



CHAPTER ONE

The old muscle car veered around the Malecón wall. It was that time at dusk when the sun had set and made space for the moon, but not yet the stars. Locals of La Habana Vieja flocked, nightly, to the low bearing stone wall that separated land and sea. The Malecón opened up a real-life living space to family, neighbors and visitors to dance, cuddle up, and converse. Their backdrop was the sparkling 90 miles of sea, separating the Cuban shore from the Florida Keys. The horizon line bled crimson before it reached into the orange, purple and midnight blue sky.

Driving by the droves of locals gathered along the winding Malecón, their car passed a lighthouse and a grand hotel before reaching a heavily shrouded tropical neighborhood. The lack of street lights blended their left and right turns together.

It was moments such as this that Frida found her mind's eye would double-check its list of red flags, allowing it to whisper to her heart and eyes, and guide her arms and feet. *"Two young women, dressed in short slinky numbers, heels high and nailed polished, winding down dark roads, an elementary fluency of the local language, driven by a handsome young man, whom they depended on for their safe arrival, and return, to their casa particular in the middle of the night. Oh and did I mention that we have zero cell service in this country?"* Frida allowed the thought a moment of attention before the remix to 'Despasito' blared into existence.

Slowly, they pulled up to the congestion of classic cars, each restored by the resilience of Cubano hands. A multi-level brick warehouse was lit up by spotlights, illuminating the large painted stencil reading 'La Factoria de Arte Cubano'. Long lines merged with those lingering outside the cars around the building's perimeter.

Their driver came to a stop, 'Hor-don' is how he pronounced his name. "Lindas?" Jordan held out his hand to assist his precious cargo from the car's original bench-style backseat. "A las once y media?"

Their agreed pick-up was at 11:30pm; two and a half hours to either love or hate this place. "Si, papi, once y media. Gracias a ti!" They'd barely kissed and waved him off before another young gentlemen approached. They picked out the Spanish words they understood: "muuuucho tiempo," "entrada," "V.I.P.," "no esperar," and "veinte dinero." The young man, dressed in a crisp white crewneck, escorted the two women around the other side of the building where even more people waited to get inside. He gave them two black cards in exchange for \$20CUC and they crossed the wide threshold that led directly to the bar. "Who knew 'V.I.P.' was universal?"

"I know, right. That was easier done than anything else so far on this trip." Marli led the way, one foot strapped into a sparkly platform followed by another. Their afternoon at Playas del Este bronzed her skin and struck a match to the bright white dress that hugged her like it missed her. As her five foot muscular frame worked its way around the bar, at least three men went thirsty and realized they needed a drink too. A shorter gentleman was a few steps from his first move when Frida wedged her way in between he and her good friend. "*Five-foot whaaa?*" She could already hear Marli taking offense to the man's flattery, so she saved them both the trouble.

"Girl, what chu drinkin'?"

"Agua con gas y vodka y limón."

"Haha! Girl, just get a mojito."

"But I don't want the sugarrrr." Frida knew it would make her recovery tomorrow that much harder if she drank sugary cocktails all night. She needed to be her best for their event in the afternoon.

"Dos Mojitos, por favor!" Marli ordered.

Frida whipped her head and reach out twinkling fingers to the brooding bartender, "POR FAVOR, UNO SIN ACUZAR!" He nodded his head and made notes on their black cards.

The walls on the first three levels of the eastern side of the building were graced with oils on canvas, acrylics on metals and a bizarre exhibit of deconstructed Nike sneakers. From a distant side of the factory, a mean bass line could be felt. Heads turned and their heels clacked on the hardwood as they approached each art piece, drinks in hand. The DJ spun Puerto Rican trap music, adding sass to their step.

Marli stopped in front of a life-size photograph of 20 Latinas assembled in a long conga line. They varied in age, color and shape, but were all dressed in the same sparkly red leotards, flesh-tone stockings and black ballroom pumps. From the glittery eyeshadow down to the red fingernails, it was all the same. Their hair was pinned up into French twists, each of their hair textures interpreting the style to suit its owner. However cliché, their smiles stole the show. Their electric energy welcomed the viewer to share their joyous debut.

"Who doesn't love beautiful women?" The man's tone was intentional and sure that Frida had wanted to speak with him, in particular. Marli had already moved on to observe another piece, leaving Frida with the choice of making a new friend or remaining distant.

Blame it on the mojitos or his oddly placed Jamaican accent, but Frida replied, "yes and now I'm wondering who they arrrrre," landing her narrowed cat-like brown eyes on his ocean blue ones.

He laughed at her defensiveness. Frida used the moment of distraction to take in the stranger's spicy smell and polished shoes. "Zimri." He offered his hand; his nails were clean. The other hand went into the pockets of pants that fit him well. Frida returned focus to his eyes, which were framed by wavy black hair and wrinkled at their creases. "Bonita, excuse me. I'm Zimri. And what is your name?"

"Frrrida." She glanced back toward the photo while politely feigning interest in the gentleman.

"Oh! Well, 'Frrrida who loves art', you should see the other half."

She looked left and then right. The life-size photograph of the 20 showgirls, young and old, thin and wide, took up the entire wall space. "Donde?"

"Oh believe me, if you love this, you will need to see the rest of it. Please, allow me."

Frida smiled at his manners and felt flattered by the exchange when she remembered she wasn't here alone. "*Marli!*" Marli was giggled up with a tall bronzy figure just a few feet away, when she met her friend's eyes.

"Mi hermano, Peter," Zimri introduced. They all moved to the next phase of the gallery floors that wound upward in a gradual spiral. On the third floor, they passed by a 3D welded map of the island of Cuba. It was made up entirely of small brass and gold keys. They came to a corner of the third floor where they met a young woman attending an archway into a parlor.

Through the arch, Frida's eyes landed on the bookcase at the far back wall. As they approached, the photograph on the neighboring bricks came into view displaying the 20 showgirls in the same conga line as before. In this photograph, they, again, wore the same

uniform from head to toe. However, instead of the sparkly leotards, they wore their birthday suits. The happy, joyous women ranged from 20 to 80 years old, from underweight and overweight to dazzling smiles and bright eyes. Not a stocking or a stitch remained, but their make-up and hairstyles were left in place. Marli had taken to the perimeter of the wood paneled parlor, getting comfortable with Peter in the smoking chairs.

"Ruins the whole thing, doesn't it?" Zimri's comment collided with the side of Frida's face as she checked on her friend. She allowed the confusion to consume her thick eyebrows, demanding an explanation. *"Don't make me regret talking to you downstairs,"* she thought.

"The women downstairs were on an even playing field," he continued. "They were collectively beautiful, united, all dressed in glitter, all smiles and it was easy to love them."

"Downstairs they are the same women they are up here. What has changed is the viewer's perception of who they are." Frida's square jaw line became rigid just beyond her polite smile.

"These women chose to pose nude," he said a-matter-of-factly. "The people's outlook that comes with that is known to be harsh."

"So their clothes comes off and you feel 'welcome' to judge them?" She began to mock his patriarchal arrogance, "step right on up! Come one, come all!"

"Look at how they talk about your president's wife."

"Oh God, don't get me started on her." Frida stepped closer to the photograph, standing shoulder to shoulder with one of the shorter women. She appreciated that she was not the only one with stretch marks on her thighs, breasts that had succumbed to gravity and sun spots that freckled her arms. She looked over to her friend with her

petite muscular frame, cropped platinum blonde haircut and a magnetizing presence. Whatever she lacked in voluptuousness, she made up for in attitude. *"With all that confidence, could she relate to the feeling of drowning in judgment?"*

"Ok, so I hear you." Zimri leaned his shoulder against one of the petite showgirl's updos and spoke more intimately, "but lets be realistic. No one wants to see this: their future selves, or wife, in my case, all wrinkled and out of shape. The lady behind you is veiny with thin skin and behind her, who knows when's the last time she saw her pum-pum." Frida's wide heart-shaped face attempted to mask her irritation as she restrained her bushy brows from furrowing. Her oversized mouth was doll-like and dimpled at the corners as she forced a smile. Zumri read right through it. "Haha! So are you telling me you think all women are beautiful in their own right? So whom among them would you trade your body with?"

Frida was unwilling to participate in such an obvious trap. He was giddy to judge these women and yet if he were on display, his enthusiasm would greatly differ. This fair, handsome face with the cute accent was becoming an energy leech. Her eyes reached over to her friend for help, but all she saw was Marli's head thrown backward in laughter. Just as Frida had accepted her burden to shoulder for the evening, two tall men walked in, alongside a woman with sharp eyes scanning the room. One of the men clearly belonged to her, but the shorter of the two sent daggers into Frida's chest just before she casually turned back to the photograph. Her heart was raced, hoping for another look at the new flavor in the room. Desperate to change the conversation's frequency, Frida pointed at three of the showgirls and asked an age old question: "Shag, marry, or kill. Which ones?"

Zimri laughed and began to weigh his options. Frida tucked her hair behind her ears, cautious of tangling it with her gold hoops, turned her head slightly and met eyes with the mysterious man in black. Her cheeks flushed, and her shoulders swiveled away, never expecting that he'd still be looking at her. He looked as much Cubano as she did, but his style, like hers, did not fit in. Meanwhile, 'Mr. Feminist' had yet to make a hard decision on any showgirl.

"Ugh! Ok, her, I'd shag her."

"That seemed very difficult for you," she half scoffed, half chuckled at his shallowness.

"I mean... isn't that the hardest part of this game? Ok... then... marry her and definitely KILL her!"

"F*! What did she do to you, man?" Frida's smoke signals had reached her target and his presence instantly shifted the mood.

Frida fiddled with a curl by her décolletage. "Haha! Nooo, you misunderstand. It's a game," she raised her eyebrows as if she had conceded to play as a courtesy to Zimri. "Have you played?" She pointed to three more women in the photograph and asked the same question.

"How can I know something so intimate by just looking at the surface? This woman," he gestured to a large woman with full lips, hips and stomach and continued on his simple trail of thought, "should I assume she would please me in every way, be a faithful lifelong partner, solely because I am attracted to her physically?"

"Oh God, this guy..." Zimri mumbled, and rolled his eyes at nauseam.

"I see you didn't miss the intent of the photograph. Did you see the first one downstairs?" Frida inquired.

"I don't assume I know what the artist intended... this is what I feel. And no, I didn't. There's a second part? Donde? Where?"

Frida's knees shook a bit. *"Wow! He hadn't seen the first photograph?"* As she described what he'd missed and the connections she'd made between the two pieces, Zimri disappeared from her awareness. 'Mystery Man' held his dimpled chin with fingernails painted black. He listened deeply and nodded as she spoke.

"How interesting. I wonder what kind of response the artist would get if the two pieces were hung directly across from each other."

"You're so right! On opposing walls, the response would be completely altered. And I imagine that your conclusions would be drawn more instantaneously."

"Yes. It seems the artist's intention was purposeful to display these beautiful women in a closed off room... almost offering a certain sense of privacy." Frida enjoyed the ease of his space and that, beyond not judging women by their bodies, he didn't mind talking with his hands while speaking. It made him seem real.

"I couldn't agree more. Separating the second image is not an issue of retaining their dignity, but a sign of respect. Oh... I'm so sorry, I'm Frida by the way."

"Hola Frrrida. I'm Rio."

He was tanned like a hazelnut with auburn curly hair that he'd dyed blonde on the ends. His olive deep U-neck tee exposed an acceptable amount of hair on his defined chest and was the only color he wore other than black: a rolled up black frayed denim jacket, black wax denim pants with rips at both knees and chunky black leather boots. He wore several necklaces and nothing more, other than the collage of colorful ink committed to his arms. His

almond shaped eyes matched his clothing. They brought out the shadows in the cleft of his chin and the bit of coal applied at the corners of his eyes. However, the mole under his lower left lashes was her favorite part of his face, as it made her think of the cryptic ancient Egyptians.

"These are my friends." He gestured to the taller fellow David, and Aline whom was assumed to be his girlfriend. They'd become familiar with Marli and Peter while Zimri had given in to being the 3rd wheel, stirring up the group with his crass comments. Rio chimed in, "hey, so there's a band playing here tonight. Shall we dance?"

They left together, now a caravan of seven, but Marli branched off to walk with Frida before Rio could take the opportunity. "Girl! There is some 'talent' in here!" They laughed, elated about the eye candy. "Peter and everyone seems cool, well Zimri is a bit much, but..." Frida exaggerated her head nods in agreement. "Haha! Yea, Peter said they're all going to the tobacco fields in Viñales tomorrow, but we have our event tomorrow." Frida nodded and sipped her 'mojita sin azucar.' He says they're going to the tobacco fields tour for work," Marli held up air quotes as she said "'market research.'" Her law degree could sniff out a liar and she was used to men stretching the success of their business ventures to impress her. "Girl, he's probably a just Cohiba enthusiast." They both laughed, holding each other as their group made its way into a large auditorium with moody purple lighting. A mini exhibit of small photographs was off to one side. A large bar was anchored at a far corner and just across it was a 20 foot projection of a black-and-white film with bench seating in front. The back wall was missing almost entirely and was wide enough to pull in a small aircraft.

"No one in Havana smokes Cohibas anyway."

"Hey Frida," Rio cut in, "would you like a drink?" Marli puckered her lips behind him and Frida tried to compose her smile.

"Sure. Marli, you?"

"Shots! Lets go!"

With a little more wiggle in their legs and heat in their chests, they carefully approached a concrete stairway, each of the three women being assisted by a male in the group. An aluminum tunnel fed the partygoers into a separate building holding the live band with another bar just before the entrance. "Last call for alcohol!" Marli was lit and Frida grinned from ear to ear, both of them swaying their hips to the Latin beat that pushed through from the other side of the doors.

The scene inside was incredible! An intimate concert venue with cathedral ceilings and walls covered with ornate baroque picture frames containing faded 1980s movie posters. They were hung just out of reach and then one on top of the other, about 6 frames high. The stage made great use of a fog machine and Broadway lights turning any performer into a superstar. However, the band was so fantastic on its own, it ignited a bounce in the crowd. Sweat in Havana was inevitable even inside this air conditioned venue, throbbing to capacity with locals and visitors alike.

Marli leaned into her friend's ear, "loosen up, Frida! Dance with him! He's really cute." Rio whistled and clapped his hands in applause at the band as they finished one tune and began another. For the entire first few songs, he was transfixed, then he shuffled his feet and turned on a dime, as if only just remembering he wanted to dance.

Without any notice, he took Frida's hands and moved his hips to the salsa rhythm. His footwork was amazing, but Frida could only mirror him in hopes that it looked ok. He spun her around and around, the lights flashing and swirling above her head. Several songs later, she and Rio were so close together, him holding her waist and her hands around his neck, that they moved as one. He dipped her backwards during the long finale note of a Spanish love song. He ran the fingertips of his large hand from her neck to her collarbone, the other gripping her waist. In her deep backbend, she saw 'Mr. Feminist' a few feet away, swaying side-to-side, with a woman who knew how to use her hips. Rio pulled her right-side up again and firmly held her against him. Pressing their foreheads together, they looked down at their noses and lips, their knees intertwined and their hips weaving through the melodies.

A DJ inserted himself in between the band's sets and played a variety of reggaeton, soca, hip-hop, salsa and pop music. It became a challenge of who knew which style of dance. Rio had all the Latin moves down and still easily followed as Frida's hips winded to an old Dancehall song. They both posed like John Travolta, with great enthusiasm, as the Bee Gees 'Staying Alive' pumped up the crowd. Rio was especially elated when Frida taught him how to Dougie. However, nothing topped the room's energy when the DJ played '24K Magic' by Bruno Mars: "Toniiiiiiiiight!!!" and everyone went wild.

"Sh*! Frida! We have five minutes to get to our driver!!" Frida took one last glance around the venue and then at Rio. She kissed him on both cheeks with no time for a real Spanish good bye. Before she knew it, she was pulled out of the crowd by her friend, paying her ridiculously cheap bar tab and running up the wide V.I.P. entrance into the dense street. "Oh thank God, Jordan! Gracias papi! Lo siento!"

The driver was prompt and perched at the hood of his classic red Chevy. "No problema, lindas. Era solo diez minutos. Vamonos!" And just like before he lent his hand to assist them inside, whisking them away into the neighborhood's tropical foliage and back to La Habana Vieja.

"That was fun!!"

"Ugh, I need water."