

Title: Torn Apart

Synopsis: When a couple enters Lorna's village cafe, a familiarity deep within her stirs.

Conflicted, she must face her fears and the risk of heartbreak a second time.

Straightening her hair, Lorna, pulled her pad and pen out of her apron and approached the couple. She paused a moment, looking at them, a puzzled look crossing her face. "What can I get you?"

The man looked up shyly. He read Lorna's name tag before waving a hand toward his companion. "Ladies first," he said, biting his lip.

The woman smiled and requested a latte, and the man requested the same. Walking back toward the counter, Lorna took a couple of quick glances over her shoulder. *There's something about those deep brown eyes and olive skin, she thought. And that accent?* Behind the counter, she passed the order to Enid at the coffee machine and dipped into the back room. As she came back, she opened her purse and removed a small, worn picture. She held it up to counter level and looked from the picture to the man in the alcove.

"Watcha' doing Lorna?" asked Enid, now looking over her shoulder. "Who's that?"

Lorna lowered the photo. "Shhh," she murmured. "I think that's Amir."

"What? You mean ... the one you've talked about? No." Enid grabbed the photograph and held it up to the light. "When was this taken?"

"Eight years ago. It's from Amir's seventeenth birthday. Just before he left." Lorna squinted. "I guess it could be him. He's obviously older now. And he didn't have a beard back then, but ..."

Enid tilted her head. "He's a good-looking fella. I can see why you've got a thing for him. Who's that with him, though? Is it ... his wife?"

"I'm not sure. He's not wearing a ring," murmured Lorna. She looked up and found Amir turning away quickly and whispering to the woman opposite.

She grabbed the drinks and placed them on a tray. Balancing them carefully, trying not to let the tremor in her grasp show, she placed them before each customer. She pushed

the bill inside a small glass on the table. "You folks can settle up whenever you're ready," she smiled.

"Thank you, Lorna," said the man, holding her gaze for a moment longer than other customers normally do.

Lorna blushed and walked away. Her thoughts drifted back to the last time they'd been together. *It had been summer, eight years ago, on the meadow at the edge of town. It had been an unusually hot day. They'd talked for hours about the future. But Amir had been distant. He'd said some things that didn't make sense. About his father and his strict beliefs. They'd parted ways with a tender kiss. That was the last time she'd seen him. The next day, she'd been told he'd left.* She shook her head to clear it. When she looked up, she noticed the man turn away again.

Five minutes later, the couple stood, and the woman headed toward the door. The man came to the counter. He handed her the receipt, a ten-pound note, and a business card. "Keep the change," he said, and joined the woman at the door. As they left, Lorna looked down at the card. On the front, it showed a name. Lorna took a sharp intake of breath. The card read, *Amir Fadel, Head of Sales, Mercedes-Benz, Barrow-town.* Lorna was stunned. She looked up as Amir opened the car door for the woman. He was looking back and smiling sweetly. He raised a hand in a small, almost embarrassed wave.

Lorna turned over the card and found a handwritten message. *I've missed you. Would be great to catch up. Please call me. Amir x.* Stunned, Lorna watched as Amir drove out of the car park.

Later in the evening, Amir was sitting on the couch with Nadia. He was looking at his phone. He appeared confused and a little concerned.

"What's wrong?" asked Nadia.

“I have a missed call and a message. It’s from a number I don’t recognise.”

“Well, listen to the message, dummy. It could be her.”

Selecting the message, he listened with trepidation. He closed the call and lowered the phone to his lap.

“Well? Was it her?”

“It was.”

“And what did she say?”

Amir hesitated. Deciding, he selected the message again and placed the phone on speaker. *“Hi Amir. It’s Lorna … Its, been a long time. I … I’m not sure having a catchup is a good idea. After all, what would your wife say? … Sorry.”* Amir closed the call and dropped it on the couch next to him. Raising his hands to his face, he said, “I should have spoken to her.”

Nadia looked confused. “Your wife? What’s she got to do with it?”

“It doesn’t matter. She said no.” Amir stood sullenly and walked to the window. He gazed out at the meadow where Lorna and he had last seen each other. “It was a mistake. I shouldn’t have come back.”

“It’s not a mistake. You need to go back and see her tomorrow.”

“And say what?” he cried.

“You need to explain everything. Including that you’re not married. I told you it was a mistake writing that message. You should have spoken to her today.”

“Whatever. It doesn’t matter. She said no.”

“Amir Mohammed Fadel, if you don’t go down there tomorrow, I’ll kick your ass.”

Amir smiled wryly. "Really? You and who's army? ... And I'll have you know, only mum uses my full name ... And usually only when I'm in trouble."

"You are in trouble." Nadia stepped to his side and hugged him. "You need to make this right ... tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay," Amir said resignedly, returning the hug. "Thanks Sis."

The following day, near closing time, Lorna noticed the Mercedes parked in the car park. She sighed heavily. "Enid?" she called. "Can you close up for me, please?" She headed towards the door. "I have something to deal with."

"Sure thing, Love," called Enid.

Exiting the café, she headed toward the car as Amir stepped out and came round to the front. "What are you doing here, Amir?"

Amir smiled sadly. "Hi Lorna. Sorry. I wanted to say something yesterday but didn't have the nerve. Nadia said I shouldn't have written the note. That I should have spoken to you. But it's been such a long time."

Lorna folded her arms. "It has been a long time. And yes, you should have said something yesterday. I wasn't sure it was you at first. You've changed. You've grown a beard for starters," she mused.

"Yeah," Amir said, stroking his close-cut beard. "A lot has changed."

"And that woman you were with? What's her name?"

Amir looked confused. "Nadia."

"And she's okay with this?" Lorna waved her arms in a circular motion.

"Of course. Why wouldn't she? She suggested it."

“A little odd, don’t you think?”

Amir looked taken aback. “I’m confused. What do you mean?”

“I guess I’m just surprised your wife is okay with you catching up with me. That’s all.”

“What’s my ex-wife got to do with this?”

“Your ex-wife? So, you and Nadia aren’t married?”

Amir laughed. “I’m sorry,” he raised his hands in defence. “There’s obviously some confusion. Nadia is my sister. Don’t you remember her from school?”

Lorna looked aghast. “Oh, my God. I’m so sorry. No. I … she’s your sister?”

Amir sighed heavily. “Please. I’d love to explain. Maybe coffee at my place?”

“Your place?”

“Yeah. If you’re okay here,” he waved toward the café. “I’ve taken up the lease on a cottage near Finnegan’s meadow. Where we last met. Remember? Let me show you.” He opened the passenger door for her.

A few minutes later, they pulled up to the front of his cottage. As they approached, Nadia opened the door. Her smile of relief showed across her face. “Hi Lorna. Welcome.” Nadia held out a hand. “I don’t think we ever formally met. I was a couple of years below you guys.”

Lorna took Nadia’s hand. It was warm and welcoming. She allowed Nadia to lead her into the kitchen, where they sat.

“You have a beautiful café, Lorna.”

“Thank you. We opened about seven years ago. Not long after I left school. Shortly after you …” she trailed off, looking at Amir.

Nadia recognised her cue. "I'll leave you guys to talk," she said, grabbing her coffee and heading toward the other room.

Amir looked shyly at Lorna. Looking around the room, she said, "This is nice. Have you been here long?"

"Not long. A couple of weeks. It's taken me that long to get the courage to come into your café. It was Nadia who finally convinced me to bite the bullet. I've been wracking my brain about what to say." He was holding an old scrapbook to his chest.

"Why don't you start by telling me why you left without saying goodbye," said Lorna tersely.

Abashed, Amir looked guilty. "I-I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you. But I couldn't."

"Couldn't? Or wouldn't?"

Amir looked down at his shoes. A few moments later, he looked back at Lorna, tears welling up in his eyes. "Eight years ago, my father upped sticks and move the whole family to a Muslim community near Edinburgh. He knew about you and me. He forbade me to contact you and threatened to cut off my inheritance if I did."

"We had plans."

"I know. And for that, I am truly sorry." He took a deep breath. "Back then, my grandfather had passed away and my father took the role of head of the household. He decided we would reconnect with the traditional origins of our faith. *No son of his was going to be with anyone but another Muslim*, despite what the progressives advocated. We all had to follow tradition. He'd already arranged a marriage, and they forced me to ..." he trailed off.

"So, you are married?"

Amir shook his head. "No. At least not anymore. We got divorced last year. It wasn't working." He hesitated. "Are you married?"

Lorna rubbed her hands together and looked sheepish. "You'll think me silly."

"No, I won't. Honest. Tell me."

"I've been waiting for you."

Amir stared at her. Afraid to move. As if moving would break the spell. "To be honest, my father wanted me to give my marriage a few more years, but I don't think it would ever have worked. I don't think it works when there's someone else in the marriage."

"There's someone else?" she gasped.

Amir shook his head. He slid the scrapbook across the kitchen surface toward Lorna. "Look," he said.

Lorna opened it and began flicking through the pages. She gasped. Each page had a picture of her and Amir. The time they'd spent together. The meadow. The country walks. Holding hands in the park.

Nadia spoke from the doorway. "You were always the one, Lorna," she said. "When Amir was forced to marry Rimsha, his world collapsed. I've never seen him so unhappy. After a couple of years, I convinced him to break from tradition and follow his heart. To find the one he truly loved." She smiled lovingly at Amir. "And here we are. He and I are supporting each other on a non-traditional road."

Lorna reached into her pocket and retrieved the picture of Amir. She placed it in front of her, tears in her eyes.

"You kept it," gasped Amir. "Oh Lorna." Amir reached across the work surface and grasped Lorna's hands. He looked deep into her eyes. No holding back this time. "And here we are," he repeated. "With the one I love. The only one I've ever loved."

"Oh Amir," exclaimed Lorna, as she gripped his hands tightly.

1938 Words

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