

The  
Safest  
Lie



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ANGELA  
CERRITO

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To Mom and Mike



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Mom and Mike, this one is for you. Actually, as I'm sure you know, they are all for you.

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# Chapter I

Mama's arm is draped over me, soft as a butterfly's wing. Papa clears his throat and pats at his coat pockets. He's been awake all night guarding us from the two men who arrived yesterday. I fling my hand in front of my face and peek through my fingers. The men are arguing. They don't speak Polish or German or French. I can't understand their language, but I feel their words stomping on top of each other, hard and heavy, like soldiers' boots.

Papa pats his pockets again. It worries Mama when he does this. "Makes it look like you have something worth stealing," she tells him. There is nothing left to steal. My silver hair brush and Papa's leather belt were taken two days ago. Or three days ago.

Mama's sleeping snug in her winter coat, so Papa can pat his pockets all he wants and it won't upset her. His pockets crunch where he touches them; they're stuffed with newspaper, nothing worth stealing. Anyone can find newspaper blowing down the street or covering a sleeping person or spread over a body.

Mama complains to Papa about the newspapers every day. "Why are you always picking up newspaper?"

"This one is clean, a nice clean sheet," Papa answers. He folds each piece of newspaper very small and tucks them away, deep in his pockets.

I don't save newspapers, but I understand. It's nice to have

something, anything, to put in your pocket when all you own in the world are the clothes you are wearing.

Mama jerks awake and pulls me into a quick hug before sitting up. She gives the new men a hard look and they stop arguing for a long moment to stare back at her. Mama waves her arms for me to stand up and insists Papa lie down. He stretches out on the mat with his shoes hanging off the edge.

I rub my eyes and run a finger across my teeth. Mama circles our half of the room, unbuttons her coat and buttons it back again. Mama has only letters in her pocket, three long letters from Grandma. It isn't cold enough to wear a winter coat, but keeping it on is the only way to prevent it from getting snatched away. Mama runs her fingers through my hair, pulling apart the tangles. Papa's snoring before she's finished.

I straighten my clothes. Dirt outlines my fingernails and fills the wrinkles of my knuckles. Mama puts a hand on each of my shoulders and closes her eyes, something she does every morning. I wish I could look into her thoughts. I ask the question I've wanted to ask for weeks. "Why do you close your eyes like that?"

"Oh, Anna . . ." She looks away, surprised I noticed. Or surprised I asked. "It's nothing. I . . . make a picture in my mind of you at home, in your school uniform, starting a . . . normal day."

My stomach spins and wobbles, but not because I'm hungry. Mama's words erase these two years. I long for my school uniform hanging on the peg behind my door, my own room, Papa's carpentry shop, the apple tree in our yard . . . more apples than I could eat in a season. Warm white bread . . . so much bread, I dropped it from the bridge to share with the ducks.

My stomach twirls and bends, stretches as if it can reach into the past and take the food I left there. Memories of home always circle around to food.

## Chapter 2

Now that there are strangers in our room, Mama can't walk me to Mrs. Rechtman's youth circle. "There is no need to worry," Mama says. These are the words she uses when danger creeps in close. "We don't know these men yet. I can't leave your father asleep and alone." I carry her voice in my head, warning me of other dangers. I walk slowly down the steps. *Don't draw attention to yourself, Anna.* And keep my hands off the rails. *Germs are everywhere, Anna.*

Mrs. Rechtman nods as each child takes a seat on the ground. I don't see Halina so I sit near the front, next to a girl I haven't met. Sonia rushes into the yard and recites a handful of names to Mrs. Rechtman. Sonia is fifteen. She has long dark hair and eyes so dark they are almost black. She is always helping.

I study the group this morning: only seven boys and five girls, including me. There used to be almost one hundred children at youth circle. But that was two years ago when we first moved here. Two years ago each family had their own apartment and enough food to survive.

We even had a secret school. Mrs. Rechtman taught in an abandoned basement. Halina and I sat in the center of the first row. We came early each day because it was our job to set the books at each desk before the other students arrived. Mrs. Rechtman had so many books, hidden in tall stacks behind the cabinets along the back wall.

Two years ago, even when the ghetto walls were built up high and the gates were closed and guarded, we had everything: a secret school, enough food, our own home. And there weren't so many people dying.

Mrs. Rechtman stands up on her rock and forces a smile. "We have a great deal of work today."

Halina rushes in and squeezes beside me. Her brother, Marek, barefoot, stands off to the side. Mrs. Rechtman gives us instructions: there is clothing to be distributed, messages to deliver, but no food. Just as we are about to split into groups, Mrs. Rechtman stops talking and sits down. She puts her head in her hands and we all freeze. Our ears reach for the sounds of soldiers' boots. Should I run? Or try to hide?

Mrs. Rechtman sobs. She's been sobbing on and off for days, since they took her husband and daughter.

It's quiet. No soldiers are stomping or talking. But a shadow stretches into our courtyard between the buildings. Sonia walks toward it.

"Jolanta!" Sonia's voice is soft but we all hear it and let out our breath. The cold hand grabbing my heart melts away. There's no reason to be afraid.

Jolanta isn't tall. But she's standing and Mrs. Rechtman is still sitting on her rock. When she pulls Mrs. Rechtman into a hug, it looks like Jolanta is the mother and Mrs. Rechtman is her daughter. Jolanta walks Mrs. Rechtman away from us. Sonia takes charge. I'm put in the group to distribute donated clothing. We stare at the mismatched shirts and trousers. I try to convince myself that it isn't pointless to donate clothing to people who are starving. Sonia reads our expressions. "It isn't too soon to prepare for winter."

Mrs. Rechtman calls us all back to the circle. "Jolanta has good news for us. Homework for each of you to share with your families." Homework is food. *Food!* My mind explodes with food dreams: meat, plums, carrots. I wonder if I'll remember what meat tastes like if I ever get a chance to eat it again.

“Only a small amount of homework. And something else.” She pauses and looks at Jolanta, but Jolanta is quiet, as usual. “Three vaccinations against typhoid fever for three children in our circle. Who will it be? How will we decide?” Mrs. Rechtman’s eyes are dry now; they’re not even red.

A tall boy stands up. “I nominate Sonia. She is the hardest worker. Everyone knows it.”

Everyone agrees. Except Sonia, of course.

“And the other two?” Mrs. Rechtman looks around.

I swallow the lump in my throat and stand. “I nominate Halina and Marek.”

“We can’t just pick our friends,” a boy objects.

“It’s true Halina is my friend.” I take a deep breath to help make my words strong. “I nominate her and Marek for good reasons. Both of their parents have the fever. They have two little sisters to care for. Does anyone else have the disease in their home?”

No one speaks up.

“Then Halina and Marek are the most at risk. They come to youth circle and work every day. They should be given the vaccinations.”

We vote. The immunizations go to Sonia, Halina and Marek. We make a tight circle around them and watch as they have needles poked into their arms and the lifesaving medicine pushed into their bodies.

Jolanta’s eyes land on me when she finishes the last injection. “What is your name?”

“Anna Bauman.”

“And why did you ask for your friends and not yourself?”

“They are a better choice. They can care for their parents and younger sisters. I’m an only child.” Jolanta nods. I can feel her eyes on me as I make my way to the mismatched clothes.

With the promise of homework, we quickly pull on three or four shirts and one or two extra pairs of pants and set out delivering the clothes. At the end of the day I have four cabbage

leaves, three pieces of dried fruit and a half slice of acorn bread tied in my scarf. Jolanta stays with us later than usual and shocks me by asking to walk me home.

“Do you speak German?” She slows her pace next to me, her head in constant motion, scanning the streets.

“Of course.”

Jolanta switches to German. “Tell me how old you are and if you have any relatives living outside the ghetto.”

“Nine. My aunt lives in Canada. She’s too far away to help. My father has tried. The rest of our family is in Lodz, the Lodz ghetto.” I swallow and try to push down the lump in my throat, remembering Grandma’s letters. “At least we think they are still there.”

“I’d like to meet your parents.” Jolanta switches back to Polish as we pass three boys leaning up against the wall of my building.

“I’m sure they would like to meet you too.” Jolanta. She smells like clean clothes and grassy fields and she brings us the greatest treasures—dried fruit and bread and cabbage leaves, and today, magic medicine.

I avoid the handrails and so does Jolanta. I almost don’t feel the steps under my feet; I am bubbling with excitement as we make our way up the steps to my door.

## Chapter 3

Jolanta, Mama and Papa whisper together. I know they are whispering about me. Papa's voice rises. "No, I won't hear of it." He takes a step back. Mama ducks her head in closer to Jolanta's and continues the conversation.

When we lived at home, Papa always had the final say, about everything. He drapes an arm around my shoulder and pulls me to the small window under the slanted ceiling. During our first nights here, Papa and I looked out the window together. As we watched the walls around our block grow taller and taller, he insisted the war would be over soon. He sounded like a leader on the radio. "Poland will never stop fighting, Anna. The country is young, but the people are old, centuries old. One hundred and twenty-three years Poland was absent from the map. Then back again. Nothing can stop the Polish people."

Now he's silent, his head nearly touching the streaked glass. I know Papa's trying to look out past the guards and the gates. Maybe he's hoping to see his old shop with the stacks of wood outside, machines humming inside and a storage room of new furniture waiting to be delivered. Like Mama with her eyes closed resting her hands upon my shoulders each morning and Papa at the window searching, I remember too. Our old life is only a few blocks away and not so long ago.

Too soon, we are spotted. "Alms, alms," cries a girl beneath our window. "Alms! Alms! Bread! Please, bread!" A crowd of

orphan children gathers below. I close my eyes and back away, clutching my scarf with the precious food inside.

The two men who share our room stare at me with hungry eyes as if they can see the food hidden beneath the cloth. I want to be kind. I want to share. I know I am fortunate to have a mother and father. We are lucky to have a room, even if we must share with strangers. And today we have food. Thanks to Jolanta.

Jolanta leaves without a smile or a nod. “Do you remember, I told you about her?” I ask Mama. “Isn’t she amazing?”

Mama folds me into a hug. “More amazing that you can imagine,” she says.

We wait in line for the bathroom at the end of the hall and the three of us enter together. It is the only place that gives us a little bit of safety and privacy to do something dangerous—eat. I place my scarf in Mama’s hands. After Papa blesses it, we each chew on a piece of dried fruit, making it last as long as possible. Papa quickly blesses the cabbage leaves; his eyes are on the door. Mama insists I have two cabbage leaves, while they each have only one.

“The bread is for you, Anna,” Mama says.

“I can’t eat it all.”

“Yes,” Papa agrees. “You must.”

It’s always this way. Mama says that I need more food because I’m growing and Papa agrees with her every time. I bless the bread. “Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”

My parents fix their eyes on me, making sure I swallow every crumb. When I’m finished, they nod as if I’ve just completed my homework and done a good job on it too.

The next morning, before sunrise, there is a knock. Mama jumps out of bed and flies to the door. I see Jolanta’s face as Mama cracks it open. She passes Mama a small piece of paper and disappears. Mama leans back against the closed door. She

doesn't know that one of the men has woken up. He watches her. She doesn't know that I've got one eye closed and the other eye fixed on her face. She unfolds the paper, brings it up to her mouth and gives it a kiss. I quickly shut my spying eye before she climbs into bed and lies down next to me.