Chapter 2

Aedan’s Curiosity

The moment Aedan closed his front door behind him, the book was in his hands again, its leather cover cool and slightly sticky from years of handling. Aedan retreated to the sanctuary of his room, flopping down on his bed as he flipped open the first page. The musty smell of old paper flooded his nose, and a thrill coursed through him.

“Let’s see what you’ve got,” Aedan breathed, barely audible above the faint creak of the binding yielding to his touch. His fingers traced over the delicate pages, feeling the indentations where the ink had been pressed into them decades, perhaps centuries, ago.

Aedan turned the pages with reverence, each offering cryptic drawings and spidery handwriting that interested him more. There were sketches of Chook River, depicted with an eerie accuracy that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand at attention. But it wasn’t just the illustrations—it was also the stories they told and the legends they discussed.

And then, there she was—the demon Al Ana. Her name sprawled across the top of a chapter like a dark cloud presiding over a doomed land. The text beneath her name was a mix of history and myth, detailing her existence as if she were as real as the river itself. Words like “vengeance,” “souls,” and “water” jumped out at him, and he could almost hear the ripple of water accompanying them.

“‘An ancient demon of vengeance who roams Chook River grounds stealing souls…‘” Aedan read aloud, letting the reality of the words sink in. A chill ran through him, but it was met with an insatiable curiosity that pushed any fear he had into the background. Aedan needed to know more, to understand if this legend was responsible for the oddities happening around Cheboygan.

As he perused the book thoroughly and carefully, he heard faint voices humming all around him. Unsure where they were coming from, he disregarded them and continued reading.

Aedan’s mind raced, connecting dots that seemed to have been laid out just for him. The sluggish movements of those customers at the store, their lifeless expressions—could Al Ana be more than just a tale? Was she influencing his town, right under his nose?

“Okay, Aedan, think,” he coached himself, sitting up straighter. “How does this all fit together?” Theories began to form, wild and unproven, yet they felt grounded in something tangible. It was as if Aedan was part of the story now, a character in a mystery that had been unfolding long before he was born.

Determined, Aedan leaned closer to the dim lamp on his bedside table, intent on uncovering every secret held within the worn pages. The clock ticked away the minutes, but time didn’t matter. He was on the precipice of something monumental and couldn’t tear himself away. He became entranced in the book, reading every word twice, turning page after page. The disembodied whispers, “Come here,” “Water,” and “Careful,” grew silent.

“Cheboygan, what are you hiding?” Aedan muttered into the quiet of his room, his eyes locked on the tattered book that seemed to pulse with ancient knowledge. Whatever answers it held, he was going to find them. No matter how deep he had to go, no matter what it took, he was ready to face the truth about Al Ana and the dark secrets of his hometown.

“Okay, so where to first?” Aedan asked himself, the book’s spine creaking as he laid it delicately on his desk—a map of secrets ready to be navigated. His fingertips brushed against the pages, each piece of paper like a silent plea for discovery. He grabbed a pen and notepad from the drawer, his chosen tools for his impromptu investigation.

As Aedan flipped through the pages, meticulously reading every detail and making notes, a folded newspaper clipping caught his attention, unveiling a concerning revelation—Tommy Canfeld and Emma Taylor missing, last seen by the river.

“Tommy Canfeld and Emma Taylor,” Aedan said aloud, as if speaking their names might conjure them up from the past. He scribbled down their names, followed by a list of places where they were last seen, according to the newspaper clipping, with Chook River at the top.

“Emma used to hang out at the old mill, right?” Aedan said. He recalled a detail from the book, adding it beneath her name. “And Tommy… he worked at the old lumber mill before, you know, before they both disappeared.”

Aedan’s heart thumped in eager anticipation, the same rush he’d get when a particularly tricky shipment came into O’Connor’s Market, and he’d figure out how to stack it just right.

Only this time, the stakes were higher. This wasn’t about apples not bruising; it was about unearthing truths that could change everything.

“Alright, Aedan, you got this,” he encouraged himself. Visions of his heroics played out in his mind—he’d be the one to crack the case, the guy who brought answers to Cheboygan. And maybe, just maybe, Lindsey would see him as more than the clumsy kid who drops soup cans when she smiles.

Aedan let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding and glanced back at the book. Its cover was faded, edges frayed, but its contents? They were alive, pulsating with the potential of untold stories and hidden dangers. With a final nod to the room, he pushed away from his desk.

“Here goes nothing.” Aedan’s voice carried the weight of his newfound resolve.

He laid aside the tattered book, now a beacon of adventure, and stood up, a mix of nerves and excitement buzzing through him. It was time to step into the unknown, chase down legends, and face whatever awaited him in the shadowy corners of his town. Cheboygan’s dark secrets wouldn’t remain buried for much longer—not if Aedan had anything to say about it.

Aedan zipped up his jacket with a steady hand, the cool Michigan air seeping through the cracks of his old house. The list he’d scribbled down earlier was folded neatly in his back pocket; the tattered book’s warnings echoed in his mind. But nothing could shake the feverish excitement that pulsed through his veins. Aedan snatched a worn-out notebook from the kitchen table, its pages filled with half-scribbles of grocery lists and homework assignments. But today, it would serve as the chronicle of his investigation.

“Pen,” Aedan chirped to himself; he’d forgotten his in his bedroom. A simple ballpoint lay on the counter, cap chewed, courtesy of countless evenings he’d spent there mulling over history notes. It wasn’t much, but it was all he needed. With a quick swipe, it joined the notebook in his pocket. His fingers lingered for a moment on the cover, feeling the indentations left by the pressure of many anxious thoughts.

“Okay, Aedan, you’ve got this,” he said quietly, voice muffled, more to brace himself than out of any real need to hear the words. In the reflection of the small mirror by the door, he caught a glimpse of his eyes—determined, maybe a bit scared, but burning with a fire that even the sight of Chook River couldn’t dampen.

As he stepped outside, the familiar creak of his front porch beneath his feet felt different, like a starting block just before a race. He pulled the door shut behind him, listening to the click of the latch falling into place. The town awaited, draped in its everyday quietness, stories and secrets churning, desperate to break free.