Hearts on the Road preview

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DKD Books

Contents

For my husband, Ed, champion of my dreams, and my mom, Audrey Ritter, who showed me the love of Christ and how to follow Him—no matter what.

Chapter One

Sunshine caressed Randi Davis's face and poked its strong rays through her closed eyelids. Clawing her way back from the depths of sleep, she knew two things were wrong. The semi-truck sat motionless, and it was past sunrise. "Jess, are you still sleeping?"

A grumble came from the bunk below. Randi peered over the side of her bunk. Jess Price her partner, still huddled under blankets. "Wake up. We're late—again." She sat up and stretched her arms in front of her.

Covers rustled below. The truck swayed. "Late?" Jess groaned. "Now we're behind schedule. Why didn't you wake me?"

"Don't yell at me. I did tell you to take over the wheel. You said okay. I assumed that meant you were. Good thing I didn't close the curtain. Without the sun in my eyes we might have slept for hours." She swung her legs over the berth, then dropped to the floor and faced her partner of two years. "If you counted up the money we've lost from the times we've overslept, we could afford to take a cruise."

Jess dragged a brush through her hair. "You know Dana will be madder than a two-year-old told no."

"Yeah, I know." Randi yanked the canvas privacy curtain closed. Twisting around in the tight space to avoid Jess, she snatched a clean T-shirt from a small set of drawers in the corner of the sleeper cab. She slid it over her head. "Let's call the office after we eat. We can feel guilty with full stomachs instead of empty ones. Dana will tell us to forget breakfast and leave now. Besides, I need my caffeine jolt."

"Jolt?" Jess slipped on a leather boot. "More like submersion."

Randi agreed as she finished tying her tennis shoe. She crawled over the driver's seat and opened the door. She reached over and grabbed the keys and her cell phone and then jumped from the cab. Heat spiraled from the asphalt parking lot of the Wyoming Fuel and Go and curled its tentacles around her. After the coolness of the truck, she welcomed the warmth. The passenger door slammed with a bang. Randi turned, waiting for Jess.

"I'm starved." Jess ran her hand across her stomach as if to calm the beast within.

"And that's new?" Randi patted the emblem on the side of the cab door. *"Round the Clock* means we don't stop long. This has to be a fast breakfast, Jess. Not one of those famous, 'I want one of everything' deals, and you can't make up your mind."

"I know what I want." Jess propelled herself in the direction of the restaurant door, leaving soft taps hovering in the air from her cowboy boots.

Randi patted the back of her jeans feeling for her wallet. "I forgot my money. Order me a large cappuccino and raspberry scones if they have them. If not, I'll take scrambled eggs."

"I love those dreams of yours. Better expect the eggs."

Randi turned back to the truck and dug into her front pocket for the keys. Her reflection bounced back at her from the side of the polished truck. Her hair resembled straw escaping from a bale. Looking for some kind of improvement, she gave it a quick finger comb.

Inside the truck under the driver's seat, her fingers grazed across the smooth leather of her wallet. A stray lock of hair poked her in the eye. Grumbling at the aggravation, she wished she'd kept her salon appointment or at least brought along scissors. She removed one of many multi-colored elastic bands that rested on the neck of the stick shift, and corralled her hair into a ponytail. Wallet in hand, she stepped onto the chrome running board then to the parking lot. She slammed the heavy truck door.

She scurried across the parking lot and pushed against the door of the truck stop. A blast of cold air from the ceiling vent sent shivers racing down her back. If they were on schedule, she'd go back for her warm shirt. She dreaded talking to the dispatcher, Dana. Concentrating on a clever excuse, she came to an abrupt stop, against someone.

"Sorry! I didn't see you."

"That's okay." A voice warm enough to melt any iceberg wound its way through her.

"My fault. I wasn't paying attention." She stepped back to see what the brick wall she had smacked into looked like. She expected an overweight, unshaven trucker. Instead, delicious eye candy stood inches away. Brown eyes met hers and summer nights of star gazing suddenly seemed within her grasp. She had to get away from him. Fast. He made her feel too much, and he'd only said two words. Definite proof she had to give up watching classic Hepburn and Tracy movies.

"Are you hurt?" He reached out and touched her arm.

She jerked away her arm. "Fine. I'm fine."

"Maybe I should stand back farther from the door. I'm Matthew Carter, by the way." He handed her a neon green sheet of paper from a stack she just now noticed he held.

"Thanks." Clutching the flyer, Randi fled, willing her face not to announce her inner turmoil, especially to Jess. She weaved around an aisle of mud flaps and yellow, over-sized

load signs into the attached restaurant. The top of Jess's red hair bobbed above a booth.

Randi slid into the booth where Jess and a mug of coffee waited. She tossed the paper in the center of the table with her phone and then slid her hands around the mug, avoiding Jess's questioning look. A gulp of the hot drink had her wincing at the searing heat on her tongue. "Muffin or eggs?"

"Eggs." Jess planted an elbow on the table top, propping her chin on her palm. "What's going on?"

Randi gathered the bundled silverware and uncurled the paper napkin. The utensils clunked against the Formica. She smoothed the napkin and placed it on her lap. "Nothing."

"Something's up. Why is your face red?" Jess nailed her with a stare. "What have you been doing?"

"I bumped into that guy over there, that's all." Randi straightened her fork, knife, and spoon into exact parallel lines, avoiding direct contact with Jess's all-knowing eyes.

"Must have been some bump." Jess turned halfway in her seat and peered across the room. "Where is he?"

"He's over by the door in the gray T-shirt, holding a bunch of green papers. I walked right into him." Randi shook her head in disbelief.

Jess emitted a soft wolf-whistle. "If you have to run into somebody, it's nice to run into a body like that." She sighed. "Makes me miss Mike that much more."

Randi reached across the table and patted Jess's hand. "We'll be back with him in Cheyenne soon." Jess's face lit. Randi ached at her friend's happiness. She remembered that feeling. It's what she'd wished for her own life, but once her thirtieth birthday slid by, she'd made a different plan for herself. Independent Randi, that's who she wanted to be, a woman not needing anyone but the open road.

The waitress arrived with a tray. "Two breakfast specials with wheat toast, right?" She slid a plate of scrambled eggs in front of Randi.

"Thanks." Randi reached for the salt shaker as the waitress set down Jess's meal.

"Randi, I thought you agreed."

Her hand stilled, she had promised to pray with Jess or at least listen while Jess prayed before meals. It wasn't that she was opposed to God, more like He didn't seem interested in her. She folded her hands. "Say it fast, Jess. I'm hungry."

Jess arched an eyebrow in disapproval. "You know you're going to make a great mom someday. You have the look down."

Jess said the common table prayer and finished with, "Father God, bring a good and God-loving man into Randi's life. Amen."

"Nice, Jess. You know that's not in my life plan. It's going to be me and a truck till the end." Jess could have Mike. Randi hoped it would work out. Maybe Mike was different from Brent. Brent had promised her a life together, and that's what he'd meant. While she was home, they were together, but as soon as she left to student teach, he drove into another woman's driveway.

"I want you to have what I have with Mike. You deserve that." Jess flipped over the crumpled flyer with two fire-engine red fingernails. "So, let's see what he's selling." Her eyes widened. "Randi, look at this picture. It's your guy. He's a minister."

"He's not mine." Randi snatched the paper and scanned the upcoming schedule of places where Matthew Carter would hold services. "He's preaching to truckers. Wonder if anyone shows up to hear him?" She checked to see if he wore that better-than-thou pastor look. He didn't, rather more like a man she might have considered dating until Brent reinforced an old lesson first taught by her father: Love can't be trusted.

Randi pushed her plate to the side, then turned over the bill to check the total. "You want to call Dana?"

"No, but I will. She doesn't seem to appreciate your wit this early in the morning." Jess took a sip of her coffee. "And she's going to be in a bad mood when she finds out we're late."

Randi squished her napkin into a ball and placed it next to her plate. "I'll pay this and meet you back at the truck." She shot a glance at the front door.

The man had left, or at least he wasn't standing there anymore.

For a moment she felt disappointment, which confused her. Why did she care if he was still here?

As Randi breezed through the glass doors, her cell phone vibrated in her hand. "Hello?"

"Miss Davis? My name is Rachel Miller. I'm with social services. Your brother's been arrested for making meth in his home. He listed you as a guardian for his daughter, Emma. When can we expect you to pick her up?"

Chapter Two

Discouraged, Matthew gripped the bundle of flyers to his chest as he crossed the blistering parking lot. It hadn't been a good day for spreading the Word of God among the drivers. Most avoided him when he offered them a sheet.

"Wait up, Carter!"

Matthew turned to see one of the men who had recently begun attending his services. "Dirk. Didn't see you inside. Did you just get here?"

"Yeah, I ran into a mess. They shut down I-80 because some woman tried to make dinner in their RV while it was moving. Caught the thing on fire."

"Did everyone get out?" Matthew shifted the stack of flyers in his arms.

"Yeah, the only fatality was dinner." Dirk sputtered a laugh, smacking his knee with his hand. "Good one, huh? And no cursing, either."

"You did good, Dirk." Matthew slapped Dirk on the back in approval. Dirk's language had improved dramatically in the last month. He knew how hard it was for Dirk to give up his favorite adjectives, verbs, and nouns when he was surrounded daily by other drivers using those words.

"Yeah, but it's too bad about that couple losing their nice ride like that."

"You mean you weren't telling me one of your stories? This really happened?" He couldn't imagine the horror of watching your retirement home burn.

"I'm 'fraid so. It was one of those mega-expensive homes on wheels." Dirk nodded at the flyers Matthew held. "Any takers today?"

"Not many." The blonde woman who smacked into him, smelling like summer, ballooned in his mind. She'd been the highlight of his day.

"That's too bad. They don't know what they're missing." Dirk fell into step with him as he walked to his pickup.

Matthew opened the door and backed away from the blast of heat that poured from the truck vents. "It's going to be a hot ride home." He tossed the flyers into a box overflowing on the floorboard.

"Once your air conditioner kicks in, you'll be alright." Dirk leaned against the side of the truck bed.

"It quit working about a month after the warranty expired." Matthew rolled down the window.

"Ooo doggie, that's rough. You need a new truck."

"I need another job. Hauling boats one-way doesn't pay enough." Matthew kicked at a lone pebble that had found its way onto the asphalt parking lot. It didn't roll far before it stopped against a wad of chewed gum someone spat on the ground. "Anyway, I thought I'd be driving full-time by now."

"Who've you applied with? Just the big companies?" Dirk drummed his fingertips on the side of the truck bed.

"Everywhere, large and small. I even suggested I'd be a chaplain without pay."

"Free? How are you going to eat and pay rent? Sure won't get your truck fixed that way." Dirk scratched his head above his ear, knocking his hat off center. "Nobody works for nothing."

"I meant for being a chaplain, as an extra thing. They'd have to pay me for driving."

"Tell you what, give me your phone number. I'll talk to my dispatcher and see if there's any openings. Sometimes you need to know somebody to get in the door." Dirk tapped his chest with his thumb. "I'm *your* somebody."

"Thanks, Dirk. I'd appreciate that."

"All right, then. I gotta get back on the road." He straightened the bill of his black hat.

Matthew watched Dirk swagger toward his rig. A faint flutter of hope sprang inside him. Maybe this time God would answer his prayers.

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Randi should have realized AJ was up to something. The last two times Randi had asked to pick up her niece Emma, for a "girly girl" day, her brother had insisted on bringing Emma to her. Fury raged inside Randi.

How could A. J. be so stupid? Drugs. Again. And this time producing them in his home, while his daughter slept in the other room. This time they wouldn't hesitate to honor him with a well-deserved, extended stay in prison.

Climbing into the truck, she slammed the door. She swallowed her anger, but it stuck there, embedded in the thickened embarrassment her brother had caused.

Jess sat behind the wheel. She adjusted the side mirror on the driver's side. "You call the next time we oversleep."

Randi chose her words with care, trying to keep her emotion over AJ from entering the discussion. "What did Dana say?"

"The usual. Any more delays, and she's going to short us on trips."

Randi snapped her seat belt. "She can't do that."

Jess pushed a button and held it for twenty seconds to warm the glow plugs. She turned the key, and the diesel started with a roar. "She knows that. She had to say something, so she'll

feel like she's in charge. I told her not to get her panties in a knot; the truck will be back in the yard before night."

"True, we both slept through the night so we could drive straight through." Randi leaned her head back on the head rest. "It's going to be a long day."

"She also said to be careful because a trucker has been shot."

Randi shivered. "Where?" A crazy with a gun who didn't like truckers might be enough to make anyone think about switching careers.

"Colorado, a drive-by at the rest stop. They haven't caught the shooter yet." Jess maneuvered the truck through the parking lot. "Seems the guy stayed on the highway and shot through the passenger window of his car."

"Sounds like he's mad at somebody. Dana didn't say if it was an east or west stop, did she?" Randi worked the rubber band out of her hair. She reached into the door cubby and pulled out a brush.

"I didn't think to ask." Jess steered the slowly rolling truck onto the highway entrance ramp. "Saw you on the phone. Who called?"

"AJ's in jail." Randi stared out the window. "He wants me to take Emma."

Jess whipped her head around. "Are you going to?"

"She can live with my mom." In her stomach, the scrambled eggs from breakfast slammed into the toast.

"Do you think that's fair to your mom? She's not been well, Randi."

Randi bristled at Jess's words. "I suppose not, but for now it's better than being put into the foster care system."

"Randi! You're her aunt. You wouldn't do that to Emma, would you?"

Randi stared at the road ahead. "I don't know what else I could do. I'm never home. How can I take care of her?"

"You could teach. You did get your degree."

"But it's not what I want to do. It was part of the plan with Brent. That didn't work."

"Maybe God is giving you another plan to follow."

Standing in the doorway of her mother's kitchen, Randi held her ground. "I can't. She can't live with me, Mom. I drive a truck for a living. I can't change my life for my brother's kid." As soon as the words tripped off her lips she regretted them, grateful Emma was at her friend's home for the night. They would pierce Emma like a sharp kitchen knife.

Mom plunged her hands into the soapy water, scrubbed a pot for a moment, and then banged it on the drainboard to dry. She turned and wiped her hands with a yellow-and blue-striped dishtowel. Her lips stretched in a tight line.

Randi's shoulders tightened. She knew the look on Mom's face. Randi had seen it many times. A long spell of talking about what's wrong and what's right was about to start. She didn't want to hear it. She needed to go home, get some sleep, and then think about what to do—tomorrow.

"You're her godmother, Randi."

"Exactly, I'm supposed to be praying for her—which I do and make sure she goes to church—which I haven't since I don't have a church anymore."

"You could have one."

"Don't get going, Mom. I know what you're going to say, but what's so wrong about Emma living with you? You have an extra bedroom. Emma will be around to keep you company and watch movies with you. Remember how we did that together? You'd make popcorn and sprinkle it with cheese from the green can, and we'd sit on the couch with Grandma's quilt spread over our laps?" For a moment, she longed for that feeling of belonging, knowing someone wanted to hear about

her day. Then she pushed it away. That wasn't her life now and never would be.

"I won't forget those times, not ever, Miranda Davis Bell. But my time for raising kids has done passed. I'm old, and I'm tired. I don't want to stay up late helping a six-year-old build a village out of cardboard or practice spelling words. I don't need the worry, either. Being a parent today can't be easy, and being Emma's parent will be even harder." Her mother scooted a wooden chair from the kitchen table. "Sit down and talk to me. Maybe you'll change your mind."

"I won't, Mom. I have student loans I'm still paying, and you know driving doesn't pay very much. Quitting my job and moving into a two-bedroom isn't possible. I'll come and get her when I'm home. It's a win-win situation." When had Mom lost weight? She was so thin. Had she stopped cooking for herself? If Emma were here, Mom would have to make good meals again. This could be good for her. Randi's mood brightened. Maybe Mom needed a little more time to think about keeping Emma. "I'd like to stay and chat, but I need to get home and pay bills and sort through the mail."

"This isn't going to go away. Emma needs a home, either with you or the state. Maybe you could use that degree instead of driving." Mom sighed. "Guess there's no discussing it with you tonight."

"I made my choice. I like what I'm doing." Randi turned to leave. Mom needed a night to think about having her granddaughter with her all the time. How many times had Randi heard Mom wishing her children were still small? Emma could fill that need.

"Just one more thing."

Randi stopped at the doorway. Mom didn't plan on letting her leave without something to think about. She never did. "What? You want me to pray about this, don't you?"

"Yes."

"That's it, then? Just pray about my decision?" It amazed Randi how Mom depended on God to direct everything in her life. Couldn't Mom decide on her own, just once?

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