

I'm not robot!

Tags cecelia ahern Featured flawed Leigh-Ann Brodber is an upcoming enthusiastic journalist. She's written book reviews, film, stage production and food articles for various websites, and she's also a born and bred animal rights activist, although she doesn't think she'll ever give up her rights to eat chicken. She has helped out at her local hospital many-a-time by indulging in weekly chit-chat with patients under a program called Candy Strippers. She also recently started getting help for her long term Facebook addiction, she swears. In Perfect, Cecelia Ahern's thrilling sequel to Flawed, Celestine must make a choice: save just herself or risk her own life to save all Flawed people. Celestine North lives in a society that demands perfection. After she was branded Flawed by a morality court, Celestine's life has completely fractured--all her freedoms gone. Since Judge Crevan has declared her the number one threat to the public, she has been a ghost, on the run with Carrick--the only person she can trust. But Celestine has a secret--one that could bring the entire Flawed system crumbling to the ground. A secret that has already caused countless people to go missing. Judge Crevan is gaining the upper hand, and time is running out for Celestine. With tensions building, can she prove that to be human in itself is to be Flawed? By Cecelia Ahern Copyright © 2016 Cecelia Ahern All rights reserved. ISBN: 978-1-250-08024-0 CHAPTER 11 AM A girl of definitions, of logic, of black and white. Remember this CHAPTER 2 NEVER TRUST A man who sits, uninvited, at the head of the table in another man's home. Not my words. They were the words of my granddad, Cornelius, who, as a result of saying them, landed himself the farthest away from this table, and he won't be welcome back anytime soon. It's not necessarily what he said that was the problem; it was whom he said it about. Judge Crevan, one of the most powerful men in the country, who is once again, despite my granddad's comment last year, sitting at the head of our dining table for our annual Earth Day gathering. Dad returned from the kitchen with a fresh bottle of red wine to find his usual place taken. I could see he was put out by it, but as it's Judge Crevan, Dad merely stalled in his tracks, jiggled the wine opener in his hand a bit while thinking about what to do, then worked his way around the table to sit beside Mom at the other end, where Judge Crevan should have sat. I can tell Mom is nervous. I can tell this because she is more perfect than ever. She doesn't have a hair out of place on her perfectly groomed head, her blond locks twisted elaborately into a chignon that only she could do herself, having had to dislocate both shoulders to reach around to the back of her head. Her skin is porcelain, as though she glows, as though she is the purest form of anything. Her makeup is immaculate, her cornflower-blue lace dress a perfect match for her blue eyes, her arms perfectly toned. In truth, my mom looks this beautiful to most people every day as a model in high demand. Despite having the three of us, her body is as perfect as it always was, though I suspect — I know — like most people she has had help in maintaining this. The only way you can know that Mom is having a bad day or week is when she arrives home with plumper cheeks, fuller lips, a smoother forehead, or less tired-looking eyes. Altering her appearance is her pick-me-up. She's persnickety about looks. She judges people by them, sums them up in a sweeping once-over. She is uncomfortable when anything is less than perfect; a crooked tooth, a double chin, an oversized nose — it all makes her question people, distrust them in a way. She's not alone. Most people feel exactly as my mom does. She likens it to trying to sell a car without washing it first; it should be gleaming. The same goes for people. Laziness in maintaining their outside represents who they are on the inside. I'm a perfectionist, too, but it doesn't stretch to physical appearances, merely to language and behavior, which bugs the hell out of my sister, Juniper, who is the most unspecific person I know. Though she is specifically unspecific, I'll give her that. I watch my nervous family's behavior with a sense of smugness because I don't feel an ounce of their tension right now. I'm actually amused. I know Judge Crevan as Bosco, dad to my boyfriend, Art. I'm in his house every day, have been on holidays with him, have been at private family functions, and know him better than my parents do, and most others at that. I've seen Bosco first thing in the morning, with his hair tousled and toothpaste stuck to his lip. I've seen him in the middle of the night, wandering sleepily in his boxers and socks — he always wears socks in bed — to the bathroom or to the kitchen for a glass of water. I've seen him drunk and passed out on the couch, mouth open, hand down the front of his trousers. I have poured popcorn down his shirt and dipped his fingers in warm water while he slept to make him pee. I've seen him drunk-dance on the dance floor and sing badly at karaoke. I've heard him vomit after a late night. I've heard him snore. I've smelled his farts and heard him cry. I can't be afraid of someone whose human side I see and know. However, my family and the rest of the country see him as a terrifying character to fear and revere. I liken him as one of those talent show judges on TV, an overexaggerated cartoon character who gets a kick out of being booed. I enjoy mimicking him, much to Art's delight. He rolls around laughing while I march up and down being Bosco in judge mode, whooshing my homemade cape around my neck; making scrunched-up, scowling faces; and finger-pointing. Bosco loves a good finger-point whenever the camera is on. I'm convinced the scary-judge persona, while important for his job, is all an act; it's not his natural state of being. He also does a mean cannonball into the pool. Bosco, known to everyone else but me and Art as Judge Crevan, is the head judge of a committee named the Guild. The Guild, originally set up as a temporary solution by the government as a public inquiry into wrongdoing, is now a permanent fixture that oversees the inquisition of individuals accused of being Flawed. The Flawed are regular citizens who have made moral or ethical mistakes in society. I've never been to the court, but it is open to the public and available to watch on TV. It's a fair process because in addition to witnesses of the event in question, friends and family are called to testify on the accused's character. On Naming Day, the judges decide whether the accused are Flawed. If so, their flaws are publicly named and their skin is seared with the F brand in one of five places. The branding location depends on the error of their judgment. For bad decisions, it's their temple. For lying, it's their tongue. For stealing from society, it's their right palm. For disloyalty to the Guild, it's their chest, over their heart. For stepping out of line with society, it's the sole of their right foot. They also have to wear an armband on their sleeve with the red letter F at all times so they can always be identified by the public and set an example. They are not imprisoned; they haven't done anything illegal but have carried out acts that are seen as damaging to society. They still live among us but are ostracized from society, having to live under separate rules. After our country slid down a slippery slope into great economic turmoil because of what was believed to be the bad decisions of our leaders, the Guild's main aim at its origin was to remove Flawed people from working in leadership roles. It now manages to oust people before they even get into those roles so damage can't be done. In the near future, the Guild boasts, we will have a morally, ethically flawless society. Judge Bosco Crevan is seen as a hero to many. Art gets his good looks from his dad — blond hair, blue eyes — and with messy blond curls that can't be controlled and big blue eyes that twinkle like a naughty imp's, he always looks like he's up to mischief, because he usually is. He sits directly opposite me at the dining table, and I have to stop myself from watching him all the time, while inside I'm jumping up and down that he's mine. Thankfully, he doesn't share his dad's intensity. He knows how to have fun and let loose, always throwing in a funny comment when the conversation gets too serious. He has good timing. Even Bosco laughs. Art is like a light to me, illuminating the darkest corners of everything. On this April day every year, we celebrate Earth Day with our neighbors the Crevans and the Tinders. Earth Day celebrations are something Juniper and I have always loved since we were kids, counting down the days on our calendar, planning what we're going to wear, decorating the house, and setting the table. This year I am more excited than ever because it's the first year Art and I are officially together. Not that I plan on groping him under the table or anything, but having my boyfriend here makes it more exciting. Dad is the head of a twenty-four-hour TV station, News 24, and our neighbor and other dinner guest Bob Tinder is the editor of the Daily News newspaper, which are both owned by Crevan Media, so the three of them mix business with pleasure. The Tinders are always late. I don't know how Bob manages to stick to publication deadlines when he can never make it to dinner on time. It's the same every year. We've had an hour of drinks already in the parlor and hope that moving to the dining room will somehow magically hurry them up. We're now sitting here with three empty chairs, their daughter, Colleen, who's in my class, being the third guest. "We should start," Bosco says suddenly, looking up from his phone, ending the casual chat and sitting up more formally. "The dinner is okay," Mom says, taking her newly filled glass of wine from Dad. "I allowed for a little delay." She smiles. "We should start," Bosco says again. "Are you in a rush?" Art asks, looking quizzically at Bosco, who suddenly seems fidgety. "The trouble with being punctual is that there's nobody there to see it," Art says, and everyone laughs. "As I should know, waiting for this girl all the time." He gives my foot a light tap under the table. "No," I disagree. "Punctual is acting or arriving exactly at the time appointed. You're not punctual; you're always ridiculously early." "The early bird catches the worm," Art defends himself. "But the second mouse gets the cheese," I reply, and Art sticks his tongue out at me. My little brother, Ewan, giggles. Juniper rolls her eyes. Bosco, seemingly frustrated by our conversation, interrupts and repeats, "Summer, Cutter, we should start the meal now." The way he says it makes us all stop laughing immediately and turn to look at him. It was an order. "Dad," Art says in surprise, with an awkward half laugh. "What are you, the food police?" Bosco doesn't break his stare with Mom. This has an odd effect on everybody at the table, causes a tense atmosphere, the kind you sense in the air just before the thunder rolls. Heavy, humid, headache-inducing. "You don't think we should wait for Bob and Angeline?" Dad asks. "And Colleen," I add, and Juniper rolls her eyes again. She hates that I pick on every little detail, but I can't help it. "No, I don't think so," he says simply, firmly, not adding any more. "Okay," Mom says, standing and making her way to the kitchen, all calm and placid as if nothing happened at all, which tells me that, underneath, her legs are paddling wildly. I look at Art in confusion and know that he feels the tension, too, because I can sense a new joke forming in his mouth, the thing that he does when he feels awkward or scared or uncomfortable. I see how his lip has started to curl at the thought of his punch line, but I never get to hear what he has to say because we hear the siren. The siren rings out, long, low, warning. It makes me jump in my seat, startled, and it sends my heart beating wildly, every inch of me sensing danger. It is a sound I have known my entire life, a sound you never want directed at you. The Guild calls it the alert signal, a three- to five-minute continuous siren, which rings out from the Guild vans, and though I never lived through any war, it gives me a sense of how people must have felt then before being attacked. In the middle of any normal moment, it can invade your happy thoughts. The siren sounds close to home and it feels sinister. We all momentarily freeze at the table, then Juniper, being Juniper, who speaks before thinking and is clumsy in her actions, jumps up first, bumps the table, and sends the glasses wobbling. Red wine splashes onto the white linen like blobs of blood. She doesn't bother to apologize or clean it, she just runs straight out of the room. Dad is close behind her. Mom looks completely startled, frozen in time. Drained of all color, she looks at Bosco, and I think she's going to faint. She doesn't even try to stop Ewan from running out the door. The siren gets louder; it's coming closer. Art jumps up, then so do I, and I follow him down the hall and outside to where they've all gathered in a tight huddle in the front yard. The same is happening in each yard around us. Old Mr. and Mrs. Miller in the yard to our right hold each other tightly, looking terrified, waiting to see whose house the siren will stop outside of. Directly across the road, Bob Tinder opens his door and steps outside. He sees Dad, and they look at each other. There's something there, but I don't quite understand it. At first, I think Dad is angry with Bob, but then Bob's face holds the same stars. I can't read them. I don't know what's going on. It's a waiting game. Who will it be? Art grips my hand tightly, squeezes it for reassurance, and tries to give me one of his winning smiles, but it's wobbly, and too quick, and only carries the opposite effect. The sirens are almost on top of us now, the sounds in our ears, in our heads. The vans turn onto our road. Two black vans with bright red F symbols branding their sides, letting everybody know who they are. The Whistleblowers are the army of the Guild, sent out to protect society from the Flawed. They are not our official police; they are responsible for taking into custody those who are morally and ethically Flawed. Criminals go to prison; they have nothing to do with the Flawed court system. The emergency lights on the roofs of the vans spin around, rotating their red lights, so bright they almost light up the dusk sky, sending out a warning beacon to all. Clusters of families celebrating Earth Day cling to one another, hoping it's not them, hoping one of theirs won't be plucked from them. Not their family, not their home, not tonight. The two vans stop in the middle of the road, directly outside our house, and I feel my body start to shake. The sirens stop. "No," I whisper. "They can't take us," Art whispers to me, and his face is so sure, so certain, that I believe him. Of course they can't take us, we have Judge Crevan sitting in our home for dinner. We are practically untouchable. This helps my fear somewhat, but then anxiety turns to the poor, unfortunate person they are targeting. This surprises me, because I've always believed that the Flawed are wrong, that the Whistleblowers are on my side, protecting me. But because it is happening on my street, at my front door, that changes. It makes me feel it's us against them. This illogical, dangerous thinking makes me shudder. The van doors slide open, and the whistles sound as four uniformed Whistleblowers leap out, wearing their signature red vests over black combat boots and shirts. They blow their whistles as they move, which has the effect of numbing my mind and stopping me from being able to form a single thought. In my head is just panic. Perhaps that's the intention. They don't run to us, as Art had assured me; they go in the opposite direction, to the Tinders' house. "No, no, no," Dad says, and I can hear the surge of anger in his voice. "Oh my God." Juniper whispers. I look at Art in shock, waiting for his reaction, and he stares ahead intently, his jaw working overtime. And then I notice Mom and Bosco still haven't joined us outside. I let go of Art's hand and rush back to the door. "Mom, Bosco, quick! It's the Tinders!" As Mom races down the corridor, hair from her chignon comes loose and falls across her face. Dad acknowledges her and shares a look that means something to the two of them, his fists opening and closing by his side. There is no sign of Bosco joining us. "I don't understand," I say, watching as they approach Bob Tinder. "What's going on?" "Shh and watch," Juniper silences me. Colleen Tinder is now in the front yard with her dad, Bob, and her two little brothers, Timothy and Jacob. Bob stands in front of his children, blocking them, protecting them, puffing his chest up and out against the Whistleblowers. Not his family, not his home, not tonight. "They can't take the babies," Mom says, her voice sounding slow and faraway, so that I know she is right here and panicking. "They won't," Dad says. "It's him. It must be him." But the officers walk straight by Bob, ignoring him, ignoring the terrified children, who have started to cry, and waving a sheet of paper in his face, which she stalls to read. They enter the house. Suddenly realizing what is happening, he tosses the piece of paper in the air and chases after them. He shouts at Colleen to look after the boys, which is a hard task because they're starting to panic now, too. "I'll help her," Juniper says, making a move, but Dad grips her arm tight. "Owl!" she yelps. "Stay here," Dad says in a voice I've never heard him use before. (Continues...) Excerpted from Flawed by Cecelia Ahern. Copyright © 2016 Cecelia Ahern. Excerpted by permission of Feiwel and Friends. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher. Excerpts are provided by Dial-A-Book Inc. solely for the personal use of visitors to this web site.



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