

**SHADOW**

Shadow © 2023 Craig Ford.  
All Rights Reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Printed in Australia

Cover design by Shawline Publishing Group Pty Ltd

Images in this book are copyright approved for Shawline Publishing Group Pty Ltd

Illustrations within this book are copyright approved for Shawline Publishing Group Pty Ltd

First Printing: April 2023

Shawline Publishing Group Pty Ltd  
[www.shawlinepublishing.com.au](http://www.shawlinepublishing.com.au)

Paperback ISBN 978-1-9228-5057-7

eBook ISBN 978-1-9227-5157-7

Distributed by Shawline Distribution and Lightningsource Global



A catalogue record for this work is available from the National Library of Australia

More great Shawline titles can be found here:



New titles also available through Books@Home Pty Ltd.  
Subscribe today - [www.booksathome.com.au](http://www.booksathome.com.au)

# SHADOW

CRAIG FORD



# CHAPTER ZERO

## THE RENDEZVOUS

I am making my way into Brisbane city. Sam and her team are about to conduct a surveillance op in Brisbane city, someone selling some stolen data or something, that doesn't matter to me though. I just care about the fact that she is going to be out in the open and I need to figure out how I can arrange a conversation with her. I head in with a couple cars, just in case I need to switch rides a few times on my exit. I will send in one of the other cars to scoop up Sam and lose any tails if needed before I join her. I can easily watch from one of the other cars and keep at a safe distance.

I watch the exchange take place and the teams break off. The main group follows the foreign agent and Sam wanders down the street, casually keeping an eye on her target. I have a feeling that agent is going to have a really bad day. I don't think it will be long before they drag him in for interrogation. This is my chance to get her alone.

'Sarina, take the tesla and stop her midway across the pedestrian crossing she is heading towards. Once she is stopped, wait for her to get in.'

I watch Sarina come to an aggressive stop right in front of Sam. It would appear she is startled by the sudden appearance of the car

and takes a few steps back. I get out my phone and type a message to Sam: *Get in*. Simple. Straight to the point.

Sam takes her phone out of her pocket while others walk around the car blocking the crossing. She just keeps looking at the message. I guess deciding if she wants to go down this path or not. I don't have time for this. I repeat my message: *Get in, Sam*.

She steps forward after a few seconds, seemingly deciding to go with it. She grabs the handle and slides into the back seat.

'Sarina, take her a few suburbs away and set up a rendezvous point so I can get in the car with her.' As Sam's door closes, the car surges to life. I wonder what Sam thinks of the no driver, it can be quite terrifying the first time. I still sometimes have the urge to take over, but honestly, Sarina is probably a better driver than I am.

Almost twenty minutes go by and I get out of my car just before the intersection. I'll get in the car at the traffic lights. Sarina will make sure the lights are red long enough to allow me to enter the car. I make my way over and I can see several cars approaching the intersection, including Sam in the Tesla. The lights turn red and the cars stop. My turn to make an entrance. I step out onto the street walking directly towards the car. I take a deep breath. Here we go. I grab the handle and slide in the car next to Sam.

As I enter the car and close the door, I can see Sam looks unsure about the situation. She glances at the door, her fingers reaching for the door handle. She furrows her eyebrows a little. I know this kind of situation is probably not one she feels comfortable in, especially after what she has gone through recently with the cartel. Random people just jumping into the car at an intersection would not be making her feel very safe at all. I'm impressed though, as she takes a deep breath and calms herself. As soon as the car door closes, the car surges forward. Sarina is getting some distance from anyone who could be trying to follow us.

‘Sarina, change tesla one’s colour to grey. Avoid surveillance zones.’ I see Sam look at me with a judgemental quirk of her eyebrow, as if she’s wondering, *what drugs is this guy on? A car can’t just change colour or drive by itself.* I study her as Sarina initiates the change on the cars nanoshell. Sam looks in awe of what is happening, her eyes are wide with fascination. If she doesn’t arrest me, I’m certain I’ll be spending some time explaining about the car and Sarina, but for now, I have pressing matters we need to discuss.

‘I missed you Sam. You look good.’ She holds my gaze. I know, I know, pressing matters and all I want to do is say I missed her? Get a hold of yourself Shadow.

A few more moments go by and she folds her arms over her chest. ‘So, what is this all about? What do you want?’ I’m a little thrown by her directness and my stomach twists into knots.

I take a deep breath. ‘I need your help...’ I take another breath. ‘I’ve gotten myself into a bit of a situation. I was trying to distract myself and went after a criminal hacking group called Arachnid. I think I may have bitten off more than I can chew.’

Her eyebrow quirks, ‘What did you do? What sort of trouble are you in?’

Where do I start... maybe I need to go back to the beginning.





**6 MONTHS EARLIER...**



# CHAPTER 1

## MY IDENTITY

I've lived in this identity for almost a year now. I'm truly starting to sink into this role, this new me. I think I'm enjoying being Jacob Loxley. He is my fifth identity since I started this mission. I've been burned a few times when I was careless or I bailed when someone was getting a little too close. I couldn't have anyone get to know me too well. I keep people at a distance and move on if it starts to become an issue.

Once I abandon an identity, it is cleaned. Nothing of mine is left behind, no photos, nothing. Like it never existed. I would wipe people's memories if I could, but it is not necessary. For most, I was just a blip they don't remember. Nothing or no one of consequence. It is strange though, isn't it? That someone could live a shadow of a life, one that doesn't exist, doesn't connect with anyone around them. Just exist, so to speak.

I have done this many times and I'm getting good at it. I interact enough for everyone to believe the lie. I go to parties, I talk to girls, but not enough to make anyone want more from me. Just enough so people will know who I am if asked but they won't remember much more.

Jacob is a university student at the Brisbane technical college,

one of the most renowned universities in the country, for only the brightest minds, at least that's what the brochure says. I think it is just a bunch of teenagers, getting drunk, taking drugs and plotting their massive game or app that is supposedly going to make them all rich. Every second day one of them is having a party. It never stops. Just party, party and more parting. I don't know how some of them are passing their classes. I guess some of them really are that smart, maybe the brochure is right. I join them in the festivities on occasion, but generally I keep to myself.

Tonight, I'm in one of those moods where I want to push back on the pain and drown some of my sorrows. A self-pity party. Alcohol and drugs I'm sure are the worst way to do it but tonight I drink with my housemates. They are certainly different but they do know how to have a good time. They are always the life of any party.

Across the room is a girl who has been watching me most of the night. She smiles whenever I see her looking. She is pretty and is not trying to hide that she has been watching me. I want to have some fun, meet a nice girl, but if I do, she might get too close and I might have to abandon this life. I'm enjoying being Jacob. The name suits me and I have been able to stay in this life longer than any other. I don't want to screw it up now.

I've been holding her gaze for too long. She takes that as an indication for her to make a move, and approaches me, coming in nice and close to talk.

'I'm Sarah, you're Jacob, right?'

I look at her for a few moments, mildly concerned my identity has preceded our interaction. Have I gotten sloppy? 'Yes, that's right.'

She smiles at me and moves a little closer. She really is very pretty. This close, I can see the faintest shimmer from a speck of silver eyeshadow that has fallen from her eyelid. I feel she would not be happy with such an imperfection. Every other detail, her hair, her

makeup, is perfect. Exactly how it should be, just that one speck. One minor imperfection.

‘Jacob, I’ve been watching you. There is something mysterious about you. Almost a bad boy vibe. Are you a bad boy?’

She’s laying this on thick and I can smell alcohol on her breath. I need to stop this before it goes too far. I open my mouth, ready to say I’m going to head home and it was nice to meet her, when she leans into me and plants a kiss on my mouth. She tastes like strawberry. I assume it’s some sort of lip gloss or something. Her lips are firm and passionate. I almost for a second forget everything around me. I forget who I am. I’m enjoying being with Sarah; who she thinks I am doesn’t feel important right now. A few heated moments pass and she starts to move her hands over my body. I’m at a turning point. I either go with this and down that rabbit hole or I stop it now. I need to make a choice and fast.

I lean back and pull our lips apart. She looks me in the eyes, trying to figure out what is happening. By the looks of her reaction, people don’t say no to her. I get it, she is very pretty and could easily wrap most guys around her finger, but I’m not most guys. Her fake blonde bimbo act is not for me. Yeah, I’m alive and I still have a pulse, I can’t deny she is friggin’ gorgeous but I don’t want that. I want something more than just good looks. I want to find someone who can challenge me, who can be my true equal, maybe even my better. This girl is not her, of that, I’m sure.

I need to do something before she makes another move.

‘Look, Sarah, I think you are a good looking girl but I’m seeing someone at the moment.’ I’m not, but it seems the kindest way to let her down. She tilts her head and looks at me for a few moments, it looks like she is deciding if that matters to her. Looks like it does.

‘Sorry. I didn’t know.’

‘Thanks, don’t worry about it. I better go. Have a good night, okay?’

She nods and heads back over to her friends, who are all giggling at what just happened. I grab my coat and head for the door.

As I leave, I see the boys over with some girls and just give them a quick wave. They give me a nod. They don't argue, it's pretty normal for me to just leave when I'm over the party. They seem to ride out the whole night but don't seem to mind if I bail on shenanigans. I find the door with a quick review of the room and make my way out.

That's enough of an adventure for me tonight. Enough of the real world.

## CHAPTER 2

# IN THE BEGINNING

I am way too buzzed to go to sleep after what just happened at the party. I have been scoping out a new target lately and might as well just do a quick check in to see what he is up too. No point heading home just yet, I might as well get to work.

I am sitting in the dark, my car parked a few blocks away from home, watching my latest target from my laptop screen. He is a family man. I know this because he's playing with his kids in their room, they are laughing and having a great time. They are up a little late but he isn't making a big deal out of it, just enjoying their company. I can tune in via his CCTV feed—which he left open to the internet with default credentials in it. Sometimes the challenge isn't even worth getting out of bed for.

I'm a hacker. I'm feared in the underbelly of our digital world. I'm the definition of the bogeyman for anyone lurking in these deeply hidden regions of cyberspace, reaching far beyond the digital space right into the real lives of anyone who dares interfere. I give no remorse or sympathy to my victims; they are collateral in a war. Nothing more.

I wasn't always like this. I was a gentle, loving boy, with parents that adored me. I remember my childhood very clearly, they were

the happy times of my life, a time when life seemed much simpler. I would spend hours playing at the park or with my favourite toy. It's hard to fight back a smile when I remember back on those days.

I wanted for nothing, I had everything I could ever need or want. My father, Peter, was from a wealthy family and was CEO of a big company involved in natural resources. You know, mining, gas, that sort of thing. He worked hard, but family always came first. My mum, Monique, and he were in love. It was so strong, it was almost infectious.

My mother was very beautiful. I still remember her vividly from those days, a truly rare beauty. I could see why my father would have first noticed her, but it was a beauty that ran deep. It radiated from her, like some kind of aura, a beauty both on the surface and within. She was an amazing woman who honestly could influence my father like no other could. He was a powerful man and was used to getting what he wanted, he would wave a hand and people would just do as he asked but not with my mother. It was different between them.

They had mutual respect, neither had a stronger influence over the other. They were a true team. One full of love. I was an only child and they shared a similar level of love for me as they did for one another. I could always feel their love.

We would go on trips around the world every few weeks. China, Japan, USA, Europe, New Zealand, Indonesia and so many more places. Dad had to work, that's why we travelled, but he always spent half the time with us and the other half working. He always made sure we were looked after and would take time off at some point to go with us to see the amazing sights, wherever we were. It was an unspoken promise, something we just knew would happen each time.

Dad would do what he needed to do and we would enjoy the resorts and pools. When he was done we would all go together. I know my childhood was great; I had it so much better than so many



people. I should value those memories, use them to make my life better. I should find a love like my parents had, an all-consuming love, one that means more than anything else.

I don't know how to do that though, my heart is poisoned, black with little love in it anymore. I'm driven by a need to crush my enemies, to make them all pay. Nothing else matters to me. It's almost intoxicating and I know deep down this path is not the best for me but I can't shake it off. I know what I am. I embrace it. I'm Shadow, the hacker that punishes those who go too far, those who take what is not theirs and have no thought for their victims. What happened to my once perfect family made me this way, made me who I am. Or at least set me on this path.

As Shadow, a dark, tormented hacker, I feel powerful and purpose-driven. I feel at home, with my life. Lately, I'm getting a little darker and more aggressive with my enemies. I'm showing no sympathy or emotion, it's just another job. I'm losing myself more and more to this world and I'm not sure if I should fight it or embrace it even further.

The feeling I get when I'm on the hunt is like a drug. My mind seems to unlock parts of myself I didn't know existed and I can bend any systems to my will. I can find anyone, crush their world in a matter of hours. Nothing can stop me.

I have come up against a lot of other hackers, some good, some lame, but none of them have presented a real challenge for me. I was like a teacher herding children running around a schoolyard. They didn't even slow me down. I would enjoy the challenge of going up against someone of real skill but there is not many of us out there, true elites, the ones who are only whispered about because of the fear they inspire. The true artists. I know someone has to be able to match my skills, or maybe even better them. I hope I get to meet them someday. I think it could be fun to truly be challenged.

I guess none of that family stuff matters anymore. Life isn't what it used to be. I don't see myself having what they had. This is my hand and I'll go with it. I'll embrace my lot and truly be Shadow. It's funny, Shadow started as my cover, my name to hide my true self, but it turns out Shadow may be my true self and Mark Matthews is my fake self. That's my "real name" if there is such a thing—my family name. That's the real value I place on it, my father's name. It still means something to me, even if not much else in this world does.

I refocus, trying to pay attention to the task at hand. I crack my knuckles and stare at the screen in front of me. Watching this guy playing with his kids makes me hope he is remorseful, to want to change. I don't want to ruin those kids lives because their father values money and power over them. I don't want to set them on the same path as me.

I sigh. This is going to be his lucky day. I am going to give him a warning shot, for his kids. He deserves the chance to prove he is a good dad, to give his kids the opportunity to have a great life, to have a great dad like I did.

He won't get a second chance though.

I load up my phone emulator and start to type a message.

'I am Shadow. I am watching you. I know what you have done. Those two kids you are playing with are the only reason I haven't ruined your life, taken back what you have stolen and made you regret ever crossing paths with me. You have one chance. Only one. Set right what you have done, be a better father, or next time you will not see me coming.'

I hit send. Maybe a little melodramatic but it will get my message across. I wait a few moments for the message to flash on his phone. As I watch, he picks his phone up and reads my message. Eyes wide, he looks around, confused. Then he slowly lifts his eyes to the camera

nestled in the corner of the room, realisation setting in. He looks at his kids for a few moments and then back at the camera and nods.

I truly hope this is not just a show and he changes course for his kids' sake. I guess time will tell.