

THE
LAST CHANCE
DETECTIVES™



**THE CURSE OF
CALAMITY WELLS**

ROBERT VERNON

THE LAST CHANCE DETECTIVES

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Revenge of the Phantom Hot Rod

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The Curse of Calamity Wells



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DETECTIVES

The Last Chance Detectives: The Curse of Calamity Wells

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FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY[®]

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Prologue

Southwestern Iran—1995

AT PRECISELY ONE A.M. ON A MOONLESS NIGHT, a highly trained, nine-man Navy SEAL unit parachuted out of a Hercules turbo-prop aircraft. Their mission was to extract an American prisoner of war held captive in a fortified compound on the outskirts of Shiraz, Iran. The men landed in an empty field east of the compound and, with practiced precision, triggered the quick-release mechanisms on their parachute harnesses, ditching the rigs where they'd landed. By the time anyone discovered the abandoned chutes, they would be long gone.

Under the cover of darkness, the team formed a single-file line and moved quickly through the shadows toward the compound. The men were all equipped with the latest in tactical equipment: night-vision goggles, body armor, in-helmet radios,

and various specialty weapons based on the role of each team member.

The two-story cinder block compound they approached had once been a hospital but was now surrounded by a high wall with two watchtowers and a huge metal gate at its entrance. The windows of the building itself were now covered by thick iron bars.

Lieutenant Devon “Pappy” Malone was the leader of the team. He silently held up a clenched fist, and the group came to an immediate halt. They had practiced this mission multiple times on a mock set with the same specifications as the compound they now faced. Their first objective was to breach the outer wall, which required incapacitating the guards in the watchtowers.

Pappy pointed to two members of the team and whispered through his mic: “Viper, Mooch—do your thing.”

The two men took careful aim at their assigned targets through the laser scopes of their M107 sniper rifles. Each was equipped with a barrel suppressor. (Unlike the fictional “silencers” depicted in movies and on television, however, the metal extension on the end of each rifle would only muffle, not eliminate, the sound of the shot.)

“On my count,” Pappy said. He took a deep breath. “Three . . . two . . . one . . .”

The shots were almost simultaneous. The silhouettes of the guards in each tower slumped over. The muffled shots echoed in the still night air, and a dog barked in the distance. But there was no other response. So far, so good.

“Heater,” Pappy said to another SEAL, then motioned toward the front gate. “Your turn.”

Kyle “Heater” Patterson was a mountain of a man who usually carried the heaviest equipment.

A belt of ammunition draped across his wide shoulders, Heater stepped forward. He aimed a Benelli M4 door breacher at the gate. They knew there was no way to suppress the sound of the shotgun. Once he fired, the element of surprise would be gone.

Before he pulled the trigger, Heater gave the gate a quick kick with his combat boot. To his surprise, the gate gave no resistance and swung open with a long, eerie creak.

Heater looked back at the rest of his team and shrugged. Pappy pointed two fingers into the compound’s inner courtyard. “Let’s get this party started,” he said.

As the team entered the courtyard, Pappy, Heater, and Mooch made a beeline for the building. The rest of the team split into two groups of three—one headed left; the other, right. Their job was to provide cover, counter any enemy resistance, and make sure the watchtowers had been cleared.

If the intelligence they’d received was still accurate, the POW was being held on the lower floor in the right corner of the compound.

Mooch arrived at the door first and pounded twice. “You inside! If you can, move away from the door!”

Heater stepped forward and pointed the M4 at the locking mechanism. His shot splintered the wooden door, leaving a gaping hole where the lock had been.

Now things might get really hairy. If the enemy hadn’t been aware of their presence yet, they surely would be now.

Heater kicked down the shattered door, and Pappy stepped past him into the small, darkened room. His flashlight beam found a figure on a cot in the far corner of the room. The

man was thin, unshaven, and wearing a tattered jumpsuit. His hands had been bound behind his back, and a gag covered his mouth. “Lieutenant Roger Drake?” Pappy asked.

The wide-eyed man nodded, a look of relief in his eyes.

Heater handed his shotgun to Mooch and with a grunt draped the frail man across his shoulders in a fireman’s carry. “You’re going home, sir!” he said.

“We’ve got the package,” Pappy announced into his helmet’s built-in radio. “Ready for extraction.”

Several miles away, a Black Hawk helicopter was already speeding toward their location.

The men sprinted across the courtyard. Halfway to the gate, Mooch stumbled over something in the dark and fell to one knee. As Pappy helped him up, they heard the sound of voices in the distance. Heater’s shotgun blast had not gone unnoticed.

“*Pappy, I don’t like this,*” Viper radioed from one of the watchtowers.

“What’s wrong?” Pappy grunted as he continued running toward the iron gate.

“*Those watchtower guards we took care of were nothing more than scarecrows—just stuffed bags of straw.*”

A chill ran up Pappy’s spine. He knew this mission had been going *way* too easily. First, the unlocked front gate was practically an invitation to enter. Second, so far, there was no resistance from enemy forces whatsoever. Now came news of scarecrows in the watchtowers. The whole thing stunk of a setup.

He pushed the thought out of his mind and continued forward. The thumping rotors of the approaching Black Hawk helicopter were getting louder.

“Regroup for extraction!” Pappy shouted into his mic.

The rest of the team wasted no time retreating from their positions inside the compound. They all raced toward the chopper, which had just touched down and was kicking up a lot of dust.

The door to the Black Hawk was already open, and Heater lowered the rescued POW safely into the aircraft's interior. As the rest of the team climbed in, a medic aboard the chopper removed the gag from Lieutenant Drake's mouth.

"Wait!" Drake cried out. "I'm not the only one! There's another!"

Pappy put out his hand to stop the helicopter door from closing. "Another American POW?"

"Yes! In the cell next to mine," Drake replied.

The team hadn't trained for this contingency, but they couldn't leave a man behind.

"Heater! Mooch!" Pappy called, but the two SEALs were already out the door and on their way. "Viper! Doc!" Pappy shouted. "Give 'em backup!"

The team knew that getting in and out of the compound quickly had been their one big advantage. They no longer had the element of surprise on their side. Returning now would raise the risks dramatically.

Mooch was already halfway across the courtyard with the rest of the team on his heels. He decided to bank left to avoid whatever he had stumbled over earlier. That's when he felt a tug on his ankle and knew he had made a mistake.

Trip wire!

The two-story building before him disappeared behind a flash of blinding light. The sound of the blast was deafening. The cinder block walls shattered, sending deadly debris in every direction. A roaring fireball rose into the sky.

Mooch opened his eyes and realized he had been momentarily knocked unconscious. But it couldn't have been long, because both large and small fragments were still raining down from the angry orange sky. He tried to focus on Heater, who was now at his side. His partner was bleeding badly from a vicious cut across his face and a deep wound in his shoulder. Mooch could see that Heater was yelling at him, but he couldn't make out anything but the loud ringing in his ears.

As Heater helped him to his feet, Mooch realized that he couldn't stand. He numbly looked down to discover that his right leg below his knee was simply gone.

Doc and Viper had fared much better since they hadn't been as close when the blast had occurred. They grabbed both Heater and Mooch and helped them stagger back to the waiting chopper. Once inside, they collapsed to the floor. The Black Hawk immediately lifted off the ground.

"What happened?" Pappy shouted over the roar of the engine as they struggled to gain altitude.

"Trip wire," Mooch groaned as Doc applied a tourniquet to his leg. "We must've been lucky to avoid it the first time."

Pappy looked out the window at the compound receding into the distance. Nothing was left but a huge mound of burning rubble among thick columns of smoke. It was obvious that no one inside could have possibly survived the blast or the raging fires.

Lieutenant Drake leaned against the back wall of the cabin, rocking back and forth with his face in his hands. "No . . ." he groaned. "*No!*"

"Who was it?" Pappy asked. "Who was in there with you?"

"He was my friend." Drake couldn't hold back his grief and began to sob. "Captain John Fowler."

Chapter 1

Ambrosia, Arizona—one week later

THE LAST CHANCE DETECTIVES WERE ON A CASE. Not a big case, mind you, but a *case* nonetheless. Mike Fowler and Ben Jones were hanging out on a downtown street corner trying to look nonchalant. Each was wearing an earpiece and a small microphone hidden under his shirt that Spencer Martin, the electronics whiz of the group, had wired up for them. Mike and Ben were keeping a careful eye on a nearby newspaper vending box and anyone who got near it.

“Lose the mustache, Ben,” Mike said flatly.

“It’s part of my disguise!” Ben was wearing not only a fake mustache but also a floppy hat and a pair of dark sunglasses.

“We’re supposed to blend in, not call attention to ourselves. And what kid our age grows a mustache?”

“I think I look like an adult,” Ben insisted. And yet, other than the hat and sunglasses, Ben was dressed in his usual manner: sneakers, blue jeans, and a denim jacket. His Batman T-shirt had an old ice cream stain running down the front. He looked exactly like the twelve-year-old that he was. “I bet nobody recognizes me.”

“Hey, Mike! Ben!” Sheriff Smitty called as he crossed the street.

“How’d you know it was me?” Ben asked.

“Glad I ran into you guys.” Smitty removed his Stetson hat and wiped his brow. “I could really use your help.”

“You could?” Mike asked. He was immediately intrigued. As the thirteen-year-old leader of the Last Chance Detectives, he was always on the lookout for their next big case.

“I’m looking for volunteers,” Smitty explained, “to help clean up after today’s big shindig.”

It was, indeed, a big day for the small desert town of Ambrosia. One hundred years earlier, to the day, the town had become officially incorporated. To celebrate the anniversary, the town fathers had planned a big centennial celebration. It would kick off at ten a.m. with a parade. Not a big parade, of course, because Ambrosia was a fairly small town. But it would feature the fifteen-member Ambrosia High School marching band, a Navajo equestrian group, and even a decorative float. Sponsored by Ambrosia’s Chamber of Commerce, the float featured an eleven-foot-tall gold prospector (affectionately named Lucky) that Ambrosia’s Women’s Auxiliary had made completely out of used Popsicle sticks.

The celebration would conclude with a fair in the park featuring food booths, greased-pig wrestling, a bouncy house,

and a dunk tank that Ambrosia's mayor, Orville Russell, had good-naturedly agreed to be the victim of. All the proceeds would go toward restoring the water tower that loomed over the south end of the park. Most locals called it "the leaning tower of Ambrosia," because back in 1964 it had been the victim of two teenage "hooligans" who were racing their souped-up hot rods. One of the drivers had lost control and ended up running into a support leg of the water tower. From that day on, the tower had begun to lean, and it seemed to lean a little more each year—inspiring a fundraiser to finally have it fixed.

The irony is that the hooligan who had caused the accident was none other than seventeen-year-old Theodore Smitty.

Smitty had eventually turned his life around by joining the military and had ultimately gone on to be elected sheriff. But he never could live down the water tower accident. As far as he was concerned, the sooner the water tower was fixed, the sooner people would stop ribbing him about what had happened.

"So what do you say, fellas?" Smitty asked. "Can I count on you to help me clean up the park after today's event? Maybe you could round up Winnie and Spence to help out too."

"Sorry, Smitty," Mike replied. "But we're all currently working on a case."

Smitty eyed them skeptically. "Looks to me like you're just standing around."

"No, really!" Mike assured him. "We're on a stakeout. We're working for Roger Huntley."

"The editor of the *Ambrosia Signal*?" A sour look spread across Smitty's face.

Smitty had never taken a liking to the editor, lead reporter,

and photographer for the *Ambrosia Signal*—a younger man who always wore a fedora with a press pass tucked into the hatband. In Smitty's opinion, Roger took himself way too seriously. He had gone so far as to change his name from Brandon Kuchenski to Roger Huntley to create the persona of a big-city journalist when, in reality, the *Signal* only had a few hundred readers.

Another burr under Smitty's saddle was the fact that Roger had endorsed Smitty's opponent in last year's sheriff's election.

"Has he got you trying to catch whoever's been stealing newspaper vending boxes?" Smitty asked.

"Yeah, they've taken 'em all except this last one." Ben pointed to the nearby metal box. "Roger said he needed to take matters into his own hands since you weren't doing anything about it."

Smitty's ice-blue eyes narrowed. "Roger *said* that?"

"Yeah, he and Spence are over there in Surveillance Unit #1 if you want to talk to him." Ben pointed across the street to a nearby 1970s van with a psychedelic pattern on its side and dark tinted windows.

"*Surveillance Unit #1*," Smitty muttered sarcastically. "Why, that's just his uncle's old party van."

"Anyway," Ben continued, "Roger thinks that with the distraction of the parade and all, this might be the day the thieves try to snatch the last newspaper vending box."

"In broad daylight?" Smitty shook his head. "I hope he's paying you."

"Not in money," Mike admitted. "But he said he would run a free ad for the Last Chance Detectives in the newspaper if we helped out. We haven't had a good case in months, and we're hoping it might drum up some business."

"Howdy, Smitty." Several men were passing on the sidewalk.

One reached over and good-naturedly slapped Smitty on the shoulder. “Big day ahead, Smitty, what with the fair to help restore the water tower. You gonna be there?”

“Yes, I am, Lewis.” Smitty lowered his head, knowing what was coming next.

“Then I guess it’s true what they say—that criminals always return to the scene of the crime!” Lewis and his friends roared with laughter.

“Ha, ha,” Smitty said flatly. “Like I haven’t heard that one before.”

Smitty turned his attention back to the boys. “Well, I’d better get moving. Gotta pick up some trash bags from the hardware store.”

“See ya, Smitty!” Mike called after him.

“Are you getting hungry?” Ben asked while pulling a donut from his jacket pocket.

“Nope,” Mike replied.

“I think raspberry-filled donuts are my favorite.” Ben took a huge bite.

“*You really ought to eat healthier food, Ben.*” It was Wynona Whitefeather’s voice coming over their earpieces. Winnie was perched on a nearby rooftop, observing the street below through a large pair of binoculars. “*You know, maybe try some vegetables from time to time.*”

“I eat plenty of vegetables,” Ben replied into his hidden mic. “Potato chips. French fries.”

“Are potatoes even vegetables?” Mike asked.

In the van across the street, Spence sat next to Roger Huntley, both observing the stakeout through a closed-circuit monitor

that was being fed video from a remote-controlled camera on the van's roof.

"Potatoes fall into the category of stem tubers," Spence said matter-of-factly into his microphone, "which are technically vegetables. But—"

"Hey!" Roger Huntley interrupted. "Tell your friends to *focus*. As long as you guys are on my newspaper's payroll, I want you to . . ." Roger paused midsentence and pointed at the monitor. "Look—somebody is approaching the newsstand!"

Spence zoomed the camera in on a man walking toward the newspaper vending machine. Both Roger and Spence leaned forward to get a good look at the monitor. The man paused at the newsstand, then bent over with outstretched arms.

Right at that moment, a large red vehicle drove into the frame, completely blocking their view. Spence zoomed back out to reveal that a fire truck had pulled to a stop in front of the donut shop. A lone firefighter jumped out of the still-idling truck and ran into the shop to pick up an order.

"Talk about horrible timing! I can't see a thing!" Roger slapped the TV. "Mike, what's our suspect doing?"

"Just buying a newspaper," Mike responded calmly. "Now he's walking away."

"He might still be our perp." Roger liked using slang terms like *perp* instead of *perpetrator*. He thought it made him sound more seasoned and street-savvy. "He could be casing the joint before he strikes later. Spence, see if you can get a good look at his face as he walks away."

"Roger that, Roger." Spence panned the camera left. He could see Mike and Ben still standing on the corner, but the fire truck completely blocked his view of the newsstand. He panned

the camera right just in time to see the man appear from behind the back of the fire truck. He headed north up Third Street and was approaching Calhoun's Jewelry.

"I don't think this is our guy." Spence zoomed in the camera to get a closer view. "He looks like an innocent businessman—"

Spence stopped himself midsentence. He had caught sight of something that did indeed look suspicious. Another man, whom their suspect had just walked past, stood outside the jewelry store and was putting on a pair of tight-fitting gloves.

"You're losing our suspect," Roger complained.

"Wait!" Spence zoomed in tighter on the second man. "It's pretty warm out. Why's that guy putting on gloves?"

The man outside the jewelry store glanced both ways to see if anybody was watching, then pulled a sheer stocking out of his back pocket and slipped it over his head. It distorted his face, making him virtually unrecognizable—except that the stocking mask pulled back his lips, revealing two prominent buckteeth.

"The Bunny Bandit!" Spence gasped.