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She had even dreamt of him, that he had been thrown out of heaven and was falling through the increasingly darkening flames to Hell. As he fell, his hair and beard caught fire and swirled about his face. The flames resembled water. He beat at them with his hands, until the hands caught fire as well. The expulsion took a very long time, so that Ofelia was able to study Señor Guevara's disgrace, the way his clothing fell away from him in ashes, long strings of ash left floating above, carried away on the air. He tumbled, his skin bubbling. It tightened and split into pieces, curling away from the musculature underneath, which itself began to sear with the increasing heat. One of Señor Guevara's feet was bloodied, and both were badly scratched, as though he had had to walk for miles, for days, over rocks and through the thorny underbrush of the hills around the village.

The señor was not alone in his descent. Many soldiers fell with him, all falling separately, quickly and without order. Their uniforms caught fire, and the lines of sweat seemed to conduct the flames through their clothing and to adhere them to the soldiers' skin, as though the flames were made of thick, acid-filled petroleum.

## **A Kiss For Señor Guevara**

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## CHAPTER 1

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## CHAPTER 2

When they had brought Señor Guevara into the village of La Higuera, Ofelia had hid in the kitchen of her mother's house, fearful that he might kill her. This is the way Communists were, she knew, especially Communist guerillas, and she didn't want to have anything to do with the *señor*. They ate people's hearts. They took your house away and gave it to rapists. The worst of it was that they wouldn't let you go to Mass. So she worried about poor Father Javier, the traveling priest who came to La Higuera once a month, who was so skinny and whose gums oozed blood from around his teeth, and with whom Ofelia loved to eat lunch because he was always so grateful to her when she served him.

She sat at one of the wooden tables in her mother's kitchen, staring at the doorway that led out to the track between her house and the schoolhouse, where the army had put Señor Guevara.

There had been four men, actually. Señor Guevara and Willy, who had helped him walk up the path into the village. Willy had appeared very frightened, a bum dressed in rags, his old boots scuffed with age and long use, muddied. His left arm extended across Señor Guevara's back, who would be taller than Willy were he able to straighten himself up. Señor Guevara was hunched over as though he were having trouble breathing. He appeared younger and even more frightened than Willy, as though he didn't know what to do and was horrified by the soldiers. Señor Guevara had been shot in the leg. His walking was hardly walking at all. As his eyes had moved from right to left, frightening Ofelia with the intensity of their murderousness, his scummy hair decorated with twigs and dirt, and his feet, in their ragged sandals, cut and bruised so that he could barely walk at all, she had retreated to the doorway of her house, where she had stood hand in hand with her mother.

The third prisoner - she learned a few minutes later that his name was Pacho - was very badly wounded, and was carried to the

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schoolhouse on a stretcher. Blood dripped to the mud from the canvas, and his face had been burned. The fourth prisoner followed behind the stretcher, a Chinese man to whom one of the soldiers spoke with quite evident anger, pushing him into the schoolhouse with the butt of his rifle.

“Hurry it up, *chinito*,” the soldier grumbled.

It was just as the radio had said. Señor Guevara *was* the devil. He was so dirty and possessed that he could only be The Malignant One, The Demon. “Shit itself,” as one of the soldiers had said. His eyes had been electric with the intention of torturing his captors. Tossed into one of the schoolrooms by himself, he was the animal of the world.

But why are they putting him in my schoolroom? Ofelia asked. How could they jail him in so respectable a place, the place she went every morning with her mother, where she prayed and sang the anthem of her own sacred Bolivia?

Where she read the few books that they had, such interesting books, about elves in snowy forests, about numbers and how to spell, about pretty *gringas* awakened by the lump of a single pea, about jet planes and enormous dams and the United States in general.

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