



THE CORNER OF HOLLYWOOD & CRIME

Hollywood, May 18, 1940

THE BIG NEWS OF THE day should have been the earthquake. Things in the nearby Imperial Valley had started rumbling a few minutes after 8:30 P.M. and Charles Richter was rating the disaster as a 6.9 on his new scale, though no one had any idea of what that meant.

This was Hollywood, after all. And notwithstanding a few cracked buildings and bridges, people had more important things on their minds. Only a handful of reporters turned up at Caltech to interview Professor Richter. Five times as many made their way to the hillside mansion of Marian Doral to witness the mysterious press conference that the legendary star had scheduled for the provocative hour of 11:45 P.M.

Security was always tight at the Doral estate. In years past, many of these same reporters had been stopped by the vigilant guards or chased by the pack of German shepherds that roamed just inside the high walls. But tonight, they were ushered inside the massive gates and escorted toward the mansion itself.

"What do you know?" whispered a stringer from *The New York Times*. He was pointing to the swimming pool cantilevered over the Hollywood Hills. "I guess even Marian Doral can't keep out an earthquake." They focused their cameras on the dramatic fissure in the empty pool's blue-tiled side. Flashbulbs popped.

"Ten to one, this is about the divorce," hissed the reporter from *Variety*.

Rumors had been running rampant. Nearly a year earlier, Marian Doral had wed Ben McMasters and, in the process, gone against good judgment and the opinion of everyone close to her. It was common knowledge, at least within the movie industry, that the star and the polo player had embarked on one of the most tempestuous marriages in a town hardly known for stable relationships.

Cameras were confiscated at the door and the reporters were crowded into the cavernous entry hall. At 11:50 P.M., Marian's manager and brother, Dexter Doral, stepped out onto the dimly lit balcony twenty feet above the sea of heads.

"Thank you for coming." Everyone liked Dexter. He had the Doral good looks but was down-to-earth and friendly, even to journalists. If Dexter happened to be totally dependent on his younger sister for employment...well, people seemed willing to overlook that.

"Marian was so looking forward to talking to you," he announced. A groan floated up from the crowd. Did this mean the box-office goddess wasn't going to make an appearance? For someone who made her living in the public eye, Marian Doral could be annoyingly private. "The pain of tonight's announcement has affected her so deeply..."

Dexter stopped as a bedroom door eased open behind him. The entry hall fell into a hush as a stunning woman, her face framed in a halo of golden hair, stepped out from the shadows. Her makeup, as usual, was perfect. But there was a tiredness and a sadness in her face. "Ben and I are getting a divorce," she said softly and simply. "Dexter?" she added, then stepped back and let her brother take over.

The reporters gazed sympathetically, pens poised over their pads. Ever since the last days of silent films, Marian Doral had been America's siren, a homegrown answer to Garbo and Dietrich. A nation of moviegoers still loved the gently aging actress, even though they'd stopped going to her movies. Her

last four films had proved disappointing, and there were the usual rumors of depression, alcohol, and pills.

"The papers were filed months ago," Dexter explained. "The divorce becomes final at midnight. That was the reason Marian invited you here at this unusual hour, to share the occasion with her."

A barrage of eager questions shot up from the floor. But before the fragile woman in the shadows could answer any of them, another voice, louder and more demanding, erupted from behind. The news writers turned on their heels and saw Ben McMasters in the doorway, a sweaty, apologetic security guard at his side.

"What do you mean, keeping me out of my own house?" he demanded. The reporters closest to him could smell the booze.

Dexter stepped forward protectively. "In five minutes, it won't be your house. This has all been worked out with the lawyers, Ben."

"I don't want a divorce," the handsome playboy pleaded. "Marian, please. I never wanted your money or your fame. I want you."

The reporters parted like the Red Sea as Ben dashed toward the staircase. The star on the balcony looked confused, almost frightened. Before Marian's estranged husband could reach the top of the stairs, she had fled back into her bedroom suite.

Ben pounded on the door, begging her to let him in. Dozens of pencils scratched out the dramatic details, and it might have almost seemed like a publicity stunt, except for the fact that there would be no romantic, last-minute reconciliation. The clock struck midnight, and the couple was officially divorced.

Dexter answered several questions and then the bedroom door opened again. Ben's face fell as he recognized Brenda Doral, Marian's older sister. The women were so different, not so much in appearance—Brenda was an inch shorter, with darker coloring and shorter hair—but in personality and

temperament. The cold, efficient Brenda stood in the doorway. "Marian refuses to see you, Ben. Please leave with the members of the press."

In the next morning's papers, the divorce made bigger headlines than the Imperial Valley earthquake with its eight deaths and millions in damage. The afternoon papers had even bigger headlines, no longer screaming about Marian's divorce, but about her death, just hours after the scene on the balcony. The star's body had been discovered by her devoted secretary, Harriet Brown.

"Miss Doral usually takes a late-night bath," Harriet told the police in her statement. "At 6 A.M. I always arrive in her bedroom with her coffee. We discuss her correspondence for half an hour before she heads off to MGM for makeup and costume. I knew she didn't sleep last night. But I never change the routine, not without direct orders. When I came into the bedroom this morning, I could see her bed hadn't been slept in. I called out for Miss Doral and when she didn't answer, I entered her bathroom. The tub was full, the water was cold, and the bubbles had all died down. I could see her clearly, her head under the water, her hair floating all around. It was horrible."

Officer Marvin Westlake spotted the bottle of pills on the edge of the bathtub and the half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels bobbing at the far end.

"It's a deep tub," Westlake told his partner who was looking, not listening. "The sides are steep and slippery. It's going to take the coroner to figure out what happened. Was it suicide? Or an accident? Did she slip and get knocked unconscious? The water's pretty high. Maybe she got knocked woozy and didn't have the strength to pull herself out. Hey, stop ogling; that's indecent."

"You're ogling, too," the partner defended himself. "Marian Doral," he added in awe, finally tearing his eyes away. "Just hours after her divorce went through. I wonder if we'll ever find out what really happened here."

(1) *How did Marian die?* (2) *Who covered up the truth and how?* (3) *What was the motive?*

If you've already solved this mystery, check the Solution on p. 141.
To discover additional clues, turn to Gathering Evidence on p. 118.

HISTORICAL NOTES ON EARTHQUAKES

THE FIRST RECORDED earthquake in California was in the Los Angeles area in 1769, chronicled by the Gaspar de Portola expedition.

No scientific way of measuring an earthquake existed until the 1890s when John "Earthquake" Milne invented the seismograph machine. But even with the seismograph, there was no way of comparing the intensity of quakes, not until 1935, when Charles Richter developed a set of logarithms now known as the Richter scale. Feeling that there should be a distinctive word to describe the strength of an earthquake—like the word *watt* for electricity or *horsepower* for engines—Richter borrowed a term from the world of astronomy, *magnitude*. One of the first events measured on the scale was the one in our story.

Contrary to popular belief, the Richter scale is not based on a scale of 1 to 10. Each point on the scale corresponds to a tenfold increase. A 6-point quake, for instance, is ten times stronger than a 5-point quake.

The strongest quake ever recorded was in Chile in 1960 (9.5), while the deadliest is believed to be a 1556 disaster in China, killing over 830,000.