

A race from  
danger straight  
into the arms  
of love.

UNDER  
A  
DESERT  
SKY

*Expect an Adventure*

DIANN MILLS

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DESERT  
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*Under a Desert Sky*

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*Under a Desert Sky* 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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*This story is dedicated to all those who know and love  
Ghost Ranch. The beauty and splendor of New Mexico's high desert  
must be experienced to appreciate it fully.*

## CHAPTER 1



October 1935

*P*oisonous snakes come in all shapes and sizes. The one towering above me stood over six feet tall and wore a gray, three-piece suit. He straddled the bullet-ridden body of my grandfather and blew out a contemptuous sigh before bending to reach inside my grandfather's suit coat for his wallet. The killer's right, black polished shoe touched my knee where I'd dropped to help Grandfather. The shoe was neatly tied, the knot and bow perfect. Blood coated the killer's hand, and he wiped it on the ground as though murder were part of everyday life.

Gasping, I waited. Terror locked my body onto the soft ground but, my heart raced. "Why?" I whispered.

"Does it matter?"

"Why did you kill my grandfather, and why am I next? I have a right to know." My voice sounded faint, distant, not at all fearless as Grandfather would have insisted.

He smirked. "It's just a job."

With the killer directly above me and the pistol barrel cold against my scalp, I could only try to control my trembling. I was going to die. I knew it. But the answers to why this was happening meant more than another breath.

The man stepped back and lifted the gun from my head. I sat still, waiting to see if he would explain why he'd chosen to kill. Whatever good his response would do me in the hereafter bewildered my wild thoughts, but I couldn't let the matter go. Grandfather resented my tenacious nature—My thoughts stopped midstream. Grandfather *had* resented.

"I don't kill women," the man said. "But others might not feel the same way. Get as far away from here as you can. Don't stop at the house and stay away from town and the law." His voice rose. "Don't stop for anything. Keep running."

Where should I go? My gaze swept to Grandfather's lifeless face. His clouded gray eyes seemed to stare into my soul as though accusing me of his demise. He'd been a hard man, but I'd never wanted him dead. If now was a time of truth, we'd both disapproved of traits in the other.

"Did you hear me, Eva? Get yourself away from him."

The killer knew my name? Urgency from the man yanked at my senses. Acid rose in my throat, but I forced it back down. Reality was settling in, but I couldn't allow it. Not yet. The man was sparing my life, and I needed to act.

"Bennington's dead, and you're going to be if you don't get out of here."

I focused on the man holding the gun, the man who had shot Grandfather three times in the chest. A high-crowned gray fedora pulled down over his brow hid his eyes and much of his face. I realized I wouldn't be able to give a description of him.

He grabbed my arm and jerked me to my feet while my wobbly legs barely held me upright. His grip tightened, and he pulled me so close that I could smell his cigar-laden breath

mixed with Old Spice aftershave. What kind of miserable creature took the time to shave before committing murder?

"If they come, I'll have to shoot you. Do you understand?" I nodded. "Yes." My teeth chattered.

"Get your gumption, girl. Don't go near the house."

He shook me loose, and I took flight like a startled doe. I ran north toward the thick woods, away from the once soothing sounds of nature and the peacefulness of the grass-trodden path that wound from the rippling creek, and away from the summer quarters of Grandfather's stone mansion.

"I can stall them for one hour."

His words forced blood into my legs. Who were they, and why did they want Grandfather and me dead? I'd heard the rumors about my grandfather being threatened for foreclosing on mortgages. The bullets pumped into his frail body gave credence to the gossip.

He'd said not to go near the house. But Victoria was there. Surely my dear friend had heard the shots. She'd be worried, pacing the floor and talking under her breath.

I raced into the cool dampness of the trees, thrashing about like a half-crazed animal, and grabbed an oak sapling. My breath came in heaves, and my legs threatened to give way.

Thoughts screamed inside my head. Shaking aside the grotesque picture of Grandfather's death mask, I settled my attention on getting away from the man and whoever was with him. That's when I made a decision. Victoria, Mrs. Jessop, and Mr. Stiles could be in danger. I had to warn them despite the killer's demands. Together, Victoria and I could figure out what to do . . . where to go.

I skirted the woods and crept up behind the house to the servant's entrance, shadowed beneath the lilac tree. I raced the several yards toward the door and shoved aside the thought of the killer nearing the house too. With a twist of my wrist, the



door opened, startling Mrs. Jessop, who had already started to fill the kitchen with the aroma of fresh rye bread. Normally the smell would have quickened my stomach, but not this morning. Not with the scent of death filling my nostrils.

Mr. Stiles sipped a cup of tea.

“You two have to leave the house.” I stared into Mrs. Jessop’s round face. “Grandfather has been murdered, and the killer might be on his way here.”

She gasped. “What? We can’t leave you and Miss Victoria here.”

“Now. I—I demand both of you leave the house immediately. Please drive to the police station and tell them what has happened. Victoria and I are right behind you.”

I hurried to the library where Victoria, my faithful nanny, spent hours reading and rereading books of every topic.

“Victoria.” My frantic voice alarmed me even more.

She appeared in the doorway. Her back stiffened and she frowned, no doubt displeased with my abrupt entrance. Completely unladylike, according to her list of proprieties.

“Did you hear the shots? Grandfather has been murdered.” I caught my breath and observed the emotions on her face swinging from shock to grief.

“What do you mean?”

“I was with him at the creek, and a man appeared. He shot him in the chest.”

Victoria grabbed me and held me close—one of the few times I could remember her displaying affection. “How did you escape?”

I shook my head, baffled by what I’d experienced. “I don’t know. He held the gun to my head and then simply changed his mind.” I pulled myself back from her comforting arms. “He told me to run. Not to come here. Not to go to town. Not to talk to anyone because ‘they’ would be coming.”

"I feared this," Victoria whispered. "Your grandfather made too many enemies in foreclosing on people's homes."

"Yes ma'am. But we need to get away now. He gave me one hour, and you could be in danger too."

Victoria shook her head and tugged on my hand. She led me from the two-story library and into the massive front hall and up the staircase where the oaken walls had heard hundreds of conversations. "Nonsense. You were the one threatened. We must get you to the train station." She turned to me on the first step and lifted a brow. "Let's quickly put together a bag. I think —" She fanned her pale face. "I think sending you to Chicago to your mother's second cousin may be best. I'll make the arrangements while we wait for the train." We hurried up the stairs, the heels of our shoes clicking in rapid succession on the marble steps.

"Yes ma'am. Is it stealing to take a little money from Grandfather's safe? I know the code."

"No, my dear. Not at all. Give me the code to his safe, and I'll pull money from there to help you on your journey."

I swallowed hard and nearly choked. "I was so afraid."

"What did he look like?"

"I couldn't tell what the man looked like. He wore his hat too far down on his head. But he had dark brown hair. I've already spoken to Mrs. Jessop and Mr. Stiles. They're driving to the police station."

"Oh, yes, let them handle this nasty business. You're what's important, my precious girl. I must see that you are tucked away safely until the killer is found."

In all my twenty-three years, I'd never seen Victoria so shaken. But then, I was too young to remember her response to my parents' deaths. The dear woman was all I had, and I was all she had. We'd never been separated except while I attended the

university. Even then, I came home often. At the top of the first landing, I squeezed her hand.

“Dear Victoria, we shall weather this and be stronger for it.” Victoria offered me a feeble smile. “We must believe that.”

Within fifteen minutes, Victoria and I were in the Ford and driving to the New York Central train station at an outrageous speed even for Victoria, who had a habit of driving beyond safety rules. I should have cautioned against her recklessness, but words failed me. A rarity.

A thought occurred.

“Once I purchase my train ticket, I must call Mr. Murdock.”

“Oh, no.” Her distress alarmed me. “Please don’t. He could be in on this—this tragedy.”

I offered her my best reassurance. “Next to you, I trust Mr. Murdock.” If Grandfather believed anything of worth about me, it was my ability to judge character.

“Promise me you won’t.” Her voice rose to a shrill tone, and I assumed the poor woman was nearing shock. And at fifty miles per hour, that was not wise.

“All right,” I said. But I believed differently. The Fortier attorney had always managed my best interests, and I had no reason to distrust him.

A chill settled on me, and I wished I’d remembered my coat. Everything was happening so fast. The late October temperatures were falling. Or perhaps it was the icy fear wrapping its garment around me.

At the train station on Erie Boulevard East, Victoria insisted upon arranging for the ticket and promised to contact my cousin. I waited inside the depot. With a myriad of thoughts bombarding my senses, I hurried into the clerk’s office to use the telephone in privacy. The young man must have seen my distress because he didn’t argue with my request. Within

seconds, I was speaking to the kindly Mr. Murdock. Quickly I explained what had happened.

“Do not board that train. Do not listen to Victoria.” His lack of decorum surprised me. “Eva, I know the safest place for you to be, and it’s not Chicago.” I glanced up and saw Victoria in the doorway. The lines above her brow narrowed, and I could feel the sparks emitting from her eyes.

“Who are you talking to?” She lifted her chin.

“Mr. Murdock.” I turned my back to her, knowing how she felt about the man.

“I will be there within the half hour,” Mr. Murdock said. “Promise me you’ll remain in the clerk’s office until I arrive.”

The second promise someone wanted me to make. “Yes, sir. I’ll wait for you.”

The moment I looked at Victoria, she burst into tears. How could one person change her mood so quickly?

“He’s coming?”

“Yes ma’am.” I sat in the clerk’s chair behind his desk. He probably wouldn’t be happy with me for taking up his small, messy office until Mr. Murdock arrived. But I’d spent the last forty-five minutes attempting to please a killer, my beloved Victoria, and my attorney. And the clerk could call his employer for all I cared.

True to his word, Mr. Murdock made his entrance in twenty-four minutes. I rose from the chair and rushed into his arms. I wanted to sob until nothing was left, but I couldn’t. Did I not care one iota for Grandfather? What was wrong with me?

Mr. Murdock gently pried the train ticket from my hand. “I’ve made travel arrangements for you.”

“I’ve already purchased her fare.” Victoria’s voice held the familiar disdain in which she held for Mr. Murdock.

“Return it.”

I stepped back from him. “Where are you sending me?”

“New Mexico.”

“Why New Mexico?” Victoria said. “Nothing but rattlesnakes and desolation exists there. Not at all a suitable place for a refined young woman.”

I had to agree. And I’d already experienced one snake today.

“The perfect place,” he said. “The train leaves at dusk, and Eva will be in my company until then.”

Did he not know I was there? “What awaits me in New Mexico?” I studied first his face and then Victoria’s.

“I’ll explain while we wait for the train.” He turned his attention to Victoria. “I’ll take over from here. The police have been notified and will need you for questioning. I’ve also made arrangements for Mr. Bennington.”

*Grandfather.* In my haste for my own protection, I’d neglected to ponder what his death meant to all of us. How horrible that I wouldn’t be here for the funeral.

“Are you dismissing me?” Victoria glared at him.

“Yes, I am.” Mr. Murdock took my arm and led me from the clerk’s office where two policemen immediately stood at our side.

I whirled around for my parting glance of Victoria. “I’ll be fine,”

I said. “Don’t worry about me.”

“Write me.” Tears pooled the woman’s eyes.

“I will. I promise.” That was a promise I intended to keep.

## CHAPTER 2



The countryside sped past me, too fast and still not fast enough. While I observed the brittle yet colorful remains of summer, I relived every moment of Grandfather's murder. At first the events leading up to his death disappeared, as though someone or something had swept them from my mind. Then as I forced myself to concentrate, bits of conversation and happenings slowly emerged.

Our daily morning walk had been delayed due to a chilling rain, which led me to believe that the killer knew our habits and had been waiting for us to leave the house.

"Come along, girl," Grandfather had said. "Life goes on. A little rain opens the mind, cleanses the thoughts."

Umbrella in hand, he sheltered me down the narrow path that wound around a wide hill, under two black walnut trees, and down to the fall garden where the rich hues of gold and orange mums hung their heads in the crisp shower. My galoshes sloshed in the softened earth in time with Grandfather's heavy steps. During the middle of his lecture about how FDR needed

to rethink some of his strategy for helping the country recover from economic despair, the killer stepped into our path.

Startled, I could only stare through the sheet of rain. The man asked Grandfather if he was Richard Bennington.

“I am. What do you want?”

The killer didn't reply. Instead, he pulled a gun from inside his coat and fired three times. Grandfather jumped, as though startled, and fell onto his back. I shuddered in memory of the blood . . . The bullets had released a river of life that mixed with the rain and sank into the earth. I wanted to scream, but my dry throat refused any resemblance of sound. Grandfather must have died instantly because not a whimper came from him either. No final words of wisdom or love. I tore off my coat and attempted to wipe the blood from him. That's when the killer interrupted my pitiful nursing.

I closed my eyes and listened to the lull of the train and hoped its rhythmic sound would put me to sleep. Soon we'd be in Chicago, where I'd change trains to the Santa Fe and travel on to Albuquerque. Ah, to forget the last few days and then waken to realize this all had been a wretched nightmare.

The train pushed down the track while I attempted to shove aside the tragic scene. I forced myself to focus on anything about the killer that would help the police identify him. He'd been much too clever for me, and I confessed my recollections were useless. The whys rumbled through my mind like the train speeding over the rails, and the hours confined to my car provided my imaginative thoughts time to play out one scenario after another with no believable conclusions.

In the past, I'd lived my adventures vicariously through books and the stories I'd heard from others. I admitted to naïveté, but I longed for so much more. Especially now when the identity of Grandfather's killer rested on my ability to recall something identifiable about him. Grandfather had insisted on

my learning responsibility, and I'd failed him one more time. Weren't the police trained for this sort of thing? But they hadn't been in the killer's presence and heard his voice. Again, *why* rang through my mind like the clanging of a shrill bell.

Could the killer have been angry because Grandfather had foreclosed on his property? Hmm . . . From the way he didn't appear personally involved, I thought the man was a hired killer, which made it all so much more frightening.

The truth be known, my responsibility now rested in hiding until Mr. Murdock deemed it safe for me to return home. He'd made arrangements in New Mexico. All I needed to do was ride this train to Albuquerque and wait for instructions. *New Mexico*. I'd never been there, but I knew it was hot, dry, and desolate. As uninviting as that sounded, I vowed to make the best of it. Above all, a woman with Bennington and Fortier blood flowing through her veins was resilient and courageous, which is what my father wrote to me on the day I was born. Perhaps he'd held a crystal ball to see my future possessed more dire circumstances than fortunate ones.

This day had started like so many before it—orderly, ordinary. And yet I'd witnessed a murder and a miracle. My life had been spared from a killer's bullet. Grandfather, with all his gruffness and lack of feeling, always stated that a person was in charge of his own destiny. If so, then I had to become strong, because I was heading into the unknown with a killer on my heels.

\* \* \*

I RODE the Santa Fe Railroad on to Albuquerque, surprising myself that I could actually sleep in the comfort of my Pullman suite. Succumbing to the lure of rest eased my mind from the tremendous burden weighing on my shoulders. The train rolled



to a screeching halt, hissing and billowing smoke on Silver Avenue. I left the security of my suite, afraid of the future but more afraid of the past. I took the porter's hand and stepped down from the train. My anxious gaze swept the long area, peering about for someone who might be waiting for me. A sign would have been nice, but if the killer had gotten there ahead of me, I'd have made a perfect target.

Strange how my thoughts focused on self-preservation.

When no one approached me, I carried my suitcase to a bench and sat down. The view allowed me to scrutinize those still disembarking from the train and those standing around the station. Everyone appeared to be preoccupied with their own business.

An old man wrapped his arm around a white-haired woman and together they waved to a young man fast approaching them. When he shouted, "Grandpa. Grandma," I nearly broke down into an emotional display that would have embarrassed Grandfather.

A woman embraced a man who clutched a satchel.

A child cried.

A whistle blew. The slow *clunk clunk* of the train captured my attention, for it sounded like an axe splitting wood.

But no one seemed to be looking for me. Granted, I was a bit wrinkled, but so was everyone else. A shiver of alarm rippled up my spine, and I stiffened to ward off the misgivings—and incredible angst.

I despised my ignorance of the world and my dire situation when I wanted to be independent. Drawing a deep breath like I'd seen Victoria do when she obviously needed to take a stand, I wrapped my fingers around my suitcase handle and walked into the train station to contact Mr. Murdock.

Inside the station, I found a uniformed man, who wore a

heavy mustache that looped over his lips. I smiled and requested the use of the telephone.

"Where to, miss?" He smiled back at me, and for a moment I forgot that I was alone in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with a killer on my heels.

"Syracuse, New York. I know the number."

He tugged on his right ear. "That's quite a ways. Do you have money for the call?"

"Yes sir." I wanted to break down and tell him my whole plight, but I'd been brought up not to tell others about hardships. Instead I pulled a few dollars from my bag and wrote down Mr. Murdock's telephone number.

He eyed me kindly and cranked up the telephone. Once he reached the operator, he handed me the receiver. Perhaps his congeniality came from the fact I'd paid him handsomely.

I waited for the call to go through, and the sound of a familiar voice warmed me. "Mrs. Wellsby, this is Eva Fortier. May I speak to Mr. Murdock?"

"Oh, my dear, he's attending your grandfather's funeral."

I hadn't considered the funeral. My selfishness and concern for myself grieved my heart. I should have been there. "I look forward to hearing about the services. When do you expect him to return?"

"I have no idea. He mentioned having a meeting with Miss Victoria afterward."

I was glad I wouldn't be privy to that conversation. However, I was curious. "When he returns, would you have him call me at this number?" I spoke distinctly into the phone with the railroad station's number.

"Isn't someone there to greet you?"

"No ma'am."

"Mr. Murdock made the arrangements. You're to be picked up and taken to Ghost Ranch."

Ghost Ranch? I nearly dropped the telephone. “Where?”

“It’s a ranch about one hundred thirty miles north of where you are. You’ll be safe there. He wanted you in Albuquerque instead of Santa Fe to give him time to reach those who will be taking care of you. I’m sure you’ll be met soon. Just relax. In the meantime, I’ll do my best to contact Mr. Murdock.”

The words “Ghost Ranch” echoed in my ears. I wanted to take an eraser and obliterate the implication of what they could mean. Was Mr. Murdock one of *them*? Why else would he send me, without Victoria, to a remote part of the country?

I must be wrong. He had to be protecting me from the killer. I stiffened my resolve to grow strong and unafraid, if for no other reason than to honor Grandfather’s memory.

## CHAPTER 3



Tahoma massaged his throbbing neck muscles and rubbed his fingers over the sand and sweat clinging to his flesh. Too little sleep and too many patients had left him surly . . . anxious about many things. His last shipment of medicine hadn't arrived in Santa Fe, and his patients needed relief. They called him a medicine man. He didn't care what title they bestowed upon him as long as they brought their sick and hurting. For three years he'd worked to convince those in his community—all relatives—to accept the white man's medicine. He'd chosen to weave his medical knowledge with his people's culture.

He stood outside his flat-roofed dwelling that served as a clinic and watched Yanaba walk toward her home, his heart heavy for what he couldn't bring himself to tell her. Yanaba's baby didn't have a heartbeat. She'd birthed three stillborn children in the last three years, and the thought of one more death to the childless couple scraped his insides raw. During Yanaba's pregnancy, her mother had used many ceremonies to ensure her daughter achieved balance and harmony for a healthy birth. The

young woman's name meant *brave*, and she'd need all the strength she could muster very soon. If only he could do more, and he prayed he was wrong.

Some of the people blamed him when Yanaba's children were stillborn. They said his years of medical school among the whites had brought evil into her life, and their lives too. None of them seemed to remember she'd have bled to death if he hadn't been there.

And now he had a message to deliver to his father from James Murdock in Syracuse, New York. Years had passed since the lawyer had contacted them, since Andrew Fortier had died. Before that, it was news of Penelope Fortier's passing. Curiosity lured Tahoma to read the message enclosed in the sealed envelope, but respect for his father stopped him. The phone call had been relayed to his father's trusted friend in Santa Fe with an important message for Nascha Benally, Tahoma's father.

He approached his father's hogan, where the older man sat outside in the sun. Having his mother nearby would have helped console his father if the news was bad. But Tahoma didn't see her, so the responsibility was left for him to help soothe any misfortune.

They'd been fortunate that the October days had warmed in the afternoons, and Tahoma was glad his father had chosen to soak up the last reminders of pleasant temperatures, easing his bones and allowing him reprieve from the cold nights. He paused to reflect on his father's failing health. His heart beat far too fast—and was wearing out far too soon.

"I have a message for you from James Murdock. It was left two days ago."

Weary eyes met his gaze. "It's been a long time since I've heard from him." He breathed in deeply as though remembering their last correspondence. "I hope nothing has happened to Andrew's daughter."

Tahoma nodded. Father's vow to Andrew Fortier had never been tested. At times that promise seemed to be the only reason his father clung to life. But if the Fortier family had ceased to exist, then Father's days were short. "Mother is not here?"

"Not until sunset."

Tahoma didn't ask where she'd gone. The crucial matter at hand lay in the contents of the telephone message. He handed the missive to his father. For a moment, Tahoma caught a glimpse of the back of the older man's veined hand and parchment-thin flesh. He studied his father's face, not expecting one line to shift or muscle to twitch that would indicate the message's contents. Nascha Bennally remained true to his Diné heritage. He'd never lower himself to be called a Navajo, as the white man called them. Tahoma waited as the moments ticked by slowly. He envied his father's stoic resolve, although it irritated him.

Once his father finished reading, he carefully folded the paper before capturing Tahoma's gaze. "My time has come."

"Why is that, Father?"

"Richard Bennington is dead . . . murdered. Eva Fortier has been sent to Ghost Ranch until the killer is found."

"Mr. Murdock must believe she is in danger too."

"He has no idea who is behind the murder, but he cannot risk her life. She is sole heir to both family fortunes. Motive for a greedy man."

*A spoiled, rich, white girl.* "Your health is at risk."

His father smiled. "I am the wind. I go where the spirit leads me, and my heart will carry me through to the end."

Frustration rushed through Tahoma's veins. "We both have much to be grateful for, but Mr. Fortier would not want you to give your life for a vow." He knew the moment the words left his mouth that they were wrong. He'd spoken selfishly to lengthen his father's life. "I'm sorry. You gave your word."

Father rose slowly to his feet and gestured around them, toward the rocks and sandy dirt beneath their feet and the high desert mountains around them. “You have a purpose here to heal the bodies of our people, *the people*. Nothing stops you. I will protect Eva Fortier for as long as I’m needed.”

“What about the sheep?”

“I’ll find someone to tend to them.”

“Mother and I need you.”

“Without Andrew Fortier, your mother would have raised you alone.”

The matter was settled, and Tahoma had realized the outcome from the moment his father revealed the contents of the message. But he had to try. “I owe the man much too.” No matter that Andrew Fortier was white, and Tahoma detested what the leaders of the country had done to his people. “I’ll help you.”

“No. This is my destiny. Your days and nights are stolen by the cries of the sick.”

“But—”

Father raised his hand. “Do not stand in the way of what I must do.” He paused, and Tahoma knew he was remembering the friendship of a man he could not forget. “I will speak with Charlotte before sunset. She already knows of this. My son, I need your promise about this matter.”

Tahoma nodded while his heart shouted otherwise.

“If something happens to me, you will complete the vow. You know our way of life—the songs, dances, prayers—all the ceremonies.” Tahoma had no choice.

“The young woman knows nothing about her father’s and my relationship.”

“Why?”

“Andrew died when she was young, and her grandfather did

not want her to know. Perhaps he feared she might be generous with our people as Andrew demonstrated.”

Tahoma gritted his teeth. He could only imagine the temperament of a young woman who'd never gone hungry or wanted for anything.

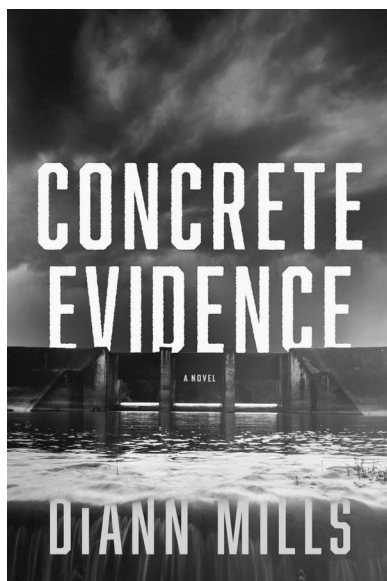


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*CONCRETE EVIDENCE*

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# CONCRETE EVIDENCE BY DIANN MILLS

## CHAPTER 1 EXCERPT

### **Texas Hill Country**

**EVERY ELLIOTT SPURRED HER HORSE** across one of the thirty- five thousand rolling acres of the Brazos River Ranch in the blazing heat. The sultry August wind blew through her hair, bathing her damp face and shoving aside her pensive mood. Granddad had told her once that if he could lasso the wind, he'd ride that bronc to eternity. She'd framed the saying and placed it in the reception area of their office.

Granddad had left at dawn to ride fence and enjoy some solitude and think time. His work habits overruled his stomach, which meant he wouldn't stop to eat until he'd inspected a recently repaired stretch. Then the Internet had gone down ending her morning's work. A good excuse for her to get away from the office and spend special time with him.

She lightly grasped the reins of the most wonderful quarter horse on the planet and the perfect cure-all for the morning's frustration. Closing her eyes, Avery allowed Darcy's rhythmic gallop to soothe her.

Avery slowed the mare to a walk and twisted her phone from her jeans pocket. Pressing on Granddad's name in Favorites, she breathed in the sweltering heat and envisioned him fumbling for his phone.

"Mornin', sweet girl."

"Can I treat you to a five- star restaurant for lunch?"

He chuckled. "You'll have to fly in the prime rib."

"I've packed us a picnic, and I'm on my way to meet you. Just say where."

"Drivin' or ridin'?"

"You've hurt Darcy's feelings."

"Give her my apologies. I'm west of the river about a mile from the family cemetery. Should be a nice breeze there this morning. We could talk and have lunch with your grandma."

"Good. I'd planned to stop at her grave while I was out." The oaks bordering the family plots would offer relief from the hundred-degree temps. With the abundance of summer rain, the area brimmed with green and vibrant wildflowers. "I'll make sure she has flowers on her grave."

"Not a day goes by that I don't think about her. Guess I'm a sentimental old man who never got over his first love."

Someday Avery wanted the same kind of love. She remembered the woman with warm brown eyes and a loving touch who fell prey to a stroke nearly fifteen years ago and never recovered. "You're not a sentimental old man but one who misses his wife and best friend."

"I see her in you." He sighed. "You have a spirit of strength deep in your heart. Others think you're quiet—until you're riled. Then you'd give the devil a run for his money."

"I hope I can always live up to that strength."

"You already have. One day you'll make the right man proud."

“Haven’t found him yet.”

“Time’s just not right. So when will you get here?”

Avery studied the familiar landmarks—thoroughbred horses grazing to the south and cattle taking advantage of the Brazos River. Why anyone would choose to live away from nature’s beauty made little sense to her. “About thirty minutes.”

“You didn’t bring tofu and carrot sticks? Mia’s new diet is killing me. The doctor doesn’t need to worry about my cholesterol or weight because she’s starving me.”

Avery laughed. “No. I packed ham and cheese, jalapeño-bacon potato salad, fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, and apple pie. You can eat light this evening.”

“I have a political dinner at six o’clock and a deacon meeting at seven thirty. Hey, how did you get the forbidden food past Mia?”

“She was upstairs while I hurried in the kitchen.” Their housekeeper and cook had entered the back side of her sixties and refused to slow down, but Granddad and Avery kept trying. Both knew better than to tell Mia to cut back on her pace unless they were looking to be chased down the road with buckshot in their rears. Granddad had no room to talk. He faced the big seven-oh in October, and he’d made no plans to ease back.

She slipped the phone back into her jeans pocket and hurried Darcy on. Avery wanted to arrive at the picnic site well before Granddad and have lunch set out for him.

Her thoughts crept back to the accounting issue from this morning. A work problem had made another moment at the ranch office torture, and getting away from the computer served as the perfect antidote. In examining Elliott Commercial Construction’s records before the auditors arrived next week, she’d found a discrepancy. A paid bill for materials was much lower than it should have been. Why hadn’t she seen this weeks

ago at the completion of the Lago de Cobre Dam? The original bid for the project included the cost to supply additional rock and expand the footprint, footers, and other foundational elements to compensate for the soft ground. Those materials were ordered, canceled, and still the specs showed the work had been completed per the contract.

She'd contacted the material's supply company, and the accounting manager confirmed they'd invoiced what they supplied. Yet Avery's files didn't reflect a different supplier for the required foundation, as though Granddad had substituted inferior materials or hadn't followed the specs. He'd never sacrifice safety. Even the idea scraped raw against her conscience.

A call had gone to Craig, the foreman, but only voice mail greeted her. The accounting mess would drive her nuts until she resolved it, but she'd have to wait. Granddad would laugh at her fears about the dam's potentially faulty construction and explain the discrepancy. Accurate details ruled her thoughts, and perfectionism had a way of eating at her logic. A lot of good her Ivy League education accomplished when the numbers didn't add up.

Granddad said Avery shared his insight and discernment. The ability took practice, prayer, and purpose—his favorite three *p*'s as though he'd outlined a sermon. But Granddad was wrong. She must have made a mistake, and the error warred within her.

Avery rode the path to the family cemetery. Elliotts had owned this property and been buried there before Texas became a state. Irish, English, and Scottish heritage—hard workers and fighters for faith, family, and freedom. Which had a lot to do with Granddad's name, Dad's, and hers—Avery Quinn Elliott, respectively Senior, Junior, and whatever that made her. Fortunately, Granddad went by Quinn or Senator,

Dad went by Buddy, and she was simply Avery. Proud family and heritage, although Dad and Mom slipped in applying all three traits of being an Elliott.

Not going there today. After spending time with Granddad and finding out the source of her accounting problem, she—A shot rang out from the direction of the cemetery.

She dug her heels into Darcy's side and bolted ahead. Had Granddad met up with a wild pig, a rattler, or even a two-legged varmint? The latter caused her to slow the mare and circle a grove of trees. If she needed her Sig, the firearm rested in a saddlebag beside the packed lunch. Granddad wasn't in sight. Only his stallion.

She dismounted and grabbed her gun. Tying Darcy to a slender oak, Avery moved closer to the iron gate of the cemetery entrance and prayed he hadn't been hurt. How had he been a mile west of here when she called him?

Hesitant to call out for him and draw the shooter's attention to her, she hid behind an oak. A riderless motorcycle—a shiny, blue Yamaha Tracer 9 GT—had parked in the shadow of more trees outside the far edge of the iron fence, a few yards from a worn path leading to the main road.

On the opposite side of the cemetery, Granddad bent over a man, whose blood stained his chest and pooled on the ground. He felt for a pulse and lifted his head to the cloudless sky. In Granddad's gloved right hand rested a gun. He shoved the weapon into his front belt and lifted his phone to his ear.

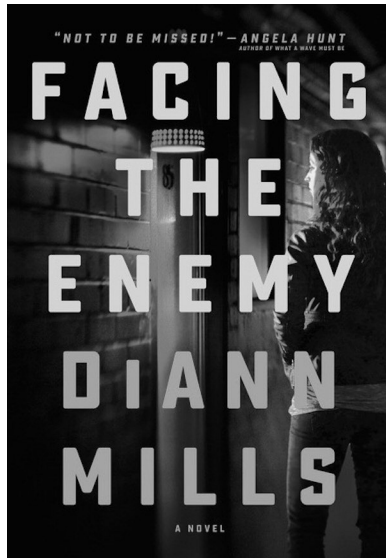
"He's dead. This has to end." Granddad scanned the area, no doubt searching for someone. "I want Avery kept out of this, but I'm expecting her in the next twenty minutes." He kicked the dirt with the toe of his boot. "He parked on the road and walked back. She isn't to know about any of it. I'll handle the situation on my end. . . . Yes, I'll be careful and not let the authorities



know what happened. Look, I need to move his body out of sight. He was a friend, one of the best. I despise where this has gone.” Granddad waved his hand. “I told you Avery won’t be a problem.”

\* \* \*

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*FACING THE ENEMY*

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FACING THE ENEMY BY DIANN  
MILLS

CHAPTER 1 EXCERPT

**Houston, Texas**

**July 29**

**Risa**

**TWELVE YEARS AGO, MY YOUNGER BROTHER** fell into an abyss of drugs and alcohol. He chose his addictions over Mom and Dad—and me. Prayers for healing fell flat, but none of us gave up, proving our belief in unconditional love. Then yesterday he called, and my hopes skyrocketed. Trenton said he missed me and wanted to make amends with his family, beginning with his older sis. We chose to meet at a popular restaurant for a late dinner within walking distance of my apartment.

A knock on my cubicle jolted me back to reality. Gage, my work partner, towered in the entryway and grinned. “Hey, what’s going on?”

The sound of his voice caused me to tingle to my toes. “Thinking.”

“Obviously, you were a million miles away.” His blue-gray eyes bore into mine, the intensity nearly distracting me.

I leaned back in my comfy, ergonomic chair. “My brother called.”

“Trenton? The guy you haven’t seen in years?”

“The same.”

“And?”

“He wants to meet tonight for dinner, to talk about making amends.”

Gage shook his head. “Risa, he has a record a mile long. He’s planning on manipulating you, squeezing every penny he can get.”

I picked up an old photo of Trenton and me as kids. Dad had snapped it while we were in our tree house. I swiped at a piece of dust, then replaced it beside my photo of Mom and Dad. “I must give him a chance. He’s my brother.”

“What if he’s gotten himself in over his head and needs his FBI agent sis to bail him out?”

I bit into my lower lip. Gage’s words had a level of truth, even if I didn’t want to admit it. “I want to hear him out.”

Gage stepped closer. “I don’t want to see you hurt. Remember three years ago when he called you from a bar demanding money, cursed you until you hung up?” The soft gentleness in his whispered tone said more than friend to friend. “Think about canceling the dinner or let me go with you.”

Emotion rose thick in my throat. “You mean well, and I—” Catching myself, I nearly said *love*. “I appreciate your concern. But I’ll be fine. Want me to call you afterward?”

He nodded. “I can run by if you need to talk.”

I peered into the face of the man I adored. “I will. Promise.”

\* \* \*

I arrived early at the restaurant to meet Trenton, anticipating his contagious smile perfected by an overpaid orthodontist. The phone attempted to keep my attention, but my mind swirled with how I wanted tonight to move forward against the reality of what had happened in the past.

The host approached me. Trenton walked behind him, towering several inches above the short man. I held my breath and stood, not feeling my legs, only my pulse speeding at the sight of my brother.

Trenton chuckled low, the familiar, dazzling, heart-crunching expression that had always touched me with sibling love. Clear brown eyes captured mine. Gone were the dilated pupils and bone-thin body. My brother held out his buff arms, and I rushed into them.

“Risa, you look amazing,” he whispered. “Thanks for seeing me on such short notice.”

“Nothing could have kept me away.” I stepped back, noting the miracle before me. Telling Mom and Dad wasn’t a part of tonight’s plan, but I wished they were here. We’d all be blubbering. I swiped at a tear and feared a humiliating sob would replace my already-fragile composure. “I want to remember this moment forever.” *Please stay strong this time.*

“Me too, Sis.” He gestured to the booth. “Sit, and let’s talk and eat.”

I slid in and he took the opposite side of the table. A server presented us with menus and asked for our drink order.

“We’ll have two Dr Peppers,” Trenton said.

He remembered my favorite drink. No mention of alcohol. I breathed in deeply to steady myself. I wanted our reunion to be special, not me a weeping mess. “I’ve missed you.”

Trenton cocked his head, and the mischievous brother from days gone by appeared. “I’ve been clean for four months.

Working steady and enrolled in night school for the next college term.” He took my hands, and his features grew serious. “But before I say another word, I’m sorry. I promise you, I’ll never hurt you, Mom, or Dad again. Please forgive me for the mess I made of my life and dragging my family through the stench of it.”

I’d heard this before, from his teen years into his twenties. Dare I believe our prayers had been answered? “I forgave you years ago. All we ever wanted for you is a healthy body and mind.”

“Thanks, Sis. I know you’ve heard this ‘I’m sorry’ junk before, but I’m well on my way.”

His words warmed me like a quilt on a chilly night. “I can see it, feel it. Why tell me first instead of Mom and Dad?”

“Great times with you growing up that never left me.”

Memories rushed over me . . . The time we went camping by ourselves and it snowed. Birthdays. Christmases. All the treasured times I believed had vanished into the chasm of addiction.

The server returned with our drinks, and Trenton released my hands.

“Have you decided on your order?” the server said.

Neither of us had picked up our menus, but I often frequented the restaurant and ordered a vegan dish. Trenton opted for their pork chop and fixings.

“And I’ll take the bill.” He pointed at me. “No arguments.”

“My treat when we have dinner again.”

“Got it.”

“You were about to tell me something about us.”

He rubbed his palms on the thighs of his jeans. “Two things stand out. The first one happened when I was four, so that made you ten. You were watching me trying to climb an oak tree in the back yard. I was crying because my short legs couldn’t

swing high enough. Then I felt your hand on my shoulder. You boosted me up onto the branch. Climbed up with me. No long after that, Dad built us a tree house.”

“I loved that tree house. You had your space and I had mine.”

“What I’ll always remember is what you said to me. “Trenton, I’m your big sis. I’ll always help you. I promise.””

I blinked back the ocean of hopeful tears. “Thanks. I remember our times in the tree house, our private little world.”

“One more reason I contacted you. I was six and you were twelve. For three summers, Mom and Dad put me in swimming lessons, but I couldn’t put my head underwater. Not sure why. You convinced Mom and Dad that you could teach me how to swim. So every day we went to the neighborhood pool, and at the end of two weeks, I was swimming. I trusted you.”

I took a deep breath. *Be aware of manipulation, Risa.* “Thanks.” I raised a finger. “I remember being a high school junior and this jerk of a guy followed me home. Wouldn’t leave me alone. You punched him in the nose.”

Trenton laughed. “My voice hadn’t changed yet, but I wasn’t going to let him bother you.”

“That’s love, Brother.” *Oh, Trenton, let this be for keeps. I’m afraid to believe the nightmare is over.*

“And we’ll make many more crazy times together. Do you have plans for Saturday morning? I volunteer at a community center for kids at risk. We have a mixed basketball team, and I could use some help with the girls.”

I shivered. What a blessing to have my brother back. “All I need is a time and place.”

“You never fail me, Sis.” He took a long drink of his Dr Pepper. “Are you writing?”

I grinned. “Dabbling here and there.”

“I never understood why you left a safe job as a college prof



and writer to the dangers of the FBI?” He shrugged. “Other than your wild side that you kept more in check than I did.”

“Teaching and writing short stories with a few successful publications failed to fill my adventure deficit. Every time I read about a crime, I wanted to be the one working the case. Dad said I couldn’t create a crime and solve it—I had to be actively involved.”

“Your personality better fits law enforcement. Still married to the FBI?”

I wiggled my shoulders. “Of course. Five years ago, I moved to the Violent Crime Division, specifically Crimes Against Children. It’s stressful and emotional, but protecting children suits me.”

He frowned. “Because of me?”

I blinked. “A little. My main reason is what happened to the little girl who lived across the street from us.”

“Right.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry her death still bothers you. Isn’t there a special team for finding missing kids?”

“Child Abduction Rapid Deployment or CARD. They’re an elite, specialized team, and that’s all they do. That’s not my role, but we often work together.”

“What do you investigate?” Trenton seemed interested in my job, another first.

“My partner and I investigate kidnappings, pedophiles, pornography, online predators, human trafficking, involuntary servitude, parental kidnapping, and any other situation that fell into the ‘violent crimes against children’ bucket.”

“I remember you were the neighborhood babysitter.” He gave me his unforgettable impish grin. “And I also remember how much fun you had learning how to handle a car at high speeds.”

I couldn’t conceal my laughter. “Guess I’m part daredevil. Blame Dad for that. I remember loving to watch him race cars.”

“He’d still be at it if Mom hadn’t insisted his speed-loving days were over.”

“When he taught me to drive, I learned a lot of tricks,” I said.

“He already knew I was danger on wheels and asked Mom to teach me.” He laughed. “Any potential brothers-in-law?”

I waved off his remark. My thoughts swept to Gage. Maybe I had found him, but that was a future conversation. “Nope. My job scares them off. I had more dates during my stint as a dull college professor.”

“You dull? Never. You just haven’t found the right guy. Pray about it, and if there’s a guy good enough for my sis, he’ll appear.”

I startled. “Did you say pray?”

“Think about it. Who but God could have turned me around? Helped me walk away from drugs, alcohol, and so-called friends?”

Even in his good days, Trenton had steered away from mentions of faith. Maybe he had changed. “I don’t know what to say.”

“That’s a first.” He chuckled. “You always had more words in one day than I had in a week. But honestly, no more jail. No more being tossed out of an apartment because I couldn’t pay the rent. No more waking up and not remembering the night before.”

Wow. A true miracle. I swiped at happy tears. “I can’t wait to tell Mom and Dad.”

He leaned over the table as though to tell me a secret. “I’ll do the honors very soon.”

When our food arrived, he asked to say grace. I was so glad our eyes were closed, or he’d have seen a leaky faucet. We chatted through dinner. Laughed about some of the goofy things we’d done as kids. Time seemingly stopped, and my half-full cup of blessings spilled over with joy.

“Will you tell me about your healing journey?” I said.

“You can hear for yourself when I talk to Mom and Dad.” He moistened his lips. “Do you trust me enough to walk you back to your apartment and call them from there? I mean, does your building have a lobby area with a little privacy?”

“It does, but you can call from my apartment. Trenton, they will be incredibly happy.”

“I hope so.”

I was so focused on our conversation that I didn't think I tasted my favorite dish. We finished and he paid the bill. Outside the restaurant, a few people mingled, and the night sky hosted a half-moon, alerting me to how long Trenton and I had talked. I breathed in thankfulness and expectations for a positive tomorrow. At the crosswalk, we waited for the pedestrian sign to signal our turn.

“How long have you lived in this fancy high-rise?” he said as we ambled across the street.

“Two years. I like the busyness and excitement.”

“It must be in your DNA. One day, I want a small place in the country where it's quiet.”

“Never for me. I'll visit you though.” The humid heat mixed with exhaust fumes spiraled around us. “What are you taking in college?”

“Psychology. See if I can't help a few kids understand life and avoid pitfalls.”

“Incredible. I'm so pro—”

Trenton grabbed my shoulders and thrust me several feet ahead next to the curb. I landed on my side and rolled over. What—?

A horrible thud.

A woman screamed.

Tires squealed.

Horns blew.

Stinging pain radiated up my leg, side, arm, and head. In agony, I managed to roll over and glance at the street.

My brother's body lay in the intersection, a twisted mass of flesh and blood.

\* \* \*

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ACCLAIM FOR DIANN MILLS

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

“Mills has added yet another winner to her growing roster of romantic thrillers, perhaps the best one yet.”

THE SUSPENSE ZONE

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“In this third book in Mills’s action-packed FBI Task Force series, the stakes are higher than ever. . . . Readers can count on being glued to the pages late into the night—as ‘just one more chapter’ turns into ‘can’t stop now.’”

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PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

**DEEP EXTRACTION**

“A harrowing police procedural [that] . . . Mills’s many fans will devour.”

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“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.”

ACCLAIM FOR DIANN MILLS

ROMANTIC TIMES, 4.- star review, Top Pick

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“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

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

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

**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 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

“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

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We hope you enjoyed reading these chapter excerpts from DiAnn Mills. For more information on these and other great books by DiAnn Mills, please visit [diannmills.com](http://diannmills.com).

DiAnn is very active online and would love to connect with readers on any of the social media platforms listed at the website: [diannmills.com](http://diannmills.com).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR






DiAnn Mills is a bestselling author who believes her readers should expect an adventure. She weaves memorable characters with unpredictable plots to create action-packed, suspense-filled novels. DiAnn believes every breath of life is someone's story, so why not capture those moments and create a thrilling adventure?

Her titles have appeared on the CBA and ECPA bestseller lists; won two Christy Awards, the Golden Scroll, Inspirational Readers' Choice, and Carol award contests.

DiAnn is a founding board member of the American Christian Fiction Writers, an active member of the Blue Ridge Mountains Christian Writers, Advanced Writers and Speakers Association, Mystery Writers of America, the Jerry Jenkins Writers Guild, Sisters in Crime, and International Thriller Writers. DiAnn continues her passion of helping other writers be successful. She speaks to various groups and teaches writing workshops around the country.

DiAnn has been termed a coffee snob and roasts her own coffee beans. She's an avid reader, loves to cook, and believes her grandchildren are the smartest kids in the universe. She and her husband live in sunny Houston, Texas.

Learn about all of DiAnn's books and connect with DiAnn at [diannmills.com](http://diannmills.com).

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