



THE
LAST CHANCE
DETECTIVES™

QUEST FOR THE
KING'S CROWN

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

Quest for the King's Crown



THE
LAST CHANCE
DETECTIVES

The Last Chance Detectives: Quest for the King's Crown

© 2022 Focus on the Family. All rights reserved.

A Focus on the Family book published by Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188.

Focus on the Family and its accompanying logo are federally registered trademarks, and *The Last Chance Detectives* and its accompanying logo are trademarks, of Focus on the Family, 8605 Explorer Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80920.

Tyndale and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Ministries.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of Focus on the Family.

All Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Reader's Version*,[®] *NIRV*.[®] Copyright © 1995, 1996, 1998, 2014 by Biblica, Inc.[®] Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. (www.zondervan.com) The "NIRV" and "New International Reader's Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.[®]

The characters and events in this story are fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

Cover design by Mike Harrigan

For manufacturing information regarding this product, please call 1-855-277-9400.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 978-1-64607-049-7

Printed in the United States of America

28 27 26 25 24 23 22
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

THE
LAST CHANCE
DETECTIVES

**QUEST FOR THE
KING'S CROWN**



ROBERT VERNON

FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY[®]

A Focus on the Family Resource
Published by Tyndale House Publishers

Prologue

*Near the present-day
United States–Mexico border—1540*

IN THE ORANGE HUES OF A LATE AFTERNOON SUNSET, a distant rider spurred his horse into a full gallop, driving it forward like a madman across the treacherous desert plain. The man's clothes were those of a Spanish conquistador. He wore a heavy steel breastplate, arm and leg greaves, and a metal skirt. On his head was a steel helmet with a pronounced crest on top and sweeping sides that came to points on either end.

The horse beneath him was lathered and nearing exhaustion, but the conquistador couldn't afford to show any mercy and continued to urge the animal on. A band of Apache warriors were hot on his trail, and he wasn't sure if they wanted the priceless cargo he had sworn to protect or were simply after his horse.

The native inhabitants of North and South America had never seen a horse before the conquistadors arrived. The idea that a man could ride an animal had not occurred to them before, but once they saw the speed and power of a horse—and what a man could do on one—they decided they must have them as well.

The Spaniard looked ahead and saw that he was approaching a row of craggy, red sandstone buttes. The biggest butte had a silhouette that resembled a saddle. Perhaps here he could find a place to hide and rest his horse before he ran it to death. But he was wary and fighting the urge to panic. He had seen firsthand the kind of torturous rituals the Apache inflicted upon their enemies and had no desire to fall into their hands.

The conquistador had no idea how the Apache were able to track his movements or keep up with the speed of his horse. Perhaps it was their sheer numbers and use of smoke signals that made it seem like they were always one step ahead of him.

The conquistador's horse was beginning to stumble as it used up what was left of its waning stamina. Without slowing, the Spaniard pushed through some thick desert brush. A covey of high desert quail exploded from the brush, momentarily startling both horse and rider. Just as the conquistador started to relax, he spotted a rope stretched tight across the trail a few yards ahead. He immediately pulled on the reins, but his horse was moving too fast and in its exhaustive state never saw the waiting trap.

His mount hit the line hard. Immediately the horse pitched forward and its haunches somersaulted into the air. The rider was thrown free, but his faithful steed was not so lucky. As the dust began to settle, the poor horse lay gasping and braying in

pain from what appeared to be a broken neck. As the Spaniard rushed to its side, he was immediately met with the angry buzz of incoming arrows. He tried to run but found that he was entangled in the reins of his horse. Pulling a knife from the scabbard at his side, he began cutting the leather lines when he felt a stinging stab in his side.

Freed at last from the tangled reins, the wounded Spaniard stumbled forward over the crest of a hill and slid down to the canyon below. At the bottom of the ravine, he found a river that looked to be about ten feet wide flowing over the sandstone rocks. He splashed into the water but had little time to enjoy its cool refreshment. He lifted his arm to examine the source of his pain and discovered that the shaft of an arrow was protruding from just below his armpit. Without thinking, he broke off the shaft of the arrow and immediately regretted it. The action caused a deep stabbing pain in his chest. He involuntarily coughed and tasted his own blood. He was no doctor but knew enough about medicine to realize that one or both of his lungs had been pierced.

He also knew the Apache would be coming over the ridge at any moment. Perhaps they already realized that the horse they sought was dying and worthless to them. They would soon turn their attention to him—to see what they could salvage off of his person.

The injured conquistador looked around frantically for a place to hide. The Apache were excellent trackers, and he had made their job too easy. Not only had he left a clear path of footprints in his haste, but his wound had probably left a telltale trail of blood leading to his current position.

Though it took a lot of effort, the Spaniard waded his way

against the current of the twisting river. He was hard to track as long as he remained in the water, but his energy was fading as fast as the wound in his side was bleeding out. He needed to find shelter soon, before he passed out. Rounding a boulder, he found a large pool of water. On the far side, a ten-foot-wide waterfall cascaded into the pool.

Though the waterfall was only four feet high, it gave the fugitive conquistador an idea. He made his way to the base of the waterfall and thrust his arm through the sheet of falling water. On the other side he found exactly what he was looking for: a small, shallow cavern behind the falls with an air pocket. The conquistador took a deep, labored breath and disappeared under the falls. On the other side, he found a three-foot-deep shelf. He raised himself onto the ledge and stretched out perpendicular to the waterfall. The pocket was wet and had small growing flora, but it offered plenty of fresh air and would hide his presence.

The conquistador realized that the tattered reins were the only thing still trailing out of the falls. They would be an instant giveaway that someone was hiding behind the watery cascade! He quickly pulled the reins back behind the falls and secured them beside him in the small air pocket.

He momentarily closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on slowing his breathing. He didn't want to take any chances that something as small as the noise of a cough would give away his hiding place.

About ten long minutes went by before he saw anything. Through the veil of water, he could barely make out the distorted shapes of several Apache warriors searching for him only a few yards away. He held his breath, fearful that at any minute a hand might reach through the falls and discover him. But

apparently his hiding place worked, as the figures eventually moved on and he could no longer make out any movement beyond the watery veil.

Only after fifteen more minutes passed—and he was sure they were gone—did the conquistador finally allow himself to relax.

His concern turned to the amount of blood he had lost. If the wound was as bad as he feared, he could bleed out within the hour. But maybe, just maybe, the bleeding wasn't as bad as he thought, and he could wrap the wound and find someone to help him. But that would have to wait, at least for the moment. He was tired and starting to feel a bit nauseated. He decided to stay where he was until his strength returned and he could move on.

As the conquistador closed his eyes, the world began to spin, the sound of the water grew faint, and he let out a long, weary exhale of breath. It was his last.

Chapter 1

Ambrosia, Arizona—1995

THE SMALL DESERT TOWN OF AMBROSIA boasted a wide array of roadside attractions and curiosities to lure in the road-weary traveler. One such example was a series of huge footprints embedded in the sidewalk in front of the town courthouse. Obviously made when the cement was still wet, the tracks were so big that visitors wondered if a dinosaur had left them.

In reality, the prints were the last remaining evidence of the Great Elephant Stampede of 1956.

On that fateful day, several elephants from a traveling circus became overheated in their stalled train cars and broke free—wildly following their noses to water. The pachyderms stampeded through the heart of the downtown square, crashing through the central band gazebo and trampling the courthouse's

freshly poured sidewalk. The herd finally came to a stop at Floyd Needham's refreshment stand: Big Chief Burgers on Sixth Street. Not to be outdone by the other "biggest ever" attractions around town, Floyd had installed the "World's Largest Snow Cone" on top of his burger stand. Every day he dutifully climbed a ladder and filled the eight-gallon basin with real crushed ice and an assortment of colored sugar water.

When Floyd saw the elephants charging at his stand that day, he thought for sure they were after his roasted peanuts and immediately surrendered them. But the elephants had their hearts set on the huge snow cone on the roof and busted down the walls until they finally had their prize in their trunks. The giant snow cone happened to be grape flavored that day, which inspired Floyd to later rename the flavor Pachyderm Purple in memory of the event.



Nearly forty years later, Pachyderm Purple happened to be Ben Jones's favorite flavor. He paid for his extra-large snow cone and was careful not to spill it as he climbed aboard his bike. Steering with one hand and holding the dripping snow cone in the other, Ben pedaled as fast as his stout legs would allow down old Route 66.

The Last Chance Detectives met every Saturday morning at nine o'clock sharp, and Ben was running a few minutes late. He avoided a motor home pulling into the Last Chance Gas and Diner and pulled his bike up to the World War II-era B-17 bomber, the *Lady Liberty*, which was parked on the far side of the property. Ben let his bike fall to the ground and quickly

entered the side door of the plane that served as the official headquarters of the Last Chance Detectives. He found Mike Fowler, Wynona Whitefeather, and Spencer Martin already waiting for him at the card table they always met around.

“Hey! You better have brought enough snow cones for the rest of us,” Mike Fowler said.

“Sorry, Mike.” Ben climbed into his usual spot in a hammock overlooking the card table. “There’s no way I could’ve balanced four snow cones on my bike at the same time.”

“As I was saying . . .” Spence interrupted and handed Mike an ordinary-looking sneaker. “I finished working on that secret shoe device I promised.”

Spence was always coming up with new inventions—each more ingenious than the last.

“So, now you’re working on an invention for Mike’s shoes?” Ben complained. “When are you finally going to get around to fixing my Gloobers video game cartridge?”

“Probably next week,” Spence assured him.

“That’s what you said last time after you finished working on Mike’s watch.”

“If it wasn’t for Spence coming up with that two-way radio wristwatch, we might have never solved the space shuttle mystery,” Winnie reminded Ben.

“Speaking of mysteries,” Mike said, “I’m calling this meeting to order.”

Mike was the leader of the Last Chance Detectives. He started the club as a way to hone his detective skills so that he might one day solve the mystery of his missing father—an Air Force fighter pilot who mysteriously disappeared while on a mission in the Middle East.

Mike turned to Winnie. "Have we got any new cases lined up?"

"Honestly?" Winnie scanned her notepad and shrugged her shoulders. "Not much. We've got the usual missing pets. A stolen lawnmower . . ."

"Boring," Ben said under his breath.

"Let's see . . ." Winnie continued. "Del Hansen claims someone is dropping nails and metal screws on the highways outside of town so that people have to stop here to have their tires fixed."

"Who would do something like that?" Spence asked.

"I don't know," Winnie admitted. "That's why it's a mystery."

"Aw, nothing good ever happens around here," Ben complained.

"Are you kidding me, Ben?" Mike asked incredulously. "We've been running this detective agency for only a little over a year and just think of all the cases we've solved. Like the UFO lights that turned out to be an international art smuggling ring. Or when we cracked the case of the desert Bigfoot!"

"Remember when we caught those bank robbers?" Winnie asked.

"How could I forget? They abandoned me out in the middle of the Fire Lake Wilderness Area," Mike said.

"That's right!" Ben exclaimed. "You got so hungry you ate a lizard!"

"How about the time we stopped international terrorists from stealing government secrets and saved the crew of the space shuttle," Spence said. "We made the front page of newspapers all over the world with that one."

"And just a few weeks ago we solved the mystery of that

phantom hot rod and helped rescue Sheriff Smitty from a burning building,” Mike reminded them. “We weren’t even sure you would survive that case, Ben.”

“I guess a lot of pretty epic stuff *has* happened,” Ben admitted.

“Sure!” Mike said. “Just give it a day or two and something big is bound to pop up. It always does.”

“What do you guys think we should do until then?” Winnie asked.

It was quiet for a moment as everyone thought it over.

Mike finally spoke up. “I say we take a day off!”

“Take a day off?” Winnie asked as everyone rolled the idea around. “What do you mean, exactly?”

“You know, do all the fun stuff we’ve been wanting to do but were too busy,” Mike explained.

Once again everyone agreed what a fine idea that was. But then the room grew uncomfortably quiet.

“So, what *is* all the fun stuff we’ve been wanting to do?” Ben wondered aloud.

“We could go to the library,” Spence suggested.

Ben rolled his eyes. “He said ‘fun,’ Spence. ‘Fun!’”

“How about the movies?” Winnie asked.

“Nothing good’s playing,” Ben stated matter-of-factly.

“How about that giant crocodile movie?”

Ben shook his head. “Already seen it and the crocodile looks fake.”

“Well . . .” Mike thought hard for a moment. “How about those wagon wheel tracks that we heard are still out in the desert? We’ve been wanting to see if those are real, haven’t we?”

“That’s right!” Ben agreed. “We could also check out that

UFO landing site Harley Fisher claims is in the same general area.”

“It’s going to be quite hot,” Spence pointed out. “The weather report says the high is supposed to reach over 100 degrees today.”

“My brother spends a lot of time out that way and says there’s a small river that runs through there. We could cool off in it,” Winnie suggested.

“It’s settled, then,” Mike said. “Everyone, get your swimsuits! I’ll gas up the quad runners, and we’ll meet back here in an hour.”