



Fair Game

A Fair to Remember - Book #2

By Carol Cox

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CHAPTER ONE

"The tea is ready," Mrs. Purvis called.

"Coming." Dinah gave one final glance out the window and hurried down the hallway to the head of the stairs. She ran her fingers along the panel of the door to her room when she passed it and smiled at the thought of the letter tucked securely away among the camisoles in her top dresser drawer. The letter that had opened up a whole new window on her future.

Mrs. Purvis hovered at the bottom of the stairs. "I started to set the tea things up in the parlor." She gave a little bounce that set her springy, iron-gray curls to bobbing around her cheery face. "Then I said to myself, why not just sit in the kitchen like a couple of old friends? I hope you don't mind. I have a feeling we're going to get on very well."

The homey thought made Dinah smile. "That sounds fine."

"This way, then. Straight through the parlor and past the dining room." Mrs. Purvis motioned for Dinah to precede her. "I'm looking forward to getting acquainted. I haven't traveled much in recent years, but I enjoy getting to know about other places from my boarders. You can tell me all about-

A peremptory knock rattled the front door. Mrs. Purvis tilted her head to one side. "Now who could that be?"

She bustled over to the door and peered out the front window. The pleasant expression slid from her face like ice melting on a summer day. "Henrietta Boggs. Whatever is she doing here?"

"Is everything all right?" Dinah asked.

"Shh!" The landlady pressed her finger to her lips and dropped her voice to a barely audible whisper. "Maybe she'll think no one is home."

The next instant, her shoulders slumped. "But that wouldn't be right, would it? I guess there's nothing else for it." With a look that reminded Dinah of a chicken cornered by a fox, she reached for the door knob.

"Henrietta. What a surprise."

A tall, broad-shouldered woman clad in battleship gray swept into the small entry hall with nary a glance at Dinah. "Good day, Ethelinda. I've just gotten back from tending to my sister and knew you would want to hear all about my trip." She lifted her chin and stared at Mrs. Purvis down the length of her prominent nose. "And I, of course, am eager to find out what has been going on in the neighborhood in my absence. Let's go have a nice, long chat. I have all afternoon." She moved toward the parlor with the relentless momentum of a barge.

Mrs. Purvis gave a little yip and trotted off in her wake.

Another knock sounded at the door. Mrs. Purvis started as though she'd been stung. She turned a beseeching look on Dinah. "Be a dear and answer that, will you?" Darting a quick glance over her shoulder, she sidled closer and whispered, "The last time I left that woman alone for more than five seconds, I caught her going through my ledger."

Dinah chewed on the inside of her lip and tried not to laugh aloud in the face of her landlady's obvious distress. "You go right ahead. I'll take care of everything."

Mrs. Purvis gave Dinah a quick squeeze and hurried after her uninvited guest. Dinah bit back a grin. It appeared she wouldn't lack for entertainment here.

The knock came again, louder this time. Dinah swung the door open wide and felt her jaw sag.

Time hung suspended as she gazed into light brown eyes that seemed to look into her very soul. She blinked and drew back, pressing one hand to her throat. "Excuse me, did you say something?"

A slow smile played across her visitor's lips. Dinah decided she liked the way his eyes crinkled at the corners, splaying lines of good humor across his upper cheeks.

"I said I wanted to extend a special invitation to everyone who lives here." He held out a flyer.

Dinah reached to take the sheet of paper, then pulled her hand back. "Oh, I don't live here. I mean, I do in a way, but. . ." Her voice trailed off.

Idiot! He'll think you're simple-minded, the way you've stared and stammered. With an effort, she pulled her attention away from his captivating gaze and drew herself erect. "I mean to say, I've just arrived in Chicago today. I'll be staying at this boarding house, so yes, I guess I do live here." She clamped her lips together before she made any more of an idiot of herself.

The crinkles around his eyes deepened and he held out the flyer again. "In that case, I'd like to invite you and everyone else who lives here to attend a meeting tonight on Michigan Avenue. It's part of Mr. Moody's World's Fair campaign."

This time Dinah accepted the paper and held it tight between her fingers. The man's smile broadened and Dinah basked in the approval that shone in his eyes. She stared into them again, noting the golden flecks barely visible against the light brown irises. The color of caramel, she thought. Like the kind her mother used to stir together on the stove.

Right now, the directness of his gaze made her feel as gooey as one of those melted candies. If he kept looking at her like that, she might dissolve into a puddle right there at his feet. The notion brought a flush to her cheeks, warming her more than the heat of the July afternoon.

"Amos B. Hall will be preaching tonight." Dinah could hear the laughter in his voice. "I hope you'll be able to come."

"It sounds like fun." Dinah winced, wondering if the response sounded as inane to him as it did to her.

"More along the lines of inspiring or soul-stirring, I'd say." He trotted down the porch steps, seeming to take some of the afternoon sunshine with him. He looked back long enough to give her a cheerful nod, then started toward the house next door.

Dinah slumped against the doorframe and stared after him, weak-kneed after the encounter.

"What was that man doing here?"

Dinah jerked upright so quickly she thumped the back of her head against the door jamb. She clapped her hand to the tender spot and tried to blink away the stars that blurred her vision.

Mrs. Boggs stepped up beside her and pointed toward the sidewalk. "That man! What did he want?"

Dinah gaped at the demand and held out the flyer. "He came to invite us to a tent meeting."

Mrs. Purvis edged out from behind her neighbor's imposing bulk and peered outside. "Now, Henrietta, he looks like a nice young man."

Very nice, Dinah amended silently.

"Pah!" Mrs. Boggs's jowls quivered. "That just shows how much you know about human nature, Ethelinda Purvis. Why, more than once I've seen him out on the streets talking to saloonkeepers and. . ." A wave of red suffused her ample cheeks. "To women of ill repute. There's no decent word for it. I find it appalling that he would come up here bold as you please and try to make the acquaintance of your new boarder, using the guise of a religious gathering."

"His coming here had nothing to do with me," Dinah protested. "The invitation was for everyone who lives here." On impulse she added, "I'm sure he'll stop at your door before long."

She found the neighbor's horrified gasp almost satisfying enough to outweigh the twinge in her conscience. "If he does, I'll soon send him packing. The very idea of a man who consorts with people of the lowest classes coming to a respectable neighborhood like this!"

"Seems to me the Bible has a good bit to say about Jesus consorting with sinners," Mrs. Purvis muttered.

Mrs. Boggs drew herself up. "That trusting nature of yours is going to get you into trouble some day. Mark my words, Ethelinda, one day you'll rue your willingness to take in total strangers."

She fixed Dinah with a steely look. "And you, young lady, you'll do well to heed what I say and stay away from that man. Consider yourself warned."

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