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Jasmine Nights (English Edition)



Par Julia Gregson
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA captivating WW2 love story from the bestselling author of EAST OF THE SUN, a Richard Judy selection.1942 and the world is at war. It is a war that has already shattered families and devastated countries. But for some, it will also mean the greatest of adventures. In a burns hospital in Sussex, a beautiful young singer performs to a ward full of injured soldiers. Saba is captivating and one pilot, Dom, shudders as her gaze turns his way. He can't bear her to see his scars but resolves to write to her once they have healed. The world is on the brink of enormous change. Saba's journey as a singer with ENSA takes her to the fading glamour of Alexandria and the heat and decadence of Turkey. On the glamorous Middle Eastern social circuit, Saba rubs shoulders with double agents and diplomats, movie stars and

smugglers. Some want her voice, some her friendship, and some the secrets she is perfectly placed to discover...JASMINE NIGHTS is a tale of decadence and destruction, of love and of danger. It is the captivating love story set in an extraordinary world.

Extrait CHAPTER 1 Queen Victoria Hospital, East Grinstead, 1942 It was only a song. That was what he thought when she put her hat on and gone, leaving the faint smell of fresh apples behind. Nothing but a song; a pretty girl. But the very least he could say about the best thing to have happened to him in a long time was that she stopped him having the dreams. In the first, he was at the end of a parachute with about three and a half miles between the soles of his feet and the Suffolk countryside. He was screaming because he couldn't land. He was rushing through the air, a light, insubstantial thing, like a thistle down or a dead moth. The bright green grass, so familiar and so dear, swooped toward him, only to jerk away again. Sometimes a woman stood and gaped at him, waving as he floated down, and then was gone on a gust of wind. In the second dream, he was in his Spitfire again. Jack's aircraft was alongside him. At first it felt good up there in the cold, clear sunlight, but then, in a moment of nauseous panic, it felt as if his eyelids had been sewn together, and he could not see. He told no one. He was one of the lucky ones about to go home after four months here. There were plenty worse off than him in this place of dark corridors and stifled screams. Every day he heard the rumble of ambulances with new burn victims, picked up from shattered aircraft up and down the east coast. The ward, an overflow from the hospital, was housed in a long, narrow hut with twenty beds on either side of it, and in the middle a potbellied stove, a table, and a piano with two brass candlesticks arranged festively on top. The ward smelled of soiled dressings, of bedpans, of dying and living flesh: old men's smells, although most of the fighter pilots in here were in their early twenties. Stourton, at the end of the ward, who had been flying Hurricanes from North Weald, had been a blind man for two weeks now. His girlfriend came in every day to teach him Braille. Squeak Townsend, the red-faced boy in the next bed with the hearty, unconvincing laugh, was a fighter pilot who'd broken his spine when his parachute had failed, and who'd confessed to Dom a few days ago that he was too nervous to ever want to fly again. Dom knew he was lucky. He'd been flying a Spitfire at twenty thousand feet over a patchwork of fields when his cockpit was transformed into a blowtorch by the explosion of the petrol tank that sat in front of his instrument panel. His hands and face were burned—typical fighter-pilot injuries, the surgeon said—and in the excruciating moments between the flames and the ground, he'd opened the plane's canopy, fumbled for the bright green tag that opened his parachute, swooned through space for what felt like an eternity, and finally landed, babbling and screaming, on top of a farmer's haystack on the Suffolk coast. Last week, Dr. Kilverton, the jaunty new plastic surgeon who now traveled from hospital to hospital, had come to the Queen Victoria and examined the burn on the right side of his face. Beautiful. Kilverton's bloodshot eye had peered through a microscope at the point where the new skin graft taken from Dom's buttock had been patchworked over his burns. That'll take about six or seven weeks to heal; then you should be fully operational. Good skin, he added. Mediterranean? My mother, Dom explained through clenched teeth. Kilverton was peeling off old skin at the time, probing the graft. French. Your father? Dom wanted him to shut up. It was easier to go inside the pain and not do the cocktail-party stuff. British. Where did you learn to fly? Tilt your head this way, please. The snub nose loomed toward him. Cambridge. The University Air Squadron. Ah, my father was there, too; sounded like jolly good fun. Yes. Kilverton talked some more about corpuscles and muscle tone and youth still being on his side; he'd repeated how lucky Dom was. Soon have your old face and your old smile back, as if a smile was a plastered-on thing. While he was listening, Dom had that nightmare sensation again of floating above himself, of seeing kind faces below and not being able to reach them. Since the accident, a new person had taken up residence inside the old face, and the old smile. A put-together self who smoked and ate, who joked and was still capable of cynical wisecracks, but who felt essentially dead. Last week, encouraged by the doctors to take his first spin on his motorbike, he'd sat on a grass verge outside the Mucky Duck, on what was supposed to be a red-letter day, and looked at his hand around the beer glass as if it belonged to someone else. During his first weeks in hospital, now a blur of drips and ambulance rides and acid baths, his sole aim in life had been to not let the side down by blubbing or screaming. Blind at first, he'd managed to quip, Are you pretty? to the nurse who'd sat with him in the ambulance that took him away from the smoldering haystack. Later, in the wards, he made a bargain with himself: he would not deny the physical pain, which was constant, searing, and so bad at times it was almost funny, but emotionally he would own up to nothing. If anyone asked him how he was, he was fine. It was only in the relative quiet of the night, in the lucid moments when he emerged from the morphine haze, that he thought about the nature of pain. What was it for? How was one to deal with it? Why had he been saved and the others were gone? And only months later, when his hands had

sufficiently healed, had he started to write in the diary his mother had sent him. Reams of stuff about Jacko and Cowbridge, both killed that day. A letter to Jackos fiance, Jill, not sent. Letters to his own parents, ditto, warning them that when he was better, he was determined to fly again. And then the girl. When she walked into the ward that night, what struck him most was how young she looked: young and spirited and hopeful. From his bed, he drank in every detail of her. She was wearing a red polka-dot dress, nipped in at the waist, and a black hat with an absurd little veil that was too old for her and made her look a little like a four-year-old who had raided her mothers dressing-up box. She couldnt have been more than twenty-two. He saw a roll of glossy dark hair under her hat. Generous lips, large brown eyes. She stood next to the piano, close to the trolley that held dressings and rolled bandages. Half imp, half angel. She was smiling as if this was where she wanted to be. A real professional, he thought, trying to keep a cynical distance. A pro. She explained in her lightly accented voice Welsh? Italian? Hard to say that her name was Saba Tarcan, and that she was a last-minute replacement for a torch singer called Janice Sophia. She hoped they wouldnt be disappointed, and then threw a bold look in Doms direction or so he imagined as if to say you wont be. A fat man in khaki uniform, her accompanist, sat down heavily at the piano, began to play. She listened, swaying slightly; a look of calm settled on her face as she sang about deep purple nights, and flickering stars, and a girl breathing a boys name while she sighed. Hed tried every trick in his book to keep her at arms length, but the song came out of the darkness like a wild thing, and her voice was so husky, so sad, and it had been such a long time since hed desired a woman, that the relief was overwhelming. Through the mist of a memory you wander back to me. So much to conceal now: his fear of being ugly, his shame that he was alive with the others gone. And then hed felt a wild desire to laugh, for Deep Purple was perhaps not the most tactful of songs to sing: many of the men in the ward had purple faces, Gentian violet being the thing they painted over the burn victims after theyd been bathed in tannic acid. Halfway through the song, shed looked startled, as if realizing her mistake, but shed kept on singing, and said nothing by way of apology at the end of it. He approved of that: the last thing any of them needed was sympathy and special songs. When shed finished, Dom saw that beads of perspiration had formed on her upper lip and rings of sweat around the arms of her dress. The ward was kept stiflingly hot. When she sang Im in the Mood for Love, Curtis, ignorant bastard, called out: Well, you know where to look, my lovely. Dom frowned. Saba Tarcan: he said the name to himself. Two more songs, said Staff Nurse Morrison, tapping her watch. And then its night-night time. And he was relieved it was too much. Like eating a ten-course meal after starving for a year. But Saba Tarcan paid no attention to the big fat nurse, and this he approved of, too. She took off her hat and laid it on the piano, as if to say I shall stay until Ive finished. She pushed back a tendril of hair from her flushed cheek, talked briefly to the pianist, and took Dom to the edge of what was bearable, as she began to sing, They Didnt Believe Me. The song Annabel had loved, singing it softly to him as they walked one night hand in hand beside the Cam, in the days when he felt he had everything: flying, Cambridge, her, other girls, too. As the tears dashed through the purple dye, he turned his head away, furious and ashamed. Annabel was considered a catch: a tall, pale, ethereal girl with long, curly fair hair, a sweet smile, and clever parents: her father a High Court judge, her mother a don. Shed come to see him religiously at first, forehead gleaming in the stifling ward, reading to him with nervous glances around her at some of the other freaks. I cant do this, Dom, Im not strong enough, shed said after two weeks. Its not you. Shed swallowed. Im starting to dread it. Shed glanced at the boy in the bed beside him. The side of his face, grafted with his own skin to his chest, looked like a badly made elephants trunk. So sorry, shed whispered softly, shortly before she left. Her round blue eyes had filled with tears. Can we stay friends? Not the first woman to have bolted out of this terrifying ward, not the last. Amazing how potent cheap music is: the kind of thing he might have said once to excuse the tears. His Nol Coward imitation had been rather admired at Cambridge. It wasnt even Annabel so much; it was everything lost, even the foolishly innocent things perhaps particularly them. His set, the self-proclaimed it boys of their year, had spent days spragged out on sofas, smoking and drinking cheap sherry, elaborately bored and showing off wildly about Charlie Parker, or Pound, or Eliot anything that amused them. How young they seemed, even at this distance. The first heady days away from home, the steady stream of good-looking undergraduate girls smuggled into their rooms, and theyd had their pick. Hed tried to be fair to Annabel, telling her after her tearful confession that he perfectly understood, didnt blame her in the slightest, in truth hed always had the guilty sense that his ardor did not equal hers, that she was not, as people said, the one. Thered been so many other girls around, and Cambridge felt like a time when the sun would never stop shining. Smetheren, whose famously untidy room was opposite his on the quad, had been killed two months ago. Clancy, one of his best friends, also a flying fanatic and among the cleverest men hed

ever met, shot down over France a month before his twenty-second birthday. And Jacko, of course. All changed within a year, and the boy had been could never have imagined himself like this: in bed at eight thirty in his pjs, desperately trying not to cry in front of a pretty girl. It was nothing but notes. He bit the inside of his lip to gain control: notes and a few minor chords, some well-chosen words. Only a song. A clink of bottles, a rumble of wheels. The night medicines were coming around on a trolley. They were stoking up the boiler in the middle of the room, dimming the lights. Last one, she said. She was wearing her ridiculous little veiled hat again. The pianist had put away his music, so she sang *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* unaccompanied, her voice strong and clear, her expression intent and focused. And then she walked around the beds to say good night. Good night to Williams, who had both legs in traction, and to poor blind Billy at the end of the ward, and to Farthingale, who was off to theater tomorrow to have his eyelids sewn back on again. She didn't seem to mind them, or was that part of the training? When she got to Dom, Curtis, the bloody idiot, called out: Go on, love! Give him a night-night kiss. He turned his head away, but she leaned toward him, so close he could see the mound of her stomach under the red and white dress. He felt the tickle of her hair. She smelled young and fresh, like apples. When she kissed his cheek, he said to protect himself, You wouldn't kiss that if you knew where it came from, and she leaned down again and whispered in his ear, How do you know that, you silly bugger? He stayed awake for the next hour thinking about her, his heart in a sort of delighted suspension. Before he went to sleep, he imagined her on the back of his motorbike. It was a summer's day. They were sitting on a grass verge outside a country inn. They were teasing each other, they were laughing. She was wearing a blue dress, and the sky was just a sky again, not something you fell from screaming. *Revue de presse* Exotic, decadent, dangerous and terrific storytelling (Fanny Blake, *WOMAN HOME*) A tenderly told and wonderfully evocative story (DAILY EXPRESS) A captivating love story set in an extraordinary world (WESTERN MAIL) Steamy, sweeping ... Saba is a modern woman struggling with old-fashioned ideas and Dom is a surprisingly complex hero. Seen through their eyes, the wartime Middle East is a heady, intoxicating place and readers will be swept away by the lush prose (PUBLISHERS WEEKLY) For romance and intrigue, with the conflict providing the perfect excuse to set a story in exotic locals like Cairo, Gregson delivers in spades believable and completely engrossing (BOOKLIST (US)) Romance may be the theme, but Gregson shines in her descriptions of the life of the rich, poor and combatant in Cairo and Alexandria, the sights of Gize and the Bosphorus, and the chaotic World War II milieu where women no longer tolerated 'boys making all the rules'. Saba and Dom love, face perils, triumph and intermittently reunite. Spare of any serious, distracting anachronisms, the story flows at a stately pace to a conclusion both satisfying and open-ended. Fans will want a sequel. Historical fiction as personal journeys through love and loss and war's havoc (KIRKUS REVIEWS) Julia Gregson's *Jasmine Nights* has all the makings of the perfect beach read: adventure, danger, international locale, historical sweep, steamy romance ... utterly delicious (CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER (US)) I love war novels set in the Middle Eastern theatre of war and this one does not disappoint, with its terrific descriptions of the seedy glamour of Cairo and Alexandria, not to mention Istanbul (GOOD BOOK GUIDE) Gregson, the author of *East of the Sun*, brings a wealth of detail to this unconventional love story, ranging from World War II history to rich cultural lore to the pop-music standards of the era. With numerous and well-drawn characters, evocative prose and a commanding story, the former journalist and foreign correspondent again proves that she is also a master of historical fiction. And smoke might not be the only thing that gets in your eyes in this moving novel (RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH (US))