

THE
SECRET GRAVE

LOIS RUBY

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CHAPTER ONE

LOTS OF PEOPLE DON'T REALIZE THAT SOME nightshade plants are poisonous. I mean, deadly poisonous. But that has nothing to do with why our house is called Nightshade. Autumn Splendor is its real name. Could there possibly be a more boring name for a fabulous old mansion that's been sprawling here on Thornbury Trace for a hundred and twenty years? The house is three stories tall with fourteen rooms and one of those wraparound porches just made for stargazing and sipping lemonade. The house went on the market last year, and my sweet, sentimental dad snapped it up because his grandparents had lived in Autumn Splendor a long time ago, just after World War II, but they only stayed about a year. I wonder why. Well, I wonder *why* a lot of things.

We moved in last winter when it was cold enough for the water leaking from most of the faucets to freeze midstream. People up north think it's always hot here in Georgia, but they're wrong. It can get deadly cold. The house creaked and groaned, and some stairs dipped from the pounding

of millions of footsteps. When you least expected it, the hardwood floors slanted east. The wind rattled windows, and don't get me started on the drafts that crept in under doors that refused to shut tight. No wonder it was vacant for six months!

"It's a delightfully quirky house," Mom said that first day as she flipped on the light switch and blew a circuit that plunged all seven of us into darkness.

Gracie, who's almost three, wailed and buried her head in Mom's sweatshirt.

"It's a nightmare. All these shadows make me crazy," my older sister Franny grumbled. Grumbling is her most cheerful way of talking.

The boys, Scooter and Trick, huddled with me on the steps as if we were waiting for the morning sunrise at three in the afternoon.

"Hey, Hannah, don't you think it would be cool if the electricity never came back on?" Scooter asked me. He was already sneezing and wheezing because of all the dust that had settled in a house empty for months and months. *What if we can't get Scooter's humidifier or breathing machine going?* I wondered. I'm the big worrier in the family.

Trick reminded us, "No lights, no TV, no WiFi, no microwave, no hot pizza. Doomsday."

Franny groaned piteously. "I'm getting a twelve-aspirin headache."

“Not me. I’m getting a brilliant idea!” Dad said, feeling his way to the breaker box under the stairs. “Ages ago, when my grandparents bought this house, the owners said it was called Nightshade. My grandma didn’t like the name and went back to Autumn Splendor, the original name. That’s fine for a stodgy, ordinary place. But this house is spectacular. It’s dark and mysterious, and now that it’s ours, I move that we go back to the perfect name for our shadowy house. Nightshade.”

“Second the motion!” we all cried, except Franny, of course. Now that the lights were back on, we started hauling personal treasures and sports equipment and Gracie’s toys and groceries into the house before the two moving vans arrived with our furniture.

It’s weird that we call the house by name like it’s the eighth member of our family. Say we’re heading home from a day at the county fair, all cotton-candy sticky, and Gracie’s asleep on Dad’s shoulder. He’ll say, “Well, kiddos, let’s hotfoot it back to Nightshade.”

An old house with a name that cool and creepy has to have ghosts, right? I’m always listening for creaky footsteps in the dark and doors slamming in empty rooms and water gurgling through the pipes when everyone else is asleep. Ghostly signs. Not that I believe in ghosts.

But if the real thing doesn’t turn up, all eerie and spooky and Halloweenish, why don’t I just appoint myself, me, Hannah Eileen Flynn, the official Ghost of Nightshade?

One of the best things about our house is its huge attic, and the only way to get to the attic is by pulling down a ladder in my bedroom. Did I choose the right room, or what? Next to my room is Dad's studio, with a balcony that seems to just hang off the edge of the house. We don't dare step foot on that balcony until Dad can get a carpenter out here to check it out and make sure we won't fall to our deaths. We couldn't even if we wanted to, anyway, because the door is painted shut, which raises lots of questions.

A bunch of the house's front windows, like big eager eyes, look out over grass and shrubs and nothing else for a half a mile on either side of us. Best of all, Nightshade backs up to a forest. Big old houses with woods for backyards have got to harbor ghosts, and ghosts probably hibernate in the winter, like bears and bats. But now that it's June and school is out, I'm dying to know what surprises the woods and Nightshade have in store for us this summer.

Something eerie and shivery, I hope.