

# Sanctuary Sample

## *Chapter One*

The branches in the pitch-black forest lashed at Sharon's upraised arms, flinging icy water into her face. She stumbled over unseen tree roots, lungs bursting, terror driving her onwards regardless of scratches and blows.

A slight lessening in the darkness ahead didn't register in her panic-stricken mind until the ground seemed to open up beneath her. She cried out, arms windmilling in a futile attempt to maintain balance, then tumbled down a low bank, crashing through the vegetation to land with a painful jar on hands and knees. She slumped face-down to the ground. Surely he'd have given up the pursuit by now.

As the adrenalin rush ebbed, Sharon knew she was too exhausted to go any further, pursued or not. With her last remaining strength she rolled over to huddle against the bank, out of sight under the overhanging weeds.

She picked up the cat-pee odour of crushed lantana. Her exposed skin smarted from contact with its sandpapery twigs and leaves. She closed her eyes, breathing in huge gasps as the cold soaking rain pounded down.

After what seemed an age, her shivering roused her. A lingering shred of reason told her that, in her exhausted state, she could easily die of exposure if she didn't find shelter soon. She raised her head and looked around groggily.

She lay on the side of a gravelled track, a faint strip of lesser darkness. Sharp stones pricked her. Icy water rushed down the table-drain on the verge, swirling over her feet, numbing them. To her right the track seemed to end in a deeper blackness that might offer shelter.

She struggled to get up, then collapsed again as her over-stressed legs failed. Sobbing with pain and misery she crawled along the stony, muddy track on hands and knees. At last the rectangular outline of a shed took shape, the roller door blessedly open. Sharon crawled inside and slumped onto dry dust of the oily-smelling earthen floor. Her eyes closed.

It seemed she'd barely relaxed when the roar of an engine jerked her up in a panic. Headlights blasted away the darkness and lit up the interior of the shed in a pitiless glare. She flung up an arm to shield her eyes.

Abruptly, the engine died, a door slammed, then a giant towered over her, a black shape with his outline glowing from the headlights behind him. Sharon collapsed, curled up and wrapped her arms over her head, speechless with terror. This was the end! She had no reserves of strength or courage left. This monstrous creature had her completely at his mercy.

"Who the hell are you?" he barked. Then, as she cringed in the dirt, he added, "Don't be frightened. I'm not going to hurt you."

A deep voice. Rather harsh, as if seldom used.

"What's the matter, kid? Bad trip?"

Sharon's panic eased a little at the gentler tone. She couldn't make any sense of his remark. "T-trip?" she managed at last.

"You're not a feral, then?"

Sharon's only answer was a petrified, empty stare.

"Hmm. Maybe not."

He turned away. She made a keening sound at this desertion. He couldn't possibly have heard it above the thunder of the rain on the unlined roof, but he came back after flicking on an overhead light and dousing the headlights. He dropped into a crouch and felt her jeans.

"You're freezing! No wonder. You're soaked through. Come on. I'll take you up to the house."

Without ceremony he scooped her up in his arms, walked to a side door of the garage and flicked switches with his elbow. The overhead light went off and Sharon saw a row of ground-level lights go on, illuminating a path winding up a steep hill, before he pulled a big raincoat over the pair of them. After that she saw very little. Her world contracted to arms clasping her against a hard chest, a heart beating powerfully against her ear, the smell of sawdust, and bristly hair tickling her face.

He paused. She heard a door open and close, then blinked in the light as he plucked the raincoat off and lowered her into an armchair in front of a stone fireplace. He bent and struck a match to the paper and kindling already laid in the grate, then turned and considered her. Sharon looked back nervously.

He was not a giant, after all. Her fear and the back-lighting had created the image, and besides, most people looked rather large beside her one-sixty centimetres. Big enough, though; at least one-eighty-five, with broad shoulders and chest tapering down to narrow hips and long legs. He wore a pair of overalls liberally coated in sawdust. Sharon guessed that much of the dirt on them probably came from her.

Grim, forbidding eyes and brows and a bushy black beard concealing the rest of his face gave him a wild and dangerous look. Sharon felt her agitation rising, and then at last he spoke.

“If it’s not a bad trip, what sort of trouble are you in? Should I call the police?”

“NO!” The cry jerked out. “No. Please. Not the police.”

His frown intensified as he stared, trying to read her face, which must have been twisted in terror, pain and utter weariness. He seemed about to say something, then changed his mind.

“All right, then. No police ... for now.” He turned away. “I’m going to run a bath. I don’t think you’re in a fit state to stand under a shower. You just relax and warm yourself.”

The fire crackled high now, radiating a blessed warmth and the sharp clean smell of eucalyptus. But Sharon couldn’t relax. Not after what she’d been through, and not in this present situation, alone and helpless in the middle of nowhere with this grim, ominous stranger. She was still sitting forward tensely, gazing into the flames, when he returned and frowned down at her.

“Can you walk?” Without waiting for a reply, he took her hands and drew her to her feet. Sharon winced as the weight came on her legs.

“I — I think so.”

He supported her with a hand under her elbow as she limped towards the bathroom.

“The water’s only lukewarm. Anything hotter would be too much for you right away. Just add hot water as you get used to it. Drop your clothes on the floor and I’ll wash them later.” He opened the bathroom door and urged her in.

“There’s a bathrobe hanging behind the door, for when you get out. Will you be able to manage on your own?”

“Yes! I’ll be fine, thanks!” she practically yelped, appalled at the thought of him undressing her. She waited tensely as he gave her a keen, enigmatic glance, then he went out and shut the door.

Once alone, the trauma of her night and day of tension, culminating in the thief’s attack and the extreme exertion of her flight through the bush, rose to overwhelm her. As her legs gave way she lunged for the basin and gripped its rim, locking her elbows and shoulders. If she fell, she knew she couldn’t get up.

Sharon closed her mind to the recent past, and the more immediate uncertainties of her situation. It was all just too much for her right now. Like a wounded animal checking its refuge, her eyes darted around the bathroom.

Its unusual design added to her sense of disorientation. The floor was basalt, like the fireplace, but in this case the rock had been ground smooth and polished, unlike the rough-cut stone of the hearth. The smoothness showed the bluish tinges in the black stone, white bands

of quartz and green sparks of olivine. The bath was sunk flush with the floor; no trouble to get into it, but would she be able to get out?

Then she caught a glimpse of herself in the big mirror over the basin, and froze. If her host's appearance was frightening, hers was revolting!

She scarcely knew herself. Her soft wavy blonde hair had congealed into muddy rat-tails; mud streaked and caked her face and clothes, and the whole mess was overlaid by a ghastly red-brown powdering of the dry dust from the garage floor and yellow sawdust from her host's overalls.

She shed her clothes with some difficulty, dropping them to litter the floor while leaning on the basin for support. Most of the mud went with them. She rinsed the rest from her face, hair and hands in the basin then limped over to the bath, lowered herself gingerly to sit on the edge, then collapsed into the tepid water.

She followed his instructions, gradually adding hot water. Swirling it around her body to mix it with the warm, Sharon felt herself relaxing at last in the delicious warmth. She knew she should try to plan for the alarming and uncertain future, but her mind remained mired in chaos. The initiative had passed from her. She just couldn't cope any more with all that had happened.

Slowly, painfully, she lathered her hair and her body. The water cooled, and she added more hot. And again. And again. Her eyelids drooped.

Insistent knocking on the door brought her awake with a start.

"Are you all right in there?" came the muffled voice of her host.

"Yes, fine!" she called. "I — I'll get out now."

Her arms seemed to have trebled in weight since dozing off, but eventually she got her hands up to the rim of floor around the bath and made to heave herself up. Nothing happened. She fought a surge of panic, and tried again, to no avail. Her body had finally given up the fight, succumbing to the trauma of the past twenty-four hours then the stress of her flight. Her muscles seemed to have turned to jelly. The warm seduction of the sunken bath had trapped her, like those pit-traps dug for wild animals in adventure stories of Africa and India she'd read as a child.

Sharon lay there, trembling, and thought over the problem. Perhaps if she rolled over, she could crawl out over the end of the bath — no. In her present state, if she managed to turn over, she'd probably slip down and drown. Even on her back she found it an effort to keep her head above the water. Nothing for it. She had to have help.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded high and frightened, even to her. "Are you still there?" No answer. "Hello? Help, please... HELP!"

After a moment the door burst open. He came two strides into the room then stopped. She registered that he'd removed his dirty overalls, revealing a jungle-green sweatshirt and khaki work-shorts. Ridges of muscle showed on his thighs and calves as he stood poised to act.

His eyes swept over her. "What's the matter with you?"

Sharon's arms flopped back into the water, one over her breasts, the other hand covering her groin. "I c-can't *move!*" she gasped, desperate with fear and embarrassment.

He took a step towards her, muttered a curse, then turned back to the towel-rail, flung a big bath-towel over his shoulder and came to crouch above her.

"Give me your hands." When she made no move he seized her hands and stood, drawing her up in one powerful surge. Her feet hit the floor and she collapsed against him, wet and boneless.

Damn! He thought. What do I do now?

He juggled her uncertainly for a moment then slung her right arm over his shoulder to support her, and attempted to dry her with the towel. With a shock he saw she was a young woman, not the adolescent her small size and bedraggled state suggested.

He tried to keep his attentions neutral, but in spite of her being small and slender she seemed

to be all breasts, buttocks and soft feminine curves. Her whole body glowed like a hot-pink neon light, both from the heat of the bath and embarrassment. Awareness burst on him that he held quite a different being to the filthy waif he'd found cowering in his garage — as if a gorgeous butterfly had emerged from a drab chrysalis. The bruises and contusions on her knees and the heels of her little hands now appeared like obscene graffiti on the porcelain clarity of her skin.

He felt a faint stirring from a part of him he'd thought long dead and buried.

“This isn't working, you're too floppy.” He started to drag her over towards the door. “Let's try something else — sorry!” he said, as she swung against him, crushing her bare breasts against his chest.

“Bloody hell.” He awkwardly held her away from bodily contact and averted his eyes.

Knowing he felt as self-conscious as she did calmed Sharon's panic. She even started to see the funny side of the situation as they moved crabwise to the door, her feet dragging across the floor, while he tried to support her without touching any sensitive regions. He took down the towelling bathrobe and smothered her in it with every appearance of relief, then swung her up again in his arms and opened the door.

A delicious smell tantalised her. To Sharon's horror, her stomach growled loudly. She'd eaten nothing all day but a tasteless fast-food sandwich at a roadside cafe. She was ravenous.

“Hungry, eh?”

“Mm.”

“Minestrone soup. That do you?”

She nodded. He deposited her once more in the armchair by the fire. He brought a footstool and raised her legs onto it, then disappeared into the kitchen, calling over his shoulder, “Dinner in five minutes.”

Sharon thought she'd better stay alert, but the dancing flames hypnotised her. She dozed off.

The increased smell of food woke her. She struggled up as he placed a tray across the arms of the chair. It held a bowl of soup, dusted with parmesan, and a buttered wholemeal roll.

“Tuck in.”

She needed no further invitation. He went back to the kitchen then returned with his own meal, cast a frown at her to check if she was eating as ordered, then sat in another chair facing the fire.

Sharon watched this enigma covertly. Although he'd dealt with her every need, he'd done so in a mechanical way. He seemed to resent her presence and to have little interest in her as a person, or in how she'd happened to materialise in his garage. Who did he remind her of?

Maybe a picture of an old-time bushranger.

Sharon glanced again at her grim, silent companion. His resemblance to a bushranger — Ned Kelly? — was very strong. The same thundercloud frown, the hard eyes, the rigid mouth half-hidden by the bristly black spade-beard.

His seemingly habitual expression didn't inspire her with confidence. He might be attending to her needs now, she thought, but to him she was an unknown quantity. He didn't know she had no one to appeal to for protection. What would he do if he knew she was completely at his mercy? That no one knew her whereabouts, and if they did, it would only increase her danger?

Apart from that, she had nowhere to go. All her options had been closed off two hours before.

She glanced over again, and started as she saw him watching her. “You do have a name, I take it.”

She flushed. “Sharon Wi— Petersen.”

His lips twitched at her hesitation. “Matthew Brodie.”

Sharon nodded. “Hi.”

“Soup okay?”

“Yes, thank you. It’s delicious.”

It was just what she needed; full of energy-giving pasta, together with onions, slivers of smoked ham and tomato, all in a rich garlic-flavoured stock and topped with grated parmesan cheese. She finished it up and wiped out the bowl with the last piece of her bread-roll.

“Some more?”

When she assured him she couldn’t eat another morsel, he rose and went to the kitchen. “I’ll put some coffee on.”

Freed of his oppressive presence, and to distract her morbid thoughts, Sharon began to take an interest in her surroundings in this most unusual house. She could tell he lived alone by the little heaps of things lying on tables and shelves: magazines, newspapers, bills, a few tools. The wide floorboards were of a rich dark-brown timber with black flecks, mellow with the polish of age. The fireplace and the corners of the room were built of irregular black basalt rocks cemented together. The walls between the masonry were a warm reddish-brown, probably rammed earth, and finished with something that gave them a varnished look. In contrast to the floor they looked new, or at least recent. A pair of heavy golden-brown curtains, each over two metres wide, fell from the high timber ceiling to the floor in the centre of one wall.

But the most curious thing, now she noticed it, was her chair.

She supposed the style would be called rustic. The frame was made of un-sawn timber; tree branches in fact. It looked deceptively simple, but the more she studied it, the more complex it appeared. The pieces of timber were assembled so their natural curves and differing grains and colours made up a harmonious whole. A single sheet of leather formed the seat and back, artfully lashed to the frame with thongs to give a comfortable support exactly where required. Each thong had a control, rather like a violin’s tuning peg, to allow fine adjustment to individual preference.

Matthew Brodie came back then with coffee. Sharon decided to try drawing him into conversation to defuse the tension between them.

As he put a mug on her tray with a jug of milk and a sugar bowl, she gave him a tentative smile.

“I’ve just been admiring this chair. Where did you get it?”

“I made it.” His curt tone displayed no pride. “How do you feel now?”

“Much better, thank you.” She could see no softening whatsoever in him. “But I’m terribly tired.”

“Okay. Finish your coffee, then off to bed. I’ll just make up the bed in the spare room.” He walked out, then came back almost immediately and thrust a T-shirt at her.

“Best I can do for nightwear. I’d better carry you in, so you might care to change while I’m doing the bed.”

Sharon watched him out of the room, then, as quickly as she could, slipped her arms out of the voluminous bathrobe, pulled the T-shirt over her head and wriggled it down under her bottom. It hung off her shoulders and came to mid-thigh; she hoped it wouldn’t ride up when he picked her up. Not that he hadn’t seen every part of her already.

He coughed a discreet warning before entering. Seeing her ready, he wordlessly picked her up and carried her out of the room. Sharon lay rigid in his arms, eyes averted, full of apprehension at the close contact, aching aware of her helplessness.

*What if he decides he’s going to join me in the bed?*

He’d turned down the bed. She clutched the bottom of the T-shirt with both hands as he laid her in it. He tucked her in like a child, then walked away. Sharon breathed a sigh of relief. At the door he hesitated, his hand on the light switch, and looked back.

She had drawn the blankets up to her nose, and stared back at him. Her hands trembled

where she gripped the blankets. His expression, she thought, looked sad and angry, as if her obvious fear troubled him. He gave her a peculiar smile that looked as if it took some effort.

“Sleep well, Sharon. I may look like a wild man from the hills, but I assure you I won’t come to ravish you in the night. Believe me, I’m the last person who’d harm you.”

Sharon stared at him, transfixed. He returned the stare for a long moment, then added, “We’ll talk in the morning, and see what’s to be done with you.”

He nodded, switched off the light, and closed the door behind him.

Sharon relaxed slowly. She was safe enough for tonight, if she could believe him. She wondered what lay behind that remark, *I’m the last person who’d harm you*. And as for *we’ll see what’s to be done with you...*

It could have been a tentative offer of protection. She gave a sob of despair. If ever she needed protection, she needed it now. But by him? And to what end?

She remembered what Steve had said, three years ago. *You need protection, Sharon. A frail little thing like you, all alone in the world*. His charming smile had disguised the subtext. Only after they were married did she find out what it meant — whoever protects someone, controls them. Eventually they *own* them. As she soon discovered, the one person she most needed protection from was Steve.

Now she’d made her long-planned bid for freedom, and it had all gone horribly wrong. Her coveted independence seemed further out of reach than ever.

She’d have to be careful tomorrow. She must try to use Brodie, without giving away any more than she had to. He’d been kind to her; but so had Steve, at first. If he was like Steve, and if he discovered her true situation, she’d be worse off than ever.

In this isolated location, Brodie could use her in any way he wished.

## *Chapter Two*

The sun’s luminous rays cut through the rain-washed morning air to pierce the window, teasing Sharon awake with dancing leaf-shadows on her eyelids. The clouds had dissolved overnight, revealing a bright-edged sub-tropical late winter’s day.

Disoriented, Sharon sat up in panic, then memory flooded back with the unaccustomed ache of stiff muscles. She gathered and ordered those memories, preparing herself for the ordeal to come.

*We’ll talk in the morning*. Just so. And how much would she, could she, reveal?

Her eyes roamed the room, but found no inspiration there. It was bare except for the bed and an old dressing-table and chair against the opposite wall. She strained her ears for movement in the house, but heard nothing except the faint rustle of leaves, distant bird calls and a trickle of running water.

Gingerly, Sharon moved her legs, and winced. But at least they moved, with the sensation of strength returning. She swung her feet to the floor and put some weight on them. They held, and she took a few experimental steps. She was mobile again, even if a tortoise could probably outrun her.

She opened the door quietly and put her head out. A radio played soft music from the Renaissance, probably tuned to the classical music station that had been her parents’ favourite. Familiar, reassuring sounds.

The bathroom door, next to hers, stood open. She nipped inside, saw it had no lock so swiftly attended to her needs. With no brush or comb, she ran her fingers through her hair in front of the mirror, then squared her shoulders, pulled down the T-shirt as far as it would go and stepped out into the lounge-room with a confidence she was far from feeling. And there she stopped,

awe-struck.

The big curtains were pulled back, disclosing a floor-to-ceiling plate-glass window about four metres wide. Sharon limped over to gaze more closely at the scene it revealed.

The path she'd been carried up last night wound down to the garage. The drive ran from there to the road, which led from the coast to the hinterland. Beyond, in the floor of the narrow valley, ran the Tweed River, little more than a creek in these upper reaches. Foothills rose steeply on the other side. Behind them soared a majestic mountain, sheer black rock glistening from last night's rain, the rainforest cloaking it wherever tree-roots could find the smallest chink to get a grip. The mountain was only a few kilometres away, but in the clear air it seemed she could reach out and touch it.

Sharon felt rather than heard Matthew Brodie come up behind her, but some instinct stopped her from turning to acknowledge him.

"That's Mount Warning, isn't it?" she said, without removing her eyes from it.

"That's what Captain Cook called it, when it told him he'd sailed too close to land. But I prefer its original name: Wollumbin."

"What does that mean?"

"Cloudmaker." She could feel his presence close behind, his breath stirring the hair on the top of her head as she tilted it back, gazing up at the mountain. She moved a step closer to the window.

"Look," he said softly. "It's making one now."

A faint mist formed on the mountain's flank, thickening as it fled up the steep slope under the treetops until it burst out to obscure them. The mountaintop vanished, and the cloud streamed from it like a banner on the battlements of a castle.

Sharon was aware that Brodie appeared as fascinated as she, although he must have seen the sight many times. *If he can appreciate beauty like this, he can't be quite as hard as he appeared last night.*

Seeking to prolong the moment of tenuous rapport she said, "It almost looks as if the trees are spinning the cloud out of the air. How does it really happen?"

"The mountain deflects the wind upwards. It expands and cools as it rises. If it's carrying enough moisture, it condenses and forms a cloud." He gave a brief laugh. "That's the scientific explanation, but I really prefer yours."

She turned then with a tentative smile, meeting his eyes for the first time that morning. It startled her to see they were grey, like the cloud the mountain spun. Not black, as she had thought last night. She told herself it must have been a combination of dim light and her fear of him that had given the darkest impression.

She surprised a relaxed, almost tender expression in his eyes, but immediately he took a half-step back, as if he were distancing himself from her and dropping the shutters again over any display of feeling.

"Breakfast's ready," he said. "Hope you like fruit and muesli."

"I do, thank you. Matthew..." she hesitated. "I'm sorry to be such a nuisance to you."

"Call me Matt. You're no trouble."

He walked away from her towards the kitchen as he spoke. Sharon sighed, and shivered in the chill morning air. He turned back in time to catch it.

"Your clothes are dry." He gestured towards the fireplace, and she turned to see them pegged out in front of it on a folding clothes-horse. She'd overlooked them when the mountain grabbed her attention.

"Better get dressed. That T-shirt is hardly adequate." Sharon muttered her thanks and unpegged them with clumsy fingers, self-conscious yet again at the thought of him washing and pegging out her clothes and underwear in the quiet of the night as she lay asleep. She went back to the bedroom to dress.

He made no conversation through breakfast. Sharon felt her tension building. That phrase from the night before, *We'll talk in the morning*, loomed over her like a thundercloud. She'd still not decided on what line to take with him. She picked at her food, eyes lowered, even though it was the sweetest pawpaw she'd ever tasted, probably taken fresh from the tree she noticed just outside the window.

He rose to pour the coffee, placed a mug in front of her and sat back, crossing an ankle on one knee. Sharon knew the moment had come.

Unwillingly, she looked up. His expression didn't look unkind.

"Well. Care to tell me about it?"

Sharon decided to keep it simple. She took a calming sip of coffee. "I was robbed last night. They took everything except the clothes I had on."

He showed no reaction to that, but merely asked, "How did that come about?"

"I sat beside this girl on the bus from Sydney, on my way to Brisbane. She was rather a rough-looking type, with lip rings, tats and weird hair. But a lot of young girls are like that these days, and she seemed really friendly.

"The bus broke down at Murwillumbah, and they couldn't fix it. They were going to have to get a replacement down from Brisbane, which wouldn't have got us there until after midnight.

"I mentioned to the girl I'd have trouble finding accommodation at that hour. She said her brother was coming to meet her here. They'd stay overnight with their parents on a farm, and they'd drive to Brisbane tomorrow — that is, today, and I could stay with them and they'd give me a lift.

"I didn't much like the look of the brother, but he acted very friendly too ... she'd raced out ahead of me to find him—"

"And to tell him what an easy mark she'd found," he added dryly.

"I'm sure. Anyway, we drove out here, up a side road and stopped." Sharon shuddered.

Matthew Brodie waited silently.

"He — he pulled out a flick-knife, and ordered me out. I didn't move, I got such a shock. And then *she* said, 'Why don't you f—, er, rape the stuck-up bitch, and—'"

Sharon paused, startled at an intense flare in Matt's eyes, a surge of some powerful emotion she couldn't read. She hoped she wasn't giving him ideas, and hurried on.

"I think she only said it to scare me into running off. It certainly worked, but he seemed to think it was a good idea. He chased me down the track and almost caught me. I took to the bush and lost him among the trees in the dark."

"Nice people."

"So, they got all my luggage, and all my money." She lifted her chin, and looked at him challengingly. "And that's how you came to find me freaked out in your garage."

He held her stare until she felt compelled to drop her eyes.

"Are you going to tell me the rest of it?" he said, and waited.

"The rest? What rest?"

"Why you were in such a hurry to get out of Sydney that you hadn't booked your accommodation ahead. And why you're so reluctant to report an offence to the police: which, incidentally, would give you a chance of getting your property back." He leaned back, clasped his hands behind his head and just looked at her. "You don't look much like a criminal on the run, Sharon."

As she'd feared, he suspected there was more to the story. Sharon knew she'd have to tell him everything, or he might just go to the police himself out of a misguided sense of duty.

The seconds ticked past. "My husband is a policeman," she said at last. "I've left him. I don't want him to find out through the force where I am."

He nodded. "So you *are* on the run. I suppose he threatened to kill you if you ever left him."

Sharon's head jerked up. "What makes you think that?"

"It figures." He counted off points on his fingers.

"Your haste to get out of Sydney, before he realised you'd gone. You didn't take a plane because you'd need to show ID, and that would leave a record of your trip, which doesn't apply for bus travel if you pay in cash.

"Women leave their husbands every day, but they're not usually so desperate to keep their whereabouts secret." He lowered his hands and his eyes narrowed. Sharon felt herself being studied and found wanting.

"Besides, you're probably just the type that sort of bastard prefers. Small, dependent ... easily cowed."

An accurate description, but not by any means one that Sharon appreciated. Stung, she snapped, "Easy for you to say! You'd weigh twice as much as me, you could throw me about with one hand. How'd *you* like to be someone who's *small and easily cowed*?"

"Bravo! So he hasn't completely broken your spirit. There's hope for you yet, Sharon." He poured himself another cup of coffee, then raised the plunger to her inquiringly. Sharon shook her head. After the first sip, she'd left her coffee untasted. Matt drank his moodily, then put the mug down with a decisive thump.

"Look — I'm sorry if I seemed so uncouth last night."

Sharon could only gape at him, surprised at this switch.

"I must have frightened you almost as much as your other experiences did. The truth is, I thought you were a feral druggie. There's a lot of them around here, and plenty of marijuana plantations hidden away in the bush.

"And I've been living like a hermit for so long, I've lost all my social skills. The only visitor I ever have is my agent from Sydney, and he's not much more talkative than I am. I must say I wasn't thrilled to find you, but I couldn't just turn you out."

"You did frighten me," she said, feeling her confidence growing following his apology. "But you treated me well, Matt. Even if you weren't particularly gracious about it."

"Gracious! That's a good one."

"Well, anyway, I don't want to put you out any further." Sharon felt a sense of desolation, but she had to say it. "If you'd just be kind enough to give me a lift into town—"

"And where will you go from there, with no money?"

She lowered her head, unable to answer.

He stood abruptly, stepped away from the table and stared out the window with his back to her, fists on his hips. His shoulders lifted, then sagged. The moments ticked by.

Sharon could make a fair guess at his thoughts. He didn't want to take any more responsibility for her. But his conscience was probably telling him he couldn't just turn her out, with no money, easy prey for the next lowlife. But what other solution could there be?

He sighed, then turned to face her, hands on hips.

"Listen. What I think you need is some time out; a quiet refuge until you get your life back together again. You'd better stay here for now." She opened her mouth to protest, but he went on swiftly.

"No, really, we can do each other a favour. I'm way behind in my orders. I'll pay you to be my housekeeper and general assistant. That way you can build up a nest-egg until the time comes when you feel able to strike out on your own."

Her mind reeling at this offer, Sharon seized on the least emotive word in his speech. "Orders?"

"I make rustic furniture. You saw some of it last night. It's got a bit of a cult following in Sydney and Melbourne."

Sharon was too surprised to say anything.

"It might help you to decide," he went on, "if I tell you I've absolutely no intention of

starting a relationship. I have other priorities. You'll be perfectly safe here — from me, and from your husband." He smiled grimly. "That won't stop the gossip, of course. It'll be the talk of the district that a beautiful young woman has moved in with the Mad Hermit. That doesn't concern me in the slightest, but it might bother you."

Sharon couldn't read this situation at all. "Are you a mad hermit?"

He sat down opposite her again, still regarding her somberly. Just when Sharon thought she'd gone too far and he wouldn't answer, he sighed. "Probably. But I'm not dangerous. At least, not to you."