

If CJ Crezner had his way, the western prairie would still be a cattleman's paradise filled with tall grass and grazing cattle. However, progress is chugging its way westward with trains bringing more and more land hungry homesteaders. Will they be his friends, or his enemies?

Goodbye, Belvidere: A Hundred and Sixty Acres

by Joyce Wheeler

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JOYCE WHEELER

Goodbye,

Belvidere

A Hundred and Sixty Acres

Goodbye, Belvidere trilogy
BOOK I

Goodbye, Belvidere

A HUNDRED AND SIXTY ACRES

Joyce Wheeler

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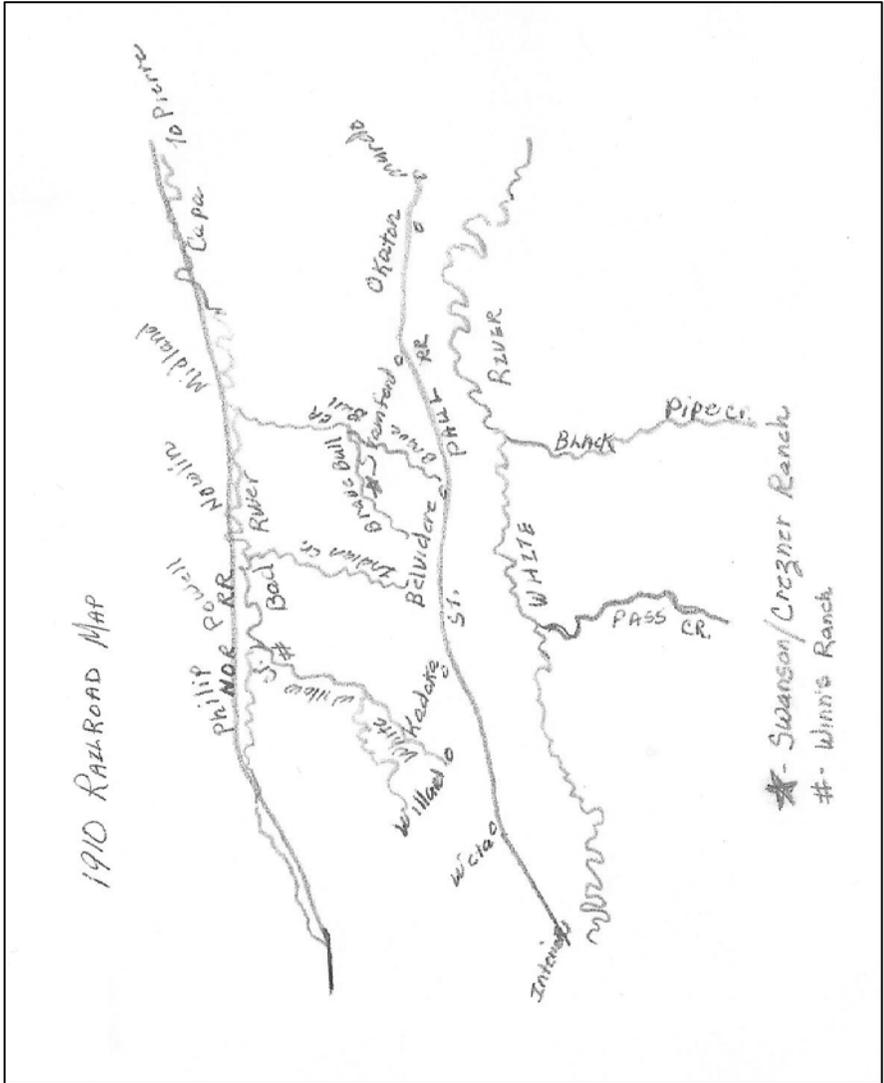
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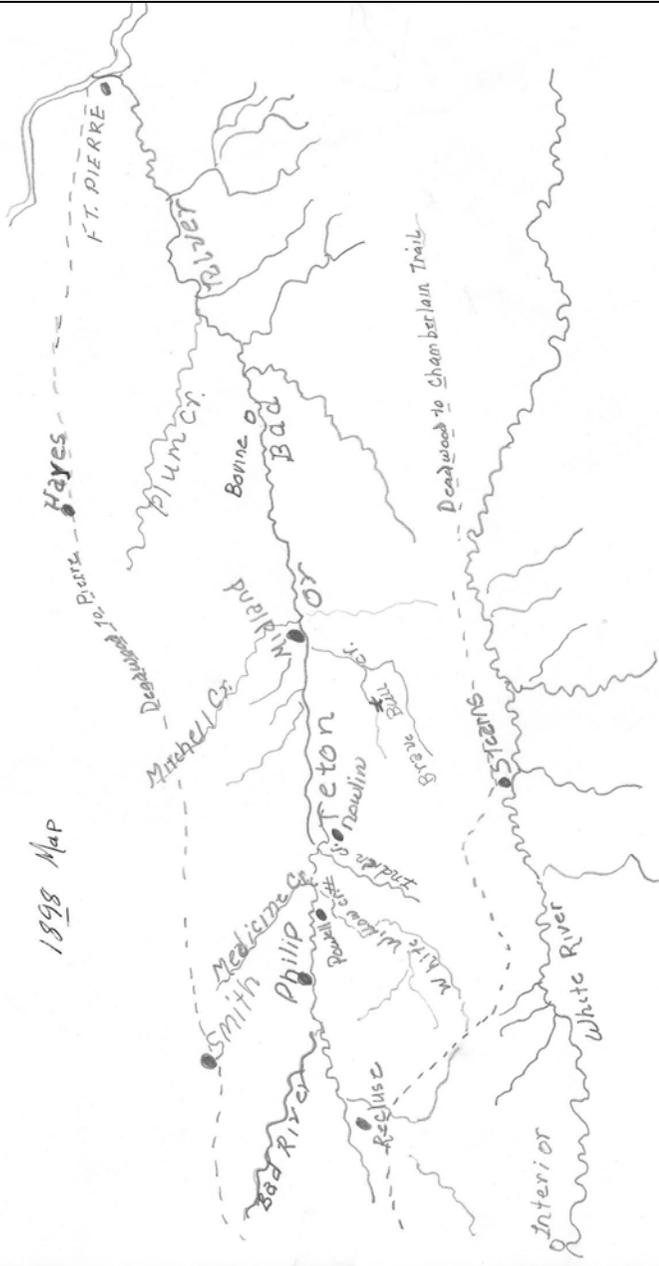
Second Edition

All scripture quote are from KJV

Maps



1898 Map



* - Swanson/Cregner Ranch

- Winn's Ranch

Four

August 27, 1898
Stearns, South Dakota

Dear Mom and Dad,

I've seen some beautiful grass country and met some fine people. Believe it or not, tonight I'm going to a dance here at Stearns. I can't imagine what kind of music or what the musicians will play, but this little burg is bustling with activity. The folks who live downriver, by the name of Thode, are doing what they call a pit barbecue. They've invited all the surrounding folks to come and enjoy the roasted meat and then stay for the dance. Since they also have a store in Stearns, they probably hope the folks will do some buying as well.

Mr. Stearns, who runs the post office and a store, is Smokey's widowed father. I don't know if he was glad to see Winn and me or not. Winn wanted his money for the cattle and wasn't exactly patient about getting it from him. Mr. Stearns didn't seem to know his son had bought cattle and he done some hemming and hawing, but finally gave Winn cash for them. After tempers cooled down, Smokey walked in. His father didn't act pleased to see him either, but Smokey has a way of congenial bantering that soothes everyone. Plus, he bought drinks for all of us.

The White River is not "purty" as Winn would say. It runs thick white water when it's riled up, and even when it settles down, the water is not clear. However, it does keep the trees and vegetation watered around here, plus providing good rough cattle country. The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is on the south side of it.

Running out of paper. Will see you later.

Love,
CJ

“I say, CJ, if you get any faster at writing these notes to your folks, I won’t even have a chance to sit down.” Winn shook his head at the rest of the group in the crowded store that doubled as a post office. “I think it’s this guy’s goal to mail a letter from every post office in the country.”

“Who knows?” Smokey retorted. “A hundred years from now people will see those letters and wonder where in the world Stearns, South Dakota, was. Same way with Recluse. Better tell the family to save all the letters, CJ. Your grandkids might be able to sell ’em for a few cents.” The words were barely out of his mouth before he jumped down from his perch on a keg of nails and hurried to the door. With a grand sloop, he opened it to admit Joanna.

Everything about Joanna looked perfectly in place—from her starched white collar to the barely discernible bottom of her white, lace petticoat.

“Aren’t you the perfect gentleman?” she said briskly, nodding at Smokey. The feathers in her hat waved gracefully. She entered the male-dominated store and post office with scarcely an acknowledgement to the motley crew, carefully stepping around the obstacles that were scattered in front of the pigeon holes which represented the US mail.

“Any mail for us, Mr. Stearns?” She didn’t wait for his reply but searched for herself among the tied up bundles that were thrust into the slots. “Oh, good!” She pulled out a stack of letters and turned around to look at the strangely silent group. “Anyone who left laundry with me can pick it up at my buggy. Isaac is waiting there to do business.”

She placed her mail into a seemingly bottomless reticule and picked up her skirt with one hand. She gave a smart little salute with the other as she left the silent men and walked out. Smokey followed her, shutting the door firmly behind him.

“Oh, that is a purty woman,” Winn said softly. “And can she ever cook. Me ‘n CJ had dinner with them a few days ago. Mmm, good!”

CJ decided to hunt down his laundry. He had heard Winn’s raving about Joanna’s cooking all the way into Stearns the day before. Her cooking was good, but, he decided, her attitude was terrible.

The little outpost of Stearns baked in the afternoon heat. Closer to the White River, the huge cottonwood trees gave welcome shade to the gradually swelling population. Word of mouth had spread quickly that food, friends, and visiting was in the works. Cowboys, Indians, cattlemen and their wives, and sojourning strangers had gathered to share a break in the routine.

CJ noted that tables had appeared out of nowhere, and it looked like everyone had brought something to add to the feast. A place to dance had been roped off, and even now a small group of musicians who brought instruments were tuning up. Discordant notes and laughter were heard as they struggled with some songs.

He saw Isaac standing in a black buggy parked in the shade of another store and watched with amusement as the little lad conducted his business with all seriousness. Joanna and Smokey were standing a short distance from him. CJ doubted she would let a penny go unwatched.

“Hi, CJ!” Isaac’s greeting was full of smiles.

“Guess you’re learning more ciphering today, right?”

“Yessir! And here’s your package and you owe—” Isaac puckered up his forehead as he read the amount on the paper. “Twenty-five cents.”

CJ frowned and looked at Joanna. He knew he owed for one pair of overalls, two shirts, and probably a host of buttons and torn places. It should be more like one dollar plus.

Isaac was patiently waiting for the money. CJ paid him and then ambled over to where Joanna and Smokey stood. Their conversation faded into silence as he came closer and Joanna’s smile disappeared.

“You don’t look happy, Mr. Crezner.”

“Ah, well, Miss Swanson, perhaps happy is not the right word. I’m perplexed. I thought I left two shirts and one pair of overalls, and from

the looks and feel of this package, there is one pair of overalls and no shirts.”

“Oh, oh, oh, Joanna.” Smokey whistled and winked at CJ. “A dissatisfied customer. I better leave the two of you alone to discuss business.” He gave Joanna a rakish grin. “Remember, you promised to dance a whole lot of dances with me.” He patted her cheek and sauntered off.

“Yes, well.” There were small red spots on Joanna’s cheeks as she turned her attention back to CJ. “I washed and mended them, but even I could not fix all the splits in the seams. Mr. Crezner, those shirts are way too small for you. Like the one you’re wearing now.”

CJ stood a little taller and felt the usual tightness under his arm pits. “What?” he yelped, a little louder than he intended.

“You apparently aren’t the skinny little weasel you used to be,” she answered firmly. “I only charged half price for the overalls.” She lifted her chin a bit defiantly. “Of course, if you want shirts that don’t fit you anymore, I could charge the whole amount, which would be one dollar and twenty cents.”

He took a deep breath and counted to ten. In the process, he realized the buttons over his chest were about ready to pop.

“Just great,” he finally muttered. “I wasn’t planning on buying new shirts.”

“You must still be a growing boy.”

“Young lady,” he said quietly, “I’m neither a weasel nor a boy. Most likely, I’m older than you are.” He walked away before he could say more than he should. She was a most infuriating woman.



The afternoon shadows were long, and the cottonwood trees graciously lent their shade to the perspiring dancers. The musicians had worked up a variety of songs together, and their efforts were appreciated. In fact, CJ mused, they sounded good. He had watched the gathering with a great deal of enjoyment, even if his new loose-fitting shirt was hotter than his old, thin tight one.

The prettiest woman there was a smiling young lady who seemed to think it was her duty to dance with every gentleman present. She

was coming his way and had a determined look. He had managed to disappear into the crowd before. It would be rude, he knew, to not share a waltz with her.

“You all must be the most bashful fellow here,” she drawled, and her accent was beautifully southern. CJ decided she was even prettier close up.

“They are playing the Missouri Waltz, and I hear you are from that great state, as I am—I believe it must be our dance!” She tilted her head to one side, and a blond tendril moved along her cheek in the light breeze.

“I believe it most certainly must be our dance,” CJ said and took her offered hand to lead her towards the swaying couples.

When she smiled delightedly at him, he noticed the dimples in her cheeks. “Isn’t this just a marvelous, marvelous gathering?” she asked as they started dancing. “I’m visiting friends and am so excited to meet everyone. I live in Pierre, and my daddy told me to get out into the country and invite people to our tent meeting next week. I’m combining business with pleasure, and so, sir, I’d like to invite you also. Now, please say you’ll come and bring all your friends!” She gave the whole speech with drawls and smiles and never missed a step of the waltz.

“What kind of tent meeting?” CJ wondered if her daddy might be a con medicine man who sent his beautiful daughter out to gather in the local yokels.

“We are having a revival to spread the message of Jesus Christ!” She acted as if she didn’t notice that CJ stumble a couple of steps and went on talking merrily. “Our church in Missouri sent us here to South Dakota to meet the spiritual needs of the west, and Daddy and Momma thought what better way for people to see and hear Daddy preach than to have a wonderful big tent meeting!

“And, Mr. CJ Crezner, I also have something more I’d like to talk to you about. Oh yes! I know your name.” She laughed at his surprised look. “Mr. Smokey told me, and he also told me you have a wonderful voice, and since I was asked to sing a few songs, I’m just begging you to sing with me! Smokey says you know all sorts of hymns, and I know it would lift up people’s hearts to hear praises to the Lord!” Her

dimples flashed and she seemed to float in his arms as they dipped and swayed to the music.

He smiled down at her, and wondered if anyone ever refused this delightful creature anything.

“Ah, Miss—”

“Oh, just call me Deborah Lynn. My daddy is the Reverend Joseph Smith, from the First Baptist Church in Pierre, and even if we don’t have a church building yet, we will in the very near future. If it’s the Lord’s will, of course.”

“Of course.” CJ made a few steps without saying anything, and then asked, “What songs do you have in mind?”

He figured correctly that Deborah Lynn knew exactly what they were going to sing and when they would be singing. She launched into another speech and her blue eyes twinkled all the while she informed him of his role and what songs they would sing, and what key they would sing them in. He was smiling broadly by this time and was surprised when he looked up to see Joanna and Smokey dancing close beside them. He was even more surprised when Joanna rolled her eyes and shook her head at him. He lost his smile immediately and glared at her. Smokey chose that moment to whirl his partner in a different direction and CJ found himself glaring at Joanna’s back.

“Well, now, that is a dark look. I certainly hope I’m not the cause of such irritation.” Deborah Lynn’s voice carried a tiny bit of reproach.

CJ hastily assured her that she was not the cause of any such thing, and before more could be said, the music stopped. It was the last song of a set, and CJ supposed the correct thing to do was to escort his partner back to her friends.

She made sure that he would indeed sing with her, and he agreed. He didn’t loiter with her and her friends, but instead took a quick tour around the crowd while he looked for Smokey. He had a few things to say to Mr. Stearns.

Instead of Smokey, he found Joanna fanning herself beside the lemonade table. Come to think about it, he also had a few things he wanted to say to her.

She raised one defined dark eyebrow at him as he approached her. "If you've come to ask me to dance, you'll have to wait a minute. I'm cooking."

He opened his mouth to say that was probably the last thing on his mind, but decided such a remark would be rude. "Well, while you're cooling down, maybe you'll tell me what the rolled eyes and so on meant." He knew his words were short and clipped.

She looked at his shirt. "You have a nice new shirt. The right size. But good grief, the collar makes you look like a preacher." She shook her head in obvious frustration at his inability to dress correctly.

The music started again, this time a slow two step. Without thinking, he steered her rather unceremoniously onto the makeshift dance floor and tersely gathered her into his arms to dance. For a brief moment he thought she was going to break away from him and return to the lemonade stand. He held her tighter and she looked at him questioningly.

"Miss Swanson." He couldn't keep the edge from his voice. "Do you know why it makes me look like a preacher?" He answered his own question with brusqueness. "I am a preacher, and, ma'am, I would be pleased if you keep that information to yourself." He took momentary pleasure in seeing her eyes widen in shock.

For several moments they danced in silence. He felt her take a deep breath and then she looked up at him with her eyes narrowed and speculating.

"The J in CJ must stand for Jonah."

"What?"

"The J in CJ must stand for Jonah. He ran away when the Lord wanted him to preach too. I wondered why an educated man like yourself was wandering around with the locals."

"What? What?" Each *what* became louder until the dancers next to them gave him a startled look. He managed a forced smile and quickly whirled Miss Swanson a little farther away from the rest of the crowd.

He muttered close to her ear. "You always make the most irritating remarks!"

"I know. It's a bad habit of mine." For a second, she looked apologetic. "But," she added with exasperation, "When people aren't

quite what they seem to be, I think they're trying to run from something."

"Not what they seem to be?" He scowled at her. "Now just what does that mean?"

"Hat, chaps, and boots don't make a cowboy."

"What?"

"Oh, pipe down." She looked at him with evident disgust. "I can't explain it, but I knew right away you weren't exactly the run of the mill cowboy."

They danced without smiling.

She continued, "So, why aren't you preaching out here? We have all sorts coming through, but not many preachers."

He didn't answer for a while. He wished with all his being that he wouldn't have told her. Not that he thought she'd say anything, but he wasn't quite ready to be a man of God. Being a wandering cowboy was much easier. He sighed. Maybe he was making the whole matter a lot more difficult than it really was.

"I needed—I wanted—time. Time to—I don't really know. Just time to pull it all together, time to get ready for what my family wants me to do."

She looked over his shoulder without saying anything for a while. "What does your family want you to do?"

"Join in with my grandfather at his church. Preach. Become the next pastor and follow in his footsteps."

"What's the problem with that?"

"I'm a lousy preacher." She was the first person he had admitted that to. He vaguely wondered why he was so honest with her. Probably because he would never see her again, and he doubted she would concern herself for any length of time over his troubles.

"Well, that's pathetic! Why don't you improve yourself? Get more fired up. You seem so...so..."

"Bland." He supplied her missing word.

She studied him with a thoughtful expression. "No. That's not the right word. I can't think of it right now." They finished the last steps of the song, and after the music ended, she put her hand on his arm. "Mr. Crezner, running away doesn't solve anything. I know that first hand."

“I wouldn’t call it running away. I’m just not quite sure.” He couldn’t seem to finish his thought and was irritated at her for no other reason than the fact she said squarely what his mind refused to admit.

Five

September 12, 1898
Pierre, South Dakota

Dear Mom and Dad,

I hope my telegram didn't alarm you. I wanted to let you know I arrived in Pierre, and I would be staying here for a while. I was so busy that it seemed best to send a quick note.

I've been helping Reverend Smith and his family with tent revival meetings, and it was a full two weeks of being the song leader with numerous other duties. Reverend Smith has been able to garner immense enthusiasm towards the building of a church and has asked me to continue working with him. It seemed like a good idea, especially after I read Granddad's letter which indicated cousin Kentworth and his family were planning to work with him. That has relieved my mind considerably. I was worried I had seemed ungrateful for the position my granddad offered me.

However, this past week, the Smith family received word that Mrs. Smith's mother in Missouri has become very ill. The family has asked me to escort Mrs. Smith and her daughter, Deborah Lynn, back to Missouri for an extended visit and I have agreed to go with them. Reverend Smith will stay in Pierre to continue with the building plans. After I have delivered the Smith ladies, I will be able to travel to Springfield to be with you for a couple of weeks.

We are leaving in two days, so I will probably be home before this letter reaches you, although I understand train connections are a little dubious going north and south.

Thanks for all the letters from home that were waiting for me at the Pierre post office. It was good to read the news. I am looking forward to seeing the family.

Love,
Carl John

CJ slowly reread his letter. It had been difficult to condense the past weeks into a couple of paragraphs. Life with the Smiths had thrust him into the middle of church life once again. He found he remembered exactly how to speak and act so he wouldn't be contentious. He remembered to murmur "Praise the Lord" at all the appropriate times. He knew church life. He wasn't sure if he knew what God wanted from him as well as he knew what the church expected of him.

He carefully folded the letter and placed it into the envelope and, just as carefully, sealed it shut. For several minutes, he sat looking out the window of his small room in the boarding house. The street below was quiet in contrast to the bustle of the town.

Pierre, South Dakota, was excited to be the new capitol of the state. It was growing, and it was building. Situated along the banks of the Missouri River gave it an ambience of a watered oasis from the brown of the prairie.

After the Stearns dance and feed, Winn had decided to accompany CJ to the stage stop at Midland where CJ would board the stage for the ride to Pierre. The two men had ambled down Brave Bull Creek with Winn making stops at every place to visit. He loved to tell whoever would listen how CJ and that purty blonde gal sang so good together that right on the spot she asked him to come with her to Pierre to help with her daddy's revival. Winn gave a great account of how CJ stuttered and stammered and finally said yes.

CJ would shake his head at Winn and knew from the looks of Winn's audience it made a good story and would be repeated.

CJ pushed back his chair and decided a walk to the post office would be a refreshing change from sitting in his room and thinking too

much. He reached over to the peg where his hat rested rather forlornly. When he arrived in Pierre, Deborah Lynn had teased him and said his hat looked passable only when he was chasing cows. Since he was with the Smiths every day, and both parents looked the same way at the dusty and battered head gear, he parked it on the peg.

For a moment, his hand hovered indecisively over his Stetson, but defiance in this tiny matter took over, and he placed it firmly on his head, grabbed his letter, and walked out the door.

“Mr. Crezner!” His landlady stood at the foot of the stairs with her hands on her hips. “Mr. Crezner, the Smith ladies are here and are a-wantin’ me to fetch you.”

“Oh. Well. Tell them I’ll be right down.” With those words, CJ slowly reopened his door and placed his tan Stetson back on its peg.

He often wondered when he saw Deborah Lynn Smith if a more vivacious or lovely lady existed. She could charm a rattlesnake if she chose to, he thought, and he had never encountered her when she wasn’t charming.

Today was no exception. As soon as he entered the parlor, both ladies bounded out of their chairs and began talking at once. Deborah Lynn laughed and gave her slightly shorter mother a hug.

“You all go ahead, Momma. I’ll let you tell him the news!”

The elder Smith lady began immediately. “CJ, we have a small monetary gift for you which the Reverend said you well deserved.” She handed him an envelope. “But this is what we are so excited about! When we were walking past the general store, what did we see in the window but the perfect hat for you?” She took a deep breath and added with an adrenal rush, “And it’s on sale!”

“Well.” CJ tried again with more enthusiasm. “Well!”

“Now, we can’t take any more time to go back with you, but we did tell the proprietor that you might be coming down. So—”

“Oh, I get to tell him this part, Momma! So the store is holding it for you until you get down there. We all just rushed up here right away to tell you! We felt so bad that you’ve gone bareheaded all these days. Daddy says a man should have a hat!”

“I was just going to the post office to mail a letter, so I’ll—I’ll check it out on my way back.” CJ put the envelope in his shirt pocket.

He had unhappy visions of what kind of hat the two ladies might think was perfect for him. Probably a derby or some other kind of sissy-type hat. He shuddered.

“Now, CJ.” Deborah Lynn put her arm through his. “We’ll just walk down to the post office with you. It’s on our way home.” He was ushered out the door and onto the street before he realized it.

The two women talked about the trip back to Missouri and how they had been praying for Mrs. Smith’s mother. They talked about the building plans and the excitement of starting a new church. When they arrived at the post office, they reminded him they were expecting him for supper that evening, and Mrs. Smith said she hoped he’d be wearing his new hat.

He waved a rather weak goodbye to them and gave an inward sigh. After he posted the letter, he decided he may as well get this nightmare over with and slowly walked to the general store.

The owner seemed to be waiting for him. “Mr. Crezner? Say, I want to tell you I sure enjoyed hearing you sing. You’ve got quite a voice there, young man.”

CJ thanked him. “Ah, I’m told there is a hat here?”

“Oh yes, sir. The Smith ladies picked this out for you. I think you’ll like it!”

CJ wondered if there was a little smirk on the guy’s face and braced himself for whatever was going to be presented. With a grand flourish, a hat box was brought out and set on the counter.

“Are you ready for this?” The owner snapped off the lid and proudly pulled out the hat with great pomp and ceremony.

CJ’s jaw dropped. He stared uncomprehendingly and was totally speechless.

“Yup. Thought you’d like it,” the storekeeper said with obvious satisfaction. “The two ladies looked it all over, pointed out a few flaws they noticed, and told me to hold it back for you. I can take cash, or if you can’t pay all of it right now, I can do a little bit of credit.”

“Well. Ah, what are you needing for it?” CJ finally found his voice.

The storekeeper puffed up his chest. “A Stetson of this caliber usually sells for four dollars and fifty cents. But, as the ladies pointed out, there are some spots on the crown, plus a tiny slit in the silk

lining. I don't know how that happened. But anyway, I took off one whole dollar. And because I sure like your singing, I told the ladies I would sell it to you for three dollars, but that's just for you and just for today."

It was quite a speech. When he was finished, he looked at CJ speculatively. "You ain't gonna find another bargain like this. 'Boss of the Plains' is the best Stetson they sell. Made of nutria fur—best there is—and the brown color, perfect for you, sir."

CJ quickly took the envelope Mrs. Smith had given him from his shirt pocket. When he opened it, he counted out the money and laid it on the counter. Then he dug into his pockets. He found enough coins to total three dollars, with two pennies left over.

"I—well, I sure never thought I could afford something like this!" CJ shook the beaming man's hand. "Boss of the Plains! A lot of guys I rode with talked about this Stetson!"

The storekeeper carefully put the money in the register and wrote up the bill. He scrawled Paid in Full on it and handed it to CJ. "You want me to shape it a little for you?"

CJ had already put it on his head. It fit a little loose, but some paper in the band would take care of that. He found a dusty mirror in the store and a quick glance told him it was just fine the way it was.

"I believe this will work."

"Yup. Looks mighty fine. The ladies said you were escorting 'em back to Missouri. Too bad about Mrs. Smith's mama. Oh, you want the box it came in?"

On his way back to his room, with a fine Stetson on his head and the empty hat box in his hands, he thought about the Smith ladies. How did they ever convince the store owner to mark this hat down and then come up with almost enough money to buy it? And the wonder of it all—to pick out a hat that he really wanted? Amazing. They were amazing women. Visions of blue eyes and dimpled cheeks sifted through his mind. Tactful. Talented. Terrific. Beautiful. And he was the lucky man who would be escorting Deborah Lynn (and her momma) back to Missouri. Wonderful!

Six

October 18, 1898
Springfield, Missouri

Dear Isaac,

I'm sending you this crate of surplus books from our church library in Springfield, Missouri. I thought you might like them. I also included some books for your father and your aunt.

I'll be heading back to Pierre in a couple of weeks. The Reverend Smith had asked me to escort Mrs. Smith and their daughter, Deborah Lynn (you remember she's the one who sang at Stearns) back to Missouri earlier because of illness in their family. Sadly, Mrs. Smith's mother passed away shortly after we arrived in Missouri.

The fall colors are beautiful and the trees look like a painter has been splashing colors all about. I will be anxious to see what South Dakota looks like in the fall.

I hope you enjoy the books.

Sincerely,
Carl John Crezner

The wooden crate was full and heavy and it would cost a pretty penny to mail. His mother had carefully packed all the books in solidly and even found nooks and crannies to add some hard candy.

"If you're finished, Carl John, we'll get the lid nailed on." His father was waiting with the hammer.

"Finished." CJ quickly stuffed the letter into the envelope and laid it on the top of the books.

Within minutes, the lid was nailed on, the address to Mr. Isaac Swanson, Stearns, South Dakota, was written in bold letters, and the return address of CJ Crezner, Pierre, South Dakota, was also added.

It was a lazy afternoon in the Missouri autumn. The curtains in the parsonage dining room fluttered silently from the slight breeze of the open window. It was, CJ reflected, the only time since he arrived that the pace of the household slowed down.

There had been several unexpected deaths in his father's congregation. With consoling the grieving families and preparing for the funeral services, his father had given CJ list after list of details to attend to and time seemed to evaporate. And while his parents had both expressed pleasure at his physical improvement, there had been an undercurrent of concern about his spiritual state of mind.

"Doc Regis was pretty proud his diagnosis of you was correct." CJ's father pulled back a dining table chair. He motioned for CJ to sit down and join him.

CJ smiled as he sat down. "Doc Regis is a crusty guy with a heart of gold. Did I ever tell you that he taught me how to fight when I was being bullied in the third grade?"

"Oh yes. I knew all about it." Humor glinted from his father's eyes. "A preacher doesn't teach his son to fight, but if the family doctor takes the boy to the barn and shows him some protective moves, praise the Lord."

CJ looked at his father with dawning comprehension. "And if the same family doctor has a brother Giles who is a trail boss, praise the Lord again."

"Exactly. You needed experience that I couldn't give you. I sometimes wish my own father had sent me away for a while. But your temperament and mine are different. I—never had the questions about my faith that you seem to have." His father gave a sigh and shook his head. "I'm glad you came home for a visit, son. Your mother and I were beginning to think you might end up in Canada."

"Well, the prairies of Dakota might seem like the end of the world for some people. I guess I like the open space. I miss it more than I ever thought I would." CJ fidgeted slightly in his chair. "It's not that I question God, or that I doubt Christ. It's more—it's more like I don't

have any enthusiasm.” He found the words hard to say and looked down at the table. “I don’t have any enthusiasm to preach.” He looked at his father pleadingly. “I’m sorry, Dad. I know I’ve disappointed you and Granddad. I’m—I’m very sorry.”

He abruptly pushed back his chair and stood up. “I listen to you and Granddad preach, and Reverend Smith, and there’s passion in your message.” He shook his head and began to pace back and forth in front of the window. “I don’t have that zeal. I don’t have a voice that has any conviction. I can’t muster up anything but dread for the pulpit. If I were to take Granddad’s church, the whole congregation would stop coming. I would feel like a hypocrite every time I preached. It’s not in me!” He slumped back into his chair. “It’s just not in me,” he repeated slowly.

His father looked at him steadily. “I have begun to realize we always took it for granted that you would be another generation of Crezner preachers. We made the mistake of not asking the Lord if this was His will.”

“I have absolutely no idea *what* His will for me is,” CJ said, a little bitterly.

“Not everyone is called to be a preacher, Carl John. There are many who serve the Lord quietly and touch people’s lives. You’ll find your calling. And while you’re waiting, study the Word and pray.”

“Was—Granddad totally disgusted with me?” He still hadn’t made the twenty mile trip to his granddad’s church.

“Surprisingly, no. Your cousin Kentworth unexpectedly married a woman with three children, and they wanted to raise them in a small town. He contacted your grandfather late this summer about moving from Kansas City and coming to help at Dad’s church. Actually, it has worked out very well. The Lord moves in mysterious ways, Carl John. Maybe it was His nudging that prompted you to head north.”

CJ frowned and looked down at his hands. Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn’t. He was never sure where the nudges came from.

He heard his mother’s voice through the open window and then two other very southern voices that he knew quite well. His quick look out the window confirmed that, indeed, his mother and the Smith ladies were almost at the door.

“Did you know we were having company?”

His question was answered by the puzzled look on his father’s face. “No. Do you recognize the voices?”

“The Smith ladies.” He barely had the words out of his mouth when three happy and chattering ladies entered the dining room.

“Look who I met at the luncheon!” His mother’s voice was full of enthusiasm. “Imagine my surprise when I found out that Miss Rovey’s niece, who was our singing entertainment today, was none other than Debora Lynn Smith! And her mother is here also!”

“Oh, I love surprises!” Debora Lynn had reached the now standing CJ and she patted his arm with obvious pleasure. “When Auntie Coramae asked me to sing, I just knew we could surprise you and your family by coming to Springfield! And to think—you and Auntie are neighbors!”

To think, CJ mused to himself, the gregarious maiden auntie who fussed over every little detail in life was this lovely creature’s relative took more than a little imagination.

“And you must be Reverend Crezner!” Mrs. Smith greeted CJ’s father with outstretched hand and her usual winning smile. “We are just delighted to meet CJ’s family. He is a very fine young man, you know, and has just taken absolutely wonderful care of Deborah Lynn and myself on this long and tiring trip. I simply don’t know what we would have done without him.” She paused for breath before continuing. “And, when you hear him and Deborah Lynn sing, it will warm your heart, just simply warm your heart. And, we have some huge plans for him to sing with Deborah Lynn tomorrow at the gospel meeting at your church. It was Coramae’s idea that these two young people could sing several songs before the meeting and several more afterwards. Oh, I just know everyone will love hearing them. Of course, that is if CJ is willing and all that.”

She paused once again and Deborah Lynn looked at CJ with pleading blue eyes. “Please, please say you will, CJ. Momma and I have some songs that we think will sound so perfect for the meeting. And Auntie approved of all of them last night. Please?”

CJ looked at his father blankly. “Gospel meeting?”

“My goodness, yes. In all the hustle these past days, I never mentioned to you we have planned a special meeting to preach the gospel. Several ministers are coming. Even your grandfather.”

“Well.” He managed a smile for Deborah Lynn and sighed inwardly. South Dakota was sounding better all the time. “Well,” he repeated, “this is short notice. What songs did you have in mind?”

Within moments, he was herded to the piano in the parlor, and excited chatter from everyone was swirling around him. He had a sinking feeling clear to the end of his booted toes. Gospel meetings. Blood and thunder preaching. Halleluiahs and Praise the Lord. *Oh God, why did You send me home to take part in this? What would have been wrong with just a quiet visit with my parents?*



Everyone said they had never heard him sing better or with more feeling than when he and Miss Deborah Lynn sang the closing hymn, “Rescue the Perishing.” It seemed to hit a tender note with the crowd and certainly added a grand finale to the meeting.

Afterwards, a bountiful lunch was spread on the tables outside in the late afternoon sunshine. Platefuls of sandwiches and dainty cakes were urged upon the enthusiastic gathering. Deborah Lynn walked with him with her arm tucked sweetly around his, and graciously said “Praise the Lord” when people would stop and congratulate them on a job well done.

“I declare, CJ, I could drink a whole pitcher of lemonade, my throat is that dry,” she told him as they passed through several groups of people.

Upon hearing her remark, a tiny lady turned towards them. “CJ? Now, Miss Smith, when did the Reverend Crezner become merely CJ?”

“Hello, Mrs. Kraft, it’s good to see you!” CJ took her tiny hand and gently brushed his lips across the gloved fingers. “Deborah Lynn, let me introduce you to my favorite teacher!”

“I taught him high school English and elementary Christianity.” Mrs. Kraft beamed.

Deborah Lynn looked puzzled. “Reverend?” She gave her liquid laugh that always seemed to float into a musical arrangement. “Reverend?” she repeated and looked at CJ for an explanation.

Mrs. Kraft didn’t wait for CJ to explain anything. “Yes, my dear. Reverend Crezner, the next generation of Crezner pastors. I, myself, attended his orientation, and even if I do say so myself, I take great pride in having taught him Sunday school for many years. Yes. Yes. He will preach as good as he sings.”

He gently hugged the tiny form. “Mrs. Kraft is, of course, prejudice, but that still doesn’t keep her from being my favorite teacher.”

“And you, young man, were my favorite student. But I must scold you for not writing to me while you were gone. Of course,” she added thoughtfully, “when I last saw you this spring, you didn’t look healthy enough to even make it to fall.” She tapped him on the arm with her fan. “Sunshine and cattle drives must be good for you. You look the picture of a strong young man now! When are you going to take your grandfather’s church?”

Deborah Lynn looked even more puzzled and seemed to be at a loss for words. A very rare thing, CJ mused to himself.

“I’m going back to South Dakota with the Smiths, Mrs. Kraft. Grandfather is very blessed to have my cousin Kentworth at his church.”

Mrs. Kraft clucked and shook her head. CJ knew she had more to say, but at that moment, Mrs. Smith swept towards them with glasses of lemonade in her hands.

“My dear children, you must be famished for something to drink!” She handed them each a glass and, with her usual gentleness, began a conversation with Mrs. Kraft.

CJ felt a gentle tug on his arm. It was clear that Deborah Lynn wanted a word with him in private.

“*Reverend* Crezner?” she asked when they were beyond the hearing of others. “Reverend? CJ, why didn’t you tell us you were an ordained minister?” Her blue eyes looked slightly stormy.

“Well.” He wanted to choose his words carefully. “It really didn’t seem important. You didn’t need a minister; you needed someone to

sing with you. Do the little jobs. I was glad to help you and your folks in that manner.” He smiled gently at her, hoping that would take away the storm which seemed to be brewing a little stronger every minute.

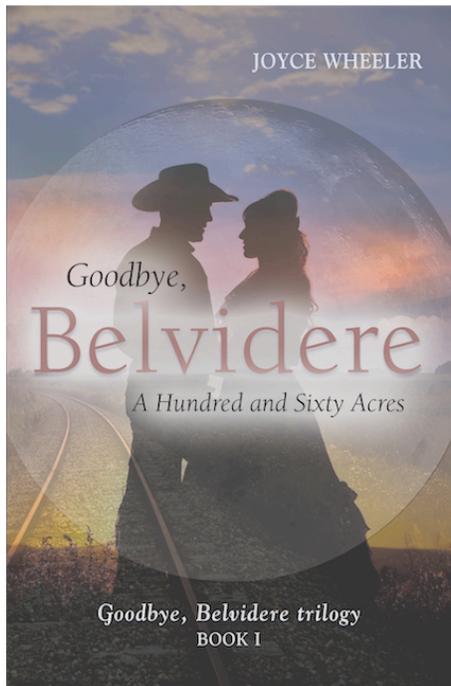
“But it was deceiving of you!” She took a long draught of lemonade, and then a deep breath. He waited for the storm to break. “I can’t understand why you aren’t proud to be an ordained minister for the work of Jesus Christ. It—frankly, CJ, it puts you in a different light, at least, for me, it does.”

He immediately took offense at her words. “There was no deceiving on my part. Pure and simple, I was ordained in the spring, I don’t have a church, and I’d just come off a cattle drive.” He looked into her troubled eyes with an edge of annoyance sparking from his own hazel ones. “You took it for granted I was a cowboy. I never said I was or I wasn’t.”

She said nothing for several seconds. Neither did he. Finally, she looked down and said softly, “CJ, we’ll have to continue this discussion another time. Momma will be wanting me to mingle with the people.” She swiftly walked away, her long skirt brushing through the grass with a swishing sound.

He gulped down his own glass of lemonade and set it on a nearby table. He turned towards the church and walked the brick pathway towards the steps that led into the sanctuary. Only as he reached the top step did he realize his grandfather was standing just inside the double doors, watching him.

“Carl John,” his grandfather said in his sonorous voice. “Come inside. I have been wanting to talk to you.”



If CJ Crezner had his way, the western prairie would still be a cattleman's paradise filled with tall grass and grazing cattle. However, progress is chugging its way westward with trains bringing more and more land hungry homesteaders. Will they be his friends, or his enemies?

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