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Chapter 1

Simon is gone. Just disappeared. He was going to spend the weekend at his best friend's house.

But he wasn't there.

He isn't anywhere.

No sign, no letter, no message.

My little brother has never gotten into trouble in all of his fifteen years. Until now, my parents thought this rather reassuring. Not any more. In their eyes, he is not that sort of kid who just scoots. Therefore, something must have happened to him. I myself prefer to cling to the hope that he's just having a good time. Even if it's out of his character. But it must not be that something has happened to him.

It all starts so innocently. Looks like a little tardiness. We're sitting at the table, Mum, Dad and I. Dinner is ready. We're waiting for Simon. He's staying with his mate, Yannick. He does that rather often. He goes there on Friday after school and returns on Sunday evening. He has to be at home by 7.00 p.m. That's our family time. We discuss the coming week. It's always been this way.

It's ten past already. Simon has not turned up. He's never done anything like that before.

A trifle, really.

But I can tell by looking at Dad that he is very irritated. The salad is already on the table, the cannelloni are still sizzling in the oven.

"Maybe his watch has stopped." my Mum says.

My Dad gets up without a word and takes the phone.

"Hi, Mrs. Gebauer, Steiger speaking. Is Simon on his way?"

My father's voice sounds amiable. But then his smile slips off his face.

"May I speak with Yannick, please?"

My father lowers the phone, stunned.

"He's not with Yannick."

"Of course he is." my mother insists, as if she knew better.

"He's not been there for the entire weekend."

Mum pales. She looks at me.



What do you know? her gaze asks.

I don't know anything.

My father raises the phone again.

"Put it on the speaker, please." my mother says.

Now we can hear Yannick.

"Yannick, where's Simon?"

Dad no longer sounds annoyed but rather scared.

"No idea."

"He told us he was going to stay the weekend with you."

"Nope, he didn't."

My father remains mute for a moment, looks helplessly at my mother who nervously chews her lips.

"And he didn't call you?"

"Nope."

"When did you last see him?"

"Friday, after school. At the bicycle stand. And then I left."

My father is silent.

"Will you give me a call when you hear from him?"

Simon's best friend now sounds anxious as well.

"Yes, we will." my father says and hangs up.

Delay and trouble are no longer a topic. We're sitting around the table as if paralyzed. The salad, the drinks, plates and cutlery, it all seems wrong.

"Maybe he's with another friend." my father says.

Mum shakes her head. "He said he was going to stay with Yannick."

"He's changed his mind then."



“I’m going to call all his class mates and friends.”

Mum is glad that there is something she can do.

“Maybe we should try his cell phone first.” I suggest.

My parents look at me as if all the wisdom of the world coalesced in me.

“Right, of course.” my father says, looks up Simon’s cell phone number and dials it.

He listens for a moment. Mailbox, he mouths silently at us and then gets started.

“Simon, this is your father. Where are you? Call us.”

He sounds aggressive and anxious at the same time.

“You were too severe.” my mother says, “and you only said half the message.”

“What’s the other half, then?”

“That he should call us not matter whether he is in trouble.”

My father holds out the phone to her. “Tell him yourself.”

I can no longer bear the tension. While my mother dials Simon’s number once more, I slip out of the room. In the hallway, I hear a familiar ringing coming from above.

“That’s Simon’s cell phone.” I say and run up the stairs. I’m already standing in his room and hold his phone when my parents come in.

“Why did he leave it here?” my father murmurs, but he knows that we can’t give him an answer to that.

The hope to reach Simon by this simple means has died in that moment.

“We’re going to call the police.” my mother says.

“First I want to check all possibilities.” my father objects. “He has to be someplace.”

Downstairs, the doorbell rings.

“Simon!” my mother cries out and hurries down the stairs.

We know, of course, that Simon has his own key. But this mixture of fear and hope turns us all into idiots. My mother flings the door open. Outside, Max is waiting. Of course. We had a date.

We were going to go out after our weekly family planning.

Were going to.



I hug Max and press my cheek against his. He feels my tears. Asks what has happened. Quietly, sensitive, with a warm voice. I'm feeling better already, now that he is here.

We're back at the table in the living room. The plates are still there. The salad has wilted. Nobody has taken the cannelloni from the oven.

Max holds my hand and remains silent with us. He is just as much at a loss as we are. He pours some mineral water in a glass and drinks. It's Simon's glass. He sits on Simon's seat.

"Do you have any idea?" my mother asks.

Max shakes his head.

"You were like a big brother to him."

"Isn't there a basketball match – out of town?"

"He's not on the team at the moment. He had this foot injury and has not yet recovered completely."

Max gives a helpless shrug. He can't cope, just like the rest of us.

Night has fallen.

Still we leave the terrace door open.

As if we wanted to give Simon a chance to quickly slip in, when he comes back after all.

It's late summer, and it's sultry outside.

But I am freezing.

I pull up my feet on the chair, loop my arms around my knees and put my head on my knees.

I'm dead tired, but at the same time my heart beats frantically.

Max carresses my back, gives me a peck on the cheek and whispers those calming words I want to hear and yet cannot believe completely. That surely nothing has happened to Simon. That everything will be fine. He wants to encourage me. It works for a few moments. And then the fear returns.

Now we all wish that Simon were the daredevil, who just runs off once in a while.

We would love to have to prepare phrases for him such as:

Just wait and see when he gets home.

He's in for a spot of trouble.



That's just typical for Simon, always a trouble-maker.

But the terrible thing is: we don't think he has it in him. And that's why we are so afraid that something bad has happened to him.

We take refuge in actions.

Max and I search Simon's room.

My parent call all his friends.

At least we are busy now.

For a moment we can forget the panic.

Chapter 2

Mum takes care of his class mates, Dad calls the basketball team and other friends.

Are there any other people? From old times, from his table-tennis club? From primary school perhaps? Does he have friends in chat-rooms? If so, what kind of friends are they? We realize with a shock that we don't know that much about Simon. It doesn't feel good.

'Keep out'. The sign hangs outside Simon's room. Until a couple of hours ago, I hadn't even noticed it. I wasn't interested in Simon's life. Now it's the only thing I care about.

My parents have not been in his room a lot, either. Simon was always good enough to bring his dirty laundry in the basement by himself. And he always took his used glasses and such back to the kitchen. A tidy kid. But this also kept Mum and Dad from his personal space.

Two years ago I had enforced that they would not to go through my stuff unannounced.

"Okay, we trust you both." my father had said back then. "Your rooms are your own realm, as long as you keep them reasonably tidy."

That was what I had fought for, and Simon had profited from it.

A lot of people at school think I'm adapted. Because I'm not always making a fuss to get attention. But when I want something badly enough, I can be quite stubborn. Like this thing with my room. I didn't want my Mum to come in all the time just like that, especially when I had friends over. The fight lasted for weeks. But I won. Now, Mum knocks at the door and waits for me to say something. It's hard for her, I know that, but she sticks to it. And she also did it with Simon.

Max and I just stand there for a moment and gaze around. There is his sports stuff in one corner. A basketball, some sports outfit crammed in a bag, a poster with Dirk Nowitzki. Right next to it there are some certificates and even a cup.



That's the cool corner. But apart from that, there is still little Simon to be seen. There are figurines from Kinder Surprise and even the advent calender from his favourite football club Eintracht Frankfurt is still hanging at the wall.

Everything is very innocent.

So much the worse.

Max hugs me and strokes my hair.

“Do you want me to take a look at his computer?”

I nod. He knows more about this stuff than I do. He turns the thing own, grumbles something about “no password” and then starts checking the files and the websites Simon recently visited.

I'm looking at the books and magazines which lie around. Not willingly, it feels like snooping. But maybe it's important. If he hadn't gone missing, the stupid little brother, then we wouldn't have to go through his stuff.

All of a sudden I'm mad at Simon.

I want to tell myself that he just scarpered.

Because if I don't, I have to think that something happened to him.

I sweep this fear aside, look for answers.

He's having a nice weekend off.

We all didn't think he had it in him.

But he should have told me, at least, the idiot.

I wouldn't have squealed on him.