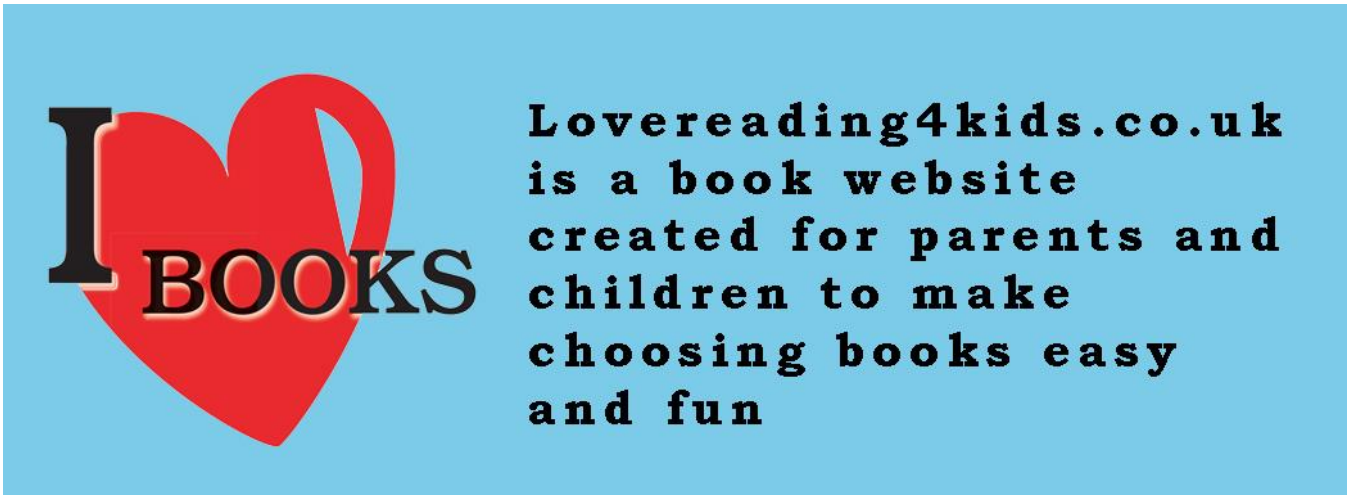


Opening extract from

Flawed

Written by

Cecelia Ahern

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FLAWED

CECELIA AHERN

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Never trust a man who sits, uninvited, at the head of the table in another man's home.

Not my words. The words of my granddad, Cornelius, who, as a result of saying them, landed himself the farthest away from this table, and won't be welcome back anytime soon. It's not necessarily what he said that was the problem; it was the person 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 returns from the kitchen with a fresh bottle of red wine to find his usual place taken. I can see he is put out by it, but as it's Judge Crevan, Dad merely stalls in his tracks, jiggles the wine opener in his hand a bit while thinking about what to do, then works his way around the table to sit beside Mum at the other end, where Judge Crevan should have sat. I can tell Mum 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 blonde locks twisted elaborately into a chignon that only she could do herself, having had to dislocate both shoulders to reach round to the back of her head. Her skin is porcelain, as though she glows, as though she is the purest form of anything. Her make-up is immaculate, her cornflower-blue lace dress a perfect match for her blue eyes, her arms perfectly toned.

In truth, my mum 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 – that like most people she has had help. The only way you can know that Mum 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 pernickety 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. She's not alone. Most people feel exactly as she 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 to one of those talent show judges on TV, an over-exaggerated 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 public inquiry into wrong-doing, 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.

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 be identified by the public and set an example. They are not imprisoned; they haven't done anything illegal, but they *have* carried out acts that are seen as damaging to

society. They still live among us, only ostracised, and under separate rules.

After our country slid 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 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 – blonde hair, blue eyes – and with his messy blonde 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 neighbours 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 neighbour and other dinner guest Bob Tinder is the editor of the Daily News newspaper, both of which are 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 parlour 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," Mum 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 Mum. This has an odd effect on everybody at the table, creates 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," Mum 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 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 then we hear the siren.