

# Behind Every (Super) Man...

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Summary: They say that behind every great man, there is an even greater woman. That is doubly true for the Man of Steel.

Disclaimer: I own nothing. I make nothing. All characters, plot points, and recognizable dialogue belong to DC comics, Warner Brothers, December 3rd Productions and anyone else with a stake in the Superman Franchise. I'm just playing with my toys again.

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WARNING: This is NOT a happy tale. It contains a "rescue gone wrong," which some readers may find disturbing. Reader discretion is advised.

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It's happened again. No matter how hard I've tried, no matter how fast I've been, it hasn't been enough. I wasn't here. I wasn't able to save these innocent lives. I wasn't here to prevent the tragedy that has unfolded. And I feel the eyes on me, hear the unvoiced questions of the masses. It torments me.

*Where were you when we needed you? How could you let this happen? Why? Why? Why?*

I have no answers for them. I can't argue with their grief, can't force myself to explain. It wouldn't do any good anyway. It wouldn't be a soothing balm on their wounds. It wouldn't have the power to bring back their loved ones.

It rips my heart to shreds, destroys my emotions, and threatens to tear down all my strength. I can't let that happen. Not here. Not now. Not in the public eye. But soon. Very soon. Behind closed doors, I will finally let the mask of Superman crumble into dry dust, to be swept away like sand in the wind. Only then will I be able to become Clark once more. Only then will I be able to grieve. Only then will I allow myself to stop being an invulnerable alien and become a vulnerable human man again.

But not yet. I still have work to do here, and to do that, I must remain as Superman. I must embody all his strength, master my emotions, and maintain the grim mask that gives away so little of what I actually feel.

I pick through the remains of the burnt-out shell of what was once a building, now gutted, like me. And not just any building. Happy Faces Daycare, right in the very heart of Metropolis. My home. The city I have sworn to protect. The city that has almost always welcomed me with open arms. The city that has honored me with special recognition and impromptu holidays in my name. The city I've let down today.

I find a few more places where embers still smolder, and I quickly extinguish them. At my side, some of the city's finest firefighters pick through the debris. One man holds the body of a limp, lifeless child in his arms, and gently carries the body outside. I can't bear to look, not even to see if he has a boy or girl in his arms. I turn my head away, shame burning my soul. Half a minute later, I hear the agonized shriek of the bereaved mother, even without my super-hearing.

I keep moving, x-raying as I go, looking for any more bodies, either living or dead. I stop short as I find one. Less than half a minute later, I've uncovered the body of a baby boy, maybe five or six months old. He's not breathing, and is terribly, horribly burnt. There is no hope of bringing him back; even burnt as he is, his body has already gone cold, the warmth leaching out of his skin as surely as his life did. I hang my head in grief, shoving aside the water that pools in my eyes.

The boy is...was...no older than my own son. An involuntary shudder wracks my body as the realization hits home. He could have *been* my son, if things had turned out differently. Lois and I — we considered enrolling our baby boy at this very daycare facility, until Lucy offered to watch him while we are at work, thrilled as she was to have a nephew. If not for Lucy, chances are that I would have lost my only child today. That thought chills me to my very bones. It freezes my blood in my veins and squeezes my heart until I'm sure that it will pop and I can no longer take a breath in the now suffocating, smoky air.

I shake my head. I can't afford to think like that now. I can't play the "what if" game. Not now. I still have work to do here. And as I shake my head, my thoughts scatter like so many dark marbles across a smooth floor. They race to the corners of my mind, waiting for the moment when I am finally alone.

I'm not really sure how long I have already been in this place, searching the debris until I am sure that the fire is completely out and that every last person is found, the survivors and victims alike. I know that my features are crinkled up into a hurt, disturbed expression, but I don't even *try* to smooth the lines in my face away. It is all right if the people see that their hero has a heart, and that his heart is affected by something this devastating, isn't it? Surely, it is all right to let them see a fraction of the immense remorse I feel, right?

I sigh deeply, satisfied that no one else is still buried in the debris. I scan once more, just to be doubly sure, and find one last stubborn patch of flame to extinguish. Then, gently cradling the unmoving, deceased infant in my arms, I leave the building for the last time. I am grateful to move out of the acrid smoke that has been filling my lungs and threatening to strangle me with its noxious odor, though even out in the open, I can still taste the stench of the fire on my tongue.

Cameras flash as I emerge, and I flinch as though they were physical blows to my body. I can hear the soft murmurs that ripple through the crowd as I step into their view. If I wanted to, I could easily pick out the whispers, and listen to what the people are saying. But I don't bother. It's not that I don't care. It's just that I don't have either the strength or the courage to know what people think of me right now, good or bad. My heart is broken enough for the lives that have been lost today.

Barely having the strength to speak, I hand the limp body over to one of the medical officers who are on the scene. I shake my head as I do so, indicating that there is no hope. The man takes the boy and examines him anyway, before coming to the same conclusion I already have. One of the firefighters touches my arm, and the expression on her soot-streaked face is one of gratitude for my assistance. For a moment, the look surprises me. I don't feel like I have done anything worthy of thanks. These innocent children died while I was overseas, in Thailand, digging a trench in the seafloor to prevent a tsunami from reaching land.

I know, of course, that I was needed overseas. I know, that by stopping the tsunami, the lives of millions were saved. But that knowledge doesn't take away the sting I feel now. It doesn't erase the shame I feel for not being *here*, for not being able to save the lives of people within my own city. It doesn't soothe the ache in my heart or disperse my immense sadness as I see a body bag being zipped up around the baby boy.

With a sigh, I take flight, never saying a word, ignoring the calls from the various television and newspaper reporters

standing amid the gathered crowd beyond the police barricades. They call to me, their voices cutting through the murmurs of the crowd. For my part, I hear them, but I don't acknowledge them. I know what it must look like to them, like the normally polite man in blue is suddenly being rude and more aloof than usual. But I know they want a good quote or two for their stories. And, wordsmith though I am by trade, I find myself utterly without a single word on my tongue, my brain blank except for the lingering visions of broken, burnt bodies. Therefore, I retreat, slowly at first but then speeding up just enough to cause the tell-tale sonic boom of my passing, a firm indication for them all that I am gone, and not coming back to the scene.

I need desperately to see my son. I need him like I need air, like I need sunlight, like I need Lois' love. But I can't go to him. Not as Superman. There are some things that the Lane Family is not privy to. My double life is among them. I can't show up as Clark either. I reek of smoke and death. I'm covered in soot and ash. So I content myself to flying to Lucy's modest apartment, and x-ray through the walls, telescoping my vision in as I do so.

She isn't there. My heart seizes in my chest and panic floods me. I snap back to my normal vision, and frantically start listening for my boy's heartbeat. Twenty seconds later, I find it, in the small public park across the street from Lucy's apartment. I hover, a good mile above the Earth, and zoom in. Relief pushes out my fear as I see my sister-in-law talking on the phone and pushing my son in his stroller. I broaden the scope of my hearing and confirm what I already suspect. She's on the phone with Lois, arranging to bring our son home soon. I take a moment to revel in his strong heartbeat and the tiny sounds of his giggles as Lucy stops and tickles one of his feet. I take a moment to revel in the warmth of his wide smile.

And yet, even knowing he is safe, I can't shake the pain in my heart over the lives lost today.

I stop two muggings before I finally get home, only to find Lois already there and waiting for me in our bedroom. At first, I can't meet her gaze. I merely plop heavily onto the bed, sitting on my side of the mattress, dangling my legs off the side, feet on the floor. Leaning forward, my elbows on my thighs, I let my head drop into my open palms. I don't even bother to slip out of the suit yet. I just sit in silence, wishing that my dark thoughts would follow my tongue's lead and quiet down.

Lois comes up beside me to sit. She doesn't say a word, but her hand reaches up and squeezes my shoulder, my upper arm. After a moment, I let my arms fall into my lap. Encouraged, Lois' hand moves now to the back of my suit, reaching beneath the heavy cape. She finds the hidden zipper there, and slowly, but fluidly, unzips it all the way down to the bottom, where it meets the red briefs. Then she tugs the material off, coaxing the tight suit from my body, until the upper half dangles around my waist and I am sitting bare-chested. I let her work, without protest, without encouragement, without so much as moving. I am simply there, existing.

That simple act triggers a switch in my brain. As the suit comes away, so too does Superman fall away. The hero vanishes, leaving behind the ordinary man. My iron grip on my emotions falters, then breaks. And a single tear falls from my eye to race down my right cheek. Lois' hand is immediately there, catching the small bead of salt water and brushing it from my skin with a touch so light, it seems almost unreal. She cups my cheek, and I take a moment to bask in the warmth of her palm.

Suddenly, as Lois' hands move up my back to the shoulder harness that keeps my cape in place, I am once again aware of the odors that still cling to me — sea salt, smoke, ash, burnt flesh, and failure. I move away from my wife, strip out of the rest of the suit, and head into the shower. But less than two minutes later, I am clean of the smoke, blood, and other substances that had been clinging to my body. I toss on a pair of sweat pants and an old t-

shirt, then take my place on the bed again. Lois is still there, waiting for me.

As before, I say nothing. I can't seem to make my tongue work, as though all my grief has pooled there and is weighing it down.

But Lois is used to my depressed moods, whenever there is a disaster that affects me particularly hard, like this one has. I'll admit, I don't have these moods nearly as often as I used to, way back when I first decided to become Superman. For the most part, I've learned to cope with my own short-comings, my own limitations. I've come to accept that I can't save everyone every single time. I've had to. Without that realization, without that acceptance, I wouldn't be able to *be* Superman. The stress would kill me, or drive me insane.

Still, once in a while, I come face to face with suffering and death on such an epic scale or a particularly disturbing crime scene. Those are the times when it is the hardest for me to keep doing what I do. Those are the times when I slip into a depressed mood, and contemplate hanging up the suit for good. Those are the times when I cannot accept all the things I can't do.

Lois gently embraces me, slipping her arms around my chest, holding me tightly to her. It's as though she is the only glue keeping my body from shattering into thousands of unrecognizable pieces; a nightmarish puzzle without any chance of ever getting put back together. She gives my body a slight squeeze, letting me know, in her own subtle way, that she's there for me. That she'll stand by me. That she wants to help me shoulder the pain I'm carrying. That she's still proud of me. That she loves me.

I am so thankful for that simple gesture. That unspoken promise. That silent show of love and support. Because it *is* the only thing holding me together.

It used to be so much more difficult, making it through each failed rescue. It used to be so much more unbearable, knowing that my speed wasn't fast enough, that my strength counted for nothing, that my powers hadn't made a difference. I used to shoulder that pain alone, lying awake in my bed at night, reliving the events over and over in my mind, until I was sure my mind would break and I'd go crazy. Those were the nights when I felt the most alone, when I would often flee to that space between the stars and the Earth, with only my bleak thoughts to keep me company.

Sure, I had my parents to talk to, to vent my frustrations to, to air my grief and self-blame to. They were always there, willing to lend a listening ear, a pat on the back, a word of encouragement. They still are. And I've always appreciated that fact. They have always been so sympathetic, so supportive.

But, they can never truly understand what it is like for me.

How can you explain to someone how it feels to be a second too late to save a life, when they've never been in that circumstance before? How do you explain to someone your guilt for being at one crisis instead of another? How do you explain the agony of having to choose when so many people are crying out for your help, all at the same moment? How do you explain what it is like to see such death and destruction, then have to slap on a cheerful face and write about it at work hours later?

My parents have never been in this position. And, God willing, they never will be.

But Lois...Lois understands. Fully, completely, intimately understands.

She's walked a mile in my boots. She's flown a mile in my cape. For a few brief days, she was Ultra Woman. During that time, she had to make choices; the same ones I am so often faced with. Mudslide or volcano eruption? Mugging or bank robbery? Out of control school bus or apartment fire? She knows what it's like to arrive on the scene only to find out that a life has already been lost. She knows what it's like to be the strongest person

alive and not have the power to bring someone back from the dead. She knows what it's like to have to ignore a plea from someone, to make the decision to help someone else, knowing that it simply isn't possible to save both people, knowing that someone is going to die.

And so, she's always been patient with me. She's always had a deeper level of understanding. She's always had a much more intimate knowledge of the kinds of thoughts that swirl around in my mind after each rescue gone horribly wrong. As a result, she knows my heart better than I do myself. She knows how to heal my wounds. She knows that I don't always need or *want* to hear spoken platitudes. She knows that "you did your best" isn't enough. She knows that "you're only one man, you can't be everywhere" doesn't heal the wounds within.

For a time, I just sit, letting Lois hug me to herself, my head hanging. Just as my body absorbs the sunlight and converts it to energy, my soul now absorbs her silent support and converts it into a soothing salve. Bit by bit, I feel myself feeling infinitesimally better, like aloe spread over a burn dulls the pain and restores the skin. After a while, I feel her shift her body ever so slightly. Her chin comes to rest on my left shoulder and her head lays against mine. I can hear her even breathing, the steady beating of her heart. And I can take comfort from those things. Because she is here with me. She is safe. She is uninjured.

But she is so much more than just her physical presence. She is more than the flesh against my own and the muscle and bone beneath. Her presence does comfort me, but there is more to it than that. She heals me because of who she is.

She is one person I can always count on. She never judges me; she never has, even when Superman was a complete stranger to her, just some strange visitor from another planet that she didn't know or even understand. And now that she does know him, knows *me*, she never even seems to get frustrated with these bleak moods of mine when they creep up. She understands them, understands me. She is always there to try to comfort me, no matter what her own thoughts and emotions are.

Even back before she knew everything about my dual life, my dual identities, she was always there for me, no matter what suit I was wearing — the professional work suit with the accompanying loud tie, or the skin-tight, gaudy blue and red one.

To Superman, she was always his number one cheerleader. She always stuck up for him, no matter how unpopular that made her, or how bad the evidence against him looked, like when he was blamed for the heat wave that first November I was in Metropolis. Her tireless efforts saved Superman, when he was so ready to give up, move on, and become a fugitive from normal life. She was Superman's first friend. His only friend. And even when he scooped her up to fly her back to the Daily Planet after lifting the Prometheus shuttle into orbit, she never feared him, unwittingly giving him hope for the world's acceptance of the powerful alien in their midst.

To Clark, she became my best friend, the only person I'd ever begun to truly open up to. She might not have admitted it at first, that she was slowly coming to accept me as a partner and as a friend. But, though she tried to hide her feelings for me, they were always there, lurking on the edges of what she said and did. When my apartment was robbed, she was there to offer words of encouragement, and whatever sources and "guys who know guys" that she could. True, she was trying to use the circumstance for a story. Yet there were so many little ways in which she told me that she really cared about the hurt I was suffering — her gentle words, her touches, the backrub she gave me at my desk when she saw how beaten down I was.

And when she thought I was dead, shot before her own eyes by Clyde Barrows, she grieved for the man she'd come to care deeply about, the man who'd slipped past all her defenses to become her best friend, and the man she could possibly come to

love. My "miraculous resurrection" brought tears to her eyes — tears that told me just how much she had missed me, and how much she cared about me. Her embrace was extra tight that night, as though she feared I'd disappear on her again, or that I was only an illusion, a figment of the imagination, brought about by her tortured mind. But it was when she offered to put her life on the line to help me, when Mazik had my parents as hostages, that I realized just how deeply her love for me ran.

Lois saved me, every single day since the moment I met her, sometimes literally when Kryptonite was around. But most often, she saved me in innumerable, tiny little ways she never even realized. Before her, I was nothing. I was a man who wanted, but could never truly attain, a normal life, though I play-acted at one with varying degrees of success. I was a man who secretly hoped for a family, but wondered if it was at all possible. I was a man who carried the world's biggest, most terrifying, and possibly deadliest secret, and who was petrified to let anyone in past my defensive walls, lest they see that hidden aspect of my life.

And then, I met Lois. And everything changed in that one, single instant.

Lois gave me a normal life. She gave me a reason to stop running from country to country, city to city. She gave me a home in Metropolis, not as the resident superhero, but as an ordinary man with an ordinary job. She gave me a reason to find a comfortable, if not elaborate, apartment — a place to rest my head without wondering when and where I would flee to next. She gave me a way to use my super-side without having to expose my true identity, effectively creating Superman for me. She became my partner, then my friend, and then my best friend. And I loved her from the first moment I saw her. In becoming close to me, she became my family, well before we began to date, well before we finally said our vows.

She proved to me that I could have the things I'd always secretly wished for. And most importantly, she gave me the *reason* I needed in order to fight for those dreams. She gave me the determination to achieve the goals I had set for myself.

And when she discovered my secret, she didn't reject me. She didn't use the knowledge to hurt me, even though she was beyond furious with my deception. She didn't use it to turn a profit for herself, though I dare think she easily would have won her Pulitzer with the story of how Clark Kent is also Superman. Instead, she protected me. She helped me. She covered for me whenever I needed her to, even when she was mad, even when I was sure she'd never want to speak to me again.

In spite of my alien self, she loved me. Not the powers. Not the suit. Not the hero. *Me*. The man beneath it all. The man who'd teased her, who'd shared takeout with her, who'd let her crash at his apartment after a long session of combing through research notes or whenever she was being threatened. She saw past the perceived glamour of being Superman's girlfriend, a dream of her own that she'd once harbored.

She chose, instead, to become Clark Kent's wife.

Beside me, Lois still hasn't said a word, but she does move her head from my shoulder now. Her soft lips kiss my temple, my cheek, my jaw, my neck. A trail of phantom fire lingers in the wake of her feather-light touch, and each one breaks a piece of the blackness within my mind, tosses it to the wayside, and allows shafts of light to penetrate the gloom. I desperately need that light. I desperately need her gentle caress. My eyes flutter shut for a moment as I savor the sensations, as I allow her to work the magic only she wields.

Her hands begin to roam now, fluidly gliding over my torso. One of her hands begins to rub my upper arm, trying to impart her love and comfort. The other rubs along the middle of my back. There is nothing remotely seductive about the motion. It's the same soothing gesture she used when she rubbed my back after Jack broke into my apartment and took my things, my

globe, my sense of privacy and security. It's the same soothing motion she used when our son battled a bout of colic during his first month of life. And yet, her gesture holds an even deeper level of intimacy. It speaks much more deeply to me than when she tried to comfort me after the robbery, because this time, she truly knows what I am going through. She truly understands the depth of my pain, and the blame I've heaped upon my own shoulders.

Her efforts work. I feel her concern in those touches. I feel her sympathy. I feel her love. More of the darkness falls away, and I can finally peek out through those cracks and fissures, those small, jaggedly broken portholes to the outside world.

And, as always, I see Lois.

I see the hurt she is carrying, reflected in the endless depths for her eyes. Her pain is my own. I see the concern she has. She's always so worried for me, when these moods strike. I see her acceptance. There is no blame, no accusation, no impatience. I see the love she has for me. It rivals that which I carry for her.

As I gaze at her, I cannot help but to feel so incredibly lucky to have her in my life. And, though some pain still lingers in my soul, I feel the weight of my sadness lift as her lips capture mine in a gentle kiss. It isn't a sensual kiss. It isn't deep or full of passion. And yet, it's not quite chaste either. It is simply an outpouring of her love for me, and I feel that love enter my bloodstream as though it were something physically injected into my veins.

I return her kiss, matching her lips' movements with my own. I don't hold back my desperation. I don't hold back my emotions. I let her know, in those kisses, just how much she's helped me today and every day. I let her know just how much I need her. I let her know just how incomplete I really am without her. I let her know just how endless and how powerful my love for her is.

It's been said that behind every great man, there is a great woman. I've always believed that. I know that I am the luckiest man of all. For behind me, backing me up in every moment of my life, in every endeavor I undertake, is Lois. She isn't just a great woman. She's a *super* woman.

THE END