



*Warrior Princess:
Fighting for Life with
Courage and Hope*
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Hitchhiking with Truck Drivers

I still needed to find a way to help keep people from becoming infected. . . . I realized that, if I was to succeed, I needed to get the message through to our men. . . .

How can I reach them? How can I change the behavior of men? There must be a way. . . . As I thought about the number of times I had been propositioned hitchhiking, bingo! An idea came to mind.

I ran to my friend Chanda's home, desperate to share my idea with her. "Chanda, I've got it, I have an idea. . . . Truck drivers are a part of this problem and I know how we can reach them. . . . We can pretend to be commercial sex workers, hitchhike with the drivers and then educate them about the virus once we're on our way." Chanda's face fell. She was used to my wild ideas, but this seemed to be too much for my friend.

"Chanda, think about it. We live in a landlocked country. All goods for import and export must travel by road. With no computer systems, drivers are forced to stay at the border for days. It's here they cause the most trouble, but if they can, they will pick up a girl along the way to take to the next border town with them." . . .

Chanda's reaction wasn't what I'd hoped for. "Princess, . . . we are married women—and Christians, for that matter. How can we do such a thing? What will people think of us? . . . It will only put us in trouble if our husbands find out. Please, let's forget about this thing and leave it alone." . . .

My daily struggle was that as Christians we care about judgment and people going to hell; true, we need to care about people's souls and eternal life. But we should also care about their lives while they're on earth and work to protect people now. Whatever I said, though, I just couldn't talk Chanda into my plan, so I left her alone. . . .

The morning of my first planned hitchhiking mission I behaved like a perfect wife. . . . I prepared a hot breakfast of sweet potato and ground-nut sauce for my husband and then waved goodbye as he set off for work. I left the children with some of our extended family members, and also gave them instructions on what to prepare for dinner, so it would appear I had been home all day. I now had eight clear hours ahead of me. . . .

Looking to make sure no one was watching, I jumped into the bushes by the side of the road. A few minutes later I looked like someone else altogether in tight jeans, a short blue silk *shaba* tank top that showed my belly, high heels and red lipstick. The transformation was empowering but also a little frightening. I'm not sure if it's something I should be proud of, but I passed easily as a commercial sex worker!

I stood still for a few moments, hidden from view, wondering whether I really had the courage to proceed. But I thought about how many girls would be saved if just one trucker changed his behavior—and, if it wasn't too late, how his wife and children would be saved too. *What if I could change two*

CUT

BOOK EXCERPT

drivers, or ten, or a hundred? Those feelings of intense hope helped me forget the risks. My fears forgotten, I was no longer scared. . . . *Let the mission begin*, I thought.

Drivers didn't seem able to resist my voluptuous African figure and curves. Their big rigs would be charging down the road, and then I would hear the sound of those giant big brakes kicking in. I would climb up into the cabin and away we went. Each time I got a lift, . . . it never took long for the driver to get suggestive in *that* way, which was my cue to switch gears.

"Sir, I have to tell you, I'm on a mission. I am sorry I actually cannot take you up on your offer."

"What are you talking about?" the driver would ask indignantly.

"I just got into your truck to tell about a disease called AIDS."

The driver would respond with something like, "Do I look promiscuous to you? That disease doesn't concern me. It is for people who are promiscuous and who sleep with prostitutes." . . .

I knew that the wrong approach would shut down a driver's willingness to listen. "Please, sir. Even the girls you pick up on the street—they may look healthy but they still can be infected with the disease. No one is immune or bullet proof to this disease, sir." Once I had their attention I would continue. "If a girl is HIV-positive and you have unprotected sex, the chances of you becoming infected are high."

"Who do you know who has this virus?" the drivers would often ask.

At this point, I would quickly reach into my bag of tricks and pull out my own HIV results. "I do, sir. Could you have guessed if I didn't tell you?" . . .

Responses from drivers varied. Some still believed they were at no risk from the virus. Their excuses and justification for their behavior flowed thick and fast. Sadly, some of my favorites were, "The girls at the border just force us. They disturb us by knocking on our truck doors while we are sleeping. We're only giving them what they want—we help each other out." And, "They dress so seductively; they encourage us. What can a man do? Sometimes I am away from my wife for several months. Am I not a man?" . . .

The reality of people living through desperate times means there's always a gathering of commercial sex workers waiting for weary drivers at African border towns. Sadly, many are just young girls, perhaps orphans themselves, trying to put food on their tables or make some money to pay for their education fees, uniforms and shoes. . . . The girls have a tragic saying that conveys their reality and shows how inextricably AIDS is linked to poverty: "AIDS may kill me in months or years, but hunger will kill me and my family tomorrow." This is what extreme poverty does to people; it robs them of the ability to think long-term. I knew desperation would see these girls return again and again, regardless of what I said, unless the drivers were willing to change their behavior. . . .

The more I rode with the drivers the more necessary it seemed to continue. Every day I was alarmed by some new behavior or attitude I uncovered. To me it was a matter of life and death. Every day I believed that if I changed the behavior of one driver, one life might be saved—one girl or mother. That seemed to me what making a difference was all about.

—Taken from chapter thirteen, "Hitchhiking with Truck Drivers"