

# O LITTLE TOWN



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A NOVEL

DON REID

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*For my best friend,  
Bobby,  
and all the Christmas Eves before*



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they were. Sometimes they even told me the *truth*, and I went back and fixed things and made them right.

And I can't forget my hometown of Staunton, Virginia. I borrowed its streets and buildings and landmarks and houses and churches for this book. Only the name was changed. I'm not exactly sure why I did that, but I liked "Mt. Jefferson" and eventually came to love it. I hope you will too.

# CHAPTER

## 1

From where I'm sitting, I can see where most of it took place. Down Main Street, clear to the end of the block, is where Macalbee's Five and Dime used to be. Then up this way, in the middle of the block, was the old police station. And if you look clear to the top of the hill, you can see the steeple from the Mason Street Methodist Church. Back then, if you listened carefully, you could hear the bell ring every morning at precisely nine o'clock—it was so dependable people opened their stores to it. And then right down there, of course, is the Crown Theater.

I don't remember the story from first-hand experience, of course, but I've heard it told often enough that it's almost as if I'd actually been there. It could have happened anywhere. In any town. In any state. But it happened in this

town, Mt. Jefferson, and in a state of Christmas bustle like we haven't seen here in half a century. The sidewalks were overflowing with shoppers and the shoppers were overflowing with packages and snow was blowing and the Salvation Army ringers were ringing and people were filling their kettles. Elvis was on the radio, Ike was in the White House, and the Lord was in his holy temple. It was Christmas 1958.



Actually it was two days before Christmas. Tuesday morning. 10:15. And it all started with a knock on the door of Milton Sandridge's second-floor office, which overlooked the sales floor of Macalbee's Five and Dime.

"Mr. Sandridge. Mr. Sandridge. It's urgent, Mr. Sandridge."

"Come in, Lois." Milton stood and walked around his desk, as he could tell by his assistant manager's voice something unusual was in the air.

As she opened the door, the look on her face matched the sound of her words. "We've got a shoplifter in aisle three."

They both turned and looked through the office window that gave an eagle's-eye view of everything and

everybody in the store. Milton counted seven customers in aisle three. A mother with a baby in a stroller, a lone woman with a scarf tied under her chin, a colored woman with two small boys hanging on her coattail, and one teenage girl in jeans and a pea jacket. Milton looked back at Lois, shrugged, raised his eyebrows, and turned up the palms of his hands. She read his question and answered with the precision he always expected from her.

“The girl. Ponytail and dungarees. She’s stuffing her pockets.”

“Is somebody on the doors?”

“Ernest is watching both front doors and Tiny is watching the back.”

“Do they know not to approach her until she hits the sidewalk?”

“They won’t do anything till they hear from me. Or you.”

“Have them stop her on the street. Take someone with you and bring her back to the storeroom and call the cops. You know the routine.”

“Ah, there’s a little more to it this time, I’m afraid.”

“What do you mean?”

“Apparently you didn’t get a good look at her. We know who she is.”

“Lois, it’s two days till Christmas. The store is filling up. We’ve got four people out with the flu and everything I ordered from the Sears catalog this year is late. Just tell me what’s up. Who is she?”

“Millie Franklin.”

“That’s supposed to mean something to me?”

“Rev. Paul Franklin, up at the Methodist Church. His daughter.”

This was the moment the palpitations started. That stuff about Sears and four people out with influenza and the store getting fuller by the minute didn’t hold a candle to this. Millie Franklin. Why hadn’t that name registered the first time he heard it? The season must have dulled his senses. But whatever it was going to take to awaken those senses now was going to have to happen in the next thirty seconds. Something had to be done before Millie got to the sidewalk because once she was there, she was a criminal, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Milton and Lois looked into each other’s eyes and connected for only a second, then turned and squeezed

through the office door at the same time and down the back steps running.

When they hit the landing, he said, “You get the back door, and I’ll get the front. Make sure she doesn’t get outside. If you spot her, let me know and I’ll approach her.” Milton knew the responsibility was his, but there was something more than duty to the store in his urgent tone. There was something personal here but no one saw it at the time. No one *could* see it. Milton was moving too fast for anyone to get a good look at his eyes and the pallor of his skin.

Lois headed for the back of the store and Milton to the front. There, just as he was supposed to be was the janitor Ernest Tolley, dressed in his signature bib overalls, plaid shirt, tie, and dress hat. He turned his head with each customer who entered or exited the front doors like he was an angel guarding the Garden of Eden.

“Has she come this way, Ernest?” Milton asked, his feet never stopping.

“No, sir. I ain’t seen her or I’d a nabbed her.”

“Sit on her if you have to,” Milton said as he walked hurriedly back through the store, checking each wide,

wooden-floored aisle. But no Millie. And where was Lois and why wasn't she covering her half of the store? He was almost at the back door when he saw three figures through the glass, huddled on the sidewalk. Lois and Tiny Grant, the store's other janitor, stood on either side of Millie Franklin, holding her by the arms. Milton's palpitations were immediately cured as his heart stopped beating altogether.

Milton looked back to discover that three clerks, curious, frightened, and amazed, had followed him and were standing, staring, and waiting for his next move. It had already gone too far. At least six people knew what had happened. Heaven only knows how many customers had already picked up on the excitement and the whispers. It was too late to do anything except the right thing, the expected thing. He would have to bring her into the storeroom, call the police, and hold her until they questioned her, searched her, and arrested her.

Macalbee's had strict policies about how such matters were to be handled, which left little room for innovation. Any one of the onlookers could say the wrong word at the wrong time and the home office in Richmond would have wind of it before sun set on another day. That's how

it was with a chain store. Oh, he might not get fired, of course, but Milton didn't want any negative attention to his managerial style.

Despite the name, Macalbee's Five and Dime was not a nickel-and-dime operation. It started as a family store in the state's capital nearly a quarter of a century earlier and had grown steadily throughout the South ever since. The Mt. Jefferson branch was the twenty-third to open, and Milton felt lucky to be part of such a flourishing company. And yet even in this most guarded of moments, standing here with all his employees seeing everything but his private thoughts, he had to admit to himself that Richmond and the revered Macalbee family was not the only reason he was dreading this present situation. The preacher's kid? Bad enough. But he was more concerned right now with the wrath of her mother.

Milton closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead and inhaled a deep breath that he wished had been full of Chesterfield tar and nicotine. But a cigarette would have to wait. He had some work to do.

## CHAPTER

# 2

Buddy Briggs was a local boy who went into WWII with a young wife and came out with a young daughter he saw for the first time when she was three years old. He never wanted to leave either one of them again, and he didn't. He tempered his dream of being the best pilot in the service and instead used what he'd learned in the Army to become the best cop in a small town that needed him. With those adventures behind him, now he sat behind a desk that both hampered him and protected him from life's opportunities and disappointments.

Lt. Briggs was on the phone in the small cubbyhole his subordinates called his office. One of two plainclothesmen on the force, today he felt the full weight of his enviable position. That wasn't a lawyer or a witness on

the other end of the phone. It wasn't the mechanic up the street telling him his car was ready or the dress shop on the corner calling to say his order was finally in. It was his wife, Amanda, and the news she just shared caused his face to turn from red to white and back to red again.

On the second cycle of changing colors, a sergeant poked his head in the door and handed him a note. Buddy glanced at it and laid it on the desk ink blotter.

"Amanda, I've gotta go. No, it's not more important than what you're telling me, but it's my job. I gotta go. I'll call you back just as soon as I can. I do care, and I'll take care of it. We'll take care of it. I promise you. Okay. Okay. Good-bye."

But then he just sat there, pulled from the conversation not by the urgency in the note—though it was important to him—but by the urgency to have a minute to himself to consider what his wife had just told him. He needed to cool down and use all his professional power to stay calm and reasonable. He looked back at the note, frowned and yelled for the sergeant.

"Carl. What's this all about? A shoplifter at Macalbee's and you're giving it to me? Don't I have a few more

important things to do around here than question a shoplifter in a dime store?”

“Your pal from the store called. What’s his name?”

“Milton?”

“Yeah, Sandridge. Milton Sandridge. He said to give it to you and to nobody else. He wants you to come personally.”

“That’s all you got?”

“I just take the messages, Lieutenant. You want me to send Sikes or Trainum?”

“No, I’ll take care of it.” At this he picked up the phone again and dialed the number from memory. Lois, always the efficient assistant manager, answered on the first ring. He could almost see her small, prim face under her tight, prim permanent and could even hear the perpetual worry lines around her tired gray eyes in the way she said, “Macalbee’s. Merry Christmas.”

“Lois, let me talk to Milton.”

“He’s not here. He’s down in the storeroom. You want me to go get him?”

Feeling the weight of all of his forty-two Christmases coming down on his shoulders, he sighed and said, “No,”

and put the phone back in its cradle. He put on his overcoat and hat and walked out the door and down the alley for a half a block and into the back door of Macalbee's. He knocked before opening the storeroom door and found Milton Sandridge sitting on a box of draperies, smoking.

Milton's receding hairline seemed to recede a little more than the last time Buddy had seen him, and his white dress shirt already had that three o'clock sag. The way Milton leaned forward while rubbing his neck served as a barometer of the situation as he slouched more with each drag of the cigarette.

"You got a violent thief here you need me to shoot or just what is up?"

"I got a little thief for sure but she's not violent. Not yet anyway. She's in the bathroom right now."

"What makes this one so special I couldn't send a uniform to take care of it?"

"It's Millie Franklin, the preacher's daughter."

"Millie? Are you sure she was stealing?"

"Her pockets are full. I haven't checked them yet so I don't know what all she took. I wanted you here before I took this thing any further."

“And you let her go to the bathroom. You know she’s probably flushed all the evidence by now.”

As he spoke, his words were accented by the loud echo of a flushing toilet on the other side of the door marked Employees Only. That same door opened and a silent, pale, girl walked out and sat down on a box marked “Fragile.”

She was teenaged thin and looked even younger than fifteen, lost in her heavy navy winter coat. Her blonde hair was pulled back tight on her head, making her blue eyes look larger than they were. She was frail and cautious but there was something defiant about that sweet, apple-pie face that didn’t fear staring you in the eye.

Buddy opened his overcoat and removed his hat from a head of hair so thick and curly it showed no indenture from the brown fedora. He looked around and found a box to sit on that put him on her level.

“Millie,” Lt. Briggs said in his best professional-yet-fatherly voice, “what’s going on here?”

Millie shrugged as only a fifteen-year-old can.

“Did you take something from the store without paying for it?”

“I reckon.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“What did you take, Millie? Let me see your pockets.”

Millie stood and reached into the pockets of her jacket, pulled out two fistfuls of merchandise and laid them on a packing table. Buddy picked them up one by one. A pair of imitation leather gloves, a pack of bobby pins, two combs, a small picture frame with a headshot of Rhonda Fleming, and a boy’s ID bracelet. The whole mess came to less than twenty dollars. At least we were talking about petty larceny here. “Petty” made it sound good. “Larceny” made it sound bad.

“What were you gonna to do with this stuff, Millie?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Didn’t you have something in mind when you pocketed these items?”

“I reckon.”

“Millie,” Milton interrupted, “I don’t want to cause you and your family any trouble, but if I don’t press charges, I could lose my job.”

Buddy cut his eyes at Milton with a look that said, “Shut up and let me handle this.”

“Millie,” Buddy said, leaning over and looking her in the eyes, “have you ever done this before?”

“Not really.”

Buddy rifled through the merchandise again. “Who’re the gloves for? You? They’re about your size. Do you really need bobby pins and combs and a picture frame that bad? And this bracelet. This is not for you is it?”

“They aren’t for me. They’re Christmas presents.”

“You got any money on you, Millie? Cause if you do, I think we can just walk this stuff up to the cash register and you can pay and we’ll all go home and forget all about it. What do you say?”

“I don’t have any money. I can get some, but I don’t have any with me.”

“You can go home and get some?”

Milton broke in again, “I can’t do that, Buddy. Too many people already know about this. I could get fired by the home company if they found out I let somebody go just because I know ’em. I can’t do it.”

“I said I *can* get the money not that I *will*.”

“What do you mean by that?” Lt. Briggs’ voice was all professional with no hint of fatherly anywhere to be heard.

“Do whatever you want to do with me. I don’t care. I’m not payin’ for anything. Take me to jail. I don’t care.” The blue in those young eyes was no longer pretty. Iced and penetrating and hard, but not pretty.

A funeral silence overcame the dusty stockroom and lingered for at least sixty seconds, which is a long time for three people to stare at one another. Lt. Briggs stuffed the pilfered items in his overcoat pockets, then took Millie Franklin by the arm and they walked not out the back door, but the length of the store to the front door and down Main Street until they were both out of Milton Sandridge’s line of sight. Customers and clerks alike watched the unlikely couple marching past the toys and kitchen utensils and finally the magazine rack and out the frosted doors. Some were silent, some were smiling, and some were just glad the Christmas season was almost over.

Milton stood in the storeroom doorway, lit another cigarette, and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Thirty-six degrees outside and he needed a cold drink.