

# STEALING SHADOWS

## By Craig Bezant

Graham shuddered. The sun had almost set, its warmth and protection fading. He ran through his apartment, making sure its five rooms each had a light on, circling to the lounge and checking the box of spare bulbs, three lights and a ladder were all accessible. A raven cawed in the parkland opposite. The sign couldn't have been more ominous. He glanced at the front door and noted his baseball bat was beside it – hardly a deterrent, but good for a burst of bravado. He edged to the apartment window, looking seven stories down to a strip of road. Its traffic was congested. The lights beside it were pulsing on.

Darkness.

Graham rocked against the sofa, listening to the hum of the air-conditioner, unable to sit properly lest he get too comfortable. That had happened before. He'd relaxed and forgotten about them until he heard the noises outside. He hadn't turned the entryway light on that time – they could have crept in with the shadows. He wouldn't make the same mistake again.

Rationality told him they could appear in the daytime too. That's why he didn't leave the house anymore, forcedly a recluse, learning how to use a computer and embrace the internet for food deliveries and a petty-cash income. He was still alive, and his home was safe – that was all that mattered. He wouldn't have scattered furnishings anymore, wouldn't find misplaced mugs and rearranged bookshelves, wouldn't be scared by silent intruders appearing out of nowhere and waiting for him to stir from slumber.

He hardly slept anyway.

The lights made this a difficult concept, but they worked. Even though their energy was an increasingly large payment he was having trouble covering, they worked. They kept the darkness edged outside.

But not tonight.

Because every contingency has its loopholes. Like the weather. You can rarely factor the weather into every consideration, and it had been the third unpredictably hot day that week. So hot that, even with the cooling night air, sections of the city's power grid were shutting down.

Complete darkness.

Graham had routinely practiced fetching the flashlights and light bulbs from his bedroom. Being in the lounge, this should have been easier. But, panic guiding him, Graham leapt from the sofa and immediately smacked his shins against his coffee table. Howling, he dropped to the carpet, disorientated. He tried to reach back for the sofa but grasped nothingness. His brain raced ahead, picking up sounds that didn't exist a split-second earlier. Whispers were coming from the hallway outside and he formed these into unfavourable sentences, spiteful directions to storm his front door. His legs numbed. He crawled along the carpet, its fibres burning his elbows. He kept moving, expecting to hit a wall, but when the cold sensation of tiles touched his fingertips he knew he'd somehow veered diagonally. He curled into a ball, cupping his hands to his mouth to stifle a rising sob.

They would come now. He was vulnerable. They would move with the shadows. It was what they did best.

Graham tried to will the streetlights outside to push through his windows, but their radiance petered at the lower levels. He tried to picture the baseball bat near the front door, which was only metres away, but thoughts of an impending invasion shuffled his concentration, freezing his limbs.

Graham just lay there, waiting.

For the burglars.

They had robbed Graham before, when he'd worked away from home, and he could have forgiven them had they just taken his electronic equipment, but his late wife's photo albums and journals... priceless to him, worthless to any black market or pawn shop. Then he'd seen a timely exposé on a current affairs program showing similar victims, displaying how easy it was to invade another's space (you could have taped the show and practiced their methods). That was when he'd awakened to the urgency of protecting his home. Burglars were the reason insurance companies thrived, and the recommended alarm systems did nothing more than inform the owner, upon returning home, their belongings were gone. True peace of mind was only achieved with one's own, ever-watchful eye.

Too bad then, that darkness could never be completely eliminated.