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Opening extract from **The Princess Plot**

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Published by
Chicken House

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THE
Princess
PILOT

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**Chicken
House**

2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS

Published in Germany as *Skogland* by Verlag Friedrich Oetinger
Original text © Verlag Friedrich Oetinger 2005
English translation © The Chicken House 2009

First published in Great Britain in 2009
The Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.doublecluck.com

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Cover illustration by Tim Spencer
Cover design by Steve Wells
Interior design by Steve Wells

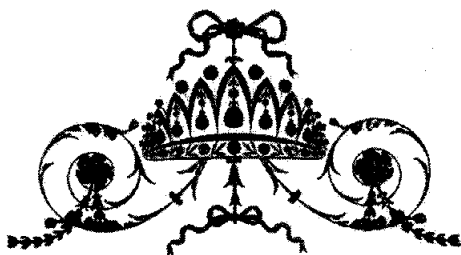
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon, CR0 4TD

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood
grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available

ISBN 978-1-905294-54-1



PROLOGUE

Scandia was in mourning.

Above the palace the flag flew at half-mast, and thousands of umbrellas lined the boulevard. The gun carriage bearing the coffin proceeded at walking pace. It was covered with flowers in the national colours and drawn by six black horses that pulled it slowly up the hill to the cemetery.

The Little Princess walked behind the coffin – alone, upright, shedding no tears. Her shoulders were straight and her gaze was unseeing. She did not look at the crowds of people, who would have given anything for a glance so that they might encourage her with a nod or comfort her with a smile, and she did not look at the coffin in which her father was making his last journey.

She'd refused to let anyone shield her from the rain, which had been falling incessantly since morning out of

a sky of unbroken grey, and her wet hair lay in rain-heavy, rain-darkened strands over her face.

'Poor child,' whispered a woman in the second row, and pressed up close to her husband for shelter beneath an inappropriately bright and cheerful umbrella. 'She may have her crown, her estates, her jewellery, gold and silver, but they're not much use to her now, are they?'

'Nothing but bad luck,' murmured her husband. He held the umbrella over her, so that the rain began to drip down the back of his neck. 'The whole family. Nothing but bad luck.'

Just a few steps behind the Little Princess, walking straight-backed and alone, came her only living relative: her uncle, Norlin. From now on he would be dealing with the business of government in her name. Norlin had instructed a black-clad court official to walk two paces behind him with an umbrella. His hair was immaculate, elegantly styled, its silver-blue sheen in contrast to his still-young face. But his mouth was twisted with sorrow, and everyone in the crowd could see how deeply he, too, was grieving.

'She's lucky to have him there, at any rate,' the woman whispered, as the government ministers filed past them in the cortège. 'The little girl won't be completely alone.'

'Let's hope they'll get on,' her husband whispered back.

The woman brushed aside his misgivings. 'At least her guardian's a relative,' she whispered, 'and not a stranger. After all, it'll be more than four years till she comes of age, poor mite.'

A young man in front of them turned and frowned. 'Can you keep your voices down a bit?' he demanded. 'This is hardly the time for a chat. If you want to talk, go home and do it!'

Cameras whirled, and two helicopters circled high above the funeral procession. The princess was already well out of sight, and yet the crowd remained standing there, motionless, silent and sad.

Only when the ten-gun salute rang out from Cemetery Hill, to tell the country that its king had been laid to rest alongside his wife in the royal tomb, did a collective sigh pass through the crowd of mourners, and they began to make their way home.

'If we hurry,' said the woman as the crowd dispersed, 'we can get the bus at quarter past. And I don't care what you say, with all the misery she's had to bear it's a blessing the little one still has her uncle. But if I was superstitious, I'd say there was a curse on this family.'

'Never mind that now! There's our bus!' cried the man. He folded the umbrella and began to run. 'Come on, we can still catch it!'

They pushed their way through to the back of the bus with a crowd of other mourners, and eventually managed to find seats.

'It's a good thing you're not superstitious,' the man said, finally responding to his wife's comments. 'A curse? We're not living in a fairy tale! If people encounter trouble and strife, my dear, they've generally brought it on themselves.'

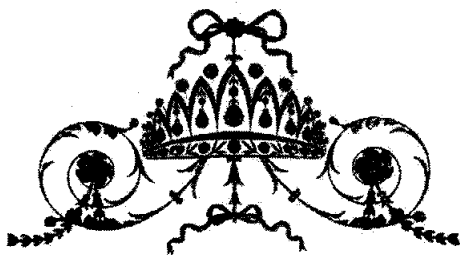
'Malena,' said Norlin. He had insisted that he and the princess should travel back to the palace together in the royal limousine. 'Malena, what can I do to comfort you?'

The Little Princess sat there expressionless, as if she hadn't even heard him.

'The best thing is to get back into your routine, Malena.' He was sitting a little apart from her, because her coat was so wet. 'Today and tomorrow you'll stay in the palace so that both of us can sign the thank-you letters for people's condolences.' He leant forwards. 'Did you hear me, Malena? After that, you'll go back to school. Back to your friends. That'll help take your mind off all this. And in two months' time it'll be your fourteenth birthday.'

Slowly, very slowly, Malena looked up. It still seemed as if she hadn't heard him. But then, without saying a word, she nodded her head.

Part One



CHAPTER ONE

The sun disappeared behind a cloud, and the two girls on the patio could feel the coolness as evening approached. Summer had come at last, and the tender green of late spring was gradually changing into the rich colours of high summer. For the first time this year, they had done their homework in the garden, and now Bea gathered her pencils together in a single sweep.

‘They shouldn’t be allowed to set us History homework like that,’ she said. She scowled at the large sheet of paper with its lines, and its lines coming out of lines. ‘History’s so boring!’

Jenna sighed. ‘Everybody thinks that, and that’s why she gives us stupid homework,’ she said. ‘Miss Black wants to make herself seem important. I’ll bet you that’s the only reason why we’re stuck here doing this now.’

‘Anyway, I’m getting cold,’ said Bea. ‘And that means

goodbye to the family tree, and she can moan as much as she likes tomorrow. I'm going inside, and I'm not going to do any more.'

Jenna looked thoughtfully at her sheet of paper, then she rolled it up and fastened it with a rubber band. 'Maybe I'll ask my mother about it,' she said. 'There's hardly anything on mine at all.'

'That's because of "the foreigner",' said Bea, but then she started guiltily. 'No, no, that came out wrong! You know what I mean. It's not fair on you having to do this when your mother won't tell you who your father is. You can't put in any of that grandmother and great-grandmother stuff. You'll just have to hand in half a family tree.'

Jenna shook her head. 'My mother's side's not much better!' she said. 'I don't know much about them either!'

Bea's mother poked her head out of the French windows. 'Girls,' she said. 'It's getting too cold for you to be outside.'

Bea twisted her lips. 'Naaaah! We're OK out here,' she said.

'Don't be cheeky,' said her mother, undeterred. 'Supper's ready. Aren't you girls hungry?'

Jenna shook her head. 'I think I'd better be going home,' she said. 'You know what my mum's like. She gets

worried even if I'm just a couple of minutes late.'

Bea tapped her watch severely. 'It's seven o'clock, sweetie,' she said. 'Time for a baby's bedtime story. Your mum's such a worrier. You really need to train her properly.'

Bea's mother put her hand on Jenna's arm. 'Don't listen to her,' she said. 'Why don't you send your mum a text message? Tell her you're having supper with us.'

Jenna nodded and switched on her mobile. She knew her mother would be annoyed. Daughters shouldn't just send their mothers a message to say where they are and where they're staying. Daughters should ring to ask if they can stay.

I'm still at Bea's, she typed, hoping that her mother had actually switched her mobile on. She was always forgetting to do that. I'll be back before dark. Love, Jenna.

Then she switched off her mobile. She didn't want to get a message from her mother to say she must come home at once.

'Done it!' she said, and plonked herself down on the fourth chair in the kitchen. (Bad manners. Sit down slowly and sit up straight.)

Jenna loved Bea's kitchen. It was always a bit of a mess, with a few dirty dishes, or washed ones still draining on the rack next to the sink, and on the wall behind the table

there were so many notes pinned to a notice board that every so often one of them would come fluttering down on to the food: The Flying Pizzaman – telephone orders 24 hours a day, or TV and hi-fi repairs – prompt, reliable and reasonable or District Chemist Opening Hours 1997. Wow! Jenna was quite sure that Bea's mother had never taken a single one of those notices off the board. She just kept pinning new ones on it. Jenna's mum would have died.

'Finished your homework?' asked Bea's father.

That was another reason why Jenna loved Bea's kitchen, Bea's house, and every meal in Bea's house. Because they were a real family. Father, mother and child. Two children, when Jenna ate with them. And because Bea's father was always himself – friendly, a bit absent-minded, never loud. Of course, she had no experience of fathers herself, but she was certain a good father must be just like that. Bea's always made her feel that he was happy to see her.

'No, you can't ever really finish the homework we had today,' said Bea, twisting a piece of salami in her fingers, and then screwing up her nose before dropping it back on to the dish of cold meats. 'We had to do a family tree.'

'Cor!' said her father. Jenna's mum would have passed out on the spot. Grown men should talk properly. 'Well, did you get it all in?'

Bea tapped her forehead. 'How could we?' she asked. 'Do you know what Grandma Biggin's parents were called?'

Her father gave an earnest nod. 'Ronald Baron of Cowdung, and Betty Baroness of Pigswill, née Chickenfeed,' he said. 'Do you want their dates of birth?'

Jenna giggled.

'Maybe making it up isn't such a bad idea. I'll think of something later,' she said. 'I haven't got anything like enough relatives. Otherwise our teacher will make my life a misery tomorrow.'

'Do you need a few convincing names?' asked Bea's father, resting his knife on the bread.

Jenna shook her head and laughed. 'Not like the ones you just said!' All the same, some help would have been useful. She found it especially hard to think of foreign names – Indian might be the simplest. They would also fit in better with her appearance. But Bea's father probably wouldn't be much good at those.

Bea's mother held out the bread basket. 'I wouldn't worry about it,' she said. 'You'll be on holiday in a week's time. They must have finished discussing the reports ages ago, so it won't really matter what you come up with now. Though of course I shouldn't be telling you that.'

At this moment there was a ring on the doorbell.

'Hello,' said Bea's father, 'are we expecting anybody?' But Jenna knew exactly who was at the door.

'What do you mean, disappeared?' cried Norlin. 'Surely Security must have had people there! The school was under guard twenty-four hours a day!'

The official hunched his shoulders as if he was expecting a beating, though of course there was no question of that in a civilized country like Scandia. 'Apparently, Your Highness,' he said, 'just at that moment . . . apparently . . . there was a diversion . . .'

'So?' yelled Norlin. The curtains had not yet been drawn across the windows, and from the square in front of the palace the reddish-yellow street lamps cast their light into the gloomy room. 'What does the housemistress have to say? The headmaster? What do they think happened? Does it look like a kidnapping?'

The official took a cautious step backwards, as if he really was about to bear the full brunt of the regent's fury.

'One can hardly imagine it being anything else, Your Highness,' he said. 'But the strange thing . . . the strange thing is . . .'

'Well?' demanded Norlin.

'The security men swear,' said the official, 'that there were no cars anywhere in the vicinity during the hours

before she disappeared. And, as you know, you can see for miles across the countryside around the school.'

'Only if you take the trouble to look!' growled Norlin. 'And I hardly need to ask if anyone saw a helicopter, or a delivery van, or a horse and cart.'

'Nothing, Your Highness!' said the official with complete conviction, and bowed. 'The men are absolutely certain.'

'Then whoever did it must have been very clever,' murmured Norlin. He looked at the messenger and drummed his fingers on his desk. 'Perhaps there's an underground passage. But I'm sure the whole area was thoroughly searched before my brother-in-law sent Malena to the school.'

'An underground passage is unlikely, Your Highness,' said the official, and bowed again. 'The subsoil is too rocky. The leader of the search party—'

Norlin interrupted him. 'I want to talk to him!' he said. 'Now!'

The messenger bowed his way backwards to the door. 'Of course, Your Highness,' he said. 'I'll get him to come straight away.'

'And not a word to the press!' said Norlin. 'Do you hear? Do you hear? I need to know more first. My God, one word, one small blunder, anything — you hear? —

anything could put my niece in terrible danger!' It seemed as if he had only now realized the implications of the news.

'I'll pass on your orders, Your Highness,' said the official. Behind him he reached for the door handle. 'And I'll tell the leader of the search party . . .'

'I want to see Bolström,' said the regent, and sank back, exhausted, into his chair. 'Send Bolström here, no matter where he is.'

'Bolström, yes, of course,' said the messenger, and now his voice sounded not only eager to serve but also relieved. 'I'll send people to look for him.'

And as he closed the door behind him, he thought what a good thing it was that since the death of the king, Norlin had been working so closely with the head of the Secret Service. Bolström would help to find the princess. Bolström would be better than the police.

'Won't you come in for a moment?' asked Bea's mother. 'We're in the kitchen.'

'Hello, Mum,' said Jenna, without looking up.

Her mother stood in the kitchen doorway and smiled.

She's so beautiful, thought Jenna. The exact opposite of me. Tall, blonde and elegant. Of course she needs to be,

for her work. But I can see that somehow she intimidates people, even just by standing in front of them.

'I thought I'd come and fetch you,' said Jenna's mother, still smiling. 'I got your text message, but it's getting a little late. I thought it would be safer.'

Bea's father gobbled his dinner. (*Don't take large bites. Don't talk with your mouth full. Bea's father never obeyed the rules.*)

'Won't you sit down for a moment?' he asked, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. (*Yes, that too.*) 'I'd have taken Jenna home myself. But I thought she'd be fine, as it's still light outside – now that it's summer . . .'

Jenna's mother smiled and Bea's father broke off. 'Of course,' she said. 'Thank you very much. But I think we should be going now.'

Jenna looked at the remains of the bread on her plate. She could hardly leave it there, but she couldn't just stuff it into her mouth, either – her mum definitely wouldn't approve of that.

Jenna stood and picked up the piece of bread. (*That was bad form as well.*) 'Thanks for everything,' she said. 'See you tomorrow, Bea. I'm really looking forward to History.' She rolled her eyes.

'Stuff History!' said Bea.

'Bea!' cried her mother. (*Even Bea's parents had their limits.*)

There were shoes scattered around the hall, and in the middle of these was a plastic bag with empty bottles sticking out of it. A ball of fluff bobbed across the floor. Jenna hadn't noticed any of that before her mum had arrived, but she did now.

'Byeeee!' she called as her mother gently pushed her out into the front garden. Bea's mother waved and closed the door.

'Mum,' said Jenna, extracting her arm from her mother's. 'You always make me look stupid!'

'You're only fourteen,' said her mother. 'You don't know what terrible things can happen to a young girl in the city.'

The sun was still shining brightly, even if it had sunk a little towards the horizon. Children were playing outside on the pavement.

'Bolström!' said Norlin. 'What on earth are we going to do now?'

The servant quietly closed the door from the outside, leaving Norlin and Bolström alone in the room.

'What did she take with her?' asked Bolström. The room was in almost complete darkness. Only the glow from the street lamps and the green shade of the reading lamp formed little islands of light, which made the areas

around them seem all the darker. 'Did she take anything at all?'

'What do you mean?' asked Norlin.

'Did she pack anything?' asked Bolström. 'Did she take a bag with her? If she packed, my dear Norlin, then maybe she wasn't kidnapped after all.'

'What do you mean?' Norlin asked again.

'Think about it,' said Bolström. 'If no one saw a car, she might simply have run away of her own accord.'

Norlin stood up. 'She didn't pack anything,' he said. He went to the window and drew the curtains.

Bolström shook his head and switched on the light.

'All right, so she didn't pack anything,' he said. 'Well, her father's just died, Norlin! Have you any idea what might be going through a child's head in that situation? She's desperate. She's confused. She is finding life unbearable. She ...'

'You think she might have killed herself?' cried Norlin.

'Well, as far as I know, nobody has found her body,' said Bolström, 'though that doesn't mean a great deal. But she might just have gone off – wandering around in the countryside. Didn't you say after the funeral that she seemed to be confused? Anything is possible.'

'Oh God!' cried Norlin.

'Well, that's better than a kidnapping, you have to

agree,' said Bolström. 'Now listen, Norlin. Let the Secret Service handle it. The important thing is that the public mustn't know what's happened. Certainly not for now – otherwise we might lose control of the situation. That's the real danger.'

'Dammit!' whispered Norlin. 'And it's her birthday next week!'

'I know,' said Bolström.

'We must . . .' whispered Norlin. 'Bolström! How can we . . .?'

Bolström put his arm round Norlin's shoulder. 'I know you're worried sick,' he said. 'Perfectly understandable. But that's why I'm here.'

Norlin stiffened.

'I'm depending on you, Bolström,' he said. 'You know how everybody loves the princess.'

'Your parents' names, at least!' cried Jenna. 'You must know the names of your parents!'

Her mother had taken off her shoes and stowed them away under the wardrobe. Now she was putting her jacket on a hanger, and pulling it straight.

'I do know the names of my parents,' she said, looking in the mirror and brushing a blonde hair away from her face. 'And I know the names of my grandparents too. I

even know the names of my great-grandparents, and my great-great-grandparents.' She went into the living room and sat down in an armchair in front of the television. 'But I'm not keen on having teachers nosing into family affairs. And that's exactly what this family tree business amounts to. Teachers should teach you, and they should help you, but your private life has nothing to do with them.'

'Please, Mum!' pleaded Jenna.

Mum shook her head. 'Sit down and watch the news. I don't want to discuss it.'

Jenna stared at her. Mum was getting even worse. She ran to her room and slammed the door. (One must expect occasional fits of temper during adolescence. Good manners are no longer guaranteed, even for children who are extremely well brought up). Maybe her teacher didn't have the right to poke into a mother's private affairs, but surely that didn't apply to a daughter. Everybody wanted to know about their family. Why wouldn't her mother tell her what her father looked like? She had let slip that he was from another country and had a dark complexion like Jenna, but what did he do, and who were her grandparents?

Jenna flopped down on her bed. Whenever she asked about her father, Mum always changed the subject very quickly – and of course, to a certain extent, Jenna could

understand why. It just didn't fit in with Mum's image. She should have had a smart partner who worked in a bank, wore Armani suits and handmade shirts – not some weird foreigner she was ashamed of.

Jenna rolled the rubber band off the family tree and sat down at her desk. Only once had her mother told her anything about her background, and that had been on her last birthday. They'd gone to a restaurant to celebrate. Jenna had had a glass of Coke, and Mum had had some wine, and then suddenly Mum had looked her up and down and said, 'You're growing up. You're gradually growing up. When I was your age . . .'

Jenna had listened in silence, with bated breath.

'Not long after that, I met your father,' Mum had said. Was it the three glasses of wine? 'We were head over heels in love, Jenna – madly in love.'

Still Jenna said nothing. She didn't want to spoil the moment.

'And one day, when it was my birthday, my eighteenth, we just ran away. We didn't bother about celebrations – we simply went to the seaside, near Saarstad. We sat on the beach, but it was still quite cold at that time of year, and as I had the key . . .'

'What key?' Jenna had asked, and straight away she'd known it was a mistake. Her mother was startled.

'Never mind,' she'd said, and she'd pushed her glass away to the centre of the table. She hadn't touched it again. 'Well, congratulations, Jenna. You're no longer a child, so I hope you'll have a wonderful time in your teens.'

Jenna looked at the almost-empty sheet lying in front of her on the desk. Maybe it would be fun to invent a few names.

She stood up and switched on the light, even though it was only just beginning to get dark.

She was clearly visible in the window from outside: a small, slightly plump figure with dark hair, standing in her room on the first floor and energetically pulling something from a shelf. Only when she sat down was the brightly-lit rectangle empty again.

On the opposite side of the street, a man moved back into a doorway and waited.