

Excerpt of

Saving Tate Michaels

A Novel by by Linda Leigh Hargrove

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Prologue

One week before the first murder

Cher Edwards felt good. Sure she was driving a stolen car but in the past twenty-four hours, she hadn't stolen a single thing. She giggled and winked at herself in the rearview mirror.

Just the thought of turning over a new leaf made her giddy. She could make a habit out of this good-girl thing. That's how people turned around. Right? One day at a time.

"One day at a time," she sang to herself, faking a country twang, "Sweet Jesus."

Now, look at her. Singing like Dolly Parton and tooling around the countryside, more than a hundred fifty miles eastward of all that was familiar in Raleigh. Nobody would think to look for her here, especially not crazy Lew Spencer. The mean old white man had probably stolen the car himself. Cher ran her hand across the buttery texture of the seat. Soft leather just didn't seem to fit the rough-cut pot-bellied good ole boy.

It had been a half hour since the sun, looking like a big orange gum ball in bowl of sherbet, had dropped behind the tops of the dark spiky pine trees she saw in her rear view mirror.

The sky was taking on the husky blue shadows of early evening. One star twinkled to her right. Not quite full day and not quite night. It was pretty out here in the country, but way too dark too fast without streetlights. She switched on the car's headlights and immediately saw the sign announcing the next town.

Finley, North Carolina. 5 Miles.

Smiling, Cher bounced on the seat and hummed a happy tune. She could almost smell the money that awaited her. Good money. For an honest night's work of acting and modeling. That's what the Craigslist ad her friend Bev had found had claimed. It was legit, Bev said. Her homegirl had already made five hundred from two gigs last week.

\$500!

In her book, that was *good* money, especially for a little bastard child from Chicago.

Any way you looked at it, acting and modeling was way better than what she usually did in hotel rooms at night. She bounced higher on the seat thinking of the possibilities. The only true mother she'd ever known, her grandmother Clara, would have been proud of her.

Looking heavenward, she whispered, "I'm turning things around, grandma."

After this gig was done, she'd be heading back to Raleigh, fat with cash. She'd be back in time to make sure her Toby got on the bus in the morning.

The three-lane highway narrowed. She slowed and rolled down the window, letting her arm loll against the car. The cool air felt good on her bare arms but the smells of dirt and dampness from the surrounding woods made her gag. Small-town life was just too small for her.

"I ain't no country girl."

She rolled her window back up and checked the printed directions she'd been mailed.

Two more right turns and she'd be at the motel, *The Port O' Finley*.

Her cell phone buzzed on the seat next to her.

It was a text from Bev: Girl where you at?

Cher giggled. "I'm coming, Bev."

Traffic slowed and the streets widened a bit. Little mom and pop storefronts lined the streets. A pickup truck with large wheels passed by, country music blaring. Cher rolled her eyes.

“Definitely ain’t no country girl in me.”

Minutes she was parked in front of the Port O’Finley, heart pounding, smile stretched ten miles wide. This was her big break. Lights. Camera.

Action.

After a quick glance in the mirror to confirm her flawless makeup, she sprang from the car and raced to room 119.

“Near the back,” she said, repeating the instructions to herself.

The door to room 119 stood ajar. Cher knocked on it. No answer.

“Hello,” she called out. “Anybody home.”

Silence.

“Bev,” she said, half expecting her friend to jump out from behind the door and surprise her.

Five seconds passed. No surprise.

Cher pushed the door wider. Two table lamps were on in the room. The beds, a queen and a double, were unmade. The shade of one lamps had been knocked to the side, casting a wacky shadow on the dingy walls.

Heart racing, Cher stepped over the threshold and called her friend’s name out again. After another step, she called out one more time, and cringed at the tremble in her own voice.

Her foot hit something on the floor. The object skittered across the brown carpet and came to a stop near the smaller bed. It was a cell phone. Pink with rhinestones trimming the edges. The glass front was marred with a large crack down the center.

Cher gasped. It was her friend Bev’s phone. No doubt about it. Cher stumbled backwards into the doorjamb, knocking her purse from her shoulder. Lipstick, gum, and loose change fell

from her bag onto the floor and a table just inside the door. She cursed and stooped to shove her things back in.

The crunch of gravel pulled her attention toward the end of the well-lit motel breezeway. Even looking sideways, with one eye on her stuff strewn on the ground, Cher could tell that the black man who approached was tall and well-built. He moved into the light and she could tell he wore a dark jacket over jeans and a ball cap with some gold lettering on it.

“Excuse me, miss,” he yelled. His deep voice was calm but all business. “Yeah, you on the ground there. Can I speak with you for a few moments?”

The red and silver cherry charms on her bracelet jingled like it was a Salvation Army bell at Christmastime. Her trembling hands didn’t want to obey fast enough. She abandoned most of the loose change and sprang from the ground, running faster than she’d run in a long time. Certainly faster than she would have ever attempted in platform boots on any other day. But she wasn’t trying to be cute.

“Stop,” the man yelled, running towards her. “FBI.”

Cher cursed out loud. *FBI!*

What was going on? Her friend had disappeared, leaving behind a busted phone. And now this fed was chasing her down.

Despite the pain in her feet and ankles, Cher found a burst of energy. She made it to the car and flung her body into the seat, barely closing the door before starting the engine and backing out.

The FBI agent, so close now that she could see the stitching in the large gold letters on his cap, was little more than an angry black man in her rear mirror by the time he made it to the parking lot.

She let out a sigh of relief and allowed herself a little giggle. There was no doubt the FBI man got a clear view of the license tag as she peeled off down the street. Lew Spencer would be called in, not Cher Edwards.

Her momentary joy was quickly replaced with concern for her friend. She reached into her bag and touched her phone, willing it to ring.

“Please be okay, Bev.”

As if on cue, her cell rang. She snatched it open.

“Hello?”

“Cher, it’s Bev.”

“Bev! Where you at? You okay? What happened? I went to the room—”

“Slow down, sistah. I’m fine. I’m okay.”

There was a disturbing shakiness in Bev’s voice.

“But I found your phone broke up on the floor.”

“Oh that. A little accident. Listen, sugar. We had a small setback. Gonna have to start some stuff over.” Cher heard someone laughing in the background. Bev giggled then said, “That’s what the photographer’s saying. I’m using his phone right now. It’s gonna take more time than he thought.”

Bev’s voice trailed off. Something didn’t feel right. The broken phone. Maybe it was an accident. Dropped to the floor and stepped on in the flurry of activity. A simple mistake. Sounds like she was having fun. Couldn’t be all bad.

But what about the FBI guy? Should she mention him? She wagged her head. Maybe he was part of the show too. Just an actor.

He chased her with such fervor. Would an actor have run after her like that?

Bev's voice cut into her flip-flopping thoughts. "Just go on back to Raleigh, Cherry girl. I'll be okay. You know me. I know how to survive. How to land on all fours." She laughed again. "I'll be back in town before sunrise."

Cher chuckled, hoping to cover her mounting uncertainties with laughter. "You better, girl."

Darkness had shrouded the countryside quickly. Concern for her son kept her driving westward to Raleigh. With each mile, she felt less sure about leaving her friend behind. Without a backup plan. Without a safety net. A person could get gone out here in no time.

Good and gone.