

## Chapter Two

### Welcome to the UnderLife

The sound of waves crashing on a shore filled August's ears. She opened her eyes to blindingly bright blue sky. Bewildered and a bit panicked, August quickly sat up. She found herself at a beach she did not recognize, sitting on a green plaid blanket with Morgan. They looked at each other in mutual shock.

August scrambled to her feet, hand instinctively going to her gun, but it wasn't there. She was no longer dressed in her Anne Klein heavily shoulder padded power suit, but instead in a purple patterned one piece swim suit. August checked her body for wounds, marks, or abrasions. Maybe she had been drugged and taken here? No, there didn't seem to be any evidence on her person of an attack or rough handling.

One second they were at the greenhouse studio in the Martel home and the next, a beach? Wearing completely different clothes? What the hell is going on?

Getting her bearings, August scanned the area around them. The strip of land they were nestled on sat in front of a fifty foot cliff face which formed a crescent alcove for this secluded beach. The tree topped cliff's edge obscured the view of any landscape beyond the rocky screen. A warm palette of colors saturated everything as the sun headed towards the horizon in front of them.

Morgan's eyes were transfixed on her. She was wearing a blue tank top with matching shorts. August knelt down and did a cursory examination of Morgan's physical state. The girl seemed perfectly fine.

"Morgan, what happened?"

"You can see me?"

"What? Yes, of course. What happened? Where is your Dad?"

"You can do it too?"

"Do what? Where are we? How did we get here? Who brought us here?"

Morgan shrugged and uttered a gasp of delight when she looked down at their blanket. The girl gleefully fell back. She stretched out on its surface, took the edge of it, and rolled herself into the blanket like she was wrapping herself into a cocoon.

August had a moment of utter confusion at Morgan's behavior and then it struck her. Their green plaid blanket looked like a much larger, whole version of Morgan's precious Blankie. She patted Morgan's side to get her attention. The kid giggled in response.

"Huh," August grunted as she realized that little revelation did nothing to solve any of the overall, 'Where are we?' and 'How did we get here?' questions.

Well, at least it was a gorgeous day, wherever they were. She knew they should probably be searching for someone who could illuminate them with

knowledge of their geographical location. However, August was so stunned by their sudden arrival that she felt no immediate impulse to explore their surroundings.

Between the bright sunlight and cool breeze playing through her hair, this place was positively relaxing. August warily sat back down onto her side of Blankie, while contemplating their next move.

At about thirty yards away, the ocean was busy doing its perpetual courtship with the earth. She figured it must be at the lowest tide since most of the beach in front of them had a hard packed, I'm-underwater-most-of-the-time look to it. An abundance of sea shells and driftwood were haphazardly strewn about like hastily discarded clothing.

High or low tide, the muddy ritual never changed. A wave crashed in, the water surged upon the terra firma and commenced with its slippery dance with the sand before enticing it back to its watery domain. Then, the elemental lovers parted. Only to be reunited moments later with the next wave.

Before there could be any more poetic waxing about nature or speculations as to the how and why of their sudden trip to the beach, a loud siren cried out in alarm. Startled, August sat up. The piercing wail was coming from further down the beach. Its exact source was obscured by the cliffs. The siren persisted for five full seconds, and then ceased, the remnant sounds echoing around them. August examined their section of the beach for other people, to no avail. They seemed to be alone.

August peered into the ocean's horizon and a woeful, "Holy shit," escaped her lips. The awesome horror of a rapidly approaching set of tsunami sized tidal waves could be seen miles out off shore.

August's jaw gaped open. Not only did they seemingly just teleport to some God-only-knows-where sunny beach, but now she needed to absorb the fact that about a million gallons of salt water was on its way to drown them if they stayed where they were. August turned to look at the only familiar thing there. Surprisingly, Morgan smiled up at her and reached over to take August's right hand in both of hers. Then, the little girl turned to face the oceanic attack and calmly said, "I don't know how to swim."

August's extensive survival training quickly took over. She jumped up and pulled Morgan to her feet. "Run!" she ordered. Morgan complied, and they took off down the beach. Somehow they needed to get around the rock wall. It would be their deaths if they waited for the imminent deluge to dash them against it.

Morgan did her best to keep up with August, but in her haste, tripped and fell into the sand. August stopped to help her up then in one fluid motion threw Morgan's small body over her right shoulder.

Morgan gave a yelp of surprise as she was unceremoniously tossed around

like a sack of potatoes. Her protests stopped there. The girl did her best to hold on to August without impeding her movement or hurting her by gripping too tightly on her skin. Morgan was astonished the pretty lady was there with her, and grateful she was trying to help. Morgan didn't know why the ocean was attacking them and wished her mother was there to hold her.

August could finally see the wisdom of all the grueling months of survival training she recently endured. She barreled over the sand with the high pace and ease of a professional athlete. Despite the added seventy pounds of cargo, she was moving quickly. Her mind whirled trying to figure out where they could go to survive the devastating wall of water which would envelop the shore any minute now.

They desperately needed to get to higher ground and were rapidly running out of time. August's muscles got that familiar burn as they started to get close to clearing the rock wall. The adrenaline was helping the weighted down full sprint she was managing to maintain, although she knew it was a temporary boost. She prayed there would be some kind of building or easy access to higher ground once they circumvented the earthen obstacle.

Her heart leapt when she saw a one story building about two hundred yards in the distance. Getting to that roof was their best hope for refuge. August pushed harder. Her limbs and lungs protested with pain as she strained to get them to safety. Luckily her cargo was doing her absolute best to mold herself to August's body, making it easier for them to move together.

The water heading towards them roared in its frothy fury. August knew in her gut they would not be able to make it to the building in time. She scanned for something else which could possibly be used to help them. A cluster of about a half a dozen oak trees stood about forty yards away. The largest of the bunch was about fifty feet tall. August thought it might hold up through at least the first wave. She risked a glance over her shoulder and knew there were no other options.

After twenty more yards, the sand gave way to more hardened earth. Panting, August swung Morgan down to her feet and with a gasp said, "Morgan, the trees!"

The last twenty yards, which the girl ran like a little champ, gave August a chance to recover her upper body strength. Once they reached the largest tree, Morgan turned to August, putting her arms up in the air for a boost. August, impressed by how cooperative and coordinated this kid was, grabbed her, and harnessed her full strength to get Morgan as high up as she could. Morgan's feet planted themselves on August's shoulders. Morgan clutched at the lowest branch. She tried to pull herself up, yet was unsuccessful.

August used Morgan's effort as an opportunity to change her grip on the girl's body and get her hands underneath her feet. Morgan's skinny legs

wobbled, stabilizing when she got more accustomed to the support. The extra inches got Morgan high enough to get a full arm, and then leg over the branch.

August inhaled sharply as cool water washed over her feet. She crouched and jumped as high as she could. Her hand caught the base of the branch Morgan was sitting on. It shook violently forcing the girl to cling to it and hold on for dear life. As the wobbling subsided, Morgan was horrifically mesmerized at the sight of the water rising steadily on the trunk below.

The branch would not hold both of them, so August used it to get her legs wrapped around the tree so her bare feet could search for a place to grip. Her right big toe found a knobby perch. She took a few, deep steadying breaths then looked up to find the proper path of perches needed to climb this mighty oak.

On the other side of the tree there was another branch. August considered it, but realized getting to it was a precarious endeavor at best. She needed to find another way, quickly.

August winced, she felt her left middle fingernail break when she jammed her hand into a make shift hold on the bark of the tree. Gritting her teeth through the pain, she got a foothold and kicked off, clutching at another branch a couple of feet up from where Morgan was on the opposite side of the tree. August dangled from her left arm before getting her right hand on the branch above. Then, she did a gymnast kip maneuver which gave her enough momentum to get a leg swung onto the branch. She labored for breath, wrestling her body onto the bough.

The tree groaned and creaked as the now five foot deep flood of water bullied the base of the mighty oak. The sound of leaves rustling violently could be heard over the liquid roar accompanying the waves. The water line continued to rise dangerously fast.

“Are you okay, Morgan?”

“I’m scared.”

“Me too sweetie... Hey, can you see me?”

August observed Morgan’s knuckles go white as she gripped her branch more tightly. At first her fear soaked body was completely unwilling to honor the commands from her brain. It took a considerable amount of strain and effort to force her head to turn and look up at August diagonally.

“Yes.”

“Okay, we need to get you up here. Can you stand up near the base of your branch?”

Morgan’s stomach somersaulted at this idea, and she was forced to look away from August. Her body was facing away from the tree. The landscape had liquefied, and she felt enormously dizzy. The adrenaline brimming within her was so intense her limbs didn’t feel attached to her body. “I don’t know

how to. I'll fall."

"Listen to me, Morgan. We are going to do this step by step. Take a deep breath, and let it out slowly."

"Um, okay."

"Now, when you are ready, scoot your body backwards until you can feel the trunk of the tree behind you."

Sweat dripped off of August's face while she fearfully watched Morgan gather her energy to move. She desperately wanted to yell at her to hurry up, they had no time to wait, but she was afraid to startle the girl. August hazarded a look to the ocean, and every ounce of moisture evaporated in her throat. What they had endured was the least of what was coming. They only had a handful of minutes before the next one hit, and it promised to be bigger than the first.

"C'mon, Morgan, you can do this."

Finally, the girl gained control over her extremities and was able to get herself to the base of the tree.

"Good job, honey. Now, I need you to sit up with your legs on either side of branch, like you are on a horse." Nervously, Morgan pushed herself up to a sitting position and let her feet dangle.

"Great, you are doing so well Morgan. Okay, turn yourself around until you are facing the tree." Morgan twisted her torso to the left and hugged the tree.

"Yes. Carefully, swing your right leg over the branch. Keep holding on to the tree and breathe. Get your left foot up on the branch, then your right one. Awesome, Morgan! You're almost there. One more deep breath and stand up."

Morgan slowly stood, scraping her body across the bark. The groaning sways of the tree did not help the process any, nor did the shaking that had developed in her hands. She shimmied to a standing position.

While waiting for Morgan, August straddled her bough, facing the trunk of the tree.

White froth crested the peak of the second wave, its momentum building, greedily gobbling up everything in its path, eager to obliterate the earth.

"Morgan, reach for my hand. We're going to swing you up here." August leaned over, covering as much distance as she could between them while still retaining her balance. Morgan reached her small hand up, got on her tip-toes, and stretched out to meet August.

Their fingers grazed at first then finally grasped each other at the exact moment when the second wave hit. The whole tree rocked hard, bending to absorb the watery onslaught. Morgan slipped off. Despite her best efforts, August did not quite have the hold she needed to keep Morgan aloft. August

watched as Morgan's eyes filled with terror and she plummeted into the dark waves below.

"Nooo...!" August howled. She swung her leg over the branch then shoved herself off of it, landing about five feet away from where Morgan slipped in. August reminded herself, as she fell, to bend her knees once her feet touched the water in order to dampen the blow of hitting the ground beneath. The water broke her fall a bit, but she still came down hard on the packed earth, and the force of the landing knocked most of the air out of her.

Morgan broke the surface before August did, both with their limbs flailing about, coughing as they gulped fresh air into their lungs.

They grasped and held on to each other tightly. The swiftly strengthening current had already swept them past their tree. They could fight to get back to it, but August did not think they would be any more successful with a second attempt at ascending it than the first.

A smaller tree in the grove, near to the one they were perched on, did not handle the second wave as well as its companions, and a loud snap emanated from it as the trunk split. The bulk of the leafy mass came down right on top of where the water had taken them.

August enveloped Morgan's body with her own to protect her. She grunted, taking the brunt of the hit on her back from a leafy whip branch from the upper canopy. It left a superficial gash across her shoulder blades which burned with pain. August's strong will forced her mind to ignore her body's complaints in order to check and see how Morgan had fared.

The fallen tree's branches had dug into the earth beneath, creating an anchor point as well as a temporary barrier from the tidal onslaught. Despite its attack on her, August moved closer to the tree rather than farther away, hoping it could offer a safer place on top of its trunk.

"Morgan, are you okay?"

"I- I think so." Her eyes welled up with tears, and she hugged August while they floated there. August had one arm around Morgan, and was holding onto the fallen tree with the other. She patted Morgan's body down, finding no wounds or breaks. Although Morgan was very shaken up, it did not seem like she had gone into shock from internal injuries.

August's feet sunk into the drenched earth, and she suddenly became aware of how vulnerable her bare legs felt submersed in the muddy cauldron. Some unknown object scraped against her left calf as if in response to her paranoia. This spurred her back into action. After some watery branch negotiation which was a labyrinth in logistics, August got Morgan onto the trunk of the tree.

Meanwhile, while they were busy climbing onto their makeshift raft, another oak near them succumbed in its battle with the ocean and started to

fall. Creaking turned into groaning, escalating into loud snapping, and finally a thunderous collapse as the massive influx of water overpowered another of nature's leafy sentinels. August was so focused on getting the girl to a modicum of safety that it made her completely unaware of the third oak's demise.

August climbed to join Morgan as a harpoon shaped branch javelined towards them from the newly fallen oak. There was a sickening crunch as the sharp wood collided with the back of August's head. A gasp of air escaped her lungs before her mouth went slack, her azure eyes glazed over, and her face pitched forward into the water. Morgan saw large splinters penetrating the back of August's skull. Blood oozed everywhere as her limp body sunk underneath the murky water.

Morgan screamed.