

**Excerpt**  
**CHILDREN OF THE VINES**

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**PROLOGUE**

It was quiet on the mountain path, only the crunch of tiny stones beneath her boots breaking the stillness. The half-moon hid its profile behind the clouds, and she squinted, straining her eyes to distinguish the pale strip of gravel from the rough ground leading towards the crest.

They had all heard the plane, the throb of engines echoing across the water as it headed for the land, bearing its deadly cargo. Earlier that week, planes had droned overhead, perhaps on a reconnaissance mission, and nothing had come of it.

The whole island was on edge, fearing the worst, scanning the skies by day and night for invading forces. The Allies kept their own counsel. ‘Loose lips sink ships’ was whispered in tavernas and cafes, and the paranoia and fear of collaboration ran like a dark thread through the community.

Then, two nights previously, the first of the paratroopers had made tentative landing – and still, the carnage that would follow in Operation Mercury had not yet entered the darkest imaginings of the Cretan population. Perhaps there would be invasion by stealth, no pitched battle, no shrill whine of bombs and rattle of artillery. For now, it was enough to capture the men who fell from the sky.

Long after dark, the throaty vibration of engines filled the air above the farm on the road to Rethymno, where the family had gathered in the kitchen to drink raki and discuss the evils of war. The sound galvanized the menfolk and they leapt to their feet sending chairs flying, their exclamations lost in the scraping of wood against flagstone floors. Daimon, the slow one, spilled his drink and scabbled in his pocket for a piece of rag to mop the liquid as it spread slowly across the polished surface of the table. Within moments they were gone, Nicos in the lead, his brothers jostling shoulder-to-shoulder through the narrow doorway, Daimon stumbling in the rear, all headed towards the only flat piece of land in the area, the one where parachutes were least likely to become entangled in the scrubby trees.

Amara stood slowly, cradling her abdomen, where two tiny souls slept, afloat in the cradle of her womb. Four months pregnant, she railed against the limitations imposed by her condition. She felt well. She was young and strong; her health was excellent. Why must she stay at home while others protected their land, their farm, their island?

She wandered into the garden and scanned the skies at the very moment the moon slid from behind a looming cloud. A large shape sailed high above, black against the purple blue, blotting out the starlight in its path. The batlike form was gone almost before she could register its existence, but every instinct told her that this was a parachute, and it was headed at a sharp angle to the direction the men had taken.

There was no time to lose if lives were to be saved. She ran back into the house and scribbled a note on the sheet of paper Nic had left on the table. Pausing for a moment, she remembered she had left her dagger in the bedroom and hurried along the hall, almost tripping over the rug in her haste.

The small silver dagger, a gift from her husband at their wedding, lay in its scabbard on the chest at the end of the bed. She raised it to her lips, murmuring a prayer of entreaty before tucking it into her pocket and vanishing out the terrace door.

Twenty minutes later, she was climbing steadily towards the crest of the foothill behind the farm, veering slightly off the path to dampen the sound of her stout boots on the gravel and loose stones. The pungent scent of rosemary filled her nostrils as she trampled the wild herbs beside the track. She stopped and bent to pick a sprig, inhaling deeply to clear her brain.

The night was silent save for the occasional squeak of some small animal and the rustle of bushes as it fled before the jaws of marten or stoat. The squeak became a thin scream as the predator found its mark.

In the silence that followed, Amara heard another sound: the rustling of fabric caught in a sudden puff of wind.

Bending as low to the ground as her swollen belly would permit, she crept forward to where the path rounded a boulder. The moon slid behind a cloud and she waited, senses straining for information, praying for a sliver of light.

By now the men would be aware of their mistake and be on their way up the mountain. Given the direction of the wind tonight, it was the only other possibility for a safe landing close enough to habitation but far enough away to avoid detection.

The fluttering of parachute silk had stopped. Apparently, he was alive and had stowed it somewhere in the rocky outcrop. So be it. She had her dagger and there was work to be done.

She stood upright just as the clouds betrayed her, drawing back to allow the moonlight to glitter on the blade she held in her right hand. The silver flashed briefly like the flanks of a fish before a hand grasped her wrist and twisted, spraining the ligaments, and almost breaking the bones. She gasped in pain and fright and fell to her knees before lowering her head to bite her captor.

He struck her repeatedly and she crumpled to the ground, unable to defend herself or do more than moan in pain. Aware of what was coming, she closed her eyes and lay as though dead, not allowing him the satisfaction of crying out as he reached for his own knife and drew it across her throat.

Her last thoughts, before darkness took her, were of the two small lives struggling for survival in her womb.....