

# I SURVIVED

THE JAPANESE  
TSUNAMI, 2011

by Lauren  
Tarshis

 SCHOLASTIC

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THE JAPANESE  
TSUNAMI, 2011



by Lauren Tarshis  
illustrated by Scott Dawson

Scholastic Inc.



TO YUKI, JOSH, AKI, AND MAYA BOFINGER

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# CHAPTER 1



MARCH 11, 2011

2:46 P.M.

SHOGAHAMA, JAPAN

At first, the wave was tiny.

It was just a ripple in the huge Pacific Ocean.

But it moved quickly, faster than a jet.

And as it got closer to Japan's coast, it got bigger. It grew and grew, until it was a monstrous wall of water, dozens of feet high, hundreds of miles long. It destroyed everything in its path.

The wave smashed into crowded cities, knocking down buildings, swallowing factories, chewing up highways and bridges. It washed away beautiful villages, flattening pine forests and turning rice fields into seas of mud and garbage. In quiet fishing towns, boats tumbled like dice into the streets, smashing into shops and homes.

Eleven-year-old Ben Kudo saw the wave coming as he stood on a street in the tiny village of Shogahama. At first, it looked to him as if a cloud of smoke was rising up over the ocean.

Was it a ship on fire?

But then a siren blared.

Terrified voices shouted out.

Ben didn't speak Japanese. But he understood one word.

*Tsunami!*

Seconds later, the huge, foaming black wave crashed into the shore.

Ben and his family thought they could race away from the wave in a car. But the water caught them. And suddenly, Ben was all by himself. The wave grabbed Ben and sucked him under. The churning water twisted him, tore at him, spun him around like a bird caught in a tornado.

Terror screamed through his body.



He was drowning!

He fought with all his might, but the water wouldn't let him go. It was as though he was in the jaws of a ferocious monster.

And there was no escape.

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# CHAPTER 2



7:45 A.M. THAT MORNING  
SHOGAHAMA, JAPAN

The score was tied with ten seconds to go. Ben grabbed the ball and dribbled down the court. He zigzagged around guys who seemed ten feet tall. The crowd cheered. As usual, Dad's voice rose up above the rest.

*"You can do it, Ben!"*

The clock was counting down —

4, 3, 2 ...

Ben shot the ball.

It sailed for the basket and hung in the air....

Ben's eyes flew open.

He sat straight up in bed, drenched with sweat, breathing hard. It took him a few seconds to remember that he wasn't at home in California. He was at his uncle's house, in the tiny village of Shogahama, Japan.

His five-year-old brother, Harry, had been asleep next to Ben. Now Harry was up, too.

"Scary dream?" Harry asked, putting a little hand on Ben's clammy back.

Ben shrugged off Harry's hand.

"Not too bad," Ben said, careful to keep his voice from shaking.

He never wanted Harry to know that he felt sad or scared.

And besides, a dream about Dad was never a bad dream.

It was waking up that was torture — remembering all over again that Dad was gone. He had died four months ago, in a car accident near the California air force base where they lived. Dad had been an F-16 pilot for the U.S. Air Force. He'd flown dangerous missions all over the world. And he'd died on a California highway, on his way home from picking up a box of doughnuts for Ben and Harry.

A few months before the accident, Dad had announced a big surprise: a family trip to

Shogahama, the fishing village in Japan where Dad had lived until he was ten. They would go in March, during Ben's school vacation. They would stay with Dad's Uncle Tomeo; they all called him *Ojisan*, the Japanese word for uncle.

Ben had always dreamed of visiting Shogahama. Ojisan was more like a grandfather to him than a far-away uncle. He'd come to visit them in California several times over the years. Ben had heard so many stories about Dad's life growing up in the village. He couldn't wait to see it for himself.

But not without Dad.

Ben couldn't believe it when his mom announced they were still taking the trip. He'd begged her to cancel, but Mom never changed her mind. "Don't be tricked by that sweet smile," Dad used to say. Mom had been in the air force, too, before she had Ben.

"She's tougher than all of us," Dad always said with a proud smile.

Mom wanted to go to Shogahama. And so here they were.

Harry got out of bed, his Darth Vader pajamas drooping on his bony shoulders. Ojisan's cat, Nya, was asleep at the foot of the mattress. Harry scooped her up. The cat had to be a hundred years old, her black fur rubbed away in places. She was small and scrawny with a crooked tail that looked like the letter z. Instead of saying, "meow," she had a shriek that hurt Ben's ears.

"*Eee! Eee!*"

Ben wished Harry would ignore the cat so she would leave them alone. But Harry had decided that Nya was a Jedi cat, Darth Vader's special assistant. And somehow the old cat didn't mind being dragged around the house as Harry played his Star Wars games, chasing invisible enemies with his lightsaber.

Now Harry rubbed his cheek against Nya's head and looked at Ben with his bright eyes.

"Will you help me climb the tree after breakfast?" he asked. "I need to make my wish."

Not that again.

One of the stories Dad told about Shogahama was that the cherry trees were magic. If you climbed to the top of a tree, Dad said, you could make a wish.

Ben knew Dad was just telling fairy tales. But Harry believed in everything. For the whole week Harry had been eyeing the cherry tree in Ojisan's small front yard, waiting for the rain to stop so he could climb to the top. Now the sky was bright blue, and Harry was ready.

"You know what I'm going to wish for?" Harry said, leaning in close. His coppery eyes sparkled. "I'm going to wish for Daddy to come back to us."

The words hit Ben right in the throat.

"Harry," he said sharply. "You know Dad is gone, and you can't bring him back."

Tears sprang into Harry's eyes.

"You'll see!" he cried, turning and running out of the room with Nya tight in his arms.

Suddenly Ben was crying, too.

He stood up quickly, angrily wiping away his tears as he pulled himself together.

Ben had to be tough, like Dad.

During Dad's last tour in Afghanistan, when Ben was a baby, the engine of Dad's F-16 exploded. He had to eject from the plane over enemy territory. He broke his ankle when he parachuted down. B

he still managed to escape into the mountains before enemy fighters found him. For six days, he'd hidden in a cave, until he was finally rescued by a helicopter filled with U.S. Marines.

Ben could picture Dad, standing in the darkness with steely eyes, never once stopping to moan or cry.

And that's how Ben was determined to be.

He went to find Harry. He guessed there was no harm in helping him climb a tree.

But Ben was too late.

He was walking toward the kitchen door when he heard Harry scream.

He ran outside, and there was his little brother, lying in a heap under the cherry tree.

He was covered in blood.



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# CHAPTER 3



Ben stood between Mom and Ojisan as the doctor looked Harry over. Ben's stomach was still twisted in knots from the sight of Harry lying on the ground. The little guy looked terrible — a blood-crusted nose and a big gash on his arm.

But as battered as he looked, he wasn't so badly hurt. It seemed that the branches of the tree had slowed Harry's fall before he hit the dirt, and that the ground was soft from all the rain. The doctor — his name was Dr. Sato — checked Harry over very carefully. When he was finished, he put his hand on Harry's head.

"You must be made of rubber, Harry," he said in perfect English. "Did you bounce when you hit the ground?"

"I think so!" Harry exclaimed.

This made them all laugh, even Ben. The sound that came out of his mouth surprised him, it hadn't been so long since he'd heard it.

"I just need to fix up that little cut on your arm," Dr. Sato said. "It will just take a few stitches."

*Uh-oh.*

"Nooooo!" screamed Harry.

Show Harry a cobra and he'd smile and reach out to pet it. But the tiniest needle sent him into fits of total panic.

Dr. Sato wasn't going to get anywhere near Harry, Ben was sure.

Except it turned out Dr. Sato was a genius.

"Mrs. Kudo," Dr. Sato said to Mom, raising his voice above Harry's screams. "Is it true that Darth Vader has a scar on his arm?"

Harry stopped crying.

"Yes," Mom said, putting on a serious face. "Isn't that right, Ben?"

"Totally," Ben answered, trying not to smile. "He got it in a lightsaber fight."

They all looked at Harry, who finally took a deep, hiccupping breath.

"Can I get a scar?" he asked softly.

“If you sit perfectly still while I do the stitches,” Dr. Sato said.

Harry held out his arm to the doctor.

“Go ahead.” He sniffed bravely.

Forty-five minutes later, Harry admired his sewn-up cut as if it was the best birthday present ever. They all said good-bye to Dr. Sato.

They piled into Ojisan’s little car and headed back to Shogahama. The road was narrow, and curved around high rocky cliffs. Out one window, Pacific waves crashed against a wall of craggy rocks. On the other side, the view stretched across rice fields to the mountains, which towered up to the clear blue sky.

“Daddy was right,” Mom said. “I think this is the most beautiful place on Earth.”

“You should stay longer,” Ojisan said.



“I want to!” Harry shouted.

Not Ben. He was glad they were leaving in two days.

He’d miss Ojisan. But being here had turned Ben all soft. He’d been dreaming about Dad every night, thinking about him all the time.

Back home, Ben managed to keep his mind clear.

It wasn’t easy. He’d given up basketball, even quitting the travel team he’d worked so hard to make. Hoops had been *their* game — Ben and Dad’s. After the accident, just the sound of a bouncing ball would hit Ben in the chest like a bullet.

He’d cleaned out his room so there were no more pictures of Dad. He’d ripped down the F-16 poster that had hung over his bed. When Mom knocked on his locked door, Ben said he was doing homework. When Harry wanted to play, Ben told him to go away.

Sometimes it seemed that Ben had turned his room into a cave, a dark space like where Dad hid after he was shot down in Afghanistan. Yeah, it was lonely in there sometimes.

But at least in his cave, Ben felt safe.

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# CHAPTER 4



2:40 P.M.

Harry was exhausted from the trip to the hospital. Mom helped him change out of his blood-spattered pajamas and tucked him into bed. A minute later he was asleep, with Nya curled up on his stomach.

Ben was in the kitchen pouring some juice when Ojisan came in.

“How about a walk?” he said quietly.

“No thanks, Ojisan,” Ben said with a tinge of guilt. “I’m kind of tired, too.”

Every day they’d been here, Ojisan had invited Ben to go exploring. And every day, Ben had thought of an excuse. Ben didn’t want to see the pine forest where Dad used to play hide-and-seek, or the marina where Dad learned to fish. He didn’t want to hear any of Ojisan’s stories about Dad.

Ben slinked out of the kitchen, avoiding Ojisan’s eyes.

He’d just stepped into the bedroom when Harry suddenly sat up.

Harry had a dreamy look on his face. Ben wondered if he was fully awake.

“You know,” he said softly, “I made it to the tippy top.”

“Top of what?” Ben asked, sitting down next to Harry.

“The cherry tree,” Harry answered. “Before I fell down, I made the wish, Ben. I made the wish!”

His eyes were glowing.

Before Ben could say anything, Nya suddenly jumped up and yowled. She stood there with her fur standing straight up, then started pushing against Harry’s arm with her nose. It looked as if she wanted to roll Harry off the bed.

Was the old cat going totally bonkers?

And then there was a strange sound, a very deep rumbling.

The glass of water on the dresser jiggled.

At first, Ben thought it was fighter jets passing overhead, like at home when a squadron returned to the base.

But the rumbling got louder and louder, and the bed began to shake.

“Ben!” Harry cried. “What is it?”

---

Dread rose up in Ben.

Ojisan shouted from somewhere across the house.

“Ben! Harry! *Dishin! Dishin!*”

Ben didn’t need to understand Japanese to know what Ojisan was saying.

*Earthquake!*

The shaking got stronger and stronger until Ben and Harry were bouncing up and down on the bed.

Ben gripped Harry as hard as he could so they wouldn’t fall off.

It was as though they were rafting on a wild river.

*Thud!*

The dresser tipped over.

*Smash!*

The lamp hit the floor, its lightbulb exploding with a shattering *pop*.

“*EEEEEE!*” screeched Nya.

But above all the other sounds was a thundering roar, like the earth itself was screaming with fury. The sound hammered into Ben’s ears and pounded his brain.

“Make it stop!” screamed Harry.

But there was no stopping it. Ben didn’t know that earthquakes could last so long. The ground in California shook all the time. But never for more than a few seconds. And never like this! Ben suddenly remembered that more earthquakes happen in Japan than practically anywhere else on Earth, even California. In Science, they learned about the earthquake that destroyed Tokyo in the 1920s, and another one in the city of Kobe, in the 1990s.

How could he have forgotten all that?

They’d also learned how skyscrapers in Japan were built to survive strong earthquakes. The tall buildings here were made to sway, like blades of grass on a windy day.

But the buildings around here looked old. Ojisan’s house was made of wood and plaster. Like all the houses here, the roof was covered with red clay tiles.

Could Ojisan’s house survive an earthquake like this?

The answer came with a *BOOM* that rose up above the other noises.

“Ben, look!” Harry cried, pointing up.

A huge crack had appeared in the ceiling. It got bigger and bigger.

Any second, the ceiling would collapse.

They had to get out of here!



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# CHAPTER 5



Ben grabbed Harry. He crawled across the floor toward the door, dragging Harry along with him. He pushed against the door. But it was stuck. It was wedged against the cracked, broken floor.

Now what? They were trapped!

Panic churned Ben's insides. They couldn't stay here! But where could they go? His body was frozen. His heart pounded. His mind swirled so that it was impossible to think.

Was this how Dad had felt, when he knew his F-16 was going to crash?

Dad had only recently told Ben the story of the crash. They'd been at the basketball court across from their house. Normally, Dad didn't tell stories about being at war. But something about the *thump, thump, thump* of the basketball had loosened Dad up, got him talking.

He'd described what had happened when the engine exploded, when the lights on the cockpit console had flashed like a video game gone haywire. He was twenty-five thousand feet in the air, rocketing through the sky at five hundred miles per hour. Any minute, the entire plane could burst into flames. His only chance was to eject, to pull the big yellow lever that would explode him out of the plane and send him shooting through the endless sky.

The roof of the cockpit — the canopy — was made of clear plastic, and was designed to pop off when the eject lever was pulled. A small explosive under Dad's seat would blast the entire seat into the air. Two parachutes would open — the first to yank Dad upright, the second to float him down to Earth.

But what if the canopy didn't open and Dad crushed his head? What if the parachutes failed and he fell like a rock straight into the ground? Dad had heard stories about ejections that went horribly wrong. Plenty of pilots had died, or were so badly hurt that they never walked again.

These were terrifying thoughts. But Dad had been trained for these life-and-death moments — to fly through enemy fire, to land on an aircraft carrier in a thunderstorm, to avoid a missile aimed straight for the belly of his jet.

"The fear is always there," Dad had told Ben, bouncing the ball and lining up at the free-throw line. "But you can't let it take over."

He'd eyed the basket and taken a shot.

---

"You have to choose: live or die. If you let yourself panic, you're finished."

*Swish.*

Now Ben remembered what Dad had said to him next.

"What you learn in training is to close your eyes," Dad had said. "You breathe deep. You breathe and breathe, and breathe. And somehow your mind clears so you can do what you need to do."

Ben closed his eyes now. It was hard to fill his lungs — his chest felt as if it was wrapped tight in rubber bands. But he kept thinking of Dad's words:

*Breathe.*

*Breathe.*

*Breathe.*

And somehow his mind stopped swirling. His body relaxed.

And then, almost without thinking, Ben grabbed Harry.

He dragged him back toward the bed, which had strong metal legs.

Ben pushed Harry underneath, and then scrambled in after him.

"Wait!" Harry screamed. "Nya!"

The cat was in the middle of the room, frozen in shock.

Harry tried to crawl out, but Ben gripped on to his ankle, pulling Harry back in.

"Get her!" Harry screamed at Ben.

Ben slid out from under the bed and crawled on his elbows after Nya. He caught her by the tail. She howled and scratched at him, but he managed to pull her back so that Harry could grab her.

Ben had barely made it under the bed when the room seemed to explode.

And the ceiling came crashing down.

---

# CHAPTER 6



Finally the shaking stopped.

It was pitch-dark. Except for Harry's soft cries, everything was completely silent.

"Ben?" Harry said, his voice barely a whimper.

"We're okay," Ben said.

And somehow they were. As the dust settled, Ben could see wreckage all over the floor — broken roof tiles, huge chunks of wood and plaster. The bed had protected them.

The panic started to creep back, cold hands climbing up Ben's spine. His mind began to swirl with questions.

Where were Mom and Ojisan?

What had happened to the rest of the house?

He and Harry had managed to survive the shaking. But what if Mom and Ojisan hadn't found a safe place? What if the earthquake started again? What if ...

He closed his eyes again and took a deep breath, then another. His thoughts slowed down enough for Ben to remember that Mom had been trained by the air force, just like Dad. She knew how to take care of herself. And Ojisan had built this house himself. He'd know where they would be safe.

Harry huddled close to Ben, crying hard.

"I'm scared," he sobbed. Ben patted his back and tried to comfort him. But Harry was screaming now, worse than when Dr. Sato told him he'd need stitches. Patting him on the back wasn't working.

"Jedi knights have to be strong," Ben said. "Now that you have a scar, you have to be brave."

That seemed to work.

Harry gave a big sniff.

He wiped his nose on his sleeve.

He snuggled Nya close. "We have to be brave, Nya," he whispered.

A moment later, there were footsteps.

"Ben! Harry!"

"Mom!" Harry shrieked.

“Boys, are you hurt?” she called, her voice ringing clear and strong through the dust.

“We’re okay!” Ben shouted, trying to sound braver than he felt. “We’re under the bed!”

“Stay where you are!” Ojisan called. Their uncle was there, too!

—

It seemed like forever before Mom and Ojisan were able to clear a path through the wreckage. But soon they were in the bedroom. And there was Mom, on her knees, peering under the bed at Ben and Harry. Her face was streaked with dirt and sweat, but her eyes were filled with relief.

“You can come out now,” she told them.

Ben pushed Harry into Mom’s arms, and Ben climbed out after him.



Mom wrapped her arms around both of them. Lately, Ben had pulled away from Mom’s hugs. Not now. He could hear Mom’s heart pounding through her thick sweater. Nya crawled out and buried her head in Harry’s leg.

“That was very smart, to hide under the bed,” Mom said, letting the boys go so she could look at them.

“Ben took us there,” Harry said, picking up Nya again.

Mom looked at Ben. She reached out and touched his cheek, and he felt a flush of unexpected pride.

But there was no time to talk. Mom found Harry’s shoes and helped him put them on.

“Come,” Ojisan said, plucking Nya from the floor and handing her to Harry. “We need to get outside. That was a very strong earthquake. It is the strongest I have ever felt. There will be more shaking. It is not safe in the house.”

As if the earth itself had heard Ojisan, there was a sharp rumble that brought another piece of ceiling crashing to the floor.

They hurried through the house, stepping over fallen furniture, piles of books, and broken glass.

The rest of the house was still standing, but it looked as if it could come down any second. Ben was relieved to get outside. They made their way across the yard and into the street. Some big trees had fallen, but Ojisan's cherry tree was still standing.

"Wait here," Ojisan said. He hurried to the middle of the street, where a group of his neighbors was gathered. Three of the houses on the road were completely wrecked. But it seemed as though everyone was safe.

Mom, Ben, and Harry huddled together in the cold. Harry held Nya tight.

"The worst is over," Mom said.

Yes, Ben told himself. Nothing could be as bad as that earthquake.

But then Ben noticed that Ojisan had drifted to the edge of the street. He was standing with two other men. They were all looking intently at the ocean in the distance.

Ben followed the path of their gaze until he figured out what they were looking at: a strange gray cloud hovering over the ocean.

It looked almost like smoke.

Was a big ship on fire?

No, that didn't make sense. No ship was that big.

A siren blared.

And with a sudden jolt, Ben understood that it wasn't a cloud.

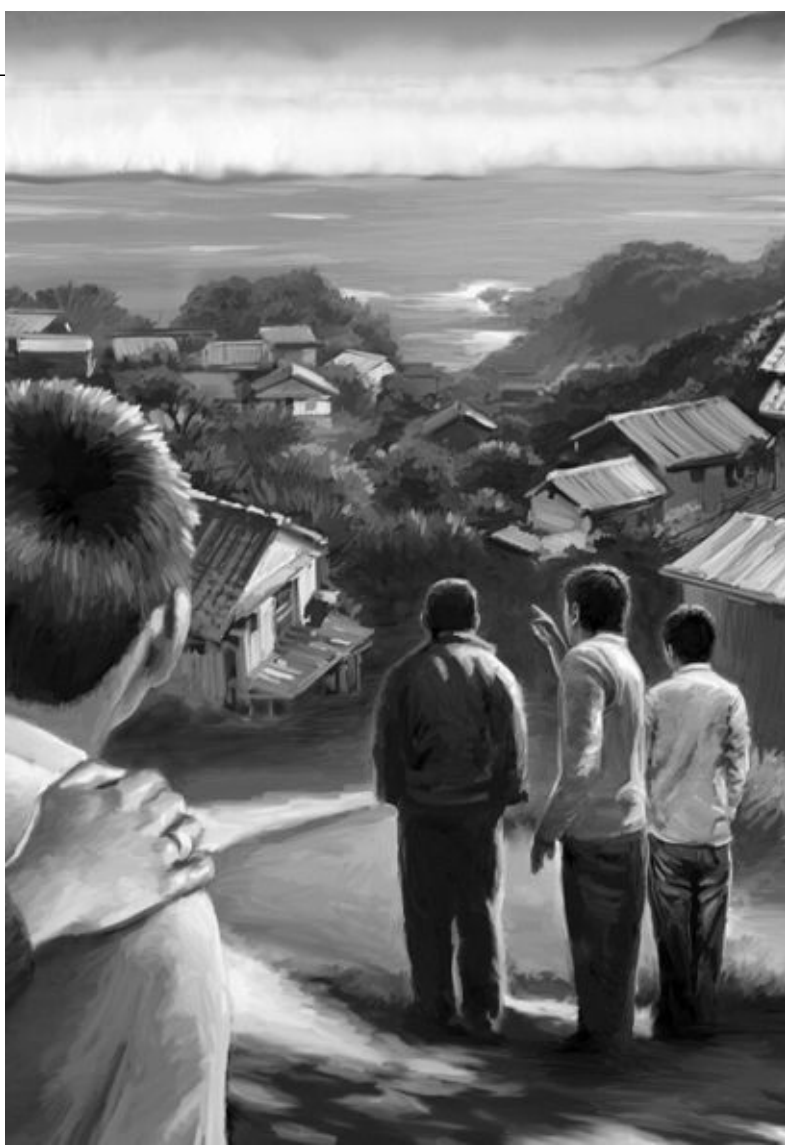
It wasn't a fire.

It was a wave.

A gigantic wave, taller than a building, and so wide he couldn't see where it started or ended. It seemed to stretch endlessly across the ocean.

Ojisan shouted.

*"Tsunami!"*



---

# CHAPTER 7



There was no time to think.

“Get to the car!” Ojisan shouted.

Mom picked up Harry and they all sprinted to the car and jumped in. Mom pulled Harry onto her lap in the front; Ben threw himself into the back.

Ojisan had the engine running even before Ben had closed his door. The car screeched out of the driveway.

Why was Ojisan panicking? Why was everyone running? They weren't very close to the ocean – it was at least a five-minute walk. Ben had never heard of a wave traveling so far inland.

Probably Ojisan just didn't want to take any chances.

The road had been split apart by the earthquake. Ojisan had to swerve around the cracks. Ben flew from side to side in the backseat until he managed to put on his seat belt.

“What's happening?” Harry cried, hugging Nya so tight Ben worried the cat's head would pop off.

“We're just moving away from the ocean,” Mom said in her usual calm voice.

There was a strange noise. It rose up suddenly, a roar louder even than the earthquake. This time it seemed as if jets were landing right behind them.

Ben turned, and what he saw almost stopped his heart:

A frothing wall of water, rushing up the street.

And it wasn't just water. The wave carried parts of houses, a smashed car, an entire pine tree, slabs of wood and metal. It was devouring everything in its path. Two men were running on the sidewalk. Ben gasped as the wave swallowed them whole.

And now the wave was coming for them.

Ojisan stomped on the gas pedal. The engine whined, and the car zoomed forward.

Mom reached back and grabbed Ben's hand, squeezing it tight. Their eyes locked. At first Ben couldn't read the expression on Mom's face, because he'd never seen it before, not even in the days after Dad's accident.

Mom was scared.

---

And suddenly there was water all around them, foaming black water, rising up in angry waves.

The car spun wildly as the waves rushed up around the tires.

Time seemed to stop.

The car tipped sharply in the rising water. Ben was held tight by his seat belt. Mom and Harry toppled onto Ojisan, and they all crashed together into his door.

The door popped open. Ojisan fell out of the car.

“Ojisan!” Ben screamed.

And now Mom and Harry were about to fall out, too! The car door was swung wide open, and Mom and Harry teetered in the doorway. Mom clung to the steering wheel with one hand, and kept her other arm around Harry, who gripped Nya.

Ben jumped forward to grab Mom, but his seat belt choked him back.

“Mom!” Ben shouted. “Hold on!”

“I’m trying!” Mom said.

Ben struggled with his seat belt, and finally got it open. But before he could grab hold of Mom, the car tipped all the way to the side, almost all the way over. Mom, Harry, and Nya tumbled out.

Ben watched in horror as the water swept them away.

Ben tried to climb over the seats, to dive out after them.

But the water was higher now, thrashing the car back and forth. The door slammed shut. Waves crashed over the roof of the car. Freezing water gushed in, surrounding Ben. In seconds, it was up to his chest. Ben tried to open the door, but it wouldn’t budge.

The water was at his chin now.

And there was no way out.



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