

THE SHADOW BOY MYSTERY SERIES BOOK 4

MYSTERY IN GRAMM'S ATTIC



Award Winning Author

FRAN ORENSTEIN

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MYSTERY IN GRAM'S ATTIC

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Written by Fran Orenstein.

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Chapter 1

Snoots and Rotten Apples

The hot Arizona sun beat down on Ellen Baron, roasting her like a turkey in the oven, except they didn't have an oven or a turkey. She sat alone on the grass, her back against the stone wall surrounding the middle-school yard. Ellen tried to shrivel into the stone, hoping for some coolness, and maybe disappear into the wall. She felt a tickle on the back of her neck and slapped at whatever flying critter wanted to bite. Ellen looked at her hand, but it was clean. She shook her head but the tickle kept on tickling, so she pushed her hair aside and scratched. Finally she gave up and figured a mosquito had already bitten her and flown away. Blood sucker.

Letting her hair fall back, she watched the other kids sit in groups eating their lunches, talking and laughing, some on the grass, others on benches, a few on the middle-school steps. They had grabbed up all the shady spots, leaving Ellen to eat a mushy apple, brown spots and all, and a few stale crackers, while baking in the heat of the day. Sure, she and her twin brother, Troy could get free lunch and, sometimes, if they were really hungry, they would sit alone in the smelly cafeteria, choking on a dry sandwich that never went down without a gulp of milk. The other kid's snickers weren't worth it.

She nibbled the apple down to the core then pushed it down into the cracked earth, hoping it might grow into a special apple tree, just for her; a magic tree, where no one could ever sit but her, because it was invisible to everyone else.

It would be her own secret fruit orchard, cool and shady, where she'd sit under the thick branches that showered her every day with apple blossoms and fresh crisp red apples, their juices dripping down her chin. She worked hard to imagine the crunch as her teeth bit into the fruit, the tang of liquid filling her mouth, something she rarely ever enjoyed except at Gram's house, the few times they had visited when she was little.

It was a long ride across the valley to Gram's, riding on a lot of buses. When Uncle Jake picked them up at the bus stop, he never said hello, except to grumble about wasting his time. Ellen hated her uncle Jake but he seemed to hate them just as much. She promised herself one day, she would find out why. They hadn't gone to their grandmother's house in a long time. She wondered about that. Didn't Gram care about them anymore? They couldn't even call her on the telephone, because her mom said they couldn't afford a phone. Ellen missed her grandmother but not Uncle Jake.

Looking off into the distance she watched girls practice flips for the tryouts for next year's cheerleader squad. A few brave members of the marching band tootled on their wind instruments under the shady overhang of the building. Ellen saw Kinsey Taylor tilt the saxophone so that it glinted off the sun. It should have been her saxophone but they couldn't afford to rent it, so Kinsey played it instead. Ellen wiped away the tear that dripped over her eyelid. She hated Kinsey for that but it was wrong, because it wasn't Kinsey's fault her father couldn't pay for it. Ellen hadn't seen her father in five years, because just after their seventh birthday, he went away and didn't come back. She and Troy didn't know why, so there wasn't anybody to blame. She pushed down the anger and squashed it under her toe until she didn't feel it any more.

Then she heard the low voices and giggles, just loud enough for her to hear. She refused to turn toward the sound, because she heard her name and knew it was the snoots. That was the name she gave them, snoots. The snobby, mean rich girls, the pretty ones on the cheerleading squad, prancing around in their red and white short skirts, giggling at the boys on the football team, Maris, Jennifer, Zoe, and Cindy, the girls she wished would disappear forever.

“Did you see her hair? I don’t think she ever washes it,” Cindy said.

Maris nodded. “Probably smells like wet dog.”

Zoe shrugged. “It doesn’t matter because nobody would get close enough to smell it.”

“Did you see that shirt she’s wearing, looks like she pulled it right out of the dirty laundry.” Jennifer rolled her eyes.

“Probably doesn’t have a washing machine,” Maris said.

“Maybe she washes it in the toilet,” Zoe giggled.

“I don’t think they even have a toilet. I heard they use a latrine, whatever that is,” Jennifer said.

“It’s like a hole in the ground with a toilet seat,” Zoe explained.

“Ugh, I might just throw up my lunch,” Cindy said.

“Use the lunch bag and get off the blanket,” Maris said.

They all laughed. Zoe said, “I heard my mother telling Mrs. Pickel that she saw Ellen’s mother walking like she was going to fall over; like she couldn’t walk in a straight line.”

“Maybe she’s a lush, whatever that is,” Zoe said.

“I think it’s somebody who drinks a lot,” Cindy said.

“Oh, you mean like that dirty man with the paper bag who sleeps in the alley by the liquor store?” Zoe asked.

Cindy nodded, then looked around and whispered, “I think her father’s a murderer or something. I heard my mom talking on the phone.”

“What?” Maris shrieked.

“Quiet, Maris,” Jennifer said. “Ellen’s sitting right over there.”

Maris clapped her hand over her mouth. Then she whispered, “My father’s on the school board. He’ll freak if he finds out there are a murderer’s kids in the school.”

“Don’t tell him. My mom says they’ve had to move a lot of times because somebody always finds out. I feel kind of sorry for them.”

“Come on, Jennifer, you never feel sorry for anybody.”

There was no breeze but the tree shook slightly and leaves fell down on the blanket. Jennifer absently brushed them off her lap. “I know, Cindy, it’s like I’m suddenly being really stupid.”

Ellen started to jump up and scream, “*You’re all liars, your mothers are liars, it’s all*

lies,” but something pressed her shoulder and held her down. She brushed at her shoulder as if she could get rid of whatever it was but it didn’t help. She looked around and didn’t see anything. Still the pressure kept up and, now, she was scared. Then, in a twinkle, Ellen relaxed and felt safe. She knew yelling at the snoots was hopeless, people believed what they heard. Her mom didn’t drink; she had one leg that hadn’t worked right since she was born, from a thing called Cerebral Palsy. Troy looked it up in the library; it was something that could happen at birth, like an accident, maybe. It made her walk funny, like she lurched and dragged her leg.

Besides they didn’t have money for liquor. Dad, well he sure wasn’t a murderer, he just went missing after the car accident. She could still remember his scratchy face when he hugged her, the smell of his after shave, and his booming laugh. No, it was all lies.

The bell rang, so the snoots picked up their lunch bags and the picnic blanket and walked away toward the school, giggling. Ellen heard their laughter long after they were across the school yard. They knew she was sitting there because they did this every day. They always sat under the Palo Verde in the shade on their pretty flowered picnic blanket, eating lunch with nasty remarks about her for dessert.

Ellen swallowed hard, trying to keep the tears from falling. Why did she punish herself every day? “Go sit somewhere else, where they can’t find you,” she muttered, knowing they would find her anyway.

“Hey, there you are, sis. I saw the four witches-in-training walking back to school, so I knew I’d find you here.” Ellen smiled, as Troy sat down beside her.

“Where were you?”

“I got lunch inside, I was really hungry. Here I brought you a present.” Troy handed Ellen a bag.

Ellen opened the bag and peeked inside. “I love you, Troy.” She fished out half a sandwich, some carrot sticks, an opened package of cookies and an orange. “This is part of your lunch, Troy. I can’t eat it, it belongs to you.”

“Big sandwich, two carrot sticks and a cookie. I’m full.”

Ellen looked at her brother. “I’m not sure I believe you but thank you.”

“Eat it fast, the bell’s about to ring.”

Ellen stuffed the half sandwich in her mouth and pocketed the rest with the orange. “For later. What would I do without you, bro?”

“Well, you almost did away with me, sitting on my head in the womb.”

Ellen peered around at Troy’s head. “Looks OK to me, brain’s intact. I can’t say much for your hair, there isn’t enough of it to comment on.”

Troy shrugged. “I’m getting ready for the Marines.”

Ellen shivered. “Stop talking like that. You know how I hate war.”

“I know, big sis, but at least I’ll have a decent roof over my head and three meals a day.”

“At the risk of killing or being killed. It’s not worth it.”

“Well I’m only twelve so I have at least five or six years to think about it.”

“You’re very smart, Troy, you can go to college and make something amazing of yourself.”

“Yeah, well, so can you and whose gonna pay for it? And what do we put down for parents on the application? Did you think of that? Father’s occupation: lawyer, but he ran away so who knows. Mother’s occupation: cleans toilets, wipes up messes at a burger joint.”

Ellen put her hands over her ears. “Shut up, OK? I don’t want to hear that any more. Get over it. We can’t change it, so we have to work around it, somehow.”

“Yeah, well you let me know when you come up with an answer on how we deal with a Mother who never finished college and a Father who disappeared one day, and the town thinks he might be a murderer.” Troy stood and looked around, the schoolyard was almost empty. “Come on, we’ll be late for class.” He held out his hand and Ellen grasped it, letting him pull her to her feet.

As they walked hand in hand across the yard, a blond boy appeared on the stone wall. He swiped his hand across his eyes and shook his head.

Ellen looked back sensing something was off but all she saw was a shadowy space. “Troy, did you see something on the wall?”

He shook his head. “Nope, just hot air rising from the baking stones.”

“I swore I saw a shadow but I guess it was a trick of the light.”

As they entered the school and the doors shut behind them, the blond boy reappeared. “I don’t know about this one, there are a lot of problems here.”

A woman appeared beside him. Her hair was blonde like his, but long and flowing. She wore a colorful long dress and bangle bracelets on her arms. “You’ll do very well, Huby. You always do.” She put an arm around him and they sat there listening to the birds. Butterflies flitted in and out of the yellow flowering Palo Verde tree, and a hummingbird did his helicopter buzz over the bougainvilla bushes, stopping to check out a red flower, wings beating a birdsong. “The world is a beautiful place, Huby. People just need to stop a while to look and listen.”

The boy leaned against the woman. “Thanks, Aunt Sonda, you always make me feel good.”

“That’s why I’m here, Huby.”

Chapter 2

Seeing Shadows

As the sun tipped toward the White Tank Mountains in the west, the hummingbird still buzzed around the schoolyard wall. Suddenly the doors opened and a mob of middle-school kids piled out, pounding down the stairs, shouting. The bird took off as the kids raced past. Ellen glanced at her special spot by the wall but it was empty. Silly, she said to herself, but she shuddered and moved closer to Troy.

He looked at her. “You OK, El?”

She shook her head. “I feel like somebody just walked across my grave.”

“You seein’ things again?”

“No, it’s just...I don’t know. It’s like something is going to happen and I don’t know what it is.”

“You know what Gram used to say, ‘if it’s going to happen then don’t go worrin’ about it ‘til it does’.”

“Yeah, well Gram has a lot of sayings. They usually don’t mean anything.”

“Gram is very smart and she knows things before they happen.”

“Like me, you mean.”

Troy nodded. “Well, you do see things sometimes.”

“Like the shadow on the wall at lunch that wasn’t there.”

“Well, yeah, stuff like that.” Troy glanced over his shoulder to check the wall. “Yup, nothing there but air. You hungry?”

Ellen nodded and adjusted her backpack. The frayed, black fabric looked rusty. Maybe if she wished hard enough she’d get some money for her birthday so she could buy a new one. Like that was ever going to happen. “Do you think we might get a burger and fries at Buddy Burger if we stop by?”

Troy shrugged. “Never know if the manager is around then Mom can’t sneak us a meal.”

“Let’s try, I’m really starving and there probably won’t be anything at home.”

“I guess Mom forgot to go to the store again.”

“I guess.” Ellen sniffed and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. Troy sighed but didn’t say anything because they never talked about the truth—that too many times there wasn’t any money for food. What was the point, it wasn’t going to change anything.

They walked away from the school toward town, ignoring the glances of the other kids. It wasn’t easy to be poor and a kid with a father everybody believed was a murderer. “He didn’t do anything, you know.”

Troy knew just what she meant. “Maybe not but it’s been five years and nobody’s even tried to prove it.”

“You need money to hire a good lawyer.”

“Gram has money,” Troy said.

“Don’t you think she’s checked it out? She hasn’t got that much money; you need like hundreds of thousands of dollars. Besides Uncle Jake wouldn’t let her spend the money if she had it. He told her it was a waste of time. He thinks Dad’s a criminal.”

“How do you know all this?”

Ellen shrugged, “I just do. I remember stuff.”

“Some brother he is.”

“I know, not like you and me, Troy. I would always believe in you.”

“I’m not going to murder anybody and neither did Dad.”

“We don’t really know him, Troy. I mean we were only seven years old.”

“Well, I remember him and he was always nice to us.”

“Memories are not the same as living with somebody all the time.”

“Come on, Ellen, you can tell if somebody is nice or not.”

Ellen didn’t answer because people sometimes put on a good act but, underneath, they weren’t nice at all, like the four witches-to-be in her class. They were part of the popular crowd but inside they were mean. Ellen heard a rustling behind her and turned. She thought she saw a shadow but it was just a bird pecking at insects in the bushes.

They reached Buddy Burger and peeked in. Mom was wiping down a table. As she turned and spotted them, she nodded toward the tables outside. Ellen’s mouth watered from the smell of the fries sizzling in their strainers. “I swear I’m drooling,” Troy said, as they picked a table around the side, out of sight of the windows and door.

In a few minutes, Lila Baron joined them with three bags and three shakes in a cardboard cup holder. “Hi guys, how was school today?”

“OK,” Troy said. “Are you going to get into trouble for this?”

Lila shook her head. “Manager’s day off and the assistant manager couldn’t care less. I’m taking my break and I’m very hungry.”

Ellen giggled as she opened the bag and laid the food out on the table. “Oh boy, this smells great.”

Lila looked at her twins and blinked back tears. This wasn’t ever how she pictured their lives. They were so smart and deserved a good life with college in their future. She couldn’t let Ellen end up like her and Troy risking his life in the military. They didn’t ask to live in a falling-down shack with an outhouse as a toilet. Something had to change and soon, before they got into high school.

As if she read her mother's mind, Ellen reached out and took her hand. "It's fine Mom, we're fine."

Troy took her other hand, "Eat Ma, 'cause you're too thin."

Lila bit her lip. "I'm not really hungry; I've been sneaking food all day. If you give me back my hands, I'll eat some fries. You enjoy the rest of the food."

Troy glanced at Ellen and shook his head. "You'll get fired for sneaking food."

Lila reached across and smoothed Troy's cheek. "You worry too much, big boy. I'm fine. Now eat, you need your protein."

Their mother watched the twins devour the sandwiches and fries. Troy managed to drink his shake and half of hers. Then he handed her the cup. "Here Ma, you need to wash down those salty fries."

Lila felt the tears welling up again but reached for the cup. "Thanks, Troy, you're the best son a mother could have."

Ellen watched the little bi-play between Ma and Troy; a stab of jealousy and anger swelling in her heart. She clenched her fists. It wasn't fair. She needed her mother to hug her and right now. Memories of the snoots' laughter still echoed in her ears. Ellen didn't say anything because her mother had enough trouble without Ellen adding more. She just wished...She barely felt the touch on her shoulder, almost like a butterfly kiss but, suddenly, the anger ran down her arm and out through her fingers. She looked down at the hand now limp, dangling by her side. Ellen's heart raced as the engine in a sports car. She turned and saw nothing behind her, except the shadow of a bush. She breathed deeply and felt her whole body slump as if she were falling asleep.

"Hey, Sis, you OK?" Troy asked.

Ellen could barely nod her head. "Too much food," she managed to say.

Lila and Troy laughed. "Too much sugar in the shake, I think," Lila said.

Ellen felt the butterfly kiss again, this time on the back of her neck. She perked up and reached behind her to slap away whatever was touching her. There was nothing but empty air and her own skin. "This is strange but I'm fine now. So, Ma, how about a hug for your smart daughter who got an A on that science paper about plant life in the Sonoran Desert."

Lila leaned over and hugged Ellen. "That's terrific, I'm so proud of you."

Ellen hung on to her mother until Lila pulled away. Now Ellen felt better, much better. *Butterfly kisses and Mom hugs will do that for you*, she thought.

Lila stood up. "I guess I should go back to work." She reached toward the table to pick up the trash, but four hands pushed hers away.

"We'll take care of it, Ma."

"See you at home later."

"Thank you children, you're both amazing. I love you." Lila walked in her lopsided way back into the restaurant and picked up a cloth and spray bottle to clean more tables and counters.

As they dumped the trash, Troy and Ellen watched her through the large window. “She’s too thin, Troy. It scares me, like she’s fading away and soon she’ll disappear.”

“I know, Sis, it scares me, too. What if she gets sick?”

“What will happen to us?” Ellen bit her lip.

“We have to do something. Maybe we should call Gram or Uncle Jake.”

Ellen shook her head. “Uncle Jake won’t help us. He hates Dad and us because we’re his kids.”

“I hate him. How could he believe Dad is guilty of murder? He’s his own brother.” Troy grabbed his shabby backpack and hoisted it over his shoulder.

Ellen snatched her backpack and followed him. She turned and saw her mom looking at them through the window. Ellen waved and blew her a kiss. Lila waved back. “I made a decision,” Ellen said. “I’m going over to the McKinley’s house when we get home, to see if she’ll let me call Gram. Maybe I can wrangle an invitation for us to visit during spring break.”

“That might work. Mom won’t have to worry about us.”

“Or spend money feeding us and eat more herself.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Troy said.

“You’re right. She’ll probably stock up on food for us to eat when we return.”

Troy frowned. “It’s still a good idea, Ellen, to try calling Gram, I mean.”

“Uh huh, I thought so.” Ellen ran ahead, Troy chasing after her.

The leaves of an overhanging oak rattled and a shadow peeled away from the branches and gently landed in the grass.

Chapter 3

The Ogre of the Desert

It took Ellen a while to find Gram's telephone number. Mom wasn't much on neatness, probably because the house was old and hard to keep clean, anyway. She finally found it in a junk drawer in a small address book Mom never looked at because she couldn't call anyone, anyway.

Ellen walked around the corner and stared at the McKinley's house. The white bungalow with the red shutters and red tile roof stood proud in a lush garden of cacti and desert flowers around the corner from their own miserable shack. Only a narrow gully and a small forest of struggling trees separated their houses. Ellen wished this were their house, with an indoor toilet, a hot shower and the beautiful garden. So different from their place with the now grayish white paint peeling in the hot sun and the weedy front garden where a few stunted cacti struggled to survive. She knew the neighbors hated them because their shack messed up the block, but the landlord lived somewhere in California and wouldn't put any money into fixing it up.

Ellen's hands shook as she reached out to knock on the welcoming red door. Well, not quite that welcoming if Mr. McKinley was home. He didn't like them. He said the outhouse stank and they were a dirty bunch of squatters, whatever that meant. Mr. McKinley was an ogre. Ellen hoped he was away at work and his sweet wife would answer the door.

She heard their strange-looking little dog yapping, sort of a cross between a Chihuahua and a poodle, with some other dog tossed in the mix. The yapping came closer and then stopped. The door opened and Mrs. McKinley's smiling face looked at her. "Well my goodness. Hello, Ellen, Pepe and I are so glad to see you, aren't we Pepe?" The dog squirmed in her arms as she kissed its head. "Come in, come in, I just baked a meatball, macaroni and cheese casserole and some chocolate chip cookies. I hope you have time for some early dinner. Where's Troy, I'll bet he would love some, too."

Ellen waited until the woman took a breath, then jumped in. "Thank you so much, Mrs. McKinley, but I really wanted to ask if I could call my grandmother on your phone and maybe use the bathroom."

"Of course, my dear, come right in. You know where the bathroom is and there's a phone in my craft room. I'm going to wrap up some of the food for you to take home; it's way too much for Harold and me to eat."

"Please don't go to any trouble, Mrs. McKinley."

"Nonsense, dear. You call your grandmother and take as long as you need. Harold won't be home for hours, he went to the casino."

"Thanks," Ellen said and hurried to the phone in Mrs. McKinley's craft room. Ellen couldn't imagine a house where someone had a room just to sew and paint. There was another room Mrs. McKinley called the man cave, where her husband had his friends over to watch sports on a giant television screen.

Ellen sighed. They didn't own a television, or a computer or even a working toilet. In their dark and shabby rented house, she and mom shared a small bedroom and Troy slept on a lumpy pull-out couch in the living room. Tucked away in a corner of the living room was a tiny kitchen. The toilet had broken years ago and the landlord wouldn't fix it. Mom was afraid to complain to the city health board and maybe get evicted, so they used an outhouse hidden behind a wall of tall bushes at the rear of the backyard that they dug themselves. Sometimes the smells came into the house when the wind blew the wrong way. The water heater didn't always work, so dashing in and out of a cold shower completed the place they called home.

Mom said they hadn't always live like this. At one time, they'd had as nice a house as the McKinleys had but the bad thing happened and money disappeared for lawyers and a private detective who didn't help Dad, anyway. They lost the house to the bank. Ellen looked around and wanted to cry. She didn't see the shadow sitting cross-legged on Mrs. McKinley's craft table but felt a veil of calm drop down over her like a cloud falling from the sky. Ellen picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hello."

Ellen loved the sound of her grandmother's deep, soothing voice, even if it was only one word. "Hi Gram, it's Ellen."

"Ellen, what a surprise. Is Troy all right? And your mother?"

"Everybody's good, Gram. I just wanted to talk to you."

"Sure, honey, I miss you and Troy a lot. I think of you every day and wish I could call you."

"We miss you, too, Gram. Um, we were thinking about coming to visit during spring break, the week of March fifth. How does that sound?"

Gram didn't answer for a minute. "I have to think about that."

Ellen's stomach felt like skiing downhill. "Is something wrong?"

"I wasn't going to say anything but I fell last week."

Ellen sat down and gulped back the nasty bile that rose in her throat. "How did you fall? Why?"

Gram didn't answer the question. "I had to go to the hospital to get my leg checked out. The doctor says I have something wrong with my heart and I have to take it easy."

"What do you mean? What's wrong with your heart? Did that make you fall?" Ellen's voice got higher.

"It's nothing terrible. It just has an irregular beat, slows down sometimes and I get dizzy, so I fell."

"What is the doctor doing for it?" Now she was practically shrieking into the phone.

"Ellen calm down, I don't want to go deaf."

"I'm sorry, Gram. I love you so much and I'm scared now."

“It’s OK, darling. He gave me some medicine and I have to watch my diet and when the leg heals, exercise a little every day. Like I said, it’s not something to worry about.”

“Gram, we’ll come and help you.”

“Actually, I was going to try to get in touch with your mother and see if you could all move out here. This house is so big, there’s plenty of room and the casita out back will also be empty because Jake is leaving. The schools are good and your mother won’t have to work.”

Ellen’s mouth fell open. Moving to Gram’s house was something she and Troy had talked about; living in a real house with a bathroom and bedrooms for each of them, a dream come true. This was the answer to a prayer, if Mom agreed. Then she realized her grandmother had said Uncle Jake was leaving. “Um, Gram, what about Uncle Jake?”

“Jacob is moving to California next month. I’ll be all alone rattling around in this empty house with no one to help me. I need you all. I want to get to know you kids and take care of you. I need to speak to your mother. Is there any way to talk to her about it?”

“I’m using a neighbor’s phone, she’s nice, but her husband doesn’t like us.”

“It’s perfect you called because I’ve wanted to do this for a long time, especially now that you twins are older, but didn’t know how to find you. I’m going to arrange for three cell phones and pay for the costs for a year. Tell your mother to take you to the nearest Telemart store tomorrow after school. I’ll make all the arrangements in the morning. Now you’ll each have a phone and we’ll be able to talk all the time.”

“Oh, Gram, are you sure you can do all that?”

“My heart may be getting older but my brain is still working just fine.”

Ellen smiled, *tough old Gram, well not so old*. “I can’t wait to tell Mom and Troy.”

“I need you here as soon as possible. Are you OK changing schools this late in the year?”

“It’s only sixth grade, so I’m fine with it and Troy will be, too. Also, Mom’s getting very thin, I don’t think she’s eating enough, saving whatever she can to feed us.”

“That’s not good at all. We’ll have to get all of you to a doctor to make sure you’re all well. Have you seen a dentist?”

Dentist? Ellen blinked back tears. “We’re fine, Gram. You worry about yourself. Is your doctor good?”

“The best, darling girl. I can’t wait to see you and Troy. Tell Mom what I said?”

“Yes ma’am. I love you Gram.”

“I love you, too, Ellen. Give Troy a hug from me.”

Ellen hung up the phone, heart beating faster and faster. She thought about the life changes they would make. No more snoots, hot baths, real toilets, enough food, maybe some new clothes instead of thrift shop stuff, and a room of her own. She found Mrs. McKinley in the kitchen. “Thank you so much for letting me call my grandmother. She

wants us to come live with her. She has a heart problem and fell, so she needs us. She has a big empty house in the east valley.” Ellen gasped.

“Breathe, Ellen. That’s right, in and out, in and out.”

“Whew, thank you Mrs. McKinley. I’m just so excited.”

“I know, my dear, it is very exciting. Grandmothers are wonderful to have around. I remember mine; she had all these stories to tell and baked such delicious cookies.”

“Well our grandmother was a school psychologist and she didn’t do a lot of baking.”

“And what did your grandfather do?”

Ellen shrugged. “I don’t remember but it might have something to do with real estate and land.”

Mrs. McKinley nodded. “Did you know him?”

“He died when I was about seven, so I really don’t remember him.” Ellen thought about her grandfather dying around the same time as her father disappeared. Until she said her age, she hadn’t realize they had both gone from her life almost the same time. *Something else to talk to Gram about.*

“That’s a shame, it’s nice to have grandfathers too.”

Ellen turned to leave.

“Wait, Ellen, don’t forget the food.” Mrs. McKinley handed her two plastic market bags.

“Oh, this is too much.”

“Not at all. It was a pleasure having you visit. Please tell me what happens.”

“I will, ma’am. And thank you for the food. We’ll enjoy it.”

The shadow boy, Huby, hiding behind the old oleander bush watched the woman watching Ellen trot down the street the bags bouncing with every step. A tear fell from her eyes. He knew she would miss the children, because she never had any of her own and so no grandchildren. He wished he could do something nice for June McKinley who had such a kind heart and loved children. Huby would have to think about it and maybe talk to Aunt Sonda. Huby followed Ellen down the street but no one could see him.

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