

THE IRISH HOARD

By

Donald Smith

There was no rain but the wan October light was stifled by cloud. As Rowena looked out, the broad main street appeared to be deserted. A few parked cars had been abandoned by their owners, overcome by lassitude. The neon sign, seen in reverse from reception, announced 'WhithornTimescan' like a message from outer space.

Rowena had already sent home her one staff member, and was contemplating cashing up for the day. Mentally she ticked off her current Netflix series, and resolved not to open another bottle of wine this evening.

Only when the van doors slammed shut did she realise that a new vehicle had arrived and parked right outside the Heritage Centre. Two burly workmen, disguised in windproof jackets and hoodies, were standing on the pavement looking uncertainly through her window. One of them was holding a plastic fertiliser bag. For a flashing moment Rowena thought she was about to be robbed. They would certainly be welcome to her day's takings.

They pushed open the door and came in.

'Is this the Museum?'

'Well, there's two to be exact,' replied Rowena, 'the Priory Museum through the arch, and Timescan here.'

'The yin wi the auld stanes. Na, we dinna want Effie MacLennan.'

'Na, we need tae talk wi the boss.'

'Effie is on duty today at the Priory, but there's no Curator.'

'So where's your boss, is he in?'

'Actually, I'm in charge of Timescan. Rowena Dalglish.'

'Are you an expert?'

'Sort of.'

'Alright, we hae to speak in private.'

'Aye, we've something to show ye. I'm Wullie and he's Mike. McGovan.'

'We're cousins.'

Rowena had a vague recollection of having seen this pair and their battered white van before, perhaps in Wigtown.'

'Alright. I'll just lock this door and we can go through to my office.'

The McGovans stood back respectfully as Rowena closed up, and then followed her through to the surprisingly spacious office. Everything was meticulous, reflecting Rowena's tidy habits, and time in hand. Wullie was still clutching the grimy fertiliser bag.

'It's this lot,' he said, and stepping forward he tipped up the bag and gingerly shoogled out its contents in front of Rowena's computer. There was amuffled jangle, and then everything tumbled out into a heap. No-one spoke. She was transfixed.

'Where did you find this?' she managed to say.

'Above the bay.'

'Aye no faur frae the carpark.'

'Wi a metal detector.'

'First time oot an aa.'

'Dae we get the money noo?'

Rowena continued to stare. There were metal chains, some broken. There were coins, lots of them. There were other pieces of jagged broken metal, silver, perhaps gold. There was a whole torc, at least one, probably more. Was that a cross? There was a strange little ornate box. Everything was tarnished, or filthy. But almost certainly it was a Hoard, Anglo-Saxon, Viking perhaps. A Treasure Hoard. At Whithorn.

'My God,' she breathed, 'it looks real. You need to take me to the spot.'

'What's it worth?'

'If it's genuine, a lot. But we need to follow the correct procedure. I'll bring my camera. We should go right now.'

'Fair enough. Our quid's in, Wullie. Telt ye.'

'Aye, will we be famous? Whit'll we call it, Miss..Ms'

'Rowena. It might be the Whithorn Hoard. But for now it's officially 'Treasure Trove', and it belongs to the Queen.'

'That's something, eh Mike, the Queen.'

'Does she give us the reward, the Queen like?'

‘Sort of, but first we need to identify the location. Are you happy for me to lock this in the Museum safe while we’re away? Then we’ll come back and register the find.’

‘Aye, right enough, we dinnae want onythingwalkinoot the door.’

‘Look, wrap everything together in this rug.’

The cousins carefully lifted the tangled pile onto the rug that Rowena’s assistant, Mollie, kept for cold days at the front counter. She swung open up the big safe and let WullieMcGovanlay the bundle inside. She did not try to hide the combination as she relocked the safe, wanting to emphasise the trust between her and these unexpected allies.

As they emerged back into the still deserted street, Rowena felt a fresh sea breeze on her face. Mike ushered her into a front seat, and then piled into the back, while Wullie drove. As the engine turned over throatily, and the van got into gear, she realised that after today, she would never look at Whithorn in the same way.

Sleepless in the early hours, what Rowena kept remembering was the location. The McGovans’ ragged dig was above the eastern end on the beach, with a panoramic view of Luce Bay and the Mull of Galloway. Somewhere further out on a clearer day was Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man.

This was what had brought her to Whithorn in the first place. It was a backwater, but that relationship between the Priory and its settlement, the Isle of Whithorn and the Bay, all opening out towards the sea was special. Having grown up near the Heads of Ayr, something about that marriage of sea and land had attracted her, despite the remoteness. And anyway first museum jobs were hard to come by.

In fact Rowena had spent a lot of time and energy on the committee that was trying to create public walkways between the three sites. As ever ownership was the stumbling block, and even the Hoard was on a doubtful boundary between Council and private land. Imagine those Vikings, probably Vikings, camping above Whithorn Bay with their longships pulled up below them on the sands. Had they raided the Priory? Almost certainly. Yet it had been some kind of abbey then, not the medieval Bishopric. Almost nothing survived from those vital early days. Now there was a pile of new evidence. Why had they left the loot behind? Was it from Whithorn, or had it just been buried here for safekeeping?

Her mind whirled through the various stages of the evening. She had carefully photographed the site of the find. There was no hesitation on her part, for the ground had evidently been newly dug in the roughest fashion. What else might be buried nearby? It was too much all at once.

They had all come back together to Timescan, and Rowena had gone through the formalities. At first Wullie and Mike had been downcast by the number of hoops through which they had to jump, but she had done a good job convincing them that this proved the importance of what they had discovered. She recorded their full names, and their addresses in Newton Stewart. Then she had them sign, and she signed in turn for receipt of the as yet unspecified Hoard, assuring the cousins that they would be recompensed in line with an official valuation. She promised to e-mail in the official Treasure Trove first thing in the morning, and to phone Wullie to let him know it had been acknowledged.

For now they should keep quiet, till the full significance of their discovery was confirmed. While emphasising this point to the reluctant pair, she did not expand on the importance of local museum involvement. As first recipient of the Trove, Whithorn Timescan might be in line to house and display the unprecedented local find. She would have to play this carefully, as it could be the makings of the struggling Heritage Centre, and her own career. There were bound to be other contenders.

As she drifted into a restless doze, Rowena remembered the young archaeologist she had met at the Museums and Galleries conference in May. Irish, Northern Irish. What was his name... Muir.... Brian Muir, that was it. Seemed nice though a bit short. Didn't he work at the National Museum of Scotland? And on the Early Medieval period? It would be useful to get some advice ahead of the game. An inside line. She would check him out, and call him in the morning. Hopefully he wasn't in the bottom of a trench somewhere in Lewis, where everything glamorous was normally buried. Archae ..o...a big word ...logically... speaking.

'Yes, Brian Muir here.'

'Hi, Brian, it's Rowena. Rowena Dalglish. We met at the conference in May.'

'I remember. Tall. Whithorn.'

'That's me alright. Listen, sorry to bother you, but we've had a bit of excitement down here in the sticks, and I'm looking for some advice.'

'Oh, aye.'

'It's a Treasure Trove, and I'm just filling in the last forms.'

'You think its Early Medieval?'

'I do. And it's big. Lots of metal items, some standard and some that look unusual, to my unpracticed eye anyway.'

'You've got more than one degree in that stuff, Rowena.'

‘But I’m not an archaeologist.’

‘Where was it found?’

‘On the shoreline above Whithorn Bay, by two amateur metal detectors.’

‘It’s an ideal beaching place for longboats.’

‘Right. It looks like some of it at least may have come from the monastery, the earliest one.’

‘Wow, that would be big.’

‘Yeh, so I would really appreciate some kind of early assessment.’

‘You’re sending in the formal report?’

‘Finger on the key.’

‘Those Treasure Trove guys are just down the corridor here. I’ll stick my head in, say I was speaking to you, and see if they’d be up for an early look see. Given the scale of the find, and it’s my period sort of thing. Then I could nip down.’

‘Brian, that would be fantastic.’

‘Hit the button. I’ll call you back in an hour. I think I might be getting a wee bit excited.’

‘I’ll be here.’

Rowena put down the phone and hit send in one easy motion.

Brian arrived the next day. It turned out he didn’t drive, so Rowena had to go all the way to Dumfries to collect him. She installed his bag in the spare room of her little flat in Wigtown, rustled up a sandwich, and then they headed down to Whithorn. She had phoned Wullie, as promised, to tell him the find was now official, and to repeat her warning to keep things quiet until they had some firm information on the contents. She did not mention Brian Muir.

As she ushered Brian through Timescan reception, she could see Mollie frankly eyeing up his short compact figure. With his short dark hair, and amiable though vaguely indefinite features, Brian might have been a well turned out Dumfriesshire farmer. Until he opened his mouth and the unmistakable Ulster accent gave that game away.

‘Brian’s going to take a first look at the things that were handed in on Tuesday, Mollie.’

‘All the way from Edinburgh. Why does everything worthwhile happen on my day off?’

‘Now, remember, Mollie,’ chided Rowena, with a significant glance Brianward, ‘we don’t know if these things are worthwhile or not. So we’ll just keep it all to ourselves for now.’

‘Us and the McGovans. Aye well, Ms Dalglish, my lips are sealed.’

The office was ready like a theatre in advance of a major operation. Both desks were clear. Brian put down his metal case and unclipped the fasteners, lifting out a pile of individual find slip cases, along with plastic bags, cotton wraps, and cotton wool for fragile items.

Rowena opened the safe and lifted out Mollie’s bulging rug.

‘It was all I had to hand,’ she apologised.

Brian nodded. His soft focus had been replaced by an intense gaze. ‘Does he wear lenses?’ wondered Rowena irrelevantly as she placed the rug gently on her empty desk and began to unfold. To her relief the same tangle of metal items was revealed.

Brian breathed out audibly.

‘Here,’ he intoned, handing Rowena a pair of gloves. She was to play a full surgical role. ‘Take out the chain links first, into one pile. Then we’ll group the coins.’

Without further commentary, they set to work. It was surprisingly easy to detach the individual items. Though it appeared to be tangled, each object came away without resistance, and the piles on each desk grew.

‘There’s much more than I realised,’ hazarded Rowena.

Brian grunted but offered no opinion. She realised how deeply he was concentrating. The hands were surprisingly small but deft, hairs on the fingers visible through the tightly moulded plastic. They separated out and almost weighed every shape before depositing it in the correct category.

When the first sort was done, they drew breath.

‘The coins stretch right back to the 6th century.’

‘So they could be from the first monastery?’

‘Possibly. But look at the rest of it.’

The pile was still significant, but somehow flattened out, more evenly distributed. Yet the objects were more varied.

‘One thing at a time, now, Rowena. If I lift will you record?’

She nodded assent.

‘This looks like a pectoral cross.’

He lifted out a piece of extended beaten gold, a handsbreadth in size, and turned it to display an intricate studded pattern of semi-precious stones.

‘It’s stunning, and almost complete.’

Carefully itemised, it went into a separate slipcase wrapped in cotton.

This was followed by five torcs, one after another. Two were complete, and silver, while those made of gold seemed to have been broken.

Next came what looked like a tarnished plate. But Brian turned it to the light and taking a damp flannel dipped in soft cleanser, he eased away the upper layers of dirt.

‘Jesus,’ he muttered, ‘Am I imagining things? Look.’

Rowena stared as the outline of an incised figure began to appear, centuries of dirt later.

‘Christ on the cross.’

‘A patten, the communion plate. These figurative ones have only ever been found in Ireland, outside the Holy Roman Empire,’ pronounced Brian firmly.

‘I think I’m dreaming.’

‘Well don’t. Look at this.’

The jewelled chalice was broken, but recognisably partner to the plate. Into a bag it went gently swaddled in cotton wool.

There were more incomplete examples of everything picked out so far, but attention was now drawn to the little box, which had caught Rowena’s attention even at first sight. It was made of gold with enamelled borders around each surface. Despite the dirt, exquisite craft work was on clear display.

‘What is it?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘You’ve never seen one like it?’

Brian took out a pair of tweezers with padded grips. He lifted the little metal box clear of the other debris with his free hand.

‘How big?’

Rowena measured it. 'Five inches by four, maybe fractionally more. Less than three deep.'

He took the lip edge in the tweezers' grip and ever so gently pulled against its weight. Nothing happened.

'Is it stuck?'

Brian picked up the box in two gloved hands. He revolved it this way and that without pressure.

'There might be an internal balance, if you know where to press.'

'Or it's stuck.'

He tried this way, and that, pressing gently on each angle.

Slowly but soundlessly the lid rose. He held the little object so they could look inside together, heads almost touching.

Once the inside must have been lined. But that had worn away leaving a single object, set directly in a cunningly shaped nest of gold. It was ivory white against the metal. And minutely scribed with knotwork. There was a curved spine and then the close set teeth. It was a tiny comb.

And within the intricate pattern there were letters. They peered leaning closer.
FINAUABBA

'The Abbot's comb. A beard comb.'

'It's perfect. But, Brian, what Abbot?'

'Finian. Abbot Finian. It's clear as day.'

'But, Brian this is Ninian's shrine, Ninian of Whithorn. There's something wrong. They must have raided it in Ireland, not here.'

'Too early to say. We'll need to finish this sort-out first. Then everything has to be photographed.'

He reverently lowered the open box onto a double layer of cotton. Then he started again on the uncategorised remains. But the little box retained pride of place in the centre of Rowena's desk.

The Martyrs Arms in Wigtown had a vague wine bar aspiration until about eight, when local drinkers began to predominate. But at least they were still serving food. They had lost track of time, as Mollie had left, and the cataloguing and careful wrapping had continued. Finally everything was ready to be packed away back into

the safe. By the time they reached Wigtown, they were ravenous and ate whatever was going without demur.

The pub was noisy but it meant they could talk freely without being overheard.

‘I’ll need to phone in first thing to let them know.’

‘What will happen next?’

‘I’d like to spend tomorrow, checking everything individually, and then photographing. Will it be ok to stay another night?’

‘Of course, stay for the weekend. I can’t bear the thought of all those things leaving for Edinburgh, even temporarily.’

‘That’ll have to be planned ahead anyway.’

They looked at their drinks. Rowena was on her third white wine, Brian on a third pint of Guinness. He was pondering now, thinking things through.

‘It’s that comb, isn’t it? Makes all the difference,’ he offered.

‘Not just exceptional, bloody extraordinary.’

‘Right. It’s like the Lewis chessmen, or the Lennox Jewel. Lifts the whole placeto a new level. But you’re not happy.’

‘It could be a complete upset, Brian, you have to see that?’

Brian stared stubbornly back into his pint, as if refusing to gaze any further.

‘What way?’

‘You must remember the fuss when that professor in Glasgow said there was no Ninian. It was a textual misread for Finian. He had no real evidence, just a theory. But now?’

‘We don’t know any of that, Rowena. We don’t know where those things came from, just where they were buried.’

‘So, some enterprising Viking raids Finian’s monastery at Moville, then sails over here to Whithorn to bury the loot close to another monastery? What sense does that make? Surely he raids the monastery here and then stashes the loot to pick up later when the expedition’s finished and he’s heading home.’

‘What evidence is there that Whithorn was raided at that period?’

‘None until yesterday. But that’s the whole point, we know almost nothing about the earliest monastery, apart from the fact there was one, and they carved stones. The

excavations all major on the medieval priories, royal shrines etc. Their remains are what survive.'

'So, people won't like having to change the Whithorn story.'

'To put it mildly.'

'Not our business surely?'

'Not yours, Brian, but I have to work here, remember.'

'Fair enough, but we're the professionals. This whole thing's only at the very early stages. There's a huge amount of work to be done before we can come to even tentative conclusions. Who knows where it'll lead, Rowena. You're jumping way ahead.'

'You're right. Of course. It's too early to get worried and anyway nothing will be made public for ages.'

'Agreed. Time for a last one? It's been a long day.'

They downed a last sociable drink, walked back to the flat and fell into their respective beds like exhausted strangers.

On Friday Rowena reverted superficially to routine. After helping to carry through the finds, she left Brian to do the photographing in the Museum store. She caught up with some admin and covered Mollie's breaks at reception. She was tired. It was hard to focus, but she was wondering what came next.

Late morning the office phone rang.

'Whithorn Timescan.'

'Is that you, Rowena? It's Moira McGlynn.' Councillor Moira McGlynn from Newton Stewart. 'Those McGovanidjeets are going round telling everyone they've found buried treasure, at Whithorn.'

'It's true, Moira, or partly true. At the bay actually. It's a Hoard of metalwork. We're not sure yet of the significance but it is genuine. I've officially registered the find as Treasure Trove.'

'Treasure Trove, bloody hell. Will it make us famous?'

'I'm not sure.'

'About time poor old Whithorn had something going for it, in my view. It's all Wigtown books bloody books. Your place is deserted.'

‘We could certainly use some more visitors.’

‘So when do we go public? I’ll want to be involved you know.’

‘Yes. But it’ll take a while. Everything has to go to Edinburgh for assessment.’

‘We’ll hae to watch that – they’ll want to keep it all there.’

‘We’ve got a claim astathe local museum. Also the find was brought here first.’

‘Under lock and key I hope. So, what do ye ken, the keelies goat something right after all.’

‘You could say that.’

‘Weill, keep me posted.’

She had gone. Rowena slowly replaced her receiver. She needed a plan. Who to inform, and what to tell them? She picked up a pen. Then the phone rang again.

‘I want to speak with Rowena Dalglish.’

‘Speaking.’

‘Councillor Belinda Crossley here.’ As if she didn’t know.

‘How can I help you, Councillor Crossley?’

‘Well, its a little delicate, Rowena, which is why I’m phoning you direct. There’s a rumour going round of some discovery at Whithorn. Finlay our gardener told my husband. But of course the Trustees have not been informed and I don’t want to appear ignorant. But of course I’m not one to interfere with the executive arms asit were so I’ve phoned you, rather than the Council offices.’

‘That’s very helpful of you, Councillor Crossley, because nothing is official yet or public.’

Rowena then explained the location of the find, the Treasure Trove procedure, and the role and rights of a local museum.

‘So was this “metalwork” found on Council land?’

‘Possibly, I photographed and recorded the location immediately. It might be on the Bay Estate.’

‘That’ll buck the Brigadier up no end. Presumably he gets some of the cash.’

‘The landowner has a right to claim. It all depends on the value and if money can be raised.’

‘To keep it here, you mean. The Council will have to be told soon. Don’t we have an archaeologist?’

‘Archaeology was outsourced. But I’ll write officially as soon as the preliminary assessment is complete. Probably at the start of next week.’

‘Well, keep me informed, Rowena. Presumably some of these items are valuable.’

‘There are some gold and silver things. A lot of it is in broken bits.’

‘Need to stick them back together then, make a decent display for the museum. Speak soon, Bye.’

Rowena settled down to write as non-committal an e-mail as she could manage for the Chief Executive of Dumfries and Galloway Council. In the Council system each area had three local councillors. Moira McGlynn was SNP, Belinda Crossley a Conservative. Generally they were at each other’s throats, while the parliamentary elections were equally a Nationalist-Tory dogfight. How would that play when the contents of the find became public? She decided to go out for some sandwiches and coffee.

When she took this snack lunch through to Brian, he was staring intently at the back of the communion plate.

‘Look, look at this.’

Rowena put everything down and looked.

Clearly etched on the plate was a small wheel cross, unnoticeable unless you were searching for the mark.

‘It’s the smith’s mark.’ Brian’s phlegmatic tone had slipped up a few notches. ‘It was made at Whitorn.’

‘So that settles it. These things came from the monastery.’

‘Appears so. It really is the Whithorn Hoard.’

Bishop Carmichael was in the window seat of his study, catching the last gloomy light of a fading afternoon. He had been immersed in prayer, preparing himself for a 5.30pm Mass. These days even the bishop had to help cover parochial duties. In the last year they had closed fourteen churches across his scattered southwest diocese. Yet still they could not catch up with the dwindling numbers of ordained priests.

It was a consolation that religion remained such a personal comfort. Who would have thought that James Carmichael, out of all his seminary cohort, would be a faithful,

practicing bishop into his seventies? So many others, more talented and cogent than he, had fallen by the wayside. Most surprising of all however was the inner strength of his devotions. As a young priest, the bishop had been conventional and uninspiring. But now he often felt God as a real presence, and it seemed to show in the respect he received in this scattered community from believers and non-believers alike. No taint of scandal, sexual or otherwise, had touched his ministry.

Of course he had no ambition. This far-flung sleepy diocese suited Bishop Carmichael perfectly. And it had suited the powers that be to dispatch him here more than thirty years since. On that point James harboured no illusions.

Yet there was one thing in which he took especial pride. The Whithorn Trust. The Bishop had been a prime mover in its formation, and a diplomatic advocate of its inclusive ecumenical spirit. So much had been achieved, with the ongoing excavations, a new visitor centre, restoration of regular pilgrimages. And then, in its third decade, the bishop's personal contribution had been honoured by his appointment as Chair. That elevation was far from automatic, given the minority status of the Roman Catholic tradition in these parts, and the strong links with Northern Ireland. But James Carmichael had won the trust of everyone involved – the Council, Historic Environment Scotland, as one had now to call them, the Churches and the wider community.

The bishop's modest pleasure in his role was all the more satisfying because it reflected the actual importance of Whithorn. This was a fount of British, not just Scottish Christianity. It was a source of all the present day traditions, and so truly ecumenical. Moreover, unlike some of the unruly and wayward Celtic foundations, Whithorn owed its origins to the mainstream European church. St Ninian had come from Rome via Tours to found his monastery, not the wilds of Ireland. As himself an average diocesan bishop, James felt strongly about the value of humdrum, middle-of-the-road dutifulness in church life. He abhorred dramas, most of which turned out anyway to be unnecessary and counter-productive.

The bishop was surprised by his desk phone ringing. He kept his mobile switched off whenever possible. It was Rowena Dalgleish, the recently appointed Director of the Trust's Museum.

'Very sorry to bother you on a Friday afternoon, Bishop.'

'Not at all. Mass is not till 5.30pm today. Is anything wrong?'

'There's been an unexpected development, a Treasure Trove find, down at Whithorn Bay, but it was registered by us here at Timescan.'

'Well that's a good thing, is it not?'

Why was he feeling slightly anxious?

‘It is,’ affirmed Rowena, ‘definitely exciting, but some of the finds are a little unusual.’

‘Really? It’s surely early days.’

‘It is, Bishop, exactly which is why I am phoning you.’ He did not try to fill the pause. ‘There is some evidence, particularly an ivory comb, that suggests the presence, or at least the influence of St Finian at Whithorn.’

‘Finian! But all that speculation was comprehensively quashed. For lack of evidence.’

‘Yes. But now we have some. Which, as I say, is why I am phoning.’

‘On whose authority do we have this evidence, Rowena?’

‘The National Museum of Scotland has sent down an archaeologist to make a preliminary assessment.’

‘Preliminary.’

‘Yes, so I have not informed the trustees generally.’

‘Very wise.’

‘Yet it was a metal detector find by the McGovan cousins from Newtown Stewart, and they seem to be talking rather freely.’

‘Probably nonsense. And I say that as their Bishop.’

‘They don’t have any idea of the content or importance of their find, just that it is genuine and almost certainly valuable.’

‘There will need to be a proper study.’

‘Of course.’

‘And in the meantime we need to refrain from unnecessary publicity and speculation.’

‘Yes.’ Rowena was beginning to feel as if she was reporting some instance of child sex abuse.

‘So, it might be better not to circulate the Trustees generally, until we have some firmer information.’

‘That’s what I wanted your advice on.’

‘Good. But I suggest we meet early next week to review the situation. Might we have anything in writing by then from the National Museum?’

‘I expect so.’

‘Right. My secretary will phone on Monday to arrange a time.’

‘Thankyou, Bishop, you’ve put my mind at rest. I’ve never experienced anything quite like this before. In theory maybe but not in practice.’

‘Not to worry. There are correct procedures for these things, and you have followed them. As long as the items are securely stored. See you next week.’

‘Yes, of course. Goodbye for now.’

Bishop Carmichael lowered the receiver into its cradle with a preoccupied air. Less than an hour, later he raised the sacred host with a similar absence of complete attention. Coming home he consumed a casserole left warm in the oven by his daily help, and returned to the study with a large glass of Merlot.

He checked the time. Still before 7.00pm. Ian Gill might be back from London but not yet engaged with dinner. Despite his belligerent endorsement of this regrettable Brexit business, Gill, the local Conservative MP, was generally reliable. He came on the phone himself.

‘Carmichael, here.’

‘Good afternoon, Bishop, or should I say evening? How can I help you?’

‘There’s been a slightly worrying development, Ian, at Whithorn. A metal detector find.’

‘I’ve just heard all about it. Those McGovan layabouts. It’s the hot gossip.’

‘What’s not known, is that the find contains some possible evidence for St Finian being at Whithorn.’

‘Oh God – sorry, Bishop- not all that stuff again.’

‘Rowena Dalgleish phoned me this afternoon to warn me. The National Museum of Scotland has sent down someone to go through all the contents and make an assessment, probably early next week.’

‘We’ll have to keep this under wraps meantime.’

‘I’ve instructed Rowena to report directly to me, and not to circulate the trustees.’

‘They’d leak like a sieve. Where is this stuff?’

‘In the Museum safe, presumably.’

‘So it is really valuable.’

‘Almost certainly.’

‘Ok, leave this with me for now, Bishop. I appreciate your call.’

‘These discoveries could have profound ecclesiastical implications.’

‘You’ll be the best judge of that.’

‘Also some political passions might be... unfortunately stirred.’

And that’s my department. We should keep in direct contact. Avoid e-mails where possible.’

‘Avoid e-mails?’

‘These Council officials can be intrusive. And there’s always Freedom of Information. We’ll speak soon. Bye.’

‘Goodbye.’

Gill had already hung up. Avoid e-mails. Carmichael felt the unwelcome encroachment of a drama. He plodded back to the kitchen to refill his glass.

Rowena sat for a while staring at the phone. Had she just been manoeuvred into a false position? Was her professionalism being compromised by her Chairman’s determination to keep the whole matter under wraps? On the other hand maybe the Bishop was right in his old-fashioned ultra-cautious way. Wait till the information was more official. The thing was that would not change the shock factor. Rowena had felt it in Carmichael’s sudden stiffening of tone. The whole Whithorn narrative might have to be re-written. Well, she had done what she could at this juncture.

Her thoughts shifted to more immediate questions. Perhaps she should cook for Brian in the flat this evening, and they could go out for a drink later. He might be more relaxed and open up a bit. He seemed completely absorbed in his work.

She went through to the store where Brian was carefully packing everything away once more. But the exquisite little box with the comb still sat open.

‘I’ve informed the Chairman, but he wants to keep the lid on everything for now.’

‘Bloody hard to photograph properly, but I’ve tried from every angle.’

‘It is exquisite though, from every side,’ mused Rowena, ‘lowering her face to the same level as the box. Do you think it could be a reliquary, you know, the comb as a sacred relic?’

‘Quite likely. Hardly an everyday object is it?’

‘Finian the Founder. God help us, but there’s going to be a carfuffle.’

‘Not now there isn’t. I’m starving. Where can we eat?’

‘I thought we could have something at mine and then go round to The Martyrs.’

‘Sounds good, if you’re ok with cooking.’

‘Fish? Lots of it round here and easy to cook.’

‘Great. Let’s get everything back into the safe. Can’t be too careful.’

What did that mean? National Museum speak. Rowena took personal charge of Finian’s comb, placing it reverently on the top shelf of the Timescan safe. After all it belonged to Whithorn.

She was unsure if her plan had worked. The meal had been a great success, and they had drunk plenty. Almost three bottles, if truth be told, but as Brian’s volubility increased so did its archaeological range and depth. He was clearly passionate about his subject, au fait with every current dig in Britain or Ireland, and widely read in the international journals. Where did private life feature in this obsession?

The only hint of something personal was his unconcealed pleasure in getting the Early Medieval slot in Edinburgh.

‘You see, Rowena,’ he confided, ‘I couldn’t have gone back to Northern Ireland. Not to live there.’

‘Why not?’ she prompted, conjuring a disastrous relationship, some obscure family scandal, parents from hell.

‘You see, I’m Irish through and through.’ She nodded. ‘But I couldn’t live there. All those bloody politics.’

‘Right, I see.’ She didn’t really see, and he offered nothing further. But she supposed growing up in the shadow of the Troubles had been a bit limiting.

By the time they reached Martyrs, the place was packed. They squeezed into one side of a long benched table, and Brian set off doggedly to get in some drinks.

Of course privacy was impossible in this environment, and Rowena’s arrival in male company was widely noted. Setting up the stylish new Museum Director with congenial companionship, however short term, had become a kind of collective project in Scotland’s Book Town. But did this short, dark fellow qualify, and anyway, who was he?

Robbie McAndrew honed in on the temporarily abandoned Rowena.

‘So who’s the mysterious stranger?’

‘A professional colleague, Robbie, from the National Museum.’

‘Oh, how exciting. We’ll come over and join you.’

Too late, Rowena realised that she had closed down one front only to open another. Robbie was a writer, regular contributor to the Bella Caledonia website, and an ardent nationalist. It was impossible for him not embroiled in the Whithorn rumour mill.

As Brian weaved his way back with the drinks, Robbie and his partner Eric arrived, glasses in hand, to introduce themselves. Soon the cultural gossip was in full flow, with Brian a slightly bemused onlooker. But Robbie was only marking time.

‘So, Brian, is it this much bruited Whithorn treasure that brings you from Edinburgh’s hallowed portals?’

‘Just here to assist the local museum,’ mumbled Brian.

‘Everything’s at a very early stage,’ insisted Rowena, ‘and all of the metal objects will need to be carefully assessed.’

‘But it is an important find?’ murmured Eric soothingly.

‘You can say that again,’ blurped Brian.

Rowena frowned furiously at her escort but he was happily oblivious, contemplating a further round.

‘Let me get some more drinks,’ chipped in Robbie, scenting a spoor. ‘Same again all round. I’ll need to waggle my hips to get anywhere near the bar. Dear, dearie me.’

Eric smiled wryly at Rowena.

‘We mustn’t stay too late, Brian. You have to get the train tomorrow.’

‘Don’t be a spoil-sport, sport, Rowena. Time for a little Friday drinkie.’

Rowena smile wryly at Eric.

‘So what period are we talking?’ Robbie began, before the fresh drinks landed on the table.

‘Early, before the medieval priories,’ Rowena confirmed.

‘But that’s fantastic, darling. At last, something before all those Northumbrian Brits got their grasping mitts on poor old Galloway.’

‘Now, Robbie, you know we can’t jump to general conclusions from specific finds.’

Brian seemed to gaze into his latest pint with bardic intensity.

‘But, Rowena, dearest, we know that it was a Celtic culture here. Ireland’s only twenty-five bloody miles away.’

‘That doesn’t mean Whithorn was Celtic a monastery, Robbie. We’ve been through all this before,’ chided Eric gently. Rowena gratefully recalled that Robbie’s partner was some kind of counsellor.

‘I know that, dear one. But these McGovan clowns might have changed everything. Is there new evidence in this find, Rowena, of Irish influence on Whithorn?’

‘There is.’ It was too direct for evasion.

‘See, I told you. The Celtic side of the story has been wilfully excluded. For no good reason. And now finally the truth will out, Whithorn Trust, Bishops et al notwithstanding. We’re not Brits here nor ever have been.’

‘Now, just a bloody minute.’

Brian had looked up from his glass, abruptly. As if by instinct the surrounding tables went quiet. Robbie now secured his audience.

‘So at last the oracle speaks. But actually we’re not such great fans of the so-called National Museum round here. Not after they stole the Galloway Hoard.’

‘That’s rubbish.’

‘Is it? Well, this time we’ll be keeping our own Treasure Trove at Whithorn, won’t we my lovely Rowena. And we’ll be unashamed in proclaiming the Celtic identity of these ancient territories, past, present and future.’

‘Fucking politics. That’s fucking politics, nothing to do with archaeol- or history.’

Brian was on his feet. Eric and Rowena made soothing noises in chorus.

‘History is it now – but whose history might that be? The people’s or a corrupt establishment?’ Robbie was on his feet now too, gesturing towards a wider public. The Martyrs, though crammed with established drinkers, showed little evidence of any other bias.

‘Shut yer gob, or I’ll shut it for you.’

‘Now, really, that’s enough,’ attempted Eric, ‘let’s calm down a bit.’

It was too late. Brian swung a wild punch at Robbie. Intent on his wider audience impact, the orator took it full on the mouth and dropped. Rowena launched herself at Brian and pulled him back down onto the bench. But others read this as an assault directed against her, and went on the offensive. An ill-tempered scrum developed.

Fortunately the landlord was on the scene immediately, separating the combatants before serious damage was done.

‘Back to your ain tables. Onymair of this nonsense and ye’re oot. I’m sorry, Miss Rowena, but he’ll have to go.’

Robbie was propped up against the bench, white-faced. Eric was dabbing at his bloody mouth with an immaculately laundered handkerchief.

‘I’m so sorry, Mr Kerr. And Robbie, Eric, I can’t say anything to excuse –’

‘Stop apologising for me. Make him come out and we’ll settle it. I’ve seen these types before, all blow and no balls.’

‘Shut up, Brian. We’ve heard enough from you to last a long time. Now get out.’

She pushed the still recalcitrant archaeologist toward the nearest exit, while continuing to address Eric. ‘This isn’t him, not really. There’s been a lot of pressure this week, and he’s drunk.’

‘Robbie didn’t exactly help matters,’ conceded Eric generously.

She gave Brian a final shove out the door, and overtaking him she headed home at a swift pace, without a backward glance.

Brian woke in the morning with immediate and vivid recall of the whole terrible scene. In fact he had endured a restless, dream-filled night, desperately curbing the need to urinate every second hour, for fear of disturbing Rowena.

But when he came sheepishly through to the kitchen she was already preparing breakfast.

‘Well, I hope you’re satisfied with your night’s work. Wrecking every good relationship I’ve built up in my first year here.’

‘Listen, Rowena, I’m really sorry. I don’t know what came over me.’

‘Boorish, boys own stuff, Brian. It was pathetic.’

‘I must have been too tired to drink. Not used to the wine. And I can’t stand that political rubbish at the best of times.’

‘You’ll need to apologise to Robbie, and Eric, by e-mail.’

‘Right.’

‘There’s some scrambled eggs in that dish. I thought we’d skip the Ulster fry.’

And there conversation ended. Through breakfast, and the drive to Dumfries Station, Rowena remained tight-lipped.

Overnight an enormous wet blanket had rolled off the sea, shutting down the views and turning everything uniformly grey. As Brian watched the fields go by, he had more than enough time to curse his folly.

When had he ever had such beautiful and intelligent company, all to himself, in such an emotion stirring situation? It was hard to believe. With her slim long-legged elegance, her fair colouring shot through with a distinctive reddish tinge, and her perfectly formed features, Rowena was class. And very nice with it, not to mention her excellent knowledge of the subject, and her all-round efficiency. What a total fucking idiot.

What if she complained to the Museum? Put in a formal report of his unprofessional conduct. He could be sacked. Maybe he should just resign. From his dream job. As soon as he got back.

They had reached the railway station. Brian got out without a word, but Rowena came round from the driver's door.

'Thanks for the lift.'

'You'll send me a copy of the assessment as soon as it's ready.'

'Yes, but if you want to complain I'll not be...'

'I don't think we should let any personal stuff get in the way of the Treasure Trove process.'

'I suppose not.'

She held out her hand, and Brian shook it. Then she was into the car, and off.

Back in Whithorn the rain had eased off, but Timescan was deserted. Rowena phoned Wullie McGovan to tell him that the assessment was complete and that a report would be coming early next week. 'It's definitely authentic though,' she stated crisply, 'and may contain some items of outstanding artistic as well as historic importance.' She owed them that much honesty.

In the late afternoon, as they closed up, she declined a call on her mobile from Moira McGlynn. She went straight home and tidied the flat, changing both beds, and running the dishwasher. If tomorrow brought better weather, she would do the whole walk from the Priory to Whithorn Bay, then Isle of Whithorn and back.

For now, the evening stretched ahead. She took a readymade lasagne out of the freezer, and infused a pot of tea. Standing beside the microwave, she allowed a few stress-relieving tears to flow. Then she put on her 'Sense and Sensibility' DVD, and fell asleep on the sofa.

It was just past 11.00am when Mollie came fluttering into the office.

'The police are here.'

‘Which police.’

‘It’s Bill Forsyth from Wigtown, and that stuck-up woman constable from Rotherham. Dear knows what she thinks she has to feel superior about.’

‘Morning, Rowena.’

‘Morning, Sergeant Forsyth.’

‘It’s about this Treasure Trove business. I’m to take all the items into protective custody.’

‘In Wigtown, Bill?’ quizzed Mollie sceptically.

‘In the first instance, yes.’

‘Under whose instructions? The Chairman’s?’ asked Rowena.

‘No, I haven’t heard from the Bishop. The instructions are from Edinburgh.’

‘It’s an Edinburgh heist!’ shrilled Mollie.

‘No need to get hysterical,’ opined WPC Faraday.

‘Of course not,’ agreed Rowena, ‘but I will need a signed receipt, for the whole itemised list.’

‘Do you have one?’ queried Bill.

‘As prepared earlier by the National Museum of Scotland,’ confirmed Rowena, flourishing Brian’s initial catalogue.

‘Very good,’ conceded the Sergeant amiably. ‘Now if you set things out, Rowena, Constable Faraday will tick them off, and I’ll load them up.’

‘What about me?’ intruded Mollie.

‘You stay at reception and keep an eye on the van,’ instructed Forsyth.

‘Everything’s wrapped up for safekeeping,’ warned Rowena.

‘Never mind that now, Miss Rowena, you’re the expert and we’ll take your word on what’s in each package. These things had better stay wrapped if they’re as costly as Wullie McGovan claims.’

So they set about the transfer, and within half an hour a receipt was signed and the police van drove off down Whithorn’s broad main street in the direction of Wigtown.

‘That’s the last we’ll see of that lot,’ harrumphed Mollie. ‘Protective custody, my behind.’

Registering mild disapproval, Rowena retreated into the office.

Beneath her calm demeanour, Rowena's mind was churning. If the Bishop had not initiated this - Bill Forsyth was a straight bat - and even if he had decided to intervene, he would definitely have spoken to her in advance - then it had to the Treasure Trove Unit. Brian had set this in motion, as soon as he got back. Without speaking to her. After that whole weekend. Was this some petty revenge for disgracing himself? And she had almost forgiven him. How could it have happened so quickly?

The phone went and she picked it up.

'It's Brian. I'm on my mobile.'

He seemed to be attempting to speak quietly.

'Yes?'

'There's something funny going on. The police came here first thing, asking for my report.'

'They've been here to take the finds into "protective custody".'

'That figures- the bloke here said there were "security concerns" about the items.'

'But whose concerns, and how did they know?'

'No idea. Rowena, it's nothing to do with me. You've got to understand that. Anyway, I'm coming down again. Security van and the whole works on Wednesday. I'm to identify the items for formal receipt by the Museum.'

'But that doesn't change the Treasure Trove rules. Timescan registered this.'

'Right. Will you meet me?'

'If you can.'

'Great, I'll phone you on this mobile. Keep the number. Got to get back in there. If anything else happens, I'll be in touch.'

'Thanks, Brian. Take care.'

He had rung off.

The first call had come in on Friday. Belinda Crossley pontificating about some unexpected archaeological find at Whithorn. Was she, Carol, now in charge of Council archaeology? And also might there be a cultural dimension? Carol promised to research the archaeology thing, though heaven knows what it had to do with her.

She also undertook to investigate the cultural angle. That was what one had to do with Councillors – placate and then flannel.

On Monday morning, it was Moira McGlynn's turn. She knew the local worthies who had made the discovery. Moreover the expert view was that the Hoard – she used that term specifically – was of outstanding artistic quality. Furthermore, on Saturday night in Wigtown, Robbe McAndrew and the archaeologist from the National Museum had come to blows over the identity of the objects, and whether they should remain in Whithorn. This was going to be big, and the Culture Committee needed to get its oar in quickly. This last bit was a dig at Belinda, who to Moira's disgruntlement had been made Culture Chair over her SNP head.

Carol agreed though with Moira's main thrust. This was more like the thing. As Creative Place Officer, part-time, for Dumfries and Galloway, this was exactly the kind of excitement the area required. In her first year in the role, very little had happened. Having moved three years ago from London to Kirkcudbright, after her husband's lucrative early retirement, she knew there were plenty of artistic people scattered across the region. The only thing was they were getting on with it in their own ways. The rest of the population remained stubbornly indifferent to their own creative potential.

But something big like this would boost tourism and have multiple spin-offs for the creative industries – a term she had never fully understood though it went down well at Council meetings. Stage One was to alert HQ in Edinburgh, as her principal role, she soon realised, was to try and extract more grant-aid from Creative Scotland's coffers, the allocation of which remained mysterious even to that quango's own staff.

Fortunately the Creative Places Portfolio Manager, Lindie Main, was at her desk.

'I can't stress how potentially immense this is,' stressed Carol, 'for the visual arts and crafts, and of course musicians and storytellers. We need to get in on the ground floor.'

'It sounds, fab, Carol, but what do you want me to do at this stage?'

'Well the Senior Management Team has to be informed, and early discussions with the National Museum and the Scottish Government could position us to lead an innovative initiative for this very neglected area of the southwest. Could I speak directly to Jen, or will you do that?'

'I wish you luck, Carol, they're all incommunicado in the War Room. And have been for weeks.'

'War Room?'

'That's what they call it, working on the three year funding allocations.'

'What on earth are they doing?'

‘Testing different scenarios.’

‘Like what?’

‘Well, like what would happen if we stopped funding anyone working with children, or disabled people.’

‘Creative Scotland aren’t going to do that, are they?’

‘Of course not, it’s just a Senior Management scenario. There’s lots of others.’

‘I see,’ said Carol unconvincingly. ‘Well meantime the real world goes on, Lindie. Can’t you alert them to what could be a dramatic development in this region?’

‘Look, dear, let’s be honest. Some of them don’t even know where Galloway is, and some of those who do think it’s in Ireland. You’ll have to leave it with me.’

‘What am I supposed to do down here?’

‘Make a holding pitch, Carol, based on these early constructive discussions.’

‘You mean make it up.’

‘Isn’t that what you normally do, darling?’

‘I’ll do my best, but please try and get a message through into the....’

‘War Room. I’ll do my best but they’re only supposed to discuss the bid assessments in there.’

‘And the scenarios.’

‘Yes, and the scenarios. It’ll all be over in another ten weeks when the Scottish Government announces its budget, and normal service can resume.’

‘Ten weeks! Anything could happen by then.’

‘Keep me posted, Carol, ‘there’s a dear. Bye.’

What a stonewall, thought Carol. She resolved to head across to Whithorn, the very next day, and check the situation out firsthand. Dumfries and Galloway would show Creative Scotland what Creative Place was really about.

Rowena carefully re-read the e-mail she had sent to all Trustees after lunch. She had printed it out for yet a further review. It was strictly chronological. The find, recording its location, reporting it as Treasure Trove, and assisting the National Museum archaeologist to make the initial assessment. Then finally the action of the police in taking the Hoard into protective custody at Wigtown, from where it would be moved to Edinburgh for detailed examination.

The difficult bit was the contents. She gave an overview of the metal objects, many of them broken up, but then picked out four things for special mention. There were the gold and silver torcs. There was the communion patten with Christ on the cross and the makers's mark, showing that the objects, or at least some of them, came from Whithorn. Then there was the reliquary containing an ivory comb on which the name Abbot Finian was clearly inscribed. Then there was the pectoral cross, golden and richly adorned with semi-precious stones. All items would be subject to further analysis.

Signing off, she expressed the hope that, when the procedures were complete, the Treasure Trove would be assigned to Whithorn Timescan. Her own part in the initial process was complete. Apart from Brian's antics at the Martyrs she had handled things ok.

Rowena had not phoned the Chairman before sending out the e-mail. But the Bishop's Secretary had phoned her immediately, asking if she could come to meet with the Chairman at 4.00pm, to which she had agreed.

On arrival she was ushered into the capacious study where tea things were already set out.

'I'm glad you could come, Rowena. Will you have tea or something stronger?'

'Better stick to the tea.'

'Very good.' Carmichael busied himself with strainers, milk and tea spoons. 'I might indulge in a small sherry.'

In due course they were settled on either side of the fireplace.

'So, the Whithorn Hoard, as I suppose we must call it.'

'I'm sorry, Bishop, that I had to send round that e-mail, before we had been able to meet. But after the police got involved I felt I had to advise the Trustees.'

'You were quite right, my dear. You have acted very properly throughout this unexpected business, and you can be sure I will commend your conduct in these circumstances to the Board.'

'Thank you, Bishop, it has been a testing few days.'

'Indeed it has, Rowena, but my fear is that things might become more testing. How are we to explain this find when matters become more public, as they surely will?'

'I've been very careful to emphasise that it will take time, and a lot of detailed work before the significance of these items becomes clearer.'

'Quite right, yet people will jump to conclusions as they do. I understand that some of our local cultural enthusiasts have already taken up positions.'

Rowena felt herself blushing, but held eye contact.

‘I’ve been thinking about that, since we had our first conversation. I went for a long walk yesterday to turn things over in my mind. Whithorn, to St Ninian’s Cave in the bay, Isle of Whithorn and then back.’

‘Well done! Magnificent, isn’t it. A latter day pilgrimage.’

‘There were British Christians here first, that’s beyond doubt. Christianity spread through the Roman Empire to southern Scotland. The burial and grave marker evidence is definite and nothing in this find changes that. But there was a period, after Rome, when Whithorn was more connected, strongly connected, with the Irish church. We had very little material evidence of that before, but now we do. But then the Northumbrian Kingdom gradually reaches into Cumbria and Galloway, and we have the Anglo-Saxon influence. Then finally that all comes together as medieval Whithorn.’

‘Yes, I can see that narrative, accept it even. But if Finian is the early medieval founder, where does that leave Saint Ninian?’

‘Different stages of an evolving tradition?’

‘Not good enough. The charge will be that Finian was deliberately suppressed and changed to Ninian.’

‘But Ninian may reflect the earlier stage of British influence.’

‘Well of course he does, but early evidence for a specific Saint called Ninian is, as you well know, scant.’

Rowena had to admire the Bishop’s grasp of the historical issues.

‘But, Bishop, surely each stage of the tradition carries truth its own right?’

‘Indeed it does, Rowena, indeed it does. And the current Tradition is important to faithful Catholics across these islands, not to mention our brethren in other churches.’

‘These new finds make Whithorn more ecumenical than ever. Is it not the political implications that will be controversial?’

‘On that subject, I had no involvement with the intervention of the police. I want you to know that.’

‘Bill Forsyth was clear about all that, Bishop. Instructions from Edinburgh.’

‘Despite your first suspicions?’

For the second time in this dialogue, Rowena felt herself redden, and this time she looked away.

‘Perfectly understandable,’ Carmichael soothed, ‘but it is our political representatives you need to consider in this regard.’

‘The Councillors?’

‘They no longer have much clout with a national police force.’

‘Ian Gill.’

‘Well, this has been a most interesting conversation. I think we are agreed that we will not jump to any precipitate conclusions until the National Museum study is complete. And in the meantime we will think very carefully about the ramifications with full Board involvement, and of course discussion including other involved parties.’

‘Yes, Bishop. If we these items are assigned to us though by Treasure Trove, there will be funding issues.’

‘Like the poor, Rowena, these are always with us. I hope the good people of Wigtown are looking after you properly.’

‘I’m very happy here, Bishop, quite the local. Thanks for giving me tea.’

The harbour was glowing with late autumn sunshine. Apart from a couple of small lobster boats, the working vessels were all out, leaving a small cluster of pleasure boats to bask in the picturesque light.

On one yacht two crewmen had just finished a morning coffee on deck. They clambered up onto the quay and strolled along the whitewashed waterfront towards the Chapel above the little headland. Whether the pilgrim landing place at Isle of Whithorn had been the ultimate origin of the harbour was uncertain, but it still existed beyond the historic port.

The two men were an unlikely looking combination, as one was short and the other tall. However both wore weather beaten blue jackets, seaman’s boots, and close fitting black wool bonnets. Two keen yachtsmen, retired old hands enjoying the day, and their peaceful anchorage.

Casting an indifferent eye over the chapel ruin, with its jumbled cairn of modern pilgrim momentos, they passed on, down toward the rocky landing stage on the other side. The place was deserted apart from one slight figure in a shabby duffel coat who was on the small beach looking out to sea. The views were exceptional today with the panorama of Luce Bay, Ireland and the Isle of Man all appearing clear and close.

‘They say pilgrims from Ireland came ashore here,’ commented the man on the beach. His accent was indefinably Scottish but overlaid with a neutral flattened English.

‘Not from our part, they didn’t,’ responded the shorter of the two recent arrivals, ‘that’s not our tradition in Larne.’

‘So you’ll be SamAndy?’

‘We are,’ said the taller yachtsman.

‘I’m Sam and he’s Andy,’ said the other.

‘What kind of boat have you brought?’

‘The yacht, twenty footer.’

‘She’s a nimble wee girl and much quicker on an even sea than the shell fisher.’

‘Where do you keep her berthed?’

‘At the Carrick Marina, but we’ve got a drop off at the mouth of Larne Harbour, on Island Magee.’

‘Good.’

‘That’s where we keep the fishing boat. It’s very quiet, and you can watch the ferries go in and out.’

‘Right, so here’s the job. The police station at Wigtown is almost on the main street with its back to the loch. There are two cells there, old fashioned lock-ups, always empty. Right now, in the left hand one as you look, they’ve got some rare archaeological finds, small metal goods, stashed in there. Our contacts want them removed for safekeeping.’

‘Funny bloody job that,’ growled Andy.

‘Ours not to reason why, big man,’ chided Sam. ‘How’s it to be done?’

Go round round tonight and cut the window bars, in place, quietly. It’s just a domestic window adapted. Tomorrow morning about ten, one of you go in the front desk to ask or report something, and the other can slip in and collect. Couple of holdalls will do it. At ten the Sergeant goes out on patrol, leaving one police woman in charge.’

‘Why can’t we do the job tonight?’

‘Too noisy – the Sergeant’s family sleep on the floor above. But anyway you have to get this stuff out of harbour without attracting attention. Security’s coming from Edinburgh to pick the goods up at lunchtime. That gives you time to come back here and sail off in broad daylight.’

‘Transport?’

‘There’s a blue hire car, sitting in the carpark at the other end of the village. Here’s the keys. Just dump them afterwards. I’ll get the car picked up.’

‘Are you still about then?’

‘I’m not involved.’

‘So what’s the deal?’

‘You’ll be paid in kind, as before.’

‘So who are you acting for?’

‘Same channels as before.’

‘I thought Scarboy was finished?’

‘He is. This is one for old time’s sake.’

‘Well, makes a difference from shipping wee white bags,’ grunted Sam. ‘What do we do with the treasure?’

‘Put it somewhere safe till you get more instructions. And don’t try anything stupid – that stuff’s unshiftable.’

‘Fucking weird,’ growled Andy.

‘Don’t mind my friend here. We’re doing it. Anything else?’

‘No, that’s it. Stick around here till I get past the Chapel.’

He wandered off like a casual visitor. Samandy stood for a while at the bay, and then strolled back to their boat.’

‘Time to get in a few drinks today then,’ said Andy, ‘acknowledging the generously proportioned Steam Packet Inn.’

‘Aye, we’re on a wee jaunt, right enough’ agreed Sam. ‘Sounds like a dawdle.’

On Whithorn main street, Bishop Carmichael parked carefully above Timescan, having driven in from the direction of the coast. Going through the pend towards the Priory, he headed not for the historic ruins but the Church of Scotland manse beyond. Doug Heggarty, the Presbyterian Minister came to the door to greet him.

‘This is a rare pleasure, Bishop’ Doug said hospitably, though this was simple truth. Before the advent of the Whithorn Trust, no Roman Catholic priest had ever crossed the Rev Heggarty’s threshold.

‘You’ll have read Rowena’s e-mail, Douglas. I felt we should have a chat about this Finian business. It could prove troublesome.’

‘The coffee is on, Bishop, come away in.’

Carmichael stepped inside gratefully. Whatever their differences, he knew that on this issue at least he could count on Presbyterian support.

As the clergy got down to business behind the main street, Carol Derwent came out of Timescan. Her visit had been highly satisfactory. Not only had Rowena shared her confidential e-mail to Trustees, but she had enthusiastically endorsed the idea of a creative initiative linked to a new exhibition of the finds. Furthermore they both agreed that the potential lay in strengthening the attractions of the Machars beyond Wigtown, through linkage between Whithorn, the Isle, the Bay, and perhaps right round towards St Finian’s Chapel on the west side. There could be walking and cycle routes, sculptures, associated business opportunities.

It was such a glorious autumn day that Carol decided to go on to Isle of Whithorn and have lunch at the Steam Packet. As she drove between the hedges the fieldscape opened up on all sides, sloping gently, and reaching towards the sea. It really was beautiful, and distinctive, though clearly work was required to create safe paths. Apparently, Rowena already had a working group on this project which she had agreed to join.

Carol parked at the top end of the village beside a single blue car, so she could walk along the harbour and enjoy the sun. At least there was one other visitor. But she arrived at the Steam Packet behind two yachtsmen, and hailing them asked where they had come from.

‘Just over from Northern Ireland,’ said the shorter of the two, ‘wee jaunt you know.’

‘That’s wonderful,’ enthused Carol, ‘it’s so lovely here isn’t it? Do you think if there was more to do, you might come more often?’

The tall one seemed to be a bit shy; he was staring at the ground.

‘Sure we would, Missis,’ said the other, ‘Any job we can turn our hands too, you know what I mean.’

With which they ended the conversation and headed determinedly for the bar. Carol settled happily into a window table and picked up the seafood menu to see what might be newly landed.

The Minister waved Ian Gill over to a dining recess. Greig McNaughtie MP, Secretary of State for Scotland was ensconced in his own private domain.

‘Glad you could make it, Ian. I took the liberty of ordering some cocktails.’

‘It’s not an official meeting then?’

‘God no. Can you see any civil servants? Just an informal chat between members for neighbouring constituencies.’

‘I will then thanks,’ said Gill, reaching for a first drink, and wondering what had occasioned this previously unknown outbreak of neighbourly bonhomie.

‘And I thought we might compare notes on this Whithorn business.’

Ah, so that was it. Whithorn was in Gill’s constituency but Greig was extending his tentacles like a Solway squid.

‘Did the Bishop contact you?’ queried Gill.

‘Not a word, though he’s a sound man for a papist, is Carmichael. But I gather that you contacted Police Scotland.’

‘I was concerned by what the Bishop told me about these new archaeological finds.’

‘Understandably, but it might have been helpful to alert me first.’

‘It’s my constituency, Greig, and policing is a devolved power, last time I looked anyway.’

‘But this has much wider implications, my dear fellow. Brexit is straining the very fabric of the Union, and the last thing we need is some nationalist surge in Dumfries and Galloway. We’re about the only part of Scotland that still has a functioning Conservative Party.’

‘I’m well aware of that.’

The waiter came over and they ordered.

‘So what can we do to head this off at the pass, I asked myself.’ This was typical of the man’s feeble rhetoric. Nor did it require any response. ‘Perhaps exceptional times demand an unusual response.’ Ditto. ‘Before my present job, of course, I was Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office.’

‘That must have been hellish,’ commiserated Gill, while registering that his colleague’s undistinguished period in Ireland had left him as the only Scottish Tory with any ministerial experience.

‘I did make some useful contacts over the water though. We had to deal with all sorts.’

‘Collusion with paramilitaries, not to beat about the bush.’

‘Now that is loaded language, Ian, for such an intelligent individual. We had to deal with the realities. As anyone with a constituency so close to Northern Ireland could grasp.’

‘And Whithorn?’ quizzed Gill, declining the bait.

‘Well, let’s say that a little direct action might not go amiss. Unofficially speaking.’

‘You can’t be serious, Minister.’

‘Indeed I am.’ McNaughtie dropped the geniality. ‘I’m not going to watch a fucking car crash on my watch. Those inconvenient bits of history are going walkies till Brexit is sorted and Global Britain’s firmly on track. I know we don’t agree on every detail – single market and all that - but I can count on your support.’

‘Unreservedly,’ chimed Gill, ‘fully aware this was an unminuted meeting. If things went belly-up, he could justifiably deny all knowledge, and position himself to replace McNaughtie in the British Cabinet. True Scottish Secretary was a sinecure, but it could be the pathway to greater things, in the right hands. ‘Mind you, I don’t need to know the details.’

‘Not to worry. Watch this space, Ian. Of course, I’m not involved in implementation, just the objective.’

‘Bring on the hand towels.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Oh. Never mind. Let’s have some wine, shall we.’

‘Right-o. Your choice, Ian. Everyone says you have such good taste. We’re on Ministerial expenses – it’s not crappie wee Holyrood.’

Good wine and palatable food were only partial compensation for two further hours of Secretary McNaughtie’s company. What on earth had the lightweight Greig set in train? On that he had been uncharacteristically reticent. Ian Gill got home to his London flat none the wiser. But he was primed to await events, and ready to exploit the outcome, whichever way this rather suspect cookie crumbled.

It was a long slow drive down to Wigtown, even though they had left central Edinburgh by 8.00am. The plan was to check in at the police station and then have some lunch before loading up. Brian texted Rowena in the hope she would be able to come up and meet him at lunchtime. Not at Martyrs.

Brian had plenty of time to turn things over in his mind. The security guy kept the radio on and lacked chat. Rowena came more and more to occupy his thoughts and he hoped he could make a fresh start with this brief visit. Also he knew now that he was

to lead work on the finds down in the Museum labs at Granton. So no-one had reported his lapse. There would be lots of opportunities to keep in touch with Whithorn.

Of course Rowena was right about the comb with its exquisite reliquary. This was the find of a lifetime, an iconic treasure that could permanently change people's understanding of Whithorn. It was just his mind didn't work so fast or in that direction. He had to come at things slowly, with a sort of stubborn short sightedness, focussing on the pieces of the jigsaw, not the overall picture. He could see and almost feel the patterning on the lid, the opening spring, and the finger-tip delicacy of the ivory incisions. That didn't mean he lacked passion or imagination. He had those in spades, but had to harbour them, protecting himself from the scepticism and indifference of others. Or their soul destroying dogmatism. Rowena hadn't been brought up in Ulster, with its blind corrosive bitterness.

Eventually they drew up outside the Wigtown police station, which was more like a house with a police sign. 'Just a minute, mate,' cautioned the guard, 'I'll need to do a quick check before you get out.' Everything looked like a normal country town day as far as Brian could see. Cars, couple of vans, a scattering of people. 'Ok, that's us.'

Brian followed his now helmeted companion up the path and into reception. Constable Faraday was waiting for them. She nodded to Brian and called through to the office, 'That's the Museum people, Bill'.

Sergeant Forsyth came through, his normal placid self. 'You go through and open up, Olive, and I'll sign the papers.'

He had just got his spectacles on, pen in hand, when there was a shout from the back. And PC Farady reappeared. 'It's gone, the stuff's gone!'

'What do you mean gone?' demanded her Sergeant as the pen fell from his hand.

'Someone's broken in, Bill, at the back.'

Forsyth rushed out of reception and then reappeared only to rush back out at the front. Brian followed him.

'You, what are you doing there?'

This was directed at two scruffily clad blokes standing beside an equally downbeat white van.

'We heard our treasure was being taken the day, so we came to see it gang.'

Brian realised they must be the famous McGovans.

'Did you see anyone come in?'

'There were two yachtsmen a while back. One of them's still inside.'

Back in ran Forsyth to quiz Olive. A yachtsman had been in asking about fishing permits – big, slow spoken, Irish. Forsyth boomeranged back out. ‘It was them. Out the back window. What was their transport, Wullie?’

‘Blue Toyota. The big guy drove off round the backs.’

‘Isle of Whithorn, has to be. Stuff’s been nicked, Wullie, by the Irish. Can you head down to the harbour and see if the car’s there? I’ll phone for the coastguard. Takes forever to go through Belfast, then Kirkcudbright. Put the word round to any crew. And take this guy Brian with you – he can identify the goods.’

‘The battling archaeologist, eh?’ smirked Wullie.

‘Get on with you! I’ll follow as soon as I can.’

A moment later Brian was wedged in the front seat between the McGovan brothers. They revved out of Wigtown and hit the Whithorn road at alarming speed.

‘At least we’ll no get a ticket,’ cracked Mike.

‘This is no bloody funny, Micky Mouse. Those bastards are away wi oor reward. Here’s the mobile - text anyone who’s in the crew.’

Brian got his own mobile out to let Rowena know he was heading for Isle of Whithorn.

‘Whit a lassie thon is, mind read Mike, ‘Class. You’ll hae tae get innate that, laddie, if ye’re no already.’

He tried to ignore this as they pelted on through Whithorn for the coast. Coing into the port they saw the blue Toyota alone in the carpark. Wullie swerved in and they piled out. ‘Keys in the car!’ yelled Mike, but backseat and boot were empty. ‘It’s been dumped. Come on.’

As they hurtled along the waterfront they could see the first crewmen to arrive, pushing out the coastguard boat. The van came to an abrupt halt.

‘Did you see a yacht gae oot? Two Irish guys.’

‘An hour ago, maybe less.’

‘Can we catch them?’

‘You’re catching no-one, Wullie McGovan. But if I get instructions then we’ll overhaul that yacht.’

As if on cue, George Baxter’s phone chirruped, and he held it to his ear.

‘Right, boys, we’re for the off, but we’re to take him,’ said George pointing at Brian. ‘Give him a life jacket. Are you used to small boats?’

Brian's head moved from side to side but no words came out.

'Well if you have to spew do it into the wind, and don't lean over the side.'

'Whit they caa a risk assessment,' confided Mike.

The last crew had arrived so they sent the boat down the slipway and jumped in. George handed in Brian last before casting off.

'Good luck, boys, they've got oor fuckin treisur.'

As the engine took they speeded through the harbour mouth. Brian looked back just in time to see Rowena's car draw up beside the McGovans' van. The discovery team was now on hand for the recovery. Isle of Whithorn Chapel was behind them on the left. They breasted into open waters and he felt his stomach lurch.

Later Brian would try to recall the impact of the open sea, sun and wind. Racing shores, the bucking motion of the boat. But at the time he was clutching a side rail to keep his balance. How did the skipper know where to go? Ireland presumably. Surely this little boat couldn't cross the Irish Sea?

He seemed to have been clinging to the boat for hours, when the yacht was spotted.

'They're heading for the Mull, George, quite close in.'

'Aye, we've got them now - they'll not get round the point against that current. They're just relyin on the engine.'

The coastguard were gaining on the white yacht.

'And here comes the cavalry.' Brian looked back to where the crewman was pointing. A distant speedboat was ploughing up the waves towards them.

'Christ, he's commandeered the Brigadier's speedboat.'

As they approached the yacht they saw two figures clambering onto the deck. George picked up a loud hailer.

'HM Coastguard,' it magnified, 'Please pull to. Coming alongside.'

The bigger man was now at the white boat's wheel. His smaller companion could be seen scanning the coast as if looking for somewhere they could land.

'Pull to! Coming alongside.'

They were within twenty yards. The small guy disappeared below and then re-emerged carrying two hold-alls.

'No!' Brian yelled, 'that's the Hoard!'

They were within striking distance. He was on his feet, struggling to keep his balance. The big guy was trying to shove them off.

‘Sit Down!’ screamed the skipper.

As the two boats made contact, the hold-alls rose in the air and fell. Brian dived.

His eyes were stinging but he could see the dark shapes disappearing into the dark. He tried to follow.

‘Pull that silly bastard out.’

The speedboat raced alongside, as Brian was hooked like a flounder and hauled back on board. At the same moment, with surprising agility Sergeant Forsyth jumped onto the yacht.

‘Right, you two are under arrest. I’ll give you your rights when we get this vessel into harbour.’

SamAndy kept their own glowering counsel.

Two of the coastguard joined Forsyth on the yacht, while a shivering, sopping Brian was transferred onto the speedboat. They pushed him under cover, wrapped in a thermal blanket.

‘Can divers get the bags?’ he spluttered going down again.

‘No there, son,’ commiserated the local helmsman, ‘the current’s gouged oot the bed aa roun the point.’

When they nosed into harbour, the whole village seemed to be on the waterfront, as Brian was bundled onto the quay.

‘Where’s the Hoard?’ demanded Wullie.

‘Never mind that now,’ cried Rowena, rushing to catch the distressed Brian as he swayed, unable to find his land legs.

‘Whatever they were after, he dived in like a maniac, and tried to save it,’ said George. ‘Can you take him into the Packet, Miss, till he can be checked over?’

‘So the fucking treasure’s sunk noo. That’s barrie, so it bloody is.’

No-one paid much attention to the McGovans as Brian was helped inside. Most eyes had turned back to sea, where the coastguard and the apprehended yacht were visible in the distance. It was a good while since Isle of Whithorn had witnessed what many took to be a drugs’ heist.

When Sergeant Forsyth berthed, he supervised the transfer of SamAndy into the police car, which was quickly driven away by Olive Faraday and a constable called in

from Newton Stewart. He was tight-lipped throughout, allowing himself only a few muttered words to WullieMcGovan, 'Get the hell out of here, and keep your traps shut.'

When Rowena got Brian home she put him straight into the shower. He came out swathed in towels to sit by the fire with a warming cocoa, as instructed by the local GP who had attended the scene.

Word spread rapidly, and Robbie and Eric were the first to come round with spare clothes and a bottle of whisky. They all settled round the imitation gas flames like old friends.

'Everything's lost, irretrievably, sunk in deep water.'

'You did your best, Brian, you're the hero of this story,' said Robbie, who was clearly won over if not smitten.

'I'm really sorry about the other night. I was totally out of order. Bloody idjeet.'

'That's all forgotten,' soothed Eric, 'McAndrew here was somewhat on his high horse.'

'And so will this be, forgotten I mean, if the usual suspects get their way.'

'What do you mean?' asked Rowena, suddenly attentive.

'It'll all be hushed up as if none of this had ever happened.'

'But we've got records, photos,' she insisted.

'The National Museum has the records, Rowena, and they've hardly played straight so far,' admitted Brian, ruefully. 'If they hadn't insisted on the police moving everything to Wigtown, we would still have the Hoard in your safe.'

'Maybe we could produce a play, a novel, a film even, to tell the true story,' began Robbie, trying to lighten the mood. 'We'll get Carol Derwent onside and tap the regional film fund.'

'Time we left these youngsters to rest up I think,' intervened Eric. 'Let's meet for coffee tomorrow. You mustn't travel back till you're fully recovered, Brian.'

As they were leaving, two complementary Fish Supper takeaways arrived from the Martyrs, with a bottle of chilled white wine. The couple fell on the food like shipwrecked mariners, and then collapsed into one another's arms.

When Brian came to in the night, Rowena was stretched along and round him like a body warmer. He felt her heat deep inside himself.

‘Rowena.’

‘What?’ she murmured sleepily.

‘Nothing, I’m fine.’

He stroked her arm contentedly. Some things had been lost, but others found.

Jim Paterson knocked discreetly on the Cabinet Secretary’s door and went in. As Department Head it was his responsibility to give Catherine Bell a weekly briefing in her office at St. Andrew’s House.

‘So, Jim, what do you have for me today?’

‘Well, Cabinet Secretary, there is the matter of the stolen archaeological finds at Whithorn.’

‘I don’t understand what’s happened there.’

‘Nor do we, but it seems as if there may have been some questionable political intervention from south of the border.’

‘McNaughtie, I suppose, the sleekit wee shit?’

‘Possibly, or even some security services involvement. The press hasn’t really cottoned on. Too remote for their little urban souls.’

‘Could I expose the interference?’ A gleam of political calculation had come over her Nationalist eyes.

‘That might not be wise, as two of our own agencies, Police Scotland and the National Museum have been involved, and potentially compromised. I am reliably informed that the local Bishop can square the Whithorn Trustees – is keen to do so in fact. You of course are not responsible for the Treasure Trove system. Which could make things worse, if it transpired that our executive arms had bungled the job.’

‘Arms length.’

‘Yes, though in this case from the Queen.’

‘So, let it drop? What about the men who have been arrested?’

‘Very dodgy Ulster types. They might be charged with a wide range of offences. Thankfully, they didn’t reach Ireland. It might have turned into an international incident.’

‘And the metal detectors?’ Ms Bell shuffled her papers. ‘McGovan.’

‘Not wholly credible characters.’

‘The young archaeologist turned diver?’

‘They tell me he is deeply in love with his job.’

‘Which leaves Rowena Dalglish, the Curator.’

‘Indeed, an excellent young professional.’

Ms Bell noted with satisfaction the omission of ‘woman’. Jim was learning fast.

‘You will recall, Cabinet Secretary, our review of the National Maritime Museum in Ayrshire. There is a need for leadership change there, a vigorous new broom.’

‘Alright, but it’s still a shame to think of those archaeological finds on the sea bottom.’

One of the compensations of this job, thought Jim, was the Cab Sec’s genuine love of her brief.

‘Who knows, perhaps in a year or two underwater technology will advance and come to our aid?’

‘What else is there?’ prompted Ms Bell, reluctantly.

‘Need you ask? Creative Scotland, and the long anticipated three-year funding decisions.’

‘They aren’t that bad, are they?’

‘Another fiasco in the making. Those people seem unsure of which country they’re in.’

‘Can I prevent it?’

‘The length of your arm may be shrinking daily, but short of kidnapping the Board and Senior Management Team, probably not.’

‘Maybe, Jim, after Brexit we could return the Arts to Westminster?’

‘That would certainly pay McNaughtie back for Whithorn. Unleash the Irish Hoard, in reverse as it were.’

‘And call it a power grab. If only we could.’

‘Yes, Cabinet Secretary, if only you could.’