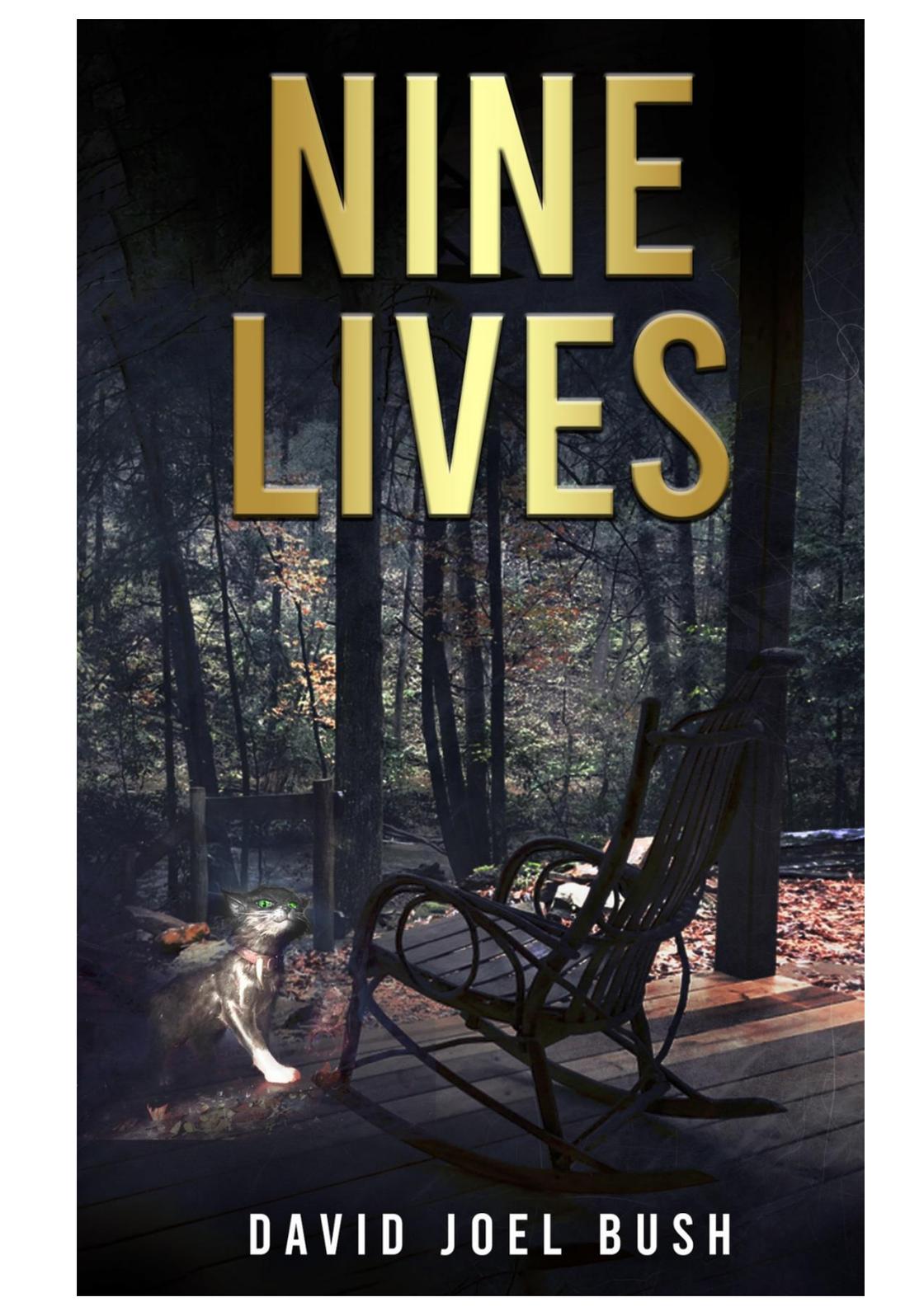


# NINE LIVES



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Nine Lives

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Alone in his cabin, Don sits at the breakfast table, relaxed and content. A faint morning wind blows through the trees from the half-open window in the kitchen. Don's cast iron skillet crackles as it cools from the aftermath of his breakfast preparations. He picks up the last crumb of bacon and savors it. Something about the last few bits of bacon after a good breakfast feels like a happy little morning dessert.

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

Like yesterday and the day before that, there's not much to do today. He's quite pleased by this. Yesterday's headache has long since gone. The headaches, however, are

becoming more frequent, a fact he attributes to worsening eyesight and reading under low light at night. He'd purchased many books over the years but had never had time to read more than a few. Now there seems to be all the time in the world, though he realizes an optometrist visit may soon be in his future.

He doesn't subscribe to any newspapers and doesn't read email. There is no mail to sort and no bills to pay. Don has been living in his retirement cabin for six months now. Six months since Emily died. He 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 bought a place in northern New Mexico to live out his days. His off-grid cabin is a small one-bedroom place on two acres of land. It's an older building, but he made sure the structure was sound and the roof would last. He updated the electric wiring and modernized the utilities before moving in so that the cabin holds all the comforts of a modern home.

There are a few neighbors, a mile or so away. Generally, the people here keep to themselves. Either running away from something or running to the wilderness. Don figures those two are about the same. He just wants some peace. No more rat race. No more bills. No more responsibilities. Just peace.

He finishes his coffee and proceeds to wash, dry, and stow the breakfast dishes. Next, he checks the cabin's status panel on the side counter in the kitchen. His panel lights are green, indicating 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 his wooden porch chair and watches the trees sway in the wind. Birds twitter as they fly back and forth. Although he's often seen deer and elk from his chair, none are out today. He

feels a headache looming and reaches into a shirt pocket. He's taken to carrying ibuprofen for such instances and downs two pills with a sip of coffee. The morning sun shines down on the forest around him while Don proceeds to enjoy his coffee and admire God's handiwork.

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Remus detects the scent of an old man carried on the morning breeze. The smell is coming from the abandoned cabin to his west. He wondered if anyone new would be moving in. He'd been living with an old woman at a nearby cabin for about five years until her recent death. He has wandered the forest since then. The forest holds an abundance of mice, shrews, rabbits, moles, and small birds. He can eat his fill.

Remus can sense winter's approach. He can survive the winter, of course, but hunting will be hard. He's getting older and can't pounce quite as fast or run quite as far as he once could. His joints have started aching each morning, and his vision doesn't seem to be quite what it used to be.

He heads toward the cabin, and the old man's scent grows ever stronger. He walks stealthily through the forest, taking his time. As with all cats, he does his best to be quiet. He has a sense of 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, he sees an old man sitting on a porch chair. The scent of the old man's drink is offensive. Remus continues to watch and listen as the old man sits and hums to himself. Remus is very good at watching.

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Don finishes his morning coffee and heads back into the cabin. 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 begin to stiffen from arthritis, so Don decides to read for a while. He's been slowly working his way through *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and, having

reached the halfway point of the book, can already see the real-world reflected in fiction. People repeat the same stories throughout their lives. He finds the book entertaining at times and occasionally hard to get through. But Don has nothing but time now, so he forges ahead to the next chapter.

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The crick in his neck wakes him and Don realizes he must have nodded off while reading again, something that never happened in his youth. But he feels he's earned the privilege to nap on an as-needed basis. The book remains on his lap with the bookmark in place. He hates losing his place in a book. 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 go for a walk.

He grabs a large book on forest trees and plant species from a small table by the door. He's taken to trying to name all the plants he can see from his 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 keeps walking away from the cabin and heads into the forest.

After the sounds and smell of the man have dissipated, 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 looks around, tail twitching. Seeing nothing but a few insects zipping about, he jumps up onto the man's chair and curls up. To an observer, it looks like Remus is fast asleep, but he's actively listening and smelling. His eyes are closed but he remains fully alert.

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What a joy! Don has gathered a half-dozen lobster mushrooms during his trek and has stashed them in his bag. He's also run across some late-season wild onions and has

added those to his bounty. A little tired from the walk, Don finishes his 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 blurs a bit. 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 himself. This is what I get for overdoing it. Too hot to be out this long. He blinks a few times and his vision comes back. The pain in his forehead subsides. Don shakes his head a bit. Maybe I'm just hungry and should fix lunch. He walks carefully to his front porch. As he climbs the steps, he spies a pillow-shaped object in his porch chair.

Is that a cat?

The feline opens its eyes, raises its head, and looks at Don with green-slitted eyes.

Don quickly looks away and proceeds into the cabin, shutting the door loudly behind him. Maybe if I ignore it, it'll go away. He's not interested in a pet. Even if he was, he's always preferred dogs over cats. He frowns. Probably feral. I

hope it doesn't have rabies or fleas or anything. 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 gets, the more it seems like he spends 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. He pushes aside the empty chili bowl and looks up to see the cat 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. That is a good human. Catering to me just like he should. Remus walks ever so slowly to the cream. He isn't thirsty or

hungry, but he knows that it makes humans feel better if you accept their offerings – it makes them feel useful. He takes a few licks while watching the human. The taste hits his tongue. Wow, this is good! Better than the low-fat milk the old lady used to offer. The stray concentrates fully on the bowl and the cream is gone within seconds.

Don steps back into the cabin. Remus slips in around the slowly closing door and follows him inside. He moves closer toward Don and starts pressing his furry self against Don's ankles while purring softly. He knows that rubbing up against humans calms them down and makes them feel better. 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. “What am I going to 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 looks 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 returns to the living room. The couch looks like the perfect napping place. He curls up and tries to ignore the noise the human is making in the kitchen as he cleans up after dinner.

Don finishes the dishes and then retires to the living room for the evening. He sits in his recliner and reads, occasionally glancing over at his new housemate. After reading for a bit, his headache starts to return. He decides to

take some aspirin and head off to bed. “Simba, are you an indoor cat or an outdoor cat?”

Remus stretches and looks at the human with amusement. It is getting late, so he needs to teach the human his nightly routine. 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 lets Simba out. The cat heads out and vanishes into the night.

“Hmm. Maybe he’s just a visitor,” Don says quietly to himself. 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 gets back up. The scratching intensifies as Don reaches the front door. “I’m coming. I’m coming.”

Don opens the door and lets Remus back into the house. “Okay, you’re an indoor-outdoor cat,” he calls out as the creature heads around him and 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 waits a bit 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 by Don’s feet. He switches off the lamp by his bedside and slowly drifts off to sleep.

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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 slight exhale as his spirit leaves his body, a thin, semitranslucent ether. Remus breathes in deeply, inhaling the spirit in its entirety.

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

Nine lives indeed. He has lived with dozens of dying humans and is well past one hundred years old. He twitches his tail and catches the scent of something on the wind that might be his next meal.