

Holly-Jane Rahlens



Extract:

## Chapter One

### *Stella Alisa Menzel*

There lived once a young girl named Stella Alisa Menzel who was in possession of a rather large piece of enchanted cloth. It was made of a lustrous blue silk satin, dotted with stars and snowflakes of silver brocade, and hemmed with golden thread.

Stella lived at a time in history when enchanted cloth was no longer commonplace. Oh, it popped up every now and then in London, off Portobello Road, in dark shops reeking of incense, shops, it was said, that were frequented by witches. Or it could be found in the far reaches of Germany's Black Forest in the ruins of century-old farmhouses, thought haunted. It was rumored that an antique dealer from Pieksämäki, Finland, had discovered several yards of it on his last trip to Transylvania; and some people have actually seen cloth like this advertised on an obscure Internet boutique that catered to magicians seeking custom-made invisible cloaks.

Despite all this talk of the supernatural, you ought to know from the start, that Stella was in no shape or form a magician, a witch, or a ghost. Nor was she a vampire, werewolf, angel, devil, or any other kind of fantasy figure. Not that she didn't occasionally behave like some of the above — especially the devil. But, no, Stella was a rather ordinary mortal like any one of us, except that she happened to have red hair, which was rather uncommon. She hardly had any freckles, too, which

was actually very uncommon for redheads. At last count, Stella had just seven freckles on her left shoulder, three on her right, nine on her upper chest, and one directly under her right nostril (which, admittedly, was not the best place to have a freckle. Little old ladies were always furtively passing her a tissue and whispering, “Dear, do clean up that ... uh ... thing under your nose”).

In brief, Stella was an ordinary young girl with an extraordinary piece of enchanted cloth in her possession. Now, it is vital to understand that this cloth wasn’t enchanted in the sense of it being magical. It couldn’t make you invisible or more beautiful than you already were, nor could it transform a prince into a frog or a frog into a *Tyrannosaurus rex*. Nonetheless, the cloth charmed everyone who possessed it, for within its folds was hidden the ability to capture their lives and their stories. This naturally carried with it a great responsibility, for she who possessed the cloth, possessed its stories. This has always been the case — ever since the cloth was made into a tapestry just about one hundred years ago. This book is meant to tell its story and the tale of a family and a young girl under its spell.

## Chapter Two

### *The Garden Gnome*

One afternoon when Stella was still a young child, she was twirling with her friend Mats among the garden gnomes in her babysitter’s garden. The hot June sun sent its rays down relentlessly through a perfect blue sky, but under Stella’s silver-brocaded, snowflake- and star-studded silk blanket — a gift from her grandmother Josephine on the day of her birth — it was dark and cool.

Stella and Mats were as devoted to one another as Hansel and Gretel. Mats could spend hours just looking at Stella's bouncy orange-red curls: fierce, fuzzy whorls radiating outward like fireworks. She was impressed with his copper-colored wire-rimmed glasses and how they magnified his eyeballs to the size of walnuts. "Little Professor," Netti, their babysitter, called him. And he was! Even at that age, Mats could determine the exact moment when their Duplo skyscraper would topple to the floor. And when it did, Stella and Mats would laugh as if the building's collapse was the greatest game ever invented, while the other children in their tiny tot group were shocked into tears by the scattered remains of their efforts. When that happened, Stella would say something seemingly unremarkable — something like, "Little Professor is bad builder" — and the others would immediately stop sobbing and burst into laughter. Mats would then squeeze Stella tight. "That's my girl," he'd say. "That's my girl."

But now they were twirling among the garden gnomes with Snowstar over their heads — Snowstar being Stella's name for the blanket. They could smell the grass, fresh and earthy. Under their bare feet, the ground felt springy, as if they were bouncing on an especially moist, giant, chocolate sponge cake. The adults were chattering away at the table under the apricot tree, behind the tool shed, ice cubes jiggling around in their punch glasses.

Stella and Mats were getting dizzy from twirling, liking the happy, giddy feeling it gave them, when they were torn out of their frolicking by barks. Snarls. Heavy panting. The blanket was yanked away. *Swoosh!* And Stella and Mats found themselves face to face with two ferocious dragons ... well, German shepherds. The beasts bared their teeth, sharp and scary, and snapped at them. Stella felt their hot, fiery breath on her face, smelled the foul monster stink of it. She screamed. Her father materialized beside the children and swooped them up. The dogs immediately jumped up on him, growling.

“Stop!” shouted Netti, the babysitter, who’d come running.

But the dogs didn’t stop. Instead, they played tug o’ war with the blanket. They ran away with it, pounced on it with their muddy paws. They slobbered over it, twisting it around and around as if it were the neck of a bird. The blanket ripped — *zzsscchhtt*. Again and again. *Zzsscchhtt*. *Zzsscchhtt*.

“Bad dogs,” Netti admonished, shooing the dogs away.

Stella’s father was losing his patience. “Пошли вон!” he cried out, which in Russian means, “Scram, you dumb, stupid, crazy, wild, blanket-eating, rabid dogs who think you’re dragons, and if you don’t, you’ll see what’s coming to you and I mean business!”

The dogs, their tails between their legs, ran off yelping, back to where they came from, to the neighbor’s garden.

Stella’s blanket — her Snowstar — could hardly be called a blanket anymore. Stella felt as if she herself had been ripped apart. Mats, his blonde hair flopping over his walnut eyes when he bent down, helped her and her father pick up the ruins. He understood Stella’s despair. He patted her shoulder. “That’s my girl,” he said. “That’s my girl.”

Stella wanted Snowstar back — immediately. She reasoned, that if Emma, who Netti also babysat, could get her hippopotamus back overnight, she herself could get Snowstar back by the morning too.

Emma brought her hippopotamus to Netti’s every day. The toy smelled faintly of barf, its beige plush was soiled and tattered, and it wore a red and yellow striped dress that was ripped and unraveling at the hem. Its right ear was missing — as if someone had lopped it off with a scissors. For reasons beyond Stella, Emma called her hippopotamus “Oink Oink.”

One day, when the children were visiting a playground, Oink Oink disappeared. Netti looked everywhere for her, asked all the mothers

and the nannies and babysitters who sat around in the playground if they had mistakenly taken her, but it was gone.

Emma cried the whole day.

But miraculously, the next morning, Emma appeared at Netti's with Oink Oink in tow again. Upon careful inspection the children discovered, however, that this was not the Oink Oink they'd come to know over the past two years. She was too clean. And she'd lost that sweaty, barfy smell that trailed along with her. And her striped dress looked too fresh, and its hem was perfect. Her missing ear had even reappeared.

"The ear is back," Stella noted.

"Oink Oink was in hospital," Emma told the others with great earnestness. "They op-rated the ear."

"What hospital?" asked Stella who had lots of broken toys that needed to be operated on.

"Toys 'R' Us?" guessed Netti.

"Uh-oh," said Stella's mother, Isabel Zwickel-Menzel, when her husband and daughter came home from Netti's garden with the blanket Snowstar muddy and in shreds. "I suppose we'll have to throw it away now. It's old and stained and ripped."

"No!" Stella cried out. "Toys 'R' Us."

"You won't find another one like this there," Isabel said. "But don't worry. We'll get you a new blanket somewhere, sweetie."

No matter how much Stella screeched, Isabel explained in that "mama voice" of hers — a voice as steady and stubborn and exasperating as the autumn rain — that even Toys 'R' Us Hospital could not rescue Snowstar. Isabel, you see, never covered a fact with a lie. She was a pharmacist and that's how pharmacists are. They may, sometimes, sugarcoat their pills, but hardly ever their words.

“Oh, dear!” Stella’s grandmother Josephine cried out when she came to dinner that evening and saw the remnants of the blue satin blanket. “Oh, dear. My own grandmother’s heirloom.”

“Mama,” said Isabel, “I’m very sorry about this, but this is what happens, when you give a child a silk satin blanket. What on earth possessed you?”

Josephine threw her daughter one of her withering looks. “That, my dear, is something you will need to find out for yourself.”

Isabel sighed. “It was old and stained when you gave it to Stella. And now it is old and stained, and muddy and torn. Throw it out!”

“No!” Stella protested. “Bring my blanket back!”

“Give it to me, please,” Josephine said, her voice even. “Let me see.”

“Mama!” Isabel replied. “You can’t make something from nothing!”

“Shush,” Josephine said, inspecting the blanket, turning it around and around and around in her hands. “Actually,” she finally said, “I think there’s enough material here to make something new.”

“You see!” Stella said triumphantly to her mother. “You see!”

Isabel just shrugged and returned to the kitchen to help her husband Mikhail with his famous strawberry blintzes.

Days passed, a week, and then two. One day, Oma Josephine came by with a package. Inside, was a dress made of blue silk satin lined with chiffon, all of it stitched together with golden thread. The satin was brocaded in silver with stars and snowflakes.

Stella was shocked. “Snowstar?” she said, near tears. “What happened to Snowstar?”

“Hmpf,” said Isabel. She grabbed up the dress and inspected it inch by inch, stitch by stitch, as if she were deciphering, letter-by-letter, a doctor’s prescription. “It’s still stained!” she finally said, pointing to some spots.

“Cranberry sauce. Thanksgiving. 1959,” said Josephine. “When it was a tablecloth. In New York,”

“And these white spots?” demanded Isabel.

“Shoe polish. 1947.”

“Hmpf,” said Isabel again, and left the room to get ready for her tango class.

“Shoe polish?” Stella parroted. “New York?”

Josephine picked Stella up and sat down with her on the sofa. “Stella,” she said, “how would you like to hear a story about an enchanted cloth?”

“A magic cloth?” Stella wanted to know.

“No, not really magical, as in abracadabra, but quite extraordinary all the same.”

Stella clapped her hands. She was glad for the diversion, for she had had a boring, rainy afternoon. And besides, she loved listening to her grandmother who had a funny accent when she spoke. “Yes! A story!” She leaned into the cushion of her grandmother’s bosom and Josephine began her tale.