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opening extract from

Conspiracy 365: January

written by

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My name is Callum Ormond.
I am fifteen
and I am a hunted fugitive . . .

CONSPIRACY 365

BOOK ONE: JANUARY

GABRIELLE LORD



A division of Hachette Children's Books

Prologue

31 DECEMBER

New Year's Eve
Flood Street, Richmond

11:25 am

It was the wild, billowing black cloak, streaming behind the menacing figure, that first caught my eye. I was walking home from the park when the sight of it stopped me in my tracks. Something or someone was staggering up my street. *The grim reaper?*

I'd been out with Boges, kicking around a football, and was heading back home to help pack the car for what Mum was calling 'the usual family New Year's shenanigans' up the coast at Treachery Bay. Poor Boges was staying at home with his mum and his gran. They'd probably struggle to stay awake watching the nine o'clock fireworks on TV. My night was going to be tough, but at least we'd be away from it, out on the boat.

The commotion down the road came closer.

As the swooping shape neared, I saw that it was a muttering, grey-looking man. He was wearing a dark dressing gown and had a weird, lopsided run, as if he was off-balance and dizzy. I was just about to cross the road to avoid him when I made out what he was saying. With a rush of fear, I realised it was me he was coming after! 'Cal!' he screamed. 'Callum Ormond!'

He stumbled towards me, his wild eyes almost bursting from their sockets. He half-limped, half-ran, his flailing arms reaching out in front of him.

A siren wailed in the distance and within seconds an ambulance with flashing lights appeared at the other end of my street. It was driving towards us, fast.

The crazy man was almost on top of me. I could smell his foul, musty breath.

'Keep away from it, Callum!' he spluttered as drool fell from his gaping mouth. 'They killed your father. They're killing me!'

My heart froze in my chest. Who was this guy? Did he mean the virus? The mention of my dad carried a wave of pain so huge, it sent my mind spinning. The man lunged at me.

'Who are you?!' I shouted, pushing him off. 'What are you talking about?! How did you know my dad?'

The ambulance screeched to a halt next to us, and before the man could grab me again, two paramedics jumped out. The first tackled him down while the second pulled something out of his bag. The madman on the ground clawed desperately at my feet.

'Who are you?' I shouted again. 'Nobody killed my dad—he was sick!'

'Leave this to us, young man,' said the first paramedic, who was gruff and built like a wrestler. 'He doesn't know what he's talking about. You need to get out of the way.'

Pinned down, the man was trapped, but as the second paramedic forced an injection into his wasted arm, he managed to twist over to me. His face was contorted, the veins in his neck pulsed and protruded.

He stared into my eyes, 'The Ormond Singularity,' he said between gasps of breath. 'Don't let it be the death of you too, boy! Get out! Get away! Hide and lie low until midnight December 31st of next year. You don't know what you're up against. Listen to me! Please! 365 days, Cal. You have 365 days!'

'Until what? What am I up against?' The demented man's menacing words had rocked me to my soul.

'What are you talking about?' I demanded.

'And what's the Ormond Singularity? How do you know who I am? Tell me who *you* are!'

The wrestler-medic sidled up beside me with a stretcher, and with a quick movement towards the man, he pushed me out of the way. 'Our patient is very sick and his mind is affected. Please leave this to us and get on your way!'

With superhuman strength, the sick man tore himself away from the medics' hold. His eyes were wide with terror. 'If you don't disappear, you're going to have to survive them for a whole year! Do you realise what that means? They're going to be after you for 365 days! Week after week! Day after day!'

My confusion and fear deepened. *Them?* Who was 'them'? 'What are you talking about?' I asked again. '*Who*'s after me?'

The sick man's sudden surge of strength collapsed. The medics quickly strapped him down on the stretcher. His head fell to one side and his eyelids blinked, furiously fighting the sedative taking over his bloodstream. His voice continued in a haunting and harsh whisper: 'Callum, the Ormond Singularity. The others already know. They know your father contacted you. They will *kill* you. You must go into hiding until December 31st next year. Get your family to leave. Until midnight on the last day of the

year . . . that's when the Singularity runs out. You're not safe until then. Somehow you must survive.'

His eyes rolled back and his body fell limp. The paramedics carried him away.

'Don't take any notice,' called out the second medic. 'Poor guy's been delusional for days. It's just getting worse. Don't let him worry you.'

As the man was pushed into the back of the ambulance, he lifted his head one last time. 'Cal,' he moaned, '365 days. Once they . . . the angel . . . you must . . . for Tom . . .'

The doors slammed and the ambulance sped off.

In a few moments, silence closed in. I stood there alone and bewildered. It was like nothing had happened. The only sounds now were the distant barking of a dog, and the rustling of leaves in the trees that lined the street.

1 JANUARY

365 days to go . . .

Fishing boat
Treachery Bay

12:00 am

Fireworks exploded overhead and even though the shoreline was two kilometres away, I could hear the shouts and cheers even from where I was in the fishing boat. Happy New Year, they shouted. Yeah, I thought. New Year it might be. Happy it sure wasn't.

As our boat bobbed on the black water, yesterday's warning made me shiver. The new year seemed to loom ahead, like some monster rising up from the deep . . .

Every January since I could remember, Dad, Mum, my little sister Gabbi and I piled into the car and headed towards the coast for the beach house at Treachery Bay. But this year, Dad wasn't with us.

I looked at the guy sitting opposite me—my

uncle—my dad's identical twin. Strangers couldn't tell them apart; to me, they looked completely different. Uncle Rafe's face somehow seemed harder than my dad's. Their features were identical—they were both tall with dark hair and squarish faces—but Dad often looked like he was thinking about a secret joke, while Rafe often looked like he was at a funeral. I was fair and slight, like Mum, but hoped that *I* looked more like my dad than Rafe did.

12:13 am

The wind had risen and I could no longer hear the hiss of the white-hot embers from the fireworks hitting the water. In the southwest, a huge bank of black clouds was about to swallow the moon.

'Uncle Rafe,' I said. 'There's a big squall coming up. We've really gotta be getting the boat back.'

I was suddenly aware that all the other small boats had disappeared.

'Rafe, start the motor now. We've got to get back—the squall's going to hit any minute.'

I pulled out our life jackets, threw one to Rafe and put on my own.

'Cal,' he said, 'don't you think you're worrying a bit too much?'

'You don't know how fast the squalls move across this bay,' I spat back at him. He'd only stayed at the beach house once or twice and I couldn't remember him ever going out in a boat.

'It's going to hit in minutes, trust me.'

12:17 am

I'd been out in this same battered old dinghy with Dad since I was two. He'd taught me a lot about the estuary lakes and bays, and right now the mood was murderous. The ocean was pushing its way in—I could see the dim white tops of the rolling breakers. The storm clouds were moving fast and the night was almost pitch black. The building waves were sending our boat lurching.

The outboard wouldn't start. Rafe fumbled and swore, trying again and again to get it going.

I hoped the waves wouldn't get any bigger; once waves get to a certain size they collapse, and if a big one collapsed onto this little boat, it would capsize us, no question.

'Here, give it to me!' I called, as I crawled towards the stern. 'Let me have a go!'

I pushed Rafe out of the way, stumbling as a huge wave lifted our boat right up then dropped us.

'What are you doing?' he yelled at me.

I ignored him, too intent on getting us out of

the situation. I gripped the starter motor loop and pulled, but the engine wouldn't kick.

'It's flooded!' I shouted. 'You've flooded it!'

I knew Mum would be anxious, waiting on the beach, wondering why we hadn't come back yet. Again, I tried the outboard. Nothing.

'Calm down, Callum!' Rafe yelled to me over the deafening wind. 'Let's just wait it out another five minutes.'

I looked at my uncle, who was drenched and unsteady. 'We haven't got another five minutes!'

12:39 am

The squall surged through the ocean on gale-force winds. The tops of larger waves were breaking over the boat, and despite my frantic baling, we were taking on water too fast.

'Grab a bucket!' I yelled. 'Hurry up and start baling, we could lose it!'

'The motor still won't start!' Rafe yelled back.

All around us were huge, shuddering sea walls, hemming us in on every side. A wave suddenly pulled the water out from under us and smacked our dinghy down hard into the empty trough. I swore and hung on tightly with one hand, while still trying to bale water out with the other.

It was a losing battle. For every litre of water

my baling threw out, ten more crashed in. Already it was slopping heavily around my shins. The boat shouldn't be floundering like this, I thought. The buoyancy tanks in the hull were designed to keep it floating, even with a lot of water on board, even if it capsized. What was wrong?

1:01 am

The stern of the boat was now sitting low in the water, weighed down by the outboard. The front of the boat lifted, like the top end of a see-saw. Somehow, the buoyancy tanks weren't working. We were sinking.

1:12 am

Then came the rain, drenching us in blinding sheets. Rafe continued to make useless attempts to restart the outboard. At least we've got life jackets, I thought. We won't drown.

I groped around for the rope to lash us together in case the boat sank, when I sensed something nearing. I looked up and I couldn't move. It was like facing a nightmare; a monstrous ten-metre wave was towering above us. There was nothing I could do. I heard Rafe shout out something, just before the great wall of water trembled above us, then curled over in an avalanche.

And that was the last thing I saw.

My arms and legs were ripped in all directions as I corkscrewed deeper and deeper into the seething water. My fears about rising and bashing into the underside of the hull quickly changed to absolute panic as I realised that my life jacket, suddenly extremely heavy, was dragging me deeper, and further away from the surface.

Wildly I kicked out, struggling to free myself. I knew I could hold my breath for almost a minute. I had to make it to the surface.

In a fleeting moment, a blurry, almost-forgotten memory of my dad's face seemed to hover in the ocean above me. His eyes were desperate, he was fully-clothed and swimming down through the water towards me. And I, a three-year-old, who'd carelessly slipped off the jetty, watched his terror as I sank helplessly below to the bottom of the bay. He saved me from drowning, that day. He was gone, but he'd save me again. Mum and Gabbi couldn't take another death.

1:25 am

With the last of my strength, I tore off the life jacket. I kicked and stroked upwards towards a surface that seemed impossibly far away. I felt like I was getting nowhere, but I kept fighting

through the crushing tonnes of water . . . and I pictured Dad. Then, when I thought I couldn't hold my breath one second longer, I burst through the wild surface.

1:26 am

By now the squall was at its worst. The wind lashed me with spray. I grabbed hold of the boat, which was now riding bottom up, only centimetres above the waves. I clung to it and sucked in huge gulps of air whenever I could get my mouth above water.

I couldn't see my uncle anywhere. 'Rafe!' I screamed, spitting out salty water. But my voice came out like a whisper beneath the sound of the storm.

'Rafe!' I screamed again before being thrown around by another massive wave. This time the force of the storm tossed me to the other end of the barely visible boat. Somehow, it was afloat, and even though the surge crashed my body hard against the hull, I caught hold of the anchor rope and quickly looped it around my wrist.

1:35 am

The rope rubbed salt into my broken skin. I could only hope that Rafe was OK and making

his way towards the shore for help. But in these conditions, what should have been a thirty-minute swim might have taken hours.

The dinghy had flipped over and trapped air beneath its upturned hull. I was lucky. While the boat stayed on the surface I had a chance.

2:59 am

I knew I must have been way out to sea now, kilometres from the beach. The anchor couldn't possibly hold against the violence of the storm. I shivered from wind chill and being in the water too long. I wondered if it was shock as well. My lashed hand was aching and I glanced down to find a long gash running across the back of my right hand under the rope.

Things Dad had said came back to me—I could almost hear his voice in my head: *Callum, you know what to do in this situation. Relax and tread water. A person can stay afloat for hours if they do that.* I tried to stay calm by thinking of all the reasons why I couldn't die.

I had to find out what Dad meant in his last letter. I had to see the pictures he drew while he was in hospital—the ones that Dr Edmundson was going to send to me. And now, the crazy guy on the street? I had to know what was going on.

4:13 am

The storm was easing. The swell was still strong and choppy, but the worst of the weather had moved on. Carefully, I lifted my body, trying to see if I could find the shoreline. I was looking for lights, but all I could see was three hundred and sixty degrees of black.

I blinked, painfully aware of how swollen and sore my eyes were. Slowly, I began to make out the shapes of the waves in the moonlight. My hand was hurting bad and I loosened my hold on the anchor rope. Blood seeped from my injured flesh.

Blood in the water.

Another flashback hit me. This time, a horrible image of a dead dog washed-up on the beach . . . or, at least, the head, shoulders and front legs of a dog. It had been torn in half, and there is only one thing in the sea that can do that.

An icy fear shivered through me.

I started reassuring myself. Sharks rarely came into the estuary. Surely by now searchers would be getting ready to start looking for me at first light. All I had to do was hang on, stay with the boat, and wait for rescue.

5:02 am

It seemed as though I'd been hanging on, head

against the hull, rope around my wrist, for hours, trying to stay alert. Exhaustion was making me weak. I could barely feel my fingers.

Then something bumped into the boat hard. I hoped we'd collided with something submerged, drifting in the water. I looked around. The sky was much lighter, but I couldn't see anything but the chopping waves.

Another bump, this time so hard I almost lost my grip on the rope. I still couldn't see anything, but I knew something was out there. I was freezing cold, but broke out in a sweat.

A third bump, so hard that it knocked me completely into the water. I splashed and slipped, scrambling back to the top of the upturned boat, hauling myself up by the ridge. In the grey light I spotted a three-metre shark rolling over, exposing its pale belly before disappearing again.

I waited, sick with fear, praying that it had gone away. I searched around for a weapon—anything to try and defend myself.

Tossing on the waves, and just out of my reach, was the boat's jag-hook.

Yet another powerful bump and the upturned boat and I, clinging desperately above, started to move over the water. The shark was under the

boat, powering us along! Any minute now, it would bash through the hull and grab me. Then, just as suddenly as it began, the motion stopped. I watched the dorsal fin speed away.

Was it leaving?

The shark had pushed me and the boat closer to the floating debris. I saw, again, the long wooden handle of the jag-hook floating nearby. And then, in the background, I saw the vanishing fin slow, turn and flick around. The shark was coming back—and straight for me!

Without even thinking about it, I seized the hook. From somewhere I was aware of a loud, throbbing noise but I was focused entirely on the huge shark ploughing through the water.

Whoomp, whoomp, whoomp. I didn't have time to think about anything but the beast before me. I raised the jag-hook, ready. The shark charged and I whacked the hook down as hard as I could on its head. Its cold left eye stared at me as it rolled underwater again.

'Come on!' I screamed furiously. 'Where are you?!'

5:28 am

Not knowing where it was lurking was worse even than seeing it.

I looked up in the direction of the noise and in a brief moment of relief I saw a helicopter in the sky. But when I turned back around, I was met with the shark. And it had returned with a friend.

Through the pink-gold surface of the dawn sea, the two fins came straight at me.

The first one hit the boat. I was terrified that if I hit the shark and the hook got stuck in its sandpaper skin, I'd be pulled into the water where the second one circled.

The first shark disappeared.

'Hang on!' shouted a male voice. 'You're going to be OK. Just hang on, Callum!'

I faced the circling shark, hook raised. The first shark was still hidden somewhere. There was no way I could fight off two of them.

Above me, an orange-overalled man was being winched down from the helicopter.

'Sharks!' I screamed out. 'There are sharks!'

The first shark suddenly revealed itself, coming at me with open jaws, ready to ravage. With every ounce of strength, I roared and smashed the jag-hook across its upper jaw. It dropped away and, for a second, I thought I was safe. The upturned boat lurched. The second shark was underneath me now!

'Hurry!' I screamed into the sky. The orange-overalled man couldn't hear me above the noise of the rotors and the engine.

The sea flattened as the helicopter came in lower. The second shark surfaced. Now the two of them raced towards me.

Somehow, I made out the man's words. 'I'm coming in close now! I'm going to grab you, OK?'

What if he missed?

What if I fell straight into the teeth of the two sharks?

I didn't know where to look—what to do . . .

The first shark hit hard, gnashing its jaws, tugging and shaking the boat.

'Let go, Cal! Let go and grab me!'

The helicopter then came down so low I thought it would end up in the sea. Suddenly the shark released the boat, leaving three of its teeth embedded in the aluminium.

The voice yelled, closer now. 'Grab onto me!'

The second shark knocked the boat, almost throwing me again into the water. It was now or never.

Just as I grabbed onto my rescuer, the first shark charged the boat with such force that its body skimmed over it. I wrenched myself up fast. The man tightened the rescue sling, clamped his

legs around me, then swung me away to safety.

Beneath me, the sharks lunged, jaws gaping wide.

Holiday house
Treachery Bay

9:46 am

I lay back and stared at the ceiling of my bedroom in our holiday house. The local doctor had checked me out, stitched my hand and given me something 'to help me relax'. Yeah, sure. Relax.

I'd told Mum and Gabbi some of what had happened out on the boat. If only they knew about that mental case, back home, yesterday. Now I felt really weird—spaced out—as if what had happened overnight had been some sort of hallucination. The pain in my fingers and the gash on the back of my hand proved its reality. I remembered the sharks and shuddered, then drifted back to sleep.

5:25 pm

It was dark. For a moment, I thought I was back in the shark-infested water. The room spun. I grabbed the sides of the bed and saw my hands;

raw, scraped and swollen.

Mum and Gabbi brought in some hot soup and pulled the blinds up, letting light into the room.

'Where's Uncle Rafe? Is he all right?' I asked.

Mum shook her head. I could see tears in her eyes. 'There's been no word about him at all,' she cried. 'Why didn't you turn back before the storm? Even *we* could see the weather coming in!'

'I tried to. I wanted to,' I said. 'I kept telling him, but Rafe—'

'Rafe doesn't know the estuary like you do!'

'I know! But he wouldn't listen to me, Mum!'

The phone rang. 'I'd better get that,' she said, wiping her face and walking away.

'Don't worry about him,' I called out as she left the room. 'He'll turn up.'

Gabbi climbed on the bed. 'I hope Uncle Rafe's OK,' she said. 'Do you really think he's going to turn up?'

'He will. I'm sure he's fine.'

'But what if he drowned, Cal?'

'Gabbi, he's fine.'

I hoped what I was saying was true.

Gabbi snuggled down beside me. 'I'll stay here and protect you from anything bad,' she whispered.

I hugged my little sister. That's what I used

to say to her when she was really small and afraid of the dark. Now she was nine and afraid of nothing.

'Thanks, Gab. But I need to sleep.'

8:03 pm

I woke up drenched with sweat from a nightmare. It was always the same one. I'm lying, unable to move—something horrible is happening—I'm freezing with cold and dread, but I can't do anything about it. And somewhere there's this threadbare white toy dog that, for some reason, scares the hell out of me.

Gabbi came in, and I tried to shake it out of my head.

'Are you OK Cal? You were calling out something. Three hundred and sixty-five what?'

'Oh, nothing, I was just having a bad dream.'

'Uncle Rafe's OK,' she said. 'He washed up at Swans Nest.'

I exhaled quietly.

'I'm glad he's alive, but the idiot almost got the two of us killed,' I said.

'Mum doesn't think he's an idiot,' said my sister. I hated hearing that.

Gabbi plonked herself on the floor, cross-legged, and looked up at me. 'Why weren't you wearing

your life jacket?' she asked. 'The men from the helicopter said you didn't have it on.'

'I *was* wearing it. It's somewhere at the bottom of the bay now.'

'What? It fell off?'

'I had to pull it off. It was dragging me down. The stuff inside must have been waterlogged or something.'

'I've never heard of that happening.'

Come to think of it, neither had I.

Gabbi pulled off her silver and black Celtic ring and leaned up on the bed to stick it on my little finger. 'Here. I want you to have this,' she said. Dad bought the ring for her in Waterford and gave it to her when he came back from his first trip to Ireland.

'Hey, I can't take that from you. You love that ring!'

'No, you have it. Please? It'll keep you safe. If you're safe, I'm safe too.' She lifted my hand up with both of hers. 'See? It fits perfectly.'

8:16 pm

There were voices outside as Rafe arrived. I could hear Mum shouting at him in the kitchen and I couldn't help but smile. It hurt my face, but it was worth it.

After Gabbi left the room, I checked out my face in the mirror. This was the first time I'd had a real good look at myself and I looked pretty shocking. I'd got myself a black eye, my lips and nose were skinned red raw, and my left cheek was all swollen and purple, with a long graze across it that marked me like war paint.

I looked hard at my face. It seemed different. And not just because of the cuts and bruises. It was more serious, harder, determined. I had a lot to sort out and I hoped the kid behind the face was up to it.

My dad was a photo-journalist. He'd gone to Ireland last year to gather footage for a documentary about Australian families with Irish ancestry. He was there with another colleague, researching, interviewing people and speaking at a huge conference, when apparently he stumbled onto something incredible.

I was determined to find out whatever it was that he had discovered about our family—the massive secret he'd told me a little about in his last letter, over six months ago. I'd read and re-read his words, trying to find something that would give me a clue. He'd sent me a drawing of an enormous angel too, that I was also yet to decipher.



The angel stood tall and was dressed in a full military kit from the First World War. He held a flaming sword and his wings were partly folded, rising up above him. If he spread the wings out, he'd have a wingspan like a 747. A guy like that wouldn't flap through the air, he'd whoomp, whoomp, whoomp like a Black Hawk helicopter.

I pulled Dad's letter out from my backpack.

CLONMEL WAY GUEST HOUSE
CARRICK-ON-SUIR, IRELAND

June 2

Dear Cal,

Only a few more weeks and I'll be home and can tell you why the enclosed angel drawing is so important.

Briefly—and I need to be really careful in case this letter falls into the wrong hands—I believe I've discovered something about our family that will cause a sensation! History itself is going to be changed, if we can work out some very complicated clues. Cal, please keep this to yourself, for now, but you kids had better sharpen your wits and get used to the idea of being rich!

I can't say much more because it's not safe. There's at least one party that already knows something—a very dangerous woman who attended the conference in Kilkenny where I delivered my presentation on the Ormond family. She questioned me relentlessly and is determined to find out what I have. If she knows about it, I'm sure other people do too. Anyway, I just found out that she has underground connections...

I need to get as much information as possible while I'm here in Ireland. Your mum and Gabbi don't need to know anything at this stage, but when I come home we'll all figure out a plan of action. We need to decide how to go about keeping things quiet... until the right time.

Cat... it's so hard to write this. I really don't want to worry you, but if anything were to happen to me, you'll have to be the one to see this through. With the stakes involved, the danger could be extreme. Please promise you'll keep this to yourself. I'll fill you in on everything when I get back.

Can't wait to see you all again.

Love, Dad.

I pinned the drawing on the wall. A breeze from the window lifted the paper, making the angel look like he wanted to fly. I took him down and folded him away with Dad's letter. I didn't want Rafe seeing it.

Dad's words kept spinning around in my mind. I could feel grief grabbing me, but I bit it back. Us, rich? What had he discovered? I didn't want any more danger. I'd had enough.

I couldn't wait until the other drawings arrived in the post. Maybe Dad drew something that would help me understand what in the world the Ormond Singularity was.