



Torn

Drew Wagar

Torn (Free Sample)

A Novel by Drew Wagar

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Dedicated to my Grandmother, Vera Ada Leeson (1918 – 2010)

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From Chapter Seven...

The car was much newer than hers, probably less than a couple of years old. She noticed the distinct aroma of leather seats combined with a slight hint of air freshener. The door closed with a solid clunk. The dashboard seemed enormous, stretching far forward to where the steeply raked windscreen met it. She was surprised by the huge number of little red lights marking the controls. They were everywhere.

The seat seemed set low down, and tilted quite a long way back. It was also shaped in a peculiar way, holding her in place firmly by the thighs, shoulders and sides as she buckled on her seatbelt. Already, he had the heater going full blast and as she sat in the passenger seat there was a sudden sensation of heat seeping up into her legs. A heated leather seat.

‘Ben Lawrence by the way,’ he said, holding out his hand. ‘I’m not sure we’ve been introduced.’

She ignored it, folding her arms and not looking at him. ‘Catriona,’ she muttered in return, not deigning to give him her surname.

He looked surprised at her name, but then said, ‘Right then Catriona, what is your postcode?’

‘What do you need my postcode for?’ she snapped.

‘For the sat nav.’

She almost refused, but part of her was curious. She’d never seen one of these satellite navigation systems in operation. She told him the code and he punched it into the display on the centre console.

He drove off immediately. The car seemed much smoother and quieter than hers, the engine purred with a subdued muffled bark whenever he changed gear. There were no rattles, squeaks or bangs. It reeked of expense.

He turned left rather than right out of the car park, which was the way she expected him to go.

‘Where are you going?’ she demanded, immediately suspicious. ‘You should be going that way.’

She indicated the right way.

‘Following the sat-nav,’ he said. ‘I’ve asked it to take a different route, the local roads may already be blocked. The snow is drifting. That narrow hill on the way into Wealdbrook is a nightmare even in good weather. I’ll switch on the voice if you like.’

She looked at the dashboard. It was a maze of red lights surrounding a screen with an illuminated map. There was a small arrow in the centre pointing up, the map was rotating around it. A soft and rather sultry female voice began occasionally giving out instructions.

‘It’s taking us back towards the motorway,’ Catriona said.

‘Yes, we’ll go up to the bypass and then back down rather than cutting across country.’

‘But the road between here and the bypass is very narrow, it’s been blocked once already this year. You should go direct before the snow gets worse.’

‘I came down it earlier. This car has four wheel drive, it will be all right.’

‘Fine. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

She shrugged, sat back in her seat and watched the snow building up under the wipers. So far the road was still passable, but it was clear that it wouldn’t be long before the village was snowed in. Catriona folded her arms and looked out of the side window. After driving along slowly for a few minutes, Benjamin looked across at her.

‘Are you going to tell me why you were so opposed to my plans?’ he asked, as if only mildly curious.

‘You heard our reasons.’

‘That’s not what I asked. You’re an environmentalist. Am I right?’

‘Why don’t you admit the truth about why you are here?’ Catriona demanded, ignoring his question and letting her natural hostility immediately come to the fore. ‘What right have you got to be mucking up people’s lives?’

‘What gives you the right to ask?’ he responded.

Catriona glared at him. ‘I live here, and so do a lot of other people less able to state their case.’

‘I live here too. I’ve lived in Wealdbrook for over six years. How long have you lived here?’

She ignored the question again. ‘And where do you work then?’

‘That depends on what I’m doing.’

‘London, I presume?’

He shrugged. ‘Sometimes.’

‘So you’re not part of this community are you? You just come back here in the evenings after working in the city. You and people like you just push up the house prices down here and force the locals out.’

He frowned. ‘House prices are not my fault. It’s people with these buy-to-let

mortgages that cause that. Or maybe the government itself not regulating it properly. I'm not a property magnate. Anyway, Kent isn't the most expensive part of the world.'

'You're part of the problem,' she said. 'You take opportunities away from people who work locally.'

'Nonsense,' he said.

'Don't take that tone with me.' she snapped back, not appreciating his manner. 'You city types think you can come down here and throw your money around and everyone will bow and scrape. You won't find us pushovers like your normal lackeys. You need to treat people with respect.'

He turned, annoyed. 'I'm not a city type.'

She scoffed and rolled her eyes at him.

'And you're a fine one to talk about respect.' he fired back. 'Like the way you get an ill-informed religious maniac to verbally abuse an invited speaker in front of an entertained audience. Very respectful.'

'You deserved it, carrying on the way you did. You insulted us, claiming we were all misguided. Ryan was right about you.'

Benjamin paused and half turned. 'Ryan?'

'He's my...' Catriona began, before stopping herself, 'The guy I came with.'

Why I am so reluctant to say he's my boyfriend?

'Oh, him. Well, perhaps if he'd listened you might have all learnt something, rather than spouting all that religious invective.'

Catriona forced her attention back to the argument, 'It's not invective. We Christians are servants of God and we're doing his will.'

'Oh, so you're a Christian, are you?' he replied in a disparaging tone.

She stared him straight in the face. 'Yes, and proud of it.'

'And which type of Christian are you?' he asked.

'A genuine believer, and an educated one. You can't pull the wool over my eyes.'

'An oxymoron if ever I heard one.' he scoffed. 'And which church do you go to?'

'Wealden Valley Fellowship.'

'Ah.' He gave her an oddly dismissive look, as if an explanation had presented itself to him.

'You don't even believe in God do you?' Catriona was infuriated by his derogatory attitude, the sheer two-facedness. He'd said he was an active member of the church in the village. 'You're one of those hypocrites that goes to church but doesn't really believe, aren't

you? All appearance and no substance. Just looks good to be seen at church I suppose? Helps your social standing?’

His gaze drifted away from her for a moment. ‘Social standing or otherwise, belief is a personal choice. I’m a scientist anyway. I have to be rational about concepts like God.’

‘God isn’t a concept.’

‘Everything is a concept. My job requires me to analyse things in light of evidence. God is no different, I have to keep an open mind. Only evidence and results matter.’

Only results matter? I lost my job because of heartless people like you.

‘You’re so empirical.’ she said, back on the offensive. ‘You scientists. Always poking into things to try and understand how they work. Unless you can write it down and explain in numbers and words exactly how something happens, you don’t believe it is true. If you can’t poke it, measure it or influence it, it just isn’t there. You don’t understand the first thing about God because there is no way you can even conceive of reaching out to Him.’

He looked genuinely surprised at her outburst. For a moment he looked as if he would dismiss what she had said, but then he recognised a worthy adversary. A more determined look crossed his face and he summoned his thoughts together.

‘I don’t intend to attack your belief system,’ he said, waving one hand vaguely at her. ‘I don’t really care what you believe. You can believe in pixies, or fairies at the bottom of the garden or whatever you like as far as I’m concerned, even if I could prove it’s total nonsense. It’s your choice.’

She took offence at that. ‘Prove it? As if. How pathetic. The best minds in the world haven’t been able to do that over hundreds of years. Anyway, how do you call it nonsense, I bet you know nothing about it.’

‘I know enough.’

‘How could you?’ she laughed humourlessly. ‘Or are you a closet theologian too along with your alleged scientific credentials?’

‘Alleged credentials? I am a scientist.’ he said, a note of exasperation creeping into his tone.

‘I bet you don’t know anything about Christianity whatsoever.’

‘I’ve read the Bible,’ he said, allowing a bit of scorn to linger on the final word as if considering some poorly composed piece of literature. He smiled at the surprised look on her face. ‘Oh yes, that’s what we scientists do whilst poking our noses into other people’s business, we study things. Research. You might want to try it some time.’

‘Then you should know better than to undermine and ridicule it.’ Catriona snapped,

feeling she had lost some ground. 'It is the Holy unadulterated word of God and cannot be subjected to mere scientific criticism.'

'A nice speech,' he said. 'Where did you learn that? Sunday school?'

Her eyes narrowed in fury. 'You are so arrogant!'

He laughed out loud. 'Me? Listen. You lot claim to be the only ones privy to the truth. Everyone else is misguided and never gets to go to Heaven unless they follow your narrow interpretation of the rules. Everyone else is wrong, everyone else is mixed up, everyone else has failed the test and lives under judgement from your God except the high and mighty Christians. You're elitist, separatist, divisive...' he paused, fumbling for the right words. '... and just plain wrong.'

'We are right.' Catriona countered rather taken aback by his response, unfamiliar with having to fight her corner so hard. 'The Bible proves we're right. The scriptures are inspired, complete, unarguable, authentic.'

'You should be embarrassed by that statement,' he replied, glaring at her. 'You've got loads of different denominations who can't agree on the basics of your faith. You can't even decide if gays or women can be ordained or not, so you half-heartedly bumble along. Your Bible contradicts itself in many places; there are inaccuracies all over the place. You just white-wash over the cracks. There are other religions in the world, and they have different viewpoints from yours. Some say the world was made inside a week, other that it has always been here and is eternal. Science paints a different view which makes a lot more sense. Your so called gods seem to be telling you different things. You can't all be right, so I suspect that makes you all wrong.'

'I can't comment on other religions,' she said. 'I don't study false beliefs. There is only one true religion.'

He smiled. 'And you still have the audacity to call me arrogant. Don't all religions say that?'

'There are prophecies we have seen come true,' she replied. 'Time after time they have been confirmed. God's power is alive and working in our church today.'

'They are so vague they could mean anything,' he said. 'And you don't mention the ones that haven't been fulfilled as you expected. You claim fulfilment after the event, but never before it. Hindsight is a wonderful thing.'

'God's miracles and powers are beyond your understanding.'

He looked at her, as if considering her deluded. 'Oh yes. I've read about the miracles, healing the sick, raising the dead and so on. They'd be very impressive if they could be

proved. I was interested when I heard that you lot claimed miracles still happened today. When some scientists investigated this a few years ago, what they found interesting was that the only miracles you lot seem to have nowadays are the ones that are easy to fake. Benny Hinn and the others? Charlatans of the highest degree.'

'It's easy to mock...' she started before Benjamin interrupted.

'Well just look at the facts for once will you?' he said. 'There is no reliable account of anyone being raised from the dead recently, and neither has anybody grown back an arm or a leg as far as I know. The only 'miracles' worth mentioning are people getting better from mild coughs, colds and fevers overnight. They don't strike me as miraculous at all, and I've checked quite carefully. All of you have a story about a miraculous healing, but when pressed it is always somebody else's remote acquaintance that conveniently is hard to trace, or recently moved away. It's all wishful thinking and Chinese whispers. Oh, and isn't it funny how whenever you lot set up your ministries of healing it always involves taking money from people... and you accuse me of being money grabbing.'

Catriona was genuinely surprised at how well informed he was and struggled to find a way to counter his argument. She tried an oblique tack. 'So you think you scientists have all the answers do you?'

'Not at all,' Benjamin batted away her question easily. 'We investigate things, we think how we might explain them, and we go back and test those ideas. If the test is positive we refine the idea. If the test shows the idea was wrong, we try again.'

'And so you have great ideas like nuclear bombs, pollution and weapons which cause untold death in wars. Innocent men, women and children slaughtered in huge numbers because of your clever ideas. You scientists know nothing of suffering!'

It wasn't really a fair accusation on her part and she knew it, but she was angry now and he deserved it.

There was a pointed delay before he responded. He was carefully considering what to say next.

'We're not perfect, we don't pretend to be,' he was more subdued now. She'd found a chink in his armour there for sure.

'At least we recognize right from wrong,' Catriona replied, not letting up. 'You don't have those concepts, everything is either true or false; you do things without considering whether or not it should be done.'

'That's a very simplistic view, one can be moral without being religious. Anyway, I'm not prepared to defend the whole scientific establishment for your sake,' he said. 'I'm a

theoretical scientist, I read Astrophysics at Canterbury.’

‘So you just disclaim responsibility do you?’ she said. ‘The high and mighty scientists just think up new ideas with reckless disregard for the basic assumption that somebody somewhere might take their ideas and turn them into a bomb or a gun. I’m surprised you can sleep at night.’

‘We try to improve life, not make it worse. You’re being totally unreasonable.’

‘Really. Well, that is what people think about you. You’ll just have to accept it.’

‘So what you are saying is that we should stop researching, give up our attempts at really understanding the world and go back and live in the caves?’

Catriona let him have it. ‘It might do you good. Your work is empty, purposeless and pointless. Worse, it’s immoral. No, amoral. You don’t even consider right and wrong. You know nothing of life, emotion or balance. You spread discord and disharmony where ever you go, creating chaos everywhere with your new-fangled ideas and inventions. People are happier to be left along to pursue their lives the way they have always done, the way their parents did before them. We don’t need change.’

‘So you’d rather live in a world with no electricity, no transport, rudimentary sanitation, disease and deprivation would you?’

‘Many people still do live in those conditions. Science hasn’t helped them has it? The billions squandered on nuclear weapons, space travel, genetically modified food and cloning – when people are starving in the third world? Defend that.’

‘These technologies hold the promise of improving everyone’s life. It’s not perfect, but to say we shouldn’t push forward our knowledge is tantamount to giving up and burying our heads in the sand and hoping the problem will go away.’

‘People need salvation, not science. They need meaning and peace, clear direction and guidelines for a happy and fulfilled life, not rampant technology.’

He shook his head furiously, unable to accept what she was saying, and then let rip at her. ‘You sicken me, you really do. I’ve seen enough of you narrow minded fools to last a lifetime. Always standing in the way of progress, playing on the uneducated fears of common folk, peddling your twisted self-serving views of life on the downtrodden, persecuting and intimidating anyone who doesn’t share your simplistic and self-righteous view of the world, stopping people from bettering themselves.’

‘We’re defending people from the likes of you.’ Catriona interrupted, shouting, her eyes blazing with fury.

Benjamin was equally incensed. ‘You manipulated that entire meeting for your own

narrow interests you selfish bitch!’

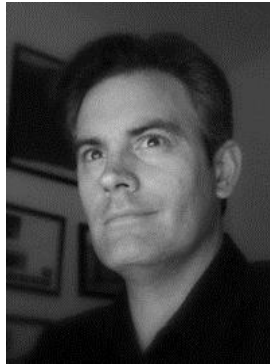
‘How dare you!’ she screamed at him, apoplectic. ‘Pull over right now and let me out. You, you...’

‘Nothing would give me more...’

Benjamin wasn’t concentrating on driving; ahead a snow drift partially blocked the narrow road. He saw it and reacted instinctively, slamming on the brakes. The car lurched and slid sideways, plumes of snow drifting up and over the windows alongside the sickening sound of the tyres scrabbling for grip on ice. Catriona shrieked, grabbing the door handle and bracing herself against what she assumed was an inevitable impact. Benjamin wrenched the steering around and the car spun back the other way, throwing them hard against their seats, traction control warning lights flickering across the dashboard...

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