

Mia and Melinda meant Murder

Mia and Melinda meant murder. They had meant murder from the very first moment they met on that midnight train to Hove. It was meant to be. A perfect swop: you murder mine and I will murder yours. They were talking husbands, of course.

The plot thickened at the Hove beach huts, where the two women met for a second time. As they whispered excitedly over their café lattes, they looked to people walking in the fresh sea air on Hove Esplanade, like two typical housewives. Mia Wilkes, teetering on the brink of forty, was no stranger to ‘glorious self-preservation’ as she called it. Teeth whitened, boobs nipped and tucked, she was slim, patrician and loaded with her three blonde children plonked in boarding school and neatly out of the way. Mia was, quite simply, immaculate but deeply, darkly unhappy.

Melinda McCoy, short, dumpy was a long way from perfection. Pale and freckled and some ten years younger than Mia, she had a nest of frizzy, ginger hair, unsure of which way to lie, Melinda was in awe of the blonde goddess beside her. *‘Poor sweet Melinda? Desperately in need of a make-over!’* Mia’s botoxed buddies would shriek at their infamous Girls nights. Knocking back the Pinot Grigio, collapsing into each others arms and wailing about their lonely lives and worn out, impotent husbands, they gathered around Mia, their undoubted Queen Bee.

Not the kind of milieu that Melinda McCoy, a nervous émigré from Bognor Regis was used to. Hove seemed dazzling to this lonely mum, still reeling from her

husband's latest love affair. Barry, an unfaithful builder with rippling muscles and rotting morality, had insisted they moved to Hove.

(2.)

“Hove's a happening place, babes!” he told Melinda. She would make friends quickly ‘over his dead body’ Barry had said, grinning with reassurance. Barry was right. Melinda *did* make friends – *over Barry's dead body*.

At first, Melinda would stand in the school playground, nervously hiding behind her two children until Mia spotted her. ‘*An act of charity*’, was how Mia described this to the girls back at the Hove ‘hive’. Mia had taken Melinda on as her ‘project’. Mia dragged her protegee around the beauty salons of Hove and with blonde streaks pushing out the ginger, teeth straightened and botox proudly plumping out her careworn cheeks, Melinda had taken on a more sophisticated look. Mia buzzed proudly! A transformation! ‘Just call me Professor Higgins, girls! Melinda McCoy is my very own Eliza!’ Mia had shrieked to her Girls. Even Barry the Builder was impressed. “You look like a bit of a babe, babe!”

Melinda, knew something was changing deep within her soul and Mia was smug in the knowledge that she had found a woman who would do her ‘messy work’. A willing drone, a worker bee to her ‘Queen’. After a trip to Harvey Nick's, and the late train back into Hove, the stage was now set for *murder*.

DCI Bev Berkowitz slurped at her tea and shoved in another Nicorette. The staff canteen at Holland Road, Hove District, was renowned for its particularly lousy cuppa. Bev sighed deeply. As District Commander for Hove Coastal, Bev took her time over the tea. Bev didn't rush for anyone. Bev had long done with rushing.

(3.)

Bev sighed again as she sipped her cuppa. She wasn't going to make it for her niece's Batmitzvah in Worthing this Friday. A nice Jewish girl like herself was expected to be at family gatherings and what better place to find a nice Jewish boy than at a Batmitzvah? Bev's mother, Shirley, recently deceased, would forever remind her of this redoubtable fact.

All Shirley's fussing, the ballet lessons, the elocution lessons, the Hebrew classes with Rabbi Werner, had not changed one thing about Beverley. Feet firmly on ground, a social conscience and a love of guns, Bev was always destined to be 'Bev the Bobbie'.

Lionel, Bev's Dad, would proudly tell his Golf club cronies of his daughter's exploits with the Hove Murder Squad as they chewed on their fat, expensive Russian cigars. If his daughter's career meant no nice Jewish husband, then so be it.

'My girl needs a ring on her finger, Lionel!' Shirley would screech but Lionel would simply smile and shrug.

'Maybe some girls don't need men, Shirley? Bev's married to her job!'

Men could be overrated, Beverley had always thought. There was that loveless grapple at the back of the Holland St car park with PC Gripp from Goering after the staff Christmas do, but a nasty case of NSU and two mortifying visits to the Clap clinic had left Bev deciding that Boys in Blue were best buttoned up.

(4.)

A short-lived engagement to Norman, a Dentist from Eastbourne with roaring halitosis and a habit of wearing Bev's silk undies, had stopped that engagement stone dead. Shirley was apoplectic. 'Oi vay? There goes another nice Jewish man!'

And here were two dead men, laid out naked on a slab down in Forensics. Two Christmas turkeys, plucked and stuffed. Barry McCoy, a builder from Bognor, his once handsome face bashed purple like a rotten damson and Anthony Wilkes, a City stock broker and Hove resident, his male member severed brutally. Bev blew her nose, her stomach churning. Could be the Nicorettes? They were acidic that was for sure, or maybe the Atkins diet she was trying?

'Pretty picture, eh, Ma'am?', Bruce whispered.

Bev nodded, slowly wiping her nose. Another beastly cold coming. Just her luck!

Bruce, their Forensics guru, was a rarity amongst men. Deliciously handsome but charmingly unaware of his St. Lucian good looks. There *is* hope for us large

lonely lummoxes, thought Bev. Shirley spat in Bev's ear. 'Black as the ace of spades, and far too handsome for a pudding like you!'

Bruce, smug as a parrot with a pecan, leaned in nearer. Bev hid her feelings, arranging her face stone set. Came in very useful being a DCI. Bruce was staring quizzically at her. 'Going down with something, Ma'am?'

Bev nodded glumly. 'What do you suspect, Bruce?'

'A double murder, that's what, Ma'am. A pact. Two different lots of DNA, one of the men, this one here ...'

(5.)

Bruce lifted a sheet to reveal a distinguished looking man, greying elegantly at the temples. 'Had a two inch nail extension embedded in his groin. Sorry to say, the killers had to be female, Ma'am. We need these ladies banged up and fast!'

Bev could feel herself blushing. She would happily be banged up by Bruce. Oi vay! (Whoops? Sorry, mum!)

Bev stiffened, the DCI once more. 'We have the two women upstairs. PCSO Jones found the body of this one in Beach Hut no 354, blood trickling out onto the Esplanade and scaring the seagulls. Cheers, Bruce. Keep the men on ice for me.'

Bev walked upstairs.

Bruce cleared his throat. 'Happy Christmas, Ma'am. Celebrating at home?'

Bev turned, her heart pounding. Would a gorgeous male specimen like Bruce, clearly in his prime, ever really be interested in a dumpling like her? Bev smiled

wryly at him. ‘Small Jewish issue, Bruce. The Cross, our Lord. We crucified him, remember?’

Bev knew all about crucifixion. Shirley banged the nails in hard.

Bruce laughed and slapped his thigh. ‘Sorry! What am I like, Ma’am!’

Bev smiled a shy smile. ‘And it’s time you stopped calling me Ma’am. We’ve been working together for what? Ten years, Bruce.’

Bruce grinned fondly. ‘Ten years, Inspector – I mean, Bev! I’m off for three weeks on Christmas Eve.

(6.)

Me mum and the cousins are getting right excited, but me brother, Winstone, he’s run up to Scotland with a married woman and I bought his plane ticket for him.

‘Me mum’s going to go mental! Bruce returns but no kid brother? If you fancy a change, I’ll keep a seat warm for you, Bev. Promise!’

Bev’s mother sneered as Bev imploded, her legs starting to shake. ‘He doesn’t mean it, you klutz! He doesn’t mean it!’

Bruce smiled warmly, lowering his voice. ‘Have a good one, eh, Bev?’
Bev nodded. She wouldn’t, of course, and Bruce would. They were trapped on the opposite sides of life: one dark and rainy, one full of sun-kissed promises.

Take me away to St. Lucia, Bruce and roll me over in the sand.

Sergent Elaine Bowes was checking the two women in at the Duty Desk. One tall and glamorous and the other small and shaking hard. Sargent Bowes came towards her. Bev nodded at her. 'Three cups of canteen dish-water please, Elaine. It's going to be a long haul!'

One of the women pushed back her Hermes headscarf and stared defiantly. Bev returned her gaze. Ring leader, no doubt? Bev approached them, picking up the Duty Desk report. 'Do you ladies want to join me down the corridor. Tea is coming.'

Bev was suddenly in a bad mood thinking about Bruce making love to some dark-skinned lovely while she played endless rounds of golf with her Dad, the rain drizzling down on them.

(7.)

Shirley, Bev's Mother, was hissing viciously in her ear as Bev waddled down the corridor. 'Look at that Vanessa Feltz? Large lady like you, dear, but nicely turned out. Grooming is everything. Your life in the Police is putting years on you, Bev!'

You're right, mum, and happily for us all you are now *dead*. Dad can play as much golf as he wants and can smoke cigars all day and I can eat as many bags of pork scratchings as I sodding well fancy! Yes, *sodding* well fancy. You heard me, Mum? You're dead and buried, so *stay* dead!

'Don't you think some people are simply better off dead, Inspector?' Bev gulped hard as she stared at Mia Wilkes, a startlingly shameless self-made widow.

This woman had clearly had it easy. No years of being bullied at Police cadets, no smashed knuckles in the locker rooms. A 'trophy wife', Bev reckoned. Bloody good looking and super-slim too. Bitch!

Bev was secretly pleased she had denied their access to a solicitor. A clear cut case of double homicide so no solicitor required until tomorrow. Bev pulled herself up. 'We have evidence to suggest that you murdered the husband of Mrs McCoy, on the 22nd December. What was your motivation in this crime, Mrs Wilkes?'

'Simple, Inspector. We were both victims of domestic abuse. These were crimes of passion, don't you see?' Mia lit up a cigarette defiantly flashing her perfect, whitened teeth as she inhaled. Bev rolled her eyes at Sargent Bowes.

(8.)

'How would you like it if your husband strapped you on your marital bed, tied you up with his belt and brutally bugged you from behind on a weekly basis, Inspector?'

Bev's eyes widened. 'I'm not married, Mrs Wilkes. What was your prime motivation in killing your friend's husband and suggesting she kill yours?'

'My motivation was simple, Inspector. I wasn't living. I was dead from the neck up and with little Mia, I had an ally. I would push Barry the Bastard builder off my roof as he did some tiling, and Mia would stab my tormentor. It was the perfect swap. Mia wanted the same thing. Freedom, if you like, Inspector!'

Freedom? Bev breathed hard. Her world was wobbling. She swallowed slowly, her throat tightening, as Melinda smiled wickedly at her. ‘Isn’t that what all we women really want, Inspector?’

Mia McCoy was more easily broken. Sitting in interview Room 12, she was putty in Bev’s hands. A squawker, as they called them.

‘Here was a woman who was taking an interest in me, Inspector. No one had ever done that, you see. Not since my time in the Guides. No one, Inspector. I was simply being asked to murder a complete stranger. My husband couldn’t keep his pants up, you see, and for twelve years of marriage he had compared me to his lady lovers, all blonde, slim, so perfect. I just couldn’t compete – it was awful!’

(9.)

Bev nodded for Sargent Bowes to assist. As Mia hooted and wiped her nose, Bev’s dead mother, Shirley, hissed quietly into her ear. ‘Do your job properly, you useless lummo!’

Bev suddenly felt bolder. Her mother again? She knew this was now the hissing and wheezing of a dying cat, the power draining out of its body.

Mia carried on, her doleful, round eyes now brimming with tears. ‘I came when asked. Melinda left the knife out for me and explained with diagrams where to stick the blade. Back of neck when Anthony was having his afternoon nap. Heavy sleeper, she said’

Bev was puzzled. 'But the beach hut? An unlikely place to store a body, Mrs McCoy?'

'Melinda had it all worked out, Inspector. She's very smart, you see! We popped Anthony into the garden wheelie bin and drove it down the Esplanade and into the hut. Seemed as safe as anywhere and with all this rain, it gave us time.'

Bev's mouth ran dry. She was at the crossroads now. More late nights, more gruelling interviews, lonely weekends sipping Bailey's in front of 'Strictly' every Saturday night. The vision was bleak. Bev could feel herself thawing.

Mia stared hard at her. 'My husband never saw me, you see, Inspector. He never saw me. Made me feel like nothing. Now, I feel like *someone*. A murderer, but at least like someone, Inspector!'

Bev nodded to Sargent Bowes to take the two women away. Mia Wilkes and Melinda McCoy had meant murder. Double homicide with mitigating circumstances. These ladies would get what? Ten years each. Perhaps less.

(10.)

They would feel at least, as Mia McCoy had said, like *someone*. *Bev sighed hard. These two women had children waiting for them, at least. These two women had lives. Lives.*

Bev drove as fast as she could back to her seafront flat. Bag, passport, roll on, lace undies, sun cream from last year, razor for any lurking leg stubble. That would

do! Taxi on way, Dad rung – mercifully understanding, bless him. Mum dead, bad girls banged up, job done!

Bruce from Forensics was at the Airport Check In desk as Bev, panting, ran up to him, pulling her wheelee suitcase. Bev bit her lip, suddenly stopping on the concourse. She looked up. No Shirley hissing at her? Bev grinned very slowly.

Bev touched Bruce's arm. Last chance, Bev Berkowitz. Time to get a life.

Spinning round, Bruce gasped with delight. 'Ma'am? It's you? It's Bev? Me DCI!'

Bev laughed loudly, tears streaming down her cheeks as Bruce dropped his bags, and hugged her, waving around an extra ticket. Bev beamed happily. She could see the headlines in *The Jewish Chronicle*: 'Nice Jewish girl runs off with black man to celebrate Christmas! Read all about it!'

Bev giggled as she beat back salty tears of happiness. 'What am I doing, Bruce? Mum will turn in her grave!'

Bruce laughed, delighted. 'Let her turn, Inspector. Let her turn!'

