

# DEAD HEAT

By ROBERT  
LESLIE BELLEM



*The cash customers paid plenty out to watch her emote on the screen. They looked upon her as a brunette angel, but there were a lot of substantial citizens in Hollywood who knew Linda for a rat*



I REACHED for the doorknob of Linda LaMarre's dressing room on the Altamount lot. Before I could turn it I heard a gurgling screech from inside, followed by a heavy thud. The thud sounded like somebody falling down and there was the terror of death in that shrill, throttled yelp; a quality that made the short hair prickle at the nape of my neck.

I whispered: "What the hell—!" and yanked the portal open, catapulted over the threshold. Then I froze as I lamped the gorgeous LaMarre cupcake writhing on the floor. Her squirms reminded me of a gaffed eel on a hot rock.

I knew she was a goner the instant I hung the focus on her glazing glims, her bluish-purple mush, her protruding tongue. A guy doesn't have to be a doctor to recognize the symptoms of asphyxia and suffocation; you

can pick up those fundamentals from any toxicology book. The quail on the carpet was obviously passing to her reward; and not from natural causes, either. I had a hunch it would turn out to be murder.

Being a private snoop, I don't hold with homicide; I think it's impolite to croak people. But you'll find plenty of substantial citizens here in Hollywood who will argue that Linda LaMarre deserved to be abolished; and maybe they're right. In addition to her status as an Altamount starlet, Linda was a prime species of rat. Very likely in some previous incarnation she'd sported grey fur and a tail.

She was smart, though. She had enough brains not to let her public know how poisonous she really was. The cash patrons who shelled out copious clams at the box office to watch her emote on the screen thought she was a brunette angel; which was a

haywire estimate, as many a poor sucker had learned to his regret. If all the homes Linda had wrecked were laid end to end, they'd have resembled Berlin after a blockbuster bombing.

She specialized in badgering married guys, and her latest victim was Henry Kermit, an inoffensive yokel who worked in the studio makeup department. Kermit was a mild looking punk with a wife, two kids, a 4-F card from his draft board and five grand stashed in his savings account. Linda LaMarre was trying to chisel the five G's away from him.

He had visited my office that same noon, begged me to help him out of his jam. "Linda's putting the heat on me and I'm worried crazy, Mr. Turner," he'd said. "I never actually played around with her; I'm a family man, not a wolf. But I accidentally let her lure me into a compromising situation not long ago, and now she threatens to tell my wife unless I fork over every dime I own."

"What can I do about it?" I asked him.

"Scare her. She knows your reputation; everybody does. She'd lay off me if she knew the great Dan Turner was on my side. It's the only plan I can think of, this side of killing her." His optics glittered behind their thick cheaters and his voice cracked harshly.

I liked the naive little jerk; hated to picture him going to gas chamber for croakery. "Don't even entertain such a nutty notion, bub," I'd snapped at him. "Come on, let's ramble to the studio. I'll see what can be done."

And away we went, buckety-blip, on a mission that turned into a homicide beef after all.

**I** DIDN'T get to interview the LaMarre she-male right away. As soon as we arrived on the lot, Henry Kermit was called to Sound Stage C on his professional duties. I ankled along behind him; wandered to the sidelines of a set where Linda was doing an important scene.

Kermit's boss, Pat Briano, head of the Altamount makeup department, stood behind the camera lines. Pat was a swarthy character with a lot of friends in the movie colony, including me. He and I had been on many a drunken brawl in the old days, and he flashed me a grin when he tabbed me. "Hiya, Sherlock. What drags you to this madhouse?"

"Business," I said. I offered him a gasper but he preferred his own Turkish atrocities. "Do you suppose I could have a few words with Linda LaMarre?"

He made a wry mouth. "Better ask the director. You're risking your life, though. He's in a stinking mood."

I thanked Pat for the warning; moved away. The director in question was Cleve Franklin, who stood six feet four inches tall and dripped vinegar from every pore: a horse-faced party with a disposition that had curdled in infancy, resulting in a chronic case of stomach ulcers. "Hey, Cleve," I said.

He turned, gave me the frigid glimpse. "Well, what is it? Speak your piece in a hurry. I'm busy."

"Is that a way to talk to an old pal who's known you since you were a third assistant office boy? Never mind, skip it. All I wanted was permission to see Miss LaMarre in private a while. I can wait."

He reddened and looked sheepish. "Sorry, Hawkshaw. I didn't mean to throw my weight around. Sure you can see Linda, just as soon as we get this sequence in the cans. You can grab a moment with her while she changes costume for the next shot—if ever I get this one finished."

"Troubles?" I inquired.

"That word's much too weak. I'm three days behind my shooting schedule and things keep getting all fouled up. Lights fail, cameras run dry of film, microphones bloop, and now more time out for makeup repairs." He gestured toward the set.

IT represented a southern plantation ballroom full of Dixie belles in skirts and hams in Confederate uniforms, and I saw the reason for the present delay. Linda LaMarre was having her creamy left shoulder touched up with grease paint by my badgered client, young Henry Kermit. There was a minor abrasion on Linda's lovely white rind, and the lenses would have registered this discolored spot if it hadn't been kept covered by flesh-colored cold cream.

The Kermit punk seemed jittery as he smeared the stuff around with his fingertips. Maybe his jitters came from the low-toned conversation he was having with her; anyhow he dropped his powderpuff while dusting talc on her shoulder. She sneered, scorched him with a sample of her bad temper. He picked up the powderpuff, fumbled it into a makeup kit, muttered an excuse and carried the kit offstage. His fingers seemed to be all thumbs.

Alongside me, Cleve Franklin: "Quiet! Places, please! Hit those lights; this is the take. Roll 'em."

The cameras started grinding and the scene began. A waltz was supposed to be concluding; and, as the music stopped, Linda and her leading man edged toward the lenses for a medium closeup. A microphone boom lowered near them to eavesdrop on their romantic dialogue.

No doubt about it, this LaMarre chick had plenty of sizzle on the ball. Her voice was a husky purr and her crinoline costume set off more than personality; and yet, despite the yumph she put into her histrionic efforts, the lanky Franklin wasn't satisfied.

"Once more, and this time let's have some sparkle," he said. He barged onto the set, shoved the leading hambo aside. "Don't act as if she had measles when you take her in your arms. Here's how I want you to do it."

He demonstrated, and I thought he was going to squeeze the brunette jessie right out of her gown like a grape. She objected to his ardor, shoved him away. "Keep your paws off

me and stop breathing in my face!"

"Sorry," I heard him mutter sarcastically. "I forgot we aren't friendly any more." Then he returned to his folding canvas chair; signaled for the retake.

PAT BRIANO, the swarthy makeup chief, nudged me for a light off my gasper. Through blue Turkish smoke he whispered: "Looks as if Linda has quit parking her spearmint in Cleve's apartment. A fragile thing, love." He chuckled.

I digested this remark as I watched the action. Presently it ended and Franklin nodded approval. "Cut. Next scene is on the veranda set. Everybody change costumes."

The LaMarre jane whisked toward her dressing quarters and I started after her. I didn't get very far, though, because Cleve Franklin buttonholed me. "How come you want to talk to her?" he demanded. "Has she . . . done something?"

I debated whether or not I should tell him how she was hanging the badger bite on young Kermit; decided to keep my yap zippered. "Just a little business matter," I shrugged and wandered away from his vicinity.

Linda was already in her dressing room when I reached its closed door; and she wasn't alone. From inside came a man's upset voice: "You can't do this to me. I can't afford it. All I've got in the world is five thousand dol—"

That was the Kermit punk talking; and he was interrupted by Linda's liquid laughter. "Too bad, sucker. That's exactly the amount you're going to give me. Or else."

I reached for the doorknob, determined to butt in and throw the fear of Golly into the black-haired witch. Whereupon a gurgling yelp filtered through the portal, followed by the thud of somebody hitting the floor. This was when I blammed myself into the room and lamped Linda LaMarre writhing on the rug like an eel with the hotfoot.

Her protruding glims and mottled,

engorged puss spelled suffocation or asphyxia. So did her thickened tongue. "Choke . . . argh . . . choking . . ." she gasped. Her heels drummed the carpet and suddenly she stiffened, arched her body convulsively. Then she went limp. The breath wheezed out of her bellows.

Even before I hunkered down beside her I knew she was gone beyond repairing. I bragged at her wrist, felt the final feeble flicker of pulse. One instant she was alive; and then she was as dead as canceled postage.

I straightened up, fixed the cold focus on Henry Kermit. I rasped: "What the hell did you croak her for? You knew I was going to help you out of your jackpot."

"But I—I never even touched her!" he moaned. "My God, you can't arrest me for—for something I didn't do!"

I hadn't said anything about pinching him. I started to tell him so, but he didn't give me the chance. He reached forth, clawed furrows on my map, shoved me out of the way. Then he blammed out of the room under a full head of steam.

I charged after him; had the tough luck to trip over Linda's remainders. I fell and went skidding on my profile; fetched up against the far wall like a guy trying to stretch an infield hit into a two-bagger. My noggin dented the woodwork with an impact that put me in a drunken daze.

Groggy, I staggered upright; and I was just in time to meet Cleve Franklin catapulting over the threshold. Pat Briano was at his heels. Franklin copped a gander at the defunct wren; then he whirled on me. "You lousy creep! You throttled her! Look at your chin where she scratched you!"

Before I could tell him it had been Henry Kermit who'd put the furrows on my mush, he spooned me a terrific bash on the button. I wasn't set for it, and I was already woozy from smacking the wall with my conk. I dropped, took the count.

THE ROOM was infested with cops when I swam out of my swoon. My friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad was leaning over me, whapping me across the profile with his open palm. "Come on, wake up and quit playing possum!" he snarled.

I blinked into his beefy features. "Lay off before I kick a kidney out of you."

"Ah. Threatening an officer of the law, hunh?" He slapped me again. "Stand up and start whistling."

"Whistling what?" I lurched to my shanks.

He looked grim. "The patter on who chilled Miss LaMarre and why."

"What makes you think I'd know about it?"

"I'll add up the score for you," he said heavily. "We got a phone bleat from Cleve Franklin. We came here pronto and found the LaMarre dame dead from a poisoned dart in her shoulder. The medical examiner thinks it was oaubain; strophanthin in concentrated crystal form. According to Pat Briano and Mr. Franklin, they found you here alone with the corpse." His voice rose to a bellow. "So you must know something about how this thing stuck the filly!" And he showed me a tiny steel needle in an evidence envelope.

I glommed a careful gander at it; wondered if Henry Kermit had used it on the cupcake who's been trying to shake him down. I was on the verge of spilling the whole story, telling Donaldson how it had been Kermit, not myself, who'd been alone in the room with the dying Linda; but some intuition warned me to clam up. After all, the Kermit punk was my client; I shouldn't dump him in the grease until I felt positive he was the killer. Right now I wasn't too damned sure about it.

So I hedged; belched only part of what had really happened. "I was coming to have a chat with the chick," I said. "Just as I started to open the door she let out a screech. I busted in, piped her wrestling with the grim reaper. Nobody else was here; not even her maid."

"It's too thin, gumshoe," Dave growled. "It doesn't account for the scratches on your puss. I guess I'll have to hold you as a material witness."

He made a move to pull out his handcuffs but never completed the gesture. From somewhere across the huge sound stage building a roscow sneezed: *Ka-Chee!* and a she-male bleat split the atmosphere, raw, harsh, hysterical.

Donaldson roared a curse, spun around, started running. Out of Linda LaMarre's dressing room he plunged; and I was breathing down his neck. At the far end of the corridor there was a cutie in crinoline costume; an extra jessie. "I—I heard a shot—in th-there!" she pointed to a door lettered *Makeup Dept.*

I **SPRINTED** past Dave, smashed the portal open. A guy was on the floor, flopping around in a messy scatter of jars and tubes of cosmetics. He was Henry Kermit, and his kisser was a hideous crimson smear where a bullet had made hamburger of his lower jaw. There was a .32 automatic near him, smoke still curling out of its muzzle, and Kermit seemed to be trying to say something. He couldn't, though, because of his wrecked yap. Even as I leaned over him, he passed out.

"Unconscious!" I panted. "We've got to get him to a doctor." Then I piped Donaldson picking up a piece of paper. "What the hell is that?"

"A confession note." Dave handed it to me. The scrawled message read:

*"I poisoned Linda LaMarre.  
Now I'm following her to hell.  
Henry Kermit."*

The setup looked plain enough—on the surface. The letter's import was all too clear: Kermit had cooled the brunette cookie, then turned a cannon on himself. Unfortunately he had merely shot part of his profile away instead of doing a thorough job, and he would

probably live to squat in the cyanide chamber up at San Quentin.

This seemed all the more likely when Cleve Franklin and Pat Briano came busting in. They were dragging a shrimp-sized bozo with them, and the shrimp looked scared. Briano said: "This guy is a sound mixer. He's got something to tell us."

"Y-yes," the undersized citizen shivered. "You remember when Kermit was dabbing makeup on Miss LaMarre's shoulder, there on the ballroom set? Well, they were talking; and they were under a live mike. Up in my mixing booth I could hear what they were saying."

"Which was—?" Donaldson prodded him.

"It seems she was demanding hush money from him. And he was threatening to k-kill her unless she laid off."

Dave looked smug. "That cinches it. Now we know the motive; and we know when he jabbed the needle in her. It was while he put new makeup on her arm. The stuff he used was a delayed action drug; she didn't kick off until later, when Turner came to her door."

I disagreed, but I kept it to myself. Watching a pair of ambulance orderlies as they rolled Kermit onto a stretcher and lugged him away, I wondered about certain angles. If the punk had intended to bump Linda, then why had he asked me to help him out of his jam? He'd wanted me to scare her into turning off the heat; which didn't make sense if he was planning to kill that heat his own way.

**S**TILL puzzled, I got Donaldson's permission to scam; drove to a grog shop and inhaled a few snifters of Vat 69 to lubricate my grey cells. Presently I hunted up a friend of mine who worked in a commercial chemical laboratory.

"Know anything about oaubain?" I asked him.

He said: "Sure. It's a form of strophanthin. It's used medically as a heart tonic, but in damned small doses. Otherwise—"

"Will it kill?"

"And how! Therapeutically it's administered in amounts varying from one two-hundredths to one three-hundredths of a grain. As little as a quarter or half a grain—the amount you'd get on a pinpoint—would do plenty of damage."

"Does it take effect right away?"

"No; but in thirty minutes or so it would cause strangulation, cyanosis, spasms. Not a pretty death."

I said: "You're telling me," and ankled out to my jalopy, as bewildered as ever. Since the poison had a delayed action, Henry Kermit couldn't have stuck the needle into Linda's lovely rind while talking to her in her dressing quarters. She wouldn't have croaked so soon afterward.

Therefore she'd been jabbed at least a half hour earlier; in other words, while she was still on the sound stage. This meshed with Dave Donaldson's theory that Kermit had done his dirty work while applying fresh makeup to the frail's shoulder.

But if so, why hadn't she winced or yelped when the barb bit into her flesh?

The more I mulled it over, the less sense it make. I headed for the homicide division; shuffled into Dave Donaldson's office. "Look, chum," I said to him. "Let's go cop a hinge at some movie rushes."

"Where?"

"Altamount. I'm beginning to think there's an angle on Linda LaMarre's rub-out that needs extra investigating."

He lifted a lip, presented me with a crafty sneer. "Nix, hot shot. Save your strength. I'll get all the angles I need as soon as that Kermit yuck is able to talk. Right now he's being operated on; the sawbones are picking bullet splinters out of his lower teeth. When he comes out of the anaesthetic he'll tell me all I want to know. In fact, he's already told me plenty. Or have you forgotten his confession note?"

"I haven't forgotten it. Maybe it's phony, though. Anyhow, it won't cost you anything to

check up this idea that's nibbling on my brisket. Be a good guy; come along."

He sighed, told me I was a damned fool. But he got up and let me ferry him to the studio just the same.

WE FOUND Cleve Franklin and Pat Briano in conference on the sound stage, discussing the possibility of making up some other actress to resemble the defunct Linda LaMarre and finish out her role in the incomplete pic. I said: "Sorry to interrupt, but I'd like to ask a favor." Then I told Cleve what I wanted.

He hemmed and hawed; finally agreed. But he was grudging about it. By five o'clock that afternoon we were all in a miniature projection room, watching certain ballroom shots being thrown on a pint-sized screen. First came the original take I had witnessed; the one Franklin hadn't liked. I studied Linda's shoulder in the closeup; couldn't tab any signs of a needle, even though the abrasion on her smooth epidermis had just been freshly covered by Henry Kermit's makeup. This proved that Kermit hadn't jabbed a barb into her while making cold cream repairs.

Next, the retake was projected; and this time I tensed as I lamped a tiny glint of light reflected against the brunette cupcake's flesh; a glint like the flash of a pinpoint diamond. It was a sliver of steel the size of a small phonograph needle, and it was buried in her shoulder!

I did some fast remembering. Who had been close to Linda in the interval between the first and second takes? Her leading ham, for one; and Cleve Franklin, for another. Cleve had demonstrated how he wanted the scene played; and she had bawled the be-joseph out of him for his ardor.

Maybe that spelled something. There was a factor that still baffled me, though: if Cleve had gaffed her with the needle while holding her in his embrace, why the hell hadn't she

flinched? It should have hurt her enough to make her twitch a little if she had any feelings at all. . . . I said: "Run that second take over again, Cleve. I think I've got something."

He grunted the order. Again I watched the screen. One moment Linda's shoulder showed no hint of the needle; the next instant it glittered in her skin.

"I've got it!" I yipped. "Come on, Dave. I'll have to make a phone call; then we'll go see the Kermit jerk at the hospital. He can tell us plenty!" And I yanked Donaldson out of the projection room without letting him know what was on my mind.

**W**E blammed from the building, piled into my chariot, rolled past the main gates. Four blocks south I parked in front of an unhealthy looking cafe; barged inside to use its pay phone. My nickel bought me a connection with my toxicologist friend, the one who worked for a chemical laboratory. I fired a question at him and he answered: "Yes. Nupercaine would do it."

Which was all I craved to know. I bounced back to my buggy, got in and gunned the cylinders. "It's in the bag," I told Donaldson.

"What is?"

"The riddle. We've set a trap for a killer—with live bait." And I headed for the hospital where Henry Kermit had been taken for surgery on his kisser.

Ten minutes later Dave and I pelted along the corridor that led to the punk's room. There was a uniformed copper stationed at the door, a police precaution to make sure Kermit wouldn't lam. Maybe this was wise idea, although how a guy could powder after just emerging from a session with the sawbones was something I couldn't savvy. Moreover, the flatfoot doing sentry duty was the dumbest cluck this side of complete idiocy.

He saluted Donaldson, "Hi, Lieutenant. You wanna see Kermit? Go right in. There's another headquarters dick with him; a sergeant. I don't know his name."

My clockworks fluttered. I said: "Cripes!" and smashed the door open; sailed into the room. Somebody was leaning over the bed, just about to smash a blackjack down on the Kermit punk's cranium.

I yanked my .32 automatic from the shoulder rig where I always carry it. I triggered a hot pill at the blackjack; blasted it out of the intruder's duke. "You've done all the murdering you're going to do, Pat Briano!" I roared at the chief of Altamount's makeup department.

His swarthy mush went grey as he whirled, stared at me. A police badge was pinned under his coat and his glims were fun of startled hate. "You—you—damn you—"

Donaldson lumbered over the threshold, his service .38 aimed at nobody in particular. I said: "Keep that rat covered. He's the guilty character." Then, while Dave drew a bead on Briano, I went to the bed and spoke to Kermit.

"Can you hear me, Henry?" I said.

He nodded, tried to answer me. He couldn't talk, though; he was wearing too many bandages.

I said: "Don't try to make with the syllables. Just nod yes or no when I ask questions. First, Linda LaMarre had that abrasion on her shoulder two or three days before today, didn't she?"

He nodded.

"And isn't there a scratch on your right mitt somewhere?"

Again he signaled yes.

**I SAID:** "When you smeared greasepaint on Linda's shoulder this afternoon, there on the set, your hand got sort of numb; so numb you dropped the powderpuff. Right?"

His head jerked an affirmative. "It was Pat Briano's makeup kit you used, wasn't it? And later, when Linda kicked the bucket, you put two and two together. After you lammed from her dressing quarters and left me to hold the sack, you went to the makeup department to examine Briano's kit—especially one certain

tube of cream. Briano caught you at it and shot you; planted a fake confession note on you. His aim was lousy or you'd have passed away right then and there, an ostensible suicide and murderer."

Kermit nodded.

I turned to the Briano guy. "I haven't figured out your motive, but I know the method you used. For some reason you craved to cool Linda. You knew she had a skinned place on her shoulder. So you mixed some Nupercaine with the grease-paint which Kermit was to smear on her skin.

"Nupercaine is a topical anaesthetic; a salve that you could easily blend with cold cream. Once on Linda's hide, it deadened that shoulder area to sensation. Some of the stuff got into a cut on Henry's finger, numbing his duke so that he fumbled his work. That was my first tip-off when I finally remembered it.

"Anyhow, the LaMarre wren's shoulder was anaesthetized. This enabled you to shoot a tiny steel poison dart into the deadened spot. In the rushes, the needle didn't show at one moment; then, the next instant, it glittered in her flesh. Yet she didn't jump when it barbed her. The Nupercaine took care of that.

"In brief, you bumped her right in front of everybody; even in front of the cameras. And nobody knew it, not even the chick herself—because she felt nothing. It was a damned smart stunt, Briano; almost as smart as the weapon itself."

He snarled: "What weapon?"

"A hollow tube in your Turkish cigarette," I said. "And subsequently you smoked the gasper, thereby destroying all evidence of your improvised blow-gun. Do you recall how you refused one of my coffin-nails but didn't set fire to your own until later?"

"Prove it!" he snarled.

I said: "Give me time. The point is, it was damned accurate marksmanship; you must have done plenty of target practise before you pulled the trick. And Linda, who didn't perish until thirty minutes later, never knew what croaked her. You were in the clear; you had a perfect alibi. You were somewhere else when she went to the pearly gates.

"But Kermit suspected something; started prowling your makeup kit. Therefore you had to scald him, make him the fall guy. If your marksmanship with a roscoe hadn't been so bad, he wouldn't have lived to deny the charges you planted on him.

"But he *is* alive; and when he's able to talk, he'll testify that you drilled him through the mush. I figured on that. And I used him as bait for a trap. In the projection room I announced we'd get the truth from Kermit. I knew you'd come here and try to finish him off. I gave you just enough time to reach the hospital ahead of me, because I had to stop and make a phone call. You glommed a fake police badge from the prop department, used it to get yourself into this room. And we nabbed you before you could do your blackjack stuff."

Briano stiffened, stared around. Then he made a wild dash for the door. This was a mistake which Dave Donaldson corrected with a .38 slug. Over the bellowing yammer of Dave's gat there came a gasping moan. That was the killer complaining about the sudden hole in his chest.

Then he fell down, went limp. Dave looked at him and remarked: "Well, what do you know! I fogged him plumb to hell!"

"Yeah," I said bitterly. "Now we'll never know why he wanted to cool Linda LaMarre. It'll always be one of those unsolved mysteries you read about in magazines."

As usual, I was right.