

THE THUG. THE ACTRESS. HER DAUGHTER. AND HOMICIDE.

By John S. Caragozian

In the 1950s, Lana Turner was one of Hollywood's biggest stars.

Born in 1921, Turner was "discovered" at age 15 at a Los Angeles malt shop. Beginning the next year, Turner was cast in bit parts, for which she received favorable notice. From 1938 to 1956, she was under contract with Metro Goldwyn Mayer and eventually starred in dozens of films. She was paired with such leading actors as Clark Gable, Lionel Barrymore, and Spencer Tracy.

While Turner's professional career soared, her personal life was complicated. As a teenager she married co-star and bandleader Artie Shaw, but they divorced after four months.

Her next husband was actor – and, later, successful restaurateur – Stephen Crane, whom Turner married twice, in 1942 and 1943. (Crane's earlier marriage had yet to be dissolved when Crane and Turner first married, thus their second marriage.) Turner and Crane had a daughter, Cheryl Crane, born in July 1943, but the couple divorced in 1944.

By 1957, Turner had married and divorced two other men. According to Cheryl Crane, the latter husband – Lex Barker – repeatedly molested and "violently raped" Crane beginning when she was ten years old. The molestations and rapes continued for years and ended only after Cheryl Crane told Turner, who promptly divorced Barker. See Hadley Meares, "Two Survivors: The Scandalous Saga of Lana Turner and Cheryl Crane," *Vanity Fair*, Jun. 8, 2023.

By mid-1957, Turner had a new romantic interest: Johnny Stompanato. During World War II, Stompanato saw combat as a U.S. Marine in the Pacific. After the war, he moved to Los Angeles and, by 1948, was a bodyguard for local crime boss Mickey Cohen, earning \$300 per week (today, over \$3,800 or almost \$200,000 per year).

Turner and Stompanato had a tempestuous relationship. Stompanato beat Turner, who repeatedly broke with, but then reconciled with him. In 1957, for example, Turner was filming "Another Time, Another Place" in London, England. Stompanato followed Turner to London, hit her, threatened to cut her with a razor, and then appeared on the set with a pistol. One of Turner's co-stars, Sean Connery, punched Stompanato and wrestled the pistol from him. Stompanato was then expelled from England. See Cheryl Crane, "Detour: A Hollywood Story," 208 (1988).

Although Turner yet again resumed her relationship with Stompanato, she chose almost never to be seen with him in public, fearing that his "underworld connections" would undermine her public image. See Patricia Bosworth, "The Gangster and the Goddess," *Vanity Fair*, Apr. 1999, at 244.

At 1958 Academy Awards, Turner was nominated for best actress for her role in "Peyton Place." (She did not win.) She refused to allow Stompanato to accompany her to the awards ceremony

on March 26. For that refusal, Stompanato beat her that night upon her return to her Beverly Hills home. *See id.*

Barely a week later, on April 4, 1958, Stompanato re-appeared at Turner's house and repeatedly threatened to kill Turner, Turner's mother, and Turner's daughter Cheryl Crane. Cheryl Crane – then 14 years old – was at the house and witnessed some of the threats. Exactly what happened next was the subject of criminal and civil proceedings, but the physical result was undisputed: Stompanato was stabbed to death that night.

According to Crane, she witnessed Turner and Stompanato arguing upstairs in Turner's bedroom on April 4, with Stompanato threatening to kill Turner. When Crane entered the bedroom, Turner apologized to Crane for subjecting Crane to the scene and ordered Crane to leave the bedroom. Crane went downstairs into the kitchen, got a knife, and returned upstairs. She waited outside her mother's bedroom door; after Crane overheard the "violent quarrel" resuming, she rushed in past her mother and stabbed Stompanato in the abdomen. Crane apologized to Stompanato, saying that she did not "mean to." *See, e.g., "Complete Testimony of Inquest,"* L.A. Times, Apr. 12, 1958, at 1; Cheryl Crane, *supra* at 219-20.

Stompanato fell and made "horrible noises," but no one immediately called for an ambulance. Instead, Turner phoned her mother and asked her mother to summon her (Turner's) personal physician. Separately, Cheryl Crane went to her own bedroom and phoned her father Stephen Crane at his restaurant, "Daddy, Daddy, come quick something terrible has happened."

Turner tried to staunch the wound with a towel, and Stompanato continued to moan. The physician, Turner's mother, and Stephen Crane appeared, but the physician was unable to detect a pulse and was unsuccessful in resuscitating Stompanato. He told Turner to call for an ambulance, which she did, but Stompanato was eventually pronounced dead at the scene. *See Complete Testimony of Inquest, supra.*

The first Beverly Hills police officers then arrived at Turner's house, summoned by the phone operator. Turner's physician told Turner to phone legendary Hollywood lawyer Jerry Giesler, who appeared with a private investigator five minutes after the first police officers. Beverly Hills Police Chief Clinton Anderson – who was a "family friend" of Turner – arrived five minutes after Giesler.

Turner asked Chief Anderson, "Can't I take the blame for this horrible thing?" Anderson answered that he wanted to know what had actually happened. Cheryl Crane then told her mother not to take the blame. Crane, *supra*, at 222.

Later that night, Turner and Cheryl Crane were questioned further at the Beverly Hills police station. Crane confessed, "I stabbed him. I didn't mean to kill him.... I just meant to frighten him." Chief Anderson posed leading, sympathetic questions to Crane such as "Then you thought your mother's life was in danger?" and to Turner such as "In other words, [Stompanato] threatened you, your daughter, and all?" *Complete Testimony of Inquest, supra.*

Further, Anderson told the press that Stompanato was a “gigolo” who “court[ed] females of wealthy means.” *E.g.*, “Police Hang Gigolo Tag on Johnny Stompanato,” Tucson Daily Citizen, Apr. 5, 1958, at 8, col. 1.

The crime scene was compromised with all the people who had appeared. Nonetheless, it yielded curiosities. For example, the knife was found in Turner’s bathroom, and the handle had been mostly wiped clean, with only one smudged (and unidentifiable) fingerprint. Turner admitted moving the knife, but could not explain why she had done so. *See Complete Testimony of Inquest, supra.*

Cheryl Crane was jailed overnight at the Beverly Hills police station. After a pre-detention hearing, Crane was moved the next day to downtown Los Angeles’s juvenile hall, and a Los Angeles County Coroner’s inquest – with a jury – was ordered. *See, e.g., Cheryl Crane, supra, at 231.*

In the meantime, Stompanato’s death had become a nationwide sensation. Beginning April 4, reporters camped out on Turner’s front lawn, and only a fraction of the press could be seated at the coroner’s inquest.

The inquest was held on April 11, 1958, and was completed in one morning. The next day’s *Los Angeles Times*, beginning on the front page, published a complete transcript of the inquest.

The questioning was led by a deputy coroner, with additional questioning by a deputy district attorney and Giesler (who represented Turner).

Cohen, for whom Stompanato had been a bodyguard, was the first witness, but refused to confirm his previous identification of Stompanato’s body “on the grounds that I may be accused of his murder.” Cohen was quickly excused.

Police Chief Anderson then testified about his initial interrogation of Turner and Cheryl Crane, but added little new information, and the follow-up questioning of him was brief and shallow.

Turner was the star witness and was examined for 62 minutes. Her testimony was consistent with what she had said to the police the night Stompanato died and included details of Stompanato’s violent abuse of Turner. One newspaper described Turner’s testimony as “the most dramatic and effective role of her long screen career....” Florabel Muir, “Lana’s Hit Show: Clear Cheryl,” N.Y. Daily News, Apr. 12, 1958, at 3.

Cheryl Crane did not appear at the inquest. She remained in juvenile hall and was excused from testifying because it would be traumatic for her. Instead, her April 4 statements to Chief Anderson were read aloud.

The jury deliberated for less than half an hour and returned a verdict of “justifiable homicide.”

The district attorney was not bound by the coroner's jury verdict, but opted not to try Cheryl Crane. Stompanato's family filed a wrongful death suit, which Turner settled in 1962 for \$20,000 (approximately \$202,000 today).

Turner's career remained successful, despite swings of public opinion. She last appeared in television's "Falcon Crest" in the early 1980s. After Stompanato's death, Turner married and divorced three more times, but had no more children. She died in 1995, age 74. Rumors have continued to swirl that Turner actually stabbed Stompanato, though the better evidence belies them.

Cheryl Crane was the subject of custody disputes between her parents and remained a ward of the court. She had difficult teenage years – moving from school to school, running away from school, and surviving a suicide attempt. Eventually, she found success as an executive in her father's restaurant company. She later became a real estate agent in Hawaii, San Francisco, and finally Palm Springs, where she still lives.

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