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ONE THAT CAN IMPROVE LIVES—AND SAVE LIVES."
—GAVIN DE BECKER, bestselling author of *The Gift of Fear*

BECOMING BULLETPROOF

- PROTECT YOURSELF
 - READ PEOPLE
 - INFLUENCE SITUATIONS
 - LIVE FEARLESSLY
-

EVY POUMPOURAS

SPECIAL AGENT,
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EVY POUMPOURAS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY REMIE GEOFFROI

ATRIA BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

*For my father, Ioannis Poumpouras July 11, 1945–September 1,
2019, for teaching me to embrace the fight rather than fear it.*

Prologue

Nothing is, everything is becoming.

—HERACLITUS

September 11, 2001

It sounded like a garbage truck had dropped out of the sky. The rattling of a

thousand pieces of metal and glass and concrete reverberated around us, piercing

a hole into the quiet September morning. But neither I nor my colleagues in the

United States Secret Service's (USSS) New York Field Office had any idea of what was about to happen.

The Secret Service occupied the 9th and 10th floors of the forty-seven-story building that was World Trade Center 7. I had gone into work early that day to

meet with our United States Customs Service liaison, Lenny, who I hoped would be able to help me apprehend a Frenchman I was pursuing for a fraud

investigation. When the first plane hit the tower, truth be told, I was so focused

on getting Lenny to agree to put my suspect on a watch list that I didn't even

glance up at the sound. "Hey, Lenny! Focus," I said when his head started to

turn toward that distant boom. "This is important."

Then there were gasps. Everyone around us, all the others who had come into

the office early that day, slowly stood up or jumped to their feet. When we

noticed everyone moving toward the windows, our conversation automatically

paused. We got up and followed them.

As we gazed out at the World Trade Center's Twin Towers, there was incomprehensibly massive. Flames poured upward from the gaping hole, engulfing the top of the building entirely. Unable to reconcile the sound we had

heard with the destruction confronting us, my mind immediately sought out a

mundane explanation. *Maybe it's an electrical fire*, I thought.

A voice came over the building's PA system, calm and authoritative. "We are

evacuating the building. Please head toward the nearest exit or stairwell."

No reason was given, no mention of the fire in the adjacent tower or the noise we had heard. As one, we all headed for the stairwell.

An eerie sort of silence hovered over everyone on the walk down. There were

no voices, no anxious questions asked—just the sound of hundreds of footsteps

descending through the building, and emerging into the crowded lobby on the

ground floor. One by one we paused in front of the lobby's floor-to-ceiling

windows. The scene that unfolded before us was like a disaster movie playing

out in full color, surreal to the point of seeming fake. Car-sized chunks of

burning metal rained down from above, detonating like bombs where they crashed into the ground. Toxic smoke and flames poured out of the gaping hole

in the tower looming over us. The wreckage falling from the sky made escape

through the main entrance of our building impossible, and so the security staff

were directing everyone to the emergency exits.

My gun and my badge—the only two things I made sure to take with me—were useless at that moment. I didn't know that a plane had been hijacked and

plunged into the World Trade Center's North Tower between the 93rd and 99th floors. I didn't know that the second plane would soon strike the second tower,

or anything else that would happen that day. I knew only that as a Special Agent,

I needed to help, however I could.

As people streamed toward the emergency exits, I immediately started looking around for my fellow agents. I found some of them deliberating in a small group by one of the stairwells and rushed over. "What are we doing?" I

asked.

"Let's get the FAT kits," one agent said. FAT kits were the first aid trauma kits

we kept in the old office, and which would undoubtedly be needed by anyone trying to escape the rearing in Tower 1. Without hesitating, we ran back up

the ten flights to retrieve them. The kits contained oxygen tanks, bandages, and a

vast array of medical supplies and trauma necessities for helping people in the

old—essentially, an ambulance in a bag—but at about twenty-six pounds, the

kits were *heavy*. I picked up my kit, knowing it would be a challenge to get these

supplies to the people who needed them most, and looked at the others. There

were six of us total. With more than two hundred agents, we were the largest

old office in the country, but I had no idea where everyone else was. We headed

back down to the ground floor, the cumbersome kits dragging down our shoulders and cutting into our hands.

Since there was no way to get out through the front doors, we used the side doors and ran as fast as we could toward the main entrance of the North Tower

as burning metal relentlessly thundered down from above.

That's when I heard it. A sound distinctly out of place, especially this close to

the epicenter of New York with its high-rise office buildings and skyscrapers.

Among the cacophony of destruction already unfolding—of twisting steel and

shattering glass—came what I only later understood to be the engines of a Boeing 767 revving for maximum impact. A moment later, United Airlines Flight 175 flew into the South Tower.

And then hell got even hotter.

The force of its impact between floors 77 and 85 of Tower 2 instantaneously turned what was already unfathomable into Armageddon. As fire and heat and

massive chunks of metal fell toward the earth from hundreds of feet overhead, I

felt a strong hand grab my wrist and yank me back. It was my colleague Michael.

I hadn't even seen the plane, but he had. We were out in the open and completely exposed. We knew we needed cover, so we broke out into a full sprint

back toward our building.

There was confusion everywhere I looked. Some people were running.

Others were walking. Some just stood there, frozen in disbelief. As I ran, I saw a

man motionless, staring at the destruction above when something large fell on

top of him. And then he was gone. Just gone. It still hadn't registered to me that

it was now two planes that had flown into two towers, or how that was even possible, or what it meant. All I knew was we had to get to the people who needed help.

When we finally reached World Trade Center 7, Michael slammed me against the brick wall, forcing the breath out of my lungs as he tried to shield me with

his body from the fire and fuel and glass and metal crashing to the ground. It felt

like an eternity as we waited for the insanity of the massive explosion to slow.

Our path now blocked, Michael and I zigzagged our way through the obstacle

course of debris, trying to find our other colleagues and another way into the towers. We ran into a group of about fifteen agents and a supervisor huddled together.

"Listen, I'm going in there to help," the supervisor said as the towers blazed behind him. "Obviously this isn't like anything we've ever seen before. You don't

have to go. No one's going to think badly of you if you don't. So whoever wants

to come, come with me, and whoever wants to turn around and go, please do."

We all fell into silence for a moment. I looked over toward the towers, at all of

the people streaming out of them, some shouting or crying, some expressionless

with shock, and then I stepped forward, as did several others.

At the same time, someone nearby started screaming, then I heard a sharp gasp. "Oh my God," someone said. "They're jumping!"

I looked up, but at first I couldn't process what I was seeing: It was a man in a

white shirt, his tie blowing back behind him as he fell through the air. His tie looked purple, or maybe blue. He had a mustache. His expression was blank when he hit the roof of one of the smaller buildings surrounding the Twin Towers and disappeared.

Countless more followed, maybe even hundreds. It was incomprehensible. It

was raining people. Then I understood. All those people were choosing death on

their own terms. Instead of burning, they chose to jump.

I looked over at my colleague Keven, who was standing next to me. There was

a gash in his arm with blood trailing down. "Keven, we have to do something," I

said. "We have to help."

Keven's voice was quiet when he answered me. His eyes remained xated on the burning towers. "What can we possibly do to stop that?" he asked.

I remember feeling angry at what he said. The idea that we should just stand there while something so horrifying unfolded in front of us was enraging. But

the fact is he was right. There was nothing we could do—nothing but witness al

of those people fal ing to their death.

Never in my entire life have I ever felt more helpless than I did in that moment.

"Okay," our supervisor said. "Let's go."

I didn't look to see who chose to leave and who stayed. It didn't matter. Al that mattered was helping everyone we could.

By now my hands were cut and blistering from the weight of carrying the FAT kit by its imsy nylon handles. The barrage of fal ing destruction made it

impossible to make our way in, so we set up a triage by the West Side Highway

near the base of Tower 2. Ambulances had begun pul ing up to the curb.

"Go to the water," we told the survivors who could walk on their own, pointing them toward the Hudson River. We guided those who needed

immediate medical help into the ambulances—treating what injuries we could

on our own. There were still so many people trapped in those buildings that we

couldn't reach. It was awful, infuriating that we couldn't get to them, but we

tried to focus on helping who we could.

One woman who came to us was having trouble breathing. When I tried to use the oxygen tank to give her air, I couldn't get it to work—it had been a long

while since I had used one. I knelt next to it, laser-focused and cursing myself for

not being able to get it to function. I was so fixated on connecting the tubes that

I didn't notice when everything around me went quiet.

It was only when I looked up that I realized everyone had disappeared.

And then, from high above, there was the eerie, unmistakable wail of bending

steel.

It happened slowly, just a metallic echo resounding through the air at first, followed by the grinding, groaning sound that precedes total destruction.

Something awful was about to happen.

I wasn't afraid, exactly—mostly because I didn't know what I should be

afraid of. I had no idea that the tower was going to fall. Based on that terrible

rending sound, I guessed that the roof or some other type of massive debris was

about to slide off one of the towers. Whatever the cause, I knew that I needed

to find shelter fast.

My mind went into autopilot, every second stretching out endlessly. The

110-story building loomed overhead. There was likely no cover that could shield

me from the chunks of steel that were about to come down, and the nearness

and sheer magnitude of the tower meant that I couldn't outrun it. So I did what

I could to ensure my survival. I spotted a concrete wall at the base of the closest

building and sprinted toward it, grabbing one of the bottles of water we had

been using to clean out people's eyes and mouths; if I was going to be buried

alive, I knew I would need water. I rushed through the patio of an abandoned

Au Bon Pain restaurant and paused just long enough to take hold of one of the

metal tables crowding the patio space. One thing you learn in explosives training

with the Secret Service is that glass can kill you just as easily as bullets can. My

adrenaline spiked as I dragged that brutally heavy table over to the building, hoping that it would protect me from falling debris and provide me with a pocket of air to shelter under should I be buried. I pushed it against the wall, crawled underneath, and pulled my knees to my chest to make myself into a smaller target.

The deafening groan of steel bending crescendoed as the tower broke apart, thousands of windows simultaneously shattering as the structure of the building finally failed.

And then the tower fell.

The cataclysm of noise and devastation that swept over me was unlike anything I've ever experienced. It was like sitting in the center of a volcano during an eruption. The heat and toxic dust filled the air so densely that I could

hardly breathe. Cement and steel and shards of glass crashed all around me and

the ground thundered with the continuous impacts, growing more deafening by

the second. It quickly became clear that this was going to be beyond anything I

had imagined. Day turned to night. The earth beneath me roared so deeply that

I thought it was going to open up and swallow me whole. It seems pointless now, but I began shaking the table as hard as I could, feebly hoping that I could

keep it from accumulating debris that would bury me. It was the only thing I

could think to do, the only way I could try to fight. I still had no idea what was

happening, but as the devastation continued unabated, the realization came to

me, both fast and slow, that I was going to die.

I remember that I didn't feel afraid—only sad that I was going to die alone, and that when all was said and done, I'd be pulverized. Annihilated. There would be nothing left of me. No body to send back to my parents. I had been

prepared for death, but I had never been prepared for a death such as this. This

was the end. My end. The sorts of worries and preoccupations that took up so

much attention in my daily life cleared away, leaving me only with this thought:

Had I done enough? Had I helped enough? Had I lived enough? I thought of my

few agents and all the people we had been trying to save. I hoped they were

safe, or if it were the end for them, too, then I wished them a painless death. As I

waited for death to claim me, I hoped that I had been a good enough person, that my family knew how much I loved them. That I had somehow somewhere

made a difference in someone's life.

Then I started to pray aloud.

"Our Father who art in Heaven,

Hallowed be thy name..."

I prayed in Greek, as I'd been taught growing up in the Greek Orthodox

Church. I kept my eyes open as the world around me split apart. I wanted to see

death coming for me. I knew I had no choice in my death, but I could choose

how I faced it. Even when I could no longer hear the sound of my own voice,

even when my face and mouth filled with dust and ash, I kept my eyes open and

prayed. As the tower collapsed above me, strange as it might sound, I felt a

peculiar peace spreading through me. No longer able to speak, I prayed silently

in my mind as the force of the blast slammed me back against the concrete wall

of the building. Smoke and metal and cement and grit shot into my throat and

into my ears and into my eyes, burning me.

And then, somehow, at some point, it stopped. The destruction felt to stillness. I realized that it was over only when I heard the quiet—the most deafening silence. Now there was nothing but a void of blackness as dense as the

dust-choked air in my lungs.

The only indication that I was still alive was the pain. My mouth and throat were on fire. My eyes and nose burned. I didn't know that I was covered in a toxic mix of chemicals and building materials and God knows what else. I raised

my hand in front of my face, but I could see nothing. Had I been buried alive

after all?

I cautiously probed around me. Nothing. No molten metal or twisted beams of steel encasing me inside a metal tomb. With my arms stretched out, I began to

crawl from underneath the table and stood only after feeling the certainty of a

brick wall to my left. That terrible stillness was all I could hear. *Oh my God*, I

thought. *Everyone must be dead.* Though my eyes were scorched with ash, I forced them to open wider and focused on what I thought was a distant shimmer of light.

I moved toward it. If I was alive, the light was a good thing. If I were dead, I

guessed the light would still be a good thing. The glow was like the soft haze of a

candle, and I followed it until I finally heard a voice. I recognized it at once—my

friend and colleague Gabriel, calling out for me.

I don't think I can adequately express the relief of hearing a familiar voice after thinking the world had just ended.

I tried to shout out, but my voice couldn't get through all the chalky debris in

my mouth and throat. I spit some of it out and tried again. "Gabriel, is that you?

Gabriel, I can't see."

"Stay where you are!" he yelled. "I'm coming to you."

I stopped moving and waited until he found me. As he led me through the wreckage, my eyes slowly began to clear. I faintly watched two rectangles heading in another direction. They looked like they were coming from battle.

One was holding up the other, who was still grasping his ax, dragging it across

the ground. There was blood streaming down his face. The world looked like the

set of an apocalyptic movie, impossible to make sense of.

We continued to stumble through the near-darkness and then practically collided with two other agents.

“Genie?” Michael said (my nickname was Genie at the time, short for Evyenia). “My God, is that you?”

I heard that same relief in his voice—I knew exactly how he felt.

“It’s me.”

Together we walked into the lobby of a nearby building. Inside there were about a dozen or so people, who had managed to escape the worst of the blast of

the first tower falling. I stood there, my eyes shut tight, the burning worsening as

I tried to get my bearings. Looking back on it now, I thought that I had been brave by keeping my eyes open and facing death head-on, but in hindsight it

probably wasn’t the smartest idea, exposing myself to all that heat and ash.

A moment later, I felt someone begin wiping at my eyes with a wet cloth. I flinched at the sudden contact, but gradually relaxed as the burning diminished.

“Better now?” asked a man’s voice with a thick Spanish accent. I opened my eyes

and saw the building super cleaning the ash from my face. I nodded and thanked

him. I looked around the lobby and my gaze fell on a little boy of about seven who

was looking back at me. He was holding a bottle of peach Snapple as he and his

mother walked over. “For your mouth,” said his mother when her son offered the bottle to me. “Rinse your mouth out.”

I accepted the bottle, took a big swig, and spat it out. I wanted more, but I didn’t want to take any more of the little boy’s drink in case he might need it.

I still didn’t completely understand what was happening, or what might still be coming.

The one thing we did know was that it wasn’t over. We probably had only minutes or seconds before the second tower fell, and we needed to evacuate as

quickly as possible. We used our badges to show everyone we were law enforcement agents and convince them, forcefully but calmly, that they needed

to get as far away as possible—right now. “Everybody out and head toward the

water,” we told them. “You all need to get out of the area.”

We pushed them as far from the vicinity as we could. When the North Tower

started coming down seconds later, everyone began to run. Even when the cloud

of dust spread out from Ground Zero and engulfed us, we kept moving,

sprinting away from the explosion, grabbing people, pulling them toward safety,

carrying people too injured to run. At one point I saw a man in a truck stop in

the middle of the street, get out, and gaze up at the mountain of debris where

the towers once stood.

I immediately ran over to him. “Hey, you’ve got to get out of here,” I told him. “It isn’t safe.”

“My cousin, she works there,” the man said in a thick Polish accent, still staring up, immobilized and helpless. I knew what he was feeling. I had friends

and colleagues in those towers, too.

“Listen,” I said. “There’s nothing you can do to help her right now. You’ve got to get yourself to safety.”

He started to weep and put his arms around me, the two of us standing there,

hugging in the middle of the West Side Highway as people stampeded down the

sidewalks on either side of us. Fire trucks were tearing down the road away from

the destruction, their sirens screaming, regiments shouting through their

loudspeakers that a gas line had broken and everyone needed to run for their

lives. It was pandemonium. The other agents kept yelling my name, calling me

back, but I couldn't leave the driver as he sobbed and held on to me. Finally, I

helped him back into his truck and watched as he drove off before I returned to

my colleagues to help the other survivors.

I spent the next couple of weeks as a part of the search-and-rescue effort. I

sifted through the rubble of Tower 7 for sensitive intelligence from the Secret

Service as well as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), whose office had been

in the same building as ours. I canvassed the surrounding area for human

remains, which we then sent to the labs so that grieving families could identify

their loved ones.

It was three days in when my friend Sofia called me, distraught. "They can't find Joanna," she said. "What do we do?"

Joanna was a friend I had known for many years from the community of

Greek girls I'd grown up with. She was kind, bubbly, always laughing. And she

had worked at Cantor Fitzgerald, which occupied the 101st through 105th floors of Tower 1, only a few floors above where the first plane hit. With the initial smash of glass and metal we heard that morning, Joanna's life had probably ended, along with so many others.

Later, when Joanna's sister, Eileen, called me, I was racked with guilt over the fact that I was alive and Joanna probably wasn't. I told her that I needed Joanna's

DNA—hair from a hairbrush—and cheek swabs from family members.

There was a long silence on the line. "Okay," she said.

Seven months later the search team found a small fragment of Joanna's right arm, which meant that her family was finally able to put her to rest. In the aftermath of 9/11, going to Joanna's memorial service was one of the hardest

things I had to do. My survivor's guilt became so overwhelming that I left the

church midway through. While her family and friends honored her inside, I sat

on the front steps of the Greek church, huddled over and heartbroken.

About twelve months later, my supervisor called me into his office to say that the Secret Service was awarding me and the other agents who had stayed to help

on September 11 the Valor Award—a medal of the highest honor within the Service. He told me the day of the ceremony and that Jerry Parr, the agent who

had saved Ronald Reagan’s life after he had been shot, had been given that same

honor. But as he spoke, a knot formed in my stomach.

“I’m sorry, sir,” I said. “I will be overseas, visiting family. Can someone else accept it on my behalf?”

He agreed, somewhat reluctantly, and I left his office.

That night, I went home and booked my flight to Greece for the date of the ceremony. It’s not that I was insensible to the importance of being awarded an

honor rarely given, particularly one that so few in the Service have ever received.

But I just couldn’t bear the thought of being given a medal for living when so

many others had perished.

And after all, I’d done only what I was supposed to do—help. The same

thing that every police officer, firefighter, paramedic, and first responder had

done. The same thing that civilians had done, like the building superintendent who

cleaned the ash from my eyes. The little boy who gave me his Snapple to rinse my

mouth. The man in the truck who might have run into a collapsed burning

building to save someone he loved. They didn't need any specialized training to

look out for people who were hurt and scared, nor did they choose to help in the

hope of being awarded medals or recognition. They helped because it was the

only thing they could do. Because, without being told, they already knew that

when it seems like the world is ending, being willing to help others is the antidote to fear.

And that is the first step toward becoming bulletproof.

Introduction: Harder to Stop

To him who is in fear, everything rustles.

—SOPHOCLES

Survival Skills

The will to survive is fundamental to us all. But in a life-or-death situation—when calm, careful planning, and logical thinking are what's needed most—research shows that most of us will lose our shit.

I know fear. I have been trained by the best of the best to recognize when fear

is walking through the door like an uninvited houseguest planning to stay

awhile. And I know his crazy cousin, *panic*—that guy will wreck your house

faster than you can blink. If either of these two take over, things can become very

dire very quickly.

Here's what I also know to be true: Fear is relative to the situation you're facing. Whether you find yourself in the middle of a terrorist attack, trying to find the courage to deal with confrontation, or negotiating an important business meeting, your ability to conquer your fear, survive, and even thrive comes down to one thing and one thing only: mental attitude. Survival is about

mastering yourself and your fear response, being able to think and act while keeping your panic at bay. Being able to navigate your mental and physical response to fear is your number one survival skill. It can also be the best ally you

have in any intimidating situation life throws your way. Managing your fear requires a deliberate act of courage. It is a choice that you make, and it's one that

everyone is capable of making.

The Post 9/11 World

The world was a different place before September 11, 2001. Before the towers

fell, no one worried about planes being hijacked by terrorists and flown into buildings. Most police departments didn't even have terrorism units prior to

2001. They focused primarily on crime. After 9/11, however, al that changed.

As the world watched in horror while New York City l ed with smoke, a new

era of threats rushed in, and with it, new fears. Things most of us had never

heard of began making their way into our conversations, words like *al Qaeda*,

suicide bomber, and *infidel*.

Fast-forward to today and we nd ourselves facing new fears. Mass shootings,

school shootings, and cyberattacks lter into our social media and news feeds.

The world feels ful of fear in a way that can immobilize and overwhelm us at a

moment's notice. The fear of going to work in a high-rise building, the fear of

going to school, the fear of going to a country music concert, or to the movies—

our fears fol ow us like ominous shadows from home, to work, to wherever we

go. Some of us wish we could keep ourselves and our loved ones safely tucked

away inside, sheltered against the unstoppable dangers in a world just waiting to

prey on us. But the truth is that's not possible. Nor is it a way to live. Instead, as

our fears evolve, so too should the way we respond to them.

The best way to manage fear is preparation. It isn't hiding from the things we're afraid of—it's facing them head-on, taking responsibility for our own safety, and giving ourselves the tools and knowledge we need to manage any

situation that might come our way. It's about confidence, personal strength, and

self-sufficiency.

This book is about teaching you to become your own hero—to not only recognize when fear is rearing its ugly head, but how to control it, reduce it, and

even harness it. It's about helping you make empowered choices rather than letting fear run the show.

Our fears are tailor-made for each of us. Some fears are handed to us by our families and culture; some just show up in our minds with no explanation while

others are a result of a traumatic situation or experience. If you want to be capable of facing conflict and crisis without falling apart, you must first understand yourself, your fears, and then strategize how best to manage them.

This book will teach you to do just that—to prepare you for those life-threatening situations we all hope to never confront, and to gain the confidence

to handle whatever adversities you may face.

Throughout this book, I will share with you my own experiences with fear.

From going through some of the most intense training academies in the world to

interrogating terrorists and criminals to protecting some of the world's most

high-level targets, fear has shown itself to me time and again, in multiple forms

and many ways. I have become intimately familiar with each of them—fear of

death, fear of danger, fear of public perception, fear of failure, and fear of

following your dreams. These fears are familiar to us all at different times and in

varying degrees.

One thing I cannot teach you is how to be fearless. Being fearless is bullshit. It

isn't possible to live without fear, and it shouldn't be necessary in order for you

to live a healthy, successful life. Fear is natural, useful, and it keeps us alive. The

reason you don't drive fast is that you fear getting into an accident or getting a

speeding ticket. The reason you wait for traffic to pass before crossing the street

is that you fear getting hit by a car. The reason you study before an exam is that

you fear failing it. The reason you pay your taxes (hopefully) is that you fear the

IRS will come knocking on your door. All good reasons to be afraid. I've worked

with some of the bravest—and I mean bravest—people in the world. And none

of them are void of fear. Neither am I.

Division of Labor

This book is divided into three sections: The first section, PROTECTION, dives deep into the myriad ways in which you can protect yourself, your

loved ones, and your property. As an agent assigned to the Presidential Protective Division (PPD), I've learned a thing or two about what it takes to keep the most

powerful human being in the world safe. But protection isn't just about jumping in front of a bullet at a moment's notice; it's about planning for the "what-ifs" in life. Here, I'll share some personal stories of how I overcame a childhood spent in fear and how I became a Special Agent for the US Secret Service. More important, I'll offer unconventional advice about how you can protect yourself in practical ways that you can use, from choosing the safest seat

at a movie theater to talking to your kids about gun violence and lockdown drills. Protecting yourself and those around you is simply about preparation.

We'll also discuss strategies and tips for when you're traveling or away from home and help you create your own personalized protection plan.

Part 1 concludes with the seemingly most difficult, yet most important lesson to learn when overcoming fear: how to take a punch. Whether in the combat stages of Academy training, the mat room of my local jiu-jitsu school, or nearly

causing an international incident with a bully from a foreign delegation, this lesson has helped me through countless personal and professional challenges.

I've learned how to take a hit and how to hit back, whenever and wherever necessary. To be clear, I don't advocate violence in any form and my hope is that

by reading this book, you'll walk away a wiser and more confident person who

doesn't need to fight at the first slung insult. You should try to avoid physical confrontation at all costs. But when you do need to fight... I want you to have the conviction and courage to do so.

Part 2 shares the secrets to the art and science of READING PEOPLE. As a former polygraph examiner and interrogator trained by the US Department of

Defense, I'll reveal how you can tell what's really going on in the minds and bodies of the people you talk to. From the subtle direction someone's feet are

pointing to the hidden meanings behind their words, you'll get a crash course on

picking up verbal and nonverbal cues to indicate honesty and deceit.

We'll also explore how not to become overwhelmed when you think you're being lied to. After all, everyone lies, and often we have very good reasons for

doing so. By the end of this section, you won't need a polygraph machine to tel

if someone's lying—you just need to be willing to truly *listen*.

Part 3, the final section, is about INFLUENCE. Here, I'll teach you strategies to influence others. We'll discuss the often-overlooked value of our voice, our

appearance, and the words we use in everyday conversations. You'll sit beside me

inside the interrogation room where I use subtle, yet highly effective techniques

to influence people into speaking openly and honestly. These persuasion tactics

can be employed just as powerfully outside the interview room, with business

partners, professional colleagues, longtime friends, and even loved ones.

Sometimes all you need to get what you want is the ability to nudge people in

the right direction. But watch out! Influence isn't just a one-way street. We are

just as susceptible to being influenced—even if we don't realize it. Whether you're negotiating a deal, turning a blind eye to the actions of an unfaithful partner, or somehow always saying "Yes" to your best friend's annoying favors,

I'll point out the red flags and white lies that often show up when the influence tables are being turned against you.

At the end of this section, I'll share with you some of my most memorable experiences protecting some of the world's most memorable people. And I'll show you why these leaders were, in fact, *leaders*. I'll describe how their virtues

influenced me and can inspire you. From the late president George H. W. Bush's

genuine appreciation of people to former president Barack Obama's poise in the

face of duplicity, you'll come to understand what it means to be "presidential" in

every situation.

Layers Upon Layers

You may be surprised to learn that the modern-day bulletproof vest is not made

up of one solid piece of material, such as a molded piece of steel. Rather, it's

composed of multiple layers of fabric called *Kevlar*, which are woven together to

create a material so strong it can stop the piercing velocity of a bullet or the slash

of a knife blade. Bulletproof vests come in a variety of thicknesses based on the

level of threat the wearer is likely to face. Police officers, bodyguards, and Special

Agents usually wear a softer, more flexible type of bulletproof vest that sits underneath their uniform or suit jacket, while military units and law

enforcement tactical response teams typically wear a thicker vest composed of

both Kevlar and a type of metal or ceramic—worn on the outside of their clothing. These vests are often bulkier and quite a bit heavier, but offer an extra

level of protection against more lethal attacks, like bomb fragments or bullets

shot from high-powered rifles.

As a Special Agent, I was issued my first bulletproof vest the day I graduated from the US Secret Service Training Academy. Along with my gun and badge,

my vest became a normal part of my wardrobe. It didn't matter if I was standing

outside the door of a protectee's hotel room or breaching the door of a fugitive's

apartment; my bulletproof vest was always on. Wearing it gave me a sense of

confidence, knowing that it could save my life, but it also gave me something

else: a physical reminder that I was not completely safe. You see, feeling that

bulletproof vest velcroed around my torso kept me mindful of the fact that I was

not wholly protected from danger; my arms, legs, and even head were still

exposed and susceptible to attack. Even the vest itself couldn't protect me from

every type of bullet leaving the barrel of a gun. If someone had a high-powered

round or was using a specially designed armor-piercing bullet, my vest wouldn't be

able to save me. But it could save me from the many other things that I faced in

my job. And that's why I wore it. I was not unstoppable, but I was harder to stop.

The lessons, tools, and techniques within the three parts of this book have been written to be applied to your own protection, much like the individual Kevlar layers in a vest. When you put together all of the information shared throughout this book, chapter upon chapter, layer upon layer, you'll come away

having created your own piece of armor—a foundation of strategies to help you

face the world as a stronger, more resilient human being.

But this book is not only about teaching you what you can use; it's also about

teaching you to recognize what you can't. Like the vulnerabilities that still come

despite wearing ballistic armor, I want you to remember that you're not completely shielded against the harshness of the outside world. And that's okay.

Being keenly aware of what can still harm you actually helps you better prepare,

defend, and often avoid threats altogether. You likely have natural strengths and

aptitudes that you may not yet know how to tap into. These, too, can become a

part of your mental, emotional, and physical armor in the world.

Today, I still value the lessons that issued piece of equipment taught me.

Although physically it was about how several individual layers of fabric could

work together to protect me, metaphorically it was about something greater. It

meant that I was a protector. And to protect others, I had to arm myself with the

tools needed to stay safe, strong, and mentally sharp. I want to help you build

the mental attitude you need to confront your own unique set of fears and

challenges and learn how to become your own protector—as well as the protector for those you love.

Part 1

PROTECTION

Chapter 1

How We Fear

Courage is knowing what not to fear.

—PLATO

Don't Panic!

As the cold water rushed in, I gasped for one final breath before I was completely

submerged. I remember the whole cockpit tipping over, the sinking sensation in

my stomach, my body straining against the harness strapping me to my seat

before I hit the water sideways. My body lit up with adrenaline, ready to panic.

And then everything went quiet.

I unclenched my hands and took a mental pause. Panicking would only make

it harder to think, wasting valuable seconds I didn't have. Blackness obscured my

vision—there was no way to see my way to safety. If I was going to get through

this, I knew I would have to feel my way out. I reached down for the release on

the seat belt harness to my left... or was it my right? Was I completely upside

down now? I had to be—I had lost my bearings and couldn't find a reference point.

Don't panic. Find the latch. Pull to release. Swim to safety.

I repeated these words as I fumbled in the dark. Damn it, where the hell was that release? My fingers finally grasped hold of the U-shaped harness lever, yanking it to the open position. As the two-inch nylon straps slowly loosened

around me, I wiggled free and pulled myself through the cockpit door. I knew I

had to swim clear of the cabin before making my way to the surface. My lungs

were burning now, my heart pounding. A few more seconds and I would be free.

I finally kicked hard and forced myself upward. As I broke through the water's

surface, I gasped for my first breath of air in what seemed like an eternity.

"Good job, Poumpouras. You didn't drown!" shouted the Secret Service instructor. "Now get out of the pool. Next!"

The Academy training scenario for the day was a simulated helicopter crash in the Olympic-size training pool. Each recruit was first blindfolded, then strapped into the seat of a mock helicopter cockpit. The cockpit was then tipped upside down, submerging the agent, who then had to release themselves

from the safety harness and swim through an underwater maze before surfacing.

The training was designed to teach us how to survive should we ever find ourselves in that exact situation.

But the simulation wasn't just a "what-if" scenario. It became part of our training after a Secret Service agent died in a real-life helicopter crash on May 26,

1973. That evening, twenty-five-year-old Special Agent J. Clifford Dietrich, along with six other agents and three Army crew members, were flying from Key

Biscayne, Florida, to the Grand Cay Islands in the Bahamas for their overnight

presidential protection assignment for President Nixon. Shortly before landing,

the twin-engine Sikorsky VH3A helicopter crashed into the Atlantic Ocean.

Although the aircraft initially remained afloat, it soon capsized, causing the cabin to quickly fill with water. While the other passengers climbed to safety on

top of the overturned helicopter, Agent Dietrich never made it out.

When his body was recovered, he was found still strapped into his safety harness. According to the medical examiner, Agent Dietrich's cause of death was

asphyxia, due to drowning. Our training instructor also told us that both of the

agent's thumbs were broken. That meant Agent Dietrich had been alive and conscious when the helicopter hit the water, but ultimately drowned because he

was unable to free himself from the seat belt. Under stress, the agent would have

reverted to what he knew about seat belts—you push the release button with your thumbs, like in a car. But in a helicopter, the seat belt mechanism is completely different, something the agent most likely couldn't remember in his

critical moments of panic.

Even though I logically knew that I probably wouldn't die in a simulated helicopter crash, there was no way around the instinctual onset of panic that flooded through me. My mind didn't care that this was a controlled exercise, which meant the fear of drowning was as real as anything I'd ever experienced.

This exercise had nothing to do with physical strength or agility. While I was

looking for a way to physically Houdini myself out of the contraption and not

drown in the process, the simulation was teaching me how to maintain control

of my emotions.

Fear is a healthy and natural response to a perceived threat. On the other hand, panic causes us to lose control of our faculties. When we panic, we can't

think, can't reason, can't process or plan. And under extreme circumstances,

panic is likely to kill you faster than whatever it is you're afraid of. If you've ever

experienced a panic attack—heart beating rapidly, hyperventilating, trembling,

feeling like you're about to die—then you may understand what that agent felt

as he hung upside down in the darkness underwater, one simple click and brief

swim to his survival. He probably had minutes to assess his situation, form a

plan, and escape to safety, but his panic made that impossible.

Think about car accidents. Most people, when in a car accident, will take their hands off the wheel. At a time when logic says we most need to keep our

hands at ten and two, panic causes us to take our hands away from the very thing

that might save us. And where do people's hands go? Over their face. In the moments when we most need our steering wheel and our vision, panic causes us

to abandon both.

This book is not about never feeling fear. It's about understanding fear and learning to control it. I want to help you master your fear so that it doesn't turn

to panic in a moment when you need to be able to think clearly. Fear can also be

a limiting influence in our lives. It can prevent us from pursuing goals that we

long to go after, from speaking openly and honestly, from being who we're truly

meant to be. When we feel threatened or exposed, our fear can connect us and

cut us off from the world. If that feels familiar, I'm going to help you change your relationship to fear. I'm going to show you how to get to know your fear,

trust your instincts, and make choices that will keep you safe and strong.

Surviving Fear

We are born with two kinds of fears hardwired into our system for survival—two

fears that scientists call innate: the fear of falling and the fear of loud sounds.

Most of us have had a dream where we're falling and then startle awake. This fear

of falling has been with us since birth. Newborns are quickly wrapped in a blanket because they can't immediately distinguish where their body ends and

the world begins, which causes them to constantly jerk as if they are falling, a fear

that eventually diminishes once their depth perception develops. Beyond their

startle reflexes, studies show that infants refuse to crawl over a platform made of

clear Plexiglas even when their mothers are at the other end calling to them.

They will stop at the edge and cry rather than risk going over the "visual cliff."

Their innate fear of falling is strong enough to override even that powerful bond

between mother and child.

Loud noises are the other stimulus that humans innately equate with danger.

When we hear a loud noise, our acoustic startle reflex kicks in and our bodies

instantly react. That's why we jump when a car backfires, why children cry at

rework shows, and why we immediately drop to the ground when we hear

anything that sounds like a gunshot.

Beyond the fear of falling and the fear of loud noises, all other fears are learned fears. These are the fears that we inherit from our parents or acquire while growing up. If your mother is afraid of dogs, chances are you are going to

grow up being afraid of dogs as well. Learned fears come from everywhere—our

family, our friends, our culture, the news we watch, the harm we've witnessed or

experienced. We are taught to be afraid of failing or afraid of trying at all. There

is no limit to the fears we can accumulate in our lifetime.

Every generation seems to grow up with some type of societal fear. In the 1950s, it was the Red Scare and communism. The 1960s became a decade of

fearing for personal safety with the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the assassinations

of President John F. Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy. In the 1970s, it was the foreign oil crisis, the political upheaval with the impeachment of President Nixon, and the

skyrocketing of crime throughout the United States. In the 1980s, it was the fear

of external threats against the United States, particularly with Iran and the

Soviet Union. In the 1990s it was the Y2K scare, fearing that all life and technology would cease once the calendar year hit 2000. The early 2000s ushered

in a global threat unlike anything before it—terrorism.

Today we have mass shootings. A 2018 Pew Research Center study found that more than 50 percent of teenagers were concerned that a shooting would

happen in their school, with 25 percent of them being “very worried.” This fear

persists despite the statistical improbability of any one student becoming a school-shooting victim. With more than 50 million American youths attending

public K–12 schools for roughly 180 days of the year, the chance of being killed

by a school shooter is about 1 in 614 million. By contrast, the likelihood of being

struck by lightning in any one year is 1 in 1.2 million. Highlighting this mathematical implausibility, however, usually won’t diminish the worry of students or their parents, any more than it would diminish the fear of being attacked and killed by a shark (1 in 3.7 million) or being in an airline crash (1 in

5.4 million).

The debilitating nature of any fear, especially unlikely ones, can drastically

limit our ability to simply enjoy life. These fears can make some people too afraid to board a plane or swim in the ocean. Perhaps those people would be willing to drive to the beach, so long as they don't wade into the water past their

knees, or take a long road trip rather than take the risk of flying. They might choose these deceptively "safer" options despite the fact that there is a far greater

chance of being injured in a car crash than a shark attack or plane crash. In fact,

there is a 1 in 102 chance that you could be killed in a car accident in a given

year. So why aren't people more afraid of dangers with a higher statistical probability, like car accidents? Why do we become so preoccupied with threats

that have an incredibly low chance of ever occurring? Our fears have to do with

several things, the first of which is the sensationalizing nature of the incidents by

the media. When things that rarely happen, happen, they become newsworthy.

You are more likely to see, and thus remember, the social media post or evening

news story about the victim of an unlikely tragedy—a surfer attacked by a great

white shark off the coast of California—than you are about the two-vehicle

accident that sent one driver to the hospital, something so common it likely won't even make the news. Exposure to those kinds of stories make those unlikely threats feel more real to us, and that fear overrides our ability to logically

assess the probability of those things actually happening.

Additionally, we are genetically predisposed to avoid things that can cause instant death—a big shark with teeth, a 1,000-volt bolt of lightning, or falling out

of the sky. My intent here is not to make you more afraid of driving, but to get

you to reflect on those things that you are most fearful of, to assess why you are

afraid of them, and look at them logically, rather than enduring a clouded sense

of dread amplified by sensationalized stories.

What Fear Looks Like

When I was sixteen, my family and I moved from Long Island City into a better

neighborhood in Queens. Although crime in that part of New York wasn't nonexistent, it wasn't nearly as bad as where we came from. Because money was

always tight, my little brother, Theodoros, and I helped our parents clean o

ce

buildings on the weekends after they each finished their day jobs. One Sunday

night, after finishing early, my mom and I drove back to our house while my father and brother stayed a few minutes longer to lock up.

When we pulled into our driveway, I noticed the vertical blinds in the living room were open and the lights were on.

“Why are the lights on?” I asked my mom. “And the blinds open?”

She looked confused. “I don’t know. We always close them.”

We didn’t completely register that something was amiss until my mom unlocked the front door and we walked in. And that’s when I saw him—a man

running through our house toward the side entrance.

My mom immediately froze—literally went motionless, as if her feet were cemented into the floor. I, on the other hand, didn’t hesitate—I charged inside.

“No!” my mom screamed. “Stop!” But she wasn’t yelling at the intruder. She

was yelling at me. I was already running after him. When I got to the side door, I

saw him leap over the neighbor’s fence and into the black of night. Gone.

“Maybe there are others still here!” I shouted back to her and began checking

every room in the house.

“No,” my mom pleaded. “Stop, just stop.”

She was terrified for me, but her cries somehow sounded far off in the distance. I was mad going on furious as I first cleared the basement and then worked my way back upstairs. I was going to protect my mom, protect our home, no matter what. I may have only been a teenager, but God help whoever

was still in this house. I didn’t know how, but I was not going to let them get away until the police arrived and took them to jail.

Now, at this point in the story you might be thinking *Wow, you’ve got some balls!*, or maybe *Listen to your mother, you idiot. You’re gonna get yourself killed.*

Regardless of what you’re thinking about my level of bravery—or stupidity —

I share this story with you for an entirely different reason. First, let’s go back to

the start of the story: we pulled up to the house together in the car and immediately knew something was wrong. Our sense of fear and uncertainty began to build. When we walked inside, we saw a man running through our house. Fear built faster alongside the slightly delayed recognition that we were

being burglarized. Now what happened? What did my mom do? What did I do?

My mom froze in her tracks. I ran after the guy. Bravery? Hardly.

My mom and I experienced the exact same exposure to a threat, yet we had two completely different reactions. These reactions are called our *Fight, Flight,*

or *Freeze responses*, also known as the F3 response. My mom went into Freeze

mode, whereas I went into Fight mode. And you could argue that the intruder I

was chasing was in Flight mode.

Researchers say our Fight, Flight, or Freeze response activates even before we

are aware of it as a way of assessing danger. If it's a threat we think we can overpower, we go into Fight mode. If it's a threat we think we can outrun, we go

into Flight mode. If it's a threat where we think we can do neither—we Freeze.

People may have a different response to the same stimuli—as my mother and I

did—but no matter what your particular response to fear may be, the most important thing is to know and understand it so you can control it.

Fight, Flight, or Freeze

F3 is your body's way of arming itself to help protect you. It is your physiological

response to help you deal with the situation at hand. It's you—but a heightened