SCR-13 — The Short-Term Rental "Long Con" & Sublease Impersonation Guide

A Complete Handbook and Web Resource for Prospective Tenants, Short-Term Hosts, and Property Managers

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Tenant & Host Defense: Unmasking Weekend Guests Posing as Landlords and Staging In-Person Walkthroughs

Executive Summary: The Ultimate In-Person Deception

For years, tenant defense checklists warned: *"Never rent an apartment without meeting the landlord in person inside the home."*

Today, cybercriminals have adapted by engineering the most audacious in-person real estate scam in modern leasing: The Short-Term Rental "Long Con" (also known as the Airbnb Sublease Impersonation).

The scheme operates with cinematic precision:

1. **The Short-Term Booking:** A scammer books a luxury furnished home, condominium, or suburban property on Airbnb, Vrbo, or corporate housing platforms for a 3-to-4-night weekend stay under a burner identity.
2. **The Long-Term Listing:** Days before check-in, the scammer posts the property on Facebook Marketplace, Craigslist, or local rental boards as an available **12-month long-term lease** at an attractive, slightly below-market rate (e.g., $1,800/month for a home that rents on Airbnb for $300/night).
3. **The In-Person Open House:** Over Saturday and Sunday, while legally possessing keys and access codes to the property, the scammer hosts a dozen prospective long-term tenants. The scammer meets each tenant at the front door, shakes their hand, walks them through every room, explains parking rules, and discusses move-in logistics.
4. **The Cash / Certified Deposit Harvest:** The scammer approves multiple applicants on the spot, executes professional paper leases, and collects first month's rent plus a security deposit ($3,500 to $5,000 per family) in certified cashier's checks or cash.
5. **The Monday Morning Disappearance:** The scammer packs their bags, checks out of the Airbnb on Monday morning, and disappears with **$25,000 to $50,000 in untraceable cash**.

The catastrophic climax occurs on the 1st of the month: five, eight, or ten different families arrive at the property with moving trucks, sofas, and children, all holding signed leases for the exact same home—only for the genuine property owner or Airbnb cleaning crew to arrive in shock.

This handbook details how renters can spot an Airbnb leasing front, how short-term rental hosts can protect their properties, and emergency actions if caught in a multi-tenant collision.

Section 1: The Anatomy of the Airbnb Long Con

Understanding how scammers weaponize short-term rentals protects both renters and hosts:

1. **Target Property Selection:** Scammers look for high-end, professionally decorated short-term rentals with keyless smart locks, minimal host on-site interaction, and residential zoning.
2. **The Staging Exploit:**
    - Because the home is fully furnished, the scammer invents a plausible backstory: *"I'm relocating to Europe for two years. You can lease the home fully furnished as-is, or my moving company will remove the furniture next week before your move-in date."*
    - This explains away why the home is fully equipped with dishes, linens, and decor.
3. **The Multi-Victim Lease Execution:**
    - Over a single 48-hour weekend, the scammer stages 10 to 15 private showings.
    - Every prospective tenant is told they were selected as the "ideal applicant."
    - The scammer creates an artificial deadline: *"I fly out on Monday morning. If you bring a cashier's check for $3,600 today, I will sign the lease and counter-sign your move-in packet right now."*
4. **The Move-In Day Collision:**
    - On the 1st of the month, multiple victims converge on the driveway.
    - The scammer's phone number is disconnected, the Facebook account is deleted, and the Airbnb booking account was opened with a prepaid card and stolen ID.

Section 2: The 5 Red Flags of an Airbnb Rental Front

Watch for these warning signs during an in-person property walkthrough:

Red Flag	Scam Profile (Airbnb Front)	Legitimate Long-Term Rental
1. The "Furnished or Unfurnished" Offer	Landlord claims furniture can stay or be removed by movers next week.	Property is leased strictly as advertised (either unfurnished or formal furnished lease).
2. Host Amenity Clues	Property has framed Wi-Fi signs, laminated guest house rules, or labeled locked owner closets.	Standard residential setup with empty closets and personal utility connections.
3. Rush Cashier's Check Demand	Pushes to sign the lease during the initial walkthrough and demands cash or certified check on the spot.	Standard multi-day application, background verification, and formal lease signing process.
4. Active Airbnb / Vrbo Listing	Reverse photo search shows the exact interior actively available for nightly booking on Airbnb.	Listed strictly in long-term MLS rental inventory or property management databases.

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5. Host Identity Mismatches	Person showing the home doesn't match the name on county deed records.	Landlord provides deed documentation or proof of property management representation.

Section 3: The 4-Step Verification Shield for Renters

Before handing over a certified check or signing a lease at an in-person showing:

Step 1: Look for Short-Term Rental Clues Inside the Home

- Inspect the entryway and kitchen: Are there framed QR codes for Wi-Fi? Laminated instruction sheets for checkout procedures?
- Check interior doors: Is the master bedroom closet or basement door secured with a heavy digital padlock (standard host supply closets)?
- If you see short-term rental markers, ask directly: *"Is this home currently operated as an Airbnb?"*

Step 2: Reverse-Search the Interior Photos

- Upload photos of the living room or kitchen to Google Lens.
- If the property appears on Airbnb or Vrbo with nightly rates, you are standing inside an active short-term rental.

Step 3: Match the Showroom Host to the County Deed

- Do not sign a lease without seeing the host's physical government ID.
- Open the county tax assessor website on your phone right at the kitchen counter. Does the "Owner of Record" name match the person standing in front of you?
- If the person claims to be a "property manager," demand to see their state real estate broker license or formal management agreement.

Step 4: Refuse On-the-Spot Cash or Cashier's Checks

- Never hand over certified cashier's checks or cash during an initial walkthrough.
- Insist that initial funds be deposited through a verifiable, insured title escrow account or established local property management office.

Section 4: Short-Term Rental Host Protection Protocol

If you operate an Airbnb, Vrbo, or corporate housing property, protect your home from becoming a scammer's leasing showroom:

1. **Deploy Exterior Video Doorbells (Ring / Nest):** Monitor showing activity. If a weekend guest has 15 different groups of people touring the property in two days, an illegal sublease showroom is operating.

2. **Post Prominent Interior Warning Placards:** Place a discrete, professional framed notice in the foyer: *"NOTICE: THIS PROPERTY IS A LICENSED SHORT-TERM RENTAL. IT IS NEVER OFFERED FOR LONG-TERM LEASE ON CRAIGSLIST OR FACEBOOK MARKETPLACE. IF YOU ARE BEING SHOWN THIS PROPERTY AS A LONG-TERM RENTAL, CONTACT LAW ENFORCEMENT IMMEDIATELY."*
3. **Mandate Verified Platform Profiles:** Do not accept 1-night or weekend bookings from brand-new profiles with zero reviews without third-party identity verification.
4. **Monitor Local Classifieds for Your Address:** Set automated Google Alerts and search Facebook Marketplace weekly for your rental's street address.

Section 5: Emergency Response Protocol — The Move-In Collision

If you arrive on move-in day and discover multiple families locked out of an Airbnb:

1. **Call Local Police Immediately:** Request an on-site officer to document the multi-victim criminal fraud scene and take formal statements from all defrauded parties.
2. **Contact Your Bank to Place a Stop-Payment on Cashier's Checks:** If the check was cashed, request an immediate fraud investigation and contact the bank where the scammer cashed the instrument.
3. **Contact Airbnb / Vrbo Trust & Safety:** Provide platform investigators with the address and date of the showing so they can freeze the scammer's booking account and preserve credit card / IP evidence for detectives.
4. **File Federal Cybercrime Reports:** Submit complaints at **reportfraud.ftc.gov** and **ic3.gov**.

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