

THE TWO CHECKS

A free sample from *The House He Skips*, Volume I of The Hard Target Handbook.

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Before you spend a dollar on any of this, go and do two things to your front door. They are free, they take about ninety seconds between them, and between them they decide whether anything else in this book is worth doing.

I put them first because most people get this backwards. They buy the camera, then the doorbell, then the sign for the yard, and the door those things are all pointing at has a fault in it that nobody has ever looked for. A camera tells you somebody is there. It does not know anything about the condition of your jamb.

Neither of these checks needs a tool you don't already own. One of them needs a flashlight. The other needs a tape measure, and you can do it with a dollar bill if you haven't got one — a bill is a bit over six inches, so fold it in six and you're close enough to know whether you have a problem.

CHECK ONE — THE JAMB THAT HAS ALREADY FAILED ONCE

Here is the thing almost nobody knows about forcing a door.

The lock doesn't break. The door doesn't break. **The jamb splits.** That strip of soft pine running down the latch side, about three-quarters of an inch thick, is the only thing your bolt is actually held by, and when a door goes in it goes in because that strip let go. Everything else is still fine. People stand there afterward looking at an intact deadbolt sitting in a piece of splintered pine, trying to work out what happened.

So far, so ordinary — you'll find that in any article about door hardware. Here is the part I don't see written down anywhere.

A great many jambs have already split once, and been fixed so you can't see it. Not from a break-in, most of the time. From twenty years of a door being slammed. From a previous owner who locked themselves out and put a shoulder into it. From a landlord's handyman.

Whatever the cause, the repair is nearly always the same: wood putty or spackle pushed into the crack, sanded flat, sanded again, painted over. From three feet away it is invisible. From one foot away it is invisible.

And it is worth nothing. Wood filler is a cosmetic product. It has no real tensile strength, it will not hold a screw under load, and a jamb repaired that way is weaker than it was before it split. The door still closes. The key still turns. The homeowner has no idea.

Go and look

1. **Open the door.** You cannot do this check with the door shut.
2. **Hold a flashlight flat against the jamb** — lens almost touching the wood, shining *along* the surface rather than at it. This is the whole trick. Light coming in straight makes everything look flat. Light raking across it throws a shadow off anything that isn't.
3. **Look at the six inches above and below the strike plate.** A filled split shows up as a faint line, a slight ripple, or a patch where the wood grain simply stops and starts again. Paint sits differently on filler than it does on pine; once you've seen it you'll never miss it again.
4. **Run a fingernail along it.** Filler is softer than the surrounding wood and dents.
5. **If you're not sure, take the strike plate off.** Two screws. Look into the mortise. A previous split shows there first and nobody bothers to hide it somewhere you'd never see.

The honest limit

If you find one, this is not a Saturday job, and I'm not going to pretend it is. Driving longer screws into filler accomplishes exactly nothing — they need to pass through the jamb and bite framing lumber behind it, and if the pine they're passing through is already cracked and puttied, you're anchoring to nothing. That jamb wants replacing or properly reinforcing, and it's one of the four things in this book I'd tell you to pay somebody for.

The good news is it's a twenty-minute conversation with a contractor rather than an afternoon of guessing, and now you know what to point at when he gets there.

CHECK TWO — THE DEADBOLT THAT ONLY LOOKS LOCKED

A deadbolt is supposed to throw **one full inch** into the frame. That isn't my preference, it's the standard the things are built to — a Grade 1 deadbolt extends an inch, and every other part of the design assumes it got there.

Plenty don't. Not because the lock is bad. Because the hole behind the strike plate was never drilled deep enough when it was fitted, or because the door has sagged a sixteenth of an inch a year on its hinges for twenty years and the bolt no longer lines up with the hole it was made for. So the bolt goes in partway, stops against wood, and the key still turns.

That's the part that gets people. From the inside, a bolt that's gone in half an inch behaves exactly like a bolt that's gone in a full inch. Same sound. Same feel. Same key. You have a latch with extra steps and you have no way of knowing.

Go and check

1. **Open the door and throw the bolt.** Measure what's sticking out. Under an inch and the lock itself is short — no amount of work on the frame fixes that, you need a different lock.
2. **Close the door, lock it, and push.** Then pull. Any movement at all, any rattle, and that bolt is not seated in its hole.
3. **The crayon test.** Rub a wax crayon or a bit of lipstick on the end of the bolt, throw it against the closed strike, then open up and look at the plate. The mark tells you exactly where the bolt is landing — clean through, catching the edge, or stopping on metal.
4. **Notice the resistance.** If the key needs a shove through the last quarter turn, that bolt is binding on wood, not seating in a hole.

The honest limit

Two different faults live here and they have two different fixes, which is the entire reason to do the check instead of guessing. A lock that throws short gets replaced. A hole that's too shallow gets drilled deeper, or the strike gets moved. Most people who sense something is wrong go and buy a new deadbolt — the more expensive answer, and usually the wrong one.

THIS WEEK

Don't do the whole book. Do these two, tonight, on the door you actually use.

Then do the same two on the back door and the door from the garage, because in my experience those are worse — they get fitted faster, by someone in a hurry, and nobody ever looks at them again.

That's it. That's the homework. Everything else in Volume I is about the street, the ground, the light and the habits that decide whether anyone walks up your drive in the first place. But it all sits on top of a door, and you may as well know what condition yours is in before you spend money defending it.

*This is one item from Module 4 of **The House He Skips** — 75 checks across eight modules, outside in. Volume II, **Ninety Seconds That Matter**, is about what you do once somebody is already inside. The complete collection adds a third volume for apartments and rentals, plus three printables: the curb card, the duress card and the dated hardware list.*

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