



A Preview of  
Author Joe Cuhaj's  
New Cozy Mystery

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## Chapter 1

The wheels of the black gurney squeaked a rhythmic one-two, one-two beat as two coroner assistants dressed in immaculate white uniforms rolled it down the narrow, dimly lit hallway of radio station WCBR. Atop the gurney, a drab gray wool blanket covered the body of the once vibrant life that was radio actress Samantha Starr.

The gurney continued its squeaky beat as it passed before the thick opened door and yawning double-paned glass window of Studio B where the radio station's staff stood huddled together staring in disbelieving silence at the macabre procession. As it passed, one of the employees caught a glimpse of something dangling from beneath the blanket. It was Samantha's hand, the flesh now pale white with the only color coming from her highly polished *Chen Yu Opium Dream* nail polish. The young woman, script girl Judy Campbell, gasped at the sight, and placing her hand over her mouth as if to stifle a scream, she turned away and rushed to the farthest corner of the studio. The further away from this horrible sight, the better.

One of the assistants noticed her reaction and saw the hand protruding uncovered from the blanket. Gently, as if Samantha were still alive and breathing, the man tucked the hand back under the cover and continued down the hallway leading to an elevator. A third man, the city coroner, followed closely behind holding onto the shoulders of a man who appeared to be in deep shock. His eyes were glazed over, staring into an abyss of nothingness. His complexion was pale as if his blood had been completely drained from him. His mouth hung slack jawed. He didn't speak. He didn't cry. He simply marched silently down the hallway with his escort doing all he could to keep the man from collapsing onto the floor.

The man being ushered out of the radio station was Samantha's husband and WCBR radio actor, Ralph Bandera. Ralph had discovered his wife's body only moments before and was now, understandably, in a state of traumatic shock.

The sound of their footsteps and the squeaking gurney eventually faded away as the procession stepped into the cab of a waiting elevator and its highly polished mirrored doors closed behind them. Police Detective Jack Reid and an accompanying police officer appeared in the doorway of Studio C or as the staff called it, the Production Room, where the body was discovered. Reid satisfactorily rubbed his belly as if he were stepping away from a sumptuous dinner.

The detective was a rotund man squat in stature. A ring of black hair with a tinge of grey stretched around the back of his head from ear to ear framing his bright, shiny bald head. The man appeared to be at retirement age and his attire showed signs that he was ready for that day to come shouting an “I don’t care” attitude to the world. He had ditched the usual detective garb of neat black or gray suit, tie, fedora hat, and trench coat. In fact, Reid’s appearance bordered on the slovenly. He was dressed in frumpy gray suit pants that looked as if he had pressed them the night before by tossing them under a mattress and then slept on top of them all night. The waistband strained around his wide barrel of a belly and was supposedly being held up by a pair of bright red suspenders. Whether or not they were doing their job was debatable. His white dress shirt was highlighted with telltale yellow sweat rings under each arm. A short stub of an unlit *Brown Beauty* cigar was clenched tightly in his teeth. He gnawed at it thoughtfully as his thoughts began to spill out of his mouth.

“Damn shame,” he said through his teeth.

“It’s horrible,” a man said sidling up to the detective. “It’s just horrible.”

The detective took the stump of a cigar from his mouth and pointed it directly at the man’s face. “And who might you be?” he asked.

“Oh, uh...” the man stumbled. “I’m the station manager, Brad Peterson.”

The detective turned back around to face the now vacant production room and let out a short grunt to acknowledge Peterson’s reply.

“Do you have any idea how this happened?” Brad questioned.

“Too early to tell,” Reid said blindly without turning around to look at Brad. “We’ll know more after the coroner takes a look at her. Our first guess is that it was some sort of a health issue. There is no evidence of a physical altercation. There are no bruises or scratches, no wounds made by a weapon. I figured it was simply a heart attack or she was feeling ill from a bug or something. She must have collapsed and on the way down, smacked her head on that

record contraption in there. That thing is made of steel. Her head took quite a blow. Quite a bit of blood.”

Judy bolted from her hiding corner in Studio B and ran down the hall into the small employee breakroom located just down the hall shrieking in terror the entire way. Another member of the staff, Art Foley, was standing in that same studio doorway as Judy fled the scene. For a split second, the thought had crossed his mind that he should follow his girlfriend and console her but instead, he decided to linger and listen as Brad and Reid continued their impromptu conversation.

“That can’t be,” Brad said, his voice rising in defense of the actress. “She was young, extremely healthy. She was never sick and never missed a day of work. She was always in top form.”

“Eh,” Reid shrugged with indifference. “Was she a heavy drinker? Heavy smoker?”

Brad tilted his head to one side and pursed his lips, silently acknowledging the detective’s questions.

“If you live the high life,” Reid continued, “these things eventually catch up with you and before you know it, POW! You’re pushing up daisies.”

Brad flinched at the detective’s terse description. “I suppose. It just doesn’t seem right, though. It’s true that she drank and smoked more than she should have, but she was energetic and full of life.”

Ignoring Brad’s thought, Reid continued in a monotone voice. “So Mr. Bandera was the first to find the body, is that right?”

“I believe so,” Brad replied.

“From what I understand,” Reid said pulling a small, well-worn notepad from his shirt pocket, a stub of a pencil dropping out of the crumpled pages into his fingers, “there was no love lost between the two. Depending on how bad the relationship was, that could put a strain on the old ticker.”

Brad chuckled and shook his head. “No, no. They had their bouts but what married couple doesn’t? But truth be told, God only knows how he put up with that woman. He took a lot of abuse from her, but I honestly believe he loved her, that is until...”

Reid stopped scribbling in his notepad when he heard Brad’s voice trail off. “Until what?”

Brad hesitated. It was obvious he was weighing whether or not he should elaborate his thoughts to the detective before finally deciding to continue. “Ralph confided in me only yesterday that he was through with what he called ‘her ways.’”

“Her ways?” Reid questioned.

Brad elaborated. “She was a temptress. She had the looks. She had the moves and she knew how to use them to her advantage to get any man that she wanted. She could get them to do anything she wanted. We’ve all seen her. She could seduce any guy she took a shine to with just a smile and a wink and then leave with them to go to who knows where to do who knows what.”

“Well,” Reid said coolly as he scribbled notes in the notepad, “that could be a motive for murder. You know: a jilted husband, a runaround wife. Seen it too many times before. And now he’s ‘tired of her ways.’ But, like I said, there is no evidence of foul play. I just don’t buy it.”

Reid looked at Brad for a moment and gathered his thoughts. “Still, I have to look at all angles. You work with the couple every day, is that right?”

“Yeah,” Brad replied. “That’s right.”

“You ever see anything personally between them?”

“What do you mean?”

“Any abuse by Mr. Bandera? Was he a tough talker? Was he ever aggressive? Did he shove her around?”

“No,” Brad answered. “Not that I’ve seen. Oh, there was the typical radio station gossip that has been floating around for a long time, but that’s how it is in the radio biz. Everyone on the staff is into everyone else’s business.”

“Go on,” Reid prodded.

Brad thought for a moment that he had said too much already. It was obvious he was struggling with whether or not he should go on but then blurted it out. “Okay. About that gossip. The staff thinks Ralph was putting on an act like he was a caring, loving husband. Outside of work, some say he is a low-down goon. They say that sometimes he would stagger home in the early morning after a night of boozin.’ That may be why Samantha acted the way she did, a response to life at home.”

Reid pointed his pencil straight up in the air cutting Brad off. Staring at his notepad he asked, “What about Miss Starr? What’s with that name? You said the couple were married?”

“Stage name,” Brad answered. “Well, radio name.”

“So that radio gossip,” Reid continued. “Did you ever see Bandera threaten her?”

Brad moved around so that he could look the detective dead in the eye.

“Like I said, I haven’t seen anything personally, but the rumor mill was buzzing this morning when the staff arrived.” Brad looked around to see if anyone was in earshot, then said in a hushed voice, “I heard that Ralph threw her out of their house last night and threatened to kill her if she ever came back. When Ralph came in this morning, he was very agitated, full of rage, and was on a mission to find Samantha. He even punched out our sales manager.”

Brad’s accusation, however, was loud enough for Foley to hear. The young man stood straighter and his eyes widened in disbelief when he heard Brad’s story. He had seen Ralph and Samantha only a few hours earlier at the couple’s home following a night at a local club with the station’s staff. What he witnessed overnight was not the Ralph Bandera that was being portrayed here. From what Foley saw, Ralph genuinely loved his wife and worried about her. He did come into work this morning acting very strangely. Okay, physically assaulting the sales manager was more than a little strange, but that was very out of character for the actor. Foley honestly believed that Ralph was not the creep Brad was describing, but he had heard things like this before. The male members of the WCBR staff had passed around rumors like this many times before, all of them having been started by Samantha herself. Samantha used the “poor me” story to latch on to a guy for a night of free drinks and dancing. She was a party girl, a flirt. If the detective did start investigating Samantha’s death as a murder, the way Brad was telling the story, Ralph would be the prime suspect and the men at the radio station would be more than happy to throw him under the bus.

The detective caught the young man’s expression from the corner of his eye and addressed him. “Your name, son?” Reid asked.

Foley stepped out of the doorway and into the hall. “Foley. Art Foley, sir.”

“What do you do here?” Reid asked.

“I’m the station’s Foley artist. I do sound effects.”

Reid stopped writing in his pad and looking up, gave Foley a puzzled look. “And your name is—?”

“It’s just a coincidence,” Foley interrupted having heard the same question countless times before in his career.

Judy reappeared from the breakroom and wiping the remaining tears from her eyes, she crossed her arms and casually leaned against the wall to listen to the conversation her boyfriend was having with the detective.

“You have a different take on this?” Reid asked.

Foley looked at the detective thoughtfully for a moment, then at Brad, then at Reid again, all the while thinking back to the events of the previous day and that very morning.

“Yes,” he finally replied. “That is not what I saw last night when I took Sam, uh, Miss Starr home.”

The detective could see Judy standing behind Foley and her reaction to what her boyfriend had just said. She stood upright, a look of startled surprise sweeping across her face.

“So, you took her home, eh?” Reid continued, chuckling at the insinuation.

“No!” Foley shouted realizing that he was digging himself into a hole. “Not my home, *her* home.”

The detective watched Judy’s reaction. Her hands now hung straight down her sides clenching tightly into fists. Her reaction was understandable - her boyfriend had taken the glamorous Samantha Starr home last night. For a fleeting moment, Reid thought there might be a real murder in the building when this young woman killed her boyfriend, but instead of lunging at Foley, Judy jabbed her fists into her hips, her elbows protruding straight out in a combative posture, ready to pounce on Foley depending on what his next answer would be.

Foley closed his eyes and grimaced when he saw Reid’s reaction. “There is a young lady standing just behind me listening, isn’t there?” he asked.

“Uh-huh,” Reid replied. For the first time, a wide grin came across the detective’s face with full knowledge of what was going on between the two.

“That’s not what I meant,” Foley said feeling the noose tightening around his neck and Judy’s gaze burning a hole in the back of his head. “Miss Starr asked if I would take her home.”

Judy released her fists. Folding her arms her eyes narrowed and her lips clenched into a determined snarl as she took one hard step forward toward her boyfriend. Reid held up the palm of his hand to deter the young woman from possibly committing murder. She got the message and stopped before any damage could be inflicted. Foley turned around to see her standing there. Her fists were once again planted firmly on her hips, her lips still pursed in anger, and her left foot tapped mercilessly on the floor waiting to hear his story.



“No, no,” Foley said. “It’s not what you think. We had just finished airing our last show of the evening and the station was about to sign off for the night. The staff agreed to meet up at the Brown Pelican afterward for a few drinks. It was late when I arrived with Mr. Peterson.”

Art Foley paused and gathered his thoughts as he began to recall the events of the last few hours.

## Chapter 2

“Well, Martha,” Trent Goodlow said maniacally, “it looks like we’re about to end this charade once and for all.”

The crash of thunder accentuated Goodlow’s point, momentarily stifling the sound of a torrential downpour in the background.

“You’ll never get away with this, Trent!” Martha shouted, hysteria building in her voice. “The police are on to you.”

“Nonsense,” Goodlow said calmly. “Only you and I know we’re here, my dear, and if by some chance they do know where to find you, unfortunately for you, by the time they arrive, you will be dead and I’ll be long gone.”

A muffled sound interrupted the conversation, unrecognizable at first, then undeniable – the sound of footsteps jogging up a rickety staircase. The march up the stairs halted abruptly and was replaced with the sound of a fist pounding on a door.

“Alright, Goodlow,” a voice drenched in Irish brogue shouted. “This is the police!”

“But, but how?” Goodlow stammered.

“You underestimated me, my dear,” Martha declared, suddenly calm, reserved, confident. “My real name is Brenda. Brenda Daring. I am a private investigator.”

“You tricked me!” Goodlow shouted.

“Yes,” the young voice said sternly, “just like you tricked those helpless punks on the street who trusted you, who thought of you as their mentor, then you pulled the rug out from under them and perverted their world, sending them off to either jail or the morgue, you scum. You’re nothing but a two-bit thug and not a good one at that.”

The sound of a door-busting off of its hinges broke the momentary silence.

“Boys,” Brenda said, “take him away.”

The dramatic sound of an organ sliced the air loudly then faded into the background as a man with a deep but precise voice began to speak clearly enunciating every word, every syllable.

“Be sure to join us again next week for another exciting adventure of *Brenda Daring: Private Investigator*, brought to you by Hoffman’s Fertilizer. Remember, from the smallest Victory garden to the largest cotton farm, the name you can trust is Hoffman’s.”

The last note played on the organ stopped and faded to memory. The room went silent until the red glow of the lighted sign above the only door into the studio and proudly beamed the words “On Air” snapped off.

Station manager Brad Peterson rushed into the room. “That’s a wrap, boys and girls,” he announced slapping his hands together joyfully and then rubbing them together briskly in a satisfied manner. “Thank you, all. Excellent job tonight. Don’t forget, rehearsals have been moved up to nine tomorrow morning. Be prompt.”

The woman who voiced the character of *Brenda Daring*, actress Samantha Starr, slung the papers that were her script at an empty gray metal desk, the pages skittering off and fluttering to the floor.

“Be prompt,” she said bitterly. “If Mr. Bandera would care to quit drinking all night long then maybe we could get here on time for once.”

Samantha sashayed across the room heading toward the studio door. She was good-looking and she knew it. Each day she would arrive at the radio station, WCBR, dressed in elegant silk dresses with provocative low-cut necklines and even lower-cut backs. What material there was did not cover much and barely left anything to the imagination, something unheard of in the bustling 1943 Gulf Coast port city of Crystal Bay. The dress clung to every part of her body, outlining her curvy frame. Her black stiletto heels accentuated her already voluptuous figure.

She had a sophisticated yet seductive elegance about her. As she walked, she would toss her head to one side just enough to flick her long, golden hair alluringly over one shoulder, then lifting her left hand slightly and holding it mid-air above her waist, she would lightly place her other hand on her hip. It was just the way a movie star would do it, but that was Samantha. She was the consummate performer who believed that Hollywood would be calling her at any moment. So far the call has not arrived.

This was a daily ritual for Samantha and one that the men of WCBR anticipated. Every day she would purposefully do this sensual strut, making sure to walk briskly enough so that the long slit in her dress gave the men at the station a good look at her shapely tanned legs. Out of the corner of her hazel eyes, she would glance over to make sure that she had turned the head of every man in the room.

Her husband, Ralph Bandera, who played the role of any and all villains that Brenda Daring would ever put in jail, watched his wife slink out through the door, turning with a flourish as she walked beneath the transom into the hallway that made her hair whip around her shoulders, the light from the hallway backlighting her dress so that the faintest outline of her soft body could be seen. You could hear the men audibly gasp at the sight.

Ralph's agitation over his wife's daily vamp was obvious – the tightening of his jaw muscles, the gnashing of his teeth, the narrowing of his eyes that shot daggers at his wife. But what could he do? Taming Samantha was a lost cause.

A loud crash from a corner of the studio shattered the sensual moment.

“Fer Chris-sakes, Foley!” Brad shouted. “Keep it down over there!”

“Yes, Mr. Peterson, sir. Yes, sir,” Foley stammered, his voice trailing off with a shaky resonance.

Art Foley was just that, a Foley artist. He did the sound effects at WCBR for the dozen or so shows the station produced locally. His name, as he would tell you, was “just a coincidence.” The lanky “Bayer,” as lifelong residents of Crystal Bay were called, had been fixated on the magic of radio for as long as he could remember. As a youngster, his parents would find him in their basement listening to the radio trying to recreate the same sound effects that he heard on his favorite mystery shows like *Nick Carter: Private Detective* and *The Falcon* using whatever implement he could find lying around.

He landed the job at WCBR two years ago and the young man was exceptional at it. He was highly attuned to the sounds around him and was able to make mental notes of everyday sounds he heard while walking around the city then immediately concocted ways to recreate them for the radio audience. His days were spent pouring over scripts imagining what props would be best suited to produce the required sounds for each of the live shows the station produced then making the magic happen later in the evening during the broadcast.

The thin young man always wore the same attire – black pants that were held up with black suspenders which were much needed because he could never find a decent pair of pants to fit his thin frame. His feet always wore the same scuffed and rarely polished brown Oxford shoes. His shirt was off-white, to many a dingy almost unwashed-looking shade of white. The sleeves were perpetually rolled up to his elbows so that the cuffs did not interfere with his work.

As Foley leaned over to pick up the assorted noisemakers that he had dropped, his head bumped into a second shelf that held a dozen cowbells, assorted pots and pans, two crash cymbals, and other tools of his trade causing the shelf to crash to the floor with a deafening cacophony of sound.

“FOLEY!” everyone who was left in the studio shouted at him in perfect unison.

“Sorry!” he apologized. “Sorry, everyone.”

Brad Peterson was the station manager and WCBR radio was his baby. He had brought the station from an unknown, 1,000-watt Gulf Coast daytime-only radio station to a 5,000-watt regional powerhouse with expanded on-air hours until 10 p.m. Despite a world war raging on the other side of the world, the station’s programming was electric and sales were skyrocketing. Life was good for him now that the station was in high gear. The only thing he had to worry about was the happiness of his stars and with egos as big as the Gulf of Mexico, that was not an easy task.

Brad stepped around a microphone stand and patted Ralph on the back. “Gonna be a two-finger night?” he asked with apathy in his voice.

Ralph sighed under his breath as he grabbed his jacket that hung on a nearby music stand. He started heading for the door and then hesitated, gazing at the now empty doorway where Samantha stood only a moment before.

“Pfft,” he sounded through his teeth in disgust. “Make it a fifth.”

Ralph continued walking slowly toward the door when the sultry figure reappeared.

“I want to go home this instant!” she shouted at Ralph. Even during a tantrum, her voice was breathy and sexy with a good dose of high-society flair. “If you don’t get a move on,” she said stamping her foot on the floor like a petulant child, “I’m sure one of these nice boys would like to take me home.”

The men in the room leaned in with their eyes widening in eager anticipation when they caught the invitation. With jacket in hand, Ralph walked out of the studio and as he passed his

wife, he nudged her out of the way with his shoulder. Indignant, Samantha gathered the hem of her dress and followed her husband down the hallway.

It didn't take long for the studio to empty leaving only Foley to clean up his gaffe. This was Studio A where WCBR produced most of its live shows: its comedies, dramas, and musicals. As with the station's other two studios, the walls were covered with thick blue carpeting that helped sound proof them from the raucous city sounds emanating far below the suite that was located in the city's iconic Maritime Exchange Building. The carpet made the studio almost unbearable to work in during the stifling summertime heat and humidity of the Gulf Coast, but this was early spring and the room was a pleasure to be in.

The studio had two windows but they did not face the outside world. One was located on a side wall that faced the control room where the producer, engineer, and more often than not Brad, could watch and control the performances of the shows that went out live to their listeners along the sun-drenched coast. On the front wall next to the door was a second window that was affectionately called the "fishbowl" by the staff. It faced the hallway and was where station visitors could look in on the studio and watch the "magic" of radio happen. It was a valuable tool for impressing prospective new sponsors.

Just above the fishbowl hung a 12 by 12-inch canvas-covered box. It was a monitor speaker that played whatever the station was airing. The monitor was normally turned off when Studio A was in use but now as the station was signing off for the day, the studio was quiet and empty. Foley flipped a switch next to the window and turned the speaker on before walking back over to his sound effects equipment. He knelt to the floor to pick up the remaining noise makers he had dropped, his suspenders stretching tight around his shoulders making him groan a bit.

A deep, authoritative voice boomed from the speaker. It was 10 p.m., time for the final newscast of the day read by newsman Darryl Thomas. It was 1943 and the news of the day was split between coverage of news from the war and the home front where the residents of Crystal Bay, and all Americans, were facing a war of their own war with the ever-present fear and anxiety that overshadowed their lives as they waited anxiously for word that their loved ones were safe and would return home soon.

Despite the horrors and ravages of war, the conflict was a boon to this port city. Crystal Bay, as with many towns and cities just before the war, had hit tough times during the Great Depression. The city appeared to be falling destitute, but thanks to the war, in a perverted sort of

way, it had regained its economic superiority with a combination of shipbuilding at the local dry docks and aircraft production and maintenance at nearby Holkham Field. Combined with its direct access to the Gulf of Mexico for shipping and troop deployment, the city was a bustling metropolis once again with the electricity of any larger city.

Darryl always ended his newscasts with notes from the home front and today was no exception. “Finally a special greeting goes out to Mary Ruth Roll from Lieutenant Loren Roll and his B-17 heavy bomber crew flying out of Holkham Field tomorrow morning to make good on a delivery across the pond to Dover in the British Isles. Lt. Roll sends all of his love to Mary, who he married at the Washington Street Baptist Church last Friday, and tells her that he will return home very soon. By the way, Lt. Roll has named the bomber, ‘Mary Ruth: Memories of Crystal Bay.’ Let those Nazis know how we all feel about them, boys, with a good dose of TNT! Good night and good morrow.”

Darryl’s voice segued into a recorded rendition of the National Anthem and then the speaker fell silent. Lights clicked off in offices up and down the corridor, all except the hallway and the studio light where Foley was finishing up his work. Brad walked back into the studio.

“Good job tonight, Foley,” he said.

“Thank you, Mr. Peterson,” Foley replied, putting the last cowbell into a box.

“Some of us are heading to the Brown Pelican for a drink. Care to join us?”

“Yes, thank you, sir,” he answered.

As he stood from his crouching position, in one fluid motion Art grabbed his jacket from a wooden coat rack next to his work table. Brad flicked off the lights in the studio and the pair walked down the hall.

“You know,” Brad said nonchalantly, his jacket slung over his right shoulder as they walked. “I was thinking about making you the station’s program director.”

“Really?” Foley asked excitedly.

“No, not really,” Brad responded deadpan.

They both laughed until Foley realized that he had once again been the butt of one of Brad’s old, tired jokes causing him to stop in the middle of the hallway and shout, “Hey!”

Brad turned around and walked back over to Foley. He grabbed the young man’s arm and pulled on it, nudging him to start walking again.

“Just kidding, pal,” Brad said as they continued, their footsteps and voices echoing off the vacant walls and then trailing off as they stepped onto a waiting elevator.

“Do you mean you were kidding about making me program director or kidding about not making me program director?” he asked.

Brad chuckled as the doors closed and the pair headed for the street below.

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