

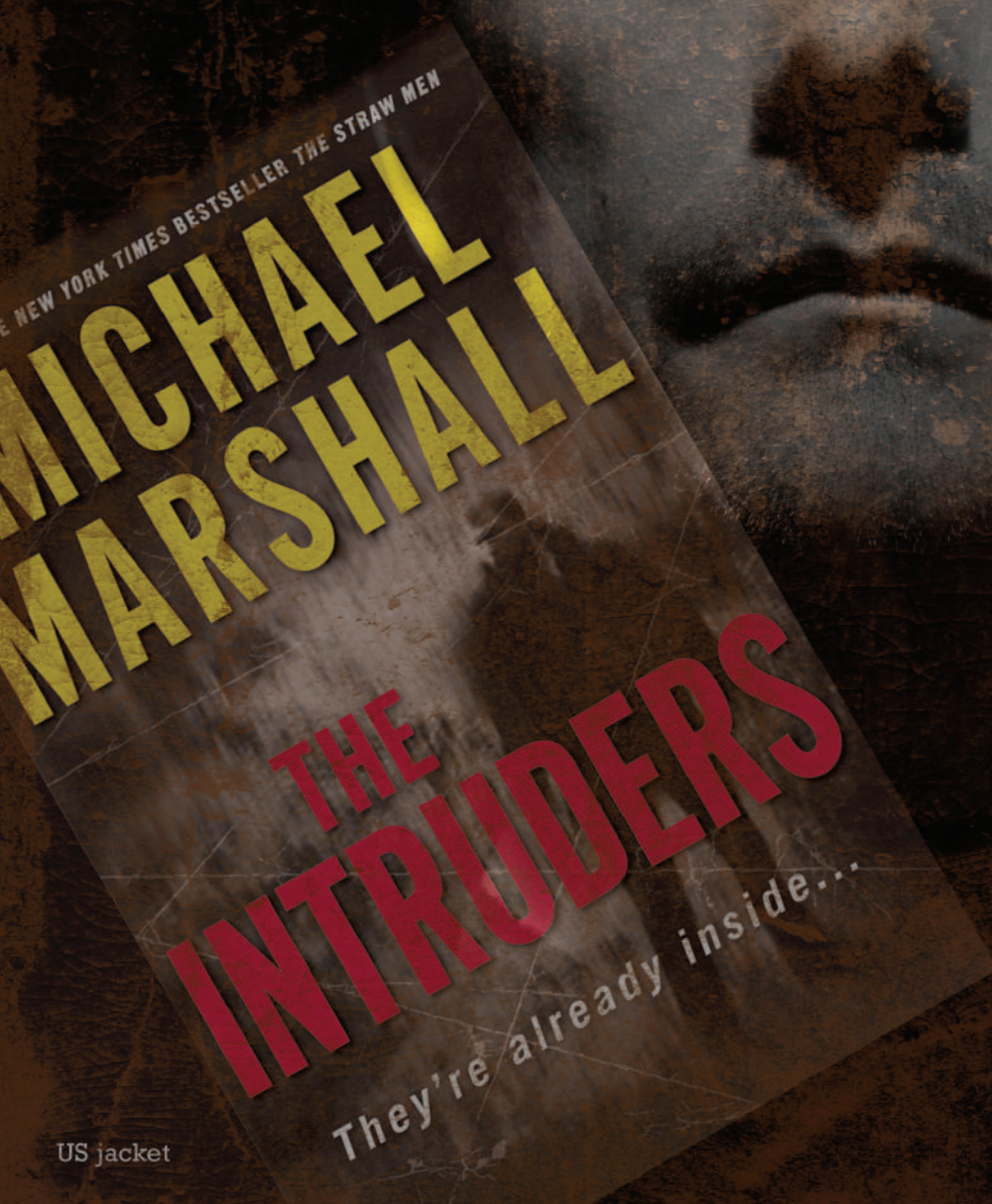
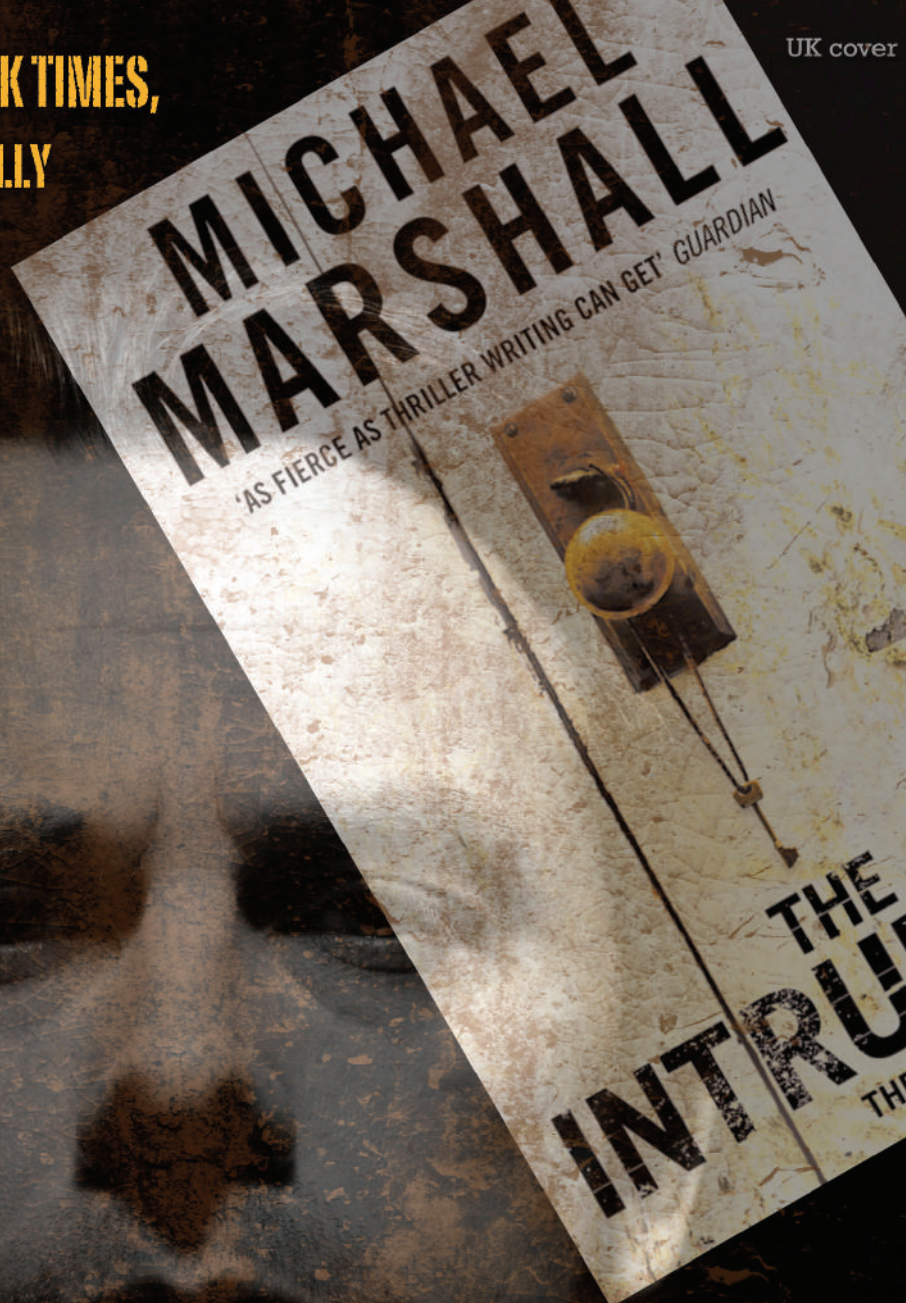
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# **THE INTRUDERS**

by

Michael Marshall

How can we be sure we are not impostors?

Jacques Lacan

*The Four Fundamental Concepts  
of Psycho-Analysis*

## Prologue

Thump, thump, thump. You could hear it half the way up the street. It was bizarre the neighbours didn't complain. Or do so more often, and more stridently. Gina sure as hell would – especially if the music sucked this bad. She knew she ought to go upstairs as soon as she got indoors, yell at Josh to turn it down. She also knew he'd look at her in that way teenagers have, like they're wondering who you are and what gives you the right to bother them and what the hell happened in your life to make you so boring and old. He was a good son at heart though, and so he'd roll his eyes and nudge the stereo down a notch, and then over the next half hour the volume would creep up until it was even louder than before.

Usually Bill was around to get into it with him – if he wasn't hidden in his basement, tinkering – but tonight he was out with a couple of faculty colleagues. That was good, partly so he could get the bowling out of his

system without involving Gina, who couldn't stand the dumb sport, also just because he went out very seldom. They usually managed to grab a meal somewhere once every couple weeks, just the two of them, but most evenings this year had seen him disappearing downstairs after dinner, screwdriver in hand and a pleasurably preoccupied look on his face. For a while he'd generated his own strange noises down there, low booming sounds that you felt in the pit of your stomach, but thankfully that had stopped. It was healthy for a guy to get out the house once in a while, hang with other guys – even if Pete Chen and Gerry Johnson were two of the geekiest dudes Gina had met in her entire *life*, and she found it impossible to imagine them cutting loose at bowling or drinking or indeed anything at all that didn't involve UNIX and/or a soldering iron. It also gave Gina a little time to herself, which – no matter how much you love your husband – is a nice thing once in a while. Her plan was a couple hours in front of the tube with *her* choice of show – screw the documentary channels. In preparation she'd gone to the big deli on Broadway, picked up groceries for the week and a handful of deluxe nibbles for right now.

As she opened the door to the house and stepped into a zone of even higher volume, she wondered if Josh ever considered that his vanilla mom might have rocked out on

her own account, back in the day. That before she'd fallen in love with a young physics lecturer called Bill Anderson and settled down to a life of happy domesticity, she'd done plenty time in the grungier venues of Seattle-Tacoma and its environs, had been no stranger to volume, cheap beer and waking up with a head that felt like someone had set about it with hammers. That she'd bounced sweatily to Pearl Jam and Ideal Mausoleum and even Nirvana themselves, back when they were local unknowns and sharp and hungry instead of hollow-faced and dying, and most memorably on a summer night when she'd puked while crowd-surfing, been dropped on her head and still got lucky in the soaking and dope-reeking restrooms with some guy she'd never met before, and never saw again.

Probably not. She smiled to herself.

Just went to show kids didn't know everything, huh.

An hour later, she'd had enough. The thumping was okay while she was just watching with half an eye – and the volume had actually dropped for a while, which maybe suggested he was doing some homework, which was a relief – but it had started racking up again and in ten minutes there was a re-run of a *West Wing* episode she'd never seen before. You needed a clear head and peace and quiet to follow what the hell was going on with those guys,

they talked so fast. Plus, Jesus, it was half past nine and getting beyond a joke.

She tried hollering up at the ceiling (Josh's bedroom was directly overhead) but received no indication she'd been heard. So she sighed, put her depleted plate of goodies on the coffee table, and hoisted herself off the couch. Tramped upstairs, feeling as if she was pushing against a wall of noise, and banged on his door.

After a fairly short time it was opened by some skinny guy with extraordinary hair. For a split second Gina didn't even recognize him. She wasn't looking at a boy any more, nothing like, and Gina realized suddenly that she and Bill were sharing their house with a young man.

'Honey,' she said, 'I don't want to cramp your style, but do you have anything that's more like actual music, if you're going to play it that loud?'

'Huh?'

*'Turn it down.'*

He grinned lopsidedly, and turned back into the room to jack the volume back. He actually cut it in half, which emboldened Gina to take a step into his room. It struck her it had been a while since she'd been there when he was also present. In years past she and Bill had spent hours sitting on the floor here together, watching

their tot careering around on wobbly legs and bringing them random objects with a triumphant 'Gah!', thinking how magical it all was; and later tucking him in and reading a story, or two, or three; then perched on the bed in the early years of homework and puzzling out sums.

At some point in the last year the rules had changed. It was a solo mission now when she came in to fix the bed or sweep up piles of t-shirts. She was in and out quickly, too, remembering her own youth well enough to respect her child's space.

She saw that, amongst the chaos of clothing and CD sleeves and pieces of at least one dismembered computer, there was evidence of homework being tackled.

'How's it going?'

He shrugged. Shrugging was the lingua franca. She remembered that too. 'Okay,' he added.

'Good. Who's that you're listening to, anyway?'

Josh blushed faintly, as if his mom had asked who this Connie Lingus was, that everyone was talking about.

'Stu Rezni,' he said, diffidently. 'He...'

'Used to hit sticks for Fallow. I know. I saw him at the Astoria. Before they knocked it down. He was so wasted he fell off his stool.'

She was gratified to see her son's eyebrows shoot up. She tried not to smile.



'Can you keep the volume sane for a while, honey? There's a show I want to watch. Plus people are staggering up the street with bleeding ears, and you know how that lowers the tone.'

'Sure,' he said, with a genuine smile. 'Sorry.'

'No problem,' she said, thinking *I hope he's going to be okay*. He was a nice boy, polite, a slacker who yet got (most of) his chores done eventually. She hoped without a trace of egotism that he'd taken on enough of her, too, along with the big old helping of Bill he'd absorbed. This young man already spent a lot of time alone, and seldom seemed more content than when taking something apart or putting it back together. That was cool, of course, but she hoped it wouldn't be too long before she saw evidence of his first hangover. Man cannot live by coding skills alone, not even in these strange days.

'Later,' she said, hoping it didn't sound too lame.

The doorbell rang.

As she hurried downstairs she heard the volume drop a little farther, and smiled. She still had this expression on her face when she opened the front door.

It was dark outside, the streetlamps at the corner spreading orange light over the fallen leaves on the lawn and sidewalk. A strong breeze rustled those still left on

the trees, sending a few to spiral down and around the crossroads where the two residential streets met.

A figure was standing a couple of yards back from the door. It was tall, wearing a long dark coat.

'Yes?' Gina said.

She flipped the porch light on. It showed a man in his mid-fifties, with short, dark hair, sallow skin in flat planes around his face. His eyes seemed dark too, almost black. They gave no impression of depth, as if they had been painted on his head from the outside.

'I'm looking for William Anderson,' he said.

'He's not here right now. Who are you?'

'Agent Shepherd,' the man said, and then paused, for a deep cough. 'Mind if I come inside?'

Gina did, but he just stepped up onto the porch and walked right past her and into the house.

'Hold on a second there, buster,' she said, leaving the door open and following him. 'Can I see some ID?'

The man pulled out a wallet and flipped it open at her without bothering to look in her direction. Instead he panned his gaze methodically around the room, then up at the ceiling.

'What's this about?' Gina asked. She'd seen the three big letters clearly enough, but the idea of having a real live Fed in the house didn't even slightly compute.

'I need to talk to your husband,' the man said. His matter-of-factness made the situation seem even more absurd.

Gina put her hands on her hips. This was her house, after all. 'Well, he's out, like I said.'

The man turned toward her. His eyes, which had seemed flat and dead before, slowly seemed to be coming alive.

'You did, and I heard you. I want to know *where* he is. And I need to take a look around your house.'

'The hell you do,' Gina said. 'I don't know what you think you're doing here, but...'

His hand came up so fast she didn't even see it. The first she knew was when it was clamped around the bottom of her face, holding her jaw like a claw.

She was too shocked to make a sound as he began to pull her slowly towards him. But then she started to shout, substituting volume for the articulation denied her by being unable to move the lower half of her mouth.

'Where is it?' he said. Matter-of-fact had become almost bored.

Gina had no clue what he was talking about. She tried to pull away, hitting at him with her fists, kicking out, jerking her head back and forth. He put up with this for about one second and then whipped his other hand around to smack her across the side of her head. Her ears rang

like a dropped hubcap and she nearly fell, but he held her up, pulling her jaw to the side in the process, making it feel like it was going to pop out.

'I'm going to find it anyway,' he said, and now she knew she could feel something tearing at the side of her head. 'But you can save us both some time and trouble. Where is it? Where does he work?'

'I... don't...'

'Mom?'

Gina and the man turned together, to see Josh at the bottom of the stairs. Her son blinked, a deep frown spreading across his face.

'Let go of my mom.'

Gina tried to tell him to get back upstairs, to just run, but it came out as desperate, breathless grunts. The man stuck his other hand in the pocket of his coat, started pulling something out.

Josh hit the ground running and launched himself across the sitting room. '*Let go of my...*'

Gina just had time to realize she'd got it wrong before, that her son wasn't a man after all but just a little boy, stretched taller and thinner but still so young, when the man shot him in the face.

She screamed then, or tried to, and the tall man swore quietly and dragged her with him as he walked over to the front door and pushed it shut.

Then he pulled her back into the room where her son lay on the ground, one arm and one leg moving in twitches. Her head felt like it was full of bright light, stuttering with shock. Then he punched her precisely on the jaw and she didn't know where she was.

A second or several minutes passed.

Then she was aware again, sprawled on the floor, half-propped against the couch she'd been curled up in ten minutes before. The plate of food lay upside down within arms' reach. Her jaw was hanging loose, she couldn't seem to move it. It felt like someone had pushed long, thick nails into both of her ears.

The man in the coat was squatted down next to Josh, whose right arm was still moving, lazily smearing through the pool of blood seeping from his head.

The smell of petrol reached Gina's face. The man finished squirting something from a small metal tin over her son, then dropped it on him and stood up.

He looked down at Gina.

'Last chance,' he said. His forehead was beaded with sweat, though the house was not warm. In one hand he held

a cigarette lighter. In the other he held his gun. 'Where is it?'

As he sparked the lighter up, holding it over Josh and looking her in the eyes, Gina knew that – whatever this was – it wasn't a last chance to live.

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