

# **Dead Air**

by Joe Cuhaj

## Chapter 1

The wheels of the black ambulance gurney squeaked a rhythmic one-two, one-two beat as two white uniformed attendants rolled it down radio station WMAL's main hallway. A drab gray wool blanket covered the body of the once vibrant life that was radio actress Samantha Starr.

It passed before the opened door and yawning double paned glass window of Studio B where most of the station's on-air staff stood huddled together staring in disbelieving silence at the macabre procession. As it passed, script girl Judy Campbell saw Samantha's hand dangling from under the blanket, the flesh now pale white, the only color came from her highly polished Chen Yu Opium Dream nail polish.

Judy gasped and placing her hand over her mouth turned away. One of the attendants noticed her reaction and looking down saw the hand then tucked it back under the cover. A third ambulance attendant followed holding Ralph Bandera by his shoulders trying to keep the grief stricken actor from falling over.

Ralph was Samantha's husband and was clearly on the verge of going into shock. Tears streamed uncontrollably down his beat red face, his hysterical cries of "No! No! No!" reverberated down the hall, eventually fading away as the procession stepped into a waiting elevator and its highly polished mirrored doors closed behind them.

Police Detective Jack Reid appeared in the doorway of Studio C and rubbed his belly. Reid was a rotund man, squat in stature with a ring of black hair that stretched around the back of his head from ear to ear framing his bright, shiny bald head.

He was dressed in frumpy gray suit pants, the waistband straining around his wide barrel of a belly. The pants were being held up, supposedly, by a pair of bright red suspenders but whether they were actually doing their job or not was debatable. His white dress shirt was highlighted with telltale yellow sweat rings under each arm. A short stub of a stogy was clenched, unlit, in his teeth.

"Damn shame," he said through his teeth.

"Horrible," station manager Brad Peterson said walking up next to the detective. "It's just horrible!"

"It's a clear case of murder," Reid said blindly without turning to look at Brad. "There are two bruise marks, one on each shoulder. She was pushed hard against the wall. Her head took quite a blow against the concrete. Like an egg."

Judy bolted from the studio and ran down the hall into the small employee lounge screaming the entire way. Art Foley was also standing in the studio doorway and thought for a split second that he should follow his girlfriend and console her but instead he lingered to listen as Brad and Reid continued.

“So Mr. Bandera found the body, is that right?” Reid asked in a monotone voice.

“Yes, that’s right,” Brad answered.

“From what I understand,” Reid said, pulling a small notepad from his shirt pocket, a stub of a pencil dropping out of the crumpled pages into his fingers, “Bandera was a real goon.”

“That’s what I hear, too,” Brad said.

“That’s what you heard?” Reid asked. “You work with the couple every day. You never saw anything personally?”

“What do you mean?”

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

“No,” Brad answered. “I only know what I’ve heard.”

“And that is—?” Reid asked, leaving a pause for Brad to fill.

Brad thought for a moment, obviously struggling in his mind if he should say anything more, which he did.

“I heard that he was a low down goon,” Brad said. “Shacking up with any two-bit floozy who would look his way, boozin’ until the sun came up —”

Reid cut him off mid-sentence.

“What about Miss Starr?” he asked. “What’s with the last name? I thought they were married?”

“Stage name,” Brad answered. “Well, radio name, really. You know, Samantha was quite the flirt herself. We’ve all seen that, but it was just harmless flirting.”

“Did Bandera ever threaten her?”

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

“I heard he threw her out of their house last night and that he told her he’d kill her if she ever came back.” Brad said.

Foley’s eyes bulged from his head in disbelief. He had seen Ralph and Samantha only a few hours before at the couple’s home and what he witnessed was not the Ralph Bandera that was being portrayed here. He was not the creep that Brad was describing. Foley thought that a case was being built on hearsay and innuendo against an innocent man. This was all typical radio station gossip.

Reid caught the young man’s expression from the corner of his eye and turned toward him.

“Your name, son?” Reid asked.

“Foley. Art Foley, sir.”

“What do you do here?”

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

Reid looked at him puzzled. “And your name is—?”

“It’s just a coincidence.”

“You have a different take on this?”

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.

## Chapter 2

“Well, Martha,” Trent Goodlow said, “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, only you and I!”

A muffled sound could now be heard, unrecognizable at first, then undeniable – the sound of footsteps jogging up a rickety staircase. The sound ended and was replaced by 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 said, her voice now calm, reserved, confident. “My real name is Brenda. Brenda Daring. I’m a private eye!”

“You tricked me!”

“Yes, 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, you scum. You’re nothing but a two-bit thug, and not a good one at that.”

The sound of a door bursting 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.

“Be sure to join us again next week for another exciting adventure of *Brenda Daring: Private Eye*, brought to you by Hoffman’s Fertilizer. Remember, for your Victory garden or cotton farm, use Hoffman’s Fertilizer.”

The organ stopped and faded to memory. The room went silent until the light bulb that cast an eerie red glow over the only door into the studio snapped off.

“That’s a wrap, boys and girls,” Brad Peterson announced, slapping his hands together happily then rubbing them together briskly. “Thank you, all. Great job tonight. Don’t forget, rehearsals have been moved 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 desk, the pages skittering off and fluttering to the floor.

“Be prompt,” she said bitterly. “If Mr. Bandera would care to quit drinking long enough tonight and not pass out maybe we could make it 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, WMAL, dressed in elegant silk dresses with provocative low cut necklines and even lower cut backs. What material there was didn't leave much to the imagination, something unheard of in 1943 Mobile, Alabama. The dress clung to every part of her body, outlining her curvy frame. Her black high heels accentuated her already voluptuous figure.

She had elegance that was hard to describe as she walked, throwing her head back just enough to flick her hair seductively over a shoulder, lifting her left hand slightly above her waist, the other hand lightly placed 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 Hollywood would be calling her at any moment. So far the call hadn't come.

This was a daily ritual and one that the men of WMAL anticipated. Every day she would purposefully do this sensual strut, making sure that the eyes of every man in the room followed her out of the corner of her own hazel eyes.

Her husband, Ralph Bandera, who played the role of any villain *that Brenda Daring* would ever put in jail, watched his wife slink out the door, turning with a flourish as she walked through the transom into the hallway that made her long, flowing blonde

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 gasp in unison ever so slightly.

Ralph could only roll his eyes and shake his head in disbelief and disgust.

A loud crash from a corner of the studio interrupted the sensual moment that just was.

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

“Ah, 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 WMAL for the dozen or so shows the station produced locally. His name, as he would tell you, was “just a coincidence.”

Foley bent over to pick up the assorted noisemakers that he had dropped. As he leaned over, his head bumped into a shelf that held a dozen cowbells, assorted pots and pans, and a box of broken glass causing it to crash to the floor with a deafening cacophony of sound.

“FOLEY!” everyone who was left in the studio shouted.

“Sorry!” he said. “Sorry, everyone!”

Brad Peterson was the station manager. This was his baby. He had brought the station from an unknown, 1,000-watt day-timer to a 5,000-watt regional powerhouse. Despite the war, 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.

He stepped around a microphone stand and patted Ralph on the back.

“Gonna be a two finger night?” he asked with apathy in his voice.

“Four,” Ralph sighed under his breath as he grabbed his jacket from a nearby music stand.

He took a step toward the door and stopped for a moment, gazing at the now empty doorway where Samantha stood only a second before.

“Check that,” he said. “Make it a fifth!”

Ralph was taking his time walking out of the studio when the sultry figure reappeared silhouetted in the door.

“I want to go home!” she shouted at Ralph, stamping a foot like a spoiled child. “If you don’t get a move on, I’m sure one of these nice boys would like to take me home!”

All of the men’s eyes in the room seemingly popped from their head like a Looney Tunes character when they caught the double entendre.

Ralph walked out of the studio, nudging Samantha 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 WMAL produced most of its live shows: its comedies, dramas, and musicals. The walls were covered with thick blue carpeting that helped sound proof it from the raucous city sounds emanating far below the suite that WMAL called home. The carpet made the studio almost unbearable to work in during the stifling summertime heat and humidity of Alabama, but this was early spring and the room was a pleasure to be in.

The studio had two windows. One was located on a side wall that allowed the producer, engineer, and more often than not Brad, watch the performances as the shows went out live to their listeners along the sun drenched Gulf Coast.

On the front wall next to the door was a second window where visitors could watch the “magic” happen live. This was an important tool for impressing perspective new sponsors.

Just above the front window was a 12 by 12-inch canvas covered box. It was a speaker that played whatever the station was airing at the time that wasn't originating from this room. Foley flipped a switch located next to the window that turned the speaker on then walked back over to his sound effects equipment. He knelt down to the floor to clean up the mess he had made, his red suspenders stretching tight around his shoulders making him groan a bit as he began reaching for the props around him.

A deep, authoritative voice boomed from the box. It was 10 pm, time for the final newscast of the day with newsman Daryl Thomas. It was 1943 and all of the news came from the war and the two fronts where our boys were defending freedom itself. While the war was a horrible experience for those seeing the action up close and personal, the agony and fear of loved ones waiting at home for their soldiers and sailors to return was almost unbearable. But despite the horrors and ravages of war, it was a boon to this port city. Mobile, as with many towns and cities just prior to the war, had hit hard times and appeared to be falling destitute. But now, thanks to the war - in a perverted sort of way - it had regained its economic superiority with a one two punch of ship building at the local dry docks and aircraft maintenance at a nearby air field. Combine that with its direct access to the Gulf of Mexico for shipping and deployment, and the city was a bustling metropolis once again with the electricity of any bigger city.

Daryl always ended his newscasts with notes from the home front. Today was no exception.

“Finally a special greeting goes out to Mary Ruth King from Lieutenant Loren Roll and his B-17 heavy bomber crew flying out of Brookley 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 Dauphin Way Baptist Church last Friday, and tells her that he’ll be home very soon. By the way, Lt. Roll has named the bomber, ‘Mary Ruth: Memories of Mobile’. Let those Nazi’s know how Mobile feels 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 all around the studio save for the hallway. Brad walked back into the studio.

“Good job today, Foley,” he said.

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

“How about a drink?”

“Yes, thank you, sir,” he answered as he stood and in one fluid motion 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.

“I was thinking about making you program director, Foley.” Brad said nonchalantly, his jacket slung over his right shoulder as they walked.

“Really?” Foley asked excitedly.

“No, not really,” Brad responded.

They both laughed then it dawned on Foley - he was the butt of Brad’s same, old tired joke, causing him to stop in his tracks.

“Hey!” he said.

Brad turned around and walked back to Foley. He grabbed his arm and pulled on to make him start walking again.

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

“About you making me program director or not making program director?” he asked.

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