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Zodiac

Written by Sam Wilson

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Zodiac

SAM WILSON



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For Tony, Diana and Kerry

Welcome to San Celeste . . .



Capricorn

Earth

22 December – 19 January

They may be the smallest group in the city, but True Capricorns are its brightest stars, controlling most of its wealth and institutions. The ‘Neo-Caps’ – born to parents of other signs – are rightly despised by True Capricorns.



Aquarius

Air

20 January – 18 February

Liberal hipster types: creative professionals, designers, architects, freelancers with laptop bags and vinyl collections. Despite being gainful members of society, they consider themselves separate from the mainstream.



Pisces

Water

19 February – 20 March

Hippies and intermittently productive ‘free-spirits’. Many of them are artists, addicts or self-professed psychics. They are not widely considered employable, but have strong family networks for support.



Aries

Fire

21 March – 19 April

The city’s underclass: violent, uncontrollable and unemployable. They mostly live in the large, dangerous slum area known as Ariesville.



Taurus

Earth

20 April – 20 May

Loyal, reliable and down-to-earth – they keep the city moving. A very large number of them work for public sector institutions such as the police force.



Gemini

Air

21 May – 20 June

The fast-talking, fast-living yuppies of San Celeste. With their silver tongues and moral flexibility, many of these city-slickers have made a killing in advertising and sales.

Where the stars always shine.



Cancer

Water

21 June – 22 July

Society's largest group. Sensible folk that uphold the status quo and fill many different management positions as they are considered naturally trustworthy.



Leo

Fire

23 July – 22 August

Hear them roar! A small but highly vocal group closely aligned with the Cancers. Also conservative, they often fill the role of entertainers, politicians and pundits.



Virgo

Earth

23 August – 22 September

Tend to be introverted and obsessive. Typical jobs include engineers and system administrators, and they have an extensive science fiction and fantasy culture.



Libra

Air

23 September – 22 October

Known to be 'people' people. They are employed largely in the service industry. Any job that requires a smile without a hard-sell is given to a Libra.



Scorpio

Water

23 October – 21 November

Could Scorpions be the new elite? Sharper and hungrier than the Capricorns, and well known for being control freaks, they are fast accumulating status and power.



Sagittarius

Fire

22 November – 21 December

Along with the Aquarians, they form the other half of the left-leaning middle-class. Often found in the education or charity sectors, they claim to have hearts of gold.

ZODIAC

by Sam Wilson

CHAPTER ONE

Holly was going to be late for her first day of work, but it wasn't her fault. The laundromat on Gull Street only opened at eight in the morning, and the manager at JiffyMaids always insisted that their uniforms were spotless, even though each of the maids only had one set each. She'd worked late the night before at a fortieth birthday party at a Sagittarius house in West Skye, and a drunken straggler had made a half-hearted attempt to hit on her and had accidentally tipped some guacamole down the front of her white apron.

"Lucky you're wearing that," the man said to cover his embarrassment. He didn't know that she couldn't show up the next day a new client's house with a soiled uniform. After four hours' fretful sleep she had woken just before the laundromat opened, and raced to clean the uniform on a quick rinse cycle. She sat in front of the washing machine and watched the clothes slosh around inside as the time ticked down to nine a.m., when she was meant to be at the new client's house.

She waited as long as she could bear, then cancelled the drying cycle early and went to the laundromat's bathroom to

put on the uniform. She didn't realise how damp her clothes were until the heat faded, leaving her checkered blue dress sticking to her legs, clammy and cold. She bundled up her warm morning clothes into a plastic bag, and got on a bus heading to Conway Heights in the Northern Suburbs of San Celeste. Every few minutes throughout the trip she double-checked the time. When the clock ticked over to nine and she still hadn't arrived, her heart sank. She didn't like letting people down. She was a Libra.

Conway Heights was a fancy district out in the northern suburbs of the city. Holly stared distractedly out the window at tennis courts, trimmed trees and fake Tuscan villas. Everything was clean and expensive. She felt like an interloper.

The bus stopped on the corner of Morin Road. Holly's plastic bag full of dry clothes bounced against her leg as she ran three blocks up hill to Eden Drive. The houses she passed had front yards with palm trees and manicured flowerbeds.

Her client's home was a wide, single-storey building with beige walls and a low-sloped roof. She mentally prepared her apology as she walked along the brick path to the front door alcove. Her finger was on the intercom buzzer button when she saw that the door was open a crack.

She tapped it with her knuckles, opening it a little more.

"Hello?" she called. "JiffyMaids!"

There was no answer.

A piece of wood was sticking out halfway up the doorframe. She touched it experimentally. It was a splinter of wood the length of her finger, torn off opposite the lock. The door had been kicked in.

“Hello?” she called again, and pressed the intercom button. A speaker buzzed somewhere deep in the house, but there was no reply.

Holly shivered in her damp dress. She stepped backwards into the sunshine, and looked up and down the road. There was no sign of life, and no sound except distant traffic and barking dogs.

She clenched her jaw, and took her pink and purple phone out of the plastic bag.

It connected after two rings.

“911. What is the nature of your emergency?”

“Hello?” said Holly uncertainly. “I’m outside... um... 36 Eden Drive in Conway Heights. I just got here and the door’s kicked in, and no one’s answering when I call inside.”

There was the faint sound of fingers clicking on a keyboard, and the operator spoke again. Her voice was warm and calm. There was a Libra lilt to it, which was reassuring.

“All right, I’m sending a patrol car to you. Can I have your name, please?”

“Holly Wells.”

“And is it your home?”

“No,” said Holly. “I work for JiffyMaids. I’m just here to clean up.”

“All right, Holly. It’ll be about eight minutes until the officers get there. I just need to ask you a few more questions, okay, Hon?”

Hon. Definitely a Libra.

“Yeah, sure,” said Holly.

“Okay. Can you tell me what you look like, so the officers will recognise you when they get there?”

“Sure. I’m about five-eight, five-nineish, I’ve got blonde hair, and I’m in a blue checked dress with a white apron. Is that enough?”

She waited, but there wasn’t a response.

“Hello?” she said.

For a moment she thought she’d been cut off, but she could hear the distant talking. She lowered the phone and could still hear it. A man was speaking nearby.

On the left side of the house was a garden wall covered over with climbing flowers, and an ornate cast-iron gate with peeling white paint. She heard a man’s voice again coming from behind it, and felt a flood of relief. Of course. The client was in the back yard, which is why he didn’t answer when she called. Everything was fine. She went to the gate, pushed down on the latch and went through, touching her hair to make sure her ponytail hadn’t come loose.

“Hello?” she called again. “Mr. Williams?”

She followed a path around the side of the house, past a flowerbed and through a wicker arch covered in dying vines. The house was built on a hillside, and the grassy lawn sloped down to give a view across the city, all the way to the WSCR tower.

Directly behind the house was an empty swimming pool. There was a trench dug into the ground next to it, and the paving slabs on one side had been pulled up and stacked against the back wall of the house.

“Hello? Holly?” said the operator on her phone. Holly brought it back up to her ear.

“Hey, sorry, I thought I heard something.”

“From the house?”

“No, from the back yard, but there’s no one here.”

“Holly, listen to me,” said the operator. “I need you to go to the front of the house so the officers know they’re at the right place.” Her voice was firm, and Holly was good enough with people to detect something else. It could have been fear.

As Holly turned she heard a new noise. It was a straining, choking sound just on the edge of her hearing. She froze, and listened. After a few seconds it came again, from the trench by the pool.

“There’s someone here,” she said.

“Holly,” said the operator sharply. “Please go back to the road.” But Holly was already at the side of the trench.

“Oh God,” she said. “Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.”

“Holly?” said the operator.

The man at the bottom was about fifty years old. He had short white hair, and was wearing black trousers and a long-sleeved white shirt that was stained with mud at the back and blood at the front. His eyes were only able to focus on her for a second before they rolled back in his head. His mouth was taped closed, and one of his nostrils ran with blood. Holly dropped her plastic bag and ran to the side of the trench, looking for something she could do to help.

“Ambulance!” she shouted into the phone. “Oh God, Ambulance!”

The operator’s voice stayed calm. “Who’s injured, Holly?”

“He’s an old man. He’s been cut open across the belly. His guts, oh God, I can see his guts, I thought they were a hosepipe or something. They’re in the mud - “

Holly caught the smell of it, and gagged. The intestines were

punctured. She took a step back from the trench and took a deep breath. She'd always told herself that she would be able to handle herself in an emergency. She knew her priorities. People first. She breathed in the clean air and stepped forward again. The man was squirming, and his breaths were short and shallow. His wrists and ankles were bound in duct tape.

"Hon! I need you to stay with me, okay?" said the operator.

"It's okay, I'm here. He's been bound and gagged. There's so much blood."

"Okay. Keep talking to me. I'm going to help you through this. I need you to slow the bleeding until the paramedics arrive."

"I've got a bag of clothes here."

"Are they clean?"

"No, but I just washed my apron, I'm wearing it now - "

"Perfect. Take it off and fold it into a long strip. I'll tell you where to hold it. The ambulance won't be long, but you're going to have to stop that blood."

Holly untied her apron and unhooked the strap from over her head. As she was folding it, some movement caught her eye. It was dark inside the house, but it looked like someone was standing behind the cream-covered curtains behind the sliding door. She froze.

"Oh, God."

"What is it, Holly?"

"I think someone's in the house."

The operator was silent. The only sound was the warbling static of cellular reception.

"Hello?" said Holly.

The line clicked, as if the operator was switching back from

talking to someone else.

“Holly, I need you to go back to the street.”

“But the man - “

“Now, Holly!”

There was a rumbling from the direction of the house. Someone in a tan jacket was pulling open the glass sliding door. He had a baseball cap on, and a black scarf hid the lower half of his face. Holly dropped her folded apron, and ran.

“He’s coming!” she shouted into the phone. “Oh God - “

The side gate had swung closed while she was in the garden. She ran up to it and tugged, but it wouldn’t move. It had jammed closed. The man was only a few steps behind her. She dropped her phone and tugged at the gate with both hands. The latch popped and it swung open. She ran through and slammed it shut behind her just as the man caught up. For a moment she was face to face with him. His eyes were bright blue. She turned and ran.

Almost immediately, the latch clicked again and the gate swung open behind her. A black car was driving down the street ahead. Holly ran out in front of it with her hands raised. It braked immediately, and came to a stop in front of her. The driver looked up at her in surprise; a middle-aged man in an elegant-looking jacket. She ran around to his window.

“Help me!” she shouted. “Let me in! Please!”

She could hear the feet of the man chasing her on the pavement. The driver saw him coming, and made a decision. He pressed a button on the door next to him, and Holly heard a clunk as the central locking disengaged.

She opened the back door and threw herself onto the seat.

As she tried to slam the door behind her, the man chasing her grabbed it, and held tight. Holly lay on the back seat and kicked at the man's hand.

"Drive!" she shouted. "Just drive!"

"Shhh," said the car's driver. She looked up into the silver barrel of his gun.

"Stay very still, please," he said.

Holly froze. The man with the scarf over his face pushed her legs off the back seat. He squeezed in next to her and closed the door behind him.

"Do you have the tape?" said the driver, keeping the gun on Holly. His hair was flecked with silver. To Holly, he looked like a bank manager or an actor playing a CEO on television.

"Yeah," said the other man.

"Tie her wrists."

Sirens wailed in the distance, getting closer. Holly felt a moment of hope.

"Shit," said the driver. "Take this."

He gave the gun to the man with the scarf. As he passed it Holly kicked again, trying to knock it out of his hands. The man next to her was quick, though. He grabbed the gun and brought it up to her head in a single swift motion.

"Uh-uh," he said.

The car pulled off, and the man in the back kept the gun on her. Slowly, with his other hand, he took a roll of metallic duct tape out of his jacket pocket. He pulled up the scarf to just over his mouth and tore off a two-foot length of tape with his teeth.

"Wrists," he said.

Holly didn't move. The man in the scarf dropped the tape.

He leaned in to her and with blinding speed punched her on the side of her jaw. Her eyes watered in shock.

I've got to get out of this.

She held her arms forward with her wrists together. The man grabbed them firmly with one hand. He dropped the gun in his lap and bound her hands with the tape.

The sirens outside the car grew louder, and the tone dropped as an ambulance passed by. Holly looked after it, but it showed no sign of slowing down. They hadn't seen her. The 911 operator was probably still on the line, on her dropped phone. No one was coming for her.

Holly was on her own.