Prologue

The world, like a brand-new page, was white. A vast canvas of sky hung over the snowy landscape, decorated with a few pale brushstroke clouds. Everything was still.

Suddenly, movement. A small, dark shape was carving a straight line across the valley. It was an animal of sorts, or at least a sketch of one. A scribble of fur with legs and a tail. A dog, maybe. Whatever it was, it moved with a distinct purpose: to escape whatever was chasing it.

Its pointy ears were pressed flat against its head as it sprinted towards a small cluster of trees near a signpost. Every ten strides or so it looked back over its shoulder with fearful, inky eyes. Time seemed to slow as the distance between the dog and the trees got smaller. A hundred metres. Fifty metres.

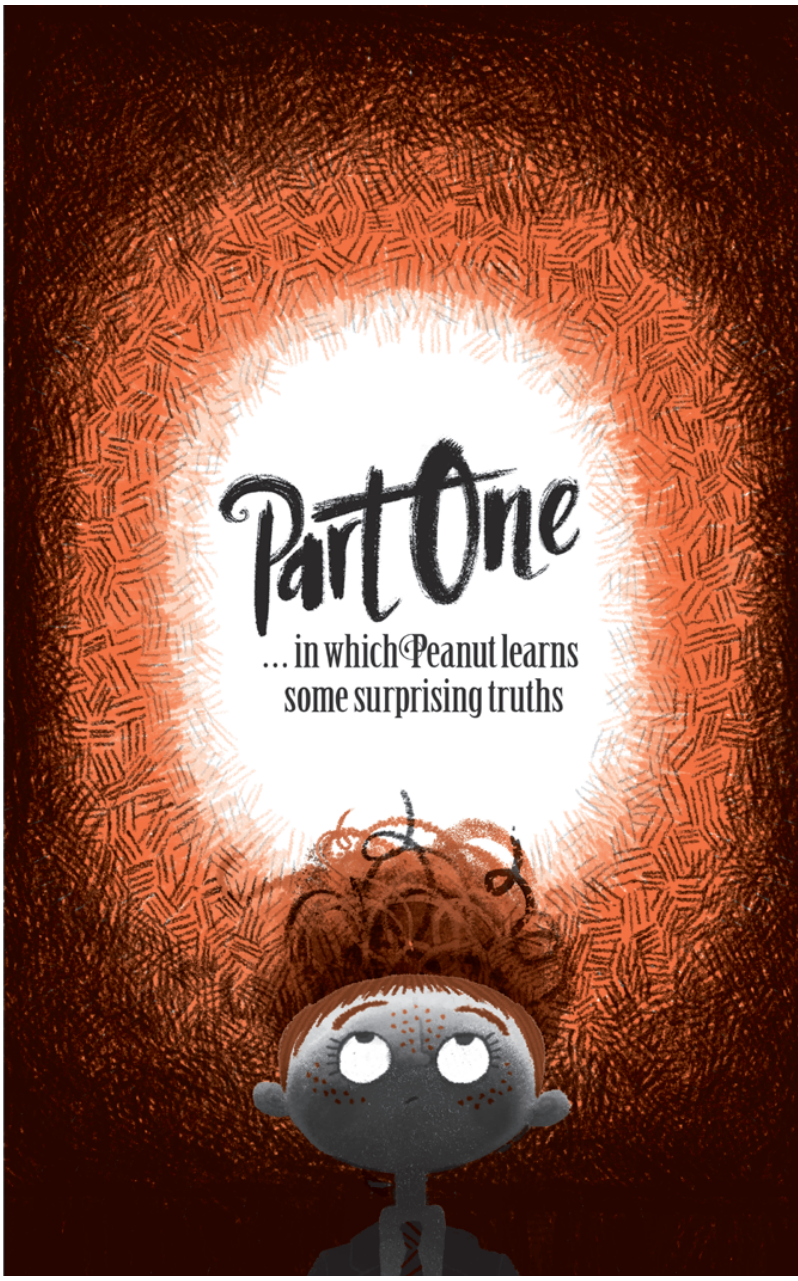
Ten metres. Then . . . it flew into the graphite copse like a bullet.

Ten seconds of silence.

Then came the sound.

You could feel it before you could hear it – a light fluttering sensation in the pit of your stomach, followed by a soft, deep hum. Gradually, it got louder. And louder. And louder. Within a minute, the whole valley shimmered as a billion snowflakes began to vibrate with the thrum.

Then the enormous, monstrous, terrifying vehicle appeared on the horizon . . .


Part One
... in which Peanut learns
some surprising truths

1
Detention

'I must not draw pictures of fire-breathing vampire unicorns in my physics exercise book.'

Peanut Jones had just written that sentence for the four hundred and ninety-sixth time. It had taken nearly two hours and had left her with a huge lump on the middle finger of her left hand. Apart from her teacher, Mr Dawkins, she was the last person left in the entire school. She raised her arm. 'Sir, I've finished.'

Dawkins looked up from his crossword, crumbs of salt-and-vinegar Chipsticks decorating his black beard.

'We'll see about that, *Pernilla*,' he sneered. He walked over to her desk and started flicking through the large pile of paper in front of her.

Peanut was so annoyed, she could feel her face turning red. She hated it when people called her that. Her birth certificate might say 'Pernilla Anne Jones', but she'd been 'Peanut' since she was born. Since before she was born, actually. Her dad had often told her, 'When your mum was a couple of months pregnant, the internet said that you were about the size of a peanut. So that's what you became known as: Peanut.' It's what everyone at Melody High, her old school, had called her, but that was too much to expect from Death Breath Dawkins.

He waved the sheets of paper at her triumphantly. 'You have filled exactly thirty-one sides of A4. Given that a maximum of sixteen lines can be written on each page, simple arithmetic tells me that you have only completed four hundred and ninety-six of the five hundred you were charged with writing. That is 99.2 per cent of your target. As you know, any pupil lucky enough to attend St Hubert's School for the Seriously Scientific and Terminally Mathematic is expected to fulfil every aspect of all tasks that they undertake. One. Hundred. Per cent. In this instance, it is clear that you are 0.8 per cent short of hitting that target.'

A smug smile was developing somewhere behind his crisp-littered beard.

'As punishment for trying to get away with doing less work, not only will you complete the task in full, but you will also write an extra hundred lines. That should give me enough time to finish my crossword, eat this Scotch egg and get home in time for *University Challenge*.'

'But, sir—'

'No buts, Jones. Get it done. I don't know what kind of namby-pamby slacking they tolerated at your previous school, but you need to realise that precision is important. Frivolous creativity has no place at St Hubert's. No place at all.'