

Chapter 1

ONLINE RESEARCH was a mixed bag. I found the most insane conspiracy theories, essays, and propositions, which I could then use to incite heated debate on my radio show. Not just flat earth but *cubed* earth, or strawberry-ice-cream-eating aliens living at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, or a pseudoscientific study claiming that vampire strippers make more in tips than mortal strippers because of their hypnotic powers. (Vampire strippers? Really? And could I get one on the show for an interview?) Or I could click through useless links for hours and feel like I've wasted a day.

Sometimes, I typed in my search request and found treasure.

The image currently on my screen was a photograph of a statue called the *Capitoline Wolf*. The sculpture showed a rather primitive-looking wolf with

stylized, patterned fur; a glaring, snarling expression; and a couple of human babies suckling at rows of impressively bulging nipples. Housed in a museum in Rome, the age of the wolf portion of the statue was under some debate. Historically, it had been assumed that it was old—pre-Roman, Etruscan even, because of its stocky shape and decidedly nonclassical features. Roman writers even made reference to a famous statue of a wolf that symbolized the founding of Rome. But modern dating techniques established the statue's origin in the late medieval period. The babies—fat and cherubic, in Renaissance detail—had obviously been added later, in the fifteenth century. Wherever it came from, whenever it was made, the statue depicted the legend of the founding of Rome: the she-wolf who discovered the abandoned brothers, Romulus and Remus, and saved their lives. They went on to found the great city of Rome. The statue was so iconic that copies of it could be found all over the world.

That was the official, published, accepted story of the *Capitoline Wolf*. However, I had my own ideas. Other details about the statue intrigued me. For example, the wolf wasn't life size, but it was a bit larger than a female wolf living in that part of the world would be. An average female wolf would weigh about seventy-five pounds, give or take ten pounds. A wolf

the size of this statue might weigh, oh, a hundred-ten pounds or so. The weight of a small woman.

Shape-shifters obeyed the law of conservation of mass. A two-hundred-pound man becomes a two-hundred-pound wolf. Hundred-and-thirty-pound me becomes a hundred-thirty-pound wolf. A two-hundred-pound were-bear becomes—a really small bear. I'd never actually seen a were-bear in bear form, so I didn't know what that looked like. Whether I *wanted* to see what that looked like depended on the temperament of the bear. When I read about the *Capitoline Wolf*, learned about the dimensions of the statue, made a mental comparison to the werewolves I'd met in both human and wolf form, my heart beat a little quicker. My journalistic instincts for a good story sang out. Because I wondered then if the story of Romulus and Remus had some basis in reality, and I wondered about the werewolf who'd rescued them.

This was all the fruit of a pointed line of research that steered me in the direction of the *Capitoline Wolf*. I'd heard a phrase: Regina Luporum. Queen of the wolves. According to an ancient vampire I'd met, the story of Romulus and Remus was real—the mother werewolf was real. The Capitoline Wolf, the foster mother of the founders of Rome, had been the original queen of the wolves. I'd been told this label was used to describe werewolves who defended their kind

when few others did. Who spoke out and stood up for what was right. A couple of times lately, *I'd* been called Regina Luporum. It wasn't a title I claimed for myself or thought I deserved. I was half of the alpha pair of the Denver werewolf pack, which was small, unassuming, and generally sedate as werewolf packs went, because my husband, Ben, and I worked hard to keep it that way.

On the other hand, publicly and professionally, I had a big mouth. I talked too much. That didn't make me queen of anything.

The statue might have been made in the thirteenth century, belying the tradition and ancient references that said it had stood watch in Rome from the beginning. But that didn't mean it might not be a copy of an earlier piece that had been destroyed. Maybe copies of the statue had been made over and over to ensure that some memory of the events it memorialized lived on. To provide continuity, to create a tradition that might become muddled over time, but would still exist in one form or another.

Stories faded. The existence of werewolves was not openly acknowledged, so she became a wolf rather than a wolf-woman, because then the tale was just another animal fable harkening back to Aesop, or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and that somehow seemed safer, more legendary. Time changes stories, no matter how carefully they're written down. Maybe the *Capitoline*

Wolf existed in one form or another two thousand years ago, maybe it didn't. Maybe the legend was true, or maybe it was a metaphor for something else entirely. Mostly, I looked at the alert and glaring expression of the statue, and saw the face of someone who must have been a hero.

Another thing I saw when I looked at the statue: the babies weren't hers—they'd been added later. She'd found them and claimed them. Adopted them. This gave me hope. Women werewolves couldn't bear children because embryos didn't survive the trauma of shape-shifting. I couldn't have children of my own—or maybe I could.

I printed out the image in full color. I wanted to be able to study the *Capitoline Wolf* whether my computer was on or off, by sunlight or by candlelight, not glowing in pixels on a screen. Kind of crazy, kind of romantic, but the picture in printed form seemed to have more dignity, more permanence. When the page emerged from the printer, I tacked it onto the corkboard on my office wall, right next to the full-page picture of another one of my heroes, General William T. Sherman. A couple of years ago, I followed up some *other* stories, some hunches, and determined that Sherman also had been a werewolf. Another one who stood up for what he believed. I wondered if history was in fact littered with werewolves.

I leaned back in my chair in my cramped and cozy

office at KNOB, my desk filled with mail and newspaper clippings, internal memos, and a million notes on scratch paper, a radio in the corner humming softly with the station's daytime alternative music format, and studied the pictures, my two werewolf heroes. They were smart, tough, savvy, and they'd made a difference in the world. They'd had battles to fight and had fought them, and lived on in song and story.

If they could do it, maybe I could do it, too.

MY EXCUSE for all this research: I was supposed to be writing my second book.

My first book had been a memoir—the life and times of America's first celebrity werewolf. This one wasn't going to be about me. It was going to be about history, stories, and the different ways of interpreting them, because they look different when you know that vampires and lycanthropes are real. I wasn't the first person to suggest that Norse berserkers might have been werewolves, but I was going to take the idea and run with it. I was going to talk about the *Capitoline Wolf*, and those Greek myths about people turning into something else. From the beginning, people told stories about the ways humans and animals interacted with each other—and the roles of each weren't always clearly defined. Animals talked, people went mad and ran off to the woods, and maybe it wasn't always a

metaphor. Maybe Daniel survived the lion's den because he knew how to talk to the lions.

I'd learned this once, but now I was being reminded in agonizing detail: announcing that you were writing a book was easy. Signing the contract and depositing the check were *very* easy. Actually doing it? Not as easy. Research, online or otherwise, was lots of fun and often yielded treasure, but it was also a deep, endless tunnel one could enter and never return from. I had stacks of notes that I needed to turn into text. Just wishing it would happen wasn't working.

When writing at my office at KNOB didn't work anymore, I rotated back home, to the office in the spare bedroom. I'd pinned up a photo of the *Capitoline Wolf* there as well and sometimes caught myself staring at it, my mind wandering.

Since Ben and I moved out of the condo and bought an honest-to-God house, we now had a home office, half mine and half his. Pretty swank. He was a lawyer with his own practice, mostly criminal defense, a job that involved a lot more paperwork and phone calls than the TV shows let on. I tried not to sprawl out of my half of the room, but with the piles of books and articles I'd collected for research, this was getting difficult. Not to mention outlines, abandoned outlines, rough drafts, and notes from editorial phone calls. If the amount of information I'd collected was any sign, I ought to have more than enough for a book, assuming

I could put it all together. I felt good, looking at my masses of notes. Productive. I could finish and actually make those shiny new house payments.

The room wasn't that big to begin with—ten feet or so on a side, with two desks and a couple of bookshelves shoehorned in. Ben and I could wheel our chairs back and run into each other if we aimed right. Fortunately, he spent as much time out of the office as in it, meeting with clients or appearing in court, so I could do what I wanted. Hence, the sprawl. It was so nice having the *space*.

After dark, I heard a familiar sedan engine hum from down the street, grow close, then stop. Ben's car, parking in the driveway. A moment later, the front door opened and closed, and his scent touched the air. My nose flared, taking in the smell of my mate—male, paperwork, and coffee, the wolfish fur-and-skin of lycanthropy. I smiled. The house was nice, but it didn't feel like home until Ben was here.

His footsteps approached, and I turned to greet him just as he appeared in the doorway.

"Hey," I said, grinning.

He glanced at me, but spent more time looking around at the rest of the office. "I take it you've been busy."

The sprawl had gotten particularly bad this afternoon. I was sitting on the floor, books open around me, manuscript pages marked up with color-coded sticky

notes tucked into them, pictures tacked to the wall or lying piled on the desk. If he was careful, he might be able to pick a path through the mess to his desk.

“There’s a method to all this. I actually know where everything is.” I was a little scared to start straightening up and moving things around—I might never find anything again. “I’m fact-checking, making sure all the references match up. It means I’m almost done. It’s a good thing.” I tried to sound confident, but ended up sounding defensive.

He pursed his lips, like he was trying to stop himself from saying something. He finally let out a sigh. “Then maybe it’s a good thing I’m going away for a couple of days. You’ll have a chance to work in peace.”

I shoved books and papers away so I could scramble to my feet. “What? No! Terrible things happen when you go away.”

“No,” he said. “Terrible things happen when *you* go away. I’m just a normal guy who has to take a business trip.”

I could have argued with the normal. Once I was standing in front of him, I couldn’t resist—I pressed myself to him, wrapped my arms around him, and leaned in for a kiss, which he was all too happy to give me. I didn’t even let him put his briefcase down first so he could hug me back properly. He just dropped it.

Yeah, I could have stayed like that for a good long while. “Business trip where?”

“Cheyenne. Friend of the family got in some trouble over illegally grazing his cattle on federal land. I’m going to go help clear it up.”

“That sounds . . . arcane.”

“It’ll be fun. This is the kind of thing that got me into law in the first place. The initial hearing’s in a couple of days, and depending how that goes, I may not have to go back.” Unless something went wrong, in which case he could be making this trip back and forth for months.

“Better you than me. Do you really have to stay there overnight?”

“I’d spend more time driving back and forth than I would on the case. Unless you really have a problem with it.” He said it hopefully, like he wanted me not to be able to live without him for even a day.

We were pack, and this was our territory. He was my mate, and we belonged together. That was what Wolf said, wanting to cling to him at the mere suggestion of a separation. The world always felt off-kilter when we were apart. We’d barely been apart in years. But we were also human, with careers and responsibilities. A normal human couple coped fine with the occasional business trip. We ought to be able to as well. *Or not*, Wolf grumbled.

Theoretically, I could go to Wyoming with him while he worked. But he was right—having the house to myself might help me get work done.

“Only a couple of days?” I said. “Promise?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then I suppose I should take advantage of you while I have the chance,” I said, hooking my hands over the waistband of his trousers, pulling even closer to him, pressing as much of myself to his body as I could, feeling gratified when his skin flushed and he responded, his hands crawling to my backside.

“Yes, please,” he said, bringing his lips to mine for some very enthusiastic encouragement as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

My phone rang. Generic cell phone ring tone, so no clue who it might be. Nose to nose, Ben and I regarded each other.

“It could be important,” he said.

“It could be telemarketers,” I replied.

If nothing else, the electronic ringing was annoying enough that I wanted to go shut it off before it drove me batty.

“It’ll probably just take a second,” I said.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said with a suggestive lilt to his brow that made my scalp tingle. Yup, he’s a keeper.

After digging my phone out from under the mess of papers on my desk, I checked the caller ID, which stated that the incoming number was in Washington, D.C. Which meant the call could still be important or telemarketers.

Keeping an eye on Ben's cute smirk, I clicked the button and answered. "Hello?"

"Kitty, it's Alette."

I frowned. This was important. Alette was the Mistress of Washington, D.C., quite possibly the most powerful vampire in the U.S., and she sounded somber, no brightness at all to her voice. She appeared to be a dignified woman in her thirties, but near as I could tell was several centuries old. She spoke with a commanding English accent. Now, she sounded tired.

"Alette, hi, what's wrong?" Ben's amusement fell away, his brow furrowing. Before she spoke, a thousand terrible scenarios passed through my mind. This was about Rick, wasn't it? Something had happened to Rick—

"We've lost Barcelona."

The statement made no sense. I had to parse it, then catch up with the pronouncement. Barcelona was one of the cities we counted as an ally in our underground war against Roman and the Long Game—or maybe not, anymore. "What do you mean, we've lost Barcelona? What about Antony—"

"Antony is gone."

I slumped against the desk. Again, the statement made no sense. My heart heard it, but my brain had to catch up. I'd met Antony, Master of Barcelona. He was brash, chatty, and seemed young for a vampire, however many centuries old he actually was. He was

astute without taking himself too seriously. I liked him. Ben had been very impressed with his fancy sports car. He couldn't be gone—he was a vampire. Immortal. But not indestructible.

“What happened?” I asked, the only thing I could think to say, my voice catching. Ben came to my side and held my hand, listening in while Alette explained.

“I got the call from Ned as soon as the sun set.” Ned, Master vampire of London. Something big had happened, probably this afternoon local time, while I'd been sprawled out on the floor thinking my book deadline was my biggest problem. “Antony got word that Dux Bellorum was in Split.”

Dux Bellorum, another name that Roman called himself. It didn't matter how much I thought about the vampire who was essentially my arch nemesis—and how weird was it that I had an arch nemesis?—when I finally learned something about him, an electric shiver traveled down my back, and I resisted an urge to look over my shoulder. Roman, in Split, fighting Antony, and what was he doing there—

“Split?” I asked. “Where's that?”

“Croatia,” Alette said patiently, the same time Ben whispered that maybe I should save my questions. “He had a location, he had a plan to find Roman, and he thought he and his people could end him once and for all.”

And he'd failed. Alette didn't even have to say it.

“Why? Why’d he do that? We were trying to *avoid* a direct confrontation.”

“I think he wanted to be a hero.” The weird thing was, I kind of understood that. If he thought he could stop Roman, of course he would have taken the chance. “But he left Barcelona undefended. The city is in the hands of Roman’s followers now.”

It was a battle lost, not the war, I told myself. But my stomach turned in on itself. This was a person, Antony, and his whole Family. If we’d only been able to stop Roman sooner—there had to have been a way. Ben moved his arm around my shoulder and pulled me close.

“There’s more, Kitty. Antony learned some information that he was able to pass on to Ned. I’m passing it on to you. Antony discovered that Roman was in Split to retrieve an artifact he’d hidden there many centuries ago. Something called the Manus Herculei.”

“Hand of Hercules,” Ben murmured helpfully. The lawyer was pretty good with Latin, it turned out.

“Indeed,” Alette said, and might have sounded impressed.

“And what’s that? Is it magical? What’s he want it for?”

“I can’t say. But if I wanted a weapon to use in my quest for power, I might very well want to acquire something called the Hand of Hercules.”

Oh, God, it was probably some magical atom bomb

or something. Next thing on Roman's "take over the world" to-do list: acquire weapon referencing invincible Greek demigod. My stomach couldn't feel any sicker. "That sounds really bad," I said.

"It does, rather," she said with icy calm.

"Does he have it? Did Roman find it?"

"We don't know. But we don't think he's left Split, so perhaps not."

"So what do we do?" I asked. Pleading.

"We wait, I think," she said with a sigh.

That wasn't what I wanted to hear. We had to *do* something, didn't we? "Should we go to Croatia? Send someone? Find out what's really going on there? *Stop* him?"

"Just as Antony did? Split is an ancient Roman city. Dux Bellorum's home territory for some two thousand years. He's most likely very well protected there, and you think we should send someone to confront him directly?" I let out the tiniest of growls. Antony hadn't been part of our pack, but he was *ours*. This felt like an invasion. Alette made a comforting *tsk*. "We hold our own, Kitty. We watch for an opportunity. We find out what this artifact is, and we learn how to oppose it before Dux Bellorum can use it. We hold the line. Do you agree?"

I tilted the phone away, looked at Ben. I imagined my own expression was as somber as his. He pressed his lips into a thin smile that seemed more fatalistic

than comforting, and I snuggled closer to his warmth and embrace.

“I—I’m sorry about Antony. I don’t know who else to tell.”

“I’ll pass along your sentiments to Ned. Antony should be commended for contacting Ned and passing along what he could, before the end. He must have felt the information was worth giving up his own safety.”

Yeah, that was a nice way of looking at it, drawing some kind of meaning—*any* meaning—from Antony’s death, to make ourselves feel better. Only time would tell if we could make Antony’s sacrifice worth it.