

# COLD WAR

## Murder in the Heartland



Robert Tecklenburg

# COLD WAR



## ***Murder in the Heartland***

by

**Robert L. Tecklenburg**

At the height of the Cold War and the Second Red Scare, when McCarthyism and fear of nuclear holocaust is at its worst, murder draws a small Midwestern Iowa town into the craze of Soviet spy rings on US soil and government-sponsored communist witch-hunts.

In one of the coldest winters on record, Jimmy Novotny is trying to deal with his own personal demons after returning home from the Korean War to Belle Plaine, Iowa, and finds himself embroiled in the investigation of several puzzling deaths. He works to solve the mystery, not just to get at the truth, but to prove himself worthy of the task – worthy of anything after the horrors he left behind in the war.

Working with him – or perhaps against him – is the beautiful redheaded reporter from Cedar Rapids, Cecilia Brom. She carries secrets of her own. And then there are others following their own agendas, each making the investigation for the truth increasingly difficult and dangerous. The question remains, is Jimmy Novotny up to the challenge, or will the Cold War freeze him out, leaving a murderer to escape unpunished? Is there anyone he can really trust to help him get to the bottom of it before more people die?

**COLD WAR**  
***Murder in the Heartland***

by  
*Robert L. Tecklenburg*

Licensed and Produced through  
**Penumbra Publishing**  
*www.PenumbraPublishing.com*



PRINTED IN USA  
ISBN/EAN-13: 978-1-938758-05-8  
Copyright 2012 Robert L. Tecklenburg  
Also available EBOOK ISBN/EAN-13: 978-1-938758-04-1

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

## ~AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT~

For Mariann.

I will always thank Rebecca for her love and support through good times and bad, and for her keen insight on the human condition, and Chris Pendleton for helping me pound out a narrative.

# COLD WAR



## ***Murder in the Heartland***

*by*

**Robert L. Tecklenburg**





## PROLOGUE

“If you run, I’ll hunt you down. Hell is the same distance, no matter where you go.”

–*Ivan Grogonov, Soviet Spymaster, Mexico City, 1951*

\* \* \* \* \*

It was late 1954, nearly a year and a half after Joseph Stalin had died, yet outside the nondescript two-story brick townhouse, the national flag of the USSR still flew at half-mast to honor the dictator. Inside the consulate, the small staff of Foreign Service personnel went about their daily routines. They provided briefings, gave educational presentations to local groups, and met with Toronto’s politicians to discuss the pertinent issues of the day. Similar routines were carried out in foreign consulates around the world.

Upstairs, however, in a small windowless office, Ivan Grogonov sat surrounded by communications equipment. He stared at the symbols and letters on a thin sheet of paper. A middle-aged man, short and thin, almost sickly in appearance, he had a bushy mustache similar to that worn by Stalin, the hero he idolized. With gray hair pasted to his scalp, he looked much older than his forty-nine years. His official title was Director of Acquisition for Agricultural Supplies, which meant that he was a purchaser of needed agricultural equipment for Soviet Russia. Unofficially, however, he had other, more important duties.

Ivan reached for his crutch, stood, and hobbled over to a table in the corner near the door. There he poured another cup

of tea, added three teaspoons of brown sugar, and began to sip. He frowned. He had lost most of his right leg during the Great Patriotic War at the long battle for Stalingrad. A political commissar serving with the city's defenses, throughout the grueling fall of '42, he had worked closely with Khrushchev to raise morale among the defenders. He had been standing on a tank, giving a speech to a company of soldiers, imploring them not to give up. "The Motherland needs you! You are her heroes!" In the middle of his speech, shrapnel from a German 88 round struck him.

The wound ended his combat service and his military career. But he had recovered and, refusing a less hazardous assignment, got Stalin to assign him to a Smersh Detachment in the newly liberated Ukraine. There he hunted traitors to the Motherland. He had distinguished himself in his work and was rewarded with this assignment. But the great passion he once felt was gone now, replaced since the years in Stalingrad by cold ruthlessness and an emptiness that never went away.

He'd spent the last ten years in Toronto. No one in the Warsaw Pact knew more about clandestine operations in North America, and he loved his work. He was convinced he was making an important contribution to the defense of the Motherland, running a very sophisticated and clandestine intelligence network. He oversaw undercover operatives planted throughout the United States and Canada, who were charged with gathering information on defense systems and new technologies. His best operative, often going by the alias 'Max,' with various surnames attached, handled more than six agents in North America, in New York, Washington, and Chicago. That network had supplied the Motherland with the latest information on the American nuclear program, troop deployments, and counterespionage activities. By early 1948, those intelligence services had become invaluable.

But in the last few years, things had become much more difficult. The Americans were conducting their own 'show trials,' not unlike Stalin, to get rid of political enemies. This strategy threatened many of the operations he was engaged in. Then,



gradually, Max's network efficiency diminished. The drops grew cold, and messages went unread. By '51, Ivan learned that his best operative wanted out and was ignoring orders passed on from Moscow. Ivan had urged him to continue for the sake of socialism, even traveling to Mexico to meet with him, but failed to persuade him. The traitor's betrayal was a major blow, both for him and for Soviet defenses.

Then the FBI started systematically picking apart the network. When 'Red' was arrested, Ivan knew for sure his main operative had been turned. No one else could have revealed Red's identity. She had developed a perfect cover – mistress and confidante to some of America's most powerful politicians, well-positioned to access sensitive information. Her loss was a terrible blow to Ivan personally. *My pretty, merciless Bolshevik, he thought almost whimsically. If the revolution were fought in bed, you'd be more powerful than Comrade Stalin himself.*

The continued loss of agents made it imperative that Ivan quickly find and terminate the traitor. He had been working almost night and day for months to plug leaks and shore up the floundering network before the American FBI could completely destroy it by capturing the remaining agents. All because one man had betrayed them and the Motherland.

"Bastard. Traitor!" Ivan growled to himself and tossed the remainder of his tea in a corner waste basket. *But you'll soon get what's coming to you, my old comrade.* He forced a smile. *Wolfhound will see to that.* Wolfhound had worked under deepest cover since 1925 and was called upon only in emergencies. This was an emergency. *I've used every trick of blackmail, bribery, and arm-twisting, even called in some favors ... and now, finally, I've tracked you down. Who would have guessed the former master spy Max once was called Otto?* Ivan chuckled. *And you hide behind yet another alias, pretending to be a farmer, with a wife, no less! Bah! Did you learn nothing in the field? A family to care about is simply a liability. This woman is the wife of a dead man!*

Removing his spectacles, Ivan wiped his watery blue eyes and looked again at the paper crumpled in his fist. It revealed

the latest message he had just received from Wolfhound and deciphered. 'Brother found. Awaiting orders.' Killing a longtime productive operative was a messy business, but Ivan knew it had to be done – and very carefully. It could never be discovered that the Motherland was to blame. He considered the hard, distasteful decisions he had made in this job and then shrugged. *Wolfhound will be coming for you soon, Max. No more running, no more hiding. No more betrayal.*

Returning to his desk, he immediately sent the encoded order over short-wave radio. A courier would deliver the encrypted message to a special drop. Ivan did not fear the Americans would be able to decipher the message, even if they managed somehow to intercept it. Strangely, Max had not revealed the code to the Americans – yet. *Perhaps the traitor wants too much money from them, and they are too cheap to pay.*

Ivan looked down at the coded message he had scribbled, deciphering it in his head. 'Use whatever force is necessary. Get the codes and any records. Neutralize him. No witnesses, no mess.' He crumpled the paper in his hand. *Dos vidania, my old comrade.*



## CHAPTER 1

Sitting in a far corner of the Oasis Tavern, Jimmy Novotny quietly nursed his mug of Grain Belt Premium Beer and stared into the half-empty pitcher – his third. Condensation on the side of the pitcher indicated the beer was fast warming up to room temperature in the dimly lit tavern reeking of stale beer and mildew. He glanced up at the leaky old roof, unable to recall a fall in Belle Plaine wetter than this one – 1954 would probably end up another Iowa record-breaker. Soon enough, the rain and dampness would give way to snow and freezing cold. But right now it was hotter than hell in the drafty old place, making him perspire. He pulled off his sweat-soaked green cap and ran a hand through his thick brown hair. The coal stove in the corner glowed red, and vapors from the burning coal irritated his eyes. He'd move, but sitting here, he was left alone, and that was the just the way he liked it.

He took another sip of lukewarm beer and sat back in the creaky chair, running a hand absently over the oil stains from his mom's '47 Mercury that spotted the front of his old green military utility shirt ... his last hold on the Marine Corps. Rubbing his chin, he felt the gristly beard growth that hid the fact he was still young despite feeling very, very old inside. His thoughts drifted to places far away...

"Hey, Jimmy! Tell us about the Commies ya killed over there in Korea," a beefy blond farm boy called over to the corner where Jimmy sat. He leaned on his cue, worn bib overalls barely covering a tattered flannel shirt.

Jimmy did not respond, continuing to stare as if he were

waiting for something to happen.

“Ya hear me?” the farm boy called again. “Why’d ya do it, anyway?” He laughed but the other men who stood near him were content to watch, not speaking or smiling.

“Fuck off, you dumb farm boy,” Jimmy growled. “I was in prison.”

“C’mon, we all know’d you was over there.”

“You blind? I’m busy.”

The farm boy laid his cue against the table, leaving the game of eight ball half played. The others stepped back to let him pass. For a few seconds, complete silence reigned in the Oasis until he said, “What’d you say?”

“Go away.” Jimmy gripped the heavy glass mug in his right hand. “I don’t have to say anything to a dumb ass like you, Milt.” He still did not move.

Milt leaned over to pull Jimmy out of the booth and grabbed his shirt. Jimmy lifted the mug with beer in it and slammed it against the side of Milt’s head. It was lights out for Milt. He fell backward against the pool table and slowly slid to the floor, knocked out stone cold.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jimmy Novotny spent almost two years in Korea. “In prison over at Anamosa,” he answered bitterly if someone over at the Oasis Tavern, where he spent most days, was brave enough to ask. While he was away fighting for his country, his bride of one year left him, his father died, and his baby daughter didn’t even know he existed. And now he was unemployed. All this weighed heavily on Jimmy’s mind.

He stood in the doorway of his widowed mother’s small home on the south side of Belle Plaine, gazing across the dirt street at the seed corn plant, the largest business in the rural Iowa community. He wondered deep and long whether working in that plant was his future.

After his father died while he was on that damn mountain in Korea, his mother had taken a job in the plant to make a

living. She was forced to sell the dairy farm where she'd grown up, get rid of the milk cows and machinery. She'd had enough of the hardscrabble life of a dairy farmer's wife and had moved to town. She could have gotten him out of the military on a deferment, back home to farm after his dad died, but decided against it. 'Banks own all the damn land anyway,' she wrote him. She also told him he was better off fighting Chinamen than trying to eke a living out of these hills.

*What the hell do I do now?* he wondered, feeling the weight of the world closing in on him. He had considered staying in California when he was discharged. There were plenty of jobs. He thought seriously about taking one of them, like a couple of his Marine buddies had. *Too late now to even think about it*, he decided with a shrug.

"Jimmy, go over to talk with Mr. Palmer. It's a good job driving a truck," his mother called from the kitchen. "I told him you'd come see him."

"Sure, Mom," he replied. He even meant it because he knew he was all his mother had, and he could never abandon her. His young daughter and mother were why he came back – probably the only reasons.

His head pounded. The black coffee didn't help. He had spent most of the night at the Oasis Tavern, drinking, shooting pool, and trying to forget. But he felt trapped, just like on that mountaintop along the 38th. He saw only a couple of ways out, and neither was good.

"Daddy," little Maggie called out. She ran across the room to him, threw her arms around his leg, and smiled up at him. Occasionally, when his ex-wife wanted to go somewhere, she would drop Maggie off at his mom's place. Still, that was better than not seeing her at all. He had a lot of catching up to do. He knew that.





## CHAPTER 2

This was the coldest January Otto Schneider could remember, and it was only the second day of the new year. Wearing coveralls, a heavy winter coat, and high rubber boots, he sat cross-legged on the plank floor of the old storage shed, hidden in the shadows. His wool cap and gloves lay next to a ladder. He shined a small flashlight on hundred dollar bills lined up neatly in rows, stacked six bundles high in an old wood crate. He carefully counted each stack, wanting to know precisely how much money he had. Outside, a blustery north wind pounded against the wood siding, whistling and howling as it squeezed through the many holes and cracks, but the chill wind neither disturbed nor distracted him.

Otto was worried. His enemies were getting close, and his options for escape had disappeared. He no longer had any place to run. He had grown old and tired, and his skills at surviving had rusted. He no longer was able to muster that sense of control, and control meant the difference between life and death.

He had always known that someday this would happen, but still he was not prepared. Now he had to consider his wife, the only person he had ever truly loved. Emma could not, would not, run. And he would not leave her. Never had life been so peaceful for him, not as Otto Schneider, certainly not as Max. Only as Heinz Hoffman. But it was a false name, a false life, a false sense of security. He always knew that.

He remembered when he had convinced Emma to make the move to Iowa. He explained that life would be better on a farm

where no one would bother them. She told him after they had moved that she would never leave. She had even purchased burial plots in Belle Plaine's cemetery.

Otto had told her very little of his life before he became a dairy farmer in Iowa. She knew him only as a factory worker and immigrant from Germany. When they first met in Milwaukee, he told her about having to flee Hitler's Germany because of his union activities. That was all true, but there had been more, so much more. For almost twenty years, Otto Schneider had led a double life. Now, almost sixty-six years old, he was weary – sickened by the game he had played brilliantly, and fearful of the dangers that used to excite him as a younger man.

His only remaining task now was to take care of Emma and ensure all her needs were provided for, after he was gone. The farm was in her name, as was everything they owned. Not a fool, he had hoarded the money left after he had purchased the farmstead, saving it for this inevitable moment. He had told her about the money, but not how he had gotten it, and she had never asked. He mentioned 'Wolfhound' only once, but she didn't know that was the code name for his handler, only that he and Wolfhound had been involved in some dark business.

*Sixty thousand dollars of clean money.* Otto was able to smile briefly. "Good," he whispered. "This will give her some security." He made sure each bundle was secure in the large crate, then replaced the lid and pushed it deeper into the shadows.

He sat down on an old hay bale and sighed. He had done many things in his life he was ashamed of. He was an abusive man, had always been, especially around those he loved. He deeply regretted how he had treated Emma, but he could not control his nature. He considered her two sons, deciding they would be happy to see something happen to him. And he could not blame them, for he had also treated them miserably over the years.

Otto climbed wearily down from the loft, stepped off the ladder, took it down, and carried it to his pickup truck parked on the gravel road near the gate. He loaded the ladder into the



back and returned to the shed. He secured the door to the large empty room with a new heavy lock. Standing in the smaller room, he paused to think. There was one thing left he had to do. He walked over to the old army cot, took out a manila folder, a pad of paper, and ballpoint pen from inside his brown coveralls, and sat down.

A gust of frigid wind blew the unlatched door open, dusting his thin pale skin and gray beard stubble with snow. The cold moisture chilled him. He got up to shut the door, pushing against the thrust of air.

“Damn cold,” he growled. Searching through a makeshift cabinet, he found matches that were still dry. Grabbing a handful of corncobs, he tore a page from an old newspaper lying beside the heavy cast-iron wood stove. He opened the stove door, its rusty hinges shrieking. He spied a partially burned oak log still inside, threw in the corncobs and wadded-up paper, then struck a match to it. The flame caught slowly at first, then began to spread. Soon the cobs were engulfed. From the folder, he pulled a sheaf of papers, most yellowed with age. He fed each paper into the blazing fire. When the fire had consumed all of them but one, he paused, staring at the combination of numbers and letters he had written years earlier, his own secret code. He smiled and fed that one into the hungry flames. *Now, they have nothing. Not the Americans or the Russians. Let them find another Max.*

He had one task left, and began to write on the pad, ‘My dearest Emma...’ When he finished what he had to say, he ended with, ‘Farewell, my love.’ Signing his name as ‘Heinz,’ he carefully folded the letter and placed it in his coat pocket. He had a special place to hide it where he knew Emma would find it.

Otto sat motionless by the old cook stove, enjoying the warmth of the fire. He closed his eyes and thought about his life, its meaning and purpose. Everything he had done was for working people, including those here in America. He hated the rich capitalists. Someday, because of him, they would be stripped of their unearned wealth. He believed that, and his

beliefs had given him the strength to do what he had done. He dozed off, thinking of the past.

Several hours later, he jerked awake. Surprised that he had fallen asleep, he looked up to see that darkness had settled in. The ashes in the old stove were growing cold. He knew it was time to leave. He had livestock that needed to be fed and a wife who worried about him. That was still a strange thing for Otto to accept, even after so long. No one had ever worried about him before Emma.

He slowly stood, buttoned his coat, and slipped on his hat and gloves. Standing in the doorway, he saw that a new snowfall had covered his earlier tracks. *It reminds me of my old life in Berlin.* He trudged through the biting wind and fresh fallen snow, back to the old truck.



## CHAPTER 3

“Awful cold, ain’t it, Doc?” Newly appointed as Belle Plaine’s Chief of Police, Jimmy Novotny stood in the doorway of the old barn and glanced at the short, elderly man beside him. “Yup, cold as hell,” he commented again when the old man did not respond.

Rubbing his gloved hands together against the frigid dampness, he stared into the shadows of the barn and saw the cows lined up in their stalls, facing away from him. Then, looking in the direction where the winter sun cast its light through an open door, he saw first the high rubber boots and brown coveralls. Moving his gaze higher, he saw the torso of the man hanging from a twelve-inch beam. Nothing moved in the stillness. Even the cows’ tails hung limp in the cold. Everything seemed caught in a frozen crystal moment.

Holding his heavy wool hat in his right hand, Jimmy fidgeted with its short brim, still contemplating what he saw before him. He didn’t exactly know why he took his hat off. To show respect for the dead, he guessed. He took another step closer. Something about the dead man’s left hand, now silhouetted in the sun’s weak rays, caught his eye. The fingers were clenched tightly into a fist. Was he struggling to escape death? Did he change his mind at the very end? Jimmy wondered. He put his hat back on and pulled the earflaps down.

A queasy feeling gripped his gut deep down. He was unable to bring himself to look up into the dead man’s face. *Not yet.* Looking too quickly and seeing how death had been captured in the frozen features might bring back the ghosts from his own

past. Then, finally, he looked.

Lips pulled back, mouth gaping – but it was the eyes that troubled him most. They always reminded him that life had burned brightly within them before it was abruptly extinguished. He turned and stepped back and away from the corpse. Doc's frail voice caught him unexpectedly. "Must be minus fifteen." His words, thin on the frosty mist that escaped his mouth, sounded almost indifferent to the spectacle of the dead man hanging from the rafters. "Didn't think anyplace, even hell, was all this cold. Makes these seventy-year-old bones hurt, right down to the marrow."

With a quick once-over, Jimmy watched the small man, thin even under the bulk of his winter wear, moving with seeming difficulty, as if his stiff joints had completely frozen up. "Believe me, Doc," he replied slowly. "Hell is cold. I've been there." He reached out to touch the dead man's hand with his gloved one. He didn't quite make contact before he pulled his hand back and stuffed it into his coat pocket. "He chose a very crude and painful way to check out."

*How things change*, Jimmy thought. Just a few months ago, he was hanging out in the Oasis Tavern, trying to forget the nightmares from Korea and wondering how he would support his kid. He was as close as he'd ever been to 'checking out' himself. He glanced back at the dead man hanging from the barn rafters. *A bullet to the head would have been much faster...*

At one time he'd thought the Marine Corps was to blame for the mess his life was in. But now, thanks to a Marine Corps buddy who'd also been his old pal in high school, he was the town cop, and the Oasis seemed like a lifetime ago. He owed Walter T. O'Connor big time. Walt had capitalized on his status as a war veteran and got himself elected county sheriff. "Don't worry," Walt had told him. "The town needs a policeman, and you're the best bet as a combat vet and a marine with a high school education. Hell, Jimmy, with that military police experience of yours at Camp Pendleton, you know enough to start. Everything else, you'll figure out as you go along. Anyway, people here respect marines. That's all you need."

The job didn't pay a whole lot, but at least Jimmy could support his daughter and help his mom when she needed it. He cleaned himself up, said goodbye to his one drinking buddy down at the Oasis – another war vet – and reported for work. The mayor, a dear friend of his mother, swore him in, gave him a weapon, and patted him on the back to wish him good luck. His predecessor, a retired farmer from north of town, was happy to hand over the job.

Jimmy shook himself out of the reverie and got back to the cold reality of winter and death. He looked over at the corpse. The boots and the body that filled them hung from a heavy hemp rope tied to a loft beam that ran above the stanchions where the man had milked his cows. The rope had been cleanly cut out of a section running from pulley to pulley along one wall of the barn. The remaining rope end was neatly knotted in front of a corner pulley. It stopped the large door high above in the hayloft from falling open.

Jimmy eyed the four-looped knot slipped tightly around the dead man's neck. About half the size of a hangman's noose, he observed. Following the rope, he saw that it wrapped once around the beam directly above his head, then down toward the wall. It was tied off at a horizontal wall plank about two feet above the barn's wood floor. He walked over to examine the knot. It was simple, but obviously strong enough to hold the dead man's weight. A milking stool with its single leg was stuck in the middle of a pile of cow dung. It was frozen perfectly upright under the dead man's heavy rubber boots. The tips of the boots brushed lightly against the stool seat. *Curious*, Jimmy thought, and filed it away. He bent down to carefully wipe away the straw covering the old wood floor. He saw bits of ice and dirt, but nothing distinguishable. *Did the man have help?*

He stood up and turned to the large open doorway to the cattle yard. He looked off to the southeast toward the sun, still barely above the horizon. The yellow of the emerging light contrasted sharply with the whiteness of the land. Everything seemed so barren, naked, and cold, like Korea. He knew, because he had given that place a year of his life.

He looked back, imagining the scenario. The dead man had evidently run four cows in and tied them off in each stall to milk them. Then he decided to kill himself. Jimmy inhaled deeply, smelling the still pungent odors of cow manure, alfalfa and clover, and something else also familiar. In the coldness of the barn with its strong aromas of life, Jimmy easily discerned the presence of death.

Doc began to look the man over closely. "Heinz Hoffmann," he said. Pulling off a mitten, he reached up to touch the dead man's gloveless hand. "Frozen hard," he observed, trying to move a single finger. "Heinz has been dead long enough that he's stiff already, from the cold as much as from rigor. When'd you get the call from the wife?"

"'bout an hour ago – five-thirty, I think." Jimmy turned to face Belle Plaine's only doctor. "I called you immediately, then grabbed Fred."

An old yellow dog yelped and growled at them – strangers. Standing just outside the barn door, he watched them suspiciously.

"What do you think?" Jimmy asked, walking around, carefully taking in details of the scene. He kicked at the straw, and the nearest black-and-white Holstein stomped her back hooves. Jimmy counted eight cows, four tied up in the barn and the others just outside the double-wide door to the large cattle yard that was fenced square with heavy wood planking. The cows had long ago trampled the snow into mud, and the mud had frozen into deep, hard ruts. But, here and there, the snow drifts grew higher, some as high as the fence. All eight cows waited to be milked. The four inside contently chewed their cud, their heads facing toward the interior, almost within reach of a wall of brown hay stacked neatly in the center of the barn. Those outside stood lined up single file in front of the doorway, waiting. They knew the routine.

Jimmy figured it would take one man at least a couple of hours to milk them all. He wondered if Hoffman had a hired man to help. And if so, where was he?

Walking carefully around the body to get a complete view,

Jimmy let his gaze come to rest on Heinz Hoffman's other hand. Reaching up, he wrapped a hand around the corpse's arm at about the elbow and pulled lightly. Hoffman's right hand was frozen in place up by his neck. The index finger was wedged between the noose and his neck. He must have struggled with it, up to the second he died. *A survival reflex? Or had the old man changed his mind?*

"Got an opinion?" Jimmy asked again when the old doctor didn't respond to his earlier inquiry.

"The man's dead. Most likely strangled himself. That's what it looks like," Doc Thompson growled, setting his bag down beside the wall. With both hands he pulled his earflaps down and the fur collar up high against his head. His eyeglasses steamed over when he spoke. "I'm too damned old for this," Doc grumbled, obviously feeling sorry for himself. "If I had any sense, I'd take what money I have and go someplace warmer for my remaining years."

"He must have had second thoughts," Jimmy said, pointing to the arm. "Tried to get loose."

"Probably."

"You think he died from strangulation?"

"Look at his face, at the position of the head," Doc ordered gruffly. "He strangled himself. Hard way to do it. Probably took a few minutes. That's why the hand. A natural reflex action." He paused, obviously waiting for Jimmy to study the face – Hoffman's eyes, the set of his jaw, bruising on the cheeks and higher, on the temple area. Jimmy knew about death, had seen it way too much in Korea. This man – that look of emptiness in his eyes – reminded him of his buddy killed that freezing night on a desolate mountaintop.

"What'd she say when you spoke with her?" Doc asked, sounding ready to move on and get home.

"Who?"

"Who the hell you think? His wife," he said, ill-tempered. He stopped scanning the corpse long enough to stare at Jimmy.

"She said she had gone out to get a pail of milk ... for the separator. Said he had been out milking for about thirty or forty

minutes. She saw him hanging there, just like that.”

“Was she upset? Distraught, I mean?”

“Not the type to get upset, Doc. Matter-a-fact, she was calm and she seemed organized. She said she was at the neighbors when she called me. Said she would meet us here. Said it sort of calm like.”

“When we arrived, she didn’t seem too distraught to me,” Doc said, mostly to himself. “Not every day your husband kills himself.”

Jimmy was inspecting the cows, patting them on the rump and talking to them. He spoke in a voice both easy and slow. He didn’t want to upset the animals. “Lot a people can hold it inside,” he said to the older man. “For them, it comes later on, when they realize what happened. She’s probably one of those, Doc. Good thing we sent her back to the neighbors to call an ambulance.”

“Yeah? Makes our job easier, you think?”

Jimmy didn’t answer. He reached down to check one cow’s udder. He gently stroked it with his hand. “Here boss, good girl,” he said, talking softly to it just like he would a woman. “He hung himself before he milked his herd.” He had some understanding of the dairy business, before he was shipped off to Korea. His mother had been forced to sell their farm after his father died.

“I guess he had other things on his mind.” Doc stared at him, looking impatient to get out of the cold. His nose and pale, whiskered cheeks had already turned a bright red. “Now, can you get Fred in here so we can cut him down and get back to town? My joints are aching something fierce in this damn deep freeze.”

“Right.” Jimmy stepped around the old yellow dog that was quietly following him around. He walked briskly to the police car, pulling the wool collar up to protect his face from the brutal north wind. “Hey, Fred, get over here. We need you.” The dog rubbed against his pants leg.

Fred Vavrock, a small, middle-aged fellow, scrambled out of the old black and white ’49 Ford with ‘Belle Plain Police’



painted on both sides in bold lettering. He left the engine running. "Sorry, chief, I was checkin' around back of the barn. I had to get in and start her up, or I was gonna freeze my ears off." He hurriedly stuck his hands into the wool mittens.

"Need your help inside." Jimmy paused, not used to being called 'chief' yet. Fred was his only deputy. "See anything back of the barn?"

"No, chief, sure didn't. Too many tracks. Cattle, hogs, people." Fred followed him, throwing his collar up over his ears. The snow crunched under their heavy boots as they walked. Jimmy looked at the tracks frozen in the ice along the path leading to the large milking barn. The snow was darkened and strewn with straw and dung where it had been trampled by the traffic in and out of the barn. He stood and looked over the farm yard, at the corner next to the barn, and the clapboard house about twenty yards away. He heard hogs moving about in a small fenced enclosure near the large barn, then looked at the milk cows still waiting patiently to be milked.

"When was the last snow, Fred?" he finally asked his deputy.

"'bout a week ago. Yeah, last Monday. I remember 'cause I was late for work," Fred replied from the doorway to the milking parlor.

Jimmy nodded. Fred Vavrock wasn't the brightest star in the sky, but he knew the business of police work. He had spent more than twenty years walking a beat with Cedar Rapids PD and knew every alley, saloon, and gambling joint in Czech Town. Last year, he had retired and come back to Belle Plaine to be near his ailing mother.

Fred was a very private person who kept his opinions to himself. But he had a direct way of seeing things, and that was exactly what Jimmy wanted in a deputy, so he hired him on the spot. After six months on the job, Jimmy had come to rely on Fred Vavrock's judgment.

