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Opening extract from

Conspiracy 365: October

Written by

Gabrielle Lord

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1 OCTOBER

92 days to go . . .

12:06 am

I was out of that house of horror in a flash, over the sagging barbed-wire fence and into the night.

I ran across the desert sand, kicking up a shadowy cloud behind me. I was spurred on by the bouncing beams of torchlight following me, Snake and Jacko's shouts and, even more terrifying, Sniffer's barking.

My legs and arms pumped, propelling me over the hard ground and past scattered pieces of corrugated iron and dried-up animal remains.

I didn't know how those two old guys were keeping up with me, but they were. And from the sound of Sniffer's barking, I could tell they were getting closer.

A shot rang out, and I dived to the ground. Was it a warning shot, or had they fired at me?

I spat dust out of my mouth, crawled to my feet and kept running.

I couldn't shake them off. The terrain was

changing as I ran, and now I was avoiding rocky outcrops and low bushes. I was desperate to find a way of throwing Sniffer off the track. If only I could find a waterway—a creek, or a stream, like I'd waded through at Blackwattle Creek—so the dog would lose my scent.

Who was I kidding? This was a desert. There were no rivers in this place.

12:17 am

The dog was gaining on me—they must have let him off his leash. I wasn't sure how far Snake or Jacko were trailing behind, but Sniffer had galloped ahead of them and his barking was getting louder and louder. I figured I only had seconds before he'd be able to pounce on me and rip me to shreds.

Panicking, I crashed straight into a dense, thorny bush.

I dived down and burrowed into the prickly leaves, wrenching my backpack behind me as I got painful scratches all over. I huddled there in a small hollow, trying to catch my breath, my blood pounding in my veins. I had hoped, for a second, that maybe if I hid in this prickly bush, the dog would give up . . . but I knew there was no chance of that actually happening. I just didn't know what else to do. I couldn't outrun the dog.

Sniffer bounded right over to the bush.

I held my breath as his bulky head turned my way. His nose dropped to the floor, sniffing, leading him directly to me.

He put his head under the bush, avoiding the worst of the thorns, and started worming his way in.

'Go away, boy,' I begged softly, as his warm breath hit my cheek. 'Please, Sniffer, go away.'

His snout was just centimetres from me. I'd have to jump up and make another break for it, shove him out of the way and run—if he didn't rip my face off first.

Sniffer growled and I wriggled as far away from him as I could.

But then his snout suddenly disappeared.

I peered through the foliage and could just make out his shadowy silhouette against the deep darkness of the night. He was a couple of metres away, sitting back on his haunches. His bulky body was still, and he was silent. He knew I was there, but he was staying away.

Was he just waiting, like a marker, for his masters to catch up so that they could drag me out of the thorny bush themselves?

The gravelly voices of the men approached. They were still some distance away, but the beams of light from their torches were becoming

brighter, lighting up dust and insects in the air. If I ran now I'd be clawed down in seconds.

I waited, tense and terrified. Any moment now, I expected the dog to explode into a barking frenzy.

'Sniffer,' I whispered. 'Please don't show them where I am. Please don't bark!'

He turned towards me and growled. A long line of drool hung from his mouth. He dashed over and started charging into the thorns again.

'No, please,' I begged, wishing I'd just kept quiet. 'Leave me alone. Go away!'

He pushed and shoved his way through the bush and right up to my face. I braced myself for a brutal attack, closing my eyes and gritting my teeth.

But instead of the sensation of teeth clamping down on me, I felt a wet, leathery lick run all the way up my face.

I froze. He nuzzled in further and continued licking the dusty sweat off my face.

When he stopped he gave a little grunt and then started to wriggle backwards, out from under the prickly bush.

Finally clear, he bounded away from where I was hiding, barking as he ran through the desert. He was leading the bounty-hunting men with the shotgun and torches in another direction!

He hadn't given me away! The dog didn't blow my cover!

Huddled and shaking, I watched with relief as their torchlight snaked further and further from me. Maybe some dogs were better than humans at telling good from bad.

I stared up at the brilliant stars above me as Sniffer's barking faded into the distance. 'Good dog,' I whispered.

12:57 am

When all was quiet, and all signs of torchlight had disappeared, I crawled out from my prickly position. I tried to remember where the main road was, and started running for it. I just hoped my memory of the map in Jacko's general store was accurate enough.

1:20 am

I thought I'd heard something—the sound of a distant truck. Was I imagining it? I stopped, straining to listen, then I heard it again. It sounded like of one those huge semi-trailers that own the night roads, speeding along with a mind of their own.

I jogged until I could see a brilliant light on the horizon. After a few more metres the powerful light divided in two—two blazing

headlights. Finally the truck drove into full view, illuminating the darkness. I watched the lights continue along the roadway until they vanished across the landscape.

Where there was one, there would be more, but no matter how thirsty and tired I was, I wasn't about to risk taking a ride from *anyone*. I was just happy I was free, alive and had the road to help guide me home.

2:01 am

I ducked for cover as another truck thundered along the road. I'd been trying to stay out of sight, worried someone would spot me and recognise me, and also worried that Snake and Jacko had hit the road searching for me after their dog had failed to help them.

Once the truck had passed, I walked on. All I could think of was my thirst, and cool, clear water.

3:35 am

I wandered along near the highway, weakening with every step from exhaustion and dehydration.

The truck had almost reached me before I even noticed its headlights on my back. Fear of being spotted put a bomb under me. I ran and dived onto the ground and scrambled behind some boulders.

The unmistakable sound of huge pressure brakes screeched into the air.

I'd been seen! He was pulling over!

The big rig veered to the side of the road and slowed to a stop. It was just metres from me.

Desperate, I looked around for somewhere better to hide, but I was in a bit of a clearing—there was nowhere to run for more cover!

The cabin door opened and the driver jumped down. Instinctively I reached for the handle of my knife and waited, tense with fear. I'd have to scare him off. But then instead of coming straight for me, the driver launched out of the truck and kept running, stopping only to awkwardly unzip his trousers.

He was having a pee!

I had to stop myself from laughing!

I looked back over at his truck and saw an opportunity to sneak a ride. In the soft glow of the rear parking lights, I could see a corner of the canvas on the back of the truck was loose, flapping in the breeze.

I ran to the opening and heaved myself under the loosened canvas flap.

I was in.

I crawled to my feet in the darkness and felt around, wondering what this guy was transporting.

As my eyes adjusted, I could not believe what I was seeing. I was surrounded by crates of clear plastic cylinders, filled with . . . *water*!

A truck full of *water*! I was in the back of a bottled water delivery truck!

The driver was back in the cabin now and as he kicked the accelerator and the truck lurched forward I almost fell into a crate behind me. As I steadied myself and greedily used my knife to pop the cap off one of the big bottles, all I could do was grin.

11:40 am

As soon as the water delivery truck began slowing alongside a big office building on the outskirts of the city, I jumped out of the back. The driver had unknowingly delivered me practically all the way to my destination.

'Is Winter OK?' I asked Boges, as soon as I'd found a public phone.

'She's fine, she's fine, but what happened to you? What did they do to you? Where are you?'

'I'm back.'

'Back from where?'

'The dead,' I said. 'Or, at least, that's where I would have come from if everything had gone *as planned*,' I said, thinking not only of the crooked old prospectors, but also of the evil Oriana de la

Force. ‘Did Winter give you the handbag with Oriana’s fingerprint on it?’

‘Not only did she give it to me, but I’ve already been practising cyanoacrylate enhancement, in preparation.’

‘Sounds fatal,’ I said, happy my friends were so reliable, even when I wasn’t around. We were lucky the bug we’d planted had caught Oriana talking about the Riddle being ‘lodged’ with Zürich Bank in the city, but now we had to pull off some very complicated biometric hacking. We had to fool Zürich Bank. How realistic were our plans? We were just a bunch of kids going up against a huge international financial institution.

‘Do you reckon we can meet up at Winter’s place?’ I asked.

‘Dude, I can only—’

‘Hello?’

The phone had cut out. It beeped in my ear before the line went dead. I hung up and searched my pockets for more coins.

I was carrying a small fortune in gold nuggets, but I didn’t have enough change to make another phone call! I had to find somewhere to charge my mobile phone.

On the opposite corner from the phone booth was a petrol station. I scanned the area, searching for a toilet sign.

Bingo! Down the right-hand side behind the tyre pumps and ice freezer was a bathroom door swinging open. I walked in hoping no-one would notice me.

The immaculate bathroom in the beachside mansion I'd come to love flashed into my mind as I took in my current petrol-station toilet surroundings. There were two toilets overflowing with toilet paper and who knows what else, the tiled floor was wet and muddy—or, at least, I hoped it was mud—and high on the graffiti-covered walls hung a dozen daddy-long-legs.

I pounced on the power point under the sink and plugged my phone charger in. When I stood up, a dusty, sunburned face looked back at me from the mirror. For a guy who'd been left for dead in the desert and then barely escaped the clutches of two bounty hunters and their dog, I didn't look that bad.

I shook my hair out and washed my face, then as I lifted my hoodie off, something strange tightened on my neck. When I reached in to feel what was pulling on me, my fingers touched a piece of fabric. Curious, I pulled it out.

It was Oriana's leopard-print scarf, the one she'd almost strangled me with! Somehow it had become caught around my neck and down the back of my hoodie, and had been there ever since!

My initial instinct was to ball it up and throw it in the bin, but then something seemed to tell me to hold on to it—that it might come in handy. I bent down and shoved it in my bag, brushing the leg of my trousers in the process.

'SDB 291245' stared back at me from my exposed ankle. I rubbed at it again, but the marks wouldn't shift. What on earth could it mean?

12 Lesley Street

9:06 pm

Winter burst through her door and ran to me as soon as I reached the top of the stairs. She'd been busy studying with Miss Sparks, her tutor, and I'd been waiting downstairs for them to finish up. I was almost falling asleep against a brick wall when I finally saw Miss Sparks step onto the street with her bulky bag of books over her shoulder. As soon as she drove away in her little yellow hatchback, I'd headed upstairs.

'Cal!' said Winter, hugging me tight. 'I'm so sorry I couldn't let you in any sooner—Miss Sparks only just left.'

'Yeah, I know, I just saw her.'

'And I'm so, so sorry,' Winter added, 'I didn't know what to do when Sumo grabbed you. I hardly managed to get away myself—'

'Let's take it inside,' I said, taking her hand and leading her back into her flat. 'You did exactly what I wanted you to do. You protected the handbag with the fingerprint. Besides, you've saved me plenty of times already—it was about time I looked after myself. And here I am, safe and sound. Sort of,' I added, rubbing my throat. It was still aching from Oriana's attack and my struggle with Snake.

Winter ran to the couch and began picking up scattered textbooks that were flagged with tiny tabs of brightly coloured papers, along with highlighters, black markers and notebooks. 'Here, sit down,' she said, gesturing to the cleared space, while awkwardly carrying everything over to her desk.

I grabbed a pillow from her bed and collapsed onto the couch. Immediately my eyes wanted to close. I tried to fight it and pay attention to what Winter was saying, but her voice was fading.