
THE
MONUMENT
Wren hid the truth in stone.
Someone is killing to keep it buried.
JONATHAN MOSS

Jonathan Moss

THE MONUMENT

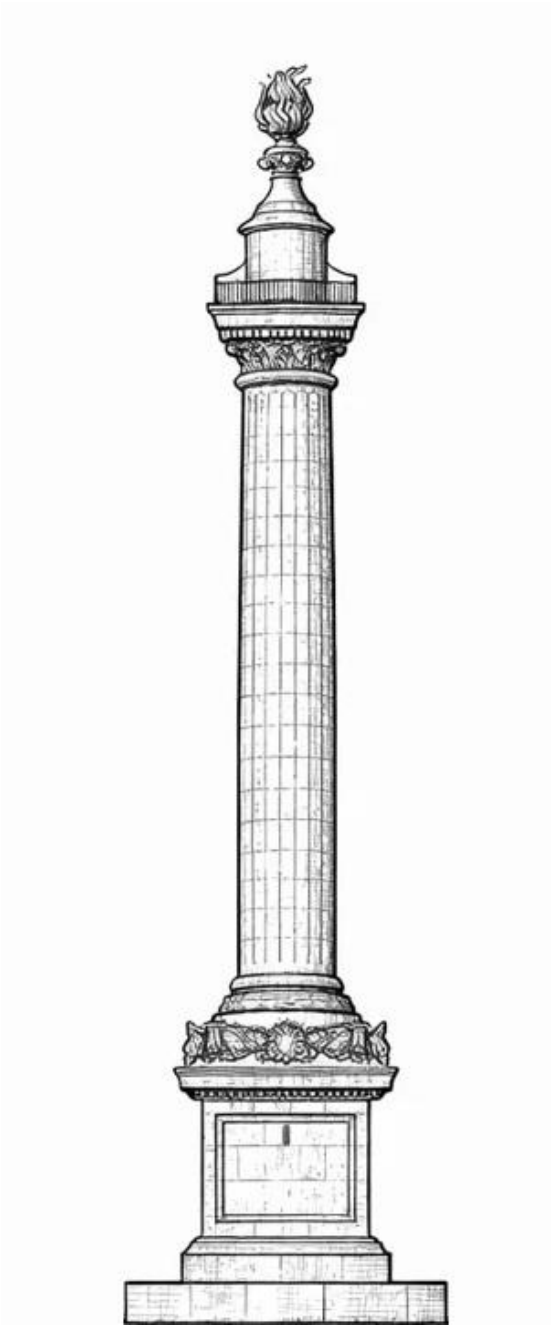
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Written by Jonathan Moss. Revised and edited with the assistance of Claude (Anthropic AI) for structural editing, continuity review, and prose refinement. All creative decisions, characters, plot, and original prose are the work of the author.

For my Mum, Patricia
who filled our home with books and love.

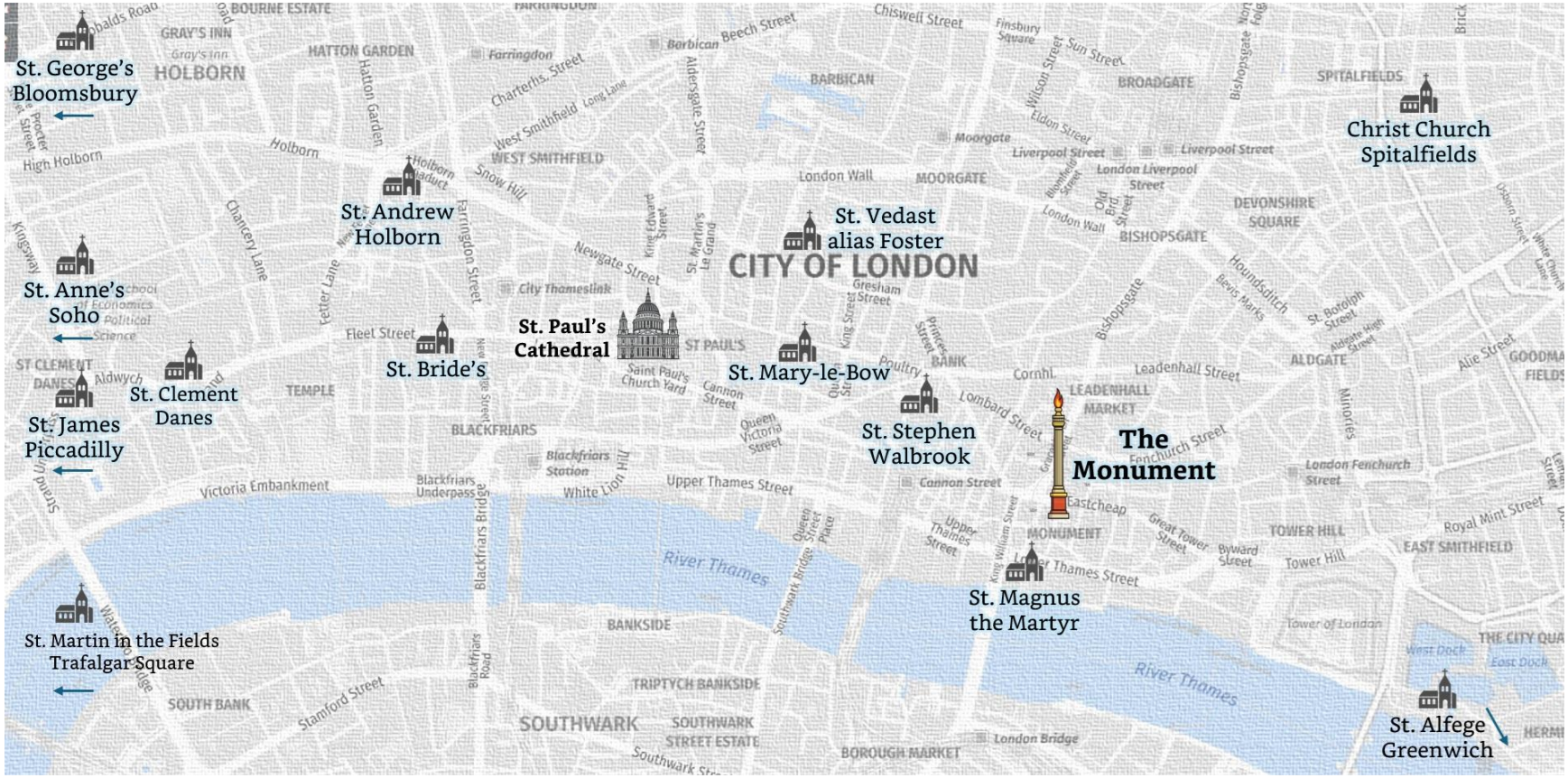


Truth endures beyond the grave

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PROLOGUE

CHRISTOPHER WREN
The Monument to the Great Fire
London, October 1677

No one could know what he was hiding.

Not the workers who'd excavated the foundation. Not the commissioners who'd approved The Monument's design. Certainly not the families whose fortunes depended on the evidence remaining buried.

Christopher Wren descended the ladder by candlelight into the chamber beneath The Monument, carrying a leather-bound journal and sealed parcels wrapped in oiled cloth. Eight feet square. Fresh mortar. The truth would wait.

In the sealed space beneath the Monument's foundation, he was hiding something far more dangerous than flame.

Above him, London slept. The Monument rose 202 feet into darkness, commemorating the fire that destroyed the city eleven years ago.

The copper cylinder felt heavy and cold in his hands. Inside were truths he could not speak. Observations proving the Earth moved

around the sun. Measurements proving certain men had moved property boundaries after fire consumed the city. Both secrets requiring astronomical precision. Both crimes against accepted truth.

One might someday be forgiven. The other would destroy families that controlled the rebuilding of London.

If such proof were discovered now, those men would see it buried again – along with anyone who tried to reveal them.

He positioned the cylinder in its niche, lined with lead to preserve it against time and moisture. Around it, he placed his journal and the instruments. The quadrant. The measuring chains. The astronomical tables. The tools that had made his testimony undeniable.

Fifty-two churches across London, each one positioned with coordinates marking what had been stolen.

Each one pointing here, to proof that would wait centuries for discovery.

Wren sealed the chamber with mortar mixed by his own hands, then climbed back toward the light.

Behind him, the truth settled into stone and silence.

Perhaps someone, someday, would find it.

ONE

OLIVIA HART
St. Paul's Cathedral, London
Present Day – Saturday, 11:47 PM

Three hundred and fifty years is a long time to keep a secret.

I watched the 3D point cloud render on my laptop screen, millions of data points painting a digital ghost of St. Paul's Cathedral. The laser scanner rotated silently on its tripod in the centre of the nave, its beam invisible but mapping every surface it could see. Every column, every arch, every decorative element captured with millimetre accuracy.

My survey was supposed to be routine. The company I was working for had contracted me to map historic buildings for earthquake resilience – a precaution everyone hoped was unnecessary, but no one wanted to skip. St. Paul's was site number fourteen of forty-seven. I'd already scanned the Tower of London, Westminster Abbey, and a dozen Wren churches without finding anything more exciting than a few unmapped Victorian drainpipes.

Tonight should have been the same.

The cathedral's silence pressed against my eardrums. At midnight, alone with a security guard dozing near the west entrance, the building felt less like architecture and more like a held breath.

The digital scanner completed its rotation with a soft beep. Eighty-three percent coverage. Good. One more position and I'd have a complete model of the foundation structure.

I moved the scanner to the south section of the crypt and started another scan. While the laser mapped the ancient stonework, I opened the comparison software and loaded Wren's original architectural drawings from the British Library's digital archive. The foundation plans from 1675 appeared on screen alongside my fresh scan data.

This was the part I loved. Overlaying present reality against historical intent. Seeing where three centuries of settling and repair had shifted things by inches.

The software began its comparison, highlighting discrepancies in green. Mostly expected variations. The foundation had settled on the east side. Some structural supports had been replaced, and a few walls showed the subtle thickness changes from twentieth-century stabilisation work.

Then a red flag appeared.

Red meant a significant structural anomaly. The software had detected something in the foundation wall that didn't match Wren's drawings.

I zoomed in. The foundation's massive stonework rendered beautifully in the point cloud. Load-bearing walls, massive

buttresses, all as Wren had designed them. But the wall thickness at one location registered wrong. Too thin by exactly eight feet.

I checked the scanner's calibration data. Perfect. No errors, no interference.

Which meant the anomaly was real.

I ran the comparison algorithm again, focusing solely on the foundation structure. The red flag persisted. Same location, same eight-foot discrepancy in wall thickness.

Not a measurement error. A void.

My pulse quickened. Buildings didn't lie. Either Wren's drawings were wrong – impossible – or something was sealed inside that wall.

I pulled up Wren's detailed drawings. The 1675 foundation plans, the 1697 amendments, the 1708 completion surveys. All showed continuous masonry at that location. No void. No chamber. No gap measuring eight feet on each side sealed within the foundation walls.

I opened the calculator app on my phone and converted the void's position to coordinates. Latitude: 51.5138 degrees north.

Halfway between the equator and the North Pole.

That couldn't be a coincidence.

I checked the void's orientation. Aligned to true north. The kind of precision that requires astronomical calculation, not guesswork.

My hands were shaking now. I pressed them flat against the keyboard until they steadied. The scanner beeped, indifferent to what it had just found.

I photographed the screen from multiple angles, then rotated the 3D model to examine the void from every direction. Eight feet on each side. Positioned in the foundation level approximately eighteen feet below ground. Not roughly eight feet. Exactly eight feet.

There. A subtle inconsistency in the foundation wall adjacent to the void. The laser data showed a section where the surface was smoother than the surrounding stone, as if something had been plastered over centuries ago. Possibly a filled-in access point.

“Buildings talk if you know how to listen, Liv. Every measurement tells a story.”

My father’s voice, clear as if he’d spoken aloud. He’d been a structural engineer too, and he’d taught me to read architecture the way others read books – to see the narrative in load-bearing walls and foundation depths. He’d died six years ago, officially from a heart attack.

I wondered what he would make of this.

The security guard’s radio crackled somewhere in the distance. I checked my watch. 12:17 AM. I’d been here for two and a half hours.

I should pack up. Go home. Write the preliminary report. Present the findings to Webb on Monday with proper documentation and recommendations.

Instead, I stood there staring at the red flag on my screen.

No.

I stopped myself. This wasn't my job. My contract was to map for seismic resilience, not to explore archaeological mysteries. And crawling through St. Paul's foundation passages at midnight, alone, looking for secret chambers was exactly the kind of reckless behaviour that got people killed in Victorian adventure novels.

I was a structural engineer, not Indiana Jones.

I saved the data to my USB drive, backed everything up to the cloud, and began packing away my equipment. The laser scanner folded into its transport case, cables coiled and secured.

Wren had been dead for centuries. Whatever he'd hidden had stayed hidden through Georgian England, Victorian expansion, two World Wars, and the Blitz. The cathedral had survived a thousand-pound bomb landing in the foundation.

And now, because of laser scanning and my obsessive need to understand why measurements didn't match drawings, the secret was visible.

What had Wren hidden that was worth hiding so carefully?

My phone buzzed. Text from Daniel, my brother:

`Still at work? Want me to wait up?`

I smiled despite myself. Daniel was twenty-one but still treated my late-night surveys like I was going off to war:

`Finishing now. Home in 40 minutes. Don't wait up.`

Okay. Did you find anything cool? Daniel replied.

I hesitated, fingers hovering over the keyboard. Daniel was autistic, brilliant, and obsessed with Christopher Wren. He worked as a tour guide at the Museum of London and could recite the construction dates of all fifty-two Wren churches. If anyone would understand the significance of a hidden chamber in St. Paul's, it was Daniel. But telling him now would mean he'd spend all night researching instead of sleeping.

Just foundations and crypts. Tell you about it tomorrow.

The lie sat there on the screen after I sent it, too clean, too easy. I stared at it, already wanting to take it back.

I finished packing, lifted the equipment case, and headed for the exit. The security guard barely looked up as I signed out and pushed through the heavy doors into the late winter night.

The taxi arrived. I gave the driver my address in Southwark and settled into the back seat, watching St. Paul's dome recede through the rear window.

The cathedral looked different now. Not a building, but a puzzle box. Somewhere inside it, Christopher Wren had hidden something he didn't want found.

Or maybe, I thought, remembering the precise positioning and deliberate orientation, he'd hidden something he did want found.

Just not yet.

*

The taxi dropped me outside my Southwark flat at ten past one. The building was a converted Victorian warehouse with exposed brick, industrial windows, and high ceilings. I'd always prized its structural honesty. No hidden spaces, no mysteries.

Tonight, that transparency felt oddly comforting.

The lift groaned its way to the third floor. Our flat was dark except for the blue glow of Daniel's computer monitor leaking under his bedroom door. So much for not waiting up.

I knocked softly. "Daniel? You should be asleep."

The door opened. My brother stood there in soft grey joggers and a Doctor Who T-shirt he'd owned since he was sixteen. His light brown hair stuck up at odd angles.

"You said forty minutes. It's been fifty-three." He didn't meet my eyes, but his tone was worried rather than accusatory.

"Traffic," I lied. "What are you working on?"

"Revising my tour script for St. Bride's. Did you know the crypt contains seven distinct archaeological layers? Roman pavement, Saxon foundations, medieval charnel house, Great Fire debris, Wren's construction, post-medieval burials, and Blitz damage. Seven complete historical periods in one location."

I smiled. Most people saw rubble and old stones. Daniel saw narrative, chronology, the mathematical beauty of accumulated time.

"That's fascinating. But it's one in the morning."

“I’m not tired.” He glanced at my equipment case. “You found something at St. Paul’s. You’re carrying the case differently.”

“Maybe,” I admitted. “I need to verify some readings before I’m sure.”

“What kind of readings?”

I hesitated.

“There’s a space in the structure,” I said. “Eight feet on each side. Exactly eight by eight by eight. It doesn’t appear on any of Wren’s drawings, but it is positioned in the foundation with perfect precision.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. He looked at me, which he only did when something truly excited him.

“Coordinates?”

“Fifty-one point five one three eight degrees north. Oriented to true north.”

He was already moving to his computer. “That’s halfway between the equator and the North Pole. Wren would have calculated that. He was Savilian Professor of Astronomy at Oxford before he became an architect. Mathematical precision was his signature.”

I set down my equipment and joined him at the desk. His screen displayed a digital overlay of St. Paul’s architectural plans.

“Show me where,” he said.

I pointed to the approximate location. Daniel zoomed in, comparing the position against three different sets of Wren's original drawings.

"It's not a construction error." He pointed to measurements I'd barely registered. "The surrounding masonry is symmetrical. If this void was accidental, the walls would be irregular. Wren was building around it."

"So, he meant it to be there."

"Obviously." Daniel pulled up another file. "Wren encoded meanings into his buildings. Mathematical ratios, geometric relationships, astronomical alignments. His churches aren't just architecture. They're arguments in stone. Look at the Monument to the Great Fire – 202 feet tall. The precise distance from its base to the bakery on Pudding Lane where the fire started. That's not decoration. That's data."

He paused. "If he was going to hide something, he'd use what he knew best. And he'd hide it where only someone who understood his language could find it."

"I need to review the data more," I said. "Make sure the readings are accurate before I report this to Dr. Webb."

"Dr. Webb knows Wren's work," Daniel said. "He'll understand the significance."

I hoped so. Marcus Webb had been my mentor since my first year of graduate school. He'd worked with my father decades ago. If anyone would take this seriously, it was him.

“I’ll show him Monday morning,” I said. “Right now, you need to sleep.”

Daniel nodded reluctantly. “Will you tell me what he says?”

“Of course.”

He stood, then paused at his bedroom door. “Olivia? If Wren hid something in St. Paul’s, it matters. He wouldn’t hide something trivial.”

“I know.”

After he closed his door, I made tea and opened my laptop at the kitchen table. The scan data loaded. I examined the void from every angle, measured its dimensions, calculated its volume.

Eight by eight by eight feet. Five hundred and twelve cubic feet. Large enough to hold a substantial amount of…what? Documents? Equipment? Treasure?

I pulled up St. Paul’s construction timeline. The dome was topped out in 1708, when the final stone was placed on the lantern. The cathedral wasn’t officially declared complete until Christmas Day 1711. Wren would have had time to seal the chamber and plaster over any access point before the final inspections.

But why?

I typed “Christopher Wren astronomy Royal Society” into Google. The results were immediate: Wren hadn’t just dabbled in science – he’d been one of the founding members of the Royal Society. And then I found it. In 1633, the Catholic Church had tried Galileo for heresy. His crime? Claiming the Earth moved around the Sun.

Even in Protestant England decades later, heliocentrism was dangerous ground – biblical scholars cited Joshua 10:13 as proof the Sun moved, not the Earth. Any scientist who pushed too far risked destruction.

I nervously pulled up the St. Paul's data again. The void's position, aligned to true north, halfway between equator and pole. Those weren't aesthetic choices. They were astronomical references.

A coordinate system frozen in architecture.

I checked the time. Nearly three in the morning.

I opened my email and composed a message to Dr. Webb:

Marcus,

Completed St. Paul's survey tonight. Found an anomaly in the foundation structure that needs discussion. Are you available for a brief meeting tomorrow (Sunday)? I can bring the data to your office.

Best, Olivia

My cursor hovered over 'Send' for a long moment. This felt like crossing a threshold. Once I involved Webb, this became official. Real. Something that would require explanation and documentation and possibly excavation.

I hit Send.

I should sleep. Instead, I pulled my father's watch from my pocket and studied its face. The hands had stopped at 3:47 AM – the exact moment his heart had stopped. I'd never had it repaired. The frozen time felt like a memorial.

Dad would have loved this mystery.

I wondered if he'd ever surveyed St. Paul's himself. His old project files were boxed up in my storage unit. I'd never gone through them. I couldn't bear to after he died.

My phone buzzed. Email notification.

I grabbed it, expecting an autoreply.

Instead, there was a response. Sent at 3:22 AM.

Olivia,

This is exactly the kind of anomaly I was hoping you'd find. Can you meet me at my office first thing tomorrow morning? Say 8:00 AM?

And Olivia – don't mention this to anyone else yet. Not until we've had a chance to verify the readings together.

Best, Marcus

I stared at the message.

'Hoping I'd find?'

I read the email again. Then a third time.

Hoping I'd find.

Not surprised. Not curious. *Hoping.*

Webb had not been surprised. He'd been expecting this, which meant he already knew about the void.

I pulled up the project file. Thirty-two of the forty-seven buildings on the survey list were designed by Christopher Wren. Not random at all. Someone had specifically wanted Wren's buildings surveyed. And Marcus Webb had personally assigned me to the project.

I stopped scrolling.

The email sat there.

Six days before he died.

"Working on something interesting. Wren's churches might be more than they appear. Will explain when I have proof."

I'd forgotten about that email. Or maybe I'd not thought about it, too painful to revisit in the aftermath of his death.

Now it felt like a warning.

My father had been investigating Wren's buildings. He'd died of a 'heart attack' before explaining what he'd found. And now Marcus Webb, who'd worked with my father, had engineered a survey that led me straight to a hidden chamber in St. Paul's.

Coincidence? Or something else?

I had already backed up the data to a cloud server Webb didn't have access to and created copies on two USB drives. One I hid in my desk drawer. The other I slipped into my pocket.

If this was nothing, I'd feel foolish on Monday.

If this was something, I wanted insurance.

Outside my window, London was beginning to wake. Streetlights clicked off. Early delivery trucks rumbled past.

I thought about Wren sealing a chamber so long ago and trusting that someday, someone would have the tools to find it.

Maybe that someone was me.

Or maybe I'd just stumbled onto something I didn't understand – something that had already cost my father his life.

I set my alarm for 7:00 AM.

Then I did something I never did. I locked my bedroom door.



"St. Paul's Cathedral, designed by Sir Christopher Wren, 1675-1710"

TWO

CHRISTOPHER WREN
Oxford
September 3, 1666

The smoke was visible from Oxford, thirty miles distant.

Christopher Wren stood at the window of his chambers at All Souls College, watching the eastern sky turn the colour of a bruised plum. Even at this distance, the glow beneath the smoke told him London was burning. Not a ward or a parish, but something vast. Something that would change everything.

He was thirty-three years old, Savilian Professor of Astronomy, a mathematician of some reputation, and an architect of almost none. One week ago, King Charles had approved his design for a new dome on St. Paul's Cathedral. A modest commission, really. Repairs to a medieval ruin.

Now that ruin was likely ash.

A college servant appeared, breathless in the doorway.

"Professor Wren, sir. News from London. They're saying it's consumed Cheapside, Cornhill, the Exchange. St. Paul's is…" The

man’s voice faltered. “They say the stones are exploding from the heat.”

Wren’s mind calculated automatically. Portland limestone, subjected to extreme heat, undergoes thermal decomposition. The calcium carbonate breaks down, releasing carbon dioxide, and the crystalline structure fractures violently. The cathedral he’d been commissioned to save was destroying itself.

“Saddle my horse,” he whispered. “I leave within the hour.”

“Sir, the roads will be choked with refugees. You’ll never reach the city.”

“Then I’ll go around them.”

Bateman hesitated at the door. “Professor, forgive me, but why? There’s nothing to be done. You can’t put out a fire that size. No one can.”

Wren turned back to the window, to that terrible glow. “No,” he agreed. “But someone must bear witness, and someone must think about what comes after.”

*

He reached the outskirts of London just after dawn on September fourth, his horse lathered and trembling. The city was still burning. Smoke rose in columns thick enough to blot out the morning sun, and the air tasted like destruction. Charred paper fell like black snow, carried on winds hot enough to sear his throat.

Refugees streamed past him on the road, carrying what they could save. A woman clutched a birdcage with no bird in it. An old man dragged a trunk that left a trail in the ash-covered mud.

By noon, he'd made his way to Ludgate Hill – or what remained of it.

St. Paul's Cathedral stood before him like a vision from Revelation. The roof had collapsed, sending flaming timbers down into the nave. The scaffolding he'd commissioned for the dome repairs had become kindling. Through shattered windows, he could see the interior glowing red. The lead on the roof was melting, running down the walls in silver rivers, pooling in the streets where it cooled into grotesque sculptures.

He'd been right about the stones. They were splitting with sounds like gunfire, the heat differential between surface and core tearing the limestone apart. Centuries of history reduced to rubble and memory.

He stood there watching his commission burn. The stones were splitting like musket shots. The lead was running silver into the streets.

A city destroyed was also a city that could be rebuilt.

And he was a man who knew how to build.

*

For six days, Wren walked the smoking ruins.

He carried a notebook, a measuring tape, a surveying instrument of his own design. While the city smouldered, he mapped the

devastation with methodical precision. Four hundred and thirty-six acres. Thirteen thousand two hundred houses. Eighty-seven parish churches. The Guildhall. The Royal Exchange. The ancient wharves where London had traded with the world.

Gone.

But the foundations remained. The crypts. The old Roman walls in places. The bones of the city, waiting for new flesh.

On September eleventh, he presented his rebuilding plan to King Charles at Whitehall Palace. Wide boulevards radiating from central plazas. A rational city replacing the medieval tangle. Rome reborn on the Thames.

The King received it graciously. Praised his ingenuity. Promised to consider it.

Wren knew it would never be built. Property rights, ancient grievances, the sheer logistics of displacing thousands of landowners. His beautiful rational city would die on paper, killed by the messy reality of English law. But that didn't mean he couldn't build something else.

That night, in his rented rooms near Westminster, Wren sat at a table covered with drawings. His dome design for St. Paul's. Sketches of parish churches. Measurements of the burned area. And beside them, something new: calculations. Astronomical observations he and Robert Hooke had been making for the past year.

Stellar parallax. The tiny apparent shift in distant stars' positions as Earth moved through its orbit. Proof, if the measurements were

precise enough, that Copernicus had been right. The Earth moved. The sun stood still. The cosmos was not what the Church claimed.

Wren picked up his pen and began to write.

Robert,

The city is gone but we can build it anew. Not stones and mortar, but something more. You know what we've discovered. You know what it means. And you know what would happen if we published.

He paused, thinking of Galileo. The trial. The recantation. House arrest until death. That was the price of challenging doctrine with truth.

But what if we don't publish? What if we preserve?

Eighty-seven churches must be rebuilt. Each one will be designed from its foundations up. Each one will have measurements, proportions, orientations that we control. If we are clever – if we are really clever – we can encode what we know into the architecture itself. Truth preserved in stone. Visible only to anyone with the tools to measure and the wit to calculate.

The King wants me to design the new St. Paul's. I'll need a decade at least, perhaps three. Time enough to build not a cathedral, but a cipher. A puzzle that will wait for future generations, when instruments are better and minds are freed from the tyranny of doctrine.

Come to London, Robert. Help me turn this ash into truth.

C.W.

He sealed the letter and set it aside. Tomorrow, he would give it to a messenger. Tonight, he had work to do.

Wren pulled out a fresh sheet of paper and began sketching. Not a church. Not yet. First, he needed the key. The thing that would tell future discoverers where to look, what to measure, how to decode what he was about to build.

A monument. Something so obvious, so public, that it would stand for centuries without question. Tall enough to see from across the city. Precise enough to function as an instrument. Built not to commemorate the past, but to preserve the future.

Two hundred and two feet he wrote.

The exact distance from the planned Monument's base to where the fire began in Pudding Lane. A memorial in numbers. A coordinate frozen in stone.

But also, something more. Beneath it, in the foundations where no one would think to look until they had reason, a vault. Small. Sealed. Containing what could not yet be said aloud: that humanity lived on a planet that moved through endless dark, that the Earth was not the centre of all creation, that observable truth trumped comfortable lies.

Wren worked through the night, his candle burning down to a stub, his hand cramping around the pen. Outside, London smouldered. Inside, he was building something that would outlast them all.

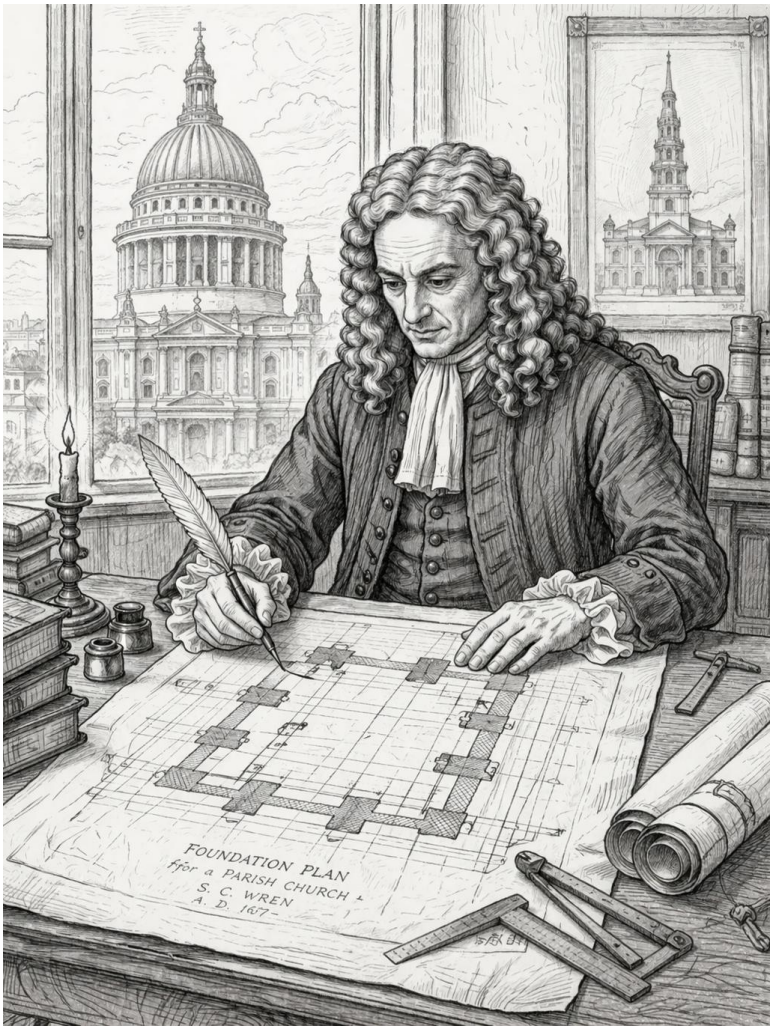
If he was careful, he could hide truth into the bones of the city. Where it would wait for someone clever enough to find it.

Someone with tools he couldn’t yet imagine. Someone brave enough to listen to what the stones were saying.

He thought of that future discoverer and felt a strange kinship across the centuries. A conversation delayed but not denied. Truth hidden but not lost.

The foundation would be his vault. The city, his cipher. The churches, his map.

Wren smiled and returned to his calculations.



THREE

OLIVIA HART
Marcus Webb's Office, Bloomsbury
Present Day – Sunday, 8:03 AM

Webb's office building is the kind of converted Georgian townhouse that makes structural engineers weep with joy. Original load-bearing walls, preserved ceiling medallions, floors that have settled into comfortable angles over three centuries. I've been coming here since I was a graduate student.

The building is empty on Sunday, as I expected. I use my key card to access the stairwell, my footsteps echoing in the silence. An empty academic building on a Sunday has a particular quality. The heating on minimum, the air still, the smell of old paper and carpet slightly more concentrated without the human presence to dilute it.

Like a held breath.

My equipment case feels heavier than it should. Inside is my laptop, backup drives, the scans that show what Christopher Wren hid beneath St. Paul's three and a half centuries ago.

And the nagging question that kept me awake the rest of the night. Why did Webb say he was hoping I'd find this?

I reach the third floor at 8:03 AM. Webb's office door is already open. Light spills into the hallway, warm and inviting. I should feel reassured. Instead, my pulse quickens.

"Olivia." Webb appears in the doorway before I can knock. "Come in, come in."

He looks terrible. Dr. Marcus Webb is normally the picture of professorial composure. Pressed shirts, reading glasses on a chain, hair that's more salt than pepper but always neatly trimmed. This morning, his shirt is rumpled, his eyes shadowed. He looks like he hasn't slept.

"Are you alright?" I ask.

"Fine, fine. Just up late reviewing some calculations." He gestures me inside. "Coffee?"

"Please."

His office is as I remember. Drafting table by the window, walls covered with framed cross-sections of Victorian buildings, bookshelves sagging under the weight of engineering manuals. The coffee maker gurgles in the corner, filling the room with familiar warmth.

Webb pours two cups with hands that aren't quite steady. "So, St. Paul's."

I set my equipment case on his desk and open my laptop. "The scan data is remarkable. The anomaly in the foundations is carefully positioned, engineered. It can't be a construction error."

"Show me."

I pull up the 3D model, rotate it to display the void. Webb leans close, studying the screen. For a moment, he's the mentor I've always known. Focused. Analytical. Then his jaw tightens.

"The coordinates are what convinced me," I continue. "Fifty-one point five one three eight degrees north. Halfway between the equator and the North Pole. And the orientation to true north, compensating for magnetic declination in 1675. Wren would have needed to calculate that."

Webb doesn't respond. He's staring at the screen, but his eyes have gone distant.

"Marcus? Did you hear me?"

He blinks. Sits back. "Yes. Yes, I heard you." His voice is flat.

"Olivia, I need you to delete this data."

I nearly drop my coffee. "What?"

"Delete it. All of it. The scans, the analysis, everything." He won't meet my eyes. "It's a measurement error. Equipment malfunction. The scanner's calibration must have been off."

"I checked the calibration three times. The readings are accurate."

"Then it's a software glitch. The comparison algorithm interpreting shadows as voids."

"Marcus, you can see the wall thickness differential. Eight feet. That's not a shadow or a glitch."

He stands abruptly, walks to the window. His shoulders are rigid, hands clasped behind his back. "Sometimes old buildings have

settling patterns that create false positives in laser scanning. Air pockets, temperature differentials between materials. You're seeing an artifact, not an actual void."

This is insane. Marcus Webb doesn't dismiss data. He's the one who taught me to trust measurements over assumptions, to follow evidence wherever it leads. The man who spent six months verifying a single structural calculation because the numbers didn't align.

"You don't believe that." I say.

Silence.

Outside, London is waking up. Sunday morning traffic, distant church bells. Inside this office, my mentor stands frozen at the window, refusing to look at me.

"Marcus, what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on. I'm telling you to delete your corrupted data and move on to the next survey. That's all." His expression is neutral, but something flickers in his eyes. Fear? "This isn't worth pursuing, Olivia. Trust me on this."

"You specifically assigned me to survey Wren's buildings. Thirty-two of them. That's not random."

"It's a representative sample of historically significant structures."

"It's a targeted search." I close my laptop and watch his reaction. "You were looking for something. And I found it. That's what your email meant, isn't it? You were hoping I'd find this because you already suspected it was there."

Webb's face drains of colour. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Then why did you respond to my email at three in the morning? Why did you tell me not to mention this to anyone? Why are you lying to me right now?"

The word hangs between us. Lying. I've never accused my mentor of dishonesty before. Never had reason to.

Webb sinks into his chair. For a long moment, he says nothing. When he speaks, his voice is barely above a whisper. "You need to delete the data and forget about this. For your own safety."

The floor seems to tilt. "My safety?"

"I can't explain. Just..." He looks up at me, and now I see it clearly. Not guilt. Terror. "Please, Olivia. Delete it and walk away."

My phone vibrates. Text from Daniel:

`Are you showing Webb the data? What did he say?`

I silence the phone, mind racing. Webb won't meet my eyes.

The man who drilled *precision* into me. Who never ignored data.

Now he wants it deleted.

"I need to think about this," I say, keeping my voice level. "Give me some time to review the equipment logs, verify there wasn't a malfunction."

His shoulders drop a fraction. "Yes. Good. Take all the time you need."

He stands again, moves toward the door. Herding me out. “And Olivia? Maybe don’t work on St. Paul’s for a few days. Focus on the other sites. Clear your head.”

I pack my equipment, buying time to think. Webb hovers near the door, anxious for me to leave. This man mentored me through graduate school. Worked with my father. He even wrote the recommendation that got me this job.

He’s trying to protect me from something.

Or he’s part of it.

“I’ll be in touch,” I say at the door.

“Good. Yes. And Olivia?” He catches my arm. His grip is gentle but urgent. “Be careful.”

Then he closes the door, and I’m alone in the hallway.

I don’t move for a full minute. Just stand there, listening to the old building settle around me, trying to make sense of what just happened.

My phone buzzes again. Another text from Daniel:

`Well???`

I type back

`Later. Something’s wrong.`

Three dots appear. Disappear. Then

`Wrong how?`

`Tell you when I get home.`

I descend the stairs, thinking. Webb wanted me to find the void. Now he wants it gone.

He lied. And he was afraid when he did it.

I reach the ground floor and push through the building's front door into grey London morning. A chilly wind cuts through my jacket. I pull out my phone, open the cloud backup, verify all the St. Paul's data is safely stored on servers Webb can't access.

Then I start walking. No destination in mind. Just moving, thinking, trying to piece together what I know.

Wren hid something.

Dad was looking for it.

Webb sent me straight to it, and now he's scared.

Someone is watching.

I stop walking.

That last thought crystallized from nowhere, but now I can't shake it. The prickling sensation between my shoulder blades. The sense of being observed.

I turn, scanning the street. Early morning dog walkers, a woman jogging past, a black sedan parked across the street. A normal Sunday morning in Bloomsbury. No one obviously watching me.

But the feeling persists.

My phone buzzes. Unknown number.

I stare at the screen, heart hammering. Unknown callers on a Sunday morning rarely mean good news. I almost don't answer. Then curiosity wins.

"Hello?"

Silence. Background noise. Traffic? Breathing?

"Hello?" I repeat.

The line goes dead.

Wrong number, probably. Or spam. But my hands are shaking as I pocket the phone.

I need to go home. Talk to Daniel. Figure out what to do next. The Tube station is two blocks away.

I make it half a block before my phone rings again. Webb's number this time.

"Marcus?"

"Olivia." His voice is different now. Urgent, breathless. "You were right. I'm sorry. I should have told you the truth from the beginning." Words tumbling out fast. "Meet me tonight. 9:00 PM. The Monument. Bring all the scans, everything you have. There's something you need to see."

"What? Marcus, slow down. What's going on?"

"I can't talk now. Not on the phone. Just meet me there. The Monument, 9:00 PM. And Olivia?" A pause. "Don't tell anyone where you're going. Anyone."

The line goes dead. Silence.

I stand on the pavement; my phone still pressed to my ear. Around me, London continues its Sunday morning routine, oblivious.

The Monument.

Where Christopher Wren built a memorial to the Great Fire, 202 feet tall, marking the precise distance to where the flames began.

And where, according to my father's last journal entry, Wren hid something worth killing for.

FOUR

SIR JAMES FAIRCHILD
The Athenaeum Club to Cornerstone Offices
Present Day – Sunday, 1:15 PM

The reading room of the Athenaeum Club had not changed in one hundred and fifty years. Leather chairs, oil paintings, the smell of old money and older power.

He arrived at quarter past one, as arranged. The Sunday afternoon meeting had been called with less than twelve hours' notice, but all the necessary parties had cleared their schedules. Some threats demanded immediate coordination.

Reginald Walker was already there, seventy-three, chairman of Templar Holdings. His property portfolio worth sixty billion, much of it resting on seventeenth-century land grants. He looked up as Fairchild approached.

"James. Thank you for calling this together." Walker's voice carried the somewhat distinctive accent that came from Eton and Oxford and centuries of inherited wealth. "I assume we have a situation?"

“We do.” Fairchild settled into the adjacent chair. “The Hart girl has made a discovery. One that could prove problematic.”

“Thomas Hart’s daughter?” A new voice. Fairchild turned to see Lord Pembroke approaching, trailed by his lawyer. The Pembroke family had held their hereditary peerage for three centuries; all built on estates surveyed in the 1680s using instruments whose accuracy they could not afford to be questioned. “I thought that was resolved six years ago.”

“Her father was resolved. She’s continuing his research.” Fairchild accepted a whisky from a club steward without asking. “She’s discovered architectural anomalies in St. Paul’s Cathedral. Sealed chambers that shouldn’t exist according to official records.”

The three other men who’d been waiting moved closer. Sir Edward Thorne, representing the Church Commissioners. David Cartwright, QC, the legal mind who’d been advising families like theirs for forty years. And James Blackwood, whose firm managed Crown estate properties worth a hundred billion pounds.

All of them with interests that depended on historical property surveys remaining unquestioned.

At the core were four families whose ancestors had orchestrated everything: Fairchilds, Pembrokes, Ashtons, and Greys. Fourteen billion pounds across their combined portfolios, every pound built on land grants and surveys since the decade after the Fire.

But the dependency extended far beyond the original four. Church properties, Crown estates, hereditary trusts – hundreds of billions in assets, all vulnerable if seventeenth-century surveys were proven fraudulent.

Lord Pembroke represented his family's interests today, as Fairchild did for his own. Henry Grey had sent his usual proxy, preferring distance from direct involvement.

But Victoria Ashton was present.

She arrived late, her entrance deliberate and disruptive. Impeccably dressed in Chanel, and with the kind of cold precision that came from running a real estate empire built on ruthless efficiency. She didn't apologize for her tardiness. Victoria Ashton never apologized.

"Gentlemen." She took a seat without waiting for invitation. "I've reviewed the situation briefing. One structural engineer with a laser scanner, and we're holding a Sunday afternoon emergency meeting? This should have been resolved before I needed to hear about it."

Fairchild kept his expression neutral. The Ashton family had always been the most aggressive of the four founding families. Victoria was continuing that tradition.

"We're developing a comprehensive strategy," he said.

"Strategy?" Victoria's tone made it sound like weakness. "Thomas Hart was a 'strategy'. He died, and now his daughter picks up where he left off. I'd call that a failure, not a strategy."

She stood abruptly, collecting her Chanel handbag. "I have more important things to do than sit through another planning session. Handle this, James. Eliminate the threats. I expect results, not meetings."

She walked out without waiting for a response. The door closed behind her with a decisive click.

Fairchild reached for his whisky.

He waited until her footsteps faded before continuing. He turned to the broader group. “Let me explain the specifics of what we’re facing.”

“What kind of specifics?” Thorne asked. “St. Paul’s has been studied extensively. Surely any structural irregularities would have been documented.”

“Not if Wren hid them.” Fairchild pulled out his phone, displayed the summary Richardson had prepared. “Olivia Hart is a structural engineer specializing in historic preservation. She’s been conducting laser surveys of Wren’s churches. Last night, she found a void in St. Paul’s basement. Eight feet square, positioned with mathematical precision.”

He let that information settle.

Cartwright spoke first. “One void proves nothing. Old buildings have air pockets, settlement gaps, construction artifacts.”

“True. But this void is positioned at exact astronomical coordinates. Fifty-one point five one three eight degrees north – London’s latitude calculated with astronomical precision. And aligned to true north, not magnetic north. That level of accuracy in 1675 required instruments and knowledge beyond conventional surveying.”

Fairchild set down his whisky. “Her father believed Wren encoded astronomical data into the positioning of his fifty-two churches.

That each one marks specific stellar coordinates, forming a map of the heavens as observed from a moving Earth."

Silence.

"Heliocentrism," Pembroke said. "Encoded into sacred architecture. Heresy hidden in plain sight."

"Not heresy. Proof." Fairchild leaned forward.

"If Wren made accurate astronomical observations in the 1670s and used them to position his buildings, those observations would be more precise than the navigational calculations used for contemporary property surveys. Every boundary drawn from that period becomes questionable."

"How inaccurate?" Blackwood's voice was sharp.

"We don't know until we see Wren's actual data. But even small deviations, compounded over three centuries, could shift property boundaries by meters. Maybe more."

Walker set down his reading glasses. "Gentlemen, I think we should be clear about what Sir James is telling us. If this young woman proves that Christopher Wren possessed astronomical instruments and knowledge superior to what was officially available in his time, and used that knowledge for precise positioning, then every property survey conducted in London between 1666 and, what, 1750? All of them become questionable."

"The legal implications would be catastrophic," Cartwright agreed. "Boundary disputes on a scale we've never seen. Challenges to deeds that have stood for hundreds of years."

Thorne looked pained. “The Church holds vast properties deeded in that period. If boundaries were drawn using faulty surveys…”

“Then billions of pounds in assets become contested,” Fairchild said. “Across Church properties, Crown estates, hereditary trusts. Decades of litigation. At best. At worst, a complete redefinition of property ownership in London.”

The room fell silent. Outside the tall windows, Sunday afternoon traffic moved along Pall Mall.

“What does she have?” Pembroke asked. “Besides one void in one building?”

“Currently? The St. Paul’s scan data. Her father’s research notes, which document his theory about the astronomical encoding pattern. And she’s in contact with Marcus Webb, who has been... cooperative with us in the past.”

“Webb?” Walker’s tone hardened. “The preservation engineer who helped manage her father’s investigation?”

“The same. He provided us with advance warning when Thomas Hart got too close. Allowed us to intervene before Hart could go public.” Fairchild paused. “However, Webb has now become a liability. The daughter showed him her St. Paul’s findings this morning. He attempted to dissuade her, but a few hours later he contacted her again. He wants to meet tonight. Says he has something to show her.”

“Webb’s conscience is troubling him,” Cartwright observed. “Guilt over the father’s death, perhaps.”

“Either way, he’s become unpredictable.”

Thorne shifted uncomfortably. “Are we discussing what I think we’re discussing?”

“We’re discussing managing a threat to billions of pounds in property assets.” Fairchild met everyone’s eyes in turn. “Thomas Hart was one researcher pursuing a theory. Easily discredited, easily stopped. His daughter is more problematic. She has modern technology, professional credentials, and physical evidence. But she’s still containable. Webb, however, has forty years of experience, institutional credibility, and detailed knowledge of which churches are most likely to contain evidence. If he decides to actively assist the daughter’s investigation, the situation escalates significantly.”

Blackwood spoke. “You’re proposing we handle this permanently.”

“I’m proposing we discuss all options for neutralizing the immediate threat while developing a longer-term strategy for the broader problem.”

He lifted his whisky. Let the silence settle.

“Webb can be managed. The question is how we handle the daughter, the evidence she’s already collected, and the possibility that she continues investigating.”

Pembroke looked around the reading room. “What’s our precedent? We’ve faced challenges before.”

“The 1950s,” Walker said. “A historian researching the Monument’s foundation. Got too close to discovering the sealed

chamber. Fortunately, he was elderly and in poor health. Natural causes were easily arranged."

The casual recitation would have shocked most people.

Fairchild signaled for another whisky.

"So, we have precedent," he summarized. "The question is methodology. Thomas Hart's death was resolved. Can we use a similar approach for Webb?"

"What are the risks?" Blackwood asked.

"Moderate. Webb is sixty-seven, diabetic, hypertensive. Richardson has methods that can resolve the situation."

"And the daughter?"

"More problematic. She's young, healthy, high-profile. Her death would draw attention, especially coming so soon after her father's. We need to exhaust other options first."

Thorne leaned forward. "Such as?"

"Discredit her," Fairchild said. "Methodology, bias, equipment error. We arrange a peer review that dismantles her findings before she can build support."

"That requires time," Cartwright noted. "How long before she gathers more evidence?"

"Unknown. With Webb's keys, she has access to most of the city's churches. If she's methodical, she could verify her father's pattern within weeks."

“Then we need to slow her down.” Walker’s fingers drummed on the arm of his chair. “Webb is the immediate priority. Remove his ability to assist her. Then focus on containing the daughter’s investigation while we prepare the longer-term discrediting campaign.”

“Agreed,” Pembroke said. “We’ll deal with Webb tonight. Make it clean, make it look natural.”

Thorne nodded reluctantly. “The Church Commissioners will support whatever narrative is necessary.”

Blackwood’s expression was grim. “The Crown estate is prepared to contribute financially to the resolution of this matter. Whatever resources are required.”

Fairchild looked at Cartwright. “Legal perspective?”

“If she goes public with insufficient evidence, we destroy her credibility through orthodox legal challenges. If she gathers compelling evidence before we can stop her, we’ll need to shift strategy to managing the fallout. Prolonged litigation, expert witnesses challenging her methodology, years of legal warfare that exhausts her resources.”

Cartwright pulled out a small notebook. “Either way, I’ll prepare contingency briefings for all affected parties.”

“Cost estimate for full legal defence?” Walker asked.

“Across all affected properties? Could run to two hundred million pounds if the litigation is extensive.”

“Split among the stakeholders, that’s manageable,” Pembroke said. “We’ll divide the costs proportionally to asset vulnerability.”

“I’ll prepare the cost-sharing structure,” Cartwright said.

Fairchild looked around the reading room. The oil paintings. The leather chairs. The men who’d cleared their Sunday afternoons without hesitation.

Some would call it conspiracy. They called it responsible stewardship.

“Then we’re agreed,” Fairchild summarized. “Webb is handled tonight. The daughter’s investigation is slowed through access denial and equipment problems. We prepare legal and public relations strategies for potential exposure. And we monitor the situation daily, escalating our response as necessary.”

Nods around the room. Agreement without need for formal votes.

“One more consideration,” Thorne said. “The Monument development. Cornerstone’s construction project.”

“Scheduled to begin in two weeks,” Fairchild confirmed. “Pile drivers will breach the foundation chamber within days of starting work. Whatever Wren sealed there in 1677 will either be extracted or destroyed in the construction process.”

“Can you accelerate the timeline?”

“We’re already working on it. If permits can be expedited, we could start in ten days. Less time for the Hart girl to gather evidence, more pressure on her investigation.”

“The Church Commissioners can facilitate permits,” Thorne said. “I’ll ensure there are no bureaucratic delays.”

“Appreciated.”

Walker stood, prompting the others to rise as well. “Gentlemen, I think we understand the situation and our respective roles. Sir James, you’ll handle the immediate operational matters?”

“Yes. Richardson will manage Webb’s elimination. I’ll personally oversee the daughter’s containment strategy.”

“Keep us informed. Daily updates on significant developments.” Walker collected his coat. “And James, I trust I don’t need to emphasize how important it is that this situation is resolved. The families represented in this room have protected these assets for generations. We will not be the generation that loses them to a crusading engineer with a laser scanner.”

“Understood.”

The group dispersed gradually. Pembroke paused to shake Fairchild’s hand.

“Your grandfather managed a similar situation in the fifties. Efficiently, from what I understand.” Pembroke’s grip was firm. “I trust the family tradition continues.”

“It does.”

*

His driver was waiting at the prearranged location. The Bentley pulled smoothly into traffic, carrying him northeast toward Canary

Wharf. Fairchild arrived at Cornerstone Heritage Properties at 3:07 PM.

Sunday afternoon meant skeleton staff, which suited his purposes. Some conversations were better conducted in private.

He took the private lift to the top floor, where the boardroom occupied the entire south-facing wall. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the Thames.

London spread below him, three centuries of construction built on foundations that rested on seventeenth-century surveys. Surveys that Christopher Wren's astronomical precision could prove inaccurate.

Richardson was waiting, as instructed. Former Metropolitan Police, now head of corporate security for Cornerstone.

"The stakeholder meeting concluded satisfactorily?" Richardson asked.

"Unanimous agreement. Webb is the immediate priority. Timeline for elimination?"

"Tonight. Sunday evening, fewer witnesses. He typically works late at his office on weekends, leaves around seven. We can intercept him enroute to the Monument, where he's supposed to meet the Hart girl at nine."

Fairchild walked to the windows. "Make it look like random violence. Nothing that suggests intent."

Richardson nodded. "Understood."

"And make it clean," Fairchild added. "No connection to us."

“The Hart girl will suspect.”

“Let her suspect. Suspicion without proof is paranoia. And a young woman whose father died mysteriously and whose mentor was murdered will be easy to paint as unstable.”

“She showed Webb the St. Paul’s scan data this morning. Our sources indicate she backed up everything to cloud servers before the meeting.”

Of course she did. Thomas Hart’s daughter would be thorough. The father had been meticulous to the point of obsession. It’s what had made him dangerous.

History repeating itself.

“Has she made contact with anyone who could corroborate her findings?”

“Not yet. She’s isolated. Single. Primary caregiver for her autistic younger brother. Limited social circle.”

“Keep her isolated,” Fairchild said. “Monitor communications. If she reaches out to anyone who can give her credibility, we shut it down.”

“How?”

“Depends on the target. Academics can be discredited or bought. Journalists can be threatened or sued. The key is preventing her from building a coalition of credible supporters.” Fairchild returned to his desk. “What’s her likely next move?”

“Unknown. With Webb dead, she loses her primary contact. She’ll be frightened. But if she’s determined to continue her father’s work, she’ll need to survey more churches to verify the pattern.”

“Then we make that difficult. Webb’s keys give her access. After tonight, we change locks on the priority sites. St. Bride’s, St. Stephen Walbrook, St. Magnus the Martyr. The churches her father identified as most likely to contain evidence. Force her to seek official permission, which we can delay or deny through our contacts at the Church Commissioners.”

“That slows her but doesn’t stop her.”

“No. But it buys time. Time for the Monument development to proceed. Time for our legal and PR strategies to prepare. Time for her to make mistakes.” Fairchild checked his watch. 3:15 PM. “Execute the operation on Webb tonight. Report back when it’s done. I want confirmation by 10:00 PM.”

“Understood.”

Richardson left. Fairchild stood alone in the boardroom, looking out at London in the afternoon light. The city that Christopher Wren had rebuilt after fire, encoding secrets into every stone.

Olivia Hart was about to learn what happened to people who asked dangerous questions. Her father had learned it too late. She would learn it in time to choose.

Stop investigating or join her father.

By tomorrow morning, Marcus Webb would be dead.

And Olivia Hart would be alone.

FIVE

OLIVIA HART
The Monument to the Great Fire of London
Present Day – Sunday, 8:47 PM

I arrive early. Thirteen minutes early, to be precise.

The Monument rises two hundred and two feet into the night, white Portland stone glowing pale orange under the streetlights. During the day, tourists climb the 311 spiral steps for views across the city, from a gallery 160 feet up, caged in steel mesh.

At night, it stands alone, a silent witness to three and a half centuries of secrets.

I position myself near the base where Webb said to meet.

The Monument is different at night. Winged stone dragons crouch at the corners of the pedestal, black against the streetlight. During the day it's a tourist destination, something to photograph and climb. At night it's simply massive. I feel its scale without looking at it. A cold that comes from the stone itself, not the air.

Monument Street is quiet on a Sunday evening.

I check my phone.

8:48 PM

Webb should arrive in twelve minutes. Maybe less if he's as anxious as he sounded on the phone this morning.

I have something to show you. Something you need to see.

The wind picks up, cutting through my jacket. I pull it tighter and pace a small circuit around the base of the Monument. The inscription faces me, carved Latin recording that the Great Fire began 202 feet to the east, a distance equal to the column's own height. A memorial frozen in mathematics.

On another face, the Latin names the builders: seven lord mayors, each with his knighthood and his year. Not one architect.

But also, if my father was right, something more. A marker. A zenith point. The convergence of everything Wren encoded into London's rebuilt architecture.

8:52 PM

A taxi passes, slows, continues. Not Webb.

I try his mobile. It rings four times, goes to voicemail. His professional greeting in that measured academic tone: "Marcus Webb. Please leave a message."

"Marcus, it's Olivia. I'm at the Monument. Just confirming you're still coming."

I hang up, pocket the phone.

8:55 PM

Two women walk past, arm in arm, laughing about something. They don't glance at me. Why would they? Just another person waiting near a monument on a Sunday night.

But I'm not waiting for a friend or a date.

I'm waiting for my mentor to explain why he tried to get me to delete the most important architectural discovery in three centuries.

The wind gusts again, stronger this time. It whistles around the Monument's column, creating a low moan that sounds almost human. I shiver, tell myself it's the cold.

9:00 PM

Webb should be here.

I scan the approaches. Monument Street from the north. Pudding Lane from the east. Fish Street Hill from the south. No one approaching. No familiar figure in a rumpled jacket carrying his worn leather briefcase.

I try his phone again.

This time it goes straight to voicemail. Phone off, or dead battery.

9:05 PM

Maybe he's running late. Traffic. Last-minute delay. Reasonable explanations for a five-minute tardiness.

Except Webb is never late. In all the years I've known him, through undergraduate tutorials and PhD supervisions and project meetings, Marcus Webb has been punctual to the point of compulsion. Three minutes early is on time. On time is late.

Five minutes late is unthinkable.

Unless something's wrong.

I text him:

`At Monument. Where are you?`

The message shows as Delivered, not Read.

`9:10 PM`

The street is emptier now. Just me and the wind.

Footsteps echo from Fish Street Hill. I turn, hopeful.

Not Webb. A man in a business suit, phone pressed to his ear, walking past without looking at me.

`9:12 PM`

I check my email. Nothing from Webb. Check my voicemail. Empty.

Try his phone one more time.

Straight to voicemail.

"Marcus, I'm worried. Please call me. I'm at the Monument like you asked."

The wind carries my words away.

9:15 PM

Something has happened.

Webb asked me to meet him here at 9:00 PM.

Webb is never late.

Webb's phone is off.

This isn't a delay.

I pace faster now, nervous energy needing an outlet. Should I leave? Go to his flat in Bloomsbury? Check his office?

Or wait, in case he's just delayed by something mundane?

9:20 PM

A car approaches from Monument Street. Dark sedan. Slowing.

My heart rate spikes. Webb doesn't drive, but maybe he took a taxi. Maybe this is him, apologetic, explaining why his phone died, ready to show me whatever truth terrified him this morning.

The car pulls to the kerb.

Two people get out.

Not Webb.

A woman and a man. Professional dress. The woman approaches me. She knows who I am. This isn't coincidence.

"Olivia Hart?" Her voice is kind but official.

"Yes."

She pulls out identification. “DCI Penny Stewart, Metropolitan Police. This is Detective Constable Decker. We need to speak with you about Dr. Marcus Webb.”

The street tilts.

I’ve been standing here for thirty-three minutes, waiting.

And something in her expression tells me something is seriously wrong.

“How did you know I was here? What happened?” My voice sounds distant.

“We spoke with your brother. I’m sorry to inform you that Dr. Webb was attacked approximately ninety minutes ago. He was pronounced dead at the scene.”

Ninety minutes ago – 7:50 PM when I was at my flat, considering whether to come to this meeting.

When Webb was walking here, to tell me whatever truth had made him betray everything he’d taught me about evidence and investigation.

“Where?” I ask.

“Monument Street. About two hundred metres from here.” Stewart gestures back the way their car came. “He was walking toward this location when he was attacked.”

He was coming to meet me.

He died on his way here.

And I've been standing at the Monument for half an hour, checking my watch, trying his phone, waiting for a dead man.

"How?" The question comes out hoarse.

"We're treating it as robbery. Wallet and phone taken. We're pursuing several lines of inquiry."

Robbery.

The same lie I would have believed, if I didn't know about the St. Paul's scans, or the fear in Webb's eyes this morning.

"I need to sit down," I say.

Decker guides me to a low wall near the Monument's base. Stewart sits beside me, professional sympathy in her expression.

"I understand Dr. Webb was your doctoral supervisor," she says gently.

"Yes. He supervised my doctorate. We stayed in touch." My mind is processing too many things at once. Webb dead. Murdered. He was coming to meet me.

Someone stopped him.

Someone who knew where he'd be.

"When did you last speak with him?"

The question I've been dreading.

Tell the truth: I met with him this morning, he was terrified, he called me later to arrange this meeting. Which leads to questions

about why, about what I showed him, about the discovery that got him killed.

Or lie. Protect the investigation. Stay alive long enough to finish what my father started.

“This morning,” I say. “We met at his office around 8:00 AM to discuss a preservation project I’m working on.”

“How did he seem?”

Terrified. Desperate. Begging me to delete evidence and forget what I found.

“Normal. We talked about work. I left around eight-thirty.”

“And you haven’t spoken with him since?”

Another lie required. Webb called me at 10:30. Asked me to meet him here, tonight, because he had something to show me.

“No. Not since this morning.”

Stewart makes notes.

Decker hasn’t written anything down. He just watches me. I become aware of my hands, folded too carefully in my lap. Whether I’m blinking too much or not enough. Whether the pause before each answer is a beat too long.

I look at the Monument instead.

“Ms. Hart, can you tell us why you’re here? At the Monument, at this time on a Sunday evening?”

My mind races. The truth is impossible. I was meeting my murdered mentor who was going to explain why he helped cover up my father's murder.

"Just walking. Thinking." I gesture vaguely at the Monument. "I work on historic preservation. Sometimes I come here to look at the architecture."

It sounds weak even as I say it. Who comes to look at architecture at 9:00 PM on a Sunday?

But Stewart nods. "Did Dr. Webb seem worried about anything? Concerned for his safety?"

Yes. He was terrified this morning. Told me to delete everything. Then called me hours later, desperate to meet, to show me something worth dying for.

"No. He seemed fine."

The lies are piling up. But the alternative is worse. Tell the police about the St. Paul's discovery, and I become the next target. The next convenient robbery. The next person found dead for knowing too much.

My father went to the authorities. Look where that got him.

Webb tried to help my father. And now Webb is dead too.

"Ms. Hart?" Stewart's voice is gentle. "Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?"

Everything. I want to tell her everything. That Webb was murdered for what I showed him. That my father was killed for the same discovery. That someone is willing to kill repeatedly to protect

whatever Christopher Wren hid beneath this Monument three and a half centuries ago.

But I don't.

Because telling her puts a target on my back. And on Daniel's.

"No. I'm sorry. I wish I could help more."

Stewart hands me a card. "If you think of anything, please call. Day or night."

I pocket the card, knowing I'll never use it.

They leave me sitting on the wall, watching their car disappear back toward Monument Street. Back toward the spot where Marcus Webb died walking to meet me.

I've been here for forty-five minutes now, waiting.

I stopped feeling my fingers ten minutes ago. The Monument rises above me, white stone and secrets and the coordinates my father spent six months documenting.

Webb died on his way to meet me.

He had the truth.

Now I do.

I pull out my phone with shaking hands. Three missed calls from Daniel. Two texts asking where I am.

I text back

`Coming home soon. Something happened. We need to talk.`

Then I do what I should have done an hour ago. I check my flat security app, the camera feed I installed last year.

The timestamp shows someone entered at 8:22 PM. Left at 8:44 PM.

After I'd left for this meeting. While I was walking to the Monument, trying to decide if I should trust Marcus Webb.

Someone searched my flat while Daniel was still at work.

Looking for the St. Paul's data.

Looking for evidence of what I found.

And when they couldn't find it, when they realized I still had it, they killed the one person who could confirm the discovery.

My grip on the phone keeps slipping.

I stand, force myself to walk. One foot in front of the other. Away from the Monument. Away from the spot where I waited for a dead man.

Back toward my flat, where Daniel is waiting. He has no idea. About the break-in. About any of it.

Marcus Webb is dead.

My father was murdered.

And I'm next unless I disappear before they realize I'm still a threat.

The Monument recedes behind me.

Two hundred and two feet of memorial.

Of truth preserved in architecture.

Wren built this to mark where the fire began.

But also, I now understand, to mark where the truth is buried.

And I’m going to dig it up.

Whatever it costs.

SIX

THOMAS HART
British Library, London
Six Years Ago – March 2020

Thomas Hart had always believed that buildings held secrets better than people.

People lied. People forgot. People revised their stories to suit present needs.

But stone remembered. Measurements didn't change. And if you were patient enough, careful enough, methodical enough, architecture would tell you everything you needed to know.

The reading room of the British Library was quiet on a Tuesday afternoon. Researchers hunched over laptops and rare books, each pursuing their own obscure quests. Thomas occupied his usual table near the window, surrounded by architectural drawings, survey maps, and three separate notebooks filled with calculations.

Six months of research, and the pattern was undeniable.

He spread out his master map: a modern satellite image of London with fifty-two red dots marking Christopher Wren's churches. At first glance, random. The scattering you'd expect from rebuilding

after the Great Fire, dictated by property lines and surviving foundations.



But when you measured the distances. When you calculated the angular relationships. When you plotted the coordinates against astronomical references from 1666 –

Not random at all.

Thomas pulled up his astronomy software, overlaid the church positions against stellar coordinates. The pattern resolved into constellations. Specifically, the night sky over London on September 2, 1666, as it would appear from a moving Earth.

Proof of heliocentrism, encoded in architecture.

“Still at it, I see.”

Thomas looked up to find Marcus Webb standing beside the table, two coffees in hand. Webb taught at Imperial College, specialised

in historic preservation, and had become an invaluable collaborator over the past three months.

“Marcus. Thanks.” Thomas accepted the coffee gratefully. “I think I’ve got it. The complete pattern.”

Webb settled into the opposite chair, studied the maps. “Show me.”

Thomas walked him through the analysis. Each church positioned according to stellar coordinates. The proportions of their steeples encoding astronomical data. The crypt depths marking specific measurements.

“And they all point to one location,” Thomas concluded, tapping the Monument on the map. “Here. The convergence point. Whatever Wren was encoding, whatever proof he preserved, it’s in the Monument’s foundation.”

Webb was quiet for a long moment. Then: “You’re certain?”

“As certain as I can be without ground-penetrating radar.” Thomas pulled out his journal, flipped to his latest calculations. “The Monument is 202 feet tall. The precise distance to where the Great Fire started. But it’s also positioned at specific coordinates that serve as the anchor point for all the church measurements. Wren built it first, then used it as the baseline for everything else.”

“A zenith telescope disguised as a memorial.”

“Exactly. And beneath it, if I’m right, there’s a sealed chamber. Protected. Preserved. Waiting for someone with the tools to find it.”

Webb leaned back, his expression troubled. “Thomas, if this is real, if Wren hid scientific evidence that contradicted Church doctrine – do you understand what you’ve stumbled onto?”

“A major archaeological discovery. Historical proof that the Scientific Revolution was more advanced than we thought. Evidence that –”

“No.” Webb’s voice was sharp. “Think about the implications. Property surveys from the 1670s and 80s would have used the old geocentric models. If Wren’s astronomical calculations prove those surveys were inaccurate, it calls into question centuries of property rights. Land grants. Boundary definitions. Billions of pounds in modern real estate built on foundations that shift when you redraw the maps.”

Thomas hadn’t considered that angle. He was an engineer, not a property lawyer. He cared about how Wren had encoded knowledge to survive persecution – not who owned the land above it now.

“Surely that’s not relevant anymore,” he said. “The surveys might have been technically inaccurate, but they established the legal boundaries. Possession is nine-tenths of the law, isn’t it?”

“In most cases, yes. But there are exceptions. Church property. Crown estates. Land held in trust for centuries with original deeds that specify measurements. If those measurements are proven wrong,” Webb shook his head. “It would be a legal nightmare. Years of litigation. Maybe decades.”

“But that’s not a reason to suppress historical truth.”

“No. Of course not.” Webb hesitated. “I’m saying, be careful. Document everything. Make sure you have ironclad evidence before you go public. And maybe consult with some people who understand the ramifications.”

“What people?”

“I know someone. Discreet and knowledgeable about this sort of thing. Property law, historical preservation, navigating complex ownership disputes.” Webb pulled out his phone, scrolled through his contacts. “Let me make some inquiries. Find out if there’s a way to pursue this that protects the discovery while minimising legal complications.”

Thomas studied his friend. Webb seemed concerned. Too careful. Too focused on the legal implications rather than the historical significance.

“Marcus, is there something you’re not telling me?”

“What? No. I don’t want to see your research buried in lawsuits before it can be properly assessed.” Webb stood, pocketed his phone. “Give me a few days. Let me talk to some people, get a sense of how to approach this. Meanwhile, document everything. Make backups. If this is as significant as you think, we need to protect it.”

“Good advice.” Thomas made a note in his journal. “I’m planning to verify the vault location this week. Run ground-penetrating radar near the Monument’s foundation. Confirm there’s something there before I make any claims.”

“Smart, smart.” Webb paused at the edge of the table. “Thomas, one more thing. Keep this quiet for now. Don’t mention it to anyone else until we understand what we’re dealing with. The last thing you want is amateur treasure hunters or conspiracy theorists muddying the waters.”

“Of course.”

After Webb left, Thomas returned to his calculations. Webb’s concern had been excessive. The legal implications were real, but they should not outweigh the historical importance of the discovery.

Unless there was more at stake than Webb was saying.

Thomas pulled up his laptop, started a new encrypted file. Webb was right about documentation. Everything needed to be backed up, preserved, made accessible to others if something happened.

He typed rapidly, recording his methodology, his findings, his conclusions. Included photographs of the maps, screenshots of the astronomical overlays, copies of Wren’s original architectural drawings with his annotations.

Then he wrote a letter to his daughter.

Olivia,

If you’re reading this, something has gone wrong. I hope that’s not the case. I hope I’m being paranoid. But your old dad has learned to trust his instincts, and right now they are telling me that what I’ve discovered is more dangerous than I initially thought.

I have found something remarkable about Christopher Wren's churches. They're not architecture. They're a code, a map, a preservation system for scientific knowledge that was too dangerous to publish in the 1670s. I believe Wren hid proof of heliocentrism and accurate longitude calculations beneath the Monument to the Great Fire.

I'm going to verify this in the next few days. If I'm right, it will be one of the most significant archaeological discoveries in London's history. If I'm wrong, well, I'll have wasted six months chasing a fascinating theory.

But if something happens to me before I can present this properly, I need you to know what I found. The files are encrypted and stored in the usual place. You know the password. Trust your engineering instincts. Follow the evidence. And be careful who you trust.

I love you and Daniel much. Take care of each other.

Dad

He saved the file, backed it up to cloud storage with encryption so robust it would take years to crack without the password. A password only Olivia knew: the coordinates of her mother's grave.

His phone buzzed. Text from Webb:

`My contact wants to meet. Tomorrow, 2:00 PM, his office. Will send address. He's interested in your research.`

Thomas stared at the message. Too fast. He'd only talked to Webb an hour ago, and already there was a meeting scheduled?

Either Webb's contact was extraordinarily available, or this had been arranged before Webb even knew the details.

Which meant Webb had already told someone about the discovery.

Which meant Thomas's paranoia might be justified.

He typed a careful response:

`Sounds good. Looking forward to it.`

Then he opened a new browser window and started researching property developers in London. Companies with interests in historic buildings. Firms that might have reason to suppress evidence that called old surveys into question.

Cornerstone Heritage Properties appeared repeatedly. A private equity firm specialising in historic real estate, with assets worth billions.

One name stood out: Richardson. Former Metropolitan Police. Now head of corporate security.

Thomas took a screenshot of the company information, added it to his encrypted files.

Then he did something he had not done in twenty years: he called a lawyer – Olivia's godfather.

Michael Ashworth answered on the third ring. "Thomas, it's been ages. How are you?"

"Michael, I need legal advice. Hypothetically."

“Oh dear. That word is never a good sign.” But Ashworth’s tone was friendly, concerned. “What kind of hypothetical are we discussing?”

“If someone discovers historical evidence that proves old property surveys were inaccurate, could that affect modern ownership claims?”

A long pause. “That’s a specific hypothetical, Thomas. What have you found?”

“I can’t say yet. Just need to understand the legal landscape.”

A pause.

“If you’ve found something that could affect historic property rights,” Ashworth said, “you need to be meticulous.”

“Meticulous how?”

“Billions of pounds creates powerful incentives. And powerful people solve problems permanently.”

“I will. Thank you, Michael.”

After hanging up, Thomas sat still. He opened his journal to a fresh page and wrote:

“Tomorrow, I verify the vault location with ground-penetrating radar. Webb says he has contacts who can help excavate safely. After six months we’ll see what Wren preserved.”

He hesitated, then added:

“Note. If anything happens to me, look at who benefited from my silence. Trust Olivia’s instincts. She sees what I see.”

He closed the journal, packed his research, and left the British Library.

By this time tomorrow, everything would be different.

SEVEN

OLIVIA HART
Premier Inn, King's Cross
Present Day – Sunday, 10:47 PM

The hotel room smells like industrial cleaning solution and stale air conditioning. A generic landscape print hangs on the wall. Two single beds with matching burgundy bedspreads to the left, and a window at the back of the room overlooking the car park.

Perfect.

I paid cash at the front desk, using a false name. We had no choice but to move out of my flat. I chose this location specifically because it's anonymous. One of dozens of identical chain hotels near King's Cross station. The kind of place where business travellers sleep between connections and no one pays attention to anyone else.

Daniel sits cross-legged on the bed nearest the window, his laptop open, carefully changing all our passwords. I've already disabled location services on both our devices, switched to encrypted messaging, and created new email addresses through a VPN.

We are ghosts now.

At least until I figure out what to do next.

My own laptop is open on the desk, the screen displaying my father's encrypted files. It took me three tries to remember the password. Not because I'd forgotten it, but because typing those coordinates felt like opening a grave.

51.53° N, 0.22° W.

My mother's burial plot in Kensal Green Cemetery.

Dad always said she'd help us find our way home if we ever got lost. I thought he meant emotionally. Spiritually. Turns out he also meant it literally, encoding the password into a location only family would know.

The files decrypt. Six months of research, hundreds of documents, photographs, calculations.

Everything my father discovered before he died.

Before he was murdered.

I start with his journal entries, reading chronologically.

October 2019 *An anomaly. St. Mary-le-Bow positioned three degrees off its expected alignment.*

November *More churches. Same deviations. Too precise to be error.*

December *Breakthrough. The positions aren't wrong. They're astronomical.*

I pause, pull up my own St. Paul's scan data. The void at 51.5138° N. Halfway between the equator and North Pole.

Astronomical positioning.

Just like my father discovered.

I keep reading.

January 2020 *The full pattern. Fifty-two churches, mapped to stellar coordinates from September 2, 1666. Not a fixed sky – but one calculated from a moving Earth.*

Proof of heliocentrism. Hidden in stone.

I read the entry again. Then a third time. Wren had turned London into a three-dimensional model of planetary motion.

February *Convergence. Every church pointing to one location.*

The Monument.

Built first. Anchor point. Baseline for everything that followed.

And beneath it…

…a sealed chamber.

Waiting.

"Olivia?" Daniel's voice breaks my concentration. "Are you okay?"

I realize I'm crying. Silent tears running down my face, dripping onto the keyboard.

"Dad figured it out," I say. "Everything. Six months before he died, he discovered what I just found. The churches, the pattern, the Monument. All of it."

Daniel closes his laptop, comes to sit beside me. He doesn't touch me; he knows I don't like physical contact when I'm upset. But he is present. Steady.

"What happened to him?" he asks.

I pull up the later journal entries.

March 10 *Showed the research to Marcus Webb. Fascinated but concerned. Legal implications. Property disputes. He wants me to meet someone who understands the risks.*

"Webb," I whisper. "He was involved from the beginning."

March 11 *Something feels wrong. The meeting was arranged too quickly. Webb is evasive. I started digging. Property developers with something to lose.*

Cornerstone Heritage Properties.

Billions in historic real estate.

I open another file. Screenshots, board members, portfolios.

One name circled in red:

Richardson. Head of Corporate Security. Former Metropolitan Police. I don't have proof. But I recognise the pattern. The way power protects itself.

March 12 *Tomorrow, I verify the vault location. Ground-penetrating radar. Webb says he has contacts who can help.*

Six months of work.

Tomorrow, we see what Wren preserved.

No entry after that.

Only a death certificate.

Two days later, he was dead.

“They killed him,” Daniel says. He’s reading over my shoulder, his face pale. “Webb told them what Dad found, and they killed him before he could go public.”

“Yes.”

“And now they’re trying to kill you.”

“Yes.”

We sit in silence. Outside, London continues its Sunday night routine. Cars in the car park. Voices in the hallway. Someone laughs at something.

Daniel speaks first. “What do we do?”

It’s the same question he asked at the flat. But this time, I have an answer.

“We finish what Dad started.” I pull up the astronomical overlay files, the church position maps, the Monument calculations. “He couldn’t go public because he was alone. One researcher making extraordinary claims without corroboration. Easy to discredit. Easy to suppress.”

“But you have the St. Paul’s scans.”

“Exactly. Independent verification. Modern technology proving Wren’s architectural encoding exists. I’m not theorising about hidden chambers. I have laser scan data showing one exists.” I

open my survey files, compare them against Dad's research. "If I can access more of Wren's churches, scan their crypts, find the sealed spaces Dad predicted, I'll have physical evidence. Multiple sites. Undeniable proof."

"They'll try to stop you."

"They'll try. But I'm not going to make Dad's mistake."

"What mistake?"

"Trusting Marcus Webb." The name tastes bitter. "Dad relied on one mentor, one collaborator. When that person betrayed him, he had no backup. No one else knew what he'd discovered." I start copying files to multiple cloud servers, creating redundant backups with different encryption methods. "I'm not going to be isolated. I'm going to document everything, share it with multiple sources, make sure the discovery survives even if I don't."

Daniel watches me work. "Who do you trust?"

Webb is dead. My father's dead. I don't know who else might be compromised, who else Cornerstone might have bought or threatened.

Then I remember.

"Dad's godfather, Michael Ashworth." I search through the files, find an email exchange from March 2020. "Dad consulted him about the legal implications. Ashworth warned him to be careful, told him to go public if he was in danger." I pull up a current contact search. "He's still practicing. Ashworth & Partners, Lincoln's Inn Fields."

“A lawyer?”

“A good lawyer. One Dad trusted.” I draft an email, pause with my fingers over the keyboard. “If I contact him, I’m putting him at risk too.”

“If you don’t, you’re alone.”

Fair point.

I write:

Mr. Ashworth,

You knew my father, Thomas Hart. He consulted you in March 2020 about legal implications of a historical discovery. He died shortly after.

I’ve continued his research. I’ve found what he was looking for. And I believe his death was not natural.

I need legal counsel. And I need someone I can trust.

If you’re willing to help, please respond to this email. If not, please delete this message and forget I contacted you.

Olivia Hart

I encrypt the message, sending it through a secure relay.

“Now what?” Daniel asks.

“Now we plan.” I pull up the map of Wren’s churches, overlay my father’s research. “Dad identified which churches should have sealed spaces based on the astronomical encoding. I need to verify

his predictions. Scan the crypts, find the hidden chambers, document everything."

"How? Those churches are locked. You can't just walk in with surveying equipment."

"No. But I have something Dad didn't." I hold up the key I took from my desk drawer. "Webb's spare office key. He kept duplicate keys for dozens of historic sites. Cathedral access, church vestries, crypt entrances. Part of his preservation work."

Daniel's eyes widen. "You're going to break into churches?"

"I'm going to survey churches. After hours. Without permission." I pull up a schedule. "Starting tomorrow night. St. Bride's Fleet Street first. Dad's notes say it should have a sealed chamber in the seventh archaeological layer of the crypt."

"That's illegal."

"So is murder."

He can't argue with that logic.

I spend the next hour planning. St. Bride's layout, access points, security systems. I've surveyed it before, legitimately.

Cameras. Guard rotations. Access to the crypt.

By midnight, I have a workable plan. Get in, scan the lowest crypt level, get out. Two hours, maximum. If I'm right, if Dad's research is accurate, the scans will show another void. Another sealed space positioned with astronomical precision.

My phone buzzes. New email.

From Michael Ashworth.

Olivia,

I remember your father well. He was a good man, and his death troubled me greatly at the time.

If you have found what he was searching for, you are in considerable danger. The people who would want to suppress this discovery have resources and motivation that shouldn't be underestimated.

I'm willing to help. But we must be meticulous. Come to my office tomorrow, 11:00 AM. Use the service entrance on Newman's Row. Do not tell anyone where you're going.

Destroy this email after reading.

MA

I show Daniel. "He believes me. He'll help."

"Or he's part of it too. Like Webb."

I consider this. It's possible. Everyone could be compromised.

Webb lied.

Ashworth might be lying.

I don't know who I can stand next to without being exposed.

"I'll be careful," I say. "I'll meet him in a public building, keep my phone recording, have an exit strategy. If anything feels wrong, I'll run."

Daniel nods. "I should come with you."

“No. You stay here. Stay safe. If something happens to me, you have all the files, all the backups. You contact the media, release everything publicly, make sure the truth gets out.”

“Olivia!”

“Promise me, Daniel. If I don’t come back, you finish this. You make sure Dad and Webb didn’t die for nothing.”

He’s quiet for a long moment. Then, “I promise. But you have to promise to come back.”

“I will.”

I don’t know if that’s true. But I need him to believe it.

We work in silence for another hour. Daniel organising files, creating a dead-man’s switch that will release everything if I don’t check in every twelve hours. Me planning the St. Bride’s infiltration, studying schematics, memorizing layouts.

By 2:00 AM, we’re both exhausted.

“Get some sleep,” I tell Daniel. “Tomorrow’s going to be difficult.”

He settles into his bed, still fully clothed. Within minutes, his breathing evens out.

I lie in the other bed, staring at the ceiling, thinking about my father. About the last time I saw him. We’d had dinner, talked about my dissertation, laughed about Daniel’s obsession with Wren churches. Dad had seemed healthy. Happy. Alive.

Two days later, the phone rang.

Hospital. Cardiac arrest.

I said thank you.

As if it made sense.

Never questioned the cardiac arrest diagnosis. Never suspected murder.

How many other people had died protecting Cornerstone's secrets? How many convenient heart attacks or tragic accidents had been assassinations?

My phone buzzes softly. Another text message. This one from an unknown address, no subject line.

`Stop now. Delete everything. Forget what you found. This is your only warning.`

I delete it without responding.

Let them try again.

They may be confident that Webb's death has contained the threat.

They're wrong, I'm not moving on.

I'm moving forward.

Tomorrow, I'll start to prove it.

EIGHT

CHRISTOPHER WREN
St. Mary-le-Bow Construction Site,
Cheapside – June 1672

The smell of cut stone filled Cheapside as the sun climbed toward noon. Christopher Wren stood at the edge of the construction site, watching masons position the foundation stones for St. Mary-le-Bow's crypt with mathematical precision he had specified down to the quarter inch.

Around him, London continued its rebirth. Six years since the Great Fire, and the city was transforming from ash to stone. Wooden scaffolding rose against the sky. The sound of hammers on chisels echoed between half-built walls. Dust hung in the air, catching the light.

This would be the seventh church completed. Forty-five more to go. Each one would carry the same secret, encoded into measurements that would survive centuries.

"The northeastern corner is off by three inches." Robert Hooke appeared beside him, wiping stone dust from his hands. "I've corrected the masons, but you should verify the adjustment."

Wren valued Hooke's eye for detail almost as much as his discretion. Hooke was the only man who knew that the blueprints in Wren's coat pocket were also star charts.

Hidden. Dangerous. Essential.

"Show me," Wren said.

They descended wooden steps into the excavated crypt. The air was cooler here, smelling of damp earth and fresh mortar. Sunlight filtered through the opening above, illuminating the foundation walls that would support the church for centuries.

Hooke indicated the corner stone with his measuring rod. "The surveyors placed it here, following the property boundary. But that puts the wall three inches east of where your calculations require."

Wren pulled his notebook from his coat pocket, opened it to reveal columns of figures written in cypher. Astronomical coordinates disguised as structural measurements. To any casual observer, these were the careful calculations of a meticulous architect. To someone who understood celestial mechanics, they were proof of heresy.

He checked the numbers against the stone's current position. "Move it west. three and one-quarter inches. The foundation must align to the stellar coordinate, not the property line."

"The Church commissioners won't notice three inches."

"No. But someone with proper instruments in the future might." Wren closed his notebook. "That's who we're building for, Robert. Not the commissioners. Not the King. The people who come after, when truth is no longer treason."

Hooke studied him in the half-light. “You’re certain about this plan? Encoding astronomical observations into church architecture? It’s mad, Christopher. Brilliant, but mad.”

“Do you have a better suggestion for preserving our work?”

“Publish it. Present the evidence to the Royal Society. Force them to acknowledge what we’ve proven.”

“And be arrested for heresy within a fortnight.” Wren ran his hand along the stone wall, feeling the texture of Portland limestone. “The King needs Rome’s blessing for his throne. Rome demands geocentric orthodoxy. Our calculations prove the Earth moves, Robert. That’s not scientific debate. It’s sedition.”

“Then why risk building it into the churches at all? Why not simply destroy the observations and save ourselves the danger?”

“Because the truth matters.” Wren looked up toward the opening above, where London’s sky showed blue beyond the construction site. “We’ve measured the heavens with a precision no one will accept,” Wren said. “Enough to change navigation, mapping. Everything.”

He turned back to Hooke. “That knowledge could save thousands of lives at sea. Could settle property disputes. Could advance navigation, cartography, everything. But only if it survives. Only if someone finds it after we’re gone and the political climate has changed.”

“So, we hide it in plain sight.”

“Fifty-two churches,” Wren said. “Each placed according to the night the fire began. When complete, they form a map of the heavens.”

Hooke traced the positions with his finger. “And they all point to one location.”

“The Monument.”

“You’ve designed a cypher that spans the entire city.”

“A cypher that looks like ordinary urban planning. Who would suspect that church positions encode star charts?” Wren smiled grimly. “The commissioners approve my designs because they’re beautiful and practical. They have no idea each spire height, each foundation depth, each orientation carries astronomical data.”

Above them, a mason called down. The corner stone was ready for adjustment.

They climbed back to the surface. The construction site buzzed with activity. Two dozen workers hauling stone, mixing mortar, cutting timber for scaffolding. None of them knowing the whole.

Wren directed the adjustment personally. Three and one-quarter inches west. The change was subtle enough that no one questioned it. The architect’s perfectionism ensuring everything aligned properly.

But once the stone was repositioned, Wren verified the coordinate with his brass quadrant, measuring the angle to true north with the sun’s position. Perfect. St. Mary-le-Bow’s foundation now marked Sirius as the star had appeared on the night London burned.

“One more anchor point established,” Hooke murmured beside him.

“Six more to place this year.” Wren wiped sweat from his forehead. June heat reflecting off stone and dust. “St. Nicholas Cole Abbey next week. Then St. James Garlickhythe. Each one adding to the pattern.”

“And if someone discovers what you’re doing before it’s complete?”

“Then they’ll have incomplete data. Useless. The pattern only resolves when all fifty-two churches are positioned. Until then, it’s just peculiar architectural choices that could be explained by aesthetic preference or structural necessity.”

Hooke pulled out his own notebook, sketched the adjusted foundation. “You should document everything. Not the measurements, but the reasoning. So, whoever finds this understands what they’re looking at.”

“I am documenting it. In the Monument’s sealed chamber. Observation logs, calculation methods, instrument specifications. Everything needed to verify our work and reproduce our results.” Wren checked the position of the sun, estimated two hours until the afternoon meeting with the Church commissioners. “But that documentation can’t be completed until all the churches are built and the pattern is established. Another five years, at minimum.”

“Five years of hiding heresy in holy architecture.”

“Five years of preserving truth for the future.”

They walked the perimeter of the foundation, Wren making notes about the next phase of construction. The walls would rise forty feet before the first floor. The tower would climb one hundred feet beyond that. And at the top, bells that would ring across Cheapside for centuries, calling Londoners to prayer in a building that secretly testified to scientific truth.

He almost smiled.

A messenger appeared at the site entrance, calling for Mr. Wren. A letter from the King's surveyor, requiring his presence at Whitehall.

Wren's stomach tightened. Unexpected summons was rarely good news.

"Go," Hooke whispered. "I'll supervise the afternoon's work. And Christopher?" He lowered his voice. "Be careful what you say. The commissioners are asking questions about why you insist on such specific positioning for the churches. They're starting to wonder if there's a pattern."

"What did you tell them?"

"That you're obsessed with aesthetic harmony. That you're using geometric principles to create visual balance across the cityscape." Hooke's expression was neutral. "They seemed satisfied. But keep your answers vague. Don't give them reason to look closer."

Wren nodded, collected his papers, and left the construction site. The walk to Whitehall took him through streets still scarred by fire, past empty lots waiting for rebuilding, around piles of salvaged stone and timber.

London was transforming, and he was designing that transformation according to a pattern only he and Hooke understood. A city rebuilt as an astronomical instrument.

A cypher written across the entire city.

At Whitehall, he was kept waiting in an antechamber for thirty minutes. Had someone deciphered his notebooks? Noticed the unusual precision of his church positioning? Questioned why certain measurements seemed to serve no structural purpose?

Finally, he was admitted to a small office where the King's surveyor sat behind a desk covered with architectural drawings.

"Mr. Wren. Thank you for coming on short notice. I have questions about your proposal for St. Paul's Cathedral."

Relief flickered. Not the churches.

The questions were routine. Cost. Stability. Scale.

Wren answered them all.

All the while, his mind remained on St. Mary-le-Bow's foundation, settling into the earth three inches west of where property boundaries dictated. On the forty-five churches yet to be built, each one carrying another piece of the celestial puzzle.

On the Monument that would eventually seal the proof beneath its foundation.

And on the distant future, when someone might understand what he was hiding.

When the meeting concluded, Wren walked back through London's dusty streets. The sun was lower now, shadows lengthening between buildings. Construction sites going quiet as workers finished their day.

He stopped at the Monument's foundation, still in early excavation. The same crew that had worked on St. Mary-le-Bow would dig this chamber. Eight feet square, positioned at the convergence point of all fifty-two churches.

In five years' time, he would descend into that space and seal away the proof. Until then, he would continue building churches that looked ordinary but carried extraordinary secrets.

Architecture that remembered what men dared not speak.

Wren turned toward home as evening fell over London. Behind him, St. Mary-le-Bow's foundation held its position, aligned to a star that had witnessed the city's destruction and would outlast its rebuilding by millennia.

One church encoded. Fifty-one to go.

He had to believe that someone would find it. That truth buried deep enough would outlast the men who feared it.

It was the only thing that made the risk worthwhile.

NINE

CHRISTOPHER WREN
St. Bride's Church, Fleet Street, London
September 1672

The encoding had to look like structural necessity.

That was the entire trick. Not secrecy for its own sake – Wren had tried secrecy in the early months, hiding his notebooks, working only after dark, and it had made him conspicuous. A man who behaved strangely around building sites attracted attention. An architect who simply worked – who measured twice, adjusted his plans, explained each calculation as standard engineering – attracted none.

St. Bride's was his seventh encoded church. The method was established now. Measurements documented in official plans under figures that looked like load-bearing calculations. Voids positioned according to stellar tables hidden in his personal notebooks, cross-referenced with the property surveys Robert Hooke had quietly commissioned through his network of Royal Society contacts.

He set up his instruments at the eastern foundation point. Nine o'clock in the morning, September light coming pale and clean

across Fleet Street. The site was busy – two dozen men working above and below ground level, the rhythmic sound of stone being cut, mortar being mixed. Wren had learned to prefer busy sites. Noise concealed precision.

He extended the measuring chain along the foundation trench. Forty-three feet, seven and a quarter inches. Then adjusted. Forty-three feet, eight and one-eighth inches. The difference was less than an inch. No structural engineer would query such an adjustment. No commissioner would notice it.

Three months of observations from the Monument's platform had given him those coordinates. Small hours. His quadrant. The wheeling sky. That fraction of an inch positioned the foundation chamber at exactly the point where the Pembroke family boundary had been fraudulently redrawn in 1668. Stone would remember what surveyors had falsified.

"Dr. Wren?"

Wren straightened without hurrying. He recognised the voice before he turned.

Edmund Fairchild moved through the construction site with the ease of a man accustomed to entering spaces that belonged to other people and behaving as though they were his. He was perhaps fifty, with a prosperous coat, good boots, and the careful cleanliness of someone who understood that appearance was authority. Wren had met him twice at Royal Society dinners, where Fairchild had donated generously and spoken knowledgeably about natural philosophy while understanding almost nothing of it.

“Mr. Fairchild.” Wren allowed nothing into his voice. “I wasn’t expecting a visit from the commissioners today.”

“Informal.” Fairchild waved a hand. “I find myself in the neighbourhood. Properties to inspect.” He looked around the site with proprietorial satisfaction. “Progress seems excellent.”

“The foundation work is proceeding to schedule.” Wren turned back to his measuring chain, making a deliberate note in his working book. The number he wrote was correct. The calculations beneath it told a different story. “We should have the lower structure complete before winter.”

Fairchild descended into the foundation trench without being invited. He had the confident physicality of a man who had never been told to wait outside. His boots were expensive and he clearly didn’t care about the mud.

Wren watched him from the corner of his eye. Kept measuring.

“I’d be interested to understand this chamber you’re building.”

“Ventilation,” he said, without looking up. “London clay retains water through winter. A properly constructed void beneath the foundation disperses the moisture before it can affect the masonry above. St. Mary-le-Bow suffered considerably from this problem before the Fire.” He made another note. “I’m ensuring the new structures do not repeat the error.”

Fairchild studied the marked dimensions. Eight feet. Eight feet. Eight feet. His expression was the expression of a man who understood money and almost nothing else.

“Our Lombard Street surveyor recommended lime render for the same problem,” he said.

“Lime render addresses the symptom.” Wren straightened, turned to face Fairchild directly. Gave him his full attention, because a man whose attention was fully held on your face was not looking at your notebooks. “This addresses the cause. The mathematics are straightforward. I can demonstrate, if you’re interested.”

Fairchild was not interested. He was politely pretending to be interested, which served Wren’s purpose equally well.

“The Great Fire has given us a remarkable opportunity,” Fairchild said, allowing Wren to move them toward what he actually wanted to discuss. “The rebuilt city will be better in every respect. Wider streets. Proper sewers. Churches that will stand for centuries.” He smiled. “And a more rational distribution of property, naturally.”

“Naturally,” Wren said.

The word came out cleanly. No irony. He had practised this. He could deliver it in precisely the register of mild agreement, a man with no particular view on property markets.

“The surveys took considerable time,” Fairchild continued. “After the Fire. Such confusion. Records lost. Boundaries disputed.” He shook his head with retrospective regret. “It required significant effort to establish proper ownership of the cleared land.”

“I imagine it did,” Wren said.

He had documented forty-seven of those boundary disputes – always toward the same four families. Fairchild was still talking. Wren kept his eyes on the measuring chain.

He had begun carrying them three months ago, after he understood what the pattern meant and understood that the pattern could kill him. Not the original documents – those were already secured. But copies. His working cipher. The key to everything encoded in stone and mortar across London's rebuilt churches.

He needed only to complete this one.

Which he would do the moment this man left his site.

"Your work is a credit to the city," Fairchild said. He moved toward the ladder out of the trench, apparently satisfied. Then paused, one foot on the rung. "You use a measuring chain to position these voids?"

A pause that Wren made last exactly as long as it needed to. Not less, which would suggest haste. Not more, which would suggest thought. "Among other instruments. Standard practice."

"The chain across the trench there." Fairchild nodded toward it. "What measurement does that give you?"

Wren looked at the chain. The number it showed was forty-three feet, eight and one-eighth inches. The number he would give Fairchild was forty-three feet, seven and a quarter. The number that existed in his working book.

"Forty-three feet, seven." He glanced at the chain with the mildly interested expression of a man confirming something he already knew. "The adjustment I made earlier. Standard tolerance for this soil condition."

Fairchild nodded. He was not a man who understood measurements. He was a man who understood power, and a man

who understood power knew that there was nothing unusual about an architect consulting his measuring chain and giving a number in feet and inches. He climbed out of the trench.

“I’ll leave you to your work,” he said. “The city is fortunate to have you, Dr Wren.”

“The city gives me more than I can repay,” Wren replied.

Which was true, though not in the sense Fairchild meant.

*

He waited until the footsteps had crossed the site entirely and faded into Fleet Street. Then he stood still for another full minute, listening.

The workmen continued around him. Stone and mortar and voices. The ordinary sounds of a city rebuilding itself over the ruins of what had been destroyed.

Wren looked at the measuring chain.

Forty-three feet, eight and one-eighth inches.

He crossed out the false entry in his working book and wrote the correct figure in its place. Drew the small mark in the margin that meant this position was encoded. Noted the stellar reference in the cipher he had developed in the first months of this work – a cipher that existed in no document any other living person could read.

Then he descended to the sealed section of foundation and continued.

The void took shape through the afternoon. Eight feet. Eight feet. Eight feet. Each dimension exact to within the tolerance of the finest instruments available to science in 1672 – instruments more accurate than the surveys that had drawn Pembroke's fraudulent boundary lines, instruments that would prove those surveys false to anyone with sufficient knowledge to read the architecture above them.

Above him, the workmen continued. Stone and mortar and voices.

No one looked down.

It was meticulous work. Slow. The kind of work that looked, to a passing observer, like the ordinary care of an architect ensuring that a church foundation would stand for three centuries.

Which it would.

As would the evidence within it.

Somewhere in the future – fifty years hence, or a hundred, or three hundred, whenever the world became safe enough for truth – someone would stand in this foundation with instruments of sufficient precision to read what he had written here.

Above him, London rebuilt itself over its own crimes.

Below him, in stone and mathematics and the angular positions of stars, Wren was ensuring the crimes had a witness.

TEN

OLIVIA HART
British Library, King's Cross
Present Day – Monday, 8:34 AM

The British Library opens at half past eight on Monday mornings. I'm waiting at the entrance when the doors unlock, my visitor's card already in hand. Around me, the usual crowd of researchers, students, and scholars file into the building, each pursuing their own obscure quests through history.

The reading room is quiet at this hour. I claim a desk near the back, away from the main traffic flow, and spread out my materials. Laptop, backup drives, the research notes printed and organised in folders. And a list of questions I need answered before I meet Ashworth at eleven.

Question one: *Was Christopher Wren capable of the astronomical observations attributed to him in the notes?*

I start with the biographical sources. Wren's early career wasn't in architecture at all. He was Professor of Astronomy at Gresham College from 1657, then Savilian Professor of Astronomy at Oxford from 1661. He designed astronomical instruments, made

detailed observations of Saturn and the Moon, and corresponded with the leading scientists of his era.

His Saturn observations from the early 1650s were presented in lectures at Gresham College in 1658. He constructed detailed lunar models, invented advanced micrometres for telescopes, and worked alongside Robert Hooke on astronomical problems.

So yes. Wren had the knowledge and skill to make precise astronomical observations.

Question two: *Did he have access to instruments accurate enough to use those observations for architectural positioning?*

I pull up a digitised copy of Robert Hooke's diary from 1672.

The British Library reading room has a quality I've always found peaceful and useful for thinking things through. The regulated air, exactly eighteen degrees. The silence of a hundred people concentrating. The weight of being surrounded by original documents, and the knowledge that you're reading a surface someone's hands once pressed.

Hooke and Wren worked together constantly during the rebuilding of London. The diary mentions instruments they developed: improved quadrants, micrometres for telescope measurements, precision measuring chains.

One entry from March 1672 stops me cold:

"Demonstrated to Wren my new method for determining true North using stellar transit. Accuracy within 30 seconds of arc. He proposes using this for foundation positioning of St. Mary-le-Bow."

Thirty seconds of arc. That's precise enough to position a building to within inches over the distances involved in London church sites.

And Hooke explicitly connects this precision to church foundation positioning.

My father was right. Wren had the tools and the knowledge.

Question three: *What was the political climate around heliocentrism in 1670s England?*

This is where it gets darker. I find a historical analysis of the period. Officially, England was more tolerant than Catholic countries. But Charles II needed papal approval for various political manoeuvres. The Church of England was trying to maintain orthodoxy against dissenting sects, and public challenges to geocentric cosmology were still considered dangerous.

In 1633, Galileo had been tried for heresy and his Dialogue banned. The Church's opposition to heliocentrism remained strong through the 1660s. By the 1670s, the scientific community understood heliocentrism was real, but publishing explicit proofs remained politically risky.

Wren would have known that presenting his astronomical observations publicly could have consequences. Loss of royal patronage at minimum. Accusations of heresy at worst.

Question four: *Is there any historical record of anyone else noticing the pattern?*

I search through secondary sources on Wren's architecture. Hundreds of books and papers analysing his designs, discussing his innovations, praising his engineering genius.

Not one mentions astronomical encoding.

Not one suggests the churches are positioned according to a celestial map.

Either the pattern is so subtle that three centuries of architectural historians missed it, or anyone who noticed was silenced before they could publish.

I think about the pattern documented in the notes. The 1890s astronomer who died in a carriage accident. The 1920s archaeological survey that was mysteriously blocked. The 1950s historian whose death seemed too convenient. He'd suspected these weren't coincidences.

Five researchers. Five silencings.

And I will not make it six.

I pull out the final journal entries, read them again with better understanding. He knew the danger. He encrypted his files, wrote warning letters, tried to protect his research.

But he trusted Marcus Webb. And that trust killed him.

I won't make the same mistake.

Question five: *What physical evidence would prove the pattern beyond doubt?*

This is the critical question. The framework could be dismissed as pattern-seeking bias. But if I can show multiple voids, multiple churches, all positioned according to the same astronomical coordinates, all pointing to the Monument's sealed chamber.

That's proof.

I open my mapping software, overlay the mapped church positions against a star chart from September 2, 1666.

The correlation is undeniable. St. Bride's marks Sirius. St. Mary-le-Bow marks Arcturus. St. Paul's marks Polaris. Each church positioned where that star appeared in the sky that night, as viewed from a moving Earth.

I count the churches my father marked as high-priority targets. Sites where the astronomical encoding would require sealed chambers in the foundations. Sites where Wren would have hidden physical evidence.

Twelve churches. Twelve potential locations where laser scanning could reveal voids.

I've surveyed one. St. Paul's. Found what he predicted.

If I can survey even three more and find the same pattern, the statistical probability of coincidence becomes negligible. Five churches would be undeniable proof.

But surveying churches requires access, time and avoiding whoever killed Webb while doing it.

My phone shows 9:47 AM. Just over an hour until I meet Ashworth. I need to formulate a strategy, a plan for how to proceed safely.

I start making notes:

IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES:

1. Survey St. Bride's (high priority, Webb had keys)

2. Document findings, multiple backups

3. Build coalition of credible experts

4. Establish legal protections (Ashworth)

5. Create dead-man's switch (Daniel)

EVIDENCE TARGETS:

1. St. Bride's – Sirius positioning

2. St. Stephen Walbrook – Vega positioning

3. St. Magnus the Martyr – Antares positioning

4. St. Mary Abchurch – Deneb positioning

5. Monument – convergence point, physical instruments

RISKS:

1. Surveillance (assume constant)

2. Physical threats (Webb's death proves willingness)

3. Professional discrediting (anticipate attacks on methodology)

4. Daniel's safety (potential leverage against me)

5. Access denial (keys may be changed, sites locked)

COUNTERMEASURES:

1. Stay mobile, no patterns

2. Multiple communication channels

3. Encrypted backups in multiple locations

4. International experts (outside UK pressure)

5. Public exposure plan if threats escalate

I'm writing this down when I notice him.

A man, early forties, academic style clothing, has been browsing the stacks near my desk for the past twenty minutes. Not reading. Not selecting books. Just present. Watching.

Could be coincidence.

But my instincts are screaming.

I close my laptop casually, gather my materials. Stand. Walk toward the restrooms as if I need a break.

The man doesn't follow. But when I glance back from the corridor, he's moving in the same direction.

I don't go to the restroom. I take the stairs down to the ground floor, exit through the main entrance, cross the plaza toward St. Pancras station.

Not coincidence. Surveillance.

They’re watching me already. Monday morning, and they’ve assigned someone to track my movements.

I duck into St. Pancras, use the crowds and the complex layout to lose him. Multiple levels, dozens of shops and corridors. I watch from a coffee shop on the upper level as he searches the main concourse below, confused, looking for his lost target.

Eventually, he gives up. Makes a phone call. Leaves.

I wait another twenty minutes before exiting through a different entrance.

I walk toward Lincoln’s Inn Fields. My pace is wrong, too fast then too slow, unable to find anything that feels normal. They know where I am. They’re not stopping me. Just watching.

Which means they haven’t decided what to do with me yet.

That gives me time. Not much. But some.

I reach Lincoln’s Inn Fields fifteen minutes early. Georgian terraces ring the square, brass plaques beside every door. Ashworth said to use the service entrance, off a narrow lane at the edge of the square.

I don’t go to it. I sit on a bench in the gardens, where I can watch the building without being on its doorstep. It looks safe. Old. Established. The kind of place where law and precedent matter more than money and violence.

I hope that’s true.

I sit, trying to calm my breathing, trying to process what just happened.

I came to the British Library to research, to verify the theories, to prepare questions.

My father died investigating this. Webb died trying to confess his role, and now I'm being actively surveyed by people who've killed twice already.

I could stop. Delete the data. Disappear. Protect Daniel and myself, but if I stop, my father died for nothing. Webb died for nothing. And Wren's truth stays buried for another generation of powerful families to exploit.

I think about the man following me through the British Library. The casual surveillance. The confidence that they can track me whenever they choose.

They're not afraid of me yet. They think I'm manageable. A grief-stricken daughter chasing her dead father's obsession. Easily discredited. Easily contained.

They're wrong.

I'm not my father's daughter. I'm a structural engineer with modern technology and a growing understanding of how to survive in a world where truth is dangerous.

I have the research. I have Webb's keys. I have a lawyer who might be an ally, if I can reach him without leading them to his door.

And I have something my father didn't have. I know they're coming.

My phone shows 10:58 AM. Ashworth is expecting me in two minutes.

Two minutes. A door, a staircase, a conversation that would put his name in whatever file they're building on me. They lost me at St. Pancras. They haven't lost me for good, and I won't be the reason they find the only person I can still trust.

I open the secure relay and type:

Followed this morning. Lost him, but I won't risk your door. I'll find another way. O.

I send it. Then I stand, gather my materials, and walk away from the one building in London that might have been safe.

ELEVEN

OLIVIA HART
St. Bride's Fleet Street
Present Day – Monday, 11:47 PM

The street is empty when I arrive.

Fleet Street at midnight belongs to ghosts and delivery trucks. The daytime chaos of journalists and office workers is replaced by sodium light and silence.

St. Bride's rises against the night sky like a tiered wedding cake, its famous spire climbing two hundred feet above the pavement.

I approach from the side entrance on St. Bride's Avenue, away from the main street. Everything I need to map the crypt's lowest level.

And find what Wren hid there.

Marcus Webb's key slides into the lock with familiar resistance. I hold my breath. If they've changed the locks since his death, if someone's inside, if this is a trap...

The lock turns. The door opens.

I slip inside and close it behind me, standing motionless in the darkness while my eyes adjust. The smell hits me first: old stone, furniture polish, hymn books. The distinctive scent of a church that has stood for three hundred years, accumulating centuries of prayer and candle wax.

My phone torch reveals a narrow corridor leading toward the main nave. I move, listening for any sound that would indicate I'm not alone. Security guards. Cleaning staff. Someone waiting.

Nothing.

The nave opens before me, vast and ghostly. Moonlight filters through tall windows, illuminating white columns and baroque plasterwork. Pews stretch in ordered rows toward the altar. Above, the barrel-vaulted ceiling disappears into shadow.

Beautiful. And empty.

I cross to the north aisle where stairs descend to the crypt. My footsteps echo despite my caution. Every sound feels amplified in the silence. The rustle of my jacket. My breathing. The faint electronic whine of the equipment case's wheels.

The crypt entrance is a simple wooden door, locked. Another of Webb's keys opens it. Beyond, stone steps descend into darkness that my phone's light barely penetrates.

I check my watch. 11:52 PM. I have six hours until dawn, four hours before early morning church staff might arrive. Plenty of time to scan the lowest level and get out.

I hope.

The stairs are worn smooth by centuries of footsteps. Seventeenth-century clergy descending to burial vaults. Victorian archaeologists excavating Roman foundations. Tourists visiting the famous crypt museum during daylight hours.

And now me, illegal surveyor in search of heresy encoded in architecture.

The first level of the crypt is familiar. I've been here before, legitimately, doing preservation surveys for Webb. Medieval stonework forms low arches. Display cases show charred wood and stone from the original church excavated from deeper layers: Roman pottery, Saxon jewellery, medieval tiles. History stacked like geological strata.

But I'm not interested in the museum level.

I continue down. Older stairs, narrower, descending to the archaeological layers normally closed to the public. The second level is Saxon, rough stone walls and earthen floor. The third level reveals Roman foundations, brick and mortar from when London was Londinium.

Each level smells different. The Victorian crypt above: stone and furniture polish, old hymn books. The Saxon level: earth and something mineral, almost chalky. Here, at the Roman foundation, the air is older – denser, as if it has been sitting undisturbed for sixteen centuries and acquired a quality that isn't quite smell and isn't quite temperature. Just presence.

Below that, accessible only through a locked gate Webb installed for the preservation team, the lowest excavated level. Where

Roman construction meets the natural substrate. Where Wren would have dug his foundations in 1672.

Where my father's calculations predicted a sealed chamber would be hidden.

The gate's padlock requires Webb's master key. I insert it, half expecting the lock to have been changed, for this entire plan to collapse.

The gate swings open.

The air that comes through is cold in a different way than the church above. Not seasonal cold – underground cold. The constant temperature of sealed spaces that doesn't vary with the seasons, that doesn't know it's March.

I descend.

The smell changes from old church to damp ancient earth.

The lowest level is essentially a cave. Exposed bedrock forms the floor. Roman brickwork forms partial walls, and rising from the bedrock, Wren's foundation stones, massive blocks of Portland limestone positioned with mathematical precision.

This is where I need to scan.

I set up the laser scanner in the centre of the space, positioning the tripod on the most level section of floor I can find. The scanner hums to life, its rotating laser head beginning to map the space in three dimensions.

While it works, I explore with my torch. The chamber is roughly circular, maybe thirty feet in diameter. The foundation walls rise

twelve feet before disappearing into the ceiling of modern brickwork. Everything down here is original seventeenth century. Wren's actual construction, untouched by later renovations.

My light catches something on the western wall. I move closer.

Numbers. Carved into the limestone. Weathered but still legible: 51.51378.

Coordinates.

My heart pounds. I pull out my phone, open the GPS app. My current location: 51.51378° N, 0.10552° W.

The carved number matches the latitude exactly.

Wren marked his positioning. Left a breadcrumb for whoever had tools precise enough to verify it.

I photograph the carving from multiple angles, then continue my inspection. The eastern wall shows similar marks, but less distinct. Time and moisture have eroded them.

The scanner completes its first pass. I check the preliminary data on my laptop.

There.

On the northern section of the foundation wall, the laser scan shows inconsistency. The wall appears solid to the eye, but the laser reveals a cavity behind it. Eight feet square. A perfect cube. The same dimensions as St. Paul's crypt.

Another sealed chamber. Just like St. Paul's. Just like my father predicted.

I zoom in on the scan data, measure the cavity's position. It's not random. The chamber is positioned along the true north-south axis, aligned with astronomical north rather than magnetic north.

The same deliberate positioning I found in St. Paul's.

The same signature of astronomical encoding.

I'm downloading the scan data when I hear it.

Footsteps.

Above me. On the museum level.

I freeze, listening. One person. Moving through the crypt exhibits. Not the purposeful stride of security making rounds. Something more cautious. Deliberate.

Someone searching.

I kill my torch. Darkness drops over the lowest level like a shroud. The scanner's faint glow is the only illumination, its LED faint.

The footsteps stop above me. Silence.

They're coming down.

I pack the scanner with hands that want to shake. Everything needs to go back in the case. Laptop, cables, tripod. No time to be careful. No time to organize.

A torch beam sweeps the space above me.

I finish packing, hoist the case, move toward the stairs. But going up means running into whoever's descending. No way past them without confrontation.

Think.

The Roman level has a secondary passage. It's partially collapsed, unsuitable for public access, but it might lead to another exit.

Might.

I move as quietly as possible toward the passage, equipment case bumping against my hip. Behind me, the footsteps get closer.

Whoever it is, they know where they're going.

The passage is narrow, barely three feet wide. My case scrapes against the walls.

Too loud.

But stopping is worse.

I push forward into the darkness, using my phone's light at minimal brightness. The passage curves, descends. Water drips somewhere ahead. The smell of earth intensifies.

A voice calls out. Male. Professional. "Ms. Hart? I know you're down here. Let's talk."

I don't recognize the voice. Not police. Not security. Someone who knows my name, knows I'm here, knows what I'm doing.

Someone sent by Fairchild.

I move faster. The passage narrows further. My case wedges between walls. I wrench it free again.

"You can't get out that way. The eastern passage collapsed in 2019. You're trapped."

He’s lying. Has to be lying.

Except I reach the collapse five meters later. Brick and earth blocking the passage.

No way through. No way forward.

Trapped.

I turn back. The man is silhouetted at the passage entrance, backlit by his torch. I can’t see his face. the outline of someone tall, broad-shouldered, blocking my only exit.

“Put down the case,” he says calmly. “Give me the equipment. Walk away. This doesn’t have to end badly.”

Too heavy to use as a weapon.

No other exits.

No one knows I’m here except Daniel, and he thinks I’m surveying, not trapped underground with someone who works for people who’ve killed twice already.

“Who are you?” I ask, stalling.

“Someone who’s trying to save your life. The people I work for want this stopped. Without more bodies.” He takes a step forward. “Give me the scans. Delete your father’s research. Disappear. That’s the deal.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then you disappear permanently.” Another step. “Your choice, Ms. Hart. I’d rather not hurt you. But I will if you force me.”

I look at my equipment case. Five years of career development. Webb's legacy. My father's research. The proof that Wren encoded astronomical truth into London's architecture.

And my life. Not an easy choice. Except it is.

I've never been good at giving up.

I grab the heaviest thing in my case, the laser scanner itself, still attached to the tripod. Swing it hard at the hanging lamp he's using for light.

Glass shatters. Darkness floods the passage.

I rush forward in the confusion, case banging against walls. He's cursing, reaching for me. His hand catches my jacket.

I twist away, fabric tearing. Push past him into the wider space of the lowest level.

He's behind me. Faster than I expected. His footsteps pounding the stone.

I reach the stairs to the Roman level, take them two at a time. Equipment rattles inside my case, breaking. Don't care. Just need to move.

He's gaining. Too fast. Too close.

He catches my case, yanks back. I lose my grip. The case crashes to the floor.

No time to retrieve it.

I race for the stairs. I feel his fingers brush my collar.

Then I’m up the stairs, through the door, into the nave.

Moonlight through the tall windows shows me the way. I sprint down the central aisle toward the side entrance I used. Behind me, footsteps. Heavy. Determined.

I hit the side door at full speed, burst into the street.

Fleet Street is still empty. No help. No witnesses. Just me and a man who’s been ordered to stop me by any means necessary.

I run west toward Ludgate Circus. My breath comes fast, sharp in my throat. My legs struggle to keep pace, but I force them forward.

Behind me, his footsteps change rhythm. He’s running now.

He isn’t going to let me reach the corner.

I cut left into a narrow alley between buildings. He follows.

The alley opens onto Bride Lane. More alleys, more options. I know this area. Did surveys here for two years. Know which passages are dead ends, which ones connect through to other streets.

I zigzag through the lanes, losing him in the maze of courts and alleys., I emerge on New Bridge Street near Blackfriars.

I risk a look back.

No one. I made it. Barely.

I slow to a walk, catching my breath.

Then a footstep scuffs the pavement behind me. Unhurried.

I can barely feel my hands. Cold, probably. Or adrenaline leaving. I check what I still have: my laptop in its bag across my body. My phone. My wallet.

Everything else is gone. The scanner. The tripod. The equipment Webb gave me. All of it left behind in St. Bride's crypt.

But the scan data is on my laptop. Backed up to the cloud. Safe.

And I nearly died for it.

I force my legs to keep moving through darkened streets, checking constantly for pursuit. Fleet Street. Bride Lane. The courts and alleyways I know from my research on Wren's London.

Behind me, footsteps echo. He's still following.

The alley behind Bride Lane dead-ends at a metal grate. I wrench at it. Locked. Rusted. Has not been opened in years.

The footsteps are getting closer.

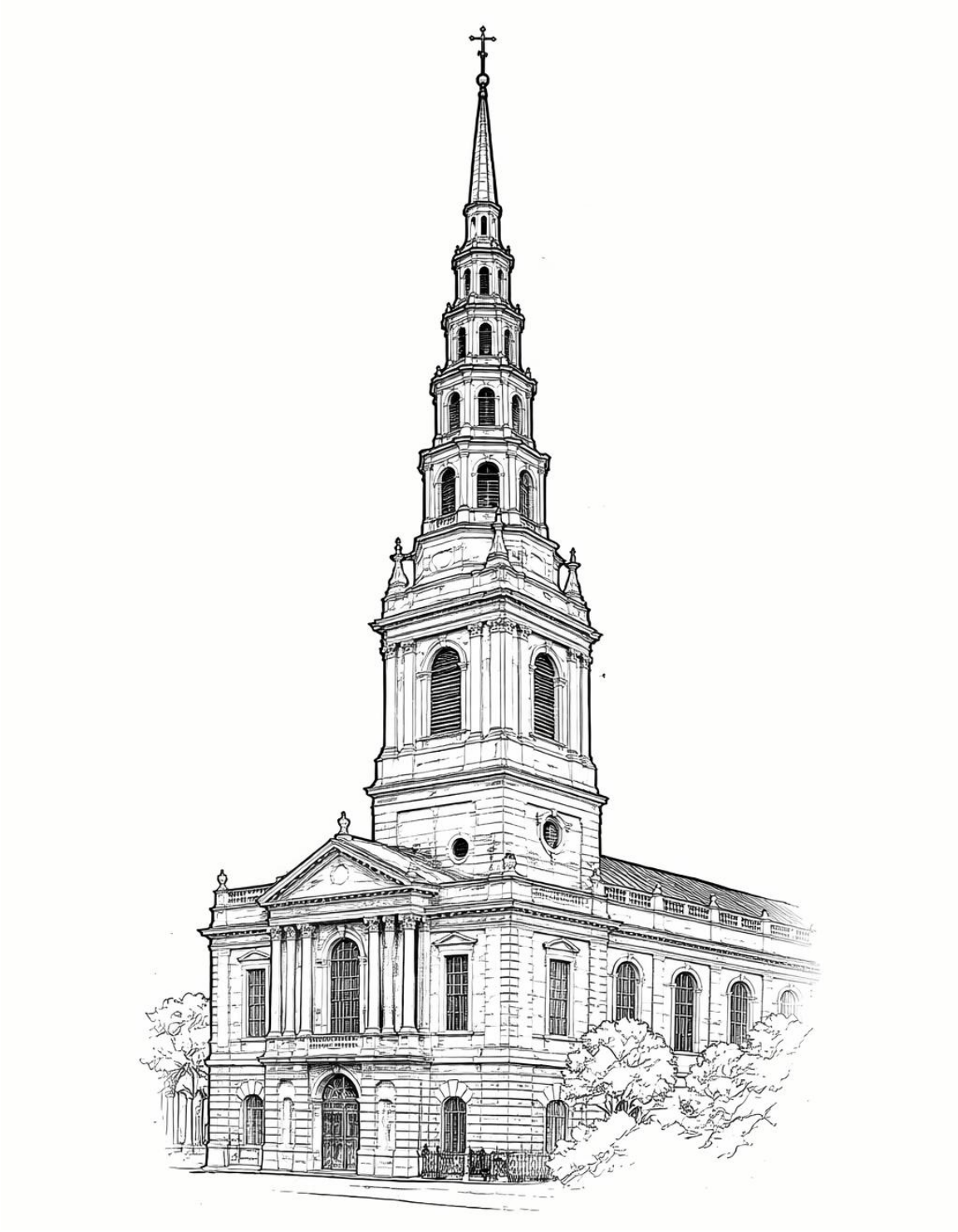
Brick walls rising on three sides. Overflowing bins. A fire escape leading up, but climbing means being visible, exposed. No other exits except back toward the man hunting me.

Then I see it. A smaller grate at ground level, half-hidden behind a commercial waste bin. Storm drain access. The kind of thing most people walk past without noticing.

The kind of thing a structural engineer knows leads somewhere.

The Fleet River, or what's left of it. Buried in the 1700s, converted to a sewer, running beneath Farringdon to the Thames. I've seen

the surveys. It runs below me. And right now, it’s my only way out.



"St. Bride's Church, Fleet Street"

TWELVE

SIR JAMES FAIRCHILD
Cornerstone Security Operations, Canary Wharf
Present Day – Tuesday, 12:03 AM

The surveillance room occupied the top floor of Cornerstone's Canary Wharf offices, a space few employees knew existed. Six monitors displayed feeds from cameras positioned throughout the city. Infrared sensors. Motion detectors. Audio pickups sophisticated enough to isolate conversations in crowded streets.

Fairchild sat in the leather chair facing the centre monitor, watching a thermal image of St. Bride's Fleet Street. The church glowed pale green against the cooler background of surrounding buildings. One heat signature, smaller and brighter, moved inside the structure.

Olivia Hart, right on schedule.

Richardson stood beside the console, headset connecting him to Harris on the ground. "She entered through the side entrance at 11:47 PM. Used Webb's key. Currently descending to the crypt levels."

"Camera coverage inside?"

“Limited. We have thermal through the windows and one camera in the main nave, but the crypt is below ground. We’re tracking her movement by heat signature bleeding through the foundation.” Richardson adjusted controls, zoomed the thermal image. “She’s in the museum level now. Heading down.”

Fairchild checked his watch. It was now past midnight. Tuesday morning technically, though London outside the windows was still deep in Monday night quiet. Canary Wharf’s towers rose dark around them, office workers long gone, leaving the financial district to security guards and people like him.

People who worked when others slept, protecting assets others didn’t know were vulnerable.

“Harris is in position?” Fairchild asked.

“In the church. Waiting until she completes the scan. We want to see what she finds before we intervene.” Richardson’s fingers moved across the keyboard, pulling up additional data. “Her equipment is active. Laser scanner running. She’s mapping the foundation level.”

On a secondary monitor, a crude 3D wireframe began to build. Not a direct feed from Hart’s scanner but approximated from the electromagnetic signatures their sensors detected. Enough to show what she was surveying.

The lowest crypt level. Wren’s original foundations. Where another sealed chamber waited to be discovered.

Fairchild felt the familiar tightness in his chest. His grandfather's surveillance files were still in the Cornerstone archive. Different technology, same purpose.

"She's found it," Richardson whispered.

The wireframe showed a void in the northern foundation wall. where Thomas Hart's research had predicted. where Christopher Wren had sealed evidence three and a half centuries ago.

Two sealed chambers discovered. Two pieces of evidence proving the astronomical encoding pattern. The probability of dismissing this as coincidence was dropping rapidly.

"Get Harris ready," Fairchild ordered. "She'll finish the scan in the next twenty minutes. He intercepts before she leaves."

Richardson spoke into his headset, low-voiced instructions. On the thermal display, a second heat signature appeared in St. Bride's nave. Harris, moving into position.

Fairchild watched the dual signatures. Hart in the lowest crypt, focused on her work, unaware of the approaching threat. Harris descending the stairs, following her path down through the archaeological layers.

This was the moment that mattered. Not the violence, not the confrontation, but the transaction. Harris would offer terms. Give us the equipment, delete the data, and walk away. Simple. Clean. A chance to resolve this without escalating to lethal force.

Whether Hart accepted those terms would determine everything that followed.

“Audio pickup?” Fairchild asked.

“Minimal. Stone walls, too much interference. We’ll get fragments when they’re in the upper crypt levels.” Richardson paused. “Sir, if she refuses to cooperate, what are Harris’s instructions?”

“Acquire the equipment. Let her leave. We’re not ready to escalate to elimination. Too many variables, too much attention after Webb’s death.” Fairchild’s voice was firm. “She’s frightened and isolated. When she realises we can reach her anywhere, the pressure will do the rest. People in her position always make mistakes.”

“And if she doesn’t make mistakes?”

“Then we adjust our approach. But for now, we demonstrate capability. Show her she’s being watched. That resistance is pointless. That her father’s investigation ended badly and hers will too unless she accepts reality.”

The thermal signatures converged. Harris had reached the lowest level. The confrontation was beginning.

Fairchild leaned forward, watching the screens. Audio crackled through the speakers. Fragments of conversation bleeding through stone and distance.

“...know you’re down here...”

“...talk...”

Static. Movement. Then clearer audio as they moved to the upper levels.

“...can’t get out that way... collapsed...”

Harris's voice, calm and professional. Doing what he'd been instructed. Establishing control of the situation, offering terms, giving her a chance to comply.

The heat signatures shifted. Rapid movement. Then separation.

"What happened?" Fairchild demanded.

Richardson pressed his headset closer. "She broke his light. Darkness. She's running."

The thermal image showed chaos. Harris pursuing, Hart fleeing up through the crypt levels. Too fast. Too chaotic.

"Tell him to secure the equipment case. Let her go if necessary but get the scanner."

More static. Voices overlapping. Then Harris, breathing hard: "She dropped the case. She's out the side door, heading west. I'm on foot behind her."

Fairchild's jaw tightened. Half success. They had her equipment, but she was running with her laptop.

"Vehicle pursuit?" Richardson asked.

"No. Too visible. Let her run. We know where she's staying. Call Harris off." Fairchild stood, walked to the window. Outside, London sprawled dark and vast. Somewhere in that maze, Olivia Hart was fleeing through empty streets, convinced she had won a victory.

She had no idea how comprehensive their surveillance was. How many cameras tracked her. How many sensors monitored her communications. How thoroughly they had mapped her life.

Richardson pressed his headset. “Harris, break off. Do not pursue. Return for the case.”

Static. Then Harris, flat and unhurried: “She’s gone down a drain off Bride Lane. Understood. Standing down.”

His phone vibrated. He glanced at the screen and felt his jaw tighten further.

Victoria Ashton.

He considered not answering. The St. Bride’s operation had concluded; he didn’t need her assessment of its failures right now.

But Victoria wasn’t someone you ignored.

He answered. “Victoria.”

“She escaped.” Not a question. A flat statement of fact. Victoria had clearly been monitoring the operation through her own channels. “Harris had her cornered in a dead-end passage, and she escaped.”

“We have her equipment. The scanner, the -”

“I don’t care about equipment.” Victoria’s voice was ice. “We care about data. Which she has on her laptop. Which she took with her. So, you’ve accomplished exactly nothing except confirming she won’t back down from a physical confrontation.”

Fairchild kept his voice level. “The operation demonstrated our reach. She knows we can find her anywhere.”

“Demonstrated your incompetence, you mean.” A pause. “I told you at the Athenaeum. Half measures don’t work. You chose to intimidate her. I said eliminate the threat.”

“Eliminating her two days after Webb would create unacceptable police attention.”

“And now she has confirmation of a second void.” A pause. “By tomorrow, she’ll be talking to academics, lawyers, journalists. While you’re still trying to scare her.”

“We have protocols. The stakeholders agreed.”

“The stakeholders agreed to let you try your way.” Her voice sharpened. “You tried. It failed. Now we do this properly.”

“I’m sending my own people.”

“Victoria!”

“Your grandfather understood what this requires. Apparently, you don’t.”

The line went dead.

Fairchild stood motionless, phone pressed to his ear, listening to silence.

Richardson spoke. “Sir?”

“Victoria is sending her own team.” Fairchild pocketed his phone. “She’s off script.”

“Can we stop her?”

“No. The consortium operates on family autonomy for internal security matters. If the Ashtons want to deploy their own resources, that’s within their rights.” Fairchild returned to his chair. “Which means we need to move faster. Before Victoria’s ‘permanent solution’ creates complications we can’t control.”

“Retrieve the equipment,” Fairchild said, his tone sharp now. “Have Harris sanitise the scene and withdraw. Then I want complete analysis of what she scanned. Compare it against her father’s predictions. Confirm whether the pattern is holding.”

“And Hart?”

“Maintain surveillance. She’ll go to ground, change locations. Follow her. Document everyone she contacts. Build the network map. Eventually, she’ll reach out to someone who can help her go public. When she does, we’ll know.”

Richardson made notes, issued orders through his headset. The thermal display showed Harris returning to St. Bride’s, collecting the equipment case from the crypt floor, and moving back through the nave toward the exit. The church returning to stillness. One heat signature where there had been two.

Fairchild returned to his chair, pulled up the wireframe data from Hart’s scan. The void was there, unmistakable, positioned along the true north axis. The same astronomical encoding signature her father had identified. The same deliberate pattern Christopher Wren had built into the city’s foundations.

Truth preserved in stone. Once again, someone was finding it.

“The Athenaeum meeting established our coordinated response,” Fairchild said, thinking aloud. “Webb has been eliminated. Hart’s professional reputation will be attacked starting tomorrow. Legal teams are preparing for potential litigation. The Monument development is accelerating.”

“We’re executing the plan,” Richardson agreed.

“But Hart is proving more resilient than anticipated. Surveillance at the British Library this morning, and she detected it. Confrontation at St. Bride’s tonight, and she escaped. She’s learning. Adapting.” Fairchild tapped his fingers on the armrest. “We need to accelerate our timeline.”

“How?”

“The academic we discussed. Someone with credentials who can offer collaboration, gain her trust. Who do we have?”

Richardson pulled up files on a secondary monitor. “Three candidates. Dr. Emily Wilson, architectural historian at Cambridge. Published extensively on Wren. No current financial pressures we can exploit.” He scrolled. “Professor Rhys Adams, Oxford. Specialises in seventeenth-century astronomy. Gambling debts, vulnerable to financial incentive.” Another scroll. “Dr. Abigail Joyce, freelance conservation consultant. Works with multiple preservation organisations. Recently lost a major grant, looking for funding.”

“Joyce,” Fairchild decided. “Freelance means flexibility. Conservation background means relevant expertise. Financial pressure means motivation. Have her reach out to Hart tomorrow. Offer collaboration on the Wren research. Say she’s heard about

Hart's St. Paul's discovery through professional channels and wants to help verify the findings."

"Hart will be suspicious after tonight."

"Which is why the approach needs to be perfect. Dr. Joyce contacts her through official preservation networks. References real projects they've both worked on. Demonstrates genuine expertise. Makes herself useful before asking for access to the research." Fairchild pulled up Joyce's file, scanned her credentials. "She's published on Wren's structural innovations. Worked on church restorations. Hart will want that expertise."

"I'll make the arrangements. Joyce will need compensation."

"Fifty thousand pounds. Half up front, half on completion. Tell her we're a private foundation concerned about protecting historic churches from false claims. That Hart's research could damage Wren's reputation if it's based on faulty methodology. We need someone on the inside to verify the data's legitimacy."

Richardson made notes. "She'll buy that narrative?"

"Academics are always willing to believe someone else's research is flawed. Especially if there's money involved." Fairchild closed the file. "Have Joyce make contact within forty-eight hours. Friendly, professional, offering expertise Hart needs. By the end of the week, we want Joyce embedded in Hart's investigation, reporting on her movements and her findings."

"Understood."

Fairchild checked the time. 1:34 AM. The St. Bride's operation had taken less than two hours from Hart's arrival to her escape. Efficient, if not entirely successful.

Thomas Hart had lasted six months before they eliminated him. Marcus Webb had lasted forty years before his conscience became a liability.

She'd evaded surveillance at the British Library. Escaped Harris in a dead-end passage. She was still moving.

The question was whether she could keep moving long enough.

"Monument development status?" Fairchild asked.

"Permits expediting as discussed. We're pushing for groundbreaking in two weeks. Pile drivers operational three days later."

"Keep it to two weeks. I want that chamber breached before Hart can survey any more churches." Fairchild stood, collected his coat. "This ends in one of two ways Richardson. Either Hart stops investigating, or we destroy the evidence she's trying to find. Preferably both."

"Yes, sir."

Fairchild took a last look at the surveillance monitors. Six screens showing different views of London at night. Cameras watching streets, tracking movements, building the comprehensive picture of a city under observation.

Somewhere in that surveyed landscape, Olivia Hart thought she was fighting for truth.

Six monitors. Every street corner, every communication channel, every contact she made.

She thought she was hiding. He was waiting.

Hart had become a problem the moment she'd scanned St. Paul's foundations. Now she was a liability.

Fairchild left the surveillance room, descended in the private lift to the underground car park. His driver was waiting and would take him home to Chelsea for a few hours of sleep before tomorrow's meetings began.

Tomorrow, the attacks on Hart's credibility would begin.

Tomorrow, Dr. Abigail Joyce would be recruited and briefed.

Tomorrow, the Monument development would move another step closer to approval.

And tomorrow, Olivia Hart would wake up in whatever hiding place she had chosen, believing she had escaped tonight's confrontation.

Not understanding that escape was temporary. That every move she made was being watched, recorded, analysed.

Not understanding that the machinery targeted against her had crushed better-resourced opponents than one lone engineer with a laser scanner and her father's research notes.

Christopher Wren had hidden his truth brilliantly.

But Fairchild would make sure it stayed hidden.

However long it took.

The truth was only dangerous if people believed it.

And Fairchild controlled who people believed.

THIRTEEN

OLIVIA HART
Fleet Sewer System, beneath Farringdon
Present Day – Tuesday, 1:12 AM

I shove the bin aside, drop to my knees.

This grate is smaller, older, but the lock is broken. Vandals probably, or rough sleepers looking for shelter. I pull it open.

The smell hits me first. Old water. Sewage. Centuries of London's effluent channelled through Victorian engineering.

The Fleet River, or what's left of it. Buried in the 1700s, converted to a sewer, running beneath Farringdon to the Thames.

I've seen the surveys. It runs below me.

And right now, it's my only way out.

I swing my legs through the grate, lower myself into darkness. My phone's torch shows a narrow shaft descending six feet to a brick-lined tunnel. I drop.

The landing jolts through my ankles.

I steady myself against the wall. The brick is gritty under my palm – not as slimy as I expected, worn smooth in places by a century and a half of water. The smell is stronger down here. Not just sewage. The mineral smell of old water moving over old stone, and beneath that, something older still. The Fleet River, invisible above for three hundred years, still remembers what it is.

Water splashes around my feet. Not deep, maybe three inches, but moving. The tunnel stretches in both directions, arched brick ceiling just high enough for me to stand if I hunch.

I pull the grate closed above me; hear it settle into place. Darkness swallows everything except my phone's small circle of light.

Above, a man's voice, low and even, talking to someone through a headset. I can't catch the words. He'll find the displaced bin, the open grate. Surely he will know where I went.

Then, right above me: "Understood. Standing down."

A torch beam slides across the bars and stops.

"Ms. Hart." The same calm voice, pitched to carry down the shaft. "I know you can hear me. We know where you live. Where your brother lives. Where everyone you know lives."

Footsteps, moving away.

Or pretending to.

But will he follow?

I start moving south, toward the Thames. The tunnel slopes downward, following the ancient course of the Fleet River that once flowed above ground through medieval London. My

footsteps splash in the slow-moving water. The arched ceiling bounces sound back at me – my actual footfall and its echo half a second behind, close enough that I sound like two people moving through the dark.

Behind me, a pale smear of light on the wet brick. A torch beam, or the ghost of one, cutting through the darkness. Then a murmur, muffled by brick and distance.

He's still following me.

I move faster, trying to keep my footsteps quiet despite the water. The tunnel curves, following the river's ancient meanders. Side passages branch off, smaller pipes feeding into the main channel. I ignore them, stay on the main line. Get lost down here and I might never find my way out.

My phone's light catches markings on the walls. Victorian-era survey marks, faded with time. Distance markers every fifty meters. I'm heading southeast, roughly parallel to Farringdon Road above.

The water is rising. Not much, maybe another inch, but enough to notice. Rain must have started above ground. Storm runoff feeding into the system.

Behind me, splashing. Light swings across the walls.

I risk a glance back. A smear of movement. Or my own beam, thrown back at me off the curved brick. I can't tell which.

The tunnel ahead splits. Left continues southeast toward the Thames. Right branches east toward the Barbican area. I know from the historical surveys that the right branch connects to other

tunnel systems, a network of underground passages and forgotten infrastructure.

More places to hide. More ways to lose pursuit.

I take the smaller right branch. Pre-Victorian maybe, brick work cruder. The ceiling drops to five and a half feet. I have to duck, moving in an awkward crouch. Water shallower here, an inch or two.

My light catches something ahead. A junction. Multiple passages converging.

I hear something behind me, closer now. A glimmer on the damp walls.

At the junction, I choose randomly. Northeast passage, ascending. The water thins to a trickle. The air smells less like sewage, more like old stone and earth.

This tunnel is different. Older than Victorian. Medieval maybe.

Nothing in modern surveys shows this.

The passage narrows further. I'm moving sideways, shoulders scraping brick. My phone light shows the tunnel ahead continuing into darkness.

Behind me, the sounds have stopped. I pause, listening.

Silence. Then a hiss that could be radio static, or water in a pipe.

They've split up. Covering the passages. Trying to box me in.

I keep moving. The narrow passage opens into a small chamber. Circular, maybe ten feet across. Multiple tunnels radiate outward

like spokes. An old junction where different sewer lines converged.

I choose the passage that ascends most steeply. Up means toward street level. Up means potential exits.

This tunnel is barely three feet wide. I'm shuffling sideways. The brick is ancient here, some sections Roman construction incorporated into later work. London building on London, layer upon layer.

The passage bends sharply. I squeeze around the corner. And stop.

Dead end.

Brick wall ahead. Solid. No exit. No grates. Nothing.

I've trapped myself.

I turn to go back, and stop.

Left at the chamber. No, right. The passage bent twice, or three times. My phone's light shows brick and more brick, every direction the same, and I can't rebuild the route.

I listen for them. For the voices that were coming through the tunnels.

Water drips. Somewhere far off, a pipe ticks as it cools. Nothing else.

No footsteps. No torches. No one.

I don't know how long it's been like this. Minutes. Longer. Whoever was above the grate gave up and left, and I've been running from my own echo.

Which means no one knows I'm down here. And I can't get back.

Think. There has to be another way.

I examine the dead end more. The brick work is different here. Newer than the surrounding tunnel. Eighteenth century maybe. Someone sealed this passage.

I press against the wall. Solid. No give.

But the mortar is old. Crumbling in places.

The only voice down here is the water, and it is louder than it was.

I brace my back against one wall, both feet against the sealed end and push.

Nothing.

I push again. The laptop bag falls into the water.

A brick shifts.

I kick, harder this time.

Another brick gives. Then another.

Enough space to force my way through.

The water behind me is deeper than it was a minute ago, and the floor of the passage has begun to run with it.

I grab my laptop bag, shove it through the hole. Follow it through, scraping my shoulders against rough brick edges.

I fall.

Not far. Maybe four feet. Land hard in freezing water that's waist deep.

My phone is underwater. I grab for it, pull it out. The light still works, protected by its waterproof case.

I'm in a different tunnel. Larger. Older. The water moves with purpose, a current pulling southeast.

This is the old Fleet. The original river channel buried and forgotten. The water is clear, not sewage. Groundwater and rain runoff, following the path it has followed for millennia.

Behind me, the hole I made is roaring as the water finds the gap.

I start wading downstream, fighting the current. The water reaches my chest. Cold enough to make breathing difficult.

The tunnel curves. The ceiling drops lower. The current strengthens.

I'm being carried now more than walking. The water is pulling me toward wherever this forgotten river flows.

A light ahead. Not daylight. Something else. Artificial orange glow filtering through the water.

I fight toward it. The current is fierce here, nearly knocking me off my feet.

The orange glow resolves into a grate. Modern construction, iron bars set into concrete. Beyond it, a larger chamber lit by emergency lighting.

The grate is locked.

But the bars are spaced wide enough. Eight inches between them. Enough for a person to squeeze through if they're desperate enough.

Behind me, the water thunders through the broken brick. The channel is filling. I have minutes, not hours.

I push my laptop bag through the grate first. Then I turn sideways, force myself between the bars. My hips stick. The current pushes me against the metal.

I twist, push. My jacket tears again. I scrape skin off my shoulders.

Then I'm through.

I fall into the lit chamber, landing on concrete. The laptop bag beside me, dripping.

I look back through the grate. Black water pouring past the bars, and beyond it, nothing. No torch. No shape. Nobody.

Nobody followed me this far. Maybe nobody followed me at all.

I grab my bag and run.

The chamber is some kind of maintenance access for the modern sewer system. Pipes run along the walls. A metal ladder leads up to a manhole cover.

I climb. Ten feet. Twenty. My wet clothes making every movement heavy.

At the top, I push against the manhole cover. It doesn't budge.

Traffic weight pressing down from above. I'm under a road.

I brace my shoulders against the cover. Push with everything I have.

It shifts. Inches up. I push harder.

Light and sound flood in. Street noise. Car engines. The ordinary chaos of London even at 1:45 AM.

I heave the cover aside, pull myself up onto wet pavement.

I'm on Farringdon Road. Commercial buildings. A late-night kebab shop still open. A taxi passing.

I flag it down, soaking wet and covered in mud and who knows what else from the tunnels.

The driver hesitates.

"Please," I say. "Just drive."

He unlocks the doors.

I collapse into the back seat, shivering. Give him an address three blocks from the hotel where Daniel is waiting. I don't want the driver to know where I'm going.

As we pull away, I look back at the manhole cover. No one emerging. No one was ever going to. Fairchild will know I came up here anyway. He will track the taxi probably, figure out where I went.

I need to get to Daniel. We need to move. Again.

My phone buzzes. Text from Daniel:

`Where are you? It's 1:50 AM.`

I type back with shaking hands:

`Coming back now. Pack everything. We have to leave.`

The taxi carries me through empty London streets. Rain has started, washing some of the tunnel filth from the windows. The city looks clean under the streetlights. Beautiful.

I leave muddy water on the seat.

I think about the voice at the grate. The calm. The resources behind it. The casual threat about knowing where Daniel lives.

They're not trying to kill me yet. They're trying to scare me into stopping.

I wipe sewer water off my face and gaze out of the window.

My father died in these streets somewhere. Poisoned. Murdered. Made to look natural.

Webb died trying to tell me the truth. Christopher Wren hid astronomical observations in sealed chambers beneath churches, encoding truth into the architecture of London because publishing it would have gotten him killed.

Three centuries of suppression.

Power protecting itself.

Truth buried to preserve assets.

I'm done running.

Well, I'm running now. But not for much longer.

The taxi pulls up three blocks from the hotel. I pay the driver, tipping him heavily for not asking questions.

Then I walk the remaining blocks, checking constantly for surveillance. See nothing obvious. But that doesn't mean they're not watching.

The hotel room is dark when I enter. Daniel is awake, sitting on his bed with his laptop, headphones on.

He looks up when I come in. Takes in my appearance. Soaking wet. Covered in mud. Shaking.

"The tunnels?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"Did it work?"

I think about the sealed chamber at St. Bride's. The void my scanner mapped before they took the equipment. The data backed up to the cloud, safe despite everything they've done to stop me.

"Yeah," I say. "It worked."

FOURTEEN

THOMAS HART
His study, Chislehurst
January 2020

The overlay took eleven seconds to render.

Thomas watched the progress bar without moving. He'd been at his desk since morning, and it was now past one. The coffee beside his keyboard had been there since ten. He noticed this and did nothing about it.

The render completed.

He leaned forward.

The map showed central London in 1666, the fire boundary overlaid in red. Onto it he'd placed two datasets: the recorded positions of Wren's fifty-two churches, and the stellar coordinates for London on the night of September 2nd, 1666, as a heliocentric model would calculate them.

The church positions and the stellar coordinates aligned. Not approximately. Not close enough to be coincidence. Each church occupied a point on the stellar map that corresponded to a configuration of the sky visible only from a moving Earth.

Not the geocentric sky. The heliocentric one.

Thomas sat back. His mind moved through the implications one by one, the way he'd trained himself to think, slowly and in order, because the alternative was to leap ahead and make errors.

Wren had encoded heliocentrism. Hidden it in the positions of fifty-two churches across London, each one a point in a stellar map that proved the Earth moved around the sun. He got up and walked to his window. The street below was empty, wet from earlier rain, orange streetlights reflecting in the tarmac. Ordinary in every way.

He came back to his desk and pulled up the property records.

He'd set them aside three weeks ago, meaning to return to them. The 1667 and 1668 surveys of the fire-damaged areas, digitised by British History Online. Boundary positions as recorded in the aftermath of the fire. He'd been collecting them to cross-reference with the church positions, a check he hadn't yet run.

He overlaid them now.

His hands froze over the keyboard.

The churches didn't just mark stellar coordinates. Each one stood at a point where the post-fire boundary survey diverged from the pre-fire records. The divergence was always in the same direction. Always toward the same cluster of family names appearing again and again in the transfer documents.

Fairchild. Pembroke. Ashton. Grey.

Thomas wrote the names on a notepad and sat looking at them.

He'd been wrong about the scale of what he'd found. This wasn't an architectural curiosity. This was evidence of the largest property fraud in London's history, documented by the greatest architect of his age, encoded in buildings that had stood for three and a half centuries.

He picked up his phone to call Olivia. She was twenty-three, finishing her doctorate, her career ahead of her. She'd understand immediately, in a way nobody else would.

He set it down. Looked at the four names on his notepad. Looked at the phone.

Then he opened a new document and began writing everything down. The observations. The correlations. The names. The property transfers. Everything he could document before allowing himself to sleep.

The calculations predicted a sealed chamber beneath the Monument's foundation; an anchor point for the entire encoding. If it existed, if it could be accessed, everything else became provable.

He worked through the rest of the night and didn't call Olivia.

*

THOMAS HART
The Monument, Fish Street Hill
March 2020

The ground-penetrating radar unit hummed softly as Thomas Hart moved it across the Monument's foundation. Three in the morning, and London was as quiet as it ever got. The security guard had been persuaded that heritage documentation required night work, when vibrations from traffic wouldn't interfere with the readings.

That, and two hundred pounds in cash.

The GPR display showed layers of soil, brick, and stone descending twenty feet below street level. Thomas watched the screen intently, looking for the anomaly he'd spent six months calculating should be here.

Marcus Webb stood beside him, holding the data logger. At sixty-two, Webb was one of the few preservation engineers Thomas trusted. They'd worked together on a dozen church surveys over the past decade.

"Anything?" Webb asked.

"Wait." Thomas adjusted the frequency, moved the sensor array another meter east. The display flickered, then stabilised.

There.

A void. Eight feet square, positioned at the Monument's geometric centre, eighteen feet below the foundation level. Surrounded by brick walls three feet thick.

Where Christopher Wren's mathematical encoding had predicted.

Thomas felt his hands trembling as he captured the image. After two years of research, countless nights analysing church positions and astronomical calculations, he'd found it. Physical confirmation that Wren had sealed something beneath the Monument in 1677.

"Is that what I think it is?" Webb leaned closer to the screen.

"A chamber. Deliberately constructed. The walls are too regular to be natural voids or settlement gaps." Thomas took additional readings from different angles. "It's cubic. And look at the positioning relative to the Monument's axis."

He pulled out his notebook, showed Webb the calculations. The sealed chamber sat at the precise convergence point of fifty-two geometric lines radiating outward from the Monument to each of Wren's churches. Each church positioned according to stellar coordinates. Each one marking a specific star's position on the night of September 2, 1666.

The night the Great Fire began.

"My God," Webb breathed. "You were right. All of it."

The academic establishment had dismissed his theories. Peer reviewers had rejected his papers. Funding committees had turned down his grant applications. Too speculative, they said. Too far-fetched.

The question was what Wren had sealed down there. The astronomical data proving heliocentrism, certainly. Observations too precise to be dismissed as measurement errors. Calculations that would have gotten him executed for heresy in 1677.

The display showed a sealed chamber, eighteen feet down.

He thought about the documents he had found three weeks ago in his mother's attic. Family papers, mostly mundane. Birth certificates, property deeds, letters between relatives long dead.

And one item that had stopped him cold.

A Bible, dated 1680. On the inside cover, written in careful seventeenth-century script:

"For John Hart, Master Mason, from his friend C.W., in gratitude for your faithful service and eternal silence."

Below that, in different ink, added later:

"The truth is buried where the fire began. When the time comes, those with Hart blood will know where to look."

Thomas had spent days researching John Hart. Found him listed in parish records as a master mason working on the Monument's construction between 1671 and 1677. Found payments recorded in Wren's account books. Found John Hart's will, which mentioned

"...special knowledge entrusted to me by Sir Christopher Wren, to be passed to my descendants when the time is right."

His own ancestor. Working with Wren. Trusted with the secret of the sealed chamber.

Why Wren's work had always drawn him. Why he had seen patterns others missed. Why he couldn't let this go.

Three hundred and forty-three years, and the Harts were still paying that debt.

But the Bible's cryptic message troubled him. "*The truth is buried where the fire began.*"

The Monument marked the spot close to where the Great Fire had started. Thomas Farriner's bakehouse on Pudding Lane, where a spark had ignited the conflagration that destroyed thirteen thousand houses and eighty-seven churches.

Or so the official history claimed.

Thomas had been examining property records from the period. The patterns he'd found were disturbing.

In the decade before the Fire, certain wealthy families had been acquiring properties throughout the City. Not developing them. Just buying. Concentrating ownership.

After the Fire, those same families received massive compensation payments for their "losses." Then purchased far larger estates during the rebuilding, using surveys that somehow gave them significantly more land than they'd originally owned.

The mathematical analysis was damning. If you mapped pre-Fire property ownership against post-Fire claims, the discrepancies averaged fifteen percent. Across the entire City of London.

Fifteen percent.

Millions of pounds in modern value. Billions, perhaps.

The families who benefited most were the same ones now holding vast property portfolios based on those seventeenth-century surveys. Together, the Fairchild, Pembroke, Ashton, and Grey

families held fourteen billion pounds in assets, including properties owned through the Fairchilds' Cornerstone Heritage Properties.

Assets whose legal foundations rested on surveys conducted after the Fire.

Surveys that Wren's astronomical precision could prove were inaccurate.

But what if inaccuracy wasn't the point? What if the surveys were manipulated? What if the Fire itself was…

Thomas stopped himself. That way lay paranoia. The Fire had been investigated extensively. The official inquiry blamed Thomas Farriner's negligence. There was no evidence of arson.

Except...

He pulled out his laptop, opened the file on pre-Fire documents he had been compiling and found the item that had caught his attention last week.

A letter dated August 1666. One month before the Fire. Written by a property developer named Edmund Fairchild to his business partner.

"The city is ripe for renewal. The old medieval warrens prevent proper development. If circumstances should provide opportunity for comprehensive rebuilding, we must be positioned to capitalise. I have secured agreements with three surveyors who understand the importance of... generous interpretation of property boundaries."

Dated August 1666.

One month before the Fire that made comprehensive rebuilding necessary.

Coincidence?

Thomas didn't believe in coincidences anymore.

He thought about the other documents he'd found. References to "land consolidation initiatives" from 1665. Property surveys conducted before the Fire that showed "anticipated development patterns." Letters between wealthy merchants discussing how a major fire would "solve the problem of cramped medieval holdings."

None of it proved anything.

But the pattern was there. The same precision he had found in Wren's churches. Too exact to be accidental.

"Thomas?" Webb's voice interrupted his thoughts. "You're doing it again. The thing where you go quiet and I can tell you're connecting dots I can't see."

Thomas looked at his old friend. Six months of research, and Webb had never once told him to stop.

Could he trust him with this?

"Marcus, what if the Fire wasn't an accident?"

Webb blinked. "What?"

"The property patterns. The pre-Fire acquisitions. The post-Fire survey manipulations." Thomas pulled up his analysis files. "What

if powerful interests wanted the old city destroyed? What if they arranged it?"

"Thomas, that's a massive accusation," Webb shook his head. "You'd need extraordinary evidence."

"I know. And I think it's down there." Thomas pointed at the GPR screen, at the sealed chamber eighteen feet below them. "I think Wren discovered it. I think that's what he's really hiding, not astronomical data. Evidence of conspiracy. Maybe even arson."

Webb was quiet for a long moment. "If you're right, if you publish this..."

"I'll be challenging some of the most powerful families in Britain. Families whose wealth is built on surveys I can prove are fraudulent. Who might be descended from the people who burned London for profit." Thomas saved his data files and began packing the GPR unit. "I know."

"They'll destroy you professionally."

"They'll try." Thomas thought about the encrypted backups he had been creating. The copies stored in three different locations. The letter he had written to his daughter, to be opened if anything happened to him. "But I have to do this. My ancestor helped Wren hide this truth. He passed down the responsibility, and now it's my turn."

"When will you publish?"

"I need more evidence first. I want to survey at least three more churches, confirm the pattern holds. I need to cross-reference more pre-Fire documents. Build an unassailable case." Thomas glanced

at his watch. Four-thirty AM. “And I need to establish legal protections. I’m meeting with Michael Ashworth next week. He’s handled whistle-blower cases. If I structure this correctly, release the data through proper channels, it’ll be harder to suppress.”

Webb helped him carry the equipment back to the van. London was starting to wake. Early morning delivery trucks. Street cleaners. The ordinary city emerging from night.

Thomas looked up at the Monument towering above them. Two hundred and two feet tall. Wren’s masterpiece of hidden meaning. Every measurement deliberate. Every stone positioned according to mathematical principles that encoded astronomical truth.

And beneath it, eighteen feet down, a chamber sealed for three hundred and forty-three years.

Waiting for someone with Hart blood to find it.

“Marcus, I need you to promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“If something happens to me, if I don’t finish this, you make sure my daughter gets my research. All of it. The encrypted files, the backup drives, everything.” Thomas handed Webb a sealed envelope. “This has the passwords and instructions. She’s a structural engineer. She’ll understand the architectural evidence. And she’s stubborn enough to see it through.”

Webb took the envelope, his expression troubled. “You’re scaring me, Thomas. You really think you’re in danger?”

“I think I’m threatening billions of pounds in assets held by families who’ve protected their interests for centuries. I think I’m uncovering evidence of the largest property fraud in British history, and I think the people responsible won’t let that become public without a fight.”

They loaded the equipment in silence. Thomas took one last look at the Monument. In a few hours, tourists would gather here, taking photos, reading the inscription about the Great Fire. None of them knowing what lay beneath their feet.

Truth buried where the fire began.

His phone buzzed. A text from an unknown number:

`We know what you’re researching. Stop now. This is your only warning.`

Thomas stared at the message. They were watching him. Already. How long had they known?

He deleted the text, pocketed his phone.

“Nothing. Just spam.” Thomas managed a smile. “Let’s get this equipment back before morning traffic gets bad.”

They drove through empty London streets. Thomas looked out the window at Wren’s churches passing by. St. Magnus the Martyr. St. Mary-le-Bow. St. Bride’s. Each one a piece of the pattern. Each one positioned according to stars that proved the Earth moved.

Each one potentially containing evidence of an even darker secret.

He thought about his daughter, Olivia. She was only twenty-two. Working on her doctorate. Brilliant, focused, with his same obsessive attention to detail.

He'd kept her away from this research. Told her he was working on standard architectural history. Didn't want her caught up in whatever was coming.

But if something happened to him, she would have his files. She could piece it together. She had his blood. The Hart blood that carried three centuries of obligation.

She would finish it.

Thomas pulled out his phone again, started composing an email to Michael Ashworth. He needed legal protection. Needed the dead-man's switch in place. If they silenced him, the research had to survive.

The sun was rising over London. Early commuters on the Tube. Delivery trucks on Wren's streets. The city going about its morning without a single glance at the churches passing by.

Lies that Christopher Wren had discovered.

Lies Thomas Hart was going to expose.

Two days later, Thomas Hart died of an apparent heart attack while working alone in his study.The official cause: natural cardiac arrest, likely stress related. The autopsy found nothing suspicious.

But the encrypted files survived.

And six years later, his daughter would find them.

FIFTEEN

OLIVIA HART
King's Cross to Paddington to Lincoln's Inn Fields
Present Day – Tuesday, 10:15 AM

We check out of the hotel before dawn. Daniel doesn't ask questions when I tell him we're moving again. He packs methodically, the way he always does, folding each item before placing it in his bag.

The new hotel is in Paddington, chosen because it is large, anonymous, and has multiple exits. I pay cash using a false name. The clerk barely glances at the ID I provide.

The room is identical to every other budget hotel room in London. Beige walls. Generic art. Two single beds.

Clean. Quiet. Anonymous.

Daniel sets up his laptop, plugging in the portable hard drives I'd given him months ago. Backups of backups. Even if they took my scanning equipment, they don't have the data.

I shower, washing tunnel filth from my hair and skin. The water runs brown for the first minute. My shoulders are scraped raw

where I squeezed through the grate. My jacket is ruined, left in a bin three blocks from the hotel.

But I'm alive. And I have the St. Bride's scan data.

By the time I emerge, dressed in fresh clothes from my emergency bag, Daniel has my laptop connected to an external monitor. Two screens showing different views of the St. Bride's scan.

"The void is there," he says without preamble. "North wall, foundation level. Eight feet square, same dimensions as St. Paul's."

I lean over his shoulder, study the 3D rendering. The sealed chamber is unmistakable. Positioned with the same precision as the St. Paul's void. Another piece of the pattern confirmed.

"Two down," I say. "Fifty more to go."

"You can't survey fifty churches." Daniel's tone is matter of fact, not judgmental. "You don't have equipment and they're watching you."

He's right, of course. The equipment Harris took cost twelve thousand pounds. My insurance won't cover it since I was technically trespassing. And even if I could replace it, every church site is now compromised. They know what I'm looking for.

My phone vibrates. Text from Michael Ashworth:

`Understood about yesterday. Can you meet today? 11:00 AM, my office. Bring your brother if needed.`

I text back confirmation. Yesterday I walked away from his door because I was afraid of leading them to it. After last night, fear is a

luxury. Ashworth was my father's godfather and solicitor, the only person outside Webb who knew about Dad's research. If anyone can help navigate the legal implications, it's him.

"We're meeting someone in an hour," I tell Daniel. "Dad's lawyer."

"Michael Ashworth, Lincoln's Inn Fields. Specialises in whistle-blower protection and intellectual property disputes." Daniel recites facts the way other people breathe. "Dad met with him three times in March 2020. The last meeting was two days before Dad died."

I never told Daniel about that last meeting.

"Did Dad ever tell you what they discussed?"

"Legal frameworks for releasing controversial research. Dead-man's switches. How to structure evidence disclosure to maximise impact while minimising personal liability." Daniel pauses. "Dad was planning for the possibility he'd be killed."

I look at my own laptop bag. The backups. The encrypted files. The dead-man's switch Daniel set up last night.

We are doing the same thing.

We take the Tube to Holborn, then walk the remaining blocks to Lincoln's Inn Fields. The law offices occupy a Georgian terrace that's been there since before Wren rebuilt London. Brass plaques beside the door list solicitors going back generations.

Ashworth's secretary shows us to his office on the second floor. The room is lined with law books, case files stacked on every

surface. A man in his sixties rises from behind the desk as we enter.

"Olivia. You've grown up since I last saw you." He shakes my hand, then Daniel's. "And Daniel, your father spoke about you often. Please, sit."

We settle into leather chairs that have been here for a century. Ashworth studies us both for a moment before speaking.

"You were right to turn around yesterday. I'm going to be direct, because I suspect you don't have time for pleasantries. Your father came to me six years ago because he had discovered something that threatened extremely powerful interests. He wanted legal protection for himself and his research. I structured several safeguards, but clearly they weren't enough." He pauses. "I've carried guilt about that for six years."

"It's not your fault," I say.

"Perhaps. But I should have pushed harder for him to stop. Or at least to slow down, wait until we had better protections in place." Ashworth opens a file on his desk. "Now you're continuing his work. Marcus Webb is dead. You've been under surveillance. You're in danger, Olivia."

"I know."

"Do you? Because the people your father was investigating have resources you can't imagine. Political connections. Legal teams. Private security. And they've already demonstrated willingness to kill."

"I'm not stopping."

Ashworth regards me for a long moment. Then nods. “I didn’t think you would. You have your father’s stubbornness. So, let’s discuss how to keep you alive while you finish what he started.”

He pulls out several documents. “First, legal protection. I’m establishing you as a client under solicitor-client privilege. Anything you tell me is protected. I’m also drafting documentation that establishes your research as legitimate academic inquiry, which provides some shield against harassment claims.”

“Will that help?”

“Against low-level harassment, yes. Against determined opponents?” He shrugs. “It slows them down. Sometimes that’s enough.”

“What else?”

“I’m setting up a dead-man’s switch. Your research data will be distributed to multiple journalists, academics, and legal authorities if you miss check-ins for more than seventy-two hours. They can kill you, but they can’t suppress the information.”

Ashworth discusses my potential death the way my father used to discuss structural load-bearing calculations. Precisely. Dispassionately. Without looking away from the numbers.

“I’ll need copies of all your research,” Ashworth continues. “Encrypted, of course. Stored in multiple jurisdictions. Switzerland, Germany, Canada. Places where British property interests can’t easily suppress it.”

Daniel speaks up. “I can handle the encryption and distribution. Military-grade protocols. Zero-knowledge architecture.”

Ashworth raises an eyebrow. “Your father mentioned you were talented with computers.”

“I’m excellent at not being found.” Daniel’s tone is neutral. “I can set up infrastructure they won’t be able to trace or shut down.”

“Excellent. That addresses data security.” Ashworth turns back to me. “Now, practical matters. You need money. You’ve lost your scanning equipment. You’re presumably not going back to your flat.”

“All of that, yes.”

He pulls out an envelope, hands it to me. “Ten thousand pounds. Cash. Untraceable. Consider it an advance against your father’s estate, which is still being settled. Use it for equipment, lodging, whatever you need.”

I open the envelope. Fifty-pound notes neatly stacked. More money than I’ve ever held. Enough to disappear. Or get killed.

“I can’t -”

“You can and you will. Your father set aside funds specifically for this scenario. He wanted to make sure you’d have resources if you continued his work.” Ashworth’s expression softens. “He was proud of you, Olivia. He believed you were the only person who could finish what he started.”

My throat tightens. I blink back tears I don’t have time for.

“There’s more,” Ashworth says. “I have contacts in European preservation organisations. People who can provide equipment, access to churches, academic support. Your father’s research

threatened British interests, but it's academically significant beyond national borders. International pressure can provide protection."

"Who?"

"Dr. Hermann Mueller. University of Heidelberg. Wren specialist.

Professor Claire Dumont. Paris. Seventeenth-century architecture.

They'll help verify your father's work."

He hands me a list of names and contact information. "Reach out to them. Build a coalition. The more people involved, the harder it becomes to suppress the research."

Daniel is already photographing the list with his phone.

"What about the Monument?" I ask. "My father's GPR scans showed a sealed chamber beneath it. That's where Wren's physical evidence is. But Cornerstone Heritage Properties owns the development rights. They're planning construction that will breach the foundation."

"When?"

"Two weeks. Maybe less."

Ashworth grimaces. "That's not much time. I can file for a heritage protection review, which might delay things. But Cornerstone has significant influence on the heritage committees. They'll push it through."

"So, what do we do?"

“You gather evidence. Survey more churches. Build an unassailable case that Wren encoded information into London’s architecture. Then we go public with it before Cornerstone can destroy the Monument chamber.” He meets my eyes. “You need at least three more church surveys. Preferably five. Enough to prove the pattern is deliberate, not coincidental.”

“I don’t have equipment.”

“You have ten thousand pounds and contacts in Europe who can help.” Ashworth pulls out another document. “I’m also writing a letter to the Church Commissioners requesting your official designation as a heritage researcher. That should get you legitimate access to church sites, at least temporarily.”

“They’ll block it.”

“Some will. But not all. The Church is a bureaucracy. Different factions, different priorities, and some people care about preserving history rather than protecting property interests.” He signs the letter with a flourish. “I’ll have this delivered this afternoon.”

We spend another hour going through details. Legal procedures. Communication protocols. Emergency contacts. Ashworth is thorough, methodical. By the time we’re finished, I have a framework. Not safety, but structure.

As we’re leaving, Ashworth stops me at the door.

“Olivia, one more thing. Your father left you a letter. To be delivered if you continued his research.” He hands me a sealed

envelope. “I don’t know what it says. But he was specific that you should only read it once you’d committed to seeing this through.”

I take the envelope. My father’s handwriting on the front:

“*For Olivia. When you’re ready.*”

“Thank you,” I manage.

“Don’t thank me yet. Just stay alive.” Ashworth’s expression is grave. “Your father didn’t. Webb didn’t. The people you’re fighting have killed before and will kill again. Be smarter than they expect. Be more careful than seems necessary.”

We leave Lincoln’s Inn Fields and walk back toward the Tube station. Daniel is quiet beside me, processing everything we learned.

I’m carrying ten thousand pounds in cash, contact information for European academics, and a letter from my dead father. The equipment I need costs twelve thousand. The international academics might help. The Church letter might grant access.

I look at Daniel, “Let’s go.”

“Daniel,” I say as we descend into Holborn station. “Can you really set up encryption they can’t break?”

“Yes.” No hesitation. No doubt.

“And if something happens to me, you’ll make sure the data gets out?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” I think about the sealed envelope in my bag. My father’s final message. “Let’s find somewhere quiet. I need to read something.”

We end up in a coffee shop near King’s Cross. I order tea I don’t drink while Daniel sets up his laptop at a corner table, already working on the encryption infrastructure Ashworth requested.

I open my father’s letter. The paper is thick, expensive. His handwriting precise.

“*My dearest Olivia,*

If you’re reading this, I’m gone and you’ve chosen to continue the work I started. I wish I could tell you to stop. To walk away. To live a normal, safe life. But I know you won’t. Because you’re my daughter, and we don’t abandon the truth, no matter how dangerous it becomes.

By now you’ve discovered that Christopher Wren encoded more than astronomical data into London’s architecture. You’ve begun to suspect the Great Fire wasn’t an accident.

I can’t give you all the answers because I didn’t find them all. But I found enough to know this: the families protecting Wren’s secret have been lying for centuries. Not about heliocentrism. About how they acquired their wealth. About what they did to get it.

You’ll find evidence in the Monument vault. Wren left it there for someone with Hart blood to discover. Our ancestor, John Hart, was his master mason. His friend. The one person Wren trusted with the complete truth.

That burden falls to you now.

Be careful. Be smart. Trust few people. Michael Ashworth is one. Daniel is another. Beyond them, assume everyone is compromised or corruptible.

And know that I'm proud of you. Whatever happens, you're doing something that matters. You're exposing lies that have shaped British history. That's worth fighting for. Worth dying for.

But please, try not to.

All my love,

Dad

P.S. The password to my deepest research files is your mother's grave. Not the coordinates. The inscription. You'll understand when you see it."

I read the letter twice, then fold it back into the envelope.

My mother's grave. I haven't been there since the funeral. Nearly nine years ago. Cancer, they said. Quick and brutal. But now I'm wondering. Now I'm thinking about patterns and coincidences and families who kill to protect their secrets.

"Daniel," I say. "When Mom died. Did you ever think it was strange?"

He looks up from his laptop. "The timeline was unusual. Diagnosis to death in six weeks. Statistically improbable but not impossible."

"Dad's research started about a year after she died."

"Yes."

"What if they're connected?"

Daniel is silent for a moment. Then: “That would mean they’ve been watching our family for a long time.”

The coffee shop feels too exposed. Too public. I pack up and motion for Daniel to follow. We need to find Mom’s grave. Get that password. Access whatever Dad was hiding in his deepest files.

Her diagnosis was April. She died in June.

Daniel closes his laptop. Stands up.

That’s all the answer I need.

SIXTEEN

OLIVIA HART
King's Cross to Kensal Green Cemetery
Present Day – Tuesday, 1:30 PM

The cemetery is in northwest London, a Victorian sprawl of monuments and mausoleums that stretch across seventy-two acres. We take the Overground to Kensal Green, then walk through iron gates that have stood here since 1833.

I haven't been here in nearly nine years. Not since the funeral.

Daniel leads the way without hesitation. He knows where we're going, the route mapped in his memory with perfect precision. Left at the Anglican chapel, past the catacombs, down the central avenue toward the older sections.

"Do you come here?" I ask.

"Once a month." He doesn't elaborate. Doesn't need to.

While I avoided this place, buried myself in work and tried not to think about losing both parents, Daniel came here every month.

He turns left at the oak tree without checking the signs.

I haven't brought flowers. I didn't even think to.

The grave is in the older section, beneath a spreading oak. Simple headstone, grey granite. No angels or crosses. Just her name and dates.

Eleanor Grace Hart

1968-2017

Truth endures beyond the grave

I stare at the inscription. Truth endures beyond the grave. Words my father chose. Words I'd forgotten in nearly nine years of avoiding this place.

"That's the password," Daniel whispers.

"Just like that?"

"Dad was deliberate about everything. Mom died June 2017. He started the deep research in July 2017. He chose this inscription specifically." Daniel pauses. "He wanted you to come here. To remember her when you accessed the files."

I kneel beside the headstone, trace the letters with my fingers. Eleanor Grace Hart. She was forty-nine when she died. Diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in April, dead by June.

"Six weeks," I say. "Diagnosis to death."

"Pancreatic cancer can progress rapidly. Median survival for stage IV is three to six months, but some cases are faster." Daniel recites statistics the way he breathes. "Statistically improbable but not impossible."

"Do you think they killed her?"

He's quiet for a long moment. Then: "I think Dad thought they might have. That's why he waited until after she died to really pursue the research. He was protecting her."

Or trying to. But she died anyway.

Would families who burned London for profit hesitate to induce cancer in one woman?

No.

"We need to go back," I say. "Access the files."

Daniel nods.

We walk back through the cemetery in silence. I glance back once at the grave beneath the oak. *Truth endures beyond the grave*. My father's promise. His burden. Now mine.

*

The hotel room feels smaller when we return. Daniel sets up his laptop with the portable hard drives, pulls up the encrypted partition on Dad's main research archive.

I dictate the passphrase: "Truth endures beyond the grave."

The screen blinks. Then cascading folders appear, organised by date and topic. Years of research, hidden behind my mother's epitaph.

"Start with the most recent files," I say.

Daniel opens a folder labelled "Monument – March 2020 – FINAL." Inside are GPR scans, property records, photographs, and a single document titled "CONCLUSION.docx"

He opens it.

I read over his shoulder.

CONCLUSIONS AND EVIDENCE SUMMARY

Thomas Hart – March 18, 2020

I. The Monument Chamber

Ground-penetrating radar confirms sealed chamber 18 feet below Monument base. Dimensions: 8x8x8 feet. Cubic. Positioned at exact foundation centre.

Chamber construction dates 1671-1677, concurrent with Monument building. No subsequent access. Hermetically sealed.

John Hart's 1680 Bible confirms family knowledge: "Truth is buried where fire began."

II. The Great Fire – New Evidence

Christopher Wren did not merely encode heliocentrism into London architecture. He hid evidence of something far more dangerous: proof the Great Fire of London was set.

Evidence accumulated:

1) PRE-FIRE PROPERTY ACQUISITIONS (1665-1666)

Analysed land registry records. Found concentrated buying pattern in City of London, Jan 1665 – Aug 1666:

- Fairchild family: 23 properties

- Pembroke family: 19 properties

- Ashton family: 17 properties

- Grey family: 15 properties

Total: 74 properties purchased in 20-month window before Fire.

All purchased at below-market rates from distressed sellers (plague deaths, financial difficulty).

All positioned in areas that burned most severely.

2) FIRE PROGRESSION ANOMALIES

Fire started Pudding Lane, Sept 2, 1666. Spread northeast and west. Official account: accidental, bakery oven.

Analysis of burn patterns shows THREE separate ignition points:

- Pudding Lane (confirmed)

- Milk Street (unconfirmed, reported in Pepys diary but dismissed)

- Gracechurch Street (no historical mention, but burn pattern suggests it)

Wind patterns could not account for simultaneous spread in three directions from single ignition point. Multiple fires necessary to create observed destruction.

3) POST-FIRE SURVEY DISCREPANCIES

Compared pre-Fire surveys (1660) with post-Fire surveys (1667-1670).

Found errors averaging 15% across entire rebuilt City. Properties that should have reverted to original owners were instead recorded as “disputed” or “abandoned” and subsequently sold to wealthy buyers.

The four families above acquired 187 additional properties post-Fire at drastically reduced rates.

Combined holdings: 261 properties representing 22% of rebuilt City of London.

Current value (2020 estimates): £14 billion.

4) THE FAIRCHILD LETTER

Found in British Library, Ashton family papers (misfiled, possibly deliberately):

“Edmund Fairchild to Thomas Pembroke, August 14, 1666:

’The plague has created opportunity, but insufficient for our purposes. The City’s medieval tangle cannot be reformed piecemeal. If circumstances should provide opportunity for comprehensive rebuilding, we must be positioned to benefit. I have secured additional properties along Gracechurch and Milk Streets as you suggested. The investment is substantial, but the potential return exceeds anything we might achieve through conventional means.’”

Written three weeks before the Fire.

Mentions specific streets that would later burn.

Refers to “comprehensive rebuilding” as if anticipated.

5) WREN’S DISCOVERY

Wren was appointed to Fire rebuilding commission September 1666. Given responsibility for mapping new property boundaries.

As Royal Society astronomer and mathematician, Wren had access to pre-Fire surveys, post-Fire measurements, and family correspondence (Pembroke was Royal Society patron).

He would have seen the discrepancies. Would have recognised the pattern.

But Wren had no power to prosecute wealthy families. The King needed their money to rebuild. Exposing the conspiracy would have collapsed the reconstruction effort.

So, Wren hid the evidence. Encoded it into the architecture he was building. Left it for someone in the future to discover.

Someone with Hart blood, who would know where to look.

III. What's in the Monument Chamber

Based on evidence patterns, I believe the Monument vault contains:

- Original Pre-Fire survey documents (proving property ownership before destruction)

- Post-Fire survey documents (showing discrepancies)

- Correspondence between families planning property acquisitions

- Wren's analysis proving Fire was arson

- Possibly physical evidence from Fire investigation (materials, witness statements)

This is not about heliocentrism. That was cover. Misdirection.

The real secret: Britain's wealthiest families acquired their fortunes through mass murder.

September 1666: The Great Fire killed 6-8 people (official count).

Actual deaths: Unknown. Poor populations not counted. Fire progression too rapid for accidental spread. Evacuation chaotic. Bodies lost in destruction.

Conservative estimate based on population density and burn patterns: 500-800 deaths.

They killed hundreds. Maybe thousands. Then profited from the reconstruction ever since.

IV. Why This Matters Now

Cornerstone Heritage Properties (Fairchild subsidiary) owns Monument development rights. Planning construction beginning March 30, 2020.

Construction will breach foundation. Chamber will be accessed. Evidence will be destroyed before anyone can document it.

This is intentional. They know what's down there. They're eliminating the last proof of their ancestors' crimes.

I have two weeks to expose this before they destroy the evidence.

V. Personal Notes

Eleanor died four months ago. Cancer, they said. Six weeks from diagnosis to death.

I waited too long to start this research. Thought I was protecting her by staying quiet. But they knew I was suspicious. They've been watching our family for years.

The Harts have always known more than we said. John's Bible proves it. The knowledge passes down, parent to child, each generation carrying the burden.

Eleanor tried to protect our children from this. Made me promise I wouldn't involve them.

But Olivia is twenty-two now. Starting her doctorate in structural engineering. She has the technical skills to finish this work, and she has the Hart stubbornness to see it through.

Daniel sees patterns I can't. His mind works differently, processes information in ways that might be crucial for understanding Wren's encoding.

If I'm killed – and I will be – they will continue this.

They won't have a choice. Because the Hart family has carried this secret across generations.

And it ends with them.

I finish reading and sit back. My mind is racing.

"He knew," I say. "He knew they'd kill him. He did it anyway."

"He wanted to protect you." Daniel's voice is quiet. "That's why he encrypted everything. That's why he set up the safeguards with Ashworth. He was trying to give you the tools to finish safely."

"And Mum?"

Daniel opens another file. Medical records. Eleanor Hart's cancer treatment timeline. Hospital admissions. Test results.

But also, something else: a toxicology report dated June 2017. Ordered by my father after her death. Conducted privately.

Results show elevated levels of Polonium-210.

I stare at the screen.

Polonium-210. The same radioactive poison used to kill Alexander Litvinenko in London, 2006. It induces symptoms indistinguishable from aggressive cancer and undetectable unless you're specifically looking for it.

“They killed her,” Daniel says flatly. “They poisoned Mum to warn Dad off the research.”

“But he didn’t stop.”

“No. He waited until she was gone. Then he accelerated. Because at that point he had nothing left to lose.”

“If I’m killed – and I will be – they will continue this.”

He wrote that two days before he died.

Truth endures beyond the grave.

He meant it literally.

“There’s more,” Daniel says. He opens another folder. “Church surveys. He completed twelve before he died.”

Twelve. not St. Paul’s and the Monument. Ten more churches, all surveyed and documented.

St. Mary-le-Bow

St. Bride’s, Fleet Street

St. Clement Danes

St. Andrew, Holborn

St. James, Piccadilly

St. Anne Soho

St. Martin-in-the-Fields

St. George, Bloomsbury

Christ Church, Spitalfields

St. Alfege, Greenwich.

Each scan shows the same thing: sealed chambers, eight feet square, positioned with mathematical precision in the foundations.

“He proved the pattern,” I breathe. “Twelve churches. All with sealed voids. All positioned exactly.”

“And he was killed before he could go public with it.”

I scroll through the scans. Dad’s meticulous notes accompany each one. Measurements. Calculations. Comparisons to astronomical positions and property boundaries.

The pattern is undeniable. Wren built a network of hidden chambers across London. Each one positioned with precision. Each one sealed and waiting.

But for what?

“The Monument chamber is central,” Daniel says. He pulls up a map showing all twelve churches plus the Monument. “Look at the positioning.”

He overlays property ownership data from 1670. Then from 2020.

The pattern is stunning.

Every church with a sealed void sits at the edge of what were major property holdings in 1670. The boundary markers of the four families’ acquisitions.

And the Monument sits at the exact centre. The convergence point.

“Wren was documenting the crime scene,” I say. “Each church marks where the families’ properties began. The Monument marks where it all started.”

“Where the Fire started. Where the evidence is buried.”

I look at the date on Dad’s final file. March 18, 2020. Two days before he died.

He knew. He’d figured it all out. Twelve churches surveyed. Evidence analysed. Proof compiled. Then they killed him before he could release it.

“We need to contact the European academics,” I say. “Mueller and Dumont. Send them Dad’s church scans. Get independent verification.”

“I’ll encrypt and transmit everything tonight.” Daniel is already opening secure communication protocols. “But Olivia, we still need physical access to the Monument chamber. Dad’s scans prove it exists, but we need what’s inside to prove the conspiracy.”

“Cornerstone starts construction in less than two weeks.”

“Then we have less than two weeks to get inside that chamber first.”

I pull out the cash Ashworth gave me. Ten thousand pounds. Enough for new scanning equipment. Maybe enough to bribe someone for Monument access.

But even if we get inside, even if we recover Wren’s evidence, we’re going up against families with multiple billion pounds in

property holdings. Families who've killed to protect their secrets for over three centuries.

Families who murdered my mother and father.

My phone vibrates. Text from unknown number:

`We know you met with Ashworth. We know you have your father's files. Stop now or Daniel dies next.`

I show Daniel the message.

He reads it without reaction. Then returns to his laptop.

"They're trying to control you through me," he says calmly. "Standard manipulation tactic. The threat is designed to make you stop."

"I won't risk you."

"You're not risking me. I'm choosing to be here." He meets my eyes. "They killed our parents. I'm not stopping."

I look at my brother.

"Okay," I say. "Then we go forward. But we use Dad's safeguards. We build the international coalition. We don't take unnecessary risks."

"Agreed."

I text back to the unknown number:

`Go fuck yourself`

Then I switch it off and remove the SIM card. Burner phones only from now on.

Daniel is already composing encrypted emails to Mueller and Dumont, attaching Dad's church surveys and analysis. Building the academic coalition that might protect us.

I pull up equipment suppliers. Twelve thousand pounds for new scanning equipment. Three days for delivery if I pay for priority.

We have Dad's research. We have international allies. We have funding and legal protection. What we don't have is time.

Cornerstone begins construction March 30. It's March 17.

Thirteen days to acquire equipment, survey more churches, build unassailable proof, and somehow access a sealed vault beneath London's most famous monument.

Thirteen days to expose the conspiracy.

I look at my mother's epitaph, still open on the screen.

Truth endures beyond the grave.

"Let's prove it."

SEVENTEEN

SIR JAMES FAIRCHILD
Cornerstone Heritage Properties, City of London
Present Day – Tuesday, 4:45 PM

The conference call has been running for forty minutes, and James's patience is wearing thin.

"She went to Ashworth." Richard Pembroke's voice crackles through the speaker phone. "Thomas Hart's solicitor. The same man who helped Hart set up his dead-man's switches six years ago."

"We're aware," James says. He keeps his tone level, professional. Twenty years of managing Cornerstone has taught him that showing frustration only encourages these people.

"Are you?" Victoria Ashton cuts in. Her voice is sharp, accusatory. "Because from where I'm sitting, this is spiralling. Webb is dead, and the girl is building legal protection. How is that progress?"

James glances at Harris, who sits across the desk with his usual impassive expression. The security consultant has been monitoring Olivia Hart for six days now. Following her, tracking her movements, applying pressure. None of it has worked.

“The situation is being managed,” James says.

“Is it?” That’s Henry Grey, oldest of the four family representatives and theoretically the senior voice on these calls. “She met with Ashworth this morning. He gave her money. Our sources say at least ten thousand pounds. She’s now financially resourced to continue her investigation.”

“Ashworth also provided European contacts,” Victoria adds. “We’ve identified communications to Professor Hermann Mueller in Heidelberg and Professor Claire Dumont in Paris. She’s internationalizing this.”

James feels the first real stirring of concern. European academics complicate things. British property law can be leveraged. Heritage committees can be influenced. But German and French universities operate outside their sphere of control.

“Mueller is known for his work on Wren’s mathematical principles,” Richard continues. “If he verifies Hart’s church surveys, we’ll have independent academic validation of the pattern.”

“The pattern that you assured us didn’t exist,” Victoria says coldly. “The pattern you said was coincidental architectural remnant.”

“The pattern exists,” James admits. “But sealed chambers don’t prove anything without content. And the content has been sealed for three hundred and fifty years.”

“It matters now.” Pembroke’s tone is clipped. “She has church surveys, property analysis, Fire acquisition records.”

“She suspects,” James corrects. “She doesn’t have proof.”

“Neither did her father,” Victoria says. “Until he nearly went public with it, and then we were forced to take action that has now blown up in our faces. Webb’s murder has the police investigating. The girl is more motivated than ever, and we’re two weeks from breaching the Monument foundation with construction crews that will inevitably discover the vault.”

“The construction will be controlled,” James says. “Cornerstone crews only. NDAs signed. Any discoveries will be contained.”

“You said the same thing about Webb.”

James’s jaw tightens. The Webb situation was messy. He’d authorized the action reluctantly, only after the historian contacted journalists.

“Webb was going to publish,” he says. “We had no choice.”

“Now his murder is national news. Police are asking questions. Forensics are involved. Your man Harris left evidence at the scene.”

James glances at Harris again. The security consultant’s expression hasn’t changed.

“No prosecutable evidence,” James says. “Harris is clean.”

“For now,” Victoria counters. “But if the Hart girl forces a public investigation into the families, if she builds international pressure, the police will look harder. They’ll find connections.”

“You can’t guarantee that.” Victoria’s voice rises slightly. “You’re betting billions in property holdings on your ability to contain a

twenty-seven-year-old woman who has already evaded every pressure we've applied."

"She's evaded Harris," Richard adds. "Who I'm told is one of the best private security consultants in Europe. She escaped surveillance at St. Paul's. Broke into St. Bride's without detection. Fled through the Fleet tunnel system while Harris's team searched above ground. This is not someone we can simply intimidate into silence."

Olivia Hart is proving more resourceful than her father. Thomas Hart was a scholar, methodical but ultimately predictable. His daughter has practical skills – structural engineering, urban exploration experience, physical fitness that makes her harder to corner.

"We've sent warnings," he says. "Direct threats against her brother."

"Has it worked?"

James doesn't answer. The silence is answer enough.

"So, what's your plan?" Henry asks. "Because from my position, we're two weeks from potential disaster. The Monument construction uncovers Wren's vault. Olivia Hart has built international support and legal protection. European academics are preparing to validate her father's research, and our only response so far has been failed surveillance and meaningless threats."

James leans back in his chair. Through the window behind him, the City of London spreads in all directions. Glass towers built on

medieval foundations. Billions in property value stacked on streets laid out during the rebuilding after the Great Fire.

The rebuilding his ancestor helped orchestrate.

“I’m proposing we approach this differently,” he says. “We acknowledge the historical facts. Yes, our ancestors acquired properties after the Fire. Yes, they benefited from the rebuilding. This is documented history. It’s not criminal.”

“It is if they set the Fire intentionally,” Victoria says.

“Which we deny. Completely. The Fire was accidental. Our families purchased distressed properties in the aftermath, which was opportunistic but not illegal.” James ticks off points on his fingers. “Wren’s sealed chambers? Architectural quirks. The survey discrepancies? Chaos of post-Fire reconstruction. We have three hundred and fifty years of legitimate business history. We control the narrative.”

“And if the Monument vault contains physical evidence?”

“Then we destroy it during construction. Controlled demolition. Everything inside the chamber is crushed, removed, buried in foundation concrete before anyone can document it.”

Silence on the line.

“You’re proposing we deliberately destroy historical evidence,” Richard says slowly. “Under Cornerstone’s management.”

“I’m proposing we ensure that whatever Wren sealed in that vault stays sealed. Permanently.”

Victoria's voice cuts through sharp and impatient. "Finally. Someone talking sense. I've been saying this for weeks. The Hart girl should have been eliminated the moment she scanned St. Paul's. Instead, we've wasted time on intimidation tactics and legal manoeuvres while she built an international coalition."

James keeps his voice level. "Victoria. We agreed on a coordinated response –"

"You agreed to half measures, James! Look where that's gotten us. Webb's dead but she has his research. Harris cornered her at St. Bride's, but she escaped with the data." Victoria's disgust is palpable. "The Ashton family doesn't debate when action is required. We act."

"Reckless action creates complications," Henry Grey interjects nervously.

"And no action creates exposure," Victoria counters. "I'm sending my own security team. Contractors who understand that some problems require permanent solutions. They'll handle the Hart situation by week's end. With or without your approval."

The line goes dead on her end.

Silence.

"She's going rogue," Henry says quietly. "Breaking from coordination. That's dangerous for all of us."

"More dangerous than public exposure?" James counters, though Victoria's intervention troubles him. The Ashtons had always been the volatile element. Three hundred years hadn't changed that.

“James,” Richard’s voice is careful. “Can you control this situation, or do we need alternative management?”

“That’s destruction of national heritage,” Henry says nervously. “If it’s discovered...”

“It won’t be. Cornerstone controls the site. I’ll personally supervise the foundation work. Small crew, trusted people, NDAs with financial penalties. The chamber is breached, emptied, and buried in concrete before anyone sees it.”

“And the girl?”

James considers. Olivia Hart has her father’s research. She has growing international support. She has legal protection. But she doesn’t have physical access to the Monument vault. Not yet.

“We monitor her. Continue surveillance but no direct action. Let her survey churches. Let her build her academic case. Without the Monument evidence, all she has is architectural anomalies and historical property records. Interesting, but not conclusive.”

“She’ll try to access the vault.”

“Not if we breach it first.”

The call concludes. James sits in silence, watching London through his window.

*

“The brother,” James says to Harris. “Daniel Hart. Tell me about him.”

Harris pulls out a tablet, swipes through surveillance files. “Twenty-three. Autism. Brilliant with computers and patterns. Lives with the sister.”

“Vulnerabilities?”

“Limited. Not motivated by money. Not susceptible to social pressure. Extremely loyal to his sister. Our warning text generated defiance, not fear. He sees this as a logic problem.”

James considers. “If we removed the sister, would he continue the research?”

“Possibly. He has the technical skills, and he’s emotionally invested in avenging his parents.”

“So, eliminating Olivia doesn’t solve the problem.”

“Correct. It likely escalates it. Daniel goes public immediately, triggers dead-man’s switches, releases everything to European academics.”

“Then we need both of them neutralized.”

“Simultaneously, which is complicated. They’re staying in different locations every night. Using burner phones. They’re practicing operational security.”

“Learned from their father’s mistakes.”

James drums his fingers on the desk. Thirteen days until ground-breaking. Sixteen days until they reach the Monument vault. Thirteen days to ensure the Hart siblings don't access the site first.

"Continue surveillance," he tells Harris. "Document everywhere they go, everyone they contact. But no direct action unless I authorize it. We can't afford another Webb situation."

"Understood."

"And build contingency. If they somehow access the Monument vault before we do, I want response protocols ready. Legal injunctions. Police involvement. Physical intervention if necessary."

"Physical intervention means killing them."

"I'm aware."

Harris nods slowly. "The families are prepared for that outcome?"

James thinks about the conference call. Victoria's sharp accusations. Richard's nervous calculations.

Fourteen billion pounds hanging on his ability to contain one woman and her autistic brother.

"The families will accept whatever outcome protects their interests," James says. "If that means two more bodies, they'll call it necessary."

"And you? Personal position?"

James looks out at the Monument. Thinks about his ancestor's letter. All those years ago, Edmund Fairchild made a choice.

He set fires that killed hundreds.

He profited from mass death.

He built an empire on ash and blood.

His descendant has the same choice now.

Protect the empire. Or let it burn.

“I do what’s necessary,” James says. “Same as every Fairchild before me.”

Harris leaves.

James pulls up the construction schedule.

March 30: Foundation excavation begins

April 2: Reach chamber depth

April 3: Vault demolition

Thirteen days to ground-breaking. Sixteen to the vault.

He can hold the situation together for thirteen days.

Because if Olivia Hart reaches that vault first, if she exposes what’s buried there, the consequences cascade beyond property holdings. Criminal investigations. International scrutiny. Parliamentary committees. The Fairchild family would survive, probably. But the wealth would be contested. Their reputation destroyed.

He pulls up Olivia’s surveillance photos. Young woman, dark hair, determined expression. Looks like her father. Same intensity. Thomas Hart had chosen truth over safety until it killed him.

His daughter was making the same choice.

Thomas Hart could have stopped. Instead, he accelerated. Compiled evidence. Built safeguards. Died trying to expose the truth.

James almost admires it. The multigenerational dedication to truth over safety.

Almost.

But admiration doesn't change the calculation. The Hart family is threatening his family's survival, and survival always wins.

He closes the surveillance file.

Sixteen days to the Monument vault.

James picks up his phone and calls the construction manager.

"Move the timeline up," he says. "I want foundation work starting March 28. Two days early."

"That's very tight. We'll need to fast-track the permits..."

"Do it. Call it a budget override. I'll approve it personally."

Eleven days now. Not thirteen.

The less time Olivia Hart has, the better.

He opens his email, begins drafting messages to the families. Updating the timeline. Reassuring them that everything is under control.

Hoping it's true.

Because if the Hart girl somehow reaches that vault first, James Fairchild will have failed the one task every generation has succeeded at.

Keeping the secret buried.

James returns to work, pushing down the small voice that asks: what if it doesn't?

He doesn't have time for doubt.

He has a vault to destroy.

EIGHTEEN

OLIVIA HART
Various Locations, London
Present Day – Wednesday, 10:00 AM

The equipment supplier is in Croydon, near the airport. I check for surveillance at every transfer. No one follows.

Harris and his team are good. But after six days of being watched, the signs are obvious. The same face appearing twice. Cars that track too consistently.

Today, I see none of it.

Either they're using different personnel, or they've backed off. Neither option is comforting.

The equipment shop occupies a converted warehouse. The owner, Khalid, meets me in his office.

"Replacement for stolen equipment?" he asks.

"How did you know?"

"Cash payment. Rush delivery. Nervous client." He shrugs. "Twenty years in this business. I've sold to archaeologists in

conflict zones, engineers in difficult situations. I don't need to hear your story."

"Twelve thousand pounds gets you a laser scanner and a ground-penetrating radar. Friday morning delivery if you pay the rush fee."

Two days. March 20th. Still about twelve days from when Fairchild breaches the Monument foundation assuming his original timeline holds.

But I don't trust that timeline.

"I'll pay the rush," I say. "But delivery to a different address."

He writes up the invoice without comment. I count out cash. Twelve thousand pounds in fifty-pound notes.

"Be careful," Khalid says as I'm leaving. "People don't steal expensive equipment unless they're serious about stopping you. My cousin was a journalist in Karachi. Investigated construction corruption. They found him in a building foundation."

"Don't be sorry. Be smart," he says.

*

I leave the warehouse, take a surveillance detection route back to central London. Different trains, multiple transfers.

At Clapham Junction, I spot him.

Grey jacket. Forty-something. Reading a newspaper but watching the platform over the top.

Harris's team. Different operative than before, but the same careful positioning. Same subtle tells.

They haven't backed off. They've adapted.

I board the train, watching Grey Jacket through the window. He doesn't follow. Doesn't need to. He's confirmed I was in Croydon. They'll know why.

By the time I reach the hotel in Paddington, I've checked for followers three more times. Clear. But they know I'm re-equipping. The clock just sped up.

*

Daniel has three laptops running, monitoring different data streams.

"Equipment ordered?" he asks.

"Arrives Friday. But Harris has new surveillance. Different team. They tracked me to Croydon."

He processes this. "Accelerated timeline?"

"Probably. We need to move faster."

"Mueller and Dumont responded," Daniel says, pulling up encrypted emails. "Both interested. Mueller's enthusiastic about Wren's mathematical precision. Dumont wants to see the church surveys."

I read over his shoulder. Professor Hermann Mueller's email notes that Wren's mathematical precision has been understudied. Professor Claire Dumont is more cautious but intrigued.

"I've sent them the St. Paul's and St. Mary-le-Bow scans as samples," Daniel continues. "Along with Dad's mathematical

analysis of the void positioning. Both agree the placement is too precise to be coincidental."

"When can they verify?"

"Mueller says three days for preliminary analysis. Dumont wants a week for thorough review. But both willing to go on record stating the pattern merits serious investigation."

British interests couldn't dismiss a German and a French university.

"I've also set up the dead-man's switch," Daniel continues. "If either of us misses check-in for seventy-two hours, encrypted data goes to fifteen journalists and twelve academics across Europe and North America. Staggered releases every six hours for a week. They can't suppress them all."

"Fifteen journalists?"

"The Guardian, BBC, New York Times, Le Monde, Der Spiegel, and ten others. I've structured the releases so each outlet gets slightly different data sets, encouraging independent investigation rather than coordinated narrative."

I stare at my brother.

"Thank you," I say.

He shrugs. "It's what I'm good at."

*

While I draft emails to the academics, Daniel works on something else. Multiple windows showing property data, maps, historical records.

“What are you looking at?” I ask.

“Dad’s property acquisition analysis. The four families – Fairchild, Pembroke, Ashton, and Grey – acquired two hundred sixty-one properties after the Fire. I’m overlaying current ownership data to see what they still control.”

“And?”

“Eighty-seven percent. They sold some holdings over the centuries, but the core properties are still family-owned through various corporate entities. Cornerstone Heritage is just the most visible one.”

He zooms in on a map of the City of London, colour-coded by ownership.

“But look at this.” He highlights a pattern. “The properties cluster around specific points. And at the centre of each cluster – a church.”

I lean closer. He’s right. The family holdings form rough circles, and at the centre of each is one of the churches my father surveyed.

“They’re using the churches as boundary markers,” I say.

“More than that. Look at the property lines from 1670.” Daniel overlays historical data. “The church positions define the edge of what each family claimed. St. Mary-le-Bow marks the northern edge of Fairchild properties. St. Bride’s marks the western edge of

Pembroke holdings. St. Clement Danes anchors the eastern boundary of Ashton claims."

"Wren was documenting the crime scene. Each church is a survey marker showing exactly what was stolen."

"The Monument is the convergence point – dead centre of all four family territories." Daniel pulls up burn pattern data from the Great Fire. "Now watch this."

He overlays burn intensity with property acquisition patterns.

The correlation is perfect.

The areas that burned hottest – the places with maximum destruction – are exactly where the four families acquired the most properties. As if the fire's path was designed to maximize damage in specific zones while leaving others relatively intact.

"Three ignition points," I breathe. "Dad said the burn pattern suggested three separate fires. If you wanted to destroy specific areas while making it look like one accidental fire spread naturally..."

"You'd start multiple fires in a coordinated pattern." Daniel highlights three spots on the map. "Pudding Lane at two a.m., confirmed by historical record. But also here at Milk Street, and here in Gracechurch Street, both at approximately two-fifteen a.m. based on burn progression analysis."

"That's not accidental. That's arson."

“Deliberate, coordinated, planned arson designed to look like a single fire with wind spread.” Daniel meets my eyes. “Dad was right. They burned London on purpose.”

*

My phone vibrates. Text from Ashworth:

`Church Commissioners responded. Access granted to four churches for heritage survey. Details attached.`

Official letter granting temporary research access to St. James Piccadilly, St. Anne Soho, Christ Church Spitalfields, and St. Alfege Greenwich.

“We have official access,” I tell Daniel. “Four churches. Friday when equipment arrives.”

Daniel pulls up their locations. “Good distribution. If all four show sealed voids with the same precision, the pattern becomes undeniable.”

“But not conclusive without the Monument evidence.”

“No.”

We look at the clock.

“We need to access that vault before Fairchild does,” I say.

“How? The Monument is locked down. It’s supervised by Heritage England. Security protocols. Even with official survey access, we don’t have authority to excavate beneath a secular monument.”

“The Monument has a hollow core,” I say slowly. “Foundations connect. If there’s a vault, there’s a way in. Medieval London had

extensive cellaring. Fleet Tunnel proved there's a network beneath the city."

Daniel pulls up underground maps. Sewer systems, Tube tunnels, medieval crypts, Victorian utility access.

"The Monument sits on Fish Street Hill," he says. "There's a Victorian sewer line beneath Pudding Lane, approximately forty feet from the Monument foundation. But it's active infrastructure – we can't access it without Thames Water authorization."

"What else?"

"St. Magnus the Martyr is adjacent. Medieval church, rebuilt by Wren after the Fire. If any structure would have connected to a Monument vault, it would be that one. If Wren wanted to provide secret access to the vault, he might have built a passage connecting them."

St. Magnus the Martyr. I pull up photos.

"Dad surveyed twelve churches," I say. "Was St. Magnus one of them?"

Daniel checks the file list. "No."

"Because it's too obvious. Right next to the Monument, rebuilt at the same time. If Wren wanted to hide it better..."

I think about my father's research. The Hart family Bible message: *"Truth is buried where fire began. Those with Hart blood will know where to look."*

John Hart was the master mason. He built these structures.

“The Bible,” I say. “Dad’s files – did he analyse the inscription in detail?”

Daniel pulls up photographs of the 1680 Bible page.

Wren’s message: *“For your faithful service and eternal silence.”*

John Hart’s message: *“Truth is buried where fire began. Those with Hart blood will know where to look.”*

I study the photograph. Small marks in the margins. Barely visible.

“Can you enhance the margins?”

Daniel adjusts contrast and resolution. The marks become clearer.

They’re symbols.

Architectural symbols.

A cross-section diagram showing layers. Foundation depth markers. A small arrow pointing downward. Coordinates.

“He left instructions,” I breathe. “John Hart left a diagram showing how to access the vault.”

Daniel measures the symbols against 1670s architectural notation. “Foundation depth marked at eighteen feet. The cross-section shows the Monument foundation, but also an adjacent structure connected by a horizontal passage.”

“St. Magnus?”

“The coordinates suggest so. But the passage entrance is marked below foundation level. In the undercroft.”

Medieval churches have undercrofts. Lower levels beneath the main floor. Many were sealed after the Fire.

If John Hart built a passage from St. Magnus's undercroft to the Monument vault, it would be hidden in basement levels no one has accessed since the 17th century.

"We need to survey St. Magnus," I say.

"It's not on Ashworth's Church Commissioner list."

"Then we survey it unofficially."

Daniel looks at me. "Breaking and entering. Again."

"We're completing Dad's research."

My brother almost smiles. "When?"

"Tonight. After dark. If there's a passage from St. Magnus to the Monument, we find it before Fairchild breaks ground."

Daniel turns back to the laptop, pulling up building plans.

I look at the Bible photograph again. John Hart's careful diagram drawn by the master mason who knew he was hiding evidence that could destroy England's most powerful families.

"Those with Hart blood will know where to look."

I look at Daniel.

The Monument vault isn't sealed. It's hidden. And John Hart left us a map.

I text Ashworth:

Need building plans for St. Magnus the Martyr. Historical and current. Urgent.

He responds within minutes:

Will send what I can find. Be careful.

Too late for careful. We're about twelve days from Fairchild's excavation. Maybe less.

Equipment arrives Friday. Academics are validating. Access is open.

And now we have a map.

NINETEEN

OLIVIA HART
St. Magnus the Martyr, Lower Thames Street
Present Day – Wednesday, 11:45 PM

The church sits in shadow, wedged between modern office buildings and the Monument. Medieval bones beneath Wren's classical shell. Most tourists walk past without noticing it, drawn to the Monument's stone column rising behind.

Perfect camouflage.

Daniel and I approach from different directions, standard counter-surveillance protocol. I come from the Monument side, Daniel from Lower Thames Street. We meet at the church's south wall, a recessed doorway hidden from street view.

"Security?" I ask.

"Basic alarm system, main entrance only. No cameras on exterior. Interior cameras in nave and vestry, but nothing in the basement levels." Daniel has spent six hours analysing building plans and security permits. "The undercroft entrance is through the vestry, down stone stairs. Sealed in 1957 when they updated the heating system."

“Sealed how?”

“Wooden door, modern lock, just to keep curious parishioners out. The space beneath hasn’t been used in seventy years.”

I pull out the lock pick set I’ve been carrying since St. Bride’s. The side door takes thirty seconds. We slip inside, close it behind us.

The church interior is dark, lit only by ambient light filtering through stained glass. The nave stretches ahead; wooden pews arranged in neat rows. The ceiling soars overhead, Wren’s geometry creating acoustics that make every small sound amplify.

We move, staying close to the walls.

The vestry is to the left, through a small door beside the chancel. Daniel leads the way, his torch on a low setting. Inside, church robes hang on hooks, filing cabinets line one wall, the clutter of an active parish.

And in the corner, a wooden door marked “Basement – No Entry.”

The lock is newer than the door, installed within the last decade. But it’s still a simple deadbolt. I have it open in under a minute.

The door opens onto stone stairs descending into darkness. Cold air rises from below, carrying the scent of damp stone and centuries of neglect. Colder than the church above. The kind of cold that accumulates in a sealed space over centuries, undisturbed by seasons or heating systems, acquiring specific gravity. It finds the gap at my collar immediately and the exposed skin of my wrists.

“After you,” Daniel says.

I go first, one hand on the stone wall for balance. The stairs are worn smooth by generations of feet, curving down into the undercroft beneath the nave. Twenty steps, then a landing, then twenty more.

We emerge into a vaulted space that predates the Fire. Original medieval construction, stone columns supporting arched ceilings. The modern church sits above this, but down here the architecture is pure thirteenth century.

Our torches sweep the space. Storage boxes are stacked against walls. Old pews awaiting repair. Heating system pipes running along the ceiling, installed in the 1950s renovation that sealed this level.

"The Bible diagram showed the passage entrance on the east wall," Daniel says. "Approximately twelve feet from the southeast corner."

We navigate through stored furniture to the east wall. Solid stone, no obvious doorways. But John Hart wouldn't have made it obvious.

I run my hands over the stones, searching for irregularities. Medieval masonry has a rhythm – blocks fitted together with mortar joints at predictable intervals. Any deviation suggests modification.

"Here," I say.

A section of wall, about four feet wide and six feet tall, has different mortar. Newer, or at least repaired more recently. The stones themselves are original, but the joints have been repointed.

“Sealed after the Fire,” Daniel says. “When Wren rebuilt the church. He would have closed the passage from this side; made it look like original construction.”

“But left it accessible for someone who knew where to look.”

I examine the edges. The mortared joints aren’t structural, they’re cosmetic. Hiding something behind them.

“We need to break through,” I say.

Daniel unpacks the tool bag we brought. Hammer, chisel, pry bar. Not subtle, but we’re past subtle.

I start chipping away at the mortar around one of the stones. It’s harder than expected – solid work. But after ten minutes of careful hammering, I’ve loosened the first stone enough to pry it free.

Behind it: darkness and cold air.

A passage.

Daniel helps me remove three more stones, creating an opening large enough to crawl through. I shine my torch into the space beyond.

A tunnel, roughly four feet wide and five feet tall. Brick-lined walls, arched ceiling. Construction style matches the late 1600s. This isn’t medieval. This was built during the rebuilding.

John Hart’s work.

“We’re going in,” I say.

“Obviously.”

I squeeze through the opening. The tunnel extends east, toward the Monument. The air is stale, undisturbed for centuries. My torch beam cuts through dust that hangs suspended, thick as fog.

Daniel follows, his taller frame requiring more manoeuvring through the gap. Once we're both inside, we pause, listening.

Silence. Just our breathing and the distant hum of the city far above.

"How far to the Monument foundation?" I ask.

"Approximately sixty feet from this wall to the centre of the Monument base." Daniel consults his phone, overlaying our position on architectural plans. "The tunnel should intersect the Monument foundation at roughly forty feet."

We move forward. The tunnel floor is packed earth, undisturbed for centuries. Our footprints mark virgin ground, the first since John Hart sealed this passage.

Every ten feet, there are marks carved into the brick walls. Depth measurements, I realize. John Hart documenting the construction as he went. Professional notation for future reference.

Or for his descendants.

The tunnel slopes downward. After thirty feet, we reach a junction. The main tunnel continues straight, but a smaller shaft branches off to the left, angling downward more steeply.

"That's not on the plans," Daniel says.

"Because no one knew it existed."

I peer down the side shaft. It's narrower, barely two feet wide. More of a chimney than a tunnel, and it descends at a sharp angle, almost forty-five degrees.

"Ventilation shaft?" Daniel suggests. "Or drainage?"

"Or access." I kneel at the edge, shine my light down. The shaft extends beyond my beam's range. "The vault is eighteen feet below Monument ground level. We've already descended maybe eight feet from the St. Magnus undercroft. This shaft could take us down another ten feet."

"That's the vault depth."

I look at Daniel. His face is illuminated by torch glow, expression unreadable.

"We could reach the vault tonight," I say. "Before Fairchild breaks ground. Before the construction crews breach the foundation."

"Or we could get trapped in a three-hundred-and-fifty-year-old tunnel system with no one knowing where we are."

We don't have proper equipment. We haven't told Ashworth where we are. If the tunnel collapses, if we get stuck, if Harris somehow followed us – no one would find us.

But the vault is right there. Eighteen feet below the Monument. Maybe accessible through this shaft.

All of Wren's evidence. Everything my father died to expose. Right below us.

“Twenty minutes,” I say. “We explore the main tunnel to the Monument foundation, see if there’s access to the vault. If not, we retreat, get proper equipment, plan a full expedition.”

“Twenty minutes,” Daniel agrees.

We continue along the main tunnel. Another thirty feet, then it opens into a larger chamber. Roughly eight feet square, brick-lined walls, ceiling high enough to stand.

The Monument foundation.

We’re inside the Monument’s base structure.

Daniel sweeps his torch around the chamber. Three walls are solid brick, part of the Monument’s foundation. But the fourth wall, the north wall, has a small doorway. Only three feet tall, sealed with a heavy iron plate.

The plate is held by four bolts, each one marked with a symbol.

I recognize the symbols. The same marks from John Hart’s Bible.

“This is it,” I breathe. “The vault entrance.”

Daniel examines the bolts. “They’re not rusted. Someone’s maintained them.”

“Wren sealed this right after construction. The Hart family must have checked on it periodically, making sure it stayed secure.”

I think about Dad standing in this exact spot. Seeing this door. Knowing what was behind it. But not having the authority or resources to breach it safely.

So, he documented it. Built the case. Left the evidence for me.

“We need tools to remove the bolts,” I say. “And we need to document this properly. Photographs, measurements, video evidence.”

“And we need to do it before Fairchild’s construction crews discover the passage from above.”

A sound echoes from behind us. Back in the tunnel.

Footsteps.

Daniel and I freeze. My hand goes automatically to the knife in my pocket.

The footsteps get closer. Multiple people. Moving but not particularly quietly.

“The side shaft,” I whisper. “Go.”

We scramble back through the tunnel, moving as quietly as possible. The footsteps behind us pause, then accelerate. They’ve heard us.

We reach the junction. The narrow shaft angles downward into darkness.

“That could lead anywhere,” Daniel hisses. “Dead end, collapse, flooding…”

“Or another exit. Go.”

He goes first, sliding into the narrow space feet-first. I follow, pulling myself into the shaft as torch beams sweep the main tunnel behind us.

The shaft is tight. My shoulders scrape brick on both sides. We descend rapidly, using hands and feet to control the slide. It's not quite vertical but close enough that gravity does most of the work.

Ten feet. Twenty. Thirty.

My foot hits something. Not empty space. A surface. Floor.

We've reached the bottom.

Daniel drops the remaining distance, lands in a crouch. I follow, emerge into another chamber.

This one is different.

Older.

The walls aren't brick, they're stone. Original medieval construction, maybe earlier. The ceiling is low, barely six feet, supported by thick columns, and the space extends in multiple directions, branching tunnels leading into darkness.

"Where are we?" Daniel asks.

I check my phone compass. "Still under the Monument area, but deeper. This might be part of the medieval cellaring system. The City's built on layers. Roman, Saxon, medieval. We've dropped into an older stratum."

Above us, voices echo down the shaft. Harris's team has reached the junction.

"They'll follow us down," Daniel says.

"No, I don't think so. They don't know where it leads. They'll call for backup, get proper equipment."

“That gives us maybe ten minutes.”

I sweep my torch around the chamber. Three passages branch off. One runs north back toward the church. One runs east deeper under the Monument area. One runs south toward the Thames.

“North gets us back to St. Magnus,” I say. “But they’ll have people there by now.”

“East takes us under the Monument foundation. Might connect to the vault from below.”

“Or might be a dead end that traps us.”

“South toward the river. Medieval cellaring often connected to the waterfront. Possible escape route.”

I think fast. We have minutes before Harris’s team follows or seals the shaft. We’re in unmapped medieval tunnels beneath one of London’s most famous monuments. Somewhere in this darkness is a vault containing proof of three centuries of lies.

“East,” I decide. “We’re this close. If there’s any chance of accessing the vault from below, we take it.”

Daniel nods.

We move through the eastern passage. The tunnel narrows, forces us to hunch. The stone walls are carved with marks. Ancient graffiti, medieval mason symbols, water level indicators from centuries of Thames flooding.

My heart is pounding. Not from exertion.

I keep moving. The passage narrows, then opens, then narrows again in a pattern that tells me we're threading between older foundations. The stone underfoot is cut flat, then replaced by earth, then cut flat again. Someone followed an existing route and improved it.

The walls change texture as I move my torch across them. For twenty feet the stone is rough-hewn, pre-seventeenth century, then a section of tighter, more deliberate cutting begins. Cleaner joints. A different mortar colour. Someone worked this passage in the 1660s, repairing and extending what was already here.

I run my fingers along the seam where old stone meets new. The angle of the cut is precise. Whoever did this had proper tools and knew how to use them.

"The stones ahead are different," Daniel says from behind me.

"Wren's team, I think. The Great Fire rebuilding period." I move my torch slowly along the right-hand wall. "They found something already here and followed it."

The passage bends slightly left. I check my compass. Still heading east-southeast. Still toward the Monument.

My heel catches something at floor level and I stop. A groove cut across the passage, about half an inch deep, running wall to wall. I crouch and look. Not accidental. A deliberate line scored into the stone, with numbers cut beside it in small, careful figures.

Distance markers. In feet.

I stand and keep walking, counting my own paces now. The air is different from the chamber above. Drier. Still. The smell of old

stone has deepened into something almost sweet. I've encountered it before in sealed spaces that haven't been opened in a very long time.

Twelve paces on, my torch catches something on the right wall. Small, deliberate. Cut into the stone at waist height.

A mason's mark.

I've seen this symbol before. In my father's notes, and in guild records I cross-referenced at the British Library. A simple figure, four lines forming a crude compass rose, with a small H inscribed in the lower right quadrant.

Hart. John Hart's guild mark.



"Daniel."

He's already at my shoulder. We stand looking at it without speaking. A craftsman's signature from 1672, cut here in secret, in the dark, in a passage no one was supposed to know existed. His way of signing something he couldn't acknowledge.

Daniel photographs it without being asked.

We move on. The passage widens briefly at a junction, a smaller tunnel running north before being blocked by a fall of brick and earth, centuries of collapse, settled and compacted. The main route continues east.

The floor slopes downward. A shallow gradient, felt more in my calves than seen. We're going under whatever lies between St. Magnus and the Monument foundation. I think about what's above us at street level. King William Street. The junction. The Monument rising two hundred and two feet into the air.

We're under it now. Or close.

"Another marker," Daniel says. He's spotted one I missed, higher on the wall. A carved cross, a date below it. He leans close with his torch. "1672."

The year Wren began encoding the churches. The year the conspiracy was still fresh, the stolen land still being registered. He was here that year, or his masons were, building this in secret while rebuilding the city above.

I think about what it would have cost him. Not money. The other kind of cost. Standing in a passage like this in the small hours, carrying evidence that could get him tried for sedition, knowing the families walking the streets above him controlled the law courts and the King's ear.

He did it anyway.

My torch beam hits something ahead and I stop.

The passage ends at a door.

Heavy oak, reinforced with iron bands, set low into the wall so you'd have to duck to pass through. Small enough you might miss it if your torch caught the frame instead of the face. The wood is dark with age but dry, preserved by the sealed air of the passage. The iron is clean. Someone built this to last.

It has.

Set into the iron bands are symbols I recognise from John Hart's Bible diagram. Daniel reads the inscription without being asked.

"Veritas manet ultra sepulchrum."

We stand for a moment. The passage is completely silent except for our breathing.

"Truth endures beyond the grave"

My mother's epitaph. The words she chose for her gravestone, not knowing they echoed what John Hart had written three centuries earlier. Or maybe she did know. Maybe my father told her what he'd found. What family message had been waiting all this time.

I reach out, touch the cold iron. My fingers trace the engraving.

This is it. What my father died trying to reach. What Webb was killed to protect. What Christopher Wren risked everything to preserve.

"Are we ready for this?" Daniel asks.

Am I?

Once we open this door, everything changes. The conspiracy becomes real. The families' crimes become provable. Three and a half centuries of guarded secrets become evidence.

And we become targets who know too much to let live.

I think about my father standing somewhere in these tunnels six years ago. Getting close to this moment. Close enough to know it existed. But not close enough to breach it before they stopped him.

I think about my mother dying of polonium poisoning, her body destroyed month by month while they made it look like cancer.

I think about Marcus Webb, murdered on Monument Street while walking to tell me the truth.

I think about all the people across three centuries who touched this secret and either fought for it or were silenced trying to reveal it.

"Yes," I say. "We're ready."

The door has no visible lock. Instead, there's a rotating mechanism – four iron wheels, each marked with symbols. A combination lock. Seventeenth-century engineering securing twenty-first-century truth.

I study the wheels, comparing the symbols to John Hart's Bible diagram that Daniel pulled up on his phone.

"Top wheel – the cross," I say. "That's the reference point. Rotate it to align with the north marker."

Daniel does. The wheel turns smoothly, well-maintained despite its age.

“Second wheel – the constellation. Ursa Major. Position it at the autumn equinox orientation.”

Click.

“Third wheel – lunar phase. First quarter, waxing.”

Click.

“Fourth wheel...” I hesitate. The symbol is less clear in the diagram. Could be a property marker. Could be an astronomical reference.

“The Monument,” Daniel says. “It’s the Monument symbol. Wren’s signature mark.”

He rotates the final wheel into position.

For a moment, nothing happens.

Then a deep mechanical sound echoes through the passage. Ancient gears moving. Counterweights shifting. The door shifts inward, unsealing from the frame.

My hands are shaking. I press both palms against the cold wood and wait for them to steady. They don’t. I push anyway.

The door swings open on hinges that barely whisper.

Beyond is darkness.

I step through the doorway, and I have to duck to clear the frame. Daniel follows, both our torches cutting through the blackness.

The room reveals itself, one detail at a time.

Stone floor – level.

Stone walls – cut.

Stone ceiling – eight feet high.

The chamber is cubic. Exactly eight feet on each side. The dimensions my father calculated. The measurements I've been chasing through a dozen churches. The signature of Wren's encoding.

But it's not empty.

Along three walls, stone shelves hold objects wrapped in oiled cloth. Some parcels are small, others substantial. All positioned, preserved with meticulous care.

In the centre of the room, a stone pedestal rises from the floor. On it sits a single object.

A leather-bound book.

I stand motionless, just breathing, just processing.

The leather book on the pedestal. The parcels on the shelves. The names carved into the walls – Fairchild, Pembroke, Ashton, Grey – repeated again and again in Wren's precise hand.

Three hundred and fifty years in the dark.

"Olivia," Daniel's voice is soft. Reverent. "Look at the walls."

I direct my torch upward, to the space above the shelves.

Engraving. Detailed, deliberate, covering every available surface. Text in Wren's precise hand. Diagrams showing church positions. Astronomical calculations. Property boundaries. Mathematical proofs.

And names. Four family names, repeated again and again in the context of property transfers and pre-Fire acquisitions.

Fairchild. Pembroke. Ashton. Grey.

“He documented everything,” I breathe. “Not hidden in paper and ink. Carved into the walls. Permanent. Undeniable. Even if someone destroyed the documents, the walls would still testify.”

Daniel moves to the nearest shelf, lifts one of the wrapped parcels. His hands are gentle, the movements of someone who understands they’re touching history.

He unfolds the oiled cloth.

Parchment. Original seventeenth-century document, the ink faded but still legible. Official seals. Legal terminology. Property ownership records from before the Fire.

“1660,” Daniel reads. “Original deed for properties in Cheapside. Owner: William Carpenter, mercer. Transferred to...” He pauses, checking the next document. “Never transferred. Carpenter died in the Fire. Property subsequently claimed by Edmund Fairchild based on a survey conducted in 1668.”

“Two years after the original owner died,” I say. “After any potential heirs had scattered or perished.”

“Convenient.”

I pick up another parcel from a different shelf. More documents inside. Correspondence. Letters in faded ink discussing property values, fire risk, reconstruction opportunities.

All dated August 1666 – three weeks before the Fire.

My legs feel unsteady. I sit down on the floor, back against the cold stone wall, and just hold the letters.

All dated August 1666. Three weeks before the Fire.

Three weeks.

"We need to document this," Daniel says. "Every page. Every inscription. Every piece of evidence. Multiple backups, multiple jurisdictions. Make it impossible to suppress."

We can't take everything tonight. Not without proper equipment, archival supplies, expert handling. But we can photograph it all. Make the evidence accessible even if they destroy the physical vault.

I stand, pull out my own phone, start working methodically through the shelves. High-resolution images of every document, every parcel, every carved inscription on the walls.

The leather-bound book on the pedestal is last.

I approach it.

My hands hover over the cover for a long moment.

Then I open it.

Wren's handwriting fills the first page. Not encoded. Not hidden in cipher or metaphor. Clear, direct, damning.

I read aloud, needing to hear the words spoken:

"September 1666. The Fire has revealed what I long suspected – that the reformation of London was desired by certain interests with sufficient means to achieve it through destructive means. I

have documented three ignition points, examined witness testimony suppressed by the official inquiry, analysed property transfers made just before the catastrophe by suspiciously narrow margins."

My voice catches. Daniel moves closer, reading over my shoulder.

Wren continues:

"John Hart, my trusted mason, has provided testimony from workers who observed unusual activity in the days before the Fire. Lamp oil stockpiled in abandoned buildings. Timber moved to strategic locations. Streets blocked to impede firefighting efforts.

I cannot prove criminal conspiracy before the courts. The families implicated have the King's favour and unlimited resources. My testimony would be dismissed or, more likely, silenced permanently.

But I can preserve the evidence. Build it into the architecture of London's resurrection. Create a record that will endure beyond any attempt at suppression.

For three hundred years hence, or three thousand, someone will find this testament. Someone with Hart blood, who inherited John's knowledge and his obligation.

To that person I say: the truth matters more than peace. Justice delayed is still justice, and London's rebirth was purchased with innocent blood that cries out for acknowledgement.

Let the guilty families prosper for their generations. But let history remember what they did."

I close the book, vision blurring.

“Dad knew,” I say. “He got this close. Maybe saw this door. Maybe even opened it. And they killed him before he could tell anyone.”

“But he left enough clues for you to finish,” Daniel says. “The encrypted files. The password only you knew. The research documented so that you could follow his path.”

He’s right.

My father didn’t fail. He ran out of time.

But he made sure I wouldn’t.

I photograph every page. Every word of Wren’s testimony. His analysis. His evidence.

“We have it,” Daniel says. “Everything we need.”

A scraping sound echoes from the shaft behind us. They’re coming down.

“Time to go,” I say.

We leave through the southern passage, moving fast now. The tunnel slopes downward, toward the river level. After a hundred feet, we encounter water – a few inches but flowing. The Thames seeps through everything down here.

The passage narrows further, becomes almost impassable. We squeeze through sideways, torches barely illuminating the way forward.

Then: light ahead. Not artificial. Moonlight.

The tunnel emerges onto a stone embankment beside the Thames. We're below street level, in the old waterfront that predates the modern Embankment construction. A forgotten space, accessible only from below or by boat.

Behind us, voices echo through the tunnels. Harris's team is still following, but we have distance now.

"We need to move," Daniel says.

Dusty, dishevelled, exhausted.

Eighty photographs on two phones. Wren's testimony. Three centuries of evidence.

My phone shows the uploads completing.

Between us, we've documented Wren's complete testimony and the original property records.

"We have to get somewhere safe," I say. "Upload these to the European academics, to Ashworth, to the dead-man's switch distribution list. Multiple copies, multiple jurisdictions."

"Already uploading." Daniel's phone shows active transfers. "Mueller and Dumont will have complete documentation within the hour. Ashworth gets his copy simultaneously. And I'm routing copies to three separate cloud services across different countries."

We walk toward the Tube station. It's almost one in the morning. The last trains are running.

My phone buzzes. Text from unknown number:

We know you were in St. Magnus. We know what you found. Last warning: stop now or die.

I show Daniel.

He reads it without expression. Then types a reply:

You're too late. Evidence is already distributed internationally. Kill us and it goes public. Your move.

He sends it.

We board the Tube, take it north to a different hotel than the one where we left our equipment. Another room, another anonymous space. But this time, we're carrying something they can't take from us.

Proof.

By the time we reach the hotel, Daniel's uploads have completed. Encrypted files safely distributed to academic institutions in Germany, France, Switzerland, and Canada. Legal organizations in London, Brussels, and New York. Journalists at major publications across three continents.

"If anything happens to us now," Daniel says, "the information releases automatically within seventy-two hours."

"And if nothing happens?"

"We still go public. Just on our timeline instead of theirs."

I look at the photographs on my phone. Wren's handwriting. The four names on the walls. The letters dated August 1666.

"We did it," I say.

“We found the evidence. Now we have to survive long enough to make sure it means something.”

My phone rings. Ashworth.

“You found it,” he says without preamble. “I just received the encrypted files. Wren’s testimony, the property records, everything.”

“We found it.”

“This changes everything. With this documentation, we can file criminal heritage challenges, force Parliamentary inquiry, and demand archaeological protection of the Monument vault. The families can’t suppress this now.”

“What about Fairchild’s construction timeline?”

“I’m filing for emergency heritage protection first thing tomorrow morning. These documents prove the Monument foundation contains historically significant evidence. No court will allow construction to proceed without proper archaeological assessment.”

“So, we’ve stopped them.”

“For now. They’ll fight it. Legal challenges, political pressure, everything they have. But you’ve documented enough to make this a legitimate public interest issue. They can’t just kill you and make it go away anymore.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“It should be. You’ve done what your father couldn’t. You’ve built a case that survives your death. That’s the only real protection you have.”

We talk for another ten minutes. Strategy, next steps, legal procedures. By the time I hang up, Daniel has compiled all our evidence into a single comprehensive document – photographs, analysis, historical context, legal implications.

“I’m sending this to Mueller with a request for immediate academic validation,” he says. “If he can verify and publish within forty-eight hours, the families lose any chance of suppressing it.”

“Will he do it?”

“He already responded. Said this is the most significant architectural conspiracy discovery in modern British history. He wants to present it at a symposium next week.”

Next week. Public presentation. Academic validation. International exposure.

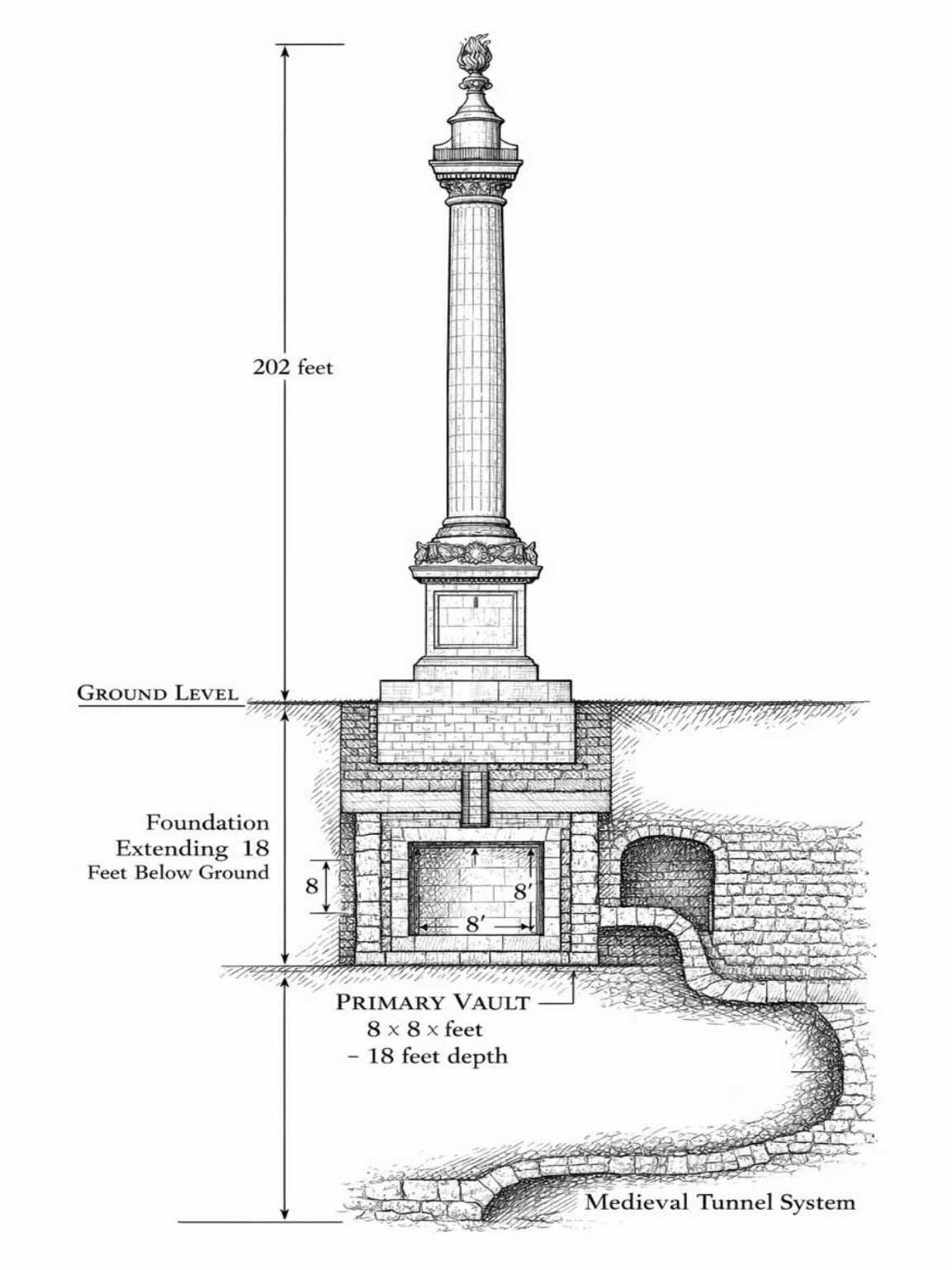
The families can’t stop that.

I lean back against the hotel room wall

“We should sleep,” Daniel says. “Tomorrow, we will deal with Fairchild’s response. But tonight, we won.”

I close my eyes, still seeing Wren’s handwriting.

“The truth matters more than peace.”



“The Monument – Cross-section showing foundation and primary vault.”

TWENTY

SIR JAMES FAIRCHILD
Cornerstone Heritage Properties, City of London
Present Day – Thursday, March 19, 2:00 AM

James's phone wakes him at 2:00 AM. Harris's number.

"They were in St. Magnus," Harris says without preamble. "Found a passage to the Monument foundation. There's a secondary vault. They documented everything and escaped through waterfront tunnels."

James wakes up instantly. "How much did they get?"

"Property records. Pre-Fire correspondence. Wren's testimony. All photographed and distributed before we could intercept. Academic institutions in Germany, France, Switzerland. Legal organizations across Europe. Major newspapers. All encrypted, all beyond our reach."

James closes his eyes. Photographed. Distributed. Encrypted across three continents.

He'd been twelve hours too slow.

"Where are they?"

“Unknown. They went dark after uploading. They know we’re watching and they’re staying ahead of us.”

“Then we need to contain the narrative.”

“Too late.” Harris’s voice is flat. “The German professor, Mueller, is already preparing an academic paper. The French academic is coordinating with heritage organizations. And Ashworth filed for emergency heritage protection of the Monument foundation at midnight.”

“Heritage protection blocks construction.”

“Pending archaeological assessment, yes. Ashworth’s filing includes Wren’s testimony as evidence. No judge will allow excavation without proper heritage supervision now. Weeks at minimum. Possibly months.”

Construction blocked. Evidence distributed. Academic validation pending.

“The families need to know.”

“Good luck with that.” Harris hangs up.

*

James stands in his bedroom, watching the city wake toward dawn. His email inbox shows three messages from Victoria Ashton, escalating from “Urgent” to “CALL ME IMMEDIATELY.”

He opens a secure browser. Searches for Hermann Mueller’s university page.

The professor's research focuses on Wren's mathematical principles. He's published extensively on post-Fire London reconstruction. A respected Heidelberg academic, not some fringe theorist. Exactly the kind of person who could validate the Hart research and make it credible.

His phone buzzes. Richard Pembroke: "Emergency call at 3:00 AM. All families. Be ready."

When the families panicked, people die.

At precisely 3:00 AM, his phone rings.

"Tell us you have good news," Henry Grey says.

"I don't."

Silence.

"Explain." Victoria's voice could freeze steel.

James summarizes: St. Magnus infiltration. Wren's testimony photographed. Evidence distributed internationally. Academic validation pending. Heritage protection filed.

When he finishes, the silence stretches.

"And you let this happen." Victoria's words are surgical.

"Harris lost them in the tunnels."

"Your man Harris has lost them repeatedly. At St. Paul's. At St. Bride's. Now at St. Magnus." Richard Pembroke sounds exhausted. "What exactly has he accomplished?"

James says nothing.

“What’s our legal exposure?” Henry asks.

“Significant. Ashworth’s heritage filing cites deliberate concealment. We could face charges of conspiracy to destroy protected sites.”

“We haven’t destroyed anything.”

“We planned to. Ashworth has emails showing Cornerstone expedited permits and moved up the timeline. That demonstrates intent.”

Silence while they absorb this.

“What about the property holdings?” Victoria asks. “If Wren’s testimony proves our ancestors acquired properties through criminal conspiracy, what happens to current ownership?”

James has been dreading this question. “Unclear. Property law protects good-faith purchases. But if acquisition involved murder and conspiracy, courts might treat it differently.”

“Define treating it differently.”

“Parliamentary inquiry. Criminal heritage investigations. Challenges to property titles across the entire City of London.”

“Billions in contested holdings,” Richard says quietly.

“Tens of billions. The legal challenges would take decades. But the reputational damage would be immediate.”

“Fairchild family as descendants of mass murderers,” Victoria says bitterly. “Three centuries of legitimate business tainted by original sin.”

“Worst-case scenario.”

“What’s the best case?”

“We acknowledge historical facts. Our ancestors purchased distressed properties opportunistically. We deny arson. Claim Wren’s testimony is one perspective, not definitive proof. Control the narrative.”

“Will that work?”

“If the evidence was limited to property records, possibly. But Wren documented three ignition points. Witness testimony. Pre-positioned materials. That’s hard to dismiss.”

“Then we discredit Wren,” Victoria says. “Suggest his testimony is self-serving. Maybe he was involved himself – saw opportunity in destruction.”

James considers this. Desperate, but desperation might be their only option.

“Risky. Wren is a national hero. Blaming him for the Fire could backfire.”

“More than our families being exposed as descendants of arsonists?”

Fair point.

“What about the Hart girl?” Victoria asks. “Can we still eliminate her?”

“Killing her triggers immediate evidence release. Every journalist and academic on her distribution list gets the complete file within seventy-two hours.”

“So, we’re hostage to a twenty-seven-year-old engineer.”

“We’re constrained by our own prior actions,” James says. “If we hadn’t killed Webb, if we hadn’t threatened her father, she might have approached this as academic research rather than justice for murdered parents.”

“Don’t lecture us,” Victoria snaps. “This is your strategy failing.”

“What do you propose?” Henry asks.

“Legal defence on multiple fronts. Criminal heritage lawyers. Property lawyers. Public relations emphasizing three centuries of legitimate business. And continued surveillance – not for elimination, but intelligence.”

“That’s defensive.”

“We’re in a defensive position. The evidence is out. We can only shape how it’s interpreted.”

“What about the Monument vault?” Richard asks. “The main chamber. If we breach it before heritage authorities establish protocols –”

“That’s exactly what Ashworth’s filing prevents. Any attempt to access the vault now proves criminal intent.”

More silence. James can feel them calculating options that don’t exist.

“I want access to the evidence they distributed,” Henry says. “Complete copies.”

“I’ll have Harris intercept academic communications.”

“No. Not Harris. He’s proven inadequate. Hire actual cyber security experts.”

James makes notes. Hire new security. Intercept evidence. Monitor academics.

“What about financial pressure?” Victoria asks. “Mueller’s university receives British government funding. Can we leverage that?”

“Attempting to suppress academic research through funding will backfire publicly.”

“We ARE powerful interests trying to bury inconvenient history.”

“Yes, but we can’t be seen doing it obviously.”

Victoria laughs, sharp and bitter. “Three hundred and fifty years of successfully burying this. One girl with a camera phone ends it.”

“It’s not ended yet,” James says, though he’s not sure he believes it.

*

At 4:00 AM, alone in his office, he opens screenshots of the vault evidence from the file Harris sent.

Wren’s handwriting fills the pages. Clear, direct, damning.

Three ignition points documented with timing and location. Witness statements. Analysis of property acquisitions that preceded the catastrophe by margins too narrow to be coincidental.

And then, a letter.

Edmund Fairchild to Thomas Pembroke. August 14, 1666.

His ancestor's words, preserved by Wren, hidden for three centuries.

"The plague has created opportunity, but insufficient for our purposes. The City's medieval tangle cannot be reformed piecemeal. If circumstances provide opportunity for comprehensive rebuilding, we must be positioned to benefit..."

James reads it three times.

His ancestor. Planning comprehensive destruction. Three weeks before the Fire.

Not opportunistic investment after tragedy. Planned arson.

Mass murder for profit.

He's known this intellectually. His father explained it when James was eighteen, as if describing a successful business venture. But seeing it in his ancestor's handwriting, preserved by Wren, documented with such care makes it real in a way it never was before.

Edmund Fairchild the First killed hundreds of people so the family could profit from rebuilding London. And James Fairchild the Tenth has spent the last week trying to protect that legacy.

He closes the laptop.

Outside, dawn is breaking over London. The city stirs. Buses with commuters checking their phones. A morning like any other.

James should be planning next moves. Calling lawyers. Coordinating defence strategies.

Instead, he sits in his office, staring at the Monument visible in the distance. Two hundred and two feet of white stone. Built to commemorate the Fire. But also, he now understands, built to mark where truth was buried.

His phone buzzes. Text from an unknown number:

`We know you've seen the evidence. We know what your ancestor did. You have a choice. Help expose it or go down with them. Think carefully. Olivia Hart`

James stares at the message.

Help expose it.

Betray his family. Destroy his own holdings. Admit ancestral guilt publicly.

Or continue fighting. Suppress the evidence however possible. Protect the empire built on murder and lies.

The same choice his ancestor made. Edmund Fairchild chose profit over human life.

What will this James Fairchild choose?

He turns off his phone, pours another coffee he won't drink, and watches the sun.

The Hart girl has given him a choice.

For the first time in his life, James Fairchild isn't sure which side he's on.

TWENTY-ONE

OLIVIA HART
Various Locations, London
Present Day – Friday, March 20, 8:30 AM

The equipment arrives exactly on schedule. Khalid's courier delivers two cases to the hotel lobby, discreet black containers that could hold anything from camera gear to medical instruments. Nothing to draw attention.

Daniel and I carry them up to the room, lock the door, and open the cases on the bed with careful reverence.

I check the corridor through the peephole before we start.

Empty.

That doesn't reassure me.

The Z-400 laser scanner gleams under the overhead light, all chrome and precision optics. The GPR-3000 sits beside it, compact but sophisticated enough to see through walls and map hidden spaces that have remained secret since the Great Fire.

"Test them please," I ask Daniel. "Make sure everything's calibrated correctly."

He powers up the scanner and runs diagnostic protocols, his fingers moving across the controls with practiced efficiency. After ten minutes of checking settings and specifications, he nods.

“Perfect calibration. Ready for field deployment.”

My phone buzzes. Email from Professor Hermann Mueller in Heidelberg.

I open it and read quickly.

Dr. Hart,

I have completed preliminary analysis of your father’s church surveys and the vault documentation you provided. The findings are extraordinary.

Christopher Wren’s architectural encoding is mathematically precise beyond any coincidental explanation. The sealed voids positioned at dimensions of eight feet on each side, aligned with astronomical coordinates and property boundaries, demonstrate deliberate design intent.

More significantly, Wren’s handwritten testimony provides historical context that transforms architectural curiosity into criminal evidence. The correlation between pre-Fire property acquisitions, burn patterns, and post-Fire survey discrepancies is compelling.

I am preparing a paper for presentation at the European Architectural History Symposium in Geneva, March 26. This gives us six days to complete verification. I need additional church surveys to strengthen the pattern analysis. Your father documented

twelve churches. Can you document at least three more with independent verification?

Professor Claire Dumont at the Sorbonne is coordinating heritage protection advocacy. She has contacts at UNESCO and European heritage organizations. If we can demonstrate deliberate encoding across fifteen churches, the pattern becomes undeniable.

Time is critical. I understand construction at the Monument site has been temporarily blocked by heritage protection filing, but legal challenges are likely. We must build academic consensus before British property interests can suppress this.

Please confirm you can provide additional surveys by March 25.

Regards,

Hermann Mueller
Professor of Architectural History
University of Heidelberg

I exhale slowly.

Five days.

I show Daniel the email.

"Three more churches by March 25," he says, already doing the mental calculation. "That's five days."

"We have official access to four churches from Ashworth's Church Commissioner letter. St. James Piccadilly, St. Anne's Soho, Christ Church Spitalfields, St. Alfege Greenwich."

"Survey all four. Give Mueller more data than he requested."

I pull up the Church Commissioner letter on my phone and read through the access conditions. Work is permitted between 9:00 AM and 5:00 PM, coordinated with parish schedules, ensuring minimal disruption to services. Professional. Legitimate. Everything my father's covert surveys were not.

"Start with St. James Piccadilly," I say. "It's closest. We can scan it today, get the data to Mueller tonight."

Daniel is already packing equipment methodically – the scanner, GPR unit, laptop, cables, backup batteries. He checks each item twice, the way he always does when the stakes are high.

My phone buzzes again. Text from Ashworth.

`Heritage protection filing accepted for preliminary review. Emergency hearing scheduled March 24th. You need to testify about the vault contents. Prepare documentation.`

March 24th. Four days. I text back:

`Understood. Will have additional church surveys completed by March 23rd.`

Ashworth responds immediately:

`Good. The families are preparing legal challenges. Cornerstone has hired three separate law firms. This will be a fight.`

Of course it will. Fourteen billion pounds in property holdings. Three centuries of accumulated wealth and carefully constructed legitimacy. They will not surrender easily.

My phone buzzes a third time. Email from Professor Claire Dumont in Paris.

Mademoiselle Hart,

Professor Mueller has shared your research. I have reviewed the architectural documentation and Wren's testimony with great interest.

I am coordinating with European heritage protection organizations to establish international oversight of the Monument excavation. If Wren's vault contains evidence of property fraud and mass casualty arson, this transcends British domestic concerns. UNESCO heritage protocols may apply.

However, we need stronger documentation. Your father's twelve church surveys provide foundation, but independent verification is essential. I have contacts at the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Institute of British Architects. If you can arrange official scans with their oversight, the data becomes unimpeachable.

I am also concerned about your safety. Families protecting such significant holdings will respond aggressively. Please ensure you have adequate legal protection and secure backup of all evidence.

I will attend the Geneva symposium March 26 to provide supporting analysis of Wren's architectural principles. Together with Professor Mueller's presentation, we can establish international academic consensus.

Time is our greatest challenge. British property interests have resources and political connections. We must move faster than they can suppress.

Courage, Mademoiselle. Your father began something important. You are finishing it.

Cordialement,

Professor Claire Dumont
Sorbonne University, Paris

I read the email twice.

My father had Webb. He trusted the wrong person and it killed him. I have Mueller, Dumont, Ashworth, Daniel, and a dead-man's switch covering three continents.

"The academics want independent oversight," I tell Daniel. "Official verification from British institutions. The Society of Antiquaries, RIBA."

"Can Ashworth arrange that?"

"Probably. He has connections across heritage organizations."

I draft an email to Ashworth, explaining the need for independent verification and academic oversight to make the surveys unimpeachable. Within twenty minutes, he responds.

I can arrange Society of Antiquaries representation for Monday's surveys. Dr. Alyson Reynolds, specialist in Wren architecture. She's sceptical but fair-minded. If the voids exist as documented, she'll verify them.

Monday. March 23rd. Three days from now.

The strategy crystallizes in my mind.

St. James Piccadilly today. Official surveys Monday through Wednesday. Data to Mueller by Wednesday night. Geneva symposium Thursday.

We will leave separately. Meet at Piccadilly Circus.

“We need to move,” I say. “St. James Piccadilly opens at nine. We can be there by nine-thirty.”

“We should assume they know where we were last night,” Daniel says.

“They always do,” I reply.

Daniel finishes packing equipment while I go through the mental checklist one more time. We leave the hotel ten minutes apart. I take the stairs. Daniel takes the lift.

We meet at Piccadilly Circus.

The Tube to Green Park takes just eight minutes.

*

St. James’s Church sits on Piccadilly, red brick and Portland stone, Wren’s elegant proportions evident despite centuries of soot and restoration. Built between 1676 and 1684, during the same period as the Monument. One of Wren’s personal favourites, he claimed in his later writings.

We enter through the south entrance. A woman lights a candle near the altar as we enter. She glances at us. Just for a second.

Then looks away.

I don’t know why that bothers me.

The interior is bright and welcoming, thoroughly renovated after World War II bombing. Modern lighting, restored woodwork, an active parish community. Nothing about it suggests hidden secrets sealed in its foundations for three and a half centuries.

The verger meets us in the nave. An elderly man with a kind face, already briefed by the Church Commissioner's office about our survey work.

"You're the heritage researchers," he says warmly. "Here about the foundations?"

"Structural survey," I confirm. "Non-invasive scanning. We'll be finished by early afternoon."

"Take your time. We have a concert rehearsal at two, but until then you have full access."

He leads us to the vestry and shows us access to the basement. Stone stairs descending to storage levels beneath the church, the same pattern as St. Magnus and St. Bride's. Every Wren church we've examined follows this design. Medieval foundations incorporated into the rebuilt structure, lower levels sealed off and forgotten by modern parishioners who worship above ground, unaware of what lies beneath their feet.

We descend carefully. The basement is cleaner than St. Magnus, better maintained. Still used for storage, though not heavily. Boxes of old hymn books, Christmas decorations, and parish records dating back decades.

I set up the laser scanner while Daniel unpacks the GPR unit. We work efficiently, dividing the space between us. The scanner maps

the three-dimensional structure while the GPR penetrates walls and reveals what's hidden behind them.

Twenty minutes into the scan, Daniel calls me over. His voice is steady, but I can hear the excitement underneath.

"East wall. Foundation level. Eight feet square."

I check the GPR display, and there it is. A perfectly cubic void sealed behind eighteenth-century brickwork. Same dimensions as St. Paul's, St. Mary-le-Bow, St. Bride's. Same mathematical precision. Same evidence of deliberate encoding.

"Wren was here," I say quietly.

Daniel nods. "He built this church knowing exactly what he was hiding."

We complete the full survey methodically, taking our time to document the void from multiple angles. We measure precise dimensions, depth, and positioning relative to the church structure above. We then cross-reference the location with property boundaries from 1670.

The void sits exactly at the northern edge of what were Pembroke family holdings after the Fire. Another boundary marker. Another piece of Wren's architectural testimony, preserved in stone and silence.

By noon, we have complete documentation. High-resolution 3D maps, GPR scans showing the sealed chamber in crisp detail, and photographs of the foundation structure from every angle.

I upload everything to my encrypted cloud storage and send copies to Mueller and Dumont. The data transmits quickly, safely distributed across European servers where British property interests can't reach it.

Once it's out there, there's no taking it back.

No controlling who sees it.

No controlling who reacts.

My phone buzzes almost immediately. Mueller responding already.

"*Excellent work. St. James confirms the pattern. Same dimensions, same precision, same correlation with property boundaries. This is the evidence we need. Please proceed with remaining churches. I am revising my paper to include all thirteen official survey locations so far.*"

Thirteen churches. My father's twelve, and now St. James. That's not counting the three we entered without permission: St. Paul's, St. Bride's, and St. Magnus.

Two more official surveys to complete the set.

*

We leave St. James's Church at one-thirty, thank the verger for his patience, and pack our equipment carefully. The afternoon light slants through London streets as we walk back toward the Tube.

"Next?" Daniel asks.

“St. Anne’s Soho tomorrow. Then Christ Church Spitalfields Sunday. St. Alfege Greenwich on Monday with the Society of Antiquaries oversight.”

“Tight schedule.”

“We have four days until the heritage hearing. We need every piece of evidence we can document.”

We return to the hotel separately. Daniel carries the equipment while I take a circuitous route through London, checking for surveillance. Still nothing obvious. Which is worse than seeing them. Either they’ve pulled back, or they’re using methods I can’t detect. Both possibilities worry me.

Back at the hotel, Daniel uploads the St. James data to his analysis system and begins the work he loves – overlaying patterns, finding connections. He compares it with the twelve churches my father documented, overlays property boundaries and burn patterns and astronomical alignments.

The pattern is stunning even on a laptop screen.

“Wren mapped the crime scene into London’s architecture,” Daniel says, his voice quiet with awe. “Every foundation, every vault. He documented exactly what was stolen and where the boundaries were drawn.”

“While rebuilding the city for the families who stole it.”

“Royal appointment. He couldn’t refuse. Couldn’t accuse them openly.”

“So, he hid the evidence where only someone looking carefully would find it.” I stare at the screen.

My phone rings. Ashworth.

“The hearing is confirmed for Tuesday. 10:00 AM, Royal Courts of Justice. You’ll testify about vault contents, present survey evidence, explain why the Monument foundation must be protected.”

“Will James Fairchild be there?”

“Cornerstone will have representation. Their legal team will challenge everything. Expect aggressive cross-examination about methodology, credentials, interpretation.”

“I have documentation.”

“Good. Bring physical copies, digital backups, academic verification letters. The more evidence, the stronger our position.”

“Will the families be there?”

“Some of them. This is public record, open court. They can’t suppress it quietly anymore. That ship has sailed.”

“Though Victoria Ashton is making their desperation extremely visible,” Ashworth adds with a dry tone. “Her legal team has filed seventeen separate motions in the past forty-eight hours. Challenges to the court’s jurisdiction, your standing as an applicant, the validity of your surveying credentials, the admissibility of your father’s research, the authenticity of Wren’s documents, Heritage England’s authority to impose restrictions –”

“Seventeen motions?”

“She’s attempting to bury us in procedural challenges. Create so much legal chaos that the hearing gets delayed indefinitely while judges sort through the filings.” He pauses. “It’s actually counterproductive. The sheer volume makes her look desperate rather than confident. Justice Henley will see through it.”

“Will any of them succeed?”

“Unlikely. They’re mostly frivolous. But they demonstrate how aggressively she’s fighting this. James Fairchild is at least attempting measured legal strategy. Victoria just wants to overwhelm the system with paperwork and force errors through exhaustion.”

“What about the other families?”

“Pembroke and Grey are much quieter. Filing through the consortium’s joint legal team rather than independently. They’re following Fairchild’s lead, mostly. Victoria is the outlier, acting alone, burning through legal resources at an astonishing rate.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s the most exposed. Ashton family properties are concentrated in areas where the burn patterns most clearly suggest deliberate ignition. If this conspiracy is proven, they have the most to lose proportionally.” Ashworth’s voice turns serious. “Which makes her the most dangerous. Desperate people make desperate choices.”

“That’s what we want.”

“Be careful what you wish for, Olivia.” His voice softens slightly. “Once this becomes public record, there’s no putting it back. The

families will know you've destroyed their legacy. They'll respond accordingly."

"They've already tried to kill me."

"Trying and succeeding are different things. Don't give them opportunities."

He hangs up.

I look at Daniel, who has been listening while continuing his work.

"Tuesday hearing," I say. "Everything goes on public record."

"What Dad wanted."

"What Mum died for."

We sit in silence. The hotel room feels small, temporary. We've been moving every night – different hotels, different locations. Staying ahead of surveillance, staying alive.

My phone buzzes. Text from an unknown number

```
We know about the hearing. We know about Mueller's
symposium. You've won this round. But we will challenge
every claim, contest every piece of evidence, fight this
through every court in Europe. You have started a war
you cannot win. JF
```

I show Daniel.

"He's threatened," Daniel observes. "Wouldn't contact directly otherwise."

"He's also right. This will be a legal battle that could take decades."

“We don’t need to win every battle. Just the first one. Heritage protection for the Monument vault. Once that’s established, once UNESCO gets involved, the families can’t destroy evidence quietly. They have to fight in public, where everyone can see them.”

“Then we focus on Tuesday. Win the heritage hearing. Everything else follows from that.”

I text back to Fairchild, keeping it simple and direct.

`You’re protecting a legacy built on mass murder. We’re exposing the truth. History will judge which side was worth fighting for.`

Send.

No response comes. I didn’t expect one.

*

Daniel returns to his analysis, compiling documentation for Tuesday’s hearing – charts, maps, measurements, all organized into clear narrative. I draft testimony notes, working out how to explain Wren’s encoding system to judges who may have no architectural background.

Outside our window, London moves through its morning. In two hours, a courtroom will begin dismantling three and a half centuries of it.

Tourists photograph the Monument, never knowing what’s buried beneath its base. Office workers pass St. Paul’s without seeing the

sealed void in the crypt below. The city functions normally, built on secrets it has forgotten existed.

Four more days until those secrets become public.

Four more days until Wren's historic testimony finally speaks in a courtroom.

I pull up the photograph of Wren's handwritten account from the vault and read his words again, the ones that have been driving me forward.

"The truth matters more than peace. Justice delayed is still justice. And London's rebirth was purchased with innocent blood that cries out for acknowledgment."

Four days to prove it. Or lose everything.

I close the laptop, check our equipment one more time, and confirm tomorrow's schedule for St. Anne's Soho. Double-check the access permissions. Triple-check the backup procedures.

We're going to finish what my father started.

We're going to prove what Wren hid.

No matter how hard the families fight. No matter what it costs.

Because now they know we can prove it.

TWENTY-TWO

OLIVIA HART
Various Church Locations, London
Present Day – Saturday, March 21, 9:00 AM

St. Anne's Soho sits tucked behind Dean Street, its brick tower rising above the chaos of central London nightlife. The Blitz took the original interior, but the foundations are entirely seventeenth-century.

The parish administrator leads us down a narrow stone staircase to the crypt, the steps worn smooth at the centre. The air changes on the third step. Cold stone, old timber, the faint mineral trace of underground water. She doesn't ask what we're looking for. Most people don't. They invite you to look and trust that what you find will confirm what they already believe: that their church is ordinary, its foundations exactly what the guidebook says.

They're almost always right.

Almost.

Fifteen minutes into the scan, the GPR shows a sealed void in the west wall, eight feet on each side, behind brickwork from the

1670s. It sits at the south-western corner of what became Ashton land after the Fire.

“Another one,” Daniel whispers.

Another boundary marker. Fourteen churches now, each sealed in the 1670s, each placed with sub-inch precision where the post-fire surveys diverged from the old. An opposing barrister will say coincidence. But you cannot accidentally be precise. Precision is intention made visible.

We upload the data from the churchyard wall while Dean Street wakes up around us. A coffee shop opening its shutters. A delivery driver arguing with a parking attendant. Saturday morning. Completely ordinary.

*

Sunday afternoon takes us to Christ Church Spitalfields. Hawksmoor’s white Portland stone, but the ground beneath it was surveyed by Wren in the 1670s. The verger talks about Hawksmoor’s astronomical alignments until Daniel unclips the GPR case, then she smiles and leaves us to it.

In the crypt, a youth choir rehearses somewhere above, their voices drifting down through the vaulted ceiling, clean and unhurried, at odds with what we’re doing below.

She was right about the geometry. She had no idea why.

The north wall gives the same answer. Eight feet square, at the eastern boundary of what became Grey property. Fifteen churches. Mueller’s number. I send him a single line: *Final survey tomorrow*

with Society of Antiquaries oversight. Complete data set to you by Monday evening.

*

Monday morning, St. Alfege Greenwich. Hawksmoor's church now, but the foundations are older than he is, and the crypt doesn't care whose name is on the drawings.

Dr. Alyson Reynolds is waiting at the entrance with her own survey equipment and two thick folders. Fifties, grey hair pulled back hard, a Wren specialist from the Society of Antiquaries. If she signs her name to this, no court or journal will question it.

"Ms. Hart." A formal handshake. "Sealed voids in fifteen churches, positioned by astronomy, encoding a criminal conspiracy. Extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence."

"I have the evidence."

"We'll see about that."

She sets her own radar beside ours and checks every scan against her calibrated instruments. Twenty-five minutes in, her screen shows what ours shows. South wall, foundation level. A sealed void, eight feet on each side, untouched since construction.

She stares at it for a long moment. "That's not possible," she whispers.

"It's there," I say.

"I can see that it's there." Her tone is sharp. "What I mean is that it cannot be coincidence." She re-runs the same section. Identical.

“The precision is extraordinary. This is encoded architecture, built to preserve information.”

Daniel opens the full survey set on his laptop. Fifteen churches side by side. The same void, the same dimensions, each on a property boundary, each on an astronomical line. Reynolds studies it for twenty minutes without a word. She zooms, cross-references, runs her own numbers on a tablet. I watch the scepticism leave her face and something close to awe take its place.

“Thirty years I have studied Wren,” she says at last. “This is the most significant discovery I have witnessed.” She looks at me. “And if it reaches court, it will hold.”

By noon she has signed formal verification that the Alfege void exists as we recorded it and matches the other fifteen in dimension and position. Then she asks the question I’ve been waiting for.

“If the pattern holds, there should be a void beneath the Monument.”

“There is. My father documented it six years ago. Eighteen feet below the base, eight feet on each side. Tomorrow at ten, Royal Courts of Justice, we ask a judge to protect it.”

“And Cornerstone planned work that would breach it?”

“Planned,” I say. “Past tense. We’re stopping them.”

“Then I’ll testify, if it helps. This is far too important to let developers destroy.”

“Thank you. Your testimony will carry enormous weight.”

We leave Greenwich by early afternoon. Daniel sends the final data to Mueller and Dumont while I assemble tomorrow's documentation.

Data. Verification. Testimony.

My phone rings as we're crossing Tower Bridge. It's Ashworth calling.

"Are you ready for tomorrow's hearing?" he asks without preamble.

"As ready as we can be."

"The opposition will be formidable," Ashworth warns. "Cornerstone has retained Blackstone Chambers. Three barristers, all specialists in heritage law and property rights. They'll argue aggressively that academic speculation doesn't justify blocking legitimate development projects."

"We have official verification from the Society of Antiquaries now."

"Which helps us enormously," Ashworth acknowledges. "Dr. Reynolds's testimony will carry substantial weight with the judge. But you should expect extremely aggressive cross-examination about your research methods, your personal motivations, and your father's death."

"They'll try to discredit me personally rather than address the evidence."

"Precisely. They want the judge to perceive you as a grief-driven conspiracy theorist rather than a legitimate researcher with

rigorous evidence. They'll question everything about how you obtained Wren's testimony, your relationship with Marcus Webb, your family's connection to the historical events."

"What should I do?"

"Stay calm regardless of provocation," Ashworth advises. "Answer every question and factually. Don't speculate beyond what you can prove with documentation. When they ask about your father's death, acknowledge that it motivated your research but emphasize that the evidence stands independent of any personal grief."

"What about Wren's testimony? The evidence we recovered from the vault?"

"That's more complicated," Ashworth admits. "You obtained it through illegal entry to church property. Cornerstone's barristers will argue that evidence obtained illegally should be inadmissible. We'll counter that heritage preservation sometimes requires extraordinary measures, but it's a genuine weak point in our case."

"The vault evidence is too important to exclude."

"I agree. But be prepared for that line of attack."

We talk for another twenty minutes about hearing procedures and likely questioning strategies. By the time I disconnect, we've reached Bethnal Green and our temporary flat.

The flat is quiet, secure. Daniel makes tea while I check my phone for messages. Nothing from the families. Nothing from Harris.

The door buzzes twenty minutes later. I check the peephole carefully.

A woman, mid-thirties, professional appearance. She holds up identification.

"Ms. Hart? I'm Rebecca Cole. Mr. Ashworth sent me. Security detail."

I open the door. Rebecca enters, surveys the room with practiced efficiency – exits, windows, sightlines, all assessed in seconds.

"Two exits, good security system, decent sightlines. You've chosen well." She sets down an equipment case. "I'll be shadowing you until this situation resolves. Former Metropolitan Police, private security for six years. Ashworth briefed me on the threats you've been facing."

"We haven't seen Harris since Friday," I tell her.

"That concerns me more than if we had seen him." She pulls out a tablet, begins setting up monitoring equipment. "Surveillance withdrawal usually means one of two things: they're backing off completely, or they're preparing something significant."

She moves through the flat methodically, checking window locks, testing the security system, examining potential vulnerabilities.

"No immediate surveillance detected outside," she reports after completing her assessment. "Harris hasn't been active in the area. The families are likely regrouping, deciding their next move."

"Tomorrow's hearing will force their hand," I observe.

"Agreed. They'll have to respond publicly. Can't suppress evidence that's being presented in open court."

My phone buzzes. Unknown number.

For a second, I consider not opening it.

But I do.

```
The hearing is a mistake. We can still negotiate terms.
Delay the construction, arrange proper archaeological
assessment, avoid hostile litigation. This benefits
everyone. – JF
```

I show the message to Daniel and Rebecca.

“He’s scared,” Daniel observes. “Wouldn’t be offering deals if he thought they could win in court.”

“Or he’s setting up some kind of ambush for tomorrow,” Rebecca counters. “Creating a false sense of security before Harris tries something at the courthouse.”

“Harris won’t attempt anything in public,” I say, though I’m not entirely certain. “Too many witnesses, too much security presence.”

“He might not have any choice,” Rebecca points out. “If the families are desperate enough and order him to act, he’ll follow those orders regardless of the risks.”

I compose a brief response:

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See you in court!
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Daniel returns to his laptop, compiling the final documentation for tomorrow’s presentation. He’s organizing evidence, preparing presentation materials, ensuring that backup copies exist in multiple secure locations.

I review my testimony notes one more time, running through what I'll say and how I'll phrase it, anticipating what questions the opposition barristers might ask.

Outside our window, London settles into its Monday evening routine. The city continues its perpetual motion. Red buses. Black cabs. The same streets Wren walked. None of it changed yet.

My phone buzzes again. This time it's an email from Professor Mueller.

Dr. Hart,

I have received all fifteen church survey reports and Dr. Reynolds's independent verification. The evidence is conclusive. Wren encoded systematic information into London's post-Fire architecture with deliberate positioning that cannot be explained through any other framework.

I have completed the paper for the Geneva presentation. It will be presented this Thursday, March 26. The title is 'Hidden Testimony: Christopher Wren's Architectural Encoding of the Great Fire Conspiracy.'

Professor Dumont will present supporting analysis of the property fraud documentation. We have confirmed international media coverage. This will become public knowledge by the end of this week.

Your father's research was truly extraordinary. You have completed his work brilliantly and with great courage.

Whatever outcome tomorrow's hearing produces, the academic community now possesses the complete evidence. The truth cannot be suppressed any longer.

With profound admiration and respect,

Hermann Mueller

I read the email twice.

International media coverage. Thursday.

Whatever happens tomorrow in court, Mueller presents his paper in Geneva on Thursday. The academic research goes public regardless. International media will cover the symposium. The conspiracy will be exposed to the entire world.

The families can fight us at the heritage hearing. They can challenge our evidence and spend millions on aggressive legal representation. They can win or lose tomorrow's ruling.

But they cannot stop the Geneva presentation.

They cannot suppress international academic consensus.

"Daniel," I say, looking up from my phone. "Even if we lose the hearing, we've already won the overall battle."

He looks up from his laptop. "Mueller's paper goes public Thursday."

"Exactly. Goes public regardless of what happens in court tomorrow. Once that academic presentation occurs, the families won't be able to destroy the Monument vault. There will be too much international attention, too many people watching.

UNESCO will demand proper oversight. A Parliamentary inquiry will almost certainly follow. They're finished."

"So, tomorrow is about protecting the vault until Thursday arrives."

"Precisely. We don't need to win permanently tomorrow. We need to delay any destruction for three more days."

Daniel allows himself a slight smile. "We can definitely accomplish that."

I hope desperately that he's right.

My phone rings late in the evening. Unknown number displayed on the screen.

I answer cautiously. "Yes?"

"Ms. Hart." The voice is measured and professional. James Fairchild. "We should talk before tomorrow's hearing begins."

"We have nothing to discuss."

"I think we do," he persists. "I'm offering a reasonable compromise here. You withdraw the heritage protection filing. In exchange, I personally guarantee a six-month delay on all Monument construction. That time frame gives you adequate opportunity to organize proper archaeological assessment, establish official excavation protocols, arrange heritage supervision through appropriate channels."

"Why would you possibly offer that arrangement?"

“Because I’ve seen the evidence your research has uncovered,” James whispers. “I know what my ancestor did. I know what’s hidden in that vault.” He pauses significantly. “I’m trying to find some path forward that doesn’t result in destroying both our families.”

“My family is already destroyed,” I remind him coldly. “You murdered my parents.”

“I didn’t personally order those deaths,” James corrects. “Harris acted on authorization from the coalition as a whole, not from me individually. I’ve been trying to contain this entire situation, not escalate it further.”

“You personally authorized Marcus Webb’s murder.”

Long silence. Then: “Yes. That specific decision was mine. I regret it profoundly now.”

“Regret doesn’t bring him back from the dead.”

“No,” he acknowledges. “It doesn’t.” Another pause. “I’m offering you six months, Ms. Hart. Professional excavation conducted properly. Full documentation of everything discovered. UNESCO oversight if you want that involvement. Everything done through legitimate channels instead of hostile litigation.”

“And in exchange for this generous offer?”

“You publicly acknowledge that our current property holdings are legitimate business operations. That my family and the others purchased properties legally over three centuries, even if the original acquisitions in 1666 involved criminal activity. Three

centuries of good-faith business operations aren't automatically invalidated by ancestral crimes."

Six months delay. Professional excavation. Everything my father wanted to achieve.

But accepting it requires me to legitimise fourteen billion pounds of wealth built on mass murder.

"No."

I don't hesitate.

"Ms. Hart!"

"You and your family had three centuries to come forward voluntarily," I interrupt. "To acknowledge what your ancestors did. To make meaningful restitution. You chose to hide the truth. To kill anyone who threatened exposure. That choice has consequences."

"Consequences that will destroy hundreds of innocent people who had nothing to do with decisions made in 1666."

"Consequences that will expose the truth," I counter. "Your current employees will find other jobs. Your tenants will find other buildings. But the people your ancestor murdered don't get second chances at life."

"You're choosing revenge over practical solutions."

"I'm choosing justice over convenient compromises."

Fairchild remains quiet for a long moment. "Then I suppose I'll see you in court tomorrow morning."

“Yes. You will.”

He hangs up.

I sit in the darkened hotel room. James Fairchild attempting negotiation. Attempting to find some middle ground. Attempting to protect his business empire whilst acknowledging ancestral guilt.

Too late for compromise now.

Too late for partial truth.

Tomorrow, everything becomes public record.

Daniel looks up from his laptop. “What did he offer you?”

“Six months construction delay. Professional excavation. UNESCO oversight.”

“In exchange for what exactly?”

“Legitimising all the current property holdings.”

“You refused.”

“Of course I refused.”

“Good.” He returns to his keyboard.

I check the time on my phone. 11:58 PM. The hearing begins in just ten hours.

I lie in the dark, eyes open, running tomorrow over and over.

Every question. Every answer. Every way this could go wrong.

I sleep fitfully, dreaming of fires and sealed vaults and my father's calm voice telling me that truth matters more than temporary peace.

When I wake, dawn light filters through the curtains.

Tuesday, March 24.

Heritage protection hearing day.

Time to expose three centuries of deliberately hidden lies in open court and finish what my father started six years ago.

I shower and dress in professional clothing. Daniel does the same. We pack all our documentation, verify that backup copies exist, confirm that our equipment is ready.

By 8:30 in the morning, we're prepared.

By 9:00 we're walking through London towards the Royal Courts of Justice.

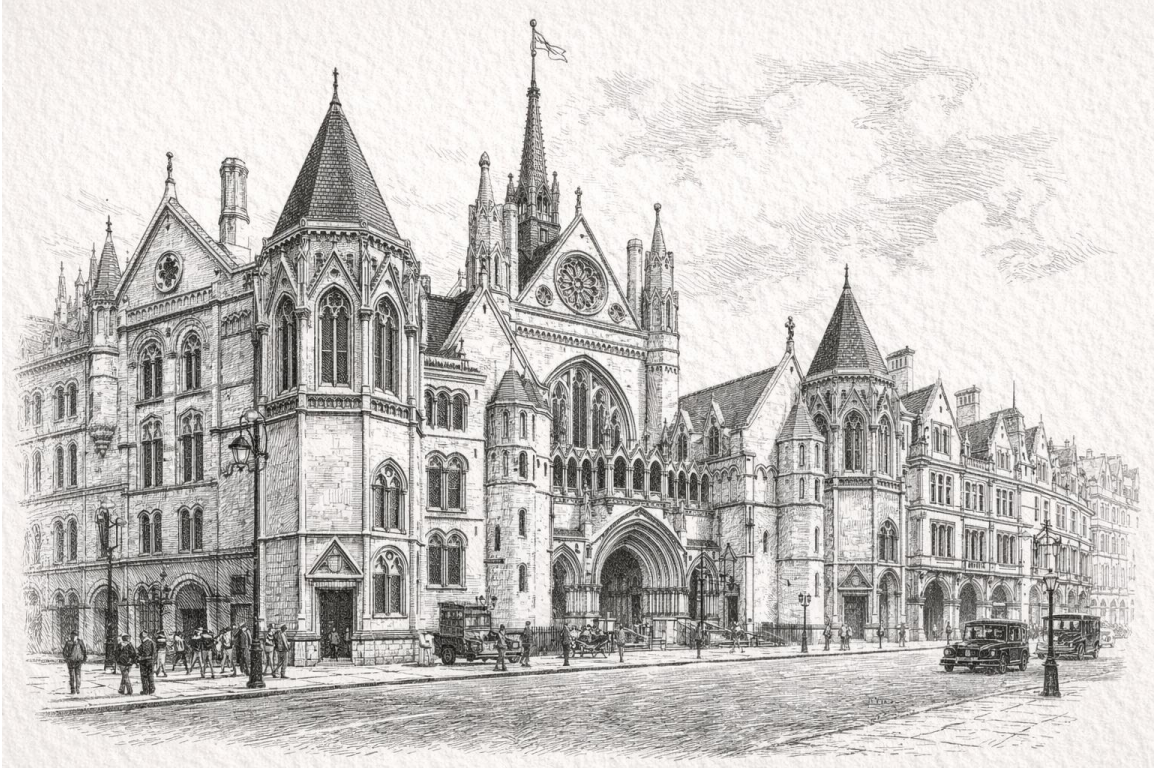
By 9:45 we're standing outside the courtroom entrance.

No more preparation.

No more control.

At 10:00 AM, the hearing begins.

And Christopher Wren's three-hundred-and-fifty-year-old testimony gets heard by people with the authority to act on it.



“Royal Courts of Justice, The Strand”

TWENTY-THREE

OLIVIA HART
Royal Courts of Justice, The Strand
Present Day – Tuesday, March 24, 10:00 AM

The Royal Courts of Justice looms over the Strand – Victorian Gothic, built to intimidate. Stone, shadow, and authority.

Justice as theatre, architecture as power.

We pass through security, surrender phones and bags for scanning, and receive our visitor passes. The building hums with activity. Barristers in wigs and gowns, solicitors carrying file boxes, journalists hunting stories.

Ashworth meets us in the Great Hall, dressed formally, carrying leather document cases.

"Courtroom twelve," he says. "Justice Robert Henley presiding. He's fair but conservative on heritage matters. He expects rigorous evidence, not speculation."

"We do."

"Good. Cornerstone has assembled quite the team. Blackstone Chambers sent three barristers led by Edmund Hartley QC just as

we anticipated. He's formidable. Don't let him bait you into emotional responses."

We climb stone stairs to the courtroom level. The corridor is lined with dark wood panels, portraits of judges past. Everything is designed to convey weight, permanence, authority.

Courtroom twelve is smaller than I expected. Public gallery with perhaps thirty seats, already half-filled with journalists and observers. The judge's bench dominates one end, raised above the proceedings. Barristers' benches face each other across a central aisle.

Cornerstone's legal team occupies the left bench. Three men in expensive suits and traditional gowns, surrounded by files and laptops. Edmund Hartley is easy to identify – he is the oldest, most confident looking, reviewing documents with barely concealed disdain for the proceedings.

Dr. Reynolds sits in the witness area, looking nervous but determined. She nods at me.

We take seats behind Ashworth on the right side. Daniel sets up his laptop, pulling up supporting documentation we might need.

At 10:00 AM, the court clerk calls everyone to rise.

Justice Henley enters. Sixties, grey hair, reading glasses perched on his nose. He takes his seat, surveys the courtroom with practised assessment.

"Please be seated." His voice carries easily. "Case reference HT-2026-000847. Application for emergency heritage protection order

regarding Monument construction site, City of London. Mr. Ashworth, you're representing the applicant?"

Ashworth stands. "Yes, my lord. Appearing for Ms. Olivia Hart, heritage researcher and structural engineer."

"Mr. Hartley for the respondent?"

Hartley QC rises smoothly. "Yes, my lord. Appearing for Cornerstone Heritage Properties Limited."

"Well Mr. Ashworth, this is your application. Please proceed."

Ashworth opens his file. "My lord, this application concerns the Monument to the Great Fire of London, built 1671-1677 to designs by Sir Christopher Wren and Dr. Robert Hooke. The applicant has discovered evidence that the Monument foundation contains a sealed chamber of extraordinary historical significance. Cornerstone Heritage Properties plans construction that would breach and destroy this chamber. We seek emergency protection to prevent irreversible damage to protected heritage."

Justice Henley makes notes. "What evidence supports the existence of this chamber?"

"Ground-penetrating radar conducted by the applicant's father in 2020, subsequently verified by the applicant herself. The chamber measures eight feet on each side, positioned eighteen feet below the Monument base."

"And the historical significance?"

"The chamber is one of at least fifteen sealed voids built by Christopher Wren into London churches and monuments following

the Great Fire. Each void is positioned with mathematical precision at property boundaries established after the Fire. The architectural encoding demonstrates detailed documentation of property fraud and criminal conspiracy."

Hartley is on his feet. "My lord, that's speculation, not evidence. We dispute –"

"You'll have your opportunity, Mr. Hartley." Henley gestures him down. "Mr. Ashworth, these are serious claims. Property fraud, criminal conspiracy. I trust you have more than ground-penetrating radar to support them."

"We do, my lord. The applicant will present documentary evidence found in a secondary vault beneath the Monument, including a handwritten testimony by Sir Christopher Wren describing systematic arson and property theft following the Great Fire."

Murmurs run through the public gallery. Journalists lean forward, pens moving.

Justice Henley frowns. "Handwritten testimony by Wren? Authenticated?"

"The applicant will testify to the discovery and preservation of these documents. We also have academic verification from Professor Hermann Mueller of Heidelberg University and Dr. Alyson Reynolds of the Society of Antiquaries, both of whom have independently examined the evidence."

"Very well. Call your first witness."

Ashworth turns. "I call Ms. Olivia Hart."

I stand, walk to the witness box, and take the oath. My voice sounds steadier than I feel.

Ashworth begins gently. “Ms. Hart, please tell the court your professional background.”

“I’m a structural engineer specialising in heritage preservation. Master’s degree from Imperial College London, five years’ professional experience surveying historic buildings.”

“And your connection to this case?”

“My father, Thomas Hart, was a historian researching Christopher Wren’s post-Fire architecture. He discovered evidence of sealed chambers in multiple London churches. He died in March 2020, two days after documenting the Monument vault. I continued his research.”

“How did your father die?”

“Official cause was heart attack. Subsequent investigation suggests poisoning designed to mimic cardiac failure.”

Hartley rises. “My lord, that’s unfounded speculation –”

“The witness may state her beliefs,” The judge says mildly. “The court will assess credibility. Continue, Ms. Hart.”

I take a breath. “My father’s research documented twelve churches with sealed voids in their foundations. Each void measures eight feet on each side, positioned with mathematical precision. I’ve subsequently surveyed three additional locations, bringing the total to fifteen confirmed sites.”

“All with identical dimensions?”

“Yes. Wren was encoding information through consistent measurements and precise positioning.”

“What information?”

“Property boundaries established after the Great Fire. Each sealed void sits at the edge of what became major family holdings – Fairchild, Pembroke, Ashton, and Grey families. The voids map exactly onto land and properties these families acquired before and after the Fire.”

Ashworth projects a map onto the courtroom screen. Fifteen churches marked in red, property boundaries overlaid, the pattern unmistakable.

“And the Monument’s position?” Henley asks.

“Dead centre of the four-family holdings. The convergence point where all boundaries meet.”

“Suggesting?”

“That Wren was documenting a crime scene. Using architecture to record what was stolen and by whom.”

Hartley QC is scribbling notes furiously. The journalists in the public gallery are typing rapidly on phones, despite the no-phones rule. The clerk doesn’t stop them.

Ashworth continues. “You mentioned documentary evidence found in a vault. Please explain.”

I describe the night at St. Magnus. The hidden passage, the medieval tunnels, the secondary vault containing Wren’s testimony. Leave out the illegal entry, focus on what we found.

“Christopher Wren’s handwriting,” I say. “Original testimony describing three ignition points for the Great Fire, witness statements about suspicious preparations, analysis of property acquisitions that preceded the Fire by weeks. He couldn’t prosecute the families at the time – they had the King’s favour and unlimited resources. So, he preserved the evidence in sealed chambers, built into the foundations of London’s reconstruction.”

“Do you have photographs of this testimony?”

“Yes. Multiple high-resolution images, backed up to cloud storage, shared with academic institutions across Europe.”

Daniel hands documents to Ashworth, who submits them as evidence. The photographs of Wren’s handwriting circulate. Justice Henley studies them.

“These appear authentic,” he says. “Seventeenth-century paper, ink consistent with the period, handwriting matching known Wren exemplars.”

“They are authentic, my lord. Dr. Reynolds from the Society of Antiquaries can verify.”

“We’ll hear from her shortly. Mr. Ashworth, what specifically are you asking the court to protect?”

“The Monument foundation vault. Cornerstone Heritage Properties plans construction beginning this week. The work will breach the foundation at the depth where Wren’s chamber exists. Once breached, whatever evidence remains inside will be destroyed or compromised. We seek protection until proper archaeological assessment can be conducted.”

“Mr. Hartley, your response?”

“My lord, this entire application is built on speculation and conspiracy theory.” he replies with controlled aggression, “Yes, there may be architectural anomalies in some church foundations. Yes, ground-penetrating radar suggests a void beneath the Monument. Neither fact justifies blocking legitimate development based on wild claims about mass murder and property fraud from 1666.”

“The evidence seems rather specific for wild claims.”

“The evidence is photographs of old documents the applicant claims to have found in medieval tunnels, with no chain of custody, no archaeological supervision, no independent verification of provenance. For all we know, Ms. Hart forged these documents to support her father’s discredited research.”

Heat climbs my neck. Daniel’s knee presses against mine under the table. *Stay calm regardless of provocation*, Ashworth said. I keep my eyes on the judge, and my hands flat on the file.

Judge Henley frowns. “That’s a serious accusation, Mr. Hartley.”

“It’s a serious application, my lord. Ms. Hart asks us to believe that Christopher Wren, celebrated architect and national hero, participated in documenting arson and property fraud, then hid evidence in church foundations. The claims are extraordinary. The evidence is questionable. And the applicant’s motives are suspect.”

“Elaborate on suspect motives,” Presses the judge.

“Her father died investigating these matters. Her mother died of cancer several years prior. Ms. Hart is grief-driven, seeing

conspiracy where none exists, attempting to blame powerful families for personal tragedies. This is revenge litigation, not legitimate heritage protection."

Ashworth is on his feet. "My lord, that's character assassination –"

"I'm establishing bias," Hartley says smoothly. "The applicant's emotional state is relevant to credibility. She's asking the court to block a multi-million pound development project based on evidence she 'found' during illegal entry to church properties, interpreted through the lens of personal grief. That evidence must be scrutinised rigorously."

Justice Henley considers. "Mr. Ashworth, your witness did break into church properties did she not?"

"The applicant conducted heritage surveys with appropriate equipment and methodology. The question of trespass is separate from whether the evidence is valid."

"The evidence can't be valid if it was obtained illegally."

"That's a question for criminal proceedings, not heritage protection. If the Monument vault contains historically significant evidence, it must be protected regardless of how we learned about it."

Hartley shakes his head. "Convenient logic. Break the law to find evidence, then claim the evidence justifies the lawbreaking. My lord, we respectfully submit that this application should be dismissed as abuse of process."

"I haven't finished hearing evidence." Henley gestures to me. "Ms. Hart, did you enter church properties without authorisation?"

I choose words. “I conducted surveys at St. Magnus the Martyr and St. Bride’s Fleet Street without formal permission. The other thirteen locations were surveyed with proper authorisation from the Church Commissioners.”

“Why the unauthorised surveys?”

“Time pressure. I believed construction would destroy evidence before official permissions could be secured. I prioritised preservation over procedure.”

“A decision you might reconsider.”

“No, my lord. I’d make the same choice again. The evidence was too important to risk losing.”

Hartley QC pounces. “You hear that, my lord? The applicant admits she’d break the law again if she thought it necessary. This isn’t a heritage researcher. This is a zealot pursuing a vendetta.”

“That’s enough, Mr. Hartley.” Justice Henley’s tone sharpens. “Save your advocacy for closing submissions. Mr. Ashworth, I want to hear from your academic expert. Dr. Reynolds?”

Dr. Reynolds takes the witness box, visibly nervous despite her credentials.

Ashworth establishes her qualifications. Thirty years studying Wren architecture. Published extensively. Society of Antiquaries fellow. Reputation beyond reproach.

“Dr. Reynolds, you examined the church survey data independently?”

“Yes. I provided oversight for the St. Alfege Greenwich survey and reviewed data from all fifteen locations.”

“Your conclusions?”

“The sealed voids exist. The dimensions are consistent – eight feet on each side across all fifteen sites. The positioning demonstrates mathematical precision impossible to achieve accidentally. This is deliberate architectural encoding.”

“Could the voids serve practical purposes? Ventilation, drainage, structural load distribution?”

“Not in the configurations observed. The voids are sealed, non-functional, positioned with precision that exceeds structural requirements. They serve documentary purposes, not practical ones.”

“In your professional opinion, are these architecturally significant?”

“Extraordinarily so. If Christopher Wren really encoded information into London’s post-Fire architecture, that changes our understanding of his work fundamentally. This is the most significant Wren discovery in modern architectural history.”

Hartley’s cross-examination is brutal.

“Dr. Reynolds, you examined fifteen locations over what timeframe?”

“I personally surveyed one location. I reviewed data from the others.”

“So, you’re accepting Ms. Hart’s data at face value?”

“I verified her methodology was sound. The equipment used is appropriate, the measurements are precise –”

“But you didn’t independently verify fourteen of the fifteen sites?”

“No, but –”

“So, your testimony rests substantially on trusting Ms. Hart’s honesty?”

Dr. Reynolds hesitates. “The data is consistent across all locations. Forgery would require extraordinarily sophisticated –”

“Yes or no, Dr. Reynolds. Your conclusions depend on trusting Ms. Hart?”

“To some extent, yes.”

“Thank you. No further questions.”

The damage is done.

Ashworth tries rehabilitation. “Dr. Reynolds, in your thirty years studying Wren architecture, have you encountered evidence of systematic architectural encoding before?”

“No. This is unprecedented.”

“Does that make it impossible?”

“Not at all. Wren was a mathematician and astronomer before becoming an architect. Encoding information through mathematical precision would align with his training and temperament.”

“Thank you.”

The judge checks his watch. “We’ll break for lunch. Resume at two o’clock. Mr. Hartley, I’ll hear your evidence this afternoon.”

The courtroom clears. Journalists rush out, already filing stories. “Wren Conspiracy Exposed,” “Monument Vault Mystery,” “Heritage Battle Over Great Fire Secrets.”

The story is out. Public. Unstoppable.

Ashworth keeps his voice low. “You did well. Stayed calm under Hartley’s provocation. Dr. Reynolds’s testimony was solid despite the cross-examination.”

“Will we win?”

“Unknown. Henley is taking this seriously, which is good. He hasn’t dismissed it as conspiracy theory. But Hartley raised legitimate questions about methodology and motivation.”

“What happens this afternoon?”

“Cornerstone presents their case. They’ll argue the development benefits outweigh speculative heritage concerns. They’ll claim proper archaeological supervision during construction can protect any significant finds. They’ll emphasise the economic costs of delay.”

“And then?”

“Henley may rule from the bench or reserve judgment. If he reserves, we could wait days or weeks for a decision.”

“Mueller presents in Geneva on Thursday. Can Henley delay that long?”

“He can’t stop academic presentations. Geneva happens regardless of this ruling.”

We eat lunch at a cafe near the courts. Daniel is quiet, processing the morning’s testimony. I check my phone.

Text from Mueller:

`Watching news coverage of your hearing. International media is picking up the story. Geneva presentation now has requests from BBC, CNN, Le Monde. This is becoming global news. Well done.`

BBC, CNN, Le Monde.

At two o’clock, we reconvene. Courtroom twelve is more crowded now. News of the morning session has drawn additional observers.

Hartley calls his first witness. James Fairchild.

I watch him take the oath. He looks composed, professional. Dressed conservatively, no visible signs of the stress I know he’s under.

Hartley QC establishes the facts. Cornerstone Heritage Properties owns development rights. Planning permission secured. Construction scheduled to begin this week. Multi-million pound investment. Jobs created. Economic benefits.

“Mr. Fairchild, are you aware of allegations that your family’s wealth originates from criminal activity in 1666?”

“I’ve heard the allegations, yes.”

“Do you have any knowledge of criminal activity by your ancestors?”

“My family has owned property in the City of London for generations. We purchased that property legally, paid taxes on it, developed it responsibly. Whatever happened in 1666 is historical speculation, not relevant to current ownership.”

“If the Monument vault contains historical documents, would you oppose proper archaeological assessment?”

“Not at all. We’ve always supported heritage preservation. If there’s legitimate historical material, we’re happy to coordinate with heritage authorities. What we oppose is blocking development based on conspiracy theories and illegally obtained evidence.”

“Thank you. No further questions.”

Ashworth’s cross-examination is sharp.

“Mr. Fairchild, when did you first learn about Christopher Wren’s sealed vaults?”

A pause. “Several months ago.”

“Before or after you accelerated the Monument construction timeline?”

“I don’t recall the exact sequence.”

“You moved construction forward from March 30 to March 28. Why?”

“Standard project management. Earlier completion benefits all parties.”

“Or you wanted to breach the vault before heritage protection could be established?”

Hartley objects. “Speculation, my lord.”

“I’ll allow it,” Justice Henley says. “Mr. Fairchild, answer the question.”

“We moved the timeline for legitimate business reasons.”

“Mr. Fairchild, are you aware your ancestor, Edmund Fairchild, wrote a letter in August 1666 discussing ‘comprehensive rebuilding’ three weeks before the Fire?”

A pause. “I’ve seen documents the applicant claims are authentic.”

“Do you deny their authenticity?”

“I haven’t had opportunity to verify them independently.”

“Have you asked experts to verify them?”

“We’re considering that option.”

“In other words, you’re afraid they’re genuine.”

“Objection!”

“Sustained. Mr. Ashworth, keep to questions, not commentary.”

“Mr. Fairchild, if the Monument vault contains evidence of deliberate orchestrated property fraud by your ancestors, would that affect your current holdings?”

“That’s a legal question I can’t answer.”

“Let me ask differently. Do you have a financial interest in ensuring the vault remains sealed?”

A long pause. James Fairchild meets my eyes across the courtroom.

“I have an interest in protecting my family’s reputation and business holdings, yes. That doesn’t mean I would destroy historical evidence.”

“Yet you opposed this hearing.”

“I oppose baseless accusations against my family. If there’s genuine historical evidence, it should be examined properly, not exploited for revenge.”

Ashworth sits down.

Judge Henley leans forward. “Mr. Fairchild, a direct question. If I grant this protection order and archaeological assessment reveals evidence of criminal property acquisition in 1666, what’s your position?”

“My lord, I believe property ownership established over three centuries creates legitimate title regardless of original circumstances. Historical wrongs can be acknowledged without invalidating current rights.”

“An honest answer. Thank you.”

Hartley presents additional witnesses. Property experts testifying to economic impacts. Construction managers describing archaeological supervision protocols. All professional, all credible.

All avoiding the same question.

At four o’clock, Justice Henley calls closing submissions.

Ashworth is concise. “My lord, this case is about preserving irreplaceable historical evidence. Whatever happened in 1666, whatever the legal implications, Christopher Wren’s architectural testimony deserves protection. Once destroyed, it cannot be recovered. Temporary protection pending proper assessment is the only responsible course.”

Hartley’s closing is equally sharp. “My lord, this case is about whether conspiracy theories and illegal evidence should block legitimate development. The applicant has failed to prove the Monument vault contains anything significant. Even if it does, proper construction supervision can protect genuine finds. Granting this order validates lawbreaking and rewards speculation over substance.”

Justice Henley reviews his notes. The courtroom waits in silence.

Finally, he speaks.

“This is an unusual application raising significant questions. The evidence is compelling but problematic. Dr. Reynolds’s testimony supports architectural significance. The documentary evidence appears authentic but lacks proper provenance. The applicant’s methods were questionable, but the urgency may have been justified.”

He pauses.

“I’m granting a temporary protection order, limited to fourteen days. During that period, Cornerstone Heritage Properties will not conduct any excavation or construction affecting the Monument foundation. The parties will arrange a proper archaeological assessment with Heritage England oversight. If that assessment

confirms the vault's significance, we'll revisit permanent protection. If not, construction may proceed."

I close my eyes for exactly one second.

Hartley QC is on his feet. "My lord, fourteen days is wholly inadequate for – "

"It's what I'm granting, Mr Hartley." Justice Henley's tone is final. "Use the time wisely."

The hearing concludes with the sharp crack of the gavel. Journalists flood out of the public gallery to file their stories; phones already pressed to ears. The courtroom erupts into controlled chaos.

Ashworth shakes my hand, his grip firm. "We won. Temporary, but we won."

"Fourteen days."

"Fourteen days for Heritage England to assess the vault. If they confirm Wren's evidence is inside, Cornerstone can't touch it. The protection becomes permanent."

I look across the courtroom. James Fairchild is speaking with his legal team, his face unreadable.

Our eyes meet for a brief moment across the emptying room.

He nods. Then he turns and leaves.

*

Outside the Royal Courts of Justice, we're surrounded by journalists, cameras, microphones thrust forward.

"Ms Hart, do you really believe the Great Fire was arson?"

I take a breath, choosing my words. "The evidence suggests systematic ignition at multiple points. Christopher Wren documented what he observed. That documentation survived intact."

"What happens now?"

"Heritage England assesses the Monument vault. Professor Mueller presents our research at the Geneva symposium on Thursday. The academic community reviews the evidence. The truth becomes public record."

"The families whose ancestors you're accusing, have they threatened you?"

I think about my mother's slow death from polonium poisoning. My father's murder staged as a heart attack. Marcus Webb's body near the Monument. The surveillance, the threats, the attempts to stop us.

"They've opposed this investigation, yes."

"Are you afraid?"

"I'm careful. There's a difference."

More questions crowd in from all sides, cameras clicking continuously. Daniel steps closer and pulls me away gently but firmly.

“That’s enough for now,” Rebecca says from my other side, creating space with her presence.

*

We walk through London in the late afternoon light, leaving the journalists behind. The city continues around us, buses and taxis and tourists flowing past. Unaware that three centuries of accepted history, quietly rewriting themselves.

My phone buzzes continuously in my pocket. Messages from Mueller, Dumont, academics across Europe. Congratulations. Support. Requests for interviews and data access.

Global. Unstoppable.

Fourteen days of protection.

Two days until Geneva.

The families’ three hundred year secret is ending, whether they fight it or not.

I think about my father, working alone in church crypts with borrowed equipment.

My mother, who never told him to stop.

Marcus Webb, who paid for the truth with his life.

They didn’t live to see this.

I wish they had.

Daniel puts his hand on my shoulder as we walk, the gesture gentle and grounding. “You did it. You won.”

“We won fourteen days.”

“Fourteen days is enough.” His voice carries quiet certainty. “Heritage England can’t ignore international academic pressure once Mueller presents. The vault gets protected permanently, and everything inside it becomes part of the historical record.”

He’s right.

We’ve done what my father died trying to do. What my mother died not knowing was possible. What Webb was killed to prevent.

Christopher Wren’s testimony survives.

TWENTY-FOUR

OLIVIA HART
Various Locations, London
Present Day – Tuesday Evening to Wednesday, March 25

The media coverage begins before we've left the courthouse steps.

BBC leads the coverage within hours.

By evening, it's global.

France. Germany. The US.

The story is everywhere.

We watch from a hotel room in Bloomsbury, Daniel monitoring coverage on three screens while I field interview requests.

BBC wants a live interview. Sky News offers studio time. The Times requests exclusive access to Wren's testimony photographs. European outlets want background, context, academic verification.

I decline most requests. Refer them to Mueller for academic commentary, Ashworth for legal perspective. Keep responses brief when I do answer.

“The evidence speaks for itself. Christopher Wren documented what he observed in 1666. The court recognized that evidence deserves protection.”

My phone rings constantly. Unknown numbers, media organizations, researchers requesting data access. I stop answering, let voicemail collect the messages.

Amateur historians are analysing our evidence on social media, architectural enthusiasts are visiting the fifteen churches, conspiracy theorists are having field days.

The story has taken on its own momentum.

“This is bigger than we anticipated,” Daniel whispers.

“Good. The more public attention, the harder it becomes for the families to suppress.”

My phone buzzes. Email from Heritage England.

Ms. Hart,

Following today’s court order, Heritage England will conduct an archaeological assessment of the Monument foundation vault. Assessment scheduled for Friday, March 27, 10:00 AM.

You are invited to attend as consulting expert. Please bring all documentation relating to ground-penetrating radar surveys, architectural analysis, and historical research.

Assessment team will include Dr. Simon Chadwick (chief archaeologist), Dr. Ellen Randall (structural assessment), and representatives from Historic Royal Palaces and the City of London Corporation.

Media presence will not be permitted during assessment. Findings will be released publicly following completion of evaluation.

Regards,

Dr. Catherine Wright
Head of Archaeological Services
Heritage England

Friday morning. Three days from now. The day after Mueller presents in Geneva.

I forward the email to Ashworth and Mueller.

Mueller responds within minutes.

Ms Hart,

Excellent. The Geneva presentation is confirmed for 2:00 PM Thursday (CET). International media coverage arranged. I have polished the paper to incorporate Dr. Reynolds's verification and yesterday's court testimony. This will be the most significant architectural history presentation in decades.

Professor Dumont will present supporting analysis of property fraud patterns. We anticipate substantial media interest.

Your courage has made this possible. Whatever happens Friday at the vault assessment, the academic record is established. Wren's testimony survives.

See you in Geneva if you can attend. Otherwise, we carry forward together.

Hermann

Geneva. I hadn't considered attending. Thursday afternoon, 2:00 PM Central European Time. Easily reachable from London by morning flight.

"We should go," Daniel says, reading over my shoulder. "Be there when the conspiracy goes public internationally."

"Friday morning is the vault assessment."

"Geneva presentation is Thursday afternoon. We can fly back Thursday night. Be here for Friday morning assessment."

He's right. Twenty-four hours in Geneva. Witness Mueller's presentation. Return for the Heritage England assessment.

I book flights. Thursday morning Heathrow to Geneva, return Thursday midnight. It's a tight schedule, but manageable.

My phone rings. Ashworth.

"Have you seen the coverage?" he asks.

"Hard to miss."

"The families are panicking. I'm hearing from multiple sources that the coalition is fracturing. Victoria Ashton wants aggressive legal challenges. Richard Pembroke is considering settlement negotiations. Henry Grey is staying quiet. James Fairchild is apparently trying to hold things together but losing control."

"Good."

"Be careful, Olivia. Cornered animals are dangerous. Now that the story is public, they can't suppress it. That might make them more desperate, not less."

“Harris won’t try anything with this much attention.”

“Harris might not have a choice. If the families decide elimination is their only option, he’ll follow orders.”

“We have fourteen-days of protection. Heritage England assessment is Friday. Mueller presents Thursday. They’ve lost.”

“They’ve lost the first battle. Wars last longer.” He pauses. “Rebecca Cole is working out well?”

“Very professional. She spotted a surveillance team yesterday we would have missed.”

“Good. I want her to stay with you through the Heritage England assessment. Your father didn’t think he needed protection either.” His voice carries weight. “Humour me on this.”

“I’m not arguing. Having her around has been... reassuring.”

“That’s the first sensible thing you’ve said all week.”

The evening continues. More media coverage, more interview requests, more social media explosion.

At 11:00 PM, exhausted, I turn off my phone and try to sleep.

Daniel is still working, compiling documentation for Geneva and the Heritage England assessment. Organizing data, creating presentation materials, ensuring backups exist everywhere.

“You should rest,” I tell him.

“Need to finish this first.”

“Daniel.”

He looks up. “I’m close to something. Pattern in the property data. Connections between the families beyond what Dad documented. Give me two more hours.”

“Two hours. Then sleep.”

“Two hours.”

I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, processing the day. The hearing. The testimony. Justice Henley’s ruling. James Fairchild’s acknowledgment.

We won.

Temporary victory, fragile protection, but we won.

Christopher Wren’s testimony survives.

Whatever happens now, we’ve accomplished what my father died trying to achieve.

I sleep fitfully, dreaming of fires and courtrooms and sealed vaults opening.

*

Wednesday morning arrives with more media frenzy.

The Times runs a front-page feature.

“The Monument Mystery:
How One Woman Exposed London’s Hidden History”

They interview Dr. Reynolds, quote Mueller extensively, and provide historical context about the Great Fire.

Guardian’s architecture critic writes analysis.

"If Wren encoded conspiracy evidence into London's foundations, we must reconsider everything we know about post-Fire reconstruction. Architecture as testimony, buildings as witnesses. The implications are profound."

International coverage intensifies. New York Times picks it up. Washington Post runs background on the Great Fire. Le Monde interviews French historians about similar conspiracies in Paris.

The story has transcended British domestic concerns. This is international architectural history, property law precedent, questions about historical accountability.

My phone shows sixty-three missed calls, two hundred unread emails. I ignore most, respond to crucial ones.

Heritage England confirms the details of Friday's assessment. Mueller sends the Geneva presentation schedule. Ashworth updates on legal developments.

Cornerstone has filed an appeal against the protection order. Expected, unlikely to succeed before Geneva and the vault assessment render it moot.

The families are also pursuing separate legal strategies. Property law firms analysing historical title challenges. PR companies attempting damage control. Political consultants reaching out to sympathetic MPs.

None of it will matter after Friday.

At noon, Daniel surfaces from his analysis.

"Found it," he says.

He looks exhausted but energized. The expression he gets when patterns align.

“Found what?”

He pulls up his screen. Property ownership data spanning three centuries, displayed as interconnected network diagrams.

“The four families didn’t just acquire properties after the Fire. They maintained coordinated ownership patterns. Look at the transfers, the sales, the corporate structures.”

He highlights connections. Properties that changed hands between families at specific intervals. Corporate entities with shared directorships. Trust structures that maintained coordinated control despite appearing independent.

“They never stopped,” Daniel says.

“Since 1666. Same families. Same network.”

He zooms in.

“Different names. Same control.”

“Why?”

“Preparation for exposure. If they knew someone was getting close to the truth, they’d want to simplify things. Make it harder to challenge multiple entities. Concentrate defensive resources.”

“They’ve been preparing for this.”

“They knew Dad was dangerous six years ago. They killed him, but they also started restructuring. Getting ready for the day someone finished his work.”

I study the network diagrams. The families haven't just protected the same secret. They've functioned as a single entity for three and a half centuries.

"This is another layer of conspiracy," I say. "Not the original Fire arson. Ongoing coordination to protect the secret."

"Exactly. And it gives us leverage. The property consolidation over the last six years shows consciousness of guilt. They wouldn't restructure unless they knew they were vulnerable."

"Can we use this for Geneva?"

"Already compiling it. Mueller will include it as supporting evidence of ongoing conspiracy. The families aren't just descendants of criminals. They're active participants in suppressing the truth."

"Send it to Ashworth too. It might be relevant for legal challenges."

Daniel nods, already typing.

The door buzzes. Rebecca arrives with coffee and a security briefing.

"We're flying to Geneva tomorrow morning," I tell her.

"I'm already booked on the same flight. I'll maintain discrete distance but stay close enough to intervene if necessary."

"Do you think they'll actually try something in Geneva?"

“Unknown. But international travel creates vulnerability – airport security, unfamiliar territory, less control over environment. If I were planning an operation, that’s when I’d execute.”

Comforting.

Rebecca sets up monitoring equipment, checks window sightlines, establishes communication protocols. Professional, thorough, unsettling in her matter-of-fact assessment of danger.

“Mr. Ashworth is taking this seriously,” she says. “He blames himself for your father’s death and won’t let the same happen to you.”

“My father died because he was right. The families killed him to prevent exposure.”

“And now you’ve exposed them publicly. They will seek to punish the person who released it. Revenge doesn’t require secrecy.”

“So, you think they’ll still try to kill me?”

“I think they’re deciding whether to cut their losses or escalate. My job is to ensure they don’t get the opportunity either way.”

She’s blunt. I appreciate that.

The afternoon passes in preparation. Daniel compiles Geneva presentation materials. I organize Heritage England documentation. Rebecca monitors security feeds and coordinates with Ashworth.

At 4:00 PM, my phone rings. Unknown number. I answer cautiously.

“Ms. Hart.” Victoria Ashton’s voice, sharp and controlled. “We should speak.”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“I’m not offering negotiation. I’m explaining consequences.” Her tone is ice. “You’ve destroyed four families’ reputations. Exposed private business matters. Created legal challenges that will cost millions to defend. You understand this doesn’t end with a court ruling?”

“It ends with the truth being public,” I say.

“The truth is negotiable. Yes, our ancestors acquired properties after the Fire. Yes, the circumstances were questionable. That doesn’t invalidate three centuries of legitimate business.”

“Your ancestor committed mass murder for profit.”

“Allegedly,” Victoria counters. “Based on testimony from a bitter architect who was passed over for preferment. You’ve built an entire conspiracy theory on one man’s writings.”

“Fifteen sealed vaults prove systematic encoding. Property patterns prove coordination. This isn’t speculation.”

“It’s historical curiosity.” Her voice sharpens. “It doesn’t justify destroying modern businesses, threatening current livelihoods, punishing people for ancestral decisions.”

“I’m not punishing anyone. I’m exposing the truth.”

“You’re pursuing revenge for your father’s death,” she says coldly. “Understandable, but not justice.”

“My father was murdered because he discovered what your families have been hiding.”

“Your father had a heart attack. Natural causes.” Victoria’s tone is deliberate, measured. “You’ve constructed an elaborate conspiracy because you can’t accept natural death.”

I grip the phone tighter.

“I have toxicology reports showing polonium poisoning.”

“Commissioned by whom? You? After his death, when you were already suspicious? Convenient evidence, Ms. Hart. Self-fulfilling investigation.”

I force myself to stay calm. “This conversation is over.”

“One more thing. Geneva tomorrow. Whatever Professor Mueller presents, whatever academic validation you’ve arranged, understand this: we will fight every claim, challenge every piece of evidence, contest every legal implication. You haven’t won. You’ve started a war that will consume years of your life and cost you everything.”

“I’ve already lost everything. You murdered my parents. Nothing you do now compares to what you’ve already taken.”

“Then you have nothing left to lose. That makes you dangerous. And dangerous people have accidents.”

She hangs up.

I stand holding the phone.

Rebecca is watching. “You recorded that?”

"Yes."

"Good. Send it to Ashworth. Direct threats help establish pattern of intimidation."

I forward the recording. Ashworth responds.

Documented. This supports our case if anything happens to you. Victoria Ashton is the most aggressive of the four families. She wanted you eliminated weeks ago. James Fairchild has been restraining her. Now that restraint is failing.

Good.

Let them fight each other.

Daniel emerges from his analytical trance. "Geneva presentation is finalized. All data compiled, verified, backed up. Mueller has everything he needs."

"And the Heritage England documentation?"

"Ready. GPR scans, architectural analysis, property correlations. Everything organized for Friday's assessment."

"Then we're prepared."

Rebecca checks her watch. "Geneva flight's at nine tomorrow, out of Heathrow. We leave the hotel at six, airport by seven. That gives us two hours for security screening, and I want every one of them."

"That early?"

"I want to control the environment as much as possible. Early departure reduces unpredictability."

I agree. Pack overnight bags. Organize documents. Confirm Geneva hotel reservations.

Two days. Mueller in Geneva tomorrow. Heritage England on Friday.

The families can fight. The truth has momentum they can't stop.

I think about my father, compiling this research in isolation. My mother, poisoned as a warning. Marcus Webb, murdered for trying to help.

Two more days. That's all.

I sleep better Wednesday night than I have in weeks. When I wake Thursday morning, Rebecca is already awake making final checks before we leave.

"Airport in ninety minutes," she says. "No surveillance detected overnight. Either they've backed off or they're being more careful."

"Which do you think?" I ask.

"They're being more careful."

We leave the hotel at 6:00 AM. London is still dark, streets are quiet. Rebecca drives, checking mirrors constantly, taking indirect routes. Daniel sits in the back with equipment cases, headphones on, reviewing Geneva presentation materials one final time.

We arrive at Heathrow at 7:00 AM. Check-in, security, departure gate. Everything normal. No signs of surveillance or threat.

Rebecca stays close, scanning crowds, assessing potential danger.

At eight-thirty, boarding begins.

Our Geneva flight departs on schedule.

As we climb above London, I look down at the city spreading below. Somewhere in that sprawl, fifteen churches contain sealed voids. The Monument stands at the centre, hiding Wren's vault.

I lean back in my seat, close my eyes.

Almost there. One more day.

And there's no way back.

TWENTY-FIVE

OLIVIA HART
Geneva, Switzerland
Present Day – Thursday, March 26

The University of Geneva's main auditorium seats four hundred people. By 1:30 PM, every seat is filled. Additional attendees stand along the back wall and crowd the aisles. Media cameras line the rear gallery.

This is not a typical academic symposium.

The European Architectural History Conference usually draws specialists, graduate students, and a handful of interested public. Today's session has attracted international press, heritage organisations, property law experts, and curious observers who've followed the story online.

BBC has a camera crew positioned prominently. CNN sent their European cultural correspondent. Le Monde's architecture critic sits in the front row. Der Spiegel, NZZ, El País. Major outlets across three continents.

Daniel and I sit near the front; Rebecca positioned strategically three rows back with clear sightlines. She's been vigilant since we

landed, scanning crowds, checking exits, maintaining professional paranoia.

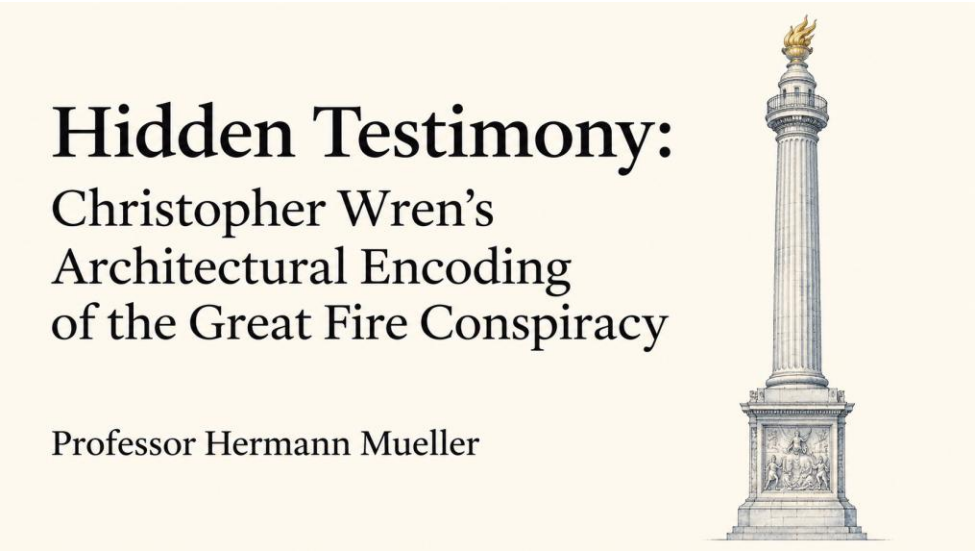
So far, nothing suspicious. No signs of Harris or the families' representatives.

Professor Mueller enters from the side door, accompanied by Professor Dumont and the symposium organisers. He looks nervous but determined, carrying document folders and a presentation remote.

The moderator calls the session to order. "Ladies and gentlemen, this afternoon's presentation addresses recent discoveries concerning Sir Christopher Wren's post-Fire architecture in London. Professor Hermann Mueller of Heidelberg University will present findings that, if verified, represent the most significant architectural history discovery in modern times."

Murmurs run through the audience. Cameras focus.

Mueller takes the podium. Projects his title slide onto the massive screen behind him.



He begins without preamble. “In March 2020, British historian Thomas Hart documented sealed chambers in twelve London churches designed by Sir Christopher Wren. These chambers, each measuring eight feet on each side, were positioned with mathematical precision at property boundaries established after the Great Fire of 1666. Mr. Hart died before publishing his research. His daughter, Ms. Olivia Hart, continued the investigation and discovered three additional locations, bringing the total to fifteen confirmed sites.”

The screen shows the map. Fifteen churches marked in red, property boundaries overlaid, the pattern unmistakable.

“Each sealed void is positioned at the edge of major property holdings acquired by four families after the Fire: Fairchild, Pembroke, Ashton, and Grey. The precision is extraordinary. The positioning demonstrates astronomical alignment and mathematical consistency impossible to achieve accidentally.”

He clicks through slides showing GPR scans, architectural measurements, comparative analysis. The academic audience leans forward, studying the data.

“The Society of Antiquaries has verified these findings. Dr. Alyson Reynolds, a leading Wren specialist, conducted independent assessment and confirmed the voids exist as documented. This is not speculation. This is measured, verified architectural fact.”

More slides. Dr. Reynolds’s verification statement, excerpts from her examination report, photographic documentation from multiple surveys.

“The question becomes: why would Wren encode information into church foundations? What was he documenting?”

Mueller pauses for effect.

“Last week, Ms. Hart discovered a secondary vault beneath the Monument containing Christopher Wren’s handwritten testimony. That testimony describes premeditated arson, property fraud, and mass casualty conspiracy involving the Great Fire of London.”

The screen displays photographs of Wren’s handwriting. Clear, direct, damning.

Mueller reads key passages.

“Three ignition points. Witness testimony about suspicious preparations. Analysis of property acquisitions preceding the Fire by weeks. Wren documented criminal conspiracy but could not prosecute the perpetrators. They had royal favour and unlimited resources. So, he preserved evidence in architecture, building testimony into London’s foundations.”

The audience is silent, absorbed.

Property acquisition patterns. Pre-Fire correspondence. Post-Fire survey discrepancies. The correlation between burn intensity and family property gains.

“Two hundred and sixty-one properties acquired by four families. Current estimated value: fourteen billion pounds. Built on foundations of mass murder.”

Gasps from the audience. Cameras zoom on the figures.

Professor Dumont takes the podium for the second half. Her presentation focuses on legal implications and property fraud patterns.

“The property transfers violated contemporary law,” she explains in accented English. “The 1667 Rebuilding Act specified that original owners retained rights unless properties were formally abandoned. Yet these survey errors transferred properties to wealthy buyers. This was not chaotic reconstruction. This was theft legitimised through false documentation.”

She projects comparative maps. Pre-Fire surveys versus post-Fire records. The discrepancies are obvious once highlighted.

“Fifteen percent error rate across the entire City of London. Always favouring the same four families. Mathematically impossible as random error. This demonstrates coordinated fraud.”

Contemporary property law, current ownership challenges, international precedents for historical restitution.

“Three centuries do not legitimise criminal acquisition,” Dumont concludes. “Property law across Europe recognises that illegal seizure creates no valid title, regardless of time elapsed. The families’ holdings are contestable.”

The presentation runs ninety minutes. When it finishes, the auditorium erupts in questions.

An Italian architectural historian asks about authentication of Wren’s testimony. Mueller describes the paper analysis, handwriting comparison, contextual verification. “We are as

certain as possible without time travel that these documents are genuine."

A journalist from The Guardian asks me. "Ms. Hart, you're here in the audience. Your father died investigating this. Do you believe the families murdered him?"

I stand. Cameras swivel towards me.

"My father died two days after documenting the Monument vault. Official cause was a heart attack. Toxicology analysis suggests polonium poisoning. My mother died of apparent cancer in 2017. Toxicology suggests the same poison. Marcus Webb, who was helping verify my father's research, was murdered last week. Draw your own conclusions."

The room explodes with questions. Journalists shouting, cameras flashing. The moderator calls for order.

Rebecca is beside me. "We should leave. Too much attention."

She's right. We exit through a side door whilst the press conference continues.

Outside, Geneva is cold and clear. Lake Geneva spreads below, Alps visible in the distance. Beautiful, calm, utterly disconnected from the chaos inside.

I receive messages from journalists, academics, legal organisations. Interview requests, data access petitions, research collaboration proposals.

Daniel checks his tablet. “Media coverage is instant. BBC has Mueller’s presentation streaming live. Guardian posted analysis within minutes. New York Times is running breaking news alert.”

The story is everywhere.

Rebecca guides us to a quiet cafe three blocks from the university, orders coffee, and positions herself where she can watch the entrance.

“That went well,” she says dryly. “Now everyone knows who you are and what you’ve exposed.”

“That was the point.”

“Makes you a target. Families can’t suppress the story anymore, but they can punish the person who released it.”

My phone rings. Ashworth.

“The world is watching,” he says. “Geneva presentation is global news. Mueller’s analysis is trending across academic networks. Dumont’s legal framework is already being cited by property law experts. The research is now established academic record.”

“What about the families?”

“They’re issuing statements. Fairchild’s PR firm released denial within minutes. Calls the presentation ‘unsubstantiated speculation based on questionable evidence.’ Pembroke’s lawyers are threatening defamation suits. Victoria Ashton gave an interview to the Telegraph: ‘She’s pursuing a vendetta beyond legal avenues to protect what is rightfully ours.’

I feel my stomach tighten. “Beyond legal avenues?”

“Direct quote. Her lawyers had heart attacks when they read it, but she said it on record.” Ashworth’s voice turns grim. “That’s not legal strategy, Olivia. That’s a threat. Victoria is the most dangerous one.”

“Noted.”

“Tomorrow’s vault assessment?”

“Heritage England has confirmed. 10:00 AM at the Monument. Media will not be permitted during the assessment itself, but findings will be released publicly afterwards. If the vault contains what you documented, the families’ position becomes untenable.”

“They must know that.”

“They know. Which is why Rebecca needs to stay close. Desperate people make desperate decisions.”

He hangs up.

Daniel is monitoring the response online. `#GenevaTruth` is trending. `#WrenConspiracy` has half a million mentions. Academic historians are debating implications. Property law experts are analysing restitution frameworks.

The conversation has shifted from “did this happen?” to “what do we do about it?”

My phone buzzes. Text message from unknown number.

```
Enjoyed the presentation. You’ve destroyed my family’s
reputation internationally. I hope you’re satisfied.
What comes next is on you.
```

No signature, no context. Victoria? The threat is clear.

I show Rebecca.

She photographs the message, and forwards it to Ashworth. “I’m Documenting everything. If something happens, we have a pattern of escalating threats.”

We spend the afternoon in Geneva, avoiding the media frenzy. Walk along the lake, visit the Reformation Wall, eat dinner at a quiet restaurant where no one recognises us. Rebecca maintains constant vigilance.

Nothing happens.

At 8:00 PM, we head to the airport. Late flight back to London, landing near midnight. The Geneva symposium is over. Tomorrow’s vault assessment determines everything.

The airport is busy with business travellers and late tourists. We pass through security without incident and wait at the gate.

Rebecca tenses. “Don’t look, but three men at ten o’clock. Watching us.”

I glance casually. Three men in business attire, positioned near the opposite gate.

“Harris?” I ask.

“Unknown. Wrong build for Harris himself but could be his team. Or could be nothing.”

We board when called. The three men don’t board our flight.

False alarm, or were they just confirming we were leaving Geneva? Rebecca doesn't relax until we're airborne.

The flight is quiet. Daniel sleeps. Rebecca stays alert. I review tomorrow's Heritage England documentation, ensuring everything is organised.

We land at Heathrow just after midnight. Rebecca has arranged a car and drives us to a hotel near the Tower of London. Ten minutes from tomorrow's assessment site.

"Get some rest," Rebecca says as we check in. "Tomorrow is the endgame. Whatever the families are planning, it happens before or during that vault assessment."

I try to sleep but fail. Keep thinking about tomorrow. Official archaeologists opening Wren's vault. What will they find?

My phone buzzes. 2:00 AM. Text from unknown number.

`Last chance. Do not attend tomorrow's assessment. Stay away from the Monument. This is not a threat. This is a warning from someone who doesn't want more blood.`

This sounds like James Fairchild.

I text back:

`I'm attending. The truth matters more than safety.`

No response.

I think I drop off to sleep sometime after 3:00 AM.

*

When I wake, it's dawn. Friday, March 27.

Vault assessment day.

Rebecca knocks on my door at 7:00 AM. “Breakfast, then we move. Assessment starts at ten. I want us on-site by nine-thirty.”

At 9:00 AM, we leave the hotel.

The Monument comes into view. White stone rising 202 feet above Fish Street Hill. Designed by Wren and Hooke to commemorate the Fire, and to mark where truth was buried.

Heritage England has established a security perimeter. Media are held back behind barriers, cameras focused on the Monument entrance. We show identification. Security waves us through.

Dr. Catherine Wright meets us at the base. She’s in her fifties, professional but clearly excited.

“Ms. Hart, thank you for attending. Your documentation has been invaluable.” She gestures to her team. “We’ve arranged access through the foundation without damaging the Monument structure. Careful excavation, proper archaeological protocols.”

She leads us inside. We descend stone stairs to foundation levels.

The excavation team has already begun. Careful, measured work. Removing stone and soil layer by layer, documenting everything.

By ten-thirty, they’ve reached the sealed chamber.

Eight feet square. A perfect cube, as my father documented.

Dr. Chadwick examines the seal. “Original construction, no subsequent access. Whatever Wren placed inside has been undisturbed for three hundred and fifty years.”

He photographs the seal from every angle. Then, with reverent care, he begins removing it.

The chamber opens.

Inside: three stone shelves holding objects wrapped in oiled cloth. Metal boxes. Another leather-bound volume.

And something unexpected.

A scale model of the City of London, carved in wood, showing the pre-Fire layout. Marked with small symbols indicating specific buildings. The buildings that burned hottest.

Dr. Chadwick removes items one by one. Unwraps the oiled cloth.

Property deeds. Survey records. Letters between the families planning acquisitions. All dated before the Fire.

The metal boxes contain physical evidence. Lamp oil samples. Timber fragments showing deliberate cutting patterns.

But the leather-bound volume presents a problem.

Water damage. Not catastrophic, but significant. Several pages are illegible; ink blurred beyond recovery. The book is intact, but incomplete.

Dr. Chadwick frowns. “Some sections are compromised. We’ll need expert restoration to recover what we can.”

My stomach tightens. Not everything survived.

“How much is readable?” I ask.

“Perhaps seventy percent. Maybe eighty with proper conservation work. But some testimony is lost permanently.”

Dr. Wright examines the damaged pages. “What remains is still substantial. Enough to corroborate the secondary vault testimony. But you’re right that this isn’t the complete archive we hoped for.”

They spend hours cataloguing items. Photographing, measuring, documenting.

By afternoon, the assessment is complete.

Dr. Wright emerges to face the assembled media. Cameras crowd close, journalists shouting questions.

She steps to the designated press position.

“Heritage England has completed our official assessment of the Monument foundation vault,” she begins. “We can confirm the presence of significant historical material relating to the Great Fire and subsequent reconstruction.”

A pause.

“Preliminary analysis supports evidence of coordinated ignition during the Great Fire.”

The media erupts.

Questions explode from dozens of journalists simultaneously. Dr. Wright raises her hand for silence.

“The materials require extensive further analysis. Some documents show water damage and will need expert restoration. But what

survives corroborates the claims of coordinated property fraud. Full findings will be released after proper examination."

She steps back. The questions continue, but she's said what needed saying.

Inside the Monument, Dr. Chadwick continues cataloguing. The evidence is substantial, even if incomplete.

Rebecca appears beside me. "We should leave. Let Heritage England finish their work."

We exit through a side entrance, avoiding the journalists clustered at the main entrance.

Daniel glances at me. "We did it. We finished what Dad started."
"He would be proud," I say.

Rebecca's phone buzzes. She checks the display, answers. "Yes, we just left. Understood."

She disconnects. "Ashworth wants an immediate meeting. Says it's urgent."

We catch a taxi, arriving at Ashworth's chambers within twenty-five minutes.

"Remarkable work," Ashworth says, shaking my hand. "Heritage England's assessment confirms everything. The families cannot deny the evidence any longer."

"What happens now?" I ask.

"This doesn't end here," Ashworth whispers. "It starts here."

Parliamentary inquiry. Heritage challenges. Criminal investigation.

The families will spend years defending themselves.

“Will anyone go to prison?” Daniel asks.

“Harris, possibly.”

“The family members themselves?” Daniel presses.

Ashworth shakes his head. “That’s more complicated. But their reputations are destroyed. Their holdings will face endless challenges. That’s meaningful accountability, even if it’s not perfect justice.”

“It’s not real justice.”

“Justice delayed is still justice,” Ashworth quotes. “Wren’s own words. This is what he built into London’s foundations.”

My phone rings.

“Ms. Hart.” James Fairchild’s voice carries exhaustion. “I’m calling to formally acknowledge defeat. You’ve won.”

“Your ancestors committed mass murder for financial profit.”

“I know,” James whispers. “I’ve read Wren’s testimony. My ancestor was monstrous.”

“What now?”

“Now I can try to salvage something from the wreckage. Protect employees who did nothing wrong. Separate three centuries of legitimate business from the original crime.”

A pause.

“I want you to know I’m sorry about your parents. I didn’t personally order their deaths, but I should have stopped them. That failure is on me.”

“You should tell the police.”

“I intend to,” James confirms. “Complete disclosure. The conspiracy, the murders, everything. I want this over.”

He disconnects abruptly.

We leave Ashworth’s office as evening settles over London.

Christopher Wren’s testimony has been heard. The truth is public.

We return to the hotel as darkness falls. Daniel collapses onto his bed, exhausted. He’s asleep within minutes.

I stand at the window, looking out at London at night. Lights stretch across the city; the modern metropolis built on Wren’s reconstruction.

Built on lies that are ending.

My phone buzzes with an email from Professor Mueller.

Ms. Hart,

The Geneva presentation has been viewed more than two million times. Academic institutions across Europe and North America are requesting access to the complete research archive.

Your father’s work will be studied for generations. Your completion of that work will be remembered as an act of extraordinary courage.

Thank you for allowing me the privilege to participate in this discovery.

With the deepest respect,

Hermann Mueller

I read the message twice.

I close my laptop.

The truth is no longer buried.

But this isn’t over.

Not yet.

TWENTY-SIX

OLIVIA HART
Various Locations, London
Present Day – Saturday, March 28

The police arrive at our hotel on Saturday morning, the day after the Monument vault assessment that changed everything. I know them before Rebecca opens the door. Through the peephole, a woman in her forties and a man a step behind her, both in plain clothes. The same two who stepped out of a dark sedan beside the Monument the night Marcus Webb died.

Detective Chief Inspector Penny Stewart gives me the same firm handshake, but this time I'm not sitting on a cold wall waiting for a dead man. Her eyes still miss nothing. Detective Constable Decker stays at her shoulder, already pulling out his notebook. I never used the card she gave me that night. And I'm fairly sure Decker, who watched me without writing a word, remembers every lie I told her.

Rebecca checks their identification with meticulous care before allowing them into my hotel room, her security training never permitting shortcuts, even with officers I have already met.

“Ms. Hart,” DCI Stewart begins once we’re all settled, “when we last spoke, you told us Dr. Webb seemed fine. Since then, your public statements to the media and your testimony in court suggest you believe otherwise. We’re now conducting an investigation into the deaths of Thomas Hart in March 2020, Eleanor Hart in June 2017, and Marcus Webb in March 2026. You believe these were murders rather than natural causes or accidents.”

“I don’t believe they were murders,” I correct her firmly. “They were murders. The evidence is there. And what survives is enough.”

“Walk us through that evidence,” Stewart requests, settling into a chair and giving me her complete attention.

I spend the next two hours explaining everything in methodical detail. My father’s research into Wren’s architectural encoding and what threats that research posed to powerful families. His death occurring two days after he completed documenting the Monument vault. My mother’s death from apparent cancer that toxicology analysis later revealed was polonium-210 poisoning administered over months. Marcus Webb murdered near the Monument on his way to meet me after he contacted journalists to verify and publicize my father’s findings.

DCI Stewart takes detailed handwritten notes throughout my explanation, occasionally asking clarifying questions. DC Decker photographs the supporting documents I provide – toxicology reports, timeline correlations showing the suspicious timing, threat messages sent to my phone from unknown numbers.

“You believe the four prominent families coordinated these murders?” Stewart asks when I finish the chronological account.

“I know they coordinated them,” I say. “Harris acted as the primary enforcer, the person who carried out or supervised the killings. Victoria Ashton pushed most aggressively for eliminating anyone who threatened exposure. James Fairchild personally authorised Marcus Webb’s death, though he claims he didn’t order my parents’ murders. Richard Pembroke and Henry Grey were part of the coalition decision-making process even if they didn’t personally pull triggers.”

“That’s an extraordinarily serious accusation against some prominent business families,” Stewart observes.

“The evidence supports every single accusation,” I reply. “Check Harris’s movements and whereabouts on the relevant dates. Examine their internal communications if you can obtain warrants. James Fairchild is apparently willing to cooperate with investigators now and provide testimony.”

Stewart exchanges a significant glance with Decker. “We’re aware that Mr. Fairchild’s legal team has reached out to the Crown Prosecution Service,” she confirms. “His cooperation would be extremely valuable if he’s willing to testify against the others with complete honesty.”

“Will you be arresting Harris?” I ask.

“We need to locate him first,” Stewart admits with visible frustration. “He’s not at his registered address. His mobile phone has been disconnected. He appears to have gone to ground after

yesterday's vault assessment, realizing that prosecution is now inevitable."

"What about the others?" I press. "Victoria Ashton, the Pembrokes, the Greys?"

"All under active investigation," Stewart assures me. "We need to build cases that will stand up in court. We need physical evidence, documented communications records, credible witness testimony. Right now, we have circumstantial connections and your allegations, which are compelling but not sufficient for prosecution. We need substantially more."

"You have Wren's testimony documenting the historical conspiracy," I point out. "You have three hundred and fifty years of systematic cover-up. You have threat messages sent to my phone."

"Which helps establish clear motive and a consistent pattern of behaviour," Stewart acknowledges. "It doesn't prove who specifically ordered or personally executed the individual murders. We need that direct connection for successful prosecution."

"I do believe you, Ms. Hart. and without reservation. Your father's death timing is extraordinarily suspicious. Your mother's polonium poisoning is highly suggestive of deliberate murder. Webb's death is clearly murder rather than accident. We're taking all this seriously. It simply requires extremely careful investigation to build prosecutable cases."

"How long will that investigation require?" I ask.

“Weeks at minimum,” Stewart says honestly. “Possibly months for the complete investigation. These are complex cases involving powerful people with access to expensive legal representation.”

“So meanwhile, they remain free.”

“Unless they do something that gives us legal cause for immediate arrest, yes,” Stewart confirms reluctantly. “We’re monitoring their activities closely. If they attempt to flee the jurisdiction or destroy evidence, we’ll act. But in the meantime, we must follow proper procedures.”

The detectives stay for another hour, obtaining formal witness statements from both Daniel and me, collecting copies of all our supporting documentation. Rebecca escorts them out when they leave.

“Bureaucracy,” she says with disgust. “They know well the families are guilty of multiple murders, but they need perfect cases before they can charge anyone. Meanwhile, Victoria Ashton is still out there making threats.”

“Has she contacted you directly?” I ask with concern.

“No, nothing direct to me,” Rebecca replies. “But Ashworth has been fielding phone calls from her solicitors. Defamation threats, harassment claims, transparent attempts at legal intimidation. She’s fighting considerably harder than the other families.”

My phone lights up. An update from Ashworth. I open it and read.

```
Parliamentary inquiry formally announced this morning.
Select Committee on Historical Property Rights will
investigate Great Fire property acquisitions and current
```

ownership validity. First hearing scheduled April 15. You'll be called to provide testimony under oath.

Three weeks from now. Public testimony before Parliament with full media coverage. The families' property holdings examined officially and publicly.

Another message arrives after the first.

Also: Victoria Ashton's legal team has filed a defamation lawsuit against you, Mueller, and Dumont. Claims your accusations constitute false statements damaging her family's reputation. Standard intimidation tactic. Don't worry – we'll handle it.

A defamation suit.

Of course.

Daniel emerges from his adjacent hotel room, laptop already in hand. He's been monitoring media coverage.

"Victoria Ashton gave an interview to BBC this morning," he reports, pulling up the video on his screen. "She's claiming the vault evidence is fabricated, that you're pursuing a personal vendetta, that the families are innocent victims of conspiracy theory nonsense."

He plays the video clip on his laptop screen.

Victoria Ashton sits in an expensively furnished office, composed and professionally presented. "Ms. Hart has constructed an elaborate fiction to explain her own personal tragedies," she states calmly to the interviewer. "Her parents died of entirely natural causes. She cannot psychologically accept that simple reality, so she's created this

elaborate narrative about a century's-old conspiracy. It's an understandable grief response, but it's actively damaging innocent people."

The BBC interviewer presses back. "But Heritage England has verified the vault contents. Christopher Wren's testimony exists."

"Documents exist, certainly," Victoria acknowledges smoothly. "But their interpretation is highly questionable. Our families purchased properties legally after the Fire. That is documented historical fact. Everything else is pure speculation designed to justify modern property challenges against entirely legitimate holdings."

"What about the physical evidence discovered in the vault?" the interviewer continues. "The lamp oil samples, the ignition tools?"

"Items that could have come from anywhere," Victoria counters, "placed in the vault by Ms. Hart herself during her admittedly illegal entry to church properties. There's no proper chain of custody. No independent verification of when these items were placed in the vault or who placed them there."

The interviewer looks sceptical. "You're suggesting that Ms. Hart forged seventeenth-century documents and planted physical evidence herself?"

"I'm suggesting the evidence quality is questionable and the underlying allegations are motivated primarily by personal vendetta rather than legitimate historical truth," Victoria replies without answering.

The interview continues for another few minutes. Victoria maintains perfect composure throughout, denying everything, attacking the credibility of the evidence and our motivations.

“She’s good at this,” Rebecca observes grudgingly. “Calm, superficially plausible, hitting the weak points in our evidentiary chain.”

“The weak points don’t ultimately matter,” I counter. “Heritage England verified that the vault was continuously sealed since 1677. She simply cannot explain that away regardless of how smooth her presentation is.”

“She doesn’t need to convince everyone,” Rebecca points out pragmatically. “She needs to convince enough people to create reasonable doubt. Muddy the evidentiary waters. Make the Parliamentary inquiry more politically contentious and difficult.”

My phone rings with a call from Professor Mueller in Heidelberg.

“Have you seen Victoria Ashton’s BBC interview?” he asks without any preamble.

“Just finished watching it,” I confirm.

“She’s factually wrong on every single point, but her presentation style is unfortunately quite effective,” Mueller says with frustration. “We need to respond and decisively. Organise an academic press conference, issue a detailed rebuttal, obtain a consensus statement from multiple independent scholars.”

“Will that help our position?”

“It prevents her alternative narrative from taking hold unchallenged,” Mueller explains. “She’s claiming the evidence is questionable. We need fifty respected academics publicly stating it’s ironclad. She’s claiming personal vendetta motivates your

research. We need independent verification from institutions that have no connection whatsoever to you or your family."

"When do you think you can organize something like that by?"

"Monday morning at the latest," Mueller promises. "I'm already coordinating with Professor Dumont, Dr. Reynolds, and colleagues across multiple European institutions. We'll present a united academic front affirming the research validity and the evidence quality."

"Thank you, Hermann."

"Don't thank me yet," he says seriously. "This is as much about protecting my own professional reputation as supporting yours. If Victoria Ashton succeeds in discrediting this research, my academic career suffers right alongside yours. We're defending our collective work together."

Yesterday, the question was whether any of it was real.

Today, the question is what it means.

And still, somehow, people are trying to drag it back into doubt.

Daniel looks up from his laptop. "Social media response is splitting," he reports with concern. "Half the comments and posts support you and the evidence. The other half are questioning everything after Victoria's interview. She's succeeding at creating substantial doubt."

"That was always going to be their strategy," I point out. "They cannot suppress the truth anymore, so they attack its credibility instead."

“The concerning part is that it’s working to some degree,” Daniel says, scrolling through comment threads. “Look at these discussions. People who believed the conspiracy was real yesterday are now wondering if you fabricated evidence. Victoria’s interview is effective.”

My phone rings. Unknown number again.

I almost don’t answer – too many blocked calls, too many threats over the past week. I pick up anyway.

“You think you’ve won?” Victoria Ashton’s voice, tight with barely controlled fury. “You’ve destroyed everything. And for what? Your pathetic need for revenge?”

I put the phone on speaker so Rebecca and Daniel could hear.

“This isn’t revenge,” I whisper. “This is justice.”

“Justice?” She laughs, brittle and harsh. “You have documents. Speculation. A sealed vault that proves nothing except that Christopher Wren was paranoid. My lawyers will tear your ‘evidence’ apart in any courtroom.”

“The Parliamentary inquiry is announced,” I counter. “Heritage England has verified everything. It’s over, Victoria.”

Silence. Her voice comes back, lower, more dangerous.

“It’s not over until I say it’s over. You’ve made a powerful enemy, Ms. Hart. You still don’t understand what you’re dealing with. What resources I have access to. How far I’m willing to go.”

The threat in her voice is unmistakable.

“Are you threatening me?” I ask.

“I’m educating you. Your father learned this lesson too late. Don’t make the same mistake.”

She hangs up.

I stare at my phone, hands trembling with anger.

“That was a direct threat,” Rebecca says, already pulling out her own phone. “Explicit reference to your father’s death. I’m calling DCI Stewart. This gives them cause for immediate arrest.”

She steps into the hallway to make the call. Daniel and I sit in tense silence.

When Rebecca returns a couple of minutes later, her expression is grim but satisfied.

“Stewart is dispatching officers to Victoria’s penthouse now. Arrest warrant is being expedited based on the direct threat and flight risk.

She said they’ll have Victoria in custody within the hour.”

“Finally,” I say.

“Finally,” Rebecca agrees, settling back into her chair. “Though I wouldn’t put it past her to try one last legal manoeuvre.”

We wait. Forty-three minutes.

Rebecca’s phone rings. DCI Stewart’s name on the screen.

Rebecca answers, listens for five seconds, and her entire body goes rigid.

“What do you mean gone?” Her voice went cold.

My stomach drops hard enough to steal my breath.

Rebecca is already on her feet, pulling out her phone, dialling. “DCI Stewart. It’s Cole. I need immediate confirmation on Victoria Ashton’s location.”

She listens, and I watch her expression change. Not quite anger. Something harder.

More focused.

“She’s running,” Rebecca says.

TWENTY-SEVEN

OLIVIA HART
Various Locations, London to Thames Estuary
Present Day – Saturday Evening

Rebecca stays on the phone with DCI Stewart, her expression hardening with each passing second.

"When?" Pause. "How much notice did you have?" Another pause. "No, we can't wait for a warrant. By the time you get one, she'll be gone."

Daniel looks up from his laptop. "What's happening?"

Rebecca covers the phone. "Victoria Ashton withdrew two hundred thousand pounds in cash from three different banks this afternoon. Her house in Knightsbridge has been dark since six, and none of the security cameras are active. Two hours ago, someone matching her description bought marine fuel at Gallions Point Marina."

"She's running," I say.

"Two thousand litres." Rebecca's eyes lock on mine. "That's ocean-going range." Into the phone: "Cash, fuel, lights out. This wasn't panic. She planned it."

Daniel is already pulling up maps on his screen. “The Ashton family owns property at St. Katharine Docks. Victorian warehouse conversion. And they have a private mooring at Chelsea Harbour.”

“Too obvious,” Rebecca says. “She knows we’ll check family properties first. She’ll use something less traceable.” To Stewart: “Can you access boat registrations? Cross-reference with Ashton shell companies, business associates, anyone connected to the family.”

She listens, then her eyes narrow. “I understand the jurisdictional issues. I’m telling you she’s about to leave British waters, and with her goes any chance of putting her in a courtroom.”

Rebecca covers the phone. “Olivia, pull up everything you have on Ashton family properties. Business holdings, investment portfolios, anything that might list assets. Daniel, I need marina locations along the Thames from Tower Bridge to Gravesend. Every possible departure point.”

I open my laptop, start searching through the files Dr. Mueller had sent. Property records. Company registrations. The Ashton family’s wealth is distributed across dozens of entities, deliberately obscured.

“Shell company registered to Ashton family interests,” I say suddenly. “Temperance Holdings Ltd. Listed asset: fifty-two-foot motor yacht, moored at…” I scroll. “Multiple locations. Last registered at Limehouse Marina.”

Rebecca relays this to Stewart. Then: “Get units there now. And send me the boat description.” She scribbles notes. “White hull,

blue stripe, registration November-Tango-seven-four-two-two. Armed?"

I look at her. "You think she'd –"

"She hired someone to kill your father. To kill Webb. To run you down in the street. Yes, I think she'd be armed." To Stewart: "Thames Marine Unit? How long?" Pause. Her jaw tightens. "Forty minutes is too long. She could be past the Thames Barrier by then, into open water."

Whatever Stewart says back, it is a no. Rebecca's voice goes cold. "I appreciate that, but I'm not letting her disappear into international waters while we wait for the Thames Marine Unit to coordinate. I have assets. Let me use them." A beat. "If you'd rather explain to your superintendent how Victoria Ashton got away while we waited for proper authorisation, put them on the phone and I'll explain it myself."

"I still have friends who owe me favours." She is dialling. "Geoff? It's Bex. I need the Interceptor. Yes, tonight. Now, actually." Pause. "Thames. Fast pursuit. Potentially armed suspect." Another pause, then a slight softening in her voice. "I know I said I was retired. Consider this a freelance consultation. Docklands. Fifteen minutes. I'll explain when I get there."

She hangs up, is already moving toward the door. "Pack light. We might be gone for hours."

"There's a fast response boat at Docklands," she adds. "Former military, now private security. Geoff's team uses it for executive protection on the river. It'll outrun anything Victoria's yacht can do."

“Isn’t this –” Daniel starts.

“Illegal? Grey area. But if Victoria gets into international waters, we lose her. And I’m not letting that happen.” Rebecca checks her weapon, secures it. “You two can stay here if –”

“No,” I say. “We’re coming.”

*

The Interceptor is a sleek, aggressive-looking vessel that looks more military than civilian. Matte black hull, powerful engines, minimal superstructure. A man in his fifties with a grey beard and watchful eyes is waiting at the dock.

“Geoff,” Rebecca says. “Thank you for this.”

“Been too long, Bex,” he says.

“Geoff, this is Olivia and Daniel Hart. The people I’m protecting.”

He studies us with the same assessing look Rebecca had used when we first met. Former military, definitely. “You expecting trouble?”

“Fifty-two-foot motor yacht,” Rebecca says. “Twenty to twenty-five knots maximum. She could have a thirty-minute head start. We don’t know yet.”

Geoff nods. “The Interceptor does forty knots. We’ll catch her.” He looks at Daniel and me. “You’ve been on a fast boat before?”

“No,” Daniel admits.

“You’ll want life jackets. And something to hold onto.” Geoff disappears into the cabin, emerging with safety equipment. “Put these on.”

While Daniel and I struggle into the jackets, Rebecca checks a gun locker built into the cabin wall.

“You really think she’ll shoot at us?” I ask.

“I think she’s desperate, and has nothing left to lose. That makes her extremely dangerous.”

Rebecca’s phone rings. “Stewart.” She answers. “Yes, we’re mobile. Docklands.” She listens, her face hardening. “CCTV confirmed at Limehouse Marina? How long ago?” Pause. “Fifteen minutes. She’s in the water then. The Temperance departed?” Another pause. “Heading downriver. Good. We’re in pursuit.”

She hangs up and moves to stand beside Geoff as he casts off and eases the Interceptor away from the dock.

“Victoria left Limehouse fifteen minutes ago,” Rebecca says. “She paid the marina security guard cash to forget he saw her. Coast guard has been notified but their nearest patrol boat is twenty minutes behind us.”

Geoff studies the river, calculating. “Fifteen minutes at twenty knots... she’s got about five miles on us. We can close that.”

Once we are clear of the berth, Geoff pushes the throttles forward and the Interceptor’s engines roar to life. The boat isn’t built for comfort. The deck vibrated through the soles of my feet, a diesel pulse that moves up through my legs and into my chest, and the acceleration pushes me back against the cabin wall. The Thames hits the hull in irregular slaps, each one colder than the last. The river-chill arrives all at once – not wind but water suspended in air, carrying the cold smell of the estuary at night.

I grab a handhold as the Thames rushes past at terrifying speed. The city lights become a blur on either side. We shoot under bridges, weave between slower vessels, the engines roaring. Daniel has gone very quiet beside me, gripping the safety rail with white knuckles.

"You alright?" I shout over the noise.

"Remind me why we thought coming along was a good idea!"

Rebecca is on the radio now, talking to coast guard. "This is private vessel Interceptor in pursuit of motor yacht Temperance, registration November-Tango-seven-four-two-two. Suspect is Victoria Ashton, wanted for conspiracy to commit murder. We're tracking downriver from Limehouse."

The coast guard response crackled back, something about maintaining safe distance and waiting for official units.

"Negative," Rebecca says. "Suspect is fleeing jurisdiction. We're maintaining pursuit."

We pass under Tower Bridge, the Gothic towers lit up against the night sky. The Thames is wider here, darker. Commercial traffic increases – barges, tourist boats, a cruise ship anchors mid-river.

Geoff navigated between them with practiced precision, the Interceptor carving through wakes and crosscurrents.

Rebecca has binoculars up, scanning ahead. "How many white-hulled yachts in range?"

“Three. Maybe four.” Geoff points. “That one’s too small. That one’s heading upriver. Could be that one, two hundred meters ahead.”

I pick up another pair of binoculars from the cabin, start scanning. Boats everywhere, most lit up properly for night navigation. But there –

“White hull, blue stripe,” I say. “No lights. Moving fast.”

Rebecca focuses her binoculars. “Got it. Geoff?”

“I see it. Closing distance now.”

The Interceptor surges forward. The yacht ahead is moving fast, throwing up wake, but we are faster. The gap starts closing.

Rebecca is back on the radio. “Coast guard, this is Interceptor. We have visual on Temperance. Confirming white hull, blue stripe, no navigation lights, heading south-southeast toward estuary.”

The yacht ahead is moving faster now, throwing up more wake. Whoever is driving knows they are being pursued.

Rebecca’s phone rings. “Stewart. Yes, visual confirmed.” She listens. “How certain?” Pause. “Understood.”

She relays the information: “Coast guard confirms thermal imaging from helicopter. Single occupant on the yacht’s bridge. Matches Temperance’s profile. It’s definitely her.”

Three hundred meters. The gap is closing.

Two hundred meters. One-fifty.

One hundred meters now. I can see the yacht clearly – sleek, expensive, running without lights toward the darkening estuary ahead.

Suddenly the yacht cuts hard to starboard, across the shipping channel.

“Hold on!” Geoff shouts.

A massive container ship’s horn blasts. The yacht had cut directly across its bow, forcing the larger vessel to alter course. Dangerous. Reckless. Geoff has to slow, navigate around the container ship’s stern. Precious seconds lost.

“She’s insane,” Daniel mutters.

Daniel is looking at his phone, the map. “There’s a marina there. Small, private. Maybe she has another boat waiting?”

Rebecca studies the shore through binoculars. “Why else would she head there? She knows we’re behind her.”

Geoff pushes the throttles forward again once we clear the container ship. “If she beaches that yacht, she’s either very desperate or very stupid. That’s a million-pound boat.”

“She’s not stupid,” Rebecca says. “She’s desperate. And that makes her more dangerous.”

We close in again. The yacht is definitely heading for the Kent shore now, a small industrial area with warehouses and a run-down marina.

“Coast guard, this is Interceptor. Suspect is approaching shore at...” Rebecca gives coordinates. “Appears to be heading for a private marina. Request ground units to location.”

The response is affirmative, but I catch the timing estimate. Ten minutes for ground units. Victoria will be long gone.

The radio cuts off as Geoff kills the engines, letting the Interceptor coast toward the marina entrance.

“Quiet approach,” he says. “If she’s armed, we don’t want to give her time to set up.”

“She’s trapped,” Geoff says quietly. “The marina only has one exit by water. If we block it, she can’t get the yacht out. But that also means she’s cornered.”

“Cornered is when people make mistakes,” Rebecca says. “Or when they decide they have nothing left to lose.”

The yacht has pulled up to a dock inside the marina. I can see Victoria now, a figure in dark clothing, moving quickly. She is pulling a bag from the yacht’s cabin.

And there is someone else. A man on the dock, standing beside a smaller, faster boat with engines running.

No, not one man … two!

Harris stands beside Richardson, scanning the approaches with military precision. Both men armed. Both watching for pursuit.

Victoria is already climbing down into the boat, a bag in her hands. “We need to go NOW!”

Richardson helps her aboard while Harris provides cover, his weapon tracking our position.

“Two armed men,” Rebecca says quietly. “Geoff, can you beach us at the adjacent dock?”

“We’re minutes from armed response. If she gets in that boat, we lose her. Faster vessel, she’ll outrun the coast guard units.”

Geoff studies the marina layout. “I can get you within fifty meters. After that, it’s on foot.”

He guides the Interceptor toward a weathered dock on the marina’s far side, killing the engines entirely, letting momentum carry us. We bump gently against old pilings. Rebecca is already moving, jumping onto the dock. She turns back. “Olivia, Daniel – stay on the boat. Get down behind the cabin.”

“Rebecca –”

“Not negotiable. If shots are fired, you stay down. Understood?”

I look at Daniel. His face is pale but determined.

Rebecca moves away, low and fast, her weapon drawn. Geoff stays with the boat, but I see him pull a weapon from somewhere beneath his jacket.

We climb onto the dock, staying low like Rebecca has, moving between cover. I can see her ahead, maybe thirty meters from Victoria’s position.

Then everything happens at once.

A bullet hits the water beside our boat, throwing up a spray.

Rebecca hits the dock, rolls behind a piling. “Armed! Get down!”

She is standing on the dock now, next to Richardson’s boat. A pistol in her hand, pointed in Rebecca’s direction.

“Ms. Ashton!” Rebecca shouts. “Put down the weapon! There’s nowhere to go. Armed response is sixty seconds out. You can’t –”

Another shot. The bullet hits the wooden piling Rebecca is behind, splinters flying.

Richardson is moving now, climbing into the faster boat. The engines are already running. Thirty seconds and they’ll be in the water, accelerating, disappearing into the darkness of the estuary.

“DCI Stewart!” Rebecca is on her phone. “Shots fired. Suspect is armed. Where are your units?”

I can’t hear the response over the boat engines. Not close enough.

Victoria is climbing down into Richardson’s boat. “Get in! GO!”

The marina’s fuel pump alarm suddenly shrieks to life, red lights flashing. I look back – Daniel has his hand on the emergency button.

“Fire alarm!” he shouts. “Automatic lockdown! The marina gates will –”

Rebecca moves.

She covers the distance in seconds, low and fast. Victoria fires – the shot goes wide, hitting a wooden post. Rebecca tackles her as she tries to climb into the boat, both women going down hard on the dock.

Richardson raises his weapon, pointing at Rebecca's back.

I don't think. I grab a rusted fire extinguisher from the dock, throw it.

Daniel throws something – I can't see what – and it hits Richardson's arm. The shot goes wild, blasting into the water.

Then a different sound. Sharper. Professional.

DCI Stewart and at least six officers flood into the marina, weapons drawn, red laser sights cutting through the darkness.

"Armed police! Drop your weapons!"

Richardson froze, the gun still in his hand. For a moment I think he might lower it, might surrender. Then his eyes find Victoria, struggling beneath Rebecca on the dock.

He raises the weapon again.

The gunshot echoes across the water. Richardson staggers backward, hits the boat's railing, goes over. The splash is sickeningly loud.

In the chaos – Rebecca tackling Victoria, Richardson collapsing into the water, Daniel shouting – Harris disappears.

I catch a glimpse of him moving low and fast toward the warehouses. Then police are flooding in, red laser sights cutting through the darkness, and I lose sight of him entirely.

Officers are already in the water, pulling Richardson out. But I can see from their faces. The way they move. The lack of urgency once they get him onto the dock.

He is dead.

Victoria sees it too. She stops fighting, goes completely still beneath Rebecca's restraining grip.

"He's dead! You killed him! Marcus!" She stares at Richardson's body on the dock. Blood pooling beneath him. "This is YOUR fault!" she screams at me. "All of this! Everything!"

Rebecca pulls her to her feet, hands her off to two officers. They are reading her rights, but Victoria isn't listening. She is still staring at Richardson's body.

"Thirty years," she says quietly. "We had thirty years. And you destroyed it in three weeks."

DCI Stewart approaches, her expression grim. "Victoria Ashton, I'm arresting you for conspiracy to commit murder, attempted murder, fleeing custody –"

"I want my lawyer."

"Of course." He nods to the officers. "Get her processed. And someone get the coroner down here."

I watch them lead her away. All that power, all that wealth, all those centuries of influence – reduced to a woman in handcuffs being loaded into a police car.

Rebecca appears at my shoulder, scanning the marina. Her weapon is still drawn.

"Where's Harris?"

I'd been so focused on Victoria and Richardson, I'd forgotten about him entirely. "He was here. With Richardson. But during the shooting –"

DCI Stewart lowers her radio, jaw tight. "Armed response had him cornered near the north warehouse. But in the chaos –" He gestures at Richardson's body, the police tape, Victoria screaming as they load her into the patrol car. "He disappeared."

"How?" Rebecca demands.

Stewart points toward the industrial buildings behind the marina. Two officers are searching with flashlights, but the warehouses loom dark and vast. "Vehicle access on the far side. By the time we secured the perimeter, he was gone. We've got units searching the area, roadblocks going up, but..." He shakes his head.

Rebecca's expression hardens. "He'll run. Get as far from London as possible. France, maybe. He has the skills."

"Harris doesn't run." Stewart cuts her off. "Former military, counter-insurgency specialist. We've been tracking him for weeks. He's disciplined. Focused. Patient." He looks at me, and something in his eyes makes my stomach drop. "Right now, Ms. Hart, you're what destroyed his employers. What ended his career. You took everything away from him."

Rebecca steps closer to me, positioning herself between me and the dark warehouses. "How long until you find him?"

"Could be hours. Could be days. He's trained for evasion." Stewart's radio crackles. Units reporting no contact, search

expanding to secondary perimeter. “But we will find him. I’m assigning protection detail to both of you until we do.”

I look back at the warehouses. At the industrial Kent shore stretching into shadow. Somewhere out there, Harris is loose. Free. Planning his next move.

*

Twenty minutes later, we are in the back of a police car heading to London.

Richardson’s body being loaded into the coroner’s van. Victoria already in custody at a Kent police station. The marina cordoned off as a crime scene.

And Harris still missing.

Daniel falls asleep against the window almost immediately, the adrenaline crash hitting him hard. I sit beside him, watching the Thames slip past in the darkness.

My phone buzzes. Dr. Mueller.

“BBC confirmed. Documentary airs Tuesday evening. 8:00 PM. They’re calling it ‘The Monument Conspiracy: Wren’s Hidden Truth.’ They want you and Daniel for interviews before the broadcast.”

Tuesday. Three days away.

I show the message to Rebecca.

“We’ll need to review security protocols,” she says quietly. “For the BBC interviews. For any public appearances. Until Stewart finds Harris.”

The car pulls into traffic, carrying us through London in the pre-dawn light. Behind us, the Thames flows on. Ahead, the city is waking.

Victoria is in custody. Richardson is dead.

But Harris is still out there.

Rebecca’s hand rests on her weapon. She’s positioned herself between me and the window, scanning every vehicle that comes too close.

I’m not safe yet.

TWENTY-EIGHT

OLIVIA HART
Various Locations, London
Present Day – Sunday morning

We arrive home just after seven, carrying fresh coffee bought from the cafe at the end of our street. Plain-clothes officers sit outside in a dark unmarked police car as part of our around-the-clock protection.

Inside the apartment, Daniel has already gone straight to bed, still wearing his life jacket. I don't have the heart to wake him. He needs to sleep.

Rebecca carries out a detailed security assessment of the flat, noting escape routes and possible threats.

I throw myself onto the sofa, relieved to finally feel warm after a cold night chasing down Victoria. My phone starts buzzing. It seems the documentary publicity machine has started already. There are text messages and emails from Dr. Mueller, journalists, and even a producer from the BBC. They can all wait. I have nothing left to give.

“What are you thinking, Bec?” I ask. I can see the cogs spinning even though she should have been as tired as the rest of us.

“Two exits,” Rebecca replies, running her fingers through her hair. “Second floor. Windows face the street. Not ideal, but defensible until we find Harris.”

“Are we safe here?” I ask, feeling the exhaustion turn to anxiety.

“You should stay somewhere else,” Rebecca says. “A hotel. Somewhere Harris doesn’t know about.”

“He’ll find me wherever I go. You said it yourself – he’s patient, disciplined.”

“Which is why we need to make you difficult to find.”

“Or,” I say quietly, “we make me easy to find. Controlled circumstances. Our terms, not his.”

Rebecca pauses. “I’m not sure that’s a great idea. Although we don’t want to spend every waking hour looking over our shoulders.”

“I’ve had enough of running and hiding,” I continue. “I don’t know how many different places Daniel and I have stayed over the past few weeks.”

“I’ll think about it,” Rebecca says, reluctantly accepting the logic.

I am exhausted, but my mind won’t stop racing, replaying the trauma of the past twenty-four hours. I turn on the television. The news anchor reports Victoria’s arrest, Richardson’s death, and “a manhunt underway for a third suspect.”

Harris's photo flashes up on the screen. Former military. Security consultant. Armed and dangerous.

And he is coming after me.

*

A few hours later, my phone rings. DCI Stewart.

"Ms. Hart. I wanted to update you on the search for Harris."

I sit up, suddenly alert. "You found him?"

"No. And that's the problem."

My stomach drops. I've been hoping. Praying even, that they've caught him trying to flee the country. That this will be over.

"We've had roadblocks around the Kent area since last night," Stewart continues. "Nothing. CCTV shows him leaving the warehouse area, then he disappears. A vehicle was reported stolen two miles from the marina about thirty minutes after the shooting. We found it abandoned in South London."

"And after that?"

"Nothing. He's gone dark. No phone usage, no bank cards, no CCTV hits. We've checked ports, airports, Eurostar terminals. Border Force has his photo. If he was running, we'd have found him by now."

The implication settles like ice in my chest. "So, he's staying in London."

"We believe so."

“Because of me.”

Stewart doesn’t deny it. “Harris is former military. Fifteen years, including counter-insurgency operations. He’s trained in evasion, surveillance, and urban combat. No digital footprint. Probably has cash, fake identification, safe houses we don’t know about.”

“So, you can’t find him.”

“We will find him. But Ms. Hart, you need to understand what we’re dealing with. This isn’t some desperate criminal making mistakes. Harris knows how we search. He knows how to disappear.”

I look at Rebecca, who is listening on speaker. Her expression is grim.

“What do you need from me?” I ask.

“Twenty-four seven armed protection. Officers outside your flat, escorts whenever you leave. We’re taking this seriously.”

“And the BBC press conference? Tomorrow morning at St. Paul’s?”

There is a pause. “You’re still planning to attend?”

“Yes.”

“Ms. Hart, that’s a public event. Advertised location. Harris will know exactly where you’ll be.”

“Then you’ll have plenty of time to set up security. Metal detectors, armed officers, the whole cathedral locked down.” I keep my voice steady. “I’m not hiding. Not anymore.”

Rebecca is shaking her head, but I ignore her.

“If you’re determined to go,” Stewart says slowly, “then yes, we’ll make it as secure as possible. But understand – even with every precaution, you’re making yourself a target.”

“I’ve been a target since my father started asking questions six years ago. At least this way, we control the circumstances.”

After I hang up, Rebecca turns to me. “That was reckless.”

“It was honest.”

“And you just told the police you’re going to stand on the steps of St. Paul’s Cathedral in front of cameras.”

“With armed protection. Surrounded by police. It’s the safest place I could be.”

“Or the perfect opportunity for someone trained to hit targets in hostile environments.” Rebecca stands, paces to the window. “He won’t just walk up and shoot you. He’ll find an angle. A moment when you’re vulnerable. And he’ll take it.”

“Then we don’t give him that moment.”

She doesn’t look convinced.

*

On Sunday afternoon I need to leave the flat. Just for an hour. I need fresh air. A normal life for ten minutes. Something that isn’t these four walls and the constant weight of being hunted.

Rebecca comes with me. She always comes with me now. The armed protection detail follows in their unmarked car.

We walk to the corner shop. Ordinary. Mundane. I buy milk, bread, and the Sunday papers. I try to pretend this is normal.

We are half a block from home when Rebecca's phone rings.

She answers, listens. Her hand moves to her weapon.

"When?" Pause. "Where exactly?" Another pause. "We're two minutes away. Keep units in position."

She hangs up, scanning the street with sudden intensity.

"What's wrong?"

"Someone matching Harris's description was spotted near your building. A shopkeeper called it in."

My blood turns cold. "When?"

"Five minutes ago."

We are moving now. Rebecca's hand on my elbow, guiding me quickly but not running. The protection detail has pulled up alongside us.

"Get in," the officer says.

We do. The car accelerates toward my flat. Police radios crackle. Units converging. Search pattern expanding.

"Do you see him?" I ask, staring out the windows.

"No one matching his description," the driver says. "But we're searching."

We reach my building. More police cars now. Officers searching the area, checking doorways, and questioning neighbours.

Rebecca positions me away from the window and stands there herself, watching.

I sit on the sofa and look at my own flat. The books on the shelf Daniel had straightened without being asked. The coffee mugs from this morning, washed and upturned on the draining board.

All of it ordinary. All of it suddenly wrong.

I've lived here for four years. I know the sound the boiler makes at six in the morning. I know which floorboard creaks outside the bathroom. I know the way the evening light comes through the kitchen window in summer and makes a rectangle on the tiles.

I look at the front door. The lock. The chain I haven't used in three years.

Below on the street, radios crackle. Officers move in and out of view. Someone is questioning the shopkeeper who's made the call. I watch the man gesturing, pointing left, then reconsidering and pointing right.

He isn't sure.

Rebecca hasn't moved from the window. She scans the street in sections, left to right, methodical, then starts again.

"What does he look like?" I ask. "When he's not being obvious."

"Clean. Forgettable. The kind of man you'd see on a Tube platform and not remember ten seconds later." She doesn't look away from the street. "That's the training. You learn to look like you belong everywhere."

I think about every street I've walked down in the past three weeks. Every cafe, every Tube carriage, every queue. All the forgettable men I haven't looked at twice.

"He's been watching for a while," I say.

"Yes."

"Not just today."

She doesn't answer, which is an answer in itself.

Outside, the search is slowing. The radius expanding, which means they haven't found him close. Officers move with less urgency now, the body language of people doing the work without expecting a result.

I get up and stand beside Rebecca at the window.

My building looks different from this angle. The entrance. The two steps up. The intercom panel on the left. I've never thought about sight lines before. Never considered which doorways opposite have a clear view of who comes and goes.

I am counting them when Rebecca's phone rings.

She listens, says nothing, hangs up.

"Twenty minutes," she says. "If they haven't found him by then, they won't."

They don't.

"False alarm?" I ask, as the last of the units wind down below.

“Maybe. Or maybe Harris testing our response times. Seeing how close he can get before we notice.”

“You think he was here?”

“I think he wants us to wonder.”

The realization makes my skin crawl. Not running. Not hiding. Getting closer.

Outside, the search ends. The police leave. No sign of Harris.

Someone has been here. Someone who looks like him. Close enough to my home that a shopkeeper notices.

“He’s playing with us,” Rebecca says quietly.

I look out at London stretching below. Seven million people. Any one of them could be him.

I turn on lights. I lock windows. I check on Daniel who is sleeping peacefully, unaware of how close danger has come.

The night feels very long.

*

Monday morning 2:00 AM. I give up trying to sleep.

Daniel’s door is still closed. I stand in the hallway listening to his steady breathing. At least one of us can rest.

I find Rebecca in the living room. She hasn’t slept either. Her laptop shows security camera feeds. Her weapon sits on the table beside cold coffee.

“You should rest,” I say.

“So should you.”

I sit on the opposite sofa. “Can’t.”

“Neither can I.”

Through the window, London is dark except for streetlights and occasional headlights. A quiet hour before dawn when the city holds its breath.

London at 2AM is a different city. Not silence – the city is never silent. There are fewer layers of sound. Individual cars instead of traffic. Footsteps from two streets away. A fox somewhere below.

“The press conference is in six hours,” I say.

“I know.”

“He’ll be there.”

“Probably.” Rebecca closes her laptop. “We should cancel. Tell the BBC you’re unwell.”

“And hide for how long? Days? Weeks? Harris isn’t going anywhere. Stewart said it herself – he’s patient.”

“Patience works both ways. We wait. Let the police search. Eventually he will make a mistake.”

“Or he doesn’t. And we spend months looking over our shoulders.” I pull my father’s watch from my pocket. Still frozen at 3:47 AM. “I’m tired of being afraid.”

Rebecca studies me. “Your father would tell you to be careful.”

“My father would tell me to finish what he started.”

“And look what happened to him.”

The words hang between us. True. Painful. Undeniable.

“I’m not my father,” I say quietly. “I have you. I have armed police. I have security that he never had.” I meet her eyes. “And I’m not doing this alone.”

Rebecca is quiet for a long moment. “He won’t get to you. I won’t let him.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“I can promise I’ll try. And I’m very good at my job.”

Something in her voice makes me believe her. Not certainty. Determination.

“What’s the plan?” I ask.

“Motorcade to St. Paul’s. Three vehicles, armed officers in each. We arrive early, sweep the cathedral, set up secure perimeter. You do the press conference surrounded by protection. Then straight back to the car and home.”

“And if Harris makes a move?”

“Then we handle it.” Rebecca’s hand moves to her weapon. “Together.”

We sit in companionable silence as the sky begins to lighten. Not quite dawn, but the darkness lifting. Monday morning arriving whether we are ready or not.

In a few hours, I’ll face the cameras. Tell the world about Wren’s conspiracy. Finish what my father started.

*

7:00 AM. Time to go.

Daniel is awake, sitting at the kitchen table. He insists on getting up to see me off, even though Rebecca has tried to convince him to stay in bed.

“Be careful,” he says.

“Always am.”

“Liar.” He hugs me tight. “Just – come back, okay?”

“I will.”

The lie comes easily. Too easily. Even if neither of us quite believes it.

Rebecca is already at the door. Three police vehicles wait outside. Armed officers in tactical gear. This isn’t subtle. This is a show of force.

I grab my jacket and check my phone one last time. Messages from Dr. Mueller wishing me luck. From journalists asking for pre-conference interviews.

Nothing from Harris. Of course not.

“Ready?” Rebecca asks.

I’m not. But I nod anyway.

The drive through London is surreal. Monday morning traffic, people going to work, living ordinary lives. While I sit in an

armoured car surrounded by armed police, heading toward a press conference that might end with someone trying to kill me.

St. Paul's Cathedral rises ahead. Wren's masterpiece. Where my father had stood asking questions that cost him his life.

The same questions that bring me here.

Police have already secured the perimeter. Barriers up, metal detectors positioned, officers scanning faces in the gathering crowd. Journalists setting up cameras. Tourists being redirected. The whole cathedral on lockdown.

Rebecca's hand touches my elbow. "Time to go."

I scan the crowd one last time. Looking for Harris. For anyone watching too carefully. For the threat I know is there but can't see.

Nothing. Just people. Cameras. Police.

I take a breath. Straighten my jacket. Prepare to step out of the

car and into whatever comes next.

"Let's finish this," I say.

Rebecca nods. Her hand never leaves her weapon.

The car door opens.

Somewhere in the crowd, Harris is watching.

TWENTY-NINE

OLIVIA HART
St. Paul's Cathedral, London
Present Day – Monday morning

The cathedral steps are a circus of cameras and microphones.

Dr. Mueller stands at the podium, explaining Wren's astronomical calculations to a crowd of journalists who are mostly interested in the scandal, not the science. Behind him, projected onto a screen, are my scans of St. Paul's. The void. The coordinates. Hundreds of years of lies made visible.

I stand to the side with Rebecca, surrounded by armed police in plain clothes. DCI Stewart has positioned armed officers throughout the crowd, on rooftops, at every exit. If Harris is here, they'll spot him.

If.

The word feels hollow. He is here. I know it the way you know you're being watched in an empty room.

Mueller finishes his explanation. The BBC producer gestures to me. My turn.

I step to the podium. Flashes erupt. Cameras click. Questions are shouted before I've even opened my mouth.

"Ms. Hart, is it true your father died investigating this conspiracy?"

"Did the families threaten you?"

"What's in the sealed chamber?"

I raise my hand. Silence falls. Sort of.

The silence that follows is a particular kind, not quiet but held, a thousand people waiting. Every sound arrives slightly softened, filtered through the great columns and thick morning air. When I begin to speak, my voice doesn't sound like mine.

"My father spent twenty years researching Christopher Wren's churches," I begin. "He believed Wren encoded astronomical data into their positioning. Data that would have been impossible to obtain using the technology officially available in the 1670s."

More flashes. I keep talking.

"Ten days ago, I discovered physical evidence supporting his theory. A sealed chamber beneath St. Paul's Cathedral, positioned with mathematical precision that requires instruments Wren supposedly didn't have access to."

A journalist near the front: "Why would Wren hide this?"

"Because in 1675, claiming the Earth moved around the sun could get you tried for heresy. Wren hid his observations in architecture. He placed his churches at coordinates that encoded stellar positions as seen from a heliocentric model. He was proving Copernicus right, in stone and mortar, where the Church couldn't burn it."

“And the families?” Another journalist. “Victoria Ashton was arrested Saturday night. Is she connected to this?”

I hesitate. Rebecca’s hand touches my elbow. Warning.

But I’ve come this far.

“The Ashton, Fairchild, Pembroke, and Grey families have spent three centuries protecting property surveys conducted in the decades after the Great Fire. Surveys that used geocentric models and inferior instruments. If Wren’s astronomical observations are more accurate than the navigational calculations used for those surveys, it calls into question billions of pounds in property ownership.”

The crowd erupts. Questions shout over each other. Cameras surging forward.

That’s when I hear people screaming.

No more questions, only panic. People are running. A sharp crack, flat and close, that might have been a gunshot or a car backfiring. I can’t tell. But Rebecca can.

“DOWN!”

She drags me off my feet and we hit the steps hard, her body over mine, the stone cold through my jacket. Around us the crowd scatters. Officers move, weapons drawn, shouting commands. More cracks – definitely gunshots now.

“Where?” I gasp.

“Rooftop! Stay low!”

She hauls me up into a crouch and we scramble toward the side of the cathedral, away from the podium, away from the open ground where I am exposed.

Another shot. Stone explodes near my head.

Rebecca jerks slightly, her hand going to her left arm. Blood seeps between her fingers.

“You’re hit!”

“Grazed. Keep moving!” She grabs my wrist with her good hand. “He’s targeting you! We need to get you away from here!”

“Inside the cathedral –”

“No! He’ll have planned for that. We run!”

“Run where?”

“Anywhere that isn’t here!”

We reach the edge of St. Paul’s Churchyard. Rebecca pulls me east, into the narrow streets of the financial district. Behind us, police are returning fire, officers shouting coordinates into radios.

And somewhere behind us, Harris is coming.

*

We run.

Not the careful jog of someone out for exercise. Full sprint. Desperate.

The City of London is built on itself. Cobbles under tarmac under newer tarmac, centuries of repaving, so the ground is slightly

uneven in ways you don't notice walking but feel immediately in your ankles when you're running in flat shoes at full speed.

Rebecca's hand grips my wrist, pulling me through streets I barely recognize.

St. Paul's Churchyard gives way to Cannon Street. Financial buildings looming on either side. Monday morning workers scatter as we burst through, two women running like their lives depend on it.

Because they do.

"Is he following?" I gasp.

Rebecca glances back. "Can't see him. Keep moving!"

My breathing turns ragged. My stride falters, muscles protesting with every step. I'm not built for this. I'm a structural engineer, not an Olympic sprinter.

But fear keeps me moving.

We cross a major intersection. Bank Junction. The Bank of England rises on our left, imposing and ancient. The Royal Exchange ahead, classical columns watching our desperate flight through the City.

A shot cracks.

We dive between parked cars. The bullet hits a wing mirror, shattering it. Glass rains down on us.

"He's behind us!" I scream.

Rebecca pulls her weapon, fires twice back the way we'd come. The shots echo off the buildings. Office workers duck for cover, screaming.

"GO!"

We are up and running again. East. Always east. Away from St. Paul's, away from the crowds, into the labyrinth of London's oldest streets.

My foot catches on uneven pavement. I stumble. Rebecca catches me, keeps me upright, never stops moving.

"Stay with me!" she shouts.

Eastcheap now. Medieval lanes barely wide enough for two people. We dodge pedestrians, crash through a businessman carrying coffee. The cup goes flying. He shouts something angry that turns to fear when he sees the blood on Rebecca's arm.

A cyclist swerves to avoid us, hits the curb, goes down hard.

I hear it before I see it – the crack of a wheel hitting stone, then the clatter of metal on pavement. Already my nervous system is sorting sounds faster than thought. Threat. Not threat. Threat.

"Sorry!" I gasp, but we can't stop. Can't help.

"Where are we going?" I shout at Rebecca.

"Anywhere he isn't!"

Another shot. The bullet sparks off an iron railing inches from my head. Too close. Way too close.

Rebecca grabs my arm, yanking me left into an even narrower alley. Loading bays for restaurants. The smell of refuse and grease. Large waste bins creating a maze.

“This way!” She pulls me behind one of the bins.

We press against the brick wall, both gasping for air. My vision is blurring. My heart hammering so hard I can feel it in my throat. Rebecca’s weapon is raised, trained on the alley entrance. Her left arm is still bleeding, the dark stain spreading down her sleeve, dripping onto the pavement.

“You’re losing too much blood –”

“Quiet,” she whispers.

Footsteps. Measured. Unhurried. Getting closer.

Harris appears at the alley entrance. Silhouetted against the street beyond. He scans the loading bay methodically, weapon sweeping left to right. Taking his time. He knows we are here somewhere.

We hold our breath.

A delivery van pulls up to the alley entrance, blocking Harris’s view. The driver gets out, clipboard in hand, completely oblivious to the armed man ten feet away.

“Now!” Rebecca hisses.

We slip out from behind the bin, staying low, using the van as cover. The driver looks up, sees us, opens his mouth to say something.

Then he sees Rebecca’s gun. His eyes go wide.

Behind us, Harris must have spotted the movement. A gunshot cracks. The van's windscreen explodes. The driver throws himself to the ground, hands over his head.

We run.

Out the far end of the alley onto a side street. My phone is buzzing in my pocket. Probably DCI Stewart. I ignore it. Can't spare the breath to talk.

"Left!" Rebecca points.

We turn onto a street I recognize. Gracechurch Street. More people here. Lunch crowd starting to emerge from offices. We weave through pedestrians, their confused faces blurring past.

A man in a suit grabs my arm. "Are you alright? Do you need – "

Rebecca pulls me free. "Police! Move!"

The man steps back, startled.

Rebecca's phone rings. She answers without slowing, phone jammed between her shoulder and ear while her good hand keeps her weapon ready.

"Stewart? We're – yes, he's pursuing – heading east – I don't know exactly, Gracechurch Street area – he's right behind us!"

She hangs up, shoves the phone in her pocket. "Police are trying to intercept. Three units converging."

"Where?"

"Everywhere. But he keeps moving. Stays ahead of them." She glances back. "There!"

I look. Harris has emerged onto Gracechurch Street a hundred yards behind us. Still walking. Not running. Like he has all day. Like this is easy for him.

It probably is. Fifteen years in the military. Counter-insurgency operations. He's chased targets through worse terrain than London streets.

We aren't targets. We are prey.

A woman with a pram steps directly into our path. Young mother, baby sleeping peacefully, completely unaware.

We swerve violently. I slam into a shop window, shoulder hitting hard enough to make my teeth rattle. The window cracks but doesn't break. The woman screams, yanks her pram back.

"Sorry!" I gasp. "Run! Get inside!"

She looks past us, sees Harris. Sees his weapon. She grabs her pram and flees into the nearest shop.

We keep running.

My legs start to fail. Each step lands harder, slower. My chest tightens, refusing to draw a full breath. Black spots dance at the edges of my vision.

I keep moving.

"Can't," I gasp. "Can't keep –"

"Yes, you can!" Rebecca's good hand grips my arm tighter. "Not far now!"

Another junction ahead. I can see the Monument rising above the surrounding buildings. Wren's column pointing at the grey sky.

A police car comes screaming around the corner, lights flashing. Finally. Help.

The car screeches to a stop. Two officers jump out, weapons drawn.

But Harris is faster.

He fires. Once. Twice. Both front tyres explode. The officers dive behind their vehicle for cover, radios crackling with urgent requests for backup.

Harris keeps walking toward us. Unhurried. Patient. Professional.

We reach Monument Street.

And there it is. The Monument itself. Two hundred feet of Portland stone reaching toward the sky. Where my father had written his last journal entry. Where Webb had wanted to meet me. Where Wren had hidden his final secret.

Where this has to end.

Rebecca grabs my shoulders, eyes darting around the area. "The Monument. We go there."

"That's suicide! He'll trap us at the top!"

"We're already trapped." She looks at me. "At least there, we have height. Visibility. Stewart will send units – they'll surround the building. We just need to buy time."

It is a terrible plan. But I don't have a better one.

“Okay,” I whisper.

“Then run!”

We run toward the Monument. Behind us, I can hear Harris’s footsteps. Still steady. Still calm. Still coming.

Police vehicles are arriving, officers shouting into radios. The area is being cordoned off. But none of them can reach us before Harris does.

“The door’s open!” Rebecca points.

We burst through the entrance. A man in a Monument fleece stands in the ticket booth with a phone at his ear, one hand out to stop us, until Rebecca’s warrant card is an inch from his face.

“Armed man. A minute behind us. Get everyone out.”

He doesn’t argue. He hits a switch under the counter and an alarm begins to ring.

The staircase corkscrews up around an open well, whitewashed wall on one side, iron handrail on the other. Three hundred and eleven steps. Every few turns a slot of window lays a blade of grey daylight across the plaster.

“Up!” Rebecca shouts. “Keep moving!”

Visitors are already coming down, a stream of startled faces pressed to the wall to let us through. A couple in matching anoraks. A man with a camera clutched to his chest. “Down!” Rebecca shouts without slowing. “Out! Don’t stop!”

My legs are already screaming from the run through London, but I force them to climb. The steps narrow to wedges at the inner rail. My palm skims the whitewash for balance, cold under my hand.

My thighs are past burning. There is a deeper ache below that, unresponsive, the kind that means the muscle has given everything it has and is running on something else now. I keep my hand on the outer wall. It is the only thing that feels real.

Behind us, Harris's footsteps echo in the stairwell. Steady. Methodical. Not hurried.

I try to count his footsteps against mine. To hear whether the gap is widening or closing. The stone throws sound back strangely, bouncing it off the curved walls until I can't tell distance from echo.

Once I look down through the rail. The well falls away in a tightening spiral, and far below a hand slides up the iron, unhurried. Then the curve swallows it.

Behind me, Rebecca's breathing has shortened to something I don't like the sound of.

"Still with me?" I manage.

"Climb," she says.

He knows we're trapped.

Round and round. Up and up.

Names had been scratched into the whitewash by hands long dead. Initials. A date: 1792. I climb past them without slowing.

My vision blurs completely. The steps tilt beneath me. My legs barely respond, moving on instinct alone.

Every breath scrapes raw through my chest.

I keep climbing anyway.

I count steps for a while. I lose count somewhere past a hundred and twenty.

“Keep going!” Rebecca gasps behind me.

Up and up. The stairs seem endless. My legs are jelly. My chest feels like it is being crushed.

Finally, the top door.

I burst through onto the viewing platform. The wind comes straight through the steel mesh that cages the gallery, a net of thin wire in open diamonds, bows overhead on curved ribs. A dropped guidebook lies face-down on the stone, its pages riffling. Beyond the wire, London spreads out in every direction under the grey sky. St. Paul’s dome to the west. The Thames running east to Tower Bridge. The city my father had loved, had died trying to understand.

Rebecca emerges behind me, weapon raised, scanning the platform. “Move to the far side. Put the column between us and the door.”

The platform runs in a narrow ring around the column. Nowhere to hide.

We move to the far side and put our backs to the cold wire. Facing the door.

Waiting.

Footsteps on the stairs below. Getting closer.

“When he comes through,” Rebecca whispers, “stay behind me.”

“Bec –”

“Just trust me.”

The door opens.

Harris steps through. Gun raised. Eyes scanning. He sees us immediately.

“End of the line, Ms. Hart.” His voice is calm. Almost gentle. “Brave run. Your father would be proud.”

“Don’t talk about my father.” I surprise myself with how steady I sound.

“He asked questions he shouldn’t have asked. Made connections he shouldn’t have made.” Harris walks slowly around the platform, keeping his weapon trained on us. “I gave him chances to stop. Multiple warnings. He ignored them all.”

“So, you killed him.”

“I followed orders. Just like I always have.”

Rebecca’s weapon is up. “Armed police are surrounding this building. You’re not getting out of here.”

Harris smiles. “Neither are you. That’s the problem with trapping someone in a cage. Works both ways.” He keeps circling. “I only need to kill one of you. Then I can take my time with the police.

They want me alive for trial. They won't risk a shot through that wire. One deflection and it could be you."

He is right. We are trapped up here with him.

"And Webb?" I ask, trying to keep him talking. Trying to buy time for... what? I don't know.

"Saturday night. Quick. Clean. He was helping you verify the pattern. The families wanted him eliminated before he could confirm your theory." Harris keeps moving, circling. "You're persistent, I'll give you that. Just like your father. But persistence without caution is just stubbornness."

"And stubbornness without conscience is just murder," I say.

Harris smiles. "Philosophical to the end. I respect that."

He raises his weapon. Points it at my head.

Rebecca fires.

The shot goes wide – intentionally. Drawing his attention. Making him turn.

Harris swings toward her. Fires.

Rebecca ducks. The bullet rings off a steel rib beside her head.

And then –

The crack of a rifle. From somewhere across the street.

Harris jerks. His weapon drops. He staggers, hand going to his chest where blood blooms dark against his jacket.

Like he can't understand what has just happened.

Another crack. Another hit. Centre mass.

Harris goes down. Falls to his knees. Then forward. Face hitting the stone platform.

He doesn't move again.

Rebecca is already moving, kicking his weapon away, checking for a pulse. "He's down. Confirmed."

"Where did that come from?"

She points to a rooftop three hundred yards away. I can barely see it – figures in tactical gear. A rifle. "Armed response. Stewart must have positioned snipers when we ran this way."

"Through that?" I stare at the mesh.

"Wire's thin. If you know your angle." She almost smiles. "They do."

"You knew?"

"Hoped." She leans against the wire, exhausted. "Saw them positioning as we ran. Figured if we could get Harris into a line of fire, they'd have a shot." She looks at me. "I couldn't tell you. Had to make it look real. Like we were actually trapped."

My legs give out. I sit down hard on the cold stone platform.

The man who killed my father is dead.

*

DCI Stewart bursts through the door seconds later, weapon drawn, officers behind her. “Secure the suspect!”

An officer checks Harris. “No pulse. Two centre-mass hits. He’s gone.”

Stewart lowers her weapon, speaks into her radio. “Suspect down. Threat neutralized. Send medical for Ms. Cole – she’s injured.”

Rebecca is leaning against the mesh, her arm still bleeding. But she is alive.

We both are.

Paramedics arrive. They check us over despite our protests. Rebecca’s arm wound is cleaned and bandaged properly. I have cuts and bruises I don’t remember getting. A gash on my shoulder from hitting the shop window.

But we are alive.

Harris isn’t.

Stewart crouches beside us. “Ms. Hart. Are you injured?”

“No. Just...” I can’t finish.

“I know. Let’s get you down from here.”

We descend the spiral staircase slowly. Paramedics helping Rebecca. Officers documenting the scene. At the base, more police. More emergency vehicles. The Monument cordoned off.

And Harris’s body being loaded into an ambulance, covered with a sheet.

I look up at the Monument rising above us. Wren's column. Built to remember a fire that destroyed a city. That gave Wren the chance to rebuild it with secrets hidden in stone.

Where my father had stood asking questions that got him killed.

Where I'd nearly died asking the same questions.

But I am alive. Rebecca is alive.

"Is it really over?" I ask Stewart.

She follows my gaze. "The immediate threat? Yes. Harris is dead. Victoria is in custody awaiting trial. Richardson's dead. The conspiracy is public. The families' power is broken." She pauses. "The legal battles over property will take years. But you don't need to be part of that anymore. You've done your part."

I nod. Too tired to feel relief. Too shaken to feel victory.

Rebecca's hand finds mine. Squeezes.

"Come on," Stewart says gently. "Let's get you home."

The ambulance takes Rebecca to hospital. Stewart drives me home personally. London passes by outside the window.

Ordinary Monday.

People going to work, living normal lives.

While I've just watched a man die on top of Wren's monument.

Daniel is waiting when we arrive. He hugs me so tight I can barely breathe.

"I saw the news. The shooting at St. Paul's. Are you okay?"

“I’m okay. Rebecca’s in hospital but she’ll be fine. And Harris...” I can’t say it.

“I know. They showed the Monument. Not the body, but...” He trails off.

Stewart promises to send officers to stay outside. Protection until they are certain there are no other threats. Then she leaves us alone.

I sit on the sofa. Daniel makes tea I don’t drink. The TV plays news coverage I can’t watch.

My phone buzzes. Dr. Mueller. The BBC. Journalists requesting interviews.

I turn it off.

The truth is out. The families are finished. My father’s killer is dead. I should have felt something. Relief. Victory. Closure.

Instead, I just feel empty.

And very, very tired.

Outside, London continues.

Wren’s city, built on secrets that are secrets no more.

THIRTY

OLIVIA HART
Various Locations, London
Six weeks later

The courtroom is packed.

I sit in the public gallery between Rebecca and Daniel, watching Victoria Ashton stand in the dock. She looks smaller than I remember. Diminished. The aristocratic composure had cracked weeks ago under the weight of evidence.

The judge's voice is steady, measured. "Victoria Elizabeth Ashton, the jury has found you guilty of conspiracy to commit murder, attempted murder, perverting the course of justice, and the murder of Max Richardson. Before I pass sentence, I will hear from the Crown, and then from the defence."

The prosecutor stands. "Your Honour, three people are dead because of this defendant's orders. Thomas Hart. Marcus Webb. Her own associate Max Richardson. And she attempted to murder Ms. Hart as well."

"Alleged orders," Victoria's lawyer interjects. "My client maintains –"

“Your client’s phone records show seventeen calls to Richardson in the week before Thomas Hart’s death,” the prosecutor continues. “Financial transfers totalling half a million pounds to offshore accounts linked to Harris. Witness testimony from James Fairchild detailing planning meetings. This isn’t a property dispute. It’s murder for hire.”

“Thank you,” the judge says. “Ms. Ashton, do you have anything to say before sentence is passed?”

Victoria’s lawyer stands. “My client wishes to express remorse for –”

“I can speak for myself.” Victoria’s voice cuts across the courtroom. She looks directly at me. “This verdict is a travesty of justice. My lawyers will be filing an appeal immediately. Three hundred and fifty years of my family’s legacy will not be undone by circumstantial evidence and the conspiracy theories of a dead historian.” Her voice is steel. Cold. Defiant. “We’ve weathered far worse than this. The Ashton name has survived plague, fire, war, and revolution. It will survive this.”

“Ms. Ashton,” the judge intervenes, “you will confine yourself to matters of mitigation –”

“I’m sixty-five years old,” Victoria interrupts. “I have the resources to fight this conviction for decades if necessary. Every appeal. Every legal avenue. I will not go quietly.”

“They weren’t theories,” I say, loud enough for the whole courtroom to hear. “They were facts. And all the appeals in the world won’t change that.”

Victoria's eyes meet mine. For a moment, something flickers in her expression. Not defeat. But recognition. She knows I am right.

She just refuses to admit it.

The judge's voice is sharp. "Ms. Ashton, you stand convicted by a jury of your peers based on overwhelming evidence. Your family's legacy is not on trial here. Your actions are."

"My actions were to protect what generations of Ashtons built through legitimate means," Victoria shoots back. "The property surveys were conducted according to the standards of the time. If modern technology reveals minor discrepancies, that doesn't invalidate three centuries of legal ownership."

"Your Honour," the prosecutor says evenly, "the defendant is still trying to reframe conspiracy to murder as a property dispute."

Victoria remains standing, spine straight, chin up. Every inch the aristocrat. "I will prove my innocence on appeal. The evidence is circumstantial. The witnesses are self-serving criminals seeking reduced sentences. This conviction will not stand."

The judge studies her for a long moment. "Ms. Ashton, the jury deliberated for six days and found you guilty on all counts. Your refusal to accept responsibility is noted for the record. Please stand for sentence."

The judge sentences her to life without possibility of parole. Victoria doesn't react. Just stands there as the guards lead her away, already speaking to her lawyer about filing the appeal.

I wait for satisfaction. It doesn't come. Satisfaction would mean my father was still alive. Webb was still alive. That Harris had never existed.

But it is justice. Imperfect. Incomplete. But real.

Outside the courthouse, journalists swarm. Dr. Mueller handles most of the questions while Rebecca and Daniel flank me, providing a physical barrier between me and the cameras.

"Ms. Hart! How do you feel about the verdict?"

"Relieved," I say. Short. Honest.

"What about the other families? The Fairchilds? Pembrokes? Greys?"

"The Crown Prosecution Service is reviewing all the evidence. I trust they'll make appropriate decisions."

What I don't say: James Fairchild had already negotiated immunity in exchange for testimony. Henry Grey's lawyers are fighting his extradition from Monaco. Lord Pembroke had died of a heart attack two weeks after Victoria's arrest – stress, the doctors say, though I suspect the shame is what killed him.

The families are finished. Not in handcuffs, maybe. Not all of them. But their power is broken. The property challenges are mounting. Three centuries of certainty, dissolved into litigation that will take decades to resolve.

My father would have called it a good start.

*

A week later, I stand at the foot of the Monument with Dr. Mueller and a team from Heritage England.

The vault was only the beginning. A second radar sweep picked up another, shallower void directly beneath the column's hollow core, the shaft Wren and Hooke built to work as a zenith telescope. The development that James Fairchild had rushed to approve is cancelled. Instead, the site is declared a heritage excavation.

"Carefully, please," Mueller calls to the workers. "The chamber should be approximately eight feet below current ground level."

Daniel stands beside me, filming on his phone. He's been documenting everything, building a digital archive of the discovery.

"Are you nervous?" he asks.

"Terrified," I admit. "What if there's nothing there?"

"There will be. Dad was right about the vault. He'll be right about this."

The excavator's bucket scrapes different stone. Older stone.

"Stop!" Mueller raises his hand. "We're through."

The capstone is massive. Seventeenth-century masonry, sealed with lead. Inscribed with a date: 1677.

"Eleven years after the Fire," Mueller breathes. "Wren sealed this the same year the Monument was completed."

When the seal finally breaks hours later, stale air rushes out. Inside are Christopher Wren's instruments. A copper cylinder. A

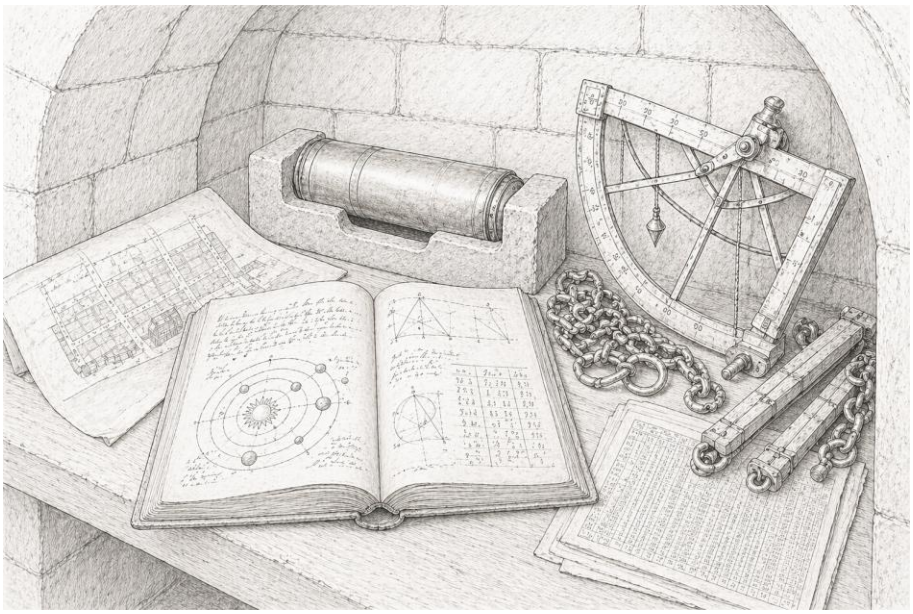
telescope. An astrolabe. Star charts. And a bound journal of observations, dated 1665 to 1677.

Mueller's hands shake as he examines them. "He did it. He actually observed the stars, calculated positions from a heliocentric model, used those calculations to position his churches."

"And hid the evidence," I say quietly, "because the truth was too expensive to acknowledge."

"But he preserved it," Daniel adds. "For someone who knew where to look."

Someone like our father.



I return to work the following Monday.

Heritage preservation engineering. The work I've trained for, the work I understand. Not chasing conspiracies or dodging bullets.

Just preserving beautiful buildings that deserve proper conservation.

My first morning back, I arrive early. Sit at my desk. Look at the blank computer screen waiting for me to fill it with structural assessments and preservation plans.

My phone buzzes. Text from Rebecca:

`First day back. You've got this.`

And one from Daniel:

`Proud of you. Dad would be too.`

I set my father's watch on the desk. Still broken. I've kept meaning to get it repaired, but somehow it feels right to leave it stopped. A reminder of what he'd lost, what I'd found.

The truth about Wren's conspiracy is public now. The families are broken. Victoria is in prison for life. Harris and Richardson are dead. The excavation at the Monument revealed exactly what my father had predicted.

His work is done, and I can finally move forward.

Not forget. Never forget but build a life that honours his legacy by living well, not just pursuing justice.

The morning sun comes through the office windows; Wren's churches scattered across the skyline. St. Paul's dome dominating the view. The Monument visible in the distance, where archaeologists are carefully documenting three hundred and fifty years of hidden truth.

I open a new project file. A seventeenth-century church in Southwark that needs structural assessment. Historic preservation. Looking backward to protect what matters, looking forward to ensure it survives.

The work my father had loved. The work I love too.

Outside, London lives on. People go to work. Tourists visit monuments. History becomes present, and present becomes history.

The truth endures.

And so do I.

EPILOGUE

OLIVIA HART
London
February 2028

Eighteen months after the Parliamentary recommendations, London is experiencing one of those rare winter days when the city seems to shimmer with possibility. The sky is clear and bright, the February cold sharp enough to invigorate rather than depress, the light catching on the Thames in ways that make the city look almost new despite its ancient bones.

I'm standing outside The Monument to the Great Fire of London, watching workmen install a new commemorative plaque. The plaque is bronze, designed to weather and age in harmony with the column itself. The inscription has been crafted by a committee that included Mueller, Dr. Reynolds, and representatives from Heritage England.

It reads:

The Monument to the Great Fire of London

Designed by Sir Christopher Wren and Dr. Robert Hooke

1671-1677

Within the foundation of this structure, Sir Christopher Wren concealed testimony documenting the true cause of the Great Fire of 1666 and the systematic property fraud that followed. His architectural encoding preserved evidence of conspiracy across sixteen London churches, ensuring that truth would survive three centuries of suppression.

The testimony was discovered through the research of historian Thomas Hart (1963-2020), whose courage and rigorous methodology exposed one of Britain's greatest historical conspiracies. His work was completed by his daughter Olivia Hart and son Daniel Hart, whose investigation led to Parliamentary acknowledgement and legal accountability.

Wren hid the truth so that it would survive. This plaque honours those who gave all they had to ensure it was found.

'Truth Endures Beyond the Grave'

- Eleanor Hart (1968–2017)

Daniel stands beside me, watching the installation with the same careful attention he brings to everything. Rebecca is nearby, no longer in an official protective capacity but present as a friend who wants to witness this moment.

"Mum would have loved seeing her words on an official monument," Daniel whispers.

“Dad would have been embarrassed by the attention but secretly pleased,” I add. “He never wanted to be famous. He wanted to be right.”

“He was both.”

The workmen finish securing the plaque and step back to admire their work. The site supervisor approaches us, a middle-aged woman with the practical bearing of someone who has overseen countless heritage installations.

“All set, Ms. Hart,” she says. “The plaque is rated for at least a century of London weather, maybe longer. Your parents’ words will be here as long as the Monument stands.”

“Thank you,” I manage to say around the unexpected tightness in my throat.

She nods and departs with her crew, leaving the three of us standing before the newly installed commemoration. Other people are beginning to gather – passersby curious about the new plaque, tourists photographing The Monument, Londoners going about their daily business in the shadow of Wren’s column.

A young woman stops to read the inscription, her expression shifting from casual interest to genuine surprise.

“I didn’t know any of this,” she says to her companion. “I thought the Fire was an accident from a bakery.”

“There’s a whole documentary about it on the BBC,” her companion replies. “The families that profited are still fighting the property challenges in court.”

They move on, but their conversation continues, voices fading as they walk towards the Thames. The story has become part of London's collective knowledge, integrated into the way people understand their city's history.

Mueller's book became an unexpected bestseller. It is now required reading in architectural history courses across Europe and North America. My father's research forms the foundation of an entire academic field now – scholars investigating similar patterns in Amsterdam, Paris, Hamburg, and Copenhagen. In fact, anywhere urban disaster was followed by suspicious reconstruction.

Three more sealed voids have been discovered in London churches since our investigation concluded. Eighteen confirmed sites now, with archaeologists examining several more potential locations.

The property challenges continue their slow progression through the legal system. Settlements have been substantial. The Fairchild family has divested more than half of their London holdings. The Thomas Hart Heritage Foundation is now funded by a trust established by James Fairchild, who chose restitution over preservation of ill-gotten wealth.

The Grey family has fought harder, contesting each challenge and appealing adverse rulings.

The Ashton family is effectively finished. Victoria remains in prison, still fighting her conviction through endless appeals. Each one has been denied, but her lawyers continue filing motions. The family's remaining holdings have been sold off to pay mounting legal fees and settlements.

I'm currently overseeing the restoration of three seventeenth-century churches, none of them connected to the conspiracy, all of them simply beautiful buildings that deserve proper conservation.

I go to work, I come home, I have dinner with Daniel, I see friends. I've even started dating someone – an architect named Simon who knows about the Monument case but cares more about my present than my past.

The extraordinary crisis has resolved into something ordinary.

And I've discovered that ordinary is what I needed.

I glance at my phone. Text from Ashworth.

`Final Pembroke settlement just announced. They're transferring their remaining disputed holdings rather than continue appeals. That completes the major cases. Thought you'd want to know the chapter is truly closed.`

I show Daniel the message. He smiles, the expression mixing satisfaction with the weariness that comes from extended legal battles concluding.

"It's done," he says. "The historical injustice has been addressed as thoroughly as the legal system allows."

Standing here before The Monument with the plaque commemorating our parents and the truth they died protecting; I realise that imperfect outcomes might be sufficient. The conspiracy has been exposed, the families have faced consequences, the evidence is preserved for all time.

The truth endured.

That was always what mattered most.

“I want to visit the vault,” I say. “The primary vault beneath the Monument. I haven’t been back since the Heritage England assessment.”

Daniel nods understanding.

Later that day, we’re descending into the Monument’s foundation levels with a Heritage England representative. The stairs are narrow and steep, leading down into the sealed spaces where Christopher Wren hid his testimony more than three and a half centuries ago.

The vault has been professionally preserved since the official assessment. Climate control maintains stable conditions, protective barriers prevent damage from visitors, archival lighting allows viewing without degradation.

The stone shelves where Wren placed his testimony are empty now – the contents have been moved to the British Museum for permanent preservation and public display. But the vault itself remains, a chamber measuring eight feet on each side positioned where my father’s ground-penetrating radar detected it eight years ago.

I stand in the centre of the space, looking up at the vaulted ceiling, running my hand along the cut stone walls. This is where Christopher Wren preserved the truth when revealing it would have been fatal. This is where evidence survived three centuries of determined suppression. This is where my father’s research was vindicated and my family’s losses were given meaning.

“What do you think Wren would make of all this?” Daniel asks. “The plaque, the book, the legal challenges, the academic field devoted to studying his work?”

“I think he’d be satisfied that his architectural testimony was read and understood,” I say. “He didn’t build these vaults for personal recognition. He built them because truth mattered to him more than his own safety or peace. The same reason Dad did his research. The same reason Mum supported him despite knowing the danger.”

“And the same reason you finished what they started.”

“We finished it. You and me together.”

The Heritage England representative gives us privacy, waiting at the entrance to the vault whilst we take our moment in this space that changed everything.

“I’m glad we did this,” I say. “Even knowing the cost. The truth needed to be exposed.”

We leave the vault and return to street level, emerging back into the bright February afternoon. The plaque gleams in the winter sunlight, bronze letters spelling out our parents’ names and their contribution to historical truth. The story has become part of London’s texture, woven into how people understand the city.

Rebecca walks with us back towards the Tube station at Monument. She’s heading to another client, her protective security work continuing with people who face more immediate threats than we do now.

“Take care of yourselves,” she says before departing. “And don’t investigate any more centuries-old conspiracies. My nerves can’t handle another case like this one.”

“We’re done with the conspiracy investigation business,” Daniel says with a slight smile.

Rebecca hugs us both and then disappears into the crowd.

Daniel and I walk together along the Thames, neither of us quite ready to return to ordinary routine. The river flows past us, constant and indifferent, carrying the city’s history and present towards some unknowable future.

“Do you ever regret it?” Daniel asks. “Everything we went through, everything we risked?”

“No,” I say without hesitation. “I regret that Mum and Dad aren’t here to see what their deaths accomplished. I regret that Marcus Webb didn’t survive to witness the outcome. But I don’t regret finishing the work or exposing the truth.”

“Neither do I.”

We walk in comfortable silence before reaching Blackfriars Bridge. The February sun is beginning to set, casting London in shades of gold and grey.

“I’m meeting Simon for dinner tonight,” I mention. “Do you want to join us?”

“I have a date,” Daniel says. “The woman I mentioned last month. We’re trying to figure out if there’s something there.”

“Romantic.”

“It works for us.”

Normal lives. Normal relationships. Normal concerns about dinner plans. The extraordinary crisis has fully resolved into the ordinary rhythms of life.

And somehow, impossibly, that’s perfect.

We part ways at the Tube station. The evening commute surrounds me – tired workers heading home, students heading out, the perpetual motion of London continuing regardless of individual stories or historical revelations.

I’m another person on the Tube now. Not an investigator or a heritage crusader. Just Olivia Hart, structural engineer, living a life that’s blessedly ordinary.

When I return to the flat late that evening, Daniel is already home, working on his laptop but clearly in a good mood.

“How was your date?” I ask.

“Promising. We’re seeing each other again this weekend.”

“Mine too.”

“So, we’re both doing the normal relationship thing now. After the year we’ve had, conventional sounds wonderful.”

I make tea and settle into my armchair with the novel I’ve been reading. The flat is warm and comfortable, filled with the quiet presence of family and safety.

Before bed, I check my email and find a message from Professor Mueller.

Olivia,

Heidelberg University is establishing a permanent research centre devoted to architectural investigation of historical conspiracies. The centre will be named the Thomas Hart Centre for Historical Truth and will coordinate international research using your father's methodologies.

Your father's legacy will outlive all of us.

With deepest respect,

Hermann Mueller

I forward the email to Daniel, who responds from his room.

"He'd be embarrassed and thrilled. Mostly embarrassed."

"Yes. Exactly that."

I lie in bed thinking about my father working alone in his study, following patterns others dismissed.

About my mother, who understood the danger and chose to stand beside him anyway.

About Marcus Webb, who could have walked away, but didn't.

About Wren, three centuries earlier, doing the same.

The truth survived. Not because it was easy. Not because it was safe, but because enough people chose it.

For a time, Daniel and I were those people too.

Now we get to be something else.

Something ordinary.

*

When I wake the next morning, London is covered in light snow.

For a few hours, everything looks new.

Clean, unmarked.

I stand at the window, watching the city in silence.

The Monument still stands, the vault beneath it no longer a secret.

But the record has been changed.

The truth endures.

Not hidden.

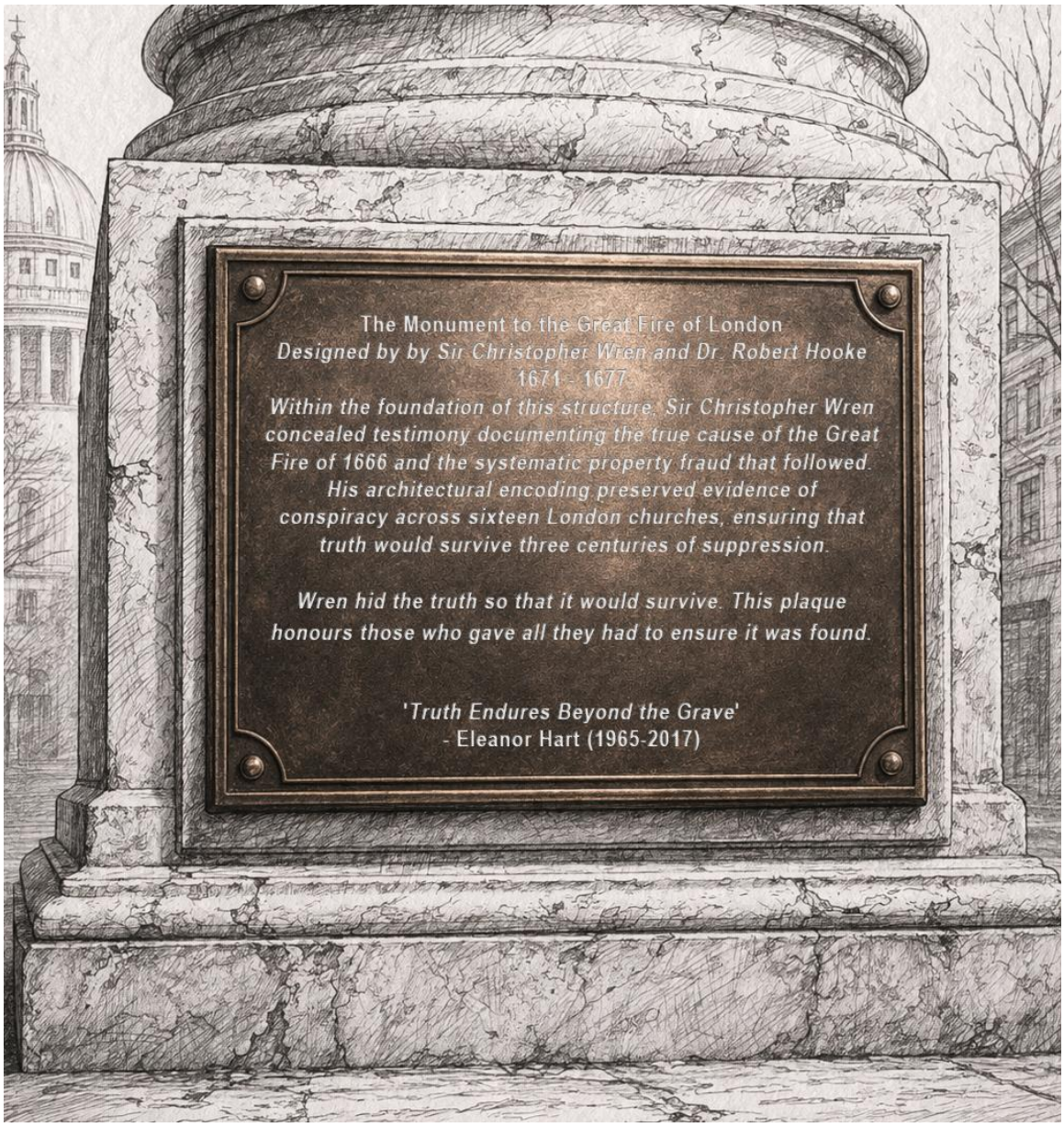
Not forgotten.

And for the first time in a long time,

there is nothing left to prove.

And nothing left to chase.

THE END



"Truth Endures Beyond the Grave"

APPENDIX

THE ARCHITECTURE OF CONSPIRACY

What's Real, What's Fiction, and Why It Matters

The Monument is a work of fiction. The conspiracy, the murders, the sealed chambers documenting evidence. These are products of my imagination. But the premise that drives the story? That's built on architectural fact.

What Christopher Wren Actually Did

Sir Christopher Wren wasn't primarily an architect. He was a mathematician, astronomer, and founding member of the Royal Society – one of the greatest scientific minds of the 17th century. When the Great Fire of 1666 destroyed medieval London, Wren got the commission to rebuild St. Paul's Cathedral and 51 parish churches. He spent the next forty years reshaping London's skyline.

And he really did hide things in his architecture.

St. Paul's Cathedral contains documented secrets:

The *famous dome* isn't one structure – it's three. The outer dome you see from outside. The inner dome you see from inside. And between them, invisible to observers, a massive brick cone that

bears the actual weight. Wren essentially built architecture that remains completely hidden.

The *Cathedral library*, completed in 1709, was described by St. Paul's itself as cleverly concealed by the ingenious architecture of Christopher Wren. It sits behind the southwest tower at Triforium level, accessible via the Dean's Stair – a geometric cantilevered staircase that appears to float without visible support.

Perhaps most remarkably, Wren quietly rebuilt his own design. The "*Warrant Design*" King Charles approved in 1675 was a traditional plan topped with a spire. The approval came with a proviso allowing "variations, rather ornamental than essential." Wren stretched that wording as far as it would go. The cathedral that rose behind the scaffolding bore little resemblance to the approved plan: it had a great dome, a grand west entrance and towers. Its central foundations were also far larger than the approved design needed, which suggests he always intended more.

If Wren hid a structural cone, concealed a library, and quietly rebuilt his approved design at his most famous building, could he have hidden something more deliberate in his other 51 churches?

That's the premise of *The Monument*.

The Technology Is Real

Ground-penetrating radar and laser scanning aren't science fiction. They're standard tools in archaeology and structural engineering.

In 2017, scientists discovered a large hidden void in the Great Pyramid of Giza using muon tomography – cosmic ray imaging.

The pyramid had been studied for 4,500 years. Nobody knew the chamber existed.

In 2015, LiDAR scanning penetrated the jungle canopy in Cambodia and revealed a lost city at Phnom Kulen, which the lead archaeologist described as the size of Phnom Penh – temples, roads, water systems that had been invisible for centuries.

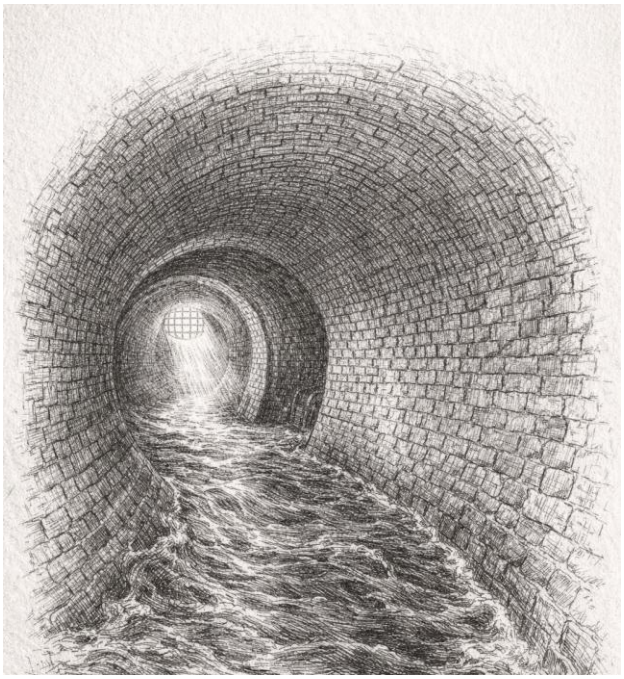
London's Crossrail construction (2009-2019) uncovered over 10,000 artefacts, around 3,000 skeletons, a Roman road and plague burials. Some discoveries were predicted. Others were complete surprises.

The equipment Olivia Hart uses in the novel – GPR and laser scanning – is the same technology making real discoveries today. The methods are accurate. The capabilities are real. The only fictional element is what she finds.

London's Hidden Infrastructure

The Fleet River still flows beneath Fleet Street, buried in a Victorian brick tunnel below the pavement. It's one of at least twenty-one rivers London buried as the city grew.

Joseph Bazalgette's revolutionary sewer system (built after the Great Stink of 1858) consists of about 1,100 miles of street sewers and 82 miles of main intercepting sewers. Many incorporate the buried rivers. The system is still in use 150 years later.



"The River Fleet"

Dozens of London Underground stations have closed over the decades. Some are bricked up. Some serve as storage. Some remain in peculiar limbo – sealed behind locked doors, their platforms in darkness, accessible only to Transport for London staff.

Olivia's escape through the Fleet sewer system in Chapter 13 is geographically accurate. The tunnel exists. The route is plausible. The danger is real. The illegality is also real – exploring London's sewers without permission is trespassing and extremely dangerous.

What's Fiction?

The conspiracy is invented. There's no evidence the Great Fire of 1666 was anything other than an accident that spread catastrophically through a wooden medieval city during a drought.

The sealed 8×8×8 foot chambers don't exist. No one has discovered Wren encoding evidence in church foundations.

The Fairchild, Pembroke, Ashton, and Grey families are fictional, though their story is inspired by real property acquisitions after the Fire.

The murders, the threats, the cover-up – all fictional.

But the question the novel asks is real: If you were a mathematical genius in 1670 who needed to preserve evidence for centuries, knowing that verbal testimony could be silenced and documents destroyed, how would you do it?

Wren's answer, I imagine, would be: Build it into the architecture itself.

Mathematical precision can't lie. Geometric relationships can be measured and verified. Buildings outlast testimony and documents. And if you encoded proof in the permanent structure of a city, protected as heritage sites, the evidence would survive long enough for someone with the right tools to find it.

Could Wren have done this? Absolutely. His mathematical genius, astronomical knowledge, architectural control, and documented practice of hiding structures prove the capability.

Did he do it? Almost certainly not.

But could someone prove it if he had? With modern scanning technology, geometric analysis, and property records – yes. That's what makes the premise work.

Why Architecture Matters

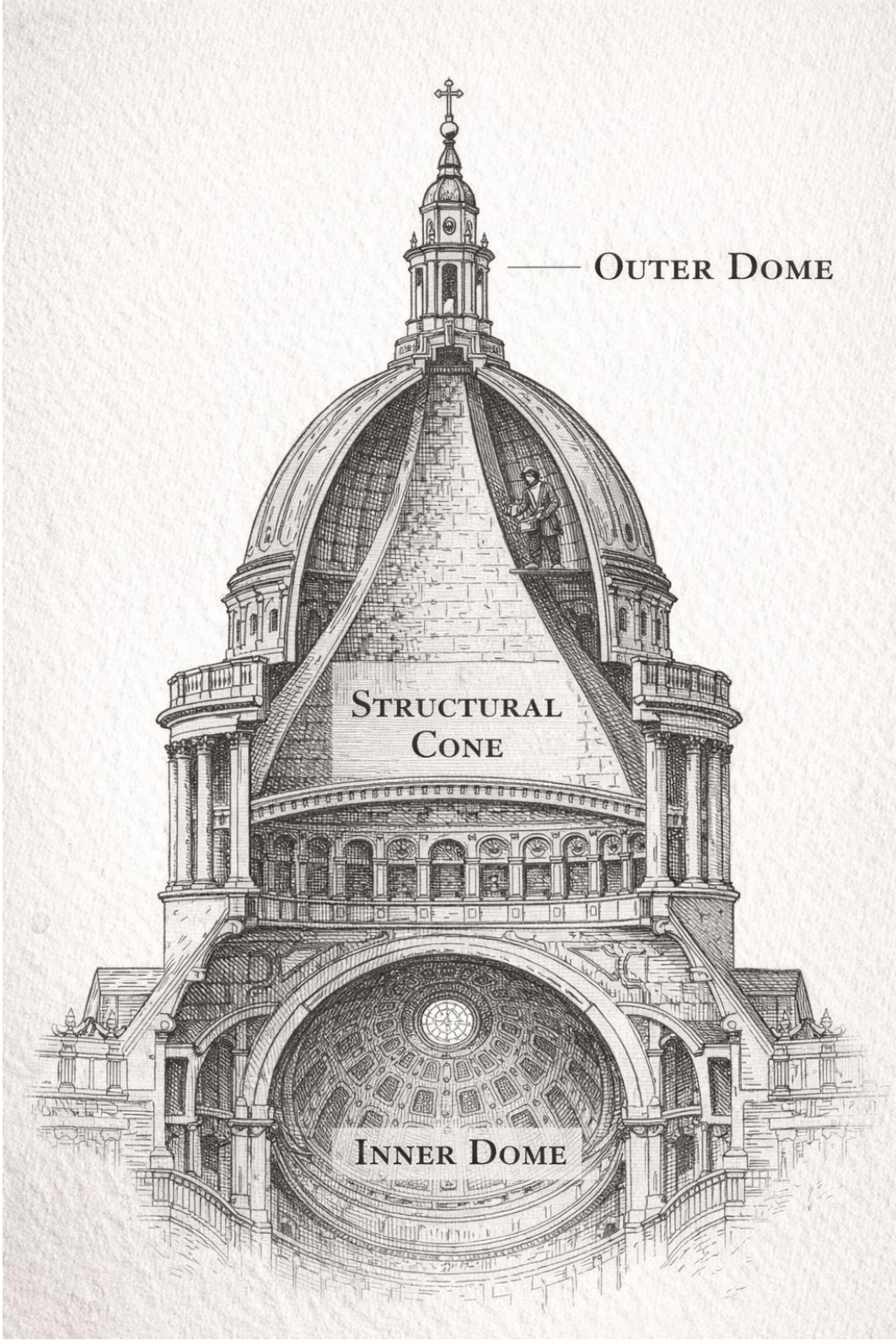
This novel asks readers to look at familiar buildings differently. St. Paul's Cathedral isn't just beautiful – it's a demonstration that essential structures can be invisible. The Monument isn't just a memorial – it's 202 feet of precisely positioned stone that could, theoretically, encode information in its dimensions and placement.

Every Wren church standing in London is a potential repository of hidden meaning. Some of that meaning is documented: astronomical alignments, sacred geometry, mathematical ratios. Some remains speculative.

The fiction of *The Monument* is built on the foundation of architectural fact. What Wren hid at St. Paul's is documented. What he might have hidden elsewhere is the question that drives the story.

And in a city that keeps revealing secrets – from Roman mosaics 18 feet below demolished churches to Victorian engineering still functioning under our feet – who's to say what else is waiting to be discovered?

For more information on the real architecture and history behind the novel, visit TheMonumentNovel.com



“The hidden structural cone – Wren’s invisible architecture”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Monument asks a simple question: If you needed to preserve evidence for three hundred years, knowing it could be destroyed or suppressed, how would you do it?

Christopher Wren's answer, I imagine, would be: Build it into the architecture.

I've always been fascinated by London's hidden layers – the buried rivers, the abandoned Tube stations, the Roman walls beneath modern streets. When I started researching Wren's post-Fire churches, I discovered he really did hide things in his architecture. St. Paul's triple dome contains an invisible structural cone. The Cathedral library was cleverly concealed by ingenious architecture. He even built a radically different cathedral from the one approved, using a proviso that let him change the design.

If Wren hid structures at his most famous building, what might he have concealed in his other 51 churches?

That premise drove me to start researching Sir Christopher Wren, his story, and his involvement in rebuilding the churches lost in the Great Fire of London. I considered the idea of modern scanning technology finding something hidden throughout London, specifically the 51 churches and St. Paul's Cathedral designed by Wren.

The conspiracy is fiction. The capability is fact.

This book is my love letter to London's architecture, to the idea that buildings can be more than decoration – they can be testimony, encoded in stone and waiting for someone with the right tools to read them.

Thank you for reading.

Jonathan Moss