



Dead Air

Joe Cuhaj

Preview Edition

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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 WRCB. 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. She couldn't watch the horrible sight that was passing before them. A colleague had died that same morning right there at the station.

One of the assistants noticed her reaction and glanced down to see the hand protruding 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 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 WRCB 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 gray 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. 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 from 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. His 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. Right now it looks like it may have simply been 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 Studio B and ran for the small employee breakroom just a few doors down sobbing the entire way. The normally strong and confident young woman was having a difficult time coping with the death since only an hour or two earlier, she had some harsh words with the deceased actress. 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 from talking with some of the staff,” 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 and looked up 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'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 up straight 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 WRCB 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 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. She folded 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 with ‘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, WRCB, 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 had not arrived.

This was a daily ritual for Samantha and one that the men of WRCB 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 WRCB 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 WRCB 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 WRCB 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 was hanging 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 stormed 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 WRCB 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 being used to broadcast from 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 that turned the speaker on and walked back over to his sound effects equipment where he knelt down 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 Daryl Thomas. His newscasts were often split between coverage of news from the war and the home front where the residents of Crystal Bay, and all Americans for that matter, faced a war of their own 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.

Daryl 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.”

Daryl’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. “Hey!” he shouted.

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 on, their footsteps and voices echoing off the vacant walls before 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.

Chapter 3

Despite it being after 10 pm, the streets of Crystal Bay were bustling, maybe even more so, than in the daytime. City buses were still ferrying hundreds of people to and from the city, heading from the heart of downtown to the city limits, better known as the “loop.” Buses would reach the loop, turn around, and head back to town with a fresh load of passengers making a loop circuit.

The buses were crammed with people. Some sat and maintained a firm grip on the back of the seat in front of them to keep their balance. Others were standing, grasping onto anything they could to prevent themselves from being knocked to the floor by the jostling the bus was dishing out.

Some of the bus riders were shipyard workers and at this hour they would be running late for the graveyard shift. Still others hopped onto the rumbling cloud-spewing vehicles to experience the city nightlife that offered them a chance to get away from the war, the world, and their worries.

Downtown was a seething mass of people with a sensory overload of sights and sounds. The streets were flooded with people, shoehorned onto the sidewalk like sardines, walking to nowhere in particular but all with some destination in mind. Sailors in town for only a night or two dressed in their crisp white uniforms, their black shoes polished to mirrored perfection,

Dixie Cup hats cocked haphazardly to one side on their head, held a Southern Belle in each arm as they walked down the street, occasionally acknowledging a passing ship mate with a simple nod of the head or the lifting of a finger off of one of his young female companion's shoulders.

Music filled the air, although slightly muffled through a thick blanket of fog that had descended upon the city from off the bay. Walking down the street one could catch a piece of a song played either live or from a jukebox. Maybe it was a little Dixieland or perhaps a knockoff of a Gene Krupa tune. It was hard to tell in the gumbo of sounds that wafted from the bars along Main Street. The misty pea soup fog that hung over the streets added color to the city's ambiance, creating a dazzling halo around the street lights and the multicolored neon signs that shined brightly from the dozens of nightclubs lining the main thoroughfare.

Crystal Bay had an almost, "I don't care" attitude about it. The city was booming and restrictive wartime laws would not stop the city from savoring as much of their newfound success as they could. The most notable restriction was the government's response to Germany's *Operation Drumbeat*. German submarines would position themselves just off the coast of U.S. port cities. In the cloak of darkness with the lights of the city burning brightly, merchant ships departing from these cities would be silhouetted by the lights making them easy targets for the German U-boats. The President's order required all cities to go dark after a certain hour to prevent such a tragedy. The citizens of Crystal Bay, however, agreed that since the city was thirty miles inland of the Gulf of Mexico, there was ample time to leave the lights burning just a little while longer and keep the good times rolling.

Foley and Brad stepped out of the Maritime Exchange Building and donning their overcoats as protection from the cool, damp air, they joined the throng that made up this scene. Brad snapped his brown Fedora onto his slightly balding head and cocked it forward partially

covering his eyes giving him what he called his “suave” look, or as suave as a pudgy, middle-aged radio station manager with a wife and five kids could look. The pair only had to stroll two blocks down the street before arriving at their destination, the place to be and be seen in this seething town, the Brown Pelican.

The Pelican had been the height of entertainment and indulgence in the city since the days of Prohibition. Its atmosphere dripped with opulence and the affluent of the city held court here nightly. It was their playground and the décor proved it. The walls had been outfitted with gleaming gold sconces. The tables draped with crisp, bright white linen table cloths on top of which were red cloth napkins, all skillfully folded and placed at each place setting. Sparkling clean goblets waited for the next customer to be seated at the table and tall, expensive floral centerpieces added to the poshness of the place. The tables ringed a meticulously maintained shiny oak dance floor where patrons crammed themselves in trying to dance the Jitterbug, Lindy Hop, or slow dance with their best girl to the music of Wes Cohn and his Orchestra.

Wes Cohn’s band was regionally famous thanks to the radio station. They would play live over WRCB every Saturday night from high atop the Hamilton Hotel in its grand ballroom that overlooked the bay. Their music traveled the airwaves reaching thousands of homes, listeners, and fans across the sprawling Gulf Coast, but not far enough to reach the ears of record executives who could sign the band to a recording contract, Cohn’s ultimate dream. Until that day came, Wes was content with his regional fame and enjoyed his gigs at the Pelican.

On any given night from across the room, one might catch a glimpse of a real Hollywood star. Being a centerpiece for the war effort, it was common for stars like Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Bob Hope, or Bing Crosby to pay a visit to the city during a USO tour or bond rally and their favorite nightclub in town was the Brown Pelican. A special section tucked away in a

secluded corner far from the maddening crowd was always held in reserve for just those special occasions.

Reviewing the menu, it was hard to imagine that outside the Pelican's doors, food shortages and rationing were the norm. Within these walls, such exotic-sounding delicacies as Broiled Caponburger a la Steak and Veal Cutlet sauté a l'Anlaise could be ordered for only \$5.00 each, a fortune to the masses outside the room, a mere pittance to those inside. Truth be known, many of those swanky-sounding items on the menu were just make-do delicacies from locally sourced seafood and whatever rationed items were available.

While they were not of the same caliber as a Bing Crosby or Fred Astaire, and surely did not command the salaries of a Hollywood celebrity, Brad, Foley, and the staff at the radio station were stars in their own right. The men and women who worked there were the voices of the city. They were known by all and considered friends to everyone in town so for them, entry into the Brown Pelican was as easy as walking into the Post Office.

Brad and Foley walked into this picture and removed their coats, handing them along with Brad's Fedora to a hat check girl who was manning a thickly shellacked wooden counter. As they walked through the crowd, Brad would occasionally wave to a familiar face, a not-so-familiar one, and sometimes, Foley thought, to no one at all just for appearances. Arriving at their usual table near the bandstand, a waiter in a short-cut white jacket with a narrow black tie and crisply pressed black pants took their drink order. For Brad, it was "the usual," a new drink that was becoming all the rage – a Margarita.

"What is a 'Margarita'?" Foley asked.

"Great stuff, my boy," Brad answered. "Puts hair on your chest. Named after Rita Hayworth, don't you know."

“Why do I doubt that?” Foley asked rhetorically before ordering something less caustic sounding – a Shirley Temple.

“Do you want an umbrella with that?” Brad joked.

“Sarcasm does not become you,” Foley replied wryly.

Their drink orders arrived and after doing a half-hearted cheers motion to each other, they began to survey the scene. On stage, the band was playing the Benny Goodman song, *Jersey Bounce*, as the crowd swayed back and forth trying to do some semblance of a dance amidst the hundreds of bodies crammed onto the dance floor, if they could even hear the music. The din of chatter from the patrons was nearly as loud as the music playing. It was then that through the mass of people, Brad spotted a man parting the crowd who was making his way to their table.

“Pierre!” Brad shouted over the music. He stood and shook the man’s hand vigorously.

The man jerked his hand from Brad’s grip and started rubbing it firmly. “I’m sorry,” he apologized. “Damn rheumatoid arthritis. Such a nuisance.”

“So sorry, Pierre,” Brad apologized then pointed at an empty chair inviting the man to sit and stay for a while.

“No, I really can’t,” the man said with a deep, booming voice that dripped with a posh British accent. From the authoritative sound of his voice and the precise pronunciation of his words, Foley immediately knew that this man worked in radio but whether or not the accent was authentic eluded him. The tall and slender man was impeccably dressed in a jet-black *Kaybrooke* double-breasted suit with a vest and brilliant red silk tie. His black hair had a slight touch of gray to it and was slicked back neatly with who knows what. Vaseline? Kreml?

Brad turned to Foley. “Art, my boy. This is Pierre Ramon. He’s the new actor I hired from New York. He’ll be alternating roles with Ralph to give us a little variety.”

“Your name is...?” Pierre asked trying to hear over the blaring trumpets.

“Foley,” he shouted. “Art Foley. I’m the station’s Foley artist.”

“And you name is...”

“It’s just a coincidence,” Foley said exasperated.

“Nice to meet you. I’m deeply sorry, gentlemen, but I really can’t stay. I came looking for Samantha. I had some urgent business to discuss with her. You haven’t seen her, have you?”

“Sure haven’t, Pierre,” Brad said. “She’s probably home with Ralph.”

“Ugh,” Pierre cringed. “Ralph Bandera! That man is a...”

His voice trailed off as anger gripped his face. The man pursed his lips turning them white, his cheeks reddened, and his hands balled into two tight fists. Pierre stared off distantly at nothing in particular, not saying another word for a few moments before shaking his head to wipe whatever thought he was having out of his mind.

“Never mind,” he finally continued. “I guess she’s a no-show. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll bid you gentlemen a good evening. I will see you in the morning.”

And with that, Pierre turned and disappeared into the crowd. Brad looked thoughtfully at the drink in his hand and chuckled. Just what he needed. Another radio ego to corral. He glanced up from his thoughts and spotted another familiar face being seated.

“Well, well,” he said putting his drink down gently. “Look who’s here.”

Foley took a sip of his drink and looked up to see Samantha. She had made a costume change since she left the station and was now decked out in a clinging sheer red sequined evening gown. The only thing that prevented a full-fledged peep show was the lacy half-slip that could be seen beneath the silky material. Foley gagged on his drink.

“Easy boy,” Brad said, patting him heavy on the back. “Haven’t you seen a woman before?”

“Not a woman like *that!*” he choked, his voice rising an octave or two.

Samantha floated to a nearby table with the usual gaggle of men following close behind.

“Do ya see those guys, Foley?” Brad asked while watching the parade.

“Can’t miss them, sir,” Foley answered. “They’re lining up behind her like the balloons at the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade.”

“Love sick puppy dogs,” Brad continued. “Every one of them tagging along, hoping they’ll catch her eye. Oh, and they will. She’ll throw the bait out, hook one, reel him in, chew on him for a while, take him for all he’s worth, and then spit him out like bad tuna casserole on a Saturday night.”

“Tuna casserole?” Foley questioned as he leaned over to look into Brad’s drink glass. “What’s in that Margarita anyway?”

Samantha was seated by the Maître’ D. Another gentleman who was already seated at the table stood up politely to greet her then sat back down. He was wearing a bright pink pinstripe Zoot Suit with wide, billowing pants legs and black and white wing-tip shoes. A long, thick gold chain was clipped to the front belt loop of the outfit, the other end hooked to his back pocket. To Foley, the gawdy suit’s broad, wide shoulder boards looked like they were wide enough to land a fighter plane on.

The Maître’ D dutifully pushed Samantha’s chair close to the table and immediately the actress went into her act, resting her elbows on the table, one hand very animated as she talked to the man sitting to her left while the other daintily held an unlit cigarette. Three of the men who had followed her to the table offered her a light from their brightly polished Zippo lighters.

Shooing two of them away, Samantha placed the cigarette seductively between her lips and leaned it into the flame of the third man's lighter all the while gazing captivantly into his eyes.

Taking a deep and sensual draw, her eyes closed briefly as she savored the flavor then reopened them to regain her gaze into the stranger's eyes. She exhaled the smoke as slowly as the intake, engulfing the man in the cloud. A look of ecstasy came over his face as he savored the moment that ended when Samantha blew him a delicate kiss. He was visibly shaken as he staggered back to his table.

Brad's eyes squinted as he tried to make out who the man sitting next to Samantha was. "Isn't that Slick sitting with Sam?"

"Our sales manager, Slick Mallon?" Foley asked. "What would he be doing here with Miss Starr? And look at that outfit he's wearing."

Brad chuckled. "He's a loud, boisterous, snake of a salesman, my boy. That get-up suits him. Why do you think we call him 'Slick'?"

Being that Samantha's table was only a short distance from theirs, Brad and Foley could pick up bits and pieces of their conversation as the Wes Cohn Orchestra began playing a selection of Glenn Miller tunes.

"I don't know what I'm going to do, Slick," Samantha said, her voice heavy and breathy.

"About?" Slick asked.

"Ralph. He's left me in an awful bind. Drinking all night, gallivanting and cavorting with any woman that comes his way."

Foley chuckled loudly. "Like she wouldn't know anything about that. I mean, cavorting with men."

“Maybe she cavorts with women, too,” Brad suggested shrugging his shoulders. “You never know with her.”

“I’m afraid he’s going to leave me destitute,” Samantha said, now beginning to sob.

“But, doll, you’re a star,” Slick said with a bit of confusion in his voice. “You’re the biggest radio star around. Surely you make —”

“A lot of money?” she interrupted, drying her tears with a lacey handkerchief that had magically appeared out of nowhere. “That tightwad Brad Peterson has me barely making enough money to take a cab home every night!”

“Whoa, ho!” blurted Foley. “Zing!”

Brad turned slowly to look Foley straight in the eyes. “Do they need Foley artists on the front?”

“No, sir,” Foley meekly replied. “No Foley’s needed in Germany, sir.”

Their attention turned back to Samantha and Slick.

“That bastard Ralph,” Slick snarled pounding a fist on the table. “I’ll kill that—”

“You’re not helping, dreamboat,” Samantha said calmly. She had tamed his anger.

“Sam, darling,” Slick reassured, “I have to go take a powder but remember, for you, I would give you the moon. I’m just a phone call away. Whatever you need.”

“You are such a good and kind-hearted man, Slick.” Samantha sobbed.

Brad and Foley rolled their eyes and covering their faces with their hands they uttered a low, “oh brother” under their breath.

Slick leaned over, kissed Samantha on the cheek, and walked off. As he disappeared into the throng of people, Samantha faced another guest – Pierre had returned. Suddenly, Samantha’s seductive eyes turned into the unmistakable look of panic bordering on fear.

“Pierre!” she stammered nervously. “What are you — ”

“Sam, dear,” he interrupted with a sneer in his voice. “Good to see you. I’m the new actor that Brad hired. Didn’t he tell you? Don’t worry. You don’t have anything to worry about, but we do have a lot to talk about. You remember, don’t you? We have some unfinished business to tend to.”

Samantha turned her head away as Pierre leaned down and lightly kissed her on the cheek. He took his hand and gently placed it on her chin and turned her face back toward him. “We’ll be talking, but not here. Not now.”

Samantha snapped her head to one side as Pierre rubbed his fingers across her cheek. The man turned on his heel and stormed out of the nightclub leaving Samantha sitting alone at the table. In that instant, her complexion had paled and her hands had developed a severe nervous twitch. She wrung her hands nervously together as she looked from side to side searching for something, perhaps an escape route to get away from the fear that Pierre had brought her. She turned and spotted Brad and Foley, and in that moment of recognition, an enticing smile crept across her ruby-red lips and the color began to return to her cheeks. A peaceful expression had replaced the fear and near terror that had gripped her only a moment before. It was a look that said “I am safe. I am with friends.”

The orchestra had just finished playing their version of *Moonlight Serenade* to the applause of the appreciative crowd. Samantha stood and slowly maneuvered her way over to her colleague’s table.

“Hello, boys,” she cooed in a heavy, dripping voice.

“Hello, Sam,” Brad replied.

Samantha walked behind Foley, lightly rubbing her hand across his shoulders as she made her way to an empty chair.

“W-w-won’t you sit down?” Foley stammered.

Samantha slowly sat down in the chair, crossing her legs so that her naked thigh was nearly totally exposed in the extremely high slit of her gown. Foley began to shake.

“Whoa, big fella,” Brad said grabbing Foley’s shoulder. “Steady now.”

Brad looked at Samantha and admired her evening attire. “That’s some dress you’re wearing.”

“Oh, this thing?” Samantha said modestly. “It’s just something I threw on.”

“Looks like you missed,” Brad retorted. Samantha shot a faux disapproving glance at Brad to show that she had been insulted by the remark while not actually being insulted.

Clearing his throat, Brad asked, “What are you doing here, Samantha? I thought you were heading home?”

“Home?” she answered sharply. “What home? I’ve got a drunken louse for a husband who flirts with every broad this side of the Mississippi. I’m assuming he’s home right now, ‘resting’ after gallivanting.”

“You’re being a bit harsh on Mr. Bandera, aren’t you Miss Starr?” Foley asked, his shaking subsiding to a mild tremble. “He seems to be a nice, decent fellow.”

“Foley,” she said leaning over to within inches of his face, her *Lentheric Confetti* perfume engulfing him, “he has made me a lonely, miserable woman. All of the fame and fortune of Hollywood could not take away the pain I am feeling at this very moment.”

Both men knew that for Samantha, a call from Hollywood would dissipate any pain she was feeling. But that was her goal in life. To get out of what she called this “backwater, hick town” and become the star she was destined to be.

Brad shook his head, saddened by what he had just heard then pointed his thumb at the table where Samantha and Pierre had their initial meeting. He looked at the actress and squinted his eyes inquisitively. “What was that all about with Pierre? Is there something I should know about you two before he starts work in the morning?”

Brad saw Samantha’s expression change once again. This time, it became stern and defiant. “No!” she shouted.

Realizing that she had raised her voice, she gathered her composure and downplayed the scene that she and Pierre had just performed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so abrupt. No. There is nothing about me and Pierre you should know about. We knew each other...once.”

Brad looked at her unconvinced by the explanation, and then glancing down at his watch he noticed the time. “Whoa! Would ya look at that,” he said jumping out of his chair. “Okay, boys and girls, I’ve gotta run and get home to the family. I will see you all in the morning.”

Brad pointed the thumb and index fingers on both hands at the two sitting at the table pretending to make them look like guns and made two clicking sounds with his tongue like he was firing them. He started for the door but before going too far he turned back to Foley.

“Be careful, kid,” he said almost fatherly.

Foley watched as Brad disappeared into the crowd.

Samantha paused for a moment and waited for Brad to be out of sight before inching her chair closer to Foley. “Do you have a girlfriend?” she asked placing an elbow on the table and resting her head lightly in her hand so that she could focus her gaze on him.

Foley could feel his face burn with embarrassment as he stuttered, “No, Ma’am, uh, I mean, yes, Ma’am.”

“Let me guess. Judy Campbell, the script girl.”

“Yes, Ma’am, we’re seeing each other.”

“Nice girl,” Samantha said as she began concentrating on straightening Foley’s collar. “She’s truly fortunate. You are a unique man – so sensitive, so caring.”

Foley began to perspire causing the white linen collar of his shirt to stick to his neck. He tugged at it undoing all of the work Samantha had just put into straightening it.

“Just like Mr. Bandera, Ma’am?”

“Sam,” she said as she began to sob again. “Call me Sam. And no, Mr. Bandera is *not* like that, the bastard.”

Foley thought for a moment that he might regret what he was about to say but said it anyway. “Is there anything I can do for you —” He hesitated for a moment. “Sam?”

The woman looked up at Foley, both eyes peering over the hanky she had once again clutched to her face. In an alluring voice, she whispered, “Take me home, Foley.”

Samantha and Foley walked out of the Brown Pelican and onto the damp fog-shrouded street. It was now well after midnight and the crowds had thinned considerably. A bus with only a fraction of the passengers it carried before rumbled by, tooting its horn at cars cutting in front of it too closely. Street cleaners pushing large, wheeled trash cans with a series of push brooms protruding from their tops walked the streets, clearing the gutters of the night’s merriment.

Samantha and Ralph lived in a nice tree-lined section of town just outside of the city. As they walked, Samantha linked her arm around Foley’s and nuzzled in close to him. “I know what

you're thinking," she said. "I'm a star. I can have anything I want. Why do I flirt with all of these men?"

"No, ma'am," Foley replied. "I was actually thinking about the sounds the city makes under such a fog. Fascinating, isn't it?"

"I'll tell you why, Foley," Samantha continued without pause for Foley's comment. "It's comforting. It's comforting to know that someone cares while my life tumbles out of control."

"Not to be rude, Miss Starr...uh, Sam, but you could be asking for trouble. Some of these guys might take your advances the wrong way. You know, take it as more than flirting. I mean, look at the way you dress."

"Oh, this thing?" Samantha asked. "It's nothing."

"That's the point," Foley replied.

As they neared Samantha's house, a muffled voice filtered through the fog interrupting the conversation. "Sam?" the voice shouted muted by the blanket surrounding them. "Sam? Is that you?"

Foley listened intently. He heard the shuffling of feet on the damp sidewalk. The patter had the slightest sound of damp gravel being crushed underfoot. The pace of the tapping feet increased and soon, he could hear them jogging toward them. He made a mental note of what it sounded like.

Ralph parted the shroud of fog like a curtain and rushed up to Samantha and into her arms. Foley watched and thought he saw tears well up in Ralph's eyes. Looking over his wife's shoulder, Ralph spotted the young man. "Foley!" he exclaimed releasing his wife from the embrace.

Art looked around for a possible escape route anticipating that Ralph was about to kill him for being with his wife. His fears were quickly laid to rest when Ralph walked over with an outstretched hand.

“I have been worried sick about her,” Ralph told Foley shaking his hand. “I’ve been looking for her all night.”

“Liar,” Samantha said with a snarl in her voice.

“Thank you, Foley,” Ralph said, turning loose of Art’s hand. “Thank you for seeing her safely home.”

Foley was not immune to the many rumors that circulated around the radio station about Ralph’s supposed drinking and affairs. Most of those rumors, as he heard firsthand tonight, all began with Samantha, which made him believe that those rumors were all projections on her part. Foley expected to smell alcohol on Ralph’s breath, on his clothes, but there was nothing. Not a trace. If this man were the lush that everyone made him out to be, he should be reeking of gin or whatever his drink of the day would have been. Instead, the actor actually smelled surprisingly good with a dose of *Vitalis Hair Tonic* neatly slicking back his hair.

Ralph put his arm around Samantha’s waist. “Thank God you’re back,” he said. “You disappeared from me earlier after we left the station. I came right home expecting to find you here but you never showed up. I was about to call the police.”

Samantha shoved him aside and did a fast jog up the walkway toward the couple’s front door. This was all confusing to Foley. This was not the man that Samantha had portrayed or that the station gossip droned on and on about. In this brief encounter, Ralph seemed to be a caring and loving husband. What gives? Was Samantha playing the victim every day just to keep men interested? Like she would really need to go that far to get attention. Foley’s questions were put

on hold as another figure stepped from the shadows. A rich British accent boomed through the mist.

“Samantha!” the voice shouted. It was Pierre Ramon.

Foley turned to look at Ralph and Samantha and as before, Samantha’s face was gripped with fear. Ralph’s mouth went slack jawed and his eyes widened with shock as if he had just seen a ghost which he thought he had.

“Pierre Ramon?” Ralph questioned visibly shaken. “I thought you —” he paused and looked at his wife. “You said he was dead?”

“She didn’t tell you, Ralph, old boy?” Pierre snickered before saying in a mocking singsong tone, “Tsk, tsk. You have some explaining to do, Samantha.”

“What’s this all about?” Ralph demanded.

Samantha grabbed her husband’s arm in an attempt to lead him briskly into the house and away from Pierre. “I’ll explain later,” she said. “Let’s go inside.”

“Oh, no!” Pierre shouted. “We’re going to let the cat out of the bag right here and right now.”

Samantha released her husband’s arm. “Pierre!” she shouted piercing the misty curtain. “Stop this right now! Go home. I will handle this. Just leave.”

“You’d better handle it, baby,” Pierre said chiding. “It could get nasty.”

And with that, Pierre turned and disappeared back into the fog. Ralph stormed into the house nearly slamming the door in Samantha’s face as she followed closely behind leaving Foley standing on the street confused and damp in the Gulf Coast fog.

Chapter 4

The blanket of fog that crept in off of Crystal Bay the previous night still hung heavy in the air but nobody in the city seemed to mind. The damp air and cooler temperatures of early spring were a short-lived blessing before the hot, heavy, humid days of the deep South barreled in making life in the city miserable.

The morning sun backlit the remaining haze revealing only the outline of the tall buildings that lined the streets which were just now coming back to life. Through the veil, the rumble of buses, the occasional toot of a car horn, and the muted footsteps and voices of a populace on the move could be heard but not seen. From the mist, people walking down the street making their way to work would magically appear seemingly out of nowhere.

Foley was one of the many, running late, trying to navigate the unseen obstacles of the city as he made his way to the WRCB studios. Instinctively he ducked into a small coffee shop, the Port-o-Call, one of several small shops that ringed the base of the Maritime Exchange Building. He rushed through the door and ignoring the glancing “morning, Foley” uttered by the shop’s owner, Art weaved his way through the crowd that had already packed the place and made his way to the front counter.

The bright red Formica counter was busy as usual. Its tall stainless steel stools topped with matching red vinyl cushioned seats were filled with businessmen dressed in suits of varying

shades of black and gray wolfing down morning breakfasts of grits and eggs or a simple slice of toast with a good dose of strong black coffee on the side. Behind the row of seated patrons was a second tier of men standing with arms outstretched trying to grab the attention of one of the overworked waitresses who were scurrying back and forth behind the counter taking and filling orders. One of the waitresses had seen Foley enter the coffee shop and had a hot cup of coffee waiting for the regular customer. He took the heavy steaming mug from the waitress and grinned a thankful acknowledgment.

Foley turned and surveyed the scene. It was obvious that there was not an empty seat in the place. The war had been good for the city and was especially good for the owner of the Port-O-Call, Bob Radcliffe, but it wasn't good for Foley. The large crowd meant that he would not have time to luxuriate over his usual coffee and prune Danish while reading the morning paper.

To his left was a news rack where the latest editions of the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, *Life*, *Look*, and *Photoplay* magazines hung suspended on wires by clothes pins. Below the rows of magazines were the daily newspapers. Foley picked up the morning edition of what he called the local fish wrapper and perused the headlines as he walked over to the cash register where he dropped 15¢ into Bob's hand without even looking up from his reading.

"Thanks, Foley," Bob said.

Foley just nodded his head. He gulped down his coffee as he concentrated on the morning headlines: *U.S. Bombers Smash U-Boat Base; Europe is Tense as Air Invasion Nears; Huge Raids on Axis Pledged by Britain.*

It was a short walk from the Port-o-Call to the main entrance of the Maritime Exchange Building. Foley arrived just in time to force his way onto one of the building's two art deco-influenced elevators. He pushed his way into the cab without once looking up from his paper

then turned to face the doors. The operator, dressed in a tight maroon jumpsuit with a single gold one-inch wide stripe stitched to the outside of each leg and a pillbox hat cocked jauntily on his head, pulled the gold handle of the elevator control backward. The doors closed and Foley's work day had officially begun.

It would be a busy week for everyone at WRCB. In just a few days, the station would be broadcasting live from the Hamilton Hotel ballroom. Next to the adventures of Brenda Daring, the Saturday evening broadcast was the most popular radio show on the entire Gulf Coast. It was a spectacular show that could rank at the top with any nationally produced variety show. The night featured Wes Cohn and his Orchestra along with an array of singers, comedians, and other acts that would make even the biggest radio execs in New York envious. This week's broadcast would be extra special as the station had organized a war bond rally. While the event would be free to the public, the station hoped that those attending would dig deep and purchase war bonds and stamps to aid in the war effort. For the WRCB staff, this meant that besides running through regular rehearsals and show prep for the evening programs, they would also have to prepare for the big Saturday show.

The doors of the elevator opened on the WRCB floor and a half dozen people, including Foley, poured out into the beige-carpeted hallway. Foley folded the paper neatly under his right arm and dashed off down the hall. Two huge glass double doors hung at the entrance to the station. The doors were framed in solid oak trim with the station call letters and frequency neatly hand-painted in bold black letters on the glass. Foley pushed open one of the doors and walked inside.

To his left was a counter that stood about chest high and behind it wearing a bulky and cumbersome black metal headset with an oversized cone-shaped microphone hanging around her

neck sat Emily, the station receptionist and switchboard operator. Emily was not much for words. Her hands were constantly flailing about as she plugged one large plug after another into a myriad of lighted holes in the switchboard to connect incoming and outgoing phone calls. Without looking up once from her work, Emily's right hand stopped only briefly to grab a stack of mail from one of a dozen slots in the wooden mail holder mounted to the wall next to her and handed the stack to Foley.

"Morning, Em," Foley said, taking the mail from her. Emily went about her business oblivious to the greeting. Foley was thumbing through the stack as he turned and bumped into the back of Judy Campbell, the station's script girl and Foley's girlfriend.

"Oh! Foley!" Judy said startled.

Judy had known Foley since their public school days as kids and they were always the best of friends, that is until the love bug bit turning friendship into love and they started officially dating after high school graduation. She started work at the station only one year ago when an opening came up and Foley recommended her to Brad. Even though she was relatively new, she knew her job well and was exceptional at it to the point of being Brad's right-hand person, something unheard of prior to a world war breaking out. Women were finding new found freedom and new opportunities in the workforce and Judy was not going to let this opportunity pass her by.

Occasionally, Judy was asked to pitch ideas to the staff writers for one of the many dramas or comedies that the station produced such as *The Road to Happiness*, *Dr. Muldour*, or *Cavalcade of Comedy* when they hit writer's block. Sometimes she was asked to do an on-air voice, nothing noteworthy, just a single line or word on one of their shows just to add a bit of variety to the regular cast of characters. Brad even called upon her to make programming and

sales decisions when he wasn't available. Even still, the bulk of her work was not nearly as glamorous – typing and proofreading the scripts and commercial copy that would air the following day after the writers had finished working out the murders and witty banter. She would then distribute them the next morning to the cast and crew and supervise rehearsals. The amount of work she fielded left precious little time for her and Foley to build on their relationship, but they were making it work.

She was petite in size with a fresh, lightly tanned girl-next-door appearance. She had long auburn hair that was always held neatly tucked away in a hairnet or a crocheted snood. She dressed very conservatively in long dresses that fell to just below her knee that she had sewed herself using *Du Berry* patterns she picked up at F.W. Woolworth's for only 15¢. The front of the dress was always buttoned up to her neck but the flowing material she used to make the dresses from gave the slightest hint of a fine figure beneath. Her shoes were comfortable low heels that gave her feet comfort while running around the station non-stop from morning to late at night. She was soft-spoken but had a biting sense of humor. As Foley would tell you, don't let that soft voice fool you. She could be very vocal and put any man or woman in their place if they crossed her.

“Hi, Judy,” Foley answered. Looking over her shoulder he noticed an unknown face standing behind her.

“Foley,” she began, “This is Mr. Merindale. He owns Delta Savings and Loan and is thinking about coming on board as a sponsor. Mr. Merindale, this is Art Foley.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Foley said extending a hand to shake the bankers. Foley thought the gentleman fit the bill for a banker: an aging man probably in his sixties wearing a

gray double-breasted pin striped suit, highly polished leather shoes, and carrying a wooden cane with a gold tip and handle that he held casually in his left hand.

“What do you do here, young man?” Mr. Merindale asked.

Foley took a deep breath knowing full well where this was heading. “I’m the Foley artist,” he said. “I do sound effects.”

“And your name is —” the man started to question but was cut off by Foley and Judy replying in unison, “It’s just a coincidence.”

Mr. Merindale looked at the pair with a puzzled look on his face as most people do when they were first introduced to Foley and then told his occupation. Perplexed, Mr. Merindale turned back to Judy and continued. “Oh, uh, ok. That’s interesting. Thank you, Miss Campbell. Please tell Mr. Mallon that the bank is on board and would like to begin sponsoring the news as soon as possible. Have him forward the contract to my office.”

“Thank you,” Judy said trying to contain her excitement from landing such a prestigious bank as a sponsor. “I will also make sure that Mr. Mallon prepares a few samples of your commercial copy as well and will have them sent to your office along with the contract for your approval.”

“Splendid,” Mr. Merindale said cheerfully. “That’s what I like to hear. Thank you again.”

Mr. Merindale shook Judy’s hand firmly then looked at Foley with another puzzled glance not knowing what to make of him before walking out of the station’s doors, and stepping on to a waiting elevator.

From down the hall like a vision strolled Samantha along with the station’s chief engineer, Jimmy Stafford, who was trying to keep pace with the actress as she briskly walked down the hallway.

Jimmy was a stout man, not fat. He just had a thick build. Jimmy was originally from Maine and he had the thick northeastern drawl with drooping, elongated vowels to prove it. He moved to Crystal Bay several years ago to take over the chief engineering staff at WRCB.

As usual, Jimmy was wearing black pants that were just tight enough to allow a small belly roll to hang slightly over the waistband. Bright yellow suspenders glowed against his immaculate white shirt. From the shirt pocket, the tops of three pencils could be seen peeking out of a pocket protector. Round British-style Windsor glasses rested low on his nose and dangling from his back pants pocket hung three patch cords that were used to make audio connections.

“I’m very sorry, Jimmy,” Samantha said as politely as possible as the pair breezed down the hall. “I’m having dinner with someone this evening. But thank you for asking.”

Jimmy’s eyes began to water and his lip twitched giving him the appearance of a scolded child or puppy. “You’re always having dinner with someone,” his voice quivered.

Samantha stopped short and turned exasperated to face the engineer. “Look, Jimmy,” she said sternly. “You are a really nice man but —”

“I get it,” he whimpered cutting her off before she could finish her sentence. “I understand. There are two more important men in your life, and I’m not one of them.”

Samantha gasped and flinched in shock at Jimmy’s remark. Her eyes grew large with surprise and her mouth dropped open as if he had stumbled on a secret she was hiding. The actress turned briskly and started for the opposite end of the hallway but before she could get more than an arm’s length away, Jimmy reached out and grabbed her by the arm causing her to spin around to face him.

“Samantha!” he begged, but before he had a chance to finish his thought, Samantha yanked her arm out of his grasp and snapped.

“That’s enough! Keep your hands off of me! For the last time, leave me alone!”

Jimmy looked at her shocked at the reaction, but what other reaction could there be? Defeated, the engineer gave in, and with a face filled with a mixture of dejection and embarrassment, he slunk off toward his sanctuary, the station’s control room.

Samantha sighed as she watched him slink away giving the impression that she might have a change of heart or at least apologize. But that was not Samantha’s way.

“Wait,” she shouted at the engineer. Jimmy turned excitedly with a broad smile beaming across his face. “Did you fix my headphones? I have commercials to record in a few minutes.”

The smile on Jimmy’s face sunk into a deep frown, his eyes turning red as they welled up once again. He took a deep breath and let it out heavily. The engineer nodded his head and pointed his finger up in the air indicating he would have them in a moment, and then disappeared into the control room.

To Jimmy, the control room was his refuge. It was the heartbeat of the station and no one, but no one got in without his permission. The room was protected like Fort Knox. He never left the room unlocked. He even went as far as to add a second padlock on the door just to be sure.

“I don’t understand this at all,” Judy said to no one in particular, shaking her head in disapproval at the blow-up Samantha just had with the engineer.

“What do you mean?” Samantha asked gliding up to Judy.

“You have all of the men in this building waiting on you hand and foot like they might have a chance with you, like they might be the next one to win your heart, and you play along. You make them believe that they have a chance of winning your love. You’re married, for goodness sake. You’re playing a dangerous game.”

“Deary,” Samantha said pulling her face close to Judy’s. “I don’t lead them on. They *think* they’re in love. I consider them ‘friends’.” The actress then went into her patented ‘poor me’ act.

“They are just friends, lending a helping hand to a woman who is in the grips of a horrible marriage. If they want to live in their fantasy world, so be it. Who am I to say?”

Judy rolled her eyes as she clutched a dozen or so scripts and commercial production copies tightly to her chest. Samantha sashayed away, exaggerating the swaying of her hips as she left and making sure that she addressed Foley as she passed him. She raised her hand and gently rubbed his cheek.

“Good morning, Art,” she said in a sultry voice, throwing a wink his way.

Judy let out an audible “OH!” and stamped her foot in anger.

Samantha hesitated then walked back to Judy satisfied she had gotten in the last jab.

“Don’t you have something for me, sweetie?”

Unclenching the papers, Judy took the top set of stapled sheets of paper from the stack. Her anger with Samantha’s attitude and her sudden attraction to her boyfriend was showing. Her lips turned pale white as they tightened together. Her eyes narrowed slinging imaginary darts at the actress who was overtly making moves on her boyfriend.

“If I had my way,” Judy whispered under her breath thinking that no one could hear. “I would get rid of her *permanently*.”

But Foley was close enough. He jumped, startled after hearing the comment Judy just made. “You don’t mean that!” he whispered in her ear.

“Don’t be silly. Of course not. I only meant that I would fire her, get her out of the station.”

But Judy Campbell was not like that. She wasn't good at staying angry at anyone, even Samantha, and she would never let anyone, not even the actress and whatever little game she was playing derail her from doing her job. The muscles in her face began to relax.

"I'm sorry," she said as she shoved a stack of papers at Samantha. "Here's your commercial production for the day."

Samantha reached out and snatched the papers out of Judy's hand and as she did, she let out a shrill, "Dammit!" Samantha never swore and now, her posh, elegant British-sounding accent had dropped away.

"You cut me with the papers, you twit!" she snapped with an obnoxious Brooklyn accent.

"Oops," Judy whispered sarcastically.

Samantha placed her wounded index finger in her mouth and glancing up, she realized that she had blown her cover. Everyone within earshot now knew that she was in reality a simple Brooklyn girl and not the high society radio actress she claimed to be. At least she hoped nobody had heard her. She quickly regrouped and reestablished her eloquent style of speaking. "This would never happen in Hollywood!" she said as she turned with a flourish hoping that her persona at the station had not suffered too much damage.

Foley leaned over and whispered into Judy's ear as Samantha walked away. "Why are you giving her production to do this early in the morning?"

"I had Pierre scheduled to do production first thing," she quietly replied, "but he hasn't shown up yet."

"I wonder where the guy is?"

"No clue," Judy sighed. "Good impression to make on your first day at work, isn't it?"

Foley and Judy were joined by newsman Daryl Thomas as they watched Samantha slink down the hallway toward the production room. Daryl was the consummate newsman having earned his chops in the hardboiled, smoke filled rooms of the daily newspapers. He still wore his old newsman's Fedora from back in the day with the "PRESS" tag still protruding from the band. He never wore a suit jacket unless going out to cover a big news event. Otherwise, he could always be found wearing a rumpled muted blue broadcloth shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, a black necktie dangling loosely around the collar, and an unlit cigarette perched behind an ear.

Judy looked at Daryl and nonchalantly asked, "Daryl, I'm a betting girl. If it were a choice between me or Samantha, who would you choose?"

Daryl squinted his eyes for a moment then looked thoughtfully up at the ceiling then back at Judy before blurting out, "Samantha," and walked away.

Judy's shoulders slumped in resignation. "Great. A 50-50 chance and I still lose."

Foley reached out and wrapped his arms around his girlfriend, hugging her tightly. "I would always choose you."

Judy pushed his arms away. "You, my friend, are treading on thin ice," she said before disappearing into her office.

Samantha walked down the hallway passing the employee breakroom, several offices, and the control room as she made her way to Studio C, or as it was commonly referred to by the staff, the Production Room.

At the far end of the hall were three studios. On the left side of the hallway was Studio A where most of the live programs originated. To the right was Studio B, a secondary on-air studio

to be used as needed or where the actors and on-air talent could rehearse. Both rooms had the same large double-pane glass windows in them that looked out into the hallway.

At the very end of the hall between those two studios was a nondescript thick oak door, the entrance to the production room. The door's thickness acted as additional soundproofing for the room. Unlike the other two studios, there were no windows in this room. Above the door was a single red light bulb that would flick on when the room was in use.

This studio was a multi-purpose room. Sometimes announcer and voice talent Guy Wendell would read announcements and commercials live from this room during one of the live comedy shows the station aired because he couldn't keep a straight face long enough to get the words out if he stayed in the main studio with the actors. Sometimes after hours, this studio would become an uncomfortable love nest. When one of the male staffers would meet a young woman during a night out on the town, they would sometimes try to impress the woman by taking her on a "personal tour" of the station. That tour would often end here with the couple lying in each other's arms making passionate love on the carpeted floor.

The production room was mainly used for recording commercials onto disks so that they could be played at a later date and time. Centered inside the room was a *Presto Model "A"* disc transcriber. This little compact gem had two record turntables, one on each side of a set of master controls. The user would first use the knobs on the machine to adjust their voice level. Then they would put a blank lacquer coated aluminum disk on one of the turntables, lower the needle, flip a switch, and it would record the actor's voice reading the commercial or show script onto the disk. It was an expensive piece of equipment but Brad made sure that WRCB had one, the only station in town to do so. It gave them an edge over the competition making it sound like one of the station's big stars, Samantha for example, was there at the station all day long ready to be on

the air at a moment's notice to tell listeners about the latest jewelry and fashions at Harvmeyer's Department Store located just off Courthouse Square or to remind listeners that the war was still on and urge them to save those tin cans for the war effort. It could also record full-length shows that could be aired as needed at a later date.

And that is where Samantha was heading. She walked into the studio and clicked a switch turning on the light inside the room and another that turned the red light above the door on for the first time that day indicating that the room was in use and the occupant was not to be disturbed.

At about that same time, sales manager Slick Mallon flew through the station's entrance, his fists clenched in anger.

"What's up?" Foley asked.

"Bandera! That's what's up," Slick replied angrily in his obnoxious barker-like salesman voice. "The bastard. That cockeyed loon. I'll snap his cap! The bastard."

"Ok," Judy interrupted. "Now that we know your word of the day, can you drop the slang? Not that it's any of my business or anything, but what exactly did Ralph do?"

"He left Samantha, that's all!" Slick shouted.

"He left her?" Foley questioned.

"I didn't stutter," Slick fired back.

"Ralph seemed glad to see her when I left her last night," Foley said.

Judy turned with a start at what Foley had just implied.

"Long story," Foley whispered to his girlfriend.

"I have all day," she shot back.

“Apparently,” Slick began adding to the story, his voice slowly settling into a calmer tone, “Ralph was in a drunken stupor, threatened Sam’s life, and kicked her out of the house telling her to never come back.”

Foley thought back to only hours before. Ralph wasn’t drunk at all. The look of relief on the man’s face was nothing like what Slick was suggesting, but then again, he didn’t have to ask where he got his information. He knew exactly where it came from – Samantha herself.

“Just like it’s none of my business,” Judy said, “it’s none of yours. We’ve got a station to run here.”

“Damn, right!” Brad’s voice boomed from his office like an unseen apparition. “Let’s cut out the chit-chat and get to work!”

Foley made his way down the hall to Studio A to set up his equipment for the morning rehearsals. From the on-air monitor in the hallway, he could hear that the station was airing the *Modern Gardner* program, a show hosted by a local college botany professor, Dr. Barbara C. Burke. The show originated from the much smaller studio across the hall.

As he pushed open the studio door he glanced over and noticed the red light was still on over the production room door. Samantha had not yet finished recording her commercials. Art stepped inside the main studio and flicked on the lights, followed closely by announcer Guy Wendell, Slick Mallon, two other actors, and organist Mindy Hostettler. Judy was the last to enter.

“Alright folks,” she began as the studio door closed silently behind her on its pneumatic hinge. “It’s going to be a long day so let’s get right to business.”

Judy began passing out the scripts for their first rehearsal of the day, a comedy called *How’s the Wife?* As Judy made the rounds passing out copies of the script to each actor, Foley

glanced up from organizing his sound effects equipment on the table before him and through the fishbowl window saw Pierre Ramon running down the hall toward the production room shouting. Even though the room was soundproofed with that heavy blue carpet and double-paned glass window, his words could be heard clearly enough: “Where is Samantha? I demand to see her!”

The crew in the main studio stood silently watching as the actor passed by the window. The sound of Pierre’s voice finally trailed off as he vanished into the production room and Judy began giving the actors their instructions on what the feel and tenor of the episode should be. As she spoke, Foley looked over her shoulder once again and saw Pierre rush out of the production room heading in the opposite direction down the hall. He just shrugged his shoulders. To him, it was another crazy day at WRCB.

He continued to ready himself for the rehearsal. The running gag of the show was that the main character was clumsy and would walk into things repeatedly. Foley had to be creative to make each crash sound realistic but with a touch of the absurd about it.

Judy lined the cast up in front of their microphones as Foley made one last check to make sure all of the effects he would need were within reach. He looked up and waited for Judy to give the cue to begin. With stop watch in hand to time the performance, she counted down. “Three-two-one,” she said firmly then pointed her finger at Mindy who cranked up the studio’s Wurlitzer organ and began playing the show’s theme song. Thirty minutes later the rehearsal was over.

“Very nice everyone,” Judy said excitedly. “You’re all the best. You sound almost professional.”

The crew laughed at the script girl’s joke. “Take a short break while Foley and I set up for *Dr. Muldour*.”

As Foley started re-organizing his equipment for the next rehearsal, the heavy studio door sluggishly opened thumping Judy in the back who was standing in front of it. Ralph stepped into the room looking like a man possessed: his hair was disheveled, his eyes bloodshot with anger, his movements combative.

“Where is Samantha?” he demanded. “Where is my wife? I need to see her NOW!”

Judy hesitantly walked over to the man afraid that he might slap her with his flailing hands or worse. Speaking softly and taking Ralph’s arm, she tried to calm him. “She’s in the production room, Mr. Bandera. Why don’t you just come over here and sit down.”

“NO!” he shouted, yanking his arm away from her grasp. Judy darted away from the actor in fear. Foley snapped around his workstation and started for Ralph with every intention of slugging the actor if he came near his girlfriend, never once thinking that his wiry frame might be snapped in two by the possessed man. But Foley had nothing to worry about. Slick Mallon was going to take care of matters. The sales manager lunged at Ralph and grabbed him by the collar. The men crashed to the floor and began exchanging blows, each landing serious punches on the other.

Slick stood up and kicked Ralph hard in the thigh causing him to reel in pain. The sales manager then grabbed the actor by the lapels on his jacket and lifted him off the floor. “Damn you!” he shouted as he flung the actor around and pushed him hard against the wall. Pulling his face close to Ralph’s, Slick shouted, “You’re not going to push Samantha around anymore. You are a dead man, pal.”

Stunned and with his leg throbbing in pain, Ralph looked at the salesman dazed and confused by the attack. He finally shook it off and regained his composure enough to shove Slick

hard enough causing the sales manager to release his grasp on the jacket. As Slick staggered backward, Ralph landed a hard right fist to Slick's jaw knocking him flat on the floor.

Ralph leaned back against the wall breathing heavily. He looked around the room at the staff who were standing there helplessly watching the scene in fear. The actor bent over, grasping his knees for balance and took two or three deep breaths. He slowly stood back up and leaned against the wall. Finally catching his breath, Ralph tugged on the lapel of his suit jacket, the same suit he had worn the day before and apparently had slept in, to straighten himself up. Brushing back his hair with his hands, he took one final deep breath.

"I'm very, *very* sorry everyone," he said humbly collecting himself. "It has been an unbelievably bad night. I apologize. This is not like me."

Ralph offered an outstretched hand to the prone sales manager to help him off the floor but Slick recoiled. "I'm sorry, Slick."

He scanned the faces of his colleagues. All eyes were on him as they sized up what he might do next. Slick sat on the floor rubbing his swollen face.

Ralph tried to reassure everyone that his outburst was over. "I'm better now. I really am. But I really do need to speak with Samantha. Excuse me."

Ralph calmly stepped out of the studio and immediately ran into Jimmy who was heading for the production room himself with Samantha's headphones in hand. Ralph took the contraptions from the engineer and walked into the production room. Jimmy spun and headed back to the control room.

With wide eyes and a quiver in her voice, Judy sighed. "What is the deal this morning? Did someone put something in the water?"

Taking a deep breath to calm her remaining jitters, Judy continued with the rehearsals. “Well, then. Okay. Let’s all calm down and go over the *Dr. Muldour* script.”

The staff took their positions at the microphones and Judy gave the cue to begin, but the rehearsal was stiff and forced. Tension lingered in the air. It had been a very strange morning and now there was this incident between Slick and Ralph. The cast bungled all of their lines and missed their cues. The thirty-minute rehearsal took more than an hour.

“Isn’t that enough for now?” Guy shouted from his announcer’s position on the far side of the room.

Judy looked at the clock on the wall. “You’re right, Guy,” she said. “Let’s take lunch and then we’ll try to wrap it up this afternoon. Foley, do me a favor, please. Would you check on Ralph and Samantha and see how they are doing? They’ve been in there an awful long time.”

Foley nodded and stepped out of the studio. The red light over the production room door was still on. That was very odd. It shouldn’t take that long to record five 15-second commercials, but then again, Samantha did have a few interruptions. He giggled at the thought. *A few interruptions?*

He knocked on the door knowing full well it was futile. No one could hear him from inside. He cracked the door an inch or two, squinting and straining his eyes to look through the narrow opening.

“Miss Starr?” he whispered. “Mr. Bandera? Hello?”

He listened intently. There was nothing but the sound of one of the turntables on the transcription recorder spinning serenely. When he opened the door a little further, he saw Ralph huddled on the floor leaning against a wall. His arms were locked around his legs holding his

knees tightly to his chest as if he were clinging on to them for dear life. Ralph's eyes were glazed over, staring blindly straight ahead, never once blinking.

Foley opened the door further and could see the production room's control panel. The lone studio microphone on its thick steel and cast iron stand was positioned directly in front of the panel. Both turntables of the transcription recorder had recordable disks on them. The first turntable was spinning making a light whirring sound. The second turntable also had a disk on it but was turned off. The headphones that Samantha demanded from Jimmy were plugged into the recorder but the headset itself dangled down the side of the machine by its cord with the headphones themselves lying next to the machine on the floor as if they had been dropped there.

Walking fully into the room, Foley had his first glimpse of what was inside and buckled over at the waist, doing all he could to avoid heaving all over the studio floor. His body weaved as if he were going to pass out and his stomach retched. Grabbing the edge of the transcription recorder to balance himself, he took one deep breath and swallowed hard. From his vantage point, he could see a dark red liquid splattered across the recorder. Lying on the floor next to the machine was Samantha. Her eyes were gray and motionless, staring straight ahead at Foley. Her otherwise rouge-colored complexion was flushed pale. A pool of viscous maroon liquid encircled her head. Much of it had soaked into the carpet darkening its color to almost black. It was clear that the pool was still expanding, oozing ever so slowly from beneath her head. Her blonde hair, once long, flowing, and seductive was now matted with her blood and stuck to the floor.

Samantha was dead.

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