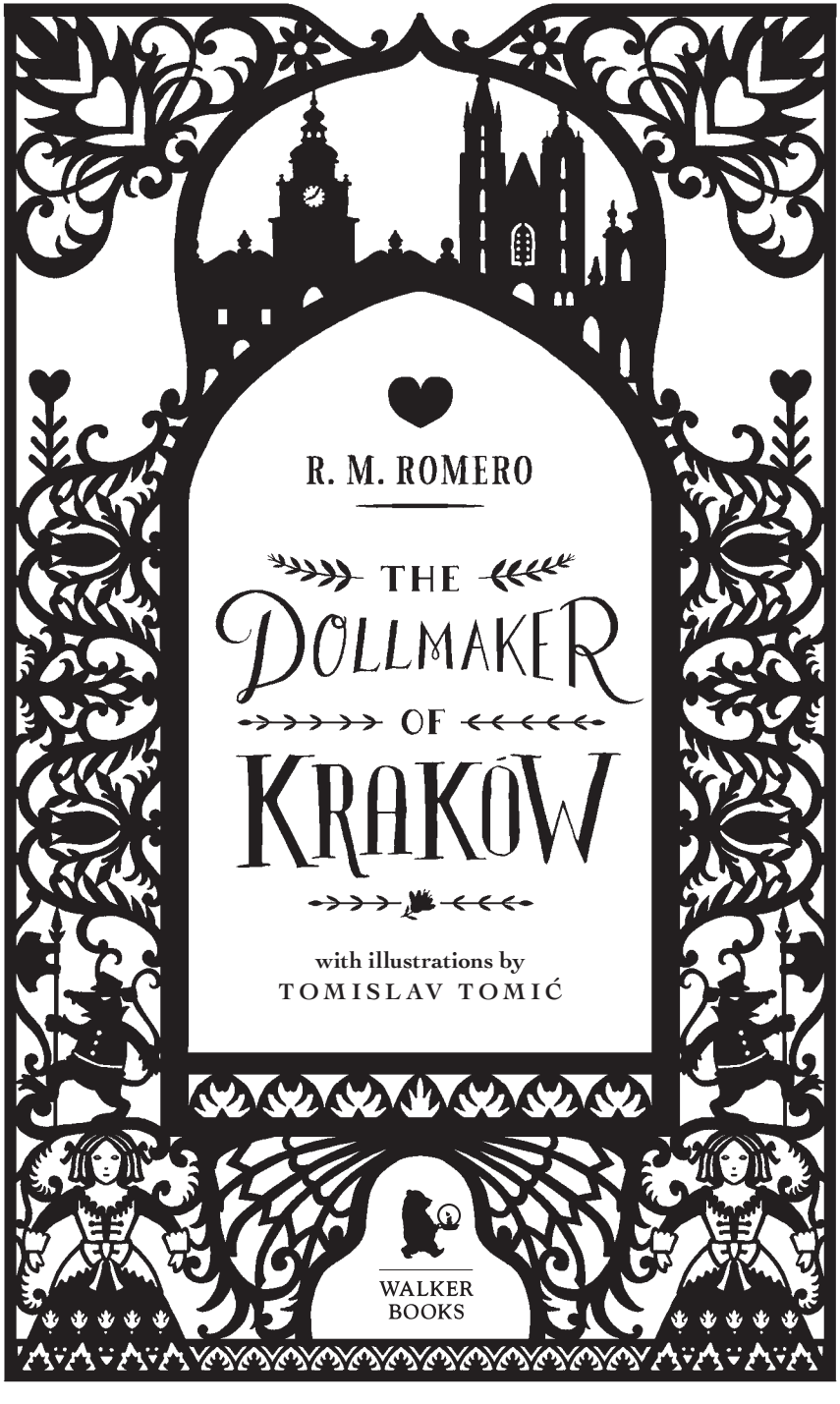
R. M. ROMERO
THE
DOLLMAKER
OF
KRAKÓW
with illustrations by
TOMISLAV TOMIĆ
WALKER
BOOKS

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PROLOGUE

The Seamstress and the Land of the Dolls

There once was a little doll named Karolina, who lived in a country far from the human world.

The Land of the Dolls was a large kingdom that stretched countless miles in any direction. To the east, lay the sea and to the west, a glass mountain sprouted from the earth and climbed towards the sun. In the days when the wise king and queen ruled, the sky had always been a perfect shade of midsummer blue, the moonlight shone as pure as silver and no one had ever grown old or shabby.

Across the sea, however, was a dark country. Its residents, huge rats whose appetites seemed as great as the ocean itself, had been crafted by a wicked witch from shadows and tears and ash. The doll king and queen lived in fear that, one day,

the rats would grow hungry enough to come to their home and would bring with them only cruelty and greed.

But Karolina knew nothing of these rumours. Her home was a tiny cottage nestled beside a brook that flowed between two green hills. The curtains were spun from wildflowers, and the walls had been built from slabs of gingerbread, though Karolina was never tempted to nibble at them. The little candy house was all she had wanted, for Karolina was not a king or a queen or even a princess; she was a seamstress.

She made satin ballgowns and velvet waistcoats, skirts that fanned out like butterfly wings and handsome jackets with gold buttons. And, best of all, Karolina sewed wishes into each piece of clothing. Each wish was an incomplete hope, a half-spun tale that still needed an ending. But Karolina could not grant the wishes she sewed; she had little magic to call her own.

Karolina loved her work, but there were a few customers whose wishes it had pained her to hear. These dolls were quiet and sad, and their tales of woe might as

well have been printed on their porcelain faces and little wooden hands.

What did the sad dolls want? To return to the human world that all the dolls had once lived in. Why? Because unlike most dolls, who could remember nothing about their time in that distant place, Karolina's melancholy friends longed to see the children who had become their closest companions.

She would never have told them so, but she did not think that their wishes could be granted. The human children who had owned them were kind to dolls at first, but eventually the children grew up, leaving their once-beloved playmates to gather dust and mildew in attics and beneath beds. When their wood and cloth and porcelain could sustain their souls no longer, they went back to the Land of the Dolls.

Karolina tried not to think about the human world; it had done her friends no good. The sad dolls had learned to cry, and little sounded worse to Karolina. She had no desire to enter that other land full of boys and girls and imaginary games ever again.

One day, the rats did indeed come to the shoreline of Karolina's country. They overthrew the king and queen with their iron bayonets and sharp teeth, and unleashed their own brand of terror. Karolina was forced to flee away from the invaders and their pyres, into the deep, dark woods. Her dress was in tatters and her cheek was cracked.

It was in the woods that she met a toy soldier named Fritz, and together, with the help of a kind wind, Dogoda, she found she was destined to return to the human world after all.

CHAPTER 1

The Dollmaker

Karolina awoke in her new world with a glass heart.

It was a heart that felt as if both roses and their thorns grew within it, for it held all the happiness and sorrow she had ever experienced in the Land of the Dolls. When she moved, it rattled against the glossy wood of her chest panel.

Trembling, Karolina raised a hand to her face. It took only a single touch for her to realize that the crack that had raced up her cheek in the Land of the Dolls was gone. Lowering her arm, she saw her fingers were smudged with blush-pink paint that smelled fresh. The kind wind had told her that someone in this human world had called out to her. So that person – whoever it was – must have been

the one who had fixed her face and placed the glass heart inside her.

Karolina glanced around and saw that she had been set on top of a high table amid wood shavings and coils of ribbon. While she was not made of glass or porcelain as some of her friends had been, she did not want to fall from her perch, so she stayed very still to avoid losing her balance. To her right was a huge shape like a mountain, though it was not as high as the ones in her country. A long, rough cloth had been draped over it. Karolina could not imagine what might be hidden underneath it.

Across from the table, a large window looked out into the darkness, which was broken only by the faint yellow glow of street lamps. They were not made of peppermint sticks, as the ones in the Land of the Dolls had been, but instead rose like dark, sturdy trees from the cobblestones. The world outside did not look inviting, but the room around her reminded Karolina of her cottage: warm and friendly. However, this shop – for it was a shop – was not full of ballgowns and jackets and scarves, as her cottage had been.

It was full of toys.

There was row upon row of rocking horses whose flanks had been painted with daisy chains and autumn leaves. There were stuffed-toy animals of many different shapes and sizes on the shelves, their tiny thread-mouths smiling.

And, best of all, there were dolls everywhere. None of them had scratched faces or limbs scorched by fire. They all seemed at peace, ready to love and be loved.

They were *safe*.

These other toys weren't like Karolina, though. None

of them had greeted her or even moved. They weren't alive and had no hearts of their own, and Karolina knew as well as any doll that only a creature with a heart could be truly alive.

Nevertheless, Karolina envied the silent toys a little; her glass heart had filled up with grey dread. She was alone. Where was the person the kind wind had said would be waiting for her?

The clatter of approaching footsteps made Karolina go rigid. A door at the back of the shop opened, and a man appeared. He had a red beard, as if the Morning Star had briefly touched it with her fingertips, and wore a pair of white pyjamas. He rubbed at his green eyes as he limped towards her. Now that he was closer, Karolina saw that the stranger was neither a little boy nor an old man, but somewhere in between. Karolina imagined that if he picked her up, she would stand only a little taller than his hand, which was speckled with the same pink paint that now coated Karolina's fingers.

He must be the person the wind had told her about, the one who had repaired her face and given her a new heart!

The man – the Dollmaker – sat down on the stool beside Karolina, wringing his hands. She could see that his face was streaked with tears that looked fresh. They had turned the pale skin of his cheeks as red and angry as battle cries.

"The Great War was more than twenty years ago," the Dollmaker said to himself. "It's 1939. I'm home in Kraków. I'm *home*. The nightmares aren't real."

It hadn't occurred to Karolina that there was such a thing as war in the human world too.

If the Dollmaker had been another toy, the right words to comfort him might have come to her, but she could not

think of anything to say. Being able to show pain with tears so openly seemed to her like a terrible magic trick, one that humans performed almost without knowing it.

His hands trembling, the Dollmaker removed the cloth from the mountain – revealing that it was no mountain at all. It was a grand doll's house that stood three storeys high and was the perfect size for Karolina. Her head would not scrape its ceilings, nor would she have to strain to reach the kitchen table or open the wardrobe she saw in the high attic bedroom. The window boxes overflowed with cloth roses, and a sleek black cat sat on the railing of the upstairs balcony. Karolina particularly liked this; the cat would gobble up any rats who strayed near.

The Dollmaker set to work putting the finishing touches to the roof's edges using a slim knife. His hand moved so quickly that Karolina doubted he could have stopped even if he had wanted to. He carved a wavy, delicate design that was so smooth it reminded her of cake icing.

As he worked, the Dollmaker's tears stopped, and Karolina thought she understood why. Creating something had always made *her* feel better. It was only when her hands were still that fear threatened to overtake her heart.

Karolina breathed in deeply. This world, this place … it smelled familiar, like dust and cinnamon and fields of yellow flowers. Had she been here before? There was no precise way to describe the strange feeling that was washing over her, cutting her as deeply as the Dollmaker's knife would have. But the more Karolina tried to grasp at that feeling, the more she felt that she was trying to catch a dream between her small hands.

Maybe the Dollmaker would be able to answer her questions.

Karolina took a step towards the doll's house, trying to think what to say. But in her haste, she tripped over the hem of her long red skirts and gasped loudly. Her arms wheeled at her sides as she struggled to regain her footing. She managed to right herself before she tumbled over.

This was *not* how she'd wanted to introduce herself, but it was too late to do anything else now.

"Hello," Karolina said, and waved. "I'm Karolina."

The Dollmaker dropped the knife, and his face turned whiter than smoke. "Oh no. It's finally happened," he said. "I've finally lost my mind."

Karolina knew that the Dollmaker *hadn't* gone mad. "There's nothing wrong with you," she said.

The Dollmaker sprang up from his stool, backing away. "But … but you can't be real. Dolls can't talk. I must be tired – I'm seeing things."

"You do look tired, but I promise, I'm just as real as you are," said Karolina. In truth, it was almost as if the Dollmaker were the strange one, the sole human in the world of the toys, and she simply a natural extension of the shop.

"But I made you," the Dollmaker said. "And I can't make something that comes to life."

"Gardeners do it all the time with flowers," said Karolina. "And you didn't really *make* me. My soul already existed – you just called out to me, and the wind brought me to you. I thought you already knew that."

"I don't remember calling to anyone. I was just trying to recreate a doll my mother had made and…" The Dollmaker shook his head rapidly. "Oh, why am I talking to a toy? This is all too much." He slumped against the side of the table, the movement causing the hem of his

pyjama bottoms to hike up several inches. Karolina saw that his leg was made from the same pale wood *she* had been carved from.

"I didn't think humans could be made out of wood," said Karolina, cocking her head to the side so that she could study the Dollmaker's leg from a different angle. He seemed so flustered that she thought he might not respond. But after a long moment filled only with the weighty ticking of a nearby clock, he did.

"Only my leg is made of wood," the Dollmaker said. "The rest of me is made of something a bit softer."

"Can I see it?" Karolina said.

The Dollmaker averted his gaze. "It isn't very … pretty," he said. "Most people don't like to look at it for very long."

"Why?" asked Karolina.

"People don't like seeing broken things," the Dollmaker said.

"You're not broken," said Karolina, planting her hands on her hips. "I'm made of *all* wood, and you don't think I'm broken, do you?"

"No one has ever put it like that before," said the Dollmaker. He rolled his pyjamas up to reveal a wooden leg strapped to what remained of his original limb, which was encased in a leather slip.

Apparently, things weren't as different in this world as Karolina had originally feared. "I like your leg," she said.

"You're one of the few who do," said the Dollmaker. Then he asked, "You're actually a living doll? You're … you're not someone who was turned *into* a doll, are you?" His hair had fallen over his temples, partially obscuring his eyes, and now he pushed it back impatiently.

"I think I would remember being human," Karolina said. "But I only remember being a doll."

"Amazing," the Dollmaker said softly. He sat back down on his stool and leaned forwards, as if he intended to snatch up every one of Karolina's words with his callused hands.

Seeing that he was growing more comfortable with her, Karolina tried a question. "You said your mother made a doll like me. What did you mean by that?"

"My mother loved making things. Many years ago, she made a doll that looked just like you and told me that, one day, I should give it to my own child. But when my mother died after the war, that doll was lost. So I decided to remake her." The Dollmaker's voice gave way to a pause that somehow seemed louder than any word he had spoken yet. Then he said, "And I made you."

Had Karolina known the Dollmaker's mother? Maybe that was why everything here felt so familiar. "Is that why you make toys? Because your mother did?"

"In a way. It only started when I couldn't sleep in the field hospital after I lost my leg." The Dollmaker patted his knee. "It gave me something to do when everyone else was asleep. It still does. My dreams can be … unsettling. Wars are hard to forget."

"I have dreams like that too," said Karolina. "Sometimes, I close my eyes and I see every awful thing that happened in the Land of the Dolls."

"The Land of the Dolls?"

"It's where I used to live before you called to me and I came here," Karolina explained. "Just like you live in…" She tapped her chin, considering. Had the Dollmaker mentioned exactly where this was?

"Kraków," the Dollmaker told her. "This is the city of Kraków in the Republic of Poland."

"Kraków." The city's name felt fresh and crisp on Karolina's tongue, like an apple slice. "What's it like? Is it a good place?"

"I believe so. I love it very much." The Dollmaker motioned towards the window. "I made a model of the city, if you'd like to see it."

Karolina bounced from one boot-clad foot to the other. "Yes, please," she said.

The Dollmaker went to pick her up, then stopped, his hands hovering above her. "May I move you?" he asked. "I don't want to be rude by carrying you if you don't want me to."

"I don't mind being carried. Your legs are so much longer than mine. It would take me for ever to walk across the room," said Karolina. She raised her arms, and the Dollmaker lifted her off the table.

As he walked over to the window, Karolina caught a glimpse of her reflection in the glass pane and a little more of her anxiety left her. The Dollmaker had captured her likeness perfectly; she had the same golden hair and large cornflower-blue eyes as she'd possessed in the Land of the Dolls.

"You did a very good job of making me," Karolina told the Dollmaker. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," the Dollmaker said. He seemed eager to change the subject, however, and pointed downwards. "Now, look at Little Kraków."