

Melanie A. Rawls

Excerpt from **Who You Love . . .**

Following is one of the family stories told by nonagenarian Rosalie Laura Jacobs Phelps, retired midwife and family matriarch, to her great-granddaughter Shay.

"Shay, do you know how you got your Indian tribe name?" I ask the girl. She is brushing my hair—what's left of my hair, but I don't want to go into that.

"Well, I'm Kathlynn Cheyenne and I know that Shawnee, Osceola, Cree and Cherokee crop up in the family. Mama says it's tradition. Says there's Native American blood in the family—or that's the story."

"Most Negroes think they have Indian blood in the family, whether or not there is. We've got no more than most. But your mama's right—those Indian tribe names are a tradition in the family. They are a tribute to my grandmother. Though her name was Cora, she was known as Cherokee."

"Because she looked Indian?"

"Because she looked Indian. And she knew about plants and animals and woodcraft. They said she had all the good and bad qualities of Indians. She was at home outdoors and she was real quiet and sneaky and deadly."

"Nana, that sounds kind of racist. . ."

"Maybe. But it's meant as a compliment both ways. Let me tell you what happened to her one time. My daddy, who was her oldest child, told me this story. She told him and her husband about the parts they didn't witness."

This happened about the 1880s, said my daddy. He was in his early twenties. He and his five brothers were out in the fields with their daddy Shiloh. (Shiloh named himself after a battle in the War Between the States. I don't know why, but he did). The family had a place in Virginia. Now, my daddy, Elijah, hadn't married yet, though he was courting. So he was still home and helping out with the farm work and carpentering with his daddy. They had a good business. Cora was a mid-wife—yes, I followed in my grandmother's footsteps. She's why I wanted to be a nurse.

My grandmother was beautiful. Everybody thought so. Big cloud of black hair with a silver streak at her right temple, bold black eyes. She was about in her forties at the time of this story, and had had a hard life, but she could still turn heads. And this man decided he wanted her. He was a well-to-do fellow, big man in the district, so he figured, I guess, that he could have any woman he wanted and she'd be flattered.

He started riding by their house during the day when Shiloh and the boys were out working. He never came by when anybody but Cora—Cherokee—was home, so he must have been keeping watch. He didn't come by too often—that would've raised suspicion. He'd say how-do, mention the weather, ask for a drink of water, tell Cherokee what a fine place they had. Cherokee was always polite. He'd chat awhile and ride on.

But one day, he didn't ride on. Cherokee was in her house making dinner for her husband and sons when in this man walks and puts the bar on the door. He's up in her kitchen all big before she

knows what's going on. She just didn't expect it because everybody in the area, colored and white, knew her and her family and respected her and her family, and most were a little afraid of her because she'd spent time in New Orleans and was said to be a conjure-woman. Nobody messed with Cherokee. She went anywhere she wanted, day or night, and got service in any place in town she took her business to.

So here's this man, in her house and the front door barred. She could make a dash for the back door, but he might catch her—by now he's all close up on her and telling her what he thinks they ought to be doing. What should she do?

She smiles all sweet and says, "Why, Mr. Allman, this is quite a surprise. I never suspected--" She hesitates and acts like she's shy and confused. She puts on the smile again and says, "Let me fix you a cup of coffee and we'll keep company." She pats her hair and continues smoothly, "My husband and sons won't be coming in for the mid-day meal for a couple of hours yet."

So he thinks he's got her. He stops blocking her way and sits down at the kitchen table. She puts on the coffee pot, excuses herself briefly and comes back into the kitchen with a fancier apron on and a scarf around her hair. He's pleased she's dressing up for him. Cherokee fusses around the kitchen cabinets, sets out a cup and saucer and a slice of pie for him. When the coffee is ready, she takes the pot and walks around behind him to pour. The coffee is very black. Cherokee fills the cup, puts down the pot

And then Mr. Allman feels the hard, cold muzzle of a gun in his ear. Cherokee says, "Your choice. Drink the coffee or take a bullet."

Allman tries to get up and Cherokee rams him down with one hand and fires at the floor with the other, grazing his leg. She cocks the gun again immediately. So Allman drinks. Cherokee brings him a bucket.

After he finishes throwing up everything but the insides of his feet, he's too sick, weak and scared to move, so Cherokee tells him to sit in the chair and don't bother her because she's got to get the meal on for her family. He sits still until he's somewhat recovered, then make a dash for the door. Cherokee jumps, swings that pistol. When he comes to, he's tied to the chair and has a bandage around his head. Cherokee is shucking corn.

When Shiloh and the boys come home, Cherokee has dinner on the table and a tied-up man at the head of it. Cherokee says, "You-all know Mr. Allman. He decided to pay me a visit. I think he ought to have dinner with us."

"That so?" says Shiloh. He looks at Allman, who's sweating like a waterfall and so pasty-faced he looks like raw biscuit dough left out too long. "Well, boys," says Shiloh, "let's wash up and not keep your mother's meal cooling."

Allman's tied to the chair by his legs and torso (and pushed right up to the table so he can't get free without a lot of commotion—Cherokee was a strong woman). His hands are free. Cherokee puts a plate in front of him. He's too scared not to eat but too scared to make a good meal of it, so he's trembling and crumbling and dropping his cornbread and choking on his coffee. He especially seemed to have trouble drinking the coffee.

Nobody says a word during the meal. Finally Shiloh and the boys are finished. He rises, and so do Cherokee and the boys. Cherokee takes a huge butcher knife out of a drawer. Allman's eyes show all their whites and he starts breathing hard and fast. Cherokee cuts the ropes: whomp! whomp! whomp!

Shiloh says, "Next time you stop by, Allman, the boys and I will keep company with you, too." He and his sons leave.

Allman finally staggers to his feet and follows Cherokee's husband and son out the door. He hauls himself up on his horse and rides slowly away.