

INTRUDER

By

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INTRUDER

It was my therapist who told me to start this journal, she says it'll help me keep perspective after my ordeal. She'll never read this, but she reckons just getting things out of my head and onto paper is a great coping mechanism. So I'm gonna tell you about the most terrifying experience of my life, even though no-one else will never read this; let's purge those demons!

Let's kick off with me hiding behind the shower curtain (cliché, I know, but I'm not the biggest or strongest of women). Tbh I didn't know where else to hide, cos I was at Lori's place, in her bathroom.

Footsteps creaked slowly along the hallway towards me. Only it wasn't Lori — I knew that for a fact because the last time I'd seen her she'd been lying on the bedroom floor with a bloody great kitchen knife sticking out of her neck, life pumping out into a dark pool, glistening in the moonlight.

Since we'd been disturbed in bed I was naked, even more vulnerable. The footsteps crept closer, the stranger was taking his time, relishing his hunt.

I watch all the horror films, I know what you're thinking. *First place he'll look!* Maybe, but trust me, in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere, I dare you to do any better.

Floorboards groaned, his breaths came deep and hoarse, I shrank back against the cold tiles.

I thought back to the newspaper on Lori's coffee table – specifically, the headline, about the serial killer breaking into peoples' houses at night, it was all anyone round here was talking about. Made for great news.

Not so great if you're on the receiving end.

Next door had buggered off on holiday, the nearest civilisation was the pub down the lane, so it was just me and him. I slowly pushed my head round the plastic curtain. From here I could see the empty landing, the stairs leading down to freedom.

I guess the horror films got it wrong, the shower wasn't the first place he looked.

A nearby crash echoed through the house. He was next door in the spare room, looking for me; it was the chance I needed.

I crept along the landing, sweeping up my jeans, my top, my bra. Down the stairs, another smash masked my steps as I grabbed everything else I'd discarded on our way up to the bedroom earlier.

Wood splintered above as he took his rage out on the furniture.

I ran to the front door but couldn't spot the key. More banging upstairs, screaming now too, frustrated howls as he searched in vain. Into the kitchen, I dropped my clothes to the floor, pulled my jeans on.

I yanked my T-shirt over my head and just like that, I didn't feel quite so vulnerable. Which was good, because the footsteps were creeping downstairs.

I looked at the back door, the garden beyond. The garden was safety. *Where the hell are Lori's keys?*

Noises were amplified in the darkness, the stairs protested under someone much bigger and scarier than me.

I poked my head round the kitchen door in time to see a filthy boot descend, followed by workman's trousers, dark overalls. I looked at my trainers on the mat, too late, nowhere to go, I slid up off the floor onto the worktop, squashing behind the door.

The sounds dragged closer, agonisingly slowly, finally he stood in the doorway, a nightmare shadow stretched across the tiles, long legs and wide body bending up the cupboards on the far wall. I held my breath.

He didn't. I could hear him rasping on the other side of the door. A blade appeared round the door, a faint red smear streaked the wood. The knife that'd killed Lori. What an idiot I was, ignoring the first rule of scary movies – grab a weapon. I glanced, the knife block was well out of reach.

He lurched into the kitchen. I pulled my knees right up under my chin, looking at the back of his head, lank mullet, huge shoulders, huge knife. He took another step forward, sniffing the air, feral. The blade flashed centimetres from my toes.

I was screwed; any second now he'd turn to see me cowering behind the door. I made a snap decision, one that saved my life.

I straightened my leg, foot out in one fluid motion, heel outstretched. Perfection; I got him right at the base of his big skull. He flew at the door, arms out, unfortunately for him it was glass, his hands disappeared with a smash. He staggered, swayed, I jumped down and aimed a kick into his belly. He slumped with a growl, legs thrashing. I backed away, feeling for the doorway, determined not to let my slim advantage evaporate.

I ran blindly into the dining room, where thin curtains billowed across a carpet littered with broken glass. Classic horror film entry point. I winced at the glass and jagged edges round the frame, it'd have to do.

I dived through, slicing my feet and arms but at least I was out, free, in the sticky summer night air.

I looked over at the woods I knew so well; normally I'd be able to lose someone in there but not in the dark, and especially not without my shoes.

A crash of glass pulled my eyes to the back door. Thin trickles of blood on the doorframe were all that remained. Where had he gone? I sprinted round the side of the house, through the garden gate. Now I had to run past the front door, down the lane to my car.

I went for it, bloodied bare feet slapping cobbles. As I passed the front door an alarm triggered in my mind, something amiss; too late I registered it. A dark space where the front door should have been.

He launched from the open doorway.

Shining teeth, a furious snarl, we collided, crashing to the ground, rolling together into the weeds.

He was on me now, getting to my car was no longer an option. I swung my right arm up, his nose exploded. I tried to throw up my left arm but for some reason it refused to move.

He pulled his hands to his face, blood streaming between his fingers, mingling with the blood from his torn wrists, dripping onto my chest. I tried to move but he pushed his

weight down. I strained, again my left arm refused to move. I turned my head, cried in pain when I saw why it wouldn't move. The kitchen knife was embedded in my shoulder.

He grinned, teeth glowing in the moonlight as he panted like an animal. Fat fingers encircled my throat, I struggled but he was far too big, too powerful.

His teeth stopped glowing, my vision dimmed, a fuzzy border crept inwards until all I could see was that grin.

I reached across my chest, gripped the handle of the kitchen knife. He either didn't notice or didn't care. In one movement I slid the knife out of my shoulder, pulled it down to my stomach, thrusting upwards. I twisted, the effect was instantaneous. He roared, rolling away, clutching between his legs as if that would reattach things. I climbed on top, not wasting a second, plunging the knife hard into the side of his neck.

I knelt on top of him, catching my breath as he spluttered, losing his. I yanked the knife back out and watched his life spurt out just like Lori's had, little dark streams weaving between the cobbles. He let out a long breath, deflating beneath me, eyes rolling back. His chest stopped moving.

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply for what seemed like ages, feeling the air filling my lungs right up, savouring *life*. When I opened my eyes the sky seemed a little brighter, trees were full of song, the air was thick with that warm damp smell of a summer dawn.

I'd survived!

I looked down at the lifeless body beneath me. I didn't recognise the guy.

Which is really odd, because I'd been watching Lori's house from the woods most of the day. Just like all the others; nice and remote, no neighbours to hear the screams.

I pulled off my mask, let it drop it to the cobbles. I presume this was the boyfriend I'd overheard Lori talking about in the pub, probably worked shifts or something, returning in the middle of the night before I could finish my fun with her.

As I collected my shoes and wiped the place down I decided this was good – I'd taken on this brute, this monster, and I'd triumphed. Reckon if I can do that, I can do anything!

So thanks, therapist, you were right; writing it down really is helping me get perspective.

In fact, I might branch out. Maybe do a whole family when my shoulder's better.

D.L Marshall won a northern writers' award in 2018 for what would become his debut novel *Anthrax Island*.

Its sequel *Black Run* was a Times book of the month, and the third book in the trilogy *77 North* was longlisted for the 2024 CWA's Ian Fleming Steel Dagger Award.

He has written extensively for award-winning docu-drama podcasts and had numerous short stories published.

He is represented by Phillip Patterson at Marjacq, and lives in Yorkshire with his partner and children.

Praise for the John Tyler trilogy

Think Alistair MacLean, but turbo-charged

Ian Rankin

Grabs the attention like a fire alarm and never gives up

The Times

Absolutely thrilling stuff... the go-to in a new-wave of thriller writers

The Scottish Sun

If James Bond came from Yorkshire... a breathless roller-coaster journey

Sheffield Telegraph