

## Chapter Three

Waking to find Zeke watching her from a chair was like a replay of the night they'd first met. Of course, back then she'd been frightened, angry, bewildered and a whole host of other emotions, all reasonable enough when confronting one's first ghost. But after a year of sharing her home and her life with the

marshal, he no longer had the power to scare her. Not even in his blackest moods. Still, it made her uncomfortable to know that she was being watched while she slept, unaware and so completely vulnerable.

"I flickered the lights, but you kept right on sleeping," Zeke said before she could protest that he hadn't used the agreed-upon signal to let her know he'd be appearing.

"What are you doing here?" Rory asked, groping for the switch on the bedside lamp. When she turned it on, the sudden brightness was so painful that she had to close her eyes again until they had a chance to adjust.

"I was hopin' you could tell me, darlin'. The Navajo police called and left a message for you. It didn't sound much like a social call. How did you get yourself in trouble so fast?"

"I didn't get into any trouble, for your information," she bristled. Sleeping those few hours hadn't done much to alleviate her fatigue or the irritability that had hitched a ride on it.

She couldn't imagine why the Navajo police would have called her home number unless Helene had meant to give them her cell number and mixed the two up. She'd certainly been upset enough to make that kind of mistake. In any case, it seemed that Zeke had a legitimate excuse for dropping in on her. The phone was still out of the question for him. Whenever they'd tried it, she'd been treated to a scream of static that threatened the integrity of her ear drum. Although he could manage e-mail and texting, he grouched about it, saying that when he asked a question he didn't want to sit around and wait for the answer like back in the days

of Morse code. He'd become a spoiled brat of technology, go figure. Rory didn't usually argue the matter. She'd learned to pick her fights with the marshal, and this one wasn't worth the hassle.

"So you're sayin' Helene's the culprit?"

"More like one of the victims." Rory told him the bare bones of the story as her aunt had related them to her.

"Page, huh? I didn't get that far north much," Zeke said, after expressing his condolences, "but I sure heard stories about how fast those slot canyons can flood. You say this Preston fellow was the only death?"

"According to Helene."

"Was he gettin' on in years?"

"He was only in his forties and looked like he was in great shape."

Zeke looked at her with a wry, little smile tugging at his moustache. "Great shape, huh? Would that be a professional sketch-artist's opinion?"

Rory ignored the remark. "Why were you asking about his age?"

"Well, I imagine there were some older folks on the tour a lot less fit than this Preston fellow, yet he's the only one who died."

"Maybe it was a matter of where he was in the canyon when the flood hit."

"Maybe, but something about this just don't sit entirely right with me."

"I don't see how his death can be attributed to anything more than a random act of nature," Rory said to stanch the speculation. The marshal might be feeling chatty, but she hadn't set the alarm for three a.m. to practice the art of conversation.

"I've known stranger things to happen. There was this one time—"

"I appreciate the message service," Rory said as pleasantly as her sleep-deprived mood would allow, "but this really isn't the best time for a visit. I need to get up to Page to make sure my aunt is as fine as she claims to be."

Since her cotton nightgown was neither skimpy nor in any way revealing, she threw back the covers and climbed out of bed. It was obvious that for a moment Zeke thought he'd be treated to a more interesting sight. His disappointment with the gown's utilitarian nature was plainly written across his face. It occurred to Rory that if he'd played poker when he was alive, he must have lost a lot more often than he won.

She grabbed her clothes from the overnight case and excused herself to use the

bathroom, with a reminder to Zeke that he wasn't welcome to join her in there. Back home, he wasn't allowed in her bedroom either, but she couldn't very well blame him for joining her in the motel bedroom, since that was all she had at the moment for receiving guests.

After she'd changed, she ran a comb through her hair, which had grown over the winter from a neat auburn cap that framed her features into an unruly set of layers that turned and twisted every which way, not unlike Medusa. Her hairdresser had told her on more than one occasion that she ought to take advantage of the fact that she looked best with short hair. According to him, she was one of the lucky few whose features didn't need camouflaging or balancing. Rory didn't agree with him. With her one dimple, she thought she looked about as unbalanced as one could be, and as far as she knew there was no hair style to correct that particular deficiency. In any case, since she had neither the time nor the inclination to fuss with her hair on a daily basis, she was going to have to let him have his way with it. Somehow it had been easier to schedule such things when she'd worked the regular hours of a police sketch artist. Once she opened Drummond and McCain Investigations, her work hours seemed to eat up each day in its entirety.

When she emerged from the bathroom dressed and ready to leave, Zeke was still sitting in the armchair. Although he seemed to be staring at the cheap print of Sedona that was hanging over the bed, his eyes were unfocused, as if he were actually looking inward instead.

He turned to her. "I'd sure as hell like to take the ride with you," he said wistfully, "but I'm nearly out of time." His record for remaining intact when he traveled beyond the house was presently in the fifteen-minute range. Since he hadn't yet shown signs of erosion, Rory figured he must have arrived shortly before the alarm went off. Thank goodness he was at least being reasonable about his limitations. She had enough on her mind without having to worry about a passenger who was shedding body parts. She could just picture the faces in the cars that came alongside them as the marshal started to disintegrate. No amount of creative lying could explain away a sight like that.

"Once you're back home, we're goin' to have to work at increasin' my endurance," Zeke intoned, as if it were a right guaranteed by the Founding Fathers and protected by the Constitution.

Well, so much for being reasonable. Considering that he needed her cooperation for any traveling practice, she thought he could have phrased it more like a polite request than a demand. Hadn't he learned by now that she didn't respond well to orders?

She tucked her toiletries and nightgown back into the overnight case without

comment. Discussions about his traveling always seemed to end in arguments, and this particular one was likely to follow suit. The bottom line was that she didn't want him to increase his traveling time. Fifteen minutes was more than adequate in her opinion. At home she lived with the potential of his appearance pretty much 24/7. Even happily married couples needed time apart.

“Did you come up with anythin’ useful in Tucson?” he asked, perhaps believing that her silence meant she’d acquiesced on the matter of traveling.

Rory didn’t answer immediately. She was distracted by his right foot, which had become translucent, as if its molecules were flying apart. She watched it shimmer for a few seconds like air caught in a heat wave before evaporating completely. Zeke seemed unconcerned about the loss, but Rory still found the process unsettling. Had he been more wraithlike to begin with, it might have been easier for her to accept this lack of cohesion. But at his optimum the marshal appeared as whole and solid as any mortal, and mortals weren’t in the habit of dissolving into thin air no matter how low their energy levels sank.

Knowing that he might wink away at any moment, Rory gave him a quick rundown of her library visit, ending with the fact that Helene’s distress call had come before she’d had a chance to track down Abner Jensen.

Zeke frowned. “I don’t see what help he would be anyhow.”

“The librarian seemed to think there might be old papers or journals in the house that could prove useful. Of course, she had no idea what I was actually researching. But with all that’s happened up in Page, I’ll have to make another trip out here to follow up with Abner. Preferably minus an acting troupe.”

She was surprised to see Zeke’s body stiffen. “I’m not interested in anythin’ more than the name of the coward who shot me in the back,” he said tersely, “and I don’t believe this Abner fella would have that sort of information.”

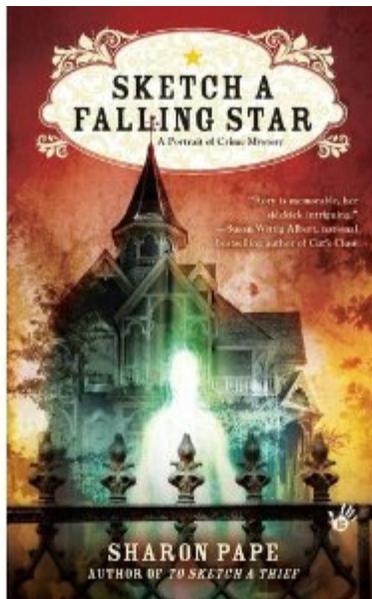
Rory had expected him to be excited and upbeat about this new avenue she’d found to explore, but he sounded irritated, almost angry. It made her wonder if he was afraid she might unearth other information—information he preferred to leave buried. Although curiosity was pressing her to pursue the subject, it would have to wait. For now, the tragedy in Page topped her list of priorities.

She did a quick check of the room to make sure she hadn’t left anything behind, then zipped up her overnight case. When she looked back at Zeke a moment later, his right arm had vanished, leaving his hand to float in midair like a relative of Thing from *The Addams Family*.

“I’ll be out of commission for a time recoverin’ from this trip,” Zeke said

finally, in a nod to his disappearing limbs. “Try not to get into any more trouble, ’cause I won’t be around to help you out.”

“I wasn’t in any trouble,” Rory reminded him sharply. “And you know damn well by now that I’m perfectly capable of resolving anything that could come up.” Before she reached the end of her sentence, the marshal was gone, and she had no way of knowing if disappearing at that precise moment was a matter of metaphysics or personal choice.



## *Sketch a Falling Star*

by Sharon Pape

- **Paperback:** 304 pages
- **Publisher:** Berkley
- **Release date:** March 6, 2012
- **Language:** English
- **ISBN-10:** 0425246698
- **ISBN-13:** 978-0425246696

Find a local independent bookstore here. Or, order now from Amazon or Barnes & Noble.

printed from [www.sharonpape.com](http://www.sharonpape.com)