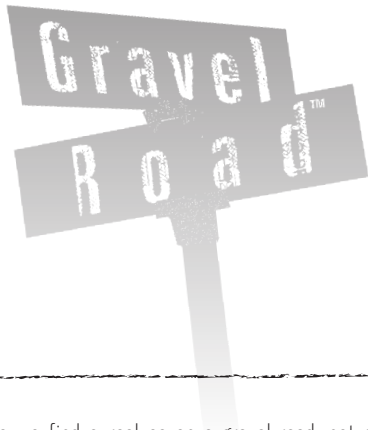




FALLING

M.G. HIGGINS

OUT
OF
PLACE



Sometimes we find ourselves on a gravel road, not sure of how we got there or where the road leads. Sharp stones pellet the unprotected. And the everyday wear and tear sears more deeply. Saddleback's series, Gravel Road, highlights the talents of our urban street lit authors.

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