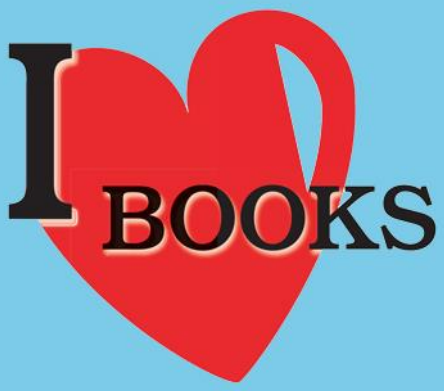


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Opening extract from

A Berlin Love Song

Written by

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Published by

Troika Books

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SARAH MATTHIAS

a BERLIN LOVE SONG

troika books

Published by TROIKA BOOKS
First published 2017
Troika Books, Well House, Green Lane,
Ardleigh CO7 7PD, UK
www.troikabooks.com

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Sample text

Printed in Poland



Double Guard Duty

I'D EXPECTED FIFTY KNEE BENDS straight off for losing my ribbon of life so early on. But Martin Gorman was preoccupied when I got back to camp, grinning and sucking up to the SS like a dog begging for dinner, so I got off lightly. Just double night-sentry duty. Four hours instead of the usual two. It could have been a good deal worse. Such as standing up to my waist in the freezing Havel for several hours, or running through a field of nettles in shorts with no shoes. Martin Gorman could be very inventive when he felt like it.

Today was the end of our three-week training course and it was back to Berlin tomorrow. We were all exhausted, so after a few rousing choruses from our songbook we hauled down the flag. I watched jealously as my comrades crawled

into their tents, longing to join them, roll myself into my army blanket, close my eyes and dream about Lili. But a swift reminder of how nettles felt on bare legs kept self-pity at bay.

I'd changed my shorts for the long trousers, warm jacket and black ski cap of our winter uniform. We were in for a cold night, which was probably just as well, I thought, as I slung my rifle over my shoulder and prepared for my night's watch. Sleeping on duty was one of the worst crimes in the long list of punishable offences in Hitler Youth, so it didn't do to be too comfortable.

The camp was noisy for a while, full of the sounds of boys bedding down, laughing and thumping boisterously against the canvas sides of the rows of peaked tents. But soon all I could hear was low snoring, although someone somewhere was playing a mouth organ. I breathed in deeply, savouring the rich, loamy smell of the woods. I can still remember the sky that night, clear and starry, with Venus bright as a splinter of glass above a sharp new moon. *Moon on its back like a smile . . . is it smiling for me?* I made a mental note to find my old diary when I got home, the one where I used to write my poems. I hugged myself, pretending my body was Lili. I hadn't written poetry for years.

The fire had died down to a deep coral glow and my feet were starting to freeze, so I decided to make my first circuit of the camp to check for wild boar lurking in the undergrowth. They'd been known to rampage through the camp, snouting rations from supply tents and running amok amongst the guy ropes. So round and round I trudged with my muffled flashlight, past the rows of trestles where we lay for rifle

practice, picking my way between tents, just like any other loyal Hitler Youth on sentry duty. But in my dreams I was back on the riverbank, creeping stealthily in the direction of that deep, throaty laugh. Parting the fronds of hairy willowherb that screened Lili's private place from prying eyes, holding my breath and peeping in . . .

I pretended to myself later that I'd heard suspicious noises in the forest and accidentally lost my way. But the truth is I couldn't really remember what happened that night. I'd somehow found myself amongst the trees like a sleepwalker, wondering how I'd got there. I flicked on my flashlight, checking the bearing on my compass that had somehow found its way into my pocket. To get to the river, I needed to walk due east.

I heard the soft babble of flowing water before I saw the glimmer of the river through the trees. I stopped, inhaling deeply, drinking in its earthy, mineral smell. Someone not far away was playing an accordion and a dog barked sharply, though it could have been a fox. I shone my flashlight along the line of willows that fringed the bank. The row of dead hedgehogs was gone, but I could still see the remains of the twine dangling limply from the willow's trunk. I crept forward, pushing through the undergrowth, until I was staring out across the mysterious black water. The fragile moon swam in its dancing dark shadows amongst a sea of stars. I didn't like rivers at night. I imagined all kinds of slippery things beneath the surface, snaking in and out of the tangled weed. But tonight this shadowy stretch was flooded with the sunlight of memory, of the surprise of Lili's naked body, and the water

sparkling as it trickled between her breasts . . .

I switched off my flashlight, preferring the velvet blackness that rushed in like a soft cloak. This was the place. I shivered, surprised to feel tears welling up in my eyes. Suddenly, all the pent up emotion of the last three weeks seemed to come together at once: my hatred of our platoon leaders, the suicide of Erwin Cornelius, the joy of seeing Lili again . . .

I heard a splash. A fish probably, leaping in the river. To begin with, I thought it was the surging of my tears, the way the air seemed to stir and shift. The darkness in front of me swayed. Alarmed, I flicked on my flashlight as a shape rose up from the flat stone at the water's edge. There stood Lili, staring at me, blinking in the golden beam.

'What took you so long?' she said, in her soft, lilting accent.

I didn't trust myself to speak. I didn't want to break the spell. And, anyway, what do you say to a stranger who you feel that you've known all your life? *We were born to be together*, I wanted to say, but it sounded naive. Like the lines from a Hollywood movie. Her hair was almost purple in the pale moonlight, her eyes so dark I saw only the glimmer of their whites as she stepped towards me through the shallow water.

'I knew you would come. I've been waiting for you.'

Words would come later, when we'd sit under the stars and Lili would tell me her wonderful stories: *The Tale of Shon and Chakano* and *How the Gypsies Found Their Fiddle*. The time would come when she'd show me how to fry duck eggs on a shovel and how to skin rooks and cook them in a hay-pit. But for the moment . . .

She placed her long fingers lightly on my chest. I stretched

out my hands, letting them rest on her shoulders. I'd imagined Lili in my dreams, soft and pliant, so the hardness of her muscles shocked me. Of course they were. How else could you soar through the air on a flying trapeze? I'd kissed girls before. In fact, I'd kissed Sophie Fischer from the cathedral quite a lot, and I'd liked it at the time. But afterwards I forgot all about her. But here, tonight . . . my heart was drumming in my throat, so hard I could scarcely breathe.

I expected her to pull back like girls always did, but Lili just stood there silently, eyes half closed, her face turned up towards mine. The skin on her throat was warm. I could taste her sweat. And then I had a sudden urge to hug her close like a long lost friend, burying my face in her hair. She made a sound like a sob and then I was kissing her mouth, and she was kissing me back, covering my face with her lips, hot breath on my neck, sending shivers snaking down my spine.

'I've never forgotten you,' I said.

She stared at me, tracing the line of my jaw with her fingertip, and then drew back suddenly, pulling me deeper into the trees. She put her hand to my lips, staring hard across the starlit river. 'It's my pa and Nano Florian,' she whispered. 'They'll kill me if they find me with you.'

Two tall men in long coats were picking their way stealthily along the opposite bank. I could feel her heart pounding against mine.

'It's a poacher's moon. I should have known they'd be out checking the long nets.' She suddenly grasped my lapels, staring into my face. 'You won't tell, will you?' Her eyes glittered in the moonlight. 'There'll be trouble if you tell.'

I pulled her back into my arms. 'Tell what?' I murmured, my lips on her hair. I wasn't really listening. I was drunk on the smell of her.

She shook her head, twisting away. 'I have to go. Ma will be wondering . . . I said I was just going to . . . water the horses . . .' She broke off shyly. 'That means . . . you know . . .'

I didn't know. All I knew was that I couldn't let her go. What if she slipped away into the darkness and I never saw her again? 'Where can I find you?'

She hesitated. 'How do I know I can trust you?' The men had disappeared but I could tell she was eager to be gone. 'Things have changed. I can't explain now. But you mustn't say you've seen me. You mustn't tell anyone you remember us from before. Do you understand? Things are different now.'

I didn't understand but I kissed her softly on her forehead. I was her slave. I'd do anything she asked. 'I promise.'

Lili smiled uncertainly, and I was lost again, heart and soul. 'We're camped over the river. By the side of the Hundekehle Lake. There's a field with a green gate. I have to go . . .'

Unwillingly I let go of her shoulders but I didn't move away. She glanced up at the new moon, now trailing fragments of cloud like smoke. '*T'e avel bachtelo a son nevo*,' she whispered. Then she held my hand to her lips, kissing the tips of my fingers as she stepped away from me. '*Let the new moon bring us happiness*.' And then she was gone, dissolving into the forest, like a dream that slips from your grasp on waking, leaving you cold and alone.

'I'll never hurt you,' I murmured into the darkness. 'You can trust me with your life.'



Tarantella

I HADN'T TOUCHED THE TAROT since Rollo died. I hadn't dared. But that night, when everyone was drinking round the campfire, I crept into Baba Sara's vardo. Softly I unlatched the little wooden cupboard beside her bed and pulled out the bag of green embroidered silk, then struck a match. The candlelight gleamed on the cards' bright colours – emerald, scarlet and gold. I shuffled and cut, fanned and cut again. The pictures were as dazzling as I remembered, and the shivery feeling when I touched them just the same. I crossed back to the door and parted the beaded curtain. Baba Sara was asleep in her blanket under the clear, cold sky and I could hear Pa and Nano Florian tuning fiddles to an accordion.

It felt so good to have the cards in my hands again. I

held my breath and laid a spread for me . . . then just as I was about to turn over the first card, I changed my mind. I heard the fiddles around the campfire strike up a lively jig and I had a sudden urge to dance. To stamp my feet to something wild and romantic, like a Tarantella. The tarot means *the way*. *The royal path to life*, so Baba Sara used to say. I gathered up the cards and slipped them back into their bag. If dark clouds were gathering, I didn't want to know. Tonight I wanted to dance. To forget the future and live for now. I'd seen my Knight of Wands again and I wasn't going to worry about anything. Not tonight. Maybe never. For I knew in my heart that whatever dark shadows the tarot might show me, I'd never swap safety for love.