

A Bitter Taste

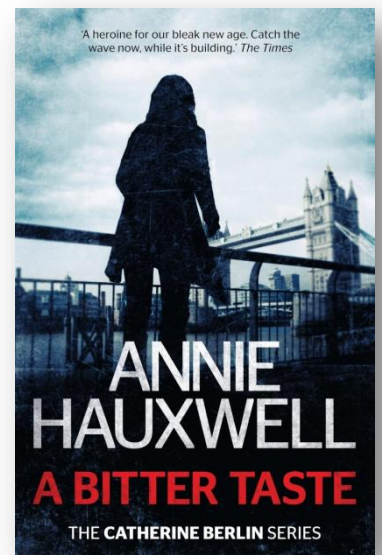
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Extract

She was ten years old, but knew enough to wipe clean the handle of the bloody kitchen knife. The night was stifling. The windows were closed, sealing in the chaos: a table upturned, shattered crockery.

Her distraught mother, bare shoulders raw with welts, knelt beside her motionless father. A taint seeped through his faded black T-shirt, staining the worn boards beneath him. A leather strap lay at his side.

The child dropped the knife as the sobbing woman rose and reached for her. She slipped through the grasping hands, snatched up her backpack, and ran.



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It was early but the dust was already rising from the concrete, suspended in shimmering thermals. Curtains of diesel fumes hung in the fetid air. Cars boiled, tempers frayed, ice-cream vans were mobbed and robbed. There were reports of pigeons dropping from the sky, stone dead. It was the hottest spell on record, with no end in sight.

London was parched.

Catherine Berlin's scars didn't sweat. The red-raw tissue banding her throat felt like a tourniquet, sealing in her agitation. She wanted to scream. She sipped her tea.

She sat in the café and watched the procession of women flowing into the mosque for morning prayers. Some wore simple headscarves, some a veil, others were swathed in black burqas. The woman she was waiting for entered the mosque in her nurse's uniform with only her hair covered. She would emerge an hour and a half later. In that time she could come and go fully veiled and no observer would be any the wiser.

Berlin paid for her tea and left. She was scraping the bottom of the investigative barrel with this job: matrimonial. And there was only a drink in it for her.

The bell rang as she walked into the shop, still referred to locally as 'the Indian' although it had been run by a Turkish family for the past eighteen months. The proprietor, Mr Demir, sat on a high stool behind the counter, his eyes dulled by sleepless nights. His inhaler always in his hand.

Mr Demir shifted his belt, which was buried in the rolls of fat around his middle, and turned to a young man flicking through the magazines. 'Murat, please attend to the crates at the back,' he said, each word punctuated by a wheeze.

Murat stared at Berlin, but didn't move.

'Please, son,' repeated his father.

Murat took his time. He ducked under the counter and emerged, still scowling, on the other side, then slunk through a beaded curtain and disappeared into the back of the shop. Mr Demir waited until the curtain was still, then greeted Berlin in the same way he had done for almost a month.

'Any developments, Miss Berlin?'

Berlin could see a shadow falling across the plastic beads. Murat was lurking within earshot. She shook her head in response to Mr Demir's query. 'She kept to the usual routine.'

'It's very *unusual*, very worrying. She was never religious,' said Mr Demir, bemused. He took a hit from his inhaler and held it deep in his chest. 'We have never been strict. About anything.' He cast a rueful glance at the back of the shop; this had clearly been a mistake with respect to their son's upbringing.

Sighing, Mr Demir handed Berlin a bag containing bread, milk and a cheap bottle of Scotch. It wasn't Talisker but it would do in an emergency. Which occurred at five o'clock most days.

'Perhaps she'll get over it,' offered Berlin, aware how weak this sounded.

Mr Demir gazed into the middle distance, perhaps seeking an answer to his own prayers. There wasn't one that held any joy. Mrs Demir's religiosity began and ended at a nearby apartment in a smart new conversion. Discreet enquiries had yielded the name of the occupant: a doctor who worked at the hospital. A burqa protected the nurse's, and no doubt the doctor's, reputation.

It seemed Mrs Demir, working in the shop during the day and caring for twenty psycho-geriatrics by night, knew paradise each morning. Berlin couldn't bring herself to tell poor Mr Demir. Besides, she needed the groceries. And the Scotch. It was unethical and unprofessional. How low could she go?

'Thank you so very much, Miss Berlin,' said Mr Demir. 'You will continue with the, er . . . enquiries until you reach a conclusion about these events?'

Berlin nodded. There was her answer. Pretty low.

In the storeroom Murat watched the street on the CCTV monitor. The camera, branded L-S-S, was state of the art. Using the joystick he could swivel it in any direction, switch to wide-angle, or zoom and focus. He could even print out an image of his target. He watched Berlin leave the shop and limp away. He pressed print.

His father had decried the expense for such a modest business. His father was an old fool. London Superior Systems offered the best after-sales service money could buy.

Berlin limped slowly to her next appointment with her tawdry payment in kind, wondering whose betrayal was worse, hers or Mrs Demir's. She was stringing Mr Demir along too, postponing the inevitable. It was sleazy duplicity; the type that involved self-deception.

The pavement was crowded, but she had the impression quick footsteps were approaching. Before she could turn someone swerved in front of her. She came to an abrupt halt.

'Stay away from my family,' said Murat.

He was breathless, but she couldn't tell if this was from exertion in the heat or the drama of the situation.

She wanted to take a step back but knew this would send the wrong signal.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she said.

Sweat plastered his dark curls to his temples. He shoved her in the chest with the flat of his hand. She staggered slightly but stood her ground.

'Stay away,' he growled. 'I'm warning you.'

Commuters surged around them, taking not a blind bit of notice of the well-built young man threatening a woman in her fifties.

Against all reason Berlin suddenly regarded Mr Demir as a valued client and one to whom she owed a professional obligation.

'Get fucked,' she said.

She pushed Murat out of her way and walked on, crossing her fingers and hoping he wouldn't follow and take the opportunity to smack her one. Turning your back was always risky.

When Berlin finally reached the clinic, behind the Royal London Hospital, the queue was snaking down the narrow street. Arms in slings and wrists encased in plaster were over-represented.

She shuffled up the hot concrete ramp. The small, pointed-arch windows set into the plain brick façade were sealed with thick wire grilles. The door, constructed of heavy steel around a panel of reinforced glass, was propped open with an old lump of cast iron, no doubt because of the stultifying heat.

The queue inched forwards and at last she made it into the waiting room, where she could gaze at the supposedly calming prints: the azure Mediterranean, a yacht at sunset and dolphins. She found the dolphins particularly irritating.

The clinic used the same ticket system as the deli counter at the supermarket. Berlin watched the red digital counter high on the wall tick over.

Finally, her number came up.

Berlin took one of the hard chairs, although armchairs were on offer. Opposite her, in an armchair, sat Dr Terrence Rolfey, known to his clients as 'Rolfey'. He must have been in his late forties, but he retained a boyish look. His cowlick of fair hair was thinning, but it still perfectly complemented his gentle manner. You couldn't help but like him.

Rolfey was always tired, slightly dishevelled and just a little distracted, but Berlin knew he was no fool. He seemed to care, and she'd heard this led to clashes with his management committee, who had a different agenda. He sat in front of his desk, not behind it, making it clear that he wanted to remove all barriers between himself and his clients. which couldn't be easy. They wanted so much and his mandate was to offer as little as possible.

He flipped open a file and scanned it.

'Berlin, we've been meeting for nearly three months. The clinic protocols require a quarterly review, which is due next week. Are we making any progress?'

Berlin knew he had a difficult job. Substance abusers with chronic pain unrelated to their addiction were Rolfey's speciality; in addition to pain management, she and Rolfey were supposed to agree on a regime that would address her heroin addiction. In other words, break the habit of a lifetime.

The clinic was the only place in London that offered this holistic approach. Addicts got cancer, were injured and suffered as many diseases as the next person. Research indicated that opiate dependents were more sensitive to pain. What analgesia do you give them and how do you get them off it again?

Berlin understood Rolfey's problem: he had no way of knowing if the agony she endured had actually diminished; she could mislead him and claim there was no improvement, so he would keep prescribing the morphine capsules. Pain is very subjective.

She felt a detached sympathy for him, but not much. It wasn't any easier for her. She couldn't tell, any more than he could, where the pain from her injuries ended and her aching addiction began.

Morphine is morphine sulphate. Heroin is diacetylmorphine. Just morphine with an acetyl molecule attached. But what a molecule.

Heroin moves across the blood-brain barrier faster, and is three times stronger, dose for dose. Rolfey prescribed morphine because of its acceptable cultural profile as analgesia. Heroin was recreational.

Berlin wanted to believe she could be weaned off morphine just like anyone else, and to ignore the fact that before she acquired these scars she had spent twenty years on pharmaceutical heroin as a so-called 'registered addict'. But she wasn't very good at pretending.

Uncertainty hovered, wings beating a tattoo of doubt. She sat mute, inscrutable.

'We need to talk,' said Rolfey.

He closed her file and tossed it on his desk.

It wasn't a good sign.