



A NOVEL

# FIREWALL

## DIANN MILLS

CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR



# PRAISE FOR DIANN MILLS

— *Firewall* —

“*Firewall* should come with a warning! Walking across Niagara Falls on a tightrope with no net would be more relaxing. 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

— *Attracted to Fire* —

“Mills’s fast-moving tale of light suspense will attract Dee Henderson fans with its well-drawn characters and snappy dialog.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Mills braids together romance and suspense in a compelling narrative about a young woman caught in the crosshairs of political ambition. This standalone will delight and draw readers of Christian romantic suspense like moths to a flame.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“The author’s storytelling skill keeps the pages turning.”

*ROMANTIC TIMES*

“The intricate maze of tantalizing twists and abrupt turns, clues and coincidences, difficult questions and half answers will keep the attention of readers.”

TITLETRAKK.COM

— *Breach of Trust* —

“This masterfully crafted suspense novel immediately hooks the reader. . . . A real page-turner.”

*BOOKLIST*

“A novel jam-packed with twists that will leave readers breathless. A must-read for any avid suspense reader.”

*ROMANTIC TIMES*

“A fast-paced, character-driven thriller. . . . Readers who enjoy the works of Dee Henderson, especially her O’Malley series, will love *Breach of Trust*.”

*MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW*

“If you’ve been waiting for a story to match Dee Henderson’s O’Malley series or Susan May Warren’s Team Hope, look no further than *Breach of Trust*, the first in the Call of Duty series.”

TITLETRAKK.COM

— *Sworn to Protect* —

“Readers who like contemporary romantic suspense . . . will enjoy this intriguing page-turner.”

*BOOKLIST*

“*Sworn to Protect* combines the best aspects of thriller, romance, and inspiration to offer an exciting and satisfying read.”

ASSOCIATEDCONTENT.COM

“A fascinating read that brings to vivid life the dangerous world of the Texas Border Patrol. Very enjoyable!”

MINDY STARNS CLARK

bestselling author of *Shadows of Lancaster County*

— *Pursuit of Justice* —

“A character-driven story that is sure to keep you reading long into the night.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Mills packs this third book in the Call of Duty series with an interesting cast of suspects that keeps the reader guessing. Fans of romantic suspense will savor the pursuit of justice.”

CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

“DiAnn Mills scores another home run. . . . *Pursuit of Justice* is Christian fiction at its best, and Mills has established herself as a suspense novelist of the highest caliber.”

CHRISTIANFICTIONBOOKREVIEWS.COM



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FBI: HOUSTON

**DIANN MILLS**



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### *Firewall*

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*Firewall* 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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# CHAPTER 1

**PRESENT DAY**

**MID-SEPTEMBER**

**7:00 A.M. MONDAY**

Taryn's perfect day melted in the heat of an early morning bottleneck. Houston traffic was a war zone during rush hour. Six lanes of bumper-to-bumper vehicles slowed to a crawl with a road construction crew flashing warning lights ahead. Six lanes narrowed to five, then four, then three, then two.

Shep touched her arm, his gold-brown eyes expressing tenderness. "Babe, the driver will get us to the airport in plenty of time."

"I hate traffic." She pulled her iPad from her purse, a habit when she needed to keep her mind occupied.

"Taryn, our honeymoon starts today." He smiled. "Do your new husband a favor and put away your gadgets. Didn't the VP tell you to forget about work and concentrate on your husband?"

"He did, and you have all my attention."

"Better yet, let me have all your toys, and I'll keep them safe. The one thing I plan to do for the rest of my life is take care of you."

Oh, this wonderful man. And he was all hers. "You're right. My life's no longer a solo project. I've been single for so long—"

"And a workaholic. Don't worry. I have room right here in my backpack." He chuckled, the rich sound reminding her of a

thundering waterfall. “I’ll keep them for you, Mrs. Shepherd. But I doubt you’ll have time to use them.”

She blushed, remembering last night. How could she argue with such devotion? “Can I at least keep my phone?”

“I suppose.” He brushed a kiss across her lips. “I love the blush in your cheeks.”

Would she always grow warm with his touch? “Comes with the hair.”

“A gorgeous match.” He twirled a tendril of her hair around his fingers and let it fall against her neck, causing a shiver from far too many sources.

Taryn knew what he was thinking, but she couldn’t respond with the limo driver listening to every word. She handed Shep her iPad, hoping he understood that until she met him, her first love had been designing software. Now, with bittersweet regret, she watched him tuck her technological lifeline into his leather backpack.

“We’ll be at the airport in twenty minutes.” He took her hand into his. “Then we’re off to our San Juan paradise. We might never come back. Live in Puerto Rico forever.”

She snuggled close to him. For the first time in years, she wouldn’t miss work—no software development projects or unrealistic deadlines. And to think she’d spend the rest of her life with this delicious man. Had it only been three months since they’d met and fallen in love? From the moment he walked into her life, he’d become her prince. They’d been inseparable, just the two of them, realizing they were meant for a lifetime. She’d dreamed of a man like Shep since she was a little girl, a man who wouldn’t care that she kept her nose in books. His entrance into her heart was like a golden path to a fairy-tale future.

After checking in at the airport, she stared at her boarding pass and wished it held her married name: Mrs. Francis Shepherd. Their next trip would show them as husband and wife.

Security moved like the traffic they’d left behind. In the crowd,

everyone's personal space was invaded, and some people responded with hostility. Taryn stepped into a long, winding line, and Shep wrapped an arm around her waist. Oh, she loved her new life. He blew her a kiss while loading his shoes and personal belongings into a bin. If cravings like these occupied her mind for the next fifty years, how would she ever get any work done again?

Once they walked through the body scanner and gathered their things, they wove through the crowd and on toward the gate. The predawn coffee caught up with her. With the urgency, she pointed to the women's restroom. "Do I have time for a quick stop?"

"Sure. My fault since I filled your cup twice to wake you. Let me have your carry-on, and I'll wait here." His smoldering look could have melted the wings off a jumbo jet.

"I'll hurry."

"No problem. The future's ours."

Rushing inside, she noted six women ahead of her, one with two children. Shep had a tendency to be impatient with time constraints, but she'd be miserable on the plane if she didn't wait her turn. Her iPhone notified her that she had fifteen minutes before boarding time.

Finally a stall opened and she hurried in. While she was drying her hands, a thunderous explosion shook the floor. A crack snaked up the wall. Then another. The mirror shattered, breaking her image into shards of glass.

She screamed and swung toward the entrance. Before she could take a step, the ceiling collapsed. Amid dirt and fallen tile, moans filled the air like a nightmare that refused to end. The walls creaked, metal and concrete shifting . . . falling.

Muffled groans alerted Taryn to her impaired hearing from the blast. Trembling, she bent to check on a young woman sprawled at her feet. Blood seeped from a head wound, and Taryn couldn't detect a pulse.

Debris rained on her. Something crashed against her head, sending her spiraling into darkness.

**11:15 A.M. MONDAY**

No one had the right to take the lives of innocent people.

Special Agent Grayson Hall always faced the challenges of his life with dogged determination. His experience with the Joint Terrorism Task Force meant his skills were needed, and he welcomed it. The bomb that exploded at IAH in a parking garage near terminal E had killed dozens and wounded countless more. The initial response team, Houston Police Department, fire department, EMTs, and FBI searched for the dead and wounded. The evidence response team labored to make the crime scene safe for investigators, conducting a postblast investigation to determine the components of what appeared to be a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device. Their findings, both electronic and physical, would lead out the investigation with the JTTF involved every step of the way. A team of FBI bomb technicians along with state and local law enforcement searched for a secondary bomb. Nothing had been found yet.

A command post had been quickly established at a hangar outside the airport on JFK Boulevard. A second post at the Houston FBI office housed the Joint Intelligence Center, and a third command post operated out of DC. Grayson worked from the FBI office, reviewing surveillance cameras. Hundreds of agents were on the case, and undoubtedly thousands would be involved before this tragedy was solved.

Those within two hundred yards of the blast were dead or would soon be. The pressure exploded their sinuses, ears, and lungs—a cruel way to die. Several victims were foreign travelers, those who believed the US was safe.

FBI agents and other Homeland Security personnel, as well as local law enforcement, were trained for disasters. But who wanted to experience it? After 9/11, every terrorist threat had the potential to be devastating, leaving too many US citizens emotional

cripples. History had proven an attack on US soil could happen again.

It looked like Homeland Security had failed, and that meant Grayson had failed too.

No chatter on the wires had indicated a potential bomb threat. The FBI's Field Intelligence Group, the FIG, scrambled for missed intel. The governor was en route to Houston via helicopter, and the White House was demanding an explanation before the president spoke to the country and the world. Grayson questioned how the country's leaders would soothe the chaos in this grave situation, especially with the death toll mounting. He mentally listed US enemies who claimed responsibility, and North Koreans and Iranians danced in the streets.

Grayson scrolled through screen after screen of heavily scrutinized security footage. The scene looked like a war zone merged with a cyclone. Agents searched for clues leading to a person or persons who might be responsible for the tragedy. He examined two segments that raised questions. Both photographs showed the guy knew where the cameras were located. Why? Unless he had something to hide. Grayson zoomed in and sent the image to the FIG.

His BlackBerry rang.

"What do you have?" Supervisory Special Agent Alan Preston, the SSA of FBI Houston, had phoned him every twenty minutes since the explosion.

"I've run info through the FIG. A couple ticketed for San Juan checked in about thirty minutes before the explosion using the names Francis Shepherd and Taryn Young. Shepherd left shortly afterward. We have Young entering a restroom, and a few moments later, Shepherd heads out and leaves in the same limo he arrived in."

"Alone?"

"Apparently. The bomb exploded five minutes after his exit."

"What do we have on them?"

“Shepherd’s name is fictitious. He avoided the cameras. Wore a cap. Little for facial recognition to compile. Young works for Gated Labs Technology, a software development company.” His BlackBerry notified him of a message. “Just got a response from the FIG on the couple.” Grayson blew out his exasperation. “Nothing on either of them. Continuing to search for Shepherd’s identification, but we don’t have a clear photo.”

“I want him found and brought in for questioning. It’s one thing for a man to change his mind about going away with a woman. It’s another to dodge security cameras and escape a bombing.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“Back to Young,” the SSA said. “Gated Labs is high-tech. Some top-secret government contracts. Any connect?”

“Young’s their top developer. Maybe the best in the country. Right now she’s in a coma at Houston Northwest Medical Center.”

“You and Vince get over there and find out what you can. At this point, it looks like Shepherd and Young are involved. Don’t lose track of her until we see where she fits. That’s your job.”





## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

DEAR READER,

The idea for *Firewall* has been with me since 2007. It started as a what-if: what if a couple on their honeymoon were separated, a bomb exploded, and like Taryn, the young woman learned her husband had been using an alias? The story would not leave me alone, and the more I thought about it, the more the plot grew.

My friends at Houston FBI are amazing. They helped me with protocol and arranged phone calls with those who serve in the bomb squad and terrorism units. For their support, I'll always be grateful.

A side note: strange dogs frighten me, especially German shepherds, and I wanted a heroine who was more courageous than I in that arena. Remember what Claire told Taryn about being approached by an unfriendly dog? Claire told the dog that Jesus loved him. I say the very same thing each time I encounter a strange, unfriendly dog.

I hope you enjoyed Taryn and Grayson's story. My goal is always to entertain readers and inspire them to attempt great things!

Be blessed.

*DiAnn*

Expect an Adventure

DiAnn Mills

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