

OCTOBER FEST

By Jess Lourey

Chapter 1

If I was a dog, I would have smelled the murder coming. I'd have caught its scent on the breeze, a hint of rotten death weaving through the chill fall air, lacing around the shedding trees, creeping over the light morning frost on mouse footsteps. Hunting me.

But I wasn't a dog. I was a 30-year-old woman who hoped but did not believe that she could get a fair shake in life's casino of love, success, and self-acceptance. The tables felt decidedly stacked this morning even though the October sun sparkled, covering me like a blanket against the still-crisp air clinging to the low ground. Ron Sims, my boss at the *Battle Lake Recall*, had ordered me to cover the Octoberfest inaugural event—a political debate—which is why I was mincing my way across the high school football field on this chummy Saturday morning, the scent of rotting leaves in the air and my sweet new shoes cutting at my heels.

I'd never attended Battle Lake's premier fall festival, but Sunny, the woman whose house I was sitting, had informed me it was a beer-soaked, polka-driven, sausage-and-potato-embracing celebration. Frankly, it didn't sound wildly different than your average weekend in this part of the world.

My newspaper reporting gig didn't consume much of my time, usually. Ron, who was the owner and editor-in-chief of the *Recall*, required a weekly food column and four full-spread articles a month, some of them investigative. In return, he paid me \$25 a week and I had an outlet for my itchy curiosity. I wasn't blind to the slave wages, though, and channeled my resentment directly into the culinary column, which I'd renamed "Battle Lake Bites" when I took it over in May.

The column was Halloween-themed this entire month, and instead of simply rounding up recipes with spooky names, I'd gone whole hog. My week one column had featured instructions for creating Haunted Head Cheese. The "cheese" in the title is a misnomer; the "head" is not. Ask a German. And last week I'd offered instructions on creating Bitter Blood Sausage. All meat sausage contains some blood, you say? Not a quarter cup per serving, intentionally added.

For the upcoming column, I was debating between Three Fried Mice (turns out you need to marinate rodents in ethyl alcohol to kill the plague and whatnot before frying) and Fearsomely Frightening Fish Chili, which I thought some locals might actually enjoy. It called for fresh fish plus their "juice" (a term which made me giggle and then feel ill), a little dill, some kidney beans, diced onions and garlic, chili powder, and voila! Frightening.

Come to think of it, if I picked that nearly edible recipe over the freakier alternative, maybe Ron would assign me fewer early morning jobs. I wasn't a big follower of politics and figured this beat to be his punishment for dedicating the Bitter Blood Sausage column to him. Any dish that depends upon a delicate balance between cream, lard, and fresh pork blood is probably best left unasccribed. I'd need to find a stealthier way to exercise my passive aggressiveness, I decided, as I neared the carnival-sized main tent with the red flag perched on top.

The main tent housed this morning's event, a public debate between the two lead candidates campaigning for Minnesota's 7th District congressional seat. Arnold Swydecker was running against the incumbent, Sarah Glokkmann. Glokkmann had gone to school just up the

road from Battle Lake and was garnering a lot of national press for her habit of slamming her foot in her mouth. Last week, around a mouthful of lefse, she'd confided to a Daughters of Norway gathering that it was her firm belief that all immigrants should be shipped home, toot suite, so real Americans could reclaim their country. Local camera crews had been in attendance, and the footage went viral.

Ron was hopeful that today I could scoop her saying something particularly incendiary and drive up newspaper sales. In the meanwhile, the election was three short weeks away, and the candidates were neck and neck in the polls. I may only be a transplant, but I knew this race was important to a lot of people.

I'd relocated to this tiny, west central Minnesota burg this past March to watch my friend Sunny's place and dog so she could accompany her monobrowed lover to Alaska. She was Battle Lake born and raised, inheriting 200 acres of rolling heaven bordering a pristine lake on the edge of town when her parents died in a car accident. She'd returned to the property after high school, spending part of her inheritance to replace the rundown farmhouse with a double-wide. She'd been happy living on the land and waiting tables until she fell in love with Dean, a furry, silver-tongued salmon fisherman who was hitching through town on his way back to the Great White North. She bought his and hers plane tickets, made me promise to guard her possessions for the summer, and flew into the sunset.

I'd found a full-time job running the library after the head librarian disappeared under mysterious circumstances. I was shamefully unqualified for the job, but there'd been so many deadly upheavals since then that my lacking the necessary degree and experience had taken a back seat in terms of Battle Lake's priorities.

The town was reeling from a rash of murders, far too many for such a beautiful little burg. I stumbled through my workdays, spending my off time lurking on librarian blogs and reading library science textbooks so I didn't make a full-dress fool of myself. I'd signed on to the part-time reporting gig to supplement my anemic city-issued library paycheck.

Overall, I made enough money to pay my bills, dine out once a week, and every now and again squirrel away a few nuts into my Get Outta Dodge fund. Then summer had passed, and Sunny had decided she didn't want to leave Alaska around the same time I decided I didn't want to leave Battle Lake. I didn't know if it was a decision so much as a lack of options, but I wore it the same.

I entered the tent and was greeted by the smell of musty canvas and trampled grass. The structure housed at least 50 people, though the crowd seemed Lilliputian within the enormous tent, rows of cafeteria tables ready for tonight's blowout festival. Not With My Horse, a local band featuring my ex, had been fine-tuning their "polka fusion" music for a week. This included, I'd heard, the keyboard player acquiring some phat accordion skillz. The Rusty Nail would serve beer, and Stub's Dining and Saloon would be catering sausage, chicken schnitzel, fried potatoes, and their famously fresh and warm four-style bread rolls. My stomach growled thinking about it. I'd left the house this morning with only enough time to grab a peanut butter granola bar and a bad attitude.

I hadn't decided if I'd join tonight's festivities or not. Newly dry, I was feeling vulnerable to be exposing myself to so much easy liquor. I decided to decide later and studied the gathered audience before choosing a prime spot. Only one person did I recognize as a local at a glance: Tanya Ingebretson, wife to the richest man in Battle Lake, on every city committee, in charge of every church function, and shallow as a grave. She'd been trying to get me fired from the library since I'd taken over, saying I lacked the credentials and didn't reflect the values of the town. The

fact that she was right didn't make me like her any more. It didn't surprise me that she'd expand her political pie-fingering to the national level.

I settled in a folding chair toward the back of the crowd, noticing that to my left and right, sharply-dressed reporters clacked away on their tiny handhelds, press passes dangling at their neck. Since I'd forgotten my press pass, I settled for yanking out my writing utensil and pad of paper to make like I was texting someone with my pencil, which, it turns out, looked just like I was taking notes. Which I was.

Murmurs of conversation ran through those gathered, but most of us stared quietly toward the stage, waiting for the show to start. We were in luck. On the makeshift platform, a woman in an elegant green pantsuit separated herself from a throng of people and approached an 80s-era, large-bulbed microphone perched on a silver stick. She cleared her throat and shoved her shoulder-length red hair behind her ear in a self-conscious gesture. She appeared about my age but classy.

"Hello, and thank you for coming. My name is Grace Swinton, and I'm Representative Glockmann's assistant." Her voice was high and clear. "I'm afraid the debate is running late due to a...scheduling conflict, but we should be ready to roll in under a half an hour."

A hot whisper ran through the audience. The camera crews on the fringe sighed and put down their heavy-looking equipment, and the reporter nearest me said to no one in particular. "I bet I know what that conflict is."

"Really?" I swiveled toward him. "What?"

He glanced at my scruffy jeans, t-shirt under a lined jean jacket, and hair in a pony tail. I gathered it required some effort to take me seriously, but he was a champ, holding his thumb and pinky out and putting them up to his mouth in a drinking motion.

I was familiar with the gesture for "drinking problem." Boy was I. And I loved the dirt. Maybe this debate wouldn't be boring after all. "One of the candidates?"

My eagerness must have repelled him. He shrugged and turned his attention to the man to his right. I tried to eavesdrop, but they were clearly friends, their heads in close as they engaged in animated but quiet conversation. Having worn out my welcome I stood, planning to take the subtle route and sidle toward the stage to sniff out who reeked of whiskey and mouthwash. The tippler had to be one of the speakers to put the debate on hold, but which one? I was woefully unfamiliar with the facts of either. If I owned a handheld, I could probably look up the info right here.

Instead, I went old school, strolling over to a woman with Asian features, Korean lineage if I had to guess, perched near the edge of the stage. She was not clearly affiliated with the press or the debaters.

"Nice day," I said, glancing around the tent.

She studied me intently for a second and then looked away, like a hawk deciding I wasn't worth the flight. I put her at mid- to late twenties, her skin clear and her features striking. She was dressed casually, but expensive casual in high-end jeans and a well-cut blazer.

I tried again. "You on one of the campaigns?"

Still nothing.

"Ever been to Battle Lake before?" The woman rolled her eyes so loud I could hear it. I switched to the direct route. "Look, I have to cover this debate because my editor wants to punish me. I wanna know if it's worth my time to hang out for something that might never happen. I hear one of the candidates is, you know." I made the same sign for "in the bottle" that the reporter had and felt like a thief for doing it.

I'd hit a nerve. "The debate'll happen," she said. "Queen Glokkmann never misses an opportunity for an audience."

From her mouth to God's ears, because a flurry of activity materialized on the stage. The waiting camera crews hoisted their equipment onto their shoulders and reporters slipped their handhelds into their pockets and leaned toward the stage. "Thanks," I said, grabbing an empty chair in the front row between two strangers too polite to sit next to each other.

Once seated, I observed that the dark-haired woman was no longer skulking on the sidelines. A security guard had replaced her, a transparent cord coiling out from an earpiece to a chunk of plastic on his shoulder. A long table was slid to the front of the stage, and two stubby cordless microphones were plunked on it, one next to the "Representative Sarah Glokkmann" placard and the other next to the "Arnold Swydecker" placard. A short blonde woman I recognized as a waitress from Stub's scurried out with a pitcher of water and two glasses, taking a shy moment to glance out at the audience from the star's perspective.

"This looks like it's gonna happen," I whispered to the woman on my left, who had a tape recorder in hand. She smiled and nodded without peeling her eyes off the stage.

I leaned toward the older gentleman on my right. He sported a cookie duster mustache and a press pass indicating he worked for the *Fergus Falls Register*. "Hey, you know which of the two candidates is the biggest drunk?" He pursed his lips and dismissively shook his head without glancing away from the stage, either.

I followed their gaze. The woman who had earlier made the debate delay announcement, Grace something or the other, re-emerged looking frazzled, making me like her infinitely more.

"Thank you for your patience!" She really seemed to mean it. "On behalf of Representative Sarah Glokkmann, I'd like to thank you all for coming. The values and concerns of rural Minnesota are our values and concerns. We look forward to serving the state for another two years and beyond."

She motioned toward the back of the stage where a makeshift curtain had been erected, gesturing for someone to step forward. Nobody did. She motioned again and waited an uncomfortable minute before giving up. "And Mr. Swydecker needs no introduction at all. So, let's begin the debate. Both candidates have prepared a statement that they will read. Then, they will each have two minutes to answer questions submitted by District 7 voters. Finally, we will take questions from the media." She smiled at us to indicate that whatever we wanted to ask would be A-okay.

"With no further ado, let the debates begin!" She shoved the microphone into the crook of her arm and clapped, walking backward so as not to block the view of the candidates.

Sarah Glokkmann arrived at the edge of the stage first, modeling sandy brown Lego-lady hair, thick orange make-up that probably looked great on TV, and an ill-fitting coral sports jacket over a matching skirt.

Arnold Swydecker shambled behind her looking like he'd been trotted out of a fifth grade band room where he'd been boring kids since the late seventies, all grey comb-over and hunched back from peering too closely at the sheet music for "Another One Bites the Dust."

Both had the makings of a career drinker, as far as I could tell.

They waved at the live audience and the cameras before claiming their seats. Glokkmann spoke first. She couldn't be older than her mid forties despite the dowdy clothes. She was poised, I'd give her that, though if I wasn't mistaken, she had a slight tremor in her left hand. "Thank you for coming, Battle Lake!" She fist-pumped the air, effectively hiding the wobble. Her cadre

on stage left hooted, drawing the attention of the cameras. On the news, it'd look like there was a whole cheering section.

"I've served you faithfully for six years, and I'm willing to continue my work for as long as you'll have me. Now, my opponent over here will tell you that I haven't done enough, but I'd like to remind him of the thirteen bills I've been involved with since elected to office."

Someone behind me snorted loudly. I snuck a glance and noted that it was the reporter who'd first mentioned a drinking problem. Drat. I shouldn't have been so desperate with him.

The snort, however, did not break Glokkmann's stride. She smiled winningly at the audience, revealing two dimples as deep as oil wells. Her hands were clasped tightly in front of her. "What is important to me is what's important to you. Increased money in your wallets. Healthier communities. Stronger families. More jobs."

It occurred to me that I should be writing this down, but I didn't see how she could be any vaguer short of saying, "I like *good* stuff!" She continued dishing out the pabulum for another ten minutes before tossing a gracious nod to Swydecker, who was as sincere as he was boring.

In a mumbling, shuffling voice, he explained how his thirty years in the education system (I knew it!) taught him the value of strong public schools and well-funded libraries, the benefit to communities if families had access to living wages and health benefits, and the importance of preserving the environment for future generations by making unpopular decisions now. He did not have a hooting section, not even a small one. In fact, I wouldn't have noticed when he stopped talking except he and the Representative took their seats.

The debate followed a pattern after that: Grace would read a question, which didn't seem fair as we knew whose team she was on. Glokkmann would answer it with a chirpy ball of nothing, and then Swydecker would respond in a specific and stultifying way before being cut off for running over his time limit. The only alteration to this pattern was in who spoke first. I didn't want to embarrass myself by nodding off and so instead closed one eye and pretended to squish the tiny heads of the people on stage.

Before I knew it, it was time for questions from the audience. I raised my hand not because I had something to ask but because I needed to reassure myself I was awake. Thankfully I wasn't called on. Instead, the blonde woman to my left got her chance. "Representative Glokkmann, there's rumors that you're considering throwing your hat into the governor ring. Is it true?"

The Representative smiled brightly. "Lila, right now my priority is serving the state in the position they've elected me to. I have no other political ambitions at this time. If that changes, my family will be the first to know, and you'll be the second." The audience laughed politely, and Glokkmann winked in Lila's direction.

Someone behind me was called on next. He stood. "Mr. Swydecker, what are your feelings on the current war?"

Swydecker appeared somber and thoughtful, which apparently was the debate equivalent of showing your throat in a dog fight. "Depends on what day you ask, doesn't it Arnie?" Glokkmann interrupted, smiling as she sliced. "But I'm always on the side of the troops and America."

Handy, I thought, settling in for a twenty-minute playground fight with Glokkmann playing the role of lunch-stealer. I was about to pack it up when the reporter who'd tipped me on the tippler was finally called on. Grace seemed to have been deliberately avoiding

acknowledging him because he'd had his hand up since before the official audience Q & A period and had been holding it impatiently aloft since.

"Yes, Bob Webber, right?" Grace said icily. "What newspaper are you with again?"

"I have a blog, actually, Ms. Swinton, but I believe you know that," he said, standing. "It's called The Body Politic. My question is for Representative Glokkmann." He cleared his throat, and I noticed that the arms of his sport coat were a little short, the front shiny from wear. He looked vulnerable standing there, like a kid owning only hand-me-downs dressing his best for a big speech.

"Ma'am, the only bill you have successfully sponsored in your three terms in the legislature is House Resolution 1294, which calls for the designation of the month of September as 'National Moebius Syndrome Awareness Month.' Of the twelve other bills you've co-sponsored, six are directly related to opening up national lands to gas and oil exploration, development, and production. Two are aimed at killing the health care bill so insurance companies rather than doctors get to decide what health care we receive, while your husband coincidentally owns an insurance company. Do you have any ethical qualms about doing little else in Congress other than using your position to line the pockets of the oil industry and your family?"

Glokkmann held her smile, though it cracked a little at each corner. "Bob, tell me what you know about Moebius Syndrome." Both hands were definitely shaking now.

"That's not my question, ma'am."

"I'll tell you what I know. I know it's an unfair disease that affects thousands, and through awareness and support, we can make a difference in the lives of children who face this tremendous hurdle. You're telling me that advocating for those who can't advocate for themselves is 'doing little?'"

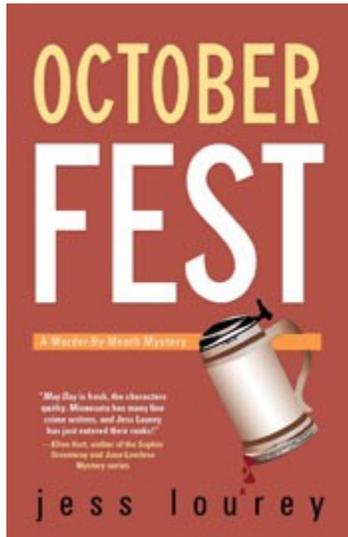
I always thought I had a gift for deflection, the pretty little sister of lying, but this lady was a pro. I craned my head fully so I could watch Webber's reaction. His cheeks flushed, and he was shifting his weight from one foot to another. He knew he couldn't pursue his line of questioning without looking coldhearted. Score one for the Lego-haired Lady. He sat down abruptly, and I turned back in time to see her smile triumphantly, her hands once again clasped in front of her.

Grace stepped in to announce the debate successful, and at an end. The candidates moved to the edge of the stage and shook hands while worker ants sprang up to clear the stage and prepare it for the night's festivities.

I wove through the crowd to reach Bob the blogger and was nearly there when a commotion erupted at the rear of the tent. A group of six or seven people marched in, all of them carrying protest signs. The posters I could read proclaimed health care a right and not a privilege, and the sign holders were chanting angrily, demanding an audience with Glokkmann and Swydecker.

I toggled to get a closer look, but so did all the other reporters and the camera crews, causing a bottleneck. Moving to the side instead of fighting forward, I was able to catch a glimpse of the dark-haired woman who'd assured me "Queen Glokkmann" would not miss a debate slide into the tent through the same opening as the protestors, a smirk on her face. She strode toward the stage and took a post where she could watch both the candidates and the sign holders. Swydecker was watching the sign holders with interest. Glokkmann, on the other hand, was high-tailing it toward an exit. The security guard materialized alongside the protestors.

I wished I had a chance to see how it all turned out, but I had to open up the library. I scribbled Bob the blogger's name in my notebook, wondering if his last name was spelled with one or two b's, and set off to start my shift. Of course, if I was a dog, I'd have bolted straight out of town, my hackles razor-sharp. The murder had never been closer, butcher and victim sharing the same tent air.



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