

CONSPIRACY
365

A black silhouette of a person in a dynamic, forward-leaning running or jumping pose, positioned to the left of the large number '365'.

BOOK FOUR: APRIL

GABRIELLE LORD

SCHOLASTIC

SYDNEY AUCKLAND NEW YORK TORONTO LONDON MEXICO CITY
NEW DELHI HONG KONG BUENOS AIRES PUERTO RICO

APRIL

1 APRIL

275 days to go . . .

Blackwattle Creek

12:00 am

Closer and closer came the rustling of slow, careful footsteps. My exhausted body shrank further against the rock face I'd quickly hidden behind. A beam of light from a powerful torch cut through the darkness ahead, about ten metres away, shining through the trees and bushes I'd just run through. He was taking his time tracking me and wouldn't have needed a lot of skill to follow the mess I'd made, charging through the scrub recklessly with my backpack.

I'd been running non-stop since we crashed in Lachlan's ute down at the creek, a couple of hours ago now, but I was exhausted and had to stop for breath and hide. Everything was aching and the impact of the seatbelt across my body had flared up the pain in my right shoulder again.

I stepped sideways and further behind the rocky outcrop so that the torchlight was no longer visible. I felt around and found the opening to a sort of cleft, a split in the rocks. I squeezed myself into it, as deep as I could, until it became too narrow for me to go any further. Unless he shone the torch directly into this crevice, I could remain unseen.

I waited. I listened. All I could hear was the blood pounding in my ears. Then there was another crackle of leaves. And another, as whoever was tailing me stealthily crept through the trees some distance away.

Another snapping of twigs as a heavy footfall crushed them . . .

I waited, too scared to breathe, as the sound of the footsteps became louder.

12:03 am

The unmistakable silhouette of the sumo wrestler—the guy I'd attacked with capsicum spray, back at Oriana de la Force's house—appeared in the moonlight. He paused almost directly in front of the cleft I was huddled in. I held my breath again. If he got his hands on me I was in all sorts of serious trouble. He and his mate Kelvin had tried to kill us by running us off

the road in their monster truck, and now he'd followed me here, chased after me through endless masses of bushland, to finish off the job.

He flashed his torch around him without moving from his position. The beam of light slowly travelled over the damp scrub, fallen logs and the rocky wall I was hidden in. I closed my eyes. Surely he wouldn't miss me from where he was.

I opened them again. The beam of light climbed up and over the walls of the narrow cleft, coming closer and closer to me. Any moment now he'd see me squashed inside.

But the torchlight passed right over my head, completely missing me! Unbelievably, I hadn't been spotted!

12:12 am

Eventually he moved on, once more through the bushes, the sound of his rustling movement slowly fading. I was weak with relief, but didn't dare let myself relax—not even for a second—in case he was still hanging around. As I pictured him creeping, searching out there, my mind started skipping back to the accident, replaying everything that had happened only a couple of hours ago . . . the terror of the high-speed chase on the

highway, Oriana's thugs—Sumo and Kelvin—in their SUV, relentlessly charging us from behind . . . and then, finally, being rammed off the road completely . . . when Lachlan's pick-up, with us trapped helplessly inside, rolled down the hill and crashed into the creek.

The silence that followed the crash had quickly filled with the sounds of the night—distant bird calls, far-off cattle, the drone of insects. We'd ended up about fifty metres down from the road, upturned and bogged in shallow water. I'd managed to climb out of the wreckage but Lachlan—poor, innocent Lachlan Drysdale—was unconscious and completely pinned under his ute . . . I had no choice but to stay there, crouched over him, holding his flopping head out of the water to stop him from drowning. There was no way I was going to leave him there alone to die.

My feet were sinking into the mud as I'd held him there, waiting for Oriana's thugs to thunder down the pulverised leaves and saplings, and grab me.

And then the dreaded sound had come: someone running towards us. For a second I'd panicked and considered grabbing my backpack, with the Riddle in it, and letting Lachlan's head

drop underwater . . . but I knew I could never do that, so I braced myself instead for the inevitable. I'd escaped from these people before, I told myself—I could do it again.

The bushes just above the creek parted and my heart jumped in fear. But instead of Sumo or Kelvin pouncing on me, it was a tall police officer hurrying over to help!

'Are you OK?' he'd called out as he looked around, assessing the scene. 'I saw what happened up there on the road. Where's the driver?'

'He's here,' I'd said, gesturing to Lachlan with a nod of my head, while trying to keep my shaky voice under control and ignore the images of juvenile prison that were flashing through my mind. 'He's breathing but he's unconscious and pinned down. I just can't get him out. I've been holding his head out of the water . . . I have a few scratches, but I'm fine.'

'Your friend is very lucky you were here,' the cop had said, as he squatted down beside us, a frown drawing his fair eyebrows together, 'otherwise . . . well, let's not think about that. I was chasing that crazy SUV that was tailgating you when I saw your vehicle fly over the embankment . . . Are you sure you're not hurt anywhere?'

'I'm fine,' I said. 'Nothing's broken.'

'Here, let me take him.' The cop then shifted into my position and took Lachlan's head from my hands. 'I've radioed for an ambulance and rescue team, along with police backup. They'll be able to free your friend here, and get you checked out, too. I reckon the highway patrol will have located the vehicle responsible for this by now.'

I was finally free to stand up. I stretched out my arms, and clenched and unclenched my aching fingers, sore from bearing the weight of Lachlan's head. While the cop had been talking, my mind had been racing in overdrive—desperately thinking of a way to get my stuff and get out of there. More cops were coming and I knew that if I didn't run, I'd be recognised and cuffed in no time. *Psycho Kid*, public enemy number one . . . the guy who'd attacked his uncle and put his sister in a coma.

The sound of a thunderous explosion suddenly boomed down from the highway. The cop and I both instinctively ducked for cover, bracing ourselves. When we both re-emerged we stared, shocked, in the direction it had come from—a massive fireball shot up into the sky, followed by a mushroom cloud of billowing smoke.

The cop swore, and adjusted his shaky hold on Lachlan's head.

'I bet that was the bloody SUV!' he said, fumbling with his free hand to grab his radio. 'Those jerks had better not have collided with one of our squad cars!'

A siren wailed in the distance. I had to go. I knew Lachlan would be OK; I just hoped he wouldn't tell anyone that I was headed to Mount Helicon. For some reason, I felt pretty sure he wouldn't.

As soon as I'd reached into the cabin of the pick-up to grab my backpack, the cop had started shouting at me, asking me what the hell I was doing. Without a word, I'd hitched my backpack high up on my shoulders and started scrambling away, leaving the pick-up and the two figures behind me, one unconscious and one completely confused and shouting. I ran, following the creek, crashing and falling over half-buried logs and timber, and dodging dense scrub, not stopping for a good two hours, at least. The cop had no choice but to stay behind and keep Lachlan's head above water.

Even as I was running away I was thinking I was doomed—I figured there'd be more cops and sniffer dogs on my trail in no time. I crossed

a wide section of the creek, a few kilometres down from the crash site, which I knew, from watching so many action movies with Dad, meant the end of the dogs being able to track my scent. It also meant that now my jeans and sneakers were completely drenched.

The *dogs* had lost me, maybe, but not Sumo. I was hidden in a rock, surely miles away from where we'd crashed in the creek, thinking that he and Kelvin probably perished in that highway explosion . . . and yet, somehow, he'd managed to almost find me in the dark middle of nowhere.

12:39 am

I'd just begun to cautiously squeeze out of my hiding place, keen to have a better look around, when from somewhere in the shadows came a sharp cracking sound, followed by a squeak. Immediately I jumped back into position—concealed, invisible, and motionless. Had Sumo returned?

The squeaking became more desperate.

When heavy wings flapped overhead, I exhaled with relief. It was just a night bird catching its prey.

I started wondering again whether Lachlan

was OK. By now, he was probably sleeping and recovering in a quiet hospital bed somewhere. They must have known it was me that ran from the scene . . . The press would be hounding him in the morning for information. Everyone would be trying to get a big break, an exclusive story, on the teen fugitive. I was sure Lachlan would never pull over to offer a stranger a ride ever again.

Poor guy. I owed him, just like I owed Repro.

I didn't even know where Repro was, or how he'd managed to escape from Oriana's place after we stole the Riddle from her desk. I hoped like hell he was safe with his collection, in his crazy little place hidden in the middle of the city. I wished I could be there with him, instead of being on the run in the depths of the bush. But right now, I had to deal with reality. It was time to move on.

12:48 am

A quarter-moon shone over the ridge, and the wind stirred the surrounding treetops. Overhead, stars twinkled in a deep black sky. I figured Sumo must have been pretty far away from me by now or, better still, had given up searching for me altogether. But what about

his partner, Kelvin? Maybe he'd been hurt in the fiery explosion up on the highway earlier. If not, would the two of them meet up and go back to the city or would they continue hunting me here?

I decided it was safe enough to come out from the rock wall. I extricated myself from my squashed position, pulled on my backpack, and with every sense quivering I cautiously continued my journey. I didn't have a clue where I was; all I knew was that I would have to be very careful, and that I was a long, long way from the pick-up truck.

The sound of crickets and insects buzzed in my ears, and beyond that I thought I could hear the hum of distant traffic—trucks on the highway perhaps. In spite of everything—the fact that I was completely lost in the scrub without hope of shelter or safety, and I was tired and hungry—I couldn't help feeling excited. Stashed in my backpack was what I hoped would be the key to the mystery that my dad had stumbled on. I'd finally got hold of the Ormond Riddle and I couldn't wait to pull it out and have a good look at it.

1:19 am

The pale light of the moon had been some help

earlier, but now it was hidden and I was floundering around in the dark. I wasn't about to use my torch, for fear of highlighting my position, so I blindly pushed on. My sneakers were still wet and squelching, my jeans soaked, and I kept knocking my shins painfully against rocks and branches that stuck out in the path I was making. A couple of times I stumbled, falling flat on my face.

I slowed for a moment to try and ring Boges, but my phone had no signal at all. I was exhausted. I needed to stop for the night—make some sort of camp where I could feel safe enough to try and get some sleep. It felt like I'd done nothing but run for twenty-four hours.

If I could find a cave, I thought, where I could camouflage the entrance, I might be able to relax and get some shut-eye. With all these rocks around, surely there'd be some cave-like shelters, even if it was only some sort of big overhang.

I peered ahead into the darkness and spotted something unusual. Surprised, I took cover behind a clump of prickly bushes. Ahead of me in a small clearing was a very small house—kind of like a hut or shed. Why would someone build something like this out in the middle of nowhere? There didn't seem to be anyone around.

The place was in total darkness. Carefully, I approached, listening intently.

Something flapped past me and I jumped back. Spooked, I crouched down, listening again.

When I was totally sure the hut was empty, I crept closer.

Sometimes there were cabins in the forests for bushwalkers and climbers, and I wondered if this was one of them. I'd heard that the rangers kept them stocked with firewood, matches, a water tank, an environmentally-friendly toilet, and basic supplies.

I walked right around the hut until I was almost back at the front again.

I had a drink from the rainwater tank that was attached to the hut's side, and then very carefully checked the door. I turned the handle and went to open it. It was stiff and I had to push hard against it, but eventually it opened right up.

As it did so something bumped past my face and I jumped back in fright! Then, whatever it was flew off high above me. I looked up but couldn't see anything. A bird or a bat must have been trapped in there. A cold wind suddenly blew up again, making an eerie sound in the treetops. I quickly stepped inside.

Digging round in my backpack, I found my torch, switched it on and flashed it over the interior of the hut.

It was a really small space—not much bigger than my bedroom at home. It had a table in the centre, a couple of benches either side, some camp stretchers stacked in a corner, a stone fireplace against one wall with a mantelpiece running along the top, a large box with rope handles, two old lamps hanging on hooks and several drums, one of which was marked 'Kerosene'.

On the mantelpiece, covered with dusty spider webs, rested several boxes.

I closed the door behind me, pulled my backpack off and slung it on the wooden table, then collapsed onto a bench. I had some shelter. Finally, I could stop running—for a while.

2:02 am

The first thing I did, after getting back up and lighting a kerosene lamp, was pull out my supply of chocolate that I'd bought when Lachlan and I stopped at the petrol station for sandwiches yesterday. After that I opened my backpack and pulled out Oriana's folder containing the Ormond Riddle.