The Caravan at the Edge of Doom

For Nicola – JIM

For Varvara, my beloved cat who has now gone Beyond – OLIA

Farshore

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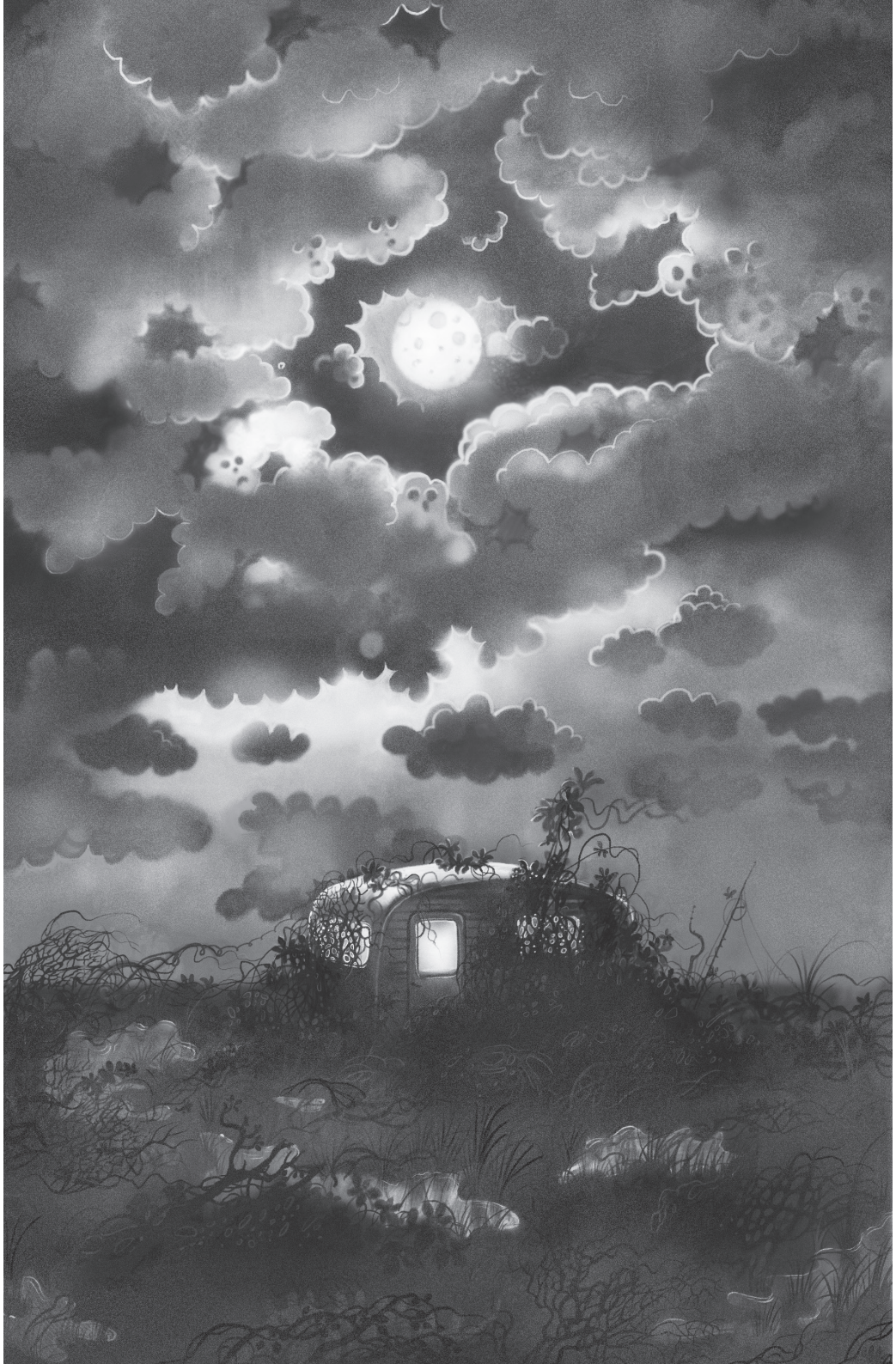
JIM BECKETT

ILLUSTRATED BY OLIA MUZA

PART ONE



1

3:57 a.m. THURSDAY

30 hours and 3 minutes until
Eternal Damnation

I knew my grandparents had been ill, but I hadn't expected them to explode. Not all on the same night anyway.

Pops went off first, with a bone-rattling blast that rocked the caravan and echoed across the moonlit moor. He was in the loo at the time – *Boom!* – right in the middle of a wee.

Gran blew up next, before I had a chance to rub the sleep out of my eyes. She went into the tiny toilet and did such a big *BOOM* that I fell out of my bunk bed.

Green smoke seeped round the edges of the bathroom door. When I saw Grandpa shuffling towards it, I leapt into

action, determined to prevent any more grandparents from exploding.

'Noooooo!!! Grandpa! Don't GOOOO!!!'

Except I couldn't actually *leap* because the zip on my sleeping bag was stuck, so I had to squirm to the loo like a desperate caterpillar – and as soon as Grandpa tinkled, I was thrown back by the biggest *BOOM* yet.

For a moment, the world was strangely silent. Apart from the smoke and the lack of grandparents, everything in the caravan looked normal. Neatly folded bedding, half-finished crossword, tea-stained mugs stacked by the sink . . .

'Peepo!'

Malcolm's grinning face popped out the top of Nana's wheelie bag like a cheeky bargain from Meg's Mini Mart. The first time he did this, we all thought it was hilarious – but he'd hidden in "Nana wee-wee gag" about a thousand times since Monday, and the joke had lost its edge. Still, it was a relief to see my little brother hadn't exploded too. Mum and Dad would've been furious.

('Don't get into trouble – *and keep an eye on Malcolm*!' That was Mum when they dropped us off on Sunday night. 'Be good for your grandparents, do your homework – *and look after your little brother*!' That was Dad. No *'Have fun!'* or *'Enjoy your holiday!'* Not that there was much danger of that.)

'Pop BAM! Gam BAM! Gampa BAM!' said Malcolm, summarising the main events of the last twenty minutes as he hugged his Diddy Dino.

'Yeah,' I said. 'They did.'

He'd had an eventful week for a sixteen-month-old. On Monday, a dog stole our picnic. On Tuesday, an ant crawled on to his knee. On Wednesday, he lost a sock. So far, Malcolm seemed to be coping pretty well with tonight's exploding grandparents catastrophe. It had taken him much longer to get over the 'woof-woof num-num nic-nic' incident.

When I finally managed to escape from my sleeping bag, I tiptoed towards the toilet.

'Grandpa?' I whispered. 'Gran? Pops? Nana?'

I gently pulled the door (the lock hadn't worked for years) and peered in, afraid of the mess I might find. But the loo was empty. No splattered flesh, no smouldering slippers, no charred pyjamas. Nothing but hot smoke and a disturbing pong.

My grandparents had vanished.

Suddenly, I heard a rattling behind me. Someone –

or some*thing* – was trying to break into the caravan! But what kind of maniac would be lurking on a lonely moor at midnight? What kind of *monster* would attack a child whose grandparents had just exploded?

I scrabbled about for a weapon, grabbing the first thing I could find. Whatever was jiggling that rusty door was about to get whacked with a rolled-up *Risborough Gazette*. Pops and Grandpa always complained the local newspaper was covered in adverts – it would soon be covered in blood and guts!

My heart was thumping. The longer I waited, the less confident I felt about the *covered in blood and guts* idea. Maybe a few nasty bruises would be enough to get the message across. Some stern words might even do the trick. After all, it was half-term. I was meant to be relaxing, not slaying Hell Beasts.

Also, I couldn't help worrying that an epic battle would be quite noisy. Bloodcurdling screams risked drawing attention to the fact that I spent my holidays in the creepy abandoned caravan on the edge of the village – and *then* someone might find out that the creepy abandoned caravan wasn't really abandoned at all. My grandparents lived here, all four of them squashed in together.

Well, they used to.

The door rattled violently. This Hell Beast wasn't going away, so I'd have to wreak havoc whether I felt like it or not.

I raised the rolled-up *Risborough Gazette*, ready to strike . . .

The door burst open, and moonlight flooded the caravan.

'Aaaaaggghhhh!!!!' I yelled, lunging at the vicious fiend in its dressing gown and slippers . . . 'Nana?'

'Hello, Harley,' said Nana. 'Did I wake you? Sorry. This door keeps sticking – needs a drop of oil.'

I caught my breath and lowered my weapon. *THREE* explosions, *FOUR* grandparents: I still had one left! What a relief! And what terrible counting! Must've been the adrenaline.

'I popped out to get a closer look at the moon,' said Nana, stepping into the caravan. 'One last look at the beautiful night sky before . . . Oh!'

Her voice cracked as she noticed the empty beds.

'They went without me!'

2

4:34 a.m. THURSDAY

29 hours and 26 minutes until Eternal Damnation

'Pop BAM! Gam BAM! Gampa BAM!' said Malcolm, updating Nana on what she'd missed.

'That wasn't your grandparents going BAM,' said Nana, as we sat down on her creaky bed. 'That BAM was the sound of the Portal of Doom slamming shut behind them. Grandpa and Gran and Pops have *passed through,* that's all. Gone *Beyond*. It was their time.'

Nana stared at the smoking toilet.

'It'll be mine soon,' she said, gripping my hand as Malcolm curled up between us. 'But before I go, I have one final story to tell you.'

I shuffled into a comfortable position. My grandparents always did this – told one of their stories instead of just saying what they meant. Once upon a time, I used to love their crazy tales of Legendary Heroes and Mythical Monsters. But I'd heard them all about a zillion times now, and I couldn't help feeling they were slightly *pointless*. We lived in Kesmitherly! The closest anyone round here had come to Legendary Heroism was the time when Billy Jessop got his foot stuck in a drain and Janet the Lollipop Lady poked him free with her stripy stick.

Besides, the Legendary Heroes and Mythical Monsters in my grandparents' stories weren't even proper ones anyone had heard of. None of them were in that book Mum and Dad bought me – *The Big Book of Legendary Heroes and Mythical Monsters from All Myths and Legends All Over the World Ever*. And when I checked online, they weren't there either – not *one*, on the whole of the internet. They were *fake myths*!

'No road led to the caravan, and no one could remember how it got there,' Nana whispered, dramatically.

'Caravan?' I said, sitting up. 'You mean *this* caravan?'

Nana nodded.

Okay – this was something new. Maybe this story was going to be useful, after all.

'From a distance,' Nana continued, 'the caravan looked like it was growing out of the ground. Weeds overwhelmed the wheels and coiled round the axle, tethering it to the

heath. But the raging winds fought to uproot it and set it free! Undergrowth and elements were locked in an eternal battle that neither could win, for the grasping grasses had no more hope of dragging the caravan into the bowels of the earth than the gusts and gales had of launching it to the heavens!'

This was classic Nana. She loved setting the scene and building suspense. Usually, I didn't mind her long descriptions of gloomy landscapes full of mist and shadow because I knew that soon enough Grandpa would jump in, getting way too excited about some Legendary Hero's peculiar childhood and enchanted weapons. Then Pops would pick up the tale, snarling and roaring and terrifying me with monsters that got bigger and scarier every time until I had to hide, giggling, behind a cushion (when I was little, I mean). But the more menacing Pops made the monsters, the tougher Gran would make the Legendary Hero! She'd get that fire in her eyes, and the Hero would come back fighting, summoning up strength from hidden depths . . . And on they'd go, all four of them weaving in and out of each other's stories, like they were separate parts of the same mad adventure.

But this wasn't that kind of story – and Pops and Gran and Grandpa were gone – and right now, I didn't have time for Nana's poetical scene-setting. I needed to know what was happening right here, right now, in real life.

I needed *facts*. What was a *Portal of Doom?* Where was *Beyond* . . .?

But Nana was on one of her Epic Pauses now, staring out of the window at the moonlit moor, while Malcolm slept peacefully between us. I turned my phone on to check the time – 04:55 – then turned it off again to save the battery. (There was no electricity in the caravan.) The moon tiptoed away; the sun peeped over the horizon . . .

Suddenly, Nana leapt off the bed, opened a cupboard, and rummaged. At last, some action! I tried to see past her, eager to get a glimpse of whatever magical heirloom she was searching for. A mystical pendant? An ancient scroll? An enchanted talisman?

'Teabags, good, plenty of teabags,' she muttered. 'Tea, tea, tea and . . . biscuits!' She bent down and opened the icebox. 'Milk – oh! Look at that!' she said, thrusting a nearly empty bottle into my face. 'There's only enough for one cup of tea, Harley! *One cup!*'

'I could go to the shop?' I suggested.

'Yes! Yes!' said Nana. 'Please. As soon as it opens, you must go.'

She took a chocolate biscuit from the cupboard and held it out to me.

'Harley, please take this biscuit. Consider it . . . a goodbye gift.'

'Because you're going *Beyond* too?' I asked.

Nana nodded, smiling sadly as I took the biscuit.

'Could you at least finish the story?' I asked, desperate to hold on to my last grandparent for as long as possible. 'It's only just begun.'

'*Yours* has, Harley,' she said, gazing wistfully out of the window. 'But mine . . .'

'Please, Nana?' I begged.

Nana turned to me decisively.

'I will finish my story. But first, there are things you must understand.' She brushed a crumb off the bed and shuffled up next to me. 'We are *Visionaries,* Harley. You, me, Pops, Malcolm, Gran, Grandpa. Even your parents. We can all see dead people.'

I stopped nibbling and lowered my biscuit.

'*I* can't see dead people,' I said.

'Harley, listen to me. This is important.' Nana gripped my hands in hers. 'Did you ever think it was strange that all your grandparents chose to live together in an old caravan upon the heath, so far from another Living Soul?'

I didn't know what to say to that. *Everything* my grandparents did was strange, and the caravan wasn't *far enough* from other Living Souls. It was only ten minutes outside the village. Half the kids at my school went past it on the bus.

'We live here,' said Nana, 'to help Restless Souls pass *Beyond* – from this life to the next! Some call us the

Gatekeepers of North-East Biddumshire . . . But that's mainly them lot over in Risborough. Round here, we're more often known as the Gatekeepers of Kesmitherly.'

'Woof-woof! Nic-nic!' squealed Malcolm, kicking wildly in his sleep.

Nana ignored him. She was very excitable.

'Our Duty,' she declared, 'is to protect and serve . . .'

She gestured towards the toilet.

'. . . this *Portal of Doom*!'