

THE
LAST CHANCE
DETECTIVES™



ESCAPE FROM
FIRE LAKE

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

Escape from Fire Lake

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FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY[®]

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Chapter 1

Ambrosia, Arizona—1994

NO ONE NOTICED when two men in a 1971 Cadillac pulled into the small town of Ambrosia and cruised down Main Street. Not that anyone should. Being located next to historic Route 66 meant that a constant flow of cars and their road-weary passengers stopped by to make one last pit stop before braving the next hundred or so miles of blistering desert. The car looked like just another asphalt-eating sedan with the typical layer of fine red dust and a windshield spattered with a diverse collection of unlucky bugs.

There was really only one thing unique about this car. It was stolen.

Josh Pendleton was a strongly built man. He had added pounds of muscle to his wide frame by spending many hours pumping weights in the prison yard. He held the Cadillac's steering wheel in a steel grip as he turned the car from Main Street onto First. He brushed his dark hair out of his eyes and kept an eye on the speedometer to make sure he didn't exceed the speed limit. He had planned things too well to be caught now by some small-town traffic cop with a radar gun. The bank was just a few blocks ahead.

Seth Parker sat next to him and peered out from under his cowboy hat. Beads of sweat leaked out from under the hatband as his tongue nervously played with a toothpick in his mouth. No matter how hard he tried to relax, he didn't think that he'd ever get used to the nerve-racking moments just before a job.

This would be their third bank robbery in two weeks. The other two had been in small towns as well. But they had been really nothing more than practice runs preparing them for this—their grab at the big brass ring in the bank of Ambrosia.

They had met in Huntsville Penitentiary. Josh considered crime his profession, while Seth was only serving a short sentence for some petty thefts. Seth had just wanted to quietly do his time and then go home. But then Josh schemed up this plan, and when Seth heard how easy it would be and how rich it would make them both—he just couldn't pass it up.

Josh had always been the mastermind, planning each job he and his accomplices pulled off. But this job practically

landed right in his lap. He had been assigned to work in the prison hospital when a dying convict told him a wild tale about a priceless jade statuette dating back to the Ming dynasty. The old man had been part of a ring of professional thieves who had smuggled it out of China. Although it was worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, the smugglers decided that they had better not try to sell it until things cooled off on the black market. So they hid it in a place where they thought no one would ever track it: a safety-deposit box in the small town of Ambrosia. The old man just had to get the story off his chest before he went to meet his Maker. He told Josh to tell the warden so the rightful owners could reclaim it.

But Josh had other ideas.

It wasn't hard to figure out which bank it was in. Ambrosia just had two, and only one offered safety-deposit boxes.

The plan was simple: Get in and out of the bank as fast as possible, make a clean getaway in the stolen car, and drive a few blocks to a waiting truck in a secluded spot. By the time the police had a description of the getaway car, Josh and Seth would be driving out of town in a clean vehicle. Easy as pie.

Josh eased the Caddy over to the curb and turned off the ignition.

"Kind of a small bank, isn't it?" drawled Seth in a thick Texas accent as he peered out the windshield.

"That's what makes it so perfect," Josh said with a smile. He reached into the backseat to retrieve a duffel bag, and then he checked his watch. "Okay. The vault should be

open. We've got five minutes, so keep your eyes peeled for the grand prize."

From behind the sun visor, Josh produced a neatly creased paper and unfolded it for Seth to see. "Take a good look. This is what's gonna make it all worthwhile."

The paper was a photocopy of a drawing of the statuette. It didn't look like much to Seth—a glaring panther head set atop a long body, enshrouded in two hawkish wings. Seth wondered what rich people saw in trinkets such as this. His appreciation of the fine arts extended only about as far as his collection of velvet Elvis pictures.

"What if it's not here?" Seth asked as he checked his own duffel bag one last time.

"Oh, it's here," Josh replied firmly. "Stolen goods like to hide out in dusty little towns like this. I did my homework."

Seth smiled and shook his head in admiration. "You're somethin', Josh. Now we take it from the first guys that stole it."

Josh pulled a revolver from his bag and twirled it nimbly in his palm before tucking it down into the waist of his pants. The ease and skill with which he used it worried Seth.

"Don't worry! No one's gonna get hurt!" Josh assured him. "Now remember, I'll take care of the safety-deposit boxes. You keep everyone covered and empty the cash tills. That way we'll have a few bucks for spending cash. You ready?"

Josh is right, thought Seth. *A small-town bank like this probably won't even have a guard.* He grabbed his bag and looked firmly into Josh's eyes. "Yeah, I'm ready!"

“Good,” Josh said with a slight laugh in his voice. “Then it’s time to make a little ‘withdrawal!’”

As the two men exited the car and walked up to the bank, they took one last look around. Aside from the usual passing cars, the street looked quiet. They politely opened the door for an exiting patron, then stepped into the bank.



Mike Fowler knew the streets of Ambrosia like the back of his hand. He had moved here with his mother to live with his grandparents after the “accident.” His father had been flying a secret mission over a hot spot in the Middle East when his plane went down. Although the military had never found his body, they had no reason to believe he had escaped and had assumed he died in the crash.

But Mike didn’t think so. He knew his dad was a fighter and would have found some way to survive. The very fact that no one had found a body or any dog tags was proof enough. To Mike it wasn’t just a hope, it was a fact: His father was alive somewhere. He could feel it. Probably being held captive by some terrorist organization. And although almost everyone else had given up hope, he hadn’t. And he intended to prove them wrong someday. But being twelve years old meant that he couldn’t do much for the time being.

Mike’s dad had always told him that he could accomplish almost anything he wanted to as long as he really set his mind to it. Combine that with a little practice and a lot of

hard work, and almost any obstacle could be scaled. So with that in mind, Mike figured that if he was ever going to solve the mystery of what happened to his dad, he'd better start practicing now.

His grandfather, Pop Fowler, let Mike use his old B-17 bomber as the headquarters. Then Mike found his three best friends, Ben Jones, Wynona Whitefeather, and Spencer Martin. Together, they'd decided to become real detectives, and Mike named the group after the business his family ran—the Last Chance Gas and Diner. And so far they had a pretty good track record. Whether it was investigating strange UFO lights out in the desert or trailing the legendary Bigfoot, the Last Chance Detectives always solved their case.

They only had one problem: finding good mysteries to solve.

Not much happens in a small town, so the biggest challenge for Mike—since the task usually fell to him—was to find interesting cases that would hone their detective skills.

And that's exactly what Mike had on his mind the morning of the bank robbery.

He and the gang were coming up a side street less than a block away from the bank when the robbers first entered the building. They were on their way home from an early morning baseball game and engaging in one of their favorite pastimes—sports trivia. Mike threw a ball for his dog, Jake, to retrieve as he tried to think up a question to stump them.

“Spence!” Mike called out. “Longest home run.”

Spence didn't even miss a beat. "Mickey Mantle, 643 feet, 1960!"

Mike threw his arms up. There was no tripping up Spence. The guy was a walking encyclopedia. "Your turn, Winnie," Mike said with a sigh.

"Ben!" Winnie challenged. "Most steals in a season."

"Um . . . give me a second! I know this one," Ben stalled, his face contorted in deep concentration.

Just to add a little pressure, Winnie started humming the theme music to *Jeopardy*. She knew this bugged him.

"Um, Lou Brock!" Ben exclaimed in triumph.

"*Brrrnk!*" Winnie made the sound of a game-show buzzer.

Winnie, Mike, and Spence all knew the answer to this one, and they chimed in together, "Rickey Henderson, 130 for Oakland, 1982."

Ben grimaced as the other three laughed.



The robbery was going exactly as planned. Seth had already emptied the cash drawers, and Josh was going through the safety-deposit boxes one by one with a master key. The bank clerks and bystanders had given up without a fuss and now lay flat on the cracked tile floor. Seth kept watch over them, pacing back and forth, cradling a sawed-off shotgun in his arms.

Seth felt a weird surge of emotions as he waited for Josh to finish the job. On the one hand, an adrenaline rush made

him feel strangely powerful. On the other, he couldn't turn off the voice that kept repeating the words *This is wrong!*

As he looked down at the trembling victims, his heart couldn't help but feel sorry for them. He wasn't like Josh. Josh had done this type of thing too many times to have his conscience bother him. Seth wondered if he, too, might eventually become as calloused. If this job panned out as well as they hoped, he wouldn't have to. He looked at his watch. In just a few minutes, this would all be a thing of the past. In just a few minutes, he and Josh would be rich men. In just a few minutes—

Catching a glimpse of movement in the corner of his eye, Seth's head snapped to look across the room. Just outside the window, four kids and a dog emerged from around the corner. If they glanced into the bank, they would easily see what was going on! Seth held his breath and hoped they would continue on by.

They didn't. They paused to stop and talk.

Seth tried not to panic as he racked his brain as to what he should do. The venetian blinds! If he could maneuver across the room and close the blinds . . .



The Last Chance Detectives rounded the corner and stopped in front of the bank. Mike, Ben, and Winnie gathered with their backs to the bank window. Spence stood facing them with a clear view into the bank.

“Okay, this is where we split up and start looking,” said Mike. “Here’s the plan—”

“Il-li-nois!” Ben interrupted, hitting Spence in the arm once for every syllable. It was just another ongoing game he and Spence played. The basic rule was this: Whoever saw an out-of-state license plate first got to sock the other guy in the arm.

“Where?” cried Spence, looking around and holding his arm in pain.

Ben pointed just a few yards away to the 1971 Cadillac parked at the curb. “I get you every time, Spence,” Ben said. “You oughta be wearing your glasses.”

“I can see fine without my glasses,” Spence replied defensively as he turned back to face the bank again.

“Cool it, Ben,” Mike said, trying to bring some order to the day. “It’s time for business. Okay, here’s the deal—we split up, look for anything worth investigating, and meet back at the B-17 at five thirty. We’ll vote on the best case. Questions?”

Spence squinted his eyes as he noticed some movement in the bank. Try as he might, he couldn’t bring it into focus. He realized that Ben was probably right—he should be wearing his glasses. All he could make out in the bank were blurs of motion.

“How can we choose a case when there’s nothing going on?” Ben asked, looking at the others. “Hasn’t been for weeks.”

Ben noticed Spence’s eyes squinting and turned to see what he was trying to focus on. The miniblinds closed with a snap.

“He’s got a point,” Winnie noted.

“That was yesterday. Today is going to be our day!” said Mike, trying to encourage the others. He took a deep breath through his nose. “Smell that? That’s a case. A good detective can always smell a case.”

Winnie, Ben, and Spence each sniffed the air. Winnie suddenly got a disgusted look on her face.

“I think those are Ben’s socks.”

“Ha-ha,” said Ben dryly.

“Okay, you’ve got till five thirty,” said Mike, ignoring the last two comments. “Keep your eyes open.”

With a couple of parting waves, the kids went their separate ways, not knowing how close they had come to their next case.