

Dead Air

By Joe Cuhaj

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

It passed before the door of Studio B where most of the on-air staff stood staring in disbelieving silence. 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 turned away. Seeing her reaction, one of the two attendants reached over and tucked the hand back under the cover. A third ambulance attendant followed the gurney 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 from his face. His hysterical shrieks of "No! No! No!" reverberated down the hall, eventually fading away as he entered the elevator.

Police Detective Jack Reid walked out of Studio C following the macabre procession. 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 belly. The pants were supposedly held up by a pair of bright red suspenders but whether they were

actually doing their job was debatable. His white shirt was highlighted with tell tale 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 behind 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 shrieking the entire way. Her boyfriend, Art Foley, was also standing in the studio doorway and thought for a split second that he should follow her and console her, but instead he lingered while 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 pencil dropping out of the crumpled pages into his fingers, “Bandera was a real goon.”

“That’s what I hear, too,” Brad said.

“You work with the couple every day. You never saw anything personally?” Reid asked.

“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 harmless.”

“Did Bandera ever threaten her?”

Brad moved around to the detective’s side. His eyes looked up from gazing at the floor and met the police chief’s.

“I heard he threw her out of their house last night and told her he’d kill her if she 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 was a completely different Ralph Bandera than what was being portrayed here. Ralph was not the creep he was being portrayed as. Foley thought that a case was being built against an innocent man based on hearsay and innuendo – 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 and began thinking back to the events of the previous day.

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