

Excerpt from The Velvet Bridge

Chapter Four



The Right Place

Sam pushed the back door open then stepped aside, allowing Mattie to enter a large foyer. The first thing she noticed was the floor, inlaid with burgundy colored stones so highly glossed they appeared to be wet. She hesitated before walking into the house, putting one muddy foot down lightly in front of the other.

"It's alright, go on in," Sam said. He stuffed his gloves into the pockets of his dark overcoat before removing it along with his hat. He hung them carefully on the polished oak rack standing in front of the heavy beveled mirror that covered one entire wall of the foyer, from ceiling to floor. "Here, dear, let me take your coat," Sam said, holding his hands ready for the threadbare garment Mattie unbuttoned. "There." He hung it next to his.

Mattie tried to avoid the mirror reflecting her image, but the pathetic looking woman she saw there stunned her. She looked like a tramp who had wandered in by mistake. She saw little resemblance to herself. The long velvet dress dragged the floor, its hem wet and muddy from her flight toward the water barrels. Blotchy stains spotted the material, slicking the nap down in places. Her thin face, framed by wild, tangled curls, looked gaunt, longer than it should. *Fix yourself up, you'll feel better.* Her puffy, faintly shadowed eyes turned away as she licked her chapped lips, feeling the cracks the mirror did not reveal.

"Have a seat here," Sam said from the adjoining room, pulling out a chair, its seat thickly cushioned in lemon yellow. "I'll get you some coffee."

He had thrown his suit coat across the back of the chair at the end of the breakfast table, which sat in a window-seated nook just off the kitchen. The sunlight spilled into the room through white laced windows, its subdued rays casting speckled silhouettes of the lacy pattern across the shiny floor.

"Sugar, cream?" he asked.

"No, black's fine." Mattie stood beside the table, running her hand along the back of the honey blonde wood of a chair. *Hey, Mama, look at our new icebox.*

"Sit, sit, make yourself comfortable." He placed the cup of dark steaming coffee and its saucer in front of her.

Wearing a starched white shirt with gold initialed cuff links, his clean, efficient hands moved deftly. His well-proportioned body shifted agilely in creased gray trousers and red suspenders. A gold clip neatly clasped the finely striped tie. With the quickness of a young man, Sam's feet glided across the waxed tiled floor, his black shoes shining.

"Oh, forgive my manners, Mattie, the bathroom's just around that corner," he said with an indicating nod. "I'll go up and tell Claudia we're here. Eight o'clock's her getting-up time." He set a napkin-lined basket of sweet rolls, and a

small dinner plate, next to Mattie's coffee. "Enjoy your breakfast," he said with a friendly smile as he left the room.

Mattie entered the bathroom slowly, closing the door behind her quietly. A lightly scented fragrance, familiar but unidentifiable, filled the pale yellow room. A white porcelain basin stood beneath a lighted mirror, with the toilet next to it.

An oval bar of pink soap rested in a floral printed dish. Mattie lathered the soap under warm running water. She washed her face and arms in the sweet rose-scented fragrance.

She had eaten her second cinnamon roll, having helped herself to another cup of coffee, by the time Mr. and Mrs. Wright walked into the room. "Claudia, this is Mattie Featherstone."

Sam towered over his wife, a petite woman dressed in an ivory satin robe and matching tiny slippers. Her dark hair hung in a single braid over her left shoulder. Silver, springy strands curled softly about her face. Thin-skinned, her complexion was flawless with a delicate peach blush over porcelain cheekbones. Thinly etched lines crinkled at the corners of ebony eyes outlined by smoky lashes.

Claudia's smile began at the corners of her wide, full mouth, spreading like a spotlight across her face and its warmth mixed with the sunlight flooding the room. Mrs. Wright's husky voice, full of earthiness, contrasted her noble look of high breeding.

"Welcome, Mattie," she spoke loudly. "How's the service in this here kitchen?" She winked at Mattie and patted her husband's arm. "I'm not complaining, you understand," she teased as she poured herself a cup of coffee. "This man brews a stout cup of coffee, strong enough for my Cajun grandmamma." Her laugh, more visible than audible, shook her fashionably padded shoulders but hardly left her throat.

"It sure tastes good to me," Mattie said.

Sam leaned over Claudia, kissing the top of his wife's head lightly. "Mattie, Claudia, have a nice day," he said, hugging his wife briefly before getting back into his suit coat. "I'll be in Highland Park all day, at the new store. It'll give you two a chance to get acquainted, for Mattie to get settled in."

When he left, Claudia sat down across from Mattie. She took a gold case from the pocket of her robe, and offered a cigarette. "They're clove. I kinda like the taste," she said.

"No, thanks, but it's nice of you to offer." Mattie had never heard of clove cigarettes, and struggled to stifle the cough, which persisted despite her effort. What must this woman think of me? She could not remember the last time another woman had shown her friendship.

"Relax." Claudia patted Mattie's hand as if she had read her mind. "How long have you had that cough?"

"Oh, two or three days."

"Probably due to exposure. We'll run over to Dr. Percy's office in the morning. Let him check you over good. You feel okay, otherwise?"

"Yeah, I guess." Mattie ran her fingers through her snarled hair, gathering it together in the back, pulling it away from her neck.

"Well, I tell you what, why don't we get you situated in your apartment. You take a nice warm bath, and then we'll talk." Claudia laid the cigarettes down on the table. "You ready?" Claudia handed Mattie her coat, then slipped a peach-colored coat-length sweater over her robe. "It's just around the corner, but we better wrap up anyway. That wind cuts to the bone."

Claudia led Mattie through the garage, in front of a pale yellow Buick convertible parked on the other side of Sam's empty parking space. Three automobiles in one family amazed Mattie.

"Do you drive any these cars?" Mattie asked, as they hurried around the side of the house. A short flight of stairs led up to living quarters. Climbing the steps behind her, Mattie noticed that Claudia limped, dragging her left leg slightly.

"The convertible, but I never have enjoyed it. Too difficult with my leg," Claudia explained, with some shortness of breath, as she unlocked the door. "The other one belongs to our son," she said, with a deep sigh. Handing the key to Mattie, she shifted the conversation away from driving. "Here we are," she said, opening the door. "Sam probably failed to mention it, but your salary is fifteen dollars a week and includes room and board."

Mattie stood spellbound in the doorway, gripping the heavy brass key. The place was more than a room. The entrance opened into a small parlor furnished with white wicker. The room expanded the width of the apartment, with one wall entirely windows. White organza priscillas, ruffled and tied back, cascaded softly from opposite sides of the windows, brushing the rose carpeted floor. The walls were covered in satiny white wallpaper, etched daintily with embossed roses the color of vanilla ice cream. *Fifteen dollars a week!*

Floral patterned pillows decorated the settee and matching chaise lounge in a splash of deep green, pale yellow, and dusty rose. Dark English ivy spread its pointed green leaves about the top of a glass covered wicker cocktail table. Several magazines were stacked next to the plant. Framed prints, splashing vibrant scenes of green, yellow, deep rose and blue, hung about the room in just the right places.

Mattie's eyes fell on the console radio and record player in the corner. *Here, Edith Kay, let's put the record player right here. Or, do you think it would look better by the window? Yeah, there, Jude, put it there.*

"I think everything's here you'll need," Claudia called from the adjoining bedroom. *It's a dream. I'm still sleepin' in that jail cell, havin' one long dream. The probate officer, Leon, the bus, all that's part of this same dream.*

A compact kitchen area, decorated in cream and pale yellow and fully equipped with a small cook stove and ice box, occupied a nook at the rear. When her shoes sank into the carpet, Mattie slipped them off, leaving them beside the front door. In a daze, she padded through a large archway into the bedroom, hardly able to pull her eyes away from the sparkling little kitchenette as she followed the sound of Claudia's voice.

"There are several different sizes here." Claudia stood in front of an open closet, holding on to its door. "These are the uniforms we furnish all the store employees, and we send them out to be laundered every week." She removed

one of the navy blue shirtwaist dresses from its hanger. Elbow length sleeves puffed at the shoulders, then tapered into large cuffs, trimmed in white piping. The same trim edged the large pointed collar and wide lapels, continuing down the front of the bodice. Five large white buttons fastened the dress down the front to the waist, and the skirt was full and circular.

"The uniform is optional. But you might prefer not having the expense, or the upkeep, of a working wardrobe."

"Thank you, Mrs. Wright. They're so pretty." Mattie felt the starched cotton fabric. She was touched by the woman's tactfulness. *What wardrobe?*

"Aren't they?" Claudia returned the dress to the closet, smoothing the fabric, and added, "There's several different sizes of shoes here, too," as she closed the door. Then, pointing to an opened door next to the closet, she said, "There's the bathroom. And, you'll find underwear in the bottom drawer there." She pointed to a polished cherry wood dresser, its short legs curved in the French provincial style. "Oh, and please call me Claudia."

Mattie had trouble absorbing it all. She had never been in a place like this, never known people like these. Her eyes caressed the triple oval mirrors framed in the rich wood, the outer two adjusted for a three-way view of anyone seated at the matching dressing stool. The cherry wood bed posters reached halfway to the ceiling.

Above the headboard, a canvas painting, almost the width of the full-sized bed, displayed a field of bluebonnets so lifelike, Mattie thought she saw the wind blowing through them. At the foot of the bed, a similar bluebonnet print pieced into the pattern of a quilt, had been folded neatly across a white chenille spread. *Tonight, I will sleep in this bed—*

"There's soap, toothpaste, shampoo, all that, in the bathroom. Just look around for anything you need, and let me know if you don't find it. I'll meet you back downstairs when you're finished." Claudia flashed her sunny smile, and added, "No need to hurry. Nothing refreshes the soul like a hot soapy bath." Then, she left Mattie alone.

Mattie stood in the middle of the bedroom, burying her toes in the deep rose carpet, and marveled at the turn of events. She moved over to a large bay window at the back of the room. White curtains matched the ones in the parlor. She rested one knee on the floral cushion of the window seat, and looked over the grounds below her. *Fifteen dollars a week!*

Suddenly, the realization came over her that she was alone again. She listened for the sound of her heart beating, but heard only the whisper of the heat from the gas heater. She waited for the panic to grab her, for the inexplicable terror to grip her heart. Nothing happened. She laid the door key on the window seat. She had gripped the metal so tightly the imprint remained in her palm.

In the bathroom, the walls were covered in a Victorian rose print. A wall heater warmed the room with its bluish white flame, and a sparkling white tub waited for her. She turned on the faucets full force, filling the tub with hot steaming water. A shelf just above the faucets, recessed into the wall, contained bottles of shampoo, bath oils and crystals. A dainty porcelain dish held an oval bar of lavender-scented soap.

She sprinkled bath crystals from one of the bottles into the tub, swishing the water around with both her hands to dissolve the fragrant granules. *Some kinda mother. Some kinda mother. Some kinda—*

“Right now, I’m takin’ a long soakin’ bath, and then I’m gonna put on some clean underwear,” she interrupted the condemning voices in her head. She unbuttoned her dress and let it drop to the bath mat beneath her bare feet. She sat naked on the toilet, wondering how much she should tell Dr. Percy in the morning, and waited for the uncomfortable trickling to stop.

A thick, soft towel and washcloth were draped over the side of the tub. She completely submersed herself in the hot perfumed water, soaking her head for a minute before sitting up to get the shampoo. She lathered her hair, scrubbing vigorously. Then she soaped her body, rubbing herself hard with the washcloth. She refilled the tub, and rinsed herself in clear warm water, which she scented with lavender oil. Reluctant to leave her bath, yet wishing to explore the apartment, she climbed out and wrapped herself in the big towel. A cabinet above the toilet contained more clean towels and washcloths. She wrapped a towel around her dripping hair.

In the mirrored medicine cabinet above the lavatory, an assortment of creams, salves, packaged toothbrushes and paste, bottled aspirin, and sundry toiletries were arranged neatly on glass shelves. She brushed her teeth vigorously, and then smoothed silky lotion over her chapped face and lips.

When she had finished in the bathroom, she found plain white underwear in the dresser drawer. The cotton panties fit her snugly. She chose one of several bras and pulled a soft slip over her head, liking the feel of the rayon crepe against her skin, the frothy lace hem against her freshly shaven legs. She pulled thin cotton stockings slowly over her feet. Stretching them tightly, she rolled them over elastic garters to just above her knees.

She took one of the dresses from its hanger and pulled it on over her head. Carefully, she buttoned the bodice and smoothed the fabric over her hips. Turning sideways, she patted her flat stomach, inspecting herself from three directions in the mirror. She looked good.

She wanted to play the phonograph, to hear some music, listen to the radio, to forget the upheaval of the last two years. She wanted to forget everything! Suddenly, in a blink of an eye, her luck had changed. She couldn’t believe it.

“Work! I have work! I got me a job, a good job.” She ran to the dresser and sat down to brush her hair, astounded by the sound of her own voice in this beautiful place. *When you have found suitable employment and can care for your daughters properly, you may petition the court to reinstate your parental rights.* The social worker’s words reminded Mattie again of the business card left in the pocket of her old sweater back at the house.

“I sure am not goin’ back to Eagle Ford Road,” she said to the pretty-papered walls. “I’ll get her number some other way. Later.”

Since the rent had not been paid, everything had most likely been moved out anyway. That’s what happened if the weekly rent was more than three days late. Mattie had watched Mr. Whisenhunt’s men load up other people’s stuff and

haul it off many times. "I can't think about it now," Mattie told herself through the mirror, "I've got a chance here, and I'm not gonna mess this up."

She went into the front room, and sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the heater, she brushed her hair dry. That's when the thought came that she probably wouldn't have gotten this job if Judith and Edith Kay had been with her. That's when Mattie began to justify her neglect. *Where would they sleep? There is just one bed here, so I don't think the Wrights' were looking for a family to move in. The best thing for me to do is keep quiet about my kids. Maybe this is the reason everything happened like it did. Even Hugh David's dying?* Guiltily, she squelched that thought. *But if I'd slept just a few minutes longer this morning, I'd probably have missed Sam. Somebody else would be here now, and I'd be back at that bus. Judith and Edith Kay are probably better off, too. At least they'll eat regular. And with Judith pregnant—* "No, this is the right thing for all of us." Hmmm, the Wright thing, she mused. "It's a sign!"

Just like that, she decided not to find her girls, not for a while. "I need some time," she whispered. "I can't help them if I can't help myself." And with that, she defended her decision.

At the dresser, she found matching combs decorated with tiny coral seashells. She brushed her hair up and away from her face, catching it firmly in place on each side toward the back of her head with the combs. She powdered her nose. *Clings for hours* the box of face powder promised, the words engraved across the top of its round lid. Mattie noticed the drawer contained a whole set of facial products. Cleansing cream, skin freshener, rose petal foundation lotion. Revlon's Hildegard Rose lipstick, a subtle pinkish gold shade, with matching nail polish. The lipstick felt creamy on her lips, tinting them lightly, accenting the pale blush that had come naturally to her cheeks. She examined her chipped nails, and quickly removed the old polish. She worried that she was taking too long, but she couldn't resist a quick coat of the pinkish gold shade.

In the closet, inside one of the shoeboxes, she found a navy pair, just her size. They laced up, and the leather fit comfortably around her narrow foot. The heels were slightly wedged, the thick rubber of the soles similar to nurse's shoes. She would have preferred something more feminine but banished the thought, fearful that even a hint of ungratefulness could reverse her good fortune. Besides, she would be getting a paycheck now. *Fifteen dollars. A week!* Her old dishwashing job had only paid five dollars a week. She couldn't believe she would be making so much money. *No rent!* She jumped up and down, hugging herself. "Oh, my God, oh, my God," she squealed.

Before leaving the apartment, she rolled up her old muddy shoes in the dirty velvet dress, and stuck the dreary bundle under her arm. Taking the key from the window seat, she closed the door softly behind her. Locking it, she slipped the heavy key into her dress pocket. Halfway down the stairs, she realized she had left her coat lying in the floor where she had dropped it. "I'd hate to put it over this dress, anyway," she murmured.

At the bottom of the stairs, she stopped long enough to discard the old clothes. Stuffing the stained velvet bundle into the trash can with all the other

garbage, she tightly closed the lid. Then she tapped lightly on the back door and waited for it to open again.