



## ARSONIST ZERO

*Karen McCoy*

They didn't call me Zero for nothing. Trust me, the ability to create fire leads to more destruction than accolades. I mean, hell, even Speed Man had trouble going out in public when he was a teenager, and spent most of his time avoiding boredom with arcade games in his mother's basement.

Somehow, though, he'd always made himself understood, could somehow control his powers so he didn't destroy anyone. Something I had yet to master.

I studied all of his memoirs, all the comics people wrote about him, but nary a one had passed on any useful how-tos or secrets.

That didn't mean I wasn't a fan. It wasn't just because of his ability, but his way with people. All the fan accounts I'd read talked about how he gave everyone personal attention, asked people about their pets, or whatever, and always seemed really interested in what his fans had to say, even if they talked about the last time their hamster took a shit.

Maybe I thought Speed Man might understand me too. I'd certainly written him plenty of emails, with no other place besides my computer to shout in silence. And yet, silence is all I got back. With so many fans banging on his door, he probably didn't perceive me as being any different than any of them. Either that, or he had no time. Or perhaps my emails just went directly to spam and he didn't read them at all.

I was tired of being frayed at the ends—not just mentally, but physically too. I considered cutting my hair, but it was the only way to hide from my parents at the dinner table, and dodge their intrusive questions about why I hadn't applied to colleges yet.

I probably shouldn't criticize their over-enthusiasm, I suppose. It was their way of maintaining structure among the chaos I created for them. Especially after the rug caught fire when I was five, or when our

the apartment accidentally burned down when I was 12 and I tried to kill a black widow that wandered in through the empty laundry room pipe. Spoiler alert: the spider survived.

The police were kind, of course. They always were with each incident, especially after I almost burned their office down just by sitting in a chair.

And I was a minor, after all. But that allowance wouldn't last much longer. With my eighteenth birthday coming up, I got antsy, tired of contorting myself into a pretzel just to make other people feel safer. Last month, I started packing a few duffel bags in the hopes of venturing out on my own and making a new reputation for myself. Of course, after I accidentally burned down the downtown hardware store, my father nixed any further employment opportunities, but he still offered me \$15 every time I mowed the lawn. So far I'd collected around \$195. It wasn't much, but it would at least get me a train ticket.

So imagine my surprise, zipping up my second blue bag, careful not to ignite it with the constant sparking from my fingernails, when a red light flickered in the corner of my screen, with an email response:

Hey Arsonist (cool name, BTW),

Sorry for my radio silence. My publicist is always barking in my ear about how I don't respond to my fans enough. I hope you can forgive a busy man who tries to balance the many demands on his time.

I'm having a fans-only get-together at this weekend's SuperCon in San Francisco—VIP, very hush-hush, and not included on the official agenda. Only true fans get an in. If you're interested, reply to this email. Replies will get an encrypted ticket with the time of day on it, to ensure this doesn't get spread to the wide and often tangled reaches of social media.

*Hope you can make it!*

*Keep it speedy,*

*Speed Man*

I read the email a second time, allowing myself to fully drink it in. Speed Man found me. Me, the tiny snowflake among his blizzard full of fans. Me, who only knew how to destroy rather than create. I was worth a top secret, hush-hush VIP pass to talk with the man himself.



## 90 | Book Two: The Underdogs

Without thinking too hard about it, too giddy to question anything, I hastily typed an instant reply and send.

*Thank you so much for thinking of me! I wouldn't miss it for the world.*

*Keeping it speedy,*

*Arsonist*

I thought maybe the “Keeping it Speedy” part was a bit cheese-ball, but it was too late to delete it now. I waited, biting my sparking nails and wincing from their tiny explosions, wondering if my email landed, if I'd made a total ass of myself, and if Speed Man would reconsider and give this rare, bona fide ticket to someone cooler.

The reply was almost instantaneous, and I gleefully printed out the VIP ticket on my computer. The coded ticket resembled the inside of a motherboard, with flattened silver circuits. That meant the conference probably had scanning machines that allowed entry.

I checked online for ticket prices and groaned at the \$180 one-day pass sticker shock. I'd probably have to use my entire savings for a ticket in once I arrived.

Worth it. Leaving for the whole day would be harder, since my parents saw me as nothing more than a ticking time-bomb waiting to go off.

Asking to borrow the car might work best, since they approved me driving within town on rare occasions. Bringing the duffel bags was a no-go though—I still needed to graduate high school if I had any hope in hell of making money on my own. And once I held that diploma in hand (assuming I didn't accidentally burn the thing), I could tell the school counselor who always followed me around with a hawk-eye to fuck off.

So the first thing I did when I sat down at dinner was push back the hair hanging over my pocked face and tell my mother how much I enjoyed her string beans, even though they reminded me of limp shoelaces. She smiled, pleasantly, through her lipstick stained teeth, and offered me a second spoonful. Great.

My dad, however, wiped his mouth, his face lines contorting to a frown behind his napkin. I often wondered if he was happier when he was younger, before those wrinkles weighed down his face. I probably

caused quite a few of them.

"This mean you're ready to talk?" he asked. "Or is it because you want a lock on the door again?"

"Just to talk," I said.

Even my mother didn't buy that. "You know why we can't do the lock. We need to be able to get in there in case you accidentally set fire to yourself."

"It's not about the lock."

My father sighed. "Tell us what it is, so we don't find out the hard way."

"Can't put anything past you," I told him, sure he'd at least respond to a pump to his ego. "I was hoping to get another chance to use the car."

"What for?" Dad asked. "You wouldn't be asking this way if it just the usual car trip."

I couldn't tell them the full truth—a danger like me, around another potentially destructive super hero? They'd never go for it. But perhaps a half-truth would do the trick. Comic books were the one thing I could love without my parents being worried—they didn't care whether comics burned or not.

"I found out there's going to be a conference in San Francisco this weekend," I said. "SuperCon. For comic book fans. I was hoping to go on Saturday."

"Actually, that might work out well," Mom said, surprising us both. Dad's beady eyes narrowed behind his reading glasses in a way that clearly said that there was no obvious way for this to work without the car exploding.

But Mom went on anyway, undeterred, despite her trembling permed curls. "I was hoping to go to a floral exhibit in Golden Gate Park. I could drop Zero off and pick him up when it's done. How long does it last, Zero?"

"Uh. It's kind of all day."

"Oh, then I'll just get a ticket too. Where do they sell them?"

This wasn't going at all as planned. There was no way I was going to introduce myself to Speed Man with my mother hanging over me like an overgrown gnat saying things like, "Yes, hi, this is Adam, but we call him Zero." Ugh.



So I came up with an excuse. "They're sold out already. I didn't want to bring it up to you until I secured a ticket, but they're non-refundable."

Dad threw his napkin on the table. "Really, Zero. Why didn't you tell us before buying it?"

"It kinda came up all of a sudden," I lied. "Really guys, I know you care, but I can't check in with you every five minutes. It's not exactly efficient."

"Efficiency is all well and good," Dad said, "but it's helpful for us to know about the big decisions."

"I'm almost eighteen," I protest, hating that we were having this argument yet again. "I need to be making my own decisions. Especially the big ones. If I keep overthinking them or deferring them to you, I'll never be able to decide anything for myself."

Dad didn't respond. I waited. Mom and Dad stared at each other for so long my green beans got cold. I just left them there on the plate—the jig was up anyway.

"How...necessary is this floral exhibit?" my father asked.

"I promised Felicia I'd drive her there the next time I went to the city," Mom said. "You know how hard it's been with her chemo."

This I didn't know. My stomach dropped, and it was all I could do to keep my hands still and not set anything aflame. Perhaps I should have talked to my parents more. Help them out, maybe. They weren't bad people, even though they were afraid of everything.

Dad sighed. "All right, I suppose. You can go, Zero, provided your mother comes along. Can you swing that, Debbie, along with driving Felicia?"

Mom nodded. "Yes. I'll wait for Zero outside the conference building, or maybe the main lobby at least. In case something goes wrong."

It wasn't ideal, but it would get me inside. "Fine by me," I said, trying my best not to gloat amid the word *cancer*, which still hung in the air like a fungus.

"Then it's settled," Dad said. He picked up his fork, and the meal resumed in silence.



The morning of the conference dawned early, and I still felt unprepared, even though I still had the VIP pass along with my top three Speed Man comics in my backpack in case he was able to autograph them. I'd say they were burning a hole in there, as a metaphor, but I wouldn't want you to think I'd actually be stupid enough to accidentally set them on fire.

In the car, I let Mom drone on as she usually does, but this time I made an effort to listen more. She didn't say anything else about Felicia, but hearing about prized tulips and two-toned roses was a small price to pay for not having anything to say.

Instead of going into the parking garage, she pulled up to the conference center's main entrance. "Go," she said. "I'm going to my show, and you should be fine here on your own. We can meet back here at around 5 or so. Sound good?"

I gaped at her. "I thought you were going to—"

"Oh, Felicia's not sick," Mom said, waving a dismissive hand. "She told me I could make up that story so we could spend some actual time together for once. I never see anyone anymore. So go. It's fine."

"What if Dad asks?"

She smirked, her lips twisted, so subtle she'd probably done it a million times, and I never noticed until now, when it was most important. "Dad isn't here. Go."

I was so flabbergasted I hugged her without thinking. "Thanks, Mom."

She sped off, and I ran inside, straight to registration, and waited in the long line to buy my entry ticket. I peered around, hoping that the meeting with Speed Man hadn't started yet, and I was missing it because I couldn't pay cash online. It was all I could do to not ignite my impatient fingers.

Day-pass and lanyard in hand, I ran up to the second floor, where conference volunteers scanned people's badges into 8-inch screens—each on a stand.

I approached the volunteer, a girl with dark hair, glaring and snapping gum. "Badge, please."



I put the badge on the screen, and it took a few tries before it finally beeped. I then pulled out my printed Speed Man ticket. "I also have this." I put it on the scanner before she could protest, and she shook her head. "Nope. That event's on Sunday. You'll have to come back tomorrow."

"What?" I yelled so loudly that a few people in the adjacent line turned their heads.

"That's on Sunday," she said, more slowly, through more gum snaps, as if I was someone with a brain injury. "You'll have to come back—"

"Okay, fine, I get it," I said, even though I was seething on the inside. In my Speed Man delirium, it didn't occur to me that the ticket could apply all weekend long. I hated it when I didn't think things through. It happened way too often for my comfort. "Where will it be?"

She studied her computer. "Exhibit Room A, looks like."

"Thanks." I snatched my tickets back from her and entered the conference area, checking my map. Exhibit Room A was down the stairs and across main floor, where other people sold comic books and dressed up like Speed Man, Haberdasher Guy and Silver Tongue, among other heroes.

In case you're wondering, Haberdasher Guy and Silver Tongue are *way* overrated. Silver Tongue just paints his tongue silver. It's disgusting.

After running slow enough to ensure I didn't accidentally set anything aflame, I stood outside Exhibit Room A's bright blue doors, noting how they were at least three times my height. I pulled on the silver handles, but they were completely sealed shut.

Of course. What was I hoping for, some miracle? That they were already setting up for Speed Man a whole day early? Fat chance.

I crumpled up my conference map, hating myself. There was no way I'd talk my father into letting me stay the night.

Maybe Mom would understand—especially leaving me here alone for hours—fat lot of good that did, even though I was grateful for it. Would she be willing to stay an extra day in the city with me? Pay for a second ticket?

Probably not. Still, I pulled out my phone and called her anyway.

"What do you mean you want to go tomorrow instead?" was the first thing she asked. Not even a semblance of the smirking woman in

the car remained. "I thought you had a plan. Did you not think it through?"

"I...There was something I was hoping to see, but it's tomorrow instead."

"Sorry, Zero, but I don't think your Dad will go for it, especially if I offer to have us spend the night here. It will blow my cover too. Just have fun today, and I'll come pick you up at five like we discussed."

"But Mom, can't you just tell him that Felicia needs you—"

"He won't care, and my Felicia excuse won't work twice. He wants you home, and safe, as soon as possible. Trust me, Zero. It's easier on us both this way. I'll see you at five." And she hung up.

I was so angry, so frustrated, that I didn't see the heat build in my fingers. My index finger and thumb turned a bright fire-engine red, and started to smoke.

The warmth spread like wildfire, too quickly for me to stave it. When it surged like this, it was only a matter of time before I turned into a human fireball. I started to think maybe, just maybe, my father had been right about keeping me home. Especially when the door puckered, bubbling with heat, and the blue paint started cracking.

I had to step back. Breathe. My veins wouldn't stop pulsating. A part of me—a larger part than I was willing to admit—wanted to see what was behind the door. Probably some other conference session. The perfect place to go out with a bang.

Exploding myself at Supercon would be epic, to say the least.

The metal handle turned a fire-engine red, groaned a bit, and then exploded. A few surrounding people screamed, and a deep voice, too calm to be real, reached my ears.

"That's probably not a good idea."

I couldn't help but jump. "Speed Man?"

"The very same."

I didn't dare turn around. I couldn't let him see the sweat on my brow, the mixture of elation and shame on my face.

"You mind if I fix the door?" he asked.

"Um. Yeah. Go ahead."

In a flash, like an old wind-up movie, he set the handle right, melding together the broken pieces. He wiped his hands, and the doors were as good as new. Most everyone backed away, as if they



weren't quite sure what happened. That's how fast he fixed my mistake.

"You must be Arsonist. I read a few of your emails. When I saw the door ignite from upstairs, I ran straight here, figuring it might be you."

My words felt odd in my mouth, as if they weren't quite sure how to come out. His face was older, more weathered than I expected, like it was made from an old shoe. He wasn't in uniform, which is why he'd escaped my attention and likely why the crowds weren't yet hoarding us. His casual jeans and plaid shirt let him blend in to the throngs of geekery. I probably ran right past him in my hurry to get to a closed door. Classic.

When I didn't say anything, he said, "A power like yours shouldn't be used for evil, you know."

"I...I don't want to use it that way." I gulped.

"But you think you can't help it," he finished.

This surprised me enough to look fully in his eyes now, to see their bright blue shine amid the crinkled lines surrounding them. "You can control yours, though," I said.

"Not always. You see, when you have people molding your words, like publicists, they tend to try and erase the lines you drew that made you who you are. They're really all about the finished product, but it deceives fans, and people like you, who think success comes instantaneously, and then all of you are too discouraged to even try."

I gulped. "You mean—you had trouble controlling your powers?"

"Of course. All people do, even those who don't have anything superhuman. Sometimes it's just controlling anger. Or keeping focus when you fall, and being brave enough to try again."

It was that simple. And that complex. I didn't want to burden him, and I was sure he had better things to do. But I had to ask. "Could you show me? I mean, I know you're only supposed to be here tomorrow—"

"Oh, the event. Right. My publicist set that up."

I deflated a bit. "You didn't answer my email?"

"Oh, yeah, I did...it was just the event that was her idea. I'll show up there and field the usual questions in the way I've been coached...but I think today, I'd rather spend time with a potential friend. And maybe show him a thing or two about harnessing his strengths."

"Thank you," I gasped. My power was a strength. Not a weakness. And now, I'd get even more than I bargained for with my "exclusive" ticket. I let it fall to the ground, where the circuits waved, flimsy among passing feet. Maybe unpredictability wasn't such a bad thing after all.

"You ready?" he asked.

I grinned. "Born ready."

"Then we'll begin."