

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."

