

THE DINNER INVITATION

While delivering a hallway violation notice, Lena is unexpectedly invited into the lavish home of a Russian family. But the family's hospitality is overshadowed by a simmering violent tension.

The strollers, scooters, and child-sized electric ride-on cars made the apartment easy to find in the maze of hallways of building 1.

Lena stepped up to the door, flanked by two large, ostentatious planters, looking rather out of place in an apartment complex. Bemused, she pressed the hallway-violation notice against the door and—

The door opened, revealing a tall man with a pale complexion and ice-blue eyes. He recoiled at Lena's unexpected appearance, taking a defensive half-step back behind the door. His eyes widened—fear or anger, Lena couldn't tell—as he barked at her:

“КТО ТЫ? ЧЕГО ТЫ ХОЧЕШЬ!”

Lena froze. She wasn't great with confrontation at the best of times, and a large man shouting at her in Russian was far from her personal, “Top 10 Best of Times.” She stammered open-mouthed at him, alarmed at the intensity of his gaze. She eventually managed a weak gesture at the notice she'd just posted. He snatched it, scanning the page, mouthing the words to himself, and Lena saw the tension in his face gave way to realization. His features softened, and a crooked smile flickered at his lips.

“Aha! This is about hallway, yes? I know. It is mess,” he said, in thickly accented English. He waved to the childhood paraphernalia strewn about the hallway. “Messy. We are big, ehh... Big messy people.” The man offered her a sheepish grin, inviting her to share the joke of his overreaction.

Lena, still somewhat flooded from being shouted at, could only shrug. She opened her mouth to say... something? Probably something.

But all she could manage was, “...Yeah.”

He laughed, half of his broad frame still hidden behind the door. The silence stretched out a bit too long, even for Lena's high tolerance of awkward silences. Task complete, Lena offered an apologetic wave that somehow mutated into a thumbs-up, and then turned to leave.

"Ehhh, no please. It's okay, we fix," the man called after Lena. "Please, would you like to come in?"

"Oh, uh.... No, it's okay, I'm sorry, I don't really care about all the stuff out here, I'm just doing my j--"

The man waved away her explanation. "'Zabey, zabey. Please. Come in."

He held the door open for her, stepping fully out of view, giving Lena a glimpse into a richly decorated apartment: plush furniture, velvet curtains, the savory smell of something roasting in the oven, and the distant sound of a small child squealing. It looked warm, expensive—a place of safety and security. A place that Lena, since she began working behind the leasing office desk 2 years ago, desperately wanted to live in, despite knowing full well she'd never be able to afford it at her current salary and life trajectory.

"Come, come! I make dinner. Plenty for guests. Come!" He stepped out into the hallway, arms out wide, welcoming.

A tingle in the back of Lena's mind. *Nope. Absolutely not.*

But her curiosity was louder, and she let the man usher her inside. He gestured to the toys outside. "It's messy, I know. We fix after dinner." He closed the door.

Inside, the décor overwhelmed her senses: a lavish settee with a folded cashmere throw, antique glass cabinets filled with Fabergé eggs and other assorted curios, walls layered with ornate mirrors and paintings. It felt like someone had transplanted an aristocratic European parlor into the Los Angeles suburbs. Behind her, the man locked the door, jolting her out of sensory overload.

"You like drink?"

Before she could answer his riddle, another voice, also accented but gentler, called from somewhere deeper in the apartment: "Marcin... English needs helper words, remember?"

Marcin blushed, an endearing sight beneath his ice-blue gaze. The knot in Lena's stomach eased. "Ach, apologies. *Would* you like a drink?" He sighed, annoyed at himself. "Your language. It is..." He paused, searching for the right word.

"Annoying?" Lena offered.

His face lit up. "Yes! Ahaha, yes. So annoying!"

"Well, if it's any consolation, your English is way better than my Russian." Marcin grinned at this, and Lena found herself grinning back on reflex.

"Don't let him off too easily, my dear." A woman emerged from a nearby bedroom. She was tiny, wearing paint-flecked overalls, and held herself with an easy confidence. She gave her husband a pointed look. "He's been neglecting his daily practice with Duo."

"Ech. Fignya bird with useless phrases," he grumbled. "And Lily is much worst."

"Worse," the woman corrected softly.

Marcin's retort was interrupted by their daughter—no older than four—bounding into the room and latching onto her mother's leg.

"Mamochka! Scooter-time!"

Marcin scooped the girl up, eliciting shrieks of delight as he rumbled playfully into her tummy with a string of Russian. Lena felt like she'd wandered into a sitcom set. Only when the silence stretched again did she remember how awkwardly she was standing there.

"Oh, let me get out of your hair, I really don't need dinner."

"Nyet, nyet, you stay! I make plenty! Er... I *made* plenty." He glanced at his wife for confirmation, looking proud after she gave an approving nod. Lena was once again endeared toward the large man's deference to his dainty wife.

"Marcin is an excellent cook. He's roasting chicken tonight. Please, join us. We love to have guests for dinner, isn't that right, Cheyla?"

Lena's mind raced for a polite excuse, but she locked eyes with Cheyla's ice-blue gaze, so much like her father's. The girl smiled, and Lena reflexively smiled back.

"Yes, stay for dinner guests!" the girl squealed. Marcin's wife kissed her daughter on the head. "Good girl. Go put your helmet on, and we'll go burn off some energy before dinner."

"Yahhhh! Scooter-time!"

The little girl ran to her room, hooting the entire way. Marcin's wife extended her hand, and Lena took it. "Katerina. It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Lena. Hi."

From the kitchen, Marcin's head popped up from his work at the cutting board. "Lena? Is Russian name! Er, *that* is a Russian name."

"Yeah, I guess it is. I was named after my grandmother. She lived there but moved to the US after the war."

Marcin nodded, resuming his chopping. "Many Russians come here. Especially to escape war."

Cheyla had finished putting on her helmet and began dragging her mother out the door. "ScooterScooterScooterScooterScoo-"

"-OKAY little one, we scoot!" Katerina smiled up at Lena. "Please, make yourself comfortable. Marcin, pour her a glass, yes?" With that, Katerina and Cheyla exited the apartment. Shrieks of "Scooter!" echoed and faded down the hallway.

A glass of red wine appeared in front of her, startling her. Marcin pretended not to notice, flashing her another smile. Lena took the glass from him, nodding in thanks. He closed the door and locked it.

"Please, sit!" Marcin gestured towards the bar stools on the kitchen island, opposite the cutting board. He began chopping the carrots, adding them to the generous mound of sliced onions and cabbage that already sat in a large mixing bowl.

"You know, there are a lot of Russians in this apartment complex," said Lena. "I work in the leasing office—that's why I was here, by the way. When you opened the door."

Marcin nodded, remaining focused on his task.

“Anyway, yeah. We’ve had about twelve or so new families move in over the last couple months. And like... maybe half are Russian. Probably more. Do you know any of them?”

Marcin shook his head, continuing his work. Lena got the sense that this topic ventured into sensitive territory, so she sipped her wine and looked around for something else to talk about.

“You guys really decked this place out. I feel like I’m in a Renaissance painting or something.”

Marcin laughed and gestured down the hallway with his knife. “Yes, a painting. Katerina is a painter. You see her studio.”

Taking that as permission to snoop, Lena wandered down the hall. Everywhere she looked were portraits, cabinets, shelves, plants... She struggled to find a single empty space on the wall.

The apartment’s third bedroom had been converted into a cluttered art space. Easels, canvases, and half-finished works filled every corner. It was messy. It felt like a different apartment.

“She’s very good, yes?” Marcin’s voice made her jump. He stood leaning halfway in through the door frame.

“Uh, yes. Yes, these are very good,” Lena said, regaining her composure. She scanned the paintings, appreciating the variety and scale of Katerina’s work alongside her obvious talent. A partially hidden canvas revealed Marcin posed in the nude, impressively rendered. She looked away quickly, cheeks burning.

“Oops,” Marcin said with an awkward laugh as he took notice. “Forgot that one was here.”

“All good,” she mumbled. She turned her gaze to a still life instead but felt his stare on her.

“The scooters,” he said, voice lower. “You come about the scooters, yes?”

Something about the tone of his voice pulled the knot in her stomach tight again.

Lena tried to speak without her voice catching. “Uh, yeah. Sorry, but I have to post notices when residents leave stuff in—”

He silenced her with a sharp wave of his free hand. She sipped at her wine, trying to stay calm under the intensity of his stare.

“A complaint was made,” he said.

She shrugged, doing her best to convey nonchalance. “I mean, I totally get it. You’ve got a lot of stuff in this apartment. Where’s Cheyla supposed to keep her scooters, right?”

Marcin nodded, expressionless. “My child loves her scooters. Katerina loves her furniture. Her art. We have many nice things, but it is small apartment, no?”

Actually no, it wasn’t. Not compared to the one-bedroom she shared with her roommate and still barely managed to afford rent. But Lena said nothing.

“I think whoever complain not have children, yes?”

Marcin raised his eyebrows at Lena’s silence, as if to reiterate the question.

“I mean, I’m not really supposed to... It was anonymous, you know?”

Marcin kneeled down to a thick black mark on the door frame. Underneath it read “*Cheylya. Age 4. 0.93 meters.*”

Marcin kneeled down, eye level with the mark. He stared at it. “The old man. He complain.”

Lena didn’t trust herself to speak. So she said nothing, sipping at her empty glass of wine.

SCHUNK!

Marcin stabbed the kitchen knife deep into the black mark. It’d been in his right hand this whole time, hidden behind the door. Lena didn’t even have the presence of mind to jump; her body felt frozen.

“That man threaten us. Threaten my family.” Marcin’s voice dripped with hatred, turning Lena’s blood cold. “He tell me—*told* me—he will call ICE. I thought he was making joke.”

Finally, Marcin looked up, eyes boring into her. “I will die before they send us back.”

The apartment fell quiet. Lena couldn't measure how long she stood there, heart hammering in her ears. At last, the anger drained from Marcin's eyes. He noticed her empty glass.

"Ah! Forgive me, you are empty." He pulled the knife free, wiping the blade on his pants as though nothing strange had happened. "Come, I pour you another glass. Dinner is ready soon."

Dazed, Lena followed him out. The aroma of sauteed onions filled the kitchen, and Marcin began adding the carrots and cabbage to the sizzling pan.

"We eat as soon as the girls return. Please, sit."

She sank onto a stool, thoughts spinning as he refilled her glass.

"It is good to have new friends, yes?" He raised his own glass, clinking it lightly against hers. "Friends help each other. Tell each other things, keep each other's secrets. I know we just meet, but I can already tell. You are friend of my family, Lena."

She could only nod and gulp down more wine.

"That Mr. Simms," he added, his tone dropping, "he's an old bastard. I see him yell at many people. He always threatens. Many don't like him. People don't like men who yell."

Lena found her voice. "He is... difficult, sure. But what can you do?"

The question was obviously rhetorical, but Marcin looked at her as if he had an answer.

Lena felt like she was teetering on a cliff, and Marcin's answer would push her over the edge. But before he could speak, the key fob to the front door unlocked and Cheyla ran inside, followed by Katerina.

"Papa, papa! I fell off my scooter and got a bruise!" Cheyla exclaimed proudly, though the tears in her eyes were from excitement, not pain.

Marcin gasped dramatically, kneeling to examine her. "Ach, my darling! Not a bruise!"

"It's okay, Papa! I was wearing my helmet. And we saw that old man again!"

Marcin shared an indecipherable look with his wife. Lena pretended not to notice.

Dinner was served soon after without incident. Marcin ladled bowls of steaming cabbage soup, alongside freshly carved roasted chicken, while Cheyla chattered happily about her scooter ride. Lena experienced it all from outside her body, making small talk when asked questions, and doing her best not to look at Marcin. After finishing her meal, she thanked the family and left the apartment as fast as she possibly could.

A week later, Mr. Simms was found dead in the stairwell. The police told the leasing office that he'd fallen and broken his neck.

Lena quit her job the following day.