



Running Haunted

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A Greek romance with a playful ghost

Love Came Running

**(A sample from an
advance reader copy)**

by

Effrosyni Moschoudi

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Chapter 1

Kelly gave a luxurious sigh as she took a seat at a seafront café with her best friend, Efi. The girls had a view to the fort of Bourtzi, the magnificent landmark of the historical town of Nafplio. Under the strong sunshine it looked as if it floated gently on the serene sea like a resting, off-white bird.

Leaning back in her comfortable chair, Kelly felt the pained muscles all over her body sing with relief. Thinking back at her amazing feat, she couldn't help but give a cheer. 'I've just finished my first marathon! I can't believe it!'

Efi, who sat beside her, beamed at Kelly for a few moments, then said, 'You'd better believe it, girl! I'm so proud of you! You've come so far to get this medal, and I don't just mean the forty-two kilometres you just ran.' She winked and hooked her mouth to the side.

Kelly gave a huge sigh, a shadow crossing her face. Instinctively, to hide it from her friend, she looked the other way and said with regret, 'I know. Please don't remind me...'

'Hey, what's this? It's been over a year, Kelly... Let it go. Besides, you just proved you're not the same girl any more. You've left all that misery behind you for good.'

'You're so right, Efi. And, from now on, I just want to look ahead, you know?'

Efi smiled but before she could say anything, a young waiter arrived to greet them with a bright smile.

'Kalimera! What will you have?' he asked, and the girls ordered coffees and toasted sandwiches.

As soon as he walked away, Efi leaned towards Kelly and said, 'Back to our conversation... Of course you should only look ahead from now on. So, what's the next challenge? And I don't mean the next marathon run... Why don't you move out of your late grandmother's apartment? You should start a new life somewhere else... Somewhere where no memories of "Mucky-Makis" can soil it.'

Kelly scrunched up her face at the sound of the name of her ex-boyfriend, Makis. She could tell another lecture was coming.

Before she could open her mouth to protest, Efi added, 'Kelly, you know I'd miss you terribly if you moved far away from me, but I really think you should go back to England. Life in Greece clearly hasn't worked out for you.'

Kelly tossed a strand of her long brown hair behind her shoulder and twisted her lips. 'Nuh... I've told you before, Efi. I don't see it that way. I've made a wrong choice of career, I know—'

'And boyfriend...' she cut her off.

'Yes. Wrong choices on both counts,' said Kelly, putting up a finger. 'But that's got nothing to do with living in Greece or England. There's plenty of fish in the sea. Both when it comes to careers and boyfriends. Now that I've finally found strength in myself, I know I'll do better next time. I'm not leaving Greece. I love it too much. It makes me feel alive. You know that, Efi.'

Efi leaned over and patted Kelly's hand. 'Girlfriend, I'm with you all the way, whatever you decide.'

Kelly, once again caressing with her eyes the fortified island of Bourtzi in the distance, gave out a soft sigh. 'To tell you the truth, I wouldn't mind leaving Athens behind.'

'To go where?'

'Well, somewhere smaller than the capital, where there's more green, beautiful scenery, a seafront... a quiet, more led back way of life.' She looked around her with a huge smile and added, 'A place like Nafplio. Just look at it! It's amazing. I never imagined it'd be so beautiful. I know we only arrived yesterday morning, but I think I've fallen in love with it already.'

'Yes, it's easy to fall in love with... And, really, you haven't even seen the view from the two fortresses up there yet...'

Efi turned around in her seat and pointed vaguely high up in

the distance. 'Only if you see Nafplio from a height you'll know just how magical it is.'

'Really?' said Kelly, following Efi's gaze, but the strong sun made it hard to see clearly. Through the glare, she could barely make out the two hills that stood, side-by-side, over the town. The fortress of Palamidi seemed like a bejewelled crown of stone on top of the higher peak.

'Don't get your hopes up, though,' warned Efi when Kelly turned to face her again. 'I doubt it'll be easy to get a job here. Unless you visit again and again and ask in every hotel or shop maybe, going from door to door.'

'Well, I can surely try online first, see if I can find any job adverts, and take it from there,' said Kelly, setting her jaw.

Efi leaned forward in her seat. 'So you're serious? You want to move here?'

'Yes... This place has an amazing energy. It's calling to me, Efi. I feel it deep inside my bones.'

'Okay, but where would you live? 'I hate to break it to you, but I doubt you'd afford a place on your own here. It's a touristy place. The rent must be sky-high even for tiny apartments.'

Kelly raised a single shoulder. 'You forget I have sound experience in hotel administration? If I land a job in one of the many hotels here, I could get room and board for free.'

'That could work...' said Efi, her voice trailing off when a male voice boomed at the next table, causing both girls to turn and look, startled.

'You don't understand, Dimos! My housekeeper is leaving today! TODAY! What am I going to do? How am I going to find another woman to run the house at such short notice?'

Chapter 2

Kelly and Efi listened in silence as the men continued to talk animatedly.

'Calm down, Alex. It's not the end of the world...'

'How can you say that, Dimos? Don't you see? My life keeps getting worse and worse! First my wife, and now this. And don't get me started with the problems at the hotel. Oh God... What am I going to do about my children? Who's going to take care of them while I work?'

At that point, the man named Dimos reached out and squeezed the shoulder of the other man. The latter crouched over in his chair and hid his face in his hands for a few moments. Then, removing his hands, he raised his head and said, 'I just don't know, Dimos. I need a miracle, I guess.'

Kelly and Efi kept watching despite themselves, and what saved their dignity was that the men appeared to be too distracted to notice them.

Kelly felt her heart constrict with feeling for the man in turmoil that was apparently called Alex. He was about her age, in his early thirties, incredibly handsome, and dressed in a smart suit. The other man, Dimos, was around the same age too, and just as impeccably dressed. Had it not been for their distressing private conversation, you'd think they were two professionals having a business meeting. That's how well-groomed and stylish they both looked.

Kelly's eyes couldn't leave the face of the man who continued to look upset. Her heart twinged with sympathy but, at the same time, she couldn't help but admire his flawless features. He had brown hair and kind eyes of the same colour, their expression pained right now, but she could tell from the way his jaw was set that he was a strong man in heart and mind.

His Roman nose and fleshy lips got most of her attention, as well as his impressive height. His legs were so long he seemed to have trouble tucking them adequately under the small table. As his friend spoke to him in a hushed tone, he kept bending and stretching one of his legs and looking quite uncomfortable, like a proud, wild animal that had been captured and put in a cage two sizes too small.

Alex continued to listen to his friend, who tried to reassure him, and, every now and then, brought a hand to rub at his chin or over his mouth. Finally, he checked his watch, saying he had little time left and had to go home soon.

At that point, Dimos offered to give him the number of an agency he knew of, saying they had good Russian and Bulgarian housekeepers for hire. He scribbled the number on the back of a card and handed it to him, saying there was a good chance that several of the women might speak adequate Greek, enough to be up to scratch for the job at hand.

Kelly felt concern grow inside her for this man. It can't be easy to trust a total stranger to live in your home at best, let alone when it comes to caring for your children. She turned to Efi, about to whisper how sorry she felt for the poor man, but was surprised to find she had stood up and was taking a step towards the men.

'Excuse me...' she heard Efi say, and her heart skipped a beat. *What on earth is she doing?*

The men turned around to look at Efi and she said, 'I am really sorry to interrupt, and I apologise for listening in your private conversation, but my friend and I couldn't really help it...'

Efi pointed towards their table and Kelly swallowed hard. Her heart thumped in her chest when the men turned to face her. *What is she doing? You crazy girl!*

Her mind went blank when Alex locked eyes with her, something that caused, somehow, the whole world around her to shrivel into nothing. He held her gaze, rendering her

hypnotized for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, he looked away, turning to Efi again to hear what she had to say.

That's when Efi dropped the bomb. 'Well, the thing is, my friend here is job-hunting right now. And I think she'd be a perfect fit for your need.'

'What?' said Kelly, despite herself, and banged her hand on her chest with an open hand. 'Efi! What are you doing?'

Efi turned to her with a glare for a split second, then her eyes softened as she said, 'But, Kelly, you have sound experience from the hotel—'

Alex shook his head. 'I'm sorry, you misunderstood,' he told Efi. 'I'm looking for someone to work in my *home*, not in my hotel.'

'I know,' cut in Kelly, without even realizing. But once the words had come out, it was too late, too late to stop those mesmerizing eyes from searching her face again. 'We heard what you said. Hard not to, as my friend said earlier...' she added with an awkward pause and both the men nodded, lips pressed together.

All three were looking at her now, and suddenly she felt conscious of her bare legs. She hadn't put on her jogging bottoms since finishing the marathon and was still in her running shorts. Still, she noticed, much to her relief, that neither of the men had let their eyes wander down at her bare limbs.

Alex seemed to be hanging from her lips, hoping for his miracle, no doubt. But was she the answer to his wish for a miracle? Did she have the skills to be a housekeeper in a house with children—she guessed they were under aged for him to feel so lost—and, presumably, no wife in sight? But if there was one thing Kelly had learned about herself in the past year was that she didn't cringe at challenges. And if this had happened just as she wished for a job in Nafplio, surely that was a sign from above. Or, at least, this could be one of

those lucky days that come very seldom in life. Either way, she was damned if she was going to miss that chance.

Finally, Kelly said, 'We realize you need a housekeeper, sir. And I have suitable experience, I believe...' She'd said the last word without being really sure, but the man's eyes ignited with hope, and she smiled in return.

'Really?' he said and beckoned with a gallant gesture. 'In this case, ladies, please join our table. Let's discuss this properly.'

The girls moved their things over to the men's table, and Kelly sat beside Alex. As soon as she did, he offered his hand.

'It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Alex. Alex Sarakis. I own a hotel here in the old town. This is my friend and associate, Dimos Orphanos. He runs a catering company in the outskirts of Nafplio.'

'Pleased to meet you,' replied Kelly, shaking his hand first, then Dimos's. Smiling brightly, she placed a hand on her chest to say, 'My name is Kelly Mellios. This is my friend, Efi Sofos. We live in Athens and came here for the marathon.' She pointed to the bib number on her running top and chuckled, then rolled her eyes. 'Well, obviously.'

This elicited peals of laughter from the others as Efi shook hands with the men. Then, Alex said, 'It's a pleasure to meet you both. And, if you have suitable work experience like you say, Kelly, then the fact we came here today and bumped into you is nothing sort of a miracle.'

'Yes, I thought that too,' said Kelly, lost in his eyes, before she could stop herself.

Efi leaned forward in her chair and pointed at Kelly. 'My friend here has sound experience as a cook, as a maid *and* as a nanny! As an office administrator too.'

Impressed, Alex turned to Kelly. 'Is that so?'

Before she could say anything, Efi, who sat beside her, jabbed her in the ribs. 'Go on! Sell yourself, you silly girl. You're so qualified for this.' Then, turning to the men, she rolled her eyes. 'English girls! So modest!'

Alex's eyes sparkled in response. 'You're English?'

Kelly smiled sweetly. 'Half-English, actually. My mother is English, my father is Greek.'

'Wow. Your Greek is impeccable.'

'That's because I was born and raised in Athens. I moved to England with my parents in my early twenties, after finishing my studies in Athens in Hotel Administration. But I returned to Greece on my own a couple of years ago. I'd come to miss the country and its people a lot. The way of life here agrees with me a lot better than that in the UK.'

'Really? But what about the crisis? Isn't it easier in England to get jobs and live a comfortable life than it is here?' burst out Dimos.

Kelly gave a dismissive wave. 'Oh... The crisis doesn't bother me. On a personal level, life can be as prosperous and positive as you wish it to be. You just have to focus and try your hardest to pursue your goals, and if you don't let fear get in the way, you can only get what you want. No matter what that is.'

'I like that... And I must say, you sound like a person who's very goal-oriented, very determined... That's exactly what I'm looking for in my employees,' said Alex, catching her attention again. 'So, about that experience Efi mentioned earlier? Please tell me more.'

'Well, when my family and I moved to England, my parents realized a lifelong dream—'

She stopped short, because the waiter arrived then to gawp at the empty table where the girls sat earlier. Dimos whistled to him humorously, and the waiter turned, his good spirits restored to find the girls sitting there. He served their coffees and toasted sandwiches, then the men ordered a coffee each. When he was gone, Alex turned to Kelly with an easy smile, his eyes crinkling at the edges, 'Well, Kelly? You were saying?'

'Yes, as I said, we went to England to live there and that's when my parents bought a small hotel. They'd wanted to do

that all their lives. They picked a small property on the coast in Cornwall, and it proved to be a wonderful choice. Of course, my studies came in handy... I practically took over all the administration of the business while my father manned reception and my mother ran the kitchen. I helped them both with their duties, and also cleaned the rooms with the hired maid. I even did heaps of baby-sitting in the evenings.'

'But that's amazing! I don't believe it... You might as well have fallen right off the sky to save me today!' said Alex.

Kelly smiled and took a sip from her coffee. Sitting across from her, Dimos's face was animated with relief for his friend. Efi seemed equally pleased. Kelly believed she had a good chance of getting the job. She had told the truth, after all. She was fully qualified and ready for this new challenge. The very thought of living in Nafplio, of starting a new life there, made her feel exhilarated.

'So, when can you start?' asked Alex.

'She got the job?' asked Efi wide-eyed. She was holding her toasted sandwich before her mouth, about to take a bite.

'Of course! As you ladies may have guessed earlier, I am in a bit of a hurry.' Alex cringed, then added with haste, 'Not to say that I feel like I am compromising in the least here, of course!' He put up a hand and extended his palm towards Kelly. 'I believe I would have hired you on the spot even if this wasn't an emergency.'

'Thank you,' said Kelly, feeling overwhelmed by the effect his laughing brown eyes had on her. She wasn't sure if they were specked with gold, or if it was the sunshine streaming in under the awning that made them look that way.

'So? Can you start today? This afternoon, maybe?'

Kelly almost jumped in her seat. She'd just had a big bite of her turkey and cheese sandwich, and it nearly went down the wrong way. 'Today? So soon?' she said, clutching her chest after swallowing hard.

'I'd really appreciate it. It means I won't have to take time off work. My current housekeeper has a family emergency,

you see... She is moving out this evening. Her son-in-law is driving her to Athens tonight. Her daughter is very ill... in hospital.'

'I'm sorry to hear that... but... but...' Lost for words, Kelly turned to Efi to find her flashing her a meaningful look.

'It's okay, Kelly. Of course you can start today.'

'But, Efi... How can I? All I have here are the basics I've packed for the weekend.'

'That's more than enough to go by for a week, and you know it. It's March, after all... It's not like you'll be going to the beach or anything. You have a couple of sweaters, your jeans, your coat... You'll be fine.'

'But, what about the rest of my stuff back in Athens?'

'Easy. You'll give me the keys to your apartment, and I'll pack for you. Then I'll meet you here next Sunday to bring you clothes and anything else you may need. Just make a list and I'll get it all, no worries.' Efi chuckled and leaned closer to Kelly, then added in a hushed tone, 'I'll even let you have my make-up bag and clean underwear from my suitcase, so there. Say, yes, you silly girl. What's wrong with you?'

The words weren't whispered low enough and the men had obviously heard, judging from their soft chuckles. Kelly cringed with embarrassment. Efi could be embarrassing like that. Still, she was right. 'This is very kind of you, Efi, thank you...' she finally said. 'I can't believe you're offering to drive back here next Sunday for me.'

'It's nothing for you, girlfriend. Just say yes to the man. Sounds to me like you both just saved each other's necks!'

A fresh round of laughter echoed then, and Alex looked beside himself with excitement. Kelly turned to him and matched his expression.

'So, when can you start, Kelly? As soon as I've had my coffee I can drive you ladies to your hotel so you can get your luggage. You could start as early as this morning, if you like.'

Kelly's eyes ignited with alarm as she gawped at him speechless, her coffee cup mid-air in her hand.

Efi put up a hand and giggled, then said, 'Easy, Alex. I know you have an emergency, but not so fast. My girl has just finished a marathon, for goodness sake. She and I are heading back to the hotel to take a shower and catch our breaths for a while. And then, we'll go grab some lunch before she falls flat on her face from exhaustion. So how about you do your thing in the meantime, then meet us back here around five p.m.? Will that work for you?'

Offering a cute, crooked smile, Alex checked his watch, and Kelly did too. It was just gone half past one. Plenty of time.

'Sure, that works,' said Alex and everyone heaved a sigh of relief. The waiter brought the men's coffees, and Alex took a sip as soon as he was served, then turned to Kelly with a bright smile.

Kelly gazed back at him, mirroring his expression and feeling magnetized. A familiar twinge at her heart told her she was smitten. She hoped that wouldn't complicate things. But most of all, she hoped the situation back at his house would be something she could handle. Panicking somewhat, she considered what she'd just done: she'd said yes without knowing anything of his home or his children and their way of life.

She rested her eyes on his charming smile and took heart. *He's a professional, for heaven's sake. A hotel owner, at that! I bet he lives in a good home. And his children will be well-behaved, surely. This is going to be a piece of cake...*

Chapter 3

In the late afternoon, having left Efi's luggage in her car, the girls walked briskly along the port to meet Alex at the café as prearranged.

From the distance, bathed in a soft, golden light, the fort of Bourtzi stood out like a sun-drenched pebble that, somehow, floated out at sea.

Kelly, who held her gym bag in her hand, hurried along, deep in thought, wondering how life living out of that bag for one week was going to be like. But, most of all, she was wondering what she was getting into.

Before leaving the café, Alex had told her that he had three under-aged children, all boys. Upon hearing their ages—thirteen, eight, and six—her mind had drawn a blank. She was an only child and didn't really know much about little boys or—even worse—teenage boys. It was one thing to mind them for a couple of hours on an evening at her parents' hotel, and another to be responsible for them around the clock. Still, she was willing to try...

'Don't worry, Kelly!' piped up Efi, snapping her out of her deep thoughts. 'I'm not leaving you unless I see a business card at least. We both got so excited about this amazing coincidence that we forgot to check the man out. Didn't even ask him what his hotel is called so we can look it up online. What if he's a liar? A criminal? I need proof before I let him take you away in his car!'

Kelly nodded firmly. 'Yes, it makes sense. Though I'm quite sure he's okay. I saw it in his eyes. His honesty, his decency... My instinct about people never fails me.'

In lieu of an answer, Efi rolled her eyes, obviously itching to contradict her by mentioning Kelly's awful ex-boyfriend, Makis.

Kelly giggled. She felt thankful Efi hadn't mentioned him again. 'I know what I'm saying, Efi. Alex is okay. You'll see...' she said as they neared the café.

Efi tutted. 'Well, at least, he's a gentleman, I'll give you that. He's still in his suit and already waiting for us. Look! He's right there...' She poked Kelly in the ribs with her elbow, causing her to turn and look.

'Oh, yes...' said Kelly, perking up. *Goodness me... I'd forgotten how handsome he is!*

As if Efi had guessed her thoughts, she jabbed her in her side again, this time harder. 'And please. I know he's a looker, and I bet his ass is tighter than the Gordian Knot, but try not to fall for him, okay? You're forever doing that, falling for the wrong men, then I have to pick up the pieces.'

Kelly eyed her for a second, enough to know her friend wasn't serious. After all, Kelly had only had one boyfriend her whole life. Other than Makis, no one had ever really broken her heart before.

'Oh shut up already!' Kelly retorted with an amused smile just as they crossed the road and stepped onto the pavement outside the café. Alex was looking the other way at the time, towards a square. Efi reached him first and tapped him on the back.

Alex turned around, his face lighting up as he raised a jovial hand in greeting. 'Oh hi, ladies. Good to see you again!'

They both greeted him happily, then Efi took over. 'Listen, Alex, I hope you don't mind, but could I have your business card please? No offence, but this is my best friend,' she pointed to Kelly, 'and you're practically about to whisk her off to your house in a car. For all I know, you could be an axe murderer.'

Kelly flinched to hear all that, unsure as to how Alex would take it. Still, deep down, she felt grateful for her friend who cared enough to be so blunt. And she made good sense, after all.

Alex broke into a big smile and nodded fervently. 'Of course, I fully understand.' He reached into his breast pocket and produced his card, handing it to Efi, but his eyes turned to Kelly when he added, 'Actually, I had thought of that too. This is why I intended to ask you, Kelly, if you'd like a little tour of my hotel before we head off to my house.' He put out a hand towards her, palm up, and added, 'To prove I am a professional in this town and to dissolve whatever hung-ups

you may have about getting in my car with me. I fully understand we are, after all, practical strangers.'

Kelly melted inside to hear his thoughtful response. Before she could say anything, Alex turned to Efi to add, 'You're more than welcome to come with us to the hotel, Efi. You can inspect the trunk in my car too, if you like. Make sure I don't carry a hatchet. Or a buzz saw.'

For a split second, both the girls froze, searching his face, wondering if, after all, he had taken offence. But then he broke into a loud guffaw and put a gentle hand on Efi's arm, then Kelly's too, to say, 'Relax, girls! I'm only joking. And now, let's go. This way!' He pointed towards the lanes. 'Hotel Nostos awaits!'

Hotel Nostos turned out to be located in an enchanting cobblestone lane near a derelict Turkish bath, and a stone's throw away from St Spyridon's church – the one where, on its doorstep, Kapodistrias, the first governor of Greece, was once murdered. Kelly noticed the plaque mounted on the wall as they passed it by, and Alex eagerly began to share with the girls what he knew about that fateful day.

Kelly admired his knowledge of Greek history and imagined it came handy in his job, something to share with his guests at every opportunity. Kelly didn't possess the gift of the gab, so she was impressed by his diction and the confidence he exuded with every word.

But all that was insignificant compared to the experience that awaited her moments later when they entered the small, yet imposing, Hotel Nostos. Housed in an old, but beautifully renovated neoclassical building, it was labelled outside as the home of one of the heroes of the War of Independence, something that filled Kelly's heart with awe as she crossed the doorstep.

Once inside, she was immediately enveloped by the whimsical aura of a bygone time. She stood at the reception hall with the others and admired the decoration. Everywhere she looked there was polished olive wood and stone.

When the receptionist greeted Alex using his surname, the latter smiled with confidence, then beckoned to the girls to follow him to the adjacent hall. It turned out to be a quaint breakfast room that served as a tea room at the time. The windowless space was lit moderately by a series of intricate antique lights mounted on the surrounding walls. A quiet couple sat in a corner sipping hot drinks from white porcelain cups and reading paperbacks. Behind them, stood a small bookshelf filled to the brim with tattered old volumes. Tea lights were lit on every table, their delicate flames flickering softly in the semi-darkness.

All the while, Alex had been talking, giving the girls information about the hotel, the day-to-day activities of the hired staff, and the amenities on offer. Nostos hotel had a wonderful energy about it. Being in that room felt like an immersion into a distant century, thanks to the fabulous old-style decoration, down to the red carpet and the gilded chairs.

Kelly didn't fail to notice that the two members of staff behind the counter were just as courteous as the receptionist had been. They had both greeted them with wide smiles. Everything and everyone in this hotel seemed impeccable, each element a part of a ticking clock that never skipped a beat.

As Alex pointed back to the reception with a flourish and began to walk towards it, Kelly stole another glance at his upright stance, his charming grin, and guessed he was a savvy and organized professional who didn't compromise when it came to quality in his business. Inside her, other than feeling admiration for him, a little hope nestled and

began to take root. It was the hope that things in his house would be ticking away just as impeccably.

Outside, a little later, feeling satisfied with the proof of his identity, Efi said her goodbyes. She gave Kelly a hug that was tighter than normal, then gave one last wave and walked away, heading back to the port and her car.

As soon as she was gone, Alex pointed to a derelict stone gate that stood at the end of the lane over what looked like an ancient canal. Judging from the weeds that had sprouted everywhere through the rocky ground, Kelly guessed it hadn't seen water in centuries.

'Come this way, Kelly. I've parked right there, beyond the Land Gate.'

Kelly was intrigued by the decrepit ruin, but this wasn't the time to ask for an extended sightseeing tour. She began to walk beside him, the first step towards his car now a little harder than she thought it would be, knowing her friend was walking in the opposite direction at the same time, the last remnant of her life up until today distancing itself from her by the second.

He turned to her then, his eyes kind, his smile dashing, and her mind filled with sunshine again. He put out a hand. 'I'm so sorry. Where are my manners? Let me carry your bag please, Kelly.'

As if in a dream, she saw her hand rise as she offered her luggage to him. In his hand now, as they resumed walking, the bag seemed weightless. And, just like that, she felt herself float effortlessly, rising off the ground a little then, like he'd just picked up a little more than her bag; her life too, giving it the boost it needed, the fresh start she'd been wishing for.

End of sample – go to the next page to read an important note from Effrosyni!

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

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