



# ELIXIR OF LIFE

**Gloria Oliver**

# Elixir of Life

*An Urban Fantasy Short Story*



**GLORIA OLIVER**



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"Mom, please, not this again." Christine loosely held the phone to her ear while she glanced around her paper-laden desk, wondering why her mother insisted on foisting strangers on her. She reached for her cup of coffee, then realized it'd gone cold.

"But, honey, Johnny's the nicest young man. It wouldn't hurt to give him a chance now, would it?"

Christine sighed, checking around for any possible eavesdroppers. The open cubicle set up in the Philadelphia field office didn't leave much room for privacy. "Mom, you know how busy work is. I just don't have time to get into any kind of relationship at the moment. It wouldn't be fair to him." Aside from one-night stands, she wasn't interested in anything long term. She had her FBI duties to keep her occupied; she didn't need companionship, except for the occasional fling to sate her body's needs. The job was essential, and she'd seen too many divorces and custody battles ensuing from her married coworkers to want to bother with the hassle. The men her mother tended to pick never seemed to understand that. She had no room for outside commitments.

"Well, just think about it, okay? He's eager to meet you."

They usually were. Everyone wanted to meet an FBI agent. But none wished to deal with the issues associated with dating one, let alone marrying them.

"I will, Mom. I've got to go. Talk to you later." Christine set the handset back on its cradle and sighed again. At least she'd diverted her mother's good intentions for an additional week or two without another lecture. Or a guilt trip about having no grandbabies to spoil.

"Agent Daniels?"

"Yes?" Christine swiveled her chair around.

"Sorry to disturb you, but we have someone who says they have information on the Sleep Murders case, and she insists she will only speak to a female agent."

Oh great, just what she needed to make the day complete—some new crackpot with supposed leads on the killings. The crazies started streaming in when the story hit the papers. If Marshall, the branch head, ever found out who'd leaked the information to the press, he would nail their butts to the wall. Luckily, what got out wasn't much, so weeding out the fakes was a simple process. The murders, or what they were reasonably certain were murders, were so odd it was easy to tell who did and didn't know anything about them.

Christine stood up, bowing to the inevitable. "Sure, I'll speak to her. Where is she?" She straightened her drab, dark-colored suit. It was hard enough to climb to where she was—so a no-nonsense style of dress helped offset the stigma that came along with good looks. While a boon in some types of work, it didn't do much to get you included in a still mainly male-dominated field. Christine followed the other agent to the elevators.

That the FBI was investigating this rash of connected murders was pure luck. All the deaths involved appeared natural, and none of the families of the deceased deemed it necessary to authorize a full autopsy, except for one. The victim recently went through a

thorough medical examination and found at the top of health, so the fact he turned up dead of a heart attack prompted the wife to provide the go-ahead. What they encountered upon opening the body was unusual. While on the surface, the vic looked normal, his internal organs had atrophied to an extreme state. The coroner possessed no idea what could have caused such a thing in such short a time.

It might have all ended there, filed away as an unexplained death, except for an intuitive leap by the case's assigned detective. On a hunch, he'd done a random search for other deaths in Philadelphia and nearby cities found under similar circumstances. They'd died at home or hotels, in the nude, dead of heart attacks. The alarming number of hits had prompted the police officer to involve the local FBI branch, and after two more autopsies, it became apparent they had a bizarre serial killer on their hands.

Even the Behavioral Analysis Unit's profile had shed little light on what they were dealing with here. Aside from all the casualties being male, there was nothing else that tied them together. They fit all ages, ethnicities, and income brackets. Killers who prayed on random victims were troublesome to catch because they had no set MO.

As Christine got off the elevator on the second floor, she hoped Lewis, the lead agent on the case, wouldn't take it out on her if this should somehow pan out. His first chance at managing a project of this size, he was riding everyone hard and wanted every detail to go through him initially, regardless of how meaningless it might be or the idiotic amount of time it wasted. He was also old school, thinking investigative work was only a "man's" prerogative. That Marshall had included her in the team hadn't sat well with Lewis at all, and it showed in a dozen little ways.

"She's in interview room B." The agent pointed to a door on the left.

"Thanks." Christine nodded to him, then checked that the recording equipment connected to the room was primed for the conversation and turned it on, then grabbed a pad and two pens.

She knocked on the door to the interview room, then let herself inside. The sight which greeted her was far from anything she'd been expecting.

A Caucasian, probably five-five, and in her early twenties was sitting with her legs crossed in the formal parallel style, reclining in the uncomfortable chair as if it were a throne. Her lush black hair lay piled high on her head, then left to cascade down the back. A small nose and full lips gave her a European look, one enhanced by the elegant cut of her blue dress and lavender jacket, and the expensive silver fox stole at her neck.

Christine held her breath as the woman rose gracefully to her feet, bright hazel eyes meeting her gaze, filled with a vibrant intensity.

"Agent Daniels, so good of you to see me on such short notice." She extended a pristinely manicured hand.

Christine blinked as she shook it, the woman's fingers cool to the touch. "I'm sorry, do we know each other?" Though the woman could have been told her name by one of the agents, something about her tone hinted at a familiarity that shouldn't be there. Christine knew she'd never met this woman before today. Someone this alive wouldn't soon be forgotten.

"Only in a matter of speaking." A soft, secretive smile lit on the woman's face. "My name is Liana Sandland. I'm hoping to be of help to you in your current case." The barest hint on an accent marked her voice, like an unexpected fruity note in a glass of fine wine.



Unsettled but not willing to show it, Christine broke eye contact and closed the door, trying to gather her wits about her again. "Ah, yes, pleased to meet you, Miss Sandland. Thanks for coming. Won't you have a seat?"

Christine stepped around the table to take the other available chair. "Because of the serious nature of the case, all interviews are being recorded." She pointed to the camera in the corner and the red light showing it was live. "I hope it won't bother you, but we tape all statements and take notes. It's a good backup and works better for us as it lets everyone see the interview for themselves, so nothing gets lost in translation."

"No, please." Sandland sat back down. "But, before we start, may I ask a favor?"

Christine glanced over at her, wondering what she might need. "What is it?"

"For your safety, I thought I'd suggest that you—how do they quaintly put it?

"Cuff" me to the table."

"Excuse me?" Christine could only stare.

Sandland leaned forward. "I might become somewhat uncontrolled before we're finished."

Christine had no idea what she could be talking about. Maybe she had got stuck with a loonie after all. Didn't someone vet the woman before letting her get to this stage? "I think I'll take my chances." Was Sandland doing this for kicks? "It's not standard procedure."

Sandland leaned back. "As you wish." She seemed neither disappointed nor relieved by the refusal.

Christine shook her head, not comprehending this at all. Pushing it aside, she stuck turned toward the camera for a moment. "Casefile 158756 interview. The subject is

Liana Sandland." She paused for a few moments, writing the data on the notepad and centering herself to the task at hand. "Miss Sandland, it's my understanding you have information you wish to share with the FBI regarding the murders reported in the paper a few days ago."

"Yes, that is correct. I believe I have knowledge, which will help you catch the killer. You see, I am here to confess to the crimes."

Christine felt a jolt of surprise, though she shouldn't have. This was but one of a dozen such admissions in the last 48 hours. The package just didn't fit the usual convention. Why would someone this young and well off, covet this type of attention? Then an angering thought occurred to her. Could Lewis have put this woman up to this? Could it be the reason Sandland had asked for a female agent, possibly by name? Would even he stoop this low? But to what end?

"I see. That's quite interesting." Christine let her expression and voice go neutral. "Please explain."

A knowing smile lighted for a moment on the other woman's face. "Such a nonsense approach. So commendable." Sandland placed her small clutch purse on the table. "As to an explanation, it will take a little time, but if you'll indulge me, everything will become clear. In the end, you might even come to believe me."

Christine said nothing, not sure what she could say. If the woman was a liar, it would be revealed soon enough.

"Do you believe in God, Agent Daniels, or any god, for that matter?"

"I don't understand what this has to do with anything, Miss Sandland."

The woman smiled. "Men believe they *can* be God. That they are able to shape and purify nature and themselves until they achieve their version of what they consider perfection." Sandland leaned forward.

"Have you ever heard of the Elixir of Life, Agent Daniels?"

"The what?"

"The Elixir of Life—one of the alchemical miracles of the Adepts, the followers of Hermetic Philosophy. A potion that would grant the drinker the gift of prolonged existence."

Christine frowned at the odd direction Sandland appeared to be taking this. "And you say this has something to do with the murders?"

"Indirectly, yes. It is the catalyst that brought about the deaths in your investigation. The mysterious source of the desiccations."

Christine tensed, this being one detail not divulged by the press. But if Lewis put her up to it...

Sandland caressed the fur of the stole at her neck, the dead animal's glass eyes glinting in the intense overhead lighting. "I never wanted it. I never asked for it. But slaves get little say in whether or not they want to be used as guinea pigs by their masters."

Christine raised a brow, still possessing no idea where this strange conversation was going. If Lewis was responsible, he must have told Sandland to come up with whatever fanciful tale she wanted to—he didn't own much of an imagination. Not for this outlandish fiction. How far would she be willing to take this? "So you're saying you're a slave and you were experimented on?"

Sandland shook her head. "Was. I *was* a slave." She smiled sadly. "Though I suppose it could be debated that I have always been one. Just got given to a different master while living with delusions of freedom."

Under other circumstances, Christine would have been quite amused by all the double talk. "Right."

"The Elixir is a lie, of course. At least the version Rothlean concocted. Even before I got dragged to his household in the Carpathian Mountains, he'd spent years working on this aspect of the alchemical arts. That he had already mastered the making of the Philosopher's Stone and could transmute lead into gold meant little to nothing to him, other than as a means to finance further experiments.

"Though he was looking to create a vision of man made perfect, he was far from that himself. Even all his study and meditation didn't drive away some of his baser needs. So they brought me to his household as a child of thirteen—a gift from an Islamic prince and a fellow student of the Arts. You'd be hard-pressed to find a more desolate hole—a lead mine turned into a house by a man as mad as he was brilliant."

"So, this was when exactly...?" Black market slavery was still a primary world concern, and if this woman had been involved in something like that and somehow escaped... Christine wasn't sure what answer she would get. The woman before her was young, but her sophistication spoke of someone older. If she'd ever been a slave, she couldn't have been one for very long.

"If memory serves, it would have been around the Year of Our Lord, 1433."

Christine had a hard time keeping the skepticism from her face.

Sandland laughed, but there was no mockery in her tone. "Yes, you heard, right. 1433. I was a casualty of some of the skirmishes still ongoing with the Moors."

Christine sighed and wrote all this dutifully down, wondering how far the woman would take the facade. Personally, she didn't enjoy fantasies. The real world was too grim to indulge in such fanciful things. "Okay, so you're centuries old, and all this happened a very long time ago, do I have that right?" It was hard to keep the sarcasm from her voice.

"Yes." Sandland didn't seem offended at her obvious disbelief. "I pleased him as expected, and he came to trust me, at least as far as he would trust anyone, which wasn't much. So when he thought he might have come to the correct balance in his formula, I was given the honor of trying it for him." She abruptly stood and began pacing in the room, stroking her stole in an absentminded gesture. Christine flinched at the sudden movement, feeling uncharacteristically jumpy and having no idea why that was.

"Can you imagine it? For years I'd seen the nauseating results of his inexhaustible experiments, and now I was to be one of them. I screamed, I pleaded, I fought, all to no avail. Though he'd insisted many times I'd become important to him, it was clear I wasn't important enough."

Her pacing picked up speed, the heels of her shoes making clip noises against the colored concrete flooring. All the micro-expressions and strained body language spoke of the emotional turmoil in recounting the events. Except it made no sense.

"The elixir burned my throat as they forced it down my mouth. Convulsions wracked me for days—and I could always feel my master's presence nearby, watching me, studying me, taking his precious notes on my progress, the entire time telling me how honored I was to be going through this for him."

Christine observed Sandland, sensing the pain behind the words, the hatred at the betrayal. You would have almost thought what she was talking about was real. Even if Sandland's name proved to be false on a more in-depth inspection, she might be able to track her through the actor's guild. Searching for someone like her shouldn't prove too difficult. She was talented, she'd give her that. "You're all right now, though. It didn't kill you."

Sandland glanced sharply at her, almost as if she'd momentarily forgotten Christine's presence. The building tension in her body flushed away. "No, you're correct, it didn't. But it doesn't stop me from wishing it had." She came back and sat down on the edge of her chair, her intensity palpable. "Then, one day, the pain was just gone. I was ravenous and ate everything in sight, but otherwise, I seemed fine. Rothlean couldn't have been more excited. With great relish, he explained the mechanics of what occurred to me, although I didn't possess the knowledge to understand any of it at the time. All I knew was that he was pleased, and I hated him for it.

"But though I lived through his latest recipe, he wasn't yet willing to take it himself. Just because I was alive didn't mean the elixir had worked, you see. He didn't want to assume anything, and to be honest, I believe the amount of pain I went through daunted his enthusiasm to try it somewhat. So he watched and waited. However, this didn't deter him from still fulfilling his occasional appetites with me. That's when I discovered what it had truly done."

Christine looked up from the notepad, waiting for her to go on. That's when she noticed Sandland doing something odd—she was pushing down on one of her fingernails with her thumb, almost as if she were checking herself for dehydration.

"Once we'd joined, I felt... a strange sensation, a current, though at the time there was nothing in my experience I could use to describe it. The one thing I knew was that it made me feel better, full, and that once Rothlean was spent, it put him into a deep sleep. I realized then that what I had gained had come from him. I hadn't taken much, but it affected him. What would happen if I took more?"

She stroked her stole again. Whether for inspiration or courage to go on, Christine couldn't tell.

"So I increased my attentions toward him, glorying in the strange energy, even as I saw the strain of it telling on his body over several weeks. He assumed my heightened appetite was a side effect of the elixir, and he couldn't have been happier—for what man would turn down a woman's willing endeavors?" She flashed a knowing smile.

Christine squirmed in the hard seat. "So, you're saying that you were—leeching the life out of him? Like a—like a--"

"A succubus? Is that the word you're looking for?"

Christine wasn't sure what she'd been searching for but nodded anyway.

"Perhaps... Although I'm not a demon, as far as I know. The Church would probably classify me as one, regardless." Sandland pressed her finger again, studying the nail intently, a cloak of sadness shrouding her form.

"I overflowed with vitality. It took a lot of effort to hide this from him, so when he slept, I ran as if mad through deserted hallways trying to expend it.

"Eventually, he admitted to himself that he suffered from something more than just fatigue. He looked worn, old. In a panic, he started running all manner of tests on himself. He was tempted to take the elixir then, but I played on his fears and made him

believe he might not survive the excruciating experience unless he was more hale before attempting it. Still, I plied him with pleasure and stole more of what little he had left, until one night, after days of acting concerned and catering to his every need, he had no more to give me."

"So you murdered him." Christine's voice was flat. The fact this Rothlean had died in bed was too reminiscent of the actual murders she was investigating. The desiccation and now this. Had Lewis revealed restricted information just to play this game? "So, what did you do then?"

Sandland stared for a moment at the room's closed door. "A struggle of sorts occurred amongst the surviving slaves and the few guards. Rothlean had no living relatives anyone knew of, and our location was so remote, no one would be the wiser, so they tried to lay claim to what had been his. It proved simple enough to swipe a few things and escape in the ensuing chaos. What fears had kept me from running before held no sway over me anymore. What use was it to have this power and the supposed ability to live forever if I was only to be passed from one master to another?"

"So I ran. Ran from the mountain to the valley and beyond. I felt no hunger, no thirst, I was too full of vitality to need any other sustenance. For the first time, I started to believe that perhaps Rothlean had inadvertently given me a gift after all—one I had, in the end, cheated him from obtaining for himself." She laughed.

"It even protected me from the elements. I could go on for days without sleep if I wished. If I'd been normal, I would surely have died during my exodus, but as things stood, I had little difficulty."



"This is why you've killed so many men? Because of your hatred of your master and the need to maintain your power?" This was something she could understand, a piece of her delusion the profilers could work with if it proved not to be a giant hoax at her expense.

Sandland laughed harder. "That would be too *easy*. Things are never so simple. Are you sure you don't wish to restrain me, Agent Daniels?"

Christine stared at the woman suspiciously, wondering if that was the crux of Lewis' scheme. For all she knew, he could be eavesdropping on the conversation from one of the monitors, waiting to see if she'd fall for the ruse and bust in once she'd restrained Sandland. Thus getting to embarrass her before the rest of the team. "I still don't think that's exactly necessary."

Sandland pressed on her fingernail again. "I would ask you to reconsider."

Christine felt a thread of annoyance. "I appreciate your concern, but I stand by my decision."

A half amused, half concerned look flashed across Sandland's face. "As you wish." She lightly ran a hand over her stole once more, as if caressing a familiar, beloved pet.

"Eventually, I stumbled upon a village in the country presently known as Moravia and later moved on to more populated cities. I ran into trouble now and again, had to escape more than once, and endured more slavery at others. Yet for years, I didn't seek to gain the energy I had so greedily taken from Rothlean.

"At some point, I started to feel a gnawing need, as if from every part of me. It made me listless and slow. I found that the only way to make it stop was to entertain—

once every few weeks. Men being what they are, this never proved a problem. But as more and more years went by, I noticed the need coming upon me more and more frequently.

"After four or five centuries, it got to where that was pretty much the only thing I was doing anymore."

The sheer desolation in her tone made Christine glance up from her notes. Sandland was once more pressing her nail.

"You've heard of animals that have to eat almost constantly, have you not? That their entire existence, aside from a little time to sleep or procreate, consists solely of feeding their never-ending hunger? *That's* what I became.

"Oh, I tried to refuse to be a slave to it. But the longer I lived, the direr the consequences of ignoring it—though it still wouldn't let me die. And despite my extended life, it wanted to live longer."

Christine frowned, wondering what she meant by consequences. This could be another facet of her delusion. Women serial killers were few, yet not unheard of. But even so, how was she killing them? The medical examiners had found no puncture marks, no bruising, nothing that indicated the desiccations were due to an external source. She squirmed a little, but for a different reason. She understood a bit about bodily demands and the need to find men to satisfy them, and how with the right face and clothing, how easy it was to do.

Christine glanced up at Sandland then blinked, knowing something about the woman had changed but didn't immediately know what.

"Before my ministrations took only minutes, perhaps hours from a man's life. But the need didn't stop, and I found my capacity for taking more at one time increasing. Whether or not I wanted to take it."

Her hair—it was her hair. Christine could have sworn that earlier, the glow from the overhead lights had reflected off it more fully. Now it seemed dulled? Less full?

"This gave me a reprieve of sorts for a while, but it didn't last long. Soon I was draining months, even decades from my partners. Then one day, five years ago, my body took it all, drained the man I was coupling with like dry earth soaking up a spilled glass of water."

Christine felt her eye twitch. Five years ago? Lewis was stretching the truth now. If that was indeed when the killings started, there were at least three and a half years of kills unaccounted for. Yet such a high rate of mortality by heart attack would have drawn someone's attention unless the deaths had been spread across the states and beyond. The woman looked to have the money to be mobile.

Sandland opened her clutch and removed some folded papers. She unfolded them and set them face up where Christine could see them. It appeared to be a list of names, places, and times.

"I swore I would do it no more. That I would rather die if it were necessary. An easy thing to say—a harder thing to do. Not even my rising self loathing proved much of a deterrent." Her hazel eyes turned toward Christine, almost commanding their gazes to meet.

Christine stared, confused by her words but more so at the delicate laugh lines and crows feet appearing on her face where none had been before. How?

"I couldn't stop myself, and no one seemed to be the wiser. So imagine my surprise when I found the article in the paper a few days ago. Someone had *finally* caught on." Sandland's laugh was a little frayed. She pushed the list across the table. "I think if you check these, you'll find more names to add to your lists. There's also a timetable. Something to help your associates if things don't work out today, as I hope they will." Sandland pressed on her nail again. This time, it came clean off the finger. She flicked it away toward the camera, watching it flip through the air on its way down as if it were nothing more than an errant piece of lint.

Christine shot up to her feet, for the first time believing this might not be a ruse. "What did you just--?"

Sandland rose, something new and menacing in her stance. Her intense stare swept up and down Christine, making her feel like a side of meat. There was a hunger there, but not the type she was used to evoking in men and even some women.

"I'm running out of time, Agent Daniels, but I'm not ready to go," Sandland said, her voice growing lower, more guttural. "This won't be pleasant—*for you*." She smiled, but instead of the brilliant white smile from before, this one seemed to yellow as Christine watched. "I've never been able to extract energy from a woman, but seeing as I've let things deteriorate this far, I believe I'm willing to try again." Sandland's expression turned feral. "It's nothing personal, but despite my convictions, it's hard not to want to live, even if it is at another's expense."

Christine froze, her eyes locked on the transforming thing before her. Liana's hair continued to dull and thin. Age spots surfaced on her hands and face. Pert breasts

expanded and then sagged, changing how her clothes lay upon her. Her shapely legs lost their firmness and tone.

"I guess someone else will have to be the one to stop me. I tried to warn you. You've no one to blame for what's about to happen but yourself." With a strong heave, Sandland the table bolted table aside, the notepad and papers scattering to the ground. "I never wanted *any* of this, but what is a helpless woman to do?"

Her mind balking against what she was seeing, Christine edged back, gagging as a cloying odor now came off Sandland in waves. Though she'd seen her share of dead bodies and assaulted by their decay, this was ten times worse. It was compacted, invasive, and it was coming from someone still living. She covered her mouth and nose even as her stomach lurched in protest at the assault.

"We are so very alike, you know. It's why I chose you for this. I imagine it will make matters more interesting." Brittle white hair fell from her head. The skin yellowed and was shrinking up against the bone. Sandland's eyes bulged and shone with inner madness as she suddenly lunged forward.

Christine didn't think, only reacted. She dodged to the left, reaching inside her jacket for her gun. "Stay back!" She glanced at the room's only door, hoping to reach it and call for other agents, but the thing that had been Sandland casually maneuvered between her and the way out.

"Whatever is happening to you, I can get you some help. But you must keep your distance and move away from the door. Do it now!"

The shriveled creature before her grinned, the teeth yellowed and cracked. "But I so want to show you how I committed the murders, my dear. How else will I make you to believe my story, Christine?"

The tone of familiarity was dreadfully clear, as if she were intimately acquainted with her in every way. Was this part of Sandland's, of this thing's MO? Did she always confess to all her victims? Christine kept the gun trained on Sandland, trying to decide what to do. Sandland was unarmed, which forbade the use of deadly force, but she'd ripped a bolted table from the concrete floor without much effort. Though versed in hand to hand combat, Christine didn't want to touch her, didn't want to be anywhere *near* her. In her heart of hearts knew it was death staring her in the face. "Don't do this!"

"I am not allowed to live for *anything* else." Sandland ran at her.

A loud retort echoed in the room as Christine fired her weapon. The bullet hit Sandland in the shoulder, jerking her back several feet. Instead of going down in writhing pain, however, Sandland's skeletal smile flashed again, amusement sparkling in the maddened eyes.

"You will have to do better than that to win, I'm afraid."

"Stop this, stop it now!" Christine's blood ran cold. This woman, this *thing*, wasn't human.

With a barked laugh, Sandland leaped forward. It forced Christine to pull the trigger a second time.

The bullet careened into Sandland's face, the force of it flipping her body backward.

Holding onto her weapon with both shaking hands and pointing it to the floor, Christine rushed to her. Sandland lay unmoving, bones covered in parched skin, a hole in the side of her face and cranium. Despite that, there was no blood, no gore. Sandland's remaining eye swiveled to look at her, the light within them dimming but lucid.

"I guess this means you win, Christine. *Thank you.*"

Suddenly the skin around her body cracked, revealing the bones beneath. Her still staring eyeball sunk into its socket, disintegrating as Christine watched. Her bones snapped and then turned to dust, leaving a fine film on the floor and her empty, expensive clothes. The eyes of the stole stared at Christine accusingly.

The door to the room yanked open. "What's going on? We thought we heard gunfire." Two agents rushed inside, weapons drawn, trying to appraise the situation.

"Where did the woman go?"

Christine shook her head, her chest hurting, the walls around her closing in, making it hard to breathe.

"Watch the video." With no other explanation to her cohorts, she half stumbled out into the hallway. She wobbled away several paces before leaning her back against the wall, her breath rasping in and out.

She shivered, but not from what she'd done—that was too fantastical to believe, let alone explain—it would catch up to her later. What was unsettling her was more fundamental, more personal. *We are so very alike, you know. It's why I chose you for this.* In many ways, Sandland had reminded her about herself and put her choices in a horrifying perspective. Sandland may have had no alternative, but Christine kept herself at a distance on purpose, draining the men she met for her own physical needs and

nothing else. Was what Sandland had become what she appeared like to the men she spent the night with? A predator? The thought of it made her feel ill.

"Miss, are you all right?"

Christine looked up at the unfamiliar voice. She found a kind-faced man with a visitors' badge staring at her worriedly. She pushed away from the wall, shoving her gun back into its holster, trying not to look embarrassed at being seen this way. "Yes, I'm fine." She quickly slammed her professional mask in place. "May I help you?"

"Oh! Sorry. My name is Michael Thorn. I am an attorney with Young & Young on retainer for Miss Liana Sandland. She asked that I bring some papers today to Agent Christine Daniels? Might you know where I could find her? I was told she was on this floor."

A wave of unreality swept through Christine, making her dizzy. Sandland had known, she'd known all along what would happen—she had planned it. Death by cop. Impossible as it seemed, it appeared she had researched Christine, figured out everything about her—especially the fact that at some deep level they were very much alike—it was why she'd *chosen* her. Not only to end her pitiable existence but to do one last decent thing before she left, to show Christine where her chosen path might lead her? "My God..."

She didn't realize she was falling until Thorn grabbed her and kept her from hitting the floor. "Miss, what's wrong?"

Christine glanced up into his face and realized she couldn't do it anymore. She didn't want to live that life; she didn't want to meet that end. The loneliness of her chosen existence came crashing down around her. She didn't want to be alone any longer.



Tears coursed down her cheeks, and she sobbed, even as the confused stranger held her. His papers scattered beneath the overhead light's unforgiving glare.



The End

## CHAPTER ONE

“Getting a little excited, are we?” I couldn’t keep the grin out of my voice as I kicked off my shoes and dug my toes into the carpet and stretched. Getting home in the evenings was one of the best perks of the day. Switching the phone to my other hand, I picked up my low heeled pumps and stepped into the bedroom.

“Yes. No? Mostly I’m totally stressing out! Richie is useless at this stuff. He’s got no idea that Peach, Taffeta Peach, and Candy Peach aren’t in *any* way the same color.” Debbie sighed from the other end of the line. “Honestly, he could try a little harder. We’ll only get married once.”

I didn’t have any idea what the differences between those colors were either but figured it wasn’t the time to say so. I tucked the shoes away in the closet and grabbed a pair of gray sweat pants and an old Beatles t-shirt, feeling the day slide off my shoulders as I changed. “You’ve known he’s been color impaired for years, love won’t change that. Or have you forgotten his color choices for the college mixer two years ago?” Drifting to the kitchen, I pulled down my favorite cup, chipped handle and all, and filled it with water and stuck it in the microwave to heat.

A stifled giggle came from the other end of the line. “What a disaster! That won’t ever be happening again on my watch.”

“I should hope not.” Grinning, I brought out my tea colander and opened the cabinet to pick the flavor of the evening.

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Blueberry Cheesecake Tea seemed just the thing.

“We’re still on for this weekend, right?” A slight note of insecurity bled through.

I worked hard not to smile. Though I usually wasn’t much into fashion or agonizing over what cake flavoring would please most people, I’d do almost anything for Debbie. “Of course, looking forward to it.”

“I love you, Tam.”

“I love you, too. But don’t tell Richie, he’ll get jealous.”

Debbie laughed. “It’s a secret. Pick you up at nine.”

I hung up just as the microwave dinged. Pulling out the mug, I put it on a tray with everything else needed, and went to the living room, looking forward to stretching out on my gray couch and sipping my tea.

I’d just set the tray down when I noticed an odd smell...like rotten eggs. I half turned, then...

A pair of headlights was coming right for me.

I froze, my breath catching at my throat, my brain refusing to accept the impossible change.

The car swerved at the last moment, and time slowed around me as a flush of adrenaline hit my system. The blare of a pressed horn crashed into my ears.

The dark blue Oldsmobile missed me by mere inches, the glow of streetlights reflecting from its sides. Humid wind whipped over me, trying to drag me along in the car’s wake. The stench from the exhaust coiled about me, and I spun around to watch the trailing red tail lights.

“Lunatic!” An arm shot out the window, the middle finger held up as an extra commentary on the near miss.

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The car never even slowed.

This was real.

Other pairs of headlights bore down my way. Fear spiked through me, yelling at me to get the hell out of there. I tripped when I took my first panicked step, the shoes on my feet feeling strange and awkward. I glanced down and saw I was wearing white boots with six-inch heels. Worse, I was also wearing a dark sequined dress that only covered a small part of my upper thighs.

I wasn't a prude, but I had taste, dammit, and this get up just wasn't me. I stumbled toward the sidewalk to my right, only too aware of the traffic heading toward me.

I almost collapsed once I made it, the high heels messing with my center of gravity. A Shell gas station and a combination KFC/Taco Bell sat in front of me. The location didn't look familiar, though, at the moment, nothing did.

How did I get here?

Panic nibbled at the back of my mind, confusion clouding everything.

I slowly turned where I stood and spotted a freeway with an overpass on my right. Across the blacktop street was a bank and several grassy lots set back from the curb. The street sign said Beechnut Street. That rang a bell—could I still be in Houston? Just thinking it gave me hope. At the moment, though, it wouldn't have surprised me to find out I was on another planet entirely.

Chilled, I rubbed my arms, even as a bead of sweat ran down my neck. A small purse on a long chain strap smacked against my thigh. I brought it close, never having seen it before, and opened it. Wads of loose cash lay inside, as well as a tube of lipstick and a

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set of keys hanging off a skull keychain. There was no driver's license or other type of ID. No cell phone, either. I couldn't tell if the purse was even actually mine. Yet the shape of one of the keys looked familiar. I was pretty sure it belonged to my apartment.

It looked like I had cash, what I hoped was my key, and I was possibly in my city. This meant I could get back home to things I knew.

Home—yes, getting home sounded excellent right now.

Taking a deep breath, I felt slightly more in control. Yes, home, I needed to get myself home. That was a plan, something to aim for. I half walked, half waddled toward the KFC/Taco Bell, hoping to find a pay phone or beg to borrow someone's cell. I'd never worn such tall heels. They tried to sink into the grass as I cut across the strip to the parking lot. As I neared the bank of glass windows advertising value meals and combo platters, I spotted my reflection and came to a complete stop.

The image that mirrored my movements was and wasn't me. I had screaming platinum blonde hair. Straight and startling in its color, it dropped down to my shoulders. It couldn't be real. No matter how many straighteners I used on my hair, it'd never been that cooperative. A shaking hand with platinum, luminescent nail polish rose up to touch the hair. After a quick inspection, I realized it was a wig. Though I wasn't considered that dark-skinned, especially when compared to the rest of my family, out here, my face and eyes seemed to suck out the light, especially with my face being framed by the platinum hairpiece, my eyes shaded with glittering eye shadow and lips with matching lipstick. The black and way too short sequined dress showed stripes of

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startling white and matched the tall-heeled white boots that rose up to my knees. I wasn't sure if I looked more like a hooker out of a cheap 60's cop show, an extra out of an old Soul Train rerun, or some exotic alien in a B-movie showing on the Syfy Channel. Either way, it wasn't me.

I swayed where I stood, the surreal feeling of it all making me dizzy. I leaned against the glass door, no longer trusting my legs. How did I come to be dressed like this or be at this place? I liked to have fun as much as anyone, but I wasn't a raving party girl. Some might even call me boring since my idea of a good time typically consisted of staying at home dressed in my sweats, curled up on the couch with a good book. So why?

Darkness prickled at the edges of my vision, so I scrunched down and placed my head between my knees while trying to force my breathing to slow, sure I was close to hyperventilating. The accountant in me whispered that all numbers added up, even if you didn't have every bit of data. All you had to do was find them. What came in always had to balance what came out, even though it might not look like it. I just needed to hold it together long enough to find all the pieces—then everything would make sense. Everything.

But to do that, I needed to keep it together—I needed to stick to my plan of getting home. My breathing slowed, and that in turn brought down the hammering in my heart.

Feeling slightly calmer, I gingerly stood up.

The night air pressed in around me, hot and sticky with humidity, not the usual norm for April. But with Texas, you just never knew. The odd thought, however, helped ground me.

I reached out for the handle on the glass door and then went

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inside to try to borrow a phone and get back to things I knew.



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Thank you so much!

*Gloria Oliver*

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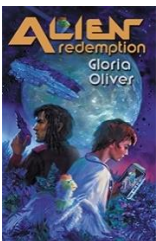
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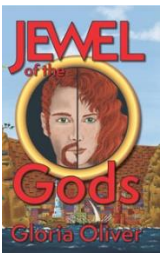


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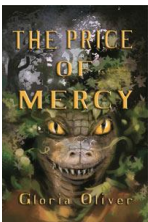


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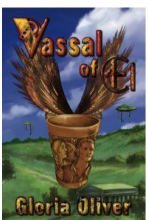


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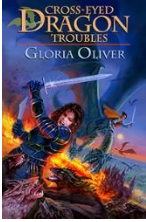
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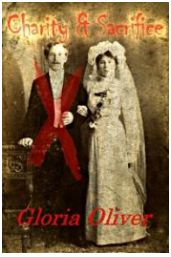
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