

The Same Hour

Chapter 1: The Reliable One

In eleventh grade, "Shoshi said she'll do it" is a full sentence.

It means the props closet is labeled, the curtain cues are written on cards, and when the school production needs a backstage head, the committee does not even vote. Shoshi, sixteen, gets the job in September.

She loves the work. She loves that a production is a hundred small promises that all come due on the same night, and she loves being the person who keeps them.

Her assistant asks why she rewrites cue cards that are already written, and Shoshi says, "Because at eight o'clock on Thursday I don't want to be guessing what Tuesday-me meant." The assistant laughs. Shoshi is only half joking. The whole job is being kind to the future.

On the easy nights she makes the assistant call the cues and stands behind her, silent, because a system only one person can run is not a system - it is a person. The assistant hates those nights and learns the most on them.

In October, the spotlight bulb dies twenty minutes before the middle-school open house, and Shoshi has the spare in the custodian's hand before the teacher finishes saying "oh no." The assistant writes it on the closet door in pencil: SPARE BULBS, SHELF TWO. It is still there in Cheshvan, and it makes Shoshi unreasonably proud - proof that the future can, in fact, be helped.

The final dress rehearsal is set for a Thursday in Cheshvan, six to nine-thirty, the only full run with lights before the performance. Shoshi clears her whole week around it.

Then the invitation comes.

Chapter 2: Two Good Things

Her cousin Faige got married on Sunday, and the sheva brachos is Thursday evening.

The invitation is cream-colored, Faige's name in gold, and her mother reads it aloud like news from the front. Her sisters are arguing about shoes within the minute. Shoshi does the thing she always does - she starts planning - before she has even registered the day.

Then she registers the day.

Family is flying in for the week. Her mother is cooking for two days, and nobody asks Shoshi whether she is coming, because obviously Shoshi is coming.

"Thursday," her mother says, ladling soup, "we all sit together. The whole family at one table."

"Thursday is the dress rehearsal," Shoshi says.

"So you'll leave early," her mother says, in the voice of a woman for whom every problem is logistics. "Run the first part, come for the main part."

"The rehearsal is the main part," Shoshi says. "It's the only full run with lights."

"So you'll come a little less early," her mother says, and the soup needs stirring, and the conversation is over in the way kitchen conversations end - not decided, just covered.

And there it is - the plan is born, in ten seconds, before Shoshi has looked at a single cue card.

Chapter 3: The Dash

The plan sounds like this: rehearsal six to nine-thirty, sheva brachos starting seven. She will run the first act, hand the cue list to her assistant at seven-thirty, maybe seven forty-five, dash home, change, and arrive for the main part.

It is a plan made entirely of maybes.

Maybe the first act ends on time - it never has, but maybe. Maybe her assistant can run the second act - she has never run a full act alone at night, but maybe. Maybe the speeches wait until eight-thirty, maybe the traffic is kind, maybe she can change in eleven minutes.

On Sunday she times the walk from the hall to her house: twenty-three minutes at a pace that is not quite running, in school shoes. She writes it in the margin of the cue list, and then, honestly, adds "plus changing, plus everyone stopping me at the door," and the margin starts to look less like a plan and more like an apology.

Shoshi carries the plan around all week like a glass of water filled to the very top, walking slowly so nothing spills.

On Monday, Morah moves the lighting run to eight-fifteen, because that is when the hall's lights are free. The water spills.

Chapter 4: The Plain Question

Shoshi finds Morah after practice and explains the new plan: stay through the eight-fifteen lighting run, dash at eight-thirty, her assistant closes.

Morah listens all the way to the end, which is kind, and then asks one question, which is not.

Morah has advised eleven productions. She once told the cast that a show is a machine made of people keeping time for each other, and she does not flatter, and she does not tilt.

"Which one are you doing?"

"Both," Shoshi says. "I'm doing both. That's the whole plan."

"That's a plan for disappointing two groups of people on the same night," Morah says, not unkindly. "A maybe to me is a maybe to twenty girls with cue cards. A maybe to your family is a maybe to people who love you enough to pretend they believe it. Pick one, Shoshi. And tell the other one early, because early is the only kind of no that doesn't cost double."

Chapter 5: The Scale

That night, Shoshi does the weighing properly, the way she does props lists - on paper.

On one side: twenty girls, a show in six days, the only full run with lights, a promise she took in September before any invitation existed. On the other side: Faige, whom she has loved since they were small; the family at one table, flown in for the wedding week; a night that happens once and then only ever gets told about.

Both good. That is the whole trouble. If one side were bad, this would be arithmetic.

She weighs what cannot be redone. The sheva brachos cannot be redone - one Thursday, one table, one week in which Faige is new to her married life. And the rehearsal? Its whole purpose is the show, and the show is Sunday, and she will run the show. What Thursday needs is a board that works, and she has spent all fall building one. She reads her own cue cards the way the assistant will read them, cold, at speed, and they hold. That is not the same as needing her there. That is the cards doing what cards are for.

The whole job is being kind to the future, and on Thursday the future arrives and asks whether she meant it.

And because she weighs the way she makes props lists - nothing off the books - she says the cost out loud, to the paper: "If I choose my family, I lose the only full run - the night the machine gets proved, with me at the board. I built that board. Not running it on Thursday costs me. That is a real loss. I am not pretending it isn't."

The loss is real. She writes it down anyway, and underneath it: I choose the family.

She does not sleep well. At two in the morning the scale tips the other way, the way scales do in the dark, and she gets up and reads the paper again by the hall light: one Thursday, one table, family flown in. The paper has not changed its mind. She goes back to bed.

Chapter 6: Telling Early

On Tuesday - early, two full days early - Shoshi finds Morah in the hall after practice.

"I want to run Thursday's rehearsal," she says. "I've wanted it since September, and I built the whole board for it. My cousin's sheva brachos is the same night, with family flying in, and I'm choosing my family. It costs me the only full run - I'm not pretending it doesn't. That's why I'm telling you today and not Thursday."

"You know how many girls have stood there and said 'I'll try to make it'?" Morah says. "You're the first no I've ever been able to plan a rehearsal by." She taps the cue list once. "The board is the assistant's on Thursday. And Shoshi - a board that only works when you're standing at it isn't a board. Yours works. You wrote it that way all fall."

Shoshi tells her mother that night - Tuesday, two days early - and her mother puts down the spoon.

"Good," she says. And then, because she is who she is: "You'll still be calling cues under your breath at the table. Call them quietly."

On Wednesday she finds her assistant in the props closet and hands her Thursday. "You're running the dress. All of it. I'm not coming in to rescue the lighting run - a rescue is just me not trusting my own cards."

The assistant's face does two things at once, terrified and delighted. "I'm not ready."

"You've been ready since October," Shoshi says. "Understudies are how shows survive."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Chapter 7: Thursday

Thursday is a good sheva brachos. It is not a smooth one - her uncle's speech runs long, the soup course is late - and it is wonderful, and Shoshi sits between her mother and her aunt at one table with family flown in for the week, and it is a little bit terrible, because both are true.

Faige's grandfather gives a speech, with the pauses before the jokes, and the table laughs in all the right places, and Shoshi thinks to herself: I am inside the story they will tell about this week. She is. She chose to be, it cost her something, and here it is.

At eight-fifteen, some part of her is standing at a cue board calling lights. She knows it is. She lets that part stand there, and she goes back in and dances.

She does not call the hall; there is nothing to call for. The cards work or they don't, and finding out at the table would not fix a single cue. Faige is laughing at the head table, and the hour holds one thing. That is what hours do.

Chapter 8: The Second Handwriting

Sunday is the performance. Shoshi arrives an hour early; clipped to the board are Thursday's cue cards, handed back like a report.

She reads them standing up. The assistant's handwriting is all over the margins - two cues retimed, one redone neater - and one new card at the bottom of the stack, in pencil, in a hand that is not hers: FIRST ACT RUNS LONG - LIGHTS CHECK 7:40. The machine held. It did more than hold - it got improved, and the improvement is not in her handwriting, and she lets that be two things at once: a sting, and the exact proof she spent all fall building toward.

Nobody says "we couldn't have done it without you." They did it without her. That was the point, and it costs a little, and she lets it.

Morah passes and says only, "The lighting run worked. Your cards held," and keeps walking - from Morah, a whole speech.

Before the house opens, Shoshi takes the first clean page of her props notebook and tapes in two things side by side: the place card from Faige's table, gold letters, and the assistant's

annotated card from Thursday night. One night, two pages, both real. She does not trade one for the other.

Then she closes the notebook, sets it on the shelf under SPARE BULBS, SHELF TWO, and goes to call places for the top of the show.

Eight activities

Activity 1: The maybe plan

Chapter 3's dash plan is "made entirely of maybes." Find at least four maybes in it. For each one, write what it hides - what has to go perfectly for the plan to survive.

Activity 2: Early is the only kind

Morah says, "Early is the only kind of no that doesn't cost double." From the story, what does a late no cost that an early no does not? What does an early no still cost?

Activity 3: The scale

List what Shoshi puts on each side of her scale in Chapter 5. Her choice is not "first come, first served." What two questions actually decide it? Where does she say the loss is real, and why does saying it matter to the choice?

Activity 4: Maybe arithmetic (all numbers made up for practice)

A late no to the production (Thursday morning) makes 20 performers replan their night at 10 minutes each. An early no (Tuesday) lets one advisor and one assistant replan one rehearsal, 15 minutes in total. How many total minutes does each version cost other people? What does this arithmetic miss? Show your steps.

Activity 5: Say it with the cost inside

Shoshi's no to Morah has three parts: what she wants, what she chooses, and the cost said out loud. Rewrite her speech in your own words, keeping her name and Morah in it, keeping all three parts. No new facts.

Activity 6: Draw the head table

Draw the sheva brachos at eight-fifteen: the dancers, the head table with Faige laughing, Shoshi on the dance floor. Only what can be seen - no labels for feelings. Caption it with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Necha's evening - a made-up case

A teen named Necha promised weeks ago to run the children's corner at the shul's Chanukah party, and then her best friend's family invites her to a special birthday dinner the same evening. Write her scale (two lines, one per side), her out-loud cost sentence, and the early no she gives, with names. Do not decide for her which one she should pick - write the tool, not the answer.

Activity 8: Word grid

Find eight words left to right. Row/column numbering begins at 1.

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P L A N K V W B F Y
B O T H L M N O R S
H O U R A I Q Z X J
C O S T F Y G H U P
P I C K R S T C D E
T E L L X J K V W B
L O S S U P L M N O
Y E S C D E A I Q Z
X J K V W B F Y G H
U P L M N O R S T C

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The eight words: PLAN, BOTH, HOUR, COST, PICK, TELL, LOSS, YES. Which two words name the answer she gives Morah at first, and the thing she says out loud to the paper?