

Chapter I

The Flood

The night of the flood, Mr. Davis met his maker. His was the only fatality, although I'd put my childhood up as the next-in-line contender. My life as a child with Mama and my brother Jackie on Second Creek washed out with all the other debris.

Miss Em, our goat, floated away and we never did see her again, so maybe she died too, but most likely she found footing in some other county. We lost a few chickens but most of them managed to ride the wave out. But for me, the flood changed everything. I was taken completely by surprise, and I've noticed since then that life tends to careen and crash along at its own pace, in any direction at all, satisfying whatever whims it wants and entirely without my consent.

It started like this: Mama and Jackie and I were lying in Mama's big bed. They were sleeping. I was listening to the *plunk plunk* of water dripping into the buckets we set carefully around the house. On the roof and all around us, rain pounded down. The creek had

been rising for days but there was no particular reason for concern. Pa had built our place up above the high water mark of the 1819 flood, and all my life we'd never had any trouble. Our house was just two rooms and a porch, but for me it had always been home.

I listened to Jackie, breathing softly, humming a little in his sleep. I loved how he did that, as though sleep for him was full of music. I nuzzled his head to smell his milky curls. Mama was curled on her side, her arm protectively around us. I, sleepless as I so often am, lay listening and letting my mind become fuzzy and soft. I was drowsing and kind of letting the raindrops sing me to sleep, when I heard Mr. Combs from up the creek hollering to "Get *up!*" and "Get *out!*" His voice sounded panicked.

"Run! Run!" he was yelling as he passed us by, and quick as a spark Mama jerked up and grabbed hold of me by the scruff of the neck. "Hurry!" she hissed as she pillowed Jackie into her body and swept all three of us out the door and up the hill as fast as we could go. I couldn't see anything but nightclothes and mud as we pulled at the hill and climbed barefooted and panting. There were weeds and stone clumps I grasped at and even though I kept sliding back I slowly made progress. My feet were freezing and torn in places from the rocks but I could barely feel them.

Once, I did glance behind and saw a wall of water coming down the creek. Literally. It was crashing in on us, tumbling toward us. I screamed. Aunt Charlotte came out of her house and we all started a mad climb

up the cliff face. It isn't sheer but it's steep and we clawed at handholds and trees and clumps of weeds to pull ourselves up and up, away from the rushing water below. Mama held Jackie and climbed too, we were spitting mud, gasping for breath and handhold, foothold, desperate to keep going: up, up, faster. I heard nothing but the sobbing of my own breath as it tore in and out of my chest. The rain lashed us and the thistles, bushes, thorns, and twigs tore at our clothes and skin. I felt none of the scratches and tears, felt no injury, felt nothing but stark panic and furious determination to get to the top.

I do not know how long we climbed. I only remember tumbling onto the street at the top of the hill. Mama and Jackie, who was crying, were lying there already, and Aunt Charlotte called for me to help her up the last few feet. I pulled on her hand and she finally came to safety. Mr. and Mrs. Norman were up there too, but I don't know where. We lay utterly limp on the streaming cobblestones of High Street gasping for air, willing our hearts to slow and our senses to return to us. The rain pounded and I was almost unconscious for a few minutes. A profound exhaustion was claiming me, but first Mama and Jackie and then Aunt Charlotte came to me and sat me up and hugged me and warmed me—or tried to—with their own soaking freezing bodies. None of us had breath to speak and Jackie cried until he cried out and we huddled there, shuddering in shock and shivering with cold, still trying to take in what had just happened.

I really don't know how much time passed before other people came, holding lanterns and shouting. Between the raindrops I saw figures in the night standing above us. Someone opened up the church and we were ushered in, where we sat huddled in the dark pews. It was cold, being late March, and for a long while, Mama just kept rubbing my legs and patting Jackie on his hands. He played a little with her fingers. In the middle of all that misery, Jackie was just a baby and wanted to make fun. It took a long time of just panting and shivering and catching our breath before we could do anything else. I was only wearing my nightgown so when there came a lady down the church aisle with a blanket, Mama quickly saw to it that I held on to Jackie and we were both wrapped up and warmed.

I saw Missy, who I knew slightly from early childhood when our mothers did wash together, walking behind a beautiful lady, the most beautiful I had ever seen up until then. The lady was tall and golden, jewels sparkled in her ears and she was richly clothed. She smelled of powder and perfume and her cloak swirled around her, defining her space. She stood above us and urged us to take the clothes they had brought. We made tents out of our arms to shield each other and changed into strangers' clothes.

"You must," Aunt Charlotte scolded me when I modestly resisted. "Otherwise, honey, you could catch your death of cold." Death had a new sharp and uncomfortable meaning for me now and I quickly patted myself dry and put on the mismatched clothes people

had brought. I have never been as cold as I was that night. I piled on clothes, wore two or three layers of dresses and still couldn't get warm.

Mama left me petting on Jackie and moved out into the aisle. People all around us were groaning and murmuring quietly. I heard crying and even some soft singing. Jackie, who had been screaming in terror as we ran, was now sitting up and looking eagerly at the people in the pews. He was an easy baby, always interested in whatever was happening around him, and I was just glad to have him in my arms.

There were people in the church from all up and down Second Creek, which is a little leg off Town Branch that runs through Lexington. Later, we learned there was a break in a dam in Maysville, which is up river from us. The water built up so fast it was huge before anyone knew it. Flash flood they call it. The wall I saw was real. It was over twenty feet high and slamming into us. I never knew until then that water could rise up like a monster and devour you, but it can.

No one knew what remained of our lives below. Could our small house have withstood such a battering? There was no way yet to know. "We have to hold ourselves in patience," Mama counseled when I voiced my thoughts.

The ladies of the Hill organized tea and cakes and broth, which were taken around to us by slaves holding huge silver platters with cups and saucers and bowls and spoons. The smell and warmth of the soup made me feel like crying. The lantern light in the church

flickered, the fire in the stove began to roar, and as the building warmed and people recovered, some children began to run up and down the aisles, laughing. There slowly developed an almost festive mood as people told their stories of what had happened over and over, newly aware of our fortunate escape. We all looked somewhat comical dressed in other people's clothing and sometimes we would start smiling over nothing. In spite of—or maybe because of—our narrow escape, our spirits rose and at times we were giddy. At some time during the night, we realized Mr. Davis wasn't among us and a long somber moment followed as we contemplated the old man's fate.

The men gathered in the back of the church where they passed a flask of something stronger than tea and coughed and stamped numb feet and talked in deep voices. Mama had made Jackie a little pallet on the pew and he was sleeping at last.

The golden woman from the Hill, which is what we on Second Creek called High Street, came to us with fresh tea. Behind her was Missy, who I now understood was this lady's slave. I had never thought of her as a slave back when we played and told secrets and raced each other down the bank of the creek. I met her eye and could see she remembered me too, but beyond a slight flicker of the eyes, she made no sign.

The lady who had so bedazzled me was called Mrs. Hunt-Adams. She was the most beautiful, elegant, and sweet-smelling woman I had ever seen in my life. Her thick honey-colored hair shimmered in the

candlelight, her eyes were warm and smiling as she bent over to talk to us. Mama and Aunt Charlotte thanked her for the provisions as Missy poured tea and passed our cups.

“And who is this?” she asked, addressing me. Her voice was like her hair, multicolored shades of gold.

I could feel myself blushing. “Calendula Farmer, ma’am,” I answered.

“Calendula?” she asked. “Like the flower?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I managed, and that was the full extent of our conversation, but when she turned back to Mama, Mrs. Hunt-Adams murmured something I couldn’t quite hear. Mama stood up and the two of them walked to an empty pew further down.

Aunt Charlotte and I sat there, Jackie sleeping between us. Finally warm and full, I almost didn’t care what they were talking about. I watched their two heads incline toward each other. How different they were. Mama’s brown hair, which was just beginning to fleck with gray, was dry now but still straggly from the rain and the mud of our climb. It contrasted with Mrs. Hunt-Adams’s pale blonde perfection.

I did not know it but while I was catching my breath, Mama was arranging my life. Maybe it was ten minutes and maybe it was fifteen, but Mama came back around to the pew where we were and said, “Calendula, you have a job.”

I was stunned. A job? Me?

Mama was saying something and I pulled my attention back to her. “You’ll be the wage earner in the

family, Cal, not the way it's supposed to be, you being just thirteen, but still. Needs must." She looked away from me then and I knew she was thinking of Pa, who for too long now had been not only absent but unheard from completely. Just then the silence of his absence roared. "You'll bring home a dollar a week, Cal, and it's money we badly need. With this flood," she gestured to the roof where we could still hear the rain pounding, "it's untelling what is left back home." She stopped and took a breath and then, speaking low but with force, she said, "I don't see another way." She sighed. "And perhaps it's Providence, in fact it probably is, our need being so great and her offer coming just now. At any rate, you will go with her tonight."

"No!" I blurted before I could control myself. "I mean, Mama, what about you and Jackie? Our house. There are just so many things." Without thinking, I said, "Mama, you need me right now." I turned to Aunt Charlotte for support and it was when I saw her sad face that I knew she agreed with Mama. Needs must.

"Daughter," Mama said in a low voice. She reached to take my hand and I had to stop myself from flinching away. But of anger and hurt—both of which I felt—it was hurt she was soothing by holding my hand, and I surprised myself by clutching at her with a desperation I would have thought myself too old for. "Cal," she said. She waited, and I knew she was waiting for me to meet her eyes, and I finally did but it was hard. "What I need from you right now is to take up this burden, shoulder it with dignity, and continue on with your life."

My face must have betrayed some of my shock and surprise. Continue on with my life? My life as I knew it was over.

“You are to get a half day free every week.” She laughed a thin chuckle. “It was supposed to be a half day every two weeks but as a kindness to me”—her eyebrows rose in a gesture of irony, as though she deserved no kindness, no special consideration—“she decided to let you have a half day every week and an hour a week for your studies. So that’s all to the good, isn’t it?”

This last was said in a way that made me realize she wasn’t at all insensitive to my feelings but helpless to change what faced us. Jackie woke and began to fuss. Mama nursed him briefly, then handed him to me. “Tell him you’ll be back,” she instructed and I saw her eyes glisten with unshed tears. Feeling her pain, as I had been able to do all my life, stabbed me with remorse at my own selfishness. Before I could stop myself, I began to sob. Trying to stop, I got the hiccups but kept crying. Sometimes, tears come and there is no stopping them, try though I might. This was one of those times. Mama hugged us both as I soaked my brother’s curls with hot salty tears. Jackie didn’t cry but rather seemed to like being in a sandwich composed of his mother and weeping sister.

There was nothing more to say so we stopped talking. Eventually, I saw Mrs. Hunt-Adams, with Missy in tow, sweeping up the aisle to where we sat in the pews. Still holding Jackie, I slid out as did

Mama before me and Aunt Charlotte behind. We all embraced, a tangle of arms and heads and hearts. My crying had ceased and I was as ready as I could be to meet what came next.

Aunt Charlotte mumbled into my neck, “You be a good girl, Cal, you hear me?” I nodded. Aunt Charlotte would be mortified to learn of any misbehavior or— heaven forbid—laziness on my part. “Make us proud, sweetness,” she said. I felt new tears threaten and I pulled apart to gain control. It never occurred to me to do anything but follow my mother’s dictums. Keep learning, do your best with dignity, and continue on with your life. From Aunt Charlotte, behave and work hard. Make us proud.

Turning to face my future as well as Mrs. Hunt-Adams, I was struck anew by the elegant beauty of her. She held herself effortlessly and perfectly erect. Even at this hour after many hours in the now-overheated church, she looked cool and clean. The fall of honey hair that was caught in a bun seemed as perfectly coiffed as when she came in. Even Missy looked better than I in her plain but clean shift and cloak. As I stood ready to go, I felt ridiculous and painfully self-conscious in layers of ill-fitting clothes and too tight shoes that belonged to someone else.

We were met at the church door by an elderly black man I came to know as Lawton. He put up an umbrella and ushered Mrs. Hunt-Adams, and to a lesser extent Missy and me, across the street and into the mansion that would become my home for the next many months.

I realize now Mama sent me out to work to save our family, not to get rid of me, but there was a place in my thirteen-year-old heart where I harbored an unseemly self-pity and a guilty, unfair anger at my mother that no amount of self-recrimination or reasoning seemed to ease.

Well, if it was to be so, so be it.

And this is how I became employed as a tweeny in Mrs. Hunt-Adams's household. Sudden, yes, but the flood had washed all the usual markers of time and custom away. Later, we found out our house on Second Creek still stood, but everything in it was gone.