

# The Toymaker

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## Extract

Adam came into her office without knocking, startling her, and asked her if she'd seen his phone. She hadn't but she called it, let it ring out, while Adam looked on, hopeful, then downcast.

'I've probably left it in the car.' He smiled then slipped out, and Tess returned to her accounts. She was trying to hunt down the person behind the abuse of the company charge card, or had been, but she'd become distracted by finding more and more fiscal misconduct. It wasn't a few indiscretions – someone was systematically ripping off the company.

She was having trouble tracking the extent of the problem. It might be achievable, even easy, if the company finances were more straightforward, but they were, like all else, a mess. Although she was ostensibly CFO, Adam insisted on approving every transaction – both their signatures were required to make money move. When she'd challenged him on the pointless bureaucracy, he'd confided that it was an exercise in 'projecting power'. 'I want every employee to know that I'm watching them all the time,' he'd said. 'The more afraid they are of me, the better productivity will be. I want them to know that if they step out of line they'll be gone, like that.' He'd clicked his fingers for emphasis, twice. Like. That.

The company's core function wasn't complicated – they imported toys produced in factories overseas, processed them in the warehouse that sprawled behind their offices and shipped them out to toy stores – but administering it was a labyrinthine task, managed by a workforce whose jobs Adam made almost impossible with his oversight. He had an erratic way of jumping excitedly into a particular project, derailing it with his inspirations, then leaving it a smoking ruin.

Tess had found herself running the company by default so gradually she didn't notice it happening, picking up a new job here or there, until she seemed to hold the entire hierarchy like a bar of soap in the bath. Every couple of months a new batch of business cards would arrive for her, along with new duties that put her in charge of the minutiae, or, as Adam framed it, gave her 'shared executive power'. The way he said it, he could have been tapping her on the shoulder with a sword, rather than bequeathing to her the endless chores that he was too busy buying magic beans to manage.

She looked over at Adam rummaging through his desk drawers, oblivious to the world and, specifically, her, and the old loneliness began to wrap itself around her. So she did what she always did when she felt low, which was to call Arkady, waiting through the ringing for his thick Eastern European 'Hchello'.

'Arkady, it's me.'

'Lubovka!' he boomed happily. His nickname for her, roughly 'Little Love Thing' – which, as he joked, was about as affectionate as Russians got. 'How are you, my dear?'

'Oh, can't complain. How are you?'

'Terribly shit!' he exclaimed, and laughed long. 'I'm a hundred years old. Of course I'm shit! Let's talk about something else, anything else.'

They talked for maybe an hour, this and that, the weather, the family. She spent, probably, more time talking to Arkady than anyone else in her life. She loved her child, adored her husband, but Arkady was her best, possibly only, friend. He was the one

she turned to when she had a problem, and she relied on his unflappable old-school charm to cheer her up and steer her towards a solution. So, conversationally, almost breezily, she brought up the abuse of the company cards.

'I think we've got a thief in the company.'

'Excuse me, Lubovka, what do you mean?'

'Someone is stealing from us, the petty cash accounts . . . Some money has gone missing.' There was a long silence on the other end. 'Arkady?'

His voice was serious now, solemn. 'Do you know who it is?'

'Not yet.'

'Well then, relax!' Arkady said, his voice jolly again. 'It's probably a misunderstanding. I'll tell you what, put away your books and go outside and play. It's a beautiful day! And tomorrow I will come into the office and help you track down this scoundrel.' Arkady signed off, and Tess hung up.

Not long after she'd first joined the company, she'd found herself trying to process a complicated set of invoices at Adam's request, while he was away on a business trip in China. She'd been sitting at her desk trying to work it out, her child throwing a tantrum on the floor, she herself past the point of tears, when she'd looked up from blowing her nose and found Adam's grandfather standing at the door, staring at her.

Even though he'd passed the company he'd founded on to Adam, Arkady still dropped by occasionally, unexpectedly and unannounced, to go over the books. She stopped immediately, embarrassed and unnerved that the dapper old man, wearing a three-piece suit despite the sun beating down outside, his hat held politely in front of him, had caught her crying.

She'd met him only briefly, in the run-up to their shotgun wedding, and didn't even speak more than a few words to him on the day, although she'd felt his pale blue eyes following her, up the aisle, through the reception, across the dance floor and out to the limousine. It was a strange, searching look, not quite like the one she usually got from men; she couldn't shake the feeling that the old man was weighing her. At the time she feared he'd marked her as a gold digger, some silly rich girl fallen on hard times and trying to get her hands on his family's fortune. He'd given the same appraising look in the office as his eyes flicked from her tear-streaked face to the stack of orders before her.

'What is it?' he'd asked, his voice so soft that the purr of his European consonants was barely audible. 'Why are you crying?' He walked in and stooped to address his screaming name-sake, then swiftly scooped him up and spun him around. The baby, suddenly airborne, was startled out of tears and started laughing. Little Kade had forgotten he was ever unhappy, and, suddenly, so had Tess.

They'd started talking, and she'd been surprised and pleased to discover that she was having fun. She'd heard his story from Adam, many times, about the war and his time in the camps, and had expected someone bitter and broken by life. Instead, she found him warm, kind and unexpectedly funny.

For perhaps the first time since little Kade was born, she found herself having an adult conversation, realised she'd had no idea how starved she'd been for it. She found herself complaining about the weird turn her life had taken, how in a matter of months her bohemian wonderland had shrunk to the space of a beautiful but claustrophobic house, one that somehow had grown even smaller since her son was born. That she had tried to fix her malaise by coming back to work, a development that only made everything worse because of the endless, stupid tasks that Adam gave her. 'He doesn't know what he's doing!' she wept. 'He's like a child, and he passes it off to me the second it gets hard.'

The old man stared at her, impassive. She realised that she'd blown it. 'Oh God, I'm sorry,' she snuffled, and the old man laughed.

'Do not apologise to God,' he smiled. 'He owes us no favours.'

'I mean, sorry, Mr Kulakov. I didn't mean to insult your family. I'm just very tired.'

'My name is Arkady, please call me that, if you like. And it is fine. You are right: my grandson does not know what he is doing. He is sometimes like a child. A nice child, but still a child. But that is why we must help him.' Arkady Kulakov came in and pulled up a chair next to her, resting his hat on the desk and pulling a ledger towards him. 'I will show you how.'

Sitting down next to her, Arkady opened a stack of invoices, and, taking a fountain pen from inside his jacket, started to show her his secrets. He was methodical, businesslike, his voice gentle and soothing as a lullaby as he took her through the alchemy behind the money. Soon she found that she not only understood but was enjoying herself.

After that he often visited her, helping her navigate the convoluted path that money took in and out of the business. At first she couldn't understand why the old man was paying so much attention to her. She suspected that he was, in the way of powerful men at the end of their life, indulging in a not-quite-decent flirtation – enjoying the proximity to her youth, and what was left of her beauty – but before long she realised she'd not given him enough credit. Bonded to her, unexpectedly, through blood, fate and chance, he'd decided that she could be trusted to look after his legacy: his family, and the company.

'The very first Sarah, she was made to cheer up a little girl during the war,' Arkady explained to Tess one day, fiddling with a doll's arm, bending it back and forth to make it wave. For a second he was subdued, lost in thought, then he went on, in a louder voice. 'After the war, in Melbourne, I used to carve them by hand, but it was very slow, even when I hired help, so I found a factory in Japan. Australia was starting to get rich, and Japan, well, we had just won the war, and they had workers desperate for purpose. In this factory, the workers make the same carvings, but do them fast and cheap. Then I import them and sell them – same old Sarah, but much more money.'

Then, going to the ancient filing cabinets that stood gathering dust, Arkady pulled out reams and reams of paper showing Tess how Sarah was now made: the raw parts for the dolls were lathed in India, then shipped to China for assembly and dressed in clothes sewn by hand in Bangladesh, all orchestrated from Melbourne, where the shipping containers full of Mitties and Sarahs would arrive pre-packaged to be driven across the country. 'You see, Tess, it is always more complicated than it looks. Everything, always so complex.'

The old man wasn't lying when he played up the complexity of the organisation. In recent years, the company had been trying to update its systems of commerce and tracking from paper to digital, but half a dozen failed attempts now meant the systems were strung across a makeshift platform of shining Macs, hulking IBM server towers and rows upon rows of old-fashioned filing cabinets, which, after all these years, only Arkady seemed to know his way around.

As time had passed, and Tess had started to grow closer to Arkady, she found a visceral thrill in the making of money, in the warp and weft of it, and began to marvel that she had ever wanted to be an artist, or any kind of entertainer. She'd been raised to believe that there was no higher pursuit than to reach somebody through art, but now she could see what a pointless exercise that was. It was a finer thing to sit on top of the world, steering the fate of a multinational that provided jobs, homes and self-esteem for thousands of people across the world, bringing joy into the lives of millions of children every day.

Tess, who worked alongside Arkady to learn the secrets of the company, knew that one smiling child was worth a million self-absorbed adults stroking their chins and applauding her artistic vision. Here was something she was good at, something that made the world better, that made her useful, something that nobody else could touch.

The money could be touched, however, and someone was stealing hers. First alerted by the spending spree on the company card, she'd gone back to check through expense accounts looking for further evidence, and found that not only were staff expenses out of control, but someone had, very clearly, very deliberately, been cooking the books, sneaking false expenses onto invoices, overhead reports, cost appraisals.

It was across all departments, on dozens of accounts, clearly an inside job, almost impossible to see if no one was looking for it, and who would look? She was inundated; Arkady was retired. Money was being spirited away. On a payment to a factory in Shenzhen, for example, twenty thousand yuan had disappeared in the transaction, whisked off to a side account via some fine print encoded in the order. She'd been investigating for only a few hours and had already found thousands of dollars missing. Who knew how far back it went? It could be years of grifting. It could be hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Someone was robbing the company, and therefore her family. She would track them down and bring Arkady their head on a pike, finally putting an end to the low-key imposter syndrome that still accompanied her to work every day.

'Do you see, Tess?' Arkady had asked her on the day she started to understand the business. His eyes sparkled bright from the wrinkles that framed them. 'We have a critical mass now. Money, when you have enough of it, becomes an abstract although, unlike most abstracts, it has gravity. It has mass. When you get enough of it, it draws itself in. Now we just maintain, slowly, slowly, gently, we live. The rest will look after itself.' He'd laid a warm, worn hand on her shoulder and squeezed it. 'The hard work is done. That is all in the past. All we have to do is protect it.'

At the end of the first month's work in the Sonderkommando, Arkady's opinion of his captors had been revised upwards, at least in comparison to his view of some of his workmates, those in the Sonderkommando who seemed to enjoy their jobs.

Each unit was divided into work details. Given a choice, he would have liked to be one of those who took receipt of the bodies and processed them for raw material: the barbers who shaved the hair off the dead for recycling into textiles, the kommandos with clever fingers who harvested the gold pulled teeth and earrings and sent them off to be melted down. His unit was tasked with leading the new arrivals down the stairs into the gas chambers, then waiting outside while pellets of hydrogen cyanide were dropped through hatches in the ceiling into four mesh pillars. While he waited for the screams to die down, Arkady would try not to imagine what was happening. He wondered if there were other doctors hiding in his unit who had the training to appreciate what the gas was doing to the people trapped in the chamber, the cyanide starving their cells of oxygen, the panic that set in at a biological level, even before the mind knew what was happening.

First they started to drool, and froth, as seizures struck them. The screaming would peak, as people fought each other, climbing over their friends and family to try to get away from the gas that rolled out along the floor before rising to the ceiling. The weakest – the old, the infirm, the children – died first, their bones broken by the panicked hordes, pushed down into the gas and the tangle of limbs and vomit, blood and excrement expelled by dying bodies.

Arkady had learned, after a tooth lost to the butt of a pistol and a night spent hanging from a hook with his arms wrenched behind his back, the full weight of his body sawing at the ligaments in his shoulders, to cooperate.

So now he worked the ovens, hosed down the gas chambers, helped with the murders to stave off his own death, even though it was killing him.

He was aware that he would already be dead if he was in the general barracks where the men who had been murderers and rapists on the outside sat at the top of an awful hierarchy, elevated to overseer by the green triangles they wore. They would beat you depending on the symbol on your shirt: for being a Gypsy, for being a Jew, for being the wrong kind of Jew. The colour of the triangle on his own shirt would be a death sentence if the wrong kapo saw it.

In the Sonderkommando barracks, life was good, comparatively. Elsewhere in the camp people were dying of empty stomachs, or eating bread made from sawdust and gruel and still starving to death, bellies bloated from malnutrition. Out there he watched people who were now barely more than skeletons walking to their work details and imagined that he could hear the rumble, deeper even than the despair, of stomachs wasting away.

In his barracks, he was warm, slept on a straw mattress; he could bathe. There was a steady supply of food, cigarettes and medicine brought into the camp by those destined for the gas chambers. Best of all, there was alcohol, and most nights you could drink yourself into a dreamless sleep.

Every day he reported for work in the crematorium, where he'd had the luck to be assigned to a detail that cleaned up the murders after the fact, rather than facilitating them; moving the bodies from the gas chambers to the ovens, loading the ovens on a bad day; or, on a good day, collecting the outfits hung neatly on numbered hooks in the entrance hall, waiting for owners who would not return. He told himself that he would have refused, and been shot, if he'd found himself on the team that lured the new arrivals to their deaths.

Dion Baro, the Hungarian who wore the red triangle of a political prisoner, was always the first to volunteer, even when he wasn't asked, insisting that he be among the kommandos who met the trainloads and truckloads of innocents. He coaxed them into the gas chambers where they would strip and be led into sealed rooms where, under the pretence of getting clean, beneath fake showerheads hung from the ceiling, they would be murdered.

When the prisoners piled out of their transports, Dion would be the first to greet them, trotting up and shaking hands warmly.

'Come! Come!' he would urge. 'You poor things, you look miserable. Come inside and have a nice hot shower, get clean, and into some nice warm clothes. This way! This way!' He would scurry along, collecting the stragglers, directing them to ignore the soldiers loitering in the crowd and hurry to the comfort of a hot shower. 'Hang your clothes on the hooks; be careful to keep them separate from your neighbours. The faster we get you showered and settled, the faster we can reunite you with your families.' When he encountered resistance, he would improvise. 'Faster, faster, now. The water is going to get cold, and if you miss out, you're going to blame me,' he would chirp, adding a rhetorical flourish, 'faster, faster, there's bread and soup waiting for you on the other side. Look at me!' he might chortle, lifting up his shirt and slapping his belly. 'I do not need all the food we have back there.'

After they were all inside, the jolly mask would slip from his face and he would stand, grimly smoking a cigarette pilfered from the clothes in the entry chamber, waiting for the screaming to stop. When some of the other prisoners confronted him at night in the barracks about the glee he took in the work, he was unapologetic. 'I'm going to survive this,' he said fiercely. 'I have a fiancée waiting for me back in Budapest, and her family is connected. I just have to wait it out.' Dion's gung-ho cooperation with the Nazis meant warmer clothes for him, better food, occasional cigarettes and cognac, even a visit to the brothel the Nazis had set up to reward collaborators. If asked, Arkady would admit that he, like most of the kommandos, did not have plans that extended beyond surviving another day. Part of him admired Dion's faith in his future.

Dion died one day when he finished his cigarette and took his place dragging the corpses out and over to the ovens. He was tugging at the leg of a woman to free it from the pyramid of black and blue bodies when he recognised his fiancée, not, after all, back home arranging his freedom, but a prisoner, like him, now dead. And he could not be consoled, raging and weeping until the SS had, exasperated, beaten his face to a puddle, his breath ragged and bubbling, the air forced through lungs pressed by cracked ribs.

Dion lay until the end of the shift as his own blood pooled and chilled around him, when the other men from his unit carried him back to the barracks and dumped him on the floor. He lay there undisturbed until his moaning got too loud and woke his bunkmates, who then kicked him silent.

By the time Arkady's own shift had finished, he could tell that the man didn't have long to live. Still, he was a doctor. He might never have taken an oath, but he knew what to do, and he did what he could. With a packet of cigarettes he'd been holding on to, he bribed one of the kapos to bring him a kettle of hot water, and tearing up his bed sheets into bandages, he cleaned the wounds on Dion's face and body as best he could. The nose was broken, and Arkady snapped the cartilage back into place with the heels of his hands. Dion whimpered but he didn't wake up. Scrunching up cotton into little balls, Arkady soaked them in boiling water and cleaned out the mouth where Dion had lost teeth, then pressed little balls of cotton into the gaps to staunch the bleeding. Deciding that was all he could do, he cleaned the blood from his hands with the last of the hot water and stood up, to find he was being watched.

A cigarette glowed in the darkness, and behind it, a voice, soft, in German. 'You are a doctor?'

Arkady shook his head. 'No. A farmer.'

'You understand it's a very bad idea to lie to me.'

Arkady shrugged. 'I studied to be a doctor, very nearly, five years, but then, the war, and your people closed our schools down.'

'What is your name?'

Arkady recited the number that was tattooed on his arm, as he'd learned quickly to do, when talking to an SS man.

'No,' the shadow said, 'I asked for your name.'

'Arkady Kulakov. Who are you?'

The shadow moved forward, offered him a hand. 'I am Dr Dieter Pfeiffer. How are you with a scalpel?'

Arkady laughed. 'Are you going to give me a scalpel?'

'Would you like one?'

'Would you trust me with one?'

'Trust is earned.' The doctor finished his cigarette, ground it out, lit another and offered it to Arkady. 'I need an assistant to help me with my research. Pathology, blood work, dissections.'

'Thank you, but, with respect, working with a Nazi doctor is not something I am interested in.'

The doctor clicked his tongue, frowned. 'That may be, but I am offering you an alternative to death, a pointless death that will certainly come soon.' Pfeiffer lowered his voice and leaned in, so that the other kommandos watching from their bunks would not overhear. 'This is not the first generation of Sonderkommandos. It will not be the last. In another month or two you will all be executed and replaced. If you live even that long.' The doctor suddenly reached out and grabbed Arkady's coat, which he wore over his camp-issue striped uniform, and pulled it back to reveal the pink triangle sewn over his heart. 'Do your friends know what you did to end up here?' The doctor spoke louder now, for the benefit of the kommandos who had fallen silent to eavesdrop from the shadows. 'Do you think they would approve? We had another man of your disposition who was discovered by his bunkmates, and let me assure you, his death was awful, even by the standards of his awful place.'

Arkady flushed, angry and humiliated and suddenly afraid.

'Come and work with me,' the doctor offered, returning to his soft, mild tone. 'Your friend here, whom you have commendably tried to save, is already dead; he is beyond what medicine can do. You will be too, soon, sooner than you think. Unless you would like to work with me, and then you will live, and live well. We will take your pink triangle and exchange it with that of our friend here, and then you will become a political prisoner, and he the . . .' Pfeiffer paused, considered, 'degenerate.'

Arkady flinched at the word, and Pfeiffer knew he had found his mark.

'So,' he asked, 'what do you say?'