

## *Keeping Secrets*

JUST BECAUSE PAPA AND I KNEW MAMA WAS GONE DIDN'T MEAN THE whole town of Harper had to find out. Of course, if Miss Chessie Roubidoux got even a whiff of trouble from our place, she'd be making up stories and spreading them about faster than thistledown in a windstorm. One year, she had everyone in town believing Mama practiced voodoo on account of the fact that she drank hibiscus tea. Miss Chessie was walking past our place on her way to the post office and she saw me and Mama sitting out on the porch sipping our fresh, brewed-in-the-sun hibiscus tea. She stopped in the street and stared at us, the dust settling on her shiny shoes. Wiping the sweat from her face with the handkerchief she kept hanging over her belt, Miss Chessie said, "What on earth are you drinking, Heirah Rae Bergen?"

Mama held up her glass and shook it a little so the flower petals in the tea would float around a bit. I could tell by the smile on her face that Mama was thinking up a good answer. "Hibiscus tea."

I was disappointed. I usually got a good laugh over watching Miss Chessie stomp off after Mama served her up a little just deserts.

"Hibiscus tea? What is that? Some voodoo brew you picked up from them colored folk down at the Crooked Gator?"

Mama was good friends with the folks down at the Crooked Gator Cafe. We were one of the only white families in there on any given day. I loved their alligator jambalaya. It was so hot, it made my mouth itch for days. Most white folks thought it was a sin to mix with

black folks, but Mama didn't give a hoot. Neither did Papa. I didn't even bother thinking about it.

Now Miss Chessie, she thought all black folks were evil because she thought they were into voodoo magic. She was sure voodoo was devil worship. Mama just played right along with Miss Chessie's stupid beliefs.

"Why yes, Chessie. This is straight from a witch doctor's kitchen." Mama held her tea up higher. "It'll shrivel the kidneys of my enemies." Mama took a big gulp.

I bit my lip to keep from giggling as Miss Chessie glared at Mama's glass of tea. She said, "You're evil, Heirah Rae Bergen. And I'm going to see that this entire town knows it."

Mama licked her lips. "You do that, Chessie."

Miss Chessie stomped off shouting, "A woman like you shouldn't be allowed to have children." She turned back to say, "With your evil ways, you'll make that sweet girl just like you!"

Mama squeezed my hand, saying, "She'll be just like herself." She stood up, went to the porch railing, then raised up her glass so Miss Chessie could see it. "Here's to your health, Chessie!"

Miss Chessie just shook her head then charged into the post office all ready to spread lies about Mama. I was a bit afraid of what Miss Chessie might say, knowing how folks in Harper can be so mean to Mama, but Mama just sat back down and laughed.

"That woman's a lunatic," she said.

"What's that?"

"Well, she's not really a lunatic like the folks who are too crazy to know their day from their night, but Chessie Roubidoux has got some of the zaniest ideas I've ever heard. Hibiscus tea a voodoo brew." Mama shook her head a bit and laughed.

Our tea wasn't a magical potion, but folks didn't talk to Mama in