

NEVER TOO LATE FOR HEROES



A.L. BROOKS



CHAPTER 1

REED SLAMMED HER PALM AGAINST the closet door. “Goddammit!” Why on Earth had she thought she could reach the top shelf without some help?

She groaned as she stepped back and rubbed her now-sore palm on her leg.

Stupid knees. I hate getting old.

A long sigh escaped her lips; she tilted her head back and gazed at the yellowed ceiling above her.

Come on, suck it up and stop being such a wimp.

She turned and walked out of the bedroom to the end of the short hallway. In the narrow store cupboard, she located what she needed and hauled it out. The ladder only had two steps, but with her knees as shot to hell as they were these days, those two steps made all the difference. She carried the ladder back into the bedroom and set it up in front of the open closet doors. Two deep breaths and she was ready to go. The first step up was the easiest, as always, but the second had her wincing in pain.

Stupid knees.

All this for a jacket. If only Mary didn’t insist on them all dressing up fancy on this day each year. Still, Reed noted, none of them had ever defied her. No one wanted to be the one who kicked the puppy. Hence why she was easing her poor knees up a damn stepladder to reach the jacket that only saw the light of day this one day each year. *Come on, get this done and then you can get back to the documentary on the history of Triumph Motorcycles.*

“Where are you, you little shit?”

She felt all around the stuff piled high on the top shelf of the closet. How had it gotten so far back?

Her touch fell on a hint of velvet fabric, and she smiled in triumph. Okay, nearly there. But even with the steps beneath her she couldn't... quite...reach.

She huffed out a frustrated breath. Stupid jacket.

Okay, one more try and if I can't get it, to hell with Mary. She snorted. Who was she kidding; she knew she'd keep trying.

As she braced with one hand against the step ladder, she reached up again to the shelf.

The tingle started in her shoulder blades. Her eyes widened, her body froze, and she nearly fell off the ladder.

"No," she whispered. "How?"

Not daring to believe, she closed her eyes and concentrated on the feeling. It was as if someone were running a low-charge static wand between her shoulder blades.

Just like...

She breathed deeply in and out. Then she focused on the tingles and reached up one more time. If it really was back, then all she'd have to do was push just a little harder and farther and—

The tingles vanished.

"No!" Reed groaned in frustration. She leaned her forehead against the shelf edge and rubbed her arm.

What the hell just happened?

* * *

Later that Friday evening, Reed strolled up to Sunny's front door and knocked loudly.

"Sunny, open up, it's me!" Reed knocked again. She knew her cousin was inside; she heard a chair scrape on the floor, then the clink of a glass. What she couldn't understand was why the infuriating woman wasn't opening her door.

"Gimme a minute!"

Reed folded her arms and tutted. She tapped one finger against her arm and waited with as much patience as she could muster.

Finally, the door swung open and Sunny's scowling face greeted her. The oldest of their group at sixty-eight, her face was the most wrinkled of them all, with deep crevices etched into her cheeks and forehead. She wore

a hideous arrangement of a polka dot pink sweater jacket over mustard-yellow pants.

Reed wondered if it was too late to retrieve her sunglasses from her room.

“I’m nearly ready.” Sunny stepped to one side to allow Reed inside.

Reed entered, and the odor hit her a second later. Something had burned—and recently if she had to guess. “What’s that smell?”

Sunny wouldn’t meet her eye, fussing with her purse at the table. “Nothing.”

“But it smells like something caught fire in here.”

“Must have come from outside.” Sunny gestured to the open window. “Someone smoking, I reckon.”

She’d always been a terrible liar. That smell was *not* from cigarette smoke, of that Reed was sure. And why was Sunny acting so weird about it?

“I just need to finish my make-up,” Sunny said. “Sit down if you want.”

Rolling her eyes at her cousin’s usual gruff tone, Reed inclined her head but didn’t sit. Instead, she waited until Sunny had left the room before beginning her quest to hunt down the source of the stench. There was nothing obvious in the living room, so she moved to the bedroom, making as little noise as she could. The smell was stronger here. It took her a moment, but then it hit her: there was a lamp on each side of the bed, but only one had a shade. And behind the bare lamp, a large smear of smoke damage coated the wall.

What the hell?

She walked to the bathroom and nearly ran into Sunny as she swept out of the small room.

“What happened in there?” Reed pointed to the bedroom.

For an instant, Sunny looked scared. Then her face slackened, and she shrugged. “Nothing. Bulb blew and a spark caught the shade.” She pushed past Reed. “Ready to go?”

Reed followed her, a dozen questions on her lips.

When Sunny turned to face her, the stubborn set of her cousin’s mouth told Reed she’d be wasting her breath. She exhaled slowly. Another time. Or maybe she’d ask Mary—Sunny seemed to confide in her more.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Well, here we are.” Reed raised her glass. “Here’s to six years at Hazy Days, the finest retirement home Missouri has to offer.”

Her three cousins raised their glasses in tandem, then tapped them together.

Reed sat back in her chair and sighed. “Six fucking years. It feels like sixty. Anyone else as bored out of their minds as I am?” Reed cast her glance around at the three of them.

Mary shook her head, a sheepish smile on her face.

“I’d be happy to lend you one of my books,” Val said, her eyes lighting up with excitement. “I just finished reading *Desert Island Passion* and it’s—”

Sunny snorted. “Reed doesn’t have a romantic bone in her body.” Her oversized glasses, as usual, had slipped down to the end of her nose. She pursed her lips. “But yeah, I’m bored too. If I have to listen to Doris Sanders sing ‘Some Enchanted Evening’ on Talent Night one more time, I’m either gonna kill myself *or* her.”

Everyone laughed, even Mary. Doris Sanders, a long-time resident who considered herself the matriarch of the home, had once been in an amateur theater production way back in the fifties. That single performance had left her with the misguided perception that she could—and should—sing in public. The stray cat that had taken up residence in the grounds of the home could be seen running for cover every time Doris let loose her voice.

Reed smirked at Sunny, unable to resist yanking her cousin’s chain. “Her singing’s better than your piano playing.”

Sunny threw Reed an affronted glare.

Val shook her head. She’d been quiet for a couple of weeks now—that is, more quiet than usual. Kinda worried looking, too. Reed had kept meaning to ask her if there was anything wrong, but there never seemed a good time. Now certainly wasn’t it, not with the others around. Val was almost the same age as Sunny but looked a lot younger. She’d always carried her years well, although Reed knew her hip was really getting her down these days.

“Don’t start, you two.” Val narrowed her eyes at Reed and Sunny. “Let’s not have anything ruin the evening. You know Mary’s been looking forward to it all week.”

Mary was always the nicest one, the carer of the group, always looking out for her cousins and doing anything she could for any of them. Tonight, their anniversary dinner, she was all dressed up in her best Sunday dress, the deep blue one with the white cat embroidered over her left breast. She'd always had that little bit extra class, and Reed couldn't help smiling at her.

"That reminds me!" Mary threw up her hands. "I bought all y'all a little gift to mark the occasion." She delved into her purse and produced three small packages. Each was a blue fabric bag, tied at the neck with bright yellow ribbon.

"Aw, you shouldn't have." Val smiled widely at Mary. "But thank you!"

They opened their bags and *oohed* and *aahed* over the contents. They'd each received a small enamel brooch with a different woodland scene embossed on the surface.

"Thanks." Reed patted Mary's hand. "You know, you seem to be the only one of us who's ever truly settled here."

Mary's cheeks pinked a little. "Well, maybe. I guess I was always the one who hated all the traveling around. I wanted to settle down." She shrugged and gestured to the rest of the room around them. "And I know it isn't quite what y'all had in mind, but I can think of worse places to see out our days, that's for sure."

Reed looked beyond Mary's outstretched arm to take in the large dining room of Hazy Days, the residential home where they'd all lived for the past six years. It was plainly furnished but had bright pictures of all kinds of flowers on the walls. The big windows looked out onto well-tended grounds, where birds flitted between the trees and bushes and some folks were already out taking their post-dinner walk. The home was large, airy, and open in general, the rooms well appointed, and Reed realized she had to agree with Mary's assessment. Yep, it wasn't *that* bad.

"I know," she said quietly. "I guess it's just... It's not quite where I thought we'd end up. Not after everything we did for all those years."

"Beats that motel in Lubbock we had to hole up in, back in seventy-five," Sunny said with a wry smile.

Mary leaned in. "Oh my, yes!" Her shoulders shook with mirth. "The guy that owned that place? I wish we'd have had time to figure out his game and teach him a few lessons."

“Hell yes.” Val kept her voice low but nodded vigorously. “There was something very wrong with that man.”

“You ever wish we could go back to some of those places? Tidy up what we had to leave behind?” Reed asked, also leaning in close. This was not a conversation the other residents of Hazy Days needed to hear.

“Always,” Sunny muttered grimly. “I know we did a lot, but...”

“Yeah. But.”

Almost as one, they all reached for their drinks once more and downed the remains of their sodas and juices.

“Anyone interested in a *real* drink?” Sunny set her glass down with a loud thud. “Somewhere a little more private where we can reminisce some more?”

“You’re on.” Reed stood as quick as her damn knees would allow. She waited while her cousins all took the time necessary to heave their old and broken bodies upright, then motioned for Sunny to lead the way.

“Y’all go on first,” Sunny said. “I need to stop by the concession stand for some snacks. I’ll catch you up.” She fished in the pocket of her revolting sweater and handed a key to Reed. “Let yourselves in and get the drinks started. Mine’s a bourbon, two fingers. Hell, make it three.”

CHAPTER 2

THERE WAS SOMETHING VERY ODD about Miss Sunny Power, Dana Chapman had decided.

Dana was a nice girl. She'd been brought up right by her parents, and she didn't go around thinking folks were odd just to be spiteful. But there was something very strange about the resident of room 221 that Dana could no longer ignore. Sure, Dana had only worked at the Hazy Days Residential Care Home for a little over two months now, and maybe that was a short amount of time to really lay a judgment on someone. Especially someone as old as Miss Sunny, who normally would command Dana's utmost respect.

But Miss Sunny was...odd. There were no two ways about it.

From her position half hidden behind the cart loaded with clean linens, Dana nibbled an already short fingernail as she watched Miss Sunny feel her way toward her room with one free hand, the other tightly clutching three large bags of chips. The skin of her pale fingers looked ghostly white against the beige walls of the hallway that led to the four rooms on this floor. The big glasses perched on her nose were apparently no help to her for finding her way. Dana wasn't really sure why Miss Sunny used them; she was obviously as blind as a bat, forever bumping into furniture and walls.

She wore, unsurprisingly, an outfit that made Dana's eyes hurt. Most days Miss Sunny looked like a four-year-old had dressed her, and today was no exception. Although, the bright pink of the polka dot sweater did contrast nicely with her dark, shoulder-length hair. It was surprisingly lustrous for a woman of her advanced years, a thought Dana had kept to herself whenever she'd combed Miss Sunny's hair for her. She seemed to like it, humming quietly to herself while Dana worked, and Dana herself had found it strangely soothing. It wasn't in her contract, not written

anywhere on her duty sheet, but it was something she'd offered, late one day toward the end of her shift, and Miss Sunny had accepted, and now it was something Dana tried to do for her whenever she could.

It was while brushing out Miss Sunny's hair last Wednesday morning that Dana had spotted the mark on the wall of the living room, right up high where it met the ceiling, near the window. About the size of a baseball, it was black, and round, but had jagged edges. Almost like something had burnt the wall, but just in that one spot.

"Miss Sunny, what's that?" She'd pointed at the mark with the brush.

Miss Sunny's eyes narrowed, becoming hard and cold, as if infuriated that Dana had asked the question. Then she smiled, and nodded, and turned back into her harmless little-old-lady self. "Nothin' for you to worry about, Dana. Nothin' at all."

And Miss Sunny had reached out a hand to the brush and guided it back to her head, and Dana, after a slight pause, had continued the task and tried very hard to put that fearsome expression out of her mind.

Miss Sunny had now reached the door to her room and pushed it open.

Dana relaxed, glad that Miss Sunny had made it back without toppling over or crashing into anything. Then she stiffened as Miss Sunny snapped her head around and stared directly at Dana, as if she could actually see her, which Dana knew was surely impossible.

A slow grin formed on Miss Sunny's face, and she tilted her head for a moment before she turned back to the door, pushed it open, and stepped into her room. The door shut with a loud thud that matched the timbre of Dana's heart thumping behind her ribs.

* * *

"Gin!" Mary slapped her cards down on the table.

Val gasped then slumped back in her chair. "Goddammit, how do you keep doing that?"

"What do you mean?" Mary glared at her cousin, insulted at the insinuation. "It's called *skill*." Mary always enjoyed her Tuesday card night with Val, but somehow Val didn't seem to feel the same way.

Val snorted. "Skill, my ass. You stacking the deck again?" She grinned, and Mary knew she was only teasing.

Mary poked out her tongue and picked up her pencil. “Now, let me see. That’s twenty-five for gin, right off, then you got a fistful of kings and queens. Oh my, there’s so many I don’t think I can count that high.” She chuckled and licked the end of her pencil before jotting down a number on the slip of paper in front of her. It wasn’t in her nature to brag, but playing gin was something she was good at, and she always enjoyed the buzz of the win.

“Shut up, wiseass.” Val flicked her fingers in her glass of water, shooting an arc of droplets all over Mary’s score sheet.

“Hey!” Mary snatched the sheet out of firing range, which only seemed to make Val try harder to flick yet more water.

They both froze as the glass sailed across the room, fully thirty feet, and smashed against the far wall above the piano.

Val glanced around the recreation room in a panic.

“Don’t worry, all clear,” Mary murmured after she too had taken a quick look around.

They stared at where the pieces of glass glittered on top of the piano.

“Shit,” Val said.

Mary let that cuss go by. It was, after all, a rather serious situation. “Uh-huh.”

Val slowly eased herself out of her chair and ambled across the room. After picking up the trash can from beside the door, she walked back over to the piano, her steps slow and measured. She carefully scooped the pieces of glass into the can.

“That’s three times this week, ain’t it?” Mary asked quietly.

“Uh-huh.” Val wasn’t looking at her.

“Should we tell Reed?” Mary’s voice was still quiet, but she added a little firmness to it. It was Val’s choice, surely, but... She wished Val would meet her eye. This was getting serious, and they really needed to talk to Reed.

But Val waited until she’d finished clearing up the glass before slowly turning back to Mary. “Yup, we’ll tell Reed.” Val sounded weary. “Over breakfast tomorrow, when Sunny’s with us too.” She narrowed her eyes. “She tell you what happened Friday night, before we all met for dinner?”

Mary nodded.

They were silent for a while, staring at each other across the table, the cards strewn on its surface.

“What do you think it means?” Mary’s voice shook.

Val didn’t answer, and once more she wouldn’t meet Mary’s eye.

* * *

Reed cursed as the bar of soap slithered out of her hands and over the side of the tub. Why did they have to make the stuff so damn slippery? She sat upright; her skin instantly prickled with goose bumps as it met the cooler evening air wafting in through the open window. She prepared to haul herself to standing but stopped short at the strange tingling in the ends of her fingers.

The tingles became an ache, and she gasped.

Then she reached and stretched, and she didn’t know whether to laugh or cry as first her fingers, then her hand, then her wrist and finally her forearm, all elongated and thinned. Soon her fingers were three times their normal length and her arm just over four feet. Heart pounding, she easily grasped hold of the soap that lay on the floor and lifted it.

Then she gasped again as her fingers, hand, and arm snapped back to their regular length and the soap shot across the room to land somewhere behind the sink.

“Ouch! Motherfuc—”

She rubbed at the arm and wrist with her other hand, the pain screaming through her tendons and skin.

How was it possible? She sat back in the bath, her brow creasing as her brain went into overdrive. There had been that one hint of it last Friday, when she’d been trying to find the anniversary dinner jacket in the back of the closet. But apart from the tingles in her shoulders, nothing had happened. Not like this.

Reed stared at her hand, flexing the fingers. Was she imagining it, or did it feel slightly stronger, somehow, in spite of the pain?

She closed her eyes. Surely that was wishful thinking. All of that was in the past, wasn’t it?

But if it was, how did she explain what had just happened when she’d reached for the soap?

Sighing, she sank back into the water.

Probably best to keep this incident to herself. No point in getting anyone else’s hopes up.

CHAPTER 3

GEENA HAD JUST BROUGHT THE cup of coffee to her lips when Agent-In-Charge Hank Lacey yelled from across the room.

“Agent Fox! I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Sighing, Geena placed the cup down on her desk and swiveled in her chair to face the approaching man.

Hank Lacey, who was head of their office here in New York, was tall, well over six feet, and broad-shouldered. He still looked like the linebacker he used to be, even with the greying temples. He was also scowling, and that was never a good sign.

“Been here all morning, sir.” The lie slipped easily from Geena lips.

“Huh. Must have kept missing you on bathroom breaks.” He glanced down at her coffee cup. “Or visits to Starbucks.”

“That must be it, sir.” Geena smiled, the fakeness of it nearly cracking her face. What the hell did he want?

He reached her desk and leaned against the partition that separated it from the next cubicle. He rarely visited her space and looked uncomfortable in his surroundings. However, his suit was immaculate, the white shirt perfect, the red tie as straight as an arrow. The picture-book AIC. Mr. Poster Boy. He made her want to vomit.

“So, Fox, I’ll get straight to the point.”

That’ll make a nice change.

“As you know, you’ve been partner-less for quite some time now. Funny how that keeps happening.” His scowl deepened. “But today is your lucky day.” He stepped to one side and gestured behind him.

Standing in the doorway to the room was a young woman. She shuffled from one foot to the other, a wan smile on her face, an over-large purse

slung over one shoulder. Her honey-blonde hair was tied up in a neat ponytail. Petite in stature, maybe only five-four, she was dressed in a suit that didn't fit as well as it should. So, either a cheap outfit from a cut-rate department store or borrowed.

Geena's gaze drifted back up to the young woman's face, then cut across to meet Lacey's stern demeanor.

"What is she, twelve?" Geena asked, acid in her tone.

Lacey grinned. It didn't suit him. "Twenty-five."

Geena glared at him. "Seriously?"

Lacey straightened, and the grin slid off his face like ice cream melting in the New York summer heat that currently blistered the pavements outside.

"Agent Leigh Walker is your new partner, as of today." Lacey leaned in, and Geena detected the scent of onions on his breath. *Really? At eleven in the morning? Ugh.* "I expect you to treat her with the respect she deserves." Geena snorted and made to speak, but Lacey cut her off. Dropping his voice to a harsh whisper, he said, "Her father is Randall Walker. You might have heard of him."

Geena stared at her boss. "Oh, well, that's just fucking great. Sir."

Lacey shrugged and straightened again. "Show her the ropes. Let her do the six months, then maybe you'll have earned a real partner."

Without another word, he turned on his heel and marched back across the room.

"Asshole." Geena frowned at his retreating back. The frown didn't shift even when Agent Leigh Walker stepped into Geena's line of sight, her smile still wan, her entire posture screaming 'nervous as hell.'

Summoning every ounce of upbringing she once possessed, Geena calmed her features, relaxed her tense shoulders, and stood. Her five-nine towered over Walker and forced the younger woman to a rapid halt as she stared up, something like awe on her face.

Oh, great. She knows all about me and she's going to be another one of those little suck-up groupies. Fuck you, Lacey.

"H-Hello." Walker held out her hand.

It was small, and as Geena clasped it—the manners autopilot kicking in—she received a nice little surprise in the strength it contained. After the obligatory three seconds, Geena let go, but her perceptions had already shifted. A little. "Hey."

“Agent Fox, it’s an honor to meet you.” Walker’s eyes were wide and shining.

“Yep, I’m sure it is.” Geena stepped back and sat back down, motioning to the small visitor’s chair her cubicle contained.

Walker sat, carefully stashing her purse beneath the chair, then smoothed out both her jacket and pants before meeting Geena’s gaze again.

“How long since you graduated?” Geena stared at Walker. She couldn’t help it; it was kinda fun intimidating the crap out of her.

Walker straightened in her chair and earned another silent kudos point from Geena. “Eight months. I just finished my first rotation.”

“Where?”

“Traffic.”

Geena just about held back the laugh. Traffic was where they sent the lowest of the graduates first, the ones who only just scraped past the qualification point in the final exams. Hell, this was going to be a long six months. Still, it explained why Walker had been assigned to her and this dead-end role. After all, everyone knew Geena’s time was nearly up, and that’s why she’d been dropped into this backwater of a job for the last six years. Ever since—

Nope. Not going there.

“Okay. So you’re here for six months. They tell you anything about what I do?”

Walker shook her head, her ponytail swishing. “No. Just that you run a unique, one-woman department and that you needed a partner.”

Okay, so half of that statement was true.

Geena leaned back in her chair. “Well, a lot of what I do I can’t tell you. National security and you don’t have clearance.”

Walker’s bright expression dimmed a little.

Geena almost felt sorry for her. A thought started to form. Why not? It would get Walker out of her hair, and she could go back to doing what she did best: as little as possible until that pension kicked in. “But you can still be useful.”

“Whatever you want me to do, Agent Fox. I’m really eager to learn as much as I can.”

God, was I ever like this?

Geena swiveled her chair back to face her desk and started rummaging in the pile of files to the left of her computer. As she extracted the file she needed, she took a deep breath in anticipation of the little stab of pain that was sure to hit as she opened it.

Yep, there it was. She resisted the urge to rub at the place where her heart hid behind her ribs.

The photo was tattered around the edges from all the times Geena had held it between her fingers. Its subject, a dark-haired woman with deep brown eyes, looked straight at the camera, a broad smile on her face, the smile that always made Geena's stomach flutter and her knees go stupidly weak. She wanted to linger in her looking, soak up every inch of the visage she held, but she also knew that was utterly pointless.

"Here," she said gruffly, handing the photo and the file to Walker. "Missing person. We need to find her. I can't say why." She flicked a few of the pages in the file until the one she needed came into view. "These are all the reported sightings in the last two years."

Walker looked down at the paper and then up again with a frown on her face. "Two sightings? That's all?"

Geena nodded.

"And the first one is already checked off." Walker's slender finger tapped against the big red cross against the note in the file.

"Yep."

"Okay." Walker smiled widely. "So, road trip. Cool. When do we get started?"

Geena snorted and slumped back in her chair. "*You* get started as soon as you can get a pool car signed out and gas card lined up. They gave you your credit card for hotels, et cetera, yes?"

"Wait, you mean... I'm going on my *own*?"

Geena couldn't tell if Walker looked scared or excited. Probably both. "Hey, it's a nice easy intro, and you'll get to prove to me how you can handle a solo assignment right off the bat." *And I get to stay home and catch the Mets game tonight.*

Walker puffed up so much it added almost four inches to her seated height. "Agent Fox, you won't regret this. I promise." She stood abruptly, grabbed her purse off the floor, and stuffed the file into it. "I'll leave right now."

“Good. You do that.” Geena handed over her card. “Call me once you get there, then I want check-ins, oh, let’s say every four hours.” If nothing else, that would give Walker something to do on what was surely a wild goose chase down in Virginia.

For a moment, she thought Walker was about to salute; she snapped to attention and her right arm made a movement upward before she stopped it and then simply grinned.

“Thank you so much for trusting me with this. I won’t let you down.”

She scampered away, her ponytail flapping violently as she did so, and Geena groaned, dropping her head back against her chair and staring unseeing at the ceiling above her.

Jesus. H. Christ. Save me.

* * *

Leigh Walker’s heart pounded as she scurried down the corridor toward the exit. A solo assignment! On her first day! Agent Fox trusting her with this made her chest swell with pride, and her breath nearly caught in her throat as the emotion overwhelmed her.

Agent Fox. *She* was working for Agent Geena Fox.

Fox was a legend at the agency, and tales of her exploits were talked about in reverent tones at the academy and in the after-training drinks at the local bars. Leigh had listened, enraptured, as trainees a year ahead of her in the program had rushed over themselves to divulge all the stories they’d heard. None of them knew which ones were true, but given Fox’s reputation, they could all have been. Had she really single-handedly disarmed three Russian agents in the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge while the morning traffic zoomed around her? Probably. Had she really sprinted the length of that pier in San Diego with a soon-to-detonate bomb in her hands and launched it into the bay before it could explode and kill hundreds of people? More than likely. And had she really managed, some years ago, an all-female team of superheroes who quietly stopped many villains in their tracks before the rest of the world even knew about them?

Leigh snorted as she reached the elevator. Hm, maybe *that* was one of the more far-fetched stories that you needed to take with a pinch of salt. Still, that took nothing away from the fact that, whatever the real stories

were, Agent Geena Fox was everything her reputation said about her. And now she, Leigh Walker, was her right-hand woman. What an honor.

She knew some people thought Fox was past it, but Leigh didn't care. Yes, Fox was quite old now—fifty-five, she thought someone had said, so thirty years her senior—but you only had to look at her to know she still had that steel inside. Her short hair still looked as if it had its natural blonde without any help from a bottle, and her figure was still trim. And her eyes... Leigh swallowed at the thought of them: piercing blue, a color so deep you felt if you looked for too long, you'd be lost forever.

Shaking her head free from that thought, Leigh pressed the button to summon the elevator and waited impatiently for its arrival. The list of things she needed to pack ran through her mind, and her excitement ratcheted up another notch. Where would she stop on the way to Virginia? It was about a seven-hour drive, so while she could feasibly do it in one day, there was nothing to stop her making an overnight there and back. Agency policy allowed for that in any trip longer than five hours.

The elevator arrived, and Leigh stepped in. She grinned at the shake in her hand as she reached to press the button for the lower level where the pool cars were held.

“Deep breaths, pumpkin,” her mother would tell her as a child when she got over-excited about something, and Leigh followed that advice now.

She scanned the file again as she breathed. The information was thin, to say the least. In the front was the very short list of sightings with the photo clipped to the top. Behind that was the standard information sheet used for a ‘person of interest.’ So, the woman wasn't a suspect in anything. Come to think of it, Agent Fox hadn't exactly been forthcoming about why Leigh needed to find this woman. And what was she supposed to do if she did find her? Heat stole across Leigh's cheeks as the elevator announced its arrival at the lower level and the doors sprang open. She hadn't even asked, had she? She'd been so keen to accept a real assignment she had completely forgotten to ask any questions about it.

Groaning, Leigh exited the elevator. The garage level was cool, with muted lighting and an atmosphere that smelled of gas, oil, and exhaust. Her nose wrinkled as she walked toward the shack in the center of the space where the car-pool attendant was based.

Fox probably thinks I'm a complete idiot.

Leigh almost groaned aloud again.

Agent Fox wouldn't be the first. *Everyone* thought Leigh was an idiot, even her own father. She wasn't the smartest trainee; she knew that. She also wasn't the fittest or the fastest, and yes, she knew she'd only got her chance at the agency because of her senator father's connections to the top brass. But she knew, deep down, that she could do this. If nothing else, she had the determination to succeed, and she *would* find a way. She just needed the right opportunity, and surely, working for the legendary Agent Fox would be just that opportunity.

Wouldn't it?

On shaky knees, she walked the final few yards to the open door of the shack and cleared her throat to get the attendant's attention.

"Yes?" He stared at her, his gaze flicking over her badge as she held it up.

Hoping her voice wouldn't fail her, Leigh said, "I need a car. Please."

He grunted and heaved his bulky body out of his rickety chair, which barely looked like it could support him, and shuffled over to the key rack. After grabbing a set of keys, he reached for a clipboard that hung on a hook on the adjacent wall and thrust it at Leigh.

"Fill this in. Sign here, here, and here." His chubby finger stabbed the page in the appropriate places.

Leigh did as she was told, with alacrity. Once she'd handed the board back to him, he held out the keys.

"The Ford in bay twenty. Bring it back in one piece," he said, as she grasped the keys. "Or else."

She blinked rapidly, nodded, and turned away.

"Damn rookies," he muttered behind her, but she kept going, her heart back to pounding again, her palms sweating.

But not, she realized, because of the man's gruffness and attitude.

She grinned. Nope, her body's reactions were for the adventure she was about to take. Her first real live assignment.

"I've got this," she whispered to herself under her breath. "I have *so* got this."

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

NEVER TOO LATE FOR HEROES

BY A.L. BROOKS

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