

‘They killed her,’ the man whispered through his tears. ‘They just.... killed her.’

Catalina instinctively took the baby from his trembling arms.

Juan immediately recognized their guest; he and Álvaro had met a few times while helping their wives at the organization. He quickly offered the sobbing man a seat as Catalina went into the kitchen to get him some water.

When Catalina got back shortly after, holding the baby in one arm and a glass of water in her other hand, tears were running down her face. She put the glass down and tried to wipe her tears away before Álvaro would notice. She knew she had to stay strong—at least until Mafe’s husband regained his composure to tell the whole story.

He spoke quietly, but the despair in his voice was clear.

‘I found her when I got home. I don’t know what happened, Catalina, I don’t...’. He paused as he grasped for air. ‘The baby... She was right there, on the floor. Next to her. Crying. I just... I didn’t know where to go.’

Juan laid his hand on the man’s shoulder. ‘You’re safe here.’

Álvaro shook his head. ‘No, no. We’re not. You’re not.’

He turned his head to Catalina. ‘They’ll come for you tomorrow, Catalina. Maybe the day after. But you’re not safe.’

He got up in a more determined way than he had sat down. He took his baby back from Catalina, and resolutely walked up to the door. Catalina rushed to him. She hadn’t had a chance to say a word until now.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said through her tears as she hugged her friend’s husband and gave her baby one last kiss. ‘Let us know if we can do anything; anything at all.’

‘You can. Leave. Now.’ He walked away as he said the words, holding his baby close to his chest and looking around the street to make sure no one had seen him.

Juan had to stop Catalina from running after him. ‘He’s right, Cata. They will come for you next.’

Catalina buried her face in her hands as her faint frame collapsed on the couch. Overwhelming pain flooded her body. It took her a while before she realized that her own family was in danger now, too. By then, Juan had already packed all the food they had and was frantically calling relatives who lived in villages where the paramilitaries couldn’t find them. It was three in the morning and no one was picking up. All they could do now was leave; as fast as they could and with a destination guided entirely by fate.¹⁰

¹⁰ This excerpt is inspired by the story of a tribe leader who used to live in Chocó, which he shared in the BBC Podcast ‘Colombia’s forgotten exodus’ with Lucy Ash (2016). Together with another community leader, the man helped members of his indigenous group to get their farms back in an ELN-controlled region (ELN (National Liberation Army) is a guerrilla group on which more information is provided in the ‘background’ paragraph of the introduction). He fled when he and his friend started receiving death threats from the ELN. After he had gotten to a safe location, the man heard that his friend – the other community leader – had already been assassinated by the guerrilla group.