# SYDNEY TAYLOR AWARD WINNER NATIONAL JEWISH BOOK AWARD WINNER COOPERATIVE CHILDREN'S BOOK CENTER'S BEST OF THE YEAR

Twelve-year-old Shaindy Goodman has never fit in. She watches with envy as her next-door neighbor, Gayil, lives the life she wishes she had—the queen bee with her ride-or-die clique, the rising star at her Orthodox Jewish middle-school, the perfect Bais Yaakov girl. Shaindy and Gayil live in two different worlds, so it comes as a surprise when Shaindy looks out her window and sees Gayil staring holding a sign with five little words: want to know a secret?

Gayil's secret is that she found a way to break into their school after hours; and along with Shaindy, they set up a series of harmless prank in their classroom. But mischief soon becomes malice, and Shaindy realizes that the pranks and humiliations are targeted only at certain girls. But what could they have in common? With the fear of Gayil's fury and her own reluctance growing, Shaindy comes to the terrifying conclusion that if she can't figure out how to stop it, the next target could be her.

"Pitch-perfect...The struggle between trying to fit in and keeping true to yourself will resonate with all tweens."—School Library Journal

"An enormously rewarding meditation on friendship, fairness, and forgiveness."—Booklist

Cover art by Jenna Stempel-Lobell Cover design by Sarah Lopez and Jenna Stempel-Lobell Printed in China



### PRAISE FOR

# THE DUBIOUS PRANKS OF SHAINDY GOODMAN

### **Cooperative Children's Book Center Best of the Year**

"Pitch-perfect...The struggle between trying to fit in and keeping true to yourself will resonate with all tweens." -School Library Journal

- ★ "Absorbing and principled...Lowe wastes not a word in crafting this taut and emotionally roiled exploration of culpability and forgiveness. Gavil is right-'sixth grade is hard'-and Shaindy's vulnerability will likely resonate deeply with readers who share Shaindy's longing for acceptance." -Shelf-Awareness (starred)
- ★ "[An] introspective novel full of perceptive emotional observations." -Horn Book (starred)

"This thoughtful middle grade novel explores complexity of middle school friendships, bullying, and what it means to make amends and have a fresh start."

-Bulletin of the Center for Children's Book

"An enormously rewarding meditation on friendship, fairness, and forgiveness." -Booklist

"A nuanced exploration of the intricacies of friendship... Engrossing and deeply relatable." -Kirkus



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# CHAPTER 1

he lights next door are flickering, casting moving shadows on the stillness of my backyard while I try to stand on shaky Rollerblades. I know that it's not a storm that's interfering with the lights. It's clear outside, and I can see all the stars from here. No, it's probably Gayil and her sisters and brothers having a dance party. I saw the packaging for a disco ball poking out of their recycling garbage can yesterday morning when I left for school, and I always hear them playing old Miami Boys Choir songs at night on top volume.

It's quiet in my house. I have one sister, not five, and Bayla is four years older than me and generally considers me a pain in the neck, as she complains to Ema when I'm around. We've never had a dance party, and if I put on music in our room, she tells me to stop because she's studying. Tonight, I haven't even tried. Instead, I'm doing something new.

Everyone rollerblades now. Fairview is basically built for it, with all our quiet developments and wide sidewalks. On Shabbos, the streets are empty except for the mail trucks, and little kids ride plastic bikes up and down them for the whole afternoon with no supervision. I see Gayil and Devorah and Rena skate to school every morning with

their brand-name Heelys, speeding past me and weaving between minivans picking up their morning carpools.

I've never been great with Rollerblades. I like my feet planted on solid ground, thank you *very* much. I've tottered around on ice skates and held on to the wall the entire time, and I've always been shaky on a bike too. But I came back from summer camp and discovered that every sixth grader at Fairview Bais Yaakov rollerblades now except for me. I don't know when it happened or how, but I'm the last to figure it out. Again.

So now I have to get good at rollerblading overnight, and I dug Bayla's old Rollerblades out of the closet and forced them onto my too-wide feet. I clomp around our flat wooden patio in them, wishing that I had some of those Heelys that Gayil wears. They're just regular sneakers with wheels that snap out of the soles, and I had begged my mother for my own pair earlier this week.

I'm not spending that much on a pair of shoes you aren't going to wear, Ema had said, and I'm determined to show her that I can do it and earn those Heelys. Except the rollerblading isn't going that well. My legs split and my knees bend and I'm falling off the patio and onto the grass, my arm slamming into a clod of dirt that feels suspiciously wet.

"Ow! Ugh." I try to wipe my arm off on the edge of the patio and succeed only in smearing it around my arm even more. "Oh, gross. This better not be cat poop." We feed the local cats and they like to hang out in the backyard, wandering down the strip of grass that we share with a dozen other neighbors along the street. Gayil always shrieks and runs when she sees them, but I like the cats. Except this, if it's what I'm afraid it is.

I hobble to the back door in my Rollerblades and push it open with my clean arm, wiggling out of the Rollerblades and going to wash up. Maybe I'll practice more tomorrow morning before school. I can't stand the thought of another morning going by, walking with my head down into the school building as other girls zip by on their skates. Chubby Shaindy just isn't athletic enough for Rollerblades, I imagine them thinking. Awkward Shaindy doesn't even know that everyone has Heelys now.

No one is mean to me aloud, of course. We're one of those classes that everyone likes to talk about, a model Bais Yaakov class that is so *sweet* and *bright* and *respectful* that every teacher looks forward to having us. But I've never really fit in with everyone else. I'm the girl who waits on the side when we do group projects, hoping someone will invite me into their group before the teacher has to assign them to me. I follow other girls around at recess, trying to join their conversations and always falling flat. I just don't have the kind of magic that Gayil has, that energy that makes everyone want to be her friend.

Maybe it's not worth it, learning how to rollerblade. By the time I get my Heelys, everyone else will be done with them and I'll be the one who caught on too late.

I head up the stairs to my room, getting an irritated "Can you not stomp so loud?" from Bayla at the desk before I dump the Rollerblades in the closet again and climb up onto my top bunk to read a book. I'd rather read than rollerblade anyway.

Still, I peer out my window, wondering if I might be able to see the Itzhaki girls dancing next door. My window looks directly at Gayil's, and I figure that the disco ball must be set up there.

But it isn't. The flashing lights are coming from downstairs, and Gayil's room is dimly lit, only a lamp near the window illuminating it. Gayil is standing in her room, staring out the window with distant eyes.

She doesn't see me at first, because I'm near the top of the window, stretched over the side of the bunk bed to see out of it. Then, she must have noticed the movement, because her eyes flicker up and catch mine.

They hold my gaze, and there is something strange glittering in them that I don't understand. I lift a hand and wave to her, half hearted, because I know that I'll just get a strained smile and a little wave in response from someone who doesn't want to be around me.

But I don't. Gayil crooks a finger as though she is beckoning me, and I blink at her in surprise. It must be a mistake. Maybe I'd misread what she was doing. I pull back, baffled, and Bayla says from the desk, "Can you stop that thumping? This Ramban is *killing* me."

"Study somewhere else, then," I say, climbing down the ladder of the bunk bed just to annoy her. I peek back at the window, and I jump, startled. Gayil is still standing there, frozen in place like a picture. Her brown eyes look almost golden in the lamp's light, and her light brown skin is shadowed.

Carefully, I walk across the room, a cool breeze wafting in from outside and tingling at my skin. I close the window where it's cracked open, an excuse to walk over to it, and I feel the steadying sensation of the hard plastic under my fingers, the faint smell of the fresh yellow paint by the wall. I dare to look up again.

Gayil is still there, a smile on her face. It's almost teasing, almost coy, transforming her face into something mischievous. I pause, transfixed, and I know that she can see me staring at her. She lifts her hands, and I see that there's a paper in them, words written in stark black marker against the white background.

The sign says, WANT TO KNOW A SECRET?

Gayil raises her eyebrows invitingly, and I am helpless to do anything but nod.