



A NOVEL

DEADLOCK

DIANN MILLS

CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

PRAISE FOR THE FBI: HOUSTON SERIES

DOUBLE CROSS

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

FRESHFICTION.COM

“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

“This book was so fast-paced that I almost got whiplash! . . . [H]eart-pounding action from the first page . . . didn’t stop until nearly the end of the book. If you like romantic suspense, I highly recommend this one.”

RADIANT LIT

“Fast-paced and action-packed. . . DiAnn Mills gives us a real winner with *Firewall*, a captivating and intense story filled with a twisting plot that will have you on the edge of your seat.”

FRESHFICTION.COM

“*Firewall* is exciting . . . thrilling. DiAnn Mills draws her readers in, holding them breathlessly hostage until the very last page. She is a master at her craft and her genre.”

BOOKFUN.ORG

“Mills’s writing is crisply transparent and filled with solid research and believable characters and a spark of romantic chemistry. The mystery-ridden maze of tumultuous twists and turns, suspects and evidence, difficult questions and half answers will rivet the reader’s attention.”

NOVELCROSSING.COM

“*Firewall* should come with a warning! Be prepared to lose your breath and a lot of sleep with this exhilarating read.”

LYNETTE EASON, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE DEADLY REUNIONS SERIES

“*Firewall* is an up-until-2 a.m. book. . . I had no idea who the mastermind was until the last two or three pages. Mills keeps getting better and better. Can’t wait for the next one!”

LAURINE SNELLING, AUTHOR OF THE WILD WEST WIND SERIES AND *WAKE THE DAWN*

“*Firewall* is a gripping ride that will keep your blood pumping and your imagination in high gear.”

DANI PETTREY, AUTHOR OF THE ALASKAN COURAGE SERIES

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Deadlock

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CHAPTER 1

HOUSTON, TEXAS

NOVEMBER

7:15 A.M. MONDAY

FBI Special Agent Bethany Sanchez swung open the door of her truck with the same jitters she had her first day at Quantico. On this gray morning, she was beginning a violent crime assignment and would meet her new partner, Special Agent Thatcher Graves, the man who'd sent her brother to jail.

Bethany caught her breath and took in the unfamiliar surroundings. The residential area was flooded with Houston police officers and unmarked cars, part of a task force between HPD and the FBI. Alicia Javon had been murdered here late yesterday afternoon, leaving behind a husband and two daughters.

The homes rose like monuments in this older, exclusive neighborhood, a mirror of refinement and dollar signs. The Javons' two-story brick with classic black shutters was no exception. Not a dog or cat in sight. In her parents' neighborhood, dogs ran loose and usually in packs, whether the four-legged or two-legged type. Here, a pair of squirrels scampered up an oak. The bushes and hedges received regular manicures. Freshly mowed yard. The three-car garage was the size of her apartment.

Contrast the tranquility with a woman who'd been shot, and it was Bethany's job to help bring down the killer.

She arched her shoulders and walked to the front door, wishing her first day in violent crime could have been less stressful. She'd been up most of the night giving herself a pep talk about working with Thatcher Graves despite their history. A little confidence on her end would boost her ego. She looked like a professional. Wore a black pantsuit and a white blouse. Hair secured at the nape. No rings. No bracelets. Just tiny gold balls in her earlobes, a small gold cross necklace, and a keen sense of determination that had never failed her.

After greeting two police officers and displaying her credentials, she entered the home, and another officer directed her toward a hum of activity to the right. She passed through a living area, where an upright bass, grand piano, and harp filled a third of the space. Beyond there she'd find Special Agent Thatcher Graves.

Her gaze pulled ahead. She wanted the partnership to work so badly that her blood pressure flared at the thought of it. She moved through the room to the kitchen. Thatcher bent behind the crime scene tape, where the body had been found. He glanced up, his earth-colored eyes stormy.

She extended her hand and hoped he didn't observe the trembling. "Good morning, I'm Bethany Sanchez."

He stood and towered over her, but most men did over her small frame. "My new partner. The gal from the civil rights division who solved a cold hate crime in the Hispanic community. And was influential in bringing peace to an Asian business district where a prostitution ring worked the streets. Welcome to violent crime." He gripped her hand, not too firm and not an ounce of wimp. "We've met before."

She offered a slight smile while her stomach rolled. "Yes, we have."

"I think it was the Labor Day picnic. Certainly not what the victim had here."

Had he forgotten *Papá's* threat at the courthouse, or did he expect her to elaborate? "I understand there's a link between

this murder and a previous one, and that's why the FBI's been called in."

"Right. Three weeks ago, Ruth Caswell, an elderly woman in the River Oaks area, was murdered. She was under hospice care but otherwise lived alone. Shot with a 9mm to the forehead, hollow-point bullet, and the killer left a plastic scorpion on her body. At that time, HPD requested our help, due to the unusual circumstances. Alicia Javon's murder appears to be identical, but it'll take weeks before we learn if the two women were killed with the same weapon."

"Didn't realize the lab was so far behind. Fingerprints?"

"Too soon to have the report. We'll see about the DNA."

"Anything to go on?"

"Looks like a serial killing."

"But the husband is a viable suspect. Looks to me like a domestic squabble that went bad."

He lifted a brow. "I've been at this longer than you have. The family will arrive in the next thirty minutes for an interview. They spent the night at a hotel."

"Can't blame them." She glanced around the kitchen. A stock-pot rested on the stove, a box of pasta beside it. A dinner that never happened. "I wouldn't want to stay here either. What else do you have?"

He grabbed a large Starbucks cup from the kitchen counter and toasted her. The man wore a muscular build like an Italian suit. "You fit your MO."

She lifted a brow. "What do you mean?"

"No-nonsense. Gets the job done. Analytical. Outstanding record—"

"Whoa. You're armed, and all I have is office chatter and media headlines."

He sipped the coffee. "I'm sure it's all true."

Egotistical, but with a sense of humor. She stared into his chiseled face. "I hope not or I'm doomed."

“Doubt it, General Sanchez. Your reputation is outstanding.”

She drew in a breath. The ring of his tone pierced her like a dull knife.

“Guess I won’t call you a general again.” The muscles in his jaw tightened. “Okay, back to the case. The killer is most likely a psychopath.”

“We need more information to make that determination, a suspect whose behavior we can psychologically examine to determine if he’s hearing voices and the like.”

“Not every psychopath is a killer, but serial killers are psychopaths.”

She’d mull his explanation when she had time to think about it. “Has the blood spatter been analyzed?”

“Yes. Nothing additional for us to follow up on there. I’ve been here since five thirty poring over the reports, trying to find a motive for both murders. We have two victims killed with the same type of weapon and identical scorpions left on each body. I sent a copy of the reports to you about an hour ago.”

“Hold on a moment while I retrieve them.” She eased her shoulder bag to the floor and snatched her phone, berating herself for not checking it sooner. She scrolled through the various reports. There it was. “Go ahead. I’m ready.”

“Alicia Javon was a forty-five-year-old wife and mother. She held a vice president position at Danford Accounting. Two daughters are enrolled at Rice University majoring in music. Her husband is currently unemployed and on disability due to a spinal injury sustained in an auto accident. He told the police his wife’s Bible and several pieces of her jewelry are missing. All heirlooms from her family. HPD noted a sizable inheritance from her family’s estate.”

Bethany read the list of diamonds, rubies, and sapphires stolen. Motive? “The husband claims the jewelry is insured. Has HPD checked the pawnshops?”

“Yes, and they will continue,” Thatcher said. “No signs of forced entry.”

“She may have known her killer or opened the door without

a visual check. Where was her husband? Do her daughters live at home?"

"The girls were out with their father. Walked in and discovered the body," he said. "It's in the report. I labeled it Scorpion."

Ouch. Could this get much worse?

"Hey, I'm messing with you. Don't worry about it."

She smiled but didn't feel it. "I noted Mrs. Javon's arm was in a cast. Worth looking into."

"I agree. Have a few thoughts about the injury."

"Theory or fact?" Immediately she regretted her question. Arguing fact and logic solved nothing. "That was inappropriate. I know you operate on instinct, and you're quite successful."

"But you have no respect for my methods, right?"

She reddened. "I'd like to think our partnership could work well organically."

He took another sip of coffee. "Well said. We could fail or become a dynamic team. When we're finished here, let's head back to the office and discuss the case."

A police officer stepped into the kitchen. "The family has arrived."

"They're early." Thatcher glanced out the kitchen window to a patio and pool area, his face stoic. "Tell them Special Agent Sanchez and I will talk to them in a few minutes. We're stepping outside for privacy."



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

DEAR READER,

Story takes me into my characters' lives. Their desires, goals, problems, strengths, and flaws direct their actions. Some of their problems are difficult, especially those involving the dynamics of family. The characters of *Deadlock* are no exception.

Thatcher experienced a rough relationship with his father, and the man died before they were reconciled. Hard reality, and many of us wish we'd said and done things to those gone from this world.

Bethany grew up with doubts about her family's views regarding her brother. She disagreed with his lawbreaking, and the result was devastating. Standing up for truth and justice can ostracize us from our families, but do we have a choice with God as our judge? Bethany loved her family, but she loved God more.

If the past haunts you with unforgiveness and lack of restitution, I suggest you face those challenges. You'll find peace in the journey.

Blessings,

DiAnn

Expect an Adventure

DiAnn Mills

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