



ROSES WILL BLOOM AGAIN

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Roses Will Bloom Again

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To E. W. and Linda Woolley and Chuck and Jane Woolley

*Let us be grateful to people who make us happy;
they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom.*

—Marcel Proust (1871–1922)

Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will direct your paths.

PROVERBS 3:5-6

In all relationships, regardless of their nature, there comes the moment when you understand that there are some things you will never understand. When you are standing in that moment, just be right with it.

IYANLA VANZANT



chapter
ONE

THE PHONE shrilled, piercing her sleep.

Emma stirred, vaguely aware now of a dog barking in the distance. She dragged the second pillow across her head to shut out the sounds. The phone jangled again and she groaned at the annoyance. Outside it was still dark. Tossing the pillow off her head, Emma reached out, walking her fingertips up the base of her bedside lamp. One eye opened to peer at the clock: 6:10 a.m. *Who on earth?*

She fumbled for the receiver. "Hello?" Her voice was a croak.

"Miss Mansi?"

Emma didn't recognize the gruff voice on the other end of the line. She fell back onto the pillow, holding the phone to her ear.

"Miss Emma Mansi?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

The solemnity in the man's tone suddenly brought her wide awake. Something was wrong somewhere. Sitting upright, Emma ran one hand through a tangled mane of thick, auburn hair.

"What's happened?"

Work? Had something gone wrong at work? Had the heaters quit in the greenhouses? Seattle temperatures had been predicted to drop into the low twenties. The small bedding plants could have been hurt.

"This is the sheriff's office in Serenity, Colorado. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this . . ."

Serenity? She hadn't been to Serenity in fifteen years.

"It's your sister, Miss Mansi."

"Lully?"

"I'm sorry. There's no easy way to say this. She was found dead this morning."

The words struck Emma like needled ice pellets. Lully? Dead? That was impossible. Lully was only thirty-five years old. Thirty-five-year-old women didn't just die.

"How?"

"We don't know, ma'am. Right now there doesn't appear to have been any foul play involved. An autopsy will be conducted later this morning."

"An autopsy." The words weren't making sense.

"You need to come to Serenity. As soon as possible."

"Today?" She couldn't think straight. Her bedroom took on a surreal atmosphere. The furniture, the white wicker—everything familiar blurred.

"Yes, Miss Mansi. Today, if possible."

"I—I don't know." There were so many arrangements to be made—

"Someone will need to identify and claim the body." The man's voice softened. "I'm sorry. This is always difficult."

Claim Lully's body? Yes, someone would have to do that. There was no one else but Emma. An image of a room filled with stainless-steel drawers and cream-colored walls flashed through her mind. Shadowy corridors. She'd seen morgues on television. The scenes had always given her the willies.

"I'm sorry," said the voice on the phone.

"I'll be there by evening—as soon as I can get a flight."

Emma's thoughts swirled after she hung up. She had to call Sue Rawlings, her employee at the greenhouse Emma owned. Most of the bedding plants would be okay. Nothing her caretaker Ed couldn't handle for a while. It was late fall, so most of the growing

season was behind her. The poinsettias were set for the Christmas season. Emma covered her eyes as tears spilled over. *Lully. Oh, Lully.* Her beautiful sister. Dead? It wasn't possible.

Emma slid out of bed, wincing when her feet touched the icy hardwood. Flannel leggings bunched at her knees; a long-tailed white shirt caught at her legs as she stumbled across the floor, bumping into the wing chair that sat beside the bed. *Lully. Lully. Dead.*

The last person she loved. The last—gone. Too young. She was abandoned again. No, she'd heard a radio preacher sermonize just yesterday morning that death was never premature; it was always God's timing.

She hadn't talked to Lully in years, but she always knew her sister was there. She could reach out to her if she wanted. It seemed only yesterday that they had been children—laughing, playing, drinking tea from miniature china cups in the shaded tree house Dad had built behind Mother's perennial garden.

Faint light seeped beneath the bathroom shade. Emma's hand fumbled for the faucet. Water splashed onto the front of her shirt. She stared at the widening blotches with morbid fascination. She was only vaguely aware of tears running down her cheeks. Tears. She hated to cry. She couldn't remember the last time she'd cried. Wait, yes, she did. The last time was when Sam had abandoned her. She'd vowed then to never cry again, but now Lully was gone. Lully had abandoned her too.

Straightening, she dashed water on her face and then turned on the hot water full blast. *No more crying, Emma Mansi. Never again. Understand? You are truly on your own now. You have to act like a big girl.*

No more crying.



Emma's eyes were red when she arrived at the greenhouse. She was the first there, first to put on the coffeepot and turn up the heat in the small office.

Sue Rawlings would be the next to arrive. She was more than an employee; she was a friend whom Emma cherished. Sue was a fifty-year-old mother of two who seemed to be in perpetual motion. Medium height, a little plump, brown hair streaked with gray at the temples—stripes she said she'd earned honestly with two teenage boys.

When Emma, new diploma in hand, had been hired for a position at The Cottage Greenhouse & Gifts, Sue had welcomed her like an old friend. Later, Sue wanted more time for family and furthering her education, so she made Emma part owner, and eventually sold her the whole business. Sue liked to keep her hands in the nursery business so she worked two days a week.

Active in her church, Sue had invited Emma to services many times but was never upset when Emma had one reason or another for not going. God wasn't someone with whom Emma had a relationship. God hadn't answered her prayers when her mother died nor when Dad had disappeared. And he certainly hadn't brought Sam back to her. Obviously God didn't concern himself with Emma Mansi, so Emma hadn't concerned herself with him for the past fifteen years.

Emma unlocked the greenhouse and stepped into the familiar space that was more home than any place she'd ever been. The smell of damp earth and leaves greening teased her senses. She automatically checked the plants as she moved down the rows, snipping a brown leaf here and there. At the end of a row she dug her forefingers into earth and rubbed it between her fingers.

How she loved her work, the care and growing of beautiful plants. She enjoyed planning and executing the landscaping of a new home or commercial building, but it was the miracle of a flower or bush or tree grown from a sprig or cutting that she loved.

"Emma." Sue's voice came to her from the door leading into the gift shop. "You're even earlier than usual."

Emma turned, wishing she'd had more time to think about going to Serenity. Going home after fifteen years. How could she do it?

"I wanted to check on a few things." Emma wiped her hands on a cloth. "Sue?"

"Yes?"

"I need to talk to you."

Sue's smile faded as Emma entered the gift shop. "What's wrong?"

"I need a few days off."

"This isn't a vacation, is it?" Sue asked, her look penetrating.

"No."

Setting a flowerpot aside, Sue smiled. "I'll pour the coffee. It sounds serious."

The combined greenhouse and gift shop was half of a converted World War II barracks—each room dedicated to a different type of gift or décor: clothing, cards and stationery, crystal and china, scents, creams and bath salts. The greenhouse added a nice touch with green plants and perennials in the spring. A variety of aromas permeated the shop as Emma and Sue walked to the tiny space that was Sue's office. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee met them. Emma suddenly remembered that she'd forgotten to eat breakfast.

Sue poured a mug of coffee for Emma and handed her a glazed donut. "Here. Sit and tell me what's going on."

Emma set the donut aside and wrapped cold fingers around the mug. She sipped gingerly, hoping the hot coffee would warm her inside. "I got a call this morning. My sister has died."

Sue's hand automatically reached out to cover Emma's. "Oh, Emma. I'm so sorry! What happened?"

"They don't know. The sheriff's office called." Emma sipped her coffee again. Whose voice had that been? Familiar—yet not. "She was found sitting in her porch swing."

"She lived in Colorado, right?"

"Yes. I haven't been home in a long time. We haven't been close—" Emma's voice caught at the thought of all the wasted years.

"I'm so sorry."

Guilt washed over Emma. She had resented Lully's interference in her life, her sister's part in destroying her dreams. But in spite

of that, she'd always known there was at least someone who cared about her. Now death had claimed the last link to family.

"She was only thirty-five. Why would a woman of thirty-five just . . . die?" Tears stung Emma's eyes. *I'm not going to cry*, she reminded herself.

"You need to go and find out," Sue said quietly. "Family is family. It doesn't matter that you haven't been close."

Emma choked back a sob. "Lully was all I had."

"Then you go." Sue waved a hand in the air. "Heaven knows I can run this place while you're gone. You've hardly taken a day in the eight years you've worked here. Take whatever time you need. We'll hold down the fort while you're gone."

"Yes," Emma conceded, "I need to do that." Though her sister's death was the last thing she wanted to confront.

"What can I do for you?" Sue gently helped Emma to her feet.

"There's nothing to do. I have a flight booked for noon."

"Are you packed?"

"No. I thought I'd do a few things here—"

"You are invaluable to us, but everything here can survive a little while without your attention. Ed can handle the greenhouse; I'll hire a temp to help me in the gift shop. You've taught Ed well, Emma. Trust him."

Trust didn't come easy for Emma. She could trust only herself. Experience had proven that.

"Go," Sue said. "Go pack, then come back here. I'll take you to the airport."

Emma knew Seattle fairly well, but in the fifteen years she'd lived here she hadn't taken a flight. "You don't need to—"

Sue set her mug aside with a thump. "Yes, I do. For me. I need to do something. Go." She took Emma's hands in hers. "Go do what needs to be done—for your sister and for yourself."

Emma went. Half of her wanted to go to Serenity to learn what had happened to Lully. But the other half wanted to stay in Seattle and pretend nothing had happened. Pretend that her life went on . . .

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On the way home she stopped at the halfway house that had become her pet project after Sue had almost twisted her arm to visit the women there. Over the years Sue had taught the women about caring for plants and home gardens. These were women who had run afoul of the law in some fashion and needed education on how to do a number of things that most women took for granted—how to dress and apply for a job, how to plan goals and work toward them. Part of that education included how to create a pleasant atmosphere in the home, which is where Sue had insisted Emma fit in.

While Emma had gone reluctantly at first, soon she became involved in spite of herself. One of the women she'd been drawn to was Janice Carter, a small, fair, blue-eyed, flaxen-haired woman who didn't have a clue about men.

Janice had been with a boyfriend who robbed a convenience store. She had waited in the car, unaware of what the man was doing, until the police stopped them. The prosecutor's office had charged her as an accomplice. Fortunately, her boyfriend had corroborated her story that she hadn't known what he was doing, and the judge believed her. Still, Janice was sentenced to two years probation, which were to be spent at the halfway house, and she was to make a concerted effort to turn her life around. Janice had agreed readily to the terms. She had, she'd told Emma, always chosen the wrong kind of man. Now thirty years old, she was ready to get her life in order.

Janice's story touched Emma. A friendship had sprung up between them, and now Emma visited Janice every week. She needed to let Janice know she was going to be gone for a few days.

"It must be awful, losing your sister like that. I don't have any brothers or sisters. Wish I did." Janice took Emma's hand between hers.

Emma smiled. If only she had been as close to Lully as she was to Janice. "I'm okay. I'll be back in a few days."

Emma hated leaving when Janice was making progress in gaining self-confidence. She looked and acted like an entirely different woman than when Emma had first met her. She'd taken all the

classes Sue had given on makeup, how to dress, how to eat in a restaurant—things Emma had to teach herself. Perhaps that's why she was drawn to Janice; Emma had had to learn how to make her way through life on her own, just as Janice was now attempting to do.

Emma had read aloud—at Sue's insistence—the list of Scriptures Sue had given Janice, trying to make sense of the words. But all that stuff about God's love didn't register with Emma. The meaning of the divine messages seemed more relevant to the women at the shelter than to her.

In a few months Janice would be able to leave the halfway house and begin life anew. Emma hoped she could get her life on the right track and not fall for the wrong man again.



It didn't take long to pack enough personal items for three or four days. Emma was back at The Cottage in plenty of time to head for the airport and check in for the noon flight.

"You don't have to do this," Emma repeated as Sue hurried her to the company van.

"Thought we'd settled that."

Emma stared out the window as Sue maneuvered the van over the freeway to Sea-Tac. Traffic was heavy this time of day.

"You haven't seen your sister in a long time?"

"Not for fifteen years." Emma was grateful that Sue had never pried into her background. She was reluctant to talk about Lully, or Serenity, or why she'd never intended to go back there. "I never thought about Lully dying."

"No one likes to think about death. But we should. Not as a thing to be feared but as the beginning of an eternity, if we have a relationship with God. Was your sister a Christian?"

Emma thought back to those days right after their father had disappeared, leaving only a note on the kitchen table and twenty-five hundred dollars in a bank account in Lully's and Emma's names.

Though at the time the two girls were scared, fifteen-year-old Lully had been sure God would take care of them. Lully's concept

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of God came from Mother, who had taught them some Scriptures. Lully didn't seem to have a clear idea of who God was, but she'd clung to the idea that he cared about them. Emma hadn't been so certain God even knew who they were. But they somehow made it by scrimping and selling produce from their garden and Emma's dried-flower arrangements from Mother's perennial and rose gardens. The arrangements were simple, but Emma's talent had shown even as a teenager.

"In her own way, she believed," Emma finally answered Sue. "She couldn't make herself go to church because she didn't like people, didn't like being out among them. But she prayed and believed."

"That's a comfort."

Was it? Emma wasn't sure about that, either. Nothing had been a comfort to her. The only thing she was certain about was that she didn't want to return to Serenity without Lully being there.

Sue parked the van and walked with her to the security gate. "You take care." Sue hugged Emma tightly. "Call if you need anything."

"Thank you for the ride and for taking over for me." Emma blinked back tears, swallowing sentimentality, something she hated. "And for your friendship."

Sue hugged her again, patting her back. "Deal with this, kiddo—it won't go away."

Emma doubted that too. Everything she'd ever loved had gone away in one form or another.

"I wish you weren't doing this alone," Sue fretted. "If there's anything I can do to help—I mean it. Sometimes we have to accept help."

Emma mustered a smile. Sue knew her independence well. "I know. Thanks."

"And you'll be in my prayers."

Emma didn't know what to say to that. Prayer was foreign to her lately. She was convinced that the only thing you could depend on was yourself, not some pie-in-the-sky benevolent person who watched over everything you did and cared—really cared—about

your needs and hurts and disappointments. God surely didn't care about joys because there had been so few in Emma's life.

Sue pulled a handful of magazines from her large purse.

"Something to occupy your flight time."

"Oh, I didn't even think—"

"I know. Now, go. Don't worry about anything here. Just take care of things at home, and Emma?"

"Yes?"

"Just remember. Without the valleys, how could we ever be confident God is always with us?"

Without the valleys.

After a final glance back at Sue, Emma passed through the security system. Her flight was being boarded, and she entered the Jetway. She found her seat and stowed her carry-on, then sat looking out the window until the plane taxied down the runway and lifted off. She closed her eyes. Sue had said to take care of things at "home." Technically, Serenity wasn't home. It hadn't been for a long time. Emma wasn't sure what she'd find there, and that made her stomach clench. Home. She really didn't know what that was anymore. But soon—too soon—she'd be back in Serenity, and she would know what had happened to take Lully's life. Tears pricked her eyes again and she closed them, willing the tears not to fall.

Would Sam be there? She hoped not. Surely God wouldn't do that to her—would he?



Serenity, Colorado, was in the four corners region of southwestern Colorado, 31.6 miles from Durango—far enough from the visiting tourists attracted by Durango and the Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, a scenic trail that runs along the old route to the silver mines, developed by the Denver and Rio Grande Western.

While the old city of Durango, with its history and cultures of the early settlers, was now a tourist, educational, and agricultural center, Serenity was a small community with few attractions other than its natural beauty. Even as a teenager Emma had recognized that.

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Tucked in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains where silver and gold had once been mined, the streams were cold and clear, the mountains tall, majestic, and snowcapped most of the year.

Long before Emma was ready, the plane landed at La Plata County Airport, a few miles outside of Durango. She rented a car, oriented herself with a map the rental agency provided, and got on Highway 160 west to Durango. Maneuvering the compact through the last of the tourist traffic in Durango, she turned on Highway 550 north to the Serenity cutoff, then drove, admiring the beauty of the rough hill country. The Animas River sparkled beneath late October sunshine.

Aspens that had already peaked in color once again captured her heart. This had been home for the first seventeen years of her life. When she'd left, she wasn't thinking of the rugged beauty she was leaving behind; all she'd thought of was the heartache she hoped to shed. To some degree it had worked, but now she was reminded of both the beauty of her home and the heartache that had driven her away from it.



Emma had forgotten to ask the sheriff's deputy where to go when she reached Serenity. She stood beside the rental car, staring at the old courthouse as a ball of red fire backlit the historic two-story building. *Fall sunsets are still the greatest*, she thought. Amber tones wrapped around the red-brick building, painting it in muted browns and gold against the blue of the snow-topped mountains in the distance. The scent of woodsmoke hung in the air, stirring memories she'd buried a long time ago.

Emma hoped the attorney who had been helpful when their father had left was still Lully's attorney. Merle Montgomery would know what to do about making arrangements for services, about the house, about Lully's personal effects.

Leaves covered the ground, and squirrels darted about, tucking nuts away for the coming winter. Walking slowly up the concrete walk, Emma focused on the five-and-dime variety store on the

corner of the square to the left of the courthouse. Still there after all these years.

She and Lully had saved their pennies and nickels, and every six months they'd walk to the dime store to buy something special. A treat. Emma got a new doll one year. Lully bought colorful beads and embroidery thread for her special jewelry projects, even though money was tight.

They'd felt the stares following them, the whispers about "those crazy Mansi girls," but they'd gotten adept at ignoring them. Lully was rumored to be a witch—ironic, since nothing could be further from the truth. She was eccentric, even as a young girl, drawing a fair amount of curious stares by the way she dressed. Flamboyant—weird, Emma conceded. Clothing in those days after Dad left had come from what they could scavenge from the Salvation Army bins. Lully picked the most colorful and dramatic garb she could put together.

On their way home, they'd stop by Lott's Restaurant and order two chocolate–chocolate chip, single-dip ice cream cones, carefully sort out the change, and after selecting one paper napkin each from the dispenser, they left the store, closing the door carefully behind them.

Old man Lott would step to the window and watch the girls making their way down the sidewalk, side by side, licking their cones. "It ain't right," the big Swede would say, crossing his arms over his ample stomach. A fierce look would come into his eyes. "That Lully Mansi's strange. A witch. She shouldn't be raisin' little Emma out there in that cemetery."

"Those girls aren't living in the cemetery," Freeda Lott was rumored to correct her husband.

"Don't know what else you'd call it. The house sits not thirty feet from Ezra Mott's headstone."

And the conversations would continue as the girls walked slowly toward the big, old Victorian house they'd called home since they were born. They'd heard the comments. Apparently those who gossiped about the Mansi girls thought they were deaf.

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But both Freeda and Lott had been right. The old town cemetery hadn't been used for fifty years. The property bordered the Mansi backyard. No one knew why a house had been built that close to a cemetery. Emma remembered hearing her mother tell that her great-grandfather, James Mansi, had set his heart on a piece of property where there was a small, abandoned house. Apparently no one knew why the original owners had left the house, perhaps because of the nearby cemetery. The lot was large and had majestic pines for shade that lent a sweet scent to the air. The location suited James, and he bought the lot in 1884 and moved his family into the abandoned house.

As the years passed, Great-Grandpa James continued to add to the original structure as funds permitted, turning the house into a funeral parlor. First, a second floor, then a third, a back porch, a wider front porch, until he'd created a strange mix. James kept changing his mind on architectural style and bought whatever materials cost least at the time. Soon the Mansi house fit right in with the growing cemetery's tilted, weathered headstones, run down and dotted with moss.

A short time after Emma and Lully were born to Ralph, James's oldest grandson, and his wife, Mary, they moved their family into the town fright. They cared for Ralph's parents until at age eighty-five they died within a few months of one another. Then their mother, Mary, got sick. In too short a time she was gone. Their father grieved. It was as if the light had gone out of his life. He brooded, hardly spoke. Ralph often forgot his girls existed. Within a year he gave up and disappeared, leaving Emma and Lully, then ages twelve and fifteen, to fend for themselves.

For months after their father left, Lully assured Emma that he'd come back. At first Emma had believed her. It wasn't until some time after Ralph disappeared that anyone in town thought to ask about him. The girls, fearful that someone might decide they couldn't take care of themselves and would notify authorities, fended off questions. "Dad was working out of town." "Dad was sick with the flu and couldn't get around." "Dad had gone fishing

up in the mountains for a few days—we can take care of ourselves real well, thank you,” they’d say. By then Lully was sixteen and the townspeople decided she could care for her sister well enough, so no one did anything about the two girls living by themselves in the big, old Victorian.

The Mansi sisters were happy enough to be left alone. They ate what they wanted when they had the money and went to bed at any hour. They cleaned house only when it was absolutely necessary—which wasn’t often. Left to their own devices, they created their own worlds. Lully graduated high school and spent her days at home, drawing the jewelry designs she said she saw in her mind, until there were stacks of papers here and there about the house. Lully stayed by herself and Emma attended school, unwilling to share any information about her living arrangement. The rumors and talk about the girls grew. When anyone ventured to ask about her father, Emma would tell another lie and walk off.

Such was her life—until Sam. When Sam came into Emma’s world, things changed. First the giddy happiness, then the awful heartbreak.

Emma’s thoughts were interrupted when she saw Merle Montgomery coming out of his office as she topped the stairs to the second floor of the courthouse.

“Emma? Emma Mansi!” Merle reached for her hand. “It’s been a long time.”

“It has. How are you, Merle?”

“I was so sorry to hear about Lully—”

“Thank you,” Emma inserted. She was on her last nerve now; if Merle was too sympathetic, she’d burst into tears and she didn’t need that.

“I’m wondering if you—are you Lully’s attorney?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I am. I was hoping you’d get here today. Ken said he’d contacted you.”

“Someone from the sheriff’s office did. I didn’t get his name.”

“Ken—Ken Gold. Sam’s youngest brother. Sam was out on a case of suspected cattle theft all night—”

Emma's heart stopped at the mention of Sam. "Sam?"

"Sure. Sam Gold. He's the sheriff here now. About five years, I think. And Kenny is his chief deputy. Couldn't separate those two with a crowbar."

It was hard for Emma to imagine Sam's younger brother old enough to—well, she supposed he was only two or three years behind Sam. Emma cleared her throat. "I have to make some arrangements—"

"Sam will help you with that. There'll be an investigation, you know."

Emma had trouble following Merle. "Concerning what?"

"Lully's death—don't know that she died of natural causes. Found her sitting in the swing on the front porch—must have been there all night. It doesn't look like foul play, but you never know."

Foul play. This was turning into a nightmare.

"Well, now that you're here, would you mind if we took care of the reading of the will tomorrow morning?"

"Tomorrow?"

He glanced at his watch. "I'm due in court in a few minutes, a case that will probably spill over into tomorrow afternoon. But there should be a break in the morning, say, about nine. Will that work for you?"

Emma's mind was numb. Lully gone. An investigation. A will to be read. Too many things to think about. "Fine. Thank you. I'll see you here at nine."

"Good, good." He patted her shoulder. "I'm so sorry that Lully's gone. She was an interesting woman." He glanced at his watch again. "See you in the morning."

"Thank you," Emma repeated, watching him hurry away.

Merle had called Lully an "interesting woman." That was kind, considering all the things people had said about the Mansi girls over the years.

Well, there was only one of the "crazy Mansi girls" left, and as soon as possible Emma would shake the dust of Serenity off her shoes—for good this time.

About the Author

Lori Copeland, Christian novelist, lives in the beautiful Ozarks with her husband and family. After writing in the secular romance market for fifteen years, Lori now spends her time penning books that edify readers and glorify God. She publishes titles with Tyndale House, WestBow, and Steeple Hill. In 2000, Lori was inducted into the Springfield, Missouri, Writers Hall of Fame.

Lori's readers know her for *Lifting Spirits with Laughter!* She is the author of the popular, best-selling *Brides of the West* series, and she coauthored the *Heavenly Daze* series with Christy Award-winning author Angela Elwell Hunt. *Stranded in Paradise* marked Lori's debut as a Women of Faith author.

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