

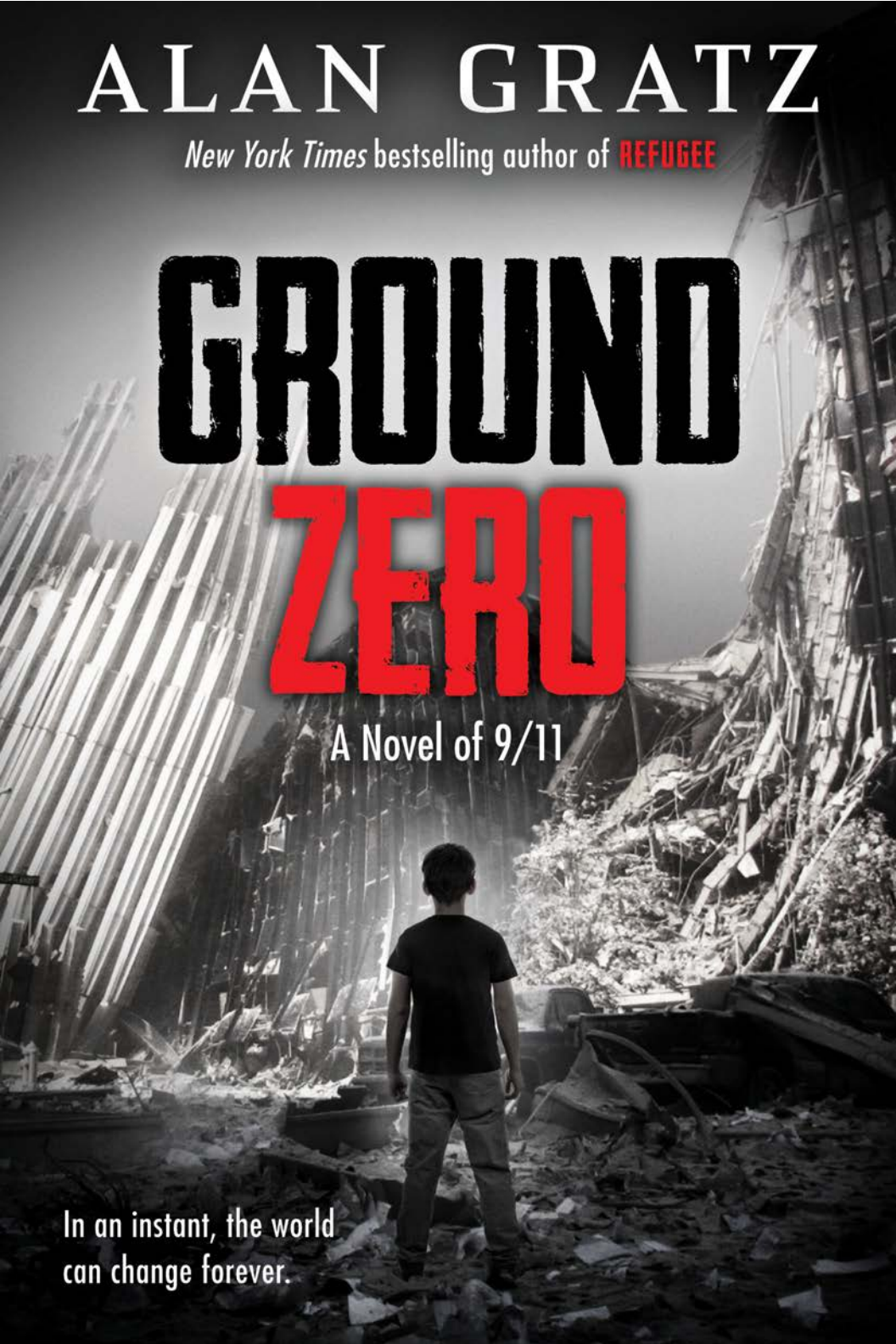
ALAN GRATZ

New York Times bestselling author of **REFUGEE**

GROUND ZERO

A Novel of 9/11

In an instant, the world
can change forever.

A black and white photograph of a young boy standing in a field of rubble and twisted metal, looking towards a destroyed building. The boy is in the foreground, seen from behind, wearing a dark t-shirt and light-colored pants. The background is a scene of devastation, with twisted metal and debris. The overall tone is somber and reflective.

A grayscale photograph of a destroyed building, likely the World Trade Center towers, with the text "GROUND ZERO" overlaid in a large, bold, black font. The image shows the skeletal remains of the structure, with debris scattered on the ground and a hazy, overcast sky in the background. The text is centered and occupies a significant portion of the middle of the frame.

GROUND ZERO



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Allies

Grenade

Refugee

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ALAN GRATZ

GROUND ZERO



Scholastic Press / New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-24575-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 21 22 23 24 25

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, February 2021

Book design by Yaffa Jaskoll



For Jennifer Hull Price

BRANDON

HOW WE SURVIVE

Brandon Chavez was in trouble.

He *should* have been in school this morning, taking his seat by the window and sharing a new skateboarding magazine with his friends. Instead, he sat next to his dad on a crowded subway train, heading from Brooklyn into Manhattan.

Brandon wasn't allowed to go to school today.

He was suspended.

SHOOM. Brandon jumped as the train burst from its underground tunnel into the full light of day for its climb to the Manhattan Bridge. It was a bright, blue, clear September morning, and he squinted from the sudden sun.

Beside him, his father folded up the newspaper he'd been reading.

“Okay, Brandon, when are we going to talk about this?”

Brandon didn’t want to talk about getting suspended. He hadn’t talked during dinner last night, or at breakfast this morning, or while he and his dad had waited for the subway. Now Brandon could *feel* the silence, like an invisible thing that had squeezed in between them on the seat and was pushing them apart.

His dad turned to face him. Leo Chavez wasn’t a big man, but he had a stocky chest and strong arms. Brandon thought he would have made a good professional wrestler. There was a quiet power in his dad, and Brandon could feel that power directed at him now.

“I get a call at work from your school, and I’m thinking, is Brandon sick? Did he crack his head open again doing stunts on the playground?” his dad said. “But no. They’re calling to tell me my son punched another kid in the nose.”

“He deserved it!” Brandon said. All his anger and frustration from yesterday came flooding back as he turned to his father. “Cedric brought these Wolverine gloves to school, like from the *X-Men* movie? And Stuart Pendleton stole them and wouldn’t give them back!”

“So you punched Stuart in the nose.”

“He wasn’t going to give them back! What was I supposed to do?”

Brandon's dad sighed. "I don't know, Brandon. *Talk* to him. Tell a teacher or something."

Talk to him? You couldn't talk to a bully like Stuart Pendleton! And telling a teacher might have gotten Cedric his gloves back, but Stuart would have just beaten Brandon up later for tattling.

"*You don't understand,*" Brandon told his dad.

"I understand enough to know that punching him wasn't the answer," his dad said. "And the principal told me that this other boy you were trying to help, his toy got broken in the fight."

Brandon brightened. He had a plan to fix *that* part, at least. But before he could explain, his dad kept talking.

"I had to leave work early yesterday, Brandon. You know we can't afford for me to miss any hours. Things are tight enough as they are."

Brandon nodded and stared out the train window. That was why he was going into work with his dad this morning—Brandon's father couldn't take a sick day, and there was nobody else to stay home and watch him.

The Q train rattled up onto the Manhattan Bridge, and Brandon saw the World Trade Center in the distance. It was hard to miss. The gray, rectangular Twin Towers stood more than twice as tall as the other skyscrapers around them at the southern end of Manhattan. The two towers were almost identical, except for the huge red-and-white antenna on the roof of the North

Tower. That was where Brandon's dad worked. He was a kitchen manager at a restaurant called Windows on the World at the very top of the North Tower, on the 107th floor.

"Brandon, what do we say about us? About you and me?" his dad asked.

Brandon gave the answer that had been drilled into him since his mother had died from cancer five years ago, when he was only four. "We're a team," he said.

"*We're a team,*" his dad repeated. "That's what we've always said. This is how we survive, right? *Together*. It's you and me against the world. But you shut me out on this one. And you let down the team."

The disappointment in his father's voice was like a punch in the gut, and Brandon felt tears come to his eyes. It hurt way worse than if his dad had just been mad at him.

The train went underground again, and the bright blue sky disappeared.

After a quick transfer to the R train, Brandon and his dad got off at their stop. They climbed the subway stairs into the underground mall below the World Trade Center Plaza. The mall was already packed by eight fifteen a.m., with long breakfast lines at Au Bon Pain and the Coffee Station.

Brandon trailed along behind his dad, lost in his thought. He wished he could have a do-over. Go back

in time and make a different decision. But even if he *could* go back, what would he do differently? Stuart Pendleton *deserved* to get punched in the nose.

“I still don’t think I should have been suspended,” Brandon told his dad as they cut through the bustling crowd. Five subway lines and the PATH train from New Jersey all stopped at stations below the mall, and three different exits led up to Manhattan streets.

“So you think you just get to go around punching people you don’t like?” his dad asked.

“If they’re bullies, yes!” Brandon said. They turned left at the Warner Bros. store, with its big statues of Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny, but he hardly noticed them today.

“There are rules, Brandon,” his dad said as they headed for the escalators at the far end of the mall. “You punch somebody, you get suspended, no matter why you did it. Your actions have to have consequences. If they didn’t, *you’d* be the bully.”

Brandon couldn’t believe what he was hearing. *Him?*
A bully?

“That’s what a bully is,” his dad said. “Somebody who pushes people around and never gets in trouble for it.”

Brandon frowned as he and his dad got on the escalator. *He* wasn’t the bully here! Stuart Pendleton was the bully!

Brandon suddenly remembered his plan—the one for making things right with Cedric. They hadn't passed the Sam Goody store, but Brandon knew there was one here in the mall. He closed his eyes and went through the layout in his head. *Back down to the J.Crew store, then right, past the Hallmark store and the Bath and Body Works.* Yes. That's where the Sam Goody was, with its CDs and DVDs and toys.

Toys like the Wolverine claws he'd broken.

Brandon patted the wad of dollars and change he'd stuffed in the pocket of his jeans before leaving home. While his dad was working in the restaurant at the top of the tower, Brandon would come back downstairs, buy a pair of Wolverine claws for Cedric, and—

“Whoa! Look out!”

Brandon turned. A Black man in a double-breasted suit with a shaved head and a beard stood behind them on the escalator, trying to juggle a briefcase, a folded-up newspaper, and a cardboard drink holder carrying three steaming cups of coffee. He was about to drop at least one thing, if not everything, and the drooping drink holder looked like it was going to be the first to go.

Brandon caught the edge of the cardboard tray before it toppled over, and his dad quickly grabbed hold of the briefcase.

“Whew. Thank you,” the businessman said. “That almost turned into a very bad day for all of us.”

Brandon and his dad helped the man rearrange his things, and they parted ways at the top of the escalator, in the lobby of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Brandon stood for a second and stared. He'd been here many times before, but the size of the place always surprised him.

The lobby was as wide as four tractor trailers parked end to end, and so tall you could stack them three high and still not hit the ceiling. Up above, there was a wrap-around mezzanine where a second floor would have been, leaving the space open and airy. Sunlight bounced off the windows of the smaller buildings across the street and made the North Tower's lobby glow.

Brandon's dad led him toward the reception desk, passing men and women of all colors and sizes wearing suits and dresses and delivery uniforms and casual clothes. Brandon's dad had once told him that more than twenty-five thousand people worked in the North Tower alone. Most of those people weren't here yet, but the lobby was still crowded.

A security guard took Brandon's picture for his temporary ID badge, and Brandon waited for the machine to spit it out.

"I took him to the nurse's station," Brandon said.

His dad frowned down at him. "Took who to what nurse's station?"

"Stuart Pendleton," Brandon said. "The boy I hit."

Brandon wanted his dad to understand he wasn't a bully. That he wasn't some mean kid who went around punching other people without feeling bad about it.

"Once I saw his nose was bleeding, I helped him up and took him to the nurse's station."

Brandon's dad sighed. "That's nice, Brandon. But did you ever stop to think that maybe you shouldn't have given the boy a bloody nose to begin with?"

"Here you go, kid," the security guard said, handing Brandon his temporary ID card.

Brandon stared at the picture of himself. Dark, messy hair. Brown skin and high cheekbones, like his dad. A slightly upturned nose and blue eyes, like his mom. His name—*Brandon Chavez*—was printed beneath the picture, along with the date:

September 11, 2001.

"Come on," said Brandon's dad. "Let's go upstairs."

RESHMINA

RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW

“Five. Six. Seven. Eight.” Reshmina counted in English as she picked up sticks for firewood. “Nine. Eleven.” No—she had missed a number. Ten.

Reshmina stood and straightened her back. It was early morning, crisp and cool. The sky was a brilliant, cloudless blue, and Reshmina could see all the way to the towering mountain range that separated her home in Afghanistan from its neighboring country, Pakistan. The mountains were arid and brown, with snowcapped peaks. Down below, a green-and-gold patchwork of rice paddies and wheat fields and vegetable gardens lined a lazy brown river.

It was September. Soon, Reshmina realized with a pang of sadness, it would be time for the harvest. Reshmina’s parents would keep her home from

school to help. Reshmina hated missing school.

“Taliban attack!” her twin brother, Pagoon, cried, leaping out from behind the bush where he’d been hiding.

Reshmina screamed in surprise, and the stack of firewood in her arms went flying.

Pagoon held a stick like a rifle and pretended to shoot at her. “Pakow pakow pakow!”

Reshmina shoved her brother with both hands. “Pagoon, you snake! Look what you made me do! Now I have to start all over.”

Pagoon cackled at his own joke. “I was just trying to help. See?” He offered her his fake rifle. “I brought you a stick.”

Reshmina snatched the stick from him. “Some help,” she said. “How long were you waiting behind that bush?”

“All morning!” Pagoon said, pleased with himself. “You took forever to get here.”

Reshmina and Pagoon were both thin, with round faces, brown skin, big brown eyes, and black hair. Pagoon’s hair was short and unkempt while Reshmina’s was long, carefully combed, and tucked under a black headscarf. Pagoon was a little taller than Reshmina, but they looked more alike than different.

How they *lived* was another matter entirely.

As a boy, Pagoon had time for games and practical jokes. His only chore was to take the goats up into the mountains to graze for a few hours. As a girl, Reshmina

worked from the moment she woke up until she went to sleep at night. While Pason had been lying in wait for her, Reshmina had been hauling water up from the river. There were also clothes to be washed, rugs to be beaten and stacked, floors to be swept, animals to be fed, food to be cooked—and, every afternoon, the two-kilometer walk back and forth to school. Pason didn't even do *that* anymore. He'd quit going to school a year ago.

Pason bent down and began collecting some of the sticks he'd made Reshmina drop.

"I heard you practicing your English," he told her. Their native language was Pashto, the language of the Afghan mountains. They both knew some Dari too—the language spoken in much of the rest of Afghanistan. Of the two of them, only Reshmina had kept up with her English lessons.

"Why?" Pason asked.

"What do you mean why?"

"I mean why bother?" said Pason.

"I'm learning English because I'm going to be a teacher," Reshmina told him.

"*Be a teacher?*" Pason cried. "The man you marry is never going to let you work!"

Reshmina frowned. Pason was probably right. In Afghanistan, women had to do what their husbands told them to, and most men told their wives they had to stay home and take care of the house and raise a family.

Reshmina's schoolteacher was a woman, but she was from Australia and unmarried.

"I'll teach until I'm married, then," Reshmina said. But she knew that was a fantasy. Reshmina's parents had just arranged for her sister Marzia to be married to an older man when she turned sixteen next year. When Reshmina turned sixteen five years from now, she'd be married off too. She would go right from school to her new home.

Reshmina's parents had planned the same fate for Reshmina's eldest sister, Hila. But Hila had died before she could be married.

Reshmina felt a rush of sadness at the thought of her sister. Hila, who'd been like a second mother to Reshmina and Pason. Who'd made up stories for them, and taught them to read. Who loved jumping out and scaring them and chasing them all around the house pretending to be a mountain lion.

Reshmina fought off the pain of remembering.

"Besides," she said now, turning back to Pason, "it's 2019. Everyone speaks English."

Pason scoffed. "Darwesh and Amaan say that when the Taliban win and the Americans leave, nobody will care about speaking English anymore."

Reshmina shook her head. Darwesh and Amaan were two foolish boys who were three years older than Pason, and he followed them around like a baby

chick. Darwesh and Amaan had left home last month, and everyone knew where they had gone. The same place all the young men went, eventually. Up into the mountains to join the Taliban.

Talib meant “student” in Pashto, and the Taliban had begun as a group of men who had studied at traditional Islamic schools. The Taliban followed a *very* strict interpretation of religious law, and during Afghanistan’s last civil war in the 1990s, they’d fought their way to power.

Reshmina’s mother and grandmother had told Reshmina horror stories about life under Taliban rule: how the Taliban beat men for not growing beards, massacred families, burned down schools, and put on public executions in the soccer stadium in Afghanistan’s capital, Kabul. It had been even worse for women. The Taliban banned girls from going to school or having jobs, beat women who left their houses without a male family member, and sold girls into slavery. The American army had driven the Taliban out of power twenty years ago, but the Taliban were still around, hiding out in the mountains, right where Reshmina lived. And the American army was still here too, fighting the Taliban alongside the Afghan National Army.

The Taliban had changed though. They were far less organized now. Some of their fighters were still motivated by the Taliban’s extreme interpretation of Islam.

Others welcomed any excuse to drive the foreign invaders from Afghanistan. Some of them were just poor boys from mountain villages who were hungry and needed a job. But they all shared a hatred of the Americans and the American-supported Afghan government, and fought them both whenever and however they could.

Pasoon turned his back to Reshmina to pick up another stick, and Reshmina saw her chance for revenge. She worked little sticks between the fingers of each hand like claws and snuck up on Pasoon.

“Snow leopard attack!” she cried, and jumped on his back.

Pasoon screamed and dropped all the sticks he’d been collecting. Reshmina scratched at his neck with her makeshift claws, and Pasoon fell to the ground. In seconds they were tumbling and wrestling and laughing like they had when they were little, before Hila had died and Marzia had been promised in marriage and Pasoon had started talking about joining the Taliban.

At last Pasoon swept her knees out from under her, and Reshmina fell to the dirt beside him. They lay on their backs, panting and staring up into the cloudless blue sky, and Reshmina’s hand found Pasoon’s. He didn’t pull away, and Reshmina smiled. This, right here, right now, was what Reshmina wanted most in the world. What had been slipping away from her, bit by

bit, as she and her brother got older. If only she could go back in time, to those days when she and Pagoon had chased each other in the hills and gone swimming in the deepest part of the river and played hide-and-seek in the caves beneath their village.

Reshmina wished she could capture this moment in a jar. Preserve it in amber. Hila was lost to her, and soon Marzia would be married and gone, and Pagoon would follow Darwesh and Amaan into the mountains, and Reshmina . . .

From their village around the mountain came the sudden sound of a woman's cry. Then Reshmina heard a man yell, "Open up!"

Reshmina felt goose bumps on her skin. Pagoon pulled his hand from hers, and they both sat up quickly. Something was happening in their village.

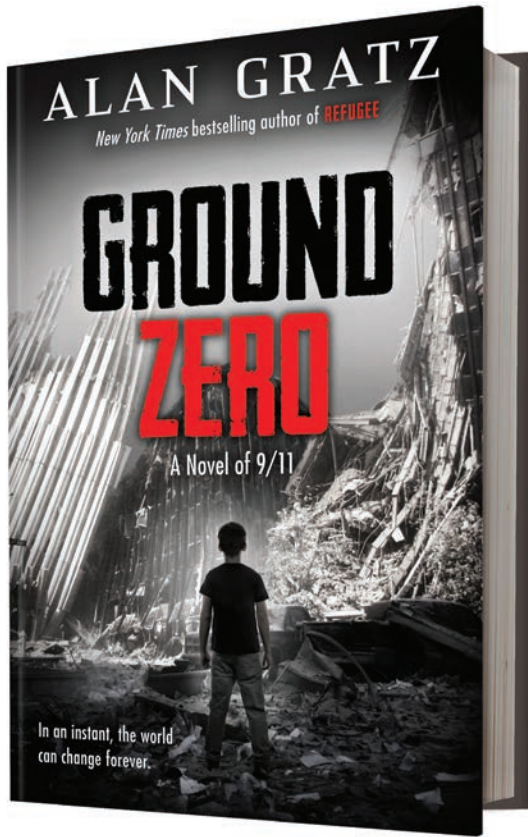
Something bad.

Pagoon hopped to his feet and ran down the hill, and Reshmina hurried to follow him. They rounded the mountain and slid to a stop at the edge of the river.

Afghan men wearing green camouflage uniforms and carrying automatic rifles—soldiers from the Afghan National Army—were pounding on doors in Reshmina's village, demanding to be let inside homes. And there were *American* soldiers with them, directing their movements.

Reshmina gasped. Her village was being raided!

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