what he knows about the heist. Unless you want to tell me anything?” he asked Snart.

Again, a more familiar, cagey expression filled the man’s face. “What do you want to know?”

Barry straightened and stepped into the room. “Bivolo was behind it?”

“He was an outlier. Didn’t expect him. Someone else planned the job.”

“Who?”

A twitch of Snart’s eye and added crease to his brow made Barry wonder whether he’d answer honestly if he wasn’t whammied into wanting to please Barry so much. “An old acquaintance of mine. Not a meta human. She must have hired Bivolo with the others.”

“She?” Barry said with some surprise, not that there weren’t plenty of female villains to go around, but Snart’s reaction to this woman made Barry wonder what their connection might be.

“Alexa Marcos,” Snart said with venom dripping from the way he said her name. At last, he hopped down from the med bed since Caitlin had stepped away. “You want to look into her, figure out how to take her down and throw her in Iron Heights, be my guest.”
Barry’s eyes widened. “Not a friend, I take it?”

“Definitely not.”

“And you knew about the heist ahead of time?”

Another twitch and tension in Snart’s face as he moved closer to Barry. “Tried to get me in on it last night. I declined. Figured I’d throw a wrench in. Knew you’d show up to assist.”

Barry fought a smile but quickly lost that battle. “So you could get away with the loot?”

“Win-win for me.” Snart smiled along with him.

The color of his eyes, part grey, part navy, part crystalline blue, had this way of sparkling that drew Barry into their depths. Only then did he realize that barely a foot separated them.

The man gravitated toward Barry every time they spoke, but Barry should have been repelled not pulled forward. Snart just had this way about him, with the charm and banter and side-eye glances. So much of their chatter wasn’t any different than how they always interacted, but it felt charged in a new way, because Snart wasn’t toying with innuendo, he was blatantly saying what he wanted.

“Right.” Barry took a step back, tightening his arms across his chest like a shield. “Well…thanks, Snart. All of that will actually be really helpful.” He glanced over to see Caitlin boasting an expression of ‘just walked in on something I wasn’t supposed to see’ again and cleared his throat. “I’ll uhh…check with Joe and see if anyone got a line on where that helicopter went.”

“Barry?” Snart called before he could fully turn for the door. “I mean it this time—”

God, could he stop with the love confessions for one—

“Call me Len.”

Oh. Barry supposed ‘Len’ suited the man better than ‘Leonard’. “Sure. Sorry. As long as you promise not to hold it against me when this is over…Len.”

Snart smiled, wider and more openly happy than Barry had ever seen on him. He looked like a brand new man when he was being honest.

No, not honest. Whammied. Manipulated. All of this was fake, Snart just didn’t know any better.

That sour feeling grew in Barry’s stomach as he headed into the Cortex to get his phone. Cisco was checking on the anti-Raider flashlight to make sure nothing was busted or configured wrong, so Barry headed down the hallway toward the Pipeline for more privacy.

He’d texted Joe earlier: Safe at the Labs. Got Snart. Long story. Guard okay?

On his way to CC General. Looks good. Call when you can. Snart huh? Great…

“Hey, Joe,” Barry said when his father answered the call. He explained everything that had happened at Tiffany’s but decided to leave out that Snart kept confessing his undying love. That wouldn’t go over well. It would be better to keep things vague until they figured out a way to fix this.

“The helicopter went dark quick,” Joe said. “We didn’t have anything in the air to chase it. Place is still a mess of glass and ice residue too. They get anything out?”
“Just the necklace from the main display upstairs. I didn’t see them take anything else.”

“Shoot, that’s the most expensive piece. They knew what they were after.”

Barry was leaned back against one of the pipes leading to the circular doorway. “They would have taken more but Snart intervened.”

“He helped huh? But got injured in the crossfire?”

“He’s okay.” Barry shifted a little uncomfortably. He hated lying to Joe, but this was more… withholding unnecessary information. “Caitlin’s checking him out.”

“Gotta eat my words on this one, don’t I? You were right about him, Barry.”

Barry smiled. He’d neglected to mention that Snart had attempted to steal the necklace first, but that didn’t change that Barry was right about the man. There was good in him, and they easily could have turned out like each other if circumstances had been reversed.

He tried to imagine Snart as a detective, a good one, unlike his crooked father. Snart would have been the best on the force by now. Barry just hoped that what happened tonight didn’t mess up all the progress he’d made.

“Does that mean I get to say ‘I told you so’ this time?” Barry teased.

Joe laughed. “Yeah, yeah, go ahead. If I came around on the Arrow, can’t exactly change the rules for Snart. Just make sure he behaves himself, okay?”

Barry choked back a laugh of his own, since Joe had no idea how Snart had been misbehaving. “I’ll do my best, Joe.”

There was a pause where Barry assumed Joe would sign off, but instead his voice came across the line more somber. “You okay, Barry?”

“Yeah. Nothing serious. Like I said, the cold gun only got my arms.”

“Not talkin’ about scrapes and bruises, kiddo.”

Right. He meant because it was Barry’s first night back in the field since…

“I’m good, Joe. Really. It was almost…nice. Normal. Ya know, normal for me, anyway,” he chuckled a little hollowly.

It really had been nice for a moment. To be honest, it had been the first brief span of time where he’d been distracted enough to not think about his father and everything he’d lost because of Zoom. Because of himself. At least something good had come out of tonight’s chaos.

“I better get back to the others. Make sure Snart’s behaving and all. Talk to ya later, Joe.”

“Okay, Barr. Be safe.”

Barry sagged against the wall and held his phone in front of him after the call ended. When the screen fell to his wallpaper background, the remaining smile on his face dropped. He kept forgetting what picture was there. He’d set it as his wallpaper the night they were all together—Team Flash with Barry’s father and even Tina McGee—right before Zoom came and…

All too familiar tears clawed their way to the surface. Barry had been so happy that night, so
confident and optimistic. Cisco had called for a group photo and they’d all crammed in. Barry held the phone to take the picture. His father and McGee were in the top corner, all the others scrunched together in the middle, and right up front was Barry and Iris.

They were going to make a go of things after Zoom was defeated. They were going to try. Iris had actually wanted to try. And for a moment, that moment, captured on his phone, everything was right with the world. Everything was good. Everything was possible. But when the time came to tell Iris if he was still ready, sitting on the steps of their childhood home, he couldn’t do it.

Just when he’d finally come to terms with the loss of his mother, Zoom had taken his father away from him too. Defeating that monster hadn’t assuaged any of the pain or guilt, it just reminded Barry that he was cursed. That Thawne was right. He would never be happy.

*I will never let anyone hurt you again.*

Snart’s words came back to him as he stood staring at his phone, watching the screen dim and eventually turn black. Barry was supposed to be the hero, but sometimes he wished he didn’t always have to be the one saving everybody else, especially when too much of the time…he failed.

He wanted to be saved too. Protected. Taken care of. Not that his friends and family never did those things, but the burden always felt heavier on his shoulders. Because he was the one they turned to. Because he was The Flash.

Iris deserved something more stable than that life. And Barry…maybe he didn’t deserve anything.

“Barry!”

Cisco’s cry wrenched Barry’s attention down the hallway. He stiffened for only a moment before he flashed through the corridors back into the Cortex. When he found no one in immediate view, he spun around until he saw that Cisco had joined Caitlin in the med room. They had Snart lying on the bed, and Cisco was doing chest compressions while Caitlin cleared his airway.

“What happened?” Barry flashed to the foot of the bed, nearly pushing it back a few inches as he collided with the edge.

“I don’t know. He stopped breathing,” Caitlin explained in her usual controlled voice of alarm that never sounded fully panicked. “After the scan, he asked for you, concerned about when you’d be back. He started clutching his chest, said he felt dizzy. I got him back to the bed but he passed out.”

Barry gripped Snart’s ankle before he registered what he was doing. They didn’t exactly have a ‘comforting each other’ sort of relationship, even if Barry had helped save the man’s sister, but seeing him lying there so defenseless made Barry want to connect again in any way he could. He couldn’t lose somebody else. Not anyone else.

Cisco’s arms trembled as he stilled his compressions, and Caitlin bent over Snart to offer a firm puff of air.

Snart coughed and gasped in a sharp breath. Thank God. Barry’s pulse steadied, but he still felt on edge. He gripped Snart’s ankle tighter, and when Snart blinked awake and found Cisco and Caitlin on either side of him, he frowned and sought out another face until he saw Barry at his feet. The sheer relief in Snart’s expression shouldn’t carry with it a gong of impending doom ringing in Barry’s ears.

Barry moved up the bed to take Cisco’s place across from Caitlin. Snart reached for him and Barry
let the prone man take his hand. He’d stopped breathing; Barry could offer him a hand. “What happened exactly?” he asked Caitlin.

“It had maybe been ten minutes. Just long enough for the scan,” she explained. “Snart acted like he was in pain, asked when you’d be back. I said it should only be a few more minutes, not thinking much of it, but with every passing moment after that, it just got worse.”

“Felt like something was tearing my chest open,” Snart gruffed out. “Same thing happened during the heist.”

A chill wracked through Barry like getting hit in the stomach with the cold gun. “After Bivolo looked at you?”

Snart nodded. “There was all this heat. Couldn’t breathe. Just pain, like nothing I’d ever felt before. Then I focused on you,” he said with a lopsided smile.

“Oh this isn’t good,” Cisco spoke what they were all thinking.

“I feel better now,” Snart assured them, as if any of this could be reassuring. He clung to Barry’s hand as he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Caitlin tried to protest, but Snart insisted, and honestly Barry could tell that he seemed fine now, as if he hadn’t nearly died on that table.

Snart let Barry’s hand go but reached up with both of his own, one curling around Barry’s neck, the other grazing gentle fingers along his cheekbone. There was that intensity again, bordering on obsession.

“Please, Barry, let me…” Snart pulled him down, but just when Barry thought he’d have to resist, to dissent, because there was no way he was kissing Snart in front of Caitlin and Cisco, Snart shifted and pulled Barry into an embrace instead. He just hugged him, held him, and Barry couldn’t deny him that. Not if they were right and Snart actually needed this.

The man held a hand to the back of Barry’s head and tangled his fingers in the strands of hair as Barry let his arms slide around Snart’s back. He could feel Snart’s heartbeat, steady in comparison to his wild, Speed Force rhythm. Snart smelled faintly of cologne and evergreens.

No mocking sounded from the others, though Caitlin and Cisco looked startled to bear witness to this. Cisco was still shaky from having helped bring the man back from the dead.

It shouldn’t feel so good just to touch someone, but again Barry thought of how little he’d touched anyone lately, and Snart, who Barry had never seen be casually physical with others, was probably just as touch-starved as he was—or he hated every second of this and was going to really hate Barry when it was over.

“What do we do?” He looked at Caitlin over Snart’s shoulder.

“I don’t know,” she said with distress knitting her brow. “This is different from how Bivolo’s powers worked before. New emotion, fixated on just you. Thankfully, he doesn’t feel like spouting his love to me or Cisco.”

“We can save that for Lisa,” Snart murmured, a moment of his normal drawl slipping through again, his more common teasing lilt, which caused Cisco to snort.

Snart pressed the side of his face against Barry’s neck like all he wanted was the comfort of feeling another person’s skin—Barry’s skin—then he released him, hands retreating without seeking
anything more intimate. Barry’s face felt hotter than ever. Hugging Snart was weightier somehow. He couldn’t imagine Snart hugging anyone.

“Just now, you felt that pain again after I was gone for ten minutes?” Barry asked him.

“On the nose,” Snart said.

He would know; he was fanatical about timing.

“What did you find out from the scan and other tests?” Barry moved around the bed to address Caitlin. Snart followed him.

“Everything else was exactly the same as what happened to Bivolo’s rage victims, except a different part of the brain is being stimulated. Intense romantic love stimulates the striatum and insula, while anger affects the amygdala.”

“But if everything else is the same,” Cisco said, coming to stand between Barry and Caitlin so the four of them made a curve around the bed, “how come he isn’t spouting love to everyone? Not that I’m complaining, dude,” he held up both hands with a ‘no thank you’ in Snart’s direction. Snart shot him an unimpressed glare. “But when Barry was hit with rage, it was a general, everyone better get out the way kinda vibe.”

“Bivolo must have more control over his powers now,” Barry said. “He can probably will a specific emotion on a specific person just by wanting it to happen that way. Proximity to the object of the emotion could just be another facet of that. But it doesn’t explain why the flashlight didn’t fix it.” He pounded a fist on the bed.

“Sorry, man,” Cisco shrugged. “We’re just gonna need more time.”

Barry was already exhausted. He couldn’t believe it had only been a few days since he took down Zoom, now another disaster had struck and once again only he could fix it. He just wanted to sleep.

“Maybe it’s not about emotion,” Snart spoke up. Barry and the others all turned to him. “Maybe the flashlight didn’t do anything because there’s no implanted emotion to erase. Bivolo could have done something else to cause me that pain. Bound me to Barry somehow.”

Barry might have believed that Snart was offering a sensible suggestion if they hadn’t just held each other. “Emotion is still part of it, Snart, because you don’t love me.”

Snart opened his mouth to protest.

“You don’t. I’m through arguing about it.”

“Only wanted to correct you on the name again, Scarlet,” Snart said with a tension to his lips that proved his smile was forced. “It’s Len, remember?”

Barry sobered like he’d been smacked. He was being selfish again, getting caught up in his own grief. This wasn’t about him. Snart was the one who’d been whammed. “Len. I’m sorry. I know you can’t control this, but I need to know that you understand something has happened to you that isn’t natural or good and we have to fix it.”

Somehow, Snart looked both contemplative and captivated all at once. “I can’t exactly live my life attached to you at the hip. Fun as that might be in small doses,” he smirked.

Cisco’s reaction was an exaggerated gagging noise, while Caitlin allowed a small giggle she
attempted to cough over. Barry didn’t know what he should be feeling.

“I know it’s late,” Caitlin addressed them all, “but we need to test how this works until we can find a solution to fix Snart’s—Len’s condition. We need to be sure he doesn’t have to touch you every ten minutes, Barry, that it’s just proximity and touch merely helps ease the pain if he’s been away from you for too long. It could be dangerous if you have to be in physical contact and that’s not possible. It’s dangerous already.”

“You’re right,” Barry said with a resigned sigh. The last thing he wanted was to put Snart’s life at risk. “We need to test as much as we can before we call it a night. Agreed?”

Cisco continued to work on the Rainbow Reversal Beam while Caitlin helped Barry test the limits of his and Snart’s potentially fatal bond. At first, they merely set a timer to make sure the two of them could stay out of physical contact for more than ten minutes. That didn’t appear to be the problem. Though Snart clearly wanted to touch Barry, he didn’t feel any pain when the timer ran down.

Next, they tried line of sight. Barry went into the Cortex with Cisco, and Snart stayed in the med room with Caitlin facing away from him. That didn’t cause the pain to return either.

Finally, they gauged distance. Barry could be in another room for more than ten minutes, even a couple rooms away, but heading down the hallway toward the Pipeline proved to be the breaking point and Caitlin called for him to come back.

He flashed to Snart’s side, finding the man doubled over with both palms pressed to his chest while he gasped for breath. But as soon as he saw Barry, especially when Barry touched the base of his spine and ran his hand up and down his back in soothing motions, Snart calmed and was perfectly fine again in moments.

“I’d recommend keeping Len in your sightline at all times, or sticking to a small area if you have to be apart,” Caitlin explained like giving a normal diagnosis.

“And how am I supposed to do that?” Barry groaned. The four of them had gathered in the Cortex. It was far too late for any of them to be dealing with this. “Sneak Snart up to my room? Joe will freak out. I can’t bring him home with me.”

“You could stay here,” Cisco suggested with minimal enthusiasm.

“Here?” Snart cringed with a look around the room before landing his gaze on Barry. “I don’t think so. You’re coming home with me. My apartment’s the right size to avoid proximity issues, and you’ll be perfectly safe, I assure you.”

Barry stared as if he must have misheard the man, because even though he had been a part of all the tests and knew how serious this was, he hadn’t expected to end the night anywhere but in his own bed—alone.

“Len,” Caitlin said in her professional, straight forward tone, never letting her previous feelings about him and what he’d done to her interfere with her bedside manner, “why don’t you get ready to leave while we chat with Barry for a moment?”

Snart eyed the three of them with uncertainty but nodded agreement and headed into the med room to gather his gear.

“I can’t go home with Leonard Snart!” Barry whipped around to hiss at his friends. “This is insane.”
“You don’t have work tomorrow,” Caitlin reminded him—it was Saturday, and even if it hadn’t been, Barry was still technically on bereavement leave. “It’ll be fine. Snart won’t hurt you, Barry. He adores you.” She smiled supportively, but to Barry it just looked like she was comforting him before tossing him to the wolves.

“He thinks he’s in love with me,” Barry protested. “He was all over me at Tiffany’s.”

“He seems more in control now,” Cisco stole a glance at the man in the other room. “I’m sure he won’t try anything. He’ll just want to be close to you. It’s not like we’re suggesting you sleep with the guy.”

Barry blanched. Where was he supposed to sleep? Snart’s couch? The floor?

“Actually, you probably should sleep with him,” Caitlin said.

Barry and Cisco both looked at her like the traitor she was.

“In the same bed, I’m not suggesting you sleep with him,” she chastised their assumption. “But since we can’t do more thorough tests, we don’t know if proximity lessens over longer periods of time. It might be risky for you to sleep in another room.”

“I think it’ll be risky for me to sleep in the same bed.” Barry took a breath to calm his nerves after snapping, because Caitlin pursed her lips at him and he immediately knew what she was thinking. A man’s life was at stake, Barry couldn’t be picky about sleeping arrangements, it was just… supremely awkward.

“Besides,” Cisco said more quietly, “this could be a really good opportunity to get some dirt on Captain Cold. You’ll be in his apartment, dude. He actually has an apartment instead of just some safehouse or whatever. This will be great intel.”

Barry scowled at him, and Caitlin’s expression mirrored his own, “He’s trusting us here, Cisco. He’s not thinking clearly and is completely reliant on us right now. Even going to his home is an invasion, which I’d rather not do at all if there was a better option. I am not snooping while I’m there.”

“We wouldn’t ask you to,” Caitlin said pointedly.

“Fine, fine,” Cisco conceded the argument, “but if you happen to stumble upon something, I’m just saying, it’s not like he didn’t use opportune moments against us in the past.”

Which was true, and it wasn’t as if Barry would be able to completely avoid seeing things that Snart—if he was in his right mind—probably wouldn’t want him to see, but he could at least be decent about this. Then, maybe, when Snart was back to normal, he’d be decent too.

Finally, Snart came out of the med room, dressed in his full gear with the cold gun tucked into its holster.

“This is just for tonight,” Barry told him. “We’re coming right back to the Labs in the morning to figure this out. Got it?”

Snart inclined his head in the affirmative but a familiar smirk painted his face. “What do you need from me, Scarlet?”

Barry sighed. He’d already packed an overnight bag from things he had in the Labs, but he’d stayed in his sweats since he would need something to sleep in. “Just the address. I’ll get us there. And
keep your hands—*and mouth*—to yourself.”

While Cisco groaned, Snart made a gesture of promise by criss-crossing two fingers over his heart. It almost would have been funny, but ‘*cross my heart and hope to die*’ didn’t hold much humor tonight.

Once Snart told him the street name and apartment number, Barry scooped the man into his arms and took off. He couldn’t believe this night had started off as a routine robbery and was somehow ending with him going home with Leonard Snart.

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

Comments are love! So much love. I love you guys!
Muddled Minds

Chapter Summary

Len is certain that he loves Barry and simply needs to convince him of that, even though a gnawing sense of wrong keeps vying for his attention, while Barry fumbles to fight off advances he might not be as opposed to as he proclaims.

Chapter Notes

This fic is hard, okay? The first chapter was hard, the second was hard, and this one too. I hope that means the work I put into it continues to appease you all, because your comments have meant so much to me and I want to live up to your expectations.

There are so many layers to this fic, and getting in the right headspace for Len in particular is difficult when I'm trying to write him both in character but with obviously out of character moments.

Anyway...I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first time Len got whisked away by The Flash, a twist of nausea had settled in his gut when he found himself on unsteady ground in the woods. Annoying, unexpected, but it had passed. Being flashed from the jewelry store, however, hadn’t left him with any discomfort.

Barry was so warm. The thermal dampeners may have played a role in that, but it was wonderfully soothing to feel the kid so close. Len felt compelled to touch him, to let him know all the things he’d never dared say out loud. He’d felt all these things before—he must have—but now, the strength of his love for Barry overwhelmed him if he dwelled on it for too long.

Traveling once again at lightning speed, Len had the same impulse to touch, but Barry had asked him not to. He could do that. He could resist. But this time Barry's face wasn’t half hidden by his cowl. Len was in the arms of his nemesis, separated by much thinner fabric than the Flash suit, and they’d be alone all night. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt such a nervous thrill shiver through him. Turning his face toward Barry’s chest, Len breathed in, smelling a strong tang of copper like a coming storm.

He knew he was acting oddly, unlike himself—of course he was. Bivolo’s powers were doing more than forcing him to be in close proximity to Barry or suffer fatal consequences. He never ached to touch another person like this. He ached for release, yes, for the comfort of a warm body, but only for the length of time it took to get what he needed and be gone. More than that had never seemed possible—or been desirable—with anyone else.

Alexa once, when Len was young and foolish. Sara in what felt like a half-mad dream, because he was foolish in a new way now, old and miserable and fumbling to find his place. But with Barry—before tonight, Len never would have dared dream he could know what the Scarlet Speedster
tasted like.

It was reckless how much Len wanted him. Dangerous how easily he divulged his feelings, wanting only for Barry to understand that he truly did love him. Nothing would make Len happier than to have Barry as his own, to make the kid as happy as Barry made him. The power behind that emotion might be influenced by Bivolo, but the core of it was real—it had to be.

Len might not have risked inviting Barry back to his home before tonight, but this was *Barry*. Naïve and caring and ever the believer in the good in people. Len didn’t need to lean on his old hang-ups; Barry wouldn’t betray his trust. And once Len convinced him that his feelings were genuine, he would show Barry how happy they could be together.

A feeling of bliss like he’d never known before spread through Len’s chest just from looking at Barry, from giving himself over to his emotions fully. It was liberating. Why had he held his emotions in check for so many years? For all the dangers what Bivolo had done to him posed, Len didn’t feel cursed. He felt free. He felt… *good*. He never wanted it to go away.

They came out of Barry’s whirlwind of lightning in the hallway outside Len’s apartment door. The coast was clear—Barry wouldn’t have allowed them to appear in the hallway if it was occupied and risk giving away his identity. It was late anyway. The only neighbor who might still be awake was Mrs. Kittelsby across the hall, and she was no rat even if she did realize The Flash was standing outside her door.

Len was set on his feet before he could lament the loss of Barry’s hold on him. Barry looked adorably out of place in his STAR Labs sweats with a duffle bag over his shoulder in Len’s hallway.

“Len? Do you have the key?”

He tried not to stare, he really did, but he hadn’t been lying when he told Barry he’d always enjoyed looking at him. Bivolo hadn’t invented that. He couldn’t. And he couldn't invent something as strong as what Len was feeling from *nothing*. Len just needed Barry to understand that.

Turning to his door, he pulled the key from a cleverly hidden interior pocket in his parka. He was letting The Flash into his apartment, the man who’d sent him to Iron Heights twice, even if only one time had ended with him arriving there and neither lasted for long.

Len’s fingers hesitated as he turned the lock. What was he doing? He couldn’t let Barry into his *home*. He needed to consider this more. Analyze his options, the various probabilities, pros and cons and how he was going to end up ahead when everything was over. He needed a plan. He didn’t have a *plan*.

Alexa. She’d done this on purpose. *Why?*

“Len?” Barry said again, more concerned, nervous standing exposed in the hallway of unfamiliar territory.

Len’s doubts vanished at the sound of his voice. He glanced back and those heartfelt hazel eyes made the apprehensive chill in his chest melt away. “Anything you see in here stays between us?” He meant it as a statement, a command, but it left his lips more uncertain.

The anxiety in Barry’s face relaxed to something Len chose to take for fondness. It could be. He hoped it could be. “I promise. And it doesn’t have to be quid pro quo or whatever. I’m helping
because I want to. You don’t owe me anything and I won’t use this against you.” Like Len had used Barry’s good nature against him.

A faint twinge reverberated through Len as he offered a simple nod, but it wasn’t like the pain he felt from being away from Barry. This pain was from an emotion he’d long ago learned to suppress. Guilt. It felt so much stronger when the person he’d wronged he also loved. Only too recently he’d felt it in an entirely different situation…

Pushing into the apartment, Len turned on the light and stepped aside for Barry to follow him. He’d make this up to Barry. He’d make everything up to him. Undoing his boots before moving further into the room, when he finished, he found Barry standing stock-still on the rug, staring at what little of the apartment the single light in the entryway illuminated.

Len shut the door behind them with a soft click, jarring Barry to attention. He quickly toed off his sneakers but clung to his duffle bag like a lifeline. He was adorable when flustered. He was adorable in any condition.

“Sorry. I don’t know what I expected. It’s just so…normal,” Barry said, taking a tentative step onto the hardwood floors.

“Well I tend to keep the acid pit and sharks with lasers in storage.”

Barry laughed. God, that sound. Len wanted to hear it every day of his life.

The apartment was spacious, with high ceilings being on the top floor and an open kitchen plan including plenty of counter space. There were wooden beams across the ceiling to give the place character and many uniquely shaped light fixtures. It was cozy, no art deco furniture or anything so stuffy, that wasn’t Len’s style. He preferred comfort, dark colors, and soft fabrics.

Everything that could be sat on had a blanket thrown over it. A fireplace had been a necessity for him as well when he got the apartment years ago, situated to the left of the sofa. The bedroom and bathroom were to the right, next to a large closet that housed the washer and dryer, which could be easily hidden and closed off.

He moved to the closet by the door and reached around to flick the kitchen light on to better brighten the apartment before he put away his gear. Punching the numbers on the keypad beside the closet, he smirked to himself at who stood behind him considering the current combination. Nothing so mundane or easily guessed as anyone’s birthday. He changed it regularly. Right now it was Joe West’s badge number.

“You have a combination on your coat closet?” Barry asked.

As the final number was punched in, the pad gave a faint beep and Len was able to open the door. “It doesn’t only house my coat,” he said while slipping the parka from his shoulders. He hung it up, then withdrew his cold gun and glanced back at Barry pointedly before placing the gun in its stand. He removed his goggles from around his neck to hang on a small hook at the back. The rest he’d remove later and wash before returning to the closet.

“You know, I could try every combination possible and break into that room by the time you crossed the kitchen,” Barry said when Len closed the door to the sound of another beep and continued into the kitchen to get a glass of water.

“It locks down and sends an alarm to several of my safe houses after two wrong attempts. But be my guest.”
Barry chuckled as he followed Len, finally removing himself of the shield his duffle created and setting it on the floor to rest against the kitchen island. “Only two?”

Len pulled down two glasses from the cabinet. “Almost made it one, but figured even I might have an off night.”

Another easy chuckle. Good. Barry was growing more comfortable.

“Water?” Len asked as he poured himself some from the sink.

“Sure. Thanks.” Barry leaned against the island but kept his distance. Not too distant, not too close, like he was unsure what was allowed. Len would allow him anything. Anything Barry asked. He couldn’t imagine a single thing the kid could request that he wouldn’t whole-heartedly offer.

Which was—that wasn’t right. He never let anyone have that sort of power over him. Never again. **Never again.**

“Ice?” Barry said, shaking loose Len’s thoughts just as he’d been about to let the second glass overflow. He turned off the tap and shot Barry a sly smirk. The kid’s jaw almost dropped. “I can’t believe I just said that. Don’t—”

“Prefer things **cold**, Barry?”

Barry groaned. “I hate you,” he said, but the smile on his face said the opposite. Len hoped that one day it *could* be the opposite. He knew Barry didn’t love him now, not yet, but if he only gave Len a chance, he’d prove to him how well ice and lightning could mix.

He filled both glasses of water with a handful of ice cubes from the freezer and offered Barry his. After taking a drink himself, Len opened the fridge. “Hungry?”

Water caught in Barry's throat as he choked. “You are not cooking for me.”

“What if I already cooked? You above leftovers?” Len pulled a container from the top shelf and waved it Barry's direction.

Barry couldn’t possibly guess at its contents, but he still pressed his lips together like he was starved for whatever lay inside. “I…well I guess if you already have something.” His hands flexed around his water glass.

“You need to eat a lot, right? Least I can offer. Fan of chicken masala?” Len crossed to the microwave above the stove to reheat the dish from last night.

“For real? I *love* chicken masala,” Barry gushed, which made Len’s stomach quiver as he glanced back at him. “Sorry. I mean thank you! Shit—*sorry*. This is just…” He fidgeted from foot to foot, so effortlessly charming in his awkwardness. “Weird? Being here. You being so nice to me.”

Cloying guilt stirred in Len’s gut again. He didn’t used to feel it so keenly, the few times in the past twenty odd years that he’d even allowed himself to feel it.

On the ship—with Mick.

At Christmas maybe, when he hadn’t known how to handle Miss West being there, so he’d pushed a little harder than intended.

The initial reaction from Barry had been stimulating, to say the least. All in Len’s space, forceful
and full of fire, but the sneer of disgust and disappointment after Len threatened Iris, how he couldn’t admit even when Barry called him on it that he was there to help, that part of him wanted to help, twisted him up inside until he felt nauseous.

“Not exactly healthy to treat those you love with cruelty,” Len said. It was just the way he’d been raised. For years, it was all he ever knew.

Barry’s expression of pity was becoming too familiar, but he fought through it with a twitch at the corner of his mouth. “Teasing them mercilessly is fine though?”

“Naturally.”

Fond exasperation lit up Barry’s face before it darkened again. “Len…you don’t really—”

The microwave let out a plaintive whine to signal it was finished. Len retrieved a fork and pushed around the contents of the container before replacing it in the microwave for a few more seconds.

Barry cleared his throat. “I uhh…I better text Joe that I’m staying at Cisco’s or something. He might be home in bed by now, but he’ll worry if I’m not there in the morning.” He pulled his cell phone from his pants pocket and thumbs flew over the keyboard in a blur. Then the phone was gone again, all in the span of a few slow blinks.

Barry’s powers amazed Len like few things could, sparking something old and forgotten in his imagination about the impossible being…possible. Usually, Len didn’t let his awe show but he had no reason to hide his admiration of Barry anymore.

“You are something else,” he said, sliding the warmed container across the island countertop, knife and fork propped inside.

“Uh…thanks.” Barry avoided Len’s stare, eyeing the table between the kitchen and living room instead. He seemed to determine that it would be too domestic to sit down, so he remained standing at the island as he speared a bite of chicken. His eyelids practically fluttered in pleasure at the first taste.

Len wished he could do more for Barry. Being so enamored by him, it was only natural to gravitate closer. It wasn’t even Bivolo’s fault. They had always gravitated toward each other, hadn’t they? In Saints and Sinners when Barry tried to make a deal for Len’s help, they’d gotten close enough that Len could have stolen a kiss if he’d been so bold. He’d been bold in other ways. The original offer he’d written on that napkin for what he wanted in exchange for helping Team Flash had been a single word.

You.

Bless the kid, he must have assumed Len meant for a heist. If he’d understood what Len really meant, he would have turned the color of his namesake. But there was no emotion involved then, and Len hadn’t thought for a second that Barry would take him seriously.

Now, he found himself crowding into Barry’s space while the kid tried to hide himself in his midnight snack—eating Len’s leftovers, down to socks and sweats, ready to spend the night. If the rest of the situation had been different, touching Barry, slipping his hands up beneath that navy sweatshirt to feel the heat from his skin, would have been a natural progression.

Barry’s eyes flicked up at the invasion of space as Len crept closer, lips tight around his fork, frozen amidst taking a bite to find Len only inches away. Slowly, Barry drew the fork from his teeth and chewed like he was afraid to make any sudden moves in the presence of a predator.
Len didn’t want Barry to think of him like that, but it was so nice to want to touch someone. He always flinched. The only times he could touch someone easily was if it was Lisa or Mick—or an act, part of a con. Valentina in 1986 Russia, even the young military woman Len had caught and dipped to steal her wallet. That was easy because it wasn’t real.

Sara, snuggling closer against his side when they were mere minutes from freezing to death and he’d offered his jacket like some foolish white knight because, “I have layers. You don’t,” was different. She’d pressed closer and he’d cringed, almost pulled away, which was insane given the circumstances. They were dying. And he’d been the one pursuing her. But seeking sex was simpler. Intimacy, real intimacy with someone had never come easily.

Her body pressed side by side with his made him wary, waiting for a moment when the tenderness would end. With sex the ending was a given, easy to predict. Len didn’t trust anything he couldn’t map out. He’d thought he knew what he wanted, but his fixations got in the way of pursuing more than a night’s reprieve.

Now, here he was, not seeking sex but seeking closeness. It wasn’t like him. It wasn’t the real him…

“Len?”

Concentrating on Barry’s lips, Len wanted to lick between them, feel Barry’s tongue and pull his body close. But as strong as that compulsion was, he knew he’d settle for merely holding him again. He’d never known this sensation before, wanting someone for more than baser needs and not feeling any inclination to lean away. Len’s chest felt lighter than he ever remembered, as if his past no longer mattered and his father was a distant memory he could finally let go.

It had to be love. It had to be.

“Hey.” Barry snapped Len from his daze as he set the container of food aside. He’d already eaten most of it. “It’s late and this is all…not normal. But if you’re ever in pain, it’s okay, you can…touch me,” he said, breathy in his embarrassment over saying that.

Len wasn’t in pain right now, but he inched his hand across the countertop anyway. To his surprise, Barry reached out first to place a hand over his.

“But it has to be like this. Simple…platonic touching. Okay? Nothing like the jewelry store.”

Relief at the contact of Barry’s skin and disappointment that this was all he was allowed vied for control. Barry’s face was so beautiful in the dim light of Len’s apartment. “I’m sorry,” he said, and he never apologized. Ever. “I was…” —am— “overwhelmed by you.”

Barry huffed out a sharp, shuddery laugh and ducked his head like he was too self-conscious to believe any of this was happening. “Yeah. I got that. You stuck your tongue down my throat and we don’t even really know each other.”

“You know me.”

“I know about you. It’s not the same thing.”

“So if you knew me better…?” Len’s eyes fell to Barry’s lips again. There were so many other things to think about from tonight, important things, dangerous, deadly things, but he couldn’t focus on any of them. Only Barry.

“I don’t…I don’t think of you like that.” Barry pulled his hand away.
“Not even a little?” Len reached for Barry’s face like he had at Tiffany’s, but at Barry's gasp, he hesitated. Barry had asked him not to. He’d asked not to. So Len slowed his approach, giving Barry far more time than a speedster needed to pull out of reach. He didn’t. He let Len cup his cheek. “I could make you so happy, Barry. If you’d let me. You changed my world when you flashed into it. Forever. For the better.”

Len would settle for an embrace, he would, but if he could claim Barry's lips again, maybe that twinge would go away and he'd be whole.

Another gasp left Barry, a quiet tremble of air when Len shifted into his space and closed the distance between them. Their mouths met, but this time, Barry leaned into the contact and Len’s free hand found a hold at his hip.

The rush of having Barry at his fingertips was intoxicating, drawing Len closer until he teased his tongue at the breach of their lips. Barry let him push deeper with a thankful sigh, tentative but willing as he sought Len out in return. When shaking hands pressed to Len’s chest, he readied himself to be pushed away, but Barry twisted his grip in the fabric of Len’s sweater and hung on. Whimpers rose in Barry's throat as he leaned into Len’s hand on his cheek and tilted his head to delve deeper.

Yes. Len loved Barry so much, he just wanted connection, any way he could have it. He found the edge of Barry’s sweatshirt and pushed up beneath it—

“Stop.” Barry snapped away with a harsh intake of breath, leaving Len panting after him. His hands were still shaking, still tangled in Len’s sweater, but he shook his head. “You don’t mean this.”

Len’s chest heaved from the sudden separation, just like Barry was heaving, flushed and hovering close. “But you wish I did?”

“No, I…” Finally, Barry released Len and tumbled back. “I’m just…human, okay? And you’re gorgeous and throwing yourself at me and…and it’s nice to hear someone say those things, I admit that. Then I remember you’re under the influence and it makes me sick thinking of when you wake up.” His scrunched brow and diverted eyes proved how much he blamed himself for that kiss, not Len.

Damn martyr. But it was all Len needed to know. Barry could want him. He did want him. He just needed to believe Len’s feelings were genuine. “I won’t try something like that again,” Len said, fueled by the strained desire he saw in Barry’s face. “I promise. But I want you to know me, Barry. I want to know you better too. Can’t deny a man the request to become…strange friends, can you?” he grinned, coaxing Barry to meet his eyes.

A half-formed laugh left Barry. “Very strange. But I guess I can't say no to understanding the man behind the parka better.”

Len settled back to lean against the kitchen island, no longer minding the distance Barry had put between them since their banter contained its own closeness. “There is more to me than my police records, you know. And I’m sure there’s more to you than an old conspiracy theory blog on Bigfoot.”

“What?” Barry’s eyes grew into saucers before he groaned, “Oh god. Because of course you know about that.”

“Imagine my amusement when that was one of the first things that came up searching ‘Barry Allen’. In this day and age, I’m surprised you didn’t have a YouTube channel and an adoring
fanbase. Don’t take it as a challenge,” he cocked his head coyly, “but if The Flash ever did decide to vlog, I’m sure it would help pay for your grocery bills.”

Barry shook his head at Len through his laughter, but the tension from a few moments ago was gone, leaving only the faint ache of want. “Mocking me is not the way to my heart, just so you know.”

“Who’s mocking? I can appreciate a healthy obsession with the paranormal. Used to sneak into the house when Lisa was little to watch The X-Files with her. Why do you think you were such an entertaining challenge? The red leather helps, of course,” he flicked his eyes down Barry’s body, “but it was first and foremost your intrigue.”

The blush to Barry’s skin was much more apparent contrasted against blue. “Wait…snuck into the house?”

“I was in my early 20s when the show first aired,” Len recounted. “Long gone from that man’s house. But Lisa hadn’t escaped yet. Mulder and Scully were a good enough escape for a while.”

A flicker of sympathy broke through Barry’s mirth, but Len didn’t need sympathy, and Barry seemed to understand that because he didn’t push, just snickered and said, “Wouldn’t she have been, like…ten?”

“No one is too young to be corrupted by good sci-fi.”

Barry laughed again, such a carefree sound accompanied by a vibrant, dimpled smile. “I should have guessed you’d be a closet geek with how much you love to play dress-up.”

“I’m sorry.” Len held a hand to his chest as if affronted, “which one of us parades around in head to toe, skin-tight—”

“Okay, okay,” Barry held up both hands for reprieve, “so maybe we have a few things in common. We can add another uber nerd to Team Flash.”

“Part of the team already? Who knew you’d be so easy, Scarlet?”

Barry’s cheeks were stretched so wide and colored so red, Len never wanted to stop making him look that happy. It made Len feel happy too. Made the thought of holding onto any of his old masks seem pointless. “Stop smiling!” Barry cried, and the way he covered his face made it impossible to tell if he was talking to Len or himself. “This is crazy. I should be upset. You kissed me again. I want to be upset. But you are way too hard to be mad at when you look at me like that.”

“This is all I ever had to do to best you? Smile?” Len smiled wider still with an ease he hadn’t felt in decades. “Maybe I’ll get right back to thieving after tonight just to test if that theory pans out.”

“Please don’t.” Barry fought to relax his face and still his giggles. “When did you start calling me that anyway?”

It took Len a moment to realize what Barry meant, the endearment had fallen from his lips so easily. He’d only ever thought it to himself before tonight. “The Scarlet Speedster was coined some time ago, as I recall.”

“Yeah, but…”

“But…you’ve been Scarlet to me for a while.” As the merriment of their verbal sparring petered off
into charged silence, Len instinctually wanted to touch again, to kiss and hold and never let Barry go, but he resisted. If he was going to prove he loved Barry, he had to show restraint. “Finish your snack,” he said, nudging the neglected container of food forward and moving around Barry to leave the kitchen. “I’ll make up the sofa. You can have the bedroom.”

“Oh, uhh, actually…” Barry was a brighter shade of red when Len looked back at him. “Caitlin thinks…sh—she said we should…probably…sleep near each other in case there’s any proximity issues over an extended period of time,” he finished in a rush. “I’ll just…sleep on the floor.”

“Or we can share the bed,” Len said.

“Or you can sleep on the floor.”

Oh, how Len loved the way Barry always rose to the challenge. “It’s just a bed. I’ll behave.”

“O-Okay, but…I mean it. No—”

“I know,” Len cut him off and dropped everything from his expression but his most earnest sincerity. “I mean it too.” He turned away before he could get lost in the green of Barry’s eyes.

Heading into the bedroom, there was an immediate pang in Len’s chest from knowing Barry would be so far away, but not far enough to cause him any damage. It was a mild, manageable pain, but they had to fix this or they’d both be prisoners, unable to leave each other’s side. As much as the thought of that warmed him, he knew it wasn’t right, wasn’t normal, he’d hate this in any other situation and…

Gripping the edge of his dresser, Len tried to steady himself. He was forgetting something important. Alexa. She’d done this to him. She was planning something bigger than a jewelry heist. She’d laid a trap for Len and he’d fallen right into it. And there was something else. About Bivolo? No. About the job.

“Len?” Barry called from the other room, once again bringing Len back from the brink—of what, he couldn’t remember. “Is the dishwasher clean or…”

“It’s clean. You can put the container in the sink. I’m just going to change,” Len called back. He never would have believed he could have such a mundane conversation with The Flash, in his own home.

Glancing around the bedroom, there wasn’t much he needed to hide from Barry. He rarely left anything important out in the open when he left the apartment. But one of his guns was in the nightstand. These days, he preferred his cold gun, but that didn’t mean being traditionally armed wasn’t necessary on occasion.

Taking the 9MM out of its drawer, Len swiftly moved to the safe in the closet. It was a small safe but it sported the same type of keypad as the closet he used for his Cold gear. This combination was Mick’s first prison number.

Inside were a few blueprints for potential heists, though they were all from before he left with the Legends. He also had several files on figures in the mob families around town, as well as a few lesser known but influential elements. Information could be more powerful than a weapon in most situations.

And then there was one item that had nothing to do with a life of crime or survival. A photograph of his mother.
In it, she was smiling, youthful and effervescent with her tightly coiled hair and dark skin. He thought it was the only photo he’d ever seen of her where she looked honestly happy. It had been his father’s photo once, shortly after she announced she was pregnant with Len, before hope got polluted and everything went to shit. The picture was the only thing about her that Len had been able to salvage.

He closed the safe and made quick work of changing into sleep pants and a long-sleeved shirt. When he came out of the bedroom, Barry had finished the chicken masala but the dish wasn’t in the sink. He’d emptied the dishwasher. Several pots and pans were set out on the counter, probably because he wasn’t sure where they belonged.

“By all means, feel free to give in to the impulse to clean my apartment,” Len said.

“Oh…I just…” Barry ceased the constant tapping of his fingers on the counter, nervous like he wasn’t allowed to move without permission. “I needed something to occupy me so I wouldn’t snoop.”

Len smiled, aching for Barry with a lurch in his gut.

He’d turned on a few more lights on his way from the bedroom, but he moved now to turn off the main light by the door, throwing him and Barry into shadow. “I appreciate you not invading my privacy, but you can relax. Make use of the bathroom and settle your things wherever you want. We should get some sleep.”

“Right. Sleep.” Barry ran a fidgety hand back through his hair. “Good idea.”

As he bent to reclaim his duffle bag and moved cautiously in the direction of the bathroom, Len allowed a straying glance down the line of Barry’s body through his sweats. Cotton or triopolymer, he was a striking temptation and made Len yearn for more than what they’d shared in that kitchen.

*Alexa. Bivolo. The heist. A trap. Something big was coming and Len had to be ready. Those voices…*

He shook his head to dismiss the din of noise blaring in his ears. The important thing right now was Barry. Only Barry. Nothing else mattered.

Turning off the kitchen light, Len walked through the darkness to follow Barry across the apartment.

XXXXX

Barry had let Snart kiss him—*again.* He was such a mess.

He tried to comfort himself thinking that he was only this weak because of the trauma he’d been through lately.

*Zoom.*

Losing his father.

Saying no to Iris.

But it wasn’t fair to blame recent events. Barry had always been weak. That’s how Thawne had been able to trick him and get into his head, because as amazing as Iris and Joe had been for him growing up, he was always desperate for more connection with people and he rarely found it.
Cisco, Caitlin, Wells…they’d been like missing pieces of Barry finally put back into place. Or so he’d thought, but it was only because he was selfish. He took and he took anything anyone would offer to replace the awful sense of loss he felt. First with his mother, now his father too. That’s all he was doing with Snart—with Len—because he was there and willing and said he wanted Barry. Said he loved him.

And he was gorgeous, Barry hadn’t been lying about that—and god, he’d actually said that out loud! Snart would hold that over him forever once he was back to normal, but he had to know how attractive he was. He was male-model handsome, with flawless features and that swagger.

Urg, Barry had to get over his stupid crush. He shouldn’t be with anyone right now, and Snart was brainwashed. It would have been different if Snart was himself and they tumbled into bed because they both wanted the escape.

Not that Barry ever did that. He’d never gone for one-night stands. He had crushes or relationships. Not many, granted, but he didn’t do casual. That’s all Snart would want once he was sane again. If he wanted anything. He’d probably just shoot Barry and be done with it.

Barry cut off his train of thought when Snart—Len; he couldn’t get used to that—entered the bathroom and he realized he’d been brushing his teeth this entire time. He quickly spit, rinsed, and got out of Len’s way. He meant to make scarce after that, but it was so morbidly fascinating, seeing Leonard Snart barefoot and in pajamas, brushing his teeth. When he was finished, he cast Barry a sly grin.

“You’re welcome to stay, Scarlet, but there are other things I need to attend to before bed.”

Like what? Barry wondered for half a second before his brain got out of the gutter and he remembered they were in the bathroom, “Oh! Sorry,” and he sprinted into the bedroom to hide.

The room was just as cozy and simplistic as the rest of the apartment. He’d set his duffle in the corner, not wanting to take up too much space. He only had his toiletries, a change of clothes, and a phone charger packed. That’s all he’d need until they returned to the Labs in the morning.

When Len came in, Barry dashed out to use the bathroom himself and found the man already sliding under the covers when he returned. He was about to share a bed with Captain Cold. He kind of wanted to giggle at the absurdity of it all. Would this feel more or less awkward after they’d made out several times tonight?

Turning off the main light to better hide how flushed he was, Barry crossed the room in near darkness, though a lamp still burned on the nightstand beside Len. Without thinking about it, Barry pulled the sweatshirt over his head and tossed it at his duffle bag. Len’s appreciative stare brought him back to his senses and he froze at the edge of the bed.

“I…I get overheated easily, it’s not—”

“An invitation. I understand.” Len remained sitting up but watched Barry with a sense of wonder, like he was truly magnificent. Only meta powers could cause something so ridiculous. “It’s okay, Barry,” he said with a touch of that grief filling his brow. “I won’t do anything to you.”

“I know,” Barry said quickly, climbing into the—thankfully—expansive bed. They wouldn’t touch without conscious effort, and when Barry laid back, he didn’t fear any effort would be made. Lust played its role in what Bivolo had done to Len, but there was something more profound in his eyes. “I trust you. It’s just been a long week.”
The worst week Barry could remember since…

His attention was drawn to Len regarding him from where he sat against the headboard. Although Barry had thought he’d seen Snart at his most vulnerable and broken when the man iced his own father in a fit of anguish, the expression he wore now was worse because it was bare. “I’m so sorry, Barry.”

“For…what?”

“You father.”

The duality of the moment startled Barry almost as much as the words, because he’d been thinking of Lewis, and Len was thinking of Henry. “You know about that?”

“Gone two months, my line of work, first thing you check is the obituaries.” Len reached up to turn off the lamp, then settled into bed beside Barry. Their eyes met, and even tinged with shadow, Barry could see the varied shades of blue. “I know you don’t believe much of anything I say right now, but I swear I mean this. I am so sorry you lost him.”

The heat and the hurt rose up quickly. Barry thought he’d cried every last tear he had left, but somehow there were more. “I…I don’t know if I believe you’d say that to me normally, but…I believe you mean it. Thank you,” he said on a hitched breath. “I want you to know, when this is over, if you don’t want to be…friendly anymore, I understand, but if you do…I really don’t want to have to face that cold gun again with you on the other end. Mostly because it hurts like hell,” he chuckled, and Len, listening intently, chuckled with him, even though when they first met the last thing that would have been was funny. “But you’re better than that, Len. You really are.”

"If I am, Barry, you’re the first person who saw it.”

“That’s not true,” Barry frowned. “There’s Lisa. And what about Heat Wave? He went with the Legends too, right? Where is he?”

Len turned to look at the ceiling. “Still with them.”

“You separated?”

“We’re not married, Scarlet,” he returned with a crooked grin.

Barry smiled in reply but he sensed Snart’s usual evasion creeping in. “You act like an old married couple sometimes.”

“Old friends get like that. And believe me,” his eyes shifted upwards once more, “right now I’m definitely in the dog house.”

“What did you do?”

He didn’t answer and Barry realized how unfair he was being.

“Sorry. You don’t have to tell me.”

“I…changed the rules. And ran away.” He might be whammied but that was still honesty on his face, mixed with grief and guilt and uncertainty.

“I don’t see you as someone who’d run away from anything,” Barry said.

“Usually, only when I’m being chased.” Len turned to look at him again and traveled his stare
down Barry’s chest. “Or chasing after something worthwhile. This was different.”

The same heat wasn’t present in Len’s gaze as he took in Barry’s bare skin. He was deflecting. He didn’t want to talk about this, he might just feel obligated to because Barry had asked, and Barry didn’t want to do that to him. “We should sleep,” he said, offering Len an easy out.

“We should.” But he didn’t look away. Eventually, he spoke across the space between them again, “And Scarlet? If you get scared during the night and need something to hang onto…feel free.”

Barry snorted and rolled his eyes. “I hate you,” he said with full amusement.

But in the silence that followed, he knew Len wanted to counter him with, “I love you.”

“Goodnight, Barry,” he said instead.

There was weight to all this that Barry didn’t fully understand, but he could feel it bearing down on him like the gravity of the Singularity or Zoom’s oppressive claws, and he had no idea how to fight it. “Goodnight, Len.”

XXXXX

Barry expected to toss and turn, being in a new environment, in an unfamiliar bed, next to Leonard Snart, of all people, but he must have been more tired than he thought. Almost instantly after closing his eyes, he found himself rousing to the faint light of a new day peeking through the curtains.

He was still on his back, blankets pulled down to mid-chest, arms overtop them to keep cool. He really did overheat during the night most of the time, his Speed Force metabolism in constant overdrive.

When he first opened his eyes, he didn’t remember where he was or why the room looked wrong. His arms twitched as he roused more fully and he felt warmth and weight on his left hand. Blinking through the semi-darkness to see what was there, he saw a third arm draped across his stomach and a hand resting casually over his.

Snart, Barry remembered and was instantly awake. Len, who thought he was in love with Barry. Who’d kissed him and held him and tried to touch every inch of Barry he was allowed, and yet in his sleep he’d only reached out to join their hands.

As the erratic thrum of his pulse calmed, a smile came to Barry’s face. Len was on his stomach, face pressed to the pillow through his even breathing. He looked so young, relaxed and unassuming in sleep. All his lines smoothed away and it was easy to forget that this man had done terrible things in his life. He’d had terrible things done to him too. Did any of that matter if he wanted to be better now?

Barry believed in Oliver. Was Len so different? Oliver had always wanted to do good, even if he’d gone about it the wrong way, and Len hadn’t, sure, but if he did now, wasn’t that what mattered?

All Barry had to imagine was Lewis Snart being there the night his mother died and taking him in instead of Joe. And while Joe was too close in age to have adopted Len, Barry still wondered how different things might have been if Len had been raised by someone better.

In that world, hero and villain would have been reversed, Barry was sure of it. Some people were like Zoom, reveling in their darkness, but others could overcome it, come out better on the other side and change if only someone believed in them.
Len was bold and smart and passionate. Now, he’d proven he had a softer side, a good side—and not because of Bivolo’s influence that Barry couldn’t trust, but because of Lisa and the Legends. Because of Christmas and how Len had teetered on the line, even if he hadn’t been able to cross to Barry’s side yet. Finally, he had. He’d been part of a team that helped save the world.

Barry just hoped Len didn’t hate him when this was over. He was so proud of him for finding his way to the Legends. The man deserved better than being forced to love someone like him.

Carefully, Barry drew his hand out from under Len and rolled away to slip free of the covers and leave the bed. Len stirred but gripped the sheets where Barry had been and seemed to calm and doze back off as he snuggled into his pillow. It was all so sweet. Anyone would find him endearing like this. Barry couldn’t be fully blamed for falling prey to his charms and allowing that kiss in the kitchen.

Though the most miraculous thing about last night was that Barry had been so distracted, he didn’t remember dreaming.

After retrieving his sweatshirt on his way out the door, Barry stepped into the main room to survey the apartment. It was impressive but not extravagant. He hadn’t been able to get a good look last night with most of the lights out, deep in the twilight hours. Now, the sun brightened the room to show off the artwork and the character in the furniture that, as homey as it was, still showed Len’s personality.

The blanket draped over the sofa was slate grey and so soft, Barry’s hand sunk into the fabric when he touched it. There were abstract paintings and cityscape photographs on the walls. Barry wondered if all of them had something to do with Len’s thefts or if they were just sentimental. Then he spotted a black and white picture of the Motorcar.

Barry had been to the diner across from the precinct so many times, he couldn’t miss it, even if the photograph had to be from at least forty years ago. The place looked a bit less like a greasy dive, and Barry had to wonder about the significance to Len. Lewis had been a cop. Len’s grandfather too. Maybe Grandpa Snart hadn’t been as terrible.

Barry resisted the urge to look around more in depth than what he could see from a quick perusal of the main room. Len might not mind, but Snart would.

It was all so unfair, but to no one more so than Len. Barry should do something before they headed to the Labs. Make breakfast maybe? He had slept with the man after all, he thought with a wry smile.

Heading to the kitchen, he started opening cabinets to find the flour…when the door handle jiggled.

Barry’s eyes shot to the entryway. Who was—

The lock clicked and the handle turned. Someone was breaking in!

Barry looked around in a panic, flashing behind the kitchen island to hide with a clatter of the cupboard he’d had open just as the door creaked with the entrance of a stranger. Who would dare break into Leonard Snart’s apartment? Maybe the person didn’t know. Maybe it was some hitman from one of the mob families who’d learned Len was back in town.

Barry’s heart was hammering so loudly, it had to be audible. He tried to stifle his breathing, to stay calm and think his way through this. He wasn’t wearing his costume but he was still the fastest
man alive. He could take down one person trying to get the upper hand on Captain Cold.

Clearing his thoughts, he focused on listening. Had the door already closed? He wasn’t sure. He couldn’t hear anything. When a solid minute passed and still no sound indicated that the perpetrator was still there, Barry risked a peek around the side of the island toward the door. No one.

Standing cautiously, Barry scanned the kitchen and living room, but there was nothing. Had he imagined things? Had it just been the landlord tossing in forgotten mail or something? But nothing was on the rug in front of the door or set on the end of the island.

Barry inched further forward, wondering if he should glimpse out into the hallway. He was just starting to relax, to think that he must have been hearing things or was going crazy after the insane night he’d had, when he reached the edge of the wall that fell off around the corner to Len’s locked closet.

A whir and squeal of turning gears sounded from the glowing yellow end of the gun that appeared around the corner, prefacing the woman who stepped out of hiding.

Barry wished he could blame such an obvious oversight on anything but his own ineptitude. He should have guessed, should have known better, considering Lisa Snart was behind that gun.

“Who the hell are you?” she growled with more bite than Barry was used to. “And where is my brother?”

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

...still with me?

Lisa next. :-}
Familial Love

Chapter Summary

Lisa doesn't take to Barry's presence very well, but at least in the aftermath of disaster, Len and Barry manage to get closer by talking things out before the next disaster strikes.

Chapter Notes

I have work tomorrow and it's almost midnight, but damn it, I could not let this chapter go unfinished another day.

You are all AMAZING.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One of these days being the fastest man alive would help Barry before he got into a sticky situation.

“Uhh…” he articulated in the least articulate way possible, raising both hands and freezing in place as he gaped at the glowing gold energy of Lisa’s gun.

He’d never seen her look so, well, cold. Even when she’d come to them for help and waves of hurt and worry had crossed her face, she’d tried to cover it with a playful smile and bat of her eyes at Cisco. Now, she faced someone she believed was standing between her and her brother—with no witnesses.

“You know me!” Barry blurted when the end of the gun began to brighten. “And your brother's fine. He’s just—”

“No dice, sweetie. No one sees the inside of this apartment.” The gun whirred louder and Barry didn’t have time to debate if she was bluffing.

Tapping into the Speed Force, the room around him slowed. He saw the stiffness of Lisa's posture and the tightness of her jaw, the wild panic in her eyes that she hid behind a stony mask. She assumed the worst finding a stranger in Len’s home whose first instinct had been to hide.

The gun glowed brighter and Barry pivoted out of the line of fire, moving around Lisa to take hold of her from behind. He grasped the hand on the trigger and pointed it upward in case the gun discharged, holding her tight against him with one arm around her waist. The smell of lilacs assaulted his senses as the room snapped back to normal speed and his cheek pressed to her hair.

“Notice any déjà vu now?” he hissed beside her ear, and her struggles instantly stilled.

“Flash?”

Barry opened his mouth to reply when a sharp heel stomped on his sock-clad foot. “Ah!” he
howled as Lisa pushed out of his arms with ease and reclaimed full control of her gun.

*That* was going to leave a mark, or a puncture wound, but he couldn’t dwell because in moments she’d spun around and was pointing her gun in his face again.

“How!” The gun charged, *glowed*, “Stop,” and Barry readied himself to flash out of the way even if he had to do it limping—when Len’s voice cut across the apartment.

“Lisa!”

The tension released in a rush as they both turned to the bedroom where Len stood dressed for bed, groggy but coming to full alertness by sheer will as he stared his sister down.

“Drop it. Now.”

Déjà vu again, only this time Barry was reminded of a different night. He saw how similar the Snart siblings could be in their expressions and body language as he was brought back to the moment Len killed his father, when he’d lowered the cold gun from threatening to shoot Barry because he’d learned Lisa was safe.

She painted an eerily similar picture, gold gun sagging in a dead drop, her steely expression cracking with a clash of anguish and relief breathing out of her all at once.

“Lenny.”

But as quickly as her walls fell, she built them up again, stowing her gun in its holster and shooting Barry a glare as she clicked her heels across the hardwood floors to meet Len in the living room. No heartfelt hug followed, just a cross of Lisa’s arms and a flick of her hair.

“Where the hell have you been?” she accused, pouty and irreverent, but unmistakably more at ease.

Len pinched the bridge of his nose like he was used to her overreacting by pointing guns at people on his behalf. “I can’t have one night without you keeping tabs on me?”

“You were gone for months last time. I’m supposed to grin and bear it? You promised—”

“Lisa—”

“You were all over the news!” Her arms flew down at her sides and then one arched across the space in front of her as if painting the headline. “FLASH AND COLD FOIL JEWELRY HEIST—together. Thanks for the invite, by the way. Now you’re *sleeping* with him?”

“Whoa.” Barry held out both hands as he approached them and—shit, he was limping a little.

“We’re not sleeping together. I mean, technically, last night we did *sleep* together, but nothing happened.”

Lisa afforded him a look that practically screamed, “*Try again, sweetheart*.”

“You’re bleeding,” Len said, the firm expression falling from his face as his eyes drew to the tinge of red leaking through the top of Barry’s sock.

“It’s fine,” Barry tried to shut down any gushing Len might fall into in front of his sister. She already scrunched her brow at him for looking so concerned. “I heal fast. Lisa just has sharp shoes.”

“*Nothing* happened?” She crossed her arms once more, scrutinizing them both with the type of
gauging that always made Barry squirm, because Len could look at him the same way, as if they
could see through anybody. “So you saved the hanky panky for some undisclosed location and
that’s why you weren’t here when I stopped by last night?” Her voice kept escalating, and with it, Barry and Len each escalated to match.

“We were out late at STAR Labs,” Len said.

“And there was no hanky panky,” Barry spoke over them. “Did you seriously just say that? Look,” he moved closer and Lisa pulled back a step, “we can’t be away from each other. Bivolo—”

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK.

All three turned to look at the door and Barry suddenly took notice of how loud they’d gotten at who knows how early on a Saturday morning.

“Lenny!” a gruff voice like an old woman with a smoking habit called from the hallway.

Len cast his sister a reproachful glare on his way across the living room. When the door opened, Barry’s guess was confirmed; a dark skinned old woman, in her 80s at least, wearing a smart yellow blouse and black slacks with a floral headscarf as though she’d seen the worst end of chemo, stood with her hands on her hips. If she was fighting cancer, her flawless makeup didn’t show it. She also stood about a head shorter than Len but with full intimidation burning from her eyes.

“Apolgies, Evelyn. We’ll try to keep it down,” Len said without any hint of his Captain Cold drawl. Even Lisa looked cowed by this woman.

“Sorry, Mrs. Kittelsby,” she echoed like speaking to a grade school teacher.

“As you should be,” the woman said in her rough voice between a growl and a purr. “An old woman can’t enjoy a quiet morning in peace? What’s all the fuss about? And who’s the fresh face?” She tilted her piercing gaze around Len to land on Barry.

He felt immediately cornered, like he had to speak but had no idea what to say. “Uh…I-I’m Sam! Lenny’s tech—”

“No. You’re not.” Len turned back to him and shook his head.

The woman snorted. “Green, isn’t he? Looks like fuzz, Lenny. Better keep your eyes on that one.” She dragged her eyes down Barry like she could see right through his STAR Labs sweatshirt to his Flash suit beneath.

Len leaned in close to her and whispered something that made her eyes widen.

“Oh! Well…” she rumbled with a slightly more intrigued smile, “isn’t that something? Keep the decibels at an appropriate level now, Lenny. And do try to be safe, will you? You too, dear,” she called to Lisa.

Lisa nodded.

“We will,” Len said, “and you, Evelyn…be good.”

She gave a sly smirk and shake of her head as if tossing hair that no longer existed before making her exit to the apartment across the hall.
Barry’s stomach dropped at the implications of her departure when Len returned to the living room. “Did you tell her I’m The Flash?”

“Of course not.” Len looked affronted. “And don’t slap on aliases that no one in their right mind would buy. You’re no criminal, even Evelyn can see that.”

“Then what—”

Lisa cleared her throat before Barry could press for more. “Don’t think I’m satisfied yet. What’s this about Bivolo and not being able to be away from each other?”

“It’s a long story—”

“Good thing I’m a fan of long stories then. And coffee,” Lisa interrupted Barry and looked at them both like an industrial crane couldn’t move her. “So why don’t we work on getting both of those things rolling, shall we?”

Barry had to smile. Both Snarts were impossibly stubborn, and while that should have been irritating, it was somehow enjoyable too, how steadfast they could be.

Len gestured Lisa to the kitchen, but with Barry he moved his hand to the small of his back and guided him forward by touch. It was subtle and simple like Barry had asked of him, but Lisa noticed, and she wasn’t as good at hiding her surprise as she’d been at caging her other emotions behind bluster and a coy smirk.

“You make the coffee,” Barry said to Len, moving out of range of those seeking hands to stand beside Lisa. “I’ll explain about last night.”

He started with the heist from his perspective, getting called to Tiffany’s by the alarm and finding the injured guard. The ice residue had him guessing that Len would be there, but they hadn’t planned anything, at least not more than Len hoping Barry would show up to thwart the goons since he’d learned about the heist the night before.

Len cut Barry off before he could repeat anything about the woman he’d mentioned. He was obviously less inclined to share that information with his sister, and Barry didn’t want to push when Len was being purposely evasive. The man had a right to some secrets, especially given his current state.

But once Barry got to the part about Bivolo, Len kept steering the conversation away from how he’d also been hit with implanted emotion, and that secret was not acceptable. Barry frowned around his frequent sips of coffee—exceptional coffee, like how did Len get his coffee that good with barely any cream or sugar in it?—and some leftover scones that single-handedly changed Barry’s perspective on the baked good forever.

He’d always thought scones were meant to be dry and flavorless, and thus avoided them, but these were rich and amazing and went so well with the coffee. Len’s culinary prowess had been proven twice now, so Barry tried to cover his enjoyment to hide how much the way to his heart really was through his stomach.

“If you’re too far away from The Flash for more than ten minutes your heart stops?” Lisa repeated when they got to the crux of the matter. She’d lost all pretense of not being worried and set her coffee down with a clank on the kitchen island.

“We’re taking care of it,” Len said.
“There’s also the other part to what Bivolo did,” Barry finally spoke up.

Len shot him a withering look. “The proximity issue is the only thing of consequence.”

“Only thing of—” Barry cut off with a slam of his own coffee mug. “You are not in love with me. Bivolo using his powers to make you think you are is just as important because it isn’t real.”

The involuntary desire Barry had been trying so hard to ignore filled Len’s face, breaking him open like a chest wound for everyone to see his beating heart. “You’ll see,” he said, entranced by Barry as if Lisa had evaporated. “When we fix this and I still love you, you’ll understand.”

Lisa would have dropped her mug if she were still holding it, her hands and mouth went so slack with disbelief. Then her features fixed into something harder. “Oh, Bivolo is gonna pay for this,” she snarled.

“Thank you,” Barry exclaimed. “Will you please explain to him that he doesn’t love me? He’s probably never even had a thing for me before.”

“Well…” her fierceness fell away and she shifted her eyes between the pair with a shrug.

Shit. The coffee churned in Barry’s stomach, and Len looked so damn pleased with himself.

“Satisfied?” he said.

“But Lenny—” Lisa started to interject only to give up with a defeated slackness in her posture to start again. She tapped her fingernails against her mug. “Listen to me, Lenny. I won’t pretend to know what you really feel for the kid. We don’t exactly share,” she spared a glance at Barry. “But love? Love you’ll actually own up to? That isn’t you.”

Barry had been fielding Len’s arguments since last night, so he anticipated denial and more confessions that would never end. Instead, Len dropped his eyes to the table.

“I know that. I know this isn’t right. But it’s still real,” he clenched his fists. “I’ve never felt this kind of want before.”

Lisa’s distaste for what was happening mirrored Barry’s own, their eyes meeting across the island with no more wariness or distrust, only concern for Len situated between them.

“That’s what Bivolo’s power does,” Barry said. “It makes you certain that you not only feel what you do but that you’re justified in feeling it.”

For once, Len didn’t counter him, merely continued staring at the counter.

Barry looked at Lisa once more so she’d understand that he was only trying to help before he reached over and placed a hand on Len’s arm, prompting him to look up and smile with heartbreaking rawness. “We’ll fix this, and then, however you really feel…at least those emotions will be yours.”

The heat in Len’s eyes was only belied by his sister being so close. If Lisa hadn’t been there, Barry was certain Len would have professed his devotion or maybe tried to kiss him again. Then Len started to lean forward and Barry realized that Lisa wasn’t any more insurance than Cisco and Caitlin had been.

“We should get to the Labs,” he withdrew his hand.
“I’m coming with you,” Lisa said.

“Okay.” Barry had anticipated as much. “Not like you haven’t been there before. And now you know my secret.” Which he seriously hoped didn’t bite him in the ass, but he wanted to trust Lisa. He wanted to trust both of them.

Pulling on a layer of allure and flirtatious musing, Lisa took another sip from her coffee. “Plus, it’ll give me the chance to see Cisco again. I’m sure he’s having a laugh riot over this.”

Watching the way Len seemed transfixed by Barry’s face, lost to the conversation, made Barry frown. “Trust me. None of us thinks this is funny.”

XXXXX

Len leaned his forehead against the cool tiles of the shower, contrasting the steaming hot temperature of the water. He couldn’t focus. It was becoming troublesome. He knew it was wrong, he knew, but he couldn’t seem to fight the disarray of his thoughts.

When Lisa first arrived and he feared for Barry’s safety, he’d been so centered, so motivated by what needed to be done. But the longer he looked at Barry and spent time in close quarters, the more the rest of the world dimmed. The ground could open up and swallow him whole and all he wanted was for Barry to touch him again.

Barry had showered first. Gotten clean and dressed at near Flash speed so Len could have his turn and they could get to STAR Labs. Barry had been in this shower, in Len’s shower, hands running along his skin, across his lean muscled form.

Len had already soaped up, no need for shampoo with the way he kept his hair, and his hand trailed down his chest through the suds, below his waist, between his hips…

No. Think. Focus.

Alexa did this on purpose. She could have used Bivolo to have Len killed, could have killed The Flash too, given how vulnerable they’d been. So why hadn’t Bivolo or one of the others taken the shot? Why didn’t Alexa want that, and what did she want instead? There was a scheme in the works that started with that necklace, with getting a good cash flow and making a show at Tiffany’s—a show of Len working with The Flash.

FLASH AND COLD FOIL JEWELRY HEIST, Lisa had said. All of Central City knew. All of Len’s old contacts knew he’d helped stop someone else’s heist. Of course Lisa had been worried. This changed everything if Alexa went around corroborating that Len was a rat. He should have seen it coming, should have been smarter and less emotionally compromised. Now, he was entirely compromised.

He knew the voices of the other pros on Alexa’s docket, the two who’d made it out with Bivolo. They didn’t care about the younger henchmen, just fodder like Len had predicted, but the two Len hadn’t seen unmasked…he knew them. He’d worked with them before. For them this might be a vendetta, but it wouldn’t be that simple for Alexa. She had something bigger in mind.

If she’d come back to Central City, then she wanted the city for herself.

There’d be more. More heists. Anything to destabilize the families, the businesses and rackets already in place. That’s why she needed The Flash. And Len…

Suddenly, the plan formed with crystal clarity and Len threw the tap off and shucked the curtain
aside. He had to warn Lisa and Barry.

Drying off and throwing on his clothes, Len burst out of the bathroom as quickly as he could, cloud of steam following him. Lisa was at the kitchen island finishing another cup of coffee, talking amiably with Barry…

Barry.

The kid was changed into the spare clothes he’d brought—jeans, black button-down, and a red bomber jacket. He looked slick and casual and effortlessly beautiful. He was even smiling that dimpled grin talking with Len’s sister, making her laugh with ease after staring down her gun and nursing a puncture in his foot. Only Barry Allen could do that, fit so seamlessly into Len’s life when anyone else might have disrupted it.

They turned to look at him as he joined them from across the apartment and he knew there was something he’d meant to say. “I have to—there was something—something important I had to tell you.”

Barry brightened, standing up straight from how he’d been leaning over the counter. “Yeah?” he asked with interest.

Len struggled to grasp what was rapidly fading, caught off guard by Barry’s eyes and the kindness and understanding shining out of them. “I…I can’t remember.” It was vexing, frustrating, because he’d been close this time, he was sure of it, to clutching something that always seemed to slip through his fingers.

Barry’s eyebrows turned downward in sympathy. “I think Bivolo’s done more to you than emotional control. Come on. Let’s go figure this out.”

Feeling foreign in his own skin, Len nodded. He wanted to be near Barry, always, forever, but he also wanted to fix this so he could prove to the miracle boy before him that his love was more than suggestion from an enemy.

It had to be.

XXXXX

Cisco and Caitlin were waiting for them at the Labs when they arrived, and Cisco nearly propelled his tablet into the air when he saw Lisa in their company. He recovered with an impressive clutch at the device and over-the-top Casanova smile that made Lisa beam like a hungry tiger given an easy meal.

“Hey…you. Lisa. How have you been?” He tried to lean casually against the center desk and failed spectacularly when his elbow didn’t quite reach where he was aiming for.

Normally, Len would have raised an eyebrow and kept his face frighteningly neutral, but he wouldn’t deny his sister discovering the same kind of love he’d found in Barry, especially since Cisco clearly returned her affections and was a far better option than any of her previous boyfriends. Cisco, Len could stand. Cisco, he even liked.

It made him want to look on Barry again, and he did, watching him move across the Cortex with that buzzing, natural grace. Len followed him rather than track Lisa to Cisco until they stood before Doctor Snow.

“Lisa?” she whispered with an implied question in the word.
“It’s fine,” Barry said, “I’m sure Heat Wave knows my identity by now too.”

“Not by my doing, but likely,” Len said.

Caitlin's face pinched at the prospect.

“Also fine,” Barry defended, “because they’re on our side now. Right?” He passed Len a hopeful glance.

Mick was a delicate issue, but Lisa would welcome the idea as long as she still got to have fun.

“Right,” Len smiled back at him.

“I take it there’s been no change since last night?” Caitlin asked.

“Actually, I think it might be getting worse,” Barry said.

“Proximity?”

“I don’t know, we made sure to stay close. But he keeps getting distracted, like he’s being forced to not think about anything but me.”

Was that…true?

Wake up, Len heard like a shout in his ear, but when he looked, no one was there.

“That makes sense,” Caitlin said as Cisco and Lisa joined them. “We think we know why Bivolo’s powers aren’t working like before. Come on. Let me show you.”

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The five of them gathered in the med room where Caitlin displayed the images from Len’s earlier brain scan on one of the monitors.

“What I noticed before was the increased activity in the insula, which relates to feelings of intense romantic love. What I missed was the decreased activity in the dorsal anterior cingulate. Those two occurrences together are how the human mind reacts to hypnosis.”

“We already know he’s hypnotized,” Barry said.

“But that’s not what Bivolo’s power did before,” Cisco countered. “He just stimulated the part of the brain that lights up when you’re angry, increasing it until it was out of control.”

“His stare is directly related to altered states of the brain,” Caitlin said, “and we think he’s figured out how to tailor that to a full hypnotic trance.”

Lisa shifted on her feet. “Meaning exactly? Lenny’s gonna start quacking like a duck?”

Len only realized he and Caitlin offered her the same unimpressed glower when their eyes eventually fell to each other. He smirked.

“It means,” Caitlin pressed on, “Bivolo isn’t operating on a single enhanced emotion anymore. Len could be acting on very precise programming. Love Barry,” she counted off. “Focus on Barry to avoid coming to conclusions about something Bivolo doesn’t want him to know about. And keep Barry close to ensure the programming is reinforced, to the point that having Barry away from him for too long sends him into a fatal panic attack.”
“Which is why the Rainbow Reversal Beam didn’t work,” Cisco said. “The subconscious is more potent than stimulating one part of the brain. Len’s basically stimulating himself.”

Lisa choked on a snicker and Cisco’s eyes shot wide.

“Pretend I didn’t word it that way.”

The humor of the pun was infectious to everyone but Barry. He leaned back against the desk beside Caitlin and crossed his arms. “So the proximity issue is all in Len’s head? He should be able to beat it then!”

“Implanted suggestion this deep isn’t that easy, Barry,” Caitlin spun in her chair to face them. “This isn’t normal hypnosis. I doubt Len would be very susceptible ordinarily.”

Barry held his arms more tightly across his chest as he looked at Len. “Do you at least believe me now that what you’re feeling is only what Bivolo made you feel?”

Common sense was Len’s cornerstone, taking a breath and the time to plan, to get the lay of the land, the players involved, and react accordingly. Everything Caitlin and Cisco had explained added up to Bivolo having complete control over him, and yet Len’s common sense warred against the facts. “Correct me if I’m wrong, doc, but isn’t hypnosis incapable of making someone act entirely against their nature?”

“Well…technically…”

“So it stands to reason there’s still a basis for how I feel?”

“We can’t know that for certain,” Caitlin spoke quickly. “With Bivolo’s powers—”

“I know,” Len conceded, taking them all in—his sister and…strange friends. But Barry was so much more than that; he’d always been more than that. “I know he’s done something that’s twisting me around, but I couldn’t love you this deep, Barry, if that didn’t come from somewhere real.”

Fire lit behind Barry’s eyes and he pushed from the desk to confront Len like he was ready to seize him by the shoulders and shake him. Then quick as a flash, the fervor faded as Barry kept himself in check. “I told you, I’m not arguing about this anymore. What matters is making sure we can be apart again so you stay safe.”

“Don’t you see?” A rush of emotion filled Len’s chest, like a fresh injection of a drug he was already addicted to. “Even now, upset with me, your first priority is my safety. Yet you’re so certain I couldn’t love you?” He wanted to move toward Barry, to take his hand, reach for his face, hold him, but he held back. Everyone’s eyes were on him and they were all distraught, but only Barry felt that way because he didn’t believe what Len saw in him.

“What do we do now?” Barry ignored Len and turned to Caitlin.

“This isn’t really either of our areas,” she indicated her and Cisco, “but it’s possible we can break the connection with additional suggestion.”

“More hypnosis?” Lisa frowned. Len wasn’t a fan of the idea either.

“We’ll have to test and see what happens,” Caitlin said. “More direct stimuli to the affected parts of the brain might work too. Lisa, we could use your help if you’re staying?”
Not even a glimmer of uncertainty hid behind his sister’s eyes and Len couldn’t help being proud of that. She never showed her hand, he’d taught her too well, but she’d always been more at home among Team Flash. She deserved so much better than the path he’d led her down.

“I’m not going anywhere. Feel free to order me around however you like,” Lisa said with a glance at Cisco, who blushed ridiculously. Caitlin rolled her eyes at the antics, but Len could tell the doctor wasn’t as put off by Lisa’s presence as she’d been when they first worked together.

“Barry, you stay with Len,” Caitlin said. “Proximity might only be in his head, but so is everything about this. That’s why being away from you affects him at a greater distance. In another room, he could still see you and knew you were close. Even not seeing you, he knew you were nearby. But the farther away you got, he started to worry and…”

“I get it,” Barry nodded stiffly, and Len recognized how right they were. It was when he didn’t know where Barry was and how soon he’d be back that the panic set in. He just wished Barry didn’t seem so put out by having to stay with him.

The others filed into the Cortex, leaving Len and Barry alone. There wasn’t much space so Len moved to sit on the bed, while Barry kept his arms crossed like a shield, as if he anticipated an ambush.

Sagging atop the thin mattress, Len’s feet dangled and he felt like some experiment gone wrong with how Barry kept his distance. “Do you hate me so much?” he asked.

“I don’t hate you,” Barry said, losing his protective expression in seconds. His arms loosened as he slowly moved across the room. “I’m sorry I keep snapping. But Bivolo is controlling your thoughts. That should infuriate you.”

“It does. But we’ll take care of him.”

“By putting him in the meta wing at Iron Heights,” Barry said like addressing a deviant child.

“Of course,” Len smiled; he could compromise when it suited him. “You’re so certain I should be unhappy, but I promise you, Barry, loving you is a wonderful feeling.”

Misery grabbed hold of Barry’s face and twisted it. “That just makes it worse.”

Len was starting to realize that while it hurt when Barry was away from him for too long, the same pain made its presence known whenever Barry was in pain. “You really have given up on love, haven’t you?”

Barry didn’t answer.

“The night before the heist I…I saw you,” Len said. “I went to the West house.”

“To warn me?” Barry’s eyes snapped up.

“Maybe. Maybe I just wanted to see you. And I did. I watched you look as heartbroken as you do now…as you denied Miss West a kiss.”

The sincerity Barry had been wearing fell to bitterness. “Spying on me again,” he gritted his teeth. “Awesome.”

Another spike of pain tore through Len. “I’ve never done right by you, have I?” he said.
“Well you attempted to kill me on multiple occasions.”

“You were a threat. But the more I learned of you, I…I saw you as something else.”

“Yeah? And what was that?”

“Opportunity. To be better.”

Barry laughed, and though the sound held no humor, the conversation kept bringing him closer.

“So you decided to kill me with Heat Wave?”

“No,” Len ached to reach for Barry as he sifted through the memories, “I knew you’d beat us. I planned it that way. You were so much fun, Scarlet, reminding me of why I loved the game. Mick and I had been on the outs, figured facing you could help. Same with Lisa. Wanted the gang back together, to have some fun in my home town.”

Barry huffed, his false smile only wounding Len further. “So you used me for team bonding. Great…”

Len was saying it all wrong. If everything had been one-sided, the appeal wouldn’t have lasted.

“Thought it was fun for you too,” he said softly.

“Not when people got hurt.”

The pain wrenched a little sharper. “I’m sorry for that. I am. I don’t want to be like that anymore.” And he knew he meant those words no matter what the others believed, because it had nothing to do with loving Barry, his love was simply why he wanted to tell him. “You believed in me to be better. Why?”

Barry’s eyes darted downward. He was close enough now to reach for the bed and lean against his palm. “No one could love their sister that much and be all bad,” he said.

Len smiled and Barry’s lips twitched too. “You believed in me before then.”

“You…listened to me. You betrayed me at every turn, but you still stuck to our deal from the woods. For the most part.” He glanced away again, always shy when the conversation turned serious. But that smile still grew. “Someone who’s as big of a dork as you couldn’t be all bad either. My…father…he lost over a decade because no one believed in him. I should be willing to give more people the benefit of the doubt. I should…but I don’t always. With you I wanted to be right.”

“And it had nothing to do with my devilish charm?”

Barry chuckled. “Definitely not. You’d have to have some first.”

“Ouch, kid,” Len laughed with him as he leaned back on his hands, but in the quiet that existed in the moments between, he kept finding his way to brutal truths he wanted Barry to understand. “I’m sorry I broke our deal, but I’m not sorry for the reasons I did. The first was to save you.”

“Save… What?” Barry blinked like he’d never considered that before.

“Ferris Air.”

“Deathbolt…” he breathed as recognition hit him.

“I wanted to have powerful new friends, a better foothold on the city, true. You gave me a golden
opportunity. Gave Lisa one too,” he smirked, and Barry broke into a fresh smile at the awful, wonderful pun. “I also didn’t approve of your methods, caging people without due process. Not a fan of the system, but at least there is a system. Were you really okay with what you planned that night?”

“I didn’t know what else to do,” Barry said. “They were all going to die if I didn’t get them out of the Pipeline, but I couldn’t just let them go. We would have found another solution after—”

“Would you? Or would they have been conveniently forgotten to make things easier? For you and for the city of course.” Len had thought all that during the mission but he hadn’t said the words. “I’m not trying to bring you low, Barry. I pushed you that night because…you made me step up my game. Least I could do was return the favor. You believed I could be better, but even before then…I believed the same of you.”

Moisture filled Barry’s eyes until they looked like emeralds shining. “And killing your father?”

“I have no regrets about that,” Len said. He never would, never could. “He threatened to kill Lisa. He tried to kill you, just to spite me. He knew you…meant something to me.”

“What?” Barry sputtered again.

Sometimes Len forgot how naïve he was. “Tech and other grunts I hire on the sly don’t call me ‘Lenny’. But if I hadn’t played along, he would have shot you then. I let you get away with too much. He noticed. Never had to say it, just gave me this look like he knew a secret.” His insides still roiled every time he thought of his father.

“He thought we were sleeping together...” Barry said as it dawned on him. “And he killed me for that?”

“He was an old-school asshole that way. Never was a fan of my…choices.”

Color flushed to Barry’s face as he spared a glance down Len’s body and then instantly looked ashamed for allowing it. “So you really are...uhh...”

Len lifted an eyebrow when Barry struggled to meet his gaze.

“Gay?”

Such a sweet, fumbling boy. “I prefer equal opportunity,” Len raised a finger, making Barry laugh. “And yes, he was willing to kill you just for that. I didn’t know you were fast enough to catch a bullet,” he drew his hand down into a fist. “I was so...sorry you’d gotten caught in my nightmare.”

“I know. I heard you,” Barry said.

Sorry, Barry.

Len thought he’d spoken too softly for even his father behind him to hear, but he’d still meant it.

“Suddenly, there you were,” he said, “but he had the trigger to Lisa’s bomb. You or Lisa, I...I can’t believe I hesitated. If it had been anyone else, anyone else, I wouldn’t have. I would have fired. But I trusted you, believed you could make sure she was safe. I couldn’t let him get away with that after, with throwing your life away, her life away, for his own selfish goals.” The emotions were still fresh, and maybe it was because what he felt for Barry was open and unfettered that these other emotions surged up in him so potently. “You believe in me...even though I’m just like him.”
“What? No, you’re not,” Barry retorted, leaning toward Len as if he’d been insulted. “You’re not.”

“Spent my whole life trying to make sure it never happened,” Len said, eyes too hot to contain what he was feeling, “but it still did.”

“No,” Barry insisted, reaching for Len’s hand that had fallen to the bed and grasping it tight. “You might be a criminal but you are nothing like your father. Maybe I don’t know what to believe about what’s happening right now, but I will always believe that.”

He was so warm, so close, so good. Barry wasn’t perfect—perfect would be boring and Len detested boring—but he was good. He might be a fool for believing in Len so blindly, but he was all Len would ever ask for of a new beginning. He could start his whole life over beneath the touch of those hands.

He knew what he’d promised Barry last night, that he wouldn’t try to kiss him again in a moment of weakness, but he was only a man and he would swear that Barry was the one who started to lean down first.

The sound of Lisa clearing her throat broke the spell and Barry snapped up straight with a jerk of his hand as if he’d been shocked. Len expected a wave of pain to follow after seeing that reaction, but it didn’t come because no part of this felt like failure.

Lisa said something about Cisco and Caitlin needing Barry’s help, then he was gone in a…flash. Len smiled as he watched his retreating form.

“Lenny,” Lisa broke into his thoughts, “what are you doing?”

He turned to her knowing that his smile was too unguarded but he couldn’t hold it back. She must have been standing in the doorway for a while before she interrupted them, judging by her disapproving scowl. “Why hide things from him? I love him.”

Unease crossed her face like she tasted something nasty in the air. “You’re starting to say that like it’s going out of style.”

_I love you._ Something he never said. Not even to her.

_Wake up, wake up, wake up!_

Nausea churned in Len’s stomach and he hopped from the bed to keep from lying back at how the room spun. Slowly, the dizziness passed, but he still felt like he might throw up.

Looking at his sister, he yearned to tell her all the things he never spoke out loud…but they weren’t easy to say. So how could he say them so openly to Barry?

“Lisa…”

“Forget it, Lenny.” She crossed in front of him and smiled in that painful, false way they’d perfected. It was a Snart staple—thanks to dear old dad. “The last thing I want is to see your heart give out right when you start using it. But we don’t even know if you mean any of this. Funny thing is, despite how it hurts seeing you like this only with him…I kinda hope you do. Mean it. Lovestruck is a nice look on you,” she smiled a little truer. “If it’s real.”

He might not be able to say the right words to her, but he still looked at Lisa without hiding anything from his expression, so she’d understand, so she’d know it wasn’t because he _didn’t_...
They drew together like forces of nature, practiced over years of not being comfortable with anyone but each other. Len pulled her to him as she fell against his chest and held her easily, like only she…and Barry had ever felt in his arms.

It was real. It was. As real as his devotion to his sister. It had to be. He wanted Barry too badly to believe otherwise, and Leonard Snart always got what he wanted.

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Hiding in plain sight was the best ruse of all. Besides, no one knew her face. Only a paltry handful in this city would spare her a second glance. Well, plenty would spare her a second, third, and forth glance, but not because they recognized that they were looking upon the next great queen of Central City.

Alexa didn’t do safe houses or low class neighborhoods, not since she was in her 20s still building her empire brick by brick. She was high class and deserved to enjoy what she’d earned. The penthouse in one of Central’s best hotels suited her fine. It even had a helicopter pad on the roof, which had served her well last night, though of course the helicopter made several stops before and after the hotel to throw off any witnesses.

“Another job this soon? In the middle of the day?”

The meta’s voice grew grating but she couldn’t dismiss his usefulness. Having powered people under her thumb was important in this new age. Still, he could learn a little more respect.

“Thought you wanted a slow build,” he said.

“I do.” Alexa lounged across from Roy Bivolo on the L-shaped sofa of her suite, enjoying a latte as she scheduled the next hit amongst her grunts with one hand flying across her laptop. Peons were for the dirty work, but she’d learned long ago that controlling every nuance remotely and knowing the intricacies of the newest software were not skills to be depended on of others. “But the initial chaos needs to be enough to rattle cages. Then the ramp up begins to throw people off each time they settle into complacency.”

Bivolo grunted. He was a good thief, she wouldn’t have enlisted his help if he was only a meta human, but he had trouble seeing the bigger picture. “You’ll run out of pawns,” he said.

“The ambitious ones won’t be as easily caught. They’ll learn. A big payoff takes work. Fall behind, too slow and snatched up by The Flash, too bad for you. But come out ahead and the rewards will be all of Central City at your feet.” She took a drink of her latte and set it on the coffee table, catching Bivolo’s attention and holding it. “Unless you think you can plan something on as grand a scale yourself?”

He sucked his teeth to avoid her stare.

“I didn’t think so. But you’re smart, Roy.” She uncrossed and recrossed her legs with a subtle shift, nothing as crass as Basic Instinct but still effective given the length of her skirt. His attention was all hers again. “You understand that with all your power, some things are best left to those who excel in different fields. The long game is mine. And we need another job done today to make sure those friends of yours at STAR Labs don’t have time to solve this riddle even if they have already guessed the punchline.”

“They can’t override my powers,” Bivolo said with all the overconfidence that explained why he’d failed the first time.
“They did before,” she reminded him.

“I’m stronger than that now.”

“I know you are. But to be safe, let’s keep them on their toes. And you two,” she looked to the men waiting in the wings for her orders, the ones who had come to her first, “remember that while Cold’s demise is inevitable and certainly your reward when this is over, the longer he stays in the game, the better it will play out. Hurt him, but leave him breathing, understand?”

The taller of the two sneered in pleasure at the thought, but the slighter man merely nodded.

“You’re the boss.”

Yes, Alexa contained her grin as she nodded for the pair to leave and head up today’s operation, _she was._

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Doubling the hypnosis had no effect on Len, even if Caitlin’s voice was soothing while she attempted. Barry was starting to wonder if he and Len were going to have to live the rest of their lives with a timeshare between STAR Labs and that apartment. They needed a line on Bivolo.

While Lisa helped Caitlin with various tests to break Len of Bivolo’s suggestions, Barry and Cisco worked on leads from the heist. Barry avoided talking directly with Joe and stuck to texts.

_Everything’s fine, Joe. Just working something for the case. What did CSI find on the roof?_

Nothing specified where the helicopter had gone. A few people had seen it around the city, but nothing concrete told them where to start looking for Bivolo or Alexa Marcos, who Barry could only assume wouldn’t be sloppy enough to use her real name. Bivolo would be easier to track, but up until now he hadn’t been very active since his escape from the convoy.

“What about known associates?” Barry leaned over Cisco’s shoulder at the main computer terminal. “Anything to give us a clue about where he might be hiding?”

“Dude, I have a whole grid mapped out for every meta human we’ve ever encountered, even some that are just rumors. All his known associates are in prison, and his powers aren’t flashy enough to know if he’s been using them around town.”

“If he’s increased his hold to full on mind control, he had to have practiced on someone.”

Cisco sipped from the slushy he'd been nursing since Barry flashed out to pick up lunch. “I’ll crosscheck anything I can find on people acting out with extreme rage or affection like they’ve been brainwashed, but half the cases of drunk and disorderly sound like that.”

Barry knew they were shooting in the dark but they had to do something. “At some point, I have to go back to work. We have lives.”

“And fresh villainy to get up to.”

Barry snorted. “You know, I’d take that over some of the other things he wants to get up to.”

Cisco promptly choked on his slushy. Served him right.

A buzz from Barry’s cell phone alerted him to a new message. He assumed it was Joe again, but instead Iris’s name blinked up at him.
Hey. Saw the news. You okay?

A week ago she would have called or walked into the Cortex demanding an update. Fine. Working the case.

With Snart?

Sometimes Barry hated how public his night job could be. With Cisco. Snart’s just lending a hand.

How about coffee tomorrow? You can tell me all about it. Jitters at 9AM?

Barry hesitated. He never used to hesitate when it came to spending time with Iris.

Cisco didn’t even try to hide his nosiness as he peered at Barry’s phone. “Dude, what is going on with you two? I thought…” he trailed with a not-so-subtle bob of his eyebrows.

“I thought too,” Barry pulled his phone to his chest, “but it’s a bad idea.”

“Because of Zoom?”

“Because of me.” Without thinking, Barry fired off a quick, Sure 9AM, because he didn’t want to lose his best friend, but he didn’t know what else to say anymore. When he looked up from his phone, Cisco was still staring at him. “What?”

“I know this is a bad time to talk about this—”

“So let’s not talk about it.” Barry circled around Cisco to put the med room at his back. The lurch in his gut from thinking about Iris increased tenfold seeing Len bookended by Lisa and Caitlin like a devil and angel on his shoulders.

“Barry…” Cisco pushed on regardless, “do you still love her?”

This must be the pain Len felt whenever Barry got too far away. “I’ll always love her.”

“Then if she’s interested in giving things a shot—”

“She doesn’t know what she’s saying,” Barry shook his head. “I know she loves me, but not… It’s like what Len’s going through now—she thinks she loves me because she…should, because it feels like the right answer, but it’s not. I didn’t pursue her after Eddie died for a reason. She’s only pursuing me now...because he’s not here.”

Cisco gaped at him, but he had to have thought it. Everyone thought it. Barry certainly did. “You believe that?”

“It’s not like I blame her.” Barry clutched at his arms; he kept doing that, like he needed to hold himself in or his heart would tumble out. “I don’t mean…I don’t resent…” He scrubbed a hand down his face and then up through his hair. “I can’t talk about this now. She should be with someone who’d be better for her. Who wouldn’t put her in danger just by existing near her.”

A pause lingered between them, but eventually Cisco said, “And you should be with someone who doesn’t mind the danger?”

Barry refused to look behind him. “This isn’t about him.”

“Hey, I know, okay?” Cisco held up his hands. “I saw the faces you and Iris made the other night when you came in from outside. You clearly shot that down before Len showed up. I figured you
just needed time because of...your dad and everything. Now this mess has you turned around coz of your thing for Snart.”

“What thing?” Barry stood up taller. “I don’t have a thing.”

Cisco raised both eyebrows in his ‘Really, bro?’ expression that was annoyingly never wrong. “You have something of a thing. The way you look at him sometimes. How close you two stand together.”

“He’s whammied by Love.”

“I’m not talking about the last couple days. Hey,” Cisco scooted his chair closer to better keep his voice hushed, “he’s a good looking guy, I can admit that. Obviously, I get how someone could be won over by the Snart charm, terrifying as it is sometimes.”

“Oh god.” Barry was losing his mind. Lisa and Leonard Snart had been their enemies less than a year ago and now he and Cisco were discussing how easy it was to fall for their charms? “I can’t even think about that when he’s like this. It doesn’t matter if I…” He trailed when Cisco raised his eyebrows again, begging for the confession he already saw coming. “I like him. Fine. A little. But that makes it worse, don’t you get that? This Alexa woman, she’s using me to target him, whatever other plans she might have. Once again, someone I care about is in danger just for knowing me. I shouldn’t be with Iris. Or Len. Or anyone.”

The lingering humor drained from Cisco’s face. “Bro, you can’t resign yourself to being alone forever. You’re hurting, you have a right to be hurting, but don’t shut everybody out. I love you,” he said, reaching out his arms like beckoning for a hug that so wouldn’t work with him sitting. “No whammy required. And even if someone kidnaps me again because you’re The Flash, which let’s be honest,” he let his arms drop, “is pretty likely, that’s never gonna change.”

What Cisco didn’t understand was how that made it worse too, because Barry knew he didn’t deserve the loyalty his friends and family had in him. Still, he had to answer, “Thank you. But I can’t shake that every time things start to head in a good direction, when I’m actually happy with my life, everything suddenly gets worse.”

“That’s not always true,” Cisco attempted optimism that Barry wished he could believe, but right that moment, Joe burst into the Cortex.

“What’s the deal, Barr? You gonna be a ghost in the machine all day?” Joe said as he strode over like a man on a mission, which was usually true. Then his eyes drifted to the med room and the glass walls he could easily see through. “Snart’s still here? His sister too?”

Before Barry could answer, the alarms went off in the Cortex.

Cisco whirled around to face his monitor as Caitlin, Lisa, and Len all rushed out of the med room. “Robbery in progress,” he reported, then turned around with a slow pivot to take in the mismatched crew and Joe’s questioning stare, “and it sounds like it’s a big one.”

TBC...
Every comment spurs me on more! :-) Thank you all!

Evelyn is totally Eartha Kitt. She will return.
Dynamic Duo

Chapter Summary

Barry and Len team up to stop a new heist, and Len gets closer and yet so far to remembering Alexa's plan.

Chapter Notes

I haven't even responded to reviews! Ah! I've been so busy, but you have no idea how much the comments feed me to write more for you. Thank you so much for every single one. :-) I will get back to you guys tomorrow.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The alarm blaring in the Cortex sent Caitlin, Lisa, and Len running out of the med room, which was when Len noticed Detective West. The disdainful look he expected from the man didn’t come, not to say he looked pleased to see Len and his sister, more reticent, tense certainly, but he didn’t immediately demand an explanation for their presence.

Len had a complicated relationship with authority, both cops and father figures, especially if someone was both. But Joe West wasn’t anything like Lewis Snart if Barry and Iris were any indication of his parenting. He hadn’t earned Len’s contempt outside of being a man of the law and being in Len’s way on occasion. Barry loved Joe like a father—like the father he’d been robbed of. Len had to play nice.

So he nodded at Joe without any snide remarks and asked Cisco, “Location?”

“Galleria on 7th,” Cisco said, fingers flying over the keyboard as he pulled up a security feed, both from inside one of the buildings and a street view. STAR Labs security might be sub-par but they didn’t skimp on tech when it came to guarding the city.

“Which business?” Barry asked. The Galleria was like a disconnected mall, two sides of one long street with shop after shop and no thru-traffic so people could walk about at their leisure.

“All of them,” Cisco said over his shoulder, then returned to his computer to pull up transcripts from dispatch. The speed with which he shifted between windows and surveillance was a beautiful thing to witness. He would have made a wonderful Rogue if it wasn’t for that pesky conscience.

Green eyes pulled Len from his thoughts. Len was a Rogue, Barry a hero, but they could meet in the middle. For all the grief the Legends had given him—the people and the mission—Len couldn’t deny that he’d enjoyed the work, the rush, the faint tug of elation in his gut at doing something good. He didn’t think he could ever give up the parts of his past that he enjoyed with equal ferocity, but there were so many elements he was tired of.
He was on Barry’s side if only that he’d never purposely hurt him or anyone close to him ever again, and if Barry needed his help…

“Sounds bad, Scarlet,” he said, holding Barry’s gaze with a subtle tilt of his head. “Guess it’s time to find out what sort of duo we make. You up for a tag-team?”

“You’re going?” Joe balked. “Not sure I’m used to you playing hero, Snart.” He scowled but held both hands up when Barry shot him an exasperated look. “Not complaining ‘bout you having back up out there, Barr. You joining them too?” he turned to Lisa.

“No,” Len and Barry overlapped, but Barry finished, “We don’t have comms for you, Lisa, and your gun isn’t as…friendly. Len can at least set his to the blast setting, and it’s not like we have a choice.”

“No choice?” Joe repeated. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The strain that overtook Barry’s expression wore on him like he was twice his age.

“Officers en route,” Cisco said, eyeing them warily.

“Come on,” Barry whirled to face Len, “we have to go back to the apartment for your gear.”

“You’ve been to his apartment? The hell am I missing?” Joe scanned the room, but no one rose to the challenge.

With Joe behind him, Barry closed his eyes in resignation. “Later,” he said before glancing aside at Cisco. “Do we have anything Len can use for comms in the meantime?”

“Uhh…” Cisco blinked owlishly.

“Forget it. Next time. Just…” But as Barry looked up at Len, acceptance of inevitable doom wasn’t at all what Len wanted to see. “Stay close.”

This whole mess was a disaster and Barry had been weathering far too many of those. Len smiled to ease him. “Always the plan,” he said, but instead of lightening Barry’s countenance, he just looked sadder.

“Keep me updated, Cisco. I’ll let you know when Len and I arrive.”

There was a spark of red and yellow that swiped the Flash suit from its mannequin just as Joe barked out, “And when the hell’d you start calling Snart—”

Another spark and Len’s stomach got left behind in STAR Labs, caught up in that same red and yellow light with the feeling of triopolymer against his cheek. They’d driven to the Labs with Lisa in tow, her on her bike, Len and Barry on his, but travel by being whisked away by the city’s own heroic blur of wind and lightning and gentle hands was the only way Len ever wanted to travel again. He’d always loved a good rollercoaster, part of why he loved his motorcycle, but neither of those things could compare with the thrill of being wrapped in the Speed Force and Barry Allen’s arms.

They were in the hallway outside Len’s apartment in moments, Barry buzzing in anticipation as he waited for Len to unlock the door.

“Thought you didn’t need keys these days,” Len said.
“I’ve never phased with someone else before. Just hurry up.”

Not for the first time, Len wondered if watching the world move at normal speed ever drove Barry bonkers. Some things needed to be savored, but the little nuances of annoyance when someone walked too slow or took too long making a Monday morning coffee order had to push The Flash close to madness.

Len entered the apartment and swiftly retrieved his parka, goggles, gun, and boots, but his sweater and thermal pants were still in the drier from last night. “I’ll—”

“I got ’em,” Barry said, and was back with the items almost before Len had finished speaking, thrusting them into his hands.

Len knew time was of the essence but he couldn’t help staring. “You gonna watch?” he grinned. Barry was practically bouncing, eager to be gone. “We don’t have time for this,” he huffed like a petulant teenager, and in the moment Len resigned himself to simply drop his pants right there, an alternative struck Barry and he zipped to the task.

The sensation was wholly different from simply being carried by The Flash. A feather-like caress moved across Len’s body and down each of his limbs, tingling across his skin and leaving goosebumps in the aftermath. Len tipped backwards at one point, but a hand at his lower back kept him steady. Then it was over, the room awash in a faint blue tinge as Len’s goggles were pulled over his eyes.

Barry stood before him once more, hopping from foot to foot, “Let’s go,” as Len looked down to discover that he was dressed for the occasion in what had been mere moments, cold gun in its holster and his previous clothes folded in a pile on the floor.

“Did you just—” He was too amazed to finish the thought and looked up at Barry with a smirk. “That’s a cheap way to sneak a peek. I didn’t even get to enjoy it.”

“I didn’t look,” Barry groused.

“Not even a little?”

The rollercoaster began again with barely the sound of Len’s door slamming shut to assure him that Barry hadn’t left it open.

“Did you at least lock up?” he called from within the whirlwind.

“Yes.”

“Pity…”

“You wish I hadn’t?”

“Glad ya did, Scarlet, just a pity I didn’t get to enjoy your hand in my pocket.”

If Barry could screech to a halt like a car slamming on its breaks, he did so, stopping just in time, too, since he’d careened around a building to hide in an alley off the Galleria. His hands braced against the wall to slow any remaining momentum as Len dropped to his feet and found himself pinned between Barry’s arms. Len had caught him off guard—again. He really shouldn’t do that while traveling 300 miles per hour.
“Not the time,” Barry panted in his face.

Len knew those few miles hadn’t winded Barry, so he could only assume the cause was their proximity—much better than what happened when they were apart. Len could count the moles on Barry’s face not hidden by his cowl. “Couldn’t resist,” he said, teasing just a little more because Barry hadn’t moved away yet and seemed to be fighting a grin.

He dropped his arms and stepped back like it all caught up to him in a rush. “Promise me you won’t do anything stupid,” he turned serious.

Len drew the cold gun from its holster. Barry had led them to a good spot; he could hear the fading screams of civilians still running for the hills. “Stupid is usually the hero’s bag.”

“You’re the hero today, Cold,” Barry shot back. “Besides, like you’ve never made a dumb move.” It was early afternoon and the sun still shined above, showing off the lovely scarlet of the suit when Barry crossed his arms. Len had forgotten how good he looked during a day heist.

“Must have been thrown off by your boyish charm,” he said.

The grin finally won out on Barry’s face, tugging at one corner of his mouth then the other until he had to turn his head to hide the color creeping into his cheeks.

Len moved into Barry’s space close enough that a quiet gasp left him assuming Len would steal another kiss, but instead he let their cheeks brush and whispered, “Definitely your charm.”

“Just a reminder,” Cisco crackled over the comms, only loud enough for Len to hear because he stood so close, “a robbery is in progress and everyone can hear you both through the comms.”

Barry flinched and pulled out of reach. “What I meant was don’t get distracted because I’m in danger or trip up when you can’t see me. We have to stop these guys. Just…be yourself, okay?”

Nothing sounded better to Len, especially if Barry was asking. “In that case, listen up,” he shifted his gun to rest on his palm with a thunk, “you’re fast. Know what that’s good for?”

“Uhh…disarming bad guys?” Barry asked incredulously.


Annoyance flitted through Barry’s eyes, followed by curiosity, and finally acceptance that it wasn’t a bad idea. He nodded once and was gone and back in seconds.

“Six men. Two in the middle shop across the street. Two on lookout out front. One circling left looking for cops, another circling right heading to the corner shop on our side of the street. No hostages.”

His analysis was thorough enough to paint a clear picture in Len’s mind. “We need to draw the two indoors outside. Take out the one circling toward us first, fast as you can. Don’t let the others see you. Knock him out and drop him in the alley parallel to ours before coming back. They’ll panic when they see him missing.”

Barry nodded again, but before he could dash off, his eyes widened. “What if one of them is Bivolo? These men are outfitted just like the ones at Tiffany’s.”

“Bivolo’s not here.”
“How can you know that?”

“How can you know that?” Len said. “She won’t use him again until the right play.”

Barry’s hand flew to his ear with a grimace. The sound was muffled but Len could still make out a loud female voice. “Lisa’s not too happy you didn’t mention Alexa before,” Barry said when the yelling stopped.

Great, but Len could deal with that later. “Do as I said.”

Bobbing on his feet once, twice, Barry took off with a spark of yellow. This time when he returned, he dropped several weapons at Len’s feet. His smile was wide, elated by the game and by Len playing it with him. He liked being given orders. “What next?”

“Check how they’re reacting, but don’t start from this corner. They’ll catch wise. Go around the block.” Len surged with his own excitement as Barry obeyed. Each time he gave a command, Barry’s eyes unfocused for a split second as he calculated the odds and always came to a grinning conclusion. Clearly, the kid rarely took the time to strategize unless he was forced into a corner.

Once again, he returned in the span of a few breaths. “The man circling for police and the two on lookout are on the move, equal points between here and the other side of the street. One of the ones in the pawn shop came out to take over as lookout, one’s still inside.”

“Too easy,” Len grinned. “Nab the one inside. From around the block again. Deposit him in the same alley as the first. Go.”

Barry didn’t even pause. By the time he returned from his task, Len could hear the remaining goons shouting to each other.

“You got ‘em scared, kid. Now you’re a phantom. You’ve been wasting your potential playing the good ol’ boy.” He dragged his eyes down Barry’s body. This was what had held his interest when they first faced off, that buzz of energy he radiated. “They’ll move to see around corners, get a line on you. Get us to the roof.” He glanced up at the building behind them.

The rush and wind and tumult in his stomach was more pleasant every time Barry took hold of him. He almost laughed at how much fun he was having.

Once they were on the roof, Len darted to the edge to look down on the Galleria. From their vantage point, it was like looking down on a long corridor with shops of equal two-story height lining both sides for the length of almost two full blocks. The remaining four goons had all fanned out, a couple quickly reaching where Len and Barry had just been, the others heading the opposite direction, both groups staying in pairs.

“Divide and conquer,” Len turned to Barry as he came up beside him. “Drop me at the end of the block. I’ll get the two there. You take the ones below us.” Looking out across the rooftops and busy streets in the distance, he took note of approaching red and blue lights. “CCPD’s only three minutes out.”

“You can tell just from seeing the lights?” Barry gaped.

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“You can tell just from seeing the lights?” Barry gaped.

“How can you know that?” Len said. “She won’t use him again until the right play.”
Barry’s face still shone with evidence of the thrill he got from one-upping the opposition. Just like Len.

The whirlwind seized him and when he blinked he stood behind the pair at the far end of the Galleria. “You boys lost?” Len whipped his gun forward, “Why not take a minute to cool off?” and blasted the man to his left, arching the beam of cold quickly toward the man on his right. The first goon flew back to hit the ground, but the second leapt for cover around the corner.

They had both been dressed in black with masks and weapons like the goons from last night, but there was no way to know if these were the same men. Six again meant Alexa had recruited more, since four from Tiffany’s were in custody.

Hugging the wall of the shop on the corner, Len inched forward and whipped around with his cold gun extended to fire, but nothing was in view but a swinging side door into the shop. Damn.

Gunfire sounded from down the street, drawing Len’s attention. He had to hurry so he could lend Barry a hand; kid could dodge bullets with ease but he didn’t have much finesse when it came to managing the field of play.

Rushing back to the man on the ground, Len kicked him hard before he could scramble to his feet. Between the concussion and the icy chill clinging to his clothes, he should stay down until the police arrived. Bending low, Len pulled the man’s mask up with a swift yank. He didn’t know him, but he’d had to check.

Spinning on his heels, he gave chase after the one who’d fled. He could hear the oncoming sirens now. The police had arrived a few blocks down.

Len entered the side door into Pottery Barn, which made him sneer at the absurdity. The Galleria was hardly a challenge. High-end shops with maybe a good amount of cash in the registers after the lunch rush before any deposits left for the bank, and a few pricier items that could be nabbed and fenced later, but it wasn’t anything like Tiffany’s. That job had been expert level planning for a singular—no, dual-purpose. Get the necklace for cash flow and keep Len and The Flash distracted.

Alexa wanted him distracted but still able to interfere—why? He already knew the answer, lingering in the back of his mind from that morning when he’d figured out the plan to the last detail, but he didn’t have time to fit the pieces back together; he had to find the missing goon before he escaped or found a way to ambush Barry.

Where was Barry? Two men should have been cake for him to take down.

More gunfire alerted Len to the commotion outside. One of them must have given Barry the slip, just like Len was experiencing now. The cops would come that much faster after hearing shots, and they’d only get in the way.

Keeping his eyes peeled for where the goon might be, Len craned his ears to hear anything, but the sounds from outside—shouts, more gunfire, sirens—made it difficult to focus. The shop was so bright and beige. A man in all black should be easy to spot. But then so was Len, wearing all black and navy blue.

A click alerted Len just in time to dodge behind a bookshelf as gunfire sprayed toward him but thankfully didn’t connect with anything but hard wood. How many minutes had passed? Len hadn’t counted on being outmatched after getting the drop on the final goons. He hadn’t expected to be separated from Barry for more than a handful of minutes. But the police were there, so at least three minutes had gone by. The time it took to explore the shop had to have been another two.
“Hard up for an interior decorator?” Len yelled, hoping to hold the goon’s attention and coax him to make a mistake. “You know this place is hugely overrated on price. Might end up having to freeze your assets.” He increased the output on his gun and fired a blast along a living room display with a glass coffee table that shattered from the cold.

Instead of taking the bait, the goon waited for the beam to dissipate, then raced for the escalator leading up. Déjà vu. For more than just the nod to last night, but because Len recognized the way the man moved. Even if he hadn’t stalled as he stared after him, he wouldn’t have been fast enough to fire another blast before the man disappeared.

Len knew him, he just had to focus long enough to grasp the information. But he didn’t know where Barry was. Barry didn’t know where he was. How could they find each other…?

A brief shock of pain clawed at Len’s chest. There was time. He had time. It had been five—no, seven minutes max. Once he caught the goon, he’d be able to run outside and see Barry at the other end of the Galleria, visible even if he was too far away. Distance hardly meant anything to The Flash once he had a destination in mind.

Len bolted for the escalator. He remembered now. The Santinis used to own this neighborhood. The high-end owners of the stores and their affluent clientele had enjoyed the casinos Len once targeted. With that family pushed out, these streets were up for grabs. Len had staked his claim by virtue of being the one who’d taken the Santinis down, but he hadn’t made a larger play in months. He’d been preparing to do so when Lewis made his reappearance. After that…

Reaching the top of the second floor, Len got his bearings quickly. The escalator opened up in the children’s section. One bedroom set looked like a dream come true for a young Star Wars fan with a bed built like the pod of a TIE fighter and a hanging light fixture that displayed speed trails and stars.

Len caught movement to his right and gave chase. As he came around a display for another bedroom set, he saw a gold frame on a nightstand holding two photos that could snap closed like a pocket book. He nabbed it. He needed something to appease Lisa later. During the thefts of his younger years, he’d always stolen at least one item just for her. He’d brought back plenty of trinkets from time traveling, all of which he knew she treasured more than she’d admit since she’d punched his arm when he first returned.

Ducking low behind a dresser, Len paused. Better to let the man sweat it out and force him to make the next move. Steeling his breaths and counting, Len let his mind go blank as he reached out with his senses to feel the presence of the room. He was better than this—he was better.

Alexa.

Eight minutes. Almost nine. It shouldn’t matter. It shouldn’t matter. It was all in his head.

What he’d realized earlier that morning became clear again. She was rousing the families to war. Any remaining loyal to the Santinis who thought they could snatch back their power. The Mendozas further east. The Dunkirks near Len’s neighborhood. Even the Koreans and the small sect of Bratva would get pulled in if enough neighborhoods came under attack. Another player with this much power shaking things up, one heist after another, seizing funds and property like they owned the place, would suss out everyone in hiding, everyone who’d been waiting for a call to arms to claim a grander seat of power.

If a war started on that scale, the city would be in chaos. They’d pick each other off just like Alexa wanted, all wondering if the others knew something they didn’t.
Len felt the last man coming up fast and stealthy on his left. He knew Len was close, so Len waited and let him get right on top of him. Only then did he jam his gun into the shin that stepped into view and rolled out of the way before any misfires could pepper his location.

The goon yelped and cursed and tried to swing around to aim his weapon, but Len was on his feet and whipped the cold gun forward first, catching the man in the jaw and sending him to his knees. Len had his chance to ice the bastard, so he dialed the setting back to ‘blast’—

A leg shot out, catching Len by surprise and tumbling him to the floor. Both cold gun and semi-automatic lay on the carpet, and the two men grappled toward each other to be the first to reclaim what they’d lost. Flailing for leverage, Len managed to get a hold of the other’s mask and tore it free.

"MacReady?"

The remaining pieces rushed to the forefront of Len’s mind. The voices he’d recognized—MacReady and Goldman. Add in Norris, the man Len had shot for getting trigger-happy at the armored truck, and he’d have his whole gang from the Kahndaq diamond heist.

He’d warned them that if they ever crossed his path again, he’d take them both out, but he’d promised Barry to be better. Not only that, he didn’t want to be the man who’d given that warning, living by a code instilled in him by his father.

_If you’re out…you’re out._

Len punched MacReady across the jaw, which carried its own satisfaction. Alexa had Len on a leash, right where she needed him. She’d taken a larger gamble in that warehouse than he’d realized. She wasn’t just laying the groundwork for a trap at Tiffany’s, she’d needed to confirm if her guess was right, that Len worked with The Flash—no, that he cared for him.

His sentimentality had been his undoing, because allowing The Flash to live time and time again was what had tipped Alexa off. He thought he’d played everything close to the cuff when he met her, but she was better than he remembered. Every word, every question, every dig at their past. She knew now that Len had a soft spot for the Scarlet Speedster that he never should have allowed to grow, because it was costing him his agency, his _dignity_, and maybe every foothold he had in this city.

It was all Barry’s fault for being so…_Barry_. Yet Len couldn’t blame him, even now thinking clearly in the brief moments before being too long without Barry would bring him to his knees. It was torture, because he knew he couldn’t hold onto the pleasant pieces of what Bivolo had done to him, the blind devotion that felt so good but wasn’t _real_. It was torture because Alexa had him right where she wanted, and once again Barry was being dragged into Len’s muck.

He didn’t love the kid…did he? He couldn’t. He wasn’t capable. But he didn’t want to watch Barry drown. He never wanted anyone to suffer for his sake, because then he’d owe them—then he’d end up dying a hero again to stop someone else from playing martyr first.

The pain ripped through him like a dagger plunged into his chest and he fell forward onto his hands. Ten minutes. It shouldn’t matter, Barry was out there somewhere close, it didn’t _matter_, but he didn’t know for sure. He couldn’t see him or hear him or have any sense of how far away he might be, but Barry had to be out there. He was. He _was_… Wasn’t he?

“Been a while since you last saw your _boy_, Snart?” MacReady spat blood onto the floor from his split lip and pushed up onto his knees. He snatched his mask and gun from the floor. “Better hope
he finds you fast, but don’t think it’s gonna give you the upper hand.”

As he stood, Len realized that MacReady had no intention of killing him, he’d just been running down the clock. He looked at Len like a predator toying with its prey.

“Because ya see, you’re not gonna remember my face the second you see him.” He grinned and pulled the mask back on tight. “Enjoy the show, Snart. We got a long one planned for ya.” Taking off toward the escalator again, MacReady didn’t even bother claiming any loot.

Last night had been about cash, today was for show—for the families, for the city, for the plan Len had to remember so he could warn Barry and the others.

The pain ratcheted up like a dial being cranked. Len really wished he had those comms about now, but without any easy way to tell Barry where he was, he had to get out of the building. Grabbing his gun, he jammed it into its holster and tried to get to his feet. The room spun. Slow breaths, he told himself. Barry was just outside, just outside.

Len snarled at the dependency, needing Barry like this and having no way to fight it. He shouldn’t need anyone, because it made him weak, barely able to make a dash for downstairs, fumbling and skidding down the escalator steps. The people he cared for always made him weak.

Lisa.

Mick.

Sara…

He would have saved his own hide at the Vanishing Point when everyone was captured if it hadn’t been for her. He would have hated himself for leaving Mick, but he’d almost done it, almost took the dropship and hightailed it to safety because the odds had seemed too great.

But the weakness Barry carved in him was heavier. Was that just Bivolo? Was it just want twisted into need? Either answer held disaster. However this ended, it could only end badly, because there was no happy ending for a man like Len. Not even if Barry was weak too, and starved and so easily swayed because of promises Len would never be able to keep.

Collapsing down the last few steps, Len hit the ground and gasped for air, digging his cold gun into his hip from how he’d landed. He tried to crawl toward the door but his vision was tunneling, darkening.

He couldn’t let Alexa win. He couldn’t let Mick down. He couldn’t leave Lisa alone. He couldn’t…let Barry…lose someone else…

XXXXX

“Barry, we’re at ten minutes.”

“I know!”

Cisco had spoken calmly, with only an edge of panic hiding in his words, but Barry couldn’t reel in his own. He’d lost sight of Len almost immediately and had no idea where he’d gone or which shop he might be in.

The first goon had been easy for Barry to take out—gun claimed, man dazed and knocked to the ground to wait for the police. But as fast as Barry was, when he’d turned to go after the second
man, he was already dodging bullets. They thudded into the wall behind him as he zigged and zagged and tried to rush up on the man’s left, but in the split second Barry needed to make his move, the man dropped a smoke bomb before his spray of bullets had even finished.

In an instant, Barry was blind, far worse than if it had been nighttime, because the sun reflected off the white smoke and made it harder to blink the spots from his eyes and pinpoint the goon’s getaway. Flashing out of the radius of the smoke’s reach, Barry coughed and squeezed his eyes shut to clear away the stinging sensation left behind. The brightness of the day might have hindered him, but it also made an all-black outfit easy to spot. The man ducked into one of the shops and Barry gave chase.

He’d been playing tag with the goon ever since. It was only when Cisco started giving him minute marks after the first five that he recognized the ploy.

The goon wasn’t trying to escape; he was stalling for time.

In the Michael Kors with mannequins every few feet making Barry second guess what was real and what might be an ambush, he felt dizzy from the maze the man led him through. He never tried to face Barry head on, but every so often he would fire his gun to lead Barry down a particular path. It was like being a damn lab rat chasing after the cheese only to get zapped by a shock.

The man had only appeared in full view just as Cisco got to nine minutes. Staring at him across the store, Barry knew he had to give up the chase. His speed wasn’t enough to stop the bad guy and save Len if he couldn’t find him fast enough.

So Barry had fled, right back out the doors onto the street to scan for where Len might be. The police were closing in, obligating Barry to flash up to them and explain where the unconscious men could be found and where he’d seen the last assailant, before he zipped away again, darting in and out of shops hoping to get lucky.

Ten minutes and he had no idea if Len was safe.

Preparing to scream Len’s name and continue canvassing every shop down the rest of the block, Barry suddenly saw a man in black dart out of the first building he’d checked and disappear around a corner behind the police. Pottery Barn. Barry had looked through the first floor initially but not the second.

Ignoring the last man, he flashed into the building. “Len!” he called as soon as he was inside, zipping from display to display, scanning every surface area that could possibly hide a crumpled parka. Then he saw him, lying still a few feet from the bottom of the escalator.

At his side in seconds, Barry gently rolled Len onto his back and reached for his face. Blue eyes fluttered up at him—he was still awake.

“Barry,” Len said like taking in a deep breath he’d been denied for hours. The color rapidly returned to his face and he breathed steadily as the panic and pain subsided. This couldn’t be good for his heart; they had to stop having close calls. Barry had been foolish to allow them to split up.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, gloved thumb grazing along Len’s cheek. “I didn’t see where you’d gone. One of mine got away.”

“One of mine too…” Len said as Barry helped him sit up. He wouldn’t look away from Barry’s face, from staring mesmerized into his eyes. Barry was on his knees, holding Len, and the sudden drop in adrenaline mixed with joy at finding Len okay made him want to settle in right there to rest
and give Len anything he asked for.

“Better head back, Barry,” Cisco reminded him of their audience. “Caitlin wants to check Len’s vitals. The police can handle the rest. They might still catch those last two.”

Barry doubted it. They were too well-organized, too methodically planned at every turn. “We’re coming,” he said, tugging Len close to heft him onto his feet, but Len resisted and reached for Barry’s shoulder instead.

“Just a minute. Please.”

Barry waited for the lean in, for Len to tug him closer and kiss him, rules be damned. Instead, just like last night in the Labs, Len sought out an embrace and held Barry tight as he pressed his head to his chest, cheek resting on the Flash symbol.

Easing into the contact, Barry slid his arms around Len in return. He tried to banish the wave of disappointment that a kiss hadn’t happened even though he knew it shouldn’t. A hug felt intimate too, however forced, however unsure Barry was if Len really wanted it.

Almost a minute exactly passed when Len lifted his head and smiled at Barry with raw emotion, with gratitude so different from a teasing smirk. Barry thought both expressions heightened how handsome he was, and he honestly wasn’t sure which one made him want to lean in more.

He snapped back, despite the hope that had glittered in Len’s eyes when he almost gave in and offered his own kiss. Berating himself for the slip, unfair to both of them and a terrible idea no matter how Barry felt, he swept Len into his arms and took off for STAR Labs. Len was warm in his arms, quiet and well-behaved all the way across town.

The fury on Lisa’s face and the disappointment on Joe’s when they arrived might have been worse than facing down six armed men.

Lisa calmed momentarily when Caitlin ushered Len into the med room to check his pulse and blood pressure, though Barry assured everyone that this time Len hadn’t lost consciousness. He kept waiting for Joe to pull him aside and demand answers, but as soon as Caitlin declared Len in good health, Lisa flew into a tirade first.

“Alexa? Alexa? And you said nothing?”

“We’re handling it.” Len hopped off the bed and bee-lined into the Cortex to escape her.

“Not without Mick you’re not.”

Len whirled to face her as he reached the center of the room, while the others all awkwardly fanned out around them, Barry included.

“You think I was too young to remember?” Lisa fired off before Len could speak. “I remember. She hurt Mick just as badly, and if she’s making a play for Central, he deserves to know.”

Hurt Mick just as badly? Which meant she’d also hurt Len? Barry knew Lisa didn’t mean it as a professional falling out given her tone, and as he looked between the siblings, a rarely seen anger boiled up inside of Len. It bubbled beneath the surface, red and steaming with a flush to his cheeks, but he fought to keep it down to a low simmer and maintain his carefully constructed control.

“Lisa...”
“Enough!” Joe shouted, stepping forward to command the room. “Everybody stop! Coz someone’s gonna explain to me what I’m missing, and the majority better come from you two,” he gestured sharply at Len and Barry. “What the hell happened back there? Who is Alexa? And what is going on?”

Explaining the situation to Joe turned out to be decidedly more nerve-wracking than facing the business end of Lisa’s gun.

“Snart thinks he’s in love with you?” His eyes widened impressively, but Barry was able to wave Len off from declaring how real his love was.

“Nothing is different from where we stood last night,” Barry said once everything had been explained. “We’re still dealing with Bivolo and a larger threat behind these heists. I was going to tell you about Alexa Marcos, but we don’t have any evidence other than Len’s word, which won’t help us put her away. Len being under Bivolo’s influence just means we have to stay close to each other, but he still would have helped us. He helped me last night before Bivolo even looked at him.”

“When he was gonna steal the necklace for himself,” Joe propped his hands on his hips.

“He still helped,” Barry refuted. “A man’s life is more important than a piece of jewelry, and before doing anything else, Len made sure that injured guard would be okay. So now we’re helping him. And figuring out what this Alexa woman has planned, because it isn’t just thefts. Something bigger is going on. Right?” He turned to Len.

The humor of where everyone stood wasn’t lost on Barry, with him at Len's side and Lisa at Joe's. She'd gravitated closer to him little by little since she maintained crossed arms and a similarly indignant tilt of her chin. Caitlin and Cisco stood off to the side like spectators to some long-standing feud, yet Barry didn’t doubt for a second his place beside Len.

“Something bigger…” Len cringed as he searched for an answer to Barry’s question, “…you’re right, but I can’t remember. There was something important…” He trailed again as he looked at Barry with frustration and deep remorse for not being able to beat the pull Bivolo had on him. “I know the answer but I can’t see it.”

“Then we’ll figure it out the long way,” Barry said, not wanting Len to lose hope, before he returned his attention to Joe and Lisa. “Everything’s out in the open now, for everyone. I’m sorry I didn’t want you to worry, Joe. I should have told you the rest upfront. And Lisa, I’m sure Len is sorry he didn’t tell you about Alexa.” He glanced again at Len, but this time the man was less accommodating and quickly wore the same obstinate mask as his sister. “Len.”

“What?” he snapped. Effortlessly, he shifted between the open man Barry had met last night and the familiar visage of being entirely walled-off as he looked at his sister. “I won’t apologize for keeping you safe.”

“Tch,” Lisa scoffed. “Sure, Lenny. Coz it’s all about me.”

“The important thing right now,” Barry interrupted, unable to handle any more secondhand embarrassment—Caitlin and Cisco looked ready to head for the hills, “is that Len stays safe. And the city. There’s still too much we don’t know.”

That finally deflated Lisa, as if she could see the erratic rhythm that had caused Len’s heart to stop. It hadn’t stopped today, but it had come close, all because Barry had been careless. Because Barry hadn’t been fast enough.
“Just tell me one thing,” Joe said, drawing Barry’s eyes away from Len. “When you said you stayed with Cisco last night…”

Barry’s throat tightened. He didn’t know how to tell his father that he’d shared a bed with Leonard Snart even if he felt no shame in it. Not in sleeping, though maybe he felt some shame in the added lip-lock he’d allowed. And in far too many other things that had nothing to do with Len.

“You’re an adult. You got this handled. You trust these two,” Joe waved his hand at Len and Lisa. “Fine. But you don’t keep things like this from me. So Snart’s life is in more danger than yours—maybe. You still tell me. No need-to-know basis, no conveniently neglected truth. Why do you think we keep getting into these messes? Coz one or several of this team isn’t honest when we need to be. And I know that goes for me too.” He relaxed into a weary acceptance that this was the life they’d chosen but he still tried to grasp some sense to it having to acknowledge Len and Lisa Snart in their midst. He’d kept his fair share of secrets, but that was exhausting too.

“I’m sorry, Joe,” Barry said. “No more lies.”

When Lisa cocked her head at Len for a similar promise, he merely stared her down. For all of Bivolo’s power over him, he was still Cold.

Joe’s brow furrowed at the Snarts but he still nodded. “So what now?”

Cisco and Caitlin jumped at the opportunity to be more than wall ornaments.

“We work the case,” Cisco took his usual seat at the main console, already flying through surveillance and police records, “and try to figure out what Mistress Mastermind is after.”

“Seriously, kid?” Len crossed to the desk and rested a hand near the monitor. “Must you?”

“Yeah. I must,” Cisco smirked. “Come on, it’s not that bad, right? Plus, you totally love yours, Cold, don’t even deny it.”

The way Len’s mouth twitched from unimpressed to hiding a smirk of his own said enough.

“Meanwhile, hopefully we can find a way to break Len of Bivolo’s control,” Caitlin said and gestured for her patient to return to the med room that he’d been so quick to leave.

Len grudgingly obeyed.

There was work to do, which might have been the only reason Lisa stuck with Cisco instead of trailing after Len, and why Joe talked about the case when he pulled Barry into a corner instead of giving him another lecture. That, Barry was certain, would likely come later.

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Cisco stiffened at the way Lisa hovered much more close-quartered than Len had or Barry ever did. “Did you uhh…want to help me canvas street cams for where the other thieves went?” He tried not to look directly at her or breathe in too obviously deep when he caught whiff of her floral scent.

Lisa curled her fingers around his shoulder and leaned in closer as she lowered her voice to a quiet hush. “Gladly, honey. I’m available any way you need me.”

Cisco gulped.
“But can you do me a teensy little favor first?”

“S-Sure. What is it?”

A smile between purely pleasant and dangerously devious played across her lips. “Tell me how to send a message to that time ship Lenny came from.”

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

Mistress Mastermind it is.
Never enough

Chapter Summary

Len grows more confident in his love for Barry, while a bad dream and coffee with Iris only prove to Barry more that he doesn't deserve love from anyone.

Chapter Notes

Redhead, my love, my muse, you amazing person you...damn it, you used an important phrase before I could in Melancholic Temperament, and when I read it, I was like...ah, shit, come on, I was gonna do that in Color of Love! :-) Great minds, great minds... You'll see.

Also, thank you to Redhead for the science in this one, as she gave me a fun direction to go with things Caitlin could try on Len, and the research was very enlightening.

I really like this one, but I also start to tread into that iffy territory of my true fan feelings for the WestAllen pairing coming out, so I want to be clear here. I love Iris. I love her character. I will just always prefer her with Eddie and I miss Eddie from the bottom of my soul. I still low-key ship WestAllen because they're adorable and I know they're end-game, but this fic instead of sweeping feelings for Iris aside, I'm actually dealing with the reasons I think it maybe isn't the best for them to be together and how I think Barry could really feel about the relationship, even if canon decided not to go this route.

Anyway...please don't hate, because I'm not trying to hate, I'm just giving one perspective, which I don't think paints any character in a bad light, it's just...how things are, and no one is at fault. Doesn't mean it's easy.

Anyway, I'm rambling, but...the friendship will always stay strong, have faith. After all...Sara will be making an appearance soon too, and there's just as much angst to come from that.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Spending the rest of the day and evening at STAR Labs made Len feel like a caged animal under observation, like some spectacle at the zoo. He wanted air, but it was late and he was exhausted by the time they headed back to his apartment. Sleep sounded better than asking Barry out for a drink.

Though that had to happen soon. A drink, a meal, something outside of rushed fast food surrounded by gawkers. Barry wouldn’t deny him a few hours of casual conversation, just the two of them. They couldn’t live at STAR Labs, only donning the streets when an alarm blared.

The only consolation to being cooped up in mixed company was getting to be by Barry’s side
through it all. When they weren’t testing proximity, Barry was never out of eyesight. Whatever pain might occasionally linger from being apart or from seeing Barry conflicted, sad, or in distress, was soothed by his return and otherwise constant presence. It made Len less and less keen to even be in the next room over.

Lisa hadn’t continued the cold shoulder as the day wore on, which made Len immediately suspicious. She smiled sweetly, played along, helped out however Cisco asked of her, and even told Len to get a good night sleep as though she honestly meant it. Barry and the others probably bought that, but Len knew better. She’d done something. How, when she hadn’t left the Labs all day either, he had no idea, but if Cisco’s poker face was anything to go by, Len would find out soon enough.

He supposed he should count his blessings that neither she nor West had demanded to play chaperon. Joe had looked honestly tempted to play tag-along as soon as Len and Barry declared they were calling it a night, which meant returning to Len’s apartment together.

But to the detective’s credit, he’d bitten his tongue, only eventually saying, “Be careful, Barr, okay?” As if the real threat might be hiding in Len’s closet—or in his parka.

More than anything, Len was brain-weary. Caitlin had been merciless in her attempts to thwart Bivolo’s control over him, non-stop from one experiment to the next like some damn automaton. Every time Len tried to ask for a break or counter her thinking, she’d shoot him a look, “I’m the doctor. Stay put,” and Barry would shrug like this was par for the course for Team Flash.

“You should have seen her when I got my powers,” he whispered at one point. “She’s really mellowed.”

The impressions on Len’s temples from the electrodes she kept on him for hours on end begged to differ. They had a headband version she’d forced onto him later for something called transcranial-magnetic stimulation. Why they already had a device that could magnetically stimulate the brain, he didn’t ask. It felt like shock therapy and left him with a splitting headache. It also didn’t work.

“The use of this treatment for patients with depression—”

“I’m not depressed.”

“It works similarly on anxiety—”

“Then how come my chest's on fire!” Len had ripped the band from his head, short of breath, pain spiking through his heart like always when Barry was too far away for too long. “Barry!”

Lightning was the only shock Len wanted in his life. In a flash, Barry was there and the rest of the world faded away. Len reached for him, pulling Barry’s head to his shoulder and clinging with tangling fingers in his hair. He’d always heard of the soothing power of touch, but he’d never known it. To be able to sink against someone and not want to recoil was better than any shot of whiskey or other indulgence he’d ever had. Barry's skin was soft and so warm.

“Don’t make me do that again,” he mouthed against Barry's neck.

Barry never held back when he hugged Len, never denied him when contact was all he asked. “Okay, we'll work on something else. You’re okay.”

Len pressed his face harder to Barry's skin, accepting anything and everything he was allowed. He’d felt even more disjointed from the magnets as fragments of memory—maybe?—had formed at the surface of his thoughts when Barry was out of sight before a pulse from the device would
scatter it. A twinge would ease his tension only for it to ratchet up the next second. Meta-induced panic attacks couldn’t be scientifically knocked out. Not like this.

“No more proximity tests,” Barry said to Caitlin, still holding Len with the beat of his pulse fast and rhythmic against Len’s cheek.

“We could still use the stimulation to increase suggestibility,” Caitlin said. “Barry can be here the entire time, Len. In fact, I’d prefer he was to better focus the association. But it might require repeated attempts over several days or longer to be effective.”

Len winced. He was a guinea pig at the mercy of a team that had once been his enemies, but until they had a clue as to where Bivolo might be, he knew it was better to try anything they could to break him of his curse. He wanted to prove his love to Barry without outside influence. Then Barry would believe him. Then he’d understand. Then they could be apart again and choose to stay in each other’s company instead of having no other recourse.

Len had agreed to the treatment, but if the magnetic pulses did anything to make him more likely to listen when Caitlin tried to break him of Bivolo’s programing, it wasn’t enough from a single round to make much difference.

At least Cisco had offered a good idea before the night ended. “Why not try jotting down notes on your phone if anything comes to you? Then even if Bivolo’s powers make you forget, we’ll have a lead.”

“Smart thinking. I see why you’re the brains of the operation,” Len had said. “And Snow of course. Guess that only leaves you, Scarlet.”

“And what am I, just a pretty face?” Barry was tired enough that he played along even with his father in the room.

“Not just that.”

The tension dissipated rather than rising stronger since they were all tired and eager for a laugh.

“I think we can agree that all of Team Flash gets points for beauty and brains,” Lisa had said, sparing an appraising look for each of the team’s members—Joe included, which got the man more flustered than Len had ever seen. This crew didn’t get heaped with enough praise, apparently, because all four flushed with color, though none quite as darkly as Cisco.

Barry packed another overnight bag, “I’ll get more from home tomorrow,” and made quick work of his nightly routine in the bathroom once they were settled at the apartment, the two of them already moving around each other on autopilot. Before long, they were slipping into Len’s bed without the strain that had existed last night.

“Can I…” Len looked at Barry with longing he couldn’t express without sounding needy and weak. He felt like a teenager, back when he’d never known how to talk to a pretty girl or boy who looked at him like he had a chance. But at least touch had been easier twenty years ago, before the pain and betrayal associated with it solidified like stone.

Not that he’d ever mastered romance. Getting someone into his bed was easy enough, but more than that, leaving behind his polished words and drawling seduction, Len didn’t know what to say.

Barry, shirtless and turning to him from his side of the bed, softened from the stern look he wore whenever Len professed his love too much. He lifted the covers and outstretched his arm. “It’s okay. If you need to.”
Need. Not want. But Len knew the truth was somewhere in between.

He slept in long sleeves and cotton pants compared to Barry in his STAR Labs sweats. Pressing a palm to Barry’s bare chest first as he reached out, Len imagined that the slight hiss from the kid was from the chill in his fingertips, but maybe there was something more beneath the surface. Shifting across the mattress, he tucked himself within Barry’s embrace and nuzzled his warm skin. Barry curled his arm around Len in return and released a shuddery breath.

“Don’t worry,” Len said, “I won’t hold your kindness against you as long as you don’t hold how pathetic I’m being against me.” He absently drew his fingers across Barry’s skin while the kid laughed. “It is a nice feeling—loving you, having you close without any…” He bit back his words and said instead, “It’s nice, even if you don’t believe I mean that.”

A sigh left Barry as he held Len tighter. “You keep saying that. Maybe it’s true, that this feels… good for you, in the moment. But it’s all warped. I hate what it’s doing to you, forcing you to act differently than you really would.”

“I certainly don’t enjoy the painful aspects, but the pleasure makes it worth it.” Len flattened his hand and marveled at Barry’s heartbeat, super sonic in its patter.

“I guess that’s…good, at least,” he said with a tremor in his voice.

“Mmm… Goodnight, Barry,” Len said, pushing out of Barry’s hold and moving back to his side of the bed.

Barry frowned after him but didn’t fight the disconnection. Len wanted to sleep in Barry’s arms, and that was something he’d never done with anybody else. The closest he’d ever come was falling asleep with a five-year-old Lisa. But maybe if he only pushed so far and left a little want between them, Barry would bridge the gap someday instead of waiting for Len.

Feeling the heat of hazel eyes on him, Len wondered if Barry yearned to do that even now.

“Goodnight, Len.”

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A cozy bed. Soft sheets. The warmth of someone else’s body heat. And the gentle pressure of lips on his neck slowly moving up his jaw to his mouth roused Barry from sleep. Full lips met his when he turned toward them, encouraging him to open up and press the kiss deeper. A smooth tongue that he’d tasted only once before tangled with own.

Iris.

His eyes snapped open and he chased after her when she started to pull away. His eagerness made her giggle.

“Morning, sleepy head,” she said and sat the rest of the way up to look down at him. She was radiant, reminding Barry of how easily he’d fallen for her so many years ago. He’d longed for her to look at him like this, like no one existed who could compare to him, the way he’d always felt about her.

He reached for her and tried to pull her toward him. “Iris—”

“Morning,” someone said from behind Barry as a larger hand slid across his shoulder. He turned just as Eddie sat up from lying on his other side.
But he wasn’t talking to Barry. He didn’t even look at him. He lifted his hand from Barry’s shoulder to take the place of Barry’s hand on Iris’s cheek. She didn’t look at Barry either, only at Eddie, as if her eyes had always been trained on him. They leaned toward each other with Barry between them like he wasn’t even there.

Sitting up with a jolt to knock them apart, Barry found himself in another bed, gasping for breath as Iris and Eddie vanished like smoke.

“Barry? Are you okay?”

He was never okay. He was never enough.

“It’s fine, Patty. Go back to sleep.”

“Are you sure? You can talk to me.”

He felt her hand on his arm and turned to look at her in the bed. But it wasn’t Patty. It was Felicity. Blond hair fanned out around her, she sat up as if just waking, smirking with a come-hither waggle of her eyebrow, barely covered by the sheets clinging to her figure. “You know, you could have had all ‘a this,” she dragged a hand down the curve of her body, “but instead you keep falling in love with people who don’t want you or sit there having no interest in the people that do.”

Barry scowled at her. “You didn’t want me either. You wanted Oliver.”

“Yeah, and look how that turned out for me. Crippled without the chip in my back and freshly single. And you?” She sat up further. “You’re getting cozy with someone who’s forced to love you. Now that is a new low, Barry.”

Stomach churning, he threw off the covers and moved to the edge of the bed to stand, but that larger hand returned, curling around his shoulder again.

“Why deny the truth, Barr?” Eddie said. “You’ve always wanted what you can’t have. Iris. Happiness. A family. How pathetic is that when Iris and I wanted each other.”

Shrugging Eddie’s hand away, Barry whirled around with a snarl—but froze when he found Len behind him instead kneeling on the bed. In the moment Barry paused, Len grasped his face in both hands.

“You like this better, don’t you, Barry? To finally have someone look at you like they can’t live without you. You. Only you. There is nothing but you.” He fell forward and slid between Barry’s lips with fervor, with a fever and madness in his eyes.

It felt so good—Len’s lips, his touch, the way he wanted Barry, but it also made him sick. “Stop,” he pulled out of reach and scrambled from the bed, “I don’t want that.”

“So which is it?” Len prowled after him. “Someone who’ll never love you as much as you love them, someone you’ll never love as much as they love you, or someone you can control to be everything you’d ever ask for?”

“Stop,” Barry cried louder, clenching his eyes shut as he backed up and curled in on himself to disappear. “I don’t want any of those things!”

“Well too bad, Flash,” said a new voice, one Barry loathed every moment he heard it, “because those are the only choices you get.”
Barry opened his eyes and there was no bed, there were only walls that could close in on him at any moment—with Eobard Thawne standing before him, the real version with blond hair and his yellow suit.

“You know you don’t get to be happy,” he grinned. “You know I’m right. You know all that awaits you in the future is more pain and suffering and loss. And you know exactly whose fault it is.”

“Yours!” Barry screamed as he flashed forward, lightning sparking around and behind him as he snatched Thawne up by the collar of his suit.

The man merely laughed like he knew something Barry didn’t, like he always knew, and as Barry stared through his hatred, he heard another voice overlapping with Thawne’s, darker and echoing. “You hurt everyone you love, Flash, and everyone who loves you.”

Barry’s grip slackened as the yellow suit beneath his fingers turned black and the grinning face stretched into a mangled monster. He recoiled from Zoom and stumbled back, terrified because Thawne had planned for everything and manipulated him but Zoom sought destruction for no other reason than because he could.

“We’re so much alike, Flash, don’t you see,” Zoom’s booming, affected voice ricocheted over the close-quartered walls. He gripped the bottom of his cowl and tore it from his face, revealing Zolomon with a grin just as mad as the monster. “You and Snart make such a sweet pair,” he said in his normal voice, “just like Caitlin and I did.”

“Ahhhhh!” Barry howled and rushed forward like before, speeding across the room until something solid collided with the other speedster’s back. Only then did he stop to wrench Zolomon forward and slam him into the wall again.

Tears stung Barry’s eyes and he couldn’t see clearly. He only knew that he wanted to rip Zolomon out of that suit and tear his skin away next until he found the real monster beneath.

“I only see one monster here,” Henry’s voice drew Barry to the face in front of him as the dampness in his eyes cleared. His hands went slack again as he looked at his father. Backpedaling, he tried to clear away the rage he’d felt that had almost made him become what he swore he hated.

He was in his house, his childhood home, dark and too similar to how he remembered it from the night he lost his mother. Zoom had his father by the throat in the same spot his mother had died and there was nothing Barry could do.

“Please, don’t…please…”

“Why did you let him kill me, Barry?” Henry asked, eyes wrought with disappointment as his voice overlapped the way Thawne and Zoom’s had—but with Nora’s. “Why didn’t you save us?” they said, as Zoom pulled his hand back to make the killing blow.

“No!”

Air rushed into Barry’s lungs as he fought past the jolt of waking for real, like he’d been being crushed until that moment. He gasped and gulped and struggled to be free of the tangle of clothes and sheets and limbs.

“Barry.”

Someone was there. Someone real and strong, who made their presence known with a firm touch.
on both Barry’s arms without trying to hold him down. Barry fumbled to grasp the wrists of those hands, to connect and ground himself as steadily in reality as he could. Thawne and Zolomon were both gone but he’d never be free of them.

“You’re okay. You’re okay,” Len said, hovering over Barry but not too close, not holding too tight, like he knew what it was like to wake up that way and need contact and space at the same time.

The dreams had started months ago, but only Patty had ever been present when Barry woke from one, screaming or thrashing or both. He’d always apologized and told her not to worry, that it was just a nightmare, that he was fine. He never told her about the dreams, never talked about what haunted him, even when she called him on it.

His guardedness had been part of why she left. He’d kept her at a distance, because she hadn’t broken through the cage he built around his heart for Iris. He hadn’t told anyone else about the dreams either because no one was around when they happened to prod and comfort and understand him the way Patty might have if he’d let her.

Now, with Len saying nothing more than quiet hushes, trapped by Barry’s hands on his wrists, Barry couldn’t hold any of the pain back. He’d shaken it off so easily when he woke up like this with Patty, but Len…knew. He knew everything beneath the mask and every part of Barry in it.

Climbing into a sitting position by seizing different holds up Len’s arms, Barry finally threw his arms around the other man’s neck and buried his face in Len’s shirt. He was despicable for seeking comfort in the very thing his subconscious had been admonishing him over—taking advantage of Len’s love that wasn’t real—but he just wanted someone to be there for him who didn’t need an explanation.

“Everyone has nightmares, Barry.” Len’s arms circled around his back without any of the hesitation Barry knew he’d have if he was in control. “Not everyone has as much to fuel them as we do.”

The sobs just came louder and more wretched against Len’s chest.

It was morning, even later than Barry expected when the blinking lights from the nightstand clock burned through the blurriness of his vision. 8:45. It would have been a good night sleep if he’d managed to last the whole night.

Finally, his pulse calmed and his breathing slowed as the tears dried up, leaving his cheeks sticky and tight. “S-Sorry if I woke you,” he pulled back enough to scrub at his face.

“You didn’t,” Len said, settling more comfortably beside him. “Had a bad dream myself.”

“Really?”

“Mmm…” He closed his eyes as if to banish the remnants of what he’d seen, “About a bright light and not waking up,” then slid his eyes to Barry. “Part of why I came home.”

“The Legends? Something happened?” Barry knew he shouldn’t press but he was curious, especially if Len was offering more willingly than he’d seemed before. “Is it part of what happened with Heat Wave?”

“A little. He…tried to do the right thing in his mind and take Raymond’s place playing martyr. Has a soft spot for the Boy Scout. They…bonded,” Len said with a twist of his lips.

“You’re kidding?” Barry grinned, sniffling back the last of his tears. Ray and Mick Rory?
“Could hardly believe it myself,” Len smiled only to let the expression falter. “But Raymond was set to bite the big one to save the rest of us and Mick couldn’t let that slide. When I found out…I couldn’t let it slide either.”

“You changed places with Mick?” Barry read between the lines. “But you’re…”

“Alive?” Len raised an eyebrow, sitting shoulder to shoulder with Barry in a mess of bunched up sheets. “Thought for sure I wasn’t for a while there. But I couldn’t let Mick make the sacrifice. He’d lost enough. All coz I dragged him along with me.”

“You wanted a friendly face along,” Barry said, hoping to banish the guilt and grief on Len’s face that was too close to looking in a mirror. “I get it. You didn’t know any of the others either than Stein, right?”

Len huffed. “Real dysfunctional team, Scarlet, you got no idea.”

“So...Mick was pissed you traded places?”

“I went the way of that bright light and almost didn’t come out of it. Team found me later. Pissed is the nice way of putting Mick’s reaction. Afterwards, I couldn’t shake it. Couldn’t shake a lot of things from what happened on that ship. Needed to be home for a while, see something solid and familiar. Lisa. Saints.” His eyes flicked to Barry again with a hooded, slow-sliding glance. “You.”

“Right.” Barry ducked his head, feeling equally humbled and sick to his stomach.

“I told you. I went to your house the night before the heist.” He leaned into Barry's shoulder. “No Bivolo involved then.”

Barry tried not to lean against Len in return but it was such a comforting weight. “Why didn’t you come inside then?” he glanced up and registered how close they were.

“I'm sure that would have gone over beautifully with West.”

“Hey, Joe didn’t bust a gasket over having you at the Labs. Or as much as I expected over this whole mess. He might not have the same faith in you that I do, but he trusts my judgment. Which... he really shouldn’t usually given I trusted Wells...” Barry scrunched his face, still bitter about Eobard Thawne even if he had found it in himself to forgive the man, spoken softly to Harry through glass. “But then I was the only one who didn’t trust the man who turned out to be Zoom, so maybe I’m getting better,” he shrugged with a hollow laugh, only for his smile to turn real again as he looked at Len. “Clearly, I was right about you.”

Len's guileless smile never failed to make Barry's stomach flip. “Wasn’t so sure for a while there myself. Figured I’d prove you wrong. But strange things happen when you got a whole team watching your back.”

“Yeah...” Barry was getting lost again, in Len’s eyes and smile and freely offered affection, taking advantage of a man who couldn’t even make his own choices. Barry leaned away. “I’m sorry, you’re...you don’t need to attend to me. I’m fine. I’m...not fine,” he admitted when Len tilted his head at him, “but I’m okay for now. Sometimes the dreams just get...bad.

“About Zoom? Your father?”

“Mixed with everything else I’m messed up about.” After all, Barry was in bed with Leonard Snart, just like his dream had shown him, someone who didn’t really love him but who looked at Barry like he did, and Barry was awful for enjoying any part of that.
“You think you should have been faster, that if only—if only.” Len turned to face Barry instead of sharing shoulder space. “You can’t do that to yourself. Having nearly screwed up the timeline personally at one point coz I figured I knew better and could change everything if only I did things right, it’s not worth the grief. You know what time travel taught me? That all we have is today. Sunday even.” He grinned and spread an arm outward as if to encompass the whole day in his gesture.

Sunday…

“A day you shouldn’t have to worry about anything—”

“Sunday!” Barry shouted with a start, eyes zeroing in on the clock behind Len’s back. “It’s 8:45! Shit, 8:50 now…”

“Okay…”

“I’m supposed to meet Iris for coffee at 9AM!” Barry blurted at Len’s startled face.

“Oh.” Only for a moment did any discomfort cross Len’s face at the mention of her name. The smile he pulled on next was such an obvious mask when Barry knew what a real one looked like. “Good thing you’re The Flash then. You should meet her. We can shower later.”

“We can…” Blood and heat rushed to Barry’s cheeks.

“I meant separately, but if you’re amenable to other ideas…”

“No.” Barry laughed through his embarrassment, pushing Len in the chest and causing him to rock back on the bed. They broke into genuine chuckles together and it was so easy to pretend like the ease and intimacy was real, and how much Barry liked Len this way.

But he wasn’t really being him, was he? Or he was, some usually more caged part of him, but he normally wouldn’t share it with Barry. He was being forced to. Barry might as well have been his warden.

Feeling nauseous again, Barry pivoted to climb out of bed. He could make Jitters in ten minutes, but it wasn’t only himself involved. He looked back at Len slipping from the bed on the other side, and his words choked in his throat when he saw Len grimace and rub his chest.

“You okay? I didn’t push you that hard, did I?” he tried to make light of what the action might mean.

“I’m fine.” Len shrugged it off like a bad bruise. “Just can’t stand seeing you hurt, is all.”

The sweetness of the words was quickly chased by something sour. “Wait…you really can’t stand seeing me hurt, like…” He couldn’t say it.

At least in moments like this, whatever part of Len would normally be evasive, wanted to be honest with Barry. “I think so. Noticed it before. When we’re apart…or when you’re in pain.”

Barry’s stomach dropped like the floor had opened up and he was still dreaming, falling forever with no end in sight. “I hurt you even when I don’t mean to,” he muttered, but now wasn’t the time. They weren’t meeting the others at the Labs until Caitlin or Cisco messaged them so Len could have a break. “We’ll deal with that later. We’ll fix all of this, I promise. After coffee. Or…I can cancel,” he frowned as he watched Len cross the room to pull out clothes for the day all because Barry had a coffee date. “You shouldn’t have to tag along—”
“It’s fine,” Len waved him away. “Get dressed. I will too. And you can whisk us away to make it on time—for once,” he added with a smirk.

Why did he have to be so easy to like, despite the history between them and his past misdeeds? “Okay, but you’re going to need a disguise if you’re joining me at Jitters.”

“How do you think I normally get around this city—outside my own neighborhood, of course—without attracting fuzz on every corner?” The playfulness and mischief told Barry that the real Captain Cold was alive and well inside the fool that thought he loved a menace. “Get dressed. I’ll be ready.”

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All Barry could think of when he looked at Captain Cold in his disguise of choice…was Captain America.

Barry had seen *The Winter Soldier* with Cisco, naturally, and it was easily one of their top favorite Marvel movies of all time. In it, when Steve Rogers needed to be undercover, he wore a T-shirt, hoodie, and jacket, with a baseball cap and a pair of black hipster glasses.

Len looked almost identical to that, in his customary blue, black, and grey color scheme, but there was more than just the outward appearance that helped him blend in. He held himself differently, moved differently, ensuring that even if someone looked him square in the face and had seen him on the news several times, they wouldn’t put two and two together.

Parting ways at the doors into Jitters, Len moved toward the counter to order something and keep up appearances, while Barry scanned the shop for Iris. She waved him over to a table in the corner. The place was packed, not unusual for later on a Sunday morning, when people could go to Jitters for fun rather than in a rush for their morning coffee before work.

Barry slid into the seat across from Iris. She always had this glow about her, even when her brow was drawn with worry and awkward tension. It used to trip him up whenever he thought he might finally confess that he loved her as so much more than a friend. If he’d only been faster, he might have swept her away before he lost her to someone else.

Fingers curling around the coffee she’d gotten for him—a Flash, of course, since it was one of the few drinks that gave him a boost—he smiled and tried to wade through the baggage between them that used to only belong to him.

“Hey, Barr. You okay? You look like you didn’t get much sleep,” she said, leaning toward him across the table. “I would have understood if you were late.”

He was late, technically. But five minutes late because Len could only brush his teeth at normal speed was still early for Barry Allen. “Rough night,” he said and took a quick gulp of coffee.

“Those heists?”

“It’s complicated.” He didn’t want to get into the details with Iris. If luck would actually be on his side for once, hopefully he’d be done with all this before she found out about Len and Bivolo and Alexa. Even Joe wouldn’t scold him for wanting that.

“Are they connected? Yesterday and the night before? Witnesses said…” Iris caught herself just as she hunkered closer, diving into reporter mode. “Sorry. This isn’t about me getting a story. I just want to know if you’re okay. If there’s anything you need, Barry…” She sighed. “You haven’t even had a chance to breathe since…”
“Yeah…” He took another long swig of coffee. “But it’s just thieves this time around, nothing like Zoom. It’s nice to have a normal case to work on. Not nice, these people need to be stopped,” he said more hushed. “A guard almost died the other night, and the property damage…” which maybe was more Len’s fault considering the cold gun had been involved, “but I…uhh…I don’t want to talk about that right now.”

“Not even about you and Cold?” she eyed him playfully, which made his insides clench before he realized she couldn’t possibly be talking about him and Len and their tangled love shape, but how the news had portrayed them as partners for stopping that first heist—and for stopping the second one.

Somehow, a civilian had been close enough to capture footage on their camera phone. It clearly showed when Barry’s lightning dropped Len off to ambush the two goons, then saw Len take one down and chase after the other one. All the TV headlines yesterday had been—CAPTAIN COLD, HERO? And—COLD ON TEAM FLASH? It was a whole different kind of fallout they’d have to deal with eventually.

“My editor is pushing me to get the scoop,” Iris said, “wondering why I didn’t break the story first that Flash and Cold were teaming up, since I’m so close with the Scarlet Speedster and all. But I won’t push if you don’t want to share.” She relaxed on her elbows, playing with her coffee cup more than drinking from it. “I’m glad he’s being more upfront about helping instead of breaking into the house to prove a point.”

Barry snorted. “Yeah…me too. I’d tell you more, Iris, but it’s difficult with him right now. It’s gonna be tough with the news saying he’s changed sides, you know? He already has a lot of enemies, now he’ll be a traitor to some people. It’s not my place—”

“I get it, Barr,” Iris broke in. “I never want either of our jobs to interfere with just…us. You tell me when you’re ready, if there’s anything to tell. I honestly just wanted coffee. Figured you needed something other than Flash work to distract you for a while. It hasn’t even been a week…” She trailed off again and her dark eyes looked so sad for him. “Is there anything you need?”

A different life. A different him.

Sometimes Barry wanted to go back to the night his mother died and undo it all anyway like he’d almost done a year ago, erase The Flash from existence if he had to just to keep his mother and father alive and let everyone else be better off without him. But he’d probably just end up making things worse.

“This is good,” he said. “Coffee. You. A quiet morning.” However long that lasted.

“I missed you, Barry.” Iris reached for his hand and he instinctively met it. “I don’t want the loss of your dad to push you away from me. From any of us. It’s awful what Zoom did. If I could give anything—”

“I know,” Barry scowled at having to think about it as he clung to her fingers. “I’m not trying to be distant, Iris. But I’m glad I’ve been busy the past couple days, because it makes it easier to not think about him. It’s like Mom all over again.” He stared at the lid of his coffee cup and smiled the same smile he’d been forcing for over a decade when he was too broken to cry anymore.

“Sometimes, it’s like I forget he’s gone. Life is business as usual, and I can laugh and joke and enjoy being The Flash, and nothing can topple me.

“Then I remember…and it starts all over again, like it’s the same night. Sometimes I sleep. Sometimes I don’t. Sometimes when I’m in that place between, I feel this pain in my chest like my
heart’s going to explode and I get that sense of freefalling when you startle yourself awake like you’ve just hit the pavement, but I’m still *falling* and I can’t…” The rest of the words stuck in his throat and he realized how much of that he’d said in a rush, clinging too tightly to Iris’s hand.

The chair behind Barry creaked against the floor, drawing his attention—only for him to see the back of Len’s head as he sat at the only table available with his acquired coffee. Barry wanted to be angry that Len had dared sit there to overhear them, but then he hated himself for thinking poorly of the man when all the other tables were full and he was tethered to Barry like an indentured servant.

Iris squeezed his hand, bringing his attention around again.

“Sorry.” Barry let out a slow breath. “When I think I’m on the brink, everyone being there for me does help. It makes it easier. *You* make it easier.”

“I do? Because I thought maybe I was making things worse.” Her sweet smile grew marred by gentle prodding that made Barry feel trapped between her in front of him and the man at his back.

He tugged his hand out of her grasp. “Iris…”

“I’m not pushing, Barry,” she retreated to her coffee cup but had that look about her like she was geared up to make a stand. “I asked you not to push when Eddie was still here. I won’t do that to you. I just wish I understood what changed. If it was Zoom—”

“It’s not only him. He just made me realize how selfish I was being.”

“Selfish?” she frowned.

Barry was keenly aware of Len at his back, even though Iris had no idea. He felt like he was on repeat. “You don’t really want to be with me, Iris. We’ll always be friends, best friends, and we’ll always be family, but you don’t love me the way you loved Eddie.”

Iris reared back like he’d pushed her. “Don’t I get to be the one to decide that?”

“You had a choice once,” Barry clutched his coffee cup harder. “You chose him. If he was here—”

“He’s not here. He’s gone and you still see him like a wall between us.”

“Because he *is,*” Barry snapped. “He’ll always be between us because you chose him and I’m just a convenient replacement.” The words spewed out of Barry before he could stop them, and he hated himself the second they did. Still, he wouldn’t take them back, even when the shock and pain settled on her face.

“Wow,” Iris said with a quiver in her voice. “That’s really how you feel?”

“I don’t want to be your consolation prize anymore.”

Iris pushed out of her chair like she couldn’t leave the table fast enough, but as she grabbed her purse from the back of her seat to leave, she hesitated, and he could tell she didn’t want to storm off when he was broken too. But that just proved how amazing she was and that he truly didn’t deserve her.

“I said I didn’t want you to push me away,” she said. “I don’t. But I didn’t think you could do *worse.* I’ll call you when I know I’m not going to regret the next thing I say,” she finished and hurried for the door with damp eyes far worse than how he’d left her on the porch.
Barry’s chest was a carved out hole and life kept ripping out more pieces—he kept ripping out more pieces. Pushing his coffee to the center of the table, he dropped his forehead until it thudded on the surface.

Only when he sensed someone take up Iris’s vacated seat did he remember Len.

“I’m sure you love this.” Barry lifted his head but still stared at the table.

“I love you,” Len said. “I don’t enjoy seeing you miserable.”

Barry cringed, wondering if even now Len was experiencing chest pains because Barry couldn’t get his life together.

“Did you mean all of that?” Len asked.

“Not…the way I said it.”

A hand slid across the tabletop into Barry’s line of sight, but Len didn’t take hold of him. He wanted to, he just wouldn’t ask because even he was being less selfish than Barry right now.

“You realize, kid, that what you’re doing with Iris only proves how good you are.”

“Yeah,” Barry sputtered. “How’s that?”

“Because you’re still thinking of her first, not yourself.”

“Only because lately I’ve been thinking of nothing but myself.”

“You’re allowed to want things on occasion. You’re allowed to want what’s best for those you care about, even if it stings. But don’t push those things apart like it’s one or the other. Think like a thief and strive to have it all.”

Barry laughed, because Len was being Len, and it was so hard to be miserable around him. He moved his hand to rest atop Len’s and looked up finally to meet those blue eyes behind the silly, sexy glasses.

“Be honest now, Scarlet,” Len said, “what do you want?”

Once, Barry would have been able to answer that without thinking. Now, he wasn’t so sure. He pulled his hand away from Len as he thought of Iris and then of the man right in front of him with a sad pull at the corners of his lips. “Something real,” he said, but he didn’t deserve that either.

He didn’t deserve to be happy and get a picture-perfect ending. Even the one headline he knew was once in his future had been a tragedy of him being lost and missing. He wondered what that headline read like now…but he didn’t have the strength to sneak a peek anymore.

“And what do you need, Barry? Right now?” Len asked, and despite the meta human push for the man to love him with such devotion, Barry wanted to believe that at least the sentiment of caring for Barry’s wellbeing was real.

After all, Len had saved him from Deathbolt. He’d murmured, “Sorry,” beneath his breath with such hurt in his voice when his father shot Barry, and he’d shown up at Christmas with a warning when he could have joined Mardon and Jesse to take Barry out. He’d even turned hero long enough to almost die for it, because Barry said he believed in him.

Len wasn’t conventional in his affections—outside of the past few days—but he did care.
“Breakfast,” Barry said. “Lots of breakfast.”

Len knew a few greasy spoons in Central City that served truly heart attack-inducing spreads for a Sunday morning. He even knew a few that had a handful of sensible items on their menus since living off of fried foods wasn’t something he could do with the same ease in his 40s as his 20s—not that Barry counted as a normal 20-something.

Still, Len knew just the place to be out of the way in a neighborhood not quite as questionable as Saints and Sinners.

Barry got a tall order of pancakes, hash browns with cheddar, breakfast sausage, two eggs over-easy, eggs benedict, and a Belgian waffle. The waitress, poor dear, assumed that was the order for the table before Len gently stopped her and said, “And I’ll have…”

Her wide eyes took in Barry’s svelte appearance with newfound awe, while Len stuck to a short stack, bacon, and a side of fruit.

Barry didn’t want to talk about Iris, so Len didn’t ask. Of course he was glad Barry hadn’t fallen into her arms. Iris was a knockout, fiercely intelligent, and passionate about everything she did. She was Barry’s childhood crush and best friend. If ever Len had competition, it was her. But even if Len had sighed relief at Barry once again pushing her away, he didn’t agree with the kid’s reasoning that he wasn’t enough and he never wanted to see Barry suffer.

The ache in Len’s chest had grown, but as long as he made Barry smile or laugh again, he was able to banish it. He just wanted to see the kid happy, whatever that meant.

Which was why he stood stunned when Barry finished the last bite on his many plates and looked at Len as if ashamed. “What do you need, Len? It shouldn’t only be about me. Cisco and Caitlin aren’t going to give us the whole day, and they shouldn’t. We need to fix you.”

“Easier said than done,” Len smirked.

“No jokes,” Barry said seriously, setting his fork aside. “I don’t want you to get hurt because of me.”

“I know.” The lightness that Len so loved about being in love with Barry, cleared away any lingering pain. “But if you’re asking what I need right now…” he grinned as an idea struck him, “how about we take a few hours to be mindless, just long enough to lead into lunch, and then we can head to STAR Labs if they haven’t interrupted us yet.”

“Mindless?” Barry blinked at him.

Leaning over the table wasn’t as easy when literally every square inch was covered in plates and bowls. “You didn’t think Captain Cold survived without a Netflix account, did you?”

There was that laugh.

“There’s a new show…well, an old show reinvigorated that I noticed has a new face. You’re probably too young to remember Mystery Science Theater—”

“3000? Are you kidding?” Barry brightened. “I love MST3K! Joe had us watch all of the original when I was a kid.”
Len had new respect for the detective if he enjoyed the old comedy series of a man and his two robots being forced to watch bad movies that they made fun of.

“We have a constantly running argument over whether or not—” Barry cut himself off. “Wait, what’s your favorite episode?”

“Gotta be *Space Mutiny,*” Len said without pause.

“Thank you! Right?” Barry was positively beaming now. “Joe says *The Final Sacrifice,* and I’m like…fine, yeah, it’s great too, but *come on.* The tough guy names kill me every time. ‘Gristle McThornday’ and ‘Big McLargeHuge,‘” he said in an exaggerated voice and then giggled at his own ridiculousness. The way the hosts of the show joked about the meathead of a main character in *Space Mutiny* was a beauty to behold for any fans of bad jokes and puns.

How could Len be anything but in love with this kid?

“Definitely one of the few movies they riff that would be hilarious even without commentary,” Barry said. “You know they stole footage from the original *Battlestar Galactica*?”

“I did know. You know Reb Brown, the actor for Ryder, has done other films? Even more recent ones?”

“For real? Oh my god…”

“We’ll save that for another time. Today, how about we give the new MST3K a whirl?” Len gestured out of their booth. “It’s waiting in my queue.”

“Yes,” Barry said wholeheartedly. “Absolutely yes to that. And eventually *Space Mutiny* too just because. I’ve wanted to show it to Cisco forever.”

“Cisco’s never seen it? My, my, Lisa would get a kick out of that. She adores that episode. Though her favorite is the *Girl in Gold Boots.*”

Barry laughed so hard, his stomach protested and he had to clutch at it, though maybe that was from the mountain of food.

Len waved the waitress over to pay. “I owe you for lunch last time,” he said when Barry protested, as if their conversation at Saints and Sinners over Lisa had been a date. They headed back to the apartment then, walking at first, but Len’s neighborhood was across town, so eventually they slipped into an alley and Barry zipped them the rest of the way to just outside Len’s door.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” Barry said as Len fished out his key. “Only if you really don’t mind, but…I noticed the Motor Car photo in your apartment and wondered… Is it a joke, since it’s a cop diner?”

Len paused before placing the key in the lock to look at Barry. “My grandfather used to take me there.”

“Oh.” Barry stuffed his hands in his pockets like he was being too invasive and needed to pull back, but it didn’t stop him from asking, “He was a cop like your dad, right?”

“*Not* like my father,” Len clarified.

“He was different?”
“He was a good man. Would have taken us away to raise us himself if it hadn’t been for the heart attack.”

Barry’s eyes widened. Clearly, he didn’t know everything about Len, but then, as Len himself had said, there was more to him than his police records. “I’m sorry,” Barry said.

“Nothing to do about it now. But I don’t mind talking about him. Honestly. You can ask. Those are the good memories.” He smiled as one came to mind of Sunday breakfast with Lisa too young to see over the table without a booster seat. “Come on,” he turned back to the door, “we’ll make a real lazy day of this yet before we’re called to business.” He smiled to himself but as he reached for the doorknob, he froze and the expression plummeted.

Unlocked. But the only person who had a key besides him and Lisa was…

Len threw the door open to find exactly who he expected waiting for him, sitting on the arm of his sofa.

“Mick.”

“You wanna explain real careful what the hell it is you think yer doing?” Mick barked, all fire and fury as he slid from the sofa and stalked toward Len, wearing a T-shirt and his canvas jacket. Then his eyes strayed to Barry. “And why yer workin’ with pretty over there instead of me?”

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

It's the consolation prize thing, Redhead. Now, you did it with Lenny/Len, but I have always had that phrase in my head for Iris and Barry. Anyway, well played, well played.

My love for MST3K (original and the new show, wow), especially Space Mutiny, knows no bounds. It's on Netflix, guys. If you've never seen it, do yourselves a favor. There is no way Len wouldn't be a fan of this. Barry too.

I hope you're all still with me, because the comments mean the world to me.

More soon!
Len pushed quickly into the apartment to block Barry from Mick’s trajectory. He felt the kid come in behind him and shut the door, but thankfully Barry stayed quiet despite the ‘pretty’ comment.

“How did you—” Len cut off before the thought could finish. “Lisa. Mick, you don’t know—”

“Damn right I don’t know,” Mick loomed over him as he snarled in Len’s face, “coz you figured it was all fine and dandy to take on Alexa without callin’ yer best friend. Or is that only true when feedin’ yer guilty conscience?”

“Hey, hang on—” Barry stepped around Len—shit, no.

“Can it, Flash,” Mick roared, face red and fists tight like he was itching to hit something, and since he obviously knew Barry's identity now, why not something he’d used as target practice before?

“Back off.” Len shouldered between them as Barry rose up, ready for a fight—absolutely not.

“Both of you,” he snapped at Barry, because seriously, did he not get the old adage about playing with fire? Len faced Mick with Barry safely at his back. “What did Lisa tell you?”

“Enough,” Mick said. “That Alexa’s back and plannin’ somethin’ big, with a whole slew of fodder to throw around and Bivolo on her payroll. That yer workin’ with Spark Plug here to take care of it and gettin’ all cozy with him—”

“Not cozy, geez,” Barry spoke over Len’s shoulder, “we’re not—”

“Yer in his god damn apartment!” Mick bellowed.

Len spread his arms to prevent himself from being flattened between a rock and a hard place. “Do you want Evelyn pounding down my door?” he hissed.

Mick retreated but pulled on a sharp smirk. “Please, I checked with Evie first, ya think I’m crazy? She’s out enjoyin’ Sunday brunch, which is where I’m guessin’ you two strolled in from. Playin’ house ain’t gonna get Alexa before she gets you.”

“Just listen, okay?” Barry said, seizing Len's arm and pulling him back to take his place facing Mick. Anxiety rippled through Len—and irritation. He didn’t need to be saved; he was trying to
keep Barry from a broken jaw, even if he could heal it in hours.

Mick breathed heavily through his nose like a bull preparing to gorge someone.

“We literally can’t be away from each other for more than ten minutes without Len’s heart stopping because of what Bivolo did to him,” Barry explained. “He didn’t choose to work with me, he has to. He didn’t want to involve you because this is complicated enough without us getting into a screaming match. He’s not sneaking behind your back, he was just trying to protect you.”

The fight dwindled from Mick’s fists, but he still grumbled, “Coz ya know him so well all of a sudden, don’t ya?”

Amazingly enough...he did.

“I was the one who helped him with Lewis,” Barry spat. “Where were you?”

Len knocked Barry back before Mick could swing at him, shooting him a glare to express how out of his mind he must be. Turning back to Mick, Len expected to find his friend seething, but Mick deflated that much further, fists loosening as he stepped back.

“Got any beer in this place?” he said, retreating for the kitchen. Retreating. That ship really had changed them.

“It’s 10:30,” Barry scoffed.

Len shot him one more look for good measure, because really?

“If Evie’s downin’ Bloody Marys and church goers havin’ Mimosas, I can have a beer.” Mick snagged a bottle from the fridge and popped the top without an opener, taking a liberal drink before he met Len's eyes again.

How much had he been doing that lately, Len wondered? He’d dragged Mick up from the bottom of a bottle too many times. But this wasn’t the same Mick. Len didn’t even know this Mick, who’d gone from getting soft on Raymond to betraying them to the pirates to being turned into a monster by the Time Masters when Len couldn’t think of a better way to control him beyond abandoning him to chance.

Never once in thirty years had Len feared Mick. A punch, a brawl, even the butt of a gun, maybe, but never real fear that Mick would do worse than Len could walk away from. He certainly never expected Mick would ever, could ever threaten Lisa. But after the pirates, Len realized he’d pushed too far and didn’t trust his own senses if Mick could choose strangers over him and expect him to bail on their team along with him.

Len had been so shaken and not able to face it, he’d dropped Mick somewhere far away, thinking he could salvage it later—later—only for Chronos to threaten his baby sister and put real fear in Len’s belly from his best friend. He’d had to save Mick after that, any way he could, any sacrifice necessary to bring the real Mick back.

Was this him? Len didn’t know, but he’d still come at Lisa’s call.

“Did you see her?” Len asked, moving toward Mick at a measured pace as his friend leaned against the island.

“Lisa? Sure. Stopped at her place first,” which shouldn’t have made Len flinch, “Said you’d be here. Said I should ask you what’s what and play nice with Red.” Mick dragged his eyes down
Barry’s lean figure as the kid came up next to Len. “He even legal?”

Barry rolled his eyes and crossed his arms tightly over his chest. “I think you need to check the definition of playing nice.”

“Didn’t say I agreed to listen now, did I?” Mick gruffed out.

“Stop.” Len pushed his fingers against his temple. This was not a merry-go-round he wanted to keep repeating. “Mick…how’d you get here? You swipe the drop-ship?”

“Pfft, didn’t need to. Sara relayed the message Lisa sent to Gideon. Said you’d told her ‘bout The Alexa Job but not the whole truth. So I said we needed to get back here since you were being an even bigger dumbass than usual. She convinced Rip the team needed some shore leave and here we are.”

“Sara’s in Central too?” Len’s throat tightened at the prospect.

“Her mother lives here.”

“Sara Lance?” Barry questioned, watching Len like there was something telling to be read in his expression. Len kept his eyes on the counter, unsure how to sift through the confusing swirl of emotions growing in his gut.

“Now this is rich,” Mick chuckled before taking another swig of beer. “Red don’t know he got competition?”

“Mick.” Len's eyes snapped up.

“What?” Arms dropping from their defiant stiffness, Barry’s face went equally slack. “You’re seeing Sara?”

“No.” Len turned to him, already feeling a twinge from the hurt and betrayal on Barry's face.

“Snart tried to get things rollin’,” Mick kept on when Len just wanted him to shut up. “She turned his ass down. Went for the kid instead, huh?”

Len was going to lose his breakfast all because Barry looked nauseous. He wasn’t like Iris. Barry wasn’t a consolation prize for him, he wasn’t.

“We're not together,” Barry retorted like he only just then registered the rest of Mick’s words. “I’m only here because I have to be.”

Fuck, that hurt, spiking a very different kind of pain through Len's chest.

“And to help with Alexa. So if you’re here to join the team and help us bring her in, let’s keep the focus on that.”

“Barry…”

“That’s what I want right now,” Barry spoke over Len and shifted his eyes away like he couldn’t stand to look at him directly. “Okay?”

Len had to explain, had to reassure Barry somehow, but not with Mick here. Turning to his partner, who kept sneaking glances at them between drinks like they were the most entertaining thing he’d seen all week, Len demanded, “Who else knows about this?”
Mick shrugged. “Ray's around.”

Perfect. “You wanna help, Mick, you follow my lead. No going off on your own agenda. I don’t care what bone you have to pick with Alexa.”

“You mean the same bone you do coz she boned both of us and royally fucked us over?” Mick slammed his beer down on the counter, causing Barry to look even greener around the edges with another of Len’s failed exploits out in the open. “I did right at the Vanishing Point. Push came to shove, I chose the team. You don’t get to order me around—”

“And you don’t get to go see Lisa when she doesn’t know what you said you’d do to her when Chronos wanted revenge,” Len barked, feeling that rare anger boil up inside of him that seemed so much quicker to rise after Bivolo’s influence, opening him up to feel without holding back.

He rocked away from Mick on his heels, realizing how he’d rushed the counter and gotten in his friend’s face, feeling the sting of his nails digging into his palms and seeing the same expression on Mick that he’d had at the Oculus when he’d resigned himself to die.

They’d never talked about it. They didn’t talk about things like that. Len couldn’t handle the emotions between them with Barry standing behind him, with one of the few ghosts he and Mick shared back to haunt them, and days of tension wrapped in centuries Mick had suffered through because Len couldn’t do right by the ones he loved.

“You don’t want me to see Lisa…fine,” Mick said, not railing back, not really. “So when she comes calling to help school your ass, what do I say? Shut her down? Walk away? Like you’ve gotten so good at?”

Shame swelled up inside of Len. It was all too quiet and bitter, this fight. He’d rather their fists were flying. That was simpler, easier.

“Forget ain’t what we do, right?” Mick went on. “Just tolerance. You puttin’ up with me coz I’m useful. Well I gotta put up with you too, pal, don’t think yer all shiny and flawless just coz Sparky here’s showing you a good time.”

“We’re not—”

“Whatever,” Mick spat at Barry before turning his intense, focused eyes back on Len that held too much history, too many years in them that Len hadn’t been a part of—like wisdom mixed with madness. “Want me to follow yer lead? Bivolo put some sort of spell on ya, ya said? Tied to Red like a yo-yo that’ll snap if you get too far apart? Yeah, real grand example yer settin’ so far.”

Len squeezed his eyes shut, feeling that oncoming headache no matter how hard he tried to will it away. “We’re working on it,” he said when he opened his eyes. “We come up empty to fix that today, we’ll hit the streets tomorrow to find a lead. Wanna help? Get your nose to the ground and meet us at Saints tomorrow. Noon. We'll sort this out then.” Len needed a moment to breathe without Mick standing close enough for him to see his failures staring back at him.

Mick frowned around Len to glare at Barry. “Trouble in paradise to fix already, huh? Fine, get rid of me.” He pushed from the island counter to head for the door.

Arm flying out to stop Mick as he tried to sweep past him, one of very few people Len had any reflex to touch in moments like this, he held his friend by the elbow, knowing that when things were this strained they could easily lead to blows. “You can see Lisa,” he said, feeling shitty for ever saying otherwise, “but she doesn’t know everything that went down. For your sake, I didn’t
“My sake?” Mick said, inches between them and miles at the same time. “Bet you didn’t tell her about almost needin’ a funeral for ya neither. Whose sake was that for?”

“Hers.”

Mick huffed and wrested his arm from Len’s hold. “Big damn hero, thinkin’ of everybody but yerself, and ya still don’t trust me.”

“I trust you, Mick, but Lisa…” There was that emotion again, all right there at the surface, bleeding out but not easy to face, not like his love for Barry that poured forth without censorship, because he’d never been carefree with how he felt, not for anyone, not even for his sister. But even what he couldn’t say came more easily to his expression now like a crack in his mask. “I almost lost her once,” he said, thinking of his father without having to say it for Mick to understand. He stared into his friend’s eyes as if to add, then I almost lost you. “I can’t…” Len choked and coughed through clearing his throat because this was too much this early on a Sunday, god damn it. “I’m handling this shit poorly, alright? All of it. I admit that.”

“Hmph,” Mick snorted. “Ya think?”

“Mick…”

“Yeah, yeah,” the larger man said, stepping back but not to escape Len this time, just to clear the air between them that finally felt less thick and rancid. “I’ll give ya space with lover boy. Saints. Tomorrow. Noon. Don’t do anything exciting without me. There another run in with Alexa’s men, I expect a call. Go figure out yer yo-yo problem.” He waved a hand at Barry like shooing off a gnat but settled his gaze on him with a touch of deference slipping in. “Pissed ain’t a bad look on you, Red. Almost intimidating.”

Reaching back to snag his beer, Mick chugged the rest and slammed it on the counter again. He was out the door the next second without any formal goodbye and the silence left behind might as well have suffocated Len in Barry’s company.

The kid’s conflicted expression, not understanding everything that had gone on between them, didn’t banish the indignant embers beneath. “I’m going to gather my things,” he said in a quiet voice as he turned to cross the living room. “We should get to the Labs.”

So much for lazy and mindless. “Barry, it’s not what you think. Sara and I were never—”

“I don’t need to know,” Barry spun around still backing away from him. “You obviously had no intention of telling me. Hell, maybe that was Bivolo’s fault too because it would disrupt the lie if you admitted your real feelings are for someone else. Fine. Forget it.” He spun again and kept moving for the bedroom. “Doesn’t matter anyway. There’s nothing between us.”

“Barry.” Len had to sprint to catch up with him, wanting to reach out but dreading being swatted away. At least Barry paused, stilled in the doorway. “You don’t believe that. You feel something for me.”

“Pity,” Barry fired over his shoulder. “Frustration.”

“More than that. I’ve seen it. I know—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Barry whirled again and leaned forward sharply enough to make Len flinch, something untamed and wild and suffering taking hold of him. “The situation’s all fucked. I almost
believed there might be some part of you that…” He squeezed his eyes shut leaving only the suffering to remain, changing focus on a dime like only a speedster could. His eyes shimmered when he opened them. “Even with meta powers involved, I’m never anyone’s first choice.”

Realizing what he’d just said, what he’d admitted out loud, Barry’s face turned panicked and he backed up another step into the bedroom.

“You are.” Len followed him, risking reaching for him, needing to touch, to hold him, but Barry continued to back away. “You’re the only choice. I wouldn’t lie. I can’t lie to you. I’ve kept things from you because that’s...how I am, how I live, but I would never lie. Never again. I love you too much—”

“Stop saying that,” Barry shook his head.

“But I do. I love you so much, Barry—”

“You don’t love me!” he flashed forward with a spark of lightning flickering through the dark room and pushed Len away just as his fingers had grasped Barry’s shirt.

It was the first time Barry actively denied Len other than the kisses he’d shied from. Len didn’t expect Barry to simply accept him or his need for contact, he never expected that, Barry didn’t owe him anything, but it still hurt to have Barry look so repulsed—with him, with himself, with all of this.

But Len knew the truth. He wasn’t crazy. He loved Barry. He just had to prove it and banish the pain staring back at him that made his chest feel like it was burning.

Searching Barry’s face for understanding, Len swallowed down the ache. “You were hit with Bivolo’s powers once before.”

Barry scowled, unwilling to meet Len’s eyes amidst the shame he felt for using his powers like that. “Yeah. Rage. So what?”

“So. Was all of the rage you felt unfounded? Did it come from nothing? Or did it start from what was already there?”

“This is different—”

“Because his powers pushed you to say and do things you wouldn’t have, but the emotions were real.”

“You’re twisting this around!” Barry yelled.

Len didn’t want to yell in kind, he wanted to comfort. He wanted Barry to be happy. He wanted to do right by the kid like he kept failing to do with everyone else. “Am I? Maybe I wouldn’t say most of this. Maybe I wouldn’t do the things I’ve done. But wanting you was always there. I wouldn’t have called it love, you’re right. Wouldn’t have admitted to it. And maybe it was infatuation more than anything, but it wasn’t nothing.

“I know you don’t feel the same.” He took a cautious step closer, causing Barry to rear up only for his legs to hit the edge of the bed. “You don’t love me back. But if you ever could, I need you to believe that you are better than anything I would ever ask for. You are the first choice I’d make in any life if I thought I had a chance. This feeling has to be based in something real because it is the only good I’ve known in a long while.”
For a moment, the moisture building in Barry’s eyes almost spilled over, and though Len didn’t want to make the kid cry, he knew it would be a sign that he’d reached him, that Barry believed him. But then the fog of tears faded as recognition filled his face instead.

“You mean aside from that ship?” Barry looked at Len with a sudden hollowness. “Aside from doing the right thing and saving your best friend? Aside from making new friends? Aside from Sara?” he said like an accusation. “Am I really the only good in your life, Len, even more so than Lisa? Or are you just compelled to say that?”

Words evaporated before Len could form them. He was never left gaping, never left without a comeback. But it was a trap, an awful, binding cage with no locks to pick. There was no answer that let him win, because he couldn’t deny that all those things Barry had listed off were good, of course they were, he’d been so overwhelmed by the good of those things…he’d had to leave.

But Barry… He was still so… Wasn’t he…? Len had to be… He knew that… What he felt was… It… He…

“Hey.”

Len’s brain was so caught up in short-circuiting, mouth floundering for the right words, he didn’t see Barry clearly until the kid came closer and gripped his shoulder. He gasped at the nearness, unable to stop the stray tear that spilled down his cheek and—shit, shit, why was he crying?

“It’s okay. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Barry pulled him in, wrapping long arms around his frozen body, but even then, Len felt like something important had been broken.

He sunk into the comfort of Barry’s touch.

“I shouldn’t be angry,” Barry said beside his ear. “You’re the one who’s hurting. You’re the one they duped into feeling like this. You shouldn’t have to waste all this effort on me. I’m not worth it. You should focus on the real good in your life. On Lisa and patching things up with Mick. You obviously love each other. Only family can drive you that crazy,” he chuckled and sniffled and held Len tighter. “He’s your family. And Lisa. And maybe…maybe even the Legends.”

Was that the problem, Len wondered? Because family either let him down or he let them down, and he didn’t need more of that grief. But he wanted it, deep down where it couldn’t hide when his eyes were this wet—he wanted it.

He just wanted Barry too.

Len hugged him back—tight, too tight—dampening Barry’s shirt while his own shoulder suffered the same. “I don’t want you to hurt either,” he said. “Tell me you believe that, Barry.”

“I believe that.”

“I want you safe.”

“I believe that,” Barry said again.

“I want you happy.”

“I…I-I don’t know…”

“I want you happy,” Len asserted.
“Okay,” Barry murmured into his shoulder.

The only thing left was to say how much Len loved Barry, but he couldn’t do that, couldn’t kiss him, couldn’t force any of the things Barry had asked him to stop offering. So he said, “I want…to get a drink when this is over,” and pulled out of Barry’s hold. “When it’s all over. As those strange friends we could be. Can we do that?”

Barry smiled despite his glittering eyes. “Yeah, Len. We can do that. I’ll even pay.”

“I should think so,” Len pulled a smirk. “It’s your turn again.”

Barry laughed, and it was as beautiful a sound as ever, but they were both too choked for comfort.

“Get your things, Barry.” Brushing off that stray tear like flicking a fallen eyelash, Len sucked down the rest that hadn’t fallen. “I’m gonna use the bathroom before we go.” He turned before Barry could respond, feeling torn up and glued back together the wrong way, but at the same time…more certain than ever about what he had to do to become whole.

Barry thought everyone he fell for was bound to be like Iris, only wanting him as a fallback even if they didn’t recognize that themselves. Len did have feelings for Sara, but they paled in comparison to what he felt for Barry. They had to—they had to.

He would win Barry’s love—by proving Barry was worth loving, whatever it took to show him that.

Falling back against the bathroom door with fresh resolve, the ache in Len's chest lessened.

Wake up. You have to wake up.

But Len could barely hear the distant voice. It was all just buzzing noise when what mattered most was Barry.

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Caitlin and Cisco were already at the Labs when they arrived, surprised to see them there so early.

“Figured you’d at least wait til lunch,” Cisco said. “You up for more already, Len?”

Len shouldn’t have to be, he deserved the break Barry had promised him, deserved MST3K and a few hours to relax, but Barry had been too selfish and ruined everything. It had just stung so much to build up an idea in his head of Len actually caring for him outside of Bivolo’s control only to find out that even if the real Len felt something for him, he was still only an afterthought.

Barry shouldn’t be so hurt when he knew Len’s feelings for him weren't real, but it still lingered like a bad bruise.

They got nowhere with suggestibility or breaking Len of his hypnosis, though Caitlin swore his brain activity was headed in a positive direction.

“Just a few more days or…” weeks, she didn't say because they didn't have that kind of time, “or a little longer and we should make some headway. In the meantime, we can focus on the case and hopefully track down the source.”

Track down Bivolo, she meant. Easier said than done, though Cisco had a number of leads for them to follow up on now, Joe too, and Len had several ideas for how Heat Wave could be a help
instead of a hindrance.

Lisa did not show up at the Labs but messaged them about joining the meet-up with Mick tomorrow. Len promptly gave Cisco the stink eye after relaying the message.

They kept expecting another heist, during the day, then once night fell, but nothing happened, not even a normal Flash call came in. All was quiet in Central City.

“It’s on purpose,” Len said, “to throw us off, prevent predictability.” But if he knew any more than that, he couldn’t say it.

They called it another day and headed home—Barry’s home—so he could pack for a longer stay at Len’s. Joe was there, of course, and Wally, but at least there was no sign of Iris. Barry wasn’t ready to face her yet or to explain what was happening.

“Why is Barry spending the night with Captain Cold?” Wally stood stiff and on guard leaning against the back of the sofa while Len waited in the entryway.

Barry zipped about, up and back down the stairs, able to keep an ear on the conversation as he gathered his things from around the house. Joe was far more on guard than Wally, obviously not wanting another of his kids to get involved in all this crazy.

“We’re moving in together,” Len said, with a tease in his voice that Barry knew was only to watch Wally gape and to fill Joe with bluster. “Didn’t you know we’ve been dating for a year?”

“That’s not funny, Len,” Barry appeared with a small suitcase and backpack, finally ready to go. He was too harried to be upset but also wasn’t in the mood for jokes. “It’s for a case, Wally. Joe can explain if he wants to.”

Joe’s expression said not bloody likely.

“Hopefully, it’ll only be a few more days, then we’ll have everything sorted. All we need is one solid lead to pan out so we can track one of Alexa’s men, or Bivolo himself, and the rest will fall into place.” It had to. “I’ll keep you posted, Joe,” Barry said, as he situated his backpack over his shoulders to more easily carry everything and Len. Maybe they needed to start using Len’s motorcycle more often. It was becoming too comfortable having the man in his arms.

“You better,” Joe said, before nodding at Len like offering a silent shovel talk, which really didn’t help matters.

Then they were off, back to Len’s apartment, only earlier this time, too early to fall into bed. They were on call in case any nefarious activities happened during the night, but they didn’t anticipate anything given the pattern.

Night heist. Day heist. Nothing. Alexa might set something in motion for tomorrow, or maybe she wouldn’t, hoping to catch them off guard either way. Nothing curdled Barry’s stomach more than the waiting game.

“Hungry?” Len asked as soon as Barry had placed his things in the bedroom. “You can’t live on takeout and protein bars alone.”

“Sure.” Barry didn’t want to argue. They’d done enough of that for one day. “But if you’re making something, I can help.”

“Why do you think I like having you around?” Len smirked as he opened the refrigerator. “The
ease of manual labor. I’m planning on having you tackle the bathroom next and fold the laundry.”

Barry chuckled, despite the last time they were in the kitchen together ending with tension and biting words. Len seemed to understand that Barry could only accept his friendship. He would gladly accept Len as a friend. The rest would be too complicated even if there wasn’t mind control involved.

Len pulled out a tomato and a red pepper, ground turkey, rice, cheese…

“This seems like too much trouble—”

“One of the easiest and quickest meals I know,” Len dismissed. “How often do you eat out of a box, kid? I enjoy cooking. It’s no trouble.” He moved about the kitchen with the same grace he maneuvered his cold gun during a heist. “You can grate the cheese,” he set the block of cheddar aside with a grater from the cabinet.

Barry zipped to the task, finished in moments, and leaned back against the island with a smug grin. Len shook his head at him in amusement.

It…warmed Barry that they could be like this. “I’m sorry,” he said suddenly, thinking too potently of that morning and how childish he’d acted when Len had so little control.

“You got nothing to apologize for,” Len said, beginning to brown the turkey at the stovetop.

“But I do. You’re being really…great, all things considered. Just promise you’ll tell me if you’re ever in any pain.”

“You think I’m keeping that from you?”

“Are you?”

The evasive silence said enough. “I don’t tell you every time I feel a twinge,” he finally said.

“I know Caitlin keeps saying you check out fine, but if there’s any lasting damage because I can’t get a handle on living my own life—”

“I’m fine,” Len insisted. “If it’s bad enough to bother me, I’ll tell you.”

“I want to believe that,” Barry said, “I just get the feeling it’s way too easy for you to tell me what I want to hear.”

Len paused at the stove, then gestured for Barry to cut the vegetables with a knife he handed him, which Barry completed before the man had even opened his mouth to reply. “You’re impulsive. Makes you sloppy. You have moments of real skill, but that often falls away in favor of speed. Skill keeps you cleaner, since you’re so hung up on not causing any permanent damage when you fight.”

Barry shifted with discomfort as Len continued to move about the kitchen as he spoke, pulling a can of sauce from the pantry and setting it near the stove without losing a beat.

“You rag on me for lying but lie constantly to your friends and family when it suits you. Your priorities are shit. You don’t take care of yourself, which also makes you sloppy. You have no mind for strategy. Most of your wins come from luck, stubbornness, and again—speed. Not good enough. You’re setting yourself up for failure. Or, if you’re not careful, that quick temper and
tendency to think you’ve earned veto power when you’re supposed to be part of a team is going to turn you into something you’re not.” He stirred the meat while casting Barry a sly glance. “That honest enough for you?”

“Brutally,” Barry said, almost put off his dinner if he wasn’t…well…him. “Thanks. Not exactly helping me not feel like crap.”

“Well I could heap on just as many praises, Scarlet, but you don’t believe me when I do that.” Len smiled a little more sweetly. “You know what would help cheer you up?”

“What?”

“Relaxing. Not too late for one episode of MST3K.”

Barry laughed again. Len was too good at drawing it out of him. “We can do that.”

Their late-night dinner was ready in twenty minutes, simple, cheesy, and delicious. Home cooked meals didn’t happen as often as they should when Barry was zipping from home to the precinct to the Labs and back again at all hours. Len had a single serving and Barry polished off the rest.

They sat on opposite ends of the sofa, eating from the coffee table to watch the first episode. Barry nearly made a mess a few times when he belly-laughed during a larger bite. Eventually, when the plates were empty and it was just them enjoying the rest of the episode like old friends, Barry felt the distance between them as if he was the one with proximity issues.

He knew too well what Len’s eyes felt like when they cast glances at him, and it was a frequent occurrence every time he laughed and sometimes just because Len thought Barry wasn’t paying attention. Until Barry caught him, caught his eyes just as Len was staring.

“I told you it’s okay,” Barry said, debating if he should reach out but finally deciding to scoot toward Len’s corner of the couch instead. “I know it makes you feel better.” He moved onto the next cushion at first, but then shifted closer and leaned against Len, boxing him into the corner. Something so benign shouldn’t feel so intimate. If there were other people on the couch with them, if it was Cisco in that corner instead of Len…

Barry almost expected Len to stretch his arm across the back of the couch. He didn’t, but his fingers inched from his lap to rest atop Barry’s hand between them. Len shuddered from that simple touch, or maybe it was Barry who shuddered.

Everything his dream had yelled at him for was true and could be added to Len’s list of his faults. He was terrible, repugnant, villainous. In his mind, he saw a flash of Iris, of Sara Lance, and Bivolo’s glowing eyes, but he still didn’t want to move away. It was almost easy to lie to himself and say it was because Len needed this that he turned his hand upward to coil their fingers.

This strange friendship would shatter the moment Len was back to full capacity. That stung most of all, the thought of losing this when, despite the glaring issues with every part of snuggling Captain Cold on the man’s own sofa, Barry liked it and felt better than he had in weeks just to have someone…

The episode went by too quickly. Suddenly, it was late and they were both tired, so Barry agreed to clean up while Len took his turn in the bathroom before bed. Rinsing the dishes and putting them in the washer at normal speed, Barry noticed Len’s cell phone sitting on its charger. When it lit up out of the corner of his eye, he couldn’t help glancing at it.

The flashing prompt was a text from Lisa—I know you’re still mad, but I did right, Lenny. You’ll
He smiled for a moment before the expression dropped. He’d forgotten to pry about Alexa. He’d already guessed there was history there, it seemed almost too obvious even before Mick’s comments, but he was insanely curious to know the details about a woman who had hurt both Len and Mick so much that it had followed them for twenty years.

Barry reached to swipe at the phone habitually, not really thinking, certainly not trying to guess Len’s password, but suddenly the screen brightened as he got past the display of dots for a lock pattern. All he’d done was a zagging line like…a lightning bolt.

Coincidence, he figured, had to be, but he promptly forgot all about that and Lisa’s text when he saw that a Memo Pad was open with very peculiar words typed in.

*Alexa needs Flash alive. Me = expendable. Distraction. Mob family*

It cut off, stopping as if unfinished. Mob family what? Which mob family? Why did Alexa need Barry alive?

Len came out of the bathroom and Barry left the last plate in the sink.

“Len,” he snatched up the phone to intercept him and turned the screen to face him, “when did you write this?”

“Write what?” Len frowned, prepared to demand what Barry thought he was doing going through his phone when his eyes fell on the words. “I don’t…I don’t remember writing that.”

“Well, what did you mean?” Barry pulled the phone toward him again. “Mob family what? A specific family?”

“I don’t know,” Len snapped, though more at himself than at Barry. “But I know she wants you alive.” His eyes brightened and Barry could almost see the light bulb spring to life. “Wants me alive too, but that’s less crucial as long as you’re distracted but still…still able to…something.” He clenched his teeth. “I can’t remember any more.”

“It’s okay,” Barry smiled in support, handing Len his phone. “This is great.”

“It is?”

“Don’t you get it? Some of the details are clearer to you now, right? If you write something down and then learn about it separately, like reading these notes, it sticks with you. It breaks the control keeping you from telling us things. Once we figure out Alexa’s plan, the rest of the control should fade away too. Maybe not the proximity or…how you feel about me, but…” Barry didn’t want to think about that part. They had a win—finally. “What triggered you to write this? Something you saw…? Something we did…?”

Len frowned staring at his phone again, unable to recall anything else.

“We’ll figure it out,” Barry assured him. “Besides, tomorrow, if we get any leads, you should remember more.”

Finally, Barry’s optimism, that spark of hope, seemed to sink in for Len. “I think you’re on to something, Scarlet.” He bumped Barry’s chest with the back of his hand still holding the phone. “Not too bad a detective for a science nerd.”
“Says the sci-fi nerd.”

“And proud. Do I come across as bashful to you?”

“Definitely not,” Barry laughed.

They stood close to one another after looking over the phone, the lights in the apartment mostly off from watching the episode, and a lightness filling Barry’s chest that had been missing all day. He rocked forward before he realized what he was doing, drawn by the magnetic pull in Len’s eyes, in his face, his body…

Snapping back with a jolt, Barry chastised himself for almost—shit.

“W-We should…get to bed,” he choked out, face on fire for his weakness and for how Len, once again, looked so dissatisfied.

“Yes. We should.”

It was only because Len kept looking at Barry like he was the center of the universe that he forgot himself and gave in to the urge to connect more than just the platonic touches he’d asked for. Len’s heart-eyes weren’t going away any time soon; Barry had to be the strong one.

They parted for Barry to take his turn in the bathroom, climbing into bed minutes later without Len asking to be held this time. Barry wasn’t disappointed. He wasn’t.

It was better if they resisted.

Because eventually, all of this would be over.

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“Do you need help with that, Ma’am?” Barry asked Len’s neighbor—Mrs. Kittelsby, Evelyn—as the woman came hobbling down the hallway with several overflowing bags of…something.

Len was in the shower, but Barry had heard an oomph through the door while attempting to make those pancakes for breakfast he hadn’t managed the morning Lisa ambushed him. He had to say ‘attempting’ though because he’d gotten the ratio of something wrong and they were more like flat, rubbery tortillas.

With Len’s door still open while Barry rushed halfway down the hall to intercept the woman, he accepted the bulbous bag she shoved at him. “Larry, was it?”

“Barry.”

“Not Sam then?” she smirked.

“No,” Barry gave a shaky chuckle. “That’s a…long story.”

“I’ll bet it is.” She gestured for Barry to follow her to her apartment and he did so dutifully, peeking back into Len’s apartment along the way to be sure Len wasn’t looking for him. He hated to leave the door open, but too much space, too many walls between them always felt like a risk after the Galleria. The two apartments were at the end of the hallway anyway, and Barry had yet to see anyone else on this floor.

Evelyn left her door open as well, which comforted Barry as he set the bag down where she indicated. While the layout of the apartment was the same as Len’s, the feel of it and style of decorating was entirely different. Altogether more pinks and purples and antique furniture. Though
she had a pretty impressive entertainment system.

Barry peered out the door once more before turning back to the woman who was suddenly handing him a mug of coffee as if in payment. “Oh. Thanks.” Her head was wrapped in a scarf again, a jacket with fur on the collar having been discarded as soon as they entered. “Can I ask—”

“How I know Lenny and his crew so well?” She grinned with mischief over her own mug that she’d apparently had ready and waiting for when she returned home. “Professional acquaintances.”

Barry choked on his first sip. She was a thief? Still a thief? He eyed the bags he’d helped carry in with a whole new perspective. She was barely five feet tall and 80.

“Relax, darling,” she said. “After all, you’re Lenny’s new boy, aren’t you? Hardly a stranger to his line of work.”

“We’re not…it’s complicated,” Barry said and took another sip of coffee. It was actually pretty good with a kick of…cayenne? “And I prefer plausible deniability when I can get it.”

Evelyn chuckled which, with her gruff voice, came out more like a rumble. “Seems Lenny is on an interesting path with that scarlet friend of his,” she eyed Barry with that same look of being able to see right through him. But Len said he hadn’t told her his secret.

“Yeah?”

“The news and all certainly seem to think so. He does so enjoy his romps with that young man. Perhaps it’s become something more. You aren’t jealous, I hope.”

“N-No,” Barry sputtered. “Definitely not jealous of The Flash. Can I ask just…one other thing?” He eyed her smile like it was a trap with teeth.

“Yes, dear?” she purred.

“The other day, when Len whispered to you…” Barry was probably entering dangerous territory, but then he was in an apartment building apparently filled with criminals.

“Oh, Lenny and I are quite close. He knows my deepest secret. My greatest regret.” She set her mug down on the kitchen island. “I had a way out of the life many years ago, you see, that I chose not to take. Couldn’t give up the rush,” she emphasized the shhhh like a true dramatic villain. “So you see, dear boy, when he whispered to me, what he said was…” She coiled her finger to beckon Barry closer, and when he leaned in, she whispered to mimic Len, “‘he’s my way out’.”

Barry flushed, wishing he could blame the heat and the tumble of his stomach on that kick of cayenne. “I should, uhh…”

“Evelyn…” Len’s voice called across the hallway.

Barry spun to find the man poised in his doorway with a smirk and crossed arms.

“Are you charming the kid?”

“Nonsense, dear,” Evelyn said. “The boy merely helped me with some heavy lifting.”

The way Len flicked his eyes down and up again in mischief answered Barry’s question about the nature of those bags.

“Thanks for the coffee,” he said and quickly passed the mug back to her to make his escape.
“Any time, dear!” she said.

Once Barry was back inside Len’s apartment and the door closed behind them, he turned to face that lingering smirk. “Was I just an accessory to robbery?”

Len snorted. “Do you really want to know?”

He really didn’t.

“Focus, Scarlet. We got time before meeting Mick, but I don’t like to sit on my laurels when we got leads burning in our pockets.”

“Right. You’re right.” Barry tried to shake the remaining flush from his cheeks by reminding himself of all the work they had to do. “I was thinking about hitting the precinct. It would make a lot of our follow-up easier. But then…” He looked at Len from head to toe. “Easy isn’t the word given our situation.”

“We can go to the precinct,” Len said with a dangerous glint in his eyes. “You think the only times I’ve been inside that building are in cuffs? I have my ways.”

“Like…an inside man?”

“You’re the inside man, Scarlet,” Len practically rolled his eyes. “I mean glasses and a ballcap isn’t the only disguise I use. Give me a moment and we can head out. Also,” he turned back with a raised finger just as he’d been about to head off and pointed at the floppy failure of Barry's pancakes, “we can grab breakfast along the way.”

“Sorry,” Barry called to Len's quickly retreating back. “I’m usually better at pancakes!”

He sat on the arm of the couch while waiting for Len to change, anxious to be active and get an early start. Not that Len was slow, Barry was just the wrong figure to measure by. His thoughts drifted until a blur of blue caught his attention and Len cleared his throat to draw Barry’s eyes to...

Wow.

“Ready?”

A police officer stood before Barry, as believable as the ones he worked with every day, hat and all. Len looked really good in uniform.

“Let’s hit the road, Allen,” Len said with a sharper bark to his voice rather than the usual drawl.

Barry scrambled from the couch when Len came closer and tried not to shiver from how thoroughly the man continued to impress him. “Yes, sir, Officer,” he said.

This was going to be interesting.

TBC...
Strangers and Stranger Friends

Chapter Summary

Barry finds a surprise waiting for him in his lab, but working with Len to solve the case stirs more surprises and more longing in his gut than he's prepared to fight.

Chapter Notes

I love you all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barry was so horny, he couldn’t think straight.

And urg, the unintentional puns were getting worse, which he decided to blame on prolonged exposure to his nemesis.

He definitely wouldn’t blame the hard-on he could barely contain on Len, or on the way Len looked in uniform, snugly fit in head-to-toe blue. Barry just had a very overactive libido and hadn’t been able to get the kind of alone time he needed on a regular basis for the past few days—three days. Usually the most he ever skipped was one.

Sure, he hadn’t really been in the mood after everything with Zoom, but he’d still spent time in his room Friday morning taking care of his annoying biology. He had to or his body tended to rebel in very awkward ways. The last thing he needed was to wake up next to Len one morning a complete mess like some repressed teenager.

Now it was Monday and clinging to Len's waist on the back of his motorcycle while the man was dressed as a cop like some fantasy role-play was not helping. If Len noticed Barry’s predicament and made any comment about ‘something in your pocket or just happy to see me’, he would die of embarrassment.

Thankfully, while moving at less than lightning speed, they still reached the precinct quickly, parking around the back where Barry usually flashed to whenever he wanted to pretend he was arriving like a normal human being. Len stored his helmet under the seat and replaced it with the officer's cap. He had a change of clothes along in a duffle bag that Barry told him to hang onto. Maybe it would help hide him if anyone tried to look at his face for too long.

“I got this, Scarlet. Besides, who wouldn’t trust an officer walking in with Baby-Face Allen?”

“No one calls me that,” Barry glowered.

“Not in your presence maybe, but trust me, it’s come up.”

Barry fought down the flush to his cheeks—he didn't need to think about anything ‘coming up’, thank you—and tried to look more upset than obviously blushing. Now he understood how Eddie
must have felt being called Officer Pretty Boy. “Most of the officers ignore me. I’m the science geek, remember, who obsessed over his father from the moment he got a badge.”

“Which you were right about.”

“I’m not saying they don’t respect my skills, but that doesn’t mean there’s any…comradery.” Barry rubbed the back of his neck. “To them I’m still the freak with a lab kit.”

Indignant distaste flared into Len's expression. “Not exactly endearing me to the current police force, Barry.”

“It’s not their fault.” Barry let his hand drop. He wasn’t targeted by bullies like Tony Woodward anymore, but sometimes indifference was worse than violence. “I keep to myself on purpose. I’m weird and awkward at my best. You only like that because you’re a giant dork.” He pulled on the self-effacing smile he’d kept at the ready for years and focused on the humor of Len being dressed as an officer.

Len tipped his hat at him. “Must be kismet.”

Well that backfired, Barry thought with a shudder. “Come on,” he said and led the way out of the alley. The sooner they got through the gamut of the precinct to his lab, the better. He would have preferred to flash straight there but he couldn’t be sure if anyone was making use of the room while he was on leave.

It was almost a disappointment that they walked through the throng of people and up the stairs with barely a passing glance thrown their way, aside from a couple sympathetic nods for Barry. He forgot sometimes how invisible he could be.

“Can I help you with something?”

Barry startled as he entered the lab. While he’d expected one of the other CSIs might be picking up some of the workload by using his equipment, he did not expect to see the room rearranged to accommodate a second desk with a stranger sitting behind it like he’d set up shop permanently.

“Who are you?”

“I believe I asked you first, mate.” The young man rose from his chair, about Barry's age and similarly tall and trim, but with blond hair and an English accent, wearing a vest, tie, and an unimpressed expression.

“This is my lab,” Barry said, perhaps a tad petulantly, forgetting Len was behind him as he took in how several of his things including the old cork board had been pushed into a corner of the room.

“Allen, is it?” the man relaxed marginally. “Heard you were on leave. Captain Singh thought now would be the most opportune time to bring in some additional help for meta human cases. Given the failures of this department thus far, it’s no wonder.”

“Failures?” Barry had to be hallucinating this exchange. Who did this guy think he was?

Len pushed into the room behind him, reminding Barry of his presence as he set the duffle down by Barry’s desk.

“No offense, Allen, but most of the closed meta cases are only closed because of death or incarceration by The Flash more than evidence. Not that you haven’t made some contribution, I’m sure.” The man crossed his arms, eyeing Barry and Len with scrutiny.
Barry could only gape, mouth bobbing like a blowfish.

“Didn’t catch your name,” Len said, walking over with a completely different gait and affectation to his voice than usual.

“Julian Albert, meta human specialist,” the man said, coming around the desk to accept the hand Len offered him. “And you, Officer…?”

“Wynters,” Len smiled affably—because of course he had to make a pun out of his alias. “Gotta say, glad to get some new blood working on stopping these metas. Allen wouldn’t admit it, but he could really use the help.”

Barry turned to him like this was the freaking Ides of March.

Len shrugged and Barry honestly wasn’t sure if this was just his persona talking or not, it was so convincing. “It’s rough out there even without adding super powers to the mix. Like this Tiffany’s case and the Galleria? Same type of guys, same gear…” he trailed leadingly.

“Yes, I heard those were likely connected,” Julian said. “The main lab is processing everything for that, of course. Nothing meta related.”

“I heard otherwise,” Len leaned forward.

“I hardly count The Flash,” Julian puffed up—Barry really didn’t like this guy. “He shows up everywhere he’s not wanted.”

A commiserating laugh left Len and his eyes briefly slid to Barry. “That he does. Kind of puts a damper on things, if I’m being honest. Not exactly a fan,” he added in a conspiratorial whisper, which caused Julian to relax further and take on an apparent newfound respect for Officer Wynters. “But I’m talking something else. Got pulled in to help with a few clean up items for Detective West. How I ran into Allen here. That guard from Tiffany’s remembered something.”

“Oh?”

Barry tried to put aside his general annoyance for this infiltrator and for Len catering to his opinions so shamelessly once he recognized what the thief was doing.

“Gave a description of a man fitting Roy Bivolo—known meta human,” Len said, which he and Barry both knew was a lie, even though Bivolo had been there. “He’s been off the grid a while but packs quite the punch if you’ve read the reports—or rather, gets others to pack his punches for him.”

“Yes, emotional control, wasn’t it?” Julian’s eyes lit up with interest. “Quite dangerous when he affected The Flash and all those civilians. Could explain why they’re having so much trouble getting anything out of the men brought in from those heists thus far.”

“That’s not hard to believe if they’re trained professionals,” Barry scoffed.

That unimpressed look as though Barry was an irritating gnat reappeared as Julian turned at the interjection. “Yes, well our trained professionals don’t believe it’s grace under pressure. Each of the men seems legitimately unable to give specifics about their employer, regardless of the tactics used to get them to talk.”

They literally couldn’t give Alexa up? Of course. “Bivolo hypnotized the grunts to forget everything,” Barry looked at Len.
“Hypnotized?” Julian repeated with a huff. “Bit out of his wheelhouse, Allen. What do you know about it anyway? Are you even authorized to be given details about ongoing cases while on leave?”

“Uhhh,” shit, the last thing Barry needed was a watchdog bent on following the rules, “…like Officer Wynters said! Joe—Detective West—called us in to help. Plus, I’ve been working on some theories with STAR Labs about how Bivolo’s powers might progress from basic emotional suggestion,” he added, which flowed out of him easily enough since it wasn’t exactly a lie.

Julian’s brow furrowed. “Didn’t know you had any meta human interest. Doctor Snow and Cisco Ramon?”

“You sure seem well versed,” Barry tried not to grit his teeth.

“They’ve both been instrumental in assisting the meta human task force,” Julian said like it should be obvious he’d know that after being here for less than a week. “Good to hear someone’s up to the task of stopping these people.”

Internally, Barry bristled, both from the insinuations that he sucked at his job and the jab at meta humans, but he tried to suppress the flare of ire in his veins. “Some metas are trying to help. Like The Flash.”

“Hardly the sort of help this city needs,” Julian sneered. “He’s a magnet for others like him. Surely, we saw that with Zoom. Who knows what he’ll attract next with his grandstanding.”

Suppressing his ire wasn’t working so well. “He stopped Zoom and helped save this city.”

“Stopped?” Julian actually laughed. “I believe the word you’re looking for, Allen, is killed.”

The room very nearly tilted.

“Now, now, boys, you should play nice if you’re going to be roommates,” Len snapped Barry out of his tunnel vision. Clearly, Barry was upset, which physically hurt Len, yet Len was the one, urg—keeping his cool. “We're all on the same side, aren’t we?”

Barry took a breath, while Julian returned his attention to Len like he was cowed to have been caught arguing.

“Of course. Apologies. I have a very heated opinion of the Scarlet Speedster.”

“You don’t say,” Barry said with a snarl he couldn’t contain.

“You know what would really help us out here, Albert?” Len leaned back against the desk between them, casual as can be. “Besides having an actual expert around for once,” he pandered further. “To compare what the other team’s been going through on these cases and see if this Bivolo lead’s legit. Don’t suppose you’d grab the files for us while I help Allen process the rest of that,” he gestured back at the duffle bag as if it was evidence. “Save us a lot of time.”

Julian shifted and cast Barry a distrustful glance. “Detective West authorized this?”

“You tell him it’s for Allen and Wynters. He’ll give the okay,” Len grinned, because that was going to go over well. Barry had purposefully avoided running into Joe when they came in. “I appreciate it.”

Once again, Julian relaxed out of his stiff exterior as if Len's easygoing manner and charming
smile were their own form of hypnotism. “Of course, mate. Happy to help.” He nodded to Len before circling wide around Barry to exit the room.

“Did you just get my usurper to work for us?” Barry strode closer to Len as soon as the door closed.

“Usurper?” Len repeated, eyeing Barry with amusement beneath the brim of his hat, back to his natural cadence and demeanor in a heartbeat. “Yet you call me the ‘dork’ between us. And please, it’s like you don’t know who you’re dealing with, Scarlet.” He pushed from the desk to return to the other side of the room.

It took all of Barry’s waning self-control not to roll his eyes as he followed Len. “I can’t believe Joe didn’t tell me about this guy.”

“You can’t? Having witnessed your reaction…”

“And why did you have to agree with him on everything?” Barry spat.

Len spun about and backed up slowly toward Barry’s desk. “Jealous?” he said, before dismissing his teasing eye-glance when Barry continued to pout. Not that he was really pouting, he was just… urg. “He pushed your buttons, Scarlet. When you want something from someone,” Len hopped up on the desk and finished more hushed, “don’t push back.”

With a sigh rather than a response because Barry was not about to admit Len had a point, he took the reprieve of having the lab to themselves and zipped about at Flash speed for anything they could use. Unfortunately, there didn’t appear to be any related files or evidence lying around, which meant Julian was right that the other CSIs must have everything. It would be beneficial to see whatever he brought back.

“Nothing I can snag around here,” Barry said as he came out of his lightning in front of his computer. Len nonchalantly turned from his perched position to face him, not even a little phased anymore by his powers. “Hide the bag behind the desk for now so Mr. Albert doesn’t think we lied about going through evidence. I’ll see if I can find anything on Alexa in the police database.”

“Didn’t Cisco already do that?” Len asked as he followed Barry’s request.

“He was focused more on Bivolo. He has a meta human database he upkeepes, which I didn’t even know about until a few months ago. Some things are easier at the source, and we’re trying to not hack into police security as much after he wiped those records for you,” Barry paused to shoot Len a judging glance.

Len nodded in acquiesce. “Fair enough. Only problem is you’re not gonna find anything on Alexa in the police database. She’s too smart for that.”

“Yet you already have a new record after less than a year,” Barry reminded him as he typed with a blinding blur of his fingers. “Saying she’s better than you?”

“I’m saying,” Len moved in closer to Barry, who stood hunched over his computer while Len sidled in almost flush to his side, “she doesn’t take the risk that offers the reward, she plays it safe.”

Barry repressed a shiver at the brush of Len’s arm. He was right; there was nothing on Alexa Marcos in the database. “And you love the thrill,” he said with another wayward glance.

“Among other things,” Len smiled.
“Len…”

“Try known associates,” he shifted away from Barry but leaned closer to the computer. “I know a few names she used to run with. Worth a shot.”

Barry did so as Len gave him the names, but only one turned up as having been in Central City lately, and he was locked up tight in Iron Heights.

Next, they tried tracing the guns. Barry didn’t have the serial numbers without a look at the evidence reports, but he’d gotten a good enough look to do a preliminary search. Several similar guns had been purchased throughout the city, but no single location at the volume required to outfit that many men.

“Could still all be her,” Len said, “spreading the love around to throw us off.”

“Maybe we could look into more around that necklace from Tiffany’s or what was stolen at the Galleria for motive.”

“Like I said before—cash flow and disruption are the only motives she needs.”

“But for what?”

“I don’t know…” Len said in the quieter voice he used when he was frustrated, which was new for Barry. He’d only barely heard that tone from the man during everything with Lewis.

“Mob families…” Barry said, leaving his computer for now and turning to lean on the desk. “If it all has to do with one of the families, maybe it’s whoever owns those neighborhoods.”

“No one owns downtown,” Len said, meaning Tiffany’s which was in a prime and very busy location—not exactly easy to muscle people for protection money. “But the Galleria’s on the edge of Uptown, where the Santinis…” he trailed, looking right at Barry but going blank as if the thought was snatched from him out of the air.

“The Santinis?” Barry pressed, remembering Len needed prompting from outside stimulus for this to work. “The Santinis own the Galleria neighborhood? Or they used to? So that’s the family you meant to write in your notes?”

“Maybe…” Len shook his head like waking from a fog and centered more clearly on Barry. “We're still missing something, but they’re definitely involved. Hitting the Galleria had an agenda around the Santinis for sure.” He sounded more confident after Barry had said it back to him.

“Maybe she’s working for the Santinis to go after you. Twofold—she gets territory, they get some back, both get revenge.” The pieces fit but Len pursed his lips like that wasn’t quite right, and Barry had a few hints as to why. “Only you’re the one who would want revenge on her. What exactly happened between you…three?” He lowered his voice to a near whisper when Len dropped his eyes. “Were you in love with her?”

Gaze flicking back to Barry’s face, Len looked heated and anguished and wasn't hiding any of it because he couldn't when it came to Barry. “I thought I was. Because I was young and foolish. She played me then and she’s playing me now, using the same weakness.”

Love. Loving her. Loving…Barry.

Barry swallowed. But Alexa couldn’t have known Len had real feelings for The Flash, even if that was true outside of Bivolo’s influence. He had met with her the night before Tiffany's though.
She’d offered him a chance to get in on the heist knowing he’d say no, because she already suspected he’d switched sides. Had she told Bivolo to use love against him because she also suspected—

“Allen!”

Barry’s attention shot to the door. Shit. Singh.

His shout had come from the hallway. There was still time to duck and cover, because Singh would not be fooled by Len’s disguise.

With half a second to decide what to do, Barry chose self-preservation over chance and flashed Len into the closet on the other side of the room, shutting it and falling back against it just as Singh stormed into the lab.

“Allen?” he barked again with more questioning upon finding the place empty.

“Here, sir,” Barry stepped forward from the captain’s left as the stern man planted his hands on his hips and whirled to face him, jacket off and sleeves rolled up in full on tirade mode.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Uhh…sir, I—”

“Are you even aware of what bereavement leave means?” he said as he stalked toward Barry.

Oh. Right.

“It means you don’t need to be here today, Allen. Or tomorrow. Hell, you can take the rest of the week. You’re not an officer. We’ll make do with Albert and the team in the other lab.” A softness touched his otherwise gruff exterior as he said that. Now even Singh was pitying Barry.

“Sir,” Barry scowled—he didn’t need to be coddled, “Joe called me in to help with these masked men cases. He just wants my perspective. I’m not officially back yet. Besides…we had the funeral already. I’m okay to look over a few—”

“Allen,” Singh cut him off with a sharp shake of his head, “I don’t need excuses. You’re allowed to stop and breathe, you know, get back on your feet at a normal pace. I know what getting your father back meant to you.”

Barry took the breath Singh had implied he needed and realized how quickly he’d been talking. “Sorry, sir. I just wanted Julian’s help looking at something in the reports in case there’s a meta connection with these heists.”

Sorry, sir. I just wanted Julian’s help looking at something in the reports in case there's a meta connection with these heists.”

“You have reason to suspect there is?” Singh asked with a searching expression.

“Yes, sir. Roy Bivolo, the Rainbow Raider. A witness puts him at Tiffany’s.”

“Damn,” Singh said as he glanced away, taking Barry at his word whenever it was something related to a case. “That’s the last disaster we need.”

Cautiously, always anxious around this man who had so little patience for him, Barry moved closer to the captain. “I’ll just cover my ideas with Julian and let him and the others handle it, sir, I promise,” he said.

Reluctant acceptance of that compromise pulled down the corners of Singh’s mouth. Or maybe that
was sympathy—pity. “Sorry you didn’t get a heads up about Albert. He put in the transfer to be moved here specifically, and given the timing, it seemed like a good call to start him right away. After Zoom, with all these new metas running around, the task force could use the help.”

Because Barry, even with his friends at STAR Labs, wasn’t enough. It had taken two of him to defeat Zoom. “I understand, sir.”

Singh straightened into something more generally surly again and pointed a finger at him. “He’s actually on time. When you’re back for good, I expect you to be too.” He made to turn away and leave Barry in peace, only to pause and glance back. “And who did he mean by Officer Wynters helping you?”

“Oh.” Shit. “I said Wallace,” Barry supplied quickly. “He must have heard me wrong.”

Singh made a skeptical face but chose not to comment any further. “Go home as soon as you’re done here, Allen. That’s an order.”

“Yes, sir.”

Barry waited a moment after Singh had left before inching toward the closet, listening for any other visitors that might be lurking about. When he opened the door, Len had his arms crossed and a smirk on his face.

“What else was I supposed to do?” Barry said.

That flick of Len’s eyes down and back up Barry’s body coiled heat at the base of his spine. “Maybe you just like getting me into tight spaces.”

Urg. This was the day of perturbed groans apparently. “I should keep you in there. If Julian talks too much about Officer Wynters…”

“The good captain will cover for you.”

“He’s the one I’m worried about.”

Len tilted his head. “Seems pretty soft on you if ya ask me.”

“Yeah right,” Barry sputtered. “Singh hates me, are you kidding?”

“He doesn’t know you’re The Flash?”

“Of course not. Why would you think that?”


“Funny.”

Stomping strides from down the hall pulled Barry’s attention to the entrance again. He should have slammed the closet door in Len’s face, but in his moment of panic, he flashed forward instead and shut the door behind them, pressed up against Len in the cramped, dark space.

“Barry…” Len rumbled with a telling tease.

“Shut up. I panicked,” Barry whispered, and he couldn’t stop panicking with his hands on Len’s chest and the rest of their bodies nearly flush. He tried to picture benign or even unappealing images to hold in his mind because the last thing he needed right now was to get excited.

“Barry?”

Or Joe. That helped too.

Joe!?

Barry sucked in a breath as his eyes met Len’s, and then Len’s eyes fell to Barry’s lips.

They could not stay in the closet like this.

Flailing behind him, Barry grabbed for the knob and twisted it, causing him and Len to tumble out into the main room. Len fell against him somewhat, which made the whole affair look that much more like, well, an affair, caught red handed in a compromising position.

“The hell were you two doing in there?” Joe growled. He stood inside the entrance with his hands on his hips much like Singh had been, and with the same practiced annoyance at Barry’s antics. Or maybe the glare was more for Len—in uniform. “Officer Wynters, I presume?” he said as Barry and Len disentangled. “Are you out of your damn minds? I thought Bivolo meddled with your brain, Snart, not fried it.”

Len adjusted his hat that had gone crooked. “Relax, West. We’re working the case. Barry wanted to stop here, so we’re here. No harm, no fowl. Albert’s even doing the legwork for us.”

Barry moved around Len to intercept Joe’s reaction. “And we already have a few leads, so it was worth the trip. We’re touching base with some of Len’s contacts later, Joe, so if Julian can find anything in the reports that ties back to Bivolo, we’re that much closer to tracking down Mistress Mastermind.”

Len slid his gaze to Barry slowly trying to look irritated, but he could never hide that he enjoyed the way Team Flash put a name to everyone.

“Some of Snart’s contacts?” Joe sagged like a deflated balloon. “Great. Now he’s got you running in his circles too. I swear, Barry, if you end up as an accessory to anything…”

Barry tried very hard to not think of Evelyn. “It’s just Lisa and…and Mick Rory, but he wants to help stop Alexa too.”

“Rory?” The rise of Joe’s blood pressure was practically visible.

“It’s fine.” Barry moved in closer to his father to appease him. “I know what I’m doing, Joe. Teamwork. With me and Len, both sides to our lives are useful in solving this case. We already know the Santinis are involved somehow. Alexa chose the Galleria specifically because it used to be one of their neighborhoods.”


“Well…we don’t know that part yet.” Barry spoke on quickly when Joe sagged once more, “But we’re getting closer! And Cisco gave us those leads on Bivolo’s former contacts that we can follow up on before we meet at Saints and Sinners.”

Joe cringed at the very mention of the place.

“Detective,” Len broke in, all Captain Cold persona set aside for now, “I don’t intend to let
anything happen to Barry, if that’s what you’re worried about. He’s safe with me. Regardless of whether you trust anything else about me right now, you can trust that. I want this case solved as much as you do.”

“Yeah?” Joe eyed him in challenge. “The difference is I want it solved to get you away from him,” he snapped.

Len went cold—hard and still.

Barry rose to his defense before he’d even paused to think about it. “That’s not fair, Joe. You said you wouldn’t treat Len any differently than Oliver. I trust him. I’ve trusted him for a long time, long before all this. And you know why.”

Joe glanced away. “Because you got it into your head that if your circumstances were reversed, you could have turned out just like each other. Yeah…maybe.” There was conflict on Joe's face like a battlezone when he shifted his attention to Len. “I want to trust you, Snart. Just not so sure how I feel about you lookin’ at him the way you do.”

Barry felt some of the blood drain from his face.

“So when this is over,” Len said steadily, “if I still look at him that way, what will you do? Assuming Barry keeps me around?”

Oh Barry did not need this conversation happening right now, especially with the way Joe turned to him with searching disbelief to see if Barry would flat out deny such a thing was possible. But he couldn’t hurt Len like that when he honestly didn’t know the answer.

Joe didn’t know how to answer either. “I don’t know,” he sighed in defeat, “but I swear, Snart, if you ever take advantage of my son’s good nature—”

“Joe!”

“We’ll have words,” Joe finished strongly, dutifully. Then waved his hand between them. “The rest, I don’t even want to think about right now. Guess I gotta leave you two to play out this partnership. See if it ends up as the disaster it should or...I don’t know what else,” he said with a creeping grimace.

That really shouldn’t sum up their actual relationship as perfectly as their professional one.

“Now, you ready to hear what I got on the goons they brought in so far?” Joe switched gears.

He reiterated what Julian had said about none of them being able to rat out their employer, but added that all of them were an array of hired guns that had been used by various mob families.

“The Santinis?” Barry asked.

“All of ‘em from what I could tell, or at least most. Like a damn smorgasbord of low-level grunts for hire. No one who’s ever been a big player in the families though.”

“No, they wouldn’t be,” Len said. “The real players are too loyal.”

“So there might be more than one family involved?” Barry was getting that bolstered feeling again, like they were really onto something.

“Definitely,” Len smiled at him.
“Before we go down that rabbit hole,” Barry glanced away from Len’s piercing stare, “how many of the families have a reason to go after you?”

“Up until a few days ago?” Len said. “Only the Santinis. Then I ended up on the news helping you.”

“Right,” Barry scratched the hairs at the back of his neck. “Sorry.”

“My choices, Scarlet. I have no regrets.”

Joe cleared his throat to remind them of his presence. “These grunts can’t even tell me where they were recruited from. They sure don’t remember anything about Alexa. I’m focusing on tracking what they were up to before Tiffany’s and the Galleria. You two…” he eyed them both like he was reluctant to leave them alone again, “be careful with your half of the workload huh?”

“I appreciate your concern, Detective,” Len stretched his grin.

Joe regarded him with grudging acceptance that Len really was on their side and there was nothing to be done about his affection toward Barry. What he thought of Barry’s affection toward Len was another matter. Still, he exited the lab to leave them to their work.

It wasn’t long after he’d gone that Julian returned.

“Here’s everything the other team had, if it’s useful,” he handed the evidence reports and case files to Len. The irony of the situation wasn’t lost on Barry—Len dressed as a cop being handed confidential files to help a case instead of hinder it. What kind of cop would he have made, Barry wondered, if he’d been raised by his grandfather and followed in his footsteps?

Len pulled Barry back to attention when he handed the files to him. Barry quickly opened the first folder, but gave a hinting, purposeful look Len’s way that he needed Julian distracted so he could look through the files effectively.

It was comfortable and soothing the way Len always knew how to read him. “We really appreciate it, Albert,” he stepped forward just enough to block Julian’s view of Barry, and while he made small talk, Barry read through everything at lightning speed with a rustle of papers and gust of air that Len must have felt and known when Barry was done, because he stepped back again at the perfect moment.

“Thanks, Julian,” Barry closed the last folder as if he’d skimmed through it all and passed the files back to him. “Sounds like one of the other guards might have been affected by Bivolo somehow given his behavior. If you can follow up on that, it would be a huge help. Also, a few masks were left behind. If Bivolo lost his, since we know he was ID-ed, it might have left some evidence behind. Checking the masks for any samples that match what we have on file for Bivolo’s DNA would be a big win too. And if it’s enough…”

“We might even be able to construct a better profile on how his powers have progressed since we last had him in custody.” Julian nodded as he followed Barry’s line of thinking. “Nice work, Allen. You saw all that from a few glances?”

Barry was used to fielding questions around what his powers allowed him to do at work, and he’d learned that less was often better when making an excuse. “I had some ideas of what to look for,” he said. “We appreciate the help. Joe too. Since I worked the last case against Bivolo, he—”

“I get it, Allen,” Julian held up a hand to indicate he was done grilling him. “Just glad to be able to work toward bringing one of these meta humans to justice.”
“Right…”

“I’ll keep the room warm while you’re away.” He offered a somewhat awkward smile. “Or… whatever the colloquialism is.”

Trying not to grimace, Barry really wished this guy wasn’t sticking around. “Great.” He indicated for him and Len to head out and Len returned to Barry’s desk to retrieve the duffle bag.

“I’ll drop the rest of this off with West on our way out,” Len said, keeping up the ruse that the bag contained evidence. “Nothing meta related. See ya around, Albert. And thanks again.”

Julian held out the pile of files to stop Len as he was about to walk past him. “Anyone ever tell you that you bear a striking resemblance to Leonard Snart?” he narrowed his eyes on Len’s face. Why couldn’t anything be easy?

“Yeah?” Len said without an ounce of concern. “Never heard that one before. Must be a good hair day,” he added with a wink.

Julian actually cracked a smile—a real one. If he honestly suspected anything, Len had banished it in a single wave of irresistible charm. Showoff.

Len made for the door, but Julian stopped Barry in a similar manner, only with a very different sort of gauging in his expression.

“Allen, I’m sorry we couldn’t have met under better circumstances. Heard your father was a causality of Zoom. I understand your loyalty to The Flash, given that. One of the reasons I entered meta human research was to prevent more people from being hurt by them. It isn’t easy to lose one’s family to someone who should be relegated to storybook monsters.”

Barry still didn’t like this guy, but the effort made given what Barry had been through was a nice gesture. “That we can agree on. Thanks for the help with Bivolo,” he said before following Len.

“If I learn anything useful,” Julian called after them, “I’ll let West know.”

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Len changed out of the police uniform into a more casual outfit of a grey sweater, jeans, and a longer black jacket. He did add the glasses but instead of a ballcap, a trilby Lisa had gotten for him as a gag gift once that he rather enjoyed on the right occasion. Barry certainly seemed to appreciate the look when he turned back from allowing Len his modesty to change in the alley.

“Shall we?”

Len already knew he was wearing Barry down from continuing to resist his advances. Barry was the one offering advances to some extent. Linked hands on the sofa, the promise of an almost but aborted kiss, the stiffness in his posture that could have meant discomfort but Len knew it was something else with the accompanying flush to Barry’s cheeks when they were pressed tight in that closet.

He also felt better every time they cracked a portion of the case that he knew to be the right answer, hidden in the recesses of his mind. It quieted that voice urging him to focus, as if even his subconscious couldn’t deny the appeal of giving in to his infatuation with Barry as long as they still found a way to stop Alexa. Because then he’d be free of the cage, trapped as he was at Barry’s side, open in casual, dangerous ways with the kid, and feeling…happier and lighter because of it.
Part of Len wished he didn’t have to give that up if they solved this and all the control fell away. He knew himself too well to think he could be like this with Barry without Bivolo’s influence, despite how certain he was that his love was real. What if the other side to him, the real him, pushed Barry away when he returned?

In that moment as Len considered the possibility, he wasn’t sure if his greatest enemy was Bivolo, Alexa, or the voice inside his head.

“Len?” Barry questioned how he’d paused walking down the street they were on, staring blankly off into space.

They’d followed the leads Cisco gave them to a tight grouping of streets and alleys in a less reputable part of town—where any number of mob contacts could be lurking, hence the need for some disguise on Len’s part—to track down two known contacts of Bivolo’s that had been seen in the area. Neither were metas themselves, which would make it easier to question them. Between Barry’s Speed Force enhanced memory, and Len’s natural eidetic memory, they knew exactly who they were looking for.

“Thinking,” Len said, soothing the churning in his stomach by tracing the lines of Barry’s face with his eyes.

“Are you in pain?”

“No.” Not yet. But what sort of pain would he feel if he ruined this? “Just lost in my head. Let’s check this alley next. Looks like a few doorways. These are the types of men who might be squatting and using abandoned buildings as safe houses.”

“Speaking from experience?” Barry smiled.

“I prefer comfort,” Len smiled back, “but it’s been known to happen. More so Mick’s style than mine.”

“Easier to burn those places to the ground when you’re done with them?”

“Won’t pretend that’s never happened either.”

Barry laughed. It wasn’t funny. Mick had put them in unintentional peril more than once, and yet Len still laughed with Barry because his life was such a mess at times and that was funny in a terrible, sad sort of way. The Legends was what had finally given Len hope that Mick could find some peace.

He moved ahead of Barry into the alley. There were three doors. One in the right building, two in the left. He tried the first one to find it unsurprisingly locked. “If any happen to be unlocked, we’ll start there first. Might mean they’re at home. Otherwise, we can break in to check these places more thoroughly.”

“You would have made a good detective,” Barry said, seemingly offhand as he trailed behind Len.

The thought had crossed Len’s mind before, always split down the middle between a wry smile thinking of his grandfather and a twist in his gut thinking of Lewis.

Even if he’d managed to escape having such an impressive juvi record because of what his father forced him to do, Lewis never would have allowed him to go into law enforcement later. The ability to do that would have come too late, after Len was already sullied and no longer acceptable to the academy. Which seemed like such a bad joke, given what a terrible, crooked piece of shit
Lewis had turned into after getting his badge.

“Sorry,” Barry said quietly.

“No, it’s…fine. Maybe I would have. But seeing as how I’m here now, spoiled goods as I am, aren’t you lucky you have these fine skills at your disposal?”

This time, Barry didn’t share the smile Len tossed him. The second door was locked too, but before Len could move on to the third, Barry stopped him. “You’re not spoiled goods. None of us can change who we were. Who we’ve…hurt. Or killed,” he said with a darkening of his green eyes, thinking back to what Julian had said in the lab. “But we can be better. I have to believe I can be better. It’s just easier to believe in you.” He forced a smile through the dampness in his eyes.

Len wanted to cup his face, ever at the ready to brush his tears away. “That’s part of what makes you so remarkable, Barry. Most people only think of themselves. Don’t let Albert get to you about Zoom. That man was a monster. You did what you had to do.”

“I know,” Barry said, eyes falling to the ground. “But sometimes I wonder…what will I have to do next?”

A bang from behind the door kicked in Len’s fight or flight, and he seized Barry by his arms, spinning them around until he pressed Barry to the wall, now on the side of the door that would be hidden if it opened, and leaving the third and final door at Len’s left.

Barry gasped but then went quiet, like he was holding his breath, both of them waiting for the door to open. When no other sound revealed itself and the door didn’t even quiver, they breathed again and Len’s adrenaline started to drop.

He glanced from the door to Barry beneath his grasp—close, so close again like they’d been in the closet, like they’d been that first night when Barry was iced to the wall and Len had kissed him. Barry could flash out of Len’s hold whenever he wanted, just a firm grip on his arms but not binding, yet he didn’t ask Len to release him. He stared instead, at his eyes, his mouth, and Len was drawn to look in kind at the features of Barry’s face and the lips he so wanted to taste again.

Len shifted just to settle his footing and his thigh pressed against Barry’s. Barry moaned, a short, reflexive whine escaping his mouth that he immediately blushed over when he realized what he’d done and what it meant.

He was hard. Len could almost feel it, and he wanted to slide closer to be sure, to confirm he wasn’t imagining how much Barry wanted him. He’d promised he wouldn’t kiss Barry again, even though it was so natural to lean in, to feel Barry’s breath on his lips—

The surge forward didn’t come from Len but from Barry seeking to connect them like he was ravenous. His tongue was a welcome slide against Len’s, an intimate coil and claim, mimicked by his hands coming up to fist in Len’s sweater—connect, touch, possess.

Barry pulled away with a fresh gasp, panting, mouth fumbling to form words of explanation that Len did not care to hear right now. Dragging Barry back to him, Len rekindled the kiss with a tighter hold and deeper, more furious battle of their tongues that Barry surrendered to. The whimpers that formed in the kid’s throat drove Len crazy.

But before they’d gone on for too long, before Len could loosen the vice grip his hands had become to keep Barry close, Barry stopped them again and twisted his head away. “We can’t,” he huffed.
“Why not?” Len said just as breathless, leaning into Barry despite the weight pushing back at him. “If we both want it…”

“Because…” the hurt in Barry’s expression caused a spike to shoot through Len’s chest, “I can’t know if you mean it.”

Always doubting him—always doubting him. It was maddening how no one was listening to what Len wanted. “But you do,” he said, moving his hands up Barry’s shoulders to his face, his pained but still beautiful face. “You want me, don’t you, Barry?” It wasn’t a question anymore, but Len needed Barry to admit it.

And he looked like he was about to, if not in words, then by kissing Len again.

When the door slammed open at Len’s left, allowing the person stumbling out of it to have a clear view of the men caught against the wall.

Len threw Barry behind him and outstretched an arm to hold him back. He’d left the duffle where he parked his bike but he still had his cold gun at his hip beneath his jacket. Only as he readied himself to draw it, the man who’s exited the building didn’t seem to pay them any attention, even though one glance at his face was all it took for Len to know that this was one of the men they had come to find.

“Hey,” Len growled, when the man, Logue, nearly ran straight into the other side of the alley, moving with a frantic momentum. Was he drunk?

Barry clung to the back of Len’s jacket but positioned himself so he could easily trade places with him, which Len knew he wouldn’t be able to stop. For now, he kept his hand on the hilt of his gun.

“Hey,” he said again. “James Logue? Heard you’re a friend of Roy Bivolo. We’re looking for him. Unless you’re feeling antagonistic, you’re gonna point us in the right direction.”

“B-Bivolo…?” Logue mumbled into the brick in front of him. He was dirty. More like a bum than the basic lowlife Len had expected. He was an art thief as well, had known Bivolo for years, but hadn’t worked with him recently. Still, witnesses had placed them together even if Bivolo hadn’t been seen in this neighborhood for a while.

“Do you know where we can find him?” Barry asked more gently, but in a loud voice, also assuming the man was sloshed given his appearance.

“I don’t know…I don’t know that name…” Logue said in a furious whisper.

“Nice try, pal.” Len pulled away from Barry to reach for Logue, but as soon as his hand came down on the man’s shoulder, Logue spun around and dropped to the ground, hands shaking and pulling in tight to his chest.

“I don’t know him, I don’t know him…”

“Hey, calm down,” Barry pushed Len aside, crouching down and holding his hands up in placation. “We’re not going to hurt you. We’re just looking for Bivolo.”

“Bivolo…” he said again, eyes wild and unfocused before he clenched them tight, “no, no, no…I don’t know him, I don’t know him…”

Barry tried to touch the man gently on the knee, just a comforting gesture, but Logue recoiled like a terrified child, still chanting the same words. “He hit you with fear, didn’t he?” Barry said like he
was nauseous from the revelation. This was clearly closer to the rage Barry had experienced, but intensified over time and never broken.

Logue blinked up at Barry once his shaking had calmed. “Who?”

The anguished look on Barry’s face when he looked at Len was pure empathy for the broken man before them and didn’t carry with it the same sting. “I think we found who Bivolo was practicing his hypnosis on.”

Len released the grip on his gun. “STAR Labs?”

“He deserves more than that,” Barry shook his head, turning back to the man without making any sudden moves. “We’ll call it in to the CCPD to pick him up, bring him to the psych ward at Central City Hospital to be safe. Caitlin can check in with him as part of the investigation.” Barry stood and pulled out his cell phone, but spoke down at the man in a tender voice. “You’ll be safe. I promise. We’re going to help you.”

Logue curled in on himself like it was safer to hide.

“On the plus side, instead of dementia, I’ll simply suffer a heart attack and die,” Len said humorlessly.

“No you won’t,” Barry frowned at him, holding his phone to his ear as it rang. “I won’t let you. But right now we have a job to do.”

They stayed with the man until they heard the sirens, then moved swiftly back to Len’s motorcycle to leave the area. They had more leads, more clues, more pieces to the puzzle, but Len couldn’t help but wonder, as distracted as he was by how close he’d come to getting Barry to give in and admit his own feelings, that if Bivolo was smart enough to practice on someone, had he also practiced on any metas?

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Len wished the morning hadn’t gone by so quickly. He wanted time to talk with Barry about what had happened, wanted the chance to steal another kiss if he was allowed, but it was time for their rendezvous with Mick and Lisa.

And Raymond, apparently.

“Great, he brought the Boy Scout,” Len grumbled as they entered and caught sight of Mick and Ray at one of the larger tables in the back. It didn’t look like Lisa had arrived yet.

“Hey, Barry!” Ray waved with a type of enthusiasm that was not befitting of the environment. Barry’s boyish looks stood out enough.

“Mick,” Len hissed as he slid onto a chair without offering Ray more than a frown, unlike Barry who accepted a hearty hug, “when you said Raymond was around…”

“I meant around,” Mick gestured at Ray like the obvious should be apparent, his other hand already closed around a beer with burgers and fries on the table that Barry eyed hungrily. “That tiny suit could be useful.”

“Technically,” Ray interrupted, “the suit isn’t tiny, it just—”

“Save it for later, Haircut.”
Barry chuckled at their interaction. Len appreciated Mick making other friends, he did, but did it have to be Raymond? He was catnip for trouble.

Len caught the waitress’s attention as she shuffled past. “Couple more orders, Janet,” he said, pointing at the burgers and fries, then he caught Barry’s shifting eyes. “Make it three orders and a milkshake,” he amended, which made Barry instantly perk up.

“Just add it to the others comin’, Jan,” Mick said.

“Lisa’s already here?” Len asked when Janet headed for the kitchen.

“Ladies room.”

“So,” Ray clapped his hands together like the overzealous puppy he was, “this should be fun. Mick said it’s like a big conspiracy with a hidden mastermind to track down, dangerous meta humans with mind control powers, and a bunch of men with guns. Right up our alley, right, partner?” he elbowed Mick like they were old friends.

Len tried not to groan, while Barry looked a little flustered to explain despite his amusement at the pair, and Mick merely snorted—but didn’t correct the use of ‘partner’.

Not that Len was bothered by it. Mick deserved a partner who could calm him without manipulation or resorting to blows.

Len was all set to explain on their behalf without waiting for Lisa, when his sister returned from the bathroom…with Sara Lance at her side.

“Leonard,” Sara smiled, taking a chair next to Barry. “Now what’s this mission about?”

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

I also love Julian.

Also...SO MANY little teases of things to come in this chapter. :-(
Len and Barry face the gamut of Lisa and the Legends, while both feel like they're losing the battle to be patient for what they really want.

Sorry again for the delay with this one, but for those who don't know, I had a convention last weekend where I sold my published novels. Sold 20 books in total, woohoo! And made some great connections. Always a blast.

I hope to usually get a new chapter up every week, but in cases where I'm later, it'll never be more than two weeks.

Thank you SO MUCH for your support with this. Comments definitely help push me to write faster. :-)
“Wouldn’t say that,” Mick muttered with a muted grin, like he knew he was smoking near a powder keg and couldn’t wait to watch it blow.

Len refrained from kicking him under the table.

“Sara was telling me about your adventures, Lenny,” Lisa piped in, and damn it, there was a reason he’d kept Lisa in his room when they were protecting her from the Time Masters on the Waverider, something he was eternally grateful she didn’t remember. “Sounds like loads of fun with not nearly enough ladies along for the ride.”

“Certainly not for my tastes.” Sara said, sharing a smile with Lisa that left Len even more conflicted. The two of them together was a dangerous enough combination without them wooing each other, though he could tell they were only purposely riling him.

“How come you tapped Mick for that trek across time and not your own sister?” Lisa pouted.

“Which is something I’ll never get used to, by the way,” Raymond said with his own smile thrown Lisa’s way—definitely not, you being Snart's sister.”

“Raymond,” Len said with as much sickly sweetness as he could muster to make Ray sweat. He didn’t interfere with Lisa's love life usually, she could handle herself, but he didn’t appreciate being ganged up on like this. “Trust me, Lisa and I are quite a bit alike. It’s why we're so close.”

“Lenny,” Lisa folded her arms primly, “you didn’t answer my question.”

Len sighed. He would have taken Lisa on the Waverider, but he feared her coming along for something so unpredictable. Besides, Rip had made the initial selection, Len simply hadn’t argued and had persuaded Mick to join him because he needed backup, someone he could trust. He never worried about Mick the way he couldn’t shake worrying over his sister, even if she was grown and fully capable of protecting herself.

Yet when push came to shove, he’d treated Mick the same way. Of course he had. Mick had been dismantled and tortured and used for decades, centuries, enough to make a normal person go mad, and it was all Len’s fault. Because he’d been shown the glow of a treasure he’d never thought he could have and wondered if he could steal it, capture it and claim it for his own—a better life, a different life. Instead, he’d given his best friend over to a life worse than death.

Half of Len hadn’t feared that Mick, any version of Mick, would kill him when he allowed his old friend to beat him to a pulp in the brig, hoping he could reach him. The other half hadn’t cared if he was wrong, because if that’s how things had to end, he deserved it.

“Our dear Captain Hunter was unpleasant enough company without me bringing along the whole family.” Len said, pressing two fingers to his temple to stave off another headache like the one Mick had created yesterday.

“You okay?” Barry, kind-hearted fool that he was, continued to bare them both open to the raging elements around them by reaching over and touching Len's hand.

When Len turned to him, to that genuine concern for his wellbeing despite everything, he wanted to cup Barry’s face and kiss him again.

Instead, he gave a short nod, though the simple act of not jerking away seemed to draw everyone's attention before Len could clear his throat.

“Now that we’re all well acquainted and through with the pleasantries,” he said, “can we move on
to more recent events?"

“Yeah, what’s the down-low?” Raymond said, excitable as ever to play hero. “I think what Mick was trying to explain earlier with his yo-yo analogy means the two of you can’t be away from each other, right? Must make bathroom breaks awkward,” he laughed in the way only someone who assumes his jokes are always funny can laugh.

Lisa was the only one who snorted, while Barry’s face turned the shade of the ketchup bottle on the table and Len shot Raymond a glare.

“What, seriously?” he took their silence for validation. “Coz I was just kidding.”

“No, Raymond, not seriously,” Len deadpanned. “But if there’s a merit badge for emotional maturity, I’ll be sure to let the Scouts know yours needs to be revoked.” There was that sour expression Len was so good at evoking from the sunshine kid. “Now pay attention, because the important bit of info here is that Barry and I have to stay within a certain radius—bathroom breaks notwithstanding—or after a ten-minute time lapse, my heart stops.”

Mick took another swig of beer while Lisa squirmed in her seat, leaving Sara and Ray to have more visceral responses.

“Now you’re joking.” Sara glanced between them.

“Fraid not.”

“Being away from Barry gives you a heart attack?” Ray exclaimed. “That’s awful. I mean, not awful having to be around Barry, though maybe more awful for you two since you hate each other.”

“We don’t hate each other,” Len snapped, perhaps more sharply than intended considering he pulled everyone’s attention again and he had no plans of going into further detail with any of them. Naturally, Barry’s eyes slid his way like he was judging Len for keeping the ‘love’ portion to himself again, but the last thing he wanted was to give Barry a platform to keep denying him. “If we hated each other, either I’d be in jail or he’d be an ice sculpture.”

Barry muffled a laugh and Len allowed himself to enjoy how easily he could affect the kid’s mood even amid disaster.

“What the focus should be on now is catching the responsible party for our predicament—Roy Bivolo.” Len flicked his eyes around the table. “Even more important is Alexa Marcos, the one signing his checks.”

“Who you implied was a place,” Sara said with a smug tilt of her head.

“She was a destination once,” Mick grumbled.

“Mick.”

“Oh really?” Sara let out a surprised chuckle. “Didn’t want to admit you had a past, Leonard? I think I could have handled it.”

Len’s stomach flipped the way it used to whenever his and Sara’s eyes met with playful banter volleying between them, but that pleasant flutter turned tumultuous when he caught sight of the tension in Barry’s jaw. “Embarrassing enough how she set us up to fail on that job without admitting I was duped by a lover.”
“You know what happened with Alexa?” Barry glanced at Sara, holding his hands in his lap and wringing his fingers like he wished he had something to clutch. “Or about the job at least?”

“Leonard told me on the Waverider,” she said, wheels spinning in her head, Len could tell, as a calculating look overtook her features the more she watched Len and Barry. Eventually, her gaze settled on Len again. “Though I suppose I don’t know how much of that was true.”

“It was all true, I just neglected to mention that Alexa walks and talks and betrays all on her own.”

“When did he tell you?” Barry asked instead of letting the matter drop. This was the world’s most awkward dinner party, and it did not help that Barry had absolutely no chill.

“It was do or die, the ship was being boarded and we didn’t even know it yet—but Leonard knew. Said he had a sixth sense about it, just like he had on The Alexa Job.” Sara recounted the story as Len had told it to her and when she finished, Barry turned to Len with honest questioning.

“Where does the real Alexa fit in? She got you onto the job?”

“She did.” Len looked at Mick who was frowning into his beer, but he must have felt Len’s eyes on him because he waved a hand to say he didn’t care if Len spilled the rest. “But it was personal before professional. Mick and I met her separately but didn’t know it. Told us she didn’t want anything public so we’d keep quiet and not spill the beans about our new gal to each other.”

“You were both dating her?” Barry gaped.

“Keep in mind this was twenty years ago so we were younger than you and just as naïve.”

Finally, Barry cracked a smile, his usual fond exasperation for Len.

“When she came to us with a job, we each thought we had a secret about the girl looking to make it big. It was our first job not playing second string or lookout. Getting it done right was going to take time to plan, but it was all ours. Between the three of us, we worked out every last detail. When the heist got close, Alexa laid the groundwork for us to find out the night before it all went down that we were both seeing her. Almost tore each other’s heads off, and oh how she played us then too.”

“Had me convinced with that sob story,” Mick slammed his beer down, looking annoyed that it was empty now. “Said she hadn’t meant to two-time or lead us along, but couldn’t choose. What a load of bull. And we bought every word.” Raymond looked particularly interested and sympathetic for Mick’s sake as he continued, “Said she needed time to think but didn’t want anything to ruin the heist we’d worked so hard to pull together.”

“What we didn’t know,” Len picked up the story again, “was that she had another crew set to hit the same place just before we got there and called the police. Figured we’d be too distracted by each other and what was going on with her to suspect anything. The idea being we’d go down for the heist red-handed, even without any loot. Easy to pin on us since we’d been planning it, and cops wouldn’t keep looking for anyone else once they had their perps. Alexa would get away clean. Probably slept with the B squad too and played them the same way.

“But when we got there, something felt off.” Len held Barry’s gaze, hoping that hearing the story in full would temper some of the nausea in his expression after learning about one of Len’s greatest mistakes. “Mick and I were tense, sure, but once we’d calmed down, we knew better than to take that with us into the job. That feeling in my gut wouldn’t go away though, and I started thinking about how Alexa might have set us up.

“When I told Mick, he was skeptical but decided to trust me. We high-tailed it, made it out just
before the cops showed. Alexa still got away with her other crew and the loot, but the cops were out looking now, making it harder for them to move. We heard later how they didn’t find anything in the warehouse, so we knew Alexa had played us even before we started to hear murmurs about the other team. Turns out once she met up with her fence, she turned those other boys in to take the heat off her while the loot circulated. Alexa played everyone and we were hardly a blip in her plan."

Len felt for the ring with his thumb rubbing along the back of his pinky, but he wasn’t wearing it today. He hadn’t wanted to wear it after seeing Alexa—after Barry had become a fixture in his home.

“And you kept a memento?” Sara asked, trained eye catching the way his fingers had moved.

“Lessons learned,” Len said, pulling his hand into a fist. “I prefer not to forget the important ones.”

“Memento?” Barry asked, ever curious, but they’d done enough caring and sharing for one day.

“Some other time.”

“Just one question,” Sara said before Len could turn the conversation back to the matter at hand. She rested her elbows on the table, hands arched and fingers laced, and smiled cryptically. “How long of a play was it?”

Months. Almost a year. Alexa had been around while Len and Mick were doing odd jobs and running interference for the mob and other small timers. She’d picked them out as the perfect targets for her plan—young and stupid but still promising players.

“Long enough,” he said out loud.

There was too much history here, past and present with Barry in the middle. Len could see in the kid’s eyes how much he was convincing himself that clearly Len’s affections lay elsewhere, more with Alexa when he was young and Sara now than with Barry. But that wasn’t true. Len wanted Barry more than he’d ever wanted either of those powerful, beautiful, dangerous women, and the real clincher was that Barry might actually want him back.

“She must be a special kinda lady to have conned both of you,” Raymond said, looking from Len to Mick with sincere surprise. He knew better than to underestimate either of them after seeing them in action.

“But I guess you weren’t thinking with the heads on your shoulders,” Sara added with a grin.

“Boys in their twenties seldom do,” Lisa fluttered her eyes at Barry, which prompted Len to knock a boot against her ankle, and she knocked him right back.

Barry was turning scarlet again, hunkering down like he could hide his lanky form by slouching, thinking everyone’s eyes were on him—and for the most part, they were.

Aside from Ray’s. “Hard to imagine you’d have the same type,” he said, jovial and oblivious as always.

“Doesn’t happen often.” Mick started to get that treacherous twist to his smile. “Alexa was more Snart’s type than mine. He likes his dolls pretty, tough, and who don’t take his shit.”

“Sounds right.” Barry and Sara overlapped, making Barry redden further as the assassin’s eyes darted to his face.
“Not that I have any insight or anything!” he tried to cover lamely, searching about the table for a drink or food he could disappear into, but none of it was his yet. “It just…sounds…like Len—Snart.” The kid was a train wreck when it came to subterfuge.

“Am I missing something?” Ray finally picked up on the tension in the air.

“You’d have to have a brain to lose it, Raymond.” Len stared at him across the table.

Sulking in that ‘somehow still smiling’ way he had, Ray said, “You know I have multiple PhDs.”

“And yet.” Len gestured at the man in general.

Mick snickered, enjoying the show far too much beside Lisa. Even Sara seemed amused as much as she was curious, but while Raymond huffed only to glance at Barry and at last seem to recognize why the conversation was so awkward, the Scarlet Speedster’s rosy cheeks were looking a little green.

“I’m gonna get a drink,” Barry pushed out of his chair. “I’ll be right back.”

He almost gave himself away with how quickly he made for the bar, but without an actual kick of lightning, Len was able to dash out of his own chair and catch him, snagging Barry’s wrist halfway to the front. Saints and Sinners didn’t tend to be busy for the lunch rush, so there weren’t any patrons at the nearby tables to overhear them. Still, Barry spun around Len like had him cornered and was trying to steal his wallet.

“What?”

“Relax, Scarlet. I didn’t know she’d be—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Barry said, bursting with the mayhem of his emotions. He calmed the second he snapped though, reining himself in for fear of making a scene. “You’re still lying. Still avoiding the whole truth. We have to tell the others you’re whammied into loving me.”

“Or that I’m just in love with you,” Len said, expecting the curl of Barry’s lips that proved he still doubted him. “Lisa knowing is enough. For the others, it isn’t their business.”

“You mean now that they think we’re sleeping together?” Barry hissed.

It was Barry’s pain that brought Len pain, but his anger didn’t exactly offer joy. Len wanted to rekindle the ease at the edges of their interactions, the shared smiles and blushes and the way they hovered close even when both made a concerted effort to stay away. “We are sleeping together,” he smirked.

For a moment, Barry looked so angry, not at Len but at himself for the crack of a smile that slipped in at Len daring to make a joke. “I hate you,” he said, but it came out affectionate and tinged with laughter.

The words were the wrong ones but the connotation made Len smile wider. “I’m not lying, Barry. I’m keeping some of the truth to myself because I’m selfish and…and maybe I don’t like hearing you deny me every time I pour my heart out.”

The smile dropped from Barry’s face and his slew of emotions gave way to guilt.

“You wanna spare me excess pain?” Len grasped his hand even though the kid tensed at the contact and looked around like someone might see them, but everyone was either behind Len’s
back or Barry’s, leaving the space between them sacred. “Ignore them. And if you’re worried
about Sara, don’t be. Yeah, I was interested. Part of me still is.” He gripped Barry’s hand tighter,
anticipating he’d pull away, but Barry’s eyes sparkled green and tentative right back at him. “Just
like part of you still has feelings for Miss West.”

That caused Barry’s gaze to drift, but Len wasn’t upset. He knew the hand he’d been dealt.

“She doesn’t mean Sara has any claim on me,” he said. “Doesn’t mean I want her more than you and
don’t know it yet because of Bivolo.”

“Len,” Barry tried to snatch his hand back finally, “we’re not having this conversation now.”

“Then we’re having it later.” Len stepped closer and held Barry’s hand to his chest, causing a
lovely scarlet to dance along the boy’s cheekbones. “I would never expect you to turn around after
years of wanting the same girl and feel all of that for me suddenly. I’d like it, but I don’t expect it.
Here I am telling you that you are everything I’d ever want, and even though you don’t believe me,
you’re still bothered by a woman who betrayed me twenty years ago and one I’ve never even been
with.

“It’s messy, I know. No way around that. But have a little faith, kid. For once in my sorry life, I do.
Because you kissed me this time,” he said like a secret that made Barry go rigid but he didn’t deny
it. “And I know, when this is over, I’m gonna want those lips again.”

Len half expected Barry to squeak when he raised the hand in his grasp to his lips and kissed
Barry’s fingertips, but all the kid did was glance around, certain someone would catch them.

Seeing the curious crew waiting for him when he turned back to the table, Len had no intention of
confessing everything that was going on. He hoped more than anything that he didn’t sabotage
himself with the baggage weighing him down when the spell was broken. If only he could find a
way to rid himself of the danger—the proximity and the pain—and keep the freedom to love Barry
without flinching.

For that compromise, that gift, Len wasn’t sure what he might sacrifice.

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Barry felt lightheaded as he finished his trek to the bar. He did need a drink, even if the buzz only
lasted a second.

“Uhh, hey, can I get another beer for Mick?” Barry assumed the bartender knew the pyro well
enough to remember what he’d ordered. “The same for me and a shot of Jameson. Please,” he
added when the man regarded him with steel in his gaze.

He was large, broad and tall, with dark skin, neatly trimmed facial hair, and a shaved head. Very
scary bouncer type who could easily kick Barry’s ass—if he wasn’t The Flash. Though maybe that
wouldn’t matter with a guy like this.

“You again huh?” he said, not moving to attend to Barry’s order. “Thought you were fighting last
time you were in here. You make it up to him?”

“Yes,” Barry floundered. The bartender remembered him from all the times he’d come here to
talk to Len. He probably thought they were sleeping together too, but contrary to Len’s joke, they
weren’t, not really. That didn’t mean Barry could explain to this guy. “We weren’t fighting. We
just…disagreed about something. But yeah, we worked it out.” Mostly, only to be replaced with
entirely different grief.
“Good. Never seen Lenny with someone here more than once, unless it’s Mickey or his sister.” At last he moved to get the beers. He must know the Rogues especially well if he could get away with calling them ‘Lenny’ and ‘Mickey’. “He’s got a soft spot for ya. Didn’t think that was possible.”

“I don’t…know about that,” Barry said as he slid onto a stool to wait.

“When you were in here last, one of my waitresses saw you. Lenny ended up in the clink after that, but when he got out and stopped in, she asked if he was gonna look you up.” He snorted as he passed one beer across the counter and started to fill the next one. “Thought you were cute. Started pestering Lenny like crazy. Normally, he’s all polite charm, but when he ain’t interested in talking about something, he’ll let you know. He tried to shut the conversation down, but got all…can hardly believe I’m sayin’ this but…flustered.” He bobbed a suggestive eyebrow at Barry. “Well, as flustered as Captain Cold gets anyway. You’re something all right.”

It figured that Len's bartender had no qualms about the clientele he got in this place, including supervillains, but a man like him wasn’t one to blow smoke, and he certainly hadn’t been given any direction from Len. Lisa maybe? Mick? No, this felt too genuine, his observation that Barry was special and had been special for a while.

Barry wasn’t sure if he wanted that when being stuck to Len by choice would be just as complicated as the current situation. Yet he couldn’t deny the pleasant flutter and thrill in his chest hearing a surly bartender say Len got flustered talking about him before he’d ended up in Barry’s living room at Christmas.

As the second beer slid over to join the first and the bartender poured Barry his shot, he risked a glance over his shoulder. The arrangement at the table had changed and a sting of jealousy yanked down the corners of his mouth when he saw that Sara had scooted over to take his seat, talking huddled now with Len while Ray talked with Mick, and Lisa—shit, Lisa was headed toward him!

He whipped forward and accepted the shot from the bartender with near dangerous speed, downing it in one quick go. For that brief second of normalcy, the alcohol burned, and then it was gone like he’d slammed a shot of water.

“Thanks, Charles,” Lisa said, sidling up to the bar and looping an arm with Barry's. “Only thinking of you and Lenny, huh? How cute.”

“The other’s for Mick,” Barry defended, head ducked as he peeked at her eyes, similar to Len’s and just as blue. “We had a tenser meeting yesterday than, well, how you and I met the day before.”

“He told me as much,” she said, always coy, always so seemingly sweet when you didn’t know how sharp her bite could be—and her heels. “Don’t take it personally. You’d know if Mick didn’t like you—about two seconds before you went up in smoke. This is a good start for getting on his good side,” she nodded at the beers. “Make it a round for the table, will you, Charles? I’ll cover Fresh Face here.”

Charles offered a corroborating smirk. “Was just about to card him too.”

Barry really hated that joke.

“Relax, honey,” Lisa squeezed his arm still caught in her grasp, “we’re only teasing because you’ve got staying power and that makes you family. I don’t mind Lenny robbing the cradle a little.”

Her easy closeness, so different from Len—from normal Len—brought home the reality of what
she was saying. Barry dropped his voice to a whisper, “Lisa, you know this isn't…”

“Real? Please,” she whispered back, while Charles was distracted by filling the other beers, “Lenny might be under the influence but you’ve got no excuses.”

How obvious was Barry being exactly? Before Bivolo’s curse, he’d never even thought of Len that way—well, not with any seriousness. Just because the guy could have walked out of the pages of GQ even in his grungiest outfits didn’t mean Barry was smitten. Not back then. But now he’d spent real time with Len, and all the things about his nemesis that used to make him smile seemed closer to the surface.

“I'm sorry about Sara,” Lisa said. “She’s fantastic, I love her already, but I didn’t know she’d be coming along. Mick showed up with the others in tow. Raymond’s a bit of a pill but cute at least and he means well. Mick tried to pass the buck before, but one thing he and Lenny have in common is they both like a pretty face,” she spared the table a glance.

“Yeah,” Barry said absently, before he realized Lisa didn’t mean Sara. “Wait, what?”

“Honey,” Lisa hugged his arm all the more possessively, “you didn’t think Lenny was the only open-minded one on the team, did you?” Barry could only blink at her. “Pity, I think PhD Ken Doll over there is even more oblivious than you.”

Now Barry had to look, and although Ray should be driving Mick nuts—he was a very chatty guy, a little holier than thou if Barry was being honest, and not the type to let someone get away with senseless villainy as the Rogues were wont to do. Mick should have set the guy’s hair or leg or entire person on fire by now, but instead, occasionally he’d chuckle and didn’t look as put out by his empty glass while Ray was talking at him.

Which could simply mean they had a connection, a budding friendship, however unlikely, like Len had said, but Lisa smiled like she knew what she was talking about.

Barry couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of what he was about to say, but he had to, “If you and Cisco start going out, we might convert the entire lot of Rogues by dating you.”

Lisa giggled, releasing Barry’s arm after another gentle squeeze. “Mmm, and what a way to go.”

The humor between them was contagious. Even after earning a puncture wound in his foot the other day, Barry and Lisa had ended up like this in Len’s kitchen too, talking and laughing like good friends instead of remembering that once upon a time Barry held a gun to her head. Though that wasn’t nearly as strange as having a growing crush on a man who’d tried to kill him.

He frowned as he watched Len and Sara continue talking, a smirk on Len’s face instead of any discomfort. “I suppose that idea still works even if Len wakes up and decides he’d rather have her,” he said with a dawning sense of loss even when he didn’t have anything yet.

“Like I said, sweetie,” Lisa spoke with a softer tone that reminded him of Len’s tender moments, “I adore Sara, and honestly I don’t know how Lenny acted around her before this, but if it’s any consolation, she isn’t ahead of you. You and Lenny have had a few…encounters by now, I imagine?” She leaned in with a wicked glint in her eyes.

Was it written across Barry’s face that they’d made out less than an hour ago? With how he’d acted at the table, it probably was.

“And all they’ve ever shared was a single kiss.”
“They kissed?” Barry erupted, far too loudly with so few people around to drown out the sound and with Charles standing there filling beers.

“Oh honey,” Lisa said with the most immediate look of pity Barry had ever received, “you’ve got it bad, don’t you?”

He shouldn’t. He really shouldn’t. Not for Len. Not under the circumstances. Maybe Barry was just horny and caught up in the fantasy of someone finally being devoted to him the way he’d always dreamed of. It would make a terrible sort of sense. But when he thought back on the moments when he most wanted to kiss Len, it wasn’t because the thief had confessed something or acted out of character amid his obsession, but when he was just being Len, being Cold even, and Barry caught a glimpse of the man who could be both sides of the coin.

“Do you think he means it?” Barry asked without thinking, hating how Lisa’s look of pity increased the second he said it. “Not all of it, obviously, I don’t think he’s in love with me, but…maybe? A little? Do you think he could ever…” He couldn’t say it—he shouldn’t want it.

“Barry,” she said, which was startling since Lisa had never said his name before, “what I think—no, what I know—is that my brother doesn’t go after anything he can’t steal. You were untouchable. This stunt, however much it frightens me, evened the playing field. Now he knows he has a chance, whether before he just wanted to get into those tight leather pants of yours…”

Barry darted his eyes to Charles, but the bartender didn’t seem to be listening.

“…or if he wanted something more even then and never entertained the idea that he could have it. You changed so much more than you realize all the way back on day one. For the better,” she said, sounding so different when she dropped her persona just like Len sounded when he dropped his drawl. Then she pulled it right back on again and shrugged. “Besides, I kinda like hanging out with Team Red.

“Now come on. Charles can help us carry all these beers, can’t you, sweetie?” She looked over the bar and he snagged two glasses without answering, while she grabbed two more and nodded at the waitress exiting the kitchen loaded down with plates. “Looks like our food is up anyway, and I hear you really need to eat.”

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True instability meant hitting another of the families right as their guards started to drop—tomorrow—and Alexa knew just who to strike.

The Dunkirks were on shaky ground with Dunkirk Junior in charge, young and impulsive as he was compared to his late father. The other families already suspected them as the culprits behind Tiffany’s and the Galleria, but if they were hit next, chaos would rear its head again, opening the doors for panic, suspicion, and mistakes.

The Flash would be busy with Captain Cold at his side, giving Alexa the only ammunition she really needed. And all according to plan.

The East docks it was, Dunkirk's gunrunners, which had the added bonus of replenishing Alexa’s supplies from the rookies that had been caught so far—not that that was out of plan either. She knew how the families worked, how they’d retaliate, and that meant sacrifices. Alexa hadn’t ever severed ties with Central City completely. She’d just been waiting for the right homecoming, even though she never expected costumes in red and blue to be her way back in.
“Time to tap your friend, Roy,” she said, looking out the balcony doors of her suite at the city below, bustling with activity and just waiting to be claimed. Peering over her shoulder at the meta human under her thumb, she gave a slow smile, and Roy echoed the expression. “Be ready for tomorrow night.”

“You got it, boss.”

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Len tensed the moment Sara slid over to take Barry’s chair, as if he didn’t trust his reactions. He loved Barry, but there was something about Sara that drew him in almost as strongly as the Scarlet Speedster. Her darkness that didn’t own her, her strength, her beauty, the way he let his guard down around her that was so rare, it always surprised him.

All things he could say about Barry too.

“Okay, Leonard, what’s really going on?” she said as Lisa stood to approach the bar, leaving Len unable to snag a limb or piece of jacket to stop her.

At least Sara’s presence meant he didn’t have to make small talk with Raymond or pretend like things were normal between him and Mick when there was still so much left unsaid.

“I think we’ve explained enough,” he said through gritted teeth and distracted attention as he followed his sister’s journey only to realize how close Sara had gotten. His gaze flicked to her eyes, then aside at the rest of the table. Ray and Mick were talking amongst themselves. “When everyone’s done treating this like a lunch date and calms down, we’ll discuss our plan of action.”

Sara leaned on the table that much closer to him. “You don’t seem particularly bothered to have a white knight babysitter supernaturally attached to you, especially considering your history with The Flash. Unless there are things about that history I don’t know, which isn’t hard to believe given your penchant for excluding the truth.”

Trained assassins were annoyingly good at reading people. “I think it goes without saying that you and I have something in common when it comes to our…proclivities,” he fanned his fingers in a playful, twirling motion.

“Aside from me leaning more toward women and you leaning decidedly the other direction?” she nodded back at the bar without looking directly at Barry, though the intent was implied.

“What can I say, tight leather does it for me more than the specifics of what’s underneath. Besides,” he leaned into her space in kind, postures hunched, faces close, Mick and Ray ignored, “someone gave the impression that our goodbye kiss was simply that—goodbye. You changing your tune?”

The same electricity Len adored around Barry wasn’t quite present, but there was still something of a tingle in the air as Sara’s eyes glanced away and back again. “To be honest, I might have been persuaded. *Might,*” she said when Len couldn’t hide his grin. “After significant effort and less treachery on your part.”

Len huffed and pulled back. “Sounds boring.”

“Precisely the problem, Leonard. Because something I’ve learned when it comes to how two people *work* is you can’t expect the other to change. You can’t yearn for an ideal version of them that fits what you want.” Her eyes dropped once more to the table. “Nyssa wanted me to stay in the League. I wanted her to leave it. But if she’d left just for me, she’d have been changing for me and
her happiness would have taken a back seat to my desires. Relationships built on that can’t last.”

One of the first things Len had done when he returned home was put his ear to the ground for any buzz in the underworld. “Way I heard it through the grapevine is she dismantled the whole kit and caboodle recently—for herself, to go her own way. Yet you’re sitting here instead of tracking her down.”

“We aren’t talking about me.” Sara’s blue eyes flashed to his face almost icier than his own.

“You brought it up.”

“To point out that he,” she raised both eyebrows, “has always seen the good in who you already are. He wouldn’t change you, but I know you want to be happier, Leonard—for you, not to appease him. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t have gotten on that ship just because he believes in you, and you wouldn’t have listened every time I tried to do the same favor you did for me—convincing you to stick to the path you chose for yourself.”

She wasn’t wrong, about any of it, but that path Len had tried to walk was a bright and scary one, with all his scars laid bare. She’d helped him face that head-on, the whole crew had in their own ways, but Barry by his side made it easier than ever to stay the course. Len had been terrified when he left the Waverider, terrified of facing the unknown and where his choices might lead him. Now that fear was overshadowed by something better, something good.

“You saying you approve of me and Flash getting cozy and picking out curtains?” he smirked.

A smile tugged at Sara’s lips. “I’m saying…sometimes you’re not so bad, Leonard, but I have it on good authority that Barry likes you even when you’re insufferable, and that is far too often for me. Although that kilt,” she leaned in especially close, “almost convinced me otherwise. I hope you kept it.”

Len chuckled. He knew he liked Sara Lance, never doubted it, but now he remembered why without feeling like he was betraying his love for Barry. The charge between him and Sara was something very different. “Don’t think you’ll ever catch me in it with bare legs. My skin is for private eyes only.”

Sara laughed as she sat back. “I was wondering why you kept your robe so tightly closed on that mission. Who’d have guessed you were just shy.”

“Finally. Ya always this slow, Spark Plug?” Mick pulled their attention as Barry and Lisa returned to the table with Janet close behind and Charles assisting with extra beers that perked up Mick’s scowly disposition.

“I was getting you a beer, Mick,” Barry said. “Then Lisa decided everyone could use one.”

Len could only hope that the worst damage his sister had done was splurge on alcohol for the table. Barry seemed more at ease though. He almost took Sara’s old spot, but she rose to offer him his previous one. A hint of awkwardness and jealousy spiked in his posture but released when he sat and shared a friendly smile with Sara that he soon passed to Len.

Somehow, disaster had molded into success. Story of Len’s life, really.

It was a lunch date in strange, mixed company, as they drank and ate and talked shop. Mick had already checked on their ‘friends’ from Ferris Air. Mardon was off on his own, out of Iron Heights again. Shawna was MIA but shouldn’t be hard to track, since Len knew the alias she’d been using as she finished up night classes toward becoming an RN.
“Surprised, Scarlet?” Len turned at Barry’s shocked scoffing. “Maybe you should have talked to your inmates more instead of throwing away the key.” A little ribbing was good for the kid, especially concerning that awful prison.

Mick and Ray would make it a priority to track down Shawna, since her powers could be invaluable if she was willing to lend a hand. Mardon was too much of a wild card, but that was only more reason to make sure he stayed out of Alexa’s hands.

“You could also try Hartley,” Barry said.

“Rathaway? Thought he played for your team?”

“Oh. Right.” Barry snapped his mouth shut like he’d honestly expected Pied Piper to be one of Len’s Rogues. Len certainly wouldn’t turn his nose up at the idea, but he’d heard the kid had gone straight—more or less.

“Are you trying to help fill my coffers, kid, coz you’re welcome to join the ranks too.”

“Not happening. You’ll have to handle your thefts without a speedster.”

“But it’s so much more fun when you crash the party. Nice to know you’re giving me leave for that next heist though.”

“I didn’t mean—” Barry cut off when Len snickered. “Very funny.”

It really was, how easy they could brush aside the things that should have formed a wedge between them.

“What about Mistress Mastermind?” Ray said the name with zeal like the nerd he was. “Sara could keep an eye out for her around the city.”

Sara was willing, but Len explained that Alexa didn’t let any pictures of her circulate, which they’d confirmed when they tried to track her using the police database and any other search engines they could think of. But she did prefer high class accommodations, even back in her twenties when they’d had nothing and squatting was more common, so she was likely hiding in plain sight.

“What’s she look like?” Barry asked, without the trepidation he’d carried when asking about Alexa before. “If we can get a pencil and paper, I can draw a quick mugshot.”

Len was intrigued and asked Janet to acquire the items. Once Barry had his supplies and Janet made scarce again, the kid set to work at Flash speed, listening carefully to Len’s descriptions. He tweaked a few things here and there when Len got a look at his progress, but once the picture was finished, it bore a striking resemblance to the real thing.

“Always pulling out new talents, Scarlet. What else are you hiding, I wonder?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Barry teased back. Win—definitely a win.

“Are you two always like this?” Ray said with his usual lacking tact, reminding Len that he and Barry were not, in fact, alone.

“Yes,” Lisa and Mick said before Len could reply, causing Sara to snicker.

“Oh.” Ray glanced around the table, maybe more oblivious than Len had thought. After all, he hadn’t noticed the way Mick looked at him yet either. “You’ve fought each other so many times, I
figured you’d bicker more. It’s nice to know you’re friendly. Product of spending so much time together lately?” he asked brightly.

“Something like that,” Len said.

“Lenny saves the old married routine for Mick,” Lisa put in. “As for my contribution to this ragtag team,” she went on before Len could counter that assessment, “I wasn’t getting my nails done this morning. I got a line on where some of those men in custody were last seen, maybe even where they were recruited from. Could narrow our search area.”

“That’s awesome!” Barry sat up, maybe a little too eagerly to shift the conversation’s focus again. “Joe’s working that angle too. You should touch base with him. I can give you his number.”

Lisa blinked at him. “You’re going to give me a detective’s personal phone number?”

“Why not?” Barry shrugged, confident but also challenging with his smile. “I can trust you guys, right?”

The Rogues shared a moment of silent comradery like they’d caught an easy mark, and Lisa leaned across the table. “I’ll at least promise not to abuse it until after we’ve caught our man. And woman. But if we’re exchanging numbers, I don’t suppose you’d supply me with one extra?”

“Lisa,” Len chided, “you could just ask Ramon for his number and I’m sure he’d gladly give it.”

“I know. But this would be more fun,” she grinned.

Barry chuckled, mirroring Lisa by leaning over the table. “Promise you won’t use Joe’s number for anything nefarious, and I’ll give you Cisco’s.”

“Deal. How nefarious I get with him is off the table.”

Another laugh and shake of Barry’s head, but he still gave Lisa what she wanted.

It was the start of a good plan, covering all their bases with their extended crew and leaving Barry and Len to check in with Caitlin about Logue and wait to hear back from Julian.

Len even pulled Mick aside at one point to ask, “You gonna keep torturing me then, or are we good?”

“You tell me,” Mick stood up straighter. “Ya gonna keep bein’ an idiot?”

The spark for a fight was always close at hand with Mick—sparks were his specialty, after all. Len released his friend’s arm and held up both hands. “There’s no one I’d rather have watching my back, Mick, or Lisa’s,” he said, honestly, before smirking and nodding at Raymond. “Even if you’re leaning toward letting somebody else watch yours.”


Len cocked his head at him.

“Don’t go playin’ hero again and tell him shit,” Mick barked. “He ain’t interested but he’s less annoying than you and prettier company. You just enjoy that Red thinks the pretty one is you.”

They’d be okay, in time, but Len still worried that Mick had one too many ghosts haunting him than he’d had before.
At least now all they had to do was split up to do their parts for finishing this mess and hope that one or several of them struck gold.

After parting with Lisa and the Legends, Len and Barry checked in at STAR Labs. Caitlin was still meeting with Logue at the hospital, but she returned shortly after their arrival.

He was definitely affected by Bivolo. All the right parts to his brain lit up, but it was sporadic compared to Len, without a firm hold, hence his erratic behavior. Since she could confirm the affects were meta human related, the plan was for her to touch base with Julian the next day. Unfortunately for Logue, the hypnosis wasn’t any easier to break than Len’s and would take time to treat.

Len was less than enthusiastic about becoming a guinea pig again for the rest of the afternoon, but working on his suggestibility required consistency, Caitlin said.

“Any success with you could help us treat Logue too. Who knows what secrets you have hidden because of Bivolo.”

What Len had hidden wasn’t his main concern so much as what he might lose.

The biggest win for the day wasn’t freeing him of Bivolo’s control, however, that was still out of reach, but having a firm starting point with their growing team and Cisco handing him and Barry a pair of goggles each before they left. Len’s were identical to what he wore with his Cold costume, but Barry’s were shaped to fit over the eye openings in his cowl and red to match.

“Unlike normal goggles,” Cisco explained, “these should deflect any attempt Bivolo might make to whammy you again if you run into him.”

“Doesn’t help me much now,” Len said, even as he admired Cisco’s handiwork.

“Somehow I doubt you want him to change your programming to clucking like a chicken, Cold,” Cisco shot back, but his phone rang before Len could continue the banter, and when he frowned at the unrecognized number, Len tugged on Barry’s arm.

“See you tomorrow, kid. And thanks,” he said, dragging Barry away just as the engineer answered the call and nearly yelped Lisa’s name.

How it was already Tuesday tomorrow, Barry had no idea. The days were long and yet sped by, leaving him exhausted and hungry but also relieved to be somewhere other than home, where Joe and Wally’s presence made him feel like he should participate in family time instead of sequestering himself in his room.

Of course, while Len was a different sort of company, he was still company, and Barry really needed alone time or he wasn’t going to be responsible for his actions soon.

Len didn’t push for the conversation he said they would get to later, but while Barry thought they’d shaken off the tension between them, being back at Len’s apartment meant they were alone for the first time since the alley. When Barry had kissed Len. And Len kissed him back. And they’d been close to kissing a third time before Logue interrupted them.

Lisa had been so…nice, really, and supportive at the bar. Even Sara didn’t seem so bad. Len didn’t
appear enamored with her and she didn’t seem to be vying for his attention, so maybe that had turned out okay too. But none of it changed that the feelings that mattered were Len’s, and only he could attest to what those had been before Bivolo. Barry couldn’t give in to the strong pull Len had over him, not until he could be sure that Len’s words and touch and want were real.

After they ate and fidgeted around each other as if static electricity shocked them every time they got close—at least for Barry; the brush of fingers on his wrist, the warmth of Len standing near him—he had to get away or he’d go mad.

“I need to, uhh…use the bathroom for a bit.”

“Feeling alright?” Len asked.

“Fine. Just…ate too much,” Barry lied and patted his stomach before escaping into the bathroom with a sharp, comforting click of the door.

He would have preferred to lie down. He’d have used the shower if he hadn’t taken one that morning, but he didn’t care for that as much. Easier cleanup but the heat tended to desensitized him, which was nice when he wanted to last but right now he just wanted to come.

Turning to face the door, he braced himself with one hand and undid his slacks with the other. His skin was warm and he was already so hard just from anticipation of finally touching himself. Whimpers formed and had to be bitten off as soon as his palm brushed the crown of his head peeking out of his boxers.

Barry was anxious, eager, desperate. With a burst of speed, he tore his pants and underwear down his thighs. That was better—the curl of his fingers, the stroke of his thumb along the head, and smooth wetness spreading up his skin. His fingers were long and thin like his limbs, but he imagined a different set touching him now, more artful and elegant, pulling tight and bringing him close to completion in only a few minutes.

Len. Barry couldn’t say his name aloud, shouldn’t even be thinking of him, of his hand, of his breath on the back of Barry’s neck and his firm body pressed in tight behind him.

Barry’s hips rocked forward in time with his strokes and the vision of his phantom partner. He could have sped through it all faster but he wanted to enjoy himself, one of the rare times he craved a normal pace even if his time was limited.

Would Len touch him if he asked? Would he drop to his knees with that wicked grin? He would but Barry couldn’t ask for anything until this was over, he could only envision it, the way Len would take care of him and cater to his whims. It was a thrilling fantasy but it had to stay a fantasy—Len’s hands, Len’s lips parting…

“Barry.”

Len’s voice…

…on the other side of the door!

Barry gasped and bit back a cry at suddenly pausing the pump of his hand. He was close; he was right there. “Y-Yeah…?” he said after a moment so Len wouldn’t know he’d already been at the door.

“Can I do anything?”
Fuck. Barry couldn’t stop now, not when Len was saying things like that; he had to finish. “I'll be out in a second,” he tried to keep his voice steady as he let his hand begin to move again.

“I know why you’re in there.”

Shit. *Shit.*

“You want to be away from me.”

“No.” Well yes, but it wasn’t like that.

“I can give you space when you need it. You can ask for that. Which I know must sound ridiculous coming through the bathroom door,” he chuckled—and god, his *laugh.* “But you can be honest with me, Barry.”

The sound of Barry’s name in that voice when he was touching himself, panting, wishing—

“I’d do anything for you.”

—and then he came, hot and fast over his hand and up his stomach all because Len was willing to offer him everything.

Which was supposed to be the problem.

“I just…need a minute,” Barry said, relieved from his release but sickened all the same.

“Okay.”

Barry heard Len walk away and turned to fall against the door, his hand and skin a mess. Everything was a mess, his whole life and every minute he lived inside a lie, and he felt like the worst villain of all...for not wanting it to stop.

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

^_^ I am so excited for the next few chapters.

Also, Sara and Lisa have talked about more than Lisa is letting on. How else would they each know a few extra tidbits?

Also, Sara and Len are alot like Barry and Felicity in my mind here. They're good together, they like each other, they're attracted to each other, YES, but they both want someone else more.

Oh! And Charles is canon from the comics in New 52. :-}
Len and Barry may be getting closer, but Barry doubts his intentions and worries he's falling too quickly for a dynamic that could still prove fake, only for their new team to hit their next obstacle amid a few small wins and enter the fight against Alexa head-on - Team Flash, Rogues, and Legends together.

Phew, back on track with a weekly update, and feeling awesome about how this one turned out.

Let me know if you're still with me!

Len read the strain in Barry’s shoulders the moment he exited the bathroom—like he had reason to be relaxed but hadn’t yet given in to it. Like maybe he had been relaxing before Len opened his mouth and tried to talk to Barry through the bathroom door when he obviously wanted space.

But then Len shook off the skewed goggles he wore when it came to Barry and picked up on the embarrassment tinging the ease and equal tension hanging on the kid, and suddenly it became very clear to Len what Barry had been doing with his private time.

Part of Len wanted to laugh, to ask Barry why he hadn’t asked for company or assistance, but he knew better than to let his mouth run away from him again. He didn’t want to push Barry or make him more uncomfortable, so he kept his mouth shut, smiled appeasingly—not like he knew Barry’s secret or was intrigued and a little turned on by the thought of him touching himself in Len’s bathroom—and kept an appropriate distance until it was time for bed.

There was so much to talk about. The air was charged as though Barry were sparking. But Len saw the fragile balance the kid was clinging to between what he wanted and what he was willing to accept and he didn’t want to ruin the progress he’d made. Everything felt clearer the more Barry gave into him.

“You still don’t believe me, do you?” he said when they were lying next to each other in the dark.

“Len…” Barry said like a sigh at dredging up the elephant in the room, wedged precariously between them.

“It’s okay.” Len turned his head, taking in the perfect profile of Barry lying in his bed beside him. “You want to be sure. You’re a good man, Barry, and you don’t want to take advantage of someone with their head on crooked. I get it. Don’t beat yourself up though if you’re a little… tempted,” he said like a purred whisper. “I am so very tempted every time I look at you, but you, Barry Allen, are worth waiting for.”
At last, green eyes turned to look at him instead of at the ceiling, and even in the near pitch darkness of the room, Len would swear he saw those pale cheeks darken. “Why do you have to say things like that?”

Len grinned. “I’d turn the charm off, kid, but I’m afraid it’s a permanent fixture.”

Barry laughed. If all Len ever had was moments like this, quiet intimacy and shared joy, he could live with that, without ever kissing Barry again or feeling his skin. But now he knew with certainty how much Barry yearned to connect too.

“Goodnight, Barry.”

“Goodnight, Len.”

It was clockwork. Now all Len needed was to figure out how to make time stand still so this never had to end. Maybe time traveling himself and hanging around someone who could do the same without the fancy ship would show him how some day.

XXXXX

Len wasn’t used to waking up to someone futzing about in his kitchen, but he slept so much more soundly ever since Barry started sharing his bed. Maybe it was Bivolo’s doing, he didn’t care, he just enjoyed the extra forty winks and the smell of coffee already brewing to wake him—that maybe smelled a little burnt if he was being honest.

“Barry…” he said in the voice Lisa had dubbed his chiding older brother tone when he exited into the main room to a much more burnt coffee smell than what had filtered into the bedroom.

Barry was zipping about the kitchen, nose wrinkled in distaste for that awful smell as he glared into the coffee cup he’d been filling. His flustered panic was far too endearing for Len to be upset with him. “I was trying to add espresso. It might still be okay.” He sniffed the contents with skepticism but passed it along the kitchen island when Len approached.

Kid had been trying to create a poor man’s Flash like what they served at Jitters, which was adorable in its own right, but burnt espresso added to coffee, no matter how much steamed milk or sugar you added, still tasted burnt.

Len tried a sip anyway before shooing Barry away from his coffee machine. “First pancakes and now my morning caffeine fix? How do you take care of yourself, Scarlet? Didn’t West teach you the basics?”

“He did. I can make things. I’m not usually this…” He trailed when Len raised an eyebrow his direction. “Okay, so maybe I have some klutzy tendencies, but usually I’m more like 70/30 with screw-ups in the kitchen. I used to be worse. As The Flash—”

“You just screw up faster?”

Barry pouted. Len would have taken a picture if his phone had been anywhere nearby.

“Calm yourself, kid. No harm done. I know how to make exactly what you were going for. So pay attention and maybe I’ll let you press my buttons again sometime.” Len winked as he dumped the mug and rinsed it in the sink, before starting a fresh batch of single serving Flashes with his admittedly high-end coffee maker that could do espresso, lattes, the works—he took his coffee very seriously.
While not immune to Len’s charms, Barry was getting a little more used to the way he casually flirted with him, and he only turned a mild shade of red with a bashful smile. His face when he tasted Len’s version of the popular Central City drink, however, was instant bliss like that first night when he tasted Len’s cooking.

“I’ll man the kitchen from now on,” Len said. “You be on standby for manual labor. Got it?”

“I really can make coffee and pancakes,” Barry insisted, cradling his mug like it was something to be treasured. “And goulash! My mom had this recipe I spent years figuring out how to replicate. I can make it perfectly now. Even Joe melts over it, and he’s a really picky eater when it comes to comfort food. All I need is one chance and I can prove to you I’m not a disaster in the kitchen.”

Leaning back against the island counter once he had his own Flash in hand, Len smirked. “Offering to make me dinner now? Shall I supply the wine and candlelight? Soft music. A movie for us to watch curled up on the sofa…” He trailed a little too seriously at the thought, because it wasn’t only a tease that he wanted to see that scenario play out.

To his surprise, Barry gave a wistful chuckle. “Make it Sam Cook and Predator and you’d have the perfect date night.”

A date. Would the world implode if The Flash and Captain Cold went on a date? “You know, when I said I wanted to get a drink as friends when this was over that didn’t mean we couldn’t have a few nights like that first. Though I’d be just as amenable to Smokey Robinson and The Thing.”

Barry laughed more jovially, open and glowing despite the lingering flush to his cheeks. “That actually sounds amazing.”

This kid had no idea what he did to Len or how suited they were for each other regardless of the complications that made it seem impossible. Len felt warm down to his toes, and it wasn’t only because of the coffee and rush of caffeine. “I suppose I have West to thank for your good taste in music and movies?”

“And my parents,” Barry said, causing his smile to flicker. “They would have been good friends with Joe. For a minute there, Dad almost was.”

Maybe Len would have been too, if life had turned out differently and he’d ended up as that detective Barry sometimes envisioned him as. But that reminded Len of the difference in their ages and he didn’t want to dwell, especially if Barry hadn’t brought it up so far. Instead, he said, “I’m sorry, Barry,” in a quiet, sincere voice.

Barry held his mug closer to his chest as if to soak up the heat. “Sometimes I…forget? Spent so many years without him around, I can go a whole day and not remember that if it hadn’t been for Zoom, he’d be here now, moving back to Central ready to start the next chapter in his life. Instead I’m starting the next chapter of mine without him.”

Someone so young shouldn’t have so many demons haunting him, dwelling deep in the darker green of his eyes. At least Len and Mick—and too many others like them—had earned their demons.

“Never doubt you had something special, kid,” Len said, taking a moment to consider how rare this was that he was having a barefoot conversation in the wee hours of the morning in his kitchen with someone who knew all his baggage, and he knew all of Barry’s now too. “The way you talk about him, I know how proud he’d be of the way you’ve kept yourself together. A lesser man would have gone a more destructive path after what you’ve been through.” He raised his mug with a twist of a
smile and took a drink.

“I almost did,” Barry said, soft and somber. “I have a few times. But a better man comes back from that even if he stumbles. Right?” He pulled on a stronger smile for Len—for Len.

Because Barry believed in him, and the connection growing between them meant more than Bivolo’s influence or Alexa’s schemes. “Let’s go be better men then and take care of those fools thinking they can threaten our city.” Len held his mug toward Barry and the kid clinked against him before taking another sip himself.

It didn’t escape Len’s notice that the more Barry drank his coffee, the more he seemed lost in his thoughts and less able to keep that smile. It wasn’t only Len he doubted, but himself.

They each took their time in the bathroom but when they were ready to head out, Len paused at the door. “We should keep those goggles Cisco made on our person at all times, just in case.”

“I got mine,” Barry patted one of the pockets of his jacket. “Where’d you put yours?”

“Top drawer in the bedroom.”

“I got it.” Barry zipped away with a fizzle of yellow lightning and that rush of air and ozone Len loved.

He expected the kid to be back in seconds, but instead, he heard a yelp.

“Barry?”

Len hurried across the living room to check on him, reaching the bedroom just in time to hear a clatter and the slam of a drawer as he discovered Barry leaning against the nightstand, completely red from neck to hairline and looking like he’d seen a very inappropriate ghost.

Tapping the top of the dresser to his left beside the bedroom door, Len said, “I meant this top drawer.”

The nightstand, while it no longer contained Len’s sidearm, did house a few more delicate items he preferred to keep close at the bedside.

The sound of faint buzzing coming from the drawer behind Barry’s back proved he’d found exactly what Len assumed, which made it difficult not to burst out laughing. Len must have betrayed himself in his expression, because Barry sagged forward and ran both hands through his hair at being caught.

“I didn’t realize what it was at first because…I’m an idiot and you are totally laughing at me right now,” Barry said in utter misery.

Len allowed a chuckle to escape him. “I’m the one who just had his sex toys fondled.”

“Stop.” Barry erupted into his own laughter, red as ever, like a damn tomato, but he was smiling anyway, adorably and sweet. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, Barry.” Len crossed the room as Barry relinquished his stiff stance in front of the nightstand.

“I half expected to find a gun in there.”

Technically, it wasn’t a lie that there wasn’t one there now. “Disappointed or…intrigued?” Len
leaned toward him as he opened the drawer to attend to the buzzing Barry had left behind in his fumbling. The kid glanced at the floor and Len knew he was pushing it. “Apologies, it’s not an easy switch for me to turn off. Unlike this one.” He flicked off the vibration without pulling out the impressive dildo he had amongst his toys and wondered if part of Barry’s flush had to do with the telling piece of equipment being red.

“I couldn’t tell,” Barry said, meaning Len’s complete lack of censorship, but then, he didn’t realize how much Len held back.

“Come on, kid,” he said, closing the drawer and returning to the dresser to retrieve his goggles, “let’s see if that team of ours has made any progress. We can discuss recreational activities later.”

Barry was a walking catastrophe. He knew that. He’d always known that. But between his spectacular failure of getting off to Len’s voice in the bathroom last night, ruining their morning coffee before Len salvaged it, and becoming so frozen over finding Len’s stash of sex toys that he might as well have been hit with the cold gun before he heard Len approaching and threw that red monstrosity back where it came from—it really would be easier if someone put him out of his misery.

Maybe if he asked nicely once they captured Bivolo, the meta would agree to wipe everyone’s memories of the embarrassing bits of the past few days, though that might amount to all of it.

Plus, what the hell was Barry doing planning dates with Len anyway? Just because they had a surprising amount in common, worked well together, and had truly electric chemistry…

Shit, he’d lost his point. He needed to stop thinking about this. He just had to keep from making an ass of himself long enough for Len to be fixed. Whatever happened after that…he was open to far more possibilities than he’d been a week ago, and that terrified him as much as he felt a thrill rush through him.

But now wasn’t the time for Barry to lose himself in someone. He hadn’t earned the happiness he craved when all the suffering everyone in his life was facing right now was because of him—one way or another it was all his fault, even Len.

Cisco was alone when they arrived at the Labs, but Sara had taken the initiative to connect the entire team, so he was already watching comms for the ex-assassin while she did recon at every fancy hotel in Central City. Meanwhile, Mick and Ray were hitting the neighborhoods most likely to lead them to Shawna Baez, and Lisa was meeting Joe for coffee at Jitters—which was definitely an episode of The Twilight Zone.

“You don’t think she has a crush on him, do you?” Cisco flicked the comms off for a moment, but then looked cornered when he turned and remembered that Barry and Len were a package deal right now.

“Please never say that again,” Len said.

“Ever,” Barry agreed. He seriously hoped Iris wasn’t getting her morning coffee any time soon.

Iris… He had to push thoughts of her from his mind. When things settled down, then he’d figure out how to make this up to her.

Joe and Lisa’s powwow led them to several neighborhoods they could scour for Bivolo’s whereabouts, and Joe also shared a few tidbits from Julian, though Caitlin was the one at the
precinct currently, meeting with the new meta human expert to get his thoughts on Logue and Bivolo’s DNA sample. Finally, Barry would have someone to commiserate with about the man’s completely unnecessary existence in his lab.

“I don’t know why you dislike him, Barry,” Caitlin said when she returned. “Julian seems perfectly fine to me.”

“For real? You like him too?” The universe was so out to get him.

“Never said I liked him, Scarlet,” Len defended when Barry indicated he was the beginning of that ‘too’, “Just don’t see why you’re so huffy about his presence other than having to share your toys.”

Barry flushed at the mention of toys, regardless of the context.

“But he’s fine?” Cisco ignored them, focusing on Caitlin as he waggled an eyebrow. “How fine exactly?”

She shot him her ‘not amused, Cisco’ expression that had been perfected over years. “As in very knowledgeable, honestly concerned about the meta human problem in Central City, and…well, maybe a little lacking in the tact department, but I don’t think the people in this room would win any awards.”

“Hey,” Barry spread his arms like he’d been physically wounded by that comment.

“Excuse me, sister, we have all the tact,” Cisco said, before sucking a lollipop into his mouth that maybe soured his argument somewhat.

Len snorted while Caitlin rolled her eyes.

“His research into Bivolo’s recent DNA sample,” she said, “combined with everything we learned during our last encounter with him, and what we know of Logue so far, has led to some very important discoveries that might solve Len’s problem.”

That shut everybody up, Barry perking instantly while Len looked…disappointed? But Barry couldn’t focus on that now.

“Julian agrees with me that regular sessions to weaken Bivolo’s hold and strengthen suggestibility could work…over a number of weeks,” she said a little more hurriedly, making all of them groan at what they already knew, “But! If everyone Bivolo has done this to has specific triggers, it stands to reason they also have specific directives.”

“Meaning…?” Barry asked.

“Meaning they’ve likely each been implanted with a goal, and once that goal is achieved, they’ll wake up.”

“Wait, so…” Barry blinked in his excitement mixed with trepidation that an end was closer at hand than he’d thought, “if we can figure out what Len’s directive is and accomplish it, he’ll snap out of this? How?” He moved closer to Caitlin. “How do we figure it out? Do you know Logue’s?”

“No yet,” Caitlin admitted, which brought the momentum to a halt once more, “but let’s see what we can figure out today. The more we learn of Mistress Mastermind’s plan, the closer we get to figuring out her goals with Len’s hypnosis.”

As reluctant as Len was to allow Caitlin to continue jolting his brain and niggling him for details
like an interrogator, he conceded, and the day started over again, like each day before it since Len had been whammed, but at least with new direction for once.

Barry felt caged as well while Len was at the mercy of Caitlin’s experiments, because he couldn’t risk dashing out to check with Sara or Ray in person, he had to sit back with Cisco and hear updates over the comms.

“Now you know what us normal humans feel like,” Cisco said.

“Cisco, you’re a meta too, remember?” Barry leaned over the desk beside him. “And eventually your ability to teleport will way beat out how fast I can run somewhere.”

“I don’t know about that…” Cisco looked away, hiding himself in watching and listening in on what the others were up to, still concerned at the edge of his potential power that it could turn him into something he wasn’t.

Barry knew better. Evil was a choice, not something brought on by powers. The real Jay proved that, Barry proved it too—or at least he tried—over Thawne and Zolomon and what they’d wanted to make of him.

“We could always practice,” Barry sat on the desk to distract Cisco from burying himself in work. “It’s not like either of us is going anywhere. Practicing your abilities regularly is the only way you’ll master them, you know,” he said with an air of authority that channeled Cisco himself—maybe even Wells.

Cisco glared at him. “That desperate to put me through the ringer like we did with you, huh?”

A grin stretched across Barry’s face. “My intentions are only mildly based in vengeance.”

The bitch-face that sprang to full force caused Barry to laugh. He meant the initial sentiment though; he didn’t worry for one moment that Cisco would become Reverb, but the only way for Cisco to prove that was to embrace his powers and use them. Barry didn’t care if he was being a hypocrite by having so many doubts in himself.

“Maybe later,” Cisco said, which was at least better than flat-out refusal, “but dude, did you see what White Canary is wearing?” he turned the attention away from him. Barry would have protested, but Cisco pulled up security footage from one of the hotels, showing Sara Lance sitting in the lobby decked out like a socialite, and his jaw dropped. “She does high class like Grade-A femme fatale.”

She really did. She wore a cocktail dress in her signature color, sleeveless with cutouts along the sides to show off her toned waistline, a sparkling choker high on her neck, with her golden hair curled all around her shoulders, dangerous heels, and smoky, elegant makeup. The way she crossed her legs and watched the crowd to scrutinize everyone who passed fit the persona of a spoiled rich kid just as well as a trained spy.

Barry shrugged away a renewed spike of jealousy, reminding himself that he was being ridiculous no matter how things turned out in the end. “Switching Canary allegiances?” he kept the topic on Cisco.

“Black Canary will always have a special place in my heart,” Cisco brought two fingers to his lips like a kiss to Laurel’s memory, “but I got plenty of love for other badass super women. We definitely need more ladies on the team.”

“Lisa Snart is working with Joe right now,” Barry reminded him, tearing his eyes from Sara’s
image on the screen. “I think we’re adding to the ranks just fine.”

The twitch of a real and smitten smile proved Cisco agreed with that more than his observations of White Canary.

For a short moment Barry imagined that date with Len playing out, no Bivolo involved, just them, with Cisco and Lisa along too, even Ray and Mick, if something beyond strange friends was possible for them, and he bit back a laugh at the joke he’d made to Lisa—converting the Rogues by dating them, by loving them. Love was a powerful thing. It even twisted someone into something they weren’t occasionally.

That pleasant dream came back down to earth with a thunderous crash. What was Barry thinking? Talking date nights were bad enough, but he was letting himself get sucked into this. What happened if they were wrong, if Len and everybody else were wrong, and Snart wanted nothing to do with him when he snapped out of his stupor? It would hurt that much more if Barry set himself up for something deeper that didn’t exist. It would be Iris all over again. And his feelings weren’t even the issue. What about Snart? How awful would it be for him remembering all the soft, sweet, intimate moments if his feelings for Barry didn’t go beyond respect and appreciation for how he looked in his suit?

Len would still be a good guy if he only desired Barry physically. Barry was just assuming otherwise because the evidence seemed to point that way and the idea was so…nice. How different this would all be if he knew Len meant it.

Shaking his head to clear away the growing cobwebs, Barry reminded himself that there was work to be done. He could worry about his disaster of a love life later.

Eventually, they ordered in lunch, more progress was made with Len though not enough to save him from Bivolo’s thrall, and good intel came in from all sides of their team—but there was no sign of Alexa or Bivolo. Mick and Ray weren’t able to track down Shawna Baez either but they knew a few new streets she’d been seen around lately, and Lisa and Joe found a safe house that was lived in not too long ago, even though Bivolo wasn’t currently residing there.

Another day rolled into evening and before Barry knew it he was hungry again, antsy and agitated to be out of the Labs, even if Len had to be his shadow. Maybe they could go out for dinner—not a date, just another gathering of their forces to touch base beyond recaps over comms. Barry was about ready to suggest as much when Caitlin released Len from her care and pulled Barry aside into the med room.

“Everything okay? Is Len okay?” Barry fell to concern when he saw the seriousness in her eyes.

“Len’s fine, Barry. It’s nothing like that, I just…I feel it’s important to tell you this.” She paused, glanced over Barry’s shoulder as if seeking out Len in the other room, and finally said, “I showed Julian Len’s brain scan.”

“You what?” Barry exclaimed before thinking better of raising his voice. He fell to a hush. “Won’t he ask questions about who the other victim is?”

“I talked with Joe first before he left the precinct to meet Lisa. We played it off that the scan is from a known criminal looking to make a deal for helping us bring Bivolo in, so his identity has to be kept anonymous.”

“And Julian went for that?”
“He did,” Caitlin shrugged, forcing Barry to envision narrowed blue eyes and that sharp accent plying Caitlin with questions before he caved. “The reason some of Logue’s programming didn’t take the way it was supposed to is because Bivolo must have tried to get him to do something against his nature. Maybe to…hurt someone else or hurt himself, something that contradicts too much with his mind’s desires. Len’s scan,” she held Barry’s gaze steadily, “doesn’t show that same conflict. His programming is based on something more in line with his true feelings.”

The wall at Barry’s back hit his shoulder blades as he instinctively tried to get away from what she was saying. “Don’t tell me this.”

“It doesn’t mean he’s in love with you, Barry,” she reached out to grip his arm, “but Len wasn’t wrong that first night when he said he likely has some feelings for you.”

“I know that,” Barry choked out, thinking of Charles at Saints and Sinners, and Lisa, and Mick, “but maybe he just wants to get me into bed and have his way with the Scarlet Speedster, and once he’s back to normal and doesn’t think he has to be my perfect idea of a partner anymore, he’ll remember he doesn’t play well with others and go back to stealing and blowing up buildings for the fun of it instead of wasting his time with someone who doesn’t fit his lifestyle.”

The words rushed out of Barry so swiftly, Caitlin reeled back. “You really think that’s true?”

No. And he felt awful for assuming so when Snart—when Snart long before all this—had done so much to prove he wanted to be more than a thief. "Everything’s pointing at him actually liking me, but it just feels so cheap right now. Sometimes he’s 100% the Snart we know, and I still enjoy his company. I really enjoy his company.” He let his gaze go distant and his cheeks fill with heat, not trying to hide what he meant, but Caitlin’s supportive stance didn’t waver. “Other times I don’t know if he’d say or do or share with me the things he has if it wasn’t for Bivolo, and that spoils everything. I feel sick about it. Like I’m using him.”

A smile crinkled the edges of Caitlin’s eyes, “That’s because you’re a good man, Barry. People shouldn’t be used or twisted to fit how someone else wants them to be,” but the smile quickly transformed into something sad, like Barry remembered from when he first met her.

“Hey,” he moved closer into her body and held her arms like she’d steadied his—like she always steadied him, “I don’t know how good of a man I am, because with everything that happened with my dad, and now all this, I haven’t once asked how you’re doing.”

“Oh.” Surprise and uncertainty filled her wide, brown eyes, before her brow furrowed and she shook her head. “You’re the one Zoom hurt the most.”

“I don’t know about that.” Barry hurt. Oh how he hurt. But Zoom had targeted Caitlin in his own terrible way that was just as unforgivable.

Words seemed to catch in her throat so Barry switched to contact instead. Even without Len’s need for touch and comfort the past few days, he would have been quick with a hug for his friend. He pulled her in tight and heard her breath hitch as she wrapped her arms around him.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “I know he got into your head too. And more than your head.”

A sharp breath puffed against his neck. “It took so long for me to imagine opening up to anyone after…Ronnie,” she spoke into his shoulder. “When I thought he died the first time, I never planned on being available for anyone ever again. Then I got him back. Then because of you and Cisco and this family, I felt like I could be me again. Even when I lost Ronnie a second time, it felt easier because of you. I know running away like I did didn’t make that very obvious,” she chuckled
shakily and he laughed with her, squeezing her tighter, “but once I came home, there was no doubt in my mind that this was home.”

Barry felt familiar hatred boil up in him for Hunter Zolomon. “And he twisted that.”

“The worst part is,” Caitlin sniffled, “I don’t think he meant to. I think some part of him honestly believed he was doing right by me trying to tap into my ‘true self’.”

“He wanted Killer Frost?”

“I don’t think so. He could have had her. Sure, she’d had her own Ronnie and blamed Zoom for killing him, but he could have done to her what he did to me. He wanted this me but a version who could be enough like her that I wouldn’t care if he destroyed everything around us.” Finally, she lifted her head and looked at Barry with damp but surprisingly clear eyes. “He wasn’t wrong either that there are times when part of me wouldn’t mind watching the world burn. Or freeze, I guess,” she smiled—sad again, so sad.

“Me too,” Barry said, and with his powers, he could do so much damage. Zoom and Reverse Flash had shown him that, and the last thing he wanted was to echo them, even if in some ways he already had.

You’ll never be happy, Barry.

At last, he and Caitlin parted, but Barry hoped the added height in her posture had something to do with him remembering to be a friend instead of just a patient and coworker.

“I wish he had been the man I started to care for instead of…” she closed her eyes with a cringe. “Instead of something else. But he wasn’t. More than anything, I hate that it makes it so hard to want to trust anybody else, but I don’t want to close myself off again. We have this family and there are good people out there.”

They shared a small smile. “You know, this may sound silly right now,” Barry said, “but the reason I didn’t trust Jay initially was because of Wells, right? I gave in and trusted him anyway, and being proven wrong again…it would be so easy to never want to trust someone like that, to never give anyone the benefit of the doubt. But then there’s Len,” he nodded toward the Cortex. “And for every part of me that worries this won’t be the same when he’s back to normal, I know the good he’s done, I know the changes he’s made, how much he’s tried to be the person his father buried. If he can be the exception, then other people can be too.” Maybe even Barry. “I guess what I mean is…no matter how much I hurt, and sometimes I hurt a lot, I never want to give up on people. I’d rather make another mistake than never try again or refuse to give someone a second chance.”

“That’s what I want too,” Caitlin said. “To prove Hunter was wrong about me and be better and happier someday than I ever felt with Jay Garrick.”

Barry had to laugh as he said, “No better revenge than living well, right?”

Another smile, one only people who had lived and breathed trauma could truly share and keep on smiling.

“Also, just to be sure we’re on the same page…” Caitlin leaned in with a secretiveness to her whisper, “you’re sure the second chance you’re trying for now is the one you want?”

“Huh?” For a moment, Barry didn’t understand, but then he realized she meant Len and his cheeks flushed, the absolute worst side effect of the Speed Force—it had to be a side effect. “I…I don’t
know.”

“Not Iris?”

There went all the good feelings Barry had been building back up. “Caitlin…I screwed up with Iris. Like really screwed up.”

He hadn’t told anyone about Sunday morning in Jitters. Only Len knew since he had overheard, but now the story poured out of him about all the things he’d told Iris and how they’d parted tense and angry. Part of Barry wished he could take it all back.

“But I wasn’t lying. That’s how I feel. She deserves better. We both deserve better.”

“Barry,” Caitlin said with gauging in her expression but confidence, unlike the sorrow that had lingered there until now, “I didn’t want to say anything before, but not too long ago when Iris admitted to me she was thinking of trying to make things work with you, it didn’t sound like she’d realized she was in love with you, but that she felt like it was an inevitability she shouldn’t fight.”

There was something truly comforting and yet also sickening deep in your gut realizing you’d been right about something awful all along.

“When you love someone, Barry, really love them, you don’t have any doubts that they’re the one.”

He knew Caitlin spoke from experience having loved and lost in such terrible ways. Barry had been so certain about Iris for so long, but he’d never had her. Now he felt conflicted finally being handed that chance. He was just as plagued with doubts about Len, but those doubts weren’t either of their faults. Barry didn’t love Len anyway, he just…wondered. He wondered how he’d feel if after all of this was over, Len turned to him and said those same words again—I love you, Barry—and meant them.

“Barry!”

Cisco’s cry pierced through Barry’s thoughts, and as he whipped his head to the door, he realized he and Caitlin were hidden, out of view, and they’d been talking for minutes and—

Zipping to Len’s side, Barry found the man furiously typing on his cell phone, not clutching at his chest in any pain like Barry had expected, yet proximity had to play a role because as soon as Len glanced up at his arrival, his fingers stopped moving.

“All of a sudden he told me to shut up,” Cisco explained from beside them, “took out his cell, and started muttering about mob families and Alexa’s grand plan.”

Barry focused on the brilliant blue of Len’s eyes that seemed lost in looking at him. “Len. What did you write?”

Blinking through the control of the hypnosis, Len gazed back down at his phone, and even though he’d likely forgotten everything he’d just jotted down, he could still read it. He paused for some time staring at the words and then smiled with that edge of a smirk at finally having one over on somebody else. “I remember. I know exactly what Alexa is planning and no tricks can knock it outta my head again.”

Caitlin’s heels clicked on the Cortex floor as she joined them from the med room, and with all of them gathered, Len finally explained the missing pieces they’d been waiting to hear.
“She needs you mopping up her mess but not in full form,” he said to Barry. “When heads start to roll, she knows you’ll take care of most of her competition for her. I’m only a bonus. I keep you distracted just enough to prevent you from stopping the real plan, and if I die, good riddance. But now we know her plot and she is not getting away with it.”

“She wants to start a mob war and take over the city after everyone’s dead or weakened,” Barry repeated the crux of the matter, the remaining dominos having fallen into place because of Len’s notes.

“Not to distract away from this good news or anything,” Cisco said, flicking a finger from Barry to Len, “but we also know something that should have been obvious. Barry being away from you hurts you, but it’s having him out of eyesight that triggered you to remember things.”

“You’re right,” Len nodded, as if hearing that made him remember too, and he focused back on Barry. “And I could never tell you, coz as soon as you’d walk in, I’d forget, and most of the time I was too distracted to realize.”

“Then if we refocus our efforts,” Caitlin said with fresh excitement, “we can learn everything you know, maybe even your directive and how to beat the hypnosis completely.”

“Whoa, wait a minute,” Barry balked. “By putting Len at risk keeping us apart? I don’t know if I like that idea.”

Len didn’t look thrilled with the suggestion either, but when Caitlin insisted, “We have to try,” the thief gave a conceding nod.

Barry really hated how wrong the right answer felt sometimes. “Okay, then let’s—”

Alarms erupted throughout the Cortex, snapping Cisco to attention as he flew back to his monitors and checked the various feeds. “Dude,” he looked over his shoulder, “reports of some serious gunfire at the East docks. CCPD’s been called in but they’re being told to hang back.”

“It’s Alexa,” Len turned to Barry. “The Dunkirks own those docks. They’re the most likely to make a fuss, so the other families would be expecting they’re behind all this, but if they’re being attacked now…”

“Chaos,” Barry agreed, then rushed forward with Len at his side to address Cisco. “Where are the others?”

“Hey, guys,” Cisco spoke into his microphone, “what’s your twenty?”

“Hungry,” Mick grumbled.

“We're headed to STAR Labs now, Cisco,” Ray elaborated, “what’s up?”

“Still at the Ritz but I can be on the road in thirty seconds,” Sara said.

“West just headed for the precinct,” Lisa added, “I’m downtown.”

Barry nudged Cisco aside to take the mic. “Does everyone have their gear?”

A slew of affirmatives replied.

“Good. Then head to the East docks. Cisco can give the details, just know that there’s gunfire between Alexa’s men and the Irish with CCPD en route. Ray, if you can fly others there faster, do
it, otherwise I can grab some of you on my way.”

Len leaned over Barry’s shoulder to add, “We need to create a perimeter and prevent as many people as possible from getting killed. Alexa needs bloodshed for her plan to work. Let’s keep her from the satisfaction.”

“You got it, boss,” Mick said with a pleased growl, like he couldn’t wait to face this old ghost and set her ablaze, even if it was doubtful Alexa would be on site.

Barry turned from the mic to let Cisco take over and was about to flash into his suit when Caitlin grabbed his arm.

“Barry, knowing this is literally Alexa’s plan to keep you distracted so we can’t catch her, that this chaos is exactly what she wants, you still want to go down there? Maybe the others—”

“I can’t ask Ray and Sara and the Rogues to fight my battles for me.”

“My battle too,” Len shot him a judging look.

“I get that, but if Bivolo shows up, we’re the only ones with protection against his powers,” Barry gestured between them to remind Len of their goggles. “It’s possible she’d send him out again if she worries we’re getting close to figuring out her plans, right?”

Len paused to consider that before curling his fingers into flourishing fists. “Throwing a meta at us again now makes sense. How much we’ve figured out by this point would be too difficult for her to predict. She’ll need to shake things up.”

“So we’re going,” Barry turned back to Caitlin. “Once we put an end to the firefight, maybe we can talk to the other mob families and get them to see reason before Alexa pushes this any further.”

“Easier said than done, Scarlet,” Len huffed.

“I know. But right now we have to move.”

More prepared this time, Len’s gear was already at the Labs, and in minutes they were both dressed, new goggles in place, ready to head for the docks. Cisco handed Len his own set of comms before they left to match the others he’d created for the new team.

Running himself and Len to a safe location passed the line of CCPD that had already arrived but near the gunfire where Mick and Ray were waiting, Barry took off again to grab Lisa and Sara and bring them the rest of the way from where they’d been moving on foot.

Lisa hobbled somewhat when Barry set her down. “My, my, Red, that’s more fun than I thought it’d be. No wonder Lenny enjoys you giving him a ride.”

For once, Barry had protection to hide how much he flushed, since the skin beneath probably matched his cowl for a moment.

“Focus, Lise,” Len peered around the large crate they were hidden behind—three Rogues, two Legends, and The Flash. Almost sounded like a bad joke about walking into a bar. “I count at least six men on the Dunkirk side near a freighter at the end of the docks, and another six dressed in that common black Alexa’s so fond of. No bodies on the ground—yet.”

“I see a sniper in black on the bridge,” Sara added, looking from the other side of the crate. “Must be Alexa’s side or he’d be firing.”
“Probably waiting for us, right?” Ray said, bouncing on his boot-clad feet. “Or you,” he nodded at Len and Barry.

“Stow the pep talk, Ray,” Mick barked, holding his heat gun close like he was itching to let loose with it. “Ya suck at it.”

Barry spread his arms for their attention. “A plan? Please? Without anyone dying,” he added for Mick’s benefit, who immediately rolled his eyes.

There was a brief pause before Sara and Len turned from their points of lookout at the same time and said, “Here’s what we’ll—” only to cut off when they realized each of them was trying to play boss.

“By all means,” Len nodded at her.

“I don’t know, Leonard. Isn’t this your city? Why don’t you go ahead?”

Len grinned, which Barry shouldn’t be focusing on right now or getting a sour feeling in his stomach over.

“Here’s what we’ll do,” Len finished what he’d started, then pointed at each of them in turn. “Lise, you distract, hit a few barrels out there close to the gunmen to get them nervous. Mick, follow their coattails with some flames when they duck and cover from the new players joining the party. Barry, hang back, wait til they scatter, then you can hit some of the stragglers when they tuck and run, while Sara and I go in low around the sides to flank. And Ray, you head up,” he pointed skyward, “take out the sniper, then get a look around and let us know if you see any sign of Bivolo or one of the masked men hanging back like he’s up to something.”

“You got us here too,” Cisco said over the comms.

“You keep the CCPD from getting trigger-happy,” Len said. “Now go.”

One by one, the others followed Len’s lead—Lisa and Mick used to working in tandem and good at knowing where to find small places to hide when gunfire turned toward them, and Ray hitting the skies to play reconnaissance.

Barry felt a rush of adrenaline flow through him, the same thrill he always felt when he was on the streets, protecting his city, but with a whole team supporting him like this it felt…different. He bounced like Ray had, sparks kicking up from his heels.

“Don’t you get annoyed with Leonard ordering you around like that?” Sara said while they waited for their time to move.

“Nah,” Len answered for Barry, smirking with a glowing blue tint to his features from holding the cold gun up and at the ready, “I think he likes it.”

Barry was not dignifying that with a response.

“Bad guys. Danger,” Cisco droned like he was seriously done with overhearing this sort of thing, “Other people listening.”

“We should make you pay for the free show sometime, Ramon,” Len snarked back, peeking once more around the crate before he whipped his head to Barry. “Now, Scarlet—Dunkirk goons on the far left, two with their guns down and at your mercy. Go!”
Barry took off without pause, trusting Len’s assessment, and was able to disarm both men without their fellows even noticing. Finding another crate to hide behind as he dropped the guns at his feet, he looked back toward where he’d come from and saw Len and Sara dive into action. Barry knew firsthand how effectively the Rogues worked together, but he’d never seen the Legends.

They spun and moved and dove over obstacles ever aware of each other’s position and how to handle their opponents without putting each other in the line of fire. When they caught up to where Mick was blasting the heels of one of Alexa’s men, he spun to be back to back with Len like it was old hat, and Lisa fell right in line to keep up with Sara.

It dawned on Barry that White Canary as a Rogue would have been a serious problem if things had gone differently.

“Uhh, guys? I’m seeing something a little weird from up here,” Ray said.

“Don’t fire, Raymond,” Len spat back as if talking to a disobedient child. “These aren’t Savage’s grunts with future tech, they’re mafia.”

“I know, I know. I don’t mean them. Something’s moving really erratic and…fast.”

“Like The Flash?” Sara stated the obvious.

“Not Barry, I see Barry, just…movement. Maybe your friend, Mick,” he said with realization, “who they said had been around Bleaker?”

“You mean Bivolo?” Lisa spoke up.

“No, he means Peek-A-Boo,” Mick said. “Last known street for her was Bleaker.”

“Shit,” Lisa cursed.

“What is it?” Len asked as if his sixth sense was tingling.

“That safe house of Bivolo’s West and I found was on Bleaker. Damn it, Mick, why didn’t you say which street you ended on?”

“I planned on it when we got the call to come here!”

“Stop,” Barry spoke over the building argument, straining his eyes around the sparse area from his hiding spot to get a lay of the land. All he could see now was Sara and Len and the occasional goon trying to outdo them. “Hang on, guys. Ray, you see Peek-A-Boo? Where?”

“Well…uhhh…”

“Here,” Len’s voice answered before Ray could, just as Barry caught sight of the brief flicker of another person before she and Len vanished.

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Barry’s speed was exhilarating. Suddenly finding himself in an entirely different location without the buzz of lightning, however, made Len feel like he was about to lose his dinner.

It was as if his lungs took a moment to realize he was breathing different air. He gasped and found himself looking at Shawna Baez, whose eyes glimmered with a tell-tale flicker of red before she punched him across the face—definitely Rage instead of Love this time.
“You free us from The Flash and now you’re working with him?” she cried, having caught Len off guard enough that his head spun. “I hope you have fun, Cold, coz your time is already ticking down.”

She vanished again—pop, gone—and Len got a look at where she’d taken him. It was residential. Street lamps and rows and rows of houses Len didn’t know, but most importantly—nowhere near the East docks.

“Len!” Barry called over the comms. “Where are you?!”

Len scanned his surrounding as best he could. Cross streets but no signs, just little turns like the people around here should just know where they were, and countless cul-de-sacs in view through the space between houses. Len knew his city, but the parts that were more suburbia weren’t his specialty.

“I don’t know,” he said, picking a direction and kicking into a sprint. “As soon as I have a landmark, I’ll give you one. Just focus on the docks and keep an eye out for Peek-A-Boo. She’s under Bivolo’s control and she is not feeling friendly.”

“Shit…shit,” came Barry’s harried reply.

No matter where Len was in the city, Barry could reach him fairly quickly, but that still meant time. Ten minutes to get his bearings enough to point the speedster in the right direction would be pushing it.

Chatter over the comms kept Len focused.

“Lenny, how bad is this?” Lisa asked through panting breaths.

“Head in the game, sis. I’ll be fine.”

“Hey, Glider,” Sara called, and Len thanked his usually unlucky stars that she’d ever sauntered into his life, “how good’s your control with that gun?”

“Flawless, honey.”

“Then gold a few of the machine guns up to their wrists. We can worry about saving their hands later.”

Cold but merciful. She really was a peach.

Occasional blasts from Raymond no doubt hitting non-living targets with his photon gun got mixed in with Mick’s flames, as Len passed house after house, all picture perfect upper middle-class. He just needed one landmark, one street sign, something, but he had a good idea that Alexa had picked this spot to make sure it was just the right amount of time away from any of those things.

There was no one on the streets, or Len would have offered the civilians he passed a casual wave and twist of his lips and asked them where he was. He might have to start knocking on doors at this rate. That would make the papers tomorrow—Captain Cold making house calls with the Joneses. Beautiful.

A grunt from Mick distracted Len, and he heard the faint voice of Shawna not quite carrying over the comms.

“Mick, don’t fry her. Try to get her to tire herself out,” he said, rather than admit that grunt
concerned him, “and watch your six, damn it.”

“I got him!” Raymond called.

“Maybe if we can figure out her directive, we can wake her up!” Barry said.

Len didn’t want to mention that her directive was probably to make sure Len ended up dead while everyone else was far away.

“Good luck with that!” Lisa shouted, then softened her voice over the comms. “Lenny, Dunkirk’s men are running, but Alexa’s boys are backing up Boo like they had this whole thing choreographed. They’re snagging a shipment of guns. Where are you?”

Every direction Len looked seemed the same, a maze of cookie-cutter living. He was at a four-way stop with still no indication of any street names. Was there some sort of association conspiracy that street signs sullied the look of their perfectly rounded flower patterns at each corner?

“It’s just houses. Not even townhomes or apartment names, just…” Len huffed and took in a slower breath. He picked a new direction and kept at a quick pace. “Gimme two minutes, I’ll find something.”

“It’s already been…” Barry trailed, returning with a ring of panic in his voice, “Cisco, how long has it been?”

“Relax, dude, it’s only been five minutes.”

As if on cue, absurd as it seemed, Len felt a twinge of pain squeeze his heart like a clawed grip, the way he felt more at nine minutes, not five. Maybe he was imagining things.

There! He could see a sign in the distance, just a few blocks down. He could make it.

Another twinge, tight and sharp and…” Barry,” Len gasped before he’d meant to, but his mind swam with the need to see the kid.

“Len?! Are you okay?!”

“Goons are gettin’ away, Ray!”

“I’m a little more occupied with the popcorn girl over here,” Ray said.

“It’s Peek-A-Boo,” Lisa said testily, as if she really cared right now about the integrity of their names when her voice betrayed how worried she was.

“Len!” Barry called again.

“I…” but he couldn’t keep moving, the pain was already intensifying, and it caused his feet to stutter and trip over themselves until he nearly stumbled. “Something’s wrong,” he said, hating that he had to admit it, but he needed Barry—he needed Barry.

“What is it?!” Barry cried more shrilly.

“It hurts. I…can’t…”

“It hasn’t been ten minutes!”

But Bivolo’s control wasn’t fair, had too many safeguards, and Len had figured out so much of
Alexa’s plan. Maybe enough to doom himself.

Len laughed as another spike of pain tore through him. “I think my clock…got shortened, kid,” he said as his breath choked in his throat and he dropped dead-weight to his knees.

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

Surprise! Alexa and Bivolo are true assholes.

Also, while Len remembers everything he figured out about Alexa's plan before, that doesn't mean he knows ALL of the plan. There's more to be discovered there.

Thank you all so much!
Whispers in the din

Chapter Summary

Len's ticking clock when away from Barry has shortened and Alexa's plans are just beginning, but both Len and Barry can only take so much before they break.

Chapter Notes

First, if you read the last chapter early, and remember there being people on the street with Len in the suburbs, I removed that, because Len wouldn't shy from simply asking where he was from strangers. I got ahead of myself remembering that people would be encountered THIS chapter. So just FYI. Thank you, tsukiryuu!

And now...I need encouragement on this one, guys, I don't know...

I don't hate it, it's everything that needs to happen, but sometimes I'm in this rut where I don't feel the flow, and I know it's mostly just me not concentrating right and being out of whack, but I worry, because I want to provide the story you're hoping for, so...

I hope you still love this. :-) I am excited for how everything is planned to finish out, and still feel that about 20 chapters will do it, but you never know as things get closer to completion. :-) 

Thank you for your support!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Len!? Len!” Barry cried, zipping behind a crate to avoid the zing of fresh bullets so he could catch his breath and focus on Len’s situation instead of the firefight happening around him—which was all part of Alexa’s plan.

But none of that mattered if Len was in peril after less than ten minutes!

“Cisco!” Barry’s voice caught. “Can you track his comms?”

“I can’t,” Cisco answered with similar panic bleeding into his words. “I was too focused on the goggles to add GPS, then we needed more for the others and—”

“Cisco, we can track his—”

“Cold gun!” Cisco shouted with Caitlin. “Snart, fire your gun! We can track the cold signature!”

Barry took a breath as the world around him slowed waiting for Len to answer. He could dilate time at will when it suited him, slip into the Speed Force like parting a curtain, but when the rest of the world was simply too slow; he felt suffocated, trapped, held down and paralyzed like he was the same little boy who’d been helpless to save his mother—and then a man just as helpless to save his father and so many others.
No one else. No one else.

“Lenny…” Lisa’s voice came next, eerily steady despite the cracks in everybody else’s.

The sniper was long removed from the equation, all of the Irish disarmed, Alexa’s men on the run after their final barrage of bullets, with Ray pinning down Peek-A-Boo as best he could while Mick and Sara worked to tire her out on the ground. But as Barry stood kicking up sparks again, ready to sprint away as soon as he had a direction to run, Lisa spun into view and settled against the crate beside him.

He turned to her, and as steady as her voice had sounded, her eyes shimmered.

“Len,” Barry said as he stared into her eyes, “please, can you hear us?”

The voices were dim and echoing like drifting to Len down a long tunnel. He rolled onto his back, struggling to breathe. The stars were so much brighter in the suburbs.

_The cold gun_. He had to fire it, had to focus. He’d had it in his hand, hadn’t he? It should be right next to him on the ground. Flexing his fingers to search for it, his chest ached but he couldn’t give up now. Barry would find him. Barry would save him. But first he had to know where to go.

There! Seizing the grip with his left hand, Len tilted the cold gun up toward the sky and fired its icy stream at the stars. The blast continued up so high that it burst without anything to stop its momentum and came back down as gentle snowfall.

“Oh my god, is that…” a voice less tunneled spoke from somewhere nearby.

Len was losing consciousness, but he thought he heard a cacophony over the comms—telling him to hang on, shouting an address, Barry on his way…

A hand alighted on Len’s arm. He blinked, eager to see Barry’s face as he tried to surge upwards, but it wasn’t the Scarlet Speedster who hovered over him. A young woman knelt at his side with a young man behind her, both guarded but curious beneath the last remnants of falling snow. The neighborhood wasn’t empty of life after all.

“Are you alright?” she asked, devoid of fear, though Len was certain both of these kids—definitely younger than Barry—knew who he was. “What can we do?”

“Len!”

_**Barry.**_

The pain that had made it impossible to answer the woman eased out of Len’s limbs and he gasped. In a flash, there was the man himself, on Len’s other side gently touching his shoulder and chest.

“You are working together,” the girl said with immediate awe for Barry that hadn’t been present for Len—but that was just as well. Barry was always the one more worthy of awe.

The speedster smiled somewhere between relief and bashfulness at being caught fawning over Captain Cold. “Yeah, we are,” he said, and helped Len sit up as the girl pulled back and stood to rejoin her companion. “He’ll be okay. Right?” Barry asked Len directly, softer and close as he kept them in contact with his hands gripping Len’s parka.
When he pulled the anti-Bivolo goggles from his eyes, Len did the same, making it clearer how much Barry wanted to allow an embrace, but that might be a bit much for the peanut gallery.

“Should we be worried?” the young man asked, drawing their attention away from each other, which finally prompted Barry to pull Len the rest of the way to his feet.

“No, the fight is a long way from here,” Barry said—a fight they should be getting back to, but he hesitated as he turned to face the pair behind them. “We’re working together to stop a bigger threat. All the chaos lately has been one person trying to stir up the mob families in Central and start a war,” both of the civilians’ eyes widened, “but we know the truth and we’re going to bring her down. You stay safe. And thank you.”

“Why did you tell them that?” Len asked as soon as they were hidden within the whirlwind of the Speed Force, headed back to the docks. “Might go to the papers.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for,” Barry said. “I’m sure Iris could pick up the story with some eye-witness accounts like that. Then if we try to talk to the mob families, they might even believe us.” He smiled, brilliant and beautiful with his lightning all around him.

Len held onto him tightly, breathing in along his neck as he snuggled closer for the few seconds they had like this. He felt Barry shudder beneath his suit, and didn’t apologize or otherwise push any further than the simple contact he craved—Barry’s warmth, his smell.

When they arrived back at the docks, Barry set him down slowly. He’d chosen the original crate they’d started at for recon, keeping them secluded for the moment as he allowed the way Len kept his arms twined about his neck for just a little longer.

“Got her!” Sara’s voice carried over the comms, and Len remembered that they were connected to an impressive group of teammates.

She must mean Shawna. There wasn’t any more gunfire, but then Len had The Flash holding his waist, wrapped up in his clutches, staring for what must have been the dozenth time at his lips, so maybe it was only a trance that the rest of the world fell away.

“Flash. Is Lenny okay?”

Lisa.

Len brushed his gloved fingers along Barry’s cheeks as he pulled from their close quarters. “I’m fine, Lise. Back on site. Where we at?”

The sigh Lisa released was audible static in Len’s earpiece.

“Two of Alexa’s men are out cold,” Sara said, “the rest got away, and some of the Irish are moving down the docks, though most of them are knocked out too. Peek-A Boo’s at my feet.”

“Cisco, tell CCPD to move in,” Barry ordered, looping an arm around Len’s waist once more now that it was clear the fighting had stopped. “We’ll get out of here. Ray, you take Peek-A-Boo. Everyone, back to the Labs. Now.”

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Barry zipped Len from the docks just as quickly as they’d arrived. By the time he was deemed fit enough to escape Caitlin’s perusal and she shifted her focus to the unconscious young woman Ray had placed on a second hospital bed, the others all trickled into the Labs.
Lisa gave Len an intense glare as she stormed into the med room, but when she finally reached him and he expected a smack on the arm or flip of her hair, she pulled him close and hugged him right there in front of everyone. Len faltered before he could hold her back, because displays of affection were rare between them, let alone in front of half a dozen people.

“Hey. No lasting damage.”

“So far.”

“I’m fine,” Len insisted, pulling out of the embrace to look at her squarely.

“I thought you got ten minutes, Lenny,” she frowned at him. “What the hell happened?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Barry walked up, cowl drawn back and limbs taut.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Len addressed the room, and since they were still in the med room, that meant far too many people crowded in one space, even with a few of them hovering by the door.

“Safeguards against breaking Bivolo’s control,” Caitlin said, despite moving about Shawna in the second bed like a well-oiled machine.

Several of the others stared in confusion.

“We figured out Alexa's plan,” Len explained, “so now I’ve lost a few minutes to slow us down with those extra triggers gone.”

“And you still think you’re in love with Barry?” Cisco asked—causing Mick, Ray, and Sara’s heads to whip his direction. “Was that…not common knowledge?”

Len leveled Cisco with a cold stare before moving his eyes to Barry to avoid the several pairs soon trained on him. “Yes, I still love him. I also maintain that won’t change when I’m finally free of this.”

Dropping his gaze to the floor, Barry hugged his arms around himself like he wanted to hide.

“I don’t understand,” Ray said, slow as ever for a man with a genius level IQ.

“The Rainbow Raider affects the emotional spectrum,” Sara said. She must have gotten in some light reading while watching for Alexa all day.

“And you think you love Barry?” At least Ray sounded generally shocked more than scandalized as—there it was; everything he’d missed before snapped into clearer focus. “Oh.”

“Figured you were just screwin’,” Mick shrugged.

“We’re not sleeping together,” Barry threw his arms to his sides, the instant flush to his cheeks making his temper run hotter too, but he calmed when his attention returned to Len. “Len maybe…probably has a thing for me and Bivolo made him think it’s something more. But his feelings aren’t real. Not completely,” he added, a small concession considering how much Len had been trying to convince him otherwise.

“Ya blind or somethin’?” A short laugh brought everyone’s attention back on Mick, though Barry was the one he focused on. “What? Ya don’t really think Snart agreed to go on some hero crusade coz a stranger in a fancy ship asked nicely, do ya?”

The tension in the room was far worse than those first few minutes at Saints and Sinners. Ray
looked as though he was reassessing several things, Mick remained amused, while Sara was cool
neutral, probably reassessing her own ideas and the conversation she and Len had yesterday, but
damn it, his feelings were real. They were real.

“Guys?” Caitlin called in trepidation.

Shawna had started to stir.

Barry and Sara dove for the hospital bed, Caitlin and Cisco already there as the young woman's
eyes fluttered open. They'd secured her wrists with power dampening cuffs, but that didn't change
how she filled with Rage when her gaze centered on her captors.

“You. You can’t keep me here again! I’m no circus freak!” Thrashing against her bonds, Shawna
flew into a sitting position, but she wasn’t only fueled by rage—there was real fear in her fury.

Len knew she had nightmares about the Pipeline, but she had no intention of following after the
boyfriend who hadn’t understood her worth. She could have sworn revenge on Team Flash, but
instead she was putting all of that behind her, going back to school, new name, new start. Alexa
had sullied that.

“No one’s keeping you here, Baez,” Len said as he walked forward. He’d argue toe to toe with
Barry if he or any of his friends tried to counter that. “We’re here to help.”

Shawna was still thrashing, still wild and panicked, until the moment her eyes met Len’s.
 Suddenly, it was as if she’d been struck and everything stopped. “Cold?” The stiffness sagged from
her body and she looked around blinking in confusion like she had no idea how she’d gotten here.
“Felt like a fire in my ribcage. What the hell?” she said more heatedly as she shook out her bound
wrists.

“I know the feeling.” Len moved in to replace Barry at her side, the others pulling back as well
while Lisa and Mick came over in their stead. “Sounds like Roy’s parlor trick finally wore off. You
good?”

“Yeah,” Shawna sighed, sitting on the hospital bed more relaxed now, without looking like she
wanted to bolt or attack anyone. Then her eyes widened. “Shit. I punched you.”

“Ya did?” Mick said with an impressed curl of his lip. “And I missed it?”

“Mick,” Lisa chided. “Boo, honey, what happened? What did Roy do to you? You even gave me
the runaround. And here I thought we were friends.”

Shawna shared Lisa’s playful smile before her eyes grew distant. “He contacted me a while back.
Said he wanted to practice his powers around someone he trusted. I figured it was a good chance to
practice mine too. Been working on longer distances without needing to see where I’m going.”

“That’s how you were doing that,” Cisco said.

Shawna shivered under her jacket but kept her eyes on Lisa. “Only works if I’ve been somewhere
before. But I should have known better with Roy. He’s never been friendly. More like slimy. Then
I sorta forgot what we talked about or even that we met, until I got this call earlier, his voice on the
line and…it was like a switch flipped in my brain and I had to get to the docks. I was sure you were
turning on the metas, working with Team Flash.” She shot a glare around the room and landed
back on Len. “Which isn’t exactly fake, now is it?”

“I’m not after metas, Baez,” Len said, “only Bivolo. You’re pretty troublesome all enraged, ya
know, hence the cuffs. But Team Flash is gonna take those off now, aren’t they?” He nodded to Barry, who glanced helplessly between Cisco and Caitlin as though they made the rules, and both of them seemed less willing to jump at Len’s command.

“Technically, she should be in prison,” Cisco said.

“Technically,” Len twirled a finger at his Rogues, “so should all of us,” which made Cisco look slightly more ashamed, and he finally conceded between the pouting expressions from Lisa and Barry.

Caitlin pursed her lips but didn’t protest as Cisco moved to undo Shawna’s cuffs.

“You really gonna let me go?” She hooded her gaze as she watched him, and rubbed her freed wrists on instinct when he was done even though they hadn’t been all that tight.

“Let’s see if you can behave first,” Cisco said, though not with any true malice, since the next moment he quirked a smile at Lisa. “I know she can’t.”

“Darn right, honey,” Lisa winked.

“Len said you’ve been working toward getting your nursing degree again.” Barry rejoined Len when Cisco retreated with the cuffs. “You probably won’t believe this, but we originally intended to reform all of you, not hold you here forever. So if you’ve managed to do that on your own, I’m glad.”

Distrust and calm indifference held claim over the young meta’s features. “Yeah… Don’t expect a thanks, Flash. Though I guess you’re kinda cute with your mask off,” she added with a sly smile, and Barry startled realizing his cowl was back and yet another Rogue knew his face.

Not that Shawna was a Rogue, just an asset who owed Len, but who had a good chance to make a go of being better than all this.

“Miss Baez,” Caitlin spoke up, “I’ve been working on how to counter what Bivolo is doing to people. It seems everyone’s been working off of a specific directive. You must have achieved yours if you snapped out of his control. Do you know what caused it?”

“Seeing me,” Len answered for her.

“He’s right,” Shawna said, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. “Roy said his boss didn’t want you dead yet. I was supposed to make sure you had a close call, then once you got back, I’d leave the docks and be done. But we're already away from there, so when I saw you…” All the pieces of her directive, however out of order, came together. “Did…did I almost kill you?”

Len smirked as though that was an adorable thought, though death had loomed ever menacing for a moment. He hadn’t lost consciousness though. That only happened the first time, and it was the dark that scared Len, because the Oculus had burned so bright before everything blew and changed and left him in the void of space and time.

But she didn’t need to know that.

“I’m pretty hard to kill, you’ll find. And you’re already being a huge help if you want to make this up to me. My directive isn’t as easy to figure out. Been locked under Roy’s control for a few days now.”

“Doing what?”
“Long story,” Len fixed her with a firm stare, “but good enough reason to be working with the crew here.”

Much as Shawna was wary of Team Flash, she nodded.

“Boo, do you know anything about Roy’s boss?” Lisa asked. “Where we can find her maybe?”

“Sorry, Goldie. Never met her. Only heard Roy call her boss over the phone. Alexa something?”

Len wished there weren’t so many dead ends in this labyrinth. “Her name we know, it’s the rest we’re working on.” As Shawna hopped down from the bed, he remained close in her space. “I want you checking in regular, understand? Don’t take any risks of being somewhere Roy might find you. Maybe even get out of town for a while.”

“You don’t want my help?” she protested with all the eagerness of youth and her short fuse. “I can finally pay you back for rescuing me.”

The way Barry shifted uneasily nearby proved how uncomfortable it made him for anyone to need to be rescued from him. “Got plenty of help,” Len gestured at the group. “And no offense, but if Bivolo got ahold of you again, your powers are about the worst I could deal with right now.”

“Something about you needing to stay close to Flash, I know that much,” Shawna said. “Must suck.”

A real smile twitched at Len’s lips. Shawna reminded him of Lisa, maybe only because she was dangerous, beautiful, and so clearly worthy of better than the lot she’d been handed, but it softened him toward her. She was also more than capable of taking what she’d earned herself. “The accommodations are better than what you had, so at least they’re learning,” he said, not mincing words for the sake of Team Flash. “Now get somewhere safe.”

Lisa pushed around the bed to gather Shawna into a hug. She’d been checking on the up and coming nurse more than any of them, supposedly to keep an eye on their asset, but Len knew better. Lisa didn’t have enough girlfriends.

Even Mick gave Shawna a nod before she left, though usually he’d be grumbling about her going straight when, “Bad guys have more fun, ya know,” but this kid wasn’t bad enough for all that, not when given the chance to be more.

A moment later, she was gone.

“Uh…couldn’t we have learned more from her?” Ray raised a hand like he was in grade school.

“She’ll call if she thinks of anything that’ll help,” Lisa said.

“The only thing that can help Len now is either suggestion over time,” Caitlin countered, “which we’re running out of, finding Bivolo to get him to undo all this, or figuring out the nature of Len’s directive.”

“What if it’s something like…kill The Flash?” Ray suggested.

Len was starting to perfect his Raymond-induced bitch-face. “If it was that, I’d be trying to kill Barry every time we’re in bed together.”

“Sleeping,” Barry added quickly. The kid really needed to relax about his sexual exploits, especially when currently on hold—or maybe Len was just shameless.
“But what if it’s to wait to kill Barry until after the mob war starts,” Cisco said.

A wave of silence cascaded through the room, dense with possibility as their cumulatively clever minds worked out if that was likely, but Len voiced an answer first.

“Can’t be. Bivolo got smarter about how this works. Failed with Logue because he tried to get him to do something against his nature, right?” he said to Caitlin, then shifted his eyes to Barry. “Meaning he can’t get me to do something even my old man couldn’t get me to do. Alexa played this angle with an agenda. It’s not to see you dead. But whatever she does have planned, I won’t let her lay a hand on you.” Strong emotion, always strong when it came to Barry, overrode Len’s verbal censor, but it was hard to care. He wanted to be honest with Barry.

“Seems she’s better at getting others to do the hands-on part for her,” Barry said, beautiful when he smiled like that with a hint of exasperation—maybe Len’s favorite expression on him. “And I can take care of myself, thanks.”

“You can,” Len agreed but spread his arms to encompass the room. “Yet you’re surrounded by a team of backup who loves you.” Not the least of which was him, and now that everyone knew that truth, he didn’t have to hide how much he ached to say it.

The room was a mix of supportive smiles for Barry and scrutiny over those words coming out of Len, but eventually, Ray walked up and patted Barry on the shoulder. “He’s right, you know. That’s part of why we’re here. We all love you, Barry.”

Mick raised an eyebrow at being lumped in with that ‘we’, though he didn’t protest, more like glaring with a yeah whatever, not really, but fine.

“Maybe not as much as Leonard,” Ray continued with a laugh, then furrowed his brow as his hand dropped. “At least under the influence. Or also out of the influence? I didn’t even realize you liked men,” he said to Len as casual as switching topics from the weather to what to have for dinner tonight. “Do you normally like men?”

How had this man ever functioned in polite society? “That sort of observation is definitely in your blind spot, Raymond,” Len said, glancing surreptitiously at Mick, whose expression hardened in warning. “Maybe you’re too straight and narrow to notice it in others.”

“Oh, I’m not…” Ray picked up on Len’s double meaning right away for once. “I mean, not completely. Is anyone completely? I had my wild college phase,” he waggled an eyebrow and took a breath as if about to go into further detail.

“Someone please stop him before I shoot,” Len reached for his gun.

“Alright, kids,” Sara came forward, swooping Ray out of the line of fire by taking his arm and leading him to the door. “We could all stand to get out of these tight quarters, and there’s still plenty of the night’s events to digest. Let’s figure out the missing pieces we still need to share before we call it a day.”

There wasn’t anything pertinent to add really—other than the Bleaker connection between Shawna and Bivolo—once everyone explained their progress so far. Cisco gave an eventual account from the CCPD on cleaning up the docks, which was soon corroborated by Detective West showing up with an exclamation of, “When’d this place get so popular?”

Eventually, Len found himself in a corner of the Cortex with his old crew, like some part of them had subconsciously wandered away from the others for a private chat between thieves.
“So that’s what Red was tryin’ to tell me before, huh?” Mick said. “That all your lovey-dovey nonsense is a mind trick?”

“You should hear him say the words all gooey sweet too,” Lisa said before Len could answer. “It’s even worse.”

The tease betrayed the underlying pain she kept to herself, and Len couldn’t hide how much that wounded him. His reactions and emotions were all stirred up between how he really felt, how he wished he could be, and old hang-ups.

“It’s okay, Lenny,” Lisa said without the sugary lilt they’d both perfected to an art form. “I never needed to hear it. Might be nice on occasion, but I’m glad, even if it is because of Roy’s meddling, that Dad doesn’t get to have a hold over you forever.”

That she even had to say that wounded Len anew. Love was a weakness. Love wasn’t allowed. Love got him hit. He’d been trained early on not to even think it. Now it came to him so readily for Barry—but only for Barry—and there was an ease to the emotion that made him wish maybe for the first time to have that sort of ease with Mick and Lisa too.

It wasn’t that he didn’t. He just flinched from the act of saying it.

“They think it isn’t real,” he said, looking across the room, meaning Barry more than any general ‘they’. “That if they fix me, I’ll wake up and this feeling will be gone.”

“Barry’s worried it isn’t real,” Lisa said, “doesn’t mean he can’t be swayed to see otherwise. You always had a thing for Flash, Lenny.” She smiled, genuine and wistful, with a stolen glance for her own less than subtle crush. “Not love, but…I don’t know what to say. If you did love him, if it could work out somehow, he’s a good guy. And I like seeing you happy.”

Happiness wasn’t the goal. Wasn’t reasonable or attainable usually. Len strove instead for contentment—which he achieved by taking what he wanted and never bowing to anyone. But those brief moments of happiness he’d found over the years were addictive and part of why he’d decided to go with the Legends, to find a way to experience happiness more often than regret.

It hadn’t exactly worked out that way, but with Barry, even a quiet moment, no words, bereft of skin contact, could fill him with such joy. The thought of losing that was far more terrifying than the darkness haunting Len’s dreams.

“Just don’t drag him around everywhere ya go after the yoyo’s fixed,” Mick said. “My teeth got plenty of other reasons to start rottin’.”

Len shook his head at his friend, then caught sight of Raymond heading their direction through the crowd. “Here comes one now,” he smirked, and it was effortless and painless and right the way Mick scowled without any real heat in his stare.

Sometimes Len needed to be alone—much as he couldn’t be now and didn’t feel the usual suffocation being tied to Barry. Mick was different, needed to have someone there all the time or his natural fixation took over and all he could think about was the flames. A bundle of energy and nonstop yapping was good for him.

“Hey, guys!” Ray said like they were all good friends and he was a natural extension of the Rogues. He had a handful of jelly beans in his palm that he was tossing into his mouth at a youthful pace—speaking of teeth rotting.

“Where’d ya get those?” Mick asked with sudden interest.
“Cisco’s desk. He always has candy.”

“Well don’t hoard it all to yerself, Haircut,” Mick manhandled Ray with a firm grip on his arm, leading him back the direction he’d come from to share the spoils.

Sara took up Mick’s empty space as if she’d materialized out of his outline. Len had a brief moment to stare at her curved smile and crystalline eyes before Cisco’s cry interrupted them.

“Hey, paws off if you’re taking that much! The good guys share!”

“So share, Candy Boy, don’t be stingy.”

Len chuckled at the carry of voices, but any mirth trailed off quickly because he still worried, he couldn’t help it after he’d once again left Mick behind. “How’s he been?” he asked Sara since he couldn’t ask Mick that bluntly.

“You mean how’s he been since you ran off?” Ouch, she really knew how to make a blow sting, but then she had been an assassin. “He’s been good, Leonard. Ray helps. I think he knows it’s best not to leave Mick alone for too long. Or Ray’s oblivious and just clingy.”

“Likely that,” Len nodded.

Sara brightened into another smile before a shade of darkness settled in to mar her good humor. “He doesn’t talk about his time as Chronos.”

Len snapped his attention to Lisa, though he’d almost forgotten she was there until Sara had to go and bring up one of the many things he’d been trying to keep quiet.

“Please, Lenny,” Lisa cocked her head to the side, “we’ve had plenty of time to chat, me and Mick. Me and Sara too. I know all those little secrets you think I shouldn’t.”

“All?” Len felt his throat tighten at the prospect, cold eyes moving between his sister and Sara, because if she’d told Lisa…

“There’s one thing they wouldn’t tell me,” Lisa said, “but I’m not an idiot. I can guess. Songbird here even mentioned your sweet smooch, so I’m guessing you did something stupid and might never have come home to me. That about right?”

The cat always got out of the bag eventually between them, but it was the affection behind her mocking expression that swayed Len to answer honestly. “I was protecting Mick.”

“Of course you were. Ya big softie.” She lifted up onto her tiptoes to peck his cheek, but she didn’t dwell. With a gentle squeeze of his arm, she left him with Sara to join the group at Cisco’s desk.

The briefly ignited argument had shifted to which candy was best between something Mick had tried in the future and the lollipops Cisco had that looked like dragon eyes and tasted like ‘cherry heaven’—Raymond’s words. All of that was mixed with general gushing and questions surrounding the modifications Mick had made to Cisco’s gun.

“My gun, Short Stuff.”

“Can it at least by our gun?”

Brought up by Raymond most likely, since Mick didn’t brag. The two equally excitable and orally fixated engineers were discovering just how much the supposed meathead of the group could
accomplish if he was allowed to take something apart once or twice.

But Len wasn’t some lone observer, and eventually his attention returned to Sara, who continued to smile like her skills as a spy knew something he didn’t.

“You gonna tell me I’m a fool for embracing such an obvious trap that’s been set for me?”

“Loving Barry isn’t the trap,” Sara said. “What you might do for that love… well, I know what real love looks like on you, Leonard, when you gave up everything for a friend.”

The point was to not talk about it. That was how Len and Mick were moving on. But these white hate types always had to drudge up the past.

“It was so inspiring, I even let you have that smooch you seemed to want so badly,” she added, using Lisa’s word with careful purpose.

Len watched her with a slide of his eyes. “Doubting now that I want a different pair of lips more?”

“No,” she didn’t pause for even a moment before answering. “Coz Mick made a good point before. While I may have kept you on that ship a few times, whatever got you on board the first day wasn’t me.” Taking a slow step back, she pivoted around to head toward the din of their comrades, leaving Len to mull alone.

Everyone was chatting, filling the Cortex with noise, some centered around Alexa and the matter at hand, while others had devolved to different topics—like how Ray had been itching to marathon the Star Wars movies, and Mick hadn’t seen any of the prequels, which he was better off for really, yet Ray and Cisco were adamant that a marathon needed to happen so Mick could see those too.

Lisa insinuated herself by commenting that Hayden Christensen wasn’t that bad, and Ewan Mcgregor managed to be flawless no matter how much the films crashed down around him, which zeroed Cisco in on her presence with fresh adoration—lost in her eyes, not just her beauty, never just her body, but the whole of her was what captured his attention.

Len doubted the four of them even realized they were planning a double date when his eyes drifted over the rest of the room to see Sara joining the conversation between Joe and Caitlin and…

Barry, whose eyes were likewise trained on Len, locking the two of them on each other with a pleasant shiver shooting up Len’s spine. The world was chaos all around them, yet their eyes met across the room and Barry smiled. There was sadness that hung on him like a heavy cloak, the weight of loss and shame and exhaustion. But when he smiled, Len saw how grateful he was for what he still had, what was still growing in the strange combination of teams meeting in the middle right here on Barry’s home turf.

Because of Len. Despite everything, so much pain and complication, maybe Len didn’t carry disaster everywhere he went.

“What is going on here?” a new voice shattered the clamor.

That pleasant shiver turned to chills as Len looked to the entrance into the Cortex to see Iris West standing in the doorway.

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Barry should have known better than to think a few text messages and a fight at Jitters would leave things quiet between him and Iris. Of course she’d come to the Labs after the news replayed events
from the docks. This was so much bigger than Tiffany’s or the Galleria, and Barry hadn’t been answering his phone.

To be fair, he was still in The Flash suit, so his phone was in his jeans...somewhere. It wasn’t his fault he’d forgotten for a moment that there were still a few people not in the Cortex that might want to talk to him.

“Snart’s in love with you,” Iris deadpanned more than asked, arms crossed and expression impassive for all the insanity Barry had just dropped at her feet.

They were barely around the corner down the hallway, not all the way into the Pipeline like she’d asked for, because Barry couldn’t risk being that far away from Len.

“He thinks he’s in love with me.”

Iris paused. Bit her lip. “Does this have anything to do with—”

“No,” Barry cut her off before she could finish the thought. “All this happened after, I just… it didn’t feel like a good time to tell you a supervillain has a giant crush on me when we were fighting.”

As standoffish as this had started, her arms loosened and emotion, however hard to read, slipped into her expression. “So you don’t have feelings for him in return?”

A week ago, Barry wouldn’t have hesitated to say no. Now he had to stop and think. Now he couldn’t find his tongue.

“You do?”

“I don’t know,” Barry sputtered, because he wasn’t without conflict in his heart over Len, and there were still so many scars in there for other people. “But he has nothing to do with you and me.”


“Iris…” He knew what she was thinking. How could he turn her down, someone he confessed to having loved since his hormones were old enough to realize he adored the way her hair smelled, and then turn around and want to be with a career criminal who’d tried to kill him.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said,” she switched topics. Well, switched to the harder portion of the only topic—Barry’s romantic tragedy; this definitely wasn’t a comedy.

“I shouldn’t have said all that the way I did,” he told her, wishing he could pull her close, but it felt like an invisible barrier filled the space between them.

Gradually, like some new part of her heart had been broken since she’d put it back together after Eddie, she met his gaze. “Maybe it’s a good thing you said it exactly the way you did. Barry,” her voice caught on his name, “do you think I’m the love of your life?”

“I used to,” he said, all the hairs on the back of his neck and down his spine standing on end.

“What changed? Just because of Eddie? Because you don’t think I love you as much?”

“That’s part of it.” He looked at the floor and felt his eyes sting with heat. “I also wonder what it would be like to love someone as much as I’ve always thought I loved you…but to know without a
doubt they feel just as crazy about me.”

The barrier separating them seemed to expand, leaving Barry alone in a constricting, suffocating space, only for Iris to breach it as she took his hands, still covered as they were in red.

“Because you deserve better than doubting anyone who says they love you,” she said, eyes as wet as his must be, but resolute and strong in a way so few people ever managed. Only Iris West could be this strong. “I can’t say I’m without doubts. You’re right. I can’t say that. I love you, Barry, of course I do…”

“But…?”

She cringed without denying what he already knew. “But the more I got passed my grieving for Eddie, wanting to move on and imagine who else could make me that happy, I’d think about…that newspaper article from the future. Or Earth-2, where a version of us is married, and it felt…inescapable, like I should accept what must be meant to be.”

“Without ever actually falling in love with me as this version of you.” A tear slipped fast and hot down Barry’s cheek and he sniffed too loudly without being able to stop himself, half wanting to pull from Iris’s hold, because even though he’d known this was how things would end, it still stung to say goodbye to the dream he’d held onto for so long.

“You are not a consolation prize, Barry Allen,” she clung to his hands all the tighter. “Don’t you ever call yourself that, you hear me?”

He sniffed again with a choked laugh escaping, nodding and trying to look up, but unable to focus on her face for too many seconds or risk the full floodgates opening.

“You’re not anyone’s consolation prize. But I wasn’t fair to you,” she said. “Maybe I was hoping for something convenient, something that should feel right so it would be easier to move on without having to start over. Which sounds awful…” She looked away, head bowed like she was the villain here when no one was at fault.

Barry let himself look at her. His friend. His best friend. “Not awful. Just human. You never meant to hurt me, Iris, I know that. Don’t ever feel ashamed for choosing Eddie over me. You loved him. He loved you. And I loved him for that, because he made you happy. He was impossible to dislike anyway,” he chuckled, because try as he had to hate the guy, he’d honestly loved Eddie too, “which should have been super annoying.”

Iris laughed with him, and the grip of their hands and steadiness of their gazes didn’t seem as difficult to maintain.

“It was a little annoying,” Barry said through a teary smile. “But you deserve to find that again, not to settle for anyone, not even me.”

“Barry, I don’t want this to—”

“Don’t say it. Nothing will ever drive us apart. Nothing will ever make us stop being friends.” At last he had the strength to pull her closer, and she wrapped her arms around his neck when he did, while he held her waist and pressed his cheek to her hair. “You will always be one of the most important people in my life, Iris. You’re not going to lose me. It’s crazy, but…I think this mess with Len and his forced feelings is helping me realize how important honest ones are.”

She chuckled again as they clung and clung, and Barry’s eyes lifted to settle on the bend in the hallway leading to the Cortex—where he could see the peeking edge of navy fabric with tufts of
white and grey trim.

“Len,” he called with a heavy sigh. He would have been upset if he didn’t want to rub it in the thief’s face how poor of an eavesdropper he was being. “I can see your fur.”

Iris turned to face the Cortex, surprised and maybe a little amused, while Len’s face tilted into view without so much as a denial.

“Miss West” he inclined his head. “I’d blame proximity, but really…old habits.” At least his smile looked somewhat self-deprecating before he slinked away.

Iris’s expression when she turned back to Barry said she wasn’t quite warmed to the idea of Len being…well, Len in Barry’s life, let alone being in Barry’s life at all, but she didn’t scold him, she simply asked, “Are you sure you know what you’re doing with him?”

At this point, Barry figured it was best not to lie. “Not even a little.”

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Alexa turned off the news and set the remote down beside her. “You were meant to keep better control over Baez, Roy. What happened?”

Even with all his power, he still slouched and avoided her gaze, well aware that he needed a boss to make it beyond dubious art thief. “We didn’t expect them to have a freaking army to deploy.”

“Well,” Alexa said, looking up from her seat at where he stood behind the sofa waiting for her orders, “now we do. The game has changed and we need to adapt.”

“Yeah, and Flash and Cold likely have our number by now. So if they know what we’re planning...”

“Then Leo has an even shorter leash for us to exploit.” She stood, smoothed down the front of her dress and turned to face Bivolo fully. “Time to do something about that so they don’t throw our plan off the rails before it’s hit its stride.”

“What are you thinking?” He looked at her with curiosity, ever hungry for how her mind worked so much faster and more cleverly than his own to tempt his appetites. It was unfortunate he had such an awful haircut and fashion sense, or she might have exploited him for more than his abilities. Though there was still time to do something about that.

“Oh, the families will do plenty for me, but I think it’s time I made a different play.” Deciding she could use a drink while she mulled over her next move, she walked with a click of her heels to the bar in her suite. “Be ready, Roy. We aren’t out of assets yet.”

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Somehow, Barry had faced Iris without catastrophe. He’d never be with her. That article would never say West-Allen. But maybe that was okay. It could be okay. Between them. For each of them someday with somebody else.

He tried to tell himself that it was entirely unrelated that the only thing he wanted when they returned to Len’s apartment was to drop unceremoniously into the thief’s arms. Because when Len stretched out on the sofa like a long, lean cat in all black, still wearing his sweater and thermal pants, Barry felt compelled to join him.
Len startled at first as Barry settled in, lying down in similar fashion, but he soon wound his arms around Barry’s waist and breathed in at the nape of his neck. “I could get used to this.”

“Just promise me—”

“I won’t hold it against you when I suddenly wake up and remember I hate you.”

“Yeah…”

Len tightened his hold. “Never gonna happen, Scarlet. I never hated you.”

Barry waited for the inevitable ‘I love you’ to follow, but Len left things there. He held back so much for Barry’s sake, though Barry remembered how Len couldn’t help spouting his devotion in the beginning. It had seemed obsessive then, scary even. Now, quieter and delicate at times, it felt realer, which should have been even more frightening.

“Another MST3K before bed?” Len asked.

“That sounds nice. With popcorn?”

“I can make popcorn. Though you’d get it done faster.”

Barry buried deeper into the sofa and Len behind him.

“Either way, kid, you’re gonna have to move if you want snacks. But you’re welcome to keep using me as a pillow afterward.”

Sometimes, Barry hated logic. Logic certainly had nothing to do with how much he enjoyed the gentle trail of Len’s fingers along his arm.

It was only because Len had almost died again that he wanted to give in and lose himself in the way the thief attended to him, because he’d been so panicked at the thought of losing Len, because…because he was running out of reasons to think Len didn’t want this, for real, and it was nice to pretend they could relax and be happy in the private bubble of Len’s apartment.

Barry knew they couldn’t go any further than the stalemate they were in now. No matter what the truth was, he had to wait until Len was completely in his right mind before allowing even one more kiss. He shouldn’t have allowed any after Tiffany’s, but he could admit now that he craved that connection. His crush had gotten out of hand, yet at the same time, having finally accepted putting his love for Iris behind him, he worried that turning to Len was just an easy escape.

Lying on the sofa was innocent though, wasn’t it? A simple comfort—watching a movie, eating popcorn, laughing and bantering like they used to when they fought. Okay, maybe a little different than when they fought. But a movie called Avalanche left far too many opportunities for cold, ice, and snow related puns, and even Barry was getting into it.

“Don’t be so frosty, Scarlet. You can’t beat me at my own game.”

“I don’t know, Len, I think you really need to…let it go.”

“You did not… A child’s film, Barry?”

“Disney is for all ages! You should be glad I haven’t called you Elsa yet.”

Len’s laugh, his honest, carefree laugh was an unfairly endearing sound. They were tucked into the corner of the sofa with Barry fit between his legs, back to his chest, fingers tangled as they rested
on Barry’s stomach—something he’d never had before, and even if it was fake, it was nice to experience for a while.

When Len returned to normal, he might even get a kick out of their companionship, since he obviously couldn’t fake liking MST3K, huge dork that he was. It saddened Barry to think that someone who easily could have been his friend if life had turned out differently had ended up following a darker path all because of some asshole who never should have been allowed to raise children.

“Len?”

“Mm?”

“Did you really join the Legends because of me?”

A sigh responded. Situated as they were, Barry couldn’t see Len’s face. “First of all, Mick has a big mouth.”

“Len...”

“It wasn’t only because of you. Had some other ideas about changing my destiny with time travel. Didn’t work out so well. I didn’t always do the right thing. I did what was necessary. But a few times, when I could have taken a less than savory path, the people on that ship, and maybe a few nagging voices from back home...helped me choose a better option. Well,” he snorted, “better is debatable, but I have no regrets. I’m not...used to that.”

“Having no regrets? Is that why you came home?” Barry wanted to keep things light, since they’d both had plenty of heavy, so he added, “Are you having an existential crisis, Captain Cold?”

Len barked another laugh. “Something like that. I want to be better for you, Barry.”

“No. Not for me.” Shifting in Len’s hold, Barry turned to look the other man in the eyes. “If I inspired you, that’s... I’m glad. Really. But it shouldn’t be about me.”

“It wasn’t. It’s not,” Len said, truthful but still desperate, still with an edge of that obsession tinging his eyes as if they might shimmer red. “But I like surprising you. Like you being...proud of me. Feels strange. Good, but no one’s ever...” He stopped as though remembering this time that no, there was Lisa too. And Mick. And Sara. And a growing number of others. “Few people have ever believed in me. It’s a nice sensation, Barry. Just like loving you.”

The moment that grew between them was movie perfect, all magic, in the dark, wrapped up in each other's limbs, faces close enough that Barry felt a puff of breath on his lips and a stir in his belly—but no. Not yet. He shifted around again to stare at the TV screen and keep from doing something he might regret.

“I believe you, Len. But I’ll believe you more when we catch Bivolo.”

Len didn’t argue, merely held Barry close as if this, just this, was enough, and pressed his lips to the side of Barry’s hair. Shuddering softly, Barry’s eyes drifted shut at the attention.

They'd both changed into sleep clothes when they got up to make popcorn. Lying together now, exhausted as they were and strangely content, it shouldn’t have surprised Barry that they eventually fell asleep.

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He didn’t dream about Zoom or The Reverse Flash. No thoughts of his father’s death plagued him. He didn’t even dream about Iris. Tonight, he dreamt of running down a long, dark tunnel, toward a figure remaining ever out of reach.

There was no Speed Force in the dreamworld. His limbs were sluggish and human the way they’d been so long ago—yet not so long ago at all. He couldn’t be certain who the figure was waiting for him at the end of that tunnel, but he knew he had to reach them before time ran out, and time was a fickle thing.

So he ran and he ran, but his quarry kept getting farther away until Barry wanted to scream, “Stop! Wait for me!”

Then everything went white—or black—all spots, he couldn’t tell—and he grasped something in his hands, fabric and sinew that made him want to cling. He wanted to hold something, to have something all his own. Wasn’t he allowed that? He wanted someone who wanted him and who could never be taken away from him—all his, only his.

The soft cotton, sculpted muscle, and tender flesh embroidered with scar tissue felt so good beneath his palms.

“Barry…”

He wanted that voice to envelop him, to sink into the warm skin beneath him and not come up for air until his lungs burned.

“Barry?”

To claim and be claimed and to never regret a single moment.

“Len.”

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

Nods to the comic in this one and Wentworth Miller himself. :-)

Also, yes Barry is half dreaming but he is physically touching the real Len.

Comments, please? :-) And more coming soon!
Barry pushes too far, but what pushes Len the most is an encounter he didn't expect, leaving both of them doubting themselves and each other before the fight starts to heat up.

I have not answered your AMAZING comments because I usually do that during work so I can spend the rest of my time writing, but that wasn't possible this week and I'm feeling very...ahhhhhhhhh!

But please know how important and impactful all of your comments are to me. Seriously, they fuel the fact that this next chapter is 10k words.

Thank you!

Hands were sliding slowly up beneath his sleep shirt, feeling acutely along every groove of muscle, softer flesh, or speckle of scar tissue. Instinct kicked in as Len awoke, hackles raised, snarl on his face—until he focused on Barry above him. His need to lash out and keep any unexpected touch away from him fled in lieu of a sense of belonging and want that he had never given into with another person before, especially not one daring to touch him in the safety of sleep.

Barry hadn’t even seen Len’s skin beneath his clothing yet—unless he had peeked while changing him the other day—and now he was seeking it with his palms, the tips of his fingers, his tongue…

“Barry…”

Len’s vision was hazy in the dim light of the room, but it was definitely morning, the two of them passed out on the sofa instead of making it to the bedroom, with the TV displaying the Netflix message ‘are you still watching?’ Wide awake the moment Barry’s fingers brushed a nipple and the other hand trailed further downward, Len shuddered as the tantalizing speedster tugged at his sleep pants to press a kiss low on his hips.

“Barry?” he questioned with a delighted laugh, looking down at the tangled fop of brunette hair.

Sluggish from sleep, Barry's head lifted, eyes half lidded and smile askew like he wasn’t all there, still half asleep. But he climbed up Len's body all the same at the sound of his voice, “Len,” and dove down to claim his lips.

Barry’s tongue was as insistent as the hands at Len’s chest and hip, one teasing him, the other trying to pull his pants the rest of the way down.
Desire stirred in Len's gut with a rush of love at actually having Barry in his arms, touching him. “Yes,” Len whined when Barry paused for breath only to settle on top of his hips. He started to rock, so distinctly hard as they collided through cotton. “Barry,” Len reached for his neck to pull him down again, but Barry was already descending and returned just as ravenous and deep, delving possessively between Len’s lips.

Bucking up into that lithe body, Len thought he might go mad at finally being allowed this.

“Yes…yes… Do you want me, Barry? I knew you did. I knew it.” Len stroked his face when they disconnected, dug fingers into his thick mess of hair, and gazed at him with all the adoration he’d been trying to hold back during the day.

But Barry still looked like he was in a daze, unfocused, numb. He didn't respond, merely scrambled for another kiss. The only word he’d spoken was Len’s name, and when he looked Len in the eyes, he didn't seem to see him.

“Barry?” Len sputtered with concern now, disengaging from the kiss because he needed to know this was real, needed to hear Barry say it, but the kid kept trying to touch him and finally yanked on Len's shirt to pull it over his head. He sat up on Len’s hips to rid him of his own shirt with a flicker of lightning.

Fully reactionary to the sudden offering, Len reached for Barry’s stomach, compelled to touch him. As he felt higher up Barry’s ribs and chest, the writhing young man dropped his head back and moaned, riding out a rhythm through the connection of their hips and blinking down at Len with hooded eyes.

Hooded. Distant. Unseeing.

Len snatched his hands from Barry’s skin, but Barry followed him, desperate to reconnect, and licked a stripe up Len’s neck. Sucking there next, while his hips moved obscenely slow to grind them together, Barry’s fingers curled into the waistband of Len’s sleep pants to finish what he kept trying to start. And oh how Len wanted to let him.

“Stop,” he gasped instead, wounded to say it at all because this was what he wanted, but he wanted so much more than Barry’s body. Lifting his legs to dislodge the kid from that lock on his hips, Len clamored for a hold of Barry’s face and lifted him up to push him away. “Barry, stop. Wake up.”

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The room tilted as air rushed into Barry’s lungs from a deep, cleansing breath. Small details tunneled indistinctly, then came back into full focus until he was finally aware of exactly what he’d been doing and who he’d been doing it to.

“Oh my god!” Barry scrambled back, almost toppling off the sofa in his haste to get in the opposite corner from Len—flushed and shirtless and hard beneath him because he’d been accosting the man in his sleep. “I'm sorry… I'm sorry. I can’t believe that happened. I only ever did that with my girlfriend before!” he spewed before he realized how that sounded. He wasn’t even sure if Len knew who Patty Spivot was.

Panting, scarred chest heaving from the disconnect and the state Barry had left him in, Len pushed up into a sitting position, forming them like bookends across from each other, both with their knees pulled in to better hide how much they needed to calm down. Yet somehow Len managed to smirk, “Wake your bedmates up like that often, do you?”
“Oh god,” Barry buried his face in his hands. “I’ve only been with one person since I got my powers, okay? Since the lightning, my libido runs so high, some days I get pent up, and if I haven’t…released enough energy…” Why was he saying all this? His face was going to erupt in flames.

“You…go into sexual autopilot?”

“Urg,” Barry dropped his face further to his knees. “Better than waking Patty up screaming from a nightmare. At least with her, this was usually nice. She thought it was cute how single-minded I was some mornings. I’d wake up eventually, totally on board. There was only one time she stopped me. And I backed off as soon as she said ‘no’ and woke me up! But it’s still…god, oh god, I’m so sorry.” Maybe if he tried hard enough, he could vibrate through the floor and disappear.

“Barry,” Len’s hand came down on his knee, startling him to realize the thief had gotten so close. His eyes were dilated from the dark—and maybe a few other things—but there was still that vibrant sliver of blue. “You weren’t taking advantage of me, if that’s what you’re worried about. I gladly would have let things continue if you’d been conscious. Or if you...wanted to pick up where we left off?” He smiled slyly, half joking, but with potent longing that cut Barry deep for how much he wished he could answer with what Len wanted to hear.

But he couldn’t.

“We can’t.”

“I know,” Len said, shifting his legs out from under him to sit again, closer to Barry now in the center of the sofa. “Would you admit you kinda wish we could?”

“Len…”

“Forget I said that.” He looked away, a touch of vulnerability showing through that made Barry want to gather him into his arms.

“I don’t kinda wish we could,” he said, steady and honest and hating the way Len flinched at those words. “I really wish we could.”

His eyes flicked upwards.

“Enough that I might need a few minutes,” Barry fell to breathless laughter, too embarrassed to hold Len’s gaze for long and see the hope in his depths that carried such a heady sting.

Still, Len chuckled with him and dropped his head back on the edge of the sofa with an exhalation of agreement. His legs crisscrossed on the center cushion, hands folded to hide any telling signs between them that might have tempted Barry to do something stupid.

“If you need to take an extra long shower this morning, Scarlet, I won’t hold it against you,” Len said. “Or some more private time with my bathroom door maybe?”

Damn it. At least the remaining heat below Barry’s waist flooded up to fill his cheeks. “Of course you knew.”

“Not immediately, but I can usually solve even the toughest puzzle, and you paint a pretty clear picture most days. Like right now,” he said more seriously, losing his drawl, “that look of nausea says you’re beating yourself up over something you do not need to be upset over. I’m fine. A little keyed up, but fine. You may not have asked for consent, Barry, but you listened when I took it back.”
Anyone making excuses for him made whatever room Barry was in feel small and constricting, but especially when Len did it, because his thoughts weren’t solely his own. “I still feel like a creep. That’s not the only thing turning my stomach though. You heard what Iris and I talked about last night?”

“Most of it, yeah,” Len admitted with a tug at his smile.

“I don’t want the reason I feel this way about you to be because you’re convenient. Or because you’re being everything you think I want when it might turn out that none of this is real for you. Might, okay?” Barry sat forward when Len scowled. “I know this sucks but that ‘might’ matters to me. I can’t accept consent from the people around you even if everyone is saying the same thing. It has to be you.”

“So, we resist temptation and focus on other things, that it?” Len said, sad at first, but as the truth won out, he offered Barry a renewed smile that made him look unfairly handsome in the wee hours of the morning sitting shirtless on his sofa. “Keep getting to know me, Barry, and when this is over, you won’t have any doubts.”

“If you don’t have any doubts, I’ll be here if you want to try…something. Being something, I mean,” Barry shrugged, failing to form sufficient words for an adult, like he was some prepubescent kid saying ‘I like you, do you like me?’ “When this is over,” he added hastily, a little amazed he was willing to promise that at all, but no anxiety tinged the words, only excitement. It was highly unfair how his eyes chose that moment to train themselves on the scars etched across Len’s skin, because it didn’t feel right to ask that question right now. Barry knew the likely cause of most of them anyway. But beyond the scars, he saw how fit Len was with a slight softness around his middle that he found especially attractive, both on men and women, maybe because he had so little of it himself. He wasn’t the scrawny noodle he used to be, but he was still lean enough that he felt inadequate around Oliver.

“Thought we were resisting temptation,” Len said, catching Barry’s eyes when they glanced up from tracing the lines of his torso.

“I am resisting, just...admiring.” Barry ducked his head again. “Sorry. You know how beautiful you are, right?” He peeked up with a subtle smile.

“Even like this?” Len said, then grimaced as if he hadn’t intended to admit that.

With his scars on display, he meant. Barry had never thought Leonard Snart could be self-conscious. The man had been lounging quite boldly until now, but with the attention shifted to his supposed flaws, he fell prey to insecurities.

“Especially like this. I like you easy and open. Not easy!” Barry caught himself too late.

Len laughed. “Well, Scarlet, I am open right now. What else do you want to know about me?”

It was such a tempting invitation. They had work to do today, everyone on the team did because there were still supervillains to face and a mystery to solve. It was early yet though, and right now all that mattered was the two of them.

A week ago Barry would have had a multitude of questions for Captain Cold, but he’d learned so much. The question that sprang to mind surprised him, maybe even with a shade of jealousy peeking through.

“What do you like about Sara Lance?” he asked.
“Cheap shot, kid,” Len said, unfolding his legs to rest on the floor. He had nothing to hide anymore, not physically, but then he had much better self-control than Barry did even when swayed by meta powers.

“I want to know. I’ll tell you what I always liked about Iris,” Barry said, an olive branch he didn’t mean to cause another twitch in Len’s brow, so he added, “And why, sometimes, even before last night…I didn’t think we were a good match.”

Blue eyes drifted from Barry’s knees up his body to his eyes, not undressing him along the way, just contemplating as only the thief could. “We can do that. But I think this conversation should be had over comfort food, don’t you? We can check with your good friend Julian again before we head to the Labs, see if he has any leads for us. Then breakfast at the Motor Car?” he finished with a devilish grin.

“You really love tempting fate, don’t you?”

“That’s the thing about gambling, kid; it’s worth it if the bet pays off.” There were no illusions between them. A different gamble was going on here than Len being recognized at a diner, and both of them stood to lose so much on the same bet.

Barry did take an extra long shower, wondering the entire time if Len was waiting outside the bathroom door with full knowledge of what he was doing in there.

A few minutes later, a knock at the front door startled Barry before Len had finished showering, but when he peered out the keyhole, it was only Evelyn. “Hi, Mrs. Kittelsby.”

“Now, darling, you call me Evelyn,” she said, headscarf brilliant today in goldenrod yellow and royal purple. “My grocery bag tore on the way up the stairs. Would you be a dear and help me gather it all?”

Barry paused like an animal caught in headlights. Len’s apartment was at the end of the hall. The stairs to the other floors was a good distance down the other end. He also had no way of knowing where the items might have spilled, maybe all the way down to the first floor. He could gather everything in a heartbeat with his speed, but not if Evelyn was watching.

“Tore?” he said, stalling as he debated what to do, hoping Len would come out of the bathroom and save him from having to make an excuse. “You don’t have a cloth bag you reuse? You know it saves money and is much better for the environment.” He was a creature of habit himself, and almost always used plastic, despite the lectures he’d received from pretty much everyone he knew, but at least he knew the talking points well.

Evelyn smiled in appeasement. “Of course I do, dear. I simply forgot it this morning.”

“Oh.” Barry may have cheated a little then by dilating time so he could steal another moment and calculate his options. “You don’t have a cloth bag you reuse? You know it saves money and is much better for the environment.” He was a creature of habit himself, and almost always used plastic, despite the lectures he’d received from pretty much everyone he knew, but at least he knew the talking points well.

Evelyn smiled in appeasement. “Of course I do, dear. I simply forgot it this morning.”

“Oh.” Barry may have cheated a little then by dilating time so he could steal another moment and calculate his options. “Then…why don’t you grab that for me, and I can gather everything into the bag without you having to go all the way down and up those stairs again.” Huh, taking a moment to think like Len really did make a difference.

“Such a sweetheart you are. I’ll do that. No wonder Lenny keeps you around.”

Barry was beyond correcting people at this point, especially her. And maybe her assumptions weren’t entirely wrong anymore, considering how Barry and Len had woken up.

Urg. He still felt awful about that, but it had felt so nice in the haze of half dreaming to give in. The thought of being able to continue when this was over—not only the sexy parts, but to really move
forward—was an appealing idea that Barry didn’t want to deny himself anymore.

Evelyn went into her apartment, retrieved a cloth bag, and Barry told her to wait for him; he’d only be a moment. He really was done in seconds, racing down the hallway the moment Evelyn disappeared through her door, and then waited an appropriate amount of time in close proximity to Len’s apartment before he joined her. At least this time he was fairly certain that the milk, bread, and various other household staples hadn't been stolen. Hopefully.

“Coffee, dear?” Evelyn offered him like she had the other morning. He set the groceries on the counter and looked back through the two open doorways into Len’s living room. He had really liked that coffee…

“Sure. Thanks.”

It was difficult to imagine the woman as a criminal, colorful and attentive as she was offering a cup of coffee to Barry for carrying in her groceries, though he supposed she was also quite willful and commanding.

“Lenny told you about me, did he?” Evelyn caught his stare, passing over a mug.

“You implied plenty yourself,” Barry said as he accepted it. “You’re an ex-thief? Ex?” he stressed for his own sanity.

“Mostly ex,” she smiled as mischievously as Len could.

Criminals, Barry thought, though more with the frustration a parent would feel toward a naughty child compared to a member of the CCPD for a supervillain. “Can I ask…” he started, then continued slower, gauging if he was pushing too far. “Your regret? Not taking a way out of the life when you had one? What happened?”

“Ah,” she glanced away.

“You don’t have to tell me, I just—”

“It’s alright, dear,” Evelyn said, moving to put her groceries away, maybe to have something to distract her while she spoke. “It pains me to think of it sometimes, but it also helps to remember him.”

“Him?”

Her smile was melancholic but still cunning. “I’m an old cat burglar, you see. And oh, I was flashy back in my day, sort of like Lenny and his crew now. A real character, the papers said. Why do it at all if you don’t enjoy yourself? We had our heroes back then too. No nifty superpowers, of course, not that I know of anyway, but spectacular people all the same. I was like Lenny, hard to catch, harder to keep. A detective and I had a game of cat and mouse for years. On the streets. In this very apartment.”

“You were sleeping with him?” Barry balked.

“I wasn’t hurting anyone with my thefts. And he was something special. Had this idea in his head that he could convince me to change my ways, but I liked the game the way it was. One day he gave me an ultimatum, a full pardon he’d worked out for me to start fresh—with him—but I had to give up my life of crime for good. He said he loved me. I said…I loved the chase. I turned him down.” She snagged her mug after finishing the groceries and held it close. “He transferred to Keystone after that. Retired eventually. Passed away a few years ago. I hear his granddaughter is a
detective now. Or was it a CSI? It’s so hard to keep track…”

She told the story with a ready smile, but Barry saw the pain maybe more clearly than someone else might have because he knew how a talented thief hid their anguish.

“Len knows all this?” he asked.

“He was a romantic once. Still is, but so much more so when he was young. He loved this life, but he didn’t choose it, you know, it was thrust on him unwilling at the start. He merely adapted because he had to and embraced what he was good at when other doors closed to him. But his dream back then was to achieve a perfect score, not to line up the next one and the next like he does now, but to be done and make time for what he really wanted.”

“And what was that?”

“A girl mostly.”

“Alexa…” Barry’s stomach dropped.

“My, my,” Evelyn tilted her head at him, “he does adore you if he’s talked about her.”

“He hasn’t really.” Barry shifted with a shred of discomfort and bitterness that had nothing to do with strong coffee. “I mean, I know about her, how she double crossed him, but not the way he felt before then. He really loved her, huh?”

“She played him the way she knew he needed to be played. Spoke sweet words, listened with subtle encouragement that opened him up about things he’d never told anyone before. A true con artist every step of the way.”

There was authority in the way she spoke. “You knew her?”

“Too much youth and vigor for me even back then, but I saw them from time to time. Lenny went from waxing on about how I should have taken my chance when I had it, to coldly telling me I’d made the right call because no one is what they seem. I’ve spent twenty years reminding him of my regret. He’s only lived across the hall a short time though. Perhaps more recently he had reason to want the reminder of my incessant chatting. I know I made the wrong call. I knew it twenty years ago. I knew it forty years ago when the choice was made. I never wanted to see Lenny share my regret. But now here he is with his hero and I couldn’t be prouder,” she raised her mug.

“I’m not—” Barry snapped to attention.

“Please, dear. The mask doesn’t cover nearly enough of your face.” She took a slow sip with her eyes fixed on him.

“I blur my face.”

“Not for every photo you don’t. Not for every villain or mugger either. You’re quite careless really,” she said with full chiding.

“Arrogance of youth, right, Evelyn?” Len’s voice startled Barry from behind.

Swiveling toward the door, Barry wondered how much of the conversation Len had overheard, but he lost his voice the moment his eyes landed on that uniform—the police uniform in honor of going to the CCPD again and the Motor Car.
“Learn anything useful, Barry?” Len smirked, leaning against Evelyn’s doorframe.

Damn. “Just trying to get to know you better.”

“Well then. Let’s continue this over breakfast, shall we?” Len held out a hand as if asking Barry to dance. He was probably an excellent dancer.

“You boys be safe now,” Evelyn said. “It’s dangerous out there. Especially for a wolf among sheep.”

“You too, Evelyn,” Len said, tugging Barry into the hallway when he accepted the offered hand for as long as he could keep it. “Be good.”

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It was too early to run into Joe at the station. Barry hoped it would be too early for Julian too and that they could swipe an update from his desk or computer files, but the man he should have been worried about was Singh.

“Allen!”

Barry went instantly rigid as they neared the lab, its door open, proving that Julian was definitely in. “I’ll try to stall him!” he hissed, and pushed Len through the door just as he whirled around to face the captain. “Still not officially back, sir, I promise, but these cases of armed men in black—”

“Save it,” Singh said, holding up a hand that immediately went back to his waist as he squared off against Barry mere feet from where Captain Cold was schmoozing the new guy. “Checking on something again? With Wynters?”

“Uhh…” Shit, who was the actual officer Barry had used for cover again?

Singh rolled his eyes in true ‘had enough of your shit, Allen’ form. “Well? You get anywhere yet? Coz our team's been hitting wall after wall, and I got a dozen men in holding now who can’t tell me squat. We're starting to look bad, Allen, so if you’re moonlighting on your time off, at least be useful about it.”

Barry relaxed. That was the Singh he was used to, but maybe the man didn’t hate him completely. “I have leads, sir. Several. I’ve shared everything I know with Joe. We just need one lucky break and—”

“Luck won’t keep our city from being shot up. Let me know if Albert withholds anything you need, got it? And Allen?” He leaned in close enough that Barry had to lean several inches back. “You better know what you’re doing, coz I had to tell Albert in there that Officer Wynters is working this case special from Keystone. I assume our frosty friend can ad lib on command?” He gave a pointed bob of his eyebrows and turned on his heels to storm back down to his office, leaving Barry gaping.

Did he…did he know? How much did he know?

“You ready?”

Barry jumped as Len came back out of the lab already, nonchalant as if they weren’t walking a tightrope. “Yeah,” he said, though he really did suck at the secret identity thing apparently. “Did Julian have anything new?”
“A little,” Len said, following Barry to the stairs to make a swift retreat. “I’m from Keystone now, by the way.”

“I heard. Let’s get that breakfast.”

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Julian hadn’t offered much, but he had been in contact with Caitlin, and they agreed that each person whammied by The Rainbow Raider’s powers seemed to have their directive closely tied to the emotion involved. Logue was filled with Fear, which further backed up their hypothesis that his directive involved self-harm, something that would have clashed against his self-preservation.

Shawna Baez, who Caitlin had shared information with Julian about last night over email, was filled with Rage, and her directive had been to cause harm to Team Flash—Len specifically, though she hadn’t divulged that part.

The mystery criminal—Len himself—would be the same, Julian said. If they knew the emotion involved, based on the person’s actions, the directive should be easy to narrow down.

Barry didn’t mean to grow quiet at that revelation, but he appreciated when the waitress came over with water and menus to shift the attention onto something else.

Tucked into a corner booth at the Motor Car, he thought about how Len had supposedly frequented the diner plenty in nothing to guise him but a pair of glasses. Still, CSI Barry Allen with a uniformed officer fit in more easily than Baby-Face Allen on a date with a stranger across the street from the precinct.

“You know, that’s the second time you and Evelyn said that to each other.”

“Said what to each other?”

“Be safe. Be good. Like a mantra or something.”

Len held a private smirk for himself and his neighbor as he perused the menu. “Evelyn worries. I maintain she should be ‘good’ because a woman of her years and less than stellar health, regardless of her skillset, does not need another stint in Iron Heights. She mostly listens.”

“About as much as you do?” Barry said.

“I’m always safe. And usually I come out on top. Not that I’m opposed to someone else…on top.” He had the nerve to wink at Barry, which flooded his cheeks with heat that he refused to surrender to.

“Your nightstand certainly proved that,” he snarked.

Pleased laughter erupted in reply. “You can prove anything you like with the items in that drawer, Barry…when this is over,” he added with a solemn nod.

When this is over. “We’ve been saying that a lot today.”

“We have. A bit nebulous, so why don’t you tell me.” Len folded his arms on top of his menu, mind made up, it seemed. “What does the future hold for the city’s hero and his nemesis?”

Barry had admitted they could try, but what did that really mean? The question was too loaded to answer simply, yet as the couple at a table near them stood to head for the door, Barry caught sight
of the newest issue of Picture News and snagged it. “Let’s see.”

“Any mention of your quote yet?” Len asked.

“That was only last night, give Iris a day or two. But this isn’t a bad headline.” He turned the front page around to face Len.

FLASH AND COLD: THE CITY’S NEW DYNAMIC DUO?

“The name could use some work,” Len snorted.

“It talks about us leading the city’s newest hero force together,” Barry read the article with a lightning fast scan of his eyes. “Some people are paying attention, at least.”

“Which is exactly what Alexa wants, you realize.”

“I know, but I kind of like this future,” he said, setting the paper aside with a faint shrug. “One where this sort of headline is the norm. If that’s what you want too?” Might as well turn the loaded questions back on Len. Up until now, he’d been quick to promise Barry that he was on his side and would always remain there.

Maybe having some of Bivolo’s control gone meant Len thought more clearly, because he said, “I might be a little old to change my stripes completely,” honestly for once, however hesitant he was to admit that.

“How old was Evelyn when she turned down her offer?” Barry teased.

The way Len stared at the menu again answered that question.

“I don’t need you to give up everything for me, Len. I wouldn’t want you to. Maybe that was the real problem for Evelyn, that her detective gave an ultimatum.” He glanced around, and though the Motor Car was fairly full, they were hidden enough in the corner that he risked reaching for Len’s hand on the tabletop. “Very little of the last two years has been black and white for me. Or for you. Why change that? I just mean…” he squeezed Len’s fingers, “if you want to try this when you’re back to normal, I won’t ask anything you don’t want to give.”

The shuddery breath Len released made the moment feel far more intimate than their encounter at the apartment.

“Thank you,” Len said.

Barry pulled his hand back before someone caught them. “It’s fair to say you know quite a bit about me, right?”

“I suppose…” Len cocked his head, waiting for Barry to continue.

“Being my personal stalker, showing up at the West house at all hours without saying hello.”

“Oh huh.”

“So…” Barry leaned forward on his elbows, “let me get to know you, if that’s really what you want. Tell me what you like about Sara.” It almost hurt to ask, but Barry needed to know.

It hurt more that after Len huffed a resigned laugh, his gaze went foggy and his smile twitched with true fondness at simply conjuring her face.
“You boys know what you want?” the waitress sidled over, pad and pen in hand like a true relic.

Barry hoped they had an answer to that question soon, but he was content enough for now to order an exorbitant breakfast and excuse himself to the bathroom while he took a few minutes to breathe.

He was up in his own world, distracted by the din of the early morning crowd and his warring thoughts, that he didn’t notice a woman slip in behind him to take his spot at the booth.

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Len’s eyes snapped up the moment she sat down, the vision of her in his periphery more than enough to suspect exactly who was about to share his space.

Auburn hair, perfectly painted lips, a snug but all-business dress in navy blue. The only ploy to hide her appearance from someone who might, say, have a picture or sketch of her handy, was the way her hair was twisted into a bun, and thick, cat-eye glasses perched on her nose.

Alexa sat within arm’s reach, and there Len was wearing a police uniform, surrounded by officers in a crowded diner. Yet he was the one who felt ambushed.

“How’d you know I’d be here?” he asked, sitting taller to hide his alarm, quickly calculating all the possible ways she might have prepared a set up.

“I remember your old haunts, Leo.” She crossed her legs and tapped her long, red fingernails on top of the table, while her left arm draped across her lap. “I have a few spies keeping an eye on the most likely places. You are a creature of habit, even after all these years.” She spared a glance toward the bathrooms. “That’s The Flash, hmm? I barely had to break a sweat to figure out his identity. You really should have a talk with him about discretion.”

If Len had his gun on him, he would have been hard-pressed not to ice her. “You only know his face.”

“Really, Leo, do you believe that?” she practically pouted at him. “I know all about the players with a hand in your incarcerations over the years, and recently there’s been this adorable CSI at the CCPD. Funny how he and your partner today have the same face.”

She was threatening Barry right in front of him, when none of the people around them could possibly be under Bivolo’s control.

Or could they?

Or did it even matter when Alexa had her ace in the hole sitting across from her?

“You’ve already ensured I won’t be able to tell him about this, haven’t you?” Len said as he realized that buying time for Barry’s return wasn’t going to help him.

“You’ll be able to tell him,” she said, “but not until I leave. In fact, when he comes back, you’ll forget all about why you even know me. Then,” she leaned forward provocatively, gorgeous and vicious all at once, “when I’m gone, the truth will creep in, little by little, until you realize you had me and couldn’t do a thing about it.”

“What do you want?” Len bit off a snarl.

Alexa’s dark lips stretched wide and mocking. “Your time limit says you already know the answer.”
“I don’t mean this city. Why me? Why now after all this time?”

A hollow laugh was his reply as she sat back and eyed him head to toe—or at least to the edge of the table. “Oh Leo, you think it’s all about you? I came to Central City with a plan because this was my home once too, and I looked into all the top players upon arrival. Imagine my surprise when Mark Mardon said you’d gone soft and refused to go in on a plan to kill The Flash. In fact, he was certain you’d tipped The Flash off to save the boy’s skin.

“Now that was interesting to me,” she crossed her arms, one hand drifting up toward her lips, “because Leo Snart was never a snitch. I wondered if maybe you owed him something, but even if you did, if he was that much of a thorn in your side, you would have played your hand like you always do to make certain he exited the picture. That tells me you were protecting him because you wanted to. And only a few people earn that sort of protection from you. Your sister. Mickey. And…well.” Her thumb teased between her lips along her teeth and tongue. “You do so love to fall for people who could never feel the same way about you.”

Len felt his empty stomach churn in protest.

“We both know this isn’t the real you, Leo. You're not that naïve twenty-year-old anymore, all lovestruck and sweet, even if you wish you were. You're who he grew into, the cold, hard, mean thief who'd sooner sneer at a domestic scene than live it. And your little hero? He isn't going to want him. Pity,” she dropped her arms with a slide of her eyes to the side just as Barry came back into view. “But we both know he'll come back to his senses as soon as you come back to yours.”

Sliding out of the booth, Alexa’s demeanor changed the second she stood, even her voice coming out gentler, while she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and shrunk all demure and shy until…Len had no idea what the woman’s name was or why she’d been sitting across from him.

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“I’m sorry. I thought your friend was someone else.”

“Oh?” Barry stared at the woman, beautiful but in that understated way of a professional who looked slick effortlessly but never believed she was a knockout when people told her.

“Old boyfriend of mine,” the woman shrugged bashfully, clearly embarrassed by the whole thing. “John MacReady? I was going to say Leonard here is much better looking than him, but…I wouldn’t want to interrupt your date. Have a nice day.” She hurried off, probably late for some meeting. Maybe she worked in the DA’s office? Barry was terrible with faces sometimes, but he felt like he should know her from somewhere.

“Date?” Barry said as he slid back into his seat. “I thought you were supposed to be undercover and she still thought this was a date, huh?”

Len was blinking after the woman as if troubled.

“Len? Everything okay?”

Pulling his attention back to Barry with seeming difficulty, Len said he was fine, just distracted. Distracted by her pretty face? She was closer to Len's age than Barry was. But no, Barry was being silly. Len wouldn’t look upset if that was the case. So why did he seem so stern?

Trying to steer the conversation back on track proved fruitless after that, because now Barry was second guessing himself, waiting for the other shoe to drop that had been poised precariously all this time.
When it finally did, mid-bite for Len, several minutes after their food arrived, it was not what Barry had expected.

“What?”

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Barry couldn’t unclench his fists he was so angry. He’d seen Alexa, talked to her, she’d been at his fingertips. All to taunt them, to torture Len and rub it in his face that she had them completely under her power.

And Barry hadn’t suspected her for a moment even though he’d been the one to draw her sketch.

“She mentioned Mardon?” Cisco asked when they were back at the Labs. Lisa was already there, bearing coffee from Jitters for the STAR Labs crew—well, at least for Cisco and Caitlin.

“Mick and Ray got Mardon tracked to the edge of Bratva territory,” she said, sipping on an iced macchiato, “just far enough on the edge to still be off the radar. They steered clear once they spotted him, since nothing seemed out of sorts, but he’d be easy to pay a visit to.”

Barry looked to Len for agreement. He’d been on edge since remembering his conversation with Alexa, brow drawn and jaw clenched.

“She mentioned him on purpose,” Len bit out. “MacReady too. So that once Barry repeated the name, I remembered he was in on this from the start. She’ll be ready for this play. Might have her whole crew of men in black waiting for us with Mardon, MacReady and Goldman included.”

“What are they so sore about?” Lisa scoffed. “You let ‘em live.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have,” Len muttered.

“Hey,” Barry stepped over to him, removed as he was from everyone else by standing near The Flash suit, “don’t say that. I know these guys are coming back to bite you now, Alexa too, but you can’t think that way. Who are MacReady and Goldman anyway?”

Arms snugly crossed, Len looked too much like he was trying to protect himself from everything around him. “Two of the men with me when you stopped us from getting the Kahndaq Diamond at that truck. A third man shot the guard. I wasn’t too happy about it. But the others thought I was obsessed after that for a lost cause…coz of you.” He smiled but it was tight and forced. “Guess they think I’ve lost my touch too.”

“You haven’t lost anything you needed,” Barry said, reaching for Len without any thought that he might be unwanted. “You’re exactly who you should be.”

Len’s smile drew up more falsely than before, and Barry realized how that must have sounded—that right now Len was who he should be, a version of him that was twisted and changed.

“I didn’t mean—”

“I know she’s just trying to get in my head,” Len cut him off, stepping into Barry’s body instead of away from him, “but it’s still working.”

“In both our heads,” Barry said, wrapping Len up in his arms for as long as he still got the chance to touch this man without consequence. “But you can’t let her. It’s all messed up, I know that, but we can still fix this. We can still win.”
Breath puffed against the side of Barry’s neck. “I love you,” Len said, as weighty as he’d ever said it. “I love you, Barry. I know you don’t believe that or want to hear it anymore, but it’s true. I’d give anything to have you say it back to me—to me. No tricks. No Alexa. Just the truth.”

“Actually…” Caitlin’s voice shook Barry as he was reminded that they were seldom without an audience these days, “there’s likely a good reason for that.”

Glancing aside to see Caitlin holding a tablet at the med room door, while Cisco and Lisa looked on from the desk with matching expressions of pity, Barry and Len unwound from their tight hold on each other.

All of Caitlin’s notes were on that tablet, many of which had been corroborated or added to by Julian. Len’s emotion was Love, his singular desire to love Barry above all else, which pointed at an obvious directive.

“He needs you to love him back.”

Barry’s heart clenched. He’d assumed as much when Len shared Julian’s findings earlier, but what was he supposed to say to that?

“Of course that’s it,” Len said, eyes falling to the floor as his arms rose up to shield him again. “Alexa’s the cynical type. Knows better than to think The Flash could ever love a criminal, even if he does have a soft heart.”

“Len…”

“Prove me wrong.” His eyes flashed up with a glint of blue from the lights. “If it’s so easy an answer and everything will be fixed, just say the words, Barry, and we can end all this misery.”

“I…” What was he supposed to do when Len looked at him like that? Like he had on Christmas, like he had with his father lying dead on the floor between them—certain he wasn’t worth Barry’s belief in him and waiting, just waiting for it to be taken away. “I love you,” Barry blurted, too rushed and desperate, but he wasn’t going to flounder and say nothing.

Len’s arms tightened, breath held and muscles tense, as he waited for the gong…and then wilted with the deepest look of sorrow when nothing changed. “Doesn’t work like that, Scarlet,” he chuckled flatly. “See, you have to mean it. But don’t beat yourself up that you don’t.”

“Len,” Barry flew into self-preservation mode because he felt like dirt that he couldn’t do this one thing after everything they’d been through. “It’s been a week.”

Barely a week, and yet the remarkable thing was, Barry had spent the past several days in Len’s non-stop company and he wasn’t remotely sick of him.

“I need time. It’s not that I could never…” He cringed because it was too cruel how Alexa had set this up, knowing the way things would play out. “I need to know how you really feel before I can even begin to sort out my own feelings. But I told you I’d be here if you wanted to try when this is over. That hasn’t changed.”

“When this is over,” Len repeated with a sneer, backing away from Barry and leaving him in the open so that he realized once again that three other pairs of eyes were watching them with silent, awkward scrutiny. “Assuming I don’t shoot you in the back, you mean.”

“I didn’t say that. You won’t do that.”
“If you really believed that, Barry, you wouldn’t doubt my feelings for you.”

“That isn’t fair,” Barry surged forward. “You can be decent and still not want me. Those things aren’t mutually exclusive. I need to know for sure.” He stopped just short of seizing Len by the shoulders again but tried to convey that he wished saying those words could be enough, maybe even wished he meant them.

The fierceness fell from Len’s eyes as he stared into the grief and indignancy in Barry’s. “I…I’m sorry. I don’t want to cause you pain, Barry. I only end up hurting myself when I do that,” he pressed a hand to his chest as if it ached. “I love you, but I’m not really me. Not like this. I don’t know what’ll happen when I wake up. Part of me never wants to find out. I’m just pathetic, like Alexa wants me to be.”

The Cortex was left too quiet after that, even with the familiar hum of the building filling the air.

“Well you’re certainly pathetic if you’re gonna talk like that,” Lisa slammed her coffee down on Cisco’s desk. “Get your head out of your ass, Lenny. My big brother isn’t a quitter, and he certainly doesn’t say uncle for some bitch with a god complex.”

“Yikes,” Cisco blurted, then clammed up when everyone turned to him. “I didn’t…I just meant…I actually think it’s really hot when you get fired up,” he told Lisa, which only made him clam up further when Len raised an eyebrow at him.

“We should go after Mardon,” Lisa pushed on with a pleased smirk and not so subtle wink tossed at Cisco. “It’s our best lead right now. Mick and Ray are on their way here anyway. Sara headed out early to watch for Alexa, but I can easily call her back.”

“Like I said,” Len moved from his self-imposed isolation to join Lisa at the desk, “Mardon could have a whole crew waiting for us.”

“So? We have a crew now too,” she stood her ground.

“If he’s under Bivolo’s control,” Caitlin added, “he’s the most dangerous pawn yet. Even if it is a trap, we can’t just leave him.”

Len turned about with a dramatic flourish to lean against Cisco’s desk, taking in everyone one at a time until his eyes landed on Barry. “Okay,” he finally nodded. “Then call Sara back. We go after Mardon with everyone, at least close enough to be backup. Sara and Ray can scout the area for Bratva, make sure we don’t step on any toes or walk into a part of this war that’s still brewing. Lisa, you and Mick join me and Barry. If we can’t fix my head yet, then we can at least disrupt Alexa’s plan and maybe figure out some of the pieces we’re still missing.”

Len was such an idiot. Even under the thrall of suggestion, loving Barry so deeply it consumed his every thought, he still pushed the kid away. What chance did they have once he was whole again? Once he was overcome by his many walls and inclinations to keep people at arm’s length?

Barry could believe in him all he wanted, but he wouldn’t put up with that for long. The beautiful boy needed touch and friendship—companionship and understanding. Len couldn’t even offer that much to his own sister and best friend.

He’d lose Barry. He’d lose everything. He never thought he’d be glad Barry didn’t love him enough to break the spell.
“Status, Canary?” Barry spoke into his comms, moving at a cautious, normal speed since they’d arrived at the warehouse. He’d gone without his Flash suit, the idea being that Mardon might be more prone to talk if he didn’t see a glimmer of red coming.

“At the border,” Sara said. “Atom and I are splitting to do a perimeter check. I know a few of these guys if we cross paths. We’ll be fine.”

Len came up close behind Barry, nearing the entrance into the building that Mick and Ray had tracked Mardon to before. Ray had done initial surveillance earlier to confirm someone was inside, and it was only one person. Still, even if he was alone, Weather Wizard was formidable and could take out The Flash with a single blast of lightning if he was quick enough.

Mick and Lisa had gone around the back to flank if things went sour, but the play was in Len’s hands. As Barry turned to him, mouth falling open to tell Len to lead the way, his expression dropped.

“Hey. Are you okay? I hate seeing you looking like your insides are tearing apart. I’m sorry me saying the words wasn’t enough. I don’t want you to think—”

“It’s okay, Barry. I get it. It’s not you, it’s me,” Len chuckled, because he hadn’t intended that joke when he started. “Because you’re too good a man to claim a slave when you’d rather have an equal. It’s hard to love a puppet. Even harder to love a lying scoundrel, I’d imagine.”

“Len,” Barry said with conviction, “you’re more than that. You’ve always been more than that. Maybe the real answer is that Alexa is just jealous you became something better without her.”

That answer drew Len’s eyes to Barry’s and he lost himself in the way the sun made all that hazel look so green. “Nice thought,” he said, so in love with this kid it choked him on his best days. “Can I…please…just one kiss for luck? To say I’m sorry?”

The alley they were in was quiet; Len heard the sharp intake of breath and the way it paused, held in, as Barry prepared to voice his dissent. But then he didn’t. He leaned forward and let his eyes close.

Breaching the remaining gap, Len touched their lips together with eager abandon, and a tingle, far gentler than static electricity, shot through him. Neither of them pushed for anything deeper, they merely pressed forward and eventually pulled back, hovering close in want to do it again.

Len couldn’t lose this. Ever.


The warehouse was a tricked out safe house once they got inside. Dark and dreary even in the middle of the day but filled with stolen goods and various tools of the trade—aside from guns, of course. Mardon didn’t need weapons when he was one.

“Been a while since I made a house call,” Len announced himself loudly as he and Barry, the kid clad in black as his criminal alias demanded, approached the center room where a TV blared and Mardon sat on a sofa eating Chinese food.

The meta human went on high alert, but he still finished his current bite without rising from his seat.

“How ya been, Mark? Business seems to be doing well since you broke out of Iron Heights. I hear they’re making those meta cells more durable. Better be careful not to get caught again.”
“Oh yeah?” Mardon said, pushing his carton of food away and standing with a shock of blue lightning zipping up his arm. “Funny you should say that, Snart, with Joe West’s kid trailing behind you.”

Barry rose up taller in alarm, but Len hadn’t expected Mardon to be entirely ignorant.

“You’ve seen the papers,” Len said as he paced slowly around the sofa, trailing his hand along the back of it, while Barry kept in step behind him and Mardon pivoted to follow them. “If I didn’t have a few ins, I wouldn’t be getting away with so much right under the Scarlet Speedster’s nose.”

“You’re duping him?” Mardon laughed, good at keeping an eye on his periphery as well as on Len and Barry. “All that fluff in the press is bull, huh? I don’t know about that. Way I remember it, you were pretty keen on keeping him breathing back at Ferris Air. Did the same when you turned me down to off him. Now you’re thwarting other people’s heists like some lackey?”

The man’s mistake was thinking Len could be done in by pride the same way he or someone like James Jesse could be cracked. “Or I’ve managed to swipe several thousand in merchandise at every location I’ve helped him out at. Try to keep up.” Len came to a stop so that directly behind Mardon was the back door Lisa and Mick were hiding behind. “Don’t you know how a big player bluffs their hand? I was coming here to give you an invite to the real game, make sure the new muscle in town doesn’t try to snatch up our territories too.”

“Since when do you have territories?”

“No one else took over the Santinis. I like to think of it as a summer home ripe for expansion. Allen here is just your speed, you know,” Len nodded at Barry, grinning wide at the private joke in his words. “He’s not so close with his adopted daddy you see. Likes to play a little dirty. Figured I’d offer his skills as a nice shot at West for you.”

The tension in Barry’s body said he wasn’t happy with this turn of events, but he smiled wickedly regardless. “Only reason I joined the force was to get my real father out of prison. Didn’t work out so well. I don’t feel like playing to the losing side anymore, so I made Snart a deal.”

Mardon eyed Barry blatantly up and down. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Barry shot right back. He was getting better at rolling with the punches. Len was a little turned on, to be honest. “I want a piece of the action, and I can help you stay clear of getting caught by the CCPD. The Flash? He thinks Snart’s legit. Makes it easier to go around him.”

“Around instead of through,” Mardon sneered. “See, Snart, that’s the part I don’t get.”

“The Flash is useful,” Len said. “Keeps other undesirables off our backs. Makes more sense than whatever play Bivolo’s been making lately.”

Mardon grinned. “You must have your wires crossed, Snart. Bivolo ain’t the one making plays.”

“So you’ve seen him lately?”

“I’ve seen him. Seen his boss too. Why? Worried they got me wrapped around their fingers like they got you?”

Shit.

“Well you can relax, Cold,” Mardon started to walk forward and Len’s arm outstretched to hold Barry behind him. He couldn’t reveal that he was The Flash like this. “Roy didn’t need to pull any
wool over my eyes. I joined up willing. Alexa made a better deal than you ever could.”

Len caught sight of movement near the back door and held steady.

“I don’t play lackey either.” Mardon filled his hands with lightning to further make his threat clear. “I want real territory. Not whatever Allen or The Flash might be offering you on the side. And ain’t Alexa a doll, coz she let me know you’d be coming. And here I thought there was no way you’d be this stupid.”

He whirled to face behind him, firing off a lightning bolt that nearly hit Mick square in the chest just as he’d raised his heat gun to blast Mardon in the back. Len seized Barry by the arm and dove behind the sofa, hating that someone as reckless as Mark Mardon could be so damn clever on occasion.

They landed hard on their knees and Len fought a cringe. Mardon wouldn’t know where they’d gone but he’d be able to guess. They had to keep moving and hope that their backup kept him busy.

“Bivolo hypnotized Baez!” Barry cried as he and Len scurried behind the sofa.

“Coz he knew she wouldn’t say yes!” Mardon called back, firing another blast at Mick, then at Lisa, both ducking behind beams that kept the warehouse stable.

Len was on the move before Mardon could shift his attention back toward them, with the edge of Barry’s jacket in his grasp, rushing to reach a beam of their own. He winced as a shock of lightning nearly singed the ends of his parka just as he plastered himself behind the pillar with Barry pulled in against him. The speedster could have snuck out when the coast was clear with a burst of speed to return as The Flash, but then the ruse would be up. The last thing they needed was for Mardon to put two and two together.

“Alexa can’t be trusted!” Len called. “She’ll use Raider against you or she already has and you just don’t know it yet!”

“Doubtful, Snart! But I’ll take my chances!”

The whir of Lisa and Mick’s guns drowned out anything else he might have said as the smell of lightning filled the room, reminding Len of a coming storm—pleasant, but not as comforting as Barry’s ozone. At last, Len pulled his cold gun from its holster, while Barry took a few deep breaths, likely to keep himself from getting speedy.

“Okay, fears confirmed,” Barry panted, not that they had much time to debate. “Alexa brought us to Mardon on purpose.”

“Which means she likely has a plan in mind for us being here,” Len said, though it was somewhat befuddling to his senses to have Barry pressed so close to his chest, something the kid seemed oblivious to at the moment.

“But if Mardon isn’t whammied, what could she be hoping for? I thought she didn’t want us dead?”

She didn’t. She wanted them distracted. Wouldn’t have made a move at the Motor Car if she wanted Mardon to fry them. “Canary, Atom,” Len’s hand flew to his comms.

“Need help?” Sara asked.

“Not yet, but what’s the skinny on the Bratva?”
“No activity so far,” Ray said.

“No activity period,” Sara said with concern. “As in not a man in sight, anywhere. Something’s going on, Leonard. The Bratva are on the move, and it’s something big if no one was left behind to watch the streets.”

“That’s the play,” Len said to Barry. “She wanted us distracted from talking with the families too soon while they rally. This isn’t about Mardon. It’s about the crime syndicates making their next play.”

“Meaning what? A heist?”

Len’s senses perked at the presence of Mardon coming around the pillar, and he seized Barry’s arms, spinning them to the other side of the beam out of sight.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are…” Mardon taunted.

Len could see Lisa waving at them from the other side of the warehouse, while Mick grumbled over the comms that ‘burning the asshole would be faster’. “Alexa pushed the families to be desperate,” Len whispered, his and Barry’s faces too close to look at each other anymore, though it was nice to feel the warmth of his breath. “They’ll be out for blood. Sara, check in with West. Find out if there’s been any chatter. And be ready as soon as we take Mardon out.”

“Understood.”

Whirling around once more as Len felt Mardon circle them, he kept the beam at his back and pushed Barry out in front of him to meet his gaze. “Think you can get creative for this fight?”

“More so if you’re calling the shots,” Barry smirked. “I like it when you give me orders, remember?”

“Still listening in on the feed, guys…” Cisco reminded them.

This was their element, opposed or on the same side, it didn’t matter, but right now Len had an idea that mixed a little of both.

“Glad to hear that, Barry,” he said, “coz you’re gonna have to think quick on your feet. Go limp and try not to get zapped.”

“What—?”

Whipping his arm around Barry’s back, Len fired a sheet of ice at the floor, coating the cold cement with an even colder slip and slide that he pushed Barry onto like throwing off a mugger. Shock filled Barry’s face as he hit the ground hard and went flying across the room, only for Mardon to reveal himself by rushing around the pillar to give chase. At least sometimes he was still an idiot.

All Len had to do was take aim.

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The key to making a successful hit in plain sight carried the same rule as fitting in at any off-limits location—act like you belong. All Bratva knew this tactic, because all Bratva always belonged wherever they went.
Niko was especially good at blending in, which was why he’d been chosen to set an example amongst the group of men currently being held at the downtown precinct.

They wouldn’t talk, the reports said. Had no idea who had hired them. American police didn’t know how to instill enough fear to get loyal men to talk. Once some blood was spilled, the others would fold. It also sent a message to whoever was at the head of this treachery, trying to take the streets of Central City that belonged under Bratva rule.

Passing through the hallways of the CCPD was easy in the right uniform. Even if there was a scrutinizing eyebrow on occasion, Niko nodded at those he passed as if he was right where he should be, and no one questioned him further.

Waiting until the coast was clear, he used the keys he’d swiped from the officer on guard and slipped into the main cell with a nod and call to one of the men inside.

“You. We need to have a word,” he said in flawless English, no trace of his heritage bleeding through.

When the man came forward, he offered his hands up to be cuffed without resistance.

Across town, in every precinct where men in black were being held, the same event was taking place at the same time enacted by Bratva brothers.

Niko reached to his side as if grabbing for cuffs but pulled a knife instead, jabbing it between the man’s ribs all the way to his heart in a single stroke. The rest of the men scattered to the back of the cell while the man in front of Niko dropped stone-cold dead to the floor.

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

That first scene...my husband does this. It really is adorable and very hot. But if I’m not in the mood and I go, honey, no, he stops and either wakes up or sort of pouts and goes back to sleep. I love him so much...

There are a few semi tipping points to come, but this is one of the big ones for how Len and Barry are both going to be dealing with things going forward.

Thank you for reading! Sorry this was so loooooooong.
Wide awake

Chapter Summary

Struggling to get through the fight with Mardon, Len and Barry are soon faced with the next step in Alexa's plan that doesn't seem to make any sense. A trap is brewing, and all they can do is prepare as best they can. What tips everything over the edge, however, isn't Alexa, but something Barry finds at his own lab in the precinct.

Chapter Notes

Another week, another chapter, another overworked Crimson who hasn't answered your comments. I really do prefer to answer, especially for those of you who have specific questions, but I should have time tomorrow, and I want you to know and never doubt...

YOUR COMMENTS ARE THE BEST PART OF MY DAYS. So thank you. When work drives me nuts, a new comment here always makes me smile.

Thank you, all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barry felt his stomach lurch forward, left behind with Len as he was pushed onto his back on the sheet of ice—a sensation that the fastest man alive was not used to experiencing. Len was using him as bait. And it was working, because as Barry went soaring across the room on his ass, he saw Mark Mardon storm around the pillar with sparks of blue glimmering between his palms, readying to throw the brunt of it at him.

Scrambling for purchase on the ice, Barry tried to at least roll away from the deadly slip and slide Len had created, but even if he had felt it safe to use his powers right now, he would have been hard-pressed to escape Mardon’s aim in time.

Thankfully, a blast of ice struck the Weather Wizard in the back at the last second, though unfortunately, his lightning arcing up at the ceiling to destabilize one of the many load-bearing pillars currently keeping the roof up. Maybe there wasn’t much to be thankful for if the ceiling came down on Barry’s head.

Something less uncomfortably solid than a wall halted his continued rolling as he slid from the remaining ice. Glancing over his shoulder, he discovered Lisa grinning down at him. With her gold gun in one hand, she reached down to help hoist him to his feet with the other.

“Quite the lovely damsel in distress you make, sweety,” she winked.

Barry wasn’t in any real distress, but he still had to grin at the comment as he accepted her hand. A creak of the ceiling brought both their eyes skyward before Barry could steady on his feet.
“Uhh…maybe we should—”

Mardon exploded into the air with a crack of lightning, not nearly winded enough by Len’s blast to stay down. The way he could swirl wind and a magnetic field around him allowed him to fly, and the high ceiling of the warehouse gave him plenty of room. The mini storm he was creating would not help the destabilized ceiling.

“Mardon, stop! The building will come down!” Barry cried, clinging to Lisa as she looped her arm with his, ready to flash them away if given no other choice.

In Barry’s moment of indecision to stay or flee, Len leapt from the other pillar to fire again, but Mardon was already trained on him. A bolt of lightning forced him to dive to the side, knocking a chunk of concrete out of the beam.

“Lisa!” Barry called, but she was already firing before he’d finished saying her name. Unfortunately, the swirl of lightning created a pulsing shield around Mardon that swept the output of her gun into an added cyclone of melted gold.

When Mardon turned their direction, Lisa grabbed hold of Barry and yanked him out of the line of fire just as they heard Mick release a roar.

“Wait!” Lisa tried to warn him, but the wave of flames he shot from a few pillars down only added to the tornado of elements.

“Back off, back off!” Barry said into the comms. Pulling his attention from Mick, he peered over his shoulder to make certain Len had crawled to safety, but he couldn’t see him anymore. “Len, are you okay? Answer me!”

“Focus on Mardon,” Len panted, too winded for Barry’s tastes, like he was hurt, but Barry still couldn’t see him.

The temperature and density of Len’s ice could maybe cut through the electromagnetic waves, but it was too much of a gamble. “Don’t fire,” Barry told him, “we have to think of something else.”

“I’m up for any bright ideas, Scarlet,” Len huffed. “Canary, Atom, backup can come any time now.”

“We’re almost there. Just stall him,” Sara said.

Stalling Zeus was easier said than done.

“Mick!” Len and Barry called at the same time, but when Barry heard Len’s voice overlapping his own, he held back.

“Fire wide! Get Mardon’s attention,” Len finished—exactly what Barry had been thinking.

Mick had his usual mad grin on his face as he jumped out of hiding to set Mardon’s sofa ablaze, then ducked back to safety before any lightning was thrown his direction.

Wait. Thrown.

“I have an idea,” Barry gripped Lisa’s shoulders.

“All ears, kid,” Mick gruffed over the comms. They only had so long before Mardon got off a lucky shot or hovered to a location that made it harder for them to hide.
“Keep Mardon’s attention on the fire.”

Lisa tilted her head at him in curiosity.

“Three-point rush,” Len said, following Barry’s lead.

“I hate that tactic,” Lisa grumbled, but she stepped away from Barry anyway and charged her gun.

“Now,” Len called, and the next wave of their attack kicked into action.

Clinging to the pillar, Barry’s eyes followed Lisa out into the open as she rushed Mardon from behind, while Mick did the same from the right and—yes, Len leapt at him from the left, looking a little battered, bleeding from a cut on his forehead, but otherwise okay. Together they froze, burned, or gilded in gold everything within range—everything except Mardon himself.

Debating who to fire at first, Mardon pivoted between the Rogues, who moved as a single unit to the other side of the building closer to the smoldering sofa.

Taking advantage of the warehouse’s expanse, Barry backed up into the empty space left behind and started to run in a wide but contained circle where Mardon couldn’t see him, faster and faster to gather an electric charge. He just hoped Weather Wizard wasn’t enough like Livewire from Kara’s world to absorb it.

Even within his own whirlwind, Barry could hear the others over the comms and see the occasional glimpse of what was happening.

There was Sara and Ray bursting in through the same door Mick and Lisa had used. Flashes of orange, gold, and blinding blue-white from the guns. Mardon’s lightning crackling around him and further destabilizing the precarious framework of the building. And all the while, the others called to each other.

“Get ‘im, Ray!” cried Mick.

“No, don’t!” said Len. “The photon canon could kill us all reacting to that mess!”

“Lenny, left! Left!” chimed in Lisa.

Almost, almost, Barry thought, as he watched the impressive flips and feints from Sara trying to get closer to Mardon with her staff. Everyone dodged and spun and had each other's backs, including Ray, who rose into the air to face Mardon on his level only to notice a shock of lightning headed toward Mick.

“Look out!”

Finally, Barry had gathered enough energy, and he timed his release from the momentum just right to pause, pull back his arm, and throw a surge of lightning at the center of Mardon’s shield. Holding his breath, Barry prayed his own electromagnetic surge would be enough to disrupt the vortex, which hit its mark just as Ray took the brunt of Mardon’s lightning and was thrown into Mick, knocking both of them to the ground.

An eruption of blue and yellow filled the warehouse as lightning struck lightning, and then it dissipated, dropping Mardon from the air, limp as a ragdoll—right onto the burning sofa!

Before Barry could flash forward, a stream of cold blasted underneath the meta human, dousing the flames just in time. Mardon landed hard on the frozen piece of furniture, but he was better off
than he would have been on fire.

The fizzled shockwave from the clash of powers caused another creak of the ceiling, and as the pillars crumbled and the roof started to come down, Barry kicked into gear to get everyone out of the building. Grabbing Mardon last, he soon had the entire team safely in the alley before the ceiling could collapse, panting from the exertion of performing a lightning throw and enacting a rescue like that in so short a time.

Which was when he realized he wasn’t wearing clothes.

“Ah!” Barry instinctively covered himself since even his underwear was hanging on flimsily given the speed he’d used. At least only his friends were present to see him, standing in the open practically naked in broad daylight, though not even they noticed his current state right away.

Mardon was unconscious on the ground from the aftershock, Sara pulling out a pair of meta dampeners to slap on his wrists, while Mick dove into a tirade at Ray for jumping in to save him. His Atom suit was sparking, but it appeared to have absorbed most of the attack.

“What the hell was that for?!” Mick yelled.

“What do you mean? That’s what partners do,” Ray defended, moving sluggishly within his fritzing suit, unable to escape Mick’s repeated pokes at his chest.

“Don’t go trying to return the favor, Haircut. No martyr bullshit.”

“Well too bad, Mick. Friends have each other’s backs.”

Mick grumbled in irritation and what Barry recognized as worry. “Now yer suit's all busted,” he said with another poke at Ray’s breastplate.

Ray responded with a blinding smile. “You can help me fix it.”

“Ramon can do that.”

“Sure, but…you notice things he wouldn't.”

It was about then that Lisa, who had been fussing over the cut on Len's forehead, finally looked up and noticed Barry’s undressed form. “My, my…I see what Lenny's so hung up on,” she smirked.

Barry flushed all the way down his chest. He wished he could flash away about now, but he couldn’t just leave everyone. As all conscious eyes turned to him with varied reactions of shock and humor, Len’s was the most openly appreciative.

“Uhh…can someone help maybe?” he implored his gawking friends. “Please?” Given the remains of his underwear, he wasn’t sure how much longer they’d stay on.

Sheathing his cold gun, Len stalked toward Barry like prowling through a jungle to a tempting piece of meat. Barry really needed to not think like that, but the thief’s eyes penetrated right through him…only for him to pull off his jacket and wrap it around Barry's shoulders. Having gone without his parka or full gear to better appeal to Mardon, the trench coat Len had donned still reached past Barry's knees.

“Thanks,” Barry slid his arms into the sleeves and pulled it tight around him. “I really liked that outfit.”
“I’ll buy you another one,” Len teased.

The trench coat emanated Len’s smell, or maybe that was because he was standing so close to Barry.

With a clearing of her throat, Sara pulled their attention to the others—particularly to Mardon, who she gestured down at. “Shall we?”

Barry was forced to flash Mardon and Len back to STAR Labs, which wasn’t an easy feat, carting two grown men, one unconscious, all across town, but he arrived without much singe damage done to Len’s jacket. Ray couldn’t fly with the injury to his suit, so he, Mick, and Lisa headed back the long way, while Sara elected to stay behind and scour the area for Bratva until the police showed up to handle the collapsed building. At least the ceiling coming down had doused the flames.

Joe didn’t get back to them about mob activity until they’d been at the Labs for several minutes, and then it was to confirm Len and Sara’s fears. The Bratva had indeed been up to something.

Four of Alexa’s men, one at each of the precincts they were being held at, were dead.

“What does that accomplish?” Cisco asked.

“For the Bratva, it sends a message,” Len said. “To the hidden boss—keep messing with our streets and you’re dead. To the men themselves—tell us who your boss is or you’re dead. The problem is, for the other families it could also mean that the Bratva are cleaning house, taking out their own men who got captured.”

“Further jumpstarting the war,” Barry said with a firm cross of his arms, changed now into an extra set of STAR Labs sweats. “Things are gonna get messy fast. We need to get that article out so some of the attention points at Alexa. I’ll call Iris.”

By the time Barry was finished speaking with her, Mardon was awake, banging on the glass of the Pipeline cell they’d chucked him into like he had no idea how he’d ended up here again. Suddenly, he was a blank slate when Barry sported his Flash suit to question him. He didn’t seem to remember the fight or anything they had talked about, and he definitely didn’t know anything about Alexa.

“Bivolo used his powers on Mardon after all,” Caitlin said. “Probably for insurance. We can keep him here until we figure out how to break him of the control. Once we do that, we’ll turn him over to the CCPD to put back in the meta wing at Iron Heights.”

Len pursed his lips at Mardon being crammed into that makeshift prison at all, but he conceded the point given the circumstances. As much as Barry hated to use the Pipeline this way, he kind of enjoyed how righteous Len was about it now that he wasn’t trying to hide his opinion.

They agreed that next steps while Ray, Mick, and Cisco worked to fix the Atom suit was to gather whatever intel they could on where the families were concentrated and to try to make contact. They’d all be on high alert, so it wouldn’t be an easy task, but Alexa was trying to stir chaos. Something needed to balance that out or it was all poised to erupt.

For now, Lisa hit the streets while Sara made check-ins from her reconnaissance in Bratva territory, and Len and Barry chose to head back to the apartment before deciding on their next move. Len’s motorcycle had been at the Labs, and he insisted on using it rather than have Barry speed them home.

“Sometimes moving at normal speeds is necessary, Scarlet. I need time to think, consider our
options.”

Barry didn’t protest. He liked riding on Len’s bike, arms wrapped around his waist as he drove wearing that ridiculous helmet. “Safety first, kid. Not all of us heal on a dime.” Though he’d still insisted that Barry wear one too.

They drove through Len’s neighborhood, parked in the underground garage, and walked out into the sunshine before heading through the front doors of the building. Not even Captain Cold had an apartment with underground parking attached to it, apparently.

It was nice to have the chance to breathe, to just…walk and take things slowly. Barry had a feeling they wouldn’t be able to enjoy that for much longer.

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Niko and the others had done well at the precincts. Now it was Ivan and Maxim’s turn.

Cold was on the Bratva list of parties to watch, tied to The Flash more than once now and present at all of the encounters dealing with the men in black. He knew something. Either he was behind it, The Flash was, they were in cahoots as the papers speculated, or Cold knew the true party responsible. Regardless, he needed to be subdued and questioned.

Niko was good at blending in to take out targets. Ivan and Maxim were good at getting targets to talk.

Watching Cold return to his neighborhood and park his motorcycle, they were finally able to pinpoint which building he lived in. Once they had the location of the exact apartment, they parted ways to break in more discreetly and to close Cold and his companion in from both sides.

Not even the famous Leonard Snart would see them coming.

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Len couldn’t help the way he watched Barry doing the most mundane of tasks, like talking on the phone to his adopted father to confirm information about the recent attacks, and to further explain the incident at the warehouse.

Sometimes, Len envied how the kid had been blessed with a birth father who adored him and an adopted father just as doting. Len hadn’t even been granted one father who was decent. But mostly his envy manifested as awe, something to be admired with a smile, not a sneer.

Barry was in workout pants and a STAR Labs sweatshirt, though eventually he’d change so they could hit the streets again. Len liked the way the outfit made the kid seem more at home, padding around in socks. In contrast, Len was dusty and dirty from the warehouse fight and needed his own change of clothes.

He’d waved Caitlin away from tending to his cut; it was just a cut, and they had more pressing matters with Mardon behind glass, but he’d still promised he’d clean it once he got a moment. The doctor was a bit like Lisa in her fierceness and authoritative demeanor when she thought she knew what was best for someone.

Grabbing Barry’s attention with a wave, Len nodded at the various items from the fridge he’d scattered over the kitchen island—Len wanted some of whatever Barry was throwing together—then he gestured that he was hitting the bathroom to get cleaned up. Barry nodded back, smile wide for Len while he continued talking to his father, all easy and non-verbal in the exchange like they’d
been partners from the start.

It had only been a week, Barry had reminded him. Len could hardly expect the kid to be in love with him after a week, but what did that say about him? Had he loved Barry since Christmas? Since his father? Ferris Air? The woods? The train? The truck? When was it if this was real…?

The woods, Len thought, when he’d first seen Barry’s face. But no, that wasn’t love. Not yet. So when?

Dizziness hung at the edges of Len’s vision as he cleaned the cut along his hairline in the bathroom sink—antiseptic applied, a bandage, and the pulse of dragging tiredness. Maybe he had a mild concussion from knocking his head when he dove to avoid Mardon’s lightning, but he knew how to watch something like that. A little rest and a few hours of less grueling physical activity and he’d be fine. If his headache worsened, he’d let Barry know.

A snack sounded wonderful. It was more like lunch time by now, which would explain how starved Len was. Just he and Barry enjoying another meal in the quiet of his apartment sounded perfect. Len really could get used to all this. When they were finally untethered, he knew he wouldn’t want Barry to go, if only Barry wanted to stay and allowed Len to hang on.

Alexa was right. Len would ruin this when he was his cold, hard, mean self again, and Barry wouldn’t stand for that, but somehow there had to be a way to prove her wrong.

Moving into the bedroom, Len tossed his recovered trench coat onto the bed since it needed to be laundered, and started to undo the buttons on his shirt, when his keen senses picked up on something wrong about the room that could only be explained by his flawless intuition. On immediate alert, Len looked up to scan the room.

His window was open.

Diving for the nightstand, he remembered his mistake too late—the gun wasn’t there anymore. Constricting arms wrapped around his torso, pinning his own arms to his chest before he could turn toward the safe in the closet. Instantly, Len’s lungs were crushed and he struggled for breath, unable to call for Barry.

Slamming his head back at the same time he stomped down with his foot, Len knew one of the acts would connect. Unfortunately, the winner was his head.

A grunt sounded from the goon as his nose cracked, and Len’s head pounded from the impact. The room tilted while he scrambled for the safe. Still fighting for breath and focus, it was easier to punch in the lock code than to cry out. While he fumbled for the revolver, those unwanted arms returned, with vicious hands clawing at Len’s hips to drag him back as he finally grasped something—his mother’s photo. Damn.

Flipped onto his back, the picture flew from Len’s hand as the goon jammed a knee into his ribs and squeezed his windpipe with oppressive fingers, going for a quick knockout, not a kill. Bratva. He wanted answers more than retribution, and Len didn’t have the same training or skills to fight back. He had experience and steadfast resolve though.

Instead of clutching at the hands on his throat, Len reached between the man’s legs and squeezed. With a yelp, the Bratva went lax and Len was able to roll over again, grab his gun, and take aim.

“Wait!”

Barry flashed across the room to save Len the trouble of firing, seizing the man from behind in a
firm wrestler's hold. The goon hadn’t seen the flicker of lightning behind him, and he couldn’t shrug off Barry’s superior strength or swift sneak attack, especially not with a broken nose and blood oozing down his face.

Bratva never did smash and grab’s solo. There was always backup, at least someone out on the street if not sneaking in through the front door. But as Len let the gun sag to the floor and prepared to call out for Barry to stay alert, a thud preceded the arrival of the second Bratva as he flew into the room with Sara following after him.

The second Bratva was out cold, and within Barry’s grasp, the first soon followed.

In the sudden silence after the commotion, Barry’s breathing was the loudest noise as he released his captive and let him tumble onto his side on the floor.

“Are you okay?” he asked Len.

Vision still swimming, head throbbing, heart racing, Len nudged the gun away to grab his mother’s photograph instead. The picture would be okay, but the glass of the frame was cracked.

Pulling it close, only one word summed up the situation. “Peachy.”

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Sara had followed the pair of Bratva all the way to Len’s neighborhood. She hadn’t known at the time where she was ending up—Len hadn’t disclosed his apartment’s address to anyone other than Barry—until she saw them arrive on the motorcycle.

“I can’t believe they got this close…” Barry said, handing Len a handful of ice wrapped in a dishtowel to press to the back of his head.

“Lucky for us, even if we didn’t notice them,” Len nodded at Sara, “they didn’t notice Canary.”

Barry’s answering smile was tight—telling in his sting of jealousy, which Len couldn’t help but eat right up, because if Barry was jealous, it meant he didn’t want anyone else to have Len.

“You should check with Caitlin, Leonard,” Sara said, having finished tying up the men for transport, though they were both still lights out at the moment. Lisa was on her way over so she and Sara could question the men before turning them over to the police. Len didn’t envy the Bratva with that sort of team-up.

“I’m fine,” he said, though a hiss betrayed him as he pressed the ice to his skull, sitting on a stool at the kitchen island. “This sort of beat down, I can handle. Just need to take it easy. If I start feeling like I might lose my lunch instead of wanting some, I’ll give in and Barry can whisk me away. For now I’d rather eat and lie low.”

The piled high sandwiches Barry had been working on did look appetizing, which was a good sign, as nausea was a surefire indication of a worsening concussion.

“Assuming at least one of these is for me…” Len started to reach for a sandwich with his free hand.

Sara and Barry exchanged similar expressions of vexation toward him, but Barry didn’t protest when Len snagged the sandwich that had obviously been set aside for him.

“We can’t stay here anymore, Len,” Barry stated the obvious. “Eat, fine. Gather what you need.
But these Bratva might not be the only ones who know how to find you.”

“I know. And not all the families will care to ask questions first. These guys wanted to capture. Others won’t be as friendly.” Having a target on his back did nothing to ruin Len’s appetite though, and he took a healthy bite. At least the kid could make a good sandwich, even if he failed at coffee and pancakes.

“Mick and Ray are busy fixing the Atom suit,” Sara leaned against the island at Len’s left, Barry hovering at his right as he snatched up a sandwich for himself, “but they’ll join us on the streets when they’re done. Lisa and I can handle the rest. You two stay safe and out of sight until we learn something new. My surveillance of the hotels has me narrowed down to only a handful given the locations hit by Alexa’s men and what we know so far. If I don’t spot her today, we’ll have the final targets to look into, and we won’t call it a night until we have something concrete for our next move.”

The assurance in her tone and her natural inclination to lead relaxed Barry. He was a good figurehead for a team to follow, but he also liked to be led and reassured by someone with confidence he usually feigned.

“She’s beautiful,” Sara said, indicating the photo Len had carried from the bedroom, unable to leave it behind while it was cracked. It sat on the counter with the broken bits of glasses picked away and thrown in the garbage.

“Is that your mom?” Barry said in wonder, like he was noticing the photo for the first time. “Now I get it.”

“Get what?” Len eyed him.

Shrugging, Barry finished swallowing his most recent bite. “You don’t look anything like your father. Got the good looks from Mom’s side, obviously.”

Len chuckled, but then cringed because his head really hurt. If he was going to split his attention, it should be between eating and holding the icepack in place.

Arms crossed, nonchalant as can be, Sara stood merely watching them with a gauging crook to her smile.

“Oh, sorry!” Barry said when he noticed her. “Did you want one?” He proceeded to hold out his current sandwich, which had several bites taken out of it, not that Len thought he meant for her to take that one.

“I’ll pass. But you two be quick. You’re a liability for the rest of today, and you can’t risk heading home, Barry. You don’t want Bratva following you to the suburbs.”

“I know,” Barry set his sandwich aside with a look of sudden queasiness. “I can’t risk anyone targeting Joe or Wally. King Shark destroying the roof was bad enough.”

“King what?” Len repeated, because Barry could not mean that the way it sounded.

“King what?” Len repeated, because Barry could not mean that the way it sounded.

“I’ll tell you later,” he said.

The only truly safe answer for where to go was to pick a place with that sentiment in the title. Len had plenty of safe houses around the city. Apparently, Mick wasn’t currently using one but staying with Ray at an old penthouse—Mick would never turn down an offer to live it up, though he was asking for trouble if he didn’t want Raymond to notice how his eyes strayed. Lisa had her own
place, and Sara was staying with her mother, so Len had his choice of safe houses.

“'I know a good location,’” he said. There was only one safe house on neutral ground between territories that he was certain no one had ever seen him enter.

It also had cable and a PS4 for Netflix.

“Like before, kid. Get your things. I’ll get mine. And once I give you the address, we’ll disappear and no one will be the wiser.”

“What about Evelyn?” Barry said, perking up like an inquisitive puppy. “Should we warn her?”

Both Barry and Sara stared at Len when he blurted another laugh. “Trust me, Scarlet, not even the Bratva would mess with her.”

The rest of the day was split between fielding phone calls and text messages from the team and trying to keep Len comfortable enough to avoid aggravating his concussion and being forced into Caitlin’s care again.

Len really shouldn’t enjoy that he was laid up and that Barry was forced to stay by his side, hiding in the dark. Well, they weren’t forced to be in the dark, but the safe house didn’t have windows, and it just made sense to turn out the lights for a movie marathon.

“I don’t want to burn out on MST3K. What else can we watch?” Barry surfed through Len’s Netflix queue after an initial episode had come and gone. Their shoulders touched as they sat side by side, snacks and drinks on the coffee table, dark and quiet and cozy.

Watching the kid’s face in the pale light from the screen, Len’s thoughts drifted back to what Alexa had said at the Motor Car.

“You’re the cold, hard, mean thief who’d sooner sneer at a domestic scene than live it. And your little hero? He isn’t going to want him.”

“You like this, don’t you?” Len asked, arm stretched over the back of the sofa behind Barry to keep him close. “My domestic side?”

Len didn’t mean it as a trick question, but he knew it was one. If what Barry liked about him were the things with the most potential to go away, what would they have left? Even if Len’s feelings stayed the same, he wasn’t physical like this normally, he wasn’t…soft. He was cold and hard and mean, just like Alexa had said. Even if he wished that wasn’t true.

“Sure,” Barry shrugged, turning to Len with a tender smile, legs crossed on the cushion with the remote in his lap. “This. Sneaking into the precinct. Breakfast at the Motor Car—before it was ruined. Even the fight with Mardon was kinda fun before I lost my clothes.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Scarlet,” Len chuckled, eyeing Barry’s body unabashedly, “I think that was the highlight for me.”

A similar laugh escaped Barry, and even though Len couldn’t tell in the dark, he imagined the kid flushed a little. Still, he didn’t shy away but allowed the intimacy he’d tried to escape in the beginning, falling deeper into the web Len had been building between them. “That’s part of what amazes me about you.”
“What?”

“That I can enjoy being The Flash with you and just being Barry too. I don’t get to be both with too many people. Definitely wasn’t with my last girlfriend. It’s sort of why she left. I mean, she left for herself, for another job, but…I wasn’t enough to keep her here since I wasn’t willing to share this part of my life with her. Which is totally fair, she was right to go…” He trailed off with a scrunched brow.

Patty Spivot. Len knew enough about her to appreciate what Barry had liked about her.

“I don’t share this sort of…whatever this is,” Len gestured between them, “with anyone. Mick and I don’t do movies snuggled on the sofa. Lisa and I...on occasion, though not like when she was little.”

“The Legends?” Barry asked, though Len knew there was a particular Legend who sprang to mind.

“There were some marathons. House of Cards. Game of Thrones. Shark Week.”

Barry laughed again. He’d already given the rundown on King Shark, which Len did and did not hope to get a look at someday. “Really?”

“It was basically a ship full of nerds, you realize.”

The continued laughter was infectious from the kid, all carefree and bright, something rarely experienced in Len’s world, and he soon fell prey to the same giddiness. “I wouldn’t call Sara Lance a nerd,” Barry said eventually, a little leadingly, which Len should have expected.

“She has her moments. Our pastime was cards, though.”

“Yeah? What game?”

“Several. Rummy. War.”

“Strip poker?” Barry waggled an eyebrow.


“Tell me what you like about her,” Barry cut through the clutter, nervous of what Len would say maybe, but still resolute to hear it. “I didn’t get an answer before.”

Pulling his arm from the back of the sofa, Len sighed. At the start of this, he thought there was no point in hiding anything from Barry, because his feelings for him beat out everything else. Now, he had his doubts, even as Barry succumbed to him more and more. “Why do you want to know?”

“Because,” Barry said earnestly, “I need to know what you saw in someone who had nothing to do with Bivolo.”

Maybe the kid had just as many doubts as Len, but he was still here, not moving away, but right in Len’s space, enjoying his company. The thing was, if Len honestly thought about all the things he liked about Sara, there was a peculiar truth to the answers.

“You don’t see the similarities between you two, do you?” he said, shifting to face Barry and lean the slightest bit closer.

“Similarities? I don’t know about that…” Barry turned away as if Len’s full attention was as blinding as direct sunlight.
“I like Sara because she didn’t treat me or Mick like criminals,” Len said, steady and measured and waiting for Barry to turn back to him before he continued. “Oh, she didn’t trust us at the start, gave both of us shit for our choices and our ways plenty, but she still had my back when it mattered. Still fought at my side. Still challenged me to be better even when she could have washed her hands of me.

“Originally, what drew me the most was how she looked in that leather and kicked ass while wearing it.” He flicked his eyes down Barry’s body once more, slower than before. “Apparently, I have a type. I definitely have a type,” he pushed on when Barry giggled and glanced away again, “because beyond that, what held my attention was her wit, and her heart, and her unwillingness to give up on anyone or anything she believes in. Fierce and loyal and beautiful…. ” His voice dropped, quieter but still direct, looking longingly at Barry so the speedster would understand exactly what he meant. “A little dark. A little deadly. But that’s not what she wants even though she knows it’s in her. She doesn’t want to be a killer.

“See, I’ve been one a long time, figured it was par for the course. But I knew she was better. I knew she could be better. And for some reason, she turned that around and believed the same of me.”

Maybe it was Len’s imagination, but he’d swear the longing on Barry’s face was identical to his own, mirrored back at him as Barry heard his words and understood that he wasn’t only talking about Sara.

“Maybe I saw a little too much home when I looked at her,” Len said. “Maybe I figured I had a better chance with someone who’d embraced their darkness for a while instead of with the golden boy I knew I could never have.”

A breath shuddered out of Barry as he scooted unconsciously closer to Len, eyes wide and wet. Their knees bumped with the distance between them steadily decreasing, as he seemed to debate how to respond, because what Len had said wasn’t wrong. It wouldn’t have been possible back then. But maybe…maybe now.

“Is that what drew you to Alexa too?” Barry asked.

“Alexa was different.”

“How?”

“She was all those same things. But with her, every moment was a lie.”

Every kind word and cherished memory like what Len was trying to recapture with Barry now. He was already broken by the time Alexa got her claws in him and Mick, but Len’s heart had fissures from his father, not a partner. There were pieces of him that still beat strong and hopeful then. So he’d given in, opened up, made himself as vulnerable as a raw nerve because he believed what he had with Alexa was real and worth it.

Now he was doing it again, forced from him by an awful, wonderful spell, but this time, he didn’t want it to crumble away and leave him as numb as Alexa had.

“After I realized I’d been conned, I learned to lie first,” Len said. “Didn’t believe too easily in the people that reminded me of what she’d pretended to be. Maybe that’s why I gave you such a hard time at Ferris Air. Maybe that’s why I pushed Sara to be what she wanted for herself, yet still snapped back when she fought me on being a coward.
“I know you doubt me, Barry,” he felt wetness in his own eyes and that was the biggest risk of all, that he was all-in and would not be the same man when this ended, no matter how the plot unfolded, “but please don’t doubt what you’ve meant to me or what I’ve always seen in you. Because it’s the same things I like about Sara, but with you, there’s an ease to this that’s incomparable.”

Taking the risk, Len reached for Barry’s hand and laced their fingers together. Even that touch carried a zing instead of a shudder like it might have a week ago, and just like last night, Barry didn’t pull away.

“I need you to believe that, even if this isn’t love when it’s over.” Len grinned, but he couldn’t hide the sadness that drew down his brows and made his eyes dampen further.

It was the perfect moment for a kiss to calm their fears and culminate the building emotions between them, but Len knew where that path led, and if Barry gave him even an inch beyond clasped hands, he doubted he could stop himself.

So he stole the remote out of Barry’s hand and turned back to the Netflix screen. “Do you like horror comedies?” He started to flip more swiftly through his list.

“Is that a question?” Barry chuckled, after a quick sniffle and a few breaths, though he didn’t release the tangle of their fingers. “The more ridiculous the better.”

“Ever seen Blood Diner?”

“What?” Barry laughed harder.

“Bit before your time, kid, but oh…you haven’t lived.”

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Barry wasn’t ashamed to admit that he spent a little time in the bathroom again before bed, just to take the edge off and ensure they didn’t have another awkward morning. The safe house was sort of fun to stay at, like a game, hiding out, just the two of them in secret where no one knew where they were but each other. If there wasn’t so much to do, Barry would have wanted to spend the rest of the week right there.

But bereavement leave wasn’t a vacation, and Barry and Len weren’t on some couples retreat, they were hiding out while Len nursed a concussion and a new supervillain planned their downfall.

Despite all that, the night went by quietly, and it was only in the morning that they had to face reality.

Sara and Lisa had been busy late into the night. They’d learned that a gathering was planned for Friday for all of the families to send representatives—and Alexa had called it.

“Alexa called it?” Barry gaped, on speaker phone with Len huddled close, still at the safe house. “Why tomorrow and not tonight? Iris texted me that her article hit the streets this morning, complete with a quote from civilians about The Flash mentioning a coup against the mob families. Why would she want to let that simmer?”

“Either she’s confident they won’t believe it,” Len said, “or she has other plans that’ll make that play obsolete. Lise, you got a location?”

“We do. Confirmed from some of our contacts with the Mendozas and a couple guys Sara knows
with the Bratva.”

“The Bratva were still open with you after you turned their men over to the police?” Barry questioned.

Silence came over the line.

“You did turn them over, right?” Barry leaned closer to the phone on the coffee table.

“Sara and I agreed we could learn more if we played nice,” Lisa said.

Barry groaned. Running his hands through his hair, he wanted to be upset, he should be upset, but it wasn’t even only the Rogues that had made the call, but Sara too—though maybe an ex-assassin wasn’t the best example to follow. At least more goons on the streets wasn’t as bad as more people dying, but the last people to die had been because of the Bratva.

“This info better be worth it,” Barry said.

“It will be,” Sara assured him. “We have some good intel so far, including several of the likely representatives. What we need is to cover more ground to learn as much as we can about those involved so you and Leonard can present our case at the meet-up.”

“Alexa will be ready for that,” Len said, fidgeting with telling motion in his fingers. “She’ll expect it. We still want to play into her hands?”

“What’s the other option?” Sara countered. “We let her own the crowd and turn the families loose against The Flash? We’re in a corner here, Leonard. I’d rather go in guns charged for the worst, hoping we can talk some sense into the families. If things go sour, we have a big enough team to make it out. Nothing could go as badly as Russia did, right?”

“Or The Vanishing Point,” Len said with a smile that spoke of shared comradery Barry wasn’t privy to, yet he was starting to believe that maybe he didn’t have to envy Sara, but could instead take what Len liked about her as a sign that the thief had a type and knew exactly what he wanted.

They had a full day and night to prepare for this meet-up, and were still close to pinpointing where Alexa was staying in Central City. Cisco had finished anti-Bivolo goggles for everyone, just in case he came along, and he likely would this time. The problem was thinking ahead to all the possible ways Alexa might play this.

“I still don’t like it,” Len said after they hung up the call. “Doesn’t make sense. Spent all this time riling everyone up just to call them together for a meet and greet?”

“Maybe she plans to blow everyone up to take out the remaining competition,” Barry said.

“Too low-brow for Alexa. And the families aren’t stupid. None of the representatives are big players. They’re higher up but still fodder. Taking out the meeting location would just put a bullseye on Alexa. She doesn’t want that either. The families are panicked enough to agree to meet, but she must have something else up her sleeve.”

“Bivolo?”

“He can’t use his powers on everyone who’ll be there. Too risky.”

Len was right, but Barry couldn’t see through the fog any better than he could, and Len excelled at strategy and figuring out how to one-up the competition.
“We have time to think about it,” Barry said. “And if we can’t get ahead of what she might be planning, we’ll at least be ready to address the representatives. If we can turn them to our side, get them to see that she’s behind all this, she’ll have nothing to fall back on.”

Len’s expression said he didn’t believe for a second it would be that simple.

While the team split up to gather info for the day, Barry hoped Joe could get a few case files from the precinct for them, but he was swamped with work from all of the activity Alexa had caused, including damage control for the murders of the men in custody. Any snooping for what they needed would have to come from Barry and Len.

“I think you just like seeing me in uniform,” Len winked when Barry suggested it.

“A little,” Barry admitted.

Luckily, Len had packed it.

This time, however, Singh had to be avoided at all costs, on the warpath as he was over the Bratva managing to sneak into holding. Whether as CSI Barry Allen or The Flash, there was nothing he had to offer the captain. All he could hope for was to put an end to this soon and avoid any more needless death.

Joe texted him a tip that Julian was out working a case, prompting them to head straight to the precinct to take advantage of the empty lab. Barry didn’t even bother doing the usual stroll in through the station, but zipped them inside at Flash speed.

“You keep watch,” Barry said, in case Julian headed back early or anyone else wandered by.

Leaning against the doorway in his police uniform, Len painted an unfairly tempting picture, lithe and long—those legs, god—with his arms crossed casually, like he could perch just about anywhere and look like he belonged. If anyone came down the hallway, he’d give Barry the head’s up.

Wasting no time, Barry hit his own computer first, printing off whatever he could find in the database on the names Lisa and Sara had given them. Any dirt or extra info on who they’d be dealing with could be instrumental. Barry also wanted real evidence to use against Alexa. Well, there was nothing on her directly, but there was plenty on Bivolo.

That meant swiping the results Julian had pulled together, assuming the uptight CSI was as organized as he appeared. Naturally, he was—the files were all color coded and labelled in plain sight right next to a very neat stack of files on meta humans.

The Flash in particular.

Barry had been zipping around the lab at top speed, but now he slowed, distracted by the multitude of research Julian had been doing on the side—about him.

There were old case files, photos of Barry as The Flash facing meta humans and other criminals, police evidence reports and cold cases left unexplained because the powers involved made it too difficult to answer what had happened. And there were Julian’s notes.

Everything tied back to The Flash and the Particle Accelerator explosion. The surge of meta humans. Flash’s arrival. Julian knew The Flash was at the heart of how everything started. He didn’t know it was because a megalomaniac from the future had decided to mess with everyone’s lives to torture Barry, but he knew it all started at STAR Labs. He even had speculations on Cisco
or Caitlin being The Flash, but he’d dismissed those thoughts after meeting Caitlin in person.

Julian’s main theory was that The Flash must work for the CCPD, which in his mind made the speedster the worst menace of all, because he could alter evidence, get ahead of cases that belonged to real officers, steal files without anyone knowing, and kill or detain meta humans without trial. Why else had some of them simply disappeared after a fight?

He’d figured out so much, though there was no post-it venturing if Barry Allen was The Flash. Not yet. But even all of that wasn’t what caused the nerve endings on Barry’s fingers to go numb. At the bottom of the stack was a handwritten journal with an entry dated only a few days ago.

*Man who saved Central City? Laughable.*

Who’s to say The Flash didn’t cause that spectacle in the sky before he closed it? Isn’t that what triggered the surge of new metas and the appearance of Zoom?

And what did The Flash do with Zoom? Bring him to justice? No, he carried out his own, flagrantly lording his power over this city in the face of the CCPD, and everyone looks the other way because the mayor gave him the key to the city.

Fools. This is how tyrants are made. He’ll be worse than the rest of them someday. He already is and the masses simply don’t realize it yet.

Meta humans. Magic. It’s all the same. An excuse for the powerful to subdue, control, and hurt the weak. Just like that bastard who killed Emma.

*The Flash isn’t this city’s hero. He’s its curse.*

“Coast is clear, kid, but you almost done?” Len’s voice cut through the static ringing in Barry’s ears, but he still took a moment to respond, too numb to speak. He didn’t know who Emma was, but it didn’t matter. What mattered was that nothing Julian had written was wrong.

“Almost done,” Barry said, snatching up the files he needed and zipping to the printer to grab the rest.

Everything was his fault. The Particle Accelerator explosion because Wells wanted to create him. The Singularity. Eddie and Ronnie’s deaths. Zoom. His father’s death. His mother’s death before that, again because of Wells—because of Thawne—but that was still all because of Barry. So many lives touched by the same events and ruined...because of him.

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Len didn’t understand. Barry had seemed lighter yesterday despite their awkward morning, and lighter still when they woke up today. But after mere minutes in the lab musing over items on Julian’s desk, he’d closed up like he’d seen his own murder report. And he wouldn’t tell Len why.

They’d been so open with each other. All of Len’s instincts told him that whatever was wrong, it was something Barry was projecting outward because of conflict he felt toward himself, not toward Len. Len knew what that sort of reaction looked like. But his worry over what might come next had him wondering if something else had been triggered to make Barry realize Len wasn’t what he wanted.

Maybe Len wasn’t that same twenty-year-old anymore, but he felt the same uncertainties in the wake of loving Barry that he’d felt with everyone who’d ever sparked his interest since Alexa.

Eventually, they ended up back at the safe house. Every call or text or span of time spent at STAR Labs had been business only, collecting info to make certain everyone would be ready for tomorrow. The Atom suit was nearly fixed. Everyone had their goggles from Cisco. They knew the location for the meeting so they could plan where to set up sentries, and they’d only be sending in
Len and Barry to deal with Alexa and the families directly. But the plan coming together didn’t mean they knew what the future held.

“Anything you want to do or watch to wind down tonight, Scarlet?” Len asked, coming into the main room of the safe house to find Barry on the sofa, not as plush as the one in his apartment, but nice enough.

The TV wasn’t on, but Barry was staring at it. He’d played the part around the others, but now that they were alone, he’d secluded himself like he wished he didn’t have to be chained to Len right now.

“If we catch Bivolo tomorrow, we can have him take his influence off of you,” Barry said, even-toned and eerily quiet. “This’ll be over.”

Len couldn’t read what was going on in Barry’s head because he didn’t have enough information. Right now, Barry was an enigma, but so obviously in pain that it shot a spike through Len’s chest.

“What’s going on? What’s wrong, Barry? Tell me,” he beseeched him as he sat on the cushion beside him.

The distress on Barry’s face had been building all day, finally allowed to escape into his expression after keeping it bottled up for hours. “You shouldn’t love me,” he said, looking toward Len but not at him. “Not now, not outside this mess, never. I’m a curse.”

“Barry, stop.”

“There is nothing good about me,” he snapped with ferocity, and the increased agony so visible in him caused Len to cringe and clutch his chest. “Look at you. Look what Alexa is doing to you, all because I exist. I only cause the people I care about pain.”

“Alexa is doing this to me,” Len said sternly, even though it was difficult to catch his breath, but he wasn’t going to be outdone by this the way lacking proximity could bring him to his knees.

“You’re a tool to her, Barry, not the cause.”

“I ruin everything,” Barry pulled away from him, shaking his head. “Mom. Dad. Eddie and Ronnie. All the metas, whether I created them, hurt them, let them die, or killed them myself.”

“Barry, stop,” Len said again, grasping his arms to keep him close.

“You ended up the hero, Len…” Barry’s sobs grew worse, tears pooling, voice catching as he tried to pry himself out of Len’s grip, “and I’m the villain.”

Len pitched forward to kiss Barry. He knew he shouldn’t, but Barry wouldn’t listen to him, and it was the only way Len knew how to silence those hateful words.

Barry kissed back with a rush of want, deep and messy to drown in something other than his tears, only to choke on a fresh sob and pant for breath. “Len…”

“You’re not a villain, Barry.” Len grasped both sides of his face and hung on tight, while Barry’s hands came up to grip his wrists. “You’re a sweet kid with shitty lucky who’s had terrible things happen to him. And somehow you still try to do everything you can to do what’s right and to help those who need you. That’s what heroes do. You’re a good man. I believe that with every fiber in me.”

“Because you love me?” Barry said like he still didn’t believe it, as awful, bitter laughter bubbled up through the continued stream of tears reddening his face.
“Yes,” Len said, grazing his thumbs beneath Barry’s eyes. And while the pain didn’t fully dissipate, the tears slowed as Barry clung tightly to Len’s wrists and filled with fresh resolve.

“Tell me,” he said, insistent and desperate. “Tell me why. Make me believe you.” Cloying for more than Len’s wrists, Barry reached instead for his chest, his shoulders, and grabbed on as he swung a leg over Len’s hips and settled in his lap.

It was easy to kiss Len through the shock he felt at having Barry entrap him like this with legs and solid weight. Wet and eager, the kiss made Len melt while Barry’s fingers twisted in his shirt.

But as his hands sank down from their hold on Barry’s face, he thought of the other morning and pulled back with a jolt. “Barry…are you awake?”

Face chapped and raw, tears sticky now as they dried, Barry smiled the cruelest, saddest smile. “Wide awake,” he said, and leaned toward Len again.

Len held him back with a hand at his chest. “Are you sure?” he said, which seemed so silly, but he didn’t mean if Barry was really awake, but if he was sure he wanted this.

Being denied filled Barry with renewed panic and a need to connect that made his eyes look wild, fiercely beautiful, and so green through his remaining tears. “Please,” his voice cracked, which was all Len needed to want nothing more than to banish Barry’s pain forever.

Grabbing him by the waist, Len spun them and dropped Barry onto the sofa so he could encase him in his arms properly and kiss him again.

He wouldn’t simply tell Barry how much he loved him. He’d show him.

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

Don’t be too hard on Barry...

There are two different directions I can go with the next chapter. My original plan, which is most likely, and what probably feels more obvious and maybe even natural at this point, so I’ll wait and see what the muse tells me.

I changed Julian’s backstory somewhat for this universe. His sister is still dead, but was killed by a meta (or magic user, Julian isn’t really sure) which spurred him to want to come to Central City to learn everything he can about them.
Throw away the plan

Chapter Summary

Make the plan. Execute the plan. Expect the plan to go off the rails.

Throw away the plan.

Chapter Notes

This was going to be another 10k chapter, but then I realized it was a better cliffhanger cut off sooner. But that means I already have 2500 words for the next chapter started, so you might get it sooner. :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Len’s tongue felt as claiming and possessive as that first night in Tiffany’s, all for Barry—devoted to him, in love with him, and willing to do anything to prove it.

Knowing how worthless he was, how much trouble he caused everyone he cared about, it felt so good to have somebody love Barry blindly, who knew the worst of him and still looked at him like he owned the world.

It was addictive, that feeling, the acknowledgement of unwavering emotion, just as Len’s kisses and the touch of his skin had been addictive since day one. Barry wanted the weight that settled over him on the sofa, the feel of Len’s hands pushing up beneath his T-shirt, the warmth of breath as Len moved from Barry’s lips across his jaw and neck.

“Tell me,” Barry whimpered, slipping a shaking hand under Len’s shirt as well, knees falling open to beckon the man closer. “Tell me why you love me.”

“Because you’re beautiful,” Len whispered, breathless as he lowered himself right where Barry wanted him, locking their hips together. “Your eyes—green and bronze and gold. Your skin,” he licked a trail up to Barry’s earlobe, “and every mole and freckle. Your legs.”

Barry whimpered again because Len’s hand slid from the skin of his stomach down around his inner thigh and squeezed. “Yes…tell me…” Maybe if he heard enough praises, felt them, believed them, he wouldn’t see himself as so ugly.

Len’s hand stayed at Barry’s thigh, caressing him boldly, while the other lifted to Barry’s face and held his cheek. “I love you,” he said plainly, eyes shimmering navy in the dark as he dipped down once more to kiss Barry full on the lips.

Hands trapped between them, Barry still managed to feel his way to the clasp of Len’s slacks.

“I love your power…and how you use it,” Len flicked his tongue over Barry’s lips, rising up slightly to accommodate those seeking hands. “I love that I can smell you coming…like a storm
brewing. The way the air tingles. Your energy, your stubbornness, your laugh.”

Yanking Len into another kiss, Barry pushed his hand into Len’s slacks and palmed him through his underwear, impressive already at half-mast, though he hardened further as Barry traced him. This was what madness must feel like, joy and misery mixed into one without any discernable seams.

“Barry,” Len said, breath hitching with a gasp, lips close and quivering. His hands moved to Barry's shirt to push it up his chest.

Lifting his arms for Len to remove it, Barry went right back to palming him, grasping for Len’s neck with his other hand to lick another lewd path between his lips.

Len couldn’t form sentences when this next kiss broke. “I love…I love…” he panted, grabbing for Barry’s hand to guide him in just the right way in how to touch him. Then it was Barry’s breath hitching because oh, he wanted this, and he loved the way Len took control.

Without even getting Barry’s jeans undone, Len slid his free hand down the front of them to grip Barry in kind. Barry was so hard, maddeningly so. Bucking up into Len's grip, he wished it was skin on skin that connected them, so he asked for it.

“All they managed for several feverish moments was over fabric groping and hot breath on each other’s skin, not even able to kiss anymore, just panting and writhing. But Len soon obeyed, peeling back the elastic of Barry’s underwear at the same time as he led Barry’s hand beneath his own.

“I love your goodness,” Len said as if he’d never faltered. “So good, Barry. And selfless. Heroic. Better than I could ever be…”

Numbness washed over Barry to halt his momentum and he resisted the pull of Len’s hand. What was he doing? He wasn’t good. Or selfless. Or heroic. Len shouldn’t think any of those things.

“What was he doing?”

“He choked out, weak from breathlessness and the tears sticky on his face, and weaker still as Len’s fingers drifted between his legs. God, Barry wished he could let Len touch him. “Len.”

But the other man’s descent stopped on its own in an overlap of Barry’s words. “I can't,” he said, pulling his hands free.

“What?” Barry blinked confusion because…he'd been the one about to stop this.

“I can’t,” Len said again, head shaking, whole body shaking as he sat back on his ankles between Barry’s parted knees and dragged a hand over the buzz of his hair. “You don’t mean this. Something happened. You’re upset. If we're together like this, you’ll regret it. I don’t want you to ever regret being with me, Barry. I love you too much. I love you so much…” Something wounded revealed itself in the way he said that, like he wanted to kiss Barry so badly it stung, but he still backed off the couch instead to get to his feet.

Len was hypnotized into thinking Barry hung the moon and wanted nothing more than to be with him, yet he had more self-control than Barry did, because his curse was love not selfish escapism —to love Barry, who wasn’t worthy of anything good.
“I’m sorry,” Barry said, scrambling to get up while Len stood off the side of the sofa, breathing in deeply to calm down. “I-I’m sorry…they made you love me.”

“Barry, wait—”

Flashing from the main room into the bathroom, Barry collapsed to his knees and clutched the toilet. The tears were building again, but bile was building faster. With a heave, he purged what little he’d eaten that day.

He’d fought so hard to be what Len believed of him, but not even his best efforts were good enough. They never were. He was a curse. He was the bad guy. And the only reason Len couldn’t see that was because he’d been brainwashed.

Sobbing and spitting and quaking in the aftermath, Barry didn’t realize he’d left the door open until he heard a knock.

“Please…” he shook his head, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and flushing to erase the evidence, “please leave me alone.”

Gentle steps signaled Len’s approach. “Kinda hard to do that with this yo-yo between us.”

A fresh sob choked out of Barry and he pulled his knees to his chest.

“Barry, come here. Get off the floor.” Len came closer and Barry zipped to his feet, ready to flash around him out of the room if he had to. He didn’t care how childish it was. If he could have left the safe house entirely without hurting Len, he would have started running and not stopped until the pain did.

“I’m off the floor,” he said, unable to look at Len directly or face what he’d almost let happen. “Now leave me alone.”

“I can’t do that.”

Zeroing in on Len with a snarl, Barry was ready to rail back at him amid his tangled, tortured emotions, but looking at Len meant finally seeing the sympathy and affection in his eyes that Barry had only known this past week. All raw and open and…fake?

“Barry, it’s okay,” Len said, voice low as he reached for Barry. “It’s not.”

“You were going to stop me yourself, that’s why you started to pull away.”

“No.” But Barry was too exhausted from crying to prevent Len from wrapping him up and holding him. The comfort of those arms felt like an exhale Barry needed to take, and he sank there greedily.

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not.”

“You were going to stop me yourself, that’s why you started to pull away.”

“Not soon enough.”

“Barry,” Len huffed a short laugh, “let me forgive you. It’s okay. Everything I said is still true.”

“But it shouldn’t be,” Barry shook his head even as he squeezed Len tighter and pressed his face to his neck. “I believe you love me, Len, but only because you can’t help it. Even if you felt this way before, you won’t after this. Not when it’s all over.”
A sigh escaped Len like he was as tired as Barry—tired of fighting. “Scarlet…stop playing martyr when you don’t need to. If one of us is despicable, it isn’t you.”

They were going in circles again, having chased each other all week like some parody of their encounters as hero and nemesis. But the reservations Barry held had staying power he couldn’t let go. “You’re not despicable. You’re trying. I’m just a mess. Why would you ever love me for real?”

“Because you’re good, Barry,” Len said, which made Barry flinch at the absurdity. “You are, and I’d be lucky to have you. You don’t want to believe the rest, fine. Believe that. But I do love you. I love every part of you. Even the parts you don’t think are worth it.”

Tears filled Barry’s eyes again, making his face so chapped and raw, he’d look a mess tomorrow if he didn’t have a healing factor. “I’m sorry… I’m sorry. It’s just so hard to hear you say things I can’t believe right now. About me…about how you feel about me. But I’m glad you’re here,” he gripped Len’s shirt to keep him in his orbit, “even if it is selfish.”

Wrapping his arms around Barry tighter, Len held him solidly. “I don’t care if it’s selfish either. I’ve never had anything like this, Barry, and I…I like the way it feels.”

Hesitant laughter escaped Barry as he nuzzled his head into Len’s chest. “You mean a hug?”

“Yes,” Len chuckled back. “Someone I can hold…and touch…and have touch me without feeling a twist in my gut. With Lisa and Mick, it’s easier, but I still pull away. What Bivolo did to me makes this brand new. I’ve never felt so light. I like this feeling and I’m glad it’s with you, even if it doesn’t last beyond tomorrow.”

Knowing how true that was, how Len didn’t try anymore to deny what they couldn’t be certain of, just made the tears surge up faster, but in the end Barry didn’t have any moisture left to spill.

“Come on, kid. Let’s go to bed early tonight. We’ll sleep this off and do our jobs tomorrow. Life will move on. It won’t be the end of the world. I can promise you one thing without any doubts. When this is over, I won’t be your enemy.”

“You haven’t been my enemy for a long time, Len.”

The problem was—the miracle was—Barry wanted to be so much more than strange friends. And he honestly didn’t need the sweet, devoted version of Len that spouted ‘I love yous’ at every opportunity. The teasing, sometimes frustrating Captain Cold who straddled the line between hero and scoundrel, he was more than enough. Though a little sweetness, Barry could admit, would be nice, if Len could offer that…and still wanted to.

Untangling to go about their usual routines before bed, by the time Barry left the bathroom, his face showed no signs of how much he’d cried.

The bedroom was smaller in the safe house than in Len’s apartment, but it wasn’t without its charm. Perhaps the sweetest thing was something that had nothing to do with Barry, and that gave him hope that an affectionate Len wasn’t impossible, just difficult to nurture.

Set in a brand-new frame, Len’s mother’s photograph rested on the nightstand.

“She died when I was young. Long before Lisa was born,” Len said without prompting as they settled into bed, confirming what Barry already assumed, that Len and Lisa didn’t share the same mother.

“Another terrible thing we have in common, huh?”
“There are a few good things we have in common.”

“Such as?”

“A love of bad puns?”

“Nope,” Barry smiled, which shouldn’t have come to him so easily, but then…Len had a way of making him smile in the darkest of times. “Pretty sure that’s still terrible.”

“Don’t be so quick to judge, Flash. I consider it a point of pride being cool under pressure.”

“Oh god,” Barry groaned, “you are such a dork!” Giggling in the dark, he couldn’t resist casting his companion a sly glance. “Time to put your skills on ice, Cold.”

A carefree laugh responded. “And you wonder why I love you,” Len said, not carrying any secondary meaning or trying to wound Barry with the statement, but while it carried a mild sting anyway, it made it easy to curl closer to Len.

Tucking his head beneath Len’s chin, Barry was hesitant to voice what he really wanted, but the words slipped out of him anyway. “Do you think, if you still want me when this is over…that it could be like this?”

“I hope so,” Len said.

Barry did too. Even if he didn’t deserve it. Even if he was broken. Maybe they could fill in a few cracks for each other.

“Goodnight, Len.”

“Goodnight, Barry.”

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The next day came without fanfare. Barry showered and dressed, and together he and Len headed to STAR Labs to prepare for the mob meet-up that evening.

Everyone came and went throughout the morning and afternoon—everyone, which included Iris and Wally, who wanted to help as much as he was allowed. He’d seen the news and read the papers too; he couldn’t be kept in the dark forever, not when he shared the same detective genes as Joe and Iris.

He was also a budding engineer and too smart for his own good. Cisco had been working on extra trackers for the team to put in their comms, which prompted an idea from Wally for perimeter sensors.

“Like an invisible fence, ya know? With enough markers, we could track when anyone tries to leave the meet-up area.”

“Can’t risk setting up anything ahead of time or the families could get nervous and change location,” Len said.

“But,” Cisco waved a Twizzlers he’d been eating Len’s direction, “if they were portable, Ray could fly them around the perimeter after everyone’s inside. I like it.” He nodded and pointed the Twizzlers toward Wally. “I got just the thing for sensors too, if you wanna help me with the programming?”
“You’re on,” Wally grinned, rubbing his hands together at the chance to be part of Team Flash for real. “And, ya know, if you need anyone extra on the streets to watch the blind spots, I could easily be another body.”

Lucky for Wally, Joe wasn’t around to hear that or he would have had an aneurism at the suggestion. Barry exchanged an exasperated look with Iris, and they both turned to Wally to give him the usual lecture at the same time.

Only for Len to beat them to it. “Another body is exactly what you’ll be—riddled with bullets on the pavement, kid. Watch and learn. Train. Make sure you can at least take out a mugger with a knife and a gun before you try taking on seasoned hitmen with semis. Then we’ll talk.”

Wally sputtered at the concise rebuttal but latched onto a particular word Len had used. “Kid? You know I’m not some teenager, right?”

“You old enough to drink?”

“Well…”

“Then it’s gonna be ‘kid’, junior, for a good long while. Learn to love it.”

Barry and Iris both snickered at how quickly Wally deflated. “He calls me ‘kid’ too,” Barry tried to comfort him.

“Also well earned,” Len said. “Just don’t call me ‘sugar daddy’.”

A snort escaped Barry between laughter and disbelief. “You’d have to pay for more than meals first. And what would be better than that, huh? Gramps? Sir?”

“I’m sure I could think of a few names I’d like to hear you call me…” Len flirted easily, because even after last night, neither of them could fully give up the hope of what could be when all of this was over.

“Wow, I really need you two to stop,” Cisco said, shooing Len and Barry apart.

“Wait, was that whole thing about you two dating all this past year true?” Wally asked, referencing Len’s joke back when Barry was first packing to move into Len’s apartment.

“More a recent development,” Cisco picked up the explanation. “We’ll explain the parts you don’t know yet later, Wally. Come on. You too, Cold. You got engineering chops, don’t pretend you don’t. Faster we get something like this done with the sensors, faster we can move onto the next failsafe for this crazy mission.” Heading out of the Cortex with Wally following, he clearly expected Len to do the same.

Len contemplated the idea as he stole one of the Twizzlers from the bag on Cisco’s desk. “I really shouldn’t humor him. There’ll be no living with the kid if he thinks he can always order me around like this.” He winked, taking a teasing bite out of the end of the Twizzlers before following Cisco anyway.

It was so…endearing. So fun, really, the way they all worked together so well. Team Flash, the Legends, and the Rogues, intertwined in their tasks. Barry was musing over how impossible it should be, unaware of the dopey smile he wore as he followed the trail of Len’s strides out of the Cortex until the progression of his gaze landed on Iris.

“What?”
“You love him,” she said succinctly.

“What?! I—”

“Barry Allen, I know the difference between how you look at someone you should love—like Felicity or Patty. Even Linda was pretty hot.” She tilted her head as she no doubt conjured an image of the woman.

“Super hot.” Barry conjured one too.

“But,” Iris snapped back and gestured between Barry and the direction Len had gone, “you never looked at any of them like that.”

“I’m not some Disney princess,” Barry defended. “It’s been a week.”

“If you were a Disney princess, you would have been in love after a day. And it hasn’t been a week, Barry. You’ve known Snart for longer than that. It’s different when you’ve known someone for a while and your perception…shifts,” she said more gently, which he wasn’t sure if he should take as meaning him or just a general statement. But she didn’t look resentful as she said it, just patient and supportive trying to get him to admit something she already knew to be true.

He wasn’t sure if he could say he loved Len, but the emotions he felt for him were almost crushing. “It’s crazy, right? What if I only like the parts of him that worship me?”

“Barry, do you really think that?”

“No. I hate when he’s like that. The times I have the most fun, when I really feel close to him, is when he’s just being the Snart I remember, who drives me crazy, but playing to the good guy’s side, ya know? Though he’s pretty fun playing a little bad too. As long as no one gets hurt!” he blurted.

“Barry Allen,” Iris said again, saying so much more than his name in the tease of her tone.

Barry had to snicker, but then looked at her seriously. “There is no way you think this is okay.”

“Well…he’s not Becky Cooper,” she said in a mockery of the way Barry had once mocked how she’d always said his old girlfriend’s name. “Plus, I see the way he looks back at you, and I think your worlds fit insanely well together somehow.”

They really did, just like the teams as a whole, but that didn’t change that a shadow lingered over them. “He might not mean it.”

“Barry,” Iris reached for his arm, squeezing it in support, “I’ve seen the way he looks at you from a lot longer ago than just this past week. I don’t think I realized what it was then, but now…I have to wonder. Wait. Be patient. But don’t write this off. When I was pushing you toward Felicity a million years ago, this was the expression I kept waiting to see on your face and never did. I’m happy if you’re happy.”

What made Iris so amazing was that she meant that. She was such a better person than Barry could ever be. “Sometimes I feel like this is all my fault,” he confessed, maybe because they were alone and it was Iris standing in front of him.

“You mean Alexa?”

“I mean everything. Everything. From the very beginning and everyone we’ve lost.”
She squeezed his arm tighter. “None of the people we’ve lost would blame you for what happened to them. You made choices. So did they. So did The Reverse Flash and Zoom. So did Snart. It isn’t about the past, Barry, it’s about now. Today. Each moment as they come. As someone with the ability to travel through time, I get why you sometimes forget that,” she smiled at him so beautifully. “I can’t promise you that what’s happening now will turn out okay, but I can promise that everyone working to end this is doing their best just like you. That’s enough. That has to be enough.”

Another squeeze, a tug at her smile, and she let go. She was always saving Barry from himself, which was maybe his real nemesis.

“Thank you,” he said.

When Iris walked away, Barry remembered why he’d loved her for so long, why he still did, and it surprised him that no pang of regret sifted in for the choices they’d made. They were good friends and it was okay if that was all they ever were.

Diving back into the projects and work to be done before evening fell, Barry wished he could scout the area surrounding the meet-up, but he worried about traps that might have been placed there, and about leaving Len behind for even a few minutes when there was risk of him not returning in time. Blueprints, city surveillance, and satellite footage had to be enough, though the one set of blueprints they couldn’t get a hold of was for the actual building the meeting was being held in.

Since Barry couldn’t run, he helped man the comms in the Cortex and compiled the profiles of the family representatives. Each family was sending one main proxy and two grunts for protection. Alexa would likely be bringing Bivolo, MacReady, and Goldman. It was doubtful the families would have much intel on her going in, which put them at a disadvantage. Barry and the team were at a disadvantage too, because while they knew all the players, they still hadn’t been able to decipher what Alexa hoped to get out of this meeting. All they could do was plan for every possibility that came to mind.

It was while Barry was alone in the Cortex, memorizing details about the participating representatives, that Sara called in over the comms.

“Alexa spotted on Columbus Avenue. I’m in pursuit.”

Barry zipped to his feet with a brief pause for breath, then flashed over to the microphone. “For real?” he called back to her. “If you catch her now, we can avoid this whole thing.”

“Don’t get your hopes up, Flash. She’s got muscle with her. Didn’t see their faces. But even though I’m good at what I do—the best—I think she made me the second I made her. Switching to aerial tactics.”

“Aerial?” Barry leaned in closer.

“She means she’s doing some impressive parkour we’re being deprived of seeing,” Len came over swiftly from the hallway entrance carrying several sensors, with Cisco and Wally trailing behind him, “getting on a rooftop or overhang to stealth her way closer from above.”

“Wow,” Wally exclaimed, “she really is like some superspy, huh?”

“You realize you’re standing in the presence of a superhero and supervillain, right?” Cisco shot the younger man a look as he set his collection of sensors on the desk beside Len’s.

“I know,” Wally shrugged, “but the ‘cool’ doesn’t stop with Captain Cold.”
Len barked a laugh. “You got promise, kid. You sure you gotta stick with the straight and narrow?”

“Len,” Barry scolded him, partly on reflex for Joe’s sake concerning Wally and partly because he wanted to know what was going on with Sara. “Canary, anything? We have your location. Do you need us to send someone in for backup? I think Ray’s still—”

“Lost ‘em,” Sara’s voice cut him off. “All of them. Damn. She either went into the Plaza or the Four Seasons, but I didn’t see which. She knew I was tailing her, even once I went vertical. She’s good, Leonard.”

“I warned you,” he leaned over Barry’s shoulder to answer.

“We can stake out both,” Sara said, “but if she’s this good, she’ll have a way to the meet-up without any of us seeing her.”

“Stay there for now,” Len told her, “just in case you catch sight of anyone else of interest, but when it gets closer to the meet-up, make scarce. If we lose her tonight, at least we’ll know where to start tomorrow.”

The near-miss had Barry’s nerves on edge, counting down the hours, feeling cooped up in the Labs and anxious. Even once everyone started to congregate in one location again, save Sara still out on recon, Barry felt like he was close to scaling the walls.

What helped was watching the at times entertaining interactions of their strange crew. By the time they’d all eaten the dinner Mick and Ray brought in—a mobile meal, with everyone chowing down on pizza and sides while in motion around the Cortex—there wasn’t any other busy-work to be handed out.

Len was explaining how his cold gun worked to Wally, showing off how he gave it a checkup before every important heist or mission by taking it apart and putting it back together. As a student fascinated by what Cisco had made—and that Len had tweaked—Wally was rapt with attention. Joe stood by with a scowl at his son interacting with a dangerous felon, though not too much of a scowl, which was something of a feat in itself.

Lisa was looking over the schematics with Cisco one last time, but was mostly using it as an excuse to hang on him. She had the plan down pat but enjoyed listening to Cisco speak from a place of authority and excitement about the mission ahead.

Ray and Caitlin were discussing the effects of Bivolo’s powers and how the goggles prevented him from manipulating their brainwaves, and Iris was chatting with Mick, which might have given someone who didn’t know her well pause, but she was one of the toughest people in the room.

She was enjoying a beer with the large pyro, needling details out of him that she could use for her next article. They were close enough to where Caitlin and Ray stood that when Mick reached for yet another beer—his third or fourth maybe—Ray strode over and snagged it, stealing a swig for himself.

He didn’t make a big deal over it, just smiled and teased his partner, “Remember that conversation about sharing more when playing for the good guys, Mick?” before passing the beer back to him. What was amazing was that the simple ribbing had the desired effect. While Mick gave some grumbling bite of a comment back to Ray, he still set the beer aside.

Mick certainly seemed to enjoy his vices to an unhealthy degree, which was why Barry thought the
act held more meaning than learning to share or having the self-control to put down the breaking point of one too many.

Ray returned to his conversation with Caitlin and Iris got pulled into their talk as well, leaving Mick to debate between joining them or one of the other clusters. Barry watched him give a non-too-subtle eye-roll at Lisa’s antics with Cisco, then seemed about to head over to Len, Wally, and Joe when he visibly tensed like he’d noticed something unpleasant.

Following the line of Mick’s gaze, Barry thought it was something about Len—the cold gun maybe? But that didn’t make any sense. Then Barry saw it, as light glinted off the metal encasing Len’s pinky finger.

He’d donned a ring today, which Barry hadn’t thought to question. Len was eccentric in many ways. A silver pinky ring was hardly strange. But the way it got Mick lost in his head made Barry wonder if it held deeper meaning, especially since Len had chosen to wear it today.

Turning away from Len’s group, Mick noticed Barry standing nearby, just distant enough to have a good view of everybody. To Barry’s surprise, Mick headed toward him.

“You not having a beer, Red?”

“Oh, uhh…doesn’t do anything for me,” Barry said, glad Mick hadn’t gone so far as to bring him one, though there was thoughtfulness in the question. “I heal so quickly, my body purges the alcohol before I feel it.”

“Sucks to be you,” Mick said, as though never being able to get a buzz again was Barry’s worst hardship.

“Sometimes…it really does.” He couldn’t help the way his eyes stayed on Len, even as Mick shifted to lean against the desk beside him.

“You noticed the ring, huh?”

Mick was talking to Barry, furthering the conversation without prompting. “Yeah, uhh…Sara said something in Saints about a memento from Alexa, right?”

“That’d be it.”

“She gave it to him?”

“Yes. After I gave it to her.”

Oh. Barry often forgot that Alexa had been seeing both Rogues back when they were young men starting their criminal careers. That they were still friends now, decades later, spoke of something far stronger than anything Alexa could break. Sad as it was to think of what she’d done to them, that gave Barry hope.

“Why would he keep it?” Barry asked.

“Cos I told him to. From me, not her. Didn’t think he’d listen for so long. Says he likes the reminder to not be a fricken idiot again.”

Barry snorted. “Yeah…yet here he is being an idiot with me, right?”

There was a grunt and grumble before Mick said, “Yer not so bad.”
A smile warmed Barry’s face. He never would have guessed he could stand beside Heat Wave and be glad they were getting along. It meant something to have the man’s blessing though. As Barry glanced aside to take in the figure of the imposing pyro, he couldn’t help thinking that his fierce expression was sadder than he wanted anyone to notice.

“Hey, Mick? What about you and Alexa?”

Mick flicked his eyes to the side at Barry, then almost instantly away again. “You know that already.”

“Right, but…we’re all so focused on Len. She’s focused on Len. What about what she was to you?”

The way Mick shifted and rolled his shoulders said he was seconds from shutting this down and walking away, but he didn’t. He clenched his jaw for a moment but eventually started to speak. “Not like I was some blushin’ virgin before her or nothin’, she was just the first nice, smart gal who gave me the time ‘a day. Always sweet, ya see, and…what’s the word? Attentive to me and Snart. ‘Course she never pushed too far when we were all together so we wouldn’t catch wise she was seeing us both. But when she had me alone…she’d get softer, always said pretty things like she knew just what…” After trailing off like he hadn’t meant to get that intimate, he cleared his throat.

“Ya probably think Lisa’s the same, huh?” Mick switched gears. “She’s not. Oh she’ll honey pot if she has to, you know that much.”

“Sure,” Barry nodded, “that’s how I first met her, when she was going after Cisco.”

“But she plays the game short and it’s done. Lexxy kept the con rollin’ for months.”

Lexxy, Barry cataloged the slip that said Mick wasn’t as over the heartache she’d left behind as he pretended. He and Len had both been wounded deep. And suddenly it dawned on Barry how deep when it came to Mick, even though Alexa barely acknowledged him for the game she’d set in motion.

“Was that ring…meant to be an engagement ring?” Barry asked.

Mick’s posture was usually an immovable wall, never fully relaxed even when drinking or acting flippant, but when he was really on edge, he seemed to turn to stone. Then he softened like it was too draining to hold onto the past tonight.

“Said she wasn’t a diamond kinda gal. But it still sparkles, don’t ya think?” he said, watching the way the light hit Len’s ring, glittering even more brilliantly than the core of the cold gun. “I was just the meathead muscle to help her finish her con. Snart was the one she had to get close to and really be careful around, since he’s so damn sharp and picks up on when things are goin’ south. Damn near broke his nose when I saw him wearing that ring the first time. Now…twenty years later, he’s still around and I don’t need the headache of some broad on my arm.”

Meaning, he didn’t mind Len wearing the ring if it represented them more than what Alexa had tried to do to them, but Barry wasn’t so sure Mick was being honest that he was happy being alone.

“What about other options?” Barry turned his gaze from Len’s group to Ray’s.

“Snart been sayin’ shit?” Mick growled.

“No,” Barry held up his hands, “I just…noticed. Lisa maybe said a few things…”
Another grumble and twitch of Mick’s fingers like he wished he had one of those beers after all. “Damn busybody.”

“It’s just…I see how you act around Len and Lisa. I see how you act around others now too. You act different around Ray. And he obviously likes you.”

“Ray likes everybody.”

Barry chuckled, but this was an important subject to him, because he knew what it was like to pine from afar. “Take it from someone who knows, it isn’t worth it to wait and never tell someone how you feel, even if you’re not sure they feel the same. Or are you waiting for some grand gesture first?”

Mick snorted, looking surlier by the moment. “It’d have to be pretty damn grand for me to believe Haircut wants anything to do with me like that. Now drop it,” he warned.

“Okay,” Barry held up his hands again, knowing he had to tread lightly with Mick, but he couldn’t let the matter drop without saying one more thing. “Guess it’s been wearing on me that Len never told me about his apparent crush all this time just because he didn’t think I’d feel the same. Now here we are and all I want is to keep being with him. Maybe you have too much in common thinking you aren’t worth love or second chances when everyone keeps trying to surround you with it. I for one—and I don’t mean to sound condescending but—I’m really proud of you, Mick. I like having the Rogues on our side. And for what it’s worth, I know Len’s really proud of you too.”

The stone wall was back, but Barry thought he saw at least a few cracks in the foundation before Mick pushed from the desk. “Knew hangin’ around you do-gooders would rot my teeth.”

Barry smiled as Mick left his side to join Len’s group. Only Lisa seemed to have noticed their discussion, and when Barry caught her eyes, he got a devious idea that definitely required a smooth talker’s touch. When the brunette tilted her head at his no doubt scheming expression, Barry gestured her over with a curl of his finger.

Sometimes people required a mild push to head the direction they deep down wanted to go. Even if Barry’s love life was potentially on its way to disaster, that didn’t mean everyone had to suffer.

XXXXX

There was one neighborhood where each of the Central City mob families had some sort of hold within a few blocks’ radius. Not impartial territory exactly, it belonged to the Mendozas, but it was still treated as a sort of neutral zone where no trafficking or illegal activity occurred out of respect for the other powers houses.

The Mendozas, Santinis, Dunkirks, Bratva, and Yeuns. With Alexa, that meant six interested factions. All they were missing was Len’s Rogues, and even without a direct invite, he was ready to make his appearance. He just never expected to be heading to a mob rendezvous with The Flash at his side.

They both wore their goggles, outfitted to the nines for the occasion, with Len is his parka and the cold gun at the ready.

The building chosen for the meeting was surrounded by streets like the center of a star, with five directions heading away from it representing the five families. Watching the building and surrounding streets from various perches was Mick, Lisa, Sara, Ray, and Joe West. Cisco, Caitlin, Iris, and young Wally were back at the Labs.
As Barry and Len made their approach, having waited a handful of minutes after the designated meet time to ensure everyone else would be inside, they moved at normal speed for the doors. Ray’s job was to plant the sensors around the perimeter before returning to his lookout point.

“Careful when hitting your marks, Raymond,” Len whispered into the comms, eyeing the dark alleyways. “Could have eyes and ears everywhere.”

“Follow our lead, Atom,” Sara said. “The rest of us can direct you to the best spots to remain undetected.”

“You got it!”

Len trusted their crew to be smart, to play things safe and make the right calls. Well, maybe everyone but Raymond, but even he was capable of following orders on occasion.

“CCPD is on standby for an anonymous tip, Barry,” West said.

There was nothing more to do than start the show.

Len reached for the doors and Barry grasped his hand briefly with overlapping fingers, squeezing mild pressure through Len’s glove to the ring beneath. Their eyes met through tinted lenses, blue and red so that both of them saw purple when they looked at each other.

Lips parting, Barry seemed about to say something, but instead he smiled, squeezed Len's hand once more, and let go.

Slipping inside the building, a murmur of voices alerted them that this was indeed the place, but there were no guards waiting to greet them. The representatives were gathered in the center of a large main room in front of a foreman’s platform like a makeshift stage. Alexa did like to leave an impression.

Large beams similar to the setup Mardon had been squatting in allowed them to sneak forward undetected. The unlocked doors without any watchful eyes guarding them proved to Len that Alexa expected him and The Flash and wanted them to be there. There’d be something they couldn’t anticipate, Len just had to hope he and Barry could adapt faster than Alexa.

Hiding behind one of the beams closest to the action with Barry tight beside him, they peered out to get a lay of the land. Len recognized nearly every face.

Mario Mendoza, the youngest son, with two of his largest muscle. He was the only member of the family who hadn’t done time, which often meant he was mistaken for weak. He was hardly weak—or stable, for that matter. He’d just never been put away for the throats he slit.

Pete Moretti for the Santinis with a couple new-blood guns for hire from Keystone. Most loyal grunt the Santinis ever had, even now, with the family scattered.

Colleen Dunkirk—oldest matriarch for the Irish. She made any of the Dunkirk men look like Boy Scouts. Alexa would get along with her swimmingly, Len imagined. Colleen had a man as wide as he was tall on one side of her and an intimidatingly muscled woman with blunt hair on the other.

The two Bratva brothers who’d been in Len's apartment were there—perfect—though the true representative for the Russians was the third in command of the Central City chapter.

Finally there was Gyeong Yeun, the leader for the Koreans. She had muscle with her like everybody else, but she’d come herself instead of sending a proxy because she didn’t trust her
subordinates with important business. Even traps she made sure to attend personally. So far she’d always made it out alive. A couple times she was the only one left alive.

None of these groups wanted to secede power. Alexa could hardly sway them that direction through threats alone, or using any of the power she’d displayed so far. After all, the Bratva had made an example of her men—men who’d been caught by The Flash and taken into the CCPD. That showed weakness more than anything. The families would be friendlier to Len than some stranger who used to call this city home. Though Moretti could pose a problem since Len had targeted the Santinis before, but the play he and Barry had in mind was still the smart one.

But that begged the question of what play Alexa was about to make.

Walking onto her stage, Bivolo trailed Alexa, as well as MacReady and Goldman just as Len had predicted. She looked as glamorous as ever—gently curled auburn hair, flawless makeup, and a dress she’d clearly chosen to grab everyone’s attention because while it was a simple black color, floor-length with long sleeves, it also had a strikingly high slit and cutouts as if the dress were a halter and the sleeves detached.

The crowd stirred, but many of them knew the men she had with her, and knew to fear Bivolo and what he could do. Meta humans had changed the game. Alexa was counting on their fear of that.

“Still remember who she is?” Barry whispered.

They’d worried initially that Bivolo’s programming for Len to forget Alexa in Barry’s presence might make their plan obsolete, which would have required resorting to plan B—Barry confronting the families alone—but Alexa must have intended that as a single-use trick or very specifically situational, because Len had no trouble remembering who she was.

“We got this,” he said.

“So glad to make all of your acquaintances,” Alexa began the gathering as the murmurs of the crowd died down, poised and sly and totally in her element. “Though, Madame Yeun, you may recall we met many years ago when I was last home, first learning the trade.”

Gyeong dipped her head in acknowledgment but not full acceptance of Alexa yet.

“I brought you all here to discuss the thorn in your sides. Stirring up your streets. Infiltrating your neighborhoods. Pitting you against each other, wondering who could be behind it all. And forcing the hand of your best men into dangerous situations at the CCPD,” she indicated the Bratva. “You want this all to stop, I imagine. You want this person’s identity so they can be handled and taken out of the equation. Well I am here to deliver them to you, because they are among us now.”

Again, the crowd stirred and rumbled. Len had several scenarios prepared for. It seemed Alexa was planning on pinning everything on one family to get the others to turn against them. A sloppy play, which didn’t seem like her style, given she could easily get caught in the crossfire.

Barry shared a concerned look with him, but he shook his head. They needed to listen a while longer before making their presence known.

“That your way of giving yourself up, sweetheart?” Mario called out, a disrespectful little sociopath, for certain, which made Alexa’s mouth twitch ever so subtly as she smiled wider.

“Picture News would certainly like you to think so,” she folded her hands primly in front of her, “since that story yesterday mentions a woman behind everything, courtesy of The Flash.”
Would she pin it on Colleen then? Or Gyeong? It would be the most advantageous to take out Gyeong since she was one of the biggest threats and actually a family head.

“Misdirection,” Alexa said. “The Flash knew I would reveal myself if called out, even if not by name, because he knows I’ve figured out his plan.”

“What is she talking about?” Barry hissed.

Len held up a hand to keep him quiet.

“I’m unfamiliar to many of you, but Central City is still my home. The Flash is one of the reasons I finally came back. Because I see what he’s doing to this city. The leash he keeps you all on. I can’t abide that as someone who remembers the power these proud families once held. An opportunistic hero looking to supplant the old ways by running things himself.”

Of course there was another obvious direction this could go, but it was going to be the hardest to talk their way out of.

“You’re saying The Flash is behind this?” Colleen folded her arms with a twist of her lips. “Then why stop his own men?”

“To make us scramble like rats,” Mario bit out. “So he can control us.”

“Precisely,” Alexa said, eyes scanning over the crowd and darting briefly beyond them right at Len. “And I’m going to tell you how.”

The way this was going to unfold suddenly became clear to Len and his stomach dropped. She wasn’t merely putting the blame on The Flash, she was going to reveal Barry’s identity. Prove he was Barry Allen—CCPD, CSI. She’d taken an extra day after the article dropped knowing Len’s side would take that time to prepare and learn everything they could about the players involved, gather the evidence—all things that would further back up Alexa’s claim, making anything they tried to use to pin the blame on her simply prove The Flash was a CSI with knowledge and access no one else should have.

Once the families knew Barry’s real name, they wouldn’t care about anything else. Alexa had ensured that every step Len and the others had taken to beat her was something she could use against them.

“I promise,” Len faced Barry, hoping his expression conveyed how much he meant this, “everything I do from here on out is to protect you.”

“What?”

Ripping the goggles from Barry’s eyes, Len pushed him out from behind the beam into the open where several heads whipped his direction, then he withdrew his cold gun to fire, coating Barry from neck to ankles like he had that night when his father caught them.

Barry’s wide eyes looking at Len in betrayal…stung, but he couldn’t let Barry and everyone the kid cared about get laid at the mercy of every mob family in Central once they learned his name.

“Sorry, I’m late,” Len said as he stepped from the beam to reveal himself, grin in place and all the ache choked down in response to Barry’s pain.

Everyone who was armed turned to point their guns at Len. Still moving forward, he didn’t pause until he was parallel with Barry, hands raised with the cold gun pointed at the ceiling.
“As promised, Alexa,” he said and watched the way her expression grew devilishly smug. Casting his gaze around the room, Len shrugged. “You didn’t really think I’d switched sides, did you?”

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

I know alot of you wanted sex, and I toyed with it, I really did, but it would have thrown off everything I planned to have happen, and it doesn't fit the theme - that Len LOVES Barry, he doesn't purely want sex with him, and because of that, even he can't accept sex he doesn't think Barry really wants.

As for how he's going to talk his way out of this mess...it's actually pretty good, even though it totally plays into what Alexa wants.

Don't think that Alexa has had everything planned from the start though, by the way, she just knows the general direction she wants things to go, and then she is flawless at reacting and improvising to get what she wants.

Thank you all so much for the amazing comments last chapter!
Time to wake up

Chapter Summary

Nothing goes as planned, but for all the chaos that has caused each of them to sleep, eventually Barry has to wake up...and so does Len.

Chapter Notes

My favorite chapter so far. Had so much fun with this one. But don't expect the cliffhangers to stop until the end. :-)

Your comments give me life!

“Snart, what are you doing?!!” Cisco cried over the comms.

A din of arguing chimed in as the STAR Labs team explained to those in the field that Barry’s vitals were dropping because of hypothermia.

Barry’s eyes were still wide, pleading with Len to explain what the hell he was thinking with this mess of a plan that had to be thrown away and reinvented.

Alexa had been the one to teach Len that lesson too. Make the plan. Execute the plan. Expect the plan to go off the rails.

Throw away the plan.

“I’ve been taking down Flash’s fodder all week and this is the thanks I get?” Len circled Barry’s ice statue, never lowering his hands but staying in motion despite the guns pointed at him. “I’m out there trying to clean up how he’s played you all for fools and you think I’m working for him? I expect that sort of fluff from the papers, but you lot...you know me better than that.”

The clamor of voices over the comms continued, quarrelling over whether or not Len was serious or playing a new con. To Len’s surprise, after scant moments of discussion, only West remained skeptical that Len was only doing what he had to do.

“Yes,” Alexa called from her podium, eager to play along, as Len knew she would be. “The Flash is the enemy. Cold’s been working for me.”

“What?” MacReady jerked forward, while Goldman looked around nervously, the smarter of the two for seeing how the tide was turning.

“As a show of good faith,” Alexa spoke over him, since most of the representatives had yet to lower their weapons, “we staged this to catch The Flash and take out two of his men who tried to undermine me.” She turned back to MacReady coldly, whose fists clenched like he was about to lunge at her.
Only Goldman understood what came next, but even as he turned to bolt from the platform, Bivolo was already pulling a revolver to shoot him between the eyes. He fired a second round at MacReady before the other man had a chance to recognize he would never be getting the payment or payback he’d been promised. Both bodies dropped to the stage.

Len couldn’t reveal the cringe he felt for those deaths on his conscience that he’d once let live, couldn’t even cast Barry a look of apology for what his rash decision had led to, but the pop of bullets caused everyone pointing a gun at him to finally drop them and face Alexa. They were ready to listen to her now. They’d been pushed into a corner and the only thing that made sense was what Alexa was selling.

Despite the chaos over the comms and a sharp, “Goddamn it, Snart,” from West, the team came to the decision that Cisco had to kick in Barry’s thermal dampeners or risk severe damage if he wasn’t thawed out quickly. Watching the ice start to melt and hearing Barry’s gasps of relief, Len lowered his hands at last and sheathed his gun. They had to commit to this ploy or there was no telling what Alexa might do.

“Better hurry up and decide how to handle him,” Len nodded at the swiftly evaporating ice. “His team has failsafes against me keeping him chilled.”

Alexa snapped her fingers at Bivolo, who moved immediately from the podium through the crowd, which parted for him curiously to see what he would do. Without the goggles, Barry was at his mercy, but if Bivolo was smart, he’d follow Alexa’s lead and not push further than Len was willing to let him get away with.

Starting to vibrate to get the ice to melt faster at Bivolo’s approach, Barry cast Len the darkest look imaginable that he hoped was merely part of the act. “I’m g-going to get you for this, Cold.”

“Looking forward to it,” Len said as Bivolo joined them.

Eyes flashing purple just as the ice finished melting, he held Barry captive. Not Love or Anger then, not that Len had expected either of those, but the way Barry relaxed from his tension with an empty look proved what emotion he’d been hit with. Peace to make him docile.

Bivolo still had his revolver in hand, and for a moment Len panicked when he raised it, but instead of firing, the meta slammed it against the side of Barry’s head, knocking him out cold to the floor.

“Good boy, Leo. Roy,” Alexa said from the stage, proudly elevated above them all. “Always knew I could count on you both. After all, the families of Central City need someone who can help control the meta humans. So that all of you can keep controlling your neighborhoods.”

“That is what you offer?” the Bratva captain said.

“It is.”

“And what, Ms. Marcos, is in it for you?”

“Hopefully, your trust,” she smiled. “Nothing gets done in this city without each of you and your influence. You don’t always like each other, but I see the power in compromise and would like to help all of the families. What I’m proposing is a true alliance to make sure no one like The Flash ever holds power over you again.”

“Like how your pet can hold power over someone?” Mario snarled, causing Bivolo to flutter his fingers on the handle of his gun.
“Or how Snart stole territory from the Santinis?” Moretti spoke up.

“Stealing’s sorta what I do, Pete,” Len titled his head without losing his grin. “But I’m not against smart business. The Santinis weren’t willing to play ball. Now you can change that.”

“Snart’s women did let us go,” one of the Bratva grunts said. Len tried not to react to the choice words Lisa and Sara spouted over the comms at being called ‘his women’.

“And don’t any of you worry about Roy,” Alexa said. “He’s a team player, but hardly a pet. He makes pets of those who would dare to cross us. Doesn’t having him on my side prove what I’m capable of?”

Even Gyeong showed some reverence for that statement. Bivolo had just put The Flash out of commission with a look, yet he answered to Alexa. Len would have been humbled too, but he already knew how she could sway and control someone with only words and the slide of her eyes.

“I want you to bring this proposal to your leaders. Confer. Get back to me. Madame Yeun, you are certainly welcome to take your time. But remember, I’ve taken out The Flash and all I’m asking for is your cooperation. We can discuss the details later.”

Murmurs again and distrusting glances, until Mario called above the others, “That mean we get to kill him?” with a leer toward Barry on the floor.

Len would ice every last one of them if it came to that, even if they took him out too.

“I have use for him,” Alexa said, wholly in command of the room, “but when I’m done, he’s all yours to fight over. Come on, Leo, gather the poor thing for me, will you? We’re going to show The Flash a good time elsewhere.”

A shiver shot up Len’s spine at whatever she meant by that. “My pleasure,” he said, and bent to scoop Barry into his arms.

“Snart,” West growled over the comms, “if this isn’t part of some bigger plan you got cooking, I swear to god, I’ll make sure you never see the inside of a jail cell.”

Charming.

“Have faith, West,” Mick answered on Len’s behalf.

“You better know what you’re doing, Leonard,” Sara said.

“Or I’ll be the first one to kick your ass,” Lisa finished.

At least for their sakes, it was easier to hold his grin.

Once Len had followed Alexa to the back of the building, the families fell to deeper discussion. Bivolo smirked at Len along the way before moving into the darker bowels of the building, but Alexa paused to wait for Len just on the other side of the platform where the families couldn’t hear them.

“Thank you for giving me an early excuse to get rid of those two,” she indicated the bodies on stage. “They were very useful for getting me up to date on how the city runs and oh so eager to double cross you. But they wanted to kill you, Leo, and I’d rather avoid that if we can. Plus, I knew you’d see reason.” She eyed Barry like a prize she couldn’t wait to get her hands on.
Len wanted to pull his gun and shoot a shard through her chest.

“Leo? Are you still under Roy’s thrall?” She caught his glower and grinned. “You are. Interesting. I thought for sure you’d be free by now, but that makes this all the sweeter. Lose the comms and anything they can track or I’ll tell the families everything they ever wanted to know about Barry Allen and throw him to the wolves.”

Moving into Len’s space, which he couldn’t maneuver away from given the burden of a lanky speedster in his arms, Alexa curled her fingers around the handle of his cold gun and pulled it free to claim it as her own. The team wouldn’t be able to track it out of this place unless it fired again, but if Len fought back now, she still won, and too many people could get hurt or killed. Barry wouldn’t want that. Len didn’t either.

“You always have such lovely toys, Leo,” she said, and when she glanced at Barry in Len’s arms, it was obvious she didn’t mean the gun.

Once she finally gave him enough space to do as she’d asked, Len set Barry against the wall to properly remove him of his comms and the emblem on his chest that he twisted free and left on the floor.

As he reached to remove his own comms, he whispered, “I’m leaving everything trackable behind but my gun, but she’s got that now. Figure out another way to find us.”

“When the sensors go off,” Cisco jumped in, “we’ll know which direction she takes you. Whoever’s watching that area can follow. You’ll be fine.”

It was a good idea in principle, but after Len left the comms and lifted Barry into his arms to rejoin Alexa, he discovered all too quickly that their way out of the building led into the basement, traveling out of range underground where the sensors wouldn’t detect them.

They were on their own.

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The pleasant part of having a healing factor was that even if Barry was out for a lengthy period of time, he tended to wake up without the splitting headache most people suffered, and he never had a concussion. Unfortunately, his healing didn’t mean he woke up any faster than the average person, so it was still possible to be knocked out and wake up somewhere entirely new.

The scenery that greeted Barry when he opened his eyes wasn’t the warehouse he and Len had last been in or anywhere near the ground for that matter. He could see STAR Labs in the distance, see the skyline of Central City all around him, while he was one of the tallest points in the area, placing him somewhere in the middle of the city on a roof. In front of him was a stand holding a tablet showing a zoomed in view of another tall building a good distance away.

Still groggy as he came to, Barry didn’t understand why someone would want him to see that other building close up when he could see its general shape and position in the distance without any magnification, until his eyes focused and he was able to make out Len tied to one of the satellite poles at the edge of the roof.

Instantly, Barry was wide awake as he lurched forward, but he was similarly secured to a pole, hands behind his back and feet chained too. His cowl was still up, but he knew his comms had been removed or disabled and his lightning bolt emblem was missing from his chest. He could feel cuffs around his wrists. Child’s play. Barry could phase out of them—
“Ah!” a sharp jolt traveled up his spine, making his breath catch and his nerves twinge in pain, scattering his thoughts. An electric shock.

“I hear you have fascinating abilities, Barry,” Alexa’s voice preceded the slow click of her heels on the concrete as she came to stand in front of him.

Elevated with the way he was tied to the pole, Barry looked down at her smug expression and noticed a remote in her hand. She tapped a few buttons.

“Wouldn’t want you to escape too quickly, would we? Let’s set it for…thirty second intervals? No—fifteen. You’re rather swift, after all.”

A few seconds passed and then another jolt shocked Barry with a stab of pain.

“Perfect,” Alexa grinned, painted thumb sliding over the remote with care. She had a dangerous beauty about her that Barry had missed when he first saw the woman pretending to be demure and frazzled in the Motor Car. If he was being honest, it was a little like Len, only Len was so much more than this viper.

Another shock struck him while he fought for words. “Are you torturing him like this too?” he said, since Len was also conscious and struggling from what Barry could see in the image of the other roof.

“Oh no. No need,” Alexa said. “And this isn’t torture, Barry. I simply need to keep you under control. You understand. No, Leo’s trial, if you will, is to see how long he can last after his tablet’s view of you turns off. As long as he can see you, he’s fine, but notice the distance between these buildings? More than enough to trigger your proximity once he loses sight of you. That’ll give him a handful of minutes, I’d wager…before his heart stops.”

Barry’s eyes darted to the tablet again, even though he knew it played into what she wanted. The continued jolts through his body made him grit his teeth almost as much as his hatred for the woman.

“He can see you right now, Barry,” she looked at the tablet as well. “He can hear us too. I’ll let him keep hearing you after the video cuts out, but you only get the visuals. Hear no evil, see no evil…something like that.”

She gave a noncommittal shrug before turning back to him.

“Let’s keep the game fun, shall we? Can you save him before time runs out? Even if you do, I already have the families on my side. So either way, you lose. They think Leo works for me now, an unexpected turn of events, to be sure, but very much in my favor. I’ll have them all under my thumb before morning. I’ll own this city and every meta human in it.”

That’s what she wanted, Barry realized—everything, every corner of power she didn’t already own.

“Are you listening, Leo?” she turned to the tablet again, and through its image, Barry watched Len look up to focus on the distant building instead of on his own screen, affording Alexa a stern glare.

“Let me tell you how this goes. If he doesn’t reach you in time, you die. Which is a shame, really, I’ll be sad to see you go, but at least I’ll have controlled the method. If he does reach you in time, rest assured, I’ll still be one step ahead of you, because I know his secret, just like you do, but unlike you I won’t hesitate to let everyone who matters know about it. How long do you think he’d last once that secret gets out? How long would his family last…”
As much as Barry feared for his loved ones, something that had haunted him ever since he first donned his mask and learned how vulnerable his heroics left everyone, he also flinched at the concern he saw grip Len’s features—all for Barry, always for Barry. He didn’t deserve that sort of devotion, no matter what Len said.

“Still though,” Alexa’s head tilted as if in deep contemplation, “I’d rather he saved you, Leo, because then we can keep playing. See, I want you to understand who holds the power here, Barry,” she snapped back to him with a gleam in her eyes that made him wonder if she had any goodness in her at all. “You play the game my way and I’ll keep your secret. You don’t, you lose everything.”

“And what happens to Len if I save him?”

“I’ll let him live, but I think I’ll alter his programming. Maybe I’ll have Roy make him forget all about me. Whenever he sees me, he’ll simply think I’m a contact, someone who hires him to carry out thefts and get my cut. When we’re apart, he’ll start to remember the truth, but it’ll always slip through his fingers, like that day in the Motor Car.” Biting her lip gently, she curled her fingers tighter around the remote in her hand. “Maybe I’ll even see how easy he is to seduce a second time around. He was so much fun, Barry. But I guess you haven’t had the pleasure yet, have you?”

Fire boiled inside of Barry, but he couldn’t hang onto it when those fifteen second intervals of painful shock kept coming. It stung worse that Len could hear it all and looked just as fiercely angry and desperate to get out of his bonds.

“Why are you doing this?” Barry spat.

“Because,” she answered simply, “I always end up on top. It’s where I belong.”

“So what, Len’s successes made you feel threatened? That’s why you came back? Or maybe you do have feelings for him and you couldn’t stand hearing rumors that he’d been doing good in this city.”

“And screwing around with his hero?” she scoffed. “Please, if he wants to waste his time that hardly affects me. Just made me realize how easy he would be to manipulate for my takeover—my ascension as the real superpower in Central. This city is the city to own, after all, the city of meta humans,” she spread her arms to encompass the cityscape around them, “and now I can control every single one.”

“With Bivolo? You think you can maintain that?”

“Do you really think Roy is my only play here, Barry?” She pressed a button on the remote and Barry saw Len’s face through the tablet glance down in panic at his own—as the video feed cut, leaving him all alone, too far away. “Clock’s ticking,” she said, and with the remote in hand, she stepped out of view.

Barry didn’t see where she went, but he knew she left the roof. Still, he couldn’t focus on her. He had to save Len, and he only had minutes to do it. Five? Six? The only way to get out of this in time was if he phased out of the cuffs.

Another shock. Fuck, it hurt. It was the same frequency, the same interval every time, and the consistency was what made it worse, because Barry barely had time to recover and heal before the next one tore through him. He couldn’t focus, let alone summon enough speed to phase.

“Len, listen to me,” Barry called toward the tablet, “I know you can hear me. Look up. Look at my
Len did so, even though he couldn’t see Barry clearly anymore.

“I’m going to get free. I’m going to get to you in time. I promise. No matter what happens, Alexa is not going to win.”

Barry watched Len nod, resolute and trusting him implicitly. His lips moved, saying something Barry couldn’t make out. A cringe filled Len’s brow when he remembered Barry couldn’t hear him, but he kept on talking.

“Len, I can’t hear you,” Barry said, though it seemed silly to state the obvious. Len just shook his head and kept on speaking. “Whatever it is, you’re going to get the chance to tell me where I can hear you, understand? I’m coming.”

Glancing away from Len to focus on the matter at hand, Barry winced as another shock caused him to clench his teeth. It grated on Barry in the worst way that what had given him power could be such a hindrance to him.

He had to focus, he just had to focus. Waiting for the next shock, Barry anticipated it, counted the seconds, learned the cadence so that he knew exactly how long he had between jolts. It stung, but he counted again to wait for the next one, made sure he knew without a doubt the length of time. The moment the next shock passed, Barry started to vibrate his wrists, faster and faster, focusing all of his energy into moving just that one small part of his body fast enough to get free.

The next jolt hit him before he could finish. “Damn it,” he cursed, thrown from his concentration enough that he couldn’t start again right away, he had to wait so he could use every bit of those fifteen seconds, but it meant wasting precious time.

The next try to beat the clock, Barry got so close, almost had one wrist free, which was all he’d need, but the shock still beat him to the punch. He cursed again, feeling his fatigue. He couldn’t allow that. He had to power through and find the strength to get out of this for Len.

Barry tried again. Again. Again.

Failing over and over, gasping now, he wasn’t sure how much time had passed. He’d been so fixated on fifteen seconds at a time not how much they were adding up to. Len still stared straight ahead at Barry’s building, breathing deep and waiting patiently, but Barry could tell the thief wasn’t sitting on his laurels. His arms were moving as he tried to get himself free, not that it would matter. Len couldn’t cross the distance of the buildings in time to reach Barry himself.

Trying again to stay ahead of the next jolt, Barry kept his eyes on Len for motivation, and saw the moment when Len got free, not with any superpowers, just by sheer skill. When this was over, Barry would have to have Len teach him how to do that.

The next shock hit Barry harder, but he knew it wasn’t the voltage, it was just because he was so tired, his heart aching and pleading for the jolts to stop. He saw Len jump from the pole and rush to the ledge of the roof, looking for Barry, even looking down at the city streets as if he might catch sight of a zigzagging streak of lightning.

“I’m trying…” Barry’s voice cracked as he spoke, causing Len’s head to whip up to look at the other roof once more. “I’m sorry, I c-c-can’t,” Barry stuttered as the next jolt traveled through him.

Len merely nodded again, a small, sad smile on his face as he started talking again, just talking, saying something Barry couldn’t hear, but the last thing Len said to Barry would not be words he
was never able to make out.

“I can do it,” Barry promised Len if only to push himself harder. “I can do it.” But as he tried again and again, he saw Len’s hand reach up to clutch his chest, cringing as Barry kept cringing, only this was so much worse. “I can do it,” Barry hissed at the phantom claws digging into Len’s heart.

Len just kept looking at him and nodding, believing him, even as he felt such pain that the agony was clear on his face, and eventually he couldn’t hold himself up. When he stumbled, struggling to hang onto the ledge, he looked up one last time and said the only words Barry couldn’t mistake for anything else—I love you—before he collapsed.

“Len!” Barry cried, hating those jolts with such passion that rage fueled his powers instead of desperation. “Len!”

Fuck these intervals, and fuck Alexa for doing this to them! Barry was the fastest man alive—he could do this, he could do this.

“Ahhhh!” The next jolt came and Barry let his wrath drive his speed, thinking of Alexa, and Zoom, and Reverse Flash, and how no one, no one was going to take someone away from him ever again.

The cuffs clanked against the pole as Barry’s arms tore free. He didn’t pause, just took off straight over the side of the building and down it to flash as fast as he could across the city to reach Len’s building. The distance was covered in moments, but to Barry it felt like ages when he knew Len was already in peril. He reached the roof without taking the time to look around, focused only on Len.

Finding him right where the man had fallen, on the ground by the edge of the roof, slumped over, there wasn’t time to rush Len to the Labs. Barry had to save him himself.

Len was unconscious, no pulse, not breathing. Shaking as he struggled to stay calm, Barry laid the other man on his back, yanked his sweater up to reveal his chest, and tore his own gloves off. Summoning lightning into his palms, he used his powers like a defibrillator, praying it would be more effective than compressions.

A jolt far stronger than what had tormented Barry seized Len’s chest off the ground. Tilting his chin back, Barry puffed in a breath of air. No response.

He jolted Len again. Breathed into his mouth again. Nothing.

“Please,” Barry choked on the tears in his throat, as he jolted Len again. Another breath. Again.

Air sputtered out of Len as he coughed and gasped, eyes shooting wide from the intense shock to his system as he groped for whatever he could cling to. What he found was Barry, right there and ready to take his hand.

“Len,” Barry laughed through the tears starting to fall, adrenaline releasing in a wave of fury, terror, and joy like he’d felt in rapid succession.

The smile Len offered Barry was nothing short of breathtaking. All Barry wanted was to kiss him and promise they’d never have a close call like that again, but as Len clung to him and tried to sit up, with one of Barry’s hands gripping Len’s and the other outstretched on his shoulder, Len’s eyes suddenly darted behind Barry.

Cuffs clamped down on Barry’s wrists, glowing, meta dampeners this time like what they used in Iron Heights.
“Close your eyes!” Len called before Barry could whirl around.

That sounded like the worst suggestion possible, but that meant their attacker was Bivolo. Without his goggles to protect him, the only thing Barry could do was obey.

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Len’s goggles still hung around his neck, and he pulled them up swiftly, safely in place before Bivolo could sidestep around Barry to whammy him yet again. Barry’s goggles were in Len’s parka, but the speedster would be fine as long as he didn’t open his eyes.

As soon as Bivolo noticed Len wasn’t as vulnerable as he’d assumed, he scrambled to pull his gun. Len was faster. Alexa still had his cold gun, but Len didn’t need a weapon to be formidable.

Whirling onto his feet, he reached up to grip Bivolo by the front of his shirt and used the momentum of pulling himself up to yank the meta human down, slamming his head into Len’s knee. It wasn’t the right angle to knock Bivolo out or do much damage, but it was more than enough to daze him.

Kicking with his opposite leg, before Len pushed Bivolo back, he snagged his revolver and had it pointed square at Bivolo’s midsection before the other man could steady on his feet. Len’s chest ached, maybe more from Barry’s lightning than the pain that had gripped his heart, but the kid had brought him back from the brink just like he’d promised.

Cracking his neck and smoothing down his hitched sweater with his free hand, Len stared Bivolo down, who had a scowl on his face and hands raised.

“Keep your eyes closed, Scarlet. I got him,” Len said, holding Bivolo in his sights as he maneuvered back to Barry where he remained powerless on his knees. “I’m gonna get these cuffs off of Flash and onto you, understood? You wanna be smart and hand over the keys, maybe the trip outta here will go smoother. Either way, those are comin’ off of him in minutes and I don’t see any backup for you. What, Alexa didn’t see fit to give you a detail of men in black, or did she put more faith in you than you deserve?”

Still scowling, Bivolo’s nose scrunched in frustration, but he had no retort.

Switching the gun to his other hand, Len bent parallel with Barry to check the cuffs.

“Wait,” Bivolo said.

“Shut up. You’re going back in the hole where you belong.”

“I can make him love you!”

Len’s hand froze as it reached for Barry.

“He won’t when the spell breaks, you know. He won’t. Coz you won’t love him, not the same way. You’ll be that surly asshole you were when you sprung me. But you like the way this feels, right?” He lowered his hands when Len hesitated. “Feels nice. Feels good. I can take away the bad parts, Cold. No more proximity issues. No chance for a broken heart. Let me go and I’ll make him love you just like you love him.”

“Len…” Barry gasped like he was ready to open his eyes regardless of the danger, rise to his feet, and protest everything Bivolo was saying, but he hesitated too, not understanding why Len would even listen.
Len shouldn’t listen. He shouldn’t want what Bivolo offered so badly.

“You can run off and be blissfully annoying together,” Bivolo continued. “Just say the word, Cold, and he’s all yours.”

Unmoving on his knees, Barry remained where he was, hands bound, helpless but not saying anything more, not trying to argue, just maintaining an expression of silent pleading. He didn’t want to have to ask Len not to listen, because it shouldn’t be a question. If Len loved Barry, there was no question.

And Len did love him. Which meant he had to accept that doing the right thing might mean losing him.

“You can keep your offer and shove it, Roy,” Len said, taking hold of the cuffs, to which Barry gave a sagging sigh.

“See reason—”

“It wouldn’t be real.”

“Tch. Being real is why it ends,” Bivolo snapped, like maybe he knew a thing or two about broken hearts.

“Then if that’s what’s meant to happen, it’ll end.”

Once Len had the cuffs free, he moved to Bivolo and slapped the cuffs on his wrists instead, as the meta glowered at him like a hyena about to snap its jaws. For good measure, Len pistol-whipped the bastard like he’d done to Barry in the warehouse. Be easier to carry him like that anyway.

When Len glanced back, Barry was standing, eyes open after hearing Bivolo’s grunt and tumble to the ground. The kid didn’t look relieved—he looked proud. For Len, that was almost as worthwhile as having Barry look at him with love.

“Come on, Scarlet. Let’s get out of here.”

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Raymond landed on the rooftop only a few short minutes after Bivolo was knocked out, enough time for them to have caught their breaths. The team had been scrambling to figure out some way to track them without Barry’s emblem, the cold gun firing, or either of their comms, but since Ray had been doing recon in the air, he’d seen Barry’s lightning trail and had eventually tracked it to the building.

Sara and a few others had initially entered the meet-up after the family representatives left, hoping for any clues they could follow. They’d retrieved the items Len left behind, but finding the entrance into the basement only meant they had a long trail to follow that didn’t lead them anywhere obvious, not with so little head start.

When Len and Barry arrived at the Labs, the first thing they did was lock the unconscious Bivolo in the Pipeline. Well, Barry took care of that alone, since the speedster pushed Len into Caitlin’s care immediately. Another bout of his heart stopping, being nearly dead for a good minute or more, meant he’d be lucky to not have permanent heart trouble for the rest of his life. Apparently, lucky was exactly what he was, because Caitlin gave him another clean bill of health.

“That was reckless,” Joe barked at him when Barry joined them in the Cortex.
“He did it to protect you,” Barry jumped to Len’s defense. “To protect everyone. We should have realized Alexa would use my identity against us. She’s been a step ahead of us this whole time.”

“Not ahead,” Len countered. “But no one adapts like she can. She has a goal, and she has twenty different ways planned out to get there, so she can adjust to make any situation fit her endgame.”

“And now she’s achieved it,” Caitlin said.

“No. She has the families, sure. But she wants the metas too. She wants more than just Bivolo, Mardon, or Baez.”

“You think she’s been recruiting others?” Cisco questioned with a fearful swivel of his chair.

“Maybe. She has another play, that’s for certain. Something that wouldn’t be disrupted by me and Barry getting away, or she wouldn’t have taken that risk.”

“You think she let us get away on purpose?” Barry asked, still in his Flash suit, but with the cowl pulled back and the emblem back where it belonged on his chest.

“I think she figured on several different scenarios for how tonight might end, and this still fits into her plan.”

“The important thing is we got Bivolo,” Cisco said, peeking on the sleeping meta in his cage through the surveillance. “Once he wakes up, we can get him to release his power over you.”

Len huffed. “He’ll want a deal to cooperate.”

“Then we make a deal,” Cisco shrugged. “Police do it all the time, right?” He smiled sheepishly Joe’s direction, who shook his head like he couldn’t believe all the ways that was wrong.

“Let’s take a few minutes to breathe, guys, okay?” Barry lifted his hands and turned to address them all. “The rest of the team is still out there. Alexa is still out there. And so are a lot of powerful people she now has in her pocket. Let’s regroup and figure out what to do next. Len, can I talk to you?” he shifted gears, looking sheepish as his voice softened, speaking to Len directly instead of the group as a whole.

Ray was out scouting again by air, along with Sara and Lisa on the ground; Iris had taken Wally home but planned to return soon; and as Joe huffed his way out of the Cortex to rejoin the CCPD trying to pick up stragglers from the meet-up, Mick came lumbering in looking sour and ready to give Len a piece of his mind for the stunt he’d pulled. Sometimes he could be worse than Lisa.

“Sure, Scarlet,” Len said, casting an apologetic nod Mick’s direction—which the pyro didn’t buy for one second—as he let Barry pull him into the med room. “Everything okay?”

There was a nervous twitchiness to Barry that had been lingering ever since they got to the Labs. He wrung his hands, chewed his lip, and kept glancing at Len only to dart his eyes away. “I feel like we forgot a step,” he said, nodding to himself and then zipping forward to throw his arms around Len’s neck—which was still visible to Mick, Caitlin, and Cisco in the main room since the walls were glass.

Still, Len laughed and held Barry in return, breathing him in and the fact that they could have this for just a little longer. They hadn’t embraced after Len was brought back, the first time they hadn’t after something like this happened. “Never gonna complain about having you in my arms,” Len mouthed along Barry’s neck.
A giggle left the kid. “Sorry,” he said as he pulled away. “Everything happened so fast and I… I needed that.”

Barry needed it—even though he didn’t need it the way Len did.

“I also wanted to ask you…” he went right back to fidgeting and averting his eyes. “When you were talking to me on the roof but I couldn’t hear you? What were you saying?”

Now it was Len’s turn to avert his gaze. “Just reassurances. That I knew you could do it. That it would be okay, even if you didn’t. That if the worst happened…” he glanced up and Barry was looking right at him, dead-centered on him, “…even if the worst happened… all this would be worth it. I’m glad for what we’ve been through together, Barry. Glad I got to know this—to know you. Even if Bivolo cooperates and frees me tonight, no matter what happens, I need you to understand that. That this me has loved loving you.”

Color rose in Barry’s cheeks and he smiled with a quiver of his dimples, eyes falling to the floor as if he’d been staring into the sun for too long. Silly kid didn’t realize he was the sun. “What if we didn’t need Bivolo to free you?” he said.

“What?”

“I don’t want things to change. I mean,” he scrambled to correct himself, “I want you to be you, the real you, but I…I want this. I want to be around you even when we don’t have to be. I want to try this, for real. Because this already is the real you,” he looked up with such heartfelt emotion, Len’s breath caught in his throat, “it’s just a you who isn’t afraid to admit how you feel. I believe you, Len. I believe you love me, that you care about me at least, and I…I care about you too. So much. Even in such a short time, I—I—”

Alarms cut into Barry’s words, sending Len’s heart trip-hammering, wondering what he had been about to say. With a panicked look shared between them, they darted back into the Cortex.

“What is it?” Barry said as they rushed to Cisco’s terminal. Caitlin and Mick gathered there as well.

Eyes wide and mouth floundering like a fish, Cisco looked over his shoulder. “Bivolo’s out of his cell.”

“What?” Len slammed a hand down on the desk.

“His door was open! He must have woken up!”

“Who unlocked his door?” Barry chorused with equal alarm.

That’s when Cisco’s expression dropped further like he might be nauseous as he pulled up previous footage. “You did,” he said to Barry. “You never locked it to begin with. It’s like you were in a… trance,” he finished with growing dread as he spun around in his chair.

Everyone whirled on Barry, who stumbled back a step like he couldn’t believe this nightmare was happening.

“Once you finished your directive, you didn’t even realize you’d done it,” Caitlin said as the truth dawned on her too.

“From when he whammied me at the meet-up. Oh god… I—”
“This is my fault,” Len said as he realized the implications.

“What?” Barry turned to him. “No, Len. You were protecting me. You couldn’t have known he’d add other programming.”

“Alexa wanted this.”

“She would have found some other way to make her plans work. Now it’s our turn to adapt.”

The lights went out, throwing everything into darkness.

“Better start adaptin’ then,” Mick grunted.

“Shit…shit…” Cisco could be heard clacking on his keyboard even through the power outage. Eventually, emergency lights flickered on, but they were dim, casting everything in a faint shade of blue like when Len wore his goggles. “Only a few systems are operational, but at least I can tell that Mardon…is also out of his cell. Ya know, in case we needed more bad news.”

“Can we get a message to the others?” Barry asked.

“No. I barely have security feeds, and only because we rerouted them after Wellsobard got spy-happy with the cameras.”

The sound of squeaking leather was familiar to Len as Mick tightened the fit of his gloves. “Ya got any bright ideas, heroes?” he barked. At least he still had his heat gun handy.

“Why is she doing this?” Barry took his turn pounding a hand on the desk.

Once again, a step too late, Len realized everything he hadn’t been able to figure out before. “Because. You have all the data on the meta humans around the city right here. Alexa knows you have everything she could ever want to exploit, because Bivolo and Mardon told her. She needed the families on her side, but more than that, this is what it’s been about—getting access to The Flash, to STAR Labs. She needs what you have on the metas so she knows who to target for her army.”

“And with Bivolo, the ones who won’t join her she can force,” Caitlin said with a shudder.

Len almost shuddered with her; Alexa would be unstoppable with every meta human on her side. No wonder Bivolo had joined her. He never could have come up with a plan like this on his own.

“We can’t let her gain access to this place,” Barry said.

“Uhh, guys?” Cisco returned his attention to the monitors that now displayed several picture-in-picture snapshots of the building, quickly filling with grunts like an army was here now. “She’s already got access. Bivolo unlocked everything, has control of almost everything, and I can’t lock him out.”

“Bratva?” Mick asked as he peered at the swarmed hallways.

“Not yet,” Len shook his head. “These are just her men, probably everyone she has left. She can’t risk handing the families access she wants to control herself. But we’re surrounded. They’ll be here in minutes and we don’t have time to wait for backup to stumble their way in.”

Everyone turned to glance at each other in the dim lighting and faint glow from Cisco’s computer screens, hoping someone would come up with a plan. Mick pulled out his gun and charged it to
indicate his suggestion, but that wouldn’t bode well for the civilians in their midst.

“Where can you hide?” Barry came to the same conclusion, spinning to face Cisco and Caitlin.

“Are you joking?” Caitlin balked.

“You can’t go up against guns with nothing but a tablet and a scalpel,” Barry argued. “You have to hide.”

“But I can help!” Cisco leapt from his chair. “I know I don’t have my whole force-push powers down yet, but I can try.”

“No,” Barry shook his head, “it’s too risky. Please, just find any tight spot you can hide in until the others realize what’s going on. They’ll check in at some point and come running when we don’t answer the comms. Mick,” he turned to the larger man with his bleeding heart on his sleeve, “stay with them. Please.”

Frowning at being dismissed from the frontlines, Mick looked to Len before making any snappy retorts. Len would have preferred his friend at his side, no question, but if anyone discovered Cisco and Caitlin without someone watching over them who could fight, they’d be done for.

“You get them somewhere that you can be sure won’t be found, I’ll welcome you back to the fight,” Len said. “Otherwise, keep them safe.”

“Barry,” Caitlin protested, while Cisco’s constant side-eyeing of the camera footage showed they had less and less time to make a call.

“If she gets us, she gets us,” Barry said. “The others will come to help. Alexa wants me and Len alive, but she won’t care about the rest of you.” He cringed as he said that with a not so subtle look at Mick, which surprised Len, because while Mick didn’t outwardly react, it meant they’d chatted about more than just shop talk earlier.

Caitlin’s lips couldn’t get any more pursed at being sent away, but she went to Mick’s side without complaint about her protector. It was Cisco who said he had an idea of where to go, and they hurried out of the Cortex using a different route than the main hallway.

Pulling up his cowl and fitting his goggles over his eyes, Barry looked to Len in resolution that once again they’d be entering the fray. Len didn’t have his cold gun, but he still had Bivolo’s revolver. Better than nothing. He fit his goggles over his eyes too.

“You got a plan, kid?”

“I thought that was usually your job.”

“And yet you managed to beat me all those times. They’re converging here,” Len gestured at the Cortex, then moved to Cisco’s monitors. “As soon as we leave this room, we lose our edge of seeing where they are. But if we stay here, we’re trapped. So how do we get behind them without leading them in the direction our friends just went?”

“Up or down?” Barry shrugged.

“Which way’s faster?”

Barry looked up at the ceiling, where Len could make out several overlarge ventilation shafts illuminated by the emergency lights. “I can’t use my speed if we’re up there, but we could get
behind them that way, maybe even get the drop on some of them too.”

“Then let’s move.”

Of course moving was the difficult part once they were crammed into the tight space. Air shafts were not squeaky clean the way they often appeared in movies, but were covered in mildew and dust. Len’s parka would need to hit the dry cleaner’s after this. At least the view was nice as he followed behind Barry, not that he could make out much in the dark.

Each time they passed over a vent, they paused to assess if anyone was around. Finally, they heard voices and reached a rendezvous point where several men were paused below them. Barry scooted into a branching shaft so he and Len could face the vent together, peering down at the collection of goons in black.

Because the lights were off and the emergency lights remained dim, the infiltrators all had masks on for night vision. They’d be able to see a hell of a lot better than Len or Barry.

And Mardon was amongst them.

“Some of the others reached the center,” one of the goons reported, mild chatter distinguishable over his radio. “Say they found what they think is the place they keep the Flash suit, but no one’s there.”

“They’re here,” Mardon growled. “We got all the exits covered. They’re not going anywhere. So find them. Flash can’t run circles around us if he can’t see.”

The trick would be to sneak up on some of them in a situation where speed wasn’t the main advantage.

Len gestured further down the direction they’d been headed, and they continued as quietly as they could. Once they reached the next vent, they listened for men or movement again. Hearing nothing, Len gestured to Barry that this was their stop.

Barry’s speed still counted for something, getting the screws loose on the vent cover in seconds. He dropped down first, reaching up to help Len descend as well. The slide of their bodies and a moment to hold each other close were all they were allowed before running footsteps approached.

Gripping Len by the arm, Barry dashed ahead at Flash speed until he reached a point in the wall he knew well enough not to need much light. To Len’s surprise, they slipped into a room that shouldn’t have existed.

“I’ve bought us a second,” Barry whispered. “Once we hear those men go past, we’ll move.”

Len nodded as Barry remained close to the doorway, but curiosity was in his nature. He couldn’t help glancing back to see where Barry had brought them.

The room was small, white, and strange with odd texture to the walls. Odder yet, however, was the screen lit up at the far end projecting a hologram of a newspaper with Barry’s image on it in mid-run. Len wasn’t sure what he was looking at, but Iris’s name was on a byline for the front-page article—dated 2024. And that wasn’t the weirdest part.

“Len, come on!”

In another swift second, Len was out of the room again, forced to focus on the present. Following Barry after the men that had rushed past, they moved at slower speeds than Barry probably wanted
to go, but they still caught up to the men quickly.

Three goons. All armed. All facing the wrong direction as they hurried to join Mardon’s group.

Len grabbed one around the neck to put in a sleeper hold, while Barry zipped ahead to knock the other two out with a lightning fast slam against the hallway walls. The thuds weren’t loud but they weren’t exactly silent either.

With an instinctive hushing motion, Len brought a finger to his lips—only for the sound of more men heading their direction to prove that stealth would have indeed been better than speed.

Pivoting to Barry’s side of the hallway and flattening himself back as he reached out with an arm to flatten Barry as well, the curve of the hallway was in their favor for when the men dashed around it, but they still had night vision and easily spotted their comrades on the ground.

“They’re here!” one of the goons shouted before Len and Barry could engage them.

The Flash was a force of nature against people with superpowers, so taking out hired guns should have been easy even with a blindfold, let alone in low light. And it was—at first. While Len grappled with one man and shot another in the leg, Barry took out three with swift punches that knocked them clean out.

But more goons came. Then another group from the opposite direction. Barry couldn’t keep up, not while watching over Len to protect him and trying not to kill anyone by overusing his speed. They were being swarmed.

“Hang onto me!” Barry cried, kicking up lightning as he readied to run. He might run into a few walls along the way, but it could buy them the precious seconds they needed to regroup.

Unfortunately, Barry wasn’t the only force of nature.

Brighter blue-white lightning lit up the hallway to overshadow Barry’s yellow, catching him in the side and sending him tumbling to the floor before Len could grab onto him.

“Flash!” Len dove in pursuit, but several hands descended and seized him by the arms, divesting him of Bivolo’s gun. He struggled anyway, despite the sheer numbers facing them, because Mardon was there, holding a mini thunderstorm in his hands as he stalked forward.

“Having trouble tapping into your sparks, Flash?” Mardon sneered as he approached Barry on the floor, his face lip up brighter than anything else in the hallway. “Here, have some of mine.”

Len thrashed against the many hands holding him back as Mardon unleashed his powers. Seeing what looked like a demon hoard of reflective bug-eyes from all the night vision goggles around them, Mardon and Barry appeared like some mad god smiting a sinner.

The course of Mardon’s lightning made Barry scream and arch up off the floor. He tried to roll over, tried to get up, but Mardon shocked him again. He’d already been jolted so many times by Alexa, and this was so much worse, so much more powerful.

“Stop!” Len cried.

Mardon actually listened, but it wasn’t comforting when he turned to Len with a grin. “Get him up,” he told the goons down the other end of the hallway, and they came forward like a swarm to pick Barry up from the floor, panting and limp as he was from the voltage. “I’d kill you now, Flash, but Alexa has a vision, you see, and well, I can settle for hearing you scream a few more
Centered on Barry’s chest to avoid any sparks lapping at his men, Mardon shocked Barry yet again. Try as he might, the kid couldn’t stop himself from giving Mardon what he wanted. He screamed, and it was an awful howl that Len never wanted to hear again.

“Stop!”

“Bring him to the main room,” Mardon gestured back at Len. “Alexa wants him for herself. I’ll make sure to put Flash to sleep before we join you.”

Len fought harder against his captors as they started dragging him away. Mardon was readying to hit Barry again, which looked to be all it would take to knock Barry out completely. But before he did, before Len was pulled too far out of range, Barry looked at him and he froze.

Because those eyes, they captured him and held him still, no veil or uncertainty to mar the emotions laid bare. Even if Barry hadn’t put a voice to what he was trying to convey, Len would have understood, but Barry still forced the words past his lips so that before Len lost sight of him around the corner, he told Len plainly.

“I love you.”

And with a sudden release of everything that had been holding Len hostage for the past week—he woke up.

TBC...
Len is finally awake. Barry isn't prepared for what that looks like.

I'm warning you this is about 80% pain, but you don't have to wait long for the payoff.

Barry’s final scream followed Len as he was dragged down the hallway toward the Cortex he’d so recently left, but all the fight in him had fled. He no longer struggled against the hands roughly pushing him along. No need, not even when they pulled his goggles down and jeered in his face that they’d caught the big bad Captain Cold and defeated The Flash.

Len remembered everything without the scarlet colored lenses he’d been seeing the world through for the past week. He’d poured his heart out to Barry Allen. Confessed undying love. Made decisions solely for Barry’s benefit. Allowed their interactions and the strange, swirling emotions he felt because of Barry to affect how he spoke and interacted with others—even Mick and his sister.

He’d been a different man all because he believed he loved Barry. He’d touched him. Kissed him countless times. Held him. Slept beside him. Shared meals and his home with the kid. Even the location of one of his safe houses. All because Alexa had a plan, and their efforts to weaken her had only made her stronger.

Twice Len’s heart had stopped. He’d banged on death’s door almost as loudly and vigorously as he had facing down destiny at the Vanishing Point. But now, finally, Len was free. Awake. Wholly himself. And as the goons manhandling him pushed him into Cisco’s chair in the Cortex and started to bind him there—with rope, not cuffs; Alexa wasn’t stupid—Len sat still in the dark like a good boy.

When he was left alone and Alexa herself materialized out of the shadows trailing a hand along the desk, Len looked up at her approach…and grinned. “Alexa. Good to see you again.”

“Is it, Leo?”

“It is. Coz I feel like a brand new man. Let’s talk.”

Usually, Barry didn’t have the pleasure of waking up from flat unconsciousness twice in one night. He was healing, but Mardon’s lightning threw off his connection to the Speed Force, making it a much slower process. He ached worse than ever and could barely lift his head when he came to.
The lights were back on. Had the rest of the team come to their rescue? Barry was in the med room on one of the hospital beds, laid back flat with little view other than the ceiling.

“Len…” he tried to call out, groping for anyone nearby.

No hand took his, but footsteps sounded, and when the approaching figure came into view—it was Len after all, perfectly fine, still in his Cold gear with the goggles drawn down.

“Len,” Barry said in a rush of relief, trying to reach for him but still too weighed down from fatigue. “You’re okay. How did you save me? Are the others here?”

There was something tight in Len’s expression and the thin smile he offered. “Sorry, Flash. No cavalry for you tonight. I’m afraid this is gonna end a bit differently than you expected.”

“What do you mean?” He sounded so formal, more reminiscent of the closed off version of Len that Barry had been used to before this mess. Maybe that was it. “You’re you again, right? It worked?” Len wasn’t usually carefree with his emotions; it was probably a big adjustment to turn back. Barry hadn’t said he loved Len with any agenda other than needing to tell him, but he had hoped it might finally be enough to save Len from Bivolo’s hold.

“I’m all me, Flash,” Len said, and the parting of his parka revealed the cold gun in its holster, when the last Barry had known of it had been in Alexa’s clutches. “Finally free.”

As more of his weariness fell away, Barry tried to sit up but realized he couldn’t, at last understanding why reaching for Len amounted to only a faint stretch of his hand. He was restrained, secured to the table at his wrists, ankles, and over his chest like a psych ward patient.

Jerking up on instinct, Barry was too tired to do more than vainly struggle. “What’s going on?” he asked, waiting for the joke, for some explanation that would make sense. But instead of an answer, a fresh shock ripped through his body and made him cry out from how much it hurt.

Which was when Alexa stepped into view on the other side of the bed.

Another shock and tears sprang to Barry’s eyes.

“Alexa,” Len tilted his head at her like he was annoyed—bored, “I told you, no need for that. We can do this cleaner.”

After a third shock that made Barry whimper, close to crying because it hurt and he didn’t understand why this was happening, the jolts stopped. She was still using the same remote somehow, her smile cruel and self-satisfied as she said, “You know him best, Leo.”

While Barry was still trying to piece together why Len would face him like this as if he and Alexa were on the same side, Len leaned over him, close, one hand touching his suit. He was still in his costume, still wearing his mask. “Relax, Flash,” Len said, soft and cold. “Once we finish ransacking the place for a new set of those meta-dampeners, we’ll leave you be until we decide how best to have Roy reprogram you.”

Barry was dreaming. This had to be a nightmare.

“But,” Len drew out with a clip of his consonants and that familiar, in-control smile that used to infuriate Barry to no end, “until we can be sure you won’t slip away…”

“Ah!” Barry cried out from the sharp stab of pain in his side where Len’s hand had been.
Looking between them, Barry could see the handle of the knife, while the blade was buried through his suit up to the hilt. He couldn’t stop the tears now because of the pain, the shock that this was happening, and that Len was the one doing it to him.

“I know it hurts, but this is only temporary,” Len said, still close and soft but without any real sympathy. “Can’t have that healing factor kicking in and messing with our plans.”

“O-Our…?”

“Gotta play this smart, kid.” Len pulled up, leaving the blade in Barry’s side. “Think of Lisa and Mick. Think of myself and how I’m gonna come out of this. Already died for my sins once. Don’t plan on doing that again. What can I say,” he shrugged like this was all just something he could slough from his shoulders, “Alexa made a better offer.”

The smirk on Alexa’s face was all victory as she stood on Barry’s right, with Len at his left, bookending him like an animal in a cage to be gawked at.

“But I…I love you,” Barry said, eyes only for Len—to hell with Alexa—waiting to see some glimmer of the man he’d come to know, any sign that he was still in there.

“Yeah,” Len sighed, like he was annoyed and bored with that too. “My directive was to get you to love me back. But you wanna know what would have accomplished that just as well?” Leaning in toward Barry again, he moved swifter this time, enough to make Barry flinch. “A good fuck. That’s all. Pity that’s not how it happened.” He flicked his eyes down Barry’s body and pressed his lips together in consideration. “But no, you had to go and say it. Had to go and mean it. Real shame for you, Flash. A real shame.”

Clutching after him as Len pulled back, Barry was only able to grip the sleeve of the parka. Len grimaced at the hold on him, but Barry tugged him closer anyway. “Please,” he said in a hushed whisper, tugging again until Len leaned down like before, “you’re just playing it up again, right? It’s all a trick?”

The sneer Len afforded him was filled with loathing. “Listen up,” he wrenched his hand from Barry’s grasp. “You want a go in my bed sometime, kid, you know where I live. Wanna play house?” he actually laughed. “Find somebody else.”

The steel of the knife felt colder in Barry’s side, like it was being dragged up to his heart.

“Even back in the warehouse, I thought I made things clear to you.”

When he iced Barry.

“You don’t mean that.” Barry shook his head, despite Alexa chuckling and Len moving away from him. “Please don’t mean that…” His hands kept grasping after Len because this was a nightmare, but the knife in his side made him cringe at every jostle of movement, holding him prisoner even more than his bonds. “You hypnotized him again!” he cried, but Alexa’s response was filled with punishing pity.

“Sorry, sweetie. Not this time.”

It was her fault. She was the cause of everything. She was worse than the speedsters who had dragged Barry through the streets with godlike power and rained chaos down upon the city. If this was real then she was to blame and there had to be some way to make her pay.

“Found your friend, Cold,” Bivolo’s voice announced his presence, and in Barry’s limited vision,
he saw Len and Alexa turn to meet the meta off the foot of the bed—pushing Mick in front of him with hands tied behind his back.

“Mick!” Barry called in equal relief and anxiety, because if they only had Mick, that meant Cisco and Caitlin were okay.

Glancing at Barry with an eye on the knife, Mick turned to Len and looked him up and down like he had to be an imposter. That at least would be easier to believe than this.

“You use your powers on him?” Len snarled at Bivolo.

“Calm down, Cold, I followed your instructions,” Bivolo said. “Had enough men to take him down easy, no powers required. But we didn’t find anyone else.”

“What’d you do with the white hats, Mick?” Len demanded, getting into his friend’s space.

Mick glowered at him. “Got ‘em out so they could make a break for it. The hell you doin’, Snart?”

Jaw tight, Len answered sharply, “Finally got my head on straight, that’s what. This jigsaw team you forced together failed, so let’s stop pretending, Mick. Listen…” He held Mick’s gaze like trying to control an anxious beast. “We can have a nice gig with Alexa. All the families under our thumb. The whole city at our feet. You still wanna play tag with Raymond and Sara on that ship, be my guest. But think of the day to day. What do you really want?”

If Barry wasn’t already weak and trembling from the trauma he’d experienced, Len making that pitch to Mick would have sent him straight there. Mick looked equally thrown by what he’d heard. Then he just looked murderous.

“’bout now I’m thinkin’ I want to shove my boot up your ass!” he growled, fighting Bivolo’s hold with a lurch, which prompted several goons to rush up to help hold him back.

Len tilted his head at Mick in disappointment. “Give him time. He’ll come around.”

“Fat chance!” Mick spat.

“I’ll play nice, Leo,” Alexa said as she moved closer to Mick. “I know how much Mickey means to you. You meant something to me once too, you know.” With an obviously fabricated look of sympathy and affection, she feathered a hand down the side of the pyro’s face, which only made Mick boil hotter on the inside, like his eyes might ignite.

“Somehow, I doubt that, doll-face,” he snapped, and shook her away, looking ready to head-butt her right between the eyes. “Somethin’ broke the yo-yo, huh? You really this stupid, Snart? They always say yer the one with brains, but anyone willin’ to work with this harpy’s gotta be dumb as a brick.”

“Now, now, Mickey, don’t be sore,” Alexa said, stepping back from him and regarding him like a fly in need of being squashed. “It’s sweet how you think differently than most boys, but I needed someone who could keep up with me back then and that was never going to be you.” With a possessive grin, she cast her gaze on Len.

Barry wanted to rip the skin from her face, surprising himself with the brutal thoughts that plagued him, but he shouldn’t be. He’d come so close to butchering Zoom and that hadn’t even been a full two weeks ago. Alexa was worse because she played off her evil like she was above everyone, got inside their heads and hearts and ruined them. She deserved worse than Zolomon, worse than being drained of time until nothing but a husk remained.
“Ya gonna start fuckin’ her again too?” Mick voiced Barry’s wounded disbelief, and the healing skin around the knife wound ripped open as he tensed, part of him wanting to hate Len too, but he couldn’t, he couldn’t.

Speaking slowly, deliberately, Len tried to reason with Mick. “This is a partnership for the greater good. My greater good. Ours. The city’s too. Think of how many fewer civilians will get caught up in mob business if the families aren’t shooting each other every week? Alexa’s plan is sound, for everyone. We just need Team Flash to fall in line,” he nodded back at Barry like a tool to be used.

“Go to hell!” Mick seethed, but all Barry could think was that they were already there.

Len’s thought process made sense in a terrible way. The only one who really got screwed was Barry, and what did Len care about that if he didn’t care about Barry himself anymore?

He cared, he had to a little, but maybe only enough to ask Alexa not to kill him.

They elected to tie Mick up next to Barry, secured to the other hospital bed. Since they propped him more upright, they did the same to Barry’s bed ‘as a courtesy’, but the shift and bend of his midsection cut the knife in deeper. Barry hated that he couldn’t keep the tears back in front of Alexa, in front of Len who barely looked upon his presence as more than a nuisance.

Mardon entered the med room a short while later. “Messages are coming in from the families,” he said.

With a clearer view into the Cortex, Barry could see the men that filled it, a few at Cisco’s terminal tapping into the meta human database and downloading the information to a remote server. No one would be safe from Alexa’s clutches after this, not even the kids they’d been trying to keep off the radar.

“Good,” she said. “We can finalize this tonight. They agree to the new location?”

“All set. But it’ll be the real heads this time. Madame Yeun wants Cold there.” Mardon gave Len a distrustful glare.

“She’s just ensuring I do my part, Wizard,” Len stared him down. “I don’t have the best history playing well with others, but I know when the score beats out distasteful company.”

Alexa was supposed to be the distasteful company, not only Mardon.

“See, Leo,” she said, hovering close to Len but careful not to drape herself on his arm or shoulder like she seemed to want to, aware of the personal ‘Snart bubble’ that few people recognized was a deal breaker—not just anyone was invited to touch him freely.

Not just anyone…

“I wanted to show you how much better you are on this side of the line. Now you see.” As she moved toward Barry once more, the proximity of her made him flinch—and flinching made him hiss from the pull of the knife. “I was planning on turning Flash over to the families as a prize, after he’s served some additional usefulness of course, but as long as you hold up your end of the bargain, you can keep him.” She looked across at Len as he moved parallel with her like before. “I know Roy’s powers can’t force someone to go against their nature, but there are ways around that.”

Desire filled Len’s gaze that was almost, almost familiar, but it was distorted now like it only cared to penetrate skin deep; emotion no longer mattered. “Can you make him forget this little betrayal?” he lifted his head toward the door.
“You miss the lovestruck puppy look, Cold?” Bivolo spoke up from beside Mardon.

A tilt of Len’s head and slow scan of his eyes down the length of Barry’s body made him shudder. “Never denied wanting a taste.”

Alexa laughed like it was funny—like any of this was funny. “Whatever you want, Leo. When we’re done, he’s all yours. For now, you two sit tight.” She tapped her nails on Barry’s ankle, which on its own was enough to make his stomach churn, then nodded at Mick before she moved for the door.

Len looked disappointed at not being allowed to have Barry like a pet at his side for this meeting of mob bosses, but he shrugged with a last look at the other bed. “Think about it, Mick. Could be like old times again,” he said and left the room with Alexa and Bivolo uncaring to what he was leaving Barry and Mick to deal with—namely Mardon and several goons. At least for the moment they had the med room to themselves as Mardon watched over the men handling the download.

Barry felt vile and sick and stunned that Len would even consider what he’d implied wanting—a brainwashed version of him like some slave. Even at Len’s worst, he never would have asked for that, would he? He was good, had so much potential to be good, wanted to be good. To be better than this.

It was Alexa’s fault. It was all her fault.

“You okay, Red?”

Cringing as he turned to look at Mick, Barry focused on keeping his breathing stable. “It hurts…but it’s shallow and in the right spot to keep healing. So it only feels like someone’s playing a live game of Operation with my ribs,” he sneered in an attempt to smile.

“No, kid,” Mick said evenly, oddly calm despite Barry’s failed try for brevity. “You okay?”

The tears Barry thought had grown numb surfaced far too quickly. “He can’t mean this, Mick. He can’t. There has to be a plan. He has to have a plan. Or she did something to him, twisted him somehow. He can’t be this cruel, this…different.”

But was this version of Len really so different from the Cold Barry first met?

As soon as that thought reared its head, Barry forced himself to feel it, to think unbiased about everything he’d been through with Leonard Snart. Not just this past week, but before then over the past two years, and how his opinion of the man had changed.

Len had started out as such a sorry case, the usual story, just an old thief who needed to be put away. Then he’d escalated when he created a situation where Barry failed to save someone with his speed for the first time. In that moment, when that usher was frozen and dead at Barry’s feet, he’d hated Len. He’d hated him more when he targeted Caitlin. Hated him for having fun when lives were at stake.

But the truth was, when no one was in danger, Barry had fun too. Caitlin ended up okay. Cisco and Dante were fine. And there were little things, signs that proved Snart wanted something more than the chaos so many other villains sought. Unlike them, Len could see reason. He didn’t want innocent people to get hurt. He wanted Barry to be fast enough to beat him because that’s what made it fun, the chase, not the payoff, and not any suffering in between.

The things Len had confessed to Barry the past several days wasn’t only said out of blind love for him, but from the truth inside of Len that he rarely let others see. He wanted his sister to be safe
and happy. He wanted his best friend to be safe and happy and to find his place amongst people who could maybe be something for him that Len couldn't. He was afraid and lonely and wanted to find a better place in this warped world for himself too.

Len wasn’t one-dimensional under Bivolo’s thrall, thinking only of Barry. He still protected himself, still protected others. He’d been conflicted before all this, had admitted that much and wasn’t sure what he wanted, but Barry knew it wasn’t this. It could never be this.

Even if Len didn’t love him, this wasn’t who Captain Cold was or any other incarnation of him. Deep down, Len was a good man who wanted more even though he didn’t believe he deserved it. Just like Barry. Both of them hopelessly trying to be happy and screwing it up at every turn was part of what drew them together.

And nothing would make Barry doubt that again.

“I love him, Mick. That’s how I broke the spell, because I told him. And I think he loves me too,” Barry said, holding Mick’s gaze through the dampness in his own. “Maybe not the way he did before, but he cares. And I know how much he loves you. He wouldn’t do this to us.”

“How sweet,” Mardon’s voice interrupted with a mocking edge as he stalked into the room, holding a pair of meta dampeners like Len had mentioned—like Len had warned them maybe? “I don’t trust Cold from atom, Flash, but you sound downright pathetic. He jabbed a knife in your side. Betrayed you multiple times. Whatsa guy gotta do to get you to give up the ghost already?”

Without offering a retort, Barry faced forward, willing himself to stay calm and unmoving at Mardon’s attempts to demoralize him. Maybe Barry was pathetic, but if that’s what he had to be to believe in people instead of assuming the worst just because the worst kept finding him—like Thawne, Zolomon, Alexa—then he’d happily be pathetic for the rest of his life.

“Look what we finally dug up,” Mardon said, dangling the cuffs from one hand. Moving for Barry’s side with the handle of the knife protruding, he flicked a finger along the edge to make Barry wince. “I’m supposed to take this out now, let you heal up a bit before slapping on these cuffs. Better do that, huh?” His fingers closed around the handle and Barry waited for him to tear it free.

A howl choked out of his throat instead as electricity surged through the steel.

“Hey!” Mick barked on his behalf.

Mardon chuckled while making Barry’s insides roil from the jolts traveling through him, so intense along the blade that Barry feared he’d pass out again. When the lightning finally dissipated, Mardon hissed at him, “Oops,” right before ripping the blade out as roughly as Barry had anticipated. Len hadn’t hit anything vital, but Mardon’s stunt didn’t help, leaving Barry bleeding freely as the wound lay gaping.

The edges of his vision dimmed as Mardon started to undo the straps holding his wrists.

“Hey,” Mick said again, calmer but adamant, “ya can’t put those on until he heals, dumbass. Ya said so yerself.”

“Shut up, Rory.”

“Yeah? Tell me to shut up, but if Flash bleeds out, the next one bleedin’ out is gonna be you when Alexa finds her toy dead.”
The threat caused Mardon to hesitate. About to secure Barry's wrists, he dropped them with a grimace and roughly bound them back to the bed. “Fine. But as soon as that stops bleeding, these are going on.” Like a pouting child, he stormed back out of the room.

“You could actually help with the bleeding, asshole!” Mick yelled, but Mardon ignored him.

“I-Its okay,” Barry gasped, even though he felt lightheaded and probably needed to eat something and get some real rest, but there wasn’t time. He willed his healing to kick in on pure adrenaline. “We h-have to get out of here, Mick, and help Len. It’s a trick. He has a plan.”

Mick didn't say anything.

“You believe that, don’t you?” Barry turned to him, but Mick was staring at the ceiling.

“Snart always thinks of the bigger picture, Red. If there’s a way around this, he’d have found it. If there isn’t...”

“He’s not like that.”

Conflict warred on Mick’s face with deep wounds and doubts that Barry knew were also turned inward. “It’s hard to change old stripes.”

“You did.”

“Don’t know about that either.”

Another voice broke in from seemingly right in front of them though Barry couldn’t see anyone there. “I do,” it said, and a figure in armor grew out of nothing, facing the door right behind an unsuspecting Mardon.

Ray.

Tapping the meta on the shoulder, Ray waited for Mardon to spin around before he punched him with a power suit-emboldened fist. As the dead weight of the man dropped, Ray managed to catch him fast enough to take the cuffs and secured them onto Mardon where they belonged.

The rest of the men were too surprised and slow reacting to make any headway before Ray moved into the Cortex to take them out as well. The few who tried to rush him or fire off shots weren’t any match for The Atom suit, not with one of their trump cards passed out and depowered on the floor.

“You brilliant idiot,” Mick said with as close to gushing approval as he got when Ray rushed back into the med room to untie them.

“I’d prefer beautiful genius,” Ray smiled widely while attending to Barry first, being gentle around his slowly healing stab wound, “but I’ll take it.” Making sure Barry was settled and stable before he moved to Mick, Ray didn’t immediately unstrap the larger man but said, “And I’ll take one other thing.”

Then he kissed him—just planted one right on the pyro’s stunned lips. Barry would have laughed if he wasn’t half willing himself to stay conscious.

Mick was speechless as Ray pulled back, blushing through the open visor of his helmet and quickly undoing Mick’s straps now that the hard part was out of the way.
“You’re a good man, Mick,” Ray said while he worked. “You can be. You’re trying to be. I think Snart’s like that too, and I’m not willing to give up on either of you. Right, Barry?” He glanced back at Barry like he needed to avoid looking directly at Mick or seeing his reaction.

“Right,” Barry said, refusing to believe that anything, especially not Alexa, could change the good he’d seen steadily growing inside of Len. Tired as he was, he offered Mick a weak smile. “Enough of a grand gesture for you?”

Mick was still staring at Ray, not speaking, maybe wondering if he was the one close to passing out, but then he glared at Barry with a sharp flick of his eyes like he’d been itching to have someone to blame. “You got him to do that?”

“No,” Barry said with earnest—and maybe a little fear. He hadn’t said anything to Ray. “Lisa might have talked to him though…”

Ray laughed nervously, clearly hoping not to be yelled at, while Mick grumbled, “Meddling brats.” But he didn’t start yelling after that. He hopped off the hospital bed, grabbed either side of Ray’s helmet, and kissed him back fiercely. He’d been too shocked to properly respond before.

Despite everything, even the hurt and ferocity clashing in his gut, the sight warmed Barry. “You’re welcome,” he said, but there wasn’t time for what remained unspoken between the two men and all of them knew that.

Making sure the unconscious henchmen were secure, Mardon in particular, once Barry had eaten several of the proteins bars Cisco kept on hand and his wound appeared to have stopped oozing, they met in the middle of the Cortex.

“There are men in black everywhere,” Ray said. “We don’t have much time before they realize their central command has fallen.”

“Can you get a message out?” Barry asked.

“Something’s blocking the comms. Probably that,” he gestured at the download still in progress of Cisco’s entire meta human database. “If we stop it—”

“No,” Barry shut him down. “If we stop it, Alexa will know. We need to buy time until we can figure out where they went. Sara and Lisa sent you in ahead?”

“Yeah. They’re outside. It was almost impossible to find an entrance without a guard, but maybe the girls saw Alexa leave.”

“I hope Cisco and Caitlin made it out okay,” Barry worried his lip.

“Nah,” Mick shook his head. “They’re still in here.”

“What?” Barry whirled on him.

“Well I wasn’t gonna tell the truth in mixed company,” Mick barked back. “Found them a good hidin’ spot like Snart said. Short Stuff was gonna try to get the comms workin’ again.”

Nodding, Barry realized that there was only one way they were getting out of this without alerting every remaining bit of muscle in the Labs. “Show us,” he said to Mick. “We get to them, we can take the Labs back and still head off Len and Alexa before it’s too late. Let’s go.”

Ray had only gotten a lay of the land coming in directly from the underground garage entrance, so
he didn’t know how many men in total were in the building, but his ability to shrink made him the perfect lookout. Leaving point to Ray also allowed Barry the time he needed to recuperate instead of diving right back in to using his speed.

There weren’t many men to encounter along the path to Cisco and Caitlin’s hiding place, which Barry was able to guess as soon as they reached the Accelerator where he often practiced his speed. There was a loose panel right at the entrance into the tunnel.

Mick knocked it clear without ceremony, which was at least quieter than calling, “Head's up!” but it meant that Cisco and Caitlin, huddled in the tight space, aimed a glowing piece of jumbled tech at them like a laser gun.

“Don’t shoot! I have a…” Cisco trailed as he realized who’d found them, “…radio. Oh thank God. Is it over? My heart can’t take bad guys storming the gates like this.”

Barry and the others explained the situation, and while Caitlin and Cisco exchanged nervous glances concerning Len, they focused on what could be done. They were close to finishing the makeshift comm system, which was easy to finalize with some borrowed tech from Ray’s suit. In moments they were in contact with Sara and Lisa, who were ready to rush in after Ray.

“Finally,” Lisa said. “West's on standby with the CCPD. Where’s Lenny? Someone just left.”

Dreading having to explain what had happened once again, especially to Lisa, Barry accepted that there was no other way. “Alexa, Bivolo…and Len.”

“She took him? What about proximity—”

“No longer an issue. He’s free. But right now it seems like he’s working with her.”

“What?”

“I don’t believe it,” Barry affirmed, like he kept affirming to everyone who seemed skeptical, save maybe Ray, who had his own reasons for believing in a man most people wrote off. “He has a plan. Somehow. He has to. We just have to figure out where they’re going.”

“Go back and get Mardon to talk?” Mick said.

“Doubtful,” Barry grimaced. Mardon would sooner let them pummel him.

“Wally has an idea,” Iris’s voice came over the comms.

“You’re there too?” Cisco exclaimed.

“Wally and Iris are patched in from home,” Lisa said.

Barry wasn’t surprised that both West children had found some way to participate once they found out the team was cut off from each other. Cisco hadn’t only given the folks in the field working comms, but Iris and Wally too, and they were huddled in the living room now, tuning in thanks to Cisco’s contraption reconnecting them all.

“Okay, so…I have an idea to use those censors we setup,” Wally crackled over the line.

After the chaos of everything that had happened at the first meetup, Barry had forgotten all about the censors.

“We cared more about tracking when people left,” Wally said, “but everyone was tagged by the
pulse signature when they exited the perimeter. As long as they haven’t changed clothes, we should be able to pinpoint where all of them went. Someone from the original meetup has to be going to the new one, right?"

“Madame Yeun,” Barry said as he remembered. “Maybe a few more too. We have to take back the Labs, locate any concentration of people tagged from the meetup, and get to the new spot as soon as possible.”

Backtracking the direction they’d come from, Barry and those with him returned to the Cortex just as a few helpful patrols stumbled upon Mardon out cold on the floor. Between Mick, Ray, and Barry—who was thankfully feeling much better as time wore on—they were able to take out this new group of goons before any of them could alert Alexa that something was amiss. Then Cisco began the process of tapping into the cameras and taking back control.

There were still a lot of men littering the place, but this time the lights were on and there was no Mardon or Bivolo hiding in the wings.

“Find out where the meetup is happening,” Barry instructed Cisco, “and figure out where Alexa is sending that download without interrupting it. We’ll handle the rest.”

With a Legend flanking either side of him, Barry headed into the bowels of his home base to clean house. Now that they could talk to their fellows again, it was easy for Lisa and Sara to join them, directed by Cisco on where to go to head off the right concentration of bad guys without getting cornered.

“Glider, Canary, left! Now right! Three henchmen coming up down the next corridor,” Cisco said. “Also, have I mentioned how much I like the gold blouse with that outfit?”

“Sweet talker,” Lisa purred.

“A little focus, please,” Sara said.

Barry welcomed the playful banter. It helped alleviate the worry that this was taking too long. He wasn’t used to having to do anything slow. The only comfort he had was in knowing that Alexa and Len traveling by car would still take longer to cross town than Barry on foot.

Once the remaining goons had been knocked out and stuffed into convenient Pipeline cells with Mardon occupying his own, Cisco had a likely location for the meetup.

“It’s another warehouse. Different part of town though.”

“That warehouse?” Mick shouldered in between the others, hovering over Cisco to get a look at the map displaying the sensor beacons.

“Uhh…yeah?” Cisco hunched down to avoid the pyro’s presence. “Why?”

“Coz that’s where this all started, twenty years ago with Alexa screwin’ us over in that building.” Side-eyeing Barry with a contemplative glance, Mick cringed in shame. “‘Could be like old times again’, he said.”

“Len,” Barry grinned. “He was giving you a clue.”

“Are you sure about that, Barry?” Caitlin pressed, ever ready to play Devil’s advocate when the answers seemed too easy, but Barry had something he’d been neglecting for far too long—faith, and the furious drive to never let anyone take one of his loved ones away from him again.
“I’m sure. That’s where we need to go.”

“Well you’ll be happy to know that the download for the meta human database,” Cisco said, “is localized in the same place. I can stop it any time now.”

“Not yet. Not until we get there.”

“Even then, Barry, that doesn’t mean she’ll lose everything she’s already downloaded. You’ll still need to intercept the receiver or someone is going to have a lot of meta humans on speed dial.”

“Understood.” Barry turned to the whole of his crew, thankful for each and every one of them, including his family not present in person but listening in, with Joe waiting for a call on where to send the police. “I need to get there now. The rest of you follow as fast as you can.”

“Wait a minute,” Lisa lurched forward. “You can carry at least one of us.”

“I think he can carry two of us,” Sara said to indicate the volunteers had been chosen. “And Ray can carry Mick.”

Barry basked in their willingness to be by his side, though he also understood that Lisa in particular worried about her brother.

“I gotcha, buddy,” Ray said with a pat on Mick’s shoulder.

Mick shot him a skeptical glance. “I ain’t no fairy princess, Haircut.”

“I know! Just think of it as payback for all the times you’ve carried me. I’d probably have trouble lifting you normally but the suit’s handy for that. For lifting and…other things. Not that I’m implying anything sexual—”

“Ray,” Sara broke in before he could cram his foot any further down his throat. “Later.”

An appreciative once-over was Mick’s response. “Then ya can imply anything you like, Pretty. Just watch the sharp edges. And I mean mine, not the suit’s.”

Barry almost expected Mick to wink, while Cisco looked like he could not handle discovering this about the pair. Luckily, Lisa was there to steal his attention back as she bent to press a kiss to his cheek before pulling up her goggles.

“Shall we, kids? Clock’s tickin’.”

It was then, readying to zip into action with the most recent configuration of his team, that Barry realized he’d been away from Len for longer than ten minutes for the first time in a week. And he missed him. Alexa was not going to win.

“We play this like Len would play it,” Barry said. “Careful. Calculating. Once we’re there, we take our time, understand exactly what’s going on, then try to figure out what Len hoped to accomplish before we blow his cover.”

“You’re putting a lot of faith in him, Barry,” Sara said, fitting her own goggles into place, “that Leonard didn’t just roll with the punches when Alexa’s side looked like the smarter option.”

Fixing Mick and Lisa with the brunt of his assurance, Barry didn’t back down from the challenge Sara presented. Even she wore a smile like she already knew his answer. “I know. And even though I don’t have proof Len’s still with us, I have all of you. I have all the things I know couldn’t
have been programmed by Bivolo that tell me Len is a good man and I am right to believe in him. So let’s go get him back.”

With conviction, Barry pulled up his cowl and goggles, looked to Sara and Lisa to be certain they were ready for the whirlwind, then they were off.

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The warehouse wasn’t as clean as the one they’d met in earlier, though not quite as dingy as the one Mardon had been squatting in. Still, it was abandoned and dank inside like they were underground in the sewer. Not exactly the high life Alexa preferred to live in at the Plaza or wherever she’d been hanging her hat. More like a gesture she needed to see through to the end, like the back cover of a novel Barry hadn’t seen the start of, but he’d experienced a helluva lot of the pages in between.

Most noticeable was that this warehouse didn’t have the same pillar structure inside or as many places to hide. There were a few back corridors and various floors, but the main area where the members of the mob families were gathered left things open, giving everyone plenty of ways to make a break for it if things went south.

No wonder they’d agreed to meet again.

Barry had perched with Lisa and Sara on a neighboring rooftop to see inside before moving closer, finally scouting out an entrance on the second floor that no itchy trigger finger Bratva or others had setup snipers in. Zipping the girls over unseen, Barry and the others snuck to the edge of a walkway overlooking the gathering already in progress. Mick and Ray were still a few minutes out, and calling in the boys in blue would be a blood bath. For now it was just them.

There weren’t only three representatives per family this time either, but each head and several bodyguards, making up two to three dozen people below them with Alexa, Bivolo, and Len at the center. Once again, a platform had been setup to give Alexa her stage.

The sight of her, flawless and elegant like some storybook sorceress in her long black dress, boiled Barry’s blood because he knew everything Len had been forced to do tonight was only because of her—it had to be.

“You all came here in good faith,” she said, mid-speech since Barry and the others were a bit late, “because I proved I could take out your biggest competition—not each other, but The Flash. With some of your most powerful allies at my side,” she gestured at Len and Bivolo.

There were dissenting voices concerning whether a meta human and Captain Cold really were allies of the families, but Alexa proceeded to plead her case.

“We are vastly outnumbered even with backup,” Sara whispered.

“Can’t you just zip Lenny out of there?” Lisa asked.

“That won’t help us if Alexa ends up running the whole city and turns everyone against us,” Barry said. “Len understands that too. She knows my identity. She knows the Labs inside and out. We have to turn this around another way.”

“I see three exits,” Sara said. “One behind the platform and two beneath us that Glider and I could drop down to. If we block the exits, we could buy more time. But what do you think Cold is hoping for? How can we get ahead of this?”
The immediate answer eluded Barry, but he reminded himself to think like Len—and suddenly it became clear. “What would Captain Cold want from this if the plan to control the families was still in play?”

Lisa snorted. “To control it all himself.”

“Exactly. The only real threat down there is Bivolo. Len isn’t wearing his goggles, but I am.” Barry adjusted them securely and glanced at each of them in turn. “Block the exits beneath us and be ready to follow my lead.”

“Wait, what about playing this careful—” Sara hissed, but Barry was already gone.

Alexa stood separate from Len and Bivolo, which made it easy to flash onto the scene in mere moments and nab her, pulling her back to the edge of the platform closer to the third exit and holding her with one arm secure across her body and the other lifted to press two fingers to the side of her temple.

Seconds of reaction time were all it took for the families to respond, Len and Bivolo reacting just as swiftly with guns drawn as the atmosphere in the room shifted on a dime.

“Barry, what are you doing?!?” Cisco called over the comms as a chorus of dissenting voices rose up at what Sara had explained he’d just done—like some morbid parallel of earlier that night when all of them had yelled at Len.

Then someone in the crowd broke the room’s silence with a laugh. “Whadda ya gonna do, Flash? Fire imaginary bullets?”

Holding out his hand for them to see, Barry answered the taunt by vibrating his fingers with blurring speed and started to slowly bring them back to Alexa’s temple. “Less funny when you think what this could do to the inside of her skull.”

“Barry,” someone chided him over the line—likely Iris or Caitlin, he couldn’t tell which—but he didn’t care.

The woman in his grasp flinched, and he felt such satisfying vindication to finally put her on the defensive. Part of him wanted to carry through on the threat right then, to just be rid of her, but then he wouldn’t have any collateral. And that should have bothered him. It should have bothered him that the only thing stopping him from what normally would have been a line he’d never cross was losing his leverage.

Eyes falling to Len, Barry pressed his now unmoving fingers to the side of Alexa’s head. The tense crowd was forgotten when the only member of the audience who mattered was in front of Barry. He had to be right about this, he had to be right that Len wanted him there and had a plan that required them working together to see it through, but Len’s expression remained flat, unreadable. Not even Bivolo glanced between them like he expected a double-cross.

“What are you doing, Flash?” Len echoed what the others kept crying over the comms, cold gun aimed squarely on Barry’s human shield. “Not exactly your style.”

“Game’s changing, Cold. Maybe I need to change with it. You didn’t think I’d be so easy to get rid of, did you?”

A cold, cruel smirk replied. “Never wanted to get rid of you, Scarlet. You’re still useful. Assuming you can learn to be obedient. What do you say,” his eyes darted to Alexa and back again, “can we cut a deal rather than bloody these folks’ fine suits?”
Yes, that had to be his angle. “Only if she’s not a part of it,” Barry said.

“Hmm,” Len tilted his head as if to contemplate the offer, “Let me think about that,” but without waiting a single beat, he fired a precision blast right at Barry’s outstretched arm.

Time dilated as Barry dodged the icicle headed for his bicep, clearing the sharp edges by only a hair and feeling the chill from the output as it passed him. In his moment of disbelief that Len had actually fired, Alexa slammed a heel down into his boot, which was only marginally less painful than when Lisa had done that to his sock-clad foot.

Stumbling back as Alexa pushed from his grasp, Barry teetered at the edge of the platform, while Len re-centered his aim on Barry’s chest.

No. Barry had to be right about this. He had to be right.

Alexa looked so triumphant.

“Like I said, kid,” Len spoke plainly, slowly, holding Barry’s gaze captive, “I thought I made things clear in the warehouse.”

An ache tore through Barry’s chest, and panic, and fury that he was wrong, that Len might actually mean this.

Until the thief’s hardened expression finally showed a flicker—just a flicker—of something only Barry could see, and maybe Alexa. Like he was hinting, pleading with Barry to understand the one clue he obviously hadn’t figured out yet, that what Len had made clear in the warehouse was what he’d said.

“I promise, everything I do from here on out is to protect you.”

Len had a plan, he just didn’t need Barry for it, but thinking on his feet as he always did, now the thief had needed for Barry to release Alexa to give him a clearer shot.

“Oh second thought, I don’t think this city needs a queen,” he said, and even with Bivolo at his side and no goggles to shield him, Len shifted his aim onto Alexa. “Right, Raider?”

Barry darted his attention to Bivolo, not believing it was possible as the man smiled…and turned his gun on Alexa too.

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

Barry seem a bit...unhinged? That's not over and done with just yet. After all, our boy has been through a lot, and we know he doesn't always think clearly when pushed too far.

Len has an even better plan that you might think, and yes, it would have gone off without a hitch if Barry hadn't decided to interfere so early. I know Len said and did some terrible things but have faith.

And stay tuned.
Len only had one chance to play this right, and he’d gambled everything to do it.

Barry was an idiot—but damn if Len didn’t...he couldn’t think it yet, not yet, but he’d at least admit that he wanted Barry, The Flash, his brilliantly ridiculous nemesis. Len wanted more of what he’d tasted while out of his mind with emotion this past week, even though he doubted he could keep it. After all, he’d saved the kid’s life before they ever could have been called friendly. Len wasn’t about to push all that aside for his biggest mistake, a woman who’d helped shape him into who he was.

For that alone, Len could never forgive Alexa.

If you’re out, you’re out.

But no, Len had a better plan than killing her. He had a way out that saved everyone and still ruined what she’d tried to build with the best possible revenge. It just happened to include partnering with Roy Bivolo.

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“How about your transparency? You played the game on a razer’s edge, Alexa, but this is how you wanted it to end. Bivolo’s control is gone, and I’m ready to make a deal. Because that’s what you really want, isn’t it? You want me with you.”

She hadn’t been able to resist the bait. Alexa wasn’t stupid of course; she didn’t agree to anything or untie Len until Bivolo was there as insurance. If Len tried anything, Bivolo could simply turn on the Rage and set Len against Barry, make him terrified of his own shadow huddled in the corner, or cause him to be docile and unable to fight. It was a terrifying power—useful and awe-inspiring.

“And what’s the price for your loyalty, Leo? Besides a seat at the table?”
“Keep The Flash alive,” Len had said, knowing he couldn’t appear too sentimental or Alexa would consider him the same weak romantic he’d been while hypnotized. “Leave his friends and family out of it. Unless they push. Which I’ll be honest, they probably will. Then you can kill them for all I care. But don’t seek out any more heat than you can handle.

“Flash can be controlled. You didn’t think I played nice just because of the fine figure he makes in that suit, did you? I blackmailed him with his identity same as you. A little pain is enough to bypass his healing. Wound him enough, and he’ll be stuck in a loop, unable to use his speed. Then once you decide how to best use him, you'll have an unstoppable asset on your hands.”

It was a sound plan, tempting to be sure, and enough for Alexa to wonder if Len was the diabolical mastermind she’d been hoping to coax out of him instead of some budding hero. Honestly, Len wondered the same thing, mostly because he doubted he could be only half of who he’d become this past year. He was both, all his broken pieces intermingled, but maybe there was room for compromise even if Barry never forgave him for what he was about to do.

“I’ll consider it,” Alexa said, weighing her options, her desires, and Len’s potential for sabotage like a smart psychopath. “Let’s see if you aren’t just buying time for some trap to be sprung, then we can talk more. I have to get The Flash secure, finish taking the building, you understand. You and Roy sit tight.”

Len tried not to grin too widely at that, because time with Raider was exactly what he needed, even if it was his biggest gamble yet.

“You really ready to throw in with Alexa?” Bivolo asked as soon as they were alone.

“Nope. I’m lying. I plan to betray her the first chance I get. Want in?”

Bivolo laughed outright. “You’re crazy.”

“Most definitely. But let’s talk about you for a minute before you call in the guards.” Len looked up from his bound position in Cisco’s chair with confidence and composure, secure certainly, beaten and seemingly broken, yet Bivolo still cocked his head to listen. “I’m not willing to be Alexa’s minion, and I don’t think you want to be that forever either. What if you could be more? What if you could be part of a team and still reap the rewards she’s promised you?”

“You’re trying to make a deal in the lion's den.”

“Always. Where better?”

Bivolo scoffed. “You'd say anything to regain the upper hand. Why should I trust you have any intention of following through when you just made similar promises to her?”

“Don’t blow my cover, Roy, and when the mob bosses come calling—and they will—before we leave, I’ll hand these over to you.” Len nodded at the goggles hanging from his neck. “My emotions and my mind will be entirely in your hands. I slip up, do something you don’t like, I’m at your mercy.”

Finally, intrigue slipped into the meta’s expression. “What’s to stop me from using my powers now and telling Alexa everything you just said?”

Now Len knew he had him. “Because you’re smarter than that. But you’re not a man with vision, not like Alexa. Not like me. You know that or you wouldn’t have gone in with her when she found you and made the initial offer. But what sort of kingdom do you want to help run? One where you’re never certain when your boss will decide you’re no longer useful, or one built on honor
among thieves?”

“I’m supposed to believe you have honor?” Bivolo barked another laugh.

Next came the real gamble—Len dropped the drawl and persona of Captain Cold completely. “Right now, it’s in my best interest to kowtow to Alexa and beg for scraps. I refuse to because of my loyalties. Because of my friends. I won’t let her hurt me and mine without a fight.”

“And including The Flash,” Bivolo said without asking. “You really do care for him, don’t you?”

Emotion and attachment weren’t luxuries Len was used to allowing, but maybe that was a lie too, because he’d always been vulnerable when it came to Lisa and Mick. He’d proven that plenty. Gone in with his father to keep Lisa safe, before finally icing the bastard. He’d even died for his friend. Now he was risking a clean bullet between the eyes, or worse, enslavement to his worst enemy, to protect people who shouldn’t have mattered. They weren’t family. They weren’t Lisa or Mick. Yet he wanted to keep them safe.

He wanted to keep *Barry* safe, beyond desire for an exciting opponent on the streets of Central City and louder than the nagging voice at the back of his mind when he’d seen Deathbolt about to blast the kid and he’d blasted the meta with his cold gun first.

Len remembered the past week, yet part of him felt like he’d been transported back to that night at Tiffany’s, maybe even further to the night he met Alexa in the warehouse and struggled to define who and what he wanted to be. He’d been drawn to Barry’s doorstep long before a flash of red eyes tied him to his nemesis with string like some deadly yo-yo hiding a time bomb. He’d sought peace and comfort and clarity in simply seeing Barry. None of those things were common experiences for him, yet he craved them, craved Barry, wanted…

Wanted something intangible that was seconds from slipping through his fingers. But more than wanting to keep it, more than wanting to protect himself, he was willing to do whatever it took to save everybody else.

Maybe he really had been infected by this hero nonsense.

“This isn’t a fairytale, Roy. No happy love story with a dramatic kiss for an ending. To keep The Flash from being hurt beyond repair, I’m still gonna have to hurt him. He might not forgive me for it, but I can live with that.”

There wasn’t true caring or sympathy on Bivolo’s face, but maybe understanding, which had been part of the gamble, since Len believed the man must have known his own heartbreak at some point, even if he was another seemingly heartless killer. “Who is he under that mask?”

“Alexa never told you?”

“She keeps her secrets,” he sneered. “Mardon doesn’t know either.”

“That is the one thing I won’t share,” Len said, refusing to budge where Barry’s long-term safety was concerned. “But you switch sides for me and I will share the protection he affords me. We can own this city without The Flash as our enemy, and if you ever doubt me, use your powers. But ask yourself, who do you really want running this city?”

“You owe me, Roy,” Len reminded him of the favor earned at Ferris Air that had been snubbed. “You think the hero track stops at Flash? They’ll never stop coming, even if you get every meta on your side. With me, you’ll be free in a way Alexa can’t promise.”
Commotion outside the room drew Bivolo’s attention. They didn’t have much time. But the man didn’t look ready to shut Len’s offer down when he turned back to him. “I’m guessing we play things neutered, that it? No killing coz it would hurt The Flash’s delicate sensibilities?”

“No killing coz it’s sloppy,” Len reiterated how Barry had sold the deal to him, “and I’m not sloppy. Not saying you can’t defend yourself, but if you join my Rogues, that is the rule we follow to keep The Flash on our good side.”

A bite of Bivolo’s lower lip stretched the silence between them, time short, and Len screwed if the other man said no. Then Bivolo shrugged. “What can I say, Snart, tough choice. Good offer either way. So I guess it comes down to one thing.”

“Yeah? And what’s that?”

“Alexa’s a bitch,” he said with a grin. “I like you better. But you fail to pull this off or double cross me, I won’t hesitate to say ‘long live the queen’ and lead you to the executioner.”

This deal Len had every intention of upholding. For Barry. For the city. For himself. Compromise was a funny thing sometimes, coz you didn’t need to change completely to try on something new. “I’d expect nothing less,” he said, sharing Bivolo’s grin.

“Well then,” the meta crossed his ankles as he leaned against Cisco’s desk, “you want me to hit her with my powers when she gets back? Let you take over?”

“No. Gotta play the long game to capitalize on the offer with the families. I got a better idea.”

“I'm listening. What do you need me to do…boss?”

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With the crowd half at Len’s back, Barry in the far corner of the platform in front of him, and Alexa even closer, held at gunpoint by Bivolo’s revolver and Len’s own misting cold gun, despite Barry’s unexpected arrival, everything about the plan was coming together.

Len had needed it to play out this way to ensure the families saw him overtake Alexa while they were still interested in her original deal. An end to petty mob bullshit really would be beneficial to the city, and hey, if Len happened to be the go between making sure everything ran smoothly, all the better.

Now, the timing should be just about right for the final trump card to arrive.

“Before we were so rudely interrupted, I believe we were talking expectations.” Len cast his eyes behind him at the room, noticing a handful of drawn guns but mostly curious faces, and of course Sara guarding one exit while Lisa held the other—smart. “And I don’t think any of you bought that I was willing to accept less than King of the Kingdom. That doesn’t involve double-crossing queens I didn’t trust when I was twenty,” he snapped back at Alexa, whose hands clenched into fists and face became marred with a snarl. “But you tell me. Would you all rather see this plan go through under her or controlled by the man who really took down The Flash and Mistress Mastermind?”

Somewhere over the comms, Cisco was cheering, Len was sure of it.

Barry betrayed only a moment’s worth of relief and elation before he veiled his expression with his own snarl, back to acting the part of broken hero—only maybe there wasn’t enough acting involved. Between Len and Alexa, Barry had been broken, even if he’d come here thinking he
knew the score. He’d been reckless, violent, too convincing with his threats and too wild in his eyes like they were dancing with sparks. This could still go all kinds of wrong, but Len’s priority was to hold the room. Barry had to come second.

“Smart play, Leo,” Alexa said, hands twitching at her sides before slipping into the nearly unseen pockets of her dress.

“Wouldn’t try it.” Len took a threatening step toward her, gun charging with promise. She couldn’t have a gun hidden there; there wasn’t room. But that didn’t mean she wasn’t dangerous. “See, I got your henchman on my side. He prefers to play for winners. Don’t hear too many complaints from the families yet either. And Flash? Oh, my dear, if you think I’ll hesitate for one moment to reveal his identity before you can open your mouth, think again. This is our city. You’re just a tourist. And you’ve got nothing left to bargain with.”

The families held steady to see who would come out the victor. Even if Len wasn’t fast enough to fire before she tried to pull something from her pocket, Barry was, and Alexa knew that. Yet still, she smiled.

“You’re good, Leo. You’re very good,” she said like a mock at the virtue in him that she could never understand. “I almost believed you. But when it actually matters…” her smile curled wicked like she’d still won, “...you never were a good liar.”

A scream tore from Barry’s throat as sparks erupted from his emblem. Len jerked forward, and a second was all it took for his gun’s aim to falter and his expression to reveal to Alexa—the only person who could see it—that of course he cared.

Before he could reach her, a jolt ripped through him as well, coming from his gun and dropping him to his knees. Same with Bivolo, shocked and stumbling. She’d planted something on each of them to impose her control if they crossed her.

But Alexa was so focused on getting one up on Len, she didn’t pay enough attention to the speedster behind her.

Barry, convulsing from the shocks, looked so tired, so sore and sick of being brought low, but through his weariness was a spark of rage that wouldn’t be forced into submission. Rushing Alexa with a scream, he attacked haphazard, not fully in control of himself or his powers, and in a flash of blue and yellow lightning, they were gone, leaving only a faint trail leading in the direction of the final exit.

The sparks traveling through Len and Bivolo ceased, and Len gulped for air, close to passing out given how powerful those jolts could be against someone with accelerated healing. But he couldn’t rest. Not yet.

Leaving his cold gun on the ground, Len groped for Bivolo and seized him by his jacket. The families were stirring; he needed more time. “Keep the room calm,” he ordered. “Alexa's mine.”

“You better hope so,” Bivolo growled even as he lurched to his feet to get everyone's attention with a shimmer of purple in his eyes, while Len hopped off the other side of the platform to give chase.

“Lenny!”

Len didn't acknowledge Lisa's cry. Bivolo couldn’t calm everyone at once—not his sister apparently—but they needed time for the final play, and none of that would mean anything if Alexa got away. Or worse, if Barry…
No. Len couldn’t think it, yet he knew he wasn’t imagining the danger. He’d never seen Barry look like that before, but he remembered well every story and nightmare and broken tremor left behind by Zoom.

Clearing the doorway into a corridor at the back of the building, Len heard struggling just ahead and ran toward it, finally bursting into a small room where Alexa and Barry were on the ground. Shocks of electricity were still lapping around Barry’s body, the only thing preventing him from falling upon Alexa fully. Still, she kicked and clamored to escape him as he clawed for the remote in her hand and finally knocked it to the floor.

“Flash!”

Howling in his freedom, Barry snatched Alexa up by the neck tight enough to choke her, while his other hand became a deadly, vibrating spear, fingers pointed, already driving downward—

“Barry, stop!”

Halting just in time through his tears and his fury, he looked at Len like a boy gone mad. “Look what she did to us!” he cried, not having to specify because it was everything—**everything**. Looking down at her once more, weapon ready and expression **cold**, Barry shook his head at her pleading gaze. “She won’t stop. She knows my name, my face. She’ll just keep coming.”

“**Barry.**” Len stepped forward, unarmed with hands raised in placation, because this battle wasn’t about weapons. “You’re not a killer. You can’t—”

“I have to. I let Zoom get away again and again because I held back, because I wouldn’t make the hard call, and he **took my father from me**. Just like Thawne took Mom. She’s just like them, Len. I have to.”

“Do you?” He took another step, urging Barry's eyes back on him. “Do you wish you’d made the hard call with me?”

Finally, a bit of the madness cleared.

“Barry, you told me this was something you feared most—what you might have to do the **next time**. Well next time is now and you **do not** have to do this.” Slowly, he dropped to his knees beside the fallen hero and his prey, hands still raised, ready to reach out if he had to. One thing Len had been getting good at was convincing other people to be the better version of themselves, but that all started with Barry doing the same for him. “I used to think I had to do so many things. You made me believe I could be better.”

The vibrations slowed through Barry’s arm, though the spear remained. “The families…”

“Taken care of. All sorted, I promise.” Assuming help arrived as planned, but the lack of chaos coming from the direction they’d just been was encouraging. “She’s not getting away with this.”

The boy’s eyes snapped to Alexa, and for a brief moment, he looked ready to make sure she didn’t get away with this.

“Even after I almost died for a chance to start over, I doubted,” Len spoke loudly to keep Barry’s attention, pouring his heart out in a whole new way, because unlike this past week, now he had his filters again, but he couldn't let them be his crutch. “I doubted I wanted this, that I could follow through even if I did. And it took a week of acting like a **fool** to figure out there is no other path.” Words that were almost harder to say than the ones he’d been spouting at Barry for days sprung to Len’s lips. “I want to be more like you, Barry. Don’t be like me. Don’t be like **her.**”
Tears choked Barry as his hand finally dropped and he loosened his hold on Alexa's throat, limp and trembling. “I-I don’t want to be the reason someone else I love gets hurt…”

*Love. All this was wrapped up in that word, even back when Len thought Alexa was something better than she’d turned out to be.*

He let his hands drop too. “Maybe you will be.”

Barry stared at him with horror in his eyes.

“Maybe you will be,” Len said again. “You’re The Flash. You planning on quitting any time soon or running away?” Barry didn’t have to nod for his answer to be clear. “Then that’s the reality you have to face. You can pretend you won’t let people get close to you, that you won’t…fall in love or get attached, but you know that’s bullshit. You also can’t control how someone else feels about you.”

*God,* those eyes—they shredded right through Len down to his black and damaged core.

“You think your friends will let you play hermit? Your family? Never. So too bad, it means they’re at risk, they’ll always be at risk, and all you can do is be better than the bad guys. It sucks. I know. But one thing this mess taught me—even before this, on the Waverider—is it’s better to have more loved ones than the bad guys know what to do with instead of a small few…who you might let down anyway.”

Like Len had, so many times, so many twisted ways. But Barry could be better. Barry had to be better, or what hope was there for Len?

All at once, Barry released Alexa, dropping her back to the floor with a gasp leaving her at being freed from his powerful grip. They looked like some morbid romance cover with her sprawled there beautiful and terrible beneath him, glaring with all her ugly hatred as he panted on his knees—the hero that almost crossed a line he’d been trying so hard to stop straddling.

When a sneer darkened Alexa’s face and she looked ready to spew something vile, Barry reared back and cracked a fist across her face with far more restraint than she deserved, knocking her out cold. Something primal in Barry was satisfied with that much, but now that the monster had been silenced, he lost his fierceness and started to shake, sobbing quietly as he peered at Len like he was ashamed. As if Len would ever pass judgment.

On his knees himself, Len crawled that last bit closer to Barry, Alexa forgotten as the kid turned to him and Len’s hand outstretched, hovering near the rip in the Flash suit where blood had dried but the wound was still raw. He stared at the healing skin, unsure how to express how sorry he was when this version of him didn’t take to those words easily.

As it turned out, nothing needed to leave him to break the tension, because Barry launched forward, arms thrown over Len’s shoulders as he hugged him as tight as he could.

The air rushed out of Len’s lungs, half from the force and half just from the contact. He wanted Barry, oh how he wanted him, but his biggest fear besides Barry’s rejection was that the next time they touched, he would flinch. His whole body went rigid in anticipation of that, but no desire to recoil surfaced and no lurch in his gut appeared learned from years of being told that love was a sickness to be shunned. Maybe Len would never be able to give Barry what he deserved, but he might not be broken beyond repair after all.

Collapsing into Barry’s warmth, some of that relief loving the kid had given him stirred in the
charred chambers of Len's heart. “Your arms feel the same,” he said, more like breathed into Barry's neck, finally lifting his hands to hold Barry back.

Another sob choked out of Barry as he gave a quaking laugh.

Len still couldn't say he was sorry as his hand trailed down to touch the skin he’d laid bare when he stabbed Barry, but he said, “She wanted to run voltage through you the whole time we were gone. I couldn’t…” His throat was too tight, overcome.

“You were protecting me,” Barry said, as if he’d never doubted that.

“I answered the only way I could—if I was faking it.”

“I know. I’m sorry I didn’t understand until you said it a second time.”

“You didn’t?” Len said more like realization, pulling back to look at Barry though the kid gripped him tightly. “But you came here, played to my side like you believed in me.”

“Of course,” Barry smiled through the rawness of his face and reddened eyes. “I always believe in you.”

It had to be the closeness of what Bivolo had put them through, that week of feeling too much and drowning in Barry Allen to explain how wet Len’s eyes became. If it was weakness to feel sentiment and…so much for this kid, Len didn’t care, he didn’t want to deny it. He’d tried to deny so much on that ship while pushing others to see the light. He wanted some of the light too, and he wasn’t running anymore. He’d save the running for the fastest man alive.

Grabbing Barry's face in both hands, familiar, red gloves fell to Len's wrists just to feel him, just to connect them, and there was no conclusion other than to pull the boy closer and claim his lips like a treasure to be stolen. Free and clear-headed, Len kissed Barry so there could be no doubt this was where he belonged and everything he wanted.

Humming in agreement, Barry gripped Len like his one lifeline and delved in deeper, only to gasp away, “Finally. Finally…” as if the past week had been torture, and in some ways it had been, but finally…

There was no spell, only them. Maybe this was Len’s love story after all.

Climbing into Len's lap, Barry renewed their kiss with fervor, with a fever of want and hands twisting in the fabric of Len’s parka.

“Barry,” Len huffed, half laughing, breathless and delirious. “Save it for when we're not next to an unconscious woman.”

A like laugh sputtered out of Barry, but when he pulled back, he scowled as he looked down at her. “How do we fix this?”

“Like I said. I got it covered.”

“Apparently,” a friendly voice answered, and they turned as one to find Sara in the doorway like she'd been poised there for several minutes. Damn assassin. She had the cold gun in her grasp, and when Len’s gaze landed on it, she tilted it upwards. “Figured it was safe once this thing stopped sparking.”

Before Len could respond, Lisa peeked around Sara’s shoulder, patient but feigning otherwise.
“So,” she said, “do we get to pretend we caught ourselves a Flash or what?”

Having backup he hadn’t anticipated, Len smiled as he helped Barry to his feet. But that smile faltered as he realized how this had to play out, and it wasn’t pretty or nice. He asked Barry plainly, “Think you can handle one more spark?” anticipating backlash as he indicated Alexa’s remote on the floor.

Barry’s expression was nauseous and tragic, but he still nodded. “Guess there’s no choice. Show me how it’s done, man with the plan,” he said, handing over to Len every ounce of his faith.

It was terrifying in some ways, to have someone trust him so implicitly. If Len was as cruel as some people expected of him, he could have done terrible things with that faith and surrender, but he and Barry had a rhythm that was almost like a promise. Banter carried that promise best. “Like I’ve said before, Scarlet, you do better with direction.”

Barry could have rolled his eyes or even scoffed, but he met Len’s gaze directly. “We’ll have to test that theory later.”

“Ahem,” Lisa reminded them of her presence, “congrats and all, but ew. Also…you two okay?” she asked more seriously.

Another glance at Alexa brought them both back down to earth. “After some real vacation days,” Barry said, “I will be.”

“What he said,” Len agreed.

It was time to grace the stage again. With Alexa draped over Sara’s shoulder, Len and Lisa led Barry at gunpoint. When they returned to the seemingly still but murmuring main room, Barry kicked up a few sparks only for a fresh jolt to rip through him from inside his emblem with Len holding the remote. They’d remove the device Alexa had planted there soon enough, just like they had with Len’s gun, but for now the ruse had to look convincing.

Len could see Mick and Raymond having taken up the exits Lisa and Sara abandoned, keeping everyone who hadn’t been calmed by Bivolo’s powers right where they needed to be. Though it hardly seemed as though Bivolo was keeping anyone whammied, because his assistance was no longer necessary.

He stood atop the platform waiting, while Evelyn Kittelsby commanded the room in her finest fur coat and silk headscarf.

Step one: get Bivolo to flip-flop.

Step two: get a message to Evelyn.

She owed Len. While the old thief insisted she had a soft spot for him, and she did, the beginning of their relationship hadn’t come from mere crossed paths but because a young Leonard Snart had once saved her life.

“You saved Evelyn’s life?” Barry exclaimed during their trek from the back of the building.

“Evelyn aged gracefully but everyone makes mistakes. Before she retired, she managed to stumble upon the one young buck lowlife in Central who didn’t know her face. He tried to swipe her take from a jewel heist. I intervened.”

“A hero even then, huh?” Barry cast a wistful smile over his shoulder.
“Or just smart business, Flash, coz being owed by the real queen of Central City, even if she retired soon after, was a favor I knew I’d have to save for a rainy day.”

They reached the platform and a renewed hush fell over the crowd. Len jabbed Barry in the back with his gun for good measure and smirked as Sara dropped Alexa onto the stage in front of Bivolo, who gave the assassin an appreciative eye that Len would have to warm him not to pursue.

“You were late,” Len whispered to Evelyn when he bent to kiss her cheek.

“Please, dear. A gentleman would have sent a car.”

“I was a little tied up,” Len said. “Literally. But I’ll make it up to you.”

Looking out at the crowd, there was far more respect in the varied faces of the mob families than there had been for Alexa, even some satisfaction. Len knew his city and the creatures that darkened its alleyways. His crew—Lisa and Mick—with a man in armor and a League of Assassins in addition, not to mention Baez once he called her back in and Bivolo up on the platform too, made Len a true king with The Flash as his jester.

A year ago, he might have played this out exactly as he was pretending to now. It wasn’t even fully pretending, because some things he’d have to follow through on to keep the families from falling into chaos after Alexa’s stunts. Captain Cold had to be Central City’s big bad supervillain who had everyone, even the city’s hero, reeling from his authority.

Sort of felt like coming home in a way that returning from the Waverider hadn’t.

“What about him?” someone called, indicating Barry.

“Oh, Flash is gonna play nice. He wants what all of us want—to come out of this ahead. Plus I know all your secrets, Scarlet,” Len whispered like a threat in Barry’s ear just loud enough for those closest to the platform to hear, “so you better learn your place. The city needs its hero, what with all these unsupervised metas running around. It also needs the families of Central to hold it together. And you need me to hold you together,” he called to the room. “So let’s talk compromise, boys and girls, and we can all leave here as friends.”

When Alexa ran for it, she’d been headed for the hidden receiver she’d setup to gather the download from STAR Labs. Better that than a flash drive left at the Labs that could have easily been corrupted or confiscated. But Bivolo knew where it was, so that information was moot. Not to say Len wouldn’t utilize some of what he found there. After all, he was playing a part that needed some truth to it, and he was curious about a few names in that database.

“You’re in my pocket now, Flash,” he said once the families were in agreement. “Let’s part amicably. The Devil you know and all that.”

It was a smart plan because it allowed Barry to go about business as usual, while Len ‘pretended’ he was a criminal mastermind running the city. All the while, Central remained safer than it had ever been before.

The families dispersed and all was well, because Evelyn carried weight long past her prime, and that’s all Len had really needed—a trustworthy proxy more impactful than Alexa and proof that he could retain his power, so long as he had Bivolo on his side and The Flash beneath his heel.

“You did well, Lenny,” Evelyn kissed his temple when the warehouse was all but deserted of undesirables. “But you listen up, young man, you hear? Be good,” she patted his cheek, saying the part of the exchange usually reserved for Len to say to her.
“Be safe,” he replied, no countering of what she’d said in expectation, because he had expectations of his own.

To be good. To be better.

Len didn’t have working comms, but he informed Raymond to tell the crew at large to watch over Evelyn on her trek back to the neighborhood. Not that she’d need it tonight, but he couldn’t shake the urge to go the extra mile for the woman who’d saved him—as he’d once saved her. After all, she’d been the one to plant it in his head that maybe his way out, like he’d so longed for, came in a mysteriously heroic package.

“Uh, what are we gonna do about her?” Ray asked, looking down on the unconscious Alexa in the wake of the families leaving. She was starting to stir. “She knows The Flash’s identity. That’s still a problem.”

“Not for long,” Len said.

The others backed away as Bivolo came forward. As soon as Alexa’s eyes opened, they were captured by the Rainbow Raider’s stare—purple again. Peace.

“She doesn’t even know what The Flash is now,” Bivolo said as she blinked obliviousness.

“But what about her directive?” Barry asked. “What’s to keep her from remembering?”

“It’ll be a hard directive to hit, I’m afraid. To find true peace on her own. If she ever does accomplish that, hopefully she won’t care that she knows your name... Flash. Don’t suppose you’ll share it with me?” Bivolo grinned.

Barry quelled a barely contained sneer at the man. “No dice, Raider, but stick to Rogue rules and we won’t have a problem.”

Len was surprised and honestly relieved that Barry allowed the truce he’d made with the man who in part had been the cause of all their strife. “A pleasure, Roy. Glad you were willing to see reason.”

“I think you’ll keep things more interesting. See ya around, boss. Flash. Heroes,” he said to the others, Lisa and Mick included.

“Had to make a deal, kid,” Len shrugged once Bivolo departed.

“I get it,” Barry said. “I don’t like it... but I’d rather he be on your side than against us, and I understand what you were thinking.”

A few shades of grey didn’t only work on the villains’ side after all. Now they just needed to release Alexa to stumble back to her hotel, where Bivolo had assured Len there was plenty of evidence to arrest her in connection to Tiffany’s. She hadn’t fenced that necklace yet.

Of course, the henchmen in the Pipeline would be released to the CCPD as well, but Mardon was another issue. He could easily escape again, and as psychotic as the man was, it might be beneficial to get him on Len’s side too.

“Really expanding those Rogues huh?”

“Gotta keep you on your toes, Flash.”
“I hate you,” Barry chuckled, but then it hit them at the same time—Len could see it in Barry’s eyes—the way those words said with fondness held such different weight between them, almost as if what was spoken had been the very opposite.

“Don’t worry, Barry,” Len said. “It may be a bit of a circus for a while, but my Rogues will be a balm more than plague on this city. I promise.”

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It should have come as no surprise that at the end of their long night, the only place they could have ended up was STAR Labs, finally free of infiltrators, just Team Flash, the visiting Legends, and Len’s small family of Rogues that would soon be expanding.

It was late, everyone running on fumes, the Scarlet Speedster included, but of course the white hats had insisted that Len get checked out by Caitlin one last time now that Bivolo’s control had been released. Once the West children showed up, it was a full house, but at least the detective himself was a little too busy with cleanup to grace them with his presence. He would be an interesting complication if Len and Barry were really going to…whatever they were about to do.

Try. Compromise. Make good on a few promises. West would hate that, but the rest of the room didn’t seem to mind.

Standing back from the throng of do-gooders to catch his breath, cold gun returned, goggles returned, Len only a few added bruises from the team—Lisa, Mick, and Cisco most notably having smacked his shoulder or poked him soundly with a, “Never do that again.” Watching them all now, Len was amazed at the ease with which Lisa and Mick interacted with the others, but especially with Barry. The kid had never once doubted Len’s intentions, not for longer than a passing second, but Len’s real pride came from how his sister and best friend had made the right call too even though they hadn’t been as certain.

What humbled him more than his own struggles ahead were those that belonged to them. To Barry, who had lost so much, he’d teetered on becoming like the villains he fought. To Lisa, desperate for a new beginning but wary like Len was, so that with Cisco she grew quiet and unsure as she struggled not to hide behind a mask. To Mick, letting Ray be cozy and close and open with his affections right there for all to see, holding Mick’s hand and running his thumb along the rough skin as they talked.

It could all blow up in their faces, but Len was a gambling man at heart. He’d place his bets on each one of them, even if faith in himself was still too new a pill to swallow easily.

When Mick finally wrenched his hand from Ray, full up on PDA for now and asking for his space, he caught sight of Len watching them and stalked over.

“Shut up.”

“Didn’t say a word,” Len raised his hands.

“Sure ya didn’t.” Mick settled in beside him, painting a similar picture to how he and Barry had been earlier in the night before they’d headed to that first meet-up. The burly man nudged Len’s shoulder. “You got yours.”

“Mmm,” Len took in Barry across the room, thinking of all that remained unsaid. “I might.”

“You better.”
The inherent threat was welcome because Len wasn’t sure he could do this if Mick and Lisa hated Barry.

“Ya know I…doubted when the kid was bleedin’ in that bed,” Mick said, “swearin’ up and down you had a plan.”

“S’okay. You got used to me lettin’ you down.”

“Who let who down? Threw in with pirates coz I was havin’ a tantrum, not sure what I wanted, how I fit in when I felt…” Mick didn’t do feelings, so the topic made him sneer and backtrack on going into detail. “Didn’t like all that grey area gettin’ muddled with white knight. But you were right. People change. Even old assholes like us.”

Len snorted because he couldn’t have said it better himself. “I might have to stick around here more, ya know, keep up appearance and all that.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” Mick said with a leading tone and his attention still on Barry.

“Doesn’t mean I wouldn’t be up for another mission some time. I made you a promise.” That he’d return to the Waverider, that he wouldn’t leave Mick alone.

Not that Mick could openly admit he missed Len, so he simply shrugged, “Wouldn’t ditch your ass. Might have reason to be on that ship more often myself, doesn’t mean I won’t come checkin’ on ya once in a while.”

“Ships passing in the night?”

“Better be more often than that. We ain’t gettin’ any younger. Though your taste in partners sure is.”

Len wished he could make a similar cut, but as youthful as Raymond looked, he was a good decade older than Barry. “Cute.”

Rumbling laughter responded.

They stood a while just watching the others calm down from recent events, finally looking ready to call it a night. Len still wore his parka, but he’d long since peeled off his gloves. When he uncrossed his arms to rest back against the desk, Mick’s eyes glanced down at the ring on his pinky.

“Think that ol’ thing brought you luck?”

“I survived,” Len said, holding it up to the light. “Nearly died about three times but still came away tickin’. Guess Alexa was good for something. On second thought, maybe not. This had your keen eye on it, after all, not hers. Sure you’d never want it back?”

“It’s yers, Snart. Suits ya. Besides, idiot like you needs reminders to keep from gettin’ in the shit all the time.”

Len laughed. Idiot like him indeed.

“Good riddance to her,” Mick added like a growled afterthought.

Even though West had confirmed Alexa had been picked up by the CCPD and wouldn’t be out of hot water any time soon, some part of Len wondered if he should have let Barry finish the job. But
if his reason for stopping Barry was more for the kid’s sake than hers, he couldn’t bring himself to take it back.

“Sorry she’s not dead?” he asked.

“Nah. Leavin’ bodies behind was startin’ to get boring.” At last, Mick turned to stare at Len directly, and Len met his gaze without feeling that push and pull of wrong between them that had grown so unbearable on the Waverider. “Lunch at Saints tomorrow after sleepin’ in?”

“Make it a late lunch. Pretty sure Raymond’s gonna want to cuddle after,” Len smirked.

“Fuck you, Snart,” Mick shook his head, but it was said with such fondness, all that sentiment again that they’d ignored for too many years, that Len finally felt like what had been broken snapped back into place.

As Mick shuffled off to Lisa and Cisco, likely to pillage the engineer’s food stash again, Len couldn’t help touching the ring and twisting it around his finger like a clock winding back to when this all started. Taking a moment to question where this was headed one more time, he asked the prominent lizard side of his brain if this was really what he wanted.

Seeing Barry, seeing every last member of their strange crew, Len couldn’t think of a single aspect of what lay ahead that he didn’t look forward to.

Which of course was when Lisa had to look over at him and grin, eager to take Mick’s place despite Cisco’s slight panic at being left alone with Mick’s appetite.

“Don’t say it,” Len said when she walked straight toward him.

“Say what? What do you think I’m gonna say, Lenny?”

“No doubt some pretty speech about how I better not be planning on breaking any hearts.”

“Well are you?” she asked, deceptively delicate arms folding over her chest.

It wasn’t fair, how easy Bivolo had made some things, bypassing the wiring in Len’s brain that tripped him up when he just wished he could be…not normal but at ease with the people who mattered. Loving Barry for a week had made some of that easier on its own, but he still stumbled. If there was one person Len wished he could confess his devotion to with the words they deserved to hear, it was this woman in front of him.

“Come here,” he said, reaching for her, beckoning in ways they rarely sought each other out because of how stern eyes once would have looked on with scorn.

When she complied, Len pulled his sister into his arms and held her.

“You know what’s crazy? I can hold him too. I did. After he knocked Alexa’s lights out,” Len chuckled. “And it felt just as good as this ridiculous week. Just as…”

“Safe?” she asked in a small voice that shook him like a strong memory.

“Yeah.”

Pulling back from her, there was something like tears in her eyes and maybe some in his own, because that’s what it boiled down to, didn’t it? Seeking someone who felt safe when they’d grown up their whole lives in fear, thinking love meant pain.
“You know I…love you, right?”

A sharp inhale responded, not as if that had ever been in question, but because it meant something to hear it. “Yeah, Lenny. Of course I do. I love your jerk-ass too.”

He laughed. Leave it to his sister to reply in just the right way.

With a glance over her shoulder, she brought his attention to Cisco arguing good-naturedly with Mick while Barry tried to mediate, and Len knew she felt the same about her way out. Safe.

“We should all rest,” Caitlin announced, causing the mulling occupants of the room to turn her direction, though her eyes settled on Len. “But first you need a thorough exam.”

“Thought we already did that, doc.”

“That was cursory. I want a full scan before I let you off as my patient. I’ll sleep better that way, and so will you. Then we can all get a good night’s sleep.”

Len was hardly equipped to deny the mother hen of the group. He supposed he would sleep better knowing there was no abnormal brain activity Bivolo had left him with, and it helped delay the inevitable of having to go home alone.

They’d deal with Mardon in the morning. Handle any fallout as it came. Discuss bigger plans when their nerves weren’t tried. And grab lunch at Saint and Sinners tomorrow as a mixed group—even Wally wanted to join, though Len doubted West would be okay with that. It felt weirdly domestic, and Len found he didn’t mind at all.

It was only when Caitlin was nearly done with him that he realized the Labs had emptied of everyone else save the hesitant stare of one lingering occupant who’d changed out of his Flash suit into a pair of STAR Labs sweats.

“You’ll be fine, Len,” Caitlin said. “Though I wouldn’t be opposed to another checkup in a week, just to make sure.”

“I’ll be around.”

“Yeah?” Barry asked from the doorway.

“Wouldn’t want to leave you bored without me,” Len said.

By the time he moved out of the med room into the Cortex, Caitlin had mysteriously vanished like all the others, leaving him and Barry alone in the semi-darkness of the Labs at night. Someone had turned off the main lights, leaving only a few overheard, though not that glaring blue of the emergency lights. Maybe that someone was Lisa or Mick just to spite Len, just to push him in case he chickened out now that he had this kid alone again.

Everything had been so much easier when he was hypnotized.

“Kinda kinky, huh, how I have to play double agent going forward?” Len asked on his way to his parka and cold gun on Cisco’s desk.

“That mean you admit you’re on the hero side now?”

“No, means I admit it’s fun stopping someone like Alexa and still owning the city’s mob bosses come the end of the night.”
Barry chuckled, hovering not at all subtly and leaning back against the desk like a purposeful blockade to keep Len from his gear. “Well *Mob King Cold* does add to the sex appeal.”

“*Add to?*” Len laughed with him. “I thought someone said I didn’t have any.”

“I was in heavy denial so I wouldn’t jump you. Which I didn’t always succeed at…” Barry trailed, losing some of his blinding smile.

The last thing Len wanted was a return of Barry’s bleeding heart; he wanted the grin, the tease, the *game.* “My stance hasn’t changed on that, kid. Don’t play martyr for me. You play that role plenty. We can call things even for now.”

“For now?” Barry asked with a hopeful edge.

“You didn’t expect me to go anywhere, did you? Though if the Legends call, I might need a day trip or two.”

There it was—that *smile,* like a 1000-watt lightbulb. “Was this the kind of compromise you were hoping for to help that existential crisis?”

Len would have denied it if he could. “Remember, I gotta make it look good for the families on occasion, so…”

“You’ll have to plan a heist now and again?”

“Which you’ll of course try to stop.”

“Win-win for Captain Cold.”

“Just the way I like it.” The scant space between them had reduced to nothing. “No one gets hurt, I promise. Might have to ice your wounds from time to time, but I’ll be gentle.”

Barry bit his lip and eyed Len all the way down his body, almost enough to make Len shiver. “Maybe you don’t have to be *too* gentle.”

*Shit.* “Barry, Barry…you expect me to put out so soon? All we promised each other was a drink. Don’t we need to start over on date one given our strange predicament?”

“For real?” Barry lamented with sudden agony in his eyes.

Oh, what this kid did to Len. His other self—hopeless, *foolish*—hadn’t been wrong about any of the ways Barry made him want with a ferocity few other things could stir in him. “Don’t worry, Scarlet. I’m not that cruel. But if you want to give in,” he ghosted a hand along Barry’s cheek before gripping his chin, “…to all we’ve been denying ourselves, how would you want that to go?”

Visibly swallowing, Barry stared at Len’s lips. “Under the influence, you were willing to do anything for me.”

“I was,” Len allowed a smirk, eager to know what Barry would be like without the limitations that had hounded them all week. “You wanna play that out?” Coz he could be a good boy if that’s what Barry wanted.

“Actually, now that you’re in your right mind again, I was hoping we could do the opposite.”

Len was feeling far too warm in his sweater and thermals. “Testing that theory about how much direction you can take, right? Coz you like being given orders?”
“From you, I do. Your voice makes it easy to obey.”

Fuck, this kid didn’t know what his voice was capable of, low and breathy like that.

“Tell me, Len. Ask anything you want from me,” he said, heated and demanding, but with an edge of vulnerability clinging. “With you, it’s just so nice to feel…” his voice caught, but somehow Len knew exactly what he was trying to say.

“Safe?”

“Yes,” Barry said with tears in his eyes like Lisa, and Len…damn it, he couldn’t resist, couldn’t hold back, just a wild bundle of emotions set loose by the longest week of his life, and he didn’t want to give up any of that freedom.

Cupping Barry’s cheek with the whole of his hand now, he let the other drift down to the spot in Barry’s side that beneath his sweatshirt would hopefully be the last wound Len ever gave him. “I will never let anyone hurt you again,” he echoed the mad, desperate promise he’d made when he first saw red, ready to go all in before he lost his nerve. “Say the words, Barry. If you mean them, I want to hear you say them again.”

The shimmer of tears in Barry’s eyes only made Len feel that much more, so grateful that he still felt everything he’d been tricked into wanting, because it wasn’t just programming, it was want he couldn’t name and surrender he never gave into, but maybe now. Maybe now.

“I love you, Len,” Barry said.

And in one great rush forward, Len pulled the boy closer to kiss Barry deep.

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

Iris and Sara are going to get their moments to shine more in the last chapter still coming, and a little bit of Julian and Singh too.

Basically, the next chapter will be smut and wrap-up. :-)

So wow...almost another one in the bag. You guys are the greatest, and your comments really make this experiencing one of the most rewarding.

Thank you!
Sometimes Order and Chaos Pairs Perfectly

Chapter Summary

Barry really does like following orders on occasion, with the right partner, and as it turns out, the perfect partner was the last person he expected. Len fears more than anything that he will disappoint Barry somewhere down the line, but there's still room for him to surprise himself.

After that, all that lies ahead is the future yet to come.

Chapter Notes

Holy shit, 12k for this chapter, I just...well, you deserved it.

Here we go...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was the rush and thrill of their first kiss when Barry was iced to the wall in Tiffany’s, combined with the mirrored want he’d felt in the alley and so many times before and after that when he’d given in despite trying to resist, all capped off with the knowledge that this, finally, was the real Len, and Barry didn’t have to hold back.

Barry wasn’t as good as some people thought. He’d been through too much. Suffered and survived too much. Because of that he had been driven to almost do despicable things, and in some cases… he had done despicable things, even if his friends would tell him it was necessary. He may not have driven his hand into Zoom’s chest like he wanted, but he’d still led the man to his death. And he’d come so close to going that one step further with Alexa.

But this man, who those same people calling Barry a hero often thought of as an untrustworthy scoundrel, had pulled Barry back from the brink.

There was good in Leonard Snart. And there was bad in Barry Allen. They saw both in each other and balanced each other out in ways Barry hadn’t found with anyone else. Safe was indeed the word for how Len made him feel. Like he could be himself and work little by little to be better, never once doubting that Len would be there beside him. As a friend. A partner. A teammate. And maybe something more.

“I love you, Len,” Barry had said so easily, because Len wanted to hear it and Barry meant it when he said it—oh how he meant it, much as it had surprised him when he first realized how much he truly wanted to say the words. If Len wanted to hear them, then the feelings Barry had so hoped were real from his nemesis had to be there somewhere, even if Len never said the words back to him.

They kissed—Len kissed him—with a hand on Barry’s face and no hesitation as he moved in closer and his free hand found a firm hold at Barry’s waist. In the dark and quiet of the Labs closed down
for the night, there were no interruptions, no ticking clocks, no battles to be won.

“Tell me how you want me,” Barry spoke breathily against Len’s lips, licking out with a teasing tongue.

Len shuddered, the grip of both hands tightening before he released Barry. “On your knees,” he said, eyes dark with desire and voice low. “Been thinking about those lips for too long, Scarlet, and how they’ll look opening up for me.”

A shot of heat went straight to Barry’s groin. He knew he had a tendency to be the more submissive partner—he enjoyed it, not to say he couldn’t be dominant too—but a week ago he never would have believed he could achieve full mast from Captain Cold’s voice alone. “Yes, sir,” he said, and dropped without a waver until his knees hit the floor.

With the parka still draped over the desk, only Len’s sweater and thermal pants separated them. Barry had touched Len before, over his underwear, felt him harden, and just barely grazed inside for more, but this would be unfettered access.

“Oh, ah, ah,” Len waggled a finger at him when Barry reached for his waistband. “You’re supposed to be taking orders, remember? I haven’t told you what to do next.”

This was what Barry loved about Len, the thrill of the dance that made their encounters so fun.

Dropping his hands to rest on his thighs, Barry waited on his knees beneath Len, who cupped his cheek again and grazed a thumb along Barry’s jaw to his lips. Barry wanted to lap at it with his tongue and suck it inside his mouth, but he hadn’t been expressly asked to do that yet.

This was a test, and Barry did so want to please Len. So only when he pushed past Barry’s lips with the pad of his thumb did Barry open wider and suck as he was prompted.

“That’s it,” Len said, rough and rumbling, “give me a preview, kid, of how good you’re gonna feel. How hot that mouth is. I wanna make this last. Enjoy myself. That flush to your cheeks. Your eyes watching me while I use those pretty lips.”

Barry sucked harder at the encouragement.

“Mmm…gorgeous. Breathtaking, truly. Never spoke praise for a single inch of you I didn’t mean, just didn’t expect I’d get to stake my claim on all those inches,” he pulled his hand free, causing Barry to lean forward after him, “with every…inch…of mine. Why don’t you take a peek, Scarlet, nice and slow?”

Slow. Len was the master of slowing Barry down, so it should come as no surprise that he’d draw things out now. But at least Barry had permission.

Fighting to keep his speed under control, he reached once more for Len’s slacks and slowly opened them. He wanted to pull Len out, but a peek didn’t mean he could touch. Instead, he lifted Len’s underwear over the growing bulge and tugged down to reveal him to the open air. There were several inches to salivate over, but that’s all he did—admire, waiting for what Len would say next.

“Maybe you can take direction,” Len said, hand returning to Barry’s cheek but this time continuing up into his hair to gently card through the strands.

When Len had first been love-drunk on Bivolo’s power, he’d said how much he wanted to run his fingers through Barry’s hair, an act that made Barry’s nerves tingle. Len was a different man now, less open maybe but no less commanding, and the foundation of the things he’d said and done was
“You set the pace, Barry. Go ahead,” Len encouraged him, urging him closer without pulling or holding firm. “I’m merely hanging on for purchase. This is all you. Now open up.” His hand brushed tenderly along the back of Barry’s head, then feathered through Barry’s hair with light tugs, making Barry’s eyelids flutter as he leaned the rest of the way forward.

The heady smell excited him further, lips parting to finally taste Len. The whammied version of him might have moaned with wanton abandon, but the real Len only sighed, a sharp exhale of air that urged Barry on. Twirling his tongue, Barry sucked Len’s head eagerly, saliva building already before he took the other man in further and dragged his tongue down the underside.

Len’s breaths came shorter, heavier while his hand kept a steady motion through Barry’s hair, then down his cheek, thumb edging Barry’s mouth where he was sucking Len in. If Len’s eyes closed, it was only briefly, always snapping open to lock with Barry’s gaze and watch the show.

“Deeper,” he said. “Deep as you can, Scarlet. Wanna see how much you can take.”

Barry was grateful he’d switched to sweatpants because The Flash suit would be painful in this state. Without permission to touch himself, he poured his desires into obeying Len’s softly spoken commands, swallowing him back—deeper, deeper—until his nose pressed to the hairs at Len’s base and he willed his throat to stay loose to handle it all.

“Good boy, Barry,” Len said, all husky and rough, as the tangle of his fingers moving through Barry’s hair grew firmer. “Such a good boy. You’re gonna keep being good for me, aren’t you?”

Fuck, Barry needed to be touched if Len was going to keep talking like that. Whining around Len’s length, he continued to deep-throat him, eventually having to pull away for breath. With spittle dribbling down his chin, he gave an answering nod before returning with gusto, sucking harder and taking Len in all the way with one lewd swallow.

Finally, Len moaned, the sexiest sound Barry could imagine, leaving him hard as a rock with the added attention on his scalp as he gave Len what he’d asked for.

“A praise kink…and one for power play?” Len said. “Oh, kid, we’re gonna mesh perfectly. Not that I ever had any doubt. And if you wanna swap places sometimes…you just say the word.”

That would be enthralling too—ordering Captain Cold around and having him cater to Barry’s whims. Next time, he thought, but tonight he wanted to stay right where he was.

“Not gonna last much longer,” Len said, hips rocking, nails scratching pleasantly across Barry’s scalp as he bobbed more fervently, taking Len deeper each time, faster—faster.

Then Barry pulled away with a pop. “Want me to drink you down, Lenny?” He fluttered his eyes up at Len, reddened lips stretching into a slow grin. “Tell me. Order me.”

With a growl, Len yanked on Barry’s hair just shy of too harsh, making Barry whimper. “Finish me off. Show me what you can really take.”

A kick of lightning answered and Len was down Barry’s throat again, hands lifting to seek his hips and hold him in place as he sucked and bobbed and swallowed—

“Shit.”

The spurt of heat made Barry hang on tighter, following orders until he knew Len was sucked dry,
lazily carding fingers through Barry’s hair once more.

“And you wondered...how I could want you,” Len said, returning his thumb to the edge of Barry’s mouth when he pulled off, slow, so slow, obscene really, which Len ate right up to witness. He swiped at the wet dribble down Barry’s chin, then passed his thumb along Barry’s moistened lips. “Gorgeous...”

For once, Barry believed him, because that wicked expression couldn’t be anything but honest. He wondered how he must look, positively sinful no doubt for Len to stare at him like that. Wishing he could reach for Len, bring him closer, anything, but wanting to play the game and wait for an order, Barry let his hands drop to his sides and waited.

“Such a good boy,” Len said again, tracing Barry’s lips with reverence, the act and words making Barry whine in want to be touched properly. “Don’t worry, Barry. We’re far from done. Stand up.”

Barry complied in one swift motion, mourning the loss of Len’s hand when it fell away, but anxious for what came next.

“Kiss me,” Len ordered, “slowly.”

At this rate, Barry was going to come without ever being touched.

Leaning forward, his hands came up to take hold of Len’s face, but he hesitated, and only after Len nodded did he follow through. Hands encasing the thief’s perfect cheekbones, Barry descended at a snail’s pace until he could lick his way between Len’s lips and deepen the connection one millimeter at a time. In this way, he passed Len’s own taste back to him, letting the kiss carry with it all his want for more.

Len’s hands settled on Barry’s waist, but one began to move forward and slip beneath the elastic of his sweats, grazing the skin and then...

Barry trembled as Len’s deft fingers disappeared into his underwear and skimmed the length of him all the way down. Gasping, he broke the kiss with a plaintive noise choking out of him.

“Ya know, Scarlet, seeing you when your clothes burned off was quite the hardship,” Len said, while palming Barry down the front of his sweatpants. Barry struggled not to giggle at the pun, while simultaneously whimpering at the feel of that hand. “Drop your arms so I can get closer.”

Instantly complying, Barry withdrew his fingers from Len’s face, standing motionless as his nemesis touched him, though his chest rose and fell heavily and noises kept building and pouring from his throat.

Len lowered his mouth toward Barry’s neck like a vampire going in for the kill, one hand at his hip, one down his pants, the all-encompassing nature of his presence making it impossible to do anything but melt, however contradictory coming from Captain Cold.

“You’re mine to play with, aren’t you?” Len said before placing a kiss beneath Barry’s ear, hand ever-moving.

“Y-Yes,” Barry nodded, stretching his neck for more.

“Good boy. We’ll fulfill a few fantasies tonight, I think, coz I expect to come a second time, Barry, and you still need to catch up.”

“Yes.”
“Think you can run like this?”

“What?” Barry’s eyes shot wide at the suggestion, rising up on tiptoe in search of Len’s hand when it pulled away, the man’s entire body moving back as he offered a sideways smirk.

“I want you home, Barry. Back at the apartment. Not enough accommodating surfaces here. Those tiny beds would buckle beneath us with what I have planned.”

The prospect sounded marvelous, but getting there...less so. Barry had never run with a hard-on before. It didn’t sound fun. Though Len was mostly hard too, still hanging proudly over the top of his underwear until he tucked himself away with a faint grimace.

“Not too fast now,” he said, “I want my parka and gun at home with us, and those are not allowed to catch fire. You get us there in one piece, I’ll finish you off before we move on to phase two.”

*Phase two* had Barry licking his lips, but he still had to ask, “Please, will you touch me a little more first?” knowing full well how desperate he sounded.

Len considered the request as if it was a huge sacrifice, but stepped closer, breath danced along Barry’s cheek. “I suppose I could allow that. Will you do anything I ask of you if I do? Only if you truly want to, of course,” he added as a quiet aside, breaking character to assure Barry that he would never push for something unwanted.

“Whatsoever you ask of me,” Barry said. “Tonight, I am all yours.”

“Only tonight?” Len gave another sly smirk.

Even playing games and surrendering to Len completely, there was the promise of tomorrow. Smiling in return was easy.

“See, I’m a betting man,” Len said, hand suddenly at Barry’s waistband again, sliding in low and sure, “and I’d wager you won’t be able to get enough of me.” Again, he stroked Barry, finding pooling wetness at his tip and the same slickness he’d left behind. “You can have a few requests too, kid, so tell me. Where do you want my hand?”

The slow slide of those fingers made it difficult to think, but multiple possibilities sprang to mind. Knowing where the night would lead, Barry couldn’t help asking, “*Lower.*”

“Already?” Len chuckled. “Mmm, I like that you’re hungry for it.”

Being quiet wasn’t an option because for several minutes, each new stroke up Barry’s length was followed by a low dip between his legs where the pads of rough fingertips circled his entrance and prodded ever so gently, but never more than a tease. When Len finally pulled his hand free, Barry was shaking.

“Get us home, Scarlet, and we can pick up where we left off.”

Not one to delay, especially after *that* order, Barry zipped to gather Len’s gear, sheathing the cold gun in its holster on Len’s leg but pulling the jacket around his own shoulders. He paused in front of Len to show off the matching navy of his STAR Labs sweatshirt and the parka, affording him a pleased grin, before they were off.

XXXXX
The thrill of being flashed away in Barry’s arms never failed to delight Len. His pants were slightly uncomfortable, but all would soon be rectified. He’d had Barry Allen’s mouth on him. He’d felt The Flash with his own hands. Nothing could pull him from this high, not even going impossible speeds only to suddenly stop—inside his apartment.

“Did you just phase us through the door?”

Barry had set Len down but stiffened like a cornered animal, glancing back at the door behind them, then at Len with oversized puppy eyes. “I didn’t…mean to?”

“Eager indeed,” Len chuckled, stepping into Barry’s space once more because being close was key. He was going to wreck this kid in all the best ways.

For a moment, being in his home with Barry for the first time since he’d returned to his senses resonated like a gong that Len needed a plan. He’d still gone full alert the first time he brought Barry here, despite losing most self-preservation whenever his eyes landed on the speedster. This time, he looked Barry over thoroughly, standing in his entryway, and considered if he really was out of his mind for letting his enemy into his home.

The problem before was that he hadn’t been able to assess the angles of what came next or think of how to stay ahead, but now…he was the literal king of Central City, on top of the world right where he belonged, and he had The Flash under his thumb in every way possible—while secretly working at the kid’s side to keep the city safe. It was the perfect compromise to have everything Len wanted without losing the changes in himself he’d gained.

It wasn’t an invasion to have Barry here. It was a culmination. And, after all, there were still several climaxes to come.

“Get me on the bed,” Len said, pulling Barry back to the moment, uncaring that the main room was dark because there was only one room they needed to utilize right now. “Lights on when we get there. I want a good show as you undress. Then I plan to have you writhing.”

The way Barry shuddered was visible even while wearing the parka. The little imp—donning Len’s coat was the most ridiculous tease, especially since the last time he’d worn it, that had been all he was wearing.

A spark and the smell of ozone, and Len was on the bed. The lights illuminated the room as requested as he removed the cold gun and set it on the nightstand while keeping rapt attention on the slow way Barry let the parka drop from his shoulders. Kid was wearing a sweatshirt and sweatpants. It shouldn’t have been erotic, yet the sight had Len hardening that much further, regaining what he’d lost during the trip home.

If Barry was sometimes shy in the bedroom, he didn’t show it. His sneakers and socks were already gone, but instead of going for the sweatshirt first, he slid the pants down his thighs, leaving his more obviously tented underwear behind, soaked through in the front a dark red—of course they were red.

Barry bit his lip as he teased a hand beneath the sweatshirt, drawing it up to reveal his taut abs, while his other hand tugged the underwear low enough to tease a hint of dark hair.

“Underwear first,” Len said, eyeing Barry ravenously. “I want an appealing image to recall every time I see that logo in the future.”
With a low giggle, Barry obeyed as he’d obeyed everything else, shimmying the underwear off. They dropped down his slender legs, leaving him exposed—hard and weeping—still wearing the sweatshirt. Once more, he drew a hand up his stomach, the other twitching to touch himself while he whined softly like he urgently needed someone to touch him.

“Come here,” Len ordered, scooting to the end of the bed, fully dressed still, but quickly kicking away his boots, “we’ll keep the sweatshirt on a while longer, but you deserve a reward for such good behavior.”

That beaming Allen smile was a ray of sunshine in Len’s dark life, making it easy to forget how much darkness surrounded him. Given the long day and night, they were both running on adrenaline more than anything, yet Len didn’t feel a lick of exhaustion. He’d likely feel it soon and well into tomorrow, but for now, his mind was singularly focused.

Barry came forward as directed and climbed into Len’s lap, whimpering as his erection became trapped between them. Kissing Barry hard, Len held the boy securely only to flip them, tumbling them to the side so he could lay Barry out on the bed. Barry was so warm and flush. He spread himself out and waited for whatever Len planned to do to him.

“Let’s put that mouth to work again.” Len brought his fingers to Barry’s lips. “Then I’ll put mine to work too.”

Sucking Len’s middle and pointer finger into his mouth, Barry was clearly on board with the idea, no doubt having full understanding of where those fingers would go next. Once they were wet enough, Len pulled them free and hunkered low between Barry’s legs.

“Although…I was debating if I should make you wait. Take two for myself and only allow you one?”

The horrified expression that filled Barry’s face made the ploy entirely worth it.

“But I suppose that would be far too cruel even for a supervillain,” Len grinned, descending just as he brought the tip of one finger beneath Barry.

The kid tasted how he smelled, coppery like a storm but fresh and exhilarating too. Len sucked him in and breached the kid’s entrance with a slow twist. Barry’s moans and whines were the prettiest melody.

Given the lead up to this moment over the long week, and especially with so much teasing tonight, Len barely started to stretch Barry open with a second finger before he felt him tense and gasp that he was close, then Len was hanging on as Barry came with a quiet thrum of his powers.

Sucking Barry clean while both hands traveled up his stomach, Len reached the edge of the sweatshirt and felt the faintly puckered skin of the healing knife wound.

He’d barely been able to see it during the striptease for how the redness had calmed, but it wasn’t completely gone yet. Stroking at it gently, Len offered a silent promise once more that he would never cause harm to Barry again if he could help it.

Understanding what had made Len pause, Barry reached down to rest a hand over his on the fading wound, cheeks flush but smile soft. “You need to undress too, Len. Please? I wanna see you.”

Len’s other self might not have cared, but the real him felt old insecurities stir that Barry would be disappointed by what was kept hidden beneath his many layers. “Bear in mind…I’m not as young as you are.”
Barry snickered.

“I mean I’m not in my 20s anymore,” Len flicked his gaze to the side, “and I have scars that last.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re hideous,” Barry laughed a little louder, then seemed to catch on to Len’s tension. “Wait, you’re seriously insecure? You’re like a GQ model. But,” he propped up on his elbows, speaking hurriedly to ease Len, as if they weren’t already in an intimate position with Len tucked between his thighs, “even if you’re not toned or smooth or whatever you think I’d get hung up on, you’re crazy to think I’m not going to love everything about seeing what’s under that sweater.

“Plus, if it hadn’t been for the lightning,” he turned small and bashful himself now, “this would be far more humbling. I know I’m still lanky, but I was super-skinny before. No abs. No muscle tone at all. Total string-bean geek. Sometimes I forget there’s anything about me that’s all that nice to look at. Especially being friends with The Arrow,” he finished with a grimace.

“Queen?” Len grimaced with him. “He hardly compares to you.”

“Ha ha.”

“Only I’m not laughing. I know what I like, and you could lose all this fine muscle tone,” Len ran his hands up Barry’s thighs, “and nothing about my desire would change.”

The color filling Barry’s cheeks was as pretty as his smile. “Yeah? Then believe me when I say the same thing. Lemme see.”

Clever kid. Not that Len had planned to keep anything from him. Sitting up on his knees, he peeled his sweater over his head.

“Oh my god!” Barry exclaimed, sitting up with a lurch. “Where did you get those?”

Len blinked down in confusion, far more startled by Barry’s outburst than he’d let on. Spreading out from his heart were branching thin red scars like a miniature lightning storm. “Those are new,” he said in awe, tentatively touching one. They didn’t hurt, but they would definitely last. “Must be from tonight.”

“From me? When I… Oh my god,” Barry said again, pressing his palm over Len’s heart. “I’m so sorry.”

“You brought me back from the dead,” Len said, sliding his hand overtop Barry’s. “A little lightning is a small price to pay. Besides, I kinda like ‘em. Much better than the others.” Than the many scars painted across his skin. Because these were new in several ways. These were hopeful.

Holding Barry captive with the connection of their hands, Len leaned forward to rock them back on the bed. “Now, I don’t believe you’re stretched enough, Scarlet. While I finish undressing, you get the supplies from the nightstand. Including our vibrating friend in there.”

Barry flushed darker beneath him.

“We should start small and work our way up, don’t you think?” Len said with promise, rubbing his clothed cock against Barry’s naked one and bending down to kiss him briefly.

Nodding once Len pulled back, Barry zipped out from under him in a flurry. Len watched the kid rummage through the nightstand, standing there bare save his sweatshirt, as Len finally removed his own pants and underwear.
“This isn’t small,” Barry said when he retrieved the dildo.

“Neither am I,” Len gave himself a few good strokes, waiting for Barry to look at him. “Assuming you want to—”

“Yes,” Barry eyed him with ravenous intent.

“Well then.” Waving a hand at the bed, Len invited Barry to join him again.

It was a curious thrill, the way Barry could be in one spot and then in seconds be somewhere else—namely, back beneath Len like he’d never left, dildo, small bottle of lube, and a condom set beside them within easy reach.

Len found Barry just as wet and pliable when he prodded his entrance with slicker fingers than before, getting more of those filthy, breathy moans to spill out of him, until Barry was begging to be stretched wider.

The dildo was definitely a stretch, but it would be good practice for the real thing, and Len wanted to be sure Barry could handle it.

“I can handle anything you give me, Lenny,” Barry said, legs crooked up to grant Len access as he pushed the dildo in halfway, opening Barry up easy, like the kid’s body knew just how to adapt.

Hearing him say ‘Lenny’ always shot a jolt to Len’s cock. “That’s my good boy,” he said with a lick of his lips. “You take it and I’ll give you something better.”

“Yes,” Barry whined when Len pushed it that much deeper.

Len knew how he wanted this to go, and he knew they could draw things out since both of them had already released once—much needed releases after too many misses and days of being pent up.

Only when Barry’s noises were a constant stream, the slow slide in and out of the dildo just as constant, did Len turn on the vibrations. Barry rocked harder into the motion.

“I-I can…do that too, ya know,” Barry said, hand flailing for Len’s wrist where he gave off a pulse that shot all the way up Len’s arm. Shit, that could come in handy.

“You’re stretched enough,” Len said. “Go shut the door.”


“You’ll see once you do it. Thought you were willing to obey anything I asked?”

Barry’s bitch-face was especially adorable.

“Then obey, Barry. You won’t regret it. And remove the sweatshirt this time.”

Slower than usual given the state of him, Barry complied. Len set the dildo aside, slid on the condom, lubed himself slick, then turned to sit on the edge of the bed just as Barry closed the door to discover the full-length mirror on the back of it.

When he glanced over his shoulder with a quirk to his smile, Len patted his thighs. “Have a seat.”

With the new scars overshadowing every old one, Len didn’t mind the sight himself in the mirror, especially with Barry taking up most of the view when he turned and gradually sheathed himself as requested. Len was larger than the toy, enough that Barry had to pause halfway, but the noises he
made were pure pleasure, no pain or plea to stop.

“Shit,” he said when he finally relaxed against Len’s chest. “You feel amazing.”

“We’ve only just begun, Barry. Look at you. How beautiful you are…” Len said, arms sliding around Barry’s waist, one hand gliding glossy fingers over his cock. Barry was a vision sitting wanton in Len’s lap, displayed so stunning and sharp in the mirror.

“Can I move?” Barry asked.

“Yeah, Scarlet. Move. Slow.”

Barry sat up with a subtle shift, then rocked back down, starting an easy rhythm.

“Slower,” Len said.

Forced to slow down, Barry was incapable of staying silent. Their eyes remained locked on each other, on the image in the mirror, as Barry moved as slow as he could, taking Len in, all of him, like the good boy he was, while Len stroked his cock and up his stomach.

Having The Flash in his arms was a treat, but to finally have him, in that moment Len couldn’t image Barry ever leaving his side.

He knew when Barry got close, ahead of him—always ahead of him—because of the increase in his breaths and the frequency of pleading whimpers. And the vibrations, a subtle rumble at first, then more intense, surrounding Len with sensation.

When he was certain Barry was about to come, he stopped them.

“On the bed, Scarlet. Still facing the mirror. All fours.”

“Len,” Barry groaned at the interruption but still stood to follow orders on quaking legs, cock throbbing and steps unsteady. The imagine was just as spectacular when he was in the new position and Len settled in behind him, gripping Barry’s hips and smoothing rough palms over his ass before he slid back home.

Barry was more open like this but still tight, lips parting as he panted, eyes hooded, hands gripping into the sheets. He quivered with an all over vibration like reflex and it was Len’s turn to moan. The lightning scars on Len’s chest seemed even more fitting in plain view above Barry, like they connected the two of them that much deeper—their matching scars, even if not all of them were visible.

“Been thinking ‘bout this…for so long,” Len said, eyes on Barry in the mirror as he picked up the pace.

“All week?”

“Longer.”

The position, the reflection, the connection had Barry staining the mattress in minutes. Almost overlapping, Len tumbled over the edge with him, buried deep inside his Scarlet right where he belonged.

Finally was indeed the word, just like Barry had said when they kissed for the first time unfettered.

Collapsing onto Barry’s back, Len slid out carefully, waiting to catch his breath, but of course
Barry recovered faster. He rolled over beneath Len, tied off the condom, and zipped away and back again before Len could barely blink, all so he could pull Len down and kiss him senseless without any barriers.

They kept on like that, kissing and clutching at each other, Barry’s legs falling open to beckon Len closer, tangled and so content. The rush of emotion running through Len overwhelmed him, and after a week of being able to say it all unencumbered, he longed to do the same now.

“Barry,” he whispered, “I…”

Don’t ever say it.

Love is a weakness.

No one will ever love you anyway.

And he tried, he really did, but his brain had been rewired and the words he wanted to say choked in his throat.

“I…”

He’d said it to Lisa; he could say it to Barry. He felt it. He meant it.

“I-I…”

“Len? Are you trying to say you love me?” Barry plucked the phrase from Len’s tongue. “But you can’t say the words?”

God damn it. What must Barry think if Len couldn’t say it? He’d leave like Len had feared, assume Len’s feelings weren’t genuine and want out. Len was such a failure at being decent, at being human. It was easier when he could focus on the physical and forget for a while that his damage went deeper.

Just when he was going to pull away, Barry gripped the back of his neck and yanked him down into another kiss. Len’s mouth gasped open in surprise and he felt the pleasant coil of Barry’s tongue holding nothing back from their reconnection.

“You mean it,” Barry laughed when they parted. “You really mean it.”

“But I can’t say it,” Len bit out, not understanding how Barry could look so happy.

“That’s not what matters. You said it all week without meaning it. If you mean it now but can’t say it…I’d rather have that. I’d rather have you. The real you.”

“Who’s dangerous and damaged?”

“Just like me,” Barry said without pause. “I’m sorry it took so long to believe you had feelings for me. I couldn’t see myself as very lovable lately. I still have trouble understanding what you see in me and how you could ever…” he trailed off and looked away like he was ashamed of having so much self-hatred in him, yet that was something they had in common too.

“Because it feels good to want you, Barry,” Len cupped his face, drawing Barry’s eyes back to him. “I always wanted you. Maybe not…love. It wasn’t love. But now…”

“Now…?”
“Now I know you. I know your terrible pancakes and worse coffee. I know you have a specific smile reserved only for food you like. I know you love puns as much as I do.”

“That’s debatable,” Barry chuckled.

“I know we have the same taste in movies and music and useless Trivial Pursuit facts,” Len pushed on. “I know the way your face looks in the morning just before you wake up. I know your dreams and your sorrows and your nightmares. And all that makes it so much easier…” he took a breath, lost in the green of Barry’s eyes, “…to love you,” and exhaled like he couldn’t believe he’d managed to say it.

Barry laughed again, smiling so bright it was blinding.

“I love you, Barry,” Len said again, because his father didn’t have any power over him now, Alexa didn’t, the past didn’t, not over either of them.

They went for another kiss and finally Len felt some of the exhaustion he’d been holding at bay creep in, but he didn’t get the chance to sag into it, because his phone started to ring.

“Urg.” It was probably Lisa. She should know better than to interrupt.

“I think that’s coming from your pants.”

“I’m aware.”

“You gonna answer it?”

“I’d prefer not to.”

“Len,” Barry chided.

Len really didn’t want to move.

“I’ll get it,” Barry said, zipping out from beneath Len with far too much ease, leaving him to roll onto his back as he watched Barry dig through the thermal pants on the floor and produce a cell phone. He smiled at the Caller ID. “Hey, Lisa.” The voice on the other end was clearly not Lisa. “Cisco. What do you mean Joe’s been… Shit.”

Apparently, West was wondering why his son hadn’t come home.

“Okay, okay. Sorry for the round robin, I left my phone at the Labs. I’ll call him. None of your business,” he added with a blush and flickering grin. “But obviously. Now go away, I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Okay, bye.”

Barry immediately started dialing another number. Len wanted to protest, because the kid was using his secure phone to call a detective, but he was too sated to intervene.

“Joe? It’s me.”

West’s voice came across loud even from where Len was lying, though he couldn’t quite make out the words.

“Relax. I’m at Len’s. Because I want to be. Well, I was planning on staying til morning.” His eyes darted to Len as if only then realizing he’d invited himself to stay over without asking.

Len pillowed a hand beneath his head and smiled in the affirmative. It was rather amusing
watching Barry chat on the phone stark naked.

“We can talk tomorrow, Joe, okay? Afternoon. We’re getting lunch at Saints and Sinners. Everyone is. You can come too if you want.”

Len sincerely hoped Joe declined the offer, and judging by Barry’s expression of relief, he did.

“I know what I’m doing. Yes. That’s all I ask. Okay, Joe, thank you. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He ended the call, looking a little winded but not upset. His father hadn’t blatantly tried to shut all this down, but there was doubt in Barry’s youthful face about the reality of this, about the future, Len could see it. He felt it too.

“Come here,” Len beckoned for Barry to return to him.

Barry did so with a soft smile, setting the phone on the nightstand before crawling over to snuggle in beside Len, lying atop the covers together, heads at the foot of the bed.

“I’m gonna tell you a secret,” Len said, relishing in the feeling of safety Barry gave him when for most of his life, another person sharing his space like this would have made him flinch. With Barry, Len could hold the boy close and tangle their fingers like he wasn’t broken. “I don’t have a plan. But for the first time in my miserable life, I’m okay with that. We can do this, come what may. Fathers and sisters and nosy friends aside, I don’t give up my spoils easy.”

“So I’m a spoil?” Barry poked Len in the ribs.

Turning to press his lips to Barry’s temple, Len was aware of the dangers of being this vulnerable with someone, yet that feeling of freedom didn’t dwindle. “You are a priceless stolen treasure, Scarlet. Now, how’s about a shower and then a long night and morning not moving from this bed?”

The noise of contentment Barry made was worth every bit of danger and complications that might lie ahead of them. “Sounds perfect.”

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Lunch at Saints and Sinners should have been more awkward than the first time, yet somehow, stumbling in side by side with Len around 12:30pm to find the rest of their crew already assembled didn’t feel weird at all.

Sure, they all looked at Len and Barry like they knew—they probably did, they’d all known what a hopeless cause the pair was from the start—but no one teased or prodded, other than Mick raising an eyebrow at Barry with a smirk and nod of thanks. Which probably had something to do with how close Ray was sitting beside him.

There was nothing much to discuss that they hadn’t already covered. Lunch was just lunch, just a chance to relax after a long mission and an especially grueling night.

Charles was working again, and the same waitress, who both seemed to accept that this oversized group during the otherwise dismal lunch rush might become something regular. Barry hoped so. Even once the Legends headed out on their next mission, he liked the comradery of team-ups.

“So…sometimes you’ll still go with them?” Barry asked Len when talk of the Legends returning to
their ship came up.

“When they need me,” Len said. “You could give it a try yourself.”

“Me and time travel are complicated allies at best, but…maybe.”

“Don’t sweat it, Red. You can keep the home fires burnin’,” Mick raised his glass Barry’s direction, causing Ray to chuckle, who was obviously content with the home fires he currently had possession over.

“Maybe I could try my hand at heroing more often,” Lisa said, catching Sara’s eye with a mischievous glint in her own. “I still think that ship is too much like a boys’ club.”

“Hear, hear,” Sara said.

“You can’t be content playing nice with Ramon?” Len frowned at his sister, always protective of her, even if he didn’t say so bluntly.

“Well, that's fun too,” she leaned over to Cisco beside her to peck his cheek, who blushed at the attention and everyone’s eyes turning to him. “And I suppose someone needs to help Lenny round up our new teammates and keep the peace.”

It still worried Barry that Baez, Bivolo, and even Mardon would be part of the Rogues going forward, but Len keeping them reigned in was better than all of them acting on their own.

“Speaking of,” Len turned an appraising eye on Barry that made him worry he was about to be trapped by the thief’s next words, “did you mention something about Pied Piper before? Perhaps we could bring Rathaway into the fold as well. Be a shame for those skills to go to waste.”

Ever the schemer. And oh how Barry loved him for it.

But all that would come later, some of it within days, others weeks or months down the line, with moving parts and trading places, but always a home to return to and the familiarity of The Flash versus Captain Cold—in some form or another. For now, they could relax. And they did, with food and drinks and, eventually, the jukebox.

Len and Mick nudged each other when Sara sauntered over to the old machine to plug in a few songs, like there was something special about the occurrence, not that Barry minded the private connection Len shared with Sara anymore. Though after she pulled Lisa onto the dance floor, who then grabbed Barry, both one by one pulling more of their friends away from the table, there was a mild stir of jealousy that washed through him when Sara finally attempted to get Len to join the others.

Initially, Len and Mick shook their heads with a clear ‘no thanks’ even though everyone else had given in by now—even Ray and Caitlin were dancing together—but Sara wasn’t letting them off the hook.

“Come on, Leonard. I’m pretty sure you owe me a dance that is long overdue.”

“I don’t boogie, kids. Sorry,” Len said. “Maybe if it was something—” then the upbeat song changed to a slower melody and his ready excuse fell apart before he could speak it.

He looked momentarily lost, which was all the time Sara needed to pounce. As she pulled him from his chair and in close to her body, Len accepted finally without much struggle, fitting them into a more formal hold that both of them took to like pros at navigating a dance floor, even with a
simple two step. All Barry could do, dancing with Lisa, was sway.

“You should ask Lenny to teach you,” she said. “He taught me.”

“He did?”

Lisa swapped their hold so she could lead and proceeded to drag Barry’s hopeless two left feet into a fairly impressive imitation of what Len and Sara were performing.

“Whoa,” Barry laughed. “Okay, okay. I’m gonna trample you if you’re not careful. Cisco’s much better at this than I am.”

“Oh really?” She peeked at the smaller man attempting to dance with Iris. Mick and Ray, twirling Caitlin between them, were fairing much better.

“Okay that was a lie,” Barry said. “Better teach Cisco too.”

Chuckling, Lisa pulled in close to give the side of Barry’s mouth a friendly kiss, passing him the most genuine, unguarded look he’d ever seen from her, before she let him go to cut in and acquire Cisco from Iris, still leading, which Cisco clearly needed.

“Hey, this is backwards!”

“Says who, sweetie? Tallest leads.”

“You’re only taller in heels!”

Falling to hopeless laughter himself, Barry didn’t have time to consider sneaking away before Iris had him, falling into step like old hat together because they’d danced many times over the years, even if they weren’t destined to be lasting partners.

“Feeling good, Barry?” she asked, still the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen, one set of hands outstretched to guide them, the others entwined and pulled in close between their bodies.

Glancing at Len and Sara, who were gently teasing each other and interacting with the familiar ease of fast friends, the jealousy in Barry’s gut faded away completely when Len’s eyes darted to him and he smiled. Barry smiled back, because even holding Iris like this didn’t leave Len looking resentful. All the various loves in their lives had places all their own that didn’t diminish what they’d found in each other.

“Yeah,” Barry said, bringing Iris’s hand to his mouth to kiss the top of her fingers, “really good. Of course I haven’t talked to Joe yet.”

Eyes wide with pity, Iris puffed out a breath. “He…likes Len.”

Barry dropped his chin in his skepticism.

“He hates this.”

“He hates this. But he’ll come around.”

“Of course he will, Barry. Whatever makes you happy. That’s all I ever wanted too.”

“Thank you,” Barry said, and as the song came to an end, he twirled Iris in place, making her smile widen before the next song started up and she slipped away just as Len stepped into view.
In the early afternoon at Saints and Sinners, Barry felt a lightness fill his chest that he hadn’t known in weeks as he asked Len for a dancing lesson.

The real reason Len decided it was a necessity to don his police uniform and head to the CCPD was because Alexa was being transferred officially to Iron Heights until her trial, and he could not rest easy without witnessing that firsthand.

It definitely wasn’t because Barry eyed him up and down like a present to be unwrapped later. Which they had to play out eventually.

“You know, at some point poor Detective West might expect you to sleep in your own bed again,” Len said as he and Barry were about to leave the apartment after another quiet night in.

“Or I could just move in with you,” Barry said. He was joking of course, all smiles and a teasing eyebrow raise, but the offhand comment made Len stiffen. “Not seriously. Oh my god, you can tell me to take a hike whenever you want, I just—”

“Barry,” Len cut him off before he could make any more of a rambling, adorable fool of himself. “It’s fine. We did live together for a solid week. Hard to imagine being away from you after that. I just… I’m not used to…” He really hated when words failed him; he usually excelled at speeches. “I’m too old to bide my time, and you speed through everything. No need for you to take a hike. I just keep waiting for you to realize your mistake.”

“And here I thought that was just me,” Barry smiled. Then blanched. “That you’d realize your mistake, not—”

“Got it. Cool your jets already. And be patient with me. Trying is harder than it looks.”

Barry smiled again, and while Len’s warring halves fought between wanting Barry to follow through with his tease to move in and yearning for a night to himself, in the end he knew he’d miss Barry the moment the kid was out of eyesight, even without the threat of chest pains.

Later, waiting in a less occupied hallway for Alexa’s transfer, Len felt more like his old self again with the chance to gloat over a fallen enemy. Only this time, he’d been on the side of good, so the uniform wasn’t a complete misrepresentation.

Barry had pulled a few strings with Joe’s help to allow Len to escort Alexa from the holding cells to the transfer vehicle outside, but while Alexa shouldn’t remember Barry anymore, Len was still adamant that Barry not be around for her to see his face—ever again. That meant that when Officer Wynters was called on to take custody of her, Barry turned about to make scarce.

“I’ll be in the lab once you’re done,” he said. “Still sure you want to do this?”

“One hundred percent. I’ll be fine.”

Barry didn’t balk back or baby him, simply nodded and headed off, while Len stepped up to take Alexa by the arm from the officer who’d brought her forward.

Besides being cuffed, she painted a rather sorry picture. She’d been given a jumpsuit to wear in
place of the dress she’d been arrested in, and only a few remnants of old mascara remained of her makeup. She looked tired, paler, older after restless sleep and the weight of defeat.

A glare filled her expression when she caught sight of Len’s face as he dragged her along beside him. “I’m sure you’re loving this, aren’t you?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“I could always cry wolf.”

“You won’t. You know I have ways around being outed in sheep’s clothing.”

“Please, you are a sheep. You’ve gone soft, Leo, like I knew you had. You think you can be king of Central City playing white knight? It’s only a matter of time before someone bigger and badder comes barking at your door.”

“You’re probably right. But I’ll be ready. What you forget, Alexa, is that I have friends in high places these days. But like I said... you forget, so you don’t even know what you’re missing.” He paused to look her in the eyes from beneath the low bill of his hat.

Brow scrunched tight, she scowled, not looking nearly as pretty when she wasn’t on the winning side. “What don’t I remember? What did you have Roy do?”

Len wasn’t about to bring up The Flash, in any sense, though eventually she’d hear of the scarlet-clad hero again, she’d just never be able to recall his true name or face unless she reached nirvana in the cold light of her cell. Unlikely.

“Guess you’ll never know,” Len said, continuing to lead her through the station. “Whenever you hit the streets again, should you manage that someday, don’t come looking for me.”

“Because when you’re out, you’re out?” she repeated the common, cruel phrase Len had been taught from a young age.

“No,” he said, hitting the light outside and approaching the vehicle that would take Alexa away, more than ready to be rid of her, “not anymore. But it’s not me you need to worry about. See, I’ve got friends, remember? And you’d have to go through them. For your sake, I hope you never try. Enjoy the clink, Alexa,” he said as he passed her to the waiting hands of the officers assigned to her. “I’m afraid it’s not nearly as nice as the Four Seasons.”

Then he tipped his hat and turned to head back inside.

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Barry couldn’t help worrying about leaving Len alone with Alexa, but he understood the need for closure with an enemy. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever really gotten that with Thawne or Zolomon since both of them had simply...died or ceased to exist, but maybe he could find closure in other ways.

“You know there were a few files out of place and missing the other day,” Julian said without so much as a ‘good morning’ when Barry waltzed into the lab. “They seem to have miraculously reappeared.”
“You don’t say? Weird,” Barry shrugged.

“Yes.”

“Off to a case?” Barry changed the subject, noting that Julian had a bag slung over his shoulder and was standing by his desk rather than sitting at it, like he’d been about to head out when he heard Barry coming and wasn’t particularly happy at the thought of leaving Barry alone in here again.

“Headed to STAR Labs actually,” he said.

“Really?” Barry hadn’t heard about that.

“Doctor Snow informed me of some additional findings related to the Bivolo case. A pity he got away, despite bringing in his employer, though it seems our Mr. Logue recovered quite suddenly as if the hold over him had been lifted despite not fulfilling his directive.”

Right. Len had made sure Bivolo took care of that. But since Barry couldn’t admit to any involvement, he simply shrugged again, trying to maintain a smile.

Julian regarded him with barely contained disdain and started to head for the door, but before he could leave, Barry felt a tug in his gut like something unfinished needing to be addressed.

“Wait.” He gently gripped Julian’s arm to stop him from passing by. “Listen…I’ll admit I may have read something on your desk—”

“About my cases?”

“About your sister.”

Julian stood up taller as if affronted. “You—”

“I’m not prying or picking any fights, I just wanted to say…I get it. My mother was killed by a meta.”

“It was. It’s…complicated. But she was killed by someone with powers. So was my dad. By Zoom. And despite that, I don’t believe people with powers have to be bad. I don’t believe people who experience trauma have to be bad either. Nobody has to be anything. But trauma, whether getting powers, losing someone close to you, or both…changes a person. It’s hard. It’s…so hard some days when I suddenly remember I had my dad back only to lose him again, but I won’t let that change who I am or how I treat people. I’m going to keep trying to be better. Just like The Flash.”

Julian didn’t hold back any of his contempt as he jerked his arm free of Barry’s hold. “This is about him? Allen…”

“You’re wrong about him, Julian. There’s been a lot that was his fault, I know that, even if he only means to do good. But he can be better. He’s trying to be better. The city needs someone to watch its back when people with superpowers are out there. It needs help sometimes from people without powers too.” Barry honestly believed that. If he didn’t, he’d hang up his cowl tonight.

Julian didn’t look convinced, but he recognized that Barry was hurt and mourning just like he was, and for that he showed a shred of honest sympathy. “I’d rather be rid of superpowers entirely, but in the event that isn’t an option, in the event law enforcement can’t keep up…well then, I guess we’ll have to wait and see if The Flash stays on the side of justice, won’t we?”
“Just like everybody else,” Barry said, which he hoped was clear that he meant either of them was just as susceptible to falling to darkness, much as they might try to keep their heads out of the muck.

Still, Julian seemed skeptical, but he conceded enough to say, “I suppose so,” before he continued for the door. Barry remained convinced that he could change the man’s mind someday, especially since, eventually, they’d be working together.

It wasn’t long after Julian left, that he heard footsteps behind him.

“Ready to go, Le—” He cut off abruptly at the sight of Captain Singh. “Captain! I’m just—”

“Save it, Allen,” Singh held up a hand, planting it immediately back on his hips to stare Barry down from the doorway. “I don’t believe you understand the concept of bereavement leave, so in light of that, I’m ordering you to take this week off—completely, never once stepping foot in this lab or I’m kicking you to the curb indefinitely. Understood?”

Barry opened his mouth to protest before remembering that part of the reason he’d come in today was so he could request additional time off instead of coming back to work. Biting back the words he’d intended to say, instead he said, “Yes, sir, Captain. Never once. You got it.”

Singh raised an eyebrow at him for caving so easily, but nodded. “You’ve had a busy few weeks. Speaking of, will I be seeing Wynters around?”

“Not after today, sir. I promise.”

“I should hope not. Make sure The Flash isn’t seen around this week either unless there’s a damn meteor hitting the Earth, got it?”

“Uhh…”

“I’m sure you can get him the message.” Singh made a point to raise both eyebrows as if to drive home that plausible deniability was key here, but he definitely knew more than he was admitting out loud.

“Yes, sir.

“Good. Now get outta here, Allen. And when you do get back to work, try not to let Albert show you up too much, will ya?”

“Of course, sir. I’ll do my best.”

Feeling oddly warm inside after Singh left, Barry glanced around the lab—his now shared lab—and didn’t mind the thought of taking a real week off, much as he loved his day job. He deserved the break. He’d earned it.

“Ready, Scarlet?”

Turning around to take in the sight of his nemesis in that snugly fit uniform, Barry smiled. Against all odds, his life wasn’t headed for a downward spiral. His boss knew most of his deepest secrets, and Barry was currently dating a man who’d tried to kill him on more than one occasion, but somehow, neither of those things was a disaster.

He missed his father fiercely, just like he still missed his mother, but deep down Barry knew he’d be okay. He had a group of supportive friends and family that scared him sometimes because of all
he still had left to lose, but also bolstered him for everything he had to be grateful for.

Life was weird. Unexpected. But it wasn’t bad. In fact, sometimes it was almost perfect.

“Yeah, Len. Let’s go home.”

XXXXX

Len was going to kill Raymond.

The man had no mind for thieving, yet he’d insisted on being counted as an alternate Rogue whenever additional help was needed. Len hadn’t called in Mardon or Bivolo for this one, but an extra set of hands would be useful, and therefore Raymond had bounced in his chair on the Waverider as he raised his hand to volunteer, eager to spend time with Mick. Mick, of course, had grinned at the chance to be a bad influence on his partner.

Currently, Len hated both of them.

This was supposed to be fun, but that didn’t mean they didn’t need to be careful. And professional. And show some common sense!

Len had been looking forward to hitting Tiffany’s right when it was having it’s grand reopening after fixing the front window and previous damage caused by Alexa’s men—and Captain Cold, of course.

“Raymond, if you even think of blasting another case like that, I will freeze you to the wall and leave you for the police.”

“I didn’t know the cannon would destroy the jewelry inside too! I reduced the output!”

“Clearly, not enough. Stick to being lookout.”

Ray pouted—actually pouted. Supervillains didn’t pout! Len maintained that he had not pouted that time when he’d been waiting for The Flash, ready to introduce the speedster to Mick for the first time, only for him to never show up.

Of course Raymond wasn’t wearing his full Atom suit tonight, since in most cases he still wanted that moniker associated with being a hero, but his all black attire—seriously, had he raided Len’s clothes from one of the safe houses?—was still accompanied by his lasers and main cannon attached to his arms. The cold gun, and in some cases even the heat gun, could affect the outer cases during a heist without destroying any loot—a photon cannon could not.

Besides, West got testy if too much damage was done, no matter how many times Barry explained the overall benefits to this new arrangement. Len preferred to keep on the detective’s good side, considering he still received death glares every time they crossed paths.

Lisa and Mick had most of the goods packed up and ready for Peek-A-Boo to ship out, which she did in quick pops in, taking a bag, a pop out to the getaway vehicles around the back of the building, then back in again. They were a clockwork machine—other than Raymond.

“He disabled the security system,” Mick said with a shrug after Ray trotted off to keep watch for
any remaining security guards or cops showing up.

“Lovely,” Len said. “Now if only he was useful in other capacities.”

“Hey. He’s useful in plenty capacities. Trust me,” Mick leered.

Len cast his friend an unimpressed glare.

“Uh oh, I think I see—” Ray began only to cut off as a whoosh alerted Len’s senses long before he saw any crackles of lightning.

“Why, Scarlet, whatever took you so long?” Len propped his cold gun on his shoulder as he turned to greet his newly arrived nemesis, with Mick already taking aim and Lisa escaping in a poof with Shawna and the last of the loot. “A little late, I’m afraid. It’s just us and a good time waiting for you. I hope you like it rough,” he finished as he tipped his gun forward.

Barry smiled as wide and humored as he had on that train so long ago. His suit was patched up from the former cut in its side, pristine and hugging all the right curves. “As if The Flash would ever fraternize with criminals,” he said for any watching cameras, though his grin said plenty of what he really thought about that statement. “You two are going back to jail.”

“Gotta catch us first, Flash!” Mick called as he fired at Barry dead-center—which of course he dodged as if it was no effort at all. He’d insisted that they never go easy on him or he might get sloppy. Mick was fine with that. He didn’t know how to go easy.

As Barry zigged and zagged out of the path of Mick’s trailing stream of fire, Len watched for his chance to trip up the kid’s feet and send him spiraling on a carpet of ice. Shawna could always pop in to rescue them, but that was hardly as fun.

And then, just as Len was about to ice the floor in the direction he was certain Barry was going, Raymond decided to remind them of his presence by blasting one of the empty display cases Barry was headed toward, causing debris to rain down on him and send him tumbling to the floor.

“Shit! Sorry, Ba—I mean Flash—uhh…sorry!” Ray hurried to meet up with Len and Mick again, looking down on Barry with a cringe.

“Nicely done,” Len nodded, then snatched Ray up by the collar of his jacket, spun him around, and pushed him Barry’s direction just as the speedster zipped to his feet. “All yours, Scarlet! No use for him anyway!” Len called before taking off for the stairs.

“Hey!” Ray exclaimed when Mick turned tail to follow, leaving both brunettes in a tangle on the floor.

“Needs of the many, Ray!” Mick shouted over his shoulder, which made Len snort at the Star Trek reference Raymond was no doubt grumbling over as he was left in the dust.

“Sorry, Flash!” Len heard the man shout as he and Mick rounded the corner to the back exit where the vehicles and Lisa and Shawna should be waiting. Then there was a sudden boom, a whoosh of air that followed after them, and a cry from Barry like his eardrums had just popped.

Whirling back around as he opened the door for Mick to hurry through, Len barely believed it when out of the smoke starting to billow was Raymond running to join them. “Th’hell did you do?” he roared with half a mind to slam the door in Ray’s face.

“Just an EMP!” Ray said as he slowed. “Sensory overload, no damage, I swear, not even to more
cases.”

That was…actually smart, given Barry’s power-set. Len allowed Raymond to rush past him into the alley, then exited behind him and iced the door for good measure in case Barry got any ideas about following.

Of course, Raymond immediately laid into Mick. “I can’t believe you left me there! And with a Spock quote, seriously? That’s just mean, Mick.”

“Yer the one wantin’ to be equal on every playin’ field. Well on this one, ya gotta play smarter. That blast for the Flash, though,” Mick crowded Ray against the wall of the building before the other man could respond, heat gun sheathed but Mick’s eyes burning in its place, “and makin’ a getaway on yer own like that? Hot as hell, Pretty.”

“Yeah?” Ray’s ire washed out of him.

“Oh yeah. ‘Sides, it’s Red in there. I’d never leave you behind with a real threat.”

Then they were kissing. It was actually disturbing how hands-on Mick and Ray were in public. Len still didn’t do touchy feely with prying eyes around, much as Barry tended to gravitate toward being in his general orbit if not brushing arms or reaching for his hand, but ever since the other two became true partners, they’d grown into that annoying couple Len just wanted to shoot.

He charged his gun their direction until Mick glared over his shoulder and Ray blinked at Len wide-eyed. Like children, honestly.

“Save your celebrating for when the getaway is over,” Len said.

“Aw, Lenny, have a heart,” Lisa sauntered toward them from where the bikes and a van with Shawna behind the wheel were parked. “I think they’re adorable.”

Mick rolled his eyes while Raymond blushed and smiled like he was eighteen years old instead of that plus twenty.

“You’re only on their side because you’re headed to see Ramon after this,” Len accused.

“Can’t a girl have a date for the after party?”

Shawna snickered from the van.

“You good to go?” Len called to her.

“All set, boss.”

“Then get the loot back to the safe house for distribution. The families need an offering to keep their coffers happy.”

“You got it.”

Off Shawna went. At least she followed orders, even if she only helped out as a courtesy and wasn’t in it for a life of crime, however veiled their roles as secretly keeping the city from spiraling into chaos.

Twirling her fingers in a wave of goodbye, Lisa headed for her bike. “You boys play nice now. After all, it’s not as if we don’t know who’s racing to beat you home, Lenny.”
Len certainly hoped that was the case.

The remaining two bikes were for him and one for Mick and Ray. They’d be off soon to join another mission with the Legends, but there was time for ‘team bonding’ in the interim. Sara was the one Len really wanted to get in on a heist, but he was still wearing her down about giving into the idea.

At last, sirens blared in the distance. Barry had likely tipped off the police or tripped the alarm somehow before making scarce. Once again the headlines would read that Captain Cold—sometimes hero, sometimes villain—had prevailed, with The Flash unable to stop him.

Some people speculated at the nature of their relationship after a week of Cold seeming to be on Flash’s side, especially when Len kept making clean getaways, but the smart ones realized that the real story was in how low the crime rate was—at least the rate of crime anyone knew about.

A few times on the way home, Len could have sworn he caught a flicker of lightning or that familiar smell of ozone, like Barry was playing tag with him, keeping just enough out of eyesight or reach for Len to truly know if he was there. But Len knew. He always knew. Just as well as he knew that Barry would be waiting for him as soon as he opened the door to his apartment.

“Ray?” he spouted before Len had even fully entered. Barry hadn’t taken his suit off yet, but stood with his arms crossed and cowl back, caught between a scowl and a grin. “You have Ray on the Rogues now?”

“Not my idea.”

“Len. There was a lot of damage—”

“All Raymond,” Len shut the door with a quiet click. “Which you can take up with him and Mick.”

Barry tried to continue looking standoffish but failed miserably. “You know at some point I really should bring you in so people don’t catch wise that we’re playing both sides.”

“They already guess we’re playing both sides,” Len said, toeing off his boots and cross the living room to join Barry. “No one cares. The public loves me. I’m the thief with a heart of gold, leading a band of similar thieves, so when I’m caught, they’re actually quite disappointed.”

The grin was quickly winning out on Barry’s face. “Even if I did put you away, you could always just escape again. I could even help you escape. I’m just trying to keep our headlines from turning into tabloids.”

Crowding close into Barry’s space, Len eyed the boy from head to toe. “If offering to break me out of prison is your idea of foreplay…it’s working.” He tipped forward to capture a kiss, which naturally Barry allowed.

“Joe’s gonna yell at me again,” he hummed when they parted.

“Tell him he can yell at me. He seems to enjoy that. Not ready to warm to me yet?”

“He’s…coping. He admits you’re not all bad, totally willing to give you a chance as a hero, just…”

“Not as your lover.”

“Please don’t say lover in front of him.”
Len couldn’t refrain from rolling his eyes at the behavior of a grown man—the one in front of him and the one they were talking about. “What does he think we’re doing here every night, having tea parties?”

“Len…”

“I’ll keep playing nice, Barry, but I can’t play too nice. I’ll get rusty at this rate. Either that or Raymond will be the death of me. When’s the next crisis scheduled?”

“Don’t jinx it. And I can always be rougher next time.” Barry grasped the edges of Len’s parka to pull him closer.

“Mmm, always up for that.”

They kissed once more—easy, lazy.

But Barry soon pulled back with a shake of his head. “Urg, my ears are still ringing from that trick of Ray’s.”

“Oh? Let me attend to them then,” Len said, swooping around Barry’s neck to lick an earlobe, nibbling and tonguing the cartilage before kissing behind it down along the hairs of Barry’s neck.

Barry giggled, shoulders locking up from the slight tickle.

“Hungry?” Len asked.

“Starved. I can heat up that casserole Evelyn dropped off earlier?”

“Sounds divine.” They parted, though Len was hungry for more than just casserole, if he was being honest. “It’s still an early night. Netflix and chill?”

“Meaning…” Barry glanced over his shoulder during his march to the kitchen.

“Movie night with light cuddling and possible debauchery if we get bored?”

“Make it certain debauchery and I’m in. But then I’m making popcorn with the casserole.”

“Heathen.”

“Yet you love me.”

“I do,” Len said with quiet, weightier seriousness.

“I love you too, Len. Now do we have any Dr Pepper left, because I have a serious craving right now?” Barry bent to look in the bottom shelf of the fridge, displaying his scarlet clad ass for Len to admire.

Scarlet. That was definitely Len’s favorite color for many reasons, and not all of them had to do with the hue of his once-enemy’s suit. It had also been the color of the eyes that held him prisoner only to free him in ways he never could have seen coming.

Poetic really, that his undoing was also his salvation; that his enemy was now his lover and his deepest, dearest love.

“Len. You drank the last one? Now I have to run to the store.”
“For the three seconds it’ll take you to get there and back?”

“It takes longer than that to pay.”

“So don’t pay,” Len said, tossing his parka over the back of the sofa and dropping down onto it himself.

“Nice try, but unlike Ray, I am not moonlighting my other moonlighting by becoming a thief.”

“Not even if dressing you in black for a heist and letting you handle my gun is a long running fantasy of mine?”

Barry paused as he let the fridge door drift closed.

“Just the two of us,” Len sat forward, arm draping out along the back of the sofa, “me giving you orders all night, culminating in a successful haul before I bend you over the nearest solid surface...”

“Well…I don’t know…”

“Come now, Barry. Don’t you wanna be a good boy for me by being a little bad?”

Barry shuddered. He always did when Len called him a ‘good boy’. Len needed to think of ways to slip that into casual conversation. “Great, now I get to run to the store like a deviant,” Barry said, looking down at how he was starting to strain his suit.

“Claim your spoils without paying like a true deviant and I’ll suck you off before dinner.”

A spark of excitement made Barry straighten. He was too easy really. Would be even easier to manipulate and wrap around Len’s finger, if he was the type to exploit the man who shared his bed, but no. Len wasn’t Alexa. He never wanted to be like her. This time, he wanted to try something new.

Being happy.

“Back in a flash,” Barry said before disappearing with a spark of lightning.

Len laughed. Poetic indeed.

XXXXX

It wasn’t until a few weeks later—several months after everything had first started—that Barry went into the hidden room to check on Gideon and the article from the future. He hadn’t given it much thought in all that time, had almost forgotten it existed, but one day it popped into his mind and he hadn’t been able to shake the idea that he needed to see how things had changed.

Later, when he told Len what he’d discovered, he learned that the changes had already been made the night Alexa stormed the Labs, because Len had seen the same thing.

The front page article not only displayed The Flash in mid-run but a smaller image of Captain Cold behind him. They’d disappeared together during the fight, part of some great crisis yet to come. But the weirdest part was that Iris’s name was still hyphened, just not to West-Allen.
THE END

Chapter End Notes

It reads West-Thawne, okay, because somehow Eddie is coming back or so help me...

But seriously, interpret as you will. Len was understandably confused when he saw that name for Iris, and then he sort of forgot about it all what with getting his common sense back and all the crazy.

Anyway, I can't thank you all enough, those who've been here from the start, those who started recently, those who commented once, only kudos, or gushed through every chapter - thank you.

Please, if you liked this crazy ride, let me know in whatever way is most comfortable for you, but I assure you, each kudos and comment just spurs me on to write more. I'm sure I'll be back with another fic, or at least new chapters of other ongoing fics soon.

Otherwise, stay tuned for Lovesick Gods, the original book version of Lovesick, coming this month or next!

And as always...see ya next ficcie!

End Notes

Some additional notes:

Len’s relationship with Mick is important and you will see more of him later on. As well as Lisa, of course. The rest of the Legends will depend on where the story takes me, but I don't plan to ignore them, especially since I love Len and Sara's friendship, and while I am playing this as more one-sided between them with any infatuation, I am a CaptainCanary fan as well and don't want to just dismiss that. Or WestAllen for that matter.

Len is going to get a little handsy to start, but remember, he was hit with LOVE, not LUST, so while he may be a little ‘drunk’ at the beginning when things get going, that will form more and more into LOVE which is very different and I plan to take this some very different directions than is usual for the trope.

Raider's powers are working differently with this too, focused solely on Barry, long-lasting, etc. The effects are going to last a long while for Len, have many consequences and interesting turns, so just…enjoy.

Also, Alexa is wholly and completely played by Melinda Clarke in my head, because I have
loved her ever since Return of the Living Dead 3 and she has only gotten more gorgeous with age.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!