



Ticket to Tomorrow

A Fair to Remember - Book #1

By Carol Cox

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CHAPTER TWO

Once outside, she paused to draw a breath of air. Not the pure, sweet air she was used to at home, but at least it wasn't the train's cooped-up atmosphere, laced with the smells of food, sweat, and stale tobacco. She eyed the teeming mass of humanity inching its way toward Terminal Station like grain flowing into a hopper and felt a quiver of expectation creep up her backbone. Silas forged ahead and Annie reached out to grip his arm. It wouldn't do to become separated in this crush. Silas would never find his way to the exhibit building on his own. More likely, he'd wind up wandering the streets of Chicago. A stout woman—one of the Bedford ladies, if memory served—bumped up hard against her. Annie scrambled to regain her balance and juttied out her elbows, hoping to prevent another collision.

Outside the train, its former passengers now seemed ready to give their exuberance free rein. Snippets of conversation chased each other through the air:

"I'm heading to the stock pavilion first. There's supposed to be a new breed of cattle on display..."

"Have you heard about the giant wheel that fellow Ferris is building? They say it's going to take people up off the ground in compartments the size of Pullman cars."

"Ha! Sounds like a fool notion to me. I'm glad we came before they finished setting it up. What's to keep the thing from getting loose and rolling right across the grounds? Why, something that large would crush everything in its path."

Annie leaned close to Silas and raised her voice to be heard over the hubbub. "We need to find someone to help us with the carriage. Do you know where we're supposed to take it once it's

unloaded? And what about the rest of our luggage? We'll need to find out where they're unloading the baggage and where we can store it while we set up the exhibit."

Silas blinked like a startled owl "Didn't I tell you? I wired my nephew. He's going to meet us here."

It was Annie's turn to blink. "I didn't know you had family in Chicago."

"I don't." Silas stopped in his tracks and craned his neck to scan the crowd.

Annie resisted the impulse was to shake him. She knew all too well that while many of Silas's comments thoroughly confused the hearer, some vestige of logic lay underneath, in Silas's mind at least. With a forbearance born of long experience, she accepted the existence of the hitherto unknown nephew. . .for the moment.

Silas continued to peer about, a dam blocking the flow of traffic. "I do hope I recognize him. I haven't seen him since he was a lad in knickers."

"Then how will we manage to know him?"

"It shouldn't be too difficult to spot him. People always said he reminded them of me." Silas gave a modest chuckle.

Annie stifled a groan. Much as she loved Silas, his dithering ways could be maddening. One muddle-headed genius to tend to was quite enough. The prospect of having two on her hands. . .no, it didn't bear thinking about.

She set her valise down by her feet and scanned the crowd, but didn't see anyone who appeared to be searching for them. "What's his name?"

"His name?" Silas's face assumed a blank expression that made her want to grind her teeth. But why should she expect him to remember? If they had been discussing a design for some new mechanism, every detail would be at the forefront of his mind, but the name of a mere nephew. . .no.

His eyes took on the light of knowledge. "Nicholas. That's it. Yes, Nicholas. After my late brother, you know."

Annie didn't, but she chose to keep that to herself. Getting Silas sidetracked was all too easy at the best of times, and this moment hardly qualified as one of them.

A portly man with a large family in tow pushed past them, sending Annie teetering off balance. One of the younger children tripped over her valise and set up a wail. The father shot a sharp glare at Annie, scooped up the youngster and continued on his way, muttering about inconsiderate people who left belongings lying about.

Annie scooted the valise closer to her. She needed to get them out of this crush. Where was the nephew? She searched the crowd again, trying to pick out anyone who looked like her companion. Knowing Silas, though, he could easily have gotten his nephew's location confused before blithely sending the wire telling him to appear at the station at a certain time. Even now, a younger version of Silas Crockett might be waiting on a platform in New York or Baltimore, watching in vain for a glimpse of his uncle.

Silas exhibited none of the anxiety that plagued Annie. He bounced on his toes, seeming to enjoy himself thoroughly. "It's hard to believe we're here at last. Wouldn't Will have been excited to see this day come?"

Grief plunged a dagger into Annie's heart and tears blurred the crowd into a confusion of shifting colors. For a moment the depot receded and she was aware of nothing but her pain. Then Silas's voice broke through the fog.

"Annie. Annie?"

She fumbled in her reticule for her handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. Silas hovered next to her, remorse evident in his crinkled brow. "I didn't mean to cause you pain, my dear. I just couldn't help thinking how pleased Will would have been. He would, wouldn't he?"

Annie blinked the last of the tears away and forced a tiny smile. She gave Silas's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Of course he would. That's the reason I'm here, remember?"

He flashed a relieved smile, then his gaze darted toward the door. "Perhaps he's waiting for us inside." Without another word, he hoisted his satchel and plunged into the maelstrom of people jostling to enter Terminal Station.

"Wait!" Panic-stricken at the thought of being separated, Annie picked up her valise and was swept up in the current. Once inside, the flow opened as most fairgoers headed straight for the outer doors and the wonders of the exposition. Annie ducked into a sheltered spot beside one of the thick, white columns. From there, she spotted Silas. . .just as he collided with a dapper man hurrying toward the exit.

The impact knocked both men to the ground. Hats, satchels, and walking sticks scattered across the pavement. The incident barely caused a ripple in the river of people. They continued their rush past, stepping over the fallen men and their strewn belongings. Annie launched herself toward Silas.

"Are you all right?" She tugged at his arm and helped him to his feet.

"Good heavens!" He wobbled in a tight circle. "Did I run into a wall?"

"No, that man over there." Annie brushed at his coat. "Are you hurt?"

He passed his hand over his eyes. "My vision is blurry. I must have hit my head on something."

Annie rescued his spectacles from where they dangled from his left ear and settled them back onto his nose. "How is that?"

"Ah, much better. And now I must see to the poor fellow I knocked down." He picked his way across the litter of scattered belongings and bent over the well-dressed, mustachioed man. "My apologies, sir. It seems to have been entirely my fault."

"Indeed it was."

"I'm terribly sorry." Silas reached out to assist his victim.

"Then perhaps you will be more careful in the future." The man brushed Silas's hand away, struggled to his feet, and began to gather his things. Still looking penitent, Silas handed him his satchel. The man snatched it away with a cold stare. "I have business here myself, but you don't see me bowling people over."

Silas wrung his hands. "It truly was an accident. I humbly beg your forgiveness."

"Consider yourself forgiven, then. I must be on my way." The man tucked his walking stick under his arm and disappeared into the throng.

Annie gathered Silas's things and carried them to him. "He didn't seem like a very sympathetic man."

Silas relieved her of the satchel and set his hat atop his head. "He didn't, did he?" He stared at a point over Annie's right shoulder and his face brightened. "There's Nicholas!" Turning back to

Annie, he confided, "The family resemblance is still there. I'd know him anywhere." He started across the station, a smile lighting his face.

Annie stared in the direction he headed and tried to pick out someone with Silas's vague eyes and distracted air. She spotted a weedy, bespectacled man on the fringe of the crowd, over near the station entrance.

Sure enough, Silas spread his arms wide as he approached the little man, then proceeded to walk right past him.

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