Summary: Washed ashore as a baby in tiny Tupelo Landing, North Carolina, Mo LoBeau, now eleven, and her best friend Dale turn detective when the amnesiac Colonel, owner of a café and co-parent of Mo with his cook, Miss Lana, seems implicated in a murder.

For my parents—Vivian Taylor Turnage
and A.C. Turnage, Jr.—who taught me to love books.
Trouble cruised into Tupelo Landing at exactly seven minutes past noon on Wednesday, the third of June, flashing a gold badge and driving a Chevy Impala the color of dirt. Almost before the dust had settled, Mr. Jesse turned up dead and life in Tupelo Landing turned upside down.

As far as I know, nobody expected it.

As for me—Miss Moses LoBeau, rising sixth grader—trouble was the last thing on my mind as I crept across Dale’s front porch at six o’clock that morning. “Hey Dale,” I whispered, pressing my face against his sagging window screen. “Wake up.”

He turned over, tugging at his sheet. “Go ’way,” he mumbled. His mongrel dog, Queen Elizabeth II, stirred beneath a hydrangea at the porch’s edge.

Dale sleeps with his window up in summer partly because he likes to hear the tree frogs and crickets, but mostly because his daddy’s too sorry to bring home any air-conditioning. “Dale!” I bellowed. “Wake up! It’s Mo.”
Dale sat bolt upright, his blue eyes round and his blond hair spiking in all directions.

“Demons!” he gasped, pointing vaguely in my direction.

I sighed. Dale’s family is Baptist. “It ain’t demons, it’s me,” I said. “I stopped by to tell you: The Colonel’s come home and he ain’t up to cooking.”

He blinked like a stunned owl. “You woke me up for that?”

“I’m sorry, Dale, I got to open the café today.”

“Oh,” Dale said, his disappointment riding the word to the ground. “But we been planning this fishing trip forever, Mo,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “How about Miss Lana? Can’t she whip up some craps, or—”

“Crepes,” I said. “It’s French. And no, she can’t. Miss Lana slammed out just after the Colonel slipped in. She’s gone.”

He swore, his voice soft as a breeze through the reeds. Dale started swearing last year. I haven’t started yet, but the way things are going, I could at any moment.

“I’m sorry, Dale. We’ll have to go fishing another time. I can’t let the Colonel and Miss Lana down.”

The Colonel and Miss Lana are the closest thing to family I’ve got. Without them, I wouldn’t have a home. I probably wouldn’t even have a name. I am bereft of kin
by fate, as Miss Lana puts it, washed into my current, rather odd life by Forces Unknown.

Just then, Dale’s bedroom door creaked open and his mama leaned into the room, her green eyes soft from sleep. “Dale?” she whispered, clutching a faded pink housecoat to her throat. “You all right? You aren’t having nightmares again, are you, baby?”

“It’s worse than that, Mama,” he said gravely. “Mo’s here.”

Miss Rose used to be a real beauty, back before time and Dale’s daddy got hold of her. That’s what people say: coal-black hair, a tilt to her chin, and a sway that made men stand taller.

“Morning, Miss Rose,” I said, pressing my best smile against the window screen.

“Lord have mercy,” she said, staggering back. “What time is it, Mo?”

“A whisker past six,” I said, smiling. “I sure hope you slept well.”

“I did,” she said, “for a shockingly brief period of time.” Like Dale, Miss Rose doesn’t necessarily wake up good. Her voice took on a silky, dangerous tone. “And you are on my porch before the sun has wiped the sleep from its eyes because . . . ?”

I took a deep breath. “Because the Colonel’s back but
Miss Lana’s gone, so I got to open the café, which means Dale and me can’t go fishing, and I feel like it would be rude not to let him know. I’m just trying to do what’s right,” I concluded.

A tiny frown creased her forehead.

Fortunately, Miss Rose is a person of manners and, as Miss Lana says, manners will tell. “Well,” she finally said, “as long as we’re all awake, won’t you come in?”

“She can’t,” Dale said, swinging his legs over the side of his bed. “Me and Mo are opening the café today.”

“Mo and I,” she murmured as he stood up fully dressed and stepped into a pair of sandals that looked way too big. She blinked. “What happened to your pajamas? And why are you wearing your brother’s old shoes?”

“Sleeping in my clothes saves time, and my feet are growing,” he replied, shoving his black T-shirt into his shorts and running his fingers through his hair. The men in Dale’s family are vain about their hair, and with good reason.

“He’s growing feet first,” I added. “The rest of him will catch up later.” Dale is the second-smallest kid in our class. Only Sally Amanda Jones is smaller. Dale’s sensitive. “Gotta go!” I shouted, and grabbed my bike and headed across the yard.

Dale caught up with me just outside town. We coasted past the mayor’s new sign—Welcome to Tupelo Land—
ING, NC, Population: 148—and skidded to a halt in
the café parking lot, kicking up a rooster tail of oyster
shells and sand. “Holy moly,” he said, dropping his bike.
“Looks like the Colonel’s got a new car.”
“A ’58 Underbird,” I said modestly. “Original paint.”
“You mean a Thunderbird,” he said, strolling around
the car.
Dale’s family knows cars. In fact, his big brother
Lavender, who I will one day marry, races at Carolina
Raceway. Dale kicked a tire and squinted at the silvery
letters sprawling across the car’s fender. “Used to be a
Thunderbird,” he announced. “Looks like the T and H
fell off.”
“Well, it’s an Underbird now,” I said, waving my key
in front of the café’s door.
“I don’t see why you do that,” he said, watching me.
Everybody in town knows that door won’t lock.”
“I don’t do this for everybody in town; I do it in case
of strangers. You can’t be too careful about strangers.
That’s what the Colonel says.”
Dale grabbed my arm. “Wait. Don’t open up today,
Mo. Please? Let’s go fishing. I was going to surprise you,
but . . . I got us a boat.”
I froze, the door half-open. “A boat? Where’d you get
a boat?”
“Mr. Jesse’s,” he said, rocking back on his heels.
I tried not to sound impressed. “You stole Mr. Jesse’s boat?”

He studied his fingernails. “I wouldn’t say stole,” he said. “But I did borrow it pretty strong.”

I sighed. “I can’t, Dale. Not today.”

“Tomorrow, then.” He grinned, grabbing the Closed sign and flipping it to Open.

Dale’s my best friend. By now, you can see why.

We barely had time to rev up the air conditioner and click on the ceiling fans before our first customer stumbled in. I won’t say our patrons are an ugly lot, but at 6:30 a.m., they ain’t pretty. I stepped up on the Pepsi crate behind the counter as Mr. Jesse came sauntering in, thin-shouldered and round-bellied, wearing a faded plaid shirt, khakis, and last night’s whiskers. “Morning, Mr. Jesse,” I said. “What’ll it be?”

“Hey, Mo,” he said, grabbing a menu. “Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“School ended last week, Mr. Jesse.”

“Oh? What grade will you . . . ?”

“Sixth.”

“Sixth grade? Good gracious, girl,” he said, looking at me for the first time. “You are growing.”

I sighed. “I’m standing on a Pepsi crate, Mr. Jesse. I ain’t grown that much since yesterday. You want to order? I got other customers to think about.”
He looked around the deserted café as the 7UP clock ticked loud and lonely on the far wall. “Other customers? Where?”

“On their way over here.”

“Oh. Lessee then,” he said. “I don’t know what I’m in a mood for. Some jackass stole my boat last night, took my appetite with it.” Dale dropped a glass. “Big-footed buzzard, too, from his prints,” he added. “I’m guessing he’s at least six foot four and a good two hundred twenty pounds.” Dale kicked his oversized sandals under the counter. Mr. Jesse licked his thin lips. “Miss Lana take her biscuits out of the oven yet?”

I made my voice gentle, the way Miss Lana does when I have a fever. “We ain’t having biscuits today, Mr. Jesse,” I said.

“Oh,” he said. Then: “Oh!” He sniffed the air like a hound, and a frown flashed across his unshaven face. “Doesn’t smell right in here,” he announced. “No coffee, no bacon, no biscuits…”

“Miss Lana’s taking some time off,” I said, keeping my voice low. “It’s probably for the best. Her biscuits are awfully fattening and you could stand to lose that belly, Mr. Jesse. You know you could.”

His eyes darted to the gray double doors leading to the kitchen. “Is the Colonel back there?” he demanded. I couldn’t blame him for being nervous.
“Want me to see if he’s in?” I offered, stepping off my Pepsi crate. I won’t say I’m short, but without the crate, I’m not tall.

“Disturb the Colonel?” he gasped. “No! Heavens no. I just like to know when he’s in town.” He dropped the menu. “What do you suggest this morning, Mo?”

I stood up straight, the way Miss Lana taught me, and draped a paper napkin over my arm. “This morning we’re offering a full line of peanut butter entrees,” I said. “We got peanut butter and jelly, peanut butter and raisins, and a delicate peanut butter/peanut butter combination. These come crunchy or smooth, on Wonder Bread, hand-squished flat on the plate or not, as you prefer. The special today is our famous peanut butter and banana sandwich. It comes on Wonder Bread, cut diagonal on the plate, with crust or without. What can I start you with?”

“The special,” he said.

“An excellent choice. Hand-squished or fluffy?”

“Fluffy,” he said. “No crust. And . . .” He gazed at the coffeemaker, his pale eyes hopeful. “Coffee?”

I shook my head. “Our drink du jour is Mountain Dew,” I said. “I got a two-liter breathing in back.”

His shoulders slumped.

“Morning!” Mayor Little sang out, the door slapping shut behind him. He smoothed his ice-blue tie over his
pudgy belly and flashed an unnaturally white smile.

“Hush!” Mr. Jesse barked. “Miss Lana’s gone and the Colonel could be in the kitchen!”

Mayor Little tiptoed to the counter, his polished loafers *tick-tick-ticking* across the tile floor. “Miss Lana gone? The Colonel back? An unfortunate turn of events, but put in an historical context, it’s nothing the town can’t handle,” he murmured. “Morning, Mo. Give me a special and drink du jour. No ice. My gums are giving me fits.”

“Coming up,” I said, turning away.

We always choose a Little for mayor in case a television crew ever comes to town. Littles like to talk and they’re naturally neat; even their babies dress good. As the mayor sipped his Mountain Dew, the breakfast crowd trickled in.

Grandmother Miss Lacy Thornton parked her Buick by the Underbird and strolled to a table by the window. Grandmother Miss Lacy Thornton always wears a navy-blue suit and shoes. Their color offsets her white-blue hair, which she sweeps up in a halo around her heart-shaped face. She stands just a little taller than me, but somehow looms above everyone in the room.

Tinks Williams darted in next to grab a sandwich, leaving his John Deere tractor idling in a patch of shade. Then came slow-talking Sam Quinerly, Lav-
ender’s racing partner and mechanic. He already had
grease on his hands. Before Dale could make Sam’s
sandwich, in strolled Reverend Thompson and his boy,
Thessalonians.

“Hey, Thes,” I said, sliding him a glass of water. “How’s
summer school?”

He grinned, his carrot-colored hair glistening.
“Wouldn’t know. I ain’t going.”

Like me, Thes doesn’t over-study. Unlike me, he’s
F-prone. I keep my borderline straight A’s to myself,
preferring to spring my brainpower on others when they
least expect it. I take after Miss Lana that way. “How’d
you wiggle out of that?” I asked.

“Makeup tests, and prayer,” Reverend Thompson
muttered.

Thes beamed. “Hey Mo, we got three potential hur-
rricanes off Africa this morning. I figure we got a thirty
percent chance one will make it all the way to us.” Thes
is a weather freak. He dreams of being a TV weather-
man, and updates for practice. As far as I know, there’s
no way to stop him.

“A couple of specials, please, Mo,” Reverend Thomp-
son said.

“Coming up.”

By 7:30 half the town had crowded into the café and
rising seventh grader Skeeter McMillan—tall, slender,
freckles the color of fresh-sliced baloney—had claimed the counter’s last spot.

“Morning, Mo,” Skeeter said, propping her law book open. “I’ll have the alleged special, please.” Skeeter, who hopes to one day be an attorney, loves to say “alleged” and “perp.” Rumor has it she’s already written to Matchbook University for a paralegal course under an assumed name. She won’t say if that’s true or false, only that unsubstantiated rumor won’t hold up in court.

“Hey Skeeter, the Colonel’s back,” Dale told her, speeding by.

She swept her law book into her bag. “Make mine to go,” she said.

The Colonel hates lawyers. We allow Skeeter to come in, since she’s only in training, but she keeps a low profile out of pride.

By 8:30, Dale and I were tearing around like our shirt-tails were on fire. I am permitted to serve meals since the café is a family business, but not to use the stove, which the Colonel says could be dangerous for someone of my height and temperament. The pre-lunch lull found me opening jars of Miss Lana’s Practically Organic Garden Soup—which, fortunately, serves up good cold in the bowl. “Miss Lana better come home soon,” I said, twisting the ring off a quart jar. “This is the last of her soup, and I ain’t no gardener.”
“You can say that again,” Dale muttered.

Dale gets his green thumb from Miss Rose. I, personally, am practically herbicidal. I’ve killed every plant I ever met, starting with my lima bean sprout in kindergarten.

As the lunch crowd drifted in, I plugged in the juke-box. The lunch crowd is the breakfast crowd shaved and combed, plus the Azalea Women, who call themselves the Uptown Garden Club. There’s six of them, all told. Add the Azalea Women to our regulars, and the café was bustling when the stranger parked his dirt-colored Impala out front and pushed open the café door.

“Afternoon,” he said, and the place went still as well water. I glanced at the clock. It was exactly seven minutes past noon.