Chapter 6

Mr Gum Lays Down His Hearts

Meanwhile, Mr Gum was a-mumblin' and a-grumblin' his way into town. He made his way past Billy William the Third's Right Royal Meats and while he was tempted to go in, he knew that it would be a waste of time. He would never find anything nice-smelling in Billy William's butcher's shop. That was one of the reasons Mr Gum liked him. Because he was a stinker.

There were no customers with Billy William at that hour and Mr Gum could see him through the dirty window. He was playing a game of Butcher's Darts, which is exactly the same as normal
darts except that the board is a pig’s head and the darts are old sheep’s bones. Billy William had invented it one day when he was drunk. Mr Gum loved Butcher’s Darts but there was no time to pop in and challenge Billy William to a match. He had more important fish to fry. Or rather, to poison. Or rather, dog, not fish. He had more important dog to poison.

So he continued on and crossed over to Mrs Lovely’s Wonderful Land of Sweets which was a sweetshop at the other end of the road. As you might guess, Mr Gum didn’t enjoy going in there at all because it was a wonderland of sweets and goodness, and Mr Gum was a filthy old devil who hated good things like sweets and birthday parties and kittens dressed as clowns. He would much rather hear a piano being demolished by illegal bulldozers than a Mozart concerto. He didn’t even like pop music, not even the Beatles. The only thing he liked about the Beatles
was their name because they sounded like insects and you could scare people with insects.

So he stepped into the sweetshop as cautiously as a paper hat in a storm. Immediately the air was full of marvellous scents. The powdery smell of sherbet lemons mingled with the odours of strawberry bombs and liquorice whips. Mr Gum felt sick. He felt as if he were being attacked by the forces of good. When he was a boy he had loved eating sweets, but that was before he turned into a bad man. Yet now he seemed to hear the voice of the boy he had once been, calling to him down the years.

‘Where did it go, all the good? Where, oh where? Turn again! Turn again! You can be good again, I know it. There is still time. Turn again, Mr Gum!’ said the voice in his head.

He looked down and saw that the voice was not in his head after all, but belonged to a young boy who was standing next to him.
'Turn again, Mr Gum! You can be good again,' said the boy, offering him a fruit chew.

For some strange reason, the boy's honest face frightened Mr Gum more than anything else in that sweetshop.

'All this talk of turning again,' he snarled, shoving the boy out of the door. 'I don't like it, I tell ya. It makes me feel sick!'

At that moment Mrs Lovely came tumbling out of the back room with her kindly eyes and kindly nose and kindly ears.

_How can noses and ears be kindly?_ wondered Mr Gum, but it was true. Everything about Mrs Lovely was kindly. She was even kindly to disgraces like Mr Gum and he could not bear this. It made him want to break down inside and cry all the bad things away.

'Hello, you old witch,' he sneered. 'Give me some lemonade powder!'
Mrs Lovely’s eyes sparkled. ‘Yes, it is a beautiful day, Mr Gum. Yes, indeed,’ she smiled as she measured out a bag of lemonade powder.

‘I don’t know what’s so lovely about it, you old menace,’ snarled Mr Gum, handing over some potatoes he had painted to look like pound coins to save money. He was annoyed to see that as soon as the potatoes touched Mrs Lovely’s hands they turned into real money.

One of them turned into a jewel with a laughing face on it.

‘Shabba me whiskers,’ he growled, turning on his heel in disgust.

‘A pleasure to see you as always, Mr Gum,’ beamed Mrs Lovely as the old man stormed out with the little bag of lemonade powder clutched between his elbows. ‘I do hope you come again soon.’
Mr Gum hardly noticed the walk home, mainly because he took a taxi. He couldn’t wait to get his plan into action. Very soon he was back in his smelly kitchen. He rubbed his hands together gleefully and danced a cruel jig, like a spiteful imp who’d snorted over all the presents on Christmas morning. He opened the little bag and sprinkled its contents over the rotten and poisoned cow hearts. Then he gave them a quick sniff.

‘Jibbers!’ he gasped, clutching his throat. ‘They smell of lemons and sunshine and friendship – I can hardly breathe!’

Holding it at arm’s length, Mr Gum took the plate of doom out into his very neat and tidy garden. He placed it right in the middle of the lawn where Jake was sure to see it.
The day was very still. Not a single blade of grass was moving. Somewhere in the distance a chicken barked. Mr Gum settled back in his favourite broken chair and waited to see what would happen.

Chapter 7

Friday O’Leary

So now we head back to Polly, who is just where we left her, having a good old cry outside the secret cottage. Who, though, is that old man watching her from the window? You’ve probably been going crazy from all the suspense, haven’t you? Well, you can breathe a sigh of