



THE
LAST CHANCE
DETECTIVES™

CANYON QUEST

JIM WARE

THE LAST CHANCE DETECTIVES

Canyon Quest

Mystery Lights of Navajo Mesa

Legend of the Desert Bigfoot

Escape from Fire Lake

Terror from Outer Space



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**FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY.**

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Chapter 1

Ambrosia—1994

“SEVENTY-NINE, EIGHTY, eighty-one, eighty-two . . .
eighty-three.”

Mike Fowler stopped counting and looked at the money where it lay spread out across his cowboy-patterned bedspread. Beside it sprawled a wrinkled Greyhound bus schedule and a Triple-A road map of the Midwestern states. Mentally he added it up again. \$53.83 in change and single bills. His entire life’s savings. *Not a lot*, he thought. *But enough.*

Once more he checked the contents of his backpack: two changes of clothes; a water bottle, an orange, three Snickers bars, and a packet of dried fruit snacks; and the leather-bound pocket Bible and compass—a big, beautiful, hand-sized compass in a

shiny brass casement with a pure glass crystal—that his dad had given him the last time they were together for his birthday.

11:42 p.m. The numbers on the digital alarm clock glowed a fuzzy red in the soft darkness. It was the eve of his twelfth birthday, and while the rest of the household slept, Mike sat huddled on the bed with his flashlight, pinning down the final details of a plan that had been taking shape in his mind for years.

A plan to get out of Ambrosia.

Mike hated Ambrosia. He hated the hot, dry winds and the barren landscape that hemmed the town in on every side. He loathed the monotonous cactuses and yucca and the endless flatness of the Arizona desert—a flatness interrupted only by the few arid red buttes and mesas that rose starkly out of the shimmering waste like the cracked and eroded bones of long-forgotten primeval monsters. He cringed at the sight of the searing sun, the unyielding blue of the daytime sky, and the oppressive swarms of winking stars at night. He hated every last bit of it.

Once more Mike consulted the bus schedule for late-night departure times. There was a coach leaving for Columbus at 1:38 a.m. every morning. *Perfect.*

He sat back on the bed, ran his fingers through his brown hair, and went over the plan in his mind. He pictured the dingy Greyhound station down on Ambrosia's drowsy main drag. Main Street, Ambrosia: once a busy stopping point along historic Route 66, now a dilapidated relic, bypassed completely by the newer Interstate 40. He couldn't bear the sight of its peeling storefronts and cartoonish neon signs, blinking

garishly in the purple desert twilight. He winced every time he passed the Wig-Wam Motor Lodge, a tacky cluster of concrete teepees huddled together in a narrow space between two crumbling sandstone cliffs at the east end of town.

Yes, thought Mike. Ambrosia had everything—everything boring and repulsive. Like the Galaxy Drive-In, a crater-based outdoor movie theater, which was one of the ugliest things he'd ever laid eyes on. Its futuristic marquee—futuristic for the 1950s—was like something out of an episode of *The Jetsons*. He fingered his money and told himself that he couldn't wait to get away.

Ambrosia wasn't anything like home. Home, in his memory, was a green and fragrant paradise: a land of gently rolling hills, thick-boughed, broad-leafed trees, and shady lanes lined with snug wood-frame houses, each with a white picket fence, brick walk, and trim green lawn.

If he closed his eyes, Mike could still smell the damp brown earth and the fresh green grass of home. He could feel the damp itchiness that came from tumbling and wrestling with his dad on the lawn during long summer evenings, when tall, puffy clouds, full of night rain, hung thick and gilded and pink above the western horizon.

He could remember sitting out on the front porch with his dad, memorizing psalms and verses out of the Bible, while the sprinklers hissed and filled the air with a gentle mist. People didn't have lawns in Ambrosia. They had rocks or gravel or "xeriscapes"—patches of spiny, spiky, scrawny plants that looked like they came from another planet and

reminded you of the kind of place where a horned toad might feel at home. Mike hated xeriscares.

What made all of this even more unbearable, he thought, was the fact Jamie Fletcher didn't live in Ambrosia. Jamie had been Mike's best friend back at home. He'd never been able to find a friend like Jamie out here in the desert. He hadn't even tried. He didn't want to.

Mike still liked to talk to Jamie on the phone as often as he could wheedle his mom into letting him call. But that didn't happen very often. Mike's mom didn't have a lot of money for long-distance phone bills. Neither did Pop and Grandma Fowler.

So Mike hated Ambrosia. He hated everything about it. Everything, that is, except the B-17.

The B-17 belonged to Pop. It was a real "Flying Fortress"—the same plane he had piloted over France during the Second World War. Now it sat on display out in front of the Last Chance Gas and Diner, the family business where Mom kept the books and waited on tables, and where Mike spent a lot of time hanging around with Pop and wiping windshields.

No question about it. The B-17 was the one thing about Ambrosia that Mike definitely did *not* hate. It was sleek and silvery and wonderful. Just looking at it stirred his imagination and filled him with dreams of being a pilot himself someday—like Pop and his dad.

During his time in Ambrosia, Mike had spent hours upon hours poring over the picture books of airplanes and aircraft he'd discovered in his bedroom—the same room his dad had

occupied as a boy. He'd memorized every model in *Jane's Pocket Book of Major Combat Aircraft* and *Jane's Pocket Book of Helicopters*. He'd have given anything for a look inside the B-17. But he'd never had the chance. The B-17 was off-limits. Pop had put padlocks on the doors to keep kids, vagrants, and curiosity seekers out. So the B-17 didn't really do Mike a whole lot of good.

At any rate, he told himself, even the B-17 couldn't change the very *worst* thing about Ambrosia. Because the very worst thing about Ambrosia was the thing that had brought him to the hot, dusty little town in the first place. It was a thing that had shaken his whole world and changed his life forever—a thing Mike couldn't put out of his mind if he lived to be a hundred.

Never would he forget that late winter afternoon, not long after his sixth birthday, when his mom had come in with red eyes and made him sit down at the end of the living room couch. She had bad news, she said. She told him to be brave and to pray and trust in the Lord.

The wreckage of his dad's F-16 fighter had been recovered. Somewhere in the Middle East. Of John Fowler himself not the slightest trace had been found. That's why they had to go away to Arizona to live with Pop and Grandma Fowler. Away from Jamie Fletcher and the white picket fences and the summer lawns and the winter snows. Away to the land of cactus and baked rocks and corrugated metal roofs. It was the only way they'd be able to make it, she said . . . without Dad.

Without Dad. *That* was the thing Mike *really* hated about

Ambrosia. *With* Dad, even Ambrosia might have been tolerable. As hard as it was to believe, Pop had often told him how much John Fowler loved growing up in this withered little town . . . what a fanatic he had been for desert exploration, and how he had left the marks of his adventures and exploits all over the place. Deep down inside, Mike almost felt that *he* could have loved Ambrosia too, if only his dad were there to help him . . . to hike with him over the bluffs, guide him through the rocky wastes, teach him the names of the desert flowers, and lead him into the mysteries of the Navajo country. But he wasn't. He was gone. And now there was nothing left of him but the compass and pocket Bible he'd given to Mike on that special birthday so long ago.

So Mike hated Ambrosia. Because without his dad, Ambrosia was nothing but a dull, dry, boring, desert waste.

Grimly, Mike smiled. Then he carefully tucked the money back into his wallet, stuffed the map and bus schedule down into his pack, and clicked off the flashlight. Climbing into bed, he pulled the covers up to his chin, bit his lip, and stared into the quiet darkness, listening to the swish of the curtains as they stirred in the breeze at his window.

Everything's ready, he assured himself—a little nervously, perhaps. Tomorrow was D-Day. His twelfth birthday. The day he'd been looking forward to and praying about for so long. The day he'd put his well-laid plans into action. There was only one thing left to do.

Make the phone call to Jamie.

Mike closed his eyes and tried to sleep.