



A Bride So Fair

A Fair to Remember - Book #3

By Carol Cox

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CHAPTER ONE

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"Stop, thief!" The commanding bellow cut through the pleasant chatter of the crowds strolling the grounds of the World's Columbian Exposition.

Emily Ralston shielded her eyes against the noonday sun and scanned the gaily dressed fairgoers on Government Plaza, trying to spot the source of the commotion.

A lanky youth burst through a cluster of women and children on the far side of the plaza, scattering them like tenpins. Shrill exclamations followed him as he bolted past the ladies to the middle of the open area, where he slowed and glanced quickly from one end of its broad expanse to the other.

A stocky man in shirtsleeves charged through the same group, evoking more outraged squawks. He stopped short, gasping like a winded horse while he scanned the crowd.

"Hey, you!" he bellowed and started off in hot pursuit of the boy. In his haste, he collided with a young matron holding a small girl in her arms, nearly toppling them to the ground. The man halted long enough to steady the pair, although the infuriated look he cast in the boy's direction showed his longing to continue the chase.

At the man's angry shout, the fleeing youth looked over his shoulder and picked up speed. Emily saw him snap his hand to one side and watched a paper container arc through the air and disappear behind a potted palm.

Emily recognized the signs of someone doing something he shouldn't. She balanced on the balls of her feet, poised for action. She could never keep up with the long-legged adolescent if she

tried to follow him across the fairgrounds, but there was more than one way to foil a troublemaker.

The boy changed course and pounded across the pavement in her direction. Emily smiled. She waited until the last instant before he reached the spot where she stood then stepped into his path.

"Stop right there!" she demanded.

The boy's eyes flared wide when he saw her blocking his escape. His feet scrambled for purchase as he veered abruptly to the right. Just as he passed, Emily darted forward and nabbed him by the ear.

"Ow!" The lad looked down at Emily with an astonished expression. "Leggo my ear!" He made as if to wrench himself out of her grasp, but a quick twist of her wrist brought him to his knees.

Emily allowed herself a brief moment of smugness. It wasn't the first time she had been victorious against an opponent larger than herself. Growing up at the Collier Children's Home had given her plenty of opportunities to learn how to equalize a difference in size.

The stocky man raced up to them, puffing like a steam engine.

"Thank you, miss," he gasped. "That was quite a catch."

Taking command of Emily's captive, he seized the boy by his upper arm and jerked him to his feet. "Where are the goods you stole, you young guttersnipe?"

The look of alarm slid off the boy's face, to be replaced by a cocky grin. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course not," the man mocked. "Why were you running, if you hadn't just stolen a package of Cracker Jacks right off the counter of my stand?"

Emily felt her jaw go slack. Cracker Jacks? She had risked her own safety for nothing more than a container of the new popcorn, peanuts, and molasses confection?

Looking more confident by the second, the boy shook his head. "I was just walking along, and you started shouting and chasing me." He shrugged. "I thought you must be crazy. No one could blame me for running when someone so much bigger than me was on my tail."

His captor looked at Emily with a glint of humor shining in his eyes. "It doesn't look to me like it takes all that much in the way of size to get you under control." His grin faded, and he gave the boy a shake. "Now where are the Cracker Jacks you stole?"

The boy shrugged again. "I'm telling you, you've got the wrong person."

Emily broke into the exchange. "Then what was that I saw you throw away?"

The youth paled, and the vendor turned his attention back to Emily. "You saw him throw something?"

"Behind that potted palm over there." Emily walked briskly toward the plant and reached behind it, retrieving a paper package that rattled when she shook it. She returned to the waiting pair and held out the parcel. "Is this what you're looking for?"

The man took it with a grateful smile. "Thank you, miss. I'll be obliged if you'll stay around until I summon one of the Columbian Guards so you can tell him what you saw."

Emily shook her head. "I'm sorry. I work at the Children's Building here on the fairgrounds, and my lunch break is nearly over." From deep within the massive Manufactures Building, she heard the clock in its alabaster tower chime the three-quarter hour. If she wanted to keep her job, she'd better get back to work and look sharp about it.

The man's face fell. "If you don't, it will be my word against his. I left my nephew watching my stand so I could catch this young rascal, and who knows what kind of mess he'll have made of things by the time I get back? The least you can do is help me out."

Emily wavered. Her supervisor took a decidedly dim view of tardiness, but the smug expression on the boy's face decided her. "All right, but only for a moment."

It took far longer than that for the guard to finish taking her statement. With the thanks of the vendor ringing in her ears, she set off once more toward the Children's Building. In the distance, she heard a clock chiming the hour.

"Oh no." She glanced from side to side, taking note of the throngs of people dotting the broad walkways. None of them seemed to be paying a bit of attention to her. Taking heart from this, Emily hiked up the hem of her skirt, planted her hand on top of her hat to keep it from blowing off, and sprinted headlong across the plaza, paying scant attention to the gleaming white buildings as she raced over the bridges spanning the lagoon to the Wooded Island and then to the far shore. From there, a quick dash put her at the front of the Children's Building.

She slumped against the outer door with one palm pressed against her heaving chest. When she managed to catch her breath, she pushed the arched door open and stepped inside. If she could assume her seat behind the reception desk before-

"Your lunch hour ended precisely three minutes ago."

Emily skidded to a halt and turned to face the gaunt woman standing against the opposite wall. "I'm sorry, Miss Strickland. I-"

"If you plan to continue working here, Miss Ralston, I would suggest you make it a point to be punctual." Her supervisor's cold stare left no doubt about her disapproval.

"Of course, ma'am." Emily ordered her knees to quit shaking and tried her best to appear composed as she hung her straw boater on the hat rack and walked toward her desk. Lucy Welch, her blue eyes shining with sympathy, rose from the heavy wooden chair to let Emily take her seat.

Emily cast a grateful look at her friend; then she turned to bestow a wobbly smile upon the woman and boy who stood waiting in front of her desk. "How may I help you?"

"Could we finish here, please?" The young matron tapped her foot and looked daggers at Emily. "I would much rather be outside viewing the fair instead of waiting for you all to sort yourselves out. I'm not certain I want to leave Alexander here if this is any indication of the competency of your staff."

At the edge of her vision, Emily saw Miss Strickland's rigid posture grow even more erect. She fumbled with the heavy black book that lay open on her desk. "I apologize for the delay. I wouldn't have been late, except-"

"Excuses are unacceptable." Miss Strickland's harsh voice broke in. "I don't tolerate tardiness for any reason."

Emily clamped her lips shut to hold back the explanation she longed to give. She ought to have known better than to tarry long enough to give the Columbian Guard her version of what had transpired, but she couldn't find it within herself to let that boy get away with stealing the vendor's merchandise.

She looked up at the boy's mother and forced a smile. "If you'll just give me some information, I'll check Alexander in and you can be on your way." She entered his name and his mother's in

the ledger then pinned a numbered tag to the boy's back and handed his mother a claim check bearing the same number. "Please keep this in a safe place. You'll need it when you come back to pick up your son. Miss Welch will take Alexander to the gymnasium. I'm sure he'll enjoy that."

She beckoned to Lucy, who had been hovering in the background, then turned back to the boy's mother. "Enjoy your time on the grounds. He will be well cared for."

Looking somewhat mollified, the woman slipped the ticket into her reticule and turned to leave. Just before she reached the door, it swung open. A man in the uniform of the Columbian Guards smiled and held it open for her; then he stepped inside. His glance wavered between Miss Strickland and Emily before he approached the reception desk.

She stared up at him, panicking at the thought that her attempt to do the right thing was going to cause her even more difficulty. "I already told the other guard everything I know."

Miss Strickland raised her eyebrows and moved toward the desk with a firm stride. "Bad enough to be tardy. What other trouble have you gotten yourself into?"

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