Helping your children choose books they will love



Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

opening extract from

Conspiracy 365: May

written by

Gabrielle Lord

published by

Hodder Children's Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.



1 MAY

245 days to go . . .

Leechwood Lodge Asylum

7:07 am

The sound of screaming woke me up with a violent jolt. My hazy nightmare with the white toy dog and the crying baby had blended in with the very real, desperate cries of the people in this place. My dazed confusion lasted only a second before I accepted the equally horrible reality: that I'd been kidnapped and locked up in Leechwood Lodge, a psychiatric institution, inhabited by homicidal maniacs, the mentally insane—and now me.

Just days ago I was hiding out in the quiet little boathouse on the water, slowly making progress and actually getting somewhere, and now I was in this high-security psych ward, under a false identity, and everything was lost.

7:10 am

There was no point in pounding on the door or joining in with the screaming out for help—the orderlies had made that very clear.

I flopped back on the yellowing pillow. Leechwood was the perfect name for this place: it seemed to suck the life out of you. My mood was as heavy as lead as I thought about what had happened to me in the last few days.

Vulkan Sligo had stolen my dad's drawings and the copy of the Ormond Riddle—thanks to the treacherous Winter Frey, who must have tipped him off about my Greenaway Park boathouse hideout. Or had she? I'd been so angry with her earlier, but I was no longer sure why. She had seemed pretty determined to protect me from the black Subaru when it showed up at Memorial Park, to stop whoever was in it from coming for me. She put herself on the line to distract them and get them off my trail . . . but then someone trashed the boathouse and grabbed me anyway.

A sick taste filled my mouth as I thought of all the things I'd worked so hard to discover and decipher that were now gone. The past four months of hell had all been for nothing! Everything I'd uncovered, while having to live on the streets and be constantly on the run, had been

served on a silver platter to Vulkan Sligo or Oriana de la Force, or whoever was responsible for trapping me in this place. Dad's drawings and the Ormond Riddle were gone. I had done all that work only to help those thieves!

Locked in here I was useless—I couldn't do anything about it. I rolled over and buried my face in the pillow. Everything hurt. My neck ached from the tranquilliser dart, which seemed to have also done something to flare up the dull pain in my right shoulder again. At least I wasn't in the straitjacket any more—one of the orderlies removed it during the night when I had to go to the bathroom, warning me that if I wasn't on my best behaviour, it would go right back on again.

I didn't want to be here—I didn't want to be who I was—it was all too hard. I wished I could just go home and be with Mum and Gabbi, so we could learn to be a family again. We needed a chance to get used to the idea of Dad being gone. Why did it have to be like this?

The screams were suddenly taken over by an ominous silence. I sat up, my feet hanging down, skimming the cold floor. I was miserable and it wasn't just being locked up in this place that was doing it. I'd had a fight with Boges, my best friend, and I couldn't blame him if he just

gave up on me. I had no idea about Winter. I felt I didn't have a friend in the world. Mum thought I was nuts and Uncle Rafe was too caught up worrying about the estate and the practical side of things. The only glimmer of hope right now was Gabbi. I knew she'd be behind me. Instinctively, my fingers went to twist the Celtic ring she'd given me, but of course it was no longer there. I'd slipped it on her finger at the hospital. The thought of her eyelids flickering and her gradual recovery was the only good thing that had come out of the last four months.

And now this.

How the hell was I going to get out?

7:17 am

The screaming started up again, closer than before.

'I'll kill him!' a man's voice shrieked. 'He's an impostor! A replacement! I'll kill him! Where is he? Where is the real Dr Snudgeglasser?'

Footsteps pounded down the corridor. Heavy doors opened and closed with urgency. I had the sense that the staff at the asylum were racing around the place trying to control someone.

The voice of whoever wanted to kill Dr Snudgeglasser was muffled, then fell silent once more.

Dr Snudgeglasser's name was on my chart as being my psychiatrist. Who was he? I wondered, and what was all that about his replacement? And what kind of madman was it out there who wanted to kill him?

In the stillness that followed the outburst, a scratch at the window made me turn around. A tiny brown bird was sitting on the window sill and, as I watched, it flew up into the eaves and disappeared from view. Immediately, I thought of Winter's small bird tattoo on her wrist, and the 'Little Bird' inscription on the back of her locket. Frustration rose up my spine. I'd been so close to finally making some sense out of everything and now I was a prisoner in this place, with no prospect of escape. I was trapped. Hopeless. Useless.

7:20 am

I turned my attention to the notes on the chart at the bottom of my bed. According to these, I was extremely dangerous. I didn't know what 'Level 5 Restraints' were, but I didn't like the sound of them.

An overwhelming feeling of claustrophobia came over me and I ran to the door. Shivering in the hospital pyjamas, I grabbed the handle and twisted it with both hands—but of course it was

locked and wouldn't budge. I shuffled away to the other side of the dingy, high-ceilinged room, near the window, and kicked the wall in frustration.

I stared back at the door. Anger surged through me and I took a running jump, throwing my body against it. I hit it hard and fell back onto the floor like a rag doll. After a few seconds I crawled back up to my feet and started banging.

But no-one came. Just like that orderly had said: you can scream all you like—nobody cares. After I'd exhausted myself, I stopped. Straitjacket, I remembered.

7:26 am

Tired and cold, I pulled the blanket off the bed and wrapped it around me. I needed to clear my head, and shake off the building anger. This sort of mindless fury was not helpful. I remembered Repro's warning about irrational people making fatal errors. I thought of him in his secret lair behind the filing cabinets—he'd made a secure little home for himself and I envied him.

I shuffled to the window once more and peered up through the glass beyond the bars. That's when I noticed a tiny mud nest attached to the eaves. I could just make out the shapes of baby birds with their beaks wide open as the

mother bird arrived and perched on the edge of the nest.

Crazy as it sounds, I even resented those little birds. They had a home—they were safe.

I looked down into the dim garden, deserted now at this early hour, desolate and forbidding in the grey light. Standing by the window, I felt the full force of my loss. I'd even been deprived of stuff like my phone, my clothes, the guardian angel pin that Repro had given me. I didn't have the little Celtic ring any more, but at least that was with Gab.

On top of all that, my identity had been stripped from me. The chart said I was supposed to be 'Ben Galloway'.

The muffled chirping of the little birds took my attention again. Diamond-shaped beaks greedily gaped wide, as each one tried to push the others away in an effort to get to their mother's food first.

The sight of the littlest one barging in from the back of the nest, shoving past his much bigger brothers, suddenly changed my mood and I switched my way of thinking. He was the smallest, but his determination took him to the front.

Right now I didn't have a plan—I didn't have a clue how I was going to get out—but I owed it to

my family not to crash into despair. I was going to fight. I sure wasn't going to make it easy for my enemies by giving up. From now on, I promised myself, I'd be always on the lookout for a gap in security.

I threw myself back on the bed. The lump on the back of my shoulder seemed to be getting bigger and was quite painful. But I had other things to worry about.

Think, Cal, *think.*

I desperately needed a plan.

8:23 am

I jumped at the sound of the door being opened. Someone in hospital greens shoved a tray through the door.

I went over to inspect breakfast—a blob of yellow and white that was supposed to be scrambled eggs, two leathery slices of toast and a cup of something like coffee. It all looked worse than army rations, but it was food, and I was starving. I grabbed the plastic spoon and tucked in.

9:03 am

The door to my room flew open and Musclehead, the big psych nurse—shaven head, a silver-lined hole in his earlobe—strode into my room.

'OK, son,' he said, 'put your clothes on. Dr Snudgeglasser will see you now.'

The nurse threw my clothes at me and waited while I pulled them on.

It felt really good to be wearing my own clothes again, and I was relieved they hadn't thrown them in an incinerator. Putting on my jeans, T-shirt, hoodie and trainers—even without the shoe laces—made me feel more human, more myself.

So, I thought, I'm going to find out who Dr Snudgeglasser is. Maybe this doctor would be able to help me—if I could just convince him that I wasn't Ben Galloway.

9:07 am

Musclehead kept a firm grip on my arm while he led me downstairs and along a corridor of doors that were the same as the one on my room—heavy and bolted. All the time my eyes were scanning, looking for a chance to escape. At the end of the corridor were glass double doors, with people coming in and out. I knew if I got a chance I'd bust through those doors and be on my way to freedom.

9:10 am

We stopped in front of a door that stood out from

the others. It was wooden and unnumbered, and didn't have the thick you're-never-getting-out-of-here bolt locking it. Musclehead knocked and then pushed me through, closing the door once more behind me.

I looked around. I was in a cosy, sun-filled office with cream-coloured walls, tall with bulging bookshelves, and a big desk near a wide window. Framed qualifications hung in the spaces that were not covered by shelving. I noticed that there were papers on the desk weighed down by a small brass moulding of a brain.

On my side of the desk was a small, straight-backed chair, while behind it, and turned away from me on an elaborate leather armchair, was a broad-shouldered figure.

'Hello?' I said.

The figure swung round—a man in a tweed sports jacket, with bushy eyebrows, black-rimmed spectacles and a stern expression in his dark eyes.

So this was the doctor that one of the other patients had been threatening this morning. I stood in front of him, feeling as if I'd been called to the principal's office.

'I'm Dr Snudgeglasser,' he said. 'Please sit down.'

He gestured to the chair in front of me, before picking up the brain paperweight and leaning back in his armchair. I sat down and checked out the row of funny little spiky cactus plants on his desk.

There was a silence until Dr Snudgeglasser put down the brain he'd been toying with and looked over the tops of his glasses at me.

'You know why we're here.'

'Actually, I don't,' I said.

He picked the brain up once more and rolled it around in his hand.

'I've been kidnapped,' I said. 'Someone stuck a tranquillising dart in my neck and the next thing I know I'm here. Locked in a cell.'

Dr Snudgeglasser wrote something down before looking up again. 'The patient's quarters are certainly not cells,' he said. 'That's a very dramatic narrative, Benjamin.'

Benjamin. This stranger's name made me feel really uneasy, but I ignored it. 'Dramatic or not, it's what happened.'

'I see,' he said, in a way that sounded like he didn't see at all.

I watched him twist the brain in his fingers. I gripped the arms of the chair that I sat on, trying to stay cool. It didn't seem like there was any hope of escaping Dr Snudgeglasser's

room. His window wasn't covered by bars, but it was sealed the whole way around. He had a button on his desk, too, which I'm sure meant he could call for help or assistance when faced with a particularly difficult patient.

Dr Snudgeglasser sighed.

'Ben,' he started.

'My name is not Ben.'

He ignored my interruption.

'Ben, I'm a psychiatrist. You have already been assessed. I have all your details, and I'm here to help you. We both need to be honest with each other. I can't do my job, and *help* you, unless you admit to me who you really are. Mr Sligo wants you to be helped, but I can't work with someone in denial.'

Sligo. I gritted my teeth, trying to hide my fury.

'I need to relate to the real *you*,' Snudgeglasser continued, 'otherwise I'm just joining you in your delusion. Do you understand?'

I didn't, but I thought it better not to say so.

'Maybe you should read Mr Sligo's letter. It was given to me when you were admitted here two days ago. It might help you come to terms with your position.'

The doctor tilted his head like he was trying to read me. He handed over the letter.

Dear Alistair

As previously discussed, I will be paying for Ben Galloway's expenses until such time as he is cured of his delusions and ready to hand over the documents he is wrongly withholding.

I have a great deal of respect for your work and interest in your hospital and hope this is evident in my financial support. I'm very confident that your expertise will help Ben come to accept the truth. As you know, his father and I were in business together for many years. Once young Ben has come to his senses, admits his true identity, and agrees to hand over certain documents that his father—may he rest in peace—entrusted to me, I will be delighted to donate further to Leechwood Lodge and, of course, continue to support Ben in whatever endeavour he chooses. Until then, I will continue to pay all expenses because of my unswerving loyalty to his father.

It was wonderful to see you at the premiere of 'Swan Lake' last week.

Yours sincerely,

Vulkan Sligo

Vulkan Sligo

I passed the letter back to him. My mind was going into overdrive. Why would Sligo go to all the trouble and expense of hijacking me and locking me up here to undergo expensive psychiatric treatment? Someone like Sligo doesn't do anything without a reason—a reason that brings big benefit to him. If he already had Dad's drawings, the text of the Ormond Riddle, the transparency with the two names and all my other papers, there'd be no reason to put this sort of pressure on me. Why not just get rid of me? It made no sense . . . It only made sense if . . .

If Sligo didn't have the drawings or the Riddle!

He was clearly behind my abduction, but he *didn't* have any of my stuff!

My feeling of elation was short-lived. If he didn't, then who did? Maybe Oriana de la Force's thugs had swooped on the boathouse and taken my things. Sligo, not knowing that the other gang already had the goods, must have sent his gorillas after me and was holding me here at Leechwood until I handed the drawings and the Riddle over to him, or revealed where they were.

'What do you have to say about the matters raised in Mr Sligo's letter, Ben?' Dr Snudgeglasser's voice interrupted.

I wasn't sure what I should say. I hesitated. If I told the truth about not knowing where the documents were, he probably wouldn't believe me. And if he did believe me, I would become useless . . . and what would Sligo do with me then?

Dr Snudgeglasser held the metal brain in his fist and tapped it on the desk, impatiently.

'Sligo has made this whole thing up because he wants to get hold of something that my father gave *me*. Something that doesn't belong to him and is none of his business. He has *never* been in partnership with my father,' I snapped.

I was going to add that Sligo had already tried to kill me, but I decided to be quiet about this for the time being. Dr Snudgeglasser might just see that accusation as another 'dramatic narrative' and another display of my craziness.

'So it's true he wants something of your father's?'

'Yes, but it's not what you're thinking. It was given to *me*. *Me*,' I repeated, 'not Ben Galloway. He's made up this story about my delusions because he's trying to get his hands on something that doesn't belong to him.'

'You're accusing Vulkan Sligo of concocting a completely false identity and history for you?'

'That's right, Doctor, I am.'

'You're not Ben Galloway?'

'Damn right, I'm not!' I shouted. 'Sligo's made this whole thing up, and you've swallowed it, hook, line and sinker!'

Dr Snudgeglasser shook his head and shuffled his chair back a few centimetres. He gave me a kindly look as if I'd just proven that I was delusional, and then picked up a large envelope, the contents of which he tipped out onto his desk. He pushed the first document towards me.

'Reality check, Ben,' he said. 'I want you to have a good look at these. This is your birth certificate, your passport and here is the rest of your ID. Take them with you. All this, I suppose, is false too?'

I snatched the documents from him and flicked through them. They looked frighteningly genuine to me, and had my picture on many of them.

'That's not me,' I said handing the passport back to him, 'and that's not my birthday, either.'

'And this is your school travel ID,' he continued, as if I hadn't spoken at all, passing me a wallet. I flipped it open. I couldn't believe what I was seeing—an ID with my photo next to Benjamin Galloway's name.



'That's not me!' I shouted. 'I've never lived there in my life!'

There was something really freaky and terrifying in seeing myself remade as someone else. Already I felt so far away from my old life. I was forgetting what Mum's happy face looked like and what it had been like living at home with Gab and Dad before he died, and before I had to go on the run, fighting to stay alive. This Ben

Galloway wasn't me, but it was starting to feel like the old Callum Ormond wasn't me either.

The doctor started tapping the brain on the desk again. 'That's not you? In the picture?'

'No,' I said. 'I mean, yes. But . . .'

'Ben, let me refresh your memory. Your father, Redmond Galloway, was Mr Sligo's business partner. He died in tragic circumstances, I understand. It's not easy to accept something like that.' He waved the passport at me. 'Do you deny this is your photograph?'

I couldn't deny it; it was me in the photo. I even remembered exactly when it was taken, with Mum and Gabbi in one of those little booths at the local shopping centre about a year ago. It just wasn't my passport or my name.

'That's my photograph,' I said.

Had someone stolen my photos and passport during the break-in at our house in January? Had they then doctored them to create this false identity?

'That's my photograph,' I said again, 'but the rest is crap. They're not my IDs.'

'So you would have me believe that Mr Sligo has gone to all this trouble and created a completely false identity for you, using your photos, so that he can get hold of something that you've got—something that he is *not* entitled to?'

'That's *exactly* what I'm saying. You've heard of identity theft? I remember when this photo was taken,' I said, pointing at the passport. 'And someone, somehow, has used it to create this totally insane and false identity, to get Sligo what he wants.'

'Why on earth would he do that? Have you any idea how difficult and expensive it is to create false passports?'

'Not if you have enough money and the right contacts. The right *criminal* contacts. And if you're the sort of person who will go to any lengths to get what he wants.'

Dr Snudgeglasser sighed loudly. 'Ben, this is clearly paranoia. What you're claiming doesn't make sense.'

'It does make sense! After my dad died, we—'

'So you admit that your father has passed on?' Dr Snudgeglasser quickly interjected.

'Yes, he died, but *Redmond Galloway* is not my father. Because *I* am not Ben Galloway!'

I was in an impossible situation. Totally lose-lose! If I admitted who I was, Cal Ormond, the nation's most wanted criminal, I was in just as much trouble as I was by denying the false identity of Ben Galloway. Either way, I lost out. Either way I'd be locked up. In the nuthouse or the slammer.

'If you're not Ben Galloway, then who are you?' asked the doctor.

I squirmed uncomfortably in my seat, not knowing what to say. The thought of being arrested seemed like a better deal right now. I could try to make a break for it while I was being picked up by the police. I was thinking that I'd rather take my chances with the cops than stay locked up here in Leechwood at the mercy of Vulkan Sligo.

Sligo and Snudgeglasser had me squeezed in a vice.

'Well?' he demanded.

'I'm Callum Ormond,' I mumbled, finally.

The doctor leaned back in his chair and ran a finger over his bushy eyebrows. I started worrying that I'd made the wrong decision by confessing my true identity. I'd spent the last few months hiding who I was, and now I was offering it up freely.

I looked up to see that the doctor seemed completely uninterested and unmoved by what I'd said. He appeared more frustrated than anything else.

'Call the police,' I said, feeling desperate. 'They're all looking for me. They'll know who I am.'

'The police?' Dr Snudgeglasser asked, dubiously peering at me.

'Go on,' I urged. 'Call them! They'll tell you who I am!'

'I agree,' Dr Snudgeglasser continued, 'now that you mention it, that you bear *some* resemblance to that wanted lad. But taking refuge in this absurd story that you're some sort of fugitive wanted by the police rather than face the truth is not going to help you get out of here.'

'I look like him because I *am* him!' I shouted, thumping my fist on the desk. My shoulder twinged with pain and I automatically grabbed it with my left hand. It felt sore and swollen.

'I am him,' I said again, this time calmly.

Dr Snudgeglasser kept talking. 'You're just taking advantage of the similarity to create this complete confabulation.'

'Confabulation?' I guessed the meaning of this word. Dr Snudgeglasser believed I was making it all up. I tried another tack. 'You must know that Vulkan Sligo is a criminal. He is notorious. Everyone knows that! He'll lie to get whatever he wants!'

'He has never been convicted of any crime,' said Dr Snudgeglasser, adjusting his glasses. 'The media is largely responsible for the sensational reports about him—most of them quite without foundation. He has a number of court cases pending with various media outlets, defending

his good name and reputation against their slanders and libels. He has been a great friend to Leechwood with his financial support.'

I recalled the terrifying night in the car yard when I was trapped inside the underground oil tank, and about to drown or suffocate. There was nothing sensational or made up about that.

I realised it was useless to try to convince him of the truth about Sligo. I understood the threat in the letter he'd written very well—I was going to have to stay in this place until I gave Sligo what he wanted. I understood also why I was supposed to be Ben Galloway—my real identity would create too much of a problem. Once the asylum knew who I was the police would pounce and I would be out of Sligo's reach. By giving me a false identity, he could keep me here safely and work on me until I handed over Dad's drawings and the Ormond Riddle. Except that I didn't have them any more! I had no illusions about what would happen when Sligo finally realised this; Ben Galloway *and* Cal Ormond would both simultaneously disappear for good.

'I need to call a friend urgently,' I said. 'I need to phone someone.' I was desperate to contact Boges. Maybe he could help me find out where all the documents were.

'All in good time, Ben,' said the doctor, insisting on calling me by my 'real' name. 'Our hospital works on a system of rewards. Good behaviour gets you privileges, like being allowed to make phone calls, outings in the garden, and, later, even visits to town. It's not a prison, Ben. You're here to get help. We're here to give you that help. So please, let's talk about you, Ben.'

'My name's not Ben,' I said again. 'Sligo is lying about everything. If you want to hear what I have to say, then let me tell you who I really am and what has happened to me.'

Dr Snudgeglasser's leather armchair squeaked as he leaned back again. He made himself comfortable as if he were waiting for a stage performance. 'I suppose we can do it this way for a while,' he said. 'I am rather interested to hear what you have to say.'

'OK. I guess it all began with a letter my dad sent me from Ireland.'

'Go on,' Dr Snudgeglasser nodded.

'Dad said that he'd come across something amazing in Ireland—some astounding secret that would change history and make our family rich.'

Dr Snudgeglasser nodded again.

'Then all these things happened. Bad things. My dad got really sick in Ireland. He came back

home but died not long after from a mysterious illness—some unknown virus that made it impossible for him to even speak to us. In the hospice, he left behind all these strange drawings that he drew for me—my last clues into the discovery he'd made and mentioned in his letter. And then my uncle and I nearly drowned at sea, because someone had sabotaged our boat. Then there was a break-in at our house. Something was taken from Dad's luggage, and I found this transparency with two odd words written on it.'

Dr Snudgeglasser stopped nodding and started making notes. Maybe I was getting through to him. Or maybe I was digging myself deeper into trouble.

I felt I had no choice but to go on.

'I also found a mention of this medieval riddle—the Ormond Riddle—and, of course, there was the angel.'

'An angel?' frowned Dr Snudgeglasser, stopping his scribbling for a moment. 'Are you saying you've seen an angel?'

'Yes,' I said, before seeing the look on his face. I couldn't help but roll my eyes. 'I'm not saying I saw an actual angel. It was a drawing, at first, but now I know there's this angel associated with our family. There's an image of it in a

stained glass window at the Memorial Park cenotaph, in honour of a distant relative, Piers Ormond, who died in the war. It's got something to do with what my dad discovered in Ireland.'

Even to me, what I was saying sounded pretty strange.

'Do go on,' invited Dr Snudgeglasser.

'After the break-in I was about to meet up with this woman who I thought could help me, when I was grabbed and thrown in a car boot.'

The doctor stared blankly at me as I spoke, as though I were about to reveal far-fetched tales of an alien abduction.

'I found out later that the kidnappers were led by Oriana de la Force.'

'The criminal lawyer?'

'Yes! Exactly! She had me tied up and she questioned me over and over. I managed to escape the closet they locked me in, and ran away. Then one day, not long after, I came home and someone had attacked my little sister and shot my uncle. I gave Gabbi CPR and then had to run again because there were people after me. I couldn't believe it when I heard the reports that I was the attacker! I had criminals after me, and the cops! I've been running for my life ever since!

'I was thrown in an oil tank to drown—

by your "great friend" Vulkan Sligo. I've been living under bridges, in sheds, in underground tunnels . . . I've been shot at, chased, bitten by a snake—'

'Attacked by a lion . . .' the doctor added, with a patronising grin.

I glared at him.

'I've read the stories, too,' he said by way of explanation.

'It all happened. To *me*.'

My voice petered out.

Dr Snudgeglasser put down his pen. 'That is certainly some story.'

'It's not a freaking story! It's what happened. I know I didn't tell it very well because it's so complicated and so much has happened, but it's all true! I've lived it!'

I could see he didn't believe a word of what I said.

Here I was, finally making a full confession of my real identity, and this doctor didn't believe me! Dr Snudgeglasser was convinced by the false passport and documents Sligo had tampered with.

'Interesting,' he continued. 'That was all very interesting. It teaches me even more than I know already about the human capacity for denial—to think that you would create such an

amazing story rather than face the truth. Most intriguing. Perhaps Mr Sligo should invest in your writing career,' he chuckled to himself.

I sprang to my feet, furious. Dr Snudgeglasser's hand moved as fast as a snake strikes, to hover over the panic button on his desk.

I was beaten, I knew it. He was probably a decent man, underneath the arrogance and the eyebrows, but he was never going to believe me. Who would? I sank back in my chair.

'Vulkan Sligo is a crook,' I said, waving my hand over the false documents. 'Please believe me. None of this is true.'

Dr Snudgeglasser withdrew his surprisingly shaky hand from the panic button on his desk.

'Ben, attacking the person who is trying to help you is not going to help your case. You must face the truth—horrible though it is. This fantasy of yours is keeping you sick. Ben—'

'I'm not Ben!' I yelled, frustrated and angry.

'—this elaborate fantasy of yours,' he continued as if I hadn't spoken, 'all this talk of riddles and attempts on your life, assaults by lions and snakes, sabotaged boats, history-changing secrets, all this is indicative of the terrible confusion and denial in your mind—your desperate attempts to avoid facing reality. This denial is delaying the healing process.

You *must* face the fact that your father is dead.'

'I'm not denying that! But it's *my* father who's dead, not the father of this fictitious Ben Galloway!'

'Listen to what you're saying. In one breath you admit that your father is dead, and in the next you deny it again,' Dr Snudgeglasser leaned across his desk. 'There's no need for you to create this paranoid escape. It's classic avoidance and it will not help you. You're similar to one of our more disturbed patients, Vernon. Poor fellow thinks he wants to kill me. He thinks I'm no longer me. Thinks I've been "replaced" by some foreign being.'

I remembered the yelling earlier this morning coming from down the corridor.

'That's what's happened to *me*!' I shouted. '*I*'ve been replaced! By this false ID!' I banged down on the phoney documents with my fist.

'Calm down, Ben. Vernon can't face the truth either. It's not me he wants to kill. It's the *truth* he wants to kill. You both have similar problems.'

I'd only made things worse, trying to explain. I could have howled with frustration and anger. But all that would earn me was a straitjacket. I controlled my temper by taking a few deep breaths.

Dr Snudgeglasser had a lot of fancy theories, I thought. But he was the one who couldn't see the truth in front of him.

'You must grieve, Ben,' he said. 'You must grieve before you can heal. You need to welcome the healing process. Death is a part of life that we all must go through.'

'I don't need a healing process!' I said, leaping uncontrollably out of my chair again. 'I just need to get out of here!'

Dr Snudgeglasser's hand shot out and pressed the red button firmly. An orderly bounded through the door and before I could jump out of the way he grabbed me and hauled me into the corridor. I kicked and yelled and tried to break free from his grip as he dragged me like a sack of potatoes down the hospital hall.

'I'm not Ben Galloway!' I screamed, kicking and struggling. 'I'm not! I'm Cal Ormond! I'm the Psycho Kid! I'm the Psycho Kid!'

Another voice from behind a locked door joined me in my screaming. '*I'm* the Psycho Kid!' he shouted. 'I am!'

Another deep voice joined in. 'No! I am! I'm the Psycho Kid!'

'I'm the Psycho Kid' cried another guy in a straitjacket who was being dragged down the hallway, past me.

It was hopeless. All these voices clamouring and shrieking, copying my words, reduced me to silence.

As I was hauled away, back to my cell, the squabbling voices faded. I was starting to see that in this place, the truth was nothing but another delusion.