

Partial Draft:

# The Zodiac Heir

by S.G. Lovell

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(Link back to: <http://www.sglovell.com/zodiac>)

### ***Chapter 3***

*Something dodgy was going on and he was going to find out what it was.*

His ex-wife was right. He had a screw loose.

Alexander O'Reilly, London's most prolific private investigator and die-hard cynic, stepped out from the doorway that had concealed him from the three men rushing past and squinted at the man-high wall closing off the narrow alleyway. The brickwork was crumbling in places, but the English bond of alternating stretching and heading courses looked hard enough to take a hit.

Not to be deceived by assumptions and a single sense when he had five at his disposal, O'Reilly sidestepped puddles and a lonely litter bin that the council had forgotten to collect, as he made his way closer to the street's dead end. The fingertips of his right hand went white as he pressed them against the rough surface. *Solid*. As expected. Except, the wall had swallowed three grown men.

Turning his head towards the pale glow of the cloud-covered moon hanging between dripping roofs, O'Reilly scanned the top of the near seven foot high brickwork. Wall running was out of the question with the surface slippery from the rain. An awkward scramble would have taken too long to go unnoticed.

He swivelled left, then right, scrutinising every shadow and coming up empty. More walls. No doorways except for the one he had occupied. No short cuts. Nowhere to

hide three bodies.

The men should be lying on the ground unconscious or moaning in pain, yet nothing hinted at their existence.

“Hey, you!” A group of young studs looking a little worse for wear half jogged, half limped down the sidewalk. “Hold up.”

“How can I help you, gentlemen?” O’Reilly kept his tone easy, his body relaxed, but he removed his hands from the pockets of his coat to dangle them loosely at his sides.

The men looked out for a fight. O’Reilly hated fights. Didn’t mean he couldn’t hold his own. One against four, though? The odds didn’t look good.

“We’re looking for someone. Three someones actually. Male.” The biggest guy shot him an assessing glance. “You didn’t happen to see a group coming this way?” His eyes probed the street behind O’Reilly.

“Is that the lot who did this to you?” O’Reilly nodded at the guy’s blood-crusting nose. Another was holding his arm at an awkward angle. Two were limping. From what O’Reilly had seen of their quarry the men were lucky to be alive.

“Just answer my question, man. Do you know where they went?”

“Sorry, no idea.” Hunching his shoulders against the downpour turned drizzle but keeping his hands free in case the quartet decided to jump him anyway, O’Reilly started walking towards the mouth of the alleyway with unhurried strides. Behind him the men deliberated in urgent tones. They would have to sort out their business without him. O’Reilly had learned early in his career that taking sides when one didn’t have all the information was a foolish thing to do. That didn’t mean he wouldn’t do everything to satisfy his own curiosity.

He pushed his fists back into his pockets as he rounded the corner and headed to the heart of London’s West end where he shared offices with his partner.

His mind was still turning over every detail his subconscious had collected on the mysterious escapees when he shook the rain from his coat as he ascended the stairs.

All three of them had been uncommonly large. Two of them had had the added movement of fighters.

The largest of the men possessed the most confronting personality. From the golden hair that streamed like a flag behind him as he ran, to the smooth, catlike grace of his

movements, everything about him screamed confidence. But he wasn't the most dangerous. No, that would be the smallest in the group. Slim, he could be easily underestimated. That would be deadly.

This man's clothes had been dark. His hair had been inky black. Even under the flickering light his body had been barely more than a shadow. His weapon was stealth. He was dangerous like the edge of a blade.

The third man in the group was the least physically aggressive. Although that wasn't saying much, when compared to the other two. He had an air of carelessness that O'Reilly had a feeling was carefully cultivated, because underneath the man's cool exterior O'Reilly had sensed a strong personality. Unlike his companions this man got his way with words first, fists second. From the look of their pursuers words had failed to settle the dispute this time.

Again, O'Reilly wondered what had started the fight. Neither group had seemed particularly intoxicated, one of the preferred excuses for street-fights on a rainy Friday night. That, or a woman.

Pushing through the glass door to his office, O'Reilly pulled the fedora that had shielded him from the worst of the rain off his head.

"You're back." Ronnie, his long-time partner, was sitting at his desk despite the late hour, the obligatory coffee cup next to his elbow and within easy reach. "Anything new?"

"A few disappearances." O'Reilly tossed his wallet and keys onto the cluttered surface of his office desk. The mess was evidence of the case he had been working on, the same case that had sent him to the secluded alley.

O'Reilly huffed. He hadn't expected to break the case. Neither had he expected to come back with more unanswered questions than he had left with.

"More dogs?" Ronnie asked.

"Three men."

Ronnie looked up in surprise. "Unusual."

"You can say that." O'Reilly sank into his office chair, shaking his head when his partner lifted a brow.

He could fill in Ronnie on the particulars later. Once he knew what the particulars were.

Having worked alongside him for years Ronnie shrugged his shoulders and shot a file across the distance between the two desks. "Solved the poodle mystery."

Pausing in the act of logging on to his computer, O'Reilly grabbed the file and opened it. "The cousin stole the dog? They're living in the same house."

"Yep. Kept it in his room. Taped his mouth shut. Poor thing was only skin and bones when we found it."

"Sick bastard. What's wrong with letting it run around the garden?"

"With some people it's all about possession. He didn't want to share." Ronnie caught the file when O'Reilly sent it back the same way, then pushed out of his chair with a sigh. He took a sip of the cold coffee and grimaced, dropping the paper cup into the rubbish bin under his desk. "That's it for me for the day. Buy you a beer?"

"Another time."

"Suit yourself." He grabbed the tweed jacket off the hanger near the door and headed into the wet night.

Silence surrounded O'Reilly as he brought up CCTV coverage of the alleyway. A single camera was mounted on a pole at a ten feet distance from the wall.

He fast forwarded the time. Ten forty-one fifty, fifty one, fifty—

"Dammit."

The footage cut out just as the party passed underneath the pole. When the image blinked back on the alley was empty.

Knowing it was futile, O'Reilly rewound the footage again and again. When he was certain there wasn't a detail he hadn't memorised, he leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers behind his head.

The lack of evidence was maddening, but it confirmed his suspicion. Something dodgy was going on and he was going to find out what it was.

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