ARMISTICE RUNNER

ALSO BY TOM PALMER

Scrum
Ghost Stadium
Secret FC

Rugby Academy: Combat Zone
Rugby Academy: Surface to Air
Rugby Academy: Deadlocked

Wings: Flyboy
Wings: Spitfire
Wings: Typhoon

Defenders: Killing Ground
Defenders: Dark Arena
Defenders: Pitch Invasion

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TOM PALMER

Gonkers

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This book is dedicated to all the volunteer coaches who give children the chance to enjoy running – with a big thank-you

ONE

Lily accelerated, keeping her eyes on the three girls ahead of her. She was ten metres behind them and within striking distance as they climbed the muddy, water-logged path.

Time to attack.

She pushed past the first of the three leaders, a thin girl in a white vest. Now Lily was in third place. Ahead of her were Gemma and Keeley. Older than Lily. Slower than Lily on the uphills. Chest hurting, legs hurting, everything hurting, Lily pushed herself hard.

She could hear her own lungs forcing air in and

out as she passed Gemma and Keeley. And, now she had taken the lead, she knew she had her breathing right.

The ground was firmer further up the hill. Not boggy like at the start of the path. But Lily placed her feet carefully, avoiding exposed roots and rocks that could mean a slip or a twist.

Attack.

Lily knew she had to keep at it, because now she could sense who was behind her. She couldn't see her, couldn't hear her, but she knew she was there all the same.

Abbie Granger. Arms pumping like an unhinged windmill, running on Lily's shoulder, waiting for her moment to overtake.

After pushing so hard up the hill, Lily was struggling to breathe evenly now. Beyond her comfort zone. She heard a voice in her head as she

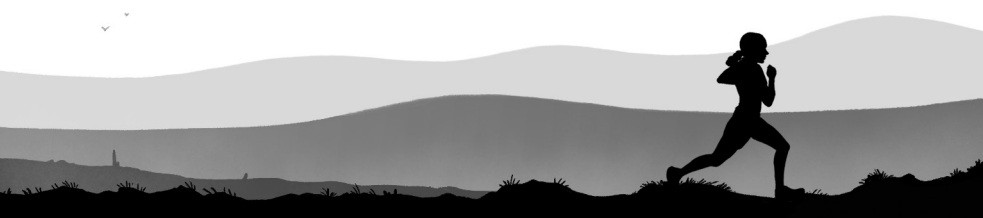
stared across the high open moor to the other side of the valley.

It's only a training run, the voice said. *Save your best for the big race.*

It was true, Lily thought. This, after all, *was* only a training run. The last training run before the first big fell race of the season. One that Lily would be racing. And one that Abbie would race too. In the Lake District village where Lily's gran and granddad lived. *That* was the important run, not this one.

Lily felt a crosswind ripple over the surface of the moor. The ground beneath her feet changed again to soft wet wild grass, damp working its way into her fell shoes.

Lily hated wind like this. It interfered with her breathing, breaking the rhythm of her ins and outs. She gazed beyond the top of the moor towards the range of higher hills in the west. Clouds drifted



eastwards. Greys and whites. Like giant sheep grazing on the hills. Eyes back on the track, Lily saw some of the parents standing on the side of the course, Abbie's dad among them.

That was the moment that Abbie chose to make her move. She put on an explosion of pace where the track widened before it fell downhill, overtaking Lily.

Lily felt a burst of sudden sullen fury. What had she been doing staring at the clouds, thinking they looked like giant sheep?

Stupid.

Now she could hear Abbie's dad yelling at his daughter.

"Take her," he yelled. "Get her! Put her out of the race."

His words came as a shock to Lily, although Abbie's dad was always like that, always shouting at

his daughter. OK, Abbie was in the lead now, but it wasn't even a proper race!

Faster. Harder. Lily felt the rhythm of her breath falter even more as she tried to match Abbie's speed. She wanted to reach out and grab her rival, pull her back. But Abbie was leaving her for dead now.

Lily wanted to cry out in anger. And she would have, if she'd been alone or somewhere Abbie couldn't hear her. Instead, she felt herself slow down, her head drop, a scowl numbing her face.

Downhill. Downhill all the way. Gemma and Keeley eased past her. Lily made up post-run excuses in her head.

My knee was aching.

I've got a cold coming on.

I didn't get to bed until late last night.

But none of those things were true and she

wouldn't say them. She'd run badly. And she'd run badly because she took her mind off running. Then – unforgivably – she'd given up and let herself be beaten.

Those were the real reasons.

Lily ran past her coaches, then she saw her dad and brother Tim. Tim was holding his hand up to make an L shape, mouthing *loser*. And Lily's head filled with thoughts. Bad thoughts.

She thought about the long drive to her grandparents with her idiot brother next to her on the back seat. About Abbie Granger and the race in a couple of days. About Gran being ill. And how it might be serious because she'd overheard Mum and Dad talking about it the night before.

The next three days might be hard.