



PERFECT

AUTHOR OF **FLAWED**

CECELIA AHERN

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For Yvonne Connolly, the perfect friend

PERFECT: *ideal, model, faultless, flawless, consummate, quintessential, exemplary, best, ultimate;* (of a person) having all the required or desirable elements, qualities, or characteristics; as good as it is possible to be.

PART ONE

ONE

THERE'S THE PERSON who you think you should be and there's the person who you really are. I've lost a sense of both.

TWO

A WEED IS just a flower growing in the wrong place.

They're not my words, they're my granddad's.

He sees the beauty in everything, or perhaps it's more that he thinks things that are unconventional and out of place are more beautiful than anything else. I see this trait in him every day: favoring the old farmhouse instead of the modernized gatehouse, brewing coffee in the ancient cast-iron pot over the open flames of the Aga instead of using the gleaming new espresso machine Mom bought him three birthdays ago that sits untouched, gathering dust, on the countertop. It's not that he's afraid of progress—in fact he is the first person to fight for change—but he likes authenticity, everything in its truest form. Including weeds: He admires their audacity, growing in places they haven't been planted. It is this trait of his that has drawn me to him in my time of need, and why he is putting his own safety on the line to harbor me.

Harbor.

That's the word the Guild has used: *Anybody who is aiding or harboring Celestine North will face severe punishment.* They don't state the punishment, but the Guild's reputation allows us to imagine. The danger of keeping me on his land doesn't appear to scare Granddad; it makes him even more convinced of his duty to protect me.

"A weed is simply a plant that wants to grow where people want something else," he adds now, stooping low to pluck the intruder from the soil with his strong hands.

He has fighting hands, big and thick like shovels, but then in contradiction to that, they're nurturing hands, too. They've sewn and grown, from his own land, and held and protected his own daughter and grandchildren. These hands that could choke a man are the same hands that reared a woman, that have cultivated the land. Maybe the strongest fighters are the nurturers because they're connected to something deep in their core, they've got something to fight for, they've got something worth saving.

Granddad owns one hundred acres, not all strawberry fields like the one we're in now, but he opens this part of the land up to the public in the summer months. Families pay to pick their own strawberries; he says the income helps him to keep things ticking over. He can't stop it this year, not just for monetary reasons but because the Guild will know he's hiding me. They're watching him. He must keep going as he does every year, and I try not to think how it will feel to hear the sounds of children happily plucking and playing, or how much more dangerous it will be with strangers on the land who might unearth me in the process.