

READ IT FIRST

the Nine Lives of
Christmas



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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE SNOW GLOBE*

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ONE

When a guy is in trouble he starts making deals with his Creator, and Ambrose was dealing like crazy. Vicious teeth snapped at him, and his whole life (actually, all nine of them) flashed before his eyes. If this dog got him it was all over.

Becoming dog food looked like a distinct possibility, as the tree Ambrose had chosen was small and the particular branch he was perched on was a flimsy twig barely capable of holding a kitten, let alone a mature cat. And the big, black beast below seemed to have springs on his paws.

I'll do anything, Ambrose yowled. Anything! Please, let me live a little longer.

This was life number nine. He knew he wouldn't get any more but he'd settle for a longer one in which he could finish his days in comfort. Under the circumstances, it would be a miracle if he survived to see that happen. But he'd seen people stringing up colored lights on their houses just the other day, which meant Christmas season was about to begin, and wasn't Christmas supposed to be

the season of miracles? Not that Christmas had ever been good to Ambrose. That was when he usually managed to meet his end.

So he wasn't surprised at what was happening to him now. That didn't mean he had to like it, though. What a horrible way to go! Pulled from a tree and brutally murdered by a bloodthirsty mongrel. All these houses and there was not a single human around to help him on this cold, gray morning. No surprise, really. Humans bought houses and then rarely stayed in them . . . until they got old, and by then, like Ambrose, their days were numbered.

Below him the dog showed his fangs again and growled. *Needing a miracle here. Soon!*

Not that he deserved one. He thought of little Robbie, who he'd scratched many a time in his seventh life, and poor Snoopy the beagle, who he had tortured in his eighth life. He shouldn't have made the dog's life so miserable but he'd been getting bitter by then. How he had enjoyed driving old Snoopy crazy by jumping on him and riding him around the house with his claws dug into the dog's back. Hee-hee. That had been . . .

Bad, very bad. He would never do anything like that again.

Why oh why hadn't he picked a tall, sturdy tree to climb instead of this immature maple? What had he been thinking? The answer to that was easy enough. He'd been thinking, *Run!*

It started to rain—fat, freezing pellets that dug under his fur, and an angry winter wind pushed the tree, making its branches sway. *Noooo.* Ambrose dug his claws deeper into the bark. *I'll be a good cat and earn my keep here on Earth. Just send me some help and I'll prove it.*

Now the dog was up on his hind legs, pushing against the tree

and reaching for Ambrose like he was some kind of doggy chew toy. Determined not to go down without a fight, Ambrose hissed at him and took a swipe with claws unsheathed. That only made the beast more berserk.

Where was a dogcatcher when you needed one? *Help! Is anybody listening?*

Out of nowhere, appearing as suddenly as the rain had come, Ambrose saw a man wearing what humans called jogging clothes. He ran up to the dog and yelled, “Go on, get out of here.”

Between the man’s aggressive clap and that big, canine-like growl of his, he not only scared away the dog, he almost gave Ambrose a heart attack.

The beast loped off down the street and the man said, “Okay, guy, looks like you’re safe.”

Safe, the best word in the world. Ambrose peered down at his rescuer. The fur on top of the man’s head was what humans called blond—not as handsome as Ambrose’s orange coat, but a shade that humans admired greatly, and his eyes were as blue as a Siamese kitten’s. He was large, which meant he probably had a spacious, comfy lap. The friendly smile he wore showed the man was a kind person. Something about that face looked familiar. Where had he seen this man before?

“You’re on your own now,” he said to Ambrose, who was still clinging to his branch. “I know you can get down anyway. You aren’t going to want to stay out in this weather any longer than me,” he added, and then jogged off down the street.

Ambrose could hardly believe he was safe. Wet, uncomfortable, and hungry, but safe. The freezing rain was letting up now and the

angry clouds began to drift away, ashamed of all the misery they'd caused. It was going to be a good day after all. He settled down to give his racing heart a chance to calm.

One last gust of wind wooshed past him with a whisper: *Remember what you promised.*

Of course Ambrose remembered. And he would be a better cat. When the opportunity presented itself. There was no hurry, really.

He made his way down the tree and was halfway across the lawn when he caught sight of the same dog loitering on the corner. The dog saw him, too.

Yikes! Time to scat. Ambrose darted into the street.

A screech of brakes, a spray of water, and an angry honk of a horn made his lives flash before his eyes once again as Ambrose barely dodged the huge metal monster. Once more the wind whispered. This time it said: *Last chance.*

Okay, okay, he got it. The time to atone for his wicked past was now. But how, exactly, was he supposed to do that? Where to start, and with whom? The storm had pretty much scrubbed the street of living creatures. Except for the murderous dog and that big man.

Helping the dog with anything was out of the question. That left the man, which made sense. A life for a life.

He set off at a run. His rescuer had a head start but Ambrose had four legs, which evened things considerably. He caught up with the man in time to see him enter a house on a quiet street. It was a large house, much the same as Ambrose's old home, freshly painted and blue as a robin's egg, and it had a chimney. That meant a warm fire on a cold day. Not a bad place to land.

It took patient camping under the bushes by the porch but finally

Ambrose was rewarded and the door opened to reveal the same man, this time wearing different clothes. He stepped out of the door and Ambrose rushed in. *Oh, delicious warmth.*

“Whoa,” said the man, “what’s this?”

What? He couldn’t tell? Ambrose refused to dignify such a silly question with a response. Instead he began to prowl the front hall of his new home. Interesting. Wood floors, a stairway on one side, and off to the other an arch opening onto what humans referred to as a living room. The house felt old and it hummed with memories, like the one his last owner, Adelaide, had lived in. That had been such a cozy home. Her horrible offspring hadn’t cared about the memories, though. All they’d cared about was putting the place up for sale.

Put it up for sale, indeed! Just where had they thought Ambrose would live if they sold the house? Of course, he’d soon found out and that was why he’d run away.

“Whoa there, Tom,” said the man, scooping Ambrose off his feet.

Tom? What an insult! Did he look like a common cat? His name had never been Tom. Never! He was Cupcake-Tiger-Morris-Muffin-Macavity-Blackie-Toby-Claus-Ambrose—Ambrose, of course, being his latest moniker.

“This isn’t a hotel for cats,” the man informed Ambrose as he opened the door. He stepped back outside and shut the door behind him, then plopped Ambrose on the porch. Back out in the cold. Of all the nerve!

Ambrose watched, tail twitching as the man strode down his front walk, got in a shiny, black car, and drove away. *If this inhospitable human is the key to keeping my ninth life I am in the doghouse.*

He could almost hear Adelaide saying, “Be patient, Ambrose dear.” (Something she always told him when he was half starving and rubbing against her legs while she poked around opening his cat food can.) Good advice now, though. He could be patient.

The man would be back. Humans went away to work, whatever that was, but they eventually returned, and when this one did he and Ambrose would settle this misunderstanding. Ambrose crawled back under the bushes and settled in to wait.

Zachary Stone returned home from working his forty-eight-hour shift with his eyes feeling gritty and his head muzzy. People thought firefighters just sat around and watched TV or slept when they weren't putting out fires or helping with medical emergencies, but they were always busy at the station. This shift had proved to be no exception. On Wednesday, Zach, Ray, and Julio had spent the day cleaning equipment and swapping out batteries on two-way radios and heart monitors. They'd gone out on two emergency calls during the wee hours of the night and then Zach had to be bright eyed and bushy tailed for a school visit the next morning. When he'd returned to the station he'd had to clean the kitchen. The oven was a disaster thanks to Stevens, who couldn't cook anything without making a mess and who never seemed to be on the schedule when kitchen day rolled around.

But Zach had preferred stove patrol to the 911 call that involved an old lady who had managed to fall out of her recliner. He frowned at the memory of his new nickname: Little Old Lady Killer. It would be a couple of weeks before he didn't have to endure a million

jabs from the paramedics about how the old woman had kept patting his arm and offering to make him cookies after he'd gotten her back into her chair (no small feat since the "little" old lady had weighed almost as much as Zach). On top of those adventures he had done his mandatory daily workouts, three home safety visits, and the crew had been called out to help with a bad accident on the highway at one A.M. That one had almost been enough to make him question why he did what he did for a living.

The answer was simple, really. He liked helping people. Doing what he did gave him a feeling of purpose. He also appreciated having so much time off during the rest of the week. It allowed him to work on big projects like flipping this old Victorian.

"Oh, you should keep it," his mother had said when she and his stepsisters stopped by uninvited to check it out shortly after he bought it. (Yet another attempt to insert herself into his life.) "I can already see it with a Christmas tree in the bay window."

And a wife and kids running around. She hadn't said that, but Zach knew she'd thought it. "It's not me," he'd said.

"It could be," she'd said right back.

That was when he'd looked at his watch and announced, "I'd better get going. I've got an appointment to look at flooring."

Mom had eyed him suspiciously. "Since when do you need an appointment to look at flooring?"

"Special order," he'd improvised, and escaped to the safety of the hardware store.

Mom wanted grandkids, who knew why. Maybe she thought she could do better as a grandmother. Whatever. It didn't look like his younger brother David was going to give her any—he was too busy

taking pictures for *National Geographic* and surfing in Australia—but it was useless to pin her hopes on Zach. He wasn't signing up for eHarmony anytime soon. Or going on *The Bachelor*.

His stepsister Natalie had nominated him for the show and someone had actually contacted him. He'd thought the guys at the station were playing a joke on him and had managed to get in some pretty insulting cracks before he realized the call was for real. Then he'd gone from amused to pissed.

Both Natalie and Kendra (whom he referred to collectively as the Steps) had been indignant that he'd passed up the opportunity to let the whole world watch while a bunch of ring-hungry chicks closed in on him. Yeah, there was a lost opportunity all right. You'd think a college freshman and a high school sophomore would have more to do than butt into their stepbrother's love life. You'd also think all three women would have figured out by now that he wasn't a get-serious kind of guy.

At least not anymore. Zach was done being a masochist.

Anyway, marriage was for . . . who was it for? His friends were all either single or divorced. Mom hadn't exactly been a shining example of wedded bliss, either, at least not with Dad. She'd stuck it out the second time around but Dad was still a mess.

No, Zach liked his life as a single dude just fine. No worries, no stress, just good times.

He had reached his front porch when the orange tomcat that had followed him home emerged from the bushes. The animal joined him at the front door and wound around Zach's legs meowing, playing the cat sympathy card.

“Hey, Tom, what the heck are you still doing hanging around? Go home, bud,” said Zach.

The cat repeated his meow and rubbed Zach’s leg.

Zach wasn’t really into cats. He was more of a dog man. At least he had been back in high school, but when Dexter died Zach swore off dogs.

Just as well. Pets required care, and with his job Zach couldn’t give an animal the kind of attention it needed. Still, he felt kind of sorry for this mangy, orange tomcat. The poor guy looked pretty skinny. Judging from his chewed-off ear he’d taken a few knocks.

But he had a flea collar and a tag. He obviously belonged to somebody. “So, are you lost, dude, is that it?”

Well, it was December—peace on earth, goodwill toward men. And cats. It wouldn’t hurt to bring this one in and hang on to him until his owner could come pick him up. Zach could do that much.

He picked the little guy up and brought him inside. Then he checked the tag on the cat’s collar. “Ambrose, huh? Kind of a wussy name, isn’t it?”

The cat yowled at him.

“I don’t blame you. I wouldn’t want to be called Ambrose, either. Well, don’t worry. I’ll get you back where you belong.”

But when he called the number on the cat’s tag, the woman on the other end of the line wasn’t thrilled to hear from him. “He was my mother’s cat. We were getting ready to take him to the animal shelter when he ran away.”

“The animal shelter, huh?” Zach looked over at the cat only to see him dash under the leather couch.

“I just lost my mother and we’re a little stressed over here,” the woman added brusquely. “I only have a few days left to take care of things before I fly back to Florida and I don’t have time to worry about that stupid cat. He’s on his own.”

Whoa, somebody was going to get the Good Samaritan seal of approval, but it wasn’t this woman.

“Thanks for calling,” she added before hanging up.

Zach stared at his cell phone in disbelief. “Geez, lady.” How could somebody be so callous about an animal?

The cat came back out and started rubbing against Zach’s legs. Zach picked him up and tried to explain to the little guy that this wouldn’t be much of a home for him. “I know you got a tough break, guy, and I’d like to help you out, but I’m a firefighter. I’m gone at the station a lot and there’s no woman here to look after you.” At least there never was on a permanent basis.

Now the cat was purring. *Aw, Geez.*

Cats pretty much took care of themselves, right? At least that was what Zach had always heard. Still, he had his hands full remodeling this place. The last thing he needed was an animal.

“Okay, tell you what. I’ll give you something to eat and then you’re on your own.”

He put the cat down and went to the fridge. It trotted after him.

The animal shelter found homes for animals. He should take the cat there right now and be done with it. Except this little dude was no cute kitten. Who would want him? He’d end up in the kitty gas chamber for sure.

Zach looked down at him and frowned. “Why did you have to show up on my doorstep?”



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