

from **The Celtic Dagger**

James pulled his coat around him against the cold wind as he made his way to Catherine's house. A matter of hours ago, he had left his parents home in the south of France where his mother explained what details she knew about the murder, in Edinburgh, of his brother, Alex. He tried to still the mixture of emotions that welled within him, as he remembered his Mother's words. "James, Alex is dead." The incoherent and fragmented information, gleaned from Alex's wife, Catherine, gave no indication of the circumstances of Alex's death so James caught the first available flight from Paris back to Edinburgh. When he reached the base of the steps, he looked up at the Georgian townhouse. Once owned by his Grandfather, the house held memories of his early childhood spent with Alex, memories that now came to the surface. As he stood there, his mind in the past, the dark green door opened and Catherine, the once self-assured, confident woman he knew, appeared in the doorway. She looked frail and drawn. He climbed the steps and took her hand. "I came as soon as I could, Catherine." She opened her mouth to speak but no words came out. James stepped inside and put an arm around her and she began to sob. After a few minutes, he stood back and looked at her. "I think a cup of coffee might do us both good. Don't you?" Catherine nodded and they walked through to the back of the house and into the kitchen where James found the familiar warmth and order of the room gone. In its place, a sense of uncertainty filled the air. He pulled out a chair for Catherine at the oak table that stood in the centre of the room, then moved the pile of unopened mail and used

coffee mugs to one side. He took off his coat, hung it on the back of a chair and walked over to open the curtains. The window looked out onto a garden where the last leaves of summer still clung to the tree branches. He turned the kettle on, washed two mugs from the pile of dishes in the sink then found instant coffee in the cupboard next to the window. As he poured the boiled water into the mugs, he looked back at Catherine. She sat motionless, unaware of his actions, her face drained of colour, her eyes sunken and dull. He took the coffee to the table and sat down.

“I can't believe Alexander is dead. I expect him to walk through the door at any moment.”

James took her hand. He could see the strain in her face but still he had to ask about Alex. “Do you feel up to telling me what happened?”

Catherine took a sip of the steaming brew. When she spoke, her voice was quiet and toneless, her eyes fixed on some point at the other side of the kitchen. “We went to a dinner that evening to welcome the new Vice Chancellor. I left before Alexander because I didn't feel well. In the morning, I realised he hadn't returned home so I telephoned his office. Not because I was worried, it wasn't unusual for Alex to work through the night, but because we'd arranged to have lunch that day with a colleague of his from London. Anyway, later in the morning, the police arrived. They came to tell me Alexander had been found dead in his office by one of the administrative staff. Vera Trenbath I believe it was. Poor Vera. How dreadful for her.” At that moment, Catherine's arm knocked a spoon from the table. It hit the tiled floor and bounced. James watched, as the noise appeared to jar her nerves. “Stabbed in the back the police said. They couldn't find the murder weapon.” Catherine put her elbows on the table, her head in her hands. When she took them

away tears streamed down her face. She reached for a tissue from the box on the table and wiped her face. "You'll have to excuse me, James. I find this difficult to talk about."

"It's okay I understand."

"Yes, I suppose you're the one person who does. How long has it been since Louise died?"

"Almost two years. The only thing I can tell you is that it gets easier with time."

"Have you spoken to the police since that morning?" James watched as Catherine pushed her blonde hair away from her face and looked at him.

"Yes. Chief Inspector Fitzjohn came to see me yesterday. He said they'd established that Alexander left the dinner about eleven-thirty. He must have decided to go to his office rather than come straight home. You know Alexander. Work came first." She hesitated, her bottom lip quivered and her voice broke. "Who would want to kill him?"

"I don't know but I'm sure the police will find out." James could see the anguish in her face and decided to change the subject. Since he had arrived, he had not seen Catherine's housekeeper, Eve Lawrence. "Where's Eve?"

"Her sister became ill and she went to take care of her. She'll be back today."

"I'll stay until she gets here then."

"There's no need, James. I'm fine." Catherine picked up her mug and took another sip of coffee.

"Is there anything I can do for you then?"

“There is actually. I have to clear Alexander’s office and I’ve been dreading it. I’d planned to go this afternoon. Would you mind helping me?”

“No, of course not. In fact, it’d make me feel useful.”

“There’s something else, James. Can you come with me for a moment? I need to show you something.”

He watched as Catherine stood up. She swayed and caught the back of the chair with her hand. James got up and put his arm out to steady her.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes. Just a little light-headed.”

He followed Catherine through the house to Alex’s study. As they moved along the hall, away from the kitchen, the air in the old house became cold. Catherine stopped at the study door and hesitated before she opened it and went in. No light penetrated the closed curtains. James walked into the familiar room where he had spent hours as a child looking through books from the shelves that lined the walls, while his Grandfather worked at his desk. Catherine moved over to the window and drew back the curtains. A meagre amount of light struck the floor. She walked over to the desk. “I rarely came in here when Alexander was alive. I’m not sure why I came in yesterday. To be close to him I suppose. He spent most of his time here when he was at home. I was surprised when I opened the door. The room was a mess. You know yourself how meticulous he was. Anyway, I started to tidy up and put things away and found the bank safety-deposit key in the desk.” Catherine held up the key. “I got the box originally to safekeep a few pieces of jewellery my mother left me but Alex also used it for

documents from time to time. Anyway, I thought I should look through them so I went to the bank yesterday and found this inside." Catherine unfolded a blue cloth that lay on the desk in front of her.

"I'm not an archaeologist, James, but I know this is an artefact and I can't imagine why Alexander put it in the safe-deposit box."

James walked over to her. "What on earth...It's the dagger and scabbard we unearthed from the burial chamber at the excavation site last month." He ran his fingers along the gold-plated scabbard then picked it up and removed the dagger revealing a delicately carved blade. The sound of metal against metal filled the room as James slipped the scabbard back onto the blade. He placed the dagger back down on the blue cloth and looked up at Catherine. "Someone in the Department at the University came to see me when I arrived this morning. He told me this, along with the gold torque we unearthed at the same time, is missing. Is this all you found?"

"Yes. Shall I tell the police?"

"I can do that, Catherine. You've got enough to handle at the moment." James turned to look out of the window then walked over and sat down in an armchair in the corner of the room behind the door. "I'm not sure what to do. This doesn't look good for the University but what concerns me more is Alex's reputation. Why would he lock it away at the bank?"

"Alexander wouldn't steal an artefact, James. He lived for his work. There must be a perfectly good explanation."

"I agree but others may not see it that way." James thought about Alex. A determined, successful man, he could also be callous if anyone stood in his way. A sense of rivalry had existed between them from

James' earliest memories. As a child, Alex excelled at everything he did and bathed in their father's admiration. Perhaps that is why James had such fond memories of time spent in the company of his Grandfather. In his presence, there was no need to prove himself. James had no illusions about his brother. He was no saint but even so, he agreed with Catherine. Alex would not steal artefacts. But there was another worry. His father's health had not been good for the past year and since Alex's death, it had deteriorated further. If Alex's reputation was ruined James feared that it would kill him.

"What shall we do?" Catherine stood with her arms wrapped around herself against the cold of the room. "Alexander's death has been enough. I didn't need this. I wish I'd never come in here."

James stood up, walked back over to where the dagger lay and wrapped it up in the blue cloth. "I'll take the dagger with me back to the University. I don't want you to worry anymore. Are you sure you feel up to going through Alex's office this afternoon? I could always do it for you."

"No. I want to. It'll be a closure of some sort."

"Are you sure you don't want me to wait with you until Eve arrives? I don't like the thought of you being here alone." Alex and Catherine did not have children and James knew Catherine's only sister, Rosemary, had died in a car accident years before.

"I'll be all right. Eve will be here in a couple of hours. When you leave, I'll have a lie-down."

"Very well, if you're sure. I'll meet you this afternoon at Alex's office."

James returned to the University and went straight to his office where he placed the dagger in his combination safe. He needed time to think. With a mixture of worry and relief, he left again and went to see Tristan Harrow, Acting Head of the Department since Alex's death. Tristan would take over Alex's role in the excavation.

James knew Alex and Tristan had been rivals ever since their student days and this rivalry had continued in their academic careers with Alex gaining promotion and recognition while others, including Tristan, struggled, one-step behind. James wondered, now, how this had affected Tristan Harrow. Had the continued competition over so many years got to him at last and had he killed Alex? No. That's ridiculous, James thought. Tristan is not capable of murder.

Tristan's office door opened when James raised his hand to knock.

"James."

"Simon? This is a surprise. You're the last person I expected to see." Simon Rhodes had been in the same year as Alex and Tristan when they were undergraduates together. After graduation, Simon moved away. He took Simon's extended hand and noticed he had not changed a great deal over the years. Now, in his late forties, his hair greyed, he was still a lean wiry man with sharp features and hard grey coloured eyes. "It must be twenty years. I didn't realise you were here in Edinburgh."

"I moved back a few months ago. It's good to see you, James. I'm sorry to hear about Alex."

"Thank you, Simon." At that moment, Tristan appeared in the doorway behind Simon.

"Look, I'd love to stay and catch up but I have an appointment at the Chancellery in a few minutes. I'll give you a call, James."

When he had gone, James turned to Tristan. "I didn't realise you'd kept in touch with Simon. Haven't seen or heard from him in years."

"I didn't. He contacted me when he came back to live in Edinburgh." They walked into Tristan's office and made their way to the armchairs in front of the fireplace. Tristan was a tall, slim man, with thick wavy dark brown hair that grew over his ears, the front almost falling into his eyes. He wore a pair of brown corduroy trousers with a sloppy dark green jumper. "He had business here today so decided to call in. Please, make yourself comfortable." James sat down in the armchair offered and watched Tristan sit in the one opposite. "I wondered when you'd turn up. Sorry about your brother. It's been a shock to us all. Have the police spoken to you yet?"

"No. I arrived just a few hours ago. I spent the morning with Catherine. She's taking this hard. I'm worried about her." James always found Tristan Harrow smug and arrogant and he could sense his disinterest in these details.

"I'm sure you'll be able to give her the support she needs. She's a strong woman but still in shock at this stage, I imagine. Now we should get down to business. I've been asked to take over the excavation project in France. I don't know how with all my other work but there you are."

"You'll find a way, Tristan." James tried to hide the contempt in his voice.

For the next hour, they discussed the activities at the excavation site over the past month. James did not, however, mention that the dagger and torque had been reported missing. If Tristan had murdered Alex, chances were he already knew. If not, then with Tristan's attitude toward Alex, he may use the information to discredit him. When he left Tristan,

he went straight to Alex's office where he found Catherine in the doorway. "Have you been waiting long?"

She turned when he spoke. "No. I just arrived. I've been standing here thinking about all the years Alexander spent in this room. A long time. Twenty years." Catherine crossed the threshold and walked over to where Alex's desk sat adjacent to the windows. She touched each item that lay there. "All as he left it. As though nothing at all has happened."

James walked over to her and took her hand. Although smartly dressed, she still looked drawn and tired. "His work will continue, Catherine. Alex made a huge contribution in his lifetime. It hasn't been in vain. Why don't you wait down in the coffee shop? I can do this for you."

"No. I'll be fine once we get started. The attendant brought up those boxes earlier." She pointed to a pile of empty boxes behind the door. "The contents of the filing cabinets must remain for the person who takes over Alex's work. The books need to be packed up and the desk cleared." She looked around the room again and then moved to the windows where she pulled back the half-closed curtains and reached up to free the window latch. The window swung outward and the sound of rain as it hit the drainpipe filled the room. A knock sounded at the door and the attendant came in. Catherine looked around. "Oh, Richard, there you are."

"I have a trolley here, Mrs Wearing. Might make it easier once the boxes are filled. Can I give you a hand?"

"Thank you but Dr. Wearing has offered so I think I'll be right. I'll give you a call when we're ready to leave."

When the attendant left, James picked up one of the boxes and walked back to the desk. He picked up the papers and books and the gold coloured stationery holder where Alex kept his pens and placed them in the box. When he did so, he noticed Alex's coffee mug beside his computer. Catherine was right. Life could change in an instant without any visible signs that you are gone. He looked around the large wood-panelled room. It would be strange to see someone else use this room after so many years. Catherine worked in silence as she emptied the bookshelves that ran along the wall next to the desk. He understood her need to do something practical in an effort to come to terms with Alex's death but he wondered how she was coping with the fact that this was the room he had been murdered in? James finished clearing the desk then walked over to the filing cabinets underneath the windows and looked in each one.

Catherine turned around. "We don't need to remove any of that, James."

"I know. I just thought this a good opportunity to see if the torque is here. I would have thought that if Alex had one of the missing artefacts he would have had the other one too."

"Wouldn't the police have found it?"

"If they did they probably wouldn't take any notice. They'd have been looking for the murder weapon."

"I suppose you're right." Catherine turned back to the bookshelves.

Finding nothing, James walked over to the fireplace at the other end of the room and placed his hand up into the chimney. "I'm satisfied now, it's not here." He helped Catherine pack the remaining books and

then phoned the attendant for his help to take them downstairs.

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