

Spring Fever © 2008 **By Lynne Marshall**

Itchy eyes and sneezes had led Doreen Sanderson to her latest crush. An unusually wet winter had produced a gloriously green spring, and pollen was plentiful. She'd suffered the worst symptoms in all of her thirty-three years, and finally consented to allergy testing. Her outcome wasn't good. The doctor recommended weekly shots for grasses, weeds, and trees, and out of desperation, Doreen signed on. The day she met her crush, she headed for the exit through the waiting room—the room she'd be spending a required half-hour- post-shot wait each Wednesday for the next six months—when her gaze landed on intense dark eyes. Eyes she'd only dreamed about before, and a face etched with character and a great head of wavy dark hair. Wow.

An old saying came to mind, "All things happen for a reason," and suddenly, she looked forward to returning to the clinic weekly, and hoped Mr. Bright Eyes would be there too.

Yep, she blamed her allergies for the crush.

The following week, she checked in at the reception counter and placed her chart in the holder by the door. He was there! He wore a shirt with a business logo above the pocket, and perused the sports page of the local paper.

"Aiden O'Keefe?" the nurse called the name of her next victim—er—patient. Doreen's crush stood up and up and up. She felt petite for the first time in her big-

boned, you-should-go-to-softball-camp-instead-of-ballet-class, life. Yes, she'd reluctantly been steered away from those things considered feminine, based solely on her size. Today, Wednesday in allergy clinic, was the first day in her life she'd felt glad about being a jock. Finally, softball had paid off; she had an opener to strike up a conversation.

"How about those Angels," she said, when Aiden sat down beside the seat she'd strategically placed herself in.

He nodded. "They're having a great season."

"Doreen Sanderson?"

Doreen jumped when the shot nurse called her name. Aiden raised his brows and nodded in the direction of the colorful scrubs-clad nurse. "It's your turn."

She gulped, rolled up her sleeves, and prepared for her fate.

Did he watch her every move from above the sports page? Not likely, but a lady could dream, couldn't she?

She sucked it up and took her shots like a big girl, then returned to her seat in the waiting room.

"You're bleeding, Doreen" he said.

"Pardon?" He'd caught her name. Good sign.

She followed his eyes to a drop of blood on her skin. He found a conveniently placed tissue box and handed her one. The tips of their fingers touched. Feeling a spark, she took the tissue with a grateful smile and pressed it on her arm.

To distract herself, she focused on the big company softball game the next night. As the pitcher, she'd have to face the team that supposedly posed the biggest threat from all of the others in the local league. She mentally ran through her strategy, though completely distracted with Aiden's healthy deltoids.

When the nurse called his name to recheck his arms and send him home, Doreen watched with interest. He had broad shoulders and long legs, and hands like a pianist. Where had he been all of her life?

And then just as quickly, he took his newspaper and left the clinic. Disappointed he hadn't even waved, she wondered if she'd see him next week.

Thursday night, Doreen was pumped. She'd perfected both her underarm speedball, and curve ball with no less than a million warm up pitches, and was ready to start the game. Her opponents, the Wolverines, took the field. Were her eyes playing tricks on her? Aiden O'Keefe seemed to be playing shortstop for the opposing team. She shook her head and readjusted her vision, then looked in his direction again. Dang. The guy really looked like Aiden from the allergy clinic, but her team got struck out so fast, she never had the opportunity to check him out up close.

Fired up, she whirled her arm around like a windmill. No way was she going to let the Wolverines steamroll over the Cougars. Walking with determination to the pitcher's mound, she wished her pants didn't fit quite so tight.

She struck the first player out, and the second player, too. Then Aiden stepped up to bat. Her eyes widened, and butterflies filled her chest at the sight of him. He took

a practice swing or two, tapped the tip of his sport shoe with the bat, adjusted his ball cap and stared at her with a squint of concentration.

Be still my heart. Now was not the time to go gaga over a hunky guy. Now was the time to play competitive softball. She deciphered the catcher's signs and prepared to pitch. Her arm circled like a sideways helicopter until she let go of the ball. Strike!

Aiden adjusted his shirt and stuck out his chin. Doreen let go of her fastball. Strike two! He cocked a brow and studied his opponent head to toe. Was that a minute smile she detected? *Too bad. No time for flirting now.* With renewed determination, she finished him off with her curve ball. Strike three!

When he walked out to his position as shortstop, he tossed her a look as if saying he didn't know what had happened, it didn't happen often, and he damn well didn't intend to get used to it. Then, of course, she may have been reading in to it. In passing he muttered, "That's one helluva pitching arm you've got, Doreen."

So he recognized her. Doreen smiled and walked a little straighter toward the dugout, she even tried to sashay, which felt more like a runway model in combat boots.

The next Wednesday, same time and place, she arrived in the allergy clinic for her shots. Aiden wasn't there. The depth of her disappointment took her by surprise. Was he avoiding her for beating the pants off of him and his sorry softball team? It was a bittersweet victorious feeling, and it made her grin.

She took care of business and got her shots, then noticed Aiden enter the clinic. She held her breath when he took the seat next to her.

He shook out the sports page, and over the top, said, "I couldn't get to first base with you the other night."

She shook her head and laughed. "That wasn't my fault."

He gazed appreciatively at her, smiled, and looked at his watch. "I was thinking about getting something to eat after my shots. You hungry?"

Stifling her glee, she said, "I could eat."

"The least I can do is buy the winning pitcher dinner."

They made small talk the rest of their waiting time, and when Aiden and Doreen were ready to leave, he grinned charmingly at her and said, "Maybe this time you'll let me get to first base."

She laughed, thinking, *Darlin' you've already hit a home run!*