

THE CRACKS BETWEEN US

PROLOGUE

Aila wrings her hands tightly as she stares across the mahogany coffee table where the woman with auburn curly hair and soft hips sits with her notebook, waiting for her to answer. She wants her to speak but Aila doesn't know how.

Her mouth is dry and there's a ball of emotion lodged in her throat making it hard to swallow. Her mind races and her fingers shake as she tries to grasp any sense of reality that would explain the world of pain she's caused. Beads of sweat form on her brow—the room suddenly feeling ten degrees warmer. Aila glances sideways at the fireplace across the room, wishing she could put out the fire. Wishing she *had* put out the fire all those months ago.

Instead, she played with it.

The devil handed her a box of matches and asked if she wanted to play. And she did it because it made her feel good. Seen. It kept her warm and made her feel safe. She wanted to light the fire.

She held each match in her hand and studied it. *What's a little flame?* She downplayed it and lit another one. Before she knew it, her entire life was on fire. She orchestrated the dancing flames on her own. She knows she did even if she didn't realize the ashes it would leave in its wake.

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How can she explain that? She doesn't know why she did it. And she certainly doesn't know how to come back from it.

Aila had done a terrible thing to someone she desperately loves.

Now, here she sits on the big brown leather couch in her therapist's office, where her husband sits a world away on the other end, wondering how he got there. How *they* got there.

She clears her throat to see if it will help. It doesn't. She opens her mouth to speak but nothing comes out. She doesn't know where to begin.

"I can see how this must be very difficult for you to talk about, Aila," the woman says, shifting in her chair.

Aila sniffs. "It's...I—I don't know where to begin."

"Well, then why don't we just start at the beginning?"

The beginning. The first hello. The first choice. The first touch. The first kiss. All the lines crossed after.

Aila glances at her husband, his eyes avoiding hers, and then stares at the therapist for a long, pondering moment.

The beginning.

"Which one?"