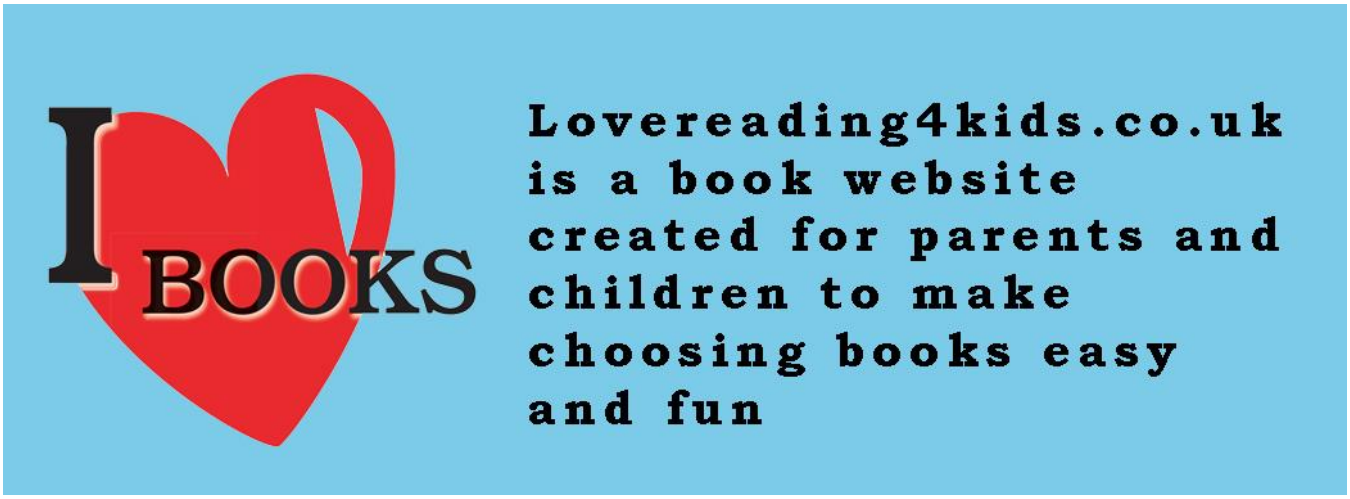


Opening extract from

The Mighty Dynamo

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Published by

Macmillan Children's Books

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Lovereading4kids.co.uk



First published 2016 by Macmillan Children's Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-4472-9978-3

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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PROLOGUE

4 JANUARY

Noah Murphy, twelve years old and skinny as a greyhound, had been dreading this moment ever since he'd first heard the news two months ago. Bad things weren't supposed to happen during the holidays. Yet here they were, happening.

He squeezed his way across the living room, pushing past neighbours and relations, apologizing as he stood on toes and accidentally poked an elbow into Mr McFadden's ribs. A fire burned fiercely in the grate, the heating was cranked up high and Noah was hot, uncomfortable and in a very bad mood.

He swung open a window, letting in a cooling gust of crisp January air. It was a relief from the stifling heat.

The moment he opened the window, there were grumbles.

'Close it immediately, Noah. We'll catch our death of cold!' Aunt Margaret said.

Cold? Noah thought. There were rooms in hell that weren't as hot as this. But he closed the window anyway. He'd been terrified of Aunt Margaret ever since he was four years old and had broken a vase at her house. She'd spent ten minutes shouting at him about how clumsy he was, and he'd never forgotten it.

Noah took another look around. He hadn't been to many

parties in his life, but this was still the worst by far. A group of old people squashed into his home, supposedly to say goodbye to his father, but more likely just to scoff the free food. They stood around in clammy groups, chatting about the weather and their various ailments, spilling drinks and cake crumbs, and flaking cigarette ash on to the thin, worn carpet. Pot-bellied men checked their watches to see whether it was time to leave. Noah's grandmother, nearly ninety now, sat by the fire, shrunken into her armchair. She'd never got over the death of his mum, her daughter. She stared, watery-eyed, at the framed photo of her on the mantelpiece, ignoring everyone else.

Noah sighed loudly, and was rewarded by a disapproving look from snobby Aunt Margaret. Then she went back to scowling at the rest of the guests, looking at them as if she expected one of them to steal her purse at any moment.

Noah heard his father's deep voice above the hum of conversations.

'Boondoggle Bend. No, I'd never heard of it either. It's a little mining town in the Northern Territory,' he said. 'About a thousand miles from anywhere. I'll be living in a camp. It's no place for children, unfortunately, which is why they're staying here.'

Noah still couldn't believe he and his sister were being left behind while their dad went abroad for work. They'd spent most of the last two months arguing about it and even now, when his father was only two days away from travelling to the other side of the world, Noah realized he was still angry with him. He understood that his father needed a job. He understood that he

owed a lot of money that needed to be paid off if they weren't going to lose their home. He even understood that working on the mines was the best-paying work someone his father's age could hope to find. What he couldn't understand was why he couldn't take Noah and his sister with him.

His dad had tried to put him off. He'd told him he wouldn't like it in Australia. That Boondoggle Bend was in the middle of nowhere and the camp he'd be living in didn't allow children. So what, Noah had said. They could live a couple of hours away and still get to see him once a month, which was better than seeing him once every eight months. It's dangerous, his dad had said. There are crocodiles and huntsman spiders. Noah had wanted to jump on the plane right there and then. That sounded far more exciting than life in his dreary hometown of Carraig Cruach in the west of Ireland. But, no matter what he said, he couldn't persuade his father to change his mind. He wanted them to stay at home with friends and family.

Though it's not like I have many friends anyway, Noah thought, and most of the family are a two-hour drive away. It isn't fair.

'It's only eighteen months, two years at most, Noah,' his dad had said. 'Then we'll be in the clear and everything can go back to normal.'

'Noah, put the kettle on for your grandmother,' Aunt Margaret snapped.

At least he wasn't going to have to stay with her. She'd offered to take them in because she thought it was the right thing to do, and Aunt Margaret was always someone who did

the right thing, but she really didn't want to and when his father said no, the relief on her face was clear, even to someone like Noah, who wasn't very good at reading people.

He made his way into the kitchen. Two men, former workmates of his dad's, were so wrapped up in their conversation they didn't even notice his arrival.

'I couldn't do it. Go to Australia for a couple of years and leave my family behind like that? I wouldn't care how much debt I was in. Two kids and the poor mother dead. It's not right,' the chubbier of the two said, slurping his coffee.

'Isn't there anyone else who could take care of the boy?' the skinnier one said, pretending to be concerned about the fate of Noah's family. 'I know the sister's supposed to mind him, but she's only nineteen or twenty. She's still a kid herself.'

'Joe's brother is in America, so he's no good, and the grandparents that are still alive are in a nursing home . . .'

The chubby man suddenly became aware that his conversation was being overheard. He had the good grace to look embarrassed.

'Oh, Noah, hello. We were just . . . erm . . . Still playing the football?' He turned to his colleague. 'Young Noah's a brilliant footballer. The Messi of the West, his dad calls him.'

Noah ignored the man. He stalked across the kitchen and grabbed the kettle in a fury, knocking it against the edge of the cooker and leaving a deep scratch in the black plastic. How dare they talk about his family like that? They didn't know anything. He turned on the kitchen tap and let the water gush into the kettle. And football? His dad was leaving

and the man was asking him about football?

He stared out of the kitchen window into the back garden. The grass was long even though it was the middle of winter. A couple of years ago, it would never have needed cutting. Noah would have had all the grass worn away from playing football on it for a couple of hours a day. He'd loved the game then. The moment he'd finished school, he'd have been out there playing against imaginary opponents.

'Forgot how to boil the kettle?' Simone said, appearing beside him.

People said that his sister looked like their mam had when she was young, but Noah couldn't see the resemblance. His mother had never dyed pink stripes into her hair or had a silver stud in her nose, a ring in her lip and eyebrow, or a row of earrings in both ears. That was all Simone.

'They'll all be gone in a few minutes,' she said.

'Even Aunt Margaret?'

'She just said it's a long way back to Athlone. That's her cue. Then it'll just be the three of us again.'

'Not for long,' Noah said.

Simone glanced towards the kitchen door. The two men had departed. It was just her and her brother.

'This is hard for us, Noah. But it's going to be extra tough for Dad. I know you think he's abandoning you, but things are serious. He wouldn't leave if there was any other option.'

'But why couldn't he just get a job in Cork or Dublin or Galway like everybody else?'

'We've been over this again and again. This mining job pays

well. Far better than anything he could get here. We have two days left, Noah. Can you do your best to be cheerful? For Dad's sake. Don't make it harder for him.'

He knew she was right. She usually was. People in school always complained about their sisters, but Simone wasn't that bad. And now, instead of going to university like she should have been, she was staying home to look after him and working two jobs to help support them.

Dad stuck his head round the door. 'There you are. Her Royal Highness is leaving.'

Noah grinned. That's what Dad used to call Margaret just to annoy their mam. It always worked too.

'Hey, Dad, want to have a kickabout tomorrow?'

They hadn't played together in a couple of years.

'Sure,' Dad said, and beamed. 'I'd love to.'

'And don't let me win easily this time. I'm not a kid any more.'

'Noah, I stopped letting you win when you were seven. Every match we've played since then, you've won fair and square.'

The next two days went by far too quickly. One minute they were laughing and joking and eating toasted cheese sandwiches together, the next Simone – the traitor – was helping their dad put his bags in Mr McFadden's car for the trip to the airport. They stayed until the plane had taken off and then Mr McFadden had driven them back home in silence.

Noah lay in his bed that night, unable to sleep. His stomach was cold and clenched in knots. He tossed and turned for hours.



The house felt different now, emptier, and he hated it. He got dressed and went downstairs. Dawn was breaking when he sat down at the kitchen table. He sat there for the next hour, thinking and watching the sun rise. There had to be something he hadn't thought of, some way to bring his family back together. If only he could get some money himself and pay off what his father owed, then Dad wouldn't have to stay in Australia. But where was he going to get the money? He could win the lottery, but they wouldn't sell him a ticket until he was eighteen. Getting a job wasn't very likely either, not at his age. He wished he was smart. Then he could probably invent a game or an app and

make a fortune. But he wasn't very smart, and wishing he was wouldn't change anything. There was very little he was good at, only one thing really. And then he remembered the flyer.

The one Stevie had given him.

The one about the tournament.



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CHAPTER ONE

25 APRIL

> *'If you're in the penalty area and you don't know what to do with the ball, put it in the net and we'll discuss the options later'*
>
> Bob Paisley

There were only four people standing on the sidelines watching the football match, and Noah knew three of them. The fourth was a stranger. He was a broad-faced man with narrow eyes who had arrived early in the second half. Noah hoped he was a scout, but football scouts rarely came to this isolated part of Ireland. In fact *people* rarely came to this part of Ireland. If they did, they usually acknowledged their mistake, made their excuses and left as swiftly as they could.

It was permanently windy in the town of Carraig Cruach. And most days were cold. When it wasn't cold it was raining, although there were months on end when it was all three at once: cold and wet and windy. Arthur Slugsley, the man on the sideline, made another note as he tried his best to shield his clipboard from the lashing rain, which seemed to be pounding him from at least three different angles. Despite his jet-black, supposedly one-hundred-per-cent-waterproof poncho, and the umbrella that was almost whipped from his hand with every sudden gust of wind, he was sopping wet. Down in the dumps, but grimly determined

to finish his work, Arthur managed to write:

GOOD GAME INTELLIGENCE. SOMETIMES FRUSTRATED BY INABILITY OF TEAMMATES TO BE ON THE SAME WAVELENGTH. WOULD THRIVE IN A BETTER TEAM

This was in addition to some of the other things he'd already written about Noah Murphy. These included:

VERY QUICK AND AGILE
HAS GREAT SKILL AND CONTROL
UNSELFISH – WILL PASS RATHER THAN SHOWBOAT

Noah was out on the left wing now, moving into space, just as he always did. Most people thought football was about skill and effort and it *was* about those things, but mainly it was about space and decisions. Finding space on the pitch in which to receive the ball and then making the right decision – when to pass, when to dribble, when to shoot.

Now he controlled a ball from Bestie and shimmied free of the man closest to him. It wasn't difficult for Noah to get away. Ever since the fourth goal had gone in, putting Noah's team, St Killian's, 4–0 up against Clydeabbey, the opposition had given up. It was almost as if they didn't *want* to be out there watching the goals flying in on this cold, wet, extremely miserable day.

Noah nutmegged the centre-back and faked a pass to the winger who was bombing into the area, before slamming the ball into the top corner himself to make it 5–0.

The goalkeeper fished the ball out of the back of the net with a heartfelt sigh. He was imagining being warm and dry in double Maths. The thought of being lulled to sleep by the steady drone of his teacher's voice was far more appealing than being stuck where he was right now.

Noah didn't celebrate the goal, his second of the game.

'You've won the match already. Why do you have to keep scoring? Are you trying to humiliate us?' the goalkeeper grumbled.

'It's nothing personal. That's just his way. He never stops,' Shieldsy, the tallest of Noah's teammates, replied. 'He's like the Terminator. If the Terminator played schools' football.'

'Can't you have a word with him? Tell him to take it easy or something.'

'He wouldn't listen. He just does his own thing.'

As he jogged back to his own half, Noah stole a glance at the sideline. The scout, if that's what he was, was making another note on his rain-soaked pad. Noah hoped it was a good one. He really needed it to be a good one, but, as Clydeabbey took their sixth kick-off of the day, his heart almost skipped a beat.

Oh no, he thought, not now.

A small figure was sidling up to Arthur Slugsley. A small figure Noah knew very well indeed. Unlike Noah, and every other person in the vicinity, Little Stevie, also known as IQ, was bone dry and almost cosy, buried as he was under layer after layer of oilskins. A wide-brimmed hat kept the rain off his face.

Noah's best friend in the world, his only friend, had been filming the match from the far side of the pitch, but he'd spent the last ten minutes edging nearer and nearer to the scout.

Slugsley looked down at the young teenager encroaching on his personal space. Even through the lashing rain, Noah could make out the look on the man's face. It was an unhappy mixture of confusion and annoyance.

With the World Cup qualifiers less than two months away, Noah knew that he had to impress the man on the sideline and he didn't need anyone messing things up by saying the wrong thing. And if anyone was going to say the wrong thing it was going to be Little Stevie Treacy.

Noah's jersey was stuck to him. The two ones that formed the number eleven on his back had begun to peel off and his navy socks sagged under the weight of water, exposing the tops of his shin pads.

'Wake up, Murphy,' came the shout from Liam O'Sullivan, the bullish left-back, as he slid the ball up the line.

Noah swore to himself. He'd lost concentration. That was stupid. O'Sullivan's pass was good, especially in these miserable conditions, and Noah took a touch, knocking the ball forward over the wet and muddy ground. He looked up, checking his options, as the huge defender, his face a furious red, thundered towards him. He'd had it in for Noah since the fourth minute of the game when Noah had turned him inside out twice in thirty seconds, before scoring the first goal. The defender was big and strong and fast, but he had no skill – though what he lacked in skill he made up for in intimidation – he was built like a son of the Hulk.

Noah caressed the ball with the outside of his right boot, sending it on a gentle parabola. It curled round the outstretched

foot of the full-back and into the space between the two central defenders. Jim Reynolds, the lightning-fast striker, had seen his teammate play a through ball like this before. Even though they disliked each other in real life, on the pitch they had a great understanding. Reynolds had started his run as soon as he'd seen Noah look up.



The centre-backs were slow to turn and Jim already had a couple of metres on them when the ball landed ahead of him, just in the right spot to take it in his stride. He cushioned it with his instep. Jim was in the penalty area with only the keeper to beat when Noah felt studs crunch into his ankle. There was a flash of nerve-shredding pain as his leg went from under him. For a second he was airborne and had a moment to consider the ugly, cold darkness of the sky, before he returned to earth with a splash as he landed in a puddle of dirty, icy-cold water. He heard the cheers of his teammates as Jim took the ball round the keeper and tapped it into the empty net.

'Get up. I barely touched you.'

Noah pulled down his sock and glanced at the six red stud marks on his ankle before turning his attention to his assailant. The defender was even more intimidating close up. He stood above Noah, leaning forward until Noah could clearly see the white pimple on the end of his square chin. The rest of his face appeared to have reddened up a notch, as if it was going to explode at any moment.

'Did you hear me? I told you to get up, you diving, whingeing, mammy's boy.'

Noah was used to being targeted in matches. He was one of the danger players, one to watch, which meant he spent half his time on the pitch getting kicked black and blue. He usually responded by partaking in some sneaky revenge when the ref wasn't looking – a little kick here, a sly dig there. He wasn't going to do anything now though, no matter how much he was provoked. There was too much at stake.

'I won't tell you a third time, you sh—'

'Take it easy,' Noah said.

'What did you call me?'

The alarm bells went off in Noah's head. He hadn't called him anything. The big bruiser was looking for a fight.

'If I wanted to call you something, I would have, but I didn't, so back off,' Noah said.

'Get him, Brick,' someone shouted.

'Your name is Brick?'

'Yeah, what's it to you?'

'Nothing, but your friends must really hate you if they call you Brick. It rhymes with too many things,' Noah said.

‘Like what?’

Noah struggled to his feet as the referee *peep-peep-peep*ed on his whistle. Brick must have figured out one of the rhymes because the next thing Noah saw was his opponent’s fleshy fist hurtling towards him. And then all hell broke loose.

PLAYER PROFILE



Name: Noah Murphy

Nickname: None really. Sometimes people call me Moses. You can probably figure out why.

Age: 12

Position: Central midfield, but as long as I get a game I don't mind where I play.

Team you play for: St Killian's is my school team. I used to play for CC United, which was the only football club in town, but it closed down last year so now it's schools' football or nothing.

Training schedule: St Killian's train on Wednesday evenings, but I do a lot of extra training myself. For the last few months, I've been getting up at 6 a.m. on school mornings to practise shooting with both feet and to improve my touch. I usually do that for an hour or two. I do a few exercises as well to improve my speed and spring. I don't eat sweets or any sugary stuff, and I make sure I eat plenty of fruit and drink lots of water. Three times a week I go jogging around the local football pitch. When I get the chance to use the internet, I go on YouTube and watch a lot of football videos to learn new skills.

Player you're most like: Fàbregas, I think.

Favourite player: Arjen Robben. He's outstanding.

Favourite goal: Zlatan's goal against FC Breda. Look it up on YouTube. It's amazing.

Messi or Ronaldo: Messi