
Mountain Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) Sanctuary

Lenora Worth

To Valerie Hansen, my treasured Arkansas friend!

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Chapter One

Adam Callahan slanted his head sideways so he could read the crooked sign in front of him.

Sanctuary House Inn Bed-and-Breakfast. Established 1888. Underneath the faded etched letters, a handwritten message announced Under New Management. Instead of a No Vacancy sign, someone had written—in what looked a child's scribbles—Lots Of Vacancies.

Well, he needed a bed and he needed breakfast. And this was apparently the Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) last place in Hot Springs, Arkansas, that had both. Just his luck that he'd come rolling into town during some sort of art festival. Every hotel and bed-and-breakfast in Hot Springs and the surroundings areas of Lake Hamilton and Lake Catherine was booked solid for the Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) next three days.

Except this one.

“Lots of vacancies,” Adam said out loud as he straightened his head, the tight muscles in his neck reminding him why he’d left New Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) Orleans in the first place.

“I need to rest,” he said as he headed up the cracked, aged bricks of what once must have been a carriage drive. Looking up at the Gothic-like, Victorian-style turreted house with the peeling white paint and the broken green shutters, Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) Adam wondered if he’d find any rest here. In the first light of an unforgiving yellow-gold dawn, the old house had the lost, forlorn look of a granny woman with dementia.

Adam could identify with that feeling. He’d been traveling all night and was bone weary. But he’d felt lost and forlorn for months now, his gut twisting with an emptiness that food couldn’t fill. He also felt as if he’d been wandering in the wilderness for forty days, confused and dazed, after all the anguish he’d seen in his ten years as a police officer in New Orleans.

But you resigned from the force, he reminded himself, his gaze taking in the dead blossoms on the geraniums sitting in cracked pots by Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) the side entrance to the B and B. The once-red blooms looked as burned-out and lifeless as Adam felt right now. With automatic precision, he reached down and plucked Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) a few of the dried-up red blooms. Then he caught himself and stopped. He just needed sleep. Lots of sleep.

He’d just put one booted foot on the lopsided wooden steps, when he heard weeping coming from the open window right next to the porch.

Startled, Adam pivoted off the porch steps to stare into the long, wide window. The sight he saw immediately caught his attention Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) and made him forget he was tired and sleepy.

A petite woman with waist-length, flowing strawberry-blond hair stood Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) at the aged butcher block table in the middle of the long, narrow kitchen, her hands covering her face as she leaned her head over and sobbed openly. The woman wore a flowery, gauzy dress covered by a smudged white apron that had so many ruffles they seemed to overpower both the dress and the woman wearing it. The smell of something burning caused Adam to glance Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) from Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) the distraught woman to the smoke coming out of the ancient six-burner stove sitting haphazardly against one wall. The woman seemed to be ignoring the smoke, but Adam saw a burned batch of what once must have been muffins spilled out on parchment paper on the messy butcher-block table. As he watched, the woman wiped at her eyes, then picked up one of the charred muffins and threw it across the kitchen, causing dishes to rattle in the wide, deep white porcelain sink.

Then she burst into tears again.

Which caused all of Adam's ingrained protective instincts to kick into overdrive, even while the practical part of his brain warned him in flashing, glaring banners to just turn Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) around and keep walking.

"Excuse me," he heard himself saying into the window. "Uh, ma'am, could I possibly get a room?" Then, because he just couldn't stop himself, he added, "And is there anything I can do to help you?"

The sound of his voice caused the woman to look up in surprise, her expression changing from disturbed to mortified as she glared at Adam through the window. "What?"

"I need a place to stay," Adam said, his tone gentle now. "Can I come in?"

"Do you know how to make blueberry Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) muffins?" the woman asked on a loud sniff, her daring expression Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) telling Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) him this might be the deal breaker.

"I sure do," he said with a soft smile. "I happen to make the best blueberry muffins this side of the Mason-Dixon line."

"You're teasing me, right?" she asked, tossing her long wavy hair back over her shoulder, her brilliant green eyes flashing. "And, mister, I am in no mood to be teased this morning."

"I'm not teasing," Adam replied, determination making him want to win entry into this strange, intriguing house so he could find out what was the matter with this strange, intriguing woman. "I was a cook in the navy. And on the police force back in New Orleans, I was the unofficial designated cook for all of our get-togethers. I did all the cooking for the guys—" He stopped, remembering cookouts and crawfish boils back on the bayou. "I can make muffins," he said, his tone turning blunt and businesslike Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) as he shoved the memories away. "But first, you have to let me in. Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) Oh, and you might want to check on whatever's in the oven."

At that, she let out a wail and rushed to the oven, then opened it to let out even more smoke. Shouting to Adam over her shoulder, she said, "C'mon on in. And hurry."

Adam didn't waste time getting there. He rushed up onto the side porch, found the door unlocked and entered, the big stained glass door squeaking his arrival.

A small boy wearing action-figure-embellished pajamas stood waiting for him, his hair the same thick strawberry-blond color of the woman's. The boy slanted big hazel eyes underneath long bangs, then flapped his hands in Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) the air. "Wow, am I glad to see you. This is the third batch she's tried this morning, and most of our visitors have done left and gone to get a sausage biscuit out on the highway."

Adam had to chuckle at the kid's dead-serious Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love

Inspired) expression. “And just who are you?”

“Kyle Watson Forsythe,” the boy said, extending a hand in a very grown-up manner. “I’m trying to help my mom. But she says this place is nothing but a big, ol’ money pit and she wishes she’d never in-hair-it-ted it in the first place.”

Adam wondered what else the kid, who looked to be around six or seven, had learned from his mama, but he refrained from asking that right now. “Show me the way to the kitchen, son,” he said in his best cop voice, his instincts Mountain Sanctuary (Mills & Boon Love Inspired) on full alert.

The boy rubbed his nose, then pointed. “Down that hallway to the right.” He pointed again, his expression bordering on panic. “She thinks the stove is messed up.”

“Thanks.” Adam dropped his leather duffel bag onto the hardwood floor and stalked across the formal Victorian parlor toward the kitchen and the sobbing woman.

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