

JADED by Barbara Raffin,

A novella

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“Love is for fools,” Hannah Calder sniffed, screwing the cap back on a saltshaker. Fellow waitress Sandy Larson looked at her across the booth table covered with condiment containers. “Love is all there is.”

Hannah grimaced as she filled another salt shaker. “It’s a waste of energy. All that angst.”

“All that *joy*,” Sandy crooned, her eyes growing dreamy.

“All the posturing.”

“All the romance.”

“Tell me how joyful it is after you two break up.”

“Who burned you so bad that you’re so bitter about love?” Sandy asked.

Hannah shook her head, a lock of her dark hair slipping across one eye. “Nobody burned me. I’ve been careful.”

Sandy grunted. “You mean you’ve walled yourself away.”

“You know what they say about fences making good neighbors,” Hannah leveled at the girl who was a mere five chronological years junior to her own twenty-nine, but eons younger in experience. “Well, walls work even better. No chance of seeing into your neighbor’s life.”

“So who was he?” Sandy pressed.

“Who?” Hannah retorted, focusing on their after-hours task of replenishing the diner’s condiments.

“The guy who hurt you.”

Any one of the lovers my mother paraded through our lives. “There was no guy.”

“Girl then?”

She rolled her eyes at Sandy. “Don’t you have a date or something tonight?”

Sandy brightened. “Yeah. Dickie’s taking me to the Roadhouse where *I* get to be waited on for a change.”

“And how many dinners did you have to cook for him to get this one dinner out?”

Sandy shook her head. “You’re such a cynic.”

Hannah wanted to take Sandy by the shoulders and shake some sense into her. But it hadn’t worked with her mother. She’d learned the hard way not to waste her breath with the idealists of the world.

“Evening, ladies,” crooned a deep voice from the rear of the diner.

Sandy looked in the direction of the kitchen and grinned, all but purring as she said, “Hey there, Jake. Whatcha up to?”

“Just stopping on my way home to say hi to Rick...and you lovely ladies.”

Hannah peered over her shoulder at her boss’s best buddy. Jake Griffin didn’t usually say things like ‘lovely ladies.’ Owner of the local newspaper, he had a reporter’s way about him and generally spoke in bare bone facts.

“Hannah,” he said, making eye contact and giving her a slight nod before slipping back into the kitchen.

That was more like the Jake Griffin she daily served breakfast, lunch, and afternoon coffee. Cordial. Watchful. But always keeping his distance.

“Isn’t he to die for?” bubbled Sandy.

Hannah raised an eyebrow at her co-worker.

Sandy shrugged.

“Ah, come on. You gotta at least admit he’s a babe magnet. Look at those broad shoulders, that thick black hair and those pale hazel eyes. Even if he wasn’t gorgeous, there’s all that family money he’s inherited.” Sandy sighed. “I wouldn’t kick him out of bed for eating crackers.”

“What about Dickie?”

“He’s not bad in bed.”

“I wasn’t talking about—”

“Shit,” Sandy exclaimed, the dreamy expression evaporating from her face as she looked at the café clock on the back wall. “If I don’t get these salt and pepper shakers filled, I’ll be late for my date.”

“Go,” Hannah said, recognizing the futility of talking sense into the girl.

“Really?”

“Really. I have nowhere to go.”

“Thanks, Hannah,” Sandy gushed, scooting across the bench and onto her feet. “You have no idea how much this means to me. Dickie is—”

“The love of your life. Yadda, yadda, yadda.”

“He is,” Sandy insisted. “He’s *the* one.”

“Isn’t that what you said about Danny week before last? And, when I got hired here six weeks ago, wasn’t it Joey?”

Sandy waved her off. “Puppy love. Mere puppy love. This time it’s for real.”

“Yeah. Sure. Get. Go hook up with the love of your life.” *This week.*

Sandy bounded happily off.

“Fool,” Hannah muttered, shoving another errant lock of hair that had escaped her ponytail behind her ear. She was definitely never falling in love. Men were not worth the pain.

So where’d she wind up? In some little town that looked like it’d been time-warped out of a fifties sitcom where women were happy housewives wearing pearls and doing housework in high heels. The heels and pearls may have gone by the wayside, but Sutter’s Grove, Wisconsin was still small town middle America where everybody knew everyone’s business and everybody thought a single woman nearly thirty was on the brink of spinsterhood.

She stared out the storefront windows of the converted café at the bucolic town square that was more of a small park with its hundred-year-old trees and its band shell. Other than the Wednesday night gathering of the local old-timers band and an occasional Saturday wedding in the park, Sutter’s Grove had no after-dark entertainment...unless you had a beau and a car with a big back seat. Or a car, period. Most drove over to Madison if they wanted some excitement.

But she didn’t have a car, at least not a working one. That was why she was stuck in Sutter’s Grove. Her car had blown its transmission just outside town six weeks ago and, until she saved up enough money to get it repaired, she wasn’t going anywhere.

At least she’d found cheap living quarters within walking distance of the diner where she’d gotten a job. That was the good news. The bad news was the place offered no privacy beyond her single room, third floor walk-up. The Tower Room, as her landlords called it because it was the room in the uppermost level of the tower of the old-mansion-turned-boarding-house, also gave her the creeps. There was just something unhappy about that room.

Which was as good a reason as any for dallying over filling condiment containers. She trailed a trimmed fingernail down the bumpy side of a salt shaker. She hadn’t had a good feeling when she’d first seen the old house and, when she’d stepped into the Tower Room, the hairs on the back of her neck prickled. But the price was right. A woman with a broken down car, a job from which she wouldn’t get her first paycheck for two weeks, and a mere twenty-seven dollars to her name took what she could get. These particular boarding house landlords hadn’t demanded a week’s rent in advance.

Boarding house. She grunted. She’d thought boarding houses were a thing of the past. But then, Sutter’s Grove was a town of the past...just as Rick’s Diner was.

She glanced around the restaurant with its worn linoleum floor, chrome-edged lunch counter, old-time soda fountain, and its promotional signs and knickknacks from their various suppliers. Her favorite promo item was a decorative tin from their soda supplier. But it wasn’t the crisp red company logo that attracted her.

She pushed aside the salt shakers and reached for the collector tin propped up on the tabletop against the wall. Customers liked to leave notes of wisdom or amusement in the tin for future diners.

It had been several days since she’d checked the tin for new messages. She turned an ear toward the kitchen. She heard Rick’s rapid fire chatter and the quiet reply of Jake Griffin’s deep voice. Even on her most hectic days, Jake could soothe her flustered state with a couple quietly spoken words. Just hearing his muffled voice now lightened her mood.

With curious anticipation, she opened the collector tin. There were three new notes. The top two were the usual sort: a clever saying and a Bible verse. But the third note...

To fear love is to fear life, and those who fear life are already three parts dead. Bertrand Russell from *Marriage and Morals* (1929)

Hannah stared at the scrap of paper napkin, rereading the words written on it, words that slammed into her protective wall like a three-ton wrecking ball—words that seemed to have been written just for her.

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