Chapter 1
THE SLICE OF LIFE



For as long as Xander Pendergras had been delivering pizzas for Papa Vito's, he had enjoyed the late-night shift. Xander was young, barely twenty years old. He had bushy brown hair that burst out from underneath his baseball cap. The delivery uniform's shirt, covering his skinny frame, was untucked and hanging over his cargo shorts. (Cargo shorts were his go-to option for bottom wear—he found all the extra pockets a necessity when delivering pizzas on a busy night.)

The hustle and bustle of Gate City after 10 p.m. ironically calmed his nerves and focused his mind. There was a noticeable shift in the customers he delivered to later at night. The steady stream of families turned into a steady stream of partygoers and the occasional late-shift worker.

Gate City was a college town, which meant that as the night crept onward, the pizza shop actually got busier. In fact, Xander made the bulk of his tip money during these late-night hours. There were times he would leave with ten or more deliveries in a single run! Most of these pizzas were taken to the various dormitories and rental homes in and around Gate City University's campus.

Xander had been delivering pizzas long enough to recognize the addresses of repeat customers. He categorized them as follows:

WHALE

A Whale was a repeat customer who always ordered enough food to feed a small nation. With these customers, no expense was too great. Extra breadsticks and chicken wings? No problem! Additionally, Whales treated Xander like a celebrity. When he pulled up in his champagne-colored ’97 Pontiac Sunfire, he was often greeted with high fives and smiles. The platitudes were wonderful, but they paled in comparison to the tips! Often, Whales would tip in excess of 50% of their bill. Unfortunately—and probably unsurprisingly—just like their namesakes, he didn’t see Whales too often.

AVERAGE JOE

The Average Joe was the bread and butter of Xander’s tip income. These were the families who needed dinner because Mom and Dad worked and didn’t have time to cook. Or it was movie night—and what goes better with a movie than pizza? (No one wants to hear it, popcorn!) Average Joes

ordered a couple of pizzas, possibly a side and a drink, and usually tipped between $4 and $7. They were easy to deal with, too. Average Joes were polite, and the transactions went smoothly.

BUMS

If Average Joes were the backbone of Xander's customers, then the Bums were, well... the bum. Bums always had enough money to order nearly as much as Whales. Typically, they required you to lug a large number of pizzas and sodas to the farthest-flung reaches of whatever building they were occupying. Unfortunately, when it came time to tip, they were out of cash!

LOS ESTUDIANTES

Xander called the local college kids Los Estudiantes. He never knew what to expect from these customers. Since many lived in dorm rooms and required a phone call or text to meet outside, Xander was often at the mercy of crammed elevators, slow walkers, or a combination of the two. It was such a time-waste that Xander developed a system where he would stagger phone calls to students. He placed the first delivery call almost as soon as he left the store and called each subsequent delivery from the one before. This system worked so well that he was able to shave valuable time off each run.

DIRTY RATS

Dirty Rats were the worst of the worst. Imagine moldy bread mixed with vomit, covered in vinegar, and rolled in sewage. Now imagine that concoction as a person, and you'd have a Dirty Rat. These "customers" were always looking for a way to scam the system and get free food. Most of them were well known by the employees at the shop. And while you couldn't deny service to anyone unless they expressly threatened an employee, terrible service was always an option.

That being said, Xander privately wondered if the behavior of the Dirty Rats was a result of the terrible service they always received. This thought made his brain cramp, so he tried not to think about it too often.

Xander looked down at his first delivery to make sure he had the address correct.

Address: 904 Courtland Ave.

The family at Courtland Avenue was younger with no children. This explained their tendency to order later than most homes in the neighborhood. These guys were classic Average Joes—porch light on, quick to greet, $5 tip.

Sweet! This was the way to get the run started! Xander thought as he walked back to his car.

It was getting close to the end of the month, and many of his

bills would be due again soon. It was important that he had a few good nights in a row. Getting back into the car, Xander looked down to confirm his next address. To his dismay, he saw this:

Address: 1217 Whilden Pl. Unit B.

“Oh no! I can’t believe I misread that address!” Xander exclaimed out loud.

1217 Whilden Place was an apartment building divided into four units. Units A, C, and D were Average Joes who tipped fairly. However, Unit B was a notorious Dirty Rat! In fact, it was one of the worst of all: Randy.

Randy was infamous around the pizza shop. His antics were well known and all the employees at Papa Vito’s knew he would try to get his meal for free. It usually became the delivery driver’s responsibility to ensure Randy paid in full.

As Xander pulled up to the apartment building, he gathered himself. He knew this would be a battle, and mentally, he needed to be prepared.

Randy answered the door and almost seemed annoyed to see Xander.

“You’re late!” were the first words out of his mouth.

Of course, Xander wasn’t late—any pizza delivery person worth their pepperonis knows to be just on time to a Dirty Rat.

“C’mon, Randy! You ordered at 9:45, and it’s 10:14 now. That’s only 29 minutes.”

Randy stood silently, staring at Xander for what seemed like an eternity. Scratching his right leg through his stained pajama bottoms, he snorted back,

“Well, I guess you got me. How much was the pie? $10?”

“It’s $15, Randy…”

“Oh, hang on. Let me get the rest of the cash.”

Randy shuffled to his cluttered kitchen. He knocked aside some plastic cups and previously delivered Papa Vito’s boxes, uncovering a sandwich bag filled with pennies and nickels.

“There should be enough here to cover the remaining $5,” he said as he dumped the contents of the bag onto his coffee table.

This was a classic stalling technique used by Dirty Rats in hopes that the delivery driver would get frustrated and let them have the pizza at a discount. Unfortunately for him, Xander wasn’t so quick to give up. He simply helped Randy count the change.

Much to no one’s surprise, Randy was still short of the necessary $15 by 75 cents.

At that point, Xander decided to cut his losses and continue on with the rest of the deliveries. Surely he would make up for this debacle.

As he walked back to his car, he could hear Randy half-heartedly shout, “Awww… man, I’ll get you next time, pizza guy!”



Xander returned to his deliveries, taking three separate orders to the same dorm. While none of them tipped well—each just over $1—he was still able to complete three deliveries in the time it would normally take to complete one. Most importantly, since he earned a flat rate of $1.50 per delivery to compensate for gas, he was essentially getting an extra $3.

After completing another delivery to a group of students living in one of the rental homes on the outskirts of campus, Xander had only one delivery left. He looked at the address:

Address: 1 Salk Pl.

“Hmmm… I don’t think I recognize this address,” Xander thought to himself.

It wasn’t often this happened. In fact, he couldn’t remember the last time he encountered an unfamiliar address. He even

had to look up the location using his phone's navigation—something he never did.

As Xander pulled up to the address, it became apparent that this was a brand-new road and building. That certainly explained why he wasn't familiar with it. A huge LED sign out front read:



In the comments section of the delivery slip, it noted: *Laboratory 17*. Xander parked his car in front of the building and headed to the main entrance. As he approached, a voice crackled over the intercom system.

"I'll buzz you in. Please bring the food to Lab 17."

"Sure thing. I'll be there in a sec!"

The two steel doors that served as the building's front entrance suddenly split open, revealing a grand lobby complete with a fountain and the largest television screen—outside of a jumbotron—that Xander had ever seen. He checked the signage in the lobby and followed the arrows to Laboratory 17.

Little did he know, this delivery would change his life forever!

