

## PROLOGUE

Verona, the late Middle Ages.

*Two rival families: the Capulets and the Montagues. Something happened between them in the distant past, and as a result they are still at each other's throats. No one can even remember how the feud began, but that old hatred keeps flaring up, over and over again. Can you imagine being born as Romeo Montague or Juliet Capulet – and falling hopelessly in love with your enemy? Love at first sight, love that grows into an all-consuming passion, love that you are willing to die for...*

The moon is a faint sickle in the early-morning sky, and the city of Verona is almost empty at this hour, but two servants of the Capulet family are walking through the streets, talking animatedly, heatedly, with swords on their hips and shields in their hands.

As is so often the case, their conversation this morning consists mainly of insulting the Montagues, their enemies – filled with fire, and with hatred in their hearts. They do not even know where that hatred comes from; they only know that the two distinguished families do not get along, and that it has even become customary for their servants to resent one another.

‘We will not allow them to humiliate us any longer,’ declares Sampson. ‘I refuse to put up with the filth they dump on us.’

‘You’re right,’ says Gregory. ‘We are not their refuse collectors.’

‘And neither are we their swine,’ says Sampson, with a glance at the pigs tucking into the leftovers that people have flung out onto the streets.

Sampson sniffs. ‘No, they’re the pigs. And the next time I meet some filthy swine of a Montague, I’m going to draw my sword.’

‘One might think you’re a little angry with them,’ Gregory responds drily.

‘I most certainly am.’ Sampson looks at the gutter running down the middle of the street, where flies are buzzing around horse dung and other filth. ‘If I see those pigs, I’ll pick them up by their snouts and their curly tails and drop them straight into this gutter with the shit, where they belong.’

Gregory laughs. ‘Well, it looks like a good place to dump a load.’

Sampson nods. ‘You’re quick this morning.’

‘Yes, I woke up in a good mood.’

‘Talking of waking up...’ Sampson gives him a big smile. ‘Do you know I barely saw my own bed last night?’

‘Aha, up to your old tricks? So you drew your noblest weapon, did you?’

The two men are enjoying their daily duel of words again, even at this early hour.

Sampson grasps the hilt of his weapon and says with a grin: ‘I left this particular sword at home, but I did indeed delight in slipping another one into something nice and soft.’ He provocatively thrusts his hips forward. ‘You know, I’ll happily cut down those Montague men with a single blow, but their women,’ – he closes his eyes and groans – ‘they’re positively begging for a few extra thrusts. And then let them lose their heads.’ He roars with laughter. ‘Push Montague’s men from the wall, and thrust his women’s rears against it.’

By now they have come to a small square, which will soon be teeming with tradespeople, with their boxes full of fragrant herbs, vegetables, fish, meat and sausages, and their rush baskets, hand-knotted rugs and earthenware crockery.

At the well, an old woman is drawing water, and a young maidservant comes along with a bucket in her hand. At the same moment, a few other early visitors enter the square: two squires, servants of the Montagues.

‘Speak of the devil...’ says Sampson with a wicked chuckle. ‘Look, it’s Abraham and Balthasar, those Montague soft boys. So soft that they find it hard to please the ladies,’ he murmurs. His eyes twinkling, he looks at Gregory. ‘How about we show them what a real hard man is?’

Gregory hesitates. Fighting is not a good idea, and certainly not if it’s you who starts the fight.

Sampson does not seem to notice his friend’s reluctance. ‘Having already covered one back this night,’ he continues, ‘I would prefer to be covered myself. Come, back me, and we shall indeed get those Montagues’ backs up.’

‘I think it would be better if we let them start it. Then we have the right to defend ourselves,’ says Gregory, voicing his doubts.

Sampson nods. ‘You have a fine point.’ And he grins again. ‘I shall say nothing, and certainly not about fighting.’

He sets his feet a little wider apart on the muddy cobbles, mockingly weighing up Abraham and Balthasar, who are approaching in a seemingly casual manner. But appearances can be deceptive. Their faces are alert, even hostile.

‘Good morning, soft boys,’ says Sampson provocatively. ‘Out for a little walk, are we?’

Abraham spits on the ground, narrowly missing Sampson’s boot.

‘Off with you! It’s you who’s soft.’

Sampson stands so close to him that their faces are almost touching. ‘You dare call *me* soft?’

Abraham does not flinch. ‘Yes, I dare. Now back off.’

Sampson provocatively takes a tiny step backwards. ‘Far enough?’

‘No. Farther.’

A scornful snort. ‘Not a chance.’

The young maidservant quickly draws water from the well and makes her escape. A little boy comes wandering up with a bucket – she grabs his arm and pulls him along with her, away from the square where a fight is clearly about to break out.

Meanwhile, Balthasar tries to change his friend Abraham’s mind, clasping him firmly by the shoulder. ‘Keep your shirt on, my coz. They’re baiting you so that you’ll start the fight – don’t fall for it.’

Abraham shoves him away. ‘Mind your own business. I’ll decide for myself if I want to fight – and whom!’

As if he has already won the victory, Sampson looks at him triumphantly. ‘That’s what I like to hear. Show that you’re a real man, in spite of the wet words dripping from your lips and the measly morsel dangling between your legs. Come, perhaps you can get your sword up now and finally manage to pull something off.’

Abraham can’t hold back any longer: ‘You miserable wretch, you piece of filth!’ With a rapid movement, he thrusts his sword forward. Just in time, Sampson steps aside, his hand clasping the hilt of his weapon.

He glances at Gregory. ‘So, do I have your permission now, friend?’ Without waiting for an answer, he takes a swing, his sword clanging against Abraham’s.

At the very same moment, Balthasar attacks. Gregory deftly dodges. ‘They started it – and now it’s our turn!’ he calls out to Sampson, clashing his sword against Balthasar’s.

‘You jest!’ Balthasar shouts at him. ‘And this is a joke that will cost you your head!’

Chickens fly off squawking, as the sound of clashing swords rebounds off the houses on the sleepy Veronese square. Pigs run away, loudly squealing. Shutters fly open, and furious people look out.

‘Drop your weapons!’ a voice suddenly yells. The fighters don’t even stop to consider this order. If you were blind, you might think an entire army was engaged in battle, even though it is no more than two pairs of hate-filled men, out to spill one another’s blood.

From the corner of his eye, Gregory sees who has dared to interfere.

‘Well, fancy that!’ he shouts as he whacks his sword against Balthasar’s and then leaps back. ‘If it isn’t Benvolio Montague, the cousin and companion of young Romeo. A good morning to you, and to your many lice. What brings you all here?’

‘I...’ begins Benvolio.

Another voice interrupts him. ‘Yes, what brings you here?’ It is Tybalt, a cousin and good friend of the Capulets.

Anticipating what is to come, the men stop their fighting for a moment. There are now six men standing in the street, three Montagues and three Capulets; this does not bode well.

A look of irritation appears on Benvolio's face. 'Let's not allow the situation to become overheated. I want peace – there has been enough fire and fury between our two families.'

Tybalt's eye falls on Benvolio's sword. 'Keeping the peace with a weapon on your hip? A strange combination.' He waves his own sword in the air. 'And I hate the word "peace" as much as I hate the name of Montague, as much as hell, and as much as you. Come here, you coward, and I'll chop off your head!'

Benvolio takes a quick step back, but has no intention of sounding the retreat. Although the Capulets always sneer and call him the 'little peacemaker', not only would running away be an act of extreme cowardice, but they would be sure to use it against him later.

Soon all six men are fighting. Drops of blood splash onto the street. People come running to watch the fight.

'Death to the Montagues!' some of them chant.

'Death to the Capulets!' others yell.

By now, the bystanders have joined in the fight, with weapons or with their bare fists, yelling and screaming. Mangy dogs circle the men, barking angrily.

In a nearby house, the old Capulet painfully swings his legs over the edge of his bed. One of his men just shook him awake, yelling 'They're fighting! They're fighting!' Capulet struggles into his clothes and then looks around for something.

‘You’re not telling me you’re taking your sword out onto the streets, are you?’ says his wife. ‘You’d be better off looking for your crutches – then at least you might stay on your feet.’

‘If I want to go out onto the streets with my sword, then that’s my business,’ grumbles Capulet. ‘There’s a fight happening, and I need to know what’s going on.’

The old Montague has also been alerted. As he approaches the scene of the fight, he sees his old enemy, Capulet, already standing on the other side of the square.

‘Look at that sad sack over there,’ Montague murmurs to his wife. He straightens his back. ‘You miserable waste of flesh!’ he shouts. ‘I’m going to chop you into mincemeat!’

His wife grabs him by the arm. ‘Stop this insane warmongering, you old fool! Just stop it!’ She’s almost squeezing his arm to a pulp. ‘Ah, now look who’s here,’ she continues. ‘The prince, no less. Control yourself! Do you hear me?’

The scene is complete. There, on that hate-filled medieval square in the city of Verona, where the morning sun is turning the gleaming red roof tiles into a fiery glow, Prince Della Scala has stepped onto the stage.

‘You bunch of idiots!’ he cries. ‘Drop those weapons! Or do I have to have you quartered alive, nailed to the pillory by your ears, or hanged upside down and flayed? You tell me. If your weapons remain in the air for one second longer, you may choose your own torture!’ He jabs a finger at the two old rivals. ‘You there, gentlemen! A single word or gesture from you is enough to make your men reach for their weapons. Time and again the peace in this city has been broken by your senseless feud. One more such disturbance and you will pay for it with your lives.’ He looks at each of the two noblemen in turn. ‘Capulet, come with me. And, Montague, I will see you this afternoon at my palace. I shall tell you

both personally what I intend to do with you. And now off with the lot of you, before I personally put nooses around everyone's necks!

Reluctantly, everyone slinks away, both the bystanders and the men who were just trying to kill one another. When the pigs and chickens, grunting and cackling, return to the square, only the old Montague, his wife and Benvolio are still there.

'Tell me, nephew,' begins Signora Montague, 'who was it who stirred up this old quarrel? Who started the fight?'

Benvolio shrugs. 'When I got here, the boys were already fighting, Signora. I tried to pull them apart, but Tybalt was there too. He waved his sword as if he wanted first to cleave the air in two, and then me. If I hadn't fought back, I'd be lying dead on the ground right now. I had no choice.'

Signora Montague, whose maid has quickly helped her into a simple morning gown, is looking around anxiously. 'But where is Romeo? Have you seen him? I'm so glad he wasn't involved in the fight.' Then a worried expression flashes across her face. 'Oh, he wasn't involved, was he? I do hope not.'

Benvolio shakes his head. 'No, Signora. Romeo had already left town before cockcrow, and headed into the forest. I know this, as worries were keeping me from my sleep, and I wanted to empty my head with an early-morning stroll. I spotted Romeo walking by the plane trees, but when he saw me, he ran away into the forest.'

'He has been spending much time there recently,' says Signor Montague, gloomily. 'Crying like a little child, mixing his tears with the dewdrops on the grass and his sighs with the wind.'

'The shadow is his best friend, or so it seems,' his wife adds. 'If not in the forest, then in bed with the shutters firmly closed. He seems to want to avoid every last little ray of sunshine. I have never seen him in such low spirits.'

Benvolio nods his agreement. 'But I can understand it, Signora,' he says in his friend's defence. 'When I felt so wretchedly miserable a while ago, I didn't want to see anyone either, and I wallowed in self-pity. So I left him in peace. Everyone has a right to be alone.'

Montague sighs. 'The poor devil,' he murmurs. 'He is creating his own night. So much gloom does not bode well. If some clever chap does not soon figure out what is going on, I am not sure how this will end.' He sighs again, leaning heavily on his sword.

His wife snorts. 'I told you that you'd be better off bringing your crutches, didn't I?'

Montague flashes her a look of irritation.

'Don't you know what's troubling Romeo?' Benvolio asks him.

'We've tried everything to get it out of him, but he refuses to talk about it. If we don't know what's wrong, then we can't help him.' The old man pulls a gloomy face. 'A flower withering in the bud, eaten by worms.'

'I don't know what's going on either, sir,' Benvolio replies, truthfully. 'But...'

Suddenly he falls silent and puts his finger to his lips. 'Ssh, here he comes. Go home, quickly, and I'll see if I can worm it out of him.'

His head bowed and his gaze fixed on the grey cobbles, Romeo comes moping along. The sound of a blacksmith's hammer echoes from a nearby street.

*A smith can forge so many things and join them together, thinks Romeo, but not a broken heart.*

'Greetings, my coz, and a fine morning to you!' Benvolio cries with exaggerated good cheer.

Romeo looks at him forlornly. 'Is it only morning? The sorrowful hours last so long.' He looks past Benvolio. 'Was that my parents I just saw slipping away?'

‘It was,’ comes Benvolio’s brief reply, ‘but let’s talk about you. What’s going on? And what’s all this about the long-lasting hours?’

‘Time crawls,’ replies Romeo. ‘No, worse, I feel as if time has rusted to a stop, as if it cannot be made to move.’

Benvolio raises his hand. ‘Let me guess: *l’amore*.’

‘Of which I am deprived,’ says Romeo.

‘Ah, yes,’ says Benvolio with a sigh. ‘They say that love is sweet, but it can be as bitter as gall.’

Romeo now spies the drops of blood on the muddy street. ‘And much gall has been spat here, I see,’ he says. ‘What happened? Have the two camps raised their fists yet again?’

‘Not only their fists, dear boy. Their weapons too.’ Benvolio nods at a club that has been left behind in the confusion.

‘Weapons or fists, what difference does it make, for goodness’ sake?’ replies Romeo. ‘Although... if only it were truly “for goodness’ sake”, but men hardly ever fight for the sake of goodness. It is always about resentment and hatred. Even though love should triumph, every time.’ He hangs his head. ‘Not that love feels so triumphant to me right now. It feels like both a feather and a lead weight, like light and dark, like health and sickness, all at once, in one big muddle. But that is how the love I do not have feels to me.’ He falls silent and seems to think about his words for a moment. ‘I hope you’re not secretly laughing at me.’

Although Benvolio does indeed find his friend’s dramatic lamentations somewhat amusing, he knows how it feels to be tormented by heartbreak – he has experienced it himself a number of times. So he is aware that one is generally more in love with the ecstasy of being in love than with the actual object of that love itself. Yet Benvolio feels sorry for Romeo. He lays a friendly hand on Romeo’s shoulder and says: ‘I wouldn’t dare, my dear coz. I know

only too well how you feel, and I would rather cry than laugh at the black clouds in your sky.’

‘Yes, but now I feel doubly wretched,’ says Romeo, ‘if I have your sorrow to add to my own.’ He appears to be searching for the right words, and then he announces in a rather dramatic tone: ‘Love is like a smoke that rises from lovers’ sighs. When that smoke has cleared, a fire glows in the eyes of the beloved, or one sheds an ocean full of lovelorn tears. Then love is nothing but a suffocating sop. Love is a stone on the heart and an insanity in the mind – that is what it is.’

Romeo abruptly turns and walks away. ‘See you around, coz. I’m off.’

But Benvolio will not be dismissed that easily: ‘Wait. I’m coming with you!’

Romeo stops and looks back.

‘Are you talking to me? The Romeo you knew no longer exists. Even I do not know who or where I am; vanished, dissolved into air, or swallowed by the earth.’

He strides away, but Benvolio catches up with him in no time and stops directly in front of him. ‘And now I want to know who has set your heart racing in such a way that you seem to have lost your senses. Who is it, Romeo?’

Romeo takes a step to the right; Benvolio, his eyes fixed on Romeo’s, steps to the left. Romeo moves the other way; his friend moves with him. The first market traders are arriving in the square with their carts full of goods; the scent of freshly baked bread wafts out of a bakery, and the line of people at the well grows longer in the warmth of the morning sun.

‘You will not be rid of me until you reveal who is driving you mad,’ says Benvolio. ‘Is it such a strange question?’

‘Maybe not, but I really am absolutely mad about her.’ Romeo sighs. ‘She’s the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen. I swear I’ll never meet a greater beauty.’

‘Ha ha, well, let me put your heart and mind at rest. If that’s the case, she’ll have been bagged by another hunter long ago.’

‘You’re wrong. She does not mean to be caught by anyone, not by hunters and not by Cupid. He can shoot as many arrows at her as he wishes, but every single one will bounce off her armour. A better name for her would be Diana, the goddess of chastity.’

Benvolio tuts. ‘Aha, she does not wish to be true to a man, but to her maidenhead. Am I right?’

‘Exactly, her virginity is most precious to her. Which is a thousand pities when a girl is so beautiful that she makes every man swoon, is it not? But she wants to know nothing of love and has completely closed herself off from it. Such a loss! When she dies, she’ll take her beauty with her to the grave. Because without the deed, and so without children, her beauty will die with her.’ Once again, Romeo heaves a deep and sorrowful sigh. ‘I might as well be dead myself.’

As though to reinforce his lament, the cawing of a flock of crows echoes across the noisy square. Benvolio can’t help but laugh, and he gently thumps Romeo’s arm. ‘My dear boy, such woe! You really must put this girl out of your mind.’

‘I’d be happy to do so, if you could only teach me how to stop thinking. I think about her twenty-four hours a day – it’s driving me mad. So if you know a way to put a stop to such thoughts, you will be my hero.’

‘Agreed. Then I am your hero. Listen, all you have to do is feast your eyes. Look around you! Do you truly think she’s the most beautiful girl in the world? Of course she’s not! Verona is bursting with beauties, each more alluring and desirable than the next.’

As if it were meant to be, two charming young women walk past at that very moment. Not noble ladies, judging by the simplicity of their linen dresses, but with tempting bosoms and beautiful faces nevertheless.

Benvolio nudges Romeo, but he does not seem impressed. 'In comparison to the radiant sun that dazzles me, other girls fade to a weak glow,' he says.

'Almighty God, so much drama, all in one person!'

'It seems I cannot do with any less,' declares Romeo. 'So you can keep your heroism in mothballs, as not even you can save me. You'll never be able to teach me to get her out of my mind. Just forget it.'

'No, *you* are the one who should forget, my friend. I will make you forget this supposedly radiant sun. Just you wait and see.'

The old Capulet asks a servant to pour two glasses of wine, one for himself and one for Count Paris, who has unexpectedly turned up at his house. The two men are in the drawing room, sitting on tall chairs upholstered with dark-red fabric.

‘The prince has called both Montague and me to account,’ says Capulet to Count Paris, ‘and made us swear to forget our feud.’ He raises his green goblet and takes a swig. ‘Oh well, we should be old enough and wise enough to keep that promise, so if Montague plays his part too, there should not be a problem.’

Paris raises his glass. ‘That sounds like a good idea. You are both respectable gentlemen. It is a waste of your time and energy to have quarrelled for so long.’ He drinks, pensively puts his glass back down and clears his throat. ‘But there’s something else, Signor Capulet. The reason I am favouring you with a visit this afternoon: have you considered my proposal?’

‘My answer is no different than it was the last time you asked me, Count Impatience. My daughter has not yet seen fourteen springs. She still knows far too little about the world to tie the knot of marriage. Let us discuss the subject again when two summers have passed, when time has ripened her enough to become some man’s wife, maybe yours.’

‘Girls younger than her have become mothers,’ protests Paris. ‘Thirteen is not so very young.’

‘The younger a girl blossoms, the sooner she wilts. I am an old man and have seen only one child grow up. I am very careful with her, she is my most precious possession, and I will not give that away to the first man who comes calling. And certainly not too soon.’ He pauses. ‘But,’ he continues, ‘if it is Juliet’s own choice to marry you, I will respect that. She has to want it herself, or it is out of the question. So if you succeed in conquering my daughter’s heart, then be my guest.’

Count Paris's face lights up.

'I am giving a party this evening,' Capulet continues, 'to which I am inviting all my good friends. You are, of course, among their number, and you will be more than welcome.' He smiles contentedly. 'Spring has once again wiped the winter from our cheeks and given the girls' faces a warm glow. Tonight many stars will twinkle on the dancefloor, and flashing young comets like you will seduce them with ease. Pick the sweetest flower that has just burst from its bud. If that happens to be my daughter, and if she returns your feelings, then you have my blessing.'

Capulet beckons a servant and hands him a list. 'Go to everyone whose name I have written here and tell them they are most welcome at my house tonight. Go on, off you go!'

The man makes a quick bow and hurries from the room. He does not dare to tell his master that he cannot read.

Benvolio and Romeo are out on the street, where there is a hustle and bustle of people, carts, mules, wandering cattle, and rats scuttling along walls.

'Chin up, chap,' says Benvolio, 'stop making life so difficult for yourself. You can put out one fire by kindling another. New pain will make old pain fade. Spin yourself dizzy – and then put it right by spinning in the other direction. Simply infect your eyes with another beauty, and the old infection will clear up in no time. In other words: give yourself a new headache by finding another girl to make your head spin. I promise you, you won't even remember your former pain.'

'Yes, and if you put a fresh plantain leaf on this wound, it will heal at once,' says Romeo, giving Benvolio a hard kick in the shins.

'Ow, you idiot, have you gone mad?'

‘You don’t seem to understand, you fool,’ shouts Romeo. ‘I’m a prisoner in my own body. It feels like I’ve been forced into a straitjacket and can’t catch my breath. I...’

‘*Buongiorno, signori,*’ a voice says, interrupting them. Angrily, the boys look up to see a man with a sheepish expression on his face. He is holding out a sheet of paper.

‘I’m sorry for disturbing your conversation,’ he says, ‘but I’ve been sent on an errand... and I can’t actually read.’

‘Neither can I,’ replies Romeo, cutting him short. ‘I can read only my own future, and that looks none too rosy.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear that, sir,’ says the servant. He gives Benvolio a pleading look. ‘What about you?’

‘My friend was joking. We can both read,’ replies Benvolio. ‘But what exactly do you want us to do?’

‘Would you...? Could you maybe...?’

Wearily, Benvolio takes the list. A smile soon appears on his face. ‘I know all of these people.’ He reads the names out loud and then looks at the servant. ‘What exactly is this for?’

‘For a party, sir, at my master’s house.’

‘And your master is...?’

‘The great and wealthy Capulet,’ replies the man proudly. ‘And as long as you are not a Montague, you are warmly invited to come and drink a glass of wine.’

Before Romeo can open his mouth, Benvolio has already answered. ‘We would be happy to accept your invitation, my good man,’ he says, returning the list to him. ‘Will you manage now? We’ll see you tonight.’

The man nods. ‘Yes, sir. Until tonight, sir.’ He rolls up the list and waves it in the air with a look of relief on his face, before dashing off.

‘Why did you accept that invitation, you dolt?’ says Romeo, when the man is out of earshot. ‘We *are* Montagues!’

Benvolio grins. ‘It’s a masked ball, so no one needs to know that.’ His grin becomes broader. ‘All of the most beautiful and alluring girls in town are on that list – and that includes Rosalina.’ He pauses.

Romeo blushes all the way down to his neck.

‘Ha ha, I knew it. It’s her!’ cries Benvolio. ‘But tonight you will be able to exchange your old love for a new one. I promise. Your beautiful swan will instantly be transformed into an ugly crow that you’d rather forget as quickly as possible.’

‘If my eyes ever tell me such lies, may my tears become flames and my sight be taken from me.’

Benvolio bursts out laughing again. ‘Mr Drama speaks once more!’

‘It’s the truth!’ shouts Romeo passionately. ‘Since the earth was created, the sun has never seen such a magnificent girl as my Rosalina.’

A dry chuckle. ‘*Your* Rosalina?’

Romeo pouts and shrugs.

‘But what do you have to lose, coz? Come with me, and if you still think your Rosalina is the most beautiful and loveliest maid tonight, then you can take it from there.’

Romeo nods. ‘You’re right. I do indeed have nothing to lose,’ he says, suddenly decisive. ‘I shall go with you, even if only to see her.’

Benvolio lays a hand on Romeo’s shoulder. ‘That’s what I like to hear, my friend. Come on, have something to eat. An empty stomach is no foundation for a celebration.’

In the peaceful home of the Capulets, the lady of the house has called for her daughter. She is sitting on the couch, her back perfectly straight, and she pats the upholstery beside her.

‘Juliet, child, come and sit with me.’

Juliet sits down, but her voice is suspicious when she says: ‘Why?’

‘There’s something I wish to discuss with you.’

‘Should I leave? Or may I stay?’ says Donna, who, ever since Juliet’s birth, has been like a mother to her.

‘You should go,’ replies Signora Capulet. ‘Or no, why don’t you stay? You know my daughter perhaps better than I, and she has, of course, reached a good age...’ She speaks these last words with such emphasis that it makes Juliet feel sick. *A good age* – that is usually said when a girl is considered ready for marriage. And Juliet is far from ready! She takes a deep breath. If her parents want to marry her off, she is going to fight tooth and nail.

‘She most certainly is at a good age,’ agrees Donna. ‘It seems like only yesterday that I was breastfeeding her though. Oh, how time flies. My Susanna would have been the same age now, God rest her soul.’ She quickly makes the sign of the cross and then wipes her nose on the back of her hand.

‘Ah, it feels like such a short time since our little lamb was born, doesn’t it, Signora Capulet?’ she chatters on. ‘I remember when the time came for the breastfeeding to stop, so I smeared a bitter remedy on my breast. And what did the dear child do? She pulled a face, and she ran away from me. I swear it! Yes, she did! She waddled right off. And then I thought of the day when she fell straight onto her lovely little face, and my husband – God rest his soul, he was a dear man – joked that one day she’d rather be lying on her back than on her belly, hahaha, and the sweet little grub actually nodded and said yes, haha, even though she was a three-year-old toddler and so she clearly didn’t have a clue what my husband meant.’ Donna

gives Signora Capulet a wink. ‘Do you remember? Ah, no, you were in Mantua at the time.’ She rattles on: ‘So, my goodness, in two weeks’ time this little lady will be fourteen. My, oh my, child, you were the dearest little tot ever to suckle at my breast. If I live to see your wedding day, it will be the most wonderful day of my life. And of yours too, of course,’ she adds with a giggle. ‘It wouldn’t be right if it was just *my* most wonderful day, and not...’

‘For heaven’s sake, woman, please be quiet!’ says Signora Capulet. ‘And let me talk to Juliet about the suitor we have in mind for her.’

All the colour drains out of Juliet’s face. ‘I don’t even want to think about marriage. Not in my dreams, let alone for real.’

‘Oh, my child,’ says her mother, ‘when I was your age, I was already your mother – and *you* are still a virgin, so think on that. But what I actually wanted to tell you was that the young Count Paris seems to have his eye on you.’

Donna claps her hands. ‘Count Paris!’ she cries in delight. ‘You could do much worse, poppet. He’s so handsome! He looks like he was sculpted from wax.’

‘Yes,’ agrees Juliet’s mother. ‘He is the finest flower that Verona has produced this season, and he is young and inexperienced, so you can mould him to your will.’

Donna lays her hands enthusiastically on Juliet’s shoulders. ‘If you’ll heed my advice, don’t leave him in the meadow, but pluck him at once!’

Juliet listens to the two women with horror. A waxwork? A flower? She does not want a waxwork. She wants a man of flesh and blood. And she does not want a flower that is forced on her; she wants to pick her own. She understands that such a choice is unusual in her circles, that being married off to a good match is the most normal thing in the world, but still she knows that she will resist it with all the strength she has in her. She wants to marry for love, not for financial gain, as her mother surely did.

Signora Capulet does not appear to notice the revulsion on her daughter's face. In fact, she says: 'Do you think you will be able to love him?'

Juliet stares at her in amazement. 'How can I know that if I have never met him?'

Signora Capulet gives her daughter's hand an aloof pat. 'Then you will have your chance this evening: he is coming to our home for the party that your father is organising. Look deep into his eyes and try to read in them that he is the best thing that could happen to you. Not only is he a handsome man, the woman who marries him will receive just as much respect as him, and everything he owns will also be hers. Come, see it as an investment that will be good for both of you: Count Paris is greatly admired for his person, and your beauty will only enhance that image. In short, you have nothing to lose.'

Juliet does not know Count Paris, and yet the very idea disgusts her. Let him look for another woman to embellish his so-called image, she thinks. It is as if a woman does not count in her own right!

'Well, nothing to lose is putting it very mildly,' says Donna in a mischievous tone. 'You'll become a lady of consequence. A big important lady. Ha ha ha! Big! Literally!' Roaring with laughter, Donna makes a huge ball in front of her belly with her hands.

Now Juliet really is horrified. She quickly gets to her feet.

'Let Cupid decide,' she snaps. 'If he aims his arrows well, I'm sure they'll find a better target for Paris's loving eyes.'

'Everything will turn out fine, poppet,' says Donna.

'Yes,' Juliet's mother blithely persists. 'I'm already looking forward to your wedding.'

Juliet turns around and strides off. She is not looking forward to anything. Certainly not to being forced to become a child bride. And most definitely not to having a big belly.

She runs to her room. Downstairs she hears servants calling to one another that the first guests are arriving even though the food is not yet on the table. The scent of roasted duck wafts towards her, a dish she usually loves, but which she cannot even think about right now.

‘Donna!’ she hears someone call. ‘We need your help!’

With a sigh, Juliet sits down at her dressing table. In the mirror she sees a young girl who is not yet ready for marriage. Let alone for a marriage to the wrong man.