

Two Whistles, One Bunk



Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18



Chapter 1: Hired Together

In June, the shul's day camp posts its staff list, and Raisel and Perla read it together off the corkboard in the lobby, the way they have done everything since third grade.

Bunk eight, girls going into third grade: Raisel, counselor. Perla, counselor.

They scream in the lobby. A rebbitzen walking by smiles and keeps walking. Sixteen years old, paid for the first time, and together. It is the best version of the summer.

"We will be the bunk mothers tell stories about," Perla says.

"We will be the bunk that loses no one," Raisel says, and they both laugh, because losing a camper is the standard joke and also the standard fear.

Morah Shaindel, the head counselor, calls a staff meeting for the Sunday before camp. She is twenty-something, organized, and not scary, which makes her scarier. She hands each bunk a schedule: swim, sports, arts, lunch, line-up times, dismissal. "The schedule is how twenty adults keep two hundred children in the right place," she says. "Your bunk follows it. If a day needs to change, you come to me before it changes, not after."

Raisel writes that down. Perla draws a star by swim.





Chapter 2: The Best Bunk

The first week is everything they promised.

Eighteen girls, loud and sticky and funny. Raisel runs line-up like a conductor. Perla knows every girl's name by Tuesday and every girl's sister's name by Wednesday. The bunk votes themselves the best bunk in camp, unanimously, twice.

The first crack comes on Thursday, and it is small.

The schedule says arts at eleven, and the arts room is a seven-minute wet-footed walk, with towels to dry first. At ten-fifty, the girls are at the sprinkler, and they are so happy, and Perla looks at Raisel and says, "Ten more minutes? They're being so good."

The rule they were given is plain: the arts room holds eighteen slots, and being late takes them from the bunk after theirs. Raisel says so. Perla says, "Ten minutes. I'll get them there fast, I promise," and she is already turning back to the sprinkler, and the girls are cheering, and Raisel does not want to be the person who ends cheering.

They are twelve minutes late to arts. The bunk after theirs waits in the hallway. Morah Shaindel writes something down.





Chapter 3: The Pattern

The second week, the crack gets company.

Perla lets a girl skip cleanup because the girl's eyes went wet when the whistle blew. Perla promises the bunk they can stay at the slide through line-up if they sing the lineup song extra loud. Perla tells two girls they can switch sports groups to be together, without checking that the other group has room.

Each one is small. Each one is kind. Each one lands somewhere: the counselor of the other sports group, the lifeguard counting heads at line-up, the cleaning lady who finds bunk eight's corner at three o'clock.

Raisel spends the week quietly repairing. She moves the two girls back, apologizing to them in a voice that does not explain why. She gets the bunk to line-up early and calls it a game. She picks up the corner herself at three o'clock, twice.





On Thursday, the whistle blows at the pool and Raisel calls the count. Seventeen. She calls it again - seventeen - and holds the line, the way they were trained.

"One went back for her bottle," Perla says. "I said she could run for it."

The lifeguard holds the bunk at the gate and calls it in, and in the same minute the girl appears on the path, bottle in hand, and the count is eighteen. Nobody was lost. But the protocol is the protocol:

before dismissal, Morah Shaindel sits with both girls for five minutes. Not angry. Exact. "Nobody walks anywhere alone. The first count is the real one. If a number is ever short, you hold the line and you tell the office the same minute." She looks at both of them.

"Both of you. The whistle has one rule, and it is not a mean one."





Chapter 4: What She Does Not Say

That night, Raisel writes a sentence in her notebook and stares at it.

Perla is being a bad counselor.

She crosses it out. Not because the day was fine - a girl walked alone and a count was short, and that is on both of them. But the sentence judges the whole person, and the problem is a list of specific choices. A list can be worked on; a verdict can't.

She writes a second sentence.

Perla is making me the rule, so she can be the fun.

She underlines half of it. Perla is making me the rule - that half she can point to. Every bend Perla makes, Raisel absorbs. Every promise Perla makes, Raisel keeps or breaks. The girls are learning there are two kinds of grown-ups in bunk eight: the one who says yes and the one who says the schedule. Raisel did not apply to be the schedule. But so she can be the fun is a guess about what is inside Perla, and a guess is not a fact she will bring to a conversation.

"And if I say something," she thinks to herself, "I'm the friend who chose a clipboard over her. Nine years, and I pick a whistle."

She closes the notebook. She opens it again. She writes a third sentence, the one she will build on: The rule is not mine. It is the camp's. Holding it is not choosing against her.





Chapter 5: In Public, Then in Private

Friday is the test, and Raisel does not plan it that way.

At line-up, the girls beg to stay at the slide, and Perla says, "Okay, but -" and Raisel says, level, "Line-up is now, bunk eight. Count off." Perla's face does something small. The girls count off. They are on time to lunch, the world does not end, and two of them are over it by the benches.

After dismissal, Raisel does not let it sit. Sitting is how it grows.

"Today," she says, "I held the schedule in front of the bunk while you were mid-sentence. I want to talk about it, because I'm going to keep doing it, and I don't want to do it against you."

Perla is quiet. Then: "You made me look like the fun police's assistant."

"I know," Raisel says. "And you make me the rule every time you say yes to something the schedule owns. We had seventeen when we needed eighteen. I held the line while the lifeguard called it in - that part was right. I can't watch us get there again, Perla. Not even for you."





Chapter 6: The Whole Conversation

It is not a short conversation, and not a mean one.

Perla's side comes out in pieces. She hates saying no to their faces.

She was a camper at this camp and remembers exactly one counselor's name, the fun one, and she wants to be that one. And she did not realize the yeses were landing on Raisel. "I thought the schedule was, like, approximate," she says. "A suggestion from people who don't know our bunk."

"The schedule is how the lifeguard knows when to count heads," Raisel says. "It's how the arts room fits everyone. It's not Morah Shaindel being organized for fun. It's two hundred kids." She pauses. "And the girls don't need us to be the fun one and the rule one. They need us to be the same bunk."

"So I become you," Perla says flatly.





"No," Raisel says. "The girls run to you in the morning. I don't want that to stop. I want the yeses to be real ones. A yes we can actually deliver."

They sit with that. The parking lot empties around them. Then Perla says, "Okay. Rules for us." She takes Raisel's notebook, turns it to a fresh page, and writes, in her terrible handwriting: no promising the girls anything that touches the schedule before we check each other. And underneath: if one of us says no, the other doesn't un-say it in public. Argue after.

Raisel adds two lines. First: the good yeses go on the plan - if the bunk earns something, we ask Morah Shaindel for it properly, ahead of time. Then the line that has to sit above all the others: safety and camp rules outrank this pact. If an answer is wrong, it gets fixed right away, even in front of the bunk. And anything about safety goes straight to Morah Shaindel, no discussing it between us first.

Perla reads it and nods. "That's the point of having one," she says. "The regular stuff stays regular so the real stuff is obvious."





Chapter 7: The Pact, Initialed

On Sunday, they bring the week-three plan to Morah Shaindel.

It is the regular schedule, with three additions written in. Friday: ten extra sprinkler minutes, which work because Morah Shaindel moves the bunk's arts to the later open slot in the book herself - the arts counselor agrees, on the condition that cleanup still finishes inside the slot, and it will. Wednesday: the girls' choice of song at line-up, which costs nothing and makes the count-off loud. And at the bottom, in Perla's handwriting, the pact: no promises without checking each other; no un-saying in public, unless an answer is wrong or unsafe, which gets fixed at once; changes come to the head counselor before, not after; safety goes straight to her, always.

Morah Shaindel reads it twice. "This is the first plan I've been brought all summer," she says, "instead of the first apology." She initials it.

The third week is not perfect. On Tuesday, Perla starts to say yes to something, catches herself, and says, "Ask me after I ask Raisel," which becomes a bunk joke by Wednesday, which means the bunk is in on the rule instead of under it. Raisel learns to say the schedule in a voice that sounds like a person.

The first count at the pool is eighteen, eighteen, eighteen.





Chapter 8: Two Whistles

On the last day of camp, the girls make a poster. It is a drawing of the bunk, and at the top are two counselors with two whistles, and the whistles are drawn the same size, which Perla says is the whole point.

A mother at dismissal tells them her daughter has described both of them as "the fun one," and laughs. Maybe she knows what she is saying.

When the buses pull out, Perla hangs her whistle on Raisel's neck next to Raisel's own, just for the photo they take by the empty bunk. Then she takes hers back.

"Same time next year," she says.

"Same rules next year," Raisel says.

"Those were our rules," Perla says, which is true, and they walk out together to count the lost-and-found, because Morah Shaindel asked for two volunteers and got the same two as always.

