

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 these had been ransacked too. 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.

