

Sneak Peek of Lost in the Woods...

Einstein said that insanity was “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” Having my entire professional career dictated by the scientific method, with its controlled constants and carefully adjusted variables, I was no stranger to that way of thinking. I was as likely to re-run an experiment the exact same way and expect my outcome to change as I was to click my heels together three times and say “There’s no place like Perrault” to achieve my desired hypothesis.

That said, perhaps it was better to be slightly insane.

Or perhaps I already was, because here I sat, Ubering through the Toronto streets during a record snowfall to accuse my former lab colleague, Dr. Carol Shaw, of sabotage. This was the same woman who, more often than not, had at least one writing implement tucked into her frizzy hair and forgotten about, and was famous for her long-standing record of most wall crashes in our chair races down Perrault Biotech’s hallowed corridors.

The idea that she’d screwed with my scientific research by inserting wolf DNA into my rapid regeneration burn serum on behalf of a shadowy venture capital group called Golden Radial was, in the words of the great Vizzini in *The Princess Bride*, inconceivable.

Yet, despite that, the immunologist was the likeliest suspect. Carol had proximity to my lab to steal the vial with my serum, doctor it, and return it. She also had the genetic know-how to splice wolf stem cells together with my heat shock protein. She wasn’t a Weaver, but she was still a level four Hothead, a fire elemental with decades of experience studying the combination of magic and science.

So here I was, paying surge pricing to confront the world’s most baffling villain.

We were halfway across town now, and my impatience at our slow progress was choking me, but at least each rollover of the Uber’s odometer brought me one click closer to answers.

I looked out the window, clocking more familiar landmarks. Carol had hosted a BBQ for the staff last summer, and I’d fallen in love with her home in the central Toronto neighborhood known as Cabbagetown. The area had a small village feel to it, the homes mostly semi-detached Victorians or charming brick row housing. It looked like something out of a period film.

Kids sledded in Riverdale Park West, shaking off flakes as they trudged up the hill dragging bright plastic sleighs, while snow on the roofs and eaves of jewel-like townhomes sat like icing on gingerbread houses.

The driver dropped me off in front of Carol's place, and I crunched through the unshoveled walkway, my breath coming out in white puffs and my nose already going numb.

Extracting answers without arousing her suspicions would be tricky, but once I did? I touched my chai pendant for good luck. Moving forward with my life and my work depended on this meeting.

I rapped on the front door, the knock keeping time with my heart pounding against my ribs.

Carol cracked it open, keeping the security chain on, her eyes growing more owlish behind her round spectacles. "Raisa? Goodness, what brings you here in this storm?" She tucked a curl behind her ear, exposing an orange crayon snagged in her locks like a fish in a net.

I repressed a relieved grin. The conclusions that led me here had to be wrong, but maybe she could point me down a better path.

"Sorry to drop in on you. I phoned yesterday but there was no answer." I kept my voice casual and light, but with a hint of urgency underneath. My posture was relaxed, and I propped one hip out, mirroring what I could see of my colleague's stance to create rapport. I'd researched the hell out of the science of lying last night. "I know it's kind of abrupt, but I've got a job interview Monday and I've been really worried about it. I was hoping I could get your thoughts in person. Career advice."

This was a lie, a pretty massive one. There'd been few places willing to even interview me when Perrault Biotech's reputation was so tainted. And by tainted I meant that Dr. Richard Woodsman, our lab director, had blown up the place and corrupted specific backup data—including mine—which was stored off-site, on the night the cops barged in to arrest him for money laundering. After that, it was hard to list the lab on my résumé without getting a lot of pointed questions about my ethics.

"You came out in the worst storm we've had all season," Carol repeated, brow furrowed, "to ask me career advice?"

"Yes," I said with what I hoped was youthful vigor. "I wanted your insights."

Carol shooed me into her foyer, closing the door against the harsh wind. "But your burn research! You were always so passionate about that. Why would you make a career shift?"

"After everything that went down, I don't have much of a choice." I sighed heavily.

Twelve years ago, when I was seventeen, I'd promised my identical twin sister, Robyn, to "make history." I'd thrown myself into that vow, honing my magic and earning a PhD in chemical genetics, where I began my research into rapid regeneration.

I'd dubbed the serum I was working on Red Carpet, both because I imagined it unfurling through the body like a red carpet, but also because rolling out the red carpet was to give someone a special treatment. I wanted my formula to make burn victims feel like rock stars, recovering like ballers, a far cry from the slow, painful teeter back and forth between okay and very not okay. I didn't want anyone else to hurt like Robyn had, for the hospital to assure some other family that this really was the best they could do.

Nothing could bring my best friend and wombmate back. I knew that. Was this my way of imbuing her death with meaning? You didn't need a psych degree to answer that. But I'd like to think that she'd be proud that she still got to make a difference in the world, long after she left it.

Carol locked the door. "It would be a shame to abandon all that work."

Frowning, I toed off a boot. Why? Because she believed in my serum or because she had a vested interest in it after she added the stem cells?

"What else can I do?" I placed my boots on the tray, snow already melting off their soles. "All my data is gone, and no one is interested in taking on work that was started at Perrault."

"Did you have any physical samples you could analyze to re-create the data so you don't have to switch your focus?"

Sure, if I'd pinned Gideon Stern down and stolen his blood after I first injected him when the serum was live in his veins or taken numerous tissue and bone marrow samples later to obtain a clear picture of what had been done to my research.

However, Carol didn't know about Gideon. More importantly, Golden Radial had no idea he was the living embodiment of their ambitions, and I intended to keep it that way.

I stuffed my scarf and gloves in my jacket pockets. "There was one sample, but it was destroyed in the fire."

"That's such a shame." She clucked her tongue and shook her head. With her frizzy hair, she resembled a distressed baby chick.

"Tell me about it."

Carol led me into the living room. Oh, goody. She had a dog. The animal was asleep on one of the two sofas. It was large and sandy-colored, with a sad, saggy face.

I eyed it warily. I didn't like big dogs at the best of times, but especially not when I'd gained entry under false pretenses. Amazingly, there wasn't a trace of dog hair on the carpet. Carol probably had to spend half her life vacuuming up after that beast—and the other half dusting the dozens of fake tropical plants in brass stands. Wow. That was quite the commitment to plastic florals.

I took the chair farthest away from the dog and closest to the front door, ready and willing to flee into the snow in my socks if it kept me from being drooled on should the pet awaken.

After I declined Carol's offer of hot chocolate, she perched on the edge of the smaller couch. "Are you looking to go into HIV research?"

"Not exactly." I folded my hands in my lap. If she was innocent, I had to keep my questions vague enough that she wouldn't have concrete information should anyone interrogate her. That would keep Carol safe if she wasn't Golden Radial's minion, and me safe if she was. "I always felt a kinship between our areas of expertise. I tried to instantly alleviate pain and suffering from burns, and you were looking at one-shot immunology treatments to overcome HIV. Both of us are trying to establish fast pathways to massive life-changing healing."

I waited for her face to light up with the look of someone about to go into excruciating detail about their project. An expression I may have worn a time or two (or always, whenever anyone was unwise enough to ask about it), but Carol just smiled. It was pleasant, but it wasn't the unhinged obsessive grin I was used to seeing from my colleagues when invited to launch into the minutiae of their work.

"Are you interested in working with stem cells?" she said.

I suppressed a shiver. I'd worked with modified heat proteins, and Carol's research involved a lot more than stem cells, so why jump to that question? "There are exciting new possibilities in that area, but the background reading I'd have to do to even begin to explore them would be immense. It'd be a very different concentration than what I've focused on so far."

"Stem cell research is such a good fit with your Weaver magic," she enthused.

Her face radiated with the fervent gleam I'd expected earlier, and my heart sank. Carol wasn't passionate about her own work; she was passionate about enticing me to do Golden Radial's bidding. There was no two ways about this. Looks like this didn't lie.

A wave of nausea rolled over me. "Could I use your bathroom?" I said faintly.

"Of course. Down the hall, second door on the left."

I got out of there without throwing up. Once at the bathroom sink, I splashed cold water on my face and blotted it off with a towel while I stared at my reflection in the mirror.

The last time I'd seen my mentor, Woody had given me a flash drive with my data and his notes on wolf DNA. He'd experimented with it to enhance human characteristics including strength, speed, heightened senses, and, for the final shot in the werewolf-creating cocktail, enhanced muscle mass.

His research had been top secret, undertaken at the behest of a venture capital firm called Golden Radial, over years and a series of tiny asks—all for the good of humanity of course—that had ended with Woody laundering money for them and nuking the lab.

Dig into Golden Radial and they were as advertised.

Would a reputable venture capital firm provide funding for medical research? Sure. It wasn't weird for them to have invested in Perrault Biotech when patents could yield big dividends.

Would a reputable firm have directed said research into the illegal creation of supernatural beings in private trials in Switzerland where the records were tightly sealed?

Not in a million years.

That's why despite pressure from Golden Radial to further his research, Woody had, instead, tried to destroy all the data in spectacular fashion.

Sadly, the officer in charge of the money laundering investigation, Inspector Gideon Stern, had almost died in the lab fire that Woody set. I'd used the single physical manifestation of my serum to save him, but whoops! I'd turned him into the world's first wolf shifter. Though that was very hush-hush and not going on my résumé.

Who said the sciences weren't exciting?

I replaced the towel on the bar.

Despite Carol being a powerful fire elemental, I'd assessed the risks before I came over and determined I had nothing to fear. The weeks following the lab's destruction had been a wild ride to find Woody and a backup of my data so I could fulfill a deathbed promise to my twin.

However, with each passing day since I'd retrieved my research, I grew more confident that the fiction of it being destroyed in the fire held firm. I didn't feel like dangerous people were watching me anymore.

As for Carol herself, not only was she forty pounds lighter than me, but she was also the type of person who took spiders outside rather than step on them. I was even surprised she had such a big dog. She'd probably faint if it ever brought her a dead animal or anything, but knowing her, her pet had probably been a senior animal who'd lived years at the shelter. She was just that kind of person.

Apparently, she was also the kind of person to betray a colleague.

I pinched my cheeks to get some color into them and returned to the living room, prepared to obtain a detailed analysis of what she'd done to my serum and the name of who had given the order, before hailing another hilariously overpriced Uber.

Except the living room wasn't as I remembered it.

I did a double take.

There was no longer a dog on the sofa.

I blinked. Once. Twice.

The plants were on the ground, their stands overturned and the meticulously dusted pots smashed to smithereens. Blood dripped onto the coffee table and down the skirt of the sofa, plopping in cruelly cheerful drops on the ground.

Carol's lifeless eyes stared back at me, her body exactly where the dog had been. Her tan sweater was slashed to ribbons and splattered in blood like a paint-by-numbers picture with only one color. The violence of the scene was shocking.

Personal.

A distant logical slice of my brain whirred through my fog of horror. She couldn't have been killed while I was in the bathroom, could she? No. This wouldn't have happened in silence or in the couple of minutes I was in there.

I stuffed my fist in my mouth to stifle a scream. If Carol had been dead this entire time, then who had I been talking to?

Was the killer still here, hiding and watching me?

I spun around on leaden legs, my shoulders tight and high, expecting the killer's breath to tickle the back of my neck and their fingers to ghost across my back, but the room was empty.

Boots thudded up the front stairs. "Police!" The cops banged on the door demanding entrance.

Thank God. I just had to make it to the front door, and I'd be safe.

Unless they were in on it? I froze, my heart slamming against my ribs. I hadn't told anyone I was coming over.

I had to get out of here. Get somewhere safe and call for help.

The front door shuddered with the sound of a body thudding against it.

I grabbed my boots and jacket, planning to run out the back door.

Little did I know that instead of listening to Einstein, I should have been taking advice from the world's foremost traveler and survivor of many a dark path: Doctor Who.

The door crashed open, wood splinters flying, and a female cop raced inside with her gun pointed at me. "On your knees!"

Geronimo.