

Andreas Steinhöfel



My Brother and I



CARLSEN



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Für Christian und Steffen

Let It Snow

The first snowfall of the year came at the beginning of December, on a Saturday.

That morning, Dirk and I went into the kitchen where Mum and Dad were already sitting at the breakfast table. Dad didn't have to work on Saturdays because the bank where he was **in charge of**¹ a department was closed. Mum worked as a secretary in Braun's large factory, but only part-time. She was always telling people that she needed the rest of the time **to clean up the mess**² we and Dad made in the flat.

So Mum was sitting with Dad at the breakfast table with both her hands placed comfortably on her **sticky-out belly**³ where the baby was. Look out of the window, she said, the outdoors has put on its white coat.

Dirk and I went over to the window and looked out. Dirk said he couldn't see a coat, but there was snow everywhere and wasn't that fantastic because now we could go sledging and build snowmen.

Tons of snowflakes were falling from the sky, millions and millions of them. I picked out one that was still a long way up and watched it until it lay on the ground with the others.

We were still living in the house on the edge of town then. Dad's aunt, the one we **inherited**⁴ the house *in* town from, hadn't died yet. Björn wasn't born either, he didn't arrive until the next April. I didn't have my **guinea pig**⁵ Fran yet either, and I only met Behruz, the fat Persian who would become my friend, much later.

But Richard was already my best friend. We were true blood brothers.

I was seven years old and Dirk was six.

Anyway, because of all the fresh snow that day, Dirk and I wanted to go sledging after breakfast.

Dad brought our sledge down from the attic. He told us **not to go mad**⁶ and break the thing, the way we did last year when Dirk had crashed into a tree and broken his arm.

Dirk was always much **braver**⁷ than I was, but then again I'd never broken anything. Apart from one summer when I had sort of ridden into a street lamp on my bike. I'd knocked out two teeth and swallowed them. But it wasn't all that bad **cos**⁸ they were only milk teeth.

While Dad was fetching the sledge, Mum wrapped us up in warm clothes. We had to wear gloves and our bobble hats. Finally, Mum wrapped the big thick scarves that Granny had knitted for us around our necks.

Granny was Mum's mum. There was usually trouble when she came to visit because Dad **couldn't stand her**⁹.

Granny always told us that Dad had been a real **yob**¹⁰ in his youth. He used to drive around on his motorbike scaring all the old people and she would never understand why Mum had married such an idiotic show-off.

Granny liked to tell stories of the old days. Her favourite stories were all about how she had run through the bombed-out ruins of the town after the war carrying Aunt Gertrud on her back. I always felt sorry for her when she told us that, cos Aunt Gertrud was really really fat.

Dad's mum had died before Dirk and I were born and we didn't have any grandads either.

So Mum wrapped the scarves around our necks and told us to be very careful and not to go breaking any bones or teeth again. And then we were finally allowed to go.

Only fifteen minutes away from our house there was a big field with a really long **slope**¹¹ that led all the way down to the stream. That's where Dirk and I were going.

The snow was piled up quite high and when we got to the field it was still snowing. It was very cold and quiet everywhere. The only sound came from the snowflakes

falling quietly on to the ground and from our boots stomping through the snow. We climbed up the slope and I pulled the sledge after me.

When we reached the top, Dirk wanted to slide down the steepest bit of course, the bit that led to the stream. Right away I thought that things were bound to go wrong, but I didn't say anything so that Dirk wouldn't think I was a **wimp**¹².

We sat down on the sledge. Dirk at the front and me at the back.

Hold tight, cried Dirk, here we go!

It was fantastic, and above all fantastically fast. The wind whooshed around my ears, snowflakes smacked into my face and I could **hardly**¹³ see anything because I had screwed my eyes up tight. We went faster and faster and Dirk shouted out that he was the best sledger in the world and I shouted out, when were we finally going to get there because I couldn't see a thing.

Then there was a bang.

I sailed briefly through the air, there was a crash and I landed with my face down in the snow. It **hurt**¹⁴ a lot and I felt hot, but at least I didn't have any broken bones.

Dirk wasn't there. Neither was the sledge.

I looked around and then I heard Dirk shouting up from the stream.

He was sitting right in the middle of it, with the sledge next to him, **soaked**¹⁵ to the skin. Thank God the stream wasn't particularly deep there. But the bank was quite high, at least a metre tall.

I had to laugh, because Dirk looked so funny with his wet bobble hat on his head. But he was really mad and yelled at me that he didn't see what was so funny, I hadn't steered properly, I was an idiot and in future I should stay at home and build snowmen.

I yelled back, idiot yourself, you're too stupid to go sledging, and I said that if he didn't **keep his trap shut**¹⁶,

then he could find his own way out of the stream.

Dirk called back that I could go ahead and leave him all alone, then he'd freeze and there'd be no Christmas and probably no New Year either because everybody would be in **mourning**¹⁷.

I pretended to think about it, and then I said, all right, I'll get you out – but only because of Christmas!

I held on to the branch of a small tree that was hanging over the stream with one hand. I stretched the other hand down to Dirk. I couldn't quite reach and it was slippery because of the snow but the branch didn't break. Dirk grabbed my hand and everything would have been fine if he hadn't leaned over towards the sledge without letting go of me, the **meanie**¹⁸.

The branch made a cracking noise and snapped, and I fell down the bank into the stream. I would have screamed but my mouth was already full of water. It was icy cold. I was so shocked I could hardly breathe.

When I had picked myself up, Dirk was standing next to me laughing himself to bits. I was so **cross**¹⁹ that I slapped him with my wet glove. Dirk stopped laughing, slapped me back and before we knew it we were both in the water fighting. If it hadn't been so freezing cold, we would probably have fought a lot longer, but we just couldn't.

We had to run downstream for quite a long time until we found a spot where we could climb out. By then it had stopped snowing, but it was windy and we were shivering with cold.

I was afraid that the two of us would freeze to death and stand there like **icicles**²⁰. Nobody would **recognise**²¹ us in our frozen state and Mum and Dad would have to call the police and ask them to search for us. It would take months until they found us and by then it would be spring, and in the meantime every single passing dog would have weed on us because they thought we were bushes covered in snow.

I really wanted to cry, but if I did my eyes might freeze shut. It was terrible and then on top of everything Dirk **wet his pants**²².

When we got home, Mum was really mad. She took off our wet things and put us into a really hot bath. Mum said, because you're so stupid and can't take care of yourselves, I am **banning**²³ sledging for the whole of the next week.

Dirk started to cry but I thought, well, the stupid sledge is stuck in the stream anyway. And that's what I told Dad when he asked about the sledge and then he was cross too. He said we only had ourselves to blame if we were only allowed to build snowmen for the whole of the following week.

But he went to fetch the sledge while Mum put Dirk and I in our pyjamas and made us a bed on the couch in the living room. She even gave us a hot water bottle for our feet. She grinned and said that we were stupid but that she loved us nonetheless and that was why she was going to make us hot chocolate.

When Dad had returned with the sledge, Dirk and I had to tell Mum and Dad exactly how we had landed in the stream and how we had got into a fight and everything.

Well, said Dad, something similar had happened to him when he was young. And he told us how, when he was a kid, he had landed in the village pond while sledging with his brother, Uncle Alfred. They had run over a duck on the frozen pond before crashing into the ice and the duck had fallen into the hole and **drowned**²⁴ and never come back up again.

Mum said, Peter! Don't tell the children such horrible things!

Dad said, *that* wasn't horrible. The horrible thing was that the duck's mate, the **drake**²⁵, was so **distraught**²⁶ at the loss of his beloved that he had thrown himself into the hole after her. And the year after that, a bush had grown out of the pond in the shape of two ducks kissing, and ducks from

all over the country had come to the pond and swum around in a circle quacking.

That's what happened, said Dad and drank some of his hot chocolate.

Quack, quack, said Dirk. And he flapped his eyes as though he wanted to fly. He knocked over his cup and the chocolate spilled all over our **blanket**²⁷.

Men! said Mum. She rolled her eyes, put one hand on her sticky-out tummy and laughed.

Two days later Dirk and I were allowed to go sledging again.

It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year

It was the week before Christmas. Dirk and I had a great idea.

There was an old people's home really close to our house. We walked past it every day on our way home from school. It was **on the edge of town**²⁸ and really big, with lots of windows and tall trees in front of it. And next to the old people's home there was a tall building. That's where the penguins lived.

Really they're called **nuns**²⁹, but we called them penguins because they wore black clothes and white bonnets on their heads. When it rained they put see-through plastic bags over their bonnets and then they really did look funny.

The penguins made sure that none of the old people ran away from the home. I couldn't stand them. Whenever we met them on our way home, they told us about the Baby Jesus and they looked all holy.

I thought the Baby Jesus was OK, but the penguins wanted us to be just like him, really nice and everything. That's why they gave us little **leaflets**³⁰ with stupid pictures inside and sayings like »love your enemy« and »it's really great to give things to people who don't have anything«. Why should I give my electric train set to some idiot who might be about to hit me, just because he doesn't have one of his own? What a stupid idea!

Anyway, back to the old people's home. That's where all the grannies and grandads lived. And Dirk and I thought that because it was nearly Christmas, we could visit them and make little presents for them and sing them songs. We