

Chapter 1 Some Like It Hot

It was only 10:30 in the morning, but already the sidewalks were hot enough to fry the proverbial egg in downtown St. Paul. I had come to work fearing that some idiot really would try to fry one, and I would be sent to interview him. Not to worry. Instead, I was given an almost equally goofy assignment. Several hundred people mad enough to go out in the noonday sun were planning to square dance in Mears Park beginning at 11:30 a.m.

I was at my desk in the air-conditioned *St. Paul Daily Dispatch* newsroom, doing routine phone checks, when City Editor Don O'Rourke appeared at my side and informed me that I had been chosen to cover the park promenaders. I'm Warren Mitchell, better known as Mitch, and I'm a reporter for the aforementioned newspaper. "But it's hotter than a lap dancer's buns out there," I said.

"There's your story angle," Don said. "Take your Siamese twin with you to get pictures of the people all dressed up in those fancy square dance clothes passing out from the heat."

My so-called Siamese twin is photographer Alan Jeffrey. We don't look at all like twins, but we've been buddies since we were wallflowers together during our first freshman mixer at the University of Minnesota nearly twenty years ago. I'm a good three inches taller than Al, and I have light brown hair and a sexy mustache. Al's hair is almost black, and so is his close-cropped beard. Because we enjoy an occasional moment of levity, Don says we're joined at the funny bone, which, in our case, he defines as the skull.

There was no use protesting further, so I went to the photo desk to give Al the bad news. He shared my enthusiasm for going outdoors on what promised to be the hottest June day in St. Paul's history.

"But it's hot out there," Al said.

"How hot is it?" I asked.

"It's so hot that the flashers in Rice Park aren't wearing their raincoats."

"Cool," I said. "Unfortunately, we won't see this undraped display because we're going in the opposite direction, to Mears Park, in about half an hour to find out what the square dancers are or are not wearing."

The park where the dancers, who were in town for the National Square and Round Dance Convention, were planning to fry their brains was in a neighborhood known as Lowertown, only a few blocks from our

office. It was a pleasant walk in normal weather, but this late June heat wave was anything but normal. We were sweating like two Eskimos wearing parkas in a tropical whorehouse when we arrived at the park, even though we were in short-sleeved shirts and had taken off our ties. A flashing thermometer on a nearby bank building was showing a temperature of 98 degrees.

Usually Mears Park was a cool place, both literally and figuratively. It covers an entire block and features a tree-and-flower-lined, manmade stream that runs through the park from the northwest corner to the southeast corner. Centered at the north edge of the park is a covered stage, which faces a brick plaza that measures about 75 by 65 feet.

This brickyard is the only part of the park not shaded by trees. It's also the only open space available for square dancing.

When Al and I arrived, couples in colorful western-style costumes were getting off buses, swarming into the park and forming squares on the baking brick surface. The predominant hair colors were gray and white, but these folks looked like they were determined to dance, the temperature and humidity be damned.

On stage, a trio of technicians was testing the sound system, which seemed as reluctant to function in the heat as I was. A half-dozen costumed men and women, whom we took to be convention officials and square dance callers, were listening to the sound tests and discussing the situation.

"I'll go talk to the folks on stage while you get some shots of the dancers," I said.

"Good thinking," Al replied. "If I wait too long, they could all be stretched out in the shade."

"Or stretchered out in an ambulance," I said.

As I approached the stage, with notebook and pen in hand, a woman wearing a white cowboy hat and a red, white and blue skirt over a mass of red petticoats stepped forward to greet me. "Howdy," she said. "I'm Tennessee McGee."

"I'm Mitch Mitchell from the *St. Paul Daily Dispatch*," I said. "I take it you're one of the callers."

"You take it right, Mitch honey. I am what's known as a national caller, which means I travel all over this great country doing my thing." She spoke with an ever-so-soft southern drawl.

"And your home is in Tennessee?"

"Well, not really," she said. "When I'm not on the road calling dances, I actually live just north of here, in Falcon Heights, where I grew up and went to school. But a name like Tennessee McGee sounds a lot more like a big-time square dance caller than plain old Mary McGee, don't you think?"

"Absolutely," I said, jotting down both names. "But what about the southern drawl?"

"Easiest accent in the world to pick up, Mitch honey. I could have you talking like a Tennessee hillbilly in half an hour if you've got any ear at all."

"You probably could. But why are you putting on the Dixie façade?"

"Calling square dances is a kind of show biz, you know? If you want to get national bookings, you've got to stand out from the crowd."

Tennessee McGee did stand out, no question. The cowboy hat sitting atop a cluster of brunette curls made her at least six feet tall. She had a round, pleasant face with large brown eyes, a cute snub nose and full, sensuous lips. Above the colorful skirt she wore a fringed white blouse that was open far enough to reveal several inches of deep, freckled cleavage. I guessed her bust measurement at thirty-eight inches, and her age to be about the same number in years.

"Come on, I'll introduce you to the rest of the folks," said Tennessee McGee. "We're itching to get started, but the sound system doesn't seem to like this weather any more than we do."

"I don't know how you can stand to wear a hat on a day like this," I said.

"Oh, Mitch honey, this hat is my signature. You won't ever see me without this hat. Unless you see me in bed, that is."

I was tempted to say that I wouldn't mind seeing her in that environment, but she pre-empted me with an introduction to a robust fifty-something man who stepped up beside her. He was wearing a black cowboy hat, a dark purple shirt with a black bolo tie and black pants. "This here is Big Eddie Plummer," Tennessee said. "He comes from Kentucky and he's one of the top national callers."

I wanted to ask why they called him "Big Eddie." He was of ordinary size, about five-nine or five-ten and maybe 170 pounds. He had a ruddy complexion, a retreating hairline, a smile that showed lots of white teeth, and a very strong handshake.

"Pleased to meet 'cha," said Big Eddie, crushing my right hand with his. "You from the paper?"

"That's right," I said. "I'm with that photographer over there." Big Eddie allowed me to withdraw my hand in order to point at Al Jeffrey.

"Well, we'd best git this show on the road then, before your photographer friend gits heat stroke out there 'mongst the dancers," Big Eddie said. "I think they finally got this fool sound system up and runnin'." He pulled a metal flask from the pocket of a black sport coat that he'd hung over a chair, unscrewed the cap and took a swig. "A little somethin' to git the motor revved up. Care for a sip?" He pushed the flask close enough for me to smell bourbon.

"No thanks," I said. "Not during working hours." Actually, not during

any hours because I'm a recovering alcoholic, but I saw no need to go into the details of my personal problems with Big Eddie.

"Let me know if'n you change your mind," he said. He took another nip, screwed the cap back on and tucked the flask into his hip pocket.

"Can I answer any questions for you?" Tennessee asked.

"I guess my biggest question is: Why the heck are you doing this?" I said.

"It's a fun thing, that's why," she said. "We try to do something different at every national convention. Last time we were in St. Paul we set a world record for the number of people dancing on a bridge.

Today, we're looking to set the record for the number of people dancing on bricks."

I remembered the bridge event. Some 6,000 people tried to dance on the Wabasha Street Bridge, which spans the Mississippi River in downtown St. Paul. The bridge began to vibrate with such intensity that some people departed during the dance, fearing a collapse.

"It was hot that day, too," I said to Tennessee. "And some people were worried about the bridge going down. Were you calling at that one?"

"Oh, my god, no. I wasn't a big enough name yet. I was just breaking into the national circuit back then, and they wanted famous names, like Big Eddie Plummer and Lefty LaBlanc, out there on the bridge."

"But today it's just you and Big Eddie?"

"Us and Ray Two Turtles. He's the tall guy over there with the fancy vest. Full-blooded Cherokee Indian from out in Oklahoma."

"I take it most of the callers are men?"

"You take it right. But there's more women breaking into it all the time. A lot of the top men are getting old and hanging it up."

"So, how many people are going to be dancing out there on the bricks?"

"Well, I'd say there's space for close to fifty squares, which would be 400 dancers. The convention committee will have some people out counting the squares once we get started. Karen Anderson over there can give you a total when we're done." Tennessee pointed to a slender woman with short blond hair, who was dressed in the blue and white convention host committee costume.

Without warning, the sound system came on full blast, playing a Willy Nelson song about a train "they call the City of New Orleans."

Somebody quickly adjusted the volume, and Big Eddie Plummer started talking. "Okay, let's square'em up, folks. We're gonna start off with a couple of singin' calls. Where do we need'em? Raise those hands. Looks like we need one couple on the left and two way in the back. Let's fill'em in. All sold out? Okay, bow to your partner and

say howdy to your corner."

Big Eddie flipped a button that started the music again from the beginning, and launched into a series of calls that meant nothing to me after "do-si-do your own" and "allemande left with your corner," which I remembered from high school gym class. The dancers moved with smooth precision in the heat and were all still standing when Big Eddie finished with, "Bow to your partners and your corners, too; that's all I've got and you're all through."

The caller wiped the sweat from his dripping face with a red bandanna and said, "Now here's your favorite Dixieland cutie-pie, Tennessee McGee, to call the next tip." He handed the microphone to Tennessee, stepped back and took another swig from his pocket flask. It amazed me that the man could be sucking up whisky before noon in ninety-degree heat.

After Tennessee McGee finished her call, I moved out into the sun to talk to some of the dancers. All the faces were beaded with sweat, but all the mouths were smiling and all the eyes were sparkling with enthusiasm.

"She's a great caller," said a woman in a vivid pink blouse. "Absolutely one of the best there is."

"What makes her great?" I asked.

"Her energy," said the woman.

"Her choreography," said her partner, who wore a western-style tie that matched the woman's pink blouse.

"Her voice," said another woman in the square.

"And her looks, too," said a man. "She's a hell of a lot more fun to watch than any of the men callers."

Big Eddie Plummer took the mike again and gave a long, flowery introduction to "that great native American caller from the great state of Oklahoma, Ray Two Turtles." The Cherokee announced that it was time to square up again, so I made my way to the sidelines and rendezvoused with Al.

"I got some great sweat shots," Al said. "Some of the people look like they just stepped out of the shower. The best shot I got was of a regular river of sweat running down between a really big woman's boobs, but Don won't ever use it."

"Maybe you can sell it to one of those supermarket tabloids," I said.

"Good idea. They can call it 'grand right and left' or something like that."

"Hey, you're really picking up this square dance lingo."

"So, why don't you bow to your partner?"

I made a deep, sweeping bow in his direction. "Okay, partner, have you got enough pix for us to promenade back to the air conditioned floor of the newsroom?"

"Yeah, but let's hang around for a little while and see if anybody goes down in the heat."

We sat on the edge of the stage while Big Eddie Plummer took over the calling chores. Karen Anderson, the committee member, sat down beside us and explained that each set of dances was called a "tip," and that a tip usually consisted of a "hash call," in which the caller just called whatever popped into his mind, and a "singing call," which was structured to a specific song. Good basic stuff for my story.

While Karen was talking, I noticed that the dancers seemed to be having trouble following Big Eddie Plummer's calls. The squares would stop, and the dancers would stand in lines, waiting for a chance to regroup. Eventually, they'd resume dancing, only to come to a halt again. This odd pattern went on all through the tip until Big Eddie finally brought it to an end. I watched him take another pull from his flask after finishing the tip, and stagger as he walked to the back of the stage.

Al and I listened to Tennessee McGee call the next tip, and I decided that the dancers were right about her energy, her choreography and especially her looks.

"We might as well go back," Al said when Tennessee finished. "These folks are as tough as they are crazy. Nobody's going to collapse."

I was about to agree when Ray Two Turtles grabbed the mike and yelled, "Is there a doctor in the crowd? We've got a caller who needs assistance."

On the other side of the stage, Karen Anderson and one of the sound technicians were bending over the prostrate form of Big Eddie Plummer.