

ONE

SEPTEMBER

CARRINGTON

My role as a hostage negotiator often plunged me into the evil designs of the human mind. I embraced the responsibility and possible danger because it's my identity—a one-woman battlefield determined to free others from victimization.

The challenge excited me, but fear of failure stalked me, and respect for human life was my constant companion. Too often innocent lives depended on my ability to negotiate their safe release without anyone getting hurt. The demands, rewards, and sometimes the defeats with tragic outcomes kept me awake at night. How could I have done things differently? My apprenticeship began when I was eight years old, but thinking about those days didn't change the past. Right now, lives were in jeopardy. . . .

I'd driven ten minutes out from a critical situation on a Wednesday afternoon when my cell phone rang. My contact, a detective from the Houston Police Department, had spent several hours talking to an angry man who held his wife and son hostage.

"Carrington, we have the information you requested," Detective Aaron Peters said. "The man inside the home is the owner, Nick Henderson. Age thirty-five. Married to Christine. He's holding his

wife and eight-year-old son at gunpoint. Yesterday, he was served divorce papers, and we believe this is in retaliation.”

Hurt. Rejected. Probably a lit stick of dynamite. “You talked to him from the outside?”

“We’ve routed his calls through our mobile command center. I tried talking to him. Got nowhere. He hung up on me.” Aaron blew out his frustration.

Domestic calls were the most dangerous, often violent, causing me to appreciate my Kevlar vest. I had a handgun in my purse, but I could count on one hand the times I’d pulled it. Never used it. “All right. I’m nearly there. SWAT in place?”

“Yes, two have clear shots. Not an action I want to take unless necessary.”

“Me either. What are Henderson’s demands?”

“Just to leave him alone or he’ll pull the trigger on his family.”

Cool, calm focus settled on me. My ability to mediate critical discussions depended on my wearing emotional blinders to the outside world. “When did the problem start?”

“The wife phoned 911 at 8:00 a.m. today. I don’t know how long he was there before she reached out to us. We’ve been called here twice in the past month for domestic abuse.”

I glanced at my watch, and it neared 4:00 p.m. “Have HPD negotiators been talking to him?”

“Yes. Henderson hung up on them too. He’s drinking. Slurring his words. Seems to have trouble concentrating.”

Alcohol could make him more volatile. Flashing lights appeared on the residential street ahead. “I’m parking now. Give me five minutes.”

“I’m standing beside my car in front of the house.”

“Aaron, do you have Henderson’s work history?”

“Fired three months ago from Home Depot, where he held a management role. They walked him out of the store in front of his employees.”

The man definitely had nothing to lose.

Phone in hand, I hurried from my parked truck and raced to where police cars barricaded the entrance to the street where Henderson

held his family. A reporter blocked my way between vehicles. She rammmed a mic in front of my face.

“Carrington Reed, do you think this standoff will have a peaceful resolution?”

My blood boiled. The last time I had verbally unleashed on her aggressive means to get the best story, she lied in her article about my concern for those in danger. I paused long enough to give her eye contact. “My goal is always a peaceful solution. Excuse me, I need to talk to HPD.”

“Are the police advocating a violent takedown?”

“No.” I sidestepped around her and ignored her shouts.

Aaron stood in front of the home and waved. He had the appearance of average—average height, weight, gray eyes, brown hair, and shoulder span—but nothing about his physical appearance showed his intense scrutiny of a crime scene. His rating as one of HPD’s finest hit my respect button.

“Good to see you. I’d like the man’s cell number,” I said. “I assume my cell phone is routed through the command center too?”

“Sure thing.” He gave me the information. “The wife’s name is Christine, and the son’s name is Rand.”

I nodded my thanks and pressed in the digits. A man answered on the second ring.

“Nick, this is Carrington. I’m standing beside a police car outside your house, and I’d like to help you.”

“I . . . leave me alone.” He spoke fast and loudly. “I’m busy.”

“What do you need?”

“You can get rid of all those cops. I can’t breathe.”

I expected a more belligerent response. “Nick, I can’t do that. These officers are here to protect you in case someone tries to break into your home and hurt you.”

“I’d kill my wife and kid first.”

“Tell me why you feel that way.”

“They deserve it for the way they’ve treated me.” He stumbled over his words. “I’m a good husband and dad.”

“I’m sure you’re great at both. Tell me what’s hurting you.”

“Christine filed for divorce.”

“I get it, Nick. I’d be mad too. How can I help?”

“Have her cancel the divorce proceedings.” He swore. “Let me move back into my house. I make the payments, and I should be able to live here.”

“I agree you have a right to be upset and have a say-so in your family’s affairs. Are you saying if Christine agrees to drop the divorce, you’ll let her and Rand go?”

I stared at the house while he delayed his answer. Blood raced through my veins. Plan B would be to dig deeper into his emotions.

“The divorce stuff is just part of it,” Nick said.

“You’re upset about the whole relationship thing.”

“She talks to me like I’m scum. And in front of my son too.” He sobbed, lowering his defenses.

“You’d like for her to agree to counseling?”

He slurped on some liquid and belched. “Add the nagging. She’s on my case about drinking.”

“Nick, I’m adding nagging to the list. Is there anything else? Tell me everything.”

“Uh. Yeah. But if she agrees and I let ’em go, then she lies, I’ll . . . I’ll find ’em and kill ’em.”

“Are you ready to release your family so we can work this out? I bet you’d like to get rid of these gawking people. Doing the right thing is the only way I can ask the police officers to leave and ensure you won’t get hurt.”

“Let me talk to her. I’ll call you back.”

“I’d rather wait on the line.” I touched my chest and breathed.

He swore again. “Suit yourself.” I heard him shout at his wife. She promised to meet his demands. “All right,” he said to me. “You’ll make Christine do the right thing?”

“I promise to talk to her and explain the seriousness of your demands. I’ll do my best.”

“She’s stubborn.”

“Nick, she’d be a fool not to hear me out. Let them go, and we’ll find a peaceful solution.”

I waited, my mouth dry, as though I stood next to Christine and her son inside the house. The door slowly opened. A woman limped out with her arm around a young boy. Blood stained her nose, mouth, and shirt. A dark-blue bruise marked her cheek. The boy seemed unhurt, but both trembled.

Officers escorted Christine and her son to a waiting ambulance. Before allowing a paramedic to treat her, she peered at me and burst into tears. "He's drunk and mean. Broke furniture."

I muted the mic on my phone and gave her my best reassuring smile. "I'm glad you and Rand are okay. Will he harm himself or open fire on officers?"

She glanced back at the brick-and-stone two-story home. "I don't know. He's really messed up. Drinks all the time and takes his misery out on us."

I understood Christine was wrestling with the idea of him pulling the trigger on himself. At one time she'd loved him, but people changed, and she'd seen the worst in her husband's behavior.

She swiped at her eyes. "He wasn't always violent. Losing his job for getting into a fight destroyed his pride."

"I'll do what I can."

The ambulance drove away, and I un-muted my phone before turning my attention back to Nick. "Are you ready to walk outside?"

"Will those cops shoot me?"

"Not if you first place your gun on the front stoop and keep your hands above your head."

"Then what?"

"These officers will escort you to a safe place where you'll find the help you need to feel better." I took a deep breath. "I'm on your side, Nick. I'd be angry and hurt if the ones I loved disrespected me."

The door opened, and a man dressed in jeans and a dirty white T-shirt stepped out. With one hand up, he laid his gun on the concrete before him and raised his other hand. Nick continued to walk toward the officers.

The first officer patted him down and cuffed him. My shoulders relaxed, but the adrenaline continued to flow. How good if all hostage

situations ended without bloodshed. For a moment, a few that ended tragically scrolled across my mind. The outcomes all boiled down to choices.

I made my way to the cuffed man. “Nick, I’m Carrington.”

“I didn’t want to hurt them. Just—” He used a colorful phrase to describe his anger.

“You did great. I’m impressed with how you so unselfishly handled yourself.” I added gentleness to my tone and gave him eye contact. I fought, as always, not to show a judgmental attitude or to condemn him. He needed counseling in whatever form the court system chose. The officers placed him in a cruiser and left the street. Other officers entered the home to assess any damage or evidence there. Two others talked with neighbors.

Aaron thanked me for the assist. I stayed awhile longer to debrief myself, to objectively process my communication with Nick.

I glanced around at the otherwise quiet community. The homes were less than ten years old, a striking subdivision hosting amenities for family life. Gated communities kept the unwanted people from the residents, but not today for Christine and Rand.

“Carrington.”

At the sound of a man’s voice, I turned to a familiar, tanned journalist who offered an engaging smile. “Hey, Levi. Good to see you.”

He gave me a side hug. “You did an unbelievable job with the hostage situation.”

“Thanks. Domestic situations can be a challenge.” I paused. “Great article in last week’s *Now America Reports*. Was that the conclusion to the series on Houston’s flooding problems?”

“Yep. ‘Water on the Rise.’ No negotiation needed.”

I bit back a grin. Levi Ehrlich didn’t need to know his charms transported me to the moon and back. “Very funny. And well written.”

“How about some coffee, conversation, and catch-up?”

“The last time we went for coffee, you tried to get an interview.” I slid him a half smile. “Anything changed?”

Levi feigned a frown. “You *are* the most gorgeous negotiator on the planet.”

“And you should get out more.” I shook my head. “I have a ton of work. Next time?”

“I’ll hold you to that.” He studied me through dark-brown eyes, just a shade lighter than his hair. “You talked Henderson down when HPD got nowhere. What did you say to him?”

I started to walk away but hesitated. “I used the truth.”

“How?”

“I told him I cared what happened to him.”

“Seriously, I admire how you approach each case with respect for those involved.”

His kind gaze held me captive. “Until next time, Levi.” I walked down the street toward my truck.

Footsteps tapped against the pavement behind me. “How about dinner? You told me I should get out more.”

I stopped and glanced over my shoulder. “I’ll take a rain check.”

“I have your number.”

“No doubt.” I bit back a grin.