

NICKLUS

(first chapter)

by

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For Jane Cat

1985 – 2003

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All characters in this book are fictional, except for Marlowe.

Bus numbers and bus routes are mostly fictional, too!

1 *The First Escape*



When the sun rose over Kensington Gardens in London, making the dew sparkle like jewels scattered across the grass, its light fell upon a blanket of

neatly-arranged newspapers on a park bench.

Under the newspapers a small boy was sleeping, half-hidden beneath the drowsy branches of a gnarled old oak. He was lying on his side and facing the sun, his head resting on the corner of a small rucksack. His face was pale and his short-cropped hair was blond. His eyes, if you could have seen them, were somewhere between blue and green. He was nearly ten years old, but looked much younger.

The warm July sunlight crept up the boy's face. He opened his eyes, blinked twice and sat up. The newspapers slid onto the grass. He looked at them

thoughtfully for a moment, as if trying to recall why they were there. Then he picked them up one at a time, folding each one carefully until he had made a tidy pile of them. He put them into his rucksack and took out a plastic box.

Suddenly a cat appeared at his side. It was a large ginger tom with most of one ear gone and only half a tail. It looked once at the box. Then it looked away, pretending it didn't have the slightest curiosity about what was inside.

The boy opened the box and took out a piece of bread and a cold, cooked beefburger. He looked at the cat. The cat glanced at him, then looked away again and began cleaning its fur, licking one broad paw and rubbing it slowly about its head and neck.

The boy took a penknife from his pocket and opened it carefully. He used it to mark a line down the middle of the burger. He studied the result in the watery sunlight before marking the line again, a hair's breadth to the right. Then he cut the burger with great care and compared the two halves. Finally he put one piece in front of the cat.

The cat quickly put its paw upon the meat. It looked

all around. Then it bent down and began tearing at the burger delicately and neatly. A smile spread across the boy's face as he watched.

'W-w-would you like some b-bread?' he asked. He spoke slowly, as if he found it difficult to get the words out. The cat looked up from the burger, sniffed at the bread offered, and gave the boy a stony look.

'I... I'll eat it then,' the boy said. And the strange couple continued their meal in comfortable silence.

Afterwards, they sat and watched the sunlight waken the park - the boy sitting near one end of the bench, the cat settled in the middle. The boy noticed that the cat kept one paw on a large, ragged feather - not the feather of a pigeon, nor even of a seagull, but of a much larger bird, an eagle perhaps. He leaned nearer to look at the feather. This seemed to bother the cat, so the boy moved back.

'S-sorry,' he whispered.

Finally the cat rose, stretched and started to move off. But then it sat down again and - as if it was the most natural thing in the world for a cat to do - asked the boy quietly:

'Where d'ya live, kid?'

It had a low, gravelly voice and spoke with a slight American accent.

The boy looked at the cat suspiciously. Then he whispered, 'I live wh-where-whenever I am. H-here.'

The cat was impressed. 'Good answer,' he purred. 'And a great place to live, too: *wherever*. Just like me! Hey, I *knew* you were different. I *knew* we could talk!'

The boy studied the cat before asking, 'W-why do you t-t-talk?'

The cat cleaned a paw before answering.

'I don't, as a rule. Words are dangerous things, know what I mean? As my old master the Sea Captain used to say, "Keep your head, keep your cool, and keep your thoughts to yourself! ". Right? And hey - if it comes to that, why do *you* talk?'

The boy shook his head. 'I don't. N-n-not m-much.'

'Like it! What's your name, kid?'

'M-my n-name is N-N-Nicklus.' he said slowly, struggling with every word.

'And I'm Marlowe. Pleased to meet'cha, Nick. And thanks for the breakfast. As my old master would have said, *you* are an officer and a gentleman!'

Nicklus smiled at the cat. 'I hope I g-gave you your

share. Diffi-diffi-... Hard to d-d-divide it fairly.'

'You did good, kid. I could tell you cared about it, and that's another reason I knew I could talk to you. But Nick, can I ask you something? What are you doing here, buddy boy? The park keeper is one mean son of a police dog, and if he catches you using his park as a hotel, it's a kick up the butt for you, buster!' The cat made an angry hissing noise.

'Butt?'

'Rear. Rump. Sit-upon.'

'Really? He'll k-k-kick me?'

'Maybe not. He might just chase you off with a few ripe swear words. I was exaggerating a bit - comes naturally to a cat, you know. But to return to the question: what's with this sleeping on a bench, Nick?'

'It's in a book a lady r-read to me. There w-was a man on a b-bench w-with newspaper over him. It's w-w-warmer.'

'Yeah. But I didn't want to know *how* you do your sleeping. I wanted to know *why*.'

Nicklus nodded. He understood now. 'Y-yesterday, I ran away f-from the place I was. I had come last w-week, w-with the others. But there was another time -

before that - long ago - I used to come here with my -'

He stopped and waved one arm, as if to clear that sentence from the air and start again. 'We used to come every w-w-week, and sit on this b-bench.'

He stopped again, searching for the right words. He touched the wooden slats of the park bench gently, running the fingers of one hand along the faded grain of the wood.

'Th-this is like going b-back in time. Back to a good time. And I have to find a w-way b-back.' Nicklus stopped to catch his breath.

'I'm not g-good at t-talking,' he said. But as he said this, he realised that he was talking to the cat more freely than he could manage with any human.

The cat twitched what was left of its tail and said kindly, 'I know the problem, kid. Hey - when I've had a hard night out doing the cat-tango around the lampposts with a few furry feline babes, I can hardly piece two meows together myself! *Grrrrrrrauuwww!*'

He pranced along the bench, doing a little cat dance. 'Hey - *relax*, kid!' he called over his shoulder, still dancing. 'In my book, Nicky boy, you're doing *fine and dandy!* Best conversation I've had since the

old man died.'

Numbers that Mean Something

Marlowe sat down again by his feather and fixed the boy with an unblinking cat stare. He said, 'Let's put it in order, shall we, buddy? You came to this park a few days back and remembered being here once before - when you were just a kitten, maybe?'

'Not a kitten!'

'Just my little joke, Nick. Okay, so now you've run off from where you're living, and you've come back *here* again because the place means a lot to you, and because you think you can find something - or someone - you used to know. How am I doing, kid? Am I good at this, or am I *good*?'

'You're v-very good!' Nicklus exclaimed.

'Hold on there, excitable human creature, we're not out of the woods yet.'

The boy looked worried. 'W-woods?' he asked.

'It's just a saying, my nervous little friend. You're a bit literal for a human, ain'tcha? What I mean is, I *still* don't know what you're looking for.'

Nicklus bit his lip thoughtfully. 'It was long ago,' he said. 'B-but I remember the n-numbers. She always used to t-tell me. Number 272, th-then 3 p-parks and 1 angel. Big clock. You take the number 11 over the water until you see the Ele-eleph-phant. Number 17 and you pass the place where the w-white men dance on the gr-green.'

He stopped to catch his breath. 'Then - I don't know, it was s-something about those bugs that make a singing sound. She said that once. Then g-get off - offly - go off - no... I can't remember that part. But the house is n-number 333, I know.'

'Run that past me again?'

Nicklus repeated the instructions.

Marlowe shook his head and scratched at his bad ear. 'Means nothing to me, kiddo,' he said.

Nicklus took a pencil and sheet of paper from his rucksack and began to sketch something. Within a few minutes the paper showed a small house with an arched doorway, a window to either side with a tidy flower garden before each window, and a path leading from the door out to a wooden gate with the number 333 on it. There were similar houses attached

on both sides. The drawing was neat and accurate.

'*Yowwwwwlll!* Fastest pencil in London, hey? What's the house, Nick?'

'M-my home. W-was.'

'You used to live there? How long ago, kiddo?'

'Don't know.'

'Who else was there?'

Nicklus paused and the suspicious look returned to his face. 'S-someone,' he said.

The cat was annoyed. 'Don'tcha trust old Marlowe?' he grumbled. 'Hey, kid, I've just put one of my precious cat lives into your hands by talking to you, but you're not gonna stump up with a bit of private information of your own? No?'

He hissed and added, 'But no matter. Curiosity is just *killing* this cat, so let me guess. It's your Mom. You're trying to find her, right?'

Nicklus nodded. 'Yes,' he said. Suddenly he looked much older.

'How?'

Nicklus bent closer and whispered. 'I'm going to l-look all around. G-going to w-walk everywhere until I find the house. All over L-L-London.'

Marlowe sat back wearily and began scratching at his bad ear again. 'Good luck, kid,' he said. 'Good luck to you. You've got guts, I'll give you that.'

'You come too?' Nicklus asked.

'What? Me? *Rrrrrrrrrrrrrroww!* Not on your life, Nick! You wanna stomp the sidewalks, you go on and do it, buddy boy. But leave me out of it!' He gave a growl and a long hiss.

'Oh. What is s-stomp the s-s-sidewalk?' Nicklus was puzzled.

'Pace the pavement. Tread the tracks.'

'Is that a b-bad thing to do?'

'For a cat, it's as dumb as dumb can be. If you've got a sidewalk - what *you* call a pavement, kid - you've got a road too. And roads mean death for cats, even those with all nine lives left. Look, kid, the only thing I hate more than a dog is a car. *Hsssssssss!* Cats and cars don't mix. Short as a cat's life is, I don't plan to make it any shorter! Dig?'

'Dig? Y-you mean l-like w-with a spade?'

Marlowe narrowed his eyes. 'You making fun of me, kid?' he asked.

'N-no.'

The cat studied the boy keenly. 'Where'd you run away from, Nick?'

'A Home f-for... I think it's f-for special children.'

'Suits you.' But to itself, the cat was thinking - '*A nuthouse. That's where he's escaped from. Several million kids in this country, and you go blabbing to a nutter. But there's some comfort in that, Marlowe. No one would believe anything he said.*'

Nicklus added, 'Twenty-two of us. They don't like us to get out. But I d-d-did! Th-then I got a bus, and another bus. All b-by myself.'

'Yeah. Sure.' The cat yawned and looked up into the oak tree. He changed the subject. 'What have we here?' he asked himself softly. 'Some new nests. I hadn't noticed that. Three nests up there now. No, four of 'em.'

Nicklus began counting nests. The cat watched with interest while Nicklus counted carefully, several times: as if this was a very important task. 'F-five nests,' the boy announced. 'You w-were wrong.'

'I still say it's four!' the cat hissed, annoyed. 'Okay then, snapshot eyes: how about the number of *leaves* on the tree? Can you do *that*, smarty-pants?'

Nicklus rose to his feet and stared at the tree. He was whispering to himself, adding number to number, leaf to leaf, branch to branch.

Marlowe watched him uneasily. 'It's all right, kid,' he growled. 'I was only kidding. And it wasn't a good joke in the first place. You can stop now.'

Nicklus' eyes were still fixed on the tree. 'I c-can do it,' he said. 'But it's diffi-difficult.'

The cat leapt onto the boy's shoulder and hissed sharply. Startled, Nicklus turned his eyes from the tree and looked into the cat's furry ginger face.

The cat spoke gently. 'It's all right, Nick. It doesn't matter. You can stop counting.'

'What?'

'It's only a number, right? You can't eat it. You can't cuddle into it on a cold winter's night. It doesn't smell of milk and fur and love like a mother cat, and it won't come running when you sing to it. Like this!'

The cat gave a great caterwaul, leapt off the boy's shoulder and scrambled into the oak tree above. It peered down at him from a branch, looking for all the world like the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland*.

The cat asked, 'Can you remember anything else?'

‘About what?’

‘About being younger.’

Nicklus sat down again. The cat stayed in the tree.

‘I had a Granddad in a b-b-big house. And he got a new w-w-wife, all young and glittery. Sh-she didn’t l-like me.’ Nicklus shook his head sadly.

‘No kidding? What was the flashy little buzzard’s name, Nick?’

‘Buzzard?’ Nicklus asked, puzzled.

‘Bird of prey. Feeds on old flesh. It’s the glitzy gal I’m meaning, kid. The wife.’

‘He called her Emmy Jaz. Her real n-name was longer. Emmeline J-Jasmine, I think. And Granddad was - he w-was...’ Nicklus went to his rucksack again. From the very bottom he took out a tiny red Bible which he opened to reveal a sheet of paper, folded small. He unfolded this carefully, smoothing it out.

‘He g-gave me this. It has his n-name on it and he said not to - to let her s-see it. Look.’ Nicklus held the paper above his head for the cat to view from his perch in the tree.

Marlowe shook his head. ‘I can look - but I can’t

read, Nick my man. Cats don't, you know.'

'But you t-t... you t-t-talk.'

'Sure. And to tell the truth, that's always been something of a surprise to me. But reading I can't do.'

'Why?'

'No answer to that, kid. Talk about it another day, all right? Maybe. What's on this piece of paper?'

'Oh. I - I can't r-r-read much either. But small w-words I do.' The boy dropped his voice. 'It's a s-secret.' He looked over his shoulder, almost fearfully.

He said, 'If you can read a little, they m-make you r-read m-more. And then they.... if you don't do it r-r-right, people get all angry and they -'

Nicklus flinched at some unpleasant memory. He pointed at the first word on the sheet of paper.

'His n-name, see? Little word!' He sounded it out. 'W - i - l - l. His name, Will. Granddad William. He gave it to me. Keep it safe, he said. *Sh-sh-she* wanted it. But I hid it w-when she came l-looking for it.'

'Good for you, Nick! Where'd you hide it?'

Nicklus smiled triumphantly. He folded the paper up again and put it carefully into his mouth. 'Here!' he said indistinctly, pointing at his cheek.

The cat slapped the tree branch with its paw. 'Yee-ha!' he exclaimed, 'You really socked it to that scheming buzzard babe! Nick, you may be a couple of cards short of a full deck, but you're *my* kind of guy!'

Nicklus removed the paper, dried it carefully and replaced it in the small Bible. He put the Bible into the rucksack, tied the bag slowly and slid it onto his back. He stood. A thoughtful look came into his eyes.

'You - you listen g-good,' he said to the cat. 'You listen w-well,' he corrected himself. 'P-people are so impatient when you're not as - as quick as them at thinking and t-talking. They have to w-w- have to w-wait a few extra seconds to - to find out the thoughts you have, your own sp-special thoughts n-no one else ever had before, and it's almost l-like... l-l-like they think you're s-stealing their whole life. You know?'

'Yeah, kid, I know. Only too well. People don't have much patience with cats, either.'

Nicklus nodded, thinking about this. Then he looked down at his hands. 'I need to w-wash. And brush my teeth.'

Marlowe said, 'There's a place by the main gates.

I'll take you there. But then you're on your own, buddy. Prowling around London streets ain't my kind of vacation. Besides, I've got a territory to protect. This is *my* patch you're on. Any cat that puts a paw near this bit of grass regrets it - and *fast*. Unless of course she's young and pretty! In that case, she thanks her lucky stars. Know what I mean? *Yowwwwl rrrrrrrr hissss* check out my Rumba, boy!

The cat performed his little cat dance again, up on the swaying branch of the old oak tree.

'Oh.' Nicklus stared at the cat, puzzled. 'W-why does she d-do that? W-what did the stars do?'

The cat stared back. Then he did a cat laugh. 'That's a good question, kid. Hey, you can really ask 'em! Off the wall and straight out of left field maybe, but pretty darn cool. That bit about the stars - you're right, it doesn't mean much, does it?'

He twitched his tail. 'Anyway, maybe I'll see you around, okay? And if you come across a good-sized fish or two, snatch 'em for old Marlowe, okay? I used to be a ship's cat and I'm tired of pigeon. You catch my drift?'

He dropped from the tree onto the bench again,

picked up his feather in his mouth, and walked with Nicklus towards the gates.

Much later, in the starry darkness of a warm July evening, a weary, disappointed boy limped along the pavement outside the park. The gates were locked but he was thin enough to slip between the bars and began to do so.

A hand suddenly gripped his shoulder. He was pulled back and shaken violently. A harsh voice shouted in his face:

‘You ugly little imbecile! You *stupid* moron! Do you know how much trouble you’ve caused? I ought to -’

Nicklus found himself sprawling on the ground. His shirt was torn and he was bruised all down one side. His head was ringing and there were stars before his eyes.

‘Get up! What were you doing here?’

Nicklus rose slowly, wiping mud from his face. His left arm was snatched by a large man in a white uniform. A woman in uniform took his other arm.

‘I w-was w-w-walking,’ Nicklus said.

‘What for?’

'N-nothing,' he said sadly. 'N-nothing at all.'

Just within the park
sat the great ginger tom.
He shook his head and
muttered to himself.



'Nutty as a pecan tree.
You sure know how to
pick 'em, Marlowe. First there was the Sea Captain
who got shipwrecked, then the mean old lady who
decided she'd buy a couple of Devil Dogs for
company, and now a kid with an empty walnut shell
where his brain should be. Forget him, Marlowe,
forget him. Try catching one of those giant Japanese
goldfish in the new pond instead. Yeah, go do that.'

And the cat trotted off into the darkness.