

## *Position Vacant*

by

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Good thing I'd brought a book. The guy in the lap pool looked like a serious swimmer. Although the pool was wide enough for two, he was raising such a wake that I'd probably get a mouthful every time we passed.

A little girl in a pink bathing suit was sitting on the edge of the pool, also waiting, kicking her feet in the water. She'd be more my speed. I looked at her, feeling the familiar futile tug of longing, then looked away before my thoughts became too maudlin.

To distract myself I lay back on a poolside lounge, and glanced around at my — so far — unfamiliar surroundings. The Brisbane River flowed past on just the other side of the walkway outside the complex's pool fence. I felt some sense of achievement at having made the move, if only with the help of a friend, to this eminently desirable apartment block at Kangaroo Point.

A CityCat swept past just then, loaded with weekend day-trippers, completing my feeling of self-satisfaction. What a pleasure it will be to go to work on that, rather than in a bus stuck in traffic on Ipswich Road. I wriggled my toes, and opened my book.

A minute or so later I had the feeling of being watched, and looked up to find the child staring at me.

I smiled at her. She got up and approached me slowly, her big, adorable dark-chocolate eyes looking very serious.

"Hi, honey," I said invitingly.

"Are you my mummy?" she asked.

Well, there's no hiding the fact that my figure is, ahem, *maternal*, particularly as my flowered bikini didn't hide much of it. But the kid seemed seriously confused.

"No, I'm not," I said gently. Then I couldn't help adding, "But I'm sure I'd like it if I was."

She gave a big smile at that, her tooth development revealing her to be about five or six.

"My name's Kiri. What's yours?" she asked.

"Sandra. But you can call me Sandy, all my friends do. Kiri is a pretty name."

"I'm named after an op-er-a star. Daddy says it's because my first yell after I was born was a perfect high F." She frowned. "Whatever that means."

Suddenly shy, she fell silent. To fill the gap I said, "Your mummy wouldn't look like me. I'm a blue-eyed blonde."

She shrugged. "My friend Melanie's got brown hair like me, and her mummy's blonde."

A deep male voice interrupted before I could think of an answer to that. "Kiri! Are you annoying the lady?"

I looked up, to see the swimmer climbing out of the pool. "She's not annoying me. We're just..."

I trailed off as he approached. Oh wow, really superior eye-candy. Tall, lean, long muscular legs, broad chest spangled with water droplets glittering in the sun, his heavy breathing from

the exercise emphasising abs and pecs that hardly needed the emphasis... I raised my eyes from the bulge in the blue Lycra racing trunks to avoid heavy breathing on my own account.

“...just talking,” I finished.

Raising my eyes hardly helped in calming me, as I viewed the progenitor of Kiri’s lovely chocolate browns.

They were taking their time coming up to meet my blues. Well, I couldn’t complain. I’d certainly ogled him, and men are such visual creatures, as everyone knows. From the expression on his face he seemed to be the type who appreciated the voluptuous — my favourite word, sounds much more classy than *plump* — women.

“I haven’t seen you here before. Have you just bought in?”

Oh ecstasy, a dark chocolate voice too. Did he intuit that I was addicted to dark chocolate? I cleared my throat and said, “I wish! I couldn’t afford one of these units on my junior solicitor’s salary. I’m sharing the rent with a friend.”

“Girlfriend or boyfriend?” Kiri asked.

“Kiri!”

“It’s okay, kids are naturally curious. Girlfriend, in fact.”

It had been a godsend when Jenny had been financially frantic to find another flatmate to share the rent when Francie got married and moved out.

Good timing, too. I’d finally accepted the fact that Brett was yet another one suffering from commitment-phobia. This had coincided with his forgetting my thirtieth birthday, an important milestone on my ticking biological clock.

I looked at Kiri with a burning desire. What a pity that we women had this crazy expectation for men to stick around and be part of a family as well as being sperm carriers.

“Her name’s Sandy, Daddy,” Kiri said helpfully.

“Pleased to meet you, Sandy.”

A big hand enveloped mine. His handshake was just right: firm, but mindful of a woman’s smaller hand. “I’m Matthew McCabe. Matt. Kiri, you can go for your swim, now that I can watch you.”

She hesitated. “Will you both watch me?”

“Sure we will,” I said. “I want to see how fast you can go.”

Matt glanced at the cover of my book, and quirked an eyebrow. Okay, so I’m an SF fan. Nothing like law books to give you a taste for escapist entertainment.

Kiri dived in and set off in an efficient freestyle, switching to breast-stroke occasionally to check we were really watching.

“She swims very well. She’s got a good, natural style,” I remarked.

“Yes. Glad we took her to swimming lessons.” Matt’s smile was soft, paternal, then he added awkwardly, “Ah, did she ask you any ... *unusual* questions?”

“Yes, she did! She asked if I was her mother. It rather surprised me.” I waited for an explanation.

He sat down on the lounge beside mine, rested his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands. “It worries me. I don’t know what to make of it.

“My wife died two years ago, you see—”

“I’m so sorry!”

“Thanks. But Kiri’s been doing this for the last three months — asking various women if they’re her mother. I think she’s refusing to believe her mother is dead, and keeps looking for her. But she denies this, says she remembers her mother clearly.”

“Do I look anything like her mother?”

“No, not at all. Cathy was tall, slender and dark.”

I put my legal mind to the problem. “Does she ask every woman she meets?”

“No, only a small minority of the ones who are round about the right age.”

“Is there any common denominator about her choices?”

He frowned in thought for a moment, then said, “Only that they’re all pleasant, friendly types, who obviously like her.”

“I’m a GP, so I know a bit about psychology, but our father-daughter relationship gets in the way of my analysing her properly. I think I should take her to a psychiatrist.”

“Well, you’re the expert, compared to me, but I’d give her a bit more time. Kids get some funny ideas into their heads. They usually grow out of them.”

“Do you have kids, Sandy?”

“No.” I sighed, and turned to watch Kiri. Perhaps the longing showed in my expression; Matt seemed about to make a comment, then apparently thought better of it.

“If you’re ever hard up for a babysitter, you can call on me,” I said on impulse.

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The CityCat’s Mowbray Park stop was only a minute’s walk away. To my secret delight, I found Matt walking there on Monday morning, and each weekday morning thereafter.

We got in quite a lot of chatting on the ten-minute ride to Riverside, and fell into an easy rapport. But, in spite of all my “available” signals, that’s as far as it went. Maybe he was still grieving for his wife. Meanwhile, I was pretty certain I was falling for him. Hard.

But after two weeks of this unhurried getting-to-know each other, I got a date — of sorts.

“Were you serious when you offered to baby-sit?” he asked me one morning.

“Sure. Anytime I’m free.”

“I know it’s short notice, but I’m going out tonight, and my regular babysitter has a cold. I wouldn’t want her to pass it on to Kiri—”

“Say no more. What time?”

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What to wear? Jenny was out with a new boyfriend, so I couldn’t ask her expert advice. Even though I was doing a Cinderella and just staying in, I wanted to look good, but it had to be practical, if Kiri wanted me to play with her. I settled first for my classiest but understated set of earrings: real amethysts, then a matching pale mauve top, and stretch jeans. Then I went up four floors and knocked on Matt’s door.

I needn’t have worried about what to wear. I was totally eclipsed. Matt looked stunning in a full formal dinner suit that set off his eyes and dark wavy hair to perfection — but drifting about in the background was a tall, slender, and formidably elegant brunette in a red satin

strapless evening gown, a white faux-fur wrap, and, judging by the glitter, real and sizeable diamonds in her earrings.

“Sandy, this is Eleanor.”

She nodded regally, and didn't offer to shake hands. Kiri defused the awkward moment by running forward into my arms. I swept her up and kissed her. She smelt clean and fresh from her bath, and toothpaste scented her breath.

“Well, we'll be off, then,” Matt said. “I shouldn't be too late.” A faint but unmistakable frown marred Eleanor's alabaster brow.

“Come and you can see all my things!” Kiri dragged me to her room to show me her treasures. I was pleased to see that Matt hadn't spoiled her by showering her with presents, as so many time-poor parents do.

We sat on the floor and talked a lot of nonsense for ages, until I saw she was struggling to keep awake. Long past what I considered was bedtime, I dangled the promise of a story. I read her *The Magic Pudding*, doing all the voices.

“You read *so* good,” she said, when I came to the end. “Are you read me another story?”

“*Will you please* read me another story,” I corrected automatically.

Kiri looked puzzled for a moment, then her eyes grew round. “Ohhh... I asked you the wrong question,” she said in a small voice.

“Yes, you did. Which story would you like?”

“No, I mean before. I meant, *Will you please* be my mummy.”

“Oh,” I said stupidly.

“I mean my new mummy, of course. My old mummy is dead. Bloody hit-run drunk.”

So that's how she'd died. I felt a certain measure of relief; I hadn't cared to ask, but had feared some hereditary disease that she might have passed down to Kiri.

I didn't correct her language, which she'd probably heard from Matt in an unguarded moment.

“Why did you ask me, Kiri? You didn't know me. I could have been a horrible person.”

She shook her head. “You gave me a *proper* smile. Not like Eleanor. I thought you looked real nice. And I was right. You *are* real nice.”

I hugged her. “You're pretty nice yourself, princess.”

She hugged me back. “So. *Will* you be my mummy?”

“It's not that simple, honey. To be your mother, I'd have to marry your daddy.”

“Do you like him?”

“Yes. Very much.”

“Okay. I'll tell him to ask you to marry him.”

“No!” I yelped. Visions of Matt accusing me of brainwashing his child to have my wicked way with him flashed through my mind. “No. It has to come from *him*. Men don't like being pressured.”

“Oh well.” She yawned, then added, “I'll just keep telling him how much I like you.”

“Just don't overdo it.” Her eyelids drooped, so I don't know if she heard. “Now it's time to go to sleep.”

“All right.”

She puckered her little rosebud mouth. I kissed her and said, “Goodnight, sweetheart.”

Almost asleep, she whispered, “Goodnight, Mummy.”

Somehow, I managed to let go of her and break the magnetic pull of our mutual need. I walked unsteadily out to the lounge room and stood there for many minutes, battered by the waves of realisation of my love for them both, and the hopelessness of the situation.

*Cathy was tall, slender and dark.*

Just like Eleanor. Men go for types, don't they? *Face reality. I'm hardly the type Matt would go for.*

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After a while, I calmed down enough to do a bit of snooping. The apartment was a sub-penthouse; three bedrooms plus study, with a large lounge, kitchen and dining area, much more spacious than our tight little two-bedder. Glass doors opened onto a wide balcony, giving a stunning view of the river, the lights outlining the Story Bridge, and the city towers beyond.

I checked out his CDs. All stuff I liked or could comfortably live with. Then his bookcase. A lot of medical tomes, of course, but many fiction authors and titles I recognised. And, aha! On the top shelf, boxed collectors' sets of *Analog* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* from the 1950s and 60s, the golden age of SF.

So that raised eyebrow at my book had been recognition, not derision. I pulled one out at random, and settled on the couch to read.

I was engrossed in a Theodore Sturgeon classic when the door opened, and Matt walked in — alone. He grinned when he saw what I was reading. “Aha, you've discovered my guilty secret.”

He sat down beside me on the couch, with a weary sigh. I studied him surreptitiously. Tired, tie slacked off ... no lipstick marks or love bites. “Was Kiri any trouble?”

“None at all. But Matt, we sorted out the mystery of the mummy question.”

I explained. He smote his forehead with the heel of his hand. “Of course. She's so bright, I keep forgetting she's only six, and sometimes gets her tenses mixed up.” He groaned. “How embarrassing. In effect, she's been asking strange women to marry me.”

“That's about it.”

Matt turned to me. Our eyes met, locked. Moments passed. They stayed locked. I swallowed. He swallowed, and said, “So, um, would you be ... interested?”

My heart somersaulted. My voice went up an octave. “What about Eleanor?”

He frowned. “Eleanor? Oh, did you think we were on a date? I only know her slightly, through our state AMA branch. We had a formal dinner tonight, to welcome our new federal president. Eleanor lives two doors down. She asked me for a lift, 'cause her car had a flat.”

*I'll bet it did.* I could just imagine her noting, for future reference, the convenient proximity of the sexy doctor she'd met at some previous medical do. Doesn't the man realise how attractive he is? Can't he recognise the signals of a hunting female? If he's so oblivious to them, maybe it's because she doesn't interest him! But what about *my* signals?

“I didn't think you'd go for plump blondes—”

“*Voluptuous* blondes.”

Oh, the darling man. I could have stopped there, basking in the compliment, but I wanted the truth, the whole truth, so I ploughed on. “—as Cathy was dark and slender.”

“Looks don’t matter. It’s the personality I go for.”

He reached out to draw me close, and his voice dropped an octave. “And it doesn’t hurt a bit that you’re warm, cuddly and very, very sexy.”

He kissed me. It was every bit as good as I’d expected, and then some.

Quite a while later, he murmured, “I wanted to ask you before. But I thought, would a hot-shot career woman in a big law firm really be interested in taking on a ready-made family? It’s a lot to ask.”

“You know what Murphy says! It’s not all it’s cracked up to be. As the junior, and not part of the old boys’ network, I get the crap jobs. And I’ve decided I don’t like corporate law. I’d rather see some of my clients behind bars, than help them find legal ways to fleece their shareholders. But I can’t afford to leave my job.”

“What would you like to do, if money was no object?”

“Work part time.” *So I can be at the school gate for Kiri, if that’s what you’re offering.* “Pick and choose my clients. Deserving ones.”

“Do it, then. After you marry me.”

“*Marry you?*”

“That was a proposal, in case you’re wondering.”

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The best day of my life was when Matt and I rocked up in front of the marriage celebrant. Kiri was the flower girl, and took great delight in telling everyone who’d listen that she’d picked me out to be her new mummy, and that it had taken Daddy much longer to realise I was The One, but then men were like that, weren’t they?

The second best day was right after I’d given birth to our son, and relief and euphoria swamped the pain of childbirth. Matt did the delivery.

“I’m not going to risk you with anyone else,” he’d said. Once we’d both cleaned up, he brought Kiri in for her first look at her new baby brother.

After the first exclamations of delight she said, with a worried expression, “Now you’ve got him, will you still love *me*, Mummy?”

“Of course, darling! Love is a lot like extending a house. You just put on a new room for the new person you love, and the old loves keep their own rooms. But the whole house is better for the extension.”

“Well put,” Matt’s smile warmed me right through. “Your mother is a very wise woman, Kiri.”

She nodded seriously. “Okay. Then I’ll put on a room for *him* too.” Then she brightened, and added, “It’ll be cool to have a little brother to boss around. I’ll help you make sure he grows up to be a good daddy — like ours.”

The next fifteen or twenty years, I thought, should be interesting.