



EVIDENCE OF MERCY

By Terri Blackstock

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Chapter One

Solitude—the perfect name for the toy that defined Jake Stevens, not because he liked being alone. He didn't. He'd always found it better to be surrounded by the right kind of people, and Jake had a knack for collecting friends just like he collected brandy snifters from the cities he'd traveled to. But the only way to be completely autonomous was to be unattached. It was a credo Jake lived by, and it meant that he knew the value of his own solitude. At the top of the pyramid that was Jake's life, there was only one person—the one he smiled at in the mirror every morning. At thirty-nine, he was just where he'd wanted to be at this point in his life. Unfettered and financially fluid, he had the world by the tail, and today he was going to bag it and take it home.

Ignoring the doorman who greeted him, he trotted down the steps in front of the Biltmore. At the bottom of the steps, his red Porsche idled as the valet got out. "Hey, put the top down, will ya?" Jake called down.

The kid, who looked no more than eighteen, knew exactly how to do it, and as the top began to buzz back, Jake's attention was snatched away by the blonde on her way up the steps. She was college aged, probably twenty years his junior, but he'd never found that to be a problem. Tipping his sunglasses, he gave her that engaging grin that had always worked for him before.

She smiled back, as they always did, and slowed her step as he came toward her.

"I'm not usually this blunt, Ma'am, but I've learned over the years that if I let an opportunity slip by me, I sometimes never get it again. And you are, by far, the most beautiful woman I've laid eyes on since I pulled into St. Clair yesterday."

She laughed, as though she'd heard the line before, but it didn't seem to hurt his chances. "I'm Sarah," she said. "Are you staying in the hotel?"

"Yes," he said, "and if I had time, I'd turn around and escort you right back inside. But alas—" He threw his hand dramatically over his heart and sighed heavily as she laughed again. "I have to be somewhere—to look at a plane I'm thinking about buying." He waited a beat for her to be sufficiently impressed, and when her eyebrows lifted slightly, he went on. "Now, I don't want you to think I'm the kind of guy who hits on every woman he sees, but do you think, by any chance, you'd care to meet a lonely transplanted Texan for drinks later? I can call you when I get back."

He knew he wasn't imagining the sparkle in her eye, for he'd seen it many times before. "I'm in room 323," she answered. "But if I'm not there, I'll probably be out by the pool."

The pool, he thought with a grin. *Perfect.* "I'll call as soon as I get back."

"You haven't told me your name yet."

"Oh, yeah," he said. "Jake. Jake Stevens."

But already he'd forgotten hers. The room number was all that really mattered. Waving, he trotted the rest of the way down the steps. Tossing a five-dollar bill at the valet, he slid behind the wheel.

Florida was great, he told himself as he pulled onto Highway 19. Opportunities everywhere he looked. It was pure luck that he'd gotten transferred here. He only wished he could spend less time house hunting and more time playing in the few days he had left before he had to report to work.

He pulled up to a stoplight and leaned his head back on the headrest, letting the morning rays of sunlight beat down on his face. The wind was picking up, haphazardly blowing his hair. *I should stop somewhere and get a haircut*, he thought, glancing into his mirror. But it didn't look so bad a little longer, and the women seemed to like it. Idly, he decided to wait.

The stoplight didn't change, and he started to get irritated. Traffic often made him feel out of control, and there was nothing he hated worse.

He glanced around at the billboards that dominated the four corners and saw one for his favorite cognac, another for a restaurant near Honeymoon Island, a third for the outlet mall, a fourth for a television station.

The light still hadn't changed, and he began to perspire. He flicked on the air conditioner, knowing that it would do little to combat the heat with the top down, but Jake had never been one to let logic interfere with his quest for comfort.

When the light flashed green, Jake stepped on the accelerator and flicked on the radio. The wind in his ears made it impossible to hear, so finally he turned it off and tried to concentrate instead

on the new toy he was going to buy—a Piper Arrow PA 28. Just what he needed to make life complete.

Once he had it, he would finally have everything he wanted.

The wind was too strong for a leisurely afternoon test flight, and Lynda Barrett wished she'd scheduled it for another day . . . another month . . . another year. But this fellow Jake Stevens was her first potential buyer, and she had already delayed showing him the plane as long as she dared; she didn't have the luxury of waiting any longer. The maddening thing about listing something for sale is that, sooner or later, someone will buy it.

Lynda stood on the wing of the Piper, gently polishing the name she'd had painted on the side when she'd bought it two years ago. *Solitude*. This plane was her escape, her refuge from the pressures of her job as an attorney.

She would rather have sold her home, her father's home, and everything else either of them owned than the plane.

But she had tried selling both houses, and there hadn't been any buyers.

Now the only way she could see to get a start on paying off the enormous debts her father had bequeathed her was to sell her favorite possession—the only thing she had that anyone seemed to want to buy.

The wind picked up, blowing an empty paper cup across the tarmac.

Her eyes followed it—until she saw Gordon Addison leaning against the wall of the hangar, smoking a cigarette. He was watching her the way he always did, with that narrow-eyed look that gave her chills. He hadn't spoken to her in weeks, not since she'd come up with her fifth excuse not to go out with him. He was the one thing about this airport she wouldn't miss when she sold her plane.

Moving to the other side of the wing so he couldn't see her so easily, she looked into the wind and ran her fingertips over the cold, smooth metal of the fuselage. She remembered the day she bought *Solitude*. It had meant that she'd finally risen above the humdrum existence of her parents—whose lives consisted of "Jeopardy" and macaroni-and-cheese. Lynda had had a plan—to have more, to do more, to *be* more. Buying the plane had meant that she had finally arrived.

As her love for the plane had grown, she had begun casting off friends, as though they exceeded the weight limit of the baggage she could carry. She had shaken off her hobbies, her clubs, and her church in order to free up more time to spend in the cockpit. The cockpit she was about to sell. Where would she anchor herself once the plane was gone?

Shaking off her quicksand depression, Lynda went back to polishing the plane. The prospective buyer would be here any minute, and she supposed she should be practicing some kind of sales

pitch. She did need the money after all. But somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew she was still hoping some miracle would keep her from having to go through with the sale.

She heard the sound of a car and turned around. Across the tarmac, a red Porsche was weaving through the parked planes, as if the driver had a perfect right to drive wherever he pleased. Lynda stopped polishing and watched as he made his way toward her.

The man who got out was in his late thirties and sported a dark tan and designer clothes that mocked his attempt to look casual. He grinned up at her, a cocky grin that set her instantly on guard. “This isn’t a parking lot,” she called down.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I parked here yesterday when I looked at the plane, and nobody objected. I’m Jake Stevens.”

The confidence with which he uttered his name riled her, and she resisted the urge to say, “Oh, well. Since you’re Jake Stevens—”

Climbing down, she eyed him more closely. He was too good-looking, too self-assured, and probably had too much money. The combination made her dislike him instantly.

Grudgingly, she extended her hand. “I’m Lynda Barrett.”

“I figured as much,” he said. “Did Mike tell you I came yesterday?”

“Yes. He said you’d want to take a test flight today.”

“I wanted to take one yesterday, but he had a problem with it.”

“He runs the airport,” she said, “but he doesn’t own this plane. I do, and I was in court.”

“So he said.” He took off his Ray Bans and dropped them into his shirt pocket, as if by showing her his “mesmerizing” eyes he might soften her mood a bit. “No problem, though. Today’s as good a day as any.”

“Not really,” she said, looking into the breeze. “The wind’s a little stronger than I like.”

“Not for me. I can handle it.”

The ego behind his words made her grin slightly. “Of course you can. So, Lindbergh, any questions you wanted to ask about the plane?”

He cocked his head at her barb. “No, but I might have a few about its owner.”

“Such as.”

“Such as, where you get your attitude?”

“My attitude?” She breathed a laugh and shook her head, her comeback forming on the tip of her tongue. But something stopped her. *No need to make him angry*, she told herself. *Unfortunately, this is business*. Sighing, she took a stab at honesty. “Look, I guess I’m just having a little trouble with this. I’m not looking forward to selling my plane.”

“I don’t blame you.” Walking under the Piper, he checked the wing flaps and glanced back at her. “I looked it over pretty well yesterday. You’ve really maintained it.”

“I spend all my spare time taking care of it,” she said. She watched him drain a little fuel from the wing sump and fought the proprietary urge to tell him to keep his hands off her plane. “Did Mike let you see the log books?”

“Yeah, and the maintenance records. He was able to answer most of my questions, but he didn’t really know why you were selling it.”

Lynda’s stomach tightened. “Financial reasons.”

“Your law practice isn’t doing well?”

“My practice is fine, thank you.”

Frowning, he turned back to her. “Excuse me for asking, but before I sink a wad into a plane like this, I need to know the real reason you want to sell.”

“I told you the real reason.”

“Okay, okay. Don’t get so hot. Save it for something worthwhile.”

It was his type that she hated she finally realized, and this guy fit every macho stereotype she could think of. “You’re pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Sometimes.” Grinning, he checked the engine sump and the oil, and Lynda watched, shaking her head at his arrogance.

The attitude, she thought. Her attitude was coming back again, filling her with bitterness, and somehow she had to fight it. Taking a deep breath, she tried to change the subject. “How long have you been flying?”

“About twenty years,” he said. “Right now I fly a 747 for TSA Airlines.”

Lynda raised her eyebrows. “Then why would you want your own plane? I’d think you’d be tired of flying when you aren’t working.”

Jake went to the propellers and ran his hands along the blades. “Flying for work and flying for pleasure are two different things. There’s nothing like leaving the world behind and being up there all alone without anybody telling you where to go.”

Lynda looked up at the sky and realized that, finally, they had found common ground. "It's a sanctuary," she said quietly. "If my church could blueprint that feeling, they'd pack the pews every Sunday."

He looked around the prop, eyeing her narrowly. "Oh, no. You're not one of those, are you?"

"Those what?"

"Those flower-selling, tract-passing, baloney-flinging religion junkies."

She couldn't decide whether to be offended or not. "Do you mean Christians?"

"Whatever they call themselves," he said, turning back to the plane. "I attract them, you know. They flock to me in airports like I'm wearing a sign that says, 'Try me. I'll believe anything.'"

"I've never sold flowers or passed out tracts or flung baloney, and you certainly don't attract me. At the moment, the only thing I'm trying to sell you is my plane."

Chuckling slightly, he touched the name painted on the side. "I like what you named it. *Solitude*. It fits me. I think I'll keep the name."

"You haven't even decided to buy it yet."

"No, but I'm really interested. It's the best I've found for the money."

"You'd better fly it first. It's a big step down from a 747 to a single engine."

"No kidding."

"You might not like it."

His grin returned. "You're trying to talk me out of it, aren't you?"

"No, of course not."

He stepped up onto the wing, opened the door, and turned back to her.

"Come on, get in. Let's see what she can do."

Reluctantly Lynda followed him up and slipped into the seat next to him. She attributed the feeling of dread taking hold of her heart to her despair that she might have to surrender the plane today.

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