

Uranova by Lenka Elbe

summary

In August 1968, a young English girl, Angela, travels to the Czechoslovak town of Joachimsthal to visit the family of her father, whom she has never met, and her fiancé Henry lends her his Bulova watch for the journey. But upon arriving in the spa and mining town riddled with uranium mines, the ground suddenly caves in beneath Angela, and her body is never found. Her fiancé Henry takes it hard, and although he soon finds a lovely new girlfriend, he cannot come to terms with the loss of Angela even after thirty years. Becoming a burnt-out music teacher, he regularly visits not only Angela's empty grave in a London cemetery but also a psychotherapist.

To resolve his trauma once and for all, he sets off for Joachimsthal in 1999, accompanied by his caring and neurotic partner Suzanne. In the town of the world's oldest radon baths, he discovers that silver was mined there in the Middle Ages and hence the dollar (thaler) is named after it. That the pitchblende in which Marie Curie discovered radium and polonium was there, and it was the area where giant uranium mines supplying the Soviet Union were and where cruel camps for political prisoners were built in the 1950s.

His biggest surprise, however, comes in the local cemetery, where he finds a grave engraved with Angela's name and her date of birth and death. But he is told that the body had never been found and so he doesn't understand who could have made the grave. Henry notices that a very old man is tending to the grave, and to make it worse, the man is wearing Henry's Bulova watch that he lent to Angela thirty years ago. When Henry discovers that the man is Franz Schmitt, a maintenance man at the small spa hotel Sklodowska, he checks in and his hunt for the truth about Angela's death begins. He soon realizes that not only are radon treatments being carried out at the hotel, but bizarre things are happening there. And not only Schmitt, the handyman, is suspicious, but also the owner of the hotel, the charismatic Dr Estela Hans, who has a collection of uranium glass and historic radioactive products in the basement, a mysterious apartment in the tower with a laboratory for the production of more than just spa cosmetics, and a field of poppies in an enclosed garden, which is linked to her fondness for opiates. Adding to the atmosphere is the quirky young spa nurse Elbe, who is either drunk or hungover, and an international group of guests – slightly hilarious nuclear chemistry professors obsessed with their beeping dosimeters and cheap alcohol.

Everything changes with the arrival of a hotel regular, named Joe Sagrado Colorado Chuchin, an antagonist. Although this arrogant guest with a fake name goes there every year, no one still has any idea who he really is. It soon comes out that he's got a glass shop in town this year, making art uranium glass, and has two helpers – a fat man and a little boy. Dr Estela is terrified of him.

While Henry, in a comically clumsy way, tries to somehow explain Angela's disappearance and suspects old man Schmitt, Chuchin chases the doctor. We follow both Henry and Estela's story until, one day, they connect – Henry doesn't know Estela at all, but Estela knows him very well. In fact, Angela is hidden inside Dr Estela Hans. For when she fell into the uranium mine thirty years ago, her mutilated body fell into a gooey black mass formed from pitchblende dust and the remains of dead bodies from the sunken graves of tortured and killed political prisoners. This vile radioactive cocktail had the supernatural ability to give her soul immortality. But Angela's body was too broken by the fall, so she had to find another – the body of the dying Estelle Hans, who was killed in 1968. She also lost her Bulova watch in the plunge.

Henry doesn't believe Estela's crazy story, of course. After several of her absurd attempts to prove the truth in the uranium mine, where a lake of black matter lies and where only a secret door from her garden gazebo leads, he finally believes her.

It soon becomes clear that Chuchin is far more dangerous than Estela thought. He's not just an arrogant evil man; he's evil personified. Plus, he already knows she's immortal and wants to know how she did it so he can become immortal himself. Of course, she won't allow that. If only because she finds out that it was Chuchin who killed the real Estella Hans in 1868, whose body she is now using. In addition, because of a photograph, Franz Schmitt remembers an incident from the end of the war in 1945, when as a young man, he found the corpse of a man who looked exactly like Chuchin in a uranium mine and also found an abandoned newborn baby. The resemblance between the two men is uncanny. Chuchin admits that the child in the photograph is him and gives her a philosophical explanation for his resemblance to the dead man. The doctor understands that they are one and the same entity. One evil died after the war; the other was born.

Henry is in a difficult situation, balancing his spa stay between his lovely partner Suzanne and the rediscovered Angela in the body of Estela, while he is about to become a hero who will help the Doctor prevent the mad Chuchin from getting his hands on the black matter of immortality.

Chuchin, however, is playing hardball. He blackmails the doctor and threatens that if she doesn't give him the source of immortality willingly, he'll take it himself. He's not afraid to kill inconvenient people, such as two of the nuclear chemistry professors, he's not afraid to use polonium to poison his opponent, and he threatens to incapacitate Henry and young Nurse Elbe. Estela no longer knows what to do or how to escape from evil. Now, for the first time in his life, a determination to fight rises in the cowering Henry. He no longer refuses to cower and fear that the evil will one day incapacitate them; he finds it much more effective to go on the counterattack and eliminate the evil. They begin to plot a plan to eliminate Chuchin, only they've never done anything like this before, and it looks like it. Old Schmitt doesn't like their risky plan at all.

Meanwhile, Henry is still faced with the decision of whether or not to become immortal as well and thus join Angela, whom he still loves. He slowly forgets his dear partner Suzanne, but surprisingly she doesn't mind too much. Henry doubts the benefits of immortality, he is afraid, but after a long hesitation, he finally promises Estela that he will soon get into the bath with the black matter that she will prepare for him.

Unfortunately, Estela and Henry's amateur plan to disarm the enemy doesn't work. Like a bolt from the blue, therefore, comes the news that Chuchin's glass workshop has exploded; there has been a cave-in in the mine, and everyone is sure that Chuchin died in the cave-in, as did poor Schmitt, who obviously wanted to take the man's destruction into his own hands and thereby protect the doctor and the others. But...

But if Chuchin had actually died in the explosion, he wouldn't have ambushed Henry when he was just about to dive into the tub of black matter. While Henry didn't have enough time to become immortal, he did have the time to put up a brave fight. And even though his opponent was vastly outnumbered, he didn't give him the victory for free.

Dr. Estela finds Henry dead in the bathroom, pierced by a shard of uranium glass. She's devastated, but unfortunately has no time to grieve. She has to act fast, because Chuchin's soul, transforming into an immortal one, is just tossing around in the bathtub. There's no stopping the process, but the doctor refuses to give up completely. She drugs Chuchin's weakened body with opiates and ties him up. She then transports the lifeless body to a secret passageway in the depths of the uranium mine, loads it into a rusted mine cart and covers it with shards of uranium glass. She realizes that she will have to guard him forever to make sure he never gets out. They're both destined to be here forever.

Henry's body is buried in Angela's still-empty grave, which he himself only discovered ten days ago in the Joachimsthal cemetery. So is Franz Schmitt's body. And so the circle is complete.

– The end