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The Girl Who Ran

Written by Nikki Owen

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THE GIRL WHO RAN

NIKKI OWEN



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



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To Dave, Abi and Hattie – my beautiful little family.

Chapter 1

Deep cover Project facility.
Present day

The room is strange and yet familiar. I know where I am yet it is all new, and when I arrive at a white door marked *Project Callidus – Clearance Grade Two*, I know that this, finally, is the right place.

I know I am truly home.

I enter. I return the black security card into a zipped pocket and proceed. Everything is neat and ordered. The walls are white and gleaming, and the door three metres and eleven centimetres ahead of me is brown, neat and straight, a gloss to its surface reflecting the strip of muted, butter-yellow lights above me. There is barely any sound. My black boots brush in clipped, precise patterns on the cream polished tiles and, as they do, I count my steps, pausing at the now familiar notice that sits encased on the wall, a note repeated at careful, measured intervals throughout the clean, frosted walkways of each Project facility in the world.

Order and routine are everything. The Project is our only friend.

I read the words on the wall and a feeling passes over me: I am one of them; finally the rightful place for me in the world is here. For is that not what we are all searching for? Acceptance? I reach the far wall, stop and turn right. In every way now I know where I am going, but there are moments when I wonder who I truly am, when I think it's hard to find a place in the world when you don't know who you are supposed to be.

Striding seven more steps in the glow of the bulbs above, I reach a small grey monitor. Ahead, another subject number talks in hushed tones to a fellow colleague, and while we follow protocol and acknowledge the other's numerical existence, each one of us is careful to make no eye contact at all.

There is a quick crackle from the monitor. 'State your name and subject number.'

I clear my throat. 'Dr Maria Martinez. Subject number 375.'

One second passes, two, until a mild buzzer sounds and, as per measured routine, I lean in to allow a soft pink light to scan my retina. The door ahead of me clicks, followed by a familiar whoosh of air and, striding seven more steps, I knock on another door. This one is thick, metal and heavy with silver casing and deep, solid locks with a sensory entrance system designed to withstand the harshest attack.

'Enter,' announces a familiar voice from inside.

In my nightmares and memories, the sound of him, of his accent, used to bother me. It would pull me into a downwards spin of fear, but now my mind has learned to find the Scottish lilt comforting, helpful to me and a welcome element in

my daily routine. Placing my hand on the steel of the door and, the internal scanner tracing every groove of the unique lines on my skin, I walk in. There is a banging noise from somewhere, a mild moan, but my brain ignores it and my eyes remain facing forwards.

'Subject 375,' he says, inhaling through flared nostrils on a thin, pointed nose, 'you are three seconds late.'

His skeletal fingers drum on a white file that sits on a metal desk, eyes as dark as oil, two round patches of bitumen pressed into deep, bottomless sockets. As he breathes, his head tilts and his tissue paper skin shines translucent, stretched across bones so thin that the blue roots of his veins glisten, criss crossing his face and neck and arms, down to where two spindled wrists hang on hooks from his triangular joints. He wears a white coat and a brown lambswool jumper, his shirt cornflower blue, and on his legs that bend like twigs about to snap hang trousers scratched from polyester and cotton that stop at his ankles where the bones jut out.

I speak. When I do, I am careful to ensure my voice does not shake or flip or fold. 'Forgive me, Dr Carr.'

He regards me. He taps a single finger on the metal table and looks to the right where a large, rectangular mirrored window rests. I catch my reflection. Hair back to black, cropped neat to the scalp and neck, my green contacts are now gone to reveal birth-brown eyes that match a tan skin which softens to honey in the glow of the light hitting the curve of my elbow. Since I was brought here and recommenced training, much of my body has changed. Where before I was lean, now I am strong, muscular, the definition of my biceps

and triceps outlined under the soft cotton white t-shirt and the smooth black brush of my Project-issue combats. My stomach is taut and when, on instruction of Dr Carr, my legs stride to the chair and sit, my quads tighten automatically, flexed, honed.

He installs a smile on his face, no eye creases, and clicks his pen. 'Time for our daily chat.'

A ripple of nerves passes through my spine down to the soles of my feet. I smell in the air, for the first time since entering, his familiar scent, a scent I have known for almost three decades since the Project took me and began their conditioning programme. Hot garlic, stale tobacco – the odour trail of his presence left long ago in my road map of memories. My immediate instinct is to run, to bang on the door with curled-up fists and yell for them to let me out, yet instead I find a way of breathing through it, of practising mental yoga in my head and moving my mind in a gentle rhythmic flow of reassurance and calm. He has taught me to react this way. When pushed to its limits, the mind can achieve so much, he says. And so I inhale his aroma and ignore the bubble of worry that threatens to burst, and gratefully channel the emerging inner-strength that the Project has helped me cultivate.

Dr Carr crosses one leg over the other and opens a folder. From the mirrored window, the moan from earlier sounds again, low, but audible.

'Have you received your Typhernol injection today at the allotted time?'

'Yes.'

‘Any reactions, symptoms?’

‘I had a headache at 06:01 hours, followed by a short nosebleed that lasted forty-seven seconds.’

He makes a note. ‘Now, Maria, as we always do in order to reinforce why we are all here, can you state for me your name, subject number, age, status and reason for being at this Project Callidus facility.’

I clock the four corners of the white room, note the laptop on the table and, next to it, one picture frame with a photograph of two people unknown to me, and yet somehow there is a flicker of familiarity at the sight of their faces, a grain of remembrance I cannot place. My eye switches to a second, smaller, clear window that throws a view onto a bank of subject numbers working silently on rows of computers beyond, each with their sight locked in front of them on their tasks. Satisfied all is in order, I begin.

‘I am Dr Maria Martinez. Subject number: 375. I am thirty-three years old—’

‘Soon to be thirty-four.’ He smiles. ‘Soon.’

I nod at this fact and continue as per routine. ‘I am a member of Project Callidus, conditioned with my Asperger’s to assist in the Project’s covert cyber and field operative missions. We protect the UK and global nations against terrorist attacks of all kinds, and, due to the NSA prism programme investigation, we are black sited and are no longer affiliated to MI5.’

He sucks in air. ‘Good. Now – my name, the special one you reserve just for me, what is it, Maria?’

‘Black Eyes,’ I say, delivering the response as per

requirement. This is his favourite part of our talks, or so he says. 'Your name, Dr Carr, the one I have always given you since you trained me from a young child, is Black Eyes.'

He nods and smiles, and I notice tiny crinkles fanning out by his eyes. 'Thank you.' He leans back a little in his chair, his stomach concave, and his jumper seems to sink into him.

'Now, since you arrived here, how do you think you are adjusting?'

'I have fully memorised the map of the facility and know all routines down to the last second.'

'Do you recall yet the immediate events leading up to your arrival at this facility for your Project re-initiation?'

I hesitate. Images sometimes come at night, blurred events, faces, but nothing yet definable or real. 'No.'

'And so when you see this'— he slides the laptop to me and clicks to a page — 'what do you think about?'

I read it fast, photographing the data to the memory banks within ten seconds. Facts. The file contains spool upon spool of facts about me. Dates, times, images all collected by my handlers over the years, undercover Project handlers at school, university, work who watched me grow up and who took me, with the help of my adoptive mother, Ines, to train me on missions, then drug me with Versed to make me forget what I had done. There are facts about my time in prison for a murder I did not commit, a murder I was set up for by the Project to get me out of the way while the NSA scandal blew up. Details on my adoptive family, how Ines killed my real father, Balthus, and shot my adoptive brother, Ramon, after pretending it was he who had given me to the Project. Facts

about how I killed Ines at her Madrid apartment to protect my then friends, Patricia and Chris, the whole scene covered up by the Project, dressed up as a gangland drug killing. There are pictures of each person I have known, intelligence on them, and I resist the urge to reach out and touch the image of their nearly forgotten faces; at this black site facility we are taught that the Project is our only friend.

I look to Black Eyes. 'When I look at this data I think about the killings.'

'Done by you or by others?'

'Both.'

'You have killed several people, Maria – how does that make you feel?'

I hesitate. Feelings, for me, are the hardest questions to answer.

'You see, Maria,' Black Eyes says now, 'you are vulnerable, or at least, you have been vulnerable to outside influences, and it affects you from time to time, as I suspect it's doing now. But that is why I am here. You must learn to lock it away, shut such trivialities from your mind, forget your past, forge your future. Ines gave you to us from Balthus and Isabella, your *real* mother, so you could be someone better.'

'Ines gave me to you so she could have cancer drugs from the Project in return,' I say, struggling to keep a worm of emotion from rising in me. 'Ines lied to all of us and was working with the Project all along. Ines… Ines helped to kill my Papa.'

'He is not your Papa,' he suddenly snaps. 'He is Alarico. He was your *adoptive* father.'

My eyes flicker to Papa's image on the computer: warm smiles, creased eyes. 'I… I miss him.'

I drop my head, feeling an acute sense of failure. I have tried to forget my family, my friends; I have come a long way and it has been hard, too hard sometimes. I glance around the room, at the walls and the window, deeply sad yet resigned, my feet weary and heavy, and the thought arrives that this here now, with Black Eyes, with the Project, is the only option I have left. The only option now. I am on my own. Everyone has deserted me. Gone or dead, I don't know – it always varies, but one thing throughout it all has been consistent: the Project. It's all I have left. I have tried, in the past, to fight them, have actively railed against them, but for what? What good has it done? What good does it do to fight for what you believe in when all you are is a wounded soldier in a losing battle? Is it not better to lay down your arms and surrender? To try and at least see down the barrel from their point of view? Here, with the Project now, with Black Eyes every day, I can see now that it offers me something of what I need: a routine. And maybe this is where I was meant to be all along, a place where a daily routine is standard, surrounded by people like me, working, perhaps, for a greater good. I can learn, maybe. I can attempt to understand what it is they are really trying to do and possibly then acceptance of it all will be easier. You can't control everything and sometimes there comes a moment when you must accept that this is the way your days are meant to be. This is, all along, who you were meant to be.

Black Eyes lets out a long sigh and shuts the laptop. He

glances to the picture frame on the desk. 'The past is hard to deal with sometimes.' He lingers on the image for a second then looks back to me. 'And, Maria, a lot has happened to you. But, what you have to remember is that it's the future that truly shapes us, if only we let it.'

I listen to him and as I do, the Project's phrase, the one bolted to the corridor walls, enters my head, clear and true. '*Order and routine are everything*,' I find myself chanting.

Then we say, together: '*The Project is our only friend*.'

A smile spreads on his face and reaches his eyes then, clearing his throat, he flicks a page. 'Now'— he taps a file with photographs— 'to pressing matters. You know these two people, correct?'

He presents me with two images. I take a sharp breath.

'This,' he says, pointing to one, 'is Patricia O'Hanlon – your cell mate at Goldmouth prison when you were incarcerated for the murder of the Catholic priest before your acquittal.'

'Yes.'

'And you were good friends, close, yes? Your first real friend, would you say?'

I swallow, nervous. Why is he asking me this? 'Yes.'

His finger traces Patricia's swan neck, her shaven head and blue saucer eyes, and as he does, I feel uncomfortable, concerned, but I don't know why. 'And this,' he says now, 'is Chris Johnson. We have a lot of data on him. Convicted American hackers tend to pique our interest. I believe it was Balthus that originally put you two in touch?'

'Yes,' I say, my throat oddly dry. 'I met Chris at his villa in Montserrat, near Barcelona. I went there after MI5 found

me at Salamanca villa. Chris was in prison for hacking a USA government database. Balthus was Chris's prison governor before he was in charge of Goldmouth.'

Black Eyes moves the file nearer to me and my vision catches Chris's familiar deep brown eyes, his uncut hair flopping to sharp cheeks and stubbled chin, and somewhere inside me, I feel an indefinable pull towards him, and towards the faces on the pages, an urge to scoop them to my chest and hold them tight.

'Maria?'

I whip my head up in fright at his sudden voice. 'Yes?'

'The *Project* is your only friend.'

His eyes reduce to small slits, one second passing in the silence, two. He looks from the faces in the file to me, then back again in a seesaw pendulum of time. I shiver, not knowing what to do, worried, scared even at how strongly I felt just now when I saw the faces of my friends, yet shocked at how much I want to please Black Eyes, please the Project, do whatever I can for them, find a place where I belong, accept that this is where I am to live my life.

After ten seconds pass without a word, Black Eyes scrapes back his chair and, striding to the glass mirror on the far side, he turns and faces me.

'Maria, I have something to show you.'

He steps back and presses a buzzer. I watch, a nervous swell inside me licking the shores of my brain as the mirror of the window begins to move and a grey blind behind starts to rise. It reaches the top, clicking to a halt but still I cannot see fully what is beyond, when another snap sounds and this

time a light switches on from the other side. A brightness floods the room and I have to blink over and over as it assaults my eyes, my hand shielding them. I have to resist the strong compulsion to duck and curl as, slowly, I finally see what was causing the moaning earlier.

'Doc! Doc!' the familiar Irish lilt of a voice shouts out.

I manage to stand and step forward, as what emerges in front of me, limb by limb, bone by bone, is a beaten, bruised and tied-up body.

When I find my voice, only one word comes out. 'Patricia.'

Chapter 2

Madrid Barajas Airport, Spain.
Time remaining to Project re-initiation: 32 hours

Even the earbuds I wear can't cancel out the chaos and noise. People march back and forth, left and right, criss crossing the glaring bright gloss of the polished airport walkways. Babies scream and toddlers yell, coffee cups clink and trolley wheels screech, tannoy systems above my head bark the next flight departure as, in the near distance, wine glasses tinkle at a champagne bar, and a group of people laugh at a joke I will never understand.

I stand and blink and watch it all as the airport scene crashes into my senses, body and mind temporarily paralysed by everything. The noise, the smells. Tinny music from open shops. Coffee, beer, oil, sickly sugar, stale cigarette smoke, burger fat, perfume, leather, sweat, the faint soak of breeze block urine. The slurp of a straw. The bite of a sandwich. Every single scent, I smell. Every tiny pinprick of noise, I hear. It all smashes into my brain, colliding into my white and grey matter until I don't know which way to look.

'Doc?'

I slip out an earbud and look to my friend.

'They're not going to spot us,' Patricia says, her voice low, calm. 'We've got through security and I know airports are a nightmare for you, but look at us.' She points to herself. 'We're in business suits and wigs. Jesus'— she smiles,— 'I've never looked so smart. So it'll be alright. Okay?'

I nod and tap my finger.

Another smile. 'Good. You're doing great. I'm right with you.'

She looks down at herself now and I watch her angled arms, her swan neck and her shaven head disguised by a long, mouse-brown wig that settles on suited shoulders. A cream, silk blouse slipped under a black jacket sits against smart tailored trousers and neat, flat ballet pumps on the end of flamingo stalks for legs. My friend. My first true friend.

'It is too loud here,' I say.

She takes my palm and presses her five fingertips into mine as she has always done. 'I know, Doc. I know it's too much information flying into your head from the airport, but I'm here.' A group of passengers shuffle nearby and Patricia forms a little bubble of space around us so no one brushes against me. I catch her familiar scent of talcum powder, fresh linen, bubble baths. It makes me breathe a little slower.

Chris wanders over. He fiddles with his suit and his newly dyed bottle-blonde hair, and shakes his bright red Converses. 'The security guards are hanging around a bit back there. We need to get moving towards boarding.'

Patricia eyes his feet. 'You couldn't have worn a pair of

smart shoes, could you? We're supposed to be pretending to be professional business people.'

He fidgets, pulling at his yellow tie, at the sleeves of his smart navy suit, shoulders twitching. 'I feel like an idiot.'

'You look like one.'

Chris glares at Patricia. He scratches where a white shirt clings to a flat surfer stomach and pulls at his trouser band muttering, 'It's too fucking tight.'

I observe my friends without any understanding of what their exchange means, the glances between them, the words. Funny or serious? Heartfelt or fickle? Ahead, a large bang slices the air as a café tray clatters to the floor, cups and plates and cutlery smashing into cold cream tiles, the sound of it hammering my head. I wince. It's exhausting. I need stability, something factually familiar for my mind to cling onto, a lifeboat of facts.

I turn to Chris. 'The term "idiot" means a person of low intelligence. You hacked into a CIA website, that takes intelligence to achieve. Therefore, the term idiot in describing you is wrong. On this occasion.'

Chris pulls his tongue out at Patricia. 'See.' Then he turns to me. 'Thanks, Google.'

'I have informed you before – that is not my name.'

He smiles, big and wide. 'I know.' Then he starts humming a song I have come to recognise from a singer he seems to greatly admire called Taylor Swift.

'That is the melody entitled…' I listen... "Shake it Off."

He grins. 'In one.'

Patricia rolls her eyes. 'We have to go. Doc?'

‘Yes?’

‘Stay by me.’

We find a semi-quiet patch in a coffee shop and sit. Immediately anxiety hits. The slurp of peoples’ lips and tongues as they sip their drinks. The clink of cups. The steam from the milk machine and the mechanical grind of coffee beans. Teeth biting down into crunchy lettuce. Someone’s lace undone, the thread hanging loose, dragging along the floor. It all collides inside me. I try to focus, count, look to Patricia who mouths to me, ‘How can I help?’ except I don’t know the answer, only know that here and now I need to keep any potential meltdown under control so no attention is drawn to me or to us. Three hours ago we were in Ines’s apartment and I killed her with an iron nail to the neck, and watched Ramon and Balthus die. The last thing we need is a scene.

‘Doc, deep breaths.’

I nod, watching Chris closely as he walks to the counter, orders our drinks, but immediately, this tips me into a panic.

‘I want a black coffee,’ I say. ‘What is he ordering for me? It can only be black.’

‘It’s okay,’ Patricia says. ‘He asked me and I said black coffee. I told him for you.’ She smiles. Soft cheeks, lines opening wide at her eyes. ‘Okay?’

I nod, but inside I am panicking.

Chris is talking to the barista now, easy, light, making random conversation about the bustle of the airport. To give myself something to focus on, I examine his movements, his facial expressions. How easy it seems to come to him, how simple such dialogue appears for him. I try pressing some

of it into my memory, the way in which he acts, remember it so I can perhaps use it, mimic it, cover me up. It's hard to find a place in the world when you don't know who you're expected to be.

Done with that yet still anxious, I turn my focus to checking and rechecking the time of our flight to Zurich where Chris has secured us a safe house through his hacking contacts until we can get further away and out of sight. Finally, Chris returns and it's only then I can be assured that the right drink has been bought. I sip slowly. The liquid is hot, scalding my palate and tongue, but I like it, as if it polishes the tips of my mind so they are ready to be used. Now and then the multiple sights, sounds, smells of the airport hit me, make my body go rigid, but breathing and counting help, and so I do that, run through numbers in my mind, murmur the digits with the tips of my fingers pressed one after the other into my thumb, all the while glancing to my friends, grateful that they are here.

'Okay, so, I checked my email,' Chris says, emptying two full sachets of sugar into a latte, 'and my buddy in Zurich is all set for us to rock up there. All secure. Also, from what I can tell, it looks as if the Alexander woman has read the message we sent her.'

Patricia looks up. 'What? The Home Secretary?'

'Yep, Balthus's wife, Harriet Alexander herself.' He draws out a computer tablet and taps the screen. 'About twenty-seven minutes ago. No, wait…twenty-eight minutes ago she read the whole file that reveals the Project Callidus bombshell, from way back in 1973 up to right now.' He starts

listing things off with his fingers. ‘The thousands of Basque blood-type people they’ve been testing on, the cancer drugs for Ines, the Project taking Maria and drugging her, Maria being Balthus’s kid, all of it, all of the stuff we hacked into in Hamburg.’ He grins at us and I wonder if his face has ever, in his life, been fixed into a frown; I resist the temptation to stick my finger into the dimple on his chin.

‘Well,’ Patricia says, ‘hopefully that’ll be it. That’ll be enough for the government to kick-start an investigation into the whole Project bollocks and it’ll finally all be over. No more running.’

‘Can your software connect to her server system?’ I ask.

‘Ah, you’re thinking of hacking into her emails, tracking who she contacts about the subject of our little message. Yep, thought of that. There’s something blocking me at the moment, don’t know what it is yet, but I’m on it.’

We finish our coffee. Chris taps on his computer the whole time and, ten minutes to go until our flight is boarding, he excuses himself to attend the lavatory. I use the spare time to carry out a reassuring check of the contents of my rucksack. One by one, I place them on the table in a neat line: three pay-as-you-go cell phones, two fake passports, money in several denominations, one wash bag, two packets of energy tablets and the other essential items I require to be on the run and hide, all itemised on a list in my head. But it is the last three things that I unpack, that now amid the din and the cappuccino milk steam and the idle chatter around tea-stained tables, that give me the most sense of calm and reassurance: my notebook and two old photographs.

I rest my hand on the worn notebook cover, flick a finger over the dog-eared pages, pages that have housed my thoughts and calculations and mathematical probabilities for years, each spare section crammed with drawings and codes scribbled feverishly after awaking from dreams and nightmares that would jolt some distant, drug induced memory.

Patricia leans in, looks at a page filled with algorithms and coding. 'I may as well be seeing spots as to understand what on earth all that means.' She inhales. 'It's been hard for you, hasn't it, Doc? Everything that's happened.'

I touch the page with my fingertips, let them skim the curve of the equations before me, the lines, the sketches of pencilled memories forgotten and only sometimes remembered. 'Ines killed Balthus,' I say, sticking to the facts, unable to express the sorrow I truly feel inside.

'Yes, Doc, she did.' Her voice is a soft pillow, a floating feather.

I blink, turn my attention to the two photographs from my bag.

'Is that your dad with you when you were young? He has the same dark hair and eyes as your brother.'

'Yes. Except they were never my biological father or brother.'

'No,' Patricia says. 'No, I know. Balthus was your biological father, and that's hard – you watched him die when you'd only just found out who he really was.'

I swallow. My eyes are a little blurred. 'Yes.'

Patricia touches the second photograph, this one more sepia-toned and worn. 'You were a cute baby.'

I take the second image between my fingers and stare. In it stands a woman, my biological mother, long hair falling in wisps around her face, two grainy, willowed hands on the ends of ribbon-thin arms cradling me – her new swaddled baby. I map the skirt that skims the ground where ten toes on bare feet rest on a bed of gravel surrounding a sprawling, stone hospital-come-nunnery with a crucifix on the door. I blink at the photograph and battle with a feeling inside me, strange and unwelcome. Anger and sadness, a tumbleweed of sorrow that, try as I might, will not go, but instead rolls along the barren land of my heart and mind, leaving behind trails in the sand that vanish with one whip of the wind. *Isabella Bidarte – my real mother*. I try the phrase out in my head, wear it like a new pair of shoes, walk it up and down the corridors of my mind, but it feels odd, stiff, as if using it for too long would create a blister filled with pus that would burst and seep and hurt.

I turn the photograph in my hands. On the back is scribbled an address and the geolocation coordinates of a hospital – Weisshorn Psychiatric Hospital, the place Isabella was last kept in Geneva, and next to it the date of her death, all etched out by my Papa and hidden from Ines before he died.

Patricia stares at it. 'He knew she was kept there, didn't he, your dad? He'd found out about what Ines was doing – getting the cancer drugs to keep her alive in exchange for you.'

Too sad to speak, I trace the address and date with my fingertips as, to the right of the café, a television repeats a news feed detailing the killings at Mama's apartment.

‘A triple homicide was reported in Madrid, in what is being cited as a cartel crime. Spanish lawyer and member of parliament Ines Villanueva; her lawyer son, Ramon Martinez; and a British prison chief, Balthus Ochoa, have all been implicated in what sources are saying is a decade-long fraud ring stretching into millions of dollars and which includes trafficking in illegal medical drugs. The bodies of the three were found at Villanueva’s central Madrid house this afternoon. Villanueva, who was a likely pick to become the next leader of the right wing, and prime minister . . .’

Tilting her head so I can see her eye-creased smile, Patricia nods to the television. ‘Same story they’re telling like before, same bullshit.’

‘It is all lies. The deaths did not happen in that way.’

She sighs as the television screen flashes across the faces of Ines, Balthus and Ramon.

We finish our coffees. I carry out a final check of my belongings, secure the photographs in an inside pocket near my notebook and, acknowledging the presence of my passport one more time, in my head I begin to carry out a run-through of the airport journey when Chris runs up to the table, breathless.

‘Jesus,’ Patricia says, ‘what’s with you?’

He swallows, pointing behind him. ‘People…’ He gulps air, slaps two palms to the table and hauls in some oxygen. ‘C-coming…’

‘What d’you mean?’ Patricia says, frowning. ‘You’re not making any sense and we’ve got to—’

‘Shush!’

Patricia opens her mouth on the verge of speaking when Chris raises a hand and finally spits out the words he wants to say.

‘The Project – they’ve found us!’