

HASAN PİLGİR



THE
COASTAL
ROAD

— A NOVELLA —

False Summer. False Safety.

THE COASTAL ROAD

A Story From The Mechanical Lullaby Universe

Hasan PILGIR

PART I – FALSE SUMMER / FALSE SAFETY

The shutters were still closed when Marcus woke, but light came through the slats in clean white bars that fell across her shoulder. She was face-down in the sheets, one arm thrown above her head, the other tucked beneath the pillow. Her hair was dark against the white linen, still damp at the roots from the night before. He could see the small constellation of freckles between her shoulder blades, three of them forming a triangle he'd traced with his thumb more than once.

The room smelled like salt and sex and the faint chemical tang of sunscreen that never quite washed off. Outside, he could hear the distant buzz of a moped climbing the hill, the irregular clatter of someone setting up café tables on the street below. Mykonos in late September. The crowds thinned out, the prices still obscene, the light turning gold earlier each afternoon.

She stirred, made a small sound into the pillow that might have been his name or might have been nothing. He watched the movement of her ribs as she breathed. There was a hickey just below her left shoulder blade that he didn't remember making. Evidence. The word came to him unbidden and he pushed it away.

"You're staring," she said without opening her eyes.

"You're awake."

"Unfortunately." She rolled onto her side, squinting at him. Her face was creased from the pillow, makeup smudged beneath one eye. She looked younger like this, less composed. "What time is it?"

"Almost ten."

"Christ." She stretched, arching her back, and the sheet slipped down to her waist. She didn't pull it back up. "We're supposed to check out at eleven."

"We can pay for another night."

"Can we?" She raised an eyebrow. "Won't someone notice you're still in Greece?"

"I told her I'm in Frankfurt until Thursday."

"Frankfurt." She laughed, a short bark of amusement. "Very romantic."

"It's a conference."

"Is it, though?"

He didn't answer. She reached for the water bottle on the nightstand, drank half of it in one go, then offered it to him. He took it, their fingers brushing. The water was warm and tasted faintly of plastic.

"I need coffee," she said. "Real coffee, not that Nescafé shit from the lobby."

"There's a place down by the harbor."

"The one with the cats?"

"That's every place."

She smiled, a real smile this time, and swung her legs out of bed. She walked naked to the bathroom without self-consciousness, her body lean and pale except where the tan lines cut across her hips and breasts. He heard the shower start, heard her swear when the water came out cold.

He lay back and stared at the ceiling. There was a crack running from the light fixture to the corner, branching like a river delta. The plaster was old, probably older than he was. The whole building felt temporary, held together by paint and tourism and the collective agreement not to look too closely at the infrastructure.

His phone was on the nightstand, face-down. He'd turned off notifications three days ago. No emails, no calls, no texts. Complete radio silence. It was supposed to feel liberating. Mostly it just felt like holding his breath.

The shower shut off. He heard her moving around in the bathroom, the cabinet opening and closing, the hair dryer starting and then stopping after thirty seconds. When she came out she was wrapped in a towel, her hair still wet, water beading on her shoulders.

"Your turn," she said.

"In a minute."

She sat on the edge of the bed and started going through her suitcase, pulling out clothes and discarding them in a pile. "I didn't pack for an extra day."

"We can buy something."

"With what? Your imaginary Frankfurt per diem?"

"I have cash."

"Of course you do." She found a sundress, pale yellow with thin straps, and held it up critically. "This is too much, isn't it? For coffee?"

"It's Greece. Everyone's overdressed or underdressed. There's no middle ground."

She pulled the dress on over her head, not bothering with underwear. The fabric clung to her damp skin. She caught him looking and smiled. "See something you like?"

"I'm considering it."

"Consider faster. I'm starving."

He got up and went to the bathroom. The mirror was still fogged from her shower. He wiped it with his hand and looked at himself: forty-three years old, starting to go soft around the middle, hair thinning at the crown. Not old, not yet, but no longer young. The face of a man who made reasonable decisions, who filed his taxes on time, who remembered birthdays and anniversaries and never caused a scene.

The face of a man who was currently in Greece with a woman who was not his wife.

He showered quickly, the water pressure weak and inconsistent, the temperature swinging wildly between scalding and freezing. When he came out she was sitting on the balcony, smoking a cigarette and looking at her phone.

"I thought you quit," he said.

"I did. This is a vacation cigarette. Doesn't count."

"That's not how it works."

"Sure it is. Vacation rules." She took a drag and blew smoke toward the street. "There's something weird going on."

"What do you mean?"

"My phone. The signal keeps dropping. And when it works, everything's slow."

"It's Greece. The infrastructure is—"

"I know, I know. But it's been fine all week. Now suddenly nothing loads." She held up her phone to show him. The screen showed a spinning wheel, a half-loaded news site. "See?"

He checked his own phone. Same thing. The signal bars flickered between full and nothing. When he tried to open his email, it timed out.

"Probably just network congestion," he said.

"At ten in the morning? In September?"

"Maybe there's maintenance."

She stubbed out her cigarette on the balcony railing and flicked it into the street below. "You're very committed to finding boring explanations for things."

"It's a gift."

"It's something." She stood and stretched, the sundress riding up her thighs. "Come on. Coffee. Before I get homicidal."

They left the room and took the stairs down to the lobby. The hotel was small, family-run, the kind of place that looked charming in photos and slightly shabby in person. The walls were painted bright white but scuffed at the corners. The tile floor was cracked in places. There were potted plants everywhere, most of them half-dead.

The woman at the desk looked up as they passed. She was in her sixties, heavy-set, with reading glasses on a chain around her neck. She said something in Greek that Marcus didn't understand.

"Sorry?" he said.

She repeated it, more slowly, then seemed to realize they didn't speak the language. She switched to English, heavily accented. "You are checking out today?"

"We'd like to stay another night, if that's possible."

She frowned and looked at her computer screen, clicking the mouse several times. "The system is very slow today."

"That's fine. We're not in a hurry."

She kept clicking, her frown deepening. "Everything is slow. Internet, phone, everything." She looked up at them. "You have heard the news?"

"What news?"

"From Athens. There is..." She gestured vaguely, searching for the word. "Problem. Big problem."

Marcus felt something tighten in his chest. "What kind of problem?"

"I don't know exactly. My daughter called this morning, very upset. She says there is trouble, maybe military. The TV is showing nothing clear." She shook her head. "Always something. Always drama."

Beside him, he felt rather than saw the woman—Claire, her name was Claire, though he tried not to think of her by name too often—go still.

"Is it serious?" Claire asked.

The desk woman shrugged. "Who knows? In Greece, everything is serious and nothing is serious. But the phones are not working right, so maybe yes, something real." She turned back to her computer. "I can give you the room for one more night. Same price."

"That's fine."

She wrote something in a ledger by hand, the computer apparently too slow to be useful. "You pay now or tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

"Okay. Enjoy your day." She said it automatically, without conviction, already looking back at her screen.

They walked out into the street. The sun was high and bright, the sky that particular shade of blue that seemed to exist only in the Mediterranean. The street was narrow, barely wide enough for a single car, lined with whitewashed buildings and bougainvillea spilling over walls. A cat sat in a doorway, watching them with yellow eyes.

"Military problem," Claire said. "That's comforting."

"She said she didn't know what it was."

"She said her daughter was upset."

"Everyone's daughter is always upset. It's probably nothing."

"You and your boring explanations."

They walked down toward the harbor, following the maze of narrow streets. The town was built on a hill, everything either uphill or downhill, no flat ground anywhere. Marcus's calves ached from three days of walking. They passed a group of tourists

taking photos, a man selling jewelry from a blanket, a restaurant with tables set up in the street and no customers.

The café was where he remembered it, tucked into a corner near the water. Small tables, mismatched chairs, a chalkboard menu in Greek and English. Three cats lounged in the shade beneath the tables. The owner, a thin man with a gray beard, nodded at them as they sat down.

"Kalimera," he said.

"Good morning," Marcus replied. "Two coffees, please. Freddo cappuccino."

The man nodded and disappeared inside.

Claire leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, tilting her face toward the sun. "This is nice."

"It is."

"We should do this more often."

"We can't do this more often."

"I know. I'm just saying we should." She opened one eye and looked at him. "Hypothetically."

"Hypothetically is a dangerous word."

"Everything's dangerous if you think about it too much." She closed her eye again. "That's your problem. You think too much."

"Someone has to."

"Do they, though?"

The owner brought their coffees, tall glasses of iced cappuccino with foam on top. Claire took a sip and made a small sound of pleasure. "God, that's good. Why doesn't coffee taste like this at home?"

"Different beans. Different water."

"Different everything." She looked out at the harbor. There were boats bobbing in the water, fishing boats and sailboats and a few larger yachts. The water was impossibly blue, almost artificial-looking. "I could stay here forever."

"No you couldn't."

"I could try."

"You'd be bored in a week."

"Maybe." She smiled. "But what a week."

They sat in silence for a while, drinking their coffee, watching the boats. A group of tourists walked by, speaking German. A moped buzzed past, the driver not wearing a helmet. Everything felt normal, lazy, suspended in amber.

Then Marcus heard it: a siren, distant but distinct, coming from somewhere inland. Not the two-tone European police siren he'd gotten used to, but something else. Something longer, more sustained. An air raid siren, he thought, and then immediately dismissed the thought as absurd.

Claire heard it too. She sat up straighter, her coffee forgotten. "What is that?"

"I don't know."

The siren continued for maybe thirty seconds, then stopped. The silence afterward felt heavy.

The café owner came out, wiping his hands on his apron. He was looking toward the hills, his expression troubled. He said something in Greek, too fast for Marcus to catch any of it.

"Sorry," Marcus said. "English?"

The man switched languages, his accent thick. "You hear the siren?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"I don't know. Civil defense, maybe. I have not heard this sound in many years." He pulled out his phone, tried to do something with it, then swore in Greek. "Nothing works. No internet, no news."

"The woman at our hotel said something about trouble in Athens," Claire said.

The man nodded. "Yes, I hear this also. My cousin called from Piraeus this morning, very early. He says there is military movement, ships, planes. He says people are worried." He shrugged. "But people are always worried. This is Greece."

Another siren started, closer this time. Then another, overlapping. The sound was eerie, primal, designed to trigger something deep in the hindbrain. Marcus felt his pulse quicken.

"Maybe we should go back to the hotel," Claire said quietly.

"And do what?"

"I don't know. Watch the news. Figure out what's happening."

"The internet's not working."

"There's a TV in the lobby."

The sirens stopped again. The silence was worse than the sound. Even the cats had disappeared, slinking away to whatever hiding places cats found when the world felt wrong.

Marcus put money on the table, more than the coffee cost. The owner nodded his thanks, but he was still looking toward the hills, his phone in his hand, waiting for it to work.

They walked back up through the narrow streets. More people were outside now, standing in doorways, talking in clusters. The conversations were all in Greek, rapid and urgent. Marcus caught fragments—"Athens," "military," "Turkey"—but couldn't piece together a coherent picture.

A man on a moped roared past, going too fast for the narrow street, nearly clipping a woman carrying groceries. She shouted after him, but he didn't slow down.

"This doesn't feel like nothing," Claire said.

"I know."

"So what do we do?"

"Let's get back to the hotel. See if we can get any information."

They climbed the hill, both of them breathing hard by the time they reached the hotel. The lobby was more crowded than before. A dozen people clustered around a small TV mounted on the wall, all of them talking at once. The picture on the screen showed a news anchor speaking urgently in Greek, but the sound was turned down. Behind the anchor, there was footage of what looked like a military base, helicopters taking off.

The desk woman saw them and waved them over. "You see? Something is happening."

"What is it?" Marcus asked.

"They are not saying clearly. But there is military alert. High level. They say people should stay inside, stay calm, wait for information." She gestured at the TV. "But they

give no information. Just 'stay calm, stay calm.' How can we stay calm when they tell us nothing?"

On the screen, the footage changed. Now it showed a map of the eastern Mediterranean, with red zones marked across Turkey and the Aegean. The anchor was pointing at something, his expression grave.

"Is it war?" someone asked in English. An American tourist, young, wearing a college t-shirt.

"No one knows," the desk woman said. "Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe just exercise, maybe real."

"Jesus Christ," the American said. "We need to get to the airport."

"Airport is closed," the desk woman said. "I hear this from my daughter. All flights cancelled."

"What? They can't do that."

"They can do anything. This is emergency."

Marcus felt Claire's hand find his, her fingers cold despite the heat. He squeezed back, trying to project a confidence he didn't feel.

"We should call the embassy," Claire said quietly.

"With what? The phones aren't working."

"They have to be working somewhere. We can find a landline."

"And say what? We're American tourists who don't know what's happening? They'll tell us to stay put and wait for instructions."

"So that's what we do?"

"What else can we do?"

She pulled her hand away. "I don't know. Something. Anything. Not just stand here watching Greek TV we can't understand."

The news footage changed again. Now it showed the harbor at Piraeus, the port near Athens. There were ships moving, military vessels, and crowds of people on the docks. The camera was shaky, handheld, someone filming from a distance.

"This was this morning," the desk woman said, translating the caption. "Six o'clock. They say the navy is mobilizing. They say there is threat from the east."

"Turkey," someone said.

"Maybe. They don't say."

Marcus watched the screen, trying to read meaning into the images. The ships looked purposeful, organized. Not panicked. That was good, wasn't it? If it was organized, it was controlled. Controlled meant manageable.

But the people on the docks didn't look controlled. They looked scared.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out, hope flaring—maybe the network was back—but it was just a notification that his storage was almost full. No signal. No data. Nothing.

"We should get our things," Claire said. "Pack. Be ready to move if we need to."

"Move where?"

"I don't know. Somewhere. Anywhere but here."

"Here is fine. We're on an island. We're safe."

"You don't know that."

"I know panicking doesn't help."

She looked at him, her eyes hard. "I'm not panicking. I'm being realistic. Something is happening, Marcus. Something big. And we're stuck on a fucking island with no information and no way to communicate and you want to just... what? Wait it out? Hope it goes away?"

"I want to not make things worse by running around like a headless chicken."

"Better than standing still like a sitting duck."

They stared at each other. Around them, the other guests were still focused on the TV, their voices rising. Someone was crying. Someone else was on their phone, shouting in Italian.

"Let's go upstairs," Marcus said quietly. "Get our things together. Then we can decide what to do."

Claire nodded, her jaw tight. They went back up to their room. The shutters were still closed, the bed still unmade. It looked exactly as they'd left it twenty minutes ago, but it felt different now. The intimacy had curdled into something else. The room felt small, claustrophobic.

Claire started throwing things into her suitcase, not bothering to fold anything. Marcus watched her for a moment, then started packing his own bag. His hands were shaking slightly. He tried to remember what he'd brought, what was important, what could be left behind. His passport. His wallet. His phone charger, for all the good it would do.

His wedding ring was in the side pocket of his suitcase, where he'd put it three days ago. He looked at it for a long moment, then left it where it was.

"We should try to rent a car," Claire said. "Get off the island. Take the ferry to the mainland."

"The ferries might not be running."

"Then we find out. But we can't just sit here."

"Okay. Okay, you're right."

She stopped packing and looked at him. "Really?"

"Really. Let's go downstairs. See if we can get information about ferries. If they're running, we'll take one. If not, we'll figure out plan B."

"Thank you."

They finished packing quickly, both of them moving with the jerky efficiency of controlled panic. Marcus zipped his suitcase and took one last look around the room. The bed with its tangled sheets. The balcony with its view of the street. The bathroom where they'd showered together that morning, laughing about something he couldn't remember now.

Three days ago, this had felt like freedom. Now it felt like a trap.

They went back downstairs. The lobby was even more crowded, people shouting questions at the desk woman in multiple languages. She was trying to answer, her face flushed, her voice strained.

"The ferries?" Marcus asked when he could get her attention.

"I don't know. Maybe yes, maybe no. You must go to the port and ask."

"Is there a car rental nearby?"

"Yes, down the street, but I think they are closed. Everyone is closed."

"We'll try anyway."

They left their bags at the desk and walked back out into the street. The sun was still bright, the sky still blue, but the atmosphere had changed. More people were outside now, moving with purpose, carrying bags, loading cars. A man was arguing with someone on a balcony, shouting up in Greek. A woman hurried past with two small children, both of them crying.

The car rental place was three blocks away, a small storefront with a faded sign. The door was locked, the lights off. Marcus cupped his hands and looked through the window. Empty.

"Shit," Claire said.

"There might be another one."

"Where?"

"I don't know. We'll ask."

They walked toward the port, asking people as they went. Most didn't speak English. Those who did either didn't know or were too busy to help. The streets were getting more crowded, more chaotic. A car honked, long and angry. Someone dropped a suitcase and it burst open, clothes spilling across the cobblestones.

At the port, there was a crowd gathered around the ferry terminal. The board that usually showed departure times was blank. A man in a uniform was trying to make an announcement, but people kept interrupting, shouting questions.

Marcus pushed closer, Claire behind him. "Excuse me," he said to the uniformed man. "Do you speak English?"

"Little bit."

"Are the ferries running?"

"Not now. Maybe later. We wait for instruction."

"When will you know?"

The man shrugged helplessly. "When they tell us."

"What about private boats? Can we hire someone?"

"I don't know. You can ask." He gestured vaguely toward the marina.

They walked along the waterfront. The marina was full of boats, but most of them looked empty, locked up, their owners nowhere to be seen. A few people were on their vessels, loading supplies, preparing to leave or preparing to stay, Marcus couldn't tell which.

He approached a man coiling rope on the deck of a sailboat. "Excuse me. Do you speak English?"

The man looked up. He was in his fifties, weathered, with a gray beard and suspicious eyes. "Yes."

"We need to get to the mainland. Can you take us?"

"No."

"We can pay."

"I don't care. I'm not going anywhere."

"Please. We're stuck here. We don't know what's happening."

"No one knows what's happening. That's why I'm staying here." He went back to his rope. "Go away."

They tried three more boats. Two didn't answer. One told them to fuck off in Greek.

Claire was breathing hard, her face flushed. "This is insane. We're trapped."

"We're not trapped. We just need to—"

A sound cut him off. Loud, mechanical, coming from above. They both looked up. A military helicopter, flying low over the water, heading north. Then another. Then a third.

The people on the waterfront stopped what they were doing and watched. The helicopters were close enough that Marcus could see the door gunners, could see the weapons mounted on the sides. They weren't trying to be subtle. This was a show of force, or a deployment, or both.

When the sound faded, the silence felt oppressive.

"We need to get off this island," Claire said. Her voice was shaking. "Right now. I don't care how."

Marcus's phone buzzed. He pulled it out. One bar of signal, flickering. A notification: emergency alert. He tapped it, but the message wouldn't load. The signal dropped again.

"Did you get that?" he asked.

Claire was looking at her phone. "Yeah. But it won't open."

"Same."

They stood there, both of them staring at their useless phones, while around them the port descended further into chaos.

PART II – FIRST DISRUPTION

They found a café that was still open, barely, the owner in the process of closing up but willing to sell them water and a sandwich they didn't want. Marcus paid with cash, overpaying, and they sat at a table in the corner while the owner locked the door behind them and flipped the sign to closed.

"Eat something," Marcus said, pushing half the sandwich toward Claire.

"I'm not hungry."

"Eat anyway. We don't know when we'll get another chance."

She picked at the bread, tearing off small pieces but not putting them in her mouth. Her phone was on the table, face-up, the screen dark. She kept glancing at it like it might suddenly come to life and explain everything.

Marcus forced himself to eat. The sandwich was dry, the bread stale, but he chewed mechanically and swallowed. Fuel. That's all food was right now. He drank half the water and gave the rest to Claire.

"We need a plan," he said.

"I thought you had a plan."

"I thought we'd be able to rent a car or take a ferry. That was the plan."

"Great plan."

"You have a better one?"

She looked at him, her eyes red-rimmed. "No. I don't. I don't have any fucking idea what to do."

The café owner was in the back, talking on a landline phone. His voice was urgent, rapid Greek. Marcus couldn't understand the words, but the tone was clear: fear, confusion, anger.

"Maybe we should just stay here," Claire said. "On the island. Wait it out. Like you said, we're probably safer here than trying to get to the mainland."

"Maybe."

"You don't sound convinced."

"I'm not convinced of anything right now."

She laughed, a short bitter sound. "That's honest, at least."

His phone buzzed again. This time when he checked it, there was a message: Emergency Alert - Shelter in place. Avoid coastal areas. Await further instructions. The message was in English, but when he tapped it for more information, nothing happened.

"I got something," he said, showing her.

She read it, her face pale. "Avoid coastal areas. We're on a fucking island. It's all coastal areas."

"It probably means beaches. Exposed areas."

"Or it means get inland. Away from the water."

"There is no inland. The whole island is ten kilometers across."

"So what do we do?"

Before he could answer, the café owner came out from the back. His face was grim. He said something in Greek, then seemed to remember they didn't understand. "You must go. I am closing. Everyone is closing."

"What's happening?" Marcus asked. "Did you hear something?"

"My brother, he is in Athens. He says there is military everywhere. He says they are evacuating some areas. He says..." The man paused, searching for words. "He says it is very bad. Maybe war. Maybe not war but something like war."

"With who?"

"Turkey, maybe. Or maybe something else. No one is saying clearly." He gestured toward the door. "Please. You must go. Find somewhere safe."

"Where is safe?"

The man shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. Inland, maybe. Away from the ports. The military bases." He paused. "You have a car?"

"No."

"Then you must find one. Or find somewhere to stay that is not near the water. The hotels here, they are all near the water. Not good."

They left the café and stood in the street. The sun was past its zenith now, the shadows starting to lengthen. The street was emptier than before, most of the shops closed, metal shutters pulled down. A dog trotted past, alone, looking lost.

"We should go back to the hotel," Marcus said. "Get our bags. Then find somewhere else to stay."

"Where?"

"I don't know. Somewhere inland. A house, maybe. We can offer to pay someone."

"With what? Your imaginary conference money?"

"I have cash. Enough."

They walked back up the hill. Marcus's legs ached, his shirt sticking to his back with sweat. The heat felt oppressive now, malevolent. He kept looking at the sky, half-expecting to see more helicopters, or planes, or something worse.

The hotel lobby was nearly empty. The TV was still on, still showing news in Greek, but no one was watching. The desk woman was gone. Their bags were where they'd left them, behind the desk, untouched.

Marcus grabbed both bags and they went back outside. "We need to head inland," he said. "Away from the port."

"How far inland?"

"As far as we can walk."

They started up the hill, away from the water. The streets were steeper here, narrower, less touristy. Residential buildings, small houses with gardens, laundry hanging on lines. A few people were outside, watching them pass with suspicious eyes.

After twenty minutes of walking, Marcus's arms were burning from carrying the bags. Claire was breathing hard, her face flushed. They stopped in the shade of a wall, both of them sweating.

"This is insane," Claire said. "We can't just wander around carrying luggage."

"What else do we do?"

"I don't know. Find someone. Ask for help."

"Ask who?"

"Anyone. Everyone. Someone has to know what's happening."

A woman came out of a nearby house, elderly, wearing black. She looked at them with open curiosity. Marcus tried a smile. "Excuse me. Do you speak English?"

She shook her head.

"We need help. We need somewhere to stay. Away from the water."

She frowned, not understanding. Marcus tried again, speaking slowly, using hand gestures. "Stay. Sleep. Here." He pointed at the ground. "Safe."

The woman's expression changed. She said something in Greek, rapid and concerned. Then she gestured for them to wait and went back inside.

"What did you do?" Claire asked.

"I don't know. Asked for help, I think."

The woman came back out with a younger woman, maybe forty, wearing jeans and a t-shirt. "You are tourists?" the younger woman asked in accented English.

"Yes. We're trying to find somewhere safe to stay. Away from the coast."

"You hear the news?"

"We can't understand it. We don't speak Greek."

The woman nodded. "There is emergency. Military emergency. They say people should go inland, away from the coast. They say there is danger from the sea."

"What kind of danger?"

"They don't say. Just danger." She looked at their bags. "You have nowhere to go?"

"No. The hotels are all near the water."

She spoke to the older woman in Greek. They had a brief conversation, the older woman shaking her head, the younger one insisting. Finally the older woman sighed and nodded.

"My mother says you can stay here," the younger woman said. "In the guest room. Just for tonight. Until things are clear."

"Thank you," Marcus said. "Thank you so much. We can pay—"

"No money. Just..." She searched for the word. "Humanity. We help each other, yes?"

"Yes. Thank you."

They followed the women inside. The house was small, cool, with tile floors and whitewashed walls. There were icons on the walls, photographs of family, a smell of cooking oil and incense. The older woman led them to a small room with a single bed and a window overlooking a garden.

"You stay here," the younger woman said. "I am Katerina. This is my mother, Eleni. We live here together."

"I'm Marcus. This is Claire."

Katerina nodded. "You are married?"

There was a pause. "Yes," Marcus said.

If Katerina noticed the hesitation, she didn't show it. "Good. You stay together. Safer." She gestured around the room. "Bathroom is there. Kitchen is there. You need anything, you ask."

"Thank you," Claire said. "Really. This is incredibly kind."

"Is nothing. In emergency, we help." Katerina paused. "You have family in America? They know you are safe?"

"The phones aren't working," Marcus said.

"Yes, is problem. But maybe later they work. You should try to call. Let them know you are okay."

After Katerina left, Marcus and Claire stood in the small room, their bags at their feet. The bed was narrow, barely big enough for one person. There was a crucifix on the wall above it.

"Well," Claire said. "This is cozy."

"It's shelter."

"It's a fucking closet."

"It's better than being on the street."

She sat on the edge of the bed, her shoulders slumped. "I can't believe this is happening."

"I know."

"We were supposed to be on vacation. We were supposed to be drinking wine and fucking and not thinking about anything."

"I know."

"And now we're trapped on an island in the middle of some kind of military emergency and we don't even know what's happening and—" Her voice broke. She put her face in her hands.

Marcus sat beside her, not touching her. "We're going to be okay."

"You don't know that."

"No. But I believe it."

"Since when do you believe anything?"

"Since right now."

She looked at him, her eyes wet. "I'm scared."

"Me too."

"What if this is really bad? What if it's war?"

"Then we'll deal with it."

"How?"

"I don't know. But we will."

She leaned against him, her head on his shoulder. He put his arm around her. They sat like that for a long time, listening to the sounds of the house: Katerina and her mother talking in the kitchen, water running, a radio playing Greek music.

Then the radio cut out. There was a moment of silence, then a loud tone, harsh and electronic. An automated voice began speaking in Greek, rapid and urgent. Marcus couldn't understand the words, but the tone was unmistakable: this was an emergency broadcast.

They went to the kitchen. Katerina and her mother were standing by the radio, listening intently. The broadcast continued for maybe a minute, then repeated. Katerina's face was pale.

"What is it?" Marcus asked. "What are they saying?"

Katerina held up a hand, listening. When the broadcast finished, she turned to them. "They say there is military threat. They say all civilians must evacuate coastal areas immediately. They say to go inland, to high ground. They say do not use the coastal roads. They say—" She paused, listening as the broadcast started again. "They say there is danger of attack. They say to seek shelter and wait for further instructions."

"Attack from who?"

"They don't say. Just attack."

The broadcast ended. The radio went back to music, but it sounded wrong now, tinny and false.

"We should go," Claire said. "Further inland. Higher up."

"Where?" Marcus asked. "We don't know the island. We don't have a car."

"My cousin has a house," Katerina said. "In the hills. Very high, very safe. But is far. Maybe five kilometers. You cannot walk with bags."

"Can we get a car?"

"Maybe. I can try to call. But phones are not working well."

She tried her phone, but couldn't get through. She tried the landline. It rang, but no one answered.

"We wait," Eleni said in Greek. Katerina translated. "My mother says we should wait. See what happens. Maybe the danger passes."

"Or maybe it gets worse," Claire said.

"Maybe. But we cannot know. So we wait."

They went back to the small room. Marcus tried his phone again. Still no signal. He tried to load the news, but nothing would connect. The emergency alert was still there, but no new information.

Claire was pacing, three steps one way, three steps back. The room was too small for pacing. "We should have left yesterday. We should have left as soon as we heard the first siren."

"We didn't know."

"We should have known. We should have paid attention."

"To what? There was nothing to pay attention to."

"There's always something. We just weren't looking."

"That's not fair."

"Fair?" She laughed. "You want to talk about fair? We're stuck on an island in the middle of a war zone because we were too busy fucking to notice the world falling apart. That's not fair. That's just stupid."

"We didn't know," Marcus said again.

"We should have."

She sat on the bed, her head in her hands. Marcus stood by the window, looking out at the garden. There were tomatoes growing, and herbs, and a lemon tree. Everything looked normal, peaceful. It was impossible to reconcile the view with the emergency broadcast, with the helicopters, with the fear in Katerina's eyes.

His phone buzzed. He grabbed it, hope flaring. One bar of signal. A text message loading. He waited, watching the spinning wheel.

The message appeared: Are you okay? Where are you?

It was from his wife.

He stared at the screen. His thumb hovered over the keyboard. What could he say? I'm in Greece. I'm safe. I'm with someone else. I'm sorry. I'm scared. I don't know what's happening.

The signal dropped. The message disappeared. When he tried to reload it, nothing happened.

"Who was it?" Claire asked.

"No one. Wrong number."

She looked at him, and he knew she didn't believe him, but she didn't push. There were bigger things to worry about now than lies.

Outside, the sun was starting to set. The light turned gold, then orange, then red. It was beautiful. It was the same sunset they'd watched from the balcony of their hotel room two nights ago, drinking wine, laughing about something trivial.

That felt like a different life now. A different world.

The radio in the kitchen crackled to life again. Another emergency broadcast. Katerina came to their door, her face grim.

"They say the situation is escalating," she said. "They say military forces are engaging. They say all civilians must take shelter immediately. They say—" She paused, listening. "They say there may be air strikes. They say to stay away from windows. They say to go to the lowest floor of your house."

"Air strikes," Claire said. "Jesus Christ."

"Is probably just warning," Katerina said. "Probably nothing happens. But we should be careful."

They moved to the center of the house, away from windows. Eleni brought blankets and pillows. They sat on the floor in the hallway, the four of them, waiting.

The sun set. The house grew dark. Katerina lit candles. No one spoke.

Then, in the distance, they heard it: a low rumble, like thunder, but not thunder. An explosion. Then another. Then silence.

Claire grabbed Marcus's hand. Her palm was slick with sweat.

"Is far away," Katerina said. "Maybe the port. Maybe the airport."

"What do we do?" Claire asked.

"We wait. We pray. We hope."

They waited. The candles burned down. The house was silent except for their breathing and the occasional creak of old wood settling.

Marcus's phone buzzed again. He checked it. Another emergency alert, this one with more detail: Military engagement in progress. All civilians ordered to evacuate coastal

zones. Proceed inland immediately. Do not use coastal roads. Repeat: Do not use coastal roads. Seek high ground and shelter.

"We need to go," he said. "Now. The alert says to evacuate."

"In the dark?" Katerina asked. "With no car? Is too dangerous."

"It's more dangerous to stay."

"We don't know that."

Another explosion, closer this time. The house shook. Dust fell from the ceiling.

Eleni said something in Greek, her voice sharp. Katerina nodded. "My mother says we should go to my cousin's house. In the hills. She says we take her car."

"You have a car?" Marcus asked.

"Is old. Is not working well. But maybe it works enough."

They gathered their things quickly. Katerina found keys, a flashlight, bottles of water. Eleni moved slowly, her hands shaking, but she didn't complain.

The car was in a small garage behind the house. It was ancient, a Fiat from the 1990s, dented and rusted. Katerina turned the key. The engine coughed, sputtered, then caught.

"Is miracle," she said. "Get in."

They piled in, bags crammed in the trunk and on laps. The car smelled like old cigarettes and mildew. Marcus sat in the back with Claire, their bodies pressed together in the narrow space.

Katerina backed out of the garage and into the street. The headlights were dim, barely illuminating the road ahead. She drove slowly, carefully, the engine whining.

"Which way?" Marcus asked.

"Inland. Away from the port. There is a road that goes through the center of the island, then up into the hills. Is maybe twenty minutes. Maybe more if there is traffic."

"Will there be traffic?"

"I don't know. Maybe everyone has the same idea."

They drove through the dark streets. The town was eerily quiet, most houses dark, no one outside. Once they passed a group of people loading a car, moving frantically in the

dim light of a phone flashlight. Once they saw a fire in the distance, orange flames against the black sky.

The road started to climb. The engine struggled, the car slowing to a crawl on the steep grade. Katerina shifted gears, the transmission grinding.

"Come on," she muttered. "Come on, you piece of shit."

The car kept moving. They climbed higher, the town falling away below them. Marcus looked back and saw lights, scattered and sparse, and in the distance, near the port, a larger glow that might have been fire.

Then the radio came on by itself.

It was loud, sudden, making them all jump. Not music this time, but a voice, automated and urgent, speaking in Greek. The same emergency broadcast, but different somehow. More insistent.

Katerina listened, her face illuminated by the dashboard lights. "They are saying the coastal road is closed. They are saying there is military activity. They are saying—" She paused. "They are saying do not go to the coast. Do not use the coastal road. Go inland only. Go to high ground."

"We're already going inland," Claire said.

"Yes. Is good. We are doing the right thing."

The broadcast continued, repeating the same message over and over. The voice was mechanical, emotionless, but there was something terrifying about its persistence. It didn't stop. It didn't pause. It just kept warning, kept insisting, kept telling them to go inland, go inland, go inland.

Marcus tried to see the road ahead, but the headlights were too dim. They were climbing into the hills now, the road narrow and winding. On one side was rock face, on the other a drop into darkness.

"How much further?" he asked.

"Maybe ten minutes. Maybe less."

The engine coughed. The car jerked, slowed, then caught again.

"Is okay," Katerina said. "Is okay. We are almost there."

But Marcus could hear the doubt in her voice.

The radio broadcast cut off suddenly. There was a moment of static, then silence. Then a different voice, human this time, speaking rapidly in Greek. Katerina's hands tightened on the wheel.

"What?" Marcus asked. "What is it?"

"They are saying..." She paused, listening. "They are saying there is immediate danger. They are saying military engagement is active. They are saying—"

The voice on the radio was replaced by a tone, high and piercing. An alarm.

Then the sky lit up.

PART III – PANIC

The light came from the east, over the water, bright enough to turn night into day for three seconds. Marcus saw everything in stark detail: the road ahead, the rocks, Katerina's face in the rearview mirror, her eyes wide. Then darkness again, deeper than before, his vision full of afterimages.

"What was that?" Claire's voice was high, tight.

"I don't know," Katerina said. "I don't—"

The sound hit them. Not an explosion, but a roar, a physical thing that shook the car and rattled the windows. It went on for five seconds, ten, then faded into a rumble that seemed to come from everywhere at once.

Eleni was praying in Greek, her voice rapid and rhythmic.

Katerina accelerated, the engine screaming. The car lurched forward, tires skidding on loose gravel. "We need to get off this road. We need to get higher."

"You said ten minutes," Marcus said.

"I know what I said. But we need to go faster."

The road curved sharply. Katerina took the turn too fast and the car fishtailed, the rear end sliding toward the edge. Marcus saw the drop, black and infinite. Then the tires caught and they were moving again, climbing.

Another flash, further away this time. Then another. The sky was lighting up like a storm, but there was no thunder, just that deep rumble that seemed to come from the earth itself.

"They're bombing the port," Claire said. "They're fucking bombing the port."

"We don't know that," Marcus said.

"What else would it be?"

He didn't have an answer.

The radio was still on, the alarm still sounding. Then it cut out completely. The silence was worse than the noise.

Katerina's phone rang. She fumbled for it, nearly dropping it, then answered. A rapid conversation in Greek, her voice rising. She hung up.

"My cousin," she said. "He says the roads are blocked. He says there are military checkpoints. He says we cannot get to his house."

"Then where do we go?" Marcus asked.

"I don't know. Somewhere high. Somewhere away from the coast."

"You said we were going inland. We are inland."

"Not far enough."

The road forked. Katerina hesitated, then took the right branch. It was narrower, less maintained, the surface broken and potholed. The car bounced violently. Something in the trunk shifted and fell.

"This is the wrong way," Eleni said in Greek. Katerina snapped something back. They argued, their voices overlapping.

"What's wrong?" Claire asked.

"My mother says this road goes back toward the coast. She says we should have taken the other way."

"Then turn around."

"I can't. Is too narrow. We have to keep going until we find a place to turn."

They kept climbing. The road got worse, barely more than a track now. Branches scraped the sides of the car. The headlights caught eyes in the darkness—a goat, or a dog, something that ran away.

Then the road ended.

Not gradually, but suddenly. One moment they were driving, the next they were facing a wall of rock. A dead end.

"Fuck," Katerina said. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"Back up," Marcus said.

"I can't. Is too narrow. I need to turn around."

"Then turn around."

"I'm trying!"

She put the car in reverse, turned the wheel. The car moved backward a few feet, then the rear tire hit something and they stopped. She tried again. The engine whined. The tire spun uselessly.

"We're stuck," she said.

"We can't be stuck."

"We are stuck."

Marcus got out. The air was cool, smelling of pine and dust. He went to the back of the car and looked. The rear tire was wedged against a rock, the wheel at an angle.

"Can you push?" Katerina called from the driver's seat.

"I can try."

Claire got out too. Together they put their hands on the trunk and pushed while Katerina gunned the engine. The car rocked but didn't move. The tire spun, smoking.

"Stop," Marcus said. "You're just digging it in deeper."

Katerina got out, leaving the engine running. She looked at the tire, then at the road behind them, then at the sky. Another flash, distant but visible through the trees.

"We have to walk," she said.

"Walk where?"

"Back to the main road. Then we find another way."

"What about your mother?"

Eleni was still in the car, her face pale in the dashboard light. Katerina spoke to her in Greek. Eleni shook her head, said something sharp.

"She says she cannot walk far. She says we should leave her here."

"We're not leaving her," Claire said.

"She is old. She is slow. She will make us slow."

"We're not leaving her."

Katerina looked at Claire, then at Marcus. "You don't understand. If we stay together, we all die. If we split up, maybe some of us live."

"That's not how this works," Marcus said.

"That is exactly how this works."

Eleni said something else, longer this time. Katerina's face crumpled. She argued back, but her voice was breaking.

"What's she saying?" Claire asked.

"She says we should go. She says she will wait here. She says God will protect her." Katerina wiped her eyes. "She says we are young. We have time. She has lived her life."

"Tell her we're not leaving," Marcus said.

"I already told her. She doesn't care."

Another flash. Closer this time. The rumble that followed shook the ground.

"We need to decide," Katerina said. "Now."

Marcus looked at Claire. Her face was streaked with dirt and sweat. She looked terrified. She looked like she was about to break.

"We stay together," he said. "All of us. We help her walk. We go slow if we have to."

"We don't have time to go slow."

"Then we make time."

Katerina stared at him, then nodded. "Okay. Okay. We try."

They got Eleni out of the car. She was heavier than she looked, her body soft and unsteady. Katerina took one arm, Marcus took the other. Claire grabbed the bags.

"Leave the bags," Marcus said.

"We need them."

"We need to move fast more than we need luggage."

"My passport is in there. My phone. My—"

"Leave it."

She hesitated, then dropped the bags. They started walking back down the road, Eleni between them, her feet shuffling. She was breathing hard, wheezing.

"How far to the main road?" Marcus asked.

"Maybe one kilometer. Maybe more."

"Can she make it?"

"She has to."

They walked. The road was dark, the only light coming from Katerina's phone flashlight. It threw wild shadows, making everything look distorted and wrong. Marcus's arms ached from supporting Eleni's weight. His shirt was soaked with sweat.

Behind them, the sky kept lighting up. The flashes were coming more frequently now, sometimes two or three in quick succession. The rumble was constant, a bass note that Marcus felt in his chest.

"What is that?" Claire asked. "What are they hitting?"

"I don't know," Katerina said. "Maybe the port. Maybe the airport. Maybe military bases."

"Are there military bases on the island?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. But maybe."

They reached the fork in the road. Katerina turned left, the way they should have gone before. This road was wider, better maintained. They moved faster.

Eleni stumbled. Marcus caught her, but barely. She said something in Greek, her voice weak.

"She says she needs to rest," Katerina translated.

"We can't rest."

"Just for a minute. Please."

They stopped. Eleni sat on a rock by the side of the road, her head down, her breathing labored. Katerina knelt beside her, speaking softly in Greek.

Marcus walked a few steps away, trying to see the road ahead. It curved down and to the left, disappearing into trees. He had no idea where they were, no idea where they were going. They were just moving, reacting, running from something they couldn't see and didn't understand.

Claire came up beside him. "This is insane."

"I know."

"We're going to die out here."

"We're not going to die."

"You keep saying that. But you don't know. You don't know anything."

"Neither do you."

"At least I'm honest about it."

He looked at her. Her face was hard, angry. "What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to admit that we're fucked. That we made the wrong choices. That we should have left yesterday, or the day before, or never come here in the first place."

"Fine. We're fucked. We made the wrong choices. Is that what you want to hear?"

"It's a start."

"It doesn't change anything."

"No. It doesn't."

They stood there, not touching, the space between them feeling vast.

Katerina called out. "We need to keep moving."

They helped Eleni up. She was shaking now, her skin clammy. Marcus didn't think she could make it much further.

They walked. The road descended, then climbed again. Marcus's legs were burning. His lungs ached. Beside him, Eleni was making small sounds of pain with each step.

Then they heard it: an engine. Coming from behind them, moving fast.

"Someone's coming," Claire said.

They moved to the side of the road. Headlights appeared, bright and blinding. A car, moving too fast for the narrow road. It came around the curve and Marcus saw it was a pickup truck, old and battered, the bed full of people and bags.

Katerina stepped into the road, waving her arms. "Stop! Please stop!"

The truck didn't slow down. It swerved around her and kept going, the people in the back staring at them with blank faces.

"Fuck," Katerina said. "Fuck them."

Another car came, then another. Neither stopped. The third one nearly hit them, forcing them off the road and into the brush.

"Everyone's running," Claire said. "Everyone's trying to get out."

"Then we need to run too," Marcus said.

"We can't run. Look at her." She gestured at Eleni, who was barely standing.

"Then we need a car."

"How? No one's stopping."

"We make them stop."

"How?"

Marcus didn't answer. He was thinking, calculating. The next car that came, he would step in front of it. Force them to stop. They'd have to stop. They couldn't just run him over.

Could they?

Another car appeared. Marcus stepped into the road.

"Marcus, what are you doing?" Claire shouted.

He stood in the center of the road, his arms raised. The car's headlights pinned him. He could see the driver's face, a man, middle-aged, his mouth open in shock or anger.

The car didn't slow down.

Marcus held his ground. The car was twenty meters away. Fifteen. Ten.

At the last second, he jumped aside. The car roared past, so close he felt the wind of it.

"Are you insane?" Claire was beside him, grabbing his arm. "You could have been killed."

"We need a car."

"Not like that."

"Then how?"

She didn't have an answer.

They kept walking. More cars passed, none of them stopping. The road was getting crowded now, a steady stream of vehicles heading inland. Some were packed with people, some were towing trailers, some were barely holding together. Everyone was running.

Then they heard a different sound: a siren. Coming from behind them, getting louder.

"Police," Katerina said. "Or military."

They moved to the side of the road. A military vehicle appeared, a jeep with a mounted gun on top. It was moving fast, lights flashing. It passed them without slowing.

"They're not stopping for anyone," Claire said.

"Why would they?" Marcus said. "They have their own problems."

Another military vehicle passed, then another. A convoy, heading inland.

"If the military is running," Claire said, "what chance do we have?"

No one answered.

They walked. Eleni was barely moving now, her feet dragging. Katerina was crying, trying to hide it, but Marcus could hear the catch in her breath.

The road leveled out. They were on a plateau now, the land opening up. In the distance, Marcus could see lights, a cluster of buildings. A village, maybe, or a town.

"There," he said, pointing. "We can get help there."

"Is Ano Mera," Katerina said. "Is maybe two kilometers."

"Can she make it?"

"She has to."

They kept walking. The sky was lighter now, not from dawn but from the fires burning on the coast. Marcus could see smoke, thick and black, rising in columns.

A car pulled up beside them. An old Mercedes, dented and dirty. The window rolled down. A man leaned out, maybe sixty, with a gray beard and tired eyes.

"You need help?" he asked in English.

"Yes," Marcus said. "Please. We need to get to Ano Mera."

"Get in. Quickly."

They didn't hesitate. Katerina and Eleni got in the back. Marcus and Claire squeezed into the front passenger seat, Claire on his lap. The car smelled like cigarettes and diesel.

The man drove fast, not speaking. The radio was on, another emergency broadcast in Greek. The man listened, his face grim.

"What's happening?" Marcus asked.

"War," the man said simply. "Or something like war. The Turks, maybe. Or maybe something else. No one knows for sure. But the military is mobilizing. The ports are being hit. The airports are closed. Everyone is trying to get inland, to the mountains."

"Is Ano Mera safe?"

"Safer than the coast. But nowhere is really safe." He glanced at them. "You are tourists?"

"Yes."

"Bad time to visit Greece."

"We didn't know."

"No one knew. That's the problem."

They reached Ano Mera. The village was chaos. Cars everywhere, people shouting, children crying. The man pulled over in front of a church.

"This is as far as I go," he said. "I have to find my family. Good luck."

They got out. The man drove away before they could thank him.

The church was open, people streaming inside. Katerina helped her mother toward the entrance. Marcus and Claire followed.

Inside, it was packed. People sitting in pews, standing in the aisles, lying on the floor. The air was thick with the smell of sweat and fear. A priest was at the altar, leading prayers in Greek. Some people were praying. Others were just sitting, staring at nothing.

They found a space near the back, against the wall. Eleni sat down heavily, her eyes closed. Katerina sat beside her, holding her hand.

Marcus and Claire stood. There was nowhere else to sit.

"Now what?" Claire asked.

"We wait."

"For what?"

"I don't know. For it to be over. For someone to tell us what to do."

"No one's going to tell us what to do. We're on our own."

"Then we figure it out ourselves."

She laughed, bitter. "You keep saying that. But we haven't figured out anything. We've just been running. And we're still not safe."

"We're safer than we were."

"Are we? Look around. Everyone here is just as lost as we are."

She was right. Marcus looked at the faces around them. Fear, confusion, exhaustion. No one had answers. No one was in control.

His phone buzzed. He pulled it out. Two bars of signal. A message loading.

It was from his wife again: Please tell me you're okay. I'm seeing the news. It looks bad. Please respond.

He stared at the message. His thumb hovered over the keyboard.

"Who is it?" Claire asked.

"No one."

"Don't lie to me. Not now."

He showed her the phone. She read the message, her face hardening.

"You should respond," she said.

"And say what?"

"That you're alive. That you're safe. That you're sorry."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know if any of that is true."

She looked at him for a long moment. "You're a coward."

"I know."

"You've always been a coward."

"I know that too."

She turned away. He put the phone back in his pocket without responding.

The priest's voice rose, leading another prayer. Around them, people joined in, their voices blending into a single sound. Marcus didn't know the words, didn't know the language, but he understood the sentiment. Please. Help us. Save us. Let this end.

But the prayer didn't stop the flashes in the sky. It didn't stop the rumble of explosions. It didn't stop the fear.

They waited. Minutes passed, or hours. Marcus couldn't tell. Time felt broken, elastic. He was thirsty, exhausted, his body aching. Beside him, Claire was silent, her arms wrapped around herself.

Then someone shouted. A man near the front of the church, pointing at his phone. Others gathered around him, their voices rising.

"What is it?" Marcus asked Katerina.

She was looking at her phone too. "They are saying the military is evacuating the islands. They are saying boats are coming to take people to the mainland."

"When?"

"Now. Soon. They are saying to go to the ports."

"But the ports are being bombed."

"Not all of them. Some are still safe. They are saying to go to the north side of the island. To Panormos. There are boats there."

"How far is that?"

"Maybe fifteen kilometers. Maybe more."

"We need a car."

"Everyone needs a car."

People were already moving, streaming out of the church. The panic was palpable, infectious. Marcus felt it rising in his own chest, the urge to run, to move, to do something.

"We should go," Claire said.

"Go where? We don't have a car. We don't know the way."

"We'll find a way. We have to."

Katerina was helping her mother up. Eleni looked worse, her face gray, her breathing shallow.

"She can't make it," Marcus said. "She needs to rest."

"There's no time to rest," Katerina said. "If we don't go now, we'll be trapped."

They went outside. The village square was chaos. Cars trying to leave, people running, shouting. A fight broke out near a truck, two men grappling over who would get in.

"This is insane," Claire said.

"We need to find a car," Marcus said. "Or someone who will take us."

They moved through the crowd, asking, begging. No one would help. Everyone was focused on their own survival.

Then Marcus saw it: a car, parked near the edge of the square. A black Mercedes S-Class, new, expensive, out of place among the old trucks and beaten-up sedans. The driver's door was open. No one inside.

"There," he said, pointing.

"That's someone's car," Claire said.

"I don't care."

"We can't just steal it."

"Watch me."

He ran to the car. The keys were in the ignition. He got in, started the engine. It purred to life, smooth and powerful.

Claire was beside him, her face pale. "Marcus, this is crazy."

"Get in."

"We can't—"

"Get in!"

She got in. Katerina helped her mother into the back seat, then got in herself.

Marcus put the car in gear and pulled out of the square. People shouted, someone tried to grab the door handle, but he accelerated and they fell away.

"Which way?" he asked.

"North," Katerina said. "Toward Panormos. I will tell you when to turn."

He drove. The car was smooth, responsive, nothing like the old Fiat. It felt powerful, invincible. For the first time in hours, Marcus felt like they had a chance.

The road was crowded, but the Mercedes was faster than most of the other cars. He passed them, weaving through traffic, ignoring the honking and the shouted curses.

"Slow down," Claire said. "You're going to get us killed."

"We're already going to get killed if we don't move fast."

"That's not—"

"Just let me drive."

She fell silent.

The road climbed, then descended. They were heading toward the coast now, the opposite direction from where they'd been going. Marcus could see the water in the distance, dark and vast.

"Are you sure this is right?" he asked Katerina.

"Yes. Panormos is on the north coast. Is the only port that is still safe."

"How do you know it's safe?"

"I don't. But is what they are saying."

The radio came on by itself again. The same emergency broadcast, but different now. More urgent. The automated voice was speaking rapidly, repeating the same phrases over and over.

"What's it saying?" Marcus asked.

Katerina listened. Her face went pale. "It's saying to evacuate immediately. It's saying there is imminent danger. It's saying..." She paused. "It's saying do not use the coastal road. It's saying the coastal road is closed. It's saying to go inland only."

"But we're going to the coast. To Panormos."

"I know. But maybe the broadcast is old. Maybe it's from before."

"Or maybe it's current and we're going the wrong way."

"We don't have a choice. The boats are at Panormos. That's where we need to go."

Marcus looked at Claire. She was staring straight ahead, her jaw tight.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I think we're fucked either way."

"That's helpful."

"You asked."

The broadcast continued, the voice mechanical and insistent. Do not use the coastal road. Do not use the coastal road. Do not use the coastal road.

Marcus kept driving.

PART IV – THE WRONG ROAD

The road forked ahead. A sign, half-visible in the headlights: one arrow pointing left toward Ano Mera, the other right toward Panormos. Marcus slowed.

"Right," Katerina said. "Toward Panormos."

"The broadcast said not to use the coastal road."

"This is not the coastal road. This is the inland road that goes to the coast. Is different."

"Is it?"

"Yes. The coastal road is the one that runs along the water. This one goes through the hills, then down to Panormos. Is safe."

Marcus looked at the sign again. The arrow pointing right was labeled "Panormos 8km." Eight kilometers. Maybe ten minutes in this car.

The broadcast was still playing. Do not use the coastal road.

"We should go back," Claire said. "Go inland. Like the broadcast says."

"There's nothing inland," Katerina said. "Just mountains. No boats. No way off the island."

"Maybe that's safer."

"Safer to be trapped? To wait for the bombs to find us?"

"We don't know they're bombing the whole island."

"We don't know they're not."

Marcus's hands were tight on the wheel. His head was pounding. He couldn't think clearly. Everything was moving too fast.

"We need to decide," he said. "Now."

"Go to Panormos," Katerina said. "Is the only way."

"The broadcast—"

"The broadcast is wrong. Or old. Or not about this road. We have to trust that the boats are there. That they will take us to safety."

Marcus looked at Claire. "What do you think?"

She was silent for a long moment. Then: "I don't know. I don't fucking know."

"That's

not good enough," Marcus said.

Claire turned to him. Her face was pale, her eyes red. The sarcasm was gone. The irony that had carried her through everything—through the affair, through the lies, through the hotel room this morning when the world was still warm and manageable—all of it had stripped away.

"I know it's not good enough," she said. Her voice was thin. "I know. But I don't know what to do. I don't know how to read this. I don't know if we're supposed to trust her or trust the radio or trust nothing. I don't know."

She was shaking. Not crying, but close.

"I'm scared," she said. "I'm really fucking scared and I don't know what the right answer is."

Marcus had never heard her sound like this. Not once. Not in two years.

He looked at Katerina. "You're sure about this?"

"I am sure," she said. "The boats will be there. They have to be."

Marcus turned the wheel to the right.

The S-Class moved smoothly onto the coastal road. The sign for Panormos passed on the left. Eight kilometers.

Behind them, the broadcast continued. Do not use the coastal road.

Then it cut out.

The radio went silent. Just static, then nothing.

"Fuck," Claire whispered.

Marcus pressed the accelerator. The car responded instantly, the engine barely audible, the ride smooth even on the uneven pavement. It felt absurd, this machine, this luxury, moving through a landscape that was coming apart.

The road curved along the hillside. To their left, the slope dropped steeply toward the water. To their right, rock face and scrub. No guardrails. No lights.

They passed a car pulled over on the shoulder, its hazards blinking. The driver was standing outside, looking at his phone, his face lit by the screen. He didn't look up as they passed.

"How far now?" Claire asked.

"Six kilometers," Marcus said.

Katerina was silent in the back seat.

The road narrowed. The pavement was cracked in places, weeds growing through. Marcus had to slow down for a curve, the headlights sweeping across the hillside.

Then they saw the smoke.

It was rising from somewhere ahead, a dark column against the night sky. Not close, but not far either.

"What is that?" Claire asked.

"I don't know."

"Maybe we should turn around."

"There's nowhere to turn around."

It was true. The road was too narrow, the drop too steep. They would have to keep going until they found a wider section.

Marcus kept driving.

The smoke grew thicker. They could smell it now, acrid and chemical. Something burning that wasn't supposed to burn.

"This is wrong," Claire said. "This is wrong, Marcus."

"I know."

"Then stop."

"I can't."

The road curved again, and suddenly they could see the source of the smoke. A building, maybe a house, maybe something else, engulfed in flames. The fire was bright, almost white at the center, and the heat was visible even from the road, the air shimmering.

Marcus slowed but didn't stop. There was nothing they could do.

They passed the burning building. The heat was intense, even through the closed windows. Claire covered her face with her hands.

Then, ahead, they saw the checkpoint.

It wasn't official. Just a truck parked across the road, and two men standing in front of it, both holding rifles.

Marcus hit the brakes. The S-Class stopped smoothly, the headlights illuminating the men. They didn't move.

"What do we do?" Claire asked.

"I don't know."

One of the men walked toward them. He was young, maybe twenty-five, wearing civilian clothes. The rifle was slung over his shoulder. He gestured for Marcus to roll down the window.

Marcus hesitated, then pressed the button. The window descended.

The man leaned down. He said something in Greek.

"We don't speak Greek," Marcus said. "English?"

The man shook his head. He said something else, louder this time, gesturing back the way they'd come.

"He wants us to turn around," Katerina said from the back seat.

"Tell him we're going to Panormos," Marcus said. "Tell him we need to get to the boats."

Katerina spoke in Greek. The man responded, his voice sharp. He gestured again, more forcefully.

"He says the road is closed," Katerina translated. "He says we have to go back."

"Ask him why."

Katerina asked. The man's response was short.

"He says it's not safe."

"Tell him we know. Tell him we have to get through."

Katerina spoke again. The man's face hardened. He stepped back and unslung the rifle, holding it across his chest. Not pointing it at them, but ready.

The second man walked over. He was older, his face lined and tired. He said something to the first man, then looked at Marcus.

"You cannot go this way," he said in heavily accented English. "You must turn back."

"We need to get to Panormos," Marcus said. "We need to get off the island."

"There are no boats in Panormos."

The words hung in the air.

"What?" Claire said.

"The boats left hours ago. There is nothing there now. Only fire."

"That's not true," Katerina said. "The boats are there. They have to be."

The older man looked at her. "I am sorry. But they are gone."

Marcus felt something cold settle in his chest.

"Then where do we go?" he asked.

"Inland. To the shelters. Away from the coast."

"The broadcast said not to use the coastal road."

"Yes. That is correct."

"Why?"

The man hesitated. Then: "Because they are targeting the coast. The strikes are coming from the sea."

Marcus's hands were numb on the wheel.

"Let us through," he said.

"I cannot."

"Let us through."

The man shook his head. "I am sorry. You must go back."

Marcus looked at Claire. Her face was blank, her eyes unfocused.

Then he looked at the truck blocking the road. It was old, rusted, the tires half-flat. The two men were standing in front of it, but they were tired, and the rifles looked heavy.

He pressed the accelerator.

The S-Class surged forward. The men shouted, jumping aside. The younger one raised his rifle, but he didn't fire. Marcus swerved around the truck, the tires kicking up gravel, and then they were past, the road opening up ahead.

"Jesus Christ," Claire said. "Jesus Christ, Marcus."

"We had to."

"They had guns."

"They weren't going to shoot."

"You don't know that."

Marcus didn't respond. He was driving fast now, faster than he should, the headlights cutting through the darkness. The road was empty. No other cars. No lights.

Katerina was silent in the back seat.

They drove for another kilometer. Then two. The smoke was behind them now, but the smell lingered.

"There's nothing there," Claire said. "He said there's nothing there."

"He could be wrong."

"He wasn't wrong."

"We don't know that."

"Marcus—"

"We don't know that."

But he did know. He could feel it. The wrongness of it. The way the road felt too empty, too quiet. The way the air tasted.

They had made the wrong choice.

The realization settled over him slowly, like cold water.

They had made the wrong choice, and now there was no way back.

The road curved again, descending toward the water. The headlights swept across the hillside, and Marcus saw something that made him brake hard.

A crater. In the middle of the road. Maybe three meters across, the edges jagged, the pavement torn away.

He stopped the car. The engine idled.

"We can't get past that," Claire said.

Marcus stared at the crater. It was fresh. The edges were still smoking.

"We have to go back," Claire said.

"We can't."

"Marcus—"

"We can't. The checkpoint. The men with guns. We can't go back."

"Then what do we do?"

Marcus didn't answer. He was looking at the crater, at the torn pavement, at the darkness beyond.

Then he heard it.

A sound. Low and distant. Growing louder.

"What is that?" Claire asked.

Marcus looked up. The sky was dark, but there was something moving across it. Something fast.

"Get down," he said.

"What?"

"Get down!"

He grabbed Claire and pulled her down, his body covering hers. In the back seat, Katerina was already on the floor.

The sound grew louder. A roar, mechanical and inhuman.

Then the light.

It came from above and behind, impossibly bright, turning the night into day. Marcus could see everything: the crater, the road, the hillside, the water below. Every detail sharp and clear.

The light lasted for maybe two seconds.

Then the blast hit.

It wasn't a sound. It was a physical thing, a wall of pressure that slammed into the car and lifted it. The S-Class—two tons of German engineering, steel and glass and leather—became weightless.

Marcus felt the world tilt. The steering wheel was torn from his hands. Claire was screaming, or maybe he was screaming, or maybe it was just the sound of metal tearing.

The car was airborne. Then it wasn't. It hit something—the road, the hillside, he couldn't tell—and the impact was brutal. The airbags deployed, slamming into his face, his chest. The windshield shattered. Glass everywhere.

Then silence.

Not real silence. His ears were ringing, a high-pitched whine that drowned out everything else. But compared to the blast, it felt like silence.

Marcus opened his eyes. The airbag was deflating in front of him. He could see through the broken windshield. The headlights were still on, pointing at an angle, illuminating dust and smoke.

He tried to move. His body responded slowly, painfully. Nothing felt broken, but everything hurt.

"Claire," he said. His voice sounded distant, muffled.

She didn't respond.

He turned his head. She was slumped against the door, her face turned away. Blood on her temple.

"Claire."

Still nothing.

He reached for her, his hand shaking. He touched her shoulder. She was warm.

"Claire."

She moved. Just slightly. A breath.

Relief flooded through him, so intense it was almost painful.

He looked back. Katerina was on the floor of the back seat, curled into a ball. She wasn't moving.

The car was tilted. The front end was lower than the back, resting against something. Rock, maybe. Or the edge of the road.

Marcus tried the door. It wouldn't open. He pushed harder. Nothing.

The window was broken. He could climb out.

He started to move, then stopped.

Something was vibrating.

He looked down. His phone. It was on the floor, between the seats, the screen lit up.

He picked it up. His hands were shaking so badly he almost dropped it.

The screen showed an alert. In English this time. Finally translated.

EMERGENCY ALERT
COASTAL EVACUATION MANDATORY
DO NOT USE COASTAL ROADS
SEEK INLAND SHELTER IMMEDIATELY
NAVAL STRIKES IN PROGRESS

He stared at the words. They were clear. Simple. Impossible to misunderstand.

He looked at Claire. She still wasn't moving.

He looked at the phone again.

The screen was bright in the darkness. The alert was still there, the words sharp and precise.

His finger hovered over the screen.

Then the light went out.

Not the phone. The headlights. The engine had stopped. Everything was dark.

Marcus sat in the silence, the phone in his hand, the alert still glowing.

He could hear his own breathing. Ragged and shallow.

He could hear the wind. Or maybe it was the sea.

He could hear nothing else.

His finger touched the screen.

The alert disappeared.

The phone went dark.

And in the darkness, Marcus waited.