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:::a quarter after tuesday

jo kadlecek



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Sample from *A Quarter After Tuesday* / ISBN 1600060501

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ISBN-10: 1-60006-050-1
ISBN-13: 978-1-60006-050-2

Cover design by Chris Gilbert, www.studiogearbox.com

Cover image by Masterfile

Author photo by John Decker, www.DeckerProductions.com

Creative Team: Traci DePree, Rod Morris, Darla Hightower, Arvid Wallen, Kathy Guist

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Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard St., Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920.

Kadlecek, Jo.

A quarter after Tuesday / Jo Kadlecek.

p. cm. -- (The Lightfoot trilogy ; bk. 2)

ISBN-13: 978-1-60006-050-2

1. Reporters and reporting--Fiction. 2. New Orleans (La.)--Fiction.

I. Title.

PS3611.A33Q83 2007

813'.6--dc22

2007004619

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 / 10 09 08 07

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Sample from *A Quarter After Tuesday* / ISBN 1600060501

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*For the people of New Orleans, to the memory of what
was and to the hope of what could be.*

(All royalties from the sale of this book will go to charities
and ministries in New Orleans.)

Summer 2004

::Chapter One

Big Wendall tossed two beignets on the counter next to my coffee and stretched his arms from side to side, laughing the whole time as if my breakfast were a source of great joy for him. I smiled back.

“Here ya go, dawlin’,” he said. His voice was so deep it echoed inside his rib cage and filled the tiny diner. Then the man—who stood at least two heads above me—snatched my dollar bills with a child’s tease, slapped them in the cash drawer, and dropped a few quarters in my hand, still laughing with each motion. Big Wendall was as happy as he was big.

“See ya tomorra!” he boomed, sending me off and waiting on the man behind me.

I nodded and stirred a few packets of sugar in the chicory drink, which looked more like milk than coffee. I inched my way through the crowd that packed the Big ’n Easy Café—which was really not big or easy to navigate. Straw chairs and folding tables lined the room as people waited beside them or at the counter that might have once been an old soda fountain. The combination of the fried pastry, powdered sugar, and creamy coffee was worth the wait and had become a staple for me ever since I discovered Big Wendall’s little diner around the corner from where I worked.

I sipped my coffee—which was lukewarm—and headed

outside. No matter. The morning temperature had already soared to ninety-seven degrees plus humidity, so I didn't mind a cool shot of caffeine to get me going.

On St. Peter's Street I stopped short when I saw a thick piece of yellow tape hanging between a building and an orange cone in the road. A handwritten sign dangled in the middle: "Workin' on banquette. Please use street." I studied it, my eyes jumping from the words to the gaping holes in the sidewalk. I set my coffee on the ground, reached for my little brown book and pencil in my bag, and scribbled: "b-a-n-q-u-e-t-t-e."

Though I'd settled into a city just a few states away from where I grew up in Colorado, sometimes I felt like I had packed up and moved to Belgium or Haiti. This place had a language and way of life I'd never seen in the Rocky Mountains.

It was New Orleans, after all. Home of the beignet—which was also in my book with the pronunciation "ben-yay" beside it, though locals call them donats—jambalaya, po'boy sandwiches, and crawfish. Not only had my eating life taken a radical—and wonderful—turn, my survival skills had required the purchase of a little notebook so I wouldn't be lost whenever new words came my way.

Like now. I recovered my coffee and walked up to my desk on the third floor of the *New Orleans Banner*, the Crescent City's number two daily newspaper. I'd barely logged on to my computer when Harry, the mail guy, darted by and flung a skinny brown envelope onto my desk.

"Here, ya," he mumbled as he kept up his pace, flinging envelopes and packages to reporters along the hall.

"Thanks, Harry," I said, though he was well into the sports section. I picked up the envelope, noticed there was no return

address, and saw that whoever sent it got my name wrong. I sighed, opened it anyway, and took a bite of my beignet. Powdered sugar spilled like an avalanche down my black T-shirt as a piece of paper from a Big Chief tablet dropped from the envelope, folded unevenly in half.

It was a message from one of God's representatives:

Jennalou, Mother God's 'ligned Her celesteel powers and come to the Bayou. We seen her and She mad, real mad, that the city's become so hard and horrible. Tell 'em in the paper. Ya chosen to deliver this message that God, She live 'neath the waters and won't tolerate folks who don't do right. Tell 'em. Cuz if ya don't, a gris-gris be on ya!—ExpectAntly, God's Kith and Kin.

It was only 9:13 a.m. yet, and now between this cheery letter and the July humidity, I prepared for a potentially long day.

I reread the lines, brushed away the “snow” on my shirt, and reconsidered my view of God. He was a She? A Mother? And now She was alive and apparently madder than hades, just waiting to wreak havoc on those of us who lived in the *horrible* city across the way?

“Oh, Lord,” I said out loud. “Not again.”

First things first. Why did these God-types always seem to get my name wrong whenever they contacted their local religion reporter? Sure, Jennalou was a nice enough name for these parts, but it was quite a deviation from the byline that represented all of who I was, the same grand name my socially conscious hippie parents—Maggie and Ron—christened me with almost thirty years ago: Jonna Lightfoot MacLaughlin.

Jonna rounded out the musical foursome of my brothers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Lightfoot invited solidarity with our First Nation American neighbors (my brothers, too, boasted Native middle names: Matt *BigBear*, Mark *RunningWind*, and Luke *EagleWing*). MacLaughlin was the gift of our Irish ancestors who shipped over from County Clare just after the Great Potato Famine.

Obviously, names meant something in our tribe. They mattered, and we could get a little testy when someone—who claimed to be in the naming business, after all—didn't get it right.

Sure, most human folks around here hadn't bothered with it either, preferring either "dawlin" like Big Wendall, "baby," like the name my neighbor Madame PennyAnne used for everyone, or "hey," if they called me anything at all. And if anyone did attempt "Jonna," they'd add another syllable entirely, drawing it out to a long slow Johhh-nnn-na. At first it made me nuts, but after almost a year of reporting in this town, I had to admit I was becoming charmed by the rolling hills of a Lousianian accent.

Still, that did not mean "Jennalou" first thing in the morning—and in the middle of my breakfast—touched the charm-spot in my soul. I scratched my head at the name and the reference to Mama God and looked around the newsroom for another brain to bounce this letter off of. The city hall reporters were on their phones and laptops, the sports guys were shooting paper wads toward the trash can as if they were at the free-throw line, and one of the feature writers had her nose buried in a book while the other two were poring over the "competition's" stories. I saw through the glass wall of her office that Hattie Lipsock, my editor, was meeting with someone, and Red—the real estate

reporter who sat next to me because they apparently alphabetized the cubicles, and religion was closest to real estate—hadn't yet come into the office this morning. He usually wandered in by the crack of noon.

I glanced back at the old family photo I'd propped up on my desk, the picture taken when my brothers and I were still in high school. Most of what I knew about the world's religions I'd learned from my family, and try as I might, I just could not remember ever hearing my parents talk about Mama Almighty when we were growing up in Colorado's mountain country. Buddha, yes. The Transcendent Self, the Dalai Lama, Moses, Elijah, even the Baha'ullah—those divine heads (and others) my brothers and I met at various detours on our parents' soul journey to Jesus.

But God as Mother? That was a new one for me. Only the Earth was our parents' spiritual mother, and then only on the occasion when she needed protecting. Those times, usually our family vacations, we'd join hundreds of other peace activists at Rocky Flats nuclear power plant, outside of Boulder, to protest its abuse on our Mother Earth.

I picked up the Big Chief message again and my now empty cup, aware that no amount of coffee or flower-child know-how could help me translate what a *gris-gris* was. I pulled out my notebook and added it to my vocabulary list. Clearly, I needed New Orleans expertise for this, to know just how seriously I should take this latest message from *God*.

The last time *God* was on the loose was when I was the number one—and only—religion reporter at the *Denver Dispatch*, the Mile High City's number two daily newspaper, my previous job. Eventually, we discovered *God* had gotten his meds mixed up. Though his messages were admittedly a little wacky, they were at

least relatively polite and safe in their tone. This morning, though, God's representative was making threats.

Which called for a cigarette.

I went down to the street and lit the end of my National Spirit, the organic cigarettes I'd ordered from www.natural-cigs.com. My prayers to quit so far had not been answered, though I was sure they would be one day. I believed the Almighty would soon have mercy on my nicotine habit. Again.

At least it was organic and not a Marlboro. Maybe part of my prayer had been heard.

I inhaled, flipped open my cell phone, and punched the numbers.

"Mornin', Madame PennyAnne," I exhaled. "It's Jonna. What's a gris-gris?"

"It's gris-gris, rhymes with free," she said, wrapping the French pronunciation around the words so I couldn't hear the s's.

"Yes, that. What is it?"

"How much time do you have?"

I looked at what remained of my cigarette.

"Couple of minutes."

"Why?"

"Because that's all I have for a cigarette break."

"That's an evil habit!"

I agreed and waited for her to "get recentered," as she called it.

"I meant, why are you asking?"

I told her about the Big Chief letter. I figured if anyone could interpret this cryptic message it would be Madame PennyAnne Trusseaux, New Orleans born and raised bartender and jazz

expert by night, psychic reader and official voodoo tour guide of the French Quarter by day. And full-time single mom of nine-year-old Ruthie. They lived upstairs from me in the tall converted garage that now held three box-like apartments.

“Well, it’s not pretty, baby.”

“No? Should I be worried?” I sucked hard on the Spirit.

“Oh yeah, and very afraid. See, a gris-gris is like, shoot, what would you Yanks call it? Reckon it’s like a curse, or a spell. It’ll mess a girl up. Who put one on ya?”

“No one yet. Just threatened to if I didn’t tell readers of *The Banner* that Mama God was alive and mad in the Bayou!”

“Everyone knows that.”

I coughed. “They do?”

“Sure. She’s been living in some gator ever since I was Ruthie’s age.”

“So I shouldn’t run a story on her?”

“Old news, sugar. Besides, if they do put a gris-gris on ya, ya can always run down to Voodoo Heaven and get ya a gris-gris bag to wear ’round your neck.”

“I can?”

“Yup, they’re real nice over there. Cost ya about twenty bucks, and it’ll give ya all the protection ya need. Hang on, baby . . .”

I heard a bell jingle as PennyAnne greeted a customer. She was in her tiny storefront “office”—the one she called Psychic Light—a space she rented on St. Ann, not far from our apartment building and right outside the French Quarter. She was hoping to get closer to Bourbon Street, where the tourists always seemed to pay good money to know their futures, but Madame PennyAnne just couldn’t afford the rents there. Yet.

“Gotta go, hon. It’s Psychic Light time.”

“Yeah, go, go. Thanks for the help.”

“Sure ’nough. See ya tonight for dinner, right?”

“Absolutely.”

I dropped my cigarette to the ground and stomped it with my clog. As I did, I thought about how different this city still seemed from home. For one, Denver was a mile high in altitude and sometimes, it seemed to me, in attitude as well. Denver was an upbeat, energetic town where bike trails and ski racks were as ubiquitous as art galleries and restaurants. New Orleans, on the other hand, was below sea level, and below the radar screen of anything I’d known as familiar back home. The sky this morning was a smoke-colored haze—complete opposite of Colorado Blue—and the heat reflected it. I wiped the sweat that had formed across my forehead during my cigarette break.

No dry western heat here, I thought, climbing the stairs, thinking too that back home even God was different. There he never threatened you with spells or curses. But then again, coffee was just coffee, and there were no beignets to be found in the Mile High City. Not to mention the fact that there, handsome Catholic men had a tendency of snapping your heart in two. Or one did anyway.

I caught my breath from the three flights of steps and decided I’d take a gris-gris and beignet over a broken heart any day.

By the time I got back to my desk, I noticed the person in Hattie’s office was just standing to leave. He was a tall man whose suit jacket fell neatly down his back. His dark brown hair was smooth against his head. From where I was sitting, I figured he was somewhere between Hattie’s age and mine, probably one of the local business owners she met with often to keep her “finger on the pulse of the Crescent City,” as she liked to say. The adver-

tising department loved her.

When he shook Hattie's hand to leave, I brushed the remaining snow tracks from my shirt, scrunched the tips of my hair in hopes of giving it some order, and grabbed the Big Chief notepaper. Hattie was another good source for All Things New Orleans. I considered PennyAnne's take on the warning. She was probably right: This was not worth pursuing. But religion reporters had to take seriously all messages from God. That was our job.

"Lightfoot! Good timing," Hattie said, pushing open the door. Like most Southern women I'd discovered since moving here, she did a quick perusal of my outfit, makeup, and hair. Usually, it was clear that my secondhand clothes, frizzy hair, and naked face deeply disappointed them. Hattie, however, always seemed to catch herself, apparently deciding I was fine the way I was, and today tossing out a broad smile to encourage me. "Well, sugar, I want you to meet someone."

"Uh-huh?" I said, looking from her smile to the man's. As I did, my blood stopped circulating. I gawked. I couldn't help it—this guy was a perfectly crafted male, straight out of the Sunday Style section. My Irish blood immediately filled my cheeks, and I let my eyes drop to his left hand. When I didn't see a gold ring, I swallowed and extended my hand.

"Jonna Lightfoot MacLaughlin," I announced, a lilt of availability in my voice.

"Our finest religion reporter ever," Hattie boasted. "Sugar, this is Reginald William Hancock the Third. One of the city's finest swindlers, I mean, developers."

"Don't believe a word Hattie tells ya, Ms. MacLaughlin," he said, his voice a rich blend of mocha and rum, his eyes a pool of chocolate sauce. "The pleasure's mine. But please call me Renn."

“Renn.” I stared. “Renn. Renn.”

“Lightfoot came down from Denver last fall,” Hattie said, slapping my elbow and my sense back into reality. “Been here almost ten months now and is a miracle worker when it comes to getting some of the best religion news *The Banner’s* ever had.”

“Religion?” said the voice. “You must have some real good connections.”

“Not nearly as many as you do, Renn Hancock!” Hattie said to him. Then she looked at me. “This boy’s family goes back to the days before New Orleans was French and Spanish and everything in between.”

He laughed and smoothed the sides of his hair with his index fingers. “Ah, Hattie, don’t go embarrassin’ me! I suppose the next thing you’ll say to this pretty young thing is that my family also owns half the city!”

Hattie winked at me. “Oh no, sweetie, I knew you’d tell her yourself.” They laughed again like two people who shared a history of dinner parties, corporate events, and campaign strategies. When the joke was over, he focused in my direction as if he’d just remembered something. I was still trying to decide if I’d heard right.

Did he just call me pretty?

“Hey, you’re not the one who wrote that story about the two lawyers in town who do some kind of ancient body-mind meditation thing to redirect their anxiety in the courtroom, are you?”

“Yes, I . . .”

“‘Om Control,’ that’s what we called it. Yup, that was Lightfoot’s story, Renn, a real gem, didn’t you think?” Hattie said. “Maybe you should try that ‘meditation thing,’ considering the stress that family business gives you.” Hattie winked again.

“Maybe I should. You know I went to school with one of those lawyers. Funny, we were good Baptists together, so I was a little surprised to see he’d switched to another religion.”

“But Mr. Han—I mean, Renn, meditation isn’t exactly a religion,” I said.

“No?” he said, leaning toward me. I could smell his cologne. “As much as I’d like to find out a little more about . . . it, you’ll have to excuse me, Ms. MacLaughlin—can I call you Janie? I’m needin’ to get to another meeting.”

Renn picked up his briefcase, and stepped toward the door, looking at me with each step.

“I hope to see you again, Janie,” he whispered.

“Me too,” I mumbled, barely audible in front of this beautiful man. “Uh, and it’s Jonna.”

He stopped and turned. “Pardon me?”

“It’s Jonna, my name. Not Janie. But don’t worry, everyone gets it wrong.” I laughed. “Anyway, very nice to meet you . . . Renn.”

He grinned when I said his name. “My apologies.” He bowed his head. “And it was very nice meeting you too . . . Jonna.” He strode down the hall as if he owned it, past the sports department and the mail room, until he disappeared into the stairwell. Finally, I looked up at Hattie, who was shaking her head at me, the corner of her mouth turned slightly up and a lecture in her eyes.

“Careful, sugar, that man’ll steal muffin tins from his own grandma,” she said as she walked back to her desk.

“Well, it doesn’t hurt to look, does it, boss?”

“Everything about that man could hurt,” she said. “Now, whatcha got for me?”

I mentally filed away her comment about Reginald William

Hancock the Third and set the letter on the keyboard in front of her. I sat down in the chair where Renn had just been. His aroma floated around me, and I took a deep breath.

“Old news, Lightfoot,” Hattie said as she looked over the Big Chief letter. Her head bounced when she looked up, and the red streaks she’d colored into her hair glistened under the fluorescent lights. I noticed her lipstick matched her blouse as usual, both bright and bold like the woman who wore them.

Hattie Lipsock was a “seasoned” newspaperwoman—divorced and middle-aged—who’d grown up thirty miles from here, but after climbing the career ladder across half a dozen cities (including Denver), she’d finally settled in back home as managing editor of *The Banner*. She believed diets and magazines were for sissies, hard work and fine food for true reporters. I thought of Hattie as the type of woman who drank every drop of life out of each day and collapsed each night enormously satisfied. She was always in the office when I arrived and still there when I’d wander home—while somehow managing to take in every new jazz band, fund-raiser, or exhibit in between.

“Old news? That’s what someone else told me. I’m just a little nervous about these things. Not a great track record when it comes to hearing from God.”

“Well, if you’re nervous, I reckon we all should be,” Hattie said, shaking out the letter like it was laundry. “Tell you what. Make a copy of this for me, okay? And let’s keep an ear to the ground about any new cults in the area, just in case someone decides to do something she shouldn’t.”

She stopped suddenly and flicked the letter. Then she pursed her lips and studied the page.

“What?” I asked.

“I might want to give a holler to an old friend on the police force. One of the good guys, just so you know.”

“Yeah?”

“Can’t hurt,” she said swiveling around to the phone. She picked up the receiver; then she realized I was still sitting across from her.

“Something else, Lightfoot? How’s the story coming on the cathedral repairs?”

“Nothing else. Fine. Good,” I said, still sitting.

She lifted her eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders.

“Is Renn really that bad?” I asked.

“He means well,” she said, rolling her eyes while pressing the numbers on her phone. “I know you’re lookin’ for a good man, sugar, but trust me on this one. Keep your distance from him and you’ll die a happy woman. Now, let’s get to work, okay?”

“Right.” I picked up the letter and hurried back to my desk. Three voice mails were waiting for me. The first was from the assistant to a city council member inviting me to the mayor’s prayer breakfast next week. The next was from the “social coordinator” for the local chapter of Scientology inviting me to their monthly lecture and dinner of organic cheese dishes. If I had a dollar for every potluck dinner I was invited to as a religion reporter, I’d all but own the paper. I was never sure why religious folks thought these gatherings were newsworthy, but one thing was certain about all of them: They liked to eat. No matter which God they worshiped or what spiritual persuasion they took up, food seemed a natural starting point.

I could appreciate that. In fact, it was almost time for lunch. In an hour.

The third voice mail was from my second oldest brother,

Mark, calling from Mobile, which was “spittin’ distance” according to Hattie. Translated: about a few hours’ drive (depending on how fast you drove). But before I had a chance to listen to all of his message, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around in a whirl.

“Red! Well, it’s not noon yet. What are you doing here?”

“Morning, Lightfoot,” he said, setting donuts and coffee on my desk before sitting at his. “Didn’t know if you’d made it over yet to Big Wendall’s, but thought I’d cover you, just in case.”

This was strange: Red never came in this early, and he’d rarely offered me anything from Big Wendall’s.

I bit and the snow fell. “Whatdyawant?” My mouth was full of sugary dough.

“What do you mean what do I want? Can’t a real estate reporter get a break around here?”

His light brown skin was still shiny from the heat outside—reminding me it was supposed to get up to a hundred degrees today. He wore creased blue jeans and a baggy white shirt, looking more like a sports reporter than the real estate agents he often profiled. Red—or **Rufus Ezekiel Denton** to his wife, family, and readers—was a local, and one of the few African American reporters on the desk. He was also one of the few friends I’d made in the office. I guess we both felt a little like outsiders compared to the rest of the staff, and it helped that our desks were next to each other. Red was a friendly but quiet guy who loved his wife, Shandra, his job, and his city. Though he was a few years older than I was, his facial features often reminded me of a teenager.

I swallowed, chased the beignet with a swig of coffee, and wiped the sugar from my lips. “Sure, you can have a break every

single day as far as I'm concerned, especially with food, but I can smell a deal a mile away."

He stared at his shoes, very seriously. Then he gulped again.

"Everything okay, Red?"

He looked up, his dark brown eyes wide with worry.

"It's my auntie, Lightfoot. She's in a home, and her health isn't what it used to be, but her mind's sharp." He paused and pointed to his temple to punctuate his comment. "Anyway, I just came from visiting her, and I thought, well, maybe you could do a story on her and the folks at the home, you know, to cheer them up."

I studied his face.

"You have an aunt?"

"'Course I do. Don't you?" He didn't wait for me to respond. "She all but raised me."

"How old is she?"

"Ninety-four. And she's sharp," he said, pointing again. "You should meet her, really."

"I'll bet," I said and took out my notepad. "Maybe I missed it, but what's the story again? And the religion angle?"

"The home itself. It was started back in the sixties by a bunch of churches—black *and* white, Protestant *and* Catholic, which was no small thing, ya know. They wanted to take care of their old folks. Together. Maybe you could profile it as a modern success story? Something like, 'Churches unite across race to care for their elderly.'" Red put his arms behind his head and stared at the ceiling as if he saw a story writing itself above him.

"Are you saying this might be a *good* news story?" My stomach perked up, and I leaned toward Red's desk. Too often I had to cover the darker side of religion—which seemed as wrong as

aerobics after a big meal. Religion was supposed to be good for people, so I was always looking for something inspiring or even uplifting to report. Red knew it. For heaven's sake, he'd heard me whine about it every day since I first plopped my books on the desk beside his.

He nodded. Then he reached into his pocket and handed me a piece of paper.

"I knew you'd get it. Here's the contact info of the folks in charge over there. They'll introduce you to my auntie." He unfolded it carefully and held it out to me. "Thanks, Lightfoot."

"Well, I haven't done anything yet," I said. I scanned the paper and set it next to the phone. Red turned toward his computer. But another idea popped into my head.

"Uh, Red, can I ask you something?"

No answer—he was already lost in his work. I coughed.

"Um, Rufus Ezekiel Denton."

He turned.

"Real quick: Since you're the real estate expert, ever hear of a developer named Reginald William Hancock the Third? And what's with the formal names anyway?"

"It's a Southern thing," he said. Then his shoulders sagged. "Renn? Sure, everyone knows him. His family's been around . . . in lots of ways." He looked up. "Why?"

"Oh, just wondering," I said. Before Red could get another word out, I picked up the phone and shifted gears. "Hey, and thanks for the *good* news tip. I could use a little of that right now."