LUCKY BREAK

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For my family

MATCH DAY

You know that feeling when you realise everything's out of control? That sort of sickly sensation that tells you the game is up? That awful regret as you look back at a chain of events that took you from being a normal kid to one who's, say, wanted for a bank job?

That.

Alarm bells started to ring when I came downstairs and saw a policeman just inside the kitchen doorway. He was holding up his hands like they do in films when they're persuading the bad guy not to shoot. I took off my headphones and watched from the hall.

'Place the weapon on the counter and put your hands on your head,' said the policeman.

Nobody moved.

'I won't ask again, miss,' the policeman said sternly. 'I said put your weapon down.'

My sister, Olivia, glanced over her shoulder at the young officer. 'Me?' she said. She was gripping a French loaf in two hands like it was a baseball bat. 'He's the one with the knife.'

Olivia was confronting a stocky boy who was backed up against the Italian marble work surface. He was holding a small butter knife, a blob of Lurpak balanced on its rounded blade. His other hand was gripping a triangle of toast.

Reluctantly Olivia lowered the bread and placed it on the worktop.

The policeman's Adam's apple bobbed in his skinny throat. 'Now step away from the baguette.'

My sister took a step backwards. 'It's not a baguette,' she mumbled. 'It's a *ficelle*, actually.'

'You too, sonny,' said the policeman. 'It's time to throw in the towel.'

The boy frowned. 'What towel?'

'He means put your knife down,' Olivia explained.

'Oh right.' The boy licked the blade clean and placed it on a plate behind him.

The policeman's top lip was glistening. 'Right, can someone explain what's going on?' he asked.

'Isn't it obvious?' my sister said. 'This kid is an intruder. He's broken in. I just arrived home and found him robbing us.'

'It looks to me like he's making toast,' said the officer.

'Whatever,' said Olivia. 'In *our* kitchen. I'm sure after he'd finished his toast he was going to ransack the house. These criminals can be very cocky, you know.'

'Is that so?' said the policeman. 'Met lots of criminals, have you, miss?'

I knew it was time to speak up – time to stop that runaway train in its tracks.

'Come to think of it . . .' The PC was studying the kid. 'You do fit the description of one of the two juveniles who tried to hold up the Lloyds Bank on Market Street yesterday. You haven't got a shorter, slimmer friend by any chance, have you?'

Instinctively I stood on tiptoes and puffed out my cheeks. Maybe it wasn't the time to pipe up after all. The boy noticed me and gave me a questioning look. I shook my head slightly. It was a gesture that meant, 'Say nothing'. It meant, 'I'll sort all this out but for now the best thing would be to keep shtum.' It meant, 'Whatever happens we mustn't admit to knowing each other.'

On reflection, it was probably too much to convey with a small head movement because the kid said, 'This is all a big misunderstanding. Tell them, Leon.'

The policeman and my sister turned to look at me.

'Le-on?' she said suspiciously.

'Leon,' the officer repeated gleefully. 'Can you confirm

your whereabouts yesterday afternoon, between approximately 4.32 and 4.44 p.m.?'

As I stood there contemplating the mess I was in I thought back to where it had all started to unravel. How had I allowed things to get this far?

I swallowed and tried to smile brightly. 'This is a funny story.'