

THE  
A N T I C H R I S T I S B O R N  
RISING  
B E F O R E T H E Y W E R E L E F T B E H I N D

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## T W E N T Y - F O U R   Y E A R S E A R L I E R

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### O N E

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MARILENA TITI'S union with Sorin Carpathia was based on anything but physical passion. Yes, they had had what the vulgar in the West would call a fling. But as his student and eventually his assistant at the University of Romania at Bucharest, Marilena had been drawn to Sorin's intellect.

The truth, she knew, was that there was little prepossessing about either of them. He was short and thin and wiry with a shock of curly red hair that, despite its thickness and his aversion to haircuts, could not camouflage the growing bald spot at his crown.

She was thick and plain and eschewed makeup, nail polish, and styling her black hair. Colleagues, who she was convinced had been wholly enculturated by outside influences, teased that her frumpy clothing and sensible shoes harkened to previous centuries. They had long

## THE RISING

since abandoned trying to make her into something she could never be. Marilena was not blind. The mirror did not lie. No amount of paint or spritz would change her, inside or out.

And inside was where she lived, physically and mentally. She would not have traded that for all the *patrician* the butcher could stuff. In recent decades, a tsunami of progress had transformed her quaint motherland from that with the lowest standard of living in Europe to a technological marvel. Marilena could have done without it all. She resided in the horn of plenty of her own prodigious mind, fertilized by an inexhaustible curiosity.

Perhaps she *had* been born a century late. She loved that no other Eastern European nations traced their lineage to the ancient Romans. And while she knew that modern Romanian women looked, dressed, spoke, danced, and acted like their Western icons, Marilena had resisted even the fitness craze that sent her peers biking, hiking, jogging, and climbing all over her native soil.

Marilena knew what was out there, outside the book-lined, computer-laden, two-room flat she shared with her husband of six years. But save for the occasional foray by bus, for reasons she could not now remember, she rarely felt compelled to travel farther than the university, where she too was now a professor of literature. That was a four-block walk to a ten-minute bus ride.

Sorin preferred his ancient bicycle, which he carried to his office upon arriving each day and four floors up to their apartment upon his return. As if they had room for that.

But hiding the bike reflected his mistrust of mankind,

and Marilena could not argue. For all their decrying of religion, particularly branches that espoused innate sinfulness, everyone Marilena knew would have taken advantage of their best friends given the slightest chance. Everyone, perhaps, but the mysterious Russian émigré who ran the Tuesday night meetings in the anteroom at a local library. After several months of attending, Marilena had not yet formed an opinion of the thirty or so others who attended, but something deep within her resonated with Viviana Ivinisova.

Ms. Ivinisova, a handsome, tailored woman in her mid-thirties, seemed to take to Marilena too. Short with salt-and-pepper hair, Viviana seemed to be speaking directly to Marilena while gazing at the others just enough to keep their attention. And sure enough, when the younger woman stayed after her twelfth meeting to ask a question, the leader asked if she cared to get a drink.

With her load of books and folders gathered to her chest as she walked, Ms. Ivinisova reminded Marilena of her university colleagues. But Viviana was no professor, bright as she was. “This,” she said, nodding to her pile of resources, “is my full-time job.”

*How delicious*, Marilena thought. She herself had never imagined a cause more worthy than expanding one’s mind.

They found a nearly deserted bistro a block from Marilena’s bus stop, were seated at a tiny, round table, and Viviana wasted no time starting the conversation. “Do you know the etymology of your name?”

Marilena felt herself redden. “Bitter light,” she said.

THE RISING

Viviana nodded, holding her gaze.

Marilena shrugged. "I don't put any stock in—"

"Oh, I do!" Viviana said. "I do indeed. *Bitter*," she said slowly. "It doesn't have to be as negative as it sounds. Sadness perchance, a bit of loneliness? emptiness? a hole? something incomplete?"

Marilena reached too quickly for her glass and sloshed the wine before drawing it to her lips. Swallowing too much, she coughed and dabbed her mouth with a napkin. She shook her head. "I feel complete," she said.

Marilena could not meet the older woman's eyes. Viviana had cocked her head and was studying Marilena with a closed-mouth smile. "There is the matter of *light*," she said. "The bitterness, whatever that entails, is counter-balanced."

"Or my late mother just liked the name," Marilena said. "She was not the type to have thought through its meaning."

"But you are."

"Yes," Marilena wanted to say. "Yes, I am. I think through everything." But agreeing would appear boastful.

Where was the European reserve? Why were Russians so direct? Not as crass as Americans, of course, but there was little diplomacy here. In spite of herself, Marilena could not hold this against Ms. Ivinisova. Something within the woman seemed to care for Marilena in a way that both attracted and repelled her. She might not abet the Russian in her attempt to violate personal borders, but she could not deny the dichotomy that the attention also strangely warmed her.

“Your husband does not attend with you anymore,” Viviana said.

It was meant, Marilena decided, to sound like a change of subject. But she knew better. It was an attack on her flank, a probe, an attempt to get to the *bitter* part of her. Clearly Ms. Ivinisova believed in the portent of one’s name. It seemed anti-intellectual to Marilena, but then that was what kept Sorin from the weekly meetings.

Marilena shook her head. “He’s not a believer.”

Viviana smiled. “Not a believer.” She lit a cigarette. “Are you happy with him?”

“Reasonably.”

The older woman raised her eyebrows, and Marilena fought to keep from letting down more of her guard.

“He’s brilliant,” Marilena added. “One of the most widely read men I have ever known.”

“Which makes you ‘reasonably happy’ with him.”

Marilena nodded warily. “We’ve been together eight years.”

Viviana slid her chair back and crossed her legs. “Tell me how you met.”

What was it about this persistence that had such a dual impact on Marilena? To anyone else she would have said, “I don’t know you well enough to tell you about my personal life.” Yet despite the direct approach, Marilena felt bathed in some sort of care, compassion, interest. She was put off and intoxicated at the same time.

She allowed a smile. “We had an affair of sorts.”

“Oh!” Viviana said, leaning forward and crushing out her smoke. “I must hear it all. Was he married?”

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THE RISING

“He was. But not happily. He did not even wear his ring, though the whiteness near his knuckle was still fresh.”

Nostalgia washed over Marilena as she recalled her days as a doctoral student under the quiet flamboyance of the strange-looking professor so enamored of classical literature. By her questions, her participation, her papers, he had been able to tell that she was not there to merely fulfill a requirement. He engaged her in class, and the other students seemed content to act as spectators to their daily dialogue.

“He was a god to me,” Marilena said. “It was as if he knew everything. I could not raise an issue, a point, a subject he had not studied and thought through. I suddenly knew what love was—not that I believed I loved him. But I could not wait to get back to his class. I threw myself into the work so I would be prepared. I had always lived for learning, but then I burned to impress him, to be considered his equal—not as an intellectual, of course, but as a fellow seeker of knowledge.”

It was the wine, Marilena decided. How long had it been since she had been this effusive, this transparent? And with a virtual stranger, no less. Of course, Viviana Ivinisova reminded her of Sorin in Marilena’s impressionable days. She was just as drawn to this woman who seemed to know so much, to care so deeply, and who was so willing to open an entirely new world to initiates. How could Viviana know who would respond to things beyond themselves, truths most would consider coarse and mystical, outside conventional academia? What

would Marilena's colleagues think? Well, she knew. They would think of her what Sorin now thought of her. His indifference spoke loudly, as did his absence from the meetings after a mere two weeks nearly three months before.

"Did you pursue him?" Viviana Ivinisova said.

"I never even considered it. I pursued his mind, yes. I wanted to be near him, with him, in his class or otherwise. But I believe it was he who pursued me."

"You believe?"

"He did. He asked if I would consider serving as his assistant. I suspected nothing more than that he respected my mind. He had to consider me his inferior, yet I allowed myself to imagine that he at least respected my intellectual curiosity and dedication to learning."

Viviana seemed not to have blinked. "You were not used to being pursued."

No debate there. Marilena barely spoke to males, and not only had she never flirted with or pursued one, but neither had she ever considered such interest coming the other way. Certainly not with Dr. Carpathia. Not even when he insisted she call him Sorin. And have a meal with him. And spend time with him aside from office hours.

Even when he became familiar, touching her shoulder, squeezing her hand, throwing an arm around her, she considered him brotherly, or more precisely, avuncular, for he was ten years her senior.

"But at some point you had to have known," Viviana said. "You married the man."

"When I first accepted his invitation to the apartment

THE RISING

we now share,” Marilena said, “we spent most of the night discussing great literature. He made dinner—very badly—but I was too intimidated to agree when he said so. We watched two movies, the first a dark, thought-provoking picture. He sat close to me, again in a familial fashion, leaning against me. I was so naïve.”

Viviana’s eyes were dancing. “Then came a romantic picture, am I right?”

Were such things so predictable, or was this part of Viviana’s gift? In the meetings she had oft proved her ability to foretell, but now she knew the past as well?

“And not a comedy,” Marilena said. “A thorough-going love story, full of pathos.”

“And true love.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me.”

“What?”

“Tell me how he seduced you.”

“I didn’t say that—”

“But he did, Marilena, didn’t he? I know he did.”

“He put his arm around me and left it there, and during the most emotional scenes, he pulled me close.”

“You spent the night, didn’t you?”

Astonishing. Sorin had, in fact, sent her home for her things after they had made love.

“Not very chivalrous of him,” Viviana said. “No wonder it hasn’t lasted.”

“It has lasted.”

Viviana shook her head with obvious pity. “You coexist,” she said. “And you know it. You’re more like

brother and sister than husband and wife. And you don't sleep together anymore."

"We have only one bed."

"You know what I mean."

"But I never wanted that anyway. Really, I didn't. I was smitten by Sorin's mind. Truthfully, I still am. There is no one I'd rather converse with, argue with, discuss ideas with."

"You never loved him?"

"I never thought about it. His seduction, as you call it, gave me an inside track on what I really wanted: to stay in proximity to that mind. He never loved me either."

"How do you know?"

"He told me by never telling me."

"That he loved you."

Marilena nodded and a foreign emotion rose in her. What was this? *Had* that been what she wanted? Had she wanted Sorin to love her and to say so? She honestly believed she had never longed for that. "I must have been an awkward lover."

"He lost interest?"

"In that. We still spent hours together talking and reading and studying. We still do."

"But the romance died."

"Within months of his divorce and our marriage two years later," Marilena said. "Except for his occasional *necessities*." She emphasized it the way he had. "And who knows where or to whom he goes now when *necessary*?"

"You don't care?"

“I don’t dwell on it. I didn’t marry him for that. I am a born student, and I live with a born teacher. I am not a physically passionate person. I have all I need or want.”

When they were on the street, Viviana walking Marilena to the bus, the older woman took her arm. “You’re lying,” she said, and Marilena felt her first rush of guilt since childhood. “We’re getting close to your bitterness, aren’t we? Your loneliness. Your emptiness. The hole in your soul.”

Marilena was glad she had to keep her eyes forward to avoid tripping in the darkness. She could not have faced her new mentor. *My soul*, she thought. Until a few months before, she had not believed she even had a soul. Souls were for religious people. She was anything but that.

Marilena wished the bus would come and whisk her away. Even facing Sorin’s bemusement at her newfound interest in what he—“and any thinking person, including you”—considered anti-intellectualism would be respite from the relentless searchlight of Viviana’s prescience.

They sat on the bench at the bus stop, Marilena hoping a stranger would join them, anything to interrupt this. “You have discovered something within yourself beyond what I have been teaching,” Viviana said.

It was true. So true.

“You pushed it from your mind the first several times the stirring came over you. You reminded yourself that you and Sorin had discussed this, had dismissed it. He’d already had a family. Besides, the apartment was too small. Your work could not be interrupted. It was out of the question.”

Marilena's jaw tightened, and she would not have been able to object had she chosen to. She pulled herself free of Viviana's arm and pressed her palms to her face. How long had it been since she had wept? This longing, this stirring, as the older woman referred to it, had nagged at her until she forced herself to push it away. Out of the question was an understatement. She did not want Sorin's child, especially one he would not want. And neither did she want to deceive him into producing a child within her. All of a sudden, after years of looking the other way when he took his "necessities" elsewhere, she would—what?—begin to be his lover again until hitting upon perfect timing?

The whine of the bus in the distance was a relief Marilena could barely embrace. She stood and fished in her shoulder bag for her transit card.

Viviana faced her and grabbed both shoulders. "We will talk next week," she said. "But let me tell you this: I have your answer, bitter one. I have your light."

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Nine-year-old Ray Steele raced up the soccer field behind Belvidere Elementary, outflanking the defense and anticipating a pass from Bobby Stark. He cut across the field about twenty feet from the goalie box, and though the feed was behind him, he quickly adjusted, spun, and dribbled the ball with his feet. Juking two defenders, he drove toward the goal, the goalie angling out to meet him.

“Go, Ray, go! Beautiful athlete!”

It was his father. Again. Truth was, Ray wished he would just shut up. It was bad enough his old man really was an old man. His parents were older than anyone else’s and looked older than that. Once another father had seen Ray walking to the car with his dad and said, “Hey, isn’t it nice your grandpa could be here to watch you play?”

“Grandpa’s here?” Ray said before figuring it out. The man and Ray’s dad found that hilarious. Ray had just jumped into his parents’ beater car and hidden his head.

Even Ray’s mistakes worked out. He faked left and went right, but the goalie was on to him. Ray reared back and drilled the ball off the goalie’s chest. It came right back to him. With the goalie now out of position and the other defenders sprinting toward him, Ray calmly toed the ball into the left side of the net.

He shook off his teammates as they tried to lift him onto their shoulders. Why did everybody have to act so stupid? It wasn’t like this was the championship, and it certainly wasn’t a deciding goal. In fact it put Ray’s team up 7–1, and the other team hadn’t won a game all season. Big deal.

Ray Steele was good at soccer, but he hated it. Too much effort for too little result. He couldn’t stand watching it on TV. All that racing up and down the field and the incredible skills of international stars, usually resulting in a scoreless tie that had to be decided by a shoot-out.

He played only to keep in shape for his favorite sports: football, basketball, and baseball. In reality, however, Ray

was better than good. He was the best player in the soccer league, the top scorer, and one of the best defenders. Young as he was, the attention of the cheerleaders wasn't lost on him. He wasn't much for talking with girls though. Didn't know what to say. It wasn't like he was going to do less than his best so people would leave him alone. He had to admit, if only to himself, that the attention wasn't all bad. But usually it was just embarrassing.

Ray was taller than the other kids and an anomaly. First, he could outrun anyone his age and even a little older at long distances. When the team took a couple of laps around the field, he sprinted to the front and led the whole way. And when they finished and everyone else was red-faced, bent over, hands on their knees, gasping, he recovered quickly and chatted with his coach. If only the coach hadn't told his father, "That son of yours is a beautiful athlete. Beautiful."

Second, Ray was faster than anyone in short races too. That was unusual for someone his height at his age. Long-distance runners weren't supposed to also be fast in the dashes. What could he say? His dad claimed to have been a great athlete when he was a kid, but how long ago must that have been?

Third, Ray was an anomaly because he knew what *anomaly* meant. How many other fourth graders had a clue? Being known as the cutest kid in the class made him self-conscious too, but he had to admit he'd rather deal with that than the opposite. He sure didn't envy the fat kid, the ugly girl, or the nerd. He had it all. Smartest, best athlete, fastest, cutest.

That didn't change the fact that he was ashamed of his parents. And their car. No one kept a car as long as Ray's dad. Oh, the plastic polymer still shone. It was designed that way. Cars simply weren't supposed to look like they aged anymore. But everybody knew, because the auto manufacturers now had only two ways to make cars look new: they changed styles every year, and color schemes changed every three or four years.

When his dad first got the yellow Chevy, it was already used. "Don't knock it," his dad said. "It's got low mileage, and I know cars. It's been taken care of, and it should give us lots of years."

That's what Ray was afraid of. It seemed his friends' families were getting the latest models all the time, and they were forever bragging about all the features. There was the silver and platinum phase when cars were designed to look like classics from the first decade of the new century. Then came the primary colors, which didn't last long—except for that Chevy. According to Ray's dad it was going to last as long as he could make it last.

Ray wished it would get stolen or burn or get smashed. He'd made the mistake of saying so.

"Why, Rayford!" his mother said. "Why would you say such a thing?"

"Come on, Ma! Everybody knows that rattletrap is at least six years old."

"In real years, maybe," Mr. Steele said. "But the way it's been maintained and the way I take care of it, it's almost good as new."

"Shakes, rattles, squeaks," Ray mumbled.

“Important thing is the engine. It’s plenty good for the likes of us.”

That was one of his dad’s favorite phrases, and while Ray knew what it meant, he could have gone the rest of his life without hearing it again. He knew what came next. “We’re just plain and simple, hardworking people.”

There was certainly nothing wrong with being hardworking. Ray himself worked hard, studied, wanted to get good grades. He wanted to be the first in his family to go to college, and nowadays even scholarship athletes had to have good grades. He was a double threat. One of those major sports he loved so much should get him into some real college, and if he also had a good grade point average and class-leadership résumé, he couldn’t miss. As much as his parents embarrassed him, he secretly wanted to make them proud.

“We’re plain and simple, all right,” he had said at the dinner table that evening. He was having more and more trouble keeping his mouth shut. And all that did was cause his parents to jump on him more.

“And what’s wrong with plain and simple?” his father thundered.

“Your dad built his tool and die business into something that puts food on this table—”

“—and clothes on my back, yeah, I know.”

“And it paid—”

“—for this house too, yeah, I know. I got it, all right?”

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you, Rayford,” his mother said. “All of a sudden we’re not good enough for you. Who do you think you are?”

## THE RISING

Ray knew he should apologize. He felt like the brat he was. But what good was being the coolest kid in fourth grade if you lived in the seediest house in the neighborhood? He didn't want to get into that. It would just bring out all the stuff about how at least it was paid for and his dad wasn't in debt, and yeah, we may live paycheck to paycheck, but there are people a lot worse off than we are in this world.

Ray just wished he knew some of them. He was top man on the totem pole in lots of areas, but he had to hang his head when he got in and out of that car, and the last thing he wanted was to invite a friend home. When he visited other kids' houses, he saw the possibilities. *Someday. Someday.*

"May I be excused?" he said.

His mother looked startled. "Well, to tell you the truth, young man, I was about to send you to your room for sassing your father, but—"

"Don't fight my battles for me," his dad said. "If he crosses the line, I'll—"

"But what, Ma?" Ray said.

"But I made your favorite dessert, and I thought—"

"Lime delight? Yes!"

"He doesn't deserve it," his dad said.

"—and I thought since you had such a great game . . ."

"I'll have it later," Ray said, bolting for his room. He kept expecting his dad to make him come back; when he glanced their way from the stairs, his mom and dad were shaking their heads and looking at each other with such despair that he nearly went back on his own.

Why did he have to be this way? He didn't really feel too good for them. It just hurt to be such a popular kid and not have all the stuff that should go along with it. Well, if it was true that hard work and brains could get you where you wanted to go in this world, he was going places.

Ray's teacher told him not to be self-conscious about towering over his classmates. That was a laugh. He loved being tall. But she said, "It's just a phase, and the rest will catch up. By junior high you won't likely be the tallest. Some of the girls might even catch you."

That was hardly what Ray wanted to hear. He hadn't decided yet which sport would be his ticket to college, but he hoped it might be basketball. He already gave the lie to the adage that white guys can't jump. If he could just keep growing, he'd be well over six feet by high school. He didn't have to be the tallest guy on the team, but being one of the tallest would be great.

Ray rushed into his room and closed the door, as if shutting out the muffled sound of his parents would take them off his mind. Small and nondescript as the house was, he had made something of his room. Extended from nylon fishing lines all over the ceiling were model planes, from ancient props to tiny fighter jets to massive modern supersonic transports.

Whenever he was asked, in person or in writing, what he wanted to be when he grew up, he invariably answered, "Pilot or pro athlete." He despised the condescending smiles of adults, which only made him recommit himself to his goals. Ray had heard enough that a professional

## THE RISING

athletic career—in any of his favorite sports—was as likely as being struck by lightning. And expressing his pilot dream always triggered teachers and counselors to remind him how hard he would have to work in math and science.

He knew. He knew. At least the aviation thing didn't draw benevolent, sympathetic smiles. It was actually an achievable goal. His dad was good with engineering stuff, manufacturing, figuring things out. And while Ray excelled in all subjects, it happened that he liked math and science best.

Ray would do whatever he had to do to realize one of his dreams, because either one of them could bring him what he really wanted. Money. That was the bottom line. That was what set people apart. People with nice cars—the latest models—had more money than his dad. He was convinced of that. His dad claimed that those people were probably in debt, and Ray decided maybe a little debt wouldn't be all bad, if for no other reason than to make it look like you had money.

But he would go one better. If he couldn't be a pro athlete and make tens of millions, he'd be a commercial pilot and make millions. He'd look like he had money because he really had it and wouldn't have to go into debt at all.