

The In-Between Moments: Darkest Before the Dawn

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: The In-Between Moments is a series that rewrites, elongates or adds scenes. Most of them take place in between major plot moments. Some of them slip easily into the canon, others roll right into an alternative universe. They're short, not connected, and in no particular order. In fact, they're usually plot bunnies that strike when I'm supposed to be working on the other epic stories I've got in the works.

Story Size: 5,265 words (29 kB as text)

In an increasingly alt-version of Fly Hard, the intrepid Planet team (and Luthor) end up spending a longer night trapped in the conference room.

The handcuff was biting into her wrist.

She'd spent too much of the evening twisting the uncomfortable cuff around in a frustrated, nervous tick once Lex had been shot. It had started to chafe about half an hour after that.

And that was an absolute eternity ago.

The opera had been slated to start at 7:30pm, and the curtain had long since dropped. After her pathetic escape attempts, the jerks holding them here had brought up some kind of equipment and were still demolishing Perry's office with it. But the last interaction with their keepers had been hours ago. It was coming up on 24 hours since most of them had slept, and they'd finally decided to try napping.

Perry was in the chair he'd been cuffed to, feet up on a second chair she'd moved into place for him. She'd draped unfolded news sheets over his legs in a vain attempt to keep him warm as he slept. If their armed handlers hadn't turned out the lights on their side of the whole floor, she'd be able to better see whether her make-shift blankets were helping her boss at all.

While Perry catnapped across the chairs, the rest of them were stretched out on the floor on the other side of the conference room table. Lex lay just inches to her left and Clark and Jack were cuffed together on her right.

She'd been excited enough to be in the belly of the beast on this heist when she thought it meant she'd get a solid story out of it. But with every hour that had passed, she became more uncertain that she'd end up surviving long enough to submit this.

Their options for escape were limited. Jimmy seemed lost in the bowels of the building. Lex had come around after he'd passed out from blood loss, but had been admittedly in and out. He hadn't even complained at all when she'd

moved them to the floor. Perry was even looking his age for once.

The police were absolutely nowhere in sight, and probably had no way of knowing what was happening anyway.

And, most frustratingly, Superman hadn't shown up.

It wasn't like him to ignore a call like this—especially from her. Maybe he'd been hurt? She wondered, for the three thousandth time, if the mythical kryptonite was making its way to Metropolis. Then again, he could just be occupied in another part of the world. One of the gunmen had turned off the televisions, so there was no way to tell if he was busy with another rescue across the globe and out of hearing range.

Wherever he was, she hoped that he was alright—and that he'd head back to Metropolis soon!

Maybe it was the lack of sleep getting to her, but she had a weird hunch that he was stuck in some kind of bad situation tonight, too.

Aside from being worried, she was also uncomfortable. Arching her back to stretch, she tried not to move the hand attached to the cuff. The cuff was linked to its mate, and that was attached to her own chosen mate for the evening.

But the longer she lay on the floor next to him, the more her skin crawled.

At first, she'd assumed the discomfort was from the situation.

...But this sort of high-intensity dangerous risk was her bread and butter.

Next, she'd blamed the environment. Her loveseats might be uncomfortable, but her mattress had a luscious feather topper beneath Egyptian cotton sheets. The floor couldn't compete. Plus, it had to be filthy.

...Still, she'd bunked in more uncomfortable places than this before during stake-outs, and had no trouble catching power naps there.

No. She'd long ago given up blaming fear, dirt or stiff muscles.

It was Lex.

Or, at least, it was her physical proximity to Lex.

She couldn't understand it. Lex was a perfectly appropriate escort, with a quick mind and a bent toward the philanthropic. On paper, he was the perfect man for her. She should be so lucky as to be sleeping next to him right now, in any situation.

Maybe it was that she'd never spent this much concentrated time with him before, especially this nearby in an enclosed space.

Or maybe it was just the handcuffs themselves, and she'd be reacting this way to anyone in his position.

Either way, she was currently weighing the options of either gnawing off her own arm or filching Jack's paperclip to free herself, buddy system be damned.

Adrenaline had carried her far tonight, but she needed at least some sleep if she expected to bargain or bash her way out of this one later.

She rolled her shoulders back, exhaled slowly and thought of Superman.

The fantasy usually excited or soothed her as she needed.

Tonight it left her cold.

Where was he? It had been hours. Surely he had to know they were in trouble. She'd called to him earlier, standing alone near the window. He hadn't replied. He had always come to her when she'd needed him before.

She squirmed, still trying not to move her wrist and risk catching Lex's attention.

She resolved to not think about anything at all and stared at the ceiling.

The squirmy, creeping feeling didn't abate, and she sighed in agitation.

Another few minutes went by.

Sleep seemed as hopeless as their current chance of escape.

She tried to listen to the others' slow breaths to help calm her. But she couldn't escape the skin-crawling sensation of being shackled to the man at her side.

She risked a glance at him.

He seemed unconscious, probably still hazy from the pain and exhausted from the injury. ...the injury he'd sustained rushing to get help to save her, to save them all.

That wasn't quite right, though, was it?

She had no idea that he'd intended to do anything but escape himself. With so many of their captors moving around outside the patterns they'd been establishing, it had been sort of a crapshoot on whether he'd make it to the door or not. She'd discerned that he'd slipped past the others in the room to make a break for the fire door. Lois was impulsive herself, but at least she'd clued Perry in on the heart-attack plan. On the other hand, Lex had named himself de facto leader, but then gone rogue at the first opportunity. He hadn't bothered to bring any of the others in on his plan.

Her eyes flicked back to the make-shift bandage over his shoulder. He'd made a sacrifice, to be sure. But he'd endangered them all, too. And now they were all still trapped, only with more annoyed, more wary guards.

Lois wasn't sure she agreed with his leadership style.

Or the results.

Forcing her cuffed hand to remain perfectly still, she closed her eyes in concentration, delicately rolled over to face away from him, bent her other arm to pillow her head and laid back down.

She stilled and waited, tense, to see if she'd woken him.

No sound or movement from her left.

Slowly, she relaxed her hand, feeling it come up an inch, fingers resting lightly on the ground.

Still no movement from him, now behind her.

Good.

Better, actually.

This was better. The crawling sensation diminished. As she tried to blot it out of her mind, she discovered that while she felt an imagined pressure at her back, she felt an almost tangible warmth in front of her.

It was the first thing that had soothed her all night, and she had to resist leaning into it.

Instead, she opened her eyes.

...and met Clark's.

He was closer than she'd realized and her movement had brought her closer still. He was laying on his side, too, facing her.

There was something deep but unreadable in his expression.

She had to resist leaning into that, too.

I'm so, so tired, she thought instead, thinking of the thing most immediately on the surface of her mind.

Her thoughts must have shown on her face because he gave her a sympathetic half-smile.

She let an answering smile creep across her own features.

It was one of the things she liked best about Clark—though she'd never tell him, never give him an inch because of it, and never admit it to anyone else.

He always got her.

He'd argue with her, sure.

But he rarely misunderstood.

She could walk into a room for the first time that day and he'd make her feel like he knew exactly what was going on in her head. He was always the first person she looked at when new information hit the newsroom, banking on him sharing her reaction, or at least being at the same level, even if he had a different take. And he was always ready to anticipate her when she did something that everyone else judged erratic or spontaneous.

Somehow, Clark could keep up.

They used words as play things between them, to joust, to tease, to paint the world they saw together in a story. But they needed precious few words to really communicate.

Not that she'd never admit it.

But she'd rely on it in the midst of this hopeless-looking night. She'd relied on it through nearly a year of investigations, and she would rely on it now.

Her eyes flicked toward the glass doors and the robbers beyond, and then back to his, which were attentively trained on hers. She didn't risk waking Lex by speaking out loud, but she knew Clark was listening for subtler clues, anyhow.

I'm worried, she tried to convey. She bit her lower lip.

His eyes changed, as if he were sad he couldn't do anything about that. He tilted his chin down with a steadying look and gave her another half smile.

She appreciated what she interpreted as reassurance, but it wasn't enough.

Someone should have been here to get us out of this by now, she thought furiously, feeling her eyebrows furrow. *Where is Superman when we need him?*

He moved his free hand up closer to their faces and laid it on the ground between them. His open palm was an obvious invitation.

He was offering her comfort.

She hesitated, and she saw him wait patiently. He didn't push her, didn't snarl with impatience, didn't take her hand and make the choice for her. He was just there. Just Clark.

And to tell the truth, she did want to take her partner's hand.

Superman hadn't shown up for her and her boyfriend was giving her the creeps. But Clark was warm, reliable and understanding. Like always, she realized. It wasn't an act that he'd been putting on all year. This was really who he was at heart.

She slowly unfolded her arm from beneath her head, and gently slid her palm into his.

They shared a look.

This is better, she thought.

Clark seemed to agree. His faint smile returned with a spark in his eye. He curled his hand securely around hers. It was the one part of her that was warm.

She felt the tight knot that had been sitting in her chest all night loosen and relax.

Tomorrow she'd write this all off as a response to the panic of the moment and the stress of being held by criminals with a nuclear device, and she'd make sure he knew it, too.

But tonight, for once, she'd let her guard down and indulge.

He'd helped her with one problem. Maybe he could help her with another. Even if he couldn't understand any of the specifics of what they were silently talking about, he was proving to be surprisingly adept at reading her emotions and making her feel better.

His eyebrows rose lightly, giving him a more open expression.

Even now, he knew her mind well enough to see it was moving on to another topic.

Or maybe her face really showed her thoughts. She'd have to work on her poker face around him after this. Especially when she was tired.

How to word this? Her mouth twisted in futility... Even in her own mind it was murky.

She half looked back at the man she was cuffed to, but thankfully still didn't detect any movement.

Assured that he was still unconscious, she focused fully back on Clark. For some reason, it was less scary to examine her own thoughts here, in the dark, staring into the eyes of her patient partner. She'd normally never tread into these turbulent waters alone, in the daylight.

I'm uncomfortable with Lex, she tried to communicate. She felt her spine twist in reaction to the millionaire so close behind her.

Surprise cut through her partner's eyes, and his brow furrowed. His eyes left hers for the first time to glance past her shoulder toward Luthor. Then he focused on her again, as if unsure that was reading her correctly.

The energy making her fidget moved further down her spine, and she twisted to try and stretch it away. She nodded as she held onto Clark's eyes.

I'm confused, she thought at him. *I feel trapped and I don't know why.*

He gave her a little shrug, as if he wasn't sure what he could do about that. She wasn't either. After all, it was her choice.

But he squeezed her hand in a reassuring way.

And it worked.

It made her feel safer.

Which, of course, made her mind commit to the confession it had begun.

How did things get this far? Now that she'd begun actually thinking this through, instead of just ambling along down the easiest path presented to her, she couldn't stop the flood of thoughts. *It was just an interview and now it's two nights a week on his arm! And at first, sure, it was interesting, even flattering! But why am I dating a man that makes me want to chew my own arm off?*

His brow had furrowed more deeply, and his thumb brushed against the back of her hand in response.

I don't think his life is the life I want, she thought miserably, feeling panic creep in. *I don't even like the opera.*

And Lex had been a liability tonight.

We couldn't even work in tandem when our lives depended on it. I doubt we could learn over laundry and breakfast dishes—and I bet Lex doesn't even do all the little normal things like laundry.

I wanted something extraordinary, she thought, holding tighter to Clark's hand. *And dating Lex should be extraordinary! But somehow, it's like the relationship is ordinary—or even worse than that. I never wanted my parents' marriage, and some part of this feels like that all over again.*

Memories of her parents' divorce triggered an old pain that reinforced the panic.

What if my life ends while I'm chained to this man? I don't want to just be remembered as the reporter who was dating Lex Luthor when she died.

She felt water begin to pool in her eyes.

I don't love him, she admitted. *I don't think he loves me. Oh, god, what if I die tonight without ever being in love?*

Lois blinked back the tears and suddenly stilled as an entirely different sensation overtook her mind.

She looked down at their entwined fingers, and her heart sped up.

Clark was kissing the back of her hand, his eyes still on hers.

She couldn't have looked away if she'd wanted to.

Her brain released its hold on what she'd been thinking about, letting her escape the mental spiral.

She felt her shoulders relax, as a more pleasant tension built.

He kissed her hand again, lightly this time, then pulled away, laying his head on his arm.

Clark studied her for a moment.

He slowly closed his eyes, then looked back at her. Rubbing his thumb soothingly over the back of her hand again, he slowly let his eyes drift shut, then looked back at her again.

He was telling her to sleep.

The trouble was, she didn't want to wake up to a bullet wound, or worse yet, slip away in her sleep after a shot to the head.

Especially if she were still cuffed to Luthor.

With a minute shake of her head, she cut her eyes pointedly back to the glass doors and the gunmen behind them.

He tugged on her hand and shook his head. Dipping his head to place his cheek against her hand, he positioned himself to look toward the doors. His eyes stayed there. He gently squeezed her hand again.

He would watch.

He would watch so that she could sleep.

She felt herself smile in gratitude. Here was her Reliable Clark again.

Moving imperceptibly closer to him, she brought her cheek against the back of his hand, and let her head rest there.

He tilted his head to look up at her, and smiled again. This time it was one of those megawatt smiles that melted her resistance and would have left her weak in the knees had she been standing. As it was, it gave her a giddy feeling. When she closed her eyes, she could still see it.

She felt him shift again to look back at the door, keeping his promise to act as a lookout.

Their faces were so close they were almost touching.

She could feel his hair entangling with hers, his soft breath against her arm.

She felt better than she had since before the gunmen had stormed the elevators, even since before Lex had picked her up for the opera tonight.

His smile lingered on her mind as her breathing slowed to keep pace with his.

She finally, finally dropped off to a soundless sleep.

* * *

The familiar scent of hot newsroom coffee permeated her senses.

Lois woke to find her palm pressed against the cold floor.

Her gaze flicked in the direction of her favorite morning stimulant and she found Clark leaning against the coffee station on the other side of the room with Jack. He focused on her as soon as her eyes sought his, but his face was tight, unhappiness written in his eyes.

What's wrong? she thought, letting the thought read on her face.

But their connection from the night before must have evaporated in the light of dawn because his expression only shuttered further.

Had their exchange in the night even been real?

It must have been, because he'd kept his promise to her. He was still angled toward the gunmen, watching them through the doors.

Or maybe he was just being cautious. It seemed like something that Clark would do.

It was then that she realized her head was lying on something soft, and there was a weight on her shoulder.

Her skin crawled there.

She tilted her head to look up and realized that she was resting on a human pillow.

"Lex," she said neutrally.

"Good morning, my dear," he replied.

She tried to get her bearings. The reality of the morning wasn't what she'd expected it to be.

"I hope you don't mind, but you looked uncomfortable on the floor. I thought you'd be more at ease this way."

Had he awoken to find her cuddled next to Clark, hands clasped? Or had Clark left her side before Luthor woke? She guessed that would be a fun surprise to learn later.

If there was a later.

She summoned a smile. "That was very thoughtful, Lex."

He looked smugly self-satisfied, and she felt the tightness in her chest return.

She fought her impulses and forced herself not to look at Clark Kent.

Instead, she sat up, dislodging the possessive grip that had been agitating her shoulder. "Is your wound any better this morning?" She managed to create some distance between them while sitting up, and reached out for a better look at his wound.

But Lex captured her hand before she could get near it. "Better than last night," he said heroically, "but still sore."

"Would you like some coffee?" she asked, freeing her hand on the premise of trying to stretch.

She could practically feel Clark tense across the room at her suggestion, but had no excuse to turn around and look to see if she was right.

"Is it drinkable?"

Lex's attempt at humor rolled down her spine. "It's caffeine," she said, careful to keep her voice even. "Even if it's not great, it's worth it." She rocked forward to get her feet under her. "Come on, I'll help you up."

Working around the handcuffs, they awkwardly managed to get Lex standing, and made their way across the conference room. She glanced over at Perry, who was staring out the window with a steaming cup of coffee in his hand. There was a soft expression in his eyes, and she wondered if he was thinking about Alice.

Her fear from last night flashed across her mind, and she wondered again if she'd ever find love like that, a love that would endure decades.

In the meantime, Clark had moved to Jack's other side to make space for her at the coffee machine.

She poured two cups, topping hers off with two packets of artificial sweetener and the non-fat powdered creamer. She reached for the second cup and paused.

"How do you take your coffee?" she asked the man beside her.

"I think black is safest," he said, eyeing her cup.

She felt the urge to grit her teeth as she poured. Was Lex in a mood already this morning, or had she never noticed his high-handed snobbery before? She reminded herself that he

was in pain, and it probably wouldn't improve his mood if she dumped the hot coffee over his head.

Handing him the cup, she said, "Black it is."

He toasted her, but hesitated before taking a drink.

She turned away to pick up her own cup so that she didn't have to see his reaction to the taste. Taking a sip, she found it didn't steady her. It was off somehow, too, like the rest of her usual touchstones today. That's what she got for not making her own coffee for a year, she supposed. She poured in a touch more of the powdered creamer and stirred.

Two loud bangs suddenly boomed from beyond their conference room.

Everyone else looked out the doors. She looked immediately to Clark instead.

"Get down!" he said in a commanding voice.

She froze for a second, and the next thing she knew, Clark was pulling her down, his hand moving over her eyes.

She saw a bright light illuminate beyond his hand, followed by another flash. There was a cacophony coming from the bullpen. Gun fire sounded. She tried to move, but Clark held her low.

"Cover your mouths!" he said. "The smoke will come in any second! Close your eyes and pull your shirts up over your noses!"

The door swung open only seconds later, and a loud voice called out, "Nobody move!"

She smelled something sharp, and Lex, who only a foot from her but closest to the open door, began to cough.

"Officer, we're the hostages!" Clark was calling out, his free hand still pressing her to the safety of the ground. "We're handcuffed together and we're unarmed."

She chanced a glance up, the smoke stinging her eyes.

Three men in S.W.A.T. vests and gas masks were advancing into the room, weapons drawn.

She sighed in relief into her sleeve.

The cavalry had arrived.

* * *

Shortly thereafter, she was standing on the pavement in front of the Planet. She'd been evacuated out of the newsroom with the others and had given her statement to one of the waiting officers. Now she was staring into the middle distance as people milled around her. Her mind was catching up with the past 12 hours.

Usually, when her life was threatened, her world narrowed down to the next action, whether it was looking for

an opportunity to escape or talking her way out. She was a person of action. But last night had been about waiting to see what her captives would choose to do with her and the people closest to her.

As a result, she'd had too much time to think.

She subconsciously fingered the bandage that covered her chaffed wrist. Last night had forced her to reassess where her life was headed. It was time to stop being swept down the path of least resistance, and time to start forging the path that she wanted most for herself.

What did she really want in her life?

What did she want to look back on in sixty years?

The job is right, she assessed. It might be dangerous, but it was exciting and challenging, too. She was good at it, and it was a way for her to really make a difference in the world. It was easy to get caught up in the Metropolis drama, though, and she wished she traveled more. She resolved to finally book that trip to Tahiti.

The friends were right, too, she knew, even if Jimmy had ended up hopelessly trapped in the air ducts for hours before getting out and getting help.

Her partner was wrong.

She couldn't afford to keep frittering away her nights on elite amusements that didn't even really appeal to her. Sometimes, particularly at a dull ballet or torpid cocktail hour, she'd glibly thought that she'd be happier parked in front of the television with cold pizza and an action movie she'd already seen. Now, she realized that was probably true.

She also realized that no matter how fairy-tale like the opening night of the opera was, she wasn't going to find true love there.

Her sister Lucy truly believed that there was a soul mate for everyone. Maybe it was time she concentrated on finding hers.

"Lois?" A voice broke through her musings.

Startled, she turned to see the object of her musing standing in front of her, already in a make-shift sling and fresh bandage. "Lex! Don't sneak up on a girl who's just been held hostage!"

"That was the third time I'd called your name," he said, his voice balancing annoyance and bemusement. "But I can understand that you might be out of sorts after such an ordeal."

"Right," she agreed, not sure how to continue the conversation.

He'd clearly expected more, but when she didn't continue, he did. "Let me take you to dinner tomorrow night. We can relax, spend the evening in a romantic atmosphere. No heists, no guns, no newsroom. I know the perfect place. The best Italian food you've ever tasted."

She doubted that. It didn't seem like take-away pizza would meet Lex's standards. And she could guess what she'd think of the kind of Italian that appealed to his palette.

She shook her head slowly. "I don't know. I think I need to take some time to think about things."

"To think about things?" he parroted. She saw the facade of concern, but could also now make out the incredulity beneath it.

"Yes," she said, trying to be gentle in spite of wanting to smack him. "Last night put some things into perspective. I'm not really sure I know what I want in my life. That's not fair to either of us. But spending the night thinking I was going to die made me feel like I need to figure it out."

He gave her a look that she could now only interpret as patronizing.

"You know, my dear, your friend didn't show up last night."

Her mind sputtered. Her friend had been next to her all night, holding her hand. He'd been the only thing to soothe her during—

Then the penny dropped.

Lex was talking about Superman.

"Lex," she said truthfully, "This isn't about him."

"Isn't it?" he asked in a tone that bordered on pedantic. His hand moved over his wounded shoulder. "I know that the rest of us are only mere mortals, but even vulnerable, we still try to protect you."

She balked. Was he trying to... to use his injury to manipulate her? Last night she couldn't even decide whether he'd send help back for them if he'd made it out! And now he was suggesting the injury was because of her? All morning, she'd been telling herself to cut him slack because he was in pain, but now her temper snapped. That... that arrogant, jerk-faced—

Poker face, she told herself firmly.

She was getting mad. If Clark could practically read her thoughts in the darkness, she would have to consciously shield her emotions from Lex now that they were standing in the early dawn light.

"Actually, after last night, I'm more convinced than ever that Superman isn't anything more personal to me than a

story. I'll always think of him as a hero, and he'll always have my support, but he's a trustworthy colleague, at best."

The low chatter that had been just out of hearing behind her had suddenly dropped out entirely. She glanced back to see Jack standing beside Clark, tugging on his sleeve to get his attention.

"Really?" Lex asked with unveiled skepticism.

"Really," she replied emphatically.

"Well, you'll have to forgive me, my dear, but with your history, you can understand why I might have a hard time believing that, hmm?"

That stung. And on top of the insult, he wasn't listening to what she was really saying. Honestly, how long had he been patronizing her without her seeing it?

"I'm not going to stand here and convince you of it," she said as reasonably as she could. She shrugged. "You'll just have to see it for yourself."

One of the paramedics came up to them then, ready to settle Lex into the ambulance gurney for the ride to the hospital.

The millionaire nodded to the man and turned back to her.

"Then I look forward to seeing what the future brings." He inclined his head. "Lois," he said in parting.

"Goodbye, Lex."

She watched as they buckled him into the gurney and closed the doors. The ambulance drove off.

Well, she thought, *as break-ups go, that could have been worse.*

Closing her eyes, she exhaled.

"Long night," came a gentle conversational volley from beside her.

She leaned sideways until she bumped his arm, and then steadied herself by resting her weight against him. "Long night," she agreed.

"Can I get you a cab home?" he offered, his voice softer.

She snorted. "I just lived through a nuclear threat as a hostage. I'm not giving one of the Metropolis cabbies a chance at killing me in the same day. I'll run out of luck."

He chuckled, his arm coming around her shoulders as she leaned against him. "Walk you home, then?"

She fought a yawn, but couldn't let her exhaustion overtake her yet. "We've got to write this up. Perry will kill us if we get scooped on a story in our own newsroom."

"Well, then, let me buy you breakfast first."

She leaned away to stand on her own and opened her mouth to agree, but he must have mistook her intent because he rushed on, “We can draft on paper while we eat, then come back and I’ll type it in. Maybe you can catch a nap before we do our final review.”

Lois looked up at him in a considering way. She didn’t miss that he’d immediately pivoted the plan to put her needs first. He was even willing to sacrifice his own sleep so she could rest.

She chose her words next purposefully.

“You’ve got a date,” she said, watching a happy light enter his eyes. It reflected the rising sun in front of them. “But let’s get breakfast first, and then we’ll write this up together back at the newsroom. Hopefully they’ll let us in again by then.”

He wasn’t a millionaire. He hadn’t been nobly injured in a ruse to get help. He hadn’t gotten them out last night.

But he had gotten her through it.

They’d been stronger together than they had apart. To her, that seemed extraordinary.

He held out his arm to her.

It turned out that she wouldn’t have to deny their silent exchange during the night. He seemed content not to push her about the intimacy she’d allowed, instead offering the reliable chivalry that she’d started to believe in again—because of him. They’d both let her confessions stay behind them in the dark, and she’d make sure they focused instead on what the light of the new day would bring.

She slid her arm into his, pulling herself close to him, and she felt her heart speed up when he smiled earnestly at her in response.

Better, she thought again.

Together, they walked toward the sunrise.

The End