

"Filled with high stakes, high emotion, and high intrigue." —Lynn H. Blackburn

TRACE OF DOUBT

DIANN
MILLS

PRaise for DiAnn Mills

TRACE OF DOUBT

“A well-researched and intimate story with some surprising twists along the way. In *Trace of Doubt*, Mills weaves together a tale of faith, intrigue, and suspense that her fans are sure to enjoy.”

STEVEN JAMES, award-winning author of *Synapse* and *Every Wicked Man*

“DiAnn Mills took me on a wild ride with *Trace of Doubt*. . . . Filled with high stakes, high emotion, and high intrigue, *Trace of Doubt* will keep you guessing until the thrilling and satisfying conclusion.”

LYNN H. BLACKBURN, award-winning author of the Dive Team Investigations series

“DiAnn Mills serves up a perfect blend of action, grit, and heart with characters so real they leap off the page. *Trace of Doubt* takes romantic suspense to a whole new level.”

JAMES R. HANNIBAL, award-winning author of *The Paris Betrayal*

“*Trace of Doubt* is a suspense reader’s best friend. From page one until the end, the action is intense and the story line keeps you guessing.”

EVA MARIE EVERSON, bestselling author of *Five Brides* and *Dust*

AIRBORNE

“When DiAnn Mills started writing suspense novels, she found her niche. They are strong stories that keep the reader guessing. *Airborne* was filled with twists and turns.”

LENA NELSON DOOLEY, bestselling, award-winning author of the Love’s Road Home series

“Mills keeps getting better with each novel.”

LAURINE SNELLING, bestselling, award-winning author of *A Blessing to Cherish* and the Home to Blessing series

FATAL STRIKE

“DiAnn Mills has done it again! *Fatal Strike* captivates the reader from the first to last page. Deliciously detailed, this fast-paced romantic suspense novel creates an emotional roller coaster that keeps the pages turning as quickly as they can be read.”

REBECCA MCLAFFERTY, author of *Intentional Heirs*

“*Fatal Strike* is a fascinating and page-turning suspense novel with fabulous characters and a touch of romance. Five stars from me! . . . The plot was full of suspense and plot twists and I was left guessing at every turn!”

SARAH GRACE GRZY, author of *Never Say Goodbye*

BURDEN OF PROOF

“DiAnn Mills never disappoints. . . . Put on a fresh pot of coffee before you start this one because you’re not going to want to sleep until the suspense ride is over. You might want to grab a safety harness while you’re at it—you’re going to need it!”

LYNETTE EASON, bestselling, award-winning author of the Elite Guardians and Blue Justice series

“Taking her readers on a veritable roller-coaster ride of unexpected plot twists and turns, *Burden of Proof* is an inherently riveting read from beginning to end.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

“Mills has added yet another winner to her growing roster of romantic thrillers, perhaps the best one yet.”

THE SUSPENSE ZONE

HIGH TREASON

“In this third book in Mills’s action-packed FBI Task Force series, the stakes are higher than ever. . . . Readers can count on being glued to the pages late into the night—as ‘just one more chapter’ turns into ‘can’t stop now.’”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“This suspenseful novel will appeal to Christian readers looking for a tidy, uplifting tale.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

DEEP EXTRACTION

“A harrowing police procedural [that] . . . Mills’s many fans will devour.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Few characters in Mills’s latest novel are who they appear to be at first glance. . . . Combined with intense action and stunning twists, this search for the truth keeps readers on the edges of their favorite reading chairs. . . . The crime is tightly plotted, and the message of faith is authentic and sincere.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, 4½-STAR REVIEW, TOP PICK

DEADLY ENCOUNTER

“Crackling dialogue and heart-stopping plotlines are the hallmarks of Mills’s thrillers, and this series launch won’t disappoint her many fans. Dealing with issues of murder, domestic terrorism, and airport security, it eerily echoes current events.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“From the first paragraph until the last, this story is a nail-biter, promising to delight readers who enjoy a well-written adventure.”

CHRISTIAN MARKET MAGAZINE

DEADLOCK

“DiAnn Mills brings us another magnificent, inspirational thriller in her FBI: Houston series. *Deadlock* is a riveting, fast-paced adventure that will hold you captive from the opening pages to the closing epilogue.”

FRESH FICTION

“Mills does a superb job building the relationship between the two polar opposite detectives. With some faith overtones, *Deadlock* is an excellent police drama that even mainstream readers would enjoy.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

DOUBLE CROSS

“DiAnn Mills always gives us a good thriller, filled with inspirational thoughts, and *Double Cross* is another great one!”

FRESH FICTION

“For the romantic suspense fan, there is plenty of action and twists present. For the inspirational reader, the faith elements fit nicely into the context of the story. . . . The romance is tenderly beautiful, and the ending bittersweet.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

FIREWALL

“Mills takes readers on an explosive ride. . . . A story as romantic as it is exciting, *Firewall* will appeal to fans of Dee Henderson’s romantic suspense stories.”

BOOKLIST

“With an intricate plot involving domestic terrorism that could have been ripped from the headlines, Mills’s romantic thriller makes for compelling reading.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

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DIANN MILLS



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Trace of Doubt

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*To every woman who has ever closed the door
on her past to step forward with Jesus.
And to Edie Melson, my sister-friend, who
inspires me to reach the mountaintops.*

PROLOGUE

SHELBY

Would I ever learn? I'd spent too many years looking out for someone else, and here I was doing the same thing again. Holly had disappeared after I sent her to the rear pantry for potatoes. She'd been gone long enough to plant and dig them up. I needed to get those potatoes boiling to feed hungry stomachs.

I left the kitchen to find her. The hallway to the pantry needed better lighting or maybe fewer corners. In any event, uneasiness swirled around me like a dust storm.

A plea to stop met my ears. I raced to the rear pantry fearing what I'd find.

Four women circled Holly. One held her arms behind her back, and the other three took turns punching her small body. My stomach tightened. I'd been in her shoes, and I'd do anything to stop the women from beating her.

"Please, stop," Holly said through a raspy breath. For one who was eighteen years old, she looked fifteen.

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“Hey, what’s going on?” I forced my voice to rise above my fear of them.

“Stay out of it, freak.”

I’d run into this woman before, and she had a mean streak.

“What’s she done to you?” I eyed the woman.

“None of your business unless you want the same.”

“It’s okay, Shelby. I can handle this.” Holly’s courageous words would only earn her another fist to her battered face.

And it did.

“Enough!” I drew my fists and stepped nose to nose with the leader.

The four turned on me. I’d lived through their beatings before, and I would again. I fell and the kicks to my ribs told me a few would be broken.

A whistle blew, and prison guards stopped the gang from delivering any more blows to Holly or me. They clamped cuffs on the four and left Holly and me on the floor with reassurance help was on its way.

I’d been her age once and forced to grow up fast. No one had counseled me but hard knocks, securing an education, and letting Jesus pave the way. I’d vowed to keep my eyes and ears open for others less fortunate.

Holly’s lip dripped blood and a huge lump formed on the side of her head. I crawled to her. “Are you okay?”

“Not sure. Thank you for standing up for me. I thought they would kill me. Why do they do this? I’ve never done a thing to them.”

“Because they can. They want to exert power, control. Stick by me, and I’ll do my best to keep you safe.”

1

I tightened my grip on the black trash bag slung over my shoulder containing my personal belongings—parole papers, a denim shoulder bag from high school, a ragged backpack, fifty dollars gate money, my driver’s license at age sixteen, and the clothes I’d worn to prison fifteen years ago.

The bus slowed to pick me up outside the prison gates, its windshield wipers keeping pace with the downpour. The rain splattered the flat ground in a steady cadence like a drum leading a prisoner to execution. I stepped back to avoid the splash of muddy water from the front tires dipping into a pothole. Air brakes breathed in and out, a massive beast taking respite from its life labors.

The door hissed open. At the top of the steps, a balding driver took my ticket, no doubt recognizing the prison’s release of a former inmate. He must have been accustomed to weary souls who’d paid their debts to society. The coldness glaring from his graphite

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eyes told me he wagered I'd be locked up again within a year. Maybe less. I couldn't blame him. The reoffend stats for female convicts like me soared high.

For too many years, I imagined the day I left prison would be bathed in sunlight. I'd be enveloped in welcoming arms and hear encouraging words from my family.

Reality hosted neither.

I moved to the rear of the bus, past a handful of people, and found a seat by myself. All around me were those engrossed in their devices. My life had been frozen in time, and now that I had permission to thaw, the world had changed. Was I ready for the fear digging its claws into my heart?

The cloudy view through the water-streaked window added to my doubts about the future. I'd memorized the prison rules, even prayed through them, and now I feared breaking one unknowingly.

The last time I'd breathed free air, riding the bus was a social gathering—in my case, a school bus. Kids chatted and laughter rose above the hum of tires. Now an eerie silence had descended.

I hadn't been alone then.

My mind drifted back to high school days, when the future rested on maintaining a 4.0 average and planning the next party. Maintaining my grades took a fraction of time, while my mind schemed forbidden fun. I'd dreamed of attending college and exploring the world on my terms.

Rebellion held bold colors, like a kaleidoscope shrouded in black light. The more I shocked others, the more I plotted something darker. My choices often seemed a means of expressing my creativity. While in my youth I viewed life as a cynic. By the time I was able to see a reflection of my brokenness and vowed to change, no one trusted me.

All that happened . . .

Before I took the blame for murdering my brother-in-law.

Before I traded my high school diploma and a career in interior design for a locked cell.

Before I spent years searching for answers.

Before I found new meaning and purpose.

How easy it would be to give in to a dismal, gray future when I longed for blue skies. I had to prove the odds against me were wrong.