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Opening extract from

Conspiracy 365: September

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PREVIOUSLY...

1 AUGUST

I've been buried alive in a coffin. I can hardly move and the air is running out, fast. Boges and Winter use my mobile signal to track my position, but when they reach the cemetery they're confronted with a dozen fresh graves. Time's running out and they have no idea where to start digging.

2 AUGUST

I wake up in hospital and realise my hands are tied—I'm trapped in police custody! Turns out Boges and Winter had to call the authorities for help . . . to save my life. I'm questioned by Senior Sergeant Dorian McGrath about my sister Gabbi—she's been kidnapped and I'm their prime suspect!

6 AUGUST

Mum and Rafe show up, begging me to tell them where Gabbi is. I can't believe they think I'm responsible. Later I find out the cops will be

was stuck in the shadowy branches on the other side of the river.

Was something there or was my mind playing tricks on me? Creating shapes out of scattered moonlight and crooked driftwood? I rubbed my eyes and squinted through the darkness.

A gush of hope jolted through me—I was sure it was a figure! Half submerged and floating near the opposite bank! Could it be Gabbi, washed up and entangled in weeds on the riverbank? Could she still be alive?

I threw myself back into the freezing water and forced the burning muscles in my legs to kick, swimming diagonally through the current, trying to stop it from dragging me away downstream.

As I got closer, I became convinced it was Gabbi. The outline became more and more familiar with every frantic second. She could be alive, I repeated in my head. She could be alive.

The current was set on stopping me from reaching her. It pulled on me with all its might, but I pushed myself beyond my limits and forged ahead.

The water grew calmer, shielded from the rushing current by a narrow headland that acted like the wall of a dam. I was almost there. I thrashed over and finally I climbed to my feet in the shallow water.

I squinted and stared at the figure as I reached for it. What I'd imagined was there—my sister—all of a sudden disappeared right in front of me. Her image was replaced by a lifeless mass of nothing.

I stopped short, and screamed with frustration and fury, smashing the water with my fists. The snagged figure was nothing but some plastic sheeting, stretched into a grotesque scarecrow shape that from the other side of the river had looked like a small person.

It had all been wishful thinking. There was no way she could have still been alive.

I crawled up the bank once more, too drained to swear, and too wrecked to cry.

12:21 am

A brief thought of Mum swirled into my consciousness. She'd be devastated. This would mean the end for her. She wouldn't be able to go on without Gab. And she'd think that her own son had killed her daughter—that I escaped from the hospital to finish the job.

Like a wounded animal, I crawled further up the riverbank until I found a flat area.

I was numb, frozen, and half dead with exhaustion.

1:03 am

Crazy dreams whirled through my head. I imagined Gabbi kneeling beside me, healthy and well. I imagined turning to her and saying, 'I saw you fall into the river. I went after you, but it was so hard to find you. The water was so cold and black and the current was impossibly strong. Please, forgive me, Gabs. I couldn't save you.'

Then my surroundings seemed to transform and we were back at Treachery Bay, mucking around in the boat.

A storm was brewing. Gabbi was frightened. 'I shouldn't have brought you out here,' I say to her. 'I'm sorry.'

'Cal,' is all she says back to me.

'Cal,' she says again, in a haunting, distant voice.

Something powerful was suddenly shaking me. Had I fallen back in the river? Was I being bashed along by the current?

'Cal, wake up!' came Gabbi's sweet voice once more.

In my dream, she was shaking me by the shoulder. Wonderful warmth flowed through my body, waking up my frozen arms and legs, sending a tingling sensation to my fingers and toes.

For a moment, I let the good feelings run all

over me. It felt like the storm at Treachery Bay had passed and the sun had come out and my sister and I were sitting in warm light.

The dreamlike vision of Gabbi was leaving me. Reality started hitting home, but I didn't want to wake up and open my eyes. That would mean facing the truth.

The truth that Gabbi was dead. That I hadn't been able to save her. That I was lying sodden on the banks of Spindrift River, with Gabbi gone forever, because of me. I had failed to protect her.

'Cal!'

I opened my eyes. A black shadow loomed over me.

Someone really was sitting beside me, shaking me.

I blinked.

The dream figure of Gabbi was still there.

Was this like the dream I had in the caravan when Great-uncle Bartholomew appeared to me, telling me that everything was going to be all right?

He'd lied. Nothing was all right. Everything was worse than I could ever have imagined. My sister was dead, and now I was seeing things.

I shook my head to clear the crazy whirlpool of images in my mind, but the figure from my dream was still there.

'Cal!'

Gabbi?

'Cal, what's happened?'

Gabbi?

'Cal, why won't you speak to me?'

Was I going crazy? Had my mind finally snapped completely?

'Gabbi?' I asked, squinting at the shape above me.

'It's me, Cal, what's going on? Why are we here?' Gabbi's voice was weak and slurred.

It was no hallucination. I was looking straight into my sister's face, and her small hand was clutching mine, gently squeezing it.

'Gabbi?'

'Yes, Cal, what's wrong with you?'

'Gabbi, it's really you! You're OK!' I reached for her, grabbing her cheeks with my hands, shocked to feel her soft skin and fair hair against me.

'Ouch, Cal, what are you trying to do?' she said, wriggling away from me.

'I'm sorry,' I cried, 'I'm just so happy to see you! And hear your voice! I can't believe you're alive!'

I stared at her. Her face had lost its chubbiness, and by the moon's weak light she looked older. But it was Gabbi—alive! Kneeling beside me, confused and shivering!

'What are you talking about? I don't understand,' she said, looking around, her voice not much more than a whisper. 'Why are we here? What are we doing here? It's really dark. I'm scared, Cal. Let's go home. *Please?*'

I grabbed her in my arms and held her tighter than ever before. If only I could take her home, I thought. If only I could just wrap her up in something warm, call Mum and then all of us could go home together . . .

'It's OK,' I whispered in her ear. 'Everything's going to be OK. I promise.'

I kept hugging her tight, trying to warm her up, trying to comfort her.

We clung on to each other, and gradually, her shivering eased. I pulled back and looked at her again. Her hair was flat and sleek on her head so that she looked like some little water creature. 'I'll get you home safe,' I promised.

'But I still don't know what's happening. Where are we?' she asked again. 'How come we went swimming in this river? In the middle of the night? How come I feel so . . . confused?'

'We didn't actually go swimming . . .' I started to say, but then stopped myself. I could see Gabbi was too dazed to understand right now. I could tell her everything later. It was just so good to have her here with me, alive, to know that she

was OK. I pushed some wet hair back from her face, then grabbed her in a bear hug again. I had missed her so much.

'I thought I was back in the surf at Treachery Bay, being dumped,' she said as I let her go. 'I just kicked out and started swimming. I was stuck in some kind of bag or something.'

'You were in a sleeping-bag,' I said.

'Huh?'

'Let's get you warm,' I said, through my chattering teeth. I glanced around us, looking again for a sign of Boges, Winter or Sharkey. Or the kidnappers. 'We have to move.'

1:13 am

'C'mon, Gabbi,' I said, helping her up. We weren't out of danger yet. I had to check our surroundings. I had to find out what had happened to my friends. And I knew that the criminals could still be in the area.

Gabbi stumbled and fell to her knees.

I bent over to pick her up and was met with a wet, teary face. 'Cal, what's wrong with me?' she whimpered between sobs. 'My legs feel like jelly and I still have no idea how we got here!'

I took her face between my hands. 'You'll just have to trust me for a minute,' I said. 'I'll answer all your questions as best I can a little

later, but just now we have to move. I have to check out some things. OK?'

She looked at me hopefully.

'OK?' I repeated. 'You can trust me, can't you?'

'OK,' she said, grabbing onto my arm to steady herself.

'Hop on,' I said, before pulling her up onto my back.

1:51 am

When we'd reached a high rocky outcrop, I stopped and let Gabbi slide off my back. I sat her on the grass and told her to wait while I looked down at the Spindrift River Bridge, from a spot just a metre or so away.

The lights that lined the bridge below were flickering on and off, swinging in the wind. There were still no signs of Boges, Winter, Sharkey or the kidnappers. The bridge was empty. Not a car was in sight.

I knew the kidnappers could still be in the area, hunting me. The thought of them being out there, lurking somewhere in the dark, was making me really nervous.

I turned back to Gabbi and lifted her onto my back again.

Just as she looped her arms around my neck, I heard the sound of someone stealthily pick-

ing their way through the scrub. Immediately I started creeping backwards.

In the dim moonlight, I could just make out the figure coming our way, head down, moving towards us.

I spotted a boulder and quickly lowered Gabbi down behind it. I signalled to her that she should stay still, and placed my finger over my lips, hushing her before she could ask any questions. 'Don't come out till I tell you it's OK,' I whispered.

I flattened myself against the front of the rock, peering ahead. I was a metre or so higher than the intruder, so I had the advantage.

Whoever it was must have been heading this way to make use of the higher ground too, intending to look around, survey the land, just the way I had. I needed to take action before they walked straight into us. No way was I going to risk losing Gabbi now!

I sunk down and my hand closed around a fist-sized rock. The figure approached, broad-shouldered, but not very tall. As the figure came within two metres of me, I dropped on top of him, crashing us both to the ground, the rock raised in my right hand ready to crack it down if I needed to.

'What do you think you're doing? It's me!'

I caught a whiff of the familiar perfume.

'Winter?'

She rolled me over and stared down into my face. Some of her hair slipped out of the black beanie she was wearing and onto my cheek. The beanie belonged to Boges. I didn't know where the leather jacket she was wearing had come from.

I realised I was still clutching the rock in my hand. I let it fall.

'I had no idea it was you. I saw the shape of the leather jacket, and thought it was a guy. Maybe one of the kidnappers. I didn't get a good look at either of them. Are you OK? Are Boges and Sharkey OK?'

'I'm fine, they're fine!' she gushed. 'Thank God you're alive! Boges and I have been searching up and down the banks. We'd just about given up! We were going out of our minds!'

She fell on me again and hugged me tight. Her hair was damp on my neck.

'This is Nelson's,' she explained as she sat back up, pulling at the collar of the leather jacket. 'He had it in the back of his car. My clothes got soaked when I went in after you.'

'You came in after me?'

'I had to. Boges couldn't leave Nelson. He'd been injured in the fight and was bleeding badly. I didn't even think about it. I just dived in.'

'You crazy girl,' I said, amazed she was so

brave, and secretly stoked that she'd dived into Spindrift River because of me. 'You could have drowned.'

'*You* could have drowned,' she repeated back to me, with a suddenly solemn tone. 'That river was impossible. It swept me along like I was a twig, and it was only good luck that I managed to grab onto some willow branches hanging over the river. You must remember that, Cal,' she said very seriously. 'The river was too strong for anyone. You couldn't have saved Gabbi. Nobody could have.'

'But, Winter—' I began, before being interrupted.

'Cal? Are you OK?' Gabbi's voice called out from the darkness.

Winter's eyes opened wide. Surprise, joy and relief shone on her face, even though much of her was in shadow. Without words, her eyes seemed to ask me, *Is it really her?*

I nodded.

'I'm fine, Gab,' I called back. 'Just wait there for me, OK?'

'OK,' she agreed.

Winter leaned in close to me. 'She's alive?' she whispered.

I nodded my head again and grinned. 'She made it. I don't know how she survived the fall, but she made it!'

'And she's awake!' Winter cried.

Winter leaped up and pulled me off the ground with surprising strength. She started dancing me around in circles.

'Boges!' she shouted into the sky. 'I found him! He's right here! With Gabbi! They're both alive!'

My little sister crawled out of her hiding place and knelt there staring at the two of us, her eyes huge in her pale face, looking as if she was about to cry.

'Who's that?' she whispered to me. 'What is she talking about?' she asked.

'It's OK, Gab. Winter's here to help. She's our friend,' I said.

4:21 am

We sat around a campfire defrosting our fingers and toes, while our clothes steamed on tree branches near Nelson Sharkey's car. Boges had returned my backpack so I was able to change into dry clothes.

Sharkey was recovering from his injuries. Boges had patched him up pretty well. They assured me the kidnappers were long gone. 'What would they stick around for?' Sharkey had said to me. 'As far as they know there's nothing left here for them to take.'

The pre-dawn chorus of birds trilled, fussed

and squabbled around us in the trees.

Even though I'd had no sleep and felt totally trashed, I wanted to sing with those birds. Gabbi was safe, Gabbi was with me. My friends were here, Boges and Winter. Winter had dived into the flooded Spindrift River to save me.

The leather jacket was now wrapped around Gabbi who was snuggled up to me, with Boges close on her other side. She was napping while Boges filled me in on what had happened after I leaped into the river, chasing after my fast-vanishing little sister. In front of us, the small fire glowed.

'After you jumped, one of them was really getting stuck into Sharkey, while the other one—the one that threw Gabbi off the bridge—ran back to the car. Before I knew it, Winter had dived into the river, after *you*. That girl is nuts. Then I yelled out that a cop car was coming, and that made both of the kidnappers abandon the scene real fast.'

'Leaving Boges free to help me out,' said Sharkey, indicating a bandaged arm. 'I think I nicked my radial artery in that struggle. The guy had a knife. It's a long time since I've had to do any hand-to-hand combat,' he admitted with a shrug. 'I'm a little out of practice.'

'We watched them drive away,' Boges contin-

ued. 'I think the kidnappers just wanted to get out of there really fast. They took what they came for and had no need for your sister any more. They thought they'd rid themselves of you too, dude.'

'Wishful thinking,' I said.

Boges softly ruffled Gabbi's drying hair—she was curled up in his lap.

'How good is this?' said Sharkey. 'To have your sister back.' From the way he was looking at me I could tell his words were about to take a more serious tone. 'Enjoy it while you can, Cal. You know we're not going to be able to stay here with her for long. We're going to have to alert the authorities. She needs to be checked over by medical staff. And your mum and your uncle need to know she's safe.'

I nodded, sadly.

'She must be really tired,' said Boges. 'Poor thing.'

'No, I'm not,' came her muffled voice. She lifted her head. 'I feel like I've been asleep for days.' She rubbed her eyes and looked around at the four of us. 'Who had a knife? How come I can't stay with you?' Her pale face scrunched up and I could see she was trying hard not to cry. She looked from Boges to me, and back to Boges again. She squinted hard at him and reached for

the short, brown fuzz on top of his head. 'Where did all your hair go?'

4:42 am

I knew when Gabbi was trying to be brave and right this minute she was doing it as hard as she could. I tightened my arm around her, trying to work out how to begin to explain everything to her.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Winter beckon to Sharkey and Boges, calling them away from us so we could have some quiet time together–just Gabbi and me. The three of them wandered off and stood in a circle a few metres away, chatting softly.

'Tell me what you remember, Gab,' I said. 'Start with what happened tonight, if you can. What do you remember about being in the river?'

'Well,' she began, 'I was in the water and it was freezing. I know it doesn't make sense, but I don't know how I got there–I was just suddenly . . . in the water.'

'It's OK,' I said. 'It doesn't need to make sense. Anything you say is OK.'

'I thought I was dreaming that I was being carried out on a rip in Treachery Bay. I was so scared. I felt trapped in something. I didn't know what was happening. Everything was mushy in

my mind. But then I realised it was night and I wasn't at a beach. And it wasn't a dream—it was real. The water really was rushing me along!'

'It's OK, Gab, you're safe now. Keep going.'

'I was stuck in something, a sleeping-bag? I couldn't breathe. Somehow I wriggled out of it and then I collided with this log that was sticking out over the water. After a few seconds of scrambling to get my head above water, I used the branches to pull myself up and onto the bank. I was really scared. It was dark and I was wet and I didn't know where I was. I was crying out but no-one could hear me. I saw some lights in the distance, so I just started heading that way. I started walking back along the riverbank but it was really weird—I kept falling over like my legs had gone to sleep. They were shaky and tingly like I had pins and needles, but it wasn't that. My legs just wouldn't work properly. I kept stumbling and falling over like a little baby. But then one time I fell over and that's when I found you!'

Gabbi had reached the limit of her bravery. I felt her small body heaving as she started crying, and I squeezed her tight.

She looked up again, her face streaked with tears. 'I thought you were dead, Cal,' she wailed. 'You were just lying there. You were so cold.

I was trying to wake you up but you wouldn't answer me!'

'It's OK, I'm here now.'

I decided on trying to tell her the truth of the situation, even though it was horrible. After what she'd been through, Gabbi deserved that.

'Gab, what do you remember happening before you fell into the river? I know you don't know how you fell in the river, but do you remember anything happening before that? Like, at home or at school?'

The puzzled look on her face deepened. 'What do you mean? I remember everything! I'm about to start Year 3 with Miss McCormack. Dad died. Last year. Why are you asking me that?'

I wondered how I was going to break the news about the months she'd lost in a coma.

'That's right,' I said. 'Just keep telling me anything you remember. What you remember happening before you ended up in the river. Then I'll explain what I can to you. OK?'

'I don't know! I don't know what else to tell you!'

'Just take a moment and think about it. Maybe something will come back.'

Gabbi took a deep breath.

She looked agitated and afraid as flickers of memories seemed to come back to her.