

Chapter 1: Ciara

I'm a girl who is perfect in everything. But being perfect worth me a lot.

I want to be an ordinary student who does what she likes. As for my mother, it doesn't matter what I like.

Tomorrow, there will be an 800-meter race among sixth graders at our school. To be honest, I don't like running. I hate running. But to remain perfect in everything, I run. And I'm the fastest in our class. So, tomorrow I'll take the first place. As always.

In the morning, getting ready for school and having oatmeal with dried fruits for breakfast, I leave our house.

Our house is huge. But the only person I meet every morning is the maid who cleans my room. She is the one I say "good morning" to first.

Mother is in the car waiting for me. Dad already left for work. He only spends time with me on weekends. Unfortunately. Mother only treats me well when Dad's around.

"Good morning," I hear her cold voice as I sit down in the back seat of the car. She hands me my backpack.

"I put some candy in the front pocket. When you win the race, share it with everyone."

I look out the window and answer softly: "Of course."

Chapter 2: Ellen

I'm never good enough. There's someone better. At everything in the world, at everything I've ever tried.

Tomorrow, there will be an 800-meter race among sixth graders at our school. I love running. Running is one of my favorite things to do. But no matter how hard I try, I'm always passed. So, I'm the second fastest in our class. Just hope I won't become third tomorrow.

"Good morning! Time to get up for school!" I hear Mom's warm voice.

I get ready and eat cereal for breakfast. After checking my backpack, I put on my running shoes. Mom walks me to the door.

Dad already left for work in our car, so the school bus takes me.

"You have a race today, right? Good luck." Mom kisses me on the cheek.

"Yeah. Thank you. Hope to come in second," I reply with a smile.

Mom rolls her eyes. "Oh, come on, don't say that. It doesn't matter what place you take. You love running and you're good at it, that's what matters!"

My smile gets even wider. Mom's support has always helped me, and I'm grateful for that. She smiles, too.

"You can do it! Go wait for the bus."

I look out the window and answer with excitement: "Of course."

Chapter 3: Ciara

"Ciara!" My three friends run up to me as I approach the school. After exchanging hugs, the conversation turns to today's race.

"Good luck, class star," one of them winks.

"Yeah, good luck. You'll prove how fast you are one more time."

"That silly girl will probably be upset about second place again," the third one says and everyone giggles.

I follow their gaze. A girl is standing there. She has a long blond shiny hair.

Ellen.

She is smiling from ear to ear and saying something to her friend. I think for a moment...

I envy her. She's so happy.

But immediately get rid of this thought.

Still... She loves to run. Unlike me.

Yes, she is never first, but that is not the most important thing, right?

Her family is not that rich, but that is not the most important thing, right?

Oh. I realize I have been staring at Ellen this whole time. As not to accidentally give away my thoughts, I laugh:

“Yeah. Well, shall we go in?”

“On your marks, get set, go!”

I run.

I run as fast as I can.

And I hate it.

But I need to because of Ellen. *Only* because of Ellen. Everyone else is already far behind us. When Ellen’s almost right next to me. Well, I am, of course, first.

After running the first lap, my legs begin to feel even more tired. I can’t run as fast as before.

I look at Ellen.

Oh no.

Now she is running right next to me and I can see her perfectly.

That’s what made me angry.

Ellen is left far behind as I sprint even faster.

Short after, I start to lose my speed. Everything becomes blurry and the only thing I can focus on are cheers near the finish line. My legs and lungs burn so hard I want to fall on the ground and never get up again.

But I have to get there first. I have to.

With horror I realize someone is running right beside me.

No. Please.

Mother's voice echoes in my head. *When you get there first... You get there first...*

I cross the finish line.

I collapse on the ground.

Everyone goes crazy.

And I hear someone else's name.

"That's it, Ellen!!"

I raise my head. Everyone is gathering around *her*.

No, it can't be.

I lost.

Chapter 4: Ellen

“Ellen!” my friend runs up to me as I get off the school bus.

“Hey.”

The conversation turns to today’s race, of course.

“Good luck!”

I smile. “I hope I come in second.”

My friend stares into my soul for a moment. “Girl, are you serious? You *are* fast, and you *are* capable of coming in first. But this attitude... Change it. You better say “today I’m finally going to be first,” or something.”

My smile gets wider, if it's even possible. “Alright. Today I’m finally going to be first!”

We both laugh. Before going in, I turn around and look at one girl.

Ciara.

She has shoulder length dark brown hair and very beautiful gold earrings. Every day she comes to school in a new stylish and fashionable outfit. Now she is saying something to her friends. She has a lot of them...

I think for a moment.

I envy her. She has a perfect life.

But immediately get rid of this thought.

“On your marks, get set, go!”

I run.

I run as fast as I can.

And every time I’m running, I feel like I’m flying.

But now I’m not just running. It is a race. A competition.

Honestly, I kind of hate competitions. I guess it’s just because I’m always second. And it sucks to be second.

Even now I’m second.

Ciara is running just ahead of me while everyone else is already far behind.

As always...

After running the first lap, my legs begin to feel tired. But I love this feeling, the feeling of the first lap.

And in addition, I notice, I’ve caught up with Ciara.

Now we are running side by side.

The thought of it gives me strength.

But then something strange happens.

Suddenly, Ciara speeds up. She speeds up a lot. And I’m left far behind.

I can see that it is hard for her, probably using all of her remaining strength.
But why'd she do that?

Over time, Ciara begins to slow down. So, I catch up with her, again.

The finish line is getting closer.

Kids and teachers cheer so loud. I think I can probably lose my hearing. Of course, I hear Ciara's name more often than my own. But I don't care.

My legs are hurting like crazy. Everything starts to become blurry. I am giving my last bit of strength, too.

My Mom's and my friend's words echo in my head. *You can do it... You are capable of coming in first...*

I cross the finish line.

I fall to my knees and catch my breath.

And only then I start to realize what is happening.

Everyone goes crazy.

And I hear my name.

"That's it, Ellen!"

It's my friend. And everyone, little by little, is gathering around *me*.

I catch Ciara's gaze. It is full of shock. I think I saw a slight emotion of fear appear in her eyes, too.

But I forget about it right away because everyone starts to literally lift me up into the air.

It can't be.

I won.

Chapter 5: Ciara

I get home and Mother is standing by the door, waiting for me.

"Welcome!" She says with a smile.

I hang my head. She doesn't know yet that I haven't finished first. But Mother doesn't seem to care about such details.

"So, how was the race? For first place today, we—"

It's now or never.

"Mother," I say in a quiet voice, raising my head, "I'm so sorry, but actually—"

But I can't continue, meeting her gaze. It seems like she is going to burn me with it. I hate this feeling more than anything in my life. Fear.

"What? What are you saying? Go on."

I take a deep breath.

“I tried really hard, but you see, I...” My voice trails off.

“Yeah?” She purses her lips. “You mean you finished second? Or third? It doesn’t matter if it’s not first. I thought you can run. But you cannot now?” When I remain silent, she goes on, almost shouting. “I thought you were the best at everything in the sixth grade. But no, it turns out you’re not good enough. And, what a surprise, only because of such an insignificant thing as running!”

Tears start to fill up my eyes. “I’m so sorry—”

Mother raises her hand.

Slap!

My cheek becomes sore. I automatically put my hand to it, feeling hot tears running down, whether from pain or not.

“You don’t get dinner tonight. Go to your room and give me your phone.”

I do not see Mother in the morning.

My stomach is growling with hunger since last night, but I don’t find any food in the fridge. So, I eat nothing.

I’ll just wait for lunch hoping that Mother put something edible in my lunch box.

When I go outside, I see the same car I've driven home in from school yesterday.

With my personal driver.

Well.

Mother is really mad.

"Good morning, miss. Here's your backpack."

This attitude is so annoying. But of course, I need to be polite.

"Thank you," I say and smile to the driver while he opens the door for me.

I just stare out the window the whole way.

I get to school and see a bunch of people around Ellen.

Suck-ups.

"Oh, don't look at that loser," I hear someone say. Here they are, my three friends.

First period is over. I am applying lip gloss in the girls' washroom, my friends around me fixing their hairstyles.

"Excuse me, but can I wash my hands?"

I recognize that voice.

Ellen.

Rolling her eyes, one of my friends moves away and makes room for her near the sink. Noticing me looking at her, Ellen turns to me. Suddenly, she says:

“Congratulations on second place.”

I snort.

Is she making fun of me?

Even though her tone didn't sound mocking, I step closer, remembering the slap and my stomach growling of hunger.

“Congratulating me? Well, I don't.”

My mother's words echo in my head once again.

You have to be perfect in everything, perfect in everything, perfect in everything...

“Who are you to be better than me?!”

I think I said that last sentence too loudly. But there are only the five of us: Ellen, me, and my three friends, who are already watching me and Ellen as if it's some kind of show.

I think Ellen is really scared. I can see it in her eyes.

“Why? Why did you do that?!” I shout standing right next to her, looking her straight in the eyes.

This picture of her reminds me of myself. But now I am the one to dominate. I like it this way.

She falls to the floor, a look of pure fear on her face. I didn't plan to do it, but I hit her.

Every time I remember Mother's words, I hit her again and again.

You're not good enough, try harder. You have to be the best. You have to be the best always, that's your place. No one can surpass you. No one.

Chapter 6: Ellen

I get home and Mom is standing by the door, waiting for me.

"How are you, darling?" She says with a smile.

"Mom... I didn't take second place," I say to see her reaction, but I guess the grin appearing on my face gave it all out.

"What does that mean?"

Before I can answer, Mom starts smiling, seeing my happy face.

"I got there first!"

She hugs me following by a kiss. "Well done, I'm so proud of you!"

“Mom, stop!” I laugh, putting my hand to my cheek, wiping off the lipstick mark she left.

I feel great in the morning.

Several kids want to sit next to me in a bus. They even play rock-paper-scissors to decide who is so lucky to sit with me.

After all, yesterday I set a new school record.

While I enter the school, not only my friend, as usual, but also several other people are with me. It feels so cool. I have so many friends for the first time.

I go to the washroom after the first period. And I am not alone in there.

Ciara and her friends.

I take a deep breath and say:

“Excuse me, can I wash my hands?”

Even though she rolls her eyes at me, one of them moves aside. But what else should I have expected?

I start washing my hands when realizing I’m standing next to Ciara. And she looks directly at me.

Looking at her, I think that she might be feeling sad. After all, she always used to be first. And she also fell at the finish line. I’ve never even spoken to her...

Not knowing what to say, I blurt out:

“Congratulations on second place.”

And only then I realize that it could have sounded like a mockery. The one to be first is me, after all.

But it's too late.

Ciara snorts. “Congratulating me? Well, I don't.”

Wow. Why did I say that?

Suddenly, she shouts. “Who are you to be better than me?!”

I didn't expect it at all. Why did she scream? I really didn't mean to make her mad, but for some reason now I can't say anything, can't even move...

I freeze.

She goes on.

“Why? Why did you do that?!”

She keeps coming closer to me, staring. My knees bend and I fall.

Her friends are just standing and watching.

They smile.

After a moment, Ciara hits me. She hits me again and again until my whole body is filled with pain.

I think of what she might be saying by that.

Stop showing off and just stay at your place. Your place, when you are good enough to try, but not good enough to win.