

BLOOD INK

BLOOD INK

Aurelia Young

Writer: Aurelia Young
Cover design: Soft cover
ISBN: 9789464922530
Copyright © 2023 by Aurelia Young

All rights reserved. Printed in the Netherlands.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any
manner whatsoever without written permission except in the
case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and
reviews. For information address Brave New Books.
www.bravenewbooks.nl

First soft cover edition 2023

Also available as Ebook

Acknowledgements

I dedicate this work to my husband, my heart, who always supports me and who helped me finish the book by reading it and giving me my first feedback. Thank you my love... for helping me.

September 29th 2023, Noord-Brabant, The Netherlands

PROLOGUE

The door flew open, a young man with a knife in his hand was standing in the kitchen of the elderly lady. The fear in the woman's gaze was immediately visible. After a brief moment, she recognized the boy she hadn't seen in years. Her younger brother stood before her... he hadn't changed with time, but she had.

"Imion..." She murmured. Her voice was soft and she did not sound afraid but astonished.

"Finally, we found you." He whispered as the others came into her house as well. Four other young men stood before her that she did not recognize from the past. *Probably his new bootlickers.* She thought.

"Where is the book?"

"I burned it." Her eyes were shining in triumph when she saw the look in the boy's eyes. Her wrinkled hands grabbed her electronic necklace. She pressed the emergency button after which a high-toned beep came from her necklace. "Get out of my house!" She hissed furiously. Even though the elderly lady was in her late eighties, she was still as spirited as she used to be!

"I do not believe you, little sister. I will ask one more time, Marina. I will spare your life if you tell us where the book is. Perhaps we will let you return home before your old bones crumble to dust." A loud voice croaked out of the necklace:

"Mrs. Lighthouse! Can you tell me what happened to you?"

All the boys were laughing at her after Imion gave a signal. They walked further into the kitchen and surrounded her.

"There's a break-in! Call the police and tell them to come here!" Her voice changed... now the fear in her voice was tangible. The old legs of the lady trembled like a leaf, it seemed as if she was about to fall. Imion was grinning when he came closer to his sister. He buried the knife in her belly before she could utter a syllable. Her brown eyes stared at the knife that was now in her stomach. Dark blood dripped on the floor when the boy pulled the knife out of her. Marina ended up on the floor, her trembling hands were trying to keep pressure on the wound. She groaned while becoming as pale as her kitchen floor. Desperately, the old woman tried her best to stop the bleeding but she knew that she would die.

"Quick! Search the house!"

The boys left her for dead and did as their boss commanded. Her brother was looking at his sister for a few more seconds before he also started to search for the book. Luckily, that gave her the chance to try and get up. Despite all the pain that she felt, she was able to get up using the countertops. Her brittle body was leaning against the cupboards as she was collecting her thoughts. She shuffled through the kitchen to get to a drawer and took a pen and paper. Her bloody hands wrote something on the paper while the bastards were contaminating her beloved house with their presence! They smashed the telly on the floor, and the books as well... later on she thought she heard the videotapes being flung to the walls, but it did not matter.

The doors towards the garden were still wide open. Sticky blood ran down her legs onto the floor and on the grass. There, close to the pond, there was the tree... her only chance!

Sirens were audible from a distance... she was almost at the tree! Blue lights were flashing over the hedges... the police had arrived! The shadows of the boys were dancing over the grass as they ran away from the scene. *It doesn't matter*

anyway... they'll never find it. She thought while having trouble breathing. Marina leaned against the bark of the tree trying to get the necklace with the key from her neck. She placed the necklace with the letter into the hole that was inside the tree. After that, she had no reason to keep fighting, she had done what she needed to do. Now she could die. The woman sank to her knees and ended up on the grass looking at the stars...

CHAPTER ONE

When the coffin of Granny Maureen disappeared into the ground, only then the first tears ran down my cheeks. *Who would do such a thing?!* I asked myself for the hundredth time. Staring at the red roses of a nearby grave did not help in solving that question. I held Lucas tightly by his narrow shoulders. I tried not to squeeze but he already pried my hands off his shoulders. Afterward, he did take my hand to feel a bit less sad. This was his first funeral.

"Come on, let's go home." Dad walked us to the car and started driving. For a long while it was quiet until he interrupted the silence: "The police called me yesterday evening and they think the thugs just did it out of spite."

"Out of spite?" The same green eyes as I had stared at me in the mirror, they looked sad and angry at the same time.

"There was nothing of value in her house." He explained.

Everyone went to their room when we got home. After an hour or so, Lucas silently joined me in my room. I put my arm over his shoulders and together we cried.

"She is in peace now. Do you remember what she used to tell us?" He shook his head. "She said that if she would die, she would always be with us. Tonight, her star will shine in the sky so we need to wave at her, just like what dad had promised her..." I swallowed my last words. *...when she was still alive.*

Soon it was dinner time. Even though we were not hungry, everyone assembled in the kitchen and ate the lovely food Mom had made. Dad had more things to tell us during dinner. "Sweethearts, I need to tell you something... it will not be fun to hear for everyone, but Mom and I have been thinking about this for over a few days and we made a decision." He

first looked at Lucas and then his gaze fell upon me. "We have inherited grannies' house. And what I am going to tell you may sound very surprising but again, we have discussed this together and we think it will be good for us..." He paused nervously before he started again. "We have decided to move into the house of Granny and to sell this house."

"WHAT?! Why? We've got everything here!"

"We know that." He said it in a blunt way and by the sound of it, he was already annoyed because of my reaction. "The most important reason is that we don't like city life anymore. We both want to go back to a more quiet place. The second reason is that I promised Granny never to sell the house."

"I understand that her house is important to you, but can't you guys think about it a bit longer? Next school year is my graduation. Can't we at least wait until I have finished secondary school? Everyone is going to study after that anyway."

"No, we have decided to move during the next summer holiday. With the money we get from selling this house, we can open a savings account for you both so that you can study wherever you like."

"Another advantage is that Dad and I will be able to live closer to work." Mom sounded happy.

"Well, I don't want to move." Even though I sounded like an obtuse child, I did say it aloud anyway. *What were they thinking?* When I saw the look on Lucas' face, I already knew that he did not have any problems with moving to another town. *You are being bullied at school, of course, you have no problems with moving away!* I was turning my potatoes into mashed ones while trying to stay calm. I had to leave all my friends behind, I had to quit my part-time job, and I had to give up karate!

After a couple of months, everything was ready. Our old house was sold within a jiffy and the summer vacation was closing in. After quitting my job at the cinema, they gave me a life supply of popcorn kernels. The only thing was that we did not have a popcorn machine at home. *Perhaps that could be my birthday gift?*

My parents organized a farewell party for my friends as well as for my karate group... but it was not a real farewell. It was just an hour or two away from Granny's house.

The summer vacation started and I was relieved that I could relax a bit and enjoy the weather with friends before moving away. But then, the time to move away finally arrived.

The day started really great... the stress of moving out had made us all jumpy and cranky so everyone was sitting in the car stuffed with boxes, clothes, and bags filled to the brim with stuff that I forgot. In the process of moving out, we also got rid of a lot of things so now we only had to move less junk around. The old village where Granny used to live looked gloomy as we were driving through the narrow and cobbled streets. Irritated already, I looked through the window and spotted the little chapel in the middle of the village.

Mom was busy on her phone, trying to arrange things for the house while Dad drove. Because of a traffic delay, it took us much longer to finally arrive at the house. I was bored and I looked at my irritable Dad through the inner mirror. Still, I wondered how he got his peculiarly frayed ears. Granny also had those strange ears as well... luckily we got normal ears!

When I was thinking about her again, my heart felt heavy again. She was such a marvelous grandmother! She could tell the most amazing bedtime stories. Every summer vacation we stayed over at her house for weeks. We never met Grandpa, he died in the war. But when we asked about him she told us what he was like, what his favourite type of food was, or what they used to do when they were young. She

never told us where she was from though. That was also something Dad also did not know.

Another strange thing was that she did not have any pictures from Grandpa in her house apart from the big painting in the hallway. It was the only way we could imagine what he looked like. And the fun thing was that we found out that we inherited his green eyes. Dad, Lucas, and I had the same eyes and we were quite proud of that! In that sense, we could always remember him in a way... even though we never met him.

Another thing we could remember him by is the mother language Granny taught us during vacation. It was very funny. We would call Granny in her unknown language when we were kids and then Mom would not understand a thing we said!

In the village she was known as the weird lady from the big house because she never went to church... and the villagers did not appreciate that. They were always evading us in a very smart way, at least, the older generation did that. The people living here now are more neutral on the matter.

Within a few minutes we crossed the little village and frankly, I did not find any interesting things except for a broken-down supermarket that was about to fall apart. Damn it! A shitty village with no mall and no sports clubs... I guess I need to find something outside this village.

The houses were smaller in the centre of the village, but as we were driving away from the church and the dusty supermarket, the houses became larger and larger. I recognized the house in an instant even though we don't visit her very often. The house was hidden behind some trees. She refused to cut down the trees even after several complaints from her neighbours. Eventually, she settled for cutting off a few branches. She only did that after a few branches had damaged the house during a storm.

Dad stopped in front of the house. There, on top of the small hill was the house of Grandma Maureen. Apparently, Grandma paid a lot of money to build the house. As a single mother with a child but without a husband, we all still wonder how she was capable of doing that. Right after the war, she moved into the house and paid the bills working as a cleaner, seamstress, and later as a secretary after she finished a course.

The house was too large for her alone. Multiple times we told her to move to a smaller apartment but she would not have it. It was her family's tradition that eventually children would come back home to take care of their parents. Since she was still mentally and physically capable of taking care of herself, Dad only hired a cleaner to help her with chores until the time came he had to go and take care of her. Unfortunately, it never came to that.

Nevertheless, it was a beautiful house and it was close to a nearby forest. There was a large pond in the backyard close to a giant tree. The house looked a bit forgotten, but it still welcomed us... even though Grandma had died there. Suddenly I felt uncomfortable. *What would the house look like inside?* I thought about that a bit longer before I shook the creepy feeling off me.

Memories flashed through my mind as I thought of the corner of the living room where Grandma had taught me how to play chess. She'd lived here all her life... and now I'm going to live in it.

I woke up from my thoughts when Mom and Dad had already gotten out of the car except for the sleeping Lucas and me. I poked his belly to wake him up.

"Luke, wake up. We're here." I climbed stiffly out of the car and reluctantly grabbed my suitcases from the trunk.

"Leanna, go pick a room! Will you help me dust everything off? A lot has to happen before the movers come!"

Mom rushed into the house impatiently. Her arms were full of things that needed to go into the kitchen. Dad followed her closely after stopping for a moment in the hallway he probably hadn't seen in some time. I put down my suitcases and helped Lucas out of the car. I always forgot that his door still had the child lock on it. He ran to the house and disappeared through the doorway without taking his suitcase with him. I sometimes missed that he wasn't small and annoying anymore... now he was big and annoying. I walked to the front door with my arms full of suitcases and tried to put them on the floor as carefully as possible.

I sighed as I recognized the smell of the house. *Grandma...* I took a moment to take it all in. It felt strange now that she wasn't around the house anymore. But, even though she was no longer with us, I could still feel her presence. I looked at the floor of the hall she always wanted to keep clean. It now had dirty footprints on it from all of us. The floor was made of gleaming beige marble and I could almost see myself in the stone.

The sound of pots and pans was audible from a distance as I walked into the living room. I followed the noise that came from the kitchen. Grandma's living room was dusty and empty except for a few things: the bookcase but then without all the books, her favourite chair, and the rug. Dad had cleaned up the rest a week ago with Uncle Peter, Mom's brother. The items were picked up by a second-hand furniture store.

The wooden floor creaked as I walked around, which made it feel even more empty. A lot of other memories came flooding back to me. Here Grandma was playing chess with me... there I was watching Pippi Longstocking on the old cable TV... and there I went to heat marshmallows by the fire with Grandma next to me.

The high bookcase was empty, like a mouth without any teeth. We heard that they had thrown all her books on the

floor in an attempt to find something of value in between the books. Suddenly I smelled a pungent odour. *What is that?* When I walked to the kitchen I smelled it... *chlorine*. Mom was busy cleaning and arranging the kitchen cabinets. She had already brought a few pans and plates for the day. This is where Grandma died. I was appalled by the thought and immediately I turned around and returned to where I came from. You could not see anything on the floor but Dad had told us... *in the kitchen, close to the back door that led to the garden...*

"Ah, sweetheart! Will you help me with putting all the things in the cabinets?" The kitchen was full of pans and plates.

"Yeah, perhaps in a minute or two... I'm going to help Lucas with his suitcase first." I walked away, out of the kitchen, through the living room until I ended up in the hall again.

"Lucas, where are you?!" I shouted loudly. My voice echoed through the old house. I heard him yell something. The door on the other side of the hall was open where the stairwell was. The spiralling staircase... Grandma called it the rose staircase. The rose staircase that reached all the way to the top floor of the house was made of metal. The old metal squeaked and creaked, often you could tell by the footsteps who was going up and down the staircase.

Every step I took echoed through the narrow space. There were small round windows in the walls so you didn't have to walk up or down through the dark. I saw the overgrown garden with flowers, the terrace, and the pond. *We should have visited much more often... she would hate to see her garden look like this!*

"Lucas are you here?!" I yelled when I reached the first floor. His voice was louder now.

"I'm here!" he yelled. *Damn, why can't he stay put for once?* I ran up the last few steps to the top floor. It was the attic room, her writing and drawing room.

In the past few years, she hardly came here because it was too tiring to go all the way up the staircase. Lucas was sitting on the old dusty ottoman playing with his gaming console, but he couldn't see that the whole room was still a mess. The old chair lay broken on the floor, and the doors of the cabinet were wide open, as were all the drawers of the desk. Dad probably threw all the mess in the corner of the room because he couldn't clean it up so quickly. I swallowed the lump in my throat. *The thugs have been here as well.*

"Lucas, I don't think you want this room. Can't you see it's a girl's room?" He didn't respond. "I wanted to help you unpack, but apparently you're old enough to do it yourself." Nonchalantly I walked to the window and looked at the garden.

"My suitcase is downstairs. I can't lift that thing!" He said annoyed. His green eyes sparkled with irritation as I was distracting him from his game. The silky brown hair he got from Dad somehow looked irritable as well.

"Oh, I am sure you'll manage on your own." I turned and walked back to the door. "I'm going to help Mom unpack."

"Wait!" He yelled as I was already walking downstairs. I looked up.

"Could you bring my suitcase upstairs?!" He asked quickly. I raised my eyebrows. "Please?" he added. Fortunately, he can still act normally.

"You scared me for a minute, Luke, I almost thought we left you and your smiles back home." I laughed. "I'll bring your suitcase upstairs, but then you have to pick a nice room right now." He grinned.

"I'll just open the window for a second so it can air." Lucas stopped playing the game and flew past me. I pushed open the squeaky skylight and stuck my head out the window.

The clouds were grey and mopey, they could erupt in a thunderstorm at any moment. For the next few days, they predicted that we would get a lot of rain. I looked up and saw

a tiny attic window sitting just above the room. I had never seen it. When I walked to the stairwell to look for an attic staircase I heard him shout:

"Lea! Mama needs you!" Lucas's high voice echoed through the stairwell.

Everyone had gone to bed. The day flew by in an instant. Mom had vacuumed the whole downstairs and then she'd cleaned the bathroom from top to bottom, I'd dusted all the bedrooms and Dad had hooked up the electricity and cleared out the garage to make room for the car. Lucas was enjoying himself in the garden by pulling all the weeds out of the border with gloves that were way too big for him. At the end of the day, I still had to change the sheets of my temporary rickety bed in the attic. Tomorrow my bed would come from home. I was exhausted. I walked into the attic room and closed the window before crawling into my squeaky bed very carefully. Someone came up the stairs, it was probably Dad.

"Goodnight Lea!" I could tell from his voice that he was hesitating to enter. I was still mad at them. I didn't answer and pretended to be asleep. "I know when you're sleeping or not, honey." He opened the door and switched on the lamp. The bright light shone into my eyes. He sat down next to me on the bed. I hope the bed won't crack!

"I know it's unfair for you that we're moving during your senior year." He said in grandma's language. I looked at him in surprise. His voice sounded gloomy again. "But I'm sure you'll get friends here. It is a small town with nothing to do. Now that you're here, maybe things will get a little more lively." I felt guilty... but I was still a little bit mad at him. I gave him a smile against my will. He kissed me on my forehead in return. "Go to sleep little elf." That's also what Grandma Maureen always said before going to sleep. He

pulled the covers over my chin and left me alone again after he'd turned off the light.

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning I didn't know where I was at first, but then it dawned on me. We had moved, and Lucas and I had to go to a new school soon.

Ill-tempered, I walked down the squeaky stairs. Mom was already moving and cleaning things while Lucas was running around the yard with a soccer ball.

"Good morning sweetie! Did you sleep well?" My mother came into the kitchen to make coffee. The moving truck would finally arrive!

"Yes, slept well. You?"

"Short but deep. Do you want coffee?" I nodded and impatiently waited for the coffee that Mom craved just as much.

After we had taken apart all the old beds we still had to take them downstairs, to the garage. We then went for coffee again and shortly after that, the moving van arrived.

We spent the whole afternoon unloading. When our furniture had been dragged to the correct spot, and after I had practically put together my bed, I lay down on the mattress with a thud. I would put the sheets on later. I had also dragged my reading books upstairs and put them in the beautiful old cupboard. They stood on the shelves, showing off their beautiful covers. I stood up again with a groan and started to organize the last mess in the room. I had crammed all the junk into the closet on the landing near the stairs. Before I knew it, it was evening already.

After dinner I went upstairs, we were all tired and we all needed sleep... but I still had to put the sheets on the bed.

I slid my fingers across the wooden desk that was mine now. I had decided to give my old desk to Lucas because now, I had

a much larger desk. This one was even too heavy to move so it would have been mine anyway.

The dark desk stood in front of the window, but I didn't have a desk chair because we gave that one to Lucas as well. The only thing I could sit on now was my bed and the old ottoman.

After putting the sheets on the bed I wanted to text my friends to ask whether they were missing me already. Apparently, I dumped my ass on the dusty ottoman too enthusiastically. The crappy, rickety thing practically exploded in a cloud of dust and leather! *Shit, I broke it!* The seat was torn, and the gray cloud spread across the room! I spat out the gray flakes and opened the window to give myself some fresh air. I angrily coughed out the filth in my lungs. I was in the mood to throw the ottoman out of the window! *I just cleaned everything!*

After a few minutes, I was done coughing. Dad was already wondering why I wanted to sleep here. The room wasn't used for years, there was fungus growing on the walls, not to mention that the room had become one gigantic nest of dustmites. I had one very important reason why I wanted to sleep here: privacy. In our previous house, we had everything but privacy. The big city was expensive, so we lived in a much smaller house. Now that we finally had some more space, I chose this room to have a little more distance from my parents. I wanted to be alone once in a while, but Lucas, Dad, or Mom often took all my free time when I was home. I just wanted to have a room where I could quietly read a good book or watch a movie without Lucas constantly asking if I wanted to play a game with him. I looked down while taking a deep breath of the fresh air.

"Tomorrow, I will clean everything again." I whispered to myself as I took a deep breath in the cool breeze. Then, the sunset broke through the clouds and the orange light coloured the grass. Sometimes a sunray fell on the pond,

another shone on the chestnut tree. When I looked a little closer I saw something glittering in the hole of the chestnut tree. I waited for the next ray of sunshine to pass by to confirm that there was something in the tree. Sunlight shone again in the hole of the tree and I saw again that something made of metal was in there! I darted down the staircase, trying to make it downstairs as silent as possible, and slipped through the back door.

I looked over my shoulder, Mom and Dad were probably in their bedroom watching a stupid series. I walked over to the chestnut tree and stood on my toes. I scanned the hole with the tip of my fingers and stumbled upon something cold and thin. I pulled it out of the slippery moss. *A key!* It was attached to a necklace. But there was still something else hidden in there. Before pulling the key out, I felt something else was in there. I reached in again and pulled it out...

Blood! I almost let go of the paper because of what was in my hands. There was blood on the paper! That could only mean one thing... *Grandma had put this here when she was dying!* An icy cold shiver was running down my spine. I turned over the wet piece of paper, and it turned out to be an envelope. Dad's name was written on the front in her handwriting: *Leo*. "What do you have there?" I turned around as my heart was racing even faster... and saw Dad standing in front of me. He had come down. Only now did I notice that I was hiding the key and the bloody envelope behind my back.

"You scared me." I said while laughing nervously.

"Sorry for scaring you. What did you find?" I gave him the rusty key.

"An old key." I pointed to my window. "The sun was shining, I could see it glistening." I tried to sound as normal as possible. He had to smile. *It worked!*

"You have sharp eyes, you probably inherited those from me." He returned the key to me. "Keep it safe. Maybe

Grandma wanted to hide it so you couldn't find her secret pancake recipe." He joked about Grandma and immediately he turned sad again. "Come inside, it's about to rain again."

Without him noticing, I stuffed the damp envelope into my back pocket. We walked back inside together.

I ran upstairs with lightning speed after ditching my dad in the kitchen. When I tried to open the wet envelope the paper tore. No matter how gently I tugged at the paper, I tore the envelope apart bit by bit. *No... soon her last words will be lost because I'm too clumsy opening the envelope!* I had to let it dry before I could read the letter. With a sigh, I put the envelope on the heater. I put the key on the desk.

The mirror was foggy after showering. I dried it with a towel before combing my dark brown hair that reached over my shoulders. When I dried my hair with the hairdryer my green eyes were staring at me. I checked whether the envelope was already dry after I finished brushing my teeth. Unfortunately, the paper was still as soggy as before. It will be dry tomorrow. I quickly crawled under the sheets and stared at the bloody paper. Although I was exhausted from this long day, I had a hard time falling asleep. Finally, I decided to turn myself around and stop looking at the paper. *What did she want to tell Dad?*

Mom and Dad just left the house to search for what type of paint they preferred in their bedroom. When they woke me up they said that a technician would come over this morning to install the router and internet wires throughout the house. After getting dressed I immediately wanted to know what was written in the envelope. Just as I reached for Grandma's envelope, the doorbell rang.

The man had to run a bunch of cables throughout the house so that we would have Wi-Fi in every nook and cranny,

including the attic. After two hours of work and one cup of coffee, he finished up. Mom and Dad came in just as I connected the Wi-Fi to my phone. Our brand new smart television still had to be set up but that was something Dad would do. Mom and Dad wanted to drink some coffee before they would start to paint their bedroom... and of course, I had to help them. Grandma's letter still had to wait.

Mom and Dad's bedroom had been painted, Lucas' wardrobe had been put in place, and the house was slowly starting to look like ours. The day flew by. I got under the sheets again and only after almost falling asleep, it dawned on me that her envelope was still on the heater. With a deep sigh, I threw off the covers and walked to the heater.

Carefully I fiddled with the opening of the envelope. After pulling out the little paper I was finally able to read what it said.

Look under the desk. I looked under the desktop because this must be the desk that she was referring to. *What is that?* I peeled the tape off the wood and heard a metal thing fall to the floor. *A door handle?* I looked at the thing in surprise. The end of the door handle was oddly shaped, more like a key than a door handle. I couldn't remember a door in the house that didn't have a door handle on it. *For which door is this handle intended?* I put the strange handle in the same drawer as the key I'd found.

I walked back to my warm bed. *Why would she hide this thing under the desk? What had Grandma been hiding?* I wondered as I slowly fell asleep. Perhaps it had to do with where she came from...

CHAPTER THREE

I was sleeping soundly until I heard Luke's voice.

"Lea... wake up!" He shook me awake. I pushed him away.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked angrily when I saw that it was only a quarter past eight in the morning. "What is going on? Did something happen?"

"No... but we're going to look at our schools today."

"Yes, today! NOT right now! Look how early it is!"

"I know, but Mom wanted to go now because we are going by bike. It's going to rain this afternoon so if we go now we'll stay dry."

"Pff... okay, fine! I'm on my way!" The energetic fluff ball sprinted out of my room. I only now noticed that he was already fully dressed, shoes and all!

I got dressed and stamped down the staircase. I wasn't hungry, it was too early to eat... it was my summer vacation. I wanted to sleep in and now we had to go and see our schools at this hour? Yesterday evening, I stayed up a bit later than usual and now I had to pay the price for that.

"Don't you want to have breakfast?" Asked Dad in surprise. I didn't respond and drank a glass of milk while leaning against the cupboards. "Do we get the silent treatment again today?" He sounded as if he was irritated. I still didn't respond. "Okay..."

After they finished breakfast we went to our schools by bike. Dad had the navigation on, we were there in twenty minutes. They thought it was important that I knew how to drive to school. *As if I don't have navigation?* I had to take Lucas to school every day from now on. Of course, she didn't think about my irregular hours. However... as long as he didn't get

me late at school, I would gladly take him with me... provided I also got lessons at that time.

"Here we are!" A village further on was the *"place to be"*. Lucas's primary school was practically across the street from my school. Fortunately, they were both modern, new buildings. I was afraid that the school would be a building that was crumbling apart out of pity for the students... but I was completely surprised by the modern look of the building. Both schools were angular, flat-roofed, and pearly white.

"Shall we walk around the schoolyard?" Mom suggested.

"No, I'm not going there until I have class." I said curtly.

"We'll go to Lucas's school for a minute." Mom pulled him along gently.

The square white box was a more modern school than my previous one, but I didn't feel like walking around. I have to start all over again... It was easier for Lucas. He would make friends and stay here. Soon, after finishing my exams, I would start college... at least if I passed my exams. Perhaps I should do what Mom suggested: ask around if someone from my home town also would study in the same city as I would. Then I only need to survive this year in this shitty little village by myself.

I wanted to go into science, but I didn't know which career was more interesting. I was doubting between choosing biology and physics... but I had good grades for chemistry as well!

Lost in thought I stood in front of the gates of the school. But something dark was visible behind a tree: a young man sat in the schoolyard. At first, I hadn't seen him because he was sitting behind a tree. But now he looked over his shoulder and I could only just see him... and he could also see me now. *Wait a minute... how did he get there? He is inside the bike shed?* At my old school, they always locked the gates during the summer holidays. It was the same with this school but nevertheless, he desperately needed to be there... for no

bloody reason at all. He just sat there, smoking. The guy got up and came closer to the bars of the fence. He wore leather boots, a leather jacket, and a small black hat that covered his ears. *Wearing a hat during summer?* I thought confused. He came even closer but luckily there was still a fence between us.

"Hey, what's your name?" He asked me while holding the bars.

"Leanna." I said curtly. I didn't feel like talking to him. *Where are mom and dad?*

"What are you doing here? School is not starting yet." He had a certain accent, but I recognized it from somewhere somehow. *Was it Italian?*

"We're looking at our new schools," I replied irritably.

"Why?"

"We just moved."

"Where to?"

"Somewhere around here... I already forgot the address."
That is none of his business!

"Where?"

"It's in Maryheath, I don't think you know it."

"No, I do know it."

"Do you know where the lake is?" I asked irritably.

"Yes." *Where are they?!* I didn't feel like continuing to talk to this strange boy.

"Near the lake. Close to the hiking path."

"Oh, over there."

I heard Mom call my name. *Finally!* They came back and Lucas beamed from ear to ear. I smiled awkwardly at the guy before turning around.

"I found something you might like about this village." Mom handed me a folder. "Sports clubs are located in the gymnasiums of your schools. Look at the back." I did as she asked and stared at the picture of two boys fighting.

Karate, THE defense sport of today! It was written in capital letters. *They have a karate dojo!* I didn't have to say anything because Mom already knew I was a bit happier. She put her arm around my shoulders and kissed my forehead. Her warm look made me feel a little better. The fiery red hair that hung over her shoulders made me jealous. It always looked so beautiful and smooth... my hair, on the other hand, was always unruly. The only thing that helped was to brush it endlessly and it still didn't come close to her hair. Lucas and I had inherited Dad's hair.

"Sorry my love, I know it's hard on you... only one year and then you can decide where to study. Also, ask your friends where they are going to study... maybe you can share a room together." She told me this for the second time, but I do think it's wise to start asking around before I start my education. Otherwise, I may end up studying alone.

When I unlocked my mountain bike, I saw the boy still standing in the schoolyard behind the fence. He stared at us with a look in his eyes I couldn't understand. I quickly followed my parents and my brother who had almost reached the end of the street.

On the way back it rained cats and dogs! Soaking wet, we arrived at Grandma's house. I rushed upstairs and pulled the sticky clothing off my body. *One time... one bloody time I go along with their plan to "have fun" and then I get soaking wet?!* Despite the promising leaflet in my jacket pocket, I felt annoyed all over again. I grabbed a book and dropped myself onto the bed.

I tried to relax my hands and only after ten minutes my fingers felt normal again, I had held the book too fiercely when I was angry. I took several deep breaths until I was breathing normally again. I had to laugh at myself.

Now that I was dry again I was bored. I wanted to stay upstairs the whole day so I could read or watch stupid

braindead videos... but I was so bored that I did not know what to start with. As I was lying on the bed looking up, it was only then that I noticed that painted branches with leaves were depicted on the ceiling. The paint had faded over the decades but they were still visible. That reminded me of Grandma's song... the song that she sang in her mother tongue.

"The branches on the sheet are a vine... the green flag gives you a sign..." I thought of the old blanket that was on the dusty old bed when I first came in here to clean the room. Outside my room was the old wardrobe that now served as a junk closet. I pulled the gray blanket out of the mess. When I tugged the blanket I saw embroidered vines on the cloth.

"The branches on the sheet..." I whispered. Lost in thought I walked back to the room and put the blanket on my bed. Then I looked at the spot where the matching banners used to hang on the wall. The metal bolts were still wedged in the brick wall, Dad had yet to remove them... *but what is that?*

I noticed that one of the pins was not quite the same as the other. It just now occurred to me. *Is that a lever?* I wondered as I walked closer to the bolt.

"A flag on the wall gives you a sign..." I quickly ran back to the cupboard and pulled a weathered banner from the shelves. *Flag also means banner in her language.* I hooked it into the eye of the metal bolt and pulled. A loud bang just outside my bedroom door startled me. *What is that?* I asked myself as I quickly walked out of my room. An attic staircase had appeared from the ceiling! Cobwebs were draped over the steps like cotton candy. Musty, dusty air greeted me. I pulled the attic stairs further down. I carefully tested the thin steps by standing on them. It seemed safe enough. I carefully climbed up the stairs.

My phone's flashlight shone brightly on the dark door. A rusty keyhole glistened at me. When I looked closer I saw that this was the door I was looking for! *The door had no*

handle! I nearly fell down the stairs in my rush to grab the weird door handle from the desk.

I dashed up the steep attic stairs again, with a beating heart I pushed the door handle into the hole but the door still wouldn't open after I pulled the handle. *The key!* I ran up and down again and unlocked the door. *Yes! I'm in!*

The dusty room was illuminated by the small window I had seen earlier. When I climbed in and then stood up I noticed that it was a very tight space. I shuffled through the small room, barely seeing where I was going because the little window on the top of the roof was way too small to let in enough light. The light from my cell phone allowed me to see every nook and cranny of the room. *Over there!* In the corner, there was something flat lying on the floor. When I got closer I saw that it was a triangular-shaped thing. I dropped to my knees and picked it up. When I wiped the thick layer of dust off the thing I noticed it was a book! *A triangular book?* I had never seen anything like it!

I was so excited about the book that I didn't hear someone coming up the staircase...the footsteps sounded like Dad's. *Shit!* In a second, I jumped down the staircase with the book in my hands, hid the attic stairs, and closed the wooden ceiling just in time. I burst into my room and tossed the triangular booklet into my wardrobe before Dad came up the landing.

"Is everything okay?" He asked when he saw me standing bewildered in the middle of my room.

"Yes." I almost whispered. *Why are you hiding this from Dad?* I felt ashamed. But the answer already surfaced in my mind. *If Dad found the bloody paper, he would feel even more horrible.*

"I just came to say we want to make it up to you. We should have asked at what time you both wanted to see the schools. You've helped us immensely with all the chores and you did not complain. And then at night when you have some time for yourself you can finally do something you like... then we

wake you up early in the morning to look at the schools." His voice sounded gloomy. I felt guilty again. In recent months he had changed a bit. He smiled less and often he ran his fingertips across his ears as a reminder to Grandma. And when he was having a hard time, I could hear it in his voice... just like now.

"I shouldn't have given you the silent treatment." I blurted out. *For goodness sake... How can I cheer him up again?!* "You've had a rough time during these past months." *How hard can it be? Just make a bloody joke! Otherwise, he'll be even more sad!* "Grandma would immediately call me an ass and put me in the corner."

We both laughed out loud when I continued in Grandma's language. He put his arm around me and looked at my new room.

"I'm glad you chose this room. Even though Grandma's bedroom was on the first floor, this was the room where I could always find her when I was young. She was always drawing or writing when she was done working."

"That's..." I struggled to find words. "...good to know." An awkward silence lay between us.

"What were you doing actually?"

"I had to clean up the last things in my room. I use the closet over there as a storage for dusty things."

"Good job." He walked out and stopped before walking down the staircase. "Are you coming downstairs with me? Mom bought apple pie!"

"Yes, I'll be right there! Just cleaning up the last things."

I waited for Dad to walk downstairs and took the dusty book from between my clothes. I brushed it clean as best I could and put it in one of the desk drawers. The weird door handle and the key to the attic were hidden behind the wooden panel in the ceiling. I locked the drawer and put the key under my pillow.

The dreaded day had arrived: I had to go to my new school. The last week of the vacation was reserved for us as a family so that we would have some time off even though we still had to do a lot in the house. But after those relaxing days were over, school started.

That morning, I had to pick up my books at the front desk of the school. I would also get a locker and my daily schedule of lessons. I cycled to school with Lucas and took him to his classroom. He was welcomed by his teacher and by his entire class. Almost immediately he forgot about me. I was most certain that he would get some friends here.

I cycled across the road and put my bike in the shed together with all the other students. My school looked like a gigantic, white cardboard box. The box looked a bit bleak. Many students were standing in the schoolyard talking to their friends. I put my hood over my head to blend in and walked inside. No one noticed I was new.

I picked up my locker key, my books, and my schedule. They were kind enough to show me where my locker was located. After putting everything I didn't need in my locker, I felt nervous.

I didn't know where all the classrooms were. I had no choice but to ask other people for directions. I turned and saw that the auditorium was to the left and the gymnasium to the right. *Okay, those are already two things I recognize, now for the rest...* I took a deep breath and walked over to a group of guys.

"Sorry, can I ask something?" The boys looked at me in a stupid way. "Do you know where room H0.145 is?" They pointed to a sign indicating the different wings. Wing H was straight ahead. "Aah, thank you!" I felt a little stupid for asking. With flushed cheeks, I continued walking through the corridors.

Some parts of the school were more decorated than others. The walls of the building were made of concrete, they'd hung some of the students' paintings to brighten it up...but it did not improve the interior.

The classroom was easy to find. I looked into the classroom and saw about twenty boys and girls sitting there. They all looked expectantly at the door because they probably already knew that the new girl would join their class. *Awesome.*

The teacher was a drawling fellow who looked at me nervously through his glasses. His voice was as dull as the look in his eyes.

"Are you Leanna Lighthouse?"

"Yes, I am." I replied quickly. Fortunately, I didn't have to tell anything about myself, the teacher was too boring anyway. I quickly sat down next to a girl who seemed nice and sat all alone in the back of the class.

The lesson had started and I forgot what the man was saying instantly. I decided to take a look around the classroom. My eye fell on my neighbour's notebook. She was drawing the logo from Thirty Seconds to Mars. Without her noticing, I looked at her a bit more and I noticed she had painted her nails dark blue except for her thumbnails, which were green and pink. She was a pretty girl with long dark blond hair. She wore dark clothes... she kind of reminded me of Avril Lavigne.

"Thirty seconds to Mars?" She looked up with a cynical look.

"I didn't know fans still existed in this village." She sounded a bit surprised that I said something to her. Her hands were covered in ink. It looked like she had an aptitude for drawing.

"No, I didn't expect that from this village either." I chuckled softly.

"Do you always say that about villagers?"

"I didn't mean it that way," I said quickly.

"I do understand it. I mean... it's a pretty pathetic town where we live."

"Wait... this is a town? Isn't it a village?" She shook her head. "Officially it's a town, but you're right. It doesn't look like a town... more like a ghost town."
"What's your name?" I reached into my bag and pulled out my MP3 player.
"Who on earth still has an MP3?" She asked while staring at the little device. I offered her an earpiece so she could listen in. She took the earpiece.
"My name is Isabelle. Why do you still have that old thing?" She whispered back. The music wasn't loud at all, but the girls sitting in front of us kept looking back as we hummed along to the chorus of the Thirty Seconds to Mars songs.

During break time I joined Isabelle...or I mean Isa, she wanted to be called Isa. She had a lovely group of friends that were very different from the rest. They talked about comic books and movies... and reading books. When they talked about that subject, I knew or had heard of, almost all the titles they listed. Suddenly the boy named Nelson cried out in amazement!

"I just got a message that the witch has a new friend who is twenty-five... and also a criminal." Everyone chuckled.

"Who's the witch?" I asked laughing. In a very brief time, gossip was on the menu. They shared some information about the girl named Charlotte. She was the daughter of some CEO of a company who got everything she wanted. But because she was so rich, she was also conceited as hell.

But soon as the subject began to grow dull again, Nelson, a two-meter-tall guy with golden curls, asked where I lived. They were silent when they heard why we had moved. The bloody news of our family drama was known in the villages surrounding ours and everyone felt sorry for me. During the next lesson, I learned a lot about Isa. She lived near me, at least... half an hour by bike from grandma's house, but still.