

GRAVES GUIDES

# HOLD THE HOUSE

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A Marine's Field Manual for Securing Your Home When You Live Alone: Door Scripts, Hiding Places, and a 30-Minute Plan for Tonight

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First edition · October 2026

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Wade Merrill is a fictional character. No real person is depicted or impersonated.

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Short on time? Do the 30-minute plan in Chapter 1 tonight, then read the rest in any order. Every checklist is collected in Appendix A so you can print it.

## How to use this book

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You do not have to read this book front to back. It is built to be used in three sittings.

**Tonight, 30 minutes.** Turn to Chapter 1. It is a plan, in order, that fixes the four things that make the biggest difference with the least money: the screws in your door frame, the lights, the mail, and what you say to a stranger. If you do nothing else in this book, do that one.

**This weekend, two hours.** Walk the property with Chapters 5 and 6, then do the room-by-room in Chapter 7. Pick three hiding places from Chapter 8 and build them. Every chapter ends with the one thing to do first.

**Whenever it comes up.** Tape the door-script card (Appendix B) inside a kitchen cabinet. Read Chapter 12 before the next storm season, not during it. If you are setting this up for a mother, a father, or a neighbor, go straight to Chapter 10.

**Every checklist in the book is collected in Appendix A, one per page, so you can print them.** The boxes are real boxes. Use a pen.

### What this book is, and is not

It is a practical manual for making an ordinary house a poor choice for the wrong person. Almost everything in it costs between nothing and twenty dollars and takes minutes.

It is not a fear book. Most people who live alone never have a problem, and nothing here asks you to live braced for one. The aim is smaller and more useful: to make your house stop telling strangers things about you that they have no business knowing.

It is not legal advice. Laws on locks, recording, and defending yourself differ by state, and a few of the ideas here (rain barrels, security film on a rented home, anything that changes the structure) are worth checking against your own local rules and your lease. Where a number appears in this book, the source is named in Appendix C. Where a price appears, it is an approximate figure for planning, so check the shelf.

It does not teach anyone to defeat a lock, and it does not tell you to confront anyone. Every method in here works by making the burglar's job harder or by making the house look like more trouble than it is worth. If a stranger is actually inside your home, leave and call 911.

# Introduction: Nobody Breaks In To Find Out You Live Alone

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It is a Tuesday afternoon. A man in a yellow vest is on your porch with a clipboard, friendly, mid-thirties. He is "checking meter readings on the block," and he has already been by your neighbor's. He asks whether now is a good time. You say sure, no rush. He asks if the homeowner is around. You say it is just you until your daughter visits Sunday. He asks what time you usually get home in the evening. You tell him, because he is polite and you are polite and it took forty-five seconds.

He thanks you. He walks to the next house. And in forty-five seconds he has collected your adult count, your schedule, and the one fact every burglar wants most: **nobody else is coming.**

That conversation is a composite. It is built from the kinds of pretext questions strangers use, and I will take it apart line by line in Chapter [4](#). The point is simple. You did nothing wrong. You were courteous. And courtesy is exactly what he was counting on.

By Sunday night, you can have this fixed. You will know what to say at the door and on the phone. You will have long screws in the one door that gets kicked. You will have broken the lighting and mail pattern that says "one person lives here." You will have three places in the house that a stranger will not find in five minutes. And you will have a plan for the next storm that does not involve a candle or a bugout bag.

A burglar does not have to pick a lock to learn you live by yourself. Most of the time the house tells him. Sometimes you tell him yourself, standing on your own porch, in a conversation so ordinary you have forgotten it by the time the door clicks shut.

I did my time in the Corps, and the habit that stayed with me is reading ground: where would I come in, where would I stand, what would I look at first. When I started looking at ordinary houses the way a stranger does, I noticed that the houses he skips and the houses he picks are not separated by money, or alarms, or neighborhoods. They are separated by **how much the house gives away.**

He is not looking for the hardest house on the block. He is looking for the easiest yes. A single porch light that comes on at the same minute every night, mail that sits for three days, one car that never moves, a polite answer to a polite question at the door: none of these is a security failure by itself. Stacked together, they add up cleanly to one person, home alone, on a predictable schedule. That is the picture he is shopping for.

The good news is that every one of those signals is cheap to change, and none of the fixes requires you to become someone else.

## What this book does

It does four jobs, in this order.

**It shows you what he sees.** Chapters 2 and 3 walk through how a stranger reads a house and the signals that say "one person lives here."

**It gives you words.** Chapter 4 is the one to learn first: exact, polite lines for the doorstep and the phone that answer the need behind the question without handing over your schedule.

**It hardens what is worth hardening.** Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 take you around the property, through each door and window, and into each room, so five minutes inside your house turns up nothing worth the trouble.

**It covers the people and the weather.** Chapters 9 and 10 are for the person living alone, and for the people who worry about one. Chapters 11, 12 and 13 cover the car, a storm, and a blackout, because the safest place to ride one out is almost always the house you are already standing in.

## A word about the numbers

I use very few statistics, and I name the source of each one in Appendix C. The two that matter most are these. Close to three in ten American households are one person living alone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024), so if that is you, you are in very large company. And when burglars do hit, a household member is home in about 28 percent of burglaries, and in about 7 percent of all burglaries someone at home is the victim of violence (Bureau of Justice Statistics, covering 2003 to 2007). That second number is not a reason for fear. It is the reason the door, the lock, and the first ten seconds of a conversation matter more than any alarm sticker you can buy.

Where I do not have a number, I will say so instead of making one up.

## How a chapter works

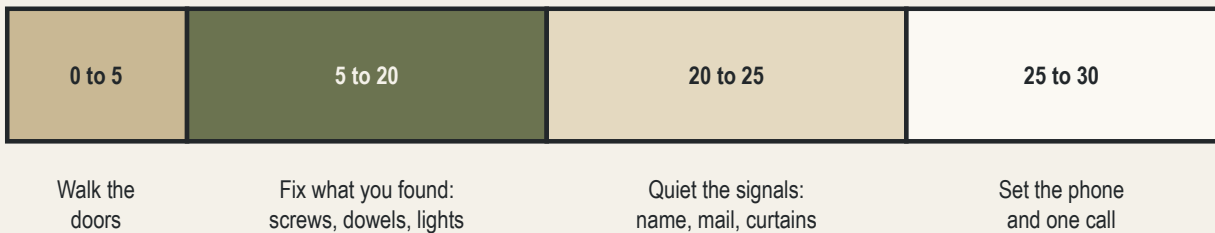
Most chapters follow the same shape: what the problem is and why it works on you, the fix, what it costs, and the **one thing to do first**. The shaded boxes are the parts you will actually come back to. **Say this** boxes are lines to speak. **Do it tonight** boxes are fixes that take under an hour. **The Tell** boxes name the signals a stranger reads.

Take it one chapter at a time. Start with Chapter 1.

# The 30-Minute Plan for Tonight

Start here. This chapter is the whole book in thirty minutes. It is ordered so each step makes the next one cheaper, and it fixes the signals a stranger reads first. Everything here costs under about \$40 total if you own nothing, and most of it costs nothing.

## THE 30-MINUTE PLAN, IN ORDER



Minutes. Do the blocks in order; each one makes the next one cheaper.

**FIGURE D-3** Thirty minutes, in order. Walk first, fix second, quiet the signals third, set the phone last.

## Minutes 0 to 5: walk your doors like a stranger

Go outside. Stand at the edge of your property, at the street if you can, and look at your house for one full minute the way a man who has never seen it would. Then walk to each exterior door and write down, on paper, three things for each: does it lock with a deadbolt, does the strike plate (the metal plate on the frame) look loose or small, and is there glass within arm's reach of the lock.

You are not fixing anything yet. You are making the list.

## Minutes 5 to 20: fix what you found

### DO IT TONIGHT

**Replace the short screws in the strike plate and the hinge plates with 3-inch screws.** Factory screws are usually three-quarters of an inch to an inch and a half and bite only the thin trim. Three-inch screws reach the stud behind it. Cost: about \$4 for a box, a drill or screwdriver, 15 minutes for the front door. (Figure D-2 in Chapter    shows why.) If you do only one thing in this book, do this.

Next, in this order:

- **Put the porch light on a new schedule.** A bulb that comes on and goes off at exactly the same minute every night is a signature. Use a \$5 to \$15 outlet timer on one lamp and set a second lamp, in a different room, to a different time. Chapter 3 explains the logic.
- **Fix the dead bulb.** If a porch or entry bulb is out, replace it today.
- **Slide a dowel or a cut broom handle into the track of every sliding glass door.** A sliding door lock is the weakest lock in most houses. A piece of wood cut to fit the track makes it a door that will not slide open. About \$2.
- **Lock the door in daylight, every time,** even when you are in the yard or just taking out the trash. A great many walk-ins are simply unlocked doors.

## Minutes 20 to 25: quiet the signals

- **Mail and packages.** Pick one neighbor and ask them to grab a package or the mail if you are ever gone more than a day. For planned trips, the Postal Service will hold your mail for free ([usps.com](https://usps.com), search "hold mail," about two minutes online).
- **Move something every day.** Open a blind to a different height in the morning than at night. It takes two seconds. A blind that never moves is a tell.
- **Trim what the mailbox and door say about you.** If they show "Mrs." or a full first name, change it to an initial and a last name. Chapter 10 explains why.
- **Break down any box with a TV or computer on it** and put it inside the bin or out on the morning of pickup, label side in. A big-screen TV box at the curb is a catalog.

## Minutes 25 to 30: set the phone and one call

- **Program your phone's emergency contact** and make sure your lock screen shows it (on most phones: the Medical ID or Emergency Information screen).
- **Call or text one neighbor.** Use the script in Chapter 9: "I'll watch your place when you are gone. Can you do the same for me? Here is my number." One real person who watches your driveway beats any gadget.

- **Put the door-script card on the inside of a kitchen cabinet.** Appendix **B** has one to cut out. You are going to need it before you need a lock.

▲ **WARNING**

**A drop-in security bar goes on a back door, never on a bedroom door or on the only way out of the house.** In a fire you need every door to open from the inside without a key and without a second thought. Anything you add for burglars must still let you out.

## What you just did

You hardened the one door that gets kicked, you broke the lighting pattern, you cut off the mail signal, and you put a real person on the other end of a text. None of it needed an alarm company. That is a better start than most houses on your street have.

### The 30-minute plan, printable

- ☐ Walked every exterior door; wrote down lock, strike plate, glass
- ☐ 3-inch screws in strike plate and hinge plates (front door first)
- ☐ Porch light and a second lamp on different timers
- ☐ Replaced any burned-out entry bulb
- ☐ Dowel in every sliding door track
- ☐ Mail and packages: neighbor asked, or hold set up
- ☐ A blind or curtain moved, morning and night
- ☐ Boxes broken down and hidden from the curb
- ☐ Emergency contact on the phone lock screen
- ☐ One neighbor called, door-script card posted

**One thing to do first:** the screws. Everything else can slide until the weekend.