

Book One: Crete

Rodino sits on the corner of the goat enclosure, the tinkling of bells and angry snorts warn him to look lively: the time to go is now.

"Come father, you promised," and he raises his voice against the wind.

The goat herd jostle each other around the gate expecting to be led out into the field and Big Billy, the dominant male, paws the ground demanding attention.

"Wait Billy!" Rodino snaps, banging his heels against the stone wall.

His father had warned him not to open the gate until he arrived, and now the sun stands three fingers above the horizon. He too hates waiting and the impatient scowl on his face is a deliberate mark of his anger. He has seen his father look like that and he wants to be the same. Tough and smart and all grown up. He stands, lifting himself nimbly onto the balls of his feet, and holds his shoulders erect and proud, posing to his own shadow on the ground. At ten years of age, Rodino is too young to know when the tears will come. He is a small boy, but only in stature. He takes after the island of his birth, his thoughts as big as the sky and his courage as big as the mountains and wherever he goes he takes the biggest steps. If the space closes down on him he runs. His eyes are bright and as green as the first buds of spring. He sees everything, even in the dark, and walks tall even when carrying the heaviest rocks to repair the enclosure. His small frame is already tough, his skin darkened by the sun. His lips are tight, but the sound from his mouth is big, swollen by the blood of his bearing.

Rodino is the only son of Pitre Xanos and will be the only son forever.

He gazes down the path willing his father to appear. The heat rises from the ground like an iron horse from the fire. The rocky landscape dips sharply away, holding the path for a brief moment before tumbling out of sight. The cliff-face is too sheer to be seen from on top of the goat enclosure and the sea appears to be level with the land and then the sky appears to be level with the sea and Rodino boasts that it is the rocks he places in the walls that keeps the sea from rushing in to drown them all.

Rodino lives with the wrecks of war. Scattered across the barren fields around his home are the reminders of the German occupation of Crete during the Second World War. A burnt boot half hidden under the sand walks no more. A pair of sunglasses warped and twisted from the heat of battle no longer frightens him. He even tried them on once, but threw them away in disgust. The rusting hulk of a German tank gapes sightlessly into the merciless heavens. Behind the tank three fallen soldiers lie beneath their

pile of stones. There are no crosses to mark their passing. Only nameless ghosts wander this lonely place and only the cheated gods from other realms come here in search of their lost ones.

As soon as he could crawl Rodino had explored these battlefields. They were his only playground until he was strong enough to stand on his own two feet and tend to the goats, but never more than one step beyond the outer wall, never. Now he dreams of accompanying his father into the mountains and vows not to cry even if his legs hurt or his lips crack from thirst.

"I am not a little boy," he growls, leaping from the wall to prove it.

Pitre strides along the narrow path leading from the village of Sphakia to the Xanos homestead. It runs perilously close to the very edge of the cliff where far below the sea rushes ashore to smash against the rocks. This is Crete, the Crete of Pitre's birth and the place where sky touches earth and life erupts. Along this forsaken coast mankind burns insane in the twisted wreckage of his dreams.

"Prepare ye for the suffering," the old folk say. "Crete is life; to be born here is the only cure for the sickness of the gods."

Pitre swings his arms effortlessly against the steepness of the climb, his coat-tails flapping in the breeze. He wears his beret at a cocky angle, a sure sign of importance, his shirt tied around his waist, a sure sign that the importance is wearing off. As he walks he wipes his brow with his faded old bandana. Then he wipes his whole face before knotting the scarf around his neck again. He is a powerfully built man and the heavy army boots strapped to his feet pound the earth relentlessly. He claims the distance to his place of work, his wife and children, and his beloved home with sure intent.

He breasts the hill and sees Rodino and waves.

Rodino comes bounding down the path to greet him.

"I see you Papa. I see you," he shouts, waving frantically to be seen.

Pitre's greeting is brief and formal. He hugs Rodino and then spins him around to face back up the path.

"Open the gate, son," he says, "keep them out of the gully, you hear me. Rodino, be careful," he shouts.

A Greek army troop convoy, flying the colour of the new socialist party, grinds past in the distance, the soldiers singing, the sound of the bazookie loud and merry. Pitre spits into the palm of his hand and turns away.

Inside the house, Felice Xanos washes baby Maria in the kitchen sink. Maria was still in her mother's womb when the soldiers were fighting outside, and even though it is now June 1946, her eyes dart nervously to the slightest sound, especially when the door bangs shut. Apolonia, the eldest child, stands on a chair putting soap in Maria's mouth and Maria giggles, reaching up to catch Apolonia's long black hair.

Pitre enters and drinks water from the barrel in the corner and kisses Felice behind the ear saying, "trouble's coming." He sits at the kitchen table and tears off a hunk of bread. "I must go away," he says.

Felice ignores him and attends to Maria.

"The kids are old enough," Pitre continues, "this time you are not alone."

Felice hangs her head over the sink and asks, "When is this going to stop," her voice desperate yet resigned to the inevitable.

"The day we win," Pitre replies.

He hurries into the bedroom to pack his kit and returns to the kitchen dressed in his Royalist army uniform, a rifle slung over his shoulder, his beret tipped back on his head. He kisses Felice warmly on the lips.

"I love you," he says.

Apolonia pulls a tongue at him and he pulls one back and they laugh. He grabs the bread and a hunk of cheese and leaves.

Outside, Rodino pretends to be a wolf and chases the goats away from the gully. Pitre whistles and all the goats run to him. Rodino stands at a distance staring at his father, knowing the meaning of that army uniform and the rifle.

"You look after Mama," Pitre says, "and don't fight with Apolonia. When I get back, we will go into the mountains, just you and me."

"Don't be late, Papa! Today you were late," Rodino says.

Pitre makes a fist and Rodino makes two fists and holds them above his head and their goodbye is done.

Pitre walks back along the same winding path, dropping down steeply to the village of Sphakia. Rodino stands frozen to the spot, his eyes closed, listening to the whistles of his father growing ever dimmer until all he can hear is the sea crashing against the shore.

Life is hard for Felice and her children without the support and protection of Pitre. In this place of the forgotten a strong leader is needed; someone to hold the darkness at bay and ward off the spirits of the damned. She struggles against the uncertainty of tomorrow and doubts her own ability to meet the challenges facing her. The summer days are long and hot; the nights lonely and quiet.

One morning while Rodino cleans the feeding bins the goats wander out of the enclosure. Rodino panics, throwing a bucket at them, and they flee into the open fields. The louder Rodino whistles and shouts the more they run. They careen this way and that ever closer to the gully, even Big Billy is spooked. Felice appears at the front door and shouts at Rodino. Apolonia shouts at him too and baby Maria starts to cry. Rodino runs for all his might, his gumboots slapping against his calves, and the scowl across his face deepens.

That night over supper, Apolonia pulls a tongue at him and he picks up a knife and points it at her. Felice slaps them both and banishes them to their room and lies on the kitchen table and cries.

The children share a room. Maria's cot hangs from the roof beams close to Apolonia's bed while Rodino sleeps on the floor in the corner. Felice and Pitre's room is at the end of the short passage with a door leading to the outside and the toilet. The shower is a low stone enclosure open to the rocky plains and the mountains. All of their social life takes place in the kitchen where they entertain themselves and their visitors. It is the biggest room and the warmest, and when the cold winds blow and the snows fall,

everyone huddles around the stove. There is nowhere to hide in the kitchen. Unseen eyes stare and secret ears listen from every crack in the stones.

The goat enclosure is Rodino's place of work. This is where he belongs and from sunrise to sunset he tends to the goats. They are his friends and he speaks out loud to them knowing each by name and sharing with them his thoughts and dreams. He respects Big Billy. There can only be one leader in matters of goat business and when Big Billy snorts Rodino leaves to attend to his own human duties. When it comes to feeding, and that bucket appears from the little shed under the roof, then Rodino is king and all line up patiently at the trough, even Big Billy.

The vegetable garden is the only other place outside of the kitchen where the whole family come together and even baby Maria will be given a job if only to chew the carrots and dig for worms.

Felice is never comfortable under the scorching sun and will soon drift off to sit in front of the mirror in her bedroom. This is her sacred space. She'll sit there for hours fixing up things on her face Rodino never knew were broken. Her nose, eyebrows and lips all look perfect, but she will find mysterious spots to dab and paint and make disappear. She will comb her hair over and over again in long gentle strokes. Rodino will lie in the corridor listening to her hum in front of that mirror and wonder what it is that she sees and that can turn on the music in her heart. Then Apolonia will come along and kick him saying, "don't spy, it's rude," and he'll run to the edge of the gully where his father had drawn a line on the ground and glare at it, willing it to move.

A heavy truck grinds towards the house and Rodino knows it brings more trouble. The day his father went away that same army truck had come. All the soldiers were singing and playing the bazookie. Now they are silent and that means more trouble. Rodino spits onto the ground just as his father had done and hurries into the house to warn his mother.

The truck stops in the yard and the soldiers jump to the ground, their buckles and weapons clinking against each other.

Captain Markos Psarriti climbs from the cab, his tall figure unwinding from his cramped position. He adjusts the dark glasses on his face and signals two men to check the back of the house, then clicking his fingers at two other soldiers, he tells them to guard over the goat enclosure. As he walks towards the front door his feet find the exact footprint of the other, toe to heel, toe to heel. Captain Markos Psarriti is a professional soldier comfortable in his command.

Rodino stands in the doorway determined not to allow the Captain to pass.

"You do not belong here," Rodino says.

Felice snaps at him to stand aside and allows the Captain to enter. She lays the coffee cups and side plates on the table, becoming sociable and friendly in the twinkling of an eye.

"We live here alone," she says to the Captain.

"I know," he replies.

"I suppose you know everything," Felice says.

"I know that your husband is a loyal soldier."

"Then do you know when he will be back?"

The Captain jerks his head at the children and Felice ushers Apolonia to the door whispering in her ear, "Run along my sweet one. I'll call you, promise."

"Your husband is often away," the Captain continues, his tone accusing.

He moves closer to Felice looking up into her face, his smile dancing in the sparkle of her eyes. The Captain takes off his hat placing it in front of him on the table before continuing, keeping his voice low not to be overheard.

"Your husband leaves his wife alone," he says, "and teaches the little boy to run with the goats."

Three soldiers amble into the kitchen and one of them picks up the flagon of wine from the shelf and exclaims that it will be sour by the end of summer if it's not drunk.

"Today we celebrate our great victory," the soldier says and he pulls the cork from the flagon.

"Hear! Hear!" the other soldiers agree and they take it in turns to tip the flagon to their lips.

"What victory," Felice wants to know. "Every day I hear on the radio that the fighting continues."

"We control the whole Island," the soldier interrupts.

"Then we are safe here," Felice replies and folds her arms in defiance.

"Come with us," the Captain pleads, "and bring the children."

Felice shakes her head, and the Captain takes Felice by the hand and leads her outside. "Your husband can help us," he says. "Those Germans who tortured the men and women of the village will soon arrive for their punishment and Pitre has information regarding one of them. If you come with us, the situation will be quickly resolved. Opa!" he shouts clicking his fingers like castanets. "Let us dance to victory. You are too beautiful to stay alone," and he lifts Felice's hand gracefully inviting her to dance. "Please," he whispers in her ear, "your husband will come to you. He is a good man just a little misinformed."

Felice stares at the Captain searching his face for the truth and he stares back, his eyes narrowing to frighten Felice into succumbing to his authority.

Suddenly she calls out to Rodino, "come here my boy. We're going."

She bundles Apolonia and Maria into the cab of the truck telling them that the war is over. "The Captain says Papa is in the village," and her voice crackles with excitement. "We must go to help him."

Maria sits in Felice's lap, her little head looking this way and that at the loud banging and shouting of the soldiers and the noise of the engine and all the confusion. Apolonia clings to the front dash staring at the Captain.

Rodino locks the goats into the enclosure and runs after the truck as it turns in the yard. He grabs the hand of a soldier who hauls him onto the tail flap.

A rain storm is brewing and the wind rattles the gate into the enclosure. Dry grass rolls end over end across the courtyard and the desperate snorts of Big Billy are cast like empty shells against the rocks of the barren fields.

End of sample read