

# THE RISING by Kerry Peresta

## EXCERPT

### Book Two in the Olivia Callahan Suspense series

*“How low you fall points to how high you’ll rise.”*

*-Matshona Dhliwayo*

The stark buildings and barbed-wire-topped walls surrounding the correctional facility reminded me of a Hitchcock movie.

My fingers tightened on the steering wheel. I found a parking spot, and waited in the car a minute, taking in the starkness and finality of a prison compound. My heart did a little lurch when I thought about Monty—my ex-husband and the father of my two daughters—inside. *Incarcerated*. I guess since I hadn’t seen him since his indictment, it didn’t seem real.

However, I’d learned that having sympathy for Monty was like having sympathy for a snake just before it sank its fangs. “It’s been eighteen months. You can keep it together with this psycho,” I hissed to myself. I hiked my purse onto my shoulder and walked out into the buttery sunshine toward the visitors’ entrance.

I presented my driver’s license, endured a frisk, offered my hand for the fingerprint process, and walked through the metal detector, which of course, went off. With stoic resignation, I endured another frisk, a few hard glances from the guards, and eventually pulled the culprit from the pocket of my pants, an aluminum foil candy bar wrapper.

While I waited for Monty at one of the small, circular tables in the visitors’ room, I scanned the list of do’s and don’ts. Hands must be visible at all times. Vulgar language not allowed. No passing anything to the prisoner. No jewelry other than a wedding band or religious necklace.

I stared at my hands, sticky with sweat. My heart beat in my throat.

I lifted my curls off my forehead and fanned my face with one hand. Three other visitors sat at tables. One woman with graying hair piled like a crown on her head stared at the floor. When she noticed that I was looking at her, she raised her head and threw me a sad smile. A younger woman at

another table struggled to keep two young children under control, and an older couple with stress-lined faces whispered to each other as they waited. The room had tan, cinder block walls, a drop-in ceiling with grid tiles that probably hid video cameras, and a single door. No windows. A scrawny, fake plant in one corner made a half-hearted attempt at civility.

The metal door opened. My thoughts were mush, a blender on high. Could I do this? After two years of physical therapy, occupational therapy, and every other kind of therapy the docs could throw at me, shouldn't I react better than this?

*Remember, they're only feelings.*

I squared my shoulders. Wiped my palms on my pants.

As Monty offered his cuffed wrists to the corrections officer, he scanned the room under lowered eyelids. When he saw me, he gave me a scorched-earth glare. After the guard removed his handcuffs, he shook out his arms and rubbed his wrists. The raven-black hair was longer, and brushed his shoulders. He'd been working out. A lot. He wore a loose-fitting top and pants. Orange. As usual, he was larger than life, and in the bright white of the visiting space, surrounded by matching plastic tables and chairs, he was a raven-haired Schwarzenegger in a room full of Danny DeVito's. I'd once had hope for reconciliation. The thought gave me the shakes now.

He dropped into the chair across from me and plopped his hands on the table. "What do you want?"

I spent a few seconds examining his face—this man I'd spent twenty, long years trying to please, and the reason I'd been assaulted and left for dead by Niles Peterson, a wreck of a man whose life Monty had destroyed as well.

The man responsible for my convoluted recovery from a brain injury that stole my past. Even after two years, I still had huge gaps in my memory, and staring at him felt like staring at a stranger instead of an ex-husband. "My therapist says I need to look back to move forward. I wanted to ask you a few questions, that's all."

"Okay," he grumbled. "I'll give you a few minutes. Oh, and you'll love this. I have to attend counseling sessions about how to keep my 'darker dispositions' under control, and I have one of those in thirty minutes."

Resisting a smile, I quipped, "Are they helping?" He rolled his eyes. "What are the questions?"

“I still have problems remembering stuff. There are things I need to... figure out about who I was before—”

“Before you hooked up with my ole’ buddy Niles?” he interrupted, with a smirk. “Before you threw away everything we had? Before you got yourself in a situation that could’ve gotten you killed? Before you started treating me like a piece of shit?”

I was careful not to react. I’d had enough therapy to understand how to treat a control freak that tried to make *me* the reason he ended up in prison. That part of my life—the part where Monty had been in charge and his spouse had to obey or else—was over. “Are you done?” I asked.

He clamped his lips together.

I folded my hands on the table and leaned in. “I’ll get right to the point. What drew you to me in the first place? What was I like before the accident, from your perspective?”

Monty tried to get comfortable in the plastic chair. Beneath his immense bulk, it seemed like a child’s chair. “Is that how you’re dealing with it?” His lips twisted in disgust. “It was an *assault*, Olivia. He tried to rape you, for God’s sake.”

I looked away. “It’s over, and he’s in the ground, thanks to you.”

He crossed his arms and glared. A corrections officer lifted his hand. With a grunt, Monty slapped both hands on the small table where the officer could see them.

After a few beats, he sneered, “You mean besides the obvious attraction of an older guy to a high school girl?” “Give me a break, Monty.”

He chuckled. “You were kind of...I don’t know...scared. I was drawn to you in a protective way. You were shy.”

I frowned. “What was I scared of?”

“Your crazy mom had married some jerk that kept you off balance all the time. Don’t you remember him?”

I thought for a few seconds. Nothing came.

“That coma still messes with you, doesn’t it? Well...might be good not to remember. Maybe he did things to you that he shouldn’t have.” Monty raised his eyebrows up and down.

I wanted to slap him, but I kept my expression neutral.

“A brain injury recovery is unpredictable. I still lose memories, even if someone has drilled them into me. I’m trying to use visualization. I have this feeling...that if I can see it, the rest will be like dominos.”

“So you may not ever remember? Even the good things about our marriage?”

I laughed. “We must have very different perspectives about the word ‘good’, Monty.”

Monty’s jaw muscles flexed. “Next?”

“Was I a capable mother? Was I available and...loving to the kids?”

Maybe it was my imagination, but his lower lip quivered. Did the guy have a heart after all? I’d always believed he loved our daughters. I hoped this was true.

“Olivia, you were a good mother. We had our problems, but you made a good home, and took excellent care of the kids. You were at every freakin’ event, every school fundraiser, *everything*.” He scowled. “I took a big back seat to the kids.”

“What problems did we have? When did they start?”

He leaned in. “You don’t remember our sex life? How terrible it was? Nothing I could do would get you to....” He shook his head. “You couldn’t even fix a decent meal. You should have been *grateful* you married someone like me so I could...teach you things.”

# CHAPTER ONE

“Keep your voice down!” I insisted, embarrassed.

He cocked his head and grinned. “You always had this...desperate need for my approval or whatever. And when you conveniently avoided telling me you weren’t taking birth control it caused a lot of issues that could’ve been avoided.” He snorted. “Like being in here.”

I tried to rein in my disgust.

“So, let me get this straight. Your priority in our marriage was sex and good food and to pin all our issues on your child bride?” My tone hardened. “A young woman who came from a single-parent home? Who had no understanding what a good and normal guy was like?”

He gave me a look that could peel the skin off my face.

“How did you react when I didn’t do things the way you wanted?” I continued.

“Like any man who’d been disrespected. I corrected the issue.”

“How? By yelling? Physical force? Kicking your pregnant wife in the stomach?” This was a memory I *had* recovered.

A vein pulsed in his neck.

“How often, Monty? Were these reactions a...a lifestyle in our marriage?” “Look,” he snarled, “I don’t know that this is productive.”

“It is for me,” I said, brightly.

I glanced at the closest officer. He had his hands full with an issue at one of the other tables.

“Mom told me that Serena and Lilly floated out to sea one time, on a rubber raft. Do you remember that?”

His eyes found a spot on the wall.

“So you do remember. What happened?”

“Look, they were, I don’t know, four and six or so. I didn’t think it would be a problem for me to run grab a drink from our bag, and come back. I was gone less than five minutes. How could I know they’d lose control of the raft?”

An earthquake of anger shot through me. “You turned your back on a four-year-old and a six-year-old and expected them to have *control* of a raft? They were *babies!*”

“Yeah. Well.” He rose. “Looks like this question thing of yours isn’t working for me.” He pushed his chair in with a bang. The correctional officer gave him a look. Monty strode to the officer’s station and held out his wrists. Adrenaline made me a little shaky after he’d gone, but it wasn’t from fear of the man. My therapist would call this real progress.

I left the room and gathered my things from the visitors’ processing center. As I walked out of the prison facility, all I could think about was...why? Why had I married this guy? And stayed for *twenty years*? I couldn’t even remember myself as a person who could do that.

At least I’d dragged more information out of him. I was determined to piece together the puzzle of the past I’d lost.