

CHAPTER 1

Parked in her van, a few dark streets from the police station, Acting Detective Sergeant Clara Mode was fighting the driver's side window. The weather had just turned and no matter how hard she pulled on the winder, the window refused to budge. A sharp wind pierced the cabin, stinging her skin. She also needed to pee.

"Bloody bastard," she hissed.

The two-way radio crackled to life.

"Noise complaint in Elm Street. Shouting and disturbance reported. Is there anyone *not* on the Shelby Estate call out? Who can respond? Over."

She grabbed the two-way radio with one hand and turned on the ignition with the other.

"This is WDS Mode. Show me responding. Over." She flicked on the headlights, making the road glow before her.

The Shelby Estate shout was one she never rushed to. She left it to the boys. The regular flare-ups between mods, skins and punks were just an opportunity to stick the boot in, not proper police work. Between the anti-Thatcher protesters, striking miners, race rioters and Greenham Common femos, police work seemed to involve a lot of head-kicking these days.

But a noise complaint could be interesting. If it was more than a property dispute, it could lead to a decent case.

“Mode?” came the voice from dispatch. “Aren’t you supposed to be off duty? Your daughter has been calling you. Over.”

“Shit. Sorry. I’ve told Beth not to call the nick. She’ll have to wait now. ETA to Elm Street: two minutes. Over.”

“Confirmed then. Since you’re willing and able. Caller says the occupant is a Mr Dennis Taylor. Disturbance has been going for a while. Over. And don’t forget to call your daughter. Over.”

She took off with a jolt. A Walkman and a half-eaten sandwich slid off the passenger seat and across the floor. Scientific magazines and a tangle of legwarmers tumbled from the bed in the back.

The van, a Bedford Electric, was her pride, joy, and her home. She bought it and had it fitted out, paying for it with the financial debris from her divorce. From the outside, it looked like any other faithful old Bedford you’d see carting cargo around town, but opening the sliding door revealed a complete, if compact, home.

In the beginning, it was the advertising slogan that grabbed her attention: *The Car. The Future. Me.* With fifty countries pledging action at the Geneva World Climate Change Conference three years previously, in 1979, the future, as far as Mode could tell, was now. And like all new innovations, she jumped on it. It was the first electric powered vehicle on the mass market. Just the start, she thought, but it lacked grunt and made her feel as though she was always running late. So, even with the head start, she knew she’d have to race to beat the boys to the shout.

“Piss off! Not interested,” growled the man through the crack of the door.

“Love to, Mr Taylor,” said Mode, showing her ID. “Dennis, isn’t it?” She smiled. “Only, one of your neighbours has called in a bit of a noise complaint and I, you know...” She rolled her eyes and shrugged. He shot accusing glares into the dark street like a vengeful gangster with a scattergun.

The neighbourhood seemed pretty good, which in Mode's mind meant she hadn't had to visit it very often. It wasn't quite leafy avenues lined with Mercedes Benz. No, it was more dog turds in the streets and Miller Cortinas, but still law-abiding for the most part, and there was a sleek new Sierra she'd noticed out front.

"No noise 'ere," said Mr Taylor. A waft of booze seeped from him as he spoke. "Nosey commie pigs should mind their own fucking bollocks."

Even though only a sliver of him was visible, Mode saw his face was at the start of middle-age, turning craggy. He wore a homely cardigan over a business shirt, top button undone. He looked ordinary. Only a sharp glint in his eyes betrayed any brutality lurking beneath the woolly exterior. She kept her smile fixed as she stole a glance inside the house. It was difficult to see into the dim shadows. Something stirred on the floor near the staircase. She could just make it out. A person. A woman. There was blood. Mode's smile grew broader.

"Righto," she said, as she clapped her hands with hearty cheer, "well, if anyone asks, let them know the police have been and gone. Nothing to report."

She walked away from the door towards the street. "Cheers," she called. She heard the front door latch close as she sauntered to her van. All was quiet on the street. Only the sound of the televisions drifted from the nearby houses on the breeze.

Mode slid into the driver's seat, stopping herself from looking back at the house. She turned on the ignition. The car stereo came on with a news report. Margaret Thatcher's detached tone spoke: "There may be three million unemployed, but we shall persevere with our economic policies. We will buffer the storm." Mode hit the off button.

"Sorry Maggie," she said to the photograph of Thatcher on the election campaign sticker fixed to the dashboard. The campaign

slogan, *Don't just hope for a better life. Vote for one*, jumped out in big, convivial letters. Underneath, a serene-looking Thatcher smiled. One corner of the sticker had curled up. Mode tried to stroke it back into place. She'd stuck it on the dashboard at the start of the triumphant election campaign nearly three years ago. It still gave her hope. After all, if Maggie could make it in a man's world, why couldn't she?

Mode reached for her two-way radio to call for an ambulance and flicked on the headlights. She could feel him watching.

Dennis had moved to the window in the front room. He could hear his own breathing and feel his heart beat heavy against the silence of the house. He edged his face closer to the net curtain to see what she was up to.

From behind the curtain, Dennis saw the headlights come on and released a sigh of relief. Then he smirked. What the bloody hell was she doing with a van? *Stupid bitch, probably can't even steer it.*

He walked back to the hallway and sneered at the bloodied figure on the floor.

"Shut it, slag," he said, then made his way to the remains of the bottle of rum on the kitchen table. He could count on rum. Rum didn't bitch, lie, or fuck your brother.

He took a couple of gulps from the bottle. God knows he'd earned it. He closed his eyes and allowed the warmth to ripple through his body.

A knock at the door shattered his peace.

"Fuck! What now?" He slammed the bottle down.

He cracked the door open enough to see that the detective lady was back, but this time looking wide-eyed.

"What?"

“I’m so sorry about this Dennis,” she was talking a lot quicker than before. “You don’t know who owns that nice Sierra out there, do you? I’m sure my insurance will cover it, but I’m afraid I’ve just backed into it a bit.” She grimaced.

“What the...?” Dennis launched through the door towards the street. Mode kicked out her foot, catching his ankle mid-flight. He felt his nose crack as he hit the path. He lifted his head to see nothing but a blur. Again, his face hit hard against the brick paving and a sharp pain stabbed as Mode slammed her knee down on his back, across his shoulders.

“Excuse the ruse, Mr Taylor, but needs must,” she explained.

“Whore! Fucking...” He flailed and writhed. Blood trickled from his nose. With two strong wrenches, Mode had him cuffed.

“Tut, tut Dennis.” She patted his head, then straightened herself with a shiver. The adrenaline surge gave her limbs a pleasant, warm tremble.

“Now, you maggot, wait there.”

Mode dashed to the body in the hallway. The motionless figure was little more than a broken heap on the cold wooden floor. Her torn dress exposed a breast. Blood matted hair covered her face.

“Can you hear me?” No response. “I’m the police. You’re safe now, treasure.” Mode knelt next to the woman and edged the matted hair from her face. No response. Her jaw lay slack and distended. Her features had swollen beyond recognition. Mode felt for a pulse on the neck, sticky with blood. Nothing. She repositioned her fingers. The seconds dragged.

She was almost too scared to breathe, willing this woman to life. The sound of a siren was approaching. Mode felt a weak beat reach her fingertips.

“Thank God,” she sighed. In the distance, the cathedral bells began to ring out across Canterbury. Although she knew it was just the weekly practice, she couldn’t help feeling a certain providence in the timing.

As she went to meet the ambulance, she heard Dennis, still spitting venom from the path. She was ready to arrest, interview and charge the vermin. The rat was going to pay. Not only that, this one was hers and hers alone. This would shut them up. A violent offender collared on her own merit and followed all the way through to conviction. Her shoulders squared as she came through the front door. The bastards could shove their piss-taking up their arses. She was enough. Clara Mode was worth her rank. She felt poised now and retrieved a sherbet lemon from her coat pocket and dropped it into her mouth. It might even stop the snide Miss Marple comments for a while, she hoped.

Beyond the medieval walls of Canterbury, far from the peel of bells and a few miles out of Willowbrook village, stood a manor house. A dowager of a bygone era. Gone were the days when the aristocracy frolicked through her halls, enjoying masked balls, shooting parties and secret trysts. For several generations, the building had served a different purpose. St Mary the Immaculate Convent School moulded young girls through the observance of modesty, obedience, and privation under the watchful eyes of a handful of implacable nuns, who had been bequeathed the estate by a wealthy supporter of the faith in the late nineteenth century.

A girl staggered along the dark corridor towards a dim light, shivering and bent. Her lank hair stuck to her forehead. She stumbled. Propping herself against the wall, she looked at the glow. She knew she should be brisk, limiting the contact of the icy floor to her feet, but her body was heavy. Reluctant. She paused and gathered her strength, then willed herself, step by step.

At the end of the hallway, in the shadows, Matron sat in an armchair. Listening. Waiting. As she did every night. She grasped the teacup from the adjacent table. And slurped, relishing the moment of perfect contentment. A brief respite from the guttersnipes and just enough whiskey to balance the tea. She

returned the cup to its saucer on the table, and smoothed the skirt of her nurse's uniform until it stayed taut, then resumed her guard.

Ingrained into the fabric of St Mary the Immaculate Convent, Matron was the only civilian engaged in the boarding house. There were a few teachers who came in school hours, but these were all kept strictly to the classroom block. The nuns lived in the old servants' quarters in a distant wing, but Matron had her abode in amongst the captives. From this strategic stronghold, next to the bathroom and central to all dormitories, she was omniscient: her rule absolute.

Matron sensed movement from the corridor. She tensed. The girl emerged from the shadows, skin waxen, her eyes sunken and dark.

“You'd better have a very good reason to be out of bed.”

“Sorry... Matron,” she breathed. “It's Natalie... I think she's getting worse. Can you come and see?”

“I might if you grew some manners, Claire Matthews.”

“Sorry Matron,” Claire swallowed hard. “*Please*, would you come and see her?”

Matron ran a sceptical eye over the girl before lifting the lantern and striding down the corridor. The rationing of electricity use had irritated her at first, but now she'd warmed to the antiquated charm of it all. She turned to see that Claire had stopped and was leaning against the wall. She held her belly, grimacing. Willing the pain to go.

“Keep up,” barked Matron, then continued her stride until she reached the last door on the right. She swung it open and scanned the room in the half light of the lantern. Like the other seven dormitories at St Mary the Immaculate, St Winifred's held beds positioned at close and even distances. Between each bed stood identical narrow cabinets. The head of each bed was positioned

against the wall, so the end of the beds formed an aisle that ran the length of the room. The number of beds in each dormitory depended on the size of the room, some held eight, some as few as three. St Winifred's held four beds, but one bed lay bare, stripped of all bedding.

Matron's eyes flitted from bed to bed. There were the coiled outlines of Natalie Smith and Hannah Gordon. Claire was still to return. Matron could hear the lazy child dawdling in the corridor.

The stench of vomit hung heavy in the air. She swallowed hard, deciding this was a task best completed at speed. As she paced towards Natalie's bed on the far side of the room, Matron observed the child, curled up against herself, clutching her stomach. She made no noise, but her face screamed in pain. On the floor next to her bed lay a bowl holding the fruits of repeated regurgitations.

"Argh," gagged Matron, taking the dish. She was on her way out the door when Claire Matthews lurched through, almost upsetting the bowl and further irritating Matron.

"Imbecile! Get to bed." Claire obeyed without a murmur. Matron huffed and left the room.

With Matron gone, Claire reached out to Natalie, but her fingertips couldn't quite make it. The other times she'd stretched her arm out to the next bed, Natalie's hand would be there already, waiting for the gentle embrace from Claire's. But theirs was not a particularly special friendship. On any given night, numerous girls would hear a quiet sob from the next bed and stretch out a hand in the dark. Their fingers would find each other and, for that moment, or until they fell asleep, they felt like they mattered. Felt some kind of love.

Claire tried again to reach Natalie, but her fingertips could only just touch the edge of the thin blanket. She slid out of her bed and knelt at Natalie's side.

“She’s got it worse than any of us.” Claire leaned across the bed and stroked the matted fringe from her face. Natalie half opened her eyes and gave a weak smile.

The door swung open. Claire sprang back to her bed. Matron stomped back into the dormitory with a clean bowl.

“I’m going to put a stop to this malingering,” she thundered. “I’ve had it up to here. Waiting on you hand and foot. I won’t have it. Even Princess Di doesn’t get this treatment.”

Claire worked her way under her blanket; hoping that guilt was not etched across her face.

By the time Mode got to the front door, the night was ablaze with flashing blue and red that illuminated the silhouettes as the ambulance officers leapt from their vehicles. DC Richard Ball and DS Robert Harden had already got the cuffed man to his feet and were wresting him off the path.

“I had this,” she said to the detectives, “you didn’t need to come. I had it.” The man writhed against his captors, snarling insults as he squirmed. Mode turned to the paramedics as they rushed forward with a stretcher.

“This way! In here. It doesn’t look good, but she’s conscious. Just.” The paramedics followed Mode into the house, ignoring the commotion out the front.

Despite the detectives’ best efforts to manhandle the suspect into submission, the cardiganed captive continued to contort and convulse.

“The tweezer?” asked Ball.

“Sure,” replied Harden. The two moved in unison, manoeuvring their solid bodies into a pincer movement, closing in like a claw around their prey, their forearms locked tight with a grasp popular among acrobats. In a few moments, they had brought

Taylor to rest, clamped between their substantial bulk.

“Take it easy there fella,” said DC Harden. “We don’t want the goods damaged, do we? Are you going to calm down?” The man squirmed. The detectives stepped in closer, tighter.

“I’ll ask you again.” Harden spoke low and slow. “Are you going to calm down?”

His eyes remained fixed on the captive for a moment before Harden felt the man slump a little and, recognising the acceptance of defeat, the detectives relaxed their grip.

“Look, there’s been a mistake,” reasoned Taylor with a weak smile. “This is a massive over-reaction. That silly bint has gone and made Mount bloody Everest out of a bleeding little molehill. You know women, fly off at the slightest, am I right?”

DC Ball returned the weak smile. “I’m sure it’s nothing. A misunderstanding. Let’s get to the nick and get it sorted,” assured DC Ball with a wink.

As the stretcher was loaded into the ambulance, Ball and Harden shoved the man into the back of their squad car. Mode emerged from the house and approached them.

Dennis Taylor scowled at her through the car window. She curled her lip at him in return before turning to the detectives.

“You didn’t need to come. I didn’t call for back-up,” she said.

“Aren’t you supposed to have knocked off?” Harden asked, “And how the bloody hell did you get here so quick? You been lurking in the streets again?” He exchanged a smirk with Ball.

“Early bird catching the worm boys, that’s me,” she replied. They watched as the ambulance drove away. “The paramedics say she’s in a bad state. Looks like he’s shattered her eye socket. Her jaw too. Either way, she won’t be up to a statement for at least a couple of days, so...” She looked at Dennis. He was crying now. “Where are we at with the knob head? I can be ready for the interview soon as.”

“Give over. He’s pissed off his tits. He can’t face an interview,” said Harden. “First thing in the morning, though.” He gave her a thin smile as he got in the car and drove away. Within seconds Mode found herself alone on the footpath again as the red taillights shimmered into the night. A light drizzle fell.

Matron glared at each of the girls before marching over to Natalie. She’d decided this would be her last act of duty and care for the night. It was getting late now and the whiskey had made her sleepy. Besides, there was probably nothing wrong with the little toads that a sound thrashing wouldn’t fix. *You’re too soft and they take advantage*, she told herself.

“Take this,” she directed, producing a white tablet the size of a penny. Natalie took the tablet and put it in her mouth. “Chew it properly, child,” Matron said, watching Natalie crunch and finally manage to swallow it down.

As Matron was leaving, Claire asked, “Do you think we should call a doctor?”

“Don’t be impertinent. What would you know? Are you Florence Nightingale now? Why would a doctor be interested in any of you? It’s a tummy bug, probably brought on by impure thoughts, or worse.” She turned at the door. “That would explain why only you girls have caught it, only this dormitory.”

The illness had hit the girls in St Winifred’s hard and fast. Natalie was the first; a sickly child to begin with. “Hypochondria is what I call it,” Matron had said. Over the years, what little patience she had for the girl had waned to open disdain. When Natalie complained of nausea at dinner, her plea was dismissed. It was only when the dessert of rice pudding arrived, a thick mass of grey lumps, that Natalie’s constitution gave way. The sheer sight of it was enough. She bolted as soon as she felt the first signs of what was to come, but the dinner of mutton stew hit the floor

before she made it out of the door.

Matron deigned to take the child's temperature. But as there was no fever, she viewed the sickness with scepticism and ministered her usual remedy: a lecture on the perils of attention-seeking, and the dangers of an over-active imagination. Within the hour, the other interns of St Winifred's had also succumbed.

The symptoms started with stomach cramps, followed by vomiting. The girls were confined to their dormitory. Matron had handed around chalky tablets and emptied the sick bowls in what seemed to be a constant flow, backwards and forwards, over the previous two days.

Outside, the world was limbering up for another day of grind and graft. Mode stood with her nose close to the bathroom mirror. She blinked hard several times, willing away the redness of fatigue stinging her eyes. She made do with a few splashes of cold tap water.

The night had passed in a flash once back at her desk from the shout. It only seemed like minutes ago that Harden was taking the piss.

"You have a home to go to, don't you? No, that's right," he smirked. "You'd be better off living in a broom cupboard."

"Hilarious. Because I'm a witch, I suppose?" Mode quipped. Harden laughed.

"No really, why do you live in that thing? I mean, Christ. A van?"

"Truthfully? It was all I could afford. Much cheaper than bricks and mortar. Besides, it has the major advantage of giving me the edge over you lot. I don't have to go home at night, no lost hours commuting, so I can give my all to a case. Anyway," she said, cocking her head a little, "it's called a limousine you know, originally made for HRH Phil the Greek."

“Well, I might admire your dedication, but it’s a plug-ugly Bedford, end of,” laughed Harden. “You still got that Thatcher sticker on the dash? What a joke.”

“What of it? She’s a flipping visionary, you lot just can’t see it. My uncle is buying his council house because of her. That’s life changing.”

Harden frowned. “You want life changing? Half my family is out of work because of her. That’s fucking life changing,” he said, getting into his coat. “My advice is don’t let anyone north of London cop an eye full of that slag on your dash. You wouldn’t live to tell the tale.” He slammed the door behind him as he left.

“Prat,” she said, too late.

The plan had been to write up the report, jot down a few notes to guide the morning interview, then have a bit of a kip in the van before the MD declared Mr Dennis Taylor sober and ripe for the plucking. But the paperwork, or rather the typewriter required to complete it, made it an exercise in frustration. It had a nasty habit of taking on a life of its own, malevolently conspiring against all efforts of Her Majesty’s finest. If the typist attempted speed, the striker arms would spring forth in a terrible tangle. It demanded a steady, frustrating pace. But even then, the bastard machine would occasionally ambush the page with a random snarl of letter arms. Each time this happened, the operator would have to stop and untangle the machinery before starting the whole thing again. She could have crossed out and initialled the errors, but she wasn’t about to let any clumsy work through on this one. She’d waited too long for this opportunity to let a piddling bit of paperwork unravel it before it started.

So she threaded a new sheet into the vicious machine and started again. What made it all the more frustrating was Mode knew such primitive methods were obsolete. She understood she was living in the most swiftly advancing age in history. There was a sense of duty to keep up to date on all the technological

advances. The only way to stay ahead of the game. She devoured a host of publications: *Popular Science*, *Quest*, *Omni*, *New Scientist* and *Computer Club* were some of her favourites. The TV programme, *Tomorrow's World*, regarded by most as ground-breaking, didn't go far enough for her liking. It was light entertainment in her view.

Several magazines had run feature articles about electronic machines that were equipped with correction tape that allowed the user to erase a mistake with the mere press of a button. They were already on the market, but that was only the start. There were computers that didn't take up a whole room but were small enough to fit onto a desk. They had programs that allowed the user to switch around whole paragraphs of a typed document at the stroke of a key. One of the more innovative magazines suggested that *thought processing* was in the offing. The user would simply think of the words and the specialised device picked up the sonic waves, converting thought into words on a page. Probably have to wait for the year 2000 for that one, pondered Mode.

The first blush of dawn glimmered as Mode ripped the last page of the report from the typewriter. She gave the machine a departing snarl. She was feeling confident, even a little cocky. Despite her progress since 1966 when she joined the policewomen's department, through the rocky integration with the male department after the Sex Discrimination Act in 1975, and making it all the way to Acting Detective Sergeant, she still felt like she was on the fringes. It seemed like she was booted or blocked every time there was the slightest hint of a case becoming interesting. Excluded from much of the gritty street policing. She'd progressed mainly on the back of courses, study and exams. Every now and then she'd get a break and join an undercover operation, usually busting perverts in prostitution stings. Just enough to scrape up through the ranks. The cases they usually gave her were fluffy rather than meaty: 'women's stuff'. In her sixteen years on the force, there were only a couple

of times she'd been near a case of substance. Months of lying in wait in the van had finally paid off. This was her chance to show off her capabilities. Sure, she'd have to have one of the blokes riding shotgun in the interview, but she would be in the lead. They'd all be watching her on this. A tinge of anxiety crept in.

Pure typewriter derived irritation had propelled her through the small hours, but as she sat at her desk strategising interview questions, a wave of weariness washed over her. She stretched and blinked a few times to remain focused. Soon, distant voices told her the early shift was arriving. She checked her watch. The square green digits informed her Taylor would be declared fit to interview soon.

The cold water had freshened her, but her eyes were still stinging and red. She peered into the mirror critically. *That's as good as it gets*, she told herself, then patted her face dry and checked her watch. Just enough time to grab a cuppa.

Matron was also preparing for the day ahead. No more acting as a scullery maid to those slugs. There had been enough loafing. She swung open the dormitory door and beat it with her fist.

“Get up,” she snapped. The girls stirred, got up and shuffled bleary eyed towards the door, heading on autopilot to the bathroom, except for one.

“You're not still carrying on,” said Matron, exasperated as she strode towards Natalie and wrenched the bedclothes off.

The girl had vomited in the night. It lay in a puddle next to her chin and mingled in her hair. “Disgusting wretch,” said Matron. The girl didn't move. Didn't blink. Her eyes were open, yellowed, vacant. Matron frowned. With a tentative hand, she reached out to the girl's face. The rigid, cold skin made her recoil.