



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 newest series, Gravel Road, highlights the talents of our urban street lit authors.



CHAPTER 1

New Year's Day

Get out!” Mom yelled at me as I grabbed my warmest fleece jacket from the closet. “How dare you accuse De Monte.” I couldn’t believe Mom was choosing her boyfriend over me. I was sixteen, not some little kid telling stories. I knew it was wrong for De Monte to touch my breasts. I knew it wasn’t an accident. It wasn’t the first time. I knew he was a creep when he was drunk. But that didn’t mean he could do what he wanted. How could Mom not see this? How could she believe him and not her own daughter?



“Mom, please!” I begged as I pulled the jacket over my shaking arms. “He’s lying. Don’t do this!”

When she didn’t answer me, I ran into my room. But Mom followed me. She was not letting up. “Neema, I said get out!”

“Mom!” I yelled back. “I’m going.” I could feel tears flowing down my cheeks. I looked her right in the eyes. “You have to let me take some of my stuff. I can’t go without anything.” Mom turned and stomped out the door. I tried to calm myself and take a deep breath. I had to pull myself together.

The room I had called mine for three years had a window that looked out over Pine Street. It was usually a busy street. But everything was dead that day. It was January first. I could see a few flurries and knew my jacket wouldn’t be enough. I was already shaking, and I hadn’t even stepped outside yet. I walked over to my bed and touched



the red and blue quilt that Mom had given me. She said she got it from her mother. It would be perfect to keep out the cold.

I grabbed the quilt off my bed and shoved it under one arm while I grabbed my overstuffed, yellow handbag in the other. I glanced inside the bag. I had my phone and my wallet, along with lip gloss and other random things like eyeliner, a bottle of Tylenol, a couple of CDs I burned myself, and some tampons. I thought they were emergency items at the time. I was suddenly scrambling for real emergency items.

I could hear Mom and De Monte cussing in the other room. I told myself I needed to clear my head. Think Neema! Think! I had to make sure I had enough for a few days. I shoved underwear and a pair of blue jeans in the bag. I looked at the closet full of clothes. There were new ones and those I had kept for memory's sake. I had to leave them. I looked at the pile of stuffed animals

