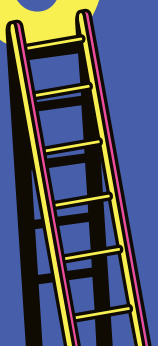
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A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BREAKING AND ENTERING





Andrew Hunter Murray

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BREAKING AND ENTERING

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For Dr Stewart Murray
who introduced me to The Don

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Prologue

This is the part where I explain how I ended up here. It's also the point – I think this is right – where I explain how terribly sorry I am about all the poor decisions that landed me here in the first place.

I'm not very remorseful, to be honest, although I hope that fact doesn't come out at trial. I'm rather *embarrassed* to be here, especially given how many lovely homes I've been in over the years, but self-pity is a terrible look, and I had a pretty good run until all this. And as for poor decisions . . . I think I would have ended up here anyway sooner or later. I just came by the scenic route.

Incidentally, you wouldn't believe how easy it is to get access to a computer in here, provided you aren't too fussy about things like 'the internet'. I've signed up for a course in

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IT Literacy, meaning I get an hour a day on a whacking great Dell in the badly named Information Suite (it's less a suite than a cupboard, and most people come out of it worse informed than they went in). Not many people want to use the Suite. The PCs in it were forged around the Late Cretaceous, meaning they are a) the size of a room and b) almost completely useless. Also, I guess a lot of my colleagues here were arrested by a PC, so the term has bad associations.

But these ancient, hulking computers – seriously, they're actual desktops, it's like being in the nineteenth century – do have a few things going for them. They have Windows '95, for one, with the full Office set, meaning that I can log on, ignore Gertrude the IT instructor, and type for a solid 57 minutes each day, with a three-minute Solitaire break at the end as a little treat. I might get this published one day, if I play my cards right. Although if anyone pays me for this, will it count as 'proceeds of crime'? Might do. I'll have to circle back to that once the trial is over. And I'll have to think of a decent pen name too. That shouldn't be a problem. My master pseudonym list is currently up to 86 entries.

I *love* a prison opening to a story, by the way. Sorry. That's another distraction, because you're already champing at the bit to get on and find out how I – a bright young man with marketable skills and good prospects – managed to end up in more trouble than anyone else in almost the entire cell block, piss off both the law *and* the criminals, and nearly get himself killed about six times along the way.

But I do love a prison opening. You can't beat them. Just

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watch *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, or read the one about that girl who literally murdered all her relatives and still managed to make herself seem like the wronged party. A prison opening tells you this is going to be *fun*. It also gives away that I live to tell the tale, although to preserve a bit of mystery I won't tell you what sort of state I'm in right now. I'll tell you this for free: my skincare routine has seen better months.

Anyway. My current circumstances are south London and medium security. They don't tie you down at night, which is how you can tell it from a maximum security place, but they *do* check the locks on the doors every few days, which is how you can differentiate it from minimum security. I argued that maybe I should be in solitary for my own protection, but they laughed and told me not to be a drama queen. I think solitary must cost them a lot more.

Although I'm actually in the Info Suite right now, typing this up under Gertrude's lazy eye, imagine me sitting in the Visitors' Room. This isn't one of those fancy American set-ups, with the little phone and the wipe-clean screens. No, this is a proper British public-sector environment, which means durable carpet tiles and plastic-coated single-seat armchairs. They have uncomfortably high arms, so it's hard to get at your pockets, and they're positioned nice and far from each other, to make it that little bit harder to hand over any contraband that avoided the friskings.

Right now, I'm waiting for a friend (lawyer) to turn up and tell me how the rest of my story is falling out. My trial is considered much lower priority than the others, but there's also

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nowhere to bail me to. Not only that, nobody had any inclination to pay my bail, so I'm just waiting around. It's probably the best place to be; the story I set in motion is prompting quite the kerfuffle out there. I'm not surprised, really. Any story featuring luxury property, big-money fraud, international espionage and high treason will snag the attention of even the thickest newspaper editor.

So those are my circumstances. A bit under-vegetabled, a bit short on vitamin D, some split ends (do men get split ends?), but alive, and typing with all the fingers that still work. As for how it all started . . . God. That's harder. I have considered the various points where it 'began'. There's the moment we heard the shot, of course, although that's too neat. Then there was the bit where I met Em and her friends for the first time, although if she and I hadn't already been in the same line of work, we'd never have teamed up.

In fact, I know where it started: 14 Cadbury Lane. My last solo job. If that had gone well – all right, if I hadn't screwed it up so badly – I'd still be a free man now. I wouldn't have encountered Davy, or Mr Bowling Ball, and I wouldn't have found out about the yacht's-worth of money that got me into this whole mess. I wouldn't have met Em, Elle or Jonny, and I wouldn't have become the primary focus of at least three law enforcement agencies and eight criminal gangs. I wouldn't have got someone else shot, or myself banged up.

But much like the Crown Prosecution Service, these things are sent to try us.

Here's how it began.

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When it comes to breaking into someone else's house, there are rules.

The rules aren't to protect the house, of course. The rules are to protect you. Although confusingly, looking after the place *is* one of the rules. If you're going to be an interloper, which is my term for my highly specific profession, you have to treat the property as if it's your own. If you manage that, more often than not the few people you encounter will genuinely believe you own it, provided they didn't see the rightful owner there last week. The rules will always guide and defend you.

Case in point: here I am, outside one of the nicest houses in the whole of this little Sussex village, about to break in. I should be very tense indeed. But I'm perfectly calm, because I have the rules on my side.

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I don't want to make my work as an interloper sound twee, incidentally. I'm not a fucking Borrower. My job is glamorous, enjoyable and yields big rewards, but it does come with risks attached. And one of those risks, not that I know it yet, is about to bite me right on the arse.

Here's how this whole mess started.

10.03 a.m. Paul Lethbridge – prosperous and fifty-something – is leaving for the airport. 'Prosperous' is my polite way of saying he's let himself go a bit in his middle years. But he does look wealthy. He's got a kind of base suntan that you can tell he's proud of, and that he doesn't let get below a certain level even in midwinter. If he has to go to Antigua in January to top it up, then off to Antigua he will go. Even the band where his wedding ring used to lie is now the same uniform honey colour as the rest of his finger.

Paul's not a bad guy, probably. He's a bit short with people, a bit too confident in his own abilities, he's got a high-pressure job, and he's also been a bit too solitary for a few too many years to be considered truly 'socialised' any more. But I could say the same of myself. And I'm *certainly* not a bad guy.

Mr Lethbridge isn't going to Antigua today. He's setting off on a three-week trip to the Middle East to conduct some of the legal work that has paid for so much over the years: this house, mainly, and the primary residence in the city. His work even manages to pay all the maintenance fees now required of him, more or less on time. He's leaving his car at home (a nice, newish proper Porsche; he's sure all this electric nonsense will blow over in a few years) and cabbing to Gatwick. Dev, the

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minicab driver, has been waiting twenty minutes already, but he doesn't mind. Mr Lethbridge is a reliable customer in an Uber-stricken industry. Dev's freshly vacuumed Toyota is waiting on the drive, inside the slightly overwrought-iron gates.

Out of the front door comes Mr L, frowning a bit when he sees the car and the tracks in his nice clean gravel; he wishes they'd wait on the road like he requested on the phone. He locks the door, checks it, waits while young whatever-his-name-is loads his enormous case into the boot, conscious that it would be improper to offer any assistance, checks the door again for good measure. Then he crunches across the drive and clambers into the back seat. The gate swings ponderously open, and the car – a little lower on its wheel arches thanks to Mr L and his luggage – moves out onto the one-lane road and away.

10.04 a.m. Quiet descends once again on this little back road of this posh little village. In the car, Mr L asks Dev to turn off Magic FM immediately, and checks his phone to see he's booked into the right first-class lounge at the airport. He doesn't even glance at the rear-view mirror. Neither does Dev.

10.05 a.m. Back at the house, I emerge from the nearby lane, and start my day's work.

I hope Mr L has a wonderful time in Jordan, but I'm glad he's gone. He and I would make terrible housemates. And for the next three weeks, his house – gorgeous, Georgian from the look of it, tastelessly modernised but still with some wonderful original features – is mine.

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I don't look like much, incidentally. I've got a shirt and jacket on, a Covid mask (the greatest innovation of the last decade as far as my line of work is concerned), and dark blue jeans, tucked into some bog-standard old Dr Martens. I could be literally any member of the gig economy right now, and I'm about as memorable. Consider the last person who delivered a package to your place. Do you remember what they looked like?

Thought not.

Right now, I'm keeping as many of the rules as possible active in my head. You know how most plane crashes happen on take-off and landing? Interloping is just the same. Get in and get out OK, and the time in between practically takes care of itself. Here are just a few of the rules I'm obeying already:

Rule 11: *Daylight is better for getting in.* You'd be amazed how conspicuous you feel at night. It's bad for your nerves. Actually, you just *are* conspicuous – it's much harder to see what you're doing, you might need a light, and the element of plausible deniability when you are found skulking around a basement window at 3 a.m. is almost nil, compared with you getting into the same predicament at 3 p.m. You're practically asking to be caught. No thank you. Let sunshine win the day.

Rule 17: *Approach on foot.* Cars are so easily scanned these days. None of the houses I go for have cameras on – for obvious reasons – but if it comes to the worst and there's a camera nearby, it'll have your plates, and if something goes wrong and the tapes are investigated, you're stuffed. Leave the car nearby and arrive on foot. It all counts towards your 10,000 steps.

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Rule 21: *No suitcases.* They drag, they make a hell of a racket on almost any surface, and they catch the eye. 'I didn't know there was someone visiting number 17, dear,' the neighbours will say as they peep out. 'Hang on, aren't they away? And this boy doesn't look like the rightful owner!' Ugh. Instead, go for a casual weekend bag over one shoulder, and slip into the place unnoticed. Many of my interloping rules, incidentally, are subdivisions of Rule 3: *Make yourself as forgettable as possible*.

The Lethbridge gates open at the touch of a button. This isn't surprising: almost all gates open during daylight hours if you press 0. People are far more concerned about the chance of missing a package than they are about someone getting into their home, which is fair enough, because everyone gets deliveries all the time these days, while the odds of me turning up at your house are slim.

What have we got? The house is low, two storeys, and comfortably double-fronted. There will be a few rustic-chic outbuildings round the back, no doubt, via the gate – damn, the *locked* gate – leading to the rear. No keys to be found on an initial sweep of the front, neither beneath the rather bedraggled pots (good, there's clearly no gardener) nor under the doormat (*Welcome to Sin City!* A post-divorce present from a mate, I bet). And, crucially, no alarm. You wouldn't believe how few places actually have alarms, and although there are ways to get around them, there's something much more relaxing about the whole experience when there's no need to fiddle about with wires or override codes.

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I give it twenty minutes before I'm in.

I leave my shoulder bag in the front, discreetly hidden behind a huge terracotta urn that's about as authentic as Mr Lethbridge's sparkling front teeth, and after a bit of undignified crawling and wriggling over the side gate, I'm in the back garden. No cat flap; no unlocked doors anywhere. I grudgingly upgrade the owner to a Category 2, or NTC (Not Totally Clueless). But there is a shed, and where there are sheds there are ladders. And ladders are a perfect mechanism for accessing all the roof windows and skylights that nobody ever checks, because what sort of nutter would try to get in via the roof?

Halfway to the shed, I look around. The house is shielded from its neighbours even this far into the garden. This is the back street of the village. At the far end, the garden dips away into a beautiful strip of woodland. I know from Google Maps that there's a golf course beyond the woods, and I'm pleased to report the trees are far too thick to be seen through. It's perfect. God bless you, Mr Lethbridge.

10.38 a.m. Mr L is out of the car. He's paid Dev (£56 one way: Mr L considers this cheeky considering it was only £48 last time, and tips four quid on top of the fee, which expressed as a percentage makes him sound like a stingy bastard but really was just a convenient way of rounding up to £60, and nobody can blame him for that). He retrieves his enormous case and moves onto the travelator towards Departures.

10.42 a.m. This is tougher than I thought it would be.

There wasn't a ladder in the shed. I looked everywhere. The garden is lovely, although it's a bit neglected; Mr L is not an

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outdoorsy type. Through the windows of one of the side rooms, I can see a gym that is worryingly well equipped for a man living alone. I might have twenty years on him, but I wouldn't like to come up against Mr L in a fight.

Fortunately, what the place lacks in ladders it makes up for in trellises. The trellis leads – with a minimum of breakage and zero footprints in the flower bed – to the first floor, the roof of which slopes up to a lovely slanting skylight. It's been left closed, of course, but these things always have a release catch somewhere. I pull out a few of my favourite tools and get to work.

10.43 a.m. At Gatwick Departures, the automatic check-in is broken – a cyberattack, according to a little paper sign that has been printed on the last working printer in the terminal – and so Mr L joins the queue. It moves briskly enough, and when he gets to the front of it, he announces his name. The girl behind the desk asks him for another key bit of information.

He pats his coat pockets. Then he pats his trouser pockets, followed by his coat pockets again, and frowns.

10.47 a.m. Exactly as Mr L is searching his clothes for the third time, I'm dropping the twelve-ish feet from the skylight window onto the floor of the orangery. (You wouldn't believe how many houses in my line of work come with an orangery. I've never seen one containing so much as a single orange.) Twelve feet is not a *fun* distance to drop, but it's onto a rug thick enough to lose a cat in, and I'm not yet thirty. Despite that, I fumble the landing. As I'm swivelling with feline grace to hit the ground, bend, *roll* and recover, I realise I haven't

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turned quite far enough. I crash clumsily onto my ankle, and Christ it hurts. *Find ice* goes onto the crowded to-do list. You clown, Al.

Never mind that for the moment, because I'm in. This is the golden half-hour.

I check my watch. I gave myself twenty minutes to get in; it actually took me forty-five. How discomfiting. Three years ago it would have taken me ten. This is the third job in a row where I've taken longer than I predicted. I'm either getting too careful, too careless (as my swelling ankle suggests) or too old. None of these options is comforting.

Never mind that right now. Golden half-hour.

11.14 a.m. Phew. Task list completed, comfortably inside the Golden H-H. That means I've done the following:

One. *Spotted* the exits. In this house there's the big beech front door, which is definitely not the best option. There's also a door out the back of the kitchen, which is a safe bet, some French doors at the back of the living room that I've taken the precaution of unlocking, and a big window in the back wall of the orangery which also looks out over the garden, so I've slipped the catch of that one, just in case. That window is actually my best option, rather than the French doors in the living room, because it leads directly onto the flagstone path running down the middle of the garden towards the woodland gate.

Two. *Sorted* any damage I caused getting in. No problem here. The orangery skylight is sealed again. I've checked the

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rug for anything I might have dropped, and the room looks as good as it did before I fell through the top of it. Easy.

Three. *Snapped* the arrangement of the key rooms, bedside tables, etc. It might seem like overkill to you, but when you are plotting an orderly departure – in other words, when an interlope has gone according to plan – it really makes a difference to have pictures, so you can get everything back in its rightful place. If anything goes wrong, of course, you'll have more to worry about than whether the alarm clock on the bedside table was facing left or right. As you're about to see.

Four. *Secured* a spare set of keys. No need to explain why these will come in handy. Mr L keeps his in a little leather posing-pouch in the hall table.

Five. *Stashed* my bag by the nearest exit, the orangery window. I know, it seems excessive – the man is going to be a thousand miles away for the best part of a month – but keeping your kit near your chief exit is a useful habit. After all, we're still in the stage of the job when things are likeliest to go wrong. I'll check the flight gets off OK, and once 24 hours have elapsed, I'll unpack a bit.

Six. *Put* the kettle on. The houses I break into – no, that I *make my way* into; 'breaking' only happens one time in three, and I always make good – might all have hi-tech kettles, but the problem is that they almost never have milk. So I've brought a pint with me. Easy.

The interior is lovely. A bit much stripped wood for my liking, but I can see what they were going for. It's the kind of

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house a banker might have bought in the nineties, if you know what I mean. I can see from the wall chart – God bless you for making my life easy, Mr L – that there's a cleaner coming on Thursday, who I'll have to watch out for. I might just pop out for the morning, give her lots of time. You have to do a double clear-out when the cleaners come – no sense in filling the bins up and creating difficult questions – but that's a small price to pay, because if they do their job right they destroy a lot of evidence that you were ever there.

11.26 a.m. This, in case you were wondering when we'd get to it, is the part where I made my big mistake. We haven't heard from Mr L for a while, have we?

I'm on the corner sofa, which runs to about two acres of plush dark green velvet. I've got my tea made: optimistic WORLD'S BEST DADDY mug, clearly being kept as proof. I've popped some frozen peas on my ankle. I've even – and this is one of the small touches on which I pride myself – got a coaster out from the central stack. *Lighthouses of the North* is the theme. I know he's technically one of my 'victims' (hate that word), but I'm beginning to like Mr L.

The sofa I'm in faces away from the window. I'm not going to sit in the uncomfortable chair opposite me just to keep eyes on the front of the property. That decision will prove to have been a bit stupid.

And then, I hear it. The faint noise of an engine in the lane outside. The problem is, the windows are triple-glazed, so it's extremely quiet, and honestly, I've had a busy few days scoping this place out, getting out of my last place, and it

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simply doesn't occur to me that anything untoward could have happened.

All of this is sloppy. I do appreciate that.

As I sit there – like a fool, not even twisting around to look – I finally notice the only other object on the table.

Sitting before me, quiet and demure, is a passport, an old-school post-Brexit dark blue set of Her Britannic Majesties.

This feels relevant.

Our two timelines – which I was really hoping would remain parallel – are about to converge.

11.27 a.m. Even as I turn, the gate to the drive is swinging open and I can see the car waiting on the lane. In the driver's seat sits Dev, who has clearly been subjected to some uranium-tipped swearing on the way back from the airport.

Stepping through the gate in an incredibly bad mood is Paul Lethbridge, who has managed over the last forty minutes of illegally fast driving to blame anyone but himself for the stupidity he has shown this morning.

Mr L, all I can say is that I know exactly how you feel.

Shit, shit, shit, shit, *shit*.

OK. So now you're about to see what I call a 'crash exit'. Despite how amateur I'm sure I appear right now, I haven't actually had to do one of these for eighteen months. They're not a lot of fun at the best of times. And right now, I've got a cup of tea in my hand and a twist in my ankle.

Pick up the tea and the peas. Move to the orangery. The good news is that there's a wall between the orangery and the front hall – his footsteps are coming closer across the gravel

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and they sound seriously pissed off – so assuming he remembers where he left his passport (living room, left off the hall), I'll be fine. Of course, there's a risk he'll go right, to the kitchen, and then pass through the orangery as he runs around the ground floor looking for it.

So: time to leave.

I take two agonised steps into the kitchen, jam the pedal bin open, shove the peas in, hobble back into the orangery. Next, I ease the window open – do the noisy bits first, before he gets in – and then, as I hear his key in the front door, I drop my single kitbag outside, scramble out after it, and stick my head back in to listen. God, it's exposed here. Once he's in the hall, he'll have only a few strides before he's overlooking the garden. It's twenty metres to the far end. And I won't have time to get to the fence without him seeing me.

Wait. I can't move without working out which way he's going. If I know he's going to his left (living room), then I can run to the right of the house, around past the kitchen window, and he won't see me there. Or if he goes right to the kitchen first, I can run *left*, and take shelter in the green of the garden. I'll be camouflaged enough. Glad I'm not wearing my hi-vis today. (Must tweak Rule 34: *Hi-vis jackets help you blend in*.)

Actually, hang on, Mr L is only going to be in the house thirty seconds with any luck, and then I'll be back in possession. He's going to run in, grab his passport, run out again. OK. This can work. I haven't left anything behind he's likely to look at – no debris in the hall, nothing but the milk in the fridge. My bag's by my side out here. OK. Breathe, Al.

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Why isn't he in yet? Oh, wait, I know – he's been trying to open the deadlock on the door, which I've already unlocked. He'll think it's jammed or something. I can practically hear how angry he is just from the way he's struggling with it. As he's doing that, I look down, and observe with faint amusement that I'm still holding the WORLD'S BEST DADDY. I pop it on the ground, outside, below the window. He won't see it there, unless he decides he left his passport in the garden.

Eventually, he stops attacking the deadlock – is he thinking? Is he getting suspicious? – and goes for the main lock instead. Now he's coming through the front door. All I have to do is listen out for his direction of travel, *ease* my head out, shut this last window, go the opposite way, and shelter until he's off the premises. Simple. I look up. Good, I shut the skylight window. Even now, I find the time to congratulate myself on sticking to my rules.

Too late, I realise I should have just thrown the passport into the front hall, so he thought he'd dropped it on his way out, and hidden behind the curtains until he left. Well, we are where we are, as they often say in Shit Creek.

He's moving right, towards the kitchen. I think so, anyway. This is a hell of a way to test my directional hearing.

No, he's *definitely* heading into the kitchen; I can hear his footsteps change as they hit tiles. I pull my head out, slide the window shut, grab the bag and the mug from the ground, and run like hell towards the left-hand side of the house, where the shrubs will hide me. I'm in among them. His shadow breezes through the orangery – he's glancing around as he goes – and

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then he's in the living room. Did I leave anything in there? I'm sure I didn't. Almost sure. If my heart keeps beating this fast, he'll think there's a cat purring in the garden. Breathe, Al, breathe. He won't be able to see me, not from here.

He's spotted his passport. Phew. He's picking it up, pocketing it, then he moves towards the door. My three-week holiday is back on. Oh, I owe the god of blaggers a sacrifice tonight.

He turns around.

He's standing in the living room, looking down at the coffee table in front of the sofa. I want to scream at him: what are you doing, Mr L? Catch that plane! Earn some money! Visit Petra on your day off!

He takes a step towards the table. I can't see what he's looking at. And then I remember it.

The coaster.

He's wondering why, when he left his coasters neatly stacked in the middle of the table, one of them is out now.

He leans down and puts his hand on it, curled into a fist so the backs of his hairy fingers touch it. Then I realise the really bad thing. I only took the mug away about thirty seconds ago. *The coaster will still be warm.*

He picks it up and looks around the room, and then – this is when I know things are about to get spicy – he pretends he hasn't noticed anything. He draws his phone from his pocket, acting nonchalant, and it doesn't take too much wit to guess the three digits he's about to dial.

If I had known then that this was the most relaxed I'd feel

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for the next several weeks, I might have lightened up a bit, or possibly just handed myself in then.

But as I don't know any of that, I reason that the most important thing is to stop him ringing the police. There are enough fingerprints in that house to identify me, and they'll go on file, and although that wouldn't mean instant arrest, because nobody's caught me yet, they would create an awful precedent.

So without even thinking about it, I am already moving from the shrubs to the side of the house, out of his field of view. Now I'm glad I unlocked the side gate during the Golden Half-Hour. See? The rules will always protect you.

What am I wearing? A shirt and dark jeans, shoes that wouldn't look out of place on a professional. This outfit will do. I haul the bag over the wall separating the property from next door – I'll come back for it later – and chuck the mug into the overgrown bit of the garden. Then, as I approach the front of the house, I stamp loudly on the gravel before knocking with as much authority as I can on the open front door. My hand is shaking.

'Hello? Is there anyone here?'

Lethbridge pops into the hall. I'm taller than average, but he's taller than me, and it looks like every drop of blood in his body is currently in his face. He lowers his phone.

'Who the fuck are you?'

'Mr Lethbridge? Paul Lethbridge? You're the rightful owner of this property?'

'Yes. Why—'

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If you let people finish their questions, you never get anywhere in this life.

'Mr Lethbridge, I'm glad to meet you.' I step forward and offer a hand. 'My name's Rob Lind. I'm with the Metropolitan Police. We've been following a criminal who we have reason to believe has been operating in this area recently. We think this house may have been his next target. Have you been at home all morning?'

'I . . . No, I'm going away. I just came back because . . .' He waves the passport he's holding. I let my expression grow grave.

'I see. It's possible he would have come in just as you left, sir. That's exactly the sort of move we think he'd make. Do you have a few minutes to discuss this?'

The phone in his hand is burbling something. He looks down, dazed, and presses a button to end the call. Excellent. I've got him in a hot state. He doesn't know which way is up.

'I don't understand . . .'

'Are you familiar with the name the Ocelot? No? He's the individual we're after. Nicknamed for a vicious little South American creature. Cat-like, dextrous, and dangerous when cornered. He's an aggressive intruder, very violent when he gets the opportunity. Are there valuables on the property?'

Mr L gestures helplessly behind him. 'There's a safe in the study . . .'

'That would undoubtedly have been his target. Do you have reason to believe the property has been compromised?'

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'There was a coaster . . . I'm sorry, this is all a lot to take in. I'm just trying to get a flight . . .'

'I'm sorry, Mr Lethbridge, I don't think you're going to make your flight. In fact, I think it would be best for us to spend a few minutes going over the house. Would that be all right?'

Ten minutes later, I've fixed the whole thing up.

It was a moment's work to rebolt the orangery window I'd climbed out of. He's shown me the coaster, and I've managed to question him about it and its temperature so much that he's not sure of himself any more. Maybe he *did* leave it out. Also, I've put gloves on – I had a pair in my pocket for emergencies (Rule 4) – and I've tried to smudge any fingerprints I might have left around the place, although you'll never catch them all. I've reassured him there's no sign of the sort of forced entry the Ocelot specialises in, and offered him a few home-safety recommendations to boot.

Back in the front hall, I give him my phone number so he can ring if he has any concerns. I also advise him to wait a few days to call ('we're so busy, you see, and this will give us time to get everything together') – that should help degrade any DNA I've left in the place – then shake his hand again. He thanks me. He's going to try and get a night flight, and ask a friend from the village to look in every day or two. No harm done.

As I head down the drive, I pass Dev, still waiting for his

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irascible customer. I give him a businesslike nod, then walk on. Once I can see he's safely back on his phone, I slip into the side lane, from which I'll be able to climb into the next-door property to retrieve my bag. Then I lean against an old dry-stone wall and almost throw up from the postponed terror of it all.

Right. Now I have to find somewhere else to sleep tonight.

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2

And that's my job. Fun, eh?

You may be thinking: that doesn't sound fun. That sounds very, very stressful. But when you've successfully got in somewhere, lived like a king for six weeks, and left undetected . . . there's no feeling like it.

I feel like you might have some questions at this point. I also feel like I might have come across a little bit pleased with myself back there. I should probably point out that I have a few likeable qualities too, to balance out all the breaking and entering. So for the avoidance of doubt:

- I'm an interloper, *not* a burglar. I've never taken anything from these places (Rule 14). That would be bad for business. It would create far more trouble than

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I need, as well as an entire new job in terms of fencing the stolen goods. Do people still say 'fencing'? Feels a bit Dickens. Anyway, it would cause lots of paperwork and negotiations, and the police would be far more interested in all the places I've visited. No thank you. If you follow the Al method, and the owners can't find anything missing, the odds are the police won't even bother sending anyone round.

- OK, fine: I'd be stretching the truth if I said I'd never had a bottle of the house wine. But I don't take people's personal possessions. There's the line.
- In fact, that's the whole point. I've read descriptions of 'squatters', 'aggressive squatters', 'housebreakers', that kind of thing . . . that's not me at all. Not that I've got anything against squatters. Most of them are just doing their bit under horrendous conditions, dealing with whoever owns the place, with the authorities, sometimes even with organised criminals who are trying to drive them out . . . The squatter's path is a stony one. There are a few in here on short sentences, and they have the slightly dazed look of people who were just trying to house themselves with decency and never thought it would come to this. And while I personally reject the S word, we're doing the same thing. We're taking space that isn't used and making it useful again. Frankly, we're battling the housing crisis. These places are all – *all* – unoccupied. And the ones I go for are all second homes (or third, or fourth). Why not put them to good use?

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- I've never hurt anyone physically. I don't have the upper-body strength, for one thing. Again, it's just not me.
- I'm not doing this to make a point. I'm not Robin Hood, I'm not a rebel against the state, I'm just doing what anyone in my (unique) position and with my (unique) skills would do.
- With that said . . . screw it. I may as well write what I think, it's not like they can jail me again. There are so many thousands of beautiful homes around the country, completely unoccupied, and there are so many *millions* of young people who are never going to get themselves anywhere nice, or anywhere near their friends and families, or anywhere better than a mouldy rented two-room they have to spend half their wages on, paying someone else's mortgage . . . so in that sense, yeah. I'm doing it to make a point.

And that's me. I'm Al. Obviously that's not my real name, but I'd be a bit disappointed if you thought I was stupid enough to let that slip. In fact, given what I've told you about myself, Al is the one name you can rule out.

Any questions?

How did you get into this? I'd prefer not to say.

Don't you have a proper job? I certainly do. Or at least, I do at this point in the story, although it only lasts another week because of the huge bucket of trouble about to fall on me as I walk into my next place.

Why don't you just get a place of your own? Can't afford

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one. Not to buy, certainly. And once I worked that out some years ago, I reasoned that I had two options: I could spend half my time working to hire a matchbox, saving jack-all, while dealing with some of the worst criminal scum on the planet (lettings agents), or I could take up a new mode of life, stay in some of the country's most beautiful homes, and develop a niche set of skills into the bargain. It's no choice at all.

Any further questions? No? Good. Anyway, it's helpful to remind myself the job is fun, because once I've retrieved my bag and got clear of Casa Lethbridge, it's still about twenty minutes before my heart rate returns to normal. Things don't often get that close. I do a fair bit of blagging, but normally with neighbours, staff, that kind of thing. It's rare to come into contact with the actual homeowner.

I get off the bus in the centre of town around 3 p.m., a couple of hours after leaving Mr Lethbridge to tidy his coasters. I spend a bit of the afternoon in a café, sorting some work emails and rigging up a few jobs (proper jobs, not interloping jobs), and then look at the time. At this time of year – this all happened in April – if I'm going to get to my lodgings in daylight, I'd better hurry.

I'm heading for the one place which has never let me down in the past: good old 17 Balfour Villas. Named for the former PM – haunting to think that one day people might actually live somewhere called Truss Crescent and not even find it funny – it's a beautiful road, even if the stucco's gone a bit soft since the unveiling.

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Imagine a row of art deco mansions, looking like ocean liners with their lovely lines and curves. This isn't the famous north London Millionaire's Row of crumbling mega-money mansions, although I do have an occasional bolthole at one end there. Balfour is about half a mile from its famous cousin, but it's much more discreet. Walk halfway along, under the ubiquitous plane trees, and turn left at the tattiest of the lot. That's number 17.

The front garden's a state, and the place is largely unfurnished, barring a few slight improvements I've made. It's been in a probate deep-freeze for years now, surrounded by legal undergrowth – I spotted it in a court report once and worried the press coverage might untangle the thickets and destroy my safe haven. Fortunately, the coverage did absolutely no good and the place remains my private fiefdom.

I know what you're thinking. Why not just live here, Al, if it's perfect and empty? Why not improve this place, do it up, at least until someone finds you and kicks you out?

I wish I knew.

It's sunset as I approach, and although the clouds are promenading before a beautiful tangerine backdrop, somehow the lovely evening only makes me even glummer. My twisted ankle feels the size of a grapefruit. If I'd been cleverer a few hours ago, I'd still be in Mr L's mini-mansion. I could have got onto the golf course at the end of the garden. I've always wanted to try golf.

Really, I'm annoyed with myself. I was so *dumb* back there. How could I have failed to notice the stupid passport on the

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table during the initial sweep? Have I just got too confident? Or – more troubling thought – am I losing it?

I don't like to admit it, but things have been getting harder for the last couple of years. It's not just the doorbell cameras everywhere, although if I'm honest it's mostly the bloody doorbell cameras. What sort of joyless people need a feed of their front door? What happened to taking a chance, seeing who turns up, taking the universe as it comes? Ugh. People.

Fortunately, plenty of the places I end up in are – weirdly – *too* nice for an Amazon Ring. And their existing security arrangements are very circumnavigable from my point of view. But every year more and more places have upgraded. I've known some absolutely gorgeous houses, about as hard to get into as a poached egg, only to come back a year later and find out they're now off-limits, all because of a couple of rubbishy devices knocked out in China for a total value of about three quid. They're anti-enterprise.

Lately I'm feeling a bit . . . past it. Which is mad, because I'm young, I'm skilled, and I have a lot of fun. But the feeling remains. The last book I read was an old sci-fi novel about a guy who turns out to be the last human alive in a world of vampires, and realises eventually that in the new world, *he's* the freak. All a bit close to home. (I decided to switch and am now on a much more entertaining biography of Princess Margaret, who as far as I can tell spent her entire life staying in other people's houses unchallenged. An icon.)

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Maybe it's time to give up. No, Al, don't think like that. 17 Balfour Villas won't let me down.

Except that as I walk the cracked flagstones (Rule 29: *Approach head-on in case of residents*), I spot something I've never seen here before. Something horrifying.

There is a shadow moving back and forth in the front room. It's not a curtain or a door. It's person-shaped.

This was the last moment I could have avoided the whole mess. If I'd turned round at this point and gone to backup #2, a lovely former coach house in Dulwich whose owner is in a Malaysian prison, I would not now be typing this document in the Information Suite of a medium-security prison with Gertie the IT instructor on my left and the Croydon Tram Flasher on my right. But I had to know. Was the probate knot finally untied? Was today about to go from merely bad to totally unsalvageable?

There are always ways to learn what you need without anyone realising you're asking for it. I walk up to the door, grabbing the clipboard from my rucksack, and press the (dumb) doorbell.

Footsteps approach, then pause, as if considering whether to let me in. I feel like I'm being *considered*, in a rather creepy way. Then, at last, a young woman opens the door, and I begin my spiel.

'Hello there, madam. Are you the property's owner, Mrs' – I consult my board again – 'Olive Hooper?'

'I am.'

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That's interesting, for two reasons. First, the woman who owns the property isn't called Olive Hooper, as I know perfectly well. And second, unlike the actual owner, this woman has clearly not been dead for eighteen months.

She's a few years younger than me, with dark brown eyes, and dark brown hair too, nearly down to her shoulders. She keeps looping it behind her ear as we talk, as if it's in her way. She's not unattractive – more on that later – but there's something slightly off-centre about her features, and she wears a knowing expression. If I was being bitchy, I'd say she looks sly. Even so, it's an easy face to like.

The other thing about her is that she keeps her eyes on me throughout our conversation. I'm so distracted by how seldom she blinks that I almost forget my next line.

'That's wonderful, Mrs Hooper. My name is Tom Byrne, I'm a representative of the church down the road, the church of Christ Geographer – do you know it? – and although I'm sure you're terribly busy, I was wondering if I might talk to you about our organ pipe campaign? It'll only take a few moments.' I clasp my hands as if in silent prayer that she's free.

'There isn't a church down the road, as far as I'm aware.' She looks at me in a rather discomfiting way. There's a ghost of a European accent in there, but I can't tell for sure which one.

'Forgive me. A figure of speech – we're about three roads over. We find it helps our fundraising efforts to stress that we're local, you see!' I give a little vicarish laugh.

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'I didn't think people in the Church were allowed to fib like that. Isn't there a headline somewhere about bearing false witness?'

I get the strangest impression just then that this woman knows exactly what I'm doing. But I also get the impression that she's doing the same thing, that she knows that I know, and that while she doesn't mind us continuing this game, we're both well aware that a game is all it is. It's a bit intoxicating, to tell you the truth. And that's when something else strikes me.

'Mrs Hooper, I hope you don't mind my asking, but is there a chance you and I have met before?'

She smiles then, a wide, knowing grin which has absolutely nothing in common with the demure smile she gave me a minute ago as she opened the door. 'I'm not much of a church-goer.' I'm *sure* I've seen her before. When?

Just then, another woman calls from behind her. 'Em? Are you there? We've found the stopcock—'

She turns, and says rather sharply to the unseen person in the hall, 'I'm just speaking to this gentleman from the local church. I won't be a minute.' The other recedes, and a door slams on their footsteps. The woman turns back to me. 'You were saying, about the organ?'

'I was. It's just . . . Oh, excuse me.' I look down at my notes. 'I seem to have got muddled here. Mrs Olive Hooper actually lives next door, at number nineteen.'

That gives her a knock. She looks at me with a bit of doubt for the first time, paws her hair behind her ear again. So it *is* an anxiety tic.

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'And your friend just there called you another name. Em, was it?' I allow the gentlest note of 'sorrowful clergy' into my tone. 'I wonder – is there something going on here that I should know about, madam?'

And that's the point at which she leans out, grabs me by the collar and hauls me into the house.

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3

'All right. Who the *fuck* are you?'

The hall – spacious, wood-panelled, permanent aroma of mothballs – is not quite as I remember it. I know, I know, I should probably only be thinking of the young woman half-throttling me, but I'm good at taking in a lot on a first glance, and it seems like someone's done up 17 Balfour a bit since I left it. No debris on the ground, floor tiles scrubbed and sparkling . . . Is that mirror new?

The one thing that's stayed the same is the main feature – a gorgeous old box chair. It's the kind that used to be used for sedans – it still has the iron brackets on the side for the poles. Whenever I come here, I like to spend half an hour sitting in the thing, imagining the total privacy it would have given you. Must have been rare even two hundred years ago. But that's

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the rich all over, I guess. The whole aim is to shield yourself from the world.

Decor aside, I have to concede I've lost a bit of authority here, given that the girl currently slamming me against the wall is about four inches shorter than I am and slightly built to boot. I break her hold by the undignified 'thrash around' method until she lets go of my shirt, but she keeps her face right up to mine.

'Who are you?' I glance down, because something is pricking my ribs. She's holding a brass blade – how did she get hold of that? – which I dimly recognise as the old-fashioned letter-opener I admired but didn't steal the last time I was staying here. Honestly, you try to have principles about personal property, and this is how the world rewards you.

'Come on. Name? Tell me or you get this.' The letter-opener is pretty blunt, but I don't really fancy learning the hard way whether it can break human skin.

'You won't be able to stab me with that,' I say. 'It struggles with thick card.'

She twists her head and bellows, 'Guys! Intruder!'

Footsteps; then two people enter the scene, respectively stage left and balcony.

The newcomer at stage left is another young woman. There's no polite way of saying it, but she looks like a photocopy of the woman currently waving the letter-opener at me. Her hair is longer and tied up in a bun, and she's slightly shorter, but all the same features are there in different proportions. She's also wearing jeans and a jumper, whereas the one

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threatening to slit me for my contents is a bit more glammed up. Maybe it's because she's not waving a weapon in my face, but I instantly warm to the second woman more than the one in front of me. I'm prone to that sort of snap judgement.

Up on the first floor – looking over the balustrade – is a tall black guy, broad too. On his top half he's wearing a hoodie that says MACRO DATA REFINEMENT (no idea). He's holding an open laptop plus an extra power pack wedged into his left hand, and two phones in his right.

Both the newcomers converge on centre stage. The tall guy pockets his phones and carefully deposits the laptop on a side table – it's running about eighteen programs, I can see from here – before returning to where the rest of us are standing.

'Em, what is this?'

Em (Letter-Opener) stands back now her friends are here. Unhelpfully, she's still between me and the door. If she wasn't, I'd bolt in a second.

'He tried to trick me into admitting I was the homeowner, and then he told me he knew it wasn't my name. I think he's a cop.'

The air thickens to the point that you could cut it even with a blunt letter-opener. I'm looking at three distinctly angry faces.

The photocopy asks: 'What do we do with him?'

Letter-Opener has a bright idea. 'Knock him out then drive him up to Hampstead Heath and leave him there. By the time he wakes up we'll be gone. We were about to shift to the new gaff anyway.'

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The guy speaks. 'I'm not knocking anyone out, Em.'

Photocopy adds, 'Also, if we knock him out we'll need a bigger car. We won't all fit in the Mini with one of us unconscious.'

'We can't just let him go, guys. We don't know what he wants from us. And Jonny, in life sometimes you have to knock people out.'

'I'm just saying, acts of violence are nothing but moments of short-term moral failure, which only ever breed new cycles of pain. I read that in my course.'

'Jonny, please shut up about your course.'

Photocopy says, 'We could go through his pockets. Or just keep asking him. Legally, I think they have to tell you if you ask three times.'

'I don't think the Met operate under that sort of honour system, El.'

At the risk of making things worse, I raise a hand.

'Hello? Can I contribute here?'

All three of them are looking at me. It's time to do what I do best: talk my way out.

'I think I've picked up that there's something going on here. I just want to reassure you that if you think I'm in the police, I'm not. I also won't go *to* the police. You . . . uh, Em, was it?' – Letter-Opener scowls assent – 'it sounds like you're worried about me talking to anyone about this. Rest assured I just want to get out of this house conscious and with all my organs in the same place. We can leave it at that.'

The tension in the room slackens a bit. Then Em says,

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'Bullshit,' and it tightens again. I try hard not to sigh too obviously.

'Right. Well, if you don't believe me, let's just remember that I'm also clearly not a vicar, as you've worked out. I . . .'

What am I, actually? I didn't have a secondary cover set up after the vicar. Dammit. This place was meant to be empty; why would I need a primary story, let alone a secondary one? Faced with Em's eyebrow, I completely fall apart, and for the first time in a while, I give someone an approximation of the truth.

'. . . I thought this place was empty and that I might be able to stay here for a few nights. Clearly it's not empty, and you were here first, so I can just—'

Photocopy interrupts me. 'Sorry? Are you saying that you do this too?'

Half an hour has passed.

We're in the principal drawing room (baby grand piano, gold brocade curtains with foot-long tassels, tatty Louis Quatorze sofas left by previous owner). We've all got a cuppa, in this arrangement: Al – builder's tea, two sugars; Em – some disgustingly sharp gunpowder concoction; Elle – Sleepytime herbal mix; Jonny – isotonic rehydration drink in ancient Sports Direct mug. Things are much jollier than before, even if Em still has the letter-opener within shanking distance.

'How long did you say you've been doing this?' I ask.

'Six months. We're pretty pleased with how it's been going

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so far.' That's Elle, who turns out to be – knew it – Em's younger sister.

'And you call it . . .'

'*Piscining*.'

'Why was that again?'

Em sighs. '*Because* El and I found out about it in France last year. Millions of places in France have their own swimming pools, way more than here. But there's almost no way of enforcing the security of your own pool. Owners keep getting home to find strangers have been enjoying their pools all day. The police can't do anything about it. We started doing that and just, you know, worked our way up to the homes themselves.'

'Via the pool house?' I must have let a bit of scorn into my tone because Em bristles as she answers.

'A lot of pool houses have bedrooms, bathrooms and food supplies. So yes, since you ask, we started in the pool houses before trading up. What about you?'

There's no way I'm going to tell them anything more about myself than I already have. Frankly, I don't even like them knowing my fake name, never mind my real one. Questions about people always deflect their attention back onto themselves, where they feel it naturally belongs, so I turn my focus: 'And, sorry, how did you enter the scene, Jonny?'

'We met online.'

'How do you mean?'

'I met the girls when they needed something done. Security on a bigger place they wanted to get into. They were after a bit

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of technical support, and they found me via a little Discord server I was running.'

I have no idea what Discord is, but I'm not going to give them the satisfaction of asking. 'So you managed to disable the security . . . remotely, did you say?' He nods. 'And then you just decided to throw in your lot with them.'

Another nod. 'I was suffering some vexed matters of accommodation at that precise time.' Jonny speaks like this a lot. 'And it transpired that our talents are mutually complementary.'

Em hasn't fallen for my new line of enquiry, or taken her eyes off me. 'Anyway. What about you?'

I'll have to tell them something, I suppose. 'I've been *interloping*' – slight emphasis there to show them it's a) a proprietary term and b) the right one – 'for about eight years now. And I've focused on one country. I'm pretty good at it.'

'Hence you turning up and just knocking on the door tonight? That your standard modus operandi?'

'There are plenty of good reasons to do that. Firstly, this place should have been empty . . .'

'Which it wasn't.'

'. . . meaning it was important to ascertain what was going on.'

'And you picked "trendy vicar" as your cover? Jesus.'

'Nothing wrong with that.' I stand by this. Ideally you want to be someone who most people would chew their thumbs off to avoid talking to, and an earnest vicar fundraising for a new pipe is the sweet spot. I've done a lot of Jehovah's Witnessing in my time too.

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