

Gloria Oliver

THE DISCOVERIES OF JULIA XERO



The SECRET
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SECRET
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The Discoveries of Julia Xero
Book 1

Gloria Oliver

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The Secret Humankind

The Discoveries of Julia Xero – Book 1

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CHAPTER 01

I'm so busted!

The DART bus came to a stop and opened its doors, its familiar *squeal* and *whoosh* propelling me to my feet. I hustled out into the baking Texas sun, oppressively aware I was late for my shift. But rather than break into a run to make up time, I paused and looked around nervously, my hands and feet feeling twitchy.

What I was searching for, I had no idea. But what my friend Laurel had dubbed my 'spidey sense' had been blaring for the last couple of

days, on and off. It didn't help that I'd had the nagging feeling I was being followed and watched since I'd left the apartment that morning. As ridiculous as it sounded, my hunches were rarely wrong about this type of thing. I just didn't have a clue what was setting them off.

The sun continued to glare down at me, waves of heat from the sidewalk making the air ripple. I could feel sweat already gathering in my armpits and lower back.

No one was around, unless you counted the old tom cat licking his furry leg and acting like I wasn't even there. The doors huffed shut behind me and the bus clattered away, spouting clouds of foul-smelling exhaust.

I took another look around and slipped one hand into my pocket to grip Stitch, my five-and-a-half-inch folding switchblade. If trouble arrived, I would be ready to prove it had made a bad decision in coming after me.

Still spotting nothing and no one that shouldn't be there, I finally broke into a jog and headed toward the Golden Corral. The familiar red-and-gold logo soon loomed before me, forcing a change in my mental gears as I approached my daily battlefield.

I opened the door and faltered for a moment, the sudden slap of cold air robbing me of breath.

"Harry, *she's here!*" Melody's sing-song mockery blared through the restaurant.

I cringed, and turned to spot my coworker at the double register near the entrance. Melody had just heralded my arrival to the one person I'd hoped to avoid. A smug look and a small inflating gum bubble met my glare.

"Julia! You're *late*." The heavysset shift supervisor rolled into view like an approaching train about to go off the rails.

"I know, I know. Sorry! The buses were off schedule. Some big wreck on I-35." I avoided making eye contact. If Harry got going, he'd keep me from clocking in for another half hour. Losing the cash and being dressed down in front of customers wasn't my idea of a good start to the day, which had been lousy enough already. I hurried past him to the employee area in the back of the restaurant.

Melody's giggled snort followed, her bubble gum popping for emphasis, as I scurried away like a coward. I couldn't afford to lose this job. Not yet.

Ever since I had applied for the third-shift job at Remington Safe and Clean, things had felt 'off.' If she'd still been alive, Laurel would have said I was just being paranoid—that these were only feelings brought on by the scary prospect of the awesome possibilities that would open up for me if I got the higher-paying job.

Even though I knew what she would have said, I still wished I could talk to her. I missed Laurel terribly, and felt a flicker of anger at her for dying. Yes, I was well aware she hadn't *wanted* to die—but being a tiny bit mad about it was easier than giving in to the bottomless despair I felt at her loss.

Laurel Caine... Just thinking her name made me sad. She had been more than my caseworker—she had been my only real and constant friend during my formative years. And Laurel had believed in my 'spidey sense' even more than I did. It had caused me some problems when I was very young, but Laurel taught me to see it as a good thing. She'd always been a glass-half-full type of person. As a

social worker, it was pretty much a requirement if you wanted to survive the job.

My spidey sense was a skill I had developed while growing up in foster care. Some would call it hyperawareness or hypervigilance, even though sometimes there was nothing around to trigger it. All I knew was that I trusted it, even if I didn't always understand it. Laurel's curiosity about it had never waned. She'd wanted to find a way to bottle it and share it with some of her other clients—a few who needed more help or common sense than she could give.

Once I'd turned eighteen and been turned loose by the system, Laurel had made sure we stayed in touch; we'd meet every two weeks or so. To me, she was family—my *only* family. I was seven years old when I met Laurel, and for fifteen years the woman had been the only unchanging thing in my life. But that had ended twelve months ago, when a brain aneurysm had unexpectedly taken her life. I never even got a chance to say goodbye before she passed, though I did still visit my friend occasionally at the cemetery.

I changed into my work clothes, pushing the depressing thoughts away. I stashed my shoulder bag in the locker, but pulled out my prepaid cell before locking the door. Wondering why I even bothered, I slipped the phone into my apron pocket. The people at RSC wouldn't be calling me back—they wouldn't give me the crime-scene cleaning job. I needed to set my sights lower if I wanted to escape from this place.

The realization was as bitter now as when I'd left the posh RSC offices in downtown Dallas a few days ago. It'd made it twice as hard to get moving this morning, to choose to willingly come to my dead-

end job and put up with the endless aggravations. But I had to eat, and I had to pay rent. So that was that.

I checked that my mousy straight brown hair was still neat and tied back, that my plain face was clean, and that the company shirt and apron were on straight. There was no point in giving Harry more to complain about. At least Melody was stuck at the register. That was for the best, even though I knew she'd end up making a mess of the till. But working the register would keep her from coming over to my assigned area, sniffing around for things to tattle on me about. If only Melody would pay as much attention to her work as she paid to finding fault with others! But her thick, shining, blond tresses and protruding double-Ds kept the skank employed, much to everyone else's continued misery. Harry had a type.

My serving area was on the restaurant's other end, past the grill house and dessert stations. I waved at a couple of the cooks as I walked by. They weren't close acquaintances, only fellow stalwart soldiers eking out a living in this unfriendly landscape. The scents of roast beef, fried chicken, and other foods mingled in the air. The melted contents of the chocolate fountain were already cascading, filling the air with their cloyingly sweet scent.

The day wore on, the cell phone in my pocket growing heavier by the hour and staying as silent as I had known it would. But at least the paranoid feeling of being watched had gone away.

"Something wrong, Julia?" An older woman leaned out on her cane and looked up at me sideways from behind a pair of rhinestone-studded glasses that matched her dark blue day dress.

"No. Everything's fine, Mrs. Conrad."

Mrs. Conrad was one of my regulars. A bit peculiar, but kind and friendly—just how I had always imagined my grandmother would be, if I'd had one. "Just have a few things on my mind today."

"Come now, call me Roxanne," she said. "We've known each other long enough to not bother with all that." Her dark eyes were alight. "Could it be *boy* trouble?" Mrs. Conrad set two quarters on the table, her face hopeful.

"No, no boy trouble. Sorry."

The wrinkled face sagged a little with disappointment. "You're such a sweet girl. You should have a boy. If you would only smile more..."

I tried to oblige her, though it wasn't my thing. This was a topic we had covered before, much like her wanting me to call her Roxanne instead of Mrs. Conrad. The fact that I wasn't interested in having a relationship with a man, and felt no need to ingratiate myself to others with unfelt smiles, only seemed to encourage the old lady. "I'll keep it in mind. Promise."

Mrs. Conrad smiled up at me. "See, such a sweet girl."

I walked with her as she shuffled along, making sure there were no wet spots or anything that she might trip over. A high shriek warned me of the careening five-year-old running between tables. I used my body to block him and keep him from running into the older woman and send her tumbling to the floor. Someone her age might end up with a broken hip—or something worse.

"Hey, kid! Watch where you're going, please!" The boy bounced away, never even slowing down. He left three streaks of chocolate on my apron as a parting gift. The little git. His parents never even

looked our way, much less ask him to stop running. I fought the urge to sigh.

As we neared the exit, the odd sensation of someone staring hard at me returned. I glanced in Melody's direction, figuring it must be her this time. But the cashier was talking animatedly with one of the other regulars about the virtues of black light-enhanced nail polish. I half-turned as I opened the door for Mrs. Conrad, but couldn't spot anyone looking in my direction. Still, the feeling hadn't gone away.

"Julia!" Harry shouted. "Shut the freakin' door and quit letting all the A/C out. You think we're made of money?"

I stepped back inside and let the glass door close. Just my luck—money was the one button I *never* wanted to push with Harry. I plastered a contrite look on my face. "Sorry."

"Prove it." He loomed over me, the heat and stench coming off him worse than what was outside. "Get your ass back to *work* before I dock your pay."

The sound of a plastic plate hitting the ground and bouncing around snapped his attention away from me. Harry stomped off to wave his arms around and yell at anyone who looked even one percent responsible.

Melody snorted, enjoying my embarrassment and discomfort. "Why do you waste your time on that old biddy, anyway? She tips for shit."

Why, indeed? But then again, why not? I would be old, too, someday. Having someone watching out for me in my dotage would be nice.

Besides, I was pretty sure the small tip was more than Mrs. Conrad could afford. She only came twice a month, and ate as much as she could stuff down her gullet. And she *a/ways* requested more rolls than she ate—but none were ever left behind. Making sure Harry and Melody were none the wiser was one of my few joys in life. I knew what it meant to go hungry, and I wouldn't wish that gnawing feeling on anyone.

So I returned to my work area, not bothering to answer Melody's question. She wouldn't have understood, anyway. Melody stared daggers at my back for ignoring her, but thankfully, hers was the only stare I sensed, and it was one I was quite used to. But enough was enough; I needed to get out of this place *pronto*.

I went on break a while later, still feeling down and no closer to a solution. I jumped when the phone in my apron pocket rang loudly for attention. My hand dived for it. I could have sworn I set the thing to vibrate. If it had gone off while I was on the floor...

I shook my head and answered the call. "Hello?"

"Is this Miss Julia Xero?" The unfamiliar female voice had an undercurrent of a strange accent and sounded very young. I didn't recognize it, but she said my last name correctly—the same pronunciation as zero—which was unusual.

"Yes, I'm Julia."

"This is Dawn Anghelescu from Remington Safe and Clean. You filled out an application with us a few days ago for the open third shift position, I believe? We'd like you to come in for an interview and testing if you're still interested."

I blinked twice, sure I had heard her wrong. "Really?"

"Karamel gave you her stamp of approval, and everything else seems to be in order."

The RSC's receptionist had been something of a shock. The petite woman behind the boat-sized reception desk had literally squealed in utter delight when she learned I wanted to apply. She had even rushed around the desk to grab my hand. Apparently the office didn't have many female employees—but the intensity of her reaction had still felt totally weird.

A touch of amusement filled the woman's voice, almost as if she knew what I was thinking. "I believe you're what we're looking for in an employee. But this type of job isn't for everyone, I'm afraid," Anghelescu said. "The practical test will prove if you'll be able to handle it."

My spidey sense rang out louder than before. I couldn't think of a reason why it would do that about a job, but I decided it didn't matter. It wasn't like it was a done deal, and if by some miracle I *did* get in, I would deal with any fallout then. Because at the moment, no matter what my gut told me, working *anywhere else* would be better than here.



CHAPTER 02

I've felt anxious on many occasions in my life. Every time a prospective parent had come by the home—at least until I realized I was too plain and shy, and later, too old, to be seriously considered. Meeting new foster parents and their kids, constantly worrying whether it would be a good or a bad home. Other jobs I'd hoped to get.

Currently, I stood at the bittersweet precipice of fearful hope and protective pessimism.

I stared at the glass doors emblazoned with the Remington Safe and Clean gold-and-purple logo. One miraculous step closer, but still with no guarantees. At least the weird sensations of being watched or followed hadn't returned. I felt nervous enough already, and didn't need my spidey sense adding to it. I hoped my black slacks and cream top didn't make me look too drab.

I reached for the door, just as it yanked open on its own.

"You're here!"

The receptionist's squeal of joy and flashing smile made me step back. We'd only met the one time. No one that friendly could be genuine. "Uh, hi."

"Come in, come in!" Karamel waved me inside. She was dressed in a blinding canary-yellow dress with puffed sleeves. Combined with her short stature, pixie haircut, and boundless energy, it made her seem like an oversized fairy.

I complied, now feeling even more jittery, though I still didn't sense any insincerity from the receptionist. "There's an interview and then a test, right?"

Karamel shook her head, her candy-scented perfume mixing with the aromatic scent of oak leaves from the thirty-foot trees growing on a strip of land on the other end of the lobby. Yes, you heard right—towering oak trees inside an enclosed lobby. Is that mindboggling or what? When I first came to apply for the job, I'd almost turned around and left after seeing them. Who in their right mind grew giant-sized trees indoors?

The massive lobby was all tinted glass in the front with white and gold marble flooring throughout. The impressive mahogany reception

desk was the size of a small boat. Everything screamed money and success.

The receptionist kept beaming at me. I'd met friendly people before, and they usually had a hidden agenda, but she had seemed genuinely excited to meet me and thrilled I'd come to apply. A rather unnerving experience, since I was used to mostly being ignored. A state I rather preferred, if I'm being honest.

"Actually, it's a test first," Karamel corrected me. "And depending on how that goes, *then* the interview. No real point in the second if you don't pass the first, you see."

"Makes sense, I guess." A way to get rid of the riffraff before wasting a higher-up's time. Unlike Laurel, I was a glass-half-empty kind of girl.

"Doesn't it?" Karamel flashed another smile. "I'll take you to the changing room, and then you can meet Stan. He'll tell you a little about the work and bring you to the test cleaning room."

Our steps rang against the white and gold marble as Karamel led me her toward the line of thirty-foot Texas oak trees. Even though I'd seen them before, they were still an impressive sight. Spaced around ten feet apart, the trees partially hid several flush doors in the wall behind them. I still couldn't wrap my head around the amount of money it must have taken to create such a lavish space.

Karamel led me to a different hidden door than on my original visit, and opened it to reveal a long hallway rather than a meeting room. A wave pattern made the soft beige walls more attractive. Recessed wooden doors and lush potted plants at irregular intervals also broke the monotony. If this area was for employees and training, I was

surprised they bothered with such niceties. Most places I'd worked at cared little about esthetics in the areas set aside for workers.

The changing room looked more like what I was used to, except the lockers were made of wood instead of metal and were twice as roomy as any I'd ever seen. They even had fancy locks built into the wooden doors.

"Locker one-oh-three is yours for the day. Here's your key." Karamel pointed to a locker and handed me an antique-looking golden key with the number embossed at the end. "The dresser on your right has uniforms of multiple sizes. If you get the job, you'll get fitted ones with your name stitched on them." The receptionist's smile blazed as if she had no doubt she'd be putting in an order for them this very day. "The hazmat suits are in the room next door. Stan will show you how to put them on after you get changed."

I had to wear a hazmat suit? What kind of test was this? "Thanks." I took the offered key but couldn't bring myself to ask what would be involved in this test of theirs.

"You'll do great. Good luck!" With a friendly wave, Karamel left me to change.

As promised, the dresser at the far end held purple, one-piece jumpsuits of different sizes. A small stitched version of the company's logo graced the upper left chest and both upper arms, and a larger one decorated the back. It seemed a bit like overkill. I changed, my sense of disconnection with reality growing stronger by the moment—as if I were Alice diving into Wonderland.

Tucking the golden key into a Velcro-sealed pocket of the uniform, I wandered back into the hallway and noticed an open door to the

right of the changing room. "Hello?"

"Great timing. Come on in."

I spotted a lanky-looking man straightening up from a long table where he'd set several items on it. As he turned in my direction, I couldn't help but notice the giant set of mutton chops on an otherwise dull face. Light brown hair streaked with gray and washed-out brown eyes made the chops stand out even more.

"Stan Lockhart, at your service." He bent at the waist, giving me a bow with an added flourish as if removing a plumed hat from his head. Acting like a royal courtier and treating me as a highborn lady rather than a prospective employee—Alice in Wonderland, indeed.

"Hi. I'm Julia Xero. The last name is with an X but pronounced like a Z." I'd had to explain this more times than I cared to count. After all this time, I still didn't know how I'd ended up with the name. Probably someone's idea of a joke, or a typo.

"Good to know." Stan straightened, giving me a sideways grin. "The jumpsuit is the uniform we wear for clients. It makes sure people know who we represent." He fingered the fancy gold stitching of his name beneath the Remington Safe and Clean logo. None of it looked or felt cheap. Stan pointed at the table beside him, indicating a folded garment made with white plastic material with the company's logo stamped on it. "But these are the clothes that matter most. These are the ones that will keep you *safe*."

"One-use, non-porous wear, aka hazmat suit." He pointed to the other items on the table in turn as he said, "Especially when combined with gloves, different types of respirators, and specialty boots. Thicknesses and materials will vary for different types of jobs."

The key thing is not to be exposed to any viruses, diseases, or toxic chemicals, depending on what we're dealing with in a particular project. Safety comes first and last. *Always.*"

I nodded. Crime scenes might have all manner of materials lying around. HIV and other contagious diseases would have to be a consideration as well. Good to know they kept all the angles covered.

"Let's get these on you; then we can move over to the test area."

Stan explained the best order to don the equipment and what to watch out for to ensure the suit and gear weren't compromised. Then, after helping me with mine, he suited up as well. The last step was a buddy check to make doubly sure nothing got missed.

"The test today is only one of the many scenarios we might run into. But it'll give you a decent idea of what the job entails and whether you can handle it. If you also pass the interview with Miss Anghelescu and get the position, there'll be more in-depth training on a wide variety of aspects of the job—jargon, state and federal regulations, certifications, tools, safety, and more."

The bulky filtered mask over my face felt awkward. The white suit was baggy, but not overly so. Together, they made me feel uneasy, though I couldn't have said why. Stan's voice sounded muffled, as if he were in another room rather than beside me.

"The filters prevent airborne contaminants from getting into your lungs, and also hold back most, if not all, the smells. It depends on what we're dealing with."

Stan led me to the rear of the room. Half of it was an open shower with a deep sink, the tiled area several inches lower than the rest of

the floor. A hatch just past that looked like something you'd find on a submarine or aircraft carrier. *Curiouser and curiouser.*

"One last thing," Stan said. "This isn't human blood or remains. Pigs get you a close enough effect for testing. If you get the urge to hurl cookies, just run back out here and use the sink. You do *not* want to lose your lunch while wearing the suit and mask. Not a pretty sight when you have to get out of it, and until you do, you're trapped in there with the stench and mess."

That explained the shower. *Ugh.*

"We know the materials we use for testing are clean, so the masks only have a light filter to give you a fuller experience of what you can run into out there.

"Under *no circumstances* are you to remove *any* of your gear while in the scene location. Barf or no barf, it's an automatic dismissal if you do." His shrug was almost lost in the loose confinement of the hazmat suit. "Safety first."

"Understood."

I waited with some trepidation as he opened the locking wheel on the hatch and pushed it open.

The smell hit me first—a thick coppery stench mixed with rotten eggs that triggered my gag reflex. It wasn't strong, but it was extremely pungent. I shifted from breathing through my nose to breathing through my mouth. It toned down the smell, but now I could taste it. I was suddenly overjoyed to be wearing the bulky face mask and filter if they were keeping any of this out. Then I caught my first look inside. It was like a scene from a horror movie, yet more *real* than anything Hollywood could ever produce.

Red to dark brown stains covered the right wall, couch, and coffee table. Bits of meat and chopped entrails dotted the floor, the walls, and the furniture—a butcher shop gone mad. It looked as if someone had taken a bucket of the stuff and just pitched it across the room like throwing dirty water into the street.

"Two of the most critical skills in this job are elbow grease and attention to detail." Stan opened a case on a table sitting against the back wall. It held several sizes of scrubbing brushes and scrapers. Beside it, a roll of biohazard bags and an industrial size sprayer sat side by side. A bucket, broom, and dustpan sat tucked beneath the table. Items I had plenty of experience with.

"We usually work our way from large to small. Depending on the scene, CID may have taken some of it with them. The rest is left for us to deal with." Stan grabbed a set of tongs. "The job has more facets than you might think. But cleaning is the largest part of it. So let's get cracking."

It was surreal. But once we picked up all the larger pieces and began spraying the liquid to break down the blood, the strangeness and the morbid, stomach-churning vibe receded. The smells became muted as I acclimated, though I was soon covered in sweat; both the suit and the labor increased my body temperature.

Once we sprayed everything down, we moved on to the scrubbing. Soon, all that existed for me was the cleaning—a strange Zen-like state I had experienced before when intensely concentrating on a simple task. My own personal Nirvana—an escape mechanism honed over time to take me away from the screaming, the crying, the

bullying, the questions, and the sadness—all the turbulent feelings and surroundings of my tumultuous youth.

I dived into the simplicity of the act of cleaning and making something better than how I'd found it. My minor mark on an otherwise uncaring and chaotic universe. A way to help me survive another day in the modern world without losing my mind.

"Julia... Julia?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry. Yes?" I stood and stretched, my knees trying to lock on me. I put on my well-honed poker face, a flash of hot embarrassment shooting through me as I realized I hadn't been paying enough attention to my surroundings.

Stan bent down to inspect my work and popped the baseboard to check behind it. "Time to call it, I think," he said. "That's some pretty thorough work. I'm kind of impressed. First-timers don't typically have much of a clue on what it truly means to get things clean."

I rolled my shoulders, only now feeling the strain from the effort. "Nothing like a nitpicky foster mom with a heavy hand to teach you to look in all the creases." I snapped my mouth shut, surprised I'd said anything. Sharing wasn't in my nature. It rarely ended well. To my surprise, though, he didn't prod, just let the comment drop. Points for him, then.

Stan led the way out. "Tai chi is pretty useful for keeping limber. It also centers your inner chi. Staying centered is a must for this work. There's a lot of emotional fallout to deal with. People just don't realize the multiple layers of this job. It takes a special kind of person."

I wasn't sure how to take that. "So what happens now?"

He barked a laugh. "We get cleaned up. Then you meet the boss. After that, we'll see what we shall see."

I didn't blame him for keeping it vague—the final decision wasn't his—but some kind of encouragement would have been nice. Or maybe not. The churning I had forgotten about for a while came back. "Well, regardless of how it turns out, I appreciate the time. Thanks."

"Yeah. Right back atcha."



Since I'm a glass-half-empty type of girl, I checked to make sure the shower area in the back of the dressing room was empty and that there weren't any signs of hidden video cameras to be found. I didn't know a ton about crime-scene decontamination, but I'd seen plenty of skeezy things happening at what appeared to be legit places—like disguised spy cams propped in women's fitting rooms, bogus job listings requiring prospective employees to change into a uniform, and the like. Yeah, my spidey sense was quiet at the moment, but since I still wasn't sure what to make of this place, and was about to bare my all, I figured better safe than sorry. I did appreciate that the showers were actual stalls, though I still brought Switch in there with me just in case. I quickly showered off the sticky film of sweat from my skin and took even less time getting dressed.

A beaming Karamel stood poised like a neon sign outside the dressing room. She looked even peppier than before—something I

wouldn't have thought possible. It made me tired just watching her try to keep still. Where did she find the energy?

"I'm so *excited!*" Karamel twirled on her tippy-toes. "You get to meet the boss! That's like *super* good news!" She let out a tiny squeal. "I'm so thrilled for you!"

I didn't know how to deal with this much positivity on my behalf. It felt strange having someone be so delighted for me. "Thanks?"

"You have *no idea* how picky she is about who gets to work with us," Karamel said. "She's always so very, very careful. So the fact that you've gotten this far...!"

I watched the diminutive receptionist struggle to hold back another squeal. Karamel's liveliness only made me more anxious. Her choice of words seemed a little odd as well. Thinking about it, a few things Stan had said were also a bit weird.

Or maybe I was just reading too much into everything.

"Come this way," the receptionist said. "I'll take you to her office."

Karamel almost skipped along as she led me back to the main lobby, then we followed the trees to a golden arch that flowed into an even fancier area of the building. More shiny marble, super thick carpeting, and lots of crystal and chrome.

"This is where we woo the *big* clients. We keep high-class meeting rooms and posh offices to make them feel important and prove that we're so worth it." She sent me a mischievous wink. "I much prefer the trees in the lobby."

They must serve some serious clientele if they felt the need to impress them this much. Even though I had just showered, I didn't dare touch anything.

"Here we are." Karamel knocked on an ornately carved wooden door. "Miss Anghelescu, I've brought Miss Xero to see you." The receptionist waved me in.

My breath hitched in my throat as I stepped into the room. Lush burgundy chairs, an old-fashioned French desk done in bone white with a scrolled trim, and granite statues in the corners screamed of sophistication and wealth.

Dawn Anghelescu, the owner of Remington Safe and Clean, came around her desk, exuding grace and poise as she offered a delicate, long-fingered hand. "Miss Xero, it's so nice to finally meet you in person."

Tall and lithe, Anghelescu wore a smart suit of black and white curves, her luxuriant hair tied into a thick braid of gold and brown. My roommate Penny, a popular fashion model, would have hated her instantly. Her oval face and lovely snub nose were pleasing, yet what drew you in and trapped you were her eyes. Dark brown with flecks of gold, her eyes seemed to look right into you, exposing your every thought or deed.

I had to consciously force my arm forward to take the other woman's hand and shake it. Hers was the voice with the subtle accent—she was the one who'd called me on the phone. Anghelescu's palm was smooth and warm, like a golden sunset. How she could stand to bring it into contact with my calloused, chapped hand was a mystery. Anghelescu's captivating gaze searched my face as if memorizing it. Then she smiled.

"Won't you take a seat?" She deftly guided me to a burgundy settee, then sat beside me as if we were old friends about to catch

up.

I glanced around in a panic, only then realizing Karamel had left me there alone. "Um..."

"Do you mind if I call you Julia? Formalities are necessary on certain occasions, but I doubt we need them here."

I had no idea what to make of this. I wasn't certain what I *had* expected, but this wasn't it. The woman didn't radiate any malice or mischief—but this felt wrong all the same. "I... Sure."

Those dark eyes bored into me while a soft smile graced Anghelescu's lips. "Stan had nice things to say about you. So did Karamel. But what do you think of us? Or is that too forward a question?"

I felt like someone had yanked the rug out from under me. This woman was confident and gorgeous; she owned and ran her own business—and did it her way, from what I could tell. She was all the things I wished to be, but wasn't—and those eyes seemed to see *everything*. "Unusual. You all seem incredibly unique."

"How polite of you to say." The soft smile grew. "It takes exceptional individuals to do what we do."

I couldn't picture this woman cleaning spilled wine with a sponge, let alone picking up guts with a pair of tongs while wearing a hazmat suit. "You've done the work?"

Anghelescu raised a well-manicured brow. "Of course. How else would I know what it entailed?"

I didn't think she was a liar, but I still couldn't quite connect this refined woman with that messy reality. "That's rare."

The brow rose higher.

"I mean, you rarely hear about company executives who've done the grunt work." *Yeah, way to put your foot in your mouth, Xero.* "No offense."

"Sadly, there have always been those who believe honest work is beneath them." Anghelescu shook her head. "You will find no one like that here. To lose touch is to die."

My brows drew together. *What a strange thing to say.*

"Do you have questions for me about the company? What we do?"

"Uh, no, ma'am." I tried not to fidget. This whole surreal episode was making me twitchy. "I did some research before coming here and filling out the application. Though the website didn't even hint at the amazing offices you have here. But it said you've been in business for over twenty-five years?"

"Yes, at least that long." The woman appeared pleased. "Although CTS decon—that's 'crime and trauma scene decontamination'—is considered a rather recent industry model, cleaning itself has been around for millennia. It's just become a bit more specialized in modern times."

I nodded. "Until I saw it in the paper, I didn't even know there were such unusual jobs out there." The nature of it, though, explained the perks. Or at least I'd thought it did before I'd set foot in the place.

"There are more of them than you realize," Anghelescu said.

Under that all-knowing gaze, I didn't dare doubt it.



CHAPTER 03

"So, how did it go?"

I put my keys in the dish by the front door and glanced at my roommate. Penny asking after me? That was rare. Typically all she thought about was herself. I hoped this wasn't a sign she was about to slip into one of her 'moods.'

"Okay, I think. The receptionist said I should hear back in a day or two."

I was positive I hadn't generated any points in my favor during the interview, as my usual solution when unclear as to what to do was to stop talking. I doubted it had reflected well on me.

"The higher pay would be nice, of course." Penny sent me a weighted glance. "I'd worry less about your ability to hold up your end of the rent."

Good old Penny—always showing concern for others. Right...

With her long legs, red-streaked blond hair, and angular features, Penny made an impression wherever she went. And she liked it that way. The fact that I was plain and called little attention to myself suited my roommate just fine. My ability to ignore her didn't hurt the relationship either, not that Penny ever noticed.

We might not pull each other out of a fire, but when she'd offered to give me a discount on my share of the rent in exchange for keeping the whole place clean and tidy, I couldn't pass it up. Half the rent for a place like this had been beyond my means. With the added perk of not having to pretend to be interested in each other's business, the arrangement suited both of us. A match made in heaven? Not on your life. But weirdly enough, it worked. "Thanks. Your concern is underwhelming."

"As if." Penny rolled her eyes. "Just hold up your end and we're golden."

I gave her a thumbs up and walked through the fancy living room with its giant-screen TV over to my plain and spartan bedroom on the left. Penny didn't know I knew, but my roommate had gone through twelve other people before I'd found her. None had stayed over a week—sometimes their choice, sometimes not.

Self-confidence was a must for a model, but Penny took it to god-like levels. Yet she still had no idea why she couldn't keep a roommate. But since modeling could at times be a cutthroat business and her personality and methods had left others in her wake, Penny had enemies, lots of enemies, and she often traveled for work. So she wasn't fond of leaving the place without a body in it to discourage any childish retaliations. Enter *me*—convenient, dull, without any modeling aspirations. Perfect!

My phone vibrated in my pocket. "This is Julia."

"Ah, Miss Xero. It's Dawn Anghelescu from Remington Safe and Clean. I am pleased to inform you that you have the job if you want it."

"Are you sure?" My face turned hot. I really *must* be tired to question Anghelescu's decision like that. *Idiot!*

A soft chuckle came from the other end of the call. "Yes, I'm positive. I believe you'll be a good fit."

My cheeks only grew hotter. "Thank you. I—I'll have to give two weeks' notice at my current job. Though they may let me go sooner." Harry was going to go ballistic. *Too bad.*

"Two weeks is perfectly acceptable. You'll receive your offer letter via Fed Ex by tomorrow. It will include your new employee packet as well as an appointment for a full physical and hepatitis B shot—but let us know if you need to reschedule for any reason."

"A hepatitis B shot?" I asked.

"Yes. It's for your safety. People may not think much of CTS decon, but the work does have risks. No matter how prepared we believe we are, you can't discount Murphy's Law, so we cover as

many bases as possible to minimize any potential hazards. It's also an OSHA requirement."

That made sense. There was a lot I'd need to learn.

"In a few days, you'll receive a package with more paperwork to fill out as well as a couple of uniforms to get you started. There'll also be a schedule and dates for a five-day training course. First time for you, but a refresher for some of our other employees.

"Welcome to our family, Miss Xero. We hope you'll be with us for a long time to come."

This was actually *happening*. I'd done it! Despite everything, I got the job! So why was my spidey sense suddenly screaming?



The following two weeks were a wild, emotional rollercoaster.

The offer letter arrived early the next day. After spending a listless night sure I'd imagined the whole thing, I had physical proof it was real. Then there was the salary—the *salary*! Twenty an hour was double what I made at the Golden Corral, *with* tips, and that was before the third shift differential of fifty percent kicked in. I stared at the paper with its shiny Remington Safe and Clean logo for thirty minutes, basking in the weird, giddy feeling flowing up from my toes. I had felt nothing like it before—never thought I *would* feel it. I was sure that only someone who'd won the lottery would have an inkling of what I was experiencing at that moment.

But when I came off the high, doubt nibbled at the back of my brain. It was too good to be true. It had to be, didn't it? Or did it?

Wonderful things happened to bad people all the time. So why couldn't I have some luck swing my way for once?

Still, it wasn't a big surprise when things got bumpy. I purposely didn't turn in my notice until the end of my shift, not wanting to be around when Harry lost it.

What I hadn't expected was him trying to make me feel like I'd betrayed him, like I *owed* him for putting up with me all this time. He even had the gall to try to guilt me into staying. Then there was Melody. Suddenly we were besties. She kept asking all sorts of questions—not that I answered any of them in anything but the vaguest of terms. I couldn't tell if she was trying to get me to stay or figure out where I got the job so she could try to take it from me.

They were two of the most exhausting weeks of my life.

I had only one regret—Mrs. Conrad. I would miss seeing her. More than that, I worried about the older woman getting enough to eat, about Melody bullying her for tips she couldn't afford, or that she wouldn't be allowed to take some extra bread home once I was gone.

The next time she came in, I made sure we had a few private moments.

"Mrs. Conrad, make sure to sit in Mary's area from now on when you come. She'll take good care of you. Georgia is okay if Mary's area is full. But you should avoid Melody at all costs."

"Oh, dear, don't worry about me, and call me Roxanne." Mrs. Conrad patted my hand. "I'll be all right. You deserve more, so I'm happy for you—though I will miss you."

"Thanks. That means a lot." I dropped my voice to a whisper. "Would, would you like to keep in touch? I'll be working the late shift, but I can probably meet you somewhere for coffee now and again. Or I'd love to take you to lunch sometime. Not here, though. Unless you'd prefer not to."

The old lady chuckled. "I'd like that. We can trade email accounts, or—are you on Facebook? You can find lots of eligible men there, you know." She looked hopeful.

"No, sorry. Never been much for social media."

"Ah, an old lady can but dream." Mrs. Conrad gave me a wistful smile. "I guess I'll have to figure out some other way to find you a promising young man."

Ugh. I certainly hoped not. I didn't have time to indulge in something fanciful like romance.

GLOSSARY

Coño – equivalent of 'damn' in Puerto Rico. The word has a different, more vulgar meaning in Spain.

CTS decon – crime and trauma scene cleanup and decontamination.

Dryad – a nature spirit or nymph that lives inside trees and take the form of young women. Originally, they were specific to oak trees.

Gaelic – the Celtic language of Scotland

Korrigan – a fairy or dwarf-like spirit in Breton.

Ogham – an ancient British and Irish alphabet. It consists of twenty characters formed by parallel strokes on either side of, or across, a continuous line.

Paphal Saġiga – (pap-hal sag-gig-ga) — Secret Humankind — (Sumerian/Old Babylonian) in the Cuneiform writing system.

Vâlvă – a Romanian spirit, female. White vâlvă are benevolent and protective, while black vâlvă are considered evil. There are many types of vâlvă, each with different associations.

DEDICATION

To Rachel Caine AKA Roxanne Longstreet Conrad AKA Julie Fortune and to Carole Nelson Douglas. Though we didn't know each other well, meeting you both led to a boatload of wonderful adventures. I still miss you guys!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to all the wonderful authors that are part of [Future Classics](#). Torturing you guys is a lot of fun!

Special thanks go to both Denise Moy and Scott Knight. Thank you for insights and pitching in.

Last but not least, I'd like to thank my editor [Serenity Editing Services](#) , who like me, got caught in the year of chaos!

ALSO BY GLORIA OLIVER

COZY HISTORICAL MYSTERIES



Black Jade - A Daiyu Wu Mystery - Book 1

She has the murder weapon. Now she needs to find the body and the murderer. But can her need for justice shield her from death?

Dallas 1930. Daiyu Wu never hungered for justice. Blind since birth she's frustrated at her parents' overprotectiveness, so when she realizes there's been a murder she keeps them in the dark. The

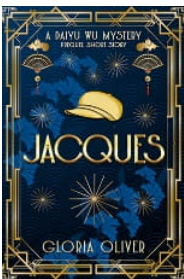
police are unaware of the misdeed, so she feels compelled to find proof and drag the evil act into the light.

Worrying her parents will figure out what she's up to, Dai continues to dig for clues as to the victim's identity. But dread cloaks her when she's targeted by a spoiled rich girl whose actions might allow the killer to slither away scot-free.

Can Dai safely navigate the pitfalls as she unearths the name of the deceased and hunts those involved, or will she take a misstep and expose herself and her family to deadly retaliation?

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Jacques - A Daiyu Wu Mystery Prequel Short

How many times can a boy lose his home?

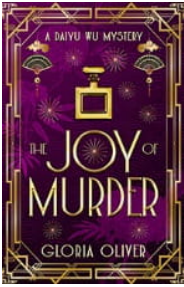
When Jacques is transferred to the Buckners Orphans' Home in 1916 at the age of six, he hopes that he's finally found a place to belong. Unfortunately, he couldn't be more wrong.

Jacques' only choice is to run away to Dallas and live on the streets. He has no future, no guarantee he will even survive.

Then he stumbles on a once-in-a-lifetime chance to change everything—if he *dares* to take it.

[Excerpt](#)

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The JOY of Murder - A Daiyu Wu Mystery - Book 2

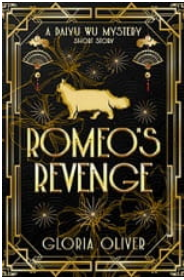
A socialite accused of murder, planted evidence, and mysterious enemies challenge blind detective Daiyu Wu in her new sleuthing adventure.

When a highly respected member of the ‘Little Mexico’ community is killed in 1930 Dallas, all the evidence points towards Grace Pierce, wife of a local businessman and a former member of the Ku Klux Klan. Grace’s son Truman turns to Daiyu Wu and her unique detective skills for help, but Dai quickly discovers that nothing about this case is what it seems.

With her companion Jacques and canine bodyguard Prince Razor, Dai must navigate a family in turmoil, racial tensions, and shady business deals to find the actual killer before Truman’s mother is sentenced to death.

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Romeo's Revenge – A Daiyu Wu Mystery Novelette

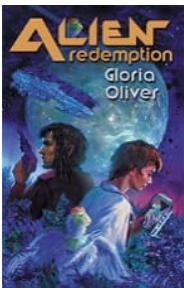
Two tragedies one year apart. An unlucky family or something more sinister? She intends to sniff it out.

When Daiyu Wu learns of a pair of seemingly unrelated deaths within the same family, her inquisitive nature demands she find out more. So, with the help of her companion, Jacques, and her canine protector, Prince Razor, can this blind sleuth find the clues in time?

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SCIENCE FICTION



Alien Redemption

She's blackmailed into a job. They discover an alien species. Will helping them get her spaced?

Claudia Zimmerman smacks rock bottom then falls off the edge. Used as a scapegoat by her employers, the medical researcher travels to the fringes of known space but is shattered when she becomes a victim of blackmail. Coerced into joining a landing party to an uncharted planet, her thrill at discovering a new intelligent race turns to horror when she realizes they are to be exploited.

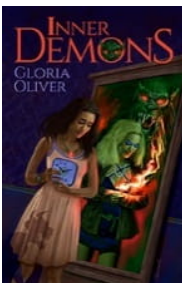
Worrying about what they aim to do with them, Claudia tries to guard their well-being while avoiding the captain's hair-trigger temper. As delivery of the lifeforms draws near, Claudia hatches a desperate plan that could end up getting her spaced.

Realizing that the aliens carry their own secrets, will Claudia's efforts save all of them or end up dooming the entire human race?

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FANTASY



Inner Demons

Possessed, her life shattered and left behind like trash. She will fight to get to the truth. Anyone standing in her way will be annihilated.

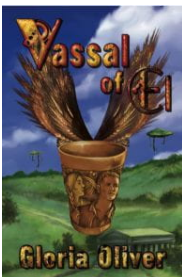
Tamara Williams is spinning like a top in six-inch heels. One moment she's cozying down with a cup of tea, and the next she's freaking out at finding herself in a dark street with headlights heading straight for her! To her chagrin she discovers she has three months of missing time in which she ruined her best friend's wedding, ditched her family and practiced blackmail.

Assuming she's bonkers, Tamara prowls for help jittery about what else she might destroy if she suffers another attack. Then she meets an older man who declares she isn't going batty but was possessed by a demon.

Knowing she was taken for a ride and then tossed to the gutter, can Tamara hunt down the supernatural culprit and give it a taste of its own medicine?

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Vassal of EI

Torn between two worlds, will he be able to save either of them?

Torren wanted nothing more than to forget his past and endure the life it had forced upon him. One small, begrudging act of kindness,

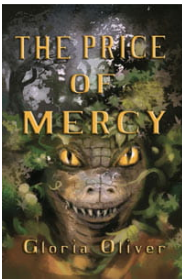
however, embarks him on a path that will bring him face to face with everything he has so heartily attempted to avoid.

In so doing, events that seemed to have no bearing on his old life now appear to be tangled with it and his present.

Caught between the world of his birth and the one he currently lives in, will Torren be able to set aside his hate and guilt long enough to keep both from utter destruction?

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The Price of Mercy

Which is worse...the monster within or without?

Wooing a new patron at the emperor's ball had been Jarrin Lestrave's only hope after being discarded by the Baroness. He finds the perfect subject, but in the end, he doesn't follow through on his plans. Yet the next day he discovers he's been marked a traitor to the realm-for defiling the emperor's daughter. Something which he did not do.

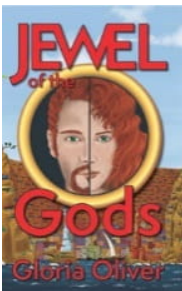
The Twelve, the emperor's secret guard, are sent after him. And when they catch him, they do not kill him. A worse fate has been set

aside for him. He is to lose his humanity and become enslaved to the empire for eternity.

Then he meets his accuser-Princess Yolandra. As he battles with his rising hatred and the invisible chains thrust upon him, he begins to see that all is not as it seems-his fate tied to the possible return of the madness which once before decimated the world around them.

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Jewel of the Gods

Long Live the King! But will he?

When fate sends Red and his crewmates to the coveted port of Syrras, it is an opportunity he plans to take full advantage of. Unfortunately, his search for a little adventure hands him a lot more than he ever bargained for.

Changed by unknown magics into something other than himself, he's told a terrible secret. One he must now help protect, even as he is tasked to find those responsible. Failure will cost him his body, his way of life, everything that makes him who he is.

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YOUNG ADULT



In the Service of Samurai

A mission unfulfilled. A young mapmaker kidnapped by skeletons. Can he serve his new masters and live or fail them and become one of the undead?

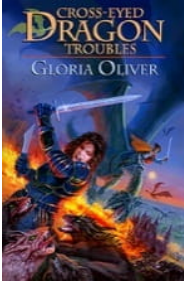
Toshiro Chizuson is about to lose everything. An apprentice cartographer in Nihon, he's horrified when a supernatural samurai lays claim to him and drags him away from all he knows. Though he valiantly tries to escape the monster's clutches, the boy is dumbfounded when told that he will help his new master willingly or be turned into a reanimated slave.

Using the skills in navigation he picked up from a foreign captain, Toshi struggles to reign in his deepening despair as he works with the cursed crew. Yet after he gets them to their destination, he's crushed when they deny him his promised freedom.

Can Toshi untangle the mysteries tied to the supernatural samurai and cut through the obstacles in his path, or will he fail and be forced to wander forever as one of the undead?

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Cross-eyed Dragon Troubles

A mental bond between a dragon and his rider has failed. A new student crashlands onto a scaly secret. Can she soar above it and spot the truth?

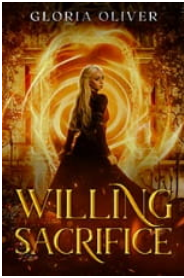
Talia has never endured such isolation. When she learns she's being sent to a far-off magic school, fear of being cut off from her friendly village leaves her frightened and adrift. Then she's dismayed at the academy's admittance officer's apathy and lack of help.

Taking other new arrivals under her wing to ease their transition and her own, Talia struggles to understand the bewildering workings of the strange institute. But when she is the accidental cause of an explosive misunderstanding, she unwittingly unearths a dragon's deeply buried secret.

Can Talia unravel the enigma of the mismatched human-dragon pair and mend the damage, all while trying to keep them and herself alive?

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Willing Sacrifice

Her destiny has always been clear. When the appointed time comes, she will offer her life to save the world. But what if she's wrong, and it leads to humanity's destruction?

La'tiera is plagued with doubts. After years of seclusion spent in preparation for her upcoming sacrifice, she's bewildered when an unexpected visitor tells her she must stay alive instead. So she battles to harden her heart and not be swayed by tempting words, knowing that caving in would result in countless gruesome deaths.

Yet seeing more of the world and interacting with others for the first time, La'tiera soon finds her resolve weakening. Still, the demons are coming and she must choose which of the two paths is the one that will not lead to humanity's doom.

Can La'tiera find evidence of her true destiny before it's too late, or will her choice cause the world to burn?

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HORROR/ALTERNATE HISTORY



Charity and Sacrifice (Novelette)

Trapped in a loveless marriage, will Elizabeth's sacrifice to regain Robert's attention be in vain?

All Elizabeth hoped to do was to rekindle the love in her marriage. Yet despite ignoring her social obligations and immersing herself in her husband's important work, somehow this only made things worse.

Her last hope is her unborn child — a source of unrequited love to fill the void inside her. But that too is taken from her. How? Why?

Her doctor avoids her. Her husband berates her. And there are whispers — whispers telling of things that cannot be.

Yet the more Elizabeth ignores the rumors, the more they press on her to seek the truth, so she concocts a plan to find it. To find it and hopefully exonerate both Robert and herself. To discover the reason she's lost all that's dear to her. And she will do it, even if she must venture into Whitechapel to do it.

[Excerpt](#)

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www.gloriaoliver.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gloria Oliver lives in Texas, staying away from rolling tumbleweeds while bowing to the wishes of her feline and canine masters. She worked at shoveling numbers around for oil & gas companies but has since retired and is now writing full-time.

Her previous works have been fantasy, urban fantasy, science fiction, and YA fantasy novels. Gloria's short stories of speculative fiction can be found in many anthologies, covering things from the fantastic and strange to a bubba apocalypse. As of 2021, she's also dipped her writer toes into writing cozy historical mysteries.

Gloria is a member in good standing of BroadUniverse though she has yet to make the list for Cat Slaves R Us. In her spare time (what's that?), she watches TV shows, movies, anime, plays PC games, and reads books.

For some free reads, novel-related short stories, sample chapters, and more, visit www.gloriaoliver.com.