

Masha, Kolya, and Me

On the balcony of the beige-bricked church building in front of us is a small flock of young people who are talking energetically and holding papers that rustle in the breeze. They're probably practicing for a skit—and the sight of their Book of Mormon–inspired robes and headdresses makes my stomach tighten in a weird mixture of excitement and dread. Next to me, Masha, who has just started learning about the Church, sees the strange costumes but doesn't ask about them. On my other side, my companion is looking at the cobblestone ground, probably praying the same prayer I am: *Please, God, let Masha have fun at this activity even though she might not understand what's going on.*

We duck into the church's entrance beneath the balcony. Inside, the foyer's scent of clean carpets is starting to drown in metallic traces of the Moscow metro as twenty-somethings walk in, hug each other, lean against the walls, meander into the chapel, and plop onto couches.

I glimpse Kolya's smug grin at a far corner of the room and quickly turn away, whispering over and over, "Please don't approach." If he tries to pull one of his flirtatious shenanigans on us and Masha tonight, I'll sic the elders on him.

"Sister Wilcox!"

I flinch and don't look at him. "Let's go," I say to Masha and my companion, then pull them into the packed chapel. Once we're seated on a bench with no spaces on either side of us, I relax.

Masha's eyes flit around, absorbing the details of the room and the loud but happy people in it. Now her questions start pouring out, mainly about what our religious beliefs are. Because we're now inside a church building, we're allowed to talk about the Church as much as we want. My companion and I respond to her questions, and my worry starts to lessen.

A young man stands at the podium and, after the crowd quiets, explains the activity. It's going to be a mishmash of different kinds of Book of Mormon–themed activities, like skits, object

lessons, and escape-room scenarios. Then everyone is separated into groups. Masha is put in a different group.

My worry returns. All I can do is give a wobbly smile when Masha's chattering group whisks her and her bewildered expression into a hallway decorated with cardstock angels and golden plates. At least the activities are creative, and the activity leaders are explaining everything well, so the situation, though not ideal, isn't horrible. *She'll be fine.*

Or she'll end up hating the Church. I've seen it happen before.

Kolya isn't in my group, thank goodness. He isn't a bad person—I do occasionally find him mildly amusing. But past experiences and stories have left a bad taste in my mouth whenever I see him. And he knows it. Somehow, though, it doesn't keep him from trying to flirt with me and other sister missionaries.

During a transition between activities, the crowd pulls Masha past me too quickly for me to say anything substantial to her. She looks like she doesn't know exactly what planet she's on—but at least people are talking to her, and her eyes don't look accusatory or overly alarmed.

Dinnertime finally arrives and we all swarm into a large room with rows of tables. My companion ends up at a nearby table. A smiling Masha sits next to me. I had planned on answering more questions from her, but she's busy talking with other people, laughing with them and asking questions between bites of salad. She looks like she could belong here. She *should* belong here.

A dark-haired man sitting across from me has been observing the goings-on with the wide eyes of a newcomer, so I introduce myself to him. He—Dmitri—motions to the Book of Mormon that he was gifted at the end of the activity, and he brings up his beliefs and questions and points about the legitimacy of such a book. “How come it was written in America?” “Why is this book needed when the Bible has all of God's words?” “Why have I never heard of it before?”

I know the answers to all of Dmitri questions, but my tongue is strangely heavy and my mouth refuses to form my brain's coherent and persuasive Russian sentences. I even know where the Book of Mormon answers one of his questions, but for the life of me I can't remember where it is. My cheeks start to heat up. I've been studying this language for three years, been living in Russia for half of that time. This should not be happening!

Ask Kolya to help you.

The prompting from the Holy Ghost is unmistakable, yet I wince a little, almost answering, *No*. I glance past Dmitri's shoulder at another table, where Kolya is conversing animatedly with other young adults.

I say to Dmitri, "Just a second," then I lean to the side so Kolya can see me. "Hey, Kolya."

The name comes out as a whisper that's immediately sucked into the room's clamor of dishes, laughter, and debates. Should I get up and go talk to him?

Then Kolya stands, not looking at me, still talking with the people at his table. It looks like he's about to leave.

"Kolya." My voice still isn't loud enough. He steps into the hallway that goes to the exit.

Last chance.

"*Kolya!*"

He whirls and his eyebrows shoot up. In English, he says, "You said my name!"

I ignore the people staring in our direction. "I need your help."

Kolya practically leaps to my side and leans down to hear me. I brief him on the situation. Now serious, and without another word to me, Kolya slips into the seat next to Dmitri and delves into the conversation. I let out a slow breath and smile a bit. Maybe I should feel bad, since Kolya might need to be getting somewhere; but, hey, I'm just obeying a prompting.

Soon after, Masha and my companion and I prepare to leave, but I keep my ear homed in on the conversation. Kolya is responding to Dmitri's concerns with facts, logic, and confidence, and Dmitri nods once in a while.

On the way home on the metro train, everything blurs together—the roar of the train, the scent of vodka and cigarettes, and the bewilderment, contentment, and fatigue in my body. But when I look at Masha, her bright eyes and her next words drive the fog away: “There’s a warm feeling in that place. I still feel it.”

**Names changed.*