



The Long Way Home

by Lauraine Snelling

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“Little, that’s enough!” The major’s order cut through the air.

Little released Louisa with a curse, muttering softly so that his commanding officer couldn’t hear him.

“We are not animals, Little, so don’t act like one.”

Louisa sucked in a breath and then another, anything to deny the blackness hovering near the edge of her mind. She clutched her dignity like a staff, sketched a nod of appreciation to the major, and shivered in spite of air so thick with humidity she could scarcely breathe.

Thank you, Lord, thank you. She wanted to shout the words, but her lips were so clamped against the roiling in her stomach, she didn’t dare move them.

“Unlock her.”

“Yes, sir.”

Even during the unlocking, Little managed to rub his upper arm against her. Without thought, Louisa stamped her heel down on his toes and flinched back as he raised his hand to strike her.

“Little!”

The order stopped the guard in midswing. He jerked the manacle off her wrist with a snarl, drawing blood.

Louisa wrapped her fingers around the deep scratch to staunch the bleeding. She took two steps back to get out of his breathing range and swallowed hard again. The blackness hovered, leering as wickedly as Little.

“Come with me.” Major Dorseys touched her elbow.

Louisa blinked and clamped her arm against her side, her other hand still protecting her

wrist. What in the world was the matter with her now? One man ripped her wrist, and a touch from the major made her elbow burn.

“Wh-what have you done with my brother?”

The major nodded to a soldier who opened another door for them, then let it clang shut after they passed through. The sound echoed and reechoed through her bones. With each clang, she felt diminished, as though the sound sliced off another strip of flesh.

Men waved and whistled from cells on either side as she followed at the major’s side.

When he showed her into a small room, empty but for a cot and a commode, she kept the tears of relief at bay by biting her lip.

“Thank you.”

“Someone will come with your supper.” He glanced around the room, nodded, and left, closing the door behind him, the sound of a key turning in the lock reverberating in the stillness.

Quiet, such a blessed relief after the din of her march through purgatory. She sank down onto the cot, releasing her fingers from her wrist to inspect the damage. Dirt crusted the blood, promising infection if she didn’t get it cleaned, and soon. The sight of the wound reminded her of Corporal Little. She needed far more than water to wash away the horror of that man.

Lord, I thank you for your care. I know you can see through prison walls. Please, could you remind someone to bring me water? She crossed the short space to the window and, resting her forehead against the glass, stared out through steel bars to the yard below. Men paced along the cut block wall, others played cards in the shade. Some slept, others talked in small groups. She wished she could hear what they were saying. While the noisy gauntlet she had traversed as she was led to this room had made her ears ring, now she wished for any voice. A fly landed on her wrist. Before brushing it away, she watched as it nibbled on the crusted blood. Another landed. And another. Three blue black creatures crawling on her wrist. When one deposited an egg, she shuddered and brushed them away. *Oh, Lord, I know you made the flies too, but what is becoming of me when I watch them feasting on my blood?* She walked back to the cot and lay down. The smell of rot and mildew filled her nostrils as she fell asleep, her opposite hand protecting the wound from the persistent flies.

When a rattle of keys woke her, Louisa noticed the room had dimmed. The door swung open, and a man entered carrying a tray with food and a pail of water.

She blinked. Was he an apparition? He looked gray enough to be so.

“Th-thank you.” Her throat rasped so dry she could barely talk. His nod would have been

missed had she not been staring at him. “Don’t tell me. Let me guess—you’ve been ordered not to talk with me.” Again that millisecond nod. “Well, there’s nothing that says

I cannot talk to you.”

Was that a twitch of the sides of his mouth?

A bit of encouragement, all that she needed.

“Is there the smallest chance you could bring me a bit of bandaging?” She held up her wrist. “I really need to clean this and wrap it. Place like this must breed infection.” She held out a hand. “Not that I’m criticizing, mind you.”

An eyebrow twitched this time. How could the man say so much with such tiny motions?

Or was she reading more into him than was there?

He set the tray on the end of her bed, reached in his pocket and drew out a small roll of bandage, set it on the tray and pointed at a smear of ointment on a bit of paper.

Louisa clasped her hands at the base of her neck. Fighting back the tears that clogged her throat faster than she could think, she whispered, “Thank you.” It had to be the major. No one else knew of the slice on her wrist. “And thank Major Dorsey for me also. And tell him you never said a word, for you haven’t. Our Lord will bless you for this kindness.”

He sketched a sign of the cross on his chest, dipped his head in the briefest of bows, and left the room, shutting the door with a click behind him, not a clang. She heard the key turn, but at the moment, it mattered not.

Bread, stew with meat, even a cup of coffee. Soap, small but real. She sniffed the tiny sliver, inhaling the sharp fragrance of clean. And a bucket of water.

Lord, O Lord, I am the most blessed of woman. Thank you. How can I thank you enough? She tore a bit of the bandage off, dipped it in the water, and then with caution born of need scrubbed at the dirt around the wound. She could hear her mother’s admonition, “*Use plenty of water to cleanse an open wound, the hotter the better.*” Hot she had no control of, but a bucketful was plenty. Quickly she drank the lukewarm coffee and used the tin cup to dip out more water. Finally she rubbed the soap on the rag and scrubbed all over the cut, causing red to well up again.

“Good. Bleed. That will help.” Finally she smeared the ointment on the cut and wrapped the cloth around it with her other hand. She used her free hand and her teeth to rip the end of the bandage to create two tails, wrapping them in each direction. Knotting took teeth and fingers working together, but she made it.

Eating cold stew was worth every minute of the time she took to ward off infection.

Thank you, Father, thank you repeated through her mind like the metronome that counted time for her piano lessons in that life long ago at Twin Oaks.

Louisa paced her cell in the darkness, the stink from the chamber pot mingling with all the stenches that seemed to permeate the very walls. Unwashed bodies, sicknesses of both body and soul, vermin, mildew, hate, all imbedded in the stones and carried on the air. Mosquitoes droned and hummed in her ears, a scratching from a corner was surely a mouse, or more likely a rat. A squeak.

Her heart leaped into a pace used for running. But where could she run? She paced back again, this time banging her shin on the cot.

All her life she had feared being alone in the dark. Her brothers had teased her, leaped out at her often enough. Now with no effort on their part, terrifying creatures haunted the corners and under the cot. Fear sucked her mouth dry.

She crept onto the cot, drawing her legs to her chest, leaning her back into the corner walls so nothing could reach her. *Mother, I need you.* She chewed the knuckle of the bent finger she kept at her mouth to still the screams that threatened to erupt.

Like a gentle breath, verses came into her mind. *“I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee...and, lo, I am with you always.... Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day...”*

Louisa lay down. *“I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.”*

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