

**GWENDA
BOND**

Lois Lane

CLOUDY WITH A CHANCE OF
DESTRUCTION



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I cranked the Bunsen burner to high and enjoyed the surge of heat and light before lowering it back to the temperature that I needed to practice my end-of-semester chemistry experiment. It was a shame every class didn't come with at least some possibility of fireworks.

Actual fireworks, not the kind taking place between the couple at the workstation next to mine.

"You're not listening to me," said Sophie, a studious, serious-faced girl who also happened to be a cheerleader. With an irritated swipe, she gathered her tidy brown hair back from her face and into a hair band, catching it in a low ponytail.

"Because I'm not interested in hearing that," countered Mike, her not-so-studious, unserious-minded boyfriend, a benchwarmer on the basketball team. Tall and muscular, he

made no move to help as she began arranging small squeeze bottles beside their sink. "I won't."

"You don't have a choice," Sophie said, finally raising her voice.

Stay out of it, Lois. It's none of your business . . .

Joining chemistry class a few weeks into the semester had come with some advantages—namely, that I did not have to endure a partnership. Not that *any* partner would have been bad. I could have attempted to make at least a short-term friend, even though I knew my Army general dad would accept a new assignment before long and we'd be on the move again.

But I was probably better off alone.

Each lab table had two workstations with a burner, a sink, and the rest of the usual equipment. The other two occupants of my station alternately bickered or flirted their way through every lab, but today they were fast becoming a textbook case of a truly explosive chemical reaction.

"It's over. We're over," Sophie said. She reached out her hand. "Now, pass me the acid solution."

Mike crossed his arms over his t-shirt and scowled. "I'll pass it to you, *if* you take that back."

I rolled my eyes. "Now that's an argument to save a relationship," I said, sotto voce. "I call take backs."

Whoops. So much for staying out of it.

Sophie tilted her head in my direction. "Right? What was I thinking?" Then she leaned forward and picked up a small bottle, presumably filled with their acid solution. "I'll just do our project on my own."

After adding a small amount of liquid to a beaker, she paused. Tiny frown lines emerged on her forehead.

The teacher, Mrs. Turner, came by then, smiling in a tidy white lab coat. "Everything all right here? Lois, you're really okay doing this on your own?"

"I love a challenge," I said.

After witnessing Sophie and Mike's argument, I was freshly thankful I didn't have to put my fate—or my grade—into the hands of anyone else.

Mrs. Turner scanned their workstation. "Looks like you two have a lot of prep work left to do," she said. "Better get to it. I expect a lot from you, Sophie." She moved on to the next group of students.

Sophie continued to frown. She looked at Mike.

"That's right," Mike said. "She expects a lot from *you*. But you can't do it by yourself, can you? You only have two hands. And you need me for the presentation. It's a lab partner project . . . for everyone except Lois Lane here. That means we get graded on how well we do *together*."

Sophie exhaled. "But we *don't* do well together. That's the issue."

"You're wrong," he said.

"Really, Mike," I said, unable to help myself, "you have got to get better arguments. Just saying no and trying to blackmail her into staying with you isn't going to get her attention, not in the way you want. Or anyone else's. It's called 'being a jerk.'"

Mike blinked. "Who even asked you?"

"No one." I shrugged one shoulder. "Unfortunately for you, I've always been on the nosy side."

“Lois has a point. But it’s too late.” Sophie smoothed her hair back behind her ears, and pled with him. “Mike, we’ll still be friends. We *are* friends. You know I need this grade. I have to keep my GPA perfect or I’ll lose my ranking in the class. Dad will make me quit the squad.”

“So, Mike, *don’t* be a jerk,” I said. I honestly thought he wasn’t a jerk at heart, more a hapless clue-needer. “You’re a decent guy, right? Recognize the lack of . . . well, chemistry between you.”

He didn’t respond right away. His gaze flicked from Sophie to me, and back again, eyes narrowing.

I turned back to my own project, measuring out the two powders I’d need in exact proportions, from memory. My experiment was based on a backyard one Dad, Lucy, and I had done a few months ago. To the powders, I would add a liquid compound called puregantum that had been debuted by a famous cleaning company three years earlier and was now widely available. Like most of the world, I’d first seen a viral video showing the impressive but harmless effect puregantum could be used to create, and had been too tempted not to ask if we could try it at home.

Dad also enjoyed a nice, non-harmful explosion. It was one of the few things we had in common.

Finally, I put on my safety glasses and measured out a teensy spoon’s worth from the tall bottle of puregantum. I dumped it into the powder mixture waiting on the burner and *poof!* My materials combined to form a cloud of non-hazardous smoke, a small billow about the size of my hands. In the backyard, our resulting cloud had been significantly bigger, of course.

Meanwhile, little explosions were still happening next to me. Mike said, "Give me one day to get your attention. I'll prove myself to you."

"And you'll help with our experiment?" Sophie asked.

"I'll do better than that," he said.

She held out her hand, palm up, and he handed her another small plastic bottle.

"Combustive reaction averted," I said, switching off the burner so I could stow my materials.

But the smug way Mike smiled made me suspect it wasn't going to be such a simple solution. There might still be fireworks to come.

★

The next morning, when my bus slowed to its stop at the quiet residential neighborhood beside the town's nuclear science research facility, I was surprised to see Mike get on. This was like most of the towns we moved to, except in addition to the military base where Dad was working, there was also this public-private corporate arm that housed various other activities. I hadn't known Mike and I shared the same bus route.

He didn't strike me as a scientist's kid, but he was carrying a small duffel bag with the Atomic Heights National Laboratory logo on the side. Not that parents and kids always shared interests. Other than a taste for the occasional explosion, I was a case in point.

He slid into the seat across from mine without acknowledging me.

“Hi, Mike,” I said. “I didn’t know you rode my bus.”

“Oh, L-Lois, hey.” I noticed that he was holding his body way more stiffly than normal. His back and neck were straight as a wooden plank. “I usually get a lift from Sophie.”

Having dismissed me, he stared straight ahead.

His hands flexed tight on the handles of the duffel in his lap as the bus shifted into gear, lumbering into motion on the quiet street. After they relaxed, he unzipped the bag to peek inside.

I slipped over to the edge of my seat and tried to get a look too. There was some sort of device tucked in there. It was gray, roughly shoebox-sized and shaped. The lab’s atom symbol was on one side . . .

“No!” he blurted, when he noticed me leaning in.

“Good morning to you too,” I said. “What do you have there?”

He swallowed. “A surprise for Sophie. I’m . . . doing what you said. Getting her attention. Making her see . . . that I’m somebody.”

“Mike,” I said, “don’t take this the wrong way, but your judgment hasn’t been the best. Maybe you should show me what you’ve got there and see if I agree.”

He hesitated, and I thought he’d cave. But he pulled the zipper closed.

“No. You’ll get to see it at school with everyone else. With Sophie,” he said, and there was a troubling note of hope in it.

“She broke up with you,” I said, as gently as I could manage.

“That was a mistake,” he said. He glanced down at the bag. “That’s why I brought this. I’ll show her that I’m willing to take a risk for her.”

“What kind of a risk?” I asked.

“I’m going to make sure she gets a good grade,” he said, offering no details on the contents of the bag. “She’ll see breaking up is a mistake.”

The contents of the bag seemed to be making him as sweaty and nervous as the thought of Sophie dumping him for good, but I let him keep his plan secret for now.

“If it’s not a mistake . . . If she stays broken up with you, you have to respect that. Understand?” I waited, watching him.

“She won’t. She’ll finally be impressed,” he said. “She’ll see that I’m capable of coming through for her.”

“Um,” I said, because I doubted it. But the buzz of my phone interrupted before I could figure out if there was any even remotely nice way to say so.

I’d signed on to the secure messenger app my long-distance online friend—a sixteen-year-old I knew only as SmallvilleGuy—and I used to communicate when I boarded the bus. I slid back across to the window to check the new message, leaving Mike to his fidgeting. What was the device he had in the bag? And, more importantly, where did he get it? I hoped he wasn’t going to get Sophie in trouble.

SmallvilleGuy: *Did you see Postman32’s latest post on Strange Skies this morning?*

I tapped out a response.

SkepticGirl1: *Yes. Does he not realize that all dogs bark at mailmen? It doesn’t mean the guy is secretly an alien and dogs are the only people who know!*

SmallvilleGuy: *Now, we don’t know that for sure. :-p*

I usually spent the bus ride to school reading the *Daily Planet* on my phone. I'd never lived in Metropolis, but I needed something steady and the same with all our moves. But sometimes SmallvilleGuy and I managed a few messages. They were almost always questions about if I'd seen the latest posts on Strange Skies, the message board we both frequented (and where we'd met two years ago) devoted to weird sightings and other hard-to-explain happenings. All I knew about him for sure besides that we were the same age was where he lived—Smallville in Kansas—and a few other details he parceled out to me. Nonetheless, he was probably the person I was closest to in the world.

SkepticGirl1: *Speaking of things we don't know for sure, you know that dude-bro in chemistry I told you about? He's got some kind of weird device with him on the bus. Claims it'll make his girlfriend un-break-up with him.*

SmallvilleGuy: *What kind of device?*

SkepticGirl1: *One I'm going to keep a serious eye on. Lot of nuclear scientists around here, y'know.*

SmallvilleGuy: *Keep me posted.*

SkepticGirl1: *Posted! Let me know if dogs bark at you. Maybe you're a secret alien too. ;)*

He didn't respond immediately. But then . . .

SmallvilleGuy: *Dogs love me. Talk to you tonight.*

By talk, he meant chat on our computers, which we did almost every night—in the twin software to what we used on our phones. Both required a crazy long alphanumeric password and had been designed by a paranoid techie genius

acquaintance of his from the boards. SmallvilleGuy claimed he had good reason for his secrecy, and I believed him. At least enough to go along with it.

Mostly. I did ask who he was at the end of every nightly chat. And every night, he didn't tell me.

His sign-off timing was perfect, because the bus was pulling up at school. I gave Mike a wide berth to walk out in front of me, cradling his duffel bag.

I was *not* looking forward to trying to defuse whatever plans he had for Sophie during class.

★

If Mike had been jumpy and nervous on the bus, he was swimming in sweat by the time we got to chemistry. His T-shirt, which read "Go Bombers" and featured the school's vaguely disturbing rocket mascot, was soaked through in several spots.

Sophie, on the other hand, looked relieved that her long-suffering partnership might be nearing its end. She'd already prepared their station, and was frowning in confusion at Mike as he pointed toward the duffel bag.

I went to my own workstation and started to put the things I needed for my experiment out, carefully measuring amounts of the powders while eavesdropping on them.

"Mike, you promised you'd help with our presentation. We can't just switch it now," she said. "I need a good grade."

"This will be way cooler," he said. "Way better. We'll get extra credit, probably. Mrs. Turner won't believe it when she sees it. I did this for you."

“When she sees what? What does it do?” Sophie asked.

Mike let her reach over and pull down the sides of the duffel bag and I got a better look at the sinister shoebox, which was how I thought of it now.

There wasn’t a whole lot to be seen on the outside of the box—a gray rectangle—except for the lab’s atom symbol and a small, fancy keypad and display on the top. The box had a smooth surface with a hard sheen. Shallow seams ran from the corners, like it might open in some complicated fashion. This was obviously a high-tech piece of machinery. *Not* something out of anyone’s garage.

“It makes a reaction,” Mike said, and it was suddenly clear to me from his hesitant tone that he didn’t fully understand what it did. If he even had clue one. “It’s really important and a big deal. I, um, borrowed it so I could show you. The reaction’s something that people have been trying to do forever, basically, and not been able to. Cold . . .”

But before he could go on, Mrs. Turner cleared her throat at the front of the room. Class time had arrived. Unfortunately, since I was now concerned that there was a ticking time bomb right beside me.

Mrs. Turner pointed to the table a few rows in front of ours. “Ms. DeLong, Mr. Garcia, why don’t you go first?”

Everyone else shifted in the direction of the couple, who started in on a presentation about some basic inorganic properties.

My attention returned to Mike and Sophie. He reached out and pushed a few buttons on the machine’s keypad, muttering as he did so, “Five-three-six-one-nine . . . And start.”

A low grumble, like a dragon or some other monster clearing its throat, came from the device. And the smooth surface turned out not to be devoid of markings besides the lab's logo after all—an ominous yellow square with three magenta blades began to pulse on the side nearest me. If I wasn't mistaken, that was a radiation hazard symbol.

"Mike?" I asked, worried, taking a step closer to them. "Why were you so nervous about this?"

"I'm afraid it won't work," he said. "Or that it will? I don't know!"

He was something else.

The screen above the keypad popped to life. With a countdown clock.

3:30 . . . 3:29 . . . 3:28 . . .

My heart was pounding way faster than it ticked off the seconds, hazard symbol pulsing away. We had less than three minutes until whatever it was counting down to happened.

A few classmates glanced our way, but Mike didn't notice. He made a fist-pump and was staring at the machine, but then he looked at Sophie. Who had backed up a step, away from the grumbly growling.

I had a feeling I'd get more useful information from her than him. "What does his dad do? At Atomic?" I asked her.

"He's a scientist," she said. "Nuclear . . . something."

"What does he work on? Has Mike told you?"

The machine made another growl, a deeper one, like it was amping up to a new level. It was already at 3:01 . . . 3:00 . . . 2:59 . . .

“Some kind of fusion reaction,” Sophie said, and she must have known from my face this was serious. “I’m sorry. I didn’t really listen.”

“I don’t blame you,” I said, studying the device. 2:39 . . . 2:38 . . . 2:37 . . .

Before, Mike had said the word *cold*.

I asked them. “That’s what your dad works on?”

“Tabletop cold fusion,” he said. “Right. He calls this his new-style baby cold fusion device. See, baby? Impressive, right?”

His triumphant exclamation and “baby” were clearly meant for Sophie. He waited to see if she was impressed. She rolled her eyes.

“Oh, you really are an idiot,” I said. “Did you take this from his lab without him knowing?”

He blinked. Which was the only yes I needed. 2:20 . . . 2:19 . . . 2:18 . . .

I whipped out my phone and called up the app, thinking fast. I typed in a message:

SkepticGirl1: *What is tabletop cold fusion?*

SmallvilleGuy was into science more than most other subjects, and there were lots of out-there speculation threads on the boards. But would he be logged into the app?

He was. Time zones working in our favor for once.

SmallvilleGuy: *Nuclear reaction at room temp. Theoretical only, tho.*

SkepticGirl1: *Radiation risk? If there’s a hazard symbol?*

SmallvilleGuy: *Possibly. This isn’t about that device?*

Crap. This was worse than I thought. I upgraded Mike from idiot to genuine moron.

SkepticGirl1: *Gotta go.*

I stashed my phone in my pocket and took Mike's shoulders. Several other students were watching us, and Mrs. Turner hissed "*Shhhhh*," before turning back to the presentation that was going on a few tables away.

Oh, yes, I'd love to shush, but I'm afraid we'll all regret it if I do.

The deepest rumble yet came from the machine, followed by a whooshing noise. Something told me that this device had only ever been tested in his father's lab, with people behind lead and in a full complement of safety gear.

1:40 . . . 1:39 . . . 1:38 . . .

Less than two minutes. I needed to get everyone out of this room, stat, if there was even the slightest chance it worked. I had to get the machine shut off.

"Do you know how it works?" I demanded.

Mike shrugged. "I knew the code to activate it, didn't I?"

ARGH. "How do you stop it?"

"The same one in reverse, maybe? And then hit the abort button?"

I went back over the sequence he'd repeated before. "Nine-one-six-three-five?"

"But if you stop it, she won't see. We won't get a better grade."

"If this machine actually works, everyone in here could be fried. No more grades. Got it?"

Mike's eyes rounded. "Really?"

I wanted to throttle him, but we didn't have time to waste. "I am going to try to shut it off. You're going to shut up and do what I tell you. We need to get everyone out of here." But how? How with 1:05 and counting left?

I glanced over at my workstation and saw the answer in a flash of memory, an image of the giant smoke cloud Dad, Lucy, and I had made in the backyard. I hurried over, and pointed to one of the powders. "Sophie, measure out a cup of that and add it."

I turned on my burner to heat the receptacle as she did what I said. Then I added the next powder, and picked up the bottle of puregantum.

"Miss Lane, can you please pay attention?" Mrs. Turner asked.

"I'm trying," I assured the teacher.

"You're next," she said. "Impress me."

I slid on a pair of safety goggles and cranked the burner. I spoke up, "I'll be demonstrating how to make a distracting—if not at all harmful—cloud for you today, via a simple chemical reaction. You may want to back up, however."

I picked up the bottle of puregantum and dumped it in. All of it.

POOF!

Since I'd quadrupled even the amounts we'd used in the backyard experiment with Dad, the reaction was . . . something to see. A smoke cloud billowed forth, quickly spreading to fill the entire room.

The fire alarm started to scream. Mrs. Turner was coughing, but managed to shout, "Go! Everyone out!"

More chaos erupted around us. Students pushed past each other, some hacking, others squealing. Coughing and some light panic were better than radiation poisoning. Things clattered to the floor as they rushed for the exit. Mike and Sophie stayed where they were, staring at me.

I eyed the machine. The hazard symbol was cycling through a round of lights, and I could barely read the display through the smoke.

00:30 . . . 00:29 . . . 00:28 . . .

"You guys need to leave," I told Mike and Sophie.

"Countdown's almost done," Mike said. "I want to watch."

"You giant moron," I said. "Get out."

"Hey," Mike weakly protested.

"I can't believe you," Sophie added. "You thought this was going to *impress* me?"

"Get out of here," I ordered.

Sophie turned, and Mike followed her through the thick smoke. I lost sight of them.

Carefully, oh-so-carefully, I lifted the device down to the floor level, below the worst of the smoke. I wished I had time to do research, wished Mike hadn't been dumb enough to think bringing an experimental cold fusion device from home was a good idea that would somehow impress his actually-smart girlfriend and not in any way endanger the school.

00:15 . . . 00:14 . . . 00:13 . . .

"Here goes hopefully nothing," I muttered. I tapped the numbers on the keypad, repeating them under my breath as I did, "Nine-one-six-three-five."

00:07 . . . 00:06 . . .

“And then—abort.” But which button was Abort? There was one key with a white X stark against the black background of the button. My best guess. I crossed my fingers and hit it.

00:03 . . . 00:02 . . .

The grumbling growling roar stopped instantly, and the countdown clock went blank. The hazard symbol faded back to invisibility, becoming one with the silver sheen around it.

I released a long breath. “No baby cold fusion today, baby.”

Through the hazy air, I fumbled for my messenger bag and stowed the device safely inside it. No way I was trusting Mike to return it.

The hallway was filled with the remnants of my successful distraction. Coughing a little, I dug out my phone, but I couldn’t make out the display until I was outside.

Where I had to take a pause to absorb the fact that the grounds were teeming with students and teachers.

They hadn’t just evacuated our classroom. The entire student body, faculty, and administration was outside.

Oops.

I squinted at my phone display. There were several messages from SmallvilleGuy in the app. I scrolled to the last one.

SmallvilleGuy: *Lois, I'm worried. Text back if you're okay.*

SkepticGirl1: *I'm fine, not cold fused.*

SmallvilleGuy: *What happened???*

Mike and Sophie rushed up to me.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Did you get it?” he asked.

“Yes, and yes,” I said.

“Thank you,” they said together.

“Mike,” I said, “do you understand what you did? Do you know what could have happened?”

His eyes went wide again. “What?”

I took a slow breath. “You could have given everyone here radiation poisoning, maybe worse. Your dad will tell us for sure.”

“You’re going to tell my dad?” he asked, and his shakes were back.

“Yeah,” I said. “We’re going to tell him.”

I was going to have to tell mine too. This was a big enough deal that General Lane would be handy in impressing upon Mike’s father more strongly—if needed—that his lab’s security protocols needed major tightening and that Mike needed to be majorly punished and let a again

“But I swear I won’t ever do anything that dumb again,” Mike said.

“I’m not sure you can help yourself,” I said. “But I bet your dad can.”

“Okay,” he said, defeated. He paused, and then faced his intended. “But Soph, don’t you think we belong together, after everything we went through?”

She shook her head. “No. Way.”

He must have actually gotten that, because he didn’t protest. He said, “Okay. We’ll still be friends.”

I held up a finger to let them know I needed a minute.

SmallvilleGuy was still waiting for a response. But then I spotted my reckoning in the form of an approaching Mrs. Turner. I wouldn't have a minute.

SkepticGirl1: *Fill you in later.*

I slid my phone back into my bag.

Mrs. Turner planted her hands on her hips. "I don't know what kind of presentation that was, but you are in big trouble."

A taller woman in a colorful blouse came to join her, the principal. Funny, I'd avoided her until now. "You did this? Who are you?" she demanded.

Sophie and Mike tensed. I could tell they thought I was about to turn them in. But it didn't feel right to. Mike would learn his lesson at home, and Sophie hadn't done anything wrong. We'd return the device, and at this point, my parents were used to calls home from school. We'd move again soon anyway. Dad wouldn't be happy about it, but he'd ultimately agree that another mark on my record wouldn't hurt as much as word of Mike's stupid stunt getting out.

"I'm Lois Lane, and I guess I just have an explosive personality." I remembered Mike's rationale. "I wanted to get everyone's attention."



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