


MARY DOWNING HAHN

The
Old Willis Place

A movie poster for 'The Old Willis Place'. The background is a dark, moody scene with a large, multi-story house in the distance, partially obscured by bare trees. In the foreground, a young woman with long dark hair, wearing a denim jacket over a white turtleneck, looks off to the side. In the bottom right corner, the back of a person's head with long, wavy hair is visible, looking towards the house. The overall color palette is dark with a blueish-purple tint.

a ghost story

An empty house ... full of secrets

Chapter 1

"They're coming, they're coming!" My brother, Georgie, ran up the shady driveway, almost too excited to speak. "Hide, Diana! Hide!"

I didn't need to ask who was coming. Scooping up my cat, Nero, I plunged into the tangle of vines and weeds lining the drive. Georgie was right behind me. Together we squatted down and watched a pickup slowly approach, bumping over the ruts. The sun and leaves patterned the windshield, hiding the people inside. Their belongings were piled haphazardly in the truck bed, held in place with ropes. Wedged among mattresses, bed frames, chests, tables, and stacks of cardboard boxes, a big golden dog panted and lurched around, excited by the smells of the woods.

"The new caretaker," I whispered. "Who's in the truck with him?"

Beside me, Nero tensed his long black body and twitched his tail, his green eyes wide with curiosity.

Georgie was still breathing hard from running to warn

me. "A girl about your age. I couldn't see her very well, but the man got out of the truck to unlock the gate. He was tall and skinny and he was wearing baggy shorts. His legs were long and white." Georgie almost choked with laughter. "And he had big knobby knees."

I giggled. "He sounds like the heron we see at the pond."

"Yes, that's exactly what he looked like—long neck, pointed nose, and his hair stuck up in a crest." Georgie bumped against me, his shoulders shaking with laughter. "Heron Man, that's what we'll call him."

"Shh, shh," I hushed him. "The dog's looking this way."

The dog barked, but no one in the truck noticed. I imagined he barked often. Dogs are foolish. They bark so much at nothing that people don't pay attention, even when they should.

The truck passed us. I glimpsed the driver's birdy profile and suppressed a giggle. Soundlessly we followed the truck, keeping the trees and brambles between us and the lane. We knew where it was going.

The truck slowed almost to a stop as it approached the house. The old Willis place everyone called it, though its true name was Oak Hill Manor. The front lawn was a field of knee-high weeds and thistles the size of small trees. Paint peeled from the front door and wood trim. The steps and porch had rotted long ago. Shutters hung crooked from the boarded windows; some had fallen off and leaned against

the house. Slates from the roof littered the yard. Two tall double chimneys tilted to the right, giving the place an unstable look, as if it might topple over at any moment in a tumble of bricks.

I wondered how much the new caretaker had been told about the old Willis place. Georgie and I had been watching the house long enough to learn quite a bit. For instance, we knew the owner, Miss Lilian Willis, had been dead for about ten years. It was common knowledge she hadn't left a will, so the county owned the property now. Workmen had patched up the house in a temporary way, covering the windows with plywood and draping the leaky roof with sheets of heavy blue plastic. They'd put chains and padlocks on the doors and posted "No Hunting, No Trespassing" signs at the gate.

They'd also hired a caretaker to live in a trailer parked near the house. He hadn't done much work or stayed long. Neither had the others the county hired, one after another, too many now to remember all their names. Maybe night noises scared them—the barking of foxes, the shrill screech of owls, the rustle of unseen deer in the woods. Maybe they *didn't* care for the solitude. Maybe they believed in ghosts. Or came to believe in them. At any rate, after a few months, one would leave and a week or so later another would come. Where the county found them I can't imagine. They were a sorry lot. Old and grumpy. Lazy, too.



Diana and her little brother, Georgie, have been living in the woods behind the old Willis place, a decaying mansion, for what seems like forever. A strict

set of rules won't allow them to leave the property or even show themselves to anyone.

But when a new caretaker and his young daughter, Lissa, come to live there, Diana is tempted to break the mysterious rules for the first time in hopes of making a new friend. She and Georgie learn quickly, though, that breaking the rules can have deadly consequences. . . .

"Hahn is a master at stretching the suspense. . . just the right mix of chilling and thrilling." —ALA Booklist

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