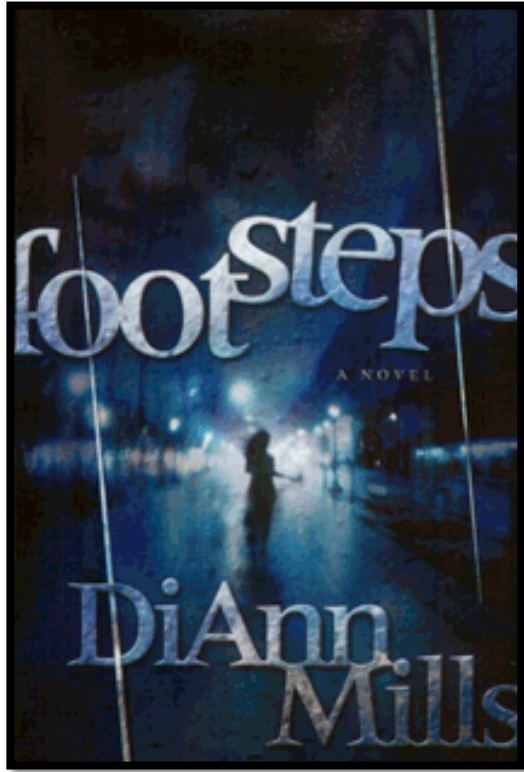




Footsteps

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Chapter 1

“Listen, kids. Stay right here while I get the car.” Standing under the shelter of the covered mall entrance, Debra fixed her gaze on one precious child then the other. All the while, a downpour hammered against the roof above them. “Chad, Lauren, don’t move. You know the rules. I’ll be right back.” She slipped tiny Lauren’s hand into Chad’s. “We did have a good day, didn’t we?”

Chad offered a thumb’s up, and Lauren smiled and nodded. Oh, how she treasured her children’s innocence--their clean smell and the taste of her lips on their peachy-soft cheeks.

Debra grabbed the many packages, evidence of their school shopping, and dashed out into the rain. She winced at the liquid needles bruising her flesh and soaking her clothes. Moments later, she started the engine of her SUV and eased backwards from her parking spot. Rain pelted the windshield, and although the wipers sliced through the cloudburst faster than she could blink, she still found it difficult to see. Pressing the air conditioner button, she anticipated the rush of cool air in the hot, humid temperatures of Houston summer.

With her fingers gripping the steering wheel, Debra rounded the corner of a department store. She could only imagine what Michael would say when he discovered the creamy-colored leather interior of his new SUV soaked from her wet clothing and in a few moments, their rain-kissed children.

She detested the driving rain no matter how badly the scorched August ground needed it. A flash of jagged light and a crack of thunder caused her to jump. "That was close," she said and realized she'd been holding her breath.

A few people darted about to retrieve their vehicles. Most of them had the sense to bring an umbrella today. But not Debra. She hadn't noted this morning's weather report in the hustle to get the kids to the mall.

She eased on the brake and stopped in front of the pavilion where she'd just left Chad and Lauren. They were nowhere in sight. Cursing under her breath, she yanked out the keys from the ignition and released the circular canopy at the same time she leaped out into the rain. Once the door slammed, she pressed the lock button on her alarm and raced toward the mall entrance, determined those two would definitely receive a sound scolding for disobeying her.

The wind played havoc with her umbrella; an unruly force whipped beneath it and flipped the fabric inside out. Again the rain drenched her. Frustrated, Debra considered all the things she planned to say to Chad and Lauren, and for certain they would not rent any video games on the way home.

Agitation coursed through her veins. After all she'd done for those two imps today, why couldn't they have stayed where she put them? The metal bench was empty. Chad knew better. An eight-year-old entering third grade in two days should realize the importance of following a few simple directions. What an example for Lauren who would be entering kindergarten. She looked up to him as the all-knowing, perfect big brother. That little girl had better be holding his hand when she found them.

Debra caught sight of herself in the glass entrance door. Her shoulder-length hair hung in ringlets, and no doubt her expensive make-up streaked down her cheeks. Embarrassment warmed her face, and irritation like smoke signals rose from the soles of her feet. Just wait till she found those two kids.

Stopping at the empty bench with water rolling down her arms and legs, Debra's gaze swept to a young black woman with a baby stroller standing nearby.

"Excuse me, but have you seen two children, a boy and a little girl? They were supposed to wait here for me while I got the car."

The woman shook her head. "No, ma'am."

A faint twinge of apprehension tugged at her heart, and the reply thickened in her throat. "Thank you. If you see them, would you ask them to stay put until I return?"

"No problem." The woman reached down to stroke the cheek of her ebony-skinned baby. "Hope you find them soon."

Glancing about, Debra stepped inside the mall. The closest store to the entrance happened to be Funville Video Arcade. She clenched her fists. That's where they are. They both have money left over from Mother Patterson's last visit. Earlier Chad had begged to check out the latest swords and demons games, but she wanted to get home--get dinner started for Michael.

Through the dim lighting with the sound of beeping, clanging, and sirens, she searched every game but couldn't find a trace of her children. Her fingernails pierced the skin of her palms. Where could they be?

Next to the video games stood a small earring and accessories' boutique. Standing at the entrance, she took in every square inch. Two teenage girls giggled over earrings, but no children were there.

Across the way, a candle shop boasted of every size and scent known to tantalize the senses. Debra swallowed the lump in her throat and moved toward the storefront. Chad and Lauren had helped her select pumpkin spice and apple votives earlier in the day. Those two are busy sniffing all those candles.

Debra explored every corner and display but emerged from the busy shop without her children. Again she scanned the area outside where she had left them. The empty bench seemed to mock her tortured emotions. More people mingled about as the rain poured unrelentingly. Concern had long replaced anger, and in its stead a gnawing fear curdled her stomach.

Standing in the middle of the mall's walkway, she turned a complete circle. "Chad, Lauren . . . Chad, Lauren." Nothing.

Hysteria began a rapid ascent. She clasped her arms about her, freezing. Why did malls have to turn their air conditioning so low?

"Ma'am," a woman said from a children's shoe store across from the candle shop. "Ma'am," the same woman called again.

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