

IN CAMERA: Hollywood Scandals, Legal Truths

EPISODE 3: Lana Turner – The Mobster, The Knife, and The Perfect Suspect

SHOW NOTES, RESOURCES & CITATIONS

KEY DATES

- **February 8, 1921** – Lana Turner born, Wallace, Idaho
- **July 25, 1943** – Cheryl Crane born, Los Angeles
- **September 1953** – Turner marries Lex Barker (4th husband)
- **July 1957** – Turner divorces Barker; Cheryl discloses abuse to her mother
- **Late 1957** – Turner begins relationship with Johnny Stompanato
- **1957–1958** – Sean Connery confronts Stompanato on UK film set; Scotland Yard escorts Stompanato out of England
- **March 26, 1958** – 30th Academy Awards ceremony, RKO Pantages Theatre, Hollywood; Turner attends without Stompanato
- **April 4, 1958** – Johnny Stompanato stabbed at Turner's home, 730 North Bedford Drive, Beverly Hills; Cheryl Crane confesses
- **Early hours, April 5, 1958** – Cheryl surrenders to police; booked and transferred to juvenile hall
- **April 7, 1958** – Closed pre-detention hearing before Juvenile Court Judge Donald O'Dell; Lana's request to release Cheryl to grandmother's custody denied
- **April 11–12, 1958** – Los Angeles coroner's inquest; jury deliberates approximately 25 minutes; verdict: justifiable homicide
- **April 24, 1958** – Juvenile court hearing; Cheryl released to grandmother's care; judge raises concerns about parental supervision

- **April 1959** — *Imitation of Life* released; massive commercial success
- **1962** — Civil wrongful death lawsuit by Stompanato family settled for \$20,000
- **January 1, 1962** — Jerry Giesler dies, Beverly Hills, age 75
- **1988** — Cheryl Crane publishes memoir *Detour: A Hollywood Story*; discloses Lex Barker's sexual abuse
- **June 29, 1995** — Lana Turner dies of throat cancer, Los Angeles, age 74

PEOPLE

Lana Turner (1921–1995)

Born Julia Jean Turner in Wallace, Idaho. MGM contract player from 1938–1956. Nicknamed "The Sweater Girl." Nominated for Best Actress (Academy Award) for Peyton Place (1957). Married seven times. Mother of Cheryl Crane. Testified at the coroner's inquest in what many journalists called the performance of her life.

Johnny Stompanato (1925–1958)

Born October 10, 1925 in Woodstock, Illinois. Former U.S. Marine (served 1943–1946, Pacific Theater). Bodyguard and enforcer for Los Angeles mob boss Mickey Cohen. Known for predatory relationships with older, wealthy women. Stabbed and killed at Turner's Beverly Hills home on April 4, 1958, age 32.

Cheryl Crane (b. 1943)

Only child of Lana Turner and actor Steve Crane. Fourteen years old at the time of the stabbing. Confessed to killing Stompanato. Subject of closed juvenile proceedings. Spent subsequent years in psychiatric institutions. Later became a real estate broker in Hawaii and Palm Springs. Published memoir *Detour: A Hollywood Story* in 1988.

Jerry Giesler (1886–1962)

Born Harold Lee Giesler in Wilton Junction, Iowa. The most prominent criminal defense attorney in Hollywood for nearly five decades. Clients included Errol Flynn, Charlie Chaplin, Bugsy Siegel, Marilyn Monroe, and Lana Turner. His reputation for winning unwinnable cases earned him the nickname "Get Me Giesler." Arrived at the Turner home within hours of the stabbing and managed the entire legal strategy. Died January 1, 1962, age 75.

Mickey Cohen (1913–1976)

Los Angeles organized crime boss. Stompanato was his bodyguard and enforcer. Furious at the outcome of the inquest, Cohen leaked Turner's private love letters to Stompanato to the press in retaliation. The public sympathized with Turner anyway.

Lex Barker (1919–1973)

Actor best known for playing Tarzan (1949–1953). Turner's fourth husband (married 1953, divorced 1957). In her 1988 memoir, Cheryl Crane alleged that Barker sexually abused her beginning at age ten, over the course of his marriage to Turner. When Turner learned of it in 1957, she immediately ended the marriage.

Sean Connery (1930–2020)

Scottish actor, pre-fame in 1957–58. Former competitive bodybuilder (Mr. Universe contestant, 1953). Cast opposite Lana Turner in *Another Time, Another Place* (1958). When Stompanato stormed the set brandishing a gun, Connery disarmed him and knocked him down. Scotland Yard subsequently escorted Stompanato off the set and out of England. After Stompanato's death, Connery received word that Cohen's associates held a grudge against him and kept a low profile.

Judge Donald O'Dell

Juvenile Court Judge who presided over Cheryl's pre-detention hearing on April 7, 1958. Declined to release Cheryl to her

grandmother's custody, citing the press siege and the mob-adjacent nature of the deceased. At the April 24th juvenile hearing, raised concerns about whether Cheryl was receiving adequate parental supervision.

HOLLYWOOD CONNECTIONS

The Stompanato case sits at the intersection of Hollywood's golden age studio system, organized crime, and the tabloid press – a collision that defines the era.

- MGM's studio protection system: Turner's career and personal scandals were managed and suppressed by MGM's publicity machine for nearly two decades before the studio system collapsed in the 1950s.
- The coroner's inquest as theater: Multiple journalists noted that the inquest functioned more like a Hollywood production than a legal proceeding – with Giesler effectively directing Turner's testimony from the courtroom floor.
- The scandal as career revival: *Imitation of Life* (1959), released less than a year after the killing, became one of Turner's greatest commercial successes. Public sympathy transformed scandal into box office.
- Peyton Place connection: Turner was nominated for Best Actress for *Peyton Place* (1957), a film about scandal and secrets in a small town – nominated at the very Academy Awards ceremony that preceded Stompanato's death by nine days.
- Life magazine's coverage: Published a split-page layout placing Turner's inquest testimony photographs alongside stills from her film performances, explicitly drawing the parallel between her acting and her courtroom "performance."

LEGAL ANALYSIS

The Coroner's Inquest

In 1958, California's coroner's inquest was a statutory proceeding convened by the county coroner to determine the cause and manner of a suspicious or violent death. It was not a criminal trial. The coroner controlled the proceedings, there was no opposing party, strict evidentiary rules did not apply, and the jury's role was limited to determining cause of death and, if homicide, whether it was justifiable.

Crucially, under California Government Code §27502.2, any inquest verdict was inadmissible in subsequent civil or criminal proceedings. This meant the justifiable homicide finding could not be used to help – or hurt – anyone in future litigation.

Giesler was present at the inquest not as a party but as Turner's personal attorney. Multiple contemporary accounts confirm he was on the courtroom floor prompting her testimony. This would have been impermissible in a criminal trial but was within the coroner's discretion at an inquest.

The Minor Strategy

Giesler's decision to have Cheryl, not Lana, be the subject of the investigation was strategically sound on three grounds:

- Forum advantage: Juvenile proceedings were closed, records sealed, no public trial, no cameras.
- Exposure reduction: If Lana were prosecuted, she faced full adult criminal proceedings with discovery, forensic evidence, and a jury. No guaranteed outcomes exist.
- Narrative advantage: A 14-year-old who saved her mother from a violent, mob-connected abuser was the most sympathetic possible defendant. The same facts, framed around Lana, were legally defensible but harder to sell in 1958.

Defense of Others vs. Self-Defense

Cheryl's applicable theory was defense of others. Under California law, deadly force is justified when a person reasonably believes another faces imminent death or great bodily injury. Cheryl heard Stompanato threaten to slash her mother's

face and harm her grandmother and herself. She heard screaming and items being thrown. The facts supported the theory on their face.

Had Lana been the perpetrator, the theory would have been self-defense – legally parallel, but psychologically and narratively different. The standards are the same; the optics are not. Giesler chose the better story.

The Civil Suit

The Stompanato family filed a wrongful death lawsuit seeking \$750,000 (approximately \$6 million today). In civil depositions, Cheryl reportedly told plaintiff's counsel she could not recall stabbing Stompanato and could not recall giving the written statement read at the inquest. Plaintiff's counsel also presented forensic evidence suggesting Stompanato may have been stabbed while lying down, inconsistent with Cheryl's standing-confrontation account.

The case settled in 1962 for \$20,000 (approximately \$158,000 today). The low settlement figure reflects the plaintiffs' weak litigation position: no usable inquest verdict, Stompanato's documented violent history, and overwhelming public sympathy on the defense side.

Note on the Inquest Date

Sources are split between April 11 and April 12 for the inquest date. The Wikipedia article on Lana Turner cites April 12; the article on Cheryl Crane and several contemporaneous accounts cite April 11. The script uses April 11. Listeners who research further may see both dates cited.

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- Crane, Cheryl, with Cliff Jahr. *Detour: A Hollywood Story*. New York: Arbor House/William Morrow, 1988.

- Giesler, Jerry, with Pete Martin. *The Jerry Giesler Story*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960.
- Turner, Lana. *Lana: The Lady, the Legend, the Truth*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1982.

Legal Sources

- California Government Code §27502.2 (coroner's inquest verdict inadmissibility).
- California Penal Code §197 (justifiable homicide; defense of others).
- California Welfare & Institutions Code (1958) – juvenile court jurisdiction and sealed proceedings.

Biographical and Encyclopedia Sources

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- "Cheryl Crane: Surviving Life with Lana." UPI Archives, February 19, 1988.

- "Lana's Notorious Little Girl Looks Back." Orlando Sentinel, February 17, 1988.
- "Lana Turner's Daughter Avoided Dead End." Chicago Tribune, January 21, 1988.
- Life magazine coverage of the 1958 inquest (contemporaneous; multiple issues).

Note on the Connery/Cohen Threat

The account of Mickey Cohen's associates directing a grudge at Connery after Stompanato's death is widely reported in biographical sources covering Connery's early career but is difficult to source to a single primary document. It is presented in the script as received historical account.

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1. turner_house.jpg

Description: 730 North Bedford Drive, Beverly Hills, California — the rented home of Lana Turner where Johnny Stompanato was killed on April 4, 1958. Color photograph, likely taken in the 1990s, showing the white Colonial-style house with black shutters and a jacaranda tree in bloom.

Source: Wikimedia Commons (if sourced there); possibly also held in the Flickr/personal photography archives. Photographer unidentified.

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2. turner_1.jpg

Description: Lana Turner, MGM glamour portrait, circa late 1940s. High-contrast studio portrait in textured jacket.

Source: Wikimedia Commons. MGM studio publicity photograph, circa 1947-1950. Photographer unidentified.

License: Public domain (published in the United States between 1928-1977 without copyright notice). MGM studio publicity stills published without copyright notice are in the public domain.

3. lana_stompanato.jpg

Description: Lana Turner and Johnny Stompanato in Acapulco, Mexico, circa 1957-58.

Source: Wikimedia Commons -

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lana_Turner_and_Johnny_Stompanato.jpg

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4. lana_stompanato_cheryl.jpg

Description: Lana Turner, Johnny Stompanato, and Cheryl Crane at Los Angeles International Airport, March 1958 - approximately three weeks before Stompanato's death.

Source: Wikimedia Commons -

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lana_Turner,_Johnny_Stompanato_and_Cheryl_Crane.jpg

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5. lana_and_connery.jpg

Description: Lana Turner and Sean Connery in Cornwall, England, during filming of *Another Time, Another Place* (1957-58).

Source: Wikimedia Commons -

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lana_Turner_and_Sean_Connery_in_Another_Time,_Another_Place_\(1958\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lana_Turner_and_Sean_Connery_in_Another_Time,_Another_Place_(1958).jpg)

License: Public domain (published in the United States between 1928-1977 without copyright notice). Production still, Lanturn Productions / Paramount Pictures.

6. corpse.jpg

Description: Beverly Hills police officer with the body of Johnny Stompanato at Lana Turner's home, 730 N. Bedford Drive, Beverly Hills, April 5, 1958.

Source: Wikimedia Commons. Original press photo by Howard Ballew, published in the Los Angeles Herald (LA 56 INP Soundphoto, April 5, 1958).

License: Public domain (published in the United States between 1928-1977 without copyright notice).

7. mirror_headline.jpg

Description: Front page of the Los Angeles Mirror evening edition, Saturday, April 5, 1958. Headline: "Lana Turner's Girl Kills Mother's Suitor." Byline by Howard Williams, Staff Writer. Includes photo of Johnny Stompanato and a weeping Lana Turner.

Source: Wikimedia Commons (if sourced there); originally published by the Los Angeles Mirror, April 5, 1958. Los Angeles Daily Mirror digital archive also holds this front page.

License: Public domain (published in the United States between 1928-1977 without copyright notice). U.S. newspaper published without copyright notice.

8. giesler.jpg

Description: Jerry Giesler (Harold Lee Giesler, 1886-1962), celebrity defense attorney who represented Lana Turner and Cheryl Crane.

Source: Wikimedia Commons -

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jerry_Giesler.jpg

License: Public domain (published in the United States between 1928-1977 without copyright notice).

9. cheryl_booking.jpg

Description: Cheryl Crane, 14, photographed at the Beverly Hills Police Station on April 5, 1958, following the death of Johnny Stompanato.

Source: Wikimedia Commons -

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cheryl_Crane_\(5_April_1958\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cheryl_Crane_(5_April_1958).jpg)

License: Public domain (published in the United States between 1928-1977 without copyright notice).

10. lana_cheryl_booked.jpg

Description: Lana Turner, visibly distressed, leaving the Beverly Hills Police Station on April 5, 1958, following the death of Johnny Stompanato.

Source: Wikimedia Commons -

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lana_Turner_\(5_April_1958\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lana_Turner_(5_April_1958).jpg)

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11. lana_cheryl.png

Description: Lana Turner and Cheryl Crane walking to the coroner's inquest, Los Angeles, April 11, 1958.

Source: Wikimedia Commons –

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lana_Turner_and_Cheryl_Crane_\(11_April_1958\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lana_Turner_and_Cheryl_Crane_(11_April_1958).jpg)

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12. lana_juvie_hearing.jpg

Description: Lana Turner at the juvenile court hearing for Cheryl Crane, Beverly Hills, April 24, 1958.

Source: Wikimedia Commons –

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13. lana_inquest.png

Description: Lana Turner at the coroner's inquest into the death of Johnny Stompanato, Los Angeles, April 11, 1958.

Source: Wikimedia Commons –

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lana_Turner_at_inquest_\(1958\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lana_Turner_at_inquest_(1958).jpg)

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14. mickey_cohen.jpg

Description: Mickey Cohen (Meyer Harris Cohen, 1913-1976), Los Angeles mobster and Stompanato's employer, circa 1950s.

Source: Wikimedia Commons –

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mickey_Cohen.jpg

License: Public domain (published in the United States between 1928-1977 without copyright notice).

15. turner_2.jpg

Description: Lana Turner, MGM publicity portrait, circa early 1950s. Caption printed on image border reads: "LANA TURNER - Metro Goldwyn Mayer" with catalog code LXT31.

Source: Wikimedia Commons. Official MGM studio publicity still, catalog code LXT31. Photographer unidentified.

License: Public domain (published in the United States between 1928-1977 without copyright notice). MGM studio publicity stills published without copyright notice are in the public domain.

16. cheryl_and_parents_at_police_station.jpg

Description: Lana Turner, Cheryl Crane, and Steve Crane leaving the East Los Angeles Police Station, April 1957.

Source: Wikimedia Commons –

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lana_Turner,_Cheryl_Crane_and_Steve_Crane_after_reunion_at_the_East_Los_Angeles_Police_Station,_April_1957.jpg

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17. book_cover.jpg

Description: Cover of *Detour: A Hollywood Story* by Cheryl Crane with Cliff Jahr (1988), showing Lana Turner and Cheryl Crane at the 1958 Academy Awards dinner.

Source: Wikimedia Commons –

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Detour_a_Hollywood_Story.jpg

License: Public domain (published in the United States prior to 1978 without copyright notice).

Note: Book cover image; use for illustrative/commentary purposes only.

18. cheryl_and_family.png

Description: Cheryl Crane with her father Stephen Crane, Lana Turner, and Helen DeMaree (Steve Crane's mother), 1958.

Source: Wikimedia Commons –

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stephen_Crane_-_Cheryl_Crane_court_hearing_\(1958\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stephen_Crane_-_Cheryl_Crane_court_hearing_(1958).jpg)

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