

Chapter One

Victoria Daniels checked her watch again. She needed to leave in the next ten minutes if she planned to make it to the restaurant on time. She reread the report a third time, satisfied that she hadn't omitted anything and hit the print button. While the report printed, she straightened her desk. As soon as it finished, she affixed her name at the bottom and headed for the lab director's office. He sat seated behind his desk flipping through a stack of papers and grumbling. Victoria knocked on the open door.

"Hey, John. Maureen threatening to throw you out again?" she teased. John's wife of thirty plus years joked on several occasions that she would trade him in for a newer model if he didn't stop being so grouchy.

John Marks glanced up from the stack of papers. "No, she did not. I'm thinking more about selling the lab. The costs of keeping up with the certification are getting to be a bit much."

Victoria chuckled. "You've been saying that for the past six months." He'd owned Fizotech Environmental Lab for over ten years and she wondered this time if he was serious. He'd mentioned it several times as of late and it bothered her because she needed to keep this job until she could find another one in her field.

"Did you need something?"

"Yes." She handed him the report. "Can you sign this report so I can fax it over to the tech company before I leave? I promised I'd have these air sample results to them by end of the day."

"Leave? It's only three thirty." He took the papers and read through the report.

"Remember, I told you I needed to leave early today?"

His brows knit in confusion briefly, then he said, "Today is Wednesday already? Oh, yeah." John signed his name and handed the sheets back to her. "See you in the morning."

"You too, boss," she said with a smile.

On the way out to the front, Victoria stopped to get her purse.

The front office receptionist turned when Victoria entered. "You get your report done?"

"Yes. Can you fax it for me? I already filled out the cover sheet."

"Of course. Have fun."

"I will. I haven't seen my cousin in almost two months, so it'll be good to catch up."

Victoria took a quick peek over her shoulder to make sure her boss wasn't in earshot, then leaned down and whispered, "By the way, John is in a grumpy mood and he's talking about selling the lab again."

Gail Cooper rolled her eyes and waved a dismissive hand. "Honey, he's been saying that for years. I've been here since the lab opened and that man isn't selling anything. He needs to keep this place so he can continue to buy all those expensive shoes Maureen likes." They shared a smile.

"On that note, I'm out of here. See you in the morning, Gail." She pushed through the front door and a wall of heat hit her. It was only the middle of June, but the Sacramento temperatures had hit ninety degrees already. She turned the air on full blast as soon as she started the car. Her cell rang before she could pull off.

Victoria smiled when she saw her cousin's name on the display. "Hey, Alicia. I know you're not canceling on me." At one year older, Alicia Jones had always been the sister Victoria never had.

Alicia laughed. "Hardly. I just wanted to let you know that I should make it there around four. There's already some traffic coming into Sac from Davis."

"No problem."

"The Corner Bakery Café, right?"

"Yep. See you in a bit."

"Okay."

She disconnected and hit the road. The drive from downtown Sacramento to Natomas would take about fifteen minutes, barring traffic. Victoria made it to the café a few minutes before four and snagged a corner booth with a view of the door. While waiting, she checked her emails. She eagerly clicked on one from the company where she had applied for an associate industrial hygienist position. The great thing was she

didn't need certification for the job and it would give her direct experience needed to sit for the certification exam. Victoria quickly read. Her heart sank. They were impressed with her work history. "But not enough to offer me the position," she muttered. She released a deep sigh. This was the third one in as many weeks and each rejection dashed her hopes a little more. She glanced up just as Alicia came through the door.

"Over here, Alicia." She stood and the two women embraced. "Oh, my goodness. You look so good. I can't believe how much you've grown in six weeks."

Alicia placed a hand on her belly. "I know. I'm only five and a half months, but I'm showing far earlier than the first time." She slid into the booth.

Victoria reclaimed her seat across from her cousin and passed a menu to Alicia. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine. But I just need five minutes alone. Mark decided not to teach this summer, and between him and his namesake, they're driving me crazy." Alicia taught kindergarten and her husband was an engineering professor at UC Davis.

"Maybe you just need to take a couple hours of 'me time'. You know go to lunch, or to get a mani-pedi... just take a book and get away."

"I don't want to leave," she whined. "I want *them* to leave."

Victoria burst out laughing. "Um... is there something you want to tell me?"

Alicia shook her head. "Wait, that didn't come out right. What I *meant* to say is I want to relax at home in my bed or recliner with my PJs on, a book, bowl of popcorn and *silence*."

"You're welcome to spend the night at my place."

"And leave Mark at home alone... all night... with a four year-old?" They both laughed.

"Yeah, okay. I see your point. Let's order. I'm starving." They pored over the menu and Victoria went up to place their orders. She filled their cups with water and brought them back to the table.

"Thanks, Toria." She took a sip of the water. "So, how's the job hunting going?"

"Terrible. I just got passed over for another position."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't know what I'm going to do. And today, John was talking about selling the lab again."

"I know you've been fired up about working in the environmental field since we were kids, but you could always tell him you'll take over the lab. You'd be great."

"Maybe, but I don't want to be stuck in a lab for the rest of my life. I want to be in the field taking the samples, not *testing* them."

"It doesn't have to be for the rest of your life, just a few more years. You're only thirty. You have plenty of time. How much more experience do you need before you can take the test?"

"A little over a year. I already have close to three, but I may have to redo more than half."

Alicia lifted a brow. "Why?"

Staring into her glass, Victoria mumbled, "Because I have to get verification of my work history from that jerk, Curtis."

"I don't understand."

"All that taking me under his wing came with a price... a broken heart and broken dreams."

A server came to deliver their food.

They both offered thanks, then Alicia asked, "Are you telling me he's refusing to verify those almost two years you worked under him because you broke off the relationship?"

"Not directly, but when I ended it and quit the job, he said he hoped I'd be able to find someone to validate my industrial hygiene experience. Because it was a contracted position through an agency, he was the one I reported to and the only one who can confirm my hours."

"That's just ridiculous. A grown man acting like a spoiled three year-old. And he was the one caught cheating."

Victoria took a bite of her chicken pomodori panini before responding. "Exactly." They had been dating two months before he suggested she apply for the open position at the company he contracted with, knowing how much she wanted to get into the field.

It wasn't until she had been on the job six months that she realized Curtis Smith had manipulated the situation somehow and assumed sole responsibility for supervising her, something he had neglected to tell her. Up to that point, he and the other two contracted industrial hygienists had contributed to her learning experience. "So, are you ready for this new little one?" she asked, changing the subject. She didn't want to spend the remainder of their time rehashing old history. Victoria listened as Alicia excitedly shared her plans for the new addition to their family, and tried to push down thoughts of her career. As much as it pained her to have to start over, she would if it meant realizing her dream. She'd worked too hard.

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"Did you find another lab?" Michael Avery asked his friend and business partner, Tyler Williams.

"We've been using the same lab since we opened our doors three years ago. Why the change?"

"They lost their certification."

"I thought you said environmental labs didn't need to be certified."

"Technically, they don't. But with this going to court, I don't want to give anyone a reason to question the validity of the results. Besides, more and more companies are wanting the tests results to come from certified labs." A group of tenants had filed a lawsuit against the owner of their apartment complex for negligence in taking care of mold issues.

"I've narrowed it down to four, but I have to check their certification and call you back with a name. How long will you be gone?"

"The training should be over by three." Michael's environmental firm had been contracted to oversee a semiconductor corporation's health and safety program. Initially, he had spent several hours a week onsite redeveloping plans and procedures for injury-illness prevention – ergonomics, hearing conservation, hazard communication – and training the employees. Fortunately, he hadn't needed to start from scratch, and now, a year later, only conducted monthly sessions.

"I should have something solid by then. I'll call you."

“Thanks.” Michael ended the call and drummed his fingers on the table. He had called the lab to cancel, but would have to redo about half of the samples because they’d already run some of them. Those samples were now void. He called the other industrial hygienist hired by the plaintiffs to let him know that a number of the samples had to be redone and to give him the option of conducting parallel samples, as the man had done initially. The two associate industrial hygienists who worked for Michael would be at other sites tomorrow, which meant the task fell to him, which meant rescheduling his meeting with the management of a small chemical company. Voices drew him out of his thoughts and he stood to resume the ergonomics training session.

Shortly after he finished, Tyler called back. “What’ve you got for me?”

“Fizotech is in the downtown area and more central to most of the contracts we have, so I figured they’d work best.”

“And they’re certified?”

“Yep. Called to make sure. The director’s name is John Marks. They close at five.”

Michael jotted down the address. “Since I’m not too far, I’m going to stop by and do a walkthrough to make sure they have all the equipment we need to run the tests.”

“Are you coming back to the office?” Tyler asked.

“Yeah. I have to pick up the pump and the cartridges. I’m going straight to the complex in the morning because this is going to be an all-day project.”

“Later.”

He called the lab, then made the short drive over, praying there were no red flags.

* * *

Michael arrived at the complex bright and early Thursday morning. The other industrial hygienist drove up a moment later. They went over the list of samples then got started. Michael stopped to take a sample outside near the building away from plants and shrubbery to establish a comparative baseline. Afterwards, he started knocking on doors and taking samples, being careful to photograph and document his findings in a notebook and on the chain of custody form that would be turned in to the lab. He took a quick break around noon to wolf down a sandwich and a bottle of water before resuming the task.

It took over six hours to complete all the sampling, and an additional two hours for the paperwork. The two men packed up and went their separate ways. Michael made it to the lab with thirty minutes to spare before it closed.

“Hello, I’m Michael Avery. I called about having some mold samples analyzed,” he said to a middle-aged woman with twinkling blue eyes.

“Hold on and let me get our lab technician.” She picked up the phone, spoke quietly into the receiver and hung up. “Victoria will be with you in a moment.”

“Thank you.” While waiting, Michael stared out the window and mentally went over his schedule for the next day. With all he had to do, it promised to be another long one.

“Excuse me.”

He spun around and his eyes widened at the sight of the brown-skinned beauty behind the counter. She had flawless cocoa skin, generous curves and a smile that did something to his insides.

“I’m Victoria Daniels. I understand you need some samples analyzed.”

Michael quickly gathered himself. “Yes. He handed everything over and waited while she examined the sheets. “I talked to the director yesterday and he said it wouldn’t be a problem getting a twenty-four hour turnaround. I’ll need a preliminary report.”

Victoria’s brow lifted. “That’s a tall order.”

He smiled. “And if I throw in dinner?” She laughed and the sound sent a sharp jolt to his midsection. *That hasn’t happened in a long time.*

“Well now, I can work with that,” she said. “It’s not often I get a dinner offer for lab results.”

“Can you give me a call when you’re done?”

He handed her one of his generic business cards. It listed his name, certifications, type of consulting he did, his cell phone number and email address.

She glanced down at the card and nodded. “Of course. Michael Avery, Certified Industrial Hygienist. Do you want me to fax or email the preliminary results?”

“Email, please.”

“Okay. Is there anything else you need from me?”

He wanted to tell her yes, there were lots of things he needed from her, starting with her phone number, but said, “No. Thanks.” It would cost extra for the short turnaround, but he couldn’t leave anything to chance with this case.

“No problem. You’ll receive the formal report within a week to ten days.”

“That’s fine.”

“Oh, and the dinner is totally unnecessary.”

“We’ll see.” He stood there a moment longer then realized he was staring like an awestruck teen and said his goodbyes.

Michael slid behind the wheel of his black Camaro and took a moment to check his emails. He clicked on one from the optometrist that let him know his contacts were in. Now he needed to find time to pick them up. He’d been wearing his glasses for the past week and would welcome putting them back on the shelf. Not seeing anything else important, he started engine and pulled out of the lot. A smile creased his face. Victoria Daniels may think he had been teasing about the dinner offer, but Michael planned to make good on the offer.