RUNNING FOR GOLD

OWEN SLOT

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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

★ 1 ★

DANNY POWELL

Until 20 May, no one had taken Danny Powell very seriously. They liked him and they kind of guessed that he was extra special because they all knew he could run so blisteringly fast. Wow, could he run fast! Everyone knew he had the quickest pair of feet in the school. In fact, they all knew that Danny could run faster than anyone in any school in the whole of the United Kingdom.

Every summer it seemed, Danny would go to the UK School Games and come back champion. Whenever those UK School Games came round, the following Monday morning you almost knew that your school email inbox at Newham Secondary would deliver the same news: that Danny Powell had won the 100 metres. Again. This meant that he was the best young sprinter in the country. Still. Indeed, pretty much everyone who had ever met Danny knew that, one day, he would be a professional athlete.

But where the whole Danny story got a bit ridiculous

was when he told them that in the summer holidays after his A levels, he was going to beat Usain Bolt.

Oh, yeah, Danny? No one beats Usain Bolt. Usain Bolt is the fastest human being of all time. Dream on, Danny.

Danny hated the idea of being a show-off and so he had not intended to let it slip. He loved to run and he loved to win. It was, by far, the best thing in his life. But he never bragged. Not around school. Nowhere. He never wanted other people to think that he was a show-off, a swank. And so his dream of beating Bolt was one that he kept completely to himself. And if it wasn't for a robbery, from right under his nose, then it would have remained there.

It happened one day during school lunchtime. He wished it hadn't. And it was the stupid thief's fault. Such a stupid, dozy, hopeless thief. Danny was hanging around the school gates, the place he and his mate, loudmouth Anthuan, and a bunch of their mates in the sixth form always hung out at lunchtime.

No one saw the thief coming. He was probably only twenty years old, average in height and average in looks. He wore dark jeans and a dark T-shirt, but they only realized all that afterwards. At the time, all anyone realized was that with one slightly nervous and aggressive sweep of his arm, he had ripped off the shoulder bag that Jess had hanging loosely

from her shoulder. He did it with such force that Jess, yelping in shock more than pain, fell to the ground.

Danny knew that it was wrong to get involved. *Keep your nose out of trouble.* That's what his father always told him. So he stood and, for about two seconds, he watched as the bloke hotfooted it down the pavement. A series of thoughts flashed through Danny's mind: *Should I let him go? Should I stay out of trouble? Might I get hurt? And should I stay here and look after Jess?* And then, in that very split second that he had persuaded himself to be cautious and avoid trouble, the thief stopped running and turned, and it seemed that he was smiling. He may just have been panting, out of breath, but from where Danny was standing it seemed that he had a triumphant grin on his face. And that was that. Danny was off.

The sight of Danny Powell at full speed is astonishing. He has a long stride and a natural balance, which combine into a beautiful elegance. So, when he is sprinting, it doesn't look as though he is trying hard – it hardly seems as though his feet touch the ground; it is more as if he is gliding. But, boy, does he move fast.

He flashed like lightning down the road. It was about two seconds before the thief turned again and realized that he was being pursued and, at that stage, his smile disappeared for good. Danny started

closing on him quick and as the distance between them was rapidly disappearing, passers-by moved out of the way and stopped and stared. As Danny got even nearer, the difference between his speed and the thief's was so great, it was almost funny. The thief's arms were pumping hard, flailing desperately from side to side but, compared to Danny, he was going so slowly it was like he was running in treacle.

Danny got closer and closer: thirty metres away, twenty-five metres, twenty . . . Suddenly, he was almost able to touch him when the thief turned round, saw that he was beaten and dropped the bag.

And that was when Danny stopped running. He didn't want to catch the thief. What would he have done to him? Fought him? He had never fought anyone; he wouldn't know what to do.

So he just stopped running and picked up Jess's bag. And that was that. End of episode. At least so he thought.

The next day at Newham Secondary, they had school assembly. School assembly was held every Thursday and it was usually pretty dull. During school assembly, Danny and Anthuan and most of their friends would have their mobile phones out and would be busy texting each other. If you got

caught with your mobile phone during assembly, it would be confiscated for the rest of the day. But hardly anyone ever got caught, at least not Danny or Anthuan; they were far too smart for that.

Up on the school stage stood the headmaster, Mr McCaffrey. As teachers go, Mr McCaffrey was OK. But he loved the sound of his own voice – and so he loved Thursdays and school assembly because that was his chance to be centre stage and do lots of talking. Mr McCaffrey also had a greying goatee beard that he seemed rather fond of even if he was slightly too old for it. He would stand and talk and stroke his goatee at the same time. Danny often wondered if Mr McCaffrey had any idea that barely anyone ever listened to a word he said.

Danny scrolled down the inbox of his phone. He was hoping for a text from Ricky, his brother. He adored Ricky, but Ricky was a student, away at university, and he never got in touch. Danny hated that. He missed Ricky. But he thought he might get a text from him today.

It was then, suddenly, that Danny's attention to his phone was ripped away. Anthuan gave him a hefty nudge in the ribs with his elbow. 'Dan,' he whispered, out of the side of his mouth. 'Listen up, Dan, he's talking about you.'

Anthuan was right. Up on stage, Mr McCaffrey was babbling on, as ever, but he was now babbling

on about a robbery incident the previous day. *Oh no, please no!* thought Danny. He hated the idea of being the centre of attention.

'. . . and this thief thought he had got away with it,' was what Mr McCaffrey was saying, 'but he hadn't accounted for the fact that at Newham Secondary, we happen to have the fastest young schoolboy in the country. So well done, Danny Powell.'

Mr McCaffrey then started clapping and there was a flutter of applause around the school hall. Danny looked down, trying to avoid everyone's stares. But then Mr McCaffrey carried on: 'And so I would like to ask Danny Powell to come up here for a minute.'

Oh no! You can't be serious! thought Danny. But the headmaster was. And it was on stage that the day really took a turn for the worse.

'Danny,' Mr McCaffrey said, turning to him, 'well done. You have made us all proud.'

'Thank you, sir,' Danny replied.

'And here we are, at the start of the athletics season. Have you got any big plans?'

Danny felt flustered. *What should I say?* he thought. So he decided he may as well be honest – and he just said: 'Yes.'

'Would you fancy running in the Olympics?' Mr McCaffrey asked.

'Of course,' Danny replied. 'Who wouldn't?'

'Exactly,' said Mr McCaffrey. 'Good luck, Danny.' And Danny had just started walking off the stage when Mr McCaffrey said: 'One other thing, Danny . . .' So Danny stopped. '. . . I don't suppose you could beat Usain Bolt, could you?'

Danny paused. *What should I say? What should I say?* And before he could stop himself, he told the truth. 'It's going to be tough, but that's certainly the plan, sir.'

The second that Danny had let that sentence fly from his mouth, he wanted to catch it and take it back again. The school hall erupted with squeals and whistles and quite a lot of laughter. And Danny couldn't stand people laughing at him.

Five minutes later, when assembly was over, the school hall had emptied and the students had piled out into the open air, he was made to feel even worse. 'Dream on, Danny!' was the first comment that was flung his way. 'Danny, I hear Usain Bolt's really scared.' 'Danny, Bolt could beat you on one leg.' And: 'Danny, what planet are you on? Come back down to earth, you might enjoy it down here.'

Ha! Ha! Very funny, the lot of you, thought Danny as he turned left out of the school hall towards the classrooms. He hated people thinking he was arrogant. But what he hated the most was the idea that people didn't believe in him, that they should laugh at the very idea that he was going to beat Usain Bolt. *I'll prove them all wrong*, he said to himself. 'Bolt could

beat you on one leg,' they said. How he wanted to ram those comments down their precious little throats.

For the rest of the day, Danny was not allowed to forget it. Most people were too scared to say anything, but he could see them smirking to each other.

Some were brave enough to comment. 'Usain's got no chance!' was one sarcastic comment. He hated that.

'Good luck against Bolt!' were the words of one younger boy. And he probably meant it, but Danny didn't like that either.

At the end of the school day, feeling thoroughly dispirited, Dan sought out the company of Anthuan. But that didn't turn out to be a very good idea either.

'Are you coming out to the movies tomorrow night, Dan?' he asked.

'I can't,' Danny replied. 'I've got to train, haven't I?'

'We're *all* going,' Anthuan said, slightly pleadingly, as if trying to play on Danny's conscience.

'I just can't,' Danny replied, shrugging. 'You know that. Training. I've got to train. I've *always* got to train.'

Anthuan seemed disappointed and went quiet. They walked out of the school gates together. And then Anthuan asked him a question that really

surprised him. And the way he asked it suggested that he was slightly uncomfortable about it himself.

'Dan,' he said, 'do you really think you could beat Usain Bolt?'

Danny stopped walking, paused for a second and then answered: 'Ant, I know it sounds crazy, and I know I sound stupid when I say it. But this is my dream. The Olympics are coming. I've got a one in a million chance of beating that guy. So yes, I do think I have a chance. It's a slim one, but it's still a chance. What do you think?'

Anthuan looked down at the ground and furrowed his brow as if he was thinking seriously. 'I think you're my best mate in the world, Dan,' he replied slowly. 'And I don't want to be hard on you. But I hate seeing people laugh at you like they did today, you know that. So come on, Dan. You're so young still and maybe you should remember that. You could be out having fun tomorrow night, but you don't want to. Do you really think you're ready to race Bolt? I just can't help feeling that if you raced Bolt now, he'd have time to finish the race and eat a cheese sandwich before you came through the line.'

Dan looked at Anthuan with disgust. He felt angry and let down. 'Oh, right, I see. So not even my best mate believes in me. See ya.' And with that, he trotted off down the road and jumped straight on the 215 bus, leaving Anthuan standing alone.

Danny was furious. But, more than that, he was really upset. *Not even Ant believes in me*, he thought to himself. *I'll just have to prove him wrong too.*