



# THE VIRUS

Pastor Willo Detective Mark

DAN HEDEGAARD

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CHAPTER 1

## The First Fever at Willowbrook

**A** man's breath came out in thin, panicked bursts on the steps of Willowbrook Community Church, like his chest couldn't decide whether to keep working. Pastor Willo watched the color drain from his face in the cold air, his hands clawing at his own collar as if the fabric might pull him back from whatever was taking him. Someone had set a thermos on the church's front bench earlier; now the metal smell of spilled coffee mingled with the sharper sting of disinfectant from the volunteer station inside. The street noise—tires hissing, a bus sighing at the curb—kept going as the man's knees buckled, and the world seemed to narrow to the wet sound of his cough.

Detective Mark arrived at a run, badge catching the streetlight as he pushed through the gathered bodies. "Clear a space," he barked, not unkind, but quick. "Back up. Let me see what we're dealing with." A woman in a denim jacket cried out, clutching her phone to her chest, her screen glowing with a video she wasn't sure she should have recorded. The man on the steps rasped once—an ugly, broken sound—and then went still for half a second too long.

Pastor Willo knelt beside him anyway, the way he had knelt for funerals and hospital beds and people who didn't believe they had the right to ask for prayer. His palms hovered over the man's arm, not touching yet. The skin was cold, colder than it should've been for someone collapsing in the middle of the day. The man's eyes fluttered open, unfocused, and he tried to speak. What came out was a thin string of words that didn't match any language Willo recognized, followed by a hard swallow that seemed to make the coughing worse.

"Sir," Willo said, leaning close. He kept his voice steady, his own breathing measured. "Can you hear me? Help is coming."

Mark's eyes flicked to him, and in that glance Willo saw the question Mark wasn't asking out loud: How much of this is sickness, and how much is something done to a

person? Mark had been on cases long enough to know the difference between a body failing and a body being forced to fail.

The man's hand jerked toward Willo's sleeve, fingers digging into cloth with sudden strength. His nails left half-moon marks. His lips moved again. This time the sounds were clearer, like the man was trying to mimic something he'd been told to repeat. "W... Willow...", he rasped, then choked on the rest. His forehead shone with sweat that shouldn't have formed so quickly.

Mark grabbed the man's wrist with a grip practiced on blood pressures and pulse checks. "Pulse is there," he said, voice turning hard with focus. "Breathing-barely." He looked up at a volunteer who had drifted nearer, holding a first-aid kit like it might protect them from what was happening. "Call an ambulance. Now. And keep people from crowding-people touch things when they're scared."

A murmur rose behind Willo, fear traveling faster than the virus ever could. Someone said, "It's catching," and someone else answered, "It's on the news already." Willo didn't know which station had started the rumor, but he could feel the church gathering shift into something sharper. The air carried a faint chemical odor now, like overheated plastic, barely there under the coffee and disinfectant.

Mark's phone buzzed in his hand. He glanced at it, then at the man on the steps. "I'm getting calls from the hospital," he said. "They're seeing something similar."

Pastor Willo's want was immediate and simple: keep the man alive long enough for answers. He also wanted the crowd to stop turning his church into a contagion story. He wanted the fear to fold back into prayer, into truth, into God's steady presence instead of rumor's spinning chaos.

He pressed his fingers lightly to the man's neck, feeling the frantic rhythm. "Lord Jesus," Willo whispered, not as a performance but as a lifeline. "Have mercy."

The man's eyes rolled upward, and his mouth opened as if to scream. No sound came. Then his body arched with a violence that startled even Mark. Mark caught him under the shoulders, grunting. The man's skin looked slick, stretched taut over bones,

and his breath turned into a ragged wheeze that made the air in Willo's lungs feel tight.

"Back!" Mark shouted, and the crowd obeyed in a stumble. Someone knocked a folding chair and it clattered across the sidewalk. That noise-sharp, ordinary-made the moment worse, because normal sounds kept intruding on something that felt wrong at its core.

The volunteer with the first-aid kit fumbled with the phone, her hands shaking so badly she nearly dropped it. "Ambulance is-" she began, then paused as if she'd heard something through the glass.

"What?" Mark demanded.

She swallowed. "They said there's a... triage delay. They're overwhelmed. They're sending someone, but-" Her voice broke. "But they're not sure it's safe to come here."

Willo turned his head slightly, watching the man's lips move again. This time the words were different, but still not quite human. The rhythm had a pattern to it, like a code forced into the shape of speech. Willo listened with the same attention he used when reading scripture in a foreign tongue, searching for meaning behind the unfamiliar.

Mark followed his gaze. "What is he saying?"

Willo leaned closer, careful not to touch the man again. "It sounds like..." He hesitated, because saying it out loud would make it more real. "Like instructions. Or a warning."

Mark's jaw tightened. "Warnings don't usually come with chemical smells." He glanced around at the street, the parked cars, the people filming. "Who called 911? Who was with him before he collapsed?"

The woman in the denim jacket stepped forward, eyes wide and shiny. "He was fine," she said quickly, as if speed could make her words believable. "He was asking about the food pantry. Then he started rubbing his throat. He said he felt dizzy. He tried to sit, and then-" Her voice fell into silence, and in that silence Willo heard the ambulance sirens in the distance, still far away.

Mark took his time with her, the way he did when he didn't want panic to run the interrogation. "What did he touch?" he asked. "Any door handles? Any vending machines? Any bottles? Anything he held?"

The woman shook her head hard. "He didn't pick anything up. He just came in off the sidewalk. He—" She looked toward the church doors, then flinched, as if the building had offended her. "He said he'd been feeling off all week, but that he'd come anyway because... because he thought God wanted him here."

Willo's throat tightened. That kind of faith-messy, stubborn-was the kind he'd seen on every kind of Sunday. But the man's collapse didn't feel like coincidence. It felt like a message sent through the wrong channel.

Mark shifted his stance, keeping his body between Willo and the man. His voice lowered. "Pastor, I need you to step back. I don't know what this is yet."

Willo stood, but he didn't retreat far. "Detective Mark," he said, using Mark's title the way he would use a steady fence. "If this is a sickness, I'll ask God to guide medicine. If it's something else, I won't pretend it's only illness."

Mark stared at him for a breath, then nodded once, sharp. "Fine. But don't get close to the airways." His eyes flicked to Willo's hands. "You touched him. How long?"

Willo looked down at his fingers. They were clean, but his skin felt suddenly aware of every surface it had touched. "Seconds," he said. "I knelt. I didn't—" He stopped, because he didn't need to defend himself. The truth would show itself in time.

Behind them, a man's voice cut through the crowd. "I saw it happen." A teenager pushed forward, phone raised. On the screen, the video showed the man stepping off the sidewalk and the instant his knees folded. The teenager's eyes were fixed on the camera lens as if he needed to watch it again to understand it. "He was... he was shaking like something was in him. Then his mouth moved and-look—" He angled the phone so the others could see.

Willo leaned toward the screen without thinking. On the video, the man's lips formed shapes. The audio was muffled, but the visible motion was unmistakably deliberate. It wasn't random choking. It was speech trying to become something else.

Mark took the phone carefully, like it might explode. He watched, then paused the video. "This doesn't match any medical jargon," he murmured, and Willo heard a new note in Mark's voice-something like suspicion turning into certainty.

The teenager looked offended. "It's on the news," he insisted, though he sounded less sure than he wanted to. "They said he had a seizure. Like-like people get all the time."

Mark didn't return the teenager's fear with comfort. "Seizures don't usually talk," he said, voice low. "And they don't smell like burning plastic." He sniffed once, then turned his head, eyes narrowing. "Where did you store the thermos?"

The volunteer blinked. "In the kitchen. We-"

Mark cut her off. "Who handled it? Anybody? Anybody who might've touched the lid?"

The volunteer opened her mouth, then shut it. Her eyes darted to the church doors, and Willo saw the moment it dawned on her that she might be connected to something she didn't understand. "I did," she admitted. "I poured it. I didn't think-"

Mark's gaze sharpened. "Did you touch your face after?"

"No," she said quickly, too quickly. "I washed my hands."

Willo stepped between them, not to stop Mark's questions but to stop the panic from turning inward. "Detective Mark," he said, gentler this time, "let's see what's inside. There are people in this church who don't deserve to be abandoned to rumor."

Mark's attention flicked to him. "We're not leaving a patient on the steps," he said, then looked past Willo toward the church entrance. "But we're also not ignoring what looks like a pattern."

The ambulance finally rounded the corner, its siren slicing the air into frantic pieces. But when it pulled up, the paramedics didn't rush out. They stood at the back, looking toward the church doors as if they'd been warned. One of them spoke to another, voice muffled by the wind, and Willo caught only fragments: "not sure," "protocol," "do we have clearance."

Mark approached the ambulance with his hands visible. "You can't refuse," he said, firm. "There's a man down."

A paramedic in a mask shook her head. "We're getting conflicting reports," she said. "The hospital told us they're seeing the same symptoms in a ward downtown. They said there might be a contaminant."

Mark's eyes went hard. "Contaminant," he repeated. "You mean chemical or viral?"

"I don't know," she snapped, then softened for a second. "But we can't risk it."

The crowd pressed closer, and Willo felt the temperature of the moment drop. Fear didn't need oxygen; it fed on itself. He could almost hear the rumor becoming scripture in people's minds-contagion, curse, conspiracy-anything except the possibility that someone had planned this.

Willo turned toward the church doors. Inside, the air would be warmer, and there were records-names, contact lists, the kind of paperwork that might hold a clue. He could also feel the tug of something else, something spiritual: the sense that the language coming from the man's mouth was meant for someone, not just for the universe. The pattern was too tight to be random.

Mark noticed his movement. "Where are you going?"

"To pray," Willo said, and there was no humor in it. "To get the church's records. And to ask God for wisdom that doesn't require guessing."

Mark exhaled through his nose, like he wanted to argue and didn't have time. "Fine. But we do this together. You don't go alone into any building if there's a contaminant."

Willo nodded and stepped toward the entrance. The church doors opened with a familiar squeal that sounded wrong against the backdrop of sirens. Warm air rolled over his face, smelling faintly of old hymnals and lemon cleaner. Inside, the volunteer area was in chaos: chairs pushed aside, a couple of people sitting too stiffly as if they were afraid to bend. One woman held her hands out in front of her like she expected them to start burning.

A man behind the reception desk—an older usher with silver hair—looked at Willo with a face that had been stripped of its usual calm. “Pastor,” he said. “They’re saying it started here.”

“It started with a collapse,” Willo replied, keeping his voice steady. “We’re going to find out what caused it.”

Mark moved to the desk, scanning the papers. “Records,” he said. “Names. Phone numbers. Anyone who came in today. Anyone who asked questions you didn’t recognize.”

The usher swallowed. “We had a visitor.” He hesitated, eyes flicking toward the hallway that led deeper into the church office. “He didn’t sign in. He said he’d been told not to.”

Willo felt a chill that had nothing to do with weather. “Who told him?”

“I don’t know,” the usher admitted. “He said he got a message on a burner phone. He asked if we could contact someone—someone connected to medical research.”

Mark’s head snapped up. “Medical research,” he echoed. “What name?”

The usher’s mouth opened, then closed. “He wouldn’t say. He said it was... coded. He said the church would understand because ‘God knows how to speak in ordinary ways.’” The usher’s voice cracked on the last words.

Willo’s mind caught on the phrasing, the way it sounded rehearsed. The man on the steps had spoken like code. Now this visitor had come with religious language that sounded like it had been written by someone who didn’t belong to the church but knew how to use it.

Mark pulled a drawer open and found a thin notebook tucked behind a stack of donation receipts. He flipped through it fast, then paused on a page that looked like it had been written in a hurry. The handwriting was slanted, hurried, and filled with short phrases separated by odd marks—slashes, dots, and repeated words that didn’t match any normal intake sheet.

Mark’s eyes narrowed. “This isn’t church bookkeeping,” he said.

Willo leaned in. The words weren't random. They formed a rhythm, and when Willo read them softly under his breath, he felt something click-not like understanding everything, but like recognizing a spiritual dialect. He'd seen this kind of pattern before in sermon notes copied by a man who loved puzzles, and in scripture memorization games where meaning hid beneath repetition.

"This isn't just coded," Willo said quietly. "It's meant to be understood by people who can look past what's written and hear what's implied."

Mark's gaze sharpened. "Or people who are willing to listen," he said.

A sharp sound came from the hallway-a metal clink, then a faint thud, as if someone had dropped something. Willo and Mark both turned. For a moment, only the humming lights filled the silence, buzzing with steady impatience.

Then a figure moved at the end of the hall, half-hidden by a doorway. The person froze when they saw Mark's badge and Willo's clerical collar. Their shoulders rose like they'd been holding breath. In the fluorescent light, Willo saw a hand clutching a small device-sealed in plastic, with a strip of tape across it.

Mark's voice went cold. "Stop. Don't move."

The figure took one step backward, eyes wide. "I didn't-" they began, then swallowed. Their gaze darted to Willo, and Willo realized with a jolt that the person wasn't afraid of Mark's authority. They were afraid of being recognized as part of the problem.

Willo's heart beat hard in his chest, but his voice came out calm. "You were here before the collapse," he said.

The figure shook their head too fast. "I just-someone gave it to me. They said it would help. They said-" Their voice broke. "They said the pastor would know what to do."

Mark stepped forward, slow and deliberate. "Who gave it to you?"

The figure's lips trembled. "A man with a scar." They glanced toward the ceiling as if the answer might be written there. "He spoke like he was reading from something. He kept repeating-" The figure's eyes darted to Willo, and their voice dropped to a whisper. "'Willowbrook, Willowbrook, Willowbrook.'"

Willo felt the words land like stones. The man on the steps had said “Willow”—a fragment of the same phrase. And now this device, this sealed thing, had been passed like a secret between hands that didn’t want to be seen.

Mark reached out, palm open, not grabbing yet. “Let’s make this simple,” he said. “Give me the device.”

The figure’s grip tightened until Willo could see the knuckles blanch through the plastic. “If I give it to you,” they whispered, “you’ll bring it to the wrong people.”

Mark’s eyes hardened. “I’m the police.”

The figure let out a shaky laugh that didn’t carry humor. “Then you’re already late.”

Willo took a step closer, feeling the air grow strangely close and heavy, like the building itself was holding its breath. The smell of disinfectant in the hallway had deepened, and beneath it Willo detected that same faint chemical tang from outside—the burning-plastic edge that didn’t belong in a church.

He thought of the patient’s mouth moving, the coded notebook, the visitor who wouldn’t sign in. He thought of the paramedics hesitating, the hospital overwhelmed, the message meant for spiritually awake ears. Something orchestrated this, and it wasn’t only about illness. It was about control—about forcing fear into public mouths until nobody asked who had started it.

Willo lifted his hand toward the device without touching it. “Tell me what it is,” he said softly, more prayer than command.

The figure’s eyes flicked to Mark, then back to Willo. “It’s a timer,” they said. “It’s set to—” They stopped, swallowing hard. “It’s set to release something when the church starts praying.”

Mark snapped, “That’s insane.”

Willo didn’t argue. He already felt the truth of it in the air: a readiness, a pressure building behind the walls. He couldn’t see the virus, couldn’t prove it yet, but he could feel the moment narrowing toward a choice.

The figure's hand jerked toward the device as if they meant to smash it, and Mark lunged. The plastic caught under Mark's grip, tape peeling with a sharp rip sound that made Willo flinch. Inside the sealed container, a small indicator light flickered once-blue, then dim.

A new sound followed, electronic and faint, like a distant heartbeat transmitted through circuitry. The lights in the hallway dimmed for a fraction of a second, then steadied.

Mark froze, hand still on the device. "What did you do?" he demanded, but the figure was already backing away, eyes wild.

Willo's mind raced, but his body moved first. He stepped between Mark and the figure, lifting his hands as if to block more than an attack-block a story from spreading. "In the name of Jesus," he whispered, not loud enough for the crowd outside, but loud enough for the unseen to hear. "Stop."

The figure stared at him as if Willo had spoken a language they'd both been trained to fear. For one breath, neither moved. Then the figure bolted down the hall, disappearing behind the office door.

Mark stared at Willo, breathing hard. "That timer-" he began.

Willo turned his gaze to the device, to the indicator light that had gone still again. He felt the weight of the coded notebook in his mind, and the patient's fragment of speech, and the way the church had become a target without anyone realizing it until it was already happening.

Outside, the sirens drew closer. Inside, the air smelled faintly of electricity and cleaner. Willo grabbed the notebook from the desk and flipped to the coded page, searching for the next line the visitor had been too afraid to explain.

Detective Mark's voice came low and urgent. "We need to get out of here."

Willo looked up at him, and in Mark's face Willo saw the same realization forming: the collapse on the steps wasn't an accident. It was an opening move.

Willo's fingers traced a repeated phrase in the notebook. The symbols weren't random after all. They pointed toward a place beneath the church, a route nobody talked about, a path that could carry fear underground where it could spread without being seen.

He met Mark's eyes. "Someone planned this," he said. "And they're already moving the next part."

CHAPTER 2

## Encrypted Prayers on a Pager

**T**he hospital air tasted like bleach and something metallic, sharp enough to make Pastor Willo's throat tighten as he followed Detective Mark down a corridor that never seemed to end. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead with a tired, electrical whine. Somewhere behind sealed doors, a monitor kept stuttering-beep-beep, pause, then a longer tone that made the hairs on Willo's arms lift. He could still see the notebook symbols in his mind from the night before, the repeated phrase traced again and again like a breadcrumb meant for eyes that knew how to read.

Mark held the seized device in a gloved hand, turning it slightly so it caught the overhead light. It looked ordinary at first glance, the kind of pager you might find in a forgotten drawer, but its screen was cracked and the casing had been pried open and forced shut again. A faint chemical smell clung to it, the same tang Willo had noticed around the collapse at Willowbrook Community Church-like burnt plastic mixed with antiseptic. He kept glancing at the ceiling as they walked, as if security cameras might suddenly start speaking.

"They don't log it like it's a medical record," Mark said, his voice low to avoid the ears that seemed to be everywhere. "They flagged it like evidence, but the messages on it... they're not patient updates. They're coded."

Willo's stomach tightened at the word coded. Not because he didn't understand secrecy—he preached from a book full of symbols and stories people misread all the time—but because this secrecy had teeth. In the notebook, the repeated phrase had felt less like a puzzle and more like a warning. Someone planned this. Someone was moving the next part.

Mark stopped at a room at the end of the hall. A plastic sign on the door read RESTRICTED, the letters scuffed and half-peeling, as if someone had tried to keep it visible without making it official. Mark swiped his badge at the reader. It flashed

green too quickly, then stayed green in a way that made Willo think of doors that were meant to be opened from the other side.

Inside, the smell of disinfectant was thicker, trapped by closed air vents. A nurse stood near a rolling cart, her mask pulled tight under her chin like she'd forgotten to secure it. Her eyes darted between Willo and Mark, then to the device in Mark's hand.

"Detective," she said, and her tone carried the strain of someone who'd been asked too many questions without ever being told the answers. "That thing was seized from the wing last night. They said you'd come."

Mark's jaw tightened. "Who held it?"

The nurse's gaze flickered toward the floor. "It was found in a staff locker. Under a set of sealed gowns. Like it was meant to be missed."

Willo stepped closer, careful with his footsteps on the slick tile. "Where in the wing?"

"Third floor," she said quickly, then hesitated, as if the words had been waiting for her tongue. "The west side. The part they told us not to-" She cut herself off, as if she couldn't finish the sentence without inviting consequences.

Mark's eyes narrowed. "Not to what?"

The nurse swallowed. "Not to talk about."

Willo felt that lie settle into the room like dust. He'd heard it in people's voices since the first collapse at Willowbrook Community Church. Fear that made mouths clamp shut. Fear that made truth sound like treason.

Mark turned the pager over in his hands. "We were told it was a communications device. That it was used during the outbreak."

Willo watched the nurse's breathing. Fast. Shallow. The way it changed every time Mark's voice rose. "If it's communications," Willo said, "why isn't it medical? Why isn't it patient scheduling or lab results?"

The nurse's eyes glistened behind her mask. "Because the messages... aren't for patients." She looked at Willo like she was hoping he could make it gentler. "It sounds

like prayers.”

Willo went still. The fluorescent lights hummed louder, or maybe his ears had simply tuned for the wrong thing. “Prayers.”

Mark’s expression didn’t soften, but his focus sharpened. “Read it.”

The nurse hesitated again, then nodded toward a workstation near the wall. A technician sat with a laptop open, the screen reflecting in his glasses. The technician didn’t look up at first. He moved like a man who’d learned not to react too quickly.

Mark held out the pager. “I want the messages.”

The technician took it carefully, as if it might bite. “It’s been partially wiped,” he said. “But there are fragments. The device stores them in segments. Someone tried to clean it, but the pattern... it keeps repeating.”

Willo leaned in, letting his eyes track the screen. The first lines that resolved were broken and corrupted, characters smeared like they’d been run through a storm. Then, in the middle of the noise, a phrase reappeared-again and again-with the same sequence of marks.

Willo felt his chest tighten. Not because the marks were familiar in a simple way, like a password he’d once seen, but because his mind recognized the rhythm of them. The notebook symbols from last night had carried that same repeated phrase, the same feeling of intentional structure.

Mark watched him. “You see it.”

Willo nodded slowly. “It’s not random.”

The technician scrolled. The pager’s fragments displayed in a blocky font, numbers and letters interspersed with symbols that looked like punctuation until Willo’s eyes caught the repetition. The language wasn’t medical shorthand. It wasn’t the kind of bureaucratic code that hospitals used to keep schedules straight. It didn’t read like a report. It read like a plea that had been wrapped in something to hide it from ordinary ears.

Willo spoke before he meant to, words coming out quieter than he intended. "It's meant for someone who knows what to listen for."

Mark's mouth tightened. "Meaning what?"

Willo stared at the screen until his eyes began to water from the harsh light. "The pattern is structured like a liturgy. Not the words exactly-someone has disguised them-but the cadence. The way it repeats. The way it sets a phrase and then answers it with a variation."

The technician let out a short breath. "I'm not religious enough to say that."

Willo didn't argue. He'd seen enough people treat spiritual things like superstition to know the difference between a lack of belief and a refusal to admit what's right in front of them. "This isn't superstition," he said. "It's message discipline. Whoever wrote it expects a mind that can recognize meaning beneath the disguise."

Mark leaned closer, his detective focus cutting through the room's tension. "Can you translate it?"

Willo shook his head. "Not completely." He reached into his memory again, the notebook phrase, the way the symbols had looked like they wanted to be prayers even when they were forced into a cipher. "But I think it's an instruction to a specific group. To a group that believes God hears encrypted words when they're spoken with the right intent."

The nurse made a small sound, half relief and half dread. "That's why we didn't know what to do with it." Her voice trembled. "When people started getting sick, they kept receiving messages. Not about symptoms. Not about protocols. Like someone was calling them-quietly-while the sickness spread."

Mark's gaze snapped to her. "Receiving messages how?"

"On their pagers," she said. "Staff ones. Not patients' phones. They'd show up in silence, like alarms that didn't announce themselves. Then everyone would get called to that wing and... disappear into rooms."

Willo felt the cold edge of anger slide under his skin. "Disappear."

The nurse nodded quickly. "We'd see them go in. Then they'd come out with their faces blank, like they'd been emptied. Like they'd forgotten how to ask questions."

Mark's hand tightened around the device until Willo heard the faint creak of plastic. "And then the sickness hit."

Willo looked back at the screen, at the repeated phrase that had been disguised into symbols. It wasn't just a code. It was a rhythm meant to keep people aligned. If it was tied to the physically spreading virus, then the messages weren't just communication—they were coordination.

Mark's phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out, eyes scanning. His expression darkened as he read, and Willo saw the moment Mark's suspicion became something heavier: certainty mixed with frustration.

"What is it?" Willo asked.

Mark didn't answer right away. He stared at the pager display, as if willing it to reveal more. Then he lifted his eyes to the technician. "Do you have the rest of the fragments?"

The technician's fingers hovered above the keyboard. "Part of it is missing. The wipe wasn't complete. There are gaps where the data looks like it was physically damaged."

Mark's voice turned sharp. "Who handled the seizure? Who transported it?"

The nurse flinched. "I told you. It was pulled from the locker. I watched them put it in a bag."

Mark's eyes stayed on her. "Which bag?"

The nurse's lips parted, then closed again. "I—" She looked toward the door as if someone might be standing out in the hall listening for her mistakes. "I don't know. I didn't see the label."

Willo stepped between them, not physically, but with his voice—calm, firm. "Mark. If they're wiping logs and damaging data, they're trying to keep this from being under-

stood. That means we can't wait for perfect access."

Mark's gaze snapped to Willo. "You think you can read it."

"I think I can recognize the shape of it," Willo said. He didn't like how it sounded-like confidence where he wanted certainty. Still, the notebook phrase and the pager's repeated cadence pulled at him like a thread he couldn't ignore. "And I think the repetition means there's a specific target phrase. A name, maybe. Or a place."

Mark's eyes narrowed. "A place."

Willo nodded toward the screen. "The cipher keeps returning to the same sequence, then shifting slightly right before it cuts off. That shift looks like a substitution for location identifiers." He swallowed against the metallic taste in his mouth. "It's like the code is trying to point somewhere it can't say plainly."

The technician frowned. "If that's true, I can try to reconstruct the missing part, but-"

Mark cut him off. "Do it."

The technician hesitated. "The device is evidence. I can't-"

Mark's voice dropped, and the authority in it didn't need volume. "You can help me find whoever is coordinating this. Or you can keep watching people fall ill."

The nurse's shoulders sagged as if the words had struck her chest. "They'll come after us."

Mark turned slightly toward her. "They already have."

Willo's mind raced over what he'd felt in the notebook: the route beneath Willowbrook Community Church, the path nobody talked about. If the pager's coded language was meant for spiritually awake minds, then the cipher might not be random. It might be a bridge between ordinary systems-hospitals, staff lockers, seized evidence-and something darker running underneath.

The laptop screen flickered, and the technician began typing, his movements quick and careful. Lines of symbols rearranged on the display as he attempted to stitch the damaged segments together. The air in the room shifted-warmer, almost-like the ven-

tilation was struggling. The nurse stared at the screen with the look of someone watching a door open to a room she'd sworn never to enter.

Willo's eyes caught on a fragment that wasn't quite like the others. The repeated phrase appeared, then a new cluster of characters arrived, shorter, blunt. No mist. No metaphor. Just a sequence that looked like it had been forced through a different filter.

He leaned closer until he could smell the technician's coffee-bitter and stale, grounding him in the reality of the room. "That fragment," he said. "That's the answer part."

Mark's voice was barely a whisper. "Answer to what?"

Willo's throat tightened again, because he could feel the meaning forming like scripture remembered by a tired mind. "It's a response phrase," he said. "A call-and-response. The first half is a plea. The second half is acknowledgment."

The technician stopped typing. "What does it say?"

Willo stared at the symbols until the pattern clicked into place. He didn't translate word-for-word; he recognized the intent. The cipher's second segment carried the same structure as the notebook's repeated phrase, but with a substitution that matched the way a location is named in code.

"It points beneath," Willo said. His voice felt strange, too steady. "Beneath a specific building. Not just any basement-an underground corridor."

Mark's gaze hardened. "You're saying it connects to Willowbrook."

Willo didn't want to say it. Saying it made it real. But the repeated cadence on the screen, the notebook symbols, and the nurse's testimony about staff vanishing into the wing all braided into one thread.

"I'm saying it connects to a place meant to carry fear without being seen," Willo replied. "And I think the pager is telling them where to send the next part."

Mark's phone buzzed again. He checked it and went pale around the edges. "Hospital security just flagged a movement in the tunnels beneath this building," he said. "No

badge. No scheduled maintenance. Someone's down there."

Willo felt his hands curl into fists. "Then we go now."

The technician stood, chair scraping softly against the floor. "You can't just—"

Mark was already moving, stepping toward the door with the seized device tucked away again in a sealed evidence bag. "Watch the screen," he told the technician without looking back. "If it sends anything else, record it."

The nurse grabbed the edge of the cart, knuckles white. "Please don't," she whispered. "They'll—"

Mark turned his head just enough for her to see his eyes. "They've already started."

Willo walked beside him into the hall, the fluorescent buzz vibrating through the bones of his skull. As they passed the restricted door, the nurse's voice followed them, small and urgent.

"They don't speak out loud," she said. "They communicate in those messages. Like they're afraid the wrong ears will hear."

Willo looked down at the pager bag as if he could see the symbols through the plastic. The encrypted prayers on a pager weren't comfort; they were coordination. They were a way to make fear travel faster than truth.

The stairwell smelled like damp concrete and old rust. Their footsteps echoed, loud in the tight space, and the air grew colder with each flight. Somewhere below, a distant hum vibrated through the walls—an engine or a generator, muted by the underground distance. Willo could hear it under the faint drip of pipes, steady and patient.

Mark moved ahead, one hand on the railing, the other gripping his phone like it could summon answers. "If there's a tunnel crew down there," he said, "they won't be waiting."

Willo kept his pace beside him, praying without words because the air itself felt too thin for speech. The repeated phrase from the notebook pressed against his thoughts, not as a magic charm but as a warning carved into symbols.

When the stairwell door finally opened into the basement corridor, the temperature dropped enough to raise gooseflesh on Willo's arms. The corridor lights were dim, flickering like they were trying to decide whether to exist. The smell was worse here—cool air mixed with chemical residue and something else beneath it, a faint sweetness that didn't belong in a hospital.

Mark held up his flashlight, beam cutting through the haze. "I don't like this," he said.

Willo's voice came out low. "Neither do I."

They reached a narrow access hatch at the end of the corridor. A metal plaque beside it was scuffed, with letters worn nearly smooth. Mark crouched, inspecting the lock. His fingers moved with practiced precision, but he stopped when he heard something—soft, rhythmic, like a device vibrating against a palm.

Mark's eyes snapped toward the sound.

A figure stepped from behind a wall panel, too quick for the dim light. The person held a pager in one hand, thumb hovering over the screen. The beam caught their face for a second: masked, eyes wide, breath visible in the cold. Their posture screamed panic, but their grip on the device was steady.

Mark raised his flashlight higher. "Police. Drop it."

The figure didn't drop it. Instead, they lifted the pager toward their mouth like it was a prayer book, and Willo's stomach turned as he saw the screen glow faintly through the cracks of the mask.

The pager flashed a new fragment of coded symbols—fresh, not wiped, not old. Then the figure spoke, not in clear words but in a rough cadence that matched the structure Willo had seen on the laptop.

A call-and-response, encrypted for ears that could understand.

Mark lunged forward, grabbing at the pager bag. The figure yanked back, and the motion sent something clattering to the floor—small vials, sealed in foam, their labels turned away. A chemical smell surged instantly, thick and sharp, making Willo's eyes water.

The figure backed toward the tunnel mouth, and for one breath Willo saw what was behind them: a narrow passage lined with cables, a low ventilation fan, and a cluster of equipment that didn't belong in any maintenance area. The air in the passage moved differently, like it was breathing.

Willo stepped in, voice cutting through the cold. "Stop."

The figure's eyes flicked to him, startled, as if they hadn't expected a pastor to stand in their way. For a heartbeat the vibration of the pager on their hand seemed to sync with the hum of the tunnel fan.

Then Mark grabbed the figure's wrist, twisting hard enough to force the pager away. The device skidded across the floor and hit a cable bundle. The screen dimmed, but the last fragment of coded text remained visible for an instant-enough for Willo to recognize the shift that pointed beneath.

The figure screamed, not from pain alone, but from loss. As Mark hauled them back, the person's mask tore slightly, and Willo caught a glimpse of bruising around the neck-marks like pressure from a strap, like someone had been kept in place until the next message arrived.

Mark shoved the figure against the wall. "Who are you?"

The figure's breath came ragged, eyes darting toward the tunnel like it could swallow them. "They-" The word broke on the second syllable, swallowed by fear. Their gaze fixed on Willo instead, and their voice lowered to a tremor. "Your church."

Willo felt the hallway tilt under him, not physically, but spiritually-like the ground of reality had shifted and he'd just realized he'd been standing over a hidden door all along. The notebook symbols weren't a coincidence. The tunnels weren't rumor.

Mark leaned in, anger and urgency braided tight in his face. "What about Willowbrook?"

The figure's eyes widened, and their mouth moved as if they were trying to speak the next encrypted prayer out loud, but the words wouldn't come. Their gaze slid past

Willo's shoulder toward the stairwell, toward the direction the next wave of fear might be coming from.

Then the figure went slack.

For a moment, the tunnel hum filled the space where their words had been. Mark released them and checked for a pulse, his hand moving quickly, the flashlight beam shaking in his grip. Willo stared at the body's stillness, the cold air clinging to the scene like a lid.

Mark looked up, eyes hard. "They didn't survive long enough."

Willo couldn't hear the rest of Mark's words over the sudden realization settling into his bones: the encrypted prayers on a pager weren't just coordinating people. They were triggering outcomes. If the coded messages were understood, something responded. If the wrong person interrupted, someone else paid the cost.

Willo bent, picked up the dropped pager from the cable bundle with careful fingers, and felt the faint warmth of the cracked screen like a heartbeat that refused to die. On its display, the final fragment flickered once more before the device went dark.

Willo glanced at the symbols, then at the tunnel mouth breathing cold air into the corridor. "This isn't finished," he said, more to the darkness than to Mark.

Mark straightened, scanning the corridor, listening for footsteps that might already be coming. "No," he agreed. "It's just changed hands."

Willo's chest tightened as they backed away from the tunnel entrance, the hospital lights above now seeming too far, too thin to protect anyone. Somewhere in the city, more messages would be waiting on more pagers, timed to the virus's spread and wrapped in coded language meant for spiritually awake eyes.

And beneath Willowbrook Community Church, the route nobody talked about was no longer an idea in a notebook. It was a place where someone had just tried to send the next part-and where Willo and Detective Mark were now forced to follow, before fear reached everyone who could still be saved.

CHAPTER 3

## A Missing Scientist's Last Call

**T**he pager Mark had lifted from the hospital wing still sat in Pastor Willo's palm like a cold stone, its cracked plastic warmed by Willo's skin. Somewhere above them, beyond the concrete and the stale air that clung to the tunnel mouth, the city's sirens rose and fell in uneven intervals, as if the sound itself couldn't decide what to be afraid of. Willo could smell disinfectant gone wrong-sharp and chemical, with an undertone of something sour that made his stomach tighten. The last time he'd held this device, Mark had been staring at it like it might bite, and Willo had been listening for the kind of pattern that didn't belong to medicine.

Now, beneath Willowbrook Community Church, the darkness pressed in close. The hospital lights that had seemed thin before felt even farther away, their glow trapped in a world above the world. Willo stood by the narrow corridor where Mark had found the seized device, and he listened to the last fragment of audio he'd been able to recover from it. It wasn't a full recording-more like a piece of a voice torn from a throat still trying to speak.

A woman in denim had been right about one thing: people were afraid. Her text messages had come in bursts, then stopped as if someone had taken the phone from her hands. The technician had refused to meet Mark's eyes when they'd asked about the pager's origin. And the nurse-who'd vanished from the hospital roster by the next morning-had left behind a silence that felt practiced.

Willo held the pager closer and let the fragment loop again.

"-don't-" a voice rasped, clipped by interference. "-hear it-call-" The audio warbled, then clipped off with a sound like breath caught in a filter. Not a scream. Not quite a plea. Something in the cadence made Willo's mind reach for Scripture without permission, as if the words were trying to wear a familiar shape.

Mark crouched beside him, his jacket damp at the shoulders from lingering cool air. He had the look he wore when the city stopped making sense—jaw set, eyes hard, fingers poised like he could grab truth before it slipped away. “This isn’t a medical log,” he said, low enough that the concrete seemed to swallow it. “It’s a handoff. Someone wanted this passed.”

“I know what it sounds like,” Willo answered. His voice came out rougher than he intended. “Not medicine. A warning wrapped in something meant to be understood.”

Mark exhaled through his nose. “Then we find who understood it first.”

Willo’s want for the moment was simple and immediate: get the rest of the message before it vanished, trace the call it belonged to, and reach the person who’d been speaking on the recording—whoever had been close enough to the experiment to lose their voice and then lose themselves entirely. He’d watched fear spread across his congregation after the first collapse at the church steps. He’d seen people whisper prayer like it might smuggle them out of harm’s way. If the conspiracy was timing the virus with encrypted signals, then the missing researcher wasn’t just gone. They were being erased in real time.

Mark glanced toward the tunnel wall where Willo had traced those strange symbols in the notebook—symbols that had stopped being ink and started being coordinates. “We followed the route under Willowbrook. Now the report’s supposed to surface. That’s what the hospital tech said before she cut us off.”

Willo nodded. “She said someone was calling. That someone was... late.”

Before Mark could answer, Willo’s phone buzzed in his pocket. The vibration felt too sharp in the dim. He pulled it out with careful fingers, as if sudden movement might trigger another wave of danger.

A text from an unknown number. No greeting. Only a short line of characters that made his throat tighten.

A voice file attachment. One second long.

Mark leaned in. “Don’t open it here.”

Willo's thumb hovered. "If it's the call fragment, it's already in motion."

Mark's eyes flicked to the pager in Willo's hand, then back to the phone. "You said people are afraid to speak. What if this is bait?"

Willo swallowed. He wanted to trust the pattern, but he also knew the city had become a maze of traps disguised as answers. In the tunnel, the air tasted faintly metallic, like coins left too long in a pocket. His pulse hammered in his ears.

He tapped the attachment.

The sound that came through was worse than interference. It was breath, heavy and close to a microphone, and behind it a room tone that felt like it had been recorded in an empty chamber. Then a voice—male this time, older, strained to the point of breaking.

"-Dr. Sutter-" the voice said, the name clipped and repeated as if it had been forced through a bad connection. "-if anyone hears this, don't-"

A sudden hiss. A click. Then the same warped cadence from the pager fragment, as though the signal itself had been stitched into something consistent. "-call-call-call-"

The file ended with a sound like a hand slamming against a surface. Not enough to be a scream. Enough to be a panic trying to become noise.

Willo jerked the phone back as if it had burned him. "That's him," he whispered.

Mark's expression tightened. "You don't know that."

"I do," Willo said, surprising himself with how certain it sounded. The voice carried the kind of exhaustion that came from years of trying to make the right thing work. He'd heard it in patients and in men who'd come to church with questions they couldn't afford to ask out loud. "The pager fragment was a handoff. This is the source."

"Source is missing," Mark corrected. "And if he's missing, whoever did this doesn't want us finding him."

Willo stared down at the phone screen, the attachment timestamp already changing as if something behind it kept trying to update. The city's fear wasn't only in people's

mouths. It was in their devices, their networks, their willingness to be silent.

“What do you want this time?” Mark asked, and his tone held a rare edge of impatience, like he hated the helplessness more than the danger.

Willo looked at the tunnel entrance, at the sliver of light from above that didn’t reach far enough. “I want to hear where he called from,” he said. “Not just the message. The place.”

Mark stood, joints creaking, and pulled a small folder from his jacket. Inside were printouts and notes from the hospital wing-names, shifts, and the gaps between them. “Then we go through contacts. The report says he vanished after receiving a call. If that call’s traceable, it’s in the network. If it’s not, the only way to find it is by finding who’s still willing to talk.”

“Still willing,” Willo repeated, remembering the technician’s eyes going flat when Mark pressed. “That’s the problem.”

Mark’s jaw flexed. “Yeah. People are scared.”

Willo closed his eyes for a breath and felt the weight of Willowbrook Community Church behind him, not as a building but as a promise. In the first collapse, a man had made cryptic sounds that didn’t belong in any medical report. In the second chapter, encrypted messages had appeared like prayers written in code. Now the missing researcher’s voice had been torn apart and passed like contraband.

He opened his eyes. “Then we speak carefully,” he said. “And we listen better than they expect.”

Mark’s gaze sharpened. “You mean like church.”

“I mean like truth,” Willo answered. He couldn’t say the word faith out loud without hearing the city laugh at it. But it lived under his tongue anyway.

They climbed out of the tunnel’s mouth and into a back corridor that smelled of damp concrete and old paper. Above ground, the noise of the city pressed harder-distant traffic, the low churn of ventilators from somewhere too far away, a siren that

sounded closer now and then cut away again. The air was warmer, and it carried the faint sweetness of something burned in a hurry.

Mark led them toward a service entrance where a row of security cameras had been offline since the first wave of illness. He tapped his badge against the doorframe, not to show it off but to trigger a system he hoped still worked. The lock clicked, then hesitated. When it finally gave, the door swung open with a reluctant groan.

They entered a small office with a desk littered by abandoned paperwork and a faint chemical smell that made Willo think of the hospital's sealed corridors. Mark moved quickly, pulling a chair back and opening a drawer that stuck. "This is where someone kept the contact list for the church's community partners," he said. "Volunteers. Clinic liaisons. People who deliver food and-when things get bad-information."

Willo didn't correct him. He could feel the urgency in Mark's shoulders, the way he wanted evidence that behaved like evidence. He wanted the missing researcher found, the conspiracy exposed, the virus stopped. But the city had made answers slippery.

Mark's phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen and his expression turned hard in a way Willo recognized. Not fear. Anger sharpened into calculation.

"What?" Willo asked.

Mark didn't answer immediately. He turned the phone toward Willo, and Willo saw a message in plain text. No number. No name. Only a sentence.

Stop asking about Sutter.

Beneath it, a second message arrived so fast the screen flickered.

If you keep going, your church will be next.

Willo felt heat rise in his throat. The words were simple, but they landed like a hand on his chest. Willowbrook Community Church-his people, his sanctuary-reduced to a threat delivered through a phone.

Mark's voice dropped. "They're watching."

Willo stared at the messages until the letters blurred. He wanted to pray, but prayer felt too small for the shape of this danger. He wanted to confront whoever was behind it, but the tunnel had taught him that confrontation without information got people killed.

“We’re not going to let them steer us by intimidation,” Mark said. His eyes stayed on the phone as if he could glare the sender into confession.

Willo’s mind raced—not with panic, but with the kind of focus that came when fear tried to become the loudest voice in the room. The conspiracy didn’t just want the virus to spread. It wanted control over who knew what. It wanted the city to become quiet at the exact moment the world needed answers.

He reached for the notebook symbols again, the one he’d tucked into his coat after the tunnel trace. His fingers found the page where the route beneath the church had become more than ink. The symbols weren’t random. They were aligned with something—timing, perhaps, or a series of contacts.

Mark watched him. “What are you looking at?”

“The call,” Willo said. He pointed to the last symbol he hadn’t been able to place earlier. It looked like a stylized waveform and a cross stitched together, the kind of mark that could mean frequency or worship if someone wanted it to mean both. “The code on the pager tried to speak. This symbol looks like it’s tied to a place that sends signals.”

Mark leaned closer. His breath fogged the air just slightly; the office was colder than it should’ve been. “A relay point.”

Willo nodded. “Or a listening station.”

Mark’s phone buzzed again, and he stiffened as if the device had thrown a warning light. He read the new message and then slowly turned the screen away, like the words had teeth.

“What?” Willo demanded, unable to keep the edge out of his voice.

Mark’s face went tight. “They want a meeting.”

Willo's stomach dropped. "With who?"

"Dr. Sutter's assistant," Mark said, then paused as if even saying the title felt like inviting a trap. "Someone named Lydia Kessler. The message says she'll talk tonight. She's scared enough to be careful. Or she's scared enough to be controlled."

Willo thought of the technician's silence and the way people's eyes had been avoiding Mark's questions. "If she's controlled," he said, "then the meeting is a way to get us into the wrong place."

Mark looked at him, and for a moment the detective's anger softened into something like respect. "Then we don't go in blind."

They moved fast, because fear didn't wait for anyone's courage. Mark pulled up Lydia Kessler's name on his phone, searching through public records while the city's noise pressed against the walls. The data came up thin-too thin. A gap where a person's life should've been. It was like someone had scraped the surface and left only enough to lure.

Willo followed the route in his notebook again, tracing the symbols with his eyes. He could feel the pattern trying to guide him toward an answer that didn't belong to any hospital hallway. Underground. Enclosed. A place where voices could be recorded and silence could be enforced.

When Mark suggested a meeting location, Willo didn't argue with the address-he argued with the timing. "If they're watching," he said, "they'll want us to arrive when the city's most distracted. When sirens are loudest, cameras are unreliable."

Mark's lips tightened. "So we go earlier."

Willo nodded. "We go earlier, and we listen before we speak."

Mark hesitated. "That doesn't sound like you."

Willo almost smiled. Almost. "It is," he said. "In church, people come with voices they can't control. We don't barge into their panic. We wait until the right moment and then we speak in a way that builds light."

Mark studied him for a heartbeat longer than the conversation needed, then nodded once. "Fine. We go early."

Outside, the air carried the smell of exhaust and something else-*ozone*, like overheated wiring. A group of people stood near a corner storefront, huddled close against the cold. Their faces were pale, and their mouths moved without sound as if words had become dangerous. Willo recognized the denim jacket from earlier-*woman* from the first scenes-*standing* with her phone held low, her knuckles white.

She looked up when she saw Willo and Mark. Relief flickered in her eyes, then vanished when her gaze caught Mark's badge.

"Don't-" she began.

Mark took a step toward her. "You messaged me," he said, voice steady. "What happened?"

Her mouth trembled. "I tried to send you the location," she whispered. "But it kept... deleting. Like something was swallowing it."

Willo lowered his voice. "Who's doing it?"

She shook her head hard. "I don't know. But Lydia-Lydia Kessler-*she* called me from a burner. She said not to talk to police. She said-*she* said the call would come again. Like a test."

Mark's eyes narrowed. "A test."

Willo felt the puzzle click in his mind the way a gear finds its slot. The voice fragment wasn't only a warning. It was a signal sent out to a specific kind of listener. The conspiracy had been testing whether people were paying attention. Whether they were spiritually awake enough to follow the pattern. Whether they would move toward the underground route when the city panicked.

Willo turned his head slightly, scanning the street for cameras and for watchers. Someone was too still across the way, pretending to be occupied with a phone that wasn't being used. The temperature seemed to drop, or maybe Willo's skin simply sensed what his mind already knew.

Mark spoke again, gentler this time. "Did Lydia say where she was?"

The woman's throat bobbed. "Under the old freight yard. The tunnels that run behind it. She said she could hear the equipment humming even when the power was out."

Willo's pulse tightened. The old freight yard. Underground tunnels. Abandoned laboratories. Deadly clues that weren't meant to stay buried.

Mark glanced at Willo. Their eyes met, and neither of them pretended the situation was anything but dangerous. The city was already sick with fear. Now the conspiracy had begun to use that fear like a leash.

Willo lifted his hand slightly, palm open-not a threat, not a command. "Thank you," he said, and the words tasted like prayer forced into a whisper.

The woman flinched as if gratitude could be detected. She turned away quickly, disappearing into the crowd's uneasy shell.

Mark grabbed Willo's sleeve. "We don't have much time."

Willo looked back once more at Willowbrook Community Church, its silhouette swallowed by the distance, its lights thin against the city's haze. He couldn't protect every person from what was coming, but he could choose not to let fear be the only voice in the tunnels.

They headed toward the freight yard, the air growing colder with every block. Somewhere behind them, Willo's phone buzzed again-another message from the same unknown sender-but he didn't look. If the conspiracy wanted him to break focus, it would have to settle for chasing a man of prayer and a detective of stubborn truth through the dark.

At the edge of the old property, a chain-link fence sagged and rattled in the wind. The ground gave a soft crunch under their steps, dust and grit shifting like dry bones. Mark shone his flashlight forward, the beam cutting through foggy air and finding a narrow service door half-hidden by weeds.

Willo stepped close enough to feel the chill leaking from the seams. Behind the metal, something sounded faint-an electrical hum, steady as a heartbeat.

Mark's voice was barely more than breath. "This is it."

Willo placed his palm against the door. The metal vibrated, as if the building itself was alive and listening. He could almost hear the missing researcher's breath on the recording, the way it had ended with a slammed surface and a forced silence.

He didn't open the door right away. He listened first, because the city had taught him that the loudest danger wasn't always the one you saw.

Then, from deeper inside the dark, a voice crackled through a speaker-distorted, but unmistakably deliberate.

"-Pastor-" the voice said, and Willo froze, the sound landing like a hand on his shoulder.

Mark's head snapped toward him. "They know you."

Willo's throat tightened. The voice continued, warped by interference, but the words came through clearly enough to turn his fear into something sharper.

"-Tell Detective Mark to come alone," it said. "Or the next call will be for someone else."

The hum deepened, and the air around the door felt charged, too cold to be natural. Willo didn't move toward the handle. He didn't step back either.

He looked at Mark, and in Mark's eyes Willo saw the same conclusion: the conspiracy wasn't only hiding evidence. It was trying to split them apart before they could reach the truth.

Willo took his hand off the door and reached for the pager in his coat instead, thumb finding the last looped fragment. He pressed play again, letting the torn voice fill the small space between them. Then he spoke, not into the darkness, but into the silence that had been engineered.

"Lord, give us discernment," Willo whispered, and the words felt like a match struck in a room full of gas.

Mark exhaled once, hard. "We go together," he said. "Whatever they're trying, we don't split."

Willo nodded, and together they pulled the door open-hinges groaning, air blasting out with that same sour disinfectant smell-and stepped into the tunnel's throat, where the hum waited and the next voice might already be warming up.

CHAPTER 4

## The Hospital Wing That Won't Open

**T**he tunnel air hit Pastor Willo in the face like damp cloth-cool, stale, and laced with the same sharp disinfectant bite that clung to the hospital hallway above. Somewhere behind the heavy door, metal complained under strain. Ahead, the passage narrowed into darkness threaded with a thin green emergency glow that made every surface look sickly, as if the building itself had been infected. The hum from the last stretch of corridor vibrated in Willo's teeth, steady and patient, like a machine waiting for permission.

Detective Mark walked with his shoulders set, one hand near his jacket pocket where his flashlight rested. In the confined space, their footsteps sounded too loud. Willo kept thinking of the pager's liturgical pattern-how it didn't read like paperwork, how it had felt like a message meant to be understood by someone listening for God. Now the tunnel throat seemed to swallow sound and replace it with that hum, as if the facility were already rehearsing silence.

Mark glanced back without stopping. "That lab corridor door-restricted access," he said, low enough that the words didn't travel far. "And every time we try, we get delays. People 'lose' records. Doors 'malfunction.'"

Willo's mouth tasted of copper. He had prayed in the hospital chapel earlier, but the prayer had been interrupted by sirens and the crunch of boots on tile. He had felt the same dread now, only closer, pressed into the walls. "This place is hiding something," he said. "Not just equipment. People."

Mark's jaw worked once. "I already checked the call logs from the missing researcher's number. Whoever did the erasing didn't do it by accident." He lifted his flashlight, and the beam caught a small wall-mounted panel with a keypad and a biometric reader that looked recently cleaned. "If there's a record here, it's not supposed to be reachable."

Willo moved closer to the panel, the cold metal seeping through his sleeve. He remembered the voice fragment-Dr. Sutter's last breath caught in the recording, the way it had sounded like he was trying to warn someone through a closed door. Willo had held that recording like a prayer stone, turning it over in his mind while Mark traced contacts who suddenly went quiet. Now the locked corridor sat just beyond this tunnel, a promise of answers sealed behind systems that should have been transparent.

Mark set his flashlight down against a pipe so it angled upward, then stepped in front of the keypad. "Let me try the badge route first," he said. He pulled a thin case from his pocket and opened it with careful fingers. The badge inside looked official, the kind of access tool that carried weight in places like this. He pressed it to the reader.

A soft chime sounded-too pleasant for the setting. Then the panel blinked red once, twice, and displayed a short message that Mark read without moving his lips. The hum deepened, or maybe Willo only noticed the change because something in the air tightened.

Mark cursed under his breath. "Access denied. System requires verification." He leaned closer, scanning the panel's small status light. "Verification requests are being routed through a monitoring station."

Willo watched the light and felt the temptation to demand answers the way people demanded miracles-loudly, urgently, as if volume could break rules. Instead, he kept his voice steady. "We don't have time for a station to wake up," he said.

Mark tried again, slower this time, tapping a sequence on the keypad with the back of his knuckle. The red light flashed, then a new alert appeared: REQUEST RECORDED. PLEASE WAIT FOR APPROVAL.

"Recorded," Mark repeated. "Like we're being logged. Like someone's watching who's asking."

Willo's stomach turned. The encrypted messages on the pager had been timed to the virus's spread, and now the facility itself seemed to be timing them-counting seconds, tracking attempts, deciding how to respond. He pressed his palm against the wall be-

side the panel, feeling the vibration of the hum through the plaster. It reminded him of a heartbeat that didn't belong to anyone in the room.

Mark pulled his phone from his pocket, thumb moving fast. The screen lit his face for a moment. "I'm going to pull security logs from the facility management system," he said. "If the corridor is locked, the logs should show attempts, timestamps, and who authorized delays."

Willo felt a small surge of hope-until Mark's screen flashed and then stalled. The phone screen dimmed, then returned with a spinning icon that looked like the system was thinking too hard.

Mark swore again. "No connection. Facility network is throttling. That's not a dead zone-it's a controlled delay." He looked at Willo, eyes sharp. "They don't want the logs. They want us to wait."

Willo stepped back from the panel and turned his attention to the corridor itself. The door beyond was thick, industrial, with a narrow window of reinforced glass that caught the emergency glow. It looked sealed with layers of grime and sealant, like it had been shut for months. A small placard near the handle listed procedures and contacts in clean, printed type-words that had been smudged by someone's deliberate thumb. The last time Willo had seen something like that, it had been in a hospital hallway where staff had gone pale at the mention of Dr. Sutter.

Mark tried a different angle-he crouched, ran a flashlight beam along the door seam, and then tapped the metal casing where a maintenance latch sat. "There should be an access port," he murmured. "If the system's been manipulated, maybe the hardware still talks."

The latch didn't move. Instead, a dull click sounded from somewhere inside the wall, followed by a low tone that was almost inaudible. The hum rose into a sharper pitch, and the air grew warmer by a degree that made Willo's skin prickle.

Mark's head snapped toward the sound. "That was a response," he said. "Something triggered."

Willo's mind flashed back to the pager seizure-how the technician had looked terrified, how he'd claimed it was "just procedure" while his hands shook. This facility didn't just lock doors. It corrected behavior. It punished curiosity.

From deeper in the tunnel, footsteps approached-slow, measured, not hurried. A faint metallic clatter followed, like keys or a tool rolling against a belt.

Mark stood, shifting his stance so his body angled between Willo and the sound. "We're not alone," he said.

"Who?" Willo asked, though his question already carried the answer he didn't want.

A voice drifted forward, filtered by the tunnel's shape. "Detective Mark. Pastor Willo." The speaker didn't sound surprised. That was worse than hostility. "You've made attempts that require review."

Mark's flashlight clicked on and swung toward the darkness. "Identify yourself."

The figure emerged at the edge of the green glow: a security officer in a facility uniform, face covered by a mask that obscured expression but not posture. Their badge flashed under the light-clean, official, the kind of identity meant to end arguments before they began.

"You're not authorized to access restricted records," the officer said. "The corridor is locked for biosafety and containment protocols."

Willo held his hands open at his sides. The movement wasn't a surrender; it was a way to keep from reaching for something he didn't have. "Dr. Sutter is missing," he said. "We have reason to believe this facility has information tied to the virus spreading in the city."

The officer's head tilted. "Your concern is noted." The tone stayed flat, as if the words were preloaded. "But your access attempts have been flagged. Additional delays will occur."

Mark took a step forward. "Delays because you're hiding records?" he demanded.

The officer's gaze moved to Mark's phone, then to the keypad. "You're attempting to override controls. That is interference."

Willo felt the anger rise, but he forced it down, feeling the pull of prayer beneath it like a steady floor. Wisdom, he thought. Not just courage. Wisdom to recognize when the enemy wanted them to fight on the facility's terms.

"Your logs," Mark said, voice hard. "They're wrong. I've seen the patterns before-events that should be time-stamped don't match the system's own records."

The officer didn't deny it. "Security systems can be adjusted for integrity."

Willo's eyes narrowed. "Adjusted," he echoed. "Or manipulated."

The officer's shoulders tightened, the smallest sign that the word hit. "You should leave this area," they said. "Now."

Mark's hand slid toward his pocket, and Willo could hear the faint rasp of fabric. Not a weapon drawn-yet. But the threat was clear in the officer's stance and the way the tunnel seemed to hold its breath.

Willo stepped closer to Mark, keeping his voice gentle so it didn't fracture into fear. "We can't win by force," he said. "Not here."

Mark's eyes flicked to him, and Willo saw the frustration there-Detective Mark wasn't used to being shut out by systems designed to protect secrets. He was used to breaking through lies by persistence, by staying in the open until truth surfaced. This place didn't allow open.

The security officer shifted weight. "If you continue, you'll be escorted out by municipal response."

Willo swallowed. He had seen what municipal response looked like during the panic-lines of cars, people coughing and shaking, and the sense that help arrived only after harm had already spread. He didn't want to be escorted away while the virus crawled through another block.

Mark lifted his phone again. This time, his thumb moved slower, as if he was trying to work around a block by reading the system's behavior rather than its commands. "The throttling is timed," he muttered. "It's not random."

Willo watched the officer closely, watching for the moment when they stopped being a person and became a mechanism. The security officer's breathing sounded controlled, measured. Their eyes kept returning to the keypad panel, the door seam, and Mark's phone-like those were the only things they cared about.

Willo's prayer changed shape. It wasn't just for protection. It was for the right action, for a moment of clarity that could outpace the facility's scripted response. He lifted his gaze and spoke quietly, not to the officer, but to God in words so plain they could cut through the hum.

"Lord," he whispered, "show us what they changed in the logs. Give us a way to see it without being shut out."

The security officer spoke at the same time, as if the tunnel itself had turned their words into a trap. "You've been recorded requesting access. Municipal response will arrive shortly."

Mark's head jerked toward the keypad. "Recorded," he said, sharper now. "That means the system acknowledges attempts." He turned, eyes landing on the panel's status light. "If they manipulated the logs, maybe the manipulation didn't touch the immediate buffer. Maybe the live audit trail is still local."

The officer's posture stiffened, as if Mark had said something forbidden.

Mark reached for the panel, faster this time, fingers moving with practiced precision. He didn't force the reader—he pressed his ear close to the casing, listening for the tiny electrical rhythm inside. Then he tapped a specific spot along the edge of the keypad where a maintenance seam hid under a strip of clear adhesive.

A faint hiss answered, and the panel's screen flickered. The red light changed to amber for a heartbeat, and a new line of text appeared—partial, glitching, as if the system was trying to correct itself.

Mark read it silently, then looked at Willo. His face went pale under the flashlight glow. "They replaced the timestamps," he said. "The logs we're seeing don't match the actual access events. Someone rewrote history."

The security officer took a step forward. "Stop."

Mark didn't stop. He pulled a small device from his pocket—a compact reader he'd used before to extract data from stubborn systems. He pressed it against the maintenance seam, and the panel's screen stuttered again, the amber light brightening like a warning.

Willo felt cold settle into his bones. So much of this case had been about erased voices and missing people. Now it was about erased time—about making it impossible to prove what had happened, when it happened, and who had been present. The virus conspiracy wasn't just in labs and tunnels. It was in the records that decided whether anyone believed the truth.

The tunnel temperature dropped abruptly, and the hum became a roar. Overhead, the emergency lights flickered, and for a moment the corridor door's window went dark, swallowing the green glow until only Mark's flashlight carved a small circle of visibility.

The security officer's voice sharpened, no longer calm. "You're triggering a lockdown."

Mark glanced at the door seam, then back to the panel. "They're trying to stop the extraction," he said. "It's not just intimidation. It's a kill-switch for evidence."

Willo's throat tightened. The last time they'd been blocked, it had cost them time and exposed them to threats. This time, the cost might be higher—data disappearing into whatever system was controlling this place.

Mark's thumb hovered over the extraction device's controls. He made a quick decision—fast, firm, like a detective choosing between two bad outcomes. He pressed the command, and the device chirped once. A thin line of code scrolled across Mark's phone screen, too fast for comfort, but alive—real.

The security officer lunged forward, hands out, as if to grab Mark's wrist. Mark twisted away, shoulders colliding with the tunnel wall. Metal scraped, and a sharp smell of ozone filled the air, biting at Willo's nose.

Willo moved then, not toward the officer, but toward the panel. He didn't know the engineering behind it, but he knew this: the corridor door was locked, and the only way through locked doors was through the truth they tried to keep sealed. He placed his palm on the panel's casing, feeling it vibrate like a trapped animal.

"Lord," he breathed again, louder this time, "don't let their silence be final."

The panel's amber light held for an extra second. Mark's phone chimed-one clean notification sound that cut through the tunnel's rising alarm. Then the amber light snapped back to red, and a new message flashed across the panel in block letters.

LOCKDOWN IN PROGRESS.

The security officer froze, as if the message belonged to someone higher than them. Their masked face tilted toward Mark's phone, and in that brief movement Willo saw something like fear.

Mark stared at the screen. "It copied," he said, voice tight. "We got something before the wipe."

Willo's relief didn't last long. The tunnel lights dimmed, then went out, leaving only the flashlight beam and the faint green spill from the corridor door's window. Somewhere behind the locked lab corridor, a mechanism engaged with a heavy, grinding motion, like steel settling into place.

Mark looked up at the ceiling, then back at Willo. "The corridor's sealing fully," he said. "And whoever's running this just tightened their grip."

Willo's hands were cold against the panel, his prayer still hanging in the air like smoke. He listened to the tunnel's new silence-the kind that comes right before a building starts making choices without asking permission.

The security officer backed away a step, not retreating in surrender, but repositioning, as if they were now part of a larger response. "You'll be quarantined," they said. "After

the lockdown completes.”

Willo felt the fear surge, but he held it steady the way he held steady during storms in Willowbrook Community Church—choosing to trust God’s presence over his own pulse. He glanced at Mark. “We prayed for wisdom,” he said softly. “Now we need courage that doesn’t rush us off the path.”

Mark’s eyes hardened. He turned his phone slightly so the screen faced Willo, showing the extracted snippet of rewritten timestamps and the weird gaps where the system claimed no access attempts had occurred. The logs were lying. But the lie had left a scar.

Mark swallowed. “They manipulated the security records,” he said. “And they did it in real time.”

Willo’s stomach dropped at how deliberate that sounded—like a plan that didn’t just react to the virus, but anticipated every step of anyone trying to stop it. The hum had shifted again, lower now, as if the machine was preparing for the next phase.

Willo lifted his chin toward the corridor door. “This locked lab corridor,” he said, “it isn’t just shut to keep contamination in.”

Mark’s voice came out rough. “It’s shut to keep the truth out.”

The emergency glow from the corridor door’s window flickered once, then steadied. The tunnel around them went colder, the air tasting suddenly of metal and disinfectant again, like the facility was reminding them what it did to people who got too close.

Willo’s next prayer was quick, urgent, and wordless in his chest even as he spoke. “God,” he said, “open what they sealed. Reveal what they erased. Before the virus spreads again.”

Then Mark shoved the phone back into his pocket, grabbed Willo’s sleeve, and pulled him away from the panel as the lockdown completed with a heavy final clank—sealing the corridor from the tunnel and sealing their window of access with it.

CHAPTER 5

## Dead Leaves, Living Code

**T**he church's front steps were slick with overnight rain, and the air carried that thin, metallic tang that had started to show up in pockets of the city whenever the virus crept closer. Pastor Willo stood under the porch light, coat collar turned up, watching a delivery van idle across the street while a pair of city workers in yellow vests jogged past with their heads down. Somewhere inside Willowbrook Community Church, an old heater clicked and failed, then clicked again, trying to warm stale carpet and hymnals that smelled faintly of dust and lemon cleaner.

Detective Mark arrived without the van's help, moving with the alert economy he used around locked doors and bad news. His jacket was damp at the shoulders, and rain-water traced a dark line down his sleeve where he'd already wiped his hand against his holster. He didn't look at Willo at first; he looked at the doorstep where a bundle waited, wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine.

"Tell me that's not what I think it is," Mark said, voice low enough to keep it from carrying.

Willo's eyes caught on the edges of the paper before he registered the intent. Printed pages, thick stock, the corners slightly curled as if they'd been handled with gloves. No logo. No return address. Only a strip of masking tape across the top, smudged like someone had pressed a thumb there and then wiped it away.

Mark stepped closer, careful not to touch the twine. "It showed up after the lockdown sealed that tunnel corridor. Nobody's been anywhere near this entrance." He nodded toward the street. "And that van has been sitting there long enough to look like a joke someone's trying to make."

Willo felt the pressure of the previous hour still sitting under his ribs. The heavy clank of the hospital wing's lockdown had sounded like a door slamming on more than

metal and air. It had sounded like a warning that whoever was behind this could tighten the world around them whenever they wanted. Willo lifted his hand just short of the bundle.

“God help us,” he murmured, not as a performance, but as a breath. “What did they send?”

Mark crouched, radio hanging from his collar like an afterthought, and used the tip of a pen to worry the tape loose from a distance. The sound was soft-paper stretching, adhesive releasing-but it seemed loud in the porch light’s cone. He peeled the strip back and let it fall away.

Inside the bundle were sheets of printed material-service inserts, old-style pamphlets, sheets that looked like they’d been pulled from a church office. The top page held a diagram of interlocking lines, like a cipher meant to be followed by someone patient enough to read it twice. Beneath that, another set of pages carried words arranged in uneven blocks, some letters missing, some repeated in patterns that made Willo’s eyes itch with recognition.

He didn’t have to see the pager again to feel the rhythm of those encrypted messages. In his mind, liturgical lines had been twisted into code, the way scripture could be used as a language that only certain ears could hear. The cipher in the bundle wasn’t medical at all. It was meant to guide.

Mark straightened, rain dripping from his hair. “You’re staring like you’ve seen it.”

Willo swallowed. “I’ve heard it,” he corrected. “Not with my ears.”

Mark glanced at the pages, then at Willo. “That pager you and I looked at-those messages didn’t read like normal comms. They read like-”

“Like something built out of worship,” Willo finished, the words coming out heavier than he wanted. He flipped the top page toward himself, fingers hovering above the paper. The ink smelled faintly of toner and something else, bitter and chemical, like the air in the hospital corridor. “They mirrored the encrypted pager patterns.”

Mark’s face tightened. “So it’s a key. Or a leash.”

Willo lifted the next page. Lines of text marched across it with careful spacing, and in the margins tiny marks repeated-dots and dashes, but not random. They matched the cadence from the pager messages, only simplified, as if someone had taken the longer code and laid it out on paper for easier decoding.

A volunteer with a first-aid kit-Marlene, Willo recalled-came around the side door carrying bandages and wipes, her hands already busy with the aftermath of the last illness call. She stopped short on the porch when she saw the bundle and the detective kneeling beside it.

“Pastor,” she said, and her voice turned cautious the moment her eyes landed on the brown paper. “Did someone bring this from the city? We’ve been getting calls about- about people not being safe near hospitals.”

Mark stood, blocking the view with his body without thinking about it. “Did you see anyone drop it off?”

Marlene shook her head. “No. The doorbell didn’t ring. I heard something at the side steps, like a package being set down. When I came out, it was already there.” She glanced toward the street. “And now there’s that van again. Like a ghost.”

Willo forced himself to look past the fear in her eyes. “Get inside,” he told her, gentle but firm. “Close the side door. Keep the children away. If anyone asks, tell them we’re handling it.”

Marlene’s jaw worked. She wanted to argue, wanted to stay useful, but she’d seen enough in the city to understand when someone else’s caution was mercy. She backed away toward the door, clutching her kit like a shield.

The porch light hummed overhead. Rain ticked off the gutter in steady taps. In the distance, a siren rose and fell, then cut off abruptly as if the city had swallowed the sound.

Mark’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He didn’t pull it out right away; he stared at the screen through the fabric as though he could read the future in the vibration. Then he answered, stepping a few feet away from the bundle.

“Detective Mark,” he said.

A voice crackled back, distorted by interference. Willo couldn’t make out the words, but he watched Mark’s expression change—tightening, then flattening, then turning hard at the eyes.

Mark clicked off. He returned to the porch like the news had weight.

“We’ve got another report,” he said. “Near the river district. People in a clinic waiting room, same symptoms, same chemical smell. They think it’s spreading through air vents.” He looked at Willo and lowered his voice. “And they’re asking questions about you and this church.”

Willo’s throat went dry. “They always ask,” he said, and regretted how close his words came to anger. “Fear makes people greedy for a target.”

Mark’s gaze dropped to the printed sheets. “Or it makes people deliver messages.”

Willo inhaled slowly. The bundle’s paper felt cool even through the air, as if it had been kept in shade. He reached in, careful not to disturb the twine too much, and pulled the top page free. The diagram of interlocking lines caught the porch light. He traced the pattern with his eyes, not his fingers.

The cipher didn’t just resemble the pager messages. It carried the same structure, the same way certain letters were withheld while others were repeated, like a liturgy written for a mind that refused to ignore patterns. Willo could almost hear the earlier pager’s broken phrasing again, the way the code had seemed to wait for someone spiritually awake enough to recognize it as language, not nonsense.

But there was an obstacle that wouldn’t let the revelation settle.

Mark leaned closer, sniffed once, and went still. “Do you smell that?”

Willo noticed it then—sharp and chemical, faint beneath the toner smell. Not disinfectant like the hospital hallway, not exactly. This was thinner, sharper, like something volatile had been near the paper. His skin prickled.

“Someone handled it with something,” Willo said.

Mark's eyes flicked around the porch. "And they wanted us to handle it."

Willo's hand hovered over the page. He remembered the tunnel air in his face-damp cloth-cool, stale, disinfectant bite. He remembered the lockdown clanging shut, closing access like a fist. Whoever was behind this didn't only send messages. They shaped the conditions around them. They forced choices.

Mark crouched again and used a corner of his handkerchief-white, folded, the kind he'd likely kept for emergencies-to touch the underside of the top page without pressing too hard. He lifted it slightly, peering at the margin.

"There," he said.

Willo leaned in. In the lower corner, where someone might have assumed no one would look, a strip of micro-printed characters ran along the edge. Under the porch light, the letters shimmered faintly like they were meant to be revealed under certain angles.

Mark held his phone up, using the flashlight. The micro-print flared into clarity.

Willo's pulse jumped. The characters weren't random. They matched the pager's cipher alphabet-at least, the parts he'd recognized. The same substitutions. The same mirrored logic. It was the first layer, laid out like bait and like proof.

Mark's voice lowered. "They're giving us the key to what they hid in the pager."

Willo's fingers curled against his palm. "Or they're giving us a path straight to the place they want."

He could feel the decision forming in him, not as a thought but as an instinct. If he avoided it, he'd be letting the conspiracy decide the pace again. If he rushed in, he might be walking into a trap disguised as a church delivery.

A door slammed somewhere inside Willowbrook Community Church. Footsteps hurried. A teenager's phone rang out from the fellowship hall, tinny and bright in the quiet. The sound made Willo flinch-because it reminded him of the earlier tunnel and the way the city's systems seemed to keep failing right when people needed them most.

Then the teenager's voice came through the doorway, breathless. "Pastor! Detective Mark! The radio station just posted something-about the illness. They say it started in a lab and-" The words tangled, then sharpened. "They say it's connected to this church."

Mark turned his head toward the sound. "Who posted it?"

The teenager stepped into the porch doorway and stopped when she saw the bundle. Her eyes widened. "I didn't post it. I swear." She clutched her phone with both hands like it might explode. "It just came through. Everyone's sharing it. They're saying it's part of a cover-up, like-like you're involved."

Willo stared at her. In her face he saw the same thing he'd seen in the hospital staff's fear when the pager messages had surfaced: panic that tried to find a story quickly, even if it meant swallowing lies. He felt the city pressing down, hungry for someone to blame.

Mark's voice stayed controlled. "Where did you hear it?"

The teenager swallowed. "My cousin. He said it's from an anonymous feed. But there's a watermark-like a logo. It looks familiar."

Willo's eyes returned to the micro-print on the margin, to the way the code shimmered under light. The watermark the teenager mentioned-he couldn't see it yet, but the thought made his stomach turn. Someone was watching the way information moved through the city. Someone was timing the virus and the narrative like one synchronized operation.

Mark reached for the bundle again, but slower now, like he was forcing himself not to act on anger. "We check the cipher," he said. "We don't touch more than we have to. But we decode what they left."

Willo nodded once. It was the only way he could keep his faith from turning into fear. "If it mirrors the pager," he said, "then it's meant to answer something we haven't asked yet."

The volunteer with the first-aid kit appeared in the doorway, breath tight. "Marlene," Willo corrected automatically in his mind-because he'd already told her to keep people away-but she didn't hear that. Her eyes darted to Mark's flashlight beam, to the pages.

"There's something else," she said. "A man came by the side gate. He asked for the pastor by name. Said he had forms to drop off. When I told him we were closed, he turned and walked away without leaving anything."

Mark's expression hardened. "Did he have a mask?"

Marlene shook her head. "No. But his eyes... they weren't right. Like he knew where the cameras were and where they weren't."

Willo felt the cold settle deeper. The bundle wasn't a random kindness or a random threat. It was a coordinated delivery. They were close enough to scout Willowbrook Community Church and far enough to vanish before anyone could grab them.

Mark stepped back from the porch bundle, phone still in hand, flashlight dimmed. "We decode the first layer now," he said. "Then we decide where it points. If it's a trap, it's still information. And if it's not, it's the first real lead we've had since the hospital."

Willo looked at the printed materials-dead leaves gathered on the doorstep, pretending to be ordinary. He thought of the earlier pager messages, the way they'd seemed to wait behind locked hospital doors. He thought of the missing scientist's last call and the fear in every voice that tried to warn them without being heard.

He took a breath that tasted like rain and toner.

"All right," Willo said, and his voice steadied as he spoke the words. "We do it together."

Mark's eyes flicked to him, and for a heartbeat the detective looked less like a man hunting evidence and more like someone fighting for time. He nodded once, then carefully pulled the page flatter on the porch railing so the micro-print stayed visible.

Willo leaned in, reading the pattern with the same attention he used when searching scripture for meaning that wasn't obvious at first. The cipher didn't scream. It whis-

pered in structure-mirroring the pager's substitutions, the mirrored letters, the repeated marks that lined up with liturgical phrasing.

The first layer wasn't a location. It wasn't a name.

It was a direction.

As Willo translated the sequence into plain language in his mind, the porch light flickered-once, twice-then steadied. Somewhere down the street, a car door shut with a soft click, too controlled to be accidental.

Willo's stomach tightened. "Mark," he said, keeping his voice low as if the code itself might hear. "This points to an address."

Mark's gaze snapped to him. "What address?"

Willo swallowed, tasting the chemical edge again, stronger now as if the paper had warmed in the rain. He stared at the decoded line until it stopped moving in his mind.

"Underground access," Willo said, the words coming out like gravel. "A tunnel entrance. But it's not the hospital tunnel."

Mark's jaw clenched. "Then where?"

Willo looked past the pages, past the porch, toward the city's dark streets. He could almost feel the conspiracy's hand on the back of his neck, guiding them toward another sealed throat.

"It's closer than we think," he said.

Mark reached for his radio and pressed the button, speaking into it with clipped urgency. "Get me a map of tunnel entrances near Willowbrook Community Church-any abandoned service lines. Now."

The teenager's phone buzzed again, louder this time, and the screen lit her face pale. "Pastor," she said, voice trembling. "The anonymous feed just updated. It says the church is about to be 'visited.'"

Willo's hands tightened on the edge of the printed page. Rain drummed on the porch roof, steady as a countdown. He felt the moment settle into something irreversible—the kind of moment where faith wasn't an escape, but a compass.

He didn't look away from the cipher as the porch light hummed and the city's noise thickened outside the walls of Willowbrook Community Church. Somewhere beneath the street, another door waited to be opened, and whatever was delivering dead leaves on a living doorstep had finally shown the first thread of its plan.

CHAPTER 6

## Underground Tunnels Under the City

**R**ain kept tapping the church steps long after the last emergency siren faded, a steady percussion that made Pastor Willo's nerves feel louder than they were. The porch light above Willowbrook Community Church hummed and flickered, throwing warped shadows across the printed cipher bundle he'd carried inside. Somewhere under the street, the city breathed through vents and pipes, warm air meeting cold stone in places no one thought about until something went wrong. Willo could still taste the sour disinfectant that had clung to the hospital hallway in his memory-sharp, metallic, wrong-like it had followed them here.

Detective Mark stood near the sanctuary side door with his jacket collar up, one hand on the wall as if the building might lurch. His phone screen had gone dark, but the glow of the cipher's coordinates lived in his eyes. He'd spread the printed pages on a folding table like evidence, matching the patterns Willo recognized from the pager messages-liturgical rhythms disguised as something else. Now Mark's gaze kept snagging on the same line, the same sequence of numbers that looked too precise to be coincidence. Outside, the rain sounded heavier, and inside, the air felt too still.

"This is it," Mark said, voice low, like the walls might overhear. He tapped the paper with a knuckle. "The coordinates point under the old transit works. Abandoned infrastructure. Not a place people go unless they're trespassing or desperate."

Willo's fingers rested on the edge of the page until the edges bit his skin. He'd prayed in the tunnels before-prayed without words, letting Scripture hold him upright when the fear tried to crawl into his chest. He wasn't sure what scared him more: the way the city's illness spread like a rumor turning into a sickness, or the way someone had been silencing witnesses while leaving behind coded messages meant for a specific kind of attention.

"What do they want us to find down there?" Willo asked.

Mark's jaw flexed. "Whatever's still running. Whatever they hid. The cipher doesn't read like a warning anymore. It reads like a route."

Willo swallowed. The last time he'd followed a coded trail, it had led them to a seized pager and the beginning of a conspiracy that reached into the hospital's locked wings. The virus didn't feel random; it felt engineered, guided, curated by hands that didn't care whose lives they broke. If the coordinates were real, then something below the city was tied to the same machinery that kept making people vanish.

Mark shoved the folding table into a corner and took the bundle in one sweep, stuffing it into a plastic evidence bag with the kind of care that looked practiced. Then he reached for his flashlight, the beam clicking on with a hard white snap that made Willo flinch at the brightness.

"There's a maintenance access behind the old transit station," Mark said. "The kind of door nobody checks unless they're supposed to. I pulled traffic camera data from the last few days. Someone's been going in and out at odd hours."

Willo stepped away from the sanctuary, the rain still drumming outside, and followed Mark into the hall. The smell of wet carpet and institutional cleaner clung to the walls. Willowbrook Community Church had become a place people came for help, and now it felt like a staging ground for something darker. He could feel the weight of Scripture in his mind-verses he'd whispered under fluorescent lights and in hospital hallways-fighting for space against the memory of that man's collapse and the strange sounds he'd made before he died.

Mark paused at the side entrance, listening. The building's vents exhaled warm air, and with it came a faint odor like overheated wires. Willo noticed it too. A subtle tang, not quite smoke, not quite chemical-something that didn't belong to a church.

"You smell that?" Mark asked.

Willo nodded once. "Sickness leaves its mark. Even when it's gone."

Mark's eyes narrowed as if he was trying to decide whether to argue with the instinct. Then his gaze hardened and he opened the door.

Cold rain slapped their faces immediately. The street beyond was slick and reflective, littered with puddles that held streetlight halos like bruises. A few blocks away, an ambulance passed with its lights dimmed, moving through the city's thickening fear. Willo kept his coat tight and walked beside Mark, matching his pace as they crossed toward the old transit works.

The transit station sat like a broken tooth at the edge of the downtown grid. Abandoned years ago, it still had a skeletal shape that caught the rain and held it in rusted seams. Mark led them around the perimeter, scanning windows and door-frames. Willo's breath fogged in front of him, and his knuckles grew numb inside his gloves, but his mind stayed sharp on the cipher's coordinates.

When they reached the service gate, Mark crouched and ran a hand along the metal. Moisture beaded on his fingers. "This latch has been touched recently," he murmured.

Willo leaned in, hearing the small, mechanical sounds of the city beneath the surface-pipes, distant trains that no longer ran, the constant low hum of infrastructure. The gate's underside had a smear of something dark, nearly black against the wet. He didn't want to touch it, but his eyes couldn't look away.

"Blood?" he asked.

Mark's flashlight swept over it, and the beam caught a faint sheen. "Not old. Not fresh enough to be obvious." He looked up at the wall, then down at the lock. "They knew we'd come. Or someone wanted us to."

A faint click came from inside the gate, as if the metal had shifted under pressure. Mark froze. Willo's pulse jumped, but he didn't move first; he held still and listened to the rain, to the distant traffic, to the sudden absence of any other sound.

Then Mark eased the latch, slow and careful. The gate swung inward with a groan that sounded like it had been waiting a long time to be heard. Cold air poured out, not just from the earth but from something else-damp concrete and stale ventilation, threaded with that same sharp chemical bite that had haunted the hospital wing.

Willo's throat tightened. He'd learned how fear could dress itself as practicality. Curiosity. Duty. Investigation. But the smell told the truth: something down there had

been running, and it had been running with intent.

“Stay close,” Mark said, not commanding, just stating the need.

Willo took a breath and forced his mind back to Scripture the way he’d done in the tunnel before—words that didn’t change with circumstances. “The Lord is my shepherd,” he whispered under his breath, and this time he didn’t pretend it was just comfort. It was a weapon against panic.

Mark didn’t respond with faith, but he did nod, the smallest acknowledgment. Then he went first, flashlight cutting the dark.

The corridor beneath the transit works swallowed the sound of the rain above. Their footsteps echoed against concrete walls slick with condensation. Water dripped somewhere overhead, irregular, like a metronome set to the wrong rhythm. The air was cold enough to make Willo’s lungs ache, and it carried a faint odor of antiseptic mixed with something metallic, like pennies left in a wet pocket.

After a few turns, Mark stopped and knelt by a section of wall where a panel had been pried open. The edges were jagged, and the screws looked new. Someone had resecured it with a different set of bolts afterward, trying to erase evidence without erasing the fact that evidence had existed.

“See?” Mark said, and his voice tightened. “This isn’t random trespassing. This is someone controlling access.”

Willo crouched beside him. His fingers hovered over the panel’s seam, then withdrew. He didn’t want to touch anything that could leave residue on his skin. Instead he studied the markings—faint scratches, almost like someone had dragged a tool across the concrete in a deliberate pattern.

“Cipher coordinates,” Willo said, remembering the printed page, remembering how the numbers had mapped to a specific kind of language. “They leave routes for the people they expect.”

Mark’s jaw clenched. “Or they leave traps for anyone who follows the routes.”

He stood and shined the flashlight deeper into the corridor. A narrow stairwell descended into blackness, the steps damp and uneven. Somewhere below, a low mechanical whir rose and fell like breathing. It wasn't loud enough to be a siren. It was worse-controlled. Intentional.

Willo felt the urge to turn back. Not because he doubted God's presence, but because he understood how quickly fear could become permission for violence. He'd seen it in the streets above—people blamed each other, rumors hardened into accusations, and the virus made everyone's judgment seem unreliable. If something underground was still working, then every minute they delayed could be the difference between containment and catastrophe.

Mark started down the stairs, flashlight bobbing. Willo followed, each step sucking cold moisture from the air and clinging to his shoes. His Bible verse didn't come as a neat line anymore; it came as fragments, as breath. He kept praying anyway, not for comfort, but for courage to see clearly.

At the bottom, the tunnel opened into a maintenance chamber. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead even though the rest of the place looked abandoned. Their glow was sickly, sick enough to make Willo's eyes water. The floor was concrete, stained with old water, and there were cables along the walls that didn't look like they belonged to a forgotten transit system. They looked like they belonged to something that had been repurposed.

Mark swept his beam across the chamber and stopped abruptly. On a workbench sat a sealed metal case with a tamper label stuck to it—fresh adhesive, unbroken seal lines. Beside it lay a small device that looked like a modem or a control unit, its screen dark but its ports scuffed.

Willo's stomach turned. "They're still here."

Mark didn't look away from the equipment. "Or they were recently."

A sound came from the far end of the chamber: a soft scrape, like fabric dragging across concrete. Mark's head snapped toward it. Willo felt the hair on his arms rise.

"Who's there?" Mark demanded, voice cutting through the buzz of the lights.

Silence answered, thick and deliberate.

Willo stepped half a pace forward, forcing his voice to stay steady. "We're not your enemy," he said, and the words tasted strange in the underground air. "We're looking for answers."

The scrape came again, closer now, and this time Willo caught a faint smell-wet cloth, body odor, and something else beneath it. Not disinfectant. Not antiseptic. Something organic, sour and sharp, like a room that had held a fever long enough for it to stain the air.

Mark raised his flashlight beam. The light caught a figure half-hidden behind a support column. A person in dark outerwear, hood up, breathing hard. Their face was pale, as if the lights had stolen color from their skin. In their hand they clutched a small device-possibly the same kind of pager Mark had found earlier, but without the messages visible. The person's thumb hovered over a button as if they were deciding whether to press it.

Mark's voice went lower. "Drop it."

The hooded figure didn't obey. Instead they looked at Willo, and the way they stared felt like recognition and accusation tangled together.

"Pastor," the person said. The word was barely audible, strained by fear. "You shouldn't be here."

Willo's chest tightened. He didn't know the voice, but he knew the weight in it-the kind of fear that came from being hunted. "Who are you?" he asked.

The figure's shoulders jerked, and then they shook their head quickly, like any answer would be dangerous. "They watch for prayers," they whispered. "They watch for people who read the... the pattern."

Mark stepped closer, slow and deliberate, keeping his flashlight trained. "What pattern? Who are they?"

The hooded figure's eyes flicked past them toward the far tunnel, and Willo followed the glance. The fluorescent light buzzed harder for a moment, then dipped. In that

dim instant, Willo saw something on the wall-fresh chalk markings, the same kind of cipher language he'd recognized on the printed page. Only this time it wasn't just numbers. It was a coordinate with a symbol beside it, like an instruction tied to a spiritual phrase.

Willo's mouth went dry. "That's the cipher," he said, and his voice sounded too loud in the chamber.

Mark's face tightened. "It's a command."

The hooded figure's breath hitched. "It's a countdown," they said. "If you open the wrong door-if you go too deep-they release it."

Mark's gaze snapped back to the person. "Release what?"

The hooded figure's hand tightened on the device. Their thumb pressed the button.

Nothing happened immediately. The chamber remained buzz-lit and cold. Then, from the far tunnel, a series of faint clicks answered, like relays switching in sequence. A low vibration ran through the concrete, subtle at first-felt more than heard-and Willo's teeth began to ache.

Mark lunged forward. "Stop!"

The hooded figure backed away, shaking their head as if tears threatened but didn't fall. "I didn't-" they began, but the words broke.

Willo lifted his hands, not in surrender but in prayer, and spoke Scripture with urgency that matched the tunnel's vibration. "The Lord is my refuge and my fortress," he said, forcing the words into the air like a barrier. "He is my God, in Him I will trust."

The hooded figure blinked hard, and for a heartbeat their expression softened-like recognition of a language they'd been raised to understand. Then their face hardened again with fear.

"They don't want you to trust," they said, and their voice went thin. "They want you to panic."

Mark grabbed the sealed metal case and yanked it off the bench. The tamper seal tore with a sharp rip that made Willo flinch. Inside, instead of harmless equipment, there were vials and cartridges arranged with clinical precision. A faint chemical smell rose immediately, thickening the air with a sharpness that made Willo's eyes sting.

Mark's eyes widened in anger and disbelief. "This is what they're running."

The vibration surged, and the lights overhead flickered. In the far tunnel, a door-one Willo hadn't noticed before-began to unlock with a grinding mechanical groan. Cold air poured through the widening seam, carrying the virus's signature smell: disinfectant, metal, and something like burned plastic.

Willo stepped back instinctively, but Mark moved forward, throwing the metal case aside and grabbing the control unit's cables. "We shut it down," he said, voice fierce.

"Mark," Willo began, but Mark's hands were already searching for a power switch that might not exist. The hooded figure stumbled backward toward the unlocked door, eyes darting between Willo and Mark like they wanted to warn them again and couldn't find the strength.

Willo's mind raced faster than his body. The cipher coordinates. The abandoned infrastructure. The sealed case. The chalk markings. This wasn't just a storage site; it was an active node in the conspiracy-one that could push the virus deeper into the city. The person behind the column had tried, in their own broken way, to stop them. Or maybe they were too late. Maybe the countdown had started long before they arrived.

Mark ripped a cable free and the control unit sparked. A burst of acrid smoke hissed into the chamber, and Willo coughed, eyes watering. The fluorescent lights stuttered, then steadied for a moment-just long enough to keep the door from fully opening.

Mark swore under his breath and slammed his palm against the unit again, searching for a reset. "Come on."

Willo staggered and grabbed Mark's sleeve, pulling him back from the smoke. "It's not just electricity," he said, forcing his words through the sting in his throat. "It's timed. It's coded."

Mark looked at him, breath ragged. "Then we break the code."

The hooded figure made a strangled sound and pointed toward the chalk symbol on the wall. "It's not the numbers," they whispered. "It's what the symbol means. It's what it's calling."

Willo stared at the chalk and felt the familiar pattern settle into his mind like a key finding its lock. The cipher wasn't only a route; it was a spiritual summons disguised as coordinates. He'd seen enough of the liturgical pattern to understand that whoever had designed it believed words had power, whether they were used for healing or for harm.

He didn't have time to explain. He didn't have time to negotiate with the fear clawing at his ribs.

Willo stepped toward the wall and spoke the phrase the cipher implied, not as magic but as Scripture made audible—words he trusted more than any machine. The moment he said it, the chamber's vibration hiccuped, then steadied, as if whatever mechanism was waiting on a signal had received something else instead.

Mark's head snapped toward him. "What did you—"

Willo didn't answer. He kept speaking, voice trembling and steady at once, the verse lines threading together like rope. The door at the far tunnel groaned, but it didn't finish unlocking. The cold air that had begun to pour in thinned, replaced by the warmer staleness of old concrete.

The hooded figure sagged against the column, finally losing the fight to stay upright. Their eyes closed, and their breath came in shuddering pulls.

Mark stared at the chalk symbol as if it had just betrayed the conspiracy's certainty. "It worked," he said.

Willo's knees felt weak, but he refused to collapse. Above them, rain continued to fall, indifferent and relentless. Inside the tunnel, the machines were still awake, and the conspiracy was still dangerous. They'd bought time, not victory.

Mark reached for the hooded figure, but Willo caught his forearm. "Wait." He looked at the person's face. "Why did you let the button get pressed?"

The hooded figure opened their eyes, and in them Willo saw a mix of guilt and terror. "Because I thought it would buy me a chance," they whispered. "A chance to get you here before they finished moving the—before they finished moving the next batch."

Mark's expression hardened. "Next batch. So there are more."

The hooded figure nodded once, barely. "And they're already on the surface," they said. "The virus spreads faster when people run. When they panic."

Willo felt the weight of that settle into his chest. The city above wasn't just sick; it was being guided into fear like a flock into a trap. They'd followed the cipher down here, and the conspiracy had been counting on that.

The fluorescent lights flickered again, weaker now, as if the system was struggling to recover from Willo's spoken disruption. The control unit emitted a final low hum, then went quiet.

Mark exhaled hard through his nose. "We have to find out where they're sending it next."

Willo looked at the chalk symbol, at the sealed case, at the unlocked door that remained only half-open. He could still smell the virus's chemical bite in the air, a reminder that time had a taste.

"We can't leave them," Willo said, nodding toward the hooded figure. "Not like this."

Mark's gaze shifted, measuring risk and urgency in the way detectives did when they had to choose between two dangers. "I'm not leaving anyone," he said, and then he corrected himself, voice rough. "But we can't stay long enough to pretend we have the luxury of saving everyone."

Willo's heart clenched at the truth in it. Still, he reached down and helped the hooded figure sit up against the column. Their hands trembled, and when Willo offered water from his pocket, the person took it with shaking gratitude.

As Mark checked the tunnel mouth and listened for footsteps above the chamber's ceiling, Willo bowed his head just once, quick and silent. He didn't pray for an easy outcome. He prayed for direction-because the city above was changing, and something underground had just proved it could be redirected, if they were willing to speak and act before the next countdown completed.

The rain's steady tapping seemed farther away now, muffled by the concrete's thick walls. Somewhere beyond them, machinery restarted with a different rhythm, as if the conspiracy had adjusted to their interference.

Mark straightened, flashlight angled toward the tunnel leading deeper. "The cipher coordinates weren't meant to end here," he said.

Willo looked toward the half-unlocked door and felt the pull of the next hidden chamber like a hook in his ribs. The conspiracy had more than one entrance. More than one path. More than one batch.

And this time, they weren't just following a code. They were fighting over what the code would do to the city.

CHAPTER 7

## The Abandoned Laboratory's Warning

**T**he maintenance door they'd pried open under the transit station gave off a sound like dry bones grinding together, and Pastor Willo felt it in his teeth before he ever saw what was behind it. The air that spilled out was cold and metallic, smelling of old coolant and dust that had been trapped too long in the dark. Somewhere deeper in the tunnels, water ticked against pipework with a steady patience, and the hum of something electrical vibrated through the concrete like a warning you couldn't ignore. Detective Mark followed with his flashlight angled low, the beam catching on slick grime on the floor, on boot prints that weren't there yesterday—or at least weren't there when they'd entered the tunnels the first time.

Willo kept his hand near the small cross he wore under his shirt, not as a performance, but because his fingers needed something steady. The half-unlocked door back behind them had pulled like gravity, and now this new chamber felt like the other side of the same pull. Mark had said the place looked "staged," and Willo had thought about how the conspiracy always seemed to keep its fingerprints clean. Even in the dark, they left messages.

They weren't alone in the room.

A row of glass-walled cabinets stood against one wall, their doors clouded from the inside as if something had been boiled there and left to cool without being cleaned. Coiled cables hung from the ceiling mounts like black veins. Beneath a workbench, a small heater clicked on and off, warming a patch of air that smelled faintly of bleach. The only light came from Mark's flashlight and the pale, intermittent flicker of a monitor on a metal cart—faint enough that Willo wondered if it was dying or if someone had simply turned it down to avoid notice.

Mark's voice came out low. "Tell me you feel that."

Willo swallowed. "The vibration?"

"Yeah." Mark's jaw tightened. He stepped closer, careful with each footfall, and Willo saw the way his shoulders stayed rigid, as if he expected the room to lunge. "This doesn't feel abandoned. It feels paused."

Willo leaned in, listening over the water tick and the electrical whine. The monitor made a thin, rhythmic sound-like a printer trying to decide whether it was allowed to speak. Willo's mind flashed to the coded pager messages they'd found in the hospital wing, the liturgical pattern he couldn't unsee once he recognized it. He'd prayed over the cipher bundle when rain hammered the church porch roof, and he'd asked God for a door that wouldn't lock them out again. Now the tunnel itself seemed to offer them a room that had been left running, waiting for someone to come back.

Mark's light swung to a chair beside the bench. A disposable lab mask lay crumpled on its seat, and beside it, a set of gloves-still stiff with the shape of hands-rested as if whoever wore them had stood up mid-thought and never returned. On the bench sat a device with a keypad and a small screen, its interface dark but clean, wiped down so thoroughly that Willo couldn't shake the feeling of deliberate preparation. "This is where they were working," Mark said. "And they didn't just leave in a hurry."

Willo moved toward the bench, forcing his breathing to slow. He wanted this scene to be concrete-proof, not speculation. He wanted to know what they'd scaled, what they'd intended, and whether the faster spread of the virus they'd sensed in the city was tied to whatever had been running down here. His thoughts returned to the last warning in coded shorthand they'd seen glimpsed on a fragment of paper in a previous contact-words that didn't belong to ordinary lab reporting. If a final note existed here, he needed to read it before the conspiracy decided it wasn't safe for him to.

Mark followed him, but his flashlight tracked the corners too. "Pastor," he said, and the name sounded worn at the edges, like he'd used it too many times when there was no time to be gentle. "I'm not saying it's safe, but if they're expecting someone, it means there's still a chain."

Willo looked at the device on the bench. Its keypad had smudges where fingers had pressed. The screen was blank, yet the cable leading into it ran into a wall socket

whose cover had been removed and reattached with new screws. Someone had maintained this place recently. He could almost hear the unspoken question in the room: How long can you keep it running without being caught?

He reached for the screen and stopped short, fingertips hovering. The air around the device felt slightly warmer than the rest of the chamber, and the smell of disinfectant grew stronger, sharp enough to sting his nose. "It's on standby," Willo murmured.

Mark's eyes narrowed. "Or it's waiting for an input."

Willo glanced toward the cabinets. One of the glass doors had a small strip of paper taped to it, edges peeling. He didn't touch it yet. The pager messages had taught him that the conspiracy could hide meaning in plain sight, and that some symbols were meant to be recognized by the spiritually awake. He had no certainty, only the pull of pattern.

Mark stepped to the cabinets and crouched, his flashlight beam tightening on the strip. "Looks like labeling," he said. "But it's... not normal."

Willo leaned closer. The tape held a short line of coded shorthand-letters and marks that looked like abbreviations at first glance. Then the rhythm in the handwriting surfaced, the way a chant might move from phrase to phrase. Willo's stomach tightened. He recognized the look of it from the cipher bundle at the church and from the coded pager entries he'd translated in his mind while Mark stared at the numbers like they were evidence in a crime scene.

Mark's voice dropped. "This isn't for inventory. It's for direction."

Willo forced himself to breathe through the disinfectant sting. "They're using the lab for communication," he said. "Not just experiments."

Before Mark could respond, the monitor on the cart flickered brighter, then dimmed, then brightened again, like a heartbeat that refused to settle. A line of text crawled across the screen in blocky characters. Willo couldn't read it directly, but he felt the structure of it, the way it stepped from one symbol pattern to the next.

Mark moved instinctively toward the cart. "That's-" he began.

The heater clicked, louder this time, and a low hiss rose from beneath the workbench. Willo's skin prickled. The sound wasn't like gas leaking. It was too controlled, too timed.

Mark froze mid-step. "Pastor. Don't—"

Willo heard it then: a faint chime, almost musical, pulsing from somewhere in the ceiling. The room's hum shifted pitch, like a machine recalibrating to new conditions. The air grew colder fast, and the disinfectant smell turned thin and metallic. His throat tightened as if the chamber itself had begun to inhale.

Mark yanked his hand back from the cart. "Motion sensor," he said, and now there was anger under the fear. "They want someone to come in and trigger something."

Willo stared at the monitor, at the crawling symbols. The message wasn't finished, and the room was actively discouraging them from reading it fully. The obstacle wasn't just physical. It was designed.

Willo reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the folded printed cipher page he'd taken from the church bundle. Rain had soaked his mind with urgency; here, the urgency was dry and mechanical. He unfolded it with clumsy fingers while Mark held his flashlight steady, the beam cutting a hard line across the bench.

Willo compared the shorthand on the tape to the cipher pattern. His eyes snagged on a recurring mark—an emblem that looked like a bent cross and a bracket fused together. In the cipher bundle, it had corresponded to "scale," as if the code wasn't only warning but describing how the experiment moved from one stage to the next. His pulse hammered against his ribs.

He looked back to the monitor. The characters resolved into a coded line that matched the cipher's structure. The room wasn't just paused; it was running a final instruction, and the instruction implied speed—implied that whatever they'd started here had been accelerated. Not by accident. By choice.

Mark's voice came sharp. "What does it say?"

Willo didn't answer immediately because the hiss under the bench climbed into something more insistent, a rhythmic breath. He could feel it in his ears. "It's a warning," he said. "They're scaling faster than expected."

Mark's eyes flashed toward him. "Scaling what?"

Willo's mouth went dry. "The experiment. The spread."

The heater clicked again, and this time the sound was accompanied by a soft clatter from behind the cabinets. A panel somewhere in the wall shifted, and a thin seam of darkness appeared where there hadn't been one. A compartment door, maybe. Or a compartment meant for something else entirely.

Mark's flashlight beam whipped across the seam. "They've got a release."

Willo stepped backward, careful not to trip over the lab cables. His mind flickered to the virus spreading through the city, to the rumors that had thickened like smoke around the river district clinic. He'd heard people whisper about air vents, about delays in triage, about patients collapsing as if their bodies were being turned off from the inside. If someone had scaled the experiment faster, then the city wasn't just suffering. It was being fed.

Mark swallowed, then spoke with grim clarity. "We have to get out before the chamber activates fully."

Willo's fingers tightened on the cipher page. Leaving without the final note felt like leaving a prayer unfinished. He could already imagine the conspiracy wiping this room clean next, burying whatever message remained. But the hiss under the bench rose into a louder, more urgent tone, and Willo felt the temperature around them drop another degree. If something released here, the air itself could become the weapon.

He made a decision anyway-not reckless, not heroic, but firm. He moved toward the bench, ignoring Mark's tense intake of breath. "Help me," Willo said, and the words were quiet but absolute.

Mark's hand shot out, grabbing Willo's sleeve. "Pastor-"

Willo looked at him, and for a second Mark's detective instincts fought his fear. Willo didn't ask for permission. He used the only tool he had that could compete with the conspiracy's timing: the code. "The monitor's still writing," Willo said. "If we can pull the line before it finishes, we can carry the warning upstairs."

Mark's eyes darted to the cabinets, to the seam, to the monitor's flicker. "And if it triggers while we're reading?"

"Then we read fast," Willo said, and stepped closer to the cart.

He pressed his hand to the side of the bench to steady himself. The metal was cold enough to bite, and the vibration in the room sharpened as if it sensed touch. The monitor's symbols crawled faster now, like whoever had left it was losing patience. Willo grabbed the cipher page and held it beside the screen, aligning the repeating marks in his mind.

The final line formed, letter by letter, and though it was still shorthand, Willo's translation came with a clarity that startled him. It wasn't merely "scale faster." It was "move through the city's breath." It referenced entry points-air systems, circulation, pathways that connected buildings the way veins connect organs. Then, at the end, a phrase appeared that he recognized from the pager translations: a coded liturgical cue that implied urgency and concealment.

Mark leaned in, his face tight with concentration. "What's that last part?" he asked.

Willo's eyes tracked the final symbols and his throat constricted. The note ended with a sequence that corresponded to a warning about a "handoff"-an transfer of responsibility between teams, between stages, between people who thought they weren't accountable because they believed someone else would finish. The conspiracy wasn't a single group acting once. It was a chain designed to keep anyone from being caught with the whole truth.

Willo spoke the last decoded words aloud before the monitor could shift again.

"They're passing it on."

The hiss under the bench cut out suddenly, replaced by a sharper whirring sound. A panel in the floor clicked, and a rush of air swept past Willo's ankles, stirring the dust

into a thin, gray veil that smelled faintly sweet beneath the disinfectant bite. Mark swore under his breath, grabbing Willo's shoulder and pulling him back hard enough that Willo stumbled.

The seam in the wall widened with a wet scrape, and something dark moved behind it. Not a person-too quick, too irregular. A mechanism, maybe, or a container being opened. The monitor's light blinked once, twice, then went dead, leaving only Mark's flashlight beam to carve the room into manageable pieces.

Mark yanked Willo toward the half-open door they'd come through. His boots thudded against the concrete, and the tunnel air felt suddenly oppressive, thick with the after-smell of whatever had just been waiting. "Move," Mark said, and the command wasn't for Willo alone.

Willo stumbled after him, lungs burning as he fought to breathe through the chemical tang. His mind raced, not only with fear but with the weight of what he'd seen in the shorthand. Scaling faster. Moving through breath. Passing it on.

Behind them, the cabinets' glass doors rattled once, like a system resetting. The room's hum dropped to a lower pitch, as if satisfied with what it had done. The final warning had been delivered, but it had also been timed to prevent them from lingering.

They reached the maintenance door, and Mark shoved it open wider with his shoulder. Damp tunnel air rushed in, cooler and less sharp than the lab's inside, carrying the faint sound of water ticking again. Willo didn't stop to look back. He only clutched the cipher page and the printed shorthand strips that Mark had managed to peel free with his gloved fingers before the lab could seal itself again.

As they slipped into the tunnel, the door behind them slammed with a heavy metallic clank, final enough to ring in Willo's bones. The sound faded into the distance, swallowed by concrete and distance, but the warning remained-etched into his mind like words carved into stone.

Mark walked fast, flashlight bobbing, and Willo kept pace, trying not to let his thoughts run ahead of his feet. He could still hear the mechanism whir, the way it had

seemed to breathe with them. He could still smell the thin sweetness under the bleach.

Mark's voice came out rough. "You got it?"

Willo looked down at the cipher page in his hand. It was wrinkled now, creased where he'd gripped it too tightly, but the marks held steady. "They scaled it faster than expected," he said again, as if repeating it could make it less impossible. "And they're moving it through the city's air systems."

Mark's jaw tightened, and Willo saw the detective's mind sprinting toward implications-ventilation routes, building circulation, the way the virus could travel without leaving a visible trail. "Then we're late," Mark said, and there was no accusation in it. Only the hard honesty of a man who'd seen too much evidence become too late.

Willo turned his face toward the direction of the transit station, toward the surface where people were still living their days without knowing their breath could be a doorway. His prayer rose in him without words, urgent and steady.

When they reached the next corridor intersection, Mark stopped abruptly, scanning the darkness. "Someone else is down here," he said.

Willo felt it before he saw it-the shift in air pressure, the faint scrape of fabric against concrete, the soft click of a device being turned on. The tunnel swallowed sound differently than the chamber had, but the presence was real. The conspiracy hadn't just left a lab running. It had set terms for who could find it and who couldn't.

Willo tightened his grip on the cipher page and lifted his chin, as if facing a storm front. "We've been warned," he whispered, and the words carried more sorrow than fear. "Now we have to decide what to do with the warning."

Mark's flashlight beam swung toward the shadow at the far end of the corridor, and the thin, controlled sound of someone breathing back at them was the only answer they got.

CHAPTER 8

## A Pastor's Confession to Mark

**T**he metal door at the end of the corridor didn't so much open as surrender, the latch giving way with a reluctant clunk that echoed off concrete and old tile. Pastor Willo tasted damp air and disinfectant on his tongue as Mark's flashlight beam cut forward, catching dust motes hanging in the stale dark. Somewhere in the tunnels, water ticked against pipework with a patient rhythm, and the sound of breathing behind them had stopped-replaced by something worse, a silence that felt arranged.

Willo's grip tightened on the printed cipher page still folded in his coat pocket. The paper was warm from his body, but the words on it had gone cold the moment he'd seen them match the pager's pattern. "We're not alone down here," he murmured, though the tunnel didn't answer. Mark's hand hovered near his holster, knuckles whitening, his other hand steadying the flashlight as it moved over exposed wires and a strip of caution tape that had been hastily torn and re-taped.

Mark didn't look back when he spoke. "The gate you saw," he said, voice low, "it wasn't left open for us. Whoever is running these tunnels wants a route. And they want us to choose it."

Willo felt the confession he'd been holding since the first page slid into his throat like a stone. He had been praying in the dark for answers, but now the darkness was pressing back. The warning—"We've been warned"—had turned into something personal. With every step deeper beneath the city, he kept remembering the calls he'd taken from people in Willowbrook Community Church: questions about where to go for help, how to get checked, what to do if symptoms started. The answers he'd given had seemed ordinary yesterday. Tonight, they felt like they'd been guided.

He wanted to know what was still working down here. He wanted to see the evidence with his own eyes, to confirm whether the virus conspiracy had built itself a nervous system through the city-through institutions, through fear, through the church network

he loved. And most of all, he wanted to stop the steering before it reached anyone else in Willowbrook, before another person mistook delay for safety.

A faint whir drifted from deeper inside the chamber, the kind of sound that didn't belong in a place abandoned. Mark eased his way forward, boots scraping grit. Willo followed, careful not to let his coat brush the walls—old residue glimmered under the light, smeared like someone had wiped away something sticky and then tried to pretend it had never been there.

The room widened into an equipment bay. Stainless tables sat under harsh, dead-white lamps, and on one wall a monitor screen blinked with a greenish glow, stubborn even without power flowing to it. Cables snaked into a rack of devices that looked patched together from hospital parts and something stranger. The air smelled sharp, metallic, and faintly sweet, like chemicals reacting.

Mark's flashlight found a chair bolted to the floor, its back turned toward the entrance as if someone had been waiting for a message to arrive. On the chair's seat sat a pager—newer than the one they'd seized earlier—its screen lit with a line of text that shouldn't have been there without a signal. The letters were small, blocky, and wrong for any medical system Willo had ever seen.

Willo stepped closer, and the pager's screen changed as he watched, the text scrolling to something that looked like a prayer written in code. It wasn't random. It had the same rhythm as the cipher page from the church doorstep, the same structure Willo had recognized because he'd spent years reading Scripture aloud and listening for patterns in the language God used.

His stomach tightened. "This isn't just a lab," he whispered. "It's a relay."

Mark crouched, keeping his flashlight steady on the pager without touching it. "Relay," he echoed, then tightened his jaw. "Or bait."

Before Willo could answer, the monitor on the wall flickered—once, twice—then snapped into a live feed. Grainy footage filled the screen: a hallway camera view, dim and industrial. A figure moved through it, shoulders hunched, face obscured by a hood. The

figure paused near what looked like a door panel. A gloved hand lifted, and a small device flashed a light toward the camera lens.

Willo's blood went cold. "That's a scanner," he said, and heard his own voice shake.

Mark's eyes tracked the screen. "We're being watched."

The pager on the chair emitted a soft vibration, like a heartbeat waking up. The screen brightened. Lines of encrypted text appeared, and beneath them, as if someone had decided to make it easier for the spiritually awake, a second line manifested—short, plain, and unmistakably liturgical in cadence, though warped by the code around it.

Willo stared until his vision narrowed. He knew those words. He'd preached them. He'd said them over bedsides when families were too frightened to breathe. The coded message didn't just reference Scripture; it used Scripture like a key, like a lock that only certain people could open.

A thought struck with the force of a slammed door: if the cipher could steer the mind toward the right doors, it could steer people away from help. It could steer them into delay, into isolation, into trusting the wrong answers because the right words sounded familiar.

Mark rose, scanning the room for exits and threats. "Whoever set this up," he said, "they expect us to read it."

"I've been reading it," Willo said, and the confession that had been strangling him finally broke loose. "At Willowbrook. Messages came to me this week—requests for guidance. People asking if the clinic was the right place, if tests were safe, if waiting it out meant they wouldn't be 'pulled into the system.'"

Mark's head snapped toward him. The flashlight beam swung, carving a bright slice across Willo's face. "You never told me that."

Willo swallowed hard. The tunnel's damp air scraped his throat. "I thought it was fear," he said. "I thought it was rumor. People were calling after the first collapses. After that man fell on the church steps." His mind flashed back to the moment: the dust,

the frantic shouts, Mark's hands steady on a pulse he'd already been trying to find. "I told them what I believed was truth."

Mark's voice went sharper. "And someone else took your truth and twisted it into a different route."

Willo shook his head, helpless and furious at himself. "I don't know how deep it goes." He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the folded cipher page. The paper looked harmless in the beam, but it felt like a live wire. "But this-this matches. Someone's using language like a steering wheel."

Mark's jaw flexed. "You're saying your church network got infiltrated."

"I'm saying I don't trust every message that comes through our doors," Willo said. "Not after this. Not after the way people have been avoiding the clinic. Not after the way a few names from my contact list started disappearing from my calls-volunteers who used to answer fast, now letting messages ring without returning them."

For a moment, Mark said nothing. The only sound was the faint hum of the monitor and the distant drip of water.

Then Mark took a step closer to Willo, lowering his voice. "Tell me everything you know that isn't on paper."

Willo almost laughed at the irony-his life of sermons and pastoral visits suddenly demanded investigation like a manhunt. But he couldn't afford pride. He unfolded the cipher page and held it up so Mark could see the alignment marks he'd noticed earlier: not just the words, but the spacing, the way the cipher seemed to anticipate a reader's interpretation.

"This pattern," Willo said, "it's not only code. It's timing. It matches the pager messages we found-down to the intervals. The printed bundle at the church wasn't random. It was placed where my people would find it, where I would recognize it."

Mark studied the page, then looked up at the monitor feed again. The hooded figure on the screen had moved closer to the door panel, and the gloved hand pressed

against it. A low click came through the speaker, even though the speaker itself looked dormant.

Willo heard the click in his bones. It sounded like a lock confirming access.

Mark's eyes narrowed. "They're opening something."

Willo's mouth went dry. "Or closing it behind us."

A sound from the doorway-metal shifting, a latch turning-cut across the chamber. Mark spun, flashlight snapping to the entrance. The corridor beyond had changed. Where they'd come in, the far edge of the tunnel now showed a half-closed gate, its mesh pattern familiar from the maintenance gate they'd forced earlier. Only this time, it wasn't half-open. It was moving into place with deliberate slowness, as if someone wanted them to hear it close.

Mark swore under his breath. "They're sealing the entrance."

Willo's pulse hammered in his ears. "There's a second exit," he said, though he didn't yet know where. He forced his eyes across the room, searching for doors, vents, anything that didn't belong to a dead lab. "They wouldn't trap us without a way out."

Mark's flashlight swept the walls. It caught a narrow service hatch set low near the floor-painted the same dull gray as the concrete, easy to miss if you weren't looking for it. There was a handle, and beside it, a small symbol etched into the metal: a cross-shaped mark surrounded by numbers that didn't match the cipher but mirrored its style.

Willo crouched, pain flaring in his knees from the earlier strain. He pressed his fingers to the hatch. The metal was cold, slick with residue that smelled faintly of bleach and something else-an oily scent that clung to his skin like a warning.

Mark dropped beside him. "You touch it," he said, "and you tell me if it triggers anything."

Willo didn't like how blunt Mark sounded, but it was the kind of bluntness that came from surviving too many unknowns. He nodded, then slid his hand along the etched

symbol without gripping the handle. The symbol's edges felt freshly filed, as if someone had modified it after they'd left.

The pager on the chair vibrated again, screen flashing a new line of coded text. The message was shorter, more urgent, and the plain liturgical cadence underneath came through like a command disguised as comfort.

Willo felt his faith strain against it. It was Scripture used as a weapon, love twisted into a leash. He understood then why people in Willowbrook had been steering away from help: the conspiracy wasn't just hiding evidence; it was hijacking hope.

Mark glanced at him. "Read it."

Willo stared at the message, then met Mark's eyes. "It's telling someone to wait," he said quietly. "To delay. To believe that suffering is meant to be endured alone."

Mark's face tightened. "That's not pastoral," he said. "That's control."

The service hatch handle shifted under Willo's fingertips. It didn't move like a normal latch. It clicked with resistance, then gave a fraction, as if the hatch had been held shut by a magnet or a pressure seal. Willo felt a faint vibration through the metal, a low tremor that traveled up his arm.

Mark grabbed Willo's wrist, pulling him back just as the entrance gate completed its slide and locked with a final heavy clank that shook dust from the ceiling. The sound echoed until it died in the corners, leaving them sealed in the chamber with the monitor's green glow and the pager's coded insistence.

"Okay," Mark said, voice tight. "So they want us trapped long enough for whatever they're doing on the other side to finish."

Willo looked toward the monitor feed. The hooded figure had vanished from view. The screen now displayed static, then a new camera angle: a close-up of a hand-gloved-placing something into a slot on a door panel. The slot had a small indicator light that blinked once, then stayed steady.

Mark followed Willo's gaze. "That's confirmation," he said. "Their system is broadcasting."

Willo's mind raced, but his hands moved with resolve. He took the cipher page from his pocket and smoothed it on his knee, aligning it with the symbols he'd seen on the hatch. The cipher didn't just decode messages; it mapped them. It suggested where the next action would happen.

He looked at Mark, and for the first time since the tunnel sealed, he didn't feel like he was asking for help. He felt like he was offering something he couldn't keep hidden anymore. "My church network," he said, voice steadying, "it might not be fully infiltrated. But it's been steered. Someone's using the trust people place in Willowbrook Community Church."

Mark's eyes locked on him. "Then we stop letting them steer."

Willo reached for the hatch handle again. This time he turned it fully, feeling the metal resist, then release with a soft hiss that smelled sharper, more chemical. A seam opened along the floor, and a gust of air rushed up-warmer than the room, tinged with the same sweet-metal odor from the equipment bay.

A narrow ladder descended into darkness.

Mark didn't hesitate. He shoved his flashlight downward, the beam catching the ladder rungs slick with moisture. "Get down," he said, and the command carried urgency that sounded like faith without the words.

Willo swallowed and climbed first, one hand gripping the ladder while the other clung to the cipher page. The paper fluttered against his palm, and he shoved it deeper into his coat pocket to keep it from snagging. The ladder creaked under his weight, and the tunnel below seemed to exhale, pulling the air from his lungs.

Behind him, Mark followed, boots thudding onto the lower surface with a dull, wet sound. The hatch above them began to slide closed-not all the way, just enough to leave a narrow gap.

Willo heard the monitor's hum shift, as if the system had changed modes. The pager vibrated one more time, and the screen flashed a final line of code that matched the cipher page's rhythm perfectly.

Willo didn't need to fully decode it to understand the intent. It wasn't a prayer anymore. It was a schedule.

He looked at Mark in the dim, the flashlight beam carving their faces out of shadow. "They're starting another release," he said.

Mark's eyes hardened. "Then we move before it spreads."

Willo climbed down into the lower tunnel, and the air turned colder, carrying a faint electrical tang that made the back of his throat tighten. Somewhere ahead, metal scraped against metal-someone else in the tunnels, moving with purpose.

And in the sealed darkness beneath Willowbrook Community Church, Pastor Willo made his choice with the confession still burning in his chest: if his people had been guided away from help, he would not hide his knowledge anymore. He would use it, even if it cost him trust he'd spent a lifetime building.

CHAPTER 9

## The Organization That Controls Silence

**M**etal grated somewhere ahead, steady as a clock you couldn't trust. The lower tunnel under Willowbrook Community Church breathed cold air that smelled faintly of bleach and damp stone, and every time Pastor Willo shifted his weight, his boots scuffed grit off the floor that felt slick even through the soles. The flashlight beam in Detective Mark's hand cut a narrow tunnel through darkness, catching on old wiring strapped to the wall and the white residue of dried disinfectant along the seams of a maintenance door.

Willo's confession still sat like a stone behind his ribs, but the sound ahead drowned his thoughts. Not a stumble. Not a panicked retreat. Someone moving equipment with purpose. A low scrape followed by the click of something being set down, then silence again, as if the other person had learned how to hold their breath.

Mark's voice came out tight, controlled. "Don't make noise."

Willo nodded, though Mark couldn't see it in the dark. His mouth tasted like copper-fear or adrenaline, he couldn't tell-and he reminded himself of what he'd already chosen: he wouldn't keep hiding what he knew. Not while people were being steered away from help, not while voices were being cut out of the story. Above them, the church's foundation held, but down here the air felt like it belonged to a different world.

He and Mark had come through the lower tunnel after the last hidden chamber, after the pager messages and the warnings that didn't read like medical notes. Now the metal sound suggested the next part of the trap had already been switched on.

Mark went forward first, his flashlight beam steady on the wall as if he could read intentions in grime. Willo kept close enough to catch Mark's shoulder if he slipped. The tunnel widened into a service corridor where the ceiling pipes ran low, and the smell

of ozone-electrical, sharp-grew stronger. Somewhere nearby, a motor hummed, not loud, but persistent, like a refrigerator in an empty house.

Willo leaned in, listening. The scrape returned, followed by a faint radio hiss swallowed by the stone. Then a voice-muffled, distorted-carried through the corridor with a rhythm that didn't match casual speech. It wasn't the non-human utterance from the seizure, but it lived in the same cadence, the same strange clipped phrasing that Willo had recognized in encrypted messages on the pager.

Mark's grip tightened on his flashlight. "You hear that?"

"I hear... something repeating." Willo swallowed. The words felt wrong in his mouth, like he was speaking about a storm while standing in its shadow. "It doesn't sound like a doctor."

Mark shifted his stance, angling his body so his light wouldn't spill too far. "Then it's not a hospital worker."

Willo's mind caught on a detail from the earlier cipher materials left at the church doorstep. The shorthand wasn't meant for everyone. It was meant for people who had been trained to interpret it-people who shared a language outside of normal procedure. If this corridor held a group receiving messages and directing actions, then the conspiracy wasn't a loose network. It was organized.

And if it was organized, it had a place where the organization gathered itself.

Mark moved toward a junction where two tunnels forked, both lined with painted arrows long faded by damp. A metal cabinet sat half-open against the wall, its contents removed or taken away. A strip of masking tape remained on the door with letters scratched into it by hand, not printed. Willo's eyes snagged on the letters because they weren't random. They formed a partial code-an abbreviation that matched the cipher pattern he'd seen in the underground bay.

Mark didn't notice the tape. He noticed the fresh smear on the cabinet hinge, dark and wet, like someone had touched it without gloves. He crouched, leaned close, and inhaled once. "That's not just grime."

Willo bent beside him. The smell rose again-bleach and something chemical beneath it, a bitterness that made the back of his throat tighten. "Same tang as before," he murmured, remembering the hospital corridor above where the air had been sharp with disinfectant and sickness.

Mark's jaw flexed. "So they've been down here."

The radio hiss grew louder, then thinned, as if whoever spoke had moved a few steps. Willo tensed when the voice sharpened into clearer syllables. There was no greeting, no explanation-just a command delivered like a habit.

"...move the shift... delay intake... keep the forms... clean."

Mark's eyes flicked toward Willo. "Forms clean," he said, as if the phrase had weight. "That's bureaucracy."

"It's control," Willo corrected, softer than Mark expected. "They're not just spreading fear. They're shaping what people can prove. What people can report."

The corridor ahead held another door, heavier than the maintenance gate they'd come through. This one had a keypad mounted at eye level, but the keypad looked unused-dust gathered in the corners, a thin film on the numbers. A strip of red tape ran across the frame, and behind it the metal was scuffed as if someone had forced the door open recently and then resealed it.

Mark straightened, listening for footsteps that didn't come. "They don't want us to get in."

Willo's pulse thudded. "Or they want us to know it's there."

He heard himself speak and hated how calm it sounded. He was done letting the conspiracy set the terms. He had already made one choice in the dark, and the confession still burned. If the organization controlling silence existed, it wasn't just hiding behind encrypted messages. It was coordinating intimidation across places where people should have been safe-hospitals, agencies, civic offices.

Willo looked at Mark. "If this is who's doing it, we can't just listen. We have to see who's inside."

Mark's mouth tightened. "We get caught, we're done."

Willo glanced down the corridor where the scrape had come from. "Then we move now."

Mark hesitated, as if weighing the risk against something deeper-something he'd carried since the first collapse near the church steps, since people had vanished and paperwork had turned into a wall. He spoke carefully, like every word might be evidence later. "If they're coordinating, there's a way they track access. A way they know who's where."

Willo nodded. "A way to keep silence."

Mark took a step closer to the door, then stopped short. The air around the red-taped frame felt different, warmer, almost stale. Willo noticed the thin line of condensation along the bottom edge, and then a faint vibration beneath the floor-like a hidden mechanism responding to movement.

Mark's flashlight beam drifted down. "Pressure plate."

Willo stared at the floor seam. The stone looked ordinary, but a hairline crack ran across it, too straight to be natural. The scrape sound echoed faintly again, closer now, and the radio hiss returned with a new burst of clipped words.

"...approve the transfer... keep the line open... make sure they don't reach the lab."

Willo's stomach turned. "They're sending people where they can be controlled."

Mark's hand hovered near his pocket where he kept his phone and what little technology he could risk. "If they're doing that, then someone is getting paid to keep it running."

Willo thought of the way people above had spoken in half-truths, suddenly afraid to sign names, suddenly hesitant to answer questions. The organization didn't need to threaten everyone directly. It only needed enough intimidation to make others cooperate.

Mark exhaled through his nose. "Okay. We don't step on that plate."

He turned his body slightly, scanning for an alternate path along the wall. His light caught something Willo would've missed if he weren't looking for it: a narrow maintenance grate set into the side panel, its screws still intact. Not meant for public access. Meant for people who belonged.

Mark's voice dropped. "There."

Willo moved with him, boots careful on the stone. The grate's metal was cold and slick beneath his fingers. When he lifted the edge, it protested with a soft metallic squeal that sounded too loud in the tunnel.

The radio hiss snapped into silence.

Willo froze, breath held. The darkness seemed to listen back.

Then, from the other side of the heavy door, a different sound cut through-footsteps, measured and confident, approaching from within rather than from the corridor. A hand bumped the metal once. Twice. A test. Then a voice came through the door, amplified by whatever system they'd installed.

"Who's there?"

Mark didn't answer. He leaned closer, as if proximity could override fear. Willo's heart beat hard enough to make his ribs ache. His mind raced toward what he knew about coded communication-about spiritually framed language used to mislead. If this organization was the one controlling silence, they would have rules for interruption. They would have a way to handle intruders without wasting emotion.

The voice behind the door continued, calm and clipped. "If you're late, you'll be reasigned. If you're early, you'll be processed."

Willo swallowed. "Processed" sounded like a threat dressed in procedure. It sounded like the kind of cruelty that hid behind forms.

Mark's eyes found Willo's. In the flashlight's thin beam, Willo could see the detective's determination and something else underneath-anger, controlled and ready, but tempered by the awareness that this wasn't just a crime scene. It was a machine.

Mark finally spoke, low. "Detective Mark."

The voice paused, as if the name had to be sorted against internal records. Then it answered with a different tone, slightly amused, slightly threatening. "Detective Mark is expected. That's why the door is sealed."

Willo felt cold spread up his arms. "Expected?"

Mark's expression tightened. "They know we're here."

The footsteps on the other side shifted, and the door's red tape trembled as pressure increased. A click sounded-mechanical, deliberate. The keypad beside the door flashed once, then died, like a system testing a response.

Willo's fingers tightened on the grate edge. "They're not locking us out," he said. "They're positioning us."

Mark looked toward the tunnel behind them, toward the corridor where the scrape had started. The radio hiss had stopped, but that didn't mean the organization had stopped listening. It only meant the conversation had moved somewhere else.

From the sealed space behind the door, the voice spoke again, softer now, almost persuasive. "You can walk away. Keep your church clean. Keep your conscience quiet."

Willo flinched at the mention of Willowbrook Community Church. Not because it was personal-though it was-but because it confirmed the reach of whoever sat behind that door. They weren't just manipulating hospitals. They knew civic influence. They knew spiritual influence. They knew which names made people comply.

Mark's voice sharpened. "Who are you?"

A brief silence stretched. Then: "The organization that controls silence."

Willo's throat went dry. He had heard stranger things in encrypted messages and in the non-human fragments, but this wasn't a riddle anymore. This was a claim of authority over the city's ability to speak about the virus, about experiments, about the missing scientists.

Willo forced air into his lungs. He couldn't let panic make him stupid. He couldn't let fear make him silent again.

He turned his head toward Mark and spoke quickly, without breaking his gaze on the door. "They're watching our reaction. If we back off, they'll spread the next rumor and delay the next intake. But if we push, we become a problem they have to solve."

Mark's eyes narrowed. "And that's what you want?"

Willo's confession burned in him like a brand. "I want people to stop vanishing."

The keypad flashed again-this time a green light blinked, then a tone sounded, faint and wrong, like a system acknowledging a command. The heavy door unlocked with a deep mechanical clank that traveled through the stone and into Willo's bones.

Mark didn't move back. He shifted his weight, ready to act. Willo reached for the grate, pulling it free with careful strength, listening for any change in the footsteps behind the door.

When the door swung inward, a slice of light spilled out-white, clinical, too bright for the tunnel's darkness. The corridor beyond held a narrow room with a table and stacks of paper sealed in clear sleeves. A computer monitor glowed with pale text that scrolled too fast to read. The air smelled like disinfectant layered over something sweet and chemical.

A man stood near the table, dressed in a dark jacket that didn't match the hospital above. He wore gloves even in the light, and his hair was neat in a way that suggested he wasn't used to running. His face was calm, but his eyes were quick.

Mark stepped forward, flashlight beam cutting across the room. "Hands where I can see them."

The man didn't flinch. "You shouldn't have come alone."

"I didn't," Mark said. He kept his voice level, but Willo heard the edge of a threat in it.

The man's gaze shifted to Willo, and something tightened in his expression. "Pastor Willo."

Willo's name spoken like that-familiar, controlled-made his skin prickle. "You know me."

"I know Willowbrook Community Church," the man corrected, as if Willo's identity was part of a larger file. "And I know what you've been trying to do."

Willo's hands curled at his sides. "People are being silenced."

The man's mouth lifted slightly, not quite a smile. "Silence keeps the city from breaking."

Mark moved his flashlight beam to the computer monitor. "What's on that screen?"

The man glanced once, then back at Mark with the patience of someone who already knew the outcome. "Information that would hurt more people than the virus does."

Willo felt the room tilt, not physically, but in his spirit. The organization behind the door wasn't just bribing and intimidating. It was rewriting the story-deciding which facts could survive long enough to be believed.

Mark's jaw tightened. "You're coordinating across hospitals and agencies."

The man's eyes flicked toward the stacks of sealed papers. "Across institutions. Across influence."

Willo stepped closer, careful, staying just beyond the threshold. The cold from the tunnel faded as the room's air warmed, carrying a faint hum from electrical equipment. "You're bribing people."

"People prefer certainty," the man said, as if it were philosophy. "We offer a path that doesn't require faith."

Willo felt the sting behind his eyes, not from tears but from anger. Faith wasn't a path that avoided fear; it was the way he stood in it. "My faith isn't for sale."

The man's gaze hardened. He reached toward the table, and Willo saw a device there-small, dark, with a blinking indicator. A kill switch. A trigger. Something that could cut communication or release more instructions into the city.

Mark moved-fast-lunging for the table. The man jerked his hand back and pressed the device.

A sharp electronic beep filled the room, then the monitor flashed red. The computer's speakers crackled, and a burst of audio spilled into the air-voices layered over voices, distorted, repeating the same phrases Willo had heard in the tunnels.

"...delay intake... keep the forms clean..."

Willo stumbled back as the sound seemed to seep into his chest. Somewhere beyond the walls, systems were answering the signal. Hospitals. Agencies. People already in motion.

Mark swore under his breath, reaching for the device, but the man stepped aside with trained ease and slammed a lever beside the door.

The heavy door began to close with a grinding force, sealing them in the room for a heartbeat too long. Willo caught the edge, fingers scraping metal, and felt the vibration of mechanisms locking down.

Mark pushed against the door, eyes locked on the man. "You're not getting away."

The man's voice came through the narrowing gap, calm as a clerk stamping a form. "You think you're fighting the virus. You're fighting the symptom. Silence is the cure we provide."

The door shut with a final clank that echoed through the room. The light dimmed slightly as if the system recalibrated to keep them isolated.

Willo stood in the sealed space, breathing bleach and electricity, listening to the faint echo of repeating phrases through the speakers. Mark's flashlight beam trembled as he turned, searching for anything he could use before the organization adjusted again.

Willo lifted his eyes to the computer monitor's pale text. It wasn't readable at first glance, but as the scrolling slowed, a heading appeared at the top-an internal label that didn't sound like medicine. It sounded like jurisdiction.

Mark stared at it, then at Willo, and something in his face went hard. "This isn't just a hospital ring," he said. "It reaches into civic leadership."

Willo felt the full weight of that sentence settle in his gut. If the organization controlling silence had hands in city offices, then the missing scientists weren't only being hidden. They were being overwritten-replaced with paperwork, rumors, and delayed reports until no one could prove what had happened.

Outside the room, the repeating audio continued, and Willo realized with a sudden clarity that the threat wasn't only that more people would fall ill. The threat was that the city would be trained to doubt itself-trained to stop asking questions before the truth could arrive.

Mark backed toward the table, eyes scanning for a way to cut the feed, for a way to stop the signal before it reached the next agency desk. Willo moved with him, heart steadying into purpose as the monitor's red glow reflected in the man's sealed papers.

The organization wanted silence. Willo refused.

In the sealed room under Willowbrook Community Church, Detective Mark reached for the blinking device and Pastor Willo read the internal label on the screen, knowing the name attached to it would lead higher than any hospital hallway-and knowing the next set of encrypted messages had already begun to travel.

CHAPTER 10

## A Scientist's Journal in Pieces

**T**he blinking device in Detective Mark's gloved hand threw a sickly blue pulse across Pastor Willo's knuckles as they stood beneath Willowbrook Community Church. The room was too small for the sound it held-fans that should have been dead still hummed, and somewhere inside the walls a cable ticked as if it were counting down. Willo tasted metal at the back of his throat, the kind that rose after bleach had soaked into concrete. Above them, the church's sanctuary had been sealed, but the city's virus-fear still pushed its breath through every vent: hot air from emergency generators, faint disinfectant, and the sour tang of panic.

Mark didn't lower the device. His jaw worked like he was chewing on a problem he couldn't spit out. "It's still receiving," he said, voice roughened by the tunnel's damp. "That means someone's broadcasting."

Willo's eyes stayed on the label Mark had read last-an internal name that sounded like it belonged on a lab door, not in a church basement. The organization wanted silence, and they'd already tried to take it from him with a sealed room and a locked panel. Willo tightened his grip on the cipher page he'd kept wrapped in cloth since Chapter 7, the paper edges soft from sweat. "Then we don't just listen," he murmured. "We find where it's coming from."

Mark angled the device toward him. The screen flickered through messages too fast to be medical logs, too patterned to be random. Willo recognized the rhythm before he fully understood the words-an old cadence, clipped and reverent, stitched into code. The missing scientist's earlier fragments had sounded like someone trying to keep a promise even as the world tried to erase him. Willo wanted that scientist's journal whole, not pieces. He wanted to know the mechanism behind the virus-how it spread, what it did to bodies-and he wanted the spiritual metaphor the man believed would still stand when the experiments failed.

But the tunnel wasn't letting them have anything clean.

The device chirped sharply, and the hum in the walls shifted pitch. Mark jerked, sweeping his flashlight across the room's corners. "That's new." The beam caught on a seam in the metal panel behind them-fresh, smeared with something that looked like gray grease.

Willo stepped closer, careful not to disturb the thin layer of dust. The seam hadn't been there before, or if it had, it had been hidden under a film of grime. Now it was open just enough to breathe. Cold air breathed out, carrying an odor like burned plastic and wet stone. "Someone's been here since we locked down," he said.

Mark's expression tightened. "Or they're trying to make us move." He thumbed the device, and the blinking pattern changed-slower now, like it was settling into a reply. "Listen. It's not just receiving. It's answering."

Willo leaned in, the light trembling across the screen. The message wasn't long. It had the same coded structure as the pager they'd seized at the hospital, and the same spiritually shaped phrases Willo had felt in his bones rather than his mind. But beneath the pattern, tucked like a warning under a hymn, was a new line of symbols-coordinates that didn't point outward toward the city.

They pointed down.

"Under the church," Mark said, reading over Willo's shoulder. "There's another access." His voice dropped. "Or a trap."

Willo's first instinct was to pray, but prayer didn't stop metal from moving. He watched the seam widen as if something inside had loosened the panel with patience. The hinges didn't squeal; they slid with a practiced smoothness, and the sound that came out wasn't a creak but a soft, wet hiss.

Mark backed a step, his shoulder bumping the wall. "Stay close," he snapped, not gentle, not cruel-just braced for impact. "If this is what I think it is, the room won't be empty for long."

The air shifted again, colder, and Willo's skin prickled under his shirt. He'd smelled disinfectant all week, but this was different—an acrid edge like hot wiring after a storm. A faint tapping began from below the seam. Not footsteps. Not machinery. Something like fingernails on metal, slow and deliberate.

Willo swallowed. "That doesn't sound like maintenance."

Mark raised the flashlight, beam narrowing like a weapon. "Then we find out." He planted his feet and grabbed the edge of the panel seam, yanking it open wider.

The metal peeled back with a reluctant groan. Dark space yawned beneath, and the smell that poured out hit Willo hard—burnt plastic, damp earth, and a thin medicinal sweetness that made his eyes water. A strip of paper fluttered up, stuck halfway out as if someone had shoved it in and then been dragged away. Mark caught it with two fingers before it could fall into the dark.

The paper wasn't a cipher page like Willo's. It was torn from something bigger—thick, coated, and stained at the edges as though it had soaked in sweat and then dried too quickly. On it, half the scientist's handwriting remained, the ink bled where it had been exposed to heat. Willo leaned forward, breath catching on the first visible line.

Mechanism. Exposure. Volatile carrier.

Mark read over his shoulder, eyes narrowing. "He's writing like he's trying to be understood by someone specific."

Willo didn't answer right away. The words were blunt, but his heart caught on the ones that followed—small, careful phrases set apart from the technical notes like margin prayers. A line repeated, almost like a refrain: Breath becomes seed. Seed becomes voice. Voice becomes chain.

Willo felt the old familiarity of liturgical structure again, but now it carried a grim weight. The scientist wasn't only describing a virus. He was describing a way of spreading—something that traveled from one body to another the way a message traveled from one mouth to the next.

Mark's voice broke the spell. "This journal is missing the rest." He held the torn page up to the flashlight. "Where's the rest of it?"

Before Willo could respond, the tapping started again, closer. A new sound joined it: a scrape that dragged across concrete, the drag of something heavy being pulled. The air below the opening trembled with movement.

Mark's flashlight snapped toward the dark. "Show yourself," he demanded, though he didn't sound like he expected a person. He sounded like he expected a mechanism.

Something shifted in the gap between shadow and concrete. A gloved hand-blackened at the fingertips, fingers too long-protruded partway into view. It didn't reach for the torn page. It reached for the flashlight beam, as if the light itself were a signal.

Willo saw the hand hesitate, then retract. The tapping stopped.

Silence dropped into the room with a suddenness that made Willo's ears ring. In that hush he heard the device in Mark's hand chirp once more, a soft insistence like a throat clearing.

Mark glanced at it. "It's sending again."

Willo stepped closer, but Mark lifted a hand to stop him. "Not yet. If someone wants us to move, I want to see the move first."

The screen displayed another fragment-short, urgent, and broken the way the last voice recording had been broken. This time, the coded line ended with a phrase that made Willo's stomach twist: The hymn is not for worship. It is for transmission.

Willo stared at it until the letters blurred. "That's what Marlene mentioned," he said quietly, surprising himself with the steadiness of his own voice. Marlene had only whispered it once, in the church hallway when she'd heard a message playing from a hospital speaker-how the words didn't sound like comfort. They sounded like instructions. "The messages aren't meant to heal. They're meant to spread."

Mark's eyes flashed. "Then we have to stop the transmitter."

Willo looked back at the torn page in Mark's hand. The scientist had written about the virus's mechanism, and he'd written about a chain of voice. If the virus carried itself like a message, then silencing wasn't just an organizational tactic. It was an engineering choice. The organization wanted quiet because quiet broke transmission—at least, that's what the scientist believed.

Willo's throat tightened. "If the journal is telling the truth, then the virus doesn't just attack bodies. It attacks communication."

Mark's jaw clenched. "And communication is where they hide."

A third sound rose from below—the faintest buzz, like a phone trying to connect through bad signal. The seam edges shuddered, and the panel itself vibrated, as if the underground access was connected to something that could wake and move.

Mark reached for the torn page again, then paused. "We can't take all this and run," he said. "We need the whole journal, but if someone's down there, we might not get out."

Willo's mind flashed to the locked panel from earlier chapters, to the way the organization had sealed them in a room and then tried to herd them into silence. He remembered the organization's willingness to tamper with evidence, to seize devices, to make witnesses disappear. The torn page in Mark's hand wasn't an accident. It was bait.

And yet Willo couldn't leave it. The scientist had written in fragments because someone had torn him apart. Even partial truth could keep people alive.

"I'm going down," Willo said.

Mark's head snapped up. "No."

Willo met his gaze. "That person—whoever guarded this—left something for us." He held Mark's device with his eyes, not his hands. "If the journal is in pieces, and we only take one piece, we'll be missing the mechanism. And if the virus spreads through voice, then the only way to stop it is to understand how it's being sent."

Mark's flashlight beam trembled across Willo's face. "You don't know what's down there."

Willo's pulse beat hard under his ribs, but he didn't look away. "Neither did the man who collapsed on the church steps," he said. "Neither did the hospital staff when the triage line got swallowed. They believed they were dealing with a medical emergency. It was a conspiracy."

Mark breathed once, sharp, and then his shoulders lowered a fraction. "If I go down, I'm not letting you do it alone."

Willo nodded. "Then we go together."

Mark grabbed the flashlight, shoved it into a firm grip, and took the torn page with him like it might be evidence in a trial that hadn't been scheduled yet. Willo reached for the cloth-wrapped cipher page at his waist, not because he wanted to carry it, but because he wanted the scientist's words to stay close. The seam beneath them opened a little more as if responding to their decision.

The air that rose out of the opening was colder now, and it smelled heavier, as though the underground held its breath and then released it all at once. Willo felt the temperature drop across his cheeks, and his skin tightened. He could hear his own breathing, loud in his ears.

Mark lowered himself first, boots scraping the metal edge. "Keep your light steady," he said.

Willo swung his legs over and followed, the metal edge biting through his clothing. The space underneath wasn't a room. It was a corridor descending at a steep angle, slick with dampness. Their flashlight beams carved narrow tunnels through darkness thick enough to hold onto light.

As they moved, the torn page in Mark's hand fluttered with each step. Willo leaned close enough to read while they descended, the paper's ink smelling faintly of chemicals.

Mechanism. Volatile carrier.

Then, separated by a line of cramped symbols that looked like both equations and prayers: When breath is shared, the seed finds a home. When truth is silenced, the

seed becomes voice.

Willo's stomach turned. He could almost hear the scientist's frustration in the structure of the writing. He had tried to speak plainly, and someone had tried to stop him.

A faint vibration ran through the corridor wall. The buzz from the opening above grew louder, and then-over it-Willo heard a sound that didn't belong: a low, distorted melody, like a recording played through a broken speaker. It wasn't a full hymn. It was a phrase on repeat, the same spiritually shaped cadence they'd seen in the encrypted messages.

Mark froze mid-step. "You hear that?"

Willo did. The sound threaded through the corridor like a wire. It made the air seem charged, as if the corridor itself was wired into the virus's transmission method.

Mark's voice went tight. "That's not coming from your device."

"It's coming from the wall," Willo said, and his own words felt wrong in his mouth-like he'd just named something he didn't want to admit was real. "They've hidden speakers down here."

The melody shifted, and the words-coded, not clear-pressed against Willo's mind with an unsettling familiarity. It carried the same structure as the spiritual metaphor the scientist had written. Not worship. Transmission.

Willo's hands clenched around the cipher page until it crinkled. He could feel the organization's intent like a pressure in the air: keep people listening. Keep them repeating. Keep them carrying something they didn't understand.

Mark raised his flashlight toward a steel grille set into the corridor wall. Behind it, something pulsed-an indicator light, dim and green. A small slot beside the grille had fresh scratches around it, as if someone had been swapping components quickly.

Mark exhaled. "That's the source."

Willo stepped closer, and the corridor's dampness clung to his sleeves. The melody continued, distorted but persistent. He lifted his hand toward the grille, then hesitated-

because the torn journal page in Mark's grip had one more line beneath the mechanism notes, half obscured by a burn mark.

The metaphor isn't just for understanding. It's for breaking the chain.

Willo lowered his hand. "We can't destroy it blindly," he said. "If we smash the mechanism, they'll reroute it. We need to interrupt the message itself."

Mark looked at him like he hated the thought of waiting. "And how do you interrupt a message that's already in the air?"

Willo swallowed against the metallic taste, then answered with the only authority he trusted: "By speaking truth over it." He didn't mean a sermon. He meant a counter-signal, a counter-breath. The scientist's metaphor had been spiritual, but it had also been practical—something about voice and chain and silence. If the virus traveled like a message, then a different message could sever the link.

Mark stared at him for a beat. "You're talking about—"

"I'm talking about refusing their silence," Willo said, voice low. He touched the cipher page with his thumb, feeling the ink's roughness through the cloth. "The organization wanted us quiet. They wanted the hymn to travel because people listened. If we speak something they can't encode, something that doesn't fit their structure..."

The melody warped, as if reacting to the shift in their breathing. The green light pulsed faster.

Mark's hand tightened around the torn journal page. "Willo. If you do this and it's wrong—"

Willo's eyes stayed on the grille. The corridor smelled of damp concrete and hot wiring. The distorted melody made his skin crawl. He thought of the missing scientist writing in pieces, and the way the organization had torn his work apart to keep it from being used. Willo couldn't put the man back together, but he could keep his words from being stolen.

"We'll find out," he said.

Mark's mouth opened, then shut. He nodded once, sharp. "Then do it. I'll cut the power if I can."

Willo stepped forward until the grille was inches from his face. He could feel the vibration of the hidden speaker through the metal. He inhaled, tasting damp air and something bitter, and then he spoke-not in code, not in the scientist's shorthand, but in plain, steady words shaped by faith and anchored in the name the organization couldn't replicate with encrypted hymns.

The distorted melody faltered.

The green light blinked, then stuttered, as if the chain had snagged on a different kind of voice. Mark lunged for a small access panel beside the grille, his flashlight beam skittering over exposed wires. He yanked the panel open and hissed as an electrical tang hit the air.

"Wires," he said, breath loud. "Too many. Someone's already modified the feed."

Willo didn't stop speaking. His words filled the corridor, pressing against the hum, and for a moment the air felt less like a trap and more like a place where truth could push back. The green light steadied-then surged brighter, as if the device was trying to drown him out.

Mark swore. He grabbed a cable, tugged, and sparks spit against the concrete with a sharp crack that made Willo flinch. The melody broke into static, then came back in a different pattern-faster, uglier, as if whoever was sending it had switched tactics.

Willo's chest tightened. The chain hadn't been fully broken. It had been interrupted, and interruption had consequences.

Mark glanced up, soot on his cheek, eyes wide. "It's not shutting down," he said. "It's... responding. Another message is coming."

Willo felt it then-the shift. The corridor's damp air warmed slightly, and the static melody rearranged itself into something that sounded almost like a voice, not just a hymn. The words were still coded, but the rhythm was clearer, closer to the scientist's

spiritual metaphor-like the organization was trying to retune the transmission to match Willo's counter-signal.

From above, faintly through the church foundation, a new sound reached them: a distant alarm chime, the kind that meant systems had noticed unauthorized interference.

Mark stared at the torn journal page in his hand as if it had grown heavier. "This isn't just about stopping the source," he said. "It's about finding whoever's listening."

Willo looked down the corridor, past the pulsing grille, toward darkness that seemed to swallow sound. Somewhere ahead, someone was waiting for the next fragment of the journal-waiting to learn which voice would carry the chain forward.

Willo tightened his grip on the cipher page and forced his breathing steady. "Then we don't run," he said. "We follow the voice that's been trying to reach us."

And as the static rearranged into a clearer coded phrase, the corridor floor gave a subtle tremor beneath their boots-like a door unlocking far down the tunnel, answering their decision with danger of its own.

CHAPTER 11

## Betrayal in the Emergency Command

**T**he emergency command center smelled like hot plastic and burnt coffee, the kind of scent that clung to your clothes even after you stepped away. Overhead lights buzzed with a tired electrical whine, and every surface—every console, every folding chair—vibrated faintly when the building’s ventilation kicked on. Pastor Willo kept one hand on the strap of his bag while he watched the wall of screens cycle through hospital feeds, ambulance routes, and color-coded symptom reports. The city looked like a living organism on a monitor, red spots spreading faster than the data could explain.

Detective Mark stood close enough that Willo could hear his breath through the mask he’d pulled halfway down his face. Mark’s eyes tracked the numbers with the sharp focus of a man who didn’t trust any system that claimed to be neutral. The tunnel door behind them—unseen now, but still heavy in Willo’s mind—had opened because they’d refused to run from the voice that had tried to reach them. Now, in this bright room full of officials and exhausted staff, the voice didn’t speak through static. It spoke through decisions.

Willo swallowed against the dryness in his throat. The cipher page in his bag was warm from his body heat, as if the paper had its own pulse. He wanted the command center to match the reports on the screens. He wanted proof that the people in charge were responding to the virus instead of arranging it. He also wanted one thing he hadn’t said out loud since they’d climbed back up from the tunnels: someone was manipulating the response, and if that someone hid behind paperwork, he needed to be found before the next wave of illness turned into a disaster with no names left to mourn.

A technician in a pale blue badge—no longer smiling, no longer pretending—leaned over a console and murmured to the Nurse near him. The Nurse didn’t look up from the

tablet in her hands. She just tapped a sequence of commands and the screen shifted. Ambulances were rerouted away from a district that had spiked hours ago. The symptom heat map didn't cool. It flared.

Mark's head snapped toward the change. "That's not what the trend says."

The technician's mouth tightened. "We're following directive. Higher priority incidents."

"Higher priority?" Mark's voice dropped low, controlled, the way it always did when he was trying to keep anger from spilling into the room. "The district you just bypassed is showing respiratory collapse within minutes. We have—"

"We have a limited fleet," the Nurse cut in, finally lifting her gaze. Her eyes were bloodshot and her knuckles were raw, as if she'd been scrubbing at the same stain for hours. "The directive came from above. Medical Command."

Willo stepped closer, the hum of the monitors filling the space between their words. He recognized the tone—not the content, but the tone—from the tunnels: a clipped refusal to see what was right in front of you. "If the route is wrong," he said, voice careful, "then people are being left without care."

The Nurse's jaw flexed. "Pastor, I'm doing everything I can."

Mark didn't take his eyes off the screen. "Doing everything you can doesn't include hiding delays behind new priorities."

The room filled with the sound of other voices, other confirmations. A Technician called out a number. Someone shouted for a status update. A volunteer with a first-aid kit moved past the door with practiced speed, her shoulders set like she could hold chaos away by sheer effort. Willo noticed her name tape-faded, half-peeled—and the way she kept glancing at the wall clock as if time might change its mind.

Then a teenager with a phone—one of the ones who'd been sent to relay crowd reports through encrypted channels—hurried to a side desk. The phone's screen reflected in her eyes, making them look too bright. She spoke quickly to a Technician at the edge of the command floor, her voice strained by fear. "I'm telling you, it's happening again. People are—people are getting sick in clusters."

The Technician's hands didn't pause. "Which cluster?"

She looked down at her phone, thumb shaking. "River district. By the old transit entrance. They're saying it's spreading through-through air like smoke."

Mark's gaze flicked toward Willo, and Willo felt the same cold recognition he'd felt beneath Willowbrook Community Church: the virus didn't only move through bodies. It moved through systems, through messages, through access points. The tunnels weren't just a passageway. They were part of the contagion's architecture.

Willo's chest tightened. "The river district," he repeated, and the words came out sharper than he intended. He could almost smell the chemical tang they'd detected in the underground air, the disinfectant bite that didn't belong to a normal medical crisis.

The Nurse inhaled like she was about to argue, but the Technician beside her interrupted, eyes darting to a comm panel. "We have a comm loss." He tapped, hard. "It's intermittent."

Mark stepped forward, reaching for a console that held a blinking status light. "Show me."

A security guard blocked his path without touching him, just standing in a way that made it clear he'd be moved if he tried. "Detective Mark, you're not cleared for that feed."

Mark's smile didn't reach his eyes. "I'm cleared for whatever keeps people alive."

"Not this channel."

Willo moved between them, not to soften the confrontation but to keep it from turning into a brawl. "If comm loss is happening," he said, "it's not coincidence. It's not weather. It's not equipment failure." He heard his own voice and hated how steady it sounded, as if he'd been practicing it for the moment when fear tried to make them helpless.

The guard's expression stayed flat. "Pastor, I can't let you-"

Mark leaned in, lowering his voice so only Willo and the guard could hear. "There's a leak," Mark said. "Inside the structure. Data gets redirected after certain transmissions. I've seen this before-someone's feeding the wrong routes, timing it with the city's response."

Willo's stomach turned. Inside the tunnels, they'd found signs of organized control. Now, in the command room, Mark was putting a name to the sensation Willo had carried since the static rearranged into something clearer: manipulation wasn't external. It was embedded.

The comm panel blinked again, then steadied. A new alert flashed across the wall screens-short, clipped text that looked like an internal directive. Willo couldn't read the full string from where he stood, but he saw the timestamp. It came a moment after the teenager's report about the river district.

The Nurse's finger hovered over her tablet. "We're not discussing this."

Mark's eyes narrowed. "You just rerouted ambulances. You're discussing it whether you want to or not."

A Technician-older, with a nicotine-stained thumb and a headset too tight across his skull-walked toward them. His badge didn't match the others, and his posture had the stiffness of someone used to being obeyed. "Detective," he said, "your concern is noted. The directives are being reviewed."

Mark let out a breath through his nose. "Reviewed by who?"

The Technician's gaze slid to Willo, and for a moment Willo felt exposed, like the room's air had turned thinner. "Pastor Willo, your presence here is... unusual."

Willo held his ground. "Unusual is what happens when people vanish and messages say one thing while systems do another."

The Technician's jaw tightened. "You're not authorized to interpret-"

A loud, metallic clank cut through the room. It came from the security door at the far end, the one that led into the secure offices where officials met without witnesses. The guard nearest it stiffened. Heads turned.

A moment later the door sealed with final, heavy pressure, locking with a sound that landed like a gavel. A hiss followed, the kind of pressure shift that made Willo's ears ring.

Mark's hand went to his belt, fingers closing around his sidearm as if it was a reflex. "That wasn't an accident."

The older Technician smiled without warmth. "Command is adjusting access."

Willo felt the cipher page in his bag like a weight. Beneath Willowbrook Community Church, the voice in the static had tried to guide them toward answers. Now the room itself was being sealed off, access tightened, feeds interrupted. It wasn't protecting the command center from the virus. It was protecting the command center from accountability.

The teenager with the phone started to back away, eyes darting. "They told us not to send those reports," she whispered, as if the words might get her punished. "They said the channel was compromised."

Mark's gaze sharpened. "Who told you?"

Her throat worked. "A-an administrator. They said it was for safety."

Willo stepped toward her, careful not to spook her. "What did they say the safety was for?"

She swallowed hard. "For the city. For the hospitals." Her voice broke on the last word. "They said the truth would cause panic."

Mark's eyes flicked to the wall screens again. The symptom map continued to flare in the river district. Panic wasn't theoretical; it was already happening in real bodies on real floors.

Willo's heart hammered, but his mind stayed on the pattern. The coded messages they'd found before-liturgical, spiritually shaped-had been meant to mislead people into believing they were being guided while the real control slipped through the gaps. This room was doing the same thing with routes and access.

He looked at the older Technician. "If you're reviewing directives," he said, "then show us the decision log. Show us who authorized the reroutes. Show us the comm loss."

The Technician's eyes hardened. "You're pushing."

Mark moved faster than the room expected. He crossed to the comm panel and jammed his hand onto the console, ignoring the guard's reach. "I'm done asking."

The guard grabbed Mark's arm. Mark twisted, shoulder straining, and the guard's grip loosened just enough for Mark to slam his palm against the panel. The blinking status light turned from red to amber, then to green. A feed opened on the screen—one line at a time, like someone typing quickly while hiding their hands.

Willo leaned close, reading what he could. The message wasn't medical. It wasn't standard directive language. It was a pattern. Familiar in shape even when the words were scrambled—like the cipher page he carried, like the spiritually coded fragments that had led them into tunnels.

Mark's face went pale. "It's a leak," he said, voice low. "Not just a leak in the building. A leak in purpose."

The older Technician lunged forward, trying to shove the console back into lockout. "Stop this."

Mark didn't stop. He pulled the feed text into a print buffer, yanking the paper cartridge with a sharp rip. The sound was loud in the tense room. The paper emerged damp and warm, already marked with a string that made Willo's fingers curl.

The older Technician's hand shot out toward the printout. Mark swatted it away, then shoved the paper into Willo's bag before the Technician could grab it.

Willo's breath caught. "Mark—"

"You're holding it," Mark said, eyes locked on the older Technician. "You're the one who can read what this is."

Willo didn't want to be the one. He wanted a doctor, a scientist, someone with clean hands and authority. But the tunnels had taught him that authority could be a mask.

The voice they'd followed wasn't meant for comfort. It was meant for survival.

The older Technician's headset crackled. "Lock down the floor. Remove unauthorized personnel."

The word unauthorized rang like a sentence. The guard who'd blocked Mark earlier stepped aside, and two others moved toward Willo and Mark with the stiff efficiency of a practiced drill.

Willo's mind flashed to a line from Scripture he'd clung to during calmer nights-truth doesn't hide forever. He reached for prayer fast, not as a performance but as an anchor. His lips moved silently, and the air around him felt suddenly colder, as if the building itself was reacting to his refusal to be swallowed.

"Pastor," Mark said, not looking away from the Technician, "they're moving us. They want us out of here before the feed fully transmits."

Willo heard the implication and didn't like it. The encrypted messages weren't just being sent. They were being received-by someone who controlled what the command center did next. If Willo and Mark were removed, the leak could keep feeding the wrong decisions without interference.

Willo tugged the cipher page from his bag, fingers brushing the paper's rough edge. Then he did something he hadn't planned: he stepped toward the wall screen, forcing his way into a position where a camera could catch him. The room's hum rose, voices tangling in alarm.

The Nurse stared at him, eyes wide. "Pastor-don't."

Willo lifted his hand, holding the cipher page so bright under the buzzing lights that it looked like a signal. "This isn't medical," he said loudly, and his voice carried over the monitors. "It's control. It's timing. It's rerouting people away from care."

The older Technician's face tightened. "Silence."

"No," Willo said, and the word came out like a door slamming shut. "Not silence. Not here."

Mark's expression flickered-something like grief, something like relief that Willo hadn't stayed quiet. The teenager with the phone pressed her hand to her mouth, eyes filling.

For a heartbeat, the room froze, caught between protocol and reality. Then the floor lights dimmed a shade, and a new alert scrolled across the wall screens-an emergency override. The command center's system began to reroute all feeds to a secure internal buffer, cutting off public and staff access.

Willo felt his stomach drop. "They're wiping it," he said.

Mark reached toward the console, but the screen flashed red and locked behind a new authentication prompt. The older Technician turned away as if the decision was already made. "The virus will be contained," he said, with a calmness that sounded like cruelty.

Willo's hands shook around the papers. In the tunnels, the voice had guided them to danger. Now it had guided them to the center of the betrayal-and betrayal meant the response efforts could be turned into a weapon.

Mark grabbed Willo's sleeve and pulled him toward the side door that still led to the stairwell. "We don't have time to argue," he said, urgency sharpening every word. "We take this proof and find who's receiving those messages."

As they moved, Willo caught the faintest smell again-chemical, disinfectant-sharp-like the building had been washed with something meant to erase evidence. Behind them, the command room's wall screens went dark one by one, as if someone was closing eyes over a city that was already sick.

Willo and Mark burst into the stairwell, the air colder there, metallic and damp. Their footsteps echoed up the concrete shaft while a distant alarm began to wail. Above, somewhere behind sealed doors, the leak inside the command structure would keep sending directives-unless they found the receiver before the next reroute finished its work.

Willo clutched the cipher page and the printout Mark had shoved into his bag. The paper felt heavy, alive with threat. He didn't know where the receiver lived, but he could

feel the shape of it now: not a single villain, not a single facility, but an organized hand inside the city's lifelines.

Mark's voice came sharp through the stairwell's echo. "We're going underground again."

Willo tightened his grip and nodded once, because there was no other place left to follow the truth. Somewhere beneath the city's lights, the tunnels waited. Somewhere inside the command's sealed walls, someone was deciding who would be saved and who would be left to fall-while the screens told everyone a different story.

CHAPTER 12

## The Virus Spreads Faster Than Forecasts

**T**he stairwell doors of the emergency command center shuddered as they sealed behind them, the sound swallowed by concrete and the low, sickly hum of backup power. Detective Mark moved first, flashlight cutting a hard beam through dust that smelled like hot wiring and bleach. Pastor Willo followed close, the collar of his jacket damp from the tunnel air that rolled up from below-cool at the surface, then sharp and medicinal as it thickened the farther they went, carrying the same chemical bite he'd noticed near Willowbrook Community Church days ago.

Above, muffled alarms kept stuttering, as if the city itself couldn't decide whether to panic or pretend everything was fine. Willo felt it in his teeth. The screens in the command center had been telling people one thing while the streets proved another, and the last thing Mark had said before the lockdown completed was too hard to ignore: We're going underground again.

Mark's jaw flexed as he checked his handheld radio, then killed it when static answered. "They're moving the data feeds," he said, not looking back. "Same pattern as the reroutes. Faster now."

Willo tried to steady his breathing, but the air tasted stale and metallic, like old coins held too long in a palm. "The encrypted messages were meant to be understood," he murmured, thinking of the cipher page he'd forced his mind to read by the flicker of a dying phone screen. "If they're accelerating the release..."

"They're accelerating the deaths," Mark cut in. His voice carried the bite of a man who'd watched too many bodies become statistics. He lifted his flashlight to the wall, where a thin line of condensation ran down concrete like a map drawn by hands that didn't want to be seen. "So we find where it's coming from. Not where they say it's coming from."

Mark's goal for this underground stretch was immediate and brutal: locate the source node behind the false triage and the tampered emergency routing. He wanted a physical anchor—an abandoned lab, a junction box, a transmitter—something he could put under evidence tags instead of trusting screens that lied. Willo's goal was narrower and harder to ignore: keep the trail connected to the encrypted communications without losing the chance to protect the living aboveground, where the virus was spreading faster than anyone wanted to admit.

They reached a service hatch bolted into the stairwell wall, its metal warped as if it had been heated and cooled too quickly. Mark knelt, ran his fingers along the seam, and found a smear—dark, tacky residue that smelled faintly of oil and something else, something chemical that made Willo's stomach tighten. "Fresh," Mark said. "Not hospital dust."

Willo put his hand on the hatch without thinking, feeling the vibration in the metal. It wasn't from their movement. Something on the other side was running—fans, maybe, or an air system pushing conditioned air through ducts. The hum threaded into the silence like a threat.

Mark pulled a small pry tool from his belt and worked the latch. The hatch resisted, then gave with a wet metallic scrape. Cold air spilled out, carrying a sharper scent now—disinfectant overlaid with a sour note like overheated plastic. Willo's mind flashed back to the way that same smell had clung to the corridor near the seized pager and the fragment of voice recording from the missing researcher. It wasn't just coincidence. It was a signature.

They slipped through into a maintenance corridor that looked like it had been built to disappear. Pipes ran overhead, sweating at irregular intervals. The floor held pooled water that reflected their lights in broken, jittering fragments. Somewhere deeper, a distant clatter—metal on metal—rang out, then stopped abruptly, as if someone had heard them and decided to hold still.

Mark took two steps, then halted. His light caught a strip of paper taped to the wall—creased, smeared at the edges, the kind of thing someone would tear down from a desk and slap into place in a hurry. Willo's breath caught when he saw the handwrit-

ing: not random notes, but the same liturgical-looking structure he'd recognized in the cipher page under Willowbrook Community Church. The marks weren't meant for the untrained eye. They were meant for the spiritually awake-or for the people who claimed to be.

Mark lifted his flashlight closer. "This is from them," he said. "Or meant to look like it."

Willo stepped nearer, careful not to let his sleeve drag through the residue on the floor. The paper trembled slightly in the airflow, and the ink smelled faintly of solvent. A line of text repeated itself in a pattern that matched the pager messages he'd heard faintly in his head since the static had rearranged into something clearer. "It's the same cipher structure," he whispered, then swallowed as the corridor seemed to tighten around them.

Mark's shoulders rose and fell once. "Then we're on the right route." He looked down the corridor. "Or we're walking into someone's trap."

A sound came from the far end-boots, too measured to be panicked. Then a voice, low and clipped, carried through the damp air. "Stop."

Mark lifted his hands, flashlight angled down so the beam wouldn't flare in someone's eyes. "Detective Mark," he said, voice steady but edged. "We're not here to steal. We're here to find where the virus is being released."

The response wasn't an answer. It was a question laced with anger. "You think the city is yours to save?"

Willo stepped forward half a pace, the way he'd done with people at funerals when their grief made them lash out. He didn't know the stranger's face, but he recognized the tone: practiced control, the kind of authority that expected obedience because it had already been granted by someone powerful. "If you're part of what's spreading this," Willo said, "stop. People are collapsing in streets. People are dying in hallways while your feeds tell them it's under control."

Silence followed. Then the voice spoke again, and this time it carried something unfamiliar-an accent that didn't quite sit right in the city's ordinary sounds. "Pastor Willo."

Willo froze. His name, spoken like that, wasn't a guess. It was tracking. The organization behind silence wasn't merely manipulating triage data; it was listening close enough to call him by name.

Mark's head turned toward him, eyes sharp. "How do they-"

Willo didn't let the question finish. He tried to keep his voice calm, as if calm could be a shield. "Who are you?"

A figure stepped into the edge of Mark's light. A security guard in a dark jacket, face partially obscured by a hood, stood with a stun baton held low but ready. The guard's breath fogged in the cold corridor. "You came down because the messages told you to," the guard said. "But you never asked what happens after you open doors."

Mark took one step, then stopped because the stun baton rose, quick as a reflex. "We're not opening doors. We're finding answers."

The guard's laugh was small and wrong, like something breaking. "Answers are for after the release. That's when the city becomes quiet."

Willo felt the weight of those words settle into his chest. Quiet had been the organization's obsession from the beginning—silence in hospitals, silence in recordings, silence in mouths that suddenly feared punishment for speaking out. Now the guard implied it wasn't just suppression. It was a phase.

The radio in Mark's pocket crackled suddenly, a burst of static that turned into a single clipped transmission. Willo couldn't make out all of it, but he heard enough: rerouting again, triage numbers shifting, a command code repeated twice like a stutter. When Mark pulled the device out, the screen showed an incoming alert with a timestamp that didn't match the command center's clock.

Mark's face tightened. "They're pushing another acceleration," he said, and there was no room left in his voice for denial. "Somebody is sending release orders from underground."

The guard watched the radio as if he'd expected it. "You can't stop what's already started."

Willo stared at the guard's baton and the damp corridor beyond him. There were choices here, and they were ugly. The evidence in their hands—the cipher paper, the smell of the same chemical signature—could be documented, preserved, brought to a court that might never exist if people kept dying. But Mark's radio showed the city moving faster than any forecast. If they stayed to decode messages, more would collapse. If they charged forward without a plan, they might get themselves killed before they even reached the source node.

Willo's hands curled around the paper, feeling the creases under his fingertips. The cipher wasn't just a clue. It was a map, and it had been guiding them already, even when the organization tried to make their path feel like a trap. His mind flicked through the pattern the static had arranged, the way it had echoed spiritual language threaded into technical timing. If the release was being accelerated, the messages would carry a next step—an action the organization expected, a door they wanted opened, or a system they wanted accessed.

Mark leaned closer, voice low. "We have to pick. We chase the source now, or we follow the coded structure and hope it points exactly where the acceleration command is coming from."

Willo looked at him, and the truth sat between them without romance. "If the source is here," he said, "then the cipher is the key to finding it without wasting time."

The guard made a small motion with his baton, a warning he didn't need to speak. "Time," the guard said. "It's already gone."

Willo took a breath that tasted like disinfectant and old water. He didn't raise a hand in surrender. He stepped toward the guard anyway, not to attack, but to keep the corridor from turning into a shooting gallery. "We can pray and still act," he said, and his voice surprised him with its steadiness. "You want the city quiet. I want it alive."

Mark's eyes flicked to him, then back to the guard. "Pastor," he warned, but it wasn't refusal. It was urgency.

Willo held up the cipher paper so the guard could see it clearly. "This isn't your language," he said. "Not really. It's borrowed. It's camouflage. Tell me what you're

protecting.”

The guard’s posture shifted—just a fraction. Fear, or recognition. The baton wavered as the guard looked at the paper as if it were something that could burn. “Stop pretending you can understand,” the guard said. “You’ve been led.”

Mark moved then, not charging the guard but stepping to the side, forcing an angle so the baton couldn’t line up cleanly with Willo. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a small recorder—one he’d used before in hospital halls when people wouldn’t speak. “We’re recording,” Mark said. “Everything you say.”

“You think words stop a virus?” the guard demanded.

Willo seized the moment of hesitation. He pressed the cipher paper against the cold wall beside the service conduit, aligning the repeated marks with a faint set of scratches he’d noticed earlier. The corridor’s hum deepened, a vibration rising through the pipes like a held note. Somewhere ahead, a lock clicked—soft, almost polite.

Mark’s breath caught. “You found the panel,” he said.

The guard’s eyes widened. “No.”

Willo didn’t let himself smile, because fear wasn’t a victory. The click turned into a series of quick mechanical sounds—grinding gears, a latch releasing somewhere out of sight. The corridor light flickered once, then stabilized. Warm air pushed through a new gap in the wall, carrying a different smell now: not bleach, but something like burned electronics and stale sweat.

Mark shoved his flashlight beam into the opening. Inside was a narrow maintenance passage, its walls lined with cables and a small control box mounted at chest height. A screen on the box displayed a line of text that shifted as if it were waiting for authorization. The characters weren’t plain letters. They arranged themselves into a pattern that matched the cipher structure on the paper—liturgical rhythm rendered in machine timing.

Willo’s pulse hammered. The organization wasn’t just sending messages to shepherd them. It was also using the infrastructure beneath the city to run the acceleration or-

ders. The encrypted communications weren't separate from the virus release. They were the steering wheel.

Mark leaned closer to the control box. "If this is the node," he said, "we can see where the command originates."

The guard lunged-fast now, baton swinging toward Mark's head. Mark twisted away, but the stun baton clipped his shoulder. Pain flared, hot and sharp, and the flashlight nearly slipped from his grip. Willo grabbed Mark's arm, feeling the tremor in the detective's muscles as the shock threatened to numb him.

Mark hissed, then forced himself steady. "Don't-" he started, but his voice faltered for a beat.

The guard backed up a step, breathing hard. "You shouldn't have touched it," the guard spat. "Now it knows you're here."

Willo looked at the control box screen again. The pattern of characters began to change faster, lines scrolling like a heartbeat under stress. A new code appeared-short, urgent, and timed to the same stutter Mark had heard in his pocket radio. The release wasn't waiting. It was adjusting in real time to their interference.

Mark's eyes met Willo's, and the decision hardened in them. They couldn't spend time fighting the guard. They couldn't afford to retreat and re-plan. If the box was live, it would keep updating until the city's hospitals were overwhelmed and the streets were quiet enough for the conspiracy to claim victory.

Mark grabbed Willo's wrist hard enough to bruise. "We go in," he said, each word punched out through pain. "Evidence later. Lives now."

Willo nodded once, and the nod felt like a prayer offered with clenched teeth. He shoved the cipher paper into his jacket pocket to keep it from fluttering loose, then leaned into the maintenance passage as the warm air thickened. "God, guide us," he breathed-not for comfort, but for direction.

Behind them, the guard raised the stun baton again, but the corridor's new vibration drowned the guard's movement in a rising mechanical whine. The passage opened

just enough to let them squeeze through. Mark shoved forward first, shoulders tight, face grim with effort. Willo followed, the smell of burned electronics filling his throat as the air grew warmer and the hum of the city's hidden machinery became a roar.

They had found the node.

And the node was already answering the acceleration command-faster than forecasts, faster than anyone in the emergency command center could correct-while the city above them kept breathing in fear.

CHAPTER 13

## A Tunnel Door Seals Behind Them

**S**team hissed somewhere behind the sealed metal wall as if the city above them still breathed heat into the tunnels. Pastor Willo held his lantern low, the light catching on slick concrete and old rust scars. The air was colder than it had been in the abandoned lab chamber they'd found running in Chapter 7, but the smell was the same-sharp disinfectant buried under something metallic and wrong.

Detective Mark moved ahead with his flashlight beam cutting a tight path through darkness. His boots scraped grit from a service track, and every scrape sounded too loud in the throat of the underground. Somewhere farther down, a faint electrical whine rose and fell like a patient machine trying to decide whether to live.

Willo's throat tightened. He'd felt the coded messages in his bones since the first pager seizure near Willowbrook Community Church, felt the way they tugged at something beyond logic. But now the node had answered the acceleration command, and the sickness above them had kept multiplying. He couldn't tell whether his fear came from the virus or from what it revealed about the people willing to make it.

Mark stopped at a section of wall that looked ordinary until the lantern light struck it just right. A seam-too clean, too recent-ran vertically through gray concrete. In the seam sat a small panel of brushed steel with a keypad that wasn't connected to anything they could see.

Mark's jaw flexed. "This wasn't here yesterday."

"It was waiting," Willo said, and surprised himself with the certainty of it. He'd prayed in the tunnels before, but this was different-this was prayer with a body behind it, with sweat and the taste of chemicals on his tongue.

Mark crouched and ran his gloved fingers along the seam. The keypad's surface was warm, as if someone had touched it moments ago. "We want proof," he said, voice

low. "Not another ghost story. Show me what they're doing down here."

Willo tightened his grip on the lantern handle. "Proof of the experiments. Proof of who's missing." He remembered the fragment of a voice recording from the missing researcher-how the message had sounded like a warning swallowed halfway. "And proof we're not chasing shadows."

Mark glanced at him. "If we're wrong, we'll still be breathing toxic air."

Willo nodded once, then stepped closer to the keypad. The digits were blank, their edges too smooth, as if the numbers had been removed and replaced with something else. A strip of faded lettering sat beneath the panel, scorched and half peeled away. Willo couldn't read the entire line, but the first word caught: *Seal*.

He didn't touch the panel. He listened instead, because the tunnels had started to feel like a living system. Under the hiss of steam, he heard a faint rhythm-click, pause, click-like a timer counting down without the mercy of a clock face.

Mark's flashlight beam shifted. "There's a camera lens right there." He pointed to a small black dot embedded in the concrete, catching light and returning it without warmth.

Willo swallowed. "Then they're watching us."

"They've been watching people since this started," Mark said. He straightened and checked the corridor behind them as if expecting the security guard from earlier to reappear, angry and armed. But the tunnel stayed empty, only the distant electrical whine growing slightly louder.

Willo felt the tremor of urgency in his chest. The virus had already turned hospitals into chaos; he'd seen a man's hands shake when he tried to speak about it. Now Mark wanted proof, and Willo wanted the missing scientists found before the conspiracy finished erasing them. He stepped toward the seam and lifted his lantern until the light washed over the scorched lettering.

Mark murmured, "Don't do anything stupid."

Willo's mouth tightened. "I'm not."

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the cipher page he'd kept folded since earlier messages had matched the pattern in the pager and the printed materials left outside Willowbrook Community Church. The paper was damp at the edges from tunnel air, but the ink held. He traced a line with a fingertip, then compared it to the scorched word *Sea*-not for numbers, but for meaning.

Mark leaned in. "What are you doing?"

"Reading," Willo said, voice strained. "Not the digits. The language underneath."

The click-click rhythm shifted, quickening as if the wall had picked up on his intent. Mark's expression hardened. "Willo-"

A thin, metallic groan ran through the concrete. The seam brightened, not with light but with a pale reflection, as if something inside the wall had opened a channel to let electricity breathe. The keypad's surface glimmered for half a second, then displayed a single character-an icon that wasn't a number at all.

Mark's breath came out fast. "That's not standard."

Willo's pulse hammered. "It's a command."

He didn't know who had written it, but he recognized the shape of the pattern-something he'd seen in the coded messages, a spiritually patterned marker rather than a typical data symbol. His fingers hovered over the keypad.

Then a voice crackled from a hidden speaker embedded in the concrete, distorted by distance and interference. It was close enough that the words vibrated against Willo's teeth.

"WILL-"

Mark spun, flashlight beam snapping toward the camera lens. "Who's there?"

The speaker hissed. "PASTOR."

Willo's skin went cold. He'd never told anyone down here where his office was. He'd never volunteered personal details. Yet the voice had reached into his identity like a hand into a pocket.

Mark's voice turned sharp, professional but tight. "State your name."

The speaker made a sound like a throat struggling with language, then returned to a garbled phrase, half human and half something that didn't belong in air. It repeated the word *Seal* in broken cadence, then added another phrase Willo recognized from the printed cipher page.

*"Don't open-"* the voice rasped, *"-finish the work."*

Willo's stomach turned. He thought of the missing researcher, of the way the voice recording had sounded like it had been forced through a filter. He thought of the experiments running in that abandoned lab chamber in Chapter 7—equipment too clean to be abandoned, too alive to be left alone.

Mark grabbed Willo's sleeve. "That's a trap."

Willo stared at the keypad, at the icon glowing faintly as if it were impatient. "If it's a trap, it's also an answer." He lifted his lantern slightly, keeping the light steady. "They left a door for a reason."

Mark's eyes flashed. "Doors don't open themselves. People do it."

Willo didn't deny it. He only refused to let fear make his hands useless. He pressed the icon—not hard, just enough to engage the seam. The concrete shuddered, and the click-click rhythm became a steady hum.

The speaker cut out.

A panel on the wall slid aside with a sound like a heavy breath released. Warm air rolled out, carrying the smell of antiseptic and something sweeter underneath—like chemicals mixed with old paper. Willo's lantern light spilled into a narrow passage leading deeper, toward a chamber just beyond.

Mark moved first. His flashlight beam swept across the corridor: scuffed footprints in dust, a faint trail of red residue on the floor, and a strip of cable leading into the darkness. The cable pulsed with a dim green glow, synchronized with the hum.

Willo followed, breath shallow. "This is where they're sealing it," he whispered, more to himself than to Mark. "Sealing evidence. Sealing people."

They didn't have to travel far. The tunnel opened into a room that should have been sealed years ago but looked recently maintained. Fluorescent strips on the ceiling flickered in uneven bands, making everything strobe between visible and hidden. Rows of metal racks lined the walls, each holding sealed canisters and labeled sample bags. Some labels were torn, as if hands had ripped them off in a hurry.

In the center, a metal table sat beneath a suspended camera rig. A printer-industrial, not the kind Mark had seen in offices above ground—was still warm. A thin slip of paper lay half-fed into a machine, its text running in broken lines.

Mark stepped closer, boots scraping the floor. "Look at this."

Willo leaned in, lantern light trembling slightly as he read. The ink wasn't random. It was coded, but the pattern matched the cipher page he'd carried. A spiritual cadence threaded through the symbols, like liturgy disguised as instructions.

Mark pointed to a section where the code changed, becoming clearer. "This part reads like a roster."

Willo's stomach tightened. He recognized names he'd seen on missing persons reports in the city's first days of panic—research staff from hospital labs, technicians who'd vanished after being questioned. Some names were crossed out with thick black marks.

And beneath those marks, a line of text repeated over and over, as if someone couldn't decide whether to warn or threaten.

*"Seal behind them,"* Willo read aloud, the words scraping his throat. *"Seal behind them."*

Mark's face went hard. "Someone wanted this found at a specific time."

Willo shook his head slowly. "Or wanted it to destroy us when we got close."

He turned toward the back wall where a thick door sat rounder and heavier than the passage door. A handle was bolted in place, and around it, the concrete had been reinforced with metal plating. In the center of the door was a window covered in opaque film, like fogged glass over a human face that refused to be seen.

Mark moved past the table, scanning the room with his flashlight. "Evidence, sure. But where's the missing personnel? Where's the human part of this?"

Willo's lantern beam caught something on the floor beside a rack: a pair of shoes, scuffed and damp, lying as if they'd been kicked aside. Nearby, a folded lab coat crumpled against the metal base of a rack. The scent hit him then-stronger now, layered over disinfectant. The air tasted like pennies and bleach.

He swallowed hard. "They weren't taken gently."

Mark's voice dropped. "Or they weren't taken at all. They might be sealed in."

The hum in the room deepened, shifting pitch like machinery deciding to enforce its own rules. Above them, the fluorescent strips flickered faster, then steadied into a harsh, white glare. A red light on the far wall blinked once, twice, then began flashing in a rapid rhythm.

Mark's eyes snapped to it. "Alarm."

Willo felt the tremor in the floor intensify. The room's air grew warmer, as if something sealed had started to pressure up. He heard the distant grinding sound of mechanisms waking.

"Mark," he said, and his voice came out more urgent than he intended. "The door we came through—"

Mark was already moving, flashlight beam carving toward the passage. "We don't wait."

Willo grabbed the cipher paper from the printer's half-fed output. It resisted his fingers as if the machine didn't want to let go, then tore free with a thin rip. The paper was warm, printed as if in real time. He stuffed it into his coat and ran.

Behind them, the alarm's tone changed. It wasn't just a siren now-it was layered with a low mechanical beat that made Willo's teeth ache. The passage behind the sealed chamber door shuddered. Concrete dust shook loose from the ceiling in soft gray drifts.

Mark reached the seam where the panel had slid aside. He slammed his palm against the metal edge, trying to pull it wide. "Come on-"

The panel didn't move. Instead, the seam began to close from within, metal sliding back into place with a precision that felt deliberate. The hum rose into a scream.

Willo skidded closer, lantern light bouncing off the closing gap. "It's sealing."

Mark's face twisted. "We triggered it. We're inside the wrong window."

Willo's mind flashed to the words on the wall-*Seal behind them*. He understood the command now, not as a metaphor but as a mechanism: close the chamber, seal the evidence, and trap whoever entered during the wrong phase.

Mark shoved his shoulder against the panel. His breath came in harsh bursts. "Willo! Move!"

Willo grabbed Mark's arm and pulled him away just as the seam clanged shut with a heavy finality. The sound echoed through the tunnel like a coffin lid dropping.

The passage behind them didn't stay quiet. The concrete groaned, then shifted. A section of the corridor wall buckled outward with a crack that sounded like bone. Dust exploded into the air, hot and choking.

Mark coughed, swinging his flashlight to keep sight. "Go-go!"

Willo ran, lungs burning. The tunnel narrowed abruptly, forcing them into a tighter space where the ceiling dipped. His lantern scraped stone, sparks skittering. He smelled burning insulation beneath the disinfectant now, and his eyes watered.

They reached the next turn, but the corridor was already collapsing. A slab of reinforced concrete slid across the path, blocking their way with the weight of something that didn't care about urgency.

Mark looked back toward the sealed chamber, then forward at the blocked route. His expression shifted from command to disbelief. "There's no way through."

Willo's hands shook as he tried to steady his lantern against the wall. "There has to be another exit. They wouldn't build a whole system without one."

Mark pointed his flashlight up at a metal grate set into the ceiling, half covered in dust. "Maybe."

Willo stared at it. The grate's bolts were old but not rusted through. It looked like an access point designed for maintenance, not for escape-yet it was there, and it was something.

The ground tremor intensified until Willo's stomach lurched. Somewhere behind the collapsed section, machinery clanked again, as if the facility had cycled to the next stage. The alarm tone rose higher, like panic given electricity.

Mark's voice came rough. "We've got minutes."

Willo opened his coat long enough to pull the cipher paper free again, holding it up in the flashlight beam. The code looked darker now under the harsh light, the symbols appearing almost wet. He felt the weight of it-the evidence they'd earned at the cost of being sealed in.

"Then we don't lose it," Willo said. His faith wasn't a theory in his chest anymore. It was a grip. "We take it and we pray our feet hold."

Mark's gaze met his, and for a moment Willo saw the detective's fear under the toughness. "You really believe this is connected to the virus?"

Willo didn't answer with certainty. He answered with what he'd felt in the voice, in the coded patterns, in the sealed words repeating like a command given to machines and men. "I believe the conspiracy thinks it's smarter than God. And that means we can still be smarter than their plan."

Mark didn't smile, but he nodded once. He shoved his shoulder against the metal grate, testing it. It didn't give. He grunted and tried again, this time with more force.

The grate rattled. Dust poured down in gritty strands.

Willo pressed his palms against the wall beside it, feeling vibration through concrete. The tunnel air grew warmer, thickening with the smell of burning insulation and chemical fumes. He could hear a steady grinding now, like something sealing from the other side of the world.

Mark finally managed to loosen one bolt. It scraped free with a squeal that made Willo flinch. The grate lifted a fraction, revealing a narrow space above filled with stale, warmer air.

Mark shoved the grate wider. "Willo!"

Willo climbed, boots scraping, fingers numb from cold. When he pushed his head through the opening, he found a narrow service duct with enough space to crawl. The duct smelled like old dust and something faintly sweet-almost like the same chemicals from the chamber.

Behind him, the tunnel collapse finished its work. A final heavy thud ran through the concrete, and the alarms cut out abruptly, replaced by a softer sound: a controlled hiss, like pressure equalizing.

Mark crawled up beside him, moving with urgency that bordered on desperation. "We're not done," he said, voice tight. "Where does this go?"

Willo stared into the duct's darkness. The ceiling above them felt like a lid closing over a secret. But the duct offered a path, and the cipher paper pressed against his chest like proof that God still let them find truth in the middle of danger.

He swallowed and reached forward into the duct air. "Deeper," he said, though he didn't know whether it meant deeper underground or deeper into the conspiracy's heart.

Mark's flashlight beam vanished into the duct ahead, catching on a faint stencil on the metal: the same icon from the keypad, repeated like a signature. Beneath it, scratched into the grime with a tool too sharp to be accidental, were the words Willo had seen in the cipher page.

*Seal behind them.*

This time, though, there was a twist to the meaning-like an invitation meant for someone else, someone who would come after they were gone.

Willo's faith tightened into resolve. "Then they expect us to disappear."

Mark's voice came steady, even as the duct vibrated with distant machinery. "We'll give them the wrong ending."

The duct trembled again, and the hiss turned into a sharper release, as if the system had begun to purge or reroute. Willo crawled forward, lungs burning, lantern tucked away, the cipher paper crumpled in his fist.

Somewhere ahead, there would be another door-another way to reach the missing scientists, or another chamber prepared to seal them in.

And above, the city kept breathing fear, unaware that the underground had just begun closing the circle.

CHAPTER 14

## The Encrypted Message That Names Them

**T**he tunnel door that had sealed behind them in Chapter 13 vibrated with a dull finality, like metal settling after a strike. Pastor Willo stood with his palm still pressed against the cold seam, feeling the faint tremor through his skin, while Detective Mark swept a flashlight beam across the narrow chamber they'd found beyond. The air smelled of wet concrete and old bleach, and somewhere deeper underground a fan clicked and whirred with a tired persistence. Above the rock, the city's fear rode the vibrations of distant sirens, but down here the sounds came muffled—thuds of boots, the scrape of fabric on grit, the soft hiss of breath inside a throat that didn't want to admit it was afraid.

Mark didn't look back at the sealed door. He knelt by a worktable scattered with shattered glass and a half-burned strip of paper, his shoulders tight beneath his jacket. "This place is still breathing," he said, voice low, as if the tunnel might report them. "Someone was here after the equipment was left on standby."

Willo drew a breath that tasted like copper and disinfectant and forced his mind back to the spiritual cipher he'd recognized in the pager messages—the liturgical structure, the coded cadence that didn't belong in any medical log. He wanted to finish what they'd started: decode the last layer of the message that had led them here, the piece they'd been chasing since the hospital wing seized device and the missing researcher's fragment. The cipher hadn't just pointed to a location. It had pointed to people.

Mark held up a small metal case, its latch still warm. "I found this behind the wall panel. Looks like it was shoved in there in a hurry." He opened it with careful fingers. Inside lay a thin strip of film and a compact recorder—an older model, its screen cracked, but the storage reel intact. A faint green light blinked once, then went dark, as if it had been waiting for them to arrive.

Willo leaned closer. On the film, pale ink formed lines that at first looked like nothing but damage-smears and scratches. Then his eyes caught the pattern: a familiar rhythm, the same kind of spiritual scaffolding he'd seen in the pager's encrypted fragments. He could almost hear the cadence in his head, the way certain phrases had been arranged as if someone expected a listener with more than technical skill.

He reached for the film, but Mark's hand shot out and stopped him. "Don't touch it," he said. "We don't know if it's contaminated."

Willo's mouth tightened. "Contaminated doesn't explain why it's arranged like that." He nodded toward the scratches. "That's not random."

Mark's jaw flexed. "I know what you're saying. I'm also saying there could be something on it that doesn't care whether we're holy or not." He looked past Willo, toward the tunnel mouth they'd come from, as if expecting movement. "We take it to the light. We read it clean."

The obstacle wasn't just the film; it was time. The tunnel air seemed colder the longer they stood there, and the clicking fan sounded closer now, faster. Willo watched dust drift in the flashlight beam, then noticed a thin line of condensation running along the ceiling, like something was exhaling through hidden vents. The chamber's silence was too controlled, like a room holding a breath for a cue.

Mark motioned him toward a recessed alcove with a battered power outlet and a small portable reader. He pulled the recorder's cord from its compartment with a practiced grip, then hesitated. "There's no power source," he muttered. "Unless—"

Willo stepped toward the outlet and saw a handprint of dried residue around it, as if someone had pressed a glove there again and again. He smelled something faint and sweet beneath the disinfectant, like burned sugar. "They wired this," he said. "Not for us. For someone else."

Mark's flashlight beam tracked over the wall. There were marks-scratches in a vertical line, too deliberate to be accidental. "Someone counted time," he said. He ran his thumb over the groove and flinched at a sharp edge. "Or warned themselves."

Willo swallowed. The missing scientists, the sealed chamber, the voice fragment that sounded wrong-non-human in a way that had still haunted him. He wanted to believe that God's truth could cut through all of it, but he also wanted certainty. He needed the last layer of the cipher because it would tell them who was really behind this, and why.

Mark finally plugged the recorder's lead into the outlet. A low hum rose, barely audible under the tunnel's distant machinery. The green light on the recorder flickered back to life. Then the cracked screen brightened just enough for a string of characters to crawl into view-letters broken by symbols, dates folded into the same spiritual structure Willo recognized.

Willo leaned in, careful not to move too quickly, and started to read the pattern the way he'd learned to decode it: not as a code meant for computers, but as a language shaped for the spiritually awake. He mouthed the syllables silently, then spoke them under his breath as the film's symbols aligned on the reader.

"Names," he said, voice rough. "It's... it's naming them."

Mark shifted closer. "Who?"

Willo's eyes snagged on the first date. It wasn't far back. It was the day the emergency command center had been sealed-he remembered Mark's anger in the stairwell, the clank of the lock, the way rerouted ambulances had made the city's response feel orchestrated rather than accidental. He read the date again, then looked at the name beside it.

His throat tightened. The name was familiar, not from the cipher earlier, but from the contact list Mark had pulled from the missing researcher's seized device. A scientist whose file had gone quiet after the voice fragment.

Mark saw his face and didn't ask again. "What does it say about them?"

Willo read the next line aloud, slower, as if speed might break the meaning. "It says... 'Transferred.'" He blinked hard. The tunnel smelled stronger now, chemical and sharp, like something heating up. "And then it says a warning."

Mark's expression hardened. "Warning how?"

Willo's eyes traveled along the string of characters, over dates that matched the virus's latest surges—two days ago, yesterday, today. The pattern wasn't just reporting. It was scheduling. And threaded through it, between the names and dates, was a direct line of text written in a way that didn't match the older cipher's liturgical scaffolding.

He read it, and the words made the chamber feel smaller.

"Pastor Willo. Detective Mark." He stopped, unable to breathe properly. The tunnel's hum sharpened into a buzz. "It says you're hunting time. It says... 'We're hunting you.'"

Mark straightened so fast his shoulder hit the wall. The flashlight beam swung, catching stray dust that glittered like ash. "That's not possible," he snapped, but his tone cracked on the last word.

Willo forced himself to continue. The cipher didn't just name them; it warned them with a cold clarity that felt human in its cruelty.

"It says," Willo continued, "that the virus is only the first seal. That the larger plan is already in motion. That the city's fear is the delivery system." His fingers tightened around the edge of the reader. "And it says the ones named here aren't missing by accident. They're being used. Or erased."

Mark's face went pale under the flashlight. He looked at Willo as if trying to decide whether anger or grief was the more immediate threat. "So they're not just releasing something," he said. "They're collecting people. Quietly. With dates."

A faint sound came from the tunnel behind them—metal tapping against metal, irregular, like someone walking carefully and testing their footing. Willo heard it and knew, with the sick certainty that comes when danger stops being theory, that the chamber's silence had been arranged for this moment.

Mark grabbed the recorder and shoved it into the metal case, then grabbed the film with gloved hands. "We're leaving," he said. "Now."

Willo's heart hammered, not with generic fear but with a specific, furious dread: the warning had been for them, and someone had taken time to write it. Someone had expected them to decode the last layer. The cipher wasn't just a map. It was a trap with scripture-shaped strings.

As they moved toward the sealed tunnel door, the air changed. A sharp, oily smell seeped through the cracks around the panel, and the hum from the power outlet faded as if it had been cut. The fan's clicking sped up, then stuttered, then returned with a different cadence-closer to a mechanical throat clearing before speech.

Willo pressed his ear to the door. "Mark," he whispered, "listen."

At first he heard nothing but distant machinery. Then came a low, distorted sound, as if a voice was being filtered through concrete. The pitch didn't match a human throat. It reminded him of the non-human utterance from the missing researcher's fragment, except this time the distortion carried a different intention-less like a warning, more like a command.

Mark's breath rasped. "That's the same pattern," he said. His eyes flashed to Willo. "They're here. Whoever's running this-"

The door shuddered.

A heavy clank sounded, not from the door itself, but from a mechanism deeper in the wall. The tunnel lights-none of them were on before-flickered to life in a thin strip along the ceiling. Red indicators glowed in harsh lines, painting everything in the chamber with a sick tint.

Willo backed away from the door as a narrow seam of darkness opened along the panel's edge, then sealed again, like a lock testing them. A soft click followed, and a speaker mounted near the ceiling crackled.

The voice that came through was still wrong, but it carried the same cadence as the cipher-words shaped to be understood by the spiritually awake, not by the ears that expected ordinary language.

“Pastor Willo. Detective Mark.” The name sounded like it had been written, then forced into sound. “The work is not finished.”

Mark swore under his breath. He raised his flashlight, sweeping it along the ceiling strip. “We’re not staying for a sermon.”

Willo’s lungs burned. He wanted to answer, to pray, to bind the fear and speak faith into the concrete. But the words on the film had been explicit. This wasn’t just spiritual warfare in the abstract. It was targeted. They were being hunted.

He turned his head toward the chamber’s corner where the wall had been scuffed and repaired before. “There,” he said.

Mark followed his gaze. A panel sat slightly askew, its edges worn as if a tool had pried it open before and then been forced shut again. Willo could feel the difference in air pressure around it, cooler and drier.

Mark’s hand found the edge. “If it opens, we can-”

A second sound interrupted him: footsteps, now unmistakably close, the wet scrape of shoes on concrete. Whoever was moving didn’t hurry. They had the advantage of knowing the layout.

Willo didn’t wait for Mark to finish the thought. He shoved his shoulder against the misaligned panel with all the strength he had left. It resisted, then gave, grinding with a low metallic protest. The panel swung inward just enough for a gust of air to spill out-tunnel air, colder, and carrying that same chemical bite.

Behind it, a narrow passage dropped away into shadow.

Mark grabbed Willo’s arm before he could step in. “Slow,” he hissed. “We don’t know what’s in there.”

Willo’s mind flashed to the dates. The scheduling. The names. The warning that the larger plan was already underway. If they stayed, they were already dead on someone’s calendar. If they ran, they might still catch the thread before it snapped.

He met Mark's eyes. "They know we're decoding. They know we're here." His voice shook, but he kept it steady. "If we don't move, we'll be caught in the same chamber that's meant to hold us."

Mark stared at the passage, then at the sealed door behind them. The tunnel's red indicators blinked as if they were counting down. Somewhere above, the city's sirens rose and fell, but down here the sound of pursuit was closer than any prayer could reach on its own.

Mark let go of Willo's arm and stepped toward the passage. "Then we move," he said.

They slipped inside together, careful with their footing. The passage felt narrow enough to scrape their shoulders, and the air was damp against Willo's skin. He could hear the footsteps in the chamber retreating, repositioning. A soft metallic scrape followed—someone adjusting a lock or moving a barrier.

Mark's flashlight beam cut through the darkness ahead, revealing a ladder bolted into the rock. The rungs were slick, and Willo could smell rust and old water. He climbed first, hands burning where cold metal met bare gloves. The ladder creaked with each step, and the sound carried farther than it should have, like the tunnel wanted to announce them.

Halfway up, the speaker's voice returned, muffled through walls and distance. "Detectors," it said, as if tasting the word. "Pastors. You carry light. You carry records." A pause, then the voice sharpened. "Light draws hunters."

Mark climbed beside him, jaw set. "Then let's give them something else to chase."

Willo almost laughed, but it died in his throat. He thought about Willowbrook Community Church—how people had gathered there in earlier days, how they'd prayed over the sick, how he'd watched fear spread through faces that used to smile freely. He thought about the names on the film. Scientists turned into tools. A larger plan tied to a virus, not as an accident but as a delivery mechanism.

He climbed the last rungs and pushed through a hatch. Their heads emerged into a cramped service corridor with exposed pipes sweating condensation. The smell here was different—less bleach, more oil and wet dust. A faint vibration ran through the

floor, the thrum of machinery somewhere deeper, the kind of steady power that didn't belong in abandoned tunnels.

Mark shut the hatch behind them, and the metal clanged with a firm, final sound. For one breath, the pursuit noise faded.

Willo pressed his palm to the corridor wall. The vibration trembled through his fingers. He pulled the film from Mark's case and held it up to the corridor's dim emergency light. The last layer of the cipher had done what it was meant to do: it had named them, dated their enemies' movements, and warned of the hunt.

But it had also revealed something else, something that made Willo's stomach twist with urgency.

The virus wasn't the end. It was the first seal. The larger plan was already running-powered by fear, fed by missing people, and coordinated down to the day.

Mark leaned close, eyes scanning the remaining names. "How many?" he asked.

Willo swallowed. "Enough that it's not just one lab. It's a system." He looked at the final line again, the one written like a verdict. "And it says the warning is for us, but the real message is for anyone who tries to stop it."

Footsteps sounded again, louder now, back in the corridor beneath the hatch they'd just climbed through. Someone was following. Not blindly. Not searching.

Guided.

Willo's heart tightened as he tucked the film into his jacket and turned toward the corridor's dark end where pipes disappeared into shadow. "We don't have time to argue about who's doing this," he said, voice low. "We find the next connection."

Mark's flashlight beam swept forward, catching a barred gate set into the far wall. A maintenance panel sat beside it, and on the panel someone had etched a symbol that matched the cipher's spiritual mark-familiar, purposeful, and unmistakably placed.

Mark's eyes narrowed. "They left it for us."

Willo stared at the gate, the metal cold against his gaze. Aboveground, the city's fear continued to spread like smoke. Underground, the hunters were moving with purpose, and the larger plan was waiting for the moment it could fully unfold.

He stepped closer to the maintenance panel, listening to the approaching footsteps behind them and the machinery's steady hum ahead, and felt the weight of the last layer settle into his bones.

They weren't just decoding a message anymore. They were walking into the part of the plot where the names became targets.

CHAPTER 15

## Confronting the Lab Director's Lie

**T**he maintenance panel's edge bit into Pastor Willo's palm as he leaned in, listening to the machinery's steady hum ahead of them and the faint, metallic cough of the tunnel behind. The air tasted wrong-cold concrete and that disinfectant bite that clung to the hospital hallways they'd left above-only now it carried a thin, chemical sweetness underneath, like something trying to mask itself. Somewhere deeper in the facility, a ventilation fan clicked, then spun faster, as if someone had just changed the rhythm of the place.

Detective Mark stood a step away, shoulders squared, his flashlight beam cutting a narrow stripe through dust. He'd pulled his phone out earlier, letting the screen glow against the grime on the metal, then shoved it away when the last layer of the encrypted message settled in. Willo could still see the way Mark's jaw had tightened at the names-the way the weight of them had landed like a verdict. They weren't decoding a message anymore. They were walking into the part of the plot where the names became targets.

Mark glanced back over his shoulder, not at Willo but at the tunnel they'd come from. "Lockdown's still holding," he said, voice low. "But if whoever's running this facility knows we're here-"

A soft click answered him. Not from the direction of their entry, but from the wall panel Willo had been staring at. The seam around it brightened for a moment with a dull, institutional light, then went dark again, as if the system had simply acknowledged them.

Willo straightened, breathing in through his nose until the chemical smell steadied his thoughts. "It's not random," he murmured, more to himself than to Mark. The cipher messages hadn't been prayers meant for comfort. They'd been coordinates and warn-

ings, stitched into spiritual language like a lifeline drawn in ink that wouldn't wash away. "This place is prepared."

Mark crouched by the panel, fingers finding the edge of a hidden latch. "Prepared for what?" he asked. "For volunteers to die? For a staged story to calm the city?"

Willo's mind flicked to the church steps where a man had collapsed, the rumors spreading like dry grass in wind. He'd heard people speak with the fear of losing control-fear that wanted a villain more than it wanted truth. And the conspiracy had been ready with something worse than ignorance: a script.

Mark exhaled, then slid the latch. The panel didn't swing open like a door; it eased back like a compartment in a machine, revealing a narrow access slot. Inside, a cable ran to a small terminal with a green indicator light. Someone had left it powered. Someone wanted them to see it.

Mark didn't touch the terminal. He just leaned close enough to listen. The hum shifted, becoming layered-electrical vibration under a quieter, rhythmic pulse. A recorder? A transmitter? His eyes flicked to Willo. "This facility is running its own story."

Willo felt the familiar pull of Scripture when lies tried to dress themselves as order. He'd stood in sanctuaries while people buried their grief under polished words. But this was different. This was deception engineered in ducts and steel, built for profit or power, then released through the city as if sickness could be managed by a cover-up.

A voice crackled from a speaker embedded in the wall, distorted but unmistakably controlled, like speech through an old radio. "Pastor."

Willo's spine went tight. He hadn't said anything. He hadn't given the voice his name. Mark's flashlight beam snapped toward the speaker housing.

"Detective Mark," the voice continued, as if reading a file. "You come with faith. You come with procedure. Both are useful. Both are insufficient."

Mark's hands curled into fists at his sides. "Who are you?" he demanded, stepping closer to the speaker. The tunnel echoed his words back at him, making the question

sound smaller.

Silence stretched for a beat too long. Then the speaker clicked again, and the voice returned, smoother now, almost patient. “The city is afraid. Fear is obedient. Fear follows the narrative.”

Willo swallowed. He could hear his own heartbeat under the machinery hum. “You’re staging the official story,” he said, forcing his voice steady. “You’re turning people into evidence.”

A faint laugh, not human enough to be comforting. “Evidence is expensive. We are economical.”

Mark straightened, eyes narrowing. “Economical with lives?”

The speaker answered with another click, and something in the terminal’s screen lit up without being touched. A line of text appeared in crisp, institutional font. Willo couldn’t read every character from where he stood, but the system had the same look as the seized devices they’d found earlier—clean interfaces used to hide filthy intent.

Mark moved like a man who hated losing time. He reached into the slot and pulled a thin storage drive from the terminal. The device felt warm, as if it had been handled recently. He didn’t plug it into anything; he just held it, watching the indicator light.

“Do you want proof?” the voice asked. “Or do you want mercy?”

Willo’s throat tightened at the word mercy. The conspiracy liked to dress its cruelty in language that sounded almost holy, almost tender, like a mask painted to resemble a face. He stepped closer to the speaker, hands open at his sides. “Mercy doesn’t require deception,” he said. “If you want mercy, stop spreading a virus and start telling the truth.”

The ventilation fan above them surged, a quick rush of air that made dust skitter across the floor. The voice lowered, as if leaning toward a microphone. “Truth is a tool. We use tools.”

Mark grabbed Willo’s sleeve and pulled him back half a step. “They’re changing the environment,” he said. “Listen.”

Willo did. Beneath the hum, there was a new sound-soft, mechanical movement, like a door sealing somewhere far off. The tunnel's temperature dropped by a degree, then another, until the chill sank into his forearms. His breath came out in a thin cloud.

The obstacle arrived as a consequence, not a surprise: a second voice, this one from a different speaker mounted farther down the corridor, crackling with the flat tone of an automated announcement. "Controlled facility access confirmed. Proceed to designated entry."

Mark's eyes flashed to Willo. "They're routing us," he said. "Or forcing us."

Willo felt the moral collapse behind the deception settle into his bones. It wasn't just that someone was lying. It was that someone had built a system where lying became a safety feature, where truth was treated like contamination.

He reached for the storage drive in Mark's hand. "We take this," he said. "We keep it."

Mark hesitated for a fraction of a second. "We take it," he agreed, then angled his body so the flashlight beam covered Willo's hands. "But we don't trust anything that comes from their terminal. Not even if it hands us what we want."

The tunnel ahead brightened faintly, lines of light crawling along the floor like thin rivers. A door-one they hadn't seen before-unlatched in the distance with a deep, pneumatic sigh. Warm air rolled out, carrying the smell of sterilization and something metallic, like blood kept too clean to admit it was ever spilled.

Mark moved first. His boots hit the concrete with a controlled rhythm, and his grip on the drive stayed firm. Willo followed, the chill giving way to stale heat that clung to his skin. Their footsteps sounded too loud in the corridor, like the facility had been waiting for them to announce their arrival.

When they reached the doorway, it opened just enough to let them pass through. Beyond was a controlled corridor with smooth walls and glass panels that reflected their silhouettes back at them in distorted angles. The lighting was bright but sterile, the kind that made every surface look like it had been scrubbed of fingerprints and guilt.

A woman in a lab coat stood near the far end, her posture rigid, her expression blank in a way that didn't belong to fear but to training. She held a tablet against her chest, and on her wrist a badge shimmered with a logo Willo couldn't read from here.

Mark raised his voice before Willo could speak. "We're law enforcement. We're here to investigate the outbreak you've been tied to."

The woman's eyes flicked to Mark's badge, then away, as if reading it only mattered to someone else. She didn't step forward. "Official channels are being followed," she said, her tone careful, rehearsed. "Please proceed to Room 3B for debriefing. Your presence was expected."

Expected. The word struck Willo like cold water. "Expected by who?" he asked.

The woman's gaze remained steady. "By the facility director."

Mark's jaw tightened. "Director's name?"

A pause, then a measured response. "Dr. Sutter is currently unavailable."

Willo felt a tightening in his chest. Dr. Sutter—one of the missing names that had haunted their decoding efforts. The facility offered the name like a curtain, something to hide behind while the real truth stayed out of reach.

Willo stepped closer, keeping his hands visible. "Where is Dr. Sutter?" he asked. "Where are the scientists you've taken?"

The woman's eyes sharpened just a fraction, like a trained person preparing to shut down a conversation. "You're asking questions outside your scope."

Mark's voice went hard. "My scope includes crimes against people."

The woman's tablet screen lit up, and a soft tone sounded, as if a timer had begun. "Your scope includes compliance," she said. "Please follow the signage."

Willo looked past her at the corridor's glass panels. Through them, he glimpsed a room with chairs and a table arranged too neatly, like a press briefing. The air in there seemed warmer, and the smell that drifted out wasn't the disinfectant bite from the

tunnels-it was the clean scent of a place staged for cameras, for reports, for the city to believe.

Mark noticed it too. "They're setting up a statement," he said quietly. "A narrative."

Willo's gaze returned to the woman. "Tell Dr. Sutter's family that he's unavailable," he said, and his voice trembled despite his effort to hold it steady. "Tell them he's missing because your director decided the truth would be inconvenient."

The woman's expression didn't change, but something in her posture tightened, as if a string had pulled her from within. "The director has ordered controlled communication," she said. "The facility must remain stable."

Stable. Willo had heard that word used in meetings where lives were treated like variables. "Stability for who?" he asked.

Mark moved suddenly, cutting between Willo and the woman. "We're not going to Room 3B," he said. "We're going to where the evidence is kept."

The woman's eyes widened by a hair. "You can't-"

A door behind her hissed and locked with a sound like a breath drawn too late. Mark spun, flashlight beam snapping over the seam. A second panel slid into place, sealing the corridor behind them. The facility had moved from staged hospitality to controlled containment with the same smooth efficiency as a machine switching modes.

Willo felt the moral collapse take a sharper edge. This wasn't a misunderstanding. This was a plan executed with calm certainty.

Mark's phone vibrated once in his pocket-one short buzz that made him flinch. He pulled it out, screen lighting in the dim sterile corridor. A message appeared, no sender listed, just text formatted like an official alert.

Mark read it aloud before he could stop himself. "'Dr. Sutter is alive. You will see him after you confirm compliance.'"

Willo stared at Mark's face. "Alive," he whispered. The word was a thread of hope, and it made him angry even as it relieved him. "Then why the disappearances? Why the

voice recordings? Why the sealed tunnels?”

Mark’s eyes flicked to the sealed door behind them, then back to the woman.

“Because they want us to walk into their plan,” he said. “They’re dangling him like proof.”

The woman in the lab coat swallowed, and for the first time her composure cracked—so small Willo almost missed it. “The director...” she started.

Mark stepped closer, lowering his voice. “Tell me what you know. Not what they want you to say.”

Her tablet buzzed again. Her shoulders stiffened as if bracing for a command. “I’m not authorized to discuss internal operations,” she said, but her words were less certain now, like the script was slipping.

Willo noticed the way her hands hovered near the tablet’s edge. She wasn’t reaching for it to defend herself. She was holding it like a weight.

He felt a sudden, sharp insight, not from cleverness but from noticing fear underneath training. “You’re afraid,” he said softly. “You don’t want to be part of this.”

The woman’s eyes flicked to Willo. In the sterile light, her pupils looked too wide. “I’m trying to survive,” she whispered.

Mark’s voice tightened. “Then help us.”

The facility hummed around them, steady and indifferent. Somewhere beyond the glass panels, doors opened and closed with the quiet choreography of a staged event. The city above them would be hearing whatever story this director decided to broadcast, and the virus would keep spreading while they argued in a hallway.

Willo felt the weight of the names in his mind, the ones they’d found encoded, the ones that had turned from letters into targets. He thought of the missing scientists, of people erased by silence. He thought of how deception didn’t just kill bodies; it killed trust, turned neighbors into suspects, turned faith into a weapon the wrong people could swing.

He stepped toward the woman in the lab coat and held out his hand, palm up. "Give me the tablet," he said.

Her breath caught. "I can't."

Mark's flashlight beam steadied on her face. "You already are involved," he said. "Now you can choose whether you're complicit or you're trying to stop it."

The woman stared at them, torn between her training and the fear she couldn't fully hide. The tablet buzzed again. Her gaze dropped to the screen, and Willo saw a small icon flash—an automated command request, the kind that could lock a device or trigger an alert if she didn't comply.

Her jaw clenched. Then, with a motion that looked like surrender, she slid the tablet toward Willo.

Mark caught it before it hit the floor. The screen was already open to a live feed—Room 3B's staged briefing, complete with a backdrop banner and a camera angle set for maximum clarity. A man sat in a chair in the middle of the room, face partially obscured by a monitor glare. The lighting made him look too clean, too controlled, like a prop in a play.

Willo leaned in, his throat dry. "Dr. Sutter," he breathed.

The man in the chair didn't move much. His head turned slightly, and Willo saw the strain in his expression, the way his eyes held back exhaustion. It wasn't the free, living look of someone who'd chosen to be there. It was the look of someone kept available for the story.

Mark's fingers tightened around the tablet edge. "He's alive," he said, voice rough. "But he's not free."

The lab director's voice came through an intercom, smooth as polished steel. "Pastor Willo. Detective Mark. Thank you for confirming compliance. Now witness how easily truth can be manufactured."

Willo's hands curled at his sides. "You're lying," he said, and the words came out with more certainty than he expected. "You're controlling him. You're using him to cover

your crimes.”

Laughter crackled through the speaker. “Crimes?” The director’s tone warmed, like a teacher correcting a student. “Call it necessity. The city needed stability. The virus needed direction.”

Mark lifted the tablet so the live feed faced him fully. “We have proof,” he said. “Your staged room. Your director’s voice. The message about Dr. Sutter being alive. It’s all recorded.”

The intercom clicked, then the director’s voice sharpened with irritation. “You have limited time before the narrative locks into place.”

The corridor lights flickered once, as if the facility had switched to a countdown. Willo felt his stomach drop. The obstacle wasn’t just the locked door anymore—it was the clock they didn’t control.

Mark looked at Willo, and in that glance Willo saw the decision forming: not to chase the director through this controlled maze, not to argue with a voice that hid behind procedure, but to secure what couldn’t be dismissed afterward. Proof that could survive denials. Evidence that could reach the courts and the church and the people who needed something solid when fear tried to rewrite reality.

Mark shoved the storage drive into the tablet’s port, then tapped the screen to begin extraction. The lab director’s voice poured into the corridor again, louder now, as if trying to drown out their work. “Stop. You’re interfering with containment.”

Willo stepped closer to Mark and placed his hand over Mark’s wrist, not to stop him but to steady him. “Don’t let them steal your purpose,” he said under his breath.

Mark’s eyes met his. For a second, the sterile air seemed less suffocating. Then Mark nodded once, hard, and kept working as the corridor lights pulsed faster.

The tablet emitted a soft chime, then displayed a progress bar that climbed with stubborn speed. Outside the glass, Room 3B’s camera feed shifted, the banner adjusting as if preparing for broadcast. Dr. Sutter’s face tightened, and he pressed his lips together as if trying to say something without sound.

Willo watched him through the screen, grief and hope tangling. The director's lie was already in motion, already shaping the city's belief. But Willo couldn't accept that deception would be the final word.

When the progress bar reached full, Mark pulled the tablet free from the port and shoved it into an evidence pouch inside his jacket. The device's screen went dark with a final flicker, cutting off the live feed. In that sudden absence, the corridor's hum sounded louder, more exposed, like the facility had lost its illusion of control.

The intercom went silent. A new sound replaced it: footsteps on the other side of the glass panels, quick and purposeful.

Mark looked at Willo, breathing hard. "We got what we came for," he said. "Proof that can't be explained away."

Willo's chest tightened, not with relief but with a grief-deepened resolve. Dr. Sutter was alive, but the director had staged him like a hostage. The city would be told whatever story the facility wanted, and fear would rush to fill the gaps.

Willo turned toward the sealed door, hearing the approaching footsteps, smelling the sharp sterilant in the air as if it had soaked into the corridor's walls. "Then we don't run from the truth," he said. "We carry it out."

Mark met his eyes, and for once his detective composure softened into something like faith's stubbornness. "Let's go before they decide the narrative includes us."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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### *Dan Hedegaard*

Dan Hedegaard har studeret Bibelen siden han var 20 år gammel og har ladet Skriften forme hans liv, tro og kald. Med en dyb passion for kristen undervisning og historiefortælling bringer han nu bibelske temaer om håb, sandhed og forløsning ind i verdenen af kristne mysterieromaner.

## **The Virus**

by Dan Hedegaard

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