

The Mystery Healer of Smokey Mountain

Chapter 1

Gatlinburg -Tennessee, June 1885

At nineteen, Marni Granger yearned for what most young women her age wanted, romance and excitement, with the promise of a better life.

To wear pretty dresses and travel to places like San Francisco, New York, and even overseas, which she'd only heard about from passing wagon trains bound for Texas. The last of these was five years ago, but Marni still remembered the stories.

She visualized them in her daydreams and again at night. Such wondrous shops that sold everything a heart could desire. Restaurants and music halls, not to mention elaborate dwellings big enough to need servants. It wasn't easy to imagine such extravagance.

For Marni, at home in her log cabin, each passing day reflected the same uneventful routines. Cleaning, tending the vegetable patch, washing or canning, and then cooking for herself and her grandfather. A venison stew sat waiting this very moment for his return home from their village. Marni's stomach was never tired of eating the delicious meat or its aroma filling the air while cooking.

This afternoon was another uneventful day.

Marni stepped onto the porch, taking a deep breath of the pure mountain air. She was thankful not to have to breathe that black smoke from locomotives she had heard about from her Grandfather. What a strange world it was becoming. Since the war ended in '65, millions of formerly enslaved people sought to find a place where they could belong. Restrictive black codes for black labor became enforced to keep those deprived people under control. The Ku Klux Klan formed, enforcing white supremacy throughout the Southern States.

Grandpa Will voiced his anger over human beings treated as enslaved people as if they were of no account. Never having owned another human being himself, Will Granger wanted to help them somehow.

Later that afternoon, he recounted to his granddaughter all he'd seen and heard that day coming home from town.

Then his talk took on a severe account.

"I'm getting old, Marni and this arthritis gets me down. It's hard to plant crops and care for the farm and animals. What will become of you when I'm gone? That's my worry now."

He had watched for her reaction to those words, and when she nodded her head in agreement, he continued talking after taking a deep breath.

"I met a man and a woman at the store today. They are in desperate need of work and home. You'll meet them this afternoon. I've decided to allow them to live in your parent's house next door." Grandfather sat down slowly on his favorite sofa.

Despair showed on his face. It was a difficult decision for him to make as his son, Marni's father, and he had built that house together. The two shared the farmland back then, always teasing each other about planting and when to harvest. It was a game to them, each trying to outdo the other.

Marni knew Grandpa was reminiscing now about those bygone days. She also thought about them but kept herself from overthinking as the agony of losing both parents remained like an arrow to the heart.

The day it happened was cold, with snow falling. Her parents drove off in the sled, all rugged up in warm clothes and blankets, covering up against the wind. They started to visit Aunt Dote in Rogersville, near Crockett Creek, early in the morning.

Aunt Dote was ailing, and although they'd waited days for the weather to lift, it was decided they would go anyway when it didn't.

"Don't think we'll be home tonight," her father Luke told his father, "we may sleep over a couple of days, depending on if this weather improves."

Grandma Peggy was still alive then, with her kind, accepting, gentle ways. Grandpa thought the world of her, and she felt the same about him. They did as much as they could together. Grandpa helped with canning and soap making after butchering a hog. Grandma carried a basket with a picnic lunch out to him in the field at plowing or harvest time. They sat under an old magnolia tree together, eating the food and discussing whatever came to mind.

Three days after Marni's parents set out, the shock waves of an unfortunate accident became evident. It was unknown how precisely or what caused it to happen. The only evidence to communicate this tragedy was the horse returning home with pieces of smashed sleigh still attached to his harness.

Snow still fell, but Grandfather took off with the sheriff and his deputy to find them.

The memory brought tears to Marni's eyes. Would she ever get over the grief?

Noise was heard outside, a horse and voices and her dog Tucker racing to the door barking alerted them of their new neighbors' arrival.

Grandpa was up and out of the door to see. His excitement showed in his sparkling eyes, and dance to his step. "They are here, girl, coming up the road right now; ain't got much baggage with them to be seen."

He stroked his beard in thought as his granddaughter joined him. Turning to her and keeping his voice low, he advised. "Let's be kind to them, Marni; they've had a hard time. It'll be nice to have neighbors living close."

Seeing as their meager belongings are threadbare. I believe they could likely use your parent's things. It's no good hanging on to something no longer useful to us now that they're here."

That was true! Marni felt selfish to argue about it with him. Eager to welcome the family, Grandpa stepped off the porch and down to the dirt path, walking to greet them.

They were African Americans. The man was tall, stout, and sturdy looking. The top of his wife's head came up to his shoulder. She wore a colorful dress and a pretty head wrap wound around her hair.

Marni loved that look, making it excellent protection for the hair while working. Two boys sat together on the horse, pulling a cart with all their belongings.

Grandpa marched happily up to the man, slapping him on the back while shaking his hand with the other. "Glad to see you made it; been expecting you." His broad smile rang the truth of his words.

The man's wife left the menfolk and hurried ahead to greet the young woman shading her eyes from the afternoon sun and watching shyly.

Smiles beamed in exchange, and Marni's hand covered her left cheek as usual. As a child, she had fallen against a hot pot of stew cooking over the open fire. The evidence of her misfortune remained in a scar, and though it faded, it still disfigured her otherwise pretty face. She always felt conscious of it, having received much teasing and name-calling when younger at school.

The woman was almost Marni's height with a pretty smile showing good teeth on a friendly face. She offered her hand after a slight bob of her knee. Marni looked at her tired, thin appearance. She instinctively drew the woman close in a warm hug, knowing it would break any barrier. It did as tears of acceptance sprang to the eyes of the other woman.

"Aren't you the sweetest girl? My name is Lucy, and my man is Tobias, but he's always called Cornbread." Lucy laughed hard at her joke. "That man will eat the whole pone alone if'n I don't hide it."

Marni laughed at her joke, looking at the husband whose body showed he was a good eater.

“It's right nice to meet you; I'm Marni. We are looking forward to having you next door to us.”

“We couldn't believe that someone would be as kind as your Grandfather, especially not knowing us and all. We prayed for God to help, and he did.” Lucy looked down and then back up, noting how Marni covered the side of her face.

“You hurting, Mam?” Her forehead creased with concern as she tried to see.

“No, Lucy, it's an old injury and doesn't hurt anymore.” She removed her hand, knowing this kind woman would be understanding and not repelled.

“Miss Marni, you are beautiful. People who love you look past that, and those who don't are ignorant of their faults, so are unimportant.”

Such kind words and Marni relaxed as Tobias and his sons came to meet her. “These here boys be our sons Jimmy and Noah.” His large hand ruffled each son's head as the boys grinned big toothy smiles, the younger missing his two front ones. They hung onto their father's trousers peeping around to look at Marni while giggling. Big dark eyes looked with humor at one another. They shone with happiness in their belonging somewhere.

“Come inside and have a cool drink of water before you see your new home,” Marni invited.

The family hesitated momentarily before Grandfather ushered them inside in front of him. The delicious aroma from the cook-pot had the children pulling at their mother and whispering while pointing towards the food.

“You are going to eat supper with us,” Grandad insisted, “we haven't had company for so long that you'll be doing us a favor.”

“Yes, you sure will. I cooked extra,” insisted Marni, adding, “and I am going to make two pones of cornbread also.”

Tobias's eyes seemed to bulge. “That's my name; we'll be back as soon as possible, Miss Marni.”

He rubbed his hands together, smiling around the room while expressing his delight and need to hurry. “Let's go, Mother. The sooner we get there, the sooner we'll be back with these fine folk.”

Downing a glass of water each, they set off with Will to guide them.

Later, sitting around the table, Cornbread, as he insisted he liked to be called, gave thanks to God for their bounty. He prayed a blessing over them all while shaking his head in disbelief to have been given such a welcome.

“The house you give us, Mr. Will, is more than we expected. Why it's like a palace compared to where we came from and what we've had.”

Tears sprung to the big man's eyes. “We are mighty grateful, sir, yep, mighty appreciative. We will help you anyway, and I will do the hard work because I'm younger than you, Mr. Will, Sir.”

Marni had never witnessed such a humble man, and his kindness to her Grandfather would be appreciated. She now wondered what background these folk came from in the South.

“Where did you come from before, Cornbread, or have you always lived in Tennessee?”

Seeing she was genuinely interested in asking, Cornbread shared the family story. He began by leaning both arms on the table and staring down at his hands.

“We come from South Carolina near the north border; we walked a long way, but thanks to our late mistress, there was some wage money for food.” He reached out and took his wife's hand, grasping it to his lips for a kiss.

“This little girl here, she stronger than she looks and a mighty fine cook. Lucy stretches a meal further than most. We finally came over the Smokies on an Indian trail, it was a long hard trek, and here we are.”

Lucy covered his hand with hers. “It felt like we were the children of Israel, crossing the desert to the land of milk and honey. I believe we found it too.”

With Jimmy and Noah's wide eyes, the boys took everything in, looking at each person around the table and enthralled with their parents' narration of the journey.

Jimmy drank his milk leaving a white rim on his top lip, which he wiped off with his shirt sleeve. “Not so much walking for Noah and me, Pa, but we still got tired.”

Noah nodded in agreement and echoed the words of his older brother while adding his own. “Cause we are little, that's why.”

Marni looked on with a knowing smile on her lips; children had an honest way of seeing the world, and these two, were exceptionally bright.

Rising from the table, she collected an apple pie, still warm from the cast-iron wood cookstove.

Placing it in the middle of the table to be served, Cornbread gave a hearty laugh. “And my second name would be apple pie!”

Lucy tapped his arm, “now that's enough of your fibbing. Cornbread is nickname enough.” She raised her eyes to the ceiling, shaking her head with a wide toothy grin. “This man loves his food - so don't be believing every word he says.”

These words from their mother tickled Jimmy and Noah, who looked at each other and laughed gleefully.

Cornbread feigned shame, turning his eyes from side to side for being called out. Marni cut and handed slices of pie to all, giving Cornbread the most significant piece.

“Y’all look starving,” was all she said.

Smiles exchanged all around as Cornbread muttered, “Darn tootin.”

Chapter 5

Lost in the Smoky Mountains

Three days after Daniel left, Marni knew she needed a diversion to stop thinking about him. *Goodness, I am mooning over a man I hardly know. If the story about Susanna were correct, then a lesson would be learned from it.*

She couldn't set her sights on the first young man who gave her his attention. Perhaps others would come along, ones whom she'd like even better.

No! Let the story of Susanna teach her not to jump in and believe something that may not be fact.

After breakfast the following day, Marni told Lucy she was off to pick blackberries. There were plenty of spots she knew where she could choose the best.

After donning a bonnet and taking some jerky to eat with a bottle of water, she set off. Walking along toward the mountain, she felt alive and carefree. "There's nothing like getting out of the routine and doing something enjoyable once in a while, Tucker."

She smiled at the enormous dog, touching his head as he looked back at her. "We are free to spend time in nature today and how good it is to smell the trees and watch the critters."

Coming to the first patch of blackberries, it was a surprise to see hardly any on the vines. "Looks like someone else beat us to it, boy; come on, we won't be put off. I can almost taste that pie, and we will have one, two, or even more!" She shouted this, skipping along with happiness.

Another half hours walk brought her to the next thicket of berries. Marni felt like screaming as she saw that these had also been ransacked. Who would do this? Everyone respected that others would be picking. It was an unspoken rule not to take them all.

Beginning to feel hungry, Marni was glad to have the jerky. She sat under a tree, eating and giving some to Tucker. The walk had been long, and she felt sleepy. Having a short nap before going further up the mountain wouldn't hurt. Inevitably there were more berries to be found.

Her eyes closed, leaning against a tree trunk; she soon nodded off. Tucker lay beside her, closing his eyes yet permanently prepared for action.

It took a few moments to get her bearings on waking and looking around. After a good drink of water, she and Tucker started once more.

"I don't know where another thicket of berries is, but this is the best country for them, so there should be more."

Marni trudged on, refreshed from her sleep and raring to go. Sunlight streamed through tall trees casting long shadows. Knowing the time of day without seeing the open sky or the sun's direction was challenging.

Climbing over dead fallen trees and rocks, sometimes sliding on damp undergrowth, she kept on going. While watching where to place her next footing, Marni almost missed a considerable mass of blackberries to her right.

Tucker barked, running over to it, and Marni joyfully followed. Hugging her faithful companion and thanking him, she began to pick from the loaded vines. Her hands gradually turned dark purple from the juice. Marni knew her mouth likely looked the same, but they tasted so good.

"You have no idea how wonderful these are, Tucker," she handed him one, which he sniffed, then declined. "More for me," Marni laughed.

When her stomach wanted no more and the basket of berries spilled over, it was time to go. Looking around as darkness settled over the treetops and ground, she began to feel fear rise. The knowledge of her predicament was only eased with the awareness of Tucker within reach.

The nighttime noises made her heart jump with fright. Holding Tucker's collar, she allowed him to lead her further up the steep grade to a small clearing.

A full moon, now rising, shone down, lighting the area somewhat. The trees around the clearing hinted mischief lurking in the shadows, waiting to strike. What she couldn't see bothered Marni, yet she knew Tucker's sight was sharper, and his nose would pick up signs if any threat were near.

She thanked God for her big protector and prayed they'd both be safe, then sitting down, she settled back against the comfort of Tucker's furry back and drifted off to sleep.

Much later, something woke her. She had an eerie feeling like someone or something was watching her. But who? And why?

Marni's befuddled mind suddenly realized her dog was missing. Where was he? He rarely left her side, and when he did, he soon returned.

With her heart thumping in her chest, she leaned back against the tree and, in her mind, quoted scripture to herself. "God hath not given ME a spirit of fear but power, love, and a sound mind. Thank you, Lord, I need your help -- please help me."

Marni rested her elbows on her knees with her head in her hands as she sat with her knees drawn up. She didn't wish to look into the darkness beyond the clearing as it was full of the unimaginable.

Breathing arduously and her heart still thumping, she closed her eyes, praying for Tucker to return. Where was her massive beast? His wandering away was alarming. Why wasn't he here?

Her eyes remained closed, believing it better not to see and imagine. Her mind and body felt in disarray, and she probably looked a mess. She'd worn her long skirt tucked up, and the blackberry thickets had scratched her legs. Her once neat hair had escaped its pins which left it hanging loose.

Marni wanted to cry, yet she was too frightened even to do that. Someone might hear her, and it would cover the tell-tale sounds if anyone crept close.

Did she hear a woman's soft voice? It seemed to be calling her name.

In singsong fashion, her name, 'Marni,' -- rang clear.

She felt no fear at hearing this. Instead, she felt a flood of comfort and hope uplifted with courage.

Lifting her head, she saw a tall young woman holding a lantern. The woman looked translucent, and her clothing shimmered in the moonlight. Marni blinked her eyes and stared. Who was this?

The woman waited to give Marni time to wake up and communicated directly with Marni's mind.

"You are not in danger; your pet is safe, but he's not here. Tucker will return. Come! Follow me, and I will take you to a refuge." She turned and began to walk towards the other side of the clearing.

Marni's heart acknowledged it was okay to follow. She sprung up, collected her basket, and followed her on stiff, sleepy limbs. It was difficult keeping up at first until her leg muscles loosened. But her protector patiently stopped to check on her progress along the way.

They went higher and higher up the mountain for what seemed an eternity until reaching a plateau. Here the figure stopped and pointed, waiting for Marni to see she was safe.

In the clearing was a spectacular log cabin with only the sound of whispering trees around it. Here was a haven, a place of comfort and shelter.

"Oh, thank you, Lord!" Marni took off running across the yard, her sights set exclusively on the house. Until remembering, she needed to thank the woman who had rescued her. Turning to look around, she discovered no one was there.

"What? Marni turned in a circle, her eyes searching. "Where are you?" she called. "Please come back; I don't want to be left alone."

Again, a voice spoke into her mind. "I shall never leave thee nor forsake thee." Marni suddenly felt relief, and with it came the assurance that all would be well.

Not knowing whether she should knock on the door and possibly wake the occupants, she hesitated before turning the door handle. Moonlight streamed through the windows, illuminating a lamp on the table waiting to be lit. There at the side of it, was a tin box. Opening it, Marni found the sulfur-headed splinter she needed. The room instantly came alive with welcoming light as she lit the lamp.

Thank God, she sank onto one of the kitchen chairs.

Marni saw that this wasn't some tiny, secluded log cabin. The owner was prosperous as the furnishings lacked nothing.

Well, I may as well sleep until the owners get up and are angry over my being in here without an invitation.

Resting folded arms on the table and her head on top, Marni drifted off to sleep again. It was daylight the next time she woke, and her neck felt stiff.

"Aww, What next?" She stretched her neck one way and the other, yet it still hurt.

Hearing noises on the porch and looking to see who it was, she knew Tucker had found her. He had a mate with him, one who looked like a purebred wolf. Marni guessed it to be female and now knew why he had left her alone. He was in love.

"Where is this relationship going, Tucker?" She wasn't at all eager to go near his friend. "You're going to have to stay outside, boy; it's not my home, so I can't invite you both inside."

Walking back into the kitchen and still with no one in sight, Marni wondered where the owners could be. Deciding to walk around and look through the rooms, she took in the beautiful décor on the way.

While opening doors after knocking and calling out, she realized the house was empty. Marni noted by the evidence lying around that there had been a recent occupant, one who was currently away from home. It seemed that only one man lived here -- alone.