

LBRIS

We know
books

Mitch
Albom

twice



Prologue

August 1978

They were calling it “the storm of the year.” All along Market Street in the city of Philadelphia the rain blew sideways and the wind gusted near hurricane force. Buses splashed through huge puddles and thunder rumbled overhead.

In the middle of this chaos, a woman suddenly appeared, young, not yet twenty years old. Her thick hair, the color of coal, blew wildly around her face, covering her eyes. She seemed confused, as if this storm were a surprise.

She clutched her handbag and undid the clasp as the rain soaked her jeans and matted them against her legs. She pulled out a small object, stared at it, then slowly put it back.

Looking up, she spotted the front entrance of Gimbel's department store. She narrowed her gaze at the sight of a revolving door, and a young man at the window, waving his arms.

A breath caught in her chest. She shivered slightly, then began to walk toward him, steadily, deliberately, as if she had been here before.

One

**NASSAU, BAHAMAS
FORTY YEARS LATER**

The detective clucked his tongue. He stared at the gray-haired man slumped across the table.

“Come on, friend. How did you do it?”

Silence.

“We can sit here all day if that’s what you want to do. Is that what you want to do? Sit here all day?”

The small room inside the police station was hot and in need of paint. The only furniture was a wooden table and the two occupied chairs. The detective, Vincent LaPorta, opened a roll of hard candy, plucked the top one out, cherry red, and popped it in his mouth.

“Want one?”

The man snorted a laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“The name.”

“Life Savers?”

“Yes.”

“Wish you had one now?”

“My life’s been saved too many times already.”

LaPorta waited for more, but the suspect hooked his fingers and looked down, as if praying. His face was tanned and unshaven, his jaw and cheekbones well-defined, maybe too defined, like a man who’d grown thin from an illness.

His mustard-colored shirt and navy-blue pants were badly wrinkled, as if he'd slept in them.

"Let's go over the accusation against you," LaPorta said. "Maybe it will jog your memory."

He slid a photograph across the table.

"In a single visit, at the island's largest casino, you correctly played three straight roulette numbers, winning over two million dollars. Then you walked out the door."

"Is that a crime?"

"No, but only because we haven't pieced together how you did it."

"So, not a crime?"

"Look, friend. My job is catching casino cheats. I've been doing it a long time. Vegas. Atlantic City. Now here in the Bahamas. What you did, you can't do without breaking the law."

"I see." The man nodded thoughtfully. "May I ask you a question, Detective?"

"Go ahead."

"Why this kind of work?"

"What are you, a shrink?"

"Just curious."

LaPorta smirked. "Let's just say I don't like people who bend the rules."

"Ah. Then you wouldn't like me."

LaPorta studied his tall, rangy suspect, who wore a small earring on his left lobe and no socks under his weathered loafers. LaPorta guessed he was in his late fifties and not

particularly well-off. In that way, he was like any number of men you'd find placing bets at an island casino. But his attitude under interrogation was unusual. Normally, suspects were jumpy, perspiring, answering too quickly or too slowly. This man almost seemed *bored*.

"Come on. Tell me how you did it. You got an inside guy?"

"I've committed no crime."

"Three straight roulette numbers? You don't call that *suspicious*?"

"Suspicion and belief can't share the same bed."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means if I told you the truth, you'd have to accept something you can't."

"Try me."

The man squinted. "No."

"You realize cheating a casino can get you sent to jail?"

"Yes."

"For a long time."

"Time doesn't mean much to me."

"Why not?"

"It's complicated."

LaPorta bit down on his hard candy.

"Tell me about a woman named Gianna Rule."

The man's expression changed. LaPorta perked up. *Here we go. Stay with this.*

"You went to a bank after you won that money and you wired it to a Gianna Rule. We can find her. Bring her in. Maybe charge her as a coconspirator. Is that what you want?"

The man blinked. LaPorta leaned across the table.

“Like I said: try me.”

“All right,” the man said, exhaling. “I had a bag when you picked me up.”

“So?”

“I’ll need it.”

LaPorta thought for a moment.

“Stay put.”

He rose and, locking the door behind him, went to his office and retrieved a faded leather satchel. He returned and handed it to the man, who reached inside and pulled out a composition notebook with a black marble cover. On the label were nine handwritten words: *For the Boss, To Be Read Upon My Death.*

He pushed it across the table.

“What?” LaPorta said. “I should read this?”

“Only if you want answers.”

The detective leafed through the handwritten pages.

“What is it?” he mumbled.

The man almost smiled.

“A love story,” he said.

THE COMPOSITION BOOK

Dear Boss,

So how do I begin? That I'm dying? I suspect you know that by now. The other day you came into the beach house and found me on the floor by the laundry basket with my left leg splayed out and my head on my elbow and you said, "Alfie, what are you doing?" and I said, "I'm looking for ants." You smiled but I could see in your eyes a genuine concern, and as you helped me to my feet there was a gentleness in your touch, the way your arm hooked under mine, the way your fingers spread against my back. If I didn't know better, I might call it a loving embrace. But I do know better. It's knowing better that leads me to this confession.

I'm not afraid of dying, Boss. I know you tell me not to call you "Boss," but hey, you pay my salary, and I guess I'm old-fashioned. Anyhow, I'm not afraid. I've skirted death many times. That may sound exaggerated. It's not.

In my long life—and it's been far longer than anyone knows—I have leapt off a mountain in Spain, dived into a pool of sharks in Australia, stood in front of an oncoming train in China, even taken a bullet during a Mexican bank robbery.

I did most of these things to see what it was like, to feel the breath of God or the devil or whatever awaits me when this life is over. It wasn't courage. I knew I would survive.

The reason I knew will be difficult to believe, Boss, but please try, because I've been waiting a long time to tell you.

All right. Here goes.

I get to do things twice.

I mean it. I get a second chance at everything. Do-overs. Rollbacks. Whatever you want to call them. It's a gift. A power. There's no explanation. But while everyone in the world must suffer the consequences of their actions, I can undo mine and try again. Not endless chances, mind you. I can't keep messing up and wiping the slate clean. Can't take the same test a hundred times.

Twice. I get two shots at everything. The thing is, I have to live with my second try. There's no going back. Over the years, I have found this to be the price that I pay for this gift.

And the price I have paid in love.

I've had one great love in my life, Boss. One woman in whose eyes I found the better version of myself. But I made a grave mistake, one I could *not* go back and fix. It's a cruel trick to have two chances at your heart's desire. It can make—

NASSAU

LaPorta stopped reading and looked up from the notebook.

“You’re screwing with me, right?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You want me to believe you can go back in time and correct things?”

“If I choose to, yes.”

LaPorta chuckled. “I doubt that will hold up in court.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Who’s your boss?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“It will if he helped plan your crimes.”

“My boss is a woman. And she didn’t.”

LaPorta scratched his eyebrow.

“You’re really dying?”

The man nodded.

“Of what?”

“Does it matter? Neurological.”

“Sorry to hear.” LaPorta sat back in his chair. “If I were dying, I sure as hell wouldn’t be writing a farewell note to *my* boss, I can tell you that much.”

“Keep reading.”

“You really want this as your alibi?”

“You asked.”

“Is it because of—what’s her name—Gianna Rule?”

The man looked away.

“Well, then, by all means, let’s keep going,” LaPorta said.
“But from now on . . .”

He slid the notebook across the table.

“*You* read it. Out loud.”

Then he added, almost mockingly, “*Alfie.*”

THE COMPOSITION BOOK

OK, Boss. Assuming you haven't thrown this notebook away by now, dismissed it as the ramblings of a longtime employee/friend whose time has come and whose mind has gone a bit cuckoo, I will tell you how I learned of my unique power, and when I first discovered it, by accident, as a child.

It was 1966. A Saturday morning. I was eight years old, and we were living in Kenya, in a small village north of Mombasa. My parents were missionaries. New ones. In their mid-thirties they'd heard the call to spread the Lord's gospel. At least my mother did. My father went along dutifully, perhaps hoping the Holy Spirit would embrace him at the airport.

We'd been there for a year, living in a thatched-roof cabin with a pull-chain toilet. Before Africa, we had lived just outside Philadelphia. I missed it terribly. I hated the relentless sun of this new continent. There was no television and little for me to do. My mother discovered an old piano in the village church, and she taught me just enough chords to play a few hymns. One Sunday she gathered the local kids in a circle and made me sing "Nearer My God to Thee." They laughed at my voice. I wanted to disappear.

I made two friends the whole time I was in Africa, one human, one animal. The animal was an elephant named Lallu. She belonged to a nearby rancher, who used her for pulling plows. On Saturdays, he let Lallu rest, and I got to play with