

# Chapter 1

What could be more glorious than sitting at a pavement café on a sunny afternoon in June, wearing a marvellous new hat and witnessing an imminent crime?

Zillah Walsh adjusted the brim of her red fedora and sat back, observing the scene unfold before her with fascination. The boy was definitely intent on shoplifting.

*How exciting.*

OK, it hadn't happened yet, but he was clearly in shoplifting mode. You could tell by his body language: the hesitation, the air of elaborate casualness, the repeated glances over his left shoulder at the elderly customer behind him.

It was also pretty apparent that he wasn't the most accomplished of criminals, seeing as he hadn't noticed that he was being closely observed through the window by the owner of the shop.

Oh poor boy. What he was doing was wrong, of course it was, but Zillah couldn't help herself. Her heart went out to him. He'd picked up the item now, was pretending to examine it whilst stealthily inching it towards the pocket of his grey hoody.

Meanwhile the shop owner had moved closer to the door and was preparing to make a grab for him . . .

Oh no, she couldn't let it happen.

'Darling, I've changed my mind!' Zillah waved her arm in the air to attract the boy's attention and called across in her most carrying voice, 'Can you get me some of those too? Come here, you'll need more money.' She beckoned him over and watched as he belatedly spotted the shop owner waiting to pounce.

The boy replaced the about-to-be-stolen item on the display stand outside the shop and crossed the narrow street. Zillah took a five-pound note out of her purse. 'Buy a big bag of them, then come back and sit down with me. If he asks, tell him I'm your grandmother.'

He feigned innocence. 'Why would he ask?'

'Don't kid a kidder. Because I've just saved you from getting arrested.'

The boy cocked a cheeky eyebrow at her. 'OK. But I'm telling you now, you're *way* older than my grandmother.'

Zillah smiled as he turned away. She briefly wondered if he'd take the fiver and make a run for it, but no. He returned to the greengrocer and was now choosing fruit from the display.

The shop owner cast a suspicious glance in Zillah's direction and she nodded back at him charmingly. Oh yes, there were times when being a well-spoken, stylish octogenarian definitely came in useful.

'Here you go.' The boy was back, handing her a bulging bag of Pink Lady apples.

'Thank you. You may keep two for yourself. And I didn't know if you drank coffee,' said Zillah as he dropped the

change into her hand, 'so I've ordered you an orange juice instead.' She pointed to the empty chair opposite. 'Sit.'

The boy sat down. 'Why are you doing this?'

'Honestly? I was intrigued. Aren't teenage boys these days more likely to shoplift cans of energy drink or strong cider? It isn't often you hear of them going for apples.'

He had a thin face, spiky dark hair and watchful eyes. 'I like apples. We don't get them at home.'

His clothes were cheap and a bit scruffy. Zillah said, 'I like apples too. But they're not worth getting a criminal record for.'

'I thought they wouldn't bother. It'd be more trouble than it was worth.'

'Maybe, but you don't know that for sure. How old are you?'

The orange juice arrived and he took a series of thirsty gulps. 'Thanks. I'm sixteen. How about you?'

'I'm eighty-three.'

'Wow, that's ancient. You look pretty good, though. For your age, I mean.'

'Thank you,' Zillah replied gravely. 'I do my best.'

'You look . . . rich.' His tone was matter-of-fact.

'I wear make-up. I buy myself nice clothes. I prefer bright outfits to dull ones.' She indicated her peacock-blue silk jacket, the vivid beads around her neck, then tilted her head and tweaked the brim of her scarlet fedora. 'I'm also very fond of a hat.'

He broke into a grin that lit up his thin face. 'I tell you what, you're *nothing* like my grandmother.'

His name was Ben, she discovered, and he was bunking off school. But it didn't matter because it was only citizenship, which was boring and didn't count.

‘How do you know it doesn’t count,’ said Zillah, ‘if you aren’t there to learn about it?’

‘That’s the kind of thing teachers say. I’ve been often enough to know it’s boring.’ Ben nodded at her left hand, the back of which was covered with a large dressing. ‘What happened there, then?’

‘I was at the hospital this morning. It’s just minor surgery.’

‘What for?’

‘I had a tattoo removed.’ Zillah sipped her coffee.

‘*Seriously?* . . . Oh, you’re joking.’ He looked disappointed. ‘What was it really?’

‘A synovial cyst.’

‘Is that cancer?’

She shook her head. ‘No, it’s nothing nasty. They just drained fluid from it.’

Ben said, ‘Well that’s good. But what would you have done if it had been cancer? I always think about stuff like that, don’t you? Would you write a bucket list?’

Zillah spluttered with laughter and put down her cup. ‘A what?’

‘Come on, you must have heard of them. People do them when they find out they’re going to die. One of my cousins lives in Swindon and his next-door neighbour had cancer. He wrote a bucket list of things to do and went up in a hot-air balloon, which was pretty good, but then he pegged it before he could do any of the other stuff. Like, he wanted to meet Mick Jagger, but it didn’t happen. Everyone was doing fund-raising things to send him to see the Rolling Stones in concert, but they ended up using the money to pay for the funeral instead.’

‘I have heard of bucket lists.’ Zillah nodded, because he was still looking quizzically at her.

‘If you ever find out you’re going to die, you should do one.’

‘Darling, I’m eighty-three. Either way, I don’t have many years left in me. I don’t think people do bucket lists at my age.’

Ben shook his head. ‘It must be weird, being so old.’

Zillah was enjoying herself immensely, all the more so because the owner of the greengrocer’s shop was still watching them, trying to work out if they really were related. ‘You kind of get used to it. So tell me, what would you put on your bucket list?’

‘Good question.’ He pointed at her approvingly. ‘OK, what would I have? I’d go out for the night with Miley Cyrus. D’you know who she is?’

‘Singer. Doesn’t wear many clothes. Has been known to twerk. That the one?’

‘Yeah. And I’d go swimming with dolphins. And definitely visit Disney World. And I’d get annual membership at the zoo.’

‘In Disney World?’

‘No, *here*.’ Ben gestured over his shoulder and she realised he was pointing in the general direction of Bristol Zoo, roughly half a mile behind them. ‘Don’t tell me you’ve never been? It’s wicked. Costs loads to get in, but if you buy a year’s membership you can go in for free as often as you like. Every day, if you want.’

Now he’d really perked up. Zillah said, ‘Which are your favourite animals there?’

‘Oh no, don’t make me choose. That’s where I want to

work when I leave school next year.' His eyes were shining. 'It's like the best place in the world.'

When they'd finished their drinks, Zillah paid the bill and Ben said, 'Yeah, well. Thanks.'

'My pleasure. You could do me a favour in return, if you like.'

He rolled his eyes slightly. 'What's this, lecture time? No more shoplifting?'

'You don't need me to tell you that. Actually, I was wondering if you'd help me carry this little lot back to my car. What with my hand hurting a bit.' She indicated the dressing on the back of it. 'And me being so ancient.'

Zillah wasn't stupid; she knew there was a slim chance that when you passed your belongings to a stranger, including your handbag, they might run off with them. But she wanted to take the risk, and that meant really hoping this wouldn't happen.

It was an uphill walk past Clifton Suspension Bridge and across the broad stretch of grass separating the shops from the hospital where this morning's minor surgery had been carried out. Clifton being the parking nightmare it always was, she'd left her car in the hospital car park.

When they finally reached it fifteen minutes later, Ben placed the various shopping bags in the boot and gave her back the large leather handbag.

'Thank you,' said Zillah. 'I'm very grateful.'

'Nice car.' He ran a hand lightly over the Mercedes' gleaming navy-blue paintwork.

'I know. I can give you a lift home if you like.'

He gave a snort of laughter. 'You don't know where I live. Try driving down our road in this thing and you'd get hijacked. They'd have it off you and leave you lying in the gutter.'

‘Well, if you’re sure.’ Opening her purse, Zillah belatedly realised that paying the bill in the café had left her without any change. She shook her head. ‘Oh look, I was going to give you a couple of pounds, but I don’t have anything. Sorry.’

Ben’s face fell; he’d clearly been hoping for a tip. ‘It’s OK,’ he said, attempting indifference. ‘Doesn’t matter.’

‘Here, write down your address for me and I’ll post it to you instead.’ She found a pen and an old receipt in the bottom of her bag. Ben hesitated for a second, then did as she asked. Returning them to her, he said, ‘You don’t need to.’

‘If I post it, will it reach you?’

‘What, two pound coins in an envelope?’ He shrugged. ‘I suppose miracles do happen.’

‘Take the apples as well.’ Zillah smiled as she handed them over. ‘They’re yours.’

That evening, back home in Bath, she addressed an envelope to Ben, slipped a ten-pound note inside and added a brief note saying: *I enjoyed meeting you!*

An hour later, having looked at Bristol Zoo’s website and purchased online a year’s membership in his name, she printed off the confirmation and added it to the contents of the envelope.

Then she sealed the envelope and poured herself an ice-cold gin and tonic, raising it by way of silent celebration.

Would he use the membership?

Would he sell it for a bit of ready cash?

Who knew? She certainly didn’t.

*Ah well, here’s to Ben, the inept apple thief. Cheers!*