

Chapter 1

As time marched on, everything happened exactly as Sol had predicted. In the very year that she went to her death, a new baby girl was born into the family to take her place – she might even be described as a second Sol. This was the firstborn daughter of Liv and Dag, baptised Cecilie, a name which evoked those of both her grandmothers, Charlotte and Silje. But despite reminding them of Sol in so many ways, Cecilie had not inherited the cold-heartedness and deep sense of torment that had characterised Sol's life.

At the same time, on a farmstead at Eikeby, not far from where this newborn baby girl was awakening to life, a far less fortunate and deformed child was also growing up. The Eikeby farmstead was one of many that made up the Gråstensholm estate. In itself, it was a continuous source of worry to its landlord, Baron Dag Meiden and his mother Charlotte. They did their best to help the impoverished tenant family to avoid starvation, but their task was made more difficult by the fact that the old crofter who lived there had decided to take literally the words of the Old Testament that commanded mankind 'to go forth and

multiply'. In fact he seemed to be trying to do it all single-handedly.

His youngest children were still small when his eldest son married and took on the daily work of the farm. He also showed himself to be very much his father's son in his determination to populate the world as fast as possible. By the year 1607, the son had produced fifteen children of his own, all of whom struggled for food. They had to battle for possession of every platter against their aunts and uncles, many of whom were not very much older than themselves.

One of these fifteen children was named Yrja. She was a young girl who had caused Tengel much trouble at her birth by trying to make her entrance feet first. It was an arrival that was to prove symbolic and typical of her young life: almost everything she put her hand to in her early years seemed to go amiss.

She had been an unlucky infant whose weary, exhausted mother was incapable of producing enough breast milk to feed her. Nor were her childhood years much better, because Yrja was always left the last scraps on the table. As a result her body had not developed properly. It was said that she had suffered from rickets, the condition that would come to be known centuries later as the 'English sickness'. All the neighbours said this was connected with the fact that, while her mother was pregnant with Yrja, she had met a crippled man on the road and this had undoubtedly caused the illness. In addition, Yrja's mother looked upon her as an encumbrance. She already had several other young offspring to care for and felt Yrja contributed little or nothing to the family and was consequently worthless.

Her father was still obliged to perform some extra duties for the Gråstensholm estate as part of his tenure and one

day as he was leaving for the manor, in sheer frustration his wife told him to take the girl with him.

‘At least I’ll have one less to look after,’ she shrieked. ‘For one day at any rate!’

Irritated, the farmer told her that it was impossible to take a child out labouring with him.

‘Then tie her to a tree while you work!’ the wife replied. ‘It’s my big washday and I just can’t look after all these little ones – and the older ones will be helping with the wash.’

In this way it was decided that Yrja should go with him. She was then six years old and it was already clear that she had inherited her father’s heavy peasant shape and face. Whenever her mother looked at her, she felt she was staring at a mutilated and uncultivated thistle.

The landlord’s children, Tarald and Cecilie, together with their cousin Sunniva, were playing at Gråstensholm Manor when they first saw the young peasant girl tethered to a tree a short distance from the barn. She was standing, head bowed and kicking her toe idly in the dirt, casting furtive glances at the children as they played. The look on her face and her behaviour both shouted out desperately: ‘What fun they’re having! If only I could join in!’ Yrja had often heard her aunts and uncles talk about past children’s parties at Gråstensholm. *They* had all been invited – but that had been when Master Dag was a child.

On realising that Yrja was tied to the tree, Cecilie stopped playing and stared. Although she was the youngest, she was the dominant one of the three. ‘She can play with us, can’t she?’ she asked the others.

Tarald and Sunniva looked quizzically at Yrja. They could see clearly that she had not been endowed with any great physical beauty, heavily built, undernourished and deformed as she was. But just as the roots of a pine tree

can often bite fast into an exposed craggy outcrop and still find the nourishment to grow strong and tower over its neighbours, Yrja had somehow, despite all the odds, managed to thrive. She was indeed a tall, uncultivated thistle.

‘Yes, why not?’ chirped Tarald at last. ‘Let’s ask.’

Together they ran over to the tree. But they stopped a few yards away from her. They could see that Yrja’s toe was now digging frantically in the dirt in embarrassment.

‘Hello,’ said Tarald. ‘What’s your name?’

Without looking up she whispered something inaudible.

‘What did you say?’ asked Cecilie, taking a step closer.

The girl before them swallowed hard again and tried to speak, but the words were clearly sticking in her throat. Overcome by her shyness, she covered her face with her arm. Then at last she managed to say, ‘Yrja.’

‘Yrja?’ repeated Cecilie. ‘Was that what you said?’

She nodded but could not meet their gaze.

‘Yrja?’ repeated Sunniva incredulously. ‘Surely nobody’s called that!’

The tethered girl looked as though she wanted the earth to swallow her up.

‘You can’t say that!’ said Cecilie scornfully to Sunniva.

‘You don’t know every name in the world!’

‘Do you want to come and play with us?’ asked Tarald.

Yrja raised her head to look at him and in that instant knew that she would die for him were he ever to ask. Then she lowered her eyes again without answering.

‘We shall ask your father,’ announced Cecilie. ‘He’s the Eikeby crofter, isn’t he?’

Yrja nodded vigorously. Father will say ‘no’, of course, she thought – but still they asked me anyway. They *really* asked!

The three ran over to the barn, where her father and some other workers were repairing the entrance ramp, and only then did Yrja dare hazard another glance at them. The boy was handsome, with dark hair and eyebrows like sea birds in flight, she thought, remembering the way they swayed upwards at their centres. One of the two girls was very pretty and as graceful as a china vase that Yrja had once seen in another crofter's cottage. The other girl, the youngest, was a bundle of energy who had already dirtied her fine dress despite the early hour. They were all standing eagerly around her father now and she could see he was not going to be easily persuaded. At that moment a lady came towards the barnyard – a gentle, fine lady who Yrja recognised. It was the mistress from Linden Allée and all three children rushed over to her at once.

‘Grandma! Grandma, can Yrja play with us?’ they chorused. ‘Please tell her father that she may – he doesn’t believe us.’

Hearing the urgency in their voices, Silje gave them a warm smile. ‘Of course she may. I shall speak to her father. But isn’t that the little girl who ... Yes, I’m sure it is!’ She waved the Eikeby crofter to join her and they all walked over to the tethered child.

‘Now children,’ said Silje, ‘I want you to know that young Yrja was born the morning after you, Tarald. My husband Tengel helped to bring both of you into the world almost at the same time. He rode back and forth between Eikeby and Gråstensholm all through the day and night. There is only about seven hours’ difference in your ages. And you, Sunniva, were born five days after them.’

‘What about me, then?’ asked Cecilie, the alert and attentive one. She was offended at seemingly being left out. ‘Why aren’t I in this secret gang?’

‘Dear Cecilie,’ laughed Silje, ‘you know very well that you are only five years old. You have been reminding me for several weeks that your birthday is coming soon. But one year is not a great difference. And besides there is something else that binds you to them – you are the image of Sol, Sunniva’s mother. She had darker hair than you – and was perhaps just a little more beautiful. Never have I seen a more beautiful girl.’

Tarald nodded. ‘I have seen her portrait at Linden Allée.’

‘Oh, that does not do her justice at all,’ said Silje, aware that Sunniva needed to have a picture in her heart of an outstanding mother. ‘Sol sparkled with so much life and vitality that it took your breath away.’

‘Sol was my Mama,’ said Sunniva proudly. ‘But am I not as beautiful as she was?’

Silje looked at her for a moment. ‘You are not really like her at all, Sunniva. You have blond hair and blue eyes. And you are as delicate as a butterfly. And you have your own very special beauty – of that you can be sure.’

None of the children had ever heard any account of Sol’s fate: how she was due to be burned at the stake as a witch after murdering Sunniva’s father, Heming the Bailiff-killer, with a pitchfork. Or how Tengel had managed to send her poison on her last night in prison in order to spare her the agony and torment of the fire. All they knew was that she had died soon after the birth of Sunniva.

At times Sunniva had asked about her father, only to be told that he was dead and that she had inherited his fine and handsome looks. Nobody ever spoke of how he had met his macabre end. And nobody ever uttered even part of his despised name out loud.

‘Tarald, untie Yrja now,’ said Silje kindly. ‘And then when you have finished playing, invite her to eat with us.’

In this way Yrja was introduced to Gråstensholm, and from then on she often spent her days there. The four children, so close in years, stuck together through thick and thin. It seemed in many ways as though the three Gråstensholm children somehow *needed* Yrja with them for some unspecified and unknown reason.

It has to be said that they divided up the workload a little unevenly and it was Yrja who was always given the boring, less glamorous roles in all their games, like running errands, standing watch and other menial tasks. Sunniva could do nothing she was assigned – she was hopeless, the others decided – while Tarald and Cecilie waged a continuous battle over who was in charge. This was a battle Cecilie consistently won, since she always refused to be beaten by an older sibling.

The adults could not conceal their surprise at how completely Yrja had been integrated into the group. Liv conjectured that perhaps they needed somebody to impress – a phenomenon not unknown either to children or adults. From Yrja's point of view and that of her family, this new lifestyle brought great improvements for her. She was well fed at Gråstensholm, sometimes getting extra helpings, and she began to grow and become stronger. After a few months Silje decided to take Yrja under her wing, moving her into her service at Linden Allée. Yrja would come a few days each week to help Silje with lighter tasks in the studio and around the house. Everyone was pleased with the arrangement, especially because Silje would now and again reward the girl with a treat – an item of clothing or a small coin.

Amazingly, Sunniva was also keen to help her grandmother, at least in the studio where exciting things happened. So the two girls took turns to assist Silje, who was now not as agile as she had once been. This

arrangement worked superbly – not least because Silje could send them away the moment she felt it was becoming tedious to have little girls fussing around in the room.

It had been several years since Sunniva moved up to Gråstensholm to be brought up alongside Dag and Liv's two children. Silje had found early on that she now lacked the energy to look after young children at home and Liv had gladly offered to care for the orphaned girl.

Silje had concerns for her youngest son, Are, who showed no sign of ever wanting to wed. All he ever thought about was the farm – its livestock, the harvest, the house and forests. This worried Silje and she fretted and nagged at him. She wanted more grandchildren and the farm needed a capable housewife. But when the moment finally arrived, the 'proposal' took on a ludicrous aspect.

It happened during Yrja's first year at Linden Allée, on a day when all the grandchildren were spending time with their grandparents, playing noisy games of hide-and-seek. For some reason they were distracted and for a little while they forgot all about Yrja, who had hidden herself in the barn. She sat as quiet as a little mouse in the calving stall and wondered why nobody came to find her.

Then yes, she heard a noise. Somebody was coming. But these were heavier footfalls than those of a child – so she drew back deeper into the shadows. Peeping through a crack in the stall's wooden partition, she saw it was Klaus, the stable lad at Gråstensholm, who had come down to Linden Allée in pursuit of his duties. He came into the barn and stood looking around for an old bridle – but he didn't notice Yrja's presence. Suddenly another of Sol's protégés also entered the building on an errand of her own. It was Meta, who over the years had been of immeasurable help to the family.

Klaus had never been very gifted. For many years he had mourned Sol, overcome with bitterness at her loss. He had been devoted to her, but then without warning he had taken a liking to the diminutive Meta, who had hair the colour of ripened corn. Now, meeting her so unexpectedly like this alone in the barn, he suddenly found he could not control his inner urges any longer.

Proudly he grabbed hold of Meta and wrenching at his own clothes, asked abruptly if she would like to see his manhood unclothed. Meta had no such desire and her screams began to pierce Yrja's eardrums. In panic the little girl started creeping on all fours towards the door and on the threshold she was almost run down by Meta. The older girl ran out ahead and met Silje, who was coming towards them on her way to the barn. Meta's face had turned a sickly green colour and she hurried into the gap between two of the farm buildings and vomited violently. In the heat of the moment, nobody noticed the inconspicuous little Yrja.

'My dear Meta,' said Silje in an alarmed voice, 'what is wrong? Are you ill?'

The girl turned to face Silje, teeth chattering, and shook her head. 'It was Klaus ... He unfastened his trousers and ... I was very frightened!' She turned away suddenly and began to retch again.

'Oh, my goodness!' gasped Silje in a horrified voice and ran into the barn.

Klaus was still standing in the same place with an embarrassed grin on his face. He had however refastened his clothing again.

'You must not do things like that, Klaus!' said Silje in a calm and determined tone. 'Especially not to Meta!'

Unseen inside the shadowy doorway, Yrja stood listening, but still nobody noticed her presence.

‘But I like her,’ replied Klaus sheepishly.

‘Forget such thoughts,’ snapped Silje. ‘You must understand that Meta was terribly frightened and injured once by a band of soldiers who all exposed themselves to her as you just did – yes, and they did much worse things besides! So when you acted in a similar way just now, she remembered that awful day and was so shaken that she became sick. Have you understood?’

Klaus was downcast. ‘But Sol liked it. And now I want to lie with Meta.’

Silje was both taken aback and deeply exasperated by this announcement. ‘Never! Now you listen to me, young lad! You can forget all about Meta! Besides, have you not noticed that there is a girl here on the farm who always tries to catch your eye?’

‘Tries to catch my eye ...’

‘Who likes you!’

‘Me? Somebody likes me?’

Silje was making things up as fast as she could go – she had never acted as a matchmaker before. But she was determined to save Meta from the attentions of a man completely unsuitable for her.

‘Who is it, Mistress Silje?’

‘Rosa! Rosa with the red cheeks and the friendly smile. Have you not noticed her working in our kitchen?’

It was torture watching the workings of Klaus’s mind as he tried to think. He had obviously not noticed the chubby scullery maid with the stocky legs who worked for Silje. Like Klaus, Rosa was also a simple soul with no family and too many summers behind her to be a temptation to most of the young single men. She was certainly five years older than Klaus, Silje reckoned, but nonetheless was a good-hearted lass and while Silje hadn’t

the vaguest idea what Rosa thought of Klaus, she had every reason to believe that the maiden would be grateful for the attentions of almost any man.

As a result of this impulsive intervention, Silje sought out Rosa later in the day, as she was cleaning some saucepans in the scullery. Taking her aside, she asked quietly: ‘Have you ever noticed that you have an admirer, Rosa?’

The well-rounded maid blushed, her cheeks turning bright crimson. ‘An admirer – me? No, Mistress, you mustn’t jest so! Who is it?’

‘Klaus, the stable lad who sometimes comes here from the big house.’ Silje paused, giving the maid time to reflect. Sure enough, immediately after Silje’s mention of the scullery maid’s name to Klaus in the barn, he had found a reason to linger outside the kitchen window to find out more about Rosa and catch a glimpse of her. Now, if Meta kept quiet about Klaus’s little indiscretion – and she probably would – and he too kept his secret, then Rosa would never know he had tried to shame another girl.

‘Mmm ... yes, well, Mistress, I suppose I did see him outside the kitchen window earlier. But I would not have thought such a big, strapping handsome lad as him would be ...’

‘He’s not very bright, you know, Rosa,’ interrupted Silje. ‘But he is kind.’

‘I’m not so bright neither! I see – Klaus, eh? Did he say if he’d soon be coming back here again?’

‘Not in so many words, Rosa. But he often has to come down here on errands.’

Rosa was silent for a moment, mulling something over. ‘Then would I be allowed to offer him some spiced buns, Mistress? I would take the stale ones, of course.’

Silje smiled. ‘You shall give him the *best* our house can offer, Rosa. He is worth it, I should say – even if he is a bit empty-headed!’

You should be ashamed of yourself, Silje thought, as she went into the large parlour, chuckling to herself. What have you started now?

As soon as Silje had left the kitchen, Rosa grabbed hold of Yrja to keep her from following her mistress. ‘Yrja, you go up to Gråstensholm a lot, don’t you?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Couldn’t you take a message to that Klaus – he’s the handsomest on the whole farm, you can’t miss him – and say that if he comes down here I’ll see he gets well fed ... a real treat? Say – oh, say its because he cured Master Tengel’s lame horse so well last winter.’

Yrja nodded and promised to pass on the message. She knew who Klaus was all right, but to say he was the ‘handsomest’ at Gråstensholm – well no, that was something she couldn’t understand! Rosa’s eyes followed Yrja’s little twisted body as she went in search of her revered Mistress Silje. Rosa could hardly wait until Klaus had an opportunity to visit her. Imagine! Such a fine-looking man!

Quietly, Yrja entered the parlour at the precise moment that Silje was about to get her second surprise that day. Master Tengel – big, broody and frightening to behold – was walking over to them. Yrja knew that behind his terrible appearance there lay nothing but goodness and decency. She also knew that next year would see him turn sixty. Yet he looked so much younger than her own father, who still had some way to go before his fiftieth year.

‘What is going on, Silje?’ asked Tengel. ‘I have just heard that Meta has walked out and left us! She has gone to a

family in Tönsberg that has been asking her to work for them as a scullery maid. She said that either she or Klaus must leave and because she is worth less to us, then she would be the one to go.'

Are came in just in time to hear Tengel's last few words and he immediately looked alarmed. 'What did you just say about Meta leaving us? I hope she hasn't. We cannot manage without her!'

'We shall have to if the girl does not want to stay with us,' said Tengel. 'Anyway, you are always complaining about her work. So I don't understand what is causing you to feel all this upset.'

'When did she leave?' yelled Are, ignoring Tengel's question. 'And by what means?'

'She set off walking, carrying a small bundle, about an hour since, I think – maybe two.'

Are was incensed. 'I shall ride after her – straightaway!'

Silje followed him into the hallway. 'Are, please be careful! Do not forget what Meta once suffered. That is also the reason for her leaving today.'

Are turned pale. 'Klaus?'

'He did nothing to her – merely showed himself. But it awakened bad memories for her.'

'I shall tear him apart with my own two hands!'

'No!' said Silje forcefully. 'I have taken care of Klaus. She will have nothing to fear from him any more.'

'Are you sure?'

'You may be certain of it. He has other interests now.'

Are simply nodded. He realised immediately that there was no harm in Klaus – his transgression was due solely to his foolishness. Shortly afterwards Yrja heard the sound of hooves galloping down the allée and she knew Are was riding out to find Meta and bring her home.

Yrja never found out what Are did after he had rode out of the yard. In truth, she did not understand what all the fuss had been about anyway. Klaus had been guilty of something unpleasant in the barn – but whatever it was, she had not been able to see from where she had been hiding. Nor would Silje and Tengel ever know the full truth of Are's bid to save Meta. Although they would know the outcome soon enough, they were never to learn exactly what took place and Are staunchly refused to reveal anything about the matter.

They could not know that Are had ridden like the wind along the road to Tönsberg, his mind in turmoil, full of regret for the years he had lost. Before very long, to his great relief, he caught up with Meta before she reached her destination and slowed his horse a little to gather his thoughts. 'Dear me,' he thought, 'she looks so tiny and pitiable.'

Her appearance in fact reminded him of that day seven years ago, when Sol had come home with this wretched lost individual. How angry he had been then at the sound of her Skåne dialect and how unpleasant he had been to her. Feeling deeply conscience-stricken, he rode up beside her and jumped from the horse. Meta turned to look up at him, wide-eyed and frightened, her eyelids swollen from all her bouts of sobbing.

'Why Meta?' he asked, in a tone that was a shade too harsh. 'Why are you running away like this?'

Immediately her chin began to quiver again and he realised that he had started badly.

'We cannot be without you at Linden Allée, Meta, you must realise that!' He was almost shouting at her and she turned away from him once more.

'What I really mean is that *I* cannot be without you, Meta!'

She swung round to face him again, with a shocked expression. 'You, Master? But you have always disliked me.'

'Have I?' he asked aggressively. 'Well, perhaps at first I did – but have I done so these past years?'

Meta paused to reflect. 'No,' she said, a little surprised. 'It just seemed like it.'

'You imagined it,' said Are. 'For have we not worked well together, you and I? We have, haven't we?'

'Yes,' she whispered, head bowed.

Are stood remembering the little shadow who had followed him everywhere, in the open countryside, in the yard and in the outbuildings. And now she was about to disappear!

Without pausing for breath, he suddenly blurted out, as though it were one long word, 'Metawillyoumarryme?'

Are had never seen such a perplexed expression on anybody's face as he saw then. He was both taken aback and surprised at his own outburst.

'Me?' she said softly. 'But I am no more than a farmyard maid!'

'You are much more than that. It was not until you were gone that I understood how much you meant – to me!'

Tears fell from her half-closed eyes. Are watched, not knowing where his courage had come from or where he had found the words. Girls and 'things like that' had not been part of his life until that moment. He had no experience to tell him how to act, and perhaps for that reason he sounded brusque.

'Don't you want to, then?' he asked quietly.

'I cannot,' she whispered.

'Because of what had happened all that time ago?'

Her head nodded rapidly.

'But ...' Are paused, agonising over how to express himself. 'But you do like me, don't you Meta? Just a little bit?'

In a muffled squeaky voice she replied, ‘I like you a lot, Master.’

‘So if ... you know what ... hadn’t happened, would you have said, “Yes”?’

‘Master, I am not worthy of you.’

‘Don’t say that!’

His words came out in a rush and again he thought: ‘Oh, no! I was too harsh with her again.’ This was not going very well at all. Why was there nobody here to help him get out of this dilemma? The country road was deserted as far as the eye could see – besides, he didn’t really want anyone to witness this divine mess he had created.

‘My own parents were not always so well respected,’ he said at last, speaking slowly and more quietly. ‘There was a time when they were outcasts themselves, a bit like you. And only Aunt Charlotte saved us all from starvation. What do you say to that?’

‘I don’t know what to say, Master.’

‘Please call me Are.’

‘A ... Are,’ she repeated breathlessly, unaccustomed to addressing him by name.

‘Listen to me, Meta,’ he said, placing his hands gently on her shoulders. ‘If you have no wish ... to share a bed with me, then you will not have to. I am not a ... passionate person.’

Did that sound foolish, he asked himself? He was sure it did, but he dared not use other words. ‘If only you will marry me ... and let me ... surround you with my love, that will be enough.’

Now she will certainly laugh at me, he thought desperately. But no, strangely enough she was not laughing. Taking a deep breath, he continued in a firm voice, ‘But although I have said that, I ... er ... would dearly like to have

a child ... or two. I'm sure you understand – Mother nags me continually about it.'

Meta bowed her head so that he saw only the blond hair on her neck. 'I am not without feelings,' she whispered. 'It is just that when certain things happen – like they did today – I go numb inside.'

'Do you compare me with Klaus?'

Meta was aghast at the thought, as she lifted her head to look up at this tall, powerful young man with black hair and classic prominent cheekbones. It was his unassuming earnest manner that she trusted and which made her feel safe – and she wanted to stay close to him.

'No! Oh, no! I would never do that!' she exclaimed.

Gently he pulled her close and kissed her forehead. He was not moved to do anything more. He was pleased to have achieved that much at least. Meta trembled, but remained pressed close against him.

'Think about it,' he whispered, his voice faltering from the emotion he was feeling. 'At least come back home. Mother seems to have "dealt" with Klaus, so that you will have nothing more to fear from him.'

Silje was, of course, privy to none of this. All she, and a wide-eyed Yrja, knew was that Are came riding back into the yard with Meta sitting in front of him, beaming happily. They had ridden slowly back, deeply engrossed in conversation.

'We are to be wed, Mother!' he cried from a distance, as though trying to prevent any objections. 'It is all settled.'

But there were no objections at all. On the contrary, both Tengel and Silje, together with his whole family were very happy for them. Nobody questioned the wisdom or otherwise of the move and everybody seemed to understand the inevitability of it.

And what was to be made of Klaus? It was only a few days after Silje had conspired to bring him and Rosa together that she caught sight of them secretly making their way towards the barn. Silje chuckled softly – Rosa would certainly not be afraid to see what Klaus was so proud to show her.

‘Are they going to thresh corn?’ asked Yrja, a little confused.

‘I suppose you could say that,’ laughed Silje.

* * * *

After talking things over, Tengel and Charlotte decided to give Klaus a smallholding that had been standing empty for some years and Klaus made an honest woman of Rosa just in time to avoid a scandal. They had two children before Rosa’s childbearing years were behind her – two children who, while they made no epoch-breaking discoveries, were blessed with far greater intellect than both their parents.

Nor was Meta about to disappoint the family. She produced three boys in quick succession, proving that she was not lacking in passion for her Are – not in the slightest!

Although little Yrja loved everyone in the family, she placed Silje high above all the others. She was, however, unable to understand her own parents. She still lived at home, yet each morning her mother would ask, ‘Are you not up at Lindallé today?’

Whenever Yrja answered, ‘Sunniva is helping Mistress Silje today,’ her mother would become irritated and wonder why ‘that spoilt child’ had to stick her nose in everywhere.

At home, before working at Linden Allée, Yrja had always been too weak to care for and carry her small brothers and sisters. Now that she was stronger and healthier, she had asked many times if she could do work around the home. But her parents always refused to hear of it.

‘Mind your back, lifting heavy things,’ they said, seemingly full of consideration, but still insisting that she look after Are and Meta’s three young sons.

Yrja could not understand this at all. She could not see that she was the most important source of income for the family. Every small thing she was given at Linden Allée – and sometimes at Gråstensholm – was of no value in her eyes and she handed these all to her parents. They, of course, were frightened she would injure herself and that they would lose all the good things Yrja provided – food, clothes and above all the coin that Mistress Silje regularly pressed upon her.

For her part, all that mattered to Yrja was being at Linden Allée. As the time she spent there lengthened, the signs of low self-esteem, poor confidence and hunger that she had suffered at the hands of her parents began to disappear. She seemed somehow to absorb knowledge from Tengel and Silje, just by being around them. From Meta, she learned housekeeping skills and from all three she learned some growing self-confidence. Very quietly and unobtrusively her own personality continued to grow and develop, but because she was so quiet and shy, at first no one took any notice.