Knowing Me, Knowing You

by orphean

Summary

The problem with time travel is that the smallest things can change and those things change the world. Barry Allen, with a wraith hot on his heels, did not think about this, being much, more concerned with how to stay alive. He expected Cisco and Caitlin to save him. They didn't. He did not expect Hartley Rathaway to save him. He did.

Then he reached out a hand, smiled like a child at a sunny day, and asked him how his trip had been.

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Barry changes the timeline, but that's not all that changes.

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Then he reached out a hand, smiled like a child at a sunny day, and asked him how his trip had been.

Barry stared, confused, non-plussed, and Hartley's smile dropped a little. Barry kept staring, as Hartley bantered with Caitlin (what?) and Cisco (what?), as Hartley left for dinner with his parents.

'So, did you change the timeline?' Cisco asked, tearing into a twizzler.
'No, no,' Barry insisted as he changed into his normal clothes, and he felt his phone vibrate.

'Not even a little?' Caitlin blowed on her tea, half school teacher, half concerned friend.

'Nope,' Barry promised as he pulled his phone out of his pocket, expecting a message from Joe, maybe Iris.

*Are we still on for tonight? I should be done by ten.* Sender: Hartley.

8.21. *Sure,* Barry typed back, *where?*

8.25. *I thought the usual?*

Barry scrolled up through their previous messages, tried to figure out where the usual would be with a would-be murderer. But, no, he guessed, Hartley wasn't a would-be murderer in this timeline, because he never escaped and he never tried to rip Barry's body apart from the inside. This Hartley seemed well-adjusted. He shook his head, trying to will his mind to get in line, to adjust to the new timeline.

'Are you okay?' Cisco asked.

'Yeah, I'm good. Just tired. I think I'm gonna head out soon.' There were so many texts in the conversation, so many quick back-and-forths. But nothing about where they usually met up. He gave up and texted Hartley, suggesting a brewpub downtown instead.

8.43. *Beer? Ew. That's fine. Look forward to it. See you at ten sharp, sugar cup.*

Sugar cup? Sugar cup? Barry was at home at this point, sprawled in a sofa, trying to understand what was going on. Sugar cup?

8.53. *The parents are bitching about you.*

8.54. *Flash you obviously, not you you. Menace to society, socialist demon, &c.*

8.56. *It is great fun. Wish you were here. You'd love it.*

8.59. *It's the great Jitters 'is the Flash hot?' debate all over again.*

9.02. *I am always on your side, of course. You know this.*

Barry read the messages, tried to understand what was happening. He wished that time aligned itself quicker, that he knew what he had been doing for the last year in this timeline. Time ticked on in slow moments, seconds like minutes, minutes like hours. 9:59 rolled around. He was at the brewpub, tossing his keys, the clinking of metal calming his nerves. Buzz buzz buzz.

10.01. *Sorry, traffic's bad. Be there soon. Get me one of your foulest lagers? Thank you babe & I will pay you back.*

Babe? Barry went inside, fumbled over beer orders and found a table for two. He sipped his beer and wondered if it was stupid to drink when it did nothing for him. Maybe Caitlin would one day figure out how to get him drunk. Maybe his last drunken day was at 24, and he was doomed to a life of sobriety. Oh well. It could be worse. He could have been doomed to sobriety at 21.

'Is that mine?' Hartley Rathaway slumped into a chair, more limbs than should be possible for such a tiny person. He looked different from how Barry remembered him, less angry and spiteful, more coy and playful. 'I do hate beer. But anything for you, Care Bear.' He raised his glass and took a sip,
'How was dinner?' Barry took a sip of his beer. It wasn't bad.

'Oh, same old, same old.'

'Humour me.'

Hartley looked at him, took another sip.

'Oh, blah blah, the world is changing and maybe we are doomed to another four years of Democrats, and how do we make money from this, little Hartley?' He gestured, frustrated. 'I don't even want to tell you who they're supporting. But he can't win, can he?' He reached a hand out, grazed Barry's wrist. 'As a policeman, what's your verdict?'

'I have no idea,' Barry replied and withdrew his hand. Hartley's face closed for a second, before he smiled again. 'So remind me, what was the Flash Jitters thing? The one you mentioned in your text?' He was grappling at straws. He hoped Hartley wouldn't notice.

'Are you looking for compliments, Allen? There are easier ways, you know.' He took a draught of beer, grinned. 'So how was the past? Anything fun happened?'

'No, nope, not at all. Everything went smoothly, more or less. Apart from the time wraith, of course. Thank you for destroying that.' Barry drummed his fingers against his knees. Hartley cocked his head a little, as though he was listening for something, and frowned a little. 'So, apart from being a hero, what have you been up to lately?'

'Hero!' Hartley laughed. Barry found it hard to equate him with the young man he had apprehended earlier that day – or a year ago, depending on how he looked at it. This was a non-killing, even laughing, Hartley, one that Barry, apparently, had become friends with. Good friends, it seemed. 'Just the usual. Independent research, trying to convince the scientific world to take me seriously. Father said something at dinner which makes me think he will offer me a job next time I see him.'

'Are you gonna take it?'

'I don't know.' Hartley was leaning over the table, elbows almost touching Barry's. 'It'd be a steady paycheck, it would be harder for my parents to drop me, I guess, and I could do something good with the money. Osgood and Rachel Rathaway, unknowing sponsors to Central City's homeless shelters.' He laughed again. Barry liked that laugh.

'And you say you're not a hero.'

Hartley reached over, placed his hand on Barry's arm. His hand stayed there longer than Barry had expected it would, the fingers hot against his sleeve.

'You are too kind to me,' Hartley said quietly, looking at his thumb which was rubbing circles in the fabric of Barry's shirt. 'I am very lucky to have you.'

Barry opened his mouth to ask what on earth he meant, but he closed it again, determined to play it cool, to keep up the act until his memories of this timeline came back. What would this Barry do? Barry considered.

'Nah, man, it's cool. That's what we have friends for, right?' Hartley huffed and withdrew his hand, but smiled.
They slipped into an easy chitchat, and Barry marvelled at how comfortable he felt in this situation. Yesterday Hartley had been another barely-averted disaster; today he was a friend. Or something like a friend. He thought about the heat of his skin when he touched him, the way Hartley looked at him. Barry was a pigeon; Hartley was a hungry cat. His eyes were drawn to Hartley’s mouth, the corners of his lips turned down even when he smiled.

‘Care Bear,’ Hartley said as he got up when the last rounds were called, as he stumbled just a little and grabbed the chair for purchase. ‘Will you drive me home?’

Hartley Rathaway owned a convertible. Of course he owned a convertible.

‘It’s a sensible convertible,’ he insisted as he handed the keys to Barry. ‘It’s electric. Excellent mileage.’ Excellent mileage or not, Barry had never driven anything so expensive. When he asked for directions, Hartley gave him a look that Barry was certain that he would spend most of the night analysing. He sighed and directed Barry, who was nervous about driving something that had cost a lot more than Barry made in a year. When he had parked, Hartley turned to Barry. ‘Do you want to come up?’

‘Sure,’ Barry said and realised, again, that he did not know what he was agreeing to.

‘Do you want a drink?’ Hartley asked as he peeled out of his winter coat and loosened his tie.

‘I think I’m good.’

‘Of course,’ Hartley dropped his coat and tie, unbuttoning the top button of his shirt. Barry stared at the hollow of his throat, unable to look away. Hartley approached him, hands in pocket, gait sauntering and voice sing-song. ‘Good boy scout Barry Allen. Well, there’s a lot of things we can do instead of drinking.’

Hartley was looking up at Barry through heavy eyelids, a smirk lifting his mouth. Barry tried not to think too much and found himself leaning down, a hand around Hartley’s neck, lips pressed against lips. Hartley stood still, not moving a muscle, and he pulled back. He looked at him in confusion.

‘I was thinking, like, video games, but that is fine, too. I didn’t expect you to –’ he frowned. ‘Did you change the timeline?’

‘Nope,’ Barry promised, who had moved away, arms folded now, very very embarrassed. He wondered if time travel could come with temporary personality disruption, if he could maybe rewind the last thirty second, knock himself out and rewrite time again. Hartley’s mouth had been warm against his and his skin had been tantalisingly soft.

‘Your heart rate’s elevated. More than usual. You’re lying. What did you change?’ Hartley didn’t look angry. He sounded concerned. Barry found the idea of lying to him difficult. He found the idea of kissing him again very appealing. He felt very confused.

‘I didn’t catch your bombs in the other timeline. You tried to kill me.’

‘So you kiss me?’

‘No, no, I didn’t want to kiss you then,’ Barry explained. ‘That’s new. That’s a today thing. I thought that you – that we had – I mean, weren’t you flirting with me?’

‘Well, yes, but I didn’t expect you to do anything in response. I’ve been doing it since before you let me out of the cells, and you never did anything then.’
‘I can’t remember anything of this timeline. It’ll come back to me, but it’s a year. I don’t remember a single conversation we’ve had apart from the day we met.’

‘So you kiss me?’ Hartley repeated.

‘No, no, I – I thought – um. I’m sorry, Hartley. That was stupid of me and I made a mistake and you’re a little drunk and I’m not and I guess I shouldn’t have kissed you.’

‘I didn’t mind it.’ Hartley had moved closer, fingers coming to rest on Barry’s arm. He smiled a smile of crooked teeth, teasing, hopeful, adorable. ‘You can try again if you’d like.’

‘You’re drunk.’

‘Not very. I had two beers. I would be good to drive. I just hate driving,’ he insisted, moving closer still. ‘And I would like it if you wanted to kiss me again. I’ll be better this time, I promise.’

‘I don’t want to hurt you,’ Barry said, resolve weakening with every moment. ‘I don’t want to ruin our friendship.’

‘You won’t ruin anything,’ Hartley promised. ‘If this is a one-time thing for you, that’s fine. I won’t mention it to anyone. It’s just a bit of fun if you want it. I won’t be weird about it.’

Stalemate. Hartley stood in Barry’s shadow, patiently searching his face, waiting for his decision. Barry, wrestling with what to do.

And then he kissed Hartley again. He had never kissed another man before – unless you counted that one truth or dare game in twelfth grade – and he had always expected it to be like kissing women. Mouths were mouths. But it was different, somehow. Maybe it was the way their cheeks scratched, the graze of stubble on stubble. Maybe it was Hartley’s hand around his neck, hands more forceful than any girl’s he had ever kissed. Maybe it was how Hartley sighed into the kisses.

Whatever it was, he wanted more. He was painfully aware of the strangled noise he made when Hartley dropped away, hands still on Barry.

‘You are very tall,’ he said. ‘Can we sit down? I can only stay on my tiptoes for so long.’

‘You’re on your tiptoes? You’re tiny!’ Hartley rolled his eyes and laced their fingers together. ‘But sure, yeah, we can sit down. Where do you want to sit?’

‘There’s the sofa,’ Hartley began, nodding towards it. ‘There’s the floor, but I think I’m too old for that. There’s my bed.’

‘I think the sofa sounds excellent.’ Barry said, far too quickly.

‘Come, then.’ Hartley grinned, a cat with the cream, and Barry followed him as he led him to the sofa. Hartley let go of his hands and Barry sat down. Hartley stayed hovered in front of him for a moment before he climbed onto the sofa and nestled himself in Barry’s lap.

‘Oh,’ said the fastest man alive.

‘Is this okay?’ Hartley asked, but his face was very close and Barry was having trouble making complete sentences. He nodded. Hartley’s smile shifted, from ferocious to wry, maybe even a little nervous. ‘Tell me if you want to stop.’
But then Hartley was kissing him again, his hands running through his hair, tracing his jawline, stroking his face. They were slow, deep kisses that made Barry’s head spin, that made him worry that maybe he wasn’t getting enough oxygen to his brain, that maybe this was some kind of slow torture that actually would kill him this time. After no time at all, or maybe time had stopped existing, Hartley released him, his breath hitched, his mouth red, his eyes dark.

‘I know you’re a gentleman, but you don’t have to keep your hands to yourself,’ Hartley took Barry’s hands, which had been slack at his sides, and placed one on his leg. The other hand he turned in his own, tracing down his palm, spreading the fingers. His eyes darted from Barry’s hand to his face. He gently kissed each fingertip. ‘You have immaculate hands.’

‘You have very pretty eyes,’ Barry managed to reply, but his voice was thicker than oatmeal. Hartley laughed.

‘Are we trading compliments now? Well then.’ He cocked his head, studied Barry critically. ‘Well, you have excellent eyebrows. Your nose is very regal. Your jawline is exceptional. Your cheekbones are very high and elegant. Your ears are – hmm – proportional. The corners of your mouth are delectable.’ Each named feature was given a kiss, a short peck of appreciation. Barry felt equal parts embarrassed, flattered and overwhelmed.

Most of all, though, he felt the press of Hartley’s body against his and that made it oh-so-difficult to focus on anything else. So he grabbed Hartley’s neck and pulled him close again. Hartley shivered, returned the kisses, matched the ferocity and depth, roamed his hands over Barry’s chest, let his thumbs trace the hem of his shirt. Barry felt lightheaded, and was struck again how bizarre this situation was, that maybe he should stop this before it went any further, but Hartley’s fingers shot sparks of electricity up his spine and he pressed closer, his thighs clamped against Barry’s hips, and Barry would rather cut off his hand than stop this. Hartley was, inch by inch, moving his fingers up his chest, pushing his shirt up. He tugged at the shirt and then stopped.

‘Is that okay? Or do you want to just kiss?’ In response Barry tore off his shirt – not quite at super speed, but still fast – and began unbuttoning Hartley’s shirt.

‘Weren’t you wearing a t-shirt this afternoon?’ Barry asked as Hartley helped remove the cufflinks, placing them on the end table and shrugging out of the shirt.

‘Do you really expect me to wear something as common as a t-shirt with my parents? Please, Barry. If I want my hands on the family fortune, I have to play the game.’ Hartley grinned, eyeing Barry, running his fingers down his chest.

‘Is that all you want from your parents?’ Barry asked, as he shivered against the touch, leaned his head back into the back of the sofa.

‘Barry.’ Hartley looked squarely at him, lips pursed. ‘Tonight my father told me that his golf buddy Ralph has a lovely daughter – called Millicent of all things – and that we should meet someday and wouldn’t it be nice if we got along. Whereas I,’ and Hartley leaned down again, kissing his way down Barry’s neck, ‘much prefer this. How about you?’

‘I – oh – I’d agree,’ Barry managed to say, and he let his fingers rest against Hartley’s stomach as he kissed the other side of his neck, traced his fingers down his throat, shifted closer. Hartley’s skin was very soft, very warm and very very nice. Hartley kissed him again, deep and slow, then feathery and fast, and all Barry could do was to try to keep up, run his hands over his back. He arched into the touch and smiled into the kisses.

‘Your heart is beating like a jackhammer,’ Hartley murmured, pushing Barry’s hair out of his face.
‘Are you alright?’ He was smiling, and Barry could, for a second, see the criminal who had looked down on him as his organs sheared apart. Then he blinked and he was gone, replaced by a young man with lips swollen from kissing, with hair in his face and eyes twinkling with excitement and concern.

‘I’m fine. Can you really hear my heart?’ Barry knew that Hartley had enhanced hearing, but he had never considered that he would hear something like a heartbeat.

‘Of course,’ he replied and spread his hand over his heart, a wry look on his face. ‘But I can feel it, too. I assume it’s because you’re enjoying this and not that you’re having a heart attack?’ Barry nodded, trying to show that yes, yes, he was very much enjoying this, and he tried to catch a kiss, but Hartley whipped his head back and studied him. ‘Would you be interested in something more than kissing?’

‘Like what?’ Barry asked, eyes wide, frozen in place. Hartley grinned, bit his lip, glanced down and then up again.

‘Would you like me to go down on you?’ Hartley asked, one hand still on Barry’s chest, one nestled in his hair. His eyes were dark and he licked his lips, waiting for an answer. Now Barry could hear his own heartbeat, hard and heavy in his ears, and he could hear his blood pulsing through his veins. ‘Or we could just kiss.’

The ability to run at the speed of sound does things with one’s perception of time. Time slowed to a halt, and Barry felt like he was studying Hartley’s face for hours, the curve of his lip, the twinkle of his eye, admiring the sharpness of his jaw, the softness of his cheek. He tried to calm his breathing and to summon his courage.

‘Would you? Please?’ He finally said, perhaps just a moment later, and Hartley’s face split into a leer. ‘Do you need me to move? Is there anything I should do?’

‘No, no, you’re good.’ Hartley leaned in to kiss him again, a succession of short pecks, reassuring him, before he slid off his lap and fell to his knees in front of him. He made quick work of undoing his jeans, tugging them off, keeping his eyes locked on Barry’s face.

‘Do you –’ and Barry felt embarrassed to ask this, never having been unprepared for this, never – well – seduced, ‘do you have protection?’

‘What?’ said Hartley, and he leaned back, fingers splayed on the floor. He wasn’t touching Barry at all and it was very disappointing. ‘Are you concerned?’

‘Um – no – but I thought that it should be something we talk about? Maybe?’ Barry wanted to reach out and touch Hartley, reassure him that he was just trying to be sensible, he wasn’t trying to spoil the mood, but he didn’t know where to move his hand – his face? his hair? his shoulder? what was even appropriate? – so he stayed in place.

‘I don’t have anything,’ Hartley said, defensively, but he sat up straighter again, let his fingers run up Barry’s legs. ‘So unless you have – I don’t know – time syphilis, I think we’re out of the woods.’

‘I don’t have time syphilis,’ Barry promised. He didn’t, did he? The particle accelerator had removed his ability to even catch a cold, so surely he was safe from time syphilis? Was that even a thing? He was starting to worry a little, both about time-related diseases and ruining whatever this thing that was about to happen was, so he asked Hartley if he could kiss him again.

Hartley nodded and lifted his body, but Barry still had to lean down for their faces to meet. Hartley
kissed slow and languid, one hand charting the whirls of Barry’s hair, the other thumbing its way up his thigh. He didn’t seem to be in a hurry, and he gasped into Barry’s mouth as he wrapped his fingers around his neck and pulled him closer. The sofa was too deep; Barry moved forward until he was on the edge of his seat, Hartley still perched between his knees. Time slowed to nothing again, and as they kissed, small details from this new timeline started appearing – Hartley’s downturned eyes when he was set free from the labs, his refusal to let Barry help him get back on his feet in a world without Harrison Wells, the first time they met up outside the lab, the first time he had called him by a stupid nickname. All the new memories of things that had not and then had happened, and that were now being rewritten again, in light of what was happening now.

Then Hartley’s free hand moved from Barry’s leg – up, up, up – and his fingers spread, his fingers wrapped themselves around him. Barry gasped and pulled away, for a split-second moving at the speed of light, before he caught his breath, before he slowed down again. Hartley was looking at him, laughter etched on his face as he was part amusement, part anticipation.

‘May I?’ he asked, his mouth ajar, and Barry somehow found his voice, lost somewhere in the kisses and memories and touches.

‘Yes, please.’ He remembered, all at once, the usual spot they met up at, a fancy but worn coffee shop that served wine (passable, according to a sneering Hartley) and cocktails (marvellous, according to a drunk Hartley).

Hartley kissed him once more, sat back down, and licked his lips. Barry remembered one of their get-togethers, only a few month ago, where Hartley had convinced a girl from the table next to theirs to sell him a cigarette for a dollar. He had stayed at a disapproving distance as Hartley smoked the cigarette, a cocktail umbrella that he had flirted off the bartender tucked behind his ear. Barry had found himself unable to look away from his mouth, the way he exhaled the plumes of smoke, the way the corners of his mouth twitched as he talked about some moron scientist who had had the nerve to publish a critique of his latest article.

Barry was thinking about Hartley’s mouth that night that what his mouth was doing this night had slipped his mind, the wetness of his tongue against his head, the warmth of him, the calculated patience with which he moved. Barry inhaled sharply, tried to calm his heartbeat, suddenly very nervous to let Hartley down, to be a disappointment. He remembered Cisco’s suggestion to think about baseball, but he couldn’t even name the positions at this point. Hartley seemed to take the breath as encouragement, his tongue lapping, his mouth opening wider, his head dipping down and down. Barry swallowed a cry and started reciting the periodic table. Hydrogen, helium, lithium, beryl–

‘Are you okay?’ Hartley had pulled away and was removing his glasses, putting them up against the light, checking for smudges, before folding them and putting them on the end table. His mouth was wet and Barry should really stop staring. ‘Do you want me to stop?’

‘No,’ and maybe Barry said that with too much force, maybe he was too quick to reply. ‘It’s just, um, very nice. Very very nice. And I’m worried that I will, um. Y’know.’

‘I thought that was what we were working towards?’ Hartley cocked an eyebrow, licked his lips. Barry wasn’t sure why they were talking.

‘I just don’t want to – too soon. There are times when being the fastest man alive has its drawbacks.’ Barry bit his tongue, embarrassed to be talking about this.

‘Tell me if you need me to stop,’ Hartley said, kissing Barry’s knees, the inside of his thighs, ever up, ever in. ‘Would you do something for me?’ he asked, and Barry nodded. ‘Put your hand in my hair. I
want you to be in control.’

Hartley’s hair was soft, and Barry brushed his fingers through it, neatening the side parting, pushing stray hairs out of his face. For a moment, Hartley closed his eyes, and leaned into the touch. He looked peaceful and serene. A young man like any other, not like a man who once plotted murder. Barry remembered one night when Hartley had been in his cups, and he had put a hand on his shoulder and rested his head against his chest, apologising for all the bad things he had done to him. That was the first time – it had been, hadn’t it? – that he had come to this apartment, making Hartley drink numerous glasses of water, sitting on the floor while Hartley, his arms covering his face, told him about his mistakes, his crimes, the evil he could have done. Barry had wanted to reach out and touch his hair, even then, let it be a small way to comfort him, but he had settled to tell him that he had been forgiven a long time ago. The next time Hartley had come to the Labs, he had brought a box of chocolates, and although he hadn’t said anything, his smile at Barry had been more crooked than usual.

His smile was crooked now, too, but with a different purpose. Hartley curved his tongue, ran it up the length of his erection, humming in satisfaction as Barry pressed down slightly on his scalp. Hartley glanced up at him, eyes squinted so as to see him more clearly, and Barry stared back as he did not break eye contact as he took him in his mouth again. He wasn’t moving slowly now, his movements quick and precise, reaching deeper than Barry felt should be possible and feeling better than should be allowed. Calcium, scandium, titanium, vanadium, he recited, scrabbling for control. Hartley’s tongue, Hartley’s lips, the way he didn’t even blink when Barry could feel the back of his throat. His head was swimming and his fingers were closing down on locks of hair. Hartley purred, heavy vibrations that made Barry exhale a moan that he did not even know he was holding in. He was tearing him apart, just like in the lost timeline, but this was much, much preferable.

Chromium, manganese, iron, cobalt – and he couldn’t remember what the next element was because Hartley had started moving again. His tongue lathed over the length of him, his lips closed down on him. He was heat and wetness and Barry desperately wanted to last, for this to never end, his hand weaving through his hair, but it had been a long time since he had done this with anyone, and – oh – Hartley was so good at this. Barry clenched his hand and maybe he gave a little tug, perhaps harder than intended, but the responding sound from Hartley was one of excitement, not protest. He was not careful and languid but fast and sloppy, the hand wrapped around the base of Barry’s cock slick with spit. Hand and mouth moved in tandem, a furious pace now, and it was only a few more seconds before it was too much, before Barry came. His fingers clenched, unclenched; he put his free hand to his face, as though that would quieten his helpless moan. He shivered and shook, and Hartley did not move until Barry’s body had stilled, until his ragged breaths had started to calm.

Hartley leaned back, wiped his hand on his trousers, and ran a thumb over his lips.

‘Fun?’ he asked, and his eyes – unfocused, pupils blown – twinkled. His hands were placed on the floor behind him again, and he cocked his head, squinting as he looked at Barry. He seemed pleased as punch. Barry nodded. They were quiet for a few moments, and Barry tried to gather his wits, remember how to form real sentences and not just sharp exclamations. He remembered one time they had met up and read together in silence, each with their own book. It had been a comfortable silence, and this was like it. Except then, of course, they had both been wearing clothes. Barry licked his lips.

‘Would you like me to –’ he didn’t know how to finish the question, and wasn’t sure if the collection of wide gestures he supplied explained what he was suggesting. Hartley seemed to understand. He laughed and shook his head.

‘Reciprocate?’ he clarified, and Barry nodded again, a human bobblehead. ‘No. But thank you for offering. Maybe next time.’
‘Next time?’ This was more familiar territory, and Barry’s teasing tone was almost free of the nervousness he was starting to feel again. Hartley lifted his eyebrows and clambered on top of him again. Barry marvelled that such a small body could produce such lithe movement, how comfortable he felt with his weight settling on his lap.

‘You did say you had fun. So I’d like a next time. If you want to,’ Hartley adds, and maybe there’s a flicker of nerves on his face, too, but he quickly dips his head and plants a salvo of kisses down his jaw. ‘I won’t be mad if you don’t. I said I wouldn’t be weird.’

‘You’re always weird,’ Barry countered, but his breath was already short again. ‘But I would, um, would like a next time.’ He touched Hartley’s face, drew it to him, pressed their mouths together. He was amazed at how well they fit.

‘Amazing what a bit of time travel can do,’ Hartley smirked between the kisses, a hand snaking through his hair.

‘I’m pretty sure I wanted this before the time travel.’ Barry frowned. ‘In this timeline, I mean. Not in the other timeline – sorry about that. I’m starting to remember this timeline. A lot of it about you. A lot of it looking at you. Looking at you a lot.’ He could feel the blush travelling over his face, but also Hartley’s gentle fingers, grazing his skin, the pad of his thumb tracing over his eyebrow.

‘But for all that looking, you didn’t see me looking at you,’ Hartley smiled, and there was perhaps a hint of sadness there, but Barry knew he couldn’t consider that now, didn’t know how to react to that statement. He opened his mouth, closed it. Tried again. He did not know what to say, so he kissed him again.

They somehow ended up lying on the sofa, with Hartley burrowed into the cushions. Barry still didn’t quite know what to do with his hands, but he cupped Hartley’s cheek as he kissed him, a thumb running over his skin. Hartley had one hand curled around Barry’s neck, another against his side, running up and down. He was not sure how long they stayed like that, moving in tandem, gentle kisses and carefully exploring hands, but when Hartley pulled away, it was far too soon.

‘It’s late,’ he said regretfully, his gaze flicking from Barry’s eyes to lips and back again. ‘And as much as I enjoy this, everyone needs to sleep sooner or later.’

‘Can I stay?’ Barry asked at once. Hartley blinked, surprised.

‘If you want to,’ he offered, but looked a little nervous.

There was an awkward dance as they got ready for bed. Barry put some of his clothes back on, while Hartley took some of his off, replacing his trousers with a silk pyjama set. He rummaged in a bathroom drawer for a spare toothbrush, while brushing his own teeth. Finding one, he passed it on to Barry, who watched him pad barefoot back to the living room. Barry wasn’t sure what to do with his toothbrush when it was done – whether to put it in the cup with Hartley’s toothbrush, leave it on the bathroom counter or think of a third, innovative solution. He left it on the counter, and found that Hartley had folded his jeans and left them on the sofa, and hung and put away his own suit and dress shirt. He was sitting on his bed, legs crossed, dragging his bottom lip through his teeth. Barry paused in the doorway, studying the drop of his shoulder, the way he looked out into the middle distance. He looked so small when he wasn’t grinning with bravado. After a moment, he glanced up, and a cautious smile spread on his face.

‘What you doing there?’ he asked, not moving from his corner of the bed.
'Just watching you,' Barry shrugged, embarrassed to have been caught staring. 'What were you thinking about?'

'Molecular degeneration of alien cells in a host body,' Hartley replied. 'And if you snore.'

'I've had no complaints. But I've always been asleep, so I can't promise anything.' Barry sat down on the bed, studied Hartley's face again. His eyes were mellow, almost shy, and his mouth twitched before looking away. Barry reached out and let his fingers run up Hartley's neck. He arched into the touch, closed his eyes. 'I didn't thank you for saving my life earlier. Thank you.'

'I guess we're even now,' Hartley replied as he shifted his head to allow Barry's fingers to run over the skin by his ear, through his hair, and down again. 'If I tried to kill you before, I mean.' He made a face. 'Sorry about that.'

'It's okay.'

It really shouldn't be okay, having almost been murdered, but it was more or less a weekly occurrence, and most of them weren't quite so sorry about it. Technically, Hartley wasn't even really an almost-murderer anymore. And he was quite an exquisite kisser. So it was okay. Barry leaned in to make sure that his kissing assessment had been correct. Then again, just to be certain.

Barry had been told that time travel could come with unintended side effects. As side effects go – Barry thought as Hartley perched on top of him and ran his fingers through his hairs – this was not half bad.

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