



To Sketch A Thief

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Chapter 1

Ghosts don't make the best business partners. The thought scrolled through Rory's head like the news crawl on CNN. It was an old loop of news that found its way to the forefront of her mind at least once a day. Some days a lot more often. What had cued it up this time was the latest email to pop into her inbox: "You fixin' to live out there?" The note was signed "Zeke," as if she might have received similar questions from any number of people.

"I'll be in soon," she wrote back, stopping herself before she could add, "You need a hobby." The problem was that *she* was his hobby -- she and the investigative firm she'd started that bore both their names. Whenever her patience with him was wearing thin, she reminded herself that Mac believed without reservation that the success of *his* PI firm had been due in large measure to the experience and canniness of Ezekiel Drummond. And to be fair, she had to admit that the marshal had been helpful, maybe even pivotal, in breaking the double murder case that had launched their strange partnership.

The trouble with Zeke sharing her business life was that he also shared her domestic life in the old Victorian home Mac had left her. She could hardly blame him, since he seemed to be pretty much stuck in that haunting ground. Yet whenever she'd suggested he look for the light that might lead him out of his limbo, he'd become enraged and would say only that he wasn't going anywhere until he knew for sure who'd shot him in the back more than a hundred years earlier. Rory had given up trying to convince him that having such information would be worthless, given that whoever the player or players might have been, they were all long dead themselves. Since Zeke was not without common sense, she was sure that there had to be another, more profound reason why he was hanging around. A reason he hadn't as yet felt inclined to share with her.

She opened the back door and walked into the kitchen, nearly plowing right through the marshal, who had chosen that moment to materialize a few feet from the doorway. She slammed to a stop, the bucket, weeder and gardening gloves flying out of her hands. She teetered there on her toes for several moments, doing an impression of an awkward ballerina, before regaining her balance enough to back away. She'd come close to touching him a dozen times before. Sooner or later her luck would run out. She didn't let herself dwell on what the encounter might be like,

although she supposed it could range anywhere from a yawner to a Ghostbuster-like sliming. She'd find out when it happened and she wasn't in any hurry to rush that moment.

Zeke, on the other hand, having no doubt experienced the mixing of mortal flesh and spiritual ether at some point during his long tenure there, had stood his ground, obviously enjoying her discomfort. His lips were canted up in a sly smile, his moustache twitching with suppressed laughter. Above the sharp planes of his cheeks, his dark eyes twinkled with mischief.

More than once she'd thought of asking him what it felt like, but each time she'd decided against it, since it was likely to be a very different experience depending upon which side of the veil one was on.

"What happened to making the lights flicker before you appear?" she demanded instead, hoping to wipe the grin off his face.

"There wasn't exactly time for that. First you weren't here, then suddenly you were. I'm a ghost, not one of those sidekicks, you know."

"Psychics," Rory muttered, sidestepping around him to retrieve her gardening things. She usually found his trouble with modern vocabulary endearing, but she wasn't feeling very charitable after being the target of his amusement. "Yeah, too bad about that. A psychic would be more useful and less inclined to startle me."

Zeke's smile only widened. "I'm pretty sure I would still be inclined to startle you. It just wouldn't be as easy."

Rory slipped her hands into the thick gloves as she walked out of the kitchen. "I'd love to stay and trade barbs with you, but I have a date with some weeds."

"You surely do know how to hurt a fella," he said, following her down the hall to the front door. With practice over the summer his hitching gait had improved so that he no longer resembled an actor in a flickering silent film. Although his stride wasn't completely fluid yet, it was good enough that the casual observer might think he suffered from a touch of arthritis or the lingering effects of a sports injury.

Before meeting Zeke, Rory would never have guessed that a ghost might have problems approximating the walk of a mortal. For that matter, before she met Zeke she would never have guessed that ghosts actually existed. She still hadn't confided in anyone that she lived with a departed soul who hadn't completely departed, let alone that she had a business relationship with him. Her mother was a worrier who didn't need the additional concern that her daughter had bought a one-way ticket to a room with padded walls and bars on the windows.

Her father, who generally left the worrying to his wife, would have reached for the remote in much the same way that a toddler might reach for the comfort of a pacifier. Of all Rory's relatives, Aunt Helene was the only one who might be counted upon to take the mention of a ghost seriously. Her eyes might bulge out of her eye sockets, and she might stumble over all the questions that sprang into her mind, but she would treat Rory's claim with respect and an eager desire to meet her ghost.

There were times when Rory so longed to have someone, anyone, in whom she could confide about Zeke, that she nearly called Helene. What invariably kept her from reaching for the phone was the fact that Helene was notorious for not being able to keep a secret.

The only other person Rory had considered telling was Leah Russell, her mentor and colleague when she'd worked for the police department and still her dearest friend. They confided in each other about every aspect of their lives. Zeke was Rory's one holdout on her and she actually felt guilty about it, as if she were hiding some dirty little secret. Yet she couldn't

quite bring herself to say the words out loud. Leah would surely want to believe her, try to believe her, but Rory was afraid that their relationship might never be the same.

Of course the easy solution would have been to invite Leah and her family over for a meet and greet. It would be hard... no, it would be downright impossible to deny the existence of Zeke if the rugged, six-foot one lawman were to materialize in front of them. But the marshal wanted no part of it.

"I'm not some damned ol' rodeo nag you can trot out to entertain folks," he'd said harshly.

"I don't see what the problem is. You certainly didn't waste any time trotting yourself out to meet *me*."

"That's different. You're sharin' this place with me, same as Mac." His face had been set hard, his jaw clamped down in a way that let her know it would be futile to pursue the issue any further.

"You gonna be long?" Zeke asked once they reached the front door.

"I doubt it. It's hard to garden in the dark."

"That may be true, darlin', but when you make up that mind of yours, there's precious little that can change it."

Look who's talking, Rory thought, struggling not to say it aloud. It was sometimes just easier to let him have the last word. She paused at the coat closet to pluck her denim jacket from its hanger, then she unlocked the front door and went outside.

After depositing the gardening tools beside the farthest flower bed, she pulled on her jacket and got down to work. She'd been tugging away at the weeds for no more than fifteen minutes when something unpleasantly cold and wet slid across the back of her neck. She whirled around and came face-to-face with a huge dog, gray and white and shaggy as a yak. She could barely make out its eyes through the cascade of hair on its face. The dog seemed delighted to see her. His plumed tail wagging madly, he wriggled closer to lick her face, miscalculated the distance and sent her sprawling into the flowers.

She sat up, laughing and brushing off the loose soil that was clinging to her. The dog seized that moment to slather her face with his wide, raspy tongue. When she reached out to hold him off, her hand hit the metal tag hanging from the collar in the thicket of fur around his neck. Leaning closer to read what it said, she bought herself another bath in doggie saliva.

According to the tag, his name was Hobo and he lived at 9 Cooper Street, a mile or so away. His name fit him well. He looked like a dog without a nationality or a pedigree. He had the coat and bulk of a bearded collie, but he was also clearly part Samoyed or husky or one of a dozen other breeds, because his ears stood up straight, just the tips folded over as if caught in genetic indecision. Rory doubted there'd been a pureblood of any kind in his family tree for many generations.

"Hobo," she said, "what are you doing all the way over here?" He cocked his large head to one side and then to the other as if that would help him to better understand what she was saying. The tips of his ears flapped up and down with each movement, adding to his quizzical expression.

"Are you lost, boy?"

Rory braved another look at Hobo's tag, hoping there was a phone number. She found it on the reverse side, and since Hobo had paused for a snack of pansies, she managed to avoid any additional moisturizing.

She reached into the pocket of her pants, pulled out her cell phone and dialed the number. The phone rang five times before it went to voice mail. It was possible that Hobo's owner was even now out looking for him. She left a message along with her number and weighed her options. If she lived alone, specifically without a ghost who had developed an aversion to dogs, she would have invited Hobo inside while she waited to hear back from his people. As it was, she decided to drive him back to his home and wait there for someone to return. The flowers would have to wait another day to be rescued. Of course, a good third of the pansies were no longer an issue, since they were already making their way down Hobo's digestive tract. It was a good thing she'd planted edible flowers.

She stood up, grabbed the dog's collar and headed toward her car in the driveway. Apparently Hobo enjoyed car rides. As soon as he saw where they were going, he took the lead and Rory had to run to keep up with him. She opened the door and the dog bounded in, taking up most of the back seat.

"Be a good boy. I'll be back in a second," she promised, shutting the door. She went into the house, slowing down just enough to maneuver around Zeke.

"What's goin' on with that dog out there?" he asked with a sour look on his face.

"He must have gotten out of his yard," she said, grabbing her keys from the bench near the stairs. "He has a tag with his address, so I'm just going to take him back."

"You oughta just let him be," Zeke grumbled. "He'll find his way home sooner or later."

"He could run into the street and be hit by a car or something," Rory said, surprised by his reaction. "What do you have against dogs anyway?"

"Dogs and I don't get along well since I cashed in my flesh and bones."

"It's not like I'm asking *you* to drive him home," she said with some attitude of her own. She pulled the door closed behind her and ran back to the car.

Hobo had smeared the side window with drool in the two minutes she'd been gone. She turned on the engine and opened the window enough for him to stick his muzzle out, but not enough for him to think about jumping ship. And off they went.

She found Cooper Street without a problem. The houses, all brick and clapboard Cape Cods, were set closer to one another and to the street than in the area where she lived. But they were well-maintained and inviting, lawns mowed, bushes trimmed, woodwork freshly painted. She turned into the driveway at number 9 and parked behind a Honda Civic. "I think we're in luck," she said to Hobo. "Looks like someone's home now."

She opened the car door and was immediately trampled by Hobo, who'd jumped into the front seat in his zeal to get out first. He made a beeline for the front door. Rory ran after him, hoping he wouldn't be distracted by a squirrel and take off on another jaunt. As she rang the bell, she noticed that the door had been left ajar. Hobo didn't waste a moment. He trotted right inside.

Rory waited on the cement stoop for the owner to respond to the bell. A minute passed. She called out, "Hello, anyone home?" No answer. She stepped inside and found herself in a small, neat living room. She called out again, but the only sound was the clicking of Hobo's claws on a floor somewhere in the rear of the house. Having decided she'd done all that social protocol demanded, Rory followed the noise through the living room and dining room to the kitchen. There she found Hobo whimpering and licking the ashen cheek of the middle-aged woman who lay sprawled on the floor in a dark pool of blood.