



Deadly Nightshade

Cynthia Riggs

Davina Porter, narrator

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This unabridged reading of the author's first Martha's Vineyard mystery (originally published in 2001) introduces that most endearing and unlikely of sleuths, ninety-two-year-old Victoria Trumbull. She's a well-regarded poet who puts her keen powers of observation to work after she hears a murder being committed one evening in the harbor at Oak Bluffs, where her granddaughter, Elizabeth, is the assistant harbormaster. The victim turns out to be Bernie Marble, a town official and hotel owner who may have been involved in transporting drugs, skimming harbor receipts, and other unsavory enterprises. More bodies will be dropping before the puzzle is finally solved.

Because the Oak Bluffs police chief is Marble's business partner and generally thought to be crooked himself, Trumbull teams up with Domingo, the harbormaster and former New York cop, to investigate the murder. There is no shortage of suspects. In addition to the shady police chief, there's a menacing townie named Meatloaf; a former MIT prof with a sleek yacht and a \$5 million Vineyard home purportedly purchased from his software-design fortune; and the hulking Dojan Minnowfish, a member of the island's Wampanoag tribe who takes a liking to Trumbull when he discovers she was a friend of his great-grandmother.

The author, a thirteenth-generation resident of Martha's Vineyard, based the character of Victoria on her mother, the poet and newspaper columnist Dionis Coffin Riggs, who died in 1997 at the age of ninety-eight. Given such grounding, it's only natural that the island itself becomes a major character, one that Riggs depicts with exquisite attention to details, sounds, and colors. She even provides an amusing Greek chorus via the patrons of the Artcliff Diner, an actual eatery in the town of Vineyard Haven. Their wry conversations about local personalities and goings-on are priceless.

The narrator, with her range of voices and grasp of natural speech patterns, is ideal for this leisurely paced tale. Rather than mimicking the clipped New England accent, her characters sound English, some with overtones of Welsh. The mixture works, enabling her to move

smoothly from Trumbull's more refined musings to Domingo's gruff profanity without descending into caricature.

A few incidents in the book seem contrived—such as the final confrontation scene around Trumbull's dinner table—but this is still a rousing good yarn and ample evidence of Riggs's extraordinary gift for intrigue and description. She has since authored five more engaging Vineyard mysteries, including *The Paperwhite Narcissus* and *Indian Pipes*.

Edward Morris