Chapter 1
A Master of Disguise

Desperado Detective Agency’s second big case snuck up on Dale and me at the end of summer, dressed in the happy-go-lucky colors and excitement of an auction.

“Mystery is a master of disguise,” Miss Lana always says, and this one proved her point. It pitched a red-and-white striped tent in a meadow by the ancient Tupelo Inn, on the edge of town, and plastered the countryside with notices of its arrival:

**AUCTION, WEDNESDAY AUGUST 24—**

**THE OLD TUPELO INN!!**

1880 inn & medicinal springs

Closed October 22, 1938

**READ ALL FINE PRINT**

Buddha Jackson, Auctioneer

The mystery Dale and I came face-to-face with there would wake up ghosts and shake up history.

Not that I—Miss Moses LoBeau, rising sixth grader and cofounder of Desperado Detective Agency—was thinking Mystery that Wednesday morning as I shov-
eled crushed ice into the café’s water glasses. I scanned the breakfast crowd and the 7UP clock on the wall. 6:45 a.m.

Where on earth was Dale? He should have been here a half hour ago.

Dale Earnhardt Johnson III, my best friend and co-sleuth, lives just outside town. Ever since his daddy went back to jail, he’s been sleeping ragged and long. So has his dog, Queen Elizabeth II.

“Order up!” the Colonel called over the café hubbub.

“Got it,” Miss Lana cried, spinning past in her pale yellow 1950s sundress and glossy Ava Gardner wig. Miss Lana, a former rising star of the Charleston community theater, adores Old Hollywood and has the wigs to prove it. “Tuck your shirttail in, sugar,” she murmured to me. “With the auction crowd blasting toward us, we’ll be standing room only within the hour. We want to look our best center stage.” She whirled away, her white sandals whispering against the tiles.

Miss Lana and the Colonel are my family of choice and I am theirs. We operate the café together. They like me to look good in a crowd.

I tucked in my shirt and grabbed some silverware for my friend Sally Amanda Jones, a fellow rising sixth grader. Salamander pushed her red Piggly Wiggly sunglasses up on top of her head. Sal’s daddy stocks shelves
at the Pig and her mama sews. They aren’t money, but there’s not a sharper dresser in Tupelo Landing. “Pancakes, please. And . . . is Dale here?” she asked, her gray eyes hopeful as she peered toward the kitchen.

Sal loves Dale like midnight loves stars. So far, he hasn’t noticed.

I broke the news easy: “Dale’s in pre-arrival mode, but I’ll check his ETA for you,” I told her, and sped away.

“Batter Up on table four,” I called as I passed the kitchen door.

The Colonel peeked out at me. He keeps his gray hair military short, but his brown eyes glow warm and friendly.

“Pancakes, sir,” I explained. “New code.”

He winked and the door swished shut behind him.

I grabbed the café phone and dialed. Dale picked up on the third ring. “H’llo,” he mumbled. “Why is it?”

Why is it?

Unlike me, Dale doesn’t wake up good. “Because,” I replied. “They’re auctioning the Tupelo Inn today and if you don’t get over here, you’ll miss our ride.”

“Mo,” he replied, and hung up. Dale’s not an inline thinker.

I gave Sal a thumbs-up as a white minivan wheeled into our gravel parking lot. The Azalea Women, aka the Uptown Garden Club, tumbled out and scattered like
pigeons. They chatted their way to the café door, and threaded through the crowd.

“I’ll be glad to see that old inn go,” one said as they bumped two red Formica tables together near the juke-box.

“I hear murder closed it down,” another added.

The café went quiet.

Murder?

Grandmother Miss Lacy Thornton, who sat at the counter serenely nibbling her toast, whipped around to stare at the Azalea Women. The toes of her navy pumps just grazed the floor. Grandmother Miss Lacy’s short, like me. We aren’t related by blood; she took me as her honorary granddaughter in first grade. She’s the oldest nice person in Tupelo Landing. Also the richest.


“Yes ma’am, it’s tragic,” I said, and waved at the Azalea Women. “Have a seat. I’ll be right with you,” I called, slipping a clue pad into my pocket.

Few people know it, but waitressing is like deep cover—with tips.

I ferried a tray of ice water to their table. “Did you mention a murder?” I asked, dealing the glasses around. “Because Desperado Detective Agency is now accepting new clients. Misdemeanors and felonies are our pleasure. Murder’s our specialty. How may we help?”
It was borderline true.

Dale and me opened Desperado Detective Agency at the beginning of the summer and solved our first murder in June. Since then we’d had just two cases, both of a Lost Pet nature. First Hannah Greene’s dog Mort, who we found running with a bad crowd at the trailer park. Then Sal’s goldfish Big Frank, who’d gone dust-to-dust behind Sal’s aquarium. Dale broke the news: “It looks like suicide,” he’d told her, his voice grim.

A second high-profile murder would be good for business.

The Azalea Women looked away from Grandmother Miss Lacy’s icy stare and studied their silverware.

I tried a different tack. “Today’s low-carb iced beverage comes to you compliments of me,” I said. I draped a paper napkin over my arm. “My name is Mo LoBeau, with the accent on the end. I’ll be taking care of you ladies today.”

“You don’t need to introduce yourself, Mo,” one of them said. “We’ve known you since the day you washed into town.”

“True,” I replied. “But I like to keep things professional to encourage tips—which, by the way, I’m saving for college. A possible orphan has to plan ahead. Today,” I continued, “we got a breakfast menagerie, which is French for sausage and egg casserole with cheese. This
comes with hot biscuits au molasses for five dollars. For anyone trying to skinny down, I can substitute you a wheat toast with sugar free. What can I start you with?"

“Coffee and skinny,” they chorused.

“An excellent choice. And your murder selection?”

This time the lead Azalea Woman stared straight at Grandmother Miss Lacy. “I won’t go into details,” she sniffed, “but I hear Red Baker’s involved.”

Crud. Another Red Baker rumor. Grandmother Miss Lacy shook her head.

“Believe you me,” the Azalea Woman continued, her voice going stiletto, “whatever happened out at that old inn—if anything did—is Red Baker’s fault. Or his people’s before him.”

I slapped my clue pad closed. A total dead end.

Red Baker, who lives outside town, mostly keeps to himself. The Colonel says he’s second generation moonshine and 100 percent trouble. Mr. Red, who visits the café once in a blue moon, has never been mean to me. But it’s a town rule that if anything goes wrong, he’s behind it. Him or else Dale’s daddy, Mr. Macon, if he’s out on bail—which, at the moment, he ain’t.

“Mark my words,” the Azalea Woman said, her eyeglasses swinging on their chain, “Red Baker’s people have always been bad news. And the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”
“Mine did,” I reminded her. “I been searching for my family tree since the day I was born. All I know so far is it’s somewhere Upstream.” I headed for the kitchen. “I’ll get your order in right away.”

Minutes later, the café was hopping. “Let’s chill things down, sugar,” Miss Lana said, sashaying toward the air conditioner. Miss Lana’s built tall and slender. I’m built more like a roller derby queen, but that could change at any minute.

Puberty happens.

While Miss Lana cranked the temp down, I turned the overhead fan to a quicker swipe. The auction notice on the bulletin board fluttered in the breeze. “Miss Lana,” I said, “are we catering the auction? Because tips should be good once everybody gets whipped into a mindless frenzy, which the Colonel says is inevitable.”

She smiled. Her Hollywood-style makeup gave her eyes a smoky, mysterious look. “Catering is a lovely idea. But no, you and I will travel incognito as part of the general public today. We’ll leave after the breakfast rush,” she added. “Miss Thornton’s offered us a ride.”

Miss Lana doesn’t drive as a public courtesy.

“Batter Up,” the Colonel barked, coming in from the kitchen. I grabbed Sal’s pancakes as the café door swung open.
“Greetings, fellow citizens,” Mayor Little sang, letting the door bang shut behind him. He smoothed his ice-blue tie over his round belly and took in Miss Lana’s dark wig, sundress, and white sandals. “Ava Gardner, 1958,” he guessed. He cocked his head. “Oh my, and Frank Sinatra on the jukebox. How romantic.”

His tasseled loafers tick-tick-ticked across the tile floor. “Beautiful day for an auction,” he said, slipping onto his regular stool. “Buddha gave me the VIP tour yesterday. The entire property is deliciously dilapidated, thoroughly antiquish. Nothing’s changed since the day the inn closed. You can’t put a price on that kind of charm, my friends. Not until the bidding starts, anyway,” he added. He winked at the Azalea Women, who ignored him.

The Colonel splashed coffee in the mayor’s cup. “What idiot would buy that dump?” the Colonel growled.

“Not me,” Tinks Williams said, slapping his John Deere cap against his leg as he strolled in. “Roof leaks like a sieve last I heard.”

The mayor tucked his napkin in his collar. “I’m picturing condos, golf courses . . . My friends, Fate smiles on Tupelo Landing today.”

The Colonel snorted, did a quick about-face, and marched into the kitchen.
“Was it something I said?” Mayor Little asked, his neat eyebrows drifting up.

“Not exactly,” I said, stepping onto the Pepsi crate I keep behind the counter for extra height. “It’s just that the Colonel says Fate is bipolar and ought to be on medications. May I take your order?”

“The special,” he said as Dale rocketed into view on his faded red bike, his mongrel dog Queen Elizabeth II loping behind. He performed a flying dismount at the edge of the parking lot and slung his bike into a patch of shade.

“Hey,” he said, blasting through the door. His sandals squeaked to a halt and he ran his fingers through his blond hair. The men in Dale’s family have scandalous good hair.

Sal knocked her pancake syrup over.

“Morning, Dale,” Mayor Little said. “Solved any murders today?”

“No, sir,” he replied, waving at Sal and me. “But it’s early.”

Like I say, Dale and me solved Mr. Jesse’s murder at the beginning of the summer. We went famous for about a week until the gravity of habit pulled our lives back into regular orbit. Small towns have rules. One is, you got to stay who you are no matter how many mur-
ders you solve. That’s why I’m back to being regular Mo LoBeau—the girl Luck washed into town the day she was born. And why Dale’s back to being just plain Dale, the son of level-headed Miss Rose and the recently incarcerated Macon Johnson.

“Specials, you two?” Miss Lana offered, swishing by.

Dale vaulted onto a stool. Dale is athletic. I ain’t.

“Thanks, Miss Lana,” he said. “Mama says will you please put it on her tab.” Miss Lana smiled and slid us a basket of biscuits. Her and Miss Rose are best friends. There ain’t no tab between them.

Fifteen minutes later, the café was standing room only—just as Miss Lana had predicted. Dale and me, who’d barely had time to brush the crumbs off our chins, flew around the café, carrying waters and taking orders. Miss Lana floated between phone, customers, and cash register, graceful as a dandelion seed on the wind.

I’d just cleared a table when Priscilla Retzyl, my teacher, swept in. A coffee cup shattered on the other side of the café. “No! My new shorts!” Dale cried. Even a whisper of teacher rattles him. Dale grabbed one of Miss Lana’s aprons, and hustled to take another order.

As I turned, Anna Celeste Simpson—blond hair, brown eyes, perfect smile—stiff-armed me to grab a window table.
I am to Anna Celeste as Sherlock Holmes is to Moriarty: Enemies for life.

“Hey, Attila,” I said.

“Mo-ron,” she murmured. “Mother and I will have the Garden Omelets and tomato juice. Good morning, Miss Retzyl,” she simpered, cutting her eyes toward our teacher. “I can’t wait for school to start tomorrow.”

School. Tomorrow.

The words thudded into my heart like dull wooden stakes.

“Make our omelets to go,” Attila’s sour-faced mother said, skinnying into the chair across from Attila. “I’m eager to scout the inn’s antiques.” She squinted at Attila. “Elbows, dear.”

Attila took her elbows off the table.

I sighed. Take-out mostly means no tips. For me, tips matter. I currently got $7.26 to my name, plus a Canada dime somebody dumped in the tip jar.

“You look tired, Mo,” Attila said, smiling to flaunt new braces. “Did your family vacation this summer? Mother and I loved Montreal.”

Montreal? In Canada? I reached in my pocket, to my Canada dime.

I hate Anna Celeste Simpson.

“You want me to put an Official Rush on this order?
It only costs a dollar more per plate and that includes your tip,” I offered.

“No,” Attila said, flouncing her hair.

I scribbled her order: 2 Gardens. Take your time.

As I worked my way back to the counter, Dale stuffed a biscuit in his apron pocket and headed for Queen Elizabeth II, who lay snuffling beneath a shrub. Queen Elizabeth’s allergic to Miss Lana’s rosemary plant. Also the big-haired twins.

I slid a special to Mayor Little, who smiled at Grandmother Miss Lacy. “Miss Thornton, do you remember the old inn’s medicinal springs?”


The hair on the back of my neck stood up. The old cemetery?

The café clattered to silence.

“Cemetery is such an unwelcoming word,” the mayor chided. “I prefer to think of it as a gated community for the dearly departed. Landscaping, ironwork, statuary . . .”

The screech of tires on pavement gobbled up the rest of his words.

The café whipped toward the window as a bright red
sports car skidded across the parking lot, spewing an arc of sand.

“Hey,” Dale shouted, stepping in front of Queen Elizabeth. “Watch it!”

The car doors flew open. A dark-haired man and a blond woman jumped out, the woman shouting and the man jabbing his finger toward her face.

“Oh my,” Miss Lana murmured as a boy—a younger, thinner version of the man—unfolded himself from the car. He wiped his palms on his shiny black slacks, looked from the man to the woman, and then at Dale.

Dale’s flowered apron fluttered in the breeze.

The boy grabbed the man’s arm and pointed. The trio turned to Dale like a pack of jackals. Dale’s hand twitched toward the apron, but I knew he’d die before he took it off now. The man’s laugh cracked like a whip.

Bullies.

My temper sprang straight to my mouth. “Hey you,” I yelled, charging into the sunshine. “Crawl back in that clown car and get out of here.”

Dale gasped.

“Not real clowns,” I whispered. Dale has a terror of clowns. Also of ghosts.

The café door opened behind me, and the Colonel’s hand fell gently on my shoulder. The man studied the Colonel and whispered in the woman’s ear. The couple
jumped in the car and fishtailed across the parking lot.

“Wait!” the boy shouted. He chased the car for a few awkward steps. “Stop!” His arms fell to his sides as the car disappeared around the curve.

“Despicable,” the Colonel muttered. “Never leave a comrade on the battlefield, Soldier.”

“No sir,” I said. “I won’t.”

“Me either,” Dale said.

The Colonel glanced at Dale. “You’re out of uniform, son.”

Dale ripped the apron off and held it behind his back. “New shorts,” he explained. That’s what Dale bought with his summer job money: school clothes. That and a pawnshop guitar. Dale is musical. I ain’t.

The boy from the car turned and walked toward us, barely whistling.

From a distance, I didn’t like him. Up close, I liked him less. Black hair, thin face, mole under his left eye. Scuffed black shoes, cheap clothes put together to look like money. He walked up lanky as a coyote, his thin shoulders sloping a modicum to the left.

“At ease, you two,” the Colonel said as the boy scuffled to a halt.

The boy’s eyes drifted from the Colonel, to me, to Dale. “Crenshaw,” he said, trying to make his voice low. “Harm Crenshaw.” Like he was Bond, James Bond.
Give me a break.


“The Colonel,” I said before Dale could get tangled up.

Crenshaw, Harm Crenshaw nodded, not quite meeting our eyes. “I need a ride to the auction,” he said, shoving his hands deep in his pockets. “Anybody going that way?”