CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1: The Drawer Full of Receipts

The house makes a sound at 2:47 a.m. Maybe it's the ice maker, or the furnace, or the back door settling in its frame. Your eyes are open before you decide to open them. Your wife is asleep beside you, or she's still on the road home from a late shift. Your hand moves toward the nightstand drawer.

Then it stops, because you already know what's in there. There's a flashlight that flickers when you shake it and a pepper spray canister you bought three summers ago. There's a "tactical" pen, a door alarm with a battery you can't remember changing, and a stun gun that crackled once in the driveway and hasn't been tested since. Under all of it sits a small pile of receipts.

In that moment, lying still and listening, you realize something that stings worse than the fear. **You don't trust a single thing you paid for.**

The 2:47 a.m. Moment

Most men who pick up this book have lived that moment more than once. The noise turns out to be nothing. You get up anyway, walk the hallway, check the front door, then come back and check it again. You lie down and stare at the ceiling until the alarm clock goes off.

What keeps you awake isn't only the fear of someone coming in. You already spent money to make this feeling go away, and it didn't go away. A careful man hates being fooled. He hates it more when he fooled himself.

I know that drawer because I had one. Years ago I kept a flashlight-and-stun-gun combo on my nightstand. One Sunday I clicked the switch at the kitchen table, and the light came on but the stun side made no sound at all. I'd been sleeping next to it for most of a year.

How a Careful, Frugal Man Ends Up With Six Dead Gadgets

Nobody buys six dead gadgets on purpose. You buy them one at a time, usually late at night, usually right after a news story or a noise in the yard. Each purchase makes sense on its own.

The prices make it easy. On Slickdeals, a deal thread for a roughly $16 Vipertek flashlight stun gun drew buyers who liked the low price and others who doubted how well budget stun devices work (Slickdeals). At sixteen dollars, nobody does research. You click, it arrives, you drop it in the drawer, and the feeling of having done something lasts about a week.

Then the gear starts dying without telling you. On an electronics forum, a hobbyist reported that his cheap stun gun had stopped arcing. Members traced failures like his to weak batteries or a failed high-voltage stage, and they warned that budget units can fail silently unless owners test them regularly (Electro-Tech-Online Forum).

Other buyers found out the device never worked the way the box promised. In one forum discussion, a man said a cheap "100,000 volt" unit made his arm spasm but would not stop an assailant. Many members agreed that pain alone is not a reliable way to stop a determined attacker (The Armory Life Forum). Another man asked outright whether any stun guns "aren't junk," after noticing that critical Amazon reviews call most of them junk (Grassroots Motorsports Forum).

> **Case:** A Maryland gun owner tried to order a stun gun and found that Amazon would not ship it to him. Forum members explained how the marketplace's own restrictions and state rules can block a delivery even where owning the device is legal (Maryland Shooters Forum). He hadn't done anything wrong. He simply ran into a rule the listing never mentioned.

The pattern repeats. A frugal man buys cheap because he's careful with money. He buys often because each cheap thing disappoints him. He never tests, because nobody told him how, and nobody told him a device can sit dead in a drawer for months. The frugality that runs his household well ends up filling the drawer.

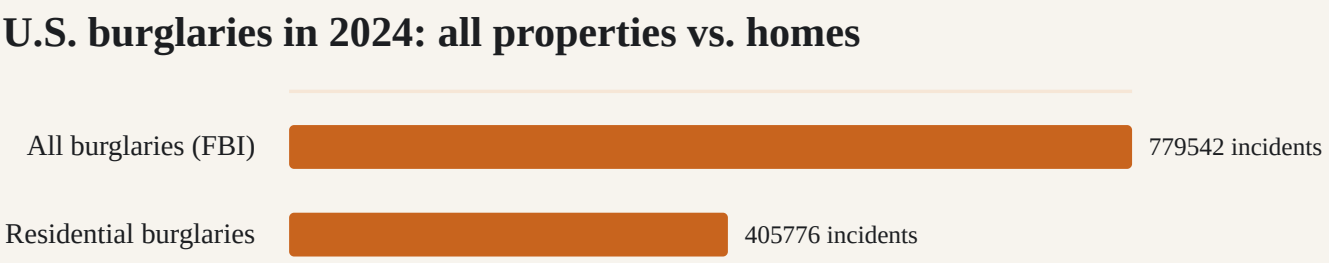
The Real Cost: Dollars, False Confidence, and Lost Sleep

Add up the receipts and the dollar figure may surprise you, but it's the smallest of three costs.

The second cost is **false confidence**, and it's the dangerous one. A dead tool in a drawer feels exactly like a live one. As long as you never test it, it keeps giving you permission to stop thinking about the problem. That permission is what you actually paid for.

The third cost is sleep. You didn't buy that gear because you enjoy gear. You bought it so you could close your eyes. If you still check the door twice, the purchase failed at the only job that mattered to you.

There's also a gap between what the drawer prepares you for and what usually happens. The FBI recorded 779,542 burglaries in 2024. That works out to a rate of 229.2 per 100,000 people, the lowest on record and 8.6% below 2023[25]. About 52% of those hit residential properties, roughly 405,776 incidents[24].



U.S. burglaries in 2024: all properties vs. homes

Those are the latest full-year figures in the sources behind this book. The risk is real, and it's also lower than your 2:47 a.m. brain insists. What burglars say they respond to is also a long way from what's in your drawer. In a UNC Charlotte survey of more than 400 convicted burglars, 83% said they would try to find out whether a home had an alarm. Sixty percent said they would pick another target if it did[34]. When KGW surveyed 86 Oregon inmates convicted of burglary, most said they got in through an unlocked door or window, and most would leave right away if an alarm sounded (KGW).

> **60%** of convicted burglars in the UNC Charlotte survey said an alarm would send them to a different house[34]. None of the six gadgets in a typical drawer makes a sound until you pick it up.

Chapter 2 digs into those findings. For now, notice the mismatch. You've been spending money on things you'd grab at close range, while the people who break into houses say they're weighing locks, noise, and whether anyone is home.



> **The Receipt Test:** if the only proof a tool works is the receipt you kept, you don't own a defense. You own a memory of shopping.

Tonight's exercise: empty the drawer

Do this before you read Chapter 2. It takes about fifteen minutes.

- ✓ Take everything out of the drawer (and the closet shelf, and the glovebox) and lay it on the kitchen table.
- ✓ Write each item on a sheet of paper, with what you paid and roughly when you bought it. Guess if you have to.
- ✓ Next to each one, write the last date you **confirmed** it worked. "Never" is an honest answer.
- ✓ Leave every item unfired and unactivated for now. Keep spray caps and safeties on, and never discharge a canister indoors. Chapter 23 walks through an outdoor test with the right setup.
- ✓ If any battery looks puffy, swollen or leaky, don't charge it or press on it. Set it aside on a hard, non-flammable surface away from heat and children until Chapter 24.

Look at the column of "nevers." That column is the problem this book solves.

What This Book Will and Won't Ask You to Buy

I owe you a straight answer before we go further. You've been sold to plenty already.

This book **won't** ask you to buy the biggest number on a box. Million-volt claims and heat ratings get their own chapter. It won't sell you a knife as a home-defense plan, or a pocket gadget that looks clever in a listing and fails in a dark hallway. It won't hand you a list of affiliate links and call that advice.

What it **will** do is give you a way to judge anything, including gear you already own. That judgment rests on three numbers you'll meet properly in Chapter 4. The first is how far away the tool actually works. The second is how many seconds it takes to go from a sleeping hand to first use. The third is how long the tool stays alive sitting in a drawer.

Those three numbers already matter for the tool most people start with. In a study of 936 police incidents, OC spray (the "oleoresin capsicum" pepper extract in most canisters) reduced violent behavior in 93% of cases. But the effective range was often under 2 meters, and it took 3 to 5 seconds of spraying to work[29]. If you haven't tested your canister, you know none of those three things about it.

When we do get to buying, the list will be short. It's one spray, one light, and one alarm, chosen by test results, dated, and checked on a calendar. For many readers, the first real upgrade isn't a gadget at all. It's the door, the frame, and the habit of locking it.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Empty the drawer tonight** and write down each item, its cost, and the last date you confirmed it worked.
- **Treat every untested device as dead** until it passes a test. A tool you've never checked gives you confidence, and nothing else.
- **Stop buying at 2:47 a.m.** Write the urge on your list and make the decision in daylight.
- **Match your spending to what burglars say deters them.** Alarms and locked doors rank high in their own accounts. Drawer gadgets don't come up.
- **Judge any tool by range, seconds and lifespan**, not by the number printed largest on the box.

Before you can judge any tool, you need to know who you're actually defending against. The figure pacing your hallway at 2:47 a.m. feels certain. But what if the man you've been buying gadgets for isn't the one who is most likely to come?