

## Chapter One: Back to Business

### Eleventh of October: Wednesday

James's phone rang and he rolled over and picked it up off the bedside dresser. It was Marcus.

"Ahoy hoy!" he answered, knowing it would drive him nuts.

"Ahoy hoy?" Marcus responded.

"Yeah, it's how Alexander Graham Bell—"

"Oh yeah, I remember now," Marcus interrupted. "It was annoying the first time I heard it."

"But less so now that you've got used to it," James offered in consolation, while quietly turning his wrist as though winding up a toy.

"No, not really," Marcus replied through clenched teeth. He knew exactly what James was doing, and he wasn't going to play the game.

"Oh well, never mind," James said brightly. Then changing the subject, he continued, "What have you been up to? Your mum said you were away on holiday for a few weeks, but it seems like ages."

He couldn't hide his curiosity. Marcus's family was being tight-lipped about where he had been, which only made James want to find out more.

"Yeah, I hadn't been sleeping very well and I needed a break to get some rest after the film shoot," Marcus explained. "My dad knows some people who own a resort, and he pulled a few strings so that I could go there for some R and R."

"Nuthouse!" James coughed to cover the word.

"It wasn't a freaking nuthouse!" Marcus exploded. "There's nothing wrong with me. I just needed a few days' rest, and my parents know some folks who own a really nice place in the sun. It was too good an opportunity to miss. Besides, we had no plans for a while, right?"

“Right, sounds great!” James agreed, completely unconvinced by Marcus’s explanation. He was pleased Marcus was getting some help for his sleep problem. There was no shame in it—everybody seemed to be in therapy these days. James just thought the dude should be upfront about it and say where he had been. After all, he was concerned about him, as a friend should be. It was obviously a sore point, so James decided to keep poking it. “Did they have those nightgowns where your arse sticks out through the back?” he asked, just about managing not to burst into laughter.

Marcus sucked in his breath. He could hear James trying not to laugh. “Listen, dork meister, it wasn’t a hospital, or a clinic, or an institution of any sort, and I was not under any kind of medical care. Are we clear about that?”

“Yes, yes. Absolutely,” James said in a calm voice, managing to keep a straight face. He decided he had wound him up enough. “So what’s happening, dude?” he asked.

“I wondered when you were going to get round to asking. I got another email from Wilfred Fothering,” Marcus explained, quickly recovering his composure now that they were talking about something else.

“Oh really, what did he have to say?” James was immediately interested; it wasn’t what he was expecting.

“There have been more big cat sightings, and he wondered if we wanted to look into it.” Marcus sounded upbeat and excited, which was also unusual, since he had never given credence to the existence of anomalous big cats roaming the countryside.

“In the Downs?” James asked.

“No, they’ve moved. Over the past few weeks there have been a slew of new sightings on Romney Marsh, also in Kent, to the south of where we were last time,” Marcus replied.

“Okay. I’ve never been there before.” James’ interest was piqued, but he was surprised by Marcus’s enthusiasm.

“Me neither, but apparently Wilfred knows a guy who lives there, and he’s willing to help us.” Given that Marcus had never been sold on the idea of cryptids, James thought he seemed a little too keen and wondered what was behind it.

“That’s good, but are you sure you want to go?” James asked with genuine concern. “You know ... After last time.”

“Yeah, that’s why I rang you. I’ve had a few weeks to get myself together and I think the best thing I can do is man-up and get back out there. Face my demons, so to speak.” James could hear the sincerity in his voice.

“Okay then, if you want to go, I’m ready!” James hadn’t wanted to push his friend into doing something he wasn’t ready for, but he seemed to be up for it. “It’ll be a great chance to try out the gear again. When do you want to go?”

“Well, the forecast is for cloudy but mainly dry weather for the next few days, right through the weekend anyway, and then there might be some rain. That’ll screw up the night-vision gear, so we should do it before that lot arrives,” Marcus suggested. “I’m thinking we go down on Friday and talk to the guy, figure out what we want to do, and then we spend the weekend out there and see how it goes. We can always stay a bit longer if it’s going well and it stays fine.”

“Okay, sounds good. Do we know where the sightings have been?” James couldn’t hide his enthusiasm any longer.

“Wilfred is playing it close to his chest, but he sent me some photos and a video that’s very compelling—if it’s not a hoax.” There was lingering doubt in his voice.

“That’s saying something, coming from you Mr Sceptical,” James teased.

“Yeah, well ...” Marcus trailed off, then after a moment, he continued, “I get the impression that there have been sightings all over the place, but his guy on the ground thinks he knows where we should go.”

“Where’s that?” James asked.

“No idea. The guy is willing to show us the place, but he won’t put anything in writing, and he wants to stay anonymous.” James could sense the irritated edge to Marcus’s voice. “If we decide to go, he’ll tell Wilfred where he wants to meet us, but he won’t give us his contact details.” Marcus found these sorts of people extremely frustrating to deal with, but it seemed that the world of paranormal investigations was full of them.

“Dude sounds as paranoid as Tim was,” James replied, having picked up on Marcus’s annoyance. He could imagine him practically pulling his hair out. It brought a happy smile to his face.

“Yeah, but it may just be that he thinks his reputation will be damaged by being associated with ‘fringe’ things. You know, some stuffed shirt on the county council or something.” Marcus was trying his best to be understanding.

"I suppose so," James agreed. "Anyway, as long as he gets us to the right spot it doesn't matter really."

"So Friday then?" Marcus suggested.

"Yeah, Friday sounds good."

"Okay, I'll see you then."

James laughed. "Right, see ya then ... Oh, and give my regards to the nurses."

"Bastard!"

Marcus put down his phone and smiled to himself. He wasn't fooling anybody. James was right. He had spent the past two weeks in therapy at a health clinic in Bath. He hadn't wanted to go, but his folks had insisted, and for the sake of familial harmony, he had agreed.

"It'll give you a chance to recharge your batteries," his mum had said. "Lots of celebrities go there, you know. Maybe you'll meet somebody famous."

His dad had been more disparaging. "Just make sure none of our friends find out. Especially members of the council. We'll tell them you're going on holiday or something."

Marcus had been left in no doubt that it wasn't considered seemly for a member of the Baines family to be suffering from, dare he say it, a mental illness.

Of course, that had just been the start of it. Soon they were banging on about how nothing had gone right for him since he had dropped out of university and thrown away his future. As for gallivanting around castles in the dead of night with a pile of foreigners, chasing ghosts! Well, they were not surprised he had ended up having some kind of mental breakdown. What did he expect would happen? What he needed was a good steady job, perhaps in advertising or real estate. And he should settle down, find himself a nice young woman. Apparently, people were starting to talk. There had been lots of serious eyebrow-raising and sideways looks at that point, and he could still see them in his mind's eye, quietly tut-tutting under their breath.

In the end, he had relented, just to get some peace and quiet.

They had booked him into a holistic health clinic for two weeks of rest and relaxation. For the most part, it wasn't too bad. There were spa pools and massage sessions that were really nice, and personal counselling which had helped him to sort out his sleep disorder and put his nightmares into perspective. But the group therapy had just about done his head in. The last thing he wanted to do was sit round in a circle with a group of New Age men all finding their inner warrior through chanting and ritual drumming. It had taken just one

session of that crap to convince him there were far worse things than hellhounds, and what he actually needed to do was get out of the place and face his fears head-on.

The email from Wilfred gave him the opportunity he was looking for. A chance to man-up and prove to himself that he actually was the guy he thought he was. He had checked himself out of the clinic the same day. His change of mood was refreshing. Now that James was on board with the whole thing, he was quite looking forward to a few days in the marsh.