

Luke fumbled the chain as he looped it away from the gate, his numb fingers clumsy while his thoughts turned to the flask of hot coffee Sonia had packed alongside two tuna salad sandwiches she'd insisted he take with him. The flask and food remained in the car, and would do so until mid-morning.

Losing track of time was one of the reasons he enjoyed metal detecting.

'Have there been any finds near here?' he said as he fastened the gate back in place and stumbled across the furrows alongside Coker.

'Not on Dennis's land, but then I don't think he's ever had anyone take a look. There were a couple of thirteenth-century brooches found a few miles away three years ago. And lots of musket balls.'

Luke groaned. 'Always the bloody musket

balls.’

‘I remember when you used to get excited about those.’

‘That was before I hit double figures. Honestly, if Charles I’s lot wasted that much ammunition during the Civil War, it’s no wonder they lost to Cromwell’s army. They obviously couldn’t shoot straight for shit.’

His friend snorted, then stopped and surveyed the landscape before them. ‘It’d be so quiet out here, if it wasn’t for those bloody birds. Dennis reckons he can’t even hear the A20 unless the wind’s blowing in this direction.’

Luke squinted against the cold chill that snapped at his coat collar, then inhaled the rich earthy air. ‘Beats being at work, too.’

‘You busy at the moment?’

He wrinkled his nose. 'In between contracts. I spent yesterday sending out quotes, and a couple of those should come through in the next week or two. You?'

'Skiving. I was meant to be rendering a house over at Sevenoaks this morning, but I sent two of the lads instead. Okay, shall we split up?'

Luke turned his attention to the rolling landscape, the noise from the tractor carrying over the hedgerow.

And still, those bloody crows. Caw, caw, caw.

'I think I'm going to head down there. Looks as if it has a slight rise, then an indentation marked on the Ordnance Survey map I took a look at before you turned up. It might yield something. What about you?'

Coker pointed to the hedgerow separating the barren field with the one where the farmer worked. ‘I’ll start there. There’s a ditch system that runs parallel to the boundary. It could be an old trackway or something, so it’s worth checking out.’

Luke bumped his fist against his friend’s outstretched hand. ‘Be lucky. Break in a couple of hours?’

‘Sounds good.’

Pulling the headphones up over his head and adjusting the pads over his ears, he switched on the machine and listened to its beeps and whirrs as it nestled into the setting he programmed. Satisfied he was ready, he began to march towards his intended search area, sweeping the metal detector in front of his feet as he walked.

It'd be sod's law if he missed a find in his hurry to reach the contoured land he had set his mind on.

The world contracted around him as he worked, the movement of the metal detector right to left and back almost trance-inducing. Any worries about work deserted him while he focused on what he was hearing.

He moved without purpose, simply staring at the tufts of long grass that were poking through the earth in a last-ditch attempt to claim it before barley seedlings took over for the summer months.

After a few minutes, he raised his gaze to his left to see Coker with his back to him, intent on his own progress. He wouldn't admit it to anyone, but a competitiveness rose in Luke's chest as he turned back to his work.