

# *Not a Single Word*

by Andreas Jungwirth

## Chapter One

Next, the biggest one of them blocks my bath. Then the others encircle me. Fifteen pairs of eyes flash at me. My stomach ties itself in knots. I feel hot, and sweat streams out of all my pores. I want to get out of here. Of course. But where to?

I turn my head to the left and to the right. I can't keep all of them in my sight at the same time. So I focus on the one across from me. In class he sits two rows behind me. Now he stands half a meter in front of me. And I wait for the first stupid comments. "Now we're gonna make you talk, man!" Yeah, something like that, for example.

I stay silent.

"So say something!" The voice of the ringleader sounds sharp.

"SAY SOMETHING!" comes from the others, several voices at once.

Instead of speaking, I close my eyes. I'm quivering under my skin.

"Look at me!" the ringleader hisses. A murmur follows.

They can pump me for information all day long, for all I care!

But they don't have any questions. They don't want to know anything about me, either.

*I'm* not of any interest to them.

I'm just supposed to TALK.

And: "If we have to, we'll beat SOMETHING out of you."

"Anything!" someone screams behind me.

"TALK! TALK! TALK!" a few of them start to chant.

Not that I can't speak. That's not it. I just don't talk anymore. Not a word. Not one single word since my parents, my sister Anne and I moved to this hick town. I've held out for three weeks already. My mom and dad have asked me about a thousand times what I'm trying to accomplish by doing this, what it's supposed to mean.

Kein einziges Wort

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“TALK! TALK! TALK!” I hear the chant droning in my head. And they’re getting closer. It’s getting louder. Any second I’ll feel fingers, hands and fists. They’ll throw me to the ground. Onto the pavement. Hit me. Kick me.

Whatever happens in the next few seconds, I won’t say anything. No last words.

“TALK! TALK!”

But suddenly, SOMETHING is going on around me, some movement, a change. The voices get quieter. Footsteps. Is someone there? And before I can even open my eyes: “Leave him alone!” Some guy has pushed his way into the middle of the circle. He’s older than the others and nobody stopped him.

Only the ringleader doesn’t back down: “WHAT DO YOU WANT? THIS ISN’T YOUR PROBLEM! WE HAVE SOMETHING TO CLEAR UP HERE!” Without any warning, he gets a blow to the chest from the guy. And if a couple of the others hadn’t caught him, he’d be laid out on the asphalt now.

“Hi.” The guy offers me his hand. “I’m Chris. You live on U Street now, too.”

I just stare at him. Chris? I’ve never noticed him before now. Not at school and not in the U-shaped street where my parents rented a house.

“When do you get out of class?” he continues, not seeming to care that the only reason the guy he just decked isn’t tackling him is because other people are holding him back. But he is spitting out threats, against me, against Chris.

Now Chris is waiting for me to say something. And when he gets no reply, Chris asks the circle around me utterly calmly, “When does he get out of school?”

Flashing eyes. Hatred. No answer.

Only after Chris has repeated his question twice do I say quietly, “In two hours.”

“Okay!” Chris turns toward me again.

SHIT!

Only now do I realize...

I SAID SOMETHING.

Shit!

For the first time in three weeks.

Shit!

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“I’ll wait here for you.” Chris’ hand still hovers between us. “And it would be better if you take it.”

I take his hand. He smiles briefly. Then he puts an arm around my shoulder.

Then we leave.

My classmates glare with hostility.

Chris and I leave the circle.

And I breathe in – as deeply as if I had been holding my breath for three weeks.

[...]

## Chapter Three

Five days later, a few crows are circling above the cornfield. I’ve been looking up at their flying show for about a minute. What are they doing HERE? I don’t get it. Above the abandoned quarry in the city that’s being filled with more and more trash, sure, but what do they want HERE?

I push my messenger bag onto my back, squat and peer into the forest of leaves. The ground between the corn stalks is colored by a chaotic mess of feathers, heads, beaks, legs. A gray and white checkered carpet that unrolls in every direction. And even though, or maybe BECAUSE I have a STRANGE FEELING, I want to know WHAT IS GOING ON HERE.

The plants reach just over my head. The corn cobs are barely as thick as a finger. Among the plants the cawing of the birds is muted. I go deeper and deeper into the field. The earth is damp from the rain in the last few days, and it’s steaming, because today is the first time the sun is shining again. Other than the crows, there’s nothing unusual.

But when I turn around to see how far I’ve already gotten from the path –

Suddenly, I almost trip over SOMETHING.

I almost trip over something soft, like something living.

But the thing that is soft like something living doesn’t jump up. It doesn’t run away.

I almost trip over – SOMETHING WITH FUR.

It’s an animal.

But the animal about the size of a young sheep is no sheep.

Kein einziges Wort

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The animal that I almost tripped over is a dog.

But not just ANY dog.

That is KEILER.

Hubert's dog.

And he's not sleeping.

Shit!

Shit!

Shit!

THAT IS A DEAD DOG!!

Keiler's muzzle is wide open, his lower jaw hanging down. The thick, swollen tongue is stuck in his throat. Flies are crawling on the pink gums. The head is bent way back, a bloody wound gapes on his neck. And crows are all over the place. Even more of them glide toward him. Crows that COULD use their hard beaks to tear open his stomach and peck out his intestines. Even just thinking about it, my stomach does flips. A sour taste fills my mouth. I squeeze my eyes shut and swallow several times in a row.

Then I see the KNIFE stuck into the ground next to the dead dog. The knife pins a scrap of paper with letters on it. But the letters look strange somehow. I squat down closer, but still can't make anything out. So I place my hands on the ground. A few birds flap away. The note is upside down, that explains the strangeness.

Letter by letter, I stitch together the two words –

FINAL WARNING

And I stretch my hand out –

- for the handle
- for the knife
- for the scrap of paper.

For what, actually?

Slowly, I straighten up again. What would Chris do now? But he got his cell phone taken away and I didn't save his HOME NUMBER in my contact list. So I dial mom's number. And get mom's voicemail. You can't reach Dad on his cell phone while he's working, and I don't know the phone number for the hospital any better than Chris's home number. My eyes travel to the dog, the knife, the note –

Who does something like this?

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Who slits a dog's throat?

Who writes FINAL WARNING?

And without any further thought, I dial 9 – 1 – 1. After it rings twice, a policewoman answers.

“A DEAD DOG?” She sounds surprised.

“Yes. And SOMETHING is strange,” I say.

“Strange?”

“YES.”

“Are you still there?”

“YES.”

“Okay. There is a dead dog.”

“YES.”

“And?”

She wants to know where I am.

Because a field has no address, I say some fairly indecipherable gibberish. She figures out where I am anyway, and promises to send a patrol car my way.

After I've hung up, I turn back to the dog and squat down again. At first the crows just hop around nervously. But suddenly the birds flap madly. As they fly away, they hit my arms and shoulders with their wings. I duck. At the same time, a shadow falls over me.

“What's going on here?” someone says behind me.

I push myself up from the ground and spin around, but the man is standing so close to me that I run into him. My bag drags me down; I slam into the ground with my back and my shoulder lands on a sharp rock. I squeeze my eyes shut – against the pain – against the tears –

The man above me is two meters tall and weighs at least a ton. A sweaty beige shirt is stretched over his stomach, tucked into a spotted gray pair of slacks. The sleeves are rolled up over his elbows, his strong forearms burned brown. The top buttons of his shirt are open. Gray hair grows from his chest, thick as tufts of grass –

“Hey, I didn't mean to scare you to death!” He offers his right hand to me.

Without taking it, I push myself to my feet.

“But what are YOU looking for here, damn it?”

Kein einziges Wort

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I squint at Keiler. A million flies have gathered in the meantime. My stomach makes a second flip.

“It’s Keiler. Hubert’s Keiler. From Meiergut,” I choke out.

He nods. “I see that. But that doesn’t answer my question.”

That’s true.

“I can’t leave here. The crows...”

“Oh, I’ll take care of the crows.”

The man pulls a gun from behind his broad back. I hadn’t noticed the narrow leather strap slung diagonally over his shirt before. “But remember this one thing: you have just as little business being on my property as these damned pests!” He lifts the barrel of the gun to the cloudless sky and flips off the safety. Just in time, I stuff my fingers into my ears.

A shot.

The crack transforms the gray and black carpet between the corn stalks into a shimmering cloud. It whirls upward, above the horizon, down into the city, heading toward the quarry. The man holds the gun skyward for a while, as if it were stuck. Then he lowers the firearm. With the gun, he lowers his gaze.

In my stomach, the gunshot is still vibrating. The man studies me as if I were another one of those stupid birds. Suddenly my mouth fills with sour liquid again. “I feel... I ... I’m going..” the man raises his eyebrows. I swallow the acid with difficulty, but instead of staying down, it comes up immediately. I retch. My stomach heaves. When the man realizes what’s going on, he takes a step back.

At the same moment, a yellowish brown mush shoots out from between my teeth. And then sticky, half-digested cornflakes are dripping from the cornstalks.

The man kneels next to the knife. He furrows his brow. He thinks. Presumably about what might be meant by FINAL WARNING. I’d like to know that, too –

He notices me next to him and smiles for the first time. “You’ve lost quite a bit of color. Everything okay?”

“I think so,” I say and wipe my mouth with my sleeve.

“It’s a gruesome thing, a dead creature like this.” He stands up and pats me on the shoulder. “I’m sorry if I was kind of rude earlier. I just don’t like it when people hang around here.”

And now what?

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“I have a gun,” says the man after a pause. “I’ll make sure the flying pests don’t land here again.” Incredibly, a few crows are already circling far overhead. “And you have faster legs and will go to Meiergut and bring Hubert here.”

Okay. Divide and conquer –

“Wait!” I turn again to the man with the gun. “What would you have done if I hadn’t come along?”

I don’t know what he means. And so I shrug.

“You didn’t want these vermin to peck his eyes out, right?”

“Exactly.”

“That’s good,” says the man. “But at some point they would have ignored you and they would have helped themselves to the dog. You wouldn’t have been able to do anything then. You didn’t think of that, did you?”

“Actually, I did.”

“Ah, you did!” he is surprised. “And what did you think then?”

“That’s why I called the police.”

“You called the police?”

“Before you came,” I say, confused. “Yes. Was that wrong?”

“No, no,” the man answers quickly, takes a deep breath and wipes his hand over his sweaty face. “But you’re a kid. You can’t keep an eye on everything. And so you can’t understand some of the connections between things, okay?”

No, I don’t understand exactly what he means –

“And so,” he continues slowly, “When the police ask you something, and you aren’t sure about it, you just let me talk, got it?”

Keiler is dead.

Keiler is dead.

Keiler is dead.

HOW DO YOU TELL A PERSON THAT SOMEONE IS DEAD?

Keiler might be just a dog, but for some people their dog is their best friend. I know that from Dad. Particularly for people who are old and live alone.

Hubert is old. He also lives alone.

These people talk with their dogs. They even let them sleep on the bed sometimes. And when their dog dies, it feels to them as if a person has died.

“Keiler is dead,” I say under my breath to try it out.

“Hello, Simon!”

Startled, my head turns quickly. At the open end of the cul-de-sac, Chris’s mother just turned around her red Renault Clio. Through her rolled down side window she looks at me. “You’re late, aren’t you?”

I just nod.

“Is something wrong, Simon?”

WHY?

“You’re pale.”

“I threw up earlier,” I say truthfully, after another terrifying second.

“But why are you going to school at all if you’re sick?”

“I’m not sick. My mother said...”

Crap. What if she talks to my mother now?

“I’m doing better now,” I add quickly. “And mom, I think, didn’t even notice anything.”

Chris’s mother briefly looks at me, incredulously, then asks if she should give me a ride into town.

“I’d rather walk.”

She can’t possibly be stupid enough to not have noticed there’s SOMETHING that I don’t want to say. “Besides, we have an hour delay today...”

Another lie! But it’s impossible for me to tell Chris’s mother that Keiler is dead. No idea why. I SIMPLY CANNOT. IMPOSSIBLE.

“And the fresh air will definitely do me good.”

“I’d like to hear a sentence like that from Chris sometime.” She smiles and rolls the window halfway up. “Three, four more days, then you can visit him again.”

“I’ll call him later,” I promise.

She nods at me. “But you’ll only get him on the home phone. His cell is still...”

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A SECOND GUNSHOT interrupts her.

The Clio lurches forward and the motor dies. I look at the cornfield. The man seems to have driven off the crows for good this time. Chris's mother looks at me questioningly. I shrug my shoulders, as if I had NO CLUE ABOUT ANYTHING.

Hubert stands in the open doorway. I don't remember him being so small and thin. Almost nothing but skin and bones. But a thick, white stubbly beard grows from his narrow face. Nose hairs sprout like spikes from his nostrils. Above his dark eyes grow long and hard eyelashes. I encountered Hubert for the first time one day when Chris and I were walking past the Meiergut. He was hobbling to his car at the time. There he unfastened his prosthetic. Keiler grabbed the fake leg, placed it in the trunk, and then jumped in afterward. That looked completely crazy.

Why was his right leg missing, I wanted to know.

"He's just a cripple," Chris said with a shrug, made HIS leg stiff and hobbled a few steps after the old orange Opel Corsa. That was unbelievably funny.

KEILER IS DEAD.

But before I can say anything, Hubert comes toward me. "Come on! Let's go! Let's go!" he barks at me.

He doesn't say WHERE TO.

I hesitate.

"What is it?" he wants to know.

"Keiler. Your dog...," I stammer.

But he doesn't let me finish: FORWARD MARCH!

Wordlessly, I make a 180-degree turn and stride off. When I turn around again after a while, confused, he huffs impatiently: "Onward! Onward!"

I turn my back to him.

"Can't you go faster?" comes from behind me.

YES –

I speed up a notch. Still, Hubert hobbles two or three steps behind me. But now he's breathing harder.

Kein einziges Wort

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In the cornfield, the man with the gun and two police officers are waiting for us. An older man and a young woman. Both in uniform. With nametags stitched onto their uniforms.

Stefan FEYRER.

Connie FRITSH.

Feyrer stands next to Keiler, has taken his hat off and runs a handkerchief over his shaved head. Keiler is still lying in the exact same position as when I saw him last. The knife and the note with FINAL WARNING have disappeared.

Hubert only gives his dead dog a passing glance. Then he fixes his eyes on the man with the gun. “Why are YOU here?”

The man shrugs his shoulders. “This is my property.”

Hubert snorts.

“This is a terrible thing, Hubert,” the man adds.

“Don’t pretend you feel sorry for anything about this,” Hubert hisses at him.

“A dog of my own died a month ago,” the man replies. “I know how much it hurts.”

Hubert lets out a short, disbelieving laugh. It’s fairly obvious that these two don’t like each other much.

“Did your dog die like THIS?” the policewoman wants to know, glancing at the wound on Keiler’s neck.

“He was old. Had cancer. I had to have him put to sleep.”

“Bad enough,” the policewoman nods sympathetically, then pulls a notepad out of her shirt pocket and studies Hubert for a moment, as if she wasn’t sure where to begin.

“Is Hubert your family name? Or is it Hubert something?”

“Don’t waste your time on it,” Hubert grumbles. “Your questions won’t bring him back to life.”

“Moos,” Feyrer chimes in.

With that he earns a hate-filled glare. Hubert seems to have something against not only the man with the gun, but everyone. Fritsch jots down a note. Then she looks at ME.

“And you...?”

“Simon.”

“Simon what?”

Kein einziges Wort

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“Spahn.”

“Very good,” she praises me. “So you found the dog?”

“And the knife,” I blurt out. “And...”

“A knife?” the policewoman raises her eyebrows. “AND WHERE IS THAT NOW?”

But surely the man must have told them that...

The policewoman followed my gaze and turns to me without letting the man out of her sight:

“And...? How does that sentence end?”

She repeats her question and looks me directly in the eyes. I want to look away.

“And ..?”

“A note,” I say so quietly that only she can hear it.

“What kind of note?” Conny Fritsch asks the group.

Suddenly Feyrer gets involved: “No, no, that... “

In the next moment, Hubert bends down to Keiler and the policeman falls silent. Hubert crosses Keiler’s front and back legs over each other, grabs them at the paws, and lifts the dog onto his shoulders with a swing. A spray of red-brown liquid shoots out of the wound at his neck and his open mouth.

“You can’t do that, Mister Moos! You can’t take the animal with you! We have to photograph it. We have to...” The policewoman tries to hide her revulsion. But Hubert is already on his way. And he just keeps walking.

“Stefan, this...,” the policewoman appeals to her colleague.

“His dog just died,” says the policeman. “When you’ve lived with an animal for that long, it HURTS. You just heard that, didn’t you? Leave him be...”

“DIED? What this looks like here. And what the boy just said. I’d say...” The voice of the policewoman sounds different now, more shrill. “I don’t understand this, Stefan.” She taps the notebook a few times with her pencil.

“Leave it, Conny...”

“Okay. We were just about to...”

“No, we...”

“But...”

And so on.

Neither lets the other one finish speaking, until Feyrer says in a loud, firm voice: “I am leading the investigation from now on!”

Conny Fritsch turns red. “Stefan, what...?”

“And you go home, too,” the policeman says to me. “If we have any more questions, we’ll get in touch with your parents.”

“No, he will NOT do that! I want an answer first,” the policewoman protests, fixing her gaze on me again. “When you left to go get Mister Moos, were the knife and the note still there?”

If I say YES, it can only mean the man with the gun made those things disappear.

“Simon, WHAT WAS WRITTEN on the note?”

“Conny, you aren’t allowed to question the boy without his parents,” the policeman says.

“Stefan, don’t you see that something is completely wrong about all this?”

“You’ll get in trouble, Conny, if you don’t let him go,” Feyrer persuades his colleague.

“I just want him to give me an answer. I’m not holding him here.”

She isn’t holding me here!

Right –

She isn’t holding me here –

That’s so true –

It clicks in my head.

And I take a step backward, turn around, and sprint away.

“Hey!” the policewoman calls after me.

I run through the field.

Between the cornstalks.

As fast as I can.

Faster than I can.

When I reach the open end of U Street, I’m completely out of breath. I press my fist into my stomach to relieve the stitch in my side and try to breathe normally. Look back. The man with the gun, the policeman and the policewoman are still standing in the same place. Nobody is looking toward me. No one is following me. Conny Fritsch is making wild gestures. I can still hear her voice, but can’t understand what she’s saying. In the air, a few crows are dancing. Five.

Kein einziges Wort

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Maybe even eight. Close to one another, they swirl together so it's impossible to count them exactly. Along with Hubert and his dead dog, they head in the direction of Meiergut.

Hungry.

No wonder, after I threw up my breakfast. In the kitchen, I cut off five slices of bread, spread them with butter, top them with cheese, decorate them with circles from the ketchup bottle and put them all on a plate. Then I open the fridge another time, wedge a Fanta under my left arm and balance the plate and five snack cakes. On the way to my room, I take the wireless phone from the charger.

I lie on the bed and dial Chris' HOME NUMBER.

But he doesn't answer.

I eat the sandwiches.

I drain the Fanta.

I wolf down the snack cakes.

Then LAND LINE PHONE CALL, second try –

"Hey!" Chris's voice sounds strange.

"Were you sleeping?"

"Nah."

"I tried calling earlier."

"I didn't answer."

"What are you up to?"

"Playing on the computer."

"Aren't you grounded?"

"Second cable?" asks Chris, as if I had asked one of the most stupid questions of all time. "But I can't get online."

"Cool."

"Something up?"

"Chris, listen, I ..."

"Shit."

“What?”

“I was almost there. And now...”

“Are you playing right now?”

“My mom’s not here.”

“Then she’s still not home?”

For a while I only hear KEYBOARD CLACKING.

“Chris!”

No answer.

“Are you still there?”

“I just said she isn’t home yet,” he grumbles into the telephone. “What do you want with her?”

“Chris, I ...”

“I was almost at the last level. Now I’m back on four!”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to,” I say, even though I couldn’t care less. Shots and explosions come out of the receiver.

“KEILER IS DEAD,” I say.

“WHAT?”

“I’ve been trying to tell you this whole time.” And I tell him how I wondered about the crows and went in between the cornstalks and finally almost tripped over the dead dog.

“But he was already ancient,” Chris interrupts me.

“But he was KILLED BY SOMEONE.”

“Someone killed him?”

“Someone slit his throat,” I say quietly. “And there were...”

“YOU found Keiler with a slit throat?” Now Chris sounds just as incredulous as I was when I figured out what was going on in the cornfield –

“Yeah. That was completely disgusting. But that’s not even all of it,” I keep talking. And tell him about the note. The man with the gun. The gunshot. The police. That the knife and the note were gone when Hubert and I got back to the field.

“FINAL WARNING.”

Kein einziges Wort

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“Was written on the note?”

YES. And that Hubert took off with the dead dog, without paying any attention to any of that.

“He didn’t see the note?”

NO. And that I wanted to tell about it, but wasn’t allowed to.

“Something about this is horribly wrong. And it all has to do with that man with the gun!”

“VOGT,” says Chris.

“WHAT?”

“The man with the gun is named Vogt. He owns most of the fields around here. The cul-de-sac was built on his property, too. He even has his own plane, a single engine CESSNA Skylane.”

Ah.

Then we’re both silent for a while. Finally I hear Chris asking, “Do you have proof?”

“OF WHAT?”

“That Vogt got rid of the knife and paper.”

No. I don’t have any proof. “But who else would it have been? I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Saw him get rid of the knife and the note...?” Chris asks, amazed.

NO, damn it. “Just that they were there at first and then gone later.”

“That doesn’t prove anything,” Chris is sure of it.

Why doesn’t that help? Sometimes you can know what someone has done without seeing them do it. Just because EVERYTHING indicates it. “Well, I know that you took down the FISHING STRICTLY FORBIDDEN sign and hung it up by the sheep.”

“Who says it was ME that did it?” Chris asks.

“You headed there again that afternoon,” I say.

“But I never said it was ME that took it down, did I?”

“Who else would have...?”

“You have just as little proof of that as that it was Vogt who took away the knife and paper,” Chris asserts.

“That’s true,” I have to admit. “But that doesn’t change the fact that YOU took down the sign.”

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“Yes it does,” says Chris. “It changes everything. No one has to believe you. And besides...,” but suddenly he holds his breath. “Shit!”

“What is it?” I ask, startled.

“Mom’s car.”

No clue WHAT I was thinking, who else would it have been?

“I have to hide the cable!”

“Besides, what?”

Chris doesn’t say anything. But he hasn’t hung up.

“What, BESIDES?”

“Do you know what he’s called around here?” Chris asks.

“WHO?”

“Vogt.”

“No idea.”

“The JACKAL.”

“The Jackal?”

“He’s called that, because it’s better not to tangle with him,” Chris says slowly, as if I didn’t understand English very well. “So it would be best if you forgot the whole thing, Simon!”

“Then you think the Jackal did it, too...”

“Of course,” says Chris. “Who else? But without proof...”

“But WHY did the Jackal do it?”

“Simon, I...”

And – SILENCE.

Hello!?

HUNG UP.

I take a deep breath.

Shit.