

ENCOUNTER AT PALAZZO CORPI

The alarm on his wristwatch went off at five minutes before midnight. Jarvis Manalastas, a newly arrived Marine guard at the American Consulate General in Istanbul, picked up a thick telephone directory in the guard station at the consulate's main entrance. He propped it against the

microphone of the building's PA system to keep the mike on. He did not anticipate an intruder, but he wanted to hear the alarm should it go off while he was away from the guard booth.

Jarvis, or JM, as he was called by colleagues who found his last name quite a mouthful, was a stocky young man with sad eyes in his mid-20s. He inherited his build from his father, a Filipino sailor in the U.S. Navy. His fair complexion and dark brown hair as well as his quiet demeanor were from his American mother, a lovely brunette who read poetry books and turned quietly, prematurely gray by the window, waiting for his father to come back from one port or another.

Jarvis followed the wide staircase to the second floor to begin his rounds. The consulate building was over one hundred years old, his gunnery sergeant had told him when he arrived in Istanbul two weeks earlier. Constructed as the residential

mansion of a rich Italian, the building certainly had neither the design nor proportions for an efficient modern office building. It also lacked many of the physical protections Jarvis had been trained to expect in a U.S. diplomatic post overseas. With its murals and frescoes and ornately carved decorations, the building reminded Jarvis more of a museum than a workplace. This made it a neat place to work, though, Jarvis had to admit. And, while the ongoing restoration of many

of the art works and renovation of large portions of the building made his nightly security rounds a bit more difficult, Jarvis looked forward to seeing the paintings when they had been restored to their original glory.

Once he reached the second floor, he was not sure if it was the sob or the light coming from the political officer's room that first caught his attention. He did not think anyone was working this late; nobody had signed the after-hours log at the Marine post. As he approached the door, he saw a woman with her back toward him, looking at a painting on the wall.

"I didn't realize anybody was working late tonight," Jarvis said.

The woman looked surprised as she turned around. She was a stunning woman, with olive skin and straight black hair, a straight nose and green eyes brimming with tears. She was wearing a dark flowing garment that reached to her ankles and a silver necklace around her neck. Jarvis thought the



Jan Stamm

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HE LOVED A
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BY RUBY E. CARLINO

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woman seemed familiar and out of place at the same time.

"Is there anything wrong?" he inquired.

"Oh, nothing," she replied brushing her eyes quickly with the back of her hand. "I was just going to leave," she added, her wide lips turning up slightly in a wan smile.

"Okay, good night then. Take care," Jarvis responded as he turned to continue his rounds. "Oh, and don't forget to wear your badge when you're in the compound," he added as an afterthought.

"Okay," she replied. "Wait! May I walk with you while you complete your rounds?" she asked.

This was not standard practice. But the woman ended up walking the rounds with Jarvis anyway. She seemed to enjoy checking out every nook and cranny of the building but she did not talk very much. At the end of the rounds, Jarvis stopped at the conference room for a last check. The woman suddenly stopped in her tracks.

"I've got to go, but you must check every inch of that room," she said abruptly, her face inscrutable as she quickly walked off.

Jarvis turned on the light. The conference room, like all the rooms on the ground floor, was stripped bare for renovation and the restoration of frescoes. Jarvis could see where the workers had started cleaning the paintings on the ceiling. The room was empty except for pails and other construction materials.

Completing his inspection of the room, he locked its thick wooden doors and wondered why she had asked him to check every inch of the room. By the time Jarvis realized he had not even asked the woman her name, she was nowhere to be found.

Jarvis quickly put the incident out of his mind. A couple of days later he was on night duty once again.

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He was performing his usual rounds when he noticed the same woman working late again. He stopped at her office for a brief chat. She looked as if she had been crying, but she seemed delighted to see him.

"You're working too much," Jarvis said in a friendly tone.

"Oh, I just had to finish a few things, JM," she replied.

"This isn't fair. You know my name but I don't know yours," he retorted, pretending to be cross.

She let out a slow and delightful chuckle, "Call me Jasmine."

Just as she had during their first encounter, Jasmine insisted on accompanying Jarvis on his rounds. This time though, she led him through the building as if she were a guide giving him a tour of the 19th-century palazzo. She painstakingly explained the mythological scenes found in the frescoes and on the paintings on the grand stairway. No one could fault him for not doing a thorough inspection, but Jarvis had to admit to himself that Jasmine was a distraction on these rounds.

When they reached the conference room, the woman stopped in her tracks once more. "I have to go," she said, and pecked his cheek. "Please ...," she said in an almost pleading voice as she gestured toward the room and left quickly.

The following day, Jarvis commented to the gunny that the new political officer had been working late the previous night again, and wasn't she a great-looking woman. The gunny made a face and cautioned him to watch what he said. The political officer was a pale young man with a shock of red hair, certainly not a woman nor particularly good-looking.

"There was this woman ...," Jarvis started to say, but the gunny had turned on his heels and was already gone. As he was new at the consulate himself, and because most Foreign Service assignments begin in the summer, Jarvis had assumed that Jasmine was a new officer at post. In the next couple of days he checked and rechecked the records of personnel at the consulate, but

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could find no one named Jasmine nor anyone resembling the woman who had walked rounds with him. He even asked the local Turkish guards, but they could not remember seeing the woman Jarvis described, either.

Jarvis encountered Jasmine just once more. He was doing his usual rounds when he saw her walking the hallway near the conference room. She was wearing the same dark clothes and silver necklace she wore the first night they met.

"I have been looking all over for you! Who are you?" Jarvis asked without preamble.

"I already told you," Jasmine replied quietly as she hurried her steps.

"But nobody knows you here," Jarvis insisted.

"I'm sorry, I can't talk right now," she said.

With that, she lifted her long skirt and ran down the hallway with Jarvis at her heels.

"Wait! I'm not going to hurt you," Jarvis shouted as he ran after her. "I just want to talk ..."

His voice trailed off as he turned a corner and found a dead end. Jarvis took a deep breath, and continued his rounds but could not shake the thoughts of the mysterious woman from his head. How did she get in? The alarm did not go off. Where did she disappear? If she were an intruder, what was she after? Alone at his guard post, Jarvis spent a long and troubled night. To get his thoughts off Jasmine and his own probable dereliction of

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duty, Jarvis started to work a crossword puzzle, one of his favorite pastimes. But questions about Jasmine kept intruding into his thoughts and turning his stomach cold.

Jarvis felt both foolish and apprehensive, but he had to write an incident report about his encounter with the mysterious Jasmine. He did not get home until noon as a complete security sweep of the consulate was ordered following his report. The security check did not find any breach, and normal operations resumed by late morning.

Jarvis was relieved that he never saw Jasmine again. However, when he was on night duty, he often heard what he thought was the sound of a woman crying. The other Marine guards never mentioned a crying woman, but they often talked about hearing light footsteps upstairs when they did their nightly rounds. Jarvis attributed the crying and the supposed footsteps to the sounds the wind makes in an old building. He was still baffled by his encounters with Jasmine, but he tried not to think too much about them and went on with his life.

Having grown up in the confines of military bases due to his father's work with the U.S. Navy, Jarvis found Istanbul an exciting and fascinating city. During his free time, he started exploring the cobblestone side streets of the Tepebai's district where the consulate was located. It was in the old European section of the former Ottoman capital. On one of his walks, Jarvis found himself in a dusty shop that sold old books and Turkish souvenirs. He had just purchased a copper plate and a couple of blue glass charms that were supposed to ward off the "evil eye" when he noticed a stack of old postcards on a side table. The postcards depicted Turkish artworks and old photographs of traditionally-clad Ottoman-era Turks and the city's imperial mosques and palaces.

Jarvis was looking through the cards when he suddenly felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. In his hand was a photo of the woman he knew as Jasmine. He turned the card and saw "Yasemin Hanım" inscribed on the back.

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"Who is this woman?" Jarvis asked the old man who ran the shop.

"Ah, very sad story," the old merchant replied as he looked at the card in Jarvis's hand. "Her name Yasemin. Palazzo Corpi, now American Consulate, built for her."

"That couldn't be," Jarvis muttered to himself.

"Yasemin was wife of Leonardo Corpi, rich Genoese shipbuilder," the merchant continued. "1873, Signor Corpi built Palazzo Corpi, house for him and wife."

"What happened?" Jarvis asked.

What Jarvis understood from the old man's story was that Yasemin's father had negotiated her marriage to the rich Signor Corpi without her consent. After the wedding, Yasemin was never seen again. Exactly six months after his wedding day, Leonardo Corpi was found dead in one of the lower unfinished bedrooms of the palazzo. One rumor spread by Corpi's fellow Europeans was that Yasemin had eloped with another man and Signor Corpi committed suicide, either for loss of his beloved bride or loss of his honor. Another version of the rumor had

Yasemin already married to a handsome young Turk when the Palazzo wedding occurred. There were also allegations of murder, reports of hidden bodies and unexplained sounds coming from the building after the disappearance of Yasemin. According to the old Turkish merchant, many other tales featured the couple that lived briefly in Palazzo Corpi, but nobody knew which were true and which were pure invention.

Jarvis could not get the story out of his mind. He loved a good mystery. If the Turkish merchant was right, the lower bedroom facing the street would be the consulate's conference room. He remembered that the mysterious Jasmine had refused to enter that room while advising him to "check it very carefully."

Jarvis was off duty the next day, and decided to see how the contractors' work was going in the conference room. The frescoes had been cleaned, and some of the workers were replacing the water-damaged floorboards near the window. Others had started sanding the walls. Jarvis chatted with the workers briefly, then quietly

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inspected the room, more minutely than he ever had before.

The walls needed repainting. The windows could use the new blast-proof coated glass. He noticed that the floorboards were wide and shiny. Except for those damaged by water near the window, they appeared to be in excellent condition. Looking for anything out of the ordinary, he thought he noticed a wet spot near the east wall.

He could not say what made him do the thing he did next. He took out his white handkerchief and rubbed it against the wet spot on the floorboard. The liquid left a red stain on his white handkerchief. "Excuse me," he called out to one of the workers, trying to keep his voice even. "Has anyone noticed this wet floorboard here?"

He could hear the Turkish worker call to his supervisor, who was talking to someone in the hallway.

"Efendim (sir)," the Turkish supervisor said in greeting, followed by Kent Johnson, the admin officer.

"I was just wondering if anyone noticed that this floorboard seems to be wet," Jarvis replied, pocketing his handkerchief furtively.

"Let's see," the Turkish supervisor answered. "Gel, gel (move, move)," he called to two of his workers, gesturing for them to come quickly. After a quick discussion in Turkish, which Jarvis could not follow, the workers hurried out of the room.

"Problem yok (no problem), we check this," the Turkish supervisor declared, smiling confidently at Kent Johnson and Jarvis. "They get tools and we open this up," he explained. The two workers came back with their tools.

Jarvis watched with trepidation as they worked in concert to quickly remove the offending floorboard. When the board was raised one of the workers knelt and peeked beneath it. He abruptly raised his head and rattled off a comment to his companion.

"What is it?" Jarvis asked.

"He's saying that there's something under the floorboard," Kent Johnson replied.

Before either one of them could say anything more, the worker who was on his knees suddenly stood up, an expression of terror on his face. He spoke unintelligibly.

While the Turkish supervisor tried to calm the worker, Jarvis dropped to his knees and looked inside the hole in the floor.

"It looks like a human skeleton," he said to Kent Johnson.

When it was all over, they had excavated skeletal remains with long black hair and a woman's jewelry. Two things struck Jarvis immediately: One piece of jewelry resembled the silver necklace Jasmine wore when he met her. And there was a smaller skull cradled within the hipbone of the remains.

Jarvis sat staring at the remains. He was suddenly 14 years old again. A female Navy officer came for him at school and brought him to the base hospital where he was horrified to find his mother in intensive care. He later learned that she had fallen from the balcony of their apartment. His mother never recovered. She died a day later from head injuries, and so did the four-month-old fetus in her womb. Was she inebriated? Did she leap to her death? Nobody knew. Not even his father had answers. The military ruled her death accidental. Jarvis never quite forgave her for dying.

"Hey, JM, are you all right?" the gunny tapped Jarvis on the shoulder.

"I'm okay," Jarvis sighed. He stood up and, after one last look at the remains, went out the door following the gunny. He finally told the gunny and the admin officer about his other encounters with the mysterious Jasmine. Both decided that it would be best if Jarvis kept those details out of his report.

The RSO opened an investigation to ascertain the body's identity and cause of death. The legal attaché from Ankara arrived a day later. But Jarvis did not have to wait for the results of the investigation to know who was buried under the floorboards.

Several days later, Jarvis was back on night duty. The palazzo was quiet. He did not hear the sounds the wind makes in an old building. And for the first time in quite awhile, he could hear himself think about the recent past. The woman he knew as Jasmine floated in and out of his thoughts like a dark cloud. He still wondered if her death had come at her husband's hand or her own, or if it was an accident. Jarvis realized that he would never know the cause of Jasmine's death, but he took comfort in knowing that she and her child were finally at rest.

"It's much too quiet in here," Jarvis murmured aloud when all he could hear was his own heartbeat as he went through the paces of his routine inspection. And from somewhere in his distant past, Jarvis remembered gleefully shouting "higher!" and heard again the laughter of a lovely brunette as she pushed him on the swing. ■