

## CHAPTER 1

# *The grateful goat and the talking spoons*

Here I am, feeling sorry for myself.

I'm sitting on a wooden crate, wedged between a cage full of geese, and a goat. If I press too hard against the geese, they honk and peck at me, and even though my coat is too thick for it to hurt, it makes me want to cry. If I press too hard against the goat, she eats my plaits. One is already ten centimetres shorter than the other, the ribbon gone, and that makes me want to cry too.

I could stand up, but the boat is rolling and tumbling so much that I would probably fall over,

and the deck is covered in water and poo and fish guts. If I don't fall over, I might bump into one of the fishermen, and they are already grumpy about having a ten-year-old on their boat. They think it is bad luck to have a child on board. Even worse luck if she is a girl.

I could go and sit with the old man and his seasick pig, but he might ask me why I am travelling alone, all the way from Copenhagen out to the island of Bornholm, and I don't want to talk about it. That will definitely make me want to cry.

I tell myself that the goat isn't so bad. She stinks, but she is friendly, and doesn't seem to mind me being close. The softness and warmth of her remind me of snuggling by the fire with Mama, listening as she reads my favourite stories. I wrap my red woollen scarf around my head to protect my hair, rest my cheek against the goat and close my eyes. A tear squeezes its way out from between my eyelids and dribbles down my face.

'Silly,' I say, licking it off my cheek as it slides near to my mouth.

I will not feel sorry for myself.

‘I will be a brave girl,’ I whisper into the goat’s kidneys. ‘I will make Mama proud of me.’

And then I fall asleep.



My grandmother meets me at the harbour at Svaneke. We have never met before, but I know it is her because she is the only woman there. She is short and round, like a barrel. Everything she wears is black – her headscarf, dress, boots and shawl. Even her eyes are black, like two raisins pressed into her wrinkled, grey face. She does not smile.

I wonder if her bloomers are black. Gloomy underwear would be enough to wipe the joy from anyone’s face.

She waits on solid ground and makes me walk alone, down the gangplank and the full length of the long, stone wharf. I have travelled all this way on my own, and still she makes me complete the final part of the journey alone.

I feel naked and lopsided, and when I reach her, I realise why.

Grandmother gasps. ‘What have you done to your hair, child?’

I touch my head and feel spiky tufts where one of my long, blonde plaits used to sit. The goat has eaten all the hair off one side of my head while I was asleep.

I can feel hot tears prickling in my eyes, but I will not let them fall. I will *not* feel sorry for myself. No matter how bald the right side of my head feels. No matter how much I wish my mother were here. No matter how long it takes before my grandmother hugs me and says that she is glad to meet me.

‘Stay here, child,’ she says, and walks along the wharf to boss some men about. I have brought an enormous trunk with me and she is not happy. It will have to come later on the back of a cart. She will have to pay someone for their trouble.

She means *I* have caused her trouble.

I think, *Don't hold your breath waiting for a hug,*  
*Inge Maria Jensen.*

The old man walks by, leading the goat on a rope. She bleats at me. I think she is saying, 'Thank you for the delicious lunch,' but I am too annoyed to say, 'You are welcome.'

But then the man scolds her and I think that maybe the goat is feeling sad and lonely too, and I give in.

'Have a pleasant evening!' I call after her and wave.

Grandmother rolls her eyes and drags me up the road by the arm. She will not even hold my hand.



The walk home is long and cold. By the time we reach Grandmother's farm, it is snowing, even though it is late in March and winter should be long gone. My legs are tired and my face is so raw that I don't even want to stop to build a snowman. My half-bald head stings with every new snowflake that lands on it.

Grandmother's house is pretty. It is bright red with black beams of wood holding the red bits

together. Like strawberries and liquorice. The roof is covered in a white icing of snow, but I can tell from the shape that it is made of straw thatching. This cheers me up a little. At least she doesn't live in a cave, or a hole in a tree. It happens, you know. I've read about it in fairy tales.

Inside is warm and cosy, but it is an old woman's home. There is a rocking chair by the fire, a basket of knitting, a small table with a lantern and a Bible. There are no books full of stories and brightly coloured pictures, no cat curled up by the fire, no squishy chairs big enough for two people to sit, side by side, cuddling, reading, talking, telling each other about their day.

'Well, child,' Grandmother snaps. 'Don't just stand there like a smoked herring with your eyes staring and your mouth open. Come inside and close the door before the wind chills the walls and there is enough snow indoors to ski.'

I look up at her, thinking that she might just have made a joke. She is frowning like an ogre. I smile anyway, and point at a flake of snow that

has blown in through the door and is flitting its way towards Grandmother.

Before I know what has happened, my outstretched hand is smarting, burning, glowing red with finger shapes.

Grandmother has slapped me!

She stomps past me and slams the door shut.

‘You are behaving like a barbarian, child!’ she scolds. ‘Pointing, gaping and disobeying your grandmother!’

I stare at her, my bottom lip trembling.

*I will not cry, I say in my head. I will not feel sorry for myself.*

But I do not know why she has slapped me. I just wanted to show her the beautiful snowflake dancing across her floor.

And I do not even know what a barbarian is.

I have never been hit before. Mama’s hands were only ever used to hug, or to help with laces and buttons, or to stroke my cheek and hair.

Grandmother whips off my coat and scarf, wipes my face clean with a cold, damp cloth and

sits me down at the kitchen table with a bowl of steaming soup.

I am starving. I have not eaten since the boat left Copenhagen yesterday. It's not easy to eat when you are watching fish guts slide around at your feet and have a seasick pig moaning at you. My stomach feels like it has shrunk to the size of a thimble and now it is begging for me to stretch it out with some food once again.

Grandmother says grace – 'Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest. Let thy gifts to us be blest' – and nods for me to eat.

The soup looks delicious – flour balls and meatballs crowd the bowl of steaming broth, bobbing merrily between the chunks of onion and carrot.

But I am even more excited by the beautiful spoon lying beside my hand. It is large and shiny and has a pattern of flowers along its handle. It is certainly a girl spoon and perhaps even a talking spoon. There are such things. I know, because I have read about this too, in my fairy-tale book.



I lift the spoon and say, ‘Thank you, pretty spoon, for your help in eating my food.’

Grandmother rolls her eyes and eats her soup.

I smile at the spoon and begin to eat, getting faster with every mouthful. It tastes delicious and I feel my tummy stretch and my face defrost. It is not enough, but when I have finished I say, ‘Thank you, Grandmother.’

She looks pleased and places not one, but *three* slices of white bread before me. Then she puts a bowl of jam and a pat of butter on the table.

My mouth is watering and my tummy is growling at me to get wolfing, but I am afraid that this is some kind of trick. Perhaps Grandmother is testing me to see whether I am a greedy child as well as a barbarian.

I sit there, hands folded politely in my lap, more miserable than a goose on Christmas Eve. Grandmother is bustling around the kitchen, boiling the kettle, making tea. She is pretending to be preoccupied, but I know that she is watching out the corner of her eye.