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A Suitable Lie

Written by Michael J. Malone

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A Suitable Lie

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To all the lost souls. May each and every one of
you find your way back to life and love.

‘It’s not the size of the dog in the fight that counts
– it’s the size of the fight in the dog’

Ike Eisenhower



Prologue

I don't know how long I walked for. My heels slammed on to concrete until they almost went numb. Fists tight in my pockets, I walked and walked.

And walked.

Light from a shop window spilled on to the pavement just in front of me. What was a shop doing open at this hour? For the first time I noticed my calves were so cold they had no feeling in them. My watch read 6.30. What the hell was I doing? I had been walking for hours wearing only boxer shorts and a t-shirt under my coat; on my feet, a pair of mule slippers.

What the hell was I thinking?

The shop door opened, a small, bald man came out and propped an advertising board for a newspaper against the wall. He stared at me as if I was an idiot searching for his village.

'Looking for my dog,' I muttered, feeling as if I had to offer this total stranger an excuse for the way I was dressed. He shrugged and walked back into his shop. The newspaper headline on the board read, 'DIVORCE DAD KILLS KIDS'.

As I turned and walked away from the shop, I realised just how weary I was. Each step was an effort and each time my heel jarred on to the ground, shockwaves reached my spine. The banner had sapped what strength I had left. What kind of a world did we live in where someone would think such a crime was their only way out? What kind of a god would countenance such an act? I stumbled to a halt. What on earth would drive a man to do such a thing? Only an extreme emotion would result in such a dreadful action. Was it desperation, anger, jealousy? A disturbed mind's version of an act of love?



I willed myself to continue walking and my own situation pushed its way to the front of my thoughts, like a small child in a crowd shouting, ‘What about me?’ ‘What about me?’ Would I ever feel that desperate?

The banner blazed like a warning.

I would have to find a solution. I would have to find a way out of this trap.

At last, my circuit brought me home. The door was unlocked, I pushed it open and walked inside. Pausing by the living room door, I saw her curled up in a chair. Fast asleep. Even in the weak light I could make out the silted lines of mascara that ran from her eyes and down the pale expanse of her cheeks, almost past her nose.

She had obviously fallen asleep waiting for me.

And that was the first time I thought about murder.

BOOK ONE



1

It was a Sunday, the day we met; Sunday 7th July 1996. I've no idea why I remember that. It just stuck. And it would be nice to say our eyes lit on each other across a crowded dance floor, cos that's romance, eh? But, no, it was a smoke-filled bar at the local rugby club.

I've no clue why she was interested in me, I was one of a type. The room was filled with broad-shouldered, thick-limbed, flat-bellied young men, so why would she pick me? My first thought was that it was ghoulish curiosity. After all, it wasn't like I hadn't encountered it before. Being a widower with a toddler before you reach the age of thirty does have a certain appeal, as my young brother Jim told me when he dragged me out that night.

'You need to get out of the house,' he said. 'All work and Disney movies makes for a dull life, brother.'

'Suits me just fine, Jim.'

'You'll thank me for it,' he countered. 'The ladies love a tragedy. They'll be throwing their knickers at you soon as you walk in the door.'

It was an image that filled me with horror. Having lost the only woman I'd ever loved, the thought of a group of women looking at me with wide-eyed, open-mouthed sympathy was more than I could bear.

'C'mon, Andy,' he pleaded. 'I told Mum I'd drag you out tonight. You know what she's like if I let her down.'

'You'd think she'd get used to that,' I grinned.

'It's been arranged anyhow.' He shrugged. 'Mum's coming over in...' he stretched his right arm out in such a way that his silver Tag wristwatch edged out past the cuff of his Thomas Pink shirt – my



brother is a slave to the high-end brands – ‘... in forty-five minutes to put the wee fella to bed.’

I groaned. Once Mum was here it would all be over. Mrs Boyd doesn’t take no for an answer.

Jim wore a sly grin like it was a badge of honour. ‘Game’s a bogie, big man. Go get your good jeans on. And wear that light-blue shirt I got you at Christmas. Makes you look less like a morgue assistant.’

‘Do I have to?’ I made one last effort at resistance.

He winked. ‘Your nutsack must weigh a ton, brother. What is it, over four years since Patricia died? Time to get them emptied.’

I shook my head. Looked him up and down and made a face. ‘You look so refined. But you’ve really just stepped out of a cave, haven’t you?’

When we walked in the door of the club an hour later, the smell of my son, Pat’s Thomas the Tank Engine pyjamas still lingered in my nostrils and that tuft of hair on his crown stuck in my mind. I’d have given anything to be back there, tucking him in, reading *The Gruffalo* to him one more time. Instead I fought the churn in my stomach and allowed Jim to push me inside.

A few of the guys came over, slapped me on the back, told me it was good to see me. Like it had been a long time, even though I had played a game with them just the previous weekend. But I knew what they meant. Since Patricia died it had been nothing but work and Pat. And the occasional game of rugby when injuries meant they were struggling for players.

As Jim led me through the crowd to the bar, a Spice Girls song came on and I was for turning and leaving. Jim sensed my movement and with a hand on my back he pushed me forward. What the hell was I doing here? A lot of nods were sent my way. Ayr was a fair-sized town with a village mentality. Everybody knew everybody. I’d gone to school with most of these guys. Their parents knew my parents.

My parent.

Another tick in the Andy Boyd tragedy box. Father died of

a massive heart attack just when the boys were approaching the troublesome teenage years.

‘You know Louise, don’t you?’ Jim said over the babble.

I hid my reaction. Two minutes in the door and he was already trying to set me up. To be fair, he’d made a good choice, I thought as I looked at Louise. I recognised her. She’d been a couple of years below us at school and had grown into herself rather nicely in the intervening time. I remembered a shy girl: look at her and she’d try to hide her blush under her long fringe.

I gave Louise a nod and a tight smile. No point in misleading her. There was as much chance of me hooking up with anyone that night as there was of Ayr winning a European championship.

Next up on the DJ’s version of a fun night was somebody singing what sounded like *Ohh, ahh, just a little bit*. Yeah, I’m all over that, I thought as I turned away from Louise, faced Jim and asked for a pint of lager. He gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head and waved at the barmaid.

Pint in hand, heart feeling as solid as if someone had poured fast-setting concrete into my chest cavity, I took the chance when Jim was distracted by Louise’s blonde pal to walk across to the far corner of the room.

I took a seat, crossed my arms and legs and surveyed the crowd. I was in a room full of people – most of whom I knew – but I’d never felt so alone.

That was when I saw her. Shoulder-length blue-black hair; black turtle-neck, short-sleeved sweater. Very little jewellery. Minimal make-up. Yet she was easily the most attractive woman in the place. She was surrounded by guys, but she was looking at them as if they held as much attraction for her as a pile of dung.

She took a sip of her red wine. Looked away as one of her would-be suiters cracked a joke. Judging by the way he threw his head back in laughter, he thought it was hilarious. Her cheeks barely budged in response.

She saw me looking.



I looked away.

Moments later, as Celine Dion was chuntering away, she sat beside me.

‘Fancy helping out a bird in bother?’

I sat with that for a moment.

‘Cos a damsel in distress doesn’t sound Ayrshire enough?’ I asked at last.

She made a ‘well done’ face. ‘You’re about the only guy in here who would have got that.’

‘And what’s bothering you?’ I asked. ‘Or who?’ I added, thinking about the guys who had been surrounding her earlier.

‘New girl in town. I know nobody,’ she said as she looked around the bar. ‘I was asked here by some guy. Ken something. And now he’s creeping me out.’ Keeping her arms straight, she tucked her hands between her knees and gave a dramatic shudder. ‘Wouldn’t be surprised if his mum’s called Norma and he stabs shower curtains in his spare time.’

I followed her line of sight. Saw a guy who grew up on another estate. We used to play football with him. The jumpers-for-goalposts kind. He would have been better taking the place of one of the jumpers.

Never took to him. His gaze would meet yours for less than a second before it slid off, as if he was afraid you would read his mind. We found him one day down the River Ayr throwing stones at the swans and avoided him from then on.

‘Ken Hunter,’ I answered. ‘His wife, Sheila, works in my office.’

‘What a prick,’ she said, leaning back and to the side, as if this would make her less visible to him. ‘Didn’t say he was married.’ She looked at me. Her eyes were large, clear and an intoxicating blue. ‘You’d rather be somewhere else, eh?’

I gave a non-committal shrug.

She stood. ‘Let’s go. We can rescue each other.’

Thinking, *why the hell not?* I followed her outside. ‘Where are we going?’ I asked when I caught her at the door.

‘I don’t know. You’re the local.’ She scanned the playing fields and the tall, full-leafed trees beyond. ‘Is the beach far from here?’

Half an hour later we were walking alongside the low grey wall that holds the sands of Ayr beach from being blown into the town. The tide was in, the waves had their lazy on and we could see the sweep and curve of the bay ahead of us. And out to sea, holding up the skyline, were the hills of Arran. A cool breeze was coming in off the water and, despite the early summer evening sunshine, I could see her arms stipple with the cold when she crossed them.

‘Nice,’ she said. ‘No wonder you’ve never left town.’

‘How did you...?’

‘It’s written all over you,’ she smiled. ‘Born, bred and buttered Ayrshireman, eh?’

On the way down here our chatter had been light and unaffected, and, to my surprise, without any awkward silences. She was an easy girl to talk to.

‘It’s Anna, by the way,’ she said as she took a seat on the wall. I sat beside her, being careful not to get too close.

An elderly couple walked past with a yellow Labrador. Judging by the colour of its coat it was just out of the sea and it chose that moment to give itself a shake, spraying us both with droplets of sea water. Anna’s laughter was loud and unrestrained.

The couple were profuse in their apologies. The dog approached us and nudged Anna’s hand with its nose. The woman tutted. ‘This is Dave, by the way.’ Her pride in the dog evident. ‘Greedy bugger’s looking for a treat.’

‘Not the only one,’ the man said and gave me a wink. ‘Jeez, hen, you’re all wet. You’ll catch your death. Here have my fleece.’

‘No,’ Anna stretched out the syllable. ‘I’ll be fine. Honestly.’

The man offered her it again. It was clear he was momentarily caught up in the glamour of her. I glanced behind me at the sea and thought of mermaids and their siren call.

‘C’mon you,’ the woman said and gave him a nudge. ‘Offering



young women your fleece. They'll be calling the cops on you.' She set off, and with a regretful air, man and dog obediently trotted after her.

Anna waited until the couple were out of earshot. 'At least the natives are friendly.' As she said *friendly*, she looked into my eyes.

Discomfited and flattered, I looked away. She was way out of my league. What the hell was she doing with me?

'We were getting round to the introductions, before Dave showered us...' The pause at the end of her sentence a request for my name.

I told her. 'And what brings you to my home town?

'I've just been sent here. Work.'

'What do you do?'

'Nothing special,' she smiled at me. There was a light in her eyes and a blush to her lips and I felt my thawing into the human race continue. 'I work for the Royal Bank,' she explained. 'But don't be asking for a loan. I'm just a teller.'

'Wait,' I sat up. 'The Royal? Which branch?'

'The one at the top of the High Street.' She cocked an eyebrow at my sudden interest.

I mentally reviewed the staff there. We were expecting a new team member, but that wasn't until next week.

'I don't start until next Monday. I've got a few days holiday to take first.' She held her hands out. 'Thought I'd take in the sights first.'

A file had arrived on my desk the day before. The name came to me.

'Anna Reid?'

'How the hell do you know that?' She straightened her back.

'Andy Boyd,' I reached out, shook her hand. 'I'm based at the branch at the other end of the town. I'm your new boss.'

She threw her head back and laughed. 'You're at it.'

I shook my head slowly. 'Nope. Not long promoted.'

'Wow. What are the chances?'

'It's a small town.'



‘Hope I made a good first impression?’ She tilted her head to the side.

‘I think your new boss is already thinking that HR have been very kind to him.’

‘Bet you say that to all the girls.’

‘Only the ones that laugh at my jokes.’

‘You tell jokes?’

‘On high days and holidays. Maybe the odd funeral.’

She lifted her legs up and swung round on her backside so that she was facing out to sea. I followed suit and in a silence usually only possible between long-time friends we stared into the distance and watched the sun as it painted the distant Isle of Arran and its crown of clouds in shades of red, amber and gold.

I sneaked a look at her. She caught me, nudged me in the side and gave a little giggle. I couldn’t help but join in.

My sensible voice warned that our employers might not take kindly to any fraternisation between us. My usually unheard devil voice was louder. It said: fuck it.

Our shoulders were all but touching. My hand was on the wall, within centimetres of hers. I felt the heat of her skin on me as she slowly moved her pinkie and linked it with mine. I looked down at how our little fingers were joined and looked up and beyond the horizon.

A smile warmed my face. My heart gave a little twist and I couldn’t help but feel, maybe, I was about to get a second chance at happiness.

2

‘So, when do I get to meet this new girlfriend of yours then?’ my mother asked in the middle of the reception area of the bank.

She’d popped in to apologise and say that Nana Morrison was going to pick Pat up from the nursery as she had a game on that afternoon. My mother the would-be champion bowler. I had my suspicions that she’d taken up this new hobby only to allow the Morrisons time with my son. I was almost tempted to visit the bowling club to see if anyone had ever heard of her.

‘Mum,’ I chided. ‘You know how I feel about the Morrisons.’ In the months after their daughter – my wife – died, they tried to get custody of Pat. I was still working through my resentment towards them.

She tutted and waved away my complaint.

I looked around me to check who might have overheard. ‘And another thing – don’t be giving the gossips ammunition.’

‘Why the secrecy, Andy?’ She gave me that look, reached out and prodded me in the stomach. ‘People will be happy for you, son.’ She smiled at me and moved the hand that had just poked me up towards my tie as if she was about to straighten it against my collar, but stopped herself before she could finish the action. I looked to the ceiling and felt like a teenager.

The top of her head barely made my chin, even with her jolt of thick white hair, which went well with her purple, sleeveless summer dress. And all the beads. When she had reached pensionable age, my mum had read the Jenny Joseph poem and run with it.

‘Mum.’ I made a face and fought down a cringe. Here I was, the manager of a large part of a massive organisation and with nothing more than a look my mother could have me behaving like a shy, thirteen-year-old.

‘Can’t a mother be pleased with her son?’ she asked, squaring her shoulders and looking around herself, taking in the counter and the team of staff working behind it. Her expression said, my son’s your boss and he’s done me very proud indeed.

I often wondered what my mother would have made of her life if she’d had the same ambition for herself as she’d had for her sons. She had a bullet-eyed view of the world and an ability to assess what was going on around her that often left me feeling inadequate. Not that I agreed with her on every occasion; she was my parent after all, and a young man has to find his own way in the world.

‘I hear she’s a bit of a looker,’ she said.

‘You’ve been talking to Jim.’

She hoisted her bag – a garish orange – into a more comfortable position on her shoulder. ‘At least *he* tells me stuff.’

‘Aye, well, Jim’s got a big mouth.’

I understood Mum’s perspective. She was understandably curious. Anna was the first woman I’d shown more than a passing interest in since Patricia’s death four years before. But I wanted to be sure we had something before I introduced her to my family. And, more importantly, before she met Pat.

He often asked about his mum. He understood – as much as a child could – that his mother was ‘in heaven’ and he had recently begun to ask if he was going to get another one.

Perhaps the answer to his question was in the fact that every moment away from Anna had my stomach twist with longing. It would have been easy to have her over at mine every night, ask her to stay till morning. But my sensible side kept reminding me that it had only been four weeks since we met. Who knew where this was going?

Except I did know.

From that moment on the wall down by the shore.

Could I afford to fall in love again? My grief for Patricia had almost broken me and I was self-aware enough to know that part of me was holding back because I wasn’t sure I could go through that



again. What if I let this love take over and I lost her as well? There wasn't just me to think about this time.

'This is more than a wee fling, isn't it, son?' My mother was studying my expression.

'Haven't you got a bowling match to prepare for?'

She snorted, pleased she could still read me.

'I knew that your father was the man for me on our second date.'

'Yeah, I know all the stories, Mum.'

'So, tomorrow night.' Thursday was late opening at the branch.

'When you come to collect Pat, bring whatsername...'

'Anna.'

'... with you. We'll make it casual. A friend dropping by. It'll be easier for Pat that way.'

I nodded, seeing the sense of what she was saying. Plus – I was allowing myself to relax into the idea now – it meant I would get to see more of Anna. Trying to juggle her, the job and Pat was becoming increasingly difficult.

The next evening, I picked Anna up from our other branch. Well, around the corner from our other branch. I wasn't quite yet at the stage where I could allow my colleagues in on the secret.

Anna sat in the passenger seat with a long, slow exhalation, followed by a deep breath and then a tight smile.

'Hey, gorgeous,' I said and leaned across to kiss her cheek. As my lips pressed against the cool of her skin I felt her face rise in a smile and caught the delicate heat and spice of her perfume. I read the sigh and the tight smile that welcomed me. 'You're not nervous are you?'

She shifted in her seat and clicked her seatbelt into place. 'Feel like I'm sixteen...' she paused. Reflected. 'No. Don't think I was this nervous when I was sixteen.'

'You'll be fine,' I said. 'Mum's great.'

She raised an eyebrow, then reached across and patted my hand. 'Just what you should say.'

'She is. Honest.' I took her hand and gave it a little squeeze. 'She

never comments on our girlfriends. Never judges.' I studied the traffic, saw a space and moved into the stream of cars that flowed down Miller Road.

Anna laughed. 'She's a mum. She'll be judging.'

'If she does, she'll keep it to herself.'

'Yeah. Well.' Anna looked away from me, out of her window. 'You're a man. You guys miss all that stuff.'

'What stuff?'

'Reading between the lines.' She turned back to me. 'That's where women communicate.' She took another deep breath. Exhaled. 'Anyway. How do I look?'

'Fantastic.' I took my hand from the gear stick and gave hers another squeeze. She had changed out of her bank uniform and was wearing black jeans and a bright-pink top. 'And Mum loves colour, so you'll fit right in there.'

Anna pulled at the neck of her top. 'Jesus,' she laughed. 'I can't believe how nervous I feel. This is ridiculous.'

'It's also very cute. Makes me love you even more.'

She pinked. 'And that right there is the best thing you could have said, Andy Boyd.' She picked my hand up to her lips and kissed the back of my fingers.

Mum made lasagne for the adults and mince and potatoes for Pat. He was openly curious about Anna, hardly taking his eyes off her for the first ten minutes. Then he handed her one of his dinosaur toys, which was a clear sign of his approval.

'What's his name?' Anna asked as she eyed the lump of plastic in her hand.

'Let Anna eat her dinner in peace, Pat,' said Mum.

'Diplodocus,' answered Pat, demonstrating that, no matter how much trouble kids had interpreting the world of adults, the Latinate name of a long-dead species was, quite literally, kids' play.

'Is he your favourite?' asked Anna.

Pat snorted. Looked over his shoulder at a box in the corner. His



toys had all been tidied up before we came to the table and he was clearly itching to get back to play with them. 'Velociraptor. He's my favourite cos he's small and fast.'

'Just like you,' I said and rubbed the top of his head, mussing his hair. He stuck his tongue out in response.

Once we'd finished eating, Anna insisted on helping mum with the dishes.

'Another woman in my kitchen?' asked Mum with mock seriousness. 'Cherish the thought.' She smiled to show that was exactly what she meant. 'Next time, for sure, Anna. This time, why don't you take the easy way out and make the coffee?'

'Deal,' said Anna with a grin.

Pat and I launched into the box of toys while the women went into the kitchen, no doubt to begin the dance in earnest. A few minutes later Anna emerged with a tray of cups and a cafetiere. She was wearing an expression that was half pleased, half harassed.

I sent her a smile of enquiry. She smiled in reply. My male brain read that everything was fine. And this was confirmed a short time later when Mum pulled Pat onto her lap.

'Why don't you let this wee guy stay with me tonight?' Mum asked. 'Let you guys do some adult stuff.'

I raised an eyebrow. Anna blushed.

'Adult stuff?' I asked.

'Go to the pub. Go for a walk. A drive? Do something without this...' she reached under Pat's arms and give him a tickle '... wee monster.'

'Great idea.' I stood up. Although Anna and I stole every moment we could with each other, we had rarely managed to spend a full night together. Waking up with her in bed beside me had so far been a rare treat during our short romance. 'You okay with that?' I asked Anna.

She gave a coy nod to my mother and a smile to me that promised much.

‘Right.’ I rubbed my hands together. ‘Let’s get this Verocirictor into his bath.’

‘Velociraptor, silly,’ replied Pat.

Between us, Mum and I wrestled Pat into the bathroom and out of his clothes. Once the bath was run, I plunked Pat into the water and placed an enormous tower of bubbles on to the top of his head.

I turned to leave the bathroom.

‘Thanks, Mum,’ I said. ‘I’ll pick him up on the way to work in the morning and take him to nursery.’

She nodded and almost gave herself a wee hug, she looked that pleased to have him all to herself.

‘And don’t be spoiling him.’ I warned.

She tutted. ‘Silly Daddy. That’s my job.’

I gave her a look, wanting to know what she thought of Anna, but didn’t ask, knowing she tended to keep her own counsel.

‘Have fun, son,’ she said and got down on to her knees at the side of the bath. She studied me as if she wanted to say something. Then settled for, ‘But just take this for what it is, eh?’