

FLAWED

CECELIA AHERN



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*Sometimes what you're most afraid of doing
is the very thing that will set you free.*

—ROBERT TEW

ONE

I AM A girl of definitions, of logic, of black and white.
Remember this.

TWO

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 Angelina?” 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 stare. 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 he 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. “Ow!” she yelps.

“Stay here,” Dad says in a voice I’ve never heard him use before.

Suddenly there’s screaming from inside the house. It’s Angelina Tinder. Mom’s hands fly to her face. A slip in her mask.

“No! No!” Angelina wails over and over again until, finally, we see her at the door, held at both sides by a Whistleblower. She is almost ready for our dinner, wearing a black satin dress, pearls around her neck. Her hair is in curlers. She is wearing jeweled sandals. She is dragged from her home. The boys start to scream as they watch their mother being taken away. They run to her and try to reach her, but the Whistleblowers hold them back.

“Get your hands off my sons!” Bob yells, attacking them, but he’s pushed to the ground, pinned down by two large Whistleblowers as Angelina screams wildly with desperation not to be taken away from her babies. I have never heard a human cry out like that before, have never heard a sound like it before. She stumbles

and the Whistleblowers catch her and she limps along, the heel of her shoe broken.

Bob shouts at them from the ground. “Let her have some *dignity*, goddammit.”

She’s taken inside the van. The door slides shut. The sound of the whistles stop.

I’ve never heard a man cry like Bob. The Whistleblowers holding him down speak to him in low, calm voices. He stops yelling, but his crying continues. They finally let him go and disappear into the second van. They drive away.

My heart is pounding, and I can barely breathe. I cannot believe what I’m seeing.

I wait for the outpouring of love from my neighbors. We are a tight, close-knit community; we have many community days; we support one another. I look around and wait. People watch Bob sit up in the grass, pulling his children close and crying. Nobody moves. I want to ask why no one is doing anything, but it seems stupid, because I’m not, either. I can’t bring myself to. Even though being Flawed isn’t a crime, aiding or assisting a Flawed carries the punishment of imprisonment. Bob isn’t Flawed—his wife is accused—but still, everyone is afraid to get involved. Our neighbors Mr. and Mrs. Miller turn around and head back into their house, and most of the others follow suit. My mouth falls open, shocked.

“Damn you!” Bob shouts across the road. It is quiet at first, and I think he’s saying it to himself, and then I think as he says it louder he’s saying it to the vans that have disappeared, but as he gets even louder and the anger increases, I see he’s directing it at us. What did we do?

“Stay here,” Dad says to us, then he gives Mom a long look. “Everybody, back inside. Keep it calm, yes?”

Mom nods, and her face is serene as if nothing has happened; the mask is back on, the loose strands of hair already back in place, though I don’t recall her fixing it.

As I turn around to look back into my house, I see Bosco standing inside at the window, arms crossed, watching the scene unfold. And I realize it’s him that Bob is shouting at. Bosco, the head of the Guild, is the head of the organization that took Angelina away.

He can help; I know it. He’s the head of the Flawed court. He will be able to help. It will be all okay. Normality can resume. The world will be turned the right way around again. Things will make sense. Knowing this, my breathing starts to return to normal again.

As Dad nears Bob, the shouting dies down, but the crying continues, a heartbreaking sound.

THREE

“LET’S ADDRESS THE elephant in the room,” Bosco says suddenly, reaching for the red wine and filling his glass generously. He had insisted we all sit back down at the table, though there isn’t anyone who feels hungry after what we’ve just witnessed. Dad is still with Bob. Mom is in the kitchen preparing the main course.

“I don’t understand,” I say to Bosco. “Angelina Tinder is accused of being Flawed?”

“Mmm-hmm,” he says good-naturedly, his blue eyes dancing as he looks at me. It’s almost as if he is enjoying my reaction.

“But Angelina is—”

Mom drops a plate in the kitchen, and it smashes and it stops me in my tracks. Was that a warning from her? To tell me to stop talking?

“I’m okay!” she calls, too chirpily.

“What were you going to say about Angelina, Celestine?”
Bosco eyes me carefully.

I swallow. I was going to say that she is nice, that she is kind, that she has young children and she’s a great mom and that they need her, that she has never said or done anything wrong in all the moments I’ve spent time with her. That she’s the most talented piano player I’ve ever heard, that I hoped I could play just like her when I’m older. But I don’t because of the way Bosco is looking at me and because Mom never usually breaks anything. Instead I say, “But she teaches me piano.”

Juniper tuts beside me in disgust. I can’t even look at Art, I’m so disappointed in myself.

Bosco laughs. “We can find you a new teacher, dear Celestine. Though you raise a good point. Perhaps we should think about stopping her from playing piano. Instruments are a luxury the Flawed don’t deserve.” He tucks into his starter and takes a huge bite of carpaccio, the only person at the table even holding his cutlery. “Come to think of it, I hope that’s all she was teaching you,” Bosco says, his smiling eyes gone.

“Yes, of course,” I say, frowning, confused that he would even question that of me. “What did she do wrong?”

“Taught you the piano,” Art teases. “Her downfall, if anyone’s heard you.”

Ewan giggles. I smile at Art, thankful for the break in nervous tension in the room.

“It’s not funny,” Juniper says beside me, quietly but firmly.

Bosco's eyes move to her immediately. "You're correct, Juniper. It's not funny."

Juniper averts her eyes.

And the tension is back.

"No, it's not funny, *comical*, but it's funny, *peculiar*," I say, feeling slapped.

"Thank you, Thesaurus," Juniper says under her breath. It's what she always calls me when I get bogged down by definitions.

Bosco ignores me and continues to direct his gaze at my sister. "Did Angelina teach you, too, Juniper?"

Juniper looks him square in the eye. "Yes, she did. Best teacher I ever had."

There's a silence.

Mom enters the room. Perfect timing. "I must say, I was very fond of Angelina. I considered her a friend. I'm . . . shocked by this . . . event."

"I did, too, Summer, and believe me no one feels more pain than I do in this moment, seeing as I am the one who will have to tell her the verdict."

"You won't just *tell* her, though, will you?" Juniper says quietly. "It will be *your* verdict. *Your* decision."

I'm afraid of Juniper's tone. This is not the correct moment for one of her soapbox airings. I don't want her to annoy Bosco. He's someone who should be treated with respect. Juniper's language feels dangerous. I've never seen anyone speak to Bosco in this way.

"You just never know what those among us, whom we consider

friends, are really like,” Bosco says, eyes on Juniper. “What lurks beneath those you consider your equals. I see it every day.”

“What did Angelina do?” I ask again.

“As you may well know, Angelina traveled outside this country with her mother a few months ago to perform euthanasia, which is illegal here.”

“But she accompanied her mother on her mother’s wishes, to another country where it was legal,” Juniper says. “She didn’t do anything illegal.”

“Nor is the Guild a legal courtroom, merely an inquisition into her character, and we feel that in her doing so, making the decision to travel to another country to carry out the act, she is deemed to have a Flawed character. Had the government known her plans to carry this out, it would have had a case to stop her.”

There’s silence at the table while we take this in. I knew that Angelina’s mother had been terribly sick for years; she had been suffering with a debilitating disease. I had not known how she had met the end of her days, but we had all been at the funeral.

“The Guild doesn’t take any religious views into account, of course,” he continues, perhaps sensing our doubts on his judgment. “We merely assess the character of a person. And in strictly observing the accepted teaching about the sanctity of life, in allowing Angelina Tinder to return to this country having done what she did, the Guild would be sanctioning anguish and pain. Whether or not it was in a different country and whether it was legal or not are beside the point. It is her character that we must look at.”

Juniper just snorts in response.

What is it with her? I hate this about my sister. In everybody else's opinion, we are identical. Though she is eleven months older than I am, we really could pass for twins. However, if you knew us, we would never get away with it, because Juniper gives herself away as soon as she opens her mouth. Like my granddad, she doesn't know when to shut up.

"Did you know that Angelina Tinder was planning on traveling to kill her mother?" Bosco asks, leaning forward, elbows on the table, focusing on Juniper.

"Of course she didn't know," Mom says, her voice coming out as a whisper, and I know that by her doing this, she wanted to shout.

Juniper stares down at her untouched starter, and I silently beg her to keep quiet. This isn't fun. A room full of people I love, and my heart is pounding as if something dangerous is happening.

"Will Angelina be branded?" I ask, still in shock that I could actually *know* a Flawed person, have one live right on this street.

"If found guilty on Naming Day, yes, she will be branded," Bosco says, then to Mom, "I'll do everything to keep it out of the press for Bob's sake, of course, which won't be difficult, as the Jimmy Child case is taking over all the airwaves. Nobody cares about a Flawed piano teacher right now."

Jimmy Child is a soccer hero who was caught cheating on his wife with her sister for the past ten years and faces a Flawed verdict, which would be disastrous, as it would mean he couldn't travel overseas for matches. Among many of the punishments the Flawed face, they must give up their passports.

"I'm sure Bob will appreciate your discretion," Mom says, and

it sounds so smooth and easy to her that I know she really feels awkward and it's stilted in her mind.

"I hope so," Bosco says, nodding. "I certainly hope so."

"Where will she be branded?" I ask, obsessed with this. I just can't seem to wrap my head around it and can't understand why nobody else is asking questions. Apart from Juniper, of course, but hers are more accusing than anything else.

"Celestine," Mom says harshly, "I don't think we need to discuss—"

"Her right hand," Bosco says.

"Theft from society," I say.

"Indeed. And every hand she goes to shake from now on will know just what she is."

"*If* she's found Flawed. Innocent until proved guilty," Juniper says, like she's reminding him.

But we all know Angelina Tinder has no chance. Everyone who goes through the Flawed court is found guilty; otherwise, they wouldn't be taken in the first place. Unlike Juniper, I understand rules. There is a line, a moral one, and Angelina crossed it, but I just can't believe that I could know someone who is Flawed, that I could sit in her house beside her at her piano, a piano she touched, then I touched with my fingers. I want to wash my hands immediately. I try to think back on our last conversation, on previous conversations, to see if she showed any hint of a dent in her character. I wonder about her daughter, Colleen. Can I still talk to her at school? Probably best not to. But that doesn't feel right, either. I'm conflicted.

“Where is Cutter?” Bosco suddenly says, looking at Mom angrily.

“He’s with Bob. I’m sure he’ll be back soon,” she says politely.

“That doesn’t look good,” he says. “He should be here.”

“I’m sure he’ll be—”

“I hope she can still play piano,” Juniper interrupts Mom, out of nowhere. “With her hand seared.”

“Do you feel sorry for her?” Bosco asks, his irritation rising.

“Of course she doesn’t,” Art pipes up, mouth full of food, knife and fork squeezed between his huge man hands and pointing up at the ceiling like he’s a caveman. He waves them around as he talks, food spraying off and flying onto the table. “We’re all just shocked, Dad, that’s all. I mean, come on, you could have given us a head’s up, that our expected dinner guests were about to be taken away? When that siren went off, poor Celestine looked like she thought she was about to get carted away to the madhouse, which between me and you is where she belongs, but she doesn’t need to know that.”

He says it so easily, so fresh, so *well*, judged that it seems to remind Bosco of where he is: in his neighbor’s dining room with his son, and not in his courtroom.

“Of course.” Bosco looks confused for a moment, and then he looks at Ewan, who has been remarkably quiet at the table. He reaches out a hand and pats my hand warmly. “Sorry, dear Celestine, I didn’t mean to scare you. Let’s start again, shall we?” He picks up his glass of red wine and holds it in the air with a beaming smile. “Happy Earth Day.”

FOUR

WHEN I HEAR that the quiet murmuring has ended in my parents' bedroom, which was decidedly longer tonight than usual after the evening's events, and the house has settled for the night, I make my way to the summit, where Art and I have been meeting most nights for the past three months.

I have spent more time with the Crevans over the past few months than with my own family, often wishing I could stay with them for good. I feel like I fit in with them more, that everything with them is logical and makes sense. I have always believed in the workings of the Guild. I am one of Bosco's greatest supporters. I like to hear him regale people with stories of the courthouse over dinner, how he Ousted a charity board member for taking a golden payment pension package, or branded a celebrity who'd made millions on the sale of her fitness DVD but was dis-

covered as having a secret tummy tuck. Every day, he has interesting stories coming through his courtroom, and I love sitting down and hearing about them. I understand what he is doing. He is preventing people from being deceived. I know the difference between right and wrong. I understand the rules. But today I feel that the rules, of which I am a true supporter, have been blurred, because today they were literally on my front doorstep.

It is 11:00 PM. The summit overlooks the sleeping capital city. We live in a valley surrounded by mountains. Atop one of those mountains, Highland Castle dominates the city. Lit up by powerful red uplighters at night, it is menacing as it watches over us. In existence since AD 1100 and once the seat of the HighKings, Highland Castle is a fortress. It stands above us all, the tallest round tower in the world, its powerful eye seeing far and wide. The home of centuries of invasions and massacres, it now houses state conferences and dinners, guided tours of its architecture, museums of its ancient artifacts, and, of course more famously now, the offices of the Guild. We sit on the summit opposite the castle; to the left of us, the lights of more cities dot the night and stretch on forever, the castle keeping its watchful eye on them all. To the right are farmland and industry, where my granddad lives. Humming is the largest and capital city of Highland, and it is rich in history and beauty. Tourists flock from all over the world to visit our city, our bridges, our fairy-tale castle and palace, our cobblestoned pathways, and our ornate town square. Most of its buildings have survived the violence and destruction of the twentieth century, and it is a hub for appreciators of our Romanesque, Gothic, and Renaissance-era architecture. Humming Bridge is one

of the most famous bridges in the world. At thirty feet wide and over six hundred yards long and built in the fourteenth century, it crosses the river and leads to Highland Castle. It, too, is a beauty at night, lit up at its six arches, three bridge towers, and the statues from our history lining the bridge to protect it.

I like to travel the world on vacations, but I intend on continuing to live here after school. Art and I have talked about it. We want to go to the city university, me studying mathematics, him studying science. We have it all worked out. Juniper wants to leave as soon as she can, become a snowboard instructor in Switzerland by winter, a lifeguard in Portugal by summer, or something like that.

Art says he likes going to the summit because it gives him perspective. He's had a tough year. His mother passed away, and I think this place helps him rise above the worries on the ground, to look at it from a height as if he is distanced from the problems, detached from his grief, which is lessening with the months. I, on the other hand, see it as a place where it is Art and me against the rest of the world. While the one million people sleep in the city below us, Art and I are together, and it makes our bond feel even stronger. It makes me feel invincible, alive. I know how the castle feels watching over everybody: untouchable.

It is only over the past six months that I have felt this way about Art. We have been friends since we were twelve, when we started school together. The teacher placed us beside each other on the first day. We hung out together with a group, me with the girls and he with the boys, yet we always found ourselves side by side. We would never have met up alone despite living across the

road from each other. It was only a year ago, when his mom passed away, that Art suddenly began to seek me out, not caring about the perception of us to the others. We'd come here together and talk, him grieving and slowly coming to terms with his mom's death; he watched her slowly die of cancer. And then the grieving gradually flickered out, didn't become the main reason for our meeting, and it became something else.

That was when the something happened for me. The rush of butterflies when I saw him, the silly smile that would appear on my face at the very thought of him, the nervous bubbles in my stomach, the jolt of electricity when his skin brushed mine. Suddenly I cared about what I wore, what I said, how I looked. This didn't go unnoticed, particularly by Juniper, who watched me each day as I obsessed over my reflection before I dashed out of the house. Art noticed, too, and then I stopped flustering over myself for a moment to notice it in him. We've been together for three months.

I finally reach the summit and seeing his shape lit by the moon turns me into jelly as usual. He is always early, always waiting for me, sitting on a blanket, his face a picture of perfect concentration as he gazes out on the sleeping city below. *Perfect* is a word I use a lot to describe Art or any moment with him.

"Hello, early bird," I say.

He looks up, the sadness replaced with a smile. And do I see relief?

"Hello, mouse. If you're looking for your cheese, I ate it."

"Worms and cheese," I say, sitting beside him on the blanket.
"Yum."

We kiss.

“This is yum,” he murmurs, pulling me closer for another, longer, more passionate kiss.

I feel there is something different about him tonight. I pull away slowly and study his face, his eyes.

“How about we make a deal to not talk about any events of tonight?”

“Good idea,” I sigh. “I have a headache just thinking about it.”

He kisses my forehead and leaves his lips there. We’re both silent, lost in our thoughts, both obviously thinking about the sights and sounds of Angelina Tinder being dragged away. We can’t stay quiet for long. Art pulls away.

“My dad tonight” . . . He trails off, looking out at the tips of roofs and chimneys, and I see his anguish over what happened tonight. Ever since his mom passed away, I’ve seen it as my role to make him feel better, to get rid of the sadness. And despite my conflicted feelings on this evening, I need to pull it together for him.

“Look, Juniper should not have spoken to him the way she did, but you know what Juniper is like. She needs to learn how to keep her trap shut. She’s just like my granddad.”

“Juniper was only saying what she thought,” he says to my absolute surprise.

“She shouldn’t be saying these things to him.”

He smiles sadly. “Everything is so black and white to you, Celestine. We’re neighbors; we were in your dining room celebrating Earth Day, not his courtroom. And he must have known that

was going to happen to Angelina tonight. I mean, why wouldn't he at least tell her, if not us? They're friends. At least she could have been ready and not dragged out like that in front of her family, her kids" . . .

I'm surprised to hear this from him. Art has never spoken out about his dad. They're buddies, a team, the only two left, a connection made stronger after his mom died. They're survivors, or at least that's how they act. The two who came out of her loss alive. I can see he is as confused about all this as I am.

"He was following the rules," I say simply, and I know it's not good enough. It doesn't feel good enough to me, but it's the truth. "What happened to Angelina was horrible, but I don't think you can blame your dad for that."

"No?" he asks, bitterness in his voice.

"It's his *job*. A Flawed being taken into custody happens almost every day somewhere in this country. Your dad is under pressure to maintain perfection. What would happen if he turned a blind eye to some and not to others?" I ask, airing some of my own thoughts. "I mean, what then? Judge Crevan on trial for being Flawed for missing a Flawed?"

Art looks at me. "I never thought about it like that."

"Well, you should. Because he's your dad. And he's powerful. And some people adore him, practically worship him. And that makes it harder for you to have a dad like that, but that's who you've got, and he loves you so much. *And* he's one half of what made you, and that makes him a genius."

He smiles, takes my face in his hands, makes a disgusted face.

“I don’t really want to think of his part in making me, thank you very much.”

“Gross.” I laugh.

“Black and white.”

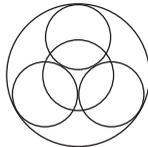
“All the way.” I smile, but my smile feels a bit wobbly, my footing not as sure as it was before. Convincing Art is easier than convincing myself.

Art clears his throat. “I wasn’t going to do this until your birthday, but after tonight . . . I think you deserve it now more than ever.”

He lifts his left leg and moves it beside me, pulling me in closer to him so that I am trapped between his thighs. Suddenly my uncertainty disappears and I am right where I want to be.

“I got you this for your eighteenth birthday, but I want to give it to you now to let you know that despite everything else going on in the world, you are the one thing that makes sense to me. You are beautiful.” He runs his finger down my cheek, across my nose, over my lips. “You are clever, you are loyal.” He drops his hand and hands me a small velvet box.

My hands are shaking so much I’m embarrassed. I open it and lift out the delicate silver chain, so fine I’m afraid I’ll break it. On the end is a symbol.



“And you are perfect,” he whispers, and it sends a shiver running through me, and my skin breaks out in goose bumps.

I examine the symbol, unable to believe what I see.

“I had a man at Highland Castle make it for me specially. You know what it means?”

I nod. “Circles are regarded as a symbol of perfection. All the radii bear a ratio of one to one to each other, showing there are no partial differences between them. They are proved to be in a state of harmony. Geometric harmony.”

“Perfection,” he says again, softly. “It’s hard to get one up on the mathematician, you know.” He laughs. “I had to do a lot of research. I think my brain is still sore.”

I laugh through my growing tears. “Thank you.” My words come out as a whisper. I attempt to wrap it around my wrist, but he stops me.

“No. Here.” He takes it from my trembling hands, and he uncrosses my ankles delicately. He moves back from me and straightens my leg, sliding my jeans up my leg slowly, his fingers warm on my skin. He fastens the chain around my ankle, and then he moves forward again, closer this time, wrapping my legs around him.

He lifts my chin and we are nose-to-nose, the moonlight between us. He tilts his head and kisses me softly, smoothly, sweetly. His lips are succulent, his tongue delicious, and I lift my hands through his hair and get lost in him, in this moment.

When I think back to that moment, my heart soars as it did then, and everything is heightened, magical, musical, and mystical, almost too good to be true. I could live that moment forever, his lips on mine, our bodies pushed together, both of us hungry for

more, our future as wide open as the vista before us, as bright as the moon. It was just us on top of the sleeping world, invincible, untouchable.

It was the most perfect moment in my life.

It was the last perfect moment in my life.

FIVE

I WAKE UP, and the first thing I do is slide my leg out from under the duvet to check my ankle. Anklet still there. It was not a dream, not some juicy figment of my imagination that dissolves as soon as I wake. I snuggle down under the covers to relive it in my head and then realize that delaying this morning would delay spending time with Art. He will be waiting for me, as he always is, at the bus stop, where we will go on to school together.

Despite my joy, my sleep was fitful, with so much to absorb after the Angelina Tinder scene. I feel unsteady on my feet as I get dressed. Something has been shaken, stirred within me. My feeling of security has been tested, and perhaps my trust, though not with Art, whom I trust more than ever. Oddly, I think it is with my own self.

I don't need to think when I dress; I never do, not like Juniper,

whom I hear swearing and sighing as she pulls yet another outfit over her head in frustration, never happy with how she looks. She gets up a half hour earlier than I do just to get dressed and still ends up being late every morning.

Juniper and I are considered identical by most people, but to me we couldn't be further apart. Unless you know us and our personalities, you would struggle to tell us apart. With a black dad and a white mom, we have inherited Dad's skin. We also have Dad's brown eyes, his nose, and his hair coloring. We have Mom's cheekbones, her long limbs. She tried to get us into modeling when we were younger, and Juniper and I did a few shoots together, but neither of us could stay at it. Me because posing for a camera failed to intellectually stimulate me, Juniper because she was even more awkward and clumsy under people's gazes.

I put on a cream linen dress and baby-pink cashmere cardigan, with gold gladiator sandals that spiral up my legs. It's hot outside, and I always wear pastel colors. Mom likes to buy pastels for all the family. She thinks that we look more like a unit when we're dressed that way. I know of some families who hire stylists to help coordinate not just the clothes but their overall look as a family. None of us wants to look out of place or like we don't belong, though Juniper often likes to do her own thing, wearing something that's not a part of our family color palette. We let her do just that—her loss, though Mom worries that it makes us look fragmented. I think the only person who looks fragmented is Juniper.

As usual, I'm downstairs before Juniper. Ewan is at the table

eating breakfast. He's wearing cream linen trousers and a baby-pink T-shirt, and I feel happy we match. A good start to the day.

Mom is staring at the TV, not moving.

"Look what I got last night," I sing.

No one looks.

"Yoo-hoo." I circle my ankle in the air, graceful like a ballerina.

Ewan finally looks at me, then down at my ankle, which I'm dangling near his face.

"A bracelet," he says, bored.

"No. A bracelet is an ornamental band for the wrist, Ewan. This is an anklet."

"Whatever, Thesaurus." He rolls his eyes and continues watching TV.

"Art gave it to me," I sing loudly, floating by Mom to get milk for my cereal from the fridge.

"Wonderful, sweetheart," she says robotically, as though she hasn't heard at all.

I stop and stare at her. She is completely engrossed in the TV. I finally pay attention and see it's News 24, and Pia Wang is reporting live from Highland Castle. Pia Wang is the correspondent for the Guild. She covers every case in extreme detail, providing a profile of the Flawed, during the trial and after. It's never a favorable profile, either. She does a good job of burying whom-ever she wants, though, to her credit, she's covering Flawed cases, people who have made bad decisions, so she's not exactly trying to glamorize them.

I look out the window. Dad's car is gone. He must have been alerted to the story and had to take off early. That happens a lot.

"This case has garnered more attention than any other," Pia says, her face perfect with peach-blush cheeks. She is wearing peach, and she looks like you could eat her, a perfect china doll. Glossy black hair, a fringe framing her innocent-looking, petite face. So perfect. "Even gaining attention around the rest of the world, which is reflected here in the turnout outside the Guild court in Highland Castle, with record numbers of people turning out to support their soccer hero Jimmy Child, Humming City's best striker, who has led us to victory so many years. And today he is victorious again, as he left the court only moments ago having been deemed by Judge Crevan and his associates *not* to be Flawed. I repeat, breaking news to those who have just joined us: Jimmy Child is *not* Flawed."

I gasp.

"What?" I say. "Has that ever happened before?"

Mom finally breaks her stare from the TV. "I don't know. I don't think so. I . . . maybe once," she says vaguely.

"Not a surprising result when a Crevan owns a share in the soccer team," Juniper says suddenly from behind us. I turn to her.

Mom's face looks pained. "Juniper" . . . she says simply.

"Damon Crevan. Owns a fifty-five percent stake in Humming City, but I suppose everyone will tell me that's just coincidence. If you ask me, it was his wife they put on trial," Juniper says. "And that dirty man got away with it."

Nobody disagrees. Jimmy Child's glamorous wife had been on the front page of every newspaper for the past few weeks as

her lifestyle was thrashed out for all to see. Every aspect of her, every inch of her body, was fodder for gossip sites and even news sites.

“Go to school,” Mom says in a warning tone. “Any more talk like that and they’ll come for you, missy.” She clips Juniper’s nose playfully.

She was almost right.

When I step outside, I see Colleen standing at her family’s car. The front door of her house is open, and she looks like she’s waiting. I guess she won’t be going to school today, probably going to the courthouse to her mom’s trial. My heart beats wildly as I try to figure out what to do. If I say hello, I might get in trouble. Anybody could see me speaking to her from their home, and I could be reported. What if Bosco sees me from one of the windows of his monstrous mansion or as he leaves for work? Saying hi may be seen as disloyalty toward the Guild, as support for Colleen and her mom. Would that be seen as aiding and assisting a Flawed? I don’t want to go to prison. But if I ignore her, it will be rude. It is Colleen’s mother who’s Flawed, not her. She looks over at me and I can’t do it. I look away quickly.

Behind me I hear Juniper say “Good luck today” to Colleen. It annoys me how easily she says that and then puts on her headphones and ignores everyone.

Art is already at the bus stop waiting for me, as usual, looking delicious, as usual. I leap on him as soon as I get to him.

“Bird.”

“Mouse.”

He kisses me, but I pull away quickly, excited to discuss the news.

“Did you hear about Jimmy Child?” I expect Art to be elated. Jimmy Child is his hero, and up until a year ago he had his posters plastered all over his walls. Most boys did. Throughout the trial, Art had the opportunity to meet him, though a quick meet and greet in a holding cell before court wasn’t what he’d been dreaming of throughout his boyhood, and he hadn’t wanted to discuss it much.

“Yeah,” he says. “Dad left at the crack of dawn this morning. He wanted to push the verdict through first thing, in time for the morning news.”

I think about how I should have said hi to Colleen; I should have known Bosco wasn’t home to have seen me—he was at court early—and what harm would it have done anyway to simply say hello? I’m angry with myself.

“I can smell your brain burning. You okay?” He sticks his knuckle into my frown and screws it around.

I laugh. “Yeah, I was just thinking. I didn’t know they had secret Naming Days. I thought it was always public. That’s so sneaky.”

“Not as sneaky as you and me,” Art says, fingers creeping up my top.

I laugh and stop his hand from traveling, something suddenly on my mind. I look over at Juniper, who is listening to her music so loudly I can hear every word from here.

I lower my voice. “Do you think Jimmy Child’s wife was put on trial?”

“Serena Child?” he asks, surprised.

“Yeah. When you think about it”—because I had been thinking about it, ever since Juniper said it, and on the walk to the bus stop with my new wobbly legs that haven’t been working since I stood up this morning—“every day it wasn’t about him or about what he’d done, but about how she was so annoying and so fake and such a *woman*, how could he not cheat?”

Art laughs. “I don’t think that’s exactly what Pia said.” He smiles at me fondly. “‘Reporting live,’” he says, imitating Pia. “‘Isn’t Serena Child such a *woman*? How could he not cheat?’”

I laugh, realizing how stupid it sounds, then turn serious, wanting to be understood. “No, but the way they talked about her looks. The surgery. The clothes. Her past . . . her cellulite. She’d kissed a girl—so what? Her tan being too orange, her eating disorder when she was fifteen. She went to school with someone who ended up being a bank robber. She never cooked a meal for her husband. He had to keep going to that diner. We learned everything about her. Like she was the one who was Flawed. Not him.”

Art laughs again, enjoying the ridiculousness of what I’m saying, or perhaps the fact that it’s so surprisingly out of character for me to say it at all. “And why would they put her on trial?”

“So he gets away with not being Flawed. People say she wasn’t a good wife, so how could he not have cheated? And the star player is still the star.”

His smile instantly fades, and he looks at me like he doesn’t know me. “Celestine, be careful.”

I shrug like I don’t care, but my heart is pounding by even saying this aloud. “I was just *saying*.”

Juniper has gotten to me. I had been unsure already, and what

she said this morning niggles at me more and has me considering the truth in her words. I think about it all the way to school on the bus in the silence between Art and me. I think about Colleen on her way to the courthouse to see her mother, her mother about to be branded Flawed for traveling to another country to help carry out the wishes of her mother. Does that really make her Flawed? I'm not ready to park this thought yet. It's Art, the person I share every thought with. Surely I can share one more. He can help sort out these muddled thoughts.

Art reaches for my hand and I feel safe.

"Do you think it's bad what Angelina did?" I say quietly.

He looks at me.

"Because I've been thinking about it. All night. And I don't think it's *that* bad. Not if it's what her mom wanted. I mean, I can think of worse."

"Of course there's worse."

"So even though there's worse, everyone gets branded the same?"

"She will only get one brand. On her hand. Some people get two."

He's not thinking about this properly. I know he's not. I know him. His answers are too quick. He is defensive, though I'm not attacking him. This is how it gets when people have discussions about the Flawed. Everyone has such strong opinions it's almost like it's personal. Only it's even more so for Art because his dad is the senior judge of it all—his grandfather was the founding member of the Guild. I was always in awe of them for that. I still am. Aren't I?

Once on the bus and in our usual seats, I concentrate on the Flawed lady in the seat that only Flawed people are allowed to occupy. There are two seats for the Flawed on the bus, because rules state that three or more Flawed are not allowed to gather together at any one time. It's to prevent the riots that broke out when the Flawed punishments were introduced. However, I wonder for the first time why they didn't just put another two Flawed seats at the back of the bus or somewhere else away from them. Alternate Flawed and regular people's seats. So often there are Flawed standing when the bus is filled with empty seats, which never bothered me before in a moral way, but bothered me when I was getting off the bus and had to squeeze by them. I swear some of them don't move deliberately, making me squish up against their Flawed bodies to get past. The Flawed seats have bright red fabric and are at the front of the bus facing all the other passengers so that everybody on the bus can see that they are Flawed. I used to find it uncomfortable when I was a little girl, having to face them throughout the journey, but then, as I got used to it, I stopped seeing them.

I watch the Flawed woman sitting alone on the seat, her armband with the blood-red symbol identifying her.



I see the symbol on her temple, too, and wonder what bad judgment she made to land herself in this predicament. The scar on her temple is certainly not new. It doesn't have the red-hot,

crusted look of newly seared flesh as some Flawed have. She has been Flawed for quite some time, and I wonder if this means she's worse now, if Flawed get more Flawed with age or if the branding, the acknowledgment of it, stops it from spreading and growing. She is texting; and when she rests the phone on her lap, I see the screen photo of her with children. For the first time I wonder what it's like for the Flawed to live life in the same world as everybody else whom they love, but under different rules. It had never occurred to me before. I think of Angelina and her children. Angelina will have job restrictions, curfews, travel restrictions. How can she go to bed earlier than the rest of her family? How can she mother them if she is living under different rules? What does a Flawed mother with a newborn do when she has to feed her baby in the middle of the night? What if the Tinders go on a family holiday abroad and Angelina can't go? What if Colleen decides to work and live abroad? Her mother won't be able to visit her. Ever. And why have I never thought of these things before?

Because I never cared, that's why. Because if people have done something wrong, then I always thought they deserved their punishment. They're not criminals, but they're just missing being physically behind bars. If Angelina, who I believed could never hurt a fly, can so easily be considered Flawed, then perhaps this woman before me is no worse, either. I have never spoken to one before. It's not that we're not allowed to, it's just that I wouldn't know what to say. I step around them when they're near me, I avoid their eye contact. I suppose I act like they don't exist. They're always in the Flawed section of the supermarket, the one that I pass through aisles to avoid, buying their grains and oats and

whatever else they have to eat as part of their basic diet for their basic living. A life with no luxury is the punishment. I never thought it would be such a bad thing; it's not like they're behind bars. But then I never thought of having to live like that when your husband doesn't, or your kids don't, or the rest of society doesn't. And then they're not really allowed to socialize together. No more than with one other at a time. For every two Flawed, there needs to be a regular person just for numbers. I think of a Flawed wedding, a Flawed birthday party, and shudder. I wonder what they even talk about with each other. Do they swap stories of how Flawed they are? Show their brands and laugh with pride, or are they ashamed, as they should be?

I feel Art's lips on my earlobe. "If you don't stop thinking, your head will explode," he whispers. His breath is hot, and it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I want to stop thinking. I really do, but I can't. For once he doesn't have my full attention. He's trying to bring me back to him, but I can't go there. I'm caught in this thought, in this moment.

The bus stops and a woman with crutches gets on. The driver helps her and guides her to the Flawed seats, which have the most legroom. The seats are deliberately set farther away so people don't have to touch them or bump against them, reinforcing that distinction between us and them. She sits beside the Flawed woman, who smiles at her.

The other woman throws her such a look of disgust that I'm embarrassed for the Flawed woman, who looks away, hurt visible in her eyes. She senses that I'm looking at her, and our eyes meet for a minuscule moment before I look away, heart pounding from

having made contact. I hope no one has seen. I hope it doesn't look like I'm on her side.

"What is going on with you today?" Art asks, a slightly bewildered and amused expression on his face.

"Oh, nothing," I say, trying to smile. "I'm just perfect. That's all."

He smiles and rubs the palm of my hand with his thumb, and I melt.

Juniper sits across the aisle from us, her body pushed so far up against the window she couldn't possibly get any farther away from me and Art, or anyone else on the bus for that matter.

I don't know when things became like this between me and Juniper. Photos and stories prove that we were extremely tight as children. Juniper is the big sister by a small amount, but she enjoyed mollycoddling me, taking on the role of nurturing big sister. But when we began junior high, things started to change between us. Though we were in the same year, we were in different classes and made our own friends for the first time, and the divide began. I excelled in school—I adore information and am always hungry to know more. I read books, I watch documentaries, my favorite subject is math, and I hope to study it at the city university when I finish school this year. My aim is to win the Fields Medal, the International Medal for Outstanding Discoveries in Mathematics, viewed as the greatest honor a mathematician can receive, like a math Nobel Prize. You have to be under forty to win it. I'm seventeen. There's time. Test results so far prove that I'm on course to get into my university program with

ease. Juniper isn't the jealous type, but our differences in grades were the first thing to make us different.

My scores were and are celebrated; hers weren't. They were never bad; they just weren't perfect. Everybody always wanted her to do better, to be better. And I understand the pressure she was under, but I could have been there to help her, not be the one she eventually blamed.

She thinks I'm a know-it-all, which she has told me plenty of times, and I try not to be one with her. I know I have a habit of correcting people's grammar or recounting dictionary definitions, but that's just me. Doing it does not make me feel I am better than the person I am saying it to. It is just an expression of who I am. I try to ask her questions, the meaning of things, pretend not to know something that I do know, but she finds this patronizing. She's right, but I don't know what else to do. My striving for perfection includes wanting to have the ideal relationship with my sister, like in the movies I see and the books I read, the stories that tell you that sisterhood is the one real true love and relationship you will have in your life.

Juniper is dyslexic. She sees this as another failure, another trait that has let her down, but I can see that it makes her view things in a different way. I'm a problem-solver. I read the signs, the proof that I see before me, and come to a conclusion. Juniper is cleverer than that. She has an alternate way of reading things. She reads people. I don't know how she does it, but she watches and listens and arrives at conclusions I could never imagine, and usually she's right. I look at things straight on; her perspective

seems to curve around things, wind and twist, turn things upside down to reach the answer. I have never told her that I think this about her. I tell myself it's because I don't want to come across as patronizing, but really I know it's because I have a jealousy of my own.

I think about what Mom said earlier about Jimmy Child maybe not being the only person to have been found not Flawed.

"Did you know that there might be other people who went through the Flawed court and were found to be not Flawed?" I whisper to Art.

I feel his grip on my hand loosen as he turns to me. He's annoyed I won't let go of this. "No, I didn't know."

"I think there must be other people found innocent that we don't know about. Has your dad ever said anything?"

"Bloody hell, Celestine, drop it, will you?"

"I'm just asking."

"You're not really supposed to."

"Aren't I?"

"Not here, anyway," he says, looking around nervously.

I go quiet. I can only look ahead at the Flawed woman, who is preparing to exit at the next stop. She gets off and a rather large lady gets on. She recognizes the woman with the crutches and sits down beside her, and they chat.

At the next stop, an old man gets on the bus, and I almost call out to him. He looks so much like my granddad that I'm convinced it's him, which doesn't make sense because my granddad lives on a farm in the country, but then I see the large *F* symbol

on his armband and I shudder, annoyed with myself for ever thinking someone like him could possibly be related to me.

My prejudice strikes me. I had been repulsed by the reaction of the woman with the crutches to the Flawed woman smiling at her, but I hold equal views of my own without ever realizing it.

The man is in his seventies or eighties. I'm not sure. He's *old*, and he is dressed in a smart suit and polished shoes, as if he's on his way to work. From this angle, I can't see any signs of branding, though it could mean it is on his chest, tongue, or foot. He looks respectable, and again I study him, surprised by his appearance. I always thought of the Flawed as less than us, and I can't believe I have admitted that to myself. He is unable to sit, because the two Flawed seats are taken—by two women who are not Flawed but are so busy chatting that they don't notice him. He stands near them, holding on to the pole to stay upright.

I hope they notice him soon. He doesn't look like he will go very far standing.

A few minutes pass. He is still standing. I look around. There are at least a dozen free seats where he could sit, but he is not allowed to. I'm a logical person, and this does not prove logical to me.

I look across at Juniper, who has taken off her headphones and is sitting up, poker straight, alert, and looking at the same situation that I am. Juniper has always been more emotional than I am, and I can see her on the edge of her seat, ready to pounce, instead of fearing she will do something stupid. For once I am glad she and I feel the same.

The old man starts coughing. And then he won't stop.

His breath is wheezy, barely still for a moment before he coughs again. He takes out a handkerchief and coughs into that, trying to block the germs and noise. His face goes from white to pink to purple, and I see Juniper move closer to the edge of her seat. She looks at the two women chatting, then back to the old man. Finally, he stops coughing.

Moments later he starts again, and all heads turn away from him and look out the window. The fat lady stops talking to look at him, and I'm relieved, knowing she will finally let him sit in the seat he is entitled to. Instead, she tuts as if he's bothering her and continues her conversation.

Now I straighten up in my seat.

The coughing *is* bothering her. It is bothering everyone on the bus. His loud gasps for breath can't be ignored, and yet they are. Rules state that if anyone aids a Flawed, they will be imprisoned, but not in this case, surely? Are we to watch him struggling right before us?

The coughing stops.

My heart is pounding.

I let go of Art's hand. It feels clammy.

"What's up?"

"Can't you hear that?"

"What?"

"The coughing."

He looks around. "There's no one coughing."

The coughing starts again, and Art doesn't bat an eyelash when he looks at me intimately and says, "You know I can't wait to be somewhere alone. Why don't we miss the first class?"

I can barely hear him over the coughing, over my pounding heart. Does nobody hear the old man? Does nobody see him? I look around, flustered. All eyes are staring out the window or on him in disgust, as if he's about to infect us all with his flaws.

Juniper's eyes are filled with tears. My own flesh and blood agreeing with me is validation enough. I make a move to stand up, and Art's hand suddenly clamps around my arm.

"Don't," he says firmly.

"Ow!" I try to move, but instead his grip feels like a burn. "You're hurting me."

"And do you think when they sear your skin it won't hurt more than this?" He squeezes tighter.

"Art, stop! Ouch!" I feel my skin burning.

He stops.

"How is this fair?" I hiss.

"He has done something wrong, Celestine."

"Like what? Something that's completely legal in another country but that people are prosecuted for here anyway?"

He looks as if I stung him.

"Don't do anything stupid, Celestine," he says, sensing he has lost the argument. "And don't help him," he adds quickly.

"I have no intention of helping him."

How I walk by this coughing, wheezing, struggling-to-breathe old man is beyond me, but I do, seeing the faint *F* scar on his temple as though it has been there a very long time, like it's as much a part of him as the freckles and hair alongside it. I walk straight to the two women in the Flawed seats. They are chatting about making jam, as if nothing is wrong.

“Excuse me,” I say sweetly, offering them the most polite smile I can muster. They respond immediately with their own bright smiles. Two polite, friendly women from the suburbs willing to help me with anything. Almost anything.

“Yes, dear.”

“I was wondering if you could help me.”

“Of course, dear.”

“Could one of you sit in any of the available seats here? Or I could offer you two seats together where my boyfriend and I are sitting so that you can continue your conversation?”

As I look up at Art, all I can see is terror on his face. Funny, I no longer feel it. I like solutions. The problem was disturbing me, and fixing it just made sense. I’m not doing anything wrong; I’m not breaking any laws or rules. I’ve always been complimented on my timing, my perfection. I come from a good home. I have a pleasant manner. the anklet of geometric harmony proves it.

“May I ask why?” the woman with the broken leg asks.

“Well, this man here”—I point to the old man—“is clearly Flawed, and you are in the Flawed seats. He can’t sit down anywhere else. And he is struggling.”

I notice a few faces turn to stare at me when I say that. I expect them to understand when I say that. I expect there to be no further conversation. I even expect the few who have overheard to step in and agree, make sense of the situation. But they don’t. They look confused, some even scared. One man looks amused. This is illogical. this is Juniper’s territory, not mine. I look at her. She has the same face of terror as Art does. She is not mov-

ing. If I ever thought she was going to back me up, I know now that she won't.

"But we're talking," the other woman says.

"And he's choking," I say with the same smile on my face, which I know looks a little psychotic, because we are no longer being polite.

"Are you trying to help him?" the woman with the crutches asks.

"N-n-no," I stutter. "I'm not. I'm trying to help the situation . . .". I flash her a brilliant smile, but she recoils from me.

"I want nothing to do with this," she says loudly, attracting more attention.

"With what?" I laugh nervously. "Your leg is fine. Perhaps if *you* just move to another chair and your friend stays here" . . .

"I'm staying right where I am," she hollers.

Now we have the attention of the entire bus.

The old man, who is beside me, can barely stand. He is bent over coughing. He turns to me, face purple, and tries to talk, but he can't catch his breath.

I don't know what he's trying to say. I don't know what to do. I don't know what medical help to give him. Even if I knew what medical help to provide, I wouldn't be able to give it to him. *Think, think, Celestine. I can't help, but a doctor can.*

"Is there a doctor here?" I call down the bus, and I see Art put his face in his hands.

There's an audible gasp in the bus.

I look around at everyone, the judgmental faces of surprise.

I feel dizzy and confused. This man is going to collapse, maybe die. My eyes start to fill.

“Are we going to just watch this?” I scream.

“Stop it, dear,” a woman says to me in a hushed voice. She is clearly upset about it, too. It’s not just me, but she’s warning me. I’m going too far.

This is completely illogical. Have we no compassion for this human being, Flawed or not, that we won’t help?

Heads look away. Eyes are averted.

“Okay, okay,” I say to the old man, who by now is panicking severely. He continues to cough, and I can see the *F* on his tongue, which makes me recoil slightly. I can’t imagine the pain of receiving it. “It’s okay.”

He punches his chest, starts to fall to his knees.

I pull him up under the arms, and I bring him to the nearest open seat.

“Stop the bus!” I yell.

The bus stops, and I assure the old man everything will be fine.

I look over at Juniper and see that she is crying.

“It’s okay,” I tell her and Art. “It’s going to be fine.” My heart is still pounding. “This has all been so very ridiculous.” My voice is high-pitched and shrill; it doesn’t sound like mine. And then I hear the siren, loud, close, intense, and threatening.

Everybody stays still in their seats, waiting, my heart beating loudly over the silence. Two Whistleblowers climb aboard blowing silver whistles so loudly most people block their ears. They make their way toward me and the old man.

“See? I told you it will be fine,” I tell the man over the noise.
“They’re here. Help is here.”

He nods faintly, his eyes closed. I expect them to go to the old man, who has passed out on the seat, exhausted and taking short breaths, a fine layer of sweat covering his skin. But they don’t go to him. They come for me.

And then they take me away.

Juniper screams at them to leave me alone, held back by Art, who doesn’t look much better. As they hold me under the arms and drag me away by the elbow, Juniper screams, “My sister! My sister!” They lead me down the steps of the bus and into their van, the sound of the whistles ringing in my ears.