

Chapter 1 - Mystery

Huff was missing.

I imagined the worst kind of snowboard accident; Huff smashed into a tree somewhere. He had taken the long easy path down a beginner run while Streak and I warmed up on the half-pipe. We had arrived among the first ones on the hill this crisp morning at Mt. Shasta Ski Park on our eighth grade winter break.

Streak raced ahead of me toward a snowboard jump. He did a 180 front side grab and skidded to a stop on the landing. “Hey, Irish!” he yelled back up the hill, “Beat that, dude!”

“Hold up!” I cut around the jump, edged my board in and stopped next to him, pulling out my iPod ear buds. “We gotta find Huff.”

“We can’t babysit him. He’s just slow.” Streak was wired, bouncing on his board. “Besides, I’m hot. You see me catch air?”

“Yeah, cool. But Huff was supposed to meet us at the lift line. This is our fifth run and it’s 10:30.” I scanned the half empty slopes and glanced at the lift chairs traveling overhead. “Nobody’s that slow.”

“He’s probably still up on the beginners’ green run or waiting down in the lift line now, wearing that stupid yellow hat. C’mon! This is our winter break, man. Fun time.”

I punched him in the shoulder. “What’s with you? Huff spends all his time drawing cartoons and writing jokes. He’s totally out of shape and could be wrapped around a tree.”

He stopped bouncing and pushed up his goggles. Looking sheepish, he said, “Sorry, man. I got in my zone and . . . never mind. You’re right. We gotta find Huff.” He snapped his goggles back on and took off, yelling over his shoulder, “Let’s go.”

Streak was the tallest kid in our class. He was a total jock in all sports, while I was in the chess club and played guitar in a garage band. Streak’s big ears were tucked in the Green Beret his dad had sent him from Iraq. He claimed it made him look tough, but I thought it made his head look like a green bottle cap.

Streak bombed straight down the hill, making a new track in the powder from last night’s snow. A blanket of gray sky sat overhead like a low mean ceiling, hiding Mt. Shasta. I suddenly felt creepified, like someone was watching me. I glanced over my shoulder, but there was no one around. Then I heard a deep rumbling voice in my head. *“Danger Abaddon.”*

Huh? Maybe a new MP3 song? I reached up to pull out my ear buds, but they already dangled on my chest and I was totally alone on this run. Who was talking and what was an Abaddon?

“Demon invasion,” the same deep voice pounded in my head.

“What?” I tensed, waited, but nothing happened. This was more than freaky. I jammed my ear buds back in and took off downhill. I pulled up next to Streak at the bottom, deciding to keep the weird voice to myself. Nobody would believe me anyway. I’m not even sure I believed it.

Streak frowned at me. “You look sick, man. You okay?”

“Yeah. Just cold.” I puffed out a breath cloud.

From where we stopped up on the hill, we could see a dozen people in the lift line, but no Huff. Luckily, the holiday crowd hadn't arrived yet. Mom and Dad had dropped us off as soon as the park opened so they could take my kid sister cross-country skiing on the other side of the mountain.

Streak and Huff went to different schools, but we met one summer four years ago and had hung out together, best friends every summer since. That's why my parents invited them on this trip. I learned to snowboard at this California ski park, but it was a first time bringing them.

My cousin Frances and her instructor skied up next to us. She was our age, and went to my school. When she found out we were going skiing, she conned an invitation. As a kid, we called her Frostie because she loved those Frostie ice cream cones. Later, the name morphed into Frost. I got annoyed all over again at the memory of her showing everyone in our 6th grade class *that* totally embarrassing photo of me. She was always bugging me, so I mostly avoided her.

Streak poked me with his elbow. "Why don't you ask her if she's seen Huff?"

I shook my head at Streak. It was bad enough riding all the way up here in the car with her. "You ask her."

Frost overheard. She gave me that whiter than white toothy grin. "Looks like Irish got an instant sunburn." She and the instructor skied down to the end of the line.

I whispered to Streak, "That's why I don't hang with her."

Streak whispered back, "You're an idiot, dude. She's cool." He skidded into line behind her. "Hey, you seen Huff?"

She shook her head. "Nope."

Streak added, "He went down a beginner run by himself. S'posed to meet us here."

In the cold air, Frost's freckles stood out against her pale skin, and her ponytail hung over her white ski suit collar. People thought she was my sister because we both had red hair and freckles. No thanks. It was bad enough she was a cousin.

Frost said, "Sorry, haven't see him."

Streak turned to me and said, "Maybe he's like I said, really, really slow."

I slid my board up closer. "He's been gone since ten and it's almost time to eat. No way he'd miss lunch."

Frost said, "You better tell the ski patrol."

I squinted at her and said, "You're not the boss."

Her instructor, a short woman with a pointed nose, chimed in, "She's right, you know. You should notify the ski patrol right away."

Frost nodded and gave me a smug smile.

"Huff's not that late," Streak said to me. "He'd freak if they sent the rescue sled out to get him. We'll find him, ourselves."

Streak and I moved up next in line, as Frost and her instructor got ready for their chair. I stomped my board a couple of times to keep warm. It was too cold a morning to stand still. As their chair came around, the instructor glanced back at me. I said to her, "We're gonna look for Huff on the mountain. Then, if we don't find him, we'll tell the ski patrol."

She gave me her serious instructor look. "All right, but make sure you do. I'll check with them after this run." She and Frost lifted off in their chair. My uncle had paid

for two days of private ski lessons so Frost could learn to slalom race. I hated to admit it, but she was darned good on skis.

As we slid up to the pickup spot, Streak shook his head. “If we don’t find Huff this time, he ain’t gonna like you reporting him lost.”

“You got a better idea?” A chair came around behind us. The lift line was already longer.

“No,” he said. “But we better find Huff before that instructor reports him missing.”

As soon as I sat in the chair, I got that creepy feeling again, like someone was watching me. In the chair ahead, Frost twisted around to look at us. Probably hoping I’d mess up.

We had just lifted off, when someone grabbed my legs. “Hey!” I yelled, holding on to the side of the chair. “Somebody’s got me!”

“Me, too!” Streak grabbed the pole on his side and was thrashing his legs, trying to jerk them free, screaming, “Leeggggoo!”

I tried to stay on, but the moving chair was going to rip my legs off. The chair tipped forward. We pitched forward off the seat, falling ten feet into the packed snow below. “Ow!” Streak’s board hit me in the head.

We landed in a tangle, Streak on top, our legs and boards twisted together.

From the chair ahead, Frost screamed something just before the lift operator slammed the control lever to a stop.

Streak pushed himself up. “You okay?”

I sat up and felt the side of my head. “Yeah, but your board gave me a lump.” As I brushed the snow off my jacket, a black bobcat ran from the back of the lift shed and disappeared into the trees.

“Hey!” Frost yelled down to us, “Are you guys hurt?”

Streak waved. “We’re okay.”

The lift operator crunched up through the ankle-deep snow. “What happened?”

Streak said, “Somebody grabbed my legs.”

“Mine, too,” I said as I rolled over on one knee with my board under me so I could stand up. “But I couldn’t see anyone.”

A kid in the chair behind yelled, “I saw a guy behind the shed, but I thought he worked here.”

The operator asked again, “You two *really* okay?”

“Just a bump,” I said, feeling my head.

The lift operator opened the binding on my board and helped me up.

Streak bounced up. “I’m fine.” He brushed snow off his winter jacket and the wet Levis he insisted on wearing.

My ski pants were coated in snow as if I’d made a butt plant, but nothing on my ski clothes was torn.

The operator looked us both over. “You’re lucky you didn’t break something. You two wait out of the way, in back of the lift shed until the Ski Patrol gets here to check you out.”

Streak scrunched up his face. “What? We have to wait?”

“Yeah, it’s the rules,” the operator said as he picked up his phone. “It’ll just take a minute.”

A woman in a Ski Patrol uniform appeared from around the front corner of the shed. She put a hand on the operator's shoulder. “Put the phone down, lad. I’ll be taking care of these two.”

He gave her a blank look as he set the phone down. His forehead knitted into a frown. “Who are you?”

“ ‘Tis my first day. Get your lift going. Folks are waiting.”

A bit disgruntled, he said, “All right. Make sure you tell them I was following policy.”

She smiled at him. “It’ll be fine, it will.”

He didn’t look convinced, but he started up the lift.

She stepped over next to us. “Och, laddies. Me thinks you should be worrying about your missing friend.” She wore a yellow Ski Patrol parka with a green nametag and a beaked cap with pads over her ears.

How did she know Huff was missing? I glanced at Streak. He noticed, too. But surprised by her accent, I said, “You’re Irish.” She was as tall as Streak, with dark hair, a round face and a pug nose like my mom.

“Aye. ‘Tis true. And I see you’ve a bit of the ole country in you, for sure.”

“My friends call me Irish. My real name's Pete Kehoe. This is my friend, Streak.”

“And you can be calling me,” she hesitated, “Dawn.” It was a strange way to introduce herself, as though Dawn wasn't really her name.

I said, “We gotta look for our friend before it gets any later.”

“Aye, and I'm going with you. Wait at the top. I'll be right along, as soon as I grab me skis.”

“What?” I said. “You don't need to go with us.”

“I'm thinking I do. Go along now, and I'll follow.” She turned and walked off.

Even though I was worried about Huff, having a ski patroller with us wasn't cool. Streak and I clambered into the next empty chair and I looked all around for someone who might want to grab me. On the ride up, I searched for any sign of Huff, at the same time wondering about what had just happened. I said, “Did you see who pulled us off? He had to be on your side behind the operator's shed.”

“There was somebody with a black wool cap, but after I fell, he was gone.”

“That's strange,” I said. “I saw a big black cat, like a bobcat, leap from behind the shed and run up the hill toward the trees, just as I slid off the chair.”

Streak snorted, “Bobcats don't hang around people and they're not black.”

I punched him in the arm. “Thanks. I already know that.”

Two thirds of the way to the top, the lift stopped. The day was turning into a total bummer. We were stuck swinging in the wind, fifty feet in the air. Streak grumbled, “Beginners up ahead of us. They always fall down getting off the lift.”

Stuck on the lift with my butt and legs getting cold, I couldn't stop thinking about our fall. “Why do you think we got pulled off the chair?”

“I dunno.”

The black bobcat was strange, but I put it away to figure out later. It was the chair lift accident that really bothered me. Why would someone pick on us? We just wanted to

look for Huff. Suddenly, I made a connection and turned to Streak. “You know what it would mean if we broke an arm or a leg?”

“No snowboarding.”

“And no searching. What if somebody doesn’t want us looking for Huff?”