

# YELLOW ROCK

## Chapter 1

### Meeting the Angels

“Square dancing?” I said. I wasn’t sure that I’d heard my wife correctly.

“Square dancing,” Martha Todd said. I had heard her correctly.

“And why would we do this?” I asked.

“Number one, for fun; number two, for exercise; number three, to meet some very nice people.”

“Number one, who says it’s fun? Number two, who needs any more exercise? Number three, what’s wrong with the very nice people we already know?”

“One, my friend Sandi, who has square danced for fifteen years, says it’s fun. Two, we both need to take off a couple of pounds. Three, the people we already know are very nice, but how many of them are from outside the groups that we work with?”

Martha Todd, who kept her maiden name when we married, is a lawyer and is impossible to reason with because she insists on being logical and using facts. I am Warren Mitchell, better known as Mitch. I work as a newspaper reporter at the St. Paul Daily Dispatch and, as such, have a deep-seated appreciation for facts, which makes it doubly difficult to debate my fact-wielding wife. We’ve been married for six years—after living together during six years of procrastination on both of our parts—and I’ve grown accustomed to being on the losing end of most of the contentious discussions that arise.

“Okay, assuming that Sandi would never tell a lie, I’ll give you number one,” I said. “And assuming that our bathroom scales haven’t been tampered with, I’ll concede number two, in my case at least. But as for number three, we know lots of people who don’t work at either Triple-L Associates or the St. Paul Daily Dispatch.”

“How many can you name?”

“As I said, lots. There’s, your friend Sandi, right off the top. Then there’s, um, Zhoumaya Jones. And, uh, there’s your parents and your grandmother. And there’s my mother and Grandma Goodie. And ... uh ...”

While I was struggling to come up with another name, Martha pounced. “Zhoumaya is our landlord and she lives in the other half of our duplex, and, except for Sandi, who I

met way back when we were in college, all the others are people we know by birth. We are in a rut socially, my darling. As you may recall, when we were both working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, we had almost nobody to social-distance ourselves from.”

Mitch knows when he might be heading toward defeat. “So when do you want to do this square dancing thing?” I asked in a tone that implied the additional adjective “crazy.”

“Sandi’s club has a class for beginners starting tomorrow night,” Martha said. “It’s the club’s first class since the pandemic made them cancel everything, so it should be very lively.”

Mitch knows when it’s time to stand up for himself. “What if I don’t want to go?”

“Then I’ll go without you. Sandi said there are several single men at the club who are looking for single women to dance with.”

Whoa! Martha is forty-eight years old but looks like she’s thirty-eight at the most. She is Cape Verdean and has a flawless coffee-with-cream-colored complexion, wavy jet black hair and a smile that would illuminate a basketball field house. Even though she thinks she needs to lose a couple of pounds, she still has the body of a beauty pageant winner and the most perfectly proportioned female ass in the world. I could picture single men in square dance regalia swarming around her like frenzied great white sharks circling a crippled seal.

Mitch knows when he is soundly defeated. “What time tomorrow do I have to be ready to leave?” I asked.”

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The Thursday night class for beginning square dancers was held in the basement of a church on Dale Street, about half a mile from our Lexington Avenue duplex. I had no trouble finding it because it was the same church that hosted the Monday night Alcoholics Anonymous meetings that I’d been attending for almost twenty years. More about that later.

We entered a side door of the church, went down a flight of stairs, walked past the room where we met for AA and another small room, turned a sharp left and then a sharp right and were facing the entrance to a large open room with a glossy hardwood floor and a stage on the far end.

Martha’s friend Sandi had said that we should dress casually and comfortably and wear leather-soled shoes that would slide easily and wouldn’t leave marks on the dance floor. It was a warm mid-September evening, so Martha wore a white short-sleeved blouse and beige slacks, and I put on a short-sleeved blue polo shirt and a pair of jeans. We were met at the entrance of the hall by a smiling gray-haired couple who were dressed just as casually and comfortably—the woman in a frilly blue blouse and jeans and the man in a long-sleeved gray pullover jersey and khaki pants. They wore red plastic

name tags with white letters that identified them as JUDY Aronson and MARK Aronson. Small red bars with white letters hanging below their tags identified them both as president.

Their apparel struck me as odd because I had seen square dance demonstrations at various county and state fairs and the dancers had always been dressed in bright costumes, with the women clad in fancy blouses and flared skirts over multi-layered frilly petticoats, and the men wearing cowboy-style neckties, decorated shirts and black or gray pants with a crease. As I looked past the Aronsons and scanned the dance floor, I saw that everyone in the hall was dressed as casually and unimaginatively as they were.

“Are we in the right place?” I asked, as Mark Aronson shook my hand and introduced himself.

“You certainly are,” he said. “You’re in the home of the Grand Squares.”

“But nobody’s wearing square dance clothes,” I said.

“This is how we dress on class nights,” he said. “Several years ago the board decided that our fancy costumes were intimidating prospective new dancers and that it would be more welcoming if we dressed casually.”

“People were intimidated by the costumes?”

“The board members were afraid that some people were looking at all that costuming and saying ‘that’s not for me’ or ‘this looks expensive,’ so now we don’t dress up until we have all the class members hooked on the fun of square dancing. If you really want to see people in square dance clothes, come to our club dance two Saturdays from now and watch us. We still dress up for those.”

“So, with everybody dressed in street clothes, how does a newcomer tell a club member from another class member?”

“By the name tags.” He pointed to the slab of red on his chest. “We have these big red badges with our names on them. When you get to the treasurers’ table, you will receive a white paper stick-on tag to print your name on. Next week you will get a white plastic name badge that identifies you as a new dancer, which you will wear until you graduate in April and, hopefully, join our club.”

“I don’t know about joining the club,” I said. “I’m like Groucho Marx in that movie where he says, ‘I refuse to join any organization that would accept a person like me as a member.’”

Mark didn’t seem to know how to respond to that, but he was saved by Martha, who was tugging at my left hand. “Come on; there are people behind us waiting to get in,” she said. We entered the hall and were greeted on our left by a man and a woman seated behind a table with several sheets of paper on it. They smiled, said “welcome,

nice to see you,” and directed us to print our names on the white stick-on paper name tags that Mark had described, and to sign one of the sheets of paper, which asked for our names, addresses, e-mail addresses and phone numbers. “Sure you don’t want our Social Security numbers?” I asked.

The man, whose red badge said PHIL Swanson, laughed and said, “We’ll gladly accept your checking account numbers.”

This witty repartee was interrupted by Martha, who said, “Here come Sandi and her husband.”

Sure enough, the next people to greet us were Sandi Sunday and her husband, Herb, who were wearing their bright red name tags. I’d met Sandi, Martha’s friend since their college days, but I’d never met her husband. Sandi was a long-legged, slender brunette with short curly hair and a pretty, oval face. Herb was about my height, six-one, and was a little heavy in the paunch and a trifle high on the hair line. Both were dressed as casually and comfortably as we were, except that Herb wore a long-sleeved shirt.

As Martha introduced me, Herb offered the standard right hand for shaking, but Sandi came at me with her arms spread wide for a hug. This startled me because Minnesotans are historic non-huggers, and I didn’t know how to respond. This resulted in my arms being pinned to my sides by her encircling arms and her soft, warm breasts being pressed snugly against my chest. This was a pleasant sensation, but I felt my face getting as warm as my chest and I realized that I was blushing.

“Don’t be bashful, Mitch,” Sandi said as she released her grip and backed away. “Hugs are a big part of square dancing.”

I had noticed that there was an excessive, for Minnesotans, amount of hugging and shouting and laughing going on all over the hall. “Is square dancing always as huggy and loud as this?” I asked.

“Oh, not quite this huggy and loud. What you’re seeing tonight is people going way overboard because this is the first time we’ve been able to dance together since the Covid-19 pandemic shut down everything that involved getting within six feet of other people.”

Sandi opened her arms again, but I was deprived of another hug by a blast of music from a tall loudspeaker at the front of the room. A man dressed all in black—wide-brimmed hat, long-sleeved shirt and creased trousers—picked up a microphone and said his name was Jack Bruce, and that he would be our caller and our teacher for the next six months. He was about six feet tall and so thin that I wasn’t sure his profile would cast a shadow. The color and length of his hair was hidden by the hat, but his closely-trimmed beard and moustache were dark brown.

Jack Bruce herded us into a giant, hand-holding circle of alternating men and women, and eventually broke the circle and sorted us into five separate squares. "Put the lady on the right," he said. "Remember, guys: the woman is always right."

We were in a square with Sandi and Herb, along with two couples made up of men with red club badges and women with white stick-on paper badges with hand-written, magic marker lettering that said NANCY and LYNETTE. Both of those single male club members, whose first names on their badges were BART and LARRY, were good looking and very friendly. They told us that they were "angels," which is what club members who come to class to help the new dancers are called. As the action began, and I watched these angels promenade hand-in-hand with their single woman partners, I was glad I had not forced Martha to come alone. Mitch Mitchell, the model husband.