



## CHAPTER 1

# Party Time for Mr. Moo

**E**very summer, I plan a birthday party for Mr. Moo, my most beloved stuffed cow. I've had him for longer than I can remember. And what can I tell you? It was love at first sight! Anyway, back to my party preps. So, it's not really a birthday party, but more like a celebrating-the-day-I-got-Moo party. The theme is always cow friendly, you know, red-and-white checked paper tablecloths, cow-patterned paper goods, plenty of watermelon, corn on the cob, baked beans, hot dogs, and all the fixings to go with it. Of course, there is also the traditional black-and-white Mr. Moo cake.

Chaim complains about my cow bash every year. He wants to know what sane person makes a party for a stuffed animal. But Mr. Moo is *my* cow, and *I* like celebrating the day he was given to me by my parents... Where was I? Oh yeah! The party's tomorrow night, and I'm pretty excited about it.



**"ANYBODY HOME?"** I shouted from the front door. "Ma's car isn't in the driveway."

"Kitchen," my brother Chaim called, from...well, the kitchen.

"Hi, Chaim. Where's everyone?"

Chaim barely looked up from the book he was reading. "Earache. Baby. Doctor."

Chaim always spoke in code when he was absorbed in a good book. Thankfully, I understood code.

I opened the fridge for a snack. "Yum!" A huge raw roast surrounded by those adorable little red potatoes arranged appetizingly in a large pan took up most of the lower shelf. "Wow! We're having a really good dinner tonight."

Chaim looked up from his book for a total of one and a half seconds. "Company. Important." Code again.

"Who's coming?"

Chaim couldn't hear me. The book he was reading had taken over his mind.

"Hellooo!"

Chaim continued to read.

"Yoo-hoo!"

Chaim didn't budge.

"Hola, bonjour, shalom!"

Chaim glimpsed my way. "What?"

"Who?"

"Who, what?"

"Who's coming for dinner?"

"People."

“Thanks.”

Chaim was once again engrossed in his book, oblivious to the world around him.

“Chaim, will you talk to me, please? You’re very annoying when you read.”

He continued to ignore me, so I did the only thing any good sister would do. I pulled the book away from him and slammed it shut.

“Hey!” Chaim yelled.

Well, at least I got his attention.

“Which people?”

“Which people what?”

“Are coming tonight for dinner?”

“Some potential fancy schmancy clients at six...happy now?”

He grabbed the book from me and stomped out of the room.

I looked at my watch. It was close to five, and my mother wasn’t home. The dining room table wasn’t set, and aside from the raw roast and cutie-pie potatoes, there was no sign of dinner. I wondered when my mother actually planned to cook the meat. I was worried. Why hadn’t my mother called? This was so unlike her. She’s the most responsible, levelheaded person I know. Too bad I don’t take after her. I dashed to the kitchen phone and called my mother on her cell, but it went directly to voice mail. So I did the next best thing; I called my father.

“Sorry, Liba,” his secretary said. “He’s in an important meeting and can’t be disturbed now.”

Maybe Chaim would know what to do.

Chaim smiled and snapped the book shut. “Finished!” he exclaimed. “What a book!” He got up and stretched.

“Chaim, the dinner guests will be here in about an hour, and if you’ve noticed, there’s no food.”

He stared blankly at me, then, slowly, his eyes cleared and comprehension set in.

He looked at his watch. “OmigoshI forgottoputtheroastin-theovenhoursago!”

Boy, Chaim was getting really good at this code thing.

“Chaim.” I smiled sweetly. “Were you supposed to put the roast in the oven hours ago?”

Chaim nodded dumbly and held up three fingers.

“You were supposed to put it in three hours ago?”

He nodded dumbly again, and my lips smiled wider than ever. Don’t get me wrong. I wasn’t happy that Chaim had ruined my parents’ dinner plans and, in all probability, would get in trouble. I was just majorly relieved that he had messed up and not me. I’ve got a pretty extensive track record.

I turned on my heels. “Well, see ya later,” I said, and headed for the steps. I hate to see a grown man cry. Okay, maybe not grown, but you get the idea.

“No! Liba! Stop! You gotta help me,” Chaim begged. “You know I’m in a fog when I read. I totally forget about everything.”

Tell me about it.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll help.” I mean, he *has* pulled me through a predicament or two...okay, thirty or forty, or a hundred, but who’s counting?

I opened the fridge, lifted the enormous pan, and popped it into the oven. I set it to 500 degrees. “It will cook twice as fast now,” I assured him.

“You think?”

“Trust me. Let’s set the table.”

I looked for the fancy tablecloth but couldn’t find it. “Chaim, did you see the fancy tablecloth?”

His eyes widened in fear. “Cleaners! Oh no!”

“You were supposed to pick it up?” I checked the time. “Whoops. They just closed.”

Chaim panted.

I’d be doubled over in laughter if this weren’t so pathetic.

“Don’t worry!” I assured him. “We’ll use the other tablecloth.”

Guess what? The nice dishes didn’t match the other tablecloth. In fact, they clashed terribly. I was in a dilemma about what to do.

With no choice, I ran to get the red-checked paper tablecloths and cow-patterned plates — stuff I had planned to use tomorrow night for my “Mega Moo Celebration.”

Chaim stood wordlessly as I set the table, peeking between parted fingers covering his face.

“There!” I said after inserting the last red-and-white napkin into a black paper cup. I stood back to survey my handiwork. The room looked like, well, a barnyard, but in a good way. With a bit of hay on the floor, it would look perfect.

“We need an appetizer,” I told Chaim.

Chaim lowered his hands and followed me to the kitchen. “Are you sure about this?”

I dropped a watermelon into his arms and ordered him to cut large slices. Chaim nodded like an obedient puppy.

The smell of tantalizing roast filled the kitchen. I opened the oven to check on it. “Hey! It looks almost done. You see,” I said triumphantly, “five hundred degrees did the trick.” I

stuck a fork in it, and, well, a brick was softer. Oh, and I forgot to mention, the adorable mini potatoes were burned to a crisp. The oven clock said a quarter to six.

“Don’t panic, Liba,” I said to myself. “You’ve been in stickier situations than this.” Only this time, I was blissfully innocent.

I yanked open the freezer and pulled out all the hot dogs I had purchased for tomorrow night’s big bash. “Outside. Grill. Fast!” I ordered Chaim. I was speaking code now.

I opened a couple of cans of baked beans and made a big green salad with my special mayo, ketchup, and pickle juice dressing. Dinner was almost ready.

The front door banged open.

“Ma,” I yelled. “Where were you?” Then I saw her. “What happened?!”

Her blouse was untucked, her sheitel a mess, a smear of grease on her left cheek — nothing at all like the neat, pretty, chic mother I knew. The cutest baby in the world slept contentedly in her arms.

“Take,” my mother said, clearly speaking code, and as an expert in decoding, I took him and gently laid him in his crib.

“Hours. Dead phone. Flat tire. Nightmare.”

Hey, my mother was good at this code thing, too.

She checked the raw roast and black, shriveled potatoes and shook her head in denial.

“No,” she said once. “No,” she said again. “Liba.” Her eyes glistened.

“Ma, don’t cry. It’s going to be okay.” I took her hand and gently led her to the dining room. “Look, I took care of everything.”

My mother’s eyes widened, and her head shook in denial.

“No,” she said once. “No,” she said again.

“Okay, so it looks like we’re having a hoedown, but everyone loves a barbeque. Right?”

My father walked in just then and did a double take. Honestly, I wasn’t sure if it was because of my choice of dinner décor or my mother’s appearance.

Chaim entered the dining room, holding a platter of sizzling hot dogs and the most shamefaced grin I’ve ever seen.



**“THANK YOU,”** our guest said as he dug into a second helping of the black-and-white Mr. Moo cake. “My wife and I are usually invited to elegant boring dinners. We never get to eat hot dogs, and frankly,” he laughed at his pun, “we’re tired of gourmet meals. This dinner was as refreshing as your beautiful family. I thoroughly enjoyed myself.”

“Yes,” his wife agreed. “It’s been ages since I’ve had a good hot dog with all the fixings. And your choice of decoration is simply brilliant.”

The guest stood and shook my father’s hand. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning to finalize the deal. I want an architect who can think outside the box, and I see you do.”

“I. Yes. Wonderful. Thanks,” my father said. I guess code runs in the family.

Mr. Moo won’t have his usual black-and-white cake at tomorrow night’s celebration, but don’t worry, I’ll make it up to him with a gourmet dinner — roast and all. And I have a feeling Chaim won’t have a word of complaint about the festivities this year.