

“*A Mile from Sunday* is an exciting and realistic account of a young journalist’s quest to expose an identity-stealing pastor. And while Kadlecek’s gripping storytelling abilities make you want to keep turning those pages, her in-depth characterization makes you want to pause for a laugh and a chocolate chip cookie with Jonna, the brave yet humble heroine. A great read that leaves you wondering, *What will Jonna’s next adventure be?*”

— BECKY FREEMAN, sports journalist

“I became attached to Jonna Lightfoot MacLaughlin, the authentic, contradictory, smart, funny, real-life woman of this book. Jonna lives in today’s world with grown-up problems, hopes, and dreams, and her relationships and life tell the gospel in a unique, compelling way that both Christians and non-Christians will enjoy. The suspense of the story lines made this a page-turner, and now I can’t wait for the next book in this trilogy.”

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Christian college vice president

“Jonna Lightfoot MacLaughlin and I became fast friends from the moment I began reading *A Mile from Sunday*. Her wisdom and wit spoke to my heart and soul as I lived each moment with her. Jo Kadlecek is a talented writer who masterfully connects you to life in the kingdom. Don’t miss it!”

— JANE ALBRIGHT, women’s basketball coach,
Wichita State University

“I love Jonna Lightfoot MacLaughlin. She’s clever, intelligent, faith-filled, and heartwarmingly vulnerable, yet wholly unique. Meet her and you’ll love her too. Highly recommended!”

— GAYLE ROPER, author of *Allah’s Fire* and *See No Evil*

:::a mile from sunday

a novel

jo kadlecek



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*For Nanci and Dad,
and, of course, Chris*

If the Divine does not make us better, it will make us very much worse. Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst. Of all created beings, the wickedest is the one who originally stood in the immediate presence of God.

— C. S. Lewis

Summer 2003

::Chapter One

God called me on the phone this morning.

Unfortunately—or fortunately, depending on your perspective—I hadn’t gotten into the office yet. My alarm forgot to go off again. So he left me a voice mail telling me that “the world was a violent and evil place, full of all kinds of unnecessary suffering because human beings had deteriorated into dreadful leeches of self-centered greed.”

“Well, you don’t need to be God to figure that out,” I mumbled right before I swallowed a lukewarm blend of 7-Eleven coffee and swished it around my mouth. The newsroom was buzzing this morning, so I pinched the phone closer to my ear, scratched my head with the tip of my pencil, and listened to the rest of his message. His voice sounded more like a whiney child than that of the Almighty:

People must turn to me, Jenny. They need me, Jenny. And so, this Saturday morning at sunrise, in the shelter of the Boulder Canyon, just outside that wretched city, I’ve invited many, many beautiful female beings to come and worship me. When they arrive, they will be delivered. You need to come, too, and cover it for your newspaper so more in the world might know, Jenny. Click.

“First things first, pal,” I said to the phone. “It’s Jonna, not Jenny.”

I logged on to the computer. You’d think God would get my name right, but then again most humans always seemed to struggle with it too. I’d been Jane, Jan, Jolene, anything but Jonna. Once I was even Jonita. I didn’t mind that one really because the woman who called me “Jonita” was ninety-three years old, every inch of her a wrinkle, and her favorite neighbor a long, long, long time ago had been Jonita. She patted my shoulder when she said her neighbor’s name, and her tiny brown eyes got cloudy. I didn’t correct her.

She, however, was the exception. To the rest of the planet I always made sure they knew the gorgeous, magical name my hippie parents gave me twenty-seven years ago when I was born, the same year the United States of America turned two hundred years old, 1976: Jonna Lightfoot MacLaughlin.

Jonna because I was a girl after my three brothers were born, and my parents—who smoked a little too much “groovy stuff” in the 1960s—really liked the names of the music groups they listened to, like Peter, Paul, and Mary, or Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young. They figured they must have heard Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John doing some tight harmonies somewhere on Haight Street in San Francisco and the names just stuck. Of course, they improvised on the last one when I was born a girl, so we became: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and me, Jonna.

Lightfoot because they were “conscientious objectors” to how Native Americans had been treated and decided that by giving their children Indian middle names—Matt BigBear, Mark RunningWind, Luke EagleWing—native traditions would be kept alive. Of course, they never had a drop of Cherokee or

Apache in their blood—that would’ve been hard to explain to three generations of Irish clan who had shipped over from County Clare after the Great Potato Famine.

Which explained *MacLaughlin* on my dad’s side and *O’Connor* on my mom’s. And why names were so important in our tribe. They meant something.

You’d think God, of all people, would understand that, especially since he had been, more or less, in the “naming” business. So if he was going to telephone the religion reporter at the *Denver Dispatch* daily newspaper to tell her about some spiritual love-fest in the Rocky Mountains, you’d think he’d get her name right.

Jonna Lightfoot MacLaughlin. Don’t forget it.

By the time I’d finished checking the other messages on my voice mail—a Methodist minister, a Catholic volunteer, and one ex-Baptist leader—it was 9:34 a.m. I jotted down their phone numbers, and aside from thinking “God” had a serious credibility problem with me right now, I wondered if I should call the Boulder Police Department to warn them about Saturday’s potentially wacky gathering.

I replayed the message and realized “God” had failed to tell me where exactly the sunrise extravaganza would be in the canyon. I was not about to get up early on a Saturday morning for nothing, let alone tip off the Boulder police that some potential cult leader was lurking around Boulder. They got those types of phone calls all the time. Their beat might as well have been dubbed New Age Headquarters, what with all the meditation gurus, spirituality centers, psychics, and animal communicators in town. For some reason, Boulder had always attracted a variety of believers and seekers, mystics and philosophers, activists and kooks. And since it was only forty minutes or so from downtown Denver,

Boulder was considered part of my territory to cover.

No shortage of story possibilities there.

I swirled coffee against the inside of my cheeks and considered my next move. At the bottom of my plastic IN-box I had tucked away half a Hershey's bar yesterday before the staff meeting. Maybe that would help. I broke off a square and waited.

"Ask the boss," a voice inside my head told me. I blinked. "Not *that* one. The one who edits your stories and signs your paychecks, not the One who runs the universe."

"Skip, I got a voice mail from God," I said, pushing the door open into his office.

"Again? Remind me to stand next to you the next time we're in a thunderstorm." Skip Gravely grinned as he said it and looked up at me from the papers on his desk. It was the same grin he had thrown my way two years before when he first recruited me to be the *Dispatch's* "Number One Religion Reporter." I was too fresh out of college to know that I would also be the *only* religion reporter. But since I'd been covering obituaries, the police blotter, and an occasional city hall meeting—the kind of sleepy assignments every rookie reporter got at every newspaper—I was ready for something a little more sizzling, something that exercised my brain muscles. So when he said the job title with such Pulitzer Prize-winning intonations—"Number One Religion Reporter"—I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been interested.

I'd never forget it. April, 2001, Denver was getting dumped on in another spring snowstorm, and I was freezing by the time I'd gotten to my desk in the newsroom that morning. I picked the snowflakes out of the curls in my hair and tried to get a comb through the mass of frozen frizz on my head. It was not going there. So I thawed and decided to go with the natural woman,

white-girl 'fro look, hoping the rest of the day would be a little more tame than my hair.

Once I had tossed my bag into the drawer beside my desk, I saw Skip's note taped to my computer screen: "See me. Now!"

I tasted the backwash of hazelnut coffee. What had I done? Maybe yesterday's obituary was terrible. Maybe I had bogged it down with too many poetic, and consequently, unnecessary details trying to make the poor guy sound halfway decent. Or maybe he hadn't really died and we were getting sued for printing a bogus obit. I thought I'd checked my facts.

Then I glanced over to the sports desks—the reporters weren't there. Maybe they were sick and I was the only reporter around to cover the Colorado state high school wrestling tournament. The last thing I needed was to watch a bunch of half-naked adolescent boys sweat onto each other's skin. I had suffered through years of wrestling tournaments watching all three of my brothers trying hopelessly not to get pinned in high school matches. The agony was too much to bear. It didn't help that Mom and Pop always gave them a positive lecture on nonviolence and good karma and told them how proud they were of "passing on peace and joy to their opponent."

"No, God, anything but wrestling," I'd prayed. Aloud. I reread Skip's note. Boy, I wanted a cigarette. Since I didn't have time, I popped a few chocolate drops into my mouth instead and walked into my editor's office as the snow fell outside his window. I put on my thin, wiry glasses, hoping they would make me look smarter, or at least older than twenty-four and a half.

"MacLaughlin, glad to see you this morning," he said. Skip was a tall, thin man whose patience translated into biblical proportions. He wore pin-striped suits that were as wrinkle

free as his attitude. The man never appeared flustered, no matter how many stories were breaking and driving the rest of his reporters and editors mad. Skip was, as they say, a calming presence. Chamomile tea with a trimmed beard.

“Mary Virginia Blake has just told me she’s calling it quits,” he said, still typing on his keyboard as the screen above it changed colors each time his fingers moved.

“Mrs. Blake? The lady with the white hair and paisley sweaters? The one who actually says ‘good morning’ when you walk by?” I sat up straight in the chair as more questions popped out of my mouth: “I mean, she covers religion and stuff like that, doesn’t she? Hasn’t she been here a while?”

“Since before Moses chiseled out the Commandments.” Skip laughed, thinking his joke was funny. I faked a chuckle too and tried not to snort. Then he looked away from his screen and straight at me.

“Know anything about church, MacLaughlin?”

I swallowed a morsel of confidence. “As a matter of fact, um, I do,” I noticed that the fluorescent lights above his desk made for terrible atmosphere. “I try to go each week, that is, when I’m not working on a story. It’s a little Presbyterian church just behind the capitol; my brother and his wife told me about it when I moved here last year from Summit County. We’re about the only members who don’t get the senior citizen discount when we hit the Sirloin Buffet after services, but I don’t mind.”

“Uh-huh. That’s what I thought,” he said, still staring. “What do you think of it?”

“Think of it? You mean of church?”

Skip nodded, pushing his eyebrows forward as he waited for my answer. He folded his hands together on the desktop and

smiled kindly at me. I relaxed.

“Actually, since you asked, I think a lot of it. My parents sort of *found Jesus* when I was in high school, and believe me, that was *big* in our family.” I snorted and held my hands out wide like I was showing him the size of the fish I’d just caught. “They had tried all sorts of religions when I was growing up, but Jesus, well, he stuck. Then they went to Costa Rica to work with coffee farmers through a Christian mission, so we haven’t seen them for a while.”

I wasn’t sure how much more I should tell him, but his eyes suddenly got real big and he leaned forward. “Go on,” he said.

And so I did. I told the same editor who’d hired me right out of Mountain State College all about my wonderful and weird parents: of their years as flower children in San Francisco; of their decision to raise my brothers and me among Mother Earth a.k.a. Colorado’s ski country; and of their dabbling in Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Humanism, Altruism, and all the other “isms” they explored throughout our lives. I told Skip about the environmental protests they took us to on family vacations, the organic cigarettes and biodegradable laundry soap we sold door-to-door—or condo-to-condo—at ski resorts, and the books my parents read to us every Sunday night during family time throughout our lives because they thought having a television was an “appalling symbol of capitalism.” And I explained to him that because my parents told us *Jesus* was what they’d been looking for their whole lives, my brothers and I now chatted regularly with him, too, and read the Bible when we remembered (though my brothers were better at remembering than I was).

When I finished, Skip unfolded his hands, crossed his arms, and gave me *that* grin.

“You, MacLaughlin, have been training all your life for the job I am about to offer you. How would you like to be the *Dispatch*’s Number One Religion Reporter?”

That was it. I was thrilled, hooked, and nervous when I said yes, shook his hand, and walked back into the newsroom. I grabbed my bag, took the elevator down to the lobby, and walked out to the entrance of the *Dispatch* to have a smoke. In the snow. And though I knew all the surgeon general’s warnings and everything, I had to admit, *that* cigarette *that* day in the freezing cold of the Mile High City was one of the best I’d ever had. At least it was organic.

I’d been on the job barely five months when the World Trade Center was attacked, and suddenly, religion stories seemed more important than ever for news outlets like the *Dispatch*, with people trying to make sense of foreign beliefs and national tragedies. I ran myself ragged trying to keep up. But now, two years and ninety-seven features, news series, and profiles later, I was still the Number One—and only—Religion Reporter at Denver’s number two daily newspaper.

I’d had a couple of phone calls from “God” before, but the message this morning bothered me more than the others had for some reason.

“Really, Skip, the guy sounded, I don’t know, scarier than usual. Talked about recruiting beautiful women and *delivering* them,” I said, slouching in the same chair I’d sat in that morning I’d been promoted. Skip never had done anything about the fluorescent lights.

“What else are you working on?” My dear, calm editor asked the question more for my sake than his—he knew I was always juggling about five stories at the same time.

“The Unity Church in Cherry Creek is about to split, the Southern Baptists are coming to the Mile High Convention Center in a few weeks for their annual shindig, which—I don’t need to tell you—is a priority for the *Dispatch*, and, you know, the usual other inspirational stuff.” Out of habit, I scrunched my hair up toward my ear hoping to give it a little more body. It didn’t.

“You found your *good news* story?” Skip looked hopeful and sipped his coffee.

“Well, not really. But I keep praying,” I said, meaning it. Ever since I took this job, I thought it would be a good opportunity to write something inspiring for our readers, to print some good news sprinkled among the bad of the daily world calamities. “Positive karma,” as my parents would have called it in their hippie years.

But rarely had I found the good news I wanted to cover. I had voiced my dream to my boss when he first gave me the promotion. “After all,” I said to him, “isn’t religion supposed to be good for you, for everybody, sort of like oatmeal and exercise? Aren’t Christians and Buddhists and Jews supposed to be nice and moral and conscientious? Don’t religious people make better citizens and nicer neighbors?”

Skip had simply smiled at me, and after two years on the beat, I knew why. I had met only a few who reflected my naive perception of religion. The rest, well, they were more human than they were religious. Or maybe it was the other way around.

Anyway, Skip kept reminding me not to despair, telling me my writing and reporting skills were being put to good use, even if they weren’t yet covering any *good* news in the world of religion. And especially since September 11 with the gloomy treatment

of religious fundamentalism getting gloomier, people actually were reading *my* stories. In fact, Skip announced in a staff meeting one morning that religion news was all the more important since the Twin Towers fell. I believed him, too. He was the type of newspaperman even conservatives, Republicans, and sportswriters respected.

“Are you really worried?” he asked as he rubbed his beard between his thumb and fingers.

“Something didn’t sound right in his voice. I can usually handle the Boulder crowd, you know, the New Agers and new religions and all. I get it because I sort of grew up in it. But this guy . . .” I took the pencil from where I’d stuck it in my curls and doodled around on the notepad where I’d taken notes from the voice mail.

“Why don’t you call Frank Murphy just in case?” Skip was flipping through his Rolodex, looking as serious as he did during staff meetings.

He scribbled down the phone number of the Boulder County detective, ripped it off the pad, and held it out for me.

“Be careful now, Jonna. Fanatics are rarely saints.” He stood as he spoke. He was a good six inches taller than I was, but then, most people were. He grabbed his coffee mug and walked down the hall with me. He said he had a cranky advertising manager to meet with. I had a cup of coffee and a deadline waiting for me.

At my desk, I gulped my coffee and popped another piece of Hershey’s to get that near-mocha experience in my throat. I scrolled through my e-mail. Conference announcements, pastors retiring, special church services—most of the thirteen e-mails were like most I received on a daily basis. Each was a lead to a potential story as more and more people paid attention to my

religion coverage in the local news.

I felt a hand slap my back.

“Got a treat for me, Lightfoot? I’m a little desperate this morning,” Hannah said, with her usual morning cheer. Hannah X. Hensley was one of the few other women journalists in the newsroom, other than the lifestyle reporters and obituary interns. She sat at the desk beside mine, an immense woman—more in presence than in pounds—a few years older than I was, but with more energy than any teammate I had had on the college ski team. Her skin was the color of an almond bar, and I always found it wonderfully ironic that that was also her favorite snack whenever we went downstairs to the cafeteria for a break.

Hannah also loved experimenting with perfumes and lipstick shades, both of which were common fixtures around her cubicle. As female reporters in a male-dominated industry, we had developed a connection from the day I first plopped down in my desk beside hers. True, our mutual devotion to chocolate helped, but there was an ethnic activism that also bound us together. She valued the *X* in her byline in the same way I did *Lightfoot*. She used the capital letter as a reminder to readers that most “African Americans really don’t know any name but the one their slave owners gave them. And honey, don’t nobody own me, so X is my way of taking it back.”

I raised my fist in solidarity each time she gave her Black Power speech. And then, within earshot of the news guys, we’d ruminate about how our feminine powers could work wonders in getting sources to trust us, open up, and spill all. Or at least help get conversations rolling. Our banter across cubicles about story angles and reporting strategies confounded some of our colleagues and kept the sports guys at bay.

“Well, do ya, Lightfoot? I’ve got to interview the mayor in an hour, and my head is groggy.” Hannah sunk into her chair.

“Oscar de la Renta?” I sniffed, tossing her the last of my Hershey’s.

“Left over from yesterday. I like it.” Hannah unwrapped the candy, placed it all in her mouth, and closed her eyes while it melted onto her tongue. Her hair and makeup were a perfect complement to her natural features, a feat I could never quite figure out for myself. This morning, her eye shadow and shoes matched her teal suit. Exactly. I sighed at the smudges on my clogs and the wrinkles across my skirt and clicked on a new e-mail with the heading, “Waiting.” At least I hadn’t yet spilled coffee down my blouse this morning.

“What’s new?” Hannah asked me as she opened her eyes and began flipping through her notepad and the morning edition of the *Dispatch*.

But I was engrossed. “Waiting” was from one of those free e-mail accounts, and as I read it, I knew it was from the same guy who called me this morning. Now I *was* nervous:

“The WORLd is dooMed, Jenny, like I told you this morning in my message. So you better come worship Me Saturday. AS the Sun rises on the wretched city. — God.”

“God’s on the loose again, Hannah,” I said, picking up the phone.

“Should I tell the mayor?”

“Hold that thought.” I waved to her like I was stopping traffic and punched the numbers on my phone. The ring turned into a beep and then a scruffy recorded voice: “This is Frank Murphy, Boulder County detective. Leave me a message, and I’ll call you back when I can.”

I hung up the phone, not exactly sure how to leave a message about an anonymous man who thought he was God and was holding a sunrise service next Saturday. I tucked Frank's number into my notebook and picked up the phone to make another call. It rang before I could.

"Hello, Jonna Lightfoot MacLaughlin here."

"Little Sister!" Matt was calling from his office at Denver College. "How's my favorite religion reporter?"

"Holy, righteous, and in the process of saving the world. How's my favorite oldest brother?"

"Up to my eyeballs in grading papers. Ugh. You should teach these kids how to write, Jon. Anyway, I have this colleague who teaches English . . ."

"Well, don't waste any time with small talk, my Brother! Let me guess, Matt. This colleague of yours is single, right?"

"You're good. How about dinner with us Saturday night?"

"He's seminormal?" I had to ask. The last time Matt set me up with a colleague was a year and a half ago during spring break. The guy was nice enough, a visiting physicist at the college researching nuclear fusion. I couldn't understand one single sentence he said over dinner. I didn't know what my brother had been thinking. At least he had waited before trying again.

"Of course he's normal. I think he teaches American literature or researches something like that, so he can't be all bad, right?"

I coughed, leaned back in my chair, and thought about it.

"If I make it through the week and the world hasn't ended by then, I'll show up with bells on. Your place?"

"Righto, Sis. Have a good one, okay?"

"You too!"

I hung up the phone and smiled at the picture I'd taped to the

bottom of my computer: Matt and his stunning wife, Mary; Luke and Sarah, his fiancée; me; and Mark, who was in between girlfriends at the time. The photo had been taken last January on top of Copper Mountain, by the same slopes we always conquered as kids. Mark had flown in from Alabama and Luke and Sarah from New Jersey for our annual family ski trip. Our parents couldn't afford to leave Costa Rica, but my brothers thought we should get together anyway. Even with our ski parkas and boots, you could pick out the MacLaughlins in the picture. Each had the same short stubby bodies and brown curly heads, just in different sizes and lengths. No one could confuse my family. And the MacLaughlin brothers—who were notorious for looking out for their little sister—beamed around the women in the picture. I sighed, hoping Matt's colleague might at least have potential.

“Whatever,” I said aloud.

“Big brother's setting you up again? It's about time.” Hannah spun around in her chair toward me, arms across her chest as if expecting a full report. The single life and our perpetual search for a decent guy were also interests Hannah and I shared.

“That is scary. How do you know those things?” I asked, pushing around the papers on my desk like pieces in a puzzle.

She tilted her head and rolled her eyes. “Lightfoot, you forget I come from a line of African warriors,” Hannah said. “I'll want all the details after the date.” She swiveled back toward her computer.

I punched another phone number and waited. The Methodist minister in Arvada, a suburb west of Denver, told me about a potluck dinner her church was hosting Friday night for the community and thought I might find it an interesting event to cover. I was certainly invited, the minister said to me. I politely

thanked her for the information without committing to coming.

If I had a Snickers bar for every potluck I'd been invited to since becoming a religion reporter, I'd be a blubbery advertisement for the candy bar company. But I wouldn't have written a single story. Potlucks were nice and all, and religious folks loved them, but with all due respect, there wasn't much news in Mrs. Smith's meatloaf casserole or Betty's "sinfully delicious" brownies.

As I was trying to hang up with the Methodist—who was now reading me the menu of what each family was bringing—Hannah tapped me on the head. I turned and watched her lip-speak to me that she was on her way to the mayor's office and would meet me later for lunch at Pete's Kitchen. I nodded and scanned the list of calls I needed to return when the Methodist stopped talking.

Terry Choyce was my next caller. His voice was low and rich, soothing even, and his tone assured me I was not about to be invited to another food festival. He introduced himself simply as one of the volunteers at the Catholic Outreach Center in the Five Points neighborhood and wondered if I would be interested in finding out more about their after-school program for children from low-income families. I paused. There was a hint of inspiration in this story, the potential for good news on a day when "God" had been making me anxious. I scanned my Day-Timer and decided to rearrange a few things before finishing my story on the now-divided Unity Church, which had a 4 p.m. deadline.

"I could come by in the next hour. Would that work?" I asked. There was silence on the phone.

"Mr. Choyce?" I asked. I swallowed the last of my coffee, which was now cold, and waited.

"Forgive me," he said softly. "I guess I was expecting you'd be

too busy for our small program.” I liked this man.

“Oh, ye of little faith,” I said to him. We both laughed, and I scribbled the directions to the Center, thanked him for his invitation, and hung up. I grabbed my notebook, cell phone, and bag, sent a quick e-mail to Skip letting him know my plans, and left.

The Denver sky was a metallic blue, and the thin air was soft across my face. Colorado summers could get hotter than fire, but my brothers, Luke and Mark—the experienced travelers in the family—informed me that the dry heat was friendlier than the East Coast or the Deep South where each lived respectively. Today there was even a playful breeze.

I turned up Twenty-third Avenue and headed north, past the Mexican restaurants and newly renovated warehouses-turned-loft apartments and into the neighborhood that was once known as the “Jazz Capital of the West.” Downtown Denver and its surrounding neighborhoods had seen quite a comeback in the past fifteen years, and now it was hip to live close to the city again, instead of retreating to the tired suburbs of the foothills.

I drove by a few housing projects, parked in front of the Center, and walked up the adobe red stairs.

“Hello. *JoAnna?*” A stunning man about Matt’s age was waiting as I walked into the lobby of the old building. The sound of his voice sliding over the syllables was so gorgeous I considered for a moment changing my name. The music of it matched the melody in his eyes, and his broad firm shoulders made me remember that it had been seven months, two weeks, and three days since I’d had a real date. Since, in fact, I’d been around any males other than reporters, story sources, or my brothers. I was suddenly quite interested in the work of the Catholic Outreach Center, thinking it might provide me what I had long been looking for since

coming to Denver: good news *and* a good man. Maybe I would even volunteer.

“It’s, um, Jonna. Lightfoot. MacLaughlin,” I heard myself saying, feeling the pink of my Irish cheeks fill out. I looked at my feet and shook my head at the stains on the toes of my clogs. Then I tried to smooth out the wrinkle in my skirt with my hand and adjusted my bag on my shoulder.

“How embarrassing,” he said. “I knew that. My apologies, *Jonna*.” It was a magnificent name, rolling off *his* lips. A stunning, glorious name filled with possibilities for wonder and devotion. He might as well have handed me a valentine. “I’m Terry Choyce.” He held out his hand, and I glanced at the other hand, noticing it had no gold band on the ring finger, and smiled. I shook it and sighed.

“Thank you for coming,” he said. “Let me show you around.” I followed. Terry’s hair was blond and wavy, his jaw firm and perfect. As he talked about his program, his arms directed an invisible orchestra with the same kind of passion my eldest brother, Matt, showed when he talked about teaching. When he escorted me into the new computer room, his eyes brightened. This room was particularly exciting to him, he said, because it would give “so many kids a step up in preparing them for the future.” I jotted down his comments in my notebook and was considering whether it would be unprofessional to ask if he was dating anyone, when my cell phone rang. A sure sign of divine intervention.

“Excuse me,” I whispered to this handsome Catholic. He nodded politely and walked over to the corner of the room so I would have privacy. A gentleman, too, I thought. This call better be important.

“Jonna Lightfoot MacLaughlin,” I answered, testily.

“Jonna, it’s Skip. Just got a call for you. The Buddhist temple on Colorado Boulevard is on fire. Right now.” He paused, cleared his throat, and continued, “The fire chief doesn’t know yet if it was arson or if one of the priests left the incense burning a little too long.” He said it as if he’d just sipped his morning tea. I marveled again at the lack of emotion my editor displayed, even when a building was burning down, and wrote the details in my notebook.

“I’ll be right there.” I flipped off my phone and dropped it in my bag, found my car keys, and hurried over to Terry. “I’m so sorry. I’ve got to get across town right now. Could I take a rain check?”

His eyes opened into empathy as he held out the door for me.

“Of course. I understand. Call me when you can; we’ll be here for a while,” he said, laughing, as he waved to me from the steps. The sun glistened across his face, and I assured him I would do just that.

I waved back from behind the steering wheel and pulled onto the street, watching him in my rearview mirror until he went back inside the center.

Whoever said religion was boring was obviously mistaken.