

CHAPTER 1

“Those napkins are going to catch on fire!”

Twelve pairs of eyes turned toward the table against the wall where a candle flame used to keep the contents of a serving dish warm threatened a pile of paper napkins stacked on a nearby plate.

As we watched, the napkins did catch on fire, sending a jet of flame and a spiral of smoke toward the high wooden ceiling of the recreation room.

“I thought I put that candle out!” Dora, a small silver-haired lady whose back had been to the napkins, exclaimed. She sat closest to the fire. She jumped up from her chair and hopped the two steps to the table. Her gait reminded me of a bird, but she showed complete competence as she grabbed a pitcher of drinking water and poured it over the napkins, quickly extinguishing the blaze.

The other eleven bridge players at the three card tables spontaneously applauded. Dora took a bow and said, tartly, “Now help me clean up this mess.”

Two women sitting at her table got up and among the three of them they quickly sopped up the water from the wet table and the hardwood floor underneath, with paper towels. They disposed of the charred napkins and everything was neat and tidy again.

A remnant of smoke odor hung in the air and reminded me of the fires that burned in the large stone fireplace at one end of the room during the winter. I started to deal the cards I had shuffled just before the crisis and said, “Well, I guess we've had our excitement for today. A false fire alarm, followed by an actual attempt to burn the place down. Something tells me they happened in the wrong order. Now can we play some bridge?”

“Quit your grouching, Lillian, and bid,” the lady to my left, said.

“Pass,” I said. “My cards are as dull as everything else around here. I wish something *really* exciting would happen.”

“Cheer up,” Tess, my partner, said. She was slightly plumper than the average woman there, with a round, smiling face and every hair immaculately in place. Tess was my best friend at Silver Acres, a retirement community in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She continued, “As a mathematician, you know you're not always going to get interesting cards.”

A commotion started at the next table. A man named Gerald Weiss was making strange noises and pointing at his throat. Dora, who was a retired nurse, quickly got up from her chair again and asked, “Gerald, are you choking?”

He nodded, unable to speak. Dora went behind his chair and wrapped her arms around him, making one hand into a fist. She pulled it sharply into his body below the rib cage, once, then again. At that point Gerald fell forward and his head hit the table with a thud. A woman sitting at the table screamed.

“Help me get him onto the floor,” Dora said.

Several people who had already stood up assisted her.

“Call the clinic!” someone said in an urgent voice.

“Call 911!”

I carry a cellular phone in my purse; my son insists that I do. I pulled it out and asked, “What's the number of the clinic?” I had wanted excitement, but not this much. Be careful what you wish for.... Somebody told me the number; I punched it in and was quickly connected to the clinic, a part of Silver Acres. “One of our residents has collapsed in the recreation room,” I told the man who answered the phone.

“He's not breathing!” Dora shouted.

“He's not breathing,” I repeated.

“We'll be right there,” he said, and hung up.

I called 911. The operator promised that the paramedics would be dispatched immediately. I disconnected the phone and watched the proceedings. Dora had Gerald's mouth open and tried to clear his air passage. The other members of the Wednesday afternoon bridge club watched in shock, but nobody panicked. At our time of life, death was always a possibility.

Others such as Dora were better able to handle medical emergencies than I could so I stayed seated at my table, half in horror, half philosophical. Tess came around the table and took my hand, holding it in a strong, trembling grip. She felt more comfortable showing her emotions than I did.

Within three minutes a doctor and a nurse ran in, breathless, from the clinic, with a medical bag. The doctor took over from Dora. After a lightning fast examination of Gerald he said, “His windpipe's closed up. We'll have to do a tracheotomy. Adrenaline.”

The nurse quickly and efficiently produced a needle and a small bottle from the bag. While the doctor drew the contents of the bottle into the needle and plunged it into Gerald's arm, the nurse pulled out a scalpel and a thin plastic tube, as well as disinfectant.

At that point I stopped watching, as did most of the others. I don't watch emergency room shows on television either. The bridge players gathered in groups of two or three, talking in low voices. Soon the paramedics arrived, in uniform, with more medical bags. We overheard one of them say that Gerald's heart had stopped beating. When they brought out the paddles to attempt to restart his heart, Tess and I left the room. Not long afterward, Gerald was pronounced dead.

Some of the stunned members of the bridge club, including Tess and I, continued to loiter in the corridor of the main building, even after they took Gerald's body away, as if we had

nowhere else to go, but nobody suggested that the bridge games be resumed. Even I had no interest in bridge. Wesley, the president of the bridge club and also of the residents' association, walked from one person to another, mouthing soothing words.

Other people came and went, including Carol Grant, the executive director of Silver Acres, who talked softly to the doctor from the clinic. She had a good job, but its downside was that she lost most of her customers because they died.

I have always had the desire to experience everything fully, so a kind of fascinated horror held me there. Tess and I talked about the uncertainties of life. After a while she calmed down and we strolled back into the recreation room. I looked at the cards still lying on Gerald's table and said, "I wonder what kind of a hand he was dealt."

Tess looked at me strangely and said, "What does it matter now?"

"I don't know; I'm just curious." I stepped over to his table. Nobody had touched anything since Gerald had collapsed. I gathered his cards, which were scattered; several were on the floor. As I put them together I saw only red suits on the cards that were face up.

When I had all 13 in a stack I fanned them out. Then I gasped. "Tess, look at this!"

Tess looked, then said, unbelievably, "They're all diamonds!" She added, "Are you sure you have the right cards?"

"Yes. The other three hands are in neat piles." I picked up each of the other hands and looked at it. They were fairly normally distributed, except that all had voids in diamonds. One hand held seven spades.

"Thirteen diamonds," Tess said, shaking her head. "A dream hand. Maybe the shock of seeing it is what killed Gerald. Although I didn't know he had a weak heart. What are the odds against being dealt a hand like this?"

“I actually tried to figure that out once,” I said, “but my calculator couldn't take such a small decimal so I gave up. I can tell you that the average bridge player will not be dealt 13 of any suit in a lifetime.”