



Fallen Hearts (Casteel)

By V.C. Andrews

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Virginia Andrews: 'Beautifully written, macabre and thoroughly nasty... it is evocative of the nasty fairy tales like Little Red Riding Hood and The Babes in the Wood, with a bit of Victorian Gothic thrown in. ... What does shine through is her ability to see the world through a child's eyes' Daily Express 'Makes horror irresistible' Glasgow Sunday Mail 'A gruesome saga... the storyline is compelling, many millions have no wish to put this down' Ms London 'There is strength in her books - the bizarre plots matched with the pathos of the entrapped' The Times

About the Author

One of the most popular authors of all time, V.C. Andrews has been a bestselling phenomenon since the publication of her spellbinding classic *Flowers in the Attic*. That blockbuster novel began her renowned Dollanganger family saga, which includes *Petals on the Wind*, *If There Be Thorns*, *Seeds of Yesterday*, and *Garden of Shadows*. Since then, readers have been captivated by more than fifty novels in V.C. Andrews' bestselling series. V.C. Andrews' novels have sold more than one hundred million copies and have been translated into sixteen foreign languages.

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Chapter 1: *Promises of Spring*

I sat on the long front porch of the cabin, reading and rereading my letter to Pa. It was a warm May morning, spring ahead -- from the cold dark winter of death and mourning, gradually warming with the promise of spring, finally bursting into warm, burgeoning summer. The sparrows and robins, were singing, Bitting from branch to branch, gently shaking the leaves. Sunlight wove its way through the woods, threading strands of gold. from birch to hickory to maple, turning the leaves where the hot bathed them. Ile world looked glorious and alive.

I took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet, fresh perfume of blossoming flowers and rich green leaves. Above me, the sky was deep cerulean blue and the candy cotton puffs of clouds stretched and curled delicious shapes, like babies stretching in sleep.

Logan had been them from the clay I returned to Winnerow. He had been there through the terrible after Tom's death, while Pa was in the hospital. He had been them after Pa had returned with Stacie and little Drake to his own home in Georgia. He had been there when Grandpa died, leaving we alone in the cabin of my childhood, now rebuilt and refurbished into a cozy home. He had been there on the, first day I began teaching my dear students at the Winnerow Grammar School. I laughed to myself now, recalling that first day, getting ready to test my competence, to see if I really could be the teacher I'd always dreamed of being.

I had come out of the cabin, just as I had this morning, intending, as I did most every day, to take a moment's pause to sit in Granny's old rocker and look out through the Willies before starting my journey down to the school. Only on this first morning, when I opened the door, there was Logan standing by the steps, a wide, happy smile on his face, his dark sapphire eyes brightening in the morning sun.

"Good morning, Miss Casteel." He performed a grand bow. "I have been sent here to escort you to your classroom. It's a fringe benefit of the Winnerow School System."

"Oh, Logan!" I cried. "You got up so early to walk up here.

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"It wasn't so early. I get up this early to open the drugstore. It's three times the size it was when we were high school students," he said proudly, "and demands a lot more work. Miss Casteel," he added, holding out his hand. I walked down the steps to take it and we started down the mountain path, just the way we had when we were high school sweethearts.

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It seemed so much like the old days -- when Logan and I trailed behind Tom and Keith and Our Jane, with Fanny taunting us, trying to provoke and tease Logan away from me with her lewd and lascivious behavior, finally giving up and running off in a sulk when she saw that he wouldn't divert his attention from me. I could almost hear my brothers, and sisters' voices ahead. Despite how hard our lives were then, the memories brought tears to my eyes.

"Hey, hey," Logan said, seeing my eyes begin to fill with tears, "this is a happy day. I want a big smile and I want to hear your laughter echo through the Willies, just the way it used to."

"Oh, Logan, thank you. Thank you for being here, for caring."

He stopped and turned me toward him; his eyes were serious and full of love.

"No, Heaven. It's I who should thank you for bein as beautiful and as lovely as I remember you. Its as if" -- he looked around, searching for the words -- "as if time stood still for us and everything that we thought happened since was only a dream. Now we are waking tip and once again you: are here I am here with you, and I have your hand in mine. I'll never let it so again," he vowed.

A tingle traveled through my fingers laced through his, a tingle of happiness that reached my heart and set it pounding the way it had that first day we kissed, when I was only twelve years old. I wanted him to kiss me again, I wanted to be that same innocent girl again, but I wasn't. And he wasn't, either. Why, only a few months ago rumors were flying that he intended to marry Maisie Setterton. But Maisie seemed to have disappeared from the picture of Logan's life as soon as I returned.

We walked silently along the wooded path. Red and brown speckled sparrows followed along, Bitting through the shadows of the forest, moving so quickly and gracefully we barely saw a branch shake.

"I know," Logan finally said, "that both our lives took strangely different directions since the days when I walked you home from school, and all the promises we made to each other then might seem more like foolish dreams. But I would like to think that our love for each other was so strong that it has outlasted all the tragedy and a the hardship since."

We stopped to face each other again. I knew he could read all the doubt in my eyes.

"Logan. I'd like to believe that, too. I'm tired of dreams that die, dreams that were really too airy and weak to last or grow stronger as we grew older. I want to believe in someone again."

"Oh, Heaven, believe in me," he pleaded, taking my hand into both of his now. "I won't disappoint you. Ever."

"I can try," I whispered and he smiled. Then he kissed me, a kiss meant to seal a promise, but all my life I had seen promises broken. Logan sensed my hesitation, my fear. He embraced me.

"I'm going to make you believe in me, Heaven. I'm going to be all you could want in a man." He pressed his face to my hair. I felt his breath on my neck, his heart beating madly against mine. In this forest on the old trail, I felt myself wanting, desperately to hope again; I felt myself softening. The Heaven Leigh Casteel who had been wounded badly as a child, tormented and seduced as a young girl, heartbroken as a young woman, turned hungrily toward the promise of happiness.

"In time I think I will believe in you, Logan."

"Oh, Heaven, dear Heaven, you've truly come home." Logan kissed me again and again.

Why was it then, that as he kissed me with all the love and passion in him, I thought of Troy, my forbidden fiancé, my dark, dead love? Why was it Troy's lips I felt pressing against my own? Why was it Troy's taste I craved? Troy's arms I felt pressing me against him? But then Logan kissed both my eyes, and I opened them, to his young, fresh, loving face, a face that had never known the depths of anguish and despair my sad, doomed Troy had succumbed to. I knew in my heart that Logan would bring me the kind of life I and my mother before me had been deprived of -- a life of calm, respect, and honor.

Logan and I courted throughout the school year, and one day he knocked on my cabin door and said, "Have I got a surprise for you, Heaven." He looked like a mischievous little boy with a frog in his pocket.

"Are you going to blindfold me?" I played along with his sweet game.

He came up behind me and put his gentle hands over my eyes. "Keep them shut, Heaven!" Then he took my hand and I stumbled along behind him on the way to his car, feeling secure being led by his boyish enthusiasm. I felt the fresh breeze on my face as we sped away, I knew not where. Then the car stopped and Logan opened my door and reached for my arm. "Come out now, were almost there," he said as he led me from the car, onto what felt like a sidewalk.

When he opened the door to the drugstore, I immediately caught the familiar scent of perfume and toiletries mixed with cold remedies and prescription medicinal smells, but I didn't let on that I knew where I was. I didn't want to dampen his great good humor. He sat me on a stool and busied himself somewhere behind the counter. It seemed like a half hour before his cheery voice returned and almost shouted, "You can open your eyes now, Heaven!"

Before me was a rainbow castle -- built of ice cream, cherries, whipped cream, and all things sweet and delicious. "Logan," I declared, "it's beautiful. But if I eat that, I'll be three hundred pounds in an hour. Then will you still love me?"

"Heaven" -- his voice grew low and raspy -- "my love for you is greater than youth and beauty. But this sundae isn't for eating -- I wanted to build you the most beautiful, sweetest castle you had ever seen. I know I can't compete with the riches of the Tattertons and the grand mansion Farthinggale. But that mansion is made of cold gray stone, and my love for you is as warm as the first day of spring. My love will build a castle around you, a castle no stone mansion can compete with. Heaven" -- he got down on his knees in front of the astonished stares of all the customers in the drugstore -- "Heaven, will you be my wife?"

I looked deep into his eyes and saw the love and sweetness there. I knew he would do everything he could to

make me so very happy. What was the passion I longed for -- the passion that had been stolen from me with Troy's death -- when compared to a lifetime of gentle love, caring, and undying commitment? "Yes," I said, the tears already welling in my eye. "Yes, Logan, yes, I will be your wife."

Suddenly applause broke out around us, as all the customers beamed their happy smiles on us, the newly engaged. Logan turned beet red and dropped my hand, just as I was about to embrace him.

"Here, Heaven," he said, popping a cherry into my mouth, trying to cover his embarrassment at the public spectacle we were making. Then he pecked me on the cheek. "I love you forever," he whispered.

So a love born years ago, like a slowly blossoming flower, finally opened completely. I felt brighter and fresher than I ever had before. I had come full circle, erasing the pain of the past, as I traveled the paths now that I had traveled as a child, only now I was clearing my own path, rather than treading one that had been marked for me. Now I could make my own fate, as the forest makes its natural trails built on the most solid ground, the firmest earth. It was as if I'd suddenly reached one of those magical clearings in the forest, and I knew enough to build my home there.

Now my childhood sweetheart was to be my lifelong sweetheart. Dreams did indeed come true and I knew that things we often think are too good and too precious to be part of the real world really could be part of the real world. I was filled with hope and happiness again. I was a young girl again, willing to believe, to be vulnerable, to open myself to someone and risk my fragile heart. In this clearing, where the sun was strong and nurturing, Logan and I would be like the sturdy saplings, growing stronger and stronger until we became mighty oak trees that could withstand any bitter storm of winter.

I spent the next few weeks planning the wedding. This wedding would be far more than merely another marriage of a Winnerow man and a woman. Even though I had remained in the hills, living in Grandpa's cabin, I still drove an expensive automobile, wore fine clothing, and carried myself as a cultured and sophisticated woman. I may have put aside a wealthy existence as the heir to the Tatterton Toy empire, but the townspeople still saw me as a scum-of-the-hills Casteel. They might have approved of the way I was teaching their children, but they still didn't like me sitting in the front pews of their church.

When Logan and I attended church together, that Sunday, after our engagement picture had adorned the bride's section of *The Winnerow Reporter*, all eyes followed us as we made our way to the very front pew -- Logan's family's place in church -- a place I had never dared sit before. "Welcome, Heaven," Mrs. Stonewall said, a little nervously, as she handed me the missal. Logan's father simply nodded his head, but when we rose to sing, I sang out proud and strong until my voice, a voice of the hills despite its patina of culture, reverberated throughout the church. And when the service was over, after I had greeted the Reverend Wise with a smile that told him I would prove all his prophecies wrong, Logan's mother said to me, "Why, Heaven, I never knew you had such a dignified singing voice. I hope you'll join our ladies' choir." I knew then and there that Loretta Stonewall had finally decided to accept me. I also knew then and there that I would make all the others do the same, that I would make them open their eyes and look at all the hill folk and see us for the honest, struggling human beings we were.

That was why I planned the kind of wedding I did. Logan tried his best to understand my motivations, and even stood up to his parents' objections. I was ever so grateful. He was even pleased and amused by the way I planned to force the people of Winnerow to commingle with the hill people. I was determined to have the finest affair Winnerow had ever seen and when I walked down that aisle, the townspeople wouldn't see poor white trash that had come into money, but someone just as good and as refined as they thought they were. I remembered when I had come back to Winnerow years ago and walked down that church looking like a

fashion plate, bedecked with rich jewels. Despite my fine raiment, the townspeople had looked down their noses at me. The hill people were supposed to take the back benches and those deemed worthiest of God were in the first rows.

My wedding would be different. I invited a number of hill families. I invited all the children in my class. I wanted my sister Fanny to be my maid of honor. I hadn't seen Fanny much in the two years since I'd returned to Winnerow, because Fanny did not seem able to put away her jealousy and resentment of me, even though I tried, as I always had, to help her in every way I could. Logan kept me up to date on Fanny's affairs and activities. Apparently, she was often the subject of conversation among the young men and women of Winnerow, and often he would overhear some of this conversation in his drugstore. Since her divorce from "Old man Mallory," the gossip was about her flirtatious involvement with a much younger man, Randall Wilcox, the lawyer's son. Randall was only eighteen years old, a first-year college student, and Fanny was a divorced woman of twenty-two.

The week after our engagement was announced, I drove up to the house Fanny had bought with old Mallory's money -- a house high on a hill, painted a gaudy pink with red trim on the windows. I hadn't spoken to Fanny in over a year, since she accused me of stealing everything that was hers, when in reality it was she who had tried to pilfer everything that was mine, especially Logan.

"Well, what a surprise this is," she proclaimed in an overly dramatic fashion when she opened the door. "Miss Heaven herself come ta visit her po' white trash sista."

"I'm not here to fight with you, Fanny. I'm too happy for you to make me angry about anything."

"Oh?"

She sat down on her couch quickly, her interest seized.

"Logan and I are going to be married in June."

"Is that so?" Fanny drawled, her entire posture collapsing in disappointment.

Why couldn't she be happy for me for once? Why couldn't we be real sisters and care for each other?

"You knew we had been seeing each other again."

"How would I know anythin'? Yer hardly eva here and we hardly eva talk ta one notha."

"You know what goes on in Winnerow, Fanny. Anyway, I would like you to be my maid of honor."

"Really?" Her eyes lit up on that. Then I saw the old spiteful fire return to Fanny's eye. "I just can't say yet, Heavin darlin'. I got a full schedule of ma own. What date exactly is your weddin' gonna be?"

I told her.

"Well" -- Fanny pretended to think about it -- "I had plans for that weekend, you know ma new man likes ta take me lots of places -- ta college dances and such. But maybe I can change ma plans. Is it gonna be a fancy weddin'?"

"The fanciest."

"And are ya gonna buy yer lovin' sista a really fancy expensive dress? And will ya take me to the city to pick it out?"

"Yes."

She thought for a moment.

"Kin I bring Randall Wilcox?" she asked. "Ya probably know he's been courtin' me. I jus' know he'd look so gorgeous in a tuxedo. The men are wearing tuxedos, aren't they?"

"Yes, Fanny. If you'd like that, I'll have an invitation hand delivered to his house."

"Sure, I'd like it. Why not?" she asked.

And so it was done.

My invitation to Pa was the last one I mailed. I started down the mountain trail a little earlier than usual that morning so I could go to the post office before going to school for my final day of class. I think I was as excited as I was the first day I had gone down the trail to begin school myself. When I got to my classroom, my students looked up at me with faces filled with expectation. Even the usually sad and tired faces of the Willies children were fresh and bright this morning. I knew they had something special planned.

Patricia Coons raised her hand.

"I have something for you, Miss Casteel," she announced shyly.

"Oh?"

She got up slowly and came forward, proud to have been chosen as the class representative. She shuffled her feet and bit one of her already chewed-down nails.

"We wanted to give you this before you got all your other wedding gifts," she said. "All us here chillen," she added as she handed me the package, wrapped in fine blue paper with a pink ribbon. "We even bought the paper in your fiancé Logan, I mean Mr. Stonewall's store," she said and I laughed.

"Thank you. Everyone."

I opened the package. Inside in a rich oak frame was a beautifully done needlepoint of my cabin in the Willies, and underneath it read, "Home Sweet Home, from your class."

For a moment I couldn't speak, but I knew all the little faces with their bright, happy eyes were on me.

"Thank you, children," I said. "No matter what gifts I get after this, none will be as precious or as important to me."

And none was.

The time between the last day of school and my wedding day seemed like ages. Minutes were more like hours and hours more like days because I wanted it to come so much. Even all the plans and preparations didn't make the time fly by, as I hoped it would. Still, the anticipation built my excitement and Logan was with me as much as possible. Replies to our invitations came flooding in. I hadn't spoken to Tony Tatterton since the day I left Farthinggale Manor, the day I learned of Troy's death. Partly, I couldn't forgive him for what had happened to Troy, partly I was so frightened of the truth I had learned, the truth that had sent Troy to his death. I knew I would no longer be able to hear his voice without hearing the familiar timbre of my own in it. What I had learned about Tony and my mother, even two years later, still sent shudders down my spine. To have lived for so long with the lie that Pa was my blood and kin, Pa who had rejected me at every turn and whose love I had needed most, only to find out that when Pa looked at me, he saw my mother's former lover, her own stepfather, my father and grandfather, Tony Tatterton.

This knowledge frightened me to the marrow, not only for its tawdriness and wrongness, but for what it told me of my heritage. I didn't dare tell Logan. His innocence might be shattered by such despicable ways of the wealthy who controlled the world. But there was something more. That last day on the beach with Tony, after he told me of Troy's hideous death, a look had come into his eyes, a look that transgressed any mourning, a look of such pure desire that I knew I must stay away from him. This is why I didn't take his phone calls, why his letters piled up on my desk unanswered, why it was Pa, rather than Tony, who I wanted to be my father at the wedding. For in spite of everything, and even though I now knew he wasn't my real father, I still craved Pa's love; I already had too much of Tony's.

But since I didn't want Logan to know the shameful truth of my heritage, I dutifully sent Tony an invitation to the wedding. And Tony, sly fox that he was, wrote not to me but to Logan, explaining that Grandmother Jillian was so ill he couldn't possibly leave her to attend the wedding, but insisting that we come to Farthinggale Manor, where he would host for us the finest wedding reception Massachusetts had ever seen. Logan was so excited by his invitation that I reluctantly agreed to spend four days at Farthy before we headed for our honeymoon in Virginia Beach. We would return to Winnerow to live in the cabin until we could build our own fine house on the outskirts of Winnerow.

But not all our plans were to fall so neatly into place. On the morning of my wedding there was a knock on the cabin door. I had been up nearly all night, too nervous and too excited to sleep. Still in my nightgown, I went to the front door to greet a special delivery postman.

"Good morning," he chirped. "Special delivery. Please sign here."

"Good morning."

It was a good morning, and not only because it was my wedding day. There wasn't a cloud in the sea-blue summer sky. Today was my day, and God had smiled down and made this day beautiful for me, chasing away all the shadows and leaving me only sunlight. I was so full of joy and fulfillment, I felt like hugging the postman.

"Thank you," he said when I handed the clipboard back to him. Then he smiled and tipped his hat. "And good luck to you. I know it's your wedding day."

"Thank you." I watched him go back to his jeep, and waved as he turned around and headed down the mountain road. Then I closed the door and hurried to the kitchen table to open the special-delivery mail. Surely it was a well-wisher. Perhaps it had come from Tony, who had decided at the last minute he would attend both receptions.

I tore open the envelope and unfolded the slim paper within. What I read brought my heart down to earth like a balloon that had sprung a leak. I sat down slowly, my pitter-patter heart becoming a thumping, heavy lead drum in my chest. The laughter that had been on my lips evaporated and tears filled my eyes, blurring the words on the page before me.

Dear Heaven,

Unfortunately, business activities involving the circus will make it impossible for me to attend your wedding. Stacie and I wish you and Logan the best of luck.

Yours,

Pa

One of my tears fell on the letter and began a quick journey over the paper, distorting Pa's words. I crumpled the letter in my fist and sat back, the tears now flowing freely over my cheeks and to the corners of my mouth, where I could taste their salty wetness.

I was crying for so many reasons, but most of all I was crying because I had hoped that my wedding would be the event to bring me and Pa together in a way we had never been. Even though it was Logan who talked me into inviting him, inviting him was a secret ambition of my heart. I had dreamt of him standing beside me, sleek and handsome in his tuxedo, holding my hand and saying the words I do, after the reverend asked, "Who gives away this bride?"

My wedding was going to be the crowning point of forgiveness -- his forgiveness of me for causing the death of his angel, Leigh, when I was born, and my forgiveness of him for selling us. I was willing to accept Tom's belief that Pa sold us because he couldn't take care of us and he thought that it would be the best thing for us.

But now none of this was to be.

I caught my breath and wiped the tears from my face. There was nothing more to do about it, I thought. I had to concentrate on Logan and our wedding. There was no time for self-pity or rage. Besides, Pa had given me away long ago. At my wedding I would give myself.

About an hour before the wedding my sister Fanny arrived with Randall Wilcox to take me to the church. Randall was a polite, shy young man with sweetpotato red hair and milk-fair skin. His forehead was splattered with tiny freckles, but he had bright blue eyes that shone like tinted crystal. I had thought that maybe he looked older than he was, but he had an innocent and fresh appearance and followed Fanny about like a puppy.

"Why, Heaven Leigh Casteel, don'cha look virginal, this mornin'," she exclaimed and threaded her arm through Randall's so she could press herself to him possessively. She had her jet-black hair crimped and blown out, making her look loose and wild like a street prostitute. I had suggested she have her hair pinned up, anticipating she would do something just like this. "Don't she, Randall?"

He looked from me to her quickly, not expecting to have to testify in support of Fanny's sarcasm.

"You look lovely," Randall said softly, diplomatically.

"Thank you, Randall." Fanny smirked. I looked at myself in the mirror, adjusted some strands of hair, and snapped on my wrist corsage.

"I'm ready," I said.

"Sure ya are," Fanny said. "Ya always was ready for this day," she added sadly. For a moment I felt sorry for her, despite her blatant jealousy. Fanny always longed for attention, always longed to be loved, but always went about it the wrong way and probably always would.

"Fanny, the dress looks very nice on you," I said. We had driven to the city and chosen a light blue crinoline for Fanny to wear as the maid of honor. But Fanny had made alterations. She had lowered the neckline until the top of her bosom was exposed. She had tightened the sides so that it seemed painted on.

"Really? My figure has improved, hasn't it?" she said, running her hands up and over her hips, all the way to her breasts, looking lasciviously at Randall all the time. He blushed. "Even after I went through the birthin", I neva lost my figure like so many women do." She turned to me. "Randall knows our little secret about Darcy. Watch out, honey, that a whole brood of little Stonewalls don't soon ruin your figure."

"I'm not planning to have children right away, Fanny," I announced.

"Oh? Maybe Logan Stonewall's got other ideas. Maisie Setterton says he always talked 'bout havin' a big family. Ya told me that, didn't ya, Randall?" I knew Fanny brought up Maisie Setterton just to make me jealous.

"Well, I didn't exactly..." He looked so flustered.

"It's all right, Randall," I interjected quickly. "Fanny isn't saying it to be mean, are you, Fanny?"

"Why, no," she whined. "I'm just' tellin' ya what Maisie said."

"See?" Randall started to laugh. Fanny saw she was the object of the humor.

"Well, she did say it," she insisted. "If ya didn't tell me, someone else did." Her smile turned to a smirk. "Anyway, I still can't believe you're going ta let Waysie marry ya."

"I have my reasons." I smiled to myself. Sure I did. And Fanny knew them. For Reverend Wise had bought Fanny from Pa, taken her into his home, made her pregnant, and claimed her baby for himself and his wife. I had tried to help Fanny buy back her child, but to no avail, and Fanny had still never forgiven me for my failure to do so. We shared the dark secret of her little girl's heritage and I wanted to look into Reverend Wise's eyes when Logan and I pronounced our vows. I wanted to blot out the words he had said to me when I went to him intending to demand Fanny's child. We argued and I told him, "You don't know me."

His eyelids parted to mere slots so his eyes glittered into the shade of his lids and he said, "You are wrong, Heaven Leigh Casteel. I do know you very well. You are the most dangerous kind of female the world can ever know. A great many will love you for your beautiful face, for your seductive body; but you will fail them all, because you will believe they all fail you first. You are an idealist of the most devastatingly tragic kind -- the romantic idealist. Born to destroy and to self-destruct."

I wanted him to see a different Heaven Leigh Casteel, I wanted him to swallow his own predictions, his own

religious arrogance, and his sinful hypocrisy.

"You may have ya reasons," Fanny smirked, "but I'll tell ya, that Waysie is sure gonna blow his stack when he pronounces you and Logan man and wife. I can't wait to see it. I surely can't."

"Shall we go?" I said.

The ceremony was all that I had dreamt it would be and more. Just about everyone we invited turned out. Four of my male students served as ushers in the church. I had specifically instructed them to escort people to the pews randomly on a first-come, firstserve basis, thus playing havoc with the unwritten segregation of the congregation. Hill and valley people sat up front with town people, some of whom were forced to sit toward the rear with other hill and valley people.

All of the hill and valley people were smiling at me, their faces filled with happiness and elation. Most of the town people looked dignified, wearing looks of approval. After all, I was marrying Logan Stonewall and completing what was, in their eyes, a complete transition from backwoods mountain girl to a proper town girl. I would be moving out of the cabin and into a home in Winnerow. I could see it in their faces they thought that in time I would forget the hill people. I had won their respect, but not their understanding. They thought I had done all that I had done just to become one of them.

Logan's father stood beside him where Tom, my dear departed brother, should have been standing to be best man. My heart skipped a beat and my eyes teared when I thought about his tragic death in the grasp of a furious beast. Except for Fanny, who strutted before me, tossing her hair about, turning her shoulders suggestively, and making eyes at every available male in the congregation, none of my family were here. Grandpa was dead and gone. Luke and his new wife were off working in his new circus. Tom was gone. Keith and Jane were in college, neither really as close to me as I would have liked. My real grandmother was back in Farthy, lost in her past, babbling gibberish to herself. Tony was at the helm of the Tatterton Toy Corporation, probably mourning this day, when I would belong to another man, never to him.

Reverend Wise, tall and impressive as ever behind his podium, lifted his eyes from the Bible and glared out at me. His slick, black, custom-made suit fitted him as beautifully as usual and made him appear as slim as he had when I first saw him.

For a moment he frightened me, as he always had, but when I locked my gaze on Logan, all the sad memories were lifted away. It was like a cloudy day that had suddenly turned bright. This was my wedding, my time, my moment in the sun, and Logan, more handsome than I ever thought he could be, stood waiting to take my hand into his, my life into his.

How wonderful a wedding of two people who were sincerely in love with each other could be, I thought. It was sacred; it was precious, and it did lift my heart and make me feel as though I were walking on air. I remembered the nights when I would look up at the stars and wish for a time when Logan and I would be like a prince and a princess. He had come into my life so dramatically, just like a storybook knight in shining armor, there to do my bidding, to devote his life to me, and I thought surely we were meant to be husband and wife.

My heart fluttered beneath my breast. Beneath my veil, my face flushed.

Reverend Wise stared out at me in silence. Then he raised his eyes toward the ceiling of the church and began.

"Let us pray. Let us give thanks. For the Lord has been generous. He has given us a chance to fill our hearts with joy. A wedding is a new beginning, a beginning of a new life and a chance to serve God in new ways. This could not be more true than it is for Logan Stonewall and Heaven Leigh Casteel."

He turned to Logan. "Logan Stonewall," he intoned, "do you take this woman, Heaven Leigh Casteel, to be your lawful wedded wife, to have and to hold, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, till death do you part?"

Logan turned to me, his face and eyes adoring. "I do with all my heart," he declared.

"Heaven Leigh Casteel" -- Reverend Wise turned to me -- "do you take this man, Logan Grant Stonewall, to be your lawful wedded husband, to have and to hold, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, till death do you part?"

I looked into Logan's eyes and whispered, "I do."

"Who has the rings?" Reverend Wise asked.

Fanny sashayed forward. "Why, Reverend, ah do," she smirked as she lifted her hands, palm up -- each held a ring. Then she bent forward, displaying her full cleavage for the Reverend's eyes, checking to make sure he was looking, and handed Logan and me our rings.

Logan smiled at me, the gentlest of smiles, as he slipped the diamond-encrusted wedding band on my wedding finger. "With this ring I thee wed," he said.

I then did the same.

"By the powers invested in me by God and our Savior Jesus Christ," Reverend Wise intoned, "I now pronounce you man and wife. What God has brought together, let no man tear asunder. You may now kiss your bride, Logan."

Logan kissed me with more passion than he ever had before. Then we walked arm in arm back up the aisle. When we reached the door, Reverend Wise called out, "Ladies and gentlemen, come greet Mr. and Mrs. Logan Stonewall."

Everyone was around us at once, especially the townspeople. It was as though the service, the pronouncement of the words, the wearing of the rings confirmed me as one of them.

Outside the church the Longchamps had started playing a lilting waltz. After everyone had greeted us in the receiving line, Logan and I were expected to dance first. I saw the hill folk hanging back, insecure and uncertain. I felt their nervousness as they filed through that proper ceremonial reception line. I kissed Logan on the cheek and said, "Hang on, honey," Then I went up to the violinist, one of the greatest hill fiddlers ever, and I said, "Play me some country foot-stompin' music." As he began to play, I could hear all around me the sound of the hill folk clappin' and tappin'. I took my husband around the waist, the memories of my hill days flooding back to me, and I broke out into the Willies' swing.

The town folk stood back as one by one the hill folks came forward to cut in on our dance. Logan was spun away by a pretty student of mine as my old neighbor Race McGee twirled me away. Then the hill folk began to pull the town folk into the dance. Never had I been so happy. Everyone was laughing, clapping, whirling

around. At last the Willies and Winnerow were one.

Suddenly I saw Fanny in her skin-tight blue dress slink across the dance floor and tap Logan's partner on the shoulder. "Make way for the sista-in-lore, for the best lady!" Fanny shouted for all to hear. She threw her arms around Logan's neck and pressed her bosom into his chest, placed her hands on his buttocks and began whirling my astonished Logan across the dance floor. When the music stopped, she announced, "I guess it's time to kiss the husband, this time," and with that I saw her tongue slither out between her lips and thrust itself into Logan's mouth.

Finally Logan yanked himself away from her grasp, but Fanny's laugh rang out above the music, tolling its alarm to warn me. I listened, and I heard. But this was my day and I wasn't going to let Fanny, or anyone or anything, spoil it.

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