



Dead Air

Joe Cuhaj

Preview Edition

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Chapter 1

How do you find Crystal Bay, Alabama? The common reply by anyone in the state is, “Just keep going south until you hit water.” They are only half kidding.

If you drove almost due south from the north of the state, you couldn't miss running into the bustling Gulf Coast port city of Crystal Bay. The city was located on the banks of its wide and expansive namesake estuary. The bay was the heartbeat of the city and the reason it was first settled by Europeans over 300 years ago. It was fed by five separate rivers that flowed down from the north creating a fertile river delta before expanding into the bay that eventually emptied into the Gulf of Mexico.

Like many port cities across the country, Crystal Bay was experiencing a rebirth and was once again a bustling sea port after the Great Depression had wreaked havoc on its economy. During that time, offices in its mid-size skyscrapers emptied and went dark; the many shops that lined the grid of roadways though downtown were boarded up; the city's main employers – the dry docks, the wharf, and the aircraft manufacturing plant – had all closed. Now, two years after the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor plunging the nation into a world war, Crystal Bay was reborn. Offices were filled once again, store fronts reopened, and the waterfront and aircraft factory were in full operation churning out ships and planes for the war effort.

Despite it being after 10 pm, the streets of Crystal Bay were bustling, maybe even more so than in the daytime. Buses were still ferrying hundreds of people to and from downtown, heading from the heart of the city to an area on the edge of town the Bayers called the “loop,” so

named because the buses would leave downtown, reach the loop, turn around, and head back into the city with a fresh load of passengers, making a continuous monotonous looping circuit.

No matter the time of day, the buses were always crammed with people. Some sat and maintained a firm grip on the back of the seat in front of them in order to keep their balance. Others stood, grasping anything within reach to prevent themselves from being knocked to the floor by the bus's jostling.

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

Downtown Crystal Bay 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 rolled in from off the bay and descended upon the city. Walking down the street, one could catch a piece of a tune either being played live by a band or from a jukebox. Maybe it was a little swinging Dixieland jazz. Perhaps it was a mournful blues tune. Or maybe it was a knockoff of a

Gene Krupa big band number. It was hard to tell in the gumbo of sounds that wafted out of the many bars and nightclubs that lined 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 shone 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 regulations would not stop the town from savoring as much of its newfound success as possible. The most notable restriction was the government's response to Germany's *Operation Drumbeat*. German submarines would position themselves off the coast of American port cities, including Crystal Bay. In the cloak of darkness with the lights of the city burning brightly, merchant ships departing from these ports would be silhouetted by those lights, making them easy targets for enemy U-boats. The President had ordered that all port cities go dark after a particular hour to prevent such a tragedy, but the citizens of Crystal Bay all agreed that since the city was thirty miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico, there was ample time to leave the lights burning just a bit longer and keep the good times rolling.

While downtown was flooded with people, just as many were content to spend a relaxing evening at home and listen to their favorite radio station, the most popular on the Gulf Coast, WRCB, "Radio Crystal Bay." The station broadcast an eclectic array of programming that ran the gambit from gardening tips in the morning to recorded music middays to live productions of dramas, comedies, and mysteries in the evening with just a touch of national network programming sprinkled in. The radio station was the voice of the city, a friend that people trusted and turned to for the latest news about their town, developments in the war, or to just be entertained and take their minds off of their worries and the world that had been turned upside down if only briefly.

To the people of Crystal Bay, the staff at the station were close friends they would allow into their living rooms any day.

The station's most popular program was a thirty minute weekly mystery, *Brenda Daring: Private Detective*. Week after week the show held its audience captivated with seemingly impossible murders that only Brenda could solve, and that was what was airing this foggy evening on WRCB – another episode of *Brenda Daring*.

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

The crash of thunder shook the tiny shack on top of the skyscraper and 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.

“All right, 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,” Brenda declared triumphantly, “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 its hinges broke the momentary silence.

“Boys,” Brenda said, “take him away.”

The dramatic sound of an organ sliced the air loudly and then faded into the background as a man with a deep but precise voice began to speak clearly, enunciating every word and 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 of the theme song stopped and faded to memory. The room went silent until the red glow of the lighted sign above the only door into the studio that 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 and satisfactorily. “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. She would arrive at the radio station each day 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 Crystal Bay, or any place else in the country, for that matter. 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 how 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 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 ensure she had turned the head of every man in the room.

Her husband, Ralph Bandera, the man who played the role of every villain 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 evident – the tightening of his jaw muscles, the gnashing of his teeth, the narrowing of his eyes that shot daggers at her. 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 the city were called, had been fixated with the magic of radio for as long as he could remember. As a youngster, his parents would often find him in their basement listening to an old Atwater Kent radio, trying to recreate the same sound effects 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 could make mental notes of what he heard while walking around the city, then immediately concoct 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 station's live shows, and making the magic happen later in the evening during the broadcast.

The thin young man always wore the same attire—black pants 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. The shelf crashed to the floor with a deafening cacophony of sound.

“FOLEY!” everyone 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 globe, the station’s programming was electric, and sales were skyrocketing. Of course, it didn’t hurt that President Roosevelt had deemed radio stations to be an essential part of the war effort, keeping citizens across the country informed about the progress of the war while at the same time entertaining them, which helped keep their minds off their troubles and worries if only for a little while.

Life was good for Brad 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.

Seeing the look on Ralph's face, Brad stepped around a microphone stand and patted the actor lightly on the back. "Gonna be a double shot night, Ralph?" he asked with empathy 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 then hesitated and stared at the now-empty doorway where Samantha had stood only a moment before.

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

Ralph walked slowly toward the door when suddenly, 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 young men would like to take me home."

The men in the room leaned in, their eyes widening in eager anticipation when they caught the invitation. With jacket in hand, Ralph stormed out of the studio. 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, mysteries, and musicals. As with the station's other two studios, the walls were covered with thick blue carpeting that helped soundproof the room 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 Gulf Coast's stifling summertime heat and humidity, 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. A second window was located on the front wall next to the studio's door that was affectionately called the "fishbowl" by the staff. It faced the hallway and was where visitors to the station could look into the studio and watch the "magic" of radio happen. It was also 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. Normally, the monitor was 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 deep, authoritative voice boomed from the speaker. It was 10 p.m. on the dot, time for the final newscast of the day, read by newsman Daryl Thomas. Daryl's 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 battle 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. Prior to the war, the Great Depression had the city 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 personal stories of men and women from the city during these trying times, and today was no exception. In his deep, authoritative voice, he began: “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, whom he married at the Washington Street Baptist Church last Friday, and tells her that he hopes to return home 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 his work. Brad walked back into the studio and casually moved a few of the microphone stands that had been left in the center of the room off to the side.

“Good job tonight, Foley,” he said.

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

Brad walked around the studio slowly, looking at nothing in particular, then asked Foley a question. “Foley, do you know how a radio apologies?”

Foley rolled his eyes knowing full well what was coming. He fought the urge not to answer and ignore his boss but gave in. "I don't know, Mr. Peterson. How does a radio apologize?"

"It says, 'I'm sorry. I must have tuned you out.'"

Brad broke out in hysterical laughter. "That's a good one, isn't it?"

"Hysterical, Mr. Peterson," Foley deadpanned.

"I thought you'd like that one. Say, 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, Art grabbed his jacket from a wooden coat rack next to his work table in one fluid motion. 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 it dawned on Foley that he had once again been the butt of one of Brad's old, tired jokes that made him pause in the middle of the hallway.

"Hey!" he shouted.

Brad turned 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?” Foley asked.

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

Chapter 2

The following morning, the blanket of fog that crept in off of Crystal Bay the previous night still hung heavily 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 a 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 that 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 heading to work would magically appear seemingly out of nowhere.

Foley was one of the many, running late and 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 the brew 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 especially 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 were suspended on a wire with 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. 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, a young man dressed in a tight fitting 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 will be broadcasting live from the Hamilton Hotel ballroom. The Saturday evening broadcast was just as popular as the adventures of Brenda Daring. It was a spectacular show that could rank at the top with any nationally produced variety show. The three-hour broadcast featured Wes Cohn and his Orchestra, along with an array of singers, comedians, and other acts that would make even the most prominent 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 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 elevator doors 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, and the station call letters and frequency were neatly 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 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.

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 before a world war broke out. Women were finding newfound freedom and new opportunities in the workforce, and Judy would not 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 the shows 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. 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. The next morning, she would distribute them 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 neatly tucked away in a hairnet or a crocheted snood. She dressed very conservatively in long dresses that fell to just below her knee. She had sewn most of her dresses 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 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, and 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.

"Oh! Foley!" Judy said, startled.

"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 considering coming on board as a sponsor. Mr. Merindale, this is Art Foley."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Foley said, shaking the banker's hand. 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 are 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 about 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 a wary glance, not sure of what to make of him. He then walked out of the station and stepped onto a waiting elevator.

Judy turned to Foley excited about landing the new sponsor. “It’s going to be a good morning, isn’t it?” she cheerfully beamed.

Foley didn’t answer. In fact, he wasn’t paying any attention to her. Instead, he stood motionless, looking over her shoulder once again. His face drooped as he murmured, “Uh, oh. Trouble.”

She knew that look—someone was walking up behind her that she didn't want to speak with. It was Slick Mallon. Judy winced when she heard the sales manager call her name.

"You should have warned me," she whispered to Foley.

"I like to see you squirm," he joked.

"I'm flattered you pay such close attention to my every cringe-worthy moment," she replied sarcastically.

"Judy," Slick called, waving some papers in his hand. "This commercial I wrote for the Henderson Funeral Company. You've crossed out the tagline I wrote. I don't see what's wrong with it. They're having a special going on this week, and—"

She turned slowly and stared at the man. "Now, Slick," she said in a mocking motherly way. "You know what you're supposed to do. Go on. Read it out loud."

Slick held the papers up in front of his face and began to read the last line of the script for all to hear. "Henderson Funeral Home with a convenient 'layaway' plan."

The sales manager paused and stared at the script. "Oh," he said, deflated. "I see what you mean."

"I knew you would," she laughed.

From down the hall, Samantha Starr appeared like a vision with the station's chief engineer, Jimmy Stafford walking beside her, trying to keep pace as she briskly walked.

Jimmy was a stout man, but not fat. He just had a thick build. The engineer was originally from Maine and 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 position 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. The tops of three pencils could be seen peeking out of a pocket protector from the shirt pocket. 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 lips twitched, making him look like a scolded child or puppy. “You’re always having dinner with someone,” his voice quivered.

Samantha stopped short, her face showing signs of exasperation with 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, shocked at Jimmy’s remark. Her eyes grew large with surprise, and her mouth dropped open as if he had stumbled upon 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, spinning her around to face him.

“Samantha!” he begged, but before he could 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 in shock from her reaction, but what other reaction could there be? Defeated, the engineer gave in, and with a face filled with 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 had 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."

Jimmy's smile sunk into a deep frown, and his eyes turned red as they welled up once again. He took a deep breath and let it out heavily. The engineer nodded his head and pointed a finger up in the air, indicating he would have them in a moment, and then he 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 adding 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 Samantha's blow-up 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 terrible 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 and made 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 released an audible “OH!” and angrily stamped her foot.

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.

Judy looked sternly at Samantha and whispered to Foley, “If I had my way, I would get rid of her *permanently*.”

Foley jumped, startled by the comment. “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 disappeared.

“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, realized that she had blown her cover. Everyone within earshot now knew that she was 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 record commercials 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?”

Newsman Daryl Thomas joined Foley and Judy as they watched Samantha slink down the hallway toward Studio C, or as the staff called it, 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 he was 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 was a choice between me or Samantha, who would you choose?”

Daryl squinted his eyes for a moment, then thoughtfully looked 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,” then disappeared into her office.

Chapter 3

Samantha breezed down the hallway, passing the employee breakroom, several offices, and the control room as she made her way to 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 that looked out into the hallway.

At the 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. 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 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. The room's main purpose was 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 tone arm's needle down onto it, flip a switch, and it would record the actor's voice reading the commercial or show script. 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 flicked a switch that turned the lights on and then 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 into the station with his fists clenched in anger.

"What's up?" Foley asked.

"Bandera! That's what's up," Slick shouted 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.

"Hm," Foley pondered out loud. "Ralph seemed happy to see her when I left her last night."

Judy turned with a start after hearing Foley's comment.

"You did what?" she said loudly.

“Long story,” he 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 never to come back.”

Foley thought back to only hours before. Samantha had asked Foley to escort her home from the Brown Pelican after some of the staff had met there to have a few drinks after the station signed off. When they arrived at her home, they were greeted by Ralph. There was no sign the actor had been drinking. In fact, 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 handing out copies of the script to each actor, Foley glanced up from his work organizing the sound effects equipment he would need for the show, and through the fishbowl, he saw the new actor, Pierre Ramon, running down the hall toward the Production Room shouting. Even though the room was heavily soundproofed with the heavy blue carpeting 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. Pierre’s voice finally trailed off as he vanished into the production room. Judy shook off the moment and began giving the actors their instructions on what the feel and tenor of the episode should be. As she spoke, Foley looked up again and this time, he saw Pierre rush back out of the Production Room, heading in the opposite direction down the hall. Foley just shrugged his shoulders. To him, it was another crazy day at WRCB.

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

Judy lined the cast up in front of their microphones as Foley made one last check, ensuring all the effects he would need were within reach. He looked up and waited for Judy to give the cue to begin. With a stopwatch in hand to time the performance, she counted down.

“Three-two-one,” she said firmly, then pointed her finger at organist Mindy Hostettler 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 her joke.

“Take a short break while Foley and I set up for *Dr. Muldour*.”

As Foley started reorganizing 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 Bandera stepped into the room looking like a man possessed: his hair was disheveled, his eyes bloodshot with anger, and 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 production, 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 the possessed man might snap his wiry frame in two. 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 grabbed the actor by the lapel of 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 won’t 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 from the attack. He finally shook it off and regained his composure enough to shove Slick hard, causing the sales manager to release his grasp on the jacket. Slick staggered backward and crashed to the floor.

Ralph leaned back against the wall, breathing heavily. He looked around the room at the staff standing there helplessly watching the scene in fear. The actor bent over and placed his hands on his knees for balance as he took a few deep breaths. Slowly he stood back up and leaned against the wall. When he had finally caught his breath, the actor tugged on the lapel of his wrinkled 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 reached out a hand to help the prone sales manager off the floor, but Slick recoiled. “I’m sorry, Slick,” Ralph apologized.

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

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 carrying Samantha's headphones. 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 members 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 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 have lunch, and then we'll try to wrap it up this afternoon. Foley, do me a favor. Please check on Ralph and Samantha to 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's odd," he said to himself. "It shouldn't take this long to record five 15-second commercials."

He chuckled at what he had just said. She did have a few interruptions.

Foley knocked on the door, knowing full well that 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. Opening the door a little wider, 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 to them for dear life. Ralph’s eyes were glazed over, staring blindly straight ahead, never once blinking.

Foley opened the door further and saw the production room’s control panel. The lone studio microphone on its thick steel and cast iron stand was positioned directly in front of it. 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 lying next to it 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. 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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