

**The First Two Pages: “Sabotage and A Murder Mystery” by Lynn Hesse**  
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An Essay by Lynn Hesse

The act of murder is motivated by money, sex, and revenge.

“Sabotage and A Murder Mystery” unfolds like a play with the bride’s mother, Harriet, taking center stage. She introduces the initial conflict over money and discusses the lack of it with her husband. Sissy’s first choice for a honeymoon, a mystery cruise, isn’t happening, and Harriet tucks away bills showing the mounting credit card debt for the impending wedding. The father doesn’t see the point of all the fuss but leaves in his Atlanta Braves cap to work an overtime shift. Through Harriet, we see outside, beyond her kitchen window, a modest Georgia neighborhood after a spring shower. A neighbor’s work truck or a truck used by a manual laborer to make a daily wage is parked across the street. Harriet grabs her “teacher of the year” tote and leaves for school. The use of objects to convey character and setting moves the scene forward.

My mother and sister taught children with hearing and learning disabilities. I can attest to their unpaid hours of overtime and low wages. If only for a few lines, Harriet, the proud mother of the bride, deserves to be in the limelight.

What went right and wrong: Introducing class as a foundation for conflict in the first scene foreshadows the power-base inequality shown in the first two pages

between the bride and groom's parents. Sissy's mother and father's names are missing from the first scene. In hindsight, I would use Harriet's name and write in the third-person point of view.

Emotion drives the story. Sissy's fiancé's mother, Margaret, isn't a kind woman. The snide woman discredits Sissy's landscaping business as "yard work" and compares Ray's first love, Susan, to the epitome of a female goddess. Inspiring this scene is my deceased mother-in-law, a frequent character in my short stories that I kill off. I chose a coffee shop in Mobile, Alabama, for Sissy's first wedding-planning meeting with her mother-in-law to-be because the research for my first book, *Well of Rage*, provided the opportunity to confer with a court jester from a mystic society that counseled the wealthy on elaborate Mardi Gras ball gown designs.

The usage of quick flash-by scenes is deliberate. At weddings, apologies aren't ever adequate for somebody's bruised feelings. The whirlwind of a thousand decisions and demands, best served in small, intimate portions, rests here. In this case, during a phone call between the bride and her mother, Sissy attempts the insurmountable sorry for giving away the traditional honor of shopping for a wedding dress with her mother. The expensive dress that Margaret, not Harriett, manipulates Sissy into buying is another item the bride's parents must pay for.

These beginning pages show how the mothers' power or lack of power influence the wedding and Sissy. Her dilemma is which mother to please. Most wedding plans are about the mothers vying for Alpha status, desiring praise, and the respect due for a job well done. A bride's coronation or the unveiling during the ceremony raises their status, but the mothers hold court before the wedding. The rivalry is fierce. After the wedding, the daughter passes another milestone into womanhood and the son into manhood, but with the reminders of duty to their mothers trailing behind. I leave it to the reader to decide how well the motives of money, sex, and revenge for an act of murder reveal themselves in this play within a short story.

### **The First Two Pages of "Sabotage and A Murder Mystery"**

I fold the bank statements and stick them underneath the spice caddy on our dinette table. Half of Sissy's wedding expenses are charged to my credit card and half to my husband's. The birds are pecking at the wet feeder outside our bay window. A bee lights on a daffodil. The Georgia morning shower has vanished, leaving spring sunshine, blooming flowers, and pollen streams on my neighbor's work truck parked across the street.

My husband, Jim, traces the curve of his coffee cup handle with his thumb. "Where are they going on their honeymoon?"

"Not sure. Sissy wanted to go on a three-day mystery cruise but they can't afford it."

"I bet Ray hates murder mysteries. He dodged a bullet." Jim pats my hand and puts on his Atlanta Braves ball cap. "I should be going. Traffic. Don't want the floor manager to regret giving me the overtime."

“Maybe interactive mystery dinner theatre tickets will suffice. See you tonight, hon.” I hear the door slam as I stack the dishes in the dishwasher, turn off the lights, and grab my “teacher-of-the-year” tote.

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## THE COFFEE WITH MADELINE

His mother disliked me from the start.

The line is long at the coffee shop, and I can’t think of anything else to say.

Madeline arches her back, pushes her store-bought breasts out, and sticks a photo of Susan in my face. “This beauty was Ray’s fiancée before you came along. She sings in the Better Hope Baptist choir and acts. Look at that skin. Flawless.” She shakes her highlighted feathered hairdo and narrows her gaze, scanning my freckles.

I order a croissant and cappuccino and scratch at the bug bites on my chin and neck. At least she can’t see the red bumps on my backside, but her son didn’t object to them last night.

Madeline sits on the shady side of the table and ogles my croissant. “So, Susan, I’m sorry. It’s Sissy. You’re lucky you do yard work for a living and don’t need to count calories.”

“I own a landscaping business. As I’ve mentioned before, I’m a master gardener and have ten employees.” I scoot and angle my chair away from the sun. I don’t bother to explain that during a recent landscaping job, my field manager asked me to drop by for a consult on the customer’s Japanese maple tree. I stepped into a mound of Georgia’s red ants. Those suckers climbed like Olympic runners up my boots and jeans and into my panties. I’m a bit unlucky.

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## THE PHONE CALL AND AFTER

I’m trying not to hyperventilate. “Hi, Mom. Sissy here. We need to talk.”

“I’m not mad, sweetheart, disappointed, sure. I thought we, mother and daughter, would pick out your dress next week. Why would Ray’s mom—”

“We met for a coffee in downtown Mobile. She asked me if I’d seen any dresses I liked and didn’t I know Mobile was famous for its designer gowns. When we leave the coffee shop, she doesn’t tell me where we are going. Before I can object, I’m being fitted in a wedding dress by this old guy who has been The Jester for the Mystic Society balls for a million years and runs the Mardi Gras Museum.”

In the background, Dad says, “How much?” I realize I’m on speakerphone.

“Tell Dad I’ll pay for the dress.” My guilt meter runs into the red zone.

“No, you won’t,” Mom says. I can visualize her scowling at Dad in their living room over three-hundred miles away.

“We can drive from Atlanta and save the plane fare,” Dad says. “The boss won’t be happy. Probably lose a day’s pay, but dads want to see their little girls happy.”

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Lynn Hesse is an award-winning author of the novels *Well of Rage*, *Murder in Mobile*, *Another Kind of Hero*, *A Matter of Respect*, *Murder in Mobile, Book 2*, and *The Forty Knots Burn*. Her last two novels won the 2023 Georgia Independent Authors Association Awards for Best Police Procedural, Best Cover Adult Fiction, Best Suspense/Thriller, and the Spotlight on Georgia Fiction.

“Shrewd Women” was reprinted in *Crimeucopia*, *Boomshalalaking*, *Modern Crimes in Modern Times*, UK in June 2023, and published by Onyx Publications and Discovery Podcast in 2022. “Bitter Love” appeared in *Crimeucopia*, *The I’s Have It* by Murderous Ink Press, 2021, UK. “Jewel’s Hell” was in the *Me Too Short Stories: An Anthology* edited by Elizabeth Zelvin, published in 2019 by Level Best Books. Lynn left law enforcement to write and lives with her husband and his six rescue cats near Atlanta, Georgia, where she performs in several dance troupes.

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