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**SAMPLE CHAPTERS OF LOVE'S CHALLENGE
BY SONdra QUINN**

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CHAPTER ONE

Adria frowned at the order form in front of her. She'd added the figures four times and come up with a different amount each time. Stretching her arms high into the air with a dancer's grace, she shook her sable hair and then returned to the form. As she punched the numbers into her calculator with fierce jabs of her pencil, the ring of the phone shattered what was left of her concentration. "Hello!" she said impatiently.

"Adria Sinclair please," said an unfamiliar voice.

"This is she." Adria tapped her pencil on the edge of the book order, instantly categorizing this as a sales call.

"Mrs. Sinclair, this is Don Mannick. I'm one of the football coaches at Howard Junior High."

"Yes?" Adria forgot all about the book order and tried to quell the wave of anxiety that swept over her. From the tone of Coach Mannick's voice, this wasn't a social call.

"Alex has had an accident here at practice. His shoulder was injured and we thought it best to take him to the hospital. Our head coach, Bryce Hathaway, went in the ambulance with him."

"Ambulance?" Adria said with alarm.

"Just a matter of policy," Coach Mannick said soothingly.

"Of course. I'll go to the hospital immediately. Thank you for calling." Adria pressed the disconnect button.

"Michael!" she called as she scrambled in her purse for her car keys. "I've got to go to the hospital. Alex has had some kind of accident at practice. I'm leaving you in charge. I'll call as soon as I've talked to the doctor."

"Okay Aunt Adria."

"And no Gameboy® till homework's done!"

Michael grinned. "Understood." He gave her a half salute as she found her keys and ran out the door. It wasn't till she got to the hospital that Adria realized she had rushed away from the house still wearing her comfortable, but worn-looking slippers. At least they weren't bunny slippers, she thought with a wry grin, remembering how proud the twins had been when they'd presented those to her for a birthday present.

Adria wrinkled her nose as the sharp odor of alcohol rushed to meet her when she stepped inside the double doors of the emergency room. All hospitals smelled alike, she thought, looking around to get her bearings. The woman at the Admissions Desk looked tired, as though she had seen far too many emergencies; yet she managed a welcoming smile as Adria asked anxiously about Alex. "The doctor was just going in to look at him. He's in Room Four, right

over there. Why don't you go see for yourself how he is? You can finish filling out these forms in there. Coach Hathaway gave us what information he could but..."

"Of course," Adria said, cutting the woman off in her haste to get to her nephew. She stepped quickly through the door of Room Four, clutching the forms tightly in her whitened knuckles. Alex lay on the table with his eyes half closed. Adria caught her breath. "Alex?"

"Hi," the boy said weakly. Adria frowned at the strain of pain in his usually cheerful voice.

"The doctor will be right in. You're going to be all right." Adria moved to the table and stroked his hair back from his pale face.

"Are you Alex's aunt?"

The velvet-edged voice hit her from behind, and for the first time, Adria realized there was someone else in the room. She turned and saw a man standing in the corner. No, not just a man, but an extremely handsome man with wavy straw-colored hair, penetrating blue eyes, and dimples she could get lost in. Adria loved dimples; she'd seen Pirates of the Caribbean four times just to look at Orlando Bloom's dimples. The man looked vaguely familiar, and she wondered where she had seen him before. "Yes, I'm Adria Sinclair, Alex's aunt." She held out her hand, noting the faint look of surprise on the man's face.

"I'm Bryce Hathaway." His large hand took her small one and held it gently, perhaps just a fraction longer than necessary. His rich, masculine scent warred with the alcohol smell of the hospital and won. "When Alex said he lived with his aunt, I expected someone quite a bit older." And not as pretty, his eyes added.

Adria forced herself to look away from his smile and back to Alex. "What happened?" she asked. "Coach Mannick told me he was hurt, but didn't say how."

"We were just having our regular practice, "A" team against the "B" team, when he got sacked. He was hit pretty hard. His shoulder was wrenched and, well-" Bryce shrugged and nodded his head in the boy's direction. "You can see what it looks like."

Yes, Adria certainly could see and she didn't like the look of it. Underneath the ice pack, the joint was swollen and misshapen. She hid her concern, though, and smiled reassuringly at her nephew. "I'll just fill out these forms," she said, "so the doctor can have a look at you." She pushed a stray lock of hair out of her eyes and quickly filled in the requested information.

Bryce watched Adria with a half smile on his face. She was the most attractive woman he had ever seen. Her inky black hair fell straight to her waist, framing her face and emphasizing her fair skin. Her soft brown eyes were large and had an intensity about them when they focused on him that he enjoyed even while finding it disconcerting. She was not much taller than Alex, but her legs, encased in faded jeans, were long and slender, and her breasts were pleasantly full. For just a moment, as he watched her tenderly stroking the hair out of Alex's eyes, he almost wished he were lying on the table in the boy's place.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Cavens." A plump, cheerful-looking man breezed into the room and held his hand out first to Bryce, then to Adria. Adria stood back

anxiously and watched as the doctor examined her nephew's shoulder. Bryce moved up to stand beside her and Adria took comfort from his solid strength. He rested his hand lightly on her shoulder, and just for a second she leaned into the warmth of his touch before self-consciously pulling herself away.

Finally the doctor turned. "It looks as if his shoulder is dislocated. I'd like to get a few x-rays so we know for sure what we're dealing with, and then I'll talk to you some more."

Adria nodded. "Of course. Do what you need to do."

An orderly came to wheel Alex to x-ray. "It'll probably be a while," he told Adria. "If you want to go to the snack bar and wait, we'll call for you as soon as he's done."

Adria hesitated, but Bryce slipped a hand under her elbow. "Come on. You can't do any good here. I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

His touch sent a tingle through Adria. She pulled her elbow away quickly, but gave him a smile. "All right," she agreed. "A cup of coffee would be good right now."

Bryce saw her seated comfortably at a chair in the snack bar before he fetched a steaming cup of coffee and fresh doughnuts. "Hope you like chocolate-iced."

"My favorite. If it's not chocolate, it's not worth eating!" Adria said with a wink. She broke off a piece of doughnut and stuffed it in her mouth. "You don't need to stay, you know," she added with gentle softness. "I can handle things from here."

"I'm sure you can, but it's my responsibility as coach to stay. I sure hate it that Alex got hit like that. He's a good kid."

A smile lit Adria's face. "Yes, he is."

"How long has he lived with you?"

Adria stirred her coffee. "About seven months. My brother and his wife were killed in a car crash."

"Must have been hard on Alex."

Adria nodded, not trusting herself to speak further. But Bryce caught a hint of it in her eyes. "And you too?" he asked gently.

"My brother and I barely had a chance to get to know each other," she said, her voice slightly husky.

"Oh?"

"He was my half brother. Our father divorced his mother to marry my mother. For a long time I didn't even know I had a brother." Not until her father had become ill and written to his son, begging for forgiveness for abandoning him as a boy. Ari had been unable to overcome his feelings of resentment toward his father, yet he had liked his half-sister and, despite the age difference between them, they had become good friends. Adria, who had been her father's pillar of strength ever since her mother had died when she was eight, had been glad to have someone else to rely on for the first time in her life.

"So now you're raising his son."

"His sons." Adria paused. "Five of them." She waited for the look of shock and horror to cross his face, as it inevitably would. As it had every man's face, including Paul's.

"Five! Wow!" Bryce didn't look horrified. No, there was a definite grin on his face. "That must have been quite a shock to become a mother to five kids overnight!"

Shock was not quite the word for it, Adria thought, remembering her dismay when the lawyer had told her that Ari's will named her as the boys' legal guardian. She had wished that someone else could take over the burden, but when she had realized that the only alternative was to separate the boys and put them in foster care, she had opened her home, and her heart to them. She'd had no choice.

She mentioned none of this to Bryce, however, but smiled cheerfully. "They're good kids," she said. The smile was quickly erased by a worried frown. "I hope Alex is all right."

"Will Adria Sinclair please return to the Emergency Room?" The summons came clearly over the loudspeaker, as if on cue, and Adria nearly knocked her coffee over in her haste to get back to the Emergency Room. Bryce followed closely behind her. The doctor met them, and led them inside one of the rooms to show them Alex's x-rays. "As I suspected, it was dislocated. We've maneuvered it back into position, but I'd like to keep him overnight just for observation."

"Yes, of course," Adria said immediately. "Whatever you feel is best. Can I see him?"

"Certainly. He's pretty woozy, but go on in."

Adria, with Bryce still behind her, stepped quietly into the room. Alex was half asleep, but he nodded when Adria told him that she would pick him up at the hospital in the morning. An orderly came to move the boy to a room on the Orthopedic Ward. A nurse was waiting for them at the door of the room and helped Alex get settled. Adria stood beside the bed and held his hand. "I hate to leave him alone," she whispered. "But I've got the other boys at home."

Alex opened his eyes. "I'll be okay," he mumbled. "Go home."

Adria hesitated. The nurse nodded. "He'll be fine, Mrs. Sinclair. He'll probably sleep straight through till morning. You ought to go on home."

"I don't guess there's anything more I can do," Adria bent down and kissed Alex's forehead. "Good night, Alex."

"G'night."

Adria left the room, Bryce at her side. A thought struck her and she turned to him. "You came here in the ambulance, didn't you? Can I give you a lift back to your car?"

An easy smile played at the corners of Bryce's mouth. He'd been hoping she'd ask. "Yes, thanks. I was afraid I'd have to call a taxi or something."

Adria led the way to the van she'd purchased after the boys had come to live with her. She unlocked the door for him and then swung into the driver's seat. "Is your car parked at the school?" she asked.

Bryce nodded and leaned back in his seat as she pulled out of the parking lot. "Your brother must have thought a lot of you if he made you the guardian of his children," he commented.

Adria shrugged. "There wasn't really anyone else. My parents are dead, and so is Ari's mother. Jean's parents are much too old to handle five kids. I was the only one left." Besides, both Ari and Jean knew they could count on her. They'd admired the way she'd looked after her father after he had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, and later, with cancer. She'd had years to develop being sensible and capable. Years devoted to caring for her sick father and keeping the family bookstore alive with no time or energy for anything else.

When her father had died, almost fourteen months before, Adria had mourned him deeply, but had been relieved that he'd been released from a life of constant pain. She'd begun to fashion a new life for herself and started to enjoy having the freedom to do whatever she pleased for the first time in her life. Then, without warning, Ari and Jean were killed in a car crash, and she was suddenly and unexpectedly saddled with five active kids. Adria had regretfully turned from the new life she had begun to fashion for herself to once again become the sensible and capable caregiver.

She had traded in her nice, one bedroom apartment for an older four-bedroom house still in need of repair. The money for high fashion, fancy restaurants, and for the long dreamed of Hawaiian vacation instead went to blue jeans, t-shirts, and sensible meals. She loved the boys but she often thought wistfully of those glorious months with no concerns other than for herself; especially after difficult days with the boys, which sometimes seemed to be a daily occurrence.

Still, she mused, despite the sacrifices she had made, she would not give the five boys up for anything. Not for her cozy little apartment, her Hawaiian vacation, or even Paul.

Bryce leaned back contentedly, watching her out of the corner of his eye as she pulled into the parking lot of the school. He wanted to see her again, but for the first time in his life he didn't know how to tell her so. He'd never been tongue-tied around women before. He'd always been ready with a glib line or joke. Of course, it had been easier when he had been a famous football player with hordes of women chasing after him. But even now he was not usually as self-conscious around women as he felt around Adria. Something about her stunning good looks coupled with her obvious competence seemed to reduce him to a bumbling teen-ager. "I'll call you tomorrow, shall I?" he said finally. "To see how Alex is, of course."

She hesitated, then inclined her head. "Yes, I'm sure Alex would like that." Truth to tell, she wouldn't mind it either. She found Bryce Hathaway incredibly attractive. She would like to see him again, even though she knew nothing would ever come of it.

"My car's over there," Bryce pointed, and Adria pulled up next to a fiery red Porsche.

"How on earth did you afford a car like that on a teacher's salary!" she gasped involuntarily.

"I have some investments," Bryce said vaguely.

"I used to have a Porsche." Adria's voice was a tad wistful.

"Used to?"

Adria waved a hand around at the van. "Kind of hard to stuff five kids in a sports car," she said wryly.

"Yes, I guess it is." Bryce paused, reluctant to leave. "Well," he said finally. "I'll talk to you tomorrow. I hope Alex feels better by then. Good night."

"Good night." Adria watched as he swung easily out of the van and walked to his car, the parking lot light reflecting off his blonde hair. She found herself looking forward to his call.

CHAPTER TWO

"Why do you look so mad, Aunt Adria?" four-year-old Devin asked from the bathtub, just before he sent another wave of sudsy water splashing down the front of her blouse.

Adria quickly readjusted her expression. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I was just thinking about something. Now hold still so I can rinse the shampoo out of your hair." She had been in a foul mood ever since she had picked Alex up from the hospital. Every time the phone had rung, she had leaped to answer it, and although she wouldn't admit it to herself, she had been disappointed that the caller had never turned out to be Bryce. "That just shows what his word is like," she told herself as she hosed off Devin's head and then turned her attention to his twin. "Kevin, quit squirming!" she said sharply.

At last both boys were out of the tub and in their pajamas. "Go pick out a story and I'll read to you in the living room," she directed, looking with dismay at the mess they had left behind. There wasn't a dry surface in the room, including herself. She bent to pick up a sodden towel when the doorbell rang. "Michael, can you get that?" she hollered.

She hung the towel on the rack and started to mop the floor. The doorbell rang again, barely noticeable over the barking of the dog. "Michael!" she yelled again. "Oh, never mind!" she ran to the door and hauled the boys' Old English Sheepdog, Fred, out of the way before she flung the door open.

"Hi!" Bryce Hathaway stood outside, a bouquet of flowers in one hand. He held them out to her.

Adria stared stupidly at him. "Oh, it's you!"

He gave her a smile that sent her pulse racing. "Can I come in?" he asked.

Adria suddenly wished she'd been doing anything but giving the twins a bath. What a mess she must look! "You caught me at a bad time," she said. "I was just giving the twins a bath and they got me all wet..." her voice faltered

"I think I caught you at a very good time," Bryce replied, his gaze moving slowly down the length of her body.

As Adria glanced down, an unwelcome blush crept into her cheeks. She wore a flimsy, cream-colored blouse that was nearly transparent from all the water. Her lacy bra could be seen quite clearly, and through her bra, the dark halos of her nipples, which responded eagerly to his intense gaze. She quickly turned away. "I guess you came to see Alex. He's upstairs in his room, resting. The doctor says he'll be okay, he just needs to wear a sling for several weeks." She knew she was babbling, but couldn't seem to stop herself. "I'll put his flowers in water for you if you like," she continued.

"Oh, the flowers are for you. I brought comic books for him," Bryce said and handed her the flowers.

For the first time Adria realized they had an audience, three pairs of eyes watching them with interest. Devin and Kevin each had a book in their hand. "When are you going to read to us, Aunt Adria?" they clamored, while twelve-year-old Michael looked at Bryce with a glint of worship in his eyes.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "I know you! You're Jon Hathaway. I have your football card!"

Adria's eyes widened with surprise. So that's why his face had seemed familiar. "That's right! You were quarterback for Omaha the year they went to the Super Bowl!"

"That's me," he admitted. "But I'm not a quarterback anymore. Alex is, and if you," he looked at Michael, "will show me to his room, I'll be able to see for myself how he's doing."

Michael was more than happy to show his idol where Alex's room was. Adria stared after them bemusedly. She couldn't believe she had not recognized him. Her father had been a big Omaha fan, and Hathaway had been one of his favorite players. Adria could well remember her father's outraged yell when Jon Hathaway had, without warning or reason, announced his retirement after only three years into his pro career. Adria wondered why he had left a brilliant career, and what he was doing in this podunk upstate New York town coaching junior high school football. Before she could speculate further, however, she was interrupted by an outraged shout from the twins. "Aunt Adria! I thought you were going to read to us!" Devin howled.

"Let me put these flowers in some water and change my clothes and then I'll be ready, guys," Adria said hurriedly. The boys settled on the couch while she rushed to change her clothes and get the flowers taken care of. As far as the twins were concerned, nothing was more important than their bedtime routine.

Bryce walked into a comfortable looking bedroom to find Alex propped up against his pillows on the bed, munching popcorn and watching TV. "Oh, hi Coach," the boy said. He aimed the remote control at the TV and switched it off.

Bryce pulled up a chair from the desk to sit on. "I brought you some comic books," he held them out.

"Thanks!" Alex's arm was in a sling, but his color looked good, although he winced when his younger brother settled himself on the bed and looked at Bryce expectantly.

"Wow! Alex, you never told me he was a real football player!" Michael said accusingly.

"Most of the boys don't know who I am," Bryce said. "Not everyone is as sharp as you." He settled himself on the chair. "So far I've only counted four boys in the house. Isn't there another one of you somewhere?"

"Let's see," Michael said helpfully. "You saw the twins; they're in the living room. There's Alex, me, and Daniel. He's the one you haven't seen. I think he's in our bedroom."

"Yeah, probably got his nose stuck in a book," Alex snorted.

"He likes to read?" Bryce asked.

"Yeah, all the time," Michael said. "Him and Aunt Adria are a pair."

"Oh, your aunt likes to read, does she?" Bryce raised his eyebrows. "Tell me, does she have a boyfriend?" he asked idly.

"No-" Alex began.

"She used to," Michael interrupted. "She was going to get married, but that was before we came to live with her."

"Oh?" Bryce raised his eyebrows questioningly.

Alex leafed through the comic books Bryce had brought. "Yeah. They broke it off, though."

"Good thing, too," Michael chimed in. "He was a real nerd."

Bryce shared in the laughter, privately hoping the boys didn't think he was a nerd. "Do you think she'd go out with me?" he asked the two boys.

Michael shrugged. "She never goes out."

"A good looking woman like your aunt? Why not?"

"I think she's still upset about Paul," Alex said uncomfortably. "He dumped her kind of hard." He glanced at Michael and didn't finish what he had started to say.

He didn't have to. Bryce had the idea. Good old Paul must not have wanted to marry a woman with five kids.

"Tomorrow's our first football game," he remarked casually, changing the subject. "I hope you'll come, Alex. We'll save a spot for you on the bench. When did the doctor say you could play again?"

"Maybe a month," Alex said glumly. "Long enough for Seaver to get a firm hold on my spot."

"I doubt that. He doesn't have half the ability you have. Our team will be hurting without you. You will come tomorrow night?"

"You bet!"

"And maybe bring your aunt?" Bryce held his breath.

Alex winked. "Well someone has to drive me there, and she's the one with the van."

Bryce nodded, pleased that he had an ally. "Well, I'd better get out of here and let you get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow." He ruffled Michael's hair on the way out and found his way to the living room.

Adria sat on the couch between the twins, quietly reading a story to them. She had changed her blouse for a soft, smoky gray sweater that emphasized the darkness of her eyes. Her gaze met his over the top of the book, but she did not stop reading. The twins giggled delightedly as she changed her voice for each of the different characters in the story. Finally she closed the book. "All right, monsters. Time for bed. You go to your room and I'll be there to tuck you in." The two boys scampered noisily out of the room, their war whoops echoing behind them.

Bryce gave her an irresistibly devastating grin. "Is it ever quiet around here?"

Adria shook her head wistfully. "Not often." The noise was one of the things Paul had mentioned when he had demanded his ring back.

Bryce looked around the room. There were no walls, only shelves filled with books. The door of the coat closet had been removed and the interior filled with shelves. A couch and chair sat in the center of the room, each paired with a lamp to augment the ceiling light. "I've never seen this many books outside of a library or a bookstore," he commented.

The beginning of a smile tipped the corners of Adria's mouth. "Books are my life. I inherited my father's bookstore when he died." She didn't mention that for the last nine years of her father's life she had kept the bookstore going when he was too sick to handle it. "I'm glad you stopped by to see Alex. I know he appreciated it. He really looks up to you, you know. All I've heard since school started is Coach Hathaway this and Coach Hathaway that." She paused, and then plunged forward. "Do the boys on the team know about your pro career?"

"A few. I guess I look a lot different in person. Besides, it's been a few years."

"Not that many," Adria said with a wry grin. "My father was a big Omaha fan, and to hear him tell it, you were their last great hope." She pinned him with a penetrating look. "Why did you leave football anyway? I don't recall ever hearing any explanation."

A muscle quivered at Bryce's jaw. He'd never been able to explain it satisfactorily. Not to the press, not to his friends, not to Stephanie, who had left him when he'd left the team. His initial impulse was to make some flippant response but the gleam of interest in her doe-like eyes compelled him to try to make her understand. He groped for the words. "I got sacked during the Super Bowl. It was a hard hit." As he spoke, he found the words came more readily. "My helmet came off and I had a bad concussion. It wasn't the first time I'd been injured that season, but it was the worst. I just suddenly felt that it wasn't for me--all the hype, the adulation, and the fans for the other team cheering when I got hurt. I thought I'd like being the hero, but I didn't. None of it was real, except the pain when I got hurt, and there wasn't enough money to make me put up with the idea of a really debilitating injury."

He knew he was expressing himself badly, but Adria was nodding as though she understood. It seemed as if those dreaded words, "coward" and "wimp" never occurred to her as they had to Stephanie and to many others, including his father.

"So now you're a teacher."

"My parents think I'm crazy." His offhand tone couldn't quite hide the pain this admission caused him.

"I don't. I think it took a lot of guts to do what you did," Adria said firmly.

He offered her a sudden, arresting smile. "Thanks. And I think it took a lot of guts to do what you did."

She quirked her eyebrow questioningly. "I haven't done anything!"

"Not many young women would take on five boys."

"There wasn't anyone else--"

"You still didn't have to do it. You could have refused custody."

"But then they'd have gone to a foster home! Probably have been broken up, and sent to who knows what!" Which was what Paul had wanted her to do, Adria remembered with a shudder.

Bryce liked the way she drew herself up, her eyes flashing. "And besides, you love them."

"Yes, I do." She said it simply, but a world of feeling came through in the simple statement.

"Aunt Adria! When are you going to tuck us in?"

Adria made an exaggerated grimace and stood up lightly. "Excuse me," she said as she left the room.

Bryce watched her go with a slight smile. He wouldn't mind having her come and tuck him in. No, he'd rather she tucked herself in bed beside him. He closed his eyes and listened to the gentle family noises, the hum of the TV from Alex's bedroom and the gentle murmurs from the room where the twins were being put to bed. It almost made him homesick, but he put that thought firmly out of his mind. There was no way he could go home again and face his father's wrath.

Burr Hathaway was a former football player and coach himself who believed his mission in life was to start a dynasty of football players that would last for generations. He'd done his part by playing and then coaching a winning team for years, and now it was Bryce's turn. Only Bryce had chickened out, gone soft, let everybody down. Bryce had tried to explain, but Burr just didn't want to hear it. Every time he'd tried to reason with his father, the conversation had degenerated into a shouting match. Finally Bryce had just stopped going home. He received an occasional letter from his mother who, he knew, was distressed by the rift between her husband and her only son. But she would never take sides against her husband, and so was unable to do more than write letters and hope that things would work out.

The only one Bryce didn't need to worry about was Stephanie. He'd not seen her nor hair of her since the day he'd announced his early retirement. He didn't miss her at all; she was too much a part of the world that he was trying to leave behind.

How different Adria's reaction had been. Instead of the scornful derision with which Stephanie had met his announcement, Adria had offered quiet understanding. For the first time since he'd left football, Bryce did not feel as though he should be ashamed for what he had done. Adria had offered to him the understanding that his parents and one-time girlfriend had denied to him, and he felt as though an immense burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

A light touch on his arm aroused him with a jolt and he opened his eyes. Adria was standing beside him, looking so tender that it was all he could do to keep from folding her into his arms.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "You must be tired."

Bryce stood up and faced her squarely. He stood so close that she could feel the heat from his body. She flushed as she saw the way his eyes narrowed as he looked at her. Disconcerted, she pointedly crossed her arms and took a

step back. "It was so nice of you to come by and see Alex. I know it cheered him up. He's really upset about not being able to play tomorrow."

"I didn't just come to see Alex, you know."

"You didn't?" Her eyes widened.

"I also came to see his aunt." Bryce's voice was low and purposely seductive.

Intense astonishment touched Adria's face. She raised her eyes to his, flustered, not sure what to say.

Bryce looked into her eyes. "You are an incredibly beautiful woman," he said huskily.

Adria lowered her head. She had heard such words before, but they sounded different coming from Bryce. His hand slowly traced her face with a touch that was almost unbearably tender. He reached his hand under her chin and lowered his mouth to hers, tracing the soft fullness of her lips with his tongue, then gently pushing them apart to explore the softness of her mouth. The kiss sent the pit of her stomach into a wild swirl, and she raised up on her tiptoes, pressing herself against his long, hard body. Through her sweater, she felt the rapid beating of his heart. They parted, and Bryce looked searchingly at her. "I've wanted to do this ever since I first saw you at the hospital," he murmured as his mouth once again took over hers.

Adria welcomed his kiss hungrily, returning it with equal fervor. Just when she felt she could spend forever in his arms, they were interrupted by a muffled laugh. Adria opened her eyes and saw Michael standing in the doorway, grinning. She pushed Bryce away quickly as a blush, like a shadow, swept over her face. She glanced at Bryce to see his reaction and was surprised to see a grin on his face almost as wide as the boy's.

"Your aunt's a very kissable lady," Bryce said affably.

"What do you need, Michael?" she asked, trying to cover her confusion.

"Nothing. I was just on my way to the kitchen," Michael said innocently.

"Why don't you finish up the watermelon that's in there, and then get your pajamas on? It's just about bedtime."

"Sounds good," Bryce murmured, moving in on her again. Adria firmly stepped back.

"Thank you for coming by, Mr. Hathaway."

"Bryce."

She lowered her eyes. "All right. Bryce."

"I'll call you this weekend."

"There's no need for you to do that. Alex is just fine."

"I won't be calling about Alex." Bryce bent and kissed her nose gently.

Then he slipped out the front door, leaving Adria staring after him with a bemused expression on her face.

She found her thoughts returning to Bryce and the kiss they had shared as she pulled her nightgown on later that night. It wasn't as though she'd never been kissed before. She and Paul had kissed often. But it had never felt as good. Bryce's kiss had seemed to reach deep down into her very soul, stirring passions

that she'd never known existed, passions that Paul had certainly never unleashed.

She paused to look at herself in the mirror. She knew she was beautiful. She'd always known that. She'd also always known that men were attracted to her because of it. She'd cultivated an air of aloofness to keep men at their distance because she'd never really had any time for them. Her duties at the bookstore and at home caring for her father had made it impossible for her to have a relationship with any man, but she had always wondered what it would be like to have a boyfriend. In her daydreams, she fantasized about a tall, handsome lover that would someday come to sweep her off her feet.

It had been very exciting after her father had died and she was finally able to experience a little romance. Exciting, and a little scary as she came to realize that the men were playing a game that she knew nothing about. She quickly latched onto Paul as the least threatening of her admirers, and she'd really thought everything would be fine between them. Paul and she didn't set off firecrackers or anything, but he was fun, and lived a fast-paced life that was a novelty to her. So what if she didn't see stars whenever they kissed? That kind of romance was probably only to be found in books anyway, and as Paul often told her, she spent way too much time with her nose stuck in a book.

She had been in no way prepared for Paul's reaction when she had told him the boys were coming to live with her. She hadn't even considered that anything would change between them, but Paul quickly announced that he was not about to take on anyone else's kids, especially five of them.

In a way, though, she was grateful to Paul. He had made it very clear that with five young boys to look after, she could pretty much forget any ideas about getting married. Now she knew exactly where she stood with men. All she was to them was a beautiful body, suitable for only one thing. She wasn't likely to get a man interested in much more than that.

Adria's eyes moved down her reflection, pausing just slightly at her breasts, which were delightfully full, then continuing down her flat stomach to where her hips flared, and then on down the long, slim length of her legs. Would it be so wrong if Bryce only wanted her body? She might as well grab what fun she could before she turned into a sour old maid. Adria followed that line of thought for a moment, then determinedly shook her head. She wanted more than a sexual relationship. If she didn't, she would never have shut Paul out of her life. She might as well resign herself to the idea that her days of romance were over.

"An old maid at 26," she murmured to herself with a little laugh as she crawled into bed. Oh well, she was happy with her life the way it was. She would do just fine without getting entangled with Bryce Hathaway, or any other man for that matter.

CHAPTER THREE

Bryce Hathaway paced back and forth in front of the bench, and tried to keep from looking up into the stands. The game was about to start, and Alex had not shown up yet. Bryce had been counting on catching a glimpse of Adria before the game, although he knew how irrational that was. If she brought Alex, she would probably drop him off in the parking lot. Still, he had hoped that she might just bring the boy into the stadium herself.

A wave of applause and cheers swept through the stadium, the loudest coming from the bench. Bryce looked up to see what the fuss was about and saw Alex walking from the locker room to take his place on the bench. His arm was firmly wrapped in its sling, but otherwise he looked good. Bryce hurried to meet him. "How are you feeling, Alex?" he asked, holding back the question that was on his lips.

"Fine, thank you sir."

"Did your aunt bring you?" Bryce tried to sound casual but was unable to keep the hope out of his voice.

Alex smiled, as if at a secret joke. "Oh yes, she brought me." He paused, savoring his information and then continued. "She's up in the stands, watching the game."

Bryce caught his breath suddenly and turned to scan the stands, catching sight of her in a seat directly behind the bench, surrounded by her nephews. She was dressed in faded blue jeans and a Howard Junior High School t-shirt, and her cheeks were flushed with excitement as the wind blew her hair about her face. She didn't look much older than many of the students around her in the stands.

"There's more," Alex said, his eyes dancing mischievously.

Bryce tore his eyes away from Adria. "What?"

"We're going out for pizza after the game. To Leona's. "

"You are?" Bryce raised his eyebrows. Now that had definite possibilities. He glanced at Adria one more time and then forced his attention back to the job at hand.

"Thanks, Alex."

"Coach," Alex grabbed his arm before he turned away.

"Yes?"

Alex bit his lip, suddenly unable to say what he'd planned to say.

Bryce studied the boy thoughtfully, then patted his shoulder reassuringly. "I'm not going to hurt your aunt, Alex."

The boy relaxed in relief. "I didn't think you would, sir. It's just-"

"Yes?"

"Well, that guy we were telling you about, Paul, he dumped her because of us. He didn't like kids, he said."

Bryce's lips tightened. "Don't worry, Alex. I like kids. And I won't hurt her."

Up in the stands, Adria tried to focus her attention on the game, but her eyes kept coming back to Bryce. She liked watching him pace up and down the sidelines, enjoyed watching the emotions play across his face as the boys he coached tried to win their first game of the season. She watched the wind play with his hair, try as he might to smooth it down, and tried to imagine what it would feel like to run her fingers through those blonde curls.

The boys, except for Daniel, were having a great time at the game. Adria refused to buy them more than a soda to drink since they were going out for pizza afterward, but they had fun booing the other team, and bouncing up and down, cheering Howard Junior High's players.

Daniel took no part in any of the fun but slumped miserably in his seat. Adria bit her lip as she looked at him. He hadn't wanted to attend the game; he'd made that very clear. It had taken a great deal of persuasion to get him to come, and even more to convince him to leave his ever present book behind. Now that he had come, he wasn't enjoying himself at all. Still, Adria thought it was good for him to get out. He spent entirely too much time cooped up in his room.

Bryce thought the game would never end. Even during the game's closest moments it was difficult for him to focus on the plays. He kept glancing up in the stands, watching Adria leap up and cheer when one of his boys scored, or gnaw fretfully at her lower lip whenever the referees made a call she didn't like. At last the game was over. Howard Junior High had won their first game. Bryce wasn't totally pleased, the margin had been too low, but still, considering they were using their back-up quarterback, the team had done pretty well. He followed the team into the locker room for the inevitable celebration, making up his mind to leave as soon as he decently could. Coach Mannick could handle things here. He just wanted to get to Leona's.

Leona's was a popular pizza restaurant in town and it was crowded when Bryce arrived. He was glad because that would make it easier for him to wangle a seat at Adria's table. He looked around until he spotted the noisy group at a booth in the corner, and found his way over there.

"Did you enjoy the game?" he asked.

Adria jumped at the sound of his voice. The twins bounced up and down in their seat. "Yeah!" they shouted in unison.

"It was a good game," Adria agreed with a welcome smile.

"Congratulations on your win."

"Thanks," Bryce said easily. He looked around the restaurant. "Pretty crowded tonight."

"Yeah, we had to wait forever for a table," Michael said.

"Have a seat with us, Coach," Alex invited.

"I'd love to; that is if your aunt doesn't mind." Before Adria could say no, Bryce slid into the booth beside her. "You must be Daniel," he said with a friendly smile to the sober-faced boy who sat across from him. "I'm Bryce Hathaway, Alex's football coach."

"He's really Jon Hathaway," Michael whispered loudly. "He used to play for Omaha!"

Daniel was unimpressed. "Big deal," he said.

"Daniel!" Adria reproved. Unconsciously her forehead creased, and she glanced uneasily at Bryce to see his reaction. To her relief, the broad smile remained in place on his face. "Have you ordered yet?" he asked.

Adria caught her breath as she felt his thigh brushing against her hip. "Yes, and I hope you like your pizza with the works," she said, "because that's the way we're having ours."

"The only way to have it," Bryce stretched his long legs out and pressed his body closer to hers.

Adria tried to ignore the jolt that went through her body every time he moved against her. She also tried to ignore his rich, incredibly masculine smell, but it was impossible. She kept her eyes firmly away from his face, knowing that if she looked at him, she wouldn't be able to resist reaching out to play with his hair.

The waitress slipped two large pizzas on the table in front of them and Adria busied herself making sure all the boys had pieces before she took one of her own. Bryce chatted easily with the boys about the game and his football career. His thoughts, however, were about Adria. It was an effort not to stare at her. Her dark hair glistened invitingly, and her eyes held a gleam that no make up could improve. Never had any woman attracted him as much as she did. Bryce reigned in his racing thoughts and concentrated on paying attention to the boys. The way to this woman's heart was through her nephews. If he wanted to get to Adria, he would need to get the boys on his side.

Finally he turned to her. "The symphony is having a concert in the park tomorrow night. Would you like to go?"

Adria shook her head. "Thanks, but I don't have anyone to watch the boys."

"Aw, come on!" Alex protested. "We're not babies, Aunt Adria. We don't need someone to watch us."

"Yeah, we don't need a babysitter," Michael echoed.

"I know you don't," Adria replied quickly. "But the little boys do."

"We can watch them," Alex insisted. "I'm almost fourteen, you know. We'll take good care of them."

"Well--"

"Well, it's settled then," Bryce said. "I'll pick you up at 5:30." Sensing that she was still hesitant, he pressed himself even closer to her and said, "I'm not letting you out of this booth till you say yes."

Adria tried to suppress a giggle. "All right," she agreed. She put her hands on his muscular chest and lightly pushed him away, fighting against the almost irresistible impulse to pull him back and beg him to kiss her. "I'd like to go very much."

"And don't worry about supper. I'll bring a picnic for us," Bryce promised.

"Sounds wonderful," Adria managed to say in a tone that hid her inner excitement. "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

Bryce stood up and pushed his hands deep in his pockets, exchanging a victorious glance with Alex over Adria's unwitting head. "I'll look forward to it."

With a deft flick of his wrist, he plucked the restaurant tab from Adria's grasp and strode purposefully toward the cash register.

Adria shook her head after him, and then gathered up all the boys. "Come on, guys. Time to go home."

To find out what happens to Bryce and Adria, purchase LOVE'S CHALLENGE from www.swimmingkangaroo.com

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