

LETHAL STANDOFF

Chapter 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 rammed 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.”