

# Nebraska Doppelganger

*A Novel*

**By  
Thomas J. Morrow**

*A Nebraska farm boy finds  
himself in Rommel's Afrika Korps,  
ending up in an Iowa POW camp, then  
back to Europe as an American soldier*

*Old Warriors Publishing Co ---- Oceanside, California*

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## *About the author*

Thomas J. Morrow lived in Nebraska and Iowa during his youth. His great-grandparents homesteaded on a sand hills farm around the turn-of-the 20<sup>th</sup> century, living in a “soddie” in Box Butte County north of Scottsbluff.

His mother graduated from Hemingford High School in the small farming community where his grandparents operated a bakery during the early ‘30s.

His father’s family were merchants in Seymour, Iowa some 7 miles north of the Missouri border, 180 miles east of the Missouri River and Nebraska.

During World War II, the Morrow family lived in Lincoln where his father worked as a foreman at the Goodyear Rubber Company’s Havelock plant where rubber gas tanks for B-29 super fortress bombers were built.

Traveling between Lincoln and Seymour along state Highway No. 2, the Morrow family would pass the huge Prisoner of War Camp Clarenda near the southwester Iowa community of Clarenda.

Although just a small child at the time, the author well remembers his mother pointing out the German POWs working in the fields near the highway, saying, “Look, Tommy, see the Nazis over there!”

The author graduated from high school in Seymour, Iowa, and through the years earned three college degrees.

For the past 38 years, he has enjoyed life as a newspaper reporter and editor, with the past 13 years spent as the daily community columnist for the *North County Times* in Oceanside, just north of San Diego, California.

He maintains his Nebraska roots through his sister, Linda Morrow Johnson, who is a retired elementary school teacher living in Kearney.

Other than the leading German and American historical figures, all characters are fictional.

As an award-winning newspaper reporter and columnist, the author interviewed dozens of Allied and German combat veterans of World War II while doing research for this book. From their stories come the “*Nebraska Doppelganger*.”

# *Nebraska Doppelganger*

A Novel by Thomas J. Morrow

## **Forward**

*Doppelganger* ---- a ghostly double of a living person. Adapted from German word *doppel*, meaning “double,” the term has come to refer to any double or look-alike of a person.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, thousands of European immigrants arrived in America to begin new lives. Among the largest of these groups were Germans, many of whom were farmers settled in the Middle-Western states of Nebraska, Minnesota, Kansas, and the Dakotas.

Germans no longer living in Deutschland were known as “*Volksdeutsche*rs.”

During World War I, the American public questioned these immigrant loyalties, and considerable discrimination was perpetrated against them. Until the Great War, the predominant language in their communities throughout the Midwest was German. After the war, a great effort was made by the *Volksdeutsche*rs themselves to learn English in order to blend into the American society. Names were changed to sound more “Anglo” and less “German.”

But, things changed in the mid-1930s for those German-Americans who felt disenfranchised. In 1933, Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany with massive work programs. The new Fuhrer and the Nazi Party were rebuilding Germany, instilling new pride into the defeated and bankrupt nation, which had been stripped of many of its lands and riches by the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I.

With renewed pride in their German heritage, hundreds, maybe thousands of American *Volksdeutsche*r families sent their children back to Germany to be educated in what was considered at the time some of the finest higher educational institutions in the world.

Once in Germany, many of these young Americans found themselves caught up in the Nazi movement, either willingly or unwittingly. Hundreds of young Americans were drafted into Hitler’s Wehrmacht.

This is the story of a young American, who became a soldier in the German army against his will. Considered a German citizen by the Third Reich, John Krauss eventually faces his own countrymen as the world goes to war for a second time.

John’s adventure is just one among many for the history books.

### ***Author’s Note:***

While there are some real historical characters referenced in this novel, all other characters, including the Krauss family are fictitious. Any similarities between actual persons living or dead are purely coincidental.

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## Chapter

# 1

It was another routine assignment for Cindy Krauss. There would be a rally on the Nebraska State Capitol's north steps between 1 and 3 pm, July 10. What wasn't routine was that it would be a rally for "white unity" sponsored by the Minneapolis-based American Nazi Party.

Cynthia "Cindy" Krauss has been a reporter for the *Nebraska State Journal* in Lincoln, the state's capital city for the past five years. She's covered her share of nutty assignments during her tenure at the city's daily newspaper, home of the University of Nebraska and, of course, "Big Red," Nebraska's celebrated collegiate gridiron team.

In Nebraska, there are only three seasons: planting, harvest, and football. The University of Nebraska Cornhuskers football team is the closest thing this Midwestern state has to a professional sports franchise. Omaha once shared ownership of the NBA's Kings Basketball team with Kansas City, but both were jilted several years ago in favor of Sacramento. There are other minor clubs, but nothing garners the accolades and the fans like the Cornhuskers.

Whether it was students, angry farmers, and railroad workers, rallies usually weren't that newsworthy. Sometimes odd; but newsworthy? Seldom.

Early on, Cindy put her journalism career ahead of all else. Any immediate plans for marriage and a family faded after she was jilted by a college sweetheart. She dates, but nothing steady. Her good, wholesome Midwestern farm girl looks and natural blond hair gave her a shot at a reporting job with one of the Omaha TV stations, but on-camera reporters don't do much writing. Rather, it's a job that relies heavily on good hair, good makeup, a spiffy wardrobe, and a smile that doesn't seem forced. Cindy keeps her hair short for quick morning get-ups, with minimal makeup, and wardrobe? Well, she's never been a slave to fashion. And, she wasn't sure she could smile on queue. At 28, Cindy is convinced writing is the key to her future.

"There'll be a bunch of skinheads with tattoos yelling a lot of curse words," City Editor Joe Hernandez grunted. "It'll sound like a bunch of drunken reporters at some new business' grand opening cocktail party, so you should feel right at home."

Cindy was not amused, but she tossed an obligatory smile his way. Joe had been on the desk too long. Those PR bashes went out of fashion in the early '90s while he was still in the field and she was at journalism school at Ol' Mizou (the University of Missouri). Large news organizations such as hers no longer allowed

their scribes to attend such soirees without paying or having a reason to attend. How do you justify a booze party on your expense report?

Joe said he'd send Sam Crandall to the Capitol with her to take photos. The two member Anglo-American team such as theirs should have no trouble covering the event such as that. Marvin Washington, the paper's African-American photographer would be sent to cover a car show in Omaha.

"I'm gonna see if I can't come up with some sort of background angle on this," she said almost to herself, looking into her computer. "You know the Omaha paper and all of the area's electronic media will be there, and they'll all be doing the same thing."

"Hell, with a name like Krauss, you ought to feel right at home," the city editor chuckled after hearing that she was taking more of an interest.

"Very funny. Hell, half of Nebraska is of German descent. Half of the Midwest, for that matter."

She paused her Internet search for a moment. Maybe that's the angle. How do people with any sort of German heritage feel about a Nazi rally staged right here in their backyard? Cindy's great-grandparents on both sides emigrated from the old country before World War I. There should be plenty of folks around who would have an opinion on such matters. Grandpa John should know. Even though he was born in Broken Bow, his parents had met at a town square dance after coming over from Germany with their parents circa 1912.

Cindy picked up the phone and dialed her mother.

"Hi, Mom. What's Grandpa John's phone number in Kearney?"

All she could ever remember was that it had a 3-0-8 area code.

"Bring me a hot dog and a diet coke," Cindy yelled to a copy boy as he headed for the "roach coach" parked outside the newsroom door. She slipped a five-dollar bill from her purse and gave it to him as he whisked by her desk.

The phone was ringing in Kearney.

"Gramps, how ya doin, it's Cindy."

"Well, how's my little Lois Lane," a gentle, familiar voice returned.

"I'm sorry I haven't been out your way for awhile. How's Grandma?"

"Well, she has her good days. She keeps talking about things that happened years ago as if they were just yesterday, but she seems happy. You come out and see her, Sissy."

"Sissy" was the family tag placed on her as a child. She had been her grandmother's favorite, but Alzheimer's had struck its cruel blow to the Krauss family and Cindy wasn't sure whether or not Grandma Krauss even recognized her.

"Gramps, I'm working on a story that you might be able to help me with."

"Well, whatever I can do...."

"There's gonna be a Nazi rally on the Capi...."

"Why would you think I could help you with that?" The voice interrupted. It had the sound of anger, one Cindy had never heard before.

"Hey, Gramps, I just thought you could give me some sort of ideas or perspectives on what German-Americans feel when they see the swastika and those bunches of skinhead bums dressed in black leather marching around?"

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

“Gramps?”

More silence.

“Hey, Gramps? What’s wrong?”

“Sissy, maybe you’d better come out here and talk to me.” The voice was back to its familiar quiet softness.

“Aw, come on, Gramps. That’s a two-hour drive. Can’t you talk to me on the phone?”

“Come, see me. Your Grandmother will want to see you as well.”

There was a click on the other end. Puzzling.

“Hey, Joe. I’m gonna take this afternoon off and go see my grandparents over in Kearney. My stories are all filed and I got plenty of comp time, okay?”

Not waiting for an answer, Cindy began gathering up her cell phone, pager, and PDA (Personal Digital Assistant), shoving them into her large catchall purse.

“Okay, but we got T-storms and a tornado warning out for Kearney, Broken Bow and Grand Island.” Joe had his bespectacled eyes glued to the weather map on his computer. “You sure you wanna be driving around in all that ugly weather?”

“I was born and raised here, Amigo. I’m not an import from Arizona like you are.”

“Hey, we get storms down in Phoenix too, you know,” he chuckled, still not looking away from his screen.

It was about 130 miles to Kearney from Lincoln west on Interstate 80. Cindy had driven the route many times since leaving home after high school. Inspired by Robert Woodward, the famed Washington Post investigative reporter and author, she had graduated from Kearney High determined to make her own name as a writer. Her first job out of J-school was a small weekly in Nebraska City but within a year she landed a reporting gig on the *State Journal*. The Lincoln paper wasn’t the *Washington Post*, but it was a stepping-stone to a bigger audience.

It would be an overnight trip, so she drove from the Journal’s downtown office to her little mail order house on Colfax Street in the historic Havelock community on Lincoln’s north side. Cindy lived alone in a small two-bedroom frame home, which arrived in the Nebraska capital city via the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad freight some time around the turn of the 20th century. The big Sears and Roebuck Company in Chicago sold thousands of single-family homes of all sizes and architectural design at modest prices via mail order catalogue, shipping the structure crated up in pieces for assembly upon arrival.

Today, practically every town, city and farming community throughout America, particularly in the Midwest, have Sears homes still providing shelter. Cindy did a Sunday feature story on the subject two years ago after discovering an old 1921 Sears catalog in her grandparent’s attic. Pick the size and style of home you wanted and, for a few hundred bucks, *voilà!* Your dream house would arrive a few weeks later in shipping crates at your nearest railroad freight depot. America’s last four or five generations are totally ignorant of the fact that Sears was one of the nation’s largest homebuilders—all by mail order catalog and railroad delivery.

Joe was right about the storm. Occasional streaks of lightning danced on the black-clouded horizon, as the approaching storm loomed larger across the northwestern sky. Cindy got onto I-80 at the 403 interchange near her home and

heading west. It's a good thing she put on those new wiper blades last week. Nothing short of an East Coast hurricane drives rain like a Midwestern thunderstorm, especially in Nebraska.

Driving along I-80 through the Midwest, especially eastern Nebraska and Iowa, offers pretty much the same scenery—rolling hills of pastures and cornfields. The corn in Nebraska is especially tall for this time of year because of all of the recent rain. Cindy noticed on a recent trip to western Iowa that its corn is about a foot shorter than Nebraska, but then, again, she thought, “Nebraska is, after all the ‘Cornhusker State.’ What’s Iowa? Hogs, soybeans.” She reckoned to herself that Iowa did grow some corn, as well. The mind wanders when you’re knifing across the plains at 75 mph. That conversation with her grandfather earlier kept coming back to Cindy.

John Krauss was a tall, quiet man who had spent all of his life in Nebraska as a farmer. He was the only son of Hans and Greta Krauss, both of whom had come to Nebraska from their native Germany before World War I. They met, married, and homesteaded a small farm near Broken Bow in Custer County on what grew to become 1,000 acres. Cindy’s brother Jack Krauss, and his wife Barbara, now work the farm. Cindy’s parents are retired and live in Lincoln; her grandparents in Kearney.

As the Krauss family lore goes, Grandpa John had wanted to be a veterinarian; but first came the Great Depression of the ‘30s, then World War II. By the time it was over, things got somehow off track. He had inherited his folks’ farm near Broken Bow where he married, raised Cindy’s father, James, and two other children, Uncle Karl and Aunt Marlene.

Cindy caught herself going more than 85 mph as she thought about her grandfather. At that rate, she’ll outrun either the Nebraska State Patrol or the approaching thunderstorm. Better slow back down to 75.

Approaching the exit for York, Cindy realized she needed gas. Besides, she needed a potty break and something to eat and drink. Hey, she thought, I never got my lunch or my change from the five bucks she gave to the copyboy back at the office.

A towering freeway sign some nine stories in the air heralding gas at \$1.85.9 for regular unleaded lured her red 2002 Ford Mustang alongside a self-serve pump. After topping off the tank, Cindy answered the call of nature and shopped for a hotdog and a Diet Coke in the Quik Mart. Back on westbound I-80, she woofed down her semi-cold dog, saving her drink so that it would last the 85 miles to Kearney. It would be 3 o’clock by the time she arrived at Grandpa John’s, but the approaching storm was darkening the sky making it seem more like night than day.

“This is a storm warning for the following counties,” the radio blared. “Sherman, Custer, Buffalo, Hall, Hamilton, Adams, Howard, and York counties. This alert will last until 6 pm.”

Buffalo County, that’s Kearney and Custer County, is where Broken Bow and the farm are, Cindy reminded herself. She hated this time of the year in Nebraska. Summer thunderstorms are not to be trifled with because they can quickly turn to tornadoes. It was a tossup whether tornadoes and thunderstorms were more troubling in the summer than a Nebraska winter, which could be deadly cold. The

only thing stopping that rush of cold, Canadian wind coming down out of the Dakotas are a few strands of barbed wire to the north on the Nebraska border.

But, this isn't winter; it's the dead of summer—wonderfully hot and humid summertime. On this mid-July afternoon, the radio was reporting humidity at 76 percent, and the temperature a blistering 95 degrees Fahrenheit, but it seemed much hotter.

"That feels like about 107 degrees," Cindy muttered to herself and she tested the outside air by letting down her door window. "In the winter, that elevated figure would be the windchill factor rather than the actual temperature. Where's that damnable Nebraska wind when we need it."

This thunderstorm certainly will cool things off for today, but the humidity will be miserable tomorrow, she thought.

The little Mustang had galloped back up to 75 mph as Cindy continued west. Two huge semi-trailer trucks were bearing down upon her, passing with ease. Where's the highway patrol when you need 'em. Oh yeah, she forgot. Those posted signs for 75 mph are mere "suggestions" for truckers. All others, however, speed at your peril.

Between York and Grand Island, Interstate 80 is straight as a stalk of tall corn. From Grand Island, I-80 follows the Platte out as far as the city of North Platte before the river bifurcates, becoming the North and South Platte. Grand Island is Nebraska's third largest city, and it isn't really that big—only about 50,000.

Wonder why they call it "Grand Island," she pondered. Cindy grew up in central Nebraska but had never given Kearney's rival city much thought. Only when the two met for gridiron battle did Kearney residents pay any attention to their eastern neighbors. The Platte River flows through the town. Cindy reckoned there must have been some sort of a large island in the middle of the Platte River when the pioneers came through in the mid-1800s, settling the area.

As she sped along I-80, racing the approaching thunderstorm, Cindy spied a farmer riding one of those John Deere mowers, apparently racing to get the yard done before the storm hits. God bless John Deere, Cindy thought. That company has managed to get husbands and sons to do something no woman has ever been able to before—mow the lawn without bellyaching. Those ride-along mowers are to the Great Midwest what TV remote controls are to urban America.

Her thoughts settled upon her hometown. It's been six months since she was home. While a senior in high school, Cindy had been a stringer for the *Kearney Hub*, the town's daily newspaper. She wouldn't think much of working for that paper today. Nothing big ever happens in central Nebraska, especially in Kearney. To her, the last big story in her hometown was back in the 19th century when the postmaster misspelled the town's new name, submitting it to the US Postmaster in Washington, D.C., as "Kearney," instead of "Kearny" as in General Stephen Kearny for whom the town was named. History records that General Kearny, a real bastard if Colonel John C. Fremont was to be believed, had commanded the frontier Fort Kearny back in the mid-1800s as pioneers and explorers such as Fremont were headed west. But, to many pioneers, he's a hero for the protection he afforded them. The town came later, complete with misspelled moniker, lovingly pronounced by its residents in flat twangy brogue of

Midwestern fashion that comes out sounding like “Car-nee,” instead of the more correct pronunciation of “Kerr-nee.”

Cindy kept flashing back to her earlier telephone conversation with her grandfather. Why had he sounded so angry? She really didn’t know enough about immigrant history to discuss the matter and that included her own family. Down through the years, it’s just been more or less accepted that the Krausses were a hard-working bunch of farmers who happened to have ancestors who came from Germany. Little else was known—or at least discussed.

Nazis in America was nothing new. During the 1930s, there was quite a movement of German-Americans and wannabes who were members of the German Bund, the American wing of the Nazi Party. Surely Cindy’s grandfather or her great-grandparents had no part in that tripe?

“Lawdy, there is a god!” she screamed as her car approached the Aurora interchange. A Nebraska State Patrolman had those two speeding semi-trucks pulled over. Cindy honked her horn, beating out “shave and haircut” as the little Mustang drove by the roadside entourage, slowing to a respectable 65 mph, and waving.

In about 15 miles or so, she’d be crossing the Platte River, with Grand Island off to her right. Another 30 minutes and she’d be in Kearney. It wasn’t 2 o’clock yet, and it was nearly dark from the looming thunderstorm. It now was raining enough that Cindy began trying out those new wiper blades. It probably was just the beginning, she thought. Hopefully, it’ll hold until she reached her grandparents home.

As the rain began to pound, there was enough light still left on the horizon that allowed the silhouette of the Archway Monument to appear ahead across the Interstate. The structure spanned the freeway, commemorating the westward migration of the pioneers during the 19th century. To Cindy, it heralded the gateway to her home town of Kearney. The 2nd Avenue Exit and the downtown area were just beyond.

Cindy managed to find her cell phone in the large catchall purse as she continued down the highway. This time she remembered her grandparents’ phone number, having just dialed it three hours earlier.

“Grandpa, its Cindy. I’m about two miles from your place. I should be there in about 10 minutes. Have ya got an umbrella to meet me out front?”

The gentle voice on the other end of the phone assured her that there would be portable shelter waiting for her when she arrived.

The lightning and thunder were getting worse. At 3 in the afternoon, the storm had turned day into night. The wind was whipping the little Mustang so hard; Cindy had to struggle to keep it on the road. While she certainly wanted to get to her grandparents’ as soon as possible, she proceeded at a more prudent 55 mph, even though several huge trucks whizzed past her, unaffected by the inclement weather.

Off the freeway and heading north into the heart of Kearney, she began to ponder whether this storm would produce a tornado. The radio hadn’t given any warnings just yet, but the things about the weather in the Midwest, no matter what’s happening at the moment, wait five minutes and it’ll change.

Some 10 blocks later, with a couple of turns, she arrived. As promised, her Grandpa John was standing, waiting on the porch with a big red golfing umbrella as Cindy pulled into the driveway. John Krauss was a tall man of about six feet with slightly stooped shoulders from many years of hard farming work. He wore his usual uniform, a pair of bib overalls, and a blue denim shirt. Cindy had only seen him out of them and into a suit at weddings and funerals. As far as she knew, Grandpa John only has one suit: a dark blue serge. It'll probably be what he'll wear the day they bury him; although the overalls would certainly be more appropriate for this man of the land.

The old man was much taller, so he had to bend over with the opened umbrella to ensure his granddaughter was sufficiently covered from the rain. They both rushed up onto the porch before exchanging their traditional hugs.

Inside the house, grandfather and granddaughter began by doing what most farm people do when they meet—talk about the weather.

“This rain'll be good for Jack up home in Custer County, but we sure don't need any more here 'bouts,” the old man reckoned.

“The corn's a foot taller around Lincoln and Nebraska City than it is across the river in Iowa. Go figure,” Cindy countered. “Guess we're in for a good year.”

“How was your drive? Any problems?”

Cindy had walked to the hallway and taken a towel out of the linen closet to brush through her wet hair. It didn't take much with her close-cropped hairdo, but she didn't want one of those nasty summer colds.

“Naw, it was a piece of cake. Saw two smart-aleck truckers get their dues from a state patrolman, though. I was goin' the speed limit and these two clowns passed me like I was standing still. Ol' Smokey got 'em around Aurora.”

She looked around the room.

“Where's Grandma?”

“Oh, she's taking a nap. She should be awake around five. She takes lots of naps these days,” the old man said, looking out the big picture window as the rain splashed against the glass. “Naps are good because it gives me a chance to rest. I never know what she's going to do or where she's going to try to go when she's awake. I hate to think about it, but maybe she'd be better off in one of those assisted living homes they have now for people with her problem.”

He stopped to ponder what he had just said.

“I promised myself that I'd keep her with me as long as she recognized me; but little darlin,' it's about all I can do to keep up with her. She gets up at 2 o'clock in the morning and starts wandering around the house. One night I caught her walking down the sidewalk in her nightgown.”

Just then a sharp flash of light and a clap of thunder so loud it could have been right on top of the house.

“Close one,” the old man smiled.

“Yeah, guess the ol' tatter wagon hit a real bump that time,” Cindy smiled.

“Tatter wagon. Gosh, you still remember that from when you were small?”

“Of course, Grandpa. Whenever the thunder and lightning would scare me when I was small, you calmed me by telling me it was just the tatter wagon that was rolling down the road and had hit a bump.”

The old man smiled, shaking his head with that pleasant memory, returning to his gaze out the front window.

“So Grandpa ... what happened on the phone this morning? Did I say something wrong to make you upset?”

He continued to gaze out the window, looking from side to side, as if to make sure the rain was distributing itself evenly over the lawn.

“Sissy, it’s way passed time that I told you a few things about me and your great-grandparents,” he began. “What I’m about the tell you, not even your Dad knows. In fact, the only person living today who probably knows, or remembers, is your grandmother.”

His eyes continued to look outside at the rain.

“You bein’ a writer, and all, a newspaper reporter, I figure you’ll get the story right. That is your job ... to get the story right?”

“Of course, Grandpa. Go on.”

“My parents came to this country before the first world war. They didn’t see what their parents saw was happening in Germany. My grandparents on both sides wanted a better life ... one that would be without war. Before World War I, they had known peace in Germany and much of Europe. Mom and Dad were always convinced things were better there than here. They were both young when their parents brought them here, so they tended to remember things the way they wanted them to be rather than how they really were.”

He settled back into his easy chair, swiveling it around so he could continue looking out the window.

“My parents were good *Volksdeutsche*,” he continued.

“What?” Cindy interrupted.

Volksdeutsche—people of Germany not living in the Fatherland. It means more than just having been born there. It’s a spirit and mindset thing,” he explained. “My parents never really seemed to be happy here, at least not when they were young. I was born in 1918, during the last days of World War I. My father believed in Germany’s cause so much that he wanted to go back and fight for the Kaiser.”

“He did?”

“Yep, he sure did. But my grandparents needed him to help on the farm. Plus, Dad and Mom having just been married, well, of course, he stayed home. Then he found out that I was on the way, and that was that.”

The old man continued looking out the window, not once looking at his granddaughter.

“I grew up during the roaring ‘20s and Great Depression. While we were struggling here in this country, Germany was on her knees in Europe. My parents thanked the Lord every night at suppertime they were here and not there, where inflation had run rampant and a loaf of bread could cost as much as a million marks. Then Adolf Hitler and the Nazis began to take power and the so-called “new Germany” emerged. Well, you can imagine how that made my parents feel ... especially my father.”

By this time, the granddaughter was sitting on a nearby couch, riveted to her grandfather’s story.

“Everything coming out of Germany was futuristic ... more modern and better ... or so we were told. The giant dirigibles were flying record times across the Atlantic between Europe, South America, and North America. You think America invented cruise ships? England, Germany, and France were doing them for years before this country got into that game.

For this last remark, the old man turned his head slightly away from the window, then back.

“German immigrants from all over in this country began sending their children back to the Fatherland to be educated. Some of the best universities in the world at that time were in Germany. Others sent their children to join the German armed forces, which were building fast.”

“Your parents didn’t want to send you there, did they?” Cindy asked.

The old man was silent.

“Grandpa John ... did they?”

For the first time, the old farmer looked away from the window and into the blue-eyes of his granddaughter.

“Yes they did.”

“Surely you didn’t go....”

“I had to go. A good German son doesn’t say ‘no’ to his parents or, to the call of his country.”

Cindy sat in disbelief. They both sat in silence. Only the ticking of big grandfather clock in the hallway could be heard. After a minute or two she spoke.

“But, this is your country.”

“My parents didn’t see it that way and there were plenty of other sons and daughters across America who were in the same position I was.”

More disbelief.

“You’re kidding, right? You mean there were other Americans who went to Germany while Hitler was in power?”

“Sure, hundreds, maybe thousands. No one knows for sure. Good *Volksdeutsche*, especially here in the Midwest, sent their children back to build a better Germany. Little did they know they were sending them to disaster.”

By now, Cindy had refocused from being a disbelieving granddaughter to becoming the inquisitive journalist she was.

“Mom once told me that she thought you might have been a medic in the Army during World War II,” she began.

“Well yes ... that’s right ... only it wasn’t the US Army. It was the German Army. The Africa Corps, to be exact. I started out in a medical unit then later was assigned to serve in Field Marshal Erwin Rommel’s command unit in North Africa.”

“My god, that must have been exciting,” Cindy caught herself muttering. “Rommel ... the Desert Fox?”

“Exciting? Terrifying would be more of an accurate description,” he replied. “Any sort of war is terrible, but tank warfare in a desert can be terrifying. I saw things I want to forget ... but can’t. As for Rommel, I don’t believe he was anymore excited about fighting that war than I was. Still, he was a good German soldier and he did his duty.”

The old man swiveled back around to look out the window at the rain, which had been reduced to sprinkles as the storm moved east and out of the area.

“Gramps, I would love to write your story. It’s unbelievable.”

“Sissy, I want you to write it ... and, you probably won’t believe it.”

“Well, you obviously ended up okay. How did you get back to this country?”

“That part you won’t believe. It was courtesy of the US Army, Navy, and the American railroad system,” he replied.

“I don’t follow,” she said with a puzzled look.

“My entire unit was captured by Allied forces in Africa and we were eventually sent back to America to a prisoner of war camp,” he said.

“How ironic. Where?”

“You won’t believe that either. Clarinda, Iowa and then later, Fort Robinson here in western Nebraska—near Chadron.”

“You’re right, I don’t believe it,” she said, almost laughing.

“It’s true,” he admitted.

Cindy broke out her handheld tape recorder and notepad.

“I gotta get all of this down,” she was muttering to herself again. “I don’t know where to begin. I mean, where do you start with a story like this,” she said, looking up at Grandpa John.

“Well, darlin’ let’s try to take it from the beginning,” he said, turning away from the picture window and looking into her eyes. “We’ll start in the morning. Can you stay the night?”

## Chapter

# 2

Sunrise on the Nebraska prairie after a thunderstorm presents a sparkling day as if washed by the hand of God. Cindy arose early after a fitful night of tossing and turning in the guest bedroom of her grandparents' home. She kept dreaming about the revelation her grandfather had confided in her the evening before. It was almost too much to comprehend.

"It's a glorious morning," her grandmother announced, finding Cindy in the front room sipping a cup of coffee. Grandma Harriet was still a beautiful woman, even though age had robbed her of her lustrous raven-black hair. Still, the gray strands gave way to hints of its original color. There were only a few age lines in her soft face after 82 years. Her blue eyes still sparkled, but they reflected memories of long ago and little else. She could recall the drought that nearly wiped them out financially in the early 1950s, but couldn't remember what she had for dinner the night before. Cindy wasn't sure her grandmother even knew who she was.

"Morning, Grandma," Cindy replied. "Did you have a good night?"

"It was simply marvelous. Did it rain last night? It should make the crops grow ever so well," the old woman reckoned. "I don't think John will be able to get out into the fields at least until afternoon, though."

She was at the big picture window, looking from side-to-side, studying how soaked the ground might have become.

It was Cindy's first hint that Harriet Krauss was caught in the past. Her husband hadn't been in the fields for nearly 20 years. They had lived in Kearney for the past 15 years. The old woman acted as if nothing had changed from the life she once knew on the farm up in Custer County. Grandpa John had tried to prepare his granddaughter for this, but it still was a shock.

"No, I don't suppose he will," Cindy said, smiling. "Would you like some coffee, Grandma?"

"You're very kind, child. I have a granddaughter, you know. You remind me of her; but of course, she's much younger. You must meet her sometime. I know she'd love to come over and play with you."

Cindy felt a slight pang of rejection. It had been six months since she last visited her grandparents and this time Grandma Harriet obviously didn't recognize her at all.

"I'm your granddaughter, Grandma. Don't you remember me?"

"It's simply a glorious morning," the older woman said again, looking out the big window, completely ignoring Cindy's last statement. "That rain last night will

be good for the crops, you wait and see.”

“What are you two girls talking about?” Grandpa John said as he entered the room, coming in from the backyard.

Oh, we’re just marveling how much the rain will help the crops,” Cindy replied, giving him a knowing look. “Grandma thinks it will really make things grow.”

Cindy pulled her purse toward her, beginning a search for her cell phone through the maze of contents.

“I’m going to call my editor and take a couple of days off so that we can continue our talk. Okay Grandpa?”

“Sure, that’ll be fine. There are lots to talk about and it can’t be done in a couple of hours,” he reckoned.

Grandma Harriet continued to look silently out the window as if searching for something. Her husband walked over, took her by the shoulders, and guided her to a large easy chair nearby.

“Here, darlin,’ sit and enjoy the morning sun. I’ll go get you some breakfast,” he said, lovingly.

Cindy was on her cell phone dialing Joe Hernandez’ home number to tell him about taking time off. It would be a week before that rally on the state capitol steps and there would be plenty of time to research what she needed. Besides, the story she anticipated from her grandfather would, no doubt, supersede anything she might encounter in Lincoln next weekend.

Grandpa John walked over to an old phonograph player in the corner of the room, flipped a switch to begin a long-play record already mounted on its turntable. Music began to play. A big smile came over the old woman’s face as she continued to stare out the window.

“Oh, I love Guy Lombardo. He has the ‘Sweetest Music This Side of Heaven’ don’t you know,” she said, looking at her granddaughter with a happy smile.

Cindy smiled back, and then looked at her grandfather. The 33-rpm album of Guy Lombardo and his Royal Canadians had to be more than 30, maybe even 40 years old. The scratchy sound revealed the many turns it had made around her grandparents old record player.

“Music is very soothing to her. It really helps. It’s one of the few things she seems to connect with,” he explained. “There’s something about music that brings Alzheimer’s patients back to life ... to reality.”

John Krauss announced he had asked a family friend to come over to stay with his wife for a couple of hours so he and Cindy could go out to talk. The old man suggested they go for some breakfast at a quiet café.

“I’ll drive the old Lincoln,” he said, half laughing. “I don’t fit very well into that little car of yours.”

Cindy didn’t argue. She hated to drive and always jumped at the chance to be chauffeured. She grabbed her large purse, making sure her small handheld recorder and notepad was inside and followed her grandfather to the car.

The 1986 Lincoln Town car pulled up in front of the Auger-In Café at the entrance of the Kearney Municipal Airport. The aroma of breakfast was in the air. The Auger-In was one of those typical Midwestern short-order cafes where biscuits and gravy on the menu were a given, especially during the morning hours. Of course, there was always the standard eggs and bacon.

Inside the Auger-In, there was a slight haze of smoke. An old wooden propeller was mounted above the large coffee urn, with a sign just below that read: “If you don’t like the food here, go home to your wife!”

Cindy expected the place to be filled with pilots who were ready to take up one of the several private planes tethered or hangared nearby; but instead, half of the joint was peopled with old men in bib overalls like Grandpa John. Several of these obviously old farmers were sitting around and chatting about, what else? The weather. Two or three were reading the morning newspapers—either The Hub or the Omaha World Herald.

“I don’t see any Nebraska State Journals being read here,” Cindy remarked in a half criticizing way; but then again, she noticed only three newspapers: the local newspaper The Hub, known as the gray lady of Omaha, the World Herald, and USA Today. All had racks outside the door of the café. “Guess I’ll have to speak to our circulation manager about this.”

The airport was unusually big for a city the size of Kearney, with its large concrete tarmacs and unusually long runways. Grandpa John told her that during World War II, the airport was built to handle B-17 bombers. It had been one of several training and staging bases for the giant Flying Fortresses before they headed east across the United States and the Atlantic Ocean for England and the war. Aircrews would train in California, Utah, Washington, and Idaho. When new planes came off the production lines out of the Boeing Aircraft factories in Washington, they would then be distributed by flying to US Army Air Corps bases in Cheyenne, Kearney, Lincoln, Omaha and dozens of other long forgotten bases. Today, many of those old tarmacs serve as municipal airports, such as is the case in Kearney and Lincoln. Old Fort Crook, located just south of Omaha, has been renamed Offutt Field, the home of the US Air Force’s Strategic Air Command—one of the biggest bases in the world.

“John, how are ya this mornin,” a slightly overweight, waitress inquired. “How’s Harriet?”

“She ‘bout the same, Gladys. Thanks for asking,” he replied.

“Do you use brown eggs?” Cindy inquired of the older waitress, who was standing at their table.

“Honey, we use whatever kind of eggs the hen will let us have,” came her droll reply. “You don’t believe that stuff they tell you in the city about brown eggs being better tasting, do you?”

Cindy was a bit embarrassed because she really didn’t know why brown eggs were preferred by so many of her friends. She’d always thought it might be an old wives’ tale.

Grandpa John just chuckled, introducing Cindy to the waitress as he stirred his large cup of coffee after pouring a spoonful of sugar and adding some cream. He told Gladys a side order of one biscuit with gravy would be more than enough for him.

“Well, Grandpa, where do we begin?” Cindy asked, trying to restart their conversation from the night before.

“I’d s’pect we’d better start at the beginning,” he reckoned.

For the first time Cindy heard her grandfather’s given name: Johann Hans Krauss. “John” was the Americanized moniker he had used since he was a little

boy.

“John worked better for me when I was going to grade school in Broken Bow,” he admitted. “Some of my friends in high school called me Jack, but no one in this country other than my parents ever knew me as “Johann.”

He was born June 25, 1918, just months before the end of the “Great War.” World War I had been a calamity for Europe and especially devastating to Germany. Here in America, thousands of German-Americans had a tough time navigating through society. Many changed their names to become more “Americanized.” The United States entered the war in 1917, three years after it started in 1914. While it was a relatively short period of participation on the side of the Allies, casualties were heavy, especially in the muddy trench warfare. By the 1920s, in some parts of this country it wasn’t popular to have a German surname, especially after so many American G.I.s were killed and wounded on the battlefields of France during the “war to end all wars.” Some 26 states outlawed the teaching of the German language in schools.

John Krauss described to his granddaughter the hardships of growing up on a farm in central Nebraska during a period that saw the world economy crash.

“During the early years of my life, we lived in a ‘soddie,’ “Grandpa John told his granddaughter.

“A what?”

“Soddie ... sod house,” he replied. “They were quite common during the 19th and early 20th centuries. On the Nebraska prairie, there were few trees, and wood had to be shipped in by rail or by horse and wagon. It was convenient to build sod houses, homes that would withstand the cold winters. In fact, our family’s soddie is used as our cow barn on the farm in Broken Bow.”

Grandpa John continued telling his granddaughter about his early life in rural Nebraska during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

“We always had plenty to eat because we grew what we needed on our farm. We just never had any money to buy things, not that there was a lot to buy in stores. When we did need things ... tools, equipment, clothes that we couldn’t make ... we traded livestock, poultry, produce, grain, and the like.”

He continued describing life in rural Nebraska during the ‘20s and ‘30s. It was bleak. During the ‘20s, more than 40 percent of the state chartered banks failed. A drought devastated the entire Midwest, forcing thousands to leave their farms seeking refuge in California.

Nebraska had few paved roads, and more families used horses to power farm implements more than anything else. Motorized tractors were scarce and possessed by only the wealthiest of farmers and ranchers; cars and trucks were luxuries few families enjoyed. A good horse and buggy was prized by most farming families until the mid-30s.

“We had an old Ford Model T,” he told her. “It was really a pretty neat machine, one of those combination jobs that you could convert from a pickup truck to a tractor to a small power plant that would drive a grain elevator. Ol’ Henry Ford himself was a farmer, so he knew how to make a machine that would be a labor-saving value to country folk.”

Grandpa John was on his second cup of coffee when he began telling about the passion his parents held for Germany; a myopic viewpoint they held far longer

than they should have.

“You have to understand that my parents, your great-grandparents, were brought here, each by their parents, sort of against their will. When they came over after the turn of the last century, they were teenagers. They didn’t meet each other until they were here in Nebraska, but they both were exposed to German culture and all that it meant at the time ... music, literature, medicine, some of the finest universities in the world. Germany was one of the most advanced nations in Europe, and to a degree, in the world.

“So, mom and dad never really left Germany, at least not in their own mind,” he continued. “They met, married, and had me, and while I was growing up, all I heard around the supper table each evening was how great everything was back home.”

“Did you buy into their delusion?” Cindy asked.

“Well, at first, yes. It was hard not to be intrigued. But, the older I got, the further I went in school, the more American I became. With Germany’s defeat in World War I, followed by the Treaty of Versailles and its humiliating peace terms, the following years resulted in poverty for the old Fatherland. Then the entire world was hit by the Great Depression. Along came Adolf Hitler and his band of thugs, who took power in 1933. Those first years after Hitler took over saw a new Germany emerge, and my parents couldn’t talk enough about it. Then the talk around the supper table began to swing toward my going to college in Germany.”

Cindy shook her head in disbelief.

“You’re one of the strongest-willed men I know, Grandpa. I’m sorry, but I’m having a hard time buying all of this. It all sounds too, too simplistic,” she said, matter-of-factly.

“Well Sissy ... you were raised in a different culture during a different time, and of course, I’m not the same person I was then. Growing up in a German household, the father was the law. His will is what everyone bends to,” he replied. “As simplistic, as you say, as all of this sounds, it’s the truth. It’s what happened.”

“So, did you go? Well, obviously you went,” she interrupted herself, half-laughing. “What happened? I mean, how did you know what was going on in Germany?”

“My parents were a member of Der Amerikadeutsche Bund, which was a political organization, kind of the Nazi wing here in America; although, it was never really that closely associated with anything going on in Europe,” he continued. “It was simply known as ‘The Bund.’ It had a newspaper my parents read, Deutscher Weckruf and Beobachter, which was nothing more than a propaganda sheet. A lot of German-Americans here in the Midwest subscribed to it, just like my folks did.

“When I turned 18, it was 1936, and I had just graduated from high school. I really was planning to go to college in Lincoln,” he continued.

“At the University of Nebraska?”

“Yes. I wanted to be a veterinarian. My father wanted me to be a medical doctor, and of course, the finest medical schools of that day were found in Europe ... in Germany.”

“So, you went to Germany in 1936,” Cindy said, taking notes.

“My father took me to Germany,” he explained. “He wanted to see, first hand,

the new German order and what Hitler had built. We arrived just in time for the Summer Olympics in Berlin.”

Father and son traveled by rail to New York, and from there, by steamship to Bremerhaven, one of Germany’s most important North Sea ports.

“My god, you must have gotten to see Jesse Owens win his four medals at the Olympics,” Cindy blurted, causing a few old farmers around the cafe to look up from their morning papers.

“Yes, I did. Saw him win the 100-yard dash, and the broad jump,” he replied.

“Broad jump? What’s that?” Cindy asked.

“I think they call it the ‘long jump’ today, but back in those days it was the ‘broad jump.’ I have to admit that it was an exciting time, and in those days, Berlin was an exciting place. I had never been in a city bigger than Grand Island before I traveled to Germany.

“Do you know that part of the ‘36 Olympics were televised? Even though the concept of television was developed in this country, the Germans had improved TV to the point they were able to transmit pictures from the Berlin stadium; but of course, the only receivers were a couple of miles away in a government studio. Still, it was one of the world’s first TV shows, albeit in the shadow of the swastika.”

Grandfather Krauss continued with his story while Cindy hung onto his every word.

For young John Krauss, traveling to Berlin in 1936 was like going to another planet. Compared to the peaceful wind-swept prairie of Nebraska, every aspect of life in Europe’s most modern city was, John had to admit, exciting. New York City, to be sure, was an exciting place as well as during the ‘30s, and he saw just enough of that big city while waiting for the boat to sail to realize there was far more to the world beyond Nebraska.

Before leaving home, John had kept very quiet to his friends about where he was going because he wasn’t really sure it was what he wanted to do—or if he would stay. Circa 1934-35, his parents had endured a lot of chastisement by a number of German-American neighbors, as well as some Anglo and Irish storekeepers in Broken Bow regarding the couple’s open admiration for Hitler and what was going on in Germany. So, the family decided to keep their thoughts to themselves.

Nothing was ever said about John attending school in Europe. In fact, everyone who asked was told that father and son had made a trip to New York City to visit family and that John would be staying to attend school on the East coast. Local gossip could go no further than knowledge of two railroad tickets to New York City.

Neither of John’s parents had become United States citizens, and because John was under 21, the legal age of that era, he traveled, accompanying his father, who used a German passport.

After their arrival in Europe, John’s father stayed in Germany for a month visiting family and old friends before sailing back to America. He had to be back in Nebraska by September, in time for the fall harvest season. Young Johann was left in Berlin with a small bank account, an even smaller apartment, and the daunting challenge of entering pre-medical school at the city’s stalwart institution

of higher learning: the University of Berlin.

Berlin was an exciting city, looking as though it were preparing for some sort of celebration or festival. Huge, blood-red banners with a giant black swastika in the center hung from what seemed like every other building throughout the city. Pedestrians in the Berlin streets appeared similar to those John had encountered on the streets of New York. Every so often, he noticed men sporting a lapel button with the black swastika. He soon learned that wearing the emblem in that manner signified the bearer as a member of the Nazi party.

His German was passable, but Johann was worried that his understanding of the language would not be enough to get him by in everyday classes. His conversational German was good as far as it went, meaning his vocabulary was limited. Reading and writing the language was another matter. His mother had taught him enough to get by, but Johann feared he wrote with the ability of a sixth-grader and only trying to impress college professors with his language prowess. John's graduating status at Broken Bow High, along with "to whom it may concern" references from teachers, enabled him to get his foot in the door of the university; sustaining his grade standing for four, possibly six years, was another matter. He knew he was admitted on a "conditional" basis. If he wasn't able to keep up, out he'd go.

John's arrival in Berlin did not go unnoticed by German authorities, particularly the Gestapo. One evening as he was having supper in a small German café around the corner from his small apartment, he was visited by a somewhat ominous looking character wearing a long, dark leather trench coat. John reckoned the young man wasn't much older than he.

"Herr Krauss, my name is Krueger," the stranger announced. "May I join you for a cup of coffee?"

The man didn't wait to be invited. He just sat down across from John and removed his black fedora.

"How can I help you," John inquired.

"Well, it's not so much how you can help me, rather it is how I might be able to help you," he countered.

John was puzzled and somewhat frightened. He had heard about the Nazi secret police. Although he had done nothing wrong, the fact the agent knew his name and was making inquiries was enough to make John nervous.

"According to your father's passport and travel information, I understand that you are from the United States. Nebraska, I believe?" the agent continued.

"Why yes ... is there anything wrong?"

"No, not at all. We like to interview all of our returning citizens to determine their intentions when they come home to the Third Reich. What are yours?" asked the man with the cold, black eyes that seemed to pierce through John's very soul.

"Well, for starters, I'm not German. I'm an American, and I'm here to see if I'm good enough to succeed as a student at the University of Berlin," John replied, thinking that adding a bit of good ol' American humble pie attitude might be a more prudent tact to take. This man was obviously a Gestapo agent.

"Ah, I see ... and what will you be studying?" Krueger countered, choosing to overlook the American citizen declaration.

"I'm going to try to be a physician. I'm hoping to survive my pre-med studies so I can go on to study at Heidelberg University."

John's answers seemed to satisfy the agent.

"As a citizen of Germany, you'll want to be sure and register at Wehrmacht headquarters," Krueger advised.

"Sir, I'm not a German citizen. I'm American. I was born on a farm near Broken Bow, Nebraska. I grew up there, and went to school in Nebraska. This is my first and only trip to Germany," John insisted.

"As far as The Reich is concerned, Herr Krauss, you're a German citizen. Your father's papers are in order and, as a member of the party, he is the head of his household. You, being his underage son, are part of that household," Krueger declared emphatically as he rose from the table, his eyes still fixed on John.

"Everything seems to be in order. If I can be of any assistance, Herr Krauss, please don't hesitate to call upon me at my office near the Reichstag," the agent said, putting on his hat.

"Here's my phone number in case you need to call. And, you won't forget to register, will you."

It was obvious that Krueger's last statement was a command and not a question. He left a calling card on the table in front of John. Like those used by most European business people, it was twice the size of the cards preferred by Americans.

John was breathing somewhat easier as he tried to convince himself that everything was all right. After all, the man did leave his business card. And, the man didn't have John accompany him to wherever it is the Gestapo takes their subjects for a more private interview.

However, as the man walked out the door of the cafe, John began to feel a quiver in the pit of his stomach. He had only heard or read about Hitler's secret police, but coming face-to-face with one of their agents was all John needed to convince himself he never wanted another such encounter. And, as he thought about it, he became more puzzled and disturbed. He couldn't think of a reason why he would ever want to use the oversized business card of why he was being called a German citizen. He was not; and registering for the German army was something he had not bargained for. Perhaps he should have accompanied his father on the return trip across the Atlantic.

"I was just a simple farm boy from Nebraska," Grandpa John told his granddaughter, who was still shaking her head in amazement. "I had been in Germany only a month before I was being grilled by the secret police and told to register for the Army."

Grandpa John explained that "registering" for the Wehrmacht didn't mean "joining," but it could mean just that because it was similar to registering for the draft in this country.

"So, then what happened? You're not going to leave it there, are you? Did you ever see the Gestapo man again? Did you get into the university? Tell, me, tell me!" Cindy said before she realized her voice was getting louder when a couple of the diner's patrons looked over their way.

"We'll talk again this afternoon," he assured, motioning with his giant hand for the young woman to lower her voice. "But, now we've got to get back to see how

your grandmother is getting along.”

Cindy gathered up her recorder and notebook, slipped them into that large catchall handbag and walked to the waiting Town Car in the parking lot.

“Grandpa, you’re not pulling my leg with all of this, are you?” she said, stopping abruptly in front of the car.

“No Sissy I’m not ... I wish I were.