

**GAVIN DE BECKER**

**SPECIAL  
KINDLE EDITION  
WITH NEW  
FOREWORD**

THE  
**GIFT**  
OF FEAR

**SURVIVAL SIGNALS**  
THAT PROTECT US FROM VIOLENCE

**#1 NATIONAL BESTSELLER**

# **THE GIFT OF FEAR**

SURVIVAL SIGNALS THAT  
PROTECT US FROM VIOLENCE

Gavin de Becker

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To the two people who taught me the most about courage and kindness: my sisters, Chrysti and Melissa. And for my mother, and grandfather, and father.

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*Note:* Men of all ages and in all parts of the world are more violent than women. For this reason, the language in this book is mostly gender-specific to men. When it comes to violence, women can proudly relinquish recognition in the language, because here at least, politically correct would be statistically incorrect.

Every story in this book is true, and 90% of the names used are the actual names of the people involved. The remainder have been changed to protect privacy or safety.

GdeB

## Foreword to the Special Kindle Edition

In 2009, when Oprah Winfrey kindly dedicated an hour-long show to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the publication of this book, my publisher rushed to get a bunch more copies into print. They put out two editions, including one with a slightly revised cover.

Taken all together, *The Gift of Fear* has been published in twenty-five editions, including the first hardback, several paperback versions, two audio-books, and at least fifteen foreign-language versions.

Aside from content, what they all had in common till now was bulk, weight, ink, paper, laminates, glue, and packaging at every level—from the plastic they were sealed in to the cartons they were shipped in. Every copy spent some time in the back of a truck, train, warehouse, or storeroom. Given that *The Gift of Fear* was a #1 National bestseller in the US and Canada, imagine how many trips to how many stores so many people made.

With this special Kindle edition, my first literary child is now freed from the bonds of the material world, so to speak, and can sail instantly, efficiently, and without waste to anywhere on earth (and soon, beyond). No more need for the reader to use a 3,000 lb car to go get a 15-ounce book.

While the paper editions of *The Gift of Fear* have indexes listing some notable references, this Kindle edition allows the reader to find every occurrence of *any* reference, name, passage, subject, topic, or even individual word—instantly.

While readers of the old editions might have occasionally benefited from having a dictionary nearby, readers of the Kindle edition can see the definition of every word at the instant it's encountered.

Appreciating these technology advances, I also observe some of the ways in which other technologies place people at greater risk than they were a decade ago. There are chapters ahead about stalking and harassment, and given the role of the Internet in our lives, perpetrators now have a wider menu of intrusive strategies than they did when this book was first published. The Internet offers greater anonymity to unwanted pursuers, and less privacy to their targets. Technology has also expanded the ways in which violent people can track down those they intend to harm, and has, at the same time, made hiding much more difficult. The chapter ahead about mass shootings at businesses includes the warning signs that precede those terrible incidents. One is the perpetrator's fascination with violent media, and technology has exponentially expanded the number and types of websites celebrating those themes. There's a chapter about school shootings, and while I referred to violent video games from which a troubled student might draw inspiration, technology in the past decade has profoundly enhanced the realness and intensity of these games.

Social networking has changed the way people come into each other's lives, and though offering women some insulation at the start of relationships, these sites also expose one's image and information to a larger population than might be wise. Through the Internet, some people have become emotionally invested in relationships with very little confirmable knowledge about the other person. They might not really know each other at all, yet feeling they do, some people have escalated in disturbing ways, all the way to murder of a competing "suitor."

Still, even with the landscape changing in terms of connectivity and depth of personal information, the basic tenets of human behavior explored in this book remain unchanged. No matter what the method of communication between predator and target, actual challenges to safety arise only in person—and thus, all that's really changed is the medium used for persuading someone to have an in-person meeting. The goal remains the same: *Avoid being in the presence of someone who might do you harm.* This book explores strategies predators use when grooming and persuading targets, and those strategies are the same whether via internet, email, text-messaging, telephone, snail-mail, or in person.

Media changes—human nature does not. Violence and predation have been a part of human life for millions of years.

In studying any topic, you reach a point where you stop finding new wrinkles and instead identify factors that appear and reappear regularly. In the study of spousal homicide, for example, there's no shortage of data: In America, a woman is killed by a spouse every two hours. So after you've drawn lessons from, say, a thousand cases, and you've seen the same dynamic again and again, it's possible to develop binding theories. Ironically, some of the key wisdom revealed through studying human violence was already known to animals.

Nature has developed remarkable defense systems, from the shell that protects the turtle, to the well-armed hive that reacts to intruders with single-minded coordination, each citizen willing to give everything to protect the queen. Like every animal in Nature, you too have a remarkable defense system. You're the newest model of human being, the result of ages of R & D that makes the most fantastic computer seem like an abacus. Nature's investment in you is far too great to leave you undefended, and while human beings didn't get the sharpest claws or strongest jaws, we did get the biggest brains. You have more brain cells than there are grains of sand on your favorite beach, and you have cleverness, dexterity, and creativity—all of which powerfully combine when you are at risk—if you listen to your intuition.

And yet, no matter how sophisticated or long-evolved a defense system might be, predators still catch prey off-guard so often, and no matter how sophisticated the predator's resources, they too fail frequently. What can you do to be on the better side of these dangerous transactions? The first step is to be the best informed participant.

Predatory animals usually devour prey in order to convert flesh into fuel. Most human predators, however, seek power, not food. To destroy or damage something is to take its power. This applies equally to a political movement, a government, a campaign, a career, a marriage, a performance, a fortune, or a religion. To push a pie into the face of the world's richest man is to take his power, if only for a moment.

When viewed as a contest between predator and prey, some human attacks look much like predation in nature: The surprise, the sudden movement, the burst of hostile energy, the jerky resistance, the wish to escape. If an animal taken by a predator could speak after the fact, he'd likely tell us: *"It all happened so fast; there wasn't time to do anything."*

But with man, there usually is time, plenty of time, and plenty of warning. In describing exactly what the warning signs look like, I hope the coming (virtual) pages reconnect you to the remarkable defenses that are part of your Nature.

*Gavin de Becker*

▪ CHAPTER ONE ▪  
IN THE PRESENCE OF DANGER

“This above all, to refuse to be a victim.”  
—Margaret Atwood

He had probably been watching her for a while. We aren't sure—but what we do know is that she was not his first victim. That afternoon, in an effort to get all her shopping done in one trip, Kelly had overestimated what she could comfortably carry home. Justifying her decision as she struggled with the heavy bags, she reminded herself that making two trips would have meant walking around after dark, and she was too careful about her safety for that. As she climbed the few steps to the apartment building door, she saw that it had been left unlatched (again). Her neighbors just don't get it, she thought, and though their lax security annoyed her, this time she was glad to be saved the trouble of getting out the key.

She closed the door behind her, pushing it until she heard it latch. She is certain she locked it, which means he must have already been inside the corridor.

Next came the four flights of stairs, which she wanted to do in one trip. Near the top of the third landing, one of the bags gave way, tearing open and dispensing cans of cat food. They rolled down the stairs almost playfully, as if they were trying to get away from her. The can in the lead paused at the second floor landing, and Kelly watched as it literally turned the corner, gained some speed, and began its seemingly mindful hop down the next flight of steps and out of sight.

“Got it! I'll bring it up,” someone called out. Kelly didn't like that voice. Right from the start something just sounded wrong to her, but then this friendly looking young guy came bounding up the steps, collecting cans along the way.

He said, “Let me give you a hand.”

“No, no thanks, I've got it.”

“You don't look like you've got it. What floor are you going to?”

She paused before answering him. “The fourth, but I'm okay, really.”

He wouldn't hear a word of it, and by this point he had a collection of cans balanced between his chest and one arm. “I'm going to the fourth floor too,” he said, “and I'm late—not my fault, broken watch—so let's not just stand here. And give me that.” He reached out and tugged on one of the heavier bags she was holding. She repeated, “No, really, thanks, but no, I've got it.”

Still holding onto the grocery bag, he said, “There's such a thing as being *too* proud, you know.”

For a moment, Kelly didn't let go of that bag, but then she did, and this seemingly insignificant exchange between the cordial stranger and the recipient of his courtesy was the signal—to him and to her—that she was willing to trust him. As the bag passed from her control to his, so did she.

“We better hurry,” he said as he walked up the stairs ahead of Kelly. “We've got a hungry cat up there.”

Even though he seemed to want nothing more at that moment than to be helpful, she was apprehensive about him, and for no good reason, she thought. He was friendly and gentlemanly, and she felt guilty about her suspicion. She didn't want to be the kind of person who distrusts everybody, so they were next approaching the door to her apartment.

“Did you know a cat can live for three weeks without eating?” he asked. “I'll tell you how I learned that tidbit: I once forgot that I'd promised to feed a cat while a friend of mine was out of town.”

Kelly was now standing at the door to her apartment, which she'd just opened.

“I'll take it from here,” she said, hoping he'd hand her the groceries, accept her thanks and be on his way. Instead, he said, “Oh no, I didn't come this far to let you have another cat food spill.” When she still hesitated to let him in her door, he laughed understandingly. “Hey, we can leave the door open like ladies do in old movies. I'll just put this stuff down and go. I promise.”

She did let him in, but he did not keep his promise.

■ ■ ■

At this point, as she is telling me the story of the rape and the whole three-hour ordeal she suffered, Kelly pauses to weep quietly. She now knows

that he killed one of his other victims, stabbed her to death.

All the while, since soon after we sat down knee to knee in the small garden outside my office, Kelly has been holding both my hands. She is twenty-seven years old. Before the rape, she was a counselor for disturbed children, but she hasn't been back to work in a long while. That friendly-looking young man had caused three hours of suffering in her apartment and at least three months of suffering in her memory. The confidence he scared off was still hiding, the dignity he pierced still healing.

Kelly is about to learn that listening to one small survival signal saved her life, just as failing to follow so many others had put her at risk in the first place. She looks at me through moist but clear eyes and says she wants to understand every strategy he used. She wants me to tell her what her intuition saw that saved her life. But she will tell me.

"It was after he'd already held the gun to my head, after he raped me. It was after that. He got up from the bed, got dressed, then closed the window. He glanced at his watch, and then started acting like he was in a hurry."

"I gotta be somewhere. Hey, don't look so scared. I promise I'm not going to hurt you." Kelly absolutely knew he was lying. She knew he planned to kill her, and though it may be hard to imagine, it was the first time since the incident began that she felt profound fear.

He waved the gun and said, "Don't you move or do anything. I'm going to the kitchen to get something to drink, and then I'll leave. I promise. But you stay right where you are." He had little reason to be concerned that Kelly might disobey his instructions because she had been, from the moment she let go of that bag until this moment, completely under his control. "You know I won't move," she assured him.

But the instant he stepped from the room, Kelly stood up and walked after him, pulling the sheet off the bed with her. "I was literally right behind him, like a ghost, and he didn't know I was there. We walked down the hall together. At one point he stopped, and so did I. He was looking at my stereo which was playing some music, and he reached out and made it louder. When he moved on toward the kitchen, I turned and walked through the living room."

Kelly could hear drawers being opened as she walked out her front door, leaving it ajar. She walked directly into the apartment across the hall (which she somehow knew would be unlocked). Holding a finger up to signal her surprised neighbors to be quiet, she locked their door behind her.

"I knew if I had stayed in my room, he was going to come back from the kitchen and kill me, but I don't know how I was so certain."

"Yes, you do," I tell her.

She sighs and then goes over it again. "He got up and got dressed, closed the window, looked at his watch. He promised he wouldn't hurt me, and that promise came out of nowhere. Then he went into the kitchen to get a drink, supposedly, but I heard him opening drawers in there. He was looking for a knife, of course, but I knew way before that." She pauses. "I guess he wanted a knife because using the gun would be too noisy."

"What makes you think he was concerned about noise?" I ask.

"I don't know." She takes a long pause, gazing off past me, looking back at him in the bedroom. "Oh... I do know. I get it, I get it. Noise was the thing—that's why he closed the window. That's how I knew."

Since he was dressed and supposedly leaving, he had no other reason to close her window. It was that subtle signal that warned her, but it was fear that gave her the courage to get up without hesitation and follow close behind the man who intended to kill her. She later described a fear so complete that it replaced every feeling in her body. Like an animal hiding inside her, it opened to its full size and stood up using the muscles in her legs. "I had nothing to do with it," she explained. "I was a passenger moving down that hallway."

What she experienced was real fear, not like when we are startled, not like the fear we feel at a movie, or the fear of public speaking. This fear is the powerful ally that says, "Do what I tell you to do." Sometimes, it tells a person to play dead, or to stop breathing, or to run or scream or fight, but to Kelly it said, "Just be quiet and don't doubt me and I'll get you out of here."

Kelly told me she felt new confidence in herself, knowing she had acted on that signal, knowing she had saved her own life. She said she was tired of being blamed and blaming herself for letting him into her apartment. She said she had learned enough in our meetings to never again be victimized that way.

"Maybe that's the good to come from it," she reflected. "The weird thing is, with all this information I'm actually less afraid walking around now than I was before it happened—but there must be an easier way people could learn."

The thought had occurred to me. I know that what saved Kelly's life can save yours. In her courage, in her commitment to listen to intuition, in her determination to make some sense out of it, in her passion to be free of unwarranted fear, I saw that the information could be shared not just with victims but with those who need never become victims at all. I want this book to help you be one of those people.

Because of my sustained look at violence, because I have predicted the behavior of murderers, stalkers, would-be assassins, rejected boyfriends, estranged husbands, angry former employees, mass killers, and others, I am called an expert. I may have learned many lessons, but my basic premise in these pages is that you too are an expert at predicting violent behavior. Like every creature, you can know when you are in the presence of danger. You have the gift of a brilliant internal guardian that stands ready to warn you of hazards and guide you through risky situations.

I've learned some lessons about safety through years of asking people who've suffered violence, "Could you have seen this coming?" Most often