

**The First Two Pages of “Make New Friends, But Keep the Old”
by Jane Limplecht**

From Chesapeake Crimes Invitation to Murder

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An Essay by Jane Limplecht

As soon as I learned that the Chessie Chapter anthology’s theme was “Invitation to Murder,” a scenario popped into my head: the monthly birthday luncheons held at my mom’s assisted living center.

My 92-year-old mother had recently passed away, after living for thirteen years in a nearby retirement community that transitioned from independent living through assisted living to nursing care. My family and I spent many, many hours with her; the retirement community was a vivid presence in my mind. The monthly birthday luncheon, advertised by invitation to residents’ family members, promised a tender filet with all the trimmings in a setting tailored to the community – bright lighting, the sociable hum of conversation instead of loud music, room to maneuver a wheelchair or walker, helpful servers who didn’t mumble.

And the added bonus for the mystery writer in me? An intriguing setting for a fictional murder by poisoning.

In the opening scene I wanted to hook the reader by immediately portraying Lorraine Taylor’s death, while also evoking a community with a rhythm of its own, a set of shared experiences, and common patterns of speech and expression.

In addition, through the depiction of Mrs. Taylor's over-the-top but nonviolent death, the narrator's daughter's rush to offer help, and the reactions of the other guests, I wanted to convey that my story occupied the cozy/amateur sleuth end of the mystery spectrum. As for that amateur sleuth narrator, first-person point of view seemed the natural choice because I was so familiar with the setting and several characters were loosely based on my own family members.

I decided to leave backstory for later rather than slow down the first few paragraphs. Once the EMTs had wheeled Mrs. Taylor away and Ms. Brightwood had shooed the residents and guests from the activities room, there would be ample time to meet the characters, untangle their relationships, and solve the mystery.

I hope you enjoy the first two pages, and I invite you to stay for the rest of the story. Dinner's at four thirty, on the dot.

I had just finished cutting up Mom's filet mignon when Lorraine Taylor shuddered violently and slumped over, her face smashing into her baked potato.

"Oh, my word!" exclaimed Verna Hanson, who had invited Mrs. Taylor to the monthly birthday luncheon at Laurel Grove Assisted Living and Nursing Care.

My daughter, Christine, shoved her chair back and knelt by Mrs. Taylor. Chris's first-year medical school training kicked in as she felt for a pulse. She turned to me and shook her head, her eyes wide.

"Call nine-one-one!" She looked around wildly. "Can somebody get an AED?"

As Chris started chest compressions on Mrs. Taylor, the activities coordinator and our young waiter dashed to the table— notable in an environment where things usually moved at a measured pace. The man sitting to my left quickly wheeled his silent wife, Dorothy, away from all the commotion. Throughout the luncheon Harlan Stanton had spoken only to Dorothy, unfolding her napkin onto her lap, raising her food to her lips, and steadying her glass as she sipped her drink.

I heard the wail of sirens approaching Laurel Grove, where Mom had moved when her eyesight started to fail. EMTs were a recurrent presence in the community, but ordinarily they tended to the residents, not the guests.

Laurel Grove's director, Nancy Brightwood, rushed from the coffee station where she had been instructing the waitstaff. She hustled us from our table as paramedics took over the chest compressions, hooked Mrs. Taylor up to an IV, and loaded her onto a gurney.

"What happened here?" The EMT directed her question to Chris, who still hovered by Mrs. Taylor.

"All of a sudden she appeared to convulse and then she fell forward," Chris answered. "I tried to get a pulse but I couldn't find one, so I started CPR. Somebody ran for the defibrillator, but you arrived before we got it going. The staff must have called nine-one-one."

The diners at the other tables sat quietly, talking among themselves. Occasionally a particularly hard-of-hearing resident's voice rose above the murmurs. A few diners took advantage of the lull to tuck into their meals. It wasn't every day that Laurel Grove transformed the first-floor activities room into a classy restaurant serving steak, baked potato, green beans, salad, and rolls, as well as birthday cake.

As I mulled over how to pack up those tender filets, Ms. Brightwood announced that regrettably the luncheon was postponed, no one should continue eating or take any food home, and each resident could pick up a boxed lunch in the second-floor dining room. She didn't have to add that Mrs. Taylor was in her fifties and had appeared healthy until a few minutes ago. The possibility of tainted food had to be considered.

Chris fetched Mom's burgundy-colored rollator from the tangle of wheeled walkers parked inside the dining room door. She rolled it

over to Mom and the three of us joined the line to leave the room. An atmosphere of concern spiced with the excitement of a novel medical emergency filled the air as residents filed out with their daughters, sons, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and friends. Here and there, printed invitations to the festive luncheon were left behind.

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Jane Limprecht started writing fiction and creative non-fiction after retiring, in December 2017, from a career that included working as a Department of Justice spokeswoman in Washington, D.C.; a legal reporter; and a legislative attorney. A native Nebraskan, Jane received her undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has two grown children and lives in Springfield, Virginia, with her husband and their black dog. She attends George Mason University as an “Auditing Senior Citizen” and volunteers for the public library and for voter registration and education.