

## The ButterMaid

Ruby leaned down, pinched the rattlesnake behind the jaw, flipped it over and milked its venom sacs. Its rattler buttons ticked like a Timex gone haywire. She reached for the deadbolt on the back door. The snake's tail flopped and the rattler buttons shook. The slick scales felt loose between her fingers, so she tightened her grip, enraging the rattlesnake even more. Once she got the door open, she flung the rattler with all her might, hoping it would land in Oklahoma. It flailed and flipped in midair, then hit the ground with a thud and a cloud of dust. Like a shot, it took off in the opposite direction, under the barbed wire fence that divided her property from Earl Glidden's back pasture.

Those damn rattlesnakes snuck into the back pinsetter room of the Devine Bowl every chance they could get. The cool concrete in the hot summer was just too inviting. But Ruby didn't have time for that kind of business this morning. She had gone back to that musty room in the first place to collect the cardboard box with *V&H Wedding* scrawled in purple magic marker on the side in her daughter Violet's curlicue handwriting. She found the box up on the top shelf and by climbing onto the mechanical workings of the bowling alley's pinsetters, she was able to lift it down from the shelf and set it on the concrete floor where the snake had previously lay prone.

The alley's dusty inner workings made her nose twitch. As she opened the cardboard flaps, a wad of tulle spilled out and she brushed it aside. Beneath it sat four rolls of pale purple crepe paper, which wouldn't be nearly enough. Luckily, she'd bought more. Rifling through the rest she found ten white, fold-up honeycomb bells; purple satin ribbon already tied into bows, but now flat as an armadillo crossing Highway 90; and an opened package of paper doilies. Piled on the very bottom of the box, in neat stacks, were lavender paper napkins. Picking one up, she turned it over to see the silver embossing:

*Violet & Harley*  
*July 10, 1966*  
*True Love Forever*

Biggest lie ever told, Ruby said to herself. She quieted her mind from going down that road and steadied herself with a memory of her dark-haired Violet in the white, high-necked gown instead. Ruby'd been the one who wanted the napkins—she thought it would make the event more sophisticated. She'd had to order a minimum of one thousand from the wedding shop over in Del Agua, even though less than a thousand folks actually lived in Devine, Texas, including the ranchers on the outskirts. The napkin salesgirl had assured her that folks would use two or three napkins apiece. Turned out all the wedding guests thought they looked so pretty they didn't want

to waste them. Judy Harper had brought in the roll of paper towels she always kept in the back-seat of her Oldsmobile and everyone passed that around instead. So Ruby'd been stuck with more than nine hundred leftover, lavender, lying napkins.

Almost ten years had passed since that day, so Ruby saw no point in letting the napkins sit in the box. Maybe with the wrong names, folks wouldn't feel so bad about using them. Lina and Jason, the soap-opera bride and groom, wouldn't actually be at this wedding reception anyhow. The real nuptial vows would be recited in Hollywood, California, on the set of *Only One Life* at the CBS studios.

Lina and Jason's reuniting had everyone in Devine, at least the womenfolk, so elated that they had decided to hold a wedding reception at Ruby's bowling alley, the Devine Bowl. The ladies even tried to have the actual wedding in Devine. Suddy Wilson wrote a letter to the president of CBS saying that since all this fancy decorating and cake baking would be going on anyway, CBS was welcome to film the wedding episode in Devine—"a town of God-fearing Texans." She'd written "a town of God-fearing Americans" first, but everyone urged her change it to Texans since they really considered themselves to be quite different. In that same letter, Suddy offered up her husband Chester's services. Since he was the minister of the First Methodist Church, all the ladies figured he ought to officiate. They were willing to forego the fact that Lina and Jason practiced Presbyterianism. There was also the issue of their two divorces each, but no one brought that up.

As they waited for a reply, the sheriff assured the ladies that the whole cast and film crew of *Only One Life*, and then some, could come to town. He could handle it, he'd had crowd control training. But the ladies never heard back from CBS.

Ruby hauled the box of decorations from the pinsetter room, up past the bowling lanes whose maple ribbing seemed to echo the crash and bang of bowling balls even when the place sat empty on a quiet morning like this. Ruby wondered if maybe that echo was permanently in her head. When she walked toward the front lobby she caught sight of her sister, Loralva. Ruby hadn't heard the ring of the cowbell tied to the door handle, but Loralva obviously had arrived early and hoisted herself up onto the counter next to a big metal washtub. Loralva held her legs straight out in front of her, admiring the pair of white ostrich-hide cowboy boots on her feet. Today her hair matched the color of the boots. She had a wig for every occasion—soap opera weddings included.

"Don't even think about walking anywhere near my maple lanes in those boots," Ruby said, setting the box of decorations on the other side of Loralva. "And that dress—that the same one you married Shep, then Buck, in? Shorter than is legal in Devine, don't you reckon?"

"Check out my earrings, Ruby honey." Loralva held back thick wisps of platinum curls from her temples to show off the rabbit's feet, ignoring Ruby's put-down as always.

"Your good luck charms already ain't working," Ruby said, pointing toward the glass front doors.

Imogene Davidson marched her heels through the parking lot gravel as she headed toward them, arms loaded down with white tablecloths. Ruby turned her attention back to the decorations, pulling a honeycomb bell from the box to tape to the RENT SHOES HERE sign that hung just above them. Loralva slid off the counter, turned on her boot heels, and said, "Catch you after the party gets going," then took the metal washtub with her as she pushed through the swinging doors of the Idyll-On-Up Saloon, which was next door to the Food Alley snack bar. Loralva would be mak-

ing what she called Mexican champagne—lemonade-flavored Kool-Aid, fizzy water and tequila. The metal washtub was the closest they could find to a punch bowl.

Loralva dresses bold and talks tough, but she's yellow bellied in the end, Ruby thought, her sister having left her to tend to Violet's mother-in-law all alone.

The lady huffed through the doors, cowbell clanking with her arrival, and dropped the tablecloths on the counter where the washtub had been sitting. "Ruby!" Imogene always shouted as though whatever she had to say was the most dire news. "I got the cake! Come help me bring it inside!" Whenever she got excited she grew even louder.

Ruby followed and together they hoisted the three-tiered wedding cake out of Imogene's El Dorado, lugged it inside the bowling alley, and lifted it onto the shoe rental counter, where Imogene wanted it prominently displayed.

"It's free advertising for Becca Ann's wedding cake business! I'm so proud of her. Becca Ann's practically like a daughter to me. She does everything I tell her to do." Imogene stood back and admired her contribution to the wedding reception.

The icing reminded Ruby of wet cement, not just because it was dirty-dishrag gray, but also because the right side of the layers had begun to cave in. Ruby tilted her head, thinking that if she set it on the back table that only had three legs and leaned to the left, the cake might not look so lopsided.

"It's not just for eating!" Imogene hollered. "It's to make it seem like a real wedding." She patted her hard-sprayed bouffant hairdo, black with thick white stripes on each side that looked pale purple under the fluorescent lighting. Then, in a normal tone of voice—Imogene's version of a whisper even though there was no one else around to hear her—she said, "This wedding ceremony and reception will be a practice run. I've got it all planned, Ruby!" She pulled a small paper sack from her purse. "Becca Ann and my Harley will cut the cake. Hand in hand!"

Ruby felt like a cactus needle had pierced her heart. She knew what Imogene was saying. Violet had run off, Harley should have a new wife. Imogene was shoving Violet's memory to the side.

From the paper sack Imogene pulled two dolls. One was a two-inch plastic bridegroom in a tuxedo and the other a Skipper doll, Barbie's younger sister, dressed in a yellow sleeveless sundress. She stuck them both into the top of the cake.

"Those ain't wedding folk," Ruby said. "They ain't even the same size."

"Becca Ann and I have already talked about it and all I have to do is get Harley to show up here this afternoon." Imogene jabbed the girl doll into the cake down to her rubber knees.

"She looks like she's fourteen," Ruby said.

"Finally, I have found someone perfect for my Harley. Plus, Becca Ann complements my personality."

"And he looks to be forty-five." Ruby cocked her head at the cake.

"He's wearing a tuxedo!" Imogene said as though that explained away any discrepancy in their ages. She stepped back to admire the happy couple.

From the box of decorations, Ruby took the lavender crepe paper and tore off a short strip from the end of the roll. She draped it over Skipper's face and tacked it to her head with a piece of tape. "There. A veil," Ruby said. That way she won't see her mother-in-law coming at her, Ruby figured.

Imogene slapped Ruby's hand away from the cake. "Won't matter. It's just for show!" Hands on her hips, she said under her breath, "The real cake will be store bought for sure."

After Imogene left to spread the tablecloths over the scoring tables, Ruby hung the crepe paper and the bells around the shoe rental counter and cake.

"Did you get the bridge mix and mints?" Imogene shouted from Lane Six.

Bridge mix? Ruby thought. Nope, she'd bought red tamales and spicy peanuts. What didn't get eaten she could sell at the snack bar after the wedding. She looked at the cake. To the girl doll she said, "You'd probably be better suited for Harley than my Violet ever was. But it still ain't right." Becca Ann with her milk-and-water ways made a much more appropriate bride for Harley, but it still violated the idea in Ruby's mind that Violet would return soon. She'd only been missing four years. Ruby still had hope. She still kept a box of Violet's things. Yet most of the hope had flitted away, hadn't it? Until it fit in that one box sitting in the back of the hall closet.

"You know, Ruby," Imogene shouted from Lane Five, "Becca Ann has such a nice smile, and whenever I ask her to do anything she grins like she wouldn't rather do nothing else! What more could you ask for in a daughter-in-law?"

To be home tending my grandkids, Ruby answered in her head. Except for Bubbie's mean streak, which was as wide as old Mrs. Parker who ate nothing but peach cobbler and pork rinds, Ruby couldn't understand why Violet would leave those sweet faces behind.

She wished those kids would run squealing through the bowling alley right this instant so she could give them a big hug, but she had dropped them at the Johnsons' house earlier. Ida Mae Johnson's oldest boys had been assigned babysitting duty so all the women in town could be free to attend their *Only One Life* wedding reception.

"Judy Harper and the extra TVs are here!" Imogene yelled.

Judy Harper's brother-in-law had a TV repair place over in Del Agua and he'd agreed to lend them a few RCA television sets that he'd fixed but hadn't gotten around to calling the owners to come and pick up yet. Ruby hoped he'd sent at least one color set, because a special event like this should be in Technicolor, not just black and white.

At the same time as Imogene's shout Ida Mae Johnson walked through the front glass doors and asked, "Where should I put these ladyfingers, Ruby?" She carried a platter of pink and green rectangular sandwiches covered in Saran Wrap.

"All the food's going on the shoe rental counter," Ruby said, pointing next to the gray wedding cake. Then she went to help Judy Harper lug in the TVs.

As the two of them set the last of the borrowed TVs up next to the deep fat fryer in the Food Alley, Ruby overheard Imogene say to Ida Mae, who was busy arranging the ladyfingers, "Becca Ann will walk along here to the trellis I saw in a bridal store window in San Antonio. It'll go right between Lanes Three and Four."

Ruby didn't want to know any more and went in the opposite direction toward the shoe rental counter to see what the other ladies brought as they arrived. Peeking under a glass CorningWare lid, she saw that her sister, Loralva, had made her signature dish: Vienna sausages in a special secret chili sauce. Loralva called them puppy peters. Besides the cement-colored cake and puppy peters, there were Ida Mae's pink and green ladyfingers, which she brought to every potluck, and Suddy Wilson had fixed up a lime Jell-O and mock pecan salad. It was a cost-cutting *Redbook* recipe that replaced pecans with pretzel pieces.

More and more ladies arrived and asked Ruby where to put their dishes and what they could do to help. She had Judy Harper blowing up balloons and Ida Mae setting out paper doilies and the lavender napkins. Ruby asked her to be sure and turn the napkins upside down so it wasn't obvious right off the bat that they were leftovers. The Devine ladies didn't know what *Only One Life's* Lina had chosen for her wedding colors, but they assumed that yellow and green balloons would be okay since that's all the Rexall had in stock.

Ruby found Suddy Wilson filling Baggies with rice, then tying them with twist ties.

"Imogene said we could throw the rice at Becca Ann and Harley," Suddy said through a twist tie hanging out of her mouth. "Another wedding." She elbowed Ruby. "Becca Ann and Harley together. Isn't that just glorious?"

Ruby shrugged. "Ain't sure it's legal. Only been four years that Violet's been missing." She picked up a Baggie to help.

"Imogene says all she has to do is file some paper at the court house and Harley's divorced on grounds of 'abandonment,' " Suddy said. "But besides that, Ruby, the Bible says that a man should not have to suffer the loneliness of not having a wife. You must understand."

Ruby didn't know where in the Bible it said that, but she wasn't about to argue with Suddy. "I can't just give up on Violet," she tried to explain. She twisted the twist tie so tight an end snapped off.

"Violet ain't here now," Suddy replied, picking grains of rice off the Formica with her fingertip and dropping them into her Baggie.

Ruby looked at Suddy one too many seconds longer than she should have, and that churchy smile the lady wore for Chester's Methodist congregation slid off and was replaced with a bitter pickle look. "It's time, Ruby," Suddy said, knotting off a Baggie of rice, "that you accept your Violet is never coming back."

With a slam, Ruby folded up the metal folding chair that leaned against the counter next to her, snatched a roll of crepe paper from the decorations box, and turned away from Suddy and her Uncle Ben's rice.

"Ruby, we been praying for her return for four years now. We're all prayed out." Suddy's church smile returned with a syrupy pitch.

Ruby stomped off to hang crepe paper. She knew that's what the whole town thought—that Harley shouldn't have to suffer. He'd suffered enough. That was one of the reasons Ruby had taken Bunny and Bubbie into her home in the first place, so that he wouldn't have more to worry about. His job at the Idyll County Fire Department, where he had four days of twenty-four-hour duty at a time, was inconvenient for child rearing. Ruby had proven herself good at taking in strays, and since no one in Devine had ever heard of a man raising kids all alone, Ruby volunteered to take over, with Imogene backing her, relieved she wouldn't have to be the one. But besides the concern about Harley, Ruby also knew, and she'd known it all along, that the town had long since given up on Violet. There was something else she knew about Violet's flight; Suddy wasn't saying it, but Ruby knew the whole town thought: *good riddance*.

Ruby stood on tiptoe on the metal folding chair, and reaching for the corner of the ceiling above the Lustre King 300 ball polisher, she attached a twisted yellow streamer of crepe paper to the ceiling with Scotch tape. She liked being across the room from the chitchat. She would rather admire the six shiny maple lanes. Her bowling alley had always been her prized possession,

something that she could count on. From the height of the chair, she noticed the stainless steel on the electronic ball retrievers needed polishing. Also, one of the saloon doors hung crooked, but there was no point in fixing that. Loralva always hung over it, talking to all the fellas when she worked nights in the bar. It would sag again in no time.

Across the room, her dead husband Rascal's picture hung over the front doors, beaming at all who passed through. He wore his blue and gold U.S. Champion bowling shirt, holding up his ball engraved with the words, *300 Points. Perfect Game.* That's what he always strove for. "Roll a little off center," he'd say. Yep, Ruby thought, things were definitely off center.

Before climbing down from her perch, Ruby took stock of the rest of the goings-on. Balloons floated all over the floor, getting kicked up into the air as all the Devine ladies milled around, wearing their best dresses, their hair poofed and teased and sprayed. Becca Ann set out bowls of bridge mix over by the scoring table on Lane Six. Apparently Imogene had called and told her to pick some up on her way over. Now Imogene stalked over and whispered something in Becca Ann's ear, probably correcting the girl on her bridge mix serving. The look on Becca Ann's face made Ruby feel a little bad for her, but the white satin headband and small lacy veil over the back half of her dishwater blond hair made Ruby change her mind. She stepped back down to the bowling alley floor.

With the crepe paper hung and Loralva's washtub of Mexican champagne hauled out from the Idyll-On-Up to the shoe rental counter, Ruby had just enough time to run home and change. Fortunately there was only a carport's distance between her house and the bowling alley.

She had picked out the butterfly blue chiffon dress she'd worn to Violet's wedding, thinking it was appropriate for today's wedding too. It'd been hanging inside the plastic bag ever since the first time it was worn. She'd ordered a special pair of red, white and blue patent leather bowling shoes for the upcoming U.S. bicentennial, and she couldn't resist making them part of her outfit today. As she made her way back to the bowling alley, she'd look down at their shininess now and again.

She stopped at the fridge on her way to get her jalapeño pie, which she'd already cut into little squares, each one speared with a colored toothpick. Then she headed back to the wedding reception preparations. As she crossed the bowling alley, going from one TV to another and flipping them to the same channel, Imogene hollered, "Ruby, be sure to give Becca Ann the name of the store where you got the napkins! She wants to order the same. Don't you, Becca Ann?"

Becca Ann nodded and smiled.

Loralva joined the party and stood next to the washtub of Mexican champagne. "Don't worry none, Ruby honey," she said. "Word is that Harley got called out to help untangle a cow from a barbed wire fence. He won't be showing up." She handed Ruby a paper cup. "Here. Jose Cuervo will make you feel better."

As Ruby took a long sip her chest unclenched and her wrinkles smoothed out. "You got a knack, Loralva." Her sister wiggled her drawn-in black eyebrows. Ruby rested against the counter for a moment.

"I was thinking we'd play Patsy Cline's 'Crazy' during the party after the wedding," Loralva said, looking around the room at the crowd. "We don't have nothing else that suits the occasion on the jukebox anyhow."

Ruby ignored her sister, knowing marriage didn't suit her, having just ended her fifth. "We'll

leave the wedding march up to CBS,” Ruby said, taking another swig of the champagne concoction. “And Hank Williams has some ballads we can play during the reception.” Ruby left her sister’s side to make certain everyone’s paper cup was filled.

Violet’s wedding decorations blowing around in the air conditioner’s blast had Ruby’s stomach churning. The ladies began taking their seats in the rows of metal folding chairs set up in front of each TV. “If you’re not wearing bowling shoes, please remember to keep your heels off the maple lanes,” she announced over the microphone. She flipped on Rascal’s collection of neon beer signs around the alley, which gave the bowling alley a nice, pinkish glow.

“It’s time!” Judy Harper hollered from the RCA set over by the Lustre King 300. The theme song from *Only One Life* gushed out into the bowling alley as they turned the volume on each set to full blast. Ruby chose a spot to sit right next to the color TV in the Food Alley.

“Becca Ann, you stand right over here by my side,” Imogene said, everyone shushing her. The TV wedding guests filled their pews, settling down just the way the ladies at the Devine Bowl had slipped into their folding chairs. The bride’s aunt, who still had amnesia from a car crash just weeks before and now wore an eye patch, sang a solo of “True Love of Mine.” Then Lina walked down the aisle as Jason’s drug-dealer cousin, who’d been to rehab twice already, played the wedding march on the church organ. Ruby was relieved they hadn’t had the real wedding at the Bowl since the train on Lina’s dress stretched longer than practically one entire maple bowling lane, and the flower arrangements reached higher than Ruby’s carport awning. As the bride and groom stood in front of the preacher at the pulpit, Lina opened her mouth for what Ruby knew would be “I do.” Then, with all the Devine ladies’ mouths poised to say the words along with her, the station went to commercial.

“Dadgumit!” Suddy said, her hands clasped in prayer.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Jason’s already seeing other women again.” Loralva brushed off pink bread-crumbs from among the fringe pieces of her white satin minidress. “I’d snatch him away from that Lina if I had the chance.”

Ruby hoped it wasn’t true, that Jason would be faithful this time, just as she wished her sister could be.

While the gossip and wonderings swirled, Ruby looked down to admire her new red, white and blue bowling shoes one more time, and worried that they might get scuffed before the bicentennial celebration.

“Ruby, where can we find more napkins?” someone behind her asked. Might have been Ida Mae Johnson, she couldn’t tell over the TV commercial jingle: *If it’s ButterMaid, it’s better made*. On the bowling alley floor, a balloon popped a few feet away from the TV stand, making the ladies scream, then laugh.

From her place standing right next to Ruby and the TV set, Suddy gasped. “Why, my Lord, our prayers really did work!”

Across the room where the second TV sat, Ida Mae said, “Wait ’til Imogene gets a load of this!”

Judy Harper whooped, “Oh, I’ve got to tell—” but with everyone worth telling already at the Bowl, Judy couldn’t think of who to share the news with.

“Ain’t that your Violet?” Suddy poked at Ruby’s arm. Ruby whirled back to the set. Suddy had to be imagining things. It was probably just somebody who looked like her Violet.

“No doubt about it!” Suddy said, this time yanking Ruby by the ear and bringing her face right up to the screen. But she hadn’t had to yank too hard, because as soon as Ruby’s eyes locked onto that screen she knew what she saw. She mouthed the words, “It can’t be.” But it was. The reality hit her brain with a big splat.

Four years had gone by, but she still knew the small kink that that wrist made when she walked, the tilt of her head that stayed a little more to the left and the smile that only Ruby knew held something other than happiness in it. The parts of her Violet Ruby didn’t recognize were the checkered minidress with the smocking, the two thick braids of hair, and the face all made up with big long eyelashes like Elsie the Cow. Violet wasn’t speaking, just smiling, blinking those eyelashes and swinging her milk bucket. In the background of the screen, a black and white Jersey cow grazed while a chorus, sounding like a holy church choir, sang the dairy product’s jingle. Sure enough, her Violet was the ButterMaid.

Ruby waved her arms in the air; she wanted to get Loralva’s attention, but didn’t want to turn her eyes away from the screen and her daughter. Her voice box closed up and she felt like she was drowning. Little John Henry Edelman drowned in thirty seconds one Sunday down at the river—the same amount of time as a TV commercial.

Suddy Wilson screamed in Ruby’s ear, “The Lord has returned our lamb to her flock.”

Judy Harper bellowed out, “It’s Violet Davidson!”

“The ButterMaid!” Ida Mae squealed.

As the ladies screamed, the TV chorus still sang, *If it’s ButterMaid, it’s better made.*

“Hot damn, Ruby honey! Your Violet’s in Hollywood!” Loralva said, pushing her way through the tight crowd around the TV set. “That’s where the game shows are!” She put one long skinny arm around Ruby. “Hollywood here we come!” Then she hugged and squeezed so tight Ruby felt her dress buttons crushing into her skin. Seeing her Violet there in the checkered dress allowed her to finally breathe out and away her old worries that the girl’s bones had been stripped clean by a coyote. But, Lordy—Hollywood? Could that be the next worst thing?

Metal folding chairs clanked and crashed as Imogene pushed her way forward, then pretended to faint. Kneeling on the floor next to her, Becca Ann fanned a lying lavender napkin over her.

While everyone crowded around the fallen Imogene, Ruby reached out to touch Violet. But her fingers thumped to a stop at the glass screen and she felt the fuzzy tingle of static electricity instead.

As the jingle tinkled its last note, Violet skipped out the other edge of the screen. The hem of her checkered dress swished just below her bottom.