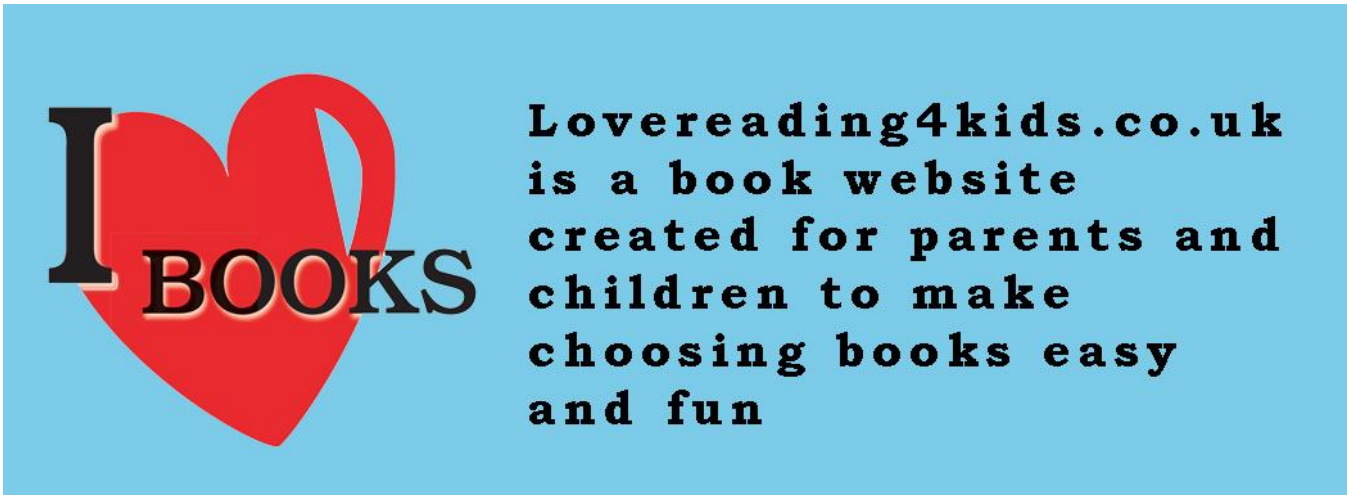


Opening extract from

Rugby Flyer: Haunting History, Thrilling Tries

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Chapter 1

Eoin's hands shook as he picked up the letter. It wasn't just that there was a distinctive blue 'Leinster Rugby' logo on the envelope, or even that his mum and dad had both come out to the hallway to see what the postman had brought and were now staring intently at him. Eoin had a fair idea of what the letter would say, but he was still completely torn on how he would respond to it.

'Oh well, at least it's not my school report,' he grinned as he tore at the white envelope. Inside was a booklet, and a one-sheet letter with just two typed sentences:

Dear Eoin,

Leinster Rugby would like you to attend a Youth Academy Induction Course at our headquarters in UCD Belfield on the weekend of July 20-21. Please confirm your attendance to the address below by 1 July, including your clothing and equipment sizes.

Eoin flicked through the glossy booklet, which was full of photos of Jamie Heaslip, Johnny Sexton and all the other great players who had played for Leinster in recent seasons.

'They want me to go up to Dublin for a weekend,' he shrugged as he handed the letter to his mum.

'Don't look so delighted,' she laughed. 'You look as if someone has stolen your boots!'

'Ah, it's a great honour, I suppose. It's just that...'

'It's just that you're a Munster man and you won't be able to face Dylan if you play for that shower up in Dublin,' laughed his dad.

'Yeah, I suppose that's it,' said Eoin. 'And it'll be hard to break the habit of hoping Leinster lose every time they play!'

Eoin's mum smiled and patted him on the back. 'Congratulations, Eoin, that's such wonderful news. Do you want me to reply? I'm sure you don't know your shirt sizes and all that.'

'Yeah, thanks, Mam,' replied Eoin. 'I arranged to meet Dylan down the club in a little while and I suppose I'll have to break the bad news to him.'

Eoin smiled to himself as he jogged the short distance to the Ormondstown Gaels GAA club. The letter hadn't brought bad news, of course – it was a fantastic opportunity to develop his rugby with Leinster, and could even lead to a career playing the game. But Eoin was Munster born and Munster bred, and since he started playing rugby all he had ever dreamed of was wearing the famous red shirt of the province – ahead even of the green jersey of Ireland.

A Leinster development officer had approached him a few months before as he celebrated winning the Junior Cup with his Dublin boarding school, Castlerock College. He had been taken aback by it at first, but his school coach was delighted and encouraged him to pursue the opportunity.

He felt his feet bounce a little more off the tarmac as he jogged through the gates of the club.

'Hiya, Barney!' he called out to the long-serving groundsman, who was busy painting the white lines on the playing field with a home-made contraption adapted from a broken wheelbarrow.

'Ah, is it Eoin?' he called back. 'Is it the round ball or the egg today?'

Eoin laughed. 'It will be a bit of both,' he replied. 'I'll be working on the place-kicking this morning.'

The Ormondstown Gaels pitch was where Eoin worked on his game, and on his dreams. He had always wanted to be good at sport, but it was only when he turned his hand to rugby that he found a game that suited his temperament and his skills. Although his grandfather had once been a big rugby star, Eoin hadn't got the chance to try out the game until he went to boarding school in Dublin three years before.

Eoin had also discovered he could see and talk to ghosts, so with a little help from a long-dead friend, Brian, he sharpened his skills and soon became the best player in his year at Castlerock. The worst thing – in fact the only bad thing – about the summer holidays was that he hadn't been able to talk to Brian, who hung around the old rugby stadium on Lansdowne Road. Although Brian had made a few appearances around Castlerock, a visit to Ormondstown seemed to be beyond him.

Eoin ducked into Barney's shed and collected the rugby and Gaelic footballs that the groundsman allowed him to store there. As he emerged from the shed he heard a roar as Barney chased a familiar figure across the field.

'Hey, Eoin, tell him to leave me alone!' laughed Dylan as the old man waved his fist.

'Steady lads, steady,' intervened Eoin, 'What's going on here?'

Barney pointed to the beautifully painted touch-line which now had an ugly kink in it.

Eoin stared down at Dylan's feet, where a large white stripe now ran across his left boot.

'I just wanted to see what it would look like,' said Dylan, sheepishly.

Barney growled. 'If you ever do that again, I'll… I'll…' before he gave up trying to imagine what punishment he would have in store for Dylan. Barney wouldn't hurt a fly.

'I'm sorry,' chirped Dylan. 'I'll give you a hand with the nets later.'

'Ah, you're grand,' laughed Barney. 'But I know now who to suggest when they're next looking for a linesman!'

Chapter 2

Eoin and Dylan dropped into Cleary's shop after training to buy a bottle of water. They sat outside on a bench, watching the world go by as they slaked their thirst.

'So, what's your plan for the summer, Eoin?' asked Dylan. 'You getting a job? I hear they're looking for lads to pick fruit in the farm over beyond the glass factory. The guys from the GAA club are all doing it and the crack is great. And there's a few euro in it too.'

'Nah, Dad wants me to do a few chores around the farm, and I won't have enough time to get a proper job,' replied Eoin.

'Why not? Are you going on a holiday or something?'

'No… well, not as such…'

Now suspicious, Dylan stared at Eoin.

'I have to go up to Dublin for a few days, maybe more,' Eoin admitted. 'It's for rugby.'

'Is this a school thing?' asked Dylan.

'No,' replied Eoin, realising he would have to front up to it. 'It's a Leinster thing.'

'Leinnnnnnster?' howled Dylan. 'What have you got to do with them?'

'Well nothing, really,' said Eoin. 'Nothing yet, anyway.'

'Yet?' quizzed Dylan, who was starting to enjoy that Eoin was so uncomfortable with his interrogation.

'Well, I never got around to telling you this… but this Leinster coaching guy came up to me at the Aviva after the final. He wrote to me today asking me to go up for this weekend camp in UCD.'

‘But we’re Munster through and through!’ said Dylan, faking a look of horror.

‘I know, I know, it’s just that they asked me and I don’t want to say no.’

‘Well, I suppose you’ll probably get good coaching and all that – it won’t hurt at all, I suppose. But Leinnnsssster?’

The pair stood up. ‘I’m going to call by to see how Dixie is,’ said Eoin. ‘Do you want to come?’

‘Yeah, I haven’t seen Dixie for ages,’ said Dylan. ‘I love going to visit him. He’s always great for the old stories.’

Eoin’s grandfather, Dixie Madden, was a rugby legend, a former star for Castlerock College – and for Leinster. But just before he was set to play for Ireland a tragic accident took his wife and he never played rugby again. He had fallen out of love with the sport until his grandson began playing for his old school.

Dixie was cutting the hedge when the boys called to the gate. He was delighted to see them, but not so impressed with Dylan’s new spiky haircut.

‘Come over here and I’ll take the shears to that hair,’ he laughed as he invited the boys in for a glass of lemonade.

They all sat around Dixie’s kitchen table as the old man opened the bottle and poured out three glasses.

‘So, what’s new with you, lads?’ asked Dixie, before grinning as he turned to Eoin. ‘Your mum rang me with your news – congratulations.’

‘Thanks, Grandad… do you think I should take it?’

Dixie stared at his grandson, silently, for several seconds.

‘Well… I suppose it would be hard for you to switch allegiance to Leinster, but it’s too early for that just yet. It’s a great opportunity to learn more about rugby, and your own game, and I think you would get a lot out of it. At your age the team you play for is from your own choice, or your parents’, and they become the team you love the most and have that passion for. It is a black-and-white issue for you now, but as you get older you start to realise that there are shades of grey in everything and who you play for is one of them.

‘I played for Leinster myself, but my greatest friends in rugby were from Limerick and Cork. There are plenty of Leinster lads playing with Munster, and Connacht, and vice versa, and some of the greatest Irish players have even gone to play in France or England.’

‘So that’s a “yes”, is it?’ asked Dylan.

‘Yes, it is I suppose,’ said Dixie. ‘It’s your decision, Eoin, of course, but I think this is such a great chance for you. And, don’t forget, playing for Leinster is a family tradition!’

‘Thanks, Grandad. I think I will take it. It won’t stop me playing for Munster later on, will it?’

‘No, no, no, that’s not a problem at all.’

‘OK, well do you want any messages done?’

‘No, I’m fine for everything, thanks. But hang on there a minute and let me tell you a story.’

Dylan grinned at Eoin and poured himself another drink. Dixie's stories were always interesting, but they did go on for ages.

'You know that big old house just before the corner?' he asked, pointing out the window. 'The one with the weeping willow trees in the garden?'

The boys nodded; the building he was talking about was well-known around the town as 'The Haunted House'.

'When I first came to Ormondstown I got to know the old man who lived there and we became great friends. He was from Russia and called himself Mr Lubov, although that wasn't his real name. He had left Russia after the Revolution in 1917 and had lots of adventures around the world before he came to live in Tipperary. I used to call up to see him every day or two and loved hearing his stories. or going for a spin with him in his sports car. We used to play chess together quite a lot, too. He was very good at it.'

'I'd love to have met him,' said Eoin. 'He sounds really cool. Why did I never hear about him before now?'

'Ah, poor old Lubov was gone before you were born,' smiled Dixie. 'It's such a long time ago.'

He resumed his story. 'Anyway, one day he got very sick and he knew he hadn't long left in the world. He called me up to the house – I remember thinking that the weeping willows were bent even lower, as if they knew he wasn't well – and gave me what he called a farewell present. He said it was a great family treasure that had once been owned by the Tsar, who was the ruler of Russia. He told me that it had been smuggled out of Russia by one of Lubov's sisters, but it had been broken on the journey.

'It's a funny thing – it looks like half a rugby ball. Since it is sort of coloured blue and yellow I thought you might like it – as a new Leinster man.'

Dixie produced a small metal dome, which was just as he described except that it was also studded with jewels.

'I never bothered getting it valued, but I suspect those things that look like jewels are made of glass. Anyway, I was clearing out some old junk and was about to put that in a charity bag when your mother rang with the Leinster news, so I thought it sort of fitted that you have it. I'm not really sure how the Tsar of Russia knew about rugby but he must have been a fan.'