

At Shutter Speed



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Cranesbill Press



Chapter 1: *Crackups and Crackdowns*

CAIRO, EGYPT

In a split second, Matty can tell you a story. With a click of the shutter, he captures a life—beginning, middle, or end. His photos tell tales, expose truths, open worlds. If journalism is a dying profession, I've been watching it kill my husband for years. But at the same time, it's keeping us alive.

A sea of humanity undulates through Tahrir Square, respiring with simmering fervor. Sirens have been blaring since evening prayers, punctuated by dull explosions from police-fired smoke bombs. Casualties litter the streets, while rescuers staunch head wounds with T-shirts and flush each other's eyes with Maalox cocktails. Hissing canisters snake through the gardens near the Egyptian Museum. Masked protestors hurl them back. *Death to the dictator, death to the regime!*

The museum's been closed for ages. No one in the immediate vicinity gives a damn about antiquities, so I've got a front row seat in the Grand Saloon between a statue of Amenhotep and an arched window facing the square. The air tastes flinty, like gunpowder. Pinpricks of fire are creeping down my throat from the gas. In theory, I'm studying, but you can't exactly study in the middle of a crackdown.

"Dear me, Leah." A bespectacled face pops up beside Amenhotep—the curator, Yusef Hafez. In his cream linen suit, with a perma-smell of aged vanilla and musk, he's something of an antiquity himself. "He hasn't returned?"

“Soon, I’m sure,” I say. Though I’m not. Matty is somewhere in the chaos outside. Which means he has his eye to the lens, so he’ll be the last to notice when the police don their masks for another round. It means he’ll come home coughing, clothes reeking of smoke, on a rush that’ll keep him from sleeping for weeks. Weeks he’ll spend restless, wandering from room to room because he keeps imagining the smell of tear gas. Where he’ll lose ten pounds because he’ll forget to eat. Where he’ll catch one whiff of a Lucky Strike or diesel fumes and it’ll be as if someone opened a window to some long ago and far away hell. It means being locked in a constant state of vigilance, watching for signs, so I can run to the icebox for the frozen orange I keep in there, because sometimes, something cold and fragrant can bring him back before it gets worse.

It means he’ll be unfocused and get lost doing simple things, then pick fights with me over stupid crap because it’s easier than letting me help. But then he’ll finish the story and—poof—he’ll be himself again, the guy who holds me close and promises me that someday, the world will be what we both desperately want it to be. It’s our thing. We’re broke and spend our lives dodging bullets or sleeping under the stars, and time was, I wouldn’t have traded it for the world. He’s the adrenaline junkie. These days, I just hang on at the fringe.

It wasn’t always this way—I spent my twenties as a humanitarian aid worker in Sudan and Uganda. The short version is that I got spooked, left the field, and went running for law school. Now I stay behind while he takes crazy risks. I should be out there too, but when one’s husband has been killing himself to put one through law school, one has no excuse for failing the bar exam. At least not twice.

“It was kind of you to let us stay here,” I say to Yusef, blinking as the dots swim on my practice test. Hours ago, as the clashes over the rigged election intensified, the government declared all foreign jour-

nalists ‘purveyors of fake news’, the new favorite epithet of authoritarian regimes everywhere. After they yanked our hotel permit, Yusef, an old friend of Matty’s, offered us a spare room in the basement.

Jowls turned down, he strokes the bristles of his beard. “You may need to make other arrangements. The museum is at risk. The Night Hotel has been set ablaze.”

Outside, a flickering orange glow lights the square. I tuck my study guide behind me, then stand on pins-and-needles legs for a better look. Even the palm trees are in flames. There goes the best fourteen-dollar-a-night hotel in Cairo. “When did that happen?”

“Some time ago.”

Students dance in front of the burning building, bare seconds before being swept away by police water cannons. “They could put it out if they wanted,” I say. “Guess it’s more fun to squirt protestors.”

“This is Egypt.” Frustration courses through Yusef’s voice. “We say ‘God will take care of it’. Then we do nothing.”

Our last trip to Cairo had been during the 2011 revolution, and so much has changed. Shop windows once filled with honeyed cakes and risqué clothes are burned and boarded. Once, students danced on the rooftops, because where else would you go when the world tipped on its head? Now, if you dare go outside, you watch the rooftops for the glint of a sniper rifle sight. Revolution isn’t binary, it isn’t an endpoint, it’s a fluid state of mind, and Egypt’s has been dark for years.

“Maybe that’s what the people outside are trying to change.”

It’s not that I think arson is a good way to solve problems, but I grew up with a giant of the civil rights era telling my bedtime stories. What’s happening outside goes beyond buildings and things. Matty’s photos of sheet-wrapped corpses prove it.

Yusef clings to the crimson ropes around the colossus, contemplating his world, the hieroglyphs of Isis, the soaring majesty of Horus, the gold in Tut’s death mask. “Egypt’s greatest treasure is her history.

In their anger, youth forget such things. They forget the past contains the answers.”

To me, it’s simple. These clashes are rooted in three things: power, money, and sex, which are pretty much all that people ever fight about anyhow. The men in power have all the money, and this being Egypt, they’re damned determined to control the sex, too. No one under thirty has a job, which means they can’t get married, which means they can’t get laid. So instead, shit gets lit on fire.

Someone—a teenage girl—slams the window, crazing the glass. A dozen cops in riot gear give chase, shields and batons raised. *We will be free*, she screams at them in Arabic, scampering into the crowd. The police start beating everyone near her.

I toss the world of contracts and torts aside. The way I should’ve done four years and a shit-ton of money ago. “That’s it.”

Yusef eyes his mummies. “Where are you going?”

“Out.” I wrap a scarf around my face, then make sure the long skirt I’m wearing covers my ankles. ‘Out’ is where people need help. ‘Out’ is where the old Leah would be. “I’m not doing any good sitting here.”

“Your husband will not like if you leave.”

Too damn bad. I snap a pair of swimming goggles on my forehead. Yusef’s been hovering all night. I figure Matty asked him to babysit, which is ironic for any number of reasons. “Probably not.”

Maybe I look like a bug-eyed Calamity Jane, but my dad, the Honorable Dale Atkins, Esq., would be ashamed if his daughter sat on her ass while thugs in riot gear form ranks across Tahrir Square.

While I’m doing the one-foot hop with my sneaker, my phone dings. Twice.

Stay put Leah

And get away from the goddamn window

I peer outside. A line of armored vehicles stretches to the cornice at the Nile end of the square. Matty is perched on the wall of the lo-

tus pond, wearing faded jeans and a flak vest, a checkered scarf over his mouth and nose. With his wheat-colored hair and dishwater-grey eyes, he’s the kind of guy who stands out in any crowd, but it’s really damn obvious here.

It’s different for me—my Mom’s French and my Dad’s roots are Igbo, which makes guessing my race some weird game show for strangers, who seem to think I’m either Mediterranean, Hispanic, or ‘wow, for a white girl, you can really tan’. The good news is that at this time of year, I can pass for a local in Cairo. The bad news is that the secret police are out in force, so nobody’s safe out there tonight.

I dial Matty’s mobile, to remind him to cover his head, but then shots start popping and he hits the deck. The crowd scatters. He scrambles away, and I hang up, fast.

Banging my temple with the phone, I watch him scurry into an alley behind the museum. My mobile rings a few seconds later.

“Hey, babe.” His breathing is labored. “How’s the studying?”

“Are you okay?”

“Far as you know.”

A wiggle of relief hits my belly. “Butthead. I’m coming out.”

The crowd sounds go quiet. “Leah, it’s bad. There’s nothing you can do.” He sounds defeated, which is never a good sign.

“Is anyone with you?”

“Reuters has a couple stringers out here. Or maybe they’re AP. Not sure they know either.”

“Not what I meant.” Matty’s parents were missionaries who dragged him from one godforsaken hotspot to the next, and it messed him up pretty good. What I care about is whether he’s working with someone who knows him. Knows what his mind can do to him when things are ‘bad’. Which they have been. For months, ever since he got injured on his last job in Syria. On the outside, he’s still healing, but something worse is eating him from the inside, something he won’t talk about. Which isn’t exactly unusual, but it’s never been this bad for

so long. We're doing our best to smile through the pain and pretend everything is getting better. It's killing me that it's not.

In the background, I hear a wolf whistle. "Cahill, is that your wife? Man, I had no idea she had tits like that."

Matty swears. "Christ, Sal."

Saleh is Yusef's son, a producer for CNN's Africa desk, and I can guess what he's looking at. A normal guy would carry a wedding photo. Maybe a vacation snap. Something that involves, say, clothes, but this is a photo of me that Matty took the first night we made love. Like...*right* after, and he's been schlepping it around ever since.

He comes back on the line. "Sorry."

"Since when are you showing that to people?"

"I wasn't, Leah, I just...needed to see it, okay?" His voice sounds distant. Sad.

"Matty, come home. You can have the real thing."

He exhales. "God, you have no idea. As soon as things calm down, I'm yours."

"Hope that's a promise."

"It is." He coughs, away from the receiver. "How's your stomach? Did that tea I brought help?"

It's a loaded question. The water in Egypt never agrees with me, and as far as he knows, that's all it is. The two pregnancy tests I took before we came agreed, and then there's the get-it-while-you-still-can-because-fuck-the-patriarchy IUD I had put in after the election. None of which does a damn thing to explain why I can't even remember the last time I had a period. Or make me feel any less jumbled up inside.

"Yeah, better," I finally say.

"Liar." He pauses. "How about I scrounge up some of that honey candy you like?"

All I need is him. Screw that. I need him to *be* him—the guy who lets me help when he's messed up, not the one who shuts me out and keeps secrets, who feels like he's one bad day from giving up. Because

from the minute we landed, my body has been doing its damndest to convince me those stupid pregnancy tests were wrong. "I'm okay."

Water jets sweep the crowd. The line of black uniforms holds. Fresh volleys of smoke burst forth. "Hey listen," he says, "rumor has it the government is shutting down the internet. Can you get to my website?"

Matty, who's a freelance journalist these days, likes to joke that he got kicked out of the Fourth Estate and into a trailer park. We met at an Iraq War protest, and even then, the news orgs were refusing to print some of the photos he took—too controversial, or they didn't fit the narrative somebody wanted to spin. His blog is his voice, in all its raw, unfiltered glory.

"It's been loading like a ninety-year-old turtle with a piano on its back," I say, waking the tablet beside me. Truth told, I've been paying more attention to that than my review books.

Mizaru's Window, reads the site's header. The letters twine around a graphic of the Three Wise Monkeys—See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil, a copy of one tattooed on his arm. All I know is it was some kind of farewell screw-you to his dad.

"Check your flights while you're at it," he says.

Originally, they were 'our' flights, but one of us is in the middle of documenting a war and the other has the bar exam in four days. "They're looking for observers down in Suez. The military says eleven dead, but Amnesty thinks it's higher. Maybe we should—"

"No."

"I could fly out tomor—"

"I'm not going to be the reason you miss that damn test again."

Okay, so I didn't exactly fail the bar the first time. Long story. This time, I have a job waiting for me in DC, which I *have* to take if we have any hope of paying back my loans. It's immigration law instead of human rights, which means diving into a system I know nothing about, which I'm only doing because the way things are going at home,

it feels as if I have to. Except taking it means an office instead of the front lines, which comes with the guilty reminder of the moment I walked away. When we started out, Matty and I were a team, and deep down, I'm scared to admit those days are gone forever. But something has to change.

Yesterday, before we left to come here, I found him naked on the beach by my parents' house—in February, no less—throwing sheaves of story notes and photos onto a campfire he'd started. High as a kite to boot. Once he'd sobered up, I told him that unless he got his act together, he wasn't coming with me to DC. In hindsight, getting on a plane with him to Cairo wasn't the best way to convince him I'm serious about leaving, but I was terrified of what might happen if I didn't. If there's a baby involved, I can't bear to think what it means.

Maybe my stomach...thing...is just stress. People who accidentally get pregnant don't have to take the bar, or soul-sucking law jobs. They get to dress up their baby girls in frilly outfits and drink Starbucks all day, don't they?

Right Leah. Keep telling yourself that.

"I got a one-ninety-one on my practice Bar today," I say. "Finished in under two hours. With a twenty-minute Angry Birds break."

"Funny that your staunch opposition to the death penalty stops with cartoon pigs."

"The evil green porkers deserve it." And like he's any different. "You realize two hundred is perfect?"

"I heard you," he replies. "I'm sure the Egyptian military will be impressed if they decide to detain you for a few weeks."

Or Borders and Customs. Sighing, I click refresh. "You realize I'm going to make a shitty lawyer if I can't even negotiate with you."

"You only suck at negotiating when you're wrong."

The cursor keeps spinning. "They must've pulled the plug."

He curses. "The US producer must be having a fit. He wanted a live feed ready as soon as Jake Tapper finishes feeding some White House Nazi his own nutsack."

"Which one?"

"I can't keep them straight. The dude who looks like his mother fucked a lightbulb."

That's my Matty. "I bet Jake Tapper would tell me to stay."

"Don't get me in the middle of your unholy crush on JT." His voice grows muffled. "Hey listen, let me go take care of some things, then I'll come find you."

"Will you be long?"

"I'm staring at a nekkid picture of my gorgeous wife. Part of me is."

"I happen to like that part. Try not to get it shot off."

Even the happiest couples have secrets. When we met, I saw him as this exotic world traveler—born in Brazil, he spoke five languages. He grew up in places like Mozambique and Iraq; I'm an attorney's daughter from P-town, Massachusetts, who'd dreamed of seeing the things he'd seen, and yet to realize they'd nearly killed him. He says he fell in love with me because I proved to him the world could change. I fell in love with him because he showed me what had to.

Billows of sweet, noxious smoke cloud the air as I slip out of the rear service door, needing to see for myself that he's okay. The goggles and my scarf protect me, though I can't stay out long. His silhouette is visible through the haze. Head tilted a little to the left, elbow raised, camera ready. I'd know it anywhere.

I've always loved watching him work, getting to look through his photos at the end of a day. Matty has this desperate search for humanity, but he sees it in things that are fleeting and hard to find. He lives in the infinitesimal space between the best and worst of human nature, and some days, the camera is all that keeps it from crashing down on him. Even in the worst situations, he manages to find some shred of hope. Dignity. But it's rare to see him this

at peace while he's doing it, and I can't help but wonder what's changed.

Near the American University, students hold vigil beside a stone church which is set up as a makeshift field hospital. Mourners gather around a lifeless body, surrounded by others who form a solidarity wall, protecting them from the riot troops. Matty moves to an alcove by the front gate, transfixed by something on his camera LCD.

All he wants is one photo that changes the world. Nobody but journalists and history buffs remember who took the Kim Phuc photo, the naked girl running from her napalmed village, but it altered the course of the war. Nobody remembers who got the shot of the guy staring down the tanks in Tiananmen Square, but the world still wonders what happened to him. It took a while before I understood why Matty lets life take so much from him. He rejected the life his parents led, but parts stuck with him nonetheless. The need to see justice done, to give a voice to the voiceless. He keeps searching for that one seismic photo because it's the only way he'll ever figure out how to live with himself.

A woman with a dark, shiny braid comes over to Matty. Thirty-ish, she's dressed in a loose olive pants and a black tunic, with a rose print scarf over her hair, an Assyrian-style cross around her neck, and a downcast expression on her face. A few words pass between them. He opens the memory slot on his camera and gives her the card, which she reluctantly accepts. After that, he draws her into an embrace, planting a tender kiss on her forehead.

Just like that, I can't breathe.

At the same moment, she glances across the square to where I'm standing, and a flicker of recognition lights her eyes. Matty notices me then too, and freezes. I catch a musky smell, a man's smell, and I realize someone is standing behind me.

Before I can even turn, the man slides into the crowd. Western clothes. Dark, flowing hair, and a pair of silver sunglasses perched on

his head, though I can't see his face. He circles the mourners like a great cat guarding a kill. Or stalking the next.

His expression flits between bemusement and rage, the latter directed at the woman with Matty, who's now kneeling in prayer inside the circle. "Come out, whore," he taunts. "Do you think I can't see you?"

Her gaze lifts. The fear is gone, replaced with anger and grief. She shifts off her knees and exits the circle, towards a young father and son standing at the gate. The boy, ragged and rail-thin, holds out a shaggy brown mongoose, which hops onto her shoulder.

The father steps protectively in front of his son. "Leave us in peace. We have beaten you. You lost." His accent is Syrian, not Egyptian, which likely explains the haunted look on his kid's face. "You have no power over us now. Or this woman."

With a bemused smirk, the jerk flicks ash from his cigarette. "This is the thanks I get? Perhaps I should not be surprised." He flashes a knife. "Offer her a place to sleep and she'll fuck you too."

The mourners break up in a chorus of peace-be-with-you and *as-Salamu Alaykums*. The jerk shoves the father aside, then lunges for the woman. A *pop-pop-pop* comes from the rooftops. The crowd screams and scatters. And then my idiot husband goes and tackles the jerk.

Matty barely dodges the knife on the first swing. On the second, the mongoose leaps, sinking its teeth into the man's neck. The knife clatters to the pavement, and the mongoose prances away, chittering triumphantly.

The woman grabs the boy by the hand and escapes down an alley. The jerk gut-punches Matty, shoving him away. Inaudible words pass between them. Matty gapes at me, white-faced and startled. Grinning, the jerk flips his knife, then skips off after the woman.

Matty is slow to get up, clutching his ribs, which he'd broken six months ago during an airstrike in Syria. I run over and help him out of the line of fire. "You're hurt."

He's got this lost, anguished expression on his face. Sweat mixes with ash, and greasy black smudges run from his temple to his chin. "She's just someone I know, Leah—that guy..."

Mixed with the pain, there's guilt, and I'm not sure I want to know where it came from, so I replace the lens cap. "It's fine, you can tell me later."

The crowd swells as we make for the safety of the museum. Smoke and flames leap through the roof of the building across the alley. "I told you to stay put," he grouches, as a tank rumbles past.

"You know me better than that." I stab Yusef's spare key into the service entrance door. "What were you thinking, going after that guy?"

"I was having another goddamn flashback, okay?" He squeezes his eyes shut. "Can we not talk about it?"

Something hits me hard, deep in the stomach. We've spent half our marriage dealing with his flashbacks. It's not why he did it.

"Fine," I say, struggling to figure out what he's not telling me. Which seems to be how I spend most of my time these days. "Then let's talk about her."

He peels the goggles off my head, hands coming to rest on my face. His skin feels raw, about a million degrees. "Stop looking at me like that." He walks me into the darkness of the unlit entryway. "You know I'm no cheat. She's a source. A friend."

What I want him to say is why the 'friend' with the jealous eyes and curvy figure was acting as if she knows me. Why he was comforting her. I'd settle for some hint of why she's in trouble in the first place, but if she's a source, with Matty, that's the end of it. I know he's no cheat, sure, but he's never been as secretive and self-destructive and just plain messed up as he's been the last few months either.

I want to blurt out *I think I'm pregnant*, but the words won't come. I've seen too much of the world to want to bring a child into it, and any time it's come up, he jokes that his brain should be donated to

science, not inflicted on another generation. Kids were never in our plan. But here we are, and I need him to tell me he'll find a way to crawl out from whatever he's under, that he'll do it for me and the baby because he loves us. Yet I love him enough to know it's not that simple.

The basement smells of must. A strange, sweet salt tickles my nose. Down here, it's a maze of painted metal boxes and shelves, filled with dusty artifacts collected god knows when. He's wandering between them, lost and unfocused, so I take his camera and set it on a nearby crate. "Matty, where are we?"

He blinks, scanning around. "Cairo, right?"

Anxious, I step between his knees, resting my forehead on his, but when I move my hand to his arm, he flinches. My hand comes away warm and sticky. I grab his wrist and pull up his sleeve, revealing a two-inch dig right below the monkey tattoo on his biceps. I know it's from a bullet, which is bad enough, but he's written his name and my cell phone number in thick, permanent marker on his arm. Suddenly I'm fighting tears.

"Hey, ssh, ssh," he says. "It's nothing, don't worry about it. I'm here, right?"

Over our years together, I've watched him bury a dozen friends, sometimes nothing more than memories in empty coffins. I've been stuck half a world away when the internet discovers the latest video of some fuckwit beheading a journalist. Worry isn't a choice, it's something that tattooed itself onto my heart long ago.

"C'mon, tough guy. You and I have a date with the first aid kit."

He buries his face in my neck and slips his hands under my skirt, cupping my rear. "Leah, I don't need a damn Band-Aid. I need you."

His kiss swallows the night, deep, wet, and lingering. He wants me to let this go, but we both know I can't. "What's wrong?" I say, caressing his temple. "Are you in trouble?"

“Nothing a good lawyer couldn’t handle.” He nudges my knees apart with his hip, shucking his T-shirt. “Though I’ve got something else for her to handle instead.”

I count the scars on his torso, making sure there are no new ones. Darfur above his left hip, Kirkuk across his left pec, Aleppo all down his right side. “You’re burning up.”

“Can’t help it.” He lifts my top over my head. “Is this okay?”

He asks, because once, someone didn’t. It’s not something I think about much these days. “It is if you tell me what’s going on.”

A kiss, a nibble, a caress of my hip. “I’m making love to my wife.” He peels down the cup of my bra, flicking his tongue over my nipple. “Who should know I’m completely mad about her.”

“Completely mad about something.” I say, surrendering in a swirl of emotion, dust, and our own tangled history. Fine, I need him too.

But then comes a commotion upstairs. Smashing glass, running footsteps. Bitter, angry shouts. Looters. Yusef’s muffled shouts rise above the fray.

Matty’s weight drops onto me. With a groan of frustration, he rolls off, contemplating the ceiling. “He’s about to get himself killed over some clay pot, isn’t he?”

As he buttons his jeans, I sit up. “Where’s my skirt?”

Leaning over for a quick kiss, he snags his shirt. “Stay. I’ll only be a few minutes.”

I snag it back, draping it over my breasts. “Seriously—what’s got you so spooked?”

He stops, wiping sweat from his forehead. “I don’t even know where to start.”

Does that mean he knows? I bite my lip. “For starters, you could tell me how you feel about it.”

His brow furrows. “Are we talking about the same thing?”

I can’t make myself say it, so I put my hand over my midsection. His jaw goes slack, and a rush of breath escapes from his lungs. “God, Leah, I—”

There’s another crash, a scream. Eyes closed, he kisses my forehead. “I love you, but right now I am scared to death. I’ll be right back. Then we’ll talk. I swear.”

Scared to death is better than I expected. “Okay. Go.”

As the sound of his footsteps fade, I slip on his shirt, and while I’m buttoning it up, I notice he didn’t take his camera. Given that it’s his sixth appendage, it’s odd. Not to mention the frustrated way he tossed it onto his bag. As if he’s tired of it ruling his life.

When I turn it on, an error comes up on the display, and that’s when I remember him passing the card to that woman.

Who is she? What did she want with it?

The looting upstairs reaches a fever-pitch. Ear-splitting scrapes, floor-shaking thuds, triumphant shouts. It’s either looters or a herd of zebras dancing *Swan Lake*.

My phone buzzes. Matty’s number comes up on the display. I hit answer. “Hey, where are you?”

“Out,” he says, breathing heavily. “Needed a smoke.”

Everything inside me goes cold. We have a code phrase. In case something ever goes bad. That was it.

Adrenaline puts a tremor in my hands. My legs. My pulse pounds in my ears, loud enough I can hear it. Forcing down the panic, I try to remember the questions we worked out, the ones we agreed to use if someone could be listening. “Could you get some ibuprofen while you’re out?” *Can you get away?*

Muffled sirens, people shouting. “Stores are closed, babe.”

My legs go weak. “Matty—”

“Check my bag,” he says. “Side pocket. Should be some in there.”

I dive on his old green duffel, hands trembling. The pocket is empty, but the lining is ripped. Inside, I find a Brazilian passport in my name. He has dual citizenship—there are places he goes where being American is a bad idea—but if I have it too, it’s news to me.

“What’s going on? Where did this come from?”

“I got your back, baby.”

“Is this about—?”

“Stop.” A rush of breath comes out of the receiver. “You don’t know anything. I haven’t told you a thing, right?”

“Matty please...”

Echoing sounds, like footsteps in an alley. More than one pair. “Say it, Leah.”

“Would I be asking if you had?”

He drops his voice low. “Listen to me. Put on my sweats. Tie the biggest goddamn knot in the waist you can because there are gangs out here who will make you regret it if you don’t. Then get your ass to the embassy—”

A low *pi-too* sounds, like gas escaping in a rush. He gasps and drops the phone. My heart stops. “Matty, say something, please.”

When he picks it up again, his voice is slurred. “I love you—you know that, right?”

I lose it. “You’re supposed to come home, Matty. You promised you’d always come home.”

“No choice,” he murmurs again. “You’re the only home I ever knew.

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