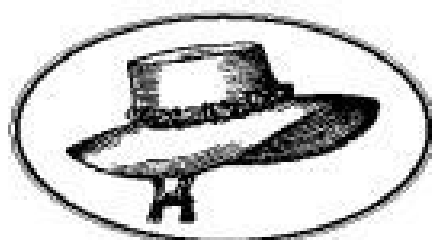


Dolled Up FOR Murder

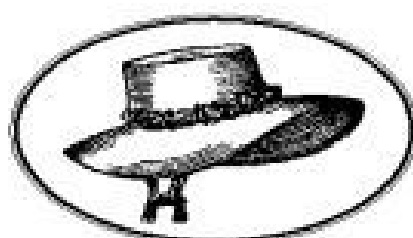


DEB BAKER



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK

Dolled Up FOR Murder



DEB BAKER



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Very hard to find

Nacho, the homeless man, wore the same clothes he'd worn the night before and had the same black garbage bag tucked under his arm. As he approached, his gaze fell on Nina's red Impala, and he froze in place.

"What . . . ?" Gretchen began, confused by his response. Nacho hadn't seen her in the passenger seat yet. He was reacting to the car as though he knew it. She jumped out when she saw him running away.

"Stay here," she commanded Nina, slamming the car door and breaking into a run. He turned the corner. Gretchen's pulse throbbed as she gave pursuit but Nacho had a wide lead. He cut across the street against the lights. Horns blew. Someone shouted.

Gretchen looked ahead just as he left the sidewalk and disappeared between two commercial buildings. Nacho was the path to her mother, the key to Martha's murder. She felt sure of it. This might be her only chance, and she wasn't about to blow it.

He ran like a desert coyote, like his life depended on it, his arms pumping hard and his eyes, when he glanced back, frightened.

Gretchen remembered the alcohol on his breath from the night before and wondered where his stamina came from. Maybe his fear was greater than hers, and his fear drove his momentum. Although he had nothing at all, he might have more to lose than she did. If that were possible . . .

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Antique dolls have histories much like their human counterparts. They have beginnings, and they have endings. Occasionally a doll collector is fortunate enough to acquire a doll with a hand-written history dating back to its creation. The collector can trace the doll's journey through its past owners and its travels. It is up to the new owner to continue writing the history, to keep a detailed record of the doll's lifetime.

—From *World of Dolls* by Caroline Birch

Head buried under a mound of pillows, Gretchen Birch struggled to ignore the phone's incessant ringing. She had stopped answering the phone at midnight, and it had rung every hour on the hour since. Gretchen lifted a corner of the pillow and squinted at the clock on the nightstand. Three in the morning. The answering machine would pick up after one more ring, and Nina's urgent message, the same hour after hour, would reverberate in her head until the woman called again at four.

What was the use? She wasn't sleeping anyway.

Gretchen fumbled in the dark for the phone and knocked it to the floor. Tangled in a sheet, she yanked herself free and lunged for the phone.

"What now?" she said. "Don't you ever give up?"

"You have to come to Phoenix." Aunt Nina, her mother's sister. Bold, bigger-than-life Nina. The dramatist. "Martha Williams is dead, and your mother is missing."

Gretchen rubbed her red, sleep-deprived eyes. "Drunken Martha tripped and fell from a mountain ledge. That's what you told me when you called the first time. Again, I extend my sympathies to you even though you hardly knew her."

"Your mother is missing." Nina's husky voice strained upward, hitting a high soprano note. "How many times do I have to tell you that?"

"According to you, she's been missing . . ." Gretchen checked the clock again. ". . . approximately fifteen hours. That isn't missing. That's out power shopping or taking a personal day to recharge. Knowing her, she's probably in Vegas, finishing up at the blackjack table as we speak."

"She didn't take her lucky bracelet. She would never go without it. And she wouldn't leave without telling me."

Gretchen's cat, Wobbles, brushed against her bare toes, demanding attention. The stray's leg had been smashed in a hit-and-run outside Gretchen's apartment two years earlier. She witnessed the accident as she stood waiting for the traffic light to change; the car traveling too fast on the winding street, the cat lying at her feet. Shocked and outraged, she scooped the injured stray into her coat, ignoring the blood soaking her clothes, and rushed to the vet. Too late to save his back leg, but a partnership developed between them. Wobbles, the three-legged cat, had stayed.

Gretchen ran her hand along the cat's silky black fur. She sighed and tried another tactic. "I lost my job last week. Downsizing, remember? I was terminated without warning along with several other startled, soon-to-be-starving souls. I don't even have the money for rent, much less airfare."

Not to mention that July in Phoenix is like the inside of a blast furnace. You cook from the inside out. Roasting, suffocating, charring heat. But Boston, home sweet home, is at its peak. Green, leafy trees, breathable salty air, foghorns calling in the harbor.

“A ticket is waiting for you at the airport,” Nina replied. “You have to get moving. Check in by seven, or you’ll lose your seat.”

Gretchen shot upright, startling Wobbles. “I need more time to think about this. If I decide to come, I need to make arrangements for Wobbles’s care, and I need to pack. I need to stop the paper for a few days and water the plants.” A to-do list formed in Gretchen’s head. “Impossible. I can’t come tonight. Tomorrow. I’ll come tomorrow. Maybe.”

Nina’s voice was tense. “Not seven P.M., Gretchen. Seven A.M. your time. You have four hours. Throw a few things together and dig out the pet carrier I sent you for Christmas.”

“But, but . . .” Gretchen searched her repertoire of excuses for the perfect response, but Nina had disconnected.

“I have to look for a new job,” Gretchen said aloud to no one in particular. What day of the week was it, anyway? Friday. With luck, she’d be back in Boston by Monday, following more weak leads to full-time employment.

Gretchen flung aside the covers and began throwing cosmetics into her travel case. Three fifteen the morning. What was she thinking? She was as crazy as her aunt Nina and, for that matter, her mother. All three were wildly impulsive and disorganized, and Gretchen secretly attributed the anomaly to a renegade gene passed down through generations of Birch women. A strong matriarchal line with a few crossed wires.

I have to learn to say no, Gretchen thought, considering another genome gone askew, afflicting her but having passed up her mother and Nina. Skipping generations, like twins. She could think *no*, shake her head back and forth *no*, and shout *no* in her head, but when it came to forming the word with her lips and emitting the actual sound, she froze. This inability to refuse a request had landed her in many murky situations. This one, for example.

She threw shorts and tank tops into a suitcase and sorted through a pile of laundry in her closet. Nearly all her clothes needed washing, but she tossed in the cleanest of the dirty clothes. She could wash them at her mother’s house. Before she closed the suitcase, she remembered one other essential item: her hiking boots. How could she forget her gear?

Phoenix had few redeeming qualities in mid-July, but it did have Camelback Mountain, and its most challenging series of steep inclines, Summit Trail, was Gretchen’s favorite. Before closing the suitcase, she added a Western states bird book and a pair of binoculars. Traveling to Arizona in July was on a par with arriving in northern Michigan in January, but she planned on making the most of it.

The first call from Nina flashed into Gretchen’s mind. Martha, a casual acquaintance of her mother, had fallen from Camelback Mountain. Found by a group of hikers. Broken. Dead. A destitute alcoholic with the bad judgment to leave the trails and wander along the rock outcroppings.

What could you expect from a crazy, onetime doll collector who roamed the streets and lived inside a bottle? Certainly not a gentle passing.

Gretchen struggled to remember more, but she’d been too tired at the time to listen to the details. Nina sounded concerned about her mother, but Nina tended to overreact to everything.

Gretchen, loaded down with luggage and a drowsy, medicated Wobbles, entered a taxi. While the

cabby expertly maneuvered through winding streets and roared toward Callahan Tunnel, which led to Logan Airport, Gretchen called Steve on her cell phone and explained the events of the last few hours.

She tried to keep her voice even, hiding the hurt she felt at his recent betrayal.

“We had dinner reservations for tonight,” Steve said when she finished, sounding groggy and confused.

The taxi flew into the tunnel, and reception on the cell phone began to break up.

Steve’s voice cracked. “This is sudden. And early. What time is it?”

“You don’t want to know,” Gretchen said, watching the tunnel walls, listening to the rapid clack-clack of the tires on the pavement. “I wanted to catch you before I boarded. It’s only for a few days. Nina’s concerned about my mother, but she’ll turn up soon. She might reappear before my plane even lands.”

“How is your mother connected with that woman’s death?”

“She’s not. Nina should be in theater. Mom’s off someplace, and Nina’s doing her sixth-sense routine. No two events can be coincidence according to her. The universe flows into and onto itself.”

“Your family is too weird,” Steve said.

Too weird for what?

Gretchen felt impatient with Steve, a gathering cloud of annoyance. *Just nerves*, she thought. *A lack of sleep*. She was about to lighten the moment by asking him what was so weird about a mother who restores dolls and an aunt who trains purse dogs, but the cell phone beeped and displayed the message Call Lost. She flipped it closed and tossed it into her purse just as the cab burst through the tunnel into the early morning sunlight.

Gretchen stood on the curb for a moment before entering the terminal, hoping to breathe the crisp Atlantic Ocean air. One last cleansing breath. But all she could smell was auto exhaust from the heavy traffic jamming the lanes leading to check-in. She considered calling Steve again but decided against it. Later, when she felt more rested, she’d call from Phoenix.

She knew she would sleep on the plane, catch up after last night’s lost battle of wills with Nina. She’d have to find a special therapy group when she returned to Boston for people like herself, people who couldn’t say no.

As the plane backed away from the gate, her thoughts turned to Steve. After seven years of dating, their relationship operated more by rote than by reckless abandon. Seven years without progress without commitment. Gretchen brushed away feelings of rejection.

She thought Steve had been preoccupied with the law firm. He would make partner this year, and that involved a deep commitment to the firm, leaving little emotional energy for a commitment to her. She had tried to remain supportive in spite of a growing sense of resentment and unease.

Then an anonymous phone call had revealed the real cause of his distraction: another woman. It only happened one time, he explained when she confronted him. No, he didn’t know the woman’s name, he said. And it didn’t matter because it would never happen again. He loved Gretchen and would do anything to make it up to her, he said. Anything.

Gretchen felt a sharp pain in her chest every time she thought about it.

Well, others had made it through rough times; so could they.

A few days apart might do them some good.

Caroline Birch was in trouble. Every nerve ending shouted, *Warning! Warning!* The Phoenix airport terminal's harsh lights and mechanical sounds felt surreal to her; intense, irrational, the day like a long, complex bad dream. She rushed now, holding her laptop close to her chest, frequently looking behind her, afraid she might be followed.

She knew that the note found in Martha's hand could be her death sentence. What a foolish thing to overlook, considering the seriousness of the circumstances. If Martha had trusted her with more information, she would possess a name and know what her next move should be. But her enemy was cloaked in obscurity. Invisible and, therefore, deadly.

Instead of standing her ground, the author of *World of Dolls* was racing across the country chasing one, betting her life that the doll would give her the answers she needed. A risky gamble.

Whatever it took, she had to get her hands on that doll.

A disembodied voice announced final boarding, and Caroline broke into a run, gasping for air but reaching the gate in time. Not a runner. Usually. But running now. Boarding pass checked, gate closed, cell phone turned off, she sighed in relief as the plane rolled from the terminal and gained speed, lifting into the air.

When the seat belt sign blinked off, Caroline stumbled down the aisle to the rear of the plane and entered a lavatory, clutching her laptop, her lifeline. She splashed cold water on her face and pressed her wet hands softly against her tired eyes. A few wisps of hair had come free from her cap, hanging across her bent face. She straightened and dried her hands, then removed the baseball cap, releasing her shoulder-length silver hair. "Foxy hair," her sister called it, her trademark. A distinguishing telling feature, when Caroline needed more than anything to blend in. She ran her fingers roughly through her hair, coiled it on top of her head, replaced the cap, and returned to her seat.

Casual collectors collect dolls for sentimental reasons—they owned a certain kind of doll as a child or they are adding to a collection that has been in the family for years. The serious collector enjoys the hunt, the taste of triumph, the sweet scent of success. Many serious collectors are dealers and are motivated by the monetary aspects rather than sentimentality.

—From *World of Dolls* by Caroline Birch

The July heat scorched the desert landscape. Gretchen could feel its heavy grip weighing on her body. She could smell the dust. Nina had picked her up at baggage and now drove through Phoenix traffic weaving in and out of lanes in her red vintage Chevy Impala. Wobbles was stowed in his carrier on the floor in the backseat, relatively calm thanks to the continuing effect of a tranquilizer. Nina's dog Tutu, was wrestling with Gretchen for the front seat while keeping one beady eye on the travel carrier.

"Tell me about Tutu," Gretchen said.

"A rescue dog. I saw her picture on the Internet and couldn't resist. She's absolutely perfect. She behaved. I can't imagine what sort of person would abandon such a wonderful pet."

Gretchen tried to pry herself free from Perfectly Behaved without success.

"How's Steve?" Nina asked, ramming through gears like a NASCAR driver. "Has he proposed yet?"

Gretchen, unwilling to ponder Nina's question, dug sunglasses out of her purse, quite a feat with the miniature schnoodle jumping on her lap. She locked eyes with the comical experiment in dog breed crossings. Schnauzer and poodle, minis at that. What would inventive breeders think of next? Pit bulls and corgis could be called piggis or pit-tis or corbulls or . . .

Gretchen stomped on her imaginary brake as Nina raced up to a red light, slowing at the last moment.

"Well," Nina insisted. "Has he popped the question?"

"We've discussed it," Gretchen said evasively.

"Discussed it?" Nina shrieked. "It's been seven years. One of you has a commitment problem. Or maybe both of you do. Living together yet?"

"No. We're comfortable the way things are." Talking about Steve and their stalled forward progress made Gretchen uncomfortable. Lately she'd been hearing her internal clock ticking louder than it once had. Ticking clocks, even those firmly attached to the wall, made her nervous.

The desperation she'd been feeling recently didn't thrill her either. She hated paging through the wedding announcements in the *Boston Globe*. Pages and pages ad nauseam.

One month and three days until she turned thirty. Chances of wearing an engagement ring were growing slim since her latest discovery.

"Humph," Nina snorted. "I'd give him an ultimatum in spite of his good looks. Pop the question and hit the road. That tactic works, you know. At least there would be some kind of action."

Gretchen couldn't imagine Steve's reaction to that sort of pressure. His imported Italian shoes

would curl up at the toes.

Nina turned right onto Lincoln and sped toward Camelback Mountain, its prominent hummock towering over the city. Caroline's home, their destination, nestled at its base.

Gretchen felt a familiar sense of wonder as she absorbed the mass of the mountain and the scope of the city. The dry, enormous clumps of reddish rock were visible throughout Phoenix and the surrounding suburbs of Paradise Valley and Scottsdale.

For all Phoenix's exotic beauty and its reputation as a haven in the winter months, it turned forbidding and hostile in July.

She had dozed fitfully on the plane. Thoughts of her mother had been disjointed and intrusive, allowing her only a light, uneasy sleep. Now she bounced new ideas off Nina. "Maybe she heard about a great estate sale and she's on a doll-buying spree."

"Must be in Timbuktu," Nina replied, refusing to catch the ball. "She would be back by now."

"Maybe she's mixing business and pleasure. She's probably sightseeing at the same time. No car in the carport, you said. Right?"

"Right."

"So we know she has it with her. And does this dog have to be on my lap?" Gretchen was annoyed with the schnoodle digging her sharp back nails into Gretchen's legs while planting groomed front paws on the side window, her nose leaving gooey streaks on the glass. Tutu wore a red lacy collar the size of a neck brace. Having sensed competition for Nina's attention the moment Gretchen opened the car door, the schnoodle insisted on the seat of command, which is exactly where Gretchen thought she should sit.

"You're in her spot," Nina said, sliding into Caroline's driveway and turning off the ignition. "You have to learn to share. See how nicely Tutu shares. Good Tutu."

Tutu wagged her tail and barked, a shrill, nerve-piercing sound.

Gretchen's opinion of dogs—groveling, dependent creatures with lofty attitudes and bad manners—hadn't changed upon meeting Tutu. Wobbles, like most cats, had a superiority complex, but at least he could clean himself. And he was quiet. Yapping dogs drove her crazy.

Nina produced a key to the door of Caroline's adobe-style home and stood back with Tutu to allow Gretchen to enter. "After you," she said with a sweeping gesture.

Standing in the doorway holding Wobbles's carrier, Gretchen felt like an intruder. The house was too quiet, disconcertingly vacant. It smelled, not fragrant and earthy like her mother, but like a closed-up, abandoned space. Her mother's spirit, which usually infused a room, was gone.

Dishes from a morning breakfast were scattered on the counter, and a newspaper lay open on the table. A box of maple buckwheat flakes had fallen next to the paper, the top left open. A few pieces of cereal had spilled from the box.

Her mother, in spite of her lack of organizational skills, was meticulous about keeping her kitchen clean, fanatical almost. She wouldn't have left the table like this unless something unforeseen had happened.

For the first time since Nina began calling yesterday, Gretchen believed it might be possible that her mother really was missing.

"See her bracelet." Nina pointed to a pink band lying on the counter. "She always wears it."

Gretchen picked up the bracelet designed to support cancer research and fingered the engraving. ~~Share Beauty Spread Hope. The bracelet matched the one on her own wrist. Their common bond was her mother's triumph over breast cancer, her mother, a five-year survivor: sickened by chemotherapy, bald, her once dark brown hair growing back a monochromatic silver. Their bond continued to strengthen through her long, frightening recovery and the sudden death of Gretchen's father in an automobile accident. Then came her mother's compelling need for a new life, ripping out established roots, the move to Phoenix to be near her sister, abandoning her life in Boston. And Gretchen.~~

"She left in a rush," Nina whispered.

"Yes," Gretchen muttered, studying the contents of the kitchen. "She didn't take the time to clean up, and that's not like her." She slipped her mother's bracelet onto her wrist next to her own pinky band. For good luck.

Gretchen wandered through the house. Her mother's workshop was exactly the same as she remembered it from her last visit. A perpetual work in progress: dolls hanging from lines, dolls scattered over workbenches, heads, bodies, repair tools. Gretchen had helped her mother with the simpler repairs such as cleaning and restringing before the move to Phoenix. Gretchen smiled at herself. She had lived every little girl's fantasy, rooms full of dolls and dresser drawers filled with doll clothing.

Nina made iced tea while Gretchen tugged Wobbles out of his carrier. He lifted his head and emitted a feeble meow, while Tutu's nose twitched, catching his scent. Tutu tried to climb Gretchen's leg.

"Call Tutu," she said to Nina, doubting that Tutu even knew the *come* command. How could Nina train dogs to stay in purses when she couldn't train Tutu in the basics? Yet her mother had insisted that Nina was the best purse dog trainer in the Valley of the Sun. Probably the only one, thought Gretchen, holding Wobbles in both arms. She'd never heard of the profession until Nina announced her new career move.

Nina picked up Tutu. Gretchen carried Wobbles down the hall to her mother's bedroom and wrapped him in the bedding. He seemed to smile gratefully and was fast asleep before she walked out, leaving the door slightly ajar.

Nina's iced tea smelled wonderfully fruity, and Gretchen sipped it slowly at the kitchen table. Nina plopped down beside her. "Tell me everything again," Gretchen said. "I want to hear it all."

"Early yesterday morning, hikers found Martha's body at the base of a ridge on the mountain," Nina began. "Information travels fast through the doll community, and by noon everyone knew about it, including your mother. In fact, I'm the one who told her."

"What did she say when she found out?" Gretchen asked.

"Very little, small exclamations of shock, I suppose. We were all gasping at the suddenness of her death." Nina picked up her glass with both hands and placed her elbows on the table, cradling the glass against her lips. "Then I told her the rest."

"The rest?"

"Bonnie Albright's son is a detective with the Phoenix Police Department. You remember Bonnie? She's president of the local doll club, the Phoenix Dollers."

Gretchen remembered. Red hair shellacked into an exaggerated flip, red-smeared lips, pencil lines where eyebrows used to be. "The Kewpie doll collector."

Her mother had a few Kewpies in her own collection. The original ones had blue wings fanning from their necks. Gretchen liked the chubby dolls, each with a small lock of hair and cherubic grin.

“That’s Bonnie,” Nina said. “She collects Action Kewpies. Farmers, drummers. Her son, Matt, called her right away because Martha didn’t have any identification with her, and he needed Bonnie help figuring out who she was.”

Gretchen frowned. “I don’t understand. How did he know Bonnie could help?”

“Because Martha had a doll parasol in the pocket of her shorts, and since his mother collected dolls, he thought she might know her. As it turns out, she did. Bonnie went down to the morgue, and sure enough, it was Martha Williams.”

Nina, a solemn expression on her face, set the glass on the table. “Poor Martha.”

“It sounds like she had a hard life,” Gretchen said.

Nina nodded, then noticed Tutu dancing at her feet. “Let’s take Tutu outside. The little dear needs to go.”

Tutu started yapping.

Gretchen watched Nina dig through a pouch as big as a baby diaper bag. Out came a white folded pad.

“What’s that?”

“You’ll see. Follow me.”

Gretchen smiled inwardly. Aunt Nina was as quirky as quirky comes. Stores her shoes on top of the refrigerator so scorpions can’t climb in. Had all the silver fillings removed from her teeth so she wouldn’t get mercury poisoning. Believes she has special psychic power and can see auras emanating from people. Gretchen wouldn’t be surprised if Nina believed that space ships flew out of holes in Antarctica.

The sweltering late morning heat hit Gretchen with enough force that she took a step back before willing her body into forward motion. After the relief of the house’s air-conditioning, her skin felt like fire. Motion took superhuman effort. Even her breathing became labored.

They paused next to Caroline’s swimming pool rimmed with Mexican tile and gazed up at Camelback Mountain. Gretchen could see a few die-hard hikers weaving upward among the rocks. She wondered how many of the mountain’s casualties were accidents and how many were calculated ends. What drove people over the edge? What did they think about in that final moment during the deadly plunge?

She shivered in spite of the heat. Even Tutu paused for a moment of silence.

“Where did she fall?”

Nina pointed to one of the highest peaks. “She must have been standing right about there. See that ledge close to the top? Bonnie thinks they found her about there.”

“She must have been an experienced hiker to climb that high. Summit Trail isn’t easy.”

Summit Trail was strenuous. Not a trail for beginners. Halfway up to the peak of the mountain, the trail steps ended, and the real climb began. Gretchen had climbed it many times and loved the challenge, but the majority of amateur hikers preferred to follow the gentler Bobby’s Rock Trail.

Nina shrugged. “As far as I know, she never climbed a mountain in her life. She was afraid of

heights. She couldn't even climb a ladder."

"Maybe she was trying to conquer her fear." Gretchen knew there were plenty of opportunities to overcome fear on this mountain.

"Bonnie said Martha was wearing sandals. Who climbs a mountain in sandals?"

Tutu began yapping again. Nina unfolded the small white pad and placed it on the ground. "Here you go, sweetie. Now do your business."

And Tutu squatted on the pad.

"This is the best invention ever designed," Nina said. "I call it the wee-wee pad. See how well Tutu is trained to go on it. No more accidents in the house if you lay one of these where you want your precious pet to go. No more rushing home to let the dog out. Not that I'd ever leave you home alone, Tutu dear."

Gretchen rolled her eyes. Nina needed an outside interest, something that didn't include Tutu.

"The only problem is that Tutu likes the pad so much she won't do what she has to do outside. No grass or desert ground for her. She refuses to pee-pee without her wee-wee pad. I would spread it out in the house, but Caroline says it isn't natural for a dog to go in the house, and she won't allow it."

Nina bundled up the used pad and handed it to Gretchen.

Holding it delicately between two fingers, Gretchen walked to the far side of her mother's swimming pool and deposited it in a trash receptacle outside of the cabana.

Instead of returning right away, Gretchen leaned against a barstool and admired the earthy Mexican tile decorating the cabana. Its open front faced the swimming pool with a circular cocktail area, and it had a small living space for guests in back. Gretchen stayed in the cabana on many visits, preferring its intimate coziness to staying in the main house.

Nina watched her from a lounge chair in the shade of a large umbrella. "Whatever happened up on the mountain, Gretchen, I'm afraid it wasn't an accident."

Gretchen sat on a lounge chair next to Nina and stared in bewilderment at her aunt. "What do you mean?"

"For starters, Martha didn't have any dolls. The bank repossessed her home three years ago, and she lost her entire collection, which, I heard, was one of the finest antique collections in Phoenix."

"You never saw it?" Gretchen eyed up the inviting blue water of the pool.

"No, she was an odd woman, reserved and not particularly friendly. I didn't know her well enough to have the opportunity. But that's not the point. The point is—why did she have a doll parasol in her pocket when she no longer owned any dolls? Martha was homeless at the end of her life. And that's not all. Brace yourself, Gretchen. I couldn't tell you this on the phone."

Nina reached over and placed her bejeweled hand over Gretchen's. "Bonnie told me the police found a note of sorts clenched in Martha's fist."

Nina might be hopelessly melodramatic, but she was pulling it off with style this time. Gretchen felt the hairs on her arm rising. "What? Tell me."

"The piece of paper had your mother's name on it. It read, 'Caroline Birch—put her away.'"

Gretchen stared at her aunt.

"My psychic ability is a curse sometimes," Nina continued, leaning back on the lounge chair and

crossing her arms. "I sense something dark happened up there. Martha Williams was pushed from Camelback Mountain and, I'm afraid, your mother is involved."

"Impossible," Gretchen said with conviction.

"That's when your mother vanished. Right after I called her and told her what the authorities found." Nina snapped her fingers, her voice urgent. "Poof. Like smoke, she was gone."

Nina roared away in her red Chevy to pick up her latest purse dog trainee, leaving Gretchen with time to herself. She made a peanut butter sandwich and a salad using slightly wilted lettuce from her mother's refrigerator. While she ate at the kitchen table, she adjusted her watch for the three-hour time difference between Boston and Phoenix, turning the hands back. Noon instead of three, a mere twelve hours since she'd given in to Nina's demands.

Instead of unpacking, she laced up her hiking boots and slipped her cell phone in her pocket. She rubbed sunscreen on her exposed flesh, hung her binoculars around her neck, and selected a bottle of water from a well-stocked supply in the refrigerator.

As an afterthought, she checked her mother's closet. Then she opened the hall closet. Her mother's set of luggage lay empty on the floor. A more thorough search produced a toothbrush in the bathroom. As far as Gretchen could tell, Caroline hadn't taken anything other than the car.

She braced herself for the explosion of afternoon heat and set off, leaving palm trees and bougainvillea behind. She walked up the hill toward Echo Canyon, where the trailhead to Camelback Mountain began.

Hikers, mostly sightseers and casual walkers, tramped up and down the footpath between the trailhead and a large boulder, where they perched like flocks of birds to admire the view of Phoenix and the valley below and to drink from lukewarm water bottles.

The serious hikers, many training for longer hikes, continued moving up where the footpath ended and the handrails began. Gretchen could see the dry washes below and cacti sprouting from impossible sheer cliff ledges. Birds flitted through the sparse shrubbery, calling to each other.

Gretchen felt light-headed as she trudged upward. Nina's words played over in her mind. Her mother. Vanished. A dead woman. Her mother's name in the woman's pocket. "*Put her away.*"

What could it mean?

A message? A warning? An accusation?

The timing of Martha's death and Caroline's disappearance wasn't coincidental, and she knew it. She felt a quick flash of anger at her mother for leaving without notifying anyone. The anger dissipated and steamed into fear. Was her mother safe? Why hadn't she called Nina? Twenty-four hours and counting since Nina had spoken with her sister, the time slowing to an agonizing pace.

Gretchen paused in her sweaty climb to admire the desert scenery. Her mother had taught her the names of the plants growing along the trails: saguaros, ocotillos, barrel cacti, and palo verde. Rattlesnakes, scorpions, and gila monsters also liked the mountain environment, three poisonous reasons to wear hiking boots and to stay on the designated trails.

Gretchen didn't think she could handle an encounter with any of these three creatures. But spiders were her worst nightmare. A black widow would provide a perfectly good reason to jump off a cliff. It was a good thing they liked dark, remote holes and rarely ventured near humans.

Cautiously she moved over the rocks, well above the cluster of tourists milling around on the boulder below. ~~She forged ahead, picking her way up, using the binoculars to scan the cliff,~~ remembering with each step the warnings about lizards and snakes. Sweat soaked her shirt and glistened on her face. Gretchen stopped to catch her breath and get her bearings. She could see the top of her mother's house in the valley below. Using the ledge that Nina had pointed out as a guide, Gretchen calculated that Martha had fallen from a ridge directly above her.

Gretchen's heart pounded against her chest cavity, and her throat felt tight and dry. She looked down at her feet, searching for signs that she stood where the woman's body had been discovered, but all she saw were clumps of red rock and a few straggly desert plants.

What if her mother lay injured somewhere up here? Could she be crumpled in the shadows beneath a rock outcropping? Gretchen continued climbing upward, sweeping the binoculars along the far reaches of Camelback until she was satisfied that she'd thoroughly covered the climbable part of the mountain.

She slowly began her descent, pausing again where she thought Martha had fallen.

When she raised the binoculars and spotted a small patch of color in the rocks above her, she thought she'd stumbled across her first sighting of a Gila monster. Her mother had shown her pictures of the venomous reptiles: massive heads and small, beady eyes, with orange, pink, or yellow blotches covering their bodies. She knew they moved sluggishly and couldn't chase her down the mountain, but she was nervous nevertheless as she edged closer for a better look. And closer. Until she stood a few yards away.

The orange coloring wasn't the scaly back of a lizard.

She was looking at a French fashion doll's paisley shawl.

Despite adrenaline pumping through her veins, Caroline fell asleep, a dreamless and heavy retreat from the world. The flight attendant gently placed a hand on her shoulder, startling her awake. "Please return your seat to its original position," she said quietly. "We'll be on the ground in a few minutes."

Groggy and disoriented, Caroline adjusted the seat and noticed for the first time that her bracelet was missing. Her lucky bracelet. Where could it be? She fought back the feeling of panic threatening to overcome her and forced a weak smile. *It's only a bracelet,* she thought. *You're getting superstitious in your old age, like Nina.*

She wondered what was happening at home right now. Were they hunting for her? Had they searched the house yet? She smiled to herself, feeling stronger and more confident.

No one could match her ability for concealing things. Thanks to her daughter's inherited competitive nature, their games had been played at a highly skilled level. Scavenger hunts. Traditional Easter basket searches. The challenge, each time, to be better than the last time.

Caroline grinned at the memories.

Let them look. They would never find it.

Paris was the birthplace of the first fashion doll. The doll's attire imitated the leading dress styles of the time. Since middle- and upper-class Parisiennes changed their outfits throughout the day, some fashion dolls came with trunks filled with gowns, ankle boots, tortoiseshell dressing sets, and other accessories.

Because little French girls played with these miniature versions of their mothers, few dolls survive in good condition. Most of the trunks and accessories were lost or destroyed.

A French Bru fashion doll in mint condition, with no cracks or repairs and in original costume, sold on eBay sans trunk. Starting bid: \$24,950. An original trunk would have made the doll worth much much more.

—From *World of Dolls* by Caroline Birch

“Ohh, isn’t it cute,” Nina cooed, holding up the multicolored cotton shawl. It was about the size of a baby’s terry washcloth.

“I wonder what this is worth?” Gretchen said in disbelief. “I’ve never seen anything like it before. It’s in perfect condition except for a tiny bit of ground-in dirt where it must have hit the rocks and settled in. It’s a miracle I found it.”

Nina looked up from admiring the shawl. “A miracle? No. This is a sign. You know that most of my psychic predictions come to me in dreams. Well, last night I dreamed about this very thing.” Nina frowned. “In my dream your mother was the size of a doll and wore the shawl over her shoulders with a dress from this exact historical period. I wonder what the dream means.”

“The problem with your dreams,” Gretchen said, “is that you can’t interpret them. You should take a class on dream analysis.” *Preferably one that doesn’t allow dogs in the classroom*, Gretchen thought with a watchful eye on Tutu.

Nina scanned a creased photograph lying on the table. “You found this next to the shawl?”

“The shawl must have been in this bag,” Gretchen said, holding up a brown paper lunch bag. “It was lucky that it had fallen out so that the colors caught my eye. The picture was inside the bag, and I almost missed finding it because the bag blended so well with the rocks.”

Gretchen gazed at the photograph. A French fashion doll with startling blue eyes, wearing a green silk gown, smiled serenely up at her from a compartment inside an open doll trunk. A straw hat with green ribbon and white flowers rested in her arms, and she wore glistening black earrings.

She noted the trunk’s domed shape, its brass-headed tacks, and brass handle.

Nina sat fingering the doll shawl, surrounded by her entourage, Tutu and her latest purse dog trainee. The trainee, a white fluff ball puppy named Rosebud, peered out from a large cloth purse slung over the workshop doorknob. Occasionally it emitted a shrill bark.

“Maltese like this one are so easy to train,” Nina said, leaving the table to give Rosebud a little attention. “Especially little females.” The tone of Nina’s voice curved upward. “Don’t feel jealous

little Tutu. You're smarter than all of them put together."

Nina looked at Gretchen. "Everyone thinks they can just buy a little dog and stick it in a purse. They don't realize it has to be trained to stay there. That's where I come in. Most of my clients are easy to work with, but Chihuahuas?" Nina shuddered for emphasis. "They're more like vicious little purebred attack dogs. I charge extra for them."

"Can't you take time off from dog training?" Gretchen asked. "Considering the circumstances."

Nina gasped. "I'd lose my clients. I'm in the early, most important stage of my new career. If I started canceling training sessions, word would get around, and no one would come to me anymore. That would be the kiss of death."

Wobbles, wide-awake after his long nap, was cautiously exploring every corner of the house. He made a brief appearance at the workshop door. Tutu's ears perked up.

"Watch Tutu," Gretchen warned Nina, reaching down and hooking a finger through Tutu's red collar to restrain her. "She's mesmerized by Wobbles, and she's licking her lips."

"Tutu won't hurt your kitty."

Gretchen shrugged knowingly. "I'm not worried about Wobbles. He could eat Tutu for lunch. It's Tutu I'm worried about. I'm not sure that Wobbles has had much experience with dogs." She smiled. Wobbles wasn't paying attention to either dog. Arrogant indifference suited him. He cared much more about his own investigation in progress and the new smells around him. After one smug glance at the dog hanging from a doorknob, he turned and stalked off.

"He's remarkably agile on three legs," Nina observed.

The doorbell chimed. Gretchen released Tutu and watched her race for the front door, yapping loudly. The purse trainee trembled, full-body tremors created by the sight of the three-legged stalking tiger and the ensuing commotion.

"That must be April." Nina rose from the table. "I forgot to tell you in all the excitement. I called her right after you called me. We should make sure the shawl is authentic. You remember April?"

Without waiting for an answer, Nina followed Tutu's lead and headed for the door. Gretchen lifted the Maltese out of the purse, holding her close and stroking her. In spite of her feelings about canine she couldn't stand to see any animal in a state of fear or in pain. Rosebud, fitting easily into her palm, licked her little lips nervously, but the tremors began to ease away.

Gretchen remembered meeting April Lehman briefly on one of her visits to Phoenix, but she didn't need a doll appraiser to examine the shawl. She sensed that it was the real thing. According to her mother, who was a well-respected doll expert and published author, doll heads were much easier to replicate than period clothing. The shawl couldn't be mistaken for anything other than an intricate antique doll accessory.

It was the picture of the doll that interested Gretchen the most.

April lumbered into the workshop wearing a muumuu the size of a Volkswagen Beetle. White crew socks and beige sandals completed her ensemble. "Hey, Gretchen," she called and heaved herself onto a stool.

"April can tell a fake doll from the real thing at twenty paces," Nina said, following April.

Gretchen knew that swindlers roamed the doll world waiting to dupe unsuspecting beginners. A good appraiser could tell an original by the number of eyelashes or the slant of an eyebrow or

marking in just the right spot. April and her kind were the backbone of the doll collecting community.

“What ya got here?” April adjusted her reading glasses and bent over the table to study the doll shawl. “My, my. Where’d you find this?”

“Hiking on the mountain. I found it in the rocks.”

April peered at her over the top of her glasses. “You don’t say.”

Then she went to work. The silence beat across the room while they waited for a verdict. Gretchen continued to stroke Rosebud, who snuggled closer and closed her eyes. After a few minutes, Nina began drumming her fingers on the table. April gave her a stern look, and Nina crossed her arms and still her impatient fingers.

Gretchen gently returned Rosebud to the purse, where she curled contently into a tiny ball.

Finally, April sat back, moved her reading glasses from the end of her nose to the top of her head and sighed with pleasure.

“It’s a wonderful example of a mid-eighteenth-century French fashion doll accessory,” she said. “No question about it.”

“I’m assuming it fell from the ridge with Martha,” Gretchen said. “Is that a safe assumption?”

April nodded.

“My exact thought,” Nina agreed.

“Bonnie’s son, that police officer,” April said. “What’s his name? Matt? He asked me to appraise the parasol they found in Martha’s pocket. Same historical period, same size. From the same doll, I be willing to bet.”

Gretchen held out the photograph she saved for last. “I found this at the same time.”

April whistled when she saw the picture.

“The tray is removable, and her trousseau is stored under it,” April said, running her finger over the image of the trunk with something approaching reverence. “See how the tray is lined with striped fabric? Wow.”

“I’m pretty sure the doll is a Bru,” Gretchen said.

April nodded. “A classic smiley Bru. She’s worth a ton of money.”

“How much?” Nina asked.

April thought for a moment. “I wouldn’t want to venture a guess without examining the doll,” she said. “What I can say with surety is that the doll is about seventeen inches high. I can base that estimate on the size of the shawl. The trunk would be about twenty inches long and fifteen inches high.”

“That’s a large trunk,” Nina said, reminding Gretchen how little Nina knew about dolls.

“Most fashion dolls were designed to fit right inside the trunks like this one does.”

“Why would Martha have an antique doll shawl and a photograph of a priceless Bru with her?” Gretchen wondered aloud. “Did she steal the shawl and the parasol?”

“Logical conclusion.” April’s voice was cold. “Personally, I never cared for the woman. Shifty, dishonest, thought, and unscrupulous. She certainly could have stolen it. But I’m not aware that any of the club members around here own an original Bru with accompanying trunk.”

“She had only a picture and a few accessories,” Nina said. “That doesn’t mean she’s a thief. Let’s not snap to any rash conclusions.”

Gretchen picked up the photo of the fashion doll and turned it over. On the back, she read the date that the film had been processed. Four years ago.

“Gretchen, is it possible Martha was at your mother’s house the night she died?” April asked, ignoring Nina’s defense of the dead woman.

Gretchen was surprised. “Why would you think that?”

“Camelback Mountain is right in Caroline’s backyard. I’m simply exploring the possibility.” Shirley arched a brow. “The police won’t overlook that, you know.”

Gretchen shrugged. “I have no way of knowing for sure. But my mother never mentioned Martha to me.” She turned to Nina. “Did Martha ever come here for repair work?”

“Caroline never mentioned it to me,” Nina said. “But everyone knew Martha. She used to be a member of the Phoenix Dollers.”

April shifted on the stool, her large form completely hiding the seat. “The next obvious question is . . . Where is the doll? And why did Martha have a picture of it?”

“That,” Gretchen replied, “is the prizewinning question.”

A find like this would be of great interest to her mother, and some of that curiosity had rubbed off on Gretchen. She’d love to see an antique doll of such quality with its own personal trunk of original clothes.

“We don’t have to notify the police, do we?” Nina said, scrunching her nose in distaste at the idea.

April swung around to look at Nina. “Martha’s death was an accident or a suicide, regardless of a few doll accessories and an old picture,” she said. “The investigation is routine. Bonnie’s son is the only one working it, and I’ll mention the shawl next time I see him, but it won’t change anything. In the meantime we should keep this our little secret. What will we accomplish by exposing Martha as a thief after her death?”

“The note found with Martha was rather mysterious.” Nina said.

Gretchen, standing slightly behind April, shook her head at Nina. Nina wrinkled her brow in confusion. The last thing Gretchen wanted was the contents of the message found in Martha’s handbag known by the entire doll community.

“Yes, the note,” April agreed. “It does beg an explanation.”

“Does everyone know about the note?” Gretchen demanded.

“News travels fast when it’s riding Bonnie’s lips,” Nina said.

“That’s the truth,” April said.

Gretchen checked her watch and left the two women chatting in the workshop. Six o’clock in Boston. Steve would probably still be at the office, even though it was Friday and most Bostonians would be on their way to happy hour.

From her mother’s bedroom, she dialed his business number. While the phone rang, she studied the Shirley Temple doll posed on the nightstand and ran her fingers across its white taffeta skirt. The receptionist answered and mechanically informed her that Steve was in a meeting and unavailable. Her harried voice reminded Gretchen that Steve’s commitment to the firm took other prisoners.

well, some not nearly as well compensated.

“Would you like to leave a message?” the receptionist asked.

“No. No message.” Gretchen hung up and tried his cell phone. No answer. She left a voice message saying she had arrived safely, her mother was still missing, and she would call later.

The bed looked inviting, but Gretchen knew she’d have trouble getting up again if she gave in to its beckoning comfort. She must look a fright by this time. Long ago, a few doll collectors had compared her features to the Shirley Temple doll next to her. Right now she was sure she looked more like a freaky Chucky doll.

Nina appeared behind her.

“Let’s go,” Nina said. “The day’s still young.”

Gretchen wondered at her aunt’s stamina. Neither of them had gotten much sleep the night before thanks to Nina’s persistence. Gretchen felt weary, her body still on Boston time. She ran her hands through her unruly brown hair in a futile attempt to restore order.

“Food,” Nina said. “You need some fuel. Let’s go out and get something to eat. April can follow in her car, and we’ll drop off my purse trainee on the way.”

“Where is the doll shawl? We can’t just leave it on the workbench.”

“I’ve wrapped it up in a wee-wee pad along with the picture, and I’ll stow it in the trunk of my car until we find out who owns them. The Impala trunk is more secure than a safe-deposit box.” She laughed. “You’d need more than a crowbar to break into it.”

Nina had wrapped it in a wee-wee pad?

“I can find something more appropriate,” Gretchen said, heading for the workshop. She transferred the shawl and photograph to a long sheet of bubble wrap and rolled it up, securing it with packing tape and placing it inside a small box.

“Ready?” Her aunt said, and Gretchen picked up the box and nodded.

Nina drove like a woman possessed by flying demons. April’s white Buick, which was noticeably dented on both the front and back bumper, fell behind and disappeared altogether when Nina gunned the Impala through a yellow light.

“We’ve lost April,” Gretchen said, looking back.

“She knows where we’re going. Let’s hope she makes it there without an accident. You saw the condition of her car. She’s crash prone,” Nina said. “Don’t worry about her. Worry instead . . .” she ground through the gears, “. . . about Wobbles and Tutu alone in the same house. I can’t believe restaurants won’t allow dogs. In France everyone dines with their dogs.”

“Paris streets are also dotted with clumps of doggy doo-doo. It’s everywhere like goose crap around a pond.”

“That’s why we have to introduce the French to wee-wee pads. A fortune could be awaiting us.” Nina peeled into a driveway and deposited Rosebud with the pup’s anxious owner.

When they arrived at Richardson’s Restaurant and entered the cool and dimly lit interior of the restaurant, they found that April had already made herself comfortable in a deep-seated booth. They sipped margaritas and ordered tomatillo toast and green chile stew.

Gretchen dug in her purse for her cell phone. She checked for voice messages, hoping for word so

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