

INN IN ABINGDON

By

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INN IN ABINGDON

CHAPTER 1 TRIP TO ABINGDON

Putting his last set of clothes into the tote bag, Spencer looked around to see if he had forgotten to pack anything. Satisfied that he had everything needed for the trip, he put on his tan denim jacket and looked in the mirror to straighten his shirt collar. He ran his fingers through his brown, thinning hair so it wouldn't seem so frayed and rubbed his hand over his day-old beard, remembering he hadn't taken the time to shave. Clipping his cell phone onto his belt, he grabbed his stress relief squeeze ball and tossed it into the air a couple of times before putting it into his bag. Zipping it closed, he carried it down to the kitchen.

Almost forgetting, he left a message on the wall phone. "Hi, this is Spencer. I'll be gone through the weekend. If you need to contact me, call me on my cell or just leave me a message and I'll contact you when I return. Thanks."

He went to the foyer and opened the door to leave. As he picked up his travel bags, he noticed the sunlight beaming through the glass storm door was reflecting on the framed picture of Miriam, his wife. The sunlight made the dust visible on the picture, so he picked it up and wiped it clean with his coat sleeve. Staring at it for a moment, he thought, *Where did we go wrong? And why did we let it get to the point of separating?*

With a heavy sigh, he set the picture down and left. Before he got to his car, however, his neighbor yelled, "Morning, neighbor."

He saw Mr. Johnson, one of his elderly neighbors, walking his dog.

"Morning to you, Mr. Johnson. It's certainly a warm day for early November," he said, setting his luggage down to open the trunk on his Infinity Coupe. Mr.

Johnson checked the weather report every morning and could give a weather forecast just as well as The Weather Channel.

“Yes, it is. The weather update this morning calls for warm and foggy days with cold and rainy nights for most of the week.”

“Then I’m glad to be staying in the mountains instead of going to the beach. By the way, I’ll be gone through the weekend. While you are out and about, would you mind keeping an eye on the condo for me?”

“Be glad to, Spencer, and I want to let you know that since the newspaper here quit publishing your articles and columns, it’s not worth reading anymore. I canceled my subscription last week.”

“Thank you for the compliment, Mr. Johnson. With advertising revenue down, they had to make some cuts somewhere. My columns along with a couple of others were canceled. I thought after working with them for nineteen years my job was secure, but this recession is affecting everyone, I guess.”

Mr. Johnson shook his head. “Well, I hope someone else will pick you up. You drive carefully, Spencer. I’ll keep an eye on the place for you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Johnson.”

Spencer loaded his bags and closed the trunk.

A few miles down the road, his thoughts turned to Miriam, his wife of twenty-seven years. Their separation was going on four months now. He was trying to figure out why they had grown apart and if there was hope to save their marriage. After all, didn’t they have the perfect American family? Both had careers, Miriam as an elementary school teacher and he as a writer for *The Charlottesville Observer*, writing articles on places of interest and their history.

Their children, Josh and Lynn, were pursuing careers and had marriages of their own. Having just recently paid off the mortgage on their Charlottesville

home, Spencer and Miriam were at a time in life when they should be enjoying the fruits of their labors. But instead, it was obvious, they had drifted apart.

Maybe it was the conversations that turned quieter, suggestions that often became debates, or that patience was no longer a virtue they sought. Why had they let the passion they once had for each other subside? Was it the extra travel he found himself doing every week for his job to find bigger and better projects to write about or his more frequent trips to the club for golf or conversation with friends? Besides, wasn't Miriam always involved in community projects, charity work, or running to help some friend who was struggling with a midlife crisis? It had gotten to the point where they just went through the motions to be together and tolerate each other. Something had to give, and separating until each could figure out what they wanted, had seemed to be the right thing to do. Agreeing to let Miriam stay in their home, Spencer moved into a condo he had leased just outside of Charlottesville.

After the separation, though, Spencer realized that he was even more unhappy and discontent than when he was living with Miriam. His social life crashed, he had no desire to be around crowds, and he began to avoid all unnecessary travel. Every morning when he woke up and every night when he went to bed, Miriam was the first and last thing on his mind. It seemed like their separation was just too easy to do. There were no arguments or fighting over assets or money. It was almost as if both of them were still trying to look after the interest of the other. He began to wonder if separating was the right thing to do, but also knew that he would never want to go back to the same stale relationship.

Now living alone, Spencer found himself longing to be back with the girl he had fallen in love with almost thirty years ago. He had thought long and hard about talking to Miriam to see if there was a chance to make their marriage work, then things had gotten worse. Two months after the separation, he lost his job. He

decided that before they could have a chance to work things out, he first needed to find employment and get his career secure. He just didn't know what Miriam's thoughts were.

As he turned right onto 64 West, his cell phone rang. The name of Elaine Wampler, his friend and agent, appeared on the screen.

"Hello, Elaine," he answered.

"Hello, Spencer. I called you at home and knew you were on your way. I just wanted to check and see if I need to take care of anything for you while you're away."

"No, everything's fine. I've just turned onto 64 West and will be on 81 South heading to Abingdon in a minute."

"Great. I have a suite reserved for you. I've also arranged for a lady I know by the name of Bernice Ferguson to meet with you today at four o'clock, if that's all right. She's a retired school teacher and has written several articles on history in southwest Virginia, especially Abingdon. I thought maybe she could give you some ideas to write about or maybe do some research for you."

Spencer hesitated. "Thanks for the effort, Elaine. I know you have a lot of faith in my writing. But with the problems Miriam and I've had over the last two years, and now the separation, along with losing my job, I'm not sure I'm in the right frame of mind to write anything again."

"I understand what you're saying, Spencer. But look at the novel you wrote three years ago. It's selling better now than when you first published it. I know it's not on a best seller list, but I think if you publish another one. It'll help get your work established. Then your writing will find a following. It's all about being discovered, and you're a gifted writer. I want to see you succeed."

Spencer sighed. "I'll try to get something started. I just don't know where to begin. Maybe you're right. A few days at this inn in Abingdon will make a

difference. Maybe I can find something interesting for a good book.” He paused to change lanes. “And maybe find a distraction to get my mind off all of my problems for awhile.”

“I have confidence in you, Spencer. I’ll be in Abingdon visiting my sister on Saturday. Maybe we can connect and do brunch together before you start back home.”

“That would be good. And, Elaine, thanks for believing in me.”

He could almost hear her smile.

“I always have and always will. Drive carefully and watch your speed on 81. You know the state police will be out with radar. Call me if I can help with anything.”

“I will, and thanks for your friendship and help. Bye now.”

Elaine worked for a small publishing company as an agent for a lot of local writers of short stories, novels, and articles of interest. Three years ago, Spencer had met Elaine at The Virginia Book Festival in Charlottesville while she was doing a seminar on how to get published the first time. He had shown her a historical novel he had written. She convinced him to publish it and was able to get a contract for him. It got him noticed, but not accepted by the big publishing companies yet. He had wanted to write another book, but with all the travel his job demanded, and now, Miriam and his drifting apart over the last two years, he just hadn’t had the inspiration.

Being the friend she was, however, Elaine knew he was out of work and needed something on which to focus. To encourage him to write again, her company was picking up the tab on his visit to the Inn at Abingdon, hoping he would find some history there that would inspire him to write again.

As he turned onto US 81 South, Spencer continued to think about his life and marriage. He had gone to college at UVA in Charlottesville where he graduated

with a degree in literature and arts. While in school, he took a couple of classes in creative writing and wrote several articles one of the local newspapers published. Upon graduation, he got a job offer from the local newspaper. The excitement of pursuing his destiny through his own newspaper column was far more appealing than teaching in a classroom. So he accepted.

Two years later, at a Chamber of Commerce Business after Hours meeting hosted by the local board of education, he met Miriam. She caught his attention when they entered the room together during the social hour. She was a petite girl with wavy brown hair, light hazel eyes, and a beautiful smile. Several times during the evening, they caught each other's glances.

Spencer remembered stepping up to the bar and asking for a glass of wine. While waiting, he glanced across the room to find this beautiful lady smiling back at him. That did it. He began making his way across the room to formally introduce himself.

Trying to casually make his way over to her, he was stopped numerous times by people who wanted to talk about some of his articles. Not wanting to be rude, but also wanting to get across the room, Spencer continued to move along and cut their conversations short when possible. Step after step, person after person, he struggled to stay focused on the conversations since his intentions were to get across the room. Finally making it across, he turned to greet her, but she was gone. A little frustrated, he turned around and was pleased to find her standing behind him smiling and holding two glasses of wine.

"I went to the bar, and the bartender said you walked away before getting your glass of wine. I told him that I was probably the cause of it, so here it is," she had said.

Spencer laughed and said, "You're probably right. It took me ten minutes to walk forty feet across here with so many people wanting to talk."

“I can see that you’re popular.” She handed him the glass of wine and extended her hand. “By the way, my name is Miriam. I’m speaking to the business community tonight about co-opting with the local educators on our Merits of Graduation Program for our school kids.”

Still holding her hand, he said, “My name is Spencer Aubreys. I’m a writer for one of the local papers.”

“Yes, I’ve read your articles. Now I know why you’re so much in demand.”

“I’m just trying to make a living. I’m looking forward to your presentation.”

She stared down at her glass, avoiding his eyes, smiling nervously, “Actually I’m a little nervous. This is different from a classroom of kids, you know.”

“No, not really, we’re probably just a little naughtier, I’m sure.”

They continued to talk and laugh until it was time for Miriam to speak.

Spencer was so attracted to her that he couldn’t take his eyes off her all evening. Two days after the Chamber meeting, he called and asked her out. Two years later, they were married.

Checking the speedometer, Spencer passed the Wytheville exit. Another call came in on his cell phone. When he saw Miriam’s number, he took a deep breath in anticipation.

“Hello, Miriam,” he said, trying to conceal the nervousness in his voice.

“Hi, Spencer. I called and got your message at home. Where are you going, a potential job interview?”

“I wish. Elaine convinced me to go down and spend a few days at an inn in Abingdon. She wants me to do some research, hoping I’ll come up with a good idea for a second book.”

“Well, at least it’ll keep your mind off not working.”

“Believe me, I would rather be working,” he said with a laugh.

“Do you need some extra money? We could withdraw something from our savings.” She sounded concerned.

“No, I’m fine for now. I’m trying not to spend any more than I need to. I just don’t know when I’ll find work. I am fifty years old, and all I’ve done is write for a newspaper. Everyone is down-sizing until the recession is over, so it could be who knows how long before I find work again.”

“Well, you know the money is there if you need it. We both have to agree to release it, but I’d be glad to.”

“I know,” he exhaled. “Life just gets more complicated, doesn’t it?”

She agreed, then said, “The reason I called is that Josh and Lynn both want to come in for Thanksgiving. Can you join us, or do you have other plans?”

“No, I don’t have other plans. Of course I want to see them.” He swallowed hard. “How are they dealing with our separation?”

“They’re both very sad and upset about it.” She paused. “You need to call them more often.”

“Yes, I know,” he said reluctantly, knowing she was right.

There was a long moment before she spoke again. “Spencer, there’s something I need to let you know. I have someone who’s been asking me out, and I’m thinking about taking him up on the offer. What do you think?”

Catching his breath, he breathed out slowly before answering. “I thought we both agreed that we would not question each other’s personal life once we separated.”

“I know it’s in the agreement, but…”

Irritation, or was it jealousy, rising sharply within him, he interrupted, “Well, Miriam, I’m not your keeper. You have to decide what you want to do.”

It was her turn to raise her voice.

“Look, I was just trying to be nice since you’re dealing with our separation and now losing your job. I know you’re already on edge and I didn’t want to put you on the spot if someone told you they saw me out with someone else.”

“Miriam, you do what you feel like you need to do.” Spencer closed the subject.

“Spencer, I’m sorry I called. Goodbye!” Click.

Spencer reluctantly pressed the off button then threw the phone down. *Dammit! Why did I pick an argument with her? It always ends this way.*

He wasn’t even sure what they had argued about, as usual. It was just such a surprise to hear that she might be going out with someone. Taking a deep breath, he tried to calm himself. *Maybe she wanted me to say no, or maybe she’s like me since we separated— even more confused and unhappy. I can’t ask her to let me come home now. With no job, she would think I was coming home out of desperation for her to support me. I have to find a way to work through this, for me and for her. I know I still love her. But does she still love me?*

He considered that question for a while, then concluded. *Maybe not, if she’s thinking about dating.*

Spencer read the road sign as he drove by the town of Marion, only thirty miles away from Abingdon. Forcing himself to focus, his thoughts turned back to his trip and visit to the Inn at Abingdon.