



Sisters of the Confederacy

by Lauraine Snelling

Excerpt provided courtesy of LauraineSnelling.com

*Springfield, Missouri
Early January 1863*

“Hey, boy, lemme see that horse of yours.”

Marse Jesse Highwood, in reality Jesselynn, turned at the shout. A blue-clad soldier, his belly protruding between dark suspenders and hanging over the waistband of his blue britches, waved at her, letting her know whom he was accosting. As she turned her mare and drew closer, she could see a scar starting below his left eye and disappearing into a fox red beard. His eyes, the faded blue of a Yankee shirt washed too many times, glittered beneath bushy eyebrows. Sergeant stripes on the shirt sleeve made Jesse sit straighter.

“Yes, suh?” She kept her gaze below his chin.

“What you doin’ with such a fine horse? Don’t you know we need every horse we can git for the Union army?”

“Old Sunny here, suh, why she just near to foal and might would die with heavy ridin’.

My daddy rode her home from the war so he could get well again and go back to fight.

He say she need rest, jus’ like him.”

“What army was he with?”

Oh, drat, my mouth’s got me in trouble again. Who would he have fought with on the Union side? As if he would have fought for the Union, but ... She wracked her mind for the name of a Union general, all the while knowing her daddy fought in the legislature to keep the Union before he was forced to put on a Confederate uniform and go off to be killed. “With Kirby Smith, suh.” She knew this man couldn’t be from Tennessee, his accent was more mountain than Northern. Even so, her answer was a gamble. At least he had called her “boy.”

“Good outfit.” He walked around the mare, who was obviously heavy with foal. The only reason Jesselynn rode her instead of one of the stallions was because of the influx of blue army men in Springfield. She should have tied her outside of town and walked in.

But then, leaving a horse in the care of a young black man left them both open for thievery. Slave traders or horse traders—neither much cared if their new possession was free before they caught them. If only she hadn’t felt the need to check on Aunt Agatha, who’d been living in Springfield since her husband, Hiram, was killed in the early days of the war. But with the death of her housemate, Agatha needed family.

“Be on your way, then. And greet your daddy for me. He musta took a lot of abuse from his neighbors if he went north to fight.”

“Yes, suh, he surely did. Why they nigh to burned our barn one night, they was so fired up.” *Shut your mouth and get on out of here.* Jesselynn touched one finger to the brim of her droopy felt hat and nudged Sunshine on up the street.

“You got any other horses out to home?”

His call sent shivers up her back. “No, suh, you done took them all.” That part at least was true. There were no more horses at home in Kentucky. She had the remaining stallions and mares with her in a cave southwest of town.

One good thing, she’d sure enough learned to lie well. Just tripped right off her tongue, they did. Dealing with the guilt was something else. All those years hearing the Scriptures at her mother’s knee made her detest lying. But keeping everyone alive was more important. Why in the world was a Union sergeant lurking on the back streets like this? Their encampment was north of town. An area she wisely stayed away from—far away from.

When her heartbeat returned to normal, she patted the mare’s shoulder and straightened her own. “That was one close call, old girl. This is the last time I bring you to town.” *Or any of our other horses.* But Aunt Agatha most likely needed more wood by now. In the saddlebags she carried a rabbit Benjamin had snared. She hoped her aunt would volunteer to repay her with some of the vegetables stored in her root cellar. The two old ladies had raised a fine garden and kept enough hens to sell a few eggs.

Now, with Lettie gone, Agatha lived alone in a borrowed house.

A house that looked as if it would fall down if one kicked a porch post. Jesselynn rode on past the hingeless gate, now tied in place with hemp rope, and into the shed-roofed barn.

The barn had been built with stalls for horses and a bay to store a buggy. The stalls had gone the way of firewood, and who knew what happened to the buggy. Most likely it was sold early on for supplies. Now only a few laying hens clucked and scratched in the dusty corners.

Jesselynn tied the mare to one of the posts and, after loosening the saddle girth, swung the saddlebags over her shoulder and headed for the house. Off to her left the remains of a garden long ago harvested appeared to be sprouting new cabbage from the stalks. A row of greens had shot up new growth too. Jesselynn ducked under the clothesline and crossed the muddy soil to check on the green leaves that looked so bright against the bleached cornstalks. Each time she came, she'd been cutting more of the garden refuse for the hens. If they had some fencing, they could build a run from the barn to the garden and let the hens help themselves.

Had her aunt even been outside to see this bit of bounty?

Back at the door she dragged her boots across the scraper set into the step, trying to remove the mud from the garden. Not hearing anyone moving around, she knocked and waited.

No answer. Had Aunt Agatha gone somewhere? If so, where?

She pounded on the door, rattling the frame as she did so. She should have brought Meshach along to make necessary repairs.

Still no answer. She turned the knob and pushed open the door, sticking her head in to call for her aunt again before she entered. Removing a hat that looked as if some rodent had been nibbling the brim, she ran her fingers through hair that had recently been darkened by walnut-husk dye and shorn by Ophelia, formerly one of her father's slaves and now freed along with the rest of them. Ophelia had cut only men's hair before, but since Jesselynn was acting that part, short was best, and ragged didn't hurt.

Since the shearing had happened the night before, Jesse was still trying to get used to it.

Would she ever be able to have long hair again and regain her place in the world of women? Did she even want to?

She brushed mud and horsehair off her britches. Her apparel was always a bone of contention between her and her aunt. At least if her clothes were clean, maybe the old lady wouldn't huff so stridently.

"Aunt Agatha?" Jesselynn laid the rabbit carcass that she had skinned and wrapped in brown paper on the table and traipsed through the house, checking every room in case her aunt had fallen or something. No one was about.

Surely she hadn't left that long ago and would be back soon. The stove was still warm, and embers glowed in the firebox. Jesselynn added a few more sticks of wood and filled a pot with water from the reservoir. Taking a knife from the drawer, she cut up the rabbit and put the pieces in the heating water. She found an onion in the pantry, chopped and added it, along with salt and pepper, and set the lid on the kettle.

Now, how else could she make herself useful?

Nothing was out of place. Each tabletop was dust free. Her aunt's Bible lay on the whatnot table by her chair, the bookmark set in the New Testament. Jesselynn flipped open the pages and read the words of 2 Corinthians 1, shaking her head. The Lord of comfort had been remarkably absent from her life in the last months. Of course her saying—nay, screaming—“I want nothing to do with you. You don't bother me, and I won't come sniveling to you” might have something to do with that. She shivered in the chilly house, though it wasn't cold. Life just wasn't what she had dreamed it to be, all because of that wicked war.

She gritted her teeth and returned to the kitchen. Perhaps she should start bread.

She combed the pantry, but the empty shelves told their own story. Her aunt had not had money to put in supplies. And Jesselynn had nothing to give to her. She and her band were living hand to mouth as it was. Surely she could put flour and sugar and such on the account at the store.

Hearing feet scraping at the back door, she returned to the kitchen to check on the stewing rabbit and moved the kettle to the back to slow down the boiling.

“Ah, Jesselynn, how good to see you.”

The humph at the end had to do with Jesselynn's clothing, but as Jesse had no intention of donning the petticoats and skirts her aunt had dragged out of the clothes press, she ignored it. “Brought you a rabbit snared just this morning,” she said, greeting her aunt. At five foot seven, Jesselynn was tall for a young woman, and when she hugged her diminutive aunt, shock bolted from mind to heart. Her aunt had lost more weight.

Pleasantly rounded when Jesselynn first arrived in Springfield back in November, Aunt Agatha no longer filled out her waist, and the skirt had been taken in. Bones poked through the shawl she wore around her shoulders, and the skin of her face hung in folds under her chin.

“How long since you've eaten?” Nothing like getting directly to the point.

Agatha pulled herself upright, and starch returned to her backbone. “I had an egg for breakfast, thank you.”

“And bread?”

Agatha turned away to lift the pot lid and stir the cooking rabbit. “Never you mind, young lady. I have my fruits and vegetables in the cellar, and—”

“What if you traded some of your stores for the things you can't grow? Surely there must be a merchant willing to trade.”

“There might be.”

Jesselynn waited, but her aunt continued stirring the pot. *How can I help you if I don't know what's wrong?* Like a whop up the side of her head, she suddenly realized the problem. Agatha

couldn't get them there. Had even a basket become too heavy for her to carry? Of course, she wouldn't ask for help. But surely someone going by in a wagon could take her few tradable things to the store.

As her mother had always quoted, "Pride goeth before a fall." And her aunt was certainly long on pride. Somehow Jesse wasn't surprised. *Must be a family trait.*

How could she phrase her question so she wouldn't get lambasted for interfering? "If ... if you'd like me to, I could carry some cabbages and carrots to the store for you, on my horse, that is."

"That would be right nice. I reckon I can spare a few of each."

"What about one of those barrels of apples I saw down there?"

"Need a wagon for that."

"True, but the next time Meshach comes in, we could manage it."

"All right, but you must take some of the things with you too. I'm sure you could use them."

"I will. Now, what would you like me to bring back?"

"Oh, flour, sugar, lard—"

"Beans?"

"No. Got plenty of them. How I would dearly love a cup of tea."

"You have dried beans?"

"Of course. Leather britches and dried shelled. You take a basket on down to the cellar and bring us up a potato or two and a mess of leather britches along with carrots and a turnip. Then fill a gunnysack to take to the store." With every word, Agatha's energy returned and her voice resumed more of its normal commanding air.

With all that food in store, why was the old lady fading away as she appeared to be? Was she ailing and not mentioning it?

"Oh, and go by the post office too, if you would. Just think how pleasant dinner would be if we heard from Richmond."

Jesselynn hadn't planned on staying for dinner, but what could she say? She took a gunnysack from a hook by the back door and went out around the house to the cellar doors. She shoved up the rusty hatch and, bending over, pulled one of the angled doors upright to lean it against the post set for that express purpose. "I bet she can't even open these doors. I should have thought of that and brought more into the house for her. Can't believe she's growing weak so quickly."

Jesselynn continued muttering as she made her way down the six rock steps onto the dirt floor of the cellar. While the flat rocks laid a path to the bins, water from the winter rains had been seeping in already and turned most of the floor to mush. Someone at least had had the foresight to build the bins on raised dirt and put logs beneath the apple barrels. The bags of snap beans dried whole with two on a stem to resemble britches and the other dried vegetables hung from nails pounded into the floor joists above.

Aunt Agatha might be frail looking now, but she and her friend Lettie Copsewald had worked like Trojans during the summer and fall to get all this set by. Jesselynn chose an assortment of carrots, turnips, parsnips, and rutabagas, plus some potatoes and two heads of cabbage for her bag for the store, then placed some of each in the basket for upstairs.

She'd get more to take out to the cave when she returned from her errands.

The clouds hung sullen gray as she mounted Sunshine for the ride to the store. She might be better walking, but time was running out if she was to be back to camp by dark. The new cave they had located after leaving the one where Dunlively found them was south and west of Springfield, several miles farther from town. Not anywhere near as convenient as the first had been, especially if they needed to walk in all the time now.

The mule had been more of a loss than she'd anticipated.

With thoughts chasing through her mind like dogs after cats, she still remembered to stay off the main streets. No sense letting herself in for more trouble, although that hadn't helped earlier. "*Greet your father for me.*" Not likely. Her snort made Sunshine flick her ears and pick up the pace.

Once at the store, she wasted a couple of minutes talking with Lawrence Dummont, the proprietor. "Just as I thought," Jesselynn said, expelling a sigh that had been building for some time. "So you're saying my aunt could put it on account if she wanted to?"

"I wouldn't let that dear old lady starve. What kind of a man do you think I am?"

Jesselynn blinked at the "dear old lady."

"Specially after all she's been through. But without her or someone telling me, how was I to know?"

"You have a point there, Mr. Dummont." Jesselynn set her sack of produce on the counter. "So you would be willing to trade, then?"

"Of course." He opened the bag, peered in, and set it to the side, nodding at Jesselynn.

"Now, what can I git you?"

Jesselynn gave him her list and waited while he measured things out. She ambled around the store looking longingly at the boots, the bolts of cloth, the ready-made pants and shirts for the two little boys in camp, her brother Thaddeus Joshua—or Joshwa, as he said it—and Sammy, the baby they'd found beside a dead slave woman. Wouldn't Ophelia love that bolt of red-and-white check cotton? But they'd have to get by. She fingered the money in her pocket.

At the counter as she was putting her supplies back in the tow sack, she remembered to ask, "Could you use a barrel of apples?"

"Sure enough. Those soldiers love to come buy apples, or anything fresh for that matter.

According to them, army food gets pretty monotonous."

"Well, at least they get enough to fill their bellies. You wouldn't know anyone who had a gallon or so of milk for sale?"

"Not right offhand. You might ask at the farms outside of town." He wrote some numbers in his ledger. "Now you tell Miz Highwood to come in anytime. She has all the credit she needs right here on the books."

"Thank you kindly, Mr. Dummont. I'll find a way to pay you somehow."

"Don't make you no nevermind. Between God and Miz Dummont, I'd suffer in both lives if I didn't help out where I could."

Jesselynn debated leaving her horse tied beside the store but decided that was more dangerous than riding her the two blocks to the post office.

The city bustled with what looked to Jesselynn like twice as much wagon traffic as usual, army personnel and the civilians who accompanied their menfolk in the army. If nothing else, the war was a boon to places like Springfield, bringing increased business on all sides. Unless, of course, a battle was fought over it.

Jesselynn trotted up the steps and inside the brick building with a sign reading *United States Post Office*. She crossed to the counter, her heels clicking on the marble floor.

"Good day. Do you have any mail for Mrs. Hiram Highwood or Master Jesse Highwood?"

"Let me see." The man with the green eyeshade and arm bands holding back the sleeves of his white shirt turned and sorted through the boxes along the wall. He returned with three envelopes. "One for Miz Highwood and two for you. You are Jesse Highwood, right?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Jesselynn looked at the handwriting on her two letters and could have jumped for joy. One from her sister Louisa in Richmond and one from Lucinda, the head of the household help at Twin Oaks. Cavendar Dunlivey had lied when he said slavers got all those left at Twin Oaks. No longer could she call her people slaves, since she herself had signed the

manumission papers in her father's name, but what other title could she give them? Perhaps if Lucinda and the others were still on the home place, Dunlivey had also lied about burning the farm to the ground. Letters from home! No longer did she notice the lowering gray clouds.

Not even attempting to hide her smile, she tucked the letters in her shirt pocket and mounted her horse. No sense loitering here in plain view while she read the letters. She could do that at the house. "Come on, Sunshine, let's hustle on back."

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"A letter for you," Jesse called to Aunt Agatha when she entered the kitchen.

"Coming." The answer floated down from upstairs.

Jesselynn moved the teakettle to the hottest part of the stove. She picked up the lid on the stewpot and savored the fragrance of rabbit stew. The wild roots and herbs they'd been using at the cave in no way measured up to good garden fare.

"Where's your teapot?" she asked as Agatha entered the kitchen, several pieces of clothing slung over her arm.

Agatha pointed to a high shelf in the cupboard and laid the garments across the back of a chair. Bright pink spots on her cheeks, most likely from the exertion of bending over trunks or boxes, made her look more like herself. "Why?"

"Because Mr. Dummont included a packet of tea with the groceries. He said you must be in terrible need of a cup of tea by now." A little fib to make her aunt feel better paled against the lies she was forced to tell on a regular basis.

"Oh, he is such a good man." Agatha gazed at the brown paper packet with shining eyes.

Then why are you so tied in knots about asking for flour and other things you can't live without? But Jesselynn kept the thought to herself and slit open the letter from Lucinda.

Dear Marse Jesse,

I am sorry I did not write before, but things have been very bad here. Dey burned de house and barns right after you left and cotched many of de field hands to sell to de slavers. Some of us got out and hid in de woods for weeks, too 'fraid to come out. Dere no place to dry de t'bacca, but we go ask Marse Marsh if we can use his barn. He say yes, so if dere be some crop, he sell it for us. When you come home, Marse Jesse? We made a shack out of logs so we be out of de rain. Joseph hurt him back. You write us by Marse Marsh. He bring it here. God bless you. Come home soon.

-Lucinda

Jesselynn closed her eyes. So Dunlivey had burned Twin Oaks and sold most of the freed slaves. Her gorge rose, threatening to choke her.

She opened her eyes to see her aunt staring at the sheet of paper she held, her face as stark white as the letter.

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