

THE
LAST CHANCE
DETECTIVES™



**REVENGE OF THE
PHANTOM HOT ROD**

ROBERT VERNON

THE LAST CHANCE DETECTIVES

Canyon Quest

Mystery Lights of Navajo Mesa

Legend of the Desert Bigfoot

Escape from Fire Lake

Terror from Outer Space

Revenge of the Phantom Hot Rod



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Revenge of the Phantom Hot Rod

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FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY[®]

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Chapter 1

Ambrosia, Arizona—1995

ARLENE BELL LET OUT A DEEP SIGH as she drove her white Ford Fiesta past the neon lights of the Last Chance Diner and onto the stretch of old Route 66 that headed east into the vast, empty desert. It was well past eight o'clock, and she just wanted to get home after a long day at the sheriff's office.

Arlene had served as Sheriff Smitty's radio dispatcher and office manager for almost seven years now, but she had never worked as hard as she had that day. The state auditor was scheduled to visit the next morning, and Arlene was tasked with making sure the filing system containing the past year's arrest reports and traffic citations was in proper order.

She turned her car off 66 and onto the US 191 cutoff, a path that eventually headed north to the long-abandoned ghost town

of Jubilee. The old road wound like a snake through the desolate volcanic hills as it gained elevation. Wild burros still wandered through the canyons and sometimes onto the road—the only remaining descendants of the once-thriving mining community.

Arlene had lived in Ambrosia most of her forty-one years, but had recently moved out of the town proper after buying a small mid-century house a few miles beyond the county line. The modest, one-story home had been repossessed by the bank and the price was just too good to pass up.

Her daily drive to work was longer than her previous commute, but Arlene didn't mind. There was usually little to no traffic on the road—except when a movie studio was filming over at the old ghost town, which was rare. Besides, the longer drive gave her a chance to listen to her favorite music. Arlene *loved* movie soundtracks, especially the soundtrack to *Casablanca*, which she was listening to right now. She found the main music theme to be utterly soothing and comforting.

But right now she couldn't afford to get *too* relaxed. After such an exhausting day at the office, she didn't want to fall asleep at the wheel.

Arlene snapped off the music and tried to concentrate on the dark, winding road ahead. It was then that she noticed something in her rearview mirror—the headlights of a fast-approaching car. Arlene lightly pressed on the accelerator and checked the Fiesta's speedometer to make sure she wasn't exceeding the posted speed limit of fifty miles per hour.

The car behind her quickly caught up, its headlights blindingly bright.

"Looks like someone's in a mighty big hurry," she said to herself as she adjusted her mirror to keep the glare out of her eyes.

As the car behind her continued to inch closer, Arlene became aware of a loud, low rumble. Whoever was back there had a lot of horses under that hood. The car was now only a few feet from her rear bumper.

“Oh, c’mon! No tailgating!” she complained out loud. “Could you be any more rude?”

The car behind her revved its engine and surged even closer.

Arlene noticed a straight patch of road ahead, lowered her driver’s side window, and waved for the other car to pass. “Just go around! Go around!”

The other car stuck to her bumper, showing no intention of passing.

“What is your problem?” Arlene lisped. Arlene always had a slight lisp, but it became much more noticeable when she was nervous. “Oh, please! I am *waaaaay* too tired to be playing games at this time of night.”

Arlene only wanted to get home, take her nightly bubble bath, snuggle into her queen-sized bed with her cat, Bogie, and read a chapter or two of her latest romance novel before nodding off to sleep.

Noticing that the road widened up ahead, Arlene came up with a plan to defuse the situation.

“All right, if you won’t pass, then I’ll just let you by!” she said to the car behind her.

Arlene turned on her right turn signal and pulled off onto the shoulder.

“Have at it! The road’s all yours!” she yelled as she slowed to a stop.

She didn’t expect the car behind her to pull over and come to a stop as well. But that’s exactly what it did.

“What in the world . . .” Arlene said to herself, momentarily stunned.

The other car idled motionless on the shoulder directly behind her, its engine rumbling in the night. A sense of dread began to creep over Arlene. Sheriff Smitty had warned her that some drivers could act irrationally when they were angered. “Road rage” is what he called it.

But I did nothing wrong, she thought. Certainly nothing to make anyone angry.

Arlene looked out her rear window to see if anyone got out of the car, but no one did. The car’s headlights just stared back at her.

What if it’s some kind of serial killer? a voice in her head warned. And you out here all by yourself!

She swallowed hard and kept her eyes on the car in her mirror. Still no movement.

It could be coincidental, a more hopeful voice suggested. Maybe the other driver just needed to pull over as well. Or perhaps the other driver noticed something wrong with her car and was trying to get her attention. But if that was the case, then why the silent treatment?

“Oh, fiddlesticks!” Arlene lisped. She couldn’t stand the building tension any longer, so she turned on her turn signal, put her car into drive, and eased back onto the highway.

Her heart sank when she saw the other car following right behind her. Soon it was once again moving close to her rear bumper.

“He’s playing with me!” Arlene said aloud. She was surprised by how scared her own voice sounded.

What if whoever’s back there follows me all the way back to my house? she wondered. Then he’ll know where I live!

Arlene was familiar enough with the road ahead to know that there were no more turnouts until she reached her home. She was kicking herself for not turning around when she had the chance. She could have pulled a simple U-turn and headed back to the safety of town. To turn around now on the narrow road would require a three-point turn, which would make her vulnerable to whoever was following her. Probably not a smart thing to do on a treacherous two-lane highway in any situation. Arlene decided she had no choice but to continue forward.

She couldn't even tell what kind of car was following her. The headlights were much too bright to make out any details. Besides, the other car was getting so close that Arlene was certain it would nudge her rear bumper at any moment.

If only there were some way to get in touch with Smitty!

Arlene wished she had one of those newfangled cell phones, but not a lot of cell towers had been installed yet, and the coverage was spotty at best in and around the small desert town of Ambrosia. Months ago she had refused Sheriff Smitty's suggestion that she install a police radio scanner in her car. She liked to leave her work at the office.

The car behind her suddenly lurched into the passing lane. The engine revved as it accelerated forward.

"Finally!" Arlene yelled. "Go ahead and pass!"

Arlene stuck out her chin and kept her eyes focused on the road ahead. She wouldn't give the stinky motorist a chance to shoot her any dirty looks as he went by. In fact, she planned to memorize his license plate as soon as he passed and report him to Smitty for reckless driving.

But he didn't pass.

Though she was doing her best to ignore him, Arlene's

peripheral vision told her that the car was now directly alongside and keeping the exact same pace. She could almost feel a pair of eyes staring at her. A chill ran up her spine.

“Just go on. Pass me,” she whispered. “Please!”

Another half mile went by. The car beside her was beginning to inch closer and closer. Arlene couldn’t stand it any longer. She just had to look over and see who was behind this.

The night was clear and the moon was full, giving Arlene a crystal clear view of the vehicle next to her. The car sported a dark finish with a lot of chrome. Arlene recognized it as some kind of souped-up hot rod that kids used to race in the 1950s, but she couldn’t identify the make or model.

When she finally looked at the driver, her mouth dropped open.

There was no one behind the wheel.

Arlene’s mind told her that what she saw—that what she *thought* she saw—couldn’t possibly be true. It had to be a mistake, perhaps a trick of the summer moonlight. She decided to take a second look.

The car was indeed empty, but the steering wheel was moving on its own, as if guided by some unseen force. Arlene glanced back and forth between the road and the driverless car as she tried to make sense of what she was witnessing.

But what she saw next was just too much. Arlene’s face contorted in horror and she let loose a bloodcurdling scream. She hit the brakes hard and was aware of the sound of screeching tires. Her head began to swim, and then—though she tried to fight it—everything went black. Arlene slumped forward in a dead faint. With her foot still on the brakes, her car slowly rolled to a stop.