

“[This] layered tale of color lines, love and struggle in an East Texas oil town is a pit-in-the-stomach family drama that goes down like it should, with pain and fascination, like a mix of sugary medicine and artisanal moonshine.”

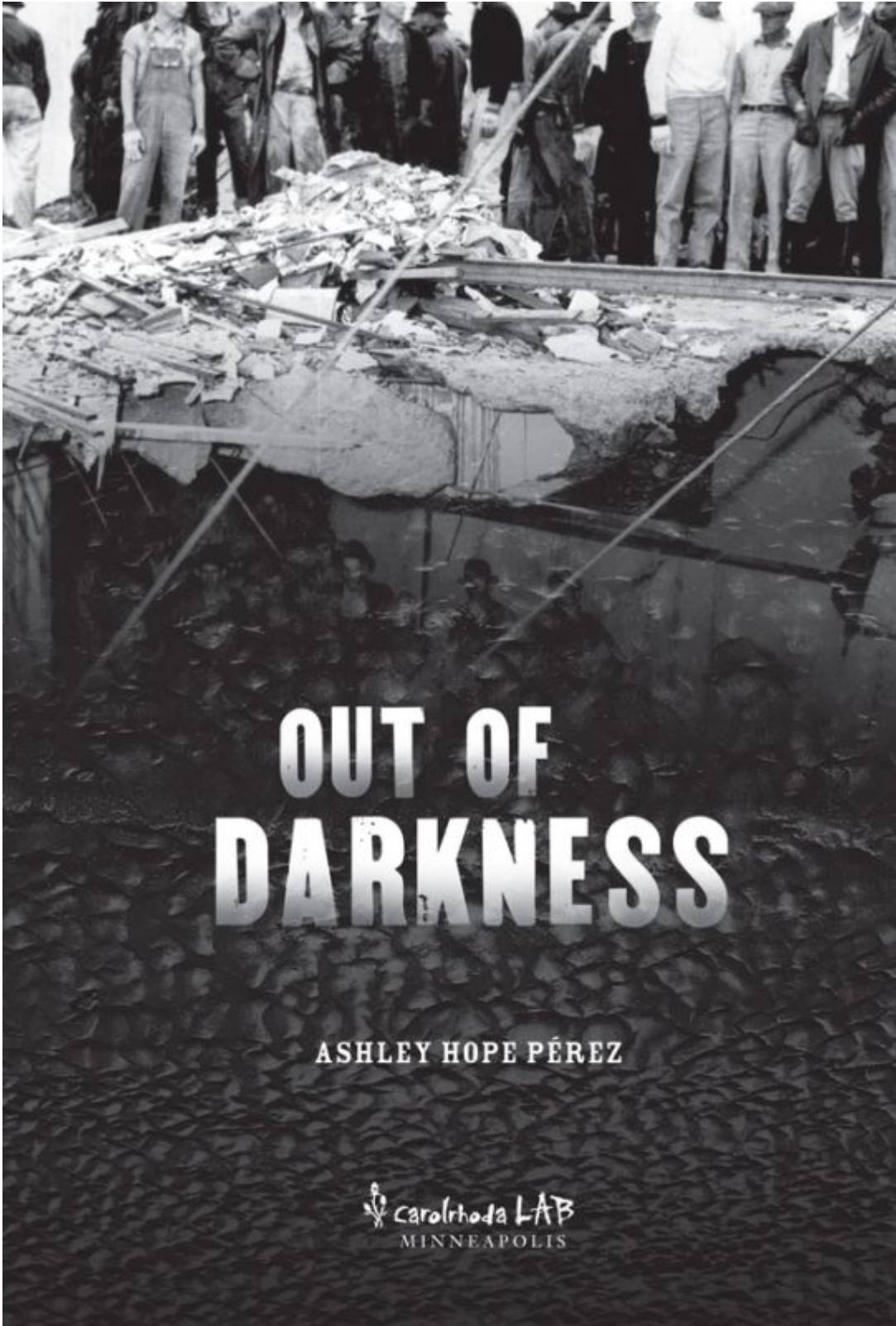
—*The New York Times Book Review*

# OUT OF DARKNESS

ASHLEY HOPE  
PÉREZ

The image features a background of crumpled paper in shades of gray. The paper is heavily textured with various folds, creases, and shadows, creating a complex, organic pattern. In the center of the image, the words "OUT OF DARKNESS" are printed in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The text is arranged in two lines: "OUT OF" on the top line and "DARKNESS" on the bottom line. The letters are slightly semi-transparent, allowing the underlying texture of the paper to be visible through them.

**OUT OF  
DARKNESS**



# OUT OF DARKNESS

ASHLEY HOPE PÉREZ

 Caralrhoda LAB  
MINNEAPOLIS

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In memory of my grandmother, Victoria Ray, who was one of the first to tell me about the New London explosion, and to my parents, who make East Texas home

Gather quickly  
Out of darkness  
All the songs you know  
And throw them at the sun  
Before they melt  
Like snow.

—Langston Hughes, “Bouquet”

It was not darkness that fell  
from the air. It was brightness.

— James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

# PROLOGUE

NEW LONDON, TEXAS: MARCH 18, 1937

From far off, it looks like hundreds of beetles ringed around a single dome of light. Then the shiny black backs resolve into pickups and cars and ambulances. The bright globe divides into many lights. Work lamps. Spotlights. Strings of Christmas bulbs. Stadium floodlights borrowed from the football field nearby. Men and dust and tents. Thousands of spectators gather, necks craned. But it is not a circus, not a rodeo.

Within the great circle of light, men crawl over the crumpled form of a collapsed school. They cart away rubble and search for survivors. For their children. Mostly, though, they find bodies. Bits of bodies. They gather these pieces in peach baskets that they pass from hand to hand, not minding their torn gloves, torn skin. They say nothing of the stench.

A man squats and pulls away crumbled bricks. Under a blasted chunk of plaster he finds a small hand missing three fingers. He places it in a basket and heaves the debris into a wheelbarrow. Farther down in the tangle of wood and schoolbooks and concrete, he uncovers a bruised toe. Later he finds a child's leg, still sheathed in denim. Bent at the knee, it fits in the basket.

Red Cross volunteers with white armbands stand at the edge of the work site and hand out cigarettes and sandwiches. They pour scorched coffee into paper cups. As if nicotine, pimento cheese, and caffeine were any match for this horror.

Just after midnight it starts to rain, but no one runs for the tents. Some men take off their hats. Water runs down their faces, the perfect cover for tears. East Texas clay mixes with plaster dust from the school; red sludge sucks at the soles of work boots. But the floodlights and lanterns and lamps shine on, their collective light so bright that later people will say they saw it ten miles away, a beacon shooting up through the



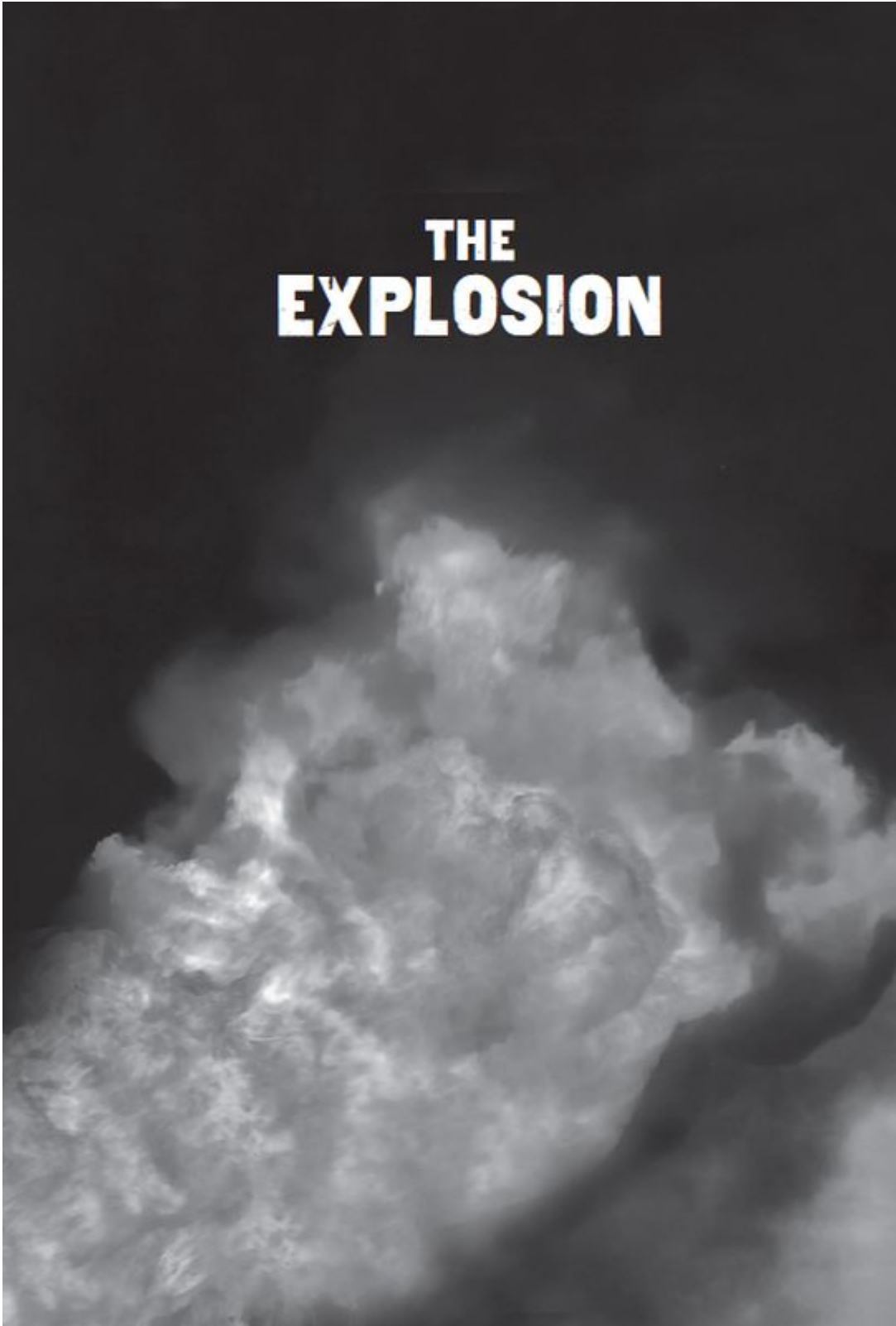
storm clouds. Across the school grounds and in the woods and in backyards and in every corner of the county, pumpjacks continue their slow rhythm, humping at the earth. Steady, steady, they draw up the oil that made this school rich.

Near dawn, every square foot of the collapsed building has been sifted and scoured for survivors and for remains. The rescue workers wander, stare, peel off their shredded gloves. They smoke and drink coffee, and then they climb into trucks and drive home. But the work continues as armies of undertakers and volunteers tend bodies in makeshift morgues. With no time for embalming, they brush the dead with formaldehyde from buckets. Eyes burn and swell shut from the fumes. Mothers and fathers walk among sheeted bodies, stop, move on. Faces are a mercy; most identifications come after scrutiny of birthmarks, scraps of clothing, scars.

There are not enough small caskets to go around. A call goes out for carpenters, and planks flow from the lumberyard into the pickups of anyone who can handle a hammer. Rough coffins come together, and a new round of digging begins; graves open up in rows.

For the next three days, alone or in numbers, families mourn their children and their neighbors' children. There are so many funerals that the pews in churches have no time to cool. Voices grow thin and hoarse from singing. Throats tighten. Consolation falters. Silence settles, and in silence they bear coffins. More than grief, more than anger, there is a need. Someone to blame. Someone to make pay.

# THE EXPLOSION



THURSDAY, MARCH 18, 1937, 3:16 P.M.

**WASH**

Wash drove his shovel into the flower bed and turned the soil. Fast but not too fast; he had to be sure to earn out the hour. He liked working at the superintendent's place, liked being close to the school, liked how Mr. Crane always paid him fair. A quarter an hour was a decent take, and he was saving for third-class train tickets to the Mexican border, the price of a new life with his girl.

He pulled up a loose bit of clover and brushed his hands on his pants. He'd ask for more hours tomorrow. Now that the long, wet winter was over and it was warm enough for planting, Mr. Crane would want him to fill the flower beds with petunias and pansies and the little pink impatiens that his wife favored, color to tide her over until her azaleas and rose bushes bloomed. But today the weather was too fine to waste, the sky rolled out bright as a bolt of blue fabric, the warm breeze combing back the last of the chill. It was weather for being in love, and Wash was in love. He counted the minutes until Mr. Crane would be done with his meeting and could pay him and the minutes after that until his girl would be done with school and they could get to the tree and be together.

He was thinking out his first touch for her—a kiss, one hand to her long, soft hair, the other to her waist—when a thundering roar filled his ears. The ground bucked. The trees above him lashed back and forth.

Wash picked himself up and stumbled forward. When he rounded the corner of the house, he saw the walls and roof of the school crumple. He ran hard across the muddy schoolyard through drifting clouds of thick black and gray and white dust that choked and blinded him.

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He found the side door of the school and stumbled into what was left of the main hallway. His arms went white with dust. Grit caked his tongue. He could hear shouts

from the schoolyard. The building groaned around him, but there was no other sound inside.

He'd been in the school to do odd jobs, but he hardly recognized it now as the dust began to settle. The walls along the hall were blasted out, and what was left of the ceiling sloped at a dangerous angle. One brass light fixture dangled, bulbs shattered. He inched forward, boots crunching on broken tile. A few yards ahead there was a dark cavern where the floor had been. Above the hole, the ceiling and the second floor were completely gone. A patch of sky showed and then disappeared behind a cloud of dust.

He was edging toward the blown-out wall of a classroom when he saw it. A black shoe with a worn strap and a red button. A shoe he knew.



SEPTEMBER 1936

**BETO**

Beto jabbed an elbow at his twin. “That’s no way to start our first day,” he said.

Cari ignored him and turned back to their older sister Naomi. “And if we don’t follow Daddy’s rules? He never got to make any before.” It was a challenge, not a question. Before Naomi could say anything, Cari ran farther down the path. She looked small amid the high straight pines. They stretched up fifty, maybe even a hundred feet before the first branches. Smaller trees with ordinary leaves grew between them.

Beside Beto, Naomi stayed quiet. Her fingers worked the ends of her long braid. Beto knew she would say something sooner or later. She was going on eighteen and in charge. And anyway, the new rules weren’t so bad. Especially considering that they came with the new house and the new school, the new town and a new daddy. Daddy had been their daddy all along, only he hadn’t been there so they hadn’t known. Cari said they didn’t need him; Beto thought they might.

He bit his lip and waited. The woods gave him the feeling of being inside and outside at the same time. Full of birds and animals but hushed, too, like a church the hour before Mass. Back in San Antonio, there were no woods. If you were outside, you knew it. The trees there were no match for the sun.

“Get over here, Cari,” Naomi called finally. Cari stopped walking, but she didn’t come back. “That’s enough sass,” Naomi said when they caught up to her. “Let’s hear the rules.”

Beto jumped at the chance to put things on track. “We keep to ourselves. We stay out of trouble. We go to church. We do good in school. And the main thing is—”

Naomi stopped him. “I want to hear it from her.”

Cari scowled.

Naomi raised an eyebrow and said that seven wasn't too old for a spanking.

"Despot," Cari said. She jutted her lip.

Beto could see that Naomi didn't know what the word meant, but she just gave Cari a long hard look. With a sigh, Cari said, "The main thing is, we don't talk Spanish in the street or at school or anywhere. Which is stupid, if you ask me."

"All right, then," Naomi said. "Just remember. And what else?"

"We call Henry 'Daddy,'" Cari said. She frowned. "And what about you? Do you have to even though he's not your daddy?"

"Me, too, and you know it," Naomi said. She crossed her arms over her chest.

"There!" Beto stopped and pointed up at a leaf on a low branch. The morning sun turned it into a pane of green, brighter even than the freshest limes in Abuelito's store.

"Why that one?" Cari asked. She stretched and pulled it from the branch. That was how the good luck game worked. If one of them noticed something worth having, the other picked it up. That way, it belonged to them both. A thing shared from the start was a lucky thing.

After Cari looked over the leaf, she handed it to Beto. Shallow lobes and a jagged border and hard veins that rose up from the rubbery green flesh. He turned the thick red stem between his thumb and pointer finger, then sniffed: tea and dirt and cane syrup.

"Does not smell like tea," Cari said. She pulled the leaf out of his hand, scrunched it up, and pressed. "It smells like—"

"Careful!" He reached for the leaf.

"—an outhouse," she finished, and she let him take it back.

"I know what I smell," Beto said. He pressed the leaf against his cheek until the cool went out of it, and then he rolled it carefully. Maybe Cari could afford to shred things before the day was even started, but he needed the luck.

He tried to think of every good thing Abuelito had said about the new school, but that only made him feel more frightened. Then the path curved to the right, and a group of buildings stood bright and yellow under red tiled roofs. Spanish style. All around the school grounds were the towers that his daddy called derricks. "That's where the money comes from, Robbie," Henry had said when they drove past some on the way from San Antonio.

Cari took off running toward the school. "Bye, Omi!" she called back. "Beto, let's go!"

Naomi reached over and squeezed his hand. "See you at the flagpole after school." She leaned close and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Beto sucked in a breath and ran after Cari. He held on tight to the leaf.



## NAOMI

Belly down on a thick branch, Naomi settled into the sway and creak of the tree. She closed her eyes and let her ears fill with wings beating air and early acorns falling onto the soft pad of pine needles. She tried not to think of the kids outside the school in their neat circles. Girls and boys with their yards and yards of ease, each group knotted tight around their belonging. She listened to small things chewing through leaves and to a scurrying in the undergrowth, and it did not remind her of white smiles flashing bright in white faces, or of the girls with their trim new dresses and headbands and bobbed hair, or of the laughter rolling off the boys in letterman jackets, or of the school bell ringing, or of the circles dissolving into streams that channeled toward the entrances. She breathed in the air and the scent of sap, and it did not remind her of the quiet after the bell stopped ringing, her still standing there, watching the empty schoolyard, dumb as a rabbit in a mown field and just as obvious. She pressed her palms hard against the branch, felt all the little hurts of its years and felt how the bark had grown up tough and fierce over those hurts, and it did not remind her of her promise to Abuelito—to watch out for the twins, yes, but also to stick with school a little longer herself and so get the diploma that not one girl in their San Antonio barrio had, all of them falling away to work or to watch their sisters' or brothers' kids or to marriages and babies of their own.

When she opened her eyes, the world flooded in. Light, so much light, falling down around her. Green and the shadow of green locked away in stem and bark. Green and green and green, leaves like coins pressed to the closed eyelid of the sky, and none of it reminded her of the empty space in the world where her mother should have been nor of Henry who had taken her out of it.

## WASH

Wash never got tired of the woods. There was the beauty of the place and also the pleasure of finding things. The woods had a way of grabbing bits out of pockets and scattering them for other people to come across. Also there were the folks who let things fall or plain dumped them when they no longer had a use for them. Mostly it was trash, but sometimes there was something worth salvaging, something he could make useful again or even sell. Things he didn't know what to do with he gathered in a small crate under his bed.

So he wasn't surprised to see a black shoe lying on its side just off the path. It looked to be a woman's shoe. He kicked through the dry pine needles and leaves, checking for its mate.

Something moved in the branches above him. For a moment, a slim brown foot dangled through the leaves. A second later he glimpsed a face. Dark eyebrows, enormous brown eyes, and a full, serious mouth. A kissable mouth.

Wash made a point of knowing every pretty black girl within walking distance from Egypt Town—knowing in whatever sense he could get away with, biblical if possible. But he'd never seen this girl. Of course, the oil field brought new people all the time. Folks looking for work and something better than where they came from. And they came from all over, what with most of the country in drought and debt and hungry to boot. Most of the oil field work was for whites only, but because of the oil there were fat cats to chauffeur, dance halls to clean, ditches to dig, pipes to lay. And there was still cotton to pick for a few nickels and a hunk of cornbread. Since most of Wash's friends were picking today, he might well be the first to meet this new girl, and he meant to make the most of it.

“Your shoe, miss?” he asked. He smiled up into the tree.

“It fell,” she said from inside the green. Her voice was soft but clear.

“I’m not sure if I can reach it up. Should I chuck it?” Wash made a motion as if to throw the shoe.

“Better not.”

“All right, then. I’d be happy to help you down so you can get it.” Most girls lapped up the gentleman bit. When she didn’t answer, Wash said, “Do you always spend your mornings in the trees?” Still no response. He took a few steps back to see if he could get a better look at her. “You still up there?” he called. The breeze rustled through the trees. A squirrel scurried past with a bulging mouthful. “Not much of a talker, huh?”

After a long moment, she said, “My grandfather says I could out-quiet a stump.”

“And my ma says I could get a stone to tell its secrets,” he said, still staring into the tree’s dense canopy. “Listen,” he tried again. “It’s hard to converse like this. Why don’t you come down from there? You’re new to town, right? I can show you around. Be my pleasure.”

“No, thank you.”

He wasn’t going to get her down. And anyway, he could hear the sound of children in the distance, which would be the little white kids at the New London school, hollering through their first recess of the year. The white school always started the day after Labor Day. Much as his father hated it, Wash and his classmates wouldn’t be in class until after all the cotton was picked. That looked to be October, maybe later. So today his time belonged to the New London school superintendent. Mr. Crane wanted a fresh coat of paint on the trim of the house, which sat proudly on the edge of the school grounds.

Wash tossed the shoe between his hands. “If I can’t get you down, I’ll leave you to your thinking. I’m Wash, by the way, Wash Fuller. What’d you say your name was?”

“Naomi.” He thought he could see those pretty red lips moving, but he couldn’t be sure.

He poked around in the underbrush until he found a long, sturdy stick. He balanced the shoe on the end and raised it up to the branch. A hand reached down, and for a

second Wash saw that sweet face again. Also smooth arms and a long dark braid hanging down over one shoulder.

“Thanks,” she said.

“Nice to meet you and your shoe, Miss Naomi.” He lifted his hat to the tree.

The only answer was the swishing of the leaves.