

# A Cut Above

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Rated: G

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Description: This time, Lois almost goes too far to get the story.

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Lois cursed under her breath. There was no way she was going to get any information on this stakeout. Her equipment just wasn't good enough for the task at hand. It was so frustrating.

She'd trailed the Balroneys gang to a small two story brownstone in a transitioning neighborhood several blocks from Hobb's Bay. The building was old, but in its day it had been an upscale place. Time had taken its toll on the former luxury residence. The building hadn't been kept up very well over the years, but most of the problems were cosmetic. It was still a solid, well-built structure. The dirty brick façade belied the thick walls and still excellent insulation. Her shotgun microphone couldn't manage to get her any intelligible conversation.

She was in a small room she'd rented in the run down hotel across the street, staring out the window that faced the second floor of the building that she knew held Louie Balroneys and his associates. She knew they were planning something big, but she just couldn't find out what. Somehow she needed to get closer.

Her thoughts turned briefly to her partner Clark Kent. He'd shown the surprising ability to read lips which had helped them out a few times in situations like this. The only problem was that the window she was able to see into wasn't in line with the area where their conversations were taking place. So Clark would've been no help to her here. That, and the fact that he was taking a week off to help his folks with the harvest.

She couldn't keep the smile from her face as her thoughts drifted to her partner and best friend. Their beginning had been a bit rocky, mostly due to her own annoyance at being saddled with the green reporter. But Perry had been insistent, and Clark was persistent. Now she could barely imagine what it had been like before Clark. No, that wasn't true, she could imagine it. It had been just like this.

Lois would charge headlong into an investigation, and if it didn't go as she planned she would get frustrated and waste a lot of time fuming about things she had no control over. There was no Clark to tease her out of her bad mood and offer her some alternative plan of attack. Over the months they'd been partnered up she became more and more impressed with his ability to come up with good ideas which helped their investigations.

Stop it, Lane, she chided herself. You were an award winning reporter before Kent and you certainly can handle an investigation without Clark holding my hand. She just needed to think out of the box.

She studied the building. It was somewhat isolated, being on the end of the block, and the lot next to it had been torn down. This gave the place an added buffer of space. She shook her head. The only way she was going to have any chance of eavesdropping on any of their plans she was going to have to get into that building. But that presented problems.

There were only two stories to the building. The top floor was still a residence which was currently leased by Louis Balroneys. The bottom floor had long ago been converted to a store front. Over the years it had been many different shops, but currently it was owned by a young stylist trying to make her start. She called her place 'A Cut Above'.

Ordinarily Lois would just break into the beauty shop at night

and set up her audio surveillance and wait for the gang to arrive and she'd be in business. Unfortunately, the pattern she'd been able to ascertain was that Balroneys and his boys would only get together during the midday. Probably some sort of lunch meetings.

Lois was worried that she was running out of time. Balroneys and his cohorts had changed their routine slightly. When Lois first started tailing them, they met every other day, but today was the second day in a row that the group got together. At first she'd been content to watch and follow, hoping that they'd lead her somewhere that would tell her what they had planned. But that didn't work, so she'd brought in the audio equipment, but that had been a bust also.

She was certain that whatever was going down was going to happen soon, and she had to find out what it was. She had to get into that shop. And it had to be tomorrow.

She shifted her gaze to take in the entrance of the small salon. She'd noticed a few customers going in and out of the shop, but it didn't have the look of a place that was in great demand. She hoped that was because the salon was new and not an indicator of the stylist's talents.

She sighed as she unconsciously ran her hand through her hair. She'd make the appointment, but first she had to get back to the Planet. She needed to talk to Jimmy.

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"So let me get this straight." Jimmy planted himself in Lois' guest chair. A fool's grin was on his face. "You, Lois Lane, the woman who said she'd never let anyone except Cindy touch her hair, is going to let some newbie stylist cut it?"

Lois glared at her young friend. "It's not that big a deal. I'm about due anyway, so I'll go in there for a trim. She cuts an inch or two. I doubt even someone fresh out of Beauty College can screw that up."

"Uh huh."

Lois swatted him on the arm. "Just tell me what you got for me from your friend at the spy store."

Jimmy's grin conveyed his excitement. He was in his element now. "Okay, here it is." He set the bag he'd been carrying on her desk. He took out a couple of items. One of the pieces looked like a pen, and the other was some sort of ear piece. It looked like a hearing aid.

"I assume this is the receiver?" She picked up the faux hearing aid.

"Yeah, it looks just like a hearing aid, but it's actually a powerful, wireless receiver which will allow you to overhear any conversation the microphone picks up."

"What's the range?"

"About a hundred feet."

"That'll work." Lois picked up the 'pen'. "This is the microphone?"

"This is a very powerful directional microphone." He reached into the bag and pulled out another piece of hardware. It looked like a small black box, which is what it was. "And this is the amplifier which takes the microphone's signal and sends it to the earpiece. It will be like you are in the room with Balroneys' gang." Jimmy dropped his head in embarrassment. "Sorry I couldn't get you a recorder, but the only one they had was broken."

Lois smiled and patted him on the arm. "That's all right. I'll just have to take good notes." Lois took a deep breath. "It looks like I'm set then."

"Oh, Lois, one other thing."

"What."

"The microphone has another use."

"Really, what?"

Jimmy grinned. "It's also a pen." Lois rolled her eyes. His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "Okay, so what's the

plan?”

Lois leaned back in her chair. “If I’ve got Balroneys’ movements correct, he and his associates should arrive a little after noon. My appointment is for one o’clock. I’ll show up early and wait. If I’m lucky, I’ll get what I need before my scheduled haircut.”

Lois grabbed the items off her desk and put them back in the bag. She glanced at her watch. If she went home right now, she’d have time to give her absent partner a call.

She missed Clark, but of course she’d never admit that to him. Instead she would regale him with the fact that she was on the verge of breaking a big story... without his help.

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Lois walked into the small shop, her oversized bag over her shoulder. She had to dig out the older purse in order to handle the extra amplifier she carried. Her normal, small clutch purse wasn’t big enough.

There was an older woman sitting in the single chair, and the young woman who owned the shop was just beginning to comb out the woman’s silvery locks. Lois learned that the young woman’s name was Crystal when she made her appointment.

Crystal gave her a questioning look when Lois sat down on the bench placed against the far wall. Lois looked up at her and smiled.

“My appointment’s not till one, but I happened to catch an earlier bus.” Lois made a show out of pulling a notebook out of the large purse. “I’ve got a big presentation coming up so I’ve got a lot of work to do before then.” Lois gave her a bigger smile. “I’ve got a lot of notes to make before then... I’ll be fine.”

Crystal just nodded and turned her attention back to the woman in the chair.

Keeping the young woman in view from the corner of her eye, Lois began to get herself prepared. She clipped the pen to the handle of her purse making sure the microphone end was pointed toward where she guessed Balroneys and his gang would be making their plans.

From her observations of the past couple of days, she’d memorized where the big dining room table was in the residence on the second floor and it’s relation to the shop below. Confident that she had the microphone placed correctly she made sure the amplifier in her bag was turned on. The receiver was already in her ear. She was ready.

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Lois’ frown got deeper. It had been nearly forty five minutes and neither Balroneys nor any of his crew had arrived yet. Crystal was just finishing up with the appointment before Lois’. She wasn’t sure what she should do.

Would it be better to bail now, assuming that Louie and his boys weren’t going to show, or wait it out a little longer? She had to make her choice quickly; Crystal was doing the final comb out of the woman currently in the chair.

Suddenly she heard a noise through her earpiece that sounded like a door opening. Then there was the sound of several voices talking all at once. They’d finally arrived. From the scraps of overlapping conversation she was getting, it sounded like they’d all met for lunch before coming to Balroneys’ place. She hoped that they’d not talk all at once when it came time to discuss their plans.

“Ms. Lane... Ms. Lane... Ms. Lane!”

Lois jerked her head up to see Crystal beckoning her toward her. Blushing slightly she got up and slowly walked over to the chair.

Lois waved toward the shampoo sink. “No need for a wash. I just washed my hair this morning.” Which she had. “And I have a new hearing aid that I had a devil of a time getting in this morning so I’d rather not have to take it out if that’s okay with you.”

Crystal responded with a small laugh. “Shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll just use the spray bottle to wet your hair down. That shouldn’t have any impact on your hearing aid.” Lois could tell that the girl was clearly curious as to why someone as young as Lois was wearing a hearing aid, but she didn’t feel like making up some story. “Well, Ms. Lane, what are we looking to do here?”

“Just a basic trim. Take off a couple of inches to bring it back above the shoulders. Take off the split ends... neaten up the whole thing. No big deal.”

Crystal smiled. “Sure. No problem.”

“Oh,” Lois pointed toward her purse on the bench, “there won’t be any problem with me leaving my purse over there will there? It’s just too heavy to have sitting in my lap during the cut.”

The young woman shook her head. “No, no problem.”

Lois nodded. “Good, besides, I still have a lot of notes for my presentation to work on.”

She placed the pad on her lap and with her pencil began to add to the phony bullet points she’d already put on the paper. Crystal began to use the spray bottle to wet down Lois’ hair and comb out any tangles she might have. Lois shifted her attention away from the young stylist and to Balroneys and his boys.

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Lois had been jotting down notes at a furious pace as she listened in on the gangs plans, using a short hand that she’d made up so that no one could see what she was actually writing if they should glance down. Things were really getting interesting. Apparently Balroneys had some big plans. They spent a lot of time going over the acquisition of a lot of very specialized equipment, and they hadn’t even mentioned what the target was yet.

“Ms. Lane... Ms. Lane... Ms. Lane!”

Lois jerked her attention back to her reality. Crystal was talking to her. It took a moment to focus on that.

“Yes?”

Crystal smiled. “You’re done.” She turned the chair to the large mirror behind them.

Lois looked at herself in the mirror. She looked perfect. Her hair was just the way she liked it. Crystal had done a good job. But she wasn’t ready to go yet. She needed more time. Lois clenched her hands in quick fists before letting out a breath and making a decision that needed to be made.

She smiled up at the girl. “It looks great, but now that I think about it, I think I might want to try it shorter. Would you mind taking a bit more off?”

Crystal nodded. “Shouldn’t be problem. I think I see what’s happening here.” Lois raised her brow. “Ms. Lane, you are obviously someone who has worn her hair the same way for a long time. And it’s a good look for you. But you’d like to try something new but are just a bit afraid to take the plunge all at once. So, you want to take it in stages, see how it looks along the way. Am I right?”

Lois was grateful for the young woman’s reasoning. It would work perfectly. She wouldn’t have to worry about Crystal cutting too much off if she was just doing it a little at a time. This would allow Lois to continue her eavesdropping on Balroneys and still stop the haircut before it got too short.

Lois favored the young stylist with what she hoped looked like an embarrassed smile. “Yeah, you got me. Could you do that for me?”

Crystal smiled. “Sure, I don’t have another appointment until three, so we won’t be rushed.”

Lois answered her smile with one of her own. “Perfect.” She then turned her attention back to Balroneys and his gang, putting Crystal and the haircut out of her mind.

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Lois was excited. She had a great story here. Louie Balroneys and his crew were planning on robbing Star Labs. They were doing the break-in for Intergang, the new syndicate in town trying

to pick up where Luthor had left off. It was a diabolically clever plan that necessitated the use of a lot of state of the art tech toys which apparently had been provided by this Intergang.

Their target was the vault where Star Labs kept their kryptonite. Star Labs was always given possession of any samples of the deadly stuff when it was captured from those who'd wish to do Superman harm. Lois was never comfortable with the fact that the stuff, once captured, wasn't immediately destroyed, but Star Labs had been doing experiments designed to figure out how and why it affected Superman like it did and thus maybe find a way to arm him against its effects.

Since this was so important, Lois had to concentrate on everything the criminals were saying. She had to make sure she got all the details just right. Times and places were absolutely critical. The only way to thwart this evil plan was to get Henderson everything he'd need to bust the gang and make sure they didn't get to the kryptonite. This was going to have to be a job for the Metropolitan Police Department. She didn't want Superman anywhere near that building when this job was taking place though she planned to be there.

Her concentration had been so intense that she hardly registered the fact that Crystal tried to talk to her several times. She barely acknowledged the girl. She just told her 'shorter' and the young woman left her alone. It seemed to work well, because she was able to keep her focus on Balroney and the plans he was laying out. In the back of her mind there was something about a 'change of style' that was mentioned, but she'd just dismissed it with a 'fine' and she was left alone again to concentrate on what was important.

Balroney and his crew were wrapping up their session and Lois was beginning to drift back to her present surroundings when suddenly a buzzing noise grabbed her attention and her gaze snapped onto Crystal and the electric clippers she had in her hand.

Lois looked at the young woman in horror. What was she doing with those! "What are you doing with those!"

Crystal shrugged. "Well, if we are going to go any shorter..." She let her implication hang.

Lois jumped out of the chair and turned quickly toward the large mirror. Her eyes grew wide. She reached up but didn't touch her head. She was afraid to. Her hair was... gone!

Well, not entirely gone, there was still a full head of dark hair staring at her, but the signature Lois Lane bob was gone. In its place was a short cap of layers.

Lois turned to the confused young woman. "What did you do to me?"

Now Crystal was really confused. "I did what you asked. I cut your hair in stages." She shrugged. "Every time I asked what you thought you just said shorter."

Lois closed her eyes for a second and took a deep breath. This *was* her fault. She had set herself up for this and once again getting lost in a story had unforeseen consequences. This time it had not been serious consequences but consequences all the same.

She turned back to the mirror. She bit on her lower lip as she fingered the short dark locks while staring hard at her reflection. She missed her longer hair, but she had to admit that, given the circumstances, it could have been worse.

Actually, her hair didn't look bad. Given a little time to get used to it, she might even come to like it.

She turned back to the bewildered young stylist. "I'm sorry. I just got a bit distracted and didn't keep a close track on what was being done. It's my fault, but I have to say that you did a great job."

She walked over and pulled her wallet out of her purse. She gave Crystal the money she owed and a generous tip. "Even if it's not the cut I came in here for, I think I like it. Thank you for

putting up with my... inattention."

Crystal laughed. "Well, thank you. If it's any consolation, as much as you must have liked your old style, I think you're going to come to love your hair this way. It does suit you." Crystal favored Lois with a wry smile. "I'll bet your boy friend is going to like having access to that long neck of yours."

Lois blushed, then her smile quickly faded. "Omgod, Clark!"  
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Lois was nervous as the elevator door opened up onto the Planet's bullpen floor. The police raid had been a complete success and Lois had a great story. Front page, big headline, the whole deal. But today was the first day Clark was going to be back.

Everyone else had by now seen her new, short hair style. Perry made a brief complimentary comment, then never mentioned it again. Jimmy had a harder time. He tried to tell her it looked good, but she knew he didn't think it was an improvement. Not many other colleagues made any mention of it, which showed her that it really wasn't as big a deal as she first imagined. Except for...

Truthfully, she wouldn't have cared if everyone else hated her short style. There were only two opinions that she really cared about. First and foremost was hers, and now that she had had a couple of days with it, she liked the short style. The only other opinion that mattered was Clark's.

She was worried about that. Men tend to have a blind spot when it comes to women's hair. The longer the better, whether it fit the person or not. Jimmy's reaction was a prime example of that. She knew Clark was not as shallow as Jimmy. If she said she liked it, he would say he was happy for her, whether he liked it or not. But it was important to Lois that she know the truth, not that there was anything she could do about it now. But it might affect how soon she would decide to grow the style out... or not.

She saw Clark sitting at his desk, hard at working typing something on his computer. Suddenly his head shot up and turned toward her. Their eyes locked. Here it comes, the look of surprise and disapproval.

He smiled at her and then turned back to his screen. Lois was shocked. He didn't react at all. Did he not even notice that her hair had been cut?

She marched to his desk and sat down on the corner of it. "Good morning, Clark, I'm glad your back. How are your folks?"

"I'm happy to be back. My folks are good, Lois. They send their love." He looked up from his screen. He smiled at her.

"Congratulations on the big Star Labs robbery story."

Lois frowned. "Thanks."

"So, what's up?"

Her eyes narrowed to mere slits as she glared at her partner. She noticed he was fighting a smile. "You rat!"

He couldn't hold it any longer and broke into a deep, hearty laugh. After a few moments he took her hand in his. "I'm sorry, Lois, I just couldn't resist. Jimmy 'warned' me about your haircut. From his description I expected you see you come in sporting a crew cut or something."

"Yeah, well, Jimmy's Jimmy." Her irritation quickly changed to apprehension. "So, what do you think?"

Clark leaned back in his chair had made a show of studying Lois for several moments. She felt herself grow more and more uncomfortable. Finally she couldn't stand it any more. "Clark!"

He chuckled. "I know you're not going to want to hear this Lois." Dread instantly filled her. "I actually like it. I think the short style suits you."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Men! They just can't tell the truth." Lois leaned closer to Clark. "I really need to know what you really think."

Clark nodded. "Okay."

Before she could react, Clark pulled Lois onto his lap.

“Clark?”

He grinned at her. “I think it makes you look adorable, sexy, and desirable. Do you have any idea what that incredible neck of yours is doing to me?”

“Clark!”

He quickly nuzzled her neck, then pulled back with a sigh.

“Too bad we have to work today. I’d really love to go somewhere private and show you just exactly what I think of your new hairstyle.”

Lois jumped out of Clark’s lap. “Perry!”

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