

DIAGNOSIS

GILLIAN HAM

They'll go for the soft parts.

I slowly look up from the three-month-old waiting room magazine that I am pretending to read. I wait a few seconds before I muster up the courage to ask, "What?" My little sister is staring at the fish tank, not blinking in her fear of missing something—or perhaps, just in fear. I don't think she meant to speak out loud. It's hard for her sometimes—to tell the difference between the inside and outside of her own eight-year-old head.

I try again: "Kayda?"

This earns a quick glance away from the fish. In my direction but not to my eyes. Just as quickly, her focus is back. She studies the apparent life-and-death situation of the silent aquatic scene.

"Sweetie, what did you say?"

She mutters something about making pies. Wait—no. That's probably not right.

"Kay, a little louder. No mumbling, remember?"

Her two unsettling eyes finally settle on my own. Two blinks. "I said,"—she sounds frustrated—"The fish will eat my eyes first. They always go for the soft parts."

That's not at all terrifying, especially coming from a pigtailed little girl. I take another moment to collect myself. I prepare my line of questions. I write an eloquent speech in my head about how goldfish are in no way dangerous to her. I'll tell her that they can't get out of the tank and that she can't get in. I'll say that—

"Kayda Jax?"

I sigh. I scoop Kay up and carry her into the doctor's office. I offer a tired smile to Dr. Rose. It isn't returned, not on diagnosis day.

Her office is sterile—the walls off-white, the files organized, the family pictures nonexistent. There's the obligatory doctor's office toy with the colorful tracks that form a maze for the trapped wooden beads. It looks like it's never been touched. A bin of thin children's books lays neglected in the corner. Even the toys are heavy with the fear of answering the question that haunts my life—

what is Kayda's diagnosis?

I thought it was grief. The days of silence followed by bouts of shouting. The inexplicable fear of fish and the fact that she never cried. The refusal to eat anything that wasn't macaroni, dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets, or mint chocolate chip ice cream with too much whipped cream. I obliged her because I thought it would go away. It was grief or shock or I don't know. Something easy. It was supposed to be easy. It was supposed to get better. It got worse.

I am twenty-three. I was supposed to have my degree in biomedical sciences. I was supposed to party with my friends and make regretful decisions. I was supposed to fall in love and get married and start my own family. Instead, at twenty-one, I became the sole guardian to my six-year-old sister. At twenty-one, my dad decided he didn't want to be my dad anymore. At twenty-one, my dad took his shotgun and aimed it at my mom and pulled the trigger. He turned it on himself and pulled it again. In that one instant, I was no longer a daughter and a sister. I was an orphan and a mom.

There was no motive. John and Melissa Jax were a happy, boring, and completely ordinary couple. High school sweethearts that had been together for nearly thirty years. They loved each other and their kids. The police said he went crazy. That they must've been fighting and that he had snapped. Of course, they didn't know that their biggest argument in my life had been about whether to have marinara or alfredo sauce with dinner. They'd make both and let me choose. No, the police didn't know anything.

The doctors didn't know anything, either. I've spent the past two years shuttling Kayda from expert to expert. Two years listening to questions that still hurt to answer. Two years dodging diagnoses that didn't fit. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Attention Deficit Disorder. Schizophrenia. An overactive imagination—I nearly hit the doctor that tried to tell me that. They would throw these words at me trying to make one stick, but they never did. I owed it to my baby girl to get her the help she needs. That's how, after two years of searching, I found myself in the cold office of Dr. Rose, a warm middle-aged woman who never talked down to me. My last hope.

"Elise?" Dr. Rose jolts me back to reality. "Are you ready?"

I swallow and blink twice. I meet her gaze and try to form the words to answer her but my throat is dry. I nod and prepare for the worst.

"I'm afraid that young miss Kayda has—"