CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1: The Night You Became the One Who Checks the Locks

It usually starts with a sound. Around eleven, the furnace clicks off, or the ice maker drops a load, or a car slows down out front longer than it should. You are already in bed. You know you locked the back door. You remember doing it.

You get up anyway, walk the hallway in your socks, and put your hand on the deadbolt. Locked, just like you knew. On the way back you check the front door too, and the window over the kitchen sink.

At some point, without anyone announcing it, you became **the one who checks the locks**. This book is for that man.

The quiet change that comes with living alone

For most of your life, the house ran on two routines. Somebody else heard the noises too. Somebody asked, "Did you lock up?" and you could say yes and mean it for both of you. Somebody else's car sat in the driveway some days and was gone on others. There were two coats by the door and two chairs on the porch.

Then the household got smaller, and the house didn't notice. The rooms are the same size. The yard is the same yard. But the way the place looks from the street changed, one small signal at a time.

I noticed it first in the evenings. After my own house went quiet, I caught myself leaving the same lamp on in the same room every night, because that was where I sat. One night I walked out to the mailbox after dark, turned around, and saw what a stranger would see: one glowing window in an otherwise dark house. I stood there longer than I'd like to admit.

That moment is where this book begins. It isn't about fear. It's about noticing.

What people living alone already know

You are far from the first person to feel this. In a set of Reddit threads collected by AOL, women who live alone traded the habits that made them feel safer (AOL compilation of Reddit posts by women living alone). Their advice was plain and cheap. They kept a rubber door-stop wedge for nights at home, because it adds time and noise if someone forces the door. They got on friendly terms with a neighbor or two who could check in. And over and over, they repeated one rule: **don't show that you live alone.**

In a similar thread, longtime solo dwellers suggested putting only a last name or initials on the mailbox, varying which lights are on, and never opening the door before a visitor identifies himself, delivery and repair workers included (AOL compilation of tips from women living solo).

Look at that list again. None of it costs much. None of it needs a contractor. Every item is about controlling what the house says to someone outside it.

> **Case:** People who live alone, asked what actually helped, didn't describe alarm contracts or reinforced safe rooms. They described a wedge under the door, a neighbor with their number, a mailbox without a first name, and lamps that change from night to night. Every one of those fits into a single weekend.

Feeling exposed is not the same as being paranoid

Let's settle something early, because it matters for everything that follows.

Paranoia means fear that has no evidence behind it. What you are feeling has evidence behind it. You have correctly noticed that your house may look like one person lives there, and that one person is predictable. That observation is accurate. The danger lies in what you do with it: worry about it every night at eleven, or fix it once and go back to sleep.

What the evidence says, in plain numbers

Start with the good news, because you rarely hear it. The U.S. burglary rate fell to 229.2 per 100,000 people in 2024, the lowest in FBI records going back to at least 1961[22]. Chapter 2 walks through that long decline. For now, hold on to one fact: break-ins are less common today than at almost any point in your adult life.

> **779,542** burglaries were recorded nationwide in 2024, about 64% below the 2,190,182 recorded in 2005[22].

Fewer burglaries does not mean zero, though. The houses that still get hit tend to share certain traits, and the people who break in are surprisingly willing to describe them.

When KGW, a Portland TV station, asked 86 Oregon inmates serving time for burglary to answer 17 anonymous questions, the things that made them move on included big barking dogs, strong heavy doors, and **signs that someone was home** (KGW). Several said they knock first, just to check whether anybody answers.

A larger study from UNC Charlotte surveyed 422 incarcerated burglars in North Carolina, Kentucky and Ohio about how they choose a target[16]. Most said they looked for signs of added security before going in (UNC Charlotte College of Humanities & Earth and Social Sciences, 2013-05-15). The researcher who led it explained why he asked the offenders directly:

> "By asking the burglars what motivates and what deters them, we believe this research can help people better understand how to protect themselves against these crimes and help law enforcement more effectively respond." Joseph Kuhns, UNC Charlotte[16]

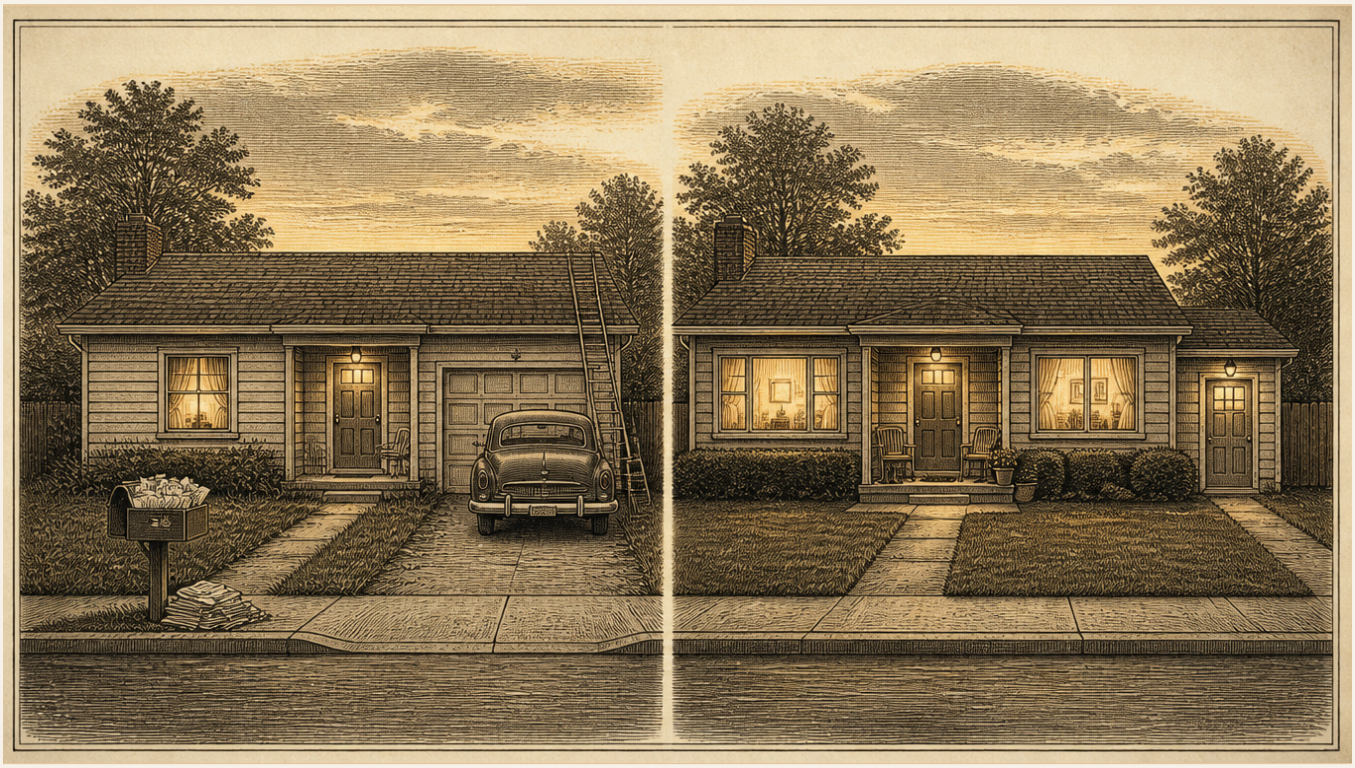
The worst fear, the one behind that walk down the hall, is meeting someone inside your own house. Bureau of Justice Statistics data from 2003 to 2007 show that about 7% of household burglaries involved some form of violence against a household member[6]. That's a small share, and Chapter 4 explains it plainly. Every step in this book aims to keep your house off the list in the first place.

The Household Signal

Here is the one idea to carry out of this chapter. I call it **the Household Signal**.

> A burglar judges your house from the curb before he ever touches a lock. Your job is to make the house read as busy, lived-in and shared, even when it's just you.

A fortress is expensive, and it still tells a passerby something about who lives inside. The Household Signal is cheap, because it is made of ordinary things: a second chair, a coat, a lamp that moves, a car that doesn't sit in the same spot for a week, a voice at the door that gives nothing away. Put together, those things answer the question every burglar asks from the street: *is anybody going to be a problem here?*



What this book asks of you: a weekend, a few dollars, no contractor

You may already have been handed a quote. Security salesmen are good at finding men who live alone. Chapter 16 looks closely at what those systems do and don't do. At the far end of the scale, residential safe rooms built to FEMA guidance run about $3,000 to $9,500 depending on size and type (FEMA). That money buys a place to hide once trouble is already inside.

This book asks for much less, and it aims earlier. Here is the deal:

- **One weekend.** Chapter 25 lays out Saturday morning, Saturday afternoon and Sunday, signal by signal.
- **A few dollars.** Most of the fixes are props and habits. The most famous hardware fix is a set of 3-inch screws for the door's strike plate (the metal plate the bolt slides into). Short factory screws often hold it only to thin trim, and longer ones reach the wall stud behind it (Seattle Police Department). Chapter 22 covers exactly how to do this safely, and what renters should check first.
- **No contractor, and nothing you aren't allowed to do.** If you rent, almost everything here can be undone the day you move out. Boots, coats, timers and scripts don't need a landlord's signature.
- **No announcement.** Nobody has to know you felt exposed. Chapter 26 even shows you how to tell your family you've handled it without making it sound like a confession.

Most of all, this book asks you to look at your own house honestly, the way a stranger would, and to do that once instead of every night at eleven.

Tonight's first step

You'll check the locks tonight anyway. This time, bring a pencil.

- ✓ At the top of a single sheet of paper, write today's date.
- ✓ As you make your nightly rounds, list every door and window you check, in the order you check them.
- ✓ Before bed, write down which lamps are on and which rooms are dark.
- ✓ Tomorrow, in full daylight and in shoes with good grip, walk to the end of your driveway or the edge of your yard. Stay on the sidewalk or grass, never out in the street, and turn around.
- ✓ Write down one thing you can see that says "one person lives here."

Keep that sheet. It becomes the start of your curbside list in Chapter 8.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Treat your unease as information.** You've noticed something real about how your house looks, and that's worth acting on once, not worrying about nightly.
- **Remember that the house is judged from the curb.** Offenders surveyed in Oregon named signs that someone was home among their strongest deterrents, and several said they knock first to check.
- **Start with signals, not spending.** The advice people living alone actually use (initials on the mailbox, varied lights, a door wedge, a friendly neighbor) costs almost nothing.
- **Keep the numbers in proportion.** Burglary is at its lowest rate in FBI records, and violence in household burglaries is uncommon, so the goal is to stay off the list, not to live braced for a fight.
- **Do tonight's sheet.** One page of honest notes turns a nightly habit into a plan.

Still, a question sits under all of this. If burglary is at a record low, why does the evening news make it sound like every street is under siege? And if the numbers keep falling, which houses are still getting chosen, and at what hour of the day? The answer surprises most men who check their locks at night, because the real numbers point somewhere else entirely.