The Dig

“There, go back,” Andrew said, a lift of excitement in his voice. Beatrice lifted the trowel and lowered it an inch to the left, waiting for his confirmation.

“Yes, there!”

“Are you sure? There’s nothing,” Beatrice said, doubtfully. Then, as she scraped a clod of dark earth away, they both saw it. Battered and thick with verdigris, a curve of ancient metal, buried too deep to be modern debris.

Crouched at a dig in the corner of a farmer’s field, the dark of a chilly November night drawing in, Andrew felt a surge of triumph. Together, they inspected a ring. Imperfectly round, a wide band with faded scratches clogged with dirt, probably bronze, certainly ancient, and, to Andrew, thrillingly beautiful.

“Nice discovery,” said Beatrice, “add it to the collection.”

“Wait.” Andrew brought the ring closer. “Unbelievable! Look.” He pointed out the detail of the fine, parallel marks. “It’s a Viking Jarl band!”

“Hmm. Maybe,” Beatrice said cautiously. “If it is, I guess it would support your PhD, right?”

Andrew nodded. “More than that. It’s the first evidence they were in this area. It could open up a whole new field of research – and we’d get the credit!”

“We?” Beatrice shrugged. “I’ve already got a field of research, so let’s agree you found it. Here, bag it up. I need a warm pub and a cold beer.”

Andrew paused, knowing he should at least make the pretence of declining Beatrice’s offer, also knowing such an opportunity might never come his way again. He reached out and touched the hand of his good friend. “You sure? Thank you.”

Back in the lab, trembling with excitement, Andrew ripped open his backpack and rummaged deep for the evidence bag. No ring. Sick with fear, he turned the pack upside down and shook it. Beneath a flurry of notes, pens and sandwich debris, nothing. Frantic, he called Beatrice.

“I saw you pack it,” she said. “You definitely have it.”

He definitely didn’t. And without evidence for his claims, Andrew’s PhD dwindled into mediocrity.

Three years later, Andrew, by then a jobbing archaeologist at a mid-ranking university, attended the annual conference of his profession. There was a buzz in the atrium, rumours of a discovery that would redefine current understanding of the Viking conquest. He signed up.

Research assistants prepared the stage, then evidence for the bold new thesis was presented: a ring. As evidence went, it was compelling. It was also Andrew’s ring, cleaned up and registered as a significant historical artefact. When its finder, the soon-to-be recipient of academic glory, generous grants and a place at the head of a burgeoning field of research, appeared on stage, Andrew knew it could be only one person.

Beatrice. Kind, supportive Beatrice, who made no reference to Andrew’s part in the ring’s discovery. Brilliant, generous Beatrice, who casually and completely claimed Andrew’s hopes, and his future, as her own. Beatrice, a friend, who was also, Andrew discovered, a traitor and a thief.