

CHAPTER 9



AROUND 10:15 A.M.
THE BEACH IN FRONT OF THE
PAGODA BATHHOUSE

There was a big overflow, even bigger than the one that he and Sarah had played in a few days ago. People were lined up on the sidewalk on the edge of the water. Excited voices rose up over the thundering roar of the waves.

“Look at those huge rollers!” a man shouted, pointing at the waves.

“Incredible!” cried a woman.

“Mama!” a little boy squealed. “Take me closer!”

Each wave towered up — as tall as Charlie’s house — and then crashed down.

Ba-ROOM!

Ba-ROOM!

Ba-ROOM!

Kids weren’t splashing and floating in the street like last time. Today’s big game was to stand on the flooded beach, wait for the waves to rise up, and sprint away before a wave could crash down over you. Lots of kids were doing this, shrieking and laughing as they ran back and forth. A few bigger kids were at least half-way down the beach.

It looked fun — but Charlie had to admit that the waves scared him a little. The entire Gulf looked different — churning, foaming, furious.

He thought of Lulu’s cloud monster. And what Sarah had said about how people once blamed storms on angry gods and goddesses.

Watching the crashing sea, it was easy for Charlie to imagine Poseidon standing above on a

cloud, his long beard whipping in the wind, raising his arms to create each wave.

Ba-ROOM!

Ba-ROOM!

Ba-ROOM!

Charlie's stomach did a flip. Poseidon seemed *very* angry.

But no one else seemed worried. The whoops and claps of the excited crowd got louder with each enormous wave.

Charlie felt almost hypnotized by the waves — until he spotted a tall, beefy kid in the middle of the beach, one of the risk-takers closer to the Gulf. Even from the back, Charlie could tell his chest was puffed out.

Gordon.

Before he could lose his nerve, Charlie reached into his pocket. He plucked a cockroach from the box. He tucked the insect into his palm, locking it into place like he'd practiced. His hand was shaking — bad.

He waited for a lull between the waves — the big ones came every two minutes or so — then

he took his chance. His knees wobbled as he waded onto the beach, where the water came up to his thighs.

The wind pushed against his back like an invisible hand.

Go. Go. Go.

Before he knew it, he was standing behind Gordon Potts. He took a breath and tapped Gordon on the shoulder. Gordon looked at Charlie with surprise, and then his usual sneer.

“What do you want, twerp?” He practically spat the question.

Charlie opened his mouth. But the words he’d practiced were all gummed up on his tongue.

“Did you know . . . ?” His voice was high and squeaky. “An ancient trick . . . cockroaches . . .”

Charlie’s hand was suddenly slick with sweat. The cockroach slipped out and plopped into the water.

He looked up at Gordon, who seemed ready to pounce.

What had Charlie been thinking? He needed to get out of here. Now!

Some kids around them had the same idea. Most were laughing, but a few were shouting.

“Look out!”

“It’s a big one!”

And then the sky seemed to disappear above Charlie as a giant wave towered up, bigger than any that had come before. It rose higher, higher, higher . . .

Charlie and Gordon turned to run. But this wave was too fast and too big. Charlie barely had enough time to take a breath before the wall of water curled over and swallowed him up.

CHAPTER 10



The churning, gritty water was everywhere at once — over Charlie, under Charlie, up his nose, down his throat. The salt water stung his cut lip.

Luckily the twisting ride didn't last long. The wave spat him off the beach. He rolled. He stopped just before he smacked into the edge of the raised sidewalk. He pulled himself up, amazed he wasn't hurt. He'd torn the knee of his trousers, but that was it.

Three younger kids had also been swept here by the wave.

“Let's do that again!” screamed the littlest one,

and they all took off back toward the beach.

Charlie glanced nervously around — scanning for Gordon. But he didn't spot him. Hopefully the wave had carried him all the way to Hawaii.

But no. Gordon had to be somewhere close. A sickening feeling swirled in his stomach. He had to get out of here before Gordon found him.

But first he had to catch his breath. Charlie climbed up onto the sidewalk and stood behind three young men. All around him, people were still cheering as the waves crashed down. These men screamed and clapped at each wave like they were at a baseball game.

But then an angry shout interrupted them.

“What are you laughing at?”

Charlie turned as an old man in a green hat hobbled toward them. Charlie was surprised to see it was Mr. Early, Grandpa's friend. He didn't seem to notice Charlie.

“This is a hurricane!” he scolded the men.

The word — *hurricane*. It jarred Charlie, as if Mr. Early had cursed.

The four men eyed one another.

“Don’t worry, sir,” said the loudest of the group. “Hurricanes can’t hit us here in Galveston.” He was talking to Mr. Early as if the old man were a toddler like Lulu.

“That’s dead wrong!” Mr. Early growled. He frowned, as if he’d argued about this before. “A hurricane nearly destroyed the whole island in 1837. That was before Galveston was even a city. But I was here back then. I was right here, and I remember it.”

He looked off into the distance.

“The wind tore houses apart. Water was everywhere, even where it had never gone before. And then the sea suddenly rose up, swallowed the entire island. So many lost . . .”

Mr. Early’s voice trailed off. A strong gust of wind lifted his hat off his head, but the old man didn’t notice. He seemed like he was far away from here in his mind. Charlie reached up and snatched the hat from the air before it blew away.

The men eyed Mr. Early impatiently — he’d

interrupted their fun. The loud man signaled to his two buddies, and they moved farther down the sidewalk.

Mr. Early didn't notice that, either.

"That tree — that's how I got through. I climbed up. Somehow I managed to hang on until the sun came up. And when the storm was done, there was nothing left. Nothing at all."

He stood there, staring at the waves, his thin white hair blowing in the wind.

Charlie waited until he was sure Mr. Early was done with his story.

"Mr. Early," Charlie said finally, speaking up over the gusts. "Here's your hat."

Mr. Early looked surprised. He took his hat, put it on, and smiled at Charlie.

"Do I know you, son?"

Charlie didn't know what to say. Of course Charlie knew him. Charlie had joined him and Grandpa on a few fishing trips. But then Charlie understood — Mr. Early's memory must be slipping away from him. The same had happened to Grandpa before he passed away.

I should help him get home, Charlie thought. But then Mr. Early tipped his hat and hobbled away. And before Charlie could go after him, a chorus of gasps rose up from the crowd.

“The Pagoda!” a woman shouted.

Charlie whipped around and stared out at the Pagoda . . . or what was left of it. Waves were attacking the building, clawing it, ripping it to pieces. The roof cracked apart. The long walkway twisted and split in two.

Charlie remembered once seeing a pack of dogs fighting over the body of a squirrel. The terrible snarls and growls. The swiping claws and bared teeth. The hunks of fur that flew through the air.

That’s what the ocean looked like now — a pack of wild beasts, devouring a carcass. Soon nothing would be left of the Pagoda but its scattered bones.

A chill slowly rose through Charlie’s body.

Mr. Early’s story . . . could it be true?

The cheering had stopped, and it had started to rain.

The wind gusted even harder.

Whoosh!

A wave crashed.

Ba-ROOM.

Mr. Cline said that it was impossible for a hurricane to hit Galveston. But Mr. Early said he'd lived through one. Charlie suddenly didn't know what to think.

He turned and ran.

He had to get home, now.