

Mitch Album



human
touch

a story in real time

Human Touch

a story in real time

Mitch Albom

–

Chapter Five

*First Release
May 8, 2020*

The Series

“Human Touch” is a new serialized story of hope during the coronavirus pandemic, set in the moment we are all living through together. It is being written by Mitch Albom in the present, one week at a time.

A new “chapter” is released every Friday at www.humantouch-story.com. An audio version is available at Audible.com.

Copyright Notice

“Human Touch.” Copyright © 2020 by ASOP Inc. All rights reserved. Published in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or re-produced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, please see www.humantouchstory.com.

The author has provided this e-book for free for your personal use only. Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author’s copyright, please notify the author at www.mitchalbom.com.

Illustrations by Marina Van Mechelen.



Week Nine

Charlene and Ricketts are arguing in the kitchen.

“What if something *happens to him?*” Charlene screams.

“Don’t holler at me, Charlene, I’m right in front of you,” Ricketts says. “And nothing’s gonna happen. He texted his brother that he’s OK.”

“You put him out!”

“Damn right, I put him out! I’d do it again for our protection! We didn’t make Buck steal that goddamn snowmobile, go to goddamn jail, expose himself to this goddamn virus, and then come crawling back here like a kitten looking for his milk—”

“Stop, it! Stop it!” Charlene yells, crying. “He’s still Mary’s son!”

Ricketts slams his fist on the counter. Mary, mother of Buck and Daniel, was the Ricketts’ only child. A spirited, exuberant woman with a mop of chestnut hair, she worked at a home and garden center and sewed her own clothes and took sole responsibility for raising her two boys when her husband proved to be more interested in gambling than fathering. Four years ago, coming home from work, Mary’s station wagon was struck head-on by a drunk driver, who veered his truck across the interstate.

Buck and Daniel have been with the Ricketts ever since.

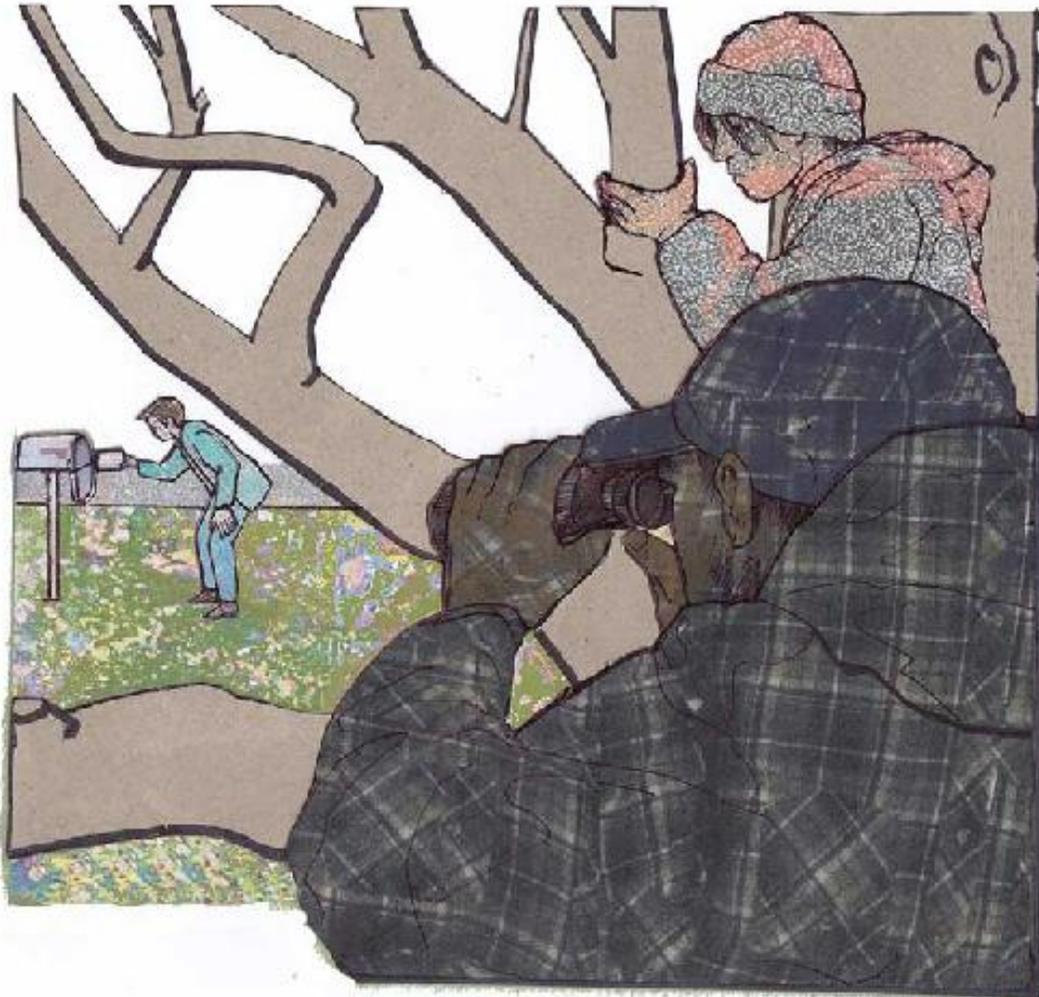
“Where is he even sleeping?” Charlene mumbles.

“I’m sure he’s with friends,” Ricketts says. “Look. If he doesn’t call by tomorrow, I’ll go looking for him, OK?”

Charlene wipes her tears, one falling faster than the next.

“OK?” Ricketts repeats.

Charlene nods.



BUCK IS IN A TREE, holding binoculars. He passes them to Anthony, on a branch below him.

“Let’s see what the Chinaman’s doing,” Anthony says, adjusting the lens. “Oh, wait, wait. Here he comes.”

The four young men – Buck, Anthony, J.P. and Riley – all crouch lower, even though it would be impossible for Sam to see them in a tree this far away.

“Where does he think *he’s* going?” Riley mumbles.

“Out to infect everybody,” J.P. says. “Bastard.”

“Easy,” Anthony says. “He’s just going down his driveway.”

Buck glances at the three of them. He’s tired of living outside, eating fast food, spending nights in a sleeping bag, and hearing what a “militia” is supposed to do. He’s still angry at his grandfather, but this is getting old. He misses his brother. He misses his room.

“Look at that infected monster, opening his mailbox,” Riley says. “Now if the mailman touches it, he’s gonna get the virus and spread it to everyone else.”

“Typical Chinese,” J.P. says, “don’t give a rat’s ass about anyone else.”

“We could pop him from here, you know,” Riley says.

Anthony sneers. “You could ‘*pop him from here*’?”

Riley spins one of the handguns they took from the Ricketts’ basement.

“Yes, sir. With this baby.”

“That ‘baby’ doesn’t have the accuracy to reach 50 yards. And that’s with someone who knows what he’s doing.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Riley says, pushing up.

“You think so?” Anthony says.

“Hey, you mind putting the gun away?” Buck says. “Please?” Riley eases back and slides the gun into his sweatshirt pocket.

“Relax, baby Buck. Don’t wet your pants.”

The others chuckle. Buck sighs. He sees Sam take the mail and walk back towards the house. He sees Little Moses come running out the door and hug Sam around the legs.

“Hey, who’s the black kid?” Anthony says.

AIMEE SITS alone at the kitchen table and fingers the RSVP card. Her eyes drift far away.

“*We can’t wait!*” her friend, Donna, had written in purple ink. That was weeks ago. This Saturday was supposed to be the day, Aimee and Greg’s 20th anniversary celebration. They had reserved a small ballroom at the Marriott hotel. Their favorite Italian restaurant was set to cater. The couple planned to renew their vows in front of 80 guests. Greg had even rented a tux.

But now? Aimee almost laughs. Now the hotel is closed. The tux place is closed. The restaurant is out of business. And you couldn’t gather 80 people anywhere in the country, not legally. Most of Aimee’s guests didn’t even bother to RSVP. It was just assumed the party, like everything else, was shut down until life returned to normal, which didn’t seem like anytime soon.

Around the world, more than 2.5 million people had now been infected, with over 200,000 dead. Every time Aimee thought the country might be making progress, Greg would come home from the hospital and confide, “It’s more widespread than they’re say-

ing,” which only made her feel worse. Her mother was in intensive care. And the closest she came to visiting her was when Greg used his phone to FaceTime from the room. Her mother couldn’t speak, she was under sedation, Aimee didn’t even know if she could hear her voice. She tried anyhow.

“It’s me, Mom. It’s Aimee, Mom. You’re gonna pull through this, Mom. Keep fighting, Mom...”

Aimee buries her head in her forearms. She’s so tired.

“Mom?” she hears Ava say.

Aimee wipes her eyes and lifts her head. She sees her daughter leaning against the refrigerator, hugging her elbows, her face red and blotchy, as if she’s been crying, too.

“I have to tell you something.”

“What, sweetheart?”

“It’s about Grandma.”

“What about her?”

“You’re gonna be mad. Don’t be mad. I didn’t know, OK? I didn’t know!”

Aimee blinks. Her voice flattens. “Ava, what did you do?”

GREG CHANGES his PPE gown and puts on new gloves. He enters Ginger’s room in the ICU and sees her in the same position as before, unmoving, unaware, the mask covering much of her face. She’s now 11 days on the ventilator. Greg knows there is a limit. Eventually, the risks of cognitive and physical effects grow exponentially. She’s almost 80. Her time is running out.

He taps his robe at chest level and feels the vial of blood that Rosebaby gave him during the walk on Saturday. Despite his better judgment, he did not throw it out. Something about what Rosebaby had said. *“This is from Little Moses. If you are wise and you wish to save Aimee’s mother, you will take it.”*

Greg has always had a strange feeling about Little Moses. The child is diminutive for his age – Greg wonders if he suffered malnutrition in Haiti – but he shows an unusual calm and constant joy. He has incredible energy, like a toy whose battery never runs out. Rosebaby claims that Little Moses has never been sick in his life – not chicken pox, not the mumps. Even during flu season, when Greg heard about most of the kids in the neighborhood who came down with it, Little Moses didn’t.

Probably just coincidence, he tells himself, his medical mind taking over. He looks once more at his mother-in-law. He remembers back, just two weeks ago, when she was feisty and funny and complaining about them taking her out of the assisted living center because “at least they make my eggs the way I like them.” Now this. A ventilator, clinging to life. Even for a doctor like Greg, the tumble from healthy to critical was startling.

He heads down the hallway. He sees Carl, a virologist and lab researcher who also plays on the hospital softball team. Carl is young and brilliant and fond of his beer. He is also, on occasion, Greg knows, a risk-taker.

“Hey, Carl, come here for a sec?” he says.

Carl’s long brown hair is tucked in a net. His glasses rest atop his N-95 respirator mask.

“What’s up, Greg?”

“Can you check out something in the lab for me?”

“Sure. What?”

Greg looks both ways. He reaches under his gown.

“It’s gonna sound crazy...” he says.

LITTLE MOSES IS RUNNING across the back yards of the neighborhood, his jacket loose and flopping back on his arms.

“I am Flash!” he yells, invoking his favorite cartoon super hero. “I am faster than everyone!”

A bright sun pokes through the late April clouds. Little Moses is heading to Miss Jean’s house. Miss Jean from church. He sees her every Sunday, because his mother usually sits next to her. He is going to her house now because his mother said, “I feel that Miss Jean is in need of you, Moses.” Little Moses does whatever his mother says. He doesn’t mind. He likes going places.

When he reaches Miss Jean’s house, he stops. He sees Pastor Winston’s car pull into the driveway and the Pastor get out.

“I am Flash,” Little Moses whispers, as he runs to the driveway and crouches behind a half wall, believing himself so fast that no one can see him.

Pastor Winston rings the bell. When Jean’s daughter answers, she keeps the screen door closed.

“Pastor,” she says.

“Hello. I, uh, heard Jean wasn’t doing so well. I wanted to pay my respects.”

“She has the virus, Pastor. About six days now.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry.”

The daughter pauses. “She got it after you held services at the church.”

“Well, now,” Winston says haltingly, “it is possible she had it before then, right? Just to be fair.”

The daughter says nothing.

“I mean, I have read where you can have symptoms for days and you don’t even know it.”

“What do you need, Pastor?” the daughter says.

“Would you please tell Jean I was asking for her?”

“I’ll tell her when she wakes up. She sleeps 10 hours at a time now. She’s in a lot of pain. And the kicker is, I can’t get near her. None of us can. She’s on the lower level. We have to leave food and towels on the steps.”

Pastor Winston doesn’t know how to respond.

“We will pray for her,” he finally says.

“Yeah, do that,” the daughter says, closing the door.

Pastor Winston returns to his car, but not before Little Moses has scooted unseen to the side of the house. He didn’t know Miss Jean was sick. He curls around the back and presses up against the sliding glass doors. He cups his hands around his eyes to block the sun’s reflection. Inside, he sees Miss Jean in a lounge chair, covered to her waist by a blanket. A TV is playing quietly.

Little Moses taps on the glass. Miss Jean doesn’t respond. He pulls the handle and the glass door opens. He steps inside and shuts it behind him, then slips off his shoes as his mother taught him.

He approaches Miss Jean. She is sleeping, her glasses on a chain around her neck. Her right arm hangs over the side of the

easy chair. Little Moses thinks back to what his mother said, “*I feel Miss Jean is in need of you.*” But he doesn’t want to wake her up.

So he eases himself under her dangling arm and tucks himself beneath it. He takes her hand and puts it gently against his face.

“It’s OK, Miss Jean,” he whispers. “I am Flash.”



CINDY STARES at the computer screen. She hits the refresh button, hoping what she saw was a mistake. But the same email re-

turns, plain as day.

“As a result of the recent pandemic, unfortunately, your position has been eliminated. Unforeseen losses and dramatic drops in business have led to this wholly unpredictable and undesirable consequence. Your contributions have been greatly appreciated—”

She can't read anymore. Fired? Jobless? Nine years, she has been at this firm, which specializes in information systems for the leisure and hospitality industry. Since the virus, nobody is traveling. Nobody is staying in hotels.

Still, Cindy tells herself, things are bound to get better. They didn't have to do this.

“I don't understand,” she says, welling up.

“What don't you understand?” Sam says, reading over her shoulder. “They cut you loose. And if you don't think it's because you're Chinese to them, you're being naïve.”

“Sam—”

“Don't 'Sam' me! Find out if any white colleagues have been canned. I'll bet you they haven't.”

Cindy feels her tears falling.

“Look,” Sam continues, “I never told you this, but one day at work, I got chased by a lunatic calling me a 'chink' and telling me to go back to China. He jumped on the car and spit at me.”

Cindy is stunned.

“He *spit* at you? When—”

“A few weeks ago.”

“Sam—”

“I'm just saying, we're the new fall boys for this pandemic. Everybody needs a scapegoat. We're it.”

“Sam, there was a sign on our lawn...”

Sam turns. “What?”

“A sign on our lawn. When you were sick.”

“What kind of sign?”

“I didn’t tell you because—”

“What *kind of sign*?”

Cindy grabs a napkin and blows her nose.

“It said, ‘Chinese Virus Lives Here. Stay Away!’ ”

Sam looks at the ceiling and exhales.

“Our wonderful frickin’ neighbors.”

“We don’t know if—”

“We don’t know? It was Ricketts. I’ll bet you a million bucks.”

“He wouldn’t—”

“Of course he would, Cindy! He’s a racist old white man! He just needed an excuse.”

Cindy shuts her computer. “Sam, I just got fired. What are we gonna do? It’s gonna be a long time before anyone is hiring. You know our bills. We can’t afford—”

“I know our bills, Cindy!”

Sam paces around the couch. Cindy feels numb. A dull pain settles in her stomach.

“We’re moving,” Sam declares. “We’re moving out of this god-damn hypocritical state!”

In the hallway behind the kitchen, Rosebaby squeezes a broom handle. She looks down, then slowly walks the broom to her bedroom, where she closes the door and picks up her phone. She dials multiple numbers. After a pause, she hears a foreign ring tone.

“*Allo?*” a voice says.

“Margaret, se mwen,” Rosebaby says. Margaret, It’s me.

“Rosebaby! Mwen kontan tande ou!” I’m happy to hear from you. *“Eske ou byen?”* Are you OK?

“Mwen bezwen èd.” I need help.

“Kisa?” What?

“Mwen bezwen jwenn doktè fèy bò lakay ou-an.” I need to find that healer from your village.

GREG PULLS his car into the employee garage at the hospital. He has dreaded coming here the last eight weeks, but today it almost feels like a relief.

He kills the engine and waves at a passing nurse, who is already covered in personal protection gear. Greg takes a facemask from a plastic bag, but stops before he pulls it on. He can’t get the other night out of his head.

He’d walked into the house to find his youngest daughter, Mia, sitting on the steps.

“Why are you sitting on the steps by yourself?” he’d asked.

“There’s too much yelling,” she’d said. *“You’re not gonna like it.”*

In the hour that followed, Greg learned that his 15 year-old daughter, Ava, had not only gone out and met a friend after he and Aimee had warned her not to make contact with other kids, but that the “friend” was a boy named Troy, and they had kissed in the woods, and then Troy came down with the virus, and Ava never said anything. Not for a week.

“Oh my God, do you realize what you’ve done?” Aimee had screamed. She blamed Ava for her mother getting the virus, and it took every ounce of control Greg had to suggest that it was possible Ava had nothing to do with that, while all the while thinking the same thing.

How can teenagers be so oblivious? he wondered. What was worse, the entire hour-long screaming match had to take place with everyone 10 feet apart. When Ava cried so hysterically her howling sounded like a wounded animal, Greg wanted to comfort her, to hold her, but he couldn’t. Aimee couldn’t. Nor could Mia. None of them could come in contact now without risk. *We’re all hot potatoes*, Greg thought.

He had Ava tested the next morning. He would find out today if she had the disease. She showed no symptoms, but doctors now said being asymptomatic was meaningless. In fact, the most potent carriers were the ones who were actually in the early, asymptomatic days of virus gestation.

What kind of enemy is this, Greg thought? It’s ridiculously contagious. It shows up before it shows up. Some people have it and never even know it. Others get it and are dead three days later. It preys on the old, but it can kill the young. It travels through the air, on surfaces, on clothes. And no one is even sure that you are immune to a second wave if you’ve suffered a first.

Greg enters the building. His temperature is taken. His ID is swiped. Greg knows that, under protocol, he should report that he might have been exposed to the virus by his daughter – after which they would send him someplace to quarantine for 14 days. But he is breaking the rules. He cannot be shut out. Not now. Not with all

this happening. Ginger is approaching two weeks on the ventilator. He has to get Ava's test results, and—

“Greg!”

He turns to see Carl, the virologist, moving swiftly towards him. Carl guides Greg by the elbow through an EXIT door and all but pushes him into a stairwell.



“That blood,” Carl says. “Where did you get it?”

“Why? What did you find?”

Carl shakes his head. “I’ve never seen anything like it. Where did you get it? Jesus, just tell me!”

“An eight year-old boy.”

Carl steps back. His body seems to slump. He removes the vial of blood from his lab coat pocket.

“This,” he says, “is a game changer.”

“LOCK HER UP! Lock her up!”

A crowd on the steps of the Michigan capitol is protesting against the governor. TV cameras are filming on the perimeter.

“She can’t keep us shut down!” a bearded man screams at a reporter. “It’s unAmerican! Our businesses should be open! Our boats should be in the water! She’s trying to kill our economy! Who the hell is she to tell us what we can’t do?”

As other protesters blow airhorns and chant, Buck, J.P. Riley and Anthony stand with a group of men in army fatigues and American flag jackets. Many of them are holding guns. A few assume military postures.

“Lock her up! Lock her up!”

Buck reads the signs. “LIFT THE ORDER!” and “We The People!” and “Death Rates a HOAX!” and “Don’t Tread On Me!” He sees some people wearing protective masks, but most are not. Many stand close to one another, despite the rules about keeping a safe distance.

“Hey, yo, listen up!” a man in green fatigues yells, running in. “The TV cameras are coming our way. When you see the red light on, give ’em hell!”

Sure enough, moments later, a cameraman points his lens in their direction. Suddenly, the men are screaming. “Liberty or

death! Liberty or death!” A few rattle their guns. Others just howl. For eight or nine seconds, it’s intense and loud. But the moment the cameraman turns away, the volume drops and the men relax.

“Damn good!” the man in fatigues declares. “That’ll be on the news!”

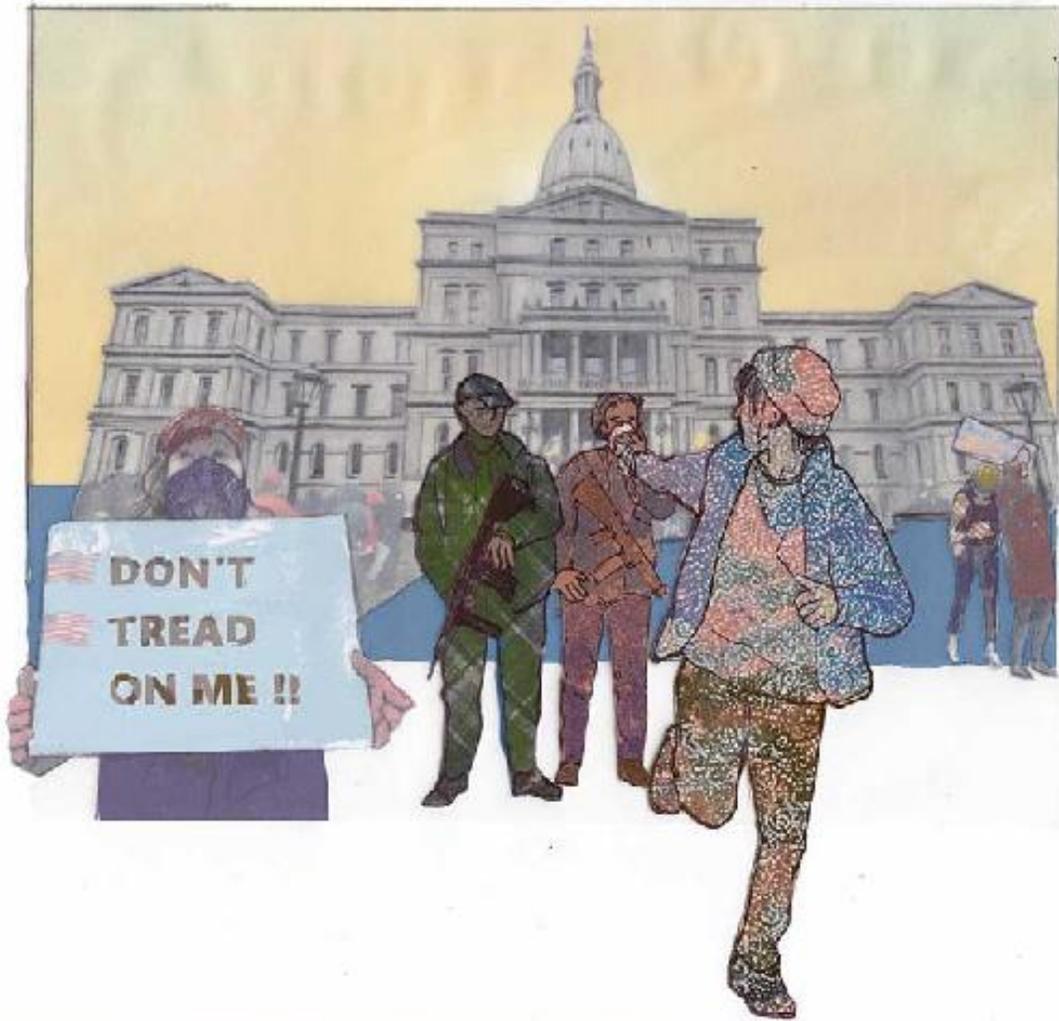
Buck grins. He’s never been on the news before. He lifts the handgun he’s been holding and hollers, “Whoo-hoo!”

“Buck? Is that you?”

Buck spins to see his grandfather, Old Man Ricketts, standing on the capitol lawn.

“Buck, what the hell are you doing here? And whose – wait, is that *my gun*? Damn it, Buck! *Is that my gun?*”

Bucks turns and runs. Ricketts gives chase. J.P and Riley step in and grab him.



“Whoa, whoa, old man! What’s your problem?”

“Back off, you dumb punk. That’s my grandson!”

Ricketts throws off Riley’s grip, which sends him sprawling. Someone yells “Fight!” Instantly, police officers in dark blue uniforms and riot masks swarm the fracas, pulling people back.

Buck is already near the street, running with his arms high. He looks back and sees the police and protesters mixing it up. He keeps running with his head turned and – BANG! He crashes nose-first into a “No Parking” sign.

The world spins.
He goes down.

“**YOU SURE** you want to do this, Pastor?” the cook in the mask says.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Winston answers, pulling on a mask of his own.

He is in downtown Detroit, in a poor neighborhood, at a busy shelter run by the Rescue Mission. He has volunteered to work in the kitchen, preparing meals for homeless clients who have tested positive for the disease. He wears a hat and blue rubber gloves. They ran out of paper gowns and eye shields.

“We appreciate your being here,” the cook says. “I’ve done a nine hour shift, through the night. Not many folks volunteering right now.”

“This is when the Lord expects the most out of us,” Winston says.

“I suppose,” the cook answers.

Winston takes his place in the kitchen and stirs the ladle in a large pot of oatmeal. The truth is, Winston is here out of guilt. He has now heard of three congregants who have the virus, all of whom were in church the last Sunday he held services. When he insisted on preaching that day, was he really doing what the Lord wanted? Or was he serving his own false sense of strength? What if one of those three people dies? What will he tell the family?

Winston sees the cook place six bowls of oatmeal on a tray.

“Are you taking those to the patients?” Winston asks.

“Yeah.” He motions to a doorway. “Just the ones on this floor. Then I’m heading home.”

“Let me,” Winston says. “You’ve been here all night.”

The cook sighs. “You sure?”

“Everyone must do his part,” Winston says.

“Just keep your mask and gloves on tight,” the cook says, handing him the tray. “Sick people have been up and down the hallways, using the bathroom and what not. I heard some expert say the virus stays in the air for a couple hours.”

“I’ll be careful,” Winston says.

“Just put one bowl outside a door and knock, then move on.”

“Understood,” Winston says. “Get some rest.”

A few minutes later, Winston is alone in the hallway. He approaches the first door. He thinks of his sick congregants. He thinks of Jean’s daughter, sneering at him. He thinks of a verse from the book of Matthew. “*Lord if you are willing, you can make me clean.*”

He lowers his mask. He removes his gloves. He knocks on the first door. After a few moments, a heavysset African-American man whose eyes are bloodshot red opens the door and seems startled to find the pastor so close.

“Eat,” Winston says, putting the bowl in the man’s hands. “I’m praying for you to get better.”



GREG LEANS over his mother-in-law. He holds the syringe. His hand is actually shaking.

You're breaking every rule, he hears himself saying. But if you don't, she'll die.

He hears his own breath inside his mask.

Keep her alive.

He takes her arm.

God help me.

He finds a vein and pierces her skin with the needle.

END OF CHAPTER FIVE

Pay It Forward

If you're enjoying "Human Touch" so far, would you consider, if you're able, adding a human touch of your own by donating any amount to help my hometown city of Detroit battle the wave of coronavirus that is overwhelming it? Our citizens are struggling - and dying - in high numbers. "DETROIT BEATS COVID-19!" focuses on first responders, seniors, poor children and the homeless.

Thanks, as always,
Mitch Albom

DETROIT BEATS COVID-19!

You can donate to help Mitch Albom's hometown of Detroit through SAY Detroit, a 501(c)(3) charity he founded in 2006, right now at <http://www.humantouchstory.com>.

The **DETROIT BEATS COVID-19!** project will devote 100% of the proceeds to fighting Covid-19 in the following ways:

- By creating a mobile testing center in Detroit
- Feeding 2,000 homebound seniors weekly
- Continuing education for more than 100 impoverished children

- Helping to operate a quarantine center for homeless citizens
- Funding the creation of reusable, washable masks and mask protectors for first responders
- Feeding medical and hospital personnel on the front lines through the purchase of food from local Detroit restaurants at risk of closing

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

About the Author

Mitch Albom is the author of numerous books of fiction and nonfiction, which have collectively sold more than forty million copies in forty-seven languages worldwide. He has written seven number-one New York Times bestsellers – including *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the bestselling memoir of all time, which topped the list for four straight years – award-winning TV films, stage plays, screenplays, a nationally syndicated newspaper column, and a musical. His most recent work is a return to nonfiction with the New York Times bestseller *Finding Chika*, a memoir about a young Haitian orphan whose short life would forever change Albom's heart. He founded and oversees SAY Detroit, a consortium of nine different charitable operations in his hometown, including a non-profit dessert shop and food product line to fund programs for Detroit's most underserved citizens. He also operates an orphanage in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, which he visits monthly. He lives with his wife, Janine, in Michigan. Learn more at www.mitcalbom.com, www.saydetroit.org, and www.havefaithaiti.org.

Follow Mitch on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram at @mitcalbom.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[The Series](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Week Nine](#)

[Pay It Forward](#)

[Also by Mitch Albom](#)

[About the Author](#)