

Excerpt - Brake Failure – Alison Brodie

That afternoon, Ruby parked outside Shady Acres. She couldn't wait for Sheriff Hank Gephart to ask her out on a date. Then she could tell him she was married. Ha!

He sat in reception. In full uniform. Why couldn't he have changed into civilian clothes? Now he would make her look like an offender - or was that his intention? Just because she'd put a few scratches in his police car.

'Hi, Ruby.' He stood up, crushing a plastic cup in one hand and tossing it in the bin.

She stared pointedly down at his belt. 'Are you going to put me in handcuffs?' she asked sarcastically.

He winked. 'Not if you're good.'

Ruby blushed. Why was it that every time she gazed into his eyes, she felt as if a hand was pressing down on her chest? She was only thankful that once she started reading to the old lady, Sheriff Gephart would go.

The receptionist was busy dealing with two elderly gentlemen, so Ruby and Sheriff Gephart had to wait to sign-in. Ruby felt strangely jittery in the big man's presence. She only wished he wouldn't stand so close. She inched further along the reception counter and, wanting to hide her nervousness, started squaring up the brochures into neat piles.

He came closer. 'Ruby, I don't like you mixing with Hells Angels.'

She felt his warm breath on her cheek. 'Is there a law against that?' Refusing to look at him, she picked up a brochure and found herself reading about incontinence.

'No, but-'

'Then, presumably, I have the freedom to choose with whom I associate?'

'Yeah, but I'm warning you-'

Warning you. Angrily, she grabbed up another brochure and flicked through it at speed, false teeth and hearing-aids flashing by. 'Why do you have to be so aggressive? Why can't you say, "*may I suggest?*"'

'Okay.' He rested his arm along the counter and leant towards her. His eyes were blue, very blue. '*May I suggest you keep away from them?*'

'No, you may-!' She stopped abruptly. A matronly nurse was hovering beside them.

'Well, Hank,' the nurse said gaily. 'Is this your lady friend you've been telling us about?'

He beamed down at Ruby with proprietary pride. 'It sure is.'

‘I’m not his lady friend,’ Ruby mumbled.

‘Nice to meet you, Ruby,’ the nurse said. ‘I’m Amy.’ She beckoned with a finger as if tempting two small well-behaved children to an exciting treat. ‘If you want to come along, Mrs Amstruther is waiting.’

As they walked along the corridor, Ruby noticed two pretty nurses break off from their conversation to study her. She sensed that Gephart had been gossiping about her. She caught up with Amy, determined to quash whatever rumours were flying around. ‘I am not at all familiar with Sheriff Gephart.’

The nurse stopped at a door and knocked. ‘I love your accent.’

Ruby persisted. ‘I have merely bumped into him on various occasions.’

‘We know.’ The nurse winked and opened the door. ‘You two go on in.’

As Ruby spluttered indignantly, Gephart took her by the elbow. ‘Mrs Amstruther?’ he called. ‘I’ve brought my friend to meet you.’

‘Come in, come in,’ a quavery voice replied.

Ruby stepped across the threshold and froze.

Mrs Amstruther was blind.

The old lady was sat up in bed, dressed in a faded, flower-print bed-jacket, her eyes wrapped in bandages; her skin appeared almost translucent, the pink skull showing beneath a mop of dazzling white hair. She smiled sweetly, reaching out a tentative hand.

Ruby felt a pang. Mrs Amstruther shouldn’t be here; she should be in a cottage-garden in Devon with a wicker table laden with a cream tea and a vase of freshly cut delphiniums; and surrounded by her grandchildren.

‘Dear Hank,’ Mrs Amstruther murmured. Ruby stepped forward, and put her hand in the old woman’s. ‘Hello, I’m Ruby.’

‘Oh, how *lovely* to hear an English voice! You’re so kind, Ruby; volunteering to read to a boring old lady like me.’

‘It’s my pleasure.’

‘Hank didn’t bully you, I hope?’ Mrs Amstruther said in mock gravity.

With an ache of sadness, Ruby gazed down at the old woman so far from home - a home she would never again see. Ruby realised the childish bickering between her and Gephart was pathetic. The discord she had brought into the room, evaporated. ‘I didn’t need to be bullied. I was delighted with Hank for asking me.’

‘Do take a seat, Ruby, dear,’ the old woman said.

Ruby pulled an armchair closer to the bed. The room was sunny, the walls covered in framed photographs of children at the seaside. Beyond the window, at the far perimeter of a vast lawn, a freight train rumbled passed, the melancholic blast of its horn fading into the distance.

Mrs Amstruther's hand was searching the rumpled bedding. 'Ruby, could you possibly read a few pages of *Wind in the Willows*? My son loved it when he was little.' She brought out a book from under the covers. 'It's so annoying not being able to see. Thankfully the bandages come off at the end of the month.'

'So it's not ...?'

'What, dear?'

'Permanent?' Ruby asked, taking the book.

'Oh, no, it's just cataracts; the curse of old age.'

Ruby, discovering the old woman would recover her sight, felt a lightness of spirit; felt she could embrace all her fellow beings - including Hank Gephart. He was standing, studying the photos on the wall. Catching his eye, she smiled at him, tilting her head towards the door, a silent message that he could leave.

He wrinkled his brow, evidently unable to gauge her meaning.

She tried again, running her fingers through the air towards the door.

He gave her a stupid look.

'Are you going?' she mouthed silently.

He nodded to signify that he understood. Then he shook his head, walked over to the armchair by the window, sat down and rested his hands squarely on his knees.

He was obviously staying.

'Have you ever read *Wind in the Willows*, Ruby?' Mrs Amstruther asked.

'Yes, years ago.'

The old lady laughed. 'Mole is delightful, isn't he? Who is your favourite character?'

'Toad. I loved it when he dressed up as a woman to escape the police.' Ruby instantly regretted the words. 'Of course, I don't *identify* with Toad,' she added hastily, forcing herself not to look at Gephart. 'I just think he's a loveable rascal.'

'Isn't he just!' Mrs Amstruther settled back to enjoy the story, and Ruby began:

“The Mole had been working hard all the morning, spring-cleaning his little home ...”

Why is P.C. Plod hanging about anyway? Surely he's not interested in riverbank creatures.

“First with brooms, then with dusters; then on ladders and steps and chairs, with a brush and a pail of whitewash till he had dust in his throat and eyes and splashes of white-wash all over his black fur, and an aching back and weary arms ...”

He’s staring at me; I know he is.

“Spring was moving in the air above and in the earth below ...”

This was too much! Ruby glared at him. ‘Haven’t you got a murder to solve?’

‘What?’ Mrs Amstruther jerked in confusion.

Ruby was appalled by her thoughtlessness. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, Mrs Amstruther, I was talking to Hank. You see, I don’t want to keep him from his *work*.’

He folded his arms across his chest and grinned. He was obviously taking delight in her embarrassment. ‘I’m off-duty,’ he said.

For the sake of the old lady, Ruby had to speak sweetly, but there was nothing stopping her from raking the man from head to foot with hostile eyes. ‘Do you always wear uniform when you’re *off-duty*?’

‘I do when I haven’t had time to get to my locker and change.’

She couldn’t bear to look at that smug face a second longer. She snatched up the book and continued to read. “Spring was moving in the air above and in the earth below-” She stopped in confusion, her cheeks a fiery red.

‘Oh, I’ve read that bit already.’

She could sense him laughing at her. *And he was!*

He stood up, his eyes dancing mischievously. ‘I’ve got a feeling Ruby can’t concentrate with me here. I’m flustering her pretty little head.’

Her relief that he was going was rapidly replaced by horror. That awful man was insinuating she fancied him! As he passed by, he bent and kissed her on the cheek. ‘I’ll be waiting for you in the lobby ... Sweet Cheeks,’ he said softly, squeezing her shoulder.

Wide-eyed and apoplectic, she watched him walk to the door.

‘He’s such a lovely man,’ Mrs Amstruther said after he had gone.

Ruby couldn’t trust herself to speak.

‘The nurses say he’s very handsome. Is he?’

Ruby was still pinning the door with a look of fury. ‘O-h-h, you don’t want to know what I think.’

She picked up the book, her decision made.

She was no longer angry; in fact, she was rather jubilant. Like any institution, this building would have a goods delivery entrance. Well, Gephart, she thought complacently. You're about to have a long wait because Sweet Cheeks, here, is going out the back.

#