

LARK'S AUDITION

Jason hustled me through a couple narrow hallways before entering a tiny darkened room. A huge bank of television monitors dominated an entire wall. In front and below was a giant slanted table with all kinds of colored lights and buttons. Several people bustled about. Most of them were young, in their twenties. All of them looked frazzled.

The director was a young woman with frizzy black hair. She wore glasses and had a grim look on her face. Her jaw muscles flexed constantly making me wonder if she was grinding her teeth. She gave me a quick smile, not unfriendly, but all business.

"Jane, this is Lark Chadwick. She's here for the audition," Jason said.

Jane and I shook hands. "Right," Jane smiled. "We're all ready for you."

"I gotta get back to editing," Jason said quickly. "Take good care of her, Jane." He rushed away. "Knock 'em dead, Lark," he called over his shoulder.

A few butterflies began circling slowly in my stomach.

"Let me show you the newsroom," Jane said. She led me through a door into a cinder-block room with yellow walls and garish florescent lighting. An aisle bisected the room with desks and computers on either side. There were no windows. It felt like a bomb shelter. Each desk was occupied. No one looked up. Keyboards clattered, phones rang, and the squawk of a police radio was constant. It was bedlam.

Jane introduced me to a guy in his thirties, bald, wearing a white shirt and suspenders. "This is Don. He's the assignment editor and six o'clock producer."

Don stood and we shook hands, but he was obviously distracted. “So you’re our new weekend anchor,” he said.

“Well, not exactly,” I smiled. “I’m just here to tape an audition.”

Don and Jane exchanged panicked looks. He looked back at me. “Um, that’s not the way I understand it. I was told you’re doing the audition on the air, live, right now.”

Suddenly I felt like I was going to barf on Don’s shoes. My palms felt wet and clammy. “Ron, the news director, told me it was going to be on tape,” I squeaked.

“That’s not what he told *me* and we don’t have another anchor scheduled. You’re it. It’s already been promoed,” Don said. I could hear the desperation in his voice.

“P-promoed?” I asked.

“Promoted,” he said impatiently. “We’ll probably have lots of extra viewers interested in checking you out.”

With Jason on deadline someplace else in this mysterious building, I was on my own.

“You ever done this before?” Don looked worried, probably a reflection of the panic he saw in my face.

“I was on CNN a couple months ago.”

Don quickly relaxed. “Oh, well, that’s different.”

I didn’t think it wise to tell him I’d never actually *anchored* before -- just been interviewed.

Don looked at the huge clock on the wall. 5:45. “Lemme give you your scripts and get you set up in the studio,” he said, guiding me by the arm into the control room.

“I’ll have someone come onto the set to do your makeup and your hair.”

Jane said, "I'll go get Bridget," and dashed off.

Don pointed at my outfit. "You're not gonna wear *that*, are you?"

"Wh-what's wrong with this?" I looked down at the light brown herringbone jacket I was wearing over a pale blue blouse and a dark blue pantsuit.

"Are you kidding? It's awful!" Don's voice had just gone up an octave. He threw another panicked look at the clock and began breathing faster.

"I know. I know," I said. "You probably think this isn't fancy enough. But for me, it's a stretch. I hate dressing up."

Don wasn't listening. "Jane!" he shouted.

Jane appeared, eyes wild. "What's wrong?"

"Houston, we have a problem. Look!" He pointed at my jacket.

"Oh, God." Her jaw dropped. "You aren't planning to wear *that* on the air, are you?"

"Well, ah, actually--"

"Quick! Take it off!" Already she was clawing at the jacket, peeling it off me.

"Why? What's the matter?" I felt sick to my stomach.

"Herringbone will make you look like a frigging test pattern out there. The cameras'll go nuts! There'll be epileptic fits all over the county." Jane held my jacket daintily out in front of her as if it was covered with anthrax. She dashed into the newsroom. "Does anyone have a jacket we can use?"

In a moment, she was back carrying a navy blue sport coat.

"Where's my jacket?" I asked, alarmed.

She ignored me. "Here. Put this on. It's a guy's, but it's the right color."

I shrugged it on. It was two sizes too big – the sleeves were three inches past my wrists.

“It’ll have to do,” Jane sighed, shooting a worried look at the clock. “You’ve got to get onto the set.” She gripped me by the arm and dragged me into the studio.

It was quiet, cavernous, and cold. Three large cameras stood in front of a semi-circular desk on a dais in front of a huge picture of the Madison skyline at twilight. A man and a woman were already seated at the desk talking and joking. Don brought me over to them.

“You probably already know these two,” Don said to me.

I didn’t.

“This is Ginger Jones. She does weather.”

Ginger was pretty, but her caked-on makeup made her look like a raccoon at a clown convention. She wore a tight cashmere sweater that accentuated her well-curved body. “Hi, sweetie,” Ginger said.

“Hi, Ginger. I’m Lark.” We shook hands.

“And this is Grant Deloatch,” Don said. “He’s the sports guy.”

Grant stood and kissed my hand. “Welcome aboard, Lark.”

“Thanks, but this is just a tryout.”

“Don’t worry,” Ginger said. “You’ll do fine.”

I took my seat at the only chair left behind the desk. It was between Ginger and Grant.

“Here, you might need your IFB.” Grant handed me a wire with a squiggly plastic thing on the end.

“Oh. Thanks.” Inside, I was panicking. *What the hell is an I-F-whatever?*

Grant pointed to his ear, and winked at Ginger. He had a similar thing in his ear. A tightly coiled wire disappeared behind his neck and beneath the collar of his suit, making him look a little like a Secret Service agent.

Quickly, I unbuttoned my borrowed, two-sizes-too-big jacket and took it off, draping the I-F-whatever cord down my back. For a split second, I thought about ditching the ridiculous sport coat and just going with a blouse, but the studio was so cold I felt that my chattering teeth would inhibit my ability to speak. As I slid back into the coat, I noticed Grant making meaningful eye contact with my chest, confirming my decision to stick with the more modest look.

“Don’t button up, yet, hon,” Ginger said, stopping me from pulling the curtain closed on Grant’s entertainment. “You’ll need to put this under the front of your jacket.” She handed me another wire with a tiny microphone at the end and a clip around it for attaching to my lapel.

“Five minutes!” barked a huge guy standing next to the center camera.

My hands began to tremble. All of a sudden I craved a drink of water. I also had to pee in the worst way.

A tinny voice spoke in my ear. “Lark, this is Jane in the control room. Can you hear me?”

I nodded, dumbly.

A woman -- actually a young girl -- wearing a headset, Rugby shirt and jeans stepped onto the platform in front of the desk. She carried a tiny sponge and a tube of

something. “Gotta make you up,” the girl explained, squeezing brown gunk onto the sponge, then dabbing my face with it.

“Mike check,” barked the voice of authority coming from the direction of the center camera.

Who the hell is Mike Check? I wondered, as the girl rubbed the makeup onto my face. It felt mercifully cool.

Ginger answered my unspoken question. “Check. Check. One, two, three, testing.”

Grant did the same thing as Ginger.

Then it was my turn. The makeup girl continued to dab me in the face as I said, “Mic check, one, two, three. Can you hear me okay, Jane?”

“A little louder, Lark,” came her voice in my ear, “stop whispering.”

“Sorry.” I cleared my throat and tried again. “Che-eck,” my voice cracked, “one, two, three, testing. That better?”

“Sounds good. One minute, everyone.”

The makeup girl powdered my face, seemingly oblivious to the time. If she didn’t get out of the way of the camera, her butt would be the lead story.

I heard Jane in my ear, but she was talking to the makeup “artist.” “Bridget, can’t you do anything about her hair?”

“THIRTY SECONDS,” boomed The Voice.

Bridget leaned back, appraised me, frowned, leaned forward, plunged her fingers into my hair and fluffed it. “Looks hopeless to me, Jane.”

“FIFTEEN SECONDS.”

Bridget backed off the dais, *trying* to speak into her headset so I wouldn't hear, "Sorry. I tried, Jane. I can't help it if she looks like a hooker who just got outta bed."

I had a pile of scripts in my hands and had not had time to read a one. It wouldn't have mattered. They were all a blur. I couldn't keep my eyes still long enough to focus on anything—I was on sensory overload. *So this is what a deer in the headlights feels like.*

All too soon, the commercial that had been on the air ended and the opening "music" began. It was actually some sort of cacophonous, nondescript, adrenaline-induced, synthesized noise, designed, I guess, to sound earnest and authoritative. Then I heard the voice of God: "THIS IS NEWSCENE 15, WITH LARK CHADWICK, PLUS GINGER JONES WITH WEATHER AND GRANT DELOATCH WITH SPORTS." The music crescendoed.

Our floor barker barked again: "STAND BY!" He held up five big fingers, then, four, then--

I felt Grant stroking my sleeve. It made me feel like crawling into Ginger's lap.

Time seemed to stand still. The studio was dead quiet. I could hear the noise of the open in my ear, but it seemed far away. I willed myself to stay calm.

The counting fingers were now below the middle camera that had a huge, white number *one* on it. When he ran out of fingers, the floor director swept his entire arm beneath the camera and pointed at me accusingly.

I stared at the camera. A big red light on top of it came on. What looked like a mirror rested at a 45-degree angle in front of the camera lens and on that glass were big words, slowly scrolling upward.

“Go!” Jane screamed in my ear.

GOOD EVENING, the words said in all capital letters, so I spoke them.

“Welcome to Newscene 15. I’m Lark Chadwick.” The act of simply speaking calmed me. *Sure. I can do this. It’s just talking and reading. No big deal. I know how to do that.*

The words on the TelePrompTer kept scrolling. If I didn’t hurry, they’d be gone before I had a chance to speak them. “Tonight’s weather in a word: SOTMRY.”

Grant smirked. Raucous laughter from the control room behind me seeped through the wall into the studio. But I swear to God, “sotmry” was exactly what was typed on the prompter.

Ginger’s face came up on the screen. She spoke. “Stormy! That’s right, Lark. I’ll be along in just a minute with all the weather.”

BLUFF

By

John DeDakis

Available wherever books are sold

JohnDeDakis.com