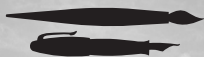


ALAN GRATZ

GROUND ZERO



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A black and white photograph of a construction site. On the left, several long, vertical wooden studs are stacked. On the right, a structure is under construction, with a large pile of debris and rubble in the foreground. The scene is dimly lit, with a bright light source from the left creating a strong glow and casting long shadows. The overall atmosphere is one of a busy, somewhat chaotic construction environment.

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."