

CHAPTER

1

Identify Your Justification: Why Bother?

Ask yourself – do I need the money? Robbing a bank isn't something to do to pass the time, like kicking footballs over the neighbour's fence or reading. Some people rob banks because they're greedy. Those people are usually caught after buying muscle cars or diamond-encrusted baseball caps. Others enjoy the adrenalin rush of thrusting sawn-off shotguns into the faces of middle-aged women. Those are typically twenty-somethings with troubled childhoods.

Me? I robbed a bank because of guilt. Specifically: guilt and a Nepalese scented candle.

Let me explain.

It was an endless summer and I was fifteen and fed up with playing *Call of Duty* and *FIFA*. There are only



so many times you can get sniped in the chin or spanked five–nil before you start questioning the meaning of it all. Mum and Dad’s moaning meant I’d applied for part-time jobs. But even McDonald’s had turned me down. Dad said this was evidence of Broken Britain. Mum said I shouldn’t stop trying.

It was a Saturday afternoon, one of those boring summer Saturdays without Premier League football and with lasagne planned for dinner. Dad was on the sofa, Mum was on the wine, and Rita was on the phone. And all my friends, apart from Beth, were on exotic holidays with never-ending beaches and azure oceans.

‘What do you know about Watergate and Richard Nixon?’ asked Dad. His question, like most of his questions, was a run-up to convincing me to watch a film. This time, it was *All the President’s Men*, which he’d first shown me when I was in primary school and I’d thought boring and confusing.

I told him I was off to see a girl. That shut him up.

‘Good for you,’ said Mum, who was at the dining table, holding a dog-eared magazine in one hand and a chipped wine glass in the other.

‘Yes,’ said Dad, waving a hand to silence Mum. ‘Live a little.’



Dad was being ironic. It was something else he did – watching films and being ironic. That was Dad. Also – snoring.

I went to my room, closed the door, and ignored the smell of sweat that rose like shimmering heat waves from my stained duvet. I fell to my knees and ran my hands underneath the bed. My fingers passed over crisp packets and sticky patches that I'd worry about later. Finally I found the package I'd been searching for. It had been hiding here since Monday when Brian, our seven-foot-tall German postman, had stood at our front door and had said:

'Parcel for you. *Ist* party time?'

And he'd smiled a smile so bright that to look directly into his mouth would blind you.

TBH, I wasn't 100 per cent convinced a Nepalese scented candle would impress my friend Beth. But I'd cornered myself when Harry, a drippy guy in the year below, had asked what I'd got Beth for her birthday.

Beth lets Harry follow her around because their mums are members of the same yoga club or something. He thinks they're best friends but they're so not.

I didn't even know she had a birthday. I mean, I know everyone has a birthday but . . .



‘I’m a teenager,’ I said. ‘I don’t buy friends birthday presents. I don’t even write on their Facebook walls.’

‘I bought her a necklace,’ said Harry. ‘It’s silver.’

Round Beth’s neck was this pretty thing with tiny dolphins that I’d not noticed until now.

‘Honestly,’ said Beth, ‘I don’t care about presents.’

I confess: I panicked.

‘A Nepalese scented candle,’ I said. ‘That’s what I got you.’

And I said this because only the day before, Dad had watched me order Mum a Nepalese scented candle on the internet. It was her birthday soon and he thought it would be good for me to get her something that smelt nice.

‘A Nepalese scented candle?’ Beth said on the swings in the rec, swinging as only teenage girls can swing. ‘That sounds cool.’

‘It sounds lame,’ said Harry.

I didn’t take any notice of Harry because he said everything was lame.

So, days later, in my room, kneeling at my bed like I was praying to the god of smelly things you buy the women in your life, I thought, *Yeah, Dad, I will take a risk. I’ll give Beth a Nepalese scented candle.*



Beth lived in a home built by her angry builder dad to resemble a miniature version of the White House and she looked exactly like Emma Stone. Like exactly. Like getting stopped in the street by old men exactly like Emma Stone. Google Emma Stone. That's what Beth looked like. Really.

Even though her home was a baby version of the White House, it was actually massive compared to everyone else's and especially mine. It even had its own cinema room, although the screen had yet to be installed. Her mum used the space to hang washing and it smelt of damp and regret.

I'd not told Dad about the cinema room. It might send him into a spiral of depression, whatever that means.