

Long excerpt from Death Opens a Window

Emory tapped the bell on the counter in the lobby of Willow Springs – senior living spaces converted from a nineteenth century Italianate house. Sounds of a mountain forest from overhead speakers pacified the air, and silk flowers sprung from every available surface. *This place doesn't seem so bad. It's peaceful.*

A scream rippled through the tranquility. Emory leapt over the counter and pounded through the door behind it. His eyes darted about in search of danger, but all he found was a fiftyish woman clutching her chest with a horrified look. Before her was an open drawer. Inside was a chicken-bone doll with a bird's foot attached as if grabbing at the heart. The woman saw Emory and pointed frantically at the drawer. "Get it out of there! Get it out!"

*That's odd. It looks kind of like the one from Corey's office.* Emory threw the doll into a nearby wastebasket. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." The woman's breathing ticked down from asthmatic. "Okay, I'm fine now. Thank you." Her chest-clutching hand dropped to her side, revealing a company badge hanging from the collar of her purple polyester blouse. "Can I help you?"

Emory found himself staring at her swept-back, brittle hair – a patchwork of brown shades given a yellow luster from the fluorescent ceiling light. *She must color it herself.* He pulled his eyes away, glancing at the name on her badge before offering her a smile. "Hi Lucy. I'm here to see Mary Belle Hinter."

"Ms... Ms. Mary Belle?" Her hand returned to her chest. "Are you a relation?"

"I'm Emory Rome. I'm investigating the death of someone she knew."

"Oh good heavens. How awful." Lucy fanned herself with her hand. "She's on the veranda. The door down the hall to your right. You can't miss it."

"Thank you." Emory pointed toward the wastebasket. "By the way, how did that thing get in your drawer?"

The woman placed a hand over her heart. "I can't rightfully say. I imagine someone confiscated it from... one of our residents. We're a Christian establishment." Emory started toward the door when the woman stopped him. "Em'ry, you don't believe she had something to do with that death, do you?"

"No, I just need to talk to her."

Lucy pursed her lips. "Are you sure?"

*That's an odd question.*

Lucy continued, "I don't mean to speak ill of the misfortunate, but that woman is a hellion straight from the loins of the devil!"

"Thanks for the warning." Emory left Lucy to her shudders. *That's twice I've been warned about Mary Belle Hinter. Who is she?*

When Emory stepped onto the veranda, he was greeted by a stifling warmth, in spite of the weak winter sunlight slaving through the glass roof. *I wonder which one is her.* Among the tight scattering of more patio heaters than were necessary, he saw about two dozen elderly denizens – some sitting alone and others playing cards or board games. One small woman with wild silver hair, however, was kneeling in front of a tree and digging in the dirt with her hands, just beyond the veranda's wood-slat flooring. Emory smirked. *Lord, don't let it be the crazy one.*

A thin fortyish man in scrubs approached him. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Mary Belle Hinter."

The man scanned the area before the tips of his mustache reached for his chin. "There she is digging at that tree again."

Emory's shoulders slumped. *Of course, it's her.*

The attendant hurried toward her. "Ms. Mary Belle, what have we said about messing with the foliage?"

Either she didn't hear him or she ignored him altogether because she broke off a small offshoot of the horse chestnut tree's root and pulled it from the ground.

"Don't put that in your mouth!"

Before the attendant could grab it, she sure enough stuffed the piece of root into her mouth and sucked on it as if it were hard candy.

The attendant threw his hands up in the air and turned to Emory. "She's all yours."

Emory nodded and extended a hand to the old woman. "Ms. Mary Belle, could I help you to your feet?"

She looked up at him and rasped through cracked lips, "If I'd a wanted on m' feet, I'd be on 'em."

"Fair enough." Emory crouched on the ground next to her.

"Ms. Mary Belle, I need to talk to you about Corey Melton. Do you know who that is?"

"I know who he was." She looked at him with jaundiced eyes and pointed an arthritic finger at his face. "Who're you?"

"I'm Emory Rome." He handed her a business card. "I'm an investigator. You said you knew who Mr. Melton was. Why did you say that?"

The old woman buried Emory's card into one of the oversized pockets of her brown tattered cloak. "I ain't ne'er forgit a name or face."

"No, why did you use the past tense?"

Ms. Mary Belle's lips curled toward her withered cheeks. "I know why you're here."

"And why's that?"

"You're askin' 'bout a feller I knew but for one reason. The curse musta met its intention."

Emory clenched his jaw. *Here we go.* "Curse?"

"The thief stole m' prop'ty! So I hexed 'im. Hexed 'im good."

*Yep, she's crazy.*

Ms. Mary Belle laughed so hard, the root fell from her mouth. "When God closes a door, Death opens a window."

"When did you last see him?"

"Ne'er did. Coward wrote me a letter! Sheriff done his dirty work. Cursed 'im too." Her last statement added a proud glimmer to her eyes. "He still wit' us?"

"As far as I know."

"Well, give it time. Give it time. Oh me..." Without warning, a flash flood of tears washed away Ms. Mary Belle's self-satisfaction.

Emory placed a hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"That prop'ty's been my family's for gen'rations. From when I came ta 'wareness as a girl, I knowed I was gonna die there." She looked over his shoulder as if she could see her erstwhile land from where she sat. "Summer's always m' fav'rite. Dancin' ina black willer seeds that're floatin' ina wind. Cooling off ina crick. Course, 'tweren't deep enough ta swim in, but it's fun all a same. Ne'er did learn ta swim. And the taste o' the sassafras trees." Her tongue poked through her gummy smile to lick her crackled lips. "You e'er had a place like that?"

Emory shrugged. "I can't say I have."

Ms. Mary Belle wiped her eyes and focused them on Emory. "So you fixin' ta 'rest me?"

"What? No, I'm not going to arrest you."

"Takin' pity ona ol' woman." She patted the back of his hand. "You're a good young'un."

"Thanks."

"Can you he'p me get m' prop'ty back?"

“Unfortunately, there’s nothing I can do about that.”

“Sweet sassafras, you an inves’gator! Inves’gate how ta git back what’s mine.”

“I’m sorry.” Emory shook his head. “It’s not that simple.”

“I got money. I can pay.”

“It’s not that. It’s just too late to do anything about it now. It’s out of our hands.”

“Our?” The old woman’s pitiable fragility evaporated, leaving behind a desiccated grimace of anger. “You workin’ wit’ ’em! You all in cahoots!”

“No, I meant there’s nothing you or I could do.”

“Stealin’ what’s mine!” Ms. Mary Belle clawed at the back of his hand, drawing blood. As Emory recoiled from her, she sucked the tiny bits of his skin from her fingertips and then spit in his face. “I curse you! No moment’s peace ’til your reckonin’, whena cold handa death’ll come a beckonin’!”

Emory jumped to his feet and backed away, almost tripping. He wiped the spit from his face and glared at her in disbelief.

Ms. Mary Belle screamed, “Git out!” followed by incomprehensible words.

Emory could feel his arm hair shrieking to attention as he retreated to his car.