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MIDNIGHT

Whittaker House, Monterey, Massachusetts, October 2019

Little Annie

It's like being awakened from a dream, a real-feeling dream where you didn't know you were sleeping. Like being pulled from a thick, muddy river bottom into cold, clear water. Though last I checked, rivers don't have candles, and this place is full of them. Voices murmur around me: a prayer I've never heard. I can't see any people at first, just feel heat from their bodies and breath. Something in me quickens, and I get a notion that one of my children is nearby, like God opened the world just a crack to show me my boy. Louis, baby? Are you here?

I do know this place. The first time I came, my companion was a pregnant girl by the name of Clementine. When the pattyrollers came, I got free but had to leave her behind. I can feel her here too, my sweet friend and the child she called Birdie.

Now the candle lights dance, showing me parts of people: a sleeve, a shoulder, hands, and fingers intertwined all around the table. But where am I? Where is my body? The mangled hands I'm known by?

This massive figure is not my own, which was light and compact, no bigger than a young boy. I look down to see heavy white hands holding the brown ones on either side of me. Thick white fingers—five on each hand, making a full ten, which proves my hunch. From Craven County all the way to Wilkes, anyone who ever heard of Little Annie Durham knew I hadn't but eight.

Dominique

In the glimmering light, shadows dance and faces become glowing masks of themselves—each participant hoping for the miracle of a reunion. Lady Leanna, holding hands with two of the Seekers who took their seats early, lifts her chin, beginning to rock. Dominique is just as determined to make contact as the rest of the group members, but the mindset eludes her as she checks on her little boy, who's sitting on the floor in the corner, playing on his iPad. If she had childcare, Dominique would have been here in time to secure the spot she's entitled to, by Lady Leanna's side.

The Seekers—named after their freedom-seeking ancestors—wouldn't even be here at Whittaker House if not for Dominique. It was she who found the aged seer's business card on the bulletin board at the Red Lion Inn in Stockbridge: *Lady Leanna, Mistress of the Occult*—curling font full of promise and potency. From a Google search, Dominique learned that Lady Leanna's real name is Leigh-Ann Whittaker—of the Tyringham-Monterey Whittakers, the abolitionist family who built this house 225 years ago, one of many Underground Railroad safehouses in Berkshire County. Some fugitives got no farther than this house, perishing within these very walls or elsewhere on the grounds.

Lady Leanna has led a few séances for the Seekers before this, but tonight is the first time she's invited them to Whittaker House. And Dominique has a feeling in her gut that this is the place where he passed through: the ancestor of Grandmere's stories.

She sensed it the moment she stepped out of the car. Gazing up at the sprawling farmhouse, whose chipped red paint looked iridescent in the moonlight, her pulse quickened. Dominique woke Sidney, which wasn't easy, then pulled the drowsy child up the gravel walk.

Lady Leanna stood in the doorway, disapproving. "You've brought your baby again."

Sidney is three, not a baby. Under normal circumstances he would have corrected the mischaracterization, but Lady Leanna's grand proportions, pallor, severe gaze, and towering, silver-white hair intimidated him.

"There was no one to watch him," Dominique explained. "But he'll be good, I promise."

When Lady Leanna ushered them inside, Dominique could smell the package-fresh autumnal potpourri mingling with old wood—as if someone had taken pains to cover up the odor of something sinister. All these old safehouses have stories to tell, some less savory than others. The floorboards creaked, echoing the deep, metallic ticking of a grandfather clock whose face lit up as Lady Leanna's candle sailed by. Sidney squeezed Dominique's hand but didn't complain about the scary darkness as another child might. He's used to being dragged along, to observing these meetings in murky alcoves, the candles, the grown-ups' excited whispers, the chants aimed at reaching the dead.

While the group members took turns kissing Lady Leanna's hand, Dominique imagined how this would look to Michelle, her nonbelieving ex-girlfriend. Eight young Black people groveling before an old white lady dressed in beads and lace. But Lady Leanna says touching a seer with

your lips as well as your fingers quickens communication with the spirits. Besides, Michelle is not here.

Sidney is fine now, calm with his iPad. He's so good. Dominique glances at him once more in the middle of the initial incantation and sees he's not alone. A little girl about his age, with fluffy coils of hair, is sitting beside him, delicate chin on his shoulder, eyes appearing to take in the images on his device, just as natural as can be. Sidney either doesn't notice her or doesn't mind the company. *I should worry*, Dominique thinks, since she doesn't know who the other child is or where she came from. But a worrying sort of mother wouldn't bring Sidney to a midnight séance at all.

Dominique exhales and adds her voice to the last lines of the chant as Lady Leanna shudders, rocking more violently. The whites of the old woman's eyes shine in the candlelight. The deep and scratchy voice that comes from her throat is not her own.