

CHAPTER ONE



GEMMA

When you slip on a banana peel, people laugh at you; but when you tell people you slipped on a banana peel, it's your laugh. So you become the hero rather than the victim of the joke.

—NORA EPHRON

Karson Zellner is my hero. Not only because he's the police officer who busted into my town house to rescue me from my roommates when he'd thought they were my captors, but also because I'm literally using him as inspiration for the hero in my next script.

He's not aware I'm here, though, because I registered for Citizen's Safety Academy at the door. All to prevent him from finding someone else to teach the class in an effort to avoid me.

As he scans the conference room in search of supervillains, I duck behind my journal. Not because I fit the supervillain profile, but because I'm Lois Lane on assignment.

I peek over the top of my journal.

He's gone back to talking with another policeman by the entrance, so I'm in the clear. There's time to take in all the details that will make my story come to life.

I scribble notes. Karson is about medium height, medium weight, and medium-brown hair, so he's more similar to Marvel's superhero Hawkeye than Superman, but that's not a bad thing. Like Hawkeye,

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he buzzes with an inner strength and intelligence. He's constantly on alert, ready for shootouts, motorcycle chases, and taking down corrupt government agencies.

My heart plays a drumroll in anticipation of the moment our eyes will meet. There's nothing average about his eyes. I'd call them cornflower blue, like the weird crayon in kindergarten that looks darker than it actually shades. In the same way, Karson's light eyes appear darker when brooding underneath his constantly creased forehead and widow's peak.

He's in uniform, of course. I've never seen him without it. Would I even recognize him in civilian clothes? It's as if he was meant to wear a shiny badge, a black button-down, and the thick belt holding all kinds of gadgets.

He stands at the doorway to the modern conference room in the back corner. The officer next to him laughs and shakes hands with the civilians entering the room.

Karson keeps his arms crossed. He's always so serious that it makes me feel flighty and frivolous in comparison.

"Are you hiding behind your diary, Gemma?" asks Charlie from the seat on my left. He's got Ashton Kutcher's good looks but not the smug smile. He's too literal to be smug.

Charlie is only here because he's thinking about directing a documentary on police reform. He doesn't hide from anything and doesn't understand why he's always upsetting people by bringing up politics and religion. I mean, he started a Bible study at one of the most liberal film schools in America. I'm grateful because it brought the three of us together, but occasionally it can get embarrassing.

After we graduated from college, I headed for SoCal with high hopes. I wouldn't say Hollywood ate me alive, but it did try to serve me as an appetizer. One director literally told me I was just another pretty face. So I'm back in Oregon, teaching high school English by day and writing by night. I admit this sounds like failure in many ways, but there are benefits to coming home. For example, the safety of renting a room from Charlie versus sharing an apartment with random roommates found in the classifieds section of the *LA Times*. I mean, if the

police have only been called to our neighborhood because of me, then it's pretty safe.

Kai, our other roommate, sits on my right. "If anyone is hiding, it should be me," he says. He has the deep voice of Keanu Reeves, but his head is rounder than Keanu's. Maybe I should be comparing him to Henry Golding.

I smile at Kai as I recall the moment he answered the door to a cop while I was bound to a chair with duct tape. "You're just saying that because Karson pulled a gun on you."

"Exactly." Kai huffs dramatically enough that he could get a job acting in front of the camera rather than operating it. "Forget the journal and give me a bulletproof vest."

I turn back toward my hero and find Charlie staring directly at my policeman. As I mentioned before, Charlie's not versed in the art of subtlety. I slap his arm. "Stop staring."

Charlie has literally turned his ergonomic seat sideways behind the long tables to face Karson. Charlie twists his body to frown over his shoulder at me. "Why?" His hazel eyes flash with confusion. "I thought you were here to watch him."

"Not like that." Kai answers for me. "You should *never* watch anyone like that."

"Oh," Charlie says, as if this is new information and he's recalling all the past times he's stared at strangers.

I tilt my head to soften the blow. "We want to observe Karson in his natural habitat, and it will be hard for him to act natural if he sees us all staring."

Charlie holds his hands wide, still confused by the try-not-to-stare thing. "He's the instructor. Everyone is going to be watching him once he starts."

I'm not sure I can reason with Charlie, but maybe he'll understand a direct request. "Will you wait until then?"

"Okay." He spins to face forward, folds his hands on the table, and looks around as if he needs to find another purpose. He has too much energy to be good at waiting, so this is probably the best we'll get.

I glance back at Kai with a smirk. I suspect he's making jokes

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about Charlie in his head, but instead of laughing at Charlie, he's narrowing his eyes at Karson.

What in the world? That's even worse than how Charlie gawked.

"I don't know what you see in him," Kai grumbles. "He looks so angry all the time."

"He's on duty." I defend my crush. "Law enforcement officers have a lot of responsibilities on their shoulders."

"Yeah," Charlie agrees, though I'm not sure if he's agreeing with me or Kai. At least he's turned to face us now so he can't stare at the police officers. "I don't think I'd put him in front of a camera. His anger would shine a negative spotlight on the Portland Police Bureau and that light has already been pretty bright. However, Karson's partner might be perfect."

Charlie spins his chair around again, and my gaze lands on the cheerful guy in uniform with biceps the size of Mt. Hood. The man shakes hands and offers high fives, his laughter carrying across the room. He's his own spotlight.

Karson says something to his buddy, and the man claps his hands. "Let's hit it!"

Karson leads the way to the front of the room. His gaze washes over the class, so I should have been bracing for impact, but the moment he spots me, I'm toppled by a sneaker wave. I lose my breath as I'm tossed in the depths of his ocean-blue eyes.

His head swivels, holding our eye contact, while he continues forward. What's he thinking? He doesn't smile, but I knew not to expect joy.

My chest tickles, and I'm suddenly an eight-year-old at Six Flags with my family. Mom had agreed to go on the free-fall ride with me because nobody else would. Strapped in seats, we faced outward, our legs dangling a couple of hundred feet in the air. At the very top, in the seconds before they dropped us, Mom yelled, "I can't believe I'm letting you do this!" I yelled back in terror, "*I* can't believe you're letting me do this!" Then we plunged toward possible death. After the screaming stopped, we got back in line to ride again. There was nothing else as thrilling.

Angela Ruth Strong

Could Karson be feeling the same thing? Is he thinking, *I can't believe I'm letting you do this?* Is he afraid he's about to fall for me?

Charlie grips my arm. "He saw you."

"You think?" Kai quips.

A few of the participants glance our way.

I pat Charlie's hand to hush him.

Karson's cool gaze travels from me to Charlie, then back across me to Kai. He's reached the front of the class, but he keeps walking toward the whiteboard, turning his back on us for a moment. He lifts an arm to run a hand over his short hair.

I curl my toes in my canvas slip-on sneakers.

He pivots to face the room but barely brushes me with his gaze before addressing everyone else. "Welcome. I'm Lieutenant Karson Zellner."

Ooh, he's a lieutenant now.

Charlie leans toward my ear as if he's about to whisper. If only he knew how to whisper. "I wonder if he's become lieutenant because so many cops have been taking early retirement or quitting."

Karson crosses his arms and waits for us to quiet. This time when his gaze meets mine, an eyebrow arches in challenge.

I put the *grin* in chagrinned. He's just so cute when he's one-hundred-percent business. Which I'm beginning to think is always.

Rather than look away again, he narrows his eyes, so I know his tiny headshake is for me.

I feel special.

His eyes roll to the ceiling before he extends an arm toward his colleague. "Officer Drew Harris will be helping me lead this training. Our goal is to educate in order to create a greater understanding of public safety's role."

I sigh with sweet anticipation. I have my summer off from teaching to really focus on writing, and I can't think of a more inspiring way to spend it than right here. Thanks to my new muse, I may even become the next Nora Ephron.

"That's right," Drew chimes in. "During the first four weeks, you'll be here at the police department. Then, for the last four weeks, you'll be training with firefighters."

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Oh, I didn't realize that. I hope Karson has to oversee the firefighting weeks as well.

Karson glances at me as if he'd heard my thoughts and disapproves. "Here at the PPB, you're going to get some experience with self-defense, work with our K-9 unit, and even race our cars through the practice course."

Charlie straightens at the mention of a racecourse. "Seriously?"

"Seriously." Drew nods. "Though you'll have to get through tonight's hands-on training first. And by hands-on, I mean we'll be taking your fingerprints and running background checks."

The class chuckles in response, but I'm too lost in my daydreams of Karson to join in. His eyes bulge my way in warning, and I realize I'm staring. I'm as bad as Charlie.

Karson clears his throat and angles his body so the two of us are not facing each other. "We're simply making sure our trainees are law-abiding citizens. We don't want any trouble here."

I'm pretty sure he's thinking about me again. I can't wait to prove him wrong.

Drew shrugs. "No need to worry if you have minor infractions like speeding tickets or being reported for disturbing the peace when you threw a party in college."

Charlie raises his hand but doesn't wait to speak. "What about if your neighbor called the cops because she saw your roommate duct-taped to a chair through your window, and she didn't realize said roommate asked to be duct-taped so she could practice escaping for a script she's working on?"

Or what about if you have murderous thoughts toward your roommate for bringing up your history with the police in front of your whole class?

Kai turns his head sideways and covers his face as if he's trying to hide. Maybe he'll take care of Charlie for me. Except we both know the dummy truly believes he's helping.

Drew blinks. No doubt he's never had to answer such a question before.

Karson's brooding expression doesn't change, and his arms re-

main crossed. “In such situations”—meaning my situation—“I’ve recommended the actress stick to acting and leave police work to professionals.”

My mouth gapes. How could he think such a thing? “I’m not an actress. I’m a writer.”

Drew’s dark eyes widen in delight. He motions my way. “That was you?”

Both of Karson’s eyebrows arch this time. “Did you or did you not act in the superhero TV show that was filmed downtown?”

So he’d recognized me from the TV show I worked on last summer. I’d only taken that job with hopes it would open the door for selling my screenplay to the director.

Chairs squeak and clothing rustles as everyone else in the room twists to see if they recognize me too.

But what I want to know is, after I appeared, did Karson keep watching the show or turn off the television?

The role wasn’t my finest work. I’d tried suggesting some changes to the writers so they could make it more believable, but then they poisoned my character. Which was actually much nicer than what other writers have done to me.

Ahh . . . poison. The most dignified of murder weapons.

“Yes, it was me,” I respond to both policemen. “But—”

“I thought you looked familiar,” a slouchy guy in the front row interrupts.

The frumpy woman next to him harrumphs. “You said she looked like a Barbie doll.”

I don’t need that kind of judgment in my life. Even if I’m judging her for wearing such crazy bright sneakers. I lean forward against the edge of the table to present my case. “I do a little acting when the opportunity presents itself, but I’m here to learn about police work so I can write more realistic stories.”

“Really?” Karson’s chin raises.

Does he guess that’s only part of the reason I’m here, and he’s the other part?

“Is there anything realistic in Hollywood?”

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Whew. He's not questioning me. He's questioning the whole film industry.

Charlie jabs a thumb to his chest, taking the opportunity for himself. "Actually, I film documentaries, so reality is my focus. I'd love to put together something about the issues you deal with on a day-to-day basis."

"Whoa, boy." Drew gives a loud clap of his hands. "Are you all in the movie biz? What about you, dude?" He snaps his fingers at Kai.

The term "dude" fits. Not only is Kai actually a Hawaiian-born surfer, but he looks like one too, with his shaggy hair and puka-shell necklace. He shrugs his broad shoulders. "I just take pictures."

I elbow him. He should be proud of his art. "Actually, Kai's a cinematographer. He does beautiful work."

More rustling and murmurs.

"All right then." Karson calls our attention back. "Anyone else here make movies?"

I scan the room to see if a producer will out themselves among the twenty or so participants, providing me the chance to pitch my latest script treatment. I may not live in Southern California anymore, but Portland has a few studios and a big indie vibe. Our airport even has a theater where they play shorts for free. But nobody else in the room admits to being in showbiz.

Karson clears his throat. "Now that we know we've got some filmmakers in the class, let me get a few things straight."

I grin at him, excited for whatever he's about to say. Yes, my roomies are filmmakers too, but I feel like he's talking to me personally.

"In real life, police do not shoot bazookas from helicopters like *Rambo*. That would have sent the chopper crashing down. In real life, we do not swing off rooftops on fire hoses while the top of the building explodes like Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*. His character should have definitely died hard."

Charlie smacks a palm on the table. "I've been saying that for years."

"Why are you ruining action flicks for us, man?" demands a biker in the back.

“But”—Karson holds up a finger—“most importantly, in real life, we do not take our shirts off to rescue anyone.”

Is he mixing up screenplay writers with cover designers for romance novels?

He crosses his arms. “If someone were drowning in a lake, I would dive in with all my clothes on to save them.”

Okay, he might have me there.

“I don’t know, Zellner.” Drew’s body shakes as he cackles. “If I looked like Terry Crews, I would take off my shirt.”

The hilarious thing is that Drew does look a bit like Terry Crews.

“Not funny.” Karson holds up his hand to halt Drew’s laughter. “Nobody stops to remove their shirt before a rescue.”

Our class keeps laughing along with his partner. If these guys played “good cop, bad cop,” Drew would be the good cop.

Karson nods at my little group. “If you’re going to write about police, don’t romanticize our job. We give out tickets, we arrest people, and we use our firearms when needed. We’re the ones who show up after a crime has been committed. Nobody wants to see us. Though we risk our lives to protect the public, they often attack us for doing our jobs.”

Charlie jabs at my journal. “Write this down for me. This is good stuff.”

I slide my journal along the table so Charlie can take his own notes. This is one of those rare occasions where life is more fascinating than anything I could write. I’m enthralled. No wonder Karson is angry all the time.

The florescent lights flick off overhead except for one panel in a corner that casts the room in a dim silver glow.

“Lieutenant Zellner is getting a little dark,” Drew jokes. He points a remote control at the projector on the ceiling. “So, since we’re talking about police movies, I’m just going to show you film of what police work looks like in real life. This footage is from body cameras.”

“Yes!” Charlie jots in my journal.

I’ll rip the pages out for him later.

Movement flashes on the whiteboard. An image of the front tire of

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a bike on a dirt trail fills the makeshift screen. “This first recording is from Zellner’s camera,” Drew narrates.

Karson groans. “Not the bike clip. Harris, we talked about this.”

Drew’s laughter drowns him out. I join in, not sure yet what we’re laughing about, just excited to find out what Karson is trying to keep hidden.