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Opening extract from

Conspiracy 365: November

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Published by

Hodder Children's Books

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1 NOVEMBER

61 days to go . . .

12:00 am

The cops closed in on me, carefully advancing in two arcs—the classic pincer movement. I couldn't believe my desperate dash from the chapel—after stopping the hitman from shooting Rafe—had ended up here. Far away from where it all began, but surrounded.

I was panting, breathlessly staring down at the motionless Special FX canister that was gleaming in the moonlight. I willed it to do something—anything!

Did it move? I thought I saw it shimmer, but wasn't sure.

A blinding wall of white flame suddenly erupted from the road, shooting up an impenetrable barrier! I was floored. The sound of the explosion almost burst my eardrums!

As I crawled to my feet, I could hear the muffled screams of the cops and SWAT guys

as they struggled on the ground, shocked and blinded by the brilliant flash.

Seconds later, a rain of stones and soil drummed down from the sky. I ducked and covered my head with my hands. My ears were still ringing and my sight was blurry but one thing was clear to me—it worked! The Special FX had taken its sweet time, but it had worked!

12:06 am

The dazzling flare slowly subsided, leaving behind columns of billowing smoke in the night air. I had to shut my mouth and eyes against the dirt and dust. In the confusion, the disoriented cops tripped and stumbled over, swearing at each other—and me—as they collided.

I squinted up to try and locate the helicopter. A greyish glow was haphazardly sweeping over the area. Its powerful light had been eclipsed by black smoke and dust—they'd completely lost my position. There was no way I was going to let them locate me now. This was my chance.

Blindly, I split off sideways and away from the haze of scrambling bodies on the street. Stumbling across the footpath, I groped my way along, almost colliding with a couple of thick tree trunks.

I blinked and rubbed my stinging eyes as my vision slowly started straightening out. The

flashing lights from the police cars that had earlier screeched to a standstill behind me strobed through the lingering smoke, pulsing out a murky blue and orange beat.

'Spread out! He can't have gone far!' a voice screamed out from only metres away. My ears were still ringing, but I'd heard those frightening orders loud and clear.

I dropped to my hands and knees and began crawling, praying that the low smoke would hide me long enough to put some distance between me and my pursuers. I followed the roadside kerbing which turned right, sharply.

As I clambered further away from the main street, my cover was thinning. A quick glance behind me showed the grey clouds from the Special FX lifting and dissolving. A cluster of dim lights were beginning to fan out—proof of police on foot.

'There he is!' another voice shouted. 'Down there! He's about to turn down that lane! Don't lose him!'

The beams of light grew stronger, criss-crossing through the darkness, searching for me. I stood up and I sprinted down the lane, the sounds of thudding boots storming close by. I'd completely broken out of the smoke now and only had the dark to hide me.

The spotlight from the chopper above had returned and was skimming around me, still yet to lock onto my position. The sound of another helicopter approached, completely freaking me out. I looked up and could just make out the TV news logo on the side. The media had finally shown up. They were like vultures in the sky, waiting for their opportunity to pounce on some helpless, withering creature.

I wasn't about to let that creature be me.

I jumped over a fence and tumbled into someone's backyard. I scrambled to my feet, took one step and almost crash-dived into a swimming pool! I leaped to the right and raced up the side of the house, tripping and almost falling as my foot got stuck in the loop of a garden hose. I barely managed to keep my balance as I grabbed hold of a tree branch reaching over the fence.

I was gripping the rough bark of the branch to steady myself when the whole tree started to shake! A roar of squeals shattered the night air and a swarm of black, flapping wings streaked around and over me!

Bats! A whole leathery colony of them! I'd disturbed their midnight feasting. I jumped back and covered my face.

They screeched off into the sky as I ducked and kept going. Adrenaline pumped into my

veins. I launched myself over the side gate and into the front yard. I flew down the driveway and into the street, crossing it in three huge strides.

Straight down the side of another house, I ran through an open gate and out again, then continued past the backyard barbecue and over the rear fence. On the other side I found myself at the start of an open field—not a good place for someone on the run. A fast-moving body was way too obvious in this still and empty space.

Sticking to the fence line, I ran around the edge of the houses that backed onto the field. The cover of darkness wasn't enough to hide me here, so I knew it wouldn't be long before I was spotted again.

Within minutes, the choppers were hovering over my head, and from somewhere the sirens were approaching.

I spotted a gap in someone's fence and squeezed through it, tearing my clothes on rusty nails in the process. I ran across the yard, around the side of the house and straight out onto another road.

The staccato beat of the choppers in the sky constantly thumped in my head, forcing me to keep going.

But I couldn't throw them. I didn't know what

to do. There was no way I could hide out in a shed or back garden, but I was tiring with every step. A house-to-house search would eventually find me, no matter how carefully I'd chosen my refuge. My only alternative was to keep moving—fast.

I bolted away, heading for a long sloping road that was crammed on both sides with old terraced houses. It was harder here for the helicopter to see me, because I could duck under awnings and into side streets. But none of that could fool the ground forces.

12:51 am

The sirens were getting closer and I knew I couldn't keep this up. Every time I thought I'd outwitted the police helicopter, it would reappear a moment later, rising in the night sky behind me or, scarier still, up ahead.

Right now it hovered almost on top of me, swinging towards me with its probing light. The deafening wind-rush from its rotors was flattening the grass and whipping my hair. Cop cars skidded and screeched in from all directions.

I zigzagged left and right, scanning my surroundings for an escape route.

By now I recognised where I was—approaching Central Station. My muscles screamed with

pain but I forced them on. I gritted my teeth and silently begged for a way to throw the cops off my tail. I had to cheat the man-hunt.

1:12 am

I hurtled past the basketball courts and pounded up the ramp towards the station entrance. Startled late commuters jumped out of my way—they must have seen the crazed determination in my eyes.

The helicopters couldn't chase me undercover, but I could hear pounding feet close behind me.

Someone was right behind me—running heaps harder than I was.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see the figure gaining on me. It was just one guy chasing me on foot.

Was it a cop? He wasn't in uniform. A plain-clothes cop?

If I couldn't get away from him and lose myself somewhere in the station, I was done for.

Every step was agony as my exhausted body demanded rest, but the cop behind me was almost on top of me, yelling out my name.

Desperate, I looked around for somewhere to jump to, dive into—anything to get this guy off my back. I threw another quick glance behind me—he was about my size and he was just a few

strides away. I would have to fight him with whatever strength I had left.

'Cal!' he shouted. 'Stop running! It's me!'

The voice was familiar, but I wasn't sure why.

'Cal, it's just me!'

Finally I stopped and stared, clenching my fists.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

'Ryan?' I croaked.

Ryan Spencer pounded up to me. The face I knew so well was staring at me, grinning. 'You're so fast—I thought I'd never catch up with you,' he said between puffs. 'I saw the whole thing on the news on my mobile. Recognised where you were and thought maybe I should help for once, instead of running away from you.'

I was stunned to hear my voice coming out of this guy's mouth like echoing feedback on a long-distance call. Looking at his face was like looking at a painting of me—except for a few small details that the artist hadn't quite perfected.

Why would he want to help me all of a sudden? I turned to start running again—I couldn't trust him, and I had to keep moving—but just as I was about to charge away, he grabbed me.

'Get off me! Let me go!'

'Calm down! I'm trying to help you!'

'I have to get away before the cops catch me!'

Before saying another word, Ryan dragged me around a corner and into a little alcove. My heaving body and straining lungs were at the point of collapse. I could barely defend myself.

'Take a breather. The helicopter can't see you in here.'

'You're really trying to help me?' I gasped, doubled over. There were so many other questions I wanted to ask him, but now wasn't the time.

'That's right,' he said. 'Beats a night of tagging. And it's not like I can keep on tagging when the entire police force has descended on the city. That would be asking for trouble.'

'So do you know somewhere we can hide?'

'I have a better idea. Nothing beats a good relay race, Cal.'

'A relay race?'

'Pass the baton, bro!'

Before I could even comprehend what he was saying, he grabbed at my blazer, wrenching it from me, while shrugging off his check shirt.

'Quick, let's swap,' he said, as he began pulling on my blazer, over a singlet. 'I'll continue the chase for you. Put my shirt on and stay here. We don't have much time.'

'But if they catch you—' I started to say.

'Don't worry; they're not going to catch me. Not if I can help it. Come on,' he urged, passing

me a cap to wear. 'Anyway, if they do catch me, they can't arrest *me*, can they—I mean, I'm not you, am I?!'

Stunned, I buttoned up the shirt he'd given me to wear. He pulled my blazer's collar up around his face.

'Wish me luck,' he grinned, only his sunburnt nose showing. 'I'll take them on for as long as possible. I won my school's under-15 cross-country race last year, so I should be able to give you plenty of time to get away.'

I was about to tell him that I'd won *my* school's under-15 cross-country race last year too, when he stepped out of the alcove, nodded to me, turned and ran.

The sound of his footsteps soon disappeared, and then the sirens picked up their wailing again, clearly having spotted Ryan—posing as me—emerging from the station.

I sank into the alcove as the SWAT team, chasing Ryan on foot, ran right past me and my hiding spot. I held my breath as they thundered by, intent on capturing the lone figure in the blazer ahead of them.

The identity switch had worked!

1:28 am

Carefully I peered out. The brilliant beam from

the helicopter was sweeping over the cityscape, just beyond the station. I waited about ten minutes before silently making my way towards the basketball courts and hauling myself up the perimeter fence.

From my vantage point, high up the wire netting, I could just make out Ryan in the distance, a running silhouette in my clothes, circled in the chopper spotlight, leading the chase far, far away from the 'real' me.

The drone of the fugitive chase was fading with every metre that Ryan led the fierce hunt away. Around me, the sounds of the night had almost returned to normal. I hung from the netting like an exhausted monkey, before finally releasing my grip and letting myself drop to the ground.

12 Lesley Street

3:20 am

I plodded up the stairs to Winter's flat, climbing like I was about a hundred years old. I owed Ryan Spencer big time. He'd shown up like a decoy clone, saved my exhausted butt, and left me behind with my mind spinning.

We were so similar, he *had* to be my twin, but nothing made sense. What had happened to us?

I recalled his November birth date. We didn't share the same birthday and we didn't share the same mum . . . It just wasn't possible.

He'd always run away from me in the past, why had he suddenly decided to help me?

Finally at the top of the stairs, I could see Winter's flat. It wasn't in complete darkness—the flicker of her TV screen was visible, glowing through a window.

I knocked softly at the door.

'Winter, it's me.'

I thought I heard a gasp, and then the volume of the TV was turned down.

'Winter,' I whispered again, 'can you let me in?'

Something tumbled to the floor as her scurrying feet approached. The door opened slowly and her smoky eyes peered through at me.

She looked dazed—maybe she'd been asleep on the couch. Slowly she stepped back and let me pass, all the time staring at me like I was a ghost.

'But how can you be here,' she murmured, 'when you're also over there?'

I glanced over to where she was pointing. On the TV screen, a grainy, shaky aerial image showed Ryan's figure, circled by chopper light, running along the Georges River.

She looked at me for an answer. 'It's meant

to be live footage,' she said. 'I just saw you—a close-up of you, Callum Ormond! How did you get from there to here?'

'I can explain.'

'And what are you wearing?' she frowned, tugging on the check shirt that Ryan had swapped with me. 'You're covered in flecks of white paint, or something.'

'Can I please get a drink first?' I asked as I collapsed in a chair at the table. I ran my hands through my hair, and realised it was full of grit and dirt from the explosions.

Winter looked at me, then back at the screen. 'What's going on? If you're standing right here with me, then who's that on the TV?'

'My ultimate body double,' I said, catching the can she'd tossed to me.

'Ryan? Ryan Spencer? Is that what you're saying? What do you mean? How could that be?'

'Has Boges filled you in on what went down at the chapel?'

'You stopped the hitman and the wedding. Your uncle, mum and Gab are OK; he told me all about it,' she rushed, 'but we had no idea what had happened to you, or whether you got away OK. Please just hurry up and explain *that*,' she said, pointing to the TV once more.

'They chased me for ages, all the way from the

chapel down to Central Station. Then just when I thought I'd run out of chances, Ryan Spencer turned up. It was crazy. We swapped clothes and then he ran off—'

'—and led the chase away so that you could escape,' Winter finished for me. 'It's genius! The perfect decoy! And he can't be arrested, because he's not you!'

'Exactly,' I agreed. 'Although I hope it doesn't come to that—he'd have a lot of explaining to do. I hope he gets away,' I said, noticing that the newsflash had ended and the screen had returned to some late-night fitness infomercial.

4:02 am

I lay awake on the couch, replaying images from last night at Chapel-by-the-Sea. I recalled Gabbi, pulling at the flowers in her hair. I cringed as I pictured Mum and Rafe standing together—about to be wed. I couldn't get my head around it, but I reminded myself that I had succeeded in what I had set out to do. I was there to protect Rafe from the assassin, and that's exactly what I had done.

Next I pictured that weird old fungus guy, Dr Leporello. He'd issued me the warning, for whatever reason, and I was relieved I'd taken

him seriously. Otherwise, Rafe, or some other innocent person, could have been taken down by a bullet.

For the time being, at least, the wedding was off. Now I had to return my focus to the real job: locating the Ormond Riddle and the Ormond Jewel and getting them both—together with myself and my friends—to the Keeper of Rare Books at Trinity College in Dublin. And that was only the start of the Ireland investigation.

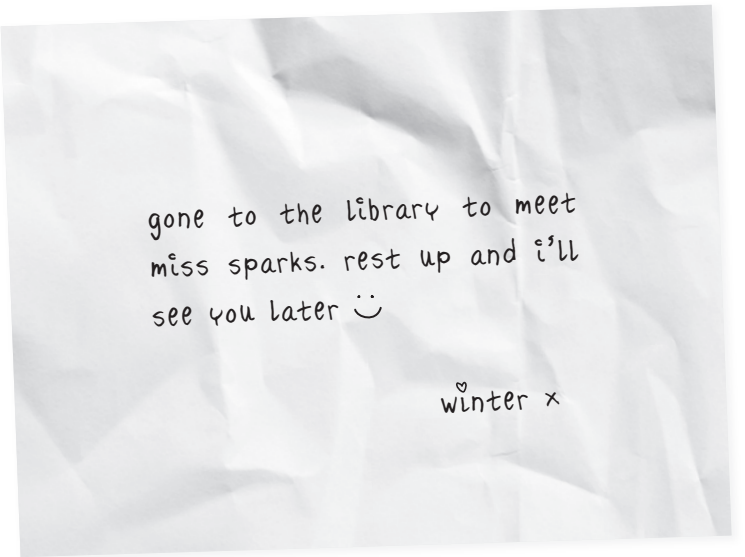
A long time had passed since that fateful New Year's Eve warning. There were only sixty-one days left in the countdown to December 31st, and in that time we had so much to do. It seemed absolutely impossible. Not only did we have to retrieve the Riddle and the Jewel, and get ourselves over to Ireland, we also had to be the first to put together the clues and uncover the secret of the Ormond Singularity. And find out what really happened to my dad.

Then, of course, there was the matter of clearing my name so that my life on the run could finally come to an end.

We needed to get a serious move on.

10:46 am

The flat was empty but Winter had left a note.



I pulled my phone off its charger and called Boges.

'Boges, it's me. I'm OK.'

'I know,' he said in a hushed voice. 'Winter already called me this morning. Crazy night, huh?'

'Insane!'

'Dude, I'm at school and am about to sit a big exam, so I'll have to go in a sec, but just quickly—I was really worried about the amount of magnesium I used in the Special FX. Did it work?'

'Sure did,' I said. 'Nearly burst my eardrums, but it gave me enough cover to get away . . . until Ryan took over.'

'Sweet! Sounds like having a double pays off! I have to go, but I have something for you that I'll bring around to Winter's tomorrow afternoon.'

'What is it?' I asked. But Boges had already hung up.