

# Sleepless Nights

A novel by

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## Chapter 1

Friday, August 5, 4 p.m.

The nation's capital sweated under a searing sun and hazy skies. The sauna-like air bathed the city in humidity, and as the day was hot, so was the spot. The Feds kept cruising through. Under the big Dutch elm on the corner of Eighth and Kennedy, the three chilled in spite of the breezeless heat. Perched on the wall, thrashing out the latest word on the street, they waited and watched for prospects.

For Gee, idle time with Tyrone and Jinx didn't used to be so boring. The two planned to unload the last of the crack cocaine, re-up for tomorrow, and call it a day. Gee was just hanging. The sun was beginning its descent, growing less intense, while the ever-present heat continued rising from the asphalt streets, concrete sidewalks, and red brick houses.

"Gee, man, where dat nice ride of yours?" Tyrone focused on his feet, admiring the new Air Jordan Jumpman sneakers.

"Home. Parked."

"Why ain't you driving?"

"Gas is expensive, walking is good exercise."

"If I had a car I wouldn't be walking on a day like this. Would you Jinx? I'd be chilling, rolling in the conditioned air. Know what I mean? Forget dat, I be exercising e'ry day all my life. Enough of dat shit. Ain't dat right Jinx?"

Jinx ignored Tyrone's prattle. Gee could tell he was anxious to get off the corner, watching the intersection, hoping for customers on foot or mobile.

“What time is it?” Jinx looked to Gee.

“Four-fifteen.” Both knew Tyrone didn’t own a watch and never would own a car.

Soon they would have to leave. The Kennedy Street crew was due to show up with more heat, brandishing automatic weapons. Eighth and Kennedy was one of the few spots where independent hustlers operated, priming business until the evening rush and lucrative late-hour trade. Claiming exclusive domain, any encroachment with a competing sale would be a challenge, and a drive-by spray of hot lead was the response. Coexisting with the fearless crew on its turf was one of the perils of working the open-air drug market. For now, a détente existed between the crew and the hustlers, and yet another danger was lurking around the corner.

The houses on this block of the Petworth neighborhood sat on a hill with steps leading down to the sidewalk bordered by a four-foot stone wall. At the van’s approach, Tyrone eased up off the wall and strutted to the curb, pulling up his baggy jeans. Sunlight glinted off the perspiration beads sprinkling his forehead. Not particularly good-looking, his best feature was a striking complexion, smooth like dark chocolate. Though his glow was appealing, it failed to compensate for or distract from his irregular teeth. His hideous mouth had a talent for telling tall tales and not much else.

The two extra-large t-shirts and double underwear of briefs and athletic shorts camouflaged his agile but slight frame and gave the illusion of bulk. Tyrone dressed more for style than comfort. Seated on the wall, Gee and Jinx watched the white Chevy van slow its roll.

“Bet I get two dubs for these dimes,” Tyrone said, concocting a scheme to beat a couple of crack-heads by doubling the street value. “Look like suckas to this bidnissman.”

Jinx eyed the approaching van. “Handle your bidniss and watch yourself.”

The opposite of Tyrone’s, Jinx’s complexion was pitted and dusty. He was ruggedly handsome but for the menacing scowl. Rarely did he smile, and the unkempt Bantu locks lent him a treacherous air.

Gee looked to the corner while Jinx kept an eye on the two in the unfamiliar van. Should it be necessary, each plotted his best escape route. In front of them, the van came to a stop. The driver rolled down his window.

“Was up?” Tyrone stepped closer to the driver, sizing up the two solidly built guys.

“Twenty.”

The driver placed his order and Gee could tell Tyrone was reconsidering his suckas. The message ran telepathically to all three. *Jump out.* The two guys appeared too straight and older than your average crackhead. Though one could never be certain of people’s private habits and few factors alone were determinative, these two men just didn’t look right.

“Hold up.” Tyrone stepped back and pretended to kick the street litter for a hidden stash, which was actually safely tucked away in the pocket sack of his briefs. Most cops didn’t like to tickle a suspect’s balls, but then again some took a perverse pleasure in it.

Gee spotted a patrol car turning the corner and leapt off the wall. “Jump out! Jump out!”

The chase began. They scattered like roaches under sudden light. The two undercover cops jumped out of the van, feet pounding the pavement as they gave chase, one after Tyrone and the other on Gee’s heels. The squad car’s siren began to wail. Red, blue, and white lights flashing, it sped down the alley, bouncing over potholes and uneven pavement, to cross the street and dive into the next block, homing in on Jinx.

Through the opposite alley, Gee sprinted, laughing along the way, around the corner then into another alley toward Georgia Avenue. His stamina would easily outlast the older cop, already panting halfway through the alley. Ten feet behind, suddenly the cop ignited a burst of energy and closed the gap almost to within reach. Gee tipped a trashcan in his wake, startling a jumbo rat into scampering across the cop’s feet. Horror-struck, the cop stumbled over the trashcan, grabbed his revolver, and aimed at the rat. In seconds, both the rodent and Gee had disappeared.

Gee wasn’t a drug dealer. He didn’t sell or use it, never touched the stuff, wouldn’t even smoke reefer. He would soon start his final year at George Mason University to complete a bachelor’s degree in computer sciences. Selling drugs was the business of Jinx and Tyrone, his childhood friends. Gee didn’t have to run. He did it for the thrill of the chase, playing decoy, distracting the cops, helping Jinx and Tyrone in their escape. To him, it was just a game.

Gee slowed to a casual walk, recovering his breath, and reached Georgia Avenue craving a cold grape soda. He’d catch up with Jinx and Tyrone tomorrow. Or would he? Maybe hanging with those two wasn’t such a good idea. Dodging the cops was fun when

he was a kid, back in the day, but now it seemed dangerous, stupid. Gee realized he'd outgrown that scene, Tyrone and Jinx as well.

It was time to go shower and get ready for work, maybe catch a catnap. Two squad cars pulled up to the stoplight and eyed him. Gee continued to stroll. The light changed and the cruisers passed. He turned into the Korean market at the corner of Georgia and Ingraham for that grape soda.

The store's icy air conditioning brought up chill bumps that made the hair on his arms rise, but it felt good. After picking out the cold drink, he turned toward the cashier, but abruptly stopped. Something in his chest tightened and forced him to suck in his breath.

She stood browsing the shelf in a pink halter-top and Daisy Duke cutoffs. Back when she was a cheerleader at Coolidge High, pretty and popular, she always had that effect on him. Marie Davis was out of his league, and now she was finer than ever. Unaware of her admirer, the shapely mocha-colored girl focused on the canned goods. He had to say something.

"Marie?" Her name softly slipped off his lips.

She turned in his direction but didn't seem to recognize him. Three years had passed, and at the age when boys turn into men.

"Yes?" Her curious expression changed to recollection and she smiled.

Known around the hood as Gee, the Spanish kid, Gustavo Augusto Garcia had been quiet and shy with a studious bent, a bit of a nerd a class ahead of her. Her look of intense interest told him that she, too, had noticed how much he had physically changed. Against her memory, the transformation must have been sudden and surprising. She was

not the first to notice his metamorphosis. Coming into manhood, putting on the freshman ten and then some, playing on the soccer team, and spending a lot of time in the weight room at George Mason, he had reached a point in his life where he attracted rather than repelled the honeys. His confidence had grown as well.

“Gee.” She greeted him with a hug.

While puzzled by the assumed familiarity, he welcomed her soft fragrant embrace. He couldn’t believe he had it going on like that.

“Wow, you sure look good.” She stepped back, her bright gray-green eyes appraising him with amazement and delight. “Still at George Mason?”

“Final year, coming up. How about you? Heard you were at Spellman.”

“Two down, two to go. Good to see you. How’s your summer?”

“Just working.”

“Where?” She returned to searching the shelves of canned tomatoes.

“Waiting tables at the Farragut.”

“Are you kidding? I heard it’s a great club. I’ve never been there.”

“What are you doing tonight?” He recaptured her eyes and her interest.

“Why?”

“I could get you a seat at the bar for the last show. Maybe when I get off we could hang out.” The old Gee would never have been so bold to ask Marie Davis out.

She smiled. “I’d like that.”

“Meet me at the door around ten. It has to be ten, that’s when I take my break.”

“I’ll be there. That all you’re getting, a soda?”

“Yeah, thirsty. What’s up with the tomatoes?”

“My mom’s making pasta.”

The matronly Korean cashier grinned at the handsome couple placing their items on the counter. Growing up in the same neighborhood and attending the same schools, Gee and Marie were acquainted with each other’s faces, family and friends, but had never really known one another. Now it seemed like a mutual attraction and Gee wondered what his chances were. He walked her home, two blocks out of his way. The police had chased off his afternoon boredom and brought the revelation that he had outgrown a childhood relationship. Now here was the possibility of inventing a new one.

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Friday, August 4, 10 p.m.

Standing at the entrance to the Farragut Tavern in his bistro uniform, starched white collar, black slacks with matching bowtie, and a long white apron, Gee met her taxi with a big grin. The valets were jumping to greet the crowd gathering for the night’s final performance. As Marie emerged, conversation lulled among a lingering group of young men. Gee closed the cab door and positioned himself between her and the gawking admirers to escort her in.

Guided past the hatcheck room, Marie gazed about at the stylish crowd. Under the portrait of Admiral David Glasgow Farragut, harried bartenders filled the constant flow of orders. The Tavern continued its nautical theme with anchors adorning the walls and mural-sized canvasses dramatizing the Navy’s first admiral leading his fleet to the capture of New Orleans in 1862 and Mobile Bay in 1864. The rustic bar and décor captured an authentic Civil War milieu.

Gee followed closely, steering her toward the bar, his eyes glued to the backless halter dress with its silky material clinging to her curves.

“Who’s performing tonight?” she asked.

“Boney James, you heard of him? He’s played on the radio a lot, especially WHUR.”

“Don’t know the name but I’ll probably recognize the sound.”

Gee scanned the bar. “I see the perfect spot for you. I’ll put you next to Tio and Mr. Drew, they’ll look after you. The show starts in about thirty minutes, I got to get to my station. I hope you don’t mind sitting at the bar.”

“Not at all, I’m glad just to be here with you.”

Gee took her hand and maneuvered through the crowd around the bar. “I was worried. A woman alone at the bar can bring the dawgs out. If you know what I mean.”

“Gee, you’re funny.”

“I’m serious. I know those guys, they’ll be hitting on you left and right, fine as you look.” The corner of his mouth turned up, dimpling in. “I know the bruthas.”

“That’s cute the way you do that.”

“What?”

“That thing you do with your mouth. It’s cute.”

Gee pretended to look puzzled and did it again.

“See, that’s it,” she said.

It was a tic, a reflexive action, and a habit so subtle only those making the closest observation would notice. It expressed many things, sometimes his puzzlement, indifference, or even annoyance, the way another might shrug.

Gee halted at a vacant stool next to Drew Smith and his sidekick Julio Mejia, and apprehensively greeted them. “Tio, Mr. Drew, this is my friend, Marie. This is Mr. Drew and Mr. Julio.”

Marie’s eyes widened and she smiled. “Wow! This is really something. You’re Drew Smith, the famous lawyer.”

“Only famous in your neighborhood. Call me Drew. I can’t break Gee of the Mr. Drew, he’s been calling me that since he was knee high.”

“You’re always in the papers. They call you D.C.’s Johnny Cochran.”

“Like I said, only in your neighborhood.”

“Tio,” Gee said to Julio, whom he considered an uncle. “Would you look after her for me while I finish up my work, please? Keep the dawgs away?”

“We’ll play bodyguard.”

Drew laughed and clapped Gee on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, Gee, she’s in good hands. We’ll keep the dawgs, wolves, MacDaddy’s, and any other lecherous creatures at bay until you say when. We’re waiting for a table. Perhaps Marie will join us for dinner.” Drew looked to Marie.

“I can’t think of anything better.” She beamed a bright smile. “This is so nice.”

“We’d be pleased to have you. Right, Julio?”

“Gee, we’ll make sure she don’t give out those digits,” Julio said. The distinguished looking Latino with wavy hair glanced over at the bar and Drew’s gaze followed. The young men from the sidewalk had moved inside, and from a distance, Marie still held their attention. “Here comes your boss,” Julio said.

“Gotta go.” Gee stepped away and was swallowed up in the crowd, but stopped to look back before pushing through the swinging kitchen doors.

His boss Theo was a dark man with an athletic build and an assured air. The manager and maitre d’ carried himself in a way that left little doubt he could handle any rough situation. He escorted Drew, Julio, and Marie to the best seats in the house. Theo asked Drew a question, and Drew, smiling, gestured toward Gee, who quickly ducked into the kitchen.

At a stage-front table, Marie was treated to dinner, and after the show, Drew and Julio released her back into Gee’s care. The young couple finished the evening at a popular hip-hop hangout.