

WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

CHAPTER ONE

Ashley Grymes stumbled across the field, her frame too slight to crush the frozen clods. So cold, she couldn't be bothered to take her hands from her pockets and brush away her blond frothy hair from her aching cheek. Ashley didn't care about any of that. Everything was good—way better than good.

Just a little farther across the Bledsoes' field to Stevens Road, then up the alley and she'd home! Her comforter pulled up and slipping into her good news. Who would have thought she'd get such good news while puking in that filthy farmhouse bathroom?

What an idiot she was. Everybody had been at Luddy Mountain. Even some Black people from New Bristol's west side: Kensheena and Anthony and some guy called T-Do. All of them, just hanging out on the porch, as though they didn't want to go into the creepy old house, but making damn sure, too, that nobody got in without passing them. So all the white kids from school had to make a show of hugging them and then make certain everyone had seen how cool they were with Black people.

Joachim's Black, too. But he wasn't on the porch—oh no—Joachim wouldn't be up there. He was down on the ratty grass with her. God, how he had ticked her off, calling her that morning to say he had told her boyfriend that she might be pregnant. All afternoon, she'd hoped that Joachim had lied—he'd never lied to her before, but there's a first time for everything. Then, as soon as she'd seen Scotty at Luddy Mountain, she knew that Joachim really had told him she might be pregnant. In front of everybody, Scotty had come up and given her a hug. Not a "Hi-I'm-happy-to-see-you" hug, but a "You're-a-special-lady hug."

And over Scotty's shoulder, she'd seen Joachim grinning. So full of himself. As if it didn't matter that she'd asked him not to tell anyone about the baby she was almost certain she was carrying.

"What are you grinning at?" she'd demanded, Scotty's arm around her, making her feel trapped.

"Nothin'."

God! How shit-faced smug Joachim had looked. Just like her sister Audra with her all A's and Princeton this, and Yale that.

"Come, on, Joachim. What are you grinning about?" she'd demanded.

"Nothin'. Just how things work out. Sooner or later everyone'll know anyway, Ash. Better sooner than later."

"If you know what's working out here, I wish you'd tell me. Since I'm the one it's going to have to work out of. Literally."

Scotty's arm around her tightened. "Come on, Ashley. I have something to show you. Let's go to my car." Everyone, even those on the porch, alert by then.

"I don't want to go to your fucking car. Your fucking car is where it all started."

Joachim's grin vanished.

"Come on, Ash," Scotty said. "I bought you something. As soon as Joachim told me I bought it. It's cute. Come on." She tried jerking out of his arm.

"It'll be okay. Go see what Scotty's got for you," Joachim said. "He told me about it."

She finally got out of Scotty's arm. "You're so stupid, Joachim. You don't even know you violated my rights."

"What are you talking about? Rights?"

“See, that’s how stupid you are. Everyone has a right to privacy. It’s in the Constitution or something. God, you’re stupid.”

“You think I’m stupid?”

“I *know* you’re stupid. You’re so stupid, you don’t even know how to keep your mouth shut.”

“If I’m so stupid, it’s because I caught stupid from living across the alley from you.”

“At least I’m not a stupid n . . .”

“A stupid what?”

“A stupid nothing.”

“That’s not what you were going to call me.”

“Yes, it was.”

“You were going to call me a stupid nigger.”

“No I wasn’t. I know what I was going to call you.” Couldn’t he see that he was forcing her to keep the baby? He had blabbed to Scotty. Now he had picked this fight. In front of everyone. They’d all know what was going on. If she didn’t have the baby everyone would know she’d gotten rid of it, and that could be worse. “You’re too stupid to know what I was going to call you.”

But Joachim’s voice had become chiseled. Everything about him had suddenly stiffened into a form she didn’t recognize. All her life he’d been her best friend, but this hard Joachim might as well have been from Mars.

“I may be stupid but I’m still smart enough to know when someone is going to call me nigger,” he said.

“I wasn’t! I would never call you that!”

“Yes you were. Why don’t you just come out with it?”

“All right. Know what you are? You’re an N-word. A stupid, mother-fucking N-word. Satisfied?” From up on the porch she heard a rumble. Something deep-throated, lurking.

Scotty was still tugging at her, “C’mon, Ashley. Let’s go.” But her tantrum had her in its grip. “N-word! N-word. Mother-fucking N-word. You’re just worth a letter, not even a whole word.”

And then it came. The slap. And then another. And then she’d swung back. And Scotty, finally grabbing Joachim’s arm, stepping between them, and trying to pull her toward himself. “Come on, Ashley. Let’s get out of here.” But she ran toward the house. People stepping away as they would from a child who’s going to get a pants-down spanking. Thank God the old bathroom had been empty and someone had thought to put a candle in it. The toilet didn’t work, but she didn’t care. Her guts felt like they were spilling hot lava.

Scotty had knocked on the door. “Ashley, you all right? You okay? Let me show you what I got.” But she didn’t have the energy to tell him to leave her alone, just to leave her the fucking alone.

When he finally stopped knocking, she’d retched, tossing forward between her legs, and seen a miracle. There, in her underpants. The surrender of her blood. No Baby! She leaned back, and her hair snagged on the crumbling wall. She sat there crying, not bothering to wipe away her tears, letting them just run down, into her mouth. Snot too. Blessed. She was so blessed. There, in that heatless, lightless bathroom, her underpants around her ankles, she sat praying, “No baby. No baby. Thank God, I’m not going to have a baby.” So very, very blessed.

In the moonlight, she’s almost reached the scrub growth bordering the Bledsoes’ field where it meets Stevens Road. Her stomach is burning, and she has to go to the bathroom again.

And suddenly, she's hungry. Those little chocolate bars her mother keeps in that silly pumpkin for trick or treaters, yeah, she'll get some of those before she goes up to bed. It isn't far now.

God, how she wants to sleep.

In the morning, she'll tell Scotty. No Baby! And she'll tell Joachim. After church. Yes, she'll go to church, no screaming at her parents that religion is just stained-glass hypocrisy. She'll kneel and pray, "Thank you. For no baby, thank you." And she'll pray for everyone else, too. For Joachim. And Scotty. Her parents. She'll even pray for Audra and apologize for taking her jacket.

Her cheek hurts and it probably will look awful. She'll have to cover it with make-up and think of something to tell her parents about how she bruised it. She can do it. At least she won't have to explain BABY to them.

The moon is so full and bright, she can make out individual stones in the Bledsoes' big old farmhouse. Maybe she should double back and knock on their door. Ruth Bledsoe is her therapist, what the hell—just barge in and tell Ruth, "I wanted you to know, no Baby." All those times Ruth had asked her if she had a boyfriend and she'd just sat there, saying, "No," but thinking "Why don't you ask if I have a MANfriend? I have a MANfriend. Do you think that I'm not mature enough to have a MANfriend?" Scotty's in college, for God's sake.

When she had stood up from the toilet, her need to sleep hit her like a brick on the back of her head, and she fell over. She wanted to bunch up Audra's jacket for a pillow, but she wanted it around her, too. She'd stayed on the floor, pressing her stomach as if she could compress the pain of her period into a small, white-hot dot that would collapse into itself like a black hole. And then she must have fallen asleep. Goodbye, Baby. Goodbye.

By the time she awoke, the house was nearly empty. She went out and into the woods—people were hanging around the ratty yard. But she didn't want anyone to see her—she just wanted to be alone.

The full moon made it easy to stay within the tree line. She kept the lights of New Bristol in her sights as she stumbled down the mountain toward the Bledsoes' field. And now she was almost across it.

She'll be good. So good. Study her French. Do that paper for American Government. And maybe even start playing her recorder again. She missed that, playing her recorder. Yeah, she'll find the time, somehow. She'll be so good, nobody will believe she's the same Ashley. And if her parents are pissed because of what she and Joachim had done at Mrs. Durham's party earlier that night, she'll go over and tell Mrs. Durham that she's sorry.

Beneath her baby-doll dress, her spindly legs are nearly blue. The Pennsylvania cold magnifies every sound, the clotted earth breaking beneath her boots, the leathery scrunch of her sister Audra's jacket, her own staggered breath.

But, then she hears a noise that doesn't belong. Someone coming. A step. Then another. Then, her name. A voice from long ago. She turns. "Hiiii...."

And then something stings her. In the middle of her forehead. Hard. Maybe a bee. Maybe a late bee hunting for a winter hive. Who would have thought? A Halloween bee. Such a little thing to sting so hard. And send her reeling. Flying.

Below, she sees Stevens Road, and someone driving away from Luddy Mountain. Maybe looking for her.

"Look up! Look up! It's me, Ashley, up here." But they drive on.

Down below, the dome of MacMaster College shines like a lighthouse in a sea of old mountains. A landlocked lighthouse guiding everyone home.

Or to a party! In front of the college library. Music floats. A party with music! Right there, at MacMaster College, where her dad teaches. An English professor. Professor Grymes. Her dad. She'll make him proud. Study hard, get into a good college, maybe not Princeton or Yale, like Audra is hoping, but someplace good.

But she'll go to parties, too. And she'll dance. Oh, how she'll dance!

Now all New Bristol lies below her. The whole little Pennsylvania town. Look at all the tiny houses. So sturdy and snug. Like the Christmas garden, her dad makes, so sweet, how he makes a Christmas garden every year. Just that morning, when she really needed it, she'd found part of the rope he'd used for the swings he'd hung for herself and Audra. He's cut them down now. Still, her dad, so sweet.

Now the party music is fading. She's so high, the whole wide valley lies below. An enveloping silence lifts her over the patient, round-shouldered Alleghany Mountains. And then she has only a glimpse of what lies beyond before she sees nothing but the beckoning moon.

