

FICTION

Happily  
Ever  
Me.

PART 1

78

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I remember the day Ma let me wear her necklace to school. It had these pretty shiny beads, and I had begged her. During indoor recess I ran over to my favorite play area: dress up. There, I found pink curtains, hangers and a mirror. I put on the sparkling blue dress and high-heeled shoes, admiring how the beads completed the outfit. I twirled around and looked at myself in the mirror, pretending I was surrounded by fairy dust and living every little girl's dream.

"I want to see the necklace." Melissa hovered over me. She seemed so big. Some of the fairy dust seemed to dissipate.

I touched the necklace. Melissa offered a smile. Could I trust her? The girl who made kindergarten a nightmare? Who called me names, whispered lies about me into other children's ears so they wouldn't be my friend and took my crayons away, threatening that the whole class would call me a tattletale if I told the teacher? This was the girl who made me burn with shame, but at the same time, she made me stash it away deep, deep within my heart. I told no one.

I noticed Melissa's smile and my heart lifted. I have something Melissa doesn't, something she wants. Maybe, if I let her try it on, she'll be nice to me.

With a shaking hand I handed over the necklace. My eyes widened and froze as she stashed it in her pocket.

"I'll keep that now." Her smile turned smug, and she walked away. She didn't threaten me

not to tell anyone. She knew I wouldn't. Not even my mother. I'd tell her I lost it.

I looked into the dress-up mirror, my eyes loaded with locked sadness, with tears I would not cry; no, I would not let Melissa get the class to call me a crybaby.

I no longer twirled, no longer admired the dress. I was like Cinderella when her stepsisters had torn her dress and yanked away her beads. Just like the picture in the worn-out Cinderella book by my bed.

I pulled off the blue dress, dreaming that one day I'd be like the real Cinderella. One day the shoe would finally fit, and people would see who I really am.



"Bella! Where is the article you promised to help me proofread?" Zeldy Blum says as I pass her down the hall.

"Yes, yes, working on it," I respond, adjusting my blue-rimmed glasses which Zeldy's shoulder had knocked ajar. Thank goodness Mrs. Blum's coffee is still intact.

"Bella!"

"Oh, hello Leah. How are you this fine morning?"

Leah Blum's eyes narrow.

"You didn't see it, did you?"

"See, um, see what?" I am genuinely confused.

"If you saw it, you'd know what it is."

A thought suddenly flashes through my mind of a résumé on the breakfast table. Hope-

Balancing the tray with one hand and straightening my shoulders, I rap on the door.

"Come in."

The lights are off, and the small office is dim. A few certificates line the wall along with a framed picture of Zeldy and Leah.

I place the tray on the mahogany desk. It had weathered my busy walk down the hall, but now, the coffee seems to groan as some of it splashes over.

"Oh, sorry. I'm so..."

"No matter," Mrs. Blum says, piercing me with her green eyes. She takes a sip of the coffee.

"Too much sugar," she sighs. I squirm. Mrs. Blum's phone rings just then.

"Oh, it's him. One moment, I need to take

*The coffee seems to groan as some of it splashes over.*

*"Oh, sorry. I'm so..."*

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ful that maybe it was for me, I had started leaning over to look, before Mrs. Blum snatched it.

"Nope, sorry," I shake my head and move briskly towards Mrs. Blum's office before Leah can question further.

"Bella!"

Miri pops her head out of our cubicle. I breathe a sigh of relief. Petite Miri with her soft, wispy voice is one person I *do* want to see.

"You've survived a whole month at *Yehudi Ani Magazine* headquarters. Good for you!" she says.

"Congratulate me again if I survive *this*," I say, gesturing to the tray with a coffee, croissant and cream cheese with my chin.

"Will do," Miri answers with a thumbs up.

I walk a few more steps and I am there: standing in front of a door shut tight with a plaque with the words "Toba Blum, Editor-in-Chief."

this." She reaches for her phone. "Sit," she commands, gesturing to the empty chair across from her.

With my eyes I trace the silver criss-cross motif on Mrs. Blum's maroon sweater as she nods and then talks into the phone.

"Look, *Mr. Rubin*, the way you have the ending planned now is just not practical... and we have a responsibility to our readers to give them an accurate representation of life. And well, you know, *life*," Mrs. Blum says, dragging out the last word with a sigh for emphasis. "I just think having Chani get married at the end, while still in med school... I'm sorry but we need to show people that you can't have everything in life. Well, I understand that her parents don't fully accept her, and she gave that up, but I'm sorry, your ending... It's just too happy."

By this point, my mouth is agape. I close it shut with my hand and bite my tongue.

"Owww."

Mrs. Blum looks up.

"I have someone here. We'll finish this later." She clicks the phone off and shakes her head.

"Kasriel Rubin is one of our most well-liked serial writers, but I must admit I need to keep him in line with reality or his stories get carried away."

I open my mouth to offer a response, but realize I am speechless.

"Now, Bella, tell me," Mrs. Blum says, leaning forward in her seat. "You've been here in Little Blue almost six weeks, you should have started to get to know the place and see your options, but it seems you still haven't found anything substantial aside from this on-the-side secretarial job I've been kind

munity. Imagine how much more inspiration you'll have to give in a year from now, after getting used to this place a little more, I mean."

The words inside me bubble to the surface. *I was in Ora over three years! It's the best kiruv seminary in Israel! And doesn't a baalas teshuvah have an original perspective and outsider enthusiasm that FFBs don't?*

"Look, we all have dreams, Bella. My twins are a bit older than you, and they are still waiting for a good *shidduch*. Life hardly ever turns out the way we want it to."

I want to point out to her that in real life, people do get married — perhaps even in med school — reflecting on Mrs. Blum's conversation with the serial writer. Does life really have to be dark, bleak and joyless? But then I remember that I'm talking to an *almanah* with two older singles in *shidduchim*, and I just nod. And, honestly, maybe she is right. Here I am, after waiting years to finally get married to that elusive Prince Charming who will come and save me, and all I'm met with is opposition from the woman who is both boss of this enterprise and also the landlady I'm renting my room from here in Little Blue. Supposedly, she knows me well.

"I understand," I say.

*Do dreams ever come true?*

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Later in my basement room at the Blums, I approach the small window, throw open the faded curtains and search the sky. Sometimes looking at the night sky takes my breath away, especially when there is a full moon with an entourage of stars. There is something there that fills me with a sense of awe, making me feel like I am not alone. That light can be found in darkness, that pain has an army of angels to brighten its path.

But tonight, I sigh.

There is no moon.

*Where is my fairy godmother? Where is my enchanted pumpkin turned carriage and my mice turned horsemen? Where is my Prince, swooping in to save me? Will anyone ever know who I really am?*

*Do I even know who I really am?*

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The next evening, the smell of stir-fry entices me up to the Blums' kitchen, despite my queasiness. I know I need to give Mrs. Blum an answer about the secretarial position soon.

"Bella, come in," Mrs. Blum says as I stall by the



enough to give you. What I'm asking is, would you like this as a permanent position or not?"

Mrs. Blum sets her gaze on me, her eyes scrutinizing. *A secretary, I think. This is a magazine office. I want... I want to be...*

An image suddenly comes to mind of the journal I'd started in high school, writing down my thoughts and feelings and even dabbling in fiction stories. I'd kept it up for a while, but at some point as I became more observant, that part of me petered out.

"I — I write," I find myself blurting out.

Mrs. Blum gives me a quizzical look, and I pause to gather my words. "I mean, I know how to write well. Maybe I can write for the magazine. I don't see myself long-term doing secretarial work."

Mrs. Blum waves her hand without even a thought, as though she is swatting at an annoying fly.

"Bella. My, my... I'd say first you have to settle into your role as an observant woman in this com-

kitchen entrance. “Stir fry?” she adds as I sit by the table. Leah and Zeldy are nowhere to be seen, so it’s just us.

My mouth waters. “Yes please.” Mrs. Blum places a plate before me and turns back to the fridge.

“Bella, I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Mrs. Blum says, sitting at the table with her own plate. “Have you thought about my proposal? The *Yehudi Ani* office is rather popular. Many girls are pining for your job, so I really must know.”

I look down, hard, at my stir-fry. “I don’t know. I need to still figure this all out. Like I said, I love writing, so I’d love to write some on the side... That’s my dream, and if we’re talking dreams... My real dream is to find a husband... so I was thinking...”

“You’re thinking *shidduchim*? What’s the rush; give it time. You’ll be a different person after taking more time to adjust to the environment here. You’ll be able to marry a boy who is learning...”

I frown. It is true that I was thinking more along the lines of a learner-earner...so I guess I would need to date a learner to get people around here to think I’m serious enough.

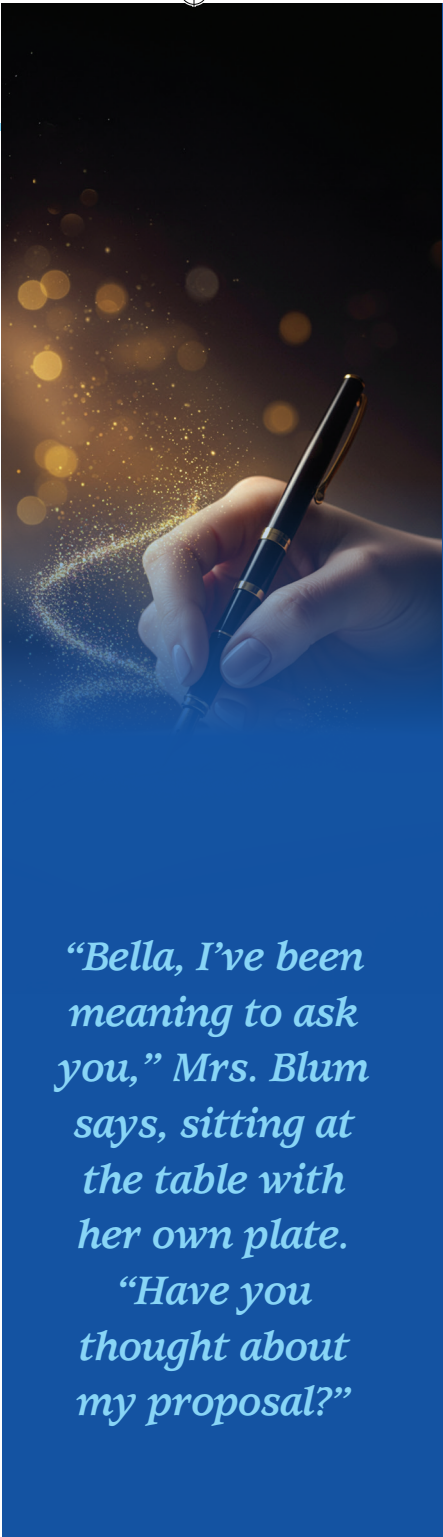
“Look, Bella, I’m only trying to help you,” Mrs. Blum says when she sees the confusion etched all over my face. “I’ll tell you what: Keep up the secretarial position, and I’ll help you look for a *shidduch*.”

I nod, making a split-second decision.

“Okay, I’ll keep it then. I’ll keep my job at *Yehudi Ani*.”

I admit I’m following along with Mrs. Blum’s plan like an obedient puppy, but a part of me wants to get up, run away and go... Where would I go? Should I go back to my parents, to their non-kosher kitchen? Back to Ora in Israel? But my teacher there, Mrs. Klein, sent me to Mrs. Blum, a distant relative, hoping that it would be easier for me financially and with *shidduchim*.

I don’t belong anywhere.



*“Bella, I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Mrs. Blum says, sitting at the table with her own plate. “Have you thought about my proposal?”*

The next day on the way to work, I sit motionless in the back seat next to Zeldy, while Leah is in the front with Mrs. Blum.

As we get ready to exit the car, I look down at my outfit. Collarbone covered and not sagging. Check. Knees and elbows covered. Check. I catch a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror. My auburn hair is in a pony, so I don’t need to worry if it is too long, because I know it is, but I still need to get a feel for what Little Blue has to say of long hair before I wear it down. I adjust my blue, round-rimmed glasses, my hazel eyes behind them holding a glimmer of anticipation mixed with apprehension.

We go through the front door and I enter my cubicle.

Three pairs of eyes look up as I enter.

“Bella, good morning! We hear that you’re here to stay. The day just got brighter,” says Ditzza, a middle-aged senior graphic designer. She has a thick Israeli accent and always seems to be gushing, which I don’t find saccharine; you can tell that she means what she says.

“Good morning!” Raquel says, swiveling around, all glitter and gloss, from her leather, Louis Vuitton purse to her nail-polished fingers.

Miri waves with her left hand, where every morning, I can’t help but notice the sparkling engagement ring on her finger. Her wedding is in just under a month. “Welcome to the

office — for real this time.”

I gulp. What have I just committed to? What about all my talents and my desire to inspire others, just as I had been inspired? But I don’t have time to dwell on my thoughts. I need to go prepare Mrs. Blum’s breakfast.

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Later, I pass by the twins’ cubicle where I hear them obsessing over something to do with Kasriel Rubin’s latest serial. Seeing how they fight over the *Yehudi Ani* at their house, I’m not surprised. It hits me then: Why can’t one

of them bring their mother a coffee every morning? And I recall how I had agreed to help Zeldy with some of her proofreading work — but do I really have to?

The next hour or so, I work on forwarding the different submissions to the correct departments and respond back to the hopeful people sending in their pieces and ideas. I yawn endlessly as I do the work, but before I know it, it's time for lunch.

I follow Raquel and Miri to the coffee room, where Raquel pulls out a salad from the fridge and Miri extracts a covered tin-foil pan.

I realize I'd left my lunch back in our cubicle and go retrieve it.

"Bella!"

I startle, jump back and fall over the swivel chair, taking a few wires with me.

"Oh, I am so sorry." I look up. It had only been Ditzza; I hadn't noticed her by her computer when I had first walked in.

She helps me up.

"I think I have a *shidduch* for you," she says, as I brush dust off my skirt.

"Wha-wha?"

"A *shidduch* idea. I happen to also be a *shadchan* in my spare time. And you just literally fell into my thoughts." She is laughing; it sounds like the tinkle of bells.

"Oh yes, just perfect, perfect!" Ditzza continues, talking more to herself than to me.

"But I'm a *baalas teshuvah*," I blurt out and then regret it. *She's offering you a shidduch! Don't ruin things so quickly, Bella.*

Ditzza waves her hand. "No matter; it's just right."

I hear Mrs. Blum's voice in my head: "*You'll be a different person after taking more time to adjust to the environment here. You'll be able to marry a learning boy...*"

"Um, but, well, is he serious

about learning?" I say.

Ditzza laughs. "Oh, yes, he learns. One of the sharpest minds around here. I'll help you make a résumé."

"Um, sure, but I have no idea how to do research..."

"If you trust me, Bella, then I can help you with that. I know him very well. He's a gem! I'll speak to him first, and let you know."

I grab my bagel and muffin, an extra bounce in my step. "Wow, thank you! I can't wait!"

...

"Now, this will be fantastic for a first date!" Raquel says, pulling a skirt out.

I hug myself with my arms. Pinch me. Yaakov Stone, the boy whom Ditzza had suggested, said "yes" to a date.

"Here. Try this with it."

When we're done, she appraises my hair.

"You should wear it down to the date, with waves. Your hair color is just too stunning to keep it in a pony." She inspects my face. "And your freckles..." I hold my breath. *No, not my freckles.* "...are too cute! Make sure your makeup doesn't overshadow them. And you have contacts, right?"

I nod.

We head over to Raquel's house, where she pulls out her curling iron, and then we proceed with the makeup job.

When she's done, I hardly recognize myself.

"Oh, my goodness, you look gorgeous! And we are running late. Hop in my car; I'll take you over to Ditzza."

Twist of guilt; I hadn't told Mrs. Blum anything. Not about Ditzza's suggestion, not that I was going out on a date. *Nada.* Not after our talk. Yaakov is picking me up from Ditzza's house.

We pass by the front hall mirror; I stop to admire the waves in my hair and how classy my skirt looks.

New to the neighborhood? Me? Not by the looks of things!

To be continued...

*I hear Mrs. Blum's voice in my head: "You'll be a different person after taking more time to adjust to the environment here. You'll be able to marry a learning boy."*

