



The
Willow
Tree

The story of a teen,
a violent act,
and hope.

by Mareta Keener

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The Willow Tree
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Summary: Finding herself pregnant following a date rape, fifteen year old Emma Lou faces troubling decisions and discovers God's love and the way of forgiveness.

(1. Christian Life - Fiction. 2. Teen Issues - Fiction. 3. Abortion/Adoption - Fiction.)

*Dedicated to my daughters,
and all other grace-givers who care
for hurting young women.*

The following is an excerpt from *The Willow Tree*.



What happened last night seemed like a bad dream. Ben grinned at me over his cup of coffee. I looked down at my cereal bowl, brushed my hair away from my face, and crossed my legs under the table.

“Hey, Red Bird, how are you doing?” he asked. His left eye lid twitched. He got up and gave me a little perky kiss on the forehead.

“I don’t know, Ben. I guess that you just don’t understand. You see I — .”

Ben interrupted, “I understand more than you know, Em,” and, winking at me, he headed for the door.

I liked Ben — a lot, but he should have listened. Love wasn’t suppose to feel this way. I felt so, well, so empty and dirty. And ashamed.

* * * * *

“Emma Lou, can’t you get anything right,” Momma screamed from the kitchen. “You are so good-for-nothing. Just look at your dad’s T-shirts!”

I put down my magazine and inched my way through the kitchen door. There was Momma, holding up two pink T-shirts. Dad’s shirts. Oh, no. Since we don’t have a washing machine, I had put his dirty shirts

in some water in the sink last night with my soiled T — my red one.

“You’ve ruined them! Girl, we’d do better without you.”

Tears stung my eyes as I ran out of the house, right smack dab into Ben’s arms.

“Whoa, Red Bird. Slow down. What’s wrong?”

“Ben, I just can’t live here anymore. Ben, take me away,” I wailed. I clung to him, then leaned back and looked into his clear blue eyes. But they were not clear. They were dark and hooded.

“I need to talk to you about that, Em.” His arms fell to his sides and he looked at his feet. “Um, I’m going to have to stop working for your dad. I called my mom and she said I could move to Florida with her. She’s going to meet me at the garage.”

“Ben, then you can take me with you!” I pleaded, “Please, Ben.”

“We had a good time, Red Bird. But that’s all.” Ben smiled down at me as if nothing had happened. But it had!

The world started to whirl around me. “Ben, you can’t leave! You — we — Please, Ben!”

“Dear Red Bird, you are a sweet kid.” He cupped my chin in his hand, brushed my mouth with his lips, and said, “Bye, Emma Lou. It’s been fun knowing you.” He turned away and strode down the street toward Highway 27.

“Ben,” I shouted after him. He didn’t even turn his head!

I sat down on the swing, pushing myself back and forth in little circles. “This is so different from last night. What have I done,” I whimpered to myself. “God, what have I done.”

* * * * *

I knew that I needed to go back in the house. I tried to sneak to my room but Momma saw me.

“Emma Lou, I didn’t mean what I said. When my heart hurts, I just blurt things out. You know how I am, Honey.”

“I know, Momma. Is Daddy still sleeping?”

“Yes, he is. Emma Lou, I’m going to throw his shirts away, so he’ll never know.”

“Thanks Momma.” I felt like my body was being attacked with crawling things, inside and out. I mumbled, “I’ve got to get in the shower.”

I scrubbed and scrubbed, and shampooed and shampooed, for what seemed like hours. But I still felt dirty. *“Oh, what have I done!”*

I slipped into a clean T-shirt and jeans. Then I attacked my room. There wasn’t much there to clean. My mattress lay on the floor and hadn’t had a sheet on it for as long as I could remember. I took off one blanket and laid it on the floor. Then I piled all the other washable stuff on it and carried it into the living room. “Momma, is Aunt Lydia coming to get our dirty clothes today?”

“I hope so. She said she was,” Momma said from her chair.

“Maybe, you can get all your stuff ready too, Momma,” I suggested with a sigh and went back to my room.

After I sprayed the mattress and wiped down the wooden planks that held my stuff, I mopped the floor with the disinfectant that the nurse had given me.

Then I sat down on the floor and watched my filmy, colored scarves float on the breeze that was gently blowing through my open window. I squinted my eyes as I looked, making the scarves come together in a rainbow of colors. I rocked back and forth. *“I’m glad that I stole the scarves and thumb tacked them over my window. They are so pure and beautiful. I wonder if heaven is filled with rainbows.”*

I’m not sure how long I sat there thinking, with my arms around my knees. Finally, Momma poked her head in my door to see what I was doing.

I opened my mouth to say something, but all I could do was shake my head. Then I blurted out, “Momma, why did you let Daddy talk to Miss Wood like that? Now I can’t go to school. Why didn’t you say something?”

“Emma, Honey, it’s so hard — Daddy — you know how upset he gets — when he drinks.” Momma sighed deeply and put her hand over her

heart. “I’m so sorry.”

“Momma, you know I need you to help me clean. I can’t get rid of the lice by myself. Some of the lice is on you and Daddy!”

Momma sighed again and said, “It’s just too much.”

I knew Momma was sick, but she could still clean up. The couch was so filthy. How could she and Daddy sit there like they did. Those nasty little critters were hiding under the cushions. I just knew it. “Oh, why should I even try,” I moaned.

I felt my face get hot and I felt tears well up in my eyes again.

“Momma, you just don’t understand. I feel ashamed of who I am and well, where I live. And yes, I’m ashamed of you and Daddy. I just want to leave this place forever!”

“What’s this?” Daddy came in from the porch. “You’re ashamed of us?” He stuck his finger in my face. “Emma Lou, I ought to whip you. After all we’ve done for you. Girl, you straighten up. You hear? Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Since your friend Ben skipped out on me — well, maybe you should dig a few weeds! What do you think of that!”

“Oh Daddy! You don’t understand!” I slid past him, jumped off the porch and ran up the road toward town. I didn’t care where I was going. I just wanted to get away.

* * * * *

Stan called to me as I stumbled by the service station. I was totally out of breath. “You look awful, Em. What’s up!”

“Nothing, Stan. Nothing at all. My whole world is self destructing. That’s all.” His arms opened and I fell into them. “*When did he get so tall?*” Suddenly, I jerked back.

“I’m sorry, Stan. I can’t do this.” I turned and sprinted away, my purple flip flops slapping the warm side walk. They seemed to be saying to me, “Shame on you, shame on you, shame on you.”

“Stop!” Stan’s feet thumped behind me. “Em, come back. Please —.”

I slowed down and Stan grabbed my hand. “Em, I hate to see you hurting. Is it your heart? You shouldn’t be running. Come on back to the garage and I’ll get you something to drink. You still like orange?”

I looked into his face and his brown eyes were glistening with concern.

“Yes, that’s what it is, my heart,” I said while taking a deep breath. “It’s kind of scary, Stan. You know what I mean?”

Stan eased me down onto a wooden crate and brought me an orange soda. “Are you still hurting? Do I need to get someone to help you?”

“Stan, you are so — well — sweet! No. I’m feeling better. Just feeling rather stupid.”

Stan smiled briefly and then his smile faded. “Em, I’m glad you’re here. I wanted to talk to you. About Ben.” I looked down at my purple finger nails. I tapped them against the orange soda can.

“You need to be careful with him. He’s dropped out of school and is — well — has a pretty wild reputation. I heard that your dad hired him to work for him.”

“Ben’s gone, Stan. Not to worry. But thanks for the tip, big brother.” My head was whirling but I managed a half smile. “I’d better go. Thanks, Stan.”

Stan touched my shoulder. “Em, you take care of yourself.”



Momma shouted from the kitchen, “Emma Lou. Someone’s knocking on the door.” The last two days had slowly marched by. I stayed in my room studying my school books most of the time, just to stay out of my parents way. I really didn’t want to talk to anybody.

“Okay, Momma. I’ll get it.”

“Well, hello. My name is Mrs. Shelton. Are you Emma?” A slender lady, with long blond hair with bangs, smiled broadly. “I’m your home bound teacher. May I come in?”

I thought, “*Oh, no! Daddy’s asleep on the couch with a beer can in his hand and the house is full of smoke from Momma’s cigarette!*” but I said, “Yes, come in, but things are kind of a mess.” I wrinkled my nose.

“Thank you, Emma Lou. Is that what you like to be called?”

“That’s what my teachers call me but I prefer Em.”

“Then Em it is,” she said with a smile.

Momma came in from the kitchen and woke Daddy up. “We’ve company, Scott.” Daddy stretched and looked around with sleepy, red eyes.

“Momma and Daddy, this is Mrs. Shelton. She is the home bound teacher that the school sent here. You remember, like what the nurse said they would do.” I wasn’t sure how they would act. They might even tell

her to leave!

Mrs. Shelton nodded her head slightly and said, "I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Prater. We are pleased with Emma Lou's work so far at school. I know she will do very well in our home bound program."

Daddy frowned and said, "Well, she'd better, because she sure doesn't do much around here."

Mrs. Shelton ignored his comment and turned to Momma. "Is there a place where Emma Lou and I can sit and spread out her assignments?"

The table in the kitchen was piled high with cans, boxes, newspapers and old dishes. "Momma, I'll take Mrs. Shelton into my bedroom. We can spread out on my bed, okay?"

Momma sighed. "That's a good idea, Emma Lou. Let me know if you need anything." As we passed by her, she said, in almost a whisper, "We're really glad that you're here, Mrs. Shelton." Mrs. Shelton patted her hand. I knew at that moment that there was something very special about this lady.

I watched Mrs. Shelton's face as she looked at my bare mattress on the floor and my make-shift dresser. She acted like she had entered a queen's palace. She seated herself on the mattress and said, "Em, what a creative way to use scarves as curtains. God makes beautiful colors to delight us, doesn't He?"

"Yes, I love my scarves," I answered. "Mrs. Shelton, I also love school. I've tried hard to keep up with my lessons."

Mrs. Shelton opened up her folder of assignments. "First of all, if I call you Em, then you must call me Annette. Is that a deal?" She smiled. I smiled back.

"Em, I know that this is a hard time for you right now. I want our time together to be fun, for both of us. I'll be coming twice a week, to give assignments and to collect them. But if you have any questions or just want to talk, I'm here for you. I'm going to give you my personal phone number."

"Mrs. Shelton, uh, I mean Annette, uh, why are you — ?" I couldn't say what I wanted to say because a big lump came up in my throat. Did Annette really care? Maybe there was hope, a way out.

Annette spread out the assignments and we went over them together.

“For your English assignment,” she explained, “I want you to describe a special place where you feel safe to express how you feel. It may be an imaginary place or a real place. Okay?”

“I understand.” I bit my nail. “Annette, when will you be coming back?”

“Today’s Thursday. I’ll be coming each Monday and Thursday. About ten o’clock. Does that sound good for you?”

“Yeah, I wish it could be every day.”

Annette put her hand on my shoulder. “Em, there are people who are very concerned about you and love you. I must go now. Is there something you want to tell me before I leave?”

I looked down at my mattress. “I just want you to know that I have sprayed and shampooed in here. Annette, I’m really trying!” Tears started to roll again.

I saw Annette’s eyes glisten, just like Stan’s had done. “Sweetheart, our Heavenly Father loves you. Talk to Him. He wants to help you. Okay? Goodbye for now, Em.” She let herself out the front door.

I looked out the window after her. *“Annette doesn’t understand. I talk to God — but He doesn’t talk to me!”*

* * * * *

I awoke the next morning with my pillow wet. Had I been crying in the night? *“Why can’t I get over this feeling that I am covered with dirt, inside and out?”* I gathered my soap and shampoo and headed for the shower. I heard water hitting plastic behind the closed door, and knew Momma was already showering.

“Momma, I’m going for a walk,” I shouted and grabbed my notebook off the floor in my bedroom.

The early morning sun turned the drops of dew that dangled on the weeds in our yard into tiny resplendent jewels. I wondered, *“Why does God decorate these weeds with pure and exquisite jewels when they are nothing but weeds? Why does He care for them and not for me?”*

I carefully stepped down the path to the river, this time avoiding the thorny briars. I could see the top of my willow tree, her willowy limbs

disappearing behind the green embankment. In no time at all, I was settled on my rock, writing down what I saw and felt, here at my secret place.

“This is so hard. How can I describe all this in words, this — this place of beauty and dreams.” Finally, I finished my assignment and sat there gazing at the leaves from last Fall being swirled about in little sparkling whirlpools. *“I know what. I’ll try to capture my secret place on my sketching pad.”*

I retrieved my plastic folder from its rock hiding place and began to draw. Minutes turned into hours but it seemed like only a few seconds. Worries melted away. I even forgot about Ben. When I was satisfied, I put my sketch away with the others: one of a doll sitting on my swing, one of the church down the road from us, one of a squirrel scampering through a maple tree. I felt light, like I could float away. I loved to draw.



Monday morning, after we had finished eating, I said to Momma, “I can hardly wait for Annette to get here.” I sat on the edge of the porch, swinging my legs back and forth. Promptly at ten o’clock, her blue Chevy pulled up in front. I waved to her. “Hi, Annette, I’ve been looking for you.”

“Hey, Em. You look bright eyed this morning. Ready to go over your lessons?”

I opened the door for her. “Sure am. Come on into my room. I’ve got all my home work laid out on the mattress.” I almost felt like giving Annette a hug, but I didn’t.

“Em, this is great. You’ve worked really hard, haven’t you.” She plopped down beside my books. She smiled at me and motioned me to sit down by her. “Some of your friends have asked about you.”

“What did you tell them?” I felt my stomach do a flip flop.

Annette looked deeply into my eyes and said, “I told them that you were unable to attend school for awhile and I knew that you missed them too.”

I let out a deep sigh. “Thanks. That’s right. I do miss them.”

Annette opened her notebook. “Well, let’s get started. Okay?” I gave her all my homework and she went over each subject with me and gave

me new assignments.

“I had a hard time with the English assignment. I couldn’t get a description of my secret place into the right words. Maybe you could read it and help me. Do you have time?”

“Sure do. Sometimes it helps to read it out loud. Why don’t you do that and, when I have a question or a suggestion, I’ll stop you and we’ll talk about it. Okay?”

I began to read to her. She half closed her eyes and cocked her head as if trying to see the willow tree and hear the tinkling water. She interrupted me. “Do you go there often?” she asked.

“Many times. No one yells at me there and I feel safe,” I answered. I read on. “I can talk to God when I sit under my willow tree by the river. But He never talks back to me. I guess He doesn’t care what happens to me. He created all these beautiful things — but when it comes to me, I feel overlooked. I feel like I am ugly and dirty, inside and out. I keep wondering. Maybe the river water can wash the dirt away.”

I looked up from my essay. A tear was spilling out of Annette’s eye and running down her cheek. She quickly brushed it away. “Em, could you take me there — to your secret place? I can’t go today, but maybe sometime?”

“Sure, but only if you promise to keep it a secret.” I gave in to the urge to hug her. “I didn’t mean to make you sad. Did you like my description?”

“Yes. You express yourself very well.” She paused for a moment. “Em, do you know who Jesus is? He said, ‘Seek and you shall find.’ Honey, you are seeking to find God and, someday, you are going to find Him. Just don’t give up.”

She gathered her things and walked out to her car. I followed her to tell her goodbye. She got in the car, opened the window, and said, “Emma Lou Prater, I think that you are beautiful!” and drove away.

* * * * *

Two times a week, Annette came to give and receive my assignments. The soft yellow greens of early spring turned into the deeper greens of late

spring. I really missed seeing Sarah and Stan but somehow the thought of visiting them turned my stomach. My lies haunted me. *“Why, oh why didn’t I tell them the truth. What a fool I have been!”*

I missed something else. The time for my monthly period had come and gone. I wondered, *“Could all my stress cause this? I can’t possibly be pregnant, can I? No, there’s no way.”*

Annette and I sat cross-legged on the porch, our books spread out before us. “You know, Em, soon school will be out for the summer. I won’t be coming to see you — that is, unless your parents request summer school for you.”

“But Annette, I need you!” I felt the blood rush into my face and my ears turn hot. “I, I —,” and every thing started to swirl in circles around me.

I felt Annette’s arms wrap around me. “Sweetheart, you can still call me and we will get together some.” She stroked my hair. “Feeling better?”

I looked into her face. It looked soft and full of love. Suddenly, words poured out of my mouth. “Annette, I missed a period and I think I’m pregnant. I don’t understand how it happened. Ben and I, well, it was only one time. Oh, Annette, what am I going to do?”

Her mouth dropped open and she shook her head. She just looked at me for what seemed like forever.

“I should never have told you. You are mad at me. Just go, Annette. I’ll figure out what to do. I don’t need you or anyone else!”

Annette took my hands and pulled me to my feet. She put her arms around me and rocked me back and forth. “Oh, Em. How could you think that I could ever leave you to face this alone. Sweetheart, I can help you.”

“But what can you do?” Sobs came up from deep inside my chest.

“Let’s go for a walk around the house. We’ll have a little more privacy.”

Annette sat down on the swing in the back yard and I sat down on an old bench near by.

After the sobs subsided, she told me about a place where girls and women can receive counseling and help. “First of all, we need to know if you really are pregnant. They will give you a free pregnancy test. Then

we can go from there.”

“But how can I get there? I can’t tell Momma and Daddy. Oh, Annette, they will kill me!”

“Let me think how we can do this without being dishonest. I’ve got it. Em, I’m going to talk with your parents and get their permission to go there tomorrow. Trust me. Can you do that?”

I nodded my head, but I thought, *“My life is over. Just over!”*