



## Daughter of Twin Oaks

by Lauraine Snelling

Excerpt provided courtesy of LauraineSnelling.com

*Twin Oaks Farm  
Mid-September 1862*

"You have...to get our...horses out of Kentucky. You're...the only one left who can." Major Joshua Highwood, brought home by his slave, Benjamin, after they'd been wounded in the battle at Kensington, lay in his own bed, being eaten alive by the gangrene. He raised up on one elbow. The struggle to get closer to his daughter's face brought sweat to his brow and an even greater weakness to his voice. "Jesselynn, I told you to take them away two years ago, and you didn't do it." He sank back on his pillows and closed his eyes, every breath a struggle. The stench of putrid flesh permeated the room. "I know...far too much to ask...of a young...woman."

Jesselynn felt as if she'd been stabbed through the heart with one of her father's swords. "I know, but Adam and Zachary said...and you were already off fighting...and Mama so--oh, Father, forgive me." At this point she wasn't sure which Father she needed forgiveness from most, heavenly or earthly.

"I know child. I do. T-too much..."

She leaned closer to hear him.

"Your mother, right there at the foot of the bed. And a man in white standing right behind her." He raised up, a smile breaking over his entire face. "I'm coming, my dear. Only a moment." He lay back and turned his head to look directly into Jesselynn's tear-filled eyes. "Promise me."

"Yes, I will, I will. Oh, Father, don't leave me." But it was too late. She could tell he'd already left her. All that remained was his broken body and the smile he wore to greet the woman he'd loved since childhood.

Jesselynn laid her head on the sheet and let the tears she'd been holding back for two long years pour forth. She cried for the father just gone to meet his God and his dear wife. If

Jesselynn hadn't believed in a life after death, she surely did now. She cried for brother Adam, who was killed in action, and for Zachary, if alive. Only God knew where he was.

She cried for the man who'd captured her heart and then been ordered out before they could marry, he, too, a casualty of the tragedy they called war. But mostly she cried for her mother, who'd died not long after the birth of baby Thaddeus. No longer could she hold the grief at bay.

"God, it is too much. I cannot bear this, I cannot." Heavy, pushing her down like a huge man with strong arms, the weight of her grief seemed to crush her beyond repair.

With her tears finally spent, she pushed herself to her feet, staggering about with a weakness beyond belief. She'd have to tell the others. She paused, the keening from the slave quarters had already begun, so the word, in a way known only to the black slaves, would pass from one plantation to another. One by one the house slaves tiptoed in to say good-bye to their master. Tears flowed freely, and Lucinda left the room with her apron over her head, sobs shaking her rounded shoulders.

Jesselynn thought about going to wake her little brother, Thaddeus, the son born not long before Major Highwood left to prepare for war. Poor child might only remember meeting his father when the man was too ill to do more than pat the boy's cheek. She chose to let him sleep. Tomorrow would be soon enough to tell him that they now had neither mother nor father. While he was too young to understand, he must be told. She sank down in the leather armchair in her father's study. Here was where she'd been conducting what little business the plantation had done since the war started. She'd shipped tobacco last fall, but this year, thanks to the drought, the crop looked meager. Picking and drying should start soon. That first November they'd had their annual yearling sale too, netting a goodly sum that carried them through. There would be none this fall. Both armies in the war were conscripting all the horses they could find.

"Take the horses and leave," her father had said. "How can I? What about Thaddeus? Go to Uncle Hiram's? I don't know the way". Thoughts raced through her mind like the foals romping in the springtime. Surely her father didn't really expect this of her. He'd been ill, that's all. It had been the ravings of a dying man.

But she had promised.

She and the remaining slaves had been hiding what horses they had left in case a patrol came by and demanded all the horseflesh available. So many men and fine animals used for cannon fodder. Even Adam, on his first and only leave, couldn't get over the mindless brutality of war. She'd never forget the look in his eyes that said he'd faced the devil himself, with his fellowmen caught in the crossfire. He had never come home again. Was buried in some unmarked grave, she supposed. All she knew for certain was that he'd been identified as killed in action. She sometimes wondered if his slave, Sammy, had died too or had run off to fight for the North. Knowing the name of a battle site wasn't important to her either. They were all casualties--sons and fathers, brothers, cousins, and

friends.

If she left, what would happen to Twin Oaks? Who would care for the slaves remaining? Who would oversee the harvest, the spring planting? Maybe she could come back in time for that. Surely the war would be over by next spring. Surely.

"Can I get you anythin' else, Missy?" Lucinda, with her dignity pulled around her like the shawl she wore in the winter, stopped just inside the doorway.

Jesselynn shook her head. Since her mother died, Lucinda had appointed Jesselynn head of the household and deferred to her accordingly. Sometimes Jesselynn wished for a scolding like former days. More often she wished for her mother's lap, a place of refuge where she could pour out her hopes and fears and be comforted by that loving hand on her head. But no more. And now Father was gone too. "You go on to bed. Tomorrow will be a busy day with neighbors coming to call. I'll send one of the stable hands round with a note, not that there are many left to come calling. I'm sure Reverend Benson will conduct the funeral on Friday. He was surprised Father lived this long."

"You not gonna wait for de young missies?"

Again Jesselynn shook her head. "They're safer where they are. Carrie Mae will have her wedding at Aunt Sylvania's, and Louisa is more help there in the hospital than she ever could be here." Jesselynn propped her head on her hand and rested her elbow on the rolled arm of the chair where her father had so often done the same. If she thought about it, she could still smell his cigar smoke. But it was a dream. He hadn't sat here smoking for over two years. Ever since the war began. A fire that had been smoldering in her breast unbeknownst to her flickered, and a thin flame reached for air. The war--always the war. How could a loving God countenance something so destructive?

"Have some lemonade, Missy. Might be you feel better wit a cool drink." Lucinda crossed her arms across her bosom.

Jesselynn gave in. No matter how hard she tried to make life easier for this woman, she failed every time. If Lucinda believed lemonade would be a help, it would be. And she'd better get used to it. "Thank you, and then you go on to bed."

The harrumph that floated back to her told her exactly what the woman thought of going to bed before her mistress.

What would she do about Lucinda and the other house slaves? Could they stay here, or would some lowlife steal them and sell them down the road?

Jesselynn rose. The decisions to be made were too momentous to undertake sitting down. Crickets sang outside the window when she stopped to peer into the darkness. "God, what am I to do?" She waited, but no answer seemed to be forthcoming. Who could she ask for advice? Her mother would say to ask the Lord. She just had. Her mother would say to

wait for an answer. She hadn't--unless you called five minutes waiting. Perhaps He'd give her an answer in a dream overnight. Her father always said, "The Lord guides His children in mysterious ways, but He guides them." Tears choked her throat. She'd never hear either of their beloved voices again.

She thanked Lucinda for the lemonade and, after blowing out the lamp, carried her glass up the stairs, sipping as she went. Lucinda was right. A cool drink did help, even when watered by a renewed burst of tears. They were never coming back. None of them.

She came down in the morning to find her father lying in state in the parlor, resplendent in his best uniform, which had been cleaned and patched so the bullet holes no longer showed. Lucinda and her helpers had created a long table by covering sawhorses with boards and draping them in black. Her father appeared to be sleeping peacefully, a pleasant dream giving him a slight smile. She remembered the glory of his face just before he died. Had the man in white been his Savior?

She crossed the hall to the study and sat down at the desk, then began writing: a note for one of the slaves to carry around announcing the death, letters to the dear sisters so far away, and a note to Reverend Benson reiterating her request for a simple burial service to be performed the next afternoon.

A longer letter went to her father's brother, Hiram Highwood, who owned a large horse farm in southern Missouri. Had her father ever written his brother, as he said he would, and asked permission for them to bring the horses there? They had never received an answer if he had.

The more she thought about it, the more certain she felt that she should keep her promise to her father. Surely no soldiers that far away would care about the few remaining horses of Twin Oaks. Missouri seemed at the western edge of the world, even though she'd read about California and Oregon Territory. Gratitude welled up in her heart for a place of refuge. Missouri it would be. Far out in the country, away from all the scouting patrols of either blue or gray. Safe until the end of the war. She called Meshach to harness a wagon and take the letters to Midway to mail and pick up supplies at the general store.

The singing and wailing from the slave quarters continued all through the day as local friends and dignitaries came to pay their respects. Lucinda and her helpers kept the dining room table covered with food, much of which Jesselynn was surprised to discover they still had in the larder. Lucinda had been known to work miracles, and this seemed to be another one. When Jesselynn tried to catch the black woman's eye, Lucinda looked the other way. Some things Jesselynn had learned to leave well enough alone, and the kitchen was one, even if she was the mistress now.

Jesselynn joined a group of older men to thank them for coming, and listened to their talk of the war.

"I knew Kentucky shoulda seceded, along with the other states. But at least we are in

Confederate hands, where we belong," one man was saying.

"Those bumbling idiots in Frankfort--they don't have no idea what we all want," another added.

"You mark my words, there'll be fighting even in Lexington if we don't watch out. You want soldiers battling right here on our lands?"

One of the men turned to her. "I'm sorry, Miss Jesselynn, this isn't polite conversation for womenfolk to hear. So sorry about Joshua. We lost a fine man."

"Thank you." She nodded, glancing around at the men gathered. "Thank you for coming." She stepped back. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I..." She had to leave before she told them what she <really> thought about the war.

"If Governor Hughes would..."

"Get that nigger lover out of the White House..."

Their discussion followed her across the room to a gathering of women.

"Jesselynn darlin', how are you holdin' up?" A slender woman, her hair now silvered and wearing black mourning for her own son, put her arm around Jesselynn's waist.

Jesselynn swallowed and forced a smile to lips that would rather quiver. "I'm fine." She could feel tears threaten to erupt. "Fine? What do you mean fine?" If she didn't get out of here she would make a spectacle of herself. "Excuse me, please, I think...I..." She nodded around the circle and fled.

She kept the sobs at bay by walking to the rose garden, all the time ordering herself to behave, to be brave and act as her mother would have wanted. She blew her nose, returned to the house and picked up a tray of small cakes before returning to the front portico. Offering food kept others from getting too close.

Through sheer will, Jesselynn kept a smile on her face, feeling like a ghost in the black dress of mourning. Thaddeus clung to her, refusing her suggestion that he go out and play with the neighbor children who came calling with their parents. Finally she had Ophelia, the boy's nursemaid, come and carry him off for a nap. He was far too young to understand what was going on anyway.

"Thank you for coming. No, I haven't heard from Zachary. Yes, it was a miracle Father was able to come home to die." Her answers became rote, leaving her mind free to run through her plans. Thank heaven her mother had instilled in her gracious manners and a backbone of iron, both required of a woman of her station.

By the time the last carriage and wagon rolled down the oak-lined drive and the last horse

and rider trotted after, she felt like lying down on the floor and wailing, just as she could hear Thaddeus doing. Ophelia carried him down the stairs, his tear-streaked face flushed and sweaty.

"I can't make 'im stop cryin'. He won't shush fo' nothin'." The slender woman with skin the color of strong tea patted his back, but the child pushed away from her, his attention focused on Jesselynn.

"Come here, baby." Jesselynn stepped forward and took him in her arms. Like a fledgling coming home to roost, Thaddeus buried his face in the softness of her neck. She propped him on her hip and patted his back with her other hand. "There now, you mustn't treat Ophelia so. You hurt her feelings." A sniff greeted her teasing voice. "Come, let's have a smile." She kissed his cheek and blew back a lock of soft golden hair. Would John's and her child have looked like this--a cherub right off a Raphael painting? Jesselynn closed off the thought. John Follett was dead, like so many others. She thought of the discussions she'd overheard that afternoon between several of the young women. She agreed with them. There wouldn't be many men of marrying age left in the South when this war was over.

And, besides, not being the world's greatest beauty, she had an annoying habit of speaking her mind, something no southern gentleman tolerated well. She knew what she looked like. Skin that freckled when out in the sun, where she'd spent much of her time planting, hoeing, and lately harvesting the garden. Sometimes she helped in the fields when necessary. While John had said her hair was the color of honey fresh from a beehive and her slightly tilted eyes when laughing sparkled like dew drops on spring green blades of grass, she had a hard time believing that now. The mirror told her that her hair looked more like straw and her eyes more gray than green of late. There hadn't been much to laugh about for the last two years. Too, she'd been graced with a figure that lacked the prerequisites of womanhood. Instead of blossoming, it remained stick straight and flat to boot. Her mother always said it was her chin that would get her in trouble--square and determined. She'd learned to not lead with it, thanks to her brothers. Boxing lessons had <not> been for the girls, but Jesselynn had watched and let her brothers practice enough on her that she learned the basics. Learning to shoot a rifle came about the same way, but much to her brothers' delight and consternation, she could outshoot both of them. Bagging a squirrel leaping from limb to limb brought her high accolades.

She buried her face in the little boy's tummy and made splattery noises to hear him laugh. If only she could switch from tears to tickles as fast as he.

"You charm him like nobody else." Ophelia now wore the relieved smile of someone who'd turned her charge over with gratitude. "He don't know him daddy gone."

"He didn't know his daddy at all, more's the pity." Jesselynn tickled Thaddy's tummy when he raised his shirt. And again. One thing with this one, once you started something, he kept it going long past anyone else's desire. Jesselynn enjoyed the game as much as he. How could she take a child this young with her to Missouri?

It wasn't as if they were going to load up the carriage and travel in comfort as they used to. Would Ophelia go along? She'd been trading flirty glances with Meshach, formerly second to Joseph down at the stables. Jesselynn had appointed him overseer of the fields and the hands who worked them. While Meshach could manage the plantation while she was gone, he had to go along with her to Missouri. There was no one else she trusted to keep them safe. And Ophelia would go anywhere if she thought it would give her time with Meshach.

Jesselynn gave the boy in her arms an extra squeeze and handed him back to his nursemaid. A headache had started at the base of her skull and was working its way around to the front. "Too much thinkin'," Lucinda would say, but far as Jesselynn could tell, thinking never hurt anyone. In fact, her father spoke highly of it, for both men and women, including his wife, daughters, sons, and slaves. Why did every thought weave its way back to her father? And every time, tears followed the same thread.

She sniffed and dug for a handkerchief in the pocket of her black silk mourning dress. After blowing her nose, she forced a smile onto lips that would rather tremble and took in a deep breath. "Well now, Ophelia, let's light the candles in the parlor, and after supper we can all gather there and I'll read from the 'Good Book,' as Father called it, and we will rejoice that he has gone home to be with his Lord and my mother. At least, we will try to rejoice." She led the way into the kitchen, where one of Lucinda's grandchildren was snapping beans.

"Henry, go on down to the quarters and tell everyone we will have a hymn-sing tonight after supper."

"An' don't you dawdle." Lucinda's admonition made him pick up his feet even faster. "Supper be ready soon, and, Missy, you needs to rest up a spell. Ophelia come git you when we's ready."

Jesselynn nodded. Did she look as bad as she felt? She mounted the stairs to her room and collapsed on the rose-sprigged counterpane. White lace suspended by the four posters of the bed created a roof above her head. She'd tied the mosquito netting back this morning as she had every morning for years. All her life she'd gone to sleep in this room except for the times she'd been visiting a friend or relative. She'd never been farther than Lexington, twenty miles away, and that only for the races at Keeneland. Would life ever be the same again? She rolled her aching head from side to side. Stupid question. Of course, it never would. While today was bad, tomorrow would be even worse.

"Dust to dust, ashes to ashes..." Reverend Benson poured a handful of rich Kentucky soil in the shape of a cross on the pine box. "In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen." He signaled the mourners, and together they turned and filed out of the ironfenced family plot. A live oak, centuries old by the size of it, shaded the final resting place of Joshua Highwood, his wife Miriam, and the two children who died before the age of five. Two field workers remained and began shoveling the dirt back in on top of the box.

Jesselynn heard the thuds echo on the wooden cover. She would return in the evening with a spray of roses from the garden and dust grass seed on the mound so it wouldn't be so harsh. The graveyard had become a place for rest and contemplation for many of the family members. Squirrels raced through the overhanging branches of the oak, pelting the ground with shells, while birds sang their courtship arias. A camellia bloomed in the spring, dropping pale pink petals over the graves. Through the benevolence of Mother Nature, helped along by the women of the Highwood family, the burying plot had become a place of peace in spite of the sadness.

Jesselynn looked back again. This too she would be leaving, her parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, along with various uncles and aunts and more cousins than she cared to count. Her family history. <Please God, don't let anyone ransack this sacred place as they have others>. She breathed the prayer and clutched her Bible in trembling fingers. God promised to watch out for orphans, and now that's what they were.

Coming out of her reverie, Jesselynn recalled her manners and stopped the preacher before he could climb into his buggy. "Won't you stay for a cool drink and some of Lucinda's lemon cookies, Reverend Benson?"

"Why, thank you, Miss Jesselynn, I most certainly would." The white-haired cleric placed his Bible and prayer book on the seat of the buggy and turned to follow his hostess to the portico, where she gestured him to one of the rocking chairs. He settled himself with a sigh and pulled the clerical band away from his perspiring neck. "Thank the good Lord for shade, breeze, and a tall glass of lemonade of Lucinda's secret recipe. I've sat here many a time and enjoyed all three." He looked across the braided rug to the young woman in the opposite chair. "Your father sat in that chair, telling me of his dreams for his family and for Kentucky. What a loss for all of us." He shook his head. "Such a waste."

His gentle voice made Jesselynn fight the tears again. She had made it to this point of the day without a tear shower, but if he kept on like this, another wasn't far away.

"What do you plan to do now?"

His question caught her up short. She couldn't tell him they still had horses on the plantation, for someone might ask him, and he'd be obliged to tell them. She was sure he didn't lie well, as neither did she. But she had to start practicing sometime, and now was as good a time as any.

"I-I'm not sure." That part was certainly the truth. "I might go visit my aunt in Memphis." Jesselynn cleared her throat. "She's been ailin'."

"Is that where Carrie Mae and Louisa are staying?"

"Ah, no. They're with Aunt Sylvania in Richmond." Truth again. Maybe that was the trick, mix truth and stories, so one couldn't tell where one began or left off.



"You are fortunate to have family to turn to. I know these years have been terribly hard for you."

"But none more than for all the others around here. The war is draining everyone, and as my father so frequently said, 'It will get nothing but worse.' If only heads like his had prevailed instead of those foolish hotheads who thought we would win the war in a matter of weeks." Pictures floated through her mind of her brothers cheering the news of Fort Sumter being fired on, thinking war was glory and honor instead of death and destruction. She brought her attention back to the man beside her.

"Yes, even if God is on our side, war is--"

Jesselynn tossed her manners over the white-painted railing, interrupting with a decidedly unladylike snort. "You don't really believe that drivel, do you?"

"What is that, my dear?"

"That God is on our side? This is war, Reverend Benson. God is on neither side. He is stepping back to let us destroy each other, and when we're finished, He will need another flood to wash the blood away--the blood that brothers fighting brothers shed." She clenched her fingers over the curved arms of the rocker. "This is no holy war, Reverend." She turned at Lucinda's throat clearing. Looking at her old mammy's face, she knew she'd overstepped the bounds of propriety.

"Excuse me." Jesselynn pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and rose to her feet. "Please make yourself comfortable, and I'll be back in a few minutes. Ah...pardon me. I-I'm not myself." She took three steps before Reverend Benson made it to his feet.

"I'm sure if you feel that way, there is no more use for me here." He clapped his hat on his head and thundered down the three steps. "Good thing your mother and father weren't here to listen to such sacrilege. All our brave boys fightin' for our very existence." He glared at her one more time. "I do pray you will come to your senses, Miss Jesselynn."

Whatever had gotten into her? Ignoring the sense that she should make things right, she entered the study and closed the door, willing herself to calm down. She could feel her heart racing, pumping blood to her face so that hours spent in the sun couldn't have made it hotter. She took several deep breaths, bracing her hands on the flat surface of her father's desk. Well, so much for propriety. She'd practiced lying, gone on a political tirade, and deeply offended her pastor, all in a few short minutes.

She was glad he left. The thought of facing him again made her cheeks burn hotter. What would her mother say to this?

"Missy Jesselynn!"

She raised her head. The call came again. She could tell by the panic in the tone that the

child calling her needed her *now*. She spun around and hurried to the back steps.  
"Missy Jess, Yankees comin' up the drive. They's gonna murder us all." The child's eyes rolled white in his round black face.

"Nonsense. You run to the stables and make sure the horses are hidden. Go now!"

The little boy took off as if the Union soldiers rode right on his heels.

Jesselynn took a deep breath to compose herself and walked back to the front portico. Sure enough, a group of horsemen were riding up the drive. Even if she hadn't been warned, from this distance she could see they wore uniforms of blue.

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