

Chapter 1

I hurried through the industrial park double-fisting takeout cups, visions of Pumpkin Spice dancing in my head. Not the flavor—I was a two-shot mocha latte woman—but the digital subject at my research lab. Early versions of my loyal simulated patient had rendered her as speckled with burns as the traditional fall latte was with cinnamon, and, morbid though it was, I chose to make light of it. Thus, Pumpkin Spice, the Virtual Colleague, was born.

Listen, if our mega-comet-sporting, black-hole-toting universe could taste like raspberries (true fact!), then my virtual 3D lab subject with disturbingly lifelike renditions of severe burns could have a cute name like Pumpkin Spice.

A checkerboard of beige and red loading bay doors dotted the corridor of long brick buildings that ran from my lab to the café. I held my breath as I passed by a herd of blue dumpsters, and a hopeful rat waddled out from between them before disappearing under a forklift.

The sodium-vapor streetlamps kicked on, infusing the cool evening with a warm reddish-yellow glow. Should everything go well in the next hour, my rapid regeneration formula for burn victims would be in clinical trials with actual people soon.

It would mark almost half a lifetime of work training my magic, attaining my PhD in chemical genetics, and further developing my research at this lab, but my promise would be fulfilled by the time I turned thirty next year. I drank deeply, savoring the very real joy of chocolate and caffeine.

A coyote's howl drowned out the grinding noises from the metal fabrication workshop a couple blocks over. Those furry bastards roamed like gangs in a turf war around here, so I picked up my pace.

The only contrast to the concrete and asphalt was a scraggly patch of half-wilted purple asters poking up from a crack in the low retaining wall. They were so bright and colorful they almost seemed fake. I smiled. One more underdog beating the odds.

I balanced the takeout cups one on top of the other in my right hand and engaged my Weaver magic. My specialty was light, specifically weaving precise targeted beams from the red light and infrared end of the spectrum. Even when I couldn't see that light with the naked eye, I sensed it. While I could also manipulate light with a higher Kelvin count, like blue light or sunlight, handling the wide spectrum was tricky. I was unwieldy at best and dangerous if I lost control.

I brushed the pads of my fingers, now glowing pale orange, over the asters.

Weaver magic manifested in a variety of ways. Some could manipulate thread so deftly that they unraveled a garment to reform a cocoon or even a solid spike to impale a person. Others wove plant material while a very rare few could weave water or fire. It all depended on power level and training. A low-level Weaver might be able to stitch a fallen hem with their magic and not much else.

The most common professional use was ward building, magically stitching a client's blood into thresholds. I had better things to do with my abilities than keep corporate towers and dictators safe.

The purple petals bloomed into fat, lush blossoms as I deftly wove light into the cellular structure of the flowers, speeding up photosynthesis. I gave them a final pat and rounded the corner, my anxiety battling it out with excitement as the sleek façade of Perrault Biotech came into view. My second home was a two-story T-shaped structure. The offices, conference rooms, and break areas formed the short part of the letter "T," while the labs occupied the longer section.

It reminded me of a superhero HQ: totally unremarkable from the outside while behind those doors we were secretly revolutionizing the world of medicine. The research lab I worked at was home to many magical and scientific breakthroughs for the advancement of healthcare, one of the top in the Toronto area. Would I be adding to those achievements tonight?

I'd soon find out.

I swung the front door open and entered the lobby to the mellow bossa nova of "Girl from Ipanema" streaming smoothly out of inset ceiling speakers.

Ella Fortose, the research facility's office manager, was busy signing files left for her by our receptionist, Kaitlin. From Ella's neat chignon to her elegant all-silk ensemble and impeccably color-coded calendar, the sixty-something brunette effortlessly held our office together.

"Celebratory coffee?" She placed the last file on top of the pile.

"Garden-variety stimulant."

"If anyone can leap this last hurdle, it's you. From day one you put your head down and didn't let any setback derail you." She pulled out her phone and swiped at the screen, her French manicure flawless. "You've nailed this. A fact I'm so confident of that I already bought the Double Stuf Oreos."

I perked up at the mention of the treats that she doled out on a merit basis. Juvenile perhaps, but popular nonetheless. "Do I get three if I pull this off?"

Ella made a raspberry sound. "Raisa, the whole pack is for you."

My grin stretched from ear to ear.

"Now, riddle me this. Ah. Here we are." She squinted at the screen, then pulled her glasses off her head. "'Shaken players carry the load.'"

Setting my boss's drink on the desk, I parsed out the cryptic crossword clue while I finished my mocha latte. Ella didn't just corner us to help solve the complex puzzles she loved so much, she'd turned it into a workplace game. Each month someone won her Helper Brain award, receiving cookies and having their picture pinned to the dented corkboard in the staff lunchroom. Competition was surprisingly fierce, with staff members going so far as to bribe her with chai lattes to let them solve more clues than other employees.

I may or may not have been among that number.

Sadly, as much as I coveted that spot, I shook my head. "Sorry. I'm coming up blank." After tossing my empty cup in the recycling bin, I grabbed the other drink, then pressed my thumb against the small biometric pad mounted on the wall behind the reception desk.

Ella shook her fist at me. "Fine. Leave me stumped."

“I’ll be back for the Oreos.” I blew her a kiss as the scanner light turned green, releasing a solid steel door with a quiet click. It connected the publicly accessible part of the “T” to the longer section where the scientists worked.

The light jazz was replaced by the hum of an air conditioner, the stylish décor switched out for bland concrete walls and exposed pipes along the ceiling. At least the original fluorescent lighting had been updated in favor of LEDs.

Bypassing the elevators to the research facilities and the small auditorium on the upper floors, I turned into the stairwell. With each step into the bowels of the building, my stomach twisted into worse knots, my footfalls echoing grimly off the walls. I swallowed against the sour taste in my mouth and took a deep breath.

Here goes everything. I unlocked the final security door to my lab.

There were no beakers or test tubes in my domain. *Lord of the Rings* figurines lined the tops of the huge monitors on my desk, while the two screens presided over my many multicolored sticky notes like twin gods. A temperature-controlled server room about the size of a walk-in closet was located off to one side. It held the computing power necessary to run the sophisticated coding that simulated my calibrations of Weaver magic and chemistry on a digital human body.

Filing cabinets and bookcases covering everything from chemistry to engineering to coding to magic gave the space a cozy private library vibe, but the framed posters of great thinkers like Descartes, Ada Lovelace, and the cartoon mouse Brain nailed that personal touch. I loved my mind grotto.

Dr. Richard Woodsman, a brilliant geneticist and the facility’s director, hunched in front of my screens, watching the latest trial. His short afro was more salt than pepper, and his lab coat was wrinkled. Knowing him, he’d probably slept in it. Woody was the Phantom to the lab’s Paris Opera House, but in the sense that he was like the world’s smartest kid in the world’s best playground. Single and childless, he didn’t have to go home unless he wanted to (or Ella told him he really needed a shower), and so he’d often camp out by the machines, helping the maintenance technicians install complicated devices, chatting with interns, or drinking coffee

while talking through a project at any time of the day or night. If he was a phantom, then he was the world's friendliest ghost and a genuine delight.

I hung my jacket on the hook over my lab coat, since I didn't work with anything dangerous, and didn't usually wear PPE, then I patted the top of the monitor featuring my digital patient spinning slowly on-screen. Her skin currently showed both the charred spots and white patches indicative of fourth-degree burns.

"Hi, Pumpkin Spice," I said. "How you doing, baby?"

"You are a disturbed individual," Woody said.

"Calling her Deadpool doesn't make you any less disturbed."

My mentor grinned and swiped his drink from my hand, revealing four pens clipped to his lab coat's uppermost pocket. I frowned. He'd only ever gotten distracted enough to have that many pens on two other occasions. Once during a proposed funding cut, and the other when he got the phone call saying he was being honored for his advancements in stem cell and genetic editing.

Unable to tell which emotion was relevant now and knowing from experience that he wouldn't share until he was good and ready, I nudged his shoulder. "Hey, Quasimodo. Sit up."

"That's Dr. Quasimodo to you." Woody took a sip and grimaced. "This isn't a mocha, double shot, double whip."

"No, it's green tea. Glad to see your four doctorates yielded such keen observational skills." As Woody had gotten comfortable in the ergonomic masterpiece, I dropped into the piece of shit chair kept for visitors. With a seat that listed sideways and one wonky wheel, I'd have turfed it ages ago, except it was the undisputed champ of midnight races in the hallway against my coworkers. "I'm not aiding and abetting your high blood pressure," I said. "Now quit bitching and keep admiring my genius."

"You're a brat." He made a note on the legal pad resting in his lap.

"That's Dr. Brat," I said sweetly. Was that a good note? A bad note? A pox on his weird shorthand that I couldn't read. Porco miseria, he wouldn't make me revise my research yet again, would he? Obviously, I'd do it—I strove for the same excellence he did—but the thought made me want to line my pockets with rocks and wade into the river. They'd find me floating near a

weeping willow, my hands clasped to my breast, and my visage beautifully pale with no pesky skin maceration. Yeah, I had planned it out, thanks.

When it came to incorporating magic in scientific research, the laws were strict. Human clinical trials were forbidden until the digital results could be flawlessly replicated, at which point they were scrutinized and approved by a special governing body. Mundane scientists didn't face that extra time-consuming hurdle.

Every day spent fine-tuning a digital trial meant practical applications had to wait—and more lives were lost due to serious burns. It didn't matter whether you were Mundane or Nefesh (possessing magic), all the money in the world couldn't buy you a treatment that didn't exist. Not even level five Healers could undo that kind of damage.

But my formula could.

I blinked away an image of haunted blue eyes staring out from weepy-looking bandages. This test run had to work and get me one step closer to clinical trials. Any other outcome was unacceptable.

On-screen, the experiment hummed along smoothly, Pumpkin Spice's exposed bone and muscle tissue healing. Although magically weaving red light into humans at a cellular level sped up regeneration, it wasn't sufficient on its own for my end goal: any and all burn-related injuries, both internal and external, healed in a matter of moments.

After much trial and error, I'd landed on an edited protein, derived from the Hsp60 gene, as the best partner with my magic. Proteins were incredible: large complex molecules that did the heavy lifting in cells. Without them, our tissues and organs wouldn't have structure, function, or the ability to regulate.

I knit the combination of magic and the heat protein into the very fabric of the affected cells to achieve accelerated wound healing throughout the body—in the digital model at least.

I glanced sideways at Woody, who remained annoyingly silent. Had his fascination left him speechless? Was he busy cataloguing my list of failures? Or worse, was he bored? I adjusted the blingy studs and gold rings of my multiple piercings in each ear, twisting my small diamond helix piercing, which my sister and I had both gotten on our thirteenth birthdays. Getting

grounded had been worth it. My weird self-soothing technique eased some of the tension from my body.

I'd dubbed my magic and science combo Red Carpet, both because I imagined it unfurling through the body like one, and because rolling out the red carpet was to give someone a special treatment, and I hoped my formula would do exactly that.

Woody tapped one of the monitors. "Do you believe the Hsp60 was the way to go?"

I curled my thumbs under my other fingers so I didn't further mutilate my already-ragged cuticles. After years of grad school where I answered to my principal investigator—aka the lab lead—I appreciated Woody training me to take the reins on my own work. At the same time, I'd be completely fine with him just giving me a gold star and telling me to move to the next phase.

"The Hsp60 is fusing nicely to the magic." I checked the vitals. "Everything appears stable and inflammation has decreased."

"And?" This guy would make a hell of a therapist. Get you to figure out your own problems, then tell you time was up and charge you a hundred and fifty bucks.

Ask me how I knew.

"And there ain't no protein like a heat shock protein," I rapped.

My mentor raised an eyebrow. "Dr. Montefiore, if you're going to bust out rhymes, at least have the courtesy to finish a full verse."

I grabbed my utility knife from my desk drawer and sliced open the plastic straps holding a bundle of new cables to replace a couple worn-out ones on the server. "We're not out of the woods yet, but I've created a clear path to success. Watch."

As if on cue, an alarm beeped out of the monitor's speakers and on-screen, cancerous tumors bloomed throughout the digital patient's body. My heart rate spiked, but I reminded myself that I'd planned for this.

Since my Red Carpet formula mutated genes, which affected cellular morphology—things like structure and size—it was great when they mutated in a way that was favorable to my desired results. Like when the cells bounced back injury free and more resilient than ever. What was less great was when the mutation went bad. More scientifically, when they exhibited an out-of-control cellular division. In layman's terms? Turbo cancer.

In seconds, Pumpkin Spice bulged with tumors. This was not the end of the game for our girl though. No way. I, Dr. Montefiore, would not give up on someone, not even a digital someone, so easily.

I leaned in and waited. *Come on, my precious.*

The bulk of my research lately had been centered around controlling this moment, finding a damping switch, a tumor-suppressing protein to integrate with my serum and beat back the cancer. I couldn't use the Hsp60, as it functioned differently, but the most recent protein had shown incredible promise. I'd investigated it from every angle before my assistant, Julian, had coded its elements into the software expression of my formula.

The tumor-suppressing protein should have kicked in by now. I gripped the utility knife, tempted to whip it like a throwing star into the computer and kill that damn alarm. Yeah, the cancer was still present. I got it without the repeated aural cue.

Woody watched without comment while I remained glued to the screen, my heart sinking and sinking until it flopped messily somewhere around the soles of my feet.

That was the catch with my Red Carpet. I had to fight the cancer back fast enough that the body could expend its precious energy healing internal burns, knitting back together damaged skin, and recuperating from the trauma. On-screen, tumors bloomed and withered, but not quickly enough. My digital patient's form grew fainter and fainter as the number of living cells decreased until she was just a dark outline, a static state.

Dead.

I laid my head upon the desk. My left hand tightened around the cables. *I'm so, so sorry, Robyn.*

Next to me, Woody grunted.

I slumped back in the shitty chair. "You were right, okay? I went down the wrong path with this particular protein—"

"That wasn't an 'I told you so,'" he said.

"Well, maybe if you used your facial muscles to help convey tone." I demonstrated with exaggerated movements. "Or better yet, used actual words. Wait. Was it a pity grunt? Because I don't want that either."

He typed a command on the keyboard and a window popped up with the results, the alarm silencing. “That damping switch worked a lot better than I expected.”

I blinked stupidly at him. I’d defended my belief in this cancer-suppressing protein in more than one rigorous exchange with Woody, and the black screen was proof of how misguided I’d been. But he never would have admitted its feasibility now if he wasn’t convinced it could work. “What led you to that conclusion?” I asked cautiously.

He tapped his pen against his lip, his gold and ruby signet ring catching the light. “You got an eighty-three percent overall regeneration rate despite the tumors. I ran the simulation twice and got identical data.”

I rolled my chair over to the small fridge in the corner under a giant whiteboard. “Is eighty-three percent enough to get your blessing in reaching out to Dr. Nakahara?”

“ABC, kid.”

Snorting at his favorite motto of “Always Be Closing,” I moved aside a six-pack of Coke kept for late-night caffeine jolts and removed the precious stoppered vial I’d stashed on the top shelf.

Despite the many, many coded iterations of Red Carpet, this vial contained the single physical manifestation of my infrared Weaver magic and the Hsp60 heat protein in existence, bound into an injectable nontoxic solution.

“I’m so close, Woody. Imagine it. No more infection, respiratory distress, or painful grafting surgeries.” I clutched the tube with the serum to my heart. “Apply this baby on-site and bam. I just need Dr. Nakahara’s help.” With her assistance, we’d add the tumor suppressant into my work and stem the issue of the cancerous growths.

“While tumor-suppressing proteins are based on hard science…” Woody rummaged around in his lab coat pockets, tossing a squash ball-sized bundle of foil on the desk. His lab coat was an emporium of wonders. Having seen everything from bottles of formaldehyde to petri dishes, and on one occasion, a half-soled sneaker he kept forgetting to have repaired come out of those pockets, nothing surprised me anymore.

Half fascinated, half impatient, and totally waiting for him to resume speaking, I carefully placed the vial back in the fridge.

He discarded a fork, two eyedroppers, and a dry cell battery before fishing out a crumpled stick of gum. He unwrapped it, tucked the paper back in a pocket, and popped the mint-scented nubbin in his mouth. “I’m not totally convinced that this particular protein will easily integrate into your regeneration cocktail, though I’ve revised its odds. You anticipated a lot of variables in coding this damping switch, but until Dr. Nakahara weighs in, I’m not taking it as empirical fact that this is the solution. If you must look in another direction, then you look in another direction. But you better remember, Dr. Montefiore, how far you’ve come. And you also better remember that you’re not letting anyone down. Okay?”

I nodded, forcing the slump out of my shoulders. “Okay.”

His phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen, then slid it back into his pocket before standing up and rolling out his shoulders. “I’m going out for my walk.”

Woody’s daily walks were the result of a series of increasingly frustrated requests from his primary care physician, who had expressed concern that Woody was becoming either a worm or a mushroom, existing inside and in the dark for as long as he did. Ella had even set up a sticker chart for him at the front desk, and he got to put a little dancing vegetable sticker on it every time he successfully exercised outside the building. If any of the lab techs or research scientists noticed a lack of new vegetables on the chart, we roasted him about it mercilessly. It was a good system.

“Enjoy, old man. Get those sticker-driven endorphins.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I’m sixty-three, not Methuselah.”

“You’re old enough to be my dad. Go on, get out there and enjoy your senior discounts.”

He held the pen like a shiv. “One day, I’m going to slice up your organs—”

“And leave them in the ravine out back for the animals to feast on. Yeah, yeah. Have you ever considered meditation for those violent tendencies?”

“Because that went so well for you.”

“I’m half Italian, what’s your excuse? Besides…” I took a deep, cleansing breath. “I am an oasis of calm and compassion.” I shooed him off. “So go take care of yourself and don’t stroke out and upset me.”

He laughed, his white teeth flashing against his Black skin, started to head out, and then backtracked. “Do an old man a favor then.” He pulled a capped syringe out of a pocket and tossed it to me. One corner of its flexible film packaging had failed to seal. “Tell Ella the thermoforming on this order is compromised.”

“Sure thing.” I shoved the syringe packet in my back skirt pocket. Better to throw out the entire order than risk contamination due to faulty wrapping.

He patted my shoulder and left.

Now that Woody had signed off on my Red Carpet serum, I could get my meeting with Dr. Nakahara. Her years of cancer research had to be the final piece in this puzzle.

People’s lives would be changed for the better.

My promise would be kept.

I yanked the utility knife out of the desk, not bothering to move my keyboard to cover up the gouge. That was a seven-holes-ago me move.

The fire exit door at the end of the hallway opened and clanged shut. The Phantom had left the building.

I reached for my cell. After many phone calls redirecting me to different offices, I tracked Dr. Nakahara down at the university hospital and convinced her to meet. I’d just hung up, ready to text my assistant, Julian, that drinks on Monday after work were on me, when Ella ran in.

Her face was flushed, and she’d snagged her nude hose, a ladder pattern snaking up one leg. “Where’s Woody?”

“Out following doctor’s orders. Why?”

“The police are here. They’ve got a search warrant.” Her hands fluttered in front of her face, almost taking out my eye with her cell phone.

“On what possible charge?” I stuttered.

“Money laundering,” Ella whispered.

I laughed, or sort of laughed. What came out was this bizarre, choked sound. “That’s ridiculous. Have they not done any research on us at all?”

Perrault Biotech had been around for almost thirty years. We were a real, legit company who provided much-needed research on complex traumas. We literally sat on the cutting edge of

medical science. And these people, what, thought that we had the spare time to twiddle our thumbs and do shady shit with money? No one—I could think of exactly zero people here—busted their ass at this place to get rich.

We busted our asses for reasons a hell of a lot better than that.

“Keep trying to get hold of Woody.” I stormed past Ella, half jogging up the stairs and through the secure steel door out into reception.

It was chaos. Ella’s light “mood-affirming” music was drowned out by the sound of cops talking and uniformed officers streaming out of the building carrying bankers boxes of files, computers, and snake trails of cables.

Hell no. This stupid misunderstanding was going to be a massive pain in the ass for Woody to unravel and would delay any further progress on our work. I came from academia, thus I was familiar with red tape and the slow speed of bureaucracies. I had to stop this before it went any further and buy my boss time to get back here.

I raced through the frosted glass door separating the reception area from the office cubicle farm and got the attention of an officer who was disconnecting the hard drive in Ella’s office. “Who’s in charge?” I demanded.

“I am.” A leanly muscled man homed in on me with a focus behind his glasses that was as sharp as his tailored suit and dark blond fade. “Inspector Gideon Stern. What seems to be the problem?”