

SEPTEMBER FAIR

By Jess Lourey

Prologue

She cut a wide swath through the eleven other young women. Every one of them was pretty. To a girl they had skin as white and creamy as lefse batter, blonde hair the color of sunlight on honey, eyes as blue as a raspberry slushie from the DQ. A brunette would have stood out like a turd in a salad bar in this bunch. It didn't always work that way. Some years, a brown-haired girl could even win the Milkfed Mary, Queen of the Dairy title. But not this year. This year, the field was an Aryan army, with one Ashley Kirsten Pederson as its general.

"Lana, did you use my lip gloss?" Ashley pouted when she asked. She couldn't believe she was forced to spend another minute with these piglets, girls she definitely wouldn't hang with in her hometown. Probably they were all farm girls, maybe even in 4H. Not her. She was just drop dead gorgeous. Her parents happened to own a dairy farm, but that wasn't her fault. "I asked, did you use it? Because your lips are all glossy and it looks a lot like Cherry Sugar Kiss from here."

"No, Ashley, I did not take your lip gloss. I have my own." Lana, for her part, was not a member of 4H. She'd been involved in Hands, Health, Head, and Heart as a kid back when she had enjoyed riding horse and raising rabbits, but once she hit high school, she became busy with the demands of maintaining a 4.0 GPA, helping her mom run the farm, and keeping her new boyfriend, Bud, on second base.

Ashley gave her corn-silk hair one last fluff. "Fine." She wasn't going to waste her time worrying about these milk duds. She was the queen this year. And thanks to her dazzling victory, Battle Lake was now in the enviable position of supplying more Milkfed Marys than any other town in the state of Minnesota. Ashley had made history.

A man wearing a pair of tiny head phones knocked before poking his face in the second floor dormitory. "Ms. Pederson?" Ashley swiveled and flashed her best smile. Her teeth were white enough to trigger migraines. "You'll want to grab your snow pants and coat. You're on in five."

Ashley took one last sip of her diet cola, her main source of nutrition. She sucked the straw delicately, ice clinking in the glass, as she imagined movie stars drank their pop. Smiling at the glory that awaited her, she set her drink down and grabbed her pine-green Columbia parka and matching pants, both good to 40 below, and floated down the cement steps that led to the massive cattle barn, which she pranced through and outside into the already steamy, late-August morning. The sun sparkled off her tiara and turned the sequins on her strapless, pale blue gown into a million glittering sapphires. She waved and the cameras flashed, clicking and popping like firecrackers. She didn't lose stride as she crossed the pavement, her right arm in constant motion — elbow, elbow, wrist wrist — and entered the front doors of the Dairy Building, which were being held open for her.

As she strode to the southwest corner of the edifice, she passed the House of Cheese on her right. It was a misnomer. There was no house, only a glassed-in display featuring the history of the cheese industry in Minnesota, illustrated with plastic cheeses in every shade of white, yellow, and orange shaped into wedges, slices, and rounds. On her left stood the Dairy Goodness concession stand, which had been selling malts, yogurt, cheese, cones, sundaes, and icy cold

glasses of milk in three flavors since 1945. The line to the front counter already snaked outside the building, and those waiting for their hit of calcium whispered excitedly as Ashley sailed past.

Overhead fans lifted Ashley's hair as she glided toward the refrigerated, glass-walled octagonal booth. It was twelve feet high and nine feet across, rested on a four foot base, and housed the most popular exhibit on the massive grounds. The clamoring crowd shoved and hustled to catch a glimpse of the queen nearing her icy throne, parting like an overweight white sea so she could float through. Ashley felt like a rock star. Ever the professional, she paused for one final photo shoot in front of the glass-sided gazebo before slipping behind to the curtained anteroom. Organizers had recently spruced up the queen's booth, and it carried the faint smell of new paint. The predominant color was white with red and blue trim. A single strand of scarlet twinkle lights crowned the top of the structure, and inside, twelve 90-pound blocks of butter were arranged like a spreadable Stonehenge, eleven in a circle on the outside with one in the center: hers.

Her grin inched up to her eyes, and in a move she had practiced countless times in front of one of her full-length mirrors at home, she turned gracefully on her heel, showing just a hint of upper thigh through the slit of her gown, and slipped behind the blue curtain that separated the entrance of the booth from the excited crowd. The private area was really a small hall. To her left were the four wooden stairs that led to the door of the gazebo. To her right were about a million plastic spoons. Dairy Goodness, whose kitchen was at the other end of the hall, had run out of storage space.

Ashley dropped her smile. "Are you ready for me?"

The sculptor nodded from her post guarding the door to the booth. She was a fill-in this year and as nervous as a wicked thought in church. "You'll want to pull up those pants and zip your jacket before we go in. It's only 38 degrees in there, and we've got a full day ahead of us."

Ashley yanked on her snowpants and adroitly tucked her gown inside, illustrating the axiom that no one can stuff a dress into winter gear like a Minnesota gal. They learned the skill in preschool and improved on technique from there. Once her lower half was swaddled, she zipped her jacket to her chin and pulled woolly mittens out of the pockets, tugging them tight. When Ashley looked ready for a full-on blizzard, the sculptor marched up the four stairs, took a shaky breath, and pulled open the single door to the booth. A rush of icy air met the wall of humid heat. The crowd outside the booth went silent, reacting to the sight of the open door visible through the glass.

"Wish me luck!" Ashley called out in her sparkly voice, pausing for one more photo opportunity as a photographer ducked his head behind the curtain, against the rules, to catch sight of the queen entering her throne room. She was a natural, the Marilyn Monroe of Minnesota's dairy industry. That ability to turn it on and off for an audience is why she'd sailed through the judging, where she'd been required to bluff her way past questions about the dairy industry and feign enthusiasm for pasteurized cheese.

"How long can you keep milk after the expiration date?"

"Well, sir, milk is a delicious product any day of the week, but it is best to drink it before the expiration date. In a pinch, though, it's always better to drink old milk than fresh pop!"

The judges shared nods of approval. "Excellent. And how important is calcium to the human body?"

"Not very, unless you like having bones!"

Ashley had the judges and the audience in stitches and on the edge of their seats. When she had been called forward with Lana and Christine, the two other runners-up, the weight of the

crown on her head had brought her no surprise, only a feeling of justice being done. Now, the world was her palm pilot. Winning the title of Milkfed Mary, Queen of the Dairy promised local and even national media attention. She was scheduled to appear on *Good Morning America* next week, and there was whispering of an *Oprah* appearance. All she had to do was get through today.

When the last click faded, Ashley took her seat inside the booth, trying not to gag at the smell of greasy milk. She was lactose intolerant, and the blocks of Grade A salted butter surrounding her made her want to ralph. Instead, she sat prettily, not even twitching as the floor of the eight-sided booth began rotating slowly, allowing everyone a generous view of the magic happening inside, the only angle not viewable the one behind the now-closed door to the booth.

And so opened the Minnesota State Fair, the country's second largest, with a tradition begun by the Midwest Milk Organization back in 1955: on the first day of the fair, Milkfed Mary, Queen of the Dairy, chosen out of some 80 county dairy princesses and then twelve finalists, posed as a larger-than-life likeness of her head was carved out of a block of butter inside of a glass-sided, rotating refrigerator. Every day after that, for eleven more days, the runners-up also were seated and immortalized in the special booth, but no butter carving was as grand as the first one of the fair. That's what Ashley was telling herself as she shivered despite her parka and mittens. She felt a killer headache developing but didn't let it touch her smile.

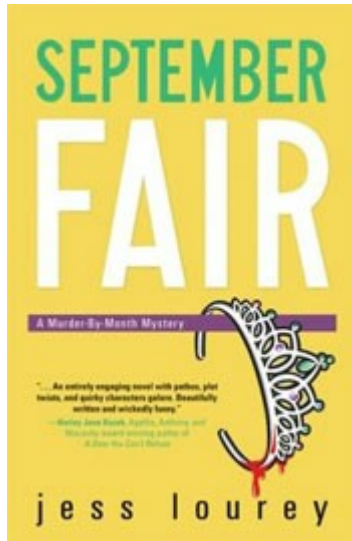
She tried passing time by brainstorming what she would do with her sculpture after the fair. Some past winners had donated their butter heads to their churches to be used in local festivals, either to make cookies and pies with or to roll corn on the cob on. Some women saved their heads in their chest freezer, between the venison sausage and the frostbitten hamburger, not ready to throw away that tie to their glorious past. Ashley envisioned something grander for hers. Maybe she would feature it as the centerpiece at her wedding next summer, or donate it to Alexandria Technical College, where she was planning to study sales and marketing when fall semester began. The college president could build a refrigerated case and display the butter head in the main entryway, with a plaque making clear that Ashley was, in fact, among them. She turned tranquilly, pats of butter falling to the floor from the sculptor's efforts. Even the rising tightness in her chest couldn't distract her from her happy place. She blinked rapidly and wondered why it was becoming so foggy in the booth.

The sculptor worked busily and with a total focus on her masterpiece. She had big shoes to fill. Linda Gerritt had sculpted every single Milkfed Mary head since the inception of the pageant, but she had broken her right arm the week before the fair, and her fill-in was under clear instructions to do everything as it had always been done. So, she used seven tools, not including her hands — knives, wires, other tricks of the trade. She began the sculpting with a serrated bread knife to get the general shape and followed with a ribbon tool to refine angles. Her philosophy of butter carving was not to force the art but rather to let the face within the dairy emerge of its own accord. Fortunately, butter was a forgiving medium. Too much off the nose, and all she had to do was scoop some off the floor and pat it back into place. Bangs not high enough? Take a little from the rear of the head and slap it on the front.

The sculptor's work soon consumed her, and her nerves subsided as the many faces outside staring at her and Ashley as if they were zoo creatures faded. The world became a small, rotating, octagonal prison. The sculptor wouldn't allow music — it distracted her — and so the booth was as quiet as a tomb when the lights unexpectedly flickered out. The outage lasted less than two minutes.

When questioned later, the sculptor could only recall violent retching and scrabbling from

Ashley's side of the booth, several moments of complete darkness, followed by a slash of brightness as someone opened the north doors and held them open to ease the panicked rustling of those in the building. Soon after, the lights were back on, and Ashley Kirsten Pederson, 54th Milkfed Mary, Queen of the Dairy, proud owner of a promise ring from Dirk Holthaus, and soon-to-be college freshman, was dead on the floor of the still-spinning octagon.



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