

The Bright Shawl, Colors of Tender Whispers Sample Chapter

SHE SAT UNDER the house, beyond the porch, far from the light. The thick, brick piers held the beams from the ground, giving her a place to lean against. If she leaned over at the waist, lowering her head when the beams threatened, she could walk. Bella felt safe there, even though the men still walked above her—their heavy treads rattling the boards.

Her father, Manuel Rodriguez, was among them. They were waiting on a shipment of drugs, money, or weapons that would arrive sometime in the evening. She wasn't sure, but she knew that when they gathered in one place, it was because they didn't trust each other enough to allow the other to take care of business. Sometimes, they drank and talked loudly, while other times, they smoked quietly and drank coffee. The nervous tension around them would crowd the room with sweat, smoke, and clenched jaws. Bella didn't intend to spend one more day with her stepfather or his associates—it was time to leave.

Manuel Rodriguez allowed these men to swelter in his kitchen. He kept them close and pushed his family to other rooms—away from their business. Sometimes, he allowed Bella's brother, Manny, to be present, especially if they decided to go to the restaurant for a meal. Manny was always included on such occasions, but Bella never questioned this. She was just glad they left her alone to find her own food and enjoy the quiet of an empty house. Only then did the stench of the men have a chance to evaporate, returning her mother's kitchen to the pleasant gathering place it used to be when Rosalinda, Bella, and their mother would bake there.

Bella's sister, Rosalinda, who was a year older than her, had already gone missing. Bella knew she would be next. It was just a matter of time before their father allowed it again. He would allow it, because he never really was their father. He was the man her mother, Mirabella Rodriguez Chavez, had married when Bella and Rosalinda were just toddlers.

Mourning the loss of their biological father, and wondering how she would support her young daughters, Mirabella had clung to the first man who showed her kindness. Bella knew, however, that Manuel Rodriguez had never been kind. He'd showered their mother with attention and empty promises to make a good life for her and her daughters. He'd described the large house, a luxury car, and no need for her to work outside of the home. Mirabella had listened to the silky words, looked into his chocolate eyes, and thought there was sweetness in both. Bella didn't blame her

mother. He could've been that sweetness, but he wasn't. There had been early signs that he was a controlling, cold man, but Mirabella had clung to the hope that she could change him.

Bella remembered her mother's excitement when she'd discovered she was pregnant with Manny. She had been elated when she gave birth to a boy, because it would surely encourage Manuel to be a positive role model for his son. "It will change him, Mija," Mirabella said. "It will make him a better man—a man his son can be proud to call 'Papi.'" That might have been the case, if Manuel was a normal person, but he wasn't. Instead of changing his character, he insisted Manny make him proud.

"Prove yourself to me, Hijo. Show me you are a man—be tough. Don't let anyone take advantage of you, and fight, if you have to." Those were the things Manuel insisted his son demonstrate to him. Her stepfather's control did not apply to his own behaviors—only those of others. Control was his goal every day.

Manuel was from Monterrey, Mexico, and an orphan from the age of twelve, taking odd jobs, and feeding himself and his younger brother who were homeless and streetwise. It was only natural that the brothers had fallen in with a gang looking for children to do odd jobs and take risks for them. They'd grown up in a culture of males looking for any way to get their next meal. Manuel and his brother, Raul, were calculated and determined, only looking out for themselves. Bella regretted that her mother had ever gotten mixed up with such men. In her attempt to find the kindness in them, Mirabella had committed herself and her daughters to a life she could not escape.

It was too late, now, though. They lived in San Antonio, Mirabella had been dead for three years, and Rosalinda had been gone for six months. Manny was thirteen, and although he attended school every day, Bella predicted he would be groomed by Manuel to participate in illegal activities.

She knew she would miss Manny, but Bella had to escape. She wouldn't tell him goodbye and risk him telling their father her plan. No, she would sit under the house in her secret spot, until the noise ceased. When the chairs stopped scraping across the floor, the foot shuffles were silenced, and the voices muted, she would creep from the crawl space with her backpack and walk under the interstate bridge, away from the lights of San Antonio, and head south. She planned to go to Corpus Christi, or maybe further east to Galveston. Bella wanted salt water and beaches—something to cleanse her past and help her start a new life.

Mirabella Chavez, Bella's mother was born in Mexico, but moved to Harlingen, Texas when she was a teenager with her parents. After several years, they became citizens of the United States. She had plans to go to college and study to be a teacher. Her plans changed when her parents were killed in a house fire. Mirabella, devastated by the loss and homeless, was taken in by friends of her parents, Paco and Petra Garcia. Mirabella worked in a clothing store for a few months and then married Paco's younger brother, Miguel. Miguel Garcia was the father of Bella and Rosalinda. Ten years older than Mirabella, he had a stable job, a place to live and offered Mirabella safety.

Bella had few memories of her father. She recalled him sitting on the porch after dinner each evening, smoking. Rosalinda would pull her in a wagon around a thick, prickly, bougainvillea, and they would giggle as a grey cat sprang from the undergrowth to attack the wagon. She remembered hearing her father's rattling cough and watching him wipe his mouth with a handkerchief. They would look up to see their mother, her bright shawl pulled close around her shoulders, standing next to their father, rubbing his back. Before Bella was three years old, her mother would find him slumped over at the kitchen table, dead of a heart attack. Mirabella wailed and people came, bringing food. Those are the things Bella remembered.

Much later in life, Mirabella told her daughters that their father's death from a heart attack was a blessing for him. He suffered from lung cancer and another breathing problem as the result of harmful chemicals he inhaled daily in his job. An attorney came to Mirabella asking her to join a class action suit against Miguel's employer, but she rejected it, suspicious of the attorney's motives. She found out later that many of the families of the men who developed the cancer received settlements from the suit. "I have not made good decisions since your father's death. Each time I thought I was doing what was right, but it is difficult to know sometimes. The only men I ever knew were my humble father, Paco, and Miguel, then I had to make a decision about trusting Manuel and the Anglo attorney who came to me with papers to sign." Mirabella told her daughters about the men in her life, trying to teach them to trust themselves, take care of themselves, and not rely on a man for support.

Bella didn't blame her mother. She knew Mirabella was young when she lost her parents and not much older when she lost her husband. She wanted to learn the lessons from Mirabella's experiences, but Bella wasn't sure that she would have made different decisions if she had been in Mirabella's place. Although, she thought she might have left Manuel before his illegal activities became so obvious. When she questioned her mother about him, Mirabella asked her to respect

her step-father and know that she was doing what she had to do. Bella didn't respect Manuel and knew she never could. She told herself her mother was trapped, unable to leave.

Manuel appeared before Bella turned four, courting their mother, bringing flowers, and promising a new life in San Antonio. Bella suspected Mirabella met him in her new job, tending bar, after Miguel's death. Bella and Rosalinda stayed with Paco and Petra in the evenings while Mirabella worked. Bella remembered the chickens in Petra's yard and eating ice cream Paco churned in a wooden freezer. She sometimes wondered why they could not have been happy there in their small house, visiting Petra and Paco, watching the grey cat behind the bougainvillea. It was a simple life, but it seemed to be all they needed. It was safe. Bella didn't think they needed a financial settlement to maintain that simple life.

Bella wondered about Manuel's seduction of her mother. What did he promise? Why was she so easily led to move the family and take her and Rosalinda from Paco and Petra—the security and family they enjoyed? Bella remembered a tenderness and quiet talking at bed time. Petra whispered stories about the ocean and the sky.

Petra talked to them before they left. Bella recalled the words. "Be good girls, *Mijas*. You will visit us. We will have ice cream and play with the cats," Petra said with tears in her eyes. Bella thought Petra knew they would never see her again. If she thought it would not put them in danger, she might go there—back to Harlingen and their little house. However, Bella knew she would be trailing danger, like a long ribbon behind her, when she left the large house in San Antonio. She would leave the massive structure with balconies and gardens to escape the life Manuel prescribed—the life her mother fell into as a prisoner of Bella's stepfather and his gang, but she would not be leaving home. Home could not be a prison where strange men gathered in the kitchen, waiting with clenched fists and narrowed eyes. Bella longed for the ease of walking into a room and knowing the people—seeing their spirits as accepting and relaxed. The taut anxiety in Manuel's kitchen robbed Bella and her siblings of the ability to bond. They were wary of other people—as clenched with their emotions and affection as the strange smelling men who visited their father, clogging their senses with the stench of their vices.

Bella read every book she could, sometimes checking out three at a time from St. Luke's library, bringing them back in a few days to check out more. She read seeking information, but also noting the characters and their relationships. Traveling to foreign places in the pages of the books, Bella wondered at the variety of people and locations. She longed to meet those spirits and

visit those places. She wanted to know the kind man with an open hand and heart who could sit with her and answer her questions about life, the skies and relationships. She longed to travel to foreign places. Instead she was like a caged animal, peering out in quick glimpses, seeking recognition in the faces she saw.

When Mirabella was killed in an automobile accident, there was little communication from Manuel about what happened to their mother. Bella had questions. She was never allowed to see her mother's body. Was her hair combed? Did someone wash the blood from her face? Were her hands folded? What did she wear? Manuel did not seem concerned about these details, but Bella worried. She had sleepless nights in her bed, worrying about her mother in a coffin. She talked with Rosalinda about her concerns and her sister held her as she cried, but there were no answers. The only thing that could stop the questions was another loss and it came, taking away the only shoulder she could lean toward.