

In the Dark

A Black Shadows Prequel

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One

Cecilia

Spring Lake, Florida
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I stared at the white stick in my hand and sighed. “Good,” I said under my breath.

Hands wrapped around my waist, making me jump. I looked in the mirror. Rick stood behind me, his eyebrows raised. “Sorry, honey.” His eyes darted to my hand. “What does it say?”

“Not pregnant,” I said.

He frowned. “And that’s good?”

I tossed the stick in the trash and turned around. “I think so. We’re not ready yet.” I wrapped my arms around him. “One day, though.”

He pulled away. “One day.” He ran his hands through his hair. “It’s never going to be the perfect time, Cecilia. We don’t want to wait too long. I’m not going to be an old dad.”

“You won’t be,” I said. “We’re still young. We have plenty of time. I want to pay down some debt first—you know I borrowed a lot of money from my parents—and get my practice up and running, save some money. . .and you need to finish your program.”

Rick sighed. He seemed to get irritated whenever I brought up his Master’s program. He was only in his first semester for a degree in marketing. He’d gotten a grant to cover the tuition at the University

of Central Florida and so we'd packed up our lives and moved from New York to Florida.

"That'll be two years. Why wait?" He shook his head. "God, why don't you want to be a mom like every other woman on the planet?"

"What? You've got to be kidding."

"You can still work part-time, but don't you want to have a baby before you get any older?" he said. "I'm not going to have my wife pregnant for the first time at 36 or 37! There are more risks involved. Our kid could have autism or Down's Syndrome. Is that what you want?"

"You're not being reasonable. Many people have kids in their late 30s and their kids are perfectly healthy."

"You're the doctor. You should know."

I frowned. "Honey," I said. "You're always making passive-aggressive comments about my job. You knew when we met in undergrad that I was Pre-Med. Why did you date me if you knew I was going to be a doctor?"

"Well I didn't *know*..."

"What do you mean? You didn't think I could do it?"

"Don't put words in my mouth!"

"What are you saying then?"

"It's just not normal, Cecilia. Having a child is the most important thing a woman can do with her life."

I laughed. "Oh my God. Both you and my father. What century are we in? I just—I just can't," I said, walking out of the room.

I'd just put a pot of coffee on when Rick yelled from the other room, "When are we supposed to be there?"

"Three," I called out.

We were going to a barbeque at Joe's house. Joe owned Coffey's Hardware and Amber's boyfriend, Brad, worked there. Brad had helped Rick get a job there when we'd moved to Florida. I was looking forward to seeing Amber, too. She'd moved down from New York shortly after us. We hadn't been able to spend much time together since moving here. We'd both been busy setting up our offices—my neurology practice at Spring Lake Medical and Amber's at Dermatology of Central Florida.

Rick jerked open the fridge and pulled out a beer. It was ten in the morning. He was starting earlier and earlier lately. My thoughts must have been clear on my face because he gave me a challenging look and sat at the bar. I poured my coffee and started to walk out of the room. I wasn't in the mood for a fight.

But he slammed his beer on the counter.

I turned. "What's wrong?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Do you have anything to say about your little performance earlier?"

"My little performance? Could you be any more condescending?"

He tossed the cap towards the trash can. It missed by a few inches and landed on the tile. "You may be the boss at work but in this house, I'm the boss. You should respect me; I'm your husband."

I raised my eyebrows. "It goes both ways. You have to respect me, too. And talking down to me like I'm a child is not respectful."

He shrugged. "When you act like a child, I have to respond in kind."

“How exactly did I act like a child?”

“You stormed out of the room when I said something you didn’t like.”

“I didn’t storm out of the room,” I said. “I left because I didn’t want to get upset and have a fight. I did the mature thing. I still can’t believe you think that having a child is the most important thing a woman can do. I don’t agree with that. What if I cured cancer one day? Wouldn’t that be more important? Wouldn’t I be saving millions of lives? How can you compare that to having a baby?”

Rick surprised me by laughing. “You’re going to cure cancer?”

I felt tears prick the corners of my eyes. Where was the man I’d married only a short time ago, the man who believed in me, in my dreams? “That’s my dream. But in the meantime, I’m doing research on slowing the growth of brain tumors.”

“That’s cute,” he said, and took a swig of his beer, a smirk on his face.

“You’re being condescending again. I wish you believed in me. You know how important it is to me to make a breakthrough in this, since my grandfather—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. He died when you were 14.”

My eyes burned and a tear escaped down my cheek. “That’s awfully insensitive of you.” His mother died three years ago and he hadn’t been the same since. I’d done nothing but support and comfort him.

He didn’t respond, but only stared at me.

“I’m going to go take a shower,” I said.

We were gathered around Joe's patio: me and Amber on lounge chairs, Rick, Joe and Brad standing around the grill. I'd worn my swimsuit under my clothes but so far, no one had gotten into the pool and I didn't want to be the first. It had to be at least 90 degrees but the large fans overhead made the heat bearable.

Rick laughed and clinked beer bottles with Brad. His smile was wide, perfect white teeth gleaming in the sun. The bronze highlights that always came out in the summer shimmered. I loved my husband. He was so handsome with his boy-next-door looks, as if he just stepped off a yacht in the Hamptons.

"Your house is amazing, man," he said to Joe.

Joe beamed and looked around. "Well, I've put a lot of work into it. Bought it as a foreclosure a couple years ago."

"Well, you did a great job." That charming smile again.

I jumped when Amber nudged me. "Hey, what's wrong?" Her turquoise eyes were wide with concern and a touch of playfulness.

"Nothing. Just deep in thought, I guess." The truth was, Rick was a great actor. He really missed his calling.

"Well, get out of your head, CeCe. Have another drink," she said, motioning to the bar across from us.

"I'm good for now."

She shrugged. "Suit yourself." Then she danced over to the bar and mixed a drink. I had no idea what it was, but it was bright blue. She pushed a cherry onto the stir stick and dropped it in her glass.

When she came back over, she stared at me until I met her eyes. "Okay, spill. What are you thinking about?"

I looked back at Rick. "He's just so different when we're out."

She followed my gaze to the men standing by the grill. “He’s outgoing. Is he quiet at home?”

I shook my head. “No, that’s not what...You know what?” I asked, forcing a laugh. “I’ll have that drink after all.” I got up before she could say anything else.

Joe met me at the bar. “Hey, I need to be a good host. Let me make one for you.” I watched as he poured vodka into a glass and then mixed in the blue liquid. I read the bottle. Curacao.

“Thanks,” I said, taking a sip.

“No prob.” He looked over at Rick. “Hiring your husband was the best decision I ever made. He’s a great guy. You’re one lucky woman.”

I smiled. “Yeah, I am. The job is perfect for him while he works on his degree.”

Joe gave me a confused look but before I could ask, Rick called over. “Hey, sweetheart, could you grab me another beer while you’re over there?”

After we ate—a feast of burgers, hot dogs, fries, coleslaw and potato salad—Amber and I laid on the lounge chairs and watched the sunset. The men were inside; I’d overheard Joe mention his signed baseball collection.

“You sure you’re okay, CeCe?” Amber asked.

I sighed. “Yeah. I just. . .I’m worried about Rick. Ever since his mom died, he hasn’t been the same.”

“How do you mean?”

“He’s been drinking a lot. And he’s changed. He’s not the nice, loving man I married.”

She frowned. “I’m sorry, CeCe.”

“If you saw him at home, you wouldn’t recognize him. He’s not,” I said, gesturing to the patio doors, “that person.”

“He’s putting on a show.”

“Oh, yes he is,” I said. “I made an appointment for him to see a friend of mine. He’s not sleeping well. But I don’t want to prescribe him anything because he could...well, if it doesn’t work, or if it gives him side effects, he’ll just have something else to be angry about.”

“Is he angry a lot?”

“Yeah, he is. But he’s just under a lot of stress from his program. I’m sure it’ll be okay once he starts getting some sleep.”

Amber wrapped her arms around me. “I love you, girl. I’m always here for you.”

I hugged her back then, “So, anything new with you? You and Brad seem happy.”

She smiled. “Yeah, we are.”

“He looks young. . .”

Amber laughed. “He’s 25. That’s not much younger than me. Not full cougar status. Yet.” She sat up straight and tied her hair into a bun. “But, my practice is doing well. I’m thinking of bringing in a resident. So far, no good applicants, though.”

“Why not?”

“They’re qualified, but their personalities are too. . .I don’t know. I don’t think we’d work well together.”

“Hmm. I’m sure you’ll find someone.”

She winked. “I will.” Then, as Joe opened the patio door, followed by Rick and Brad, “Oh, look, the boys are back.” She jumped up and

hugged Brad. “I missed you so much, my love. Where have you been all my life?”

Brad laughed. “So dramatic.”

Rick glared at me. Shocked, I looked around but no one seemed to notice. Joe was joking around with Brad and Amber. Then, Rick’s face transformed into a warm smile. “What are you girls doing out here? Gossiping?”

“Not all women gossip,” I said, forcing a smile. “We were talking about work.”

Brad made a shooing motion with his hand. “Work shmirk. Gossiping would be more fun.”

Rick came over and put his arm around my shoulders. “Ambitious women. Gotta love ‘em.”

“Hey, your wife’s a neurosurgeon. I’d say that’s pretty cool,” Joe said to Rick. Then Joe turned to me. “And if you have any single work friends. . .”

I laughed. “I’ll let you know.”

Later, I changed into my pajamas and sat in bed reading. I couldn’t focus on my book, though. Rick’s words replayed in my mind: “Ambitious women. Gotta love ‘em.” It was so clearly a dig, considering what we’d argued about only hours before. He resented my ambition. Well, let him. Maybe once he realized how the mortgage gets paid every month, how our debt is almost paid off. . .It certainly wouldn’t be from his meager salary at Coffey’s Hardware. I didn’t want to emasculate him. I never brought up what he made. It didn’t matter to me. I made enough to support both of us. But he always said he wanted to get a degree so he could get a better job. A friend

of his had told him there was a position for him at his marketing firm, but they preferred candidates to have master's degrees.

He was moving around in the kitchen. Glasses clinked, the silverware drawer slammed shut. *What was he doing?* I wanted a glass of water anyway, so I went downstairs.

The kitchen was a mess. A bottle of Jack Daniels was half empty on the counter and a few drops had splashed out of the glass. A bag of potato chips was on the floor, a few crumbs strewn on the tile. Rick reached into the cabinet and pulled out an orange prescription bottle. He slammed back two pills with his drink.

I walked over to the cabinet for a glass. He turned and stared at me. "Hey, honey," I said. "Just getting a glass of water."

He grabbed my ass and squeezed. Then he leaned in and kissed my neck, leaving slobber on my skin. I pulled away. He reeked of whiskey and cigarettes. "Rick, no, not when you're drunk." I looked at the ashtray on the table. "Could you please smoke outside?" I asked gently.

"Jesus! Lighten up," he slurred. "Let a man smoke in his own house. It's not like we have kids or anything." He shook his head. "You make damn sure of that," he said under his breath.

I decided to ignore the last comment. "It just lingers in the house. It's really hard to get the smell out. If you could just step onto the back porch to smoke—"

"I'll do what I want in my own fucking house!"

I put up my hands. "Okay. We can talk about this another time. I need to go to bed." I started to leave but saw him grab the pill bottle again. "Rick, how many have you taken?"

He spun around and nearly fell over. "None of your business!"

“I’m just worried about you, that’s all. I love you. If you’ve already taken some, it’s dangerous to take more, especially if you’ve been drinking—”

“Thank you for your recommendation, doctor.” He threw the bottle back in the cabinet and slammed it shut. He took a step towards me, his eyes glassy, arms tense with his hands balled into fists.

I backed up. “I’m just going to go to bed.”

I laid in bed staring at the ceiling, listening to a show Rick was watching downstairs. He was probably passed out by now. He rarely slept in bed with me anymore. I turned on my side and closed my eyes. But then I heard something outside the window. It sounded like someone was on the ledge. I swore I heard the sound of men’s boots. But that was impossible. I was on the second floor and there was no way for someone to climb up. I propped myself up on my elbow and pushed aside the curtain. It was too dark to see anything but the tree branches moving in the moonlight. As my eyes adjusted, I looked down at the ground and saw a dark figure moving through the trees then disappear.

Two

Aiden

August 13, 2013
Spring Lake, Florida

Cecilia almost caught me a couple nights ago. I was going to have to be more careful. I'd thought she was asleep and I just wanted to watch her. She was beautiful. And she looked just like Elara.

Rick, her deadbeat husband, was drunk as usual. I knew his mother had died a few years ago but the man was not moving on. I saw him through the window taking pills and pouring glass after glass of whiskey. Being blessed with super intuition allowed me to know this was going to end badly, one way or the other. Here was Cecilia, an intelligent, hard-working neurosurgeon, and she was married to this guy? Why women married so far beneath them was beyond my understanding. She could do so much better.

I'd spent months tracking her down. That was nothing compared to the years, no, the centuries, I'd spent searching for the evil women that killed my family. I hadn't found them yet, but I was getting closer. Their descendants were scattered all over the world, but this was the only one I was interested in. Here she was. Dr. Cecilia Harper, maiden name Brennan, 31 years old and married to a loser. She'd moved with said loser from New York to the sunshine state so he could get his degree. How ambitious of him. I could tell Cecilia hated Florida. It didn't suit her.

I wanted her all for myself but I wasn't quite sure what I was going to do with her yet. Kill her and finally have my revenge, finally see justice served for how her ancestors had wronged me, or. . .

My phone rang and jolted me from my thoughts. It was Liam. We'd been friends a long time and he was happy I'd come down to Florida. I told him I was going to practice medicine here in Spring Lake, but that was just a cover for the real reason I'd come.

"Hey, man. What's up?"

"Aiden! You've been down here a while and I've barely seen you. What have you been up to?" Liam asked.

"I've been busy setting up my practice. I think I found a spot downtown. A nice little brownstone by the hospital." I was lying but it didn't matter. What I did for work wasn't important; I didn't need the money. I'd paid cash for my house, the house where my future wife would live with me.

"Oh, good location," he said. "How's the house?"

"It's coming along. I'm having the deck fixed up and putting in an outdoor bar and grill." I'd found a company with a sucker for an owner—John Abrams—who was charging me next to nothing for the work. He must have been hard up. In reality, I could do the work myself but why go to the trouble when I could have someone else do it? I had more important things to attend to.

"That's great! Well, I can't wait to come and see it."

I wrapped up the conversation. I needed to take a trip to Spring Lake Medical today to check up on Cecilia, do more research on her life. The more I knew, the better.

Turns out she worked with a beta male named Bruce Patton. He was a neurosurgeon, too, but I knew at first glance that he was not as

intelligent as Cecilia, despite being a doctor much longer. He was about ten years older than her and had a dusting of freckles on his milky-white skin and a tuft of orange hair on his head. He was ugly.

And he was in love with Cecilia.

It disgusted me the way he looked at her. I admired the way she handled his flirtation: she was polite but a little cold. She brought up her husband at every opportunity to show him she wasn't available. But he was undeterred. He also lacked any semblance of morals: The ugly ginger was married with a kid.

I was disappointed that Rick and Cecilia didn't have kids. That would have been another way to exact my revenge.

I watched her from outside her office window. It was getting late—almost nine o'clock—and she was still typing at the computer. Such a devoted doctor. What I'd give to surprise her and walk into her office, lay her on the little green couch by the window and take her. But she wasn't alone. A security officer held post in the lobby. I wondered how late he was there. He probably stayed until she left to protect her from men like me.

Three

Cecilia

August 16, 2013
Spring Lake, Florida

Sparkling orange and yellow water droplets trickled down the clear plastic cup in the hot afternoon sun. The ice in my coffee had melted turning the liquid into a watery caramel color. The fading sun was warm on my cheek. I closed my eyes and angled my face to the light, listening to a couple leaving the coffee shop. They were discussing their evening plans: meeting up with another couple for dinner and then a movie. I wondered if they were as happy as they sounded.

“How did you find out Rick dropped out of school?” Amber asked.

I opened my eyes. She squinted in the sun, her head cocked to the side. Gripping the red straw in her cup, she sucked down the rest of her coffee.

“He didn’t tell me he dropped out but there haven’t been any books around the house for the past couple weeks. And Joe seemed confused when I mentioned Rick being in school. He must not have told him he had even started. It’s like he planned to drop out all along.” I sighed and took another sip of my coffee. It tasted warm and watered down. I pushed the cup aside.

Amber frowned. “But why move all the way here if he never intended to go through with it?”

“I have no idea,” I said, then I remembered our trip to the Keys. “When we were visiting Florida before, he said he wanted to move here. I didn’t think he was serious. We were both drinking.”

“Did he really get the grant to study at UCF? What if he never really went at all?”

“I saw the paperwork before we moved. And he did have textbooks up until recently.”

Amber raised her eyebrows.

“Do you think he was faking it the whole time?” I asked, rubbing my temples. “I mean, he had books! Those aren’t cheap. Surely he wouldn’t buy them just to pretend he was in school. And if that’s the case, why don’t I still see them around the house?”

Shaking her head, Amber said, “I don’t know, CeCe. It doesn’t make sense.”

“I think he did go but just stopped,” I said. “I need to talk to him. It’s not going to be a fun conversation, especially if he’s been drinking.”

When I got home, Rick was on the couch, a glass of whiskey on the coffee table, a dirty ashtray next to it. SportsCenter blared from the TV. I tried to study him inconspicuously to gauge his level of drunkenness. From the looks of it, he’d had a couple drinks, but wasn’t hammered. Yet.

“I’ve only had two,” he said, reading my mind.

Instead of responding, I asked, “How are classes going?”

He sighed loudly and sat up, slapping his hands on his knees. “I don’t feel like talking about school right now. I’d like to relax.”

“Okay,” I said. “Just asking. I haven’t seen any books lately and thought maybe you were on a break or something.”

He narrowed his eyes. "I'm on a long break."

"What do you mean?"

He stood up and turned off the TV then threw the remote across the room. "I dropped out, okay? There it is. Now go ahead and give me a lecture." He crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm waiting."

"I'm not going to lecture you. I care because I'm your wife and I love you. I just want to know what's going on."

"I quit because I fucking hated it, okay? Now can we drop it?"

I sat on the couch. "Sit down, Rick. You can talk to me about this. I'm not judging, I just want to know why you quit. What happened?"

He laughed and ran his hands through his hair, pacing the room. "I told you. I quit because I hated it. I can't keep up with it *and* work full time at Joe's."

"Okay," I said quietly. "That's all I wanted to know."

He turned and stared at me.

"What if you went to part-time at the hardware store? That might make it easier—"

He lunged towards me and I jumped back. "Jesus, Rick. Please calm down. I'm just trying to talk to you. I care about you and I want—"

"You want me to be like you!" He yelled. "You want me get some fancy degree. Well, I don't care about all that!"

"I don't want you to be like me," I said. "I want you to be happy. You wanted to go to school. That's why we moved."

He shook his head. "No, it's not."

I sat in stunned silence for a moment. “It’s not? What do you mean?”

“Damn it, Cecilia!” He shoved his drink off the coffee table, the brown liquid splashing on me before the glass landed on the floor and shattered. I stared at the shards of glass on the floor, feeling the sticky liquid dripping down my bare legs.

“We have no business being in New York. We agreed we’d move and start a family—”

“Yes, but after—”

“After what?” he asked, glaring at me.

“When we were ready. You said you wanted to get your degree first and get a better job.”

“I can get a better job without this degree.”

“That’s not what you said when you were applying for the program,” I said. “You got a grant. It covers all the tuition; it wouldn’t even cost us anything.”

“I don’t care! What don’t you understand? I just wanted to start a family with you, be like normal people, not wait until we’re 40 until we even try to have a child.”

“But we won’t be 40—”

“Enough! I’m done with this. I’m done with you pressuring me.”

“I didn’t pressure you—”

He lunged again. “You always have!” Then he looked down at my legs where the whiskey was now drying on my skin and gave me a disgusted look. “Get yourself cleaned up! I’m going out.” He grabbed his keys and stalked towards the garage door.

“Rick,” I said, standing up. “Please don’t drive.”

“I’m fine,” he mumbled.

He slammed the door behind him, making a picture fall and crash to the floor.

I stared out the window, watching him pull out of the driveway. Then I saw the photo that had fallen, the glass shattered, the frame in pieces. It was a photo of us from our honeymoon. I picked it up, the surface now scratched from the broken glass. We were smiling, our arms wrapped around each other, the waves crashing behind us on the beach.

Movement in the corner of my eye made me drop the photo. Something had passed by the window. I peered out, watching for Rick’s truck, listening for the garage door to screech open. *Good, he came back home.* I debated hiding in the bedroom, pretending to be asleep to avoid another fight. After a few moments of silence, I switched on the porch light and opened the front door. The street was silent and still with no sign of Rick’s truck.

“Rick?” I called out.

No response.

When we’d moved in, our neighbors told us there had been bear sightings in the woods behind our houses. But something had just been on the porch. I looked down at the wooden floor. It needed to be re-stained but we hadn’t gotten around to it yet. The deep green stain was beginning to peel off along the edges of the porch. Footprints—large, like men’s boots—were lined up along the area from the door to the side of the porch. Right under the window where I’d been standing only a few moments ago and seen movement. I ran inside and slammed the door. Rick wouldn’t have been walking along the porch. His truck wasn’t here.

I tried calling his cell but it went to voicemail. I sat on the couch facing the window, waiting to see another shadow move outside. After a long time and no sound and no movement, I grabbed a towel from the kitchen and wiped the sticky mess off my legs. Then I grabbed the small brush and dustpan from the pantry and set to cleaning up the tiny shards of glass that once encased our happy photo. I suddenly felt weak and leaned against the couch. Tears poured from my eyes and I let myself cry, the sadness taking over. I wouldn't be able to sleep until he came home. *Please, let him be okay*, I thought. *I don't want to lose my husband.*

On my lunch break the next day, I thought about the conversation—if you could call it that—I'd had with Rick when he came home at two in the morning. He'd laughed and called me crazy when I told him about the footprints on the porch. When I left for work this morning, they'd been gone.

My phone buzzed. It was Amber.

"Hey, you!" she said. "How are you doing?"

"I'm good," I lied.

"Are you? Did you get to talk to Rick?"

I sighed. "Yeah. He did drop out. He said it was too much. . . I can tell you more later. You want to meet up after work?"

"Yeah!" she said. "I have some good news!"

"Oh?"

"I found a resident to join my practice. Her name is Katherine. She seems to be a great fit. She's super sweet and eager to learn," she said.

"That's great!" I said. "I'm glad you finally found someone."

“Me too!” she said, laughing. “It’s about time. I think we’re going to get along great. She has a very unique sense of style, too. She looks she belongs on the set of Mad Men, all retro and everything. She wore a red dress to the interview and her hair was in a bouffant with a big red flower.” She laughed again. “Anyway, I like her.”

I laughed. “She seems cool.”

“She is! She said she moved here to get her ex-boyfriend back and then saw the opening at my office. Isn’t that funny?”

“Hmm...interesting,” I said. “Well, I hope she gets her ex back, too.”

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About the Author

Elaine Ewertz is the author of the Black Shadows series including *The Devil You Know*, *Shadow House*, and *Eternal*. She loves to escape the real world by writing. Creating new worlds and characters who experience everyday issues as well as extraordinary ones, all while exploring the psychology of relationships, is her idea of fun. The original idea for the first book in the series came from an overactive imagination late at night while lying in bed. She heard a noise and thought, “What if there was someone knocking at my door?” That morphed into, “What if I looked through the peephole and saw a scary face?” That’s it. And now, here we are, almost three books into the series. Magical.

Elaine lives in Central Florida and when she’s not writing, she’s working in healthcare. She loves hearing from readers so drop her a line at eSquaredPress@outlook.com and be sure to check out ElaineEwertz.com for news, updates and extras.