

*The
Chase*

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The Vow

Had Anna inherited her mother's disintegrating mind, or was something sinister afoot? She jerked upright in her bed. A feverish sweat had glued her lavender cotton nightie to her flat bosom and bony rib cage. She reeked as if she had bathed in soiled cat litter. Surfacing in January, the vision had disrupted her sleep for the past three months. She kicked off the duvet, twisted to the bank of windows, and the grim scene replayed on the frost-crusting glass.

A monk with curly black hair, wearing a cadaver-grey cassock, skulked toward the waif lying on a lower bunk. She had tucked her limbs in a fetal position as if trying to protect her body from harm. A veil of tangled sable locks shrouded her face, but the crystal angel brooch clasped to the frayed collar of the tattered blush-pink dress gleamed. The Princess Sophia Steamship lurched, and he hitched to a post to steady himself. The jewellery was his ticket to a better life in America. Murder, deception, thievery; Cosimo Levato would take what he wanted, and as soon as the seas calmed, he would make it his own.

Why was the waif wearing her mother's angel brooch? The cherubs symbolized Anna's sisters who had died young. Laura Number Two's death had triggered her mother's unravelling, and she now depended on others to help her live her life. The illness had also trapped Anna, and at forty-three, she had found herself ensnared in a web of stifling circumstances from which escape was unthinkable.

Anna flung her legs to the side and yanked her nightie over her knees. Dried blood dotted the ragged cuticles of her brittle fingernails. She curled her skeleton toes and dangled her feet above the hardwood

floor. Why was the waif's dress the blush-pink colour of the flannel receiving blankets with which her mother had swaddled Laura Number One and Laura Number Two? And why was the monk a carbon-copy of her deceased Uncle Mike?

A waning crescent moon flickered fractured light over a frozen riverscape. Anna had purchased the isolated Lake Superior property on the outskirts of the small Northern Ontario town of Port Superior post-divorce. Her children had moved away, but this was her sanctuary. How much longer could she endure this menacing presence?

Who was Cosimo Levato? What was the significance of his religious disguise? Anna's grandparents had settled here after immigrating to Canada from Calabria, an impoverished region in southern Italy, in the 1900s. They had voyaged across the Atlantic Ocean on *The America Steamship* and no Molinaro ancestor bore this name.

Puffs of powdered snow chased ghoulish spirits in a spooky game of tag across the frigid desert. Anna's eyes watered glacial tears. She refused to believe that she had inherited her mother's disease. Had the waif, therefore, personified her mother and the monk, an impending threat? Or was there another explanation?

What should Anna do? Inaction posed a danger that she dared not risk. She would study the vignette frame by frame until she deciphered its meaning. Her mother had lost enough, and she had to save what remained of the woman she might have become. Regardless of the sacrifice, Anna vowed to keep her safe.