

A series of murders at the Park Ridge Senior Center by four elderly pinochle players points up the division between "active" and "passive" seniors and the perils of the defining them as such.

PARK RIDGE: A Senior Center Murder

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A Senior Center Murder

**Cheryl Hagedorn**

## Chapter One

Within every senior center in the country, from Seattle to Miami, from Charleston to Santa Fe, tucked away in some corner of the building, whether rented, leased or owned, you will find senior citizens playing cards. Whether crowded into church basements or luxuriating in the card room aboard cruise ships, they will spend hour after hour playing bridge or hearts or rummy or euchre. But wherever they play, you will find at least one table distinct in its wealth of bright, multi-colored face cards because the game of choice is pinochle.

The game of Bezique traveled as easily as a deck of cards stowed in a pocket of a salesman from Germany to France where it was promptly renamed Binocle. Perhaps the peculiar alliance or unnatural marriage of the Queen of Spades to the Jack of Diamonds, the ultimate meld, breaking rank and violating suit, provided the name. A “pinochle” built with a French deck of cards portrays a young knight who looks to his left at Her Highness who wistfully returns his gaze. Whether Binocle (as in binoculars) refers to their refusal to meet the eyes of those who hold their fate, revealing only one eye each, who knows?

For years the United States Playing Card Company produced special Pinochle decks with an eye on the German immigrants who brought the game to America. In 2006 in order to play, two decks of regular playing cards must be gutted, relieved of base cards (2-8), to achieve the panoply of power cards that pinochle requires. Destroy the integrity of four commonplace decks and you can play double-deck pinochle.

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On a day in late February in a small, northwestern suburb of Chicago, four card players began the complex process of bidding for the privilege of calling trump. As expected the winner, Jack Buchtel, named trump. But, the trump he named was murder.

## Chapter Four

Tuesday morning a week after Gordon's death, Gloria popped her head inside the door that the receptionist's area shared with the Director. "There's a police detective here to see you."

"Um, okay." In a whisper she asked, "Does he want to see me or the Director?"

"Well, since you're both, you get to see him either way, right? You can relax that guilty conscience. He asked to see the Director."

"Okay, give me a minute to clear off a chair for him to sit in." Teresa Cusentino, thirty-seven-year old Tap Dance Instructor, moved her black and red sequined costume from the back of the chair to a hanger on the back of the door. Teresa Cusentino, co-chair of the Illinois Parks and Recreation Association (IPRA), Leisure and Aging Section, and member of the IPRA Speakers Bureau, gathered several overflowing and flopping manila folders plus a multitude of miscellaneous flyers into her arms and set them on the floor next to the filing cabinet. Then, Teresa Cusentino, fifteen sixteenths Italian, one sixteenth Cherokee, the Director of the Park Ridge Senior Center, went into the reception area.

"Hi. I'm Teresa Cusentino, Detective. Come on in." She flipped her long dark hair behind her shoulder as he walked past her, waited until he was seated, then closed the door to the reception area. "Will I need to close the hallway door, too?"

"Probably be a good idea, Director."

She got up, swished behind him to close the door. *Whoa, there!* He took in the lush curves, the bright reds

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and oranges of her clothes, the heavy gold earrings and necklace, the click of her heels on the tile floor.

She, in turn, lapped up the vision of the tall, dark-haired man before her. If he was single, she had a place for him at her breakfast table. "I think I've seen you before. Is that possible? Do we know each other?"

The detective got a funny little grin on his face and shook his head no.

"Oh, sorry. You just...."

"I wasn't shaking my head 'no' meaning that we hadn't met. It's incredible. Mom said that you had a memory for faces. I met you at the Senior Center Prom Night party at the Lincoln Middle School a few months back. My dad died three years ago, and my mother really wanted to go to the party. She doesn't think much of the men here, no offense, and asked me to be her date."

He pulled his wallet from his back pocket, showed her his badge, and took out a business card, handing it to her.

"Detective Stanley Nevins. You're Stella Nevins' son."

"Yes, ma'am, I am." He said that with a cowboy twang that matched the silver and turquoise bolo tie he was wearing with his pale blue western shirt. His black curly hair appeared to have missed at least two haircuts, but his Clark Gable moustache was precise.

*So that's where those good looks came from.* Stella Nevins was a stunning woman, in her early sixties, one of the younger members of the Center. A tall, slender woman, always immaculately dressed even for golf, she wore her long white hair in luscious waves falling around her face. *If only I age that well!* Teresa automatically recited to herself what she knew about Stella: *lives in Edison Park, belongs to Book Discussion Group, Science Club, Genealogy Club and Women's Club.*



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“That accent doesn’t sound local.” Her long dark hair swung forward from her shoulders as she leaned toward him with a warm smile on her face. Her dark eyes sparkled against her dark skin, as did the rings on her fingers. *No wedding ring*, he noticed.

He leaned back in his chair, stretched out his legs, hooked his thumbs in his belt with the huge silver and turquoise buckle, and said, “No, ma’am. Studied those old western movies to perfect it.” Then he shifted back to a pure Park Ridge, heart of the flat-toned Midwest accent, “Born and raised right here.”

“The hometown of Hillary Rodham Clinton, population 37,000?”

“Even went to school here, University of Illinois.”

“Chicago or Urbana?”

“Chicago campus. Don’t tell me you’re an Illini, too?”

“Of course. Urbana. BS in Parks and Recreation.”

“BA, MA Criminal Justice.”

They were both grinning when the phone rang. “Excuse me. Teresa Cusentino. Can I help you?” When she finished the call, she opened the door and was going to tell Gloria to hold her calls, but there was no one at the desk. She checked her watch. “Sorry. It’s lunch time and I’ll have to take the calls until the receptionist gets back.”

“It’s okay. This shouldn’t take long, but before I get to business, any chance of getting a tour of the place?”

“Why not? Let me just send the calls to voice mail.”

They left her office through her hallway door just inside the sliding double doors at the entrance. In the lobby she showed him the posters for the kitchen-remodel that would be voted on in a few weeks as part of a Park District referendum. She pointed at the men’s restroom, indicating that the ladies’ was around the

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corner. They paused at the display case of ceramic doodads, crocheted whatnots, and cleverly arranged artificial flowers. She said with pride, "The flowers alone netted us \$1000 last year."

Across from the ladies' room was a single room used for ceramics, painting, and writing. He noted a back door, all glass, that connected the Center to the parking lot as well as a long sidewalk to the main office of the Park District.

Teresa took him back to the office. "We have two receptionists: Gloria, full-time, Debby part-time. And one janitor, Bert."

She gestured to the right side of the hall as they walked. "This is the Computer Room, and down here," gesturing left, "is the Billiards Room."

Stan ducked his head into both for a quick look. Both rooms were empty.

At the Recreation Area, Teresa was greeted with shouts and waves. She tapped out some steps, ending with a ta-da to more applause. She walked over to several different tables where people were playing cards. She made small talk and touched them on shoulders or hands, making sure to greet each one, and to use their names. To Stan she said, "Do you want something to drink, Detective? I'll buy."

They made a short detour to the pop machine where she bought two Lipton Iced Teas. Sipping and walking they checked out the library and the kitchen. *Another outside entrance at the front of the building.*

Bert was setting up rows of folding chairs in the large multi-purpose room. "This room is for banquets, plays, and luncheons. We used to hold parties like the Prom Night here, but we seem to have outgrown it, which is a good thing."

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The hallway dead-ended at a T. “Down there,” she gestured to the right, “is an informal lounge area, something Bert setup, and several classrooms. Restrooms, of course, are in front of us. We’re going this way.”

As he followed her, the sound of country music became louder. “More classrooms on the right.” She opened the first door on the left. Perhaps fifty men and women in several long lines were shifting and shuffling, dipping and spinning to the music. With her back to Teresa and Stan, the middle-aged instructor was calling directions into her microphone. “Weave cross, side, behind, hold, side, rock, cross, hold.” Connie Francis was singing, “My Heart Has a Mind of its Own.”

Stan impulsively reached for Teresa’s hand, “You do line-dance, don’t you?” Giggling, they squeezed in, taking places in the front line. Somewhere in the middle of “1/2 box: chasse right, 1/4 turn left, chasse left, hold,” they caught up with the rest of the group. The dance ended with the direction, “Rocking chair with taps and brushes.”

Thrilled with the Director and her new young man, the seniors catcalled and clapped as the two left. After closing the door, she pointed down the hall, “More classrooms and a door to the parking lot. That’s it, Detective.”

“You can’t keep calling me ‘Detective.’ We’ve shared an intimate musical moment. In fact I’m wondering if you’d like to share another musical moment at *Charlie’s Western Bar* with me Friday night. They’ve got a country DJ, line-dancing, Texas two-step. Better still, they’ve got great margaritas.”

“You’re on, Cowboy. Friday night at *Charlie’s*.” Teresa laughed. “Now that we’ve finished the tour, will you tell me why you’re here?”

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Once they were in her office with the door closed, Stan spoke, "I'm here to investigate the death of Gordon Williams a week ago."

"You're what? I wasn't here when it happened, but Gloria said he had slipped and hit his head on the edge of the pool table. Senior citizens just don't have the balance they had when they were younger. He may have simply had a dizzy spell. It happens more often than they want to admit. Why would they send a detective to investigate an accident?"

"I'm just following up as a personal favor to the Chief, nothing official. He heard through the grapevine, some guy who plays golf with Gordon's son-in-law, that Gordon might have been in a fight. In which case the fall might not have been an accident. He wanted me to just take a look around, talk to a few people."

"Okay, let me get this straight." She moved back in her chair and sat up straighter. "You think Gordon got into it with somebody and that somebody what? Shoved him? Hit him with a pool stick?" He couldn't read her face. *Was she angry?* "More to the point, what do you want from me? Help you find the aluminum walker someone used to shuffle into the Billiards Room, so he could take a swing at Gordon and murder him?"

"Hey! A little stereotypical, don't you think?"

Her nostrils flared as she crossed her arms. "You waltz in here saying that there might have been a brawl – in the Center that I run – and someone was killed. You wouldn't be a little defensive?"

She rocked back in her chair, "I was just trying to show you how ludicrous that is. Don't you think that if there had been a fight we would know about it? And what kind of people do you think we have here? This isn't the inner city where the women walk around with pistols in their purses. This is Park Ridge! How could you

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believe that someone here would kill someone else? And why would they? What possible reason could they have?"

"Look, I know an investigation, even unofficial, is a bit of a shock, but older people still get angry; they do unreasonable things. There was a story out in Connecticut a little while ago. Two guys, one was seventy-three, the other sixty-nine. They'd been playing cards the day before, and the next day the loser went after the winner with a hammer."

"New Englanders."

"People," he countered. "You, most of all, should realize that these are real people."

"I know what you're saying. It's just that it catches me off guard still when I see them really angry or swearing a blue streak. Not exactly the image we've been fed all these years."

At the risk of losing an opportunity to date this fine woman, Stan forced himself to bash one more stereotype. "You know, most people finding a seventy-two-year old lying on the floor would assume that he had fallen. If it was a younger man, say in his fifties, that was lying there, a fall wouldn't necessarily be your first guess. Make him even younger, maybe thirty-seven like I am, and you'd start wondering if a crime had been committed – even without the suggestion of a fight."

"I'll give you that, too. It's possible. But I want you to know that Gordon Williams was a sweet man, lots of energy, lots of friends, at the heart of every party, first on the bus for every trip. He even won a medal at last year's Six-County Senior Olympics. I can't think of a single reason for anyone to hurt him."

"What else can you tell me about him?"

Teresa thought for a moment, and then reached into her briefcase. "Why don't I let Gordon answer that?" She took out the CD and placed it in the drive on her

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computer. When a small preview window opened, she turned the monitor so that Stan could see it with her. She clicked to maximize the image and hit play. “I haven’t had a chance to edit this yet.”

The man on the screen was holding a piece of paper in his left hand. He read from it, “What is the most significant activity you participate in here and why?” He shrugged his shoulders, shook his head. He then recited a list of things that he took part in. He couldn’t identify a single activity, he complained. From off screen a voice prompted, “Just try, please.” The man sighed and said, “Okay. I suppose it would be taking trips. I ....”

Teresa whispered to Stan that the interview would go for a full five minutes.

He watched in fascination as the older man’s face lit up remembering particular trips or smiled in memory of an amusing incident. His zest for life and the clear, pure pleasure at being with the other people sharing his experience were evident. Hard to believe anyone would want to hurt him. Maybe Teresa was right.

When the video finished, she shut the program down. “That’s part of the conference presentation I’m doing. Well, I hope to be doing. I haven’t heard from the committee that’s vetting proposals yet. But several of the interviews are even better than this one.”

“You taped them yourself?”

“Oh no. But thanks for your faith in me! We have at least one group a year, sometimes several, that want to interview or profile our members. Mrs. Nelson’s seventh grade class at Lincoln Middle School, just across the street, visited in October as part of their ‘Intergenerational Initiative.’ One year a handful of college students from University of Chicago came out to talk with World War II veterans as part of an oral history project. The videos I’m using for my presentation come

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from a project by a class from Northwestern two years ago.”

As Teresa enthusiastically shared the details of the project, Stan encouraged her with questions. Animated and glowing, her face serious, then laughing, he was mesmerized. He’d do anything to keep her talking.

“We had over seventy people sign up! So many that the students had to bring six video cameras and set them up all over the building. They also rigged up lights. When one minute was left, a yellow light would go on. When only thirty seconds remained, the yellow light would begin flashing slowly. A red light meant stop. This was the only assistance they would get.”

“Like for the presidential debates?” Stan prompted.

“Exactly. The most intriguing part was that participants were not told the question ahead of time. They were given a slip of paper just before taping. Just like the one Gordon was holding. They were told they would have five minutes in which to answer, and they would not be allowed to leave until time was up. The super part was that several of them had to really reach for things to fill the time. When the interview was over, each participant got a five dollar bill.”

“So you say you have seventy of these on tape?”

“In exchange for our cooperation the Senior Center received a copy of the final assessment based on the questionnaires and the videos. I asked for and received a copy of the tapes. I watched every last one of them – almost six hours’ worth. Of course, it took much longer since I was taking notes. When I found ones I wanted to listen to more closely, I copied those onto my computer. I’m using several of those, with the participants’ permission, of course, in my presentation.”

As she closed the program and sat back, he said, “I guess the point of all these tapes is that the members

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here are all sweet little old ladies and men? You know, I still have to check out this thing with Gordon. Try to find out if there's anything that would support the theory that it wasn't an accident. I haven't gone to see his wife because there may be nothing to it. I know just the suggestion would put my mother off the wall. But I'd like to talk to his friends if you could give me a list of them and when and where I might be able to find them."

She checked her watch, "Can you give me ten minutes? It's just that I have to introduce a speaker for Women's Club."

"Sure. I'd also like to check out the Billiards Room. When I'm done, I'll meet you back here. Okay?"

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Hands in his pockets, Stan scuffed his boot against the tiled floor of the Billiards Room. It didn't feel at all slippery. He wandered over to where windows with blinds formed one wall of the room, then turned. Four billiard tables, a rack of maybe twenty sticks, two guys playing. He nodded at the men, then introduced himself as plain Stan Nevins. "Just waiting for the Director." Stan noticed that there was another door, farther away from the office, which provided access to the room.

The two men looked at each other, and the heavier one winked. "Prettiest senior center director in six counties. Worth waiting for. Heck of a great woman, too." The second asked, "Did you say, Nevins? Are you Stella Nevins's son?" When he admitted he was, the one whistled. "Now there's a nice looking woman."

He used some excuse to look at each of the sticks while the men played. When they were finished, he asked to check their sticks. "You can keep that one and play against Harry. I'll watch." Luckily Teresa came in time to



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rescue him. "Harry was killing me at eight-ball." Their eyes met and hers said, *Not funny.*

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"Well, I looked at each of the pool cues. None with blood or hair that I could see. None of them smelled like aftershave or hair gel."

"You sniffed each of them?" She held an imaginary stick stretched between her arms and sniffed the length of it, laughing. "The guys playing pool must have thought you were crazy."

"Probably. The sticks likely each have fifty sets of prints, and there's no way to tell how many have been handled since the 'accident.' Unless my interviews turn up a motive and a suspect, it doesn't appear that there's been a crime."

"That's a relief. I had visions of you setting up a table in the lobby and fingerprinting everyone as they walked in the door." She handed him a list of four names and the clubs or activities that they were involved in and the days and times that they met. "Gordon knew a lot of people, but these were the ones closest to him. The Science Club will be finishing up today at 2:30. You can catch Roy Jones then. Do you want me to introduce you? Better yet, have your mom introduce you. I saw her come in. I should tell you that all the people on that list can keep this a secret if you'd like. They're good people." She reminded him that the library was just past the Rec Area, opposite the kitchen.

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