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Published by Choc Lit

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Run Rabbit Run

Kate Johnson

Prologue & 1st Chapter



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First published 2012 by Choc Lit Limited

Penrose House, Crawley Drive, Camberley, Surrey GU15 2AB, UK

www.choclitpublishing.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-978-1-906931-73-5

Prologue

Four in the morning and I was painting over the number plate of my boyfriend's car with black nail varnish while I hid in a camera blindspot in a car park in Dover for the early crossing to Calais. A 3 turned to an 8, a P turned to an R. Job done, I sprayed the whole thing with hairspray to fool the cameras, and got back into the car to wait, hat pulled down low over my face.

In the ladies' room on the ferry, I nabbed a shower cubicle and, wincing, cut off my long blonde ponytail. Masses of hair fell into the shower tray, clogging the drain. I poked it all down with my hands and rubbed some cheap brown dye into what was left hanging around my ears.

The result was not pretty.

The bar area of the ferry looked like a refugee camp, tired families and lone backpackers setting out their own little camps, marked with rucksacks and coats and unfeasibly large pushchairs. I glanced longingly at the bar, and had it not been for the long drive ahead of me I'd seriously have considered beer for breakfast.

Little cameras blinked everywhere. Trying not to be noticed, I found an ATM and withdrew everything in my bank account as Euros, then went out on deck, huddled into my coat, and mainlined black coffee.

An hour later I drove off the ferry and onto the wrong side of the road. French lorries beeping madly at me, I swung the Vectra back into the right-hand lane and followed signs towards Paris. I didn't want to go to Paris, but it was a start.

Twelve hours after that, having stopped once for coffee and refuelling, eyes blurry with exhaustion, I saw a sign for a campsite in a small seaside town on the Riviera and pulled in. I drove up to one of the bright courier tents belonging to those big luxury camping companies and asked if they had any pitches available. They did. I paid in cash, registered with a fake name, and hauled the car around to a small plot with a big tent on it.

I had a pillow and sleeping bag, a handful of personal possessions,

clothes and toiletries. The lot of it was dumped on the floor next to the camp bed, onto which I fell, exhausted and near tears.

You would not believe the trouble I'm in.

Chapter One

Phone calls in the night are rarely a good thing.

When Luke Sharpe's phone rang in the invisible hours of the morning he knew it was one of two things. Either work, which meant some sort of crisis, or Sophie, which meant some sort of crisis.

He rolled over and glanced at the glowing screen. Work.

'Sharpe,' he yawned into the phone, feeling anything but.

'What the hell is going on with your girlfriend?' exploded a furious voice on the other end.

Luke blinked at the empty side of the bed. She hadn't come over last night, and he'd fallen asleep waiting to hear from her.

He wasn't concerned. Sophie was a walking magnet for trouble and she could generally take care of herself. 'What's she done now?' he asked.

'Shot an MI5 officer and disappeared, that's what,' said Sheila.

That got his attention. Sitting up in bed, Luke said, 'She's what?'

'Shot Sir Theodore Chesshyre dead,' said his boss. 'Where is she?'

'She-' Luke blinked and tried to put this together. Sophie didn't go around shooting people. Well, not often, anyway. And certainly not people she was trying to get a job from.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, but didn't wake up. Not a dream, then. Excellent. 'Why would she shoot Theodore Chesshyre?'

'Your guess is as good as mine, Sharpe.'

'She went to see him for a job interview.'

'To which she apparently took her gun. And explain to me, Sharpe, why she still had the gun? I have it registered here as destroyed. Sunk in a Cornish harbour.'

Bugger. 'Why would she take her gun to a job interview?' he said vaguely. Truth was, Sophie owned two guns; the one Sheila was referring to and a little revolver Sophie had liberated from a dead enemy a few years ago. The thing hadn't been registered to anyone, so she'd just kept it quiet as a back-up. If Sophie was going to shoot

anyone on the QT, she'd have used that.

'You tell me. While the gun is missing from the scene, ballistics have identified the bullet. It's a nine millimeter Parabellum and matches perfectly to bullets previously fired from a SIG-Sauer P-239 registered to one Sophie Green. We keep records of that sort of thing,' she added crisply, before he could say anything. 'Unless someone created two SIG-Sauer P-239s with identical rifling on the barrel, I'd say the evidence is pretty incriminating. So, Sharpe, where is she?'

'Not here,' Luke said, because that was the only honest answer he could give his boss.

Although, given that he'd just noticed a scrabbling sound coming from the kitchen, he wasn't entirely sure if that was true.

Quietly, he picked up his gun.

'I didn't ask if she was with you, I asked where she was.'

'I honestly have no idea,' Luke replied.

While his boss ranted on in his ear, he swung out of bed and padded into the living room, gun loose in his hand. Please God, don't let her be stupid enough to hide under the coffee table.

The living room was dark, but it was also entirely empty of Sophie. After a year together, he was pretty attuned to her presence. Besides, Sophie was about as subtle as a house fire.

The phone on the kitchen counter wasn't showing any new messages, but that wasn't what caught his attention. What caught his attention was the cat travelling box on the floor beside it.

Unease churned in his gut. A small tabby paw shot out through the bars at the front of the box and a pitiful miaow escaped.

If she'd brought Tammy here it wasn't going to be good news.

'Look,' he said into his phone, 'this is the first I've heard of it. It's three a.m. for God's sake. Sophie's not here, I wasn't expecting to see her until tomorrow, I'm her boyfriend not her keeper, and I have as much idea about what's going on as you do. Okay?'

There was a short silence. 'If you're keeping anything from me –'
'I swear I'm not.'

Another silence. ‘Keep me informed,’ she said, and rang off.

Luke put his phone down, let Tammy out of her box and scooped her into his arms. Her tiny body vibrated with a huge purr as she snuggled against him.

‘You okay, Tam? Been here long?’

She wriggled again, so he put her down and went in search of cat food. Since Tammy was Sophie’s cat and lived with her, the best Luke had to offer was a tin of tuna.

This met with Tammy’s approval.

‘Pee on my floor and you’re going to your granny’s house,’ he warned her, then went to start up his computer. While he waited, he switched on the TV and keyed in BBC News 24. The newsreader was running some story about the American president and Luke waited for the story to change. Politics. Earthquake. Entertainment. Royal family. American president.

So the news wasn’t that big. Well, how could it be? 5 didn’t go around broadcasting their business, did they?

On the other hand, if they thought a national news campaign was the way to get information about Sophie, they’d blanket every network on TV.

It was a mistake. It had to be a mistake.

He checked online news agencies but turned up nothing. Ran a search on Sophie’s name in conjunction with Sir Theodore’s. Conspicuously nothing. Finally, he searched for Sophie alone, but apart from her Facebook account and a one-line profile from the bookshop where she worked, there was nothing.

He had a hack into police frequencies, but got nothing there, either.

MI5 clearly didn’t want to broadcast this, at least not just yet. Perhaps they didn’t consider Sophie to really be a suspect, or perhaps they assumed they could find her fast enough that a public appeal wasn’t necessary.

He scanned his email for any relevant messages. Nothing from Sophie – she wouldn’t be that stupid – and nothing from anyone she

was likely to have confided in, either.

If this was all true, if she really was on the run, then Sophie would know MI5 would hit up her friends faster than she hit up a shoe sale.

Luke started making calls. Not to Sophie, because if she'd been daft enough to take her phone with her then the second it rang there'd be a trace on it. And if she hadn't taken it with her, there would be no point calling.

He called Maria, who berated him for waking her in the middle of the night, but sharpened up when he told her why. She wasn't with his department any more, but she was still Service and she was still Sophie's friend. 'I'll see what I can find out,' she promised, and ended the call.

Harvey answered, 'Why are you calling me at three a.m.?'

'Because you're in America so it's late evening, and because Sophie has gone off the deep end,' Luke replied.

His American friend laughed. 'Buddy, I hate to break it to you, but she did that years ago.'

Luke's fist clenched. All right, so Harvey might be married to Sophie's best friend, and he might have helped Sophie out of some dire situations, and he might be an official liaison from the CIA, but ...

... but Harvey had kissed Sophie a couple of times, and in Luke's mind there ought to be a law against anyone else kissing Sophie.

'She's in trouble,' he said shortly. 'Accused of murder. 5 are after her. It's ...' he tried to think of the phrase Sophie used.

'A whole mess of crap?' Harvey guessed.

'That's the one. You heard anything?'

'Not my playground, but I'll see what I can find out.' Harvey paused. 'You okay?'

Luke snorted, and resorted to Sophie's trick of Buffy references to lighten the mood. 'Sophie's in trouble. Must be Tuesday.'

'It's Friday for you, buddy.'

'She can be in trouble on Fridays, too,' Luke said, with feeling.

I slept right through until morning, woke up and staggered to the shower block to wash away the terror-sweat that had accumulated in my pores all day yesterday. Unfortunately, I also washed away some of the cheap dye. My wet hair looked dreadful: hacked and uneven, the colour of diarrhoea. I looked like I'd just fallen down a French toilet.

I sternly reminded myself that the goal of this exercise was not to look attractive. Rather it was the opposite. I wanted no one to notice me.

Dressing and popping in my coloured contact lenses, I made my way into town. There are people who wouldn't consider coloured contact lenses to be the sort of emergency item one might pick up from one's flat in a dash to pick up supplies when one is in terrible trouble. Those people wouldn't include me.

In the bar next to the camp shop the TV was playing the news, in English. It was only a matter of time before the story broke.

I made one quick stop in town at the first phone shop I came to. Pay-as-you-go, no contract, the biggest hurdle being my inability to understand the French instructions. But I understood that it had GPS, which was pretty much all I needed right now.

Eventually I found what I needed: a slightly faded looking shop front with pictures of eighties' hairstyles in the front. The peeling legend over the door simply read Sandrine Le Bon.

Deep breath, Sophie. You've done the hard part already.

Ever notice how it's the bits after the hard part that make you want to cry?

I pushed open the door and half-a-dozen women looked me over. The radio was playing French pop. The air was thick with hairspray and perm solution. A woman with sky-high hair greeted me, '*Bonjour, chérie.*'

'*Parlez-vous Anglais?*' I asked, and she nodded.

'Ow can I 'elp you?'

I took off my baseball cap and Sandrine (for I assumed it was she) gasped. '*Chérie!*'

The other women, customers and staff, all turned to look at me and made Gallic noises of disgust.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I need something different. And can you dye it? I want dark hair.’

Sandrine did not like the idea of me with dark hair, and to be truthful neither did I, especially as I’d spent so much money on lightening it. Naturally, my hair is a sort of nondescript dark blonde but it’s sort of, shall we say, *assisted* by my local hairdresser every now and then.

But I was firm. It’s all right for Gwen Stefani to want a platinum-blonde life, but I didn’t need the attention. Sandrine dyed my hair dark brown and cut it into a Meg Ryan crop that looked okay when it had been blow-dried, but I knew would look a cow as soon as I walked out.

I paid her in cash and left, my once-long blonde hair short and brown, my blue eyes hidden behind brown contact lenses, my tall posture stooped. Just another tourist.

He called various colleagues, half of whom told him this was MI5’s problem, not 6’s, and half of whom seemed to have developed amnesia when it came to his girlfriend. Being that Sophie was 5’10” in her bare feet, tended to wear ludicrously high heels and a lot of bright pink, wore a DD cup and had a mane of hair that would make a lion envious, coupled with her inability to keep her mouth shut for five consecutive minutes, he doubted anyone had really forgotten her.

He called the police, who stonewalled him. He called airline contacts to see if Sophie had been stupid enough to get herself on a passenger manifest. She hadn’t, but he hit gold with a cross-Channel ferry.

She’d gone to France in the very early hours of the morning. He didn’t bother asking why: it was the quickest and easiest way to leave the country without anyone asking questions, and from there she could drive anywhere. The description on the ferry booking matched his car but the registration number didn’t. He wondered how

professionally she'd managed to alter it.

Luke glanced at the clock, and was surprised to see it was mid-morning. She could be anywhere by now.

He was just about to log off the computer and attempt some sleep when something caught his eye. *BUFFY NEWS: Joss Whedon to direct Stephanie Plum movie.*

All right, so he'd hold his hand up to being a *Buffy* fan, but it was Sophie who was always going on about Stephanie Plum and – Sophie was always going on about Stephanie Plum and –

– Sophie was a *Buffy* fan and –

He opened the email as fast as he could and swore when his computer took its time.

'*Buffy* creator Joss Whedon has signed up to direct every movie in the Stephanie Plum series. It's a huge coup ...'

The piece was nonsense, especially as Sophie had jabbered on excitedly about the movie already being made. Joss Whedon could barely buy a cup of coffee without Sophie hearing about it. She'd have told him if this was true.

Which meant ...

He scanned the email for clues, and when he found one, he smiled.

'If you do not wish to receive further emails, please call this number.'

A French mobile number. Halle-bleeding-lujah.

He memorised the number, deleted the email, and crossed to the front window. His car was indeed missing, but Sophie's great lummoX of a Defender was parked there instead.

'Cheers, Soph,' he muttered.

Across the road was a plain silver Ford. Inside it sat two people. Nothing about them spoke of anything unusual, which in itself was a great screaming clue that they were there to watch him.

He looked at the phone in his hand, then at the Ford. There was only one person left to call and he really, really didn't want to call him.

Tammy wandered over and started twining around his ankles,

purring hopefully.

‘I hate this guy,’ Luke told her. Tammy didn’t seem to care.

Wincing, he dialled.

‘You know where she is?’ Docherty asked without preamble.

‘No idea. You?’

‘Went to France. Haven’t tracked the car yet.’ Docherty paused.

‘You want company?’

Luke hesitated. His flat would be bugged the second he stepped outside, or possibly while he was sleeping. There was probably a tap on his phone line already, although he expected Docherty would have nullified it from his end. Nonetheless ...

‘I’ll put the kettle on,’ Luke said, and Docherty disconnected.

‘I don’t suppose your mummy told you where she was going, did she?’ Luke asked Tammy.

The cat gave him a look of contempt.

‘No,’ he sighed, ‘I suppose not.’

The TV in the camp bar was still showing the news in English, and I bought a beer while I stood and watched, heart in mouth, baseball cap pulled low over my face. But there was nothing about me or Sir Theodore. Not even one line about a man being found dead in his office, police are investigating. Which probably meant that the police weren’t investigating. Sir Theodore had been MI5. Clearly, they’d leapt on the story before it reached the ears of the public. I wasn’t sure if this was a good thing – after all, I didn’t want my face all over the news – or bad. The quicker MI5 picked up on my involvement, the quicker they’d trace me.

I really ought to move on from here.

It wasn’t really warm enough to sunbathe, being only April, but I am British and therefore if there’s sand and sea I have to at least take my shoes and socks off and paddle. I lounged around on a towel for a while, feeling rather chilly, reading one of the paperbacks I’d picked up on the ferry. It was rubbish, so I put my headphones on and listened to Skunk Anansie for strength.

I bought an overpriced sandwich and a Coke from the beach café and read another book. The sun started to go down and I wondered what the hell was taking him so long. Was my phone broken? Out of signal? Had I got the number wrong? Misunderstood the French instructions? Or had he not understood the message? Deleted it as spam or just ignored it? Maybe he hadn't even checked his emails today. Hell, if he went missing I think I'd have better things to do.

But he's a trained spy. He's good at what he does. He'd check every angle. And he'd know that email was fake as soon as he saw it.

I just hoped to hell no one else would.

Just as I was gathering up my things to go back to the tent for the night, the phone rang. Number unknown. I took a breath, and answered.

'Sophie?'

Luke. I nearly broke down at the sound of his voice.

'Luke,' I said, and heard the catch in my own voice. I wanted to run into his arms like Melly and Ashley in *Gone With The Wind*. There ought to have been music swelling.

'What the hell is going on? Where are you? Do you have my car?'

I smiled. 'Yes, I have your car. Have you ... heard?'

'Have I-?' He made a sound of disbelief. 'I got woken in the middle of the night with the news.'

Middle of the night. I hoped he was exaggerating, otherwise I had less of a lead time than I thought.

No. If that was the case they'd have found me already.

'Who called you? Is it on the news?'

'My boss called me, and no, it's not. 5 seem to have jumped on it pretty fast. But inside the community, it's all over. Either they're pumping me for details or they're pretending they don't know me. Sophie, you've been accused of *murder*.'

He sounded tense and worried. Good. If he'd been calm I'd have been heartbroken. Luke's a damn good spy but he's not as cool as he thinks he is. When I met Luke he seemed about as emotional as your average coffee machine, but I fear I've unlocked a door that can't be

shut again. He'd like you to think he doesn't have any emotions, but lately it seems to me he's been letting his heart dictate to his head, which is a dangerous thing in a spy. As I well know.

'I didn't kill him,' I said in quiet tones. 'I found him dead but I didn't kill him. Luke, where are you calling from?'

'Docherty's phone.'

'He's there?' I was surprised. Ever since I had a very brief liaison with Docherty, months ago now, when Luke and I were not together, Luke has hissed and spat at the mere mention of his name. They used to be friends well, acquaintances, really, but I didn't think Docherty had even been in the country since that night. He's a pretty shadowy character, and to be honest he scares the living daylight out of me.

But I was touched that Luke had turned to him.

'He's been trying to find you all day.'

'Any luck?'

'You got on a ferry, or at least your passport did. How far are you from Calais?'

I hesitated. Luke would never tell anyone where I was, but even so ... 'Quite a long way.'

'You're not going to tell me, are you?' His voice was flat.

'I can't.'

Luke sighed, a long deep sigh. 'Why did you run?'

Sheer blind panic.

'Because he was shot with a bullet from my gun and my fingerprints are all over his office and I was seen going back in there late at night.'

'Why did you go back in?'

'He offered to lock my valuables in his desk while we had dinner. I was going back to fetch my bag.'

'Why did you take your SIG?'

'I didn't,' I said wretchedly. 'I thought I'd get into trouble – you know, with scanners and everything –'

'Especially since you're not supposed to have it any more,' Luke supplied helpfully.

‘I don’t know how it got there. My revolver was still in the gun safe when I got back to my flat and there were no signs of a break in. But someone must have stolen my SIG and used it to frame me. Someone who knew where I was going to be.’

Luke sighed, and I sensed monumental restraint in him not pointing out that the strongest security feature my home boasts is an irascible tabby cat.

A thought occurred to me. Dammit, why didn’t I think of it before?

Well, you try being framed for murder and tell me how clearly you think.

‘There wasn’t any CCTV in his office, was there?’

‘Disabled. Sophie, you shouldn’t have run, especially not with the gun. It doesn’t look good.’

‘Yeah?’ I snapped, my voice rising, ‘What would you have done? Hung around to be arrested?’

‘You didn’t do anything.’

‘Yeah, because they so often believe that line in court.’

There was a bit of a silence, and then for the first time since I’d seen Theodore Chesshyre’s body, I felt hot tears bleed out from my eyes.

‘Sophie, where are you?’ Luke asked, and he sounded tired. Desperate.

‘I can’t tell you. I’m going to move on soon anyway.’

‘And then what? Keep on running?’

‘I don’t know,’ I wailed, dabbing at my eyes with my towel, filling my lids with sand and therefore crying harder.

‘Okay,’ he sighed. ‘Look, just – just keep in touch, okay? This is a safe number?’

‘Brand new today. My old phone is still at home. I knew they’d trace it.’

‘Good girl,’ Luke said. ‘Listen, they’ll be checking all ports for your passport. Probably checking for my car, too. If you want to move around I suggest you get a new passport.’

Yeah, like they sell them at the *supermarché*. The whole reason I'd picked a campsite and not a hotel was the reduced likelihood of them looking at my passport when I checked in. 'From?'

'I'll sort it out.'

I gave him my fake name and told him to call me when he had it sorted. I didn't yet have anywhere for him to send it, but I figured I'd cross that bridge later.

Then there was a pause, while I tried to figure out a reason to keep him on the line a bit longer. I thought of Tammy, my poor sweet baby tabby cat, locked up in her travel box on Luke's living-room floor.

'Are you looking after Tammy?'

'Yeah, she's fine. I tell you, Sophie, I am not looking forward to explaining this to your parents.'

Oh, Christ. My parents don't even know I used to be a spy.

Yes, don't laugh too hard.

'Tell them an alien entity has taken over my body.'

'Ha ha.'

'They watch too much *Star Trek* anyway.'

Another pause.

'I miss you,' I said quietly.

There was a pause. *I love you*. Say it, Luke.

'Keep safe, Sophie.'

I sighed. He does love me, I'm pretty sure he does, it's just – well, Luke's about as comfortable having emotions as most people are with having stomach flu.

'Don't do anything stupid,' he added, and there was a note of pleading in his voice that made me smile.

'What, like leave the country?'

'Or leave bloody fingerprints everywhere. Okay. Docherty needs his phone back. I'm going to try and find another number I can call you on. I'll let you know about the passport.'

'Bye,' I sniffed, and ended the call before we got into an endless round of 'No, *you* hang up,' and I started bawling. I really didn't

want to draw attention to myself.

At the camp shop I got some bread and cheese for tea. And some wine. I was feeling sorry for myself, not least because I was really hungry and there wasn't much I could cook on a two-ring hob. I don't eat meat, which should make a stay in France quite interesting.

Having eaten, I read a bit more of my book, got into my pyjamas and slid my SIG under my pillow.

Then I put it under the bed, because I didn't want to accidentally blow my brains out.

Then I moved it from there, because it looked slightly obvious. Where could I put it?

Eventually I settled with it in one of the deep canvas pockets that lined the wall of the tent bedroom, and drank some more wine to calm my nerves. I brushed my teeth with bottled water and lay back on the bed, eyes open, brain swirling.

.... To be continued.