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Opening Extract from...

The Shadow Land

Written by Elizabeth Kostova

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Epigraph from *Antigone* translated by Robert Fagles (1982)

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DO AS YOU LIKE,
WHATEVER SUITS YOU BEST—
I WILL BURY HIM MYSELF.

—Sophocles, *Antigone*

The SHADOW LAND

This book is a train with many cars, the old kind, moving clumsily along a track at night. One car contains a small supply of coal, which spills out into the passageway when an internal door is opened. You have to step over piles of slippery black grit to get through the corridor. Another car contains grain, shipped for export. One car is full of musicians and instruments and cheap overnight bags, nearly half an orchestra sitting according to their friendships and rivalries in the seats of the second-class compartments. Another car contains bad dreams. The final train car has no seats but instead is full of sleeping men, who lie crushed together on their coats in the dark.

The door to that one has been nailed shut from the outside.

ONE

SOFIA, THE YEAR 2008. THE MONTH OF MAY, IMPECCABLE SPRING weather, and the goddess Capitalism sitting on her long-since-tawdry throne. On the top step outside Hotel Forest hovered a young woman, more a girl than a woman, and more a foreigner—which she also was—than anything else. The hotel looked out over NDK, the former communist regime's palace of culture, a giant concrete blossom now patrolled by teenagers; sunlight falling across the plaza glinted off their spiky heads. Alexandra Boyd, exhausted from an endless plane ride, stood watching the Bulgarian kids on their skateboards and trying to tuck her long straight hair behind one ear. To her right rose apartment buildings of ochre and gray stucco, as well as more recent glass-and-steel construction and a billboard that showed a woman in a bikini whose breasts surged out toward a bottle of vodka. Stately trees bloomed near the billboard, white and magenta—horse chestnuts, which she had seen during a trip to France in college, her only other time on the European continent. Her eyes were gritty, her scalp grimed with the sweat of travel. She needed to eat, shower, sleep—yes, sleep, after the final flight from Amsterdam, that jerking awake every few minutes into self-exile across an ocean. She glanced down at her feet to make sure they were still there. Except for a pair of bright red sneakers, her clothes were simple—thin blouse, blue jeans, a sweater tied around her waist—so that she felt dowdy next to the tailored skirts and stilettos that made their way past her. On her left wrist, she wore a wide black bracelet; in her ears, spears of obsidian. She gripped the handles of a rolling suitcase and a dark satchel containing a guidebook, a dictionary, extra clothes. Over

her shoulder she carried a computer bag and her loose multicolored purse with a notebook and a paperback of Emily Dickinson at the very bottom.

From her plane window, Alexandra had seen a city cradled in mountains and flanked with towering apartment buildings like tombstones. Stepping off the plane with her new camera in her hand, she'd breathed unfamiliar air—coal and diesel and then a gust that smelled of plowed earth. She had walked across the tarmac and onto the airport bus, observed shiny new customs booths and their taciturn officials, the exotic stamp in her passport. Her taxi had looped around the edges of Sofia and into the heart of the city—a longer route than necessary, she now suspected—brushing past outdoor café tables and lampposts that bore political placards or signs for sex shops. From the taxi window, she'd photographed ancient Fords and Opels, new Audis with tinted gangster windows, large slow buses, and trolleys like clanking Megalosauruses that threw sparks from their iron rails. To her amazement, she'd seen that the center of the city was paved with yellow cobblestones.

But the driver had somehow misunderstood her request and dropped her here, at Hotel Forest, not at the hostel she'd booked weeks earlier. Alexandra hadn't understood the situation, either, until he was gone and she had mounted the steps of the hotel to get a closer look. Now she was alone, more thoroughly than she had ever been in her twenty-six years. In the middle of the city, in the middle of a history about which she had no real idea, among people who went purposefully up and down the steps of the hotel, she stood wondering whether to descend and try to get another taxi. She doubted she could afford the glass and cement monolith that loomed at her back, with its tinted windows, its crow-like clients in dark suits hustling in and out or smoking on the steps. One thing seemed certain: she was in the wrong place.

ALEXANDRA MIGHT HAVE STOOD this way long minutes more, but suddenly the doors slid open just behind her and she turned to see three people coming out of the hotel. One of them was a white-haired man in a wheelchair clutching several travel bags against his suit jacket. A tall

middle-aged man held on to the chair with one hand and a cell phone with the other; he was speaking with someone. Beside him stood their companion, an old woman with one hand on the tall man's elbow and a purse dangling from her wrist, bowlegged beneath her black dress. Her hair was auburn, with streaks of gray that radiated from a painfully bare parting. The middle-aged man finished his call and hung up. The old lady looked up at him and he bent over to tell her something.

Alexandra moved aside and watched them struggle across the hotel landing to the top of the steps and felt, as she often did, a stab of compassion for other people's fates. There was no way for them to descend, no ramp or wheelchair access, as there would have been at home. But the dark-haired tall man appeared to be magically strong; he bent and lifted the older man out of the chair, taking his luggage along. And the woman seemed to come alive inside her empty gaze, long enough to fold the chair with a few practiced motions and carry it slowly down the steps—she, was stronger than she looked.

Alexandra picked up her own satchels and suitcase and followed them, feeling that their sense of purpose might propel her forward. At the bottom of the steps, the tall man put the old man back into the wheelchair. They all rested a moment, Alexandra standing almost next to them at the edge of the taxi lane. She saw that the tall man was dressed in a black vest and an immaculate white shirt, too warm and formal for the day. His trousers were also too shiny, his black shoes too highly polished. His thick dark hair, with its sheen of silver, was brushed firmly back from his forehead. A strong profile. Up close he looked younger than she'd first thought him. He was frowning, his face flushed, glance sharp. It was hard for her to tell whether he was nearer to thirty-eight or fifty-five. She realized through her fatigue that in fact he might be one of the handsomest men she'd ever observed, broad-shouldered and dignified under his somehow out-of-date clothes, his nose long and elegant, the cheekbones flowing up toward narrow bright eyes when he turned slightly in her direction. Fine grooves radiated from the edges of his mouth, as if he had a different face that he reserved for smiling. She saw that he was too old for her after all. His hand hung at his side, only a few feet from one of hers. She felt an actual twinge of desire, and took a step

away.

Now the tall man went over to the window of the nearest taxi and plunged into some sort of negotiation; the taxi driver's voice rose in protest. Alexandra wondered if she might learn something from all this. While she was watching, she had a moment of vertigo, so that the traffic receded to an uncomfortable buzz in her ears and then returned louder—jet lag. The tall man could not seem to come to an agreement with the driver, even when the old woman leaned in and added indignant words of her own. The driver waved a dismissive hand and rolled up his window.

The tall man picked up their luggage again, three or four nylon and canvas bags, and stepped to another taxi, even nearer to where Alexandra stood. She resolved not to try the first driver herself. The tall man abruptly concluded his bargaining and opened the back door of this acceptable new cab. He set their luggage down on the sidewalk and helped the crooked figure out of the wheelchair and into the back seat.

Alexandra wouldn't have moved toward them again if the old woman hadn't suddenly stumbled, trying to get into the taxi beside the old man. Alexandra reached out and caught the woman's upper arm in a firm sudden grip she hadn't known herself capable of. Through the black fabric of the sleeve, she could feel a bone, surprisingly light and warm. The woman turned to stare at her, then righted herself and said something in Bulgarian, and the tall man looked fully around at Alexandra for the first time. Maybe he wasn't really handsome, she thought; it was just that his eyes were remarkable—larger than they'd seemed from the side, the irises amber when the sunlight touched them. He and the old lady both smiled at her; he helped his mother carefully into the seat of the taxi, reaching back with his other hand for their bags. It was as if he knew Alexandra would come to their rescue again. And she did, catching the smaller bags up in a tangle and passing them to him. He seemed to be in a hurry now. She kept a grip on her own heavy satchel and laptop, and especially on her purse, just in case.

He straightened up and glanced down at the bags she had handed to him. Then he looked at her again.

"Thank you very much," he said to her in heavily accented English—

was it so obvious that she was a foreigner?

"Can I help you?" she asked, and then felt foolish.

"You already helped me," he said. Now his face was sad, the momentary smile gone. "Are you in Bulgaria for a vacation?"

"No," she said. "To teach. Are you visiting Sofia from somewhere else?" After she said this, she realized it might not sound complimentary. It was true that he and his elderly parents did not look cosmopolitan in this setting. But he was the first person she had really spoken to in almost two days, and she didn't want to stop, although the old man and the old woman were waiting for him in the cab.

He shook his head. She had read in her guidebook that Bulgarians traditionally nodded to mean "no" and shook their heads to mean "yes," but that not everyone did this anymore. She wondered which category the tall man fell into.

"Our plan—it was to go to Velin Monastery," he said. He glanced behind him, as if expecting to see someone else. "It is very pretty and famous. You must visit it."

She liked his voice. "Yes, I'll try to do that," she said.

He did smile then—slightly, without activating all the grooves. He smelled of soap, and of clean wool. He started to turn away, then paused. "Do you like Bulgaria? People say that it is the place where anything will happen. *Can* happen," he corrected himself.

Alexandra hadn't been even in Sofia long enough to know what she thought of the country.

"It's beautiful," she said finally, and saying this reminded her of the mountains she had seen as she flew in. "Really beautiful," she added with more conviction.

He inclined his head to one side, seemed to bow a little—polite people, Bulgarians—and turned toward the cab.

"May I take your picture?" she said quickly. "Would you mind? You're the first people I've talked with here." She wanted a photograph of him—the most interesting face she'd ever seen, and now would never see again.

The tall man bent obligingly close to the open cab door, although he looked anxious. She had again the impression that he was in a hurry. But

the old woman leaned out toward Alexandra with a smile of her own: dentures, too white and regular. The old man did not turn; he sat gazing ahead in the back seat of the taxi. Alexandra pulled her camera out of her purse and took a swift shot. She wondered if she should offer to send the picture to them, later, but she wasn't sure that elderly people in this country—or a formal-looking middle-aged man—passed photos around on email, especially with strangers.

"Thank you," she said. *"Mersi."* That was the simple Bulgarian version of thanks; she couldn't bring herself to attempt the longer, infinitely harder word she'd tried to memorize. The tall man stared at her for a moment, and she thought his face was even sadder. He raised a hand to her and shut his old people quickly into the cab. Then he swung down into the front seat beside the driver. Their conversation had taken only a couple of minutes, but a taxi somewhere along the line had lost patience and was honking behind them. The driver of the little family took off with a rush of tires and moved into the river of traffic, vanishing at once.

TWO

BUT NOW WHAT SHOULD SHE DO? THE DRIVER IN THE NEXT CAB had noticed her, apparently; he rolled down the window and looked out with an alertness that she thought might get her to her hostel at last.

"Taxi?" he called. She noted his fair face and wide-set eyes, the first blue eyes she remembered seeing since she'd arrived in Sofia. He had straight light hair that fell in a bowl cut over his forehead, as if he had swapped himself with one of the early Beatles. When she showed him her slip of paper, an address she had written out in Cyrillic letters, he nodded at once and held up his fingers to demonstrate the right amount of *leva*. An honest guy, and apparently he meant "yes" by a nod. He hopped out, took her big suitcase, and put it in the trunk.

Alexandra got quickly into the back of the taxi. He didn't speak to her further, although his face looked pleasant in the mirror; apparently he already knew enough about her to satisfy him. She set her bags on the seat beside her and leaned back at last. The driver pulled out into traffic and around the corner so that suddenly they became part of Sofia. She could see tall straight poplars next to the street, people walking fast in their dark clothes or blue jeans, teenagers in vivid T-shirts with English words on them, the shine of litter and broken glass along a muddy gutter, as if this were both a city and a kind of dilapidated countryside. It was another world, but she realized now that she would manage here—especially after a few hours in a quiet room where she could lock the door and go to sleep.

Exactly at that moment she noticed the tall man's satchel, or was it the old man's, resting on the seat beside her, pressed against her own bags,

all the straps dropping over her knee together. The sight of it went through her like a whisper of voltage—plain black canvas, long black handles, the upper side closed with a black zipper. She touched it. No, it was not one of hers. It was similar to her smaller bag; but it was his, theirs, and they had disappeared into the city.

She touched the top of the bag. There was no marking on the canvas, on the handles or sides. After another breath she unzipped it and looked for an internal label. She could feel something angular, something hard wrapped in black velvet. When she couldn't find any identification on the inside, she dug around for a moment and unwrapped the top of the object.

It was a box made of wood—ornate carving around the upper edge, the rest beautifully polished—and here at last was a label, or rather a thin wooden plaque with Cyrillic lettering chiseled onto it. Two words, one longer than the other: Стоян Лазаров. She felt the taxi turn a corner. Her heart was already squeezing into a knot. Because there was no other information, she sounded the words out very slowly, using the alphabet she had tried to memorize. *Stoyan Lazarov*. No dates. The ending of the second word made her think, from other passages in her guidebook, that it must be a last name. Alexandra searched numbly in the bag, but there seemed to be nothing else. Without really wanting to, she raised the hinged lid of the box. Inside sat a clear plastic sack, sealed. It was full of ashes—dark gray, pale gray, rougher white particles among them. She touched the outside of the plastic with a fingertip; in a more normal situation, the movement of her hand would have looked like reverence, and in fact she could feel the reverence even under her terrible consternation.

Alexandra glanced all around, ahead and behind, at the blurred city. She had no idea what to do. Jack would have known, if he'd lived to his almost twenty-eight years now. This was when one needed a brother. They might have been traveling together across Europe, slinging backpacks on side by side.

She reached over the seat and shook the driver by his bony shoulder—shook him hard.

"Stop!" she said. "Please, stop!" Then she began to cry.