

THE WINDY CITY SAGA • 3

# *Drawn by the Current*



**JOCELYN GREEN**

Christy Award-Winning Author of *The Mark of the King*

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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In memory of those who lost  
their lives on the SS *Eastland*.

And to their loved ones who survived,  
and the generations that followed.



Kindred spirits alone do not change with  
changing years.

—L. M. Montgomery,  
*Anne of the Island*

My help comes from the LORD,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.

—Psalm 121:2 NIV





## CHAPTER ONE



### CHICAGO FRIDAY, JUNE 11, 1915

Olive Pierce chided herself for the tingle of nerves in her fingertips. She was twenty-nine years old and had been working for MetLife's main Chicago office for the last seven. She had no cause to feel anything less than confident.

Wind nipped her ankles and tugged at her hat as though nudging her to get moving. Putting the courthouse behind her, she crossed Washington Street to the twenty-one-story Conway Building where she worked. The white granite gleamed in the morning sun. Unseen from the street, an inner courtyard brought light to every interior office as well. The Conway had opened earlier this year, shrinking the commute from her apartment to just over a block. All the tenants renting office space were enjoying a major upgrade from wherever they'd been last.

It was a sign, Olive told herself. The time was right for her career to get an upgrade, too.

Bolstered, she breezed through the doors and into a space awash with sun pouring through skylights. Her heels clicked over Tennessee marble as she crossed the two-story rotunda surrounded

by shops and cafés and caught an elevator that carried her to the fifteenth floor.

She could do this, she reminded herself, and closed the few remaining yards to the MetLife office.

Greeting the two secretaries already at work, Olive passed between their desks and dropped her things off in her own office. After smoothing her hair, she wove back through reception and hesitated at the door to the corner office.

“Olive?” Gwendolyn Walsh slapped the return on her typewriter carriage and continued hammering the keys, a honey-blond curl bouncing beside her cheek. “Mr. Roth is expecting you. Go right on in, sweetie.”

Olive had long ago given up trying to correct the young secretary, who had been calling her *sweetie* ever since she was hired fresh out of college three years ago. Still, Olive hoped her boss hadn’t overheard. She was a professional life insurance agent, after all, and if she was going to be promoted, it wouldn’t be for being sweet.

A throat clearing behind her turned her attention to the other secretary, Blanche Holden. At fifty-five years old, her hair was as white as her name, but her brown eyes snapped with the spirit of a woman half her age. “Go get it, Olive.”

That was more like it.

“Thanks, ladies.” With a deep breath, Olive entered her boss’s office.

“Well, good morning, Miss Pierce,” Edgar Roth said. “You’re looking rather fetching today.”

Olive’s smile froze. *Fetching* was not the look she’d been going for when she’d dressed in the white shirtwaist, green jacket, and matching skirt. Capable. Ready for action. *That* was what she meant to project.

“You chose your ensemble to match your eyes, I expect? Smart. Not every girl can pull off your coloring, my dear, but I daresay you almost make a man forget about your hair.”

It wasn't even red, for pity's sake. It was auburn. A deep auburn that Anne Shirley would have been more than happy with.

"If you please, Mr. Roth, I have far more to offer than my eyes and hair." Instantly, her cheeks burned. "I'd like to discuss my career at MetLife."

"Absolutely." He smiled, creasing a face lined and tanned from hours at the Chicago Golf Club. "But before we get started, I need my first cup of coffee." Dark eyebrows lifted toward a slightly receding hairline. When she didn't respond, he glanced pointedly toward the door. "I believe it's just through there."

If her cheeks weren't already scarlet, she was sure they would be by now. "I don't—I'm not—" Olive sputtered. "I don't make the coffee here." This man had been her boss for six months. He ought to know that.

"Is that any reason not to pour me a cup?" His injured expression triggered her temper.

"As a matter of fact—"

"Pardon me, Mr. Roth." Gwendolyn appeared in the doorway, cup in hand. Bless her. After placing it on his desk, she sashayed away.

Olive sat opposite him and collected herself while he sipped. "Mr. Roth," she tried again, "I want to be very clear about what I do here. You are aware that I am not a secretary. I'm an insurance agent. I help clients choose the best plan to fit their needs and budgets. I survey their medical histories to make sure we're giving them the best rates possible."

Mr. Roth watched her as if half amused.

Simmering, she plunged ahead. "When a MetLife client dies, I activate the process of verification and the prompt payment of death benefits for the bereaved. And I do it with all the tact and compassion the situation requires."

"Of course you do. You're a nurturer. It's what you women are good at. I hear Blanche sends our clients birthday and Christmas cards."



“She also subscribes to every church newsletter in the city. If any clients are sick, she’s the first to find out and send a card.”

Mr. Roth nodded. “That’s the sort of thing that makes you women suited for the work you’re doing. Nurturing.”

“If you’ll pardon my bluntness, sir, that’s not all I’m good at. I’ve been doing this for seven years. I can do more. I want to do more.”

“Seven years! You don’t look old enough to have been working that long. What’s the matter, you don’t want to get married and have a family?”

The question stung, not just for the implication that something was wrong with her, but because she could not imagine he would ever ask her colleague Howard Penrose, who was two years older than she was, why he wasn’t married. She exhaled. “Seven years is a long time. My point exactly.”

“Oh. You’re not quitting on me, are you? Some fellow proposed finally?”

“Not a bit.” Olive’s smile came easily. “I have a proposal of my own. You’re aware that Howard is the only insurance investigator in our office. You may not be aware that he was promoted after only a year on the job, and yet—” She spread her hands, allowing her own tenure to speak for her. “Train me to be an investigator, too.”

She’d be good at it. Really good. She was her father’s daughter, after all. As a reporter and editor for the *Chicago Tribune*, Nate Pierce had always been asking questions, searching out all angles. Growing up in and out of her aunt’s bookstore might have fueled Olive’s imagination, but it was her father’s blood in her veins that instilled a hunger for truth.

“I’ll be able to fill either role,” she went on. “Selling policies when that’s needed, investigating when Howard has too much to handle on his own.” She tried not to hold her breath. “I’m not just a nurturer. I’m a creative thinker and a problem solver.”

Mr. Roth’s eyebrows drew together. Pushing away his mug, he

dropped his elbows to the desk and tented his fingers in front of his blue serge suit. "I appreciate your loyalty to the company. I do. But your caring spirit, which is a strength in certain capacities, would be a weakness in the field. I need investigators who think with their brains, not with their hearts."

*Balderdash.* "You don't believe women use their minds?"

He patted the air to calm her, further agitating her instead. "What you've proposed is too unconventional for my taste."

She swallowed. "If putting a woman in the role is an acquired taste, there's only one way to acquire it." Another smile. This time, not as easy. "Look, Mr. Roth. The Chicago Police Department hired ten women two years ago. Alice Clement serves as a bona fide detective. If the police trust a woman detective, surely MetLife can trust me to be an insurance investigator."

The wariness playing across his face threatened to melt the metal from her spine. "The police can do whatever the blue blazes they want. This is my office. I don't see the need for it."

"It's a new era, Mr. Roth. Women may not have won the vote nationally yet, but we can vote for president in the state of Illinois as of two years ago. Why not embrace the change?"

"Embrace the change?" He chuckled and stood. "The only change I'd like to embrace is for my employees to do as I ask without a fuss."

He thrust his empty mug into her hand.



If Blanche hadn't pried Mr. Roth's mug from Olive's grip so quickly, Olive might have been tempted to spit in it.

"Well, based on those flaring nostrils of yours, I don't need to ask how it went." The secretary cocked her head toward the coffee counter in the back of the reception space.

Olive followed her past the doorways to Howard's office, her own, and the records room, then crossed her arms, a huff of frustration escaping her.

“I’m sorry, Olive. You deserve every chance that Howard had to prove yourself an investigator. If there were anything I could say to secure that for you, believe me, I would. But you will *not* serve that man coffee. At least not as long as I’m here.”

A stab of guilt pricked Olive. “It’s not that I think I’m too good to do it,” she said. “It’s just that if he doesn’t recognize the work I do as it is, this will only . . .” Unwilling to insult either Blanche or Gwendolyn, she looked for a safe place to land her next words and found none.

“Confuse him further?” A smile warmed Blanche’s faintly lined face. Her wedding ring glinted as she poured the steaming brew into Mr. Roth’s cup. “I completely understand. This isn’t in your job description, but it is in mine. It’s best to stick to our roles, or he’ll never learn to keep us straight.”

“Exactly.” Olive exhaled, thanked Blanche, and returned to her office, leaving the paneled door partway open to the reception area. She still felt defeated—and she was—but at least she also felt a little more understood.

The rest of the morning passed without appointment or incident. Olive tried not to glare at the ivory wall separating her office from Howard’s. He wasn’t here. Was he in the Union Stock Yards, investigating a death that had only been made to look like an accident? Or at the railroad tracks, looking into a suspected suicide on the rails? Maybe he was at the morgue, conferring with a medical examiner over a cold metal table. Was it natural causes, or was the dead man murdered by the new spouse who stood to gain a fortune from his death?

She glanced at the clock. She, too, had somewhere to be today, even if it was just lunching with her friend. After jabbing a pearl-headed pin through her hat, she scooped up her handbag.

“I’m taking lunch,” she told Blanche on her way out. “See you in an hour.”

“Oh, wait!” Blanche called after her. “I’m so sorry I forgot to tell you, but your friend Claire called while you were with Roth.

She said she's very sorry, but she's ill and won't be able to meet for lunch."

Olive formed a new plan. She could wash out her Thermos, fill it with chicken noodle soup at a café downstairs, and take the train out to Claire's house. "I may be back a little later than usual from my lunch break, then. But I've no appointments until two, and I'll work later this evening to make up for any time over an hour."

"Bringing lunch to her, are you? Take your time. In fact, she and her husband are your clients, correct? This calls for a get-well card." With a flourish, Blanche withdrew one from a drawer, added her own warm wishes inside, then handed the pen to Olive. "Pay your MetLife customer a house call."

Olive laughed. "You really are the best. If Mr. Roth should ask where I am, tell him I'm out nurturing."