



SWORN ^{to} PROTECT

DiAnn Mills



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Sworn to Protect

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*This book is dedicated to the courageous men and women of the
Border Patrol, who protect our country's borders.*



Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

ROMANS 12:2



*Many thanks to all who made this book possible: Carol Cox;
Richard Mabry, MD; Kathy Roeth; and Debbie Gail Smith.*



CHAPTER 1

**We are truly a nation of immigrants.
But we are also a nation of laws.
BRENT ASHABRANNER**

McAllen, Texas

THE RIO GRANDE was not just murky. It was toxic. Danika Morales respected the river's temperament—lazy and rushing, crystal and muddy, breathtaking and devastating. To many illegal immigrants, its flowing water signified hope and an opportunity for a better tomorrow, while others viewed the river crossing as a means of smuggling drugs or spreading terrorism. But for Danika, the depths meant death, and it didn't discriminate among its victims. That was why she chose a Border Patrol badge and carried a gun.

Shortly after the 8 a.m. muster, Danika snatched up the keys to the Tahoe assigned to her for the next ten hours and checked out an M4. A hum of voices, most with Hispanic accents and clipped with occasional laughter, swirled around the station. A labyrinth of sights and sounds had succeeded in disorienting her. A daze.

She took a sip of the steaming coffee in hopes no one saw how the day's date affected her. Her hands shook. The twelfth of July. The second anniversary of Toby's murder. She thought she could handle it better than this, but the raw ache still seared her heart.

“Tough day for me too,” Jacob whispered beside her. “We can get through this together.” The familiar tone of voice, as in many times before, nearly paralyzed her. Jacob sounded so much like his brother.

She stood shoulder to shoulder with her brother-in-law and glanced at his muscular frame and the silver streaks in his closely cropped hair, everything about him oddly different from Toby. Gone were the gentleness, the patience, and the outstretched arms of love.

“Thanks. But I’m all right.”

He frowned, a typical expression. “Well, I’m not, and you shouldn’t be either.”

She was in no mood to rile him today. “I miss Toby every minute of the day, but we have to move on. He would have wanted it that way.”

“Not till his murderer is found.” Jacob’s jaw tightened. “I’m disappointed in you.”

Danika took another sip of the hot coffee, burning her tongue. Caustic words threatened to surface and add one more brick to the wall dividing them. “I want the killer found too. I’m committed to it. I think about him every day and mourn for our daughter, who will never know her daddy. But I choose not to spend my time harboring hate and vengeance.”

“You must not have really loved my brother.”

The words cut deep, as Jacob must have known they would. No woman could have loved Toby like she did. “I refuse to be browbeaten by you anymore. Your hate is going to explode in your own backyard one day.” She stopped herself before she lit a match to his temper. Actually, she’d rather have been dropped in the bush for the next ten hours with a shotgun and a can of OFF! than argue with him. But the time had come to distance herself from Jacob.

“Hey, Danika,” an agent called, “do these belong to you?”

She turned to see wiry Felipe Chavez carrying a vase with a huge bouquet of roses. *They remembered.* She swallowed a chunk of life. “Oh, guys, you didn’t have to do this.”

Felipe made his way toward her. The other agents hushed; then one of them started to clap. She smiled through the tears as he handed her the clear glass vase. The sweet fragrance no longer reminded her of death, but of life and her resolve to live each day in a way that commemorated Toby’s devotion to her and their little daughter. Perhaps this was what the two-year marker meant.

She took the roses and studied the small crowd of agents. Good men, all of them—even Jacob.

“We cared about what happened to Toby too,” Felipe said with a grim smile.

Danika brushed her finger around one of the delicate petals and formed her words. Memories had stalked her like a demon since last night. “Don’t know what to say except thank you. Toby was a soldier for his own cause, and he spent his life doing what he believed in. Just like all of us.”

One agent shook his head, frowned, and left the room. Far too many explanations for his disapproval raced through her mind. But Danika needed to put the ugliness behind her.

She set the flowers on the long table in front of her. “Today is the second anniversary of Toby’s death. All of you have looked after me and my daughter, especially during holidays and special occasions. His death is why I’m more dedicated than ever to help protect the border.” She paused, sensing her emotions rushing into chaos. “I appreciate your remembering him and the sacrifice he made, especially since his beliefs were controversial.” Enough said.

She took a deep, cleansing breath. “I brought doughnuts.”

And they were buttermilk, Toby’s favorite.

She glanced at Jacob, hoping to end the tension between

them. How Barbara could stay married to him was beyond her comprehension. He treated her and their four kids like yesterday's trash.

Danika wound through the crowd of agents, greeting those who offered condolences and others who offered a good-morning.

The field operations supervisor, Agent Oden Herrera, stood in front of the flags—the U.S., Homeland Security, and the Border Patrol. Pushing the emotions of regret and grief about Toby aside, Danika captured the supervisor's attention. "During the muster you said intel had picked up a cocaine drop last night?"

Herrera walked to a wall map and pointed. "Like I said earlier: arrested seven men and two women right along here, your area. A kid had a small bag of cocaine on him. Most likely a deterrent. The drug smuggler either hid it before being apprehended, or he's still waiting for someone to pick him up. Dogs have been out there most of the night, but Barnett and Fire-Eater are headed that way in a few minutes."

Danika finished her coffee and made her way into the stifling heat and stopped by Jon Barnett's truck. As Fire-Eater's handler, he had everyone's admiration, and the Belgian sheepdog had a reputation for being the best of the K-9s. Barnett snapped on the dog's leash and waved.

"I hear we're working the same area today." Danika refrained from patting Fire-Eater. Some days he wasn't people friendly. After seeing the dog in action a few times when he'd found drug runners, she sometimes felt sorry for those he brought down.

Barnett grinned and wiped the sweat already beading on his face. "He's a good dog, Morales. Just needs a little help with his people skills." He laughed, his freckles deepening in the intense sun. "And he's great with the wife and kids. Like another member of the family." He pulled out his keys. "Do you want to talk? We have a few minutes."

All she really wanted was for the day to be over. Talking

increased the chances of liquid emotion—which was more lethal than the river flowing between the U.S. and Mexico. “No thanks. I’m fine.”

“Do you *need* to talk?”

“It’s been two years.” Therapeutic or not, she would not open up, even to a sweet guy like Barnett. She’d spent hours building a reputation as a tough agent, and she wasn’t about to take a nosedive now.

“Right, and the sooner you admit that today has crept up on you worse than a case of food poisoning, the better you’ll feel.”

She had to agree. “Have you turned psychologist?”

“Fire-Eater and five kids taught me all I know.”

“I had a dog when I was a kid,” she said, looking for any subject except Toby. “Gentle, sensed my moods, smart. My best friend. Sure missed him when he was gone.” Danika blinked back a tear, despising her reaction. She stared at Fire-Eater rather than look into Barnett’s face.

“I bet he slept at the foot of your bed.”

Fire-Eater climbed into the backseat of the double-cab truck.

“Sometimes in it. We even shared meals. I didn’t like meat, and he’d eat it for me.”

“Who’s your best friend now?”

She swallowed the ever-increasing lump in her throat. “Toby’s gone, and I have a tough time in church.”

“Confession is a beginning. Any family?”

“Toby’s family has been good to me.” *Never mind Jacob.* “My folks never approved of my marriage.” She sucked in a breath. It hissed like the poisonous snakes she feared. “Well-meaning friends do this to me.”

“Do you feel any better?”

Sneak. “Yeah, thanks, doc. You—”

Fire-Eater barked. No doubt anxious to get moving. The animal

and Jacob had similar personalities, but today she'd rather be with the dog.



Danika turned off Old Military Road and bounced along a narrow dirt and gravel path, bordered by tall, thick grass and brush and laden with prickly pears on the Rio Grande side and more thick brush on the other. Jon had radioed ahead and reported signs from last night, but nothing new. Every agent was on alert. Trouble brewed along the entire two-thousand-mile border between Mexico and the United States. Drug cartels were slaughtering innocent people in the streets, and those on the U.S. side feared it was only a matter of time before the fighting spilled over the line. Not on her watch.

She drove slowly past the few houses perched on the right side of the road, most of which had been stash houses at one time or another, havens for illegal aliens and drug smugglers. She stopped the truck beside a well-worn trail to look for recent signs in the dirt. After a generous spray of mosquito repellent on her uniform and hands, she stepped into the stifling ninety-degree heat and bent to study the hours-old footprints indicating where the illegals had gained access into Texas before being apprehended. Most of them only wanted an opportunity to better themselves, but others had a darker agenda. At least she hoped the footprints had been accounted for.

A breeze from the north fanned her face and offered a brief reprieve from the unrelenting sun. The tall grass with its thick growth waved as though mocking her commitment to the Border Patrol.

Fifteen minutes later, Barnett radioed a call for assistance.

“Spotted a man wearing a backpack near the 112 sensor. He headed into the *carrizo*.”

Danika ran back to the truck and raced her vehicle toward Barnett's location. She wanted to tell him to wait for backup and not search through the thick grass alone, but she knew Barnett and Fire-Eater were a team and stayed on the traffic. The smuggler probably hid on a rattler's nest.

She was the first to respond to Barnett's request. Pulling in behind his truck, she unclipped her HK from her belt while radioing her arrival. She grabbed her cell phone and dialed his number.

"Barnett, I'm here," she said. "Tell me you're not in the middle of the *carrizo*."

He chuckled. "Fire-Eater's after him. I'm skirting it. Neither one of us is coming out until we have our man."

She pocketed her cell phone and followed the agent's footprints on the dusty road until they disappeared into the thicket. Hot as it was, the Kevlar vest felt good, even if it was worthless against a stab wound or a shotgun blast.

Fire-Eater barked, snapping Danika's attention toward the riverbank. The dog growled from somewhere in the depths of the overgrowth.

Gunfire cracked in the still morning air. Alert to the danger, she pulled her weapon.

"This is the United States Border Patrol! Come out with your hands up!" Barnett's voice roared.

Another shot fired. Fire-Eater yelped.

Blood pumping, Danika yanked out her radio. "Shots fired. Shots fired. Agent or K-9 may be down."

Two more shots pierced the air.

When Barnett didn't respond, she clicked the radio in place on her belt. "Barnett," she yelled, "tell me you're all right."

Nothing.

A dark-haired man emerged from the right side of the road

several yards away, wearing a backpack that no doubt contained drugs. His attention scattered in different directions.

“Alto, o disparo,” she said.

The man turned and fired at her before racing across the road. The bullet angled to her left. Danika returned the fire and sank a bullet into his thigh. He fell, and she raced toward him.

“Drop the gun, or I’ll be forced to shoot again.”

He kept his fingers wrapped around it. She wrestled with the rage that always seemed to lie below the surface of her control. If she killed him, she could claim self-defense. But her job title meant self-control.

“I said drop the gun.” She fired above him and kept running in his direction.

He lifted his hand and aimed. Instinctively she pumped a bullet into his hand. His wound caused a burst of blood to splatter the ground and the quiet air to echo with obscenities. Still he refused to release the hold on his gun.

“Do you want your whole hand blown off?” She stood over him and clamped her booted foot over his injured hand.

He screamed, and she pointed her firearm at his face. Danika trembled. She wasn’t a murderer, but anger did struggle to rule her emotions.

“You’ll pay for this,” the man said. “I know who you are, and there’s a contract out for you.”

“You aren’t the first or the last to threaten me.” She picked up the man’s gun, an older model Beretta. With his leg and hand bleeding, he wasn’t going anywhere. She slipped the handcuffs from her belt and clamped them on his wrists. Rolling him over, she brushed his bleeding leg against the hard ground, and he moaned. Where was backup? *Please, let Barnett be okay. Five kids. A respected agent.*

“The drug cartels will destroy the Border Patrol.”

“Big talk for a man in handcuffs.”

“You wait and see who wins.” He spit on her boot. “You’ll never find out who killed your husband.”

She smothered the gasp that nearly stole her breath. How did the man know her? know about Toby’s death? He clearly had inside information—information that couldn’t have been obtained easily. Unless Toby’s murder was related to something bigger than she had imagined.

Focus. Now was not the time to weigh the shooter’s words. Later she’d look into it.

Her gaze searched the area. An outstretched arm poked through the overgrowth where the downed man had attempted to cross the road. She hurried, gun raised, eyes taking in every inch of the brush. As she grew closer, she saw the rest of Barnett’s body sprawled on the trodden grass. Blood soaked the ground, creating a small puddle of red against the vibrant green. Danika bent to his side.

Barnett moaned. “He shot Fire-Eater,” he whispered. “Get him.”

“I have him cuffed. Hold on. Help’s coming.” She pulled out the radio. “Need EMS. Agent down.”

She hadn’t been there for Toby, but she could be there for Barnett.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear reader,

When I started writing *Sworn to Protect*, I believed I had an understanding of the immigration problem. After all, I know people who are undocumented immigrants, and I know people who are Border Patrol agents. Their situation and plight are familiar to most of us living in southern Texas.

Then Danika and Alex's story began to unfold. As I looked into their hearts and those of the people around them, I discovered I really didn't know much at all about the emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual stresses of our neighbors south of the Rio Grande or the brave men and women who protect our borders. Learning along with my characters proved to be a challenging and enjoyable journey.

While conducting research, I was fortunate to ride the line with a couple of Border Patrol agents. I hope I have been able to portray these courageous people accurately. I remember how hot the days, how muddy the Rio Grande, and how desperate the people. The Border Patrol agents' compassion and respect for undocumented immigrants impressed me. I also became aware of the dangers the agents face. Can you imagine not wearing your uniform to and from work for fear of endangering your family's lives?

Without a doubt, *Sworn to Protect* does not attempt to address all the complex issues surrounding immigration in the United States. It would be difficult to do that within the pages of a novel. If you'd like to learn more about the Border Patrol and

DIANN MILLS

undocumented immigrants, I invite you to read *Patrolling Chaos: The U.S. Border Patrol in Deep South Texas* by Robert Lee Maril (Texas Tech University Press, 2006). For a distinctly Christian perspective, you may want to read *Welcoming the Stranger* by Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang (InterVarsity Press, 2009).

I hope you enjoyed *Sworn to Protect*. I left a piece of my heart with the characters. It's been said that if a writer doesn't change and grow in writing a novel, then she can't expect the reader to change and grow either. I hope this novel has made you more aware of our immigration issues, and may we pray together for a resolution.

Expect an Adventure
DiAnn Mills
www.dianmills.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR DiAnn Mills is a fiction writer who combines an adventuresome spirit with unforgettable characters to create action-packed novels. DiAnn's first book was published in 1998. She currently has more than forty books in print, which have sold more than a million and a half copies.

Six of her books have appeared on the CBA best-seller list. Eight of her books have been nominated for the American Christian Fiction Writers' Book of the Year contest, and she is the recipient of the Inspirational Reader's Choice award for 2005 and 2007. *Lightning and Lace* was a 2008 Christy Award finalist.

DiAnn is a founding board member for American Christian Fiction Writers and a member of Inspirational Writers Alive; Romance Writers of America's Faith, Hope and Love chapter; and the Advanced Writers and Speakers Association. She speaks to various groups and teaches writing workshops around the country. DiAnn is also a mentor for the Jerry B. Jenkins Christian Writers Guild.

Her latest releases are *Awaken My Heart* and *Breach of Trust*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever considered taking a job that might put you or your family in danger?
2. How far would you go to protect a family member?
3. Grief is often a formidable monster. How well does Danika handle the second anniversary of her husband's death? How do you handle reminders of loss or grief in your life?
4. Jacob is bitter about his brother's death, and it affects his relationship with his family. How might you react in a similar situation?
5. If you were Danika's friend, would you encourage her to seek out a relationship with Alex? Why or why not?
6. Should Alex have told Danika from the beginning about his friendship with Toby? How might his doing so have changed the trajectory of their relationship?
7. Alex has his own personal views about undocumented immigrants. How are they different from Danika's?
8. It's been said that desperate people do desperate things. What particular desperation motivates Sandra? Lucy? Jose?

9. How do you feel about Sandra's deceit? Was she justified in what she did?
10. Jacob made a renewed commitment to God and his family. Do you think he will be able to keep his word? Why or why not?
11. At the end of the story, Danika and Alex pledge their love to each other. What have they learned from past relationships? Where does their faith in Christ fit?
12. Before reading this novel, what was your opinion of the Border Patrol and the immigration debate? Has it changed, and if so, in what ways? Do you have any ideas for a solution to the situation with our borders?