

# Mitch Albom

Author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*

## the stranger in the lifeboat



**ALSO BY MITCH ALBOM**

*Tuesdays with Morrie*

*The Five People You Meet in Heaven*

*For One More Day*

*Have a Little Faith*

*The Time Keeper*

*The First Phone Call from Heaven*

*The Magic Strings of Frankie Presto*

*The Next Person You Meet in Heaven*

*Finding Chika*

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# Contents

[Also by Mitch Albom](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

*To Janine, Trisha, and Connie, who show me,  
every day, the stunning power of belief*

# One



## Sea

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When we pulled him from the water, he didn't have a scratch on him. That's the first thing I noticed. The rest of us were all gashes and bruises, but he was unmarked, with smooth almond skin and thick dark hair matted by seawater. He was bare-chested, not particularly muscular, maybe twenty years old, and his eyes were pale blue, the color you imagine the ocean to be when you dream of a tropical vacation—not the endless gray waves that surround this crowded lifeboat, waiting for us like an open grave.

Forgive me for such despair, my love. It's been three days since the *Galaxy* sank. No one has come looking for us. I try to stay positive, to believe rescue is near. But we are short on food and water. Sharks have been spotted. I see surrender in the eyes of many on board. The words *We're going to die* have been uttered too many times.

If that is to be, if this is indeed my end, then I am writing to you in the pages of this notebook, Annabelle, in hopes you might somehow read them after I am gone. I need to tell you something, and I need to tell the world as well.

I could begin with why I was on the *Galaxy* that night, or Dobby's plan, or my deep sense of guilt at the yacht exploding, even though I cannot be sure of what happened. But for now, the story must begin with this morning, when we pulled the young stranger from the sea. He wore no life jacket, nor was he holding on to anything when we spotted him bobbing in the waves. We let him catch his breath, and from our various perches in the boat, we introduced ourselves.

Lambert, the boss, spoke first, saying, "Jason Lambert, I owned the *Galaxy*." Then came Nevin, the tall Brit, who apologized that he could not rise for a proper welcome, having gashed his leg trying to escape the sinking vessel. Geri just nodded and balled up the line she had used to tug

the man in. Yannis offered a weak handshake. Nina mumbled “Hi.” Mrs. Laghari, the woman from India, said nothing; she didn’t seem to trust the newcomer. Jean Philippe, the Haitian cook, smiled and said, “Welcome, brother,” but kept a palm on the shoulder of his sleeping wife, Bernadette, who is wounded from the explosion, badly wounded, I believe. The little girl we call Alice, who hasn’t spoken since we found her clinging to a deck chair in the ocean, remained silent.

I went last. “Benji,” I said. “My name is Benji.” For some reason my voice caught in my throat.

We waited for the stranger to respond, but he just looked at us, doe-eyed. Lambert said, “He’s probably in shock.” Nevin yelled, “HOW LONG WERE YOU IN THE WATER?” perhaps thinking a raised voice would snap him to his senses. When he didn’t answer, Nina touched his shoulder and said, “Well, thank the Lord we found you.”

Which is when the man finally spoke.

“I *am* the Lord,” he whispered.



## Land

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The inspector put out his cigarette. His chair creaked. It was already hot on this Montserrat morning, and his starched white shirt stuck to his sweaty back. His temples were throbbing from a hangover headache. He gazed at the thin, bearded man who'd been waiting for him when he arrived at the police station.

"Let's start again," the inspector said.

It was Sunday. He had been in bed when the call came. *A man is here. He says he found a raft from that American yacht that blew up.* The inspector mumbled a curse. His wife, Patrice, groaned and rolled over on her pillow.

"What time did you get home last night?" she mumbled.

"Late."

"How late?"

He dressed without answering her, made instant coffee, poured it into a Styrofoam cup, and kicked the door frame as he left the house, banging his big toe. It still hurt.

"My name is Jarty LeFleur," he said now, sizing up the man across the desk. "I am the chief inspector for the island. And your name is ..."

"Rom, Inspector."

"Do you have a last name, Rom?"

"Yes, Inspector."

LeFleur sighed. "What is it?"

"Rosh, Inspector."

LeFleur wrote it down, then lit another cigarette. He rubbed his head. He needed aspirin.

"So you found a raft, Rom?"

"Yes, Inspector."

"Where?"

“Marguerita Bay.”

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

LeFleur looked up to see the man staring at a desk photo of LeFleur and his wife swinging their young daughter over a beach towel.

“Is that your family?” Rom asked.

“Don’t look at that,” LeFleur snapped. “Look at me. This raft. How did you know it was from the *Galaxy*?”

“It’s written on the inside.”

“And you just found it, washed up on the beach?”

“Yes, Inspector.”

“Nobody with it?”

“No, Inspector.”

LeFleur was sweating. He moved the desk fan closer. The story was plausible. All kinds of things washed up on the north shore. Suitcases, parachutes, drugs, fish-aggregating contraptions that swept into the currents and floated across the North Atlantic.

Nothing was too strange to roll in with the tide. But a raft from the *Galaxy*? That would be a major event. The huge luxury yacht had sunk last year, fifty miles from Cape Verde off the West African coast. It made news around the world, mostly because of all the rich and famous people who’d been on board. None of them were found.

LeFleur rocked back and forth. *That raft didn’t inflate itself.* Maybe the authorities were wrong. Maybe someone had survived the *Galaxy* tragedy, at least briefly.

“OK, Rom,” he said, snuffing out his cigarette. “Let’s go take a look.”

## Sea

---

“I *am* the Lord.”

What do you say to that, my love? Maybe under normal conditions you laugh or make a wisecrack. *You're the Lord? Buy the drinks.* But alone in the middle of this ocean, thirsty and desperate, well, it unnerved me, to be honest.

“What did he just say?” Nina whispered.

“He said he was the *Lord*,” Lambert scoffed.

“You got a first name, Lord?” Yannis asked.

“I have many names,” the stranger said. His voice was calm but husky, almost hoarse.

“And you’ve been swimming for three days?” Mrs. Laghari interjected. “That’s impossible.”

“She’s right,” Geri said. “The water temperature is sixty-seven degrees. You can’t live in that for three days.”

Geri is the most experienced sea person among us. She was an Olympic swimmer when she was younger and has that take-charge tone—confident, curt, intolerant of stupid questions—that makes people pay heed.

“DID YOU FLOAT IN SOMETHING?” Nevin yelled.

“For Christ’s sake, Nevin,” Yannis said, “he’s not deaf.”

The stranger looked at Yannis when he said “for Christ’s sake,” and Yannis closed his mouth, as if trying to suck the words back in.

“What’s your real story, mister?” Lambert said.

“I am here,” the stranger said.

“*Why* are you here?” Nina asked.

“Haven’t you been calling me?”

We glanced at one another. We are a pathetic-looking lot, faces blistered by the sun, clothes crusted by salt water. We can’t fully stand up without

falling into someone, and the floor smells of rubber, glue, and vomit from our retching. It is true, most of us, at some point, thrashing in the waves that first night or staring at the empty horizon in the days that followed, have cried out for divine intervention. *Please, Lord! ... Help us, God!* Is that what this new man meant? *Haven't you been calling me?* As you know, Annabelle, I have struggled with faith much of my life. I was a dutiful altar boy, like many Irish kids, but the church and I parted company years ago. What happened with my mother. What happened with you. Too much disappointment. Not enough comfort.

Still, I never considered what I would do if I called for the Lord and He actually appeared before me.

“Is there any water you can share?” the man asked.

“God is thirsty?” Lambert said, laughing. “Great. Anything else?”

“Perhaps something to eat?”

“This is foolish,” Mrs. Laghari grumbled. “He’s obviously playing games.”

“No!” Nina yelled abruptly, her face contorting like a denied child. “Let him talk.” She spun toward the man. “Are you here to save us?”

His voice softened. “I can only do that,” he said, “when everyone here believes I am who I say I am.”

No one moved. You could hear the smack of the sea against the boat’s sides. Finally, Geri, who is too practical for talk like this, surveyed the group like an annoyed schoolteacher.

“Well, buddy,” she said, “you let us know when that happens. Until then, we better adjust our food rations.”

## News

REPORTER: *This is Valerie Cortez, aboard the Galaxy, the spectacular yacht owned by Jason Lambert. The billionaire businessman has assembled some of the biggest names in the world for a weeklong adventure, and he's here with us now. Hello, Jason.*

LAMBERT: *Welcome, Valerie.*

REPORTER: *You've called this extravaganza "the Grand Idea." Why?*

LAMBERT: *Because everyone on this ship has done something grand, something to shape their industry, their country, maybe even the planet. We have technology leaders, business leaders, political leaders, entertainment leaders. They're big-idea people.*

REPORTER: *Movers and shakers, like yourself.*

LAMBERT: *Well. Ha. I don't know about that.*

REPORTER: *And you brought them together for what reason?*

LAMBERT: *Valerie, it's a \$200 million yacht. I think a good time is possible!*

REPORTER: *Obviously!*

LAMBERT: *No. Seriously. Idea people need to be around other idea people. They spur each other to change the world.*

REPORTER: *So this is like the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland?*

LAMBERT: *Right. But a more fun version—on water.*

REPORTER: *And you hope many grand ideas come out of this trip?*

LAMBERT: *That, and some quality hangovers.*

REPORTER: *Hangovers, did you say?*

LAMBERT: *What's life without a party, Valerie? Am I right?*

## Sea

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Lambert throws up. He is on his knees, heaving over the side. His fat midsection protrudes from his T-shirt, and he is hairy at the navel. Some of the vomit blows back in his face, and he groans.

It is evening. The sea is choppy. Others have been sick as well. The winds are fierce. Maybe it will rain. We've had no rain since the *Galaxy* sank.

Looking back, we were still hopeful that first morning—shocked at what happened, but grateful to be alive. The ten of us huddled inside the lifeboat. We spoke about rescue planes. We scanned the horizon.

“Who here has children?” Mrs. Laghari suddenly asked, as if starting a car game. “I myself have two. Grown now.”

“Three,” Nevin offered.

“Five,” Lambert said. “Got you beat.”

“But how many wives?” Nevin poked.

“That wasn't the question,” Lambert said.

“I've been too busy,” Yannis said.

“Not yet for me,” Nina said.

“Have you got a husband?” Mrs. Laghari asked.

“Do I need one?”

Mrs. Laghari laughed. “Well, I did! Anyhow, you won't have any problem in that department.”

“We have four sons,” Jean Philippe announced. He rested a hand on his sleeping wife's shoulder. “Bernadette and I. Four good boys.” He turned to me. “And you, Benji?”

“No kids, Jean Philippe.”

“Do you have a wife?”

I hesitated.

“Yes.”

“Well, then, you can start when we get home!”

He flashed a broad smile, and the group laughed a little. But as the day went on, the waves grew bumpier and we all got seasick. By evening, the mood had changed. It felt as if we’d been out here a week. I remember seeing little Alice sleeping in Nina’s lap, and Nina’s face streaked with tears. Mrs. Laghari grabbed her hand as Nina whimpered, “What if they can’t *find* us?”

What if they can’t? Without a compass, Geri has been trying to chart our course by the stars. She thinks we are heading southwest, away from Cape Verde and farther into the wide, empty Atlantic. That is not good.

Meanwhile, to avoid direct sunlight, we spend hours tucked under a stretched canopy that covers more than half of the boat. We must sit inches from one another, stripped down, sweaty, foul-smelling. It’s a far cry from the *Galaxy*, even if some of us were guests on that luxury vessel and some of us workers. Here we are all the same. Half-naked and scared.

The Grand Idea—the voyage that brought us all together—was Lambert’s brainchild. He told invitees they were there to change the world. I never believed that. The yacht’s size. Its multiple decks. The swimming pool, gym, the ballroom. That’s what he wanted them to remember.

As for workers like Nina, Bernadette, Jean Philippe, and me? We were only there to serve. I have labored under Jason Lambert for five months now, and I have never felt so invisible. Staff on the *Galaxy* are forbidden to make eye contact with guests, nor can we eat in their presence. Meanwhile, Lambert does what he wants, barreling into the kitchen, using his fingers to pick at the food, stuffing his face as the workers lower their heads. Everything about him screams gluttony, from his flashy rings to his obese midsection. I can see why Dobby wanted him dead.



I turn away from Lambert’s puking and study the new arrival, who is sleeping outside the canopy with his mouth slightly open. He is not particularly striking for a man who claims to be the Almighty. His eyebrows are thick, his cheeks are flabby, he has a wide chin and small ears, partly covered by that dark nest of hair. I admit I felt a chill when he said those things yesterday: *I am here ... Have you not been calling me?* But later,

when Geri handed out packets of peanut butter crackers, he ripped open the plastic and devoured the contents so quickly, I thought he'd choke. I doubt God would ever get that hungry. Certainly not for peanut butter crackers.

Still, for the moment, he has distracted us. Earlier, as he slept, we gathered to whisper our theories.

"Do you think he's delirious?"

"Of course! He probably banged his head."

"There's no way he survived three days treading water."

"What's the longest a man can do that?"

"I read about a guy who lasted twenty-eight hours."

"Still not three days."

"He honestly thinks he's *God*?"

"He had no life jacket!"

"Maybe he came from another boat."

"If there were another boat, we would have seen it."

Finally, Nina spoke up. She was the *Galaxy's* hairstylist, born in Ethiopia. With her high cheekbones and flowing dark locks, she retains a certain elegance even here in the middle of the sea. "Has anyone considered the least likely explanation?" she asked.

"Which is?" Yannis said.

"That he's telling the truth? That he's come in our hour of need?"

Eyes darted from one to the next. Then Lambert started laughing, a deep, dismissive cackle. "Oh, yes! That's how we all picture God. Floating like seaweed until you pull him into your boat. Come on. Did you look at him? He's like some island kid who fell off his surfboard."

We shifted our legs. No one said much after that. I looked up at the pale white moon, which hung large in the sky. Do some of us think it possible? That this strange new arrival is actually the Lord incarnate?

I can only speak for myself.

No, I do not.



## Land

---

LeFleur drove the man called Rom to the north shore of the island. He tried to make conversation, but Rom answered with polite deflections: “Yes, Inspector” and “No, Inspector.” LeFleur eyed the glove compartment, where he kept a small flask of whisky.

“You live up by St. John’s?” LeFleur tried.

Rom half nodded.

“Where do you go liming?”

Rom looked at him blankly.

“Liming? Chilling? Hanging out?”

No response. They drove past a rum shop and a boarded-up disco/café, with turquoise shutters hanging loosely off their hinges.

“What about surfing? You do any surfing? Bransby Point? Trants Bay?”

“I don’t care much for the water.”

“Come on, man,” LeFleur laughed. “You’re on an island!” Rom looked straight ahead. The inspector gave up. He reached for another cigarette. Through his rolled-down window, he glanced back at the mountains.

Twenty-four years before, Montserrat’s volcano, Soufrière Hills, erupted after centuries of silence, covering the entire southern part of the island in mud and ash. The capital was destroyed. Lava smothered the airport. Just like that, the nation’s economy evaporated in dark smoke. Two-thirds of the population fled Montserrat within a year, mostly to England, where they were given emergency citizen status. Even now, the island’s southern half remains uninhabited, an ash-covered “exclusion zone” of abandoned towns and villas.

LeFleur glanced at his passenger, who was tapping annoyingly on the door handle. He thought about calling Patrice, apologizing for this morning, leaving so abruptly. Instead he reached across Rom’s chest, mumbled

“Excuse me,” and popped open the glove compartment, removing the whisky flask.

“You want some?” he asked.

“No, thank you, Inspector.”

“Don’t drink?”

“Not anymore.”

“How come?”

“I drank to forget things.”

“And?”

“I kept remembering them.”

LeFleur paused, then took a swig. They drove in silence the rest of the way.

## Sea

---

Dear Annabelle—

The “Lord” has not saved us. He has worked no magic. He’s done little and said even less. He will apparently be just another mouth to feed and another body to make room for.

The wind and waves kicked back up today, so we all squeezed for shelter under the canopy. This puts us knee to knee, elbow to elbow. I sat with Mrs. Laghari on one side and the new man on another. At times I brushed against his bare skin. It felt no different than my own.

“Come on, ‘Lord,’ tell us the truth,” Lambert said, pointing at the new man. “How did you get on my boat?”

“I was never on your boat,” he replied.

“Then how did you fall into the ocean?” Geri asked.

“I did not fall.”

“What were you doing in the water?”

“Coming to you.”

We looked at one another.

“Let me get this straight,” Yannis said. “God decided to drop from the sky, swim to this raft, and start talking to us?”

“I talk to you all the time,” he said. “I came here to listen.”

“Listen to what?” I said.

“Enough!” Lambert broke in. “If you know so much, tell me what happened to my *damn yacht!*”

The man smiled. “Why are you angry about that?”

“I lost my boat!”

“You are in another.”

“It’s not the same!”

“True,” the man said. “This one is still afloat.”