



BENEATH

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PROLOGUE



She was going to vomit.

Stella Gullaksen looped her arm through the tuna tower ladder. The LED spotlights cut through the storm, revealing a pool of seawater on the cockpit floor of the sport fishing boat. The brine was creeping up to her calves now. Across from her, Col, her best friend's brother, wrapped a rope around his arm like a boa constrictor. Dark hair was pasted to his forehead and his eyes were lost in the night, but the bright red coil in his free hand was visible enough. He nodded at her and tossed it.

Stella clawed at the darkness, squinting against the blinding fusion of rain and saltwater. The rope unraveled, winding through the water, eluding her grappling hand. Finally, she latched onto it and read his encouraging nod to secure it around herself. Trembling fingers attempted the task, but another black wave smashed into the hull, cascading against her hip and nearly tossing her over. She clung to the aluminum rigging.

This was to have been a weekend fishing jaunt, a last respite before her freshman year in college. Stella's best friend, Jill Wexler, was also a

freshman at the same college. They met each other as freshmen in high school when Stella moved to Monmouth County from Pennsylvania. They were polar opposites in personality, but somehow it worked, and they had been attached at the hip since.

Jill's parents owned the STARKISSED, a 32' Topaz Express saltwater fishing boat. It was a tight squeeze to fit Donald and Anne Wexler, their eighteen-year-old daughter, Jill, their twenty-year-old son, Colin, along with Stella. It was only for a night, though. It took too long to reach the New Jersey underwater canyons, where yellowfin tuna fishing was at its best. They had to spend the night out at sea and were due back into port late tomorrow evening.

Inside the cockpit she saw Don Wexler hunched over the steering wheel, smacking the radar display. His curses were loud enough to carry over the maelstrom.

"I checked with the Coast Guard. I checked the satellite. The weather was clear!"

The defense seemed lame given their current predicament. Did it matter what the weather report claimed? They were over a hundred miles off the coast of New Jersey in the center of a mean tropical storm. The fact that it was the middle of the night was just a cruel bonus.

Stella cast a frantic look at the cabin hatch now submerged under several inches of water. Jill was down there, along with her mother. Only a few moments ago Stella had been with them. When the storm struck, her stomach was the first to protest.

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She rushed up to the cockpit in search of air, and instead, emerged into chaos.

The hatch burst open and the blonde head of Anne Wexler cracked through. She held her hand over her eyes to shield against nature's assault. Water poured into the cabin. The blonde head disappeared, replaced by Jill's tawny ponytail. She tripped up the small staircase and crawled through the pooling water until her brother's arm latched onto her. Anne's head reappeared as she climbed out of the cabin, hauling an armful of life vests. To Stella's horror, Don hollered out something to the effect of, *it's too late*.

Another wave came. This one taller than the fourteen-foot tuna tower. It struck with the force of a speeding tractor trailer.

Stella no longer dwelled on her nausea. She was the first to enter the sea as the STARKISSED slapped onto its side, surrendering to the force of the breaker.

Stella surfaced, reaching for the slick hull. It was nearly inverted now, and she kicked back away from it, afraid it might drag her down.

An eerie glow from the submerged lights wrapped around her legs. She watched in horrified fascination as they twitched frantically.

"Help!" she choked.

Saltwater slapped her in the face. There was no sound other than the angry stream of the ocean.

"Jill? Mr. Wexler?"

She coughed and tried to blink the sting of salt from her eyes. The storm had come on so

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suddenly that no one had time to put on their life vests. As the lights from the boat faded into the depths, Stella took stock of her grim predicament. She was in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, being pummeled by a rogue gale with only the waning strength in her muscles to keep her afloat.

Before the notion of her demise even formed, another shadowy wave towered above. It seemed to labor, toying with its prey before it drilled down upon her.

Under its force, Stella plunged down—down—down—into the obscurity beneath.