

SYMPTOMS
of a
HEARTBREAK



SONA CHARAIPOTRA

{Imprint}
MAKE YOUR MARK
New York

{Imprint}
MAKE YOUR MARK

A part of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271

SYMPTOMS OF A HEARTBREAK. Copyright © 2019 by CAKE Literary, LLC. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication
Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-250-19910-2 (hardcover) / ISBN 978-1-250-19911-9 (ebook)

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by email at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

Book design by Elynn Cohen

Imprint logo designed by Amanda Spielman

First edition, 2019

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

fiercereads.com

Book curse

*To my Mommy, Dr. Neelam Charaipotra, for always setting the example.
And for pushing me past my limits*

*And to my Papa, Dr. Kamal Prakash Charaipotra. I miss you every day.
I hope I can make you proud*

GIRL GENIUS DONS DOCTOR'S COAT

TIME MAGAZINE, JUNE 16

The University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey graduated its youngest MD yesterday, conferring a doctor of medicine degree — with highest honors — to New Jersey's "Dr. Girl Genius," as she's been dubbed. Saira Sehgal, 16, joins Princeton Presbyterian — where her mother, Dr. Rana Sehgal, heads the pediatrics department — as one of three pediatric oncology interns in the teaching hospital's pre-residency training fellowship, a feeder for their oncology program.

Dr. Alfred Charles, the hospital's chief of staff, said he's thrilled to welcome Sehgal to their facility. "I first had the pleasure of meeting young Dr. Sehgal when she was eight, as a friend to an oncology patient," Dr. Charles said. "Even then her immense potential was blatantly apparent. In fact, she helped us diagnose her friend and even consulted on treatment strategies. I'm proud she's chosen Princeton Presbyterian as the place where she'll begin her medical career."

Sehgal is humble about the high expectations she faces. "It's an honor," she said. "Princeton Presbyterian is a top-rated teaching hospital, and the internship program has graduated many well-known doctors. I'm thrilled to work with Dr. Charles, chief resident Dr. Arora, and the staff at Princeton. I'm sure it will be a challenging and exciting opportunity."

Sehgal got her GED at 10, earned her undergraduate degree from Princeton and completed med school at 16 with honors and on full scholarship — all rare feats. She said she was inspired to pursue medicine when she saw how carefully the hospital's staff treated her friend Harper Rose Strich, who succumbed to acute leukemia at eight. "She got the best treatment, and Dr. Charles, who was the attending oncologist at the time, made sure she was very well taken care of. He tried new treatments that gave my friend a fighting chance. Sadly, she died of her disease when she was eight. I fight on in her honor."

CHAPTER 1

It's 7:30, and it's all going smoothly.

Paperwork: done.

Shower: complete.

First-Day Pants and Blouse selected: clean and classic.

White coat: ironed and safe in its dry-cleaning bag.

Loafers: stiff and polished.

Laptop and phone: charged.

Briefcase: prepped.

Everything just right. Or it was, anyway.

And then, there she is.

Mom. That familiar knock. Only about an hour too late.

I've just slicked down my hair again—this July heat triggers the frizz, inevitably—when she starts pounding on my bedroom door.

I look at my smartwatch. Yup, 7:43. If I actually relied on her to get me up on time, I'd be so very late.

"Saira, beta! Time to get up," my mother singsongs just outside my door. "Dadima made paranthe!"

"Mom, I don't have time."

"Of course you have time. Your dadima made you a special first-day breakfast, and you absolutely will eat it."

I sigh. I better get dressed. I've already been up for hours—three to be precise—but I didn't get dressed yet because I don't want to wrinkle my clothes. I mean, it's my first day. I've had a lot of first days on my

path to becoming a doctor, but this is a pretty damn important one. I want to be ready. I *need* to be ready.

I walk over to the bed where I've laid out my perfect First Day as a Real Doctor Outfit: a mauve button-down shirt and gray slacks—a picture of Harper tucked into the left back pocket as a reminder—along with black loafers and the same plain, small gold hoop earrings I always wear.

But my outfit's not there. I mean, like, it was there twenty minutes ago when I got into the shower. And now it is GONE.

"It was just so wrong."

I turn around and my big sister Taara's standing in the doorway to the jill-and-jill bathroom we share—or did, before she left for college last year—a smirk on her already-glossed lips as she holds up a shopping bag.

"Taaaaara," I say, lunging forward, trying to find my clothes, but she blocks my path.

"Nope," she says, and I sigh as I take the bag.

"I mean, just because you're a doctor doesn't mean you want to look like you're forty," she says, taking things out of the bag and handing them to me. A soft, satiny black-and-white polka-dotted blouse, black tailored-but-casual capri-length pants, strappy black sandals. And some cute dangly earrings that I'll totally lose by the end of the day. "The white coat should do the trick."

I pull on the clothes and follow her back into the bathroom so she can do my makeup. There's no use fighting it.

"Aren't you supposed to be in class, like, right now?" I ask her as she lines my eyes with kohl. Taara's a sophomore at Rutgers. Premed, following in our mom's footsteps. This year should be pretty intense for her.

"No talking."

She works for a few minutes, frowning the whole time.

"What?" I say.

"We should really do something about those brows."

“I thought thick brows were in now.”

“Thick brows, yes. Bert brows, no.” She waves a pair of tweezers in the air, and I smack her hand away.

“No time.”

“All right, but I’m warning you now.” She grimaces and gets back to work, lining my eyes with kohl. She hands me lip gloss and I dab some on.

“There.” She grins at me in the mirror, satisfied. “But it’d still be better—”

“No.” I take a quick look. I do look cute. The problem: I also look so very sixteen.

“I told you . . .,” she says, preempting my complaint.

“I know, I know,” I say. “The white coat should do it.”

Should. But it won’t. I know from experience.

Breakfast is a spread. Dadima went all out. There are aloo ke paranthe and egg bhurji and samose and of course chai.

And there’s Vish, tucked into the booth right next to my dad, talking about cricket or Bollywood or some other boyfriend-father bonding topic. Here’s a thing you should know about Vish: Technically, to everyone else, he’s my *boyfriend*, one word, and has been pretty much forever. Like since we were twelve. But to me he’s my *boy friend*, two very separate words, and decidedly platonic, because he’s probably, definitely, totally gay. He just hasn’t told anyone besides me (and his boyfriend, Luke) yet. He will when he’s ready.

Here’s the other thing you should know about Vish: He’s half-Punjabi, half-Gujarati, and fully vegetarian. Read: hard to feed. Which sort of puts him on Dadima’s shit list. (Granted: It’s quite a long list.)

That’s why she frowns and scowls when he playfully swipes the fresh, hot parantha she’s just carried over from the stove.

“That was for Saira,” she says, hustling me toward the breakfast nook. “Extra chili. You will regret. Saira, sit, eat. Quickly. Otherwise you’re going to be late.”

Taara and I squish into the booth and dig into the crispy potato-stuffed bread my grandmother has laid out, dipping it into cool yogurt and spicy mango achar.

“Are you nervous, Guddi?” Vish asks, taking a sip of chai. Guddi is his old nickname for me. It means doll.

I shake my head, my mouth already full of food.

“She’s got this,” Taara says. “She’s only been preparing, like, her whole life.”

“Where’s Mom?” I wonder aloud. But I already know, because she’s decidedly not in this room.

“In the shower,” Taara mumbles.

“But she’s fast,” Papa says, and they all laugh.

I don’t. Because this is no joking matter.

“I mean, if she’s running behind, I can drop you off,” Vish says, and I can feel the little dents on my forehead collapsing into those familiar creases. “Like, we can leave right now.”

Dadi starts clearing away plates, and pours me another cup of chai. “Relax. It’s not even eight yet. You have time.” She plonks a grease-stained brown paper bag onto the table. “Treats. For your big day.”

I sigh. It’s inevitable. I’m going to be late. On my first day. Because of Mom. As usual. All my life, my mom has made us late. She’s known as the local pediatrician in our neighborhood—and has been for nearly thirty years—and so every time she steps out of the house she has to look perfect. And as junior representatives of her, so do Taara and I. For Taara—all long, lean, and flawless, like Katrina Kaif—that’s pretty easy. For me? Not so much.

Mom walks into the kitchen, her shoulder-length bob freshly set, her burgundy blouse a perfect match to her burgundy pants (and burgundy lipstick), her black patent loafers freshly polished. You’d think it was *her* first day.

But it’s mine. And we’re late.

“Ready?” she asks. Like I’m the one who’s been holding things up. Dadi, prepared as always, hands her a muffin and her to-go chai.

And a full twenty minutes behind schedule, we're finally headed out the door.

We should be okay. Barring any other incidents.

But as soon as we step outside, we're surrounded. By thirty members of the extended Sehgal-Kapoor-Dhillon clan, along with a few stray cousins thrice removed for good measure. The whole paltan, as my dad would say. Except for my friend Lizzie, who'll be sleeping till noon.

Vish's mom stands front and center, of course, a puja thali prepared with the glow of a lit diya and a small bowl of vermilion.

"Pele pait puja, abh asli puja," Vish says, laughing, and I shoot him the glare of death.

"Oh, Saira, we all just wanted to come to show our support and offer our blessings," his mom—forever known as Sweetie Auntie to me—says, waving the tray around near my face in a precarious circle. She dips her ring finger into the vermilion and pokes a little tikka of red onto my forehead as they all lean in close to peer at me. My dad glares in annoyance. He thinks Vish's parents are too religious. But that's probably because we're hardly religious at all. Too many doctors in the family.

"We should get going—" I start, but the expression on Mom's face stops me cold. I rub my cheek. "What?"

"You can't go to the hospital with your eyebrows looking like that," she says, her voice stern and worried.

"I mentioned it this morning, but Saira said we didn't have time," Taara says in her told-you-so voice.

"We still don't have time."

"Of course we have time," Sonia Mamiji says, stepping forward with authority. It's barely eight a.m., but she's all dolled up, her face made, her hair curled. "I even have my kit in the car."

And that's how I end up in the passenger seat of Mom's car, the seat reclined, as Mamiji uses her quick-heating wax strips and professional tweezers to coax and refine those suckers into shape as an audience of

twenty—most of the men wisely bailed when the brow talk began—watches with smug satisfaction.

“You really should get them done every two to three weeks,” Mamiji says as I yelp with pain. “Otherwise they’re out of control.”

“Yeh tho main hamesha isko kethi hoon,” Mom says. “But she never listens to her mother.”

“Or her sister,” Taara adds with a grin as I fire death rays from my eyes, framed by newly impeccable brows.

When we finally start the car, it’s already 8:45. Thank gods the hospital has that rule that mandates doctors live in a fifteen-minute radius. Because we are SO. VERY. LATE.

CHAPTER 2

It's 9:04 when we finally pull into the staff parking lot at Princeton Presbyterian.

I hate being late. Loathe it. It literally gives me hives. They're psychosomatic, obviously. Physical manifestations of emotional stress are usually fascinating. Except when it's the first day of the rest of your life and you've got roses blooming on your arms and face.

By the time I climb out of the car, it's already 9:06.

Mom and I race to the main lobby and barely make it through the elevator doors as they close. I stab the button for the eighth floor as the people inside—a nurse, another doctor, a couple of civilians—frown or fret.

Except for one, tucked away in the corner—a boy about my age, tall and lanky, skater shorts and board, his hair flopping into his eyes as he stares at his phone. He brushes it away with his free hand, and I notice the freckles on his nose.

My stomach does an odd flip.

Weird.

I look down at my brand-new feet-pinching, old-people loafers, trying to focus. But there's something about him that makes me look again.

He catches me staring and grins. I look away quickly, blushing, the brief erythema warming my cheeks.

He's busy with his phone again, that smirk still on his lips. I wonder what's so funny. Especially at 9:08 in the morning at the hospital.

There's only one reason someone his age—well, my age—ends up at this part of the hospital. Someone's really sick. Or, like, having a baby or something. I wonder who.

He's cute, if somewhat unkempt.

Cutie McFreckles sneezes, and I automatically say, "Bless you." He grins at me again, then looks back at his phone, the moment over.

"Code blue! Code blue!" As the elevator doors open, the alert sounds on the intercom, shaking us all awake. That familiar hospital scent fills the elevator as one of the doctors on board rushes out, frantically punching at his phone. Not good news, clearly.

I reach for the photo I keep in my back pocket, and that's when it hits me. It's in my other pants. *Shit*. No Harper. How am I supposed to get through today?

A lump forms in my throat as her little face pushes its way into my brain. Every inch of this place reminds me of her. Those big blue eyes, rosy cherubic cheeks, that funny, familiar, hiccupping laugh that would crack me up and get us shushed by the nurses.

I close my eyes and can almost feel her by my side.

I shiver. I count to ten, then reopen them.

I can do this. I have to do this.

Focus, Saira, focus.

As we continue up, the elevator's half-empty now and the skater boy has moved closer to the doors, pretty much right next to me. He's tapping away on his phone, the clicking echoing in the silence as we continue to whoosh up past three, four, five.

I wonder where he's going.

My mom catches me looking at him. She nudges my shoulder and raises one perfectly groomed eyebrow.

The door opens and others step out, but he stays. It's the three of us now: me, Mom, and him.

I jab the eighth-floor button again for good measure. I check my watch.

It's 9:11 a.m. Catastrophically late.

This is all Mom's fault. And Taara's. And Sweetie Auntie's. And Sonia Mamiji's.

And okay, maybe just a bit mine. I should have gotten my brows done last week because this was pretty much inevitable. Or maybe I should have worked on getting my license this summer like any normal sixteen-year-old.

Then I wouldn't have had to have my mommy drive me to my first day of work.

She grins at me as I glare at her, and raises her brows comically.

Gods, I really do need a license.

As we get off the elevator on eight, I steal one more look at Cutie McFreckles (because for some reason, I can't *not* look), then bolt out, rushing down the hall toward oncology.

"See, I got you here, safe and sound and in one piece," Mom says, trailing behind me, her arms full of stuff. Why is she following me?

"Yes, but I'm late, Mom." I flash my smartwatch her way pointedly. She's supposed to be at pediatrics on the eleventh floor already, not here with me. "And aren't you late, too?"

"What, half the place is Desis!" she says with a grin. "We're always late."

"Mother, Indian Standard Time is an excuse manufactured by chronically delayed brown people like you." Mom's looking me up and down, "from tip to toe," as she always says, pausing at my earlobes. *Damn. I forgot my earrings.* She reaches up toward her own ear, ready to remove one of her ruby studs.

I stop her before she can get it out. "Yes, I forgot them. And no, I don't want yours."

I hear laughter, and that's when I see him. The guy from the elevator. McFreckles. He's standing near the registration desk, still on his phone, skateboard on the floor beside him, all casual like he's got no place else to be. Except maybe the oncology floor. And he's laughing. At us.

I glare at him, then at my mom, check my smartwatch one more time, and start walking toward the main oncology door.

Mom grabs my arm before I can storm off.

“Not another hug. I can’t take it anymore, Mom.”

“Did you remember your lunch?” she asks, and I can feel her mentally checking my briefcase.

I nod at her, raising my newly perfect eyebrows so she’ll take the hint and leave. Instead, she steps closer, spits on her hands, and starts to smooth them out with her fingers. “Sonia Mamiji made this one a bit thicker—”

I shove her hands away. Hard. “*Mother!*”

The guy laughs again. Louder this time. He’s not looking at his phone anymore, just staring right at us, like we’re a part of his favorite sitcom or something. Mom notices him and frowns, but turns her focus to me.

“I knew we should have waited for Reshma to return,” Mom says, and she can’t resist one last eyebrow stroke even as I’m backing away toward the wall. “She’s the only one who really knows how to do them properly.”

My phone vibrates in my backpack. Lizzie, likely. If she’s up early.

“Mom, I’m late!” I basically shout this time, making a move toward the door. My stomach is about to boil over, like an overdone pot of chai. This is pretty much the most important day of my life so far, and I am SO LATE. “I’ll see you at lunch.”

“Wait,” she says, shoving the greasy brown bag toward me. “Don’t forget the samose.”

“I don’t want them.”

The guy laughs again, and I hear him say under his breath, “I’ll take them.”

“But, beta, your friends will enjoy them—”

“No.”

“Acha,” she says, tucking them back into her bag. “Have a good day.”

She gathers all her crap—the carryall, the samose, three other random bags—and heads back toward the elevator. As it dings, I take a deep breath, then exhale.

“I’ve never witnessed anyone so violently reject samosas,” the boy says to me. “I mean, I’ve never seen anyone reject samosas at all.”

My cheeks are blooming again as he waltzes right up to me, just a few inches away. He’s a good foot taller, and he smells familiar—like crisp citrus and something sweeter, maybe cinnamon. His dark hair flops forward into his eyes as he looks down at me, a dimple denting one cheek and that smirk playing on his mouth again. He looks mostly white, but there’s a hint of something else, like that guy from my best friend Lizzie’s favorite K-drama.

“You new?” he says when I don’t answer. “You’ve got that new-kid vibe.”

“You could say that,” I say, picking up my briefcase. “And I’m late.”

“So I heard,” he says with a laugh. It’s rough around the edges, like it could turn into a cough pretty quick, and he clears his throat to stop it. “Big appointment?”

“Yes,” I say, looking at my smartwatch again. “And I really am super late now.”

I rush off.

But I can’t help but look back one last time.

He’s still standing there, his phone at his side, staring after me with a wide grin. “Maybe I’ll see you around. Give you the tour. Or something.”

“Maybe!” I shout, then nearly trip over my own two feet as I head toward the oncology double doors. I catch myself, and for reasons I can’t explain, I take a little bow, like some nerdy, uncoordinated ballerina, and push on through.

His laughter follows me through the door, and that tingle rushes up my back again, making me want to stay, to chat another minute. But I know I can’t—my smartwatch tells me it’s now 9:18. I’m a whole eighteen minutes late. On my first day of work.

So very late.

CHAPTER 3

I stride into the administration office, as grown-up as I can be, my hair in a fancy Taara braid, my polka-dot blouse paired with some tailored black pants—I just couldn't do the capris—and my new cherry lip gloss adding just the right hint of color and shine. (At least according to my sister.) Professional, but not stiff. I hope.

All eyes land on me—because, of course, I'm the last one here. And I'm sixteen, so, you know, I stand out. A blush warms my cheeks. The erythema again.

I pull my shoulders back, take a deep breath, and try to focus on the details instead of my anxiety. There's too much to look at, too much to think about. *Breathe, Saira, breathe.*

The rest of the group is already gathered, and there's a woman taking attendance. "Glad you could make it," the woman says sternly. Dr. Davis, the hospital administrator, I guess. She's tall and blond, with Texas curls and an accent to match. But there's not a touch of softness to her. Which works, since she's like the boss of this whole place. If doctors worship medicine, and the hospital is our church, this lady is like the pope. You don't want to mess with her. She decides who gets to stay—and who has to go. I've heard terrible things about her. Mostly from Mom—who's now standing next to her, waiting, expectantly. She's got Dadi's sack of samose in one hand. And my dry-cleaning bag in the other. *Wait, what?*

Oh yeah, that.

"How did you get in here?" I ask, my voice croaking.

Mom points. The stairs, obviously.

“Your white coat,” Mom says brightly, shimmying the dry-cleaning bag. She hands the sack of samose to Dr. Arora, the chief of residents, whom I met at my interview, and he smiles graciously as Mom ignores the fact that *everybody* is staring at us. Arora’s the guy I’ll be working under in oncology. Mom’s invited him to dinner several times—I think she wants to set him up with Taara—but he keeps politely declining. Which makes me like him already.

“Mom, get out of here!” I whisper-shout, but she’s beaming at me as she unzips the dry cleaning.

My coat. It’s so crisp and white, I want to touch the collar in awe. No more wearing my mother’s white coat and following her around the office like a little kid playing doctor. I mean, I’ve worn an actual lab coat since the White Coat Ceremony last year and all, but this one is brand-new, and marked with the Princeton Presbyterian logo, all official.

This is it.

This is real.

I suddenly feel super nauseous.

There are snickers among the group. Except for Davis, who clears her throat loudly.

“Just a minute, Davis,” Mom says to her. A mistiness coats Mom’s eyes, and I’m as red as that gross chicken tikka masala at the Indian place at the mall, but I have to let her have it. This is a moment she’s been imagining for years—and so have I. “You know this has to be done properly. Come on, beta, let’s get you ready.”

Mom holds up the coat for me like she did with my coats when I was small.

I slip my arms through the sleeves, button up the front. Smiling, my mother smugly pins my ID to the front pocket, then straightens the collar. Part of me is mortified at all the witnesses, but I can’t help but relish this moment a little, too.

My mother raises a hand, giving into her urge to smooth my

French braid. I duck and bump into one of the other interns, a young black woman with springy, dark curls and glasses. She grins.

“Mom, I think Dr. Davis is waiting,” I say, trying to usher her to the door. “I’ll see you at lunch.”

“Okay, beta.” She waves to Davis and the others. “Enjoy the samose!” She wanders off toward the door, empty dry-cleaning bag in hand.

“Well, now that drop-off is done, maybe we can get this show on the road?” Davis says. “Given that we’re a good half hour behind, thanks to Sehgal here.”

“Sorry about that,” I say.

Davis grimaces at me. “First things first.” She passes around folders of paperwork. “Welcome to the Pediatric Oncology Fast-Track program here at Princeton Presbyterian. It is unique, and you are lucky to be here. These folders will contain all the information you need to acclimate yourself to the hospital, including maps, log-ins, and passwords for the electronic records system, your intern lounge and cafeteria pass, and other details. And here’s Dr. Arora, whom you all met at your interviews last month.”

Arora clears his throat, as if he’s about to give his Oscar speech, and turns to address the three of us, young, new, naive, and ID’d as interns by the pink strip on our badges. “Dr. Sehgal, Dr. Howard, Dr. Cho,” he says. “Welcome to Princeton Presbyterian, your home—and I do mean you will pretty much live here—for the next year.”

My fellow interns are the young black woman, who seems friendly, and a scowling twentysomething Asian man who’s wearing a tailored suit—complete with an oversized Winnie the Pooh tie—under his lab coat. Is he a doctor or a clown?

“Princeton Presbyterian is one of the most renowned teaching hospitals in the United States. This is the inaugural year of the Fast-Track program, a specialized residency year designed as a filter program for the award-winning pediatric oncology program here in Princeton. As you all know, the three of you were selected from among hundreds

of applicants based on your stellar records of academic merit, recommendations from your clinical and rotational supervisors, and your previous research. As interns, you will be competing for two coveted spots in our pediatrics program, which feeds our renowned pediatric oncology fellowship—of which I am a graduate myself. As you know, our fellows have gone on to practice and teach at many esteemed institutions, including Harvard, UCLA, Hopkins, and others.

“Once we fill out some of the paperwork, Dr. Davis needs to set up your night calls, and I’ll give you guys a tour of the pediatric oncology ward.”

I scan the packet in my hands, reading through the schedule—state-mandated forty hours a week for me, to start, and nearly double that for the other interns—the rules and regulations, the criteria that we’ll be judged on, and information about board certification, which I’m already studying for. I scrawl some notes in the margins of the pages.

“Seagull! Sara Seagull!” Davis yells my name (or her own slaughtered version of it, anyway), then taps me.

“Here!” I say, like she’s going through the class roster.

Davis raps on her clipboard like it’s a clock that’s stopped working. “Sara Sehgal, if I could get your rapt attention for a moment.”

Apparently, she doesn’t like to repeat herself.

It makes me feel like the bad kid in class—which I’ve never experienced before.

“Sorry, Dr. Davis, it’s actually Saira. Like Sigh-ra Say-gull.” My words rush out in a whoosh when I’m nervous.

“What?”

“Saira, you know, with an *i*. Sigh-ra. Etymologically, it’s of Arabic origin and means ‘traveler.’ There’s also a Hebrew version that means ‘princess.’ But my parents named me after Saira Banu, the Bollywood starlet from the sixties, known for her roles in classic films like *Jungle* and *Padosan*. There are more than sixteen hundred Sairas in the United States, all of whom spell their names with the aforementioned *i*.”

Cho rolls his eyes with a scoff. He’s tall and well built, with pitch-black

hair and wire-rim glasses. Arora smiles. I wonder if people butcher his name a lot, too.

Davis sighs. “Look, Sara. Sigh-ra. Whatever. I understand that you were late, that your mommy brought your lab coat and your lunch because you forgot them, and I know you don’t have your license yet. But—”

“I have my permit,” I tell her. “And I’m preparing for the practical exam, too.”

This does not seem to impress her.

“What I was going to say, Sehgal, before I was so rudely interrupted, is that I really don’t care for excuses.”

“Neither do I, Dr. Davis. And I’m not making them. But you know how it is, learning to drive.”

She frowns.

“Or not,” I add.

“In any case, punctuality is a vital facet to your employment here at Princeton Presbyterian. I expect you to be on time, and fully committed while you’re here.” She looks haughtily at the three of us and clicks the clipboard again. “Understand that this will be trial by fire—you will be assigned a supervised caseload and will be expected to pitch in wherever you are needed within the department. All three of you. And by the end of the year, only two of you will remain for residency. If today is any indication, it won’t be much of a challenge to eliminate one of you, and while Dr. Arora has the majority say, nothing is finalized here without my approval.” She looks pointedly at me. “Now, once you’ve filled out your paperwork, Dr. Arora will lead you through the different sections here in the children’s oncology wing, introduce you to the nurses and staff, and give you your schedules for the coming weeks, which are subject to change.”

She turns her attention back to me. Which is unfortunate. “Sehgal, I understand, too, that you’re temporarily excused from night rotations due to your . . . circumstances.”

“Ah yes, I’m age-challenged.”

“If that’s what you want to call it.”

Mom and I negotiated—as soon as she’s comfortable with me driving solo, she’ll notify the state to green-light overnights. Who knows when that will be, though. Since I’m still nowhere near getting my license.

Davis marks something down on her paper again. I rarely dislike anything or anyone. It wastes too much energy. For her, maybe, I’m making an exception. She could be a nemesis.

“Cho, Howard. The two of you will be working five sixteen-hour shifts per week.” The other interns are trying—and failing—to look unbothered. Davis continues. “While Sehgal, of course, is exempted.” She turns to address me. “For the moment, we have you working four ten-hour shifts per week, which is less than half of the usual workload. I guess it helps to have your mommy on the hospital board.” Her eyes are narrowed, and she’s practically snarling.

Howard and Arora look alarmed. Cho’s entertained, like he’s binge-watching his favorite TV doc drama.

I try not to suck my teeth. “Yes, that’s a state mandate, actually, for this kind of situation—for which I’m the precedent. My mother has—”

“Convinced the state of New Jersey that you only have to do half the work to become a whole doctor?” Davis delivers this casually, while scribbling on her ubiquitous clipboard.

Cho actually cackles, but the others look on in stunned silence.

“My *mother* actually had nothing to do with the decision,” I finish, trying to keep my voice steady. Yes, she’s a senior attending in pediatrics at Princeton Presbyterian. But that has nothing to do with me landing *my* spot here. Or the special rules the state makes for minors. “New Jersey decided that all on its own.”

“And I’m sure she doesn’t iron your lab coats, either,” Davis says, leaning in close to flick an imaginary piece of lint from my shoulder.

I take a step away and smile. “Nope, we have our coats dry-cleaned at Schroder’s on Elm. Organic and lavender-scented. My favorite.” I

take a deep breath. “In any case, I’m happy to discuss this in private if it’s something you’d like to explore further. In fact, I’ll stop by later to see if I can get on your calendar.” *Maybe we’re getting off on the wrong foot. Maybe—*

“That won’t be necessary.” I swear there’s fire flashing in her eyes. “My calendar is pretty full. Some of us are here to actually work, Sehgal.”

“*Dr. Sehgal,*” I say, smiling so I won’t scream.

“Excuse me?”

“I’d prefer you call me Dr. Sehgal, Dr. Davis.”

“That’s a title you’ll have to earn from me, Sehgal,” Davis says as she’s walking away, waving her clipboard in the air as she goes. “All the interns have to. You’ve got a year to prove yourself.”

Diagnosis: Hate her.

Prognosis: War!

CHAPTER 4

“Don’t take it too personally.” Arora walks up to me, clipboard in hand—they’re all about the clipboards in this hospital. He tucks a pen behind his ear. “She’s like that with all of us.” He’s so tall, I feel like a little kid standing in front of the Empire State Building, staring up at him. “Especially the Indian doctors. There’s too many of us or something.”

So the rudeness is because I’m brown? “She seems to like you just fine,” I say with a frown. “Maybe it’s because of Mom. She’s always saying that the Sehgal name means something. I always thought she meant in a good way.”

Arora laughs, so I decide to work it. “And, given the population density of the state and the regional demographic, we may actually be underrepresented here,” I say. “I mean, we’re in the thick of Central Jersey. If anything, there should be more brown people. And don’t white people, like, love our food? I should be the most popular intern here.” I point to the samosa bag.

“Ah yes, the infamous Sehgal samosas,” he says. “Classic. So, your mom has told me a little about the root of your passion for pediatric oncology. Very interesting.”

“Yeah, I’ve wanted to do this since I was, like, eight.” I can almost see him wanting to roll his eyes. “And I’ve been working toward it for a long time—just as long as anyone else. But because I’m sixteen, there are rules, like they have for kid actors and stuff. I didn’t ask the state to regulate my hours. I mean, I graduated magna cum laude from

Princeton and from UMDNJ. I'm perfectly capable of handling the workload."

"I wouldn't have hired you if I didn't think so, Girl Genius," he says with a smile as I cringe. "You are too modest, but your mom makes up for it. And you're not much older than some of our patients here in pediatric oncology, as you'll soon learn." He leans back against the counter, resting his clipboard on it and scrawling something else on the first page. "You know, back in the day, I was sort of a protégé myself. That's how I got to be the youngest chief resident in New Jersey. I think you'll shatter my record, if things work out well here. Although that Varun Khanna kid might beat you to it. I'll try not to hold that against either of you."

Gab. Why'd he have to bring up Varun Khanna? At nineteen, he's the second-youngest doctor in America. And decidedly my nemesis. Although we've only met twice. I wonder if he was up for this internship. In any case, I'm the one who got it.

Howard walks up to us, carrying two cups of coffee, and for once, I'm not the only one blushing. I swear, Arora stands a full three inches taller all of the sudden. And I can't really blame him. Howard is adorable—light brown skin scattered with freckles, with these teal-blue-tortoiseshell cat's-eye glasses, her pink-streaked brown curls held back by a red polka-dot scarf. A look Taara would appreciate, even if it is a bit too hipster for my sister's posh style. I stare down at my stiff doctorly loafers and frown. I should have gone with the sandals.

"Hey, is this a private conversation?" Howard says in a flirty tone, handing one of the coffees to Arora.

I must look shocked, because she sticks out her hand, suddenly formal. "I'm Sam. Samantha Howard. Your competition." She winks. "Georgetown, magna cum laude. But you knew that already, I'm sure."

"You might be right," I say. "That Kids Caring for Kids program sounds amazing."

"It's now pairing up kids with shared cancer diagnoses from all over the world."

I've got my work cut out for me between Howard and Cho, who, as uncharming as he might seem, graduated from Yale, also magna cum laude, with a year in adult oncology already under his belt.

This isn't going to be easy.

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Howard," I say.

"Call me Sam!"

"Okay, Dr. Howard."

"No, really, you're making me feel old."

Well, you are old. She must be, like, almost thirty. I can't say that, though. "I, uh, okay, Dr. Sammy."

"Okay, then." She laughs, and it's this light, tinkling thing, and I kind of feel like I want to be her. "Just so you know: We're gonna have fun this year." Her eyes twinkle as she grins at me. "Think of it as a year-long slumber party. With less sleep and more blood."

Diagnosis: A unicorn in scrubs.

Prognosis: Could be trouble!

We roam through the main oncology floors—all linoleum and antiseptic, the same beige concrete-block walls and hunter-green pleather waiting room chairs that I remember from my mom's office in pediatrics. There's the constant thrum of nurses on rounds, chatting as they wheel patients and do paperwork. Orderlies run cleanup duty, and staff start the next batch of lunch deliveries. Every so often, the background beeping of an alarm goes off and running, the specter of death reminding us why we're all here. I try not let it throw me, the way it used to when I was here for Harper. But my heart races every time it happens anyway.

After some paperwork, Arora gives us a tour of the children's floors. There are three of them (one of which my mom is in charge of—pediatrics, hence the nepotism worries), but in this special program, we'll be focusing on the subspecialization of pediatric oncology, which has a separate wing. It's where the really sick kids are. The cancer kids.

The doors to the ward are stainless steel, cold, and foreboding. And familiar.

“You need a special ID card to enter this area. Access is limited to those working or supporting children in the wing. They’re too fragile for us risk exposure,” Arora says solemnly. “And it’s not a fun space to spend a lot of time in if you don’t have to. Unfortunately—or fortunately?—for you all, you do have to.”

We walk through the double doors and scrub down immediately, washing our hands and arms before moving forward.

“The children in this ward suffer from forms of cancer including melanoma, leukemia, sarcomas, and carcinomas, and especially localized disease, which we are seeing a significant rise in recently,” Arora says, drying his hands. Howard hangs on every word, while Cho makes frantic notes on his phone, and I hold my breath, bracing for memories of Harper. “The hospital is one of the premier centers on the East Coast for treatment of such pediatric ailments, with a forty-bed in-patient facility and an eighty-person out-patient capability. We meet state and federal requirements for the utmost in pediatric care, and some of our doctors have even been awarded the Pediatric Oncology Award by the American Society of Clinical Oncology. Make no mistake, being here is a privilege. Understand, too, that the competition here makes this already stressful experience all the more so. Remember this: While the people in this room right now are your rivals, they’re also the people you will need and learn to rely on.”

My heart flutters—palpitations. The oncology wing looks the same as it did when I was six and here visiting Harper during her treatment for acute lymphocytic leukemia.

The walls are painted a bright, cheerful but chipping yellow, with images of balloons and circus animals on murals here and there. The furniture and cabinetry haven’t been updated in a decade or more. The clown mural near the nurses’ station—with its blue hair and red nose—still scares me a little. Harper used to make me hold her hand and close my eyes when we walked past it. The hair on my arms stands.

Harper was my first-ever diagnosis. She'd fallen off the swing after school at our neighborhood park. Her big purplish bruise wouldn't heal, so I researched it online, then cross-checked it against my mom's medical books. I remember calling her mom and insisting that Harper go to a special doctor called an oncologist. I even spelled it for her.

We pause at the entry desk. I met Dr. Charles, the current chief of staff, for the first time when he was the surgeon supervising Harper's chemo treatments. He called me a little doctor and took me seriously when I brought in information about treatment options. In the end, it didn't matter. Harper died anyway.

Arora continues on, telling us that the wing admits patients as young as three months old and as old as eighteen years old, and has a recovery rate of 90 percent. "That's a number I'm pretty proud of," Arora says, "and one that we will work really hard to maintain and improve."

"We're playing God here," Cho says gleefully. He's slick, self-assured, maybe a touch too excited. Too thirsty, and always back for refills. "Controlling life and death." It's almost like he can feel the thrum of power, the way he's drumming on the counter. "Each new technology brings us that much closer to giving every kid—even the worst off—a fighting chance at survival."

"That's right, Dr. Cho," Arora says carefully, like Cho might explode. "The technology is critical. But one of the biggest and best tools in our medical arsenal is hope."

"We have the power to shape things and shift things," Howard adds, leaning in close to Arora. "A small sliver of light can lead the way. Our patients need our optimism."

I thought that, too, once. That hope would be enough. But now all I can really see is Harper's face in my head. It takes hard science, the work of medicine, to really give a patient any chance at all. I ponder opening my mouth to tell them so, but Arora steps forward then, all business again.

"Okay, time for us to get your system access sorted," he says, taking a pointed step away from Howard. "You'll get your rotation schedules

this afternoon.” He heads into the administrative office, leaving us behind to worry in his wake. Well, I’m worried anyway.

And like he can sense it, Cho pounces. “So you’re the genius, huh?” Cho asks, a weird smirk snaking across his face. “Can I offer you some advice?”

I frown at him. Cho-splaining is clearly going to be a thing. Howard grins. She’s clearly reading my mind.

“Do your best to stay on Davis’s good side. Oh, too late! Seriously,” Cho says, and in my head he’s hopping up and down like a leprechaun in a suit and tie, full of malicious glee. “She’s notoriously difficult. And we all know why you’re here—especially her. So I don’t think it will take much for them to cut you.”

“And why do you think I’m here?” I ask. “Because I thought it was the advanced medical degree I earned. You know, like the one you have.”

“Your ‘degree’”—oh my gods, he literally air-quotes the word “degree”—“might as well be in finger painting for all the good it’ll do you. You won’t last a month.”

“Go ahead, Cho. Underestimate me. It’ll hurt that much worse when I kick your ass.” I feel weird about cursing in front of all these adults, but I have to show them I can hold my own.

Cho does that weird smirk thing again. A list of things I’m going to tell Lizzie about him grows in my head. *Like a tumor*. Uh-oh. Med student syndrome is setting in already. My mom warned me that doctors tend to be the worst hypochondriacs.

“Leave the kid alone, Cho,” Howard says.

I appreciate her coming to my defense—but “*kid*”?

“Oncology is difficult and exhausting—mentally, physically, and emotionally,” he says. “An eidetic memory is hardly going to be enough to get you by. You’re clearly too young for it.”

“I don’t think you’re qualified to make that judgment. After all, my UMDNJ degree would state otherwise,” I say. “And I agree that my memory won’t be enough, so I’ll be using my intellect, too. It’s

not about memorization. You have to be able to *extrapolate* and take decisive action.”

“Listen, little girl, you think you get it,” he practically spits. “This job takes more than smarts. There’s an emotional maturity needed that can’t be taught.”

“And are you going to be the big bad emotionally mature wolf of this whole thing?” I say. It’s like he’s reading from some script, eager to play the villain.

“It doesn’t take a genius to see that you’re gonna crash and burn. After all, Mommy can’t save the day every time.”

Grrrr! “You leave my mom out of this,” I say, seething.

“I would, but then who’d drive you home when playtime’s over?” He grins like the wolf baring fangs, gleeful.

Howard flashes us a serious look, one that warns us to stop.

“Guys, this is going to be the hardest and most exciting year of our lives,” Howard says. “We’re in this together—the three of us. This is work, yes. But we’re in the business of healing, of saving lives. And having enough room in your heart to care is a big part of it. That’s something that can’t be taught. It can be grown, though. That starts with us. We’re going to need each other.” She side-eyes Cho big-time.

Cho grimaces, and I try not to laugh. Or cry. Like it or not, I’m going to spend my days with him for the next year. We’ve got to get along. Or kill each other.

Diagnosis: Standard narcissist.

Prognosis: Going down.

CHAPTER 5

The Pizza Hut waiter sets a pie down on the table between me and Lizzie. Ugh, mushrooms. I definitely didn't order mushrooms. I glare at Lizzie, who's oblivious, staring down at her phone, and probably responsible for the offending topping. Yuck.

"Into fungi today, are we?" I say to get her attention while I pick off the endless mushrooms, stacking them up on the side of my plate, leaving the good stuff, like peppers and pepperoni.

Lizzie—Bizzie Bopper, as I've called her for the ten years I've known her—is my best friend, and one of only two non-Desi people here. (The other is my cousin-in-law Lisa, who's Taiwanese and married to Sunil, my cousin twice removed.) But she fits right in, and she's family, pretty much. Which is good, because she's an only child.

One of my little cousins races through the restaurant screaming, "You're it, you're it, you're it!" Sonia Mamiji and the other aunties dig into a pile of garlic bread, ignoring their kids and the chaos they make, but my aunt Anya—Dragon Auntie, we call her—shouts at them to bring the volume down.

I know this scene by heart, I've lived it so many times. Thirty-five of us are crammed at six big tables, piles of cheese and meat congealing in front of us, my mom standing at the center of the room waving her arms like she's conducting an orchestra.

This, in the Sehgal clan, is what you call "a small family party." Meant to celebrate my first official day as a real doctor.

I cringe. The sheer number and noise we bring confuses and

confounds other unsuspecting diners, especially with all our musical chairs—ing around the room.

“Ralphie!” Papa shouts to the manager from two tables away. “Can we get another jalapeño-and-onion pie?”

“And a just pepperoni for the little ones,” Anya Auntie yells from across the room, glaring in our direction. She’s always glaring. Mom is annoyed that she didn’t show up for my big send-off this morning, but I was grateful to not deal with her disapproving grimaces so early in the a.m. “Those kids swiped the whole pie.”

The frazzled manager hands off extra napkins and straws, then bustles toward the kitchen. Papa leans over Raju Mamaji’s Sprite with some vodka from his water bottle, pretending no one notices, even though the waiters know exactly what’s up, since we’re here at least once a month.

My dad and uncle slap at each other, laughing, and Raju Mamu takes a big swig of the “water.”

Vish slides into the seat across from me and starts inhaling his meatless thick-crust extra-cheese monstrosity.

“Well, hi to you, too,” I say.

“Too hungry for hellos.” He sets his new digital SLR camera on the table. He’s a wannabe photographer and filmmaker, so he never travels without it. Even to Pizza Hut.

“Move over,” Taara says as she shoves into the booth, picking up a slice from her thin-crust veggie pie (because she doesn’t do grease). “This is pretty much the unhealthiest thing you could ever eat. You’d think a family of doctors would know that.”

We all ignore her, not wanting to trigger the usual rant. Taara shoots a glare around the room, clearly wishing she was somewhere else.

“Sit down. Stop running,” she barks at our six-year-old little twin cousins Dolly and Molly (yes, rhyming is a thing), five-year-old Shaiyar, and the baby of the group, Pinky, who’s two. They’re racing around the tables like they’re working a giant obstacle course, and the waiters bearing trays of pizza are just another hurdle in their game.

They take one look at Taara, still glaring, and erupt with laughter as one of them crashes into a table or chair.

My mom directs waiters balancing more pies to other tables, and my dadi and all the aunties sit at the outskirts of the group, gossiping as they pick at their pizza, ignoring the chaos, along with their kids.

“Arre, beta, why are you eating Lizzie’s supreme?” Mom hovers over my head, waving her arms around, and the thick, musky scent of Shalimar and sweat descends like a storm cloud. The clang of the bangles she wore to match her fancy gold-worked salwar kameez, all for an outing at Pizza Hut, echo loudly over our family’s din. “Where is your barbeque chicken pie?”

“Mother, it’s okay. I can pull the mushrooms off.” I use my arms to cover my plate, blocking her invasion.

“No, I’ll get it, and let’s order another one. Onions, peppers, chicken?” She looks from me to my sister to Lizzie. “Do you need more garlic bread?”

Nobody ever really needs more garlic bread. But those are apparently the magic words.

“Yes, please,” Vish says, not looking up from his phone. “With cheese!”

“Okay, two more pies and two orders of garlic bread. I’m on it.” My mom rushes off to go order more death on a plate.

“I can’t believe Davis called you out,” Lizzie proclaims for the sixtieth time. She’s looking at the camera in her phone, inspecting her new look: a lacy shirt and black leather skirt, her blue eyes lined with kohl (Taara gleefully taught her how to do it), her usually stick-straight hair curled in big blond ringlets. “Dr. Davis is going down.”

“Well, Saira was late,” Vish says, trying to be the voice of reason. He’s conflict avoidant.

“She’s brown,” Taara adds, reaching over for more thick crust. “We’re always late.”

“Not all of us,” Vish says, then turns to me. “Keep a low profile for a minute. Let it blow over. Davis’s rec—”

“Is a big part of my grade,” I interrupt. “I know. She pissed me off.”

“Yeah, but you’re a professional now,” Vish says. “Gotta get it together. And besides, you just started. Maybe all the doctors in training *do* have to earn the title. Like JV versus varsity, ya know?” He takes another huge chomp of his pizza.

Lizzie flashes the phone at me again. “The white coat pic I posted for you got like two thousand hearts,” she says. “And I remembered to tag Princeton Presbyterian!”

“That’s great,” I say. Lizzie’s been doing my social media, and as far as I can tell, she’s pretty good at it.

“Yeah, I think it should be a good mix of doctor Saira and teenager Saira,” she says. “So we’ll get some good shots to post at the Fourth of July party, too.” She grins. “Maybe of you and Vish, lovey-dovey.”

Vish and I both groan. I am so not going to that party.

“Oh, and once you finally have your license, let’s do a shoot of you going car shopping for something super fancy,” Lizzie says. “Like an Alfa Romero or something.”

I frown.

“I mean, what’s the point of living at home and making all this money if you’re not gonna blow it on something sexy and slinky?”

Of course that’s when my older cousin Arun strides in from outside, shouting to my mother, “You want me to get the cake, Masi?”

“Ohhh!” My mother spins around, frantic. “No! Don’t you dare. Nobody touches the cake but me.” She glares at my dad. “Especially not your uncle! Remember Taara’s twelfth birthday, when he dropped it?”

“You’re the one who ordered slippery ice cream cake instead of platters of jalebi, like I told you to!” Papa shouts, then guffaws, as if what he said actually made sense and was funny. Raju Mamaji joins him, apparently already tipsy.

Arun laughs—at them, not with them—then tucks into our booth, squishing Vish in farther. “You bring it up anytime there’s cake!”

And there’s cake *every time*.

Arun towers over us now. He grew like a foot after his freshman year at Rutgers and is very Ranbir Kapoor these days—all lean brown muscle and close-cropped hair. Lizzie’s already batting her eyes from across the table.

“Eat, eat,” Mom says, rushing toward the restaurant door. “I will go get it!”

“Arun, did you see that new Deepika movie they just released online?” Lizzie leans forward, showing too much cleavage, eager for his attention.

He turns to Vish, already distracted.

“I mean, she’s no Madhuri—” Lizzie continues. She’s nothing if not determined.

“I haven’t seen it yet. I’ll check it out.” He jostles Vish’s shoulder. “I saw your game last week,” he says.

Vish turns beet red.

“You gonna play college lacrosse?” Arun says. “I could put a good word in at Rutgers.”

“Dunno yet,” Vish says, scooting away, though there’s nowhere to go. “I’m thinking California, maybe?” He points to the camera. “Hollywood and everything.”

“I wanted to go to Cali, too. Mom wouldn’t even let me apply.” Taara pouts and shreds the wrapper from her straw. “But Rutgers isn’t so bad.”

“Actually,” I say, “Rutgers is ranked among the top hundred public universities in the nation, and its affiliation with UMDNJ makes it a very logical move for you, Taa—”

A sudden crash silences the restaurant noise. Oh no, the cake? Again? But Mom’s not back yet.

It’s my little cousin Pinky, who’s collapsed onto the dirty linoleum floor. Vomit spills from her little lips, and they’re turning from pale pink to blue. Her eyes roll back in her head.

I jump up and rush over to her.

“Pinky!” Anya Auntie shouts, letting out a peal of anguish unlike any sound I’ve ever heard before.

Pinky’s body flops and goes stiff, then starts flopping again. I drop down next to her, my eyes on my smartwatch, counting. My uncle Ramesh scoops her up, trying to hold her quaking body still.

“Turn her on her side,” I say.

He doesn’t hear me, his body frozen with panic.

“Her side, please. It’s important!”

Fluid spills out of Pinky’s mouth and onto the floor.

He nods and does it. The shaking doesn’t stop.

“Don’t touch her,” Anya Auntie keeps yelling at me. “And someone call 911!” Anya sobs. “Please! My baby!”

I kneel closer, peering at her to see if she has food in her mouth.

Nothing.

“Does Pinky have any allergies?” I ask. I try to remember—nuts, soy, shellfish, but Pinky eats anything, as far as I know. Not that Anya lets us see her all that often.

He looks at me with a stunned expression.

“Ramesh Uncle,” I say gently this time, trying to calm him down.

“No, no, nothing that we know of,” he says, his voice panicked.

I lean in, undoing the ribbon and zipper on Pinky’s frilly dress, trying to give her as much breathing room as possible.

Anya Auntie pushes forward again, eager to shove my hands away from Pinky. “The paramedics are coming.”

“This could be a reaction to nuts or honey,” I say.

Ramesh Uncle is still frozen in his stupor.

“Taara, move the tables and chairs away!” I yell out, and she and Lizzie follow orders for once.

“What’s wrong with her?” Ramesh Uncle asks, dumbstruck.

“How about low blood sugar levels? Any known history of that?” I ask. “Has she had a high fever? A recent head injury? Has she been around other sick children?”

He shakes his head.

“Does she have medication? Prior history of seizures?” I already know the answers. She’s been perfectly healthy—until now.

Ramesh Uncle shakes his head again.

“Don’t touch her. Don’t touch her!” Anya Auntie shouts, her voice frantic and full of sobs.

Sirens wail outside.

My mother marches back inside and makes eye contact with me, instantly mirroring the worry she sees on my face. She drops the cake and rushes forward, trying to make her way through the crowd. “What’s going on? Saira!”

The cake box is splayed open and thick white frosting is splattered everywhere. She kneels down beside me, looking from me to Ramesh Uncle, and touches Pinky’s forehead.

Pinky’s shaking stops, just like that, like when the washing machine is done with its cycle.

“She’s okay, Mom,” I say. “For now.”

The paramedics push through.

“Step back, step back, move!” a female paramedic shouts, parting the crowd, kneeling down next to Pinky. “Miss, I need you to back away,” she tells me.

I don’t move. She tries to push me away—physically. I catch her hands. “Seems like a seizure, first known incidence, clocking at three minutes before resolving itself,” I say calmly. “Her lips turned blue before going pink again. I’d take her in and do a full workup and—”

“Step away from her. Now.”

“I know what I’m doing,” I say.

“Yes,” Ramesh Uncle says. “She helped my baby. She saved her.”

“You did the right thing by clearing the space and not moving her, but knowing how to manage a seizure doesn’t make you a medical profess—”

“I know that. Being a doctor does.”

She stares blankly at me, her eyebrows drawing together.

“I am a doctor.”

She flinches.

“I’m at Princeton Presbyterian. But you’re right. She should definitely have a formal follow-up, and we can run some tests to see what might have caused this. I’d do a pulse ox, maybe a dose of Diastat to be sure. With no prior history, I’m a bit worried. My mom will know more, but right now Pinky needs medical attention.”

The paramedic is unimpressed. “Well, we intend to give it to her.”

I turn to Ramesh Uncle. “The emergency room will run some tests, but she’s awake and alert, which is a good sign. Go with her now. I’ll check in at the hospital tomorrow for an update.” Anya Auntie pushes forward, trying to shove me away again, but I hold firm. “It’s important.” I don’t dare look away from Anya Auntie’s face. I need her to take me seriously, to trust me. “Did you hear me, Anya Auntie? Take her to the hospital. Now.”

Ramesh Uncle squeezes my shoulder. Pinky’s breathing steadies and she lets out a wail. I take a deep breath, relieved to hear her crying. Anya Auntie leaps forward to hug her baby. Both the paramedic and I pull her back.

“She needs breathing room right now,” I tell Anya Auntie. “They’ll take her in—you can ride with her. I’ll be there first thing in the morning to check on her.”

“No, you won’t,” Anya Auntie says. “I want her to see a *real* doctor.” She looks around the room, hoping to pick another fight with my mother.

It stings like a slap to the face. My cheeks burn hot as everyone stares. This isn’t the first showdown Anya Auntie and I have had—she’s never quite bought into the Girl Genius thing, and never lets me forget it. But this definitely hurts the worst.

“Saira is a real doctor,” Taara says. “And either way, Pinky needs medical attention.”

“We’ll make sure she gets it,” Anya Auntie says, her shoulders

squared as she hovers between me and the paramedics, who carefully lay a whimpering Pinky on a gurney and buckle her in.

“Thank you,” Ramesh Uncle says as they start to follow the paramedics out.

“I’ll be there—first thing,” I say. “I promise.”

“And I will, too,” my mom adds.

Ramesh Uncle nods and races out after the stretcher.

The din starts up again, slowly at first. Soon, people are talking, laughing, focused on their families and friends. I’m sort of lost in it, standing in the spot where Pinky collapsed, trying to figure out exactly what just happened.

My dad marches into the room from the bathroom. “What happened?”

“Oh, nothing!” Lizzie says with a grin. “Just Saira, saving lives and taking names.”

Papa laughs, murmuring something about cake, but I can’t stop thinking about Pinky. Whatever that was, it wasn’t good.

PRINCETON PAPER—PRINCETON, NJ

TEEN DOCTOR SAVES TODDLER—AT PIZZA HUT

The Girl Genius is at it again. Everyone's favorite real-life *Doogie Howser, M.D.* — teen doctor and Princeton-native Saira Sehgal — was at it again this weekend. Ralphie Higgins, the manager of the Pizza Hut, reports that the 16-year-old Dr. Sehgal, who recently started as an oncology intern at Princeton Presbyterian, performed emergency care on an unidentified 2-year-old who had a seizure on the premises on Thursday evening.

“She cleared the space, checked the child out, and did some medical stuff,” Higgins said. “I can't even tell you what she

did, really. In the end, the girl was A-OK. It was magic to watch — a child saving a child.” The 2-year-old is reported to be in stable condition, though further information about her diagnosis was unavailable.

Sehgal's mother, a prominent local pediatrician, runs her own practice affiliated with Princeton Presbyterian, but Higgins says she wasn't in the room when the incident happened. “The teen was perfectly capable of handling the situation on her own. She's a real doctor!” Higgins said.

Stay tuned for more on Dr. Girl Genius — we're sure she'll be saving more lives around town.

CHAPTER 6

If yesterday felt like the first day of school, today feels like the SATs—when you haven't cracked a book all summer. Not that I *actually* know what that would be like. It seems apt, though.

Today's our first day of rotations, and I made Mom leave the house super early so we don't have a repeat of yesterday.

The oncology floor is bustling, with kitchen staff serving in-patient breakfasts, nurses making their morning rounds, the chemo lab doing the a.m. shift for kids who can still handle going to school.

I swing open the intern lounge door to meet Arora for rotation, and Cho and Howard are already there. One of the bunks is still sleep-rumpled, so at least one of them spent the night. Show-offs.

Before I can make my way over to them, a nurse with a stack of folders steps into my path.

"So you're her, huh?" the nurse says. He's tall, with light brown skin and thick, wavy dark hair, and dressed in scrubs. He gives me a proper once-over, all obvious and dramatic, and it would make me cringe if it didn't make me giggle. He has a stack of files in his hands—for today, I'm presuming—but he doesn't seem ready to hand them over.

"Dr. Saira Sehgal, Girl Genius. Have you trademarked that yet, by the way? I read about you in the *Star Ledger* a couple of years ago. So intriguing. Been following your career ever since," he says, and a bright, toothy grin plays on his face. "I'm José Gonzalez-Martin, your nurse practitioner extraordinaire. I work frequently with Dr. Arora, so I'll be

on your rotations, as well as Howard's and Cho's." He frowns at this. "That Cho, such a sweetheart."

"A peach," I reply, and put my hand out for the files. I notice the little flag pin that he wears on the collar of his scrubs. "Dominican Republic?" I ask, and point.

"How dare you?" he says with a mock gasp. "Puerto Rico!"

I laugh.

"I wear it so my Spanish-speaking patients know immediately that they can talk to me."

"Nice."

"Do you still read tarot cards, too?" he asks.

"That was a really old article," I say, and he laughs.

"Yeah, you were, like, twelve then. I guess in teen years that's, like, decades ago. Maybe we can get a deck to play around with on breaks."

"I'll be honest: They wanted something to 'soften' me for the story," I say, wondering why I'm telling this guy the truth. "My best friend Lizzie is still very much a believer, though. She can read your cards." I try not to roll my eyes as I say it. Lizzie's into tarot; Taara's into astrology. Delusions. Pseudoscience.

"Well, maybe I'll manage to convince you. But in the meantime, we've got work to do." He heads toward the computer, and I follow.

We both sit, and he logs on. "Let me introduce you to your first caseload. You'll be doing rotations on eight of Abhi's—that's Dr. Arora, I mean—patients, along with Dr. Cho and Dr. Howard. You'll each be assigned specific cases, but for the purposes of training under this special program, you'll be rotating as a group so you'll all be up-to-date on everyone." A wrinkle creases his forehead as he clicks into a screen. "Get ready; this is going to be fun."

"Oh, I've already been through it—I logged into the online system first thing this morning," I say as my phone buzzes in my pocket. I ignore it. Lizzie's finally up, I guess, and harassing me again about the pool party tonight. No thank you. The last thing I want to do with

my Friday night is hang out with a bunch of drunk teenagers. “I prefer the neatness of computerized records. I computerized all of my mom’s records when the hospital demanded she be up to code with her electronic medical records system. It was very relaxing.”

“Sounds like it,” José says. I follow his gaze and realize he’s looking at my hands. I raise an eyebrow, and he grins. “Very nice. Neat, clean, no polish. Dull, but super professional. You don’t want to give them any more reason to distrust you than they already have. These people are putting their kids’ lives into your little hands. I’m glad they’re well manicured. Some of the other interns have got to clean up their act.” He steals a glance at Cho, who’s looking at a stack of files. “Especially their cuticles.”

I grin at him. He’s definitely got a point. “Have you met my mother yet? She would love you.”

“Oh, Dr. Sehgal Senior, you mean? Who do you think she brings all those samosas for? I’m her favorite child, not you.” He shuffles through a bunch of papers. “Okay, let’s get to it. So you interns have eight new admits assigned to you. Abhi will supervise your work. One day soon, you’ll each be doing some of those solo, while he and the others observe and offer second opinions.” He leans in close and whispers, “This place is no joke. I’ve seen interns flee the hospital in tears, never to return. I’m rooting for you. I have been since you were twelve.” He glances back at the others again. “Although Cho is fun to look at, when he’s not chewing his fingernails.” Ouch.

Diagnosis: Charming—and he knows it.

Prognosis: Future hospital bestie.

He runs through the protocol—paperwork first, which is mostly complete, our initial visit and confirmation of diagnosis, prognosis, and strategy. All of which I already know. Then plotting out a chart of treatment and procedures.

“You got this already, but we’re also scheduled with tech for a

run-through on the EMR system, too. They're obsessed with record-keeping here, especially Davis. I presume you won't have this issue. People have been fired more than once for being sloppy about it."

"Yeah, my mom's told me about the drama with that doctor who got kicked out. She's glad that I can help her with some of that stuff."

"I'd believe it. She keeps saying she wants to recruit you for primary pediatrics—then you can work under her at the hospital and take over her practice."

I frown, and he laughs.

"She didn't mention that to you? Family practice and all."

"She's mentioned it to me a million times, and I've told her a million and one that I'm oncology all the way. Whether she likes it or not."

"Oh, you're in for a mess of trouble with your mama."

"I can hold my own."

He grins. "I can tell." He looks at his phone. He stands and claps twice, startling Howard and Cho. "All right, let's go. You guys are officially on call!"

Right before we go inside, Arora gathers us for a pep talk. It seems to be his MO, and I actually kind of like it. "So today is a big day. You'll be introduced to your current caseload, which is mostly new admits. Unlike some residency programs, our approach is more team-based. I'll observe your interactions the first few weeks, then assign you each specific cases to manage. So while one of you will be assigned as the primary intern on each case, I expect all of you to be informed and up-to-date on each case. Under my supervision, of course."

Howard opens her mouth to say something but thinks better of it. Not Cho, though. "Doesn't that limit our ability to really learn to lead?"

Arora frowns. He's clearly proud of his strategy, and didn't expect questions. "No, quite the opposite. I think it simulates the experience of taking charge and leading while getting active feedback. And sometimes contradictory feedback. I've tentatively assigned each of you a patient, so let's see how it goes this week. Regarding Brendan Jackson: Sam, you're up."

Howard steps in. “Yes, Brendan Jackson, age eight, diagnosed with Stage One non-Hodgkin lymphoma, a type of cancer that develops in the lymph nodes and begins to grow and spread quickly,” she says all formal, as Arora watches and takes notes on her performance. The attending already knows the diagnosis—but we’re graded on our assessments and delivery, like this is a practical exam. “It was discovered as a small swelling on his abdomen and caught pretty early because it was causing him stomach troubles.”

We walk into the first patient room as a group and are greeted warmly by an older black woman with a shock of graying curls. She’s sitting in a chair, knitting what looks like a blanket in pinks and reds—a clash my mom would surely appreciate.

“Hello, hello!” she says, standing as we walk in. She marches right up to Howard and shakes her hand, then turns to me and embraces me in a bear hug, even though we’re strangers. “I’m Ruby, Brendan’s grandmother, and this is my daughter Ericka.”

A younger woman who’s an echo of her mother—the same dark brown skin and hazel eyes—smiles tightly and nods toward me, worry lines marring her otherwise smooth forehead. She’s wearing a suit and her exhaustion like a coat. “Hello,” she says, offering a firm, formal handshake.

“You must be Saira,” Ms. Ruby says. “Your mama’s told us so much about you, ever since you were knee-high.”

Before I can speak, Cho shoves himself in the space between the Jacksons and I. “I’m Dr. Cho.” Then he points to José. “And that’s Nurse Gonzalez-Martin. Nice to meet you, Mrs. Jackson.”

“That’s Ms.,” Ms. Ruby says with a big grin. “I’m quite single. A longtime widow.”

Cho blushes, and José laughs.

“Well, Ms. Jackson, let’s get started,” I say, following toward the bed, where a little boy lies.

“Call me Ruby, dear. And say hello, Brendan.”

I wave at Brendan, who looks so small in the oversized hospital bed.

He's got bright brown eyes that almost match his skin color and flashes of his grandma's smile, except a missing tooth or two. He's got a tablet on his lap and earbuds in, which his grandma pulls out casually. Ericka busies herself rearranging the bedsheets and Brendan's things.

"Hello," he says, then pops the earbuds back in, his eyes settling back onto the screen.

"Lovely to meet you," I say. "I understand from the file that Brendan is one of my mom's patients?"

Ericka nods. "And I was, too, before him."

"Yes, dear," Ms. Ruby adds. "We've been going to your mama since my own babies were born. Your mama's like a member of our family."

My phone starts buzzing and I rush to silence it. Cho shoots daggers at me, his eyes tattling. "If I recall correctly, you're the maker of those amazing sweet potato pies we get every Thanksgiving."

Ms. Ruby laughs again, and it's lovely. "That would be me! Ericka's got no baking skills—she's too busy lawyering—but Brendan here's been apprenticing with his grandma, reluctantly."

"Back to business," Ericka interjects. "Dr. Sehgal—your mom, I mean—says we caught it early and that perhaps things are salvageable."

"He was barely eating, and when he did, he couldn't keep anything down, not even water," Ms. Ruby says. "Complained about stomach-aches. Poor boy. Got so bad he couldn't go to school for days on end. We spent a lot of time praying on it. And he was already a skinny little thing. Look at him now."

Brendan focuses harder on the screen—I see flashes of an old *Power Rangers* cartoon. He hasn't said more than a word the entire we've been here. I make a mental note to try to chat with him one-on-one.

"Why don't we step outside so we can discuss some options," Howard says, and the group follows her to an office suite.

Ms. Ruby trails behind her, still talking. "Then we found the swelling. It was bad." Ms. Ruby turns to me. "Dear, your mama said you'd take good care of my grandbaby, and I believe her."

"Of course, Ms. Ruby," Howard says, hiding annoyance. "The

main treatment for lymphoma is chemotherapy, which is intense for the patient—and for the family. Because his cancer is spreading quickly, we need to move fast. There will be four phases of treatment: first surgery to remove the growth; then radiation treatment and chemotherapy to eradicate any future growth; and then maintenance. Unfortunately, this may take several years, and it's not an easy process. But we want to make sure we get it all and prevent recurrence.”

“Years!” Ms. Ruby says, and her eyes go misty. “My poor boy.”

Ericka frowns at her mother but doesn't say anything.

“He's in good hands here,” Howard says. “And he has a loving support system at home—which is critical.”

“That he does,” Ms. Ruby says. She takes my hand, and Howard's. “Thank you for taking this on, my dears. I know it seems like Brendan isn't listening, but he's absorbing everything. It's too much for him.” Then she hooks a finger under my chin, lifting it. “And you, sweetheart, you're the spitting image of your mother. With you, he's gonna feel safe.”

I nod, and we say our goodbyes—for now. “We'll be back later this afternoon with further information about Brendan's treatment plan,” Howard says. “Brendan's got a long road ahead of him. So for now, the best thing he can do is get some rest.”

That's definitely what he needs. But as I steal one more glance at Ms. Jackson and her frowning daughter, I sense some familiar mother-daughter tension simmering between them. I don't think this case (or any of them, really) is going to be as straightforward as it seems.