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THE CHINABERRY ALBUM

THE BAY HARBOR SAGA

Ruth Coe Chambers

Chapter One

Bay Harbor was a city as sure as if its population had been five or even ten thousand. Actually, there weren't five thousand people in all of Bay Harbor, not even in the summer when people came to the beach or when World War II forced its soldiers and sailors among us. It had nothing to do with size. It was a feeling among the people. We felt like city people. Maybe it was because of the water. The Gulf of Mexico touched places and people we never saw, and that made us feel bigger than we were. Then again, maybe we were just privileged. We had water around us and history behind us.

Once Bay Harbor had been a city even in population — a teeming city, sin city. A saloon on every corner. It had been a thriving port, a bustling, busy place until a deadly fever struck it down. It was difficult to imagine Bay Harbor crowded, bursting with people, when we never even had to step off the sidewalk to let someone pass. We knew the names of all our neighbors, what their wash looked like and what kind of table they set. The Bay Harbor we knew was so different from its former self that the past seemed almost unreal. Its history was a picture we could look at without it changing us at all.

Only the Baptists tried to make it otherwise. So that we would always remember what God did to the wicked, they did their best to keep the memory of the town's evil history alive. First, there had been the fever brought in on one of the ships. They had tried to contain it, of course, but a fever-crazed sailor escaped from the ship and swam ashore. In a town so crowded, yellow fever spread like wildfire. But that hadn't satisfied God. Bay Harbor might still have become the state capital. Following the fever He sent a great tidal wave, and that's what really finished sin city.

The Chinaberry Album

When the town was rebuilt, she lifted her skirts out of the mud and sidestepped slightly to the north. Nothing prospered as well in the new location, not even sin, but so that people didn't forget — and the Baptists felt it was a measure of Bay Harbor's wickedness that God didn't leave something beautiful like a rainbow — the water never left entirely. Part of Bay Harbor still lay buried beneath the bay. The fact that in some places there was land where water had once been never entered the Baptists' accounting of things.

Bay Harbor no longer aspired to be the state capital. We didn't have to. We could afford to be unhurried because of those who had hurried before us. We lived secure in the knowledge of what we were and what we had been. We were proud to be Southerners. Not anything or anybody could ever take that away or make it any less than it was, and we knew it. When we talked, no matter what we said, it sounded soft and was gentle to the ear. Tourists traveled hundreds of miles to see things we took for granted. We didn't have to leave home to see the sun grow huge behind the tall palms as it sank slowly into the bay or cart home bags of curly gray moss or boxes of seashells. Almost at our doorsteps, we had beaches with sand so glistening white it hurt your eyes to look at it too long. And the Gulf water was salty to support us and warm to the touch. If the salt also burned our eyes and the undertow threatened to suck us away, it taught us respect. We could leave if we wanted to, but we never had to be tourists.

Still, we didn't wonder that they came. Bay Harbor was beautiful. As clean and sparkling as a freshly washed shell, it had to be the brightest spot on any map. Our houses were mostly wood, mostly painted white and set comfortably back from straight black roads that softened in the summer sun and hardened to the winter wind. One main street ran through town with a second, lesser street behind it for filling stations, offices for two doctors, a dentist, a lawyer, and the mayor. The lesser street became the winding beach road lined with palm trees, and it got most of the tourist traffic. Sun-washed and treeless, the main street was bordered with smooth sidewalks, perfect for skating. The most important buildings were the drugstore, the post office, the police station, our new picture show, and the boarding house.

Helen and Chester Armstrong owned more than the boarding house. They owned the star in Bay Harbor's crown. Covered with white clapboard siding, its high upstairs porch trimmed with elaborate gingerbread lace, the boarding house towered over Bay Harbor like a giant wedding cake glistening in the sun. The lettering had long since worn off the swinging sign that hung out front, but there wasn't a soul in town who didn't know the name of the big two-storied building. It was our landmark. As sure a beacon

as the mirrored, winding lighthouse that flashed to the Gulf of Mexico, it beckoned to us all. Forming a balcony that seemed to float suspended over the sidewalk, the screened second-story porch supported a row of wooden rockers, every one of which was familiar to me because Helen was Mama's best friend. Her dining room was the only public eating place in town, and the words *Dining Room* had once been lettered in blue above the small door cut, like an afterthought, into the side of the building. The rain and wind had rubbed that lettering off too, but it didn't hurt her business any. The long tables, pushed together and covered with white cloths, were crowded with people every day at noon. Only a thin wall separated the kitchen from the long, narrow dining room, and the heat that was a nuisance in the summer was a necessity in the winter. But in the summer, tall fans, like giant trees, blew across the ends of the tables so that it was never too uncomfortable.

The dishes, like the tablecloths, were perfectly white. All the color came from the wedges of cornbread, large plump biscuits or golden sweet potato soufflé topped with pale brown marshmallows. There were always greens of some kind too, — collards, turnips, or deep green spinach flowered with slices of boiled egg. There might be slices of ham fanning the length of huge platters or roasts or heaping mounds of fried chicken or freshly caught, pan-fried fish. But when the smell of chitlins settled over Bay Harbor like a choking fog, I gave wide berth to the boarding house. I couldn't imagine that Helen liked chitlins, but no doubt the boarders did.

In all the times I'd been to her dining room, I'd never seen Helen lift a hand to cook a thing. She'd just walk into the kitchen, smile at the Nigra cooks, calling them each by name, and nod her head as she looked at the bowls of food and large platters of meat that would stretch the length of the tables when the noon whistle blew.

Helen's detachment fascinated me. She was somehow removed from the rest of us and above the kinds of things that involved Mama and most of the other women I knew. I could never recall seeing her eat because she was always standing, making sure everything was okay. Because she was Mama's best friend, I could eat there any time I wanted and not have to pay. I had only to walk in and sit down, and at some point during the meal Helen would come by and rest her soft white hands on my shoulders.

"Everything all right?" she'd ask. She'd say it to me, but all the men would answer, waving forks and talking with their mouths full of food. They liked Helen and were eager to please her. She was in the right business all right. Men were drawn to her like bees to honey. It was a good thing too. Chester couldn't attract a gnat.

Age was as kind to Helen as it was gentle to Bay Harbor. Bay Harbor might mellow, its corners give way to gentle curves, but it never looked old or worn. There was something ageless about the main street and the sidewalks stretching beside it as they continued on past the boarding house to the railroad station where they stopped. The greenest lawn and some of the brightest flowers in town grew there, but perhaps they were so colorful only in contrast to the drabness of the worn path behind the station that led to the Quarters.

The entire Nigra population of Bay Harbor lived beyond the railroad tracks in its own dusty little town. For the most part, the houses were small and unpainted, looking as though they were part of the earth beneath them. A few had somehow gotten painted, and one even had a white picket fence, but these were jammed in between their sorrier neighbors as if they were all the same. They lined either side of soft, powdery streets that were the color of gray dog ticks. These fed into their unpaved main street which sported a few stores and a juke or two, owned and run by men from town who'd eat dust all day if there was a dollar in it. The rest of the main street was given to vacant lots covered with weeds that were sometimes cleared away to make room for a peanut stand.

They were kept separated from town and yet were a part of us, were so like Bay Harbor, for it was a quiet place and friendly. People didn't lock their doors at night. Even the air was still. Taking a deep breath in any direction, you could tell what the neighbors were having for supper.

But being a city, Bay Harbor was progressive. The first sign of progress I remember was the picture show. It seemed like nothing exciting had ever happened in Bay Harbor until they built the picture show. After that we had a rash of revival meetings, and the Ku Klux Klan burned crosses occasionally. That's the only thing the Klan ever did in Bay Harbor, burn crosses across the street from the picture show. Sometimes they'd even burn them during their lunch hour to keep from going out in the evening. They didn't stop anybody from going to the show though. An ordinary movie could become quite exciting if a charred cross lay smoldering on the grass when you walked outside. Daddy said it was better advertising than the show owners could have bought. A lot of people had to see a picture twice just to find out what was wrong with it. In the face of such competition, Malone's Furniture lowered the price of radios.

The newness still hadn't worn off the picture show when the posters about Mr. Magic began to appear. We'd never had a magic show in Bay

Harbor before. I thought it must be something pretty wonderful, a special kind of show that couldn't be held in the outdoor tents where we'd watched dancing girls in filmy dresses. Because Daddy was the deputy sheriff, Mama and I could go to the tent shows without paying. Daddy didn't pay either, but then he was working. He couldn't sit down with Mama and me but stood in the back of the tent and watched from there.

If any doubted this was work, he proved them wrong the night he stopped the show. A lady on the stage was dancing around in a thin green dress when I noticed Daddy out of the corner of my eye. He was striding down the grassy aisle toward the stage, and even in the dim light of the tent I could see the sharp creases Mama had so carefully pressed into his pants. As Daddy walked in front of all those people, advancing on the stage, I knew she was glad she'd polished his shoes that morning too. Not the least bit embarrassed, he walked right out on the stage and stood with his hands clasped behind him until the lady quit dancing. It wasn't a long wait. Then he walked around behind her and marched her off the stage just as though he'd been doing that sort of thing every day of his life. Mama wouldn't say what had been wrong. She promised to tell me when I was older, but I knew she'd forget.

Far beyond any of the traveling shows that came to Bay Harbor, the Magic Show was no more suited to the school auditorium where the Grand Old Opry had been held than it was to an outdoor tent. It was clear to me that the magician had waited for the proper setting — our new picture show with its red velvet curtains and popsicle-colored lights along the walls.

I studied the cardboard posters carefully. It was March and apt to be windy so they were nailed securely to telephone poles or faced the sidewalk from inside grocery store windows. Mr. Magic had a great deal of blue wavy hair. In spite of the unnatural coloring, he looked a lot like Brother Palmer, the Baptist minister, but I tried to keep that from bothering me too much. I could talk of nothing but the Magic Show. The thought of having to wait two weeks to see Mr. Magic was almost unbearable. A lot could happen in two weeks.

I didn't worry that the war might keep Mr. Magic from coming to Bay Harbor. World War II was only news on the radio and a shortage of candy and chewing gum. My biggest dread was that the end of the world would come before he arrived.

Our next door neighbor, Miss Red, knew all the signs from the Book of Revelation and thought the end of the world was coming most

any time. When the picture show was completed, she was certain the end couldn't be far off. It pained her terribly to see people drawn to a place of sin, especially young people.

Living so close to Miss Red made it pretty hard on me at times. Nearly every Saturday it was the same thing. I'd dress with special care, and when it was time to leave for the picture show, I'd clutch a quarter tightly in my hand, eager to join the line waiting for the double feature to begin. But then I'd stop and look out the side window. Miss Red would be waiting for me on her front porch. There was no chance of my missing her by leaving early. Not even bothering to finish her meal, she'd come out and wait for me with a glass of iced tea in her hand. I'd stand for a minute with my hands against the screen door, then I'd fling it open and race across the porch and down the steps as fast as I could. I'd pretend I didn't see her, but she'd holler anyway.

"Hey there, Anna Lee Owens, how'd you like to be in the picture show when Jesus comes?"

I'd often wondered how she was so sure Jesus would pick Bay Harbor for His Second Coming, but I never asked her about it.

"This just might be the day, you know. He'll come like a thief in the night. Now think, Anna Lee, think how you'd feel if He found you in the picture show!"

She always spoiled a little of the show for me. Sometimes in the middle of the picture, I'd hear noises from the street and think the world really was coming to an end. I could almost see Jesus standing in front waiting for me to come out.

It was mainly because Miss Red was such a good cook that she kept such a strong hold on all the children in the neighborhood. We'd sit around her kitchen table with the oilcloth on it and listen to her talk about the Bible as long as the cookies held out. Little children were always taking her the stuff they made in Bible school because that meant extra cookies. She had quite a collection of macaroni necklaces, painted seashells and brightly colored Bible pictures.

Except for an occasional serving of canned peach halves and store-bought pound cake, we didn't have dessert except on Sundays and holidays. But Miss Red had dessert every day of the week. Every day! And she wasn't fat either. Of course, it was hard to say what Miss Red looked like since so little of her showed beneath the long print dresses and black cotton stockings she wore summer and winter. Her hair was gray, but it was dark like

the clothes she wore and pulled back into a knot at the nape of her neck. She had to be very old, but her body looked as smooth and unbending as a block of stove wood. And her face wasn't wrinkled with countless wandering lines. There were lines but deep ones that divided her face into smooth little islands separated like chunks of floating clabber.

I'd had ample time to study Miss Red as I'd wait for her to make chocolate pudding. She had a way with chocolate pudding that made my mouth water just to think about it. The meringue was always high and billowy with brown-tipped peaks and little yellow drops here and there like spilled beads. There were never any beads on Mama's meringues. She said there wouldn't have been any on Miss Red's if she'd known how to make one properly, but I was convinced there wasn't anything Miss Red couldn't cook properly if she wanted to. I don't suppose Miss Red ever made a chocolate pudding without giving me some because she knew I liked it so much. I always felt that I could eat the whole bowl of pudding instead of the single serving all wobbly and warm in the dish she'd set before me. I never found out if I could or not though. Miss Red never offered me a whole bowl, and Mama wouldn't make one for me.

Every Sunday for what seemed the better part of a year, Mama specialized in banana puddings. One week there'd be bits of cherries tucked in among the bananas, and the next there'd be pecan halves. There was always something, but they were never as good as Miss Red's chocolate pudding, and Mama knew it. Not that I ever told her so; I just never showed any desire to eat the whole bowl. I was very careful when I talked to Mama about Miss Red's cooking because Mama wanted to be the best cook in all of Bay Harbor.

Once Miss Red sent over a jar of bread and butter pickles, and Daddy said he hadn't had any that good since his mother died. The very next day Mama went out and bought a half bushel of cucumbers. She took down the *Household Searchlight Recipe Book* Uncle Johnn had given her and blew the dust off it. Mama never used recipes, but Uncle Johnn had given her the cookbook before he knew that. She never measured anything either, having taught herself to cook long before she'd learned how to read. Living alone with her daddy, she'd stood on a box in order to reach the stove.

It was a hot day, and Mama really worked over those pickles, wiping her face with a towel and blinking back moisture from her eyes to see the pages of the cookbook. I'd never had a particular fondness for pickles, but when they were ready she insisted I sample them for her. I could see Mama's

eyes starting to glow with pride as I lifted the pickle to my mouth. I didn't see the light fade. The inside of my mouth seemed to draw together, trying to meet in the middle, and my tongue wanted to roll up like a piece of new linoleum. When she was sure I wasn't going to choke to death, she said in a low voice barely above a whisper, "Don't you ever breathe a word of this to anybody, you hear?"

I hadn't seen her so upset since the time I swallowed the asafetida bag she'd hung round my neck to ward off disease. I nodded to her. I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to talk again.

People were used to burying things. Nigra maids were accused of burying stuff they stole from the houses where they worked, and people were still trying to dig up Spanish treasure rumored to be buried near Bay Harbor. It seemed impossible that a Spanish ship might lie beneath our town, something as big as a ship hidden under grass and trees and land where people walked without even getting their feet wet. Nevertheless, rumors persisted that a ship loaded with gold had foundered in a hurricane and sunk into the bay when it had extended miles inland around Bay Harbor. Mama insisted more money had been spent trying to locate that gold than it would be worth if they ever found it. From time to time, digging equipment and rigs were brought in, and iron jaws chewed away at the land. The only thing anybody ever got for their trouble was a bit of wood, thought to be from some wooden kegs carried on the ship. They may have even held the gold. The man who lost his money on the venture wasn't impressed with that bit of history, but one of the Nigra men who'd helped him with the digging gathered all the bits and pieces and put them in a fruit jar, his toothless grin disappearing when the chief of police took it away from him to put on display at the police station. Daddy finally persuaded them to let the old man take the jar home. The police station was only a single room, hardly larger than an outhouse, and even something as small as a fruit jar took up valuable space.

Mama was one of the few people around who wasn't interested in buried treasure. But then Mama was a relative newcomer to Bay Harbor. A Georgia peach born and raised in Atlanta, she referred to Floridians as "crackers" and was very careful never to get involved with anything tacky. She considered treasure hunts tacky. Being unaccustomed, therefore, to either digging or burying things, Mama probably went too deep and hit water. In the backyard near the steps, there appeared a slight mound that resembled a small grave, but I knew it was where Mama had buried those pickles. She'd become an unwilling participant in a Bay Harbor tradition.

When I went out of my way at supper that night to tell her how much I loved her pickled peaches, she silenced me with a hidden kick beneath the table.

The closer the time came for the Magic Show, the more excited I became. I begged Mama to go with me because that was the only way I'd get to wear a Sunday dress. She wouldn't go. She'd seen a magic show in New York City one time.

"If you've seen one," she said, "you've seen them all. The hand's quicker than the eye. That's all there is to it."

I didn't want tricks. I wanted real magic, hope for my dreams and promises beyond death. I didn't talk to her about it anymore. I was afraid she'd spoil it for me the way Miss Red spoiled the movies.

The world didn't come to an end. Saturday, March 27, 1943, finally arrived and with it Mr. Magic. He looked younger than his picture, and his youth was despised by the wives and mothers of absent soldiers. Whispers rose like dust in a sudden wind, and when Mr. Magic limped onto the stage of the Bay Harbor theater, I knew it was a slight limp of the kind one could acquire from sticking a toe beneath a passing locomotive. His feet didn't concern me, however. I was determined to watch the hand that was quicker than my eye. If he held something in his right hand, I fastened my eyes on his left hand for one false move. I didn't see a thing to betray the magic and was finally able to settle back and enjoy the show.

In glittering clothes and polished tables, in endless boxes and trunks, magic had come to Bay Harbor. A lot of girls screamed when he started to cut the woman in half. She wore a pink and black-striped bathing suit and black stockings. I knew he wasn't about to cut her in half but was relieved nevertheless when she jumped out of the box, curtsied and ran off the stage. Next Mr. Magic pulled dozens of colored scarves out of his hat and laid them on the table. It was a thin little table, but Mama had warned me that it would have a false bottom in it. He pulled an egg out of the hat and placed it carefully on top of the scarves before he reached in again and pulled a white rabbit out by the ears. I heard him say, "Who'd like to have this rabbit? Would one of you fine boys or girls like to have this rabbit?"

I didn't even raise my hand. I hadn't lived nine years to be somebody's fool. He wouldn't give his rabbit away. That was just more magic. But he *was* giving it away! He pointed to Opal Sims and told her to come up on the stage. Too late, I raised my hand. He didn't give any more rabbits away. I'd been tricked after all. If only I had believed him, he might have given the rabbit to me. I could have walked past the velvet curtains and

been close enough to touch Mr. Magic or the colored scarves. We might never see Mr. Magic again, and now he'd gone and left a little of himself behind with Opal Sims, the only albino in Bay Harbor.

Miss Red had a bowl of chocolate pudding waiting when I went to her house that afternoon. She wouldn't have asked if her life depended on it, but I knew she wanted me to tell her about Mr. Magic. She couldn't find any particular sin in listening.

"Well," she said to me, "I'm sure glad you didn't get that rabbit, Anna Lee. They're filthy things, rabbits. There's nothing magic about that filth. I knew a girl once that got ringworm from a rabbit. Got it all over her face. She was a pretty girl too. I say *was*. Once she got that ringworm, her face was never fit to look at. Opal ain't the lucky one for getting that rabbit. No sir!"

I stood up suddenly, nearly overturning my chair. "Miss Red, you told me it was a cat that gave that girl ringworm. When I brought home those six kittens somebody tried to drown, you told daddy it was a cat!"

"Cat. Rabbit. What difference does it make? They're all part and parcel of the same thing. They're all filth. And don't you ever forget, Anna Lee, that cleanliness is next to Godliness. When you grow up and have a house and children of your own, you just remember that now, you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am, I hear."

I spent what was left of the afternoon at the drugstore with Uncle John. I dusted the midnight blue bottles of Evening in Paris cologne and straightened the few funny books he could get during the war. The funny books were always a mess, but Uncle John never said a word to the boys and girls who crowded around the stand reading them. He didn't mind that he sold so few of them either. His only regret was that he couldn't provide real books for us to read. We had our schoolbooks and the teachers had books, but there was no library. To get a book you had to know somebody who owned one you could borrow.

By the time I had things in order, it was going on six o'clock, and when I felt a hand on my shoulder, I knew it was his. I touched his fingers lightly with my own, and his strong hand gripped mine and helped me to my feet. Walking home together, I told him the whole thing, every bit of it.

"And it wasn't a cat, Uncle John, it was a rabbit. A rabbit gave that girl ringworm! I'll never go to Miss Red's house again as long as I live. Never! All those little kittens could have been mine!"

Miss Red, of all people, lying. Of course her name was sort of a lie. Even though she'd been married once, she still went by her maiden name. But she wasn't deceiving us. We knew she'd been married, and she knew

we knew it. Verna was living, breathing proof of Miss Red's marriage no matter what name they went by.

At least I felt better for having talked to Uncle Johnn. With Mama and Daddy I sometimes felt like an outsider but never with Uncle Johnn. Having him for an uncle was as wonderful as knowing I wasn't a tourist or adopted or some other awful thing. With his strong angular jaw, surprising in one so gentle, he was taller and more handsome than any man in town. So lean and straight, he gave his clothes the same quality Ashley Wilkes gave to his Confederate uniform in *Gone with the Wind*.

Maybe Mama and Helen were right when they declared *Gone with the Wind* to be the standard by which Southerners measured life. I liked Ashley better than Rhett Butler, Mama's favorite. She said Ashley was too weak to suit her, too much like Uncle Johnn. To me Ashley, like Uncle Johnn, was the strongest of them all, never pretending to be anything more than he was. And if, like Ashley, Uncle Johnn seemed preoccupied, almost sad at times, I had to remember that the burden of owning the only drugstore in town and filling all those prescriptions every day sometimes made him seem older than his thirty-one years. The most eligible bachelor in Bay Harbor, he was never a boisterous man, but oh, how he could curse. And it was so unlikely coming from him that it seemed all the more eloquent. He never raised his voice. He wouldn't call to you from another room, but curse words poured from his mouth as naturally as seaweed from the bay. He knew words people in Bay Harbor would never have dreamed of, each as vivid and brilliant as a sunset. Mama said that's what an education would do for you, but coming from Uncle Johnn, cursing wasn't dirty. It was an art. It was reserved for our family alone though. Uncle Johnn cursed only at home.

Supper was already on the table when we walked into the house. Pie shaped wedges of cornbread were stacked next to my plate, and the odor of collards filled the house. My favorite meal and I didn't think I could swallow a mouthful. I picked at my food, and Mama was sure I'd eaten a whole bowl of Miss Red's chocolate pudding. As soon as we finished eating, she sent me to bed. If I had eaten all the pudding, going to bed was punishment. If I was truly sick then I belonged in bed anyway. Daddy always said you had to get up early to get one on Mama.

It was still light outside when I lay down on my bed, and too much had happened for sleep to come easily, even as I watched the light beneath the window shades grow dimmer. I heard Uncle Johnn in the living room talking to Mama about the war news, and I thought back, remembering how he had come to live with us in Bay Harbor.