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# Bogotá Blessings

E. A. WEST

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## **Bogotá Blessings**

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## Dedication

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

~ Matthew 5:7



## Endorsements

### *Dreams Do Come True*

"Ms. West's writing flows as seamlessly as invisible thread. She's able to capture the reader and bring them straight into the story." ~ Miss Mae, author of romantic mysteries

"I loved this sweet uplifting story...I will definitely be on the lookout for more from this author as she convinced me that dreams really do come true." ~ Theresa Joseph, The Romance Studio

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### *The Key to Charlotte*

"This is an incredibly sweet romance, profound and absolutely unforgettable—a bite-sized read that packs a super-sized emotional wallop." ~ Delia Latham, inspirational romance author

"I highly recommend *The Key to Charlotte* to anyone who needs to be reminded of the love available to us through both other humans and God." ~ Crystal, CK2S Kwips and Kritiques

### *Breath of Christmas*

"There is something so beautiful about the way EA West creates her stories. They tug on the heart, they depict realistic characters, and I love the unique circumstances and fresh plots she develops." ~ Marianne Evans, inspirational romance author







# 1

“Mateo Luis! I need to speak with you.”

Mateo Luis Gómez Días paused with his hand on the door. Why did the pastor always need him when he was about to take a break? Sighing, Mateo turned toward gray-haired Carlos Ramírez Ochoa. “Yes, Pastor?”

“Do you remember the renovation consultants coming from the United States?”

“Yes, of course. You asked that I help them with the renovation and any translation work.”

“I need you to go with Maria to collect them from the airport in an hour. I’m afraid I must visit an elderly congregant who is not doing well, so I can’t go with her.” Carlos sighed and combed his fingers through his short, thinning hair. “You know how my wife feels about traveling the city with foreigners by herself.”

“I know.” Mateo scratched his jaw, making a mental note to find time to shave before he sported a full beard. Even though Bogotá was safer than it had been just a few years ago, the violence from drug traffickers still invaded the city limits from time to time. The lingering fear of foreigners being kidnapped at gunpoint despite the drop in abductions kept the pastor’s wife on edge. Plus the mission was in a bad neighborhood, which put everyone at risk. Mateo dropped his hand to his side, knowing he couldn’t refuse the pastor’s request. “I will go with her and do

my best to ensure she and the Americans arrive here safely.”

“Thank you, Mateo Luis.” Carlos clapped a hand on Mateo’s shoulder, giving him a warm smile. “God truly blessed us by bringing you to us.”

“I am the one who is blessed.” Mateo reached up and squeezed the pastor’s hand. “You gave me a purpose and a family.”

Carlos chuckled and withdrew his hand. “Why don’t we just say that God has blessed us both and leave it at that?”

“I can live with that.” Mateo put his hand on the door once more. “Tell Maria I will meet her at the bus in fifteen minutes.”

He stepped outside and gazed at the clear blue sky framed by stucco and brick buildings in various states of repair. A group of children played *fútbol* down the dusty block, their clothing ragged and their faces dirty. His heart went out to them. He had been like them once, one of *los desechables*—the disposables—impoverished and starving, barely surviving his life on the streets spending much of his time looking for ways to get food or money. Then he had been taken by the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, and his life had become a waking nightmare. Those years before he’d been left for dead were the reason he worked so hard to keep the street children out of the hands of the FARC.

Mateo drew in a deep breath of cool air to clear his mind of the memories of his teen years. The FARC was in his past, and God had forgiven him for the things he had been forced to do. What mattered now was helping to insure the street children of Bogotá were given the best opportunity to survive and possibly, by

some miracle, even thrive.

He headed toward the group playing fútbol, regulars at the mission. They grinned and ran toward him, their game forgotten. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a handful of hard candy in distinctive green wrappers with yellow letters.

"Is this what you're hoping for?" Mateo said, showing them the coconut-flavored sweet he carried everywhere.

"Please, Mateo, may we have a piece?" one of the boys asked.

"I have enough for all of you." He passed out the candy, then unwrapped one and popped it in his mouth. The sweet coconut flavor took him back to the first time he had entered the mission as a seventeen-year-old on crutches, barely healed from a surgery that saved as much of his left leg as possible. Maria had welcomed him warmly and given him a piece of the coconut candy to keep him occupied while he waited for Carlos to arrive.

A tug on his sleeve brought Mateo back to the present, and he looked down to find Claudia standing beside him, her hopeful brown eyes peering out of a dirt-smudged face. The six-year-old was one of his favorite regulars at the mission, and her sweet smile had melted the heart of more than one volunteer.

He pulled out two pieces of candy and handed them to her. "Here you go, Claudia. I haven't forgotten you. There is one for your brother as well."

"Thank you, Mateo," she said with a shy smile. Then she darted away, presumably to find her nine-year-old brother, Juan Miguel. The two children claimed to live with relatives, whose supposed relationship to them changed with great regularity, but

no one from the mission had ever seen evidence of an adult presence in their lives.

The fútbol game resumed, and Mateo headed for the parking lot behind the mission. He would love to save every needy child, with or without family, but it was an impossible dream. The best he could do was brighten their lives with a little candy now and then, share the love of Christ with them, and help however many children he could. If by doing that he kept even one desperate youngster from voluntarily joining the FARC for the promise of three meals a day and two sets of clothing, he would consider it worth the heartbreak of seeing so many kids suffer in extreme poverty.

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Passing through customs was a breeze, thanks to Shaw Restoration's excellent reputation, local connections, and attention to detail in all the travel arrangements and paperwork. Kayla Shaw adjusted the straps of her backpack, then hefted her suitcase and followed the other two members of the team toward the exit. The number of armed soldiers in the airport was a little disconcerting, but Kayla knew they were there to protect the passengers and the people picking them up or dropping them off.

Angie Martin, the other woman on the team, fell into step with Kayla. "Do you know who's supposed to be picking us up?"

"My dad said the pastor in charge of the mission and his wife will meet us. Since I've never seen them, I'm hoping they'll have a sign of some sort so we can identify them." Kayla scanned the crowd, but didn't

see anyone who appeared to be the Ramírez couple.

They stopped near the exit and gathered around Kayla. She looked into the tired faces and wished her father had chosen someone else to be the fearless leader of the group, someone with more international travel experience. Maybe even someone from the Bogotá or Cartagena office. But he'd given her leadership, since he'd been unable to come on the trip himself. Something about a member of the family being the best person to represent the family business. All she knew was that she had no idea what to do now that it appeared their ride had forgotten to show up. She'd been warned against using any kind of public transportation, but her father hadn't given her a back-up plan in case of emergency. Perhaps she could call the Bogotá office to see if they could send someone to pick them up.

"So, what now?" Paul Reed said. "After reading that information from the State Department, there's no way I'm going to suggest we take a taxi."

"Or a bus," Angie chimed in. "Maybe they got caught in traffic."

"Let's pray that's all it is."

Kayla's gaze drifted to the door as an older woman hurried in with a piece of cardboard in her hand. The woman looked over and held up the sign with a questioning look—*Shaw Restoration*.

Relief washed over Kayla as she returned the woman's smile and nodded. "Our ride's here."

She led the way over to the woman. "Hi, I'm Kayla Shaw, and this is Angie Martin and Paul Reed. We're the group from Shaw Restoration."

"I am Maria Santiago Uribe de Ramírez, wife of Pastor Carlos Ramírez Ochoa. Please forgive me for

being late," the woman said in heavily accented English. "The bus did not want to start, and Mateo Luis had to fix it before we could come."

"I understand," Kayla assured her.

"My husband sends his apologies for not being here, but he was called away by an emergency." Maria lifted a hand toward the exit. "Come. Mateo is waiting to take us to the mission."

As soon as Kayla saw the rusty, ancient bus with the mission name scrawled in faded blue paint across the side, she completely understood why Maria had been late. The vehicle looked as if it would take a miracle to get it to run, and Kayla made a mental note to contact the missions committee of the church she attended with her father. Perhaps they could raise enough to fix up the bus or possibly buy a newer one. The mission needed reliable transportation, and their current bus appeared to be far from it.

A swarthy-skinned man stepped out of the open door of the vehicle, and Kayla's heart leapt into her throat. His dark, brooding eyes scanned the group, his stance wary as he took them in. A scar down the left side of his face made him look even more menacing than the heavy, dark stubble shadowing his face.

Maria stepped up beside him with a warm smile. "This is Mateo Luis. He works for the mission, so you will likely see him often. Mateo, this is Kayla, Angie, and Paul."

Kayla struggled to find her voice, certain it was her responsibility as team leader to respond. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

He nodded, his gaze drifting over her. "If you will move to the back of the bus, we can load your luggage."

As they followed him, Kayla noticed a slight limp in his walk. She felt a small twinge of guilt for judging him by his appearance alone. Since he worked for the mission, he was probably a very nice guy, even if he did look as scary as the rebels she'd seen in news reports. Perhaps his limp had been caused by the violence that had gripped Colombia for several decades. That could explain his wariness and the scar on his face as well.

Still, a little wariness of her own until she knew him better wouldn't be amiss.

Luggage loaded, they boarded the bus and it started with a groan of protest. Maria kept up a running commentary on the passing city, but Kayla couldn't focus on it. Mateo kept looking in the rearview mirror, his gaze locking briefly onto her before returning to the road once more. His interest was disconcerting, and she hoped she wouldn't have to see him too often. Nice guy or not, the man gave off some kind of mysterious vibe that left her wondering just how many skeletons he had hidden in his closet.

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Mateo parked the bus in its usual space behind the mission and turned off the engine. It coughed and sputtered for a moment before falling silent. Although they'd kept it running for years with creativity and prayer, he had a feeling the poor vehicle was nearing the end of its life. Hopefully, it would continue to run until enough donations came in to replace it.

He opened the door and motioned the Americans out. The leader of the trio, Kayla, gave him a nervous smile as she passed by, her light brown ponytail

swinging gently as she walked. Mateo's heart thumped painfully as he watched her descend to the pavement with graceful movements. Rarely had he seen such a beautiful volunteer, but he knew he had no chance with her. Not even an ugly woman would want a man with one leg. Besides, she would go back to America in two weeks, and he would still be here in Colombia, doing whatever was needed to help the mission succeed.

After the Americans retrieved their luggage from the back of the bus, Maria took them to the dormitory next to the main building. Volunteers stayed in rooms on the second floor; he and the Ramírezes had apartments on the ground floor. Mateo went to the common area of the mission, where children and teens gathered daily to play games, learn to read and write, and just be kids. Many of them wandered in off the streets, but some were orphans who lived in the mission's over-crowded children's home.

"Mateo!" One of the local volunteers hurried over with a big smile on her face. "Have the Americans arrived?"

"Yes. Maria is showing them to the dormitory." He fought down his amusement over Luz's excitement.

She often dreamed of going to another country and spent as much time as she could talking to the foreign volunteers about what life was like in whatever nation they were from.

"Has Carlos returned yet?"

"Not yet." Luz glanced toward the group she had been with. "Some of the older boys would like you to spend time with them."

Mateo nodded. He often acted as a male role model for the boys, and the older boys in particular



seemed to look to him for reassurance that they could grow into godly men who earned the respect of others through hard work rather than gaining it by creating fear. An idea to help them came to mind, and he turned to Luz. "If you see Carlos before I do, could you tell him I need to speak with him?"

"Of course." She gave him another smile as a group of younger children called to her, and then she hurried away.

Mateo went and sat in an empty seat next to the older boys playing a board game. "I hear you boys are lonely."

Raul laughed and tossed the dice. "We're not lonely. But we don't want you to get bored."

"Ah, I see." Mateo waited for one of them to mention why they wanted to talk to him. Whenever they requested his presence, at least one had something weighing on his mind that he needed to discuss.

After a few rounds of the game, the oldest of the group, Jorge, spoke up. "Eduardo is thinking about joining the FARC."

Mateo's heart stopped. Eduardo was Jorge's sixteen-year-old brother, two years older than Jorge. Three years older than Mateo had been when he was forced to join the FARC.

All game play halted as the boys waited for Mateo to speak. He took a breath and wished he wasn't having this discussion...again. "Did Eduardo say why he wants to join them?"

"He thinks it will give him better opportunities than staying here," Jorge said with a shrug. "I told him he should come talk to the people here about work, that the mission has helped others find jobs, but he thinks it would be better to join the rebels."

“It would not be better.” Memories flashed of the harsh reality faced by the young members of the FARC. “You tell him to come see me before he decides. I will talk to him.”

“Thank you, Mateo.” Relief shone in Jorge’s eyes.

The game resumed, and Mateo kept the boys company even though he wished he could go knock some sense into Eduardo. The boy had come to the mission frequently when he was younger, but his visits had become sporadic in the last year. Unlike his younger brother who had found peace and safety within the walls of the mission, Eduardo seemed unable to look past the suffering and desperation of daily life. Mateo knew the feeling all too well, but he also knew there was a better way than joining rebels or paramilitaries. Perhaps with the Americans here to renovate what would be the new children’s home, he could talk them into allowing Eduardo to work with them. It might help the boy to see that he could have a future outside of fighting, and the work experience could help him get a steady job that wasn’t likely to get him injured or killed.

Mateo excused himself from the boys and left the common room. When Carlos returned, Mateo would discuss his idea to have some of the teens help with the renovation. For now, the need to speak with Kayla lay heavy on his heart. Surely if she learned about Eduardo, she would allow him to help with the work.

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A knock on the open door interrupted Kayla’s unpacking, and she turned to find Angie stepping into the room, which was barely large enough for the

narrow bed and small chest of drawers.

“Unpacked already?” Kayla said as she set the last of her clothes in a drawer and pushed it closed. The screech of wood caused her to make a mental note to see about some wax or a bar of soap to lubricate the drawer.

Angie plopped onto the bed. “For the most part. Now, tell me what you think of the driver, Mateo Luis.”

“Um...” What did she think? Despite her initial reaction, she was starting to wish she could spend some time getting to know him. For the sake of keeping Angie from teasing her about boyfriends, however, she opted to mention her initial assessment of the man. “Do the words scary beyond imagination mean much to you?”

“Oh, yeah.” Angie laughed and nodded. “I just about had a heart attack when I first saw him. Put him in a set of fatigues, and he could easily be one of the rebels causing so much trouble down here.”

“That was my thought.” She remembered his limp and the scar on his face. Had he fought the rebels? She shook off her ponderings and focused on the reason they were in Colombia. “Do you know if Paul’s unpacked? I’d like to see if we can go over to the house we’re renovating so we can find out just what we need to do and how many people we’ll need to help us do it.”

“Let’s go ask. Maria stuck him in a room at the end of the hall.” Angie hopped off the bed and went to the door. “Oh, and I think she said she’d be downstairs if we need anything.”

“That’s what she told me,” Kayla said as she dug a notebook and pen out of her backpack.

It only took a moment to collect Paul, and then they headed downstairs to find the pastor's wife. Kayla wished the pastor was there, since her father had told her Carlos Ramírez would oversee the project. How could they start working without talking to the man in charge? Hopefully, he'd left some kind of instructions about the project with his wife.

Before they found Maria, Kayla spotted a familiar brooding figure coming toward them. The scowl on Mateo's face did nothing to calm her nerves. Neither did the nudge Angie gave her as he looked up and his expression cleared.

Mateo stopped before them, his gaze steady on Kayla. "I need to speak with you."

"Oh?" A stab of fear caused her to hold her breath. He wasn't bringing bad news, was he?

"Yes, it is about the renovation. I know a boy who would benefit from helping. He is sixteen years old."

Kayla smiled, relieved it was something so innocuous. "Well, we're going to need plenty of help to finish the house before we leave. Does he have any kind of construction experience?"

"Not that I know of." Mateo sighed and raked his fingers through his shaggy black hair. "His younger brother told me he wants to join the rebels. It is my hope that if he is given the opportunity to work on the house, he will change his mind."

The concern shining in Mateo's gaze broke through Kayla's fear. This man wasn't frightening or dangerous. He was worried about keeping children from a hazardous and traumatic life. Perhaps he had a background similar to the kids he now worked with, perhaps he didn't. All that mattered now was that she saw him for what he was—a man with a burden for

street children.

"We'd be glad to have him help," Kayla said. "I'm not sure what job we'll give him, but we'll find something for him to do. Maybe he could work with Paul on the plumbing."

"That might be best," Mateo said, his gaze going to Paul. "Eduardo has no father and needs a good male role model."

Paul's chuckle had a nervous quality to it. "I don't know how much of a role model I can be while we're working on plumbing, but I'll do my best."

"Thank you. I pray that God will use your efforts to keep Eduardo out of the FARC. That is no life for any child, even one who will soon be a man." The sincerity and sadness in Mateo's eyes tugged at Kayla's heart, but she once again sensed he had a rather dark past. His gaze returned to her, and a shiver ran down her spine. "I know you will not start working today, but would you like to see the house? I would be happy to take you there."

Kayla laughed, shaking off the sudden thought that Mateo was actually kind of handsome in a brooding rogue sort of way. "We were on our way to see if we could look at the house. It'll be easier to plan out a work schedule and arrange for supplies once we have a better idea of what needs to be done."

"Come, we will tell Maria we are going to the house." Mateo met Kayla's gaze. "You must always let someone know where you are going. That way they know where to start looking if you don't come back."

"I'll keep that in mind." The force with which he spoke sent fear skittering through her. Maybe she wasn't as safe at the mission as she'd thought, despite the assurances Pastor Ramírez had given them when