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## **Chapter 2: La Pegajosa, Pinar del Rio, 1968**

The school was assigned to forty-five days of farm work in the region of San Cristóbal, in the province of Pinar del Rio. The girls' camp was on the northeast quarter of a diversified farm two kilometers away from the boys' barracks. This arrangement rendered some girls desolate, wondering what they would do during their idle time without boys for whom to shave armpits and legs, wear tight clothes and try new hairdos.

Most cityfied young *habaneras* would have given anything to be excused from participating in the country-wide program, but only those who held an authentic physician's slip were exempt. The slip was authentic only when issued by one of the government-established hospitals or walk-in clinics. The few remaining private physicians were waiting for visas to emigrate, and their opinions were not considered official.

Celeste and Rosi stood together, holding on to the restraints directly behind the truck's cab, covering their mouths and noses against the rising dust that clung to their sweaty skin. The dilapidated vehicle hadn't been filled to capacity with students and their cargo, so there was room to stretch and even sit, but the truck bed was carpeted by recent cow droppings.

"At least cows are herbivores," Celeste tried to comfort Rosi, who looked pale and sweaty as she stoically grasped the railing, fighting nausea. "Their shit is somehow cleaner."

The caravan came to a grinding stop in front of a gate. High-pitched exclamations of protest and disgust rose, as some of the girls lost their balance and made direct contact with manure. From behind a curtain of dust, the name of the farm emerged both as a warning and a promise in large, red letters, *La Pegajosa*, The Sticky One.

"Was this place named in honor of a venereal disease?" A girl asked.

"That's disgusting!" another yelled.

"Oh, be quiet!"

Many of the passengers embraced their bags in silence while others echoed the Communist Youth members' jubilation with their own little cheers.



Soon the trucks started again for another fifteen minutes of tumbling and bouncing. And finally, the caravan clanked to a full stop in front of a row of cinderblock barracks which looked more and more prison-like as the dust settled. Teachers, transformed now into unit chiefs, were the first to descend from the trucks, some jumping off with ease, while others helplessly sat on the edge of the truck bed, requiring assistance from all sides. Celeste jumped off the side of the truck to assist many others after depositing an unsteady Rosi on firm land.

Turned into members of a workers' brigade, the rest of the students dropped off the trucks like heavy weights and trailed behind their unit chiefs, their eyes fixated on the drab buildings that would be home for a month and a half. As reality set in, the cheers died down.

*Compañera* Brígida, nick-named *Frígida* by the students, was the new principal of the school, and the commander-in-chief at the camp. Hand-picked by the Ministry of Education, she was assigned the mission of reforming disaffected youth. To that end she was placed in a target school that, because of its location in the upper-scale neighborhood of El Vedado, was filled with the offspring of the former privileged class. Since her appointment, *Compañera* Brígida had militarized the school and dispatched a number of unruly boys to special camps to be reformed by labor. Girls who misbehaved were subject to school transfers into undesirable neighborhoods where they would have to fraternize with those they had once seen as little more than scum, now the new proletariat. Fully aware of how widely feared she was, *Compañera* Brígida flaunted her position of authority, and abused it with the blessings of the Ministry. Having looked forward to the moment when the student body would be at her mercy, far from home, on this day she beamed, barking orders to her immediate inferiors, the teachers. They too had been chosen. A purge of the educational system had left only those teachers who had become members of the Communist Party and of the "people's militia." Therein the reason for the sudden fall of the former principal, who refused to submit. Vacancies left by those unwilling to conform were filled with new, ill-prepared teachers trained in the eastern mountains in record time. Many educators begrudgingly enlisted in the militia in order to keep the teaching job they loved, or to avoid alternative work assignments in remote locations, away from their families.

Troops were called to formation by a piercing whistle clipped between *Compañera* Brígida's protruding lips. Girls scrambled aimlessly until they spotted their unit chiefs. *Compañera* Brígida shook her head in disapproval, filled her lungs and barked, "Attention!"

When the columns were in place, however haphazardly, the principal proceeded to inspect them. With her hands behind her back she walked heavily, crunching hot gravel under her heels, a smirk twisting her face into an Edward G. Robinson look-alike.



"Do you understand what standing at attention means, *compañeras*? This is not the beach! Those backs must be straight and your heels together!... I'll say it again," She puffed her chest, "Atten-tion!"

Cringing, the girls held their positions as their commander marched past them on her way to a large crate turned into a podium. The odor of rotten cabbage permeated the container and its surroundings, attracting hundreds of pesky flies. *Compañera* Brígida kicked the crate and the swarm disbanded in all directions, creating a stir among the students.

*Compañera* Brígida's military uniform was at least one size too small. Her breasts threatened to burst out of her shirt as she stepped up onto the makeshift platform. Her pants rode up her snatch and accentuated her abdomen, wide hips, and flat buttocks.

"At ease!" She glanced at the files with obvious contempt. "You're all spoiled rotten! This is your chance to change all that!" Her eyes darted about as she gauged the effect of her opening statements on the squinting faces before her. "Princesses of El Vedado, hear me clearly! You will be up every morning before dawn! The sun will find you in the fields, ready to work. From the time this whistle sounds--she held it high so everyone would see it-- you will have one half-hour to wash, go to the latrines, and eat breakfast!" She again scanned the rows, which had become increasingly fidgety. "No tweezing of eyebrows, no shaving of legs, no filing of nails... This is where the Revolution continues to be fought! And you're going to fight for it, too, whether you like it or not!" She pushed her sleeves up. "But if, by chance, any of you goes against regulations, the consequences will be severe! Those who arrive last to formation in the morning will have to stay in camp to clean the latrines, sweat in the kitchen stirring pots, and scour the whole place down." *Compañera* Brígida flashed her crooked smile and continued to recite rules to the young troops. She announced that each night a different pair of girls, hoe in hand, would have to stand guard in front of each barracks, in case of enemy intrusion or irregular activities of any kind. "We have to be watchful!" she warned. "The enemy lurks around every corner! The *compañeras* standing guard will be responsible for everything that happens in this camp during their watch. If something goes wrong, they will inform me immediately, or pay the same price as the perpetrators."

Gasps were heard among the troops as their duties were further delineated. Many grimaced, glancing at each other and rolling their eyes in mutual commiseration.

Pale and clammy, Rosi still felt a bit queasy. Celeste stood behind her, sweat running down her back. She contemplated Rosi's hair, which glistened like gold under the sun. Its gloss remained in spite of all the dust it had braved that day. "Poor Rosi" She thought. "She's too delicate for this place."



"And now!" *Compañera* Brígida's delivery, in a sudden *crescendo*, yanked Celeste from her contemplation. "I want you to express your gratitude to someone who's taken great pains to provide us with so many comforts..." She introduced *Compañero* Rufino, the production coordinator, and the only male who would spend any time around the girls' camp. "His job here is to give us our labor assignments in the fields, to make sure things are in order, and to drive the cooks in and out of camp."

Rufino, a small man with a missing front tooth, helped *Compañera* Brígida off the crate and stood in her place, taking his hat off and puffing his chest. "It is a greatly tremendous honor for me to welcome you, *compañeras* from Havana. You have come to *La Pegajosa* to sweat for the glory of our country!" he proclaimed, shaking his fist in the air. *¡La Pegajosa* welcomes you!ö

The Communist Youth Union members applauded, and an encouraged *Compañero* Rufino continued, straining his voice. "You will occupy the same bunks that other hard-working *compañeros* have soaked with their sweat."

A grunt emerged among the girls.

"There's hard work to be done in these fields," he declared, making a sweeping gesture with his arm. "We must achieve our production goals for our sector, and for the country, and you look like the kind of *compañeras* who would make *La Pegajosa* proud. *Viva La Revolución!*"

A few *vivas* followed his address, and Rufino descended from the crate with a satisfied smile on his face.

Groups of thirty to forty girls were assigned to a pair of teachers, each forming a unit. Two units were then assigned to each large barracks, which could shelter up to one hundred workers.

The girls turned to face ten boxy cinderblock structures and began to file in, seeking respite from the sun. Many embraced their belongings, sniffing, already longing for their worried parents and the comforts of home.

As they entered the buildings, their jaws dropped in horror. The three-level bunks were nothing but frames made of knobby wood that had never been exposed to sandpaper. Sacks made of burlap were stretched over the frame and nailed down, with some of the nails sticking out menacingly. Several burlap sheets sewn together in large stitches served as lumpy mattresses.

The entire place was uniformly drab, and the girls searched in vain for a choice spot. The dirt floor was compact and carefully swept, and the low, narrow windows were



open to a steamy breeze. There were no shutters, only sacks, rolled up and tied with thin rope across the window panes. A pungent odor of damp burlap permeated the air.

"What kind of a dump is this?" a tall, dark-haired girl dropped her homemade back-pack on the floor and made mug handles of her arms. "Do they expect us to actually live here, and sleep in these, these, sacks?"

"Shut up, you idiot!" somebody whispered.

"This is subhuman!" she insisted. "When my parents find out..."

"What will they do?" challenged the girl standing by her side. "Shut up or I'll smack you!"

"My parents are going to..."

"Your parents can't do shit, and neither can mine."

"What's going on back there?" The unit chief began to walk in the direction of the voices. But the argument was dropped at once.

Hesitantly, the girls began to claim bunks here and there, placing their bags on the "mattresses," then looking around like caged mice, wondering what would come next.