

# NINE LIVES



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Remus leaps briskly out the open window of the dead woman's house. He feels unusually spry as his four paws meet the ground. *That was an excellent meal!* His tail twitches back and forth a few times, slowing to a stop to form a question mark. Battle-scarred ears move back and forth, probing the sounds of the forest ahead of him. He stalks stealthily into the tree line in search of small rodents or other worthy prey.

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Don sits at the breakfast table, relaxed and content. A faint but pleasant morning breeze blows in through the half-open kitchen window. The cast iron skillet crackles, cooling from the aftermath of Don's breakfast preparations. He picks up the last crumb of bacon, savoring its taste. Following a

hearty breakfast, something about the last few bacon crumbs feels to Don like a happy little morning dessert.

Don pushes his plate away and swallows another sip of steaming coffee. He always takes it with cream and sugar, and enjoys the heat of the near-scorching liquid and its slightly bitter taste as it settles into his stomach.

Like yesterday and the day before, there's little to do today. He's quite pleased by this. His mind is relaxed, but his body is a different matter. Don's joints still ache today, and he is squinting more and more to see clearly around the cabin. His vision is no longer as sharp as it once was. The headaches have become more frequent, a fact Don attributes to his worsening eyesight and a nightly habit of reading under low light. *I really should see an eye doctor soon.*

His day looks to be calm; no mail to sort or bills to pay. Don has resided in his retirement cabin for the last six months. Six months since Emily died. He constantly misses his wife of forty-two years. But since he can't be with her, he is more than happy to be alone. After Emily's death, Don

sold their condo and purchased the northern New Mexico property to live out his days. The off-grid cabin, a small, one-bedroom place on two acres of land, is an older building, but Don made sure the structure was sound and the roof would last. He updated the circuit breaker panel and purchased modern appliances before moving in, ensuring that the cabin held all the comforts of a modern home.

There are few neighbors. The nearest is a mile away. Generally, the residents here keep to themselves, either running away from something or running to the wilderness. Don figures those two are about the same. He only wants peace. No more rat race. No more bills. No more responsibilities. Just peace.

Don finishes his coffee and groans as he rises from the table. *Darn knees.* He proceeds to wash, dry, and stow the breakfast dishes. Next, he checks the cabin's status panel on the side counter. A series of green lights indicate that the well is working, the water-holding tank is nearly full, the batteries

are topped off, and the solar array is functioning as expected. Same as yesterday and the day before.

Don refills his coffee cup and walks onto his covered porch to enjoy the morning sun. It is late summer. A bit cool in the morning then a bit hot in the afternoon. He eases into a wooden porch chair and watches the trees sway in the wind. A quiet chorus of twittering birds reaches him from the forest. Although he's often seen deer and smaller critters, none are present today. *Such a nice area of the country. No predators, just peaceful wildlife.* The morning sun shines down on the forest around him while Don enjoys his coffee and admires God's handiwork.

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Remus knows he is losing ground, so he abandons the chase. He inhales and exhales in ragged gasps and tries to catch his breath. *I would have caught that rabbit if I was a few years younger.*

Remus can sense winter's approach. Hunting will be harder than it used to be. His joints, once spry, have started

aching each morning, and his formerly sharp vision is in decline. He can no longer pounce as fast or run as far as he once could. *I need to find a human to shelter with and feed me.*

Remus sniffs a few times. There is an aroma in the air. *There it is!* The scent of an old man carried on the morning breeze. The smell, he realizes, is originating from the abandoned cabin to his west. *I wondered if anyone new would be moving in.* He'd lived with the old woman in her cabin for about five years until her death and has wandered the forest since then.

Remus heads toward the cabin, and the old man's scent grows ever stronger. *That smells good!* He moves with a stealthy slowness through the forest. As with all cats, Remus does his best to be quiet. He can sense when prey is near and when *he* might be the prey.

The cabin is suddenly visible through a clearing in the trees. Remus settles down to watch and, sure enough, sees an old man sitting on a porch chair. An hour passes and he

continues to watch and listen as the old man sits and hums to himself. Remus is very, very patient.

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A vague nervousness washes across Don. He feels as if he's being watched. He surveils the surroundings with intent. *No, no one here but me, the crazy old man.* Don shrugs away the feeling, finishes his morning coffee, and heads back inside. A quick rinse of the cup and he places it on the drying rack.

He typically passes his days whittling or reading. There are small chores to do, but he takes those in stride as needed. His hands feel the stiffness of arthritis, so Don decides to read for a while. He's been slowly working his way through Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Having reached the halfway point of the book, Don can already see how Márquez reflects the real world in fiction. *We repeat the same stories throughout our lives.* He finds the book entertaining at times and occasionally



wearisome. But Don has only time now, so he forges ahead to the next chapter.

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The crick in his neck wakes him. Don realizes he must have again nodded off while reading, an occurrence that never happened in his youth. Rather than view his lethargy negatively he considers it an earned right to be utilized as needed. Don places the book on a side table and stands up to stretch. *Maybe I should get out of the cabin for a bit and take a walk.*

He feels the onset of a headache and reaches into a shirt pocket for ibuprofen. He's recently started carrying it for such instances and dry swallows it. *Maybe that'll help with the knee pain some,*

He grabs a large book on forest trees and plant species from a small table by the door. He's become determined to name all the plants visible from the porch. Don grabs a bag, too, and heads out of the cabin. He wonders if he might find a root, herb, or vegetable that could spice up tonight's dinner.

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Remus watches as the man wanders slowly away from the cabin, bending down and looking at the ground every so often. *What a curious way to walk. Humans are strange.* The human continues to walk away from the cabin and soon vanishes into the forest.

*Should I stalk him or wait for his return? Stalking sounds fun. On the other hand, the sun is shining on the cabin's porch, and it looks warm and inviting.*

Remus twitches his tail slightly and yawns. In a blur, he springs up from his crouched position and sprints onto the cabin's porch. Once there, he stops suddenly and gazes around, tail twitching. Seeing only a few insects zipping about, the feline jumps up onto the man's chair and curls up in the warm sun. To an observer, Remus appears to be asleep. But although his eyes are closed, he remains fully alert.

#

*What a joy!* Don walks triumphantly toward home, his shoulder bag filled with the day's findings: six lobster mushrooms and several late-season wild onions. A little tired from the walk, Don finishes the day's plant survey and heads to the back of the cabin to conduct the daily visual inspection of the solar panels to ensure they're clean.

As he leans over for a closer look, his vision starts to blur. He's hit with a wave of dizziness and a spike of pain across his temple. He grabs hold of a solar panel to steady his balance. *This is what I get for overdoing it. Too hot to be out this long.* He blinks a few times and clear vision returns. The pain in his temple slowly subsides and Don shakes his head. *Maybe I'm just hungry and should fix lunch.*

He walks carefully to the front porch. As he climbs the steps, Don spies a pillow-shaped object in his porch chair. *Is that a cat?*

The feline slowly raises its head, and greets Don with green-slitted eyes.

*Maybe if I ignore it, it'll leave.* Don quickly looks away and proceeds into the cabin, shutting the door loudly behind him. He's not interested in a pet. Even if he was, he's always preferred dogs to cats. He frowns. *Probably feral. I hope it doesn't have rabies or fleas or anything contagious. I'll probably have to sanitize the porch chair before I can use it again.*

Lunch consists of reheated chili and cornbread. Don daydreams as he eats. The older he becomes, the more he seems to spend time inside his head. He finds it curious how memories of his teens and early years with Emily remain so vivid, while things he did as recently as last week seem to largely fade away.

He feels the sensation of being watched. Don pushes aside the empty chili bowl and looks up to see a pair of green eyes gazing at him from the ledge outside the front window. The creature meows loudly. *Geez. Maybe the darn thing is hungry. Wouldn't want to be hungry and alone in the woods myself.*

Don pours some heavy cream from the fridge into a small bowl. He places it outside the front door and steps back to watch. “Here you go, kitty.”

Remus eyes the man as he sets the bowl on the porch. *Good human. Cater to me as you should.* Remus walks ever so slowly to the cream. He’s neither thirsty nor hungry, but he knows humans feel better if you accept their offerings—it makes them feel useful. He takes a few licks while keeping his eyes on the human. The taste hits his tongue. *Wow, this is good! Better than the low-fat milk the old woman used to offer.* The stray concentrates fully on the bowl and consumes the cream within seconds.

Don steps back into the cabin. Remus slips in around the slowly closing door and follows. He moves closer toward Don and starts pressing his furry self against the human’s ankles while purring softly. He knows that rubbing up against humans calms them down and makes them feel better about themselves. The human smell is much stronger in the house.

Don looks down at the cat. *Darn! Well, he... or she looks healthy enough. Should have left the door closed.* He sighs and heads into the living room, his new companion in tow.

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That night, Don prepares dinner and opens a can of tuna for the cat. He places the tuna on the floor. “What shall I call you?” he asks. The cat looks up at him with green eyes but offers no suggestions.

“That was rhetorical; you don’t have to answer,” Don adds. He ponders for a few minutes. “Garfield? Lucifer? Tom? None of those seem to fit you. Hmmm. You came out of the woods so how about Simba?”

Remus again gazes up from the tuna. He doesn’t care what he is called. A name is about as useful to a cat as a unicycle.

“Simba it is! Welcome to my domain, Simba.”

Remus finishes the tuna and trots into the living room. The couch looks like a perfect napping place. He curls up and

tries to ignore the noise the human is making in the kitchen as he cleans up the dinner dishes.

Don soon retires to the living room for the evening. He sits in his recliner and reads, occasionally glancing over at his new housemate. Soon his headache starts to return. He decides to take an aspirin and head off to bed. “Simba, are you an indoor cat or an outdoor cat?”

Remus stretches as he stares at the human with amusement. It is getting late, so he better teach his nightly routine to the human. It’s pointless, he knows, because it’s almost time. But being a feline of habit, Remus jumps down off the couch, walks to the front door, and breaks the silence of the room with a loud *meow*.

Don laughs. “I guess you’re an outdoor cat. Okay, here you go.” He opens the door and Simba steps onto the porch and soon vanishes into the night.

“Hmm. Maybe he was just a visitor,” Don says quietly. He heads to the bathroom to take care of his nightly ablutions.

A while later, Don sits on the side of his bed and is about to lie down when he hears a loud *meow* accompanied by scratching sounds coming from the front door. He sighs and rises to his feet. The scratching intensifies as Don reaches the front door. “I’m coming. I’m coming.”

Don opens the door and Remus slides around him into the house. “Okay, you’re an indoor-outdoor cat,” he calls out as the creature heads into the bedroom. Don sighs as he follows.

Remus hops onto the bed and begins grooming himself.

“You aren’t a snorer, are you, Simba?” Don asks. He pauses for an answer, but the cat is clearly ignoring him. “You’re right; that question was also rhetorical.”

Don settles into bed, the cat curled up on a comforter at the foot of the bed. The room dissolves into darkness as Don switches off the bedside lamp. He slowly drifts off to sleep.

#



Remus hears the human's breathing change halfway through the night. He crawls slowly up onto the man's chest to watch him. The human's smell is very strong now. *It's almost time.*

A short while later, the man's breathing slows. The rising and falling of his chest becomes increasingly faint and then fully stops.

Remus creeps forward a bit more and stares down directly at the human's mouth which is now slightly slack. The man's mouth opens a bit more and he emits a final, slight exhale as his spirit—a thin, semitranslucent ether—exits his body. Remus breathes in deeply, inhaling the man's soul.

Moments later, Remus stands and stretches out with renewed vigor. He feels much friskier now and hops easily down from the bed. *Another soul, another five years younger and stronger. Though I must admit, this one went faster than I expected.* Remus finds a half-open living room window and bounds out, returning to the forest.

Shakespeare said that cats have nine lives. Nine lives indeed. Remus has eaten the souls of dozens of humans and is well beyond a century old. His tail twitches back and forth as he catches a familiar scent on the wind. The scent of his next meal.