

ARKHAM
HORROR™



THE
BOOTLEGGER'S
DANCE



DANCE HALL



ROSEMARY
JONES

This is an excerpt from

The

BOOTLEGGER'S DANCE

An Arkham Horror Novel

BY ROSEMARY JONES

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Christmas comes to *Arkham Horror* in this action-packed eldritch adventure full of secret whispers, haunted streets, and a lost actor falling through time

Raquel Malone Gutierrez is running away, although she won't admit that to herself. Suffering from hearing loss after an illness, the former music teacher wants to find a way to retain her independence, but only a wealthy relative offers any hope of that. Put to work in her aunt Nova's Kingsport dance hall, Raquel stumbles upon a mystery when her new hearing aids begin picking up conversations that no one else can hear. As Christmas draws closer, Raquel realizes the voice comes from a hunted man lost in time. Now she must do everything she can to free him before the monsters chasing him can catch up and break through.

PROLOGUE

A dying man gifted me this blank book so I could write my thoughts, but my thoughts are birds, winging wildly toward the sky, hounds baying below them. My mind is a cemetery full of hideous sounds created by the hungry trees surrounding me. Then I hear your voice and the birds of my thoughts return to my head. I want to ask you, before I forget again, what is your name?

My name changed frequently in my life, almost every time I crossed a border or entered a new city. Many days I forget what I call myself. Then I remember a name and write it in this journal which ties me to a better world.

My name is Paul.

Forgive me. Such a terrible way to introduce myself. My words may frighten you. Do not be afraid. Please do not be afraid. One of us must be without fear. Let me start again.

My name is... but I have written down my name, at least the one that I remember.

So let me begin with a proper beginning, the beginning to the stories we whisper in the dark to comfort children. Let me

start again with a sentence to hold back the night terrors. Let me speak it out loud and drown out the baying of the hounds and the whispering of the trees.

“Once upon a time, something happened. If it had not happened, it would not be told.”

Let us start there. I remember so little, but I know in my bones how to start a story, even a story as strange as mine. All my life, I have listened to stories. I have taught myself languages by listening to stories.

A creaking graybeard recited “if it had not happened” every night when we were all packed together in a boxcar rolling across a vast steppe, packed as tight as fleas on a well-fed dog. The men on the outer edges of the crowd fell asleep and did not wake. We rolled their frozen bodies out the doors in the morning.

But the rest of us sat shoulder to shoulder so the old man stayed warm in the middle as the train clacked on and winter settled over all of us. His tales quieted the fear. His stories kept us alive.

I have lost so much out of my head, but I remember his tales of the wonderful twins with stars on their foreheads.

I have not seen stars in such a long time. When I first looked up here, I saw only darkness, a night without stars. So I kept my eyes on the ground. Until I heard the howling of the hounds, their terrible baying, and then I ran.

I am still running. I run through cities. I run through time. This something happened to me, but it must be told to you.

CHAPTER ONE

“Isn’t it beautiful, Raquel?” my aunt exclaimed as she ushered me out of her Rolls Royce and pointed me to her latest business. The long two-story white building occupied nearly the entire length of the street. The sign high overhead proclaimed in large letters the name of the Diamond Dog. Posters plastered on either side of the double doors promised dances with live entertainment.

Snow swirled through the air while the clouds above looked like a bruise, but the glow of lights outlining the marquee made the whole street seem warmer and welcoming. The rest of the town, from what I’d seen when we’d driven across it, looked like it once modeled for an old-fashioned Currier and Ives print. With snow gilding the rooftops, and even along the edges of the well-shoveled walks, it appeared like a scene from a Christmas card.

My aunt tipped her head back to smile at the lights brightening the gloom of the December afternoon.

“Kingsport,” said Aunt Nova with a look of pride that I had come to know in recent weeks, “never had a place like this.

It's all the best inside. Wait until you see the ballroom. And—" she pointed to a small door further away, "-we built the radio studio right there. We broadcast one show every day at noon and then live from the dance floor four evenings a week."

"But if they can hear the music at home for free," I said, following my aunt through the double doors and into the Diamond Dog, "why would anyone pay to come to dance here?"

Nova laughed. "It's because they hear our broadcast that they're wild to come to the Diamond Dog. Why, the phone rings off the hook during every broadcast with people asking if they can come the next week to the show." She pointed out the box office inside the lobby, a glass and brass kiosk where couples could buy tickets that allowed them an evening of frolics inside. Prices were posted on a fancy printed card resting on an easel. I noticed tickets for Friday and Saturday nights were slightly higher than Wednesday and Thursday. All promised tickets included dancing until midnight and a light refreshment during the evening.

Seeing the direction of my gaze, my aunt explained, "We have a buffet supper around 10 PM for the dancers. Just sandwiches and soup, along with coffee, tea, and other beverages."

"No liquor?" I said. Supper clubs in Boston, especially private clubs that required tickets or membership, were notoriously false fronts for the sale of illegal booze.

"No liquor," promised Nova as she walked me through the lobby. "I run a dry house in Kingsport. Not that the police completely believe that. We've had a few raids and they've looked mighty embarrassed to come up with nothing but a

kettle of fish chowder and coffee on the stove.”

On another easel, a separate printed poster showed pictures of the house band, extolling the keyboard virtuoso Billy Oliver and the chanteuse Harlean Kirk. Across the bottom of this lobby card, printed in red ink with letters as large and flamboyant as those spelling out the performers’ names, the poster proudly proclaimed: “As Heard on the Radio.”

We crossed the lobby and entered the ballroom itself. The room ran the length of the building, with a gleaming wooden floor, small tables ringing the outer edge, and a stage for the band built along the side closest to the radio studio. I’d been to public ballrooms in Boston as well as many college dances; the dance floor appeared as fine as any of those, with a very pleasant spring underfoot and beautifully polished to a honey glow.

The red velvet curtains swathing the back wall, the crystal chandeliers gleaming overhead, and the white and gold walls decorated in the art deco style showed that Aunt Nova had spared no expense in her creation of the Diamond Dog. The only question was how she could afford so luxurious a place as the owner of a small cafe known for its chowder and its apple pie.

Music swelled through the room, a welcome distraction from the niggling questions raised by even a brief walk through the Diamond Dog. I told my conscience to hush its nagging and turned toward the band.

On the stage the band was practicing, a mix of men and women playing together with exuberant style.

Oh, the music! I could not only hear the notes ricochet off the white plaster walls, but the tune shook the very floor

until I felt it throughout my body. Since my illness earlier in the summer, I avoided symphonies, concerts, and even the college's tea dances. In short, I tried to never be in the same space as someone performing on the piano. The Black man on the piano played with brilliant technique as the singer beside him belted out "It's All Your Fault," one of my favorite Eubie Blake songs.

"My poor heart is aching, it's almost breaking. And it's all your fault," the song concluded with a crash of emphasis from the piano.

Aunt Nova walked across the room and said to the pianist, "Billy, I'm not sure about that one. Isn't it a bit old?"

The young man spun around on the piano stool and bounced to his feet. "Hello, Miss Malone. Why, no song ever sounds old, not when Billy Oliver plays it. I make everything sound like it was composed this morning! And everyone can dance to it."

"Oh, leave it in the program," said the singer, a slender woman who topped the dapper Billy by nearly a foot. She was a platinum blonde, with a figure so long and lean that she'd look elegant in anything that she wore. She draped one arm across the shoulders of the piano player. "I love a good heartbreak song. I heard Miss Sophie Tucker sing it once and never forgot the performance. I asked Billy to add it to tonight's list," she added.

"Harlean sings it better than Miss Tucker," declared Billy, "and everyone will love it."

"What does the rest of the band think?" said Aunt Nova with a nod toward the woman playing the saxophone and the man behind the drum set.

“It swings,” said the saxophonist. “The people listening to the broadcast will recognize it.”

The drummer just gave a crash of cymbals and a nod.

Aunt Nova nodded. “I hired you to play the music so I should trust you to pick the songs.”

“It will be a spectacular evening or I’m not Billy Oliver,” said the piano player, reaching behind his back to give a glissando of the keys with more of a bop at the end than I’d ever heard in any concert or dance hall. The sound made my fingers itch to try it. “Who is the pretty lady? Is she here to help the radio boys with their broadcast?”

My aunt turned to me with a smile. “Come over here, Raquel, and let me introduce you to the band.”

Billy Oliver hopped down from the stage, to be followed more slowly by the two women, while the drummer stayed enthroned behind his drums. From our very first encounter at the Diamond Dog that day through all the years that I sought him out wherever he was playing, I never saw Billy move slowly or even stand still for more than a minute, whether on stage or off it. When he played, all his sizzling energy poured out of him and into the piano until his audience could practically dance on the music streaming through the air. His technique dazzled me. I doubt the world will ever know another virtuoso like Billy at the piano.

“Billy Oliver,” he said with a twinkle, “which you may have guessed. This is Harlean Kirk and Ginger Devine. Up there on the drums is my pal Cozy.”

“We call him Cozy because he likes to be comfortable and warm. This time of year, he hardly ever ventures out beyond that drum set,” said Ginger, shaking my hand. “His

real name is Charles Lane, and he comes from Georgia. The New England winter has been a terrible shock to his system.” The drummer gave an impatient double tap on the top of the snare drum. “He’s not much of a talker either. So I do the talking for both of us.”

“We call her Ginger,” said Harlean, “because she is spicy hot on the saxophone.”

Ginger laughed at this comment and gave Harlean a little wink. Then she said to me, “Is Billy right? Are you here to help with the broadcast?”

“No,” I said. “I’m Nova’s niece, Raquel Gutierrez. Why did you think I was with the radio station?”

“Because of the headset, of course,” said Ginger with a nod to the gadget sitting on top of my head.

I really had forgotten that I was wearing it. Or rather, I wanted to forget I was wearing it as all eyes turned to the strange contraption. Like a home radio headset, there was a metal disk covering my left ear that amplified conversations picked up by the microphone. The earpiece was held in place with a hair band going right across my head. The round microphone swung like a pendant across my chest.

Another wire snaked into the purse over my arm which held the battery pack.

This latest model was designed for a lady, according to the salesman who looped the wires around my head and neck. He said it looked like jewelry with art deco trim covering the microphone and earpiece. “Please note this battery fits in any handbag,” the man bragged as he fought to squeeze it into a new leather purse that my aunt purchased for me. My own handbags were far too small for the battery.

We purchased the listening device in New York after several doctors said it was the only solution. The thing was hideously expensive, but Aunt Nova paid for it without complaint. Everyone told me how lucky I was to have an aunt willing to give me such a marvel.

I hated it.

The hearing aid did amplify sound in my left ear, which was the better of my two ears at this point. I could hear certain people better with the hearing aid turned on than off. But the device also buzzed in my ear and created a jumble of noise which was more distracting than not hearing anything. I often reached into the purse and turned off the battery just to give myself some peace.

But I couldn't tell Aunt Nova how I felt.

Her kindness, her generosity, and her sheer enthusiasm for the hideous device made it impossible to do what I wished to do: tear it off my head and stomp it under my feet.

So I wore it. And tried to forget I was wearing the hearing aid even as the headset rubbed my ear, the microphone pulled on my neck, and the battery banged awkwardly against my hip no matter how carefully I moved.

"No, this isn't for the radio," I said and hoped to avoid further explanations. I still hadn't come to terms with the fact that a simple bout of fever left me with a significant loss of hearing in both ears, a loss the doctors predicted would only become worse. Because what was more useless than a piano teacher who couldn't hear?

"It's a hearing aid," Aunt Nova boomed. A big woman with a big voice, I could hear her with or without the device. She draped an arm around my shoulders and gave an affectionate

squeeze. “The very latest technology.”

This was greeted with an awkward silence as everyone stared at me.

“I could hear you even without it,” I said to the musicians. “When you were playing. I felt it in my body. I’ve never seen anyone handle a piano like that.”

Billy Oliver’s face split into a wide grin while the two women groaned. “Now you’re in for it,” said Ginger with a shake of her head.

“I was born to play,” Billy replied. “From the time I was a little baby, my hands were dancing across the keyboards. I am on this earth to make music.”

“I would love to hear more,” I said, and I meant it.

“You are a beautiful lady with a rare appreciation for my musical genius,” said Billy with a smile so sweet that his boast was obviously meant to make people laugh. “I would be happy to play for you.” Billy hopped back on the stage and seated himself at the piano.

I chuckled at his comments as he intended. I loved music in all forms and flavors and was intrigued by how Billy played. However, I knew I wasn’t beautiful. The fashion in 1926 was for tall flat-chested women like Harlean or little sprites like the movie star Betsy Baxter. As a tall woman myself, I easily matched Harlean for height, but all similarities ended there. I was broad across the shoulders, and curved in all other places, just like my Aunt Nova and my own mother. What would have looked magnificent when they were young women in the nineties definitely did not suit the current fashions. Instead of trying to look like a flapper, binding my chest and bobbing my hair like one of my college students, I draped myself in

sensible sweater sets and tweed skirts. I looked like what I used to be: a piano teacher, although hopefully a young and stylish college-educated teacher, not one of those old ladies in lavender and lace.

Cozy gave a tap of the drums. Billy set off with his hands flying up and down the keys of the piano. For nearly an hour, he played through a medley of songs, the latest jazz pieces and old standards made new by his improvisations. Harlean and Ginger danced on the floor to his music, pulling Nova and me into an impromptu circle. Other employees came out from the kitchen and radio station next door with a whooping shout: "Go, Billy, go!"

He just grinned and waved. The music swelled through the room. The songs shook my worries out of my head. All the anger and frustration, all the sorrow, flowed away as people grabbed my hand and swung me through the dance. They shouted their names at me, welcoming me to the Diamond Dog.

Then Billy started a boogie-woogie version of "Jingle Bells" with everyone hollering the lyrics at him as they swayed across the floor. I dropped panting into a chair beside Aunt Nova, who'd wisely left the dance floor earlier to sit on the side of the room and sip a cup of coffee.

"I never liked that song before," I said to her. As a child, the verses always disturbed me. So jolly but also so sinister, with the line about "Misfortune was his lot." However, the rest of my family adored the song and I could play it in my sleep. I certainly never played "Jingle Bells" like Billy did, and his jazz rendition made my toes tap against the floor.

Nova smiled at the raucous group gathered near the stage.

“Billy can make any song into a party,” she said. “Some nights he takes challenges from the floor, to see if they stump him with a tune that can’t be danced to. Never have, so far. I went all the way to Chicago to recruit him for the Diamond Dog. I’m glad I did.”

“He is amazing,” I started to say, but the sound of barking distracted me. It sounded like a large hound in considerable distress, so I looked around the room trying to spot it. I couldn’t see any dogs. I tapped the earphone of the hearing device with one finger, followed by a similar tap on the microphone. I doubted either gesture did anything for good or ill, but it made me feel better to fiddle with it, as if I controlled the device and it did not control my ability to hear the world around me. A second glance around the room confirmed no dogs, but the howls grew louder. Certain sounds, amplified by the hearing device, could mimic other things as I had found to my confusion while staying in New York. Once I believed that I heard the singing of a canary. It turned out to be a poorly oiled hinge in the hotel dining room. A fact I discovered after questioning the waiter several times and causing looks of amusement or pity throughout the dining room.

Still, this did sound like a hound baying. The deep cry started very low and very far away. When I shifted in my seat, I could swear I heard wind whistling through trees and the call of the hound grew closer. Perhaps the animal was penned up outside and echoes of its barking were sounding in the ballroom.

Just as I turned to Aunt Nova to ask her if she had a pet, the door at the far end of the hall flew open. A tall man dressed in

an impeccable suit came striding in, followed by a policeman in uniform.

The music came to a crashing halt. Everyone stared at the intruders.

The newcomer pushed his glasses higher on his nose and then proclaimed with a shaking of his finger, "Do you see? I told you that they were holding illegal dances here." He pointed at Aunt Nova with her coffee cup half raised to her mouth. "And serving alcohol. Do your duty! Arrest that bootlegger."

INTERLUDE

Let me try another beginning. This one I learned from a man in the trenches of a war that I wish I could forget. Why so much of my life is lost while the memories of mud drenched in blood remain, I don't know.

“In olden times, there once was a very poor man who had no coat.” My fellow soldier in the trench began his story just so.

Where I am now, I wandered for a long, long time without a coat. Before I became lost in the terrible place, I had a coat, nothing rich or fancy, just a plain black coat like a tramp might wear on a summer day. There was a reason for wearing the coat. Somebody handed it to me and asked me to wear it, but I do not remember why.

But then the hounds pursued me. I barely escaped their sharp teeth and claws. They rent my coat from my shoulders, tearing it with their bloody mouths. I ran away through a forest of trees without leaves, bare branches stretching over my head and a misty starless sky above those hungry trees.

The hounds bayed behind me, horrible mournful cries full

of every sorrow in the world and every promise to destroy me. I found a track circling under the trees and ran down it. Eventually the cries grew farther and farther away. I stayed on the muddy path going deeper into the forest despite my terror of the trees.

Have I said yet that the trees here bite? They snatch at you with long twiggy fingers and try to pull you into their open trunks, all lined with teeth and oozing green sap. Twice I narrowly missed being ground up to nothing by their ravenous mouths. I learned to stay on the path and never try to leave it. If you leave the path, the trees will eat you.

Finally, I dropped to the ground in exhaustion and woke up in an alley, surrounded by brick buildings and ashcans. In my ears was the cheerful whistle of a tune, a tune I knew but could not name. A big dog panted in my face.

I screamed, expecting the dog to tear my throat out. Bone-weary with fright, I could not run anymore. I lacked the strength to thrust the beast away. I simply lay upon the cold ground and waited to die.

“Duke, Duke,” called a man’s voice. “Let the poor man alone. Hey, buddy, don’t worry. He’s a good dog, my Duke.”

The dog sat down in front of me, beating its stubby tail upon the ground. A roughly dressed man held out his hand to me, pulling me into a sitting position.

“You look half frozen,” he said as I fumbled through the languages echoing in my head until I realized he was speaking English. An American by his accent, I decided.

My own English came back to me with a stuttering, hesitant “Thank you” to him.

“My name’s Pete,” he said with the casual friendly

handshake that Americans loved so much. I worked for a time in Hollywood and all the men, and many of the women, would grab my hand just so.

I never felt so happy to be touched by another human being. This man could have kicked me or hit me and I would have wept with joy. For his touch meant that this moment was real and not a dream.

“My name is Paul,” I told him as words and memories flooded back into my head now I was out of the hungry forest.

“What are you doing sleeping outside with no coat?” Pete asked as he sank down on his heels to look me in the eyes. “This is too cold a night to be sleeping rough like that. The Mission is open, Paul, if you need a bed. Nobody is going to turn you away on Christmas Eve in Arkham.”

I struggled to my feet. The kind dog owner held my arm until I was steady.

“Say,” he said, “don’t I know you? Weren’t you in Arkham a while back? Been years, but you look familiar.”

I shivered and shook my head. I didn’t know him, although I doubt that I would have recognized anyone, no matter how many times we had met. Memories of a forest trying to eat me overwhelmed my mind. I could barely remember my own name, much less the names and faces of others.

The air was cold, far colder than I expected. In my head it was early June and the air, even at night, should have been warm and slightly humid. But as I looked around the alley, I could see signs of snow and frost along the edges. Large icicles dripped from the building gutter overhead. I recognized nothing. I was certain that I’d never seen this dreary place. A trio of ashcans were lined up beside a door

opposite us. The dog abandoned us to sniff around these.

Pete laughed. "Duke's treasure hunting tonight. You wouldn't believe what people throw out, and just before Christmas too. You'd think with the stock market crashing they'd want to save stuff. But maybe they figure 1930 will be a better year."

Distracted by the dog, I missed part of his speech, but something sounded wrong. The last year I remembered was 1923 and everyone in Hollywood gossiping about the wealth to be found on the stock market. I rubbed my head wondering if I'd hit it or if Pete was the one confused.

Pete swung a large rucksack and a guitar off his shoulder. Carefully propping the guitar against the wall, he opened the rucksack and stuck a hand inside. "Here, Duke must have found this for you."

To my amazement, he thrust a leather jacket into my hands. "Go on, take it," he said. "You need a coat."

With trembling hands, I took the jacket from him and pulled it over my dirty shirt. The warmth embraced me.

"Now," said Pete, humming a little under his breath as he pulled the neck of the rucksack closed, "I'll walk you to the Mission. It's not far."

I nodded, willing to follow this man anywhere, as long as it took me away from my nightmares.

"Oh, what sport," sang Pete as he strode ahead of me, whistling to his dog.

The song nagged at me. I started to ask him the name of the tune as I pulled on the coat.

But when I walked out of the alley, I stood again under the terrible trees with their grasping branches. I heard the

howling of the hounds, more eerie than the wind. Pete and his dog Duke had vanished. I was alone.

So I ran.

CHAPTER TWO

When the man in the suit began shouting about arresting Aunt Nova, everyone stood completely still, staring at him. Though I could swear my microphone still picked up a faint echo of someone singing “Jingle Bells.” It sounded nothing like the raucous way that Billy had been playing the tune, rather a simpler rendition of the melody in a pleasant baritone. I decided the dratted thing had picked up the song from someone out on the street. I put my hand into my purse and switched off the hearing aid.

I truly didn’t need it to hear Aunt Nova reply in her booming voice, “Now, Chilton Brewster, you know that there’s no liquor here. In fact, if you find one drop in any cup in this establishment, I will pay \$10,000 toward your next campaign.”

Again, I wondered how my aunt could speak so causally about spending thousands of dollars. Then I stifled my doubts about the legality of Nova’s fortune. If she said that there was nothing wrong, I decided to believe her. The alternative was – well, I didn’t know the alternative, which was why I persuaded

Nova to let me spend Christmas in Kingsport.

“Furthermore, it’s not illegal for my employees to rehearse for the dance tonight,” Aunt Nova said to the policeman accompanying Brewster.

Brewster strode forward. With his slicked back hair, stiff clean collar, and neatly knotted tie, he appeared a wealthy businessman. His perfectly trimmed goatee and his round glasses gave him something of the look of Dr John Romulus Brinkley, the famed radio doctor.

“Nova Malone,” said Brewster. “You may have gotten away with your tricks in Innsmouth, but Kingsport is a different type of town. We don’t need you or your sinful dance hall here.”

“The only sin is in the eye of the beholder, and this is a ballroom for the enjoyment of anyone who wishes to dance. Don’t pretend it’s some low-class saloon,” said my aunt. She turned again to the policeman. “Well, Mac, are you arresting me for listening to my band rehearse on a Wednesday afternoon?”

“No, Miss Malone,” said the man with a baleful stare at his companion. “Mr Brewster and I were just walking down the street when we heard the music. It sounded mighty fine, Billy.”

Billy Oliver gave the policeman a wave from the piano stool.

Mac continued, “I told Mr Brewster that there’s nothing in the ordinances about people playing music during the day. Figured you were practicing or making a broadcast. Fact is that you could even hold afternoon dances as long as the activity does not interfere with the other businesses on the street.”

“Ah,” said my aunt with a gleam in her eye. “A Wednesday afternoon dance might be popular in some quarters. We could serve tea and cucumber sandwiches to go with it.” The last part she spoke with a fair imitation of a Boston Brahmin drawl, a direct tease, I realized, about Brewster calling her place a low-class dance hall.

“Now, Miss Nova,” said the policeman, “you would have to get the agreement of the other shop owners and businesses up and down the street first. They might not like it.”

“Or they might consider it a good way to bring business into Kingsport on a slow December day,” countered Nova. “It’s certainly something to consider.”

“When I’m mayor—” interrupted Brewster, apparently realizing that the conversation was running away from him. Certainly, all attention was on Aunt Nova.

“When you’re mayor, governor, or senator, you can try to change the law,” said Nova. “But until then, you’re a citizen like all the rest of us. Even then, you may find the position isn’t as powerful as you believe. When you hear the piano playing in the Diamond Dog, you needn’t come busting through the door with a policeman in tow. You’re welcome to dance whenever you want. I hope you enjoy the broadcasts just as much from the comfort of your home.”

“I find your broadcasts disturb the peace of our beautiful city,” said Brewster. “When I am in charge, we will clean up, clean out, and keep it clean. Why, just today the Talking Machine and Radio Men’s Association sent a proposal to Congress to better regulate the airwaves.”

“When they make a law, I’ll run my business according to the law. I always do,” replied Nova without hesitation. “You

need to find a new slogan and a new topic to beat to death in those editorials you read to Kingsport every morning. Radio stations broadcast what the people want to hear. You cannot stop it any more than you can shut down the movie theaters or put folks back into horse-drawn buggies. This is America, Chilton, and Americans do love their contraptions. It's 1926 and nobody is willing to live like it is 1896. Movie theaters, automobiles, radio, and airplanes. It's all here to stay, no matter how strange you find it."

Brewster started to sputter, then he looked around the room. The looks he was getting back weren't hostile – mine was probably slightly bemused as I had no idea who he was then – but the faces weren't friendly either. So his own expression shifted, just smoothed out to a pleasant smile and slight tilt of his head.

"Miss Malone," he said to my aunt in tones which were meant to carry to everyone in the room. Certainly I could hear him almost perfectly. "We welcome new investment in Kingsport. But we cherish the atmosphere of our town as well. If you'd only come to us before you began this venture, we could all have found a way to make it more harmonious."

"I went to the mayor," replied my aunt. "I paid the fees and filled out the paperwork. I did the safety upgrades requested in your letters to the city council. You can inspect the new hose yourself since you are here."

Nova gestured at the red velvet curtain draped across the back wall. One of the men grabbed the edge and pulled it aside to display a coil of hose attached to an oversized spigot. "That's a regulation fire hose," said Nova, "connected to the town's water supply. If any fire breaks out in the hall due to

it being electrified for the radio station, we can put it out before the fire station even sounds their bell. You'll note the extra extinguishers hanging on the wall as well. There are additional extinguishers in the station itself and upstairs in my apartment. I had the fire chief himself in the building to oversee the installation of all our safety measures. He told me that this is now the safest building in Kingsport."

The policeman strolled over to the wall to inspect the hose and extinguishers. "Chief was very envious of these," he said, gesturing at the copper extinguishers. "He said you had the very latest, some chemical I can't pronounce."

"Methyl bromide," said Nova. As I'd recently discovered, my aunt loved scientific discoveries and new ways of doing things. She made a habit of searching such stories out in the newspapers and magazines as well as purchasing such items as often as possible. "It's much more effective than the older combinations. I gave a few to the fire station. Even donated extinguishers to the school as well as a considerable sum toward the school's new roof."

"Your donation to the school was most appreciated," Brewster said. He didn't seem like a man inclined to stay silent for long. "The education of the young is one of the most important duties of any civic organization. Our children are our greatest resource to build a better future."

Nova stopped him from launching into a longer speech. "Happy to help the kiddies. As I said just a few minutes ago, everyone is welcome to dance at the Diamond Dog. Further, any good citizen of Kingsport can come to the radio station and contribute to our broadcasts. Mrs Jacob read her favorite ginger snap recipe on the radio just a few days ago. I

understand it was popular with our listeners. There's nothing more wholesome than cookies." She chuckled at Brewster's grimace. "Bring your favorite Christmas cookie recipe to the station tomorrow and we'll put you on the air too, Chilton."

He started to frown and then with a strange quirk of his face smoothed all expression away. "I prefer to speak elsewhere," he said, but so blandly that it took all the sting out of the statement.

"Your friend Elmo's station doesn't have half the strength of mine," said Nova. "Nor half the listeners. Although I do enjoy hearing you read the headlines every morning. You must subscribe to an awful lot of newspapers."

"New York and Boston," Chilton Brewster replied almost automatically. Then he puffed himself up a bit more and his voice was again pitched to reach the back corners of the room so I could hear every word perfectly even with my hearing aid switched off. "A man should be well informed. It's my civic duty to share news of the wider world so Kingsport's good citizens are aware of the dangers outside our town." Then he looked around the room again and spoke directly to the policeman. "Mac, don't you have work to do? Let's be going. I want to talk to you about the new streetlights."

"Yes, Mr Brewster," said Mac with something that was almost but not quite a roll of his eyes.

The two left. The room broke out into such a buzz of conversation that I lost track of all the comments. When one or two people were speaking in a room, I could follow conversations as well as before my fever. Perhaps I missed a word or two, but it was usually easy to fill it in from the rest of the conversation, which is what I've done in writing my

story here. I always had a knack for observation too. While not as good at lip reading as I would become, I often guessed correctly what a person was saying even when they weren't speaking directly to me.

This trick served me well as a teacher, interrupting whispered conversations at the back of the room with a telling phrase or two. My college students had called me clairvoyant. As I'd only been a handful of years older than them, it was a reputation that I cultivated to help preserve order in my classroom.

Now I had no students. Once the dean learned of my increasing deafness, my contract was terminated. If Aunt Nova had not answered my letters, I would have been forced to return home to Denver. I hated the thought of having to admit the failure of my grand dreams of becoming a concert pianist. I was sure it would ruin the Christmas celebrations for my entire family. They would be so concentrated on comforting me that there would be no joy in such a reunion. Or so I told myself. The truth was that my family had weathered a greater sorrow, but my own disappointment would sour any homecoming for me. I was barely used to the hearing aid and I dreaded exclamations from strangers. I was certain that it would be much worse to endure the same from people I loved.

I felt a tap on my hand. I looked up at Aunt Nova leaning across the table. "Lost in your thoughts?" she said with a shrewd but kind look. As we made the round of doctors, Nova often broke through my increasing moments of despair with small gestures and pleasant distractions. Shopping was her favorite hobby. She was particularly keen on jewelry and gadgets.

While in New York, we spent considerable time at Tiffany's and almost as much time in tiny walk-up offices where inventors demonstrated everything from electric bread slicers to a strange wristwatch that displayed minuscule maps printed on scrolls. The latter, claimed the inventor, would keep drivers from ever becoming lost. Nova had been intrigued with the invention until it turned out the only maps printed so far showed roads in England.

"Come and meet the rest of the Diamond Dog's crew properly. You can't dance and talk at the same time," my aunt said to me, pulling me out of my chair. "You'll like this lot. They're sure to cheer you up."

I smiled at her. Reaching into my handbag, I switched the hearing aid back on and followed her across the room.

"Let's see," said Nova. "You've met the band. Here's Reggie. He's the genius behind the radio station."

A lanky man in his early forties shook my hand. His hair, despite attempts to grease it into place, stood up in odd spikes around his head, giving him the look of a slightly puzzled porcupine. I recognized the mess created by dragging a headset on and off.

"Nice to meet you," said Reggie, shaking my hand. "Reggie Stubblefield. I'm the station's chief engineer. I keep all the equipment running so people hear sound instead of static."

"And I'm the voice of WKP," said a gentleman with a rich baritone standing next to him. An inch or two shorter and much more solidly built than Reggie, the bearded gentleman introduced himself as Johnny Carlucci. "Giovanni Carlucci, of course," he said. "But we're calling me Johnny Carl on the air."

“My dean insisted I call myself Miss Malone when teaching,” I replied, “and not Miss Gutierrez.”

“In my father’s day they objected to Malone,” said Nova, overhearing us. “I’m a bit surprised your Boston college didn’t object to the Irish as well. Stuffy place. You’re well rid of it.”

I knew she meant to be kind, but the loss of my job still stung. The college, while small, held an outsized reputation with Boston’s patrons of music. I hoped when I took the position to earn a place in the faculty concerts and, possibly, even be taken to New York to perform. All those dreams were dust and ashes, although only Nova knew that yet. As reluctant as I was to write home and tell the disastrous news to my parents, even worse would be disappointing my younger sister. Clara planned to come back east and take her studies at a similarly prestigious school. I spent many days discussing this with Aunt Nova. I feared my misadventures would end Clara’s academic career before it began.

My father reluctantly agreed to my own plans of teaching at a Boston college while making his usual concerned predictions of disaster. There was no man on earth that I trusted or loved more than my father. However, his tendency to wrap all his children in cotton wool, especially after the death of my youngest brother at age eleven, sent us all out into the world aching for adventure.

My older brothers sidestepped banking careers, much to my father’s dismay, to join the Navy during the Great War. David seemed intent upon climbing the ladder to admiral. My brother Luis had been bitten by the flying bug and was currently working as a consulting engineer for a company impressed by his passion for propellers.

After far too many family discussions around the dinner table, my father finally agreed that Boston was a reasonably safe city for his eldest daughter to pursue her musical ambitions. "At least she is not interested in Hollywood," he said to my mother.

Clara also scorned the movies, being intent on a career in literature. She wanted to pen intriguing mysteries for the magazines and experiment in theater, being an admirer of the writer Eleanor Nash. Clara talked of the latest trends in modern dance and how those could be incorporated into the type of performance that she longed to see. All of which, she was convinced, could only be truly experienced in New York.

To overcome our father's sure objections, we planned for her to start college in Boston while sharing lodgings with me. Then, with some distance between us and Papa, she could move to New York in pursuit of her literary adventures. However, if I didn't have a position in Boston, her dreams might well be at an end too.

I hadn't had the heart to write Clara. I didn't want to spoil anyone's Christmas with my troubles, even though my aunt kept assuring me that we would find a way to bring about Clara's college career.

Nova clapped her hands, interrupting my gloomy thoughts.

"It's the first of December," she said. "Which means we have twenty-three days until our biggest dance yet. With Christmas Eve falling on a Friday, I plan to make it a true humdinger of a party. Have the special invitations been sent?"

"Yes, Miss Malone," said an older woman in a dark blue dress. She pulled a little notebook and a pencil from one pocket. "I took them to the post office myself yesterday. The

box office started selling tickets for the Christmas Eve dance today and we've already had a small rush from the regulars. Now, what shall we do next?"

Nova smiled at the woman. "Lily, you're a treasure. Raquel, come meet Lily McGee. She's the office manager for both the station and the Diamond Dog."

"I was Chilton Brewster's secretary at the bank," said Lily, shaking my hand, "until your aunt hired me away with a fancier title and a better salary."

Nova shrugged. "You deserved it. I could tell that from the first time that I met you. Besides, I need good people to keep this place humming."

"Still, I can't imagine why Mr Brewster came in here making such a fuss," said Lily. "He's been so disapproving of this project from the beginning, but it's a nice high-class business. Just what he said he wanted for Kingsport."

Nova shrugged. "Who knows why one person dislikes another? Myself, I've always thought it was a waste of time to bother about such rivalries. Now, let's decide on the decorations."

As the two fell into conversation, the crackle of my hearing aid increased to an uncomfortable pitch. Besides the two women talking in front of me, I heard a jumble of voices, like the sound of several men speaking all at once. The barking resumed, except this time it sounded more like a hound's baying. I remembered a neighbor's bloodhound sounding off with a similar mournful howl.

I moved away from the others, closer to a pair of roughly dressed men that I hadn't yet been introduced to. I was fiddling with my microphone when I swung it toward

one of them. I clearly heard him say to the other, “We’ll make the run tonight. It should be safe. There’s almost no moon.”

“Best ask Miss Malone,” said the other. “She’ll be hopping mad if we lose this one too.” At least that’s what I thought he said, although his voice was more muffled and the static of the headset continued to disturb me.

“Nah, the boys will be right where we need them,” replied the first man. “Our cookie lady made sure of that.”

The other made some answer, but the howling was so loud in my ears that I missed his words entirely. I twiddled the controls of the hearing aid, determined to make the thing behave or shut it off completely. According to the salesman’s instructions, I was supposed to shift my body so the microphone hanging across my chest was pointing at a person speaking. I couldn’t imagine anything more embarrassing than maneuvering the microphone in such a way. Nor did I want the two men to think I was trying to eavesdrop on them.

My aunt looked around for me. Seeing the men standing close beside me, her eyes narrowed and she called out, “Otis and Tim, don’t you need to fetch some supplies?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said one. “We’re on our way.”

They brushed past me without any further conversation and I promptly forgot about them due to my struggles with the hearing aid. Over the following days, I would see both men working around the Diamond Dog frequently. But they rarely interacted with the rest of the staff. Their major responsibilities were carrying in boxes of supplies or working on the truck, a large delivery van, that Nova dispatched frequently to fetch more boxes.

Disturbed by the noise generated by the headset, I left the hall entirely, searching for the dog or dogs that I heard howling. But there were clearly no hounds inside the hall. The salesman had been clear in our discussions that the range of the hearing aid was limited, but I still wondered if I was picking up more noise generated outside than he thought possible.

However, when I looked out the door leading to the street, I saw only the snow falling faster in the waning light. Kingsport still looked like a Currier and Ives picture, like the print decorating the wall of my old music studio. The dusty relic had been left behind by some other teacher with a poor taste in art. I recalled the picture's bare black trees stretching toward a sinister moon masked by wisps of clouds. I always thought it was a singularly unpleasant depiction of winter and quickly replaced it with a sunnier print by Maxfield Parrish.

The wind turned. The icy flakes of snow blew into my face. I shut the door upon the cold and went back into the ballroom to discuss decorations with Aunt Nova.

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