CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1: The Night a House Gets Chosen

The man on the sidewalk is walking slowly. He has no tools and no plan for any one house, and he isn't thinking about the woman who lives at number 14. He is looking at her porch, her windows and her driveway, and he is asking himself a single question.

By the time he reaches the corner, he has the answer. He doesn't know her name, her age, or what she keeps in the bedroom closet. He knows only what her house told him in passing. That is how most houses get chosen. It happens in a few unremarkable steps, by someone who will never meet the person inside.

This book is about changing what your house says during those steps.

Why burglars shop for houses, not people

When people picture a break-in, they usually picture a target. They imagine someone who learned about their jewelry, their late husband's coin collection, or their habit of keeping cash in a coffee can. That does happen, but it is not the usual way.

Most burglars shop the way you shop for tomatoes. They walk along the row, glance, and pick the one that looks easiest to take home. The person who owns the tomato never enters the decision.

We know this because researchers asked them. A UNC Charlotte study interviewed 422 incarcerated burglars in North Carolina, Kentucky and Ohio. About 60% said an alarm would make them look for another target (UNC Charlotte, 2013-05-15). The study is now more than a decade old. Even so, the phrase that matters has not aged: *another target*. These men were not attached to any particular home. When one house looked like trouble, they moved on to the next.

> **83%** of the burglars interviewed said they checked for signs of an alarm before breaking in. About half said they would leave right away if one went off (UNC Charlotte, 2013-05-15).

Read that number the way a burglar would. Before he touches your door, he is reading clues. He is weighing the house, and he is ready to walk away.

My own mother taught me this without meaning to. After my father died, she kept his heavy work boots on the mat by the back door for almost two years. She said it was because she couldn't bear to move them. Years later I understood they had been doing a second job the whole time.

The short walk that decides everything

Burglars rarely pick a house from a car at speed. They check. Police in Burbank, California describe what they call **"knock-knock" burglaries**. Someone knocks or rings to see if anyone is home. If a resident answers, he gives a fake excuse: the wrong address, a request for directions, or a name of someone who doesn't live there. If nobody answers, he breaks in[1].

> **Case:** Residents near Toluca Lake and Burbank reported these burglaries happening weekly. The visitor rang the bell and made up a reason to be there if someone answered. If no one did, he checked around the house for an open window or door (NBC Los Angeles, 2025-02-01).

This happens in the daytime too. In Evesham, New Jersey, residents reported burglars knocking on doors in broad daylight before breaking into the homes where no one answered (CBS News Philadelphia).

Look at the order of events. First comes the walk past. Then, sometimes, the knock. Only after that comes the door or the window. The house had already been judged before anyone touched it.

That gives you an opening. You don't need to win the fight at the door if your house loses the stranger's interest on the sidewalk.

> **The Sidewalk Verdict:** your house is judged from the street before anyone touches it. Change what it shows the street, and you change the verdict.

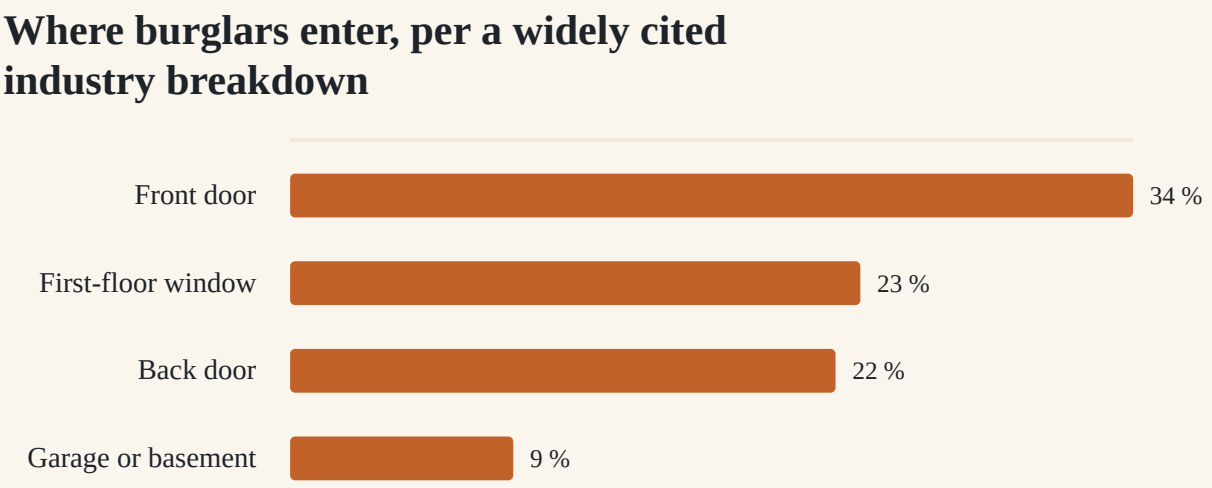
I'll come back to the Sidewalk Verdict throughout this book. Every fix we make will be measured against it.

What 'easy' looks like to a stranger on the sidewalk

So what is he reading? He wants three things: a house that looks empty, a way in that won't take long, and a way out where nobody will notice him.

Empty shows in small ways. A delivery box sits on the step from yesterday. Every window is dark at the same hours. Blinds stay in the same position for days. One car sits in the driveway and never moves. None of these mean much alone, but together they read like a sign on the lawn.

Quick shows in the doors and windows. An industry breakdown repeated by Reolink and others says about 34% of burglars enter through the front door, 23% through a first-floor window, 22% through a back door, and 9% through a garage or basement (Reolink, 2026-01-01). These figures come from the security industry, not from a government count, so treat them as a rough picture. The picture is still useful. Most break-ins use the ordinary ways people come and go.



Where burglars enter, per a widely cited industry breakdown

Unwatched shows in tall shrubs by the windows, a side gate that hangs open, or a back porch nobody can see from the street.



Notice what is missing from that list. He doesn't need to know you live alone or that you are 74. He doesn't need to know your income. The house tells him enough.

One more fact deserves a calm look. Bureau of Justice Statistics victimization data show that a household member was home during about 28% of household burglaries. Someone was violently hurt in about 7% of all burglaries (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010-09-30). That data is older, and I won't pretend it describes this year exactly. Still, it explains why this book starts with prevention instead of confrontation. Burglars, like the ones in that UNC Charlotte study, mostly want to avoid people. The best night is the one where he never chooses your house in the first place.

The good news: almost every signal is fixable

This is the part I most want you to hear. Nearly everything on the stranger's list can be changed by one person without heavy lifting, without a contractor, and in most cases without a drill.

A box on the porch can be redirected with a delivery instruction. A dark window can be lit by a plug-in timer. A blind that never moves can be moved each morning when you open the kitchen curtains. Later chapters cover the doors and windows themselves, and every fix includes a version for renters.

Some fixes take no equipment at all. Burbank police and the Sacramento Police Department say that when someone knocks, you shouldn't open the door, but you shouldn't stay silent either. Speak through the closed door so the caller knows someone is home[21]. Sacramento police put it plainly in an advisory: "If Someone Knocks at Your Door, Don't Ignore It!" You don't owe that person an explanation. A voice is enough.

You may have heard that expensive systems failed on your street, or that the police report went nowhere. Both may be true, and we'll deal honestly with each one later. For now, hold onto this: the first decision belongs to the stranger, but the evidence he decides on belongs to you.

Tonight's ten-minute look

You don't need to buy anything to start. Tonight, look at your house the way he does.

- ✓ Turn on the porch light and take a flashlight, even if the street seems bright. Wear shoes with grip and carry your phone.
- ✓ Walk only as far as the end of your own driveway or the sidewalk in front of your house. If steps or ice make that unsafe, look from a front window or ask a neighbor to look for you.
- ✓ Stand still and look for about as long as it takes to walk past. Count the signs of "nobody home": packages, dark windows, closed blinds, a car that hasn't moved.
- ✓ Write down the first three things you noticed. Don't fix anything yet.
- ✓ Go back inside and lock the door behind you.

Keep that list. Chapter 5 will show you how to read it, and Chapter 9 will help you erase most of it in one evening.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Judge your house from the sidewalk, not the hallway.** The stranger decides from the street, so that is where your fixes need to be visible.
- **Remove the signs of "empty" before you upgrade a lock.** Packages, dark windows and blinds that never move are the cheapest signals to fix.
- **Answer a knock with your voice, not the door.** Police advise speaking through a closed door so the caller knows the house is occupied.
- **Write down the first three signals you see tonight.** That list is the start of your plan.

The man on the sidewalk has already made up his mind about many houses on your street. Before you change what your house says, though, it helps to know how often he walks by at all, and when. The national numbers tell a surprising story, and part of it may change how you sleep. So how worried should you actually be?