

TO RECLAIM A LIFE

A Novel

Nelson Erlick



To Reclaim A Life
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For Melissa

For Rayna

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Chapter One

SECOND EXIT

My name is Richard A. King.
And I am anything but.
I am not a good man. I am not a bad one, either.

It depends on where and when you catch me in The Cycle.

The room was small but it fit the monitoring equipment checking her heart, blood pressure, and circulation. Before the cancer had overwhelmed her, she had agreed to an intravenous tube with a needle piercing her hand at one end and a clear bag of fluid dripping into the other end. The fluid contained no treatment. That ship had sailed—only morphine or a substitute could ease the pain.

The walls were stark. Only a few familiar photographs of family and friends, most of which I recognized. This was her apartment, such as it was. At least the room wasn't filled with the acrid smell of urine expected of an institution where people went to die. Though she never asked, I would have gladly paid for her hospice in her own home—and spent my last penny doing so.

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Hospice, Knot's word echoed in my head. Is that euphemism supposed to be funny? The original meaning of hospice was a place of hospitality for travelers and starving backpackers.

"Shut up!" I snapped. Knot always seemed to be maddeningly correct in the right place at the wrongest possible time.

There, in the bed, was Mrs. Rebecca King. Or should I say, Miss Rebecca Wilson. She had shucked my name when she'd left me. Such is the consequence of divorce.

How sallow she was, her face gaunt. She looked as if she had been deflated by an industrial-strength vacuum, leaving only tightened skin behind and unnaturally prominent facial bones. Her once-full hair now was wispy. Her chest continued to weakly rise and fall as she labored for each breath. I held her limp hand. I could feel her body slowly growing cold. Amazing how a small set of fucking stupid cells only good for duplicating could ravage a body.

The nurse outside the door had whispered to me the end would come soon—a day or so. Maybe hours.

Though she was my ex-wife, I had grown to love her far more than on our wedding day. Since that day, I had dreaded this moment. I had spent countless hours over the years steeling myself against this day, imagining how I would react and weave my way through the aftermath. Still, as the moment approached, my mind began to reject it, leaving me to ward off the inevitable. She was the most precious thing I had, or, for that matter will ever have in my short future ahead. She was the reason I persevered.

And I had destroyed her.

Not by causing the cancer, of course, but I had hollowed her out. If she wanted to stay with me, she had to live The Cycle over and over,

year after year, decade after decade, each iteration different yet the same, wearing her down. She knew I had The Cycle when we married. She did not know what she would have to endure.

I was the reason she was alone, with only me, in this room from which she would never leave.

I was the reason she had never cultivated friends.

I was the reason what was left of our family died on the vine.

My thoughts selfishly concentrated on me instead of Rebecca. What was *I* going to do next? What was *I* going to do the moment after that? And the next moment?

Atta boy! Knot said. *There is your empathy. Such a good soul.* His words reverberated in my head.

“Shut up!”

But Knot had a point. I was the one who deserved to be stretched out in agony on that bed, not her.

I whispered into Rebecca’s ear, “You know if I could, I would trade places with you in a heartbeat.”

I waited for Knot’s sarcastic comment. It never came.

Rebecca stirred. Her eyes fluttered, opened, and narrowed, her blue iris shining through. At that moment, I believe she saw me, but I could not tell whether she had heard me.

She summoned what might have been the last of her energy and managed to hold up the middle finger on her right hand that still rested on the bed.

I know what she is thinking: Heaven. Knot’s announcement burst into my consciousness. *That place dripping bliss. Where children come to life as babies, or toddlers, or happy, healthy, grateful, respectful children. Where*

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parents return as wise, supportive guardians. Where love with your spouse blooms again. Where you and your partner live in pure joy—until they want to bring along the in-laws who could never resist denigrating you and that worthless brotherinlaw who—

“Enough! That’s enough! Shut up!”

The nurse outside the door rushed in.

“Sorry,” I apologized. “It’s just me talking to myself.” I hated when Knot did that.

The caretaker said, “It’s one thing to cry, but another to shout. Please respect your wife’s serenity at this delicate moment.” And left the room.

Asshole! Knot spat.

When I turned to Rebecca, she raised her index finger along with her third finger already up.

I nodded at her, as if she could see and understand. “Two years. Yes, I promise.”

Knot scoffed.

She closed her eyes, drifting off to her labored sleep. I laid my head on her chest and listened to her heart beat. Until it didn’t.

Chapter Two

SCENARIOS

Everyone has a little Voice in their heads. People give it different names: conscience, conscious thoughts, angel, devil, Jiminy Cricket. If the Voice encourages you to do good, compassionate/empathetic, or altruistic acts, we call it an angel. If the Voice encourages you to do bad, anti-social, even evil acts, we call it a demon. Sometimes, these are different Voices. Sometimes, the Voice is both, simultaneously. Sometimes people are convinced that the Voice is God, that they are speaking directly to God. Sometimes God's Voice commands them to feed the hungry, heal the sick, house the homeless, harmonize the soul. Sometimes God's Voice commands them to lead followers down a path to needless sacrifice, misery, and death, or force non-believers to submit at the end of a sword. History is replete with zealots, saints, crusaders, and jihadists.

It all depends on how the Voice behaves.

Correction. It all depends on how the host allows the Voice to behave, Knot said.

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The Voice's speech can be your own, someone you know, someone or something else, or nondescript like words being read off a page. Its volume can be soft or deafening. Its content: insightful or repugnant. Its frequency: sporadic or planned. Its timing: from the worst possible to the cavalry at the nick of time. And if you listen, anything from moronic to brilliant.

If the Voice stays in your head, it can be any of those things.

Hearing the Voice is normal. Acting on it may not be.

Hearing the Voice is not weak-minded. Choosing to follow it without question is.

But if the Voice comes out and manifests itself in the real world, your sanity is in jeopardy.

I have a Voice. It sometimes speaks in a non-descript tone. I have a name for it: *Knot*. I named it Knot because if I listen, it often ties my life up in knots.

Who are you kidding? Knot chuckled. *What you really named me is* "Not Me."

I sneered. "I don't think so."

Who else could I possibly be?

"You're a wise-cracking asshole."

But I have my endearing qualities.

"Who ties events in knots and fucks up my life with your endless scenarios."

Which you occasionally find useful.

It would not have been possible to keep Knot bottled in my brain indefinitely. I have never seen my Voice appear in the physical world, though sometimes I swear I almost see him out of the corner of my eye. But my sanity was not in jeopardy. I was and am not schizophrenic.

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You have said what you are not. Admit what you are—at least to yourself.

I am—I am a prisoner of The Cycle. In the trough of The Cycle, I have periods of depression, hopelessness, self-hatred that seem to last forever. Knot can fan the flame by whispering how worthless I am, what a failure I am, how everything I have ever, or will ever, do is shit.

I am you.

“And sometimes I’m certain you’re trying to manipulate me.”

I cannot speak what you do not think somewhere in the recesses of your brain, our brain.

Those are the times when I am in the Down Phase of The Cycle. I burn from within. I am no longer me. I shrink inside me, my body an outside shell without restraint. I am not violent—I have never been violent or abusive—but the true me cannot escape.

Then there are times when I am at the pinnacle, in the Up Phase of The Cycle. I bask in a warm, comforting feeling, my work and pleasures resonate with frenetic joy. I can do anything. But what I think is pleasure is not. What I think is stellar work is schlock. What I think of myself as near perfection is riddled with faults. It never lasts.

And then I come back to a steady baseline where I am calm, where I put on a façade of normalcy, where inside I try to be unfeeling. It is as if I am on a calm sea, but I know a storm is brewing. And I will sink yet again. Much depends on my environment and circumstances. The storm might not arrive for weeks or months—or next Tuesday. The pharmaceutical industry creates drugs that extend The Cycle, with the hopes of subduing it. But they never stop it.

These days, whenever I think about The Cycle, I remember how difficult it was to live for those around me—especially for Rebecca, and Kathryn before her.

I had told Rebecca as the cancer spread that if and when she was gone, there would be nothing holding me here: no work, no family, no friends. The two fingers Rebecca had held up in the closing hours of her life meant two years. She had guilted me, had me swear that I would not do anything rash for two years after she was gone. She never used the word “suicide.”

Two years to delay any “irrational” act. Two years to reconsider whether I should take my life. Two years to take in life and decide whether it was worth living. But not an empty two years. There would be a psychiatrist prescribing drugs, a psychologist providing talk therapy, membership in a grief group playing “Can You Top This,” with each participant competing to show that their loss was the most severe, and a pastor doling out platitudes masquerading as spiritual guidance.

I stood in front of my refrigerator door, calendars hanging precariously by a magnet. Crossed out were seven hundred thirty-one days in this year’s calendar on top of last year’s. “Time flies when you’re having fun,” I muttered.

But it crawls when you are in Purgatory, quipped Knot.

I had completed my two-year agreement, in full, for Rebecca.

But ahead, beyond the two years, all I could see was emptiness. There could be no sense of satisfaction, nothing worthwhile, nothing to achieve. If I endured, I could look forward to assisted living where I could no longer cook or clean for myself and would spend endless hours a prisoner of my own growing incompetence, living amidst cackling cliques of old women stirring up malicious gossip. And finally, a nursing home, in a wheelchair, unable to take a step on my own, dependent on others to cart me around

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acid, sterile, institutional halls while I uncontrollably peed into a bag. To hope that you have not been forgotten, but when you have visitors, it is even worse because it shouts out what they can do with ease, but you know you never, never will. And so you're left sleeping the rest of your life away, reliving old memories over and over and over, trying but unable to embellish them. I'd have no new memories to make.

When you stop making memories and just relive old ones, you are living death, said Knot.

I had honored Rebecca's request. Now it was time to exit.

You adhere to the letter of your agreement but violate its spirit. Two years was to give you time to manage the grief. Not a countdown.

"I am so tired. So exhausted. There's nothing left of me."

Coward!

"I'm sick and tired of failing. When I finally do the deed, I'll probably screw that up, too."

You might remember what Pacino said in The Devil's Advocate. "Guilt is like a bag of bricks." Well, regret is like the mortar that binds them. So put the fucking bag down!

"Easier said than done. How?"

By forgetting that you even carry the bag.

"How, asshole? I can't change the past!"

But you can change how you remember it!

I chuckled. "And how am I supposed to do that?"

Scenarios!

Knot was more than just an annoying inner Voice. It was the source of my imagination.

Scenarios. Five-second sketches, scenes, vignettes.

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Scenarios. Projections into the future, suppositions, what-ifs. All in a matter of five seconds. I would appear to be daydreaming, but I could live an hour, a day, a month, even a year within those five seconds.

What if someone ran me off the road? What would I do?

What if someone burgled our house? What would I do?

What if someone robbed Rebecca and beat her up? What would I do?

What if someone cheated me out of my life savings? What would I do?

In five seconds, I would have a scenario addressing the situation.

Knot was at it constantly. The list seemed endless. My mind would whirl for an instant as Knot ran through different scenarios. Sometimes dozens of scenarios in my mind as to how to address a situation. Even situations that never occurred—but could have if only... Mundane situations. Stressful situations. Life and death situations. Knot's scenarios were constantly intruding on my thoughts, like bubbles in a boiling pot of water, appearing and then bursting as they reached the surface.

Sometimes Knot's scenarios ended with unexpected rewards. Sometimes they ended with unexpected consequences. The trick was to find a satisfying one among the dozens Knot would offer up.

I create scenarios to help you cope with your past. Scenarios that literally change your past. I create scenarios of new memories that you can live with, to write over old memories that you cannot.

"You can't change the past."

Are you sure? As I said, you can change how you remember it. And in the end, is that not that all that matters?

"Most of your scenarios end in disaster."

Choose the best scenario to solve the situation. Only you can.

"The correct scenario—"

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No. The best scenario. The best scenario is the right one. There may be more than one correct scenario, but only one is the best for you.

“Why are you offering this now?”

Knot hesitated. *Because it is necessary.*

“Necessary why?”

Are you happy with your life as it is?

“Of course I’m not.”

This is your one and only chance to change it. Time is limited.

“Why is time limited? What’s the rush? A scenario only takes a few seconds.”

We have a lot of scenarios to play. It is now or never.

“Even if I could recognize and choose the best scenario, how could I accept something as real that never happened?”

This is not new to you. You have followed many scenarios before. This is just one step further.

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

You will see the scenario you choose over and over and over and over and over and over. History has taught us if you tell a lie enough times, people will begin to believe it. There is no reason to believe you are an exception. After all, I know you—intimately.

“Prove it.”