

To Angie and Claire

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# CONSPIRACY 365

BOOK EIGHT: AUGUST

## GABRIELLE LORD

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1 AUGUST

153 days to go . . .

Unmarked grave, Infinity Gardens

12:00 am

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*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 loud-speaker 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! 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? Yell 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.