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contact: ulla.saar@elk.ee



The Old Town Detectives. Letters Written in Blood

Text by Reeli Reinaus

Illustrations by Sirly Oder

Ronk ronk, 2026

138 pp, hard cover

ISBN: 9789908973111

chapterbook, fiction

Topics: crime, ghosts, child detectives, old town

Age: 11+

Rebeka and Gregor have a new case to solve: are the flats in the Old Town really haunted, or is there a simpler explanation? As they investigate, Rebeka comes face to face with the spirit of a girl from long ago — and finds herself drawn into her story.

Lota turns out to be an unexpected ally, and Gregor has to admit, at last, that she is actually quite likeable. As for Kaspar, he surprises everyone by reinventing himself as a bit of a hipster.

Letters Written in Blood is the second book in the Old Town Detectives series.



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[pp 17–28]

The Door

Lota stood in the middle of the street, staring intently at the entrance of a house a short distance away. The stone frame arched to a point and the door, painted a dark red, was covered in six lighter-red square panels. Two identical panels stood above it.

She glanced down at the black-and-white photo held gingerly between her thick mittens. It didn't show a doorway, but that didn't matter because she was sure that if the address was right, then the building had to be right, too. And if that was true, then the door was probably right as well.

Lota was exactly where she needed to be. All she had to do was enter...

Suddenly, the door she'd been eying for nearly ten minutes already swung open, and a woman in a black winter coat walked out. Lota instinctively took a step back even though the woman was quite far away. As she did, she bumped into someone and they both apologized automatically. A moment later, Lota registered that it was a young man wearing a red hat and a beige jacket.

Meanwhile, the woman in the black winter coat set off in the same direction of the young man. Only after getting a better look did Lota realize the man was an actor at the Tallinn City Theater whom several girls in her class were wild about. So much so that on the first of every month, when tickets for new performances went on sale, they lined up at the theater's ticket window at the crack of dawn and even skipped a few morning lessons as a result. Lota found their approach absolutely baffling. If she had wanted to meet the guy, then she'd simply offer to clean the theater for free or volunteer or have come up with something else. She wouldn't have spent money on tickets, in any case, without gaining the slightest opportunity to get to know the object of obsession himself.

"People really do have so little strategic reasoning," Lota murmured, watching the heartthrob actor walk through the door of the City Theater a couple buildings down as the black-coated woman strolled onward.

The door had closed once again. Lota considered waiting for the woman to return (she'd probably gone out for lunch) and then thinking up some kind of an excuse for slipping inside with her. But the cold was making her toes prickle, so she resolved to go home instead. What's more, she felt she actually wasn't quite ready for that yet.

For facing the truth.

The big hand on the wall clock stood over twelve and the little hand over five. Rebeka absentmindedly rolled a ball of dough back and forth between her fingers and stared at the clock just as apathetically. Part of her was in the space where she existed and part of her seemed not to be. And she couldn't even say exactly why. Maybe it was because she felt a strange tension in the air and didn't like it one bit. Or could she simply be imagining things? Because how can you feel tension if it can't be seen with the eyes or touched with the hands? If she were to hold her arm out, she'd touch nothing at all. Rebeka wondered if it was the same with ghosts. They couldn't be touched, either. And yet, she still saw them. That was exactly the point.

"Is there anything you want to talk about?"

"What do you mean?"

Luisa shrugged. "I dunno. You're kinda pensive."

Rebeka sighed. It was all so dumb. The way people don't know how to communicate. Or are afraid of the truth. She herself was no different. Her best friend and classmate Luisa had come over, and they were making cheesy biscuits, which were their favorite. But everything was still off. That same weird, invisible tension hung between them.



Reeli Reinaus. *The Old Town Detectives. Letters Written in Blood.* Translated by Adam Cullen

"Do you not hang out with him anymore?"

Rebeka's mom had asked the same question. She'd tried to sound casual, though Rebeka detected a hint of worry in her voice. It was apparently an attempt at probing whether Rebeka wanted to talk about it. And now, Luisa had asked the exact same question.

"What'd you two get up to, anyway?"

Rebeka's mind went to Balthazar the Blackhead, whom she'd gotten to know nearly a month earlier. For a moment, she considered spilling the whole truth to Luisa. She didn't want to lie to her best friend and desk-mate at school. Because of what? Some weird lady who sent them an anonymous note inviting them to meet on Town Hall Square at midnight? Some stupid ghosts that were now the reason she nearly went out of her way to avoid Old Town in the dark?

But something held her back regardless. She couldn't put her finger on the cause.

It's not just your secret. It's Gregor's secret, too, a voice in the girl's head whispered. What was it? Her conscience?

It all felt like a bizarre dream in retrospect. The whole unnaturally warm December and everything that'd happened over the course of a month. Dreamlike encounters; fear and a peculiar clarity that struck her simultaneously. Plus, the fact that there was something else beyond the physical world. Another that exists right alongside ours. One filled with spirits who are almost like people but still mere shadows—souls that can only lightly brush the world they'd once inhabited. Experiencing joy and sadness alike.

"Do you believe in life after death?"

It was Luisa's turn to frown. Then, she shrugged.

"I really don't know," she said. "I... Can we maybe talk about something else?"

Rebeka nodded. She remembered that Luisa's dog, which the girl had had for as long as Rebeka could remember, had been put to sleep recently. Death obviously wasn't a topic that her friend was very inclined to discuss right then.

Strange. Rebeka had wanted to wriggle her way out of answering Luisa's questions but now, she felt bad regardless. As if she'd somehow tricked Luisa into changing the topic.

"Would you like to shred the cheese this time?" she asked, and Luisa nodded.

Rebeka reckoned it probably made no difference what she did. She'd still have an unsettling sense of guilt.

That night, long after Luisa had gone home, the landline phone in Rebeka's home rang.

A New Assignment

Rebeka sat in Gregor's bedroom, watching as the boy pulled a giant bar of hazelnut chocolate out of his school backpack. He'd bought it in preparation for their meeting.

"I told you we'd get a new assignment!" the boy said contentedly, tearing off the wrapping.

Rebeka eked out a smile.

"I thought you'd be glad," he said, cocking his head.

Gregor had noticed Rebeka's strained expression. Now, he looked a little disappointed as he broke the chocolate up into smaller pieces. As if someone were chipping little bits off his own good mood.

Rebeka felt rotten for being a disappointment to the boy. Of course she'd wanted to meet up with him. But just to hang out. Simply to hang out.

She was still convinced that ghosts weren't her cup of tea in the very least, which meant she'd gotten a good spook when the landline rang the night before. Although Rebeka hesitated for a moment, she answered all the same. Even though she knew who was calling the second she lifted the receiver. At first, there was only an uncanny silence. Then, a familiar woman's voice informed her that they had a new assignment and detailed instructions were awaiting in the agreed-upon drop spot. And the caller hung up.

The instant she set down the receiver, Rebeka was afraid that maybe she'd imagined the entire call. Could her subconscious have somehow conjured up the conversation to prompt her into making good on her wish to see Gregor again? She texted him a couple

minutes later and the boy practically called back the second she pressed “send”. Gregor sounded over the moon about meeting up. Not like now, where he was deflating with every minute.

“Well, shall we open it?” he asked cautiously.

Rebeka nodded.

“But you don’t actually want to, do you?” he pressed. Rebeka could see that there wasn’t much left of the chipper Gregor who’d come to meet her at the door.

“I suppose it doesn’t really matter what I want,” she said, trying to make her expression slightly more optimistic. “We’ve been picked for this assignment so there’s no getting out of it for us.”

“It’s pretty uncool if you’re only doing it against your will.”

Rebeka noticed that he hadn’t touched a single piece of chocolate. She was perplexed by how she could suddenly be such a disappointment to everyone around her. Luisa yesterday, Gregor today. And so, she decided to come out with the truth.

“I’m not doing it against my will. I just don’t want...”

Rebeka picked up the brown padded envelope, still sealed.

“Look. This letter is 100% real. My hand can’t go through it, see? Not so long ago, my whole world was this way. Nothing and nobody could pass through anything else. Women dressed in medieval clothes didn’t walk right through me in the middle of the street. I’m obviously still having a hard time getting used to it. But I’ve got zero problems with you and with getting the chance to solve a mystery together again,” Rebeka finally admitted.

Gregor smiled.

“Okay. Let’s see what Huldra expects from us this time.”

Rebeka nodded. She vowed to herself that she’d treat the assignment, no matter what it might be, like an adventure and would do her very best to keep Gregor from feeling like she was an unwilling participant. Even so, her heart was beating anxiously as she handed the boy the envelope and watched him slice it open with a pair of scissors.

“You ready?” Gregor asked.

Rebeka nodded, and the boy dumped the contents onto the desk in front of them.

Out of the envelope came a couple sheets of paper and two ordinary door keys, each attached to a little round RFID fob. The documents turned out to be floorplans of apartments that the keys could apparently access. One was on Vene Street and the other on Lai Street. Beneath each diagram was a photo of the building, the apartment number, and times.

“I suppose these are keys to the apartments,” Gregor deduced. “She wants us to check them out for some reason.”

But why? Rebeka wondered. She then noticed a note folded twice over into a square, which had also tumbled from the envelope.

It revealed their new assignment: “Determine whether these apartments are haunted.”

“I thought it’d be something more difficult,” Gregor murmured. Rebeka could hear a note of disappointment in his voice.

“It might not be so simple at all,” Rebeka noted, though deep down she was, unlike Gregor, feeling more cheerful. Excluding the fact that they’d be secretly intruding into strangers’ apartments, the assignment couldn’t be anything too dreadful.

“You remember how we had to wait a really long time in the Hall of the Brotherhood of Blackheads before Balthazar appeared?” she reminded him. “What if some ghosts are very shy? Or spiteful?”

Gregor nodded.

“You may be right. But I wonder—why does Huldra need this information?”

“Maybe we’ll find out as the assignment goes along.”

Gregor took the note and studied it, frowning.

“I feel like we could start tomorrow already,” he proposed. “What time do you have classes till?”

“Definitely, let’s get started,” Rebeka agreed, adding that she only had to be at school until one. Part of her wanted to tackle the assignment as soon as possible to get it over with

as fast as they could. Another part wanted to begin because she'd also been longing to spend time together with Gregor.

[pp 73–77]

The Von Hueck House

Rebeka sat at her desk in her bedroom, staring out at the falling snow and thinking. Mainly about the girl she'd found haunting the house at 29 Lai Street. As well as who she was.

Who she really was.

First, Mr. Kirsipuu told them the story about the building that guides typically told on tours. One about a young woman named Margaret, a secret wedding, a monk, and letters written in blood. But in truth, the tale was far different.

The real story began quite similarly. It told of a friar named Johann Hilten who arrived in Tallinn in the mid-15th century. The friar found lodging in the home of a merchant on Lai Street and immediately set out to spread the Gospel to the townsfolk. Hilten's preaching swiftly gained popularity and his audience included a large number of merchants, noblemen, ministers, and even councilmen. The merchant who hosted the friar had thirteen children, the eldest of whom was his stepdaughter, Margarete. When Margarete was old enough to marry, her uncle found her a suitor from the Netherlands, but before the two could tie the knot, Tallinn was struck by the plague. All of Margarete's brothers and sisters perished, leaving her as the only sibling to recover from the dreadful disease. Meanwhile, she'd fallen in love with a poor merchant's apprentice named Diderick, and the two wed in secret. Friar Johann conducted the ceremony. Before long, however, it turned out that the friar himself was in love with her as well. The young bride began receiving love letters, at least one of which was scrawled in the admirer's own blood. Nevertheless, Margaret had no interest in the friar or his letters and informed her uncle, who issued an official complaint to the Tallinn Town Council in turn. Yet, as several of the councilmen were devoted disciples of the friar, they ignored the protest and declined to expel him from the city, as was practice in such cases. The tables unexpectedly turned, and the friar and Margarete's uncle began plotting revenge against the young couple instead. The whole affair culminated in Margarete's stepfather selling the house on Lai Street while his son-in-law was away on a shipping journey, and the feud went on for decades to come.

But Rebeka found the story's conclusion most shocking of all—Lota's grandfather confirmed that Margarete was about fifty years old when she died.

Thus, the girl she saw in the house's hallway couldn't be Margarete, even though that was what she claimed. But who could she be, then? And why was she lying? And why did every story about the house confirm it?

Rebeka was still lost in thought at the dinner table that night. She remembered feeling sorry for the girl she met in the hallway. How she'd wanted to help. Now, Rebeka just felt like she'd been duped.

"Is everything okay?" her mom asked. "You look a bit preoccupied today."

Rebeka nodded and tried to put a smile on her face. The last thing she needed was for her mom to start prying. Because then, she'd have to... lie? That's exactly what fake-Margarete had done. And what was it she wanted to achieve by that?

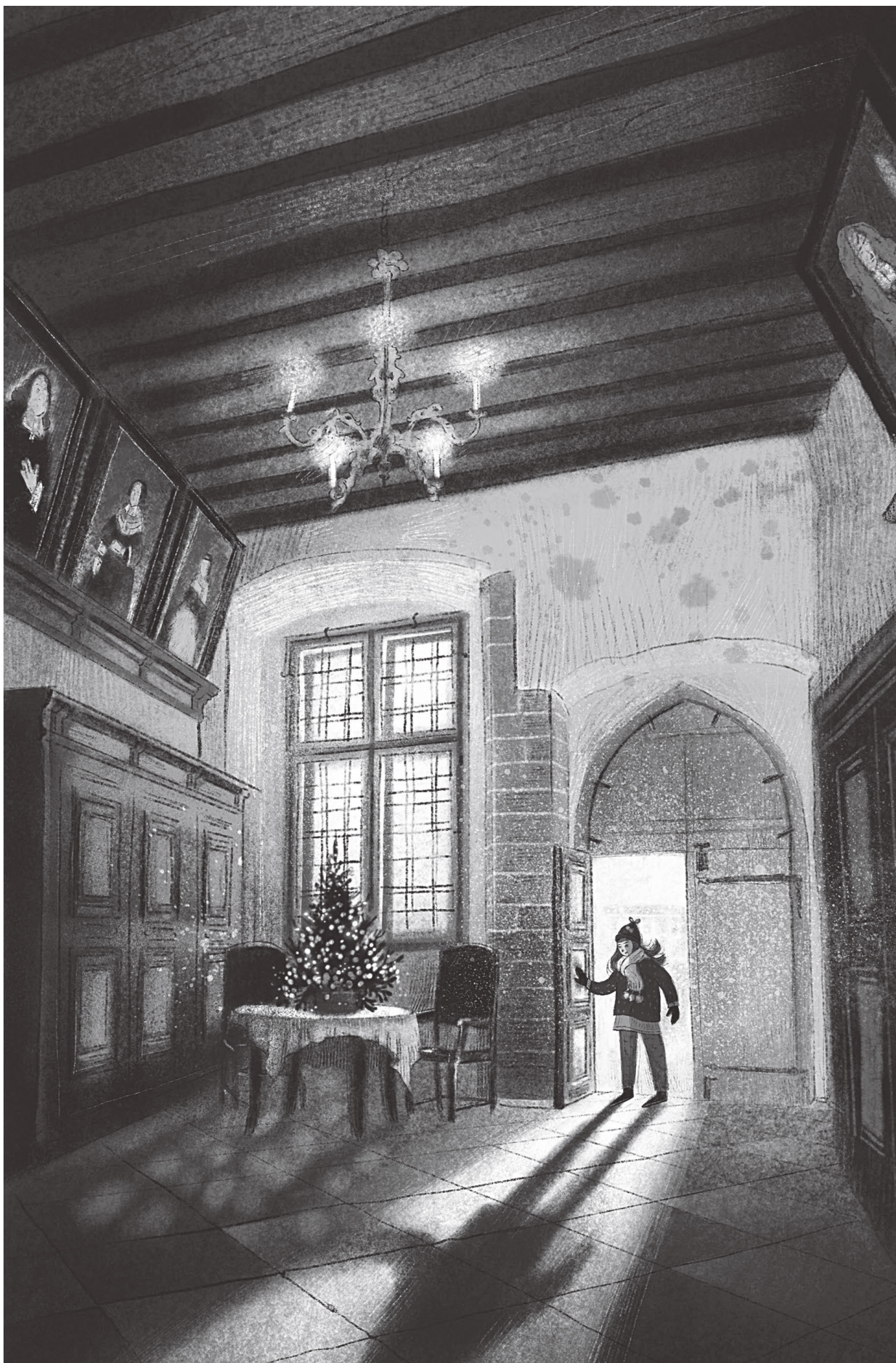
She glanced over at her dad. He seemed to be in a pretty good mood, so she decided to ask his opinion.

"Dad, why do people lie?"

Rebeka noticed her mom tense.

Luckily, the question at least seemed appetizing to its recipient.

"That's a very interesting topic," Dad said, his eyes glittering. "Firstly, to hide something, of course. Something that might hurt the person if they learned the truth. Secondly, to get something or to make the liar seem like a better person. Though I suppose that actually qualifies as hiding something, too."



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"People also lie when they don't want to do something or just can't be bothered to do it," Mom said, shooting Dad a somewhat critical look.

He paid no attention. Instead, he picked up his phone.

"Let's take a deep dive, shall we?" he said, ignoring the next, even more critical glare that Mom gave him.

"It's impolite to play around on your phone at the dinner table," she grumbled.

"Yes, but I'm just trying to broaden our conversation a bit," Dad defended. "We already mentioned comfort, right?" he asked, turning to Rebeka.

She nodded. "I think so."

"By the way, do you know what a white lie is?" he asked after a brief pause.

"It's like a good lie, isn't it?"

"Exactly. For example, if you don't want to be impolite or to hurt someone, then a teensy bit of lying is permissible."

Rebeka noticed her mom roll her eyes. At the same time, she wondered what could have caused the Lai Street spirit to lie. She was absolutely sure it couldn't be a white lie.

"They say here that most people lie every single day," Dad continued.

"I don't believe that," Mom chimed in. "In any case, I'm certainly not like most people."

"Don't worry! Here, they also say that men lie three times more than women do," Dad added.

"So, yesterday when I asked you about that red dress I bought—if you're totally sure it really does make me look thinner..."

Dad paled and Rebeka swiftly stood up from the table. She didn't want to know what came next. As soon as she closed her bedroom door behind her, she called Lota.