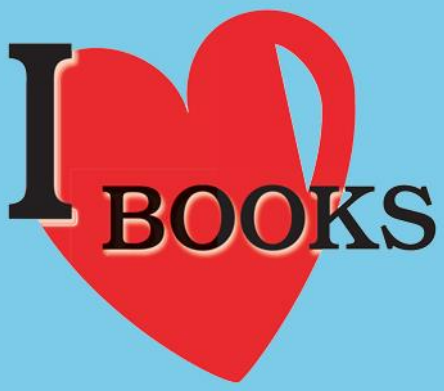


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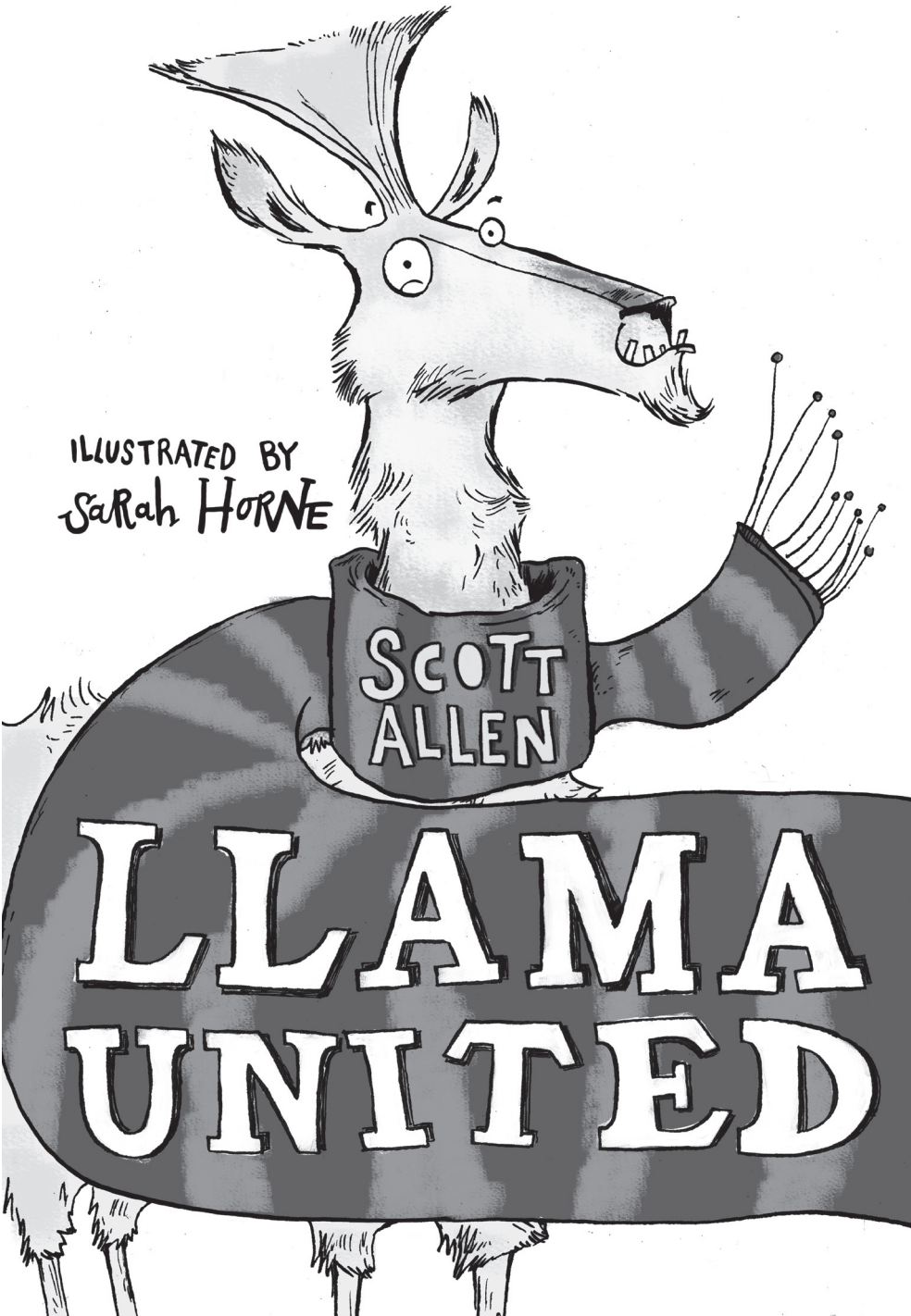
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To Dad – sorry you missed it

PROLOGUE



Well, hello there. I don't need to introduce myself do I? You'll know who I am already, won't you?

You don't?

OK, well for the few readers who *don't* know who I am I'll enlighten you. I'm Arthur Muckluck – the world's greatest footballer – EVER.

What do you mean you've never heard of me? I'm Arthur Muckluck: over fifty England caps, three Cup winners' medals, two Division One league titles and a World Cup winner. A creative genius, rocket quick, brilliant in the air, composed in front of goal and never scared to make crucial, crunching tackles. I even went in goal on two separate occasions – saved two penalties and kept two clean sheets. They used to call me 'The Legend' . . .

You remember me now, don't you?

No?! What do they teach you in school nowadays?

Don't you learn about the Golden Age of football? When footballs were as heavy as cannonballs, boots were made out of leather as thick as rump steaks, and football kits were exactly the same as the horrible chunky jumpers your gran knits for Christmas.

You don't have lessons about football at school? Oh.

Poor you.



Well, this book isn't really about me – it's about some llamas, an eleven-year-old boy and some other random fruitcakes who wander into his life. I'm just going to help you along with the story, so you don't get bored.

Now, I might have been one of the world's greatest footballers, but this sadly didn't

stop me having a fatal accident in my kitchen one Tuesday morning. I was doing some keepie-ups with a jar of mayonnaise, a plastic one not a glass one (I'm not stupid!), when I slipped on a slice of cheese that had boldly escaped from the fridge. I came crashing down and then . . . nothing.

I was a goner. The cheese and the mayonnaise also met a sticky end.

My wife, a lovely woman who happens to have rather hairy palms, thought it would be nice to scatter my ashes on the first field I ever played football on. The football historians among you will know this was in deepest darkest East London, where I grew up. Unfortunately, my wife is a bit forgetful, and she ended up in a field on a farm nearly three hundred miles away. Close-ish some might say. At least she got the country right.

It wasn't a particularly pleasant field; sitting on the outskirts of a small village, and full of weeds and discarded junk. At the time I wished she had picked a better place for me, to be honest. However, by sheer fluke, as you will find out later, she selected a field that plays a crucial role in the rest of this book. Round of applause for my wife . . . no? OK, let's move on.

Because of her hairy palms, as she attempted



to open the large black urn containing my ashes it slipped out of her grasp and cartwheeled away, scattering my mortal remains all over the grotty field before coming to a rest between a discarded pink sofa and a lime-green sink. The sink had retired there after thirty years in the army. I don't know where the sofa came from.

Are you still with me? Good, because this will be important later. For now, let's go and see what our hero, the eleven-year-old boy I mentioned earlier, is up to . . .

1
MEET THE GRAVYS



Frank Gravy looked out of the window. It was grey, cold and blustery outside. Through the murk he could see his eleven-year-old son, Chipsn, playing football in the puddles in the yard. Not really! He wasn't called Chipsn; that would mean he would be called Chipsn Gravy. What a stupid name that would be. Frank's son was actually called, rather boringly, Tim.

Tim was playing in the puddles on his own because he didn't have any friends. Two months ago he had lived in the city and had loads of friends at his school. But Frank had decided that he didn't want to work selling photocopier ink anymore and fancied becoming a farmer in the 'middle of nowhere'. Which is just next to 'I've never heard of it' and on the borders of 'I'm lost, where is this place again?' The family wasn't pleased with this sudden job change. It



made them all really miserable. The kind of miserable you feel when you discover someone has forgotten to get the pigs-in-blankets for Christmas dinner.

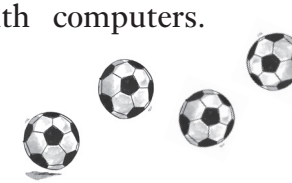
Tim is eleven, average height, average build, average hair colour, average shoe size, average eye colour, average-sized nose, just average all round really. He would wrongly describe himself as 'all right' at everything. He was actually quite good at sport, quite good at English and quite good at computer games, but he always felt there was someone better than him. Tim didn't have the self-confidence to really push himself to be brilliant at anything. He took small parts in school plays, was the reserve keeper in the football team and was happy coming third or fourth in everything on sports day. Tim didn't really mind – he had some good friends and was fairly content with being an average sort of fellow. But that all changed when the Gravys left the city.

Tim's new school was tiny. It was attended by just twenty children and he was the only child in Year Six. Not only was he the eldest, but he was also the only child in the school with all his own teeth. This sounds odd doesn't it? But there is a good reason. Every summer, all the children have swimming lessons in

the village pond. Large, dark and incredibly cooling in the hot summer months, it's also green, slimy and full of hidden nasties. The truth is, swimming in the mucky pond not only rots teeth, it isn't very good for the brain either. Not that the villagers have worked this out. They just think they all have bad teeth because the nearest dentist lives fifty miles away (and they have never even bothered to think about why they aren't very clever).

This made Tim, with his average teeth and average brain, stick out like a sore thumb. Every time the teacher asked Tim to answer an easy question, all the other children would laugh, point at his normal set of teeth and scoff at his cleverness. They also mocked his height, his age, his hair and even his choice of socks, which were usually just black. This went on every day for two months solid and made him thoroughly miserable. He was no longer average. Poor Tim; I do hope the rest of this story will make him a bit happier.

Tim has two very different sisters. Monica is seventeen and, if my maths is correct, the eldest of the Gravy children. She's a rarity when it comes to older sisters; incredibly cheerful, helpful, resourceful, intelligent, caring and brilliant with computers.



Luckily for Monica, she goes to college in the nearest town, which has a normal swimming pool. Although Monica doesn't really like swimming.

The youngest child is Fiona, and she is everything Monica isn't: annoying, loud, selfish and demanding. She's probably about six, and is prone to leaping out of cupboards and demanding sweets. Fiona goes to the same school as Tim but is incredibly popular because she is the only person with blonde hair. So unusual is her hair colour in the village, she is treated like a princess by her fawning classmates. She thinks this is brilliant and is



thinking of changing her name to 'The Lovely Fiona'.

Then comes Mum, or Beetroot as she is affectionately called by the rest of the family, because that's the colour she goes when she's been exercising. She used to be a dance instructor at an old people's home. There are hardly any old people's homes in the countryside and usually the last thing country folk want to do is learn how to twerk. She now spends her time making cakes and cookies and doing squat-thrusts. The farmhouse is bursting with tins and boxes full of sweet treats. There are only so many slices of cake you can eat in one day. Believe me I've tried. Ten pieces of Battenberg cake one teatime is my record. My sick was pink and yellow for a week.

Pets next? Nope, the Gravys have no pets, which is rare for a farming family. Tim had never understood what all the fuss was about having a pet. The prospect of picking up warm dog poo and putting it in a plastic bag made him shiver.

Then right at the back is Dad, or Frank as everyone is going to call him in this book, because hardly anyone is called Frank anymore and I think it's a name that needs a bit more glory. Most footballers in my day were called Clive or Frank or Roger . . . oh yes, or Pelo. No, not Pelé . . . what a foolish name.



Frank had sunk all of his money into the farm, which was horribly overpriced considering it only had two fields and one of them was full of rubbish. His other problem was that he knew absolutely nothing about being a farmer, expect for wearing wellingtons and occasionally leaning on fences to slowly give directions to people who were lost. This wouldn't be enough to keep a farm running. Farming is hard – as Frank and his family are about to find out.