

Nine Lives: Excerpt

By Tara Walker

Today is the day you are going to die.

5 You'd think I'd have made peace with it by now. It's been a long time coming... but it's still here far too soon. You're only sixty-six, for chrissakes. I've burned more of my own candle down; I should be the one going first, not the one left behind.

But I will be. It's all over you, in the rattle of your breath, the pallor of your skin, the smell that's filled the bedroom. That's the worst of it, the smell. It burns my nose and itches my eyes. It feeds the fear that's lived in my stomach for months.

10 Doesn't matter. I'm not going anywhere.

They tried to make me, your visitors. Tried to usher me out, bribe me away, all the simpering idiots who came to pay respects to someone still living. None of them invited, mind you—but you didn't mind. Your arms are open to anyone, anytime, even when you're the one suffering.

15 That's how you and I found each other, after all.

But that's the thing about small towns: everybody knows everybody. Word spreads. *Did you hear, Etta Ingram has cancer? Did you hear, Etta Ingram is dying?* And out of the woodwork they come, everyone wanting to be part of the tragedy.

And they tried to make me leave. *Me*. So that *they* could say goodbye.

20 Thanks for telling them to go to hell.

No, those aren't the words you used. But they're the words I heard.

You cough, and every bit of me sparks to attention.

"Tom?"

25 It comes out in a croak, the name no one called me until you came along. No one called me much of anything, until you came along. Everybody knows everybody, but nobody wanted to know me. Not until you.

I reach for you, and your chest sinks with relief.

Every time you fall asleep, it takes longer for you to wake up. Every time you wake up, it takes longer for your eyes to open. Every time your eyes open, they stare longer into some other
30 world where I can't follow.

I would follow. In a heartbeat. But I'd do anything to keep you from going at all. Make a deal with whatever god would have mercy on you, sell my soul to whatever devil works in trades. Anything to save you. But all I can do is sit by your side.

"Tom," you groan, holding me as tightly you can, which isn't tight at all.

35 Remember when you'd squeeze me until I begged for mercy? When you'd pull me into your warmth, curl your body against mine, and fall asleep with one arm snug around me? God, I miss that.

"Oh, Tom."

You'd cry, if you had any tears left in you.

40 People keep trumpeting on about how brave and strong you are—and you are, hands down, the bravest, strongest human being I've ever known. But it seems they equate giving the finger to treatment with being at peace with death, ready for what comes next. You can't really blame them; they only see your stoic smiles, your dark humor, your pride in seizing what control you can. They don't see all that slip away when it's just you and me. They don't see what you
45 don't let them.

For too long, you just breathe. Blink. Grit your teeth. You just stare into the oblivion lurking around the corner.

There's nothing peaceful about it.

50 Finally, you look at me with those dry, bloodshot eyes, and heave a sigh so deep I worry it might shatter what's left of you.

"It's time," you whisper into my neck. "Isn't it?"

No. It isn't. Not yet.

I am not at peace with this. I am not ready for what comes next.

I don't know how to live in a world without you in it.

55 You can't leave me.

But I'd never say any of that to you. Even if I could.