

Chapter One

Kim-Jack kicked the nearest locker, doing minimal damage to the thin metal door but aggravating his sore toe again. It was five minutes to eleven according to his phone, just about dinnertime six hours away in Honolulu where his fiancée should have called from nearly three hours ago. He knew that Madeline had a problem with the time difference when she traveled, but her parents were there, his father and stepmother were there, as was a bevy of helpful hotel employees who already knew his voice over the phone and had promised to have her call as soon as she was spotted.

He tapped the redial button, but canceled the call before it could connect. Staring at the device as though it was to blame, he sighed. "Waste of time and Tito's alone with the pizzas."

Leaving his partner in the middle of an experiment had resulted in disastrous results before and he wasn't going to let *that* happen again. Stowing his cellphone in his back pocket, Kim-Jack hurried back into the science lab and over to the white marble-topped lab bench, currently covered in pizza boxes.

Anxiously, he refreshed the display on his laptop several times in less than a minute, smiling so wide at what he saw that he nearly drooled on his notes. Leaning over to pencil in the time and temperature reading on a yellow legal pad, he nudged Tito awake.

"Two hours and eight minutes with no change in temperature." He shoved his groggy research assistant again. "Yo, Tito, did you hear me? It's working!"

Rolling out a yawn that ended with a loud belch, Tito Czerwinski, co-chair of the science department at Barack Obama High School, lifted the pad a few inches from his eyes rather than dig around in the pockets of his lab coat for his glasses. He was too nearsighted to drive and too farsighted to read. The glasses added to his baldness, making him look twice as old and a hundred times frumpier.

Kim-Jack thought his fellow teacher was fifty when they first met and had been ribbing him about it for the past three school years. Even though they were both twenty-eight, Tito was born six months after Kim-Jack and was a foot shorter, which he thought made his partner look older. However, when speaking to other teachers, Tito always referred to his co-chair as the old man.

"Can we eat the goddamn pizza now?" Tito dropped the pad on the counter and gingerly slid off his stool. "It's so far past dinner that my stomach is wondering if my throat's been cut. Honestly, I'm hungry enough to eat one of your disgusting protein bars, or maybe I'll just gnaw on my fingernails." He nodded at Kim-Jack. "Maybe I'll try *your* fingernails?"

"You want to eat pizza at eleven o'clock at night?" Kim-Jack aligned the pad with the edge of the counter and placed the pencil on the top line. "No wonder you weigh three hundred pounds."

"And you are the skinniest Chinaman—"

"I'm half black and one hundred percent American. Don't start that shit again. Do I even look Chinese?" Kim-Jack bent over so that Tito could see his hair. "How many Chinese do you know with cornrows?"

"Hey, you're the one who got into it with that kid, Marcus about black heritage and black pride and all that angry young man shit...again."

"Goddamn freshman punk, what the hell does he think he knows about black heritage beyond what he's learned on the street?" Blowing out a hard breath, Kim-Jack yanked the probe

from the side of their experimental pizza box and wiped it clean with a tissue. "My dad grew up in the sixties. I should bring him into class one day and let him explain what it means to be beat down and shoved out."

Gingerly examining the exterior of the box, Kim-Jack checked for leaks with the precision of an astronaut about to step out of a spaceship. He smiled. "Nothing. Tight as your belt."

Tito raised an eyebrow.

"Okay. No more fat jokes tonight."

"Thank you." Tito took a step back and sneezed. "Sixty-two degrees outside and they finally turn on the air conditioning. Gotta love the way the city spends our taxes."

Kim-Jack nodded toward the street. "They didn't unlock the windows until the first week in October. I had seven students pass out at their desks on the last day of September."

"For real pass out or for I-know-you'll-send-me-to-the-nurse pass out?" Smiling, Tito bent over the box and sniffed. "I can smell pizza."

"As you should. The box may not be one-hundred-percent airtight, but it's definitely thermally sealed."

Tito's stomach rumbled and he reached for the lid. Kim-Jack slapped his hand.

"Give me a minute to double-check the data. We're coming up on two hours, ten minutes."

"I'll give you one more minute and I'm watching the clock." Setting his phone on the lab bench, Tito started the countdown timer. "If this works, we could literally make a bazillion dollars."

"Bazillion or Brazilian?"

"Is there a difference?"

Kim-Jack shrugged. "I don't know. If it's that much money, you could probably buy a country."

"And be king?"

"Of course."

Tito clapped his hands. "I would buy Bolivia and make myself King."

Kim-Jack shook his head. "I'd go with Burundi."

He stopped clapping. "Why Burundi?"

"It sounds better." Kim-Jack held out his left palm. "I'm King of Bolivia." He switched to his right. "I'm King of Burundi. See, Burundi sounds more masculine."

Tito pondered the two names for a second. "Burundi it is. But where does that leave you?"

Kim-Jack waved his arms slowly around the classroom. "Right here, doing what I do best." Smiling, he put the legal pad and pencil on an empty desk, with a quick adjustment to get it square. "I think we're ready."

Tito, whose stomach was now in control of both mind and body, was at his breaking point. Well beyond the point of thinking, he leaned around the six plus feet of the senior partner of their team and opened the box with a flourish.

"The goddamn cheese is stuck to the top of the box where it sagged."

Kim-Jack tapped on his cellphone camera. "Let me get a couple of shots before you screw it up."

"Quickly, please."

Capturing the cheesy stalactites as digital images, Kim-Jack laid his phone on the lab bench. "Go ahead."

Tito ripped off several full sheets of paper towel and laid a slice of pie on them to absorb the grease. While he refused to participate in a diet regimen, keeping his cholesterol below two-hundred meant the monthly checks from his wealthy and extremely health conscious stepfather would continue to flow into his checking account. A teacher's salary was not the fast lane to prosperity.

Shoving him out of the way, Kim-Jack grabbed his first slice out of the box along with a dollop of gooey cheese on the tips of his fingers. "I can't eat like this when Madeline's around."

"Did she call?"

"Of course not." Kim-Jack shook his head. "She probably thinks I'm sleeping."

Tito pointed a slice of pie at him. "Well, there's your sign. Dig in. She's not here, so shut up and enjoy the moment."

Along with his fiancée's disapproval of his diet, the sagging lid was only one of the many problems facing the two experimenters. Their original pizza box was too heavy and the pizza cooled to room temperature in half an hour. They had been using various foils to insulate the box, but the price of the foil that worked the best meant the box would cost over twenty dollars to construct. A Google search revealed that no one else was designing the perfect pizza box, so the task was left up to a pair of high school science teachers.

Digging into the task, the two scientists left the real world several times a week and entered the cardboard box universe. Kim-Jack handled the research, Tito ordered pizza and covered their expenses. They shared the dream of unlimited wealth, perhaps even the Nobel Prize for food preservation, if such an award existed. Their golden goose was an eighty-cent cardboard box that could maintain a pizza at tongue-scorching temperature for at least three hours. They had been working on the box since spring break of Kim-Jack's first year, fortunately with more positive results than negative.

Hot pizza was their goal. Burning their mouths was the danger to avoid on the way, although both men had blistered their tongues dozens of times in the three years they'd been attempting to construct the perfect pizza box. As a reward for teaching in a less than desirable high school, their principal had green-flagged the experiment and personally marched it through the budget approval process. The school's science lab, shared by the two teachers-co-chairs of their two-man department—was theirs to use after hours for as long as necessary.

The search for a modern pizza box that could keep a pie hot and fresh for hours was mostly the result of boredom on the part of Kim-Jack. His only hobby was collecting expensive red wine, and then drinking it. He jogged when struck with the mood, and swam in the lake all summer. The school's gym was loaded with exercise equipment and the basketball coach was more than happy to have a former college star workout with his team. Fitness wasn't an issue.

So, with too much spare time on his hands, and constantly getting cold delivery pizza when Madeline wasn't around, he set about to solve two problems with one solution.

In the back of his mind, he saw riches, but the front door led to the classroom. One evening, not long after they'd been at the project for two school years, Kim-Jack admitted to his partner that no amount of money they made on this whimsical dream would ever make him walk away from teaching. Tito had laughed for a few seconds and then, seeing the serious look on Kim-Jack's face, clapped him on the shoulder and said he understood.

Kim-Jack doubted he was telling the truth.

Pizza boxes aside, teaching had always been his dream. Starting in kindergarten, Kim-Jack fell in love with his teachers. No other female meant as much or had as profound an impact on his life. His teacher was the only person he gave a Valentine to each year, with the exception of his father. While his peers were conquering the sexual torrents of adolescence, Kim-Jack couldn't shake his love for the women who stood in front of the classroom. Rarely dating in high school, he remained a virgin until his second year in college.

He was book smart with a photographic memory. As far back as he could remember, the minute details of life, the never-fading trivia, every story he'd ever read, found its way into his deep gray matter. The dream then, was to release that knowledge to his students. To let it flow from his mind to theirs. Teaching science was the pinnacle of that dream. Teaching science in a city where children were more interested in surviving than learning the botanical names for the local flora led to his daily questioning of whether or not he'd made the right career choice. The answer was always the same.

Most of his students would never live long enough nor spend sufficient time in school to actually graduate. Those few that reached their senior year rarely got jobs, hardly ever continued on to college, and only wanted the degree so that they could join the military and legally carry a weapon. Kim-Jack had followed the school district's curriculum for the first year and then trashed it completely in September of his second year as a science teacher. Most of his lectures revolved around the human body and how to keep it functioning with a six-inch knife in the chest or multiple non-fatal bullet wounds.

He spent a full week on human reproduction. A waste of time with a classroom that had at least four pregnant female students each semester. The district office sent a woman to meet with Kim-Jack in his office, after hours, to explain to the new teacher that they already had a curriculum in place to handle Sex Education and that he was overstepping his bounds. Kim-Jack had a copy of the district's Sex Ed manual, complete with his red circles around every phrase that was misleading, unclear, or written for a first-grader who'd only recently learned the difference between male and female sex organs by walking into the wrong bathroom.

The woman left in a huff and no one ever complained about his daily teaching plan again.

Kim-Jack had been fighting an ongoing battle of the generations with one of his students, Marcus Tighe, age fifteen, since the first day of school this year. The lanky boy who always sat in the front row, with waist-length dreadlocks and a terrible home life, would have been a warrior for the cause at some distant point in the past. Now, he was just a street thug who had somehow made his way into the first year of high school in a city where most kids his age would be working, thieving, or slowly dying. Kim-Jack did his best to avoid physical contact, but he dreamt of beating the kid senseless to save him the trouble of surviving the real world once school ended.

It seemed that every new school year brought with it at least one student who challenged everything Kim-Jack said. Marcus was the current thorn, but he wasn't sharp enough to cause his teacher permanent pain. Knowing that summer would eventually slide in and chase the students away was enough to temper even the worst days for an inner city high school teacher.

Somehow, their feeding frenzy had left the two hungry researchers with a single slice of pizza in the box out of eight possible. It wasn't the first time this had happened, and as before, Tito accused Kim-Jack of eating one more slice than him, insisting that the odd piece was his.

Knowing full well that Tito ate twice as fast and that he probably ate two slices at the same time without realizing, Kim-Jack pushed the box over to him and got off his stool. His appetite had faded with the long hours.

"Eat it. I had a big lunch." He turned toward the door. "I'm going downstairs to the teacher's lounge to get a soda. You want something?"

Tito shook his head. "I've got a two-liter bottle of cola in the specimen fridge."

"Are you kidding?"

"What?"

Kim-Jack made a puking motion with his fingers half into his mouth. "There are dozens of Petri dishes in that fridge with all sorts of nasty bugs my students have been collecting from around the school."

"So?"

"So, you are exposing your beverage to all sorts of virulent creatures that will, if nothing else, solve your weight problem if they don't kill you first." Kim-Jack pinched the bridge of his nose. "Good lord, Tito, this is a science lab, filled with scientific experiments in case you haven't noticed. My students and a couple of yours have been swabbing the toilets in all the lavatories. Wiping the drains in the boys' locker room. Inspecting the cafeteria trash. I wouldn't touch anything that comes out of that refrigerator with anything less than four-foot tongs and a hazmat suit."

Tito looked over at the refrigerator covered in bumper stickers that went back twenty-plus years and shrugged. "I've been keeping my lunch in there for years. I could never understand why it wasn't stolen."

Due to the high crime rate of the nearby neighborhood, the school had four armed security officers on duty from six in the morning until six in the evening. Overnight, there were just two, and both could always be found hanging out in the most elegant teachers' lounge outside of Beverly Hills. To a first-time visitor, it would appear that they'd walked into a living room designed from the pages of *Architectural Digest*. The four ultra-plush brown leather sectional couches that had plenty of room for six large adults and the marble-topped coffee tables that seemed to be everywhere and in a multitude of sizes were the perfect venue to watch the seventy-inch television that occupied one full wall.

The first floor lounge was equipped with an adequate kitchen: no oven, but there was a cooktop and three microwaves—no waiting. The Home Economics teachers came here to test their recipes before foisting them on their students. The lounge had its own restrooms, vending machines, a refrigerator with an icemaker, and wall-to-wall carpeting. It was a wonder any of the teachers ever went home. Other than the bars on the windows and the bulletproof glass, the room was certainly nicer than any part of a teacher's domicile.

Teachers coming to the school for the first time were amazed at the opulence showered on them. However, the lounge was just one of the many perks the Board of Education had agreed to supply in order to get teachers to accept an assignment far more hazardous than any battlefield. All of the glass, inside and out, was bulletproof. Metal detectors were used at every entrance. A razor wire fence protected their cars. Upon request, a security guard would accompany a teacher to the safe parking area and stay there until the teacher had left the school

grounds. Baseball tickets, skyboxes at the football stadium, and prime theater seats were always available to convince a prospective teacher to sign a contract.

Yet even with the benefits, most teachers at Barack Obama High School lasted only a few semesters. Some went on to more fashionable school districts. Some simply retired. All who left swore they'd never return, even for more money and gold-plated toilets.

Kim-Jack scanned his ID card at the door and nudged it open with his elbow. He knew what was growing on the doorknobs, handrails, lockers, and walls outside this sanctuary. Even though students were never allowed inside, they still made physical contact with the surfaces on the exterior. What they left behind was as dangerous as the contents of the refrigerator in the science lab.

Looking away from the late night, West Coast, baseball game he'd been watching, Fred Washburn, who everyone called "Physical Fred" or just Fizz for short, smiled at Kim-Jack and waved him over.

"Pizza man. How's it going?"

"We broke the two-hour mark again." Kim-Jack pumped his fist in the air. "I'm betting we can reach three hours by the end of the semester."

Fizz winked at him. "Take your time. We love all the free pizza."

"Where's your partner?"

"On the roof, getting some fresh air." Another wink.

Kim-Jack glanced upward. "It's good to know there's a stoned security guard wandering around the building with a gun."

"Protect and serve."

The protectee blew out a short breath. "Live long and prosper."

Fizz had been an actual police officer many years in the past. His reasons for leaving the force were a matter of speculation, and he wasn't talking. Even though he was receiving a pension from the department and healthy social security stipend, Fizz was the first to complain about the lack of pay raises from the Board of Education. Of course, that was his old attitude, before the Board reassigned him to Barack Obama High School with its luxury lounge.

A long fly ball caught the security guard's attention. It went deep into right field before a gust of wind took it foul. Kim-Jack took advantage of the distraction and walked over to the refrigerator.

"Mind if I steal a beer?"

"Just for you?" Nodding, Fizz muted the television. "Professor Tito owes me a six-pack. You keep his fat ass out of my shit, okay?"

"I told him beer will raise his cholesterol." Kim-Jack grinned. "You've got nothing to worry about anymore."

The door lock clicked and both men turned to watch Vincent Giacomo slide into the room, combing his slick black hair off his forehead. Less than half as old as Fizz, Vincent's background was the military police and the current holder of the number of times anyone had failed the city's police exam.

"Yo, Vinnie, you talk to the birds?" Fizz laughed and got up from the couch. He changed the channel to the streaming service his partner had been watching before his circuit and trip to the roof. "I gotta do the one-o'clock circuit. See you in forty-five."

Vincent jammed his comb into his back pocket and gave his partner the thumbs up. "Don't get lost." Turning to Kim-Jack, he held out his hand. "Hey, glad to meet you. I'm Vincent Giacomo. I'm Fred's new partner."

Kim-Jack held back his laughter and shook the young man's hand. "We met six hours ago, Vinnie."

"We did?" Vincent pursed his lips. "Yeah. You're right. I remember. You're the pizza professor with the funny name."

"Kim-Jack."

"Yeah." Pausing in thought for a few seconds, Vincent cocked his head to the side. "How'd you get stuck with a name like that anyhow?"

Even though he'd told the story hundreds of times since learning to speak, Kim-Jack sighed and readied himself to tell it again. He took a drink of beer and placed the bottle on the counter.

"My mom was Chinese. My dad comes from Georgia. His family is black. So, I'm half Chinese and half black. They met at a banking conference in Singapore and, according to my dad, they instantly fell in love. The conference was three days. They spent a month in Singapore and got married upon returning to the States. Mom was pregnant."

Vincent clasped his hands and smiled. "That's so cool."

Groaning softly, Kim-Jack continued. "My mom insisted that I was going to be a girl and that I should be named Kimberly. My dad said, okay, then if it's a boy, I want to name him Jackson after my father who died in Vietnam."

"You're a boy." Vincent stammered. "I mean a man. How come you're not just called Jack?"

"My mom died a few hours after I was born. She threw a blood clot and stroked out. My dad told me that she spent the first few hours of my life holding me, and that her death was instantaneous when the clot hit her brain. She didn't suffer." Kim-Jack let loose a long, deep breath and took another pull off the beer.

"You okay, man?" Vincent walked over and put his hand on Kim-Jack's shoulder. "That's some heavy shit."

"Yeah." Switching his beer to the hand attached to his shoulder where Vincent was at this very moment transferring bacteria, Kim-Jack was able slip out of the security guard's embrace to complete his story.

"So, my dad decided to honor my mom by using half of the name she wanted with half of what he would have used. Thus, I became Kim for Kimberly and Jack for Jackson. Rather than make up a middle name, he used a hyphen, so my birth certificate reads Kim-Jack Donaldson."

"No middle name? I thought everyone had a middle name."

Kim-Jack shook his head. "Nope."

A tear slid down Vincent's left cheek. "Wow. That's a beautiful story, man."

Kim-Jack finished the beer and tossed the bottle into the recycle bin. "Yeah. Same one I told you six hours ago."

Stepping onto the third floor, Kim-Jack's phone buzzed several times. Having already watched a teacher get shoved backwards down the stairs, out of habit he walked across the hallway to a row of lockers before reaching for the phone. The caller ID displayed Madeline, his fiancée.

Finally.

"I've been calling you for hours, but my calls went straight to voicemail. Where are you? Is everything okay?"

Really? Kim-Jack checked the time and slapped his forehead. "I guess I must have been busy. I didn't realize it was this late. I hope I'm not keeping you from dinner. I'm just finishing up in the lab and then I'm headed to the townhouse." He paused for a moment. Most of his comments usually flew past her. "We had great results." *And do you care?*

"I'm onboard the flight home from Honolulu with my parents. We decided to leave earlier and skip the dinner. Your dad said to say hello and your stepmom got totally wasted before we left the hotel, so she's passed out in her seat."

As I thought. "So, it's almost six where you are."

"And it must be almost one o'clock in the morning at home. I hope I didn't wake you up."

Mornings. He frowned. She was a terrible morning person. Not a coffee drinker, Madeline's sole morning beverage was orange juice and god help anyone that poured it out of a can, cardboard container, or a bottle. Madeline's orange juice had to be fresh squeezed, a task that Kim-Jack relished, as she always drank it in bed—a precursor to morning sex.

"You're off by a couple of hours." Big surprise.

"You would have loved Hawaii. The surfing was awesome. I rode the pipeline!"

Kim-Jack muted the phone and muttered out loud no one in particular. "And survived. Thank god." He switched back to live. "That's great, baby. I hope your dad got some cool photos to add to our travel wall. Did you get a chance to sing?"

Madeline Kloppeleman loved to sing, and she had the voice to prove it. If they walked into a bar with a karaoke machine, it would be hours before they ordered something to eat. She loved show tunes and the crooners from a century before she was born: Sinatra, Mathis, Nat King Cole. Any excuse for her to break into song. And if someone was celebrating a birthday and the server parade was led by a cake and candles? Madeline would rush over to their targeted table and sing the Birthday Song so loud that everyone in the restaurant felt safe to join her.

His stepmother's birthday was the same day they arrived in Hawaii, and Madeline had arranged a special dinner. Kim-Jack warned her in advance that Trisha got embarrassed faster than a schoolchild with a porno magazine caught by a parent. He was going to ask about the special dinner since it had been a secret plan that only Madeline knew in detail, but she was already on a roll.

"OMG, you missed the most amazing luau on the beach for Trisha's birthday party! Fifteen Hawaiian dancers with flaming batons. The music was so intense that I nearly climaxed. And then the dancers surrounded your stepmother and sang Happy Birthday in Hawaiian. I got up and we sang again in American."

American. Kim-Jack stifled the correction, but sighed loud enough for the sound to echo through the empty third-floor corridor. "She must have turned as red as your lipstick."

"Your stepmother might have blushed, but she slid under the table before I finished."

Kim-Jack laughed. "I'm sorry I missed it, but the Board of Ed is quite strict when it comes to their teachers having a good time."

"There was a lot of pot smoking."

"I'm sure you enjoyed it."

"Once or twice, but it screws up my throat. Your stepmother got hammered. What a hoot!"

He'd seen his stepmother stoned plenty of times. She started out with the strength of a church candle, but eventually melted into a puddle of spent wax. "It takes a few tokes to get her to unwind, but Trisha's a lot of fun when she gets blasted."

Feeling the urge in his pants, he was going to say how much he missed her and wait for her to argue that he was just horny, but he could hear the announcement about airplane mode in the background. He was glad he didn't get the chance.

"I've gotta go. We're departing. I love you and can't wait to have those big, powerful hands running up and down my naked body. I want to scream the last three bars of 'My Way' when you make me cum. You can't imagine how horny I am right now."

"Jesus, Madeline. Are you sitting with your parents?" A bolt of fear ran up his spine. "With my parents?"

"Oh, hell no." She laughed. *"They're all up front in First Class, planning a really cool vacation wedding for you and me. Oh, my god, you're gonna love it! Your dad is cray, cray when it comes to cool ideas."*

Kim-Jack took a step away from the lockers, glancing up and down the hallway for some non-existent threat. Her parents had planned four different destination weddings in the year and four months they'd been engaged. He'd been able to talk her out of all of them so far. She had almost been convinced to having a simple wedding on her parents' estate. He'd even acquiesced to a rabbi instead of a priest despite his father and stepmother's vehement objections.

"Another vacation wedding?" He took a deep breath. "To where this time?"

She replied with only one word before disconnecting, but he could sense her joy nonetheless.

"Antarctica!"

The word echoed around his brain before locking onto an appropriate image of ice and snow and wind so strong that his cornrows unraveled. His throat constricted. His breathing stopped. But Madeline ended the call before he had the chance to shout, "No goddamn way!" slamming his fist into the nearest locker.