

FICTION

Happily
Ever
Me.

PART 2

94

BINAH / JUNE 23, 2025

ELISHEVA HALLE

Recap: Bella, haunted by her experience of being bullied as a child, grows up to wish for a perfect reality where she will finally be seen. After finishing a few years at a Kiruv seminary, she ends up in a frum town called Little Blue, having been sent there by the Menacheles of her seminary who hoped that she would have an easier time there with shidduchim and parnassah. She's living in the basement of Mrs. Blum, an almanah and the editor-in-chief of a magazine, who employs Bella. The Blums' twin girls who are in shidduchim also work there. Mrs. Blum has a tight grip on reality and makes it obvious she doesn't believe in "happy endings." Bella starts to give up hope that she'll ever meet her Prince Charming. She decides to date boys who are only learning in order to impress those around her — even though she initially wanted a learner-earner. A coworker tells her she has a shidduch idea for her: a boy, she says, who is serious about learning.

Haakov has that tall and dark look, a stylish suit and classy glasses. "So, um, you, um learn?" Couldn't they make these chairs more comfortable? It's after we're seated that I realize that I have no clue what to talk about with a *yeshivah bachur*.

"Yeah, yeah, of course," Yaakov says, then tilts his head up thoughtfully. "So, what do you imagine your future home looking like?"

I shift my feet.

"Uh, er, yes, m-my future home? Yes, a Torah home, Torah learning practically wafting through the home, free of outside influence." I close my eyes a moment and think about the homes I visited in Eretz Yisrael: simple, plain. I recall how one of our hostesses had said, "Rav Chaim doesn't have Harry Potter in his house," when we had asked her if she had it around.

"No secular books," I continue, "like, none. Not even Harry Potter —, and honestly, if we could avoid it, even fiction altogether. I mean, why stuff nonsense in our children's heads when they could be learning *Mishnayos*. Just a home infused with Torah."

I lean back with a sigh of relief, just as Yaakov's eyebrows shoot up. Whew, I think I

impressed him.

"Wow, I mean, wow. You're really idealistic."

I nod vigorously, "Yup, that's just who I am."

Yaakov chuckles. "Oh, okay." He clams up.

There is a moment of awkward silence, and I take a sip of water, my mind racing. Everything I think of sharing feels so BT.

"So, um, I heard you went to Ora. Tell me about that," Yaakov says, stepping into the



silence.

I freeze. My *kiruv* sem? Quick, change the topic.

“Well, Eretz Yisrael is just amazing,” I answer drawing out the ‘ael’ in Yisrael so I sound authentic yeshivish. “The Kosel, Kever Rochel, *kevarim*... such an atmosphere of growth.” I stop and wait for Yaakov’s enthusiastic response.

“Yea, there is nothing like *davening* by the Kosel. I loved the Dead Sea and climbing Har Arbel too.”

“What about *Toras Eretz Yisrael*?”

Yaakov raises his eyebrows again. “I mean, um, yeah. I love Torah learning. I’m really passionate about it. And Eretz Yisrael just took it to another level.”

My whole body stiffens. *Relax.. You’re doing great — just relax.*

“Um, are you okay?” Yaakov asks, “maybe we

some time to spare while the Blums get ready to go. “Girls, you must look perfect. There are many *shidduch* opportunities tonight.” I take out my journal, leafing through. I find myself chuckling at some of the entries. Wow, I can be funny. Did I lose some of my spunk with this whole well... façade. Wait — did I just think of this as a façade?

Well, the girl you were on the date was not you, says a small stern voice.

I put down my journal and stare at myself in the full-length mirror. What makes me me?

I remember that little girl who just wanted to be like Cinderella. Now I have a pretty blue dress, and a fancy hairdo, but again the “happily ever after” reality seems just out of reach. And it’s not Melissa this time.

I flip through my journal again. I had started

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can walk around outside?”

“Yes.”

I need air.

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“What should I wear to the wedding tonight?”

It’s been over a week since my date with Yaakov. He hadn’t agreed to another date, to my chagrin (more like to my utter devastation), but Ditza said she would work on trying to convince him. She also mentioned that Yaakov would probably be at Miri’s wedding, and my appearance proved crucial, so I’m on the phone with Raquel, waiting for her advice.

“There was a lovely teal one with white flowers? I think it’s perfect.”

“Not too fancy?”

“Just right.”

I apply my makeup myself this time and have

writing it as a teen and often reflected back on some of the more scarring episodes from my childhood bullying experience to help me process them. As I peruse the pages, I stumble upon the story of the time the kids in first grade argued over whose backpack they would use to hit me —and Melissa, tired of their arguing, went ahead, used her own backpack and did the deed. The teacher who walked in that moment assigned her five minutes of missed recess but then didn’t enforce it. What kept me going? What kept me getting up every morning and trudging back to school?

One day someone’s going to know who I really am, I see scribbled in the journal.

It occurs to me that more than Mrs. Blum’s affirmation that I could make it all the way to the *kollel* lifestyle, I don’t want a lifestyle, I want a person. Someone who will be able to hear about my past yet still see me for who I am today, someone

who won't dismiss my dreams.... Is Yaakov that person?
"Bella! Ready?" I grab my journal and stuff it in my purse.

I trudge up the stairs, lost in thought with a hint of uncertainty about me.

"Wow, Bella, you look amazing. I bet you'll get a lot of suggestions tonight," Zeldy says.

"You would never guess that you're a *baalas teshuvah*," Leah adds.

I should have felt sky high, but instead, my head hangs all the way to the car.

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The wedding is beautiful. Miri glows, and when her *chassan* pulls down the veil, I can't help but think: When will it be my turn? Everywhere I look, it seems like I see



women clad in *sheitels* and diamond rings.

At some point I can't take it anymore. How will I ever make it in this new world? My palms are clammy and my heart races. I rush to the bathroom, where I lock myself up in a stall and force myself to take deep breaths.

I hear a clacking of heels.

"Oh, Ditz, fancy meeting you here. I need to talk to you a moment."

It's Mrs. Blum's voice. My eyes widen, and I take a step back, pressing myself against the back of the stall. *Don't breathe.*

"Don't worry Toba, I'll be finished with the design layout for the new serial by tomorrow so you can have an idea of the word count."

"No, no, Ditz. I need to talk about *shidduchim* with you." Her voice lowers to a whisper, and my ears sharpen.

"Oh..."

"I heard that Bella went out with Yaakov Stone. I'm

still trying to get him to date my Leah. Bella needs more time. You and I know that. What is this all about?"

The bathroom door opens again, and the voices stop as a few giggling teens enter the bathroom. I wait a good five minutes after I see Mrs. Blum's and Ditz's feet shuffling out before I exit myself.

I brush past the women and make it through the front door, everything a blur, my tears on the verge of spilling. I run down the stairs, ignoring the people milling around, but my purse has other intentions, catching onto the rail, sending me flying down the last two steps with the contents spilling.

I'm sprawled on the ground, my arm aching, but I sit up, horrified, when the people around me come into focus.

I feel breath on my face. It's an older lady. "Someone give her a hand."

"I'm all right," I say, standing up despite the pain, and hastily throw the contents of my purse back in.

"Bella, are you okay?" I turn around.

Yaakov.

"Yes, yes, I'm *fine*," I say, embarrassed and annoyed. Yaakov raises an eyebrow as I wipe away an escaped tear. "Really," I add for emphasis, "I'm *okay*."

With that, I stalk off, ignoring the curious and concerned eyes boring into my retreating back. A little further in the distance I see an enchanting lake with a bridge over it. The moon is bright and full in the darkening sky, and it pulls me, closer and closer, until I'm there, blessedly alone, and I lean against the bridge rail and allow the tears to flow.

Around me nightfall descends. Dark, like I am. My whole life, I've been invisible, I think, and I only survived because I told myself that one day I'd have a chance to really shine. But now I see that it was all a dream... all those years of hoping and waiting... and now I realize it was all just a little girl's dream.

When I look up again, though, the full moon catches me off guard with its brightness, like a lantern, lighting the way through the night.

Maybe I don't need to choose between reality and my dreams — maybe I can be who I am and still shine.

I reach into my purse to find my journal, feeling like I'd like to get this thought down. I rummage for a minute, but it is nowhere to be found.

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Later that night, I'm folding the outfit I wore to the wedding — made of a silky, blue fabric with white flowers — when I pause. Something about the way it shimmers reminds me of that dress-up corner in first grade.

I see it in my mind's eye — the blue dress, the high heels, Ma's borrowed necklace. The imaginary fairy dust. And I remember what came after — Melissa's grin, the theft, the silence. The shame.

But what I hadn't remembered until now was what I did when I got home. I read that Cinderella book, the one with the frayed corners and ripped spine. I must have read it a hundred times that year.

It then occurs to me. Hashem gave me stories to remind me of my value and true royal essence when I was being pushed underground.

That story saved me.

My journal is missing. But that strong, quiet dreamer? She's still here. I open up an old notebook and find a blank page. Not to write about what happened today. But to write a story. About a girl who had her externals stripped away and has nothing but the power of her own voice.

Mrs. Blum's words echo in my mind — "first you have to settle into your role as an observant woman in this community. Imagine how much more inspiration you'll have to give in a year from now." The words tease me.

But maybe I'm not here to inspire like she means it. Maybe I'm here to tell the kind of stories that are borne of real struggles and what is learned from there. Stories of healing, hope and connection to our essence.

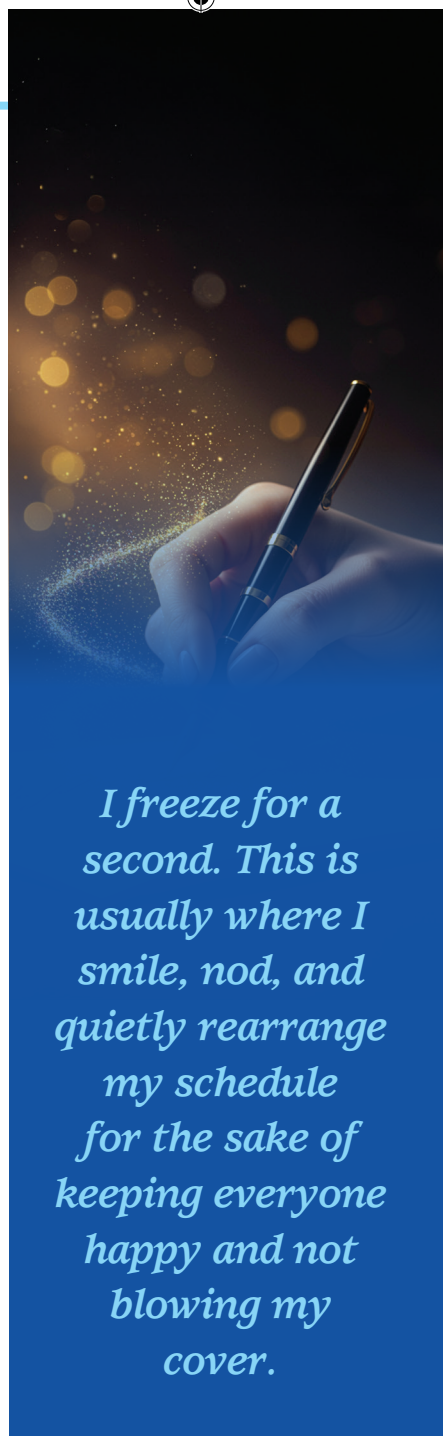
I need to learn how to do this right — how to make a story linger past the last page. But I know I have enough inside to start. And so I begin to write.



I'm mixing hot chocolate mix into my coffee — something we all used to do back at Ora — when Ditza walks into the coffee room.

"You still want me to talk to Yaakov, Mamale?"

She looks worn as she says the words. Mrs. Blum's reprimand from last night must be ringing in her ears, as



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it is in mine.

I shake my head. "I think I decided that I should stick to other *baalei teshuvah* or maybe someone dedicated to Torah but working..."

Ditza looks like she wants to say something, but Zeldy wanders into the coffee room at that moment, clutching a sheaf of papers.

"Oh, Bella, so happy I found you! I have some proofreading work I need help with — the deadline's tight."

I freeze for a second. This is usually where I smile, nod, and quietly rearrange my schedule for the sake of keeping everyone happy and not blowing my cover.

But not today. I am tired, so tired of waiting for someone to see me. I know who I really am, even if no one else does.

I straighten slightly. "Actually, Zeldy..."

She blinks, still smiling. "Yes?"

"I won't be able to help with that right now."

Her smile falters, just a beat. "Oh?"

"I've started working on something of my own — a story. It's something I've wanted to do for a long time."

She stares at me like I just told her that I have valuable *yichus*.

"Well," she says, recovering, "that's... ambitious. Are you sure?"

"Yes," I say, quieter this time.

But the kind of quiet that doesn't need volume to carry weight. "I'm sure."

I stir my hot chocolate-coffee combo once more as if my announcement was no big deal, while Zeldy hovers for a moment longer, then drifts away down the hall.

So maybe dreams can come true — it's just not always according to the original script.



"I'm looking for a Bella Kinder."

I nearly fall off my chair, or, more accurately, I do. I collide into Miri and knock her keyboard to the floor.

It's Yaakov Stone.

"Oh, sorry to startle you. I um, I have a submissions question for you."

Now I'm more puzzled than surprised. Yaakov gestures for me to follow him, and I don't look behind me as I go, not wanting to see Miri, Ditzza and Raquel's stares.

Yaakov leads me to right outside the *Yehudi Ani* office to the parking lot.

"I need to return this to you."

He pulls out a notebook.

"My...my journal!"

"I found it on the ground on my way out of the hall at the end of the wedding. Bella, you're a talented writer..."

"You — you read my journal!" It's more than an accusation. My cheeks switch shades from red to white and back to red.

"Okay, with all honesty, I just read a paragraph on the first page. I *chapped* after a few sentences that this was someone's private journal and stopped reading it, and then I noticed your name on the inside cover."

I open up my journal. *I still remember the day Ma let me wear her necklace to school*, the first sentence reads.

"I can't believe it. I'm so embarrassed."

"Well, I didn't read much. But it was enough to see that you have it in you. You've got some writing talent. And it was enough to see that I owe you an apology — and another chance."

I swallow, not trusting myself to speak.

"I just wasn't sure I could keep up with your high standards. It sounded like you want someone who learns all day and an uber-*frum* home."

"You don't learn all day?" I had trusted Ditzza so much. I never even saw Yaakov's résumé.

Yaakov chuckles. "I'm serious about learning, but I'm a writer by trade. I write serials, actually."

"You..." I blush when I recall my blabber about kids not reading fiction on our date.

"My pen name is actually

Kasriel Rubin."

"You're... you're Kasriel Rubin? The famous serial writer?"

"Well, I dunno about 'famous'..."

"Well, only published in the go-to *frum* magazine, *Yehudi Ani*, read by half a million people..."

I take a moment to take it all in. Then look up at Yaakov/Kasriel, the guy who's read some of my journal, who hasn't run away, who's here talking to me, and is also really..."

"I owe you an apology," I say. "The girl you met last time, she was a little, um, fake?"

"I realized after I read this," he says quietly.

"It's just that I was trying so hard to fit in, so I could get married and all my dreams would come true..."

Yaakov looks at me, not with pity, but with something softer. Perhaps understanding. Perhaps hope.

"Maybe the answer to your dreams isn't out there somewhere," he says quietly. "Maybe it's a light inside you, just waiting for you to stop and really live the moment you're in so that it can come out."

"Very poetic," I chuckle.

Yaakov gestures towards my journal.

"And Bella, you have a gift..."

"Well, maybe. But getting past Mrs. Blum's story rejections?"

"I got more than 10 before my first story was published. I finally figured out how to write a story with that sweet spot ending that's uplifting yet realistic. Mrs. Blum still grumbles about the uplifting parts, but the other editors usually end up backing me."

Before we know it, Yaakov and I exchange storytelling and writing tips and woes, and then we catch ourselves. He grins guiltily, and if I could bottle that smile... and then he says, "Well, I mean, um, not sure if you're still interested in another date but uh..."

Just then my cellphone rings. It's Mrs. Blum. "Bella, where are you? There's lots of work to do. And the coffee has too much sugar again."

I barely process her comment. "I'm coming," I tell her.

I wave to Yakov, "I'll speak to Ditzza," I tell him, and then I walk back into the office, hugging my journal close to me, as though it's made of glass. ●

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