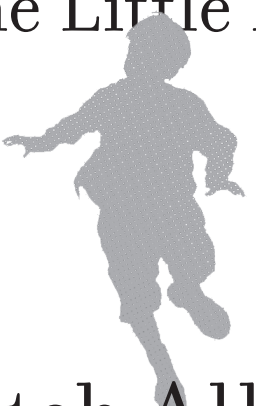
The Little Liar



Mitch Albom

SPHERE

SPHERE

First published in the United States in 2023 by Harper,
an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers
First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Sphere

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © by ASOP, Inc.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7515-8457-8

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A

Papers used by Sphere are from well-managed forests
and other responsible sources.



Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

For Eva and Solomon Nesser, and others who wore the numbers on their arms, and for all who still mourn them.

It is not your memories which haunt you.
It is not what you have written down.
It is what you have forgotten, what you must forget.
What you must go on forgetting all your life.

—JAMES FENTON, "A German Requiem"

Everything's gonna change, everything but the truth.

—LUCINDA WILLIAMS

Part I

1943

"It's a lie."

The large man's voice was deep and hoarse.

"What's a lie?" someone whispered.

"Where we're going."

"They're taking us north."

"They're taking us to die."

"Not true!"

"It is true," the large man said. "They'll kill us once we get there."

"No! We're being resettled! To new homes! You heard the boy on the platform!"

"To new homes!" another voice added.

"There are no new homes," the large man said.

A shriek of train wheels silenced the conversation. The large man studied the metal grate that covered the only window in this lightless wagon, which was intended to carry cows, not humans. There were no seats. No food or water. Nearly a hundred others were crammed inside, a solid block of human beings. Old men in suits. Children in their sleeping clothes. A

young mother cupping an infant to her chest. Only one person was sitting, a teenaged girl with her dress hiked up over a tin bucket the passengers were given to relieve themselves. She hid her face in her hands.

The large man had seen enough. He wiped sweat from his forehead then pushed through the bodies toward the window.

"Hey!"

"Watch it!"

"Where are you going!"

He reached the grate and jammed his thick fingers through the holes. He grunted loudly. With his face contorting, he began to pull.

Everyone in the cattle car went silent. *What is he doing? What if the guards come?* In the corner, a lanky boy named Sebastian stood against the wall, watching all this unfold. Next to him was most of his family, his mother, his father, his grandparents, his two younger sisters. But when he saw the man pulling at the window grate, his focus turned to a thin dark-haired girl a few feet away.

Her name was Fannie. Before all the trouble began, before the tanks and the soldiers and the barking dogs and the midnight door-pounding and the rounding up of all the Jewish people in his home city of Salonika, Sebastian believed that he loved this girl, if there is such a thing as love when you are fourteen years old.

He had never shared this feeling, not with her or anyone else. But now, for some reason, he felt swollen with it, and he focused on her as the large man wiggled the grate until it loosened from the wall. With a last mighty pull, he ripped it free

and let it drop. Air rushed through the open rectangle, and a springtime sky was visible for all to see.

The large man wasted no time. He pulled himself up, but the opening was too small. His thick midsection could not fit through.

He dropped down, cursing. A murmur went through the train car.

"Someone smaller," a voice said.

Parents clutched their children. For a moment, nobody moved. Sebastian squeezed his eyes shut, took a deep breath, then grabbed Fannie by the shoulders and pushed her forward.

"She can fit."

"Sebastian, no!" Fannie yelled.

"Where are her parents?" someone asked.

"Dead," someone answered.

"Come, child."

"Hurry, child!"

The passengers shuffled Fannie through the scrum of bodies, touching her back as if sealing wishes upon it. She reached the large man, who hoisted her to the window.

"Legs first," he instructed. "When you land, curl up and roll."

"Wait—"

"We can't wait! You must go now!"

Fannie spun toward Sebastian. Tears filled his eyes. *I will see you again*, he said, but he said it to himself. A bearded man who had been mumbling prayers edged forward to whisper in Fannie's ear.

"Be a good person," he said. "Tell the world what happened here."

Her mouth went to form a question, but before she could, the large man pushed her through the opening, and she was gone.

Wind whooshed through the window. For a moment, the passengers seemed paralyzed, as if waiting for Fannie to come crawling back. When that didn't happen, they began pushing forward. Ripples of hope spread through the boxcar. *We can get out! We can leave!* They crushed up against one another.

And then.

BANG! A gunshot. Then several more. As the train screeched its brakes, passengers scrambled to put the grate back over the window. No luck. It wouldn't hold. When the car stopped moving, the doors yanked open, and a short German officer stood in blinding sunlight, his pistol held high.

"HALT!" he screamed.

Sebastian watched the hands fall away from the window like dead leaves dropping from a shaken branch. He looked at the officer, looked at the passengers, looked at the teenage girl crying on the waste bucket, and he knew their last hope had just been extinguished. At that moment, he cursed the one missing member of his family, his younger brother, Nico, and he swore he would find him one day, make him pay for all this, and never, ever, forgive him.

Let Me Tell You Who I Am

You can trust the story you are about to hear. You can trust it because I am telling it to you, and I am the only thing in this world you can trust.

Some would say you can trust nature, but I disagree. Nature is fickle; species thrive then flame out. Others suggest you can trust faith. Which faith? I ask.

As for humans? Well. Humans can be trusted only to watch out for themselves. When threatened, they will destroy anything to survive, especially me.

But I am the shadow you cannot outrun, the mirror that holds your final reflection. You may duck my gaze for all your days on earth, but let me assure you, I get the last look.

I am Truth.

And this is a story about a boy who tried to break me.

For years, he hid, during the Holocaust and after it, changing names, changing lives. But in the end, he must have known I would find him.

Who could spot a little liar better than me?

"Such a beautiful boy!"

Let me introduce you to him, before all the lying began. Stare at this page until your eyes drift into cloudy subconscious. Ah. There he is. Little Nico Krispis, playing in the streets of Salonika, Greece—also known as Thessaloniki—a city by the Aegean Sea that dates back to 300 BCE. Here the ruins of ancient bathhouses mix with streetcars and horse-drawn wagons, the olive oil market bustles, and street vendors sell their fruits, fish, and spices taken off the morning boats from the harbor.

The year is 1936. The summer sun is heating the cobblestone by the famous White Tower, a fifteenth-century fortress built to protect Salonika's shores. In a nearby park, children shriek happily in a game called *abariza*, where two teams draw chalk boxes then chase one another between them. If they are caught, they must stand in the box until they are "freed" by a teammate.

Nico Krispis is the last one left from his team. He is being chased by an older boy named Giorgos. The captured children shout "Look out, Nico!" whenever Giorgos gets too close.

Nico grins. He is fast for his age. He dashes to a streetlamp,

grabs hold, then spins around, launching himself like a slingshot. Giorgos pumps his arms. It's a footrace now. Nico's toe touches the edge of the chalk box just as the older boy slaps his shoulder.

"*Abariza!*" Nico yells as the children scatter. "*Liberté!* Freedom!"

"No, no! I got you, Nico!" Giorgos declares. "I tagged you before you touched!"

The children freeze. They turn to Nico. What's it going to be? He looks at his sandal. He looks at Giorgos.

"He's right," Nico says. "He got me."

His teammates groan. They stomp away.

"Oh, Nico," one laments, "why do you always have to tell the truth?"

I know why.

I can always spot an admirer.



Now, perhaps you ask: Why focus on this one little boy? Of what interest can he be? Are there not billions of lives that Truth could share, baring the intimate accounts of their time on earth?

The answer is yes. But with Nico, I offer you a story of consequence, one that heretofore has never been told. It concerns deception, great deception, but also great truth, and heartbreak and war and family and revenge and love, the kind of love that is tested over and over. Before the story ends, there is even a moment of magic, set against an endless tapestry of human frailty.

When we finish this story, you may say, "That was impossible." But here is the funny thing about truth: the less real something seems, the more people want to believe it.

So consider this about Nico Krispis:

Until he was eleven years old, he never told a lie.

That will get you noticed, at least by me. If Nico snuck a sweet roll from the kitchen, he would admit it the moment he was questioned. If his mother said, "Are you tired, Nico?" he would confess he was, even if it got him sent to bed early.

In school, if Nico was unable to answer a teacher's question, he would willingly share that he had not read his homework. The other students laughed at his honesty. But Nico's grandfather, Lazarre, whom Nico adored, had taught him early on of my precious value. When Nico was only five years old, they were sitting near the harbor, staring over the gulf at the majestic Mount Olympus.

"My friend told me the gods live up there," Nico said.

"There is only one God, Nico," Lazarre replied. "And he does not live on a mountain."

Nico frowned. "Then why did my friend say it?"

"People say many things. Some are true. Some are lies. Sometimes, if you say a lie long enough, people believe it's the truth.

"Never be the one to tell lies, Nico."

"I won't, Nano."

"God is always watching."

Three things to know about Nico Krispis.

1. **He had a remarkable facility for languages.**
2. **He could draw almost anything.**
3. **He was an attractive child.**

The third item will prove significant as we go on. Nico was blessed with the best features of his tall, muscular father, a tobacco merchant, and his fair-haired mother, who volunteered at a local theater in hopes of taking the stage. I claim no credit for a person's physical features, but I can tell you that whatever countenance you were born with, Truth will enhance it.

I have a look.

Nico wore that look on a face that was so pleasing, even strangers stopped to admire him. "Such a beautiful child," they would say, touching his cheeks or his chin. They would sometimes add, "He does not look Jewish." This, during the war, would also be significant.

But what strangers were mostly drawn to with Nico, beyond the wavy blond hair, the sparkly blue eyes, or the full lips that spread over prominent white teeth, was his pure heart. There was no guile anywhere.

He was a boy to be believed.

Over time, people in his neighborhood began calling him Chioni—the Greek word for "snow"—because he seemed so untouched by earthly deceit. How could I not take note of such a creature? In a world full of lies, honesty glimmers like silver foil reflecting the sun.