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Opening extract from

Mr Gum and the Dancing Bear

Written by

Andy Stanton

illustrated by

David Tazzyman

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For Vicky and William



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Some of the crazy old townsfolk from Lamonic Bibber



Mrs Lovely



Friday O'Leary



Billy William the Third



Old Granny



Mr Gum



Martin Laundereffe



Alan Taylor



Polly

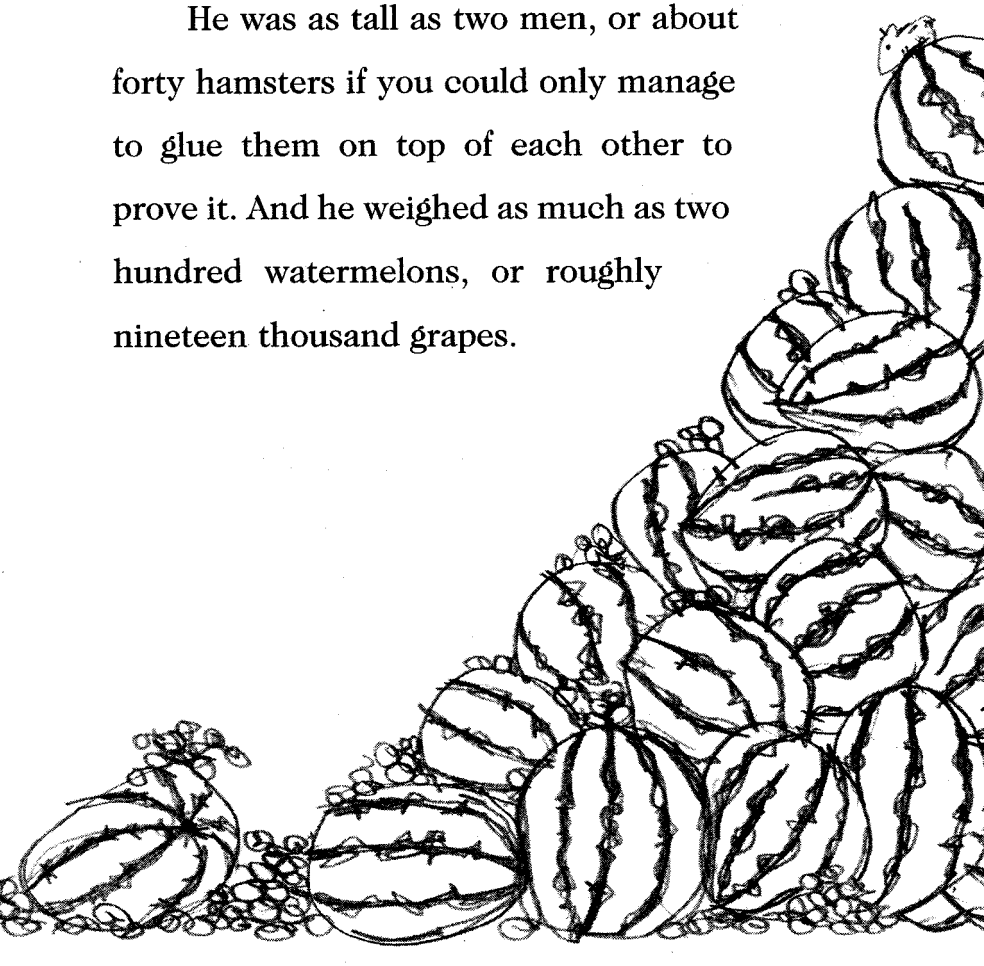
Chapter 1
Padlock the Bear

Who likes bears? Everyone likes bears. I likes bears, you likes bears, this guy I know called Will Bulman likes bears. Everyone likes bears. They are truly the king of the jungle. They are nature's way of saying, 'here's what bears look like'. They are the best. They are the bears.

And guess what, bear-likers? You're in luck, because this story is all about a bear. Not just any bear, mind you, but a startlingly big and handsome specimen who came strolling into the little town of Lamonic Bibber one fine autumn morning. He was a proper fat shaggy rumble-me-tumble sort of a roly-poly flip-flap-flopper of a big brown bear, not like some of these cheap bears you see nowadays who have hardly got any legs and need batteries.



He was as tall as two men, or about forty hamsters if you could only manage to glue them on top of each other to prove it. And he weighed as much as two hundred watermelons, or roughly nineteen thousand grapes.



But what about his fur? Well, I'm glad I asked me that because he was covered from head to foot in the most gorgeous, chocolate-coloured fur you've ever seen. It was soft and deep and long, and it was glossy with healthy goodness, just like a bear's fur should be. And his eyes, oh his eyes, his precious hazel eyes! One look into those big beautiful blinkers and that was it, you were in love forever.

And as this glorious new arrival came

rumbling down the high street on his thick hind legs, everyone stopped what they were doing to stare.

'Kroola-hoola!' exclaimed Jonathan Ripples, the fattest man in town. 'He's as fat as me!'

'Wab!' remarked Old Granny, the oldest woman in Lamonic Bibber. 'There hasn't been a bear in this town since the Great Gecko Plague of 1922 – and even then there weren't any bears, just quite a lot of geckos.'

'A bear!' shouted the postman.

'A bear!' shouted the milkman.

'Hey, you greedy herons! Keep away from my breakfast!' shouted Friday O'Leary, who was having a spot of bother over at the *Heron Attack Café*.

Soon there was a huge parade of laughing

townsfolk, all capering and cavorting along behind the lumbering bear as he waddled down the high street and into the town square. And there, upon a bench beneath the statue of Sir Henry Violin, the inventor of the saxophone, the bear sat himself down, buried his face in his paws and began to sob.

Well now. There is nothing quite as sad as the sight of a sobbing bear. It is sadder than a broken toy lying in the rain. It is sadder than a

little white onion being bullied by a gang of tough courgettes in leather jackets. It is sadder than a grandma who no one comes to visit because her face is just too hairy. Believe me, children of all ages, a sobbing bear is not a happy sight.

The townsfolk looked on in astonishment. But did any of them go and comfort that poor beast in his hour of soggy need? No, they did not. Oh, they all *said* they liked bears. They all donated money to charities like 'Bear Aid', 'Save The Bears'

and 'Let's Buy Some Bears a New Toothbrush'. But when it came to actually helping one out in real life, it was another story entirely. It was a story of the townsfolk looking on in astonishment – until a heroic young girl called Polly passed by, that is. Polly was nine years old, with lovely sandy hair and nice trainers, and she simply couldn't stand to see another person in trouble, especially if that person happened to be a bear.

'My goodnesses, that's not right,' she

exclaimed, and without a thought for her own safety she approached the beast as he sat there, bawling away like a greengrocer.

'Good morning, furry visitor,' said Polly. 'I'm sorry you're so sad.'

'Mmmmmph?' said the bear, for the truth was that no human being had ever spoken so kindly to him before. Taking his tear-stained paws from his eyes, he peered at the little girl who stood unafraid before him in the bright autumn sunshine.



'Eat her! Eat her! Eat her!' chanted the townsfolk. Not really, but it would have been funny if they had.

'My name's Polly,' said Polly, gazing into the creature's doleful hazel eyes. Through his tears the bear gazed back at Polly, and in that moment something remarkable happened. In that moment the two of them became the best of friends, like Laurel & Hardy or Batman & Robin or Albert Einstein & Tarzan.

'I'm a-gonna call you "Padlock",' Polly told the bear, 'if that's OK with you. Do you like crackers? I got loads in my skirt pocket, only some of them's a bit broken, sorry.'

But Padlock didn't mind at all, and together he and Polly sat in the town square eating broken crackers, while all around them the leaves fell, soft and sad like autumn's teardrops.