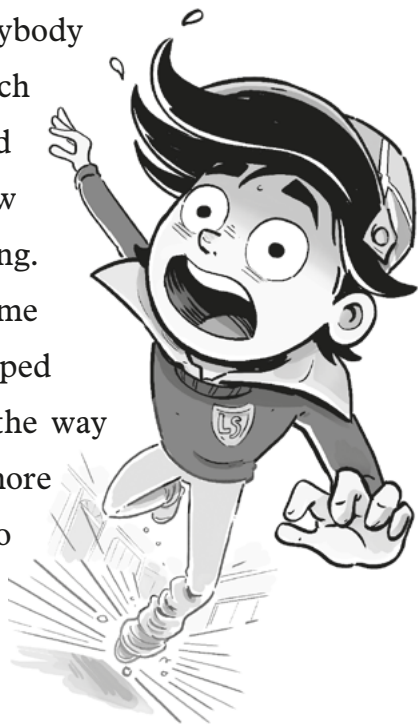


## CHAPTER 1

# LENNY

'I hate sequels,' whispered Agatha. 'They're never as good as the original.'

Our class was shuffling into assembly, and we were whispering about the new superhero movie, *Revengers II: The Really Long War*. As it was the start of the school year, everybody had brand-new stuff – lunch boxes, pencil cases and baggy uniforms. My new trousers were *sooooo* long. Mum said it was to give me room to grow, but I'd tripped over them three times on the way to school. I looked even more ridiculous standing next to



Agatha, who was going for the ankle-grazing look. She caught me looking from my trousers to hers.

‘My parents didn’t have time to get me new ones,’ she blurted out.

I shrugged, then turned to Ernie Strewdel and whispered, ‘Have you seen *Revenge* yet, Ern?’

Ernie nodded enthusiastically as we sat down. ‘Yes! It was great. I was totally surprised by who the bad guy turned out to be!’

‘Don’t tell me!’ I said. ‘My dad was supposed to take me, but he got very busy with work.’

Agatha raised an eyebrow. ‘For the whole of the summer holidays?’

I was about to tell her that she should know that the life of an MI5 agent is a busy one, but she shushed me and nodded up at the ceiling. Perched on the rafters were two of the Minerva robot-owl librarians, which the headmaster, Dr Errno, had introduced last year. Their eyes were glowing red and they were scanning everybody for bad behaviour.



A look of terror crossed Ernie’s face, which is only to be expected because not everybody can be a super-brave spy-detective like me.

Agatha tapped me on the shoulder and I let out a courageous scream of warning. The robot owls swung their heads, their eyes focusing on me. I gulped but, luckily for me, a couple of new Year Three kids were still chatting happily away to each other. One of the owls’ warning alarms sounded.

**‘UNAUTHORIZED TALKING!  
UNAUTHORIZED TALKING!’**



Then the owls swooped down and dive-bombed the new kids. All they could do was wail as owly beaks clamped on to their collars. The rest of the school watched as they were pulled to their feet and hauled out of the assembly hall. Absolute silence fell.

‘Let that be a warning to you all,’ Dr Errno said, leaning forward on his lectern. ‘At Little Strangehaven, we expect exemplary behaviour at all times or you will be undertaking a repentance task.’

Repentance tasks are THE WORST! Trust me, I’ve done loads of them. I once had to clean the school chickens’ feet with a tiny toothbrush because I left one muddy footprint in a corridor. Another time, I spent ages handwashing all the stinky lost PE kit because I’d forgotten my gym shorts. The robot owls hover above you while you do the tasks and if you stop, even for a second, they’ll land on top of your head and peck you until you start again.

As I fumed at the thought of the horrible robot

owls, Agatha pointed to the stage. ‘That looks like trouble,’ she whispered darkly.

Standing behind Dr Errno was a man I’d never seen before. He was wearing tiny shorts and a T-shirt and had really long legs.

My spy-detective antennae started going crazy. There was something wrong about this guy. You should never trust somebody who wears tiny shorts after summer; they’re always angry because they have cold legs.

‘Who’s he?’ I whispered.

‘Who’s who?’ Agatha whispered back.

‘The man in the tiny shorts.’

‘Never mind the man in the *really* far-too-tiny shorts. Look who’s *next* to him!’

I moved my eyeballs slightly to the left, and saw who Agatha was pointing at. It was none other than Pamela Stranglebum, whose company, Minerva, was responsible for the robot-owl librarians now making everyone’s life a misery. I fumed some more.



*‘What’s she doing back here?’* Agatha asked.

*What’s she doing back here?* I thought, just after Agatha said it, which was annoying because I’d wanted to say it first.

Dr Errno flared his impossibly large nostrils and the silence in the hall got even silenter.

‘Now, children,’ Dr Errno said, ‘I’d like you to welcome two people today. The first –’ he pointed to the man in the tiny shorts – ‘is our new PE teacher, Mr Whip.’

I knew it! I knew there was something bad about him! A PE teacher! Of all the teachers in all the schools, PE teachers are the cruellest, and this one looked no different. From the cold, murderous gleam in his eyes, to the cold, hairless look of his legs, I just knew he was going to be a truly evil addition to Little Strangehaven Primary.

‘Mr Whip joins us following a celebrated career as a prison officer.’

I think everybody in the hall gulped.



‘And next to me,’ Dr Errno continued, ‘is Ms Stranglebum from Minerva. And they are both here for an exciting announcement!’

Exciting announcements in school were never exciting. They were usually terrible, and I was not wrong here. With a flourish, Dr Errno clicked a clicker and a video started playing on the screen behind him.

It started with the owl logo of Minerva and then flashed up pictures of our school. A smarmy voice spoke over the top.

‘It’s time for Little Strangehaven to go GREEN! And Minerva Industries are here to help usher in the twenty-first century . . .’

The video cut to Pamela Stranglebum sporting a brilliantly white lab coat. She beamed right down the camera lens.

‘After the successful introduction of the robot librarians, the next step in turning Little Strangehaven into the school of the future is the introduction of free renewable energy.’

‘That sounds quite good!’ I whispered to Agatha.

‘Hmm,’ Agatha whisper-hmmed, which is actually an incredibly difficult thing to hear and might have just been her normal breathing.

‘To achieve this,’ video-Stranglebum continued, ‘we are rolling out our patented green child-power technology across the whole school.’

I didn’t get it. How would painting children green create energy? We had to find out more.

The video ended, and the screen began to rise into the ceiling, revealing a large object hidden under a shiny blanket.

‘Now could I please have a volunteer?’ Dr Errno asked.

Here was our chance to find out more about this mysterious child-painting technology. My hand shot up.

‘Ah!’ Dr Errno pointed at me. ‘Lennox Tuchus –’

‘Yes, Agatha Topps would like to volunteer,’ I said.

Agatha shot me a look of stunned admiration for coming up with the idea.

‘I think not, Tuchus,’ said Dr Errno. ‘You just volunteered yourself. Up you come.’

Matzo balls!

I trudged up onstage, nearly tripping over my extra-long new trousers on the way. I paused and gave the whole school a little bow because I was probably a bit of a celebrity in that moment. Once I’d stopped bowing, Dr Errno whipped off the shiny blanket and my bum nearly threw up right there and then when I saw what it had been hiding.

It was a bike.

An exercise bike, but still a bike.

And I couldn’t ride a bike. My dad had got me one for my birthday but had always been away, doing important, probably secret-spy-service things, and too busy to teach me. And, because my mum thought there was an ancient bike-riding curse on our family, she never taught me either.

The curse dated back to the nineteenth century,

when my great-great-great-great-grandpa Shlomi Tuchus from Krakow was taking his first-ever bike ride and accidentally ran over a witch. He then panicked and reversed over her, and then panicked some more and rode over her again. The witch was *very* unhappy, and cursed Grandpa Shlomi for evermore. Since then, Tuchuses and bikes have never gone together well.

‘Get on, Tuchus,’ said Dr Errno.

I felt my knees wobble. ‘I can’t,’ I whispered.

‘Get on the bike!’

By now, the whole school was staring, waiting for me to saddle up.

‘But I can’t ride a bike!’ I whisper-wailed to Dr Errno.

‘Tuchus. This is an exercise bike. It doesn’t move.’

‘It’s still a bike!’

Mr Whip stalked across the stage and stopped a few millimetres from me. He was so close I could almost taste the oniony scent that was coming off

him. I looked up, knees knocking, and said, ‘I’m just not very good with bikes. See, there’s a family curse –’

But I didn’t get to tell Mr Whip about my great-great-great-great-grandpa Shlomi Tuchus and the witch because he blared in my face, ‘GET YOUR SCRAWNY BACKSIDE ON THAT BIKE AND START PEDALLING OR ELSE!’

I did not know what *or else* was, but something told me it was probably best not to find out. So I climbed on to the bike and clung to the handlebars for dear life.

Dr Errno said, ‘See, now that wasn’t so hard, was it?’ Then he turned to Pamela Stranglebum, flashed her a smile and said, ‘Ms Stranglebum, please continue.’

Pamela Stranglebum stood up and pointed to me with a laser pointer.

‘As of today, every child in the school will pedal throughout their lessons. Minerva’s patented green child-power technology transforms the

pedalling into free energy. There will, of course, be rewards for the best pedallers and repentance tasks for the laziest. We call this initiative Pedal-Power.’

‘Get pedalling!’ Errno hissed at me.

‘I can’t –’

‘DO IT!’

Whimpering a little, I started pedalling.

‘And best of all,’ continued Ms Stranglebum, ‘the system is completely idiot-proof!’

The wheels began to whiz round and a panel of lights started to glow.

I couldn’t believe it! It was working! I was riding. I was *riding* a bike! Finally!

But then the Tuchus family curse came back to haunt me. My overlong new school trousers caught in the gears. There was a terrible ripping sound, a jerking sensation, and then I was flipped head first straight over the handlebars. I soared through the air for what seemed like a very long time and luckily crash-landed on top of some Year Ones at

the front of the hall.

‘I thought you said it was idiot-proof!’  
Dr Errno yelped at Pamela Stranglebum.

‘It . . . it . . . is!’ she said.

It might have been idiot-proof, but it wasn’t  
Tuchus-family-curse-proof.

The whole school was staring at me as I picked  
myself up. I absolutely was NOT blushing as I  
walked over and sat back down next to Agatha.

‘No sign of any green paint,’ I whispered. To  
which Agatha gave me one of her looks, which was  
very, very difficult to read.