

The Doorman

An Excerpt

PROLOGUE: TONIGHT

Front Door

Chicky Diaz stands on his little patch of the earth, the clean quiet sidewalk in front of the Bohemia Apartments, thinking: there sure are a lot of great places to kill someone in this city.

There are the sprawling industrial zones in Hunts Point and Maspeth. There are the underpasses of bridges and highways and on-ramps and off-, all those loud echoing voids littered with abandoned vans and homeless camps and piles of trash. There are the late-night-creepy canyons down in the Financial District, and the creepier step streets up in Washington Heights, the ends of elevated subway stations, underground ones too. There are hundreds of miles of waterfront with car-sized boulders and crumbling piers that jut out into the deadly currents of rivers and canals and bays and the mighty Atlantic Ocean. There's that weird-ass auto-repair shantytown out in Willets Point, a place that reminds Chicky of nothing in the States so much as that time he and his buddies took a wrong turn in Panama City. A few wrong turns.

There's all of Staten Island, probably, though in truth Chicky has never stepped foot. Just driven through that time with Julio to visit Reggie who was living rough in Rahway. But he's heard. There are the parks, ten thousand acres of hills and woods and beaches and ponds, grass ballfields and concrete courts and golf courses and even a lawn-bowling green of all things, just a few minutes from here. The bowlers wear all white. They basically are all white.

Signs at entrances claim PARK CLOSES AT DARK but there aren't many gates that close and no attempt at enforcement. Has anyone ever been deterred by a Parks and Rec placard? It's like no spitting, no loitering, no jaywalking. The type of laws that make a mockery of the very idea of laws.

No jaywalking. What an idea.

The best place to kill someone, though? That's right at home. Away from witnesses and good Samaritans and security cameras, in environments that can be controlled and crime scenes that can be scrubbed, evidence that can be destroyed on the one hand or manufactured on the other. Behind the locked doors and closed curtains of aluminum-sided Capes in Elmhurst or

Flatlands, of brownstones up in Harlem and out in Park Slope, of luxury lofts in Tribeca and shitty lofts in Bushwick, of little Tudors out in Forest Hills and huge Tudors up in Riverdale, of slums in the South Bronx and Brownsville, of the housing projects that are everywhere, in every corner of every borough, even places you'd never expect—the Alfred E. Smith Houses just a couple blocks from City Hall, or the ones practically spitting distance from right here.

Every class and every race and every religion and every sexual orientation, everybody's every body, shoulder to shoulder.

This fucking city. Eight million people.

Every one of them can be killed.

Chicky looks across to the park's dark that's broken up only by streetlamps along roadways and footpaths. To Chicky these pools of light seem to increase the menace more than lessen it, drawing attention to just how little safety is out there. Even here on fancy Central Park West with fancier Fifth Avenue on the far side, on these streets that are homes to millionaires and billionaires and the biggest museums of the greatest city in the whole wide world. Even here, danger is right over there.

This is one of the main reasons Chicky's job exists to begin with. Ensuring safety. Trying to.

Chicky has been here for twenty-eight years. Longer than anyone else on staff, longer than most of the residents too. Chicky is who comes to mind when people think of a doorman at the Bohemia, residents and visitors and regular guests, the extended families who descend each Thanksgiving to watch the parade. In all these people's mental dictionaries, the definition of doorman is Chicky Diaz in his spotless uniform and bell crown cap. He's woven into the fabric of the place.

The job suits him. Chicky is always quick with a smile or a joke or the door. He never hesitates to grab a bag or hail a cab, to gently shoo away gawkers or panhandlers, to commiserate about the Mets or the Nets or even the godforsaken Jets.

Chicky is not a particularly religious man but he does believe in god, and it's obvious that he has forsaken the Jets for some unknowable reason. It seems impossible for any sports franchise to be so bad for so long. Especially a team that plays in a major market. The major-est. And yet.

Mysterious ways, they say.

Chicky never fails to remember a resident's name or a visiting grandson or a close friend or "friend." He never calls in sick, never leaves early, never arrives late. He never complains or rolls his eyes at a ridiculous request, of which there are plenty. He is unerringly patient and unfailingly nice. He is relentlessly upbeat.

Or he was.

On the next block a tiny old woman is walking a tiny dog, both miniatures. But otherwise there's nothing but red traffic lights and red taillights and a red light at the end of an awning to beckon a yellow cab. Good luck, this day and age. Taxis don't roam like they used to.

Somewhere a car guns its engine in a way that sounds hostile. Chicky feels a tingle on the back of his clean-cut neck.

Every place to kill someone is also, obviously, a place to get killed. It can happen out on the sidewalk in a hail of automatic gunfire, the murder attempt of a coward who's sitting safely in the passenger side, random bullets hitting thighs and butts and arms but mostly trash cans and windows and innocent passersby. Sometimes little kids, babies.

It's surprising how many gunshot targets manage to survive the indiscriminate spray. Not the one well-placed bullet to the head. No one survives that. But that requires a whole different set of balls. To walk right up to a guy, maybe even look him in the eye, boom.

It can happen at any moment, anywhere, to anyone. Right here, right now. You might never know that you're about to get killed. You might never know that you're about to kill someone.

Chicky sure as fuck hadn't.