

A SUITABLE LIE by Michael J. Malone
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Domestic abuse towards women has featured in many a literary thriller recently. Therefore, when a novel comes along which puts the male at the receiving end, it immediately stands out from the rest. *A Suitable Lie* is just such a novel. With 40 per cent of domestic violence victims now being male, it is guaranteed to make people challenge their own preconceived ideas.

THE PLOT

Andy Boyd is a big, gentle Scotsman whose beloved wife, Patricia, died during childbirth. Finding it hard to come to terms with his loss, Andy decides he will never love another woman and dedicates the next five years to raising their baby son, Pat.

Reluctantly dragged to a club one night by his well-meaning brother, Jim, Andy is about to slip off home when he bumps into Anna Reid, a beautiful woman who asks him to rescue her from some unwanted attention. Much to Andy's surprise, he finds himself drawn to her.

Following a whirlwind romance, Andy asks Anna to marry him, despite the concerns of his family. However, far from being the caring new wife he was expecting, Anna turns out to be the spouse from hell.

Right from the start of their marriage, it soon becomes obvious Anna suffers from violent bursts of uncontrollable anger... using Andy as a convenient punch bag. Unwilling to hit a woman and too embarrassed to tell anybody he is being abused by a wife much smaller than himself, Andy hides his physical and emotional pain from everyone – especially his five-year-old son. Even when he eventually snaps and lashes out in self-defence, he is the one who ends up apologising.

To make matters worse, someone is stealing money from the bank where Andy works, throwing suspicion on two close colleagues. As he tries to sort it out, gossip and suspicion gradually spreads throughout the bank.

When he discovers one of the suspects, Sheila Hunter, has recently managed to break free from an abusive marriage, Andy begins to realise he needs to do the same, despite the fact he still loves Anna. However, after eventually evicting Anna from the house, he relents and takes her back when she announces she is pregnant. Unfortunately, soon after his second son, Ryan, is born, Anna reverts to her old self and Andy once again becomes a target.

As the violence escalates, Andy struggles to cope with the reality of his miserable life, while still desperately clinging to the hope Anna will change. However, when Anna begins to use the children as a weapon against him, Andy knows he must forget about his own pain and protect his sons.

Finally, Anna surpasses herself by deliberately smashing her nose against a door and telling the police Andy had attacked her. As expected, the police refuse to believe

Andy is the real victim. They evict him from the house, forcing him to leave his sons behind.

Fearing for their safety, Andy finally realises the only way he will get his children back is to put his male pride to one side and seek help.

MY REVIEW

I have to admit, probably like many other people, when I hear of domestic abuse I automatically expect the victim to be a woman. However, after reading *A Suitable Lie*, I now know how wrong I was in this assumption. Men are also victims of abuse... they just have a harder time seeking help.

A Suitable Lie is a chilling, psychological thriller set in Scotland. The storyline revolves around domestic violence and is narrated by Andy Boyd, whose second wife, Anna, turns out to be a psychopathic nightmare. Prone to unpredictable mood swings and uncontrollable bouts of violence, she regularly takes her aggression out on Andy. However, he is reluctant to retaliate.

At first, I found this reaction hard to comprehend, as Andy is a big, tough rugby player, who enjoys the odd pint with his mates. I am sure this is a response a lot of people would share, as it begs the question, why can he not stand up to Anna? She is, after all, so much smaller than him? Why keep making excuses for her, especially when it becomes blatantly obvious her initial attack was not a one off? Why not walk away? Or at least share his ordeal with his family?

Well, the answer is simple. His masculine pride will not allow him to admit he is scared of Anna, especially in front of his sons. Also – because of his size – he is frightened to even contemplate repaying her in kind. That is where the difference lies between most abused men and women... and one that makes Andy's plight all the harder.

Michael Malone's emotional depth of writing builds extremely vivid pictures of Anna's increasingly violent and unpredictable behaviour, making it easy to empathise with Andy. The reader feels not only his physical pain but also, more importantly, his excruciating humiliation. His dilemma and internal struggle become all the more understandable by sharing his everyday routine of dealing with the stresses of work while, at the same time, dreading his return home – certainly no sanctuary there. Even when he starts to vent his pent up anger by picking unprovoked fights in pubs, it is a measure of the writing that he still retains our support. I was therefore filled with righteous indignation when the police made it perfectly clear whose side they were on, after Anna accuses Andy of being the abuser.

The title of this novel perfectly describes how Andy Boyle manages to keep the true state of his marriage from his family and colleagues. Like the majority of decent men, Andy is culturally programmed not to hit a woman. The alternative, however, is to suffer in silence. Unwilling to resort to the former, he is left with no choice but to conjure up an image of perfect marital bliss... to tell a 'suitable lie'.

Andy's life is made all the more unbearable by the prejudicial reaction of others – including the police who refuse to believe him, forcing him to leave his home and sons to the mercy of his demented wife. Knowing the truth, it is hard not to share Andy's anger when the male policeman fails to conceal his utter contempt, all too ready to condemn Andy without knowing the facts. Even the refuge centre Andy eventually telephones for advice will not listen. With the majority of their clients being female, they automatically assume he is a crank call and give him short shrift.

As with most things though, there are always two sides to a story. Having been brought up in a violent home herself, Anna has no idea how to love. Violence is her only means of expression. Although Andy has always tried to take this into account, when she starts to involve the boys in her psychological games, any remaining feelings he has been harbouring for Anna immediately disappear. All that matters to him is getting his sons back.

However, Anna has one last card up her sleeve. When Andy turns up one night demanding to see Pat and Ryan, she completely takes him by surprise by giving him immediate custody of the boys. Like Andy, it is hard not to suspect her motives but it later becomes clear there is a method in her self-destructive madness. As the novel comes to a dramatic ending, Andy soon discovers physical violence is not the only kind Anna can mete out.

A Suitable Lie will definitely tear at your heartstrings, especially the scenes where Andy's young son, Pat, tries to make sense of what is happening to his father. It is thought provoking and emotional. However, one thing it will *not* do is leave you sitting on the fence.

THE AUTHOR

Michael J Malone is a prize-winning poet and author who was born and brought up in the heart of Burns' country, just a stone's throw from the great man's cottage in Ayr. (Well, a stone thrown by a catapult.) He has published over 200 poems in literary magazines throughout the UK, including *New Writing Scotland*, *Poetry Scotland* and *Markings*. His career as a poet has also included a (very) brief stint as the Poet-In-Residence for an adult gift shop. *Blood Tears*, his bestselling debut novel won the Pitlochry Prize (judge: Alex Gray) from the Scottish Association of Writers. Other published work includes: *Carnegie's Call* (a non-fiction work about successful modern-day Scots); *A Taste for Malice*; *The Guillotine Choice*; *Beyond the Rage* and *Bad Samaritan*. His poetry includes: *In The Raw*, *Running Threads* and *Lip Synch*. Michael is a regular reviewer for the hugely popular crime fiction website www.crimesquad.com. A former Regional Sales Manager (Faber & Faber) he has also worked as an IFA and a bookseller. This novel marks a major departure for him.

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