

**The First Two Pages: “The Other Wedding Crasher” by Karen McCullough**

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*25 Wedding Cozy Mystery & Crime Fiction Stories* (Marla Bradeen)

An Essay by Karen McCullough

The call for the *Malice, Matrimony, and Murder* anthology requested mystery stories set around a wedding. I decided I wanted to write a story where some dirty dealings were happening almost in plain sight at a wedding reception, with (almost) no one noticing until the crisis hit.

The first paragraph of the story establishes that the first-person narrator is not your average wedding guest. In fact, Lynn is not a guest at all. Of course, that was already hinted at by the title, but I wanted to suggest she’s something more than just an average wedding crasher (if there is such a thing). She has a professional approach to sneaking into the reception, careful to avoid notice but not overly furtive about it either. It appears she’s done this kind of thing before.

The second paragraph sets the scene at a lavish, expensive country club wedding reception and shows the protagonist scoping out the venue in a different way from the average person. Looking over the site, she doesn’t notice the flowers or decorations or what people are wearing. She doesn’t search for other people she might know. She’s checking for sightlines, hidden corners, and means of access.

That paragraph also tries to plant doubt in the reader’s mind about her motive for being there. Using expressions like “killer heels” and “slay her feet” not only makes clear she is female and well-dressed, but also that her mind is in a darker place than

enjoying a wedding celebration. She's not there for free food and drinks. But she's apparently good at being a chameleon, since her expensive clothes, grooming, and polite manners let her blend into the crowd. Then the line describing her "shimmery, beaded" purse as "just big enough to hold my car key, phone, tissues, and a Beretta 21A single/double with seven rounds" should make clear she has a different agenda. A couple of paragraphs later she says straight out she's there to do a job.

At this point I want the reader to be wondering what kind of job she's been hired to do. She's clearly someone who knows her way around weapons and crime or battle scenes. Is she a hired assassin or there to thwart one? Is she setting up a crime or trying to prevent one?

In the next few paragraphs Lynn gathers information from guests. She doesn't know anyone there well, but she is adept at inviting people to talk to her. We begin to get a picture of the happy couple, particularly the bride, and there are suggestions that she's a difficult person. That sets the tone for the rest of the story with its implication that there's more going on at this wedding than appears on the surface.

It's my hope that readers will be intrigued enough to read farther to find out why someone like Lynn has shown up, uninvited, at the wedding, who "the other wedding crasher" is, why both of them are there, and what's going on in this marriage that seems to be inviting trouble.

## The First Two Pages of “The Other Wedding Crasher”

No one was checking invitations or credentials at the door, but just to be safe I waited for a small group of people to go by before I got out of the car and followed behind them. The chattering partygoers didn't notice me, but to anyone else I looked like a straggling member.

We went into the clubhouse, through the reception area, and up a few steps to an enormous room, comprised of three sections separated by widely spaced wood columns. None of the wedding party had arrived yet. Still posing for pictures, I imagined. That gave me time to scope things out—check angles and exposed areas. No one questioned me as I moved around the enormous room, studying the placement of windows, doors, and banquet tables. I wasn't sure if that indifference reflected the lack of interest from the minimum wage staff or was a testament to the power of a three-hundred-dollar dress and killer high heels. I just hoped those killer heels didn't slay my feet before the evening ended. My shimmery, beaded shoulder purse was just big enough to hold my car key, phone, tissues, and a Beretta 21A single/double with seven rounds.

Long buffet tables lined the back wall of the first section, with round ones that could variously seat between six and ten people taking up half the rest of the area. The cake sat on a pedestal to one side. The bar occupied half the smaller central section. At the far end, a DJ had set up his equipment next to the dance floor. Soft but bouncy music emerged from several giant speakers.

Waiters circulated through the arriving crowd with trays of canapes and champagne glasses. I accepted a glass from one of the passing servers and took three careful sips to make it appear I was drinking. I walked twice around the entire room and peered into a bustling kitchen. Once I'd fixed the layout in my mind, I chose a seat at one of the round tables.

No assigned seating for this reception, which made my job easier. A sit-down dinner would've required a different strategy.

A small dais with podium stood opposite the longest buffet just beyond the cake pedestal. I was betting the toasts and welcomes would happen there. An older couple approached the table, nodded, and the woman asked if anyone had claimed the chairs next to me. I shook my head, pulling my purse closer.

“Thank you,” she said, breathing an audible sigh. “Carol Mason,” she identified herself. “And this is my husband, Vern. Katherine's mother is an old friend. We flew in from Chicago last night.”

Katherine was the bride. Nice to know which side of the couple they belonged to. Better yet, they weren't relatives so they wouldn't know a lot of people here. "Lynn," I introduced myself, shaking hands with both. "Groom's cousin. I drove up from Raleigh this morning. I'm waiting for some other relatives, but they're running late. Stuck in traffic on 95 around Richmond." I preferred to stay with the truth where I could. Easier to keep track of. But if I had to make stuff up, I wanted it to sound realistic.

"Wasn't it a lovely wedding?" Carol asked, "Such a beautiful service."

"It was," I agreed. "The bride looked amazing!"

"Didn't she? I didn't even ask Estelle—that's Katherine's mother—how much that dress cost. It had to be a small fortune. But then she's their only daughter, and it's taken her such a long time to settle down, they were ready to go all out to make it special."

"I think it's safe to say they succeeded," I agreed. "So much work and planning went into this."

"Oh, yes. Estelle was on the phone with me almost every day. It seemed like there was some kind of crisis practically every hour. The florist couldn't get the right kind of flowers, or Katherine wasn't happy about the caterer's choices, or two of the bridesmaid's dresses looked bad on them."

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Karen McCullough is the author of almost two dozen published novels and novellas in the mystery, romance, suspense, and fantasy genres, including the Market Center Mysteries Series, originally published by Five Star/Cengage and reprinted by Harlequin Worldwide Mystery Library, and three books in the No Brides Club series. A member of Mystery Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, and the Short Mystery Fiction Society, she is also a past president of the Southeast chapter of Mystery Writers of America and served on the MWA national board. Karen has won numerous awards, including the 2021 Bould Awards and an Eppie Award for fantasy, and has also been a finalist in the Daphne, Prism, Dream Realm, International Digital, Lories, and Vixen Award contests. Her short fiction has appeared in a wide variety of anthologies. More information is available at her website: <http://www.kmccullough.com>.