

THE SHADOW BOY MYSTERY SERIES BOOK 1

MYSTERY UNDER THIRD BASE



Award Winning Author

FRAN ORENSTEIN

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MYSTERY UNDER THIRD BASE

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Chapter One



Stone Walls and Ghostly Calls

“He’s gotta be somewhere,” Viggie whispered. “We saw him creep around those bushes.”

Jimmy shook his head. “It’s like he just disappeared into the sand.”

“How could that happen?”

“Maybe he beamed up into space.”

“Right, aliens in Arizona.” Viggie poked around the shrubs, but no Willie.”

“I bet the sand swallowed him, as some of those giant lizards do.”

“That was a movie and they lived under the sand; they just came up to eat people.”

“Yuck,” Jimmy stuck his finger in his mouth and gagged.

Viggie rolled his eyes and sat down under a tree. Jimmy plopped down next to him. “So now what?” he asked.

Viggie shrugged. “How should I know?”

The tree shook and yellow flowers rained down covering the boys. They jumped up and ran out from underneath the branches. “What was that?” Jimmy said shaking the petals from his shirt.

Viggie looked up but couldn’t see anything in the branches. There was a blank spot, as if something blocked the sun, but then it was gone before Viggie could figure it out. “I’m getting out of here.” He raced across the empty lot tripping over a dented beer can.

“Wait for me,” Jimmy yelled. He sideswiped a dead prickly pear cactus and grabbed Viggie’s arm pulling him up. The leaves on the tree shook as if they were laughing at clowns whooping it up in a circus, then it settled down. A boy-shaped shadow slid down from the lowest branch, landed on the ground and disappeared. Ten feet away, a pile of dead cactus and brush parted as if spread by an invisible hand, revealing a door behind the remains of cinder block basement and a chimney, its stone walls rising to the cloudless blue sky. The air was still, the only sound, the mournful moan of a dove calling for a mate. One by one, butterflies returned to the tree to flutter among the yellow flowers. A lone hummingbird checked out the red flowers of an ancient bougainvillea bush, now towering over six feet tall.

Below the desert, in one corner of the dark, cellar, a tiny spark of light flickered as though imbedded in the stone wall. A soft cry, so faint it would not have been heard by the human ear echoed from that same spot. The cellar smelled of decayed things, long gone; dead bugs and desiccated caterpillars returned to the earth. A tiny ribbon of light, creeping under the edges of the slanted door at the top of the rotting wooden steps, cut the blackness like a shiny knife.

Against the chipped stone walls, a shadowy figure sat cross-legged on the dry earth. For an hour now, he had been watching Willie sleep. Every so often, he glanced at the soft pulsing glow in the wall behind the boy. A sigh echoed around the walls, but Willie never moved. He slept on, dreaming in the dark of spaceships moving faster than light. The watcher looked at the brown curls that fell over the boy's smooth, round face. Willie was small and thin, but the watcher could see a hint of the tall, strong man he would one day become. Unconsciously, the observer pushed aside his own hair that fell forward in straight, yellow sticks across his eyes, and continued to watch.

The light flickered again. The watcher sensed that something else was here with them, something that no longer belonged here. After a while, Willie rolled over and stretched. He blinked and looked around with a dazed expression. The shadow watcher stared deeply into Willie's dark brown eyes but the boy saw only the blank darkness of the wall. The sigh grew louder and the light pulsed faster. Willie reached for his flashlight and flicked it on, brightening the dark space.

Convinced that nothing was in the cellar with him, Willie clicked off the flashlight, and wrapped his arms tighter around his body to push away the cold that seeped up from the floor through the blanket. "Why did it always feel so cold down here?" he wondered. Sometimes he imagined he could feel squishy things moving in the dirt under him. Every so often Willie glanced at the soft, pulsing glow in the wall behind him.

A sigh echoed once more around the walls, but Willie never moved. He lay there still in a dream state, imagining giant starships floating in the vast blackness of space. He saw them drifting in and out of planets, across galaxies, and skirting fiery stars. Willie was one with the universe, captain of his own space vehicle, exploring.

The light pulsed again. Willie shifted so he could just see it winking out of the corner of his eye. He sensed that something else was here with him, something that should have left a long time ago.

"Don't be a baby," he said aloud. "It's probably fireflies or something." Although he didn't really think fireflies lived in abandoned cellars, anything else was too spooky. After a while, Willie sat up and stretched. There was a sigh, like wind drifting through the trees. He blinked and looked around. The sigh grew louder and the light pulsed faster. The boy reached for his flashlight and turned it on again, sending the shadows flying. Willie grabbed the book and stood up. "I should write all this down. I might be able to turn it into a ghost story and become famous." His nervous giggle echoed, joined by the faint sound of laughter.

"Just an echo," he said, turning to climb the stairs toward the door at the top. The steps creaked in protest. The walls pulsed with sighs and the tiny light winked out. Willie thought he heard crying but that was impossible. The shadow in the now darkened corner flew up the wall and across the ceiling. Willie shivered. There was nothing in the old cellar but bugs and worms. He shoved hard against the door. The hinges shrieked in protest. "Think oil can, oil can," Willie muttered, turning off the flashlight and laying it down on the top step. Sunshine streamed down the stairs. Squinting against the bright light, the boy slammed the door, and pushed branches and leaves over it. Then he stepped

back to survey the camouflage. All he could see was an empty field filled with debris and the remains of an old stone chimney.

There was a whoosh overhead. Willie glanced up, but there was nothing to see. Probably a bird, he thought, a big bird. He hurried faster through the grass toward the house on the other side of the field. *You're getting spooked, like some little kid*, he thought. Satisfied, Willie jogged off across the field, head down, hugging the book to his chest.

When he reached his own yard, Willie plopped down on his stomach in the soft grass and opened the book. He knew his mom was in the house, and he didn't want to go in just yet. Just knowing she was nearby was OK, though. Willie could feel the warm blanket of the sun on his back. He drifted into that space of awareness where he was one with the ideas in his book, only vaguely aware of what was happening around him. Shifting time, folding space, Willie barely understood the theory, but knew it was important in his dreams of space travel.

Chapter Two



Out of Nowhere

“What are you reading?”

“Huh?” Willie jumped up, his pulse racing. “Who are you?”

“Scared you, didn’t I?”

“You did not,” Willie said. “I just didn’t expect anybody to sneak up on me.”

“Sorry. I guess I should have made some noise or something.”

Willie narrowed his eyes against the sun, studying the boy standing in front of him. He was about his own size with blond straight hair that fell over his ears and very bright blue eyes. Willie had never seen him before. “Where’d you come from?”

“Just over there,” the boy answered as he turned and pointed toward the line of bushes. “My name’s Huby, like ruby, the gem.”

Willie’s heart beat faster. “There’s nothing over there but the burned out chimney of the Jackson house. Nobody lives over there.”

Huby shrugged. “I don’t live in a chimney, just with my aunt. I was exploring and I saw you over here. So what’s your name?”

Willie’s heart slowed. The kid was a stranger, but he was about his own age, so he guessed it was OK. Anyway, this was his own backyard and his mother was just a yell away. Besides, Willie hadn’t had anyone to talk to all day. “Willie. So how old are you?”

Huby said, “I guess the same age as you.”

“Eleven?”

Huby nodded.

“Don’t you go to school?” Willie asked.

“I’m just visiting for a little while. What are you reading?”

Willie looked at the book as if he just remembered it was in his hand. “It’s just a book about Albert Einstein. There’s this Einstein chat group on the Internet and I thought I would read up on him so I could talk to them and they wouldn’t think I was dumb.”

Huby wrinkled his brow. “The Internet?”

“You know on the computer?” Willie said.

Huby shrugged. Willie couldn’t believe he had just met a kid who had never heard of the Internet or even computers. “Man, I thought everybody knew about the Internet. You find things out on the net. A chat room, well, it’s like playing a computer game with live people. They don’t know I’m a kid and I can say whatever I want and nobody laughs at me for being too smart. And I learn all kinds of neat things.”

Huby smiled. "We don't have computers where I've been living."

"You must have lived in some wilderness somewhere. Everybody has computers."

Huby shrugged. Willie had a feeling there were lots of things Huby didn't know. It was as if he plopped down into the backyard from outer space. A shivery finger ran up his back and tickled the back of his neck. Willie shook his head. *Today is turning out really weird.* First, the light and sound show in the cellar and now this strange kid appears from nowhere. Willie's feet said run into the house but his curiosity was stronger. "So, where do you come from?" Willie asked as he sat down again.

"Oh, where there's lots of space and air."

"Are there mountains and wild animals?" Willie's eyes lit up.

"Well," said Huby, "I've lived lots of places. My family travels around a lot."

"Boy, you're lucky. I wish I could travel all over the world. I'm just stuck in this stupid town. Tell me about some of the places you've lived."

Huby sat down next to Willie. "Once we lived in a place that had jungles filled with lions and tigers and bears."

Willie frowned. "Lions and tigers and bears don't live together. They don't even live on the same continents. I think that's from some poem or something. You're just making this up."

"Hey, you asked me and I told you," Huby said.

"OK, so you come from some lost island in the middle of the ocean that has lions and tigers and bears."

Huby smiled. "Well, it can't really be lost if I came from there, right?"

Willie grinned. "You are some kind of weird, Huby."

"Anyway, it wasn't in the middle of an ocean."

"I suppose it was in the middle of the sky," Willie said.

Huby looked up, "You might say that. Maybe I'm from outer space."

Willie rubbed his hands together. "I got my own alien. Nobody will ever believe this."

Huby opened his mouth wide and yelled...

"Beware, Earthling, I am a visitor from the planet Arganus." Both boys flopped over on the grass laughing. When they could catch their breath again, they lay there looking up at the sky. Willie glanced over at the boy lying next to him. He felt warm all over and not just from the sun. It had been a long time since he'd talked to another boy his age.

Just last week he had overheard his mother tell his father that he was too isolated. He knew that meant by himself too much. They blamed it on the computer. Willie knew the real reason he was alone all the time. It wasn't his fault all the kids treated him like he had some disease called geekitis. Well, as soon as he was old enough, he'd show them all; gone from this hokey town at warp speed.

He'd never again have to put up with his tormenters, Jimmy Spriggs and Viggy McCoy. Last year, he overheard his dad say Mr. Spriggs was a mean drunk, always beating up on Jimmy's mother and probably Jimmy, too. He thought maybe someone should call child services and report him. Mom told him to mind his own business. Then in the next breath, she called Mr. McCoy a bum, who couldn't hold down a job 'cause he was so lazy. She felt so sorry for his wife because she had six kids to raise in that shack outside of town. Willie figured Jimmy and Viggy had plenty of troubles but why did they have to take it out on him?

Well, that didn't explain his brother, Sam's, torture. They didn't have rotten parents who beat their kids or didn't work. Willie wondered why Sam was so mean to him. Brothers were supposed to look out for each other, weren't they? His stomach scrunched up like it was waiting for a fist. A sour taste filled his mouth.

"Lots of clouds up there," Huby said, pointing to the sky.

Willie jerked back to the present and the sick feeling disappeared. "Look," he said, "See that cloud shaped like a lion."

Huby pointed to the right and said, "And see that one, doesn't it look like a tiger?"

"And there's a bear," both boys shouted at the same time. They giggled.

When Huby could speak again he said, "That's where I live."

That set Willie off again and soon the two boys were rolling around on the grass. Suddenly, two dark shadows cut off the sunlight.

Chapter Three



What's a Huby?

“Hey, brainiac, what’re you two jerks laughing

about so hard?” Above them, stood a boy of about fourteen, who looked like an older version of Willie.

Willie jumped to his feet. He shrank back and pulled his arms in front of his body. His stomach flipped over and the sickness rose up again.

“Yeah, Willie-the-Wonder, what’s so funny?” Another even taller boy joined the group. “And who’s this creep?” he said.

Huby stood up but suddenly he seemed bigger than Willie had remembered. He was almost as tall as the other boys were. Huby looked very hard at the two older boys and they began to back away. “I’m Huby, like the red ruby. Who are you?”

Willie shrank even further back. “This is my brother, Sam, and that’s his friend, K-K-Kai,” he stammered.

“Hey kid, you look like you’re gonna get hit,” Sam took a step toward Willie, who backed away. Then Sam glanced at Huby and rubbed the side of his head. He suddenly stopped laughing and the grin disappeared from his face. “Yeah, well, listen, we were just going to the store. You want anything Willie, uh, you too, Huby?”

Huby shook his head and Willie dropped his arms and stared in astonishment at Sam. “Um, thanks anyway,” he squeaked.

“Yeah,” Sam said, frowning. Sam looked back for a minute at Huby and a strange expression came over his face. Then he grabbed Kai’s arm and walked faster out of the yard.

Willie blinked. Was Sam actually scared of Huby? “I wonder what happened to Sam. He’s never done anything like that before. Like, he’s never that nice to me. He usually punches me a few times and he never asks me if I want anything from the store.” Willie turned to Huby, who looked like he was eleven and not fourteen like Sam. “You know, just for a minute you looked as big as Sam.”

“Must be the sun in your eyes,” said Huby. “You sure made him back off, Willie. That was neat.”

Willie pushed his fingers through his hair, “I don’t know what happened. What did I do?”

Huby smiled, “You stood up to him. You didn’t let him get to you.”

“I did?”

Huby put his hand on Willie’s shoulder and said, “You’ll always be able to stand up to your brother and your sister from now on.”

Willie took a deep breath. His shoulder felt warm where Huby had touched him. Then he backed away. "Wait a minute. How did you know I have a sister?"

"You told me."

"I did not."

"Sure you did, else, how would I know?"

Willie made a face. "This is too crazy. I don't remember telling you about my sister."

Huby shrugged. "You probably just forgot."

Willie glanced at Huby. Suddenly, he couldn't remember if he'd mentioned Jen or not.

"I gotta go, Willie."

"Wait," Willie blurted out. "You want to see a secret place?" Then he blinked, surprised he had actually said that. He hardly knew Huby. He just didn't want him to leave so soon. Having a boy his age to talk to was a new experience.

"What kind of secret place?" Huby asked.

"It's my secret place. Where I go when I want to get away from everybody. Like a hideout." The words sounded stupid but Willie couldn't stop himself. "I've never told anybody about it before. So will you come with me?"

Huby shrugged.

"OK." Willie jumped up and down. "First, you gotta swear on your life that you won't tell anybody."

Huby grinned. "I swear. Anyway, who would I tell?"

Huby ran after Willie across the field toward the stone chimney. Willie pushed aside the thick, overgrown bushes and pointed to a weathered wooden door. "There it is," he whispered.

"What is it?" Huby whispered back.

"It's a secret door to my secret place," Willie whispered.

"Why are we whispering?" Huby asked.

"I don't know," Willie said. "Sometimes I think something is listening."

Huby shivered in spite of himself.

"Ha, got ya. Don't tell me you're scared of an old storm cellar? Anyway, I think you're supposed to whisper when you do something secret," Willie said.

Huby shook his head, "There's nobody around to hear us anyway," he said.

Willie pulled open the screeching door and the sunlight showed a flight of stairs going down into a black hole. "Remember the chimney? This old cellar goes under it to where the Jackson house used to be, Willie explained. "It's blocked off, though, so you can't get out, except through this door."

"Is it safe?" Huby asked.

“Sure, I come here a lot. It’s neat. I have a flashlight and a blanket down here and I bring my book. Nobody bothers me,” Willie said as he started down the stairs.

Huby wrinkled his nose. “I don’t know about this, Willie. It smells funny.”

“Huby, come on, don’t be a wimp,” Willie called from the bottom of the steps.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Huby said, descending the steps slowly. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he stopped short. “Willie, I just remembered that I have to be home in a few minutes. Come on up and walk me back. We can come back here another day.”

Huby jumped as Willie suddenly appeared by his side and said, “Do you like my secret place? It’s really cool. They never find me here.”

“Who is ‘they’?” Huby asked, pushing Willie ahead of him up the stairs.

“The other kids, my brother, you know, the ones who don’t like me ‘cause I’m too smart or something,” Willie said. As Willie bent down to close the door, they heard a faint moan from the cellar.

Huby whirled around. “What’s that?”

“I don’t know. I hear it sometimes when I close the door. It’s almost like something down there doesn’t want me to leave. Silly, isn’t it? There’s nothing there, just dirt and some bugs,” Willie said, shutting the creaking door with a loud thump against the sounds and smells. It was better outside in the sun. “Can you come on over tomorrow after school, Huby?”

“I guess I can,” Huby said. “Maybe you can show me around the town.”

“Great, see you tomorrow.” Willie waved, watching Huby walk across the field toward the woods on the other side. Suddenly, a bright glare from the sun blinded Willie for a moment and when it was gone, so was Huby. “I didn’t even get his last name or find out where he lives,” Willie said to himself as he turned toward his house.

He smiled a secret smile and wondered if Huby would really show up tomorrow afternoon. He liked Huby. It would be nice to have another boy to talk to and have adventures with, even if it was only for a couple of weeks.

That night at dinner Sam mumbled, his mouth full of food, “Hey, Willie, who’s this Huby kid you were with this afternoon. He sure is weird. And he’s as big as me.”

Willie’s mother looked up with her soft brown-green eyes and frowned. “That’s disgusting, Sam, don’t talk with a full mouth. Who’s Huby?”

His father looked up from his plate, his brown eyes boring a hole through Willie. “Do I know his father?”

His sister, Jen, glared at him with the same hazel eyes as their mother, from above her glass of water. It was eerie. “What’s a Huby?” She mumbled.

“How old is he?” His mom asked.

Willie looked long and hard at each member of his family. He should have known Sam would say something. His brother continued to shovel food into his mouth, his head never

rising more than a few inches from his plate. Jen tossed back her long, shiny brown hair and stared at him, her eyes glinting with a secret knowledge known only to sixteen-year-old girls. She'd told him enough times he was a worm and she hadn't meant bookworm.

His mother inclined her head toward his father and nodded. His dad sighed and rubbed his dark mustache with the napkin. "So?" he asked. "Who is this Huby?"

Willie gritted his teeth. Sometimes he felt as if he were a criminal, being interrogated by the cops. Why was it everybody's business? Couldn't he do anything without the whole family nosing into his life? He took a deep breath and said in a strong voice, "Huby's just a kid visiting his aunt for a while. He's eleven like me. His family travels a lot and he's lived all over the world. He's staying with his aunt while they are in, um, Africa." *Just a small lie*, Willie thought. Besides, maybe they were in Africa. He couldn't very well say they were on Arganus. He put his hand over his mouth to stifle a giggle.

"Oh, OK," Willie's father said, turning back to his food.

"Cool," said Jen, finishing her water.

"Bring him around one night for dinner so we can meet him," his mother said.

Sam just shrugged his shoulders and continued shoveling food into his mouth.

Willie let out a long breath. That was easy, he thought, too easy. *Maybe Huby's right. All I have to do was stand up to them.* Willie felt a surge of power run through his body. *Yeah, Willie the Wonder Boy.*

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