

# ONE

*16th December 1987*

Detective Inspector Andrew Joyce was about to commit murder in broad daylight, and there was nothing anybody could do about it.

He tightened his fingers around the cold metal in his right hand and slowly exhaled through his nose, trying to block out the relentless wailing that had been feverishly spinning his fraying patience into what was beginning to look like an increasingly tempting garrotte.

Andrew could still see the smug expression at the corner of his vision, needling him as the seconds passed with a mocking sluggishness; those beady little eyes nestled behind cheap plastic spectacles stared at him, unblinking, and the slight curl to the thin lips was like a personalised invitation to Andrew's mounting need for vengeance.

The wail sounded again – closer now – and as the pitch crawled higher with a gasping intake of breath, Andrew finally snapped.

He spun around to unleash the projectile on its intended target, entirely ready to wipe that self-satisfied grin away for good.

‘Sorry, sir!’

Andrew paused in surprise at the shout, hand still raised above his shoulder. His nose twitched as Detective Constable Lloyd Parker materialised in front of him, clutching a stack of white and green paper bags.

‘Are you alright there, boss?’ Lloyd asked slowly as his apologetic expression crept towards baffled concern. The frown deepened as he looked quickly between Andrew's face and the can of fizzy Vimto still being held threateningly at chin-height. ‘What did I miss?’

Andrew pursed his lips and slowly returned his arm to his side. 'Nothing.'

Lloyd turned his head, scanning their surroundings for anything out of the ordinary. He raised his eyebrows. 'Sir, were you about to deck that plastic Santa with a can of pop?'

Andrew decided that it would probably be best to avoid answering Lloyd's question. He kept his eyes averted from the five-foot Father Christmas, with its stupid rictus sneer still in place. 'What took you so bloody long?'

Lloyd, fully aware that he'd deduced Andrew's planned course of action correctly, shrugged in response. 'They didn't have any of the turkey and cranberry ones made up, and you know what the boss would be like if I came back without three for him.'

To his eternal chagrin, Andrew *did* know what DCI Higson would be like if Lloyd returned without his specified lunch order.

'Oh, and they'd run out of their own stuffing as well,' Lloyd continued, 'so I had to wait because one of the girls had just nipped up to Safeway to get more of that one that comes in the box. You know, the one you just add water to? Mum refuses to buy it, even though *her* stuffing always tastes like cardboard. Anyway, it wasn't finished in the oven.'

Andrew was still trying to process Lloyd's rambling explanation when the godawful shrieking rallied with renewed vigour.

'Christ.' Lloyd winced, nodding towards the bawling toddler who, by then, was prostrate on the ground. 'I thought kids loved all this Christmas stuff.'

Andrew glanced up at the heavily decorated tree towering over the heaving mass of shoppers navigating the Arndale Centre and shook his head. 'Apparently not at all of them.'

To a degree, Andrew could relate. He could pinpoint the exact moment that *he* had decided that he hated Christmas: It had been July 1963, and his mother – unusually lucid that day – had

asked him what he wanted for Christmas that year. He'd stared at her, confused that she'd brought up Christmas in the middle of summer, and even more confused that she'd asked him such a question in the first place. He'd been unable to recall a single other occurrence of that same inquiry in the decade since his birth.

Agatha hadn't seemed fazed by her son's silence; she'd just taken a sip of her tea and leant back in her chair to patiently await a response.

'I don't know,' is all Andrew had eventually been able to offer quietly. It hadn't been quite the truth, of course. The truth had been that he hadn't given two hoots about Christmas – or much else for that matter – since his older brother Rob's sudden death the year before, but he had been certain that his mother wouldn't appreciate that answer.

Agatha hadn't actually appreciated the answer he'd eventually given either. She'd slammed her mug down on the small kitchen table and stone-cold milky tea had violently sloshed up the sides and over the lip.

Andrew had watched as the chalky liquid had crept towards the edge of the table. When the first drop had hit the vinyl tile with a barely audible splash, Agatha had risen slowly to her feet and pressed her palms flat to the stained tabletop. She'd leant down towards her son, with greasy strands of unkempt hair falling like mismatched curtains either side of her reddened eyes, shaking her head in obvious disappointment.

'Then you'll get nothing from me,' she'd sneered. 'Which is all you deserve.'

Andrew had known better than to answer back, and so he'd remained mute and motionless, with his head bowed, letting his mother hiss furious accusations at him until she'd abruptly left the room.

Later that afternoon, Nana Joyce had arrived and helped

Andrew pack his belongings into his granddad's war-battered duffle bag. The house had still been simmering in strained silence when they'd left together, but Agatha had been nowhere to be seen.

By the time Christmas had arrived five months later, Agatha had made no attempt to see her son. As promised, Andrew hadn't received a single thing from her that December.

'Should we go, boss?'

Andrew blinked away the lingering traces of his mother's bitter words and rolled his eyes at Lloyd. 'You're never this keen to get back to work.'

Lloyd raised his eyebrows and gestured towards his watch. 'It's already nearly half-twelve. Higson'll kill me if there's not lunch on his desk when he comes in!'

Andrew couldn't argue with that assessment, so he just turned and headed for the exit without further comment.

On a personal note, he wasn't actually raring to get back to Tib Street. Back in the beginning, when he'd first been transferred to the Ballroom, he couldn't have imagined there ever being a day when he'd willingly choose to be there; that had all changed, of course, but for months now he'd been trudging through the tedious, *entirely pointless* cases that Higson had been handing out to them, and he was really starting to wonder just how much longer he could stay there without dropping dead from sheer boredom.

The case that they'd finally cracked that morning was as perfect an example of the problem as Andrew would be able to find: the sudden disappearance of Alan Jermyn, a man who'd spent the sixties selling exotic animals to rich idiots who'd thought that crocodiles and leopards would make great pets. Jermyn had apparently left his shop in January 1972 to deliver a puma to a customer – Angelica Fortnum – out in Bowdon. Mrs Fortnum had been rather put out when Jermyn didn't arrive as

promised and had called the police the next morning to complain that Jermyn had taken her money but not delivered the promised big cat. By all accounts, Jermyn had never returned to his shop, and disappeared off the face of the earth, along with Angelica Fortnum's puma.

When Andrew had called her earlier that week, a snappish Mrs Fortnum had been very keen for him to understand just how disappointed her guests had been when they'd arrived on the evening of Jermyn's disappearance and there'd been no lovely new animal for them to coo over after pudding. Andrew had been the very picture of professionalism and had refrained from asking why the hell anyone would *want* a puma to come to dinner in the first place, nor had he questioned just why you'd still be quite so bitter about the whole thing fifteen years later. If Andrew had learned anything at all since moving to the Ballroom, it was that extremely rich people often had significantly more money than sense. He'd seen very little evidence to suggest that this problem wasn't endemic in the upper echelons of society, with only *very specific* exceptions aside.

Although Mrs Fortnum had been entirely useless to Andrew's investigation, and despite Lloyd's fortnight-long campaign to convince his colleagues that Jermyn had clearly been eaten by the puma – which, incidentally, in Lloyd's argument, had somehow relocated itself to the South West to begin its new career as the Beast of Exmoor after offing Jermyn – they had eventually happened upon the truth of the matter that morning when the Ballroom had received a tearful phone call from the missing man himself.

Thankfully, the Ballroom's resident pragmatist, DS Jen Cusack, had been the one to answer the phone and listen to the entire snivelling story, which Andrew's soul-deep lack of patience for hysteria would have entirely failed to cope with.

According to his sergeant's summary, Jermyn had copped to

the fact that there'd never actually been a puma in his possession, and he'd simply bugged off to Benidorm with Angelica Fortnum's money, in order to open a bar with a woman he'd met on holiday the year before.

'Why's he admitting to it now?' Lloyd had asked, his bewilderment overshadowed by abject disappointment that his Beast of Exmoor theory hadn't played out.

Jen had shrugged. 'Apparently, he found God after his wife filed for divorce, and he felt *compelled* to tell us the truth as part of atoning for his sins. One of his mates has known where he's been the whole time, and when they told Jermyn we'd been asking after him he decided to call us and confess.'

'Which friend?' Andrew had asked tersely, desperately hoping that they could at least go and do something about whichever one of Jermyn's associates had been withholding key information from them.

'He wouldn't say,' Jen had winced. 'Apparently, Jesus wouldn't want him to dob his mates in.'

'Do we get to go to Spain?' Lloyd had asked hopefully, already immersed in a daydream of winter sun.

Jen had rolled her eyes. 'Doubt it. Apparently, he's coming back to Manchester for Christmas – he's given me his flight details and everything.'

'He's given you his flight details?' Andrew had asked blankly.

Jen had nodded with yet another shrug. 'Yeah. He says he lands on the twenty-fourth, and he'll be expecting us at the airport.'

'It's a Christmas miracle, sir,' Lloyd had guffawed, and Andrew had only barely restrained himself from throwing something at the younger man.

'We can't even be sure it's him,' Andrew had argued instead. 'Anyone could have made that call!'

'I guess we'll find out next Thursday,' Jen had concluded as

she'd turned away to write up the call.

And that, really, had been that.

Higson had told them that he bloody well wouldn't be going to the airport on Christmas Eve, and that they could argue amongst themselves over who was going to make up the welcome party for Jermyn's possible return. He'd then grumpily announced that he was going out, and that he'd be expecting food on his desk when he got back.

Even knowing that there were few worse places to be than a shopping centre the week before Christmas, Andrew had offered to go and buy lunch with Lloyd because somehow staying in the Ballroom without anything to do had seemed an even less attractive option. The whole trip, however, had only confirmed what Andrew already knew – he was genuinely down to his last nerve, and something fundamental needed to change.

'Boss?' Lloyd asked with uncharacteristic hesitance as they turned the corner at Debenhams and found themselves back on Tib Street.

'Yeah?'

'Do you think it's weird that all the cases we've had recently are a bit...?' Lloyd trailed off and twisted his lips.

*A bit shit*, Andrew thought. 'A bit pedestrian?' is what he voiced aloud.

'Well, I was going to say, 'a bit shit', to be honest,' Lloyd admitted as the Ballroom came into view further up the street. 'But, yeah, *pedestrian*.'

'It can't always be murders and gangs, Lloyd,' Andrew replied, hoping that his own frustration was imperceptible.

'Yeah, I know that,' Lloyd agreed begrudgingly, 'but it's been months since we've had anything even a bit interesting. I mean, when was the last time Peggy agreed to come in and take a look at something?'

Andrew knew *exactly* how long it had been since they'd had to

call Peggy Swan in – five whole months. Handing Lloyd that precise answer felt a bit like giving away more than he'd like though, so he offered a one-shouldered shrug instead. 'Couple of months?'

Lloyd shook his head as they reached the battered door and awkwardly fished around in his pockets for his keys, all the while trying not to drop Higson's lunch order. 'It's way longer than that. Come on, it was the summer, surely.'

Andrew didn't answer. Instead, he feigned an interest in the continually baffling *Cheryl Richard Dance Studio* plaque that hung on the exterior wall. He'd been at Tib Street for just over eighteen months, and he *still* hadn't the foggiest about the Ballroom's history beyond the most basic of explanations he'd received on his first day.

Lloyd kicked the bottom left of the door and then threw his shoulder against the centre until it scraped open with a sound too like nails on a chalkboard for Andrew's liking. He'd drenched the whole thing with WD-40 in the summer, but it didn't seem to have made the slightest difference.

Andrew nipped past where Lloyd reversed the same steps to close the door again and took the stairs as quickly as he could without breaking into an actual run. Dolly's particular blend of cigarette smoke and bleach was lingering in the air, and Andrew had no desire whatsoever to find himself face to face with their terrifying cleaning lady and her enigmatic pronouncements about life or her more specifically pointed criticisms of Andrew and his appearance.

'I was about to send out a search party!' Jen exclaimed as Andrew dropped despondently into his chair and proffered the carrier bag of fizzy pop cans towards her.

'It's mental in that place,' Lloyd muttered as he handed one paper bag to Jen and another to Andrew. He then turned and placed the remainder on Higson's desk. 'Boss not back yet?'

‘No,’ Jen confirmed as she carefully unwrapped her lunch.

‘Where’d he go, anyway?’ Lloyd asked around a mouthful of sandwich.

‘Don’t talk when you’re eating,’ Jen chastised her younger colleague. ‘As for Higson, I have no idea. He can’t have gone far though.’

‘How’d you figure that one?’ Lloyd asked, mouth blessedly empty.

‘Car keys are still on his desk.’ Jen nodded towards the DCI’s corner of the room.

Andrew was fairly certain that Higson was propping up a bar somewhere in the vicinity of Tib Street and he’d no doubt appear when his stomach told him it was lunchtime. ‘He’ll be back in a minute.’

A minute passed, and there was no sign of Higson.

Nor was there any sign of Higson when Andrew pushed his chair back and stood up an hour later.

‘Right, I need to do something,’ he said, pressing his fingertips to his temples. ‘We’re not getting any further with Jermyn until Christmas Eve, but I can’t just sit here and wait for that.’

Lloyd looked at him as though he’d sprouted an extra head. ‘But Higson’s not here.’

‘So? I think I’m perfectly capable of going to the archive room and picking up a case file.’

Lloyd blanched. ‘You really wanna go in there? Even after what Peggy said?’

No, Andrew could safely say that he really didn’t want to go into the archive room. After his own slightly odd experience earlier in the year, he hadn’t been thrilled to hear that Peggy had experienced something unsettling enough to send her fleeing from the building.

‘There’s nothing there, Lloyd,’ Andrew replied as steadily as he could manage. ‘It’s just a boring room full of files.’

‘Sir, I’m not sure this is a very good idea,’ Jen added. ‘DCI Higson did say that he didn’t want any of us going in there; that he’d pick out the cases.’

‘Well, he’s not here right now,’ Andrew replied, backing towards the double doors. ‘Look, I’ll just go and grab whatever he’s left on the top of the pile. No matter how bloody dull it is, it’s got to be better than sitting here waiting for him to come back for lunch.’

Jen grimaced and then sighed in what Andrew would take as tacit agreement for his plan. Lloyd continued to look troubled with just a smidge of eagerness but given that was Lloyd’s default expression whenever anything remotely ghost-adjacent was brought up, Andrew assumed he had the younger man’s backing too. He snatched up the heavy keyring from Higson’s desk and left the room before either of his colleagues could invent another protest.

Andrew jogged down the staircase to the lower landing, spurred on by an almost childish sense of freedom, but his steps slowed dramatically as he actually approached the door to the first archive room.

A shiver tried to fight its way up his spine, but he shrugged it off with a quiet rumble of disdain. It was just a bloody boring room, filled to the brim with what were, apparently, the world’s most bloody boring files.

He turned the key in the lock, surprised by how loud the click sounded in the otherwise silent hallway.

Armed with the disappointing knowledge that ghosts were, unfortunately, something he should be concerned about, Andrew steeled himself and pushed down on the handle.

Absolutely nothing of note happened, and the door swung open easily. There was no immediate sense of being watched, nor any hint of a threat lurking in the shadowy corners.

Tension bled from his shoulders, and he stepped into the

room with a sigh of relief.

Andrew kicked the doorstep in place to counteract the sloping floor of the room and switched on the light.

Any relief was immediately replaced with a sense of dawning disgust as the buttery glow of the single, naked bulb above his head revealed the chaotic, grimy mess that the archive room had become.

He wrinkled his nose as his eyes trailed over the numerous mugs on the small table in the centre of the room; none had been drained completely, and the varying quantities of remaining rancid coffee were scarring the air with a sour tang that tickled the back of Andrew's throat as he stepped closer.

There were two overflowing ashtrays on the old carpet, and a third was perched precariously at the very edge of the table, right next to a tall stack of files.

Andrew assumed that these were the cases that Higson had already pulled for the team to work on. With a brief but potent yearning for a pair of gloves, he gingerly picked up the top file and opened it.

'Oh, for fuck's sake,' he muttered to himself as he despondently scanned the file. Higson couldn't really want them to look into a spate of break-ins at Italian restaurants in the fifties, could he?

He knew that he'd told the others that he was just going to bring back the first case he found, but he'd rather submit himself to the mercy of rabid Christmas shoppers on Market Street than go back upstairs with *that*.

'Oops,' he said dryly as he carelessly pushed the remaining files onto the floor, dropping the folder in his hand into the sliding mass. He picked another case at random.

Surely this way, he'd have plausible deniability if Higson questioned him on why he hadn't taken the Italian restaurant case. If Andrew had entered the archive to discover that the files

had all fallen on the floor, then it really couldn't be his fault if he selected a different file instead, could it?

He knew how immature he was being, but if Higson was going to treat them all like idiots for reasons unknown, then Andrew figured that he could allow himself to act the prat on this occasion.

'Please, Christ, be something better,' Andrew hissed as he opened the new case file. The words 'Theft' and 'Lord Mayor' jumped out at him, and for just a second, he thought that he might be onto something.

Andrew's triumph was felled a moment later when he scanned the initial incident report and saw that the date was in the forties.

According to the brief, neatly typed sheet of paper, the Lord Mayor's hotel room had been broken into while he was attending a function, and he'd returned to discover that some of his belongings had been taken. The valuables stolen included gold-plated cufflinks and a pair of socks that he'd worn to every ceremonial occasion during his tenure.

Andrew growled in frustration. Higson was obviously taking the complete piss, and Andrew couldn't for the life of him understand why.

Initially, Andrew had been content to assume that Peggy had been increasingly declining to consult on investigations after the *Lady Bancroft* debacle and so Higson had been focusing on finding cases that the Ballroom could investigate without the need for any ghostly intervention. That excuse had worn thin as the summer had dwindled, and now it was nearly Christmas, and a missing pair of novelty socks turned out to be the straw that finally broke the camel's back.

Andrew crouched down to pick up an armful of files, fully intending to unceremoniously drop them on Higson's desk when he returned, while asking for an explanation for what the hell was actually going on.

As he reached out to retrieve some papers that had ended up under the table, Andrew paused when something caught his eye. For a split second he wasn't sure what it was that had snared his attention, and a sense of apprehension twisted in his gut, but as he turned his head, he relaxed.

There, on the seat of the rickety chair that had been tucked beneath the table, was a single case folder. Unlike the sparsely filled ones that now littered the floor, this one looked to be bursting with paper, and even from his awkward vantage point, Andrew could see that the file was stained and well-worn. It was an obvious anomaly, and Andrew was instantly drawn to it.

He staggered to his feet and pulled the chair back so that he could pick up the case file.

The cover was emblazoned with a smudged Manchester City Police stamp, which suggested that it was an original file, and not the usual sort of copy produced for the Ballroom. A vertical indent ran down the middle, and another bisected the file from left to right, as though the whole thing been quite savagely folded in half in both directions on multiple occasions in its past.

Admittedly, the date on the smudged stamp was December 1967, but even the fact that it was a twenty-year-old case wasn't enough to dent Andrew's curiosity.

Inside, the margins of a handwritten incident report were covered in Higson's distinctive, spidery scrawl; the ink was more faded in some places than others, which suggested that Higson had been making notes on this case for *years*.

He'd barely read to the end of the first paragraph when he remembered that he was on borrowed time. He needed to get this file out of the archive room and in front of Jen and Lloyd before Higson got back, otherwise he could kiss goodbye to any chance he had of finding out more.

He snapped the file closed, gave the coffee mugs one final horrified glance and made for the door.

Listening carefully for any hint that Higson had made it back to the building, Andrew removed the doorstop and hurried out of the room towards the staircase.

His right foot had just hit the upper landing when an awful realisation brought him up short:

The archive room door hadn't closed behind him.

He vividly remembered the last time that had happened, and it was with more than a smidge of trepidation that he turned his head to look back over his shoulder.

Sure enough, the door was wide open, but nothing held it in place.

Andrew swallowed heavily and waited, almost holding his breath for fear he might disturb something. He stared at the door, not entirely sure whether he wanted it to move or not.

Just as he'd convinced himself that holding a staring contest with an inanimate object wasn't the best use of his time, and that he should really go back and close the door, a car backfired noisily out on Tib Street.

Andrew jolted in surprise at the blast of sound, clutching the file tighter to his chest.

The archive room door lazily swung towards the landing, as though it had nothing better to do than give Andrew a heart attack, before closing with the softest of clicks.

Andrew knew a dismissal when he saw one, so he turned on his heel and bolted up the staircase.