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opening extract from

Conspiracy 365: February

written by

Gabrielle Lord

published by

Hodder Children's Books

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



BOOK TWO: FEBRUARY

GABRIELLE LORD

Hodder Children's Books

A division of Hachette Children's Books

PREVIOUSLY . . .

31 DECEMBER

I'm chased by a madman, who tells me my dad was murdered, and that I will be too if I don't hide out until midnight, next December 31st. *365 days . . .*

1 JANUARY

I somehow survive a boating accident during a violent storm in shark-infested waters.

2 JANUARY

Our house gets broken into and trashed.

9 JANUARY

Some woman's called me claiming to have information on my dad. But before we meet I'm kidnapped and interrogated by a group of criminals.

10 JANUARY

After narrowly escaping my captors, my uncle and little sister are brutally attacked. Rafe is recovering in hospital and Gabbi's on life support. *My* face is on the news as the attacker! The police are after me now, too! I've got no choice but to run.

13 JANUARY

I'm hiding out in a St Johns Street dump, trying to make sense of the crazy drawings Dad did just before he died, and trying to figure out a way to clear my name.

31 JANUARY

I'm grabbed off the street by another criminal gang, this time led by the infamous Vulkan Sligo. When he realises I have no information to give him, he traps me in a fast-filling underground oil tank . . . and leaves me there to drown . . .

1 FEBRUARY

334 days to go . . .

Car yard

12:00 am

The stinking sump oil gushed out of the pipe on my right, relentlessly filling the underground tank I was trapped in. I struggled to hold my mouth above the rising tide as I bashed my slippery fists on the manhole cover at my head. It was useless. It wouldn't budge.

Car wheels screeched and sped away in the distance, reminding me that I was completely alone. Left to die.

12:03 am

No matter how hard I tried to move around in the thick, glue-like oil, I couldn't stop it from climbing my face. My mouth was almost completely covered. I shut it tight. I desperately pushed my head back and forced my nostrils—

my last chance at life—up and away from the surface that was swallowing me whole.

You've got to slow down your breathing, I told myself. I knew it would be certain death if my nose started sucking up the oil. The powerful, caustic fumes burned through my insides like acid. My head spun, and fear made me breathe faster and harder.

My own voice, from moments ago, played back in my mind . . . *Red hair. Purple sunglasses.* But I'd never even seen the woman who'd abducted me the first time, so what in the world had made me describe her like that to Sligo?!

And, even more puzzling, he seemed to know who I was talking about—he knew someone from the conference that fitted that exact description! What was going on?

I had escaped death at sea, just a month ago, only to find myself facing it again. But there was no possible escape from this.

12:04 am

The oil reached the bottom of my nose. Any moment now and it would block my nostrils entirely . . . I strained my muscles harder, trying to lift my body even just a millimetre higher, but it was impossible; there was nowhere to go.

I started inhaling droplets of oil. *365 days* . . .

the crazy guy's deranged warning from New Year's Eve screamed through my mind, taunting me. I'd only made it through one month—whatever lethal force had cursed my family had finally got to me. A few more seconds and I wouldn't be able to breathe . . . I closed my eyes and hoped it would be quick.

12:05 am

I was so intensely focused on letting myself die calmly that I didn't hear the exact moment the gushing stopped. But, for some reason, it *had* stopped. Somehow, the flow had been turned off!

Some sort of miracle had put an end to the process. What had happened? I was shaking all over. I was almost completely submerged in oil, but I was alive . . .

I opened my eyes, still straining to keep my nostrils higher than the level of the oil, and listened . . .

Nothing.

I slowly pulled up my arm, trying to avoid making a wave that would swamp my face, and thumped on the cover above me.

I pushed myself closer into the corner, hoping to exert more pressure. But it was a waste of energy. Yeah, the oil might have stopped, but I was just as hopelessly trapped as I was before.

12:09 am

The relief I'd felt a moment ago started turning into horror. I was stupid to think that the end of the gushing oil meant I'd survived, and that someone had come to my rescue; I was no closer to making it unless I got out.

My mind raced. Maybe it would have been better for the tank to fill completely, so that I could have at least drowned quickly. Now I was going to be stuck in the darkness of the tank and die of asphyxiation or, worse, slowly and painfully from thirst!

I strained to listen for a sign of hope outside my oil-filled tomb, but all I could hear in the silence was the beating of my blood against my eardrums—the thumping of my fighting heart.

How was I going to get out of this?

12:18 am

'Hey!'

A *voice*?

'You in the tank,' it continued. 'You OK?'

OK? Someone was asking me if I was OK? Was I hearing things? I was so light-headed from fumes and adrenaline that I wasn't sure of anything. I wanted to yell out but there was no way I could open my mouth. I had to make *some* noise, somehow, to let whoever was out

there know I was still alive. I was terrified I'd miss my chance—if it even was a chance—and be left there for dead when I was so close to making it.

I took a slow, careful breath through my nose, shut my eyes tight, and thumped at the manhole cover with my fists. Oil splashed all over my face.

I stopped and waited.

I knew I couldn't hold my breath much longer.

Just as I was giving up on hope of air, there was a creaking, grinding noise. Someone was twisting open the cover!

It lifted and soft light fell on the sea of black surrounding me. I hauled myself up the ladder and out of the opening, spitting and gasping. I'd freed my mouth and nostrils from the deadly tide and re-emerged into life.

I coughed and wheezed uncontrollably, madly shaking my oil-soaked head. I clung to the ground while my lower half hung exhausted below me, still in the tank and submerged in oil.

'Who's there?' I finally managed to croak, spitting oil from my lips.

No answer.

'Hello?' I asked again, cautiously looking around.

Was I imagining things? Was this some trick or some sort of mental torture that Vulkan Sligo was inflicting on me?

'Why don't you pull yourself out already? Or do you like hanging out in there?'

There was no mistake, it was a voice. The voice of a girl. I struggled to climb a little higher. My clothes and shoes were heavy and saturated, and my feet skidded, banging my shins hard into the ladder.

Eventually I crawled all the way out of the tank and rolled over onto my back, exhausted.

Something loomed in my vision. I blinked and tried to focus.

Above me stood the girl I'd seen earlier in the office with Sligo; the one with the strange eye make-up and wild hair. She stared down at me with her shadowed, almond-shaped eyes.

'Who are you?' I asked, groggily. 'Did you turn the oil off?'

'Look at you,' she said pointing down at me. 'You look like a swamp monster!'

What?

'Actually, your eyes and forehead are still human. Kind of!' she laughed.

After all I'd been through, this girl was cracking jokes? I started lifting myself to my feet, trying to think of something clever to throw

back at her, but instead I slipped and fell, landing heavily on my side.

I sat back up to hear more laughter. The girl was laughing at me again!

'You should see yourself!' she said as I crawled away from the tank. 'Believe me, it's funny!'

I tried to stand up again and this time the girl grabbed my flailing right hand, with a surprisingly strong grip, and steadied me. As I balanced myself so I could stand without her help, one of my greasy trainers skidded out from under me and down again I crashed.

The girl was still gripping my hand, so she came down too and fell awkwardly on top of me. At least that stopped her laughing.

She scrambled to her feet, and scrunched up her face in disgust. Her hands and clothes were covered in oil too.

'Look what you've done!' she yelled.

'Just like a swamp monster,' I jeered. 'You should see *your*self!'

She looked down, unsuccessfully trying to rub the black muck off.

'I've gotta get this off me,' she said, turning and running towards a building behind the office where I'd been interrogated. I followed, squelching after her.

12:38 am

We were in some sort of laundry. The girl was washing her face over a big steel tub. A cracked mirror hung above the basin I was standing in front of and I was shocked to see my reflection: the whites of my eyes stared out of a messy black head, and oil crawled down my face in gluey streams and dripped onto the floor.

My heart rate started to slow down a little. I was alive, and I was out.

'You're not going to get very far looking like that,' she warned, peering up at me with dark, smudged eyes. 'You'd better be quick if you want to clean up, they'll be back soon to fish your body out of the tank, and if they find you here instead of there, you're not the only one that'll be in trouble.'

She rushed around and kept looking past me towards the door. Although she had a pretty face, her eyes were cold and unsmiling. But, for some reason, she'd stuck around to save my life.

'OK,' I said, 'but I have to grab my backpack, first.'

'I've already helped enough. I'm getting out of here the second I've cleaned up. You're on your own.'

I quickly washed some of the oil off my face. I knew I didn't have long to get the answers I

needed but surely this stranger could tell me something . . .

'What's your story?' I asked her. 'What are you doing with Vulkan Sligo, and why did you help me?'

She wiped her face hurriedly with a towel. 'You want to know why I helped you?' she asked. Clearly she didn't want to answer the first part of my question.

'I helped because . . . I liked your piercings,' she said.

'You saved my life because of my *studs*?' I quickly felt around to see if my fake studs were even still there. And then I remembered Gabbi's Celtic ring and felt frantically for it on my hand. Relieved, I found it clinging on tight.

'You got a problem with that?' she threatened. 'What does it matter, anyway? You're alive, aren't ya? Isn't that enough?'

This girl was unbelievable.

'You'd better hurry up if you want to *stay* alive,' she added. 'I'm serious, Sligo will be back any minute, and if he sees me—' she paused and slung her bag over her shoulder, 'he'll know it was me who got you out. We can't let that happen. He can't even find out that I *knew* you were in the tank.'

'I get it,' I said. She didn't need to warn me.

I knew all about danger. Sligo had just left me to drown. I knew what he was capable of. 'But first we need to get back into the office to grab my bag.'

The girl brushed down her damp skirt. '*We?* I'm sorry, but like I just said, I don't have time. I don't want to end up in the oil tank like you. I don't think I'd have anyone coming to *my* rescue.'

She grabbed her scarf from the basin and headed for the door.

'Wait! Who are you? Why did you help me?'

She pushed past me on her way out, slowing briefly at the doorway. 'Look, I can wait a few minutes for you down the road. But it's too dangerous for me to hang around here any longer. If you do get away before Sligo comes back, don't go through the main entrance; use the small gate in the back corner of the car yard.' She looked at her watch then started running, turning briefly to yell back, 'I'm only waiting a few minutes, got it?'

'But my bag!' I shouted. 'The office is locked!'

Her voice drifted back. 'There's a spare key on top of the window frame.'

12:52 am

I ran around to the stairs in front of the office, leaving dark, wet footprints behind me. I hurried to the verandah and stretched up, feeling along the top of the window frame to my right.

Nothing.

There was the sound of an approaching car. It had to be Sligo or his thugs coming back to collect my body.

I launched up towards the top of the left-hand window frame and my scrabbling fingers finally lucked onto a key. I almost dropped it—I was still slipping everywhere—but somehow I managed to unlock the door. My backpack was exactly where I'd seen it last—shoved in the bin. I lunged and snatched it, and in one move was outside again.

I couldn't hear the car any more. The yard looked deserted. Maybe it hadn't been Sligo coming back after all.

I kicked off my oil-drenched jeans and pulled on another pair from my bag, struggling to drag them over my wet skin. I threw on my hoodie and began running, hoping this wasn't the kind of place that had bloodthirsty dogs prowling around.

A powerful, automatic light suddenly flooded the area. I swung around and realised that I was

standing, startled stiff, in headlights! The car was right there behind me!

I started running again. Brilliant headlights shifted and followed me as the car drove further into the yard.

Two men jumped out and came after me on foot. I bolted away, counting on finding the gate that the girl had told me to use. I kept low as I scrambled over rusty car parts, engines and other bits of machinery until finally I spotted the gate in the wire fence.

I broke cover and made a run for it.

1:01 am

The thugs shouted and thundered behind me. I put my head down and drove my legs as hard as I could.

When I'd made it a few hundred metres from the gate, I slowed down a little, scanning the street for the girl. She suddenly emerged from the bushes.

'Run!' I yelled. 'They're coming!'

Without a word she joined me and we both pounded along the road together, turning up and down streets without even thinking—anything to get as far away as possible from that place. Away from Sligo. Away from the oil tank. Away from danger.

1:23 am

Eventually the sound of our pursuers died away and we stopped running. I leaned heavily against a brick fence, trying to catch my breath. The girl had also stopped and was panting nearby. She looked down at the palms of her hands and I noticed, under the thin stream of street light, that they were red, swollen and blistered. She must have hurt them turning off the oil.

She suddenly looked up and caught me staring at her hands.

'And you haven't even said thanks,' she snapped.

1:25 am

'Believe me,' I pleaded. 'I'm grateful. Thanks . . . I don't even know your name.'

She ignored me and started walking off. She *had* saved my life, so if she wanted silence I'd let her have it. For now.

We loped along together, and I hoped we'd put enough distance between us and the Slug for the time being. I was sweating from the heat of the night and all of that hard running. What a life.

'I know *your* name,' she suddenly said, raising her eyes and shifting her embroidered shoulder bag from one side to the other. 'Everyone in the city knows your name. Sligo certainly does.'

Closer up I could see green-gold flecks in her dark eyes. I also noticed that her wild and wavy hair had little sparkles in it.

'I know,' I said. But what did she mean by that? Sligo didn't seem the sort of guy who'd be interested in a teenage fugitive, so there was only one reason why he'd be after me—somehow, he must have known something about my dad's life-changing discovery. I knew he'd already found out about the angel, a jewel and the riddle. Maybe something had been leaked to him from the conference in Ireland.

1:32 am

We'd stopped again and everything was still and quiet, except for the crickets. I felt like I was shaking all over. It must have been some sort of delayed shock.

We were surrounded by suburban houses; I was sure all the families inside them would have long ago been tucked into bed. I thought of Mum, sleepless in our house, suburbs away, and Gabbi on life support, alone in the hospital. Mum had almost lost our whole family—first Dad, Gabbi in a way, and now me. I wanted my old life back so badly and wished I wasn't this hunted kid, on the run, living in a derelict dump, trying to stay one jump ahead of . . . of everyone.

'I overhear things,' said the girl, suddenly interrupting my thoughts. 'I know you've got something Sligo wants.'

I looked down the long street. 'You know what that is?' I asked. It would be great if this girl had a few real answers for me.

She shook her head and the glitter in her hair flashed. 'Only that it's massive, and that he'll stop at nothing to get it.'

'So I've noticed.'

'But I knew you didn't know anything about it,' she said matter-of-factly. 'You would have told him if you did. Anybody would have . . . over drowning in sump oil.'

Finally something straightforward that I could agree with. 'You seem to know so much about me. It's hardly fair I don't even know your name,' I said, hoping for the straight talk to continue. I was careful—I didn't want to scare her off. I owed her for shutting off the oil pump, and there were so many questions I needed to ask. Not just about Sligo and what he knew about my dad, but about her. She'd helped me—saved my life—but what was she doing with Sligo? I couldn't make her out. She was nothing like the girls I knew from school. But, as strange as she was, she was company, and it felt good to have someone around to talk to . . . someone who wasn't trying to kill me.

'I'll tell you my name when we get there,' she said.

'Get where? I thought we were just getting *away*.'

'Now you're going to help *me*.'

'Is that right? You could have just asked for my help,' I suggested. 'Nobody likes being bossed around, especially not by some nameless girl.'

With one hand on her hip, she stared back at me with intense eyes. 'All right. My name is Winter,' she said. 'Winter Frey. Happy?'

'Fancy name,' I said.

'Fancy suits me,' she replied.

I was trying to think of something funny to say back when a car turned onto the road ahead, about a block away. I didn't wait to see if it was the black Subaru; I just grabbed Winter's hand and hauled her off the footpath and into a bushy driveway. I let go of her, but not before noticing a tiny tattoo of a bird on the inside of her left wrist. She pulled away quickly, protectively folding her arms, and we both huddled down, sneaking glimpses of the car slowly rolling past.

'Sligo's car,' she hissed.

We waited, hidden in the darkness, until we were sure that the car had gone. Winter looked around. 'Let's go.'