

A WIDOW SAFE AND SECURE

or Renting the Space

A healing by Darren V. Michael



Darren Van Michael  
109 Kimbrough Ct.  
Clarksville, TN 37043  
[michaeld@apsu.edu](mailto:michaeld@apsu.edu)  
C: 731-217-0964  
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## CHARACTERS

- WILLOW 50s, beautiful but dulled by sadness, an adventurous, almost whimsical spirit shackled just the slightest by the recent passing of her husband, a woman who has forgotten her best qualities and fallen into a despair so deep she is oblivious to its effect. She is a beautiful woman who is now broken.
- KALIL 30s, attractive, Middle Eastern man with a quiet, exotic nature. He exudes a peace that is almost unnatural. When he speaks, it is most often with confidence. Though fluent in the English language, like many new actually using a second language, he may not completely understand the nuance of language. He seeks to comfort people and only stumbles when he fails at that. Otherwise, he speaks with a haunting peace.

## SETTING

A brownstone apartment in a large city.

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The living room of a small brownstone apartment. WILLOW sits on a sofa talking on a phone to her friend.

WILLOW

The casket was indulgent and excessive. Ornate inside and out. But I wouldn't have it any other way. That's why he had me. I think he would have appreciated it. Of course, I could hear the whispers. Why? Why is she doing this? Is this some weird way of grieving. I don't know. Maybe. I just like the idea of giving Howard his dream funeral. He never would have done this for himself. Always saving a penny here or there. Wherever he could save money. But he always loved when I insisted he spend money on himself. On big elaborate vacations. Once Jessie had grown and moved out, retirement came, I made Howard think about us. I told him, after all these years, we can finally be stingy, selfish. Spend the time and money how we want to spend it. We can be ridiculous, even irresponsible if we want. We're retired. No strings. I always thought it was like adolescence all over again. I'm not sure Jessie was too thrilled, worried about our safety. Wanted us to settle down. Mom, please don't. You're too old to snow ski. You're going to hurt yourself. Please don't get Dad on that mountain. Mom, what are you going to do on an African safari? I thought he was going to have a stroke when Howard told him we were going to bungee jump from the Royal Gorge Bridge in Colorado. A thousand foot plunge. Honestly, Howard always complained initially – we don't have the money, we're too old to be doing this – I wonder where Jessie gets that from? Hehe. But after ever adventure you could tell Howard loved every minute of it. Jessie fought it too but I think for more selfish reasons. I love that boy, but if I'm being honest, I think he was worried about his inheritance. Didn't want us blowing it all, before he got his share.

(Sighing)

I don't know what to do now. We did just about everything. Now I've got wonderful memories and a house that's too big for one person. I can't sell it. I don't want to live anywhere else. Maybe renting that extra room is a good idea. Howard said we should have years ago. A little extra income, someone to keep an eye on the place while we're gone. But I always liked our life together. The two of us. Facing the world.

(Sighs again)

What do you do with half your life left and the one you thought you were going to spend it with is gone?

(responded to the person on the other end's question)

Yes, I guess so. A new chapter, right. Ok. Are you coming by this evening? Oh, they are? Of course. Oh, stop it.

WILLOW

(putting on a smile)

Oh, stop it. Of course, you go be with your boys. I'll figure out something. There are still tons of boxes to go through and a lot of stuff that needs to be trashed. I've got plenty to do. Go, go. Have fun. We'll connect tomorrow. Hazel, please. You are not abandoning me. Please, no drama. Really, I have a ton to keep me busy. No, no. You should be with your boys. As appealing as that offer really is, I think I want to stay in tonight.

WILLOW hangs up the phone and sits alone, not stirring for a moment. She turns back into the empty room. Stares for a minute. Realizing how empty the room really is and how little she wants to tackle, she slowly exits to her bedroom. There is a brief silence, then a knock at the front door. WILLOW reenters and goes to the door.

WILLOW

Just a minute. I'm coming. Be right there.

WILLOW opens the door to find KALIL, a Middle Eastern man around his early 30's. Attractive, dressed neat, but with an air of the exotic.

KALIL

(with the slightest air of an accent)

Hello. My name is Kalil al Bayaat. I'm here seeking the room.

WILLOW is stunned by the question and the stranger.

KALIL (cont'd)

Hello? The room? For rent? Is it still available?

WILLOW

(finally and a little embarrassed)

Oh, yes. The room. I, ah...I hadn't really been thinking about it. I'd really just forgotten. We haven't had many people asking about it.

KALIL

Is it still available?

WILLOW

Uh, yes. Yes, it is. (brief pause then –) I'm sorry. Your name again?

KALIL

Kalil. Kalil al Bayaat. Is this a good time? I know it's a little late in the afternoon.

WILLOW

Late? No. Uh, pardon me. I'm a little distracted today.

KALIL

Distracted. Yes. I had been meaning to come by yesterday, but first day at my new job. Today is finding the place to stay. A little backwards possibly. But here I am. Is the room still available?

WILLOW

Oh, yes. Uh, please. Come in. Have a seat... Mr. Bayaat.

She opens the door wide for him and shows him to a couch in the middle of the room.

KALIL

Al Bayaat. The full last name is Al Bayaat. But please call me Kalil.

WILLOW

I'm so sorry, Mr. Al – . Kalil. You can call me Willow.

KALIL

(notices the boxes)

Willow. A very interesting name. Are you going somewhere?

WILLOW

Oh, no. Just organizing, getting rid of a few things.

KALIL

Oh, if this is not a good time, I could come back another time. I could go back down to the shelter.

WILLOW

The shelter? You're staying at the shelter?

KALIL

(only slightly embarrassed)

Oh, why, yes. I haven't been in the city very long. Didn't really have any place to go. I didn't want to spend my money on a hotel room. Hoping to find an apartment to lease as soon as possible, you see. It's not that bad.

WILLOW

It's terrible. Ah, my goodness. Well, ok...let's see what we can do.

WILLOW doesn't know how to proceed from this point.

KALIL

Madam? Are you okay?

WILLOW

Well, I must admit I'm a little out of my element. What do we do from here? Frankly I hadn't thought about that ad for a few days. It's only been in the papers since last week. Right before...

An awkward pause. KALIL tries to figure out why but instead decides to break the silence.

KALIL

(helping her)

Well, introductions maybe? I'm from Damascus. Syria. Born there. I have been in the U.S. for about a week now. I am happy to report I am the newest employee of Bailey Electronics on 46<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Street.

WILLOW

(awkwardly, but honest)

Well, welcome to our country, I guess.

KALIL

Thank you very much. It is a most interesting place you have here.

WILLOW

So you are looking for an apartment? How long?

KALIL

Excuse me?

WILLOW

How long? Of a lease? Six months? A year?

KALIL

Oh, I am looking for a home. I think I will be here forever in the U.S. Permanently. This is now my home.

WILLOW

Well...splendid. Uhhh, I'm very sorry for being so bad at this. Normally, I'm much more on top of things.

KALIL

(politely)

There is no need to explain. I believe you are doing just fine.

WILLOW

But we will not have you staying in a shelter. How inhospitable would that be? So new to the country, new in the city, and then thrust into a shelter. No, no, no.

KALIL

(getting up)

May I look around?

WILLOW nods. KALIL slowly moves around the room, scanning boxes and surveying the place.

WILLOW

There are two bedrooms to the place. It was a guest room. I wanted to rent it out before but...you know for a little extra income but never really got around to doing it. Mostly because it doesn't have it's own bath and you'd have to share a kitchen. It's small but nice. Had it refurbished a few years ago.

KALIL

(listening and moving around)

Mm-hmm. This room here would be mine?

WILLOW

Yes. It is a very nice room. Do you like America?

KALIL

Hmm?

WILLOW

Do you like it here? So far?

KALIL

Well, my brief experiences have been the immigration office, a shelter, a small electronics store, and you're lovely home and hospitality.

KALIL smiles and WILLOW seems a little embarrassed but this does seem to make her relax a bit.

WILLOW

What brings you to this country?

KALIL

Have you watched the news lately? Syria isn't the best place to be right now. I love the place of my birth but it is a difficult time. The Arab Spring has become the Arab Summer and the Arab Fall. If I want to get on with my life I must leave.

WILLOW

Oh, goodness. That's very sad.

KALIL

A little, yes. But I am an American now. Well, will be one day I hope.

WILLOW

Aren't you angry? I think I would be angry.

KALIL

Angry? Why?



WILLOW

At us? At the U.S.? I always hear that we've really screwed things up over there. How everyone hates us.

KALIL

(laughing slightly)

Well, there would be no popularity contest you would win, but I think Americans think they are more important than they really are. The Syrians, the Arab World has more to think about daily than what is America doing. I think that is a distraction.

WILLOW smiles and seems intrigued.

KALIL (cont'd)

Only one door?

WILLOW

Yes. No back entrance. But don't worry I'm a heavy sleeper if you're coming and going late hours.

KALIL

No, no late hours for me. I don't really have the time.

(noticing a picture or something)

Have you ever been to the Middle East?

WILLOW

No, I haven't. I've been to a lot of places, never there. I find America boring. Lonely even.

KALIL

Really? I find it stimulating. Frightening but definitely stimulating.

(suddenly as if sensing her struggle)

You seem ill at ease with my presence. Maybe this was not meant to be as they say. I will keep looking. I thank you for your time.

WILLOW

What? No. Don't go. You haven't seen the bedroom yet, the bath. I'm being terribly odd, I know.

(trying to make things comfortable again)

Any family? Wife? Oh, of course not. She'd be with you. Brothers? Sisters?

KALIL

Two brothers. I was married.

WILLOW

Ah, me too. Was married. It is a brutal awakening to one day find yourself on your own. Don't you think?

KALIL

Yes.

WILLOW

You find yourself second guessing everything. Before, you would just open the door and head out to whatever was waiting, go wherever the wind took you. Then all of sudden, you're looking over your shoulder. Making sure the next person you come in contact with doesn't want to harm you or kidnap you, violate you in some way.

KALIL is unnerved just slightly by her confession.

KALIL

Yes...I guess.

(nervously attempting to make a joke)

You aren't one of those people right? Just a generous woman looking for a tenant.

WILLOW

Oh, why, yes. And you aren't one of those people either, right?

KALIL

(after a pause for effect)

No. I think not. At least not until after we talk price.

WILLOW

(laughing)

Oh. Hehe. Yes. I think you're harmless.

KALIL

I wouldn't say harmless. I know what you Americans think of an Arabic man. The Homeland Security airport screener was very gentle in his strip search.

WILLOW is shocked then realizes he's joking with her.

WILLOW

Do you miss your home? Your family? Your wife?

KALIL

Do you miss your husband?

Neither has to answer.

WILLOW

Sometimes we find ourselves in a place we didn't want to be.

KALIL

Sometimes that's exactly where I think we should be.

WILLOW

I used to think that way. Funny thing thirty years ago I never thought I would marry. Never even entertained having children.

KALIL

How many do you have?

WILLOW

One. Jessie. He's a good son. But he's busy a lot. Very successful. Always on the go. I think I taught him that.

KALIL

You are no longer "on the go"?

WILLOW

No. I just uhm...well, I'm not. What brought you to the states? Oh, well, I've already asked that, haven't I?

KALIL

You do not like being alone now, but you did once?

WILLOW

It isn't that I liked being alone. I liked having no strings or fewer strings.

KALIL

Strings. Attachments. Was your husband a string? Your son?

WILLOW

(insulted)

What? What are you implying? No, I love my husband, my son. The nerve of you.

KALIL

I meant nothing. I am trying to listen, uh, understand. I came to look at an apartment. You talk about your family and strings and your loneliness. I apologize. I should not have said what I said. I should have not pried. If I was inappropriate, I'm very sorry. Just a few days here. Things were going well then this catastrophe.

WILLOW

(trying to mend the situation)

No, I'm the one who was inappropriate. I find I like people so much less now. Isn't that awful? And I'm taking it out on you. I was never this bitter, this mean, this frail. It infuriates me. I just need to --

WILLOW starts to yell but grits her teeth instead and holds in the explosion.

KALIL

I find people quite full of beauty. Unique.

WILLOW

Well, you're either crazy or naïve.

KALIL

(laughing a bit)

Possibly. But I still find myself here and in your apartment and in need of a room.

WILLOW

I honestly never thought of renting to a man. Not that I'm against men, but being a single woman, a widow, it just seemed strange.

KALIL

I see. Well, I can understand that. I'm a bit of a recluse myself. I will go if it's uncomfortable for you.

WILLOW

It is. A little. (a pause) But stay.

KALIL

I will be an ideal tenant. I'm clean. I'm foreign so that has to be good for your security. I may keep strangers at bay.

(She laughs at his attempt at a joke.)

I don't watch TV. I can cook.

WILLOW

Well, I do like TV. I read.

KALIL

I read as well. We can share authors.

WILLOW

Yes. I guess so. Okay...well, the rent is \$1200. A month.

KALIL

(a bit taken back at the sudden shift)

Oh...no. Thank you.

WILLOW

I think it's a fair price.

KALIL

I will give you \$600 a month. Final offer.

WILLOW

\$600?! That's ridiculous. You won't find anything laround here in that price range. \$1200. Nothing less.

(This haggling has given her a chance to be brave again.)

I think you have underestimated me, Mr. al Bayaat. I may look like I'm easily taken but you'll find I'm a little tougher than most women.

KALIL

I can see that. You've been around the world.

WILLOW

Are you making fun of me? Who do you think you are? I think you should go.

KALIL

I am not. No, please. You misunderstand. We haggle, right? Mr. Tarvoli at the store said I should make sure I am not taken advantage of.

WILLOW

I would never do that. You want a room to rent. You want to get out of the shelter. The room is \$1200 a month.

KALIL

But you don't like people. I'm people. I was not sure your intentions.

WILLOW

My intentions are to rent you this room for \$1200.

KALIL

I'm not sure I can afford that. I don't get my first check for two weeks. I just have what I have saved. \$800 a month?

WILLOW

I thought you liked people. You think they are unique.

KALIL

Yes, beautiful and unique, but that doesn't mean they won't take advantage of me.

WILLOW

I am not that type of person. I am not a beautiful, unique person. I won't take advantage of you. I just need that room filled.

KALIL

I – uh – I am not sure what to say. \$850?

WILLOW

Eight fifty? You think that's fair.

KALIL

No, I think that's what I've got to offer.

WILLOW

(she thinks for a moment)

I will not be taken advantage of. No. (a pause) Nine hundred dollars a month. Take it or leave it.

KALIL

Yes. Thank you, Mrs, uh, Miss Willow.

WILLOW

Thank you, Mr. al Bayaat.

KALIL

(trying to lighten the mood)

Your husband would be proud of such a tough negotiator.

WILLOW smiles slightly. She starts to exit to a room but then –

WILLOW

Mr. al Bayaat? May I ask how your wife died?

KALIL

(gently but very matter-of-factly)

She was murdered on the street outside our home by men who did not appreciate her being without a man to escort her.

WILLOW

People are beautiful?

KALIL

And unique.

WILLOW

I will get your key.

WILLOW exits as KALIL stands alone.

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY