



# Sketcher in the Rye

## Chapter 1

When Rory found Hobo he was frolicking in the mud with the pigs. By that time she was half crazy with worry. Harper Farms covered thirty plus acres with indoor and outdoor nurseries, a produce store and bakery, a petting zoo with pony rides and since it was fall, a vast corn maze. There were too many places for a dog to hide, even a dog as big as Hobo. She was so relieved to see him again that his mud-caked appearance didn't immediately register with her. Hobo appeared to be just as pleased to see her. He bounded over and launched himself, landing with his front paws squarely on her shoulders. The impact knocked the air out of her and sent her staggering backward until she slammed into the side of the barn. Pinned there, she was treated to an enthusiastic face washing, which she wouldn't have minded under normal circumstances. But the pungent smell of pig and overheated dog rose from Hobo in a steamy wave that threatened to bring her breakfast back for an encore. She grabbed his mud-soaked leash and ordered him "off" in the most commanding tone she could manage. After several failed attempts, she wound up having to push him into obedience. By then she couldn't be sure if he was finally listening to her or was simply tired of standing on two legs. In any case, once he was back on all fours he gave his coat a vigorous shake, the long fur spewing mud everywhere like a food processor at top speed without benefit of a lid. Being only a foot away from the eye of the mud storm, Rory got the worst of it. She was as muddy and stinky as he was, not to mention chilled from the stiff November breeze that had swept into the area while she'd been meeting with Gil Harper. As much as she hated to admit it, Zeke was probably right. She really did need to hire a trainer. She could just picture the marshal wearing his "told-you-so" grin that hiked his moustache nearly up to his sideburns.

What had possessed her to take Hobo along to a business meeting anyway? Oh yeah -- a good, old-fashioned dose of guilt. Work had been taking her away from the house and her adjacent office so much lately that she was feeling bad about leaving him yet again. Of course he wasn't completely alone in the old Victorian she'd inherited from her uncle Mac. Now that Hobo had adjusted to living with a ghost, and Zeke had worked out his own issues with the arrangement, the two could often be found engaged in a lively game of fetch, providing the marshal wasn't too depleted from his own recent outings. Although his ability to manifest in full 3D mode had improved well beyond Rory's expectations, and often her tolerance level, Zeke was still frustrated by the limits death had imposed on him for more than a hundred and thirty years.

"You should be grateful you can leave the house at all," Rory reminded him one day when he was brooding about his situation. "Before I moved in here you couldn't go anywhere." Back when Mac had been alive, the marshal had partnered with him on his PI cases too, but

always from the confines of the house. For some reason neither she nor Zeke could fathom, as long as she was with him or at the other end of his journey, he could now travel about. At least until sheer exhaustion pulled him bungee-like back to the house where he'd exhaled his last breath.

"Hey, glad to see you found your dog," Gil Harper called out as he came around the corner of the barn and spotted them. The patriarch of the family business was tall, lean and fiftyish with blonde hair that was doing a nice job of masking the incoming crop of gray. "Looks like you'll both be needing a bath though." Although he sounded genuinely relieved that Hobo was okay, his lips were twitching as if he was trying hard not to laugh at the muddy spectacle before him. "Any idea how he got out of your car?"

Rory was wiping at the mud on her face with hands that were equally dirty. "Well," she said realizing it was pointless, "I must have forgotten to lock the car. Then I guess someone came along and thought it would be a good idea to set him free. Either that or he grew opposable thumbs during the past hour. "

"Anything I can do to help?" Gil asked, backing away as he spoke. He might have had the best intentions with his offer, but his subconscious was clearly not onboard with them.

"Thanks, but I'm afraid soap and water is the only solution. The sooner I get us home the better." With a tight grip on Hobo's muddy leash she headed off in the direction of the car. But after the first few steps Hobo dug in his paws and refused to move any farther. He'd never done anything like that before. Rory gave the leash a sharp tug and ordered him to heel. The dog looked at her, then looked over his shoulder at the pig pen and whined.

"You have got to be kidding!" she said. "Are you begging for more time in the mud?"

Harper started laughing. If he hadn't been a potential client Rory would have told him in no uncertain terms what she thought of his sense of humor. As it was she was having trouble holding her tongue. "I'm not laughing at you," he assured her when he'd quieted enough to speak. "I think I understand Hobo's problem." He pointed to a little pig who was staring back at the dog and making a noise somewhere between a grunt and a squeal. "I believe what we may have here is a budding interspecies romance."

Rory didn't know whether to laugh with him or cry. She couldn't exactly scoop a dog of Hobo's size into her arms and carry him back to the car.

"Let me grab Pigmalion and remove her from the equation," Harper said. A much more realistic option. As soon as he and the little pig were out of sight, Hobo started whining again. Rory figured she could live with the whining as long as she could get him moving. In her most authoritative voice, she ordered him to heel and to her relief, he stood up and padded after her, his shaggy head hung low in resignation.

The parking lot had been almost empty when they'd arrived at eight AM, but now that it was close to opening time cars filled nearly half of it. The corn maze and petting zoo were big draws until the season's first hard frost or snowfall officially shut down those attractions for the winter.

Rory and Hobo had nearly reached the car when the wind gusted, blowing from the opposite direction. Hobo stopped and raised his snout to take stock of the incoming air. Rory hoped it was a promising sign that he'd forgotten Pigmalion and was moving on to other interests. A second later she was nearly yanked her off her feet as the dog raced helter skelter

toward the corn maze. Rory managed to stay upright, but she could feel the leash slipping through her fingers. At the entrance to the maze, Hobo ploughed right past a group of teenagers about to enter it as the first visitors of the day.

"Coming through," Rory yelled in case they hadn't noticed she was attached to the crazy mutt who'd almost trampled them. Hobo sped on, taking the turns like a sailboat heeling in rough surf. On the other end of the leash, Rory was tripping over furrows and getting smacked in the face by dead corn stalks. She felt like she'd been conscripted into a remake of a Three Stooges movie. After one particularly bad stumble, she landed hard on her knees and the leash tugged free of her hand. Hobo careened onward, either unaware or unconcerned that he'd left her behind.

She jumped to her feet and took off after him, moving more quickly now that she wasn't being buffeted by corn stalks along the way. Up ahead Hobo had started some serious barking, what Rory called his all points bulletin. He only used it when he was reporting trouble. It was hard to get a good fix on just how far ahead he was, because the corn stalks worked like a baffle, distorting the sound. She hoped he hadn't cornered a wild animal. Raccoons were a problem on Long Island and when they were prowling around during the day, it generally meant they were rabid to boot. Hobo's up to date on his inoculations, her brain pointed out, whereas you have no such protection. Danger noted and filed, her heart responded as she ran on. After several wrong turns led to frustrating dead ends and wasted seconds, she rounded a curve and ran smack into the dog.

He was standing beside a man sprawled face down in the dirt. The good news -- Hobo wasn't in any danger. The bad news -- someone else was having a really terrible day. Rory grabbed the dog's leash to keep him from taking flight again. He didn't appear interested in going anywhere else, but with Hobo she couldn't be sure. Now that he'd summoned the cavalry, his barking had ebbed to a breathless chuffing. Rory stepped around him and knelt beside the body to assess the situation. There was no blood on or around the man, whom she guessed to be in his early thirties, and there were no bullet holes or knife wounds, at least none she could see from his present position. When she checked his neck for a pulse, there was none, and his skin was cold to the touch. She was no doctor, but the few years she'd spent as a detective and sketch artist had given her a working knowledge of what constituted "dead." She stepped back from the body, making an effort to walk in her own footprints. But she quickly realized that it was pointless. The soft, moist ground was already covered with overlapping footprints from all the people who'd recently visited the maze. It would be impossible to get a cast of any one set.

She grabbed her phone from the muddy messenger bag slung across her chest and dialed Leah at the Homicide Division out in Yaphank. Without preamble, she gave her friend a rundown on the situation. It would take Leah and her partner forty-five minutes to reach Huntington, but once they notified the local precinct, patrol cars would be screaming to Harper Farms in a matter of minutes.

With that done, Rory needed to find Gil Harper and fill him in on what was happening. She had no idea if he knew the victim, but whether he did or not, he was bound to be distressed by the death. A dead body on the premises was never good for business, especially if the death wasn't attributable to natural causes. She tried his cell number, but after several rings her call went to voicemail. This wasn't the type of news she wanted to deliver that way. She was torn

between racing off to find him and keeping watch over the crime scene until the local cops arrived.

"I leave you on your own for a couple of hours and you stumble over another body," a voice behind her said. There was no mistaking the sarcasm or the drawl, but Rory was so caught up in her dilemma that she reacted as if someone had jumped out of a dark alley and yelled "boo!" Even Hobo, with his more finely tuned senses, yelped with surprise.

Rory wheeled around to face the marshal. "What are you doing here?" she demanded in a harsh whisper. He was standing before her in his well-worn, western duds looking every bit as alive as anyone else on planet Earth. She was always nervous when he joined her out in public, due to the sheer potential for disaster. But in spite of her concerns, things generally went well enough as long as no one tried to touch him, and he remembered to use doors instead of walking through walls. Unfortunately though, there were a number of people in long-term therapy as a result of his mistakes.

"What in tarnation happened to you?" Zeke asked, convulsing into laughter now that she was facing him.

For a moment Rory couldn't figure out what was so hilarious about a dead body, but then she remembered that she was still covered in mud. "Hobo happened to me," she responded crisply. "And could you please try to focus on the bigger picture here?" She didn't mind being the butt of a joke from time to time, but the marshal seemed to take an inordinate amount of pleasure from her predicaments.

"You smell as ripe as a pigpen, darlin'," he chuckled, nearly doubled over in his glee.

"I'm aware of that," she said evenly. Nothing fueled Zeke's fire more than her irritation. "And you're here because...?"

The marshal's laughter throttled down to a chuckle. "Well, I was feelin' rested, so I popped in to say 'hello.' But since you and the mutt weren't home, I came to see what you were up to."

"That's nice, but you can't be here now," she said firmly. "Any minute now there'll be cops swarming all over this place." As if on cue, sirens shattered the air, providing a soundtrack to her warning. Even if Zeke had been dressed for the twenty-first century, the police would want to know who he was and why he was there. And if they dragged him down to headquarters for further questioning, there was a good chance he'd run out of energy and vanish before their eyes. Rory shut down the "what ifs" before they could reduce her to a babbling fool. She needed to have her wits about her.

"Of course I can be here," Zeke said, giving her a wink as he disappeared. "But only you and the mutt will know it."

"Fine," she conceded, since she didn't have any real choice in the matter. "No comments out of you either."

"Not a one."

"Zip it."

"Yes, M'am...mmmmmmmm."

There was the sound of squad cars screeching to a stop beyond the corn maze, then multiple car doors being slammed shut and a smattering of voices. Rory couldn't make out what they were saying, but it was no doubt standard police chatter. Some of them would be roping off the area with yellow, crime scene tape and trying to disperse whatever crowd had gathered. Others would be making their way into the maze slowly and with guns drawn, since they couldn't discount the possibility that a potential killer or killers might be waiting for them around the next bend. They also needed to stay together in the maze or risk mistaking a fellow officer for a suspect.

Spurred by the sounds of people coming, Hobo had started barking again, which was fine with Rory. The racket he was raising was far more effective than her own voice would be at letting the cops know they were in the maze too. When the police finally entered the row where she and Hobo waited with the body, Detective Harvey Cirello was in the lead. Terrific. Rory and he had disliked one another from the first time they'd met. He was one of the local detectives who'd responded when she'd found Hobo's owner dead on the kitchen floor. Cirello looked every bit as dour as he had when she'd last seen him. If she were to sketch him, she'd place a lemon where his heart should have been. The two patrolmen with him holstered their guns, but remained at the entrance to the row like bouncers ready to keep the riff-raff out of an exclusive club.

"You again," Cirello said when he saw Rory. He tucked his weapon into a shoulder holster under his jacket "What is it with you and dead bodies?" Hobo growled, a menacing rumble deep in his throat, as if he remembered the detective had wanted to send him to the pound.

"Hobo found the deceased about nine AM, before any of today's visitors had a chance to come through here," she said, ignoring Cirello's question. "I checked him for a pulse, but I didn't check his pockets or disturb the scene in any way." Most cops would have appreciated her input. She wasn't at all surprised to find that Cirello was barely paying attention.

"I see you kept the mutt," he said shaking his head as he pulled on latex gloves. He hunkered down next to the body. "Has the owner of the place been notified?"

"I didn't want to leave the scene until you arrived. I'll do it now."

"No need. My partner will find him. You know the deceased?"

"I don't think so, but I can't be sure from this angle."

Cirello searched the man's pockets. All he came away with was a thin wallet. He straightened up as he rifled through it. "Matthew Dmitriev," he said, pulling out a driver's license. "Ring a bell?"

"I know the name," Rory said, "but I never met him." She'd heard the name for the first time that morning when Gil Harper hired her to find out who in his company was involved in industrial espionage and sabotage for the competition. Matthew was the Harper's CPA, and Gil had wanted her to meet with him when he returned from vacation next week. He'd apparently come back early. She wondered if he'd still be alive if he hadn't changed his plans.

"That's it?" Cirello asked as if he suspected she was holding out on him. Despite Rory's antipathy for the detective, if he'd been with homicide she would have felt constrained to tell him

everything she knew. But since he wasn't, she didn't intend to say anything more until Leah arrived.

The detective's eyes narrowed. "How is it you know the name?"

Okay, she was going to have to answer that question or flirt with an obstruction of justice charge. And Cirello was just the guy to make sure it stuck.

"Gil Harper told me Matthew worked for him." There, that should be enough to keep her out of jail. She glanced at her watch. It wouldn't be too much longer before Leah made it there. Meanwhile two more patrolmen had arrived in their corn row. The place was getting crowded. Cirello told them to walk the rest of the maze to see what they could find. "Just don't touch anything," he shouted after them. One of the men raised his hand to indicate he'd heard the warning. Rory had a feeling he would have preferred to use four less fingers. With Cirello's attitude he had to be the darling of the precinct.

"Is that him? Is that Matthew?" Gil Harper had just come around the bend accompanied by Danny, Cirello's younger partner. "Oh no, no, no." Gil was wild-eyed and ashen, a very different man from the one Rory had been with barely fifteen minutes earlier.

"Rory?" Gil's voice seemed to be brimming with unasked questions. He searched her face as if he might find an explanation there.

"I'm so sorry," she said, reaching out to touch his arm. But his focus had already shifted back to Matthew. She exchanged a low-key greeting with Danny, surprised to see that he was still with Cirello. If she'd been saddled with the nasty curmudgeon, she wouldn't have lasted a week. Maybe there were some secret perk to being Cirello's partner. Like maybe he made the best barbeque or fudge on the Island. But somehow Rory doubted it.

"Mr. Harper," Cirello said without bothering to introduce himself.

"How can I ever tell his mother?" Gil was mumbling. "She'll be devastated, destroyed. He was all...."

"Mr. Harper," Cirello repeated, impatience sharpening his tone. But it was as if a wall had sprung up around Gil, insulating him from Cirello's words.

Danny stepped closer to him. "It's okay, Mr. Harper," he said gently, "we'll take care of notifying the next of kin."

Gil turned to him and nodded. "Thank you. Please let Anya know we'll take care of all the expenses, anything she needs. We're here for her. She and Matthew--," his voice cracked, "like part of my own family, since Matthew was a little kid."

"When did you last see the deceased?" Cirello asked, still using his naked-light-bulb approach. Rory wasn't surprised to find that he hadn't learned any compassion from the time he'd spent with his younger partner.

Gil's brow furrowed and he seemed momentarily lost. Danny didn't try to rush him, but Cirello was turning an interesting shade of angry and the muscles in his neck had started to bulge. "I...I'm not sure," Gil stammered finally, "...a week...a week or so ago?"

"Maybe you could finish the interview in Mr. Harper's office?" Rory suggested. Standing this close to the body had to be making it harder for Gil to concentrate.

Cirello glared at her. "Believe it or not, Ms. McCain, I'm quite capable of doing my job without your assistance." Rory clamped her jaw shut before she could say something she was bound to regret. She didn't want to make the situation worse for Gil or Danny. "In fact there's no reason for you to even be here," he went on. "You and that dog belong on the other side of the police tape."

From behind his partner's back, Danny gave her a sympathetic shrug. Rory knew he couldn't help her out. She was no longer with the police department, and Cirello had every right to banish her from the crime scene.

"You heard me," Cirello snapped at her. "Take that mud-caked flea bag and get out of here." The words were barely out of his mouth when his knees suddenly buckled under him and he pitched forward onto the ground, landing on top of Matthew. One of the uniforms tried to help him up, but he waved the man off and scrambled to his feet on his own. "Which one of you jokers pushed me?" he demanded glaring at each of them in turn.

"Nobody," Danny said, looking equally surprised. "No one touched you."

"Someone slammed me in the back of the knees hard enough to send me flying. I'll find out eventually, so whoever did it might as well man up now."

Rory had a pretty good idea who was responsible, but she had no intentions of sharing that bit of knowledge. "Maybe it was one of those microbursts they talk about on the weather channel," she suggested.

"Localized at the back of my knees? What kind of fool do you think I am?" he shot back at her as he brushed the dirt off his suit.

"There's actually a new phenomenon they're calling a marshaled burst," she said, trying to keep a straight face. The other policemen were looking at one another with raised eyebrows, but even if they thought she was nuts, they all chose to remain silent. If their emperor was naked, he wasn't going to learn the truth from them.

"I thought I told you to get out of here," Cirello snapped, having apparently chosen her as his scapegoat for lack of a better candidate.

Rory placed her hand on Gil's arm again. "We'll talk soon," she told him as she led Hobo past the patrolmen. "Try to stay out of drafts," she called over her shoulder to Cirello. She knew she was baiting the beast, but she couldn't help herself.

## **Sketcher in the Rye**

**by Sharon Pape**

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