

## **Room 223**

### **The Siren**

The sun had gone down on Anchor Point, sinking behind the buildings of the resort district, myriad shapes becoming steadily black and melting altogether into the night sky. The sounds of beach-going families had died until all that remained was the unwavering rhythm of the tide and the distant mewing of gulls. Charles was a man who ventured out only at times like this. He disliked the crowds that flocked to the shore, bringing their noise and chaos. During the day he preferred to remain in his room; 223 at King's Inn, just as always. Now that the crowds were gone, he felt he could enjoy this place the way he had as a child.

He stood on the concrete deck behind the inn, removing his shoes under the yellow glow of a street lamp, flies buzzing about the bulb in a barely audible frenzy. Things had changed very little over the years and Anchor Point was just as it had been when he was young. He walked barefoot down the wooden path his parents had led him down so many times before, to the cool, dark sand. All was black between the lights of the hotel behind him and the moonlight glistening on the waves ahead.

He stopped at the water's edge, letting his feet sink into the muddy shoreline, and taking in a deep breath of salty air. It was thick and humid but here it was beyond refreshing. There were few things he found so comforting as the sound and smell of the ocean. It was as if, just for a while; an hour or two, he had escaped the world he knew. The world he had grown to hate. The world of car horns and deadlines and the pushy, egotistical cretins who were their masters. Here, all of that nonsense was a fading memory.

Charles shivered a bit in the night air, chilled by a gentle ocean haze. He wrapped his arms across his chest as he closed his eyes and just listened to the crashing waves. Over and over again the sound continued in an endless symphony. It was something that no power on Earth could stop; nobody could change. He smiled as the thought occurred to him.

But a new sound reached his ears from over the waves, one he had never heard before, and his smile faded. It had the brassy depth of a fog horn, sending a tangible tremor through his bones. But over the terrible groan drifted a glassy melody like the pale froth on top of a crushing wave. It was unlike anything he had ever heard and something he felt sure he would not hear again. It was too alien, too ancient, too terrifyingly beautiful to belong even to the gentle world of night.

He could discern the echo of voices in the melody but not such as came from human throats. Of all things he was familiar with; voice, notes, instruments, rhythm; it had none, yet it was music all the same. For a moment he thought he might be listening to the songs of whales in the distance. But he had heard whale songs before. They were sad and full of regret. But this music was all the more haunting because it beckoned to him. It called to him with a longing he had never felt before.

But as he looked across the black waters he felt an unshakeable chill in his blood. The music which had once been enticing and fascinating had altogether taken a terrifying

turn. There was little of the beauty left in the melody and, whatever remained was swallowed up by the terrible roar beneath it. It was full of hate and he knew that there was something beyond those waves, consumed with the anger of ages, and it was calling to him. Just to him.

Suddenly he felt no comfort in the waves or the sand or the moonlight. He longed for the world of small-minded people and the traffic jams. He wished for nothing more now than to leave the water behind and return to the confines of his room. He quickly slipped his shoes on and jogged up the sands with the looming image of King's Inn growing in his view. The street lamps were safety, the realm of the noisy, bothersome world were comfort. They were alive and vivid in contrast to the sea music. It was death and rage and malice.

He rushed up the wooden ramp, the footfalls echoing through the planks with each desperate step. And yet no sound could overpower the dreadful melody that had followed him up the beach. The yellow lamp surrounded him with a halo of warm light. It was little protection, but it reminded him that he was back in the world of the living. He breathed a sigh of relief. The sound had stopped. He laughed at himself when he thought of how foolish he could be, letting some ocean sound get the better of him. Surely any sound could be misread as something evil if one's mind is vulnerable enough.

He made his way wearily around the deck at the side of the inn and stumbled into the lobby. "Is something wrong, Mr. Covacs?" the man at the front desk asked.

"No, no," Charles replied with a smile and a shake of the head. "Everything is just fine, Joe." He staggered over to the desk as if stepping out of a dream, happy to have awakened. "I just got myself a little spooked, that's all."

Joe chuckled and said, "I know how you feel. Sometimes we're so used to all the noise of the day that, when night comes, we don't know what to do with it."

"Well I know one thing," Charles began as he moved toward the elevator. "I'm retiring for the night."

As the elevator doors opened, a young boy stepped out, clutching a ventriloquist's dummy in his arms. He had a strangely vacant expression on his face but Charles was too tired to notice. He stepped into the elevator car and rested his head against the wall as he pushed the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor button.

Joe was right. His life was so hectic that it made it hard to enjoy peace and quiet when he had it. But it was only the first night of his vacation and he still had two weeks to enjoy the solitude of Anchor Point. He was still just a little worked up and a good night's sleep was just what he needed.

The doors parted and he stepped onto the navy carpet of the hall. Even at King's Inn, which was booked to the rafters this time of year, his floor was silent and he was already looking forward to a rest.

He heard the bolt click, all the more loudly now, as he unlocked the door and entered the dark room. He switched on the lights and collapsed on the bed, coming to a new decision about what was the most relaxing thing in the world. As he lay in bed, watching the ceiling fan slowly spin, he shut his eyes and just took in the sweet unbroken silence.

Then he heard it. The glass of the balcony door trembled and the bed frame creaked as that deep bellow passed through them. The same happened to his own body. And woven into that bassy roar was the crystalline song, like wailing bells coated in winter frost, dripping as the icicles were slowly melting.

He opened his eyes and, shaking, sat himself up. Charles feared the sound but was captivated by it. It was simultaneously repulsive and fascinating, so that he felt compelled to rise from the bed and make his way to the sliding door. With his face drawn and his blood chilled, he placed his palms against the cold glass, feeling the reverberations of that dreadful moan coarse through it.

With his hand trembling, as if urged on by the sound itself, he gripped the handle, lifted the latch and pulled the door aside. The echoing melody riding on the steadily crashing waves, came up to him in full force now, louder and clearer than before. He stepped into the salty night air and inched toward the rail of the balcony, peering down to the blackness below. His hair whipped in front of his eyes, causing illusions to dance across his face. But it was no illusion he saw shifting in the darkness among the roaring tide. A quivering silhouette against the reflective foam, shaking with pale, luminous eyes. The twitching form staggered out of the water like a drunkard, limping and flailing gnarled, bony limbs as it moved across the sand and up the beach.

Charles was frozen with fear, unable even to look away as the thing lurched away from the water. He wanted to run inside and lock the door. He wanted to hide. But the music, the unearthly song kept him locked in place, his eyes and ears fixed on this deplorable creature.

And as it neared the wooden ramp and the light above the deck, his fear climbed ever higher. He did not wish to see this thing, whatever it was, but he could not move from the railing. Finally, the creature halted just beyond the reach of the light and stood still as the grave. Then the wretched head turned upward and those two piercing eyes locked onto Charles'. That was it. It had seen him.

He broke free of the musical trance and bolted from the balcony, slamming the glass door behind him. He then pulled the curtains closed and stumbled backward, nearly tripping over the corner of the bed. He ran to the kitchenette and poured himself a glass of scotch, quavering as he did so.

"This is impossible," he muttered, his eyes darting all around the room. "This isn't real! It can't be real!" But the song was not an illusion; not a dream. Suddenly, he was able to discern individual tones from the melodic sea of alien sounds, and they became words. They sang of the waves and how they were beaten and battered and finally dragged down to the depths of the ocean; how theirs was the rage of the sea. They were living once but they were all taken by the water, never again to see the surface except to lead others to share their fate.

All these things became clear to Charles as he stood, trembling in the corner of his room. The song was growing louder and the melody was thick with hate. Every wailing note dripping with the agony of a bloated, waterlogged corpse. And he heard others now. A symphony of pain and anguish as a multitude of tormented voices joined the first, each with their own harrowing story to tell.

“Join us,” they wailed. “Come to the sea. It is lonely there and we must have others. This is a world of conflict and worry but at the bottom of the waves there is no fear.” But the horror in their voices belied their words of comfort.

They were damned souls and, like the tempests that raged over the sea, they would never be at peace. They were altogether wretched creatures whose only solace was in sharing their dreadful fate with others. Not all heard their song. But there were some, like Charles, who secretly longed for their world of darkness, to leave the realm of the living behind. For them, the music was an invitation of death that could not be resisted.

He didn't want to die. He didn't want to join these things. He collapsed in the corner as he heard their wet, decaying hands grip the railing of his balcony. The song was now deafening as a throng of bent silhouettes rose over the railing and congregated at his door. Only the glass and the yellow curtains stood between him and the horrifying shapes outside.

“Let us in,” they sang from pale and bloated lips. “Come to us.” With each word, the sound of gently spilling water was heard as it seeped and bubbled from every orifice and splattered against the concrete. “We will keep you safe.” He could see only the twisted, writhing shadows through the curtains and didn't wish to see more.

But their song. It had a horrifying truth to it. He did hate his own world. Maybe these things had chosen him because they knew how much he desired escape. Perhaps hiding beneath the waves was the only way he could escape. His job was like living death, controlled by men of lesser quality than his own. All year he looked forward only to the few quiet nights on the beach he was more than due. To escape.

No. Not this way. There were other ways to change his life. This was not what he wanted. He was a strong man; a smart man; and there were so many things he could do to make his own way. He wouldn't have to answer to anyone ever again and he would be free to live the life he wanted. He would remember this as the night he not only survived but discovered life all over again. He wasn't about to give up.

Then he looked down and realized that his hand was gripping the handle of the balcony door. Before he knew what he was doing; before he could stop himself, he had peeled back the curtain. He gaped in horror at the dead, wet faces staring back at him, covered in slime and seaweed. The hideous anticipation rose in their blackened, hollow eyes as Charles' finger was already undoing the latch. It was as if he had lost all control of himself. In an instant the glass door slid aside and a multitude of clammy fingers were on him; pale arms groping and skeletal grins crowding around him.

He screamed but the sound was entirely drowned out by the siren song of the dead intruders and his body was dragged down from the balcony, leaving only a trail of glistening water on the threshold of the wide open door. Nobody knew what became of Charles Covacs. No one knew that he had been dragged, shrieking, into the ocean, nor that he would remain there with the things that took him that night.

But there would come a time, some night, when some other person, unsatisfied with his life, would be drawn there. Then Charles would return, though none would recognize the dead, drenched shell he had become, and it would be his turn to sing.