

Inn In Abingdon

by Donnie Stevens

## Chapter 1

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His head bowed and hands clasped, Spence Aubrey dwelled on all that had gone wrong in his life. Seated on a bench in the white gazebo on the back lawn of the Martha Washington Inn in Virginia, he leaned forward with his elbows resting on his thighs. A cool November breeze ushered a light evening drizzle amid the thickening fog blanketing Abingdon. Almost as dismal as his insides.

His chest tightened with the familiar sense of loss, and the tentacles of fog seemed to seep inside, squeezing, aching. Spence pulled his brown denim sports jacket snug over his flannel shirt. No. He sat up and slapped his thighs. Sitting here feeling sorry for himself wouldn't bring back love or dignity. He abruptly rose to walk back to the inn. Then he saw her.

A girl stood on the back lawn to his right a few feet away. The hem of a pale blue dress floated around her ankles, and a knitted auburn shawl—almost a match to the fiery hair that cascaded in curls down her back—draped across her shoulders. She clutched the ends of her shawl with both hands and stared below at the railroad tracks.

Why was she out here alone, just standing in the cold mist? Spencer leaned out of the gazebo and cleared his throat. “Good evening, ma’am.”

She jerked her head toward him and cringed, her face a pale white.

Spencer held up a hand. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m staying here at the inn and stepped out to get a breath of fresh air before dark.”

She hesitated and then replied. “Yes, I came out to get away for a spell too. So much is going on, with so many people hurting.”

With the light drizzle falling faster, Spencer gestured her closer. “Look. It’s starting to rain more. Why don’t you come over and stand under the gazebo where you won’t get wet?”

She hesitated again. “I suppose you’re right.” As she neared, her thin, small frame and radiant red hair almost illuminated the thickening fog and darkness surrounding her.

When he extended his hand to help her step up onto the gazebo, she carefully lifted her dress with her free hand. She took a long step, lost her balance, and fell against him. Helping her steady herself, he was close enough that when she looked up, her soft blue eyes and velvet-smooth complexion convinced him she was no more than fifteen or sixteen years old.

She felt chilled against him. “Are you cold?”

Pulling her hand away, she moved back. “I’m fine, thank you.”

“Here. Take my coat.” He removed his jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. “This should at least keep you dry until we get back to the inn.” Spencer retreated farther under the gazebo to get out of the windblown drizzle. “My name is Spencer. What is your name?”

Still clutching the shawl around her shoulders, she met his gaze and spoke softly. “Katherine . . . Katherine Broadwater.” Her eyelids fluttered. “But not for long. When Sam comes home from the war, I will bear his name.”

That must mean they would be married. He had to listen closely to catch every word. He hadn't heard such a thick accent in forever, except in a few old Southern Appalachian movies. "I guess congratulations are in order. When will your fiancé be coming home?"

"Most any day now. I was afraid for him to return to the war since he'd been wounded and almost died. But he said he wouldn't find peace and be able to settle down until this war was fought and won."

"He must be a true patriot and hero." Spencer had heard of similar stories of other young men who also went back to fight in the Iraq or Afghanistan wars.

"I'm so tired of the fighting and killing that happens every day. Everyone lives in such fear, families and friends are divided, and it's too dangerous to move around outside of Abingdon."

"Uh ..." Who did she mean was divided and it being dangerous to move around? Was she a bit confused? "Let's make our way back to the inn." He motioned toward the drizzle that had become a steady rain. "It's dark and we don't need to get caught in a downpour." He pulled his jacket snug around the girl's shoulders. "That should hold you until we get inside."

"Much obliged, sir."

Sir? What proper manners. Walking side by side up the rock sidewalk with this strange but graceful young lady, Spencer allowed his curiosity to form into another question. "Where are you from?"

"Copper Creek. A day's ride west of Abingdon. Mama and Papa had me attending school here, but once the war arrived, they turned the building into a hospital. Most of us girls stayed and volunteered to help take care of the wounded. That's how I met Sam."

As they neared the patio steps, Spencer frowned and rubbed his jaw. Her talk about the war and staying to care for the wounded didn't make sense. He wasn't aware of any hospital in this area that cared for wounded soldiers, much less veterans.

Katherine, ignoring the falling rain, stooped to pluck a flower from a bush beside the patio steps. She caressed the pink petals as if touching a flower for the first time and lifted it to smell the blossom. When she turned her gaze to Spencer, her bright blue eyes reflecting the inn's outdoor lights mesmerized him. Oh, the stories he could write about this young girl!

He yearned to continue the conversation, but first to get Katherine out of the cold. "Why don't we go inside? Maybe we can talk more over coffee?"

"Yes, I suppose I need to go inside. I'm sure my help is needed."

He stepped onto the rock slab steps, extended his hand to Katherine, and walked up toward the breezeway porch. Allen, the elderly man who'd checked him in and delivered his luggage to his room, stood at the door, speaking with someone inside.

As Spencer approached, the silver-haired attendant turned. "Oh, Mr. Aubrey, I have a message for you from the front desk. Someone by the name of Miriam called and said she tried calling you on your cell but couldn't reach you. She asked if we saw you to relay the message. No emergency though."

"Sure, I'll give her a call once I'm in my room. I didn't bring my phone out with me. Thank you."

"You dropped your coat behind you." Allen pointed.

Spencer turned. His coat lay on the bottom step, the flower Katherine had picked on top of it. He gathered his coat and the flower and gazed out into the darkness, but only saw droplets of rain sparkling from the outside lantern lights of the inn.

Where had she gone? Had his invitation scared her off? “Katherine ... Katherine!”

“Mr. Aubrey, can I help?”

Spencer glanced back at Allen, who watched closely under a furrowed brow. “Yes, I was talking to a young girl or lady named Katherine. She was walking behind me, wearing this jacket.” He held it up. “Now she’s gone. Didn’t you see her?”

“No, Mr. Aubrey. I saw no one but you.”

“You had to. There’s no way she could’ve walked away that fast. She was dressed in a long light-blue dress and had long auburn hair.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t even see you until I heard you start up the steps and looked your way.”

Spencer brushed the water from his coat. “Does she work here?”

“I can’t recall anyone working here named Katherine, or who even looks like her.”

It was Spencer’s turn to frown and shake his head. “I can’t believe she just walked off. She was right behind me when I started up the steps.” He continued to stare out into the night.

“Maybe she’s one of the actresses who walked over from the Barter theater across the street. They come over here often when on break or their play ends.” Allen held out his umbrella. “If you’re going to continue standing in this rain, take this broly. I’m stepping back inside.”

“Very well.” That had to be it—an actress, just playing a part. But so convincing or had she been playing him too? Spencer gave one last glance out into the cold, rainy night and conceded. He followed Allen back into the inn.



A few minutes later, inside his two-room suite furnished with nineteenth-century antiques, Spencer lit the gas logs in the bedroom fireplace to knock off the chill. The heavy poster bed sat

on an original wooden floor with the headboard extending two-thirds up the wall, crowned with a plush mattress he needed a stool to reach. Across the room, on a circular rug, wingback chairs and a plush sofa congregated around a square cocktail table.

A rectangular rug in a bright-red design accented the living room fireplace. Luxurious seating and small novelty furniture complemented the pale-blue papered walls. A small desk and chair sat in a corner beside a large-paned window encased with floral curtains extending to the floor. It provided a balcony view of Main Street.

He owed his stay here to a very thoughtful friend. Six months earlier, he'd separated from his love of twenty-seven years, and three months later, he'd lost his journalism job at the *Lynchburg Gazette*, where he'd written daily editorials for more than two decades. The only thing going for him now was that Elaine Gentry, the literary agent who'd placed his first and only manuscript several years back, still believed in his writing skill. She'd convinced him to visit this quiet resort for a week to seek inspiration for another novel.

But the only things Spencer had found since he'd arrived were more idleness, dread, and expectations of how much worse his life might become.

Still holding the flower Katherine had picked, he went to the room's bar, poured water into a glass, and placed the stem in it. He set the glass on the corner of the table, right beside his stress ball. Ah, yes. That reminded him. He needed to call Miriam, so he retrieved his phone from the bedroom and sat at the desk by the window. Spencer hesitated. Their last conversation had turned into an argument. But she may be calling about one of their kids. So, blowing out a soft breath, he dialed her number.

"Hello." His estranged wife's voice always tugged at his heart chain. Even separated, he still savored her soft tone and southwestern Carolina Appalachian accent.

“Hello, Miriam. I’m returning your call.” He could imagine her sitting in her comfy chair, curled up and reading a book by the fireplace like she always did late evenings, her long brunette hair probably in a messy bun and her olive-green eyes fixated on the pages of a good mystery.” He tried to conceal the nervousness in his voice.

“I called after hearing the message you left on your house phone voicemail that you were gone next week. Something about staying at the Martha Washington Inn in Abingdon. What are you doing there? A potential job interview, I hope?”

“I wish. No, Elaine convinced me to come down and spend a few days here.” He hastened to explain, lest she think he was here on a hot fling. “She’s my agent who helped me get my first book published eight years ago.”

“I remember. She definitely believed in your writing.”

“She wants me to do some research while here in Abingdon, hoping I’ll come up with a good idea for another historical novel.”

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

“Believe me, I’d rather be working.” He eased back in his chair. At least they weren’t shouting at each other.

“Do you need any money? I was realizing your unemployment may have run out. I don’t mind you withdrawing some from our savings.” Her voice softened.

“No, I’m okay for now. I’m trying not to spend any more than I have to. I just don’t know when I’ll find work again. At fifty-three years old, and all I’ve done is write for a newspaper, there aren’t a lot of opportunities out there. Except freelancing, and I doubt I could make a living from that.”

“You said their downsizing was due to the recession. Maybe they’ll call you back when the economy picks up.”

“No, that was their excuse. The real reason is they’re losing subscriptions because people are obtaining their news off the internet much faster. It’s the same with all newspapers, so I don’t have a clue what kind of work I’ll be able to find.”

“In that case, if you need a few dollars to tide you over, I don’t mind helping you out. But our separation agreement states we both need to sign to release the money.”

“I know.” He exhaled a long breath. “I’ll let you know if we need to meet up after my trip. Life just gets more complicated, doesn’t it?”

“Exactly, which brings me to why I called. Two reasons, really. First, Noah and Parker both want to come in for Thanksgiving. Can you join us, or do you have other plans?”

“No, I have no other plans.” Why would he? “Of course, I want to see them.” Their son and daughter, both recently married and living out of the area, holidays had become a tradition to best unify the family. He swallowed hard. “How are they dealing with our separation?”

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

“Yeah, I know.” He bowed his forehead to his hand. Too much distance to visit, he had no excuse not to call. His children were the one thing that kept him grounded.

“And the other thing ...” Her sigh reverberated over the phone. “Spencer, there’s something I need to let you know.”

A long pause followed.

Spencer tapped his finger on his knee. “Miriam, are you still there?”

“Yes. I have someone who’s been asking me out to dinner, and I’m thinking about taking him up on the offer. But only as a friend, of course. What do you think?”



Catching his breath, he exhaled out a slow puff of air before answering. “I thought we both agreed we wouldn’t question each other’s personal life once we separated.”

“I know, but—”

Irritation—or was it jealousy?—rising sharply within him, he interrupted. “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. 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, do what you feel like you need to do.” Biting his lip, Spencer closed the subject.

The phone went silent for a long moment.

Finally, she spoke again, her tone resigned. “Spencer, I didn’t call to argue. I was hoping we could have a civil conversation for once.”

He rubbed a hand over his face, a sudden heaviness filling his gut. “Okay. I think we covered your two topics. Is there anything else you need to talk about?”

“I want you to talk about you. Believe it or not, I understand what you’re going through. I know losing your job along with our separation has to be stressful. I want to help in some way if you’ll let me.” Her voice trailed off.

“Okay ... I’ll let you know.” He picked up his stress ball and squeezed it.

“How do you like the inn where you’re staying?” She was trying to end the conversation on a positive note.

Spencer made the effort to meet her halfway. “It’s a beautiful place. You would approve of it. Reminds me of some of the bed-and breakfast-inns we used to visit. High ceilings, large-

paned windows, antique furniture, colorful décor, accentuated with a large fireplace in both rooms. With hardly anyone here this week, I feel like I have the resort to myself.”

“Have you found anything interesting to write about?”

“Actually, I have, or I think so. I was just outside and met an interesting girl who has a unique Southern Appalachian accent and kind of a strange story to tell.”

“What kind of strange story?”

“Something about her and a boy named Sam who’s coming home from the war and they’re planning on getting married.” He laid the ball down and picked up the glass with the flower.

“Why do you think that’s strange?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe how she was dressed in what looked like an old-fashioned dress. And her story, as odd as it sounded, seemed convincing. Something about it stirred my writer’s curiosity. After all, I did come here to seek inspiration.”

“Will you even see this girl again?”

“I’m not sure. She kind of left suddenly when Allen, the bellhop, caught my attention to tell me you’d called. He said she was probably an actress who’d come over to take a break from the Barter theater across the street from the inn.”

“If there’s a story there, I’m sure you will find it.”

“I could definitely use a distraction now.” He picked up his stress ball.

“We’ll figure our lives out, eventually. You just need to relax and not get so stressed out over everything.”

“Miriam, that’s easy for you to say. Your life hasn’t completely fallen apart like mine.”

He squeezed the soft rubber. Tight.

“Do you think my life is better since we’ve separated?” Agitation rang in her voice. “Do you think I’m living in a world of bliss now?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Why do you always end up contradicting everything I say when we talk?”

He waved his hand out. “Miriam, I’m sorry. Forget I mentioned it.”

“Good night, Spencer.” *Click.*

He slumped in his chair. Why were they both so defensive? Well, for his part, his wife of almost three decades was hinting at dating a friend, even though they’d agreed to sit down after six months and talk about their marriage before seeking a divorce. He’d seriously thought about having that reconciliation talk with her months ago but didn’t want Miriam thinking losing his job had any influence over his decision. He’d decided to wait until he was first employed again. But now, with her considering dating someone else, had the time to save their marriage passed? Is she ready to call them quits? The reason for her call?

His mind reeling, he stared out the window at the street lampposts shattering the wet darkness. A downpour of rain blew against the windowpanes and danced on the porch outside his window.

The warmth radiating from the fireplace gas logs drew his attention. Not in a mood to go down to the bar and not yet ready for bed, he decided to attempt to write. He booted up his laptop. While he waited, he stared at the flower on the desk.

Would he see Katherine again, to learn more about this young lady to maybe add as a character in a story? As mesmerizing as she was, her dress, dialogue, and youthful innocence, she’d make an excellent character to write about. For now, he’d have to use his imagination.