

## Chapter 1 – The Witch

Mom called out, “Watch for rattlesnakes on the hill, Pete. Hot weather brings them out.”

I yelled over my shoulder, “I will.” The cabin screen door slammed shut behind me as I jumped off the porch. I headed for the gate in the fenced yard, stopping only long enough to reach for an apple in our tree.

A deep voice rumbled through the branches. “*Danger from Abaddon.*”

I jerked my hand back and froze. “Streak? Huff?” No answer. It kinda sounded like Huff’s gravelly voice. “Okay, Huff. Ha. Ha. Very funny. Game’s over. C’mon out.” I waited. Nothing. And nobody was hiding in the bushes. I reached into the tree again and touched the apple. No voice. Maybe it was an animal noise or a bird. Whatever! I wasn’t going to hang around here wasting time on my last week of vacation.

I grabbed my helmet and pushed my BMX through the side gate, glancing back at the tree. Weird. I shook my head, and rode down the dirt path through the big meadow in front of our cabin. Halfway across, I left the path, bunny-hopped a rock, and pumped hard through the tall, yellow weeds as grasshoppers bounced out of my way.

Suddenly, a huge rattlesnake with a black slash mark on its back was in front of me. I braked, nearly hitting it, but it just sat there, coiled and staring at me with blood red eyes. I leaned over the handlebars to make sure the snake really had red eyes. It did. Like two fiery red coals. Huh? Then, in one quick move, it disappeared into the tall grass.

Streak was chewing on a piece of jerky and waiting for me on the paved road at the bottom of our downhill run. He had on his favorite camo shirt and Giant’s baseball

cap on backwards. It made his big ears stick out even more. As I skidded to a stop in front of him, he said, “Hey, Irish.”

When my grandparents visited here from Ireland, I mimicked their brogue, so my friends started calling me Irish and it stuck.

“Did you hear?” Streak said, “The Giants wiped the Dodgers!”

I shrugged.

Streak shook his head. “You gotta watch sports, dude. All that reading makes you boring.”

I said, “Did you see that big rattler with red eyes out in the field?”

“No way! Snakes don’t have red eyes.”

“This one did and it acted weird.”

Huff came down the road toward us on his dirt bike wearing a dark hoodie and baggy shorts. He was shorter and wider than either of us and had a blonde buzz-cut that made him look bald. The three of us had biked together here in Lake County California every summer. We were tight, like blood brothers, so we called ourselves the Cool Dirt Bikers. We even had a CDB handshake.

Huff, in his froggy voice that always surprised people, said “Hey!”

I said, “Huff, were you at my place a little while ago trying to spook me?”

Huff pushed his hood back. “Whatta you talking about? I just had breakfast and came over here.”

“Nothing. Forget it.” I pointed up the hill. “Let’s do it.”

My family cabin faced a killer mountainside that was great for DH biking. The downhill track wound through the trees with dropoffs and slippery rock gardens. Our goal

was to go fast enough to hit the berm at the bottom, fly over the ditch on the downhill side, and land on the paved road. So far, no one had even come close.

Streak and Huff started pumping up a grinder switchback path to the top. Following them, I passed next to an oak tree and a gravelly voice rumbled, “*Danger from Abaddon.*” Startled, my left foot slipped off the pedal and I jammed to a stop.

It was just like the voice I heard at the apple tree, only deeper. And branches had moved, but there was no wind. Was I losing it? There was no one around and it wasn’t Streak or Huff. They were ahead of me and still climbing. Who or what was Abaddon? What danger? And why did I all of a sudden hear voices?

Huff, off his bike, yelled back down the hill, “Whatta you doing, Irish?”

They were four switchbacks above me. I called up, “Did you guys hear that?”

Huff shook his head. Streak stopped, shrugged and said, “Hear what?”

“You know. A voice.”

Streak laughed. “Yeah, dude, we hear voices. What did yours say?”

“Forget it.” I glanced around. Nothing looked dangerous, so I started up the hill again. Why didn’t they hear the voice? Was it really coming from the tree? I caught up and we climbed to the flat spot at the top of our downhill track. Wary, I kept looking around, expecting—I didn’t know what.

Huff said, “Hey, Irish? You looking for ghosts or something?”

Streak chimed in, “Yeah, invisible vampires.” And he laughed.

“Bug off, Streak.”

The valley below was quiet as a cave. No movement around the two or three neighboring cabins near ours. I didn’t even see a car on the road.

“Let’s do it,” I said.

“Wait a minute,” Huff said. “I’ll time you. Start on the count of three.”

As I glanced over at Huff, a movement on the mountain above and behind us caught my eye. When I turned to look, the shadow of a figure disappeared behind a tree. I pointed. “Did you see that?”

Streak looked over his shoulder. “There ain’t nothing up there, dude ... I know. You don’t wanna race me.”

“Fat chance,” I said. “You’re gonna lose, big time.” I glanced up the hill again. Maybe it was just a cloud shadow. The voices and the weird snake had me freaked out.

Streak said, “I’ll go first.” He moved three bike lengths behind the first six-foot drop off and said, “Watch me!” On Huff’s count of three, he raced forward, launched off the edge and flew off the seat as the bike dropped under him. Still holding the handlebars, he landed back on the seat and skidded ten feet sideways down the path, finally flipping over. The bike rolled over him, but he held on and rolled back up on the bike. He raised one fist and yelled, “Yee Haw!”

Fists raised, we cheered back, “C-D-B!”

Then Streak charged down the rest of our track. At the bottom, he broke into the open and pumped for the berm, but hit it at a funny angle. He took off across the ditch, holding onto the handlebars, trying to twist back straight, but it was too late. He and the bike seemed to freeze in midair for a second before he let go. The bike hit a few feet away from him. Streak landed feet first, then automatically tucked his head and one shoulder into a judo roll, landing on his back. “Oooff!” He got up, brushed off his shorts, and yelled back up the hill, “Beat that, Irish!”

I said, "See you at the bottom, Huff."

I took off on his count of three. If I dumped, I'd lose. So I kept the bike under me and pumped every straight run and even some corners. I hit the rocks, skidded, turned into the slide and dabbed three times to stay up. It worked. On two corners with trees I bounced off their trunks to gain speed. Out of the trees, I raced for the berm and hit it square, flew over the ditch and landed back wheel first, then skidded to a stop.

"Whooooee!"

Streak said, "Not bad for second place."

I smirked, "No way."

Then Streak and I watched Huff do the run cautiously, come at the berm too slow, try to stop, fly over the handlebars and come down hard on his left wrist. We dropped our bikes and ran over to pick him up. He was head down in the ditch with his feet tangled in the frame, a silly grin on his face. Streak chuckled, "You stacked, man."

I grabbed Huff's arm. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I screwed up." As we pulled him up he said, "Ouch. My wrist kinda hurts."

Streak picked up his bike. "Maybe you sprained it."

"Bummer," I said.

Huff tapped his watch. "One minute and seven seconds for Irish. Streak was one minute and twenty-two seconds."

I said, "You lose, Streak! But that was a great wipe out!"

Streak frowned. "I made it further over the ditch!"

"It doesn't count," I said. "You weren't on your bike."

Suddenly the trees across the meadow wavered. I pointed. “Look.”

Then the ground underfoot shifted violently back and forth with a roar like a race car and a second big jolt rocked us. I crouched low.

“Earthquake!” I shouted.

Huff was knocked to the ground next to my bike. The roar tapered off and the shifting stopped, but the ground began to vibrate and a different booming, grinding sound got louder. Huff was the only one facing up hill. His eyes grew large and his mouth dropped open. I spun around. A boulder big as a small car rumbled down the hill, coming right at us.

“Look out!” I yelled.

Streak jumped sideways and scrambled away on all fours. Huff froze in the boulder’s path with his hands over his head. I grabbed Huff’s shirt with both hands, dug in my heels, and pulled. He flew up as I churned my feet backwards. We landed in a pile with Huff on top of me. A cloud of dirt and small rocks hit us as the boulder rumbled past, missing us by inches. In one hop, it flattened my bike with an ugly crunch, hit the road and shattered into a half dozen pieces. Stunned, I sat there. What was going on?

Huff had his mouth open like he was going to say something but he just stared at the boulder pieces. None of us moved. The ground shook a couple of times and stopped. I checked out my bike, shaking my head.

“It’s totally wasted,” Huff said.

I kicked the mangled front wheel. “Yeah.”

“You could bury it, right here.” Huff picked up a broken piece of reflector.

“We are gathered here today.” Streak clasped his hands like he was praying. “To bury Irish’s bike.”

I punched him in the shoulder. “Real funny. How am I gonna get another bike?”

“Get over it,” he said, brushing imaginary dirt off his shoulder. He crossed the road and kicked a chunk of boulder. “Where’d this come from? I’ve never seen any big boulders on this side of the mountain.”

“So?” My BMX was road kill and I was bummed out.

“Streak’s right, Irish,” Huff said. “There are no boulders on this hill. Where’d it come from?”

“I dunno,” I said, turning and looking at the slope above us. I thought about the warnings and said, “Maybe Abaddon did it.”

“Abba-who?” Huff said, “What kinda name is that and who is it?”

I shook my head. “I dunno. The voice I told you about said, ‘*Danger from Abaddon.*’”

Streak cocked his head to one side. “What are you talking about, dude?”

“I’m telling you, I heard voices. First in my yard, then here. Each time they said, ‘*Danger from Abaddon.*’”

“I don’t buy your voices from space, man. But you can tell them I ain’t afraid of Abba-who-ever-he-is.” Streak turned to pick up his bike.

“Oh, yeah?” I said, “That boulder almost mashed us. I should’ve listened to those trees.”

Huff repeated, “Trees?” Like it was some alien word.

Streak scoffed, “Oh, right. Now the trees are talking to you.”

“Look,” I said, feeling like the lone geek of the universe. “Okay it’s weird, but every time I hear this voice, it sounds like it’s coming from a tree.”

They were both looking at me like I had a contagious disease. Huff said, “Maybe you should tell your parents.”

I shook my head. “No way. They won’t believe me, either.” Then, as I picked up my bike, I said, “Let’s get outta here before any more boulders roll down.” I eyed the pieces of the boulder that almost crushed us. Killer boulders? Talking trees? Abaddon? And I almost forgot about the snake. What was going on today?

As I carried my bike and they walked their bikes back to my cabin, nobody said anything for a long time. When we passed the intersection with Mountain Road, Streak pointed up the road. “Kids told me about a witch that just moved into a house up there.”

“I heard about that witch,” I said. “It’s BS.”

Streak argued, “She lives alone, she wears black and they say she casts spells on people.”

“Oh, sure,” I taunted. “Don’t eat any of her poisoned red apples. You think my voices are crazy—and you believe in witches.”

“Be a loser,” Streak grumbled. “That’s what I heard.” He paused, then continued, looking serious for once. “We got boulders from nowhere and voices in your head, Irish. Maybe you wanna ask her about them?”

Huff chimed in, “Cool! Let’s go!”

I hesitated. “She’s probably just a little old lady.” But I wasn’t too sure and remembering Abaddon and the boulder, I said, “What if she’s a bad witch? She might even *be* Abaddon. It’s kinda weird that you just happen to remember the witch now.”



Huff lowered his voice. “We could, like, spy on her to see if she’s good or bad.”

Streak brightened. “Cool. Whatta you think, Irish?”

Well, I thought, it wouldn’t hurt to take a look and I didn’t want them to think I was afraid of an old lady. “Okay. You can keep your bikes at my cabin. I’m leaving mine here.”

They had just stashed their bikes behind my cabin when my kid sister, Kathy, came running around the corner wearing her favorite dolphin t-shirt. “I wanna downhill, too!”

“Uhhhh ...” Streak gave me a look. I had to think of something quick. “We already biked, Kath. Now we’re going on a major hike. It’s gonna be tough and you might get hurt.”

“No, I won’t,” she said with hands on her hips just like Mom. “I can hike, too.”

Just then, Mom looked out a rear window. “What’s the problem, Pete?”

Before I could say anything, Kathy pleaded, “Can I go with them, Mom?”

“No, honey. You’re too young. I’ll take you to play with your friend, Mary.”

Kathy stuck her tongue out at me. My sister was cool, but she was only seven and I was twelve. “Kath,” I said, “I’ll play Monopoly with you tonight.”

Her eyes lit up. “Promise?”

“Yeah. I promise.”

As we got close to the witch’s house, we left the steep, gravel Mountain Road to sneak up behind trees and bushes. Streak led the way as we scrambled through low

shrubs and blackberry brambles, watching out for poison oak. We crawled behind a bush across the road from the witch's front door. Her house was hidden in the shadow of trees with dark moss on the roof and vines like snakes crawling up the shingled sides.

Huff said, "That cabin gives me the creeps."

Streak whispered, "Let's throw rocks on her roof. When she comes out to see what's happening, we can check her out."

Huff balked. "Oh, yeah. I'm not throwing rocks. She'll come out and turn us into nose hair or boogers."

"He's right, Streak," I said. "What if she *is* Abaddon?"

Streak taunted, "Abaddon's in your head, man. You're both chicken!"

Huff stuck his chin out. "I don't see you throwing any rocks."

"Oh yeah? Watch this." Streak grabbed a stone, ran out in the open, and threw it up on the roof of the house. It bounced down the slope and clattered into the gutter with a bang. Grinning, he ran back behind the bush with us. We watched the cabin and waited, but no one came out. Streak hissed, "Huff, you're next!"

Huff shook his head. "No way. I don't wanna get turned into a booger."

Streak made a fart noise with his lips and turned toward me. "Okay, dude."

I hesitated ... I wasn't going to let him call me a chicken. I grabbed a stone and ran out in front of the witch's house, ready to throw. The front door opened. I saw a dark shape and heard Huff suck in his breath behind me. I panicked, dropped the stone, and turned to run, but slipped and landed flat on my face. My hands stung where they slid on the gravel. Streak peered from behind the bush. Before I could get up, I felt something

hard, like a gun, pushed into my back. I froze. If I made a move she'd probably pull the trigger.

“Turn over, lad,” she commanded with an Irish brogue.