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Unleashed: A Life and Death Job

Written by

Ali Sparkes

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UNLEASHED

A LIFE AND DEATH JOB

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UNLEASHED

A LIFE AND DEATH JOB

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1

First came the smell. A stink which crept low across the floor in company with a rolling grey mist. It was the smell of the nastiest sumps of the Thames at low tide—the river's halitosis. Fetid and rank and damp.

Lisa put down her cup and eased round slowly on her chair, drawing a shallow breath.

Next came the water. Dark rivulets snaking across the wine coloured carpet, beading on the fine woven Persian pattern and sinking into the tassels at its edge. Lisa allowed her eyes to travel back up the delta of tiny rivers to their source—bare toes, blackened by silt and puffy in the brackish tidal flow. The girl stood in a luminous blue light. Her nightgown had been white but was now green or brown or grey, depending on where the weed or

barnacles clung. It stuck to her thin frame. Her hair hung in clumps across her face. Once it had been golden and as fine as silk, a perfect frame for her blue eyes. Now it was a dull shade of sludge and the eyes it framed today were washed out and cloudy, like those of a dead fish.

The girl held out her hands, and two frayed bracelets of rope swung on her wrists, heavy with water, silt, and algae. She fixed her dead fish eyes on Lisa and opened her mouth, allowing a small torrent of dark brine to escape down her chin before she spoke.

'Left. Abandoned. I was left . . . ' she whispered. Her voice was so heavy with woe it could barely make it out of her throat. 'Left to drown . . . '

Lisa stared at the girl, tilting her head to one side as if trying to understand.

'Left to drown before . . . '

'Yeah, I know,' butted in Lisa. 'Before you were fourteen. Bad luck. But, listen, sister, any chance you could hurry it along today? Only I've got to get going.'

The apparition looked confused.

'Look—it's not that I'm unsympathetic or anything, but I've heard it all three times now,' said

Lisa, getting up, pulling her blonde hair into a ponytail and checking her reflection in the mirror. She was wearing new jeans and a funky little yellow top. She looked good if she did say so herself. And she did. Behind her the apparition was still dripping and holding out its hands—but had at least stopped wittering on about not getting to be fourteen.

'Trust me,' said Lisa, sitting back down to tug on her high-heeled Jimmy Choo zip-up ankle boots. 'Being fourteen is no great shakes. Not much different from thirteen. You're better off out of it.'

'I was *left* . . . ' the girl began again.

'Yep. That was a bit of a bummer, no mistake,' agreed Lisa. 'But there's no use dwelling on it, is there?'

She zipped up the second boot, jumped up, grabbed her Fendi satchel bag and left the room, closing the door abruptly on the damp spirit. A few steps down the thick runner carpet of the hotel corridor she turned and rapped on the next door along, ignoring the average looking man who had come out of the room opposite, like a trapdoor spider on a mission. On the third knock the door was opened by a tall, slender girl with dark hair and startlingly violet eyes.

'That was quick,' said Mia, raising an impressed eyebrow and beckoning her best friend in. 'You normally take ages getting ready!'

'I'm not done yet,' said Lisa, stalking into Mia's room and depositing her bag on her dressing table. 'I thought I'd finish up in here with you. We can chat!' She smiled brightly and foraged around in the bag for her lip gloss.

Mia folded her arms and gave a hard stare. 'What is it?' she asked.

'Does there have to be a special reason to want to get ready in your room?' trilled Lisa.

Mia sniffed. She wrinkled her nose and looked around. 'Pshwww!' she commented. 'Is that you?'

Lisa stared into the mirror and rolled her eyes. 'Nope. Not me,' she muttered, through gritted teeth. '*Her.*'

Mia looked around with a shiver. She was highly sensitive but rarely saw what Lisa saw, unless she made an effort. She walked across to her friend and rested a warm hand on her shoulder. At once she spotted the girl walking through the wall. Mia let out a shaky breath. She would never get used to this.

Lisa turned round to glare directly at the spirit.

'BO, girlfriend,' she said. 'You're always the last to know.'

'Lisa!' Mia was shocked. Her friend's rudeness to the dead was another thing she could never get used to. 'She can't help it! She looks as if she was drowned.'

'*Left*,' began the girl, as a fresh tide of water travelled across Mia's floor. '*Abandoned*.'

'I told Chambers—please, I said. Let us have a new hotel!' Lisa stood up and flung her little pot of Molton Brown lip gloss back into her bag. 'No *old* ones! Nothing with any *history*. So where does he put us? An eighteenth century building! Honestly, it's like having to bunk up in a dormitory with three hundred years worth of gone-off relatives.'

'*Abandoned*!' insisted the girl.

'Why don't you help her?' asked Mia, still holding on to Lisa's shoulder so she could see the spirit, her face crumpling with sympathy. 'She can't be older than us. Poor thing! Look what happened to her!'

Lisa slapped Mia's fingers off her shoulder and, turning her back on the spirit, rested her hands on her hips. 'I don't like to *encourage* them! You *know* that!'

'Yes, I know . . . but couldn't you just—?'

'I am MEANT to be on HOLIDAY!' shouted Lisa, turning back to face the spirit.

It had gone.

Lisa punched the air. 'Re*sult*!'

Mia shook her head and turned to get her jacket from the bed. She didn't say anything but Lisa knew she'd upset her friend. It made her feel guilty. And that made her feel furious. It was not *fair*. She was meant to be having a break. She'd had to wait months and months for this treat—a week-long trip to London—and getting Mia out with her had been almost impossible. Dad had pulled every string available to him and even offered to pay for the extra security detail—and even then it had taken months of wrangling and promises and planning.

And throughout that time, like a good girl, back at the college she had dealt with the dead pretty much non-stop, like a Post Office counter clerk with no relief staff. Without complaint. Well . . . maybe a bit of complaint, but hey, she wasn't a saint.

Mia was brushing her hair now, sharing the mirror. She was dressed in dark green—a close fitting

top and combat trousers ending in shiny black boots with square two inch heels. Her jacket was black and boyish and she pushed the sleeves up to her elbows. It was a tough look. The woven leather bracelet on her left wrist added to it, with its gleam of misshapen black obsidian. But as tough as Mia dressed, the wellspring of warmth from within her softened every carefully planned edge. Mia was a healer. She couldn't help it. Being around her made people feel so good they were apt to stare and even follow. Everyone fell in love with her. It eased off a little after some time in Mia's presence but there was no denying it was damned annoying in the early stages. Lisa reminded herself of this as she planned their next move out of the building. *The choker.* The young porter in reception was so besotted with Mia he literally dribbled whenever they were in close proximity and he was on duty today.

'Wear your choker,' she suggested, as Mia put down her hairbrush. 'In case we bump into bellhop boy!' she added. 'He can't take any more Mia Effect today. He'll be running up and down the corridor and licking the walls soon—and then he'll have to be arrested.'

Mia allowed herself a rueful smile as she dug out

her choker. It was also made of fine black leather strands, woven together with smaller beads of black obsidian and tourmaline. It was pretty but, more to the point, it was useful. While Mia would never give up her strengthening black obsidian, she had agreed to tourmaline as well and this helped to block her effect on people, just a bit. On a crowded street, at speed, sometimes people didn't look at all. And sometimes they were just looking at Lisa. Lisa was worth a look or two—and well aware of it.

'You're good for my ego, you know that?' said Lisa as she clipped her bag shut and shrugged it over one shoulder.

'Can't think why,' said Mia. 'I think you're horrible. That poor girl.'

'No—I mean, good at stopping it running away with itself. I get a lot of attention,' she gave herself a final mirror check, before smiling smugly, 'and so I should after all the work I put in. But you can go out looking like GI Joe and you still get all the love.'

'Rubbish,' said Mia. 'You know it's not real.' She looked embarrassed. '*You're* the babe. Who was the one who got approached by a model scout in Covent Garden yesterday?'

Lisa allowed herself a little pout of pleasure as they stepped outside, and allowed the door to clunk shut. 'I want you to mention that, in passing, next time we see Gideon,' she grinned.

'No. You're smug enough,' laughed Mia. 'And don't think I've forgiven you, yet, for being so nasty to that poor drowned girl.'

Lisa sighed as they headed for the lifts and the man with nondescript hair and an unremarkable jacket began to follow. 'Mia—what do you think I can do?'

'Send her on to the next dimension!' said Mia. 'Give her some peace.'

'Ah, yes. That would be great. Waft a bit of incense around and tell her to run to the light, yeah?' Lisa pressed the amber button for the ground floor.

'Yes! Why not? You were given this gift to use it!'

Lisa fought back the surge of anger that rose in her as the lift arrived. *Gift*. Yeah. Right. 'It's not as simple as that. She's a VS.'

'A what?' Mia blinked.

'A VS—vengeance seeker,' sighed Lisa. 'She doesn't *want* to run into the light, she wants payback. She wants to tell me who left her to drown and see that they get what's coming to them.'

'Oh,' said Mia, holding the lift door open for the man with forgettable features. 'How do you know? Did she ask for vengeance?'

'Nope. Never got to it. So far I've managed to get out of there or just confuse or annoy her enough until her energy runs out and she has to wait for the next time. I was hoping she was a monthly one or at least a weekly, but no, she's a daily. Must be *really* narked.'

'So . . . vengeance,' murmured Mia. She smiled at the man. She always felt a bit sorry for them. Lisa didn't. Lisa made a point of absolutely ignoring them.

'Yes—vengeance. Which would involve days if not *weeks* of research, trying to find the descendants of whoever did for her and then trying to get them to understand and then maybe do some kind of séance and all say sorry or maybe just kick over a headstone or something. I don't know. I haven't got time for it. She'll just have to wait for the next poor gullible medium who shows up. I'm not on duty.'

'Oh,' said Mia, again.

Lisa knew Mia only partly understood. Almost everyone in the world thought that being a psychic

medium was a strange, mystic, spiritual thing. Something wondrous and thrilling. Well, it bloody well wasn't. Not when you had it *every day*. Right now, for example, as the lift opened to let a middle-aged lady in, Lisa could see an elderly man knocking at the wall with a small hammer. He was knocking and knocking and there was a look of horrific joy on his gaunt face. He turned to look at her and pointed the hammer at her with a knowing, gap-toothed grin just as the lift doors slid shut. And in that instant the reason for his hammering slid into her mind like a cold metal blade. She blocked it fast, but it stayed with her for a few seconds. Murder. It was usually to do with murder. She ejected it before the detail could emerge. How about the lobby, eh? What treat would await her there? The lift opened onto a golden atrium of Italian marble, crystal chandeliers, glistening mullioned windows, an elaborate fountain in a round pool—all overlaid with the perfume of extreme wealth.

A small boy and a smaller girl ran past the fountain, giggling. They glanced over at Lisa as they went, their pale thin faces dappled with death-light and a smell of . . . hmmm . . . yep, that would be cholera. She smiled tightly back at them and shook

her head. *Not me. Not today.* Hanged maid dangling to the left of the staircase? Check. Pining Dalmatian dog fading in and out next to the fountain? Check. Indistinct blurry mauve thing wafting about by the concierge's desk? Check. Some kind of footman or butler walking across from the front door to the basement steps—only sunk to his knees in the marble floor (it had obviously been raised in the past century)? Check. Yep. The regulars were all there. Permanently anchored to this place by some trauma or another. Every day Lisa saw oblivious guests and staff wander past, under, and often *through* these apparitions. She carefully sidestepped them and tried hard not to make eye contact.

Of course, there were the voices too. The voices in her head. As soon as she let her shutter up even a little they burst through, a raging torrent of departed souls desperate to get a message back to the living. When this had begun, three years ago, she had nearly gone mad. Back then she had clung to the hope that it might one day stop. It had not stopped. If anything it was worse—but—and this was a crucial but—she had been taught to protect herself. Taught how to put psychic shutters up to keep them out for a while. That was the best gift the

Cola project had given her. So although she usually still saw everything, she *could* shut off the noise for periods of time. And she had become almost immune to the more shocking vision. Almost.

'Hi, Jeff', said Mia, as a second man arrived next to Gary, the first one. Jeff nodded and smiled very slightly. It was not his job to like the assets, but who could fail to like Mia?

'OK—Itchy and Scratchy are in place,' muttered Lisa as they reached the huge revolving door which led on to Sloane Street. 'Does that mean we can go shopping?'

Mia laughed. 'Shall we go into lingerie again? I just love their faces when we do that.'

'All the SAS training in the world can't prepare them for frilly bras,' sniggered Lisa.

'Poor men!' Mia glanced back at them across the opulent reception hall. She would never admit it to Lisa, but she was glad to have their constant companions from M15. She and Lisa, together with around a hundred other Children Of Limitless Ability—or Colas—were listed as the UK's most precious living assets. And as two of the True Eleven—the eleven most powerful of them all—it was astonishing they had been let out at all from

their secluded college in the Lake District. Terrible things could happen to Colas. She and Lisa already knew this.

Their minders always walked a discreet distance behind and rarely talked to them—although they would chat to other people at the drop of a hat; they had a remarkable talent for it. At any time at all, if they needed to, they could morph into all kinds of people, from leaflet touts to football fans to concerned dog owners seeking a missing Labrador. Anything and everything to help them blend in. They were under cover and very good at it. They wore clothes which ensured they would not stand out. They were average to look at. They could slip and slide and merge into near invisibility in a crowded London street. They were like wraiths. Because although the two people they were tailing were well aware of them, it was important that it was not obvious to the casual observer that these two teenage girls were anything extraordinary. That they needed twenty-four hour protection, like it or not.

And like it, Lisa did *not*. She constantly had to suppress the urge to shake them off. Only the memory of some of the more awful things which had

happened to unprotected Colas in the past three years made her behave and tolerate the minders.

As they waited for the next segment of revolving door to open to them Lisa cast her eyes around the hotel foyer. And then her heart gave a thud and she let out a rare gasp of shock.

'What?' said Mia.

Lisa stared at Mia, her dark blue eyes wide and confused.

'The regulars!' she whispered. 'They've all gone.'