

Even after years of sobriety, Matt Fleming suffers anxiety over a heinous crime perpetrated in New Orleans against a prostitute on his 21st birthday. God seems silent until a miracle demonstrates the father's constant care and concern.

No Road for Cowards

By Jarvis King

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A long, straight asphalt road stretches from the bottom center towards the horizon, flanked by white lines. The road is set in a vast, open landscape with sparse, dry vegetation. In the distance, a range of mountains is visible under a sky filled with heavy, dark clouds, with a bright light source breaking through near the horizon. The overall mood is one of solitude and a journey.

NO ROAD FOR COWARDS

JARVIS KING

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Chapter 1

“I don’t understand how you did it for forty days,” he said, seemingly to the air, as he plodded along.

It had becoming increasingly difficult to think of anything other than the hollow space in his middle and the sounds of hungry predators growling from his gut.

“It’s only been two days, and I feel like a Hindu on a hunger strike. The Bible says you were hungry, Lord, so the temptation to turn some stones into bread had to have sounded fairly reasonable.”

He often wondered if passers-by ever considered notifying the authorities about a crazy person observed walking along, holding a conversation with an imaginary friend. Of course, this was a comical thought as nothing was imaginary about the friend with whom he regularly conversed. In fact, he discussed matters, large and small, with this friend much more than with any other person. It made perfect sense to him; after all, his friend was incapable of dishonesty, and his counsel never failed to provide the ideal solution for every question or problem arising in his life.

However, every now and then he would fail to heed the advice of his friend. These stubborn occasions invariably lead to precarious situations from which his friend always seemed willing to extricate him. After these moments of pigheadedness, he was continually amazed that his wise friend never seemed to scold him. Instead of exhibiting an air of

superiority, his friend applied a bulls-eye life lesson. Indeed, there was never the usual human diatribe beginning with “I told you so” or the ever-popular, “You should have done as I told you.” Instead, there would be a gentle and perfectly made point or two accompanied by a suggestion that they carry on and leave the nasty business behind them.

Hearing another hungry bear growl just above his belt line, he thought he might use the situation to his spiritual advantage.

“If a person has not had the opportunity to eat, can the forced nutritional hiatus be counted as fasting?”

He often posed these theological queries less to get an answer than to entertain himself while he walked along. And some days, all he did was walk. Like today, for instance, and the day before, he had been strolling east along Highway 60 between the Canadian River in the Texas Panhandle and Enid, Oklahoma. His instructions were to go to Enid and purchase a one-way bus ticket to New Orleans. Even though he only had thirty-seven dollars in his wallet, which was certainly not enough to buy a ticket, he was excited about returning to the “Big Easy.” Unlike many of the towns and cities he had visited, not only was he familiar with New Orleans but some of his best friends could be found there. Like many times, he simply trusted God to get him the bus ticket.

New Orleans—the very name conjured up memories of a personality he hardly recognized. Almost bestial in its makeup and completely bent on self-gratification, it did whatever was necessary to have its way. The satisfaction of its immediate urges seemed almost paramount to its very survival.

Consequences were never a factor regarding the behavior and actions of this party-loving Mr. Hyde, let alone the well-being of those outside his immediate circle of associates.

He found it odd sometimes that God allowed him to remember such despicable things from his past when God chose to forget them altogether. Thinking about New Orleans caused one such memory to come flooding back as he walked along the west Oklahoma highway.

Many years before, some friends had taken him to the French Quarter to celebrate his twenty-first birthday. The party started a hundred miles north of New Orleans in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, on the University of Southern Mississippi campus, where he and his buddies were enrolled as students. After splitting an 8-ball of cocaine and a fifth of whiskey, the party rats left Hattiesburg bound for the crowded streets of the French Quarter.

As a birthday present, his buddies had arranged for a prostitute to meet them at Pat O'Brien's bar around ten o'clock. It would have been a surprise if Todd had not let the proverbial cat out of the bag.

"We got a surprise for you, ol' buddy," Todd slurred while falling into Matt, causing him to spill some of his Budweiser.

Every time they partied together, Todd was always the one who passed out first. Every crew had a premature crasher, and Todd was theirs. Sometimes it was a hassle taking Todd along, but his father was wealthy, so Todd always had plenty of

money he didn't mind spending. That was reason enough to put up with his lack of endurance.

"Well, I hope it's a bag of weed 'cause I could use a big, fat joint about now."

They had smoked their last joint while driving over the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway, and it was time for another buzz.

"No, dude," Todd said, enjoying Matt's disdain for surprises. "It's way better than that."

"Oh, come on, dude," Matt said, placing his arm around Todd's shoulders. "You ain't never been able to keep a secret from ol' Matt."

"I don't know. I might just keep this little secret."

"You might as well spill the beans before you throw 'em up," Matt stated flatly. He was tiring of Todd's little game. "You look pretty green there, spiffy. Besides, if you want any of the other 8-ball I'm holding—"

"We got you a hooker!" Todd exclaimed.

At that moment, Tinsel and Chris, their two compatriots, returned from the bar with four shots of Jose Cuervo. They noticed the mischievous grin on Todd's face as they heard Matt exclaim over the raucous noise of the crowded bar.

"Y'all what?" Matt asked.

"We got you a hooker for your birthday," Todd repeated a bit too loud. "She oughta be here any minute."

It was nearly ten o'clock, and, like most people in the bar, he and his buddies were pretty loaded. Nevertheless, several patrons in the establishment couldn't help but overhear Todd's big mouth and responded with congratulations and happy birthdays, as well as several lewd comments concerning the prostitute.

"Y'all ain't fixing me up with a hooker," Matt stated emphatically.

Realizing Todd had ruined the secret, Chris, the undeclared leader of the miscreants, attempted some damage control.

"You told him?" Chris asked, glaring at Todd. "We agreed not to say anything until she showed up. I swear, Tinsel, we need to start calling him Todd the Tool."

As he distributed the tequila shots, Tinsel replied, "Yeah, well, I think we should call him abandoned and leave him wherever he passes out this time."

Tinsel wasn't his real name. His given name was Herman, after his grandfather. That name was only one of the factors fueling the hatred he held for his parents. He was always happy to point out what idiots they were, especially when he consumed large quantities of alcohol.

He acquired the nickname, Tinsel, because he enjoyed chewing aluminum foil when he was high. He claimed it gave him some shock, adding more pleasure to his buzz. Herman was observed one year biting on some Christmas tree tinsel. Although the tinsel was plastic and didn't give poor Herman the desired effect, the nickname stuck.

Raising his shot glass, Chris made a toast. “Happy birthday, and may you not catch anything from your date tonight.”

They laughed, touched glasses, and downed the shots.

“I’m serious, y’all. I will not get fixed up with a prostitute.” Matt said this with as much conviction as a drunk refusing a shot of bourbon.

“Yes, you will,” Chris said. They had been friends since they were kids, and he knew Matt had been with several girls as bad as any prostitute. His piety was a farce.

“Okay, Einstein,” Matt observed, “there are probably two hundred people crammed in this place, so how’s she gonna know who we are?”

Chris and Tinsel only smiled, but as usual Todd had to ruin a good thing. Matt caught him eyeing the Merlin the Wizard birthday hat he forgot he was wearing. Now Chris’s suggestion that the birthday hat would score some free drinks was revealed for its true purpose: to make him a marked man for some lady of the evening. So he removed the pointed hooker magnet and placed it atop the curly, red mop of Todd’s melon instead.

“Oh no, junior!” Chris exclaimed, reaching for the hat.

Todd backed away and announced, “If Matt don’t want her, I’ll take her.”

They could hardly understand Tinsel’s response from the laughter accompanying it. “You! Todd, you wouldn’t know what to do with her if she came with operating instructions.”

In all honesty, the jab was accurate. In the three years they had known him, no one could remember Todd ever having a girlfriend, let alone having been with a girl.

The joke didn't sit well with Todd, and it showed. His face matched his hair color, and he looked like he might take a swing at Tinsel. Tinsel, who outweighed the wounded Todd by some sixty pounds and owned several golden gloves boxing trophies, was unimpressed but willing to accommodate Todd's alcohol-induced bravado nonetheless.

Matt stepped between the would-be combatants. "Look you, idiots," he said, reaching for the hat, "y'all ain't ruining my birthday."

This diffused the situation and refocused everyone's attention.

"So does this mean you'll roll with the plan?" Chris asked.

"I tell you what, pimp daddy," Matt replied. "If this lady even shows up, which is highly unlikely, we're gonna show her how some Mississippi rednecks party."

"I love Mississippi rednecks," someone announced behind him.

Everyone looked to see a slender, young woman dressed in a tight, purple mini-dress. She had shoulder-length blonde hair and wore enough makeup for three prostitutes.

"You the birthday boy, Fantasia?" she said with a thick New Orleans brogue.

"Oh, yeah, here we go!" Chris exclaimed.

“Fantasia?” Matt appeared perplexed. His response produced peals of laughter.

The hooker caressed his cheek, looking at Matt’s birthday hat. “Yeah, you know, honey...Walt Disney, Mickey Mouse. Like that.”

“No, no,” Matt replied, regaining his cool demeanor. “This is a Merlin hat, babe. I’m wearing this ‘cause I make the magic happen.”

Chris, Tinsel, and Todd laughed, pleased with the comeback.

She touched his upper arm as if feeling his muscles. “Oh, honey, I can tell a strong young man like yourself knows all about magic.”

Matt’s three amigos could see a saga in the making; it had top-shelf story potential written all over it.

Because he didn’t want to be left out of the game and partly because he needed another beverage, Tinsel asked their new companion, “Hey, Julia. You want a drink or something?”

“Julia?” Now she looked perplexed.

“You know, honey,” Tinsel said mockingly, “Richard Gere, Pretty Woman, working girl. Like that.”

Unfazed, she looked Tinsel up and down and said with obvious sarcasm, “You’re quick, ain’t ya, chief? Too bad it’s not your birthday. But my name is actually Lana.”

“Okay, Lana,” Tinsel asked. “Would you care for a drink?”

She looked around like she expected to see someone she knew. As a matter of fact, she did know several people who hung around Pat O's, and she really didn't want to bump into them.

"No, thank you," she replied. "I can't hang around in here for long. In fact, why don't we mosey outside so we can talk a little business. Okay?"

Matt figured Lana had probably gotten in a beef with somebody who hung around the bar. On the other hand, maybe the management didn't like prostitutes picking guys up on the premises. Either way, it didn't matter. They had been in Pat O's for two hours, so he was ready to move. Besides, he wanted to smoke a joint anyhow.

Once outside, Lana informed the crew she kept a small apartment within easy walking distance for just such occasions. It was on Carroll Street, just a few blocks from Pat O'Brien's. Pleased they wouldn't have to pay for a hotel room, Chris and Tinsel encouraged the idea and signaled Lana to lead the way.

The revelers made four stops on the way to Lana's apartment. One was a planned stop at a local market, where Chris and Tinsel purchased a case of beer, a bottle of cheap champagne, and a pack of Zig Zag rolling papers. The other three stops were made randomly to allow Todd to puke. These vomiting sessions caused the contents of Matt's stomach to beg for release as well, but he managed to choke the feeling down. He espoused that a person could keep himself from hurling by thinking about something else. "Mind over sour mash," he

called it. Unfortunately, quite often, this power of positive alcoholic thinking failed to have the desired effect.

“Well, here we are, boys,” Lana announced, stopping outside a large and very old Victorian structure. She pointed at Todd, who was being all but carried by Chris and Matt. “He’s not coming in my place if he’s gonna throw up all over my Persian rug.”

“It’s cool,” Chris replied. “I’m pretty sure he got it all out.”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it,” Tinsel chimed in. “He does this all the time. He pukes two or three times and then passes out for a couple of hours. He’ll wake up after while looking for a beer and a joint.”

“You own this house?” Matt asked as Lana opened a creaking gate in a black, wrought-iron fence.

“It was left to me and a cousin of mine,” she replied. “But he lives in Florida, so I stay here and look after the place.”

To Matt, it looked like the place got little looking after. The house’s white paint was flaking and peeling, a terrible dip in the porch indicated joist issues, and the porch railing was all but falling off. He couldn’t help but notice, having been raised around construction.

As they followed Lana up an overgrown walkway, deafening, heavy metal music blared from somewhere nearby. Matt soon realized the music was coming from inside the house. Having been in and around the drug culture for several years, three of which included muling dope from the Mississippi Gulf Coast to Hattiesburg, he had become highly

suspicious; many would have called him downright paranoid. The last thing he wanted was to be lured into a bad situation where some metalheads were waiting to jack some poor tourist for his travel dope. Chris must have been thinking the same thing.

“Look here, sweet thing,” he announced, grabbing the prostitute’s arm and spinning her around. “We ain’t about a neighborhood, block party. This is supposed to be a private session for the birthday boy.”

“Ease up, sweetie,” Lana said, freeing her arm and smiling at Chris. “Those are just some of my tenants. The place is divided into four apartments. A band lives in one of the bottom apartments.”

“That’s cool because we’re holding some party favors, and we ain’t big on sharing with people we don’t know.” Matt was sure someone in her line of work would understand.

“I hope that doesn’t include me because I positively adore party favors.”

“Don’t worry, babe, we all have something for you,” Tinsel informed her. “Well, maybe not him,” he said, looking at a blacked-out Todd. “But the rest of us are gonna help you out tonight.”

The prostitute glanced around the crew with a furrowed brow as she unlocked the front door. Once inside, she walked across a large foyer and climbed a flight of stairs. There was a landing halfway up the staircase, where the stairs turned back toward the front of the house. She unlocked another door at the top of the stairs and entered her apartment.

The living room was quite large, with high ceilings. Large, brightly-colored throw pillows covered nearly all empty floor space. It was on to one of those that Chris and Matt unceremoniously dropped Todd.

The furniture in the room was covered in neon-colored polyester and looked like it belonged in a museum of 1960s memorabilia. The ceiling was framed with wide crown molding ornately carved with reliefs of naked people. Matt thought it would have been very cool had it not been painted a gaudy shade of purple. The garish color scheme seemed consistent throughout the apartment, with the chair rail and shoe mold painted yellow and purple. The colors blended perfectly with a Mardi Gras mural covering the entire front wall of the living room.

It was immediately apparent that the mural was no typical depiction of Mardi Gras. The centerpiece of the work was a float, with “Krewe of Debauchery” embossed in gold along its length. Eighteen to twenty people rode the float, all engaged in various sex acts. The theme was depicted everywhere throughout the mural. The people in the street and those on the balconies of the French Quarter were depicted as brazen participants in a massive orgy.

On closer inspection, Matt noticed that one of the people riding the float was, unmistakably, Lana. She was seated on a black throne high above the other passengers. In her right hand, she held a large golden scepter, which she held aloft as if giving her blessing to the host of perverted revelers. Matt looked closer and discovered that Lana wept while everyone in the

painting seemed to enjoy the debauchery. She appeared to be utterly miserable and alone. Perhaps it was a glimpse into a prostitute's tortured soul.

As Matt surveyed the scene, he couldn't help but wonder if Lana ever invited her grandmother over for Sunday dinner.

"Whoa, Nellie!" Tinsel exclaimed, looking at the mural. "That's what I call a mega-orgy!"

"I've never seen anything like that," Chris said. "Only in New Orleans, boys."

"You like it?" Lana asked. "I painted it myself."

Matt, Chris, and Tinsel looked at her and then at one another, nodding with appreciation and respect.

Tinsel kicked Todd in the head. "Hey, porn junkie, you're missing it again, dude."

"Kinda makes me feel a little weird, though," Matt said. "Like, I really shouldn't be looking at it."

"What are you," Lana chuckled, "a priest or something? But, don't worry, I'll fix that."

"It just makes me feel funny, that's all."

Chris placed his arm around Matt's shoulders. "Dude, you overanalyze everything. It's just a bunch of people gittin' nasty. You're about to do the same thing. So don't mess up a good thing, birthday boy."

Chris never wanted to discuss the ethical or moral aspects of any situation. Matt suspected it had to do with Chris' dad being a pastor. Indeed, he never discussed Christian topics. On

many occasions, Matt had seen him leave the room when people started talking about God or the church.

“Yeah,” Tinsel said. “Don’t get preachy on us. I came down here to get tow up from the flow up.” With that, Tinsel produced a bag of weed from the crotch of his pants, plopped down on a pink, polyester sofa, and announced, “Let’s get stoned!”

“Now you’re talkin’,” Lana said. “While you’re twisting up a doobish, I’m gonna slip into something more comfortable.”

“It won’t do any good to get too comfortable,” Tinsel said sarcastically.

Lana winked in response and then, spinning around dramatically, opened a pair of French doors opposite the Mardi Gras mural and disappeared into what Matt assumed was her bedroom.

Unlike Matt and Chris, Tinsel wasn’t burdened with their childhood background of parent-imposed religion. In fact, Matt wondered if Tinsel had ever been inside a church at all. Always cold and calculating, he seemed absolutely amoral in every aspect of his life. He approached every social interaction as if it were a drug deal. Suspicious and wary of the intentions of everyone, Tinsel’s goal was to achieve and maintain the upper hand in his relationships, be they with friends, family, professors, or strangers.

Tinsel’s father owned a small barroom in Gulfport, Mississippi, known to be frequented by members of a motorcycle gang. His father was a bookie who ran craps and

poker games in the back room. Tinsel had helped his father balance the books since he was a kid. That may have explained why he was so good with numbers. He often helped Matt with his algebra, and he couldn't understand why Matt had problems with it.

After Lana closed the doors to her bedroom, Chris looked at Tinsel and said, "All right, homes, we need to get the money thing worked out with this chick when she comes back, so Matt can do his thing. I wanna go to some strip joints while we're down here."

"No problem, boss. I got my part," Tinsel replied, then pointed at Todd. "What about gag-o-matic over there?"

"Don't worry about sleeping beauty," Chris said, producing a wallet. "I kept this when we stopped for beer."

"Cool. When she comes back, we'll work out the details."

While Tinsel rolled a couple of joints, Matt chopped and lined out a few rails of coke on a glass coffee table. Lana soon returned wearing a Japanese kimono.

"Oh yeah, that's what I'm talkin' about!" Tinsel said, leering lustfully at the young woman. Then, lighting the joints, he passed one to Lana and declared, "Let's get this thing cranked off."

For the next hour every one, except for Todd, smoked weed, snorted cocaine, and drank beer while Matt and Lana danced to the music of Queen. The stereo had to be turned up to distortion volume to be heard over the band practicing in the downstairs apartment.

“Must be hard for your other tenants to get any quality sleep around here,” Matt yelled in Lana’s ear as they held each other loosely.

“The only other tenant is a guy who rents the other downstairs apartment, and he works nights at a refinery. So no one lives upstairs except me, and I also work nights,” she said, laughing.

While Chris danced with Lana, Matt watched Tinsel have a little fun with the sleeping Todd. He produced a can of mentholated shaving cream and a disposable razor from the bathroom. He applied the shaving cream just above Todd’s eyes, and in seconds, Todd’s eyebrows circled the drain in the kitchen sink.

While Matt, Chris, and Lana cackled, Tinsel smiled wickedly and gave Todd a hard slap. Lana attempted to speak several times over the next few minutes, but it was impossible; she couldn’t keep her eyes off the browless young man on her living room floor. Noticing her trouble, Tinsel covered Todd’s face with a dish towel. This produced another round of laughter but soon subsided enough for normal speech.

“Well, birthday boy,” she said, “are you ready for your present?”

With the aid of the cocaine and alcohol, not to mention the constant rubbing and touching from Lana, any inhibitions he may have had were utterly annihilated.

“Hey, I feel like a green colt in a buckin’ chute!” Matt shouted to his buddies.

“There you go, son!” Chris coached. “Git after it!”

“I suppose that means you’re ready,” Lana said, giggling.

“It’s about time,” Tinsel yelled. “I might want a turn in a minute.”

Lana turned and said, “If you’ve got the money, honey, I’ve got the time.”

As Lana took Matt by the hand and led him to the bedroom, he turned and gave his pals a parting grin of drunken satisfaction.

Lana’s bedroom was as large as the living room but was so poorly lit that Matt needed help making out its details. She had returned to the room earlier for something, and now he saw it must have been to light a few candles because various sizes burned all around the room. In addition to the candlelight, a wan light shone through French doors identical to the ones leading to the living room.

Opening the doors, Lana said, “How about some fresh air.”

Just outside the open doors there was a small balcony with ornamental railing. Matt stepped out on the balcony to find a courtyard below, surrounded by an ivy-covered brick wall.

The breeze, wafting in from the open doorway, felt good to Matt because he was beginning to feel a bit queasy and unsteady on his feet. He turned, leaned against the railing and sheepishly admitted, “I’m gonna be straight with you, Lana. I’ve never been with a—a—”

“A working girl,” Lana finished for the tongue-tied Matt.

“Yeah, a working girl.”

“Don’t worry about that, honey. I’ve had plenty of first-timers,” she assured him as she helped him remove his shirt.

“Do you like to try new things, sweetie?” she asked. “I mean, do you like to experiment?”

“I’ll try anything once,” Matt replied. Until that night, he always believed he would.

After Matt and the prostitute left the room, Chris and Tinsel scoured the kitchen cabinets, the medicine cabinet, and every nook and cranny they could find in a mad search for dope or money. It was a common practice for both of them. They hoped to find something of value that would reimburse them for Matt’s “date.” What was she going to do, they reasoned, call the cops?

They were both in the bathroom, conducting their salvage operation, when someone yelled from behind them.

“Hey, what y’all up to?”

They spun around and expected to see an angry Lana but were happy to find it was only Todd, recently returned from the dead.

“Shut up, you idiot!” Tinsel spat. He pushed past and headed to the kitchen.

“Are we at the hooker’s place?” Todd inquired of Chris, who had turned back to the contents of a closet.

“Yeah, Matt’s in her bedroom now. But, of course, you would know that if you hadn’t passed out.”

“All that tequila must have gotten to me,” Todd replied, attempting to justify his lack of party stamina. “We got any beer?”

“Let’s both get one,” Chris said, leaving the bathroom. “This chick ain’t no fool. I ain’t found any dope or money.”

After grabbing a couple of beers from the fridge and handing one to Todd, Chris returned to the living room to find Tinsel smoking another joint while peeking through the lace curtains that covered the inside of the bedroom doors.

“Anything happening in there?” Chris asked, sitting on the sofa to snort a line of coke.

“I don’t know. Can’t see a thing,” Tinsel responded. “Can’t hear nothin’ either, with Twisted Blister wailing away downstairs.”

At that moment, Matt, like a deranged mental patient, crashed through the French doors screaming, “Oh, man! No way! Get away from me!”

Matt and the doors slammed into Tinsel, the collision sending him careening across the living room and crashing through the glass coffee table as Chris and Todd looked on in astonishment—stoned and frozen.

“She’s a dude!” Matt screamed. “He’s a she!” He yelled over and over as if his buddies wouldn’t believe him.

“What?” Todd exclaimed.

“That chick’s a guy!” Matt screamed.

“Who, Lana?” Chris asked. “You sure?” He couldn’t process the data. They had partied with this chick for two

hours. He had even danced with her. Chris could not make his wasted brain accept such a bizarre scenario.

“Yeah, man!” Matt assured him. He pointed toward the open doors as Lana emerged from the bedroom. “Her—him! That dude!”

Lana was no longer wearing the kimono. In fact, she wasn’t wearing anything. And it was painfully apparent to everyone that she was, as Matt had clearly stated, a dude.

“Oh, my god!” Lana screamed. “Look at my coffee table!”

Chris and Todd were so dumbfounded by the strange turn of events that they had yet to notice Tinsel lying unconscious in the twisted and shattered remains of the coffee table. They now saw that he looked severely injured and was bleeding from several lacerations.

“Look what you’ve done with all your freaking out!” she/he exclaimed.

Chris and Todd looked at Matt, then to Tinsel, and then at this slim, naked guy wearing a wig on his head and five pounds of makeup on his face. They stood frozen as if they had lost the power of voluntary movement.

After he noticed Tinsel’s predicament, Matt’s combat medic training kicked into gear.

“We gotta do something for Tinsel, man!” Matt shouted excitedly. “He’s bleeding, bad.”

“Oh, my poor coffee table!” Lana screamed again while he stomped his feet like a spoiled child.

Seeing his bleeding friend, and hearing this freak wail about a stupid coffee table, brought Chris to his senses, such as they were. Spinning around, he caught Lana flush on the left jaw with a brutal right cross. The blow sent Lana reeling backward into the bedroom, where he fell, unconscious, to the hardwood floor. As he fell, he bumped into an end table with a burning candle. The candle tipped over, setting a box of tissues ablaze.

As Matt knelt by Tinsel and examined his wounds, he yelled to Chris and Todd, “Get some towels from the bathroom!”

When neither man moved, he looked to see Todd and Chris staring back at him. Clearly, the command had not registered.

“Hey!” he screamed as loud as he could. “Get with me here!”

“What?” Todd blinked and shook his head.

“Get some towels from the bathroom. We need to stop the bleeding.”

While Todd ran to the bathroom, Chris rounded up their dope and repeatedly said, “This is bad, man! This is bad! Matt, this is bad, dude!”

“Get a grip, Chris!” Matt grabbed him by the arm and shook him. “Everything’s gonna be all right. I just need to get that bleeding stopped.”

As Todd returned to the room with a stack of what Matt hoped were clean towels, Tinsel regained consciousness. Then, looking from Matt to Chris, he asked, “Hey, who hit me?”

“It was an accident, brother. I bumped into you, and you fell through that coffee table.”

“You all right, man?” Todd asked, stooping to help Matt and Chris extricate Tinsel from the table’s wreckage.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Tinsel said, somewhat disoriented.

As they sat him on the couch, he noticed he was bleeding. “I’m cut! Who cut me?”

“Nobody, bro,” Chris explained. “You fell through that table right there.”

“I don’t remember falling through a table. All I remember was Matt yelling about that chick being a dude.” It was then that he noticed Lana lying on the bedroom floor.

With Tinsel sitting upright, Matt could better assess his injuries. He discovered that most of them were superficial. One, however, in the small of his back, was quite severe and would require several stitches.

By this time, a stack of newspapers was on fire and falling to the floor. In a matter of seconds, a shag rug was ablaze.

“Hey, something’s on fire in there!” Todd yelled.

They all looked into the bedroom and noticed not only the flames but Lana, slowly rising to his feet. He wore a dazed and confused expression as his brain processed what was happening. It took only a moment.

“Fire, fire!” he screamed. “Get some water! Call the fire department, call the police!” His ranting certainly sounded like a girl.

At the mention of the police, Tinsel sprang from the couch and ran into the bedroom.

“Shut up, you freak!” he yelled, shoving Lana back to the floor. “We ain’t callin’ the cops.”

The fire spread over the rug, and the bed’s comforter began to burn. The rug and newspapers had caught the end table on fire. The situation was quickly getting out of control.

“We need to get outta here!” Chris yelled at Matt. “I don’t wanna be here when the cops show up.”

Matt followed Tinsel around, trying to keep pressure on the wound in his back. He assumed all the coke, weed, and booze numbed the pain Tinsel should have felt.

The still-naked Lana scrambled to a telephone beside the sofa, but Matt snatched the phone from his hand. Lana leaped to his feet and scratched Matt across the face with fake fingernails. An angered Matt gripped Lana by his throat and overpowered him. He backed the struggling man into the bedroom and pushed him to the floor.

Loosening the grip of his left hand, Matt repeatedly punched Lana in the face. His anger was growing into something he had never felt before. Jolts of an almost electric nature pulsed through his body. Waves and waves of a rushing sensation, fueled by drugs, overpowered any semblance of self-control. It seemed reason had been abandoned, and in its place, there was only rage. He beat the defenseless Lana mercilessly until someone grabbed him from behind.

“Matt!” From a great distance, he heard someone calling his name. “Matt! That’s enough, dude. You’re gonna kill him!” Chris grabbed a wrist and pulled him off the unconscious Lana.

“Who cares if he kills that freak!” Tinsel screamed over the music still blaring from downstairs. “That dude was gonna do you wrong, Matt. He deserves everything he’s got comin’!”

The fire was now consuming the end table, and the bed was completely engulfed. Todd ran into the room with a small bucket of water and tossed it on the bed. It did little good. Smoke billowed from the open doorway of the balcony. The music from downstairs suddenly stopped but sirens wailed in the distance.

“Matt, help me pick him up,” Tinsel said, grabbing Lana under the arms.

“I’m outta here, man,” Chris said. “If you know what’s good for ya, you’ll get out too!”

“I’m going with Chris,” Todd yelled to Matt and Tinsel.

“Matt!” Tinsel yelled again. “Grab him.”

As Chris and Todd headed for the door, Chris called over his shoulder, “We’ll meet y’all at the car. Remember, it’s at the Sheraton parking garage.”

Matt didn’t understand what Tinsel was doing. He couldn’t think straight. Something was terribly wrong.

“Come on, Matt, hurry up!” Tinsel called to him as he dragged Lana toward the balcony.

Matt placed his arms under Lana’s knees and lifted him quickly from the floor. Then, before he could collect his

swirling thoughts, he and Tinsel dropped Lana over the balcony railing, where he landed with a sickening thud on the courtyard's flagstones below.

"How ya like rednecks now, you pervert," Tinsel hissed at the motionless Lana, with a voice devoid of human compassion. Then he pulled Matt from the balcony. "Let's vamoose, amigo."

Matt hadn't looked down for long, but in the dim light of the courtyard, he was sure he caught a glimpse of something dark and glistening, spreading grotesquely from beneath Lana's head.

As they headed toward the living room, from a rattan chair Tinsel snatched the kimono Lana had been wearing. Halfway down the stairs, Matt realized he wasn't wearing a shirt. This, in turn, caused him remember his windbreaker.

"I gotta go back," Matt said.

"We ain't got time for that, man! I hear the cops."

As he turned and headed back up the stairs, Matt said, "I left my jacket. My wallet's in it."

Racing back into the apartment—quickly filling with dark, acrid smoke—Matt found his jacket where he had dropped it. He looked through the French doors into the bedroom and saw his shirt on the floor which he retrieved. He and Tinsel hurried down the stairs, and when they burst onto the porch, they were met by a small crowd of people gathered on the front lawn wearing accusatory expressions.

“Were y’all partying with Landry?” asked a skinny, pale young man with bleached-out, waist-length hair.

“Just keep moving,” Matt said as they descended the front steps.

“Hey, where’s Landry?” another man asked, taking hold of Tinsel’s arm.

Tinsel whirled quickly, and a well-placed elbow dropped the assailant to his knees. He then drew a small, semi-automatic pistol from a back pocket and waved it at the crowd.

“The next one that touches me or my friend is gonna get lit up! Let’s go, Matt.”

As they ran up Carroll Street they heard the crowd yelling for them to stop and accusing them of starting the fire. Matt wondered how long it would be before the hooker was found in the courtyard.

The cut in Tinsel’s back was bleeding profusely, and the back of his yellow T-shirt was thoroughly soaked.

“Hey bro, take that shirt off and put this one on,” Matt said, coming alongside. “Wad yours up and hold it against that cut in your back.”

“I’m good,” Tinsel replied.

“Look, man, your shirt is covered with blood. We’ll be spotted a mile off.”

Tinsel did as instructed, while Matt pulled on his jacket.

Matt didn’t think they would ever make the few blocks to the Sheraton without being spotted by the cops. However, they

calmly entered the parking structure by some miracle and found Chris and Todd waiting at Matt's car.

It wasn't until they were on I-59 headed back across Lake Pontchartrain that Tinsel yelled, "Whewie, what a night, boys!"

Chapter 2

No, Matt didn't understand why God allowed such despicable memories to be burned so vividly into his mind, especially the one about Lana, Landry, or whatever the poor person's name was he left for dead on October 24, 1984.

From that year forward, he always dreaded his birthday. It was a day filled with unanswered questions and heart-rending remorse. Did the man die? Did his house burn down? Was anyone else hurt on Carroll Street that night?

Matt lived with a sense of impending doom for years after "the incident." He didn't know how often he had awakened from the nightmare of a naked Lana rising from the ground in that New Orleans courtyard. His grotesquely misshapen head gushed blood while those bulging eyes bored into his soul. The nightmare always ended with the same slack-jawed question, "Why Matt? Why didn't you and your friends simply leave?"

He had gone to the library on the campus of Southern Miss every day for weeks after the incident, scouring the Times-Picayune newspaper to glean any information about a fire on Carroll Street or the murder of a male prostitute. He feared he would be arrested sooner or later and charged with arson or murder, or both. Even though years would pass, he knew the day would come; after all, there was no statute of limitation for murder.

The years passed but did little to assuage the guilt and dread he carried. His only solace came from a can or a bottle.

Serenity was elusive, while the smoke of a pipe or the elixir of a syringe provided only fleeting moments of relief from the constant torment he endured. But those moments of relief dwindled over time, and the drink and the drugs became agents of despair, which only magnified his dread. Ultimately, those things he had always turned to for release became but added links in the ever-tightening chains that bound him—body, soul, and spirit.

Matt supposed that since “the incident” happened in New Orleans, God saw fit to allow his deliverance to take place in New Orleans because it was there that a miraculous transformation had taken place. In a faith-based treatment program called Louisiana Adult and Teen Challenge, he discovered a life he had only dared dream of. Jesus Christ led Matt into a life of peace and wholeness, where his weakened conscience was no longer losing a war with the demons of addiction and deception. The selfish and perverse person he had once been seemed only to exist now as a figment of his imagination. There was once a depressed, deceitful, and deluded individual living in his body. However, through God’s transforming power, that individual had been miraculously replaced by a joyful, honest, and compassionate person.

He often wondered how long it took for the transformation to complete after he cried out to Jesus. What metaphysical mechanism had been triggered? How had the spiritual switch been tripped? The change was so real; it was tangible for some inner part of himself. Tangible, that is, because it affected change in every aspect of his being. The atmosphere around him seemed illuminated by a new source of light. The pull of

gravity seemed lessened because he felt like a tremendous weight had been gently yet forcefully lifted from his shoulders. Instantly, his looming dread and dark depression were replaced by inexplicable joy and hopeful excitement for the future. Such a glorious moment!

Where were the suspicion and paranoia? Where was the feeling that the world and everyone in it had formulated a conspiracy to harm him and kill his dreams? They had vanished like so many shadows, fleeing with the night as they saw the glorious dawn approaching. However, the emotion that instantly filled the spiritual vacuum in his soul was more amazing than the vanishing of the dread. Love! Pure and permeating love surrounded and flooded through him, filling his deepest crevices of longing. It was an emotion so intense but, at the same instant, ultimately sublime. This love cleansed him and washed away his guilt and shame. It delivered him from his pain and loneliness. This love didn't seem to care that the garbage and filth had accumulated due to selfish choices and self-induced degradation. He was being loved and accepted despite his past.

He could remember having the strangest sensation of being welcomed. A spiritual homecoming, if you will. It was like he had been on a long, arduous journey fraught with terrible dangers and dream-killing disappointments. But, in a moment of redemption, God opened His loving arms, held him in a firm embrace, and whispered, "Welcome home, son. We've been waiting for you."

2 Corinthians 5:17 doesn't say how long it took. Still, he was thankful for what it did say: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new." His former self had passed away, and his new self hadn't been hung over or locked up for three years. He was finally living the life he had always longed for. It was a life of freedom and contentment.

He felt overwhelmed by God's mercy, patience, and forgiveness as he gazed across the vastness of the Oklahoma plains. When he considered what he used to be and how God was helping him today, he found it impossible to contain his emotions.

"I love you, Jesus!" he called to the clear October sky with all the breath and strength he could muster. And then softly, overwhelmed once again by a mystery, he said, "When I cried out to you, you didn't turn your back on me. You didn't leave me in that awful place. Instead, you met me and carried me out. You bound up my wounds and healed my broken heart."

The hunger pangs were gnawing at him again as he topped a rise in the landscape, hoping to see a town somewhere in the distance with a Mickey D's, a Taco Bell, or some other franchise with fast food, dollar-menu delicacies.

A city? A town? A west Oklahoma roadside hot dog vendor? Alas, no such luck. All he saw from the top of the ridge were endless rolling hills of grass, scrub brush, and sparsely scattered trees that dotted the geography here and there. Terrain like the kind he was currently viewing made him

homesick for a southwest Mississippi forest with trees so big two people could barely reach around them.

Thoughts like those always took him home to Mississippi, where the hills, pastures, woods, and sometimes even the lakes, creeks, and rivers took on a hundred shades of green. Oh, to be home again, where the land looked lush and fertile. How was it that Rick, his buddy in the national guard, used to describe home? Springtime in Mississippi; it's like you're living in a greenhouse.

And, of course, he couldn't think of home without thinking of his family, especially his mother.

Poor mama. Probably still thinks I've lost my mind.

He drifted back to the day he broke the news to her concerning God's plan for his life.

"But, Matt, what does that mean?" she asked.

"Well," Matt replied, "it's like home missions."

"No, son, home missions is an arm of the missions department in a church organization," she responded. "It's organized and funded through local churches for outreach to inner cities, Indian reservations, disaster relief, and things like that."

"Well, I have two arms, and the Church is the organization I'll be looking to for funding." Matt couldn't help but have a little fun at his mother's expense.

“But son, these don’t sound like the mission trips of a church; they sound like the aimless wanderings of a vagabond.”

“I guess I would seem a little like a vagabond.”

“Oh, Matt, come on now. You can’t just go wandering around the country helping folks,” she said, looking genuinely perplexed.

“Why not? Jesus did it.” He watched with amusement as his mother attempted some mental gymnastics.

“But Matt, Jesus wasn’t just wandering around,” she replied, the tempo of the statement slowing as it went. “The father was...leading...him.”

“Hmmm. Imagine that.”

Over the past three months, ever since his first seek and save mission, Matt had given this concept much thought and even more prayer. He knew this was what God would have him do, and he would do it. It was as simple as that.

Like many Christians, his mom encouraged fellow believers to trust God no matter what. She was quick to tell others that God always knows what he’s doing and that they should follow him and trust his plan for their lives. But when it came to God’s plan for her family, the Lord needed to keep the program safe, standard, and comfortable.

Matt’s opinion differed a bit. Jesus had radically saved him from an extreme life of almost constant danger. The Lord had often protected him from death and destruction before saving him, so Matt believed God’s protection would be even

stronger. Why shouldn't God expect him to live a radical life now that Jesus had set him free? Besides, he had suffered for the devil long enough, so he figured he could suffer for Jesus if need be.

"But how will you get to the places God will send you to? Surely, not in that old pick-up of yours." Uncertainty loomed over her, attempting to smother her with doubt.

"I'll walk, or I'll take a bus or a train, or I'll ride a bike. I don't know, Mom. If God directs me to go somewhere, he'll make a way for me. Don't you believe God can do something that simple?" He knew this would get her goat, but he needed her to remember that God could provide for all their needs.

"I know, son," she said, sniffing. "I do believe. I do. It's just that—that..."

"It's all right, mom," he said softly, taking her in his arms. "You've got more faith than anyone I know."

"I always knew God had a special calling for your life, Matt." She had trouble speaking. "It's just that I always thought you would go to Bible school after you accepted the Lord. Then maybe you would be a teacher, evangelist, or missionary." As she said this, she pulled back and looked at her son. It was as if a light had switched on in her heart.

Her beautiful smile returned. "I suppose you'll be all those things, won't you?"

"Mom," Matt replied, kissing her on the cheek. "I am all those things." And then he added, "Our father doesn't make mistakes, remember?"

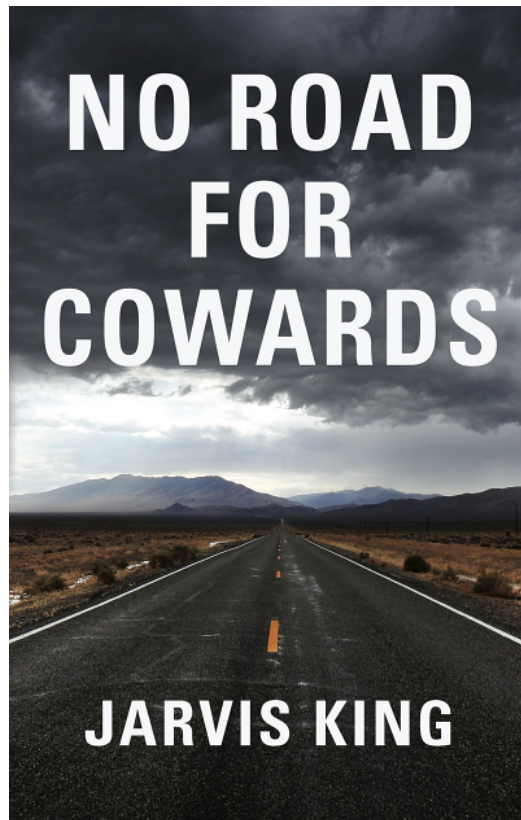
She grabbed him, squeezed as hard as her seventy-five-year-old arms could, and said, “Your dad would be so proud of you.”

“He is proud of me, Mom. God told me he lets our loved ones know the good things.” Matt’s earthly father went home to be with the Lord after winning his battle with lung cancer.

Sometime later, after a large plate of his mom’s chicken and dumplings with a side of turnip greens, they sat on the front porch, rocking and listening to the whippoorwills.

“Matt, when did you realize God called you to this kind of ministry?”

“Hmm,” Matt thought out loud. “Where to start?”



Even after years of sobriety, Matt Fleming suffers anxiety over a heinous crime perpetrated in New Orleans against a prostitute on his 21st birthday. God seems silent until a miracle demonstrates the father's constant care and concern.

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