



CHAPTER 1

A Shabbos Treat?

Here's the thing: There's a lot to love about Shabbos. I enjoy going to shul and sitting with Abba, hanging with my buddies in the afternoon, no one telling me to do my homework. And I can use a break from my detective work — even though I love it, it's *hard work*.

But sitting here at the Kagans' table, I'm thinking of another thing I love: cholent.

Thick, gooey cholent, all those potatoes and beans and hunks of meat in a yummy gravy... Mmm...

"Chanie, the eggplant dip is delicious," Ima says as she takes a second helping and spreads it on a piece of challah. "Have some, Shimmy."

She passes the serving bowl to me. I take an even bigger scoop.

“And the challah...delicious! Mine never comes out this light.”

I look out the corner of my eye at my younger brother Yitzy, sitting next to me. His forehead is wrinkled in concentration. Is he about to tell one of his ridiculous jokes?

That’s what Yitzy does. He tells jokes — and he does it all the time. He’s only eight, so I’m hoping he’ll grow out of it. But that’ll never happen if our brother Nosson, who’s seven, doesn’t stop laughing at *all* Yitzy’s jokes, even the really bad ones.

When Yitzy fails to come up with a joke this time, I sigh in relief.

“Oh, the dip...it’s really easy to make,” Mrs. Kagan says. *Back to the eggplant.*

“She’s too modest,” Mr. Kagan chimes in. “It’s her specialty, and it’s terrific.” He wipes his challah across his plate like it’s a sponge sopping up a spill. He pops it into his mouth, closes his eyes, and smiles like he’s having some great dream.

Yoel Kagan and I look at each other. Yoel is in my grade at school. He frowns a little. Is he thinking what I’m thinking? *Enough with the challah and dips already. Bring on the cholent!*

Finally, the ladies stand and clear the table. Mrs. Kagan says something quietly, and Ima giggles like my ten-year-old sister does.

Speaking of ten-year-old sisters, Adina’s not here today. She’s at a friend’s house for lunch.

And *that* is making my other sister, Miri, kind of whiny.

Miri's only four. She follows Adina around like a puppy looking for a treat, but she loves to be with Ima too. Miri was invited to go with Adina but decided to come here instead. It was such a big decision for her, you'd have thought someone asked her to choose between the soft blanket she sleeps with and her goofy stuffed monkey she takes everywhere.

The mothers leave with the dishes and return in a minute. Ima has a wooden bowl, probably the salad, wedged in her bent elbow, and a platter of cold cuts in her hand. And Mrs. Kagan has the—

“Cholent!” I exclaim when she sets down the enormous bowl in front of her husband. Steam rises in swirling puffs as he stirs it with a silver spoon almost as big as the shovel Miri had at the beach last summer. I can't wait until he shovels some into a bowl for *me*.

“Hey!” Yitzy exclaims, a big smile on his face.

Uh-oh. I should have known to expect this since we got through the first part of lunch without a joke.

“What do they serve on a train on Shabbos?” Yitzy asks.

Nosson doesn't even wait for the punch line to start chuckling.

“Choo-choo-choolent!” Yitzy shouts. He gives

an elbow jab to Nosson, who opens his mouth wide in laughter. Wide enough to see what's left of the challah he was just eating. Yuck!

"Good one, Yitzy," Mr. Kagan says as he spoons a portion of cholent into a bowl and passes it to Abba.

"Smells wonderful," Abba says.

Mrs. Kagan lowers her chin a little. "To be honest, I'm not so sure how the cholent turned out—"

"Nonsense, dear," Mr. Kagan says. "Your cholent is always amazing."

"But this time, I didn't..." Mrs. Kagan's voice trails off as she passes filled bowls down to Yoel and me. The adults wait politely until everyone's been served. It's good I get mine after them — I don't think I could have waited. The spicy smell and rising steam tickle my nose.

"Dig in, everyone," Mr. Kagan says, lifting his fork. I scoop up a big heap of cholent and shove it into my mouth. I clamp down on a chunk of meat. *Mmm...this was worth waiting for.* I savor the taste a moment, swallow, and dig back in for more.

As I shovel in another mouthful, I notice that this time, something isn't right. I can barely chew. Thick, rubbery lumps fill the little grooves in my teeth. It's like chewing taffy, only there's nothing sweet about it. It *tastes* like cholent...but it sure doesn't *feel* like cholent.

I glance at Yitzy. His mouth clamps down and seems stuck that way. I kick him lightly under the table, and he looks at me. I shake my head, just a little, hoping no one else will see. I press my lips tight, signaling that whatever he wants to say — and Yitzy *always* has something to say — should be kept inside.

Mr. Kagan looks like he's trying to chew tar, and Ima wears a forced smile.

"Mommy?" Yoel says.

"That's what I was trying to tell you." His mother frowns at the bowl in front of her. "I had no potatoes to put in. Even though I just bought them a few days ago. There was no time before Shabbos to run to the store, so I tried a couple of neighbors. But no one picked up the phone. They must have been busy getting ready for Shabbos."

"Well..." Mr. Kagan pauses, seeming to grope for his next words. "It's very...*tasty*," he finally says. That's true, at least. Even though you can't chew it.

Suddenly, Mrs. Kagan starts to laugh. "Nobody eat this! It's awful!" she says between giggles.

Then Mr. Kagan joins in. Ima and Abba stare at them, then steal a look at each other. Soon we're all laughing. We're like a bunch of kids watching a circus clown.

"I've got chicken from last night," Mrs. Kagan says. "I'll whip up some chicken salad, and there

are the cold cuts and side dishes. *No one* will leave this Shabbos table hungry.” She fights back another laugh.

Well, *that’s* good news. Still, if Yitzy’s joke is better than Mrs. Kagan’s cholent, we’ve got a problem.