

THE CRUSHING

Olivia Callahan Suspense, Book Four

By Kerry Peresta

PROLOGUE

Sherry crammed the phone against her ear as she dashed through the thick undergrowth, trudged across boggy marshes, and arrived at a feeder stream.

“*Olivia!* Olivia?”

Nothing.

“Dammit!” she muttered, shoving her cell back into her pocket. She calculated that the nearest town rested fifteen miles down the highway out here in Florida-cracker country, and holing up until the shooter emerged seemed the best option.

She should’ve known there’d be no service out here.

Where did he go? She scraped mud off her face and rubbed her sunburned cheeks. He actually *fired a weapon*. On no planet had she ever thought this little trek would become a fight for her life, yet here she stood, hands glued to the trunk of a huge palm, eyes darting back and forth across the marshy, pancake-flat wastelands of inland Florida. Behind her lay a wide body of water surrounded by suspicious-looking marsh grass and, she suspected, alligators...and in front of her lay miles of marshland and bedraggled palms spearing the sky.

Why had she volunteered for this assignment, again?

“I just *had* to get my investigator’s license,” she muttered. “Maybe I should’ve stayed put as Olivia’s assistant instead of private investigator. This isn’t quite how I envisioned the job.”

She rubbed her calves. How long had she been running? Fifteen minutes? Twenty? An hour? Where was Olivia?

The distant blast of gunfire reached her ears. A bullet sliced through the air and hit the tree she’d wrapped herself around, missing her hand by inches. Sherry felt her stomach freeze into a block of ice.

Wiping the sweat from her eyes, she slid her hand to the paddle holster on her belt, gripped her Smith & Wesson revolver, and released the safety strap. Another crack of gunfire erupted closer this time. She swallowed, hard. A whoosh of air zipped past a mere twelve inches in front of her nose. Sherry dropped to the ground like a stone. The spikey bushes on the ground dug into her arms, her chest, her legs. She located a slight rise about ten feet away, and hastily low-crawled through the weeds on her stomach, edged to the top of the incline, and threw herself over the top.

Breathing hard, she peeked out above the edge. The crack-crack-crack of shots fired caused her to dive for cover. She took a deep breath, wiped the sweat off her palms, and fired back a volley of her own. When silence fell, she relaxed against the incline and tugged out her phone. A signal!

With fumbling fingers, she pressed in Olivia’s number. She waited through one ring, then two, before her call was answered.

“Where are you?” Olivia’s anxious voice demanded. “Are you okay?”

Tears of relief trailed down her cheeks. She rattled off a description of her location. Her gaze trained on the best-case origination of shots fired, she whispered, “Olivia! I found Hannah.

She's exhausted and weak, but I've got her." Sherry listened to Olivia's instructions. "Okay. I'll meet you at the airport, but...wait. I hear something," she whispered, and stuck the phone back in her pocket. She gripped her weapon with both hands.

Minutes passed. Sherry tried to breathe.

Something shuffled through the grass. Her eyes sliced left, right.

The shuffling stopped.

The hum of cicadas intensified. She swatted at mosquitoes. Sweat trickled down her face.

Sherry adjusted her grip on her sidearm.

She strained to hear more footsteps, but only heard the faint squawk of herons and hoot of owls. The setting sun left a red slash on the horizon. Bats dipped and swooped above her.

She lowered her weapon, puzzled. Had one of her prior shots wounded her target?

Taking her time, she rose from her niche behind the incline.

A single shot burst from her adversary's weapon and sizzled through the air.

She cried out in pain. The bullet had nicked her, the sting of a monster wasp. She groped her waist with her free hand and lifted it away wet with blood. Rage rushed through her chest and down her arms. She planted her legs wide and emptied her weapon in the direction of the shooter.

The phone in her pocket vibrated with a text as she reloaded.

Another bullet clipped her in the shoulder.

The sound of sirens wailed in the distance.

She collapsed.