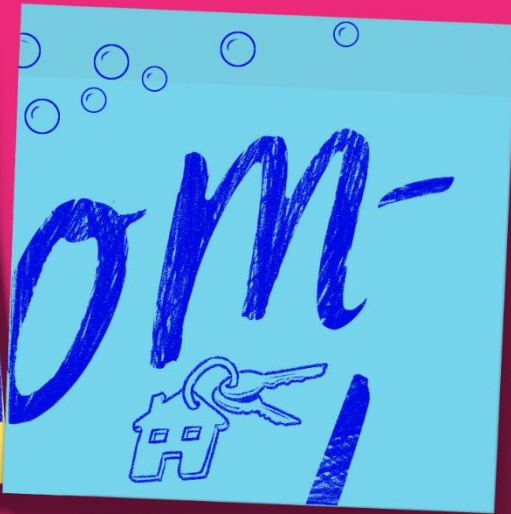


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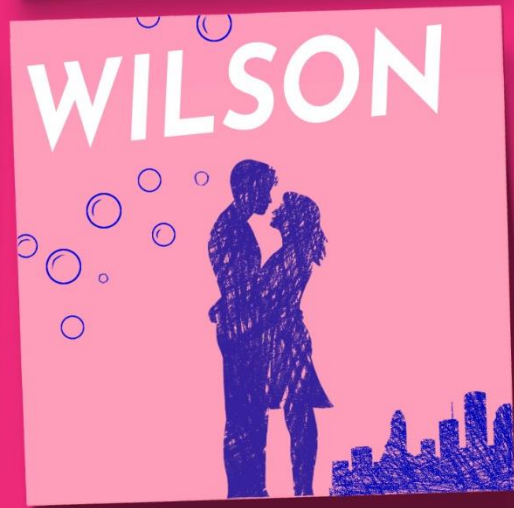
a Novel



SARIAH



WILSON



PRAISE FOR SARIAH WILSON

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ROOMMAID

SARIAH WILSON



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Published by Montlake, Seattle

www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781542023801

ISBN-10: 1542023807

Cover design by Philip Pascuzzo

Printed in the United States of America

For my aunt Pixie and her Pigeon

CHAPTER ONE

“Do you know what this apartment has?” Frederica asked me as she threw her arms wide, like she was the ringmaster about to introduce the clowns.

Which felt like an appropriate gesture, given how my life was going.

“Madison,” she said my name, trying to get me to pay attention. “Do you know what this apartment has?”

She was obviously expecting a response equal to her level of theatrics. “A staph infection? Flesh-eating bacteria? A hantavirus?”

My real estate agent / aunt glared at me. “Wrong. The correct answer is it has nine-foot ceilings. Do you have any idea how hard it is to find this ceiling height in an apartment in the city at this price?”

The city was Houston, Texas. And I chalked up not noticing how tall the ceilings were to my upbringing. Because I’d grown up in one of the largest mansions in the state, nice things felt normal. Comfortable. But given my decision to become a teacher (a career choice my family heartily disagreed with by cutting me off, kicking me out of the house, and rescinding my trust fund), I was quickly finding out that on my salary I couldn’t afford said nice things. Or even semilivable things.

I knew Frederica was getting frustrated with me. She had shown me dozens of apartments that were either too far away from my job as a second-grade teacher at Millstone Academy, or else they’d been completely terrible. Like they sported their own special petting zoos that consisted of

cockroaches, ants, and bedbugs. Or they'd been little more than a dumping ground for cinder blocks, old magazines, and used tires.

But I couldn't afford better. When I'd opened my first paycheck, I had audibly gasped. The total net amount (after some jerk named FICA took most of my money) was for less than what I used to spend in hair maintenance every month. I didn't know how anyone was supposed to live on such a tiny amount.

Or how I was supposed to save up enough money for first and last month's rent as well as a deposit. I also needed to get a car to get to and from work and run errands. Apparently I needed to put a deposit down for that, too.

No matter how hard I tried, it felt impossible to set aside money. I had been crashing on my best friend Shay's couch for the last three months.

After I'd told her I'd only be living with her for two weeks.

It was way past time for me to move out.

This apartment seemed decent and was only a half hour away from work. I'd really wanted to be closer to the school but at this point I was going to have to take what I could get. I could make this tiny apartment work. I knew Frederica had grown tired of dragging me all over the city. Especially since she wasn't earning a commission and was running the risk of incurring my mother's wrath by helping me.

I figured she was doing it because, secretly, I'd always been her favorite niece.

Which was not a hard contest to win. My older twin sisters were terrible. The oldest, Violet, had been groomed to take over my dad's finance company. She was cutthroat and ambitious and did the Huntington name proud. Vanessa, since she hadn't gone into the family business, went the other acceptable route—she was married to a vice president at Daddy's company, had three

children with a fourth on the way, and rubbed her Perfect Life in my face every chance she got. Both of my sisters were snobby, self-centered suck-ups who had always made my life miserable.

Frederica's voice pierced my thoughts, interrupting them. "This is a nice one, right?"

It was. I had opened my mouth to say as much when I caught the expression on her face. There was something she wasn't telling me. "Yes, it's nice. But what aren't you saying?"

"Oh." She waved one hand in the air, as if to suggest that I was being silly. "Nothing. It's got these great ceilings and laminate wood floors. It should work for you."

She was fine with laminate wood floors? Now I knew something was up. "Tell me."

"Fine." She turned the word into four syllables. "If you must know, the previous tenant was slightly . . . murdered here a year ago."

"Murdered?" I repeated. "As in, somebody came in and killed the person who lived here? The police found the body in this very apartment? This was a crime scene?" I folded my arms across my chest, suddenly afraid to touch anything.

"I mean, it was just the one person. It's not like some serial, ongoing situation. A crime of passion, apparently, and the man is good and locked up. So no need to worry. I only told you because the law requires me to. And it shouldn't really matter because lots of people die in houses."

That was probably true enough, but there was no way I would live here. I could almost see the police tape and chalk outline. "This is a definite no."

I would take the cockroaches over this. I was not up for being haunted.

She sighed, ever so slightly and dramatically, and opened the front door for me. I went out into the hallway while she locked up. Even though I knew it was all in my head, the hallway suddenly seemed dark and foreboding. As if crime-passioned murderers were waiting in every shadow. I felt a rush of relief when we exited the building, grateful for the setting sun.

We didn't say much as I followed her back down to her beloved car, a Ferrari she had named J. Lo. The color of the Ferrari was what Frederica called *Louboutin red*. It was her signature color. Right now, it was the shade of lipstick she wore, the color of her silk blouse, and the soles on the bottom of her high heels. Her expensive taste reminded me how much money she usually made finding homes for Houston's elite, and I felt instantly guilty that I had been wasting so much of her time.

"She's a beauty," I said, trying to get back on her good side by complimenting the Ferrari.

Her broad smile indicated that I'd accomplished my task as we slid onto the soft-as-butter leather seats. "She is. Are you still planning on buying a car of your own?"

"I am." I'd only recently acquired my license. It hadn't been necessary growing up since my family's drivers had always taken me everywhere I needed to go. My mother had often wondered aloud why Huntington women would even need a driver's license. It made "no rational sense" to her.

Not surprisingly, neither one of my sisters had a license.

And neither one of them had their own personal car, either.

I felt great pride that I'd be the first in my immediate family. "I'm even thinking about getting a used car." If that didn't send my mom into a fit of vapors, I didn't know if anything ever would. My mother refused to touch anything that had been used by someone else, which included such things as hotel sheets and duvets, towels at the gym, and bathrobes at her favorite spa. It gave me a small, rebellious thrill to plan on buying a car that had been previously owned.

"You should try the Ares dealership."

"Ares?" I echoed her recommendation. "Isn't that the car rental company?"

“Yes, but once their cars hit a certain mileage they sell them. So you can get an, er, *used* car that’s been reasonably looked after and presumably kept up well.” She said the word *used* the same way my mother did: as if it were an unsightly and invasive mole that should be beaten over the head with a tack hammer for daring to disturb her prize-winning roses.

“I’ll check it out.” We reached the outskirts of the downtown area and I realized I didn’t know if our apartment-hunting tour was over. “Did you have any place else to show me or are we calling it a day?”

Frederica drummed her red-lacquered fingernails against her steering wheel. “There is one more possibility I’ve been considering. But it’s really unorthodox.”

More unorthodox than murder apartments and bug paradises? “How so?”

We came to a red light and she reached inside her Prada purse to pull out her cell phone. She quickly thumbed through a couple of screens, mumbling something about Instagram before the light changed. She handed me her phone and then pulled forward.

On the screen was the most handsome man I’d ever seen in my entire life. And that included all the men in movies, magazine ads, and TV shows. He was . . . stunning. Golden-brown hair with piercing blue eyes, a jawline that was so killer it was begging for its own Lifetime movie, and a brilliant, warm smile that could melt the coldest, frostiest heart.

“He’s . . . he’s . . . he’s . . . wow.” Was all I could come up with. I zoomed in a little on his face. This had to be some filter, or angle or trick of the light. Nobody was actually this gorgeous.

As if she could read my mind, Frederica announced, “He’s even better looking in real life.”

My mouth gaped. That was just . . . not possible. How could it be? I was sitting here assuming he was just one of those people the camera loved. To be fair, the camera didn’t just love him; it also brought him flowers every day for a month, sang him ballads, and wanted to meet his parents.

I kind of wanted to do that, too.

“Who is this?” I finally choked the words out. I mean, if I was going to be introduced to his family, I should probably find out what his name was first.

“Tyler Roth. I met him at the Wesleys’ charity ball. Something about underprivileged iguanas. Anyway, he was standing in a corner all by himself and my heart just went out to him. Nobody that delicious should ever be alone.”

I nodded, fervently. In total agreement. The still-functioning part of my brain that hadn’t been rendered a drooling mess by his photo wondered what Frederica’s unorthodox plan concerning Tyler was. Maybe she wanted me to marry him and then I’d have someplace to live. If her plan involved me eloping with him to Vegas, I had the sneaking suspicion I was probably going to agree.

“And he told me that he travels quite a bit for his job and that he’s been looking to find someone to live in his apartment and look after his dog, Pigeon. She has some anxiety issues and he doesn’t want her to be alone. Isn’t she a beautiful dog?”

She pointed at her phone and it was only then that I realized that there was also a dog in the picture. A golden retriever. “Yes. The dog. Beautiful.” Not that I could really tell as my gaze quickly drifted back to Tyler.

“Tyler also needs someone to clean up the apartment. He’s had some bad luck with housekeepers lately. And in exchange for looking after Pigeon and cleaning, he’s willing to offer a rent-free room. I told him I’d keep an eye out for a good candidate.”

While I had zero experience with caring for dogs, I had even less with housekeeping. “I would have to clean?”

Frederica seemed to have either forgotten how spoiled I'd been or didn't consider it to be an obstacle. "Mm-hmm. You'd be his roommate who cleans. Oh! His roommaid!" She eased her Ferrari over to the side of the road and grabbed her phone back. I felt a little bereft at losing it. "I'm going to text my attorney and see if I can trademark that word. *Roommaid*." She let out a little laugh at her own cleverness.

Her fingers kept flying over her keyboard while she announced, "And now I'm texting Tyler to see if we can stop by and see his place." She paused. "If you're interested."

It would make sense that she would ask. Excepting Shay, the potential roommate situation had been somewhat terrifying. I'd explored that on my own, and either I had the world's worst luck or there were a scary number of disturbing people out there looking for someone to share their apartment and their crazy. It was why my aunt had been focusing on places I could afford on my own.

But anybody who looked like Tyler did and loved his dog and was that handsome and that gorgeous couldn't be a bad guy, could he? Plus, Frederica was sort of vouching for him after speaking to him for ten minutes at a party.

That should definitely count for something. Right?

It was then that I realized my aunt was waiting for my response. "Yes, I'm interested." Holy crap was I interested.

She smiled and pushed the send button. As we waited, it suddenly occurred to me that his apartment might be terrible. And just as quickly I decided I didn't care. I would seriously consider moving into the murder apartment for this guy.

That might have made me shallow, but given that I'd made such a big noble sacrifice lately, I felt like I was owed some tiny bit of cosmic justice.

And possibly some exquisite eye candy.

I didn't realize that I'd been holding my breath until I heard the ding of a reply message.

Frederica grinned at me. "He says to head over and he'll meet us there as soon as he can. He said his doorman will let us into the apartment."

A doorman? I thought of Shay's fourth-floor walkup and what a relief it would be to live in a building where there was someone who could help me carry my groceries upstairs. Who would get my packages before they were stolen. That there might be an actual elevator involved was enough to make me giddy.

On our drive over, Frederica told me more about her conversation with Tyler, which consisted mostly of them exchanging information about their dogs, while I resisted the urge to reach for her phone and get another happy eyeful. Then she said something that pulled me out of imagining Tyler and me as the stars of a music video, where we fell in love to the swelling of a poignant love song.

"He said he'd prefer a male roommate because in college he shared an apartment with a platonic female friend who ended up falling in love with him and made his home life miserable. He had to take out a restraining order."

I'd seen a picture of him. I could kind of see where she'd been coming from.

"But that won't be a problem for you because you're in a serious relationship," she said in a self-satisfied tone.

I was? Oh, she meant Brad. More accurately, Bradford Beauregard Branson IV. My high school sweetheart who hadn't spoken to me since my parents had cut me off.

Something nobody in my family knew, and I certainly wasn't in any hurry to tell them.

Because the Bransons were the very heart of Houston society. Pedigreed and wealthy and super connected. Being permanently tied to the Bransons was my mother's fondest wish. If telling her I wasn't going into the family business had thrown a hand grenade into the middle of our relationship, breaking up with Brad would be the equivalent of going nuclear.

I'd been quietly rebellious in a serious way, but it was something my parents could ignore while waiting for me to see the light and come around. Despite my recent bravery, I was not ready for the fallout of a rebellion that loud and major. There would be no forgiveness in this world or in the world to come.

So I ignored whatever our current relationship status actually was and pretended like we were fine. My mother and Frederica feuded on a regular basis (and it was another part of the reason I suspected Frederica was helping me find an apartment: to annoy my mom), but sometimes they were the best of friends. I couldn't risk the truth getting back to my mom. So I said, "Right. I have Brad and so I won't be romantically pursuing Tyler."

Technically it wasn't a lie. Because Brad and I hadn't officially broken up. Although I was taking his ghosting me as confirmation that our on-again, off-again relationship was finally dead and buried.

We arrived at the apartment building and Frederica parked right in front of it. "There's a parking garage," she told me. "But we're just running in and out today. I don't know if you're familiar with this part of town, but we're only ten minutes away from your school."

I was glad to hear it was so close. We got out of the car and headed for the front door.

Once we entered the building, I realized that Tyler had money. Not just doctor or lawyer money, but a lot of money.

A fact that was reconfirmed when the doorman took us up to the penthouse. I let out a sigh of comfort when we stepped inside. This felt familiar. A few months ago this place wouldn't have impressed me. I probably would have thought of it as being cozy or cute. But now it seemed practically palatial. The entire living area was surrounded by windows that looked out over the city. I guessed it would be stunning at night. There was a large balcony where I could see myself having my morning coffee, watching the sun rise. I turned to see the kitchen, and even though it had top-of-the-line stainless steel appliances and quartz countertops, it looked very lived in. The sink was full of dirty dishes and there were a dozen different things scattered over the various countertops. It didn't seem like Tyler was a neat freak.

Clearly no one had died here recently, and it had not been invaded by any kind of insect. That was enough to make it the winner.

“What do you think?” Frederica asked once the doorman had left us alone.

“It's fantastic.”

“Let's go see the rest of it,” she said. We found the guest bedroom and I sat on the edge of the queen-size bed, bouncing up and down a little to test the comfort level. Definitely better than Shay's couch.

The room had been decorated in a mixture of blues and grays that I found soothing. I could easily live in this room. My aunt was saying something about hand-scraped hardwoods and Italian marble, but I ran over to check out the large walk-in closet. I practically wept with joy at the thought of not having to live out of my suitcases any longer.

It was in that moment that I realized I would do whatever I had to do to become Tyler's roommate. He wanted me to take care of his dog? I'd turn into Dr. Doolittle. He needed a clean

home? Then I'd be . . . Marie Kondo? No, that was organizational stuff. Mary Poppins? She was the kid expert. Martha Stewart? More on the entertaining side of things.

An image and a name flashed in my mind. Mr. Clean! I would be Mr. / Dr. Clean-Doolittle. Practically perfect in every way.

“Isn't this wonderful?” Frederica asked me, clearly sensing how much I'd been won over, given her victorious and smug smile.

“I have to live here. I love it.”

The elevator doors opened and closed and I heard a man say, “Pidge! I'm home! Where are you, girl?”

That had to be Tyler. And of course his voice was sexy, too. All deep and masculine and shiver-inducing. I heard the skittering of claws on the floors and caught a glimpse of a golden, furry blur go racing by. I half wanted to run and jump into his arms, too.

Frederica grabbed my arm. “Come on, I can't wait to introduce you to Tyler.”

The last time my heart had beaten this hard and my stomach fluttered this hard had been the first day of school with my very own class. When I was at the beginning of something special and important, knowing my life was never going to be the same again.

I just knew that the same was true here. Standing at a precipice, everything was about to change.

Time to meet Tyler Roth.



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