

The Hottest Team in Town: A Tank-and-Wendy-esque challenge

By HappyGirl <michelloyd@aol.com> and Female Hawk <hawka@iinet.net.au>

Rated PG

Submitted November, 2009

Summary: Clark Kent has landed his dream job, and, for the first time in his life, he's head over heels in love. There's just one problem. A Tank-and-Wendy-esque challenge by HappyGirl and Female Hawk

Story Size: 5,730 words (31Kb as text)

Thanks to our GE, NearlyNoelNeill. This story was originally posted to the message boards as Part 1, with the following plea for a Part 2:

You can thank Classica for this idea. You'll recognize most of this from the pilot, of course, but keep your eye out for the twist. In keeping with the spirit of the Tank-and-Wendy challenges of yesteryear, I do have an idea of how to fix this. But I'll let you all have fun coming up with your own. So, without further ado, here is Part 1:

Perry White looked up from the resume in his hand. "So, Mr..."

"Kent. Clark Kent."

"Yes. Kent. Professor Carlton called me about you. I haven't seen him in..." The sentence trailed off as the editor focused once more on the resume. "Let's see...editor of the Smallville Press. Smallville...that's..."

"Kansas," Clark supplied.

The intercom buzzed, and Mr. White leaned over to listen. Clark could hear the voice of a young man in the background, but he didn't eavesdrop. His parents had raised him better than that.

"Well, tell him to keep his pants on. And where's my lunch? If Carlini's can't deliver on time, find a place that can." The editor gave Clark a sigh and a long-suffering look. "I bought a blood pressure monitor last week, you believe it?"

"Paava leaves," Clark blurted. Oh, great. A job interview is just the place to be giving medical advice. But it was too late now.

"Excuse me?"

"The Yolngu tribe in New Guinea eats paava leaves to relieve stress...puts them in a meditative state. Maybe you should try it." Oh, yeah, that was going to go over well.

"Uh huh. Sounds like you've done some traveling."

Clark nodded. "I spent some time in a Llamasary in Tibet and with the Sherpas in Nepal. I just got back from Australia." No need to mention that he'd been studying Dreamtime theory in Aboriginal mythology. Perry White didn't look like the sort of man who went in for mythology.

"A citizen of the world." Was the editor humoring him?

"Not really. It's my first time in Metropolis. I've brought

some writing samples." Clark needed to get the conversation off his travels and onto his writing. He handed Mr. White his portfolio.

"Well, let's take a look." The man's eyebrows rose higher and higher as he perused Clark's samples. That couldn't be a good sign.

"The Borneo Gazette? 'Mating rituals of the knob-tailed gecko?'" He looked up at Clark. It was a sympathetic look, but not an encouraging one.

"Look, Kent, I'm sure these stories are fascinating, but this is the Daily Planet, the greatest newspaper in the world! Our people are dedicated servants of the fourth estate who deal routinely with matters of international significance."

At that moment, the door behind Mr. White swung open and a young man in khakis and a sport coat burst in waving a sheaf of loose papers. He was already speaking as he entered.

"Chief, I think there's a story here and we should check this guy out. The crazy one from this morning? His name is Samuel Platt and he was an engineer at EPRAD for ten years. He's..."

Mr. White interrupted before the intruder got any further. "Can't you see I'm in the middle of something here?"

The young man blinked at Clark. Obviously, he hadn't even noticed that there was a third person in the room. "Oh."

The older man attempted to cover for his underling's rudeness with an introduction. "James Olsen, Clark Kent."

Clark began to stand to offer the other man his hand, but Olsen just gave him a cursory glance and a brief nod.

"Nice to meet you." Then, to Mr. White, "Anyway, this guy worked on the messenger, he..."

"Jim, what happened to that mood piece I gave you two? The razing of that old theater on Forty-second?"

Olsen gave the editor a cocky grin. "She wasn't in the mood." Clark tried not to smile at the comeback. The editor was not amused.

"Now listen here, Olsen. I..."

But the conversation was interrupted once again, this time by a knock on the glass window that separated White's office from the newsroom. All three men turned to see the source of the sound. But it was Clark's jaw that went slack.

Waving at James Olsen and tapping her watch impatiently was the most beautiful woman Clark had ever seen. Luckily, Clark had time to school his features before anyone noticed him. Olsen and White's eyes were on the woman, and then Olsen spoke.

"Gotta run. Catch you later, Chief." And he was out the door, following the striking woman in a brisk trot toward the elevators. Mr. White shook his head.

"If that man wasn't one of the best damn photographers I've ever seen, I'd..." He turned his attention back to Clark.

"Look, Kent, you seem like an intelligent guy, but you can't just walk in here with this kind of resume and expect a job."

"Mr. White, I know I lack experience, but I'm a hard worker and a good writer. I..."

That was as far as he got in his appeal. "Kent. I'm sorry. I haven't got anything for you."

Clark had no choice but to yield as gracefully as he could. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate your taking the time to see me."

Twenty-four hours later Clark waited outside that same office, this time feeling a bit more hopeful. It had been a stroke of inspiration to wander down to that theater on Forty-second Street. If he could get Perry White to read the piece that had resulted from that impromptu foray, he had a good chance of at least selling it free-lance. He still needed a permanent job, but at least the money would tide him over for a few more days.

James Olsen was in with the editor now, and Clark waited for their conversation to wrap up. Clark watched through the open

blinds as Olsen stood up, his business with the Chief evidently concluded. The door opened and Clark stepped back to let the young man through. Mr. White called one last remark as Olsen was on his way out.

“Jim, I almost forgot. Alice wanted me to invite you and the family for dinner Friday. She specifically said to bring your daughter along.”

Olsen turned back with an easy smile. “Sure, Chief. I’ll have to double-check with the Missus, but I think we’re free.”

Turning back to leave, Olsen noticed Clark waiting to enter.

“Hello again,” he greeted him. “I’m sorry I was in such a hurry yesterday. I don’t feel like I’ve properly met you yet.” The man held a hand out to Clark. “Jim Olsen.”

“Clark Kent.” As Clark shook hands with the young man, he silently took note of the ring he’d missed the day before. The man looked too young to have a wife and daughter, but Clark knew that look could be deceiving. “Nice to meet you.”

“I take it your interview went well yesterday.”

Clark returned Olsen’s friendly smile with a sheepish one of his own. “Not really, but I’ve got a free-lance piece I hope Mr. White will like. You gave me the idea, actually, about the closing of the theater on Forty-second. I hope you don’t mind.”

The young man laughed. “Not at all. More power to you. There’s no way Lois Lane was ever going to write that piece, and if the Chief buys it I can always run down and get a few shots to go with it.”

A small light went off in Clark’s head. “Wait a minute. Lois Lane? And James Olsen. You’re that Olsen? Of Lane and Olsen? The Hottest Team in Town?”

The man smiled again. He seemed to smile constantly and it was contagious. “Guilty as charged. Now come on, let’s see what you’ve done with the assignment that Lois wasn’t in the mood for.”

By this time Perry White had come out from behind his desk, curious as to the conversation that was taking place in his office doorway between his star photographer and the rookie he’d turned down the day before. As Clark turned to look for the editor, he was already there, holding out his hand for the article. He began reading as he walked back to his desk, absently waving for Clark to take the same seat he’d had for his disastrous job interview the day before. Jim Olsen leaned casually against the doorframe, shamelessly listening in as Perry began to read aloud.

“Beatrice was eighteen when she made her debut. Warren G. Harding was President, the unknown soldier was interred at Arlington, and Babe Ruth was sold to the Yankees...”

As Mr. White continued to read, Clark’s confidence began to rise. The editor was reading the entire article, not just skimming it. And Jim Olsen seemed impressed.

In fact, three paragraphs into the article, Olsen quietly reached out his hand and grabbed a passing woman by the elbow. Clark knew right away who she was. The young lady from the window yesterday. She looked like she would object, but Olsen held his index finger to his lips and nodded silently toward Perry White, who was still reading Clark’s article aloud. The woman crossed her arms in annoyance, but she stayed to listen. By the end of the article she was as entranced as Olsen and White.

“...she came to say goodbye. Goodbye to a young girl in a gossamer dress, goodbye to the players, long dead, to the spirit of the theater, so strong that nothing, not even the wrecking ball, could destroy it. She came to say goodbye, as we all must, to the past, and to a life and a place that soon would exist only in a bittersweet memory.”

Perry looked up from the paper, his glance taking in Clark in the chair in front of him and Jim and the young woman in the doorway.

“Smooth.” It was Olsen who broke the silence.

Perry turned an inquiring eye on the woman next to Jim.

Awkwardly, she shifted position, as if embarrassed to be caught listening so attentively. “Yeah” she said begrudgingly, “if you like that sort of thing.”

The editor turned his attention back to Clark.

“You know, Kent, there’s one attribute I value as much as experience, and that’s initiative.” He held out his hand to Clark. “Clark Kent, welcome to the Daily Planet.”

Clark couldn’t believe his ears. He had hoped to sell the article, but he had landed his dream job after all. He returned the editor’s handshake with enthusiasm.

“Thank you, Mr. White. You won’t regret it.”

Clark knew that a sappy grin was spreading across his face, but he couldn’t help it. He’d landed the job, and, if he were very lucky, he might even get a chance to work with the woman who drew his attention like a magnet every time he saw her.

“See that I don’t.” The reply sounded gruff, but Clark could tell it was just for show.

“Now, seeing as you’re new in town, I’m going to start you off slowly. I’m sure I’ll come up with something for you to write in a day or two, but I’d like you to start out by trailing these two around town for the next couple of days.” He nodded toward the pair in the doorway.

The woman opened her mouth to object, but the Chief overrode her. “Just for a couple of days, Lois, until he gets the lay of the land. You’ve worked with a partner for years; having one rookie in tow for a few days is not going to kill you.”

Clark had surmised from the conversation that the woman must be the famous Lois Lane. They hadn’t been properly introduced, though. Clark stood and was about to introduce himself when Jim Olsen beat him to it.

“Clark, I don’t think you’ve met the other half of the team yet.”

He turned to Lois and said, “Lois, I’d like you meet my new friend and colleague, Clark Kent.”

Then, turning to Clark and casually draping an arm around Lois’s shoulders, Jim continued, “Clark, I’d like you to meet Lois Lane, the Planet’s best investigative reporter, and my wife.”

Thus ended the first part of the challenge. Female Hawk took up the gauntlet and offered the following rescue for our poor star-crossed duo:

His *wife*.

Clark arranged his face into a mask of polite acknowledgement, even as sharp disappointment gouged a trench through his heart.

Lois leaned out of Jim’s embrace and stretched her hand towards Clark. He stared at it, dumbfounded, then with a start, took her hand in his. Her touch discharged a series of fiery darts the length of his arm.

Another man’s wife.

Clark deliberately turned his attention back to Perry. Or, more accurately, *away* from Lois.

“You two all set?” Perry said, his question directed at Jim and Lois.

Jim winked at Lois. “You bet, Chief,” he said. “You can trust The Hottest Team in Town.”

Clark swallowed as a never-before-experienced emotion engulfed him.

Envy.

Jim Olsen was the luckiest man alive.

The next morning, Clark waited as a sporadic stream of people — some he’d met, some he hadn’t — flowed into the conference room.

He stared into his coffee, letting the hubbub wash over him. He didn’t really want the drink, but he’d got it as a precaution. He

might just need a distraction when Lois and Jim walked in.

After spending the night together.

Whilst he'd had to constantly drag his mind back from the boundary of impropriety.

Perry walked in and the room fell silent. He scanned the faces as if checking a mental list. "Where are Lane and Olsen?" he barked.

Clark heard the sniggers and gulped from his coffee.

Before the undercurrent of laughter had died away, Jim strode in, his face radiating complete satisfaction. "Sorry I'm late, Chief," he said, looking anything but apologetic. He sat down, pulled his camera from its case and began cleaning it with a patch of soft material.

"Where's Lois?" Perry demanded.

"Just a moment or two behind me."

The woman next to Clark elaborately cleared her throat. "So how *is* Lois?" she crooned. "Did you two have a good night?" Clark glanced at her. He'd been introduced to her yesterday. Cat — her name suited her well.

Jim didn't look up. "I can tell you this," he said. "There's nothing trivial about a game of Trivial Pursuit with Lois Lane."

This time the sniggers were bolder. Clark shifted uncomfortably and bit back his defense of the absent Lois Lane. They shouldn't be talking about her like this — though he could certainly understand their levity. If Lois were *his* wife, he was sure the Trivial Pursuit board wouldn't see the light of day — or night — for at least the first two decades of marriage.

"But?" Perry demanded.

Jim looked up from camera, his grin just about wide enough to split his face. "Suffice to say it was a *very* productive night. But I'll let Lois tell you when she gets here."

"I guess the daughter had a busy night?" the guy across from Clark asked.

Jim nodded, still lovingly cleaning every nook and cranny of his camera. "Barely had a moment's rest."

Clark scanned the amused faces of the gathered people. Somehow a restless child didn't fit with the picture in his mind. The picture he was trying very hard to get out of his mind.

Jim glanced up. Clark tried to iron out his expression, but he wasn't quite quick enough. Jim's eyes crinkled with fun and he gestured to his camera. "This is my *daughter*," he explained. "Because she costs me a fortune buying every latest gadget for her and —"

"And," Perry cut in, "Jim gets very twitchy if anyone so much as looks at her."

The room erupted into laughter although Clark knew they must have all heard the joke before. He forced a smile. "You take pictures?" he asked before he could stop himself.

Jim shrugged. "Can't imagine doing anything else."

"Alice will have the grandchildren on Friday," Perry said. "It's been at least a month since she last had photos taken of them."

Jim nodded, his casualness directly contrasting with the discomfort flooding through Clark. People weren't quite so ... explicit in Smallville.

Clark's tension increased exponentially at the arrival of Lois Lane. She bounced into the room, her brown eyes shining and her expression exultant.

Knowing every eye was on her, she dramatically dropped two video tapes and a handful of computer disks onto the table. "Got 'em," she said with a smirk.

"Both of them?" Perry asked.

She nodded with such jubilation, Clark's heart lost the ability to maintain anything resembling a steady rhythm. "Peter Roarke ... and Congressman Ian Harrington," she said gleefully. "Nailed 'em cold."

Perry sprung from his chair and wrapped Lois in a big hug.

Then he patted Jim's shoulder. "What a team," Perry said proudly.

Lois removed the wedding band from her finger and tossed it next to the video tapes. "A *reporting* team," she said.

Jim removed the band from his finger and dropped it next to Lois's. "I guess the honeymoon's over." They shared a friendly grin.

"It wasn't all bad, was it?" Perry asked Lois.

"It wasn't too bad at all," Lois said. "Although sharing a small bathroom with two teenage boys is definitely not to be recommended. They walk in, shut the door, you hear nothing for over an hour, then they walk out, looking exactly the same as they did when they walked in."

"You took your kid brothers?" Cat asked Jim, her distaste evident. "To the Honeymoon Suite at the Lexor Hotel?"

Jim shrugged as he replaced his camera back in its bag. "I had to ... if I wanted the apartment still intact when I got home." Again everyone laughed.

Clark joined in absently, his mind spinning. Lois *wasn't* married? "So ... who's 'The Missus'?" The question was out before Clark realized it had come from him.

Jim flashed him that boyish grin again. "The conglomeration that is my life," he said. "Two kid brothers, a camera, and Mad Dog Lane for a partner — I'd have more freedom if I *were* married."

Lois *wasn't* married. Clark's pulse was singing through his veins.

"Hey Chief?" Cat called out. "Wasn't the hotel reservation for tonight as well?"

Perry nodded. "And already paid for. Anyone want it?"

Cat clamped her hand on Clark's arm and leaned flirtatiously against him. "What do you say, Handsome? You're new in town. Would you like Cat to show you the ropes?"

Clark purposefully reclaimed his arm and backed away. "No, thanks," he replied, politely, but with a cool steeliness that said unmistakably, 'not now, not ever'.

Cat pouted.

Clark turned away.

To Lois.

His eyes plunged into hers and he smiled.

She smiled back.

And his heart exploded.

Personally, I think that's the perfect place to end this story. But, since I had made the tactical error of mentioning that I had a possible solution in mind, Dragon and Female Hawk started a campaign to elicit said solution. So, for your reading pleasure, here is the

Alternate Ending

There is something about a last day that heightens the senses. The very knowledge that this is the last time lends an uncanny significance to the most mundane act. That awareness runs like an internal narrator in the back of your mind. "This is the last time I'll wake up in this room. This is the last time I'll buy my morning coffee from Justin on this corner. This is my last time walking through the revolving doors of the Planet lobby."

Clark had had many last days over the years. His last day at the elementary school, the junior high, the high school, Midwest U. Senior Day on the football team. He'd moved out of his parents' house and four college dorm rooms.

Later, he'd had days that he hadn't known were the last until they were almost over. Days that were only the last in retrospect. The last day in Tibet, in Nepal, in Borneo, in Australia. Those were days that ended in a hastily packed suitcase and a quick flight back to Smallville to regroup.

But this last day was different. It wasn't a joyfully anticipated

rite of passage. It wasn't a bittersweet end to a season that had run its course. It wasn't even a forced flight to preserve his secret. The secret was safe, thanks to Superman.

No, this last day was entirely his own choice. This was the last day that, for the first time in his life, would mark Clark Kent as a quitter. Clark called for the elevator. As he waited for it to carry him to the newsroom that had become so familiar to him in the last few weeks, Clark was assaulted with a stream of unwanted memories, as if his own mind was reminding him why he couldn't stay.

The three of them. It was always the three of them. Ever since that very first story when Clark had flown out of that hangar with Jim and Lois each tucked under an arm.

It was Jim and Lois and Clark landing in the mud puddle. Jim and Lois and Clark trapped in Trask's plane, Clark diving after the pair when Trask threw them out. Jim and Lois working late when Clark wandered in, dejected and discouraged after that early story on the drive-by shooter.

"Whatever he can't do, it doesn't matter," Lois had said. "It's the idea of Superman. Someone to believe in. Someone to build a few hopes around."

"Yeah, CK," Jim had chimed in. "Whatever he can do, that's enough."

The three of them arguing over the existence of an invisible man, babysitting Alan Morris and sipping tea on Clark's balcony. The three of them undercover at the Metro Club, Lois singing 'I've Got a Crush on You' straight to Jim as he sat in the audience, nursing the non-alcoholic drink that Clark has slipped him to keep him sober on the job. People around the newsroom were starting to call Clark the Third Amigo. He felt more like the third wheel.

The times when it wasn't the three of them were worse. When the legwork had been done and it was time to write the story, Jim would take off for the darkroom, leaving Lois and Clark alone.

Clark had tried to put on a brave face. He'd tried to meet Lois's gruff manner with his own snappy comebacks.

"Watch it, Farmboy. Not even my husband edits my copy," she'd told him.

"Your husband isn't a writer," he'd shot back.

"Neither are you," she'd responded, giving his chest a slap. She meant it in fun, but to Clark it was torture.

But Perry White wanted him on the team, and, given what a risk Perry had taken by hiring him, he couldn't refuse. Not that Lois was all that keen on the idea either.

"Partners?" He could hear Lois arguing with Perry in his memory.

"You and Kent. The experience of a battle-scarred veteran paired with the hunger of a fresh exciting new talent."

"I'm not so scarred and he's not so exciting."

"Your tenacity, his tact. Trust me, the two of you, there's chemistry there. It'll make for better stories."

"But Perry, partnership is like marriage, and I've already got a partner."

"No, Lois. Partnership is not entirely like marriage. You're right that they both take work."

"Yes, and they both take patience, understanding, a willingness to be supportive."

"I know. Fake it. Because I'll tell you how they're different: unlike marriage, a partnership can have more than two members. And, also unlike marriage, it's the boss who picks the partners. Enough said."

And that had been the end of that. Or rather the beginning. But it had to end. Clark couldn't take one more day of working beside Jim Olsen and Lois Lane.

The soft 'ping' of the elevator doors brought him out of his reverie. Clark stepped out onto the bullpen's landing, conscious

of the resignation letter resting in the inner pocket of his suit coat. He felt like a heel. After everything that Perry White had done for him, he hated to leave him after so short a time. But it was necessary.

When it came right down to it, Clark didn't trust himself enough to stay. At first he had hoped that his attraction to Lois Lane would fade with time. But it only grew stronger, despite his constant reminders to himself that it was completely out of line. She was a married woman, and Clark would *not* cross that line. Not with anyone, for any reason.

Besides, Jim Olsen was his friend. He'd welcomed Clark with open arms even before he was hired. And, unlike Lois, Jim seemed delighted that Perry had added Clark to the Hottest Team. Clark had never felt the slightest hint of jealousy from Jim, never had an inkling that Jim might be uncomfortable having Clark horn in on his working relationship with his wife. It was Lois who seemed to begrudge Clark's presence. Maybe that was because Lois was the writer, and therefore had to work more closely with Clark and share the credit for their joint work.

It didn't matter now. After today, she wouldn't have to put up with him any more. He'd move on to the next city. Superman would keep patrolling Metropolis for a few weeks, then begin spreading his activities around more. Eventually Superman might make the move along with Clark. To Gotham, Center City, San Francisco, he didn't much care where. He'd land on his feet—he always did. But his heart would never be the same.

Probably it was that black mood which explained what happened next. As Clark made his way on automatic pilot toward the coffee area, he was brought up short by the unexpected sight of Jim Olsen and Angela Dunkirk chatting over the donut box. The discussion involved the relative merits of cake donuts versus raised, but that wasn't what made Clark lose his temper. It was the way Jim was leaning toward Angela, touching her on her arm, smiling and laughing as if she were the most fascinating woman to ever grace the snack corner with her presence.

This was insane. Jim Olsen was the luckiest man alive, married to the most beautiful, brilliant, heart-stopping woman on the planet, and he was flirting with some young research assistant as if were picking her up at the Ace of Clubs. Clark marched straight up to the offending pair, grasped Jim Olsen by the elbow, and, without uttering a word, marched him into the conference room and closed the door behind them.

Clark released Jim's elbow. It was only with great effort that he refrained from tossing Jim bodily across the room in the process.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" Clark demanded. He couldn't believe how out of character Jim was acting.

Jim rubbed his elbow and directed his incredulous gaze at Clark. "I *was* getting a donut and a cup of coffee. What do you think *you're* doing hauling me in here like I'm the class clown and you're the principal?"

"You were not getting a donut; you were *flirting* with Angela. At work. In public. Where your *wife* might walk in at any moment. Your wife who deserves better than to have her *husband* act like he's picking up girls at some sleazy bar when by rights he should be thanking God every day that he has the amazing good fortune to be married to Lois Lane!"

"Clark, I..." Jim trailed off, a look of sudden realization dawning on his face. "Oh my God. How did I not see it before now? Of course."

Clark was nonplussed by Jim's sudden change of tack. "See what?"

Jim was pointing an accusatory finger at Clark. "You're in love with her!"

"Who? Angela? Don't be ridiculous!"

"Not Angela, Clark. Lois. You are in love with my wife."

Afterward, Clark would realize that Jim should have sounded angrier at that moment. Instead, he sounded as if he had just discovered the last piece of a puzzle that had been eluding him. But at the moment, Clark was too miserable to notice. All he could think of was his own guilt. His righteous indignation fled and he collapsed into the nearest chair.

"I'm sorry, Jim. I didn't mean for it to happen." At Jim's look of surprise, Clark hastened to add, "Not that anything happened. I would never... Jim, you have to believe me... I never..."

Finding himself at a loss for words, Clark finally reached into his pocket and handed the letter to Jim.

"Here. You can give that to Perry for me. You don't have to worry, Jim. I'm not staying."

As he stood to take his leave, Clark heard Jim open the letter. He couldn't look his friend in the eye. He ran his hand through his hair and turned to make his way to the door. The door which opened before him, revealing an impatient Lois Lane with one hand on the doorknob and the other on her hip.

"Would someone like to tell me what my two partners are doing in here and why neither of them is ready to go to our interview that starts in..." she glanced at her watch... "fifteen minutes?"

"I'm sorry, Lois. I have to go." It was all Clark could manage. As he began to steer his way around Lois to make his escape, he was stopped by Jim's voice from behind him.

"Clark, wait." Funny. He didn't sound angry. "Lois," he heard Jim say, "it's time."

"Time for what, Jim?"

"Time for the announcement."

"I thought we were going to do that after the interview."

"We were, but things have changed." He handed Lois Clark's letter.

She skimmed it quickly and looked quietly from Clark to Jim and back again.

Still holding Clark's gaze, she addressed her husband. "You're right, Jim. The Beckworth School can wait. Come on, partners."

A befuddled Clark followed Lois and Jim into the newsroom. Pulling Lois behind him, Jim trotted half-way up the ramp and turned to face the newsroom floor.

"May I have your attention, please? Everyone?" Lois's piercing whistle brought a sudden silence to the room and every eye turned to the pair. Jim glanced at his wife with an amused "Thank you, honey."

"As all of you know," Jim began, "Lois and I have been married for the last four years, since the summer we both graduated from Met U's journalism program. What most of you don't know is why." He paused to give his wife's hand an encouraging squeeze. "In April, 1989, Lois's parents, Sam and Ellen Lane, were killed in the crash of LexAir flight 1806 in the Colorado Rockies. Lois was 21 years old, but her sister, Lucy, was only 14. Lois was terrified that Lucy would be taken from her and placed in foster care. Lois was my best friend." Jim gave his wife a tender glance. "She still is. It was my idea that if the two of us got married, Lois would have a better chance at gaining custody of her sister. As you can guess, it worked. Lucy has been our 'daughter' for the last four years. This weekend, Lucy turned 18. She's legally an adult now, and she no longer needs us to be her parents. In fact, I think she needs Lois to stop being her mom and go back to being her sister. So, after four mostly happy..." he gave Lois a wink "...years as a family, I am pleased to announce that the Lane/Olsen marriage has been very amicably dissolved."

"Ain't that quick, Olsen? I thought a divorce took six months at least?" yelled Ralph from the back corner.

"A divorce, yes. But not an annulment," Jim answered.

"Not that it's any of your business," added Lois with a glare in Ralph's direction.

Not to be deterred, Ralph persisted, "Annulment? I thought you could only get one of those if the marriage hasn't been consummated. You mean to tell me you two never..." Even Ralph could read the danger that was now emanating from Lois Lane, and the question faded into shocked silence.

"Lois is my friend, and that's all either of us is going to say about that," Jim finished. "Except that we are both now free agents," he added with a grin. Lois's answering scowl said loud and clear that, unlike her former spouse, she was not in the market for a rebound fling.

As the background hum of the newsroom returned to its normal volume, Jim strode down the ramp and handed Clark his letter. "I don't think you'll be needing that after all," he remarked.

Clark's gaze was riveted on Lois as he answered his friend, "No, I guess I won't."

Lois's answer was a warning. "Don't fall for me, Farmboy. I don't have time for it."

But Clark wasn't the only one who saw the look in her eyes that belied her words. Lois headed for the elevators, but before she could call them with a confident, "Come on, you two, the Beckworth School is waiting," Jim whispered in Clark's ear.

"Famous last words."

THE END