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PROLOGUE

Imagine

Dawn casts the shadow of a vanished palace upon the mist. A king's flute solo drifts on the air. Saplings take root on the forgotten railway siding where Lenin paused before sparking his revolution. Victory flashes gold through the thick Tiergarten trees. Ashes from Sachsenhausen's ovens are caught in dusty whirlwinds above the Holocaust Memorial. Children's laughter echoes along narrow, naked parks where the Wall once stood. In a banal car park, tourists stand, transfixed, atop Hitler's hidden bunker.

Why are we drawn to certain cities? Perhaps because of a story read in childhood. Or a chance teenage meeting. Or maybe simply because the place touches us, embodying in its tribes, towers and history an aspect of our understanding of what it means to be human. Paris is about romantic love. Lourdes equates with devotion. New York means energy. London is forever trendy.

Berlin is all about volatility. Its identity is based not on stability but on change. No other city has repeatedly been so powerful, and fallen so low. No other capital has been so hated, so feared, so loved. No other place has been so twisted and torn across five

centuries of conflict, from religious wars to Cold War, at the hub of Europe's ideological struggle.

Berlin is a city that is forever in the process of becoming, never being, and so lives more powerfully in the imagination. Long before setting eyes on it, the stranger feels its aching absences as much as its brazen presence: the sense of lives lived, dreams realised and evils executed with an intensity so shocking that they rent the air and shook its fabric. So much of it has been lost or reinvented that the mind rushes to fill the vacuum, fleshing out the invisible, linking facts with fiction. As neither are fixed, an animated dialogue sparks between present and past, between the observed city and the place portrayed in ten thousand books, films, paintings and fanciful architectural utopias. Yesterday echoes along today's streets and the ideas conjured up by Berlin's dreamers and dictators seem as solid as its bricks and mortar. The hypnotic and volatile city comes alive in the mind.

A lifetime ago I was a teenage traveller 'doing' Europe. During a happy, footloose summer I climbed the Eiffel Tower, tripped down the Spanish Steps and felt the earth move under the stars on an Aegean beach. Then on the last week of the holiday I saw the Wall. The sight of the heinous barrier shook me to my core. At the heart of the Continent were watchtowers, barbed wire and border guards instructed to shoot fellow citizens who wanted to live under a different government.

I knew the history. I understood what had happened. But I couldn't conceive how it had happened. The individuals whose actions had divided Germany and Europe – the wartime planners, the Soviet commissars, the Stasi agents – weren't monsters. They were ordinary men and women. I longed to understand their motivation, how they came to act as they did, yet at the same time I was repulsed by their crimes and needed to feel their victims' suffering.

Throughout that week I was drawn again and again to the Wall. I stood for hours on the wooden observation platform at the end of a bizarre cul-de-sac overlooking vanished Potsdamer Platz. I stared

in silence across the death strip, stunned that a clash of ideas could be set in cement at the centre of a city.

Then on the final day of the holiday I crossed into the East. At Checkpoint Charlie I stepped over a white-painted line and slipped through a gap in the Wall. Gates lifted then closed behind me. Cars and pedestrians were corralled into a concrete chicane of sharp double bends. A Soviet MiG flew low over the deserted Brandenburg Gate, touching the sound barrier, shaking the windows and my faith in the inherent goodness of man.

I surrendered my passport to an armed, buttoned-up officer, paid for a visa and stood in the drizzle under the gaze of a Volksarmee lieutenant dressed in field grey. He carried a loaded rifle. Beyond his squat lookout post, the doors of the surrounding buildings had been bricked up. The entrances to underground stations were sealed. Along Friedrichstraße – once the bustling Fleet Street of Berlin – stretched a bleak and narrow transit route of flat concrete-rendered façades, from which residents and memories had been sucked away.

On that last – and first – day I walked away from the tightly controlled border area and made for windswept Alexanderplatz. I carried with me a collection of Alfred Döblin's 1920s short stories. Before the war and Wall, Berlin's greatest biographer had wandered through the central square's cobbled courtyards and cloth shops, noting the idle youths in cheeky caps, the clockmakers and the '*very* cheap women'. Around him locals had called out in guttural Yiddish. Fishmongers had sold fat herring on ice, chalking price lists on the cellar doors of their high, angular houses. Fairground barrel organs had clamoured outside the Münzstraße cinemas. Above a workers' bookshop a painted hand had rested on an open book, beneath a sickle, ears of corn and the words, 'To produce more you need to know more.'

But in the 1970s the monstrous expanse of grey concrete offered me no hint that fifty years earlier it had been Döblin's 'quivering heart' of Berlin. Almost nothing had survived of the old town, due to the combined efforts of Albert Speer's fantasies, British Lancaster bombers and Communist city planners. Around me I heard

neither voices nor birdsong. The tiled 'Fountain of Friendship among People' was bone dry. The cavernous, colourless Centrum department store seemed to sell nothing but Russian *Melodiya* LPs. Smudges of brown coal smoke hung in the air and the blackened station smelt of blast dust. A maroon and beige S-Bahn train rattled over the arches. I clutched my book so tightly that my knuckles turned white. Alexanderplatz appeared to be deserted, apart from a young couple pushing a pram. Beneath the tarnished World Clock – in which planets jerked like dying atoms around a nuclear centre – they paused to adjust the baby's blanket. I glanced into the pram. Their baby was a plastic doll.

A single building of human proportion caught my eye. On the square's western edge beyond a tram shelter, the Marienkirche was Berlin's second parish church, built on a sandy rise in an unknown year during the thirteenth century. Its canted angle alone echoed the old street plan. Yet as I darted towards it I saw that bullet holes still peppered its old brick walls. The mingy light which seeped through its dirty windows dragged the spirit down into the lurking shadows, instead of drawing it up to heaven. In its doorway a lone woman shivered in her bare stockings as a cobbler whetted his knife and shaped the new heels of her boots.

Death stood in the vestibule behind them. He seized the hands of cardinal and pope, king and knight, magistrate and fool, and led them on their last journey. I moved with them into the body of the church, along the length of the pale, twenty-metre Gothic mural. The *Totentanz* had been painted with childlike simplicity around 1469 and survived blitz, firestorm and agnosticism, hidden under whitewash for almost half a millennium. Its awkward line of dancers had been invisible when – for example – Nietzsche had walked past them and first felt Berlin's 'hidden will to death'. Goethe, Voltaire and the Brothers Grimm had followed him into the Marienkirche, sensing rather than seeing the *Totentanz*, as had visitors and residents Chekhov, Kafka, Döblin, Nabokov and Günter Grass. In this same vestibule Anita Berber – the black-lipped erotic dancer painted by Otto Dix – had been stirred to create her own naked death dance and Nick Cave had paused, hearing in his head the lyrics of 'Death

is Not the End'. During his sojourn in the city Jean-Paul Sartre may even have imagined here a world where the dead lived alongside the living, unseen by them and unable to touch them.

'Come you all with me and join the Dance of Death,' called the grisly, shrouded leader in Low German verse, glancing back at his cavorting charges, and I realised that he was also staring at me, as he'd stared at everyone who had passed this way, drawing us all into the dance.

For an instant I pictured myself taking hold of the doomed dancers' hands. I stepped out of the church with them as the sun emerged from behind the clouds. Alexanderplatz was no longer deserted. In a wink it had become crowded with plague victims and Habsburg Army whores. Medieval storytellers and cackling fishwives rose into life. Vengeful Red Army soldiers taunted bent-back rubble women. In the throng I spotted gum-chewing GIs and charred British bombardiers clutching flaming parachutes. I saw Napoleon astride his white charger and SS Panzergrenadiers prance around murdered Jewish children. I watched John F. Kennedy's motorcade stop at a baker's stall to buy a dozen sugar-dusted *Pfannkuchen* with plum filling.

Not only that, but among the dead appeared the city's iconic creations: David Bowie's heroes kissed by the Wall, Wim Wenders' angels winged above a torch-lit Nazi parade, Sally Bowles went shopping with Marlene Dietrich and le Carré's George Smiley watched the packed trains leave for Auschwitz. As far as the eye could see Berlin's legends, both real and imagined, joined hands together with Death – and me.

The light changed, ending my reverie and the summer. I left the church and flew home to Canada and my ordinary world. But there's a part of me that believes we go on existing in a place after we've left it and soon I felt compelled to return to Berlin. Over the next decade I came back again and again to make movies and to start my first book, trying to see through the whitewash and patina of daily life, falling in and out of (and back in) love with the haunted, ecstatic, volatile city.

Then in 1989 the sun came out again. *Ossis* and *Wessis*, East and West, danced together on the Wall, holding hands, waving sparklers, not in a last waltz with Death but in jubilation for new beginnings. I made a trail of footprints across the smoothed sand of no man's land, linking two worlds. Around me thousands of Berliners hacked away at the barrier with pickaxes and hammers. A swarm of buzzing Trabants – the cardboard car for comrades, belching blue smoke, breaking down, being pushed – circled gangs of soldiers dismantling the concrete slabs. At Checkpoint Charlie the Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich – who had been harassed, intimidated and stripped of his citizenship by the Soviets – played an impromptu Bach suite. Beside him an old man dropped to his knees and cried. Road crews rejoined severed streets. 'Ghost' U-Bahn stations were freed of their phantoms. Within a year 155 kilometres of the Wall vanished, leaving in its place only a discreet line of paving stones and peculiar, twisting cycle paths. In this city my own actions became memories, and a part of Berlin's history too, not so much because I did anything of importance here, but because others did, and their deeds became enmeshed in my life.

Now, after forty years of visits, I've settled here to try to map this place, divided as it is between past and present, conformity and rebellion, the visible and the invisible. I stand in Alexanderplatz, busy with tattooed tourists and old Berliners basking in the sunshine, holding iPhones and lapdogs, flashing neon wristbands or folding themselves into blankets outside the cafés. I start to walk away from them, at once back and forth in time, spiralling out from the square and into the city. I know that no true map can be drawn by simply trekking across town and noting interesting facts. To chart both the seen and unseen, and to navigate the potency of Berlin's vigorous mythology, one needs to know its mythmakers: the artists, thinkers and activists whose heated visions have become no less real than the city's bitter winter nights. It is Berlin that made them, as they made Berlin, transforming a mean and artless outpost into the capital of Europe.

This book portrays the city through those men and women,

alongside some of the countless others whom one has never heard of, whose lives can only be divined: Germans and foreigners, native daughters and adopted sons, politicians and painters, a broken-hearted king and a reborn pop star, a diabolical genius and at least one angel. Each of them is different, each an individual. But one characteristic unites them all, as well as their modern counterparts. In this laboratory of creativity and evil, in this *Heimat* of fantasy and Death, Berlin dared them to imagine.

Marienkirche, 1469

He never liked to scribe the words, never liked to clip their wings, to fix them in time like the poor, glass-eyed songbirds stuffed and mounted in the Kurfürst's Room of Wonders. Words spoken were thoughts alive, unfettered, tracing ever-changing patterns in the air and mind, blown to and fro by a breath of fancy or gust of laughter. A gilding here, an embellishment there, the deed of a hero or the tender-hearted longing of a shepherdess tweaked and tailored for Cölln, Berlin, Spandau or Treptow. Each town was different, each ballad rejigged to suit the place, the time, the mood and appetite of the crowd. That was the artistry, the freedom, and that had been the swallow's flight of his calling. Without it his words lost their music, and his music its resonance, like a thrush snared on the branch and stunned into silence. Yet now, on this dull September evening in the Marienkirche, Konrad needed to write down the words, to tether the lyrics and melodies of the old *chansons*. In the lamplight the fresh paint on the mural, on his father's portrait, looked as wet as the tears on his cheeks. He lifted the flask to his lips then

stumbled back through the vestibule and out into the boneyard.

His father Gottfried von Cölln had been a *Minnesänger*, a wandering poet and a vassal of the prince. In the year of Our Lord 1448, soon after Kurfürst Frederick 'Irontooth' had ordered the building of the Schloss, Gottfried had led Berliners to defy him, opening the Spree floodgates to swamp its foundations. 'Irontooth' responded as he had when he'd disbanded the town council, with viciousness. Five hundred knights – more skinhead bully boys than nobles – took to the streets, smiting the rebels, throwing into the Spree their statue of Roland, prized symbol of citizens' rights. Gottfried's *Unwille* had been the single rebellious act of his life, after which he had to flee of course. But not before bidding his wife a farewell so fond that it led – nine months later – to the birth of Konrad.

For the first decade of the boy's life, Gottfried had wandered through German lands, tramped abroad to Prague and Paris, taking whatever God sent him: sun, rain, mist, snow, famine or feast. In far Lusatia he ate pike broth and stag's liver pasties. On the banks of the Elbe he drank hot cordial spiced with cloves and gillyflowers. He was robbed, beaten and left for dead in the Alps of Savoy. He watched the sun rise over the Mediterranean. And in every place he sang, to fill his heart as much as to earn his crust.

At the courts of margraves and princes, Gottfried told the old tales of mighty soldiers of long ago, of maidens with garlands of fresh roses in their hair, of saints wise and demons wicked. He sang in Latin, French and Occitan. He even joined with a harper and a fiddler to form a travelling band, honing his powers of enticement.

At the same time he collected other traditional songs. On the Petit Pont and in Provence, he plucked *sons d'amour* and wanderers' melodies from the air as swallows catch insects, locking them in his memory, always favouring the courtly romances of a more chivalrous age.

But, as the traveller brings settled folk a little hunger for freedom, so he came to pine for his own hearth. Ten years to the day after his departure, the wayfarer stood on his threshold, holding out a calloused hand to the boy hiding behind his mother's skirts.

Gottfried then pulled young Konrad through the earthen lanes, over the wooden Langebrücke to the Schloss by the Spree, to stand before the Kurfürst. He dropped to his knees and groaned for forgiveness. He said that he had followed his heart and the poem of the road, unravelling its twists and bends, its *Wort und Weise*, until it told him to return home to Berlin. He recited:

Revertere, revertere
iam, ut intueamurte.

Return, return now,
so that we may look at you.

Kurfürst 'Irontooth' – splendid in his red tunic shot through with gold – might have drawn his sword, or called upon a ruffian knight to give him satisfaction. Yet he chose not to rush the moment, and to humble the rebel poet. Instead he led both Gottfried and his son into his *Wunderkammer*.

In this Room of Wonders were stuffed birds and the spurs of a knight who had fallen at the siege of Constantinople, books rare and precious, a lock of the emperor's hair and a splinter from the true Cross. Young Konrad gawked at the splendid riches but the sight did not humble Gottfried. Rather he was moved to speak of the soul's unappeased hunger for beauty, as well as the troubadours' joy in summer and love, in noble quests and in sweet, blessed ladies who await the return of their betrothed. 'There is no greater power, no stronger magic in the world, than music to save the tender blossoms of life,' he said.

At first the old ideals seemed to touch 'Irontooth', for he replied without apparent anger, 'Then *Minnesänger*, you will sing once for me.' There and then in the *Wunderkammer*, flanked by Ovid's *Amores* and a mirror said to reflect holy light, Gottfried sang the *Roman de Horn* as if his life depended on it:

Lors prent la harpe a sei, qu'il la veut atemperer . . .

When he tunes the harp,
and touches its strings,
and makes them sing;
Lord, what heavenly harmony!

A *chanson de geste* was followed by a pair of lyric pieces. Gottfried slid the words into the music like a hand into a glove, jerking his head as he threw out the lines, growing so excited that he seemed about to fly. He recounted tales of lost love and Christian heroes until the shadows fell across the room and in the lane below cowed priests answered the call to Vespers.

Throughout the performance the Kurfürst said nothing. When Gottfried finished, he stated simply, 'You have a gift, and you will never use it again.'

Twenty years later, on that dull September evening, Gottfried's son Konrad stumbled out of the Marienkirche. He had no bone to pick with graveyards. Unlike some who were unsettled by their sweet, heady stench, he didn't find the air unpleasant. Cemeteries felt strangely comforting to him, in their levelling of prince and pauper, in that they were a destination to which all men travelled. In any case he didn't want to go home yet, drunk and dishevelled as he was, to sit by the cold hearth listening to his mother weep.

He picked his way around a tangle of wooden crosses. The new stone was set beyond the shallow hollow of an old plague pit against the church wall. Konrad noted that the workmanship was fine, the letters carved well and deep, the chisel cut still sharp to the touch. Murderous 'Irontooth' himself had paid for the stone, if one could believe it, as if to hide his infamy from eternity. Here lies a good man. Here ruled a just prince. Here the Word was cherished, and other such lies.

Konrad dropped against the slab and felt the soil ooze between his toes. He couldn't remember where he'd left his boots. He wanted to believe that his father was still near, that he'd catch sight of him in a crowd on the Mühlendamm bank or among the monks

at red-brick Lehnin. Yet at the same time he thanked God that his father's two decades of suffering had finally ended.

Overhead the light drained from the sky and the limbs of the elms seemed to reach out to one another in the dusk, clinging together for support through the coming night.

'Shove over,' she barked, startling him awake. Konrad must have fallen asleep, judging from the stiffness in his bones. He didn't know the hour.

'Don't throw your arms and legs about so,' cautioned the woman as he made room at the slab. 'Keep your elbows in or you'll knock over a ghost.'

Konrad was irritated. His mourning solitude had been disturbed and he was cold. 'There are no ghosts here,' he replied as silhouettes of crosses danced across the broken earth, cast by torches on the Neuer Markt. 'Only flesh rotting into earth.'

'Sacrilege,' she accused, jabbing a finger at him. 'We walk among a multitude of ghosts who are visible only to the messenger of souls.'

In the half-light the woman's face was not wholly unpleasant. Her hair was uncovered and loose. But her arms were fat and he was in no mood for conversation.

'Are you a messenger of souls?' he taunted.

'I am Lola.'

He could have kicked her, driven her away or walked off himself but her proximity stirred him, as did the warm hand now placed with skill on his thigh. He knew well that certain women – whom some called swallows – were drawn to churches and cathedrals like the feathered travellers themselves. He understood from the moans and titters around them that it was not the dead who were coming to life among the graves. Like these hidden others, he too decided to reach for comfort in the cold night, so that he might forget death for an hour and a coin or two.

'So you *are* alive,' laughed Lola.

At dawn she was gone, taking her superstitions with her. Konrad rose to drag himself home, crossing the waking market with its stout horse dealers, its bakers whitened by flour, its yawning peddlers of

pepper and cumin seed. Pigeon-breasted farmers' wives in dusty sandals snored over baskets of onions. Stinking beggars displayed their stumps and called for alms. A Jew in ringlets and spotless black frock coat paused at a cloth merchant's stand, unfolding rich reams of Flanders indigo and perse. A wrestler in bearskin with hair wind-wild challenged passers-by to a tug-of-war.

Medieval Berlin was a dirty patchwork of squalid hovels and mean manors stitched to a low, lazy twist of the Spree. Along its sandy banks fisherboys hawked the morning catch, their high voices lifting in a kind of babbling river music. Brawny lads stripped to the waist unloaded barrels of Rhenish wine and sacks of rice from Arborio. A matron from a noble house craned her neck to select the finest trout, the freshest loaf, the thickest wedge of cheese, tucking each prize into her willow basket. Urchins raced by the Mühlen-damm mills like dogs on a scent. Blue-tunicked soldiers sauntered through the *mêlée*, plucking any ware that took their fancy.

Konrad crossed the river to the Cölln side, to the better half of the sister settlements, behind a lone scholar with a curl of crisp linen rising above his dark jacket. The man slipped into the Dominicans' cloister – the so-called Dom – and Konrad turned left into narrow Brüderstraße with its clustered, peak-roofed dwelling houses. Around him the *Klang* of canaries yellow and foreign and ironsmiths at their forges hung in the air, as did the smell of beeswax and roasting chestnuts.

In these shadowed courtyards he had learnt his father's craft in secret, memorising for over twenty years the formal songs which Gottfried himself had been banned from singing, coming to master the flute, the vielle and the viol. Gottfried had been a strict teacher, his standards sharpened by frustration, and Konrad never seemed able to live up to his expectations. He tried so hard for perfection that a tightness held him back, until finally he rejected his father's staid and dated *Minnesang* music, as well as its courtly Latin and French lyrics.

Konrad wanted instead to sing as a free man, in the drinking houses and at the fairs of common folk. He loved to croon on impulse and in German, composing spontaneous tunes for artisans

and peasants, even though they had almost no money to pay him. He played and sang until the music moved them onto their feet, into song, to dance. He uncaged his father's chivalrous *Lieder* and let them soar, rewording them on the fly, spinning them anew for his audience and age, proud of never repeating himself in performance.

Often payment came to him in pleasure. He gorged himself on *Berlinerinnen*, becoming a skilful and energetic lover both on and off stage, a lustful carnivore who could not imagine feasting for ever on a single female. But the sport had its dangers, for the Kurfürst had imposed strict penalties for petty crimes. Loose-liver fornicators could be hung by the neck. Adulterous women were apt to be killed by the sword. Likewise, thieves who stole from the Church were buried alive and liars were boiled in an iron cauldron. Public executions took place on every second Wednesday at the Oderberg Gate, a death rattle east of the Marienkirche. The corpses were hung on the Langebrücke as a warning to others.

Konrad mourned away the September day at home until evening, when he re-crossed the long bridge to Berlin. The weather was grey and wet, a Baltic rain blowing cold and sea-scented from the north. Berlin was a place incapable of tenderness, he thought, a volatile and moody virago who only ever ran fiery hot or bitter cold or drenched herself in tears.

He had told his mother that he wished to look again at his father's painted likeness. In truth he went back to the church for the living as much as the dead. When he saw Lola, her skirts dirty from practising her trade on the damp grass, he felt another flash of irritation. Like most Berliners, she was ignorant and uncouth, preferring carousal to contemplation. As she drew him near he jumped away, unable either to stand tall or lie down. He wanted to gather up his feeble defences against loss yet at the same time he could not wait to surrender to it. In response she simply warned him about striking out at ghosts and, when night closed around them, her persistence softened the man, though only his heart.

'Lola Lola', he called aloud like a child. Lola Lola.

Afterwards a woodsmoke mist rolled across the earth and he

began to speak of his father, gesturing down at the mound on which they lay.

‘I will write down all his old songs,’ he told her, the smoke bringing tears to his eyes. ‘I cannot bear to lose them too.’

In the fifteenth century lyrics were rarely recorded. Songs passed by mouth from master to apprentice, father to son with an emphasis on accuracy and external form: numbers of syllables, orthodox rhymes, rote learning. Gutenberg’s press was but a dozen years old and had not yet overtaken the oral tradition. The few manuscripts in Berlin’s *Wunderkammer* had come from a scriptorium, copied and bound by Franciscan or Dominican hands. No learned scribe had ever bothered to fix the old poems to the page. Now, in the shabby outpost, Konrad dared to imagine doing just that, with Lola at his side.

Theirs was not a usual courtship. He did not send her fragments of sugar and sweet notes. She did not withhold her favours. Instead they continued to couple like rats in straw and, after their wedding, he moved her into his house. By day he became a scribe at his father’s table, bent over sheaves of cloth parchment, recalling and writing down songs. By night in his parents’ old bed he was a farmer glad to plough his wife’s fertile field.

Unter den Linden, an der Heide,
da unser zweier Bette was,
da muget ir vinden, schöne beide
gebrochen Bluomen unde Gras.

Under the linden trees, and on the heath,
where we made our bed,
we left the grass and blooms,
so flattened by beauty.

Konrad could not spell of course, or at least words were not yet put down with a standard arrangement of letters, yet the handicap did not diminish his eagerness. Strangely Lola’s reluctance to give

up her old trade also heightened his sense of urgency. He beat her, as was his right, locking her in the granary until she agreed to stop. She called it her own hunger, and it grew more acute with the loss of their firstborn. In the spring before the meadows were sown she held the babe in her arms. When it died, she placed a Bible at its head in the crib.

‘Er tuot ein scheiden von mir hin, das mir nie scheiden leider wart . . .’ wrote Konrad that sad morning, recording the old German refrain:

He leaves me, and no leaving brings me more pain,
I give him my heart to guide his journey.

*

Berlin and Cölln were minor towns, sharing a provost and mayor, bypassed by Europe’s main trade routes, much less important than busy Magdeburg and Frankfurt-an-der-Oder. Within their compact defensive walls gossip spread as swiftly as the pox, between women warming themselves by the fire, through servants at the Rathaus pump, to courtiers in the Schloss. When the Kurfürst heard of Konrad’s ink-horned undertaking, he summoned him to the court.

Kurfürst ‘Irontooth’ held strong views on legend and legacy, as he did on most matters. He recognised that his Brandenburg was a headstrong borderland of little learning, peopled for the most part by the dispossessed. They’d tramped in from every corner of the Holy Roman Empire and beyond. His subjects needed both to be built up, so that they might serve him, and to be cut down so as not to rebel.

The Kurfürst understood the power of chronicle and in his chambers he instructed Konrad on which lyrics were to be preserved. Konrad was to glorify the leaders of the Germani tribes, from Hermann who had destroyed three Roman legions to Albert the Bear and ‘Irontooth’ himself. He was to describe war as destiny. He was never to call their land Slavonia, or Slavic, but rather a place forever German.

‘Do this and you shall sit at my table and sing for me. Fail me and

you – and your whoring wife – will sing a different tune, when you suffer the same fate as your father.’

As he'd been born under the sign of the Scorpion, 'Irontooth' never forgave nor forgot. Over the years he had forbidden Konrad's father to perform, taking away his voice, making him as mute as one of his stuffed songbirds. Two decades after the flooding of the Schloss foundations, when he had exacted pain enough to polish his power, the Kurfürst had taken final revenge. Gottfried had been dragged from his home and lashed to a wooden platform. A dozen wooden blocks had been rammed beneath his body and he was battered with clubs. When his arms, legs and spine had been broken he was threaded onto a large wheel and hoisted onto a post at the Oderberg Gate. Then as he died, as maggots devoured his still-living flesh and crows pecked out his eyes, 'Irontooth' had instructed that Gottfried be portrayed as the singing fool – holding Death's hand, dancing with a drum at his feet and musical bells on his two-tone tunic – in the Marienkirche *Totentanz*.

Konrad was no hero. He had no wish to be broken on the wheel. He simply wanted to share the stories which moved him. He began to fear the loss of his own life as much as the loss of those whom he loved. His fear made him timid, and he trimmed the course of his endeavour. Not only did he stop his own performances, he also started to shape his father's *Lieder* to please his patron. On the page he recorded the bravery of a pure, northern race, romanticising their battles, demonising the uncourtly knights of archaic West Francia and Slavic Moscovy. He preserved only appropriate epics for posterity.

As a result he acquired a green velvet coat, a fur cap and a satchel of good leather in which to carry his pages. Noble folk who once laughed at his careless tunes now lowered their eyes in respect as he prepared to join the Mastersingers' Guild. Whenever he felt uneasy with his compromise, 'Irontooth' rewarded him with a reading at court, after which he was free to partake of any willing lady in the audience, as long as her maid kept watch at the bedroom door.

He even had silver enough to make a weekly call at the Flemish bathhouse. Indeed it was there, at the turning point of his life, in

the arms of a most-favoured Brussels nymph (whose slender feet and firm breasts transported him into a particular ecstasy) that he thought he heard his father's voice.

The sounds of copulation do not vary much from lover to lover yet, through the bulging bathhouse wall, the passionate groans next door brought to his mind Gottfried's plea long ago for forgiveness. Konrad uncoupled himself from his fair partner and without dressing burst into the adjoining room. The grunting stranger – so set on his task that he wasn't distracted by the interruption – was unfamiliar to him but Konrad recognised the woman beneath as his own wife.

'You live by prostitution,' he accused her.

'We live by prostitution,' she replied.

Konrad's last Sunday dawned with him back in the Marienkirche boneyard, the imagined voice of his father and his wife's true words ringing in his ears. His chin was disjointed and pocked by pebbles. His velvet coat was ingrained with dirt. His breath stank of *Brandewin*. His arms were spread wide over the grave mound as if to embrace it.

He had not been home, not slept in his bed, not washed and refreshed himself for the day. His unruly, natural ways were inappropriate on this of all mornings, he told himself, for it was the day that he was to perform an approved poem and be admitted to the guild.

Poetry was a mechanical art to be learnt through diligent study, according to the guild. Its creation had nothing to do with inspiration. To gain membership Konrad had agreed to submit himself to rules which dictated both the manner of delivery and a song's subject, as well as permissible structure, rhymes, melodies and cacophonies. He made himself accept that words could never be altered, except upon the instruction of a superior authority.

Konrad hurried home to change, passing synagogue and stagnant city moat, keeping to the back lanes so as not to be espied in his shameful disarray. He returned to town as red and white banners were hung from the Rathaus roof. In the gathering crowd