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# BELFAST CENTRAL

T H R I L L E R

- EXTRACT -

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# Map of Ireland, present day



This story and its characters are fictional.  
However, the novel is based on true historical events.



# 1



Our patient Mrs Weaver is filled with joy. She has finally been allowed to go home. One week in the hospital is more than enough anyway. Her birthday is coming up, and she has to be home. There will be a big party with her kids and grandkids and lots of cake. Yes, definitely lots of cake. She grins at us, showing her false teeth, which she must have put in her mouth a bit hastily this morning. The teeth look crooked and a bit out of place.

Mrs Weaver lives in Ardoyne, in north Belfast. Northwick Drive is predominantly comprised of a vast number of narrow houses, with long driveways bordered by fences.

Jarvis and I help her out of the ambulance.

Mrs Weaver links arms with me and walks towards her front door.

Jarvis stays with the ambulance and eats a chocolate bar.

‘He isn’t much of a help, is he?’ Mrs Weaver asks.

‘Jarvis? Oh, no. He’s OK.’

‘But he is letting you do all the donkey work.’

‘Donkey work? Are you kidding me? To accompany such a lovely woman home is an honour. We were fighting about it earlier.’

She giggles and her shoulders jump up and down. 'Boys haven't fought over me since school.'

Somebody clears his throat next to us. In the driveway of the neighbour's house stands an elderly man with a bouquet of tulips.

'Earl?' Mrs Weaver asks.

I have seen those hairy, bearlike arms before. When we had picked Mrs Weaver up, Earl had looked lost behind the fence.

'What do you want?' Mrs Weaver asks.

He smooths his sparse hair. 'I heard that you would be back today.'

'So what?' she asks crankily. 'That's not any of your business, is it?'

He shrugs his shoulders. 'You're right. It's not.' Earl stretches out the arm in which he holds the flowers.

Misses Weaver frowns. 'What am I supposed to do with those?'

'Put them in a vase?' Earl says.

'I have to go, Mrs Weaver,' I say.

'Thank you for everything. You're a sweetheart.' Mrs Weaver pulls me to her and plants a kiss on my cheek.

I can feel Earl's glance on me.

'Give him a chance. He is quite acceptable,' I whisper in Mrs Weaver's ear, then leave the lovebirds to themselves.



I do my training in the Ardoyne Ambulance Station, a grey building that looks like a warehouse. From the garage, an old, wooden door leads into the common room. Here, my trainer Jarvis and I go our separate ways.

Jarvis always sits with his experienced colleagues at the big table

and plays cards with them. I was never invited to join. In fact, they even asked me to leave when I once tried to sit with them. ‘You don’t belong here, rookie,’ Jarvis had said to me. That is how the folding chair and the wobbly table in the corner became my spot.

After returning, we have to wait for the next emergency or the next break, whatever happens first. Today’s evening is remarkably quiet. I’m so bored that I check the equipment of each ambulance. It’s a pointless task because every team checks their equipment after returning from an emergency call anyway. Counting syringes and bandages makes time pass a bit quicker, though. By the time I finally manage to get rid of that nasty stain on my driver seat, it’s dark outside.

Jarvis and his mates are having a good time at their table. None of them seem to have noticed that I was in the garage for a few hours. I get back to my table and read through Lena’s letter once again. On seven pages, she writes about going on a safari in South Africa, diving in the Southern Pacific, and hiking in the Australian Outback. I can hear her soft voice whenever I read these stories.

Someone clears his throat next to me. Jarvis stands in front of me and tries to read the letter. I put it away fast. Whatever Lena has to tell me is none of his business.

‘Dinner?’ Jarvis asks.

What a lame attempt to make me pick up the take-away for everyone. Jarvis disappears into the hallway, then peeks in through the door a moment later. ‘Come on. Let’s go.’

How could I say ‘no’ to that charming invitation?

I follow Jarvis through the hallway and out the front door. It’s unpleasantly chilly outside compared to the afternoon. I close the zipper of my jacket and walk a bit faster to warm myself up.

As we walk up the main street, we hardly see any pedestrians or

cars. Behind the windows of a few houses, the lights are still on. The people behind the curtains prepare dinner in their kitchen or sit in the living room and watch TV. They enjoy their free time. The end of our shift is still far away, but a good meal will give us the strength to pull through.

On a blackboard, the pub at the corner promotes a big portion of fish and chips for half price. The pub is crowded and it's noisy inside. Cigarette smoke and stale air mix in my lungs.

The owner of the pub makes no secret of being a Catholic. The Irish Tricolour and portraits of Irish patriots hang on the wood-panelled walls. Behind the bar, the picture of a black phoenix with red wings is prominently placed – the symbol of the Irish Republican Army.

Jarvis finds two free barstools for us. The barkeeper looks at me unfavourably, as if he knew that I don't belong here. As if he knew I visit a different church than him.

‘What do you want to drink?’ he asks grumpily.

Jarvis orders a pint of beer. I'm not eager to go back to work drunk, especially while I'm still on training. I order a soda instead.

Shortly after the drinks, the food is served. The greasy fish and chips don't meet my expectations.

‘What is so gripping about it?’ Jarvis asks.

‘Hm?’

‘The letter. You've had it with you for days. What's so gripping about it?’

I'm not sure I want to talk about it. ‘Nothing.’

Jarvis smiles. ‘What's her name?’

‘Lena.’

‘Did she break up with you?’

‘Bollocks. We are friends.’

'Yeah, right. Let me guess ... it was her idea,' Jarvis says. His loud smacking disturbs me.

'That's not how it is.' Why is he pestering me about it?

'May I give you some advice?'

*No, thank you,* would be impolite, I guess.

'You need a girlfriend that can not only bear you, but also your job.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'This job can destroy relationships. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about.'

'Lena and I are not in a relationship.'

'If you say so.' Jarvis stuffs a handful of chips into his mouth.

I get a feeling this isn't about me. 'You know what you are talking about? What do you mean by that?'

He squints. 'Five years. I was married for five years. Then I started this job, and a year later everything was over.'

'And you blame this job?'

'What else should I blame?'

I shrug my shoulders. 'I don't know. But relationships don't just end like that, right? Usually, there is more behind a break-up than we want to admit.'

'You like to be a smart-ass, hm?'

Maybe I hit the spot a bit too hard. 'We can talk about it if you want to.'

'Forget about it. You're not interested in what I have to say anyway.' He wipes his fingers with a paper napkin and leaves. Most of his fish still lies in the greasy newspaper.

On the way back, I start to feel sick. That was the first and last time I was eating in that pub. When we enter the common room at the ambulance station, I realize we have not missed much. Our

colleagues are watching a cricket match from last week on our tiny TV. Jarvis and I join them in silence. Somehow, I feel like I missed the chance to become his friend.

After midnight, our shift becomes chaotic once more. Car accident, food poisoning, stabbing in a bar. One team after another is called out to an emergency.

The sharp tune of the siren hurts my ears. There was a shooting at the train station. That is mine and Jarvis' call.



We arrive at the train station within a few minutes. There are no parking lots in front of the station, so I park behind the police car on the bus track.

We reach the main entrance, but it's closed.

'There has to be another way in,' Jarvis says.

A staircase links the main road with the station's parking lot, which is situated a bit lower. Jarvis starts running. I follow him.

There is a side entrance leading from the parking lot into the building. The glass door was smashed.

As we enter the train station, I feel unease.

'Hello?' Jarvis yells. 'Is somebody here?'

Jarvis's voice echoes off the walls. No answer.

What if nobody answers because everyone is dead already?

I swallow hard. 'Maybe we should wait for the police reinforcement.'

'Wait? For a patient with a gun wound, every second counts.'

Jarvis runs up the stairs and into the entrance hall. A police officer is lying there on the floor. The way he's positioned only leaves one possible conclusion: he is dead.

Jarvis kneels next to him, looking for a pulse. He then turns to me and shakes his head.

The poor fellow definitely had a partner. It would be wrong not to search for him. We have to keep going. I pass Jarvis and the dead officer and enter the main hall. Two long corridors lead to the platforms.

Jarvis stands behind me. I can hear him breathe, smell his aftershave.

‘We split. In case you find somebody, let me know over the radio,’ he says and runs down the right corridor to platforms three and four.

‘Hello? Hello!’ he yells.

On the way to the left corridor, I pass the toilets and stop abruptly. It’s just a notion – a sensation. I’m proven right. There is someone in the toilets. A man is sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall. Above his head is a box filled with paper towels.

The man is unconscious. He was shot in the stomach and had tried to stop the bleeding with the paper towels. His gun lies beside him.

I kneel next to him. ‘Sir? Can you hear me? Sir?’ I grip the radio on my shoulder. ‘Jarvis. Men’s toilet, now.’

‘I’m on my way,’ Jarvis’s voice sounds through the speaker.

The wounded man opens his eyes. Fear, hope, pain. I open my emergency backpack. ‘I’m going to help you. Don’t worry.’ I cut open his blood-soaked shirt with scissors.

He grabs me by the collar. ‘Police,’ he moans.

I press a cloth to his stomach to control the bleeding. ‘Calm down, sir. The police are on their way.’

Jarvis rushes through the door. There is a shadow behind him. A shot rings out. Jarvis falls to the ground. His empty eyes stare

at me. From his head wound, blood spreads to the floor. I crawl backwards.

The shooter is a police officer. He aims his gun at me and pulls the trigger.

It feels like someone rammed a torch into my chest. It burns fiercely. The blood on my fingers cannot be mine, can it? The *bang* of the shots still rings in my ears. Behind me, the tile wall feels cold. I gasp for breath. My vision flickers.

Next to the shooter sits the wounded man on the floor, still leaning against the wall. His eyes are as lifeless as Jarvis'.

Tears and fatigue. I close my eyes.

The next shot is fired. I flinch.

Footsteps. Hands on my chest.

I look into a wrinkled face; green eyes look back at me. The old man calls for help over my radio. The answer is a mix of words and noise.

That will not save me. At least the excruciating pain will stop soon. I try to think of one last nice thought. Nothing comes to my mind.

The old man says something. It sounds like the babble of a child. Something drags me under. An abyss. Silence. Darkness.

## 2



My head throbs as I wake up. I feel ill and have a bad taste in my mouth. The sweaty smell is stinging in my nose. Someone needs a bath here.

Dok, my roommate, once told me that his life as a university student passed quite fast. Considering how much he always partied and drank, it's not surprising – memories must have gotten lost along the way.

That's the first thing springing to my mind as Dad tells me I was knocked out cold for four days. My sister Miranda talks about visits I don't remember, Mom stands in silence next to the window, and Oliver ... Oliver plays with his Gameboy – like always.

'Where is Dok?' I ask. If I got so wasted that I was incapacitated for days, Dok was definitely involved.

'Your friends were here yesterday,' Miranda says. Her hand strokes my head. 'Don't you remember?'

'Of course, I remember.' My voice is faint and my throat scratchy. 'I remember every detail.' I stare down onto my hands as if I could find clarity there.

'Are you in a lot of pain?' Dad asks.

Pain? What did the alcohol make me do? Dok once jumped off

a car roof when he was completely boozed up. That must have been painful. But I would not be so stupid, would I?

‘I’m fine.’ My eyelids feel heavy.

Miranda puts a cup to my lips. I never tasted water as delicious as this.

I try to understand what Dad is saying. ‘Don’t worry about me,’ I want to say. But what I really mutter, I don’t know. I can’t keep my eyes open any longer.



Dr Glover is in charge of the daily visits. He must weigh about a hundred kilos and is shorter than most nurses. Whether he walks that slowly due to cosiness or overexertion, I cannot tell.

He asks me the same stupid question every day: ‘How do you feel, Mister Goodwin?’

‘I want to go home.’ Always the same answer.

‘Mhm, mhm.’ He nods and skims through my medical record. ‘Your inflammation values are finally better. They were worrying us.’

The same day, I’m transferred from the ICU to a normal room. My roommate’s name is Joe. He is a truck driver. During his last ride, he got a heart attack and woke up here in hospital.

‘I was really lucky. You should see the driver’s cabin. You would guess, the driver is porridge now.’ He eats his pudding enthusiastically. ‘What happened to you?’

‘A stupid story ... I was drunk as hell.’ Not even I’m convinced of that story.

Joe just nods and turns back to the TV.

I bite my lower lip till it bleeds. What happened to me? Braced

on my infusion stand, I make my way to the bathroom. I need to know what the bandage around my chest covers. On the left of my sternum, there is a fresh scar from a surgery.

The barrel of a gun, a deafening bang.

I come around on the cold floor, gasping for air.

I don't dare to ask what happened to me. I'm not ready for the answer.

Unfortunately, a few days later, I get it served with breakfast by Nurse Julie. It's the first time I read a newspaper since I'm in hospital. In the local section, there is a picture of me, and above it, an article with the title: 'Young hero is recovering.'

I skim the article. Belfast Central, exchange of fire. Memories start to surface, memories I would rather not relive. My eyes get stuck on one certain part of the article:

*'When I found out what happened, I was shocked,' a good friend of Ryan G. says. 'We have known each other for years. He is like a brother to me.'*

I recognise the picture in the newspaper. It was shot last year at a barbeque. Dok took it with his new camera. What an idiot!

When he visits me the same evening, I want to rip off his head. 'Wow, is someone PMSing here?' Larry 'Dok' Hainsworth sits on a chair beside me and grins.

'You gave an interview!'

'Oh, yeah. Right. How do you like the article?'

'Are you kidding me?'

'Oh, come on.' He pats me on the shoulder and the familiar pain shoots through my chest. 'I raised your market value.' He looks over at Nurse Julie, who stands in the doorway and stares at us. As I look at her, her cheeks turn bright red and she starts to giggle.

Dok waves at her. 'You are a hero, mate. That means easy game with the chicks.'



The next day, Dr Glover brings company. The man is tall and skinny, and therefore, a funny counterpart to the doctor. 'Hello, Mister Goodwin. My name is Inspector Rhodes.' He shakes my hand.

Dr Glover goes through my medical record in silence.

'How are you feeling?' Rhodes asks.

'Fine. Thank you.'

'That's good to hear.' His head wiggles up and down, like a bobblehead. 'Would it be OK for you to answer some questions?'

He sits down.

'Questions?'

Dr Glover continues his visit by checking on Joe.

'Questions about the night of the shooting. If you don't mind.' Inspector Rhodes has pen and paper ready.

'For all I care.'

'Could you please tell me what happened that night?'

I'm sitting in the ambulance again with Jarvis beside me. 'We got a call about a shooting at Belfast Central. When Jarvis and I got there, the main entrance was closed. We went in the side door and ... and we found a dead police officer. We decided to split up. I went to check the toilets.'

I see the unconscious guy before me, slumped against the wall, bleeding from his stomach.

'You found a wounded man there, right?' Rhodes asks.

I nod.

‘What happened then?’ Rhodes asks.

‘It’s all a bit of a blur. Somebody shot me and Jarvis...’ I shake my head, trying to get rid of the memories resurfacing.

‘Jarvis was your colleague?’

‘Yes.’

‘How did he get to the toilets? You said you split up.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Think about it. Did you call for him?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Who was shot first? You or Jarvis?’

‘I don’t remember.’

‘Can you describe the man that shot you?’

A gun, a bang, pain. Indescribable pain. I cannot breathe. My heart is racing. The monitor next to me beeps faster and faster.

‘That’s enough,’ Dr Glover says.

I breathe intermittently and nod at him thankfully.

Inspector Rhodes hands me his business card. ‘In case you remember anything else.’

The inspector has green eyes. Green. His face gets blurry. I see the face of an old man. The old man! He called the ambulance, talked to me. He saved me. How could I forget about him?

Inspector Rhodes is already with one foot out the door when I call out to him. ‘Did you also question the other guy?’

‘The other guy?’ Rhodes turns around. ‘Which other guy?’

‘The old man. There was an old man. He helped me.’

‘What did he look like?’ Inspector Rhodes comes closer.

‘White hair, green eyes.’ Rhodes isn’t taking notes.

I feel stupid. This description applies to many men.

‘How old was he?’

‘I don’t know. Sixty? Seventy?’

‘Was he the shooter?’

‘No, the other one. That was the other one.’

Rhodes sits down next to me once more. ‘Once again, but slowly. Which old man? Which other one?’

‘The shooter. There was the shooter. And then the old guy. He shot him.’

‘The shooter the old guy?’

‘No.’

‘What did the shooter look like?’

‘I don't remember.’

‘For goodness’ sake, don't you see that he is completely lost?’  
Dr Glover says.

Inspector Rhodes apologizes. ‘We can talk about it another day. Get well soon, Mister Goodwin.’

That night I dream of Jarvis. He sits next to my bed and talks to me about cricket and women. Then he asks me why I sent him to death. His empty eyes look at me. He lies next to me with a bleeding head wound. A shot rings out and I wake up in my bed, soaked in sweat.

Joe snores. Everything that happened that night runs through my head again and again. The face of the old man gets clearer than ever. If I don't capture him now, I'll lose him.

On my bedside table, I find a pencil and paper. I begin to draw.

*Keen to find out how the story continues?*

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## ABOUT A. K. AMHERST



Born and raised in Austria, I travelled the world from a young age. This influenced my writing, which relates to history and cultures of foreign countries. Intensive research is part of my job, and I really *love* this job. You want to be taken into another setting and experience life from a different angle? Then I am the writer for you.

As a business graduate, I never really fitted into the number-driven accountant-stereotype. Despite all these boring business lectures, my creative spirit was not broken. In the end, I managed to find my spot within the vast world of business: in marketing. My job has given me the opportunity to work with a bunch of creative people and learn a lot from them.

Besides writing and traveling, I like to try new hobbies. I have been to archery classes, African drum classes, and Hot Yoga classes. For me, staying curious is essential for inspiration.

As broad as my interests are, my portfolio includes short stories, travel blog articles, and my first book, *Belfast Central*.