



FALLING

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OUT
OF
PLACE

CHAPTER

1

My parents are lame. I mean, really lame. Right now they're in the living room talking about me. Dad likes to rant in Spanish. I hear him flick something with his finger. Probably my C-average report card.

I'm sitting on my bed with my knees drawn up to my chest. I pick at a loose thread on the hem of my LA Sparks T-shirt. I have to wait for my parents to finish talking. That's the rule. I don't get a say. After they decide my fate, they'll let me know. I'm guessing it will be no TV and no dating Tony for a month. That's my usual punishment. Tony will understand if we can't go out. He's as loyal as a puppy dog. I don't care, as long as I can play basketball.

I push a deep breath out of my chest. I really should get some homework done. I lean over and yank my backpack off the floor. I'm not even sure what homework I have. A literature essay, I think. Except I haven't read the book

we're supposed to write about. A research paper for my government class. There's a test in geometry tomorrow. Or is it Friday?

I unzip my backpack. The inside looks like my locker threw up in it. My stomach twists with stress. I lean my head against the wall and think about texting Tony. Maybe let him know what's up. But my hands feel like lead and fall onto my lap. I stretch my legs out.

Across the room, my *quinceañera* portrait stares back at me. I look like the queen of unicorns in my white ball gown and sparkly crown. Talk about lame. I can't believe I agreed to that big church service when I turned fifteen. Or the huge party. It cost my parents a bundle, as much as Celia's party. Dad has never said so, but I know he's pissed he had four daughters.

From the living room I hear him bark, "*Y no mas baloncesto!*"

What? My face gets hot. The leaden feeling vanishes. I jump off my bed and run into the living room. Mom and Dad are facing each other, their arms crossed. I see Rosie and Marta at the kitchen table. Their school books are open, but I can tell they're listening.

I glare at Dad. "What do you mean 'no more basketball'?"

He glares back at me. I expect him to order me to my

room. But he says, “When Celia was seventeen, she had a job and got straight As.”

“So?” I cross my arms, copying them.

“So there’s an opening in the warehouse,” Mom says. “Two hours after school and all day Saturday.”

“I don’t spend that much time playing basketball!” I shout.

“No TV or dates for a month.” It’s as if Dad didn’t hear me. “And no cell phone.”

“What? No!” My phone is a cheap piece of crap. But it’s my lifeline. I scramble for an excuse. “What if I have an emergency?”

“If you’re not home, you’ll be at school or work. Those places have phones,” Dad says. He pauses. “We expect you to raise every one of your grades. By the end of the semester. Or no cell phone until you graduate.”

I stare at him with my mouth open. “There’s no way! I’m not as smart as Celia. I can’t raise all of my grades. Especially geometry.”

“You can. You’re choosing not to.” Of course that’s what Dad says. He moved here from Mexico with nothing. He works hard. So does Mom. My older sister, Celia, is just like them. She’s in college on a scholarship. The three of them think anything is possible if you just try hard enough. Well, I have tried. It’s not possible.

“Screw you,” I tell him.

“Gabriella!” Dad yells.

Mom gasps. “Respect your father!”

I march back to my room. Slam the door. Wish it had a lock. I think about sneaking out. Hooking up with Tony. But I’m already in enough trouble. Grabbing my phone off my desk, I start to call Uncle Mike. He’ll understand when I tell him what a jerk his big brother is being.

The door flies open just as I’m pressing his number. Dad steps into my room and holds out his palm. I press my lips together, grip my phone. He doesn’t say anything. Just stares. I loosen my grip. Drop it onto his hand.

His eyes soften a little. “We only want what’s best for you, Gabby.” He glances at my photo over the dresser. Then he says, “You’re not a child any more.” He leaves, closing the door behind him.

My bed feels cold and clammy when I crawl into it. I curl into a ball. My friend Randi tells me I’m lucky I have two parents. I’m lucky they’re married and not divorced. I’m lucky my dad’s not in prison. Or drunk. Or having kids with other women.

Yeah. Lucky me.

CHAPTER

2

Randi's short Afro is the first thing I see when I walk into school the next morning. She's standing in front of her locker. At six feet, she towers over most other students. She looks way more like a basketball player than I do at only five eight.

"Hey," I mutter, stepping up behind her.

She twists around. "Hey, Gabs." She slams her locker shut. "What's wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't return my texts last night," she said.

"Oh. Right." We make our way down the crammed hallway to first period. "I had a big fight with my parents. Dad took my phone until I raise every grade."

Randi's eyes widen in horror. "No way! Even geometry?"

I nod.

“Wow. Severe.” She’s quiet a few seconds. Then she shrugs. “At least they care. Mom barely glanced at my report card last night.”

At least. I hate those words. Being turned into a clone of my sister doesn’t feel like my parents care very much. But I don’t want to explain all of that again. “So what were you texting me about that was so freakin’ urgent?”

We’ve reached her English class. “Um,” she mumbles without looking at me. “Nothing important.” She’s frowning. “I’ve got make-up chem lab at lunch. See you at basketball.”

Randi walks into her classroom.

Okay, so my frustration leaked out. I got a little snarky. Randi is so sensitive. I reach into my backpack for my phone. I’ll text her with a simple *sorry*. But I can’t find my phone! Then I remember.

Crap.

I shift my backpack on my shoulder and trudge to social studies.

I tend to block things out of my head that I don’t want to think about. That’s why I didn’t mention to Randi that my parents expect me to quit basketball and get a job. It’s also why I go to the gym after school. Somewhere in my brain, I hope Mom and Dad have changed their minds. A bigger part of my brain knows they haven’t. But at the moment, my ignoring brain cells are in full control.

We're warming up, on our first lap around the court. Running laps isn't my favorite activity in the world, but it beats working at a friggin' job. Randi is up ahead. She ignored me in the locker room when we were suiting up. I take a deep breath. It's time to get us back to normal. I sprint and catch up.

"Hey," I say, struggling to stay even with her long strides.

"Hey." Her voice is all mopey.

I take a deep breath. "So how's it going with El Paco?"

That gets a small smile out of her. She shrugs.

"Is that what you were texting me about?" I ask.

She nods. "He's being a jerk." Randi then describes the fight she had with her boyfriend, Franklin Jamison. He lives in the Valley. They met last year at a basketball tournament. It's a long-distance romance. He complains about spending money on gas. She's constantly jealous. As usual, she's worried he's dating another girl. He backed out of their weekend plans.

She finally finishes her sob story. Before I can tell my mouth to stop, I spit out, "Dump him."

She slows to a walk and stares at me. "What?"

She wanted me to tell her not to worry. That he loves her. That they're the perfect couple. Except ... I'm not in the mood.

"Well yeah," I say. "It's clearly not working out. You only talk about how miserable you guys are."

“But I like Franklin. I don’t want to break up.” Her toffee-colored skin can’t hide the angry red darkening her cheeks. “Gabby,” she sputters, “you can be so—”

From center court, Coach Matthews shouts, “Line up! Shooting drills!”

We join our teammates behind the free-throw line. Randi’s arms are crossed. She looks away from me.

I complete the sentence she started a minute ago. I can be so insensitive. So bitchy. Whatever. It was just my opinion. Randi has been high maintenance since we met freshman year. I’m tired of apologizing for myself. I’m tired of always having to fix what I say.

I feel hyped up all of a sudden. I really need to play. I bounce up and down on my toes. Everyone. Is. Moving. So. Slowly. “Come on!” I clap my hands. “Let’s go!” I practically tear the ball from Tiana for my free throw.

“Hey,” she whines.

“What?” I dribble the ball a few times, bashing it on the floor. I lift the ball, eye the basket, and throw. It misses wide. “Crap.”

I race up, grab the rebound, and toss it into the basket.

“Gabby,” Coach says. “What are you doing?” Getting our own rebounds is not part of the drill.

“Sorry. I got carried away.”

By the time the game starts, I want to play so bad I can scream. My best friend doesn’t understand me. My

parents don't understand me. But basketball? We are simpatico.

I play small forward. That's position number three. It means I do a little of everything on the court. Foul shooting is my specialty. I make about sixty-five percent of every free throw I try. That's pretty good. In order to shoot fouls, I have to draw fouls. That's easy because I'm aggressive. I get to the line quick on layups and post-up plays. In the process I'm always running smack into defenders.

My muscles are twitching when our opponents trot onto the court. The St. Barnard Tigers. They're a Catholic high school, like us. We're the All Saints Crusaders. It's amazing how ruthless our teams play each other. I figure God must like winning games more than he likes people sitting around reading the Bible. I'm up for that. Yay, God.

Once the game starts, everything else melts away. It's just me, sprinting, watching the ball, passing the ball, dribbling the ball, shooting the ball. If people in the stands are yelling, I don't hear them. Coach gets on my case for not listening to instructions from the sidelines. I can't help it. I'm too focused on the court.

Alicia has just nabbed a missed rebound on the Tiger's side of the court.

I'm open. "Here!" I yell.

She passes to me. I surge toward the three-point line. The Tiger's point guard steps in front of me. She's tall

and hefty. She reaches out to steal the ball. I run straight through her tree-limb arms, trying to draw a foul.

Instead, we get tangled up. I trip over her big feet. The wooden floor rises up and slaps my right cheek. *Smack*. The rest of my body follows.

For a second, I lie on my stomach, dazed. The court swims around me. Something snaps. She tripped me. The bitch tripped me. My blood turns hot.

I push myself onto my hands, searching for her. Randi is gripping my arm. She helps me stagger to my feet. There's a worried crease between her eyebrows. She's asking me something. I don't hear her. I don't hear anything except an annoying buzz.

There she is. Standing with her teammates under the basket. She's wearing a satisfied smirk. At least, that's what it looks like to me. My skin, my muscles, everything is on fire. I shake Randi's hands off my arm. I take four steps, and I'm fighting with a Tiger.