DEAD
STRAIGHT
LINE

Also by Malcolm Duffy

Me Mam. Me Dad. Me.

Sofa Surfer

Read Between the Lies

Seven Million Sunflowers

Malcolm Duffy

DEAD STRAIGHT LINE

ZEPHYR

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To Tabi

‘Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none.’

William Shakespeare

ONE

I DON'T HAVE trouble finding trouble.

It finds me.

I used to go looking for it.

Not any more.

I've got more trouble now than I know what to do with.

It all started with the gang.

I'm the leader, the one they follow, as if I'm a tour guide. We're not a drug gang; we don't defend our postcode. *Stay away from our numbers and letters!* We're a bunch of six guys who hang about and mess around. None of us will ever be prefects. Defects, more like it.

How come I'm the leader?

Four reasons.

One: humour.

Being funny gets you things.

Attention. Detention.

Two: I'm taller than they are.

Whether they want to or not, they have to look up to me.

Three: reckon I'm smarter than them.

My teachers reckon otherwise. They think I'm CEO of Stupid. Could be good at school if I could be bothered. I leave the bothering to others.

Want a job that brings maximum money for minimum effort, like a goalkeeper for a team that's so good, I never have to save a shot. When the ref blows for full time, I'll collect my fifty grand for keeping the goal so empty. That would be cool.

Four: I've got ideas. Tons of them.

When we're standing outside Lickin' Chicken wondering what to do next, it's me who finds a brainwave to surf in on. Usually involves something risky.

Always pushing things.

Doors.

People.

Situations.

Any road, what about the rest of the gang?

Here goes.

Barny.

Real name, Jayden Barns.

Average brain. Above average legs. Can go faster than most missiles. Never needs a bus app. He catches them no matter how far up the road they've gone. I've known Barny since, like, forever.

Mad.

Real name, Richard Maddison.

Reckon he's got Attention Seeking Disorder. Whatever gene stops you doing crazy stuff is missing from his body.

Example: we were once on a super-high roof, wondering if it was possible for a human body to leap, without the aid of rockets, to the car park opposite. Mad doesn't do wonder. He just does. Took a running jump and soared across. Must have been twenty metres to the ground. Didn't even ask us to film it. How insane is that?

Dean.

Real name, Dean Clarke.

He's the oldest of us, but not the brightest bulb in the ceiling. His parents send him to tutors to help his brain catch up. But it's lagging so far behind, they'd be better off spending their money on takeaways.

Sharky.

Real name, Finn Edwards.

Sharky's girl mad. Problem is, it's one-way traffic. None of them are bothered about him, no matter how much he combs his hair.

Then there's Yell.

Real name, Eliot Hollings.

He's the quiet one. Yell is a recent addition. Shouldn't officially be in our gang as he's in Year Ten, but he got in because I'm seeing his sister, Lauren. She asked if he

could join, as he's always hanging around the house. Now he hangs around with us. Told Yell he could join on one condition. Nothing we do ever gets back to Lauren.

We don't have many rules. We're not the government. But we do have one. You gotta take part. Unfortunately, Yell doesn't seem to like this rule. Last time we jumped off Clinker's Bridge, Yell stayed dry, holding our phones. When we moved *For Sale* signs into gardens of houses that weren't for sale, Yell stood watching. A gang is not a spectator sport. He's starting to aggravate me. Being Lauren's brother does not excuse him. Time to get him off the sub's bench.

'What you doing Friday, Yell?'

He shrugs.

'Good, 'cos you and me are going on a little expedition.'

'Do I have any choice?'

Shake my head.

'You have to do it, Yell. It's the law round these parts.'

'What is it?'

'Meet me outside Soapy Suds, 7 p.m., and you'll find out.'

'What about the others?' asks Yell, looking at the rest of the gang. He bites his lower lip as if it's a chipolata.

'They've done it. Now it's your turn.'

'What we going to do?' he asks, his voice going higher with every syllable.

'DSL?'

'What's that?'

'What do you think?'

Imagine the neurons in his head breaking the speed limit as they fly about searching for the answer.

'Doing Something Lazy?'

Dean sniggers into his hand.

'Try again. And no laughing when he gets it wrong.'

Yell's nose scrunches up like a slug that's been poked with a stick.

'Demon Sticky Lasagne.'

'Not even close. Put him out of his misery, Sharky.'

'It stands for Dead Straight Line.'

TWO

YELL IS ILLUMINATED by the fluorescent lighting from the laundrette. Thought he might have pulled a sicky. But no, there he is, hopping from foot to foot, like he doesn't know which one to stand on.

I fist bump him.

'Y'all right, Yell?'

'Yeah, I'm ready.'

But he's not giving off ready vibes. Looks like he'd rather have stayed in watching Netflix in his jimmy jams.

'I was nervous the first time. But that's what tonight's all about, – giving your nerves a good work out.'

A squeaky laugh breaks from his lips.

'What's Dead Straight Line, Rory?'

Told the others not to tell him. Don't want to scare him off before it's even started.

'Very good question, Yell. Come on.' We start walking down the high street. 'It's a game I invented

a few months back. It's got everything you could want – fun, excitement, exercise, only just the wrong side of legal and doesn't cost a thing, apart from a few holes in your jeans.'

'You still haven't told me what it is yet.'

'Soon, Yell, soon.'

Dead Straight Line is just one of the things we do to keep ourselves amused.

We go to parties we're not invited to. Mean, what's the point of going somewhere you know everyone? Better being the face people take notice of. Sometimes we get rumbled and thrown out. But there's always another to crash. Social is full of them. Sharky's job is tracking them down.

We do things we shouldn't. Mad's brother took a car once. We went along for the ride. Won't be doing that again. Idiot forgot to check the fuel gauge. Came to a stop on a country road, miles from town. Cost us fifty quid to get home in an Uber.

We go to movies and play Inappropriate. Wait for a really sad scene and burst out laughing. Drives people crazy.

We play Hole in One. Go to the local golf course and find a par-three hole where the golfers can't see the flag. When they hit their shots, one of us – usually Barny – rushes out from nearby bushes, puts a ball in the hole and runs back. Hard part is keeping our laughs

inside as the golfer goes crazy thinking they've hit a hole-in-one.

But best of the lot is Dead Straight Line. Dean nearly bottled it the first time; said he didn't have the right gear. He didn't quit, though. Pretended to enjoy it but could tell he was loading his nappy the whole way. Still, credit to him for doing it. Mad loved it so much, he wanted to do it again, the second we finished. Reckon he does it on his own when we're not around.

'Does it last long?' asks Yell, in a voice that belongs to a Year Seven.

'Depends,' I say. 'Could be a long time, could be short. All down to what happens.'

'Is it dangerous?'

Swallow some night air. 'On a danger scale of one to ten, where one is reading a book, and ten is walking into a cage of lions wearing mince, this is… four.'

A thought hits me.

'You haven't told Lauren, have you?'

'No, said I was hanging out with you.'

'Good. Keep it that way.'

Lauren wouldn't approve. Never seen her do anything remotely bad. She even picks up litter.

'It's gonna be ace,' I say, giving Yell a playful punch.

He rubs his arm, as if I've shanked him with a blade. Never seen anyone look so terrified. Tempted to let

him off, but the temptation doesn't last. Need to know what he's made of, apart from putty.

We turn off the high street into a road with houses stretching off as far as you can see.

We stop.

Take my phone out and check Google Maps.

'This'll do.'

Yell looks around, confused. 'We're gonna play the game here… in the street?'

'Yeah, this is where it starts.'

Haven't seen so much confusion on a face since Mr Hastings tried to explain heat and thermodynamics.

Time to put him out of his misery.

'Okay, Yell, here's the score. We're going to go from here, Hamilton Road, to your house in Melbourne Street. But no following footpaths, no buses, no Ubers, no detours. We go in a straight line. A dead one. Hence the name.'

For once Yell's lips stay unchewed as his mouth flops open. 'We go through people's front gardens, back gardens, over their fences?'

'Correct.'

'Isn't that trespassing?'

'Probably.'

'What if someone sees us.'

'We say we're looking for a football.'

'We haven't got a football.'

'That's why we're looking for it.'

Yell looks baffled.

'It's mad, Rory.'

'Exactly,' I say, grinning.

'How many times have you done it?'

'About twenty.'

It's closer to ten, but he doesn't need to know that. Want him to think I'm an expert at this.

'Has anything ever gone wrong?'

'No,' I lie. 'Been barked at by a couple of dogs, had a few people shout out of their windows, but most are too busy gawping at the TV. By the time they see anything on their doorbell cameras, we're on to the next garden.'

'They might see our faces.'

'Not with these they won't.'

Pull a balaclava from my pocket and hand it to Yell.

'They'll think we're burglars.'

'Yell, burglars go *into* houses, we go *around* them. And when we finish, we take the masks off and go home as if nothing happened. Do I make myself clear?'

'What's the point?'

'The point is, Yell, it's a challenge. If Mount Everest had an escalator to the top, there'd be no point in going. If the English Channel had a footbridge no one would bother swimming it. People do it 'cos it tests them.'

'Thought you said this was easy.'

'No, I said it wasn't dangerous.'

Yell seems to have shrunk. By the end of the night might have to carry him home in my pocket.

'Are you sure it's gonna be okay?'

Yell has turned into a human questionnaire.

''Course it's gonna be okay,' I shout. 'I don't do things that are impossible. Now come on, let's do it.' Find a streetlamp and show him Google Maps on my phone. 'See this house here. There's an alleyway leading to the back lane. We go down there, hop the fence into the garden of the house behind. We pick up the next alleyway and exit into Dunbar Road. Then we cross into this front garden and carry on.'

'Have you done this route before?'

'Yeah.'

A big lie wrapped in a bow. I've done Dead Straight Line a few streets from here, but not this one. That's half the challenge. Different starting points. Different routes. Different obstacles. The fun is not knowing what you're up against, trying to figure out how to stay on line.

'Okay,' I say. 'Route sorted. Now switch your phone off.'

'Why?'

'Don't want your mum saying, "Eliot, what were you doing in the middle of a back garden in Dunbar Road?" Best to switch it off for a few minutes.'

Yell takes out his phone and turns it off.

'Ready?'

Yell looks light years from ready, but he's going to do this whether he likes it or not.

'Don't want you lagging behind. Need you to stick to me like cheese to a burger.'

'Okay,' he mumbles.

Check the street to see no one's around.

'Masks on.'

We pull on our masks. Take a final look at my phone, switch it off, and we run down a garden path into an ink-black alleyway.