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Opening extract from

Conspiracy 365: August

Written by

Gabrielle Lord

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CONSPIRACY 365

BOOK EIGHT: AUGUST

GABRIELLE LORD



A division of Hachette Children's Books

Note: This story is set in Australia, where August is a winter month

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To Angie and Claire

PREVIOUSLY...

1 JULY

I gulp down a lungful of air as the fishing net I'm trapped in finally lifts out of the water. The boat crew hide me from the cops and I'm forced to work as a wheeler until the debt's paid off. When I'm helping a guy unload his fish into a freezer, a deckhand—who turns out to be Three-O from the attempted car jacking—locks me in the freezer so he can give me to the cops and claim the reward money. I'm desperate to escape before I freeze to death. I end up using Repro's track detonators to blast myself out.

3 JULY

Back at the beachside mansion my recurring nightmare of the white toy dog and wailing baby continues to taunt me.

8 JULY

Boges gives me an address—'Manresa' in Redcliffe—where I hope to find Great-aunt Millicent. Police

presence on roads out of town has been increased which means it will be hard to get there.

9 JULY

Winter has overheard Sligo saying there is something written inside the Jewel. I confront her about the photo I found in Sligo's safe of her wearing the Jewel and she denies it, saying the image must have been digitally edited.

13 JULY

After narrowly escaping the cops, Zombrovski and Sligo at the train station, I begin my journey on a bus to Redcliffe. When I notice some guys looking at me, I get off and start making my way on foot, avoiding roadblocks as I go.

18 JULY

Winter sends me a warning, saying Sligo has a lead on my location. I know I only have a short time to find my great-aunt. Manresa turns out to be a convent, and I'm told Millicent has taken another name—Sister Mary Perpetua—and that she hasn't spoken in twenty years. Straight away I start worrying that my trip has been for nothing . . . I call Boges and tell him about the writing on the Jewel. I spend the night in a dead nun's 'cell'.

19 JULY

I meet my great-aunt and to my shock she breaks her silence, mistaking me for her brother, Bartholomew. Apparently my dad contacted her about the Ormond Singularity before he died, but the family papers were put away in an envelope when she entered the convent. She warns me that the Ormond Singularity has meant the death of all who have tried to unravel it, and she also mentions a tragic set of twins—one returned safely, the other one lost . . . I locate the envelope in the convent archives and discover letters from Piers Ormond and a family tree.

20 JULY

Disturbed by a sound in the middle of the night I wander into the corridor and find Zombrovski sneaking around, dressed as a nun! He chases me through the convent and up the bell tower. With nowhere left to run, I'm trapped. Zombie shoves the massive bell towards me, but I lift my body out of its path, narrowly missing its force. The rebound momentum swings back towards Zombie, throwing him out of the tower, and sending him free-falling to the ground far below.

The fall is fatal—Zombie is dead. I grab my things and flee on a motorbike, gunning it through

the crossfire of a shootout between Bruno and the police.

24 JULY

Back at the mansion, Boges and I catch up on what happened in Redcliffe. We go over the French script on the Jewel as well as Piers's letters. The solicitor whose name I couldn't remember contacts me on my blog!

25 JULY

I call the solicitor, Sheldrake Rathbone, and he tells me that he has Piers Ormond's will. He also has a client who wants confirmation that I have possession of the Jewel and the Riddle, in return for 'something of great importance'.

It's almost the anniversary of my dad's death, so Winter and I visit the Ormond mausoleum. She tells me more about the accident on her tenth birthday that took her parents' lives. She admits that it was her sneaking around Sligo's car yard months ago, looking for the car her parents had died in.

30 JULY

Oriana de la Force identifies herself on my blog as Rathbone's mysterious client. She urges me to meet him with the promise of Piers Ormond's

will and information related to the twin baby abduction. Boges, Winter and I set up the meeting with Rathbone.

31 JULY

The three of us head to the arranged meeting place. As I enter the premises, alone, I realise I'm in a funeral parlour. I reach for the envelope waiting for me when the counter erupts and hits me on the forehead. Something sharp pierces my neck and I start to black out. I reawaken to find myself trapped inside a coffin. I sense myself being loaded into a hearse and driven to an unknown location. I can't move or scream. I feel the coffin being lowered into a grave, followed by the thudding sound of dirt being shovelled on top of it . . . It's my sixteenth birthday and I'm being buried alive.

1 AUGUST

153 days to go . . .

Unmarked grave, Infinity Gardens

12:00 am

Thud . . .

The thudding was becoming duller, more distant.

Thud . . .

The grave was being filled in, fast. The earth raining down on the lid of the coffin was building up an unbreakable barrier between me and the world of the living above.

I broke out in a cold sweat. I was being buried alive!

Thud . . .

I strained and struggled, terror and panic finally starting to overcome the effects of the drug they'd used to immobilise me. I tried to scream and kick and claw at the wooden walls, but it was useless. Fear destroyed all rationality, as I kept on thrashing—smashing my knees,

elbows, fingers and head against the unyielding tomb.

Think, Cal, think.

Who said that?

Was I becoming delirious, hearing voices in my head?

Or was I hearing things because my brain was already shutting down, starved of oxygen?

Air. I needed to conserve air. Already, I was finding it hard to breathe. Struggling and panicking were consuming what little reserves there were.

I willed myself to be still.

The rhythmic thudding of shovels full of soil had stopped. Now it sounded like the dirt on top was being patted down.

Then that stopped too.

The job was over. They were done burying me.

I shook as I imagined the hearse driving away. I was in a desperate situation, but I needed to keep my head. I forced myself to breathe softly and lightly.

Again, I struggled uselessly, but then something vibrated near my hip.

My mobile!

How could they have left that on me? They must have thought that the drug they'd given me would keep me quiet . . . unconscious until I

was dead. Or maybe they'd completely overlooked my mobile, tucked into my waistband, switched to 'silent'.

Please, Boges, I hope it's you calling, I said in my head. *Please stop this from happening! Please find me!*

In the tight, confined space, it was a struggle to reach my phone. I twisted and bent my elbow up awkwardly, then strained and stretched my fingers desperately. Finally my hand closed around it.

Then it stopped vibrating.

I'd been too slow! I'd missed it!

The air around my face and body felt hot. The air was thinning out. I held my phone, willing it to vibrate again.

I moved my sweating, trembling fingers until they rested on the loudspeaker button–I knew it would be too hard to get the phone up to my ear fast enough, and I didn't want to waste any more chances . . . if I was lucky enough to have another one come my way.

The instant my fingers felt the phone vibrating again, I hit the loudspeaker button.

'Dude! Where are you?' Boges's urgent voice reverberated around me. 'What have they done with you?'

'Boges, get me out of here!' I begged, faint with relief. 'Don't let me die down here!'

'Where are you?'

'I'm in a coffin! They've buried me! I don't know where I am, but please, get me out of here! I'm freaking out, man. Freaking out!'

Boges swore. Was I hallucinating again, or was that Winter's voice I heard crying out, 'Buried? He's been buried?'

The words coming out of my phone's loudspeaker were suddenly muffled. I couldn't make out what was being said.

'Boges! Winter!' I shouted. 'What's going on? Get me out of here! Please! I don't know how much longer I can last!'

'Tell us where you are!' Boges's voice returned, calling down a crackly line. I hoped the signal would hold up.

'I don't know where I am! I'm in a coffin, six feet under! I could be in a cemetery, but—' I paused, short of breath, and frustrated, 'I could be anywhere! All I know is that I'm underground!'

'OK, OK,' my friend repeated, trying to process what I was saying. Trying to figure out a way to save me.

'You have to help me! Did you see them drive off?' I asked, hoping Boges or Winter had seen the vehicle I'd been loaded into, back at the funeral parlour, and the direction it had taken. They had both promised they would be watching

out for me when I went to meet Rathbone. 'Wherever they took me,' I added, 'there's a mound of fresh soil. And I'm under it!'

'We were watching Temperance Lane at both ends, and just after you went in we realised you were meeting Rathbone at a funeral parlour! We didn't see anyone coming, but after a while we saw a car—a hearse—leaving, sneaking along without any headlights on, and we tried to follow it . . .'

'Someone jumped me—they were hiding in one of the coffins, waiting for me. Whoever it was knocked me out, stuck me in a coffin, drove me away, and then buried me! You have to find me before I run out of air!'

'We will, I promise. There's a cemetery not far from where we are now. We're on our way!'

'But what if they took him somewhere else?' Winter's voice pleaded faintly in the background.

'We have to try!' Boges said back to her. The small amount of air in my terrifying prison was becoming thicker and hotter; I could feel my head swelling. 'Hang in there, Cal. Keep the line open. Cal? You there?'

'I'm not sure how much battery I have left. And I feel like I can't breathe properly.'

'Let's go! Boges, let's go!' Winter's voice screamed.

'We'll find you, I swear!' said Boges. 'Just hang

in there and stay calm. I have a program I can use to track your mobile and your location. You have to keep your phone on so the scanning program can home in on you. Try to take small, shallow breaths. You can survive in there for maybe thirty, forty minutes . . .'

'Just hurry, please . . .'

12:15 am

I felt like I was starting to hallucinate in the dark, hot box where I lay. Black and red misty demons seemed to dance in front of my eyes.

'Dude! Are you there?' called Boges. His voice was distorted. Was it me, or just my phone?

My heart was banging in my head and body, drumming a beat in my ears. I'd lost the Ormond Riddle and the Ormond Jewel. They'd been shoved into a coffin, just like me, and if Boges and Winter didn't find me soon, I'd be just another body in this hollowed ground, surrounded by the dead.

'Dude! Are you still with us?' begged Boges. 'Say something, please? Just say "yes".'

I wasn't sure if I was talking or just thinking the words. Turbulent voices twisted and thrashed against my skull. Could I really hear Boges's voice?

'We're looking for you right now, Cal! Just stay awake, OK!'

I knew that soon the oxygen sealed with me in the coffin would be replaced by the carbon dioxide I was breathing out. It would be lethal. I would die from my own toxic breath.

Unless my friends found me first.

12:19 am

I was hot, then cold. I seemed to come and go, lapsing in and out of consciousness. Clammy chills shuddered through me.

'Cal! Stay with us, we're on our way. I've activated the mobile phone scanner program on my laptop. Keep this line open. Hang in there, please buddy? Stay with me.'

12:26 am

'Cal, we're here! Your number's lighting up on my screen. Any minute now. Hang on! I can see a freshly dug grave! Winter, look! Over there!'

'Quick,' I croaked with renewed hope.

At last, they'd found me. I was almost sick with relief and terror all mashed together.

Then I heard Boges shout out again, and my heart faltered.

'Oh no! There's another one! And another one! There are loads of fresh graves in this place! Hell! What are we going to do? My program only gives us an approximate position. He's here somewhere

. . . What do we do, Winter? How are we going to know which one is his?'

'Boges, I don't know! We just have to start digging!'

'Cal? You there? You OK? Winter, he's not talking! He's not responding! How the hell can we know which pile he's under?'

I tried to speak, but I was too weak. My friends had come so close, and yet I was doomed to suffocate.

From somewhere, a long way off, I thought I heard Winter sobbing half-crazy words. 'Cal! I'm digging, I'll save you! Where are you? Call out! Shout out! I need to hear your voice so I can find you!'

Half-conscious, I tried to open my mouth and call out to her. All that came out was a choking noise—the kind you make in a nightmare. Blackness swirled around me. Crazy patterns scrambled in the blackness in front of my eyes. I knew the lights were going out.

Then I thought I heard Boges's voice . . .

'Winter! We have to call for help! We can't do this, we have no choice. You can't dig him out . . . not with your bare hands . . . Stop it! Winter! Go to that phone box we saw across the road . . . I think his . . . battery's about to . . . about to die . . . Cal, if you can hear me,' he said to me,

with a hazy voice like one from a dream, 'I'm so sorry. We really need help. We won't let you die. We can't do this alone. Cal? Cal? Winter's gone to call the police . . . I'm sorry, we have no choice. We need help . . . to get you out of there. But . . . if you can hear me and if you can manage it, somehow, try and lose the SIM card, Cal. Don't let anyone get their hands on it. Hang in there. We're going to get you out of there and we're all going to get back onto solving the DMO. See you again soon, OK buddy?'

I tried to answer him but darkness was closing in. The SIM card! With its record of all my phone calls, it would lead the police straight to Boges and Winter. After all they'd done for me I couldn't let them get caught. Any laws they'd broken, they'd broken for my sake only.

The phone cut out. Now I was completely alone. There was nothing but silence and the ghosts of the dead.

With every shallow breath I could feel myself slipping away. I fought to stay alert long enough to go over everything Boges had said. What could I possibly do about the SIM card? How could I lose the SIM card down here? There was nowhere to hide it. Unless . . .

I mustered all of my strength and concentration, and with weak fingers, I managed to fumble

open the SIM card slot in my mobile. Slowly, despite the blood pounding in my ears and the shrieking noises that seemed to be coming from the centre of my brain, I struggled to move my hand, carefully clutching the card, to my lips. I poked my tongue out and pulled the card back into my mouth, then sucked it to the back of my throat.

My mouth was so dry, I didn't know if I could swallow it.

A whirlpool of blackness took me down.