

THE WINDY CITY SAGA • I

# *Veiled in Smoke*



**JOCELYN GREEN**

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

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*Veiled  
in Smoke*

JOCELYN GREEN



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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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To all those who feel wounded  
by loss and pain.  
May God bring you beauty from ashes.



The strength, if strength we have, is certainly  
never in our own selves; it is given us.

—Charlotte Brontë





## CHAPTER ONE



**CHICAGO**  
**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 1871**

Meg's father was gone. Again.

She stood in his empty room for only a moment, summoning her wits. Crickets chirred outside the open windows, and moonlight spilled across the unrumpled bed. Surely he hadn't gotten very far.

A gust of wind swung the door closed behind her. Dread mounting, Meg pulled out the top drawer of Stephen's desk and found it empty. *Oh no.*

She hurried into the hallway of their second-floor apartment to find her sister, Sylvie, emerging from her room, her dark hair in a braid down her back. At twenty-one years of age, she was two years Meg's junior, but her brow wore the cares of someone much older.

"I heard a door slam. Did he leave?" Sylvie asked.

"He has his gun."

Meg rushed to the building's exterior stairwell. Cold metal met her skin as she climbed up the stairs barefoot, one pale hand on the railing, the other hoisting her nightdress as dew-heavy air flowed around her.

"Wait!" Sylvie cried from below, but Meg didn't slow until she gained the landing halfway between the third floor and the roof. The stairs shook as Sylvie chased after her. "Stop!" Wild-eyed and breathless, she caught up to Meg and grasped her arm.

“Shhh!” Meg pointed above them. Stephen was pacing the flat, block-long roof, patrolling to keep his property safe from dangers only he imagined. “Don’t startle him. I need to talk him back inside before anyone else sees him.”

“Please don’t!” With uncharacteristic force, Sylvie jerked Meg down so they sat together on the landing, the bricks at their backs pressing through their cotton gowns. Coronas of light surrounded the lampposts on the street below.

“What are you doing?” Meg whispered. On the other side of the wall was the third-floor apartment they rented to James and Flora Spencer. Meg hoped the elderly tenants wouldn’t stir.

“Listen to me.” The end of Sylvie’s braid swirled in the wind that moaned past the building. Her fingers dug into Meg’s arm. “You remember him as he was before the war, before Andersonville changed him. I know him as he *is*. He’s unpredictable, Meg. Stay away from him. I wish Mother had.”

Meg’s voice bunched into a hard lump at the base of her throat. Swallowing, she forced it back into service. “She was ill and never should have gotten out of bed.”

Sylvie’s jaw hardened, and her nostrils flared. “You make it sound as though it were her fault.”

Meg’s blond hair pulled from her braid and whipped across her face. “If I blame anyone, it’s myself.” Even in illness, Ruth’s first concern was for her husband. Meg had fallen asleep when it was her turn to keep vigil through the night, or she could have stopped her mother and checked on her father herself. The drenching that Ruth endured in the storm that night while trying to coax Stephen down was too much for her weakened state. She never recovered. “With her last words, she begged me to take care of him. I promised. That’s exactly what I’m trying to do.”

Sylvie drew her knees up beneath her chin and looked toward the city’s dark silhouette. Bats stitched their flight across the moon. Several blocks away, voices crescendoed, signaling a crowd’s exit from a music hall, theater, or saloon. Hearing them, Stephen grew more agitated, muttering to himself as he paced.

Sylvie gripped Meg's hand. "I think he needs help."

"I agree. Before he hurts someone." A dim light flickered behind the window of James and Flora's apartment. Meg started to rise.

"No." Sylvie pulled her back down. "Not our help. Other help." She waited until Stephen's voice receded as he marched to the opposite end of the roof. "I think he needs more than we can give him."

"What are you saying?"

"It has been six years, and Father still isn't himself."

"He's not insane," Meg hissed.

"I didn't say he was. But he isn't well either. It's time to reconsider some kind of treatment."

"Treatment." Frustration licked through Meg. "That happens at the asylum. No. Mother never wanted that for him."

"Mother isn't here and hasn't been for two years."

"I don't want that for him."

Stephen's voice grew louder, hovering above them. He about-faced, and splinters of tar-coated wood from the roof rattled through the stairs and fell into Meg's lap. He was walking too close to the edge. Her heart banged within its cage. What if he slipped, with his foot or with the finger on the trigger?

Below, a dog barked and gave chase through the leaf-strewn alley, upsetting a crate of tin cans. Two gentlemen jumped out of the way, nearly falling over, then laughed drunkenly before weaving their way to the front door of the Sherman House hotel, which shared the building with the bookshop Meg's family owned on the ground level.

Sweat misted her skin, then chilled it as wind rushed by. "After being in a prison camp for so long, how do you think he would respond to being locked in an asylum?" A cloud passed over the moon. "He's not going." She stood without waiting for her sister's response.

"Who's there?" Stephen's pace increased as he neared. "Show yourself!"

Unmoving, Meg called out, "Father? It's me, Meg. It's all right."

"Meg?"



“Yes, it’s Meg and Sylvie. We’re on the stairwell. No one else is here.”

Stiffly, he marched to the edge of the building and peered over. “What on earth are you doing? This is my watch, not yours.” His Colt Army revolver glinted in his hand.

Meg steadied her voice. “Put the gun away. There’s no need for it. Come on inside.”

Moonlight gleamed in Stephen’s eyes. “I can’t go in. I must stand watch.”

As Meg began to climb the stairs, Sylvie tugged her from behind with a whisper. “Don’t you dare. Don’t go up there.”

Caught between her sister’s fear and her father’s paranoia, Meg felt her shoulders knot. How could she care for one without neglecting the other? Little wonder her mother had suffered chronic nosebleeds after Father came home.

Lifting her head, Meg tried to reason with him. “It’s really windy up here. We’re tired, and we’d like to go in. Let’s all go in together. We’ll lock the doors once we’re inside, and we’ll be fine.”

Silence met her request. Long moments later, the stairs shook with his heavy tread. She knew better than to embrace him, for touch was no longer a comfort. It was just as well, considering she felt less affection than irritation right now. Compassion, she had discovered, was not a bottomless well.

“They took John.” He glanced over his shoulder, then down below, scanning. Cares etched his face. “I received a letter today that said they took him right from his home and locked him up. They say it will keep him safe, but it won’t, you know. It isn’t right. They took John from his home.”

“You need to rest,” Sylvie told him. “Let’s go inside.”

A puff of air escaped his nose. “I don’t feel restful.” He hushed his voice. “There’s devilment afoot, I know it. John must have stopped his lookout, or he’d never have let them take him. I won’t be caught unawares. I won’t be locked up again. Upon my life, I won’t.”

“That’s right, you won’t.” Dust itched over Meg’s skin with each gust of wind. “Now, let’s go home.”

He pulled at his beard, considering.

“Please, Father?” Sylvie whispered. She rubbed her arms.

Before he could form a response, the fire bell sounded from the cupola of the courthouse, jerking his attention that direction.

“It’s all right,” Meg said. “Look around, there’s no blaze within sight. It’s just a small fire somewhere else. You know the watchman in the tower is required to ring the bell whenever the firemen are called to action anywhere in the city.”

She’d grown up hearing that bell and ignoring it, though lately it clanged more often than ever, thanks to the dry summer and strong winds sweeping in off the prairie. But the number of strokes indicated where in the city the fire was located, so she knew they were well out of harm’s way.

Even so, each strike of the enormous bell heaped another layer of dismay upon Stephen’s countenance. “Get inside, girls,” he said at length. “There is devilment afoot. I know it. I won’t be taken unawares.”

Sylvie stomped down the stairs, Stephen marched back to the roof, and Meg stood in between, reaching out to both with empty hands.



## FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 1871

Meg could barely admit to herself, let alone to Sylvie, that aside from keeping her father from being locked away, she was at a loss as to how to soothe his mind and spirit. That uncomfortable fact was far easier to ignore during business hours, when she could lose herself in what she did know how to do.

So in the southeast corner of her family’s bookshop, framed by the display window, Meg squeezed paint from metal tubes onto her palette, then added a portion of medium to the center. She felt the tension in her shoulders slowly release as she began to mix the colors.

“Ten o’clock. Let’s hope we’re busier today than we’ve been so

far this week.” Sylvie unlocked the front door and flipped the sign to announce that Corner Books & More was open.

Meg glanced at the bustle outside. From their vantage point on the corner of Randolph and Clark Streets, she had a full view of Court House Square diagonally across from the store. Horse-drawn carriages, wagons, and drays clattered over the pine-block street. Ladies in smart jackets and skirts and men in sack suits streamed out of a streetcar and onto raised wooden sidewalks. Chicago held more than three hundred thousand souls. It did not seem too vain a hope that a small fraction of one percent might be persuaded to buy a book.

“We still have the rent coming in from our tenants,” Meg reminded her sister. “And if Beth and Rosemary don’t visit today, you’ll have more time to devote to customers.” Sylvie’s two best friends from their school days were nice enough, but they ought to know better than to distract Sylvie from work. It should be enough that the trio saw each other at church, at Hoffman’s Bakery down the block, and at Beth’s and Rosemary’s homes.

Sylvie stiffened. “If your friends stopped by to see you, I wouldn’t turn them away.”

But that was unlikely to happen, and they both knew it. The few friends Meg had were married now, tied by their apron strings to their households. They had husbands and babies to tend. Meg had the store and her father, and no girlish dreams of more. She’d accepted that the war had claimed many young men and that, regardless, her lot was to take care of Stephen. Not a husband, not a babe of her own.

Resolved, Meg turned back to her painting of Margaret Hale, the heroine of the novel *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell. Once completed, the portrait would join the dozen other beloved characters hanging on the shop’s walls. Patrons came not just to purchase books, but to see which character Meg was painting next, which was why she so often painted here instead of in her art studio upstairs. A few paintings had even sold, but not nearly as many as she wished.

After mixing a little medium in with her paint, she scrubbed in the background on the canvas. She was so focused that she didn't notice anyone had entered the shop until she sensed someone at her elbow.

"Good morning, my dear!" Leaning on his walking stick, Hiram Sloane stood even with her height, his accumulated years stooping the shoulders beneath his brown herringbone frock coat. For years he'd played the part of benevolent uncle to her and Sylvie, and guardian of their family while her father was at war.

"Father will be so pleased to see you," Meg told him. The two men first met at an abolition rally a decade before the war began. They'd bonded quickly, meeting time and again to discuss shared convictions, the news, and literature. He was the only friend Stephen still had. "He's in the backyard, I believe."

"Fine day to be out in the sunshine. I would have walked if my carriage driver had let me."

"Then Eli has more sense than you." Meg laughed to take the sting out of her words. Hiram's home was two and a half miles south of the store. Not only was it too far for a man of Hiram's years to walk, but three times last summer he had set off and completely lost his way. Thank goodness he hadn't wandered into any of the vice-ridden patches along the river. Each time, a policeman had brought him home before he'd been in any danger.

"Yes. Eli." The way Hiram repeated the name, Meg could tell he was attempting to commit it to memory once more. "Well, then. I will visit with your father after I pay my respects to your sister." He moved toward the interior of the shop.

A few passersby paused outside the window, watching Meg blend the background with a large, flat bristle brush. Her thoughts, however, remained with her father, who ought to be bent over his worktable in the rear of the shop, repairing broken bindings on rare first edition books. Before the war, he had taken great pride and satisfaction in mending what was torn, restoring and renewing old treasures. These days he could not always muster the concentration required. She breathed in the smells of linseed oil and

turpentine, then exhaled slowly. Her cares had finally faded to the corners of her mind when the door opened again.

Dried leaves somersaulted inside, crunching beneath a pair of shoes creased with use but polished to a shine. Their owner consulted his timepiece, then slipped it back into his vest pocket before removing his derby hat. Chestnut hair brushed the collar of his sable-colored suit.

Stepping away from Hiram, Sylvie approached the customer, her plaid pleated skirt rustling. “Mr. Pierce, what a pleasure to see you.”

He gave a slight bow, then pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. “Thank you again for the invitation to come.”

“Yes, of course. This is my sister, Meg. Meg, this is Mr. Nathaniel Pierce with the *Chicago Tribune*. We met at the Soldiers’ Home last Sunday.”

Mr. Pierce looked at Meg. “How do you do?”

Meg sent him a smile while appraising him from an artist’s perspective, noting the exact shade of blue in his eyes, the proportions of his lean frame, the sun’s glints in his hair, and his tapered fingers, one stained with ink. “My sister can help you find whatever you want. Or whomever, as the case may be. David Copperfield, perhaps? Or the elusive *Moby Dick*?”

A corner of his mouth turned up. He smoothed a hand over the two cowlicks at the back of his head. “Stephen Townsend, if you please. If Miss Sylvie didn’t mention it, I’m doing an article on Chicago’s war heroes, and I’d love to record your father’s experiences.”

“An article.” Swallowing the surprise edging her tone, Meg set down her brush. Her apple-green muslin skirt whispered as she stepped closer. “Now? Six years after the war’s end?”

“Ten years after the war’s beginning. A fine time for reflection, don’t you think?”

What a luxury that some people might wait that long to consider the war’s toll, when she and Sylvie could not get away from it. “It was ten years in April. You’re a bit late, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’ve been featuring our veterans on a regular basis since then.” Mr. Pierce gave her a look as if to say she would know this if she read the newspaper. “I’m merely continuing the series.”

Hiram joined them, wiry eyebrows drawn together. “Doing a story on the war, young man? Why, if I can be of service, I’d be most willing. I served as a prison guard at Camp Douglas in the south part of town. I remember it well.”

That much was true. It was anything after the war that seemed to slip Hiram’s recollection more and more of late.

While the two men chatted, Meg pulled Sylvie toward the counter. On it sat their mother’s copy of *Little Women*, which Sylvie must have been reading. Not only did it contain their mother’s notes in the margins, but it also held the photograph of their father when he enlisted. The precious image showed Stephen as he had been before the war had altered him. He didn’t want to see it, but Meg and Sylvie wouldn’t part with it for anything.

Meg glanced at the reporter before refocusing on her sister. “Exactly what have you arranged?”

“I see no harm in it. Mr. Pierce was gathering stories at the Soldiers’ Home last week when I was there dropping off some books. When he learned about Father, he asked to interview him, and I agreed.”

“For a newspaper article,” Meg said. “He barely talks to *us* about the war. You suppose he’ll talk to a stranger?”

“He might.” Sylvie straightened the cameo at her collar. “I want Chicago to know of Father’s sacrifices on their behalf. On the country’s behalf. Look out there.” She gestured to the window. “All those people going about their business like nothing ever happened. This city got rich off the war—filthy rich—while soldiers gave life or limb, or came home broken beyond repair.”

Meg’s throat cinched tight. “Father can heal. He just needs time and patience and love.” This was her mother’s conviction, bequeathed to Meg before she died. She only hoped her voice sounded as confident as her words.

Sylvie looked away. “He’s had time and love and patience. But

perhaps he could do with a bit more respect as well. And it could help the store. We need the business. We may draw new customers from other parts of the city who wish to patronize a veteran-owned shop. A newspaper article is our best chance to reach them.”

“You want to exploit our father for gain?”

“Pardon me.” Mr. Pierce inserted himself into their argument, Hiram still at his side. “I do not exploit.”

“Our father—” Meg stopped before she could say that he was different from the average veteran. That he was easy to exploit, that children already taunted him. They threw bread crusts and apple cores over the Townsends’ backyard fence just to laugh as Stephen scrambled to gather them up. Lifting her chin, she tried again. “Our father survived Andersonville.”

“Exactly why his story should be shared.”

Hiram pounded his walking stick on the floor. “Quite right! My dear girls, your father is a grown man. Let us leave the question to him, eh? Allow him the dignity of making his own decision.”

The ridge between Sylvie’s eyes smoothed away. “I’ll mind the store.”

Conceding, Meg turned her back on the unfinished painting and led the men to the work in progress she could not seem to improve.



It was a lie, Meg had realized years ago, that the end of the war meant the end of suffering. At the age of seventeen, she’d linked arms with Sylvie and their mother on the train platform, waiting for her father’s return. Steam engines hissed, whistles blasted, crowds tramped across the soot-filmed floor. Nearly dizzy with anticipation, she had craned her neck, searching form and face. But the stranger who finally shuffled toward them had borne no resemblance to Stephen Townsend. Emaciated, covered with scabs, breath that reeked of illness. Even his voice was thin. Only the eyes belonged to the man they remembered, but those looked both haunted and hunted.

That night at home, rather than resuming his chair at the head

of the table, he had left it empty, choosing to sit elsewhere. Pointing to the vacant spot Meg had waited four years for him to fill, he'd said, "The man who left is not the one who came home. I'm sorry. I am a shock to you. I'm a shock to myself."

Meg wondered if Stephen was a shock to Nathaniel Pierce as well. Though no longer stamped and scored by starvation, her father remained thin, his beard uncut, his eyes possessed of a fierce alertness. He squatted on the far side of the yard, the knees of his trousers threadbare to a shine though other pairs filled his closet. A canteen hung at his hip. He held up a hand to halt their approach, then pointed to the reason.

Beneath a naked linden tree, a stray dog devoured the blackberry pie Meg had brought home from the bakery last night. Scattered in a drift of dead leaves were the crumbs of what she could only guess had been a loaf of bread.

Meg watched helplessly, Hiram and Mr. Pierce flanking her. At last the floppy-eared stray finished his feast and scampered through the gap in the wooden fence. The air was warm as summer and dry as dust, for they'd had less than an inch of rain since July.

"Father." She made her way to him, carefully stepping over and around the marks he'd made on the ground, while Hiram stood back with Mr. Pierce. "The pie and bread were for us," she whispered.

"He was hungry. No man or beast should know hunger. If a creature comes asking for a bite to eat and it's in my power to give it, I'll do it. Every time."

She nodded, choosing to see the compassion and kindness in the act, though she wondered if the reporter would interpret it that way.

Stephen ran a hand down his brown beard, grizzled with coarse grey strands though he was only forty-five. "Who does Hiram have with him?"

"His name is Mr. Nathaniel Pierce, and he's with the *Tribune*. Sylvie met him at the Soldiers' Home. He'd like to hear about your experiences during the war for a series of articles he's writing on



Chicago's veterans. I'll introduce you, if you'd like." Her voice tilted up in question at the end.

"He wants information?" Stephen squinted across the grassless yard. At length, he said, "Let's see what he's about." With strides ungainly from perpetual ache in his joints, he led the way to the waiting men.

"Stephen!" Hiram shook her father's hand. "This young fellow wants to hear what you have to say about Andersonville. Whatever you want the city to know, he says he'll print it in that newspaper of his."

"It would be a privilege, sir." Mr. Pierce extended his hand.

Stephen turned away from it, pulling Hiram aside.

Mr. Pierce stepped back to allow them more privacy. Meg offered him an apologetic half smile. On the third floor, a window slid open, and she imagined the Spencers were watching and listening to everything.

"Who is this man, really?" Stephen whispered to Hiram. "What do we know about him?"

Hiram clasped Stephen's arm and held firm. "He's a reporter, friend. He merely wants to listen to you."

God bless Hiram Sloane. He could talk Stephen down from his suspicions in ways she couldn't, for her father considered her naïve. Perhaps if Meg had been born a son rather than a daughter, he would heed her insights. If she'd been a son, she would have gone to war herself and fought alongside him. Instead, she was the daughter who needed extra time and attention during her childhood, and he still deemed her *delicate*. If what he meant by that was *fragile*, he was wrong.

"It is up to you, of course," Hiram added. "But I trust him. He'd like to hear whatever you want to tell him. Some might consider that a gift indeed." Hiram didn't know that he was that gift to Stephen every time he came to visit, listening to the same stories over and over again with the same rapt attention, as though it were his first time hearing them. In Hiram's mind, it was.

Mr. Pierce shifted his weight, placed his hat over his heart. "I

sincerely would be honored to hear and explain to our readers your sacrifices. We are all of us in your debt.”

Stephen appraised him. “You served? Or were you not old enough to enlist?”

A bit of color rode the reporter’s cheekbones. “I was twenty at the start of the war. Old enough to stay here and raise my three young stepsiblings.”

Meg stifled her surprise. If he wasn’t a veteran himself, how could he possibly understand and represent a man like her father? “Maybe this isn’t a good idea after all. Thank you for your time.” She touched Mr. Pierce’s elbow, signaling that he should leave.

Stephen reached out to stay them, dirt beneath his fingernails. “Your parents?”

“Cholera, ’fifty-nine. Took my mother, stepfather, and many neighbors.”

Hiram clucked his tongue. “And you were left to tend the children.”

“The least I can do now,” Mr. Pierce forged ahead, “is to record stories like yours. As you are a bookstore owner, surely we can agree on the importance of not letting history disappear. We have much to learn from you, sir.”

Stephen hooked a thumb behind the strap of his canteen and angled toward the back of the house as though considering. “Far be it from me to fault a man for caring for his own.” He cleared his throat. “I’ll talk.”

“Good. I’m grateful.” A subdued smile warmed Mr. Pierce’s face. Reseating his hat, he asked if there was some other place Stephen wanted to go to conduct the interview.

“Here’s fine,” Stephen replied. “Here’s fitting.”

He spread his arms and spun in a slow circle, dust clouding the tops of his boots. Meg followed Mr. Pierce’s gaze and saw with his eyes what she had grown accustomed to during the last six years.

All the grass had been pulled up. In a large rectangle that encompassed nearly the entire yard, sticks whittled to pointed ends were driven into the ground. Inside that barrier was another perim-

eter made up of the same. Small pebbles spelled the words *Dead Line* inside the second rectangle. Three straight lines cut through the dirt, marked *Market Street*, *Water Street*, and *South Street*. Cutting across the width of the southern half of the rectangle was a deep groove Stephen had carved out with his knife. Seeing that it was dry, he crouched and poured water from his canteen into the cavity. *Stockade Creek* read the pebbles alongside its bank. Inside the *Dead Line*, uncounted scraps of fabric were nailed into the hard-packed ground to represent makeshift tents.

Rising again, Stephen took a drink from his canteen. “Welcome to Andersonville.”

Sorrow clamped Meg’s chest, screwing tighter with each breath. This model he’d made and faithfully maintained had been part of her landscape for so long that she had learned to bury its significance. After all these years, and in a city that had grown fat with profit from the war, her father still wasn’t free of the prison that had shattered him.