

Excerpt from *I Rode with Cullen Baker*

by RLB Hartmann

Pp 12 - 18

Two nights passed. We continued traveling west, holing up in deserted sheds during the days, stealing out at dawn and dusk like deer to nibble berries and search for nuts which we cracked between rocks. "Who are you afraid of now?" I asked, as we saw no soldiers, enemy or otherwise.

"The's plenty bad men in this country, Miss Jessica. If anybody stop us, don't tell them a thing. If they ask you your name, you say it Jess. Just Jess, like a boy. You got to be a boy, till we can get where we going."

Late afternoon of the third day, we came to a river and boarded a ferry. "Texas," he explained, digging several coins from his old green coat.

I tried to remember when he might have had opportunity to empty Papa's strongbox. He knew where all Papa's cash and important papers were kept, and had a key. But the last few days and nights were painful to recall, so I sat on a barrel and tried not to succumb to dizziness. The river was neither wide nor swift, but certainly deep, and I had never learned to swim.

The raft, pulled along in jerks by a man working a rope on a pulley, bobbed first to one side then the other, never seeming to advance on the opposite bank despite the brisk hand-over-hand motion, and his tuneless whistle became breathless and finally ceased.

In the silence, the water lapped against the ends of the raft logs. Joshua sat on another barrel and studied the shoreline. We were the only passengers and the ferryman kept giving us curious looks. At last we reached the landing. "Pleasure," the man said as we climbed the sandy

bank. My foot slipped and I stumbled, but I understood why Joshua neglected to help me.

Around a curve in the road, he halted and drew an envelope out of a pocket. "Miss-- Jess, you hold on to this here."

"Is there money in it?" There seemed to be several folded sheets of paper sealed inside.

"No, little one, but you ever get in trouble, remember you got it."

The sound of that chilled me. He didn't give me time to question further, but set out as fast as he could walk. I slid the envelope into my coat pocket and practiced swaggering as I'd seen boys do.

The woods thinned and the road widened into the main street, running straight as a plumb line between clapboard buildings, some whitewashed, most not, and I could tell by the rusted tin roofs that the settlement had been here awhile. A few houses, alleys between the stores, a wagon making wheel tracks in the dust. Destitute people loitered on the board walks.

"Are we staying here?" I had never lived in a town, only on our plantation property at the bayou. "Do you have relatives here?"

"No. This be a bad place. We get past, quick as we can. You see a telegraph office, you let me know."

He stumped beside me, bent with rheumatism, worse since our flight through the swamp.

I was looking for a sign for the telegraph office when I saw the young man on the porch.

It ran the length of a small frame house which someone long ago had started to whitewash. He leaned his chair against the dingy wall, boots on the railing, indolently whetting a hunting knife. He appeared to be twenty-five or thirty and healthy, and I wondered why he wasn't in the army.

His battered hat tilted down in front, leaving a lot of brown hair to curl around his ears and straggle about the collar of a faded blue shirt. His brown coat hung open and his beard was not well-trimmed, nor even combed. As we approached, he glanced up.

His eyes held mine briefly, flicked to Joshua, returned to me. Their touch across the distance (too great to determine color) made me feel as if we had recognized each other, though I could never have seen him before. There was something exciting about him, hidden like the mysterious depths of the swamp, and I knew instinctively that he lived on the sharp edge of survival. Had I really been a boy, I would have walked up the steps and spoken to him, asking for the tales I was sure he could tell.

His closed lips smiled, faintly, as if he read my thoughts.

Joshua's hand on the nape of my neck reminded me that even without ruffled dimity and ringlets, I was Miss Jessica Linville, of Linville Plantation, Southport, Louisiana. "Don' you be lookin' at no trash like him," he muttered. The urge to turn and smile at the man was strong, but I controlled it, ashamed to incur further rebuke.

"There's the telegraph," I said. Joshua quickened his limping pace. Going up on the boardwalk behind him, I cast one furtive glance toward the white house, but the chair was empty, a bit askew.

Disappointed, I scarcely listened to Joshua and the telegraph operator exchanging words, until one voice rose harshly. "Get out of here, nigger. I don't send telegrams for the likes of you."

"My money's good." Joshua's words placated, but his manner remained proud. "And it ain't for me. I have to let this boy's uncle know--"

The telegraph operator came around the end of his counter. "Take your money and git. Wasn't for your kind, we wouldn't be in this damn war."

"I got to notify the boy's kin to come for--"

"You're in *my* place! You understand that? Bob, come throw this nigger out. I hear a message coming in."

He went back to his key, and a burly man strode through an inner door.

"I'm goin'-- I'm goin'," Joshua said, turning, but Bob didn't stop. He grabbed the green coat near one shoulder and hustled us outside.

Another man passing in the street hollered, "What you caught, Bob?" A third man hurried up, his aspect wild, his accusation loud. "I bet you anything he's the skunk what attacked that white woman in Line Ferry last week. Davy, get a rope and let's make sure he don't see tomorrow."

I grasped at Joshua's other sleeve and threatened hysterically, "I'll get the sheriff!"

The men laughed and one said, "You'll have to go to Cass County to find him."

They pulled us into the alley, their curses and taunts drawing others to the fight. Some blows bashed in the old felt hat and knocked it off. I yelled for help--but those who came joined in the attack.

Several fists struck me by mistake. When someone got a noose around his neck, I screeched in earnest. Both of us were trying to loosen the rope when a hand shoved a pistol against his temple. Joshua threw a shielding arm in front of my face, yet the explosion deafened me and powder smoke blinded me and stung my nostrils, and we fell together. More gunshots sounded fuzzy and far away to my shocked eardrums.

The tangle of fists surrounding us disappeared as some of the crowd ran off; others stayed to fight each other.

Joshua's weight across me pinned me down, and I knew he must be dead but had no time to realize what that meant, because fingers gripped my arm. A rough boot gave his body a shove, rolling it off me like a meal sack. Hauling me upright, someone jerked me to my feet and flung me onto a tall, speckled horse, then vaulted into the saddle behind me, and I clung to the saddle horn as we galloped like Furies for a woods west of town.

Riding on the saddleforks with black mane whipping me, I had no opportunity to glimpse my rescuer. With both of us in the seat, it was a tight fit, his body curving close against mine. I noticed the edges of a faded blue shirt sticking out from the ragged brown sleeves of a coat. The hands on the reins were strong, dirty. And familiar.

It was the man from the porch.

We crashed through underbrush, hit a faint trail, and followed it among a maze of huge trees that grew close and dropped red, gold, and yellow leaves about our heads. Veering, we entered a pine forest, plunged into unexpected little streams without ceremony. The swift, pounding motion of the horse made my head reel. My riding had been confined to a plush seat in a carriage drawn by a sedate team, so this flight across gullies and dodging marshy places, nearly snapped my already raw nerves.

Tensed for a spill that would dash my brains out, I clutched the pommel until my knuckles were white. Eyes closed, I shuddered at the image of that noose around Joshua's neck, his pitifully grizzled hair, heard again the gun blast ending his life, his arm thrust between us in a last act of caring for me.

Tears dripped off my chin and when I wiped them away, my palm bore smears of Joshua's blood. Sobs wrenched upward and found release. I hadn't finished grieving for Papa, and now my friend and buffer against

everything unknown lay a corpse in the dust of a town I couldn't name. Nothing I loved existed anymore.

The man behind me said no word of comfort, seeming not to notice my distress. Less and less sun shone through the thatch above us, shut out by great oaks, magnolias, pines, cypresses covered in vines and hanging moss. All manner of lush, exotic flowering plants, just finishing their season, gave the place a rank, wild smell.

At last he drew the horse to a jerky stop.

Dismounting, he reached up for me. When he set me on the ground, my legs buckled and I grabbed the stirrup to keep standing. I was afraid to cry any more, unsure what he might do if he suspected or discovered I wasn't a boy. Everyone in the household had warned me against letting strange men near enough to "take advantage" of me, and now here I was in the middle of a darkening woods, with a man against whom I had no defense whatever.

Though he did not unsaddle the sweating horse, he began rubbing it with handfuls of leaves. As it seemed we were going to stay here awhile, I sat on a fallen log and tried to gather my wits. Nothing was visible in any direction except forest. "Why did you bring me here?"

"You like it better in town?"

His voice was soft, but far from effeminate, with an edge of cynical humor. Our eyes met briefly and I answered honestly. "No."

"That's why."

He cleared a spot of rotting leaves, gathered twigs and laid the kindling, and got a little smokeless blaze going. Then he uncapped a canteen and took a long swallow before offering it to me.

The first gulp burned all the way into my stomach. I held the canteen away, sputtering. "That's vile!"

"It's good whiskey," he pointed out, and took another drink. "Some folks I know would pay a pretty penny for a couple pints of it."

He then rummaged in a knapsack called a war bag. Out of it came utensils and a couple packages wrapped in butcher's paper. Opening a small sack with his pocket knife, he poured what appeared to be half-cooked beans into a dented pot and added water from another canteen. He started coffee in a second pot. I wanted water badly, but he clearly was saving it, so I decided I'd better keep quiet. He'd rescued me, but his motive for doing so was unclear.

I drew up my knees and linked my arms around them. As the wind freshened, the whisper of leaves sounded like spirits gossiping. I felt awed being exactly where I had wished to be, when I'd imagined myself making friends with a strangely exciting man.

He was slender, muscular, more than a head taller than I, with the easy movements of someone accustomed to camp life. The curly hair touching his shoulders had held a chestnut glint in the sun, though everything about him seemed rougher and less civilized away from town. He didn't smile nor exert himself to get acquainted.

"My name's Jess," I told him. "What's yours?"

He bit the inside of his lower lip, and I could see he was making up a lie. "Call me Cully."