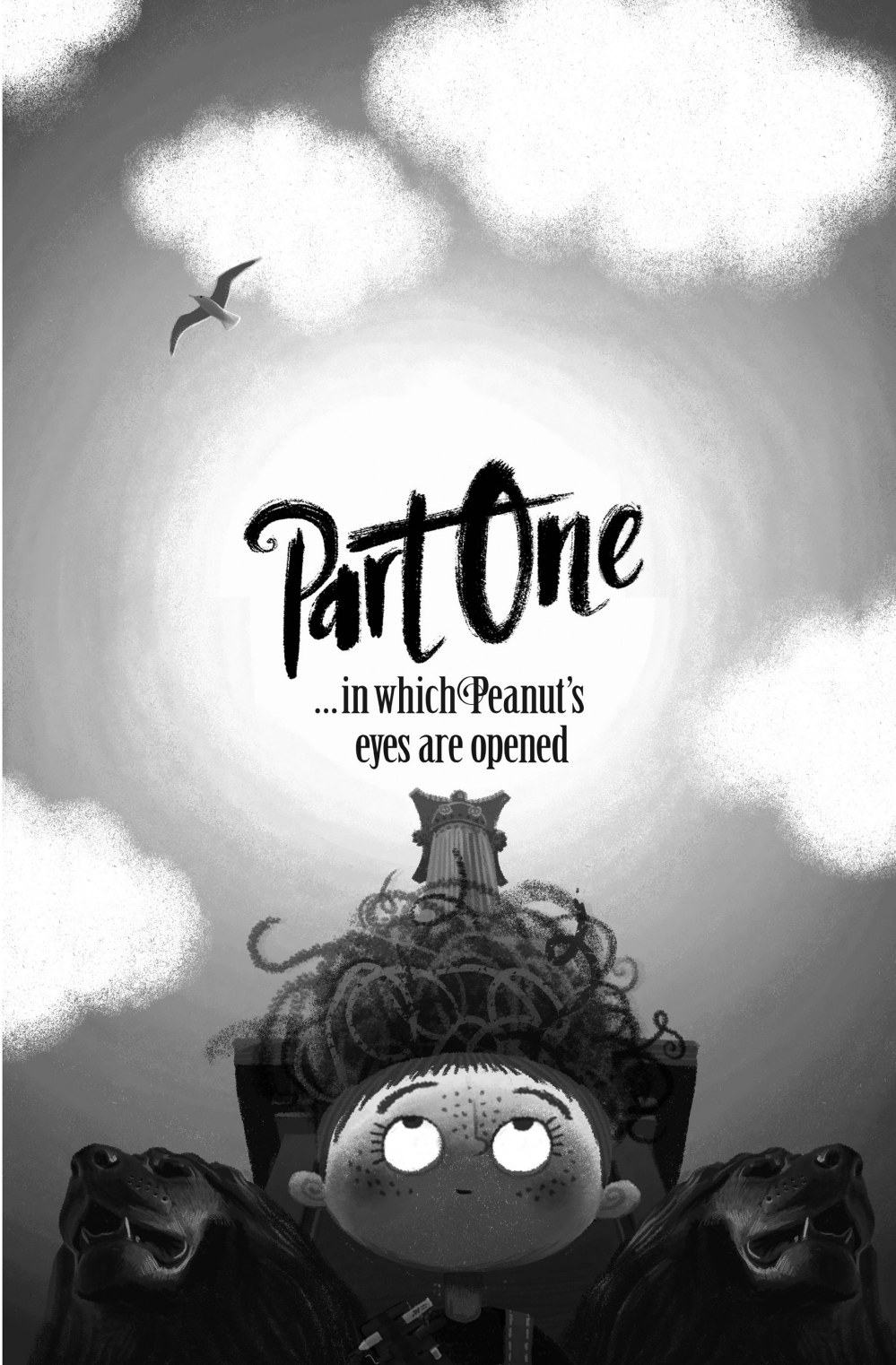

Part One
...in which Peanut's
eyes are opened

INK
SPRAY
THICK

1

Earlier That Day

Peanut Jones picked up the last of the marker pens and carefully slid it into the custom-made slot on her new artistic utility belt. It was a perfect fit, just as the paintbrushes, the charcoal block, the brush pen, the ink roller, the pots of black-and-white ink, the stamps, the can of spray paint and the small tin of watercolours had been. The belt was fully loaded and ready to go. Well, *almost* fully loaded. One slot remained empty.

This was the second iteration of her bandolier. The first version had been taken from her a few months ago when she and her friends had been imprisoned in the Spire, a huge tower at the centre of Chroma, the Illustrated City. But far worse than losing the bandolier had been the loss of her all-important magic pencil. It had been stolen by a small man

wearing a white fedora, after an incident involving a remote detonator (given to Peanut, her friend Rockwell and her sister Little-Bit by a talking alligator) and several thousand exploding mechanical fish.

Peanut reached over to her desk and picked up the wooden box that was sitting on top of her exercise books. It was full to the brim with small, yellow Post-it notes. Each one had been decorated with a picture drawn by her dad – he used to hide one inside her school lunchbox every day to cheer her up as she ate her sandwiches. But that was before he suddenly went missing. She ran her fingers across the two words carved into the lid: 'Little Tail'. It was inside the secret compartment at the bottom of this box that she had first found Conté's Pencil Number One, the magic pencil, and soon after its discovery she'd realised that whatever it drew became real. That, in turn, had started a chain of events that led to her drawing a door, opening it, and stepping through into Chroma, the Illustrated City.

The driving beat of the drums, guitars and keyboards coming from her radio faded as the DJ's voice kicked back in.

'The Beatles there with "Get Back" – one of their very best! And now at five o'clock, it's time for the top-of-the-hour news headlines, read to you today by Benedict Hughes.'

Peanut opened the lid and picked up one of the Post-it notes. On it, Dad had drawn a perfect miniature version of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* by Hokusai. *How appropriate*, she thought. At various points over the past year she'd felt as if she were in the eye of a similarly overwhelming storm. Just recently, however, it seemed as though the clouds had parted slightly, and one or two beams of sunlight were beginning to break through. Finally, there was a glimmer of hope.

'One of the world's most famous paintings, Guernica *by Pablo Picasso, today became the tenth priceless work of art to mysteriously disintegrate in the last three months.'*

Peanut's eyes flicked from the Hokusai Post-it note to the radio.

'The bizarre turn of events happened just before Madrid's Museo Reina Sofia opened this morning. Renowned art historian Diana Drown described it as a tragedy to end all tragedies. "What was once the most moving and powerful anti-war painting in history is now just a medium-sized pile of silvery grey powder on the gallery floor. I haven't stopped crying all day."'

Peanut's coppery topknot swayed from side to side as she shook her head. *Another one?* She thought to herself. *This has definitely got Mr White's fingerprints all over it. The sooner we get back to Chroma the better.*

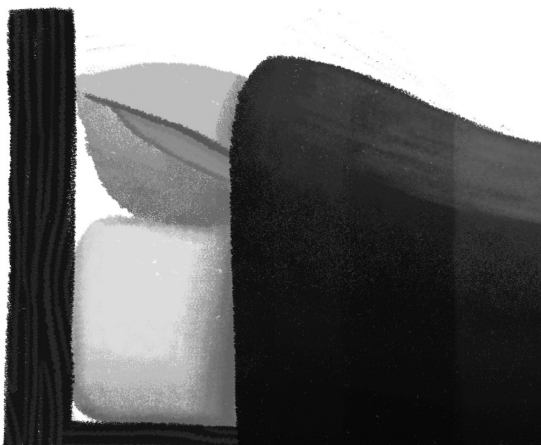
Mr White. The man who had stolen the pencil from her in Chroma. The man who had imprisoned her in the Spire. The man who wanted to rid the world of all its creativity.

'In other news, a woman in Buckinghamshire today found a turnip in her local supermarket that looks exactly like the Prime Minister. Barbara Armitage, from Chalfont St Peter, described the likeness as uncanny. "And, what's more, it would probably make a better job of running the country!"...'

Peanut stuck the Hokusai drawing to the wall, switched off the radio and turned to face her newest collection of Post-it notes which were stuck to the wardrobe door.

These notes had started to show up in her lunchbox on a daily basis a couple of weeks after she had returned from Chroma. Most of them featured abstract shapes made up of one or two thick, black lines, but some were almost blank. Almost. On every one, the words 'Love you forever x' were written in tiny, cursive handwriting. Her dad's tiny, cursive

handwriting to be exact. He had written the same thing on every single packed-lunch Post-it note he had ever drawn for her.

When Dad had disappeared, Peanut's lunchtime notes had also stopped. So she had been delighted when, three months ago, she'd found one nestled between her sandwich and her cereal bar. Since then, a new note had appeared every day – in fact, on some days there had been more than one.

This was her glimmer of hope. Not only was it proof that Dad was alive, but also that he was trying to tell her something. She just needed to work out what that something was.