A romantic couple embracing in a magical forest setting. The man is wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans, and the woman is wearing a pink long-sleeved top and white pants. They are standing in front of a large, arched opening in a tree trunk, through which a bright rainbow is visible. The scene is bathed in soft, golden light, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall mood is romantic and whimsical.

THE BOY
on the
BRIDGE

EFFROSYNI MOSCHOUDI

The Boy on the Bridge

(A sample)

by

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Chapter 1

I still remember the first time I saw Alexandros. He looked so carefree that day - a young teenage boy, his whole life ahead of him. He was standing on the arch stone bridge I crossed daily on foot to go to work and back. He was smoking a pipe, to my surprise, and watching the water flow peacefully down the river.

It was lunchtime and I was returning home from work, looking forward to seeing my beloved girlfriend, Evgenia, if only a moment sooner.

The sun was high up in the sky, hammering on the lush valley without mercy. It was not a usual winter's day for Zagori, Greece. Then again, that day wasn't usual by any means.

As soon as I neared Alexandros on the bridge, he put up a hand, his face bright. "Hi there."

To me he was just a stranger that day. Yet, something in his eyes called out to me and, despite feeling exhausted, I felt willing to stop by and have a little chat with him. I guess the best way to describe it is, he didn't feel like a stranger, but like a friend I was meant to have.

I am good with faces and was certain I'd never seen him before. "Hello. How are you?" I replied, shooting up a hand to my brow to wipe it from sweat.

"Fine, thanks. You look tired, my friend," he said with a grin.

I sniffed, raking my dark hair with a firm hand. I gave a thin smile, my eyes focusing behind the boy for a moment. The church tower on the hill up ahead glinted across the valley. It towered over the grey-stone rooftops of the traditional houses of Kipoi, one of the most stunning villages of central Zagori that I'd been calling home for the past year.

"I feel worse than I look." I said finally. "Two cows at the farm where I work had calves today. I'll just say it was a

messy affair, and we'll leave it at that! But I'll be home soon." I pointed to the hill with an open smile.

The boy turned around to gaze at the village for a few moments, then faced me again with a wistful look in his eyes. To my surprise, I noticed they were misty. Had he been crying or did his eyes just mist up? I couldn't say.

"How I love this village..." he lamented, shaking his head. I know every stone and every twig up in that blessed place."

Scratching my temple, I asked, "Are you a local? How come I've never seen you before? Been living here for a year now."

"You haven't seen me, no. It's because I've just... er... come back."

"You have? Oh, that's great. Welcome home!" I said, patting him on the back. It was something out of character for me as I am the reserved type. The strange familiarity I felt towards the boy caught me by surprise.

Still, he didn't seem to mind and served me another smile. He looked happy again now, as if the pat I'd given him had chased away his momentary sadness.

"I am Alexandros," he said, offering his hand.

I shook it firmly, with feeling, again despite myself. "Lefteris. Pleased to meet you." I pointed with my head towards the hill and added, "So, where is your house in Kipoi? I live three houses down from the church. You? Do you have family in the village? I bet I know them." Somehow, I managed to end the torrent of words coming out of my mouth by placing a hand over it and looking away.

What's wrong with me? Other than reserved, I am also not much of a talker. But I felt this peculiar urge to know everything about this boy. So intrigued was I that, for a moment, I had even forgotten how tired, ravenous, and thirsty I felt.

"Nuh... I don't stay up there." Alexandros turned away, focusing his eyes towards the valley where the river of Voidomatis snaked its way into the distance, its crystal

water glinting in the sunlight like studded diamonds. A mesmerizing sight it was, and in the short silence that ensued, both Alexandros and I seemed content to marvel at the beautiful view without talking.

I tilted my head and finally said, "So? Where are you staying?" I was intrigued now as to what he was doing there in the middle of nowhere on his own. Other than Kipoi, which was just a couple minutes away on foot, the closest village was five miles away.

He faced me, squinting his eyes for a few moments before speaking, lips twitching. "I... I'm not staying anywhere in particular. Just roaming for now. I like the countryside." He looked away again, and this time I realized he was evading my questions. I thought he probably did stay in the village, and had recently been reunited with family members, whoever they were, and he didn't want to tell me. Perhaps he was a private person. Either way, I didn't believe he was camping in the wilderness.

I looked him up and down surreptitiously. He was dressed in cotton trousers, a shirt, and a light jacket. His clothes looked as if he'd put them on fresh this morning. They weren't shabby, soiled or crumpled, the way you'd expect from a person sleeping in the rough. Even his brown boots were made of fine leather and were in mint condition. The only thing about him that seemed out of sorts was the pipe. I mean, who smokes a pipe these days, and a teenager at that?

Still, Alexandros seemed to enjoy it as he kept inhaling the fragrant tobacco, milky, delicate smoke rising slowly into the air with every exhalation, dispersing ever so softly in the light breeze.

"How old are you?" I asked, my curiosity rising about his smoking.

"Thirteen. Why do you ask?" he replied with a glint in his eye. I knew then he could tell why I had asked.

I opened my mouth to say I was just curious, but he was faster to add, "No one has ever managed to stop me from

smoking, so don't you try!" He shook a finger and gave a hearty laugh.

I put up my hands and chuckled. "Fine! I won't say anything." I eyed him with growing mystification and couldn't help but admire his spirit, despite his nasty habit.

"How old are *you*?" he asked me.

"Twenty-five."

He gave a cheeky smile. "Oh. An old man then."

I laughed at that, then asked, "Did you say you have family in the village?" It bothered me how mysterious he was.

Alexandros looked at me squarely but offered no response, the look in his eyes enigmatic, and I began to wonder why I was wasting my time talking to him, after all.

Slowly, my feelings of tiredness, hunger and thirst began to niggle on my mind, making my feet restless. I decided that it was time to resume walking home and made a move to go.

That's when it happened. It was the moment that pinned my feet to the ground anew. For that was when Alexandros took two steps closer, looked at me deeply in the eyes and said, "Don't ask me anything else, Lefteris. Just let me talk. I am here to warn you about Evgenia."

Chapter 2

What Alexandros had told me was strange. And, to start with, he hadn't even explained to me how he knew what he told me, or how he knew Evgenia. She'd never spoken of anyone called Alexandros... And why did he ask me not to mention him to her? It didn't make any sense.

But Alexandros had issued a warning I couldn't just ignore. He told me to run to the village so I could get there before one p.m. He said Evgenia was in danger and that once I'd gone there to save her I would know he was for real. Yet, he never told me what the danger was.

I had only five precious minutes until the church bell struck one. As I ran, as fast as I could, along the paved road that led to the village, I pushed to the back of my mind all my physical needs that cried for me to stop exerting myself any further. Yet, I did wonder if Alexandros was a prankster, or worse, a criminal, who'd put my precious girl in some kind of danger just to get his kicks for the day.

As soon as I arrived at the main square I began to run even faster, uphill now, towards the church, beads of sweat trickling down my face, neck and torso, but I didn't care. Nor did I bat an eyelid when passers-by turned around and looked at me puzzled.

When I arrived at my rented house I pushed the low garden gate open and ran to the front door, digging a hand in my pocket to get the keys at the same time.

I closed the door with a bang and stood in the hall for just a moment to catch my breath, my whole body trembling, and yelled, "Evgenia! I'm home!" No answer. I made a run for the kitchen. *The place has knives, for God's sake! Hot oven rings! What if she had a terrible accident in there?*

In a mad rush, I got to the kitchen only to give a long sigh of relief. No one there. Then, I noticed a scrap piece of paper

left on the table with a pen on top of it. Evgenia always drew my attention to any messages by placing a pen on top.

I picked up the note and read. She was going to her father's house. He had called in a panic, to say he wasn't feeling well. Panic now struck at my heart too. Dizzy by exhaustion, but with the adrenaline that pumped through me giving me all I needed to keep going, I dashed outside and ran through the streets.

Evgenia's father's house was nearby. It was a small, detached house on the outskirts of Kipoi, tucked between a green pasture and a small playground.

I was nearing the end of the lane that led to the pasture when I heard it. It was an explosion, no question about that. Soon, I saw flames writhing towards the sky, the acrid smell of smoke reaching my nostrils, and I froze on the spot, mad with panic, before my feet began to take me to the house again, as if by their own volition.

The front of the house, the part that used to be the kitchen that is, had blown up. Some debris had landed on the pasture, but no animals were there to be seen. As for the playground, it seemed to be totally unaffected by the blast. I saw some people standing on it, including children, and all looked ashen with shock, but from what I could tell no one had been harmed.

Most of the debris had landed in front of the house, big chunks of concrete, in-wall cabling, wooden shutters, and tons of grey dust.

I stood outside the front of the old man's house, just looking in, my jaw slack, feeling numb for a few more seconds. The stove was on fire. The kitchen table and cupboards had caught light and were burning fiercely, tiny explosions erupting here and there as god-knows-what surrendered to the fire inside cupboards and drawers.

Thick black smoke oozed out through the half-demolished front wall, the smell overpowering. I raised my arm to cover

my nose and, jerking forward, jumped over the ruined wall easily, as if it'd been no more than a pavement.

I turned around and shouted at the people outside, who were still watching, dazed. "Please! Call for help!" Then, without wasting another moment, I headed for the hallway that led to the bedroom on the back. "Evgenia! Thomas!" I called out as I stumbled blindly over debris, running through jet black smoke and hoping to find my Evgenia and her father in one piece, somehow.

"Here! We're here!" I heard Evgenia respond in a frail voice that shot energy down my legs, energy I didn't know I had left. It brought me to her side in a heartbeat. I found her and her father huddled together. He was leaning forward in his old rocking chair by the window where he spent his mornings looking out when he wasn't watching TV. Evgenia was kneeling before him, grasping his hands as if both his and her lives depended on it.

"Oh my God! Are you okay?" I said to them both. The old man nodded, but his eyes were focusing nowhere in particular. He suffered from dementia as it was; now he seemed more lost and confused than ever before. My heart constricted with sympathy, but I couldn't help turning my attention to my darling Evgenia again. The moment she saw me she leaped up and fell into my arms, sobbing.

From the little she said that made sense, I understood that they were unaffected by the blast as they were both in the bedroom when it happened; she said it was a gas explosion. Our worst fears that her father was going to cause an accident by leaving something on in the kitchen someday had finally come true.

Evgenia had recently lost her job at a hotel in Dilofo where she worked as a maid. And while she searched for new employment, she had found the opportunity to spend more time with her father. This had postponed our plans to find him a retirement home where he could be properly cared for.

I looked over my shoulder at the debris of paper, glass, and wood that covered the carpet in the hallway. The power of the blast had destroyed all light fixtures, picture frames, and knickknacks from the kitchen all the way to the back of the house where the bedroom was.

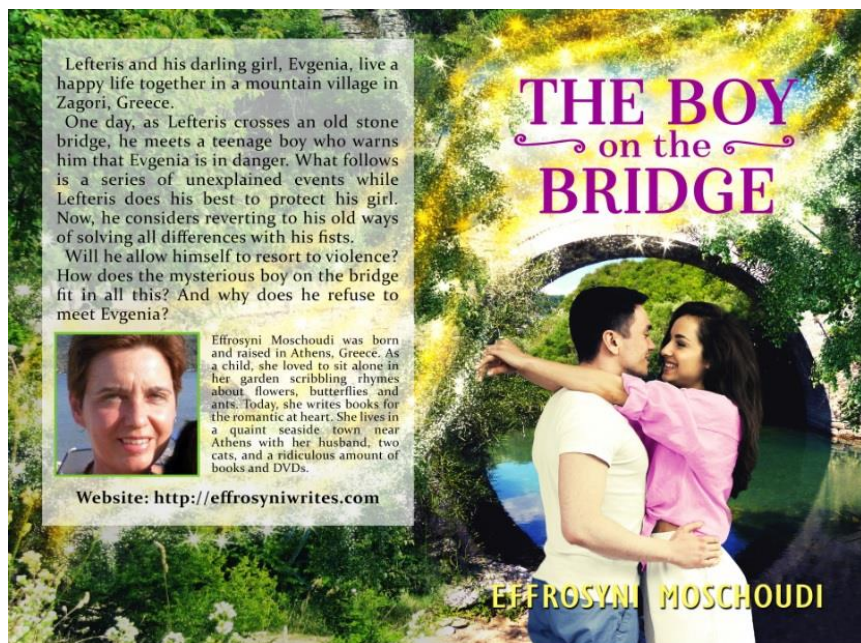
I shook my head and realized we'd have to find a suitable retirement home as soon as possible. Evgenia's childhood home had been rendered uninhabitable, and her father a homeless man that we'd have to take to our home temporarily until a permanent solution could be found.

Then, we heard a siren and commotion outside. I looked through the window to see a small crowd of people surrounding an ambulance from the medical centre. It had just parked by the pasture.

Two burly men stepped outside with a young man that looked like a doctor, the latter waving his arms frantically, telling the people to move back and clear the road as the fire brigade truck would be arriving soon.

I made sounds to Evgenia and her father that everything was going to be fine, then rushed outside to show the men in.

You've reached the end of the sample.



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