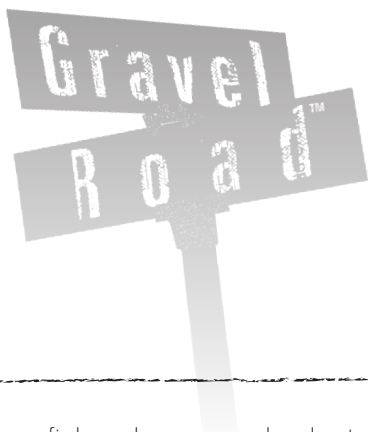


2 Days

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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

and old dolls that sat neatly on my dressers. I had to leave them too. I looked at the pictures neatly stuck to my wall. One of my mother and me smiling. A few of me pretending to be a top model. Then there was a single picture of my father in uniform. He looked about twenty. I never knew him. I believed he was saving the world. I ripped all the photos from the wall and stuffed them into my bag.

I took a glance in the mirror. I looked awful. My hair was all crazy. I hadn't even washed my face. I hadn't had time to get ready to go out. I never would have left my home like this. I was always the best-looking girl at school. Always hair with the newest style. Always makeup to show off my beautiful brown eyes. The girls always said I looked like Beyoncé, with beautiful caramel skin and a body others would kill for. But at that moment I looked like a mess.

I suddenly felt De Monte towering over me. I turned to face him. “You heard your mother. Get out!” His angry, black face was looking down at me. I could still smell the stink of his partying from the night before. The night he tried to touch my Beyoncé body.

“Get away from me, creep!” I moved away from him and headed toward the door. He followed. Mom was standing in the kitchen crying. Black eyeliner was smeared across her smooth, brown cheeks. She wouldn’t even look at me. I wasn’t sure if she was crying for herself or me. “Mom?” I begged one more time. She didn’t even look at me. My own mother let me walk down the steps to the outside door and stand on the cold street. I knew she was crying for herself.

I stood for a few minutes in front of De Monte’s Pawn Shop. He’d moved us to his upstairs apartment when Mom needed a

place for us to live. He'd been good when I was younger. But booze and time had changed him.

The snow started to come down a little harder. I awkwardly carried my belongings toward the subway station. There was no way I would be out in the cold for long. I had money to get on the next ride to Park Central Station. Only two stops away. I took out my phone. My hands were shaking. I texted Nate that I was on my way. He'd been my boyfriend for six months. I knew he would help me.

As I sat in the warmth of the subway car, I finally let myself breathe. I wish I hadn't. I wish I'd stayed on running mode. But I didn't. Suddenly I was crying again. There were only four other people sitting nearby. They didn't even turn their heads. They didn't care. So I didn't care. I just cried.

CHAPTER 2

Shelter

The snow had stopped when I got off at Park Central. There were tall trees surrounding a park where some kids were playing. The snowfall had not given much to play with, but the kids were excited anyway. I walked to one of the four apartment buildings that surrounded the park like a large fortress. I found the right door and pushed the doorbell that read Boyd. My heart raced. I hoped they would be home. It was noon. Nate hadn't answered my text. I pulled out my phone and texted again. This time I got a response. "I'm not home. Wait for me at the park. I'll

come get you. Got a car.” Car? I found that strange. Exciting too! Thinking about the car took my mind off of Mom. I pushed away her words. I pushed her away.

I walked over to the kids again and sat down on a wet bench. I covered myself with my quilt. It brought some warmth. I waited half an hour before Nate pulled up in an old, blue Chevy station wagon. His window was rolled down, and I could see the smooth, brown skin of his arm facing the cold. Nate looked like he was on a summer afternoon drive with just a T-shirt on. His hair was in tight cornrows, and he smiled a smile that would make any girl melt. He parked and got out of the car.

“Dang, you look like an old bag lady.” Nate laughed as he walked up to me. I looked at him and started to cry again. He sat down next to me and crawled under the quilt. “Come on, baby. It can’t be that bad. Tell me what’s going on.”