

ABARAT

CLIVE BARKER



JOANNA COTLER BOOKS

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

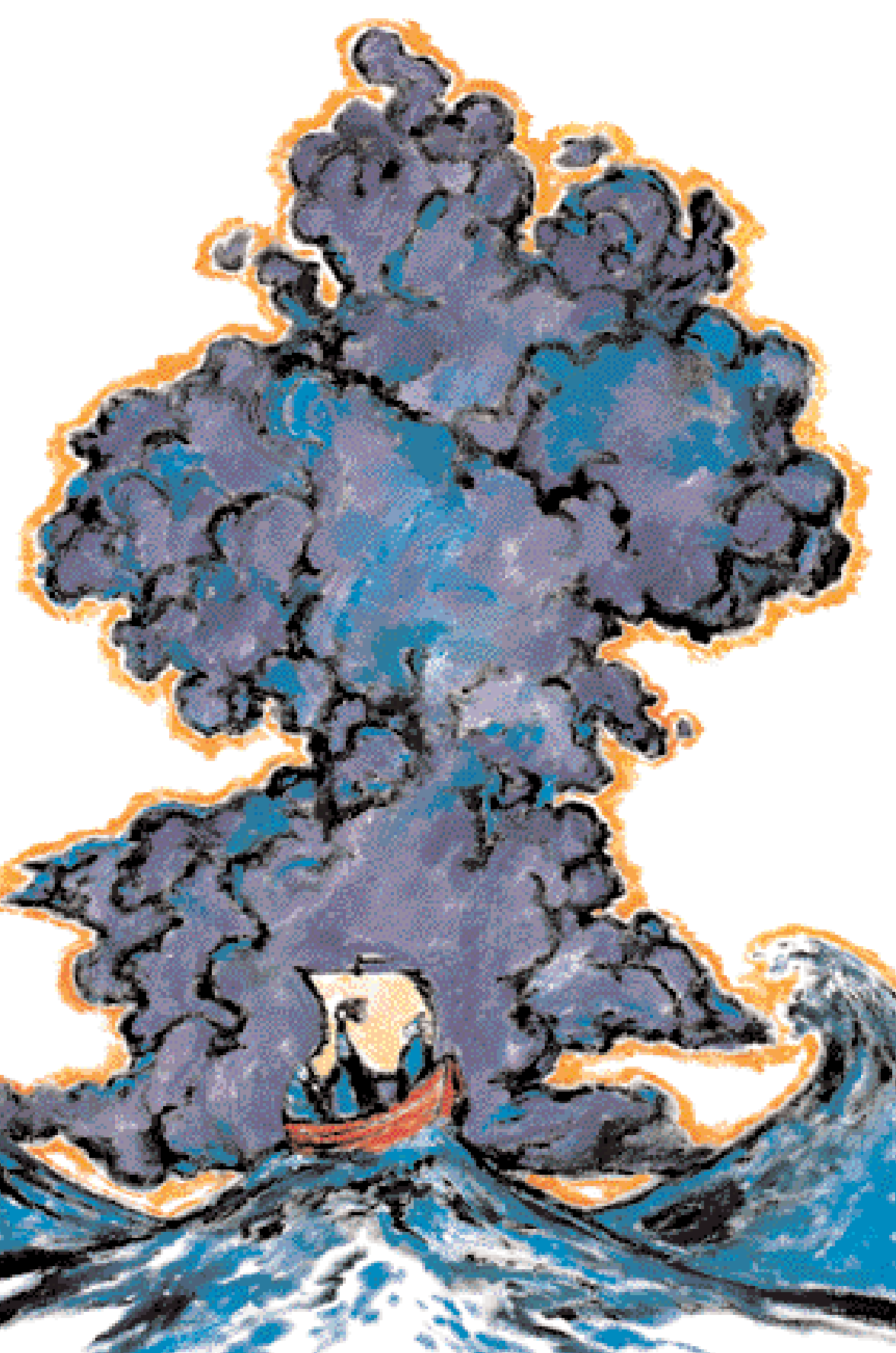
PROLOGUE

THE MISSION



*Three is the number of those who do holy work;
Two is the number of those who do lover's work;
One is the number of those who do perfect evil
Or perfect good.*

—From the notes of a monk
of the Order of St. Oco;
his name unknown



THE STORM CAME UP out of the southwest like a fiend, stalking its prey on legs of lightning.

The wind it brought with it was as foul as the devil's own breath and it stirred up the peaceful waters of the sea. By the time the little red boat that the three women had chosen for their perilous voyage had emerged from the shelter of the islands, and was out in the open waters, the waves were as steep as cliffs, twenty-five, thirty feet tall.

"Somebody sent this storm," said Joephi, who was doing her best to steer the boat, which was called *The Lyre*. The sail shook like a leaf in a tempest, swinging back and forth wildly, nearly impossible to hold down. "I swear, Diamanda, this is no natural storm!"

Diamanda, the oldest of the three women, sat in the center of the tiny vessel with her dark blue robes gathered around her and their precious cargo pressed to her bosom.

"Let's not get hysterical," she told Joephi and Mespa. She wiped a long piece of white hair out of her eyes. "Nobody saw us leave the Palace of Bowers. We escaped unseen, I'm certain of it."

"So why this storm?" said Mespa, who was a black woman, renowned for her resilience, but who now looked close to being washed away by the rain beating down on the women's heads.

"Why are you so surprised that the heavens complain?" Diamanda said. "Didn't we know the world would be turned upside down by what just happened?"

Joephi fought with the sail, cursing it.

"Indeed, isn't this the way it *should* be?" Diamanda went on.

“Isn’t it right that the sky is torn to tatters and the sea put in a frenzy? Would we prefer it if the world did not care?”

“No, no of course not,” said Mespa, holding on to the edge of the pitching boat, her face as white as her close-cropped hair was black. “I just wish we weren’t out in the middle of it all.”

“Well, we are!” said the old woman. “And there’s not a thing any of us can do about it. So I suggest you finish emptying your stomach, Mespa—”

“It *is* empty,” the sick woman said. “I have nothing left to bring up.”

“—and you Joephi, handle the sail—”

“Oh, Goddesses . . .” Joephi murmured. “*Look.*”

“What is it?” said Diamanda.

Joephi pointed up into the sky.

Several stars had been shaken down from the firmament—great white cobs of fire piercing the clouds and falling seaward. One of them was heading directly toward *The Lyre*.

“Down!” Joephi yelled, catching hold of the back of Diamanda’s robes and pushing the old woman off her seat.

Diamanda hated to be touched; *manhandling*, she called it. She started to berate Joephi roundly for what she’d done, but she was drowned out by the roaring sound of the falling star as it rushed toward the vessel. It burst the billowing sail of *The Lyre*, burning a hole right through the canvas, and then plunged into the sea, where it was extinguished with a great hissing sound.

“I swear that was meant for us,” Mespa said when they had all raised their heads from the boards. She helped Diamanda to her feet.

“All right,” the old lady replied, yelling over the din of the seething waters, “that was closer than I would have liked.”

“So you think we *are* targets?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” Diamanda said. “We just have to trust to the holiness of our mission.”

Mespa licked her pale lips before she chanced her next words.

“Are we *sure* it’s holy?” she said. “Perhaps what we’re doing is sacrilegious. Perhaps she should be left to—”

“*Rest in peace?*” said Joephi.

“Yes,” Mespa replied.

“She was barely more than a girl, Mespa,” Joephi said. “She had a life of perfect love ahead of her, and it was stolen.”

“Joephi’s right,” said Diamanda. “Do you think a soul like hers would sleep quietly, with so much life left to live? So many dreams that she never saw come true?”

Mespa nodded. “You’re right, of course,” she conceded. “We must do this work, whatever the cost.”

The thunderhead that had followed them from the islands was now directly overhead. It threw down a vile, icy rain, thick as phlegm, which struck the boards of *The Lyre* like drumming. The lightning came down around the trembling vessel on every side, its lurid light throwing the curling waves into silhouette as they rose to break over the boat.

“The sail’s no use to us now,” said Joephi, looking up at the tattered canvas.

“Then we must find other means,” said Diamanda. “Mespa. Take hold of our cargo for a few moments. And be careful.”

With great reverence Mespa took the small box, its sides and lid decorated with the closely etched lines of talismans. Relieved of her burden, Diamanda walked down to the stern of *The Lyre*, the pitching of the boat threatening several times to throw her over the side before she reached the safety of the little seat. There she knelt and leaned forward, plunging her arthritic hands into the icy waters.

“You’d best be careful,” Mespa warned her. “There’s a fifty-foot mantizac that’s been following us for the last half hour. I saw it when I was throwing up.”

“No self-respecting fish is going to want my old bones,” Diamanda said.

She’d no sooner spoken than the mottled head of a mantizac—not quite the size Mespa had described, but still huge—broke the

surface. Its vast maw gaped not more than a foot from Diamanda's outstretched arms.

"*Goddess!*" the old lady yelled, withdrawing her hands and sitting up sharply.

The frustrated fish pushed against the back of the boat, as if to nudge one of the human morsels on board into its own element.

"So . . ." said Diamanda. "I think this calls for some moon-magic."

"Wait," said Joephi. "You said if we used magic, we would risk drawing attention to ourselves."

"So I did," Diamanda replied. "But in our present state we risk drowning or being eaten by that *thing*." The mantizac was now moving up the side of *The Lyre*, turning up its enormous head and fixing the women with its silver-and-scarlet eye.

Mespa clutched the little box even closer to her bosom. "It won't take me," she said, a profound terror in her voice.

"No," said Diamanda reassuringly. "*It won't.*"

She raised her aged hands. Dark threads of energy moved through her veins and leaped from her fingertips, forming delicate shapes on the air, and then fled heavenward.

"Lady Moon," she called. "You know we would not call on you unless we needed your intervention. So we do. Lady, we three are of no consequence. We ask this boon not for ourselves but for the soul of one who was taken from among us before she was ready to leave. Please, Lady, bear us all safely through this storm, so that her life may find continuance . . ."

"*Name our destination!*" Joephi yelled over the roar of the water.

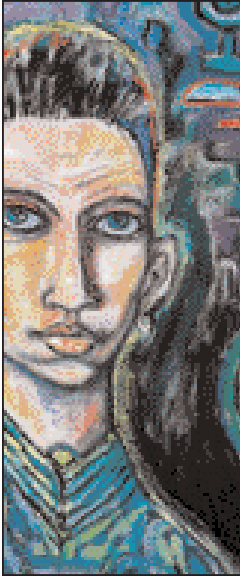
"She knows our minds," Diamanda said.

"Even so," Joephi replied. "*Name it!*"

Diamanda glanced back at her companion, faintly irritated. "If you insist," she said. Then, reaching toward the sky again, she said: "*Take us to the Hereafter.*"

"Good," said Joephi.

"Lady, hear us—" Diamanda started to say.



But she was interrupted by Mespa.

“She heard, Diamanda.”

“What?”

“She heard.”

The three women looked up. The roiling storm clouds were parting, as though pressed aside by titanic hands. Through the widening slit there came a shaft of moonlight: the purest white, yet somehow warm. It illuminated the trough between the waves where the women’s boat was buried. It covered the vessel from end to end with light.

“Thank you, Lady . . .” Diamanda murmured.

The moonlight was *moving* over the boat, searching out every part of the tiny vessel, even to the shadowy keel that lay beneath the water. It blessed every nail and board from prow to stern, every grommet, every oar, every pivot, every fleck of paint, every inch of rope.

It touched the women too, inspiring fresh life in their weary bones and warming their icy skin.

All of this took perhaps ten seconds.

Then the clouds began to close again, cutting the moonlight off. Just as abruptly as it had begun, the blessing was over.

The sea seemed doubly dark when the light had passed away, the wind keener. But the timbers of the boat had acquired a subtle luminescence from the appearance of the moon, and they were stronger for the benediction they had received. The boat no longer creaked when it was broad-sided. Instead it seemed to rise effortlessly up the steep sides of the waves.

"That's better," said Diamanda.

She reached out to reclaim their precious cargo.

"I can take care of it," Mespa protested.

"I'm sure you can," said Diamanda. "But the responsibility lies with me. I know the world we're going to, remember? You don't."

"You remember the way it *was*," Joephi reminded her. "But it will have changed."

"Very possibly," Diamanda agreed. "But I still have a better idea of what lies ahead of us than you two do. Now give me the box, Mespa."

Mespa handed the treasure over, and the women's vessel carved its way through the lightless sea, picking up speed as it went, the bow lifting a little way above the waters.

The rain continued to beat down on the women's heads, gathering in the bottom of the boat until it was four inches deep. But the voyagers took no notice of its assault. They simply sat together in grateful silence, as the magic of the moon hurried them toward their destination.

"*There!*" said Joephi. She pointed off toward the distant shore. "I see the Hereafter."

"I see it too!" said Mespa. "Oh, thank the Goddess! I see it! I see it!"

"Hush yourselves," Diamanda said. "We don't want to draw attention."

"It looks empty," Joephi said, scanning the landscape ahead. "You said there was a town."

“There *is* a town. But it’s a little distance from the harbor.”

“I see no harbor.”

“Well, there’s not much of it left,” Diamanda said. “It was burned down, long before my time.”

The keel of *The Lyre* was grating on the shore of the Hereafter. Joephi was first out, hauling on the rope and securing it to a piece of aged timber that was driven into the ground. Mespa helped Diamanda out, and the three of them stood side by side assessing the unpromising landscape spread before them. The storm had followed them across the divide between the two worlds, its fury undimmed.

“Now, let’s remember,” said Diamanda, “we’re here to do one thing and one thing only. We get our business done and then we leave. Remember: *we should not be here.*”

“We know that,” said Mespa.

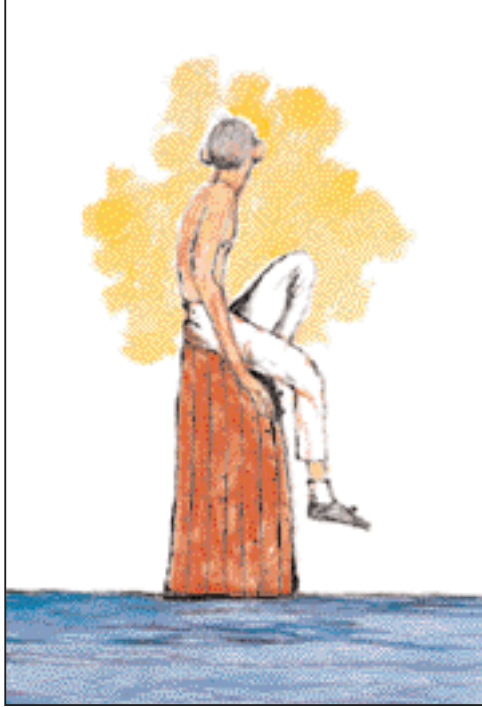
“But let’s not be hasty and make a mistake,” Joephi said, glancing at the box Diamanda carried. “For *her* sake we have to do this right. We carry the hopes of the Abarat with us.”

Even Diamanda was quieted by this remark. She seemed to meditate on it for a long moment, her head downturned, the rain washing her white hair into curtains that framed the box she held. Then she said: “Are you both ready?”

The other women murmured that yes, they were; and with Diamanda leading the way, they left the shore and headed through the rain-lashed grass, to find the place where providence had arranged they would do their holy work.

PART ONE

MORNINGTIDE



*Life is short,
And pleasures few,
And holed the ship,
And drowned the crew,
But o! But o!
How very blue
The sea is!*

—The last poem written by
Righteous Bandy, the nomad
Poet of Abarat



ROOM NINETEEN

THE PROJECT MISS SCHWARTZ had set for Candy's class was simple enough. Everyone had a week to bring into school ten interesting facts about the town in which they all lived. Something about the history of Chickentown would be fine, she said, or, if students preferred, facts about the way the town was today, which meant, of course, the same old stuff about chicken farming in modern Minnesota.

Candy had done her best. She'd visited the school library and scoured its shelves for something, *anything*, about the town that to her sounded vaguely *interesting*. There was nothing. Nada, zero, zip. There was a library on Naughton Street that was ten times the size of the school library; so she went there. Again, she scanned the shelves. There were a few books about Minnesota that mentioned the town, but the same boring facts were repeated in volume after volume. Chickentown had a population of 36,793 and it was the biggest producer of chicken meat in the state. One of the books, having mentioned the chickens, described the town as "otherwise undistinguished."

Perfect, Candy thought. *I live in a town that is otherwise undistinguished*. Well, that was Fact Number One. She needed only nine more.

"We live in the most boring town in the country," she complained to her mother, Melissa, when she returned home. "I can't find anything worth writing about for Miss Schwartz."

Melissa Quackenbush was in the kitchen, making meatloaf. The kitchen door was closed, so as not to disturb Candy's father, Bill. He was in a beer-induced slumber in front of the television, and Candy's mother wanted to keep it that way. The longer he stayed unconscious, the easier it was for everyone in the house—including Candy's brothers, Don and Ricky—to get on with their lives. Nobody ever mentioned this aloud. It was a silent understanding between the members of the household. Life was more pleasant for everyone when Bill Quackenbush was asleep.

"Why do you say it's *boring*?" Melissa asked, as she seasoned the meatloaf.

"Just take a look out there," Candy said.

Melissa didn't bother, but that was only because she knew the scene outside the window all too well. Beyond the grimy glass was the family's chaotic backyard: the shin-high grass browned by the heat wave that had come unexpectedly in the middle of May, the inflatable pool they'd bought the previous summer and had never deflated and stowed away, now a dirty circle of red-and-white plastic at the far end of the yard. Beyond the collapsed pool was the broken fence. And beyond the fence? Another yard in not much better shape, and another, and another, until eventually the yards ended, and the streets too, and the empty grasslands began.

"I know what you want for your project," she said.

"Oh?" said Candy, going to the fridge and taking out a soda. "What do I want?"

"You want something *weird*," Melissa said, putting the meat into the baking tin and thumbing it down. "You've got a little morbid streak in you, just like your grandma Frances. She used to go to the funerals of complete strangers—"

"She did not," Candy said with a laugh.

"She did. I swear. She loved anything like that. You get it from her. You certainly don't get it from me or your dad."

"Oh well, that really makes me feel welcome."

"You know what I mean," Candy's mother protested.

“So you don’t think Chickentown is boring?” Candy said.

“There are worse places, believe me,” Melissa said. “At least it’s got a bit of history . . .”

“Not much of one. Not according to the books I looked at,” Candy said.

“You know who you should talk to?” Melissa said.

“Who?”

“Norma Lipnik. You remember Norma? She and I used to work at the Comfort Tree Hotel together?”

“Vaguely,” Candy said.

“All kinds of strange things happen at hotels. And the Comfort Tree has been around since . . . oh, I don’t know. You ask Norma, she’ll tell you.”

“Is she the one with the white-blond hair, who always wore too much lipstick?”

Melissa looked up at her daughter with a little smile. “Don’t you go saying anything rude to her now.”

“I wouldn’t do a thing like that.”

“I know how these things slip out with you.”

“*Mom*. I’ll be really polite.”

“Good. You do that. She’s the assistant manager there now, so if you’re real nice to her, and you ask the right questions, I bet you she’ll give you something for your project that nobody else in class will have.”

“Like what?”

“You go over there and ask her. She’ll remember you. Ask her to tell you about Henry Murkitt.”

“Who’s Henry Murkitt?”

“You go and ask her. It’s your project. You should get out there and do some legwork. Like a detective.”

“Is there much to detect?” Candy said.

“You’d be surprised.”

She was. The first surprise was Norma Lipnik herself, who was no longer the tacky woman that Candy remembered: her hair teased

high and her dress too short. In the eight years or so since Candy had seen Norma, she had let her hair go naturally gray. The bright red lipstick was a thing of the past, as were the short dresses. But once Candy had introduced herself, Norma's new professional reserve was soon cast to the winds, and the warm gossipy woman Candy remembered emerged.

"Lord, how you have grown, Candy," she said. "I never see you around; you or your mother. Is she doing okay?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"I heard your dad lost his job at the chicken factory. Had a little problem with the beer, so I was told?" Candy didn't have time to agree or deny this. "You know what? I think that sometimes people should be given second chances. If you don't give people second chances, how are they ever going to change?"

"I don't know," Candy said, feeling uncomfortable.

"*Men.*" Norma said, "You stay away from them, darlin'. They are more trouble than they're worth. I'm on my third marriage, and I don't give that more than two months."

"Oh—"

"Anyway, you didn't come over here to listen to me chattering on. So how can I help you?"

"I've got this project to do, about Chickentown," Candy explained. "It was set by Miss Schwartz, who always gives us these projects that are only fit for sixth graders. Besides, she doesn't like me very much—"

"Oh, don't let her get you down, honey. There's always one who makes your life hell. You'll be out of school soon enough. What are you going to do then? Work over at the factory?"

Candy felt a great weight settle on her shoulders, imagining that horrendous prospect.

"I hope not," she said. "I want to do something more with my life."

"But you don't know what?"

Candy shook her head.

“Don’t worry, it’ll come to Norma said. “I hope it does, because you don’t want to get stuck here.”

“No, I don’t. I really don’t.”

“So you’ve got a project about Chickentown—”

“Yes. And Mom said there were some things that went on in the hotel I should find out about. She said you’d know what she was talking about.”

“Did she indeed?” said Norma with a teasing little smile.

“She said to ask you about Henry—

“—Murkitt.”

“Yes. Henry Murkitt.”

“Poor old Henry. What else did she say? Did she tell you about Room Nineteen?”

“No. She didn’t mention anything about a room. She just gave me the name.”

“Well, I can tell you the tale,” Norma said. “But I don’t know if Murkitt’s story is the kind of thing your Miss Schwartz will be looking for.”

“Why not?”

“Well, because it’s rather *dark*,” Norma said. “Tragic, in fact.”

Candy smiled. “Well, Mom says I’m morbid, so I’ll probably like it.”

“Morbid, huh? All right,” said Norma. “I guess I should tell you the whole darn thing. You see, Chickentown used to be called Murkitt.”

“Really? That wasn’t in any of the books about Minnesota.”

“You know how it is. There’s the history that finds its way into the books and there’s the history that doesn’t.”



“And Henry Murkitt—?”

“—is part of the history that doesn’t.”

“Huh.”

Candy was fascinated. Remembering what her mother had said about doing some detective work, she took out her notebook and began to write in it. *Murkitt. History we don’t know.*

“So the town was named after Henry Murkitt?”

“No,” said Norma. “It was named after his grandfather Wallace Murkitt.”

“Why did they change it?”

“I guess Chickentown fits, doesn’t it? This place has got more damn chickens in it than it has people. And sometimes I think folks care more about the chickens than they do about each other. My husband works over at the factory, so that’s all I ever hear from him and his friends—”

“Chicken talk?”

“Chickens, chickens and more darn chickens.” Norma glanced at her watch. “You know I don’t have much time to show you Room Nineteen today. I’ve got a big party of folks coming in. Can we do this another day?”

“I’ve got to have the report in by tomorrow morning.”

“You kids, always leaving things to the last minute,” Norma said. “Well, okay. We’ll do this quickly. But you be sure to jot it all down, because I won’t have time to say anything twice.”

“I’m ready,” said Candy.

Norma took her passkey from her pocket. “Linda?” she said to the woman working at the front desk, “I’m just going up to Room Nineteen.”

The woman frowned. “Really? What for?”

The question went unanswered.

“I won’t be more than ten minutes,” Norma said.

She led Candy away from the reception area, talking as she went. “This is the new part of the hotel we’re in right now,” she explained. “It was built in 1964. But once we step through

here”—she led Candy through a pair of double doors—“we’re in the old hotel. It used to be called the High Seas Hotel. Don’t ask me why.”

Even if Candy hadn’t been told that there was a difference between the portion of the hotel she’d been in and the part that Norma had brought her into, she would have known it. The passageways were narrower here and less well lit. There was a sour smell of age in the air, as if somebody had left the gas on.

“We only put people up in the old part of the hotel if all the other rooms are full. And that only happens when there’s a Chicken Buyer’s Conference. Even then, we try never to put people in Room Nineteen.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, it’s not that it’s *haunted*, exactly. Though there have been stories. Personally, I think all that stuff about the afterlife is nonsense. You get one life and you’d better make the best of it. My sister got religion last year and she’s shaping up for a sainthood, I swear.”

Norma had led Candy to the end of a passageway where there was a narrow staircase, illuminated by a single lamp. It cast a yellowish light that did nothing to flatter the charmless wallpaper and the cracking paintwork.

Candy almost remarked that it was no wonder the management kept this part of the hotel out of the sight of guests, but she bit her tongue, remembering what her mother had said about keeping less courteous thoughts to herself.

Up the creaking stairs they went. They were steep.

“I should stop smoking,” Norma remarked. “It’ll be the death of me.”

There were two doors at the top. One was Room Seventeen. The other was Room Nineteen.

Norma handed the passkey to Candy.

“You want to open it?” Norma said.

“Sure.”

Candy took the key and put it in the lock.

“You have to jiggle it around a little.”

Candy jiggled. And after a little work, the key turned, and Candy opened the ill-oiled door of Room Nineteen.

