

excerpt from  
*Sketch Me If You Can*

by Sharon Pape

Even as Rory was jumping up from the couch, she was taking aim at the man in the chair. In spite of her trembling hands, she managed to keep him firmly in her sights. How could the shadowy product of her imagination actually exist in the harsh glare of the lamp? The bogey man was never in the closet when you finally built up the courage to look. And the monster was never really under the bed, even if you were sure you could hear it breathing. So why hadn't this shadow simply evaporated in the light, leaving her to laugh at her own foolishness? But there he was in her crosshairs and what made it even worse, he seemed perfectly relaxed and comfortable in spite of her obvious advantage over him. In fact, she thought she detected a bit of a smile on his lips as if he were just fine with the way things were going.

Rory felt anger quickly overtaking shock. "Who the hell are you?" she demanded, her voice strong and steady even though her insides were quivering.

"Ezekiel Drummond," he said, in a drawl that was a mixture of southern and something else she couldn't immediately place. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Ma'am." He dipped his head as if he were introducing himself at a polite social function.

"You can drop the phony act, Mr. Drummond. Just tell me how you got in here and why you've been sitting there watching me."

"Phony?" he said, effecting a stricken look. "And here I was doin' my best to be charmin'."

Rory was in no mood to engage in witty banter with a potential rapist or murderer. "Just answer the questions."

"Well, you were sleepin' so peaceful, it didn't seem right to wake you,"

"But the breaking and entering-- that part seemed all right to you?"

"Now hold on a minute there," he said, "or we're goin' get off on the wrong...."

"Too late," Rory interrupted. "So this is how we're going to fix that. You're going to get up very slowly and take that gun out of your holster and drop it on the floor. Then you're going to kick it over to me and put your hands on your head. Don't even *think* about trying anything funny."

"Yes, Ma'am," he said as he stood and followed her instructions. He was tall, an inch or so over six feet, with rough hewn features, deep set blue eyes, an unruly thatch of dark

hair and a thick moustache. What really caught Rory's attention was that he appeared to be dressed for a party with a Wild West theme. But the clothes hadn't come from any costume shop, they were well worn and not recently laundered. He had on brown pants and scuffed boots, a long sleeved white shirt that was on its way to yellowing at the collar and cuffs and a vest with the tin star of a lawman. Even the gun in his holster looked like an authentic Colt single action. He could have walked straight out of any number of old TV or movie westerns.

He drew the gun slowly out of the holster and let it drop to the floor. It landed on the hardwood without making a sound. Rory assumed that in her current state of mind and with the racket that her heart was making in her chest, she simply hadn't heard it. But when she glanced down to see where it had fallen, it was nowhere in sight.

"What did you do with the gun?" she snapped, cocking her own weapon.

"It's gone. Seemed like the best thing to do under the circumstances."

"Gone? What the hell does that mean?"

"For a pretty little lady, you sure like to use that word *hell* a lot."

"I'm not finding this the least bit amusing, Mr. Drummond. And in case you've forgotten, I'm the one holding the gun. So in less you want to test my patience or my accuracy, I suggest you start answering my questions."

"Okay, okay, no need to go gettin' yourself all in a lather."

*In a lather?* Rory tried to remember the location of the nearest psychiatric hospital, because it was becoming more obvious by the moment that Ezekiel here, if that was in fact his name, had taken an unauthorized leave of absence from a well padded cell where he spent his days rounding up cattle rustlers and heading up posses. But that still didn't explain what had become of the gun or how he had managed to break into the house to begin with.

"The gun wasn't real," Ezekiel said with a shrug of his shoulders. "I made it up."

"You can't just make up a gun or think one away for that matter." Unless... "was it some kind of hologram?" That seemed like the only plausible explanation, but holograms required equipment and she was fairly certain there was no equipment of that nature in the house.

"Hollow gram?" Ezekiel said, rolling the word around in his mouth as if he were trying it out for the first time. "No Ma'am, can't say as how I know what that is."

If he wasn't crazy, he was sure one damned good actor. Maybe somebody put him up to this, she thought, seizing on the possibility with relief. She worked with a few young detectives who loved practical jokes. She didn't know why she hadn't thought of that sooner. But even as she was warming to the theory, she realized that not even the most socially inept among them would have orchestrated a prank like this so soon after her uncle's passing.

She was back to where she had started. Her arms were tiring and starting to shake with the weight of the gun. She wished she'd taken handcuffs with her, but she'd left them behind in her other purse, since she couldn't imagine any use for them while she was cleaning out Mac's place.

She had to put more distance between herself and her uninvited guest. She ordered him to sit down in the chair again and she back stepped carefully until she could perch on the arm of the couch and rest her gun hand on her knee.

She knew she should call 911 or her own precinct house. She should have done it right away for that matter, but she'd wanted to have some kind of handle on the situation before she made the call. She didn't want to sound unhinged, even if she was feeling like Alice in free fall down the rabbit hole. She'd try one more time to get a sensible answer out of him. Then, whether or not she succeeded, she'd call for help.

"I'm still waiting to hear how you got in here, Mr. Drummond," she said, temporarily putting aside the matter of the vanishing gun.

"Well now, the truth is that I never actually left."

"All right, then *when* did you gain entrance to this house?" Was it possible that he'd been here since yesterday? Was he the shadow she'd thought she'd seen in the bedroom doorway? The shape she'd seen in the window last week? A chill leapt up her spine and she steeled herself to keep from shuddering. It wouldn't be wise to show vulnerability.

"You really expect me to believe that you don't know?" Ezekiel no longer sounded amused. "Mac said he'd make sure you knew. And one thing about Mac – he always kept his word." His tone was accusatory and Rory actually felt herself squirm under his suddenly baleful gaze.

"What exactly am I supposed to know?" she replied sharply, determined not to be put on the defensive. Her unwelcome guest knew Mac? Had talked to him about her? It didn't seem possible that this encounter could become any stranger.

Ezekiel ignored the question, a frown working over his eyes. "He said he'd put it all down on paper so that there'd be no misunderstanding," he muttered as if he were trying to make sense of this apparent lapse on Mac's part.

Rory realized that he could still be playing her. He might have seen the notice of Mac's death in the obituary column. Her dad had listed his brother's full name along with the nickname that most people knew him by. But even if this assumption were true, she still had no idea what the intruder's motivation could possibly be, which brought her right back to the question of his sanity.

Okay, time was up. From her perch, she grabbed the portable phone from its base on the side table adjacent to the couch and dialed 911. *Oh my Lord, the letter!* Before anyone could pick up, she clicked off and set the phone down again. How on earth could

she have forgotten the letter? The one Friedlander had given her; the one that Mac wanted her to read as soon as possible. She'd put it into the manila envelope with the rest of the papers, but she'd been so busy trying to tie up Mac's affairs that she'd forgotten to read it. It was still in the envelope on the passenger seat of her car. It was hard to imagine any explanation that would make sense at this point, but she had to give Ezekiel the benefit of the doubt before turning him over to authorities. For all she knew, Mac had given the man a key to the house, which would at least answer one of her questions.

"Mr. Drummond," Rory said, rising. "I have to get something that I left in my car. With any luck, we should have this whole thing sorted out very soon." She wasn't ready to admit that she might be at fault in this encounter. "But I have to make sure that you stay put for the next few minutes."

The only door in the house that could not be opened from the inside was the coat closet that was tucked beneath the staircase. Rory marched her unwelcome guest across the room to it with the gun at his back. He walked with a peculiar gait that was jerky and poorly coordinated as if he suffered from some neurological problem.

She opened the closet door and switched on the low wattage bulb that illuminated the cramped space and Ezekiel, although still clearly disgruntled, stepped inside without argument, which in retrospect should have set off some alarms in her head.

She retrieved the envelope from the car and took it back inside with her. But before she sat down to read the letter, she went back to the closet to assure her prisoner that she would soon be letting him out.

"Mr. Drummond, are you okay? It will just be a couple more minutes."

There was no response.

"Mr. Drummond?"

Nothing. He couldn't have used up the oxygen in the closet that quickly. But if he were claustrophobic, he might have fainted. Rory drew the gun out of her pocket where she'd temporarily stowed it and cautiously unlocked the closet door. It was a shallow closet, and without clothes hanging from the single pole, it was immediately clear that Ezekiel was no longer in there.

She spent the next twenty minutes going through the house in search of him. She had no idea how he had managed his escape, but it was just one more unanswerable question to add to the growing list of them. Once she was certain that she'd checked every conceivable place in which a man over six feet tall might hide, she decided that he must have slipped out of the house while she was retrieving the letter.

She locked all the doors and windows and reset the alarm, and when the house was as secure as she could make it, she sat down on the couch with her gun beside her and opened Mac's letter.