

Chapter 1

The city of Bern, Switzerland, August 1444

The city of Bern was a beautiful place. Its streets were clean and airy, alpine breezes throughout the year ensuring the stench of people and animals did not linger within its walls. It was a new city, being established only two hundred and fifty years before by a powerful German lord called Berthold. He built a city on a hairpin bend in the River Aare, which meant Bern had water on three sides, giving it a strong defensive position. It was also a strategic position, being located on the Swiss plateau between the Jura Mountains and the Alps. The city itself was sited on a hilly peninsula, which aided the social segregation of Bern. Its lower part, both literally and figuratively, was known as the Matte and was where the numerous 'unclean' people and their activities were located.

The Matte was close to the river so those professions that used water for their work were concentrated there. The tanneries used water, urine and excrement in their work, which produced foul pollution and a royal stench. Millers could also be found in the Matte, using the river to power the wheels in their mills. Though mills did not rely on waste to produce bread, millers themselves were regarded with suspicion, being viewed as cheats and profiteers. The Matte was also home to prostitutes, beggars, petty thieves and other unsavoury elements that every town and city in Christendom possessed.

Bern had begun as a settlement of wooden homes and businesses, the buildings created from the pine that grew in abundance throughout the region. But the city of timber buildings disappeared forty years before when a great fire ripped through its streets, destroying over two-thirds of the homes, and killing hundreds. The city's governing body, the Council of Twelve, took the decision to use stone to rebuild Bern. The crowded, filth-ridden narrow streets were to disappear, to be replaced with one wide, main street in the centre and narrower streets running parallel to it. The main thoroughfare was called Market Street and it was where wealthy merchants and the heads of trade guilds lived. The buildings were made of sandstone quarried in nearby Wabern, Gurten and Ostermundigen. All these quarries were owned by Maximillian Steiner, the wealthiest man in Bern and the head of the Council of Twelve. He lived with his family in Church Lane, which was reserved exclusively for Bern's leading patrician families. The second-tier nobles lived in 'Nobles' Lane,' which was also exclusive, though not as grandiose or sought-after as Church Lane, which was near the minster. The minster itself was in the process of construction but was still a place filled with ornate statues, tapestries and altars. The building was only twenty years old but was already a striking place of worship. Around the minster were

more churches, a convent and a monastery, all the streets in the immediate vicinity being of cobblestone and clean.

The home of Maximilian Steiner was a magnificent building with pointed arches, vaulted ceilings, light, airy rooms, and intricate gargoyles on the outside to drain rainwater off the roof.

There were other exquisite carvings on the outside of the Steiner household, all intended to convey an impression of wealth, power and influence. It was an accurate representation of a man who owned all the quarries outside Bern's city walls, though wall was a more accurate description: the river surrounded the city on three sides, the wall provided protection on the other side. The city was made of Steiner sandstone. Leon looked up at the magnificent multi-storey building and smiled. Even his own house, though it was actually his father's, was made of Steiner sandstone.

It was still light despite the late hour, the summer sun reluctantly dropping in the west to cast long shadows over Church Lane. The street was deserted, the twin doors giving access to the Steiner home locked. Soon the night watchmen would be patrolling the area looking for anyone who did not belong in the street reserved for patricians and their families. The list of undesirables included Leon Muller, youngest son of Manfred Muller, who though he came from a rising family, had no right to be in Church Lane in the evening, or during the day for that matter. Leon moved quickly, using the shadows to enter the wide alley beside the property that gave access to the rear of the building so the kitchens could receive deliveries. The architects who had designed the property had decorated the outside with flanges, stone carvings and ornate window ledges. All of which were an aid to anyone who had a mind to scale the walls.

Leon, being tall and possessed of a muscular physique, decided to take on the challenge and jumped up to grab a dragon carved in stone, hauling himself up to get within touching distance of a first-floor window ledge. To reach the ledge required a literal leap of faith. If he missed he would fall to the ground, which though not life-threatening would probably result in one or more broken bones, which might at worst lead to infection and amputation. And if he broke his back his life would be over. He gripped the snarling dragon with both hands, summoned up all his courage and hauled himself up with his arms, reaching out for the ledge with his right hand. His fingers gained the stone ledge, though for a couple of seconds he swung perilously before he managed to grip the ledge with his left hand. He steadied himself, thanked God for His mercy and then heaved himself up on to the ledge, which was at least a foot wide and six times that in length. Being the residence of a wealthy family, the Steiner home had glass windows, these being small pieces of glass held together with strips of lead, similar to the stained glass in cathedrals. The more glass windows a building had, the richer its owner, and Maximilian

Steiner was very rich. His architects had also devised a system whereby some of the windows could pivot in their frames to allow air to enter. And all the windows to the room Leon wished to access were open, this particular August being very warm. He managed to squeeze his frame through one open window to enter the bedroom of Emma Steiner, the young woman his heart belonged to.

She was sitting beside her bed reading her Bible, engrossed in the words and at first not noticing a tall young man with hair like beaten gold and a strong jaw standing on the other side of the bed. But then her instincts told her something was awry, and her blue eyes turned away from the printed word to look up. She gasped with horror when she saw Leon, dropping the Bible and clutching her hands to her chest.

‘Leon, in the name of all that’s holy, what are you doing here?’

She was tall like him, graceful and womanly, her green dress with its floor-length sleeves decorated with pearls indicative of her high social status. Her thick auburn hair framed her face and for a moment all he could do was smile and admire the vision of grace and beauty before him.

‘I love you,’ he said softly.

She frowned and walked over to him, speaking in hushed tones.

‘You must leave. If my father discovers you are here, in my bedroom, he will kill you. Literally.’

‘I do not care, Emma. I cannot contain my love for you any longer. I had to see you tonight and to hell with everyone else.’

He clutched a hand to his chest. ‘My heart is aching, Emma, aching for you.’

She was outraged, frightened but elated at the same time. For months she and Leon had been seeing each other, albeit only for a few fleeting moments on each occasion. At the market, at the minster, in Church Lane where Leon would wait for hours just for the chance to pass his beloved, who was always accompanied by a rather dour middle-aged maid. Snatched moments and short conversations were the seeds from which their mutual love and lust for each other grew. They were both young, handsome and beautiful, and as spring turned into summer their desire for each grew until Leon could stand it no more.

He reached out to take her hand, the first time he had had any physical contact with her. He held her hand gently. Their fingers entwined.

‘I believe fate has decreed we should be together, my love. I want to marry you.’

The words pleased her. She smiled a beautiful smile and reached out with her other hand to caress his face. She was filled with sinful thoughts and knew what she was thinking was

wrong, but desire on a summer's evening is a difficult beast to control. He was handsome, tall and powerfully built and he had shown the fortitude and patience of a crusader searching for the Holy Grail in his love for her.

Leon leaned forward and planted a delicate kiss on her fulsome lips. She did not recoil, her eyes closing as she savoured the feeling of his lips on hers. He gently embraced her and kissed her more passionately, pressing his muscular frame against hers, his manhood threatening to burst from his hose. Time stopped as they kissed, at first tenderly and then hungrily, their hands like hounds with the scent of blood unfastening clothes as they searched for flesh.

'I will be gone before the dawn,' he managed to whisper in her ear between her hungry kisses.

Once they had disrobed each other they fell on the bed and explored each other's bodies, both of them fine specimens of masculine and feminine physicality. How easy it was for them to make love for an extended period without respite, their youthful bodies brimming with carnal stamina. All social norms and restraints were cast aside in their white-hot desire for each other. And when it was finally over, when the ecstasy had abated and they were both thoroughly spent, Leon and Emma fell into a deep sleep entwined in each other's arms. The dawn came and the miller's son was stilling dozing beside his young love, both of them naked and uncovered on the bed. This was the picture that greeted the old crone who was Emma's maid in the morning when she came to rouse her young mistress for morning prayers. Shocked and outraged, the maid left the room and reported her findings to the steward of the house, who acted quickly, as Leon soon discovered.

He sent the maid back into the bedroom to cover Emma's body before he and two male servants rushed in and dragged Leon away. Emma woke and began screaming but her maid managed to calm her as her young lover was hauled away, the steward delivering a flurry of blows on his head and to his belly. The steward was a man of many talents, and he knew his master well. Once Maximillian Steiner found out his daughter had been ravaged by a housebreaker, he would kill Leon Muller on the spot. But the Mullers were also wealthy and whereas not as high in social status as the Steiners, they had much support in the city. Manfred Muller was a clever man and had ensured the flour produced in his mills inside and outside Bern was always a reasonable price. He took a long-term view regarding his mills, never over-charging bakers and trying to ensure the price of flour remained stable rather than being subject to wild fluctuations. In this way the people of Bern enjoyed relatively cheap bread, which was noted and appreciated by all and sundry. This made the Mullers popular in the city, and the youngest son of Manfred Muller was also a well-liked figure, being an enthusiastic member of the city militia,

which his father had lavished money on to provide it with armour, helmets and weapons. All of this made the Muller family liked and respected throughout Bern, which meant anyone who killed one of their number risked retaliation. So, Leon was clothed and taken to the city jail near the minister before Maximillian Steiner was informed of what had taken place in his daughter's bedroom.

Leon was thrown into a cell with a bruised face and aching belly, a belly that was rumbling after the physical exertions of the night before. After he had recovered his senses he began banging his fists on the heavy wooden door.

'Release me. Do you know who I am? I am Leon Muller, son of Manfred Muller. I will have you flogged for this outrage. And bring me some food and drink.'

The cell was dark, filthy and stank of piss. There was a lice-ridden bed against one damp wall, a stool opposite and a bucket to relieve oneself in. Light was provided by a small opening in the wall, over which were metal bars. After banging his fists on the door and shouting at the top of his voice, all of which elicited no response, he sat on the stool and held his head in his hands. His youthful bravado drained from him, and a feeling of misery began to embrace him. The grim realisation of his unenviable position began to dawn on him. He had promised Emma he would depart her bedroom before dawn, exiting the same way he had entered to disappear into Bern's streets before the sun's rays appeared in the eastern sky. But instead, he had allowed himself to be caught, putting both himself and Emma in danger. The temper of Maximillian Steiner was well known and after he had finished with him he would turn his wrath on his daughter. Maximillian Steiner was indeed a vengeful individual, but he was also calculating and was not about to be outmanoeuvred by a seventeen-year-old boy.

Leon sat in that stinking cell for the rest of the morning. No one answered his demands, which turned into requests and then pathetic pleas as his mind began to fill with images of him being left alone to rot in this cell. He had heard of *oubliettes* – 'forgotten chambers' – into which prisoners were tossed, never to be seen again. When a key turned in the lock and the door opened there were tears of joy in his eyes. He swiftly wiped them away, stood and tried to present a manly appearance. Sheer relief coursed through him when his father walked into the cell, followed by the jailer.

'I release him into your custody, sir,' said the jailer.

'Follow me,' Manfred told his son before turning on his heels and striding from the dingy cell.

Manfred's coach was waiting outside the jail, an elaborately decorated four-wheel carriage pulled by four horses. It had internal curtains, so Manfred was able to hide his son and his

shame as the carriage trundled away from the prison to head towards the Muller house on Market Street. The journey was a form of torture, Manfred not speaking a word to his son as the carriage jolted over the cobblestones. Leon tried to look his father in the eye, but those pale green eyes were cold and avoiding his. Like Leon, Manfred was tall and broad-shouldered, though his arms were thinner and his fingers longer. He had an unkindly face that rarely wore a smile, though was quick to adopt a scowl, as now.

The carriage stopped at the rear of the Muller residence, a large, three-storey building with windows and well-dressed stonework. A servant opened the door to the carriage to allow Manfred to exit, Leon following.

‘My office in an hour,’ hissed Manfred. ‘Get yourself cleaned up. You are a disgrace.’

Leon was unsure whether the last few words were a reference to his appearance or the fact he had brought shame on the Muller family, but his father was undoubtedly enraged by his behaviour, which had increased his already deep disappointment in his youngest son. It was common knowledge that Manfred Muller had only really loved one other person in his life – his wife Elise. She had born him three sons and a daughter but had died giving birth to the last child – Leon. With her passing any love he may have felt for his children had disappeared. He undoubtedly had a fondness for his daughter Heidi and respect for his two eldest sons, Andreas and Detlev, but felt nothing towards Leon, which his youngest son was acutely aware of.

In the hour between him arriving back at his home and meeting his father in his office, Leon washed, changed, filled his belly and talked to his sister. Only a year separated them both, but Heidi was mature beyond her years and possessed of a keen mind. Not particularly attractive, with a long face, brown hair and grey eyes, her father had tried and failed to find her a suitable husband, one who would advance the Muller family rather than fulfil Heidi’s dreams of happiness. She remained in her father’s home, devoting her time to Bible studies, supervising meals, sharing in the running of the household with the steward and overseeing fixtures and fittings. She had no part in the running of the family business or matters pertaining to city affairs.

She sat opposite Leon in the kitchens watching him devour the bread, cheese and fruit served to him.

‘Why did you do it, Leon?’

He stopped munching on an apple and smiled at her, a mischievous glint in his eye. She sighed.

‘Such behaviour brings disrepute not only on you, Leon, but on our family.’

‘It was not my intention. I love her.’

‘Emma Steiner? And she may love you. I certainly hope she does after surrendering her virtue to you.’

He smiled at the delicious memory. Heidi shook her head.

‘You will both pay for your sins, I fear.’

‘I do not fear the consequences of what I have done for love.’

Her head dropped.

‘Oh, Leon. What a young fool you are. Do you think Maximillian Steiner will allow you to marry his daughter because you love her?’

Leon shrugged. ‘Why not? We love each other and that is all that matters.’

‘In your world, yes. But in the real world, the world we all live in, things are very different, as you are about to discover. While you were languishing in jail this morning, father was summoned to the Steiner residence. I did not enquire how he had fared, but the look on his face when he returned was enough to know the visit was not a happy one. You should prepare yourself.’

Leon shoved a piece of cheese into his mouth. ‘For what?’

‘For the consequences of your reckless actions.’

Heidi stood, walked around the table, and kissed him on the head.

‘I will pray for you.’

She turned and walked from the kitchens, which suddenly acquired a sombre aspect. Leon knew something was wrong because the maids and cooks avoided eye contact with him and went about their work in silence. He finished his meal and made his way to his father’s office on the second floor. Like most of the residence the interior of the room was austere: a single chair behind a functionary desk and two large oak chests along the walls, which were covered with tapestries depicting scenes of a miller’s life. Leon’s eyes drifted towards the scenes as his seated father opposite his standing son perused a document. Manfred did not look up when he began speaking.

‘It has taken many years for our family to raise themselves up from the humble origins you see depicted in the tapestries on these walls. You were born into wealth and privilege, Leon, the labours and privations of the people illustrated here laying the foundation of the comfortable life we now lead. You are aware of your privileged life, I assume?’

‘Yes, father.’

Manfred stopped reading and looked up at his son.

‘A hundred years ago, the Mullers were just another impoverished family eking out a living on the banks of a river with a single mill. Now we live in a fine house in a splendid city, and I own all the mills in the city and in the villages around Bern.’

‘It is a commendable achievement, father.’

Manfried slowly brought his hands together.

‘This morning I received a summons from Maximillian Steiner. I believed he had summoned me so we could discuss my joining the city council. Imagine my surprise after having arrived at his home to discover an enraged Maximillian telling me my son had broken into his home and raped his daughter.’

Leon was shocked. ‘I did not rape her, father.’

‘You shamed us! You disgraced us!’

His father’s words were like crossbow bolts slamming into him. Leon visibly recoiled when they shot from his father’s mouth.

‘Maximillian Steiner wants your head and would have had it were it not for the fact that to bring you to trial would mean revealing his daughter’s stolen chastity, which would have ruined her chances of a good marriage.’

An evil leer showed on Manfried’s face.

‘Instead, it was agreed that your life should be spared to avoid any scandal.’

Leon breathed a sigh of relief. His father pointed a bony finger at him.

‘But you will be banished from the city of Bern. Tomorrow, the commander of the city militia is leading a contingent north to do battle with the French. You will be joining that contingent.’

Leon was elated and despondent in equal measure. Elated because he was being given the chance to fight for Bern, despondent because he was being banished from the city of his birth.

‘What happens when the militia returns?’

‘It will be welcomed back,’ said his father. ‘But this letter is to its commander, Henman Sevogel, instructing him to dismiss you once the militia’s service is over. As to what happens to you after that, it is in God’s hands. But if you return to Bern you will be put to death. And you should thank God you still have a life to lead after your idiotic and disgusting escapade last night.’

‘You are sending me away to die,’ muttered Leon forlornly.

His father was unconcerned.

‘For the last seventeen years I have watched you develop from a lazy child into a lazy young man. Despite the expensive education you have received, you have shown no gratitude or inclination to lead a worthwhile life.

‘Your eldest brother Andreas has dedicated himself to learning all about the family business, has married well and will one day assume his rightful place among the leading families of this city. Your other brother Detlev has devoted his life to the law and will one day be a senior judge in Bern. And what have you achieved?’

The last sentence was uttered in a sneering manner.

‘Shall I tell you?’ asked Manfred.

Leon gave him a pathetic nod.

‘Nothing,’ came the terse reply. ‘You have shown no interest in the family business, the church or the law, devoting your existence to an infantile obsession with the militia. Your sister informed me a short time ago that your commander told her you were skilful in the use of a halberd. That is your one achievement thus far in your miserable life. You are good with a stick with a piece of metal on top.’

‘All male citizens are required to learn the use of a weapon and drill with the militia, father.’

‘A hundred years ago, perhaps. But times change and families of substance have better things to do than stand in the mud and rain battling Austrian knights.’

It had been one hundred and twenty-nine years since Swiss alpine shepherds had destroyed an Austrian army of heavily armed knights at the pass at Morgarten, and fifty-six years since Austrian nobility had been humiliated again at the Battle of Sempach. The Swiss were ferocious in defence of their liberty and every canton – a geographic and political region – enforced strict rules when it came to military service and weapons storage. Every Swiss male was expected to keep a weapon in his home, said weapon to be kept in excellent order, its metal surfaces to be free of rust, its edges to be sharp, and all its wooden parts to be unbroken and free from rot. The number and type of weapons stored in homes was graduated according to an owner’s wealth. The wealthy were expected not only to store two weapons for every male in the household, but also purchase enough armour for at least two men. But when it came to military service, a wealthy merchant or patrician could pay another man to fulfil his military obligations.

‘I wish to see Emma Steiner before I depart.’

‘Denied,’ said his father with relish. ‘She is to be married immediately.’

‘What?’

'Married to Lukas Keller in two days' time, or so I was informed earlier. The Keller family have been pushing for a union of their eldest son and the Steiner girl for a while, but her father was prevaricating, the match being suitable but not particularly advantageous for the Steiner family. Your actions have forced his hand, which is another reason why he wants you dead.'

Leon was barely hearing what his father was saying, the revelation Emma was to be married off to another being like a dagger thrust into his heart. His banishment would mean having to fend for himself in the world, which he was ill-equipped to do. But he now no longer cared if he lived or died. What was his life without Emma? Nothing.

'You will report to the militia in front of the minster first thing in the morning. You may take the armour and weapons in your bedroom. You may go. We will not see each other again.'

'You will not bid me farewell in the morning?'

Manfried's eyes were cold as he looked at his son.

'When your mother died giving you life, I believed the sacrifice she made would give me a son to be proud of, who would excel in life to make the name Muller renowned and respected. I see now it was a bad trade. Now get out.'

Leon managed to eat a few morsels that evening as he pondered his future, such as it was. The militia was mustering in front on the minster in the morning and he would be marching with it. The thought of his first campaign filled him with excitement and trepidation, but the disgrace of his banishment and not seeing his beloved again hung over him like a black cloud. He debated leaving the house in the dead of night with his weapons and helmet, making his way to the Steiner house, breaking in and rescuing Emma. But the plan was hare-brained and doomed to failure. He knew it and so he decided to try to get some sleep before he left the Muller home. Forever.

The night passed agonisingly slowly, and he was fully awake and dressed before dawn broke. He made his way to the dining hall in his armour where sad-faced servants provided hot broth and warm bread, which he forced himself to eat. His sister joined him at the table, though she refused any food.

'You look like I feel,' Leon said to her in an attempt at levity.

'I have prayed all night for you, Leon. Prayed for God to protect you and show you the way to a worthwhile future.'

He finished the broth and scooped out the bowl with a piece of bread.

'I have no future; did not father tell you?'

Their father was conspicuous by his absence, though he rarely ate breakfast in the dining hall, preferring to eat the first meal of the day in his bedroom.

Heidi's eyes moistened.

'I tried to reason with him, but he was unyielding. I will continue to argue your case while you are away. When you come home from the war, he might have mellowed.'

Leon shook his head. 'You are wasting your time, Heidi. Father hates me and is glad to see the back of me. My actions have played right into his hands. Well, more fool me.'

He stood and picked up the canvas haversack that had been prepared by the cook. It contained enough food for fourteen days of campaigning and contained oatmeal, salt, bread, cheese and butter. It was filled to bursting because in addition to the food, it also held a spare pair of boots – the only spare item of clothing carried in a haversack according to regulations. Leon picked it up and slung it over his shoulder, adjusted his belt from which hung his scabbard holding his long dagger, and grabbed the halberd leaning against the long wooden table.

Heidi rose, walked round the table and embraced her brother, tears running down her cheeks. He held her tightly and kissed her on the cheek, wrenching himself free out of fear her emotions were infectious and he would begin to weep like a child. He had no wish to appear at the muster with red eyes.

'It is time for me to leave,' he told her, picking up his helmet and marching towards the door to the dining hall, being careful not to damage the framework with his halberd.

The steward, a middle-aged man who had served the Muller household since boyhood, stood by the door leading to the street, opening it when Leon and Heidi appeared, both of them downcast, Heidi trying her utmost not to break down.

'Good luck, master,' the steward said to Leon as he passed him.

Leon gave him a half-smile and walked into the street. It was still dark, the predawn air cool, though it would be another warm August day once the sun was up. Leon turned, smiled to his weeping sister, steeled his nerves, and then marched off to war and an uncertain future.