

FRITZ LANG'S

# *The Big Heat*



*"That's the beauty of Lang's moral ambidexterity. He tells the story of a heroic cop, while using it to mask another story, so much darker, underneath."*

Roger Ebert



**Glenn Ford** as Dave Bannion, a homicide detective with an intense drive to see justice served, even if it means placing his family and others in jeopardy.

## *Film Noir or Crime Melodrama?*

**Don't let the lurid poster art fool you.** This film is anything but cheap or crass, although it isn't quite at the same level as Lang's early masterpieces, "**Metropolis**" and "**M.**" On its own impressive terms, **The Big Heat** is a take-no-prisoners, cautionary tale of an honest detective who squares-off against a ruthless mob syndicate that holds his compromised superiors on perpetual tenterhooks. The film can be enjoyed as a straight-up crime thriller or as a stellar example of film noir in its darkest and most unforgiving form.

If pressed to categorize it, I would lean toward film noir simply because Lang and his exemplary cast create a vivid world of fear and betrayal that lingers long after the final credits roll. At key moments, particularly in the flashy acting styles of **Gloria Grahame** and **Lee Marvin**, the film takes on a surreal quality that is both jaw dropping and borderline camp. Lang, however, wisely anchors it with a stalwart performance by Ford, whose upright character doggedly pursues justice, even when the stakes are way beyond his grasp.

Facilitating all of this is a street-smart script by **Sydney Boehm** that boasts some tart and ironic dialog. The story may be familiar by now, but Lang delivers a series of increasingly edgy exchanges that draw you into the singular dilemma of a 1950's gumshoe who refuses to give-up. While the cop and his family personify the "**Father Knows Best**" wholesomeness of the Eisenhower era, the film pulls no punches in its depiction of a city bullied by a pack of unhinged mobsters and undermined by a corrupt police force.

**Jocelyn Brando** (Marlon's older sister) plays Ford's loving wife Katie and **Linda Bennett** is his innocent daughter.



## *First Suicide, Then An Insurance Plan*



**Jeanette Nolan** as Bertha, the calculating widow of a corrupt and suicidal policeman.

**In the opening scene, the police department's Head Of Records commits suicide and leaves an incriminating letter that reveals widespread corruption within the police force.** He also links high-ranking city officials to the local mob syndicate. We later learn that the Police Commissioner is indeed on the mob's payroll and he is bending the law to protect them.

The policeman's wife (**Jeanette Nolan**) discovers his body and wastes no time in leveraging her husband's death to protect herself and secure a wealthy future. She makes sure that if anything happens to her, the letter will be sent to the press, thereby exposing the police department corruption and bringing down the mobsters.

Nolan, in steely black widow mode, is the first of a memorable gallery of female characters in this film. She operates on pure self-interest and displays zero grief over her husband's untimely death. Her resolve stands in sharp contrast to the other women, ranging from a sweetly trusting wife to a tragic barfly, who becomes the first example of the mob's brutal treatment of women.

**Dorothy Green** plays Lucy Chapman, a sympathetic loner who makes two fatal mistakes: threatening to go public with what she knows and under estimating the brutality of the syndicate. Her character is the first in a series of women who are brutalized in this film.



# *A Town Without Pity For Women and The Disenfranchised*

**It's difficult not to wonder whether Lang and screenwriter Boehm harbored a deeply rooted contempt for women after seeing this film.**

I can't recall another movie from the pre-feminist era that showed such chilling disregard for its female characters. The acts of violence against them here are graphic in a casually degrading manner, as if putting too much thought into it gave the victims more importance than they deserved. It feels like a twisted form of entitlement that belongs to a distant and warped place in time. I kept imagining what women of my mother's generation must have endured without the benefits of wealth and education or the professional opportunities afforded their male counterparts. Those thoughts are still running through my mind as I write this.

The screenplay, which was based on a popular serial by **William P. McGivern** in **The Saturday Evening Post**, exudes an overwhelming sense of menace when it comes to the plight of its female characters. The only woman who stands-up to the syndicate is a disenfranchised barfly, and she pays for it with her life, after she is tortured by a sadistic peacock of a thug. Another woman steps innocently into the driver's seat of a car that is rigged to explode the moment she starts the ignition. And in the most jarring example, the lead female character is doused with a pot of boiling hot coffee that permanently disfigures her. Were it not for the sweet revenge granted her in the final scenes, the harsh treatment of women in this film might have convinced even the most conservative movie goers that it was time to launch a feminist movement. On second thought, considering the times, probably not!



**Gloria Grahame** as Debby Marsh, the unwitting girlfriend of a mobster, who gives as good as she gets when it comes to serving hot coffee.

# How Do You Solve A Problem Like Debby Marsh?



Gun moll Debby Marsh (**Grahame**) turns to detective Dave Bannon (**Ford**) for protection and a way out, but she is betrayed and brutalized before she can settle the score.

## **There is no way to describe Gloria Grahame in one word.**

No single adjective, no matter how apt or precise, does her justice. She was an actress who could spin coy innuendo into a fine art. She could ‘out-fizz’ **Judy Holiday** at her ditziest, and she possessed a droll line delivery that served her beautifully in comedy and serious drama. She was also known for a petulant pout that framed her childlike speaking voice. Grahame often appeared to be in her own cinematic universe, but she never failed to connect with the essence of her character. Happily, all of her rare and captivating qualities are on hypnotic display in this film.

Debby Marsh is one of the most intriguing “bad girls” in film noir history, and in her early scenes, Grahame plays her like a hellcat on amphetamines. Everything about her behavior is a high-strung defense mechanism: her off-key, rhythmless humming when she mixes martinis; her chronic addiction to shopping; and her bizarre impersonations of circus performers. Whenever the reality of her situation threatens to surface, she pours another cocktail and plants herself in front of the nearest mirror to primp and fluff-up the merchandise. She may have sold her soul to the devil, but deep down she knows it and she regrets it.

Her eventual transformation into a vengeful gun moll matches Lee Marvin’s macho savagery every step of the way. I can’t think of a more satisfying payoff than her “surprise” for Marvin’s character at the end of the film. Grahame proves herself a perfect match for some of the film’s best lines too. When her character walks into Ford’s seedy hotel room, she gives it a once over and says: “Hey, I like this. Early nothing.”



**“We should use first names, Bertha. We’re sisters under the mink.”**



**Two-Faced Woman: Grahame goes all out for revenge and redemption.**

# The Good, The Bad & The Ugly



**Alexander Scourby** as Mike Lagana, the mob boss who holds the keys to the city by corrupting the police force and eliminating anyone who tries to stop him.



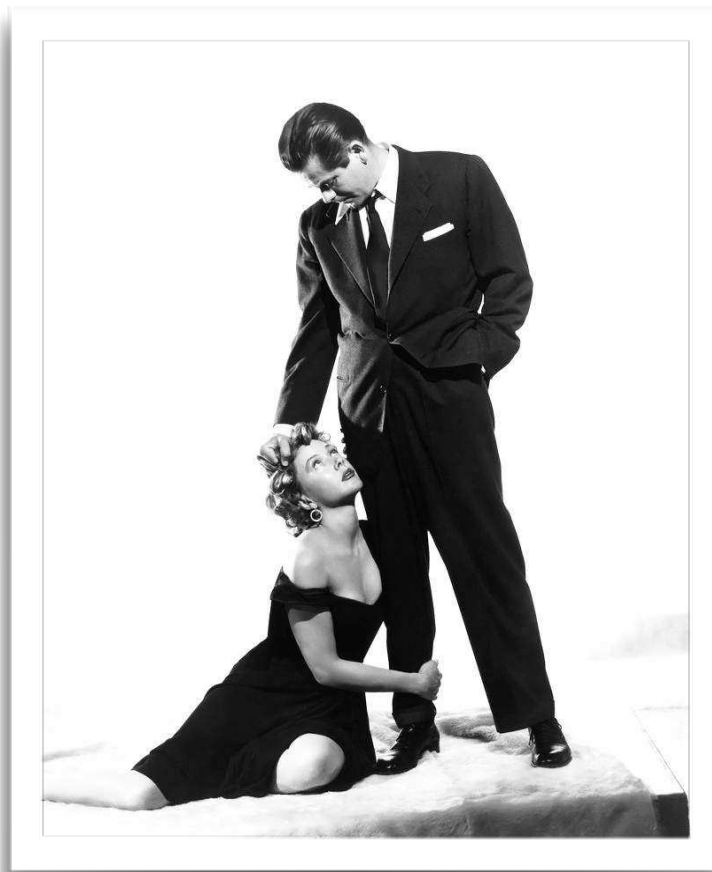
**Lee Marvin** as Vince Stone, whose name pretty much sums-up his brutal character.

**When honest cop Glenn Ford confronts syndicate boss Mike Lagana at his palatial home, he barges through the front door and demands a meeting with the man who ordered the murder of an innocent woman.** Ford, who plays the cop as fearless and disgusted with the weak leadership in the police force, demonstrates why he was cast in so many tough guy roles. He backs-

up his self-righteous crusade to crush the mob with muscle and a stubborn refusal to look the other way. He even takes pleasure in chiding the mobster for his hypocrisy in pretending to lead a respectable life. Ford's direct acting style works beautifully here. His performance is steady and sure, the perfect complement to the flamboyant performances by Grahame and Marvin.

Marvin, as the mob's chief henchman, holds nothing back as a menacing goon who doesn't think twice about disfiguring women or taking another life. His character is rather one-note, but Marvin plays it with a fierceness that is quite unsettling. He makes you believe that he could burn a woman's hand or break her arm without losing a moment's sleep.





**Sign Of The Times:**

**A publicity shot with Grahame in a provocative and submissive pose with Glenn Ford.**

## *Awards For The Big Heat*

Edgar Allan Poe Awards - 1954

**Won**

Best Motion Picture

Sydney Boehm (screenwriter)

William P. McGivern (novel)

National Film Preservation Board, USA - 2011

**Won**

National Film Register

**Source: "The Big Heat: IMDB home page**



## *Ford on Lang: "The Precision Of An Architect"*



In "**Glenn Ford: A Life**," Ford's son Peter writes that director **Fritz Lang** was anything but the malevolent dictator his father had anticipated. He says that his dad found Lang easy to work with and considered him "a wonderful friend ... he couldn't have been sweeter." Furthermore, his dad "watched with enthusiasm and admiration the way Lang crafted the film, putting his actors and camera in place with the precision of an architect."

Source: "**Glenn Ford: A Life**" by Peter Ford





**“Mr. Lang can direct a film. He has put his mind to it in this instance, and he has brought forth a hot one with a sting.”**

**Bosley Crowther, The New York Times, October 15, 1953**



**Debby to an unresponsive Bannion:  
“You’re about as romantic as a pair of handcuffs.”**

*“The Big Heat”*

*Researched and Written by Michael Hadley*

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