

THE LAST RESORT

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There was a corpse in Lila Clement's bathroom.

Not human, mind you.

No, this was much worse. This was a *spider* corpse. Eight disjointed legs stretched toward the ceiling, like they were reaching for Lila herself as she stood there, brushing her teeth, minding her own business.

She'd just squeezed a dollop of paste onto her brush when she saw it from the corner of her eye.

She hated seeing things out of the corner of her eye. There was always that moment between curiosity and terror. She dropped her toothbrush in the sink, spat, and rushed to the door, ready to fly out of the room screaming at the top of her lungs. But as soon as she fled into the hall, she stopped and took a deep breath.

No screaming. No flailing your arms. No drama. You are a New Lila. Calm, cool, collected. You are not a girl who overreacts. You are

a girl who underreacts. Maybe you're a girl who doesn't react at all. You're cool. Like a block of ice.

"You're a block of ice," she whispered to herself as she made her way to the living room, where she planned to tell her parents—*coolly*—that there was an enormous dead spider in the vicinity, after which she would remind them—*calmly*—that Arizona was home to some of the deadliest spiders in the world, one of which could have injected them with venom. Then she would suggest that they *collectively* evacuate the house as soon as possible and proceed immediately to the nearest emergency room.

Her mother was a freelance writer and had been everywhere from the jungles of her native Philippines to the bug-infested Amazon, so she probably wouldn't be too alarmed over a bathroom spider. The only thing that scared her mother was big dogs, because she'd been bitten as a little girl. A spider smaller than Lila's hand wouldn't garner much of a reaction.

Lila would have to project her fears onto her dad. He'd grown up in the suburbs of Ohio and was too afraid to get on a plane. He'd be more sympathetic, probably.

But she'd have to be calm. Otherwise, they wouldn't take her seriously.

"You're a block of ice," she whispered.

Then she remembered that ice melted.

“You’re a rock,” she said.

Strong and steady.

When she entered the living room, she expected to see her parents in their usual Saturday-morning spots—her father, Clifton, in his chair; mother, Meredith, nestled in the corner of the sofa. They would both be on their phones. Dad, pretending he was reading the news when he was actually playing *Juice Jam*. Mom, solving the *New York Times* Spelling Bee.

But that’s not what she found.

Her parents were together on the couch, face-to-face, no phones in sight. And—wait, this couldn’t be right.

It looked like Dad was *crying*.

Mom was holding Dad’s hand. Lila stared at their entwined fingers—her mom’s light brown skin against her father’s pale freckles—and stopped where she stood. Her stomach plummeted to her socked feet. She swallowed the last bit of toothpaste from her mouth.

“Did something happen to Caleb?” Lila asked, which was a silly question because she’d just seen her ten-year-old brother fifteen minutes ago when he’d tried to push his way into the bathroom and she’d told him to go away. She could even hear him now, in his room, talking to *Go Soldier One*, his favorite video game.

Her parents looked up, surprised to see her there. And now she saw that her mom was crying, too.

“No, Caleb’s fine, Lila-Bear,” Mom said.

Under normal circumstances, Lila would have protested the use of “Lila-Bear.” What eleven-year-old went by “Lila-Bear”? This was just the sort of thing that made her friends at school think she was immature. But clearly now was not the time to nitpick nicknames.

“What’s going on?” Lila asked.

“Actually,” Mom said, “you should get your brother and tell him to come here. We have something to tell both of you.”

Lila’s eyes widened. “Ohmygod. Are you sick? Is Dad sick? Are you *both* sick? What’s going to happen to us? Wait, no—it’s not that, is it? You’re getting divorced, aren’t you? Is that it? You’re getting divorced and we’re going to have to choose which parent to live with. Oh, don’t make me choose! I can’t—”

“Lila,” Mom said, pinching the bridge of her nose. “No one is sick and no one is getting divorced. Please dial it down a notch and go get your brother.”

Dial it down a notch.

If she could remove one sentence from her parents’ vocabulary, that would be it. It was just another version of things Lexi and Ava told her at school.

You’re such a drama queen.

You overreact to everything.

Sometimes you're so immature.

She walked down the hall, suddenly less sympathetic to whatever was going on with her parents.

"Dial it down a notch," she muttered.

She knocked on her brother's door, immediately opened it, and told him to come into the living room. He was wearing his gaming headphones, though, so he had to take them off so she could repeat herself. He heaved an enormous sigh, and minutes later, the youngest members of the Clement family were gathered with their parents, awaiting the big news.

"We got a phone call this morning," Mom said. She shifted her eyes to Dad. He took a deep breath.

"Your grandfather died," he said.

"Which one?" said Caleb. "Dad's dad? The weird one?"

Lila smacked her brother on the arm. "Caleb! That's so rude!"

"If you're talking about Grandpa Clem, then yes," Mom said. "And he wasn't weird. He was . . . eccentric."

"That's just a fancy word for weird," said Caleb. "He lives in Idaho, right?"

"Ohio," Dad corrected. He cleared his throat. "Which brings us to our next point."

Mom clasped her hands in her lap. Lila knew from personal

experience that clasped-Mom-hands never meant anything good.

“We have to go to Ohio to take care of things,” she said. “It will be a long drive and we’re not sure how long we’ll be there.”

“We have to settle all his affairs, arrange the funeral . . .” Dad continued. “So we’ll probably be there for a couple of weeks, at least.”

Lila immediately shot up, ready to shout, scream, and cry. *No! Summer break just started! I can’t go! My friendships are hanging on by a thread! If I leave now I may be friendless when we come back! I never even met Grandpa! No, no, I won’t go! You’ll never take me alive!*

But then she remembered she was a rock.

The three of them looked at her, eyebrows raised, waiting for the dramatic outburst they knew was coming.

Instead, Lila sat down and said, “Interesting.”

“Where are we staying?” Caleb asked.

Mom and Dad exchanged looks.

“We’re staying at the inn,” Dad said.

Caleb’s eyes widened with glee. “The big mansion? Yes!”

Dad’s jaw twitched. “It’s not a mansion. It’s just a big old house.”

“Yeah,” Caleb said. “Big like a mansion.”

Mansion or not, Lila knew one thing for certain: She could not—*would* not—go to Ohio. She needed to fix things with her friends. She

needed to fix *herself*. How could she do that if she was in some stuffy old inn a million miles away?

“What about your jobs?” she asked, though she knew this was a pointless question. Her father worked from home and her mom made her own schedule.

“Everything’s taken care of,” Dad said.

“But I didn’t even know Grandpa Clem,” Lila muttered.

What difference did it make if she were there or not?