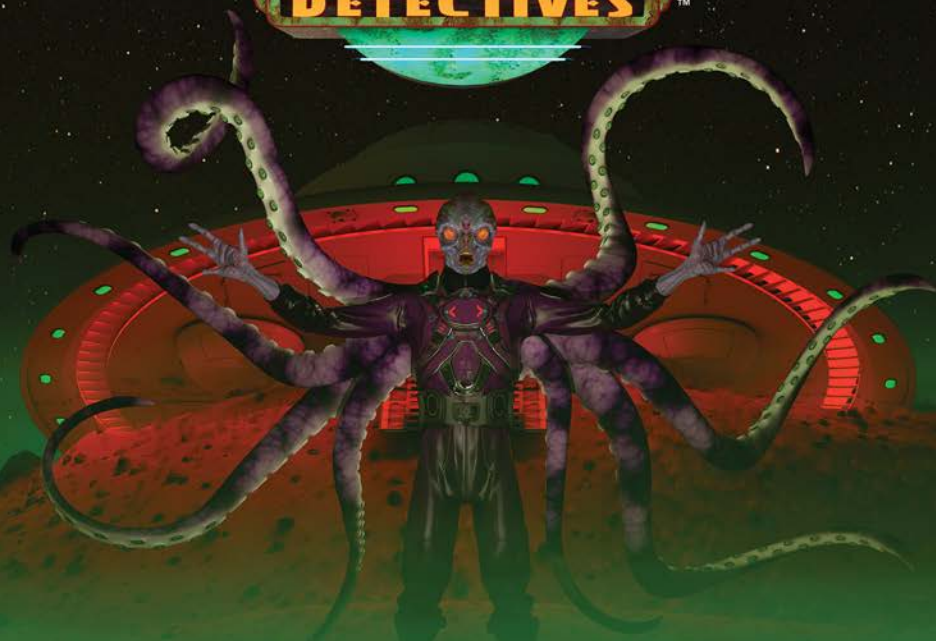


THE  
**LAST CHANCE**  
DETECTIVES™



**TERROR FROM**  
**OUTER SPACE**

**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*





THE  
**LAST CHANCE**  
**DETECTIVES**

*Terror from Outer Space*

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# TERROR FROM OUTER SPACE



**ROBERT VERNON**

**FOCUS**  
ON THE FAMILY<sup>®</sup>

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# Chapter 1

*Ambrosia, Arizona—1995*

THE FOLKS IN THE SMALL, DUSTY TOWN of Ambrosia were certainly no strangers to spells of hot weather. But this particular late spring afternoon was turning out to be what the old-timers called “a real barn burner of a day.” Over 107 degrees according to the large thermometer that hung over Grundey’s Drugstore on the south side of town.

It was even hotter on the blacktop-covered roof of the EZ Industrial Storage building on the northeast side of town.

As the four members of the Last Chance Detectives made their way across its roof, their sneakers sank and slightly stuck in the soft roofing tar. The heat was unmerciful, radiating from both above and below. And to make matters worse, Mike Fowler and Ben Jones were struggling to carry Spence’s



latest invention—a large, strange-looking device that weighed well over 150 pounds. The old building’s ceiling creaked and groaned with each heavy step.

“How much farther?” Ben complained.

Spencer Martin stopped next to a three-foot square skylight and knelt down. Sweat was beading on his brown skin. “Set it right here. As close to the skylight as possible.”

Mike and Ben set down the contraption with a loud thud.

Wynona “Winnie” Whitefeather brushed her long black hair out of her eyes and peered through an oversized pair of binoculars at the gravel road below. “The coast looks clear, guys. But hurry! It’s not getting any cooler up here!”

Spence snapped open the stabilizing legs on the strange-looking device. *Rappel-O-Matic* was stenciled in sloppy red letters on its side. Spence may not have been gifted in the graphic arts department, but he more than made up for it with his clever inventions. This latest contraption was a strange combination of a car battery, an electric garage door opener, wires, pulleys, and counterweights, all strapped to a sturdy metal frame.

Mike pulled a crowbar out of his backpack and dug the business end under the edge of the skylight. At thirteen years old, Mike was not only a year ahead of his friends, but his easygoing self-confidence made him their natural leader.

“Now listen, guys. We go in and get out as quickly as possible,” he said. The skylight popped open with a loud creak, and Mike leaned the cover back, exposing a hole big enough for a person to drop through. “Spence, you sure that this thing can haul us back out of there?”

“Absolutely. I tested it with Ben in the harness several times.” Though Spence was a bit younger than the rest of his friends,

his inventive mind and photographic memory made him an invaluable member of the team. “If it can successfully lift Ben’s weight, the rest of us should be a breeze.” Spence suddenly realized how insensitive his remark must have sounded and looked sheepishly over his glasses. “No offense, Ben,” he said.

“None taken.” Ben shrugged. “Mom says I just got a husky frame.”

Ben *was* a little heavy for his age. He was what some folks might call chubby. With wavy hair, freckles, and a quick smile, Ben liked video games and comic books more than sports and school. As for nutrition—he never met a candy bar or pizza he didn’t like (as long as anchovies weren’t involved). His contribution to the team was his wild imagination that got everyone thinking outside the box. Besides that, he had a good sense of humor that never failed to lighten the mood of everyone around him.

“Okay. We go in one at a time.” Mike stepped into the rappelling harness and pulled back his leather jacket in order to clip himself into the line attached to the Rappel-O-Matic. No matter the weather, Mike always wore his trademark A2 flight jacket. Today it made him look a little like Indiana Jones about to drop into an ancient catacomb. “Spence, do you think you should stay up top just in case?”

“We should be fine as long as I have this remote.” Spence adjusted his glasses and held up a simple garage door controller for them to examine. “Besides, I want to see what’s in there too.”

Mike straddled the open skylight and eased his weight into the harness. “Hit it, Spence!”

With a click of Spence’s remote, the Rappel-O-Matic whirred to life and started to slowly let out line.

As Mike sank into the darkness below, the walkie-talkie at his waist suddenly crackled to life.

*"Hello? Mike? You there?"*

Mike immediately recognized his mom's voice. Gail Fowler usually had her hands full serving customers at the Last Chance Gas and Diner, but she was never too busy to keep tabs on her only son's whereabouts.

*"Mike Fowler? Do you read me?"* she persisted.

As Mike continued to descend into the vast storage facility below, he lifted the walkie-talkie to his mouth. "Mother Hen, it is imperative that strict radio protocol be maintained during all covert missions."

*"Oh! Uh . . ."* Gail lowered her voice to make it sound as official as possible. *"Sorry, Desert Eagle."*

"That's okay, Mom." Mike chuckled as his feet hit the dusty concrete floor. "I was just teasing."

Mike unbuckled himself, stepped out of the harness, and gave the line a quick tug. "Okay, Ben, you're next!"

Mike's two-way radio crackled back to life. *"Listen, Mike. I know you've got permission from the owner to go in there, but if your hunch is right and somebody is illegally using that place to hide stolen goods . . ."* Even over the walkie-talkie speaker, Gail sounded a bit worried. *"Well, I just want you kids to be careful."*

"We will," Mike assured her as he sent the line back up to Spence.

*"I also wanted to tell you,"* Gail continued, *"because of a hurricane system over Florida, it looks like the space shuttle is being diverted to Edwards Air Force Base after all."*

*"Tomorrow night?"*

*"Yep."*

“All right!” Mike exclaimed. “Does Pop think he can rig up the radio in time?”

*“He’s working on it right now. Be sure to tell Winnie and Spence that they’re welcome to join us.”*

“Tell her we’ll be there!” Spence called down. “Whoa, careful, Ben!”

Ben had somehow gotten himself tangled in the line on the way down and was now hanging sideways, slowly spinning in a wide circle.

“Need a little help here!” Ben called as he flailed about.

*“I already spoke to Mrs. Jones,”* Gail continued. *“Tell Ben that she said he could spend the night. Ben is there with you, isn’t he?”*

“Yeah, he’s sort of hanging around.” Mike laughed as he grabbed Ben and helped steady him on his feet.

*“Mike?”* Gail sounded as though she sensed she might be missing something. *“Are you sure everything’s okay?”*

“No worries, Mother Hen. Tell Pop I’ll be back as soon as I can to give him a hand.” Mike unhooked Ben and sent the line back up to Spence.

*“All right, Desert Eagle. This is Mother Hen signing off. And, Mike?”*

“I know,” Mike assured her. “Be careful!”



Once Winnie had rappelled down and joined Mike and Ben in the dusty warehouse, they turned their attention to the surrounding darkness.

Their flashlight beams revealed a large room filled with boxes and tarps covering various odd-shaped objects. Shadows

danced across the walls as the kids wandered deeper into the room to investigate.

“Look! Right there! That’s my stolen bike!” Ben exclaimed. “I knew Buchanan and his gang took it!”

“Kachina dolls! These are definitely from my grandmother’s trading post,” Winnie said. Winnie was proud of her Navajo heritage. Her family lived on the nearby reservation and ran the very successful Tres Rios Trading Post on historic Route 66. She picked up one of the kachina dolls and examined its base. “Yep. Even has our price tag still on it.”

Their flashlight beams revealed dozens of car stereos, television sets, and various appliances—some still in their original boxes.

“This place is full of stolen stuff from all over town,” Winnie whispered.

“And check this out.” Mike lifted a large tarp, revealing a white, four-door convertible. “Widow Stevens’ Buick! This thing’s been missing since last fall.”

“Oh, just wait until Sheriff Smitty sees all this stuff!” Ben pumped his fist victoriously in the air. “Scott Buchanan is so busted!”



Scott Buchanan scowled as he eased his beat-up ’78 Ford pickup onto the Sixth Street gravel road. But, then again, he was always scowling. Whether his mood was happy, sad, or indifferent—that scowl was a permanent fixture. Buchanan was in his late teens and was known around town as the local troublemaker. He had an arrest record to back it up. He was known to hang out with two other high school dropouts, Shorty Reese and

Brent Fischer. They were currently in the back of his pickup, struggling to keep a top-heavy, tarp-covered object from tipping over as the truck came to a quick stop at the EZ Industrial Storage building.

“Hey! Take it easy!” one of them yelled.

“Take it easy yourself!” Buchanan growled as his powerfully built frame exited the vehicle and let down the tailgate of the truck. “Get that stupid thing outta there before someone sees us!”

“At least give us a hand!” Shorty called.

Ignoring them, Buchanan started fishing through his pockets, searching for the keys to the storage facility. “You’re the masterminds who stole that piece of junk. Deal with it yourselves.”

As Shorty and Brent struggled with their prize, the tarp slipped, revealing a fiberglass figure of a smiling boy in checkered overalls, holding a hamburger. This goofy-looking figure had been the mascot of Ambrosia’s one and only Burger Boy Restaurant for well over forty years until it went missing several days earlier. Shorty’s foot slipped, and the figure teetered on the edge of the tailgate, before finally falling backward into the truck bed with a loud crash.



Inside the warehouse, Spence was in mid-descent when he heard the crash. “What was that?”

Everyone froze and listened. After a moment, they could distinctly hear nearby voices arguing.

“Oh, no!” Ben looked around frantically. “Not now!”

Spence quickly punched the button on his remote and the Rappel-O-Matic began lifting him back up.

As Mike and Winnie looked for cover, Ben ran up and grasped at Spence. "Don't go!" he pleaded. "Take me with you!"

"Get away, Ben!" Spence hoarsely whispered as he continued to ascend. "It can't hold us both at the same time!"



The fiberglass figure smiled lazily up at the sky as Buchanan's two cohorts in crime carried it to the large door of the warehouse he was unlocking. The padlock snapped open, and Buchanan tossed it at Shorty, hitting him squarely between the eyes.

"Ow! What was that for?" Shorty asked as he rubbed the sore spot.

"For jeopardizing this sweet operation for a lousy, fiberglass dork!" Buchanan grouched.

"Hey, this thing's worth some bank. It's a collectible!" Shorty argued.

"Yeah? Well, where you gonna sell it?" Buchanan's tone was derisive.

"Well," Shorty mumbled. "I don't know."

"Exactly!" Buchanan put his shoulder into the door and pushed, and the door crashed open. "Now get that thing in here before someone sees you."

Struggling to get the figure through the door, the two followed Buchanan as he strode into the center of the large room.

"I swear, if Sheriff Smitty caught us with that thing on the way here, you two would've wished you'd never been bor—" Buchanan's sentence trailed off as he looked around suspiciously.

“What’s the matter?” Brent asked.

Buchanan’s eyes narrowed. “Somethin’s not right.”

Unnoticed, but hanging directly above them, Spence held his breath and prayed they wouldn’t look up. A bead of sweat slowly rolled off his nose and dropped before he could catch it. The droplet seemed to hang in the air for an eternity before it fell directly in front of Buchanan. He didn’t see it. And it only made a light splat as it hit the pavement. But it was enough to draw Buchanan’s attention to the cement floor. His eyes widened as he noticed fresh sneaker prints in the thick dust. Prints that disappeared under a large tarp.

Buchanan lunged forward and yanked the tarp back, revealing Widow Stevens’ Buick. Ben sat in the driver’s seat, his eyes as wide as saucers. Mike sat next to him in the passenger seat and acknowledged they’d been caught with a slight wave of the hand. Winnie smiled sheepishly from the backseat.

Pure rage turned Buchanan’s face a deep shade of red.

“You’re probably wondering what we’re doing in here,” Ben said rather meekly. “You see, it’s just that—” As he spoke, Ben casually reached forward and punched a button on his door. All four doors of the car locked in unison.

“Good thinking, Ben!” Winnie exclaimed.

“Ha! Can’t get us now, can you, Mr. Tough Guy?” Ben was suddenly full of bravado. “You’re just gonna have to wait out there with your silly little friends until we’re good and ready to come out. And we’ve got a walkie-talkie! So, you better get outta here before we call for—”

Ben was mid-sentence when Buchanan coolly grabbed the soft-top roof in his huge, powerful hands. With one quick swipe he easily tore a huge swath of the old material back.



Ben looked up through the gaping hole in the roof and could only get out a small, pathetic, "Help."

"Now, take it easy, Buchanan," Mike said.

An evil grin grew across Buchanan's face as he cracked his knuckles. "Mike Fowler . . . Ben Jones . . . Oh, I'm gonna enjoy this!"

With nowhere to run, Ben nervously gripped the steering wheel and turned to Mike. "Do something, Mike!"

Ben always turned to Mike when they were in a fix. For that matter, so did Winnie and Spence. Mike was a quick, creative thinker. And when faced with a problem, he often came up with a solution that was both bold and decisive. This time was no different.

Mike quickly reached over and turned the key in the ignition. The car roared to life.

Ben suddenly realized Mike's plan. "No! Wait! Wait!"

Mike threw the car into gear and stomped on the accelerator in front of Ben.

The Buick's wheels momentarily spun in place before catching traction and fishtailing forward. Buchanan and his pals could only jump clear as the Buick crashed through the aluminum doors of the storage facility.

Winnie let out a scream and slapped her hands over her eyes. "I can't look!"

Being twelve years old, Ben Jones had fairly limited driving experience. He had driven a Big Wheel, several bicycles, a quad runner, and even a sand rail once (which he ended up crashing), but never a full-sized car. He hung onto the wheel, whimpering, as Mike, who still had his foot pressed firmly on the accelerator, tried to drive from the passenger seat. The Buick rocketed

forward, barely missing Buchanan's pickup, and then continued on, swerving wildly from side to side down Sixth Street.

Buchanan burst from the warehouse and jumped into the pickup. Shorty and Brent were right on his heels and barely had time to dive into the bed of the truck. Buchanan gunned the truck, spraying gravel and dust in all directions, and headed after the Buick.

All was suddenly quiet back in the storage warehouse. Spence slowly swung back and forth in the safety of his harness, watching as the two vehicles sped off toward the heart of town. "I've got a feeling that's not going to end well," he stated.