

A NOVEL



BURDEN
OF PROOF
DIANN MILLS



PRAISE FOR DIANN MILLS

BURDEN OF PROOF

"DiAnn Mills never disappoints. From characters to fall in love with to those who need to be behind bars, this story is one that will tug on every emotion and wring you dry—while making you love every minute. 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

"In *Burden of Proof*, DiAnn Mills pairs a traumatized FBI agent with a desperate father to create a suspense-packed story that will keep readers captivated until the very last page."

NANCY MEHL, author of the *Defenders of Justice* series

"DiAnn Mills has raised the bar for romantic suspense yet again. *Burden of Proof* will hover in your mind until you finish it and are sad there is no more. Good thing she continues to write such powerful novels."

LAURINE SNELLING, author of the *Under Northern Lights* series

HIGH TREASON

"In this third book in Mills's action-packed FBI Task Force series, the stakes are higher than ever. Compelling characters and a riveting plot that fits seamlessly with current events make this novel impossible to put down. 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

"Mills has brought cultural and spiritual differences to life. Her characters, along with their real-life struggles, will bring an instant connection to readers. Her expertise in story development guarantees *High Treason* will end up as a favorite."

CHRISTIAN MARKET MAGAZINE

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

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

"The action-packed, romantic suspense includes the FBI, the CIA, a Saudi prince, and foreign intrigue wrapped in a mystery that keeps readers guessing until the last page is turned. . . . Fans of clean read suspense, without explicit sexual content and bad language, will enjoy the romantic chemistry, the suspense, and the conclusion."

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

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

"[Mills] has the ability to sweep you off your feet and into the middle of an adventure in a matter of paragraphs. . . . If you are looking for a little bit of action, romance, intrigue, and domestic terrorism (and a happily ever after!), then this is the book for you."

RADIANT LIT

"Fans of clean romantic suspense will enjoy this well-plotted winner."

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

"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

"Steady pacing and solid characterization make this latest from DiAnn Mills a sure favorite among FBI procedural fans. . . . The well-crafted case takes several twists and turns along the way and keeps the pace and tension high."

ROMANTIC TIMES

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's newest installment in the FBI: Houston series will keep readers on the edge of their seats. For those who love a good 'who-done-it,' *Deadlock* delivers."

CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

"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

"Tension explodes at every corner within these pages. . . . Mills's writing is transparently crisp, backed up with solid research, filled with believable characters and sparks of romantic chemistry."

NOVELCROSSING.COM

"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

"A fast-moving, intricately plotted thriller."

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

"Mills once again demonstrates her spectacular writing skills in her latest action-packed work. . . . The story moves at a fast pace that will keep readers riveted until the climactic end."

ROMANTIC TIMES

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Burden of Proof

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Burden of Proof is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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1

EERIE FEELINGS ARE rarely something to ignore, and hostage negotiator Special Agent April Ramos feared her arrival at a critical scene might be too late. She raced up the apartment building's six flights of stairs to the rooftop patio, urgency beating into each step. Houston police had phoned the FBI for assistance when a family-related dispute, resulting from a job layoff, drove a man onto a rooftop ledge threatening suicide at any minute.

April stopped in front of the door leading to the distressed man. She didn't want to startle him. SWAT had given her his name and visual confirmation of his location. She'd persuade him to embrace life and seek help instead of giving up. Determination poured into her body. He wouldn't jump on her watch.

She knocked and pushed the door slightly open. "Benson, my name is April. I'd like to talk to you. Can I join you?"

BURDEN OF PROOF

“We can talk fine this way.” His voice shook with out-of-control emotions.

“Sure, if that’s what you want. I understand you’re upset. I would be too if my company downsized and I no longer had a job.” She dug deep for his emotional label. Anger? Regret? Shame? “Would you like something? A bottle of water?”

“I want my life back.”

Poor man. “We can work through this. Let’s talk face-to-face.”

“Just you there?”

“Only me.”

“Okay.”

Relief offered a swirl of hope. She entered the rooftop area to a faintly lit living space and garden designed for residents to relax. Benson teetered on a four-foot ledge, his feet dangling over a busy Houston street below. He turned to her in the shadows, and the sight of him shook her. Snow-white hair and medium build—an uncanny resemblance to Simon, her partner.

Focus on helping this man.

“Hi, Benson.” She approached him slowly, her shoes noiseless on the turfed rooftop. Most people didn’t want to end their lives but needed a reason to live.

His hands hung loosely at his sides. “I’m warning you—this is a waste of time.”

“Making a new friend is never a waste.” Within five feet of his position, she stopped. “Please, let’s talk.” She gestured to the chairs. “Those look very comfortable.”

“Appreciate you coming all the way up here, but no thanks.” Despite the cool November air, sweat beaded on his forehead and dripped down the side of his face. She longed to see his eyes and make the emotional connection of one human to another.

“Okay, we’ll talk this way.” She spoke silent confidence into her mind.

“Make it fast. I have things to do.” He leaned slightly down. “Do the cops think their flashing red lights will change my mind?”

“Ignore them. You and I can be friends, Benson.”

He waved his hand as though discounting her. “You have no idea what I’m thinking or what’s happened. Go away.”

“You’re right. I’m clueless about your problems, but I want to hear your story. I’m your friend and I’m not leaving you.”

A minute ticked by. He faced the night, motionless. Where was he? Had her friend approach been too pushy? “Tell me about yourself. Where did you work?”

“Developmental Energy Solutions.”

“The one housed downtown?” She’d heard on the news of massive layoffs due to Chapter 11.

“The same.”

She needed to provide him with an opportunity to open up. “What were your responsibilities?”

“I’m an energy engineer. Oversaw a team that analyzed environmental concerns in new building construction.”

Finally, a few more words. “Sounds impressive. I’ve read about the company’s research on green building. How long were you with them?”

“Twenty-four years.” He spat the words. “Eleven months short of retirement.”

“Why not join me over here”—*away from that ledge*—“and we can talk about what happened today?” She raised her hand for him to take it, but he ignored her.

“I’m fine right where I’m at.”

Please, life has more to offer than pain. “Benson, I hate it when big business is unfair to its employees.”

“Right. No warning. Went to work, and first thing, my boss called me to his office. Gave me my notice. A security guard escorted me to my desk. I was given a cardboard box and ten minutes to pack

my stuff. Twenty-four years reduced to a box.” Benson trembled, his face rigid.

“I’d be angry too. It’s very difficult for me to imagine what you’re going through.”

“I wanted to kill all of them. The security guard wouldn’t let me say good-bye to my team. Check emails. Nothing. Later I learned many of my friends were also let go.”

“How awful. The owners are extremely insensitive. There’s no regard for the people who work hard for them. No wonder you’re upset.”

He rubbed his face. “How am I going to pay my bills? Child support? College tuition?”

“I have a friend who can help you find a steady job with benefits.”

“I won’t take charity.”

She kept her hand extended, longing for him to grasp his tomorrow. “This is a work program. They’ll help you find a job that matches your skill set. We—”

“It’s my responsibility to take care of my family. If I can’t, there’s no reason to live. All I have is life insurance. No medical. Nothing.” Hopelessness threaded his words into a tapestry of anxiety.

“You have experience and knowledge that’s in high demand.”

“Are you lying to me?” His tone rose into mounting hysteria. He whipped his head her way. “I despise liars.”

“I wouldn’t deceive you. It’s a program for those who’ve lost their jobs and want to work. Come down and we’ll talk about it.”

His shoulders slumped. “Impossible.”

“We could sit on the ledge together.” Bold move, but if putting her life in danger saved his, she’d do it.

“Up here with me? Sure.”

She held her breath while he scooted down on the ledge. This meant progress, but the trauma wasn’t over until he walked off the rooftop.

He pointed to a spot about ten feet from him. “There’s a good place for you.”

She still couldn't see his eyes, even with a light mounted to the building above them. She smiled as though they were sharing light conversation. "Halfway?" Without waiting for his permission, she seated herself nearer than he'd requested. If she inched closer, she could touch him. He clasped his hands in his lap, and for the next few minutes he looked out at the flickering city lights.

He turned to her. "You're not very big."

"You're not the first to say that."

"Where are you from?"

"My parents were born in the Philippines. I met the world here in Houston. Tell me about your family."

For the next hour, she coaxed Benson into reliving treasured memories about his family, his hobbies, a dog from his boyhood days. Yet he refused to relinquish his position on the ledge. Flashing lights from HPD below awaited the outcome.

"In the last three seconds, he sank the ball and won the game," Benson said.

April laughed. "Shortest guy, second string, and your son proves he's a powerhouse," she said.

"Got accepted into A&M." His face saddened. "My life insurance ensures graduation. See why I have to lay a path for my kids?"

Don't go there, Benson. "There are many ways you can keep your son in college without sacrificing yourself. Tell me about your daughter."

"She's tiny, like you. Long blonde hair. Fifteen. A real beauty. Makes good grades. Looks like her mom when I first met her." Benson talked for another forty-five minutes about his daughter and ex-wife. He appeared happy and relaxed.

"I'm hungry," she said. "Want to grab something to eat?"

"We could do that," he said slowly.

"What do you like?" A surge of satisfaction coursed through her. She'd learned a lot about Benson, and she believed he had a solid

future ahead of him. “For me, this time of morning, it’s eggs, bacon, hot biscuits and honey. Or pancakes?”

“My stomach’s growling.”

“And coffee,” she said. Her hand moved within an inch of his fingertips.

“Houston has great coffeehouses,” he said. “My wife and I used to explore different cafés. Then she decided being married to me no longer had any meaning.”

“I’ve been hurt in relationships, and it’s not fun. Ready to join me?” she said. “My treat.”

“No need. I have money.” He reached into his pant pocket. “Can’t believe I don’t have my wallet.”

“It’s okay. You can buy the next time.”

“This must be my sign.” His voice sank low. “Child support due today. Our paychecks are delayed due to bankruptcy proceedings.”

“Benson, I’ll help you sort out finances. I’m your friend, and we’ll take this one step at a time.”

He placed his hands on each side of him, gripping the ledge. “You’re paid to talk to me. You’re no friend. I don’t even know you.”

“You’ve shared with me about your family. You love them, want the best for them. You are a survivor—I believe in you.”

He gave her a sideways glance. “Did my ex call the cops when I told her what happened?”

“Yes. She was very concerned about you.”

“Right. That’s why she reminded me of my financial obligations tonight.”

April sensed she was losing him. She grappled for words. “After breakfast, we’ll put together a plan.”

“I had one before you arrived.”

“But we’ve talked through a new one.”

“It’s over.” He flung himself over the ledge.

“Benson!”

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Life is unpredictable. We aren't guaranteed tomorrow, and we don't know what sorts of mountains and valleys we'll experience along our journeys. The age-old question of why do bad things happen to good people can become our mantra. Or we can choose to ignore our bruises and travel the road of good and prioritize truth and justice above all things.

April blamed herself for a hostage negotiation that ended in a tragic death. She couldn't seem to get past it. She held tightly to guilt, not realizing that setting it free could bring healing.

Jason ignored the truth about what was going on in his community until the injustices left a staggering blow. He was forced to make a decision to ensure his community was safe for young and old.

April and Jason's story shows how God can work in the unexpected and the tragic for good. Together they learned that, with God, *Life doesn't get much better than this.*

Be blessed, my friends.

DiAnn