

# The Price You Pay

By: Michelle D. Sonnier

Elena sat bathed in the glory of the full moon with skeins of yarn arrayed all around her. The damp midnight grass pressed into the backs of her thighs through her thin cotton dress. Elena gently caressed one skein, then another. The child to come was a girl and she was coming soon. Not that her mother was aware of it. Elena thought of her neighbor, Kitty, two blocks away in the sleepy suburban neighborhood, fast asleep cradled in the comfort of her Lay-Z-Boy recliner while her husband pretended to read a book, but he was really watching her and taking comfort in the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest. Kitty slumbered peaceful in the knowledge that at six and half months she had plenty of time to prepare for her child. Elena knew better. When she had brushed Kitty's belly at the grocery store earlier that afternoon, she knew. The child would be a girl and she would be early. The baby shower in two weeks would be just in time. All the new gifts would be put to use shortly after they were unwrapped. The child would be healthy and happy.

Elena's fingers drifted across one fuzzy skein. Even though the moonlight leached all the color out of the fiber around her Elena knew the yarn under her fingers was pale blue. The nubbly skein next to it was mint green and the smooth yarn next to that was soft peach. Elena gently squeezed the peach skein like a ripe fruit. Peach would be the color for Kitty's girl, in a delicate ripple fan pattern, a perfect reflection of the personality to come.

Elena found the end of the yarn in the center of the skein and gently pulled it out, then began the foundation chain with her favorite birch wood needle. The chain stitches fell like even pearls from the soft blonde wood.

"You will be strong. You will not break. You will be strong. You will not break."  
Elena chanted with the rhythm of the needle. A proper foundation was so important in both

people and blankets. She turned the chain and began the pattern proper. Four doubles, skip two chains, four doubles, fan stitch, repeat all down the foundation chain. As she continued her chanting varied.

“I wish you peace. I wish you joy. I wish you peace. I wish you joy.”

“Have patience and kindness for all. Have patience and kindness for all.”

“Love will find you. Love will find you.”

The moon set and Elena packed up her needle and yarn. She had made a good start and would be able to finish the blanket before the moon started to wane. It would be ready in time for the shower and to bring the little one home.



Elena strolled down the sidewalk through the gentle spring afternoon on her way to Kitty’s baby shower. The soft breeze caressed her cheeks and rifled through her raven colored hair. She cradled a brightly wrapped package in her arms as if the blanket within already held a baby. Elena slipped through the garden gate at Kitty’s Mother-in-Law’s and into the back yard. Paper streamers of pink, blue, and white radiated out from the enormous oak that dominated Margerie’s yard. Beneath the spreading branches picnic tables decked out in the same colors offered a sinful array of food; deviled eggs, mini quiches, fresh fruit with melted chocolate for dipping.

“Elena! I’m so glad you could make it.” Margerie swept up to Elena and wrapped her arms around her.

“My pleasure.” Elena pecked Margerie on the cheek. “Where shall I put this?” She offered the package with teddy bears in pink and blue pajamas dancing across it.

“The gift table is right over here.” Margerie guided her across the yard by the elbow.

“Do you really think Kitty will be surprised?” Elena asked as she set her gift among the dozens of other brightly wrapped packages.

“Oh, I think she’s expecting something but I don’t think she’ll expect this early.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Well,” said Margerie. “I could use a hand cutting up vegetables in the kitchen. We really should have something at least a little bit healthy.” She winked.

In the kitchen Margerie's next door neighbors were already at work, chatting as they went. Cathy was separating the broccoli and cauliflower into neat little florettes while Janice washed and cut the celery into manageable sticks.

"If you could slice up the cucumbers, that would be great," Margerie said.

Cathy and Janice warmly greeted Elena, immediately involving her with the neighborhood gossip.

"Did you see that new car in the Samuelson's driveway?" said Janice. "I think Harry's raise is a little bit better than Karen's letting on."

"Well, good for them." Cathy said as she arranged then rearranged the broccoli and cauliflower on the platter. "So Elena, did you bring another of your sought after baby blankets?"

"Yes," said Elena. "I know it must get boring, me bringing the same gift every time, but everyone seems to like them."

"Like them!" Janice exclaimed. "Everyone loves them! Do you know that I have actually heard people say that your little blankets are magic?"

"Magic? Who believes in magic these days?" Margerie swept through the kitchen carrying another centerpiece out into the yard. Elena just smiled faintly.

"Really, I swear." Janice leaned in close to the other ladies at the kitchen table. "Betty Dougan says that your blanket is the only reason her little Rosie is so well behaved. All her other kids, that she had before she moved here, are little monsters. Even she admits that."

"And that wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that all of her other children are active little boys?" Cathy raised her eyebrow.

"Well, that's just one case." Janice chopped through another stalk. "Out of Beverly's three kids the only one not to have a horrible case of colic was the one Elena made a blanket for, the youngest, Robbie I think."

Cathy rolled her eyes and glanced at Elena with a smile. Elena smiled back and continued to cut her cucumbers into neat coin shapes.

"Then there are the Goldbergs, did you hear about them?" Janice asked.

"Didn't they move away?" Cathy said.

"Yes," Janice's eyes were bright. "And they gave away all of their baby stuff before they left since they weren't going to have any more, then Eva got pregnant anyway! And that poor little thing, the baby only lived eight days. Jenny told me that she heard Eva say she wished she

had kept Elena's blankets because then everything would have been different. Now what do you think about that?" Janice slapped her hand on the table.

"I think that's very sad, losing a baby like that," said Elena.

"I agree," said Cathy. "It's very sad. But let's not talk about sad things right now; this is supposed to be a happy party! So, do you think Kitty is going to have a boy or a girl?"

"Well, her belly is riding high so I think they'll have a boy but who knows. She didn't want the doctor to tell her," said Janice.

Elena just smiled her own quiet smile and let the conversation flow around her. The vegetables were finished. More guests arrived. Like a flock of excited doves they cooed and chattered under the oak tree waiting for the guest of honor.

When she arrived Kitty looked genuinely surprised. Margerie and Elena exchanged pleased glances. The neighborhood women descended on the food and soon the party was in full swing. Kitty reclined in an Adirondack chair like a queen presiding over her kingdom. The women fussed over her, bringing tasty morsels so that she wouldn't have to stir herself from her comfort to walk three yards to the groaning tables. Normally a mousy little woman, Kitty basked in all the attention. The gorging slowed to fitful nibbling and the conversation began to slow. Margerie clapped her hands to get everyone's attention.

"Time for presents!" She sang.

As if of one mind the women oohed and gathered around Kitty, bright spring flowers facing their sun in adoration. Elena sat quietly in the back of the group, sipping her punch. Margerie brought the presents to Kitty one by one and everyone oohed and ahed just as they should. A car seat and a stroller. Ooh ahh. Footie pajamas in soft pastels and a duck theme mobile. Ooh ahh. A bath set for mommy with lavender infused sea salts; this brought appreciative sighs. Janice sat next to Kitty and recorded every present and who it was from to make thank you notes that much easier for Kitty. Elena straightened up just a little bit as she saw Margerie pluck her gift from the dwindling pile. Kitty opened the card.

"This one is from Elena," she said. Janice smiled and wrote Elena's name in the proper column and without a pause wrote "hand made baby blanket" next to it. Kitty didn't notice as she tore the teddy bear paper. She drew the soft peach blanket from the box with a gasp.

“It’s beautiful!” Kitty held up the blanket suspended in a delicate web between her hands, displaying the graceful shell pattern. All the women gasped and murmured. Elena could hear those closest to her.

“Oh my, that must have taken a lot of work.”

“It’s so lovely; I wish I could do things like that.”

“I don’t know how she does it. She’s so talented.”

The women turned and smiled at Elena. She blushed but still felt a swell of pride. Everyone wanted to be complimented for their excellent taste in gift giving, but no one liked to admit that. It wasn’t supposed to be about the giver.



Elena stood in the frozen food section debating the merits of peas and carrots versus peas and pearl onions.

“Hi, Elena,” chirped a petite blonde woman next to her.

“Samantha, how are you?” Elena smiled and hugged the tiny woman.

“I’m so excited I’m just about to burst. I’ve had to hold this news in so long.”

“What’s going on?”

“Bob and I are pregnant!”

“That’s wonderful.” Elena hugged her friend again. “How far along are you?”

“Sixteen weeks. We were waiting to make sure I wasn’t going to miscarry. But now I can tell everyone.” Samantha squealed.

“I’m so happy for you,” Elena said and placed a casual hand on Samantha’s just barely beginning to swell belly. Immediately a sour taste filled her mouth and waves of nausea roiled through her stomach. The child was a boy and he was evil. Elena snatched her hand away.

“Elena, are you okay?” Samantha’s brow furrowed.

“Oh fine, just a muscle spasm.”

“Well, I’d better get moving,” Samantha said and she hugged Elena again. “I’m making spaghetti tonight.”

Elena managed a meek wave as Samantha rolled away, smiling widely and completely, blissfully unaware of the evil growing in her womb. Elena glanced up and down the aisle. She

was alone. She leaned her forehead against the door of the frozen vegetable case until the nausea passed.



Elena tried to put her encounter with Samantha out of her mind. She had to be wrong. There was no way that an innocent unborn babe could be so evil. By their very nature babies were innocent. Babies and evil just did not go together.

Elena had just about managed to untie the knots from her stomach when the invitation came. She knew what it was as soon as she saw the bright yellow envelope in the mailbox. The smooth sweeping curves of the handwriting were recognizably Samantha's. Elena took her mail from the box and stared at yellow envelope on top. There was a giraffe in blue ink in the corner saying, "You're invited!" Elena paced back up the walk closed off to the world around her, unable to take her eyes off the little square envelope on the top of the stack. Once in the house she sorted the bills into their slots, threw away the junk mail, and put the new catalogues in the bathroom. She left the invitation on her entrance hall table.

Throughout the afternoon and evening Elena kept drifting by the table and staring at the little yellow envelope. The moon set and darkness took over the neighborhood. The envelope glowed on the table. It was nearly midnight when she tore open the envelope. Green and yellow alphabet blocks spelled out "Baby Shower" on the front of the card. Elena flipped open the card and read that Samantha's shower would be next month at the neighbor's. Elena began to shiver and sweat. She could feel the evil of the child through the invitation itself. The nausea was back. She could feel the bile rising up her throat.

She strode back to the kitchen and lit her gas stove. She poked the corner of the invitation into the blue flames, and her eyes widened a little as it caught quickly and shot up its own orange and red flare. She held it up for a moment, entranced by the glow, then tossed it into the stainless steel sink with a flick of her wrist. She watched the colorful card turn to ash and turned off the gas behind her absently, never taking her eyes off the burning invitation. When the little blaze had finally guttered out she washed the ash down the drain.

That night, nightmare armies marched through her dreams. She saw the whole reason why the child gave off such waves of evil. Armies loyal to him marched across the face of the earth killing and raping and burning. To say that he was the reincarnation of Hitler was to

belittle the pain that he would cause the world. His evil would visit every continent. He would bathe the world in blood.

In the morning, Elena checked the moon charts. The full moon would bloom the night after tomorrow. She had to try; she had to think of a way. But how could you bless evil?



The full moon found Elena in her back yard again with the yarn piled next to her in the grass. There was no need to spend time selecting a yarn tonight. She had already selected a serene sea blue in the hopes that the calming color would bring peace to the little war-monger's heart. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Elena scanned the sky watching the thick clouds scud across it. The full moon and her array of stars were nearly covered, only the occasional tatter allowed moonbeams and starlight to peek out on the earth below. The willows in Elena's yard swayed fiercely in the growing wind. There was a storm coming.

Elena tried to put the unsettled weather out of her mind and got to work. Her hands trembled and the initial slip knot kept falling out of the yarn. She got the chain started and stared in dismay of the lumpy mess her usually nimble fingers had formed. She ripped it out and started again. It was better but still not up to her usual standards. Lightning blitzed across the sky and the nearby clap of thunder made her jump. There was no time to rip back again. Her hands shook and she dropped a loop. She spilt the thread three times attempting a simple double crochet. She finally made it through the first row, already exhausted, and looked down at her handiwork to discover that she had missed several key stitches in the pattern and that there were others where they didn't belong. So much was missing or in the wrong place that she would never be able to salvage it. She ripped back to the worst mistake as the first fat drops of rain hit her hands. She took a deep breath and tried to work slowly and calmly. Yarn over, through the foundation chain, draw up a loop, yarn over and through two loops, yarn over and through two loops and on to the next stitch. Angry raindrops pelted her scalp and hammered her shoulders. The willow trees writhed as the wind screeched through their branches. Elena tried to chant.

"You will do no harm. You will do no harm."

The yarn knotted and stuck to her fingers. She yanked on the skein and found a hopeless snarl in her hand. She tried to continue.

"You will find peace in your heart. You will find peace in your heart."

Thunder crashed and the wind blew so hard it knocked her over. Elena righted herself and continued to work.

“You will not be evil! You will not be evil!” Elena shouted into the wind.

She inserted her hook into the next stitch and her favorite birch wood needle snapped in two in her hand. The same needle that had made hundreds of blankets that brought hundreds of babies good fortune lay on her palm neatly snapped in two. Elena threw the yarn and the needle away from her and leaned her head back, face up to the sky. She threw her arms wide and wailed. When her breath failed her she drew a deep hiccupping breath and let loose another unearthly wail. Elena fell forward on the grass and began to sob. The fierce storm turned gentle and sweet, warm rain stroked Elena’s shoulders as she sobbed into the grass.



When the new moon came Elena was ready. Her yard was nearly pitch black from the lack of moonlight but Elena’s fingers didn’t need the light. They knew the way. Her needle was cold polished aluminum, something that wouldn’t allow the darkness of the curse to stick to it. The yarn in her lap was a mix of navy blue and white. It was wool but with just enough acrylic mixed in to fool the untrained hand. She needed the natural fiber. It held magic better, and this spell must not fail. The pattern was simply called “Geese,” a deceptively gentle name for so dark a curse. She’d only made it once before when her mother taught her the pattern. When they were done they weaved in the ends, looked at their neat handiwork for a few moments, then promptly burned both blankets.

Elena began the foundation chain. The stitches spun off her hook one after another. Elena shuddered. It frightened her that her fingers could make something so dark so easily. There was only one thing to chant during this pattern.

“You will leave this earth. You will leave this earth.”

Elena could feel the heat from the curse radiating from the fiber as it drew across her fingers. The yarn did not flow smoothly as it normally did. The natural lanolin in the wool should have made it fly across her fingers and even provide a bit of moisture. Instead the yarn felt like twine dragged across raw flesh. Elena could not see it in the dark, but she could feel the blood welling up from her fingertips. The pain made her whimper but she could not stop. It

must be done. The wounds on her fingers grew deeper and she felt a thin trickle of blood go down one wrist. But the price had to be paid. There was always a price to be paid.

It was dawn when she weaved in the final end. She spread the blanket out on the dew soaked grass in front of her. It was beautiful to the eye. Graceful triangles called to mind the geese of the pattern name. But the geese were fleeing south from the winter, away from certain death. The malevolence of the curse radiated out from the blanket. Elena pulled her knees to her chest and rocked and cried for hours.

When the shower came Elena sent the gift along with her regrets. She claimed a nasty case of the flu. She could not bear to watch the other women ooh and ahh over her gift when she knew the curse it carried. Later one of the neighborhood children came with a slice of cake from the baby shower and note from Samantha that she had missed Elena and hoped that she would feel better soon. The little child could not understand why Elena wept over the cake.

Elena retreated into the house, her tears and hitching sobs bringing on a coughing fit. When she brought her hand away from her mouth she saw her palm covered with droplets of blood. *And so it begins*, she thought as she scrubbed her hands at the kitchen sink and put the cake down the garbage disposal.



Samantha's son took his first life on the day he was born. He was so large and the birth so violent that Samantha bled to death before the doctors could help. The boy was hale and hearty and did not seem to mind in the least that he was motherless. Bob took his son home and began to plan his wife's funeral. Immediately the boy began to sicken. He cried and coughed all through the night and on into the day. The neighborhood women took pity on Bob and took shifts helping him care for his new born son. Elena stayed away. The doctors came and could find no cause for the sickness. Nothing they did seemed to help. Samantha and Bob's little boy died when he was three days old.



Elena opened the door to find Bob standing on her porch with the geese blanket in his hands.

“Hi,” he said trying to smile and failing. “I wanted to bring this back to you. Sammy won’t be needing it anymore, and I... I thought maybe some other child could get some use out of it.” He thrust the blanket forward. The deep purple wells under his bloodshot eyes spoke of sleepless, tearful nights. His cheeks were gaunt and sunken. Elena tucked her hands under her arms.

“Oh, no, Bob,” she said. “I can’t take it back. I make those for each person. Why don’t you bury it with him?”

“That’s not a bad idea. Thanks, Elena.”

Elena watched his hunched shoulders retreat down the walk and sincerely hoped that the curse in his arms hadn’t touched him too deeply yet. Hopefully he would return to full health once the thing was in the ground. Her own breath rasped in and out of her lungs. She found it almost a comfort.



At the funeral the whole town remarked on how peaceful Samantha and her son looked in the coffin, and how absolutely heart wrenching it was to see her cradling little Sammy in her arms, wrapped in the blanket Elena had made.

It took Elena hours to steel herself to pay her respects. She hung to the back of the room, comforting others and offering the clichéd phrases that seem to be the only thing your mouth can find when faced with death. Finally, in a lull in the visitation there was just no other way to avoid it. The path was clear. Elena’s usual confident gait shrank to timid, mincing steps. Her heart fluttered in her chest like a trapped bird. What would she find among the lilies and gladioli that surrounded Samantha and her child?

Elena stood before the coffin, knees shaking. Samantha and the baby did indeed look serene. The undertaker had done a beautiful job on them both, making them into a recumbent waxen Madonna and child. Elena reached forth a trembling hand and touched the child. She could feel the heat of the curse in the blanket, but the child was empty; completely blessed empty. She could feel the echo of Samantha’s spirit in her shell, but the child had not stayed long enough to leave his mark on this flesh. Relief broke open in Elena’s belly and escaped in a great sob out her throat. Another breath hitched up her chest and she sobbed again, and this time great, fat tears followed down her cheeks. Her knees threatened to give out and friendly hands

guided her away. The hands of those she had patted and soothed patted and soothed her in turn. Someone gave her a glass of water.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “I think I need a bit of air.”

She stumbled outside, wrenching coughs shaking her body and filling her handkerchief with blood. *This will probably be my last public appearance*, she thought as her wobbly legs threatened to betray her. When the coughing stopped, she wiped her mouth and looked up to see Bob a small distance away also taking a bit of air, and for a rare moment he was alone. She hung back at first, then approached him.

“So, how are you doing?” she asked.

“About as well as can be expected I guess.” He flexed the corners of his lips upward.

“Tell me, Bob,” Elena said. “Do you believe in fate?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that some things are just meant to happen, and that no matter what you do, nothing can stop them.” Elena looked up at him and clutched her purse tighter. Tears threatened to roll down her cheeks again.

“That is a very comforting thought,” he said glancing back to the funeral parlor. “I think I do believe in fate. After something like this I think I have to.”

Elena’s shoulders relaxed. “Yes, I believe in fate too.”



Elena had been in bed for a week, refusing all offers for help in a kind but firm tone, when her cousin Kate swept into town. Elena lifted her head off the pillow, her eyes wide with surprise when Kate entered her bedroom and flung an overnight bag in a chair in the corner.

“What are you doing here? How did you get in?” Elena’s voice rasped out.

“You gave me a spare key when you bought the place, remember?” She felt Elena’s face for fever, then lifted her wrist to check her pulse. “And I’m here to help you since you’re obviously too stubborn to call for help. Wow, you look awful.” She began to trace the lines of Elena’s body with her hands hovering about six inches above.

In truth, Elena did look awful. Her robust frame had shrunk down to near skeletal proportions. Her eyes were bloodshot and glassy, and her hair hung in lank strings around her face. Formerly rosy skin was now gray and waxy, stretched tight over her bones.

“I don’t want any help,” Elena grunted as she levered herself into a sitting position, pushing Kate’s hands away.

“Excuse me?” Kate didn’t bother keeping the surprise out of her voice. “You may not want the help, sweetie, but you need it. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but you’re dying.”

“I know I’m dying. I deserve it.” Elena wheezed into another coughing fit and snatched up a tissue from the bedside table to spit out a mouthful of blood.

“Whoa, stop the presses here. You deserve it? I think you’ve got some explaining to do, missy. The Elena I know would never do anything to deserve anything anywhere near this bad.”

Elena laid back down on her side, curling into a fetal ball. “I’ve done something really awful, Kate. Trust me, I deserve this. Now just go away and let me die in peace.”

Kate sat down on the edge of the bed and began to stroke her cousin’s back. “Sweetie, you can talk to me, whatever it is. We can fight this.”

“Don’t you understand?” Elena said. “I don’t want to fight it. I deserve this.”

“Elena, what did you do?” Kate’s voice was gentle and she waited until her cousin had stopped crying before she asked again.

“Elena, what did you do?”

“I killed.” Elena could barely force out a whisper. “I killed a baby.”

Kate’s breath whistled past her teeth and she was glad her cousin couldn’t see her eyes grown wide with shock and horror. But she managed to keep her voice soft, “Why?”

“He was evil, Kate. So evil that the premonition made me sick. He was going to kill so many people. So much pain...” Elena rolled her face into her pillow and began to sob. Kate gathered Elena up and held her close, letting her cry it all out. When she finally stopped Elena looked up at her cousin with blood shot eyes.

“I really thought I did the right thing. I still think I did the right thing. But I have to pay for it, and I think my life for stopping all that misery is worth it. Do you understand?”

“I think I do,” Kate nodded and eased Elena back into a more comfortable position. “But I still can’t sit back and watch you die. That’s why I brought a few things.”

Kate unzipped her bag and produced a gorgeous fan pattern quilt, made from a riot of bright springtime colors.

“No, oh no, Kate,” Elena said. “You need to save that for someone else. Those take so long to make and the magic is so strong.”

“Sshhhh...” Kate snapped the quilt out over the bed and let it settle softly. She tucked it tight around Elena, making sure she was entirely cocooned. “Elena, trust me. Please, I want to do this for you.”

“But,” Elena furrowed her brow. “I’ll still have to pay the whole price. If I don’t do it now, I’m just going to have to keep paying in the next lifetime.”

“That’s true,” said Kate as she stroked the hair away from Elena’s face. “But think of it as an installment plan. You don’t have to pay it all at once.”

“I don’t know.” Elena could feel her pain start to ebb as the quilt began its work.

“You saved lives, Elena. Yes, you need to pay for what you did, but I don’t see the need for you to do it all at once. And there’s still so much more good you can do in this lifetime.”

“I suppose.” Elena yawned as healing sleep began to steal over her.

“I know,” Kate whispered as she kissed Elena’s forehead, then headed downstairs to start a pot of chicken soup.

