

In-Between Moments: Signs

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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 ongoing canon, while others roll right into an alternative universe. They're all one-shots, usually plot bunnies that strike when I'm supposed to be working on something else. They're short, not connected, and in no particular order – and they usually have happy little endings.

Story Size: 4,941 words (28 kB as text)

Set in the space between Seasons 1 and 2, Lois is floundering after her near-miss of a wedding. Clark's been doing his best to keep her upright, but she's not moving on. Superman swoops in to try and give her a little boost.

She was having the dream again.

It happened so regularly that she was always aware it was a dream. ...Even if she could never make it stop.

Tightly corseted into her beaded, lace, pure white wedding dress, she stood before a full-length mirror, sobbing. At least she knew why this time. It wasn't because the veil was gaudy or her lipstick was all wrong – though the veil was gaudy and she hated this shade of lipstick.

It was because she was marrying the wrong man. Lois Lane had never felt any sanctity about money, especially amounts in the embarrassing excess that Lex had. Yet, that was the very life she'd contracted herself to. She'd let go of the likelihood of finding true love during college, a decision that was reinforced only a year into her job at the Planet. Since then, the only thing she'd really invested in was her career. She'd thrown herself into it, mostly content for that to be the focus of her life. But everything she'd spent years working for was all gone now, never to be rebuilt.

How had her life been so spectacularly turned upside down?

Stringed instruments had started to play somewhere outside her suite.

She looked down to see that a white bouquet that had materialized in her hands. The roses were fresh and pristine, but felt somehow lifeless to her. She flinched as one of them pricked her, her finger going to her mouth to try and soothe the pain.

The music was suddenly louder and she easily made out the opening strains of *Here Comes the Bride*. When she looked up again, she'd found that she'd been transported to the hallway outside the ceremony, and a pair of thick wooden doors was creaking open before her to reveal a hall filled with people.

Her panic increased the further they opened.

Lois knew what came next and wished the dream would just end here for once. But she couldn't stop it now any more than she'd been able to in real life. She felt a deep pang from that thought even within the dreamscape.

Even so... maybe she could change it enough to avoid reliving this.

She picked up her heavy, appliquéd skirts, ready to run in the opposite direction, when something made her glance down the aisle.

This time, inexplicably, Clark was standing there.

The dream panic immediately waned.

Clark was waiting for her at the end of the aisle, hair uncharacteristically slicked back, boutonniere in his lapel, and a look in his eyes that rolled over her and warmed her to her toes.

Acting on instinct, she smoothed her skirts and gripped the thorn-less, ribboned roses in her hand, starting her measured processional toward him.

Dream logic kicked in.

Marrying Clark was much better than marrying Lex. It made all the sense in the world to have the wedding this way. She'd marry Clark, escape the trap that Lex had set, and after the ceremony she and her new husband would sort out whatever was happening. Because they were a team. And she could always count on Clark.

Looking up at him now, still patiently waiting, she felt an earnest smile steal across her face. His smile answered hers, and she felt, for the first time, as if things might turn out alright after all. Her steps toward him became more confident.

She saw her friends in their seats as she passed their rows. Jimmy gave her a wide grin and a big thumbs up. Perry smiled mistily, and patted his chest over his heart before taking Alice's hand. Clark's parents were in the front row and looked the proudest and happiest she'd ever seen them.

In her heels and wide skirt, she carefully navigated the three steps up to the raised dais where Clark was waiting, and turned to her soon-to-be-husband with a smile.

He wasn't there.

The organ music had faded away.

"Clark?" she called out, looking past where he'd just stood.

He wasn't anywhere.

He'd left her.

A heavy panic invaded the dream.

Even the air felt frantic.

In the enclosing silence, there was a sudden sonic boom overhead. If Superman had been nearby, he'd left now, too.

She looked out into the crowd, but her friends were gone, the chairs all empty.

Her bouquet wasn't even in her hands anymore, and her veil had incomprehensibly disappeared from her hair, leaving her unexpectedly vulnerable.

Everyone had abandoned her.

"Clark!" she called again, louder this time. He always responded when she called. She couldn't understand why he wasn't coming to help her. She needed him!

A loud knock reverberated through the enormous hall, which felt even larger with no one else in it. She spun to look back down the aisle but the cathedral-esque wooden doors she'd come through were still open. No one could be knocking on them.

The knocking sound came again, louder, echoing through the cavernous space.

She whipped around, looking behind her, and then into every corner of the empty room.

Her panic escalated.

There was no one there.

But the knocking continued on.

She clutched her skirts, ready to run again, but no longer sure from what.

"Clark!" she yelled, desperate.

She woke up sweating, gripping the sheets, mumbling his name.

She blinked herself more awake.

...And discovered that she was alone, again — *still*, she corrected — in her apartment, in bed. She wasn't at her wedding at all. That had been weeks — no, *months* — ago now.

She closed her eyes again and rolled over, feeling her breathing return to normal, even if an irrepressible tightness still gripped her chest. Usually, Lois was the type of person that would spring into the new day as soon as her alarm went off. But it had been a while since she'd set an alarm. With nowhere to go, no job to motivate her, and no obligations left, she found herself sleeping later every day. It seemed like more and more of a Sisyphean task to get out of bed each morning, and she'd begun to spend the better part of the day laying there until her growling stomach finally drove her from the bed.

Well, she wasn't hungry now, she decided willfully, yawning. She buried her face more deeply into her sympathetic pillow, blocking out the rest of the world.

A sharp knocking interrupted her purposeful descent back into blissful unconsciousness.

Her eyes opened wide. The knocking from her dream?

No, that was silly, of course. This knocking had probably just infiltrated her dream as it woke her.

Well, whoever it was would come back if they really wanted something.

Although...

It didn't sound like the knocking was coming from her front door. That had a thicker, more reverberant echo to it. This sound had a different pitch to it.

Blearily, she sat up, halfway between annoyed and curious at the sound invading her plan to marathon nap her way through the day, and reached for the robe hanging from her bed post. Throwing it over her shoulders, she made her way past her bedroom door and out into the main room, trying to isolate the new noise.

The sound wasn't coming from her door at all, she realized quickly.

It was coming from her window.

The realization froze her.

What was *he* doing here? It had been weeks. No — *months*, she reminded herself. She didn't want to see him. She'd had enough embarrassment for one lifetime, and her

last interaction with *him* had been the start of a downhill slide for her entire life.

Still... he'd know she was in here, right? She couldn't exactly hide from a man who was probably listening to her breathe right now, or, worse, watching her stand in frozen hesitation.

She intentionally tied her robe belt spitefully tight. Whether he could see through the robe or not, she'd be better armored this time. She trudged begrudgingly over to the window, and moved the curtain aside.

His head came up and their eyes met.

She absolutely forced her heart not to skip the beat it usually did.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she parroted.

Her voice must have betrayed the civility she'd been aiming for because his expression fell a bit.

"May I come in?" he asked, tilting his head at the window that separated them.

She paused, but, unable to quickly come up with a reason not to allow the superhero entrance, she shrugged and undid the window latch, lightly cracking it open and stepping back. If he wanted to come in, he could open the windows himself.

Looking down, she subtly checked that her robe was still securely tied, and subconsciously tucked her hair behind her ear.

She heard the window creak all the way open and stuffed her hands into her pockets so that she wouldn't give into the urge to keep fidgeting.

"What's up?" she asked the floor, hoping to cut to the chase and get this meeting over with.

"I have something I want to show you."

She cocked her head. "At 7am?"

"I didn't get to pick the time it's happening," he replied, apology tinged his words.

She bit her lower lip, considering. This couldn't be for a story, since there was no newspaper. That meant this visit was *personal*. She had to stop herself from sighing out loud. Nothing personal had worked out in her life, as was evidenced by the total seclusion she'd found herself in since she'd lost the Planet, and then, just as swiftly, her friends, fiancé and the LNN gig. She felt the pique of curiosity behind the dull haze that accompanied her recent mornings, but tamped it down. She wasn't really inclined to go with him after their last humiliating encounter. Besides, he was

probably just setting her up to make another crack about her sleeping attire.

"I'm not sure that I have time today," she lied, looking down at a wrist that didn't have a watch on it.

His eyes traveled from her naked wrist back to meet her eyes.

"It won't take long," he assured her.

She didn't reply.

"I promise," he urged gently.

His voice lulled her into a sense of safety, the way it always did.

But he wasn't her safe place anymore.

All the more reason to get this over with.

"Fine," she acquiesced, folding her arms. "Show me."

He held out his hand.

She looked at it expectantly and then back at him.

He cleared his throat. "It's across town. I can fly us there."

Her muscles clenched involuntarily. Flying with Superman wasn't what she'd signed up for today.

She glanced down at her robe pointedly, holding out her arms to the side to highlight her sleep apparel. "I'm not exactly dressed for a field trip," she scoffed petulantly, "Even if the other people out there *can't* see through my robe, lead-lined or not."

When she looked back up at him, a flash of some fleeting emotion was fleeing the depths of his eyes, and... was that the merest hint of a blush?

Good, she thought with spite.

"I promise to keep us out of sight," he said in a voice that didn't have the usual confidence.

"I don't have even a minute to change?" she asked, not willing to let this go, and needing to score a win over him for reasons she couldn't quite harness.

"Well—" he looked away from her, high and toward the north side of the city, and she got the feeling that he was looking for something specific. "It's about to start, so maybe just a minute?"

"I'll be a minute, then," she muttered, doing a swift about face. She headed to her hall closet and grabbed a trench coat, then moved back to her bedroom, swiping her favorite running shoes out of the closet on the way to her bathroom, where she dropped her armload on the floor and stepped over it to the sink. Taking a mouthful of mouthwash

straight from the bottle, she sat on the closed toilet lid and shoved her feet into her sneakers. She stood, untying her robe belt while spitting into the sink. Pushing the robe back off her shoulders, she let it fall to the ground and grabbed her trench, knotting the belt as she made her way back out toward her waiting escort.

She grabbed a scrunchie off the dresser as she passed it, catching a look at herself in the dresser. Her skin looked sallow and sullen, and something about her eyes looked hollow. No make-up and near depression was a better look than some of the disguises she'd worn – not to mention that frothy white puff of a wedding dress Lex had insisted she pick. Not that it could have mattered at all to the blue spandex-clad man she was approaching what she looked like, anyway. He'd made that perfectly clear. She tied her hair back messily with malice.

“Ready?” He asked as she reappeared.

She nodded and there was a brief awkward moment as she hesitated, realizing she'd have to spend the next few minutes cradled in his arms.

He seemed to come to the same realization at the exact same time, running a nervous hand over his hair in a gesture that didn't fit but still somehow seemed familiar.

She felt her head tilt as her mind chased a memory of that gesture. Had he done that when he'd dropped her off after saving the space shuttle? Or at their interview afterward? Why was she picturing him in the newsroom?

She felt a guilty jolt at the thought of the newsroom. Another piece of her life that was decimated, and her own fault, too.

“We should...” his gesture was confused, one hand pointing to the window and the other vaguely suggesting the space between them.

She realized she'd stopped a few feet from him, just staring.

“Oh. Right.” Letting her train of thought go, she moved toward him.

She reached out to put her arm around his left shoulder just as he dipped to pick her up, and they fumbled. He drew away, looking sheepish, and she felt something unnamed in her chest sink further.

“I guess it's been a while.”

“I guess so,” she agreed, surprised at the flatness in her own tone.

He held out a hand to guide her, and for once she let him take the lead. He scooped her up, successfully this time, and a heartbeat later they were airborne.

Flying with him wasn't the thrill it used to be.

It was the latest incident in a trending string of disappointments since the almost-wedding.

She wasn't lovelorn over Lex. That part she'd eventually figured out. But she was heartbroken over every single other piece in her life. Her friends had been investigating her fiancé and hadn't told her. They may have saved her life, but now it seemed that they'd mostly abandoned her to live out the rest of it on her own. Even her instincts as a reporter had fled her. The betrayal of her own good sense had broken her heart.

Not to mention all the tension between her and the man currently flying her silently toward the city center. She hadn't seen Superman once after he'd rejected her. Until now. And they hadn't had the most auspicious start today.

Their current awkwardness made her think of Clark. She'd seen him over the last few weeks, but things had been different since she'd rejected him. In the days after the wedding, he'd seemed so listless that she'd wondered if he was sick. After the first couple of weeks, it had gotten better, but it wasn't the same. *They* weren't the same.

What a mess she'd made of her life in under 8 hours – rejecting Clark, blindsiding Superman and accepting Lex.

Until that awful day, she'd considered Superman and Clark two of her closest friends. But it felt like they'd both been through with her once she decided that she didn't want to fit into the molds that each had envisioned for her.

She'd lost them both in the same day.

And she still hadn't recovered from it.

In fact, the strain of both of them abandoning her had sent her into an emotional tailspin that all but guaranteed that she wouldn't right herself. She nearly hadn't until it was too late.

She was glad she'd said 'no' to Lex when it mattered.

But it niggled at her that she'd given Clark that same answer, with far less thought. She couldn't name why. Maybe she should have given her best friend more consideration.

Maybe she still should.

He'd been around this summer. He'd stopped by with pizza and rented movies. On Sundays, he brought over the New York Times crossword puzzle. He'd cajoled her out of the house, pushed her to keep up with the national news, and even coerced her into a dinner with his folks once when they were in town. He'd single-handedly kept her moving during the worst time of her life.

But there was something between them that hadn't been there ever before.

A cold wall.

But it was impossible to breach and just as hard to pinpoint.

He was still friendly, but his words were more carefully considered.

He was still affectionate, but he barely touched her anymore.

He was still himself, but he was subtly, quietly guarded.

And that might have broken her heart most of all. She'd wounded him. And seeing the effect she'd had on him — on sweet, open, optimistic, heart-on-his-sleeve Clark — broke her, in turn, every time she saw the evidence of it.

Despite what she suspected was his best attempt, there was plenty of evidence.

Maybe that wall was why he hadn't been able to bring her out of this heavy, stinging, exhausting depression.

She felt tired.

Maybe she'd take a nap after whatever super scavenger hunt her pilot had planned.

Meanwhile, they were landing on a roof not too far from the old skeleton of the Planet. She managed to step out of his embrace with more success than she'd had stepping into it. ...which just figured. She was better at parting with people than drawing them close. The dark comedy of it pulled at her innards in a sinking way and she refocused to look around.

In front of them was the tallest building in the city.

The morning air wasn't cold, but she put her arms around herself anyway, drawing her long jacket closer and dropping her eyes to her sneakered feet. The tightness in her chest gripped her harder.

"Why did you bring me here?" she asked, knowing she was physically shrinking away from the building before them.

The building she had nearly lived in. The building that she was nearly married in. The building that was nearly her gilded and everlasting cage.

"I wanted you to see this."

"I've seen it." She took another involuntary step backwards, eyes skittering up to his.

The expression she found there was a sad one, but he insisted, "I don't think you've seen *this*."

He gestured back to the building.

Whatever he'd brought her out here for had obviously warranted his attention. That alone captured her curiosity.

But she couldn't fight the raging disquiet swirling through her.

"I don't want to be here."

She took another sidestep back, placing him between herself and the building.

He kept his eyes on her, but didn't move. "Please, Lois, just one look?"

Obviously, he wasn't going to let this go, if he wasn't already scooping her up for the flight home, in spite of her visible and increasing level of discomfort.

Steeling herself, she glanced quickly back at the building again, intent to look away as fast as possible, hopefully fulfilling his request enough to convince him to take her home.

But something caught her eye.

There was a large crane standing beside the building. A bevy of workers in bright yellow hardhats were on the roof, milling around as the tower crane came to life and the jib turned toward them.

There was something soothing about the slow, steady path of the crane.

A hook block hung from its end, and when the hoist was over the front section of the roof, the hook started to lower slowly.

Once it was down, the construction crew swarmed over it, attaching cables.

Her mind pieced it together.

The Luthor Corp sign was being taken down.

The building might still be standing, but the House of Luthor had truly fallen.

Lex didn't live there anymore.

He didn't live anywhere.

As if reading her thoughts, Superman chose that moment to speak.

"He didn't win, Lois."

Her head turned sharply toward him.

"He's gone," the hero continued. "Whatever he did, whatever he said, whatever he put out into the world — none of it matters anymore."

Her temper erupted, hotter than she anticipated.

"How can you say that?" she demanded angrily. "Everything he did! All the lives he ruined! They all counted. And they're all still ruined now."

He looked sad again.

“He did a lot of bad things to a lot of good people,” he agreed. “But he didn’t ruin your life.”

She felt the hot tears gather, obscuring her vision.

“You’re right!” she all but shouted at him. “I did that myself!”

“You didn’t,” he said softly.

“I did! I picked this! I picked him! I could have picked C —“ she swallowed that thought before she could say it out loud, before she could breathe it into the world and make it real. “I did,” she said emphatically again.

“He fooled you, Lois,” Superman said slowly. Then he shrugged. “He fooled everyone.”

“He didn’t fool *everyone!*” she bit out, thinking of Clark again, angry at him for seeing what she couldn’t, and angry at herself for not listening to him. “He didn’t fool —“ She stopped herself from saying her partner’s name, and met Superman’s eyes. “He didn’t fool you.”

“I can see through walls,” he said apologetically. “It’s harder to fool me.”

She rolled her eyes in rejection of his glib simplicity.

And she wondered what Clark’s excuse would be, to offset her shortcoming?

But she didn’t say that out loud, either.

“I made a life off of not being fooled, of never being taken in. And when it mattered most, I missed it! I gambled my career and my friends and my *best* friend on not being fooled. I put all of it, all of *them* in danger. And I can’t ever go back to any of it now.”

His eyebrows knit together. “Lois, is that what you’re doing?”

“What?”

“Are you... punishing yourself for not seeing through Luthor?”

She felt her cheeks flame as her heart rate rose erratically.

She hadn’t thought of it like that.

...But it wasn’t far off.

Lex had eradicated the Planet. He’d destroyed her friends’ livelihoods. Jimmy had been living on the street because of her. Perry had retired early into a life that he didn’t want. Clark was... Clark was broken — and she knew that with more certainty than anyone, since she’d made it her penance to witness it every time he offered to stop by. And she could have stopped it all.

She was the best reporter at the best paper in the best city in the world. And she’d been so focused on arguing with Clark — *who’d been right all along*, she thought furiously — that she’d—

“Oh, Lois...” his voice was so soft that she almost missed it.

It was so empathetic.

It was so gentle.

And it stung like hell.

“I don’t need your pity,” she hissed.

“You’re wrong.”

Her eyebrows hit her hairline. “You seriously think I need your pity?”

He sighed and took a step closer, his posture relaxing out of his usual stoic pose. “Look at that building.”

“I get the metaphor,” she said stubbornly, looking away.

But he gestured insistently toward the building again. “No, really, Lois. Look at it.”

Crossing her arms, she turned toward it with a huff. The hook block had been lifted directly above the sign now, and she could see the workers adjusting the loose cables.

“That is the tallest building in Metropolis. State of the art. Luxurious. Luthor had it built from the ground up. Well, from the creepy underground bunker up.” She flicked him a surprised look for knowing about the bunker before remembering that, as he’d just pointed out, he could see through walls. He gently gestured back to the building and she trained her eyes on it again.

“That building is the biggest in the city, and only one of his many, many properties. He had a nearly infinite bankroll. He bribed people to tell the story he needed and silenced the ones who wouldn’t spread his lies. His influence was in every major public department in Metropolis. He was reshaping the city, physically, politically and socially. He made you see what he wanted you to see. He had smokescreens in every sphere. With that kind of endless resource, how could you have seen through him?”

She felt her tense shoulders drop an inch.

“Unless you can see through walls now, too?”

Knowing she was supposed to laugh at that, she gave him a dry look.

But he caught her glance and held it.

“Luthor *did* ruin lives. But not *yours*. Don’t let him haunt you. You’re stronger than that, Lois. Don’t let him win now.”

The air went out of her chest.

His words reverberated through her.

Looking out over the vista before her, she saw the crane was moving again. The sign had been lifted clear of the building, leaving it free and ready for whatever it would become next. The jib was slowly turning again, obscuring the sign as it crossed her line of sight and into the rays of the newly risen sun.

She took a new breath in.

And something in her felt light again.

Clark had been keeping her afloat all summer, but even with his support she hadn't been able to shake off the trauma of Luthor's trap. She'd needed this closure to recover — both the confirmation that Lex was well and truly gone, and the resuscitation of this fractured friendship that she'd broken on the day of so many miserable mistakes. She felt better. Released. Open to that glimmer of hope on the horizon line.

Maybe she wouldn't spend the day aiming for unconsciousness. Maybe today she'd be the one to pick up pizza and movies. And maybe one day soon she would be able to help close Clark's wound, as Superman had healed hers.

She turned toward her hero. "Thank you," she said, her voice cracking. She tried again, gesturing to the building. "For this. This was—" She swallowed thickly. "Thank you."

He nodded, a small smile blooming across his mouth.

"Thank you for making the time today," he said, calling back to their earlier conversation. He offered a hand. "Would you like me to take you home now?"

She started to nod, but her impulses got the best of her. "Just one more thing?"

"What's that?"

Taking two steps closer to him, she pulled him into a hug, tucking her face into his neck. She felt his surprise, but his arms came around her instantly. He relaxed against her a fraction, and she felt his cheek come to rest on her temple.

They stayed that way for a long moment.

Then she pulled back, but not wholly out of his embrace. "And I'm sorry. I never should have asked you to come over that night. Lex had proposed and the Planet was gone and I'd let Clark down and I just felt so lost that day. I shouldn't have pushed you to—" She felt the babbling take hold and stopped herself before she sunk both of them beneath the waters of a tempest two months old. She took a breath, and said, "I just shouldn't have."

He shook his head against her words, his hands tightening their gentle grip on her own arms into something closer to an embrace. "No, I was the one who was out of line that night," His was voice just as pleading as hers had been. "You don't have to—"

"I do," she interrupted firmly. "You're a good friend, and you didn't deserve that."

There was a tentative light in his eyes.

"Still friends, then?"

She nodded, feeling the awkwardness drop away from them, feeling a wall come down. "Still friends always," she said, reassuring them both.

She realized that he wasn't in one of his usual stoic and polite poses. He was relaxed and engaged. They were standing so close that she could feel him breathe. The warmth from his hands was making her skin tingle. His embrace suddenly didn't seem so awkward. In fact, it felt as if she were right where she was meant to be.

Her heart skipped in a familiar pattern.

A familiar grin was tugging at his mouth again.

"How would you like to take the scenic route back?"

"I'd love to," she said, for the first time in months not having to fabricate enthusiasm.

And this time when she jumped into his arms, he caught her with a seamless motion, twisting in tandem with her movement to secure her against his chest and gain altitude, never letting gravity catch hold of her as they rocketed upward together, chasing the sunbeams that glinted and peeked out from behind the clouds.

The wind carried her peals of laughter all the way back to the now unnamed tower.

Its future was unknown again, open to possibility.

And so was hers.