

# **The Carlswick Conspiracy**

**By SL Beaumont**

# Chapter 1

## Day 7

The peace and tranquillity of the summer morning was broken as a large black SUV with tinted windows skidded to a stop, its tyres screeching in protest. A flock of birds took flight, squawking at being disturbed. The driver began reversing the vehicle at speed along the quiet country road.

“That’s it,” the front seat passenger said in heavily accented English. He glanced at the photograph lying on his lap. “Turn here.” He was a large man in his early forties, dressed from head to toe in black. A jagged scar, a souvenir from an old altercation, ran from the top of his left cheek to just below his earlobe.

The driver spun the wheel, over-correcting several times as he sped through the wrought iron gates of the imposing stone-columned entrance. The long gravel driveway was bordered with massive oak trees and as the car careered around the last corner the three men squashed into the back seat had their first glimpse of the manor house. There were murmurs of surprise and reluctant approval as they took in the magnificent pale brick building, its chimneys rising skyward. The sweeping lawn sloped gracefully from the front of the house to the miniature lake. A man on a ride-on mower was grooming the expansive grass carpet on the other side.

One of the men in the back put his hand on his gun holster but lowered it again after receiving a sharp rebuke from the front seat passenger.

“Sorry, Ivan,” he muttered.

With a spatter of flying gravel the car jerked to a stop in front of the house. All four doors opened at once and the five men got out. Ivan and the driver, a lumbering giant of a man, walked towards the stone porch surrounding the main entrance and the other three men, younger, dressed in similar dark jeans and shirts, split up, peering in windows and around the sides of the house. Ivan pressed the ornate doorbell at one side of a large wooden door.

Approaching footsteps could be heard and several seconds later the door was opened by a grey-haired woman in her late fifties. She wiped her flour-covered hands on her apron and regarded the two men with a pleasant smile.

“Good morning, gentlemen. How can I help you?”

“Mrs Knox?” Ivan asked.

“Oh no, I’m Grace, the housekeeper,” she replied, glancing over Ivan’s shoulder. Her eye caught movement in her peripheral vision and she noticed the other men studying the house. She took a half step backwards and rested her hand on a ledge just inside the doorway, her fingers feeling for a button.

“Well then, Grace. We would like to speak with Alex Knox,” Ivan said, his cold blue eyes studying her.

Grace’s fingers found the button and pressed it twice. “Join the queue,” she said, keeping her gaze on the two men in front of her.

The second man took a step forward, looking affronted.

“Is he here?” Ivan asked, putting a hand out as if to restrain his colleague.

“No. We haven’t seen him in almost a year,” she replied.

Ivan was silent for a moment. “Well then, you won’t mind if we take a look around to see for ourselves.”

Grace stayed exactly where she was. “Actually, I would mind. You can leave your name and *if* I hear from him, I will pass on your details.” She raised her chin and looked him directly in the eye.

The man beside Ivan spat onto the ground and swore in a foreign language. Grace flinched, her breath catching in her throat.

The engine sounds of several approaching vehicles filled the silence that followed. A large farm truck pulled to a stop in front of the house followed by two quad bikes. Two men alighted from the truck’s cab and one bounded from the tray on the back, a shotgun slung over his shoulder. The male passengers stepped off the back of the quad bikes leaving their drivers, two women, seated with the engines idling. The farm workers flanked the visitors.

Grace exhaled and caught her husband’s eye. “These gentlemen are looking for Alex,” she called.

“Well you won’t find him here,” Ken Walker replied, closing the door of the truck and stepping forward. He was a tall, softly spoken man wearing muddy overalls. “But if you do come across him, send him our way. We too have a number of things to discuss with him.”

Ivan gave a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes and held up his hands in a gesture of peace as he stepped back from the doorway. He gave a flick of his head and he and his men walked back to their car. When he reached the car he gave a single nod to the tallest of the group, a man with the build of a rugby player, who

reached into the back and retrieved a semi-automatic weapon fixed to the inside of the door.

A collective gasp sounded from the farm workers as the man cradled the weapon like a precious baby, its sleek black casing catching the sunlight.

The farmer carrying the shotgun began to swing it around from over his shoulder but Ken shook his head.

“No, Steve.”

Steve hesitated and then using deliberate movements, laid the shotgun on the ground in front of him and took two steps backwards, not taking his eyes off Ivan or the gunman as he did so.

Ken spread his arms as a show of surrender and glanced around at his crew who appeared to be frozen in place. No one spoke. Even the birds and animals had fallen silent as though waiting for something to happen. Time seemed suspended and tension hung in the air between the locals and the visitors for a long minute.

Ivan surveyed the gathering in a calm and considered manner, ensuring he had everyone’s attention. He then gave another single nod.

The gunman raised the weapon and sprayed the house with a volley of bullets. The loud burst of gunfire took everyone by surprise. The bullets made a dull thud as they slammed into the brickwork of the house, sending small clouds of plaster dust into the air. Ken and the other farm workers yelled and dropped to the ground, covering their heads with their hands as the quad bike drivers dived for cover behind their vehicles.

The sound of glass shattering in the drawing room windows filled the air. Grace crouched in the doorway, holding the doorframe with one hand and covering her face with her other arm, crying out as a trail of bullets thumped into the wood above her, small woodchips splintering over her head.

The firing continued in bursts for several more seconds, smashing the windows of Alex’s study, before ceasing. There was complete silence for a moment after the glass stopped falling from the shattered windows.

Those on the ground lifted their heads a little and peered from beneath their arms. The gunman turned his body slightly and fired again, two short controlled bursts, taking out the windscreen and front tyres of the truck. One of the women hiding behind her quad bike screamed. The gunman lowered his weapon as his mouth curved into a satisfied grin.

Ivan held the door of the car open as he surveyed the destruction. “Alex owes us a good deal of money. He has been given seven days, otherwise we will be forced to look elsewhere to recover our losses,” he said, eyeing the house. “Do you understand?”

“Alex is wanted by the police in this country. He no longer has any claim on this property,” Ken replied, rising to his knees from his prone position.

“It belongs to his family, no?” Ivan asked. “Then we have claim to it. Tell Alex that we’re looking for him and next time we’ll not be so accommodating.”

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