

What a  
Desi  
Girl  
Wants

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# CHAPTER ONE

I glare at my phone screen, willing the image on it to disappear or for the phone to spontaneously combust. Anything to erase what I'm looking at.

A few months ago I started following Aleena Obaid, an Indian social media influencer. She's also the daughter of Naz, the socialite my dad started dating earlier this year. Aleena's feed consists mostly of parties at opulent venues, incredible fashion, and perfectly styled photos—and my dad sometimes shows up in them too. I've gotten used to that. But now the caption of Aleena's latest post proclaims her desi royalty as soon-to-be stepdaughter of Nawab Reza Rabbani of Agra, India.

That's right—I have just found out through a social media post that my dad, whom I haven't spoken to recently or seen in almost a year, is engaged to marry Aleena's mother. I guess I should have answered when he called earlier.

Given how materialistic Aleena obviously is, her mother is probably some gold digger who's after my dad's royal title and wealth. Two things of which I know very little since I live

with my mom in Newton, Kansas, a city known for . . . well, nothing much.

A loud clattering in the kitchen startles me. I smell something burning and quickly slide my phone into the back pocket of my jeans as Mom walks out, globs of something stuck in her hair and traces of her battle with dinner prep on her apron.

I raise my eyebrows. "I'll order pizza?"

She nods wordlessly on her way to the bathroom. I grab my phone and order a large mushroom, onion, and jalapeño pizza.

"Mehar, did you remember to bring in the mail?" Mom is back, all cleaned up.

I nod at the pile of unopened mail on the dining table, surrounded by papers, notebooks, packages, and everything else that gets dumped there.

"By the way," I add. ". . . Dad called earlier today."

"Yeah? What did he say?" Mom pages through the mail, adding a bunch of flyers to a growing stack of recycling.

"I didn't pick up." I avoid looking at her.

"Well, honey, you're going to have to talk to him sometime," she says. She walks over to the couch and settles in. I join her, tucking my legs under me and leaning against her shoulder.

"I don't know what to say." I mean, I didn't even before I found out that he was starting a whole new life without me. I know my mom is going to learn the news soon, but I can't bring myself to say it out loud.

She brushes back my hair and bends to kiss my forehead. "Just tell him what you told me. I know you want to patch things up, and he'll understand. He's your dad, and he loves you—"

Without thinking, I interrupt her. "If he loves me so much, how come he's not here, Mom? I mean, it's easy to call every

now and then, but maybe he can try harder to actually be a part of my life, don't you think?"

I immediately regret my words. I can tell how much it hurts Mom every time I bring up the fact that my father decided to stay in India with his mother and sisters rather than live with us here. I wish I had more control over my tongue, because the last thing I want is to cause Mom any more pain. She's already had more than her share in her life. But I get so angry whenever I think about Dad and how he chose not to be in my life the way a father should. All I get are occasional visits, as if I don't matter.

"Look, Mom, I want to fix things with Dad, you know I do." I look into her eyes, trying to calm the anger that rises inside me whenever I think about my father. "But I'm also so mad at him. All the time. I don't know what to do."

Mom doesn't say anything, and I let out a deep sigh and snuggle even closer to her. I've mastered the art of not adulating, and I think I like it right here.

A little later, we've watched two recorded episodes of *The Voice* and devoured an entire pizza, and I have to peel myself off the couch. I have a late shift at the seniors' home in downtown Newton, where my best friend, Norah, and I work part-time.

November in Kansas is typically nicer, but today the skies are gray and cloudy. I peer through the windshield of my thirdhand truck, regretting that I ran out of the house without my raincoat or umbrella. Now I'm going to get soaked running through the parking lot and I'll have to borrow scrubs from one of the nurses to make it through my shift. They're always too big because I'm barely five foot two, and I look like I'm playing dress-up. It's hard enough to get the seniors to take me seriously. Especially old Mr. Watkins, who never wants to sit still during craft time and says he doesn't have to listen to anyone who barely

reaches up to his waist. Short or not, I beat him at chess every time.

Norah and I always try to sign up for the same shifts. It makes the time go faster because after crafts and the occasional dance sessions, the residents are pretty tired and it's kind of hard for us to stay awake. Usually we work on school stuff, but today neither of us has much left to finish.

I pull out my phone, open the Instagram app to Aleena's post, and shove it under Norah's face.

"Is that Aleena? She always looks like a model."

"Sure, yeah. Anyway, she just posted this." Norah gives me a questioning look and I purse my lips. "My dad's getting remarried."