

BOOK  
2

The *swiftly unraveling*  
balance  
between the Old South  
and the **post-war** world is  
shattering Bay Harbor.

*The much-anticipated  
sequel to The Chinaberry Album*

# HEAT LIGHTNING

THE BAY HARBOR SAGA

Ruth Coe Chambers

# Chapter One

## *Post World War II – 1940s*

The tea colored water of the bay eased back and forth over seaweed and sand lapping at Bay Harbor's toes. Farther up the Florida coast the Gulf drew the town to its embrace with the titan force of undertow after a storm.

The townspeople took the water for granted, had long since grown accustomed to the quiet brilliance of sunsets that slid beneath the Bay and the promise of buoyancy from the briny water of the Gulf. They wore its fragile mist on their skin, breathed the scent of it, and tasted the salt as it rode the wind. The water defined the people and the town. Barrier or gate.

Despite the sparkling waters and the picture perfect sunsets, Bay Harbor wasn't a picture postcard town. It had that lived-in look. Cracked uneven sidewalks, a few businesses that could have used a coat of paint, the ramshackle Bay pier in desperate need of repair — flaws, but nothing hopeless. The main street was as unassuming as a dirt path. It didn't border the beach, had no claim to beauty but remained sun washed and treeless, a road straight to the heart with a complete lack of pretense that made Bay Harbor so welcoming.

Soldiers who returned there from World War II had never seen a sight more beautiful. They were home, and Bay Harbor welcomed them even if it meant a woman had to give up a cherished job to a returning soldier or a husband saw his wife through eyes with memories she'd never imagine.

Miles away in Kentucky, Bay Harbor had just begun to take shape in the mind of a too thin soldier mustering out at Camp Campbell. Hilton Fields

stared at the clothes spread out on his bunk and began jamming them into his duffle bag. A sergeant came by and stopped at his bunk.

“What’s the matter, buddy? You’re jamming them clothes in there like you’re mad at somebody. Aren’t you glad to be going home? Jesus Christ, the war’s over. You’re mustering out, son.”

Hilton shoved his trembling hands inside his pockets and looked up with a smile that concealed his thoughts. *I’m not your son, you fat son-of-a-bitch. Your hold over me is almost a thing of the past.*

“Just preoccupied, I guess. Thinking of home,” he answered.

“We’re all thinking the same thing, buddy. Where you from?”

Hilton forced another smile and replied, “No place special, Sarge, just a little town without foxholes.”

The sergeant laughed, Hilton saluted, and the guy moved on down the line.

Hilton zipped the duffle bag and sat on the side of his bunk, clutching his hands between his knees. He was thinking of home all right, trying to figure out where that would be. He’d never missed it before, but the war changed all that. He had no desire to go on being a gypsy the rest of his life. Bay Harbor was the only place that came to mind. Perhaps it could offer him a new beginning, the happy event every soldier longed for. Though he knew that for some the return home would be a new look at tragedy, a divorce, a life that no longer fit, he determined to make his fit.

Hilton dismissed the fact that his mother lived in Bay Harbor now, that they’d never gotten along, that he hadn’t written her a letter since the war began. He’d written her a letter once, and in return she’d sent him a first grade speller.

His closest friend, Robert Owens, lived in Bay Harbor too, someone else he hadn’t written. But he’d make it up to Robert. His mother? She was another matter entirely, but she was old now. And he’d always gotten along with Mr. Richards, his stepfather. Hilton could make it work. He was sure of it. It was a decision that brought him the first happiness he’d known since the war began, and he’d celebrate the only way he knew how. He’d bed the first whore he could find.

Hilton had a way with money and women, but he had yet to really know Bay Harbor. A small town of fewer than 5,000 people, Bay Harbor’s impact on its residents was immeasurable. Since his mother and step-father had moved there, Hilton had visited infrequently and never longer than a day. He had no inkling of the ways Bay Harbor charmed its residents, made them feel special, even when they weren’t.

Robert Owens' daughter, twelve year old Anna Lee, thought Bay Harbor made her special, understood she had been living in a memorable time and place. Bay Harbor was all she knew, that and the war.

The war had been the storm that carried people along, gave them purpose, kept them patriotic, loyal, and ready to sacrifice whatever it took to preserve their way of life. Anna Lee cherished all the war had made of them, had already begun to live its memory, wondering how they'd ever get along without it.

Anna Lee's daddy was Bay Harbor's deputy sheriff and a respected member of the community. Her Uncle Johnn was the only pharmacist and the most handsome man in town. And her mother, Estelle, was a sharp-tongued woman who cooked food fit for angels and could have made their robes too if she'd set her mind to it. Anna Lee believed these things gave her status, never realizing she was but a small shell on Bay Harbor's shore.

And now Anna Lee worried that she was betraying her place in Bay Harbor, admitting only to herself that she had loved the war. How could she adjust to life without exciting war movies, the special taste of a piece of candy that was rationed, soldiers in jeeps, Bay Harbor's deep waters bearing ships to war.

Guilt tormented her. What kind of person loved a war! Just one more secret to make her stomach hurt.

Anna Lee wasn't popular within her own age group and gravitated to friendships with older girls. Her favorite was Bay Harbor's beauty, nineteen year old Tyler Rose. She knew Tyler would hate her if she found out how she felt about the war. Her fiancé was in the Navy, and Tyler wrote to him every day.

Tyler seemed to have it all, but local girls took comfort from the fact that, for all her beauty, Tyler's family name would always be Rose, as in Rose Funeral Home. A family business for several generations, it was her constant burden, but one that lightened considerably when World War II brought Tyler her first serious boyfriend.

It was 1943 and while the townspeople drove dull grey and black Chevrolets and Fords that moved like storm clouds on the horizon, Stephen Rayburn, a recent graduate of the Naval Academy in Annapolis, came to town on a spring day crisp and important in his brilliant white uniform. Tall and slender, fine boned and handsome, he cut a fine figure. The people

in Bay Harbor were nothing if not impressed, particularly Tyler's mother, Beatrice.

Tyler always told Stephen that she felt his presence even before she saw him in Johnn Owens' drugstore.

"The air felt charged, Stephen. I swear it did." She softened her voice a little, dragged her words more than usual because he'd told her how he enjoyed her liquid vowels. She liked the sound of that. Liquid vowels.

Wars make lots of striking couples, but none more so than Tyler and Stephen. When Tyler linked her arm with Stephen's, her long, deliberate stride matching his, they seemed to own the sidewalk.

The night before Stephen shipped out, he gave Tyler a string of pearls. "They were to be your wedding gift, but I want you to have them now. Even though I'm far away, I'll be able to picture you wearing them." He cupped the pearls in both his palms and kissed them. Twice. When he placed his hands beneath Tyler's shoulder length pageboy and fastened them around her neck, he kissed them again. Tyler knew she was the luckiest girl in the world.

The telegram came in November of 1945. Stuck inside the screen door by an impatient delivery boy, it had been caught in a chill November wind and blown into the garden where Beatrice had sent Tyler to pick some late roses and foliage to brighten the house.

Anna Lee had just started down the sidewalk when she saw Tyler go into the garden. Even as late as November Tyler's olive complexion looked tan, and Anna Lee knew she'd be wearing the pearls Stephen gave her before he left. She never took them off.

Anna Lee's mother said she thought it was bad luck to give somebody a wedding gift early. Anna Lee didn't tell Tyler that. She just watched the pearls grow more luminous with each passing day, the way Tyler said they would.

Anna Lee called, "Hey, Tyler," and stepped through the gate, inhaling the earthy smell of neglect and the bitter scent of dying mums. She rubbed her nose on her sleeve and, noticing how pretty Tyler looked, became acutely conscious of her own thin brown hair pulled back with a tacky bow shaped barrette, her bony frame lost inside a blue plaid dress. All her dresses were too big. Her mother made them that way to allow for growth. And though she wore them out before she grew into them, her mother went right on making them too large. Tyler's gray slacks definitely weren't too big.

Anna Lee kicked some dried rose petals and noticed a bit of yellow paper nearly hidden beneath some pine straw mulch. She brushed the

dirt off the envelope with her skirt, and said, "Why, it has your name on it, Tyler, but they spelled it with an 'i' instead of a 'y'. I love Tyler with a 'y', but I don't think it's pretty at all with an 'i', do you? It sounds the same and yet it doesn't, knowing the 'y' isn't there. Just like Uncle Johnn having that second 'n' in his name. It keeps it from being so common, don't you think?"

Anna Lee grew quiet when she realized Tyler wasn't listening to her and watched as Tyler placed the basket on the ground as carefully as if it held eggs. Then, still in slow motion, she stretched her hand in the direction of the telegram. She opened it and ran screaming, "Mother! Mother!"

Close on Tyler's heels, Anna Lee could hear Beatrice Rose pleading softly as she took the telegram from Tyler, "Not Stephen, oh God, please don't let it be Stephen." The telegram floated to the floor, and Beatrice gathered the limp and weeping Tyler into her arms. Anna Lee stood there clutching the basket of flowers, trembling so hard her teeth chattered.

Beatrice let out a guttural moan and shouted, "Anna Lee, for the love of God, go home! Tyler's had a terrible shock. Stephen's missing."

Flowers spilled on the floor when Anna Lee dropped the basket and ran out the front door and down the steps. She was closing the gate when Tyler's cousin, T. J., called to her from the porch of the funeral home, "There's a death tour today at four, Anna Lee. Wanna come?"

Anna Lee loved death tours at the funeral home and never missed one if she could help it, but she could think of nothing but the news in the telegram.

"Maybe. I don't know. Stephen's missing." She hadn't stopped running and didn't know if he heard her or not.

Anna Lee's footsteps echoed on the smooth sidewalk as she passed the frame houses of her neighbors, none of them grand, just large, comfortable homes spread beneath sheltering trees. All were painted white, all with front porches that boasted inviting swings, padded wicker furniture, all blurred by her haste. *No one outside to tell.* She glimpsed a gold star framed in the Schneider's window for their son who had been killed in action, and victory gardens where flowers had once bloomed. It wasn't far to her own house, but the sidewalk narrowed and was uneven, far enough to be out of the neighborhood of lovely, gracious homes, far from the crumpled tragedy of a yellow telegram. She ran into the house, much as Tyler had, calling, "Mama! Mama!"

Her mother sat at her Singer sewing machine, the room strong with the odor of machine oil. Estelle pushed the cast iron treadle in a slow,

rhythmic motion. Anna Lee knew that had she been angry, her feet would have worked back and forth pressing the treadle to its maximum speed. Taking all this in at a glance, she rushed up and grabbed her mother's arm.

"Anna Lee, you nearly took my breath away!" Estelle pressed her hand to her heart. "Don't do that!"

"But, Mama. . ."

"Don't 'but Mama' me. You about gave me a heart attack."

"Yes, ma'am, but, Mama. . ."

"Anna Lee, just calm down. You're much too excitable these days. God knows how I'm going to handle the change and your puberty at the same time."

"Yes, ma'am." Anna Lee hung her head and started out of the room.

"Anna Lee Owens, get back here! After all that upset, what did you want?"

"It's Stephen. He's missing."

"Stephen?"

"Tyler Rose's Stephen."

"My, God! Is Beatrice Rose having a nervous breakdown?"

"I'm not sure. Tyler's crying."

"Little wonder. As proud as her mother is of that Stephen Rayburn, I'll bet she's crying too. Nothing like realizing your ambitions through your children." Then faster than she could crochet a chain stitch, Estelle added, "Pride goeth before a fall." Estelle wasn't a religious woman but had a preacher's talent for furthering her own purpose with a bit of scripture.

"Not that I'm glad he's missing. I surely hope he's okay. Still, if some people weren't so snooty, it'd be a lot easier to feel sorry for them."

"Tyler's not snooty."

"What would you call her then? She acts like she's the prettiest thing God ever put breath in."

"She's nice to me. I think she's beautiful, like an angel. I've always thought she should teach Sunday school."

"In God's name, why?"

"Because she looks like an angel."

"Angels don't teach Sunday school, Anna Lee. They're musical. They play harps."

"Well, if they know God it seems they could teach Sunday school too."

"Just because you're twelve years old, you don't know everything, Miss." Estelle lifted the fabric from the machine and bit the thread with

her teeth. She frowned at Anna Lee. "What'd you say? You know better than to mumble."

"All those straight pins on the floor. Do you want me to pick them up?"

"No. Now that the war's over, I'll be able to buy all the pins I want. I enjoy throwing the old ones in the garbage, just cause I can."

Anna Lee moved her shoe back and forth over a cluster of pins. "Mama, do you think maybe Stephen got lost on the way home, and they just think he's missing?"

"No I don't. And when it's all over, it'll be a long time before everybody's accounted for. Why, Tyler's daddy hasn't been heard from in God knows how long. Lord help us if Larry's missing too."

"Poor Tyler. She's so young and pretty, and now she has a broken heart."

"You're just a child. You don't know anything about broken hearts."

"Was your heart ever broken?"

"A mother's heart breaks every day."

"I don't mean that way. Remember how sad Miss Amy was when her husband died, before she married Uncle Johnn? Her eyes were always red from crying.

"Well, there's all kinds of heartbreak, same as there's all kinds of love." Estelle glanced at the picture on the back of a Simplicity pattern and then back at the fabric on her sewing machine. "In about a minute you'll be able to hear my heart break if I've cut this pattern wrong."

As she started to leave the room, Anna Lee looked at her mother and hated her a little, hated her for not knowing she was so much more than twelve, that she'd grown old with the burden of protecting her parents, protecting them from finding out she'd learned their secret, that it had become her secret too. Tears blurred her eyes.

The treadle stopped moving and Estelle snapped another thread with her teeth. "Anna Lee, stop staring at me like that. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, Mama. I was just thinking."

"Well do your thinking someplace else. How can I concentrate with you standing there?"

She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment and then returned to her errand. She had to tell somebody else about the telegram or she'd burst.

*Who can I tell? Not T. J. He'd make it his news and run with it like a kite. I know! I'll tell Lola Edwards and her mother. They won't know anything about it at the lighthouse.*