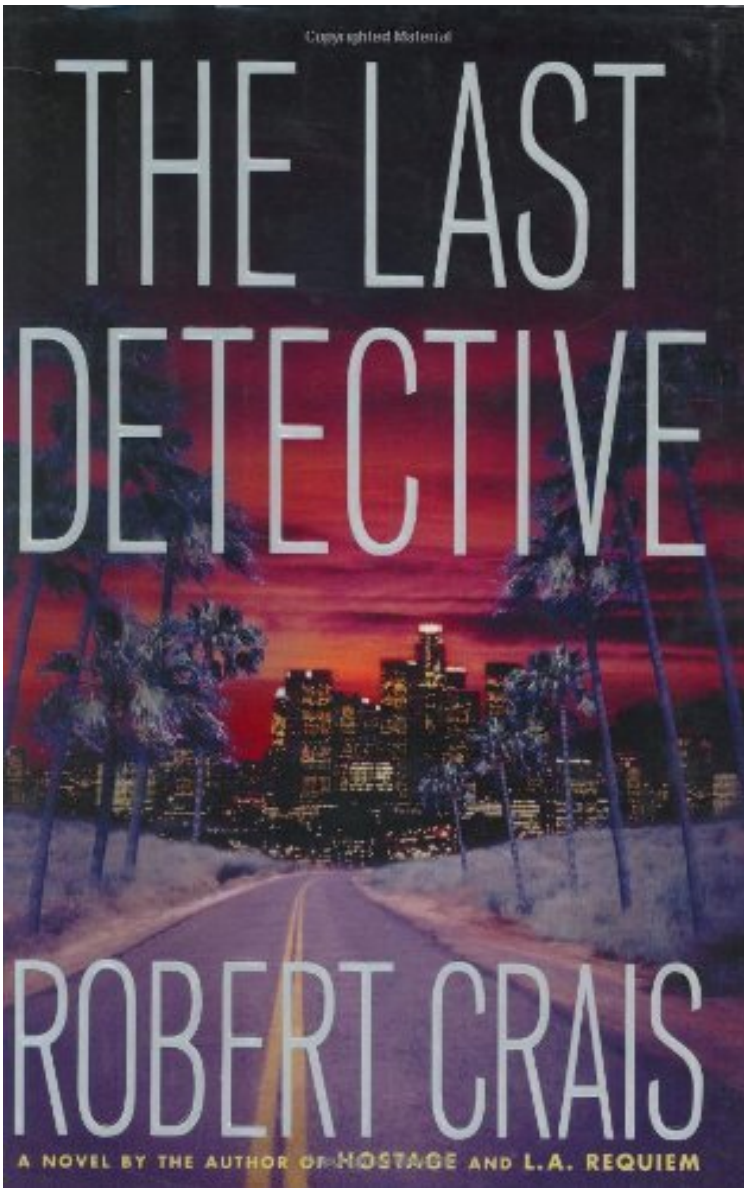


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The Last Detective: A Novel



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurElvis Cole is back...With his acclaimed bestsellers, Hostage (a New York Times Notable Book) and Demolition Angel, Robert Crais drew raves for his unstoppable pacing, edgy characterizations, and cinematic prose. Now, in The Last Detective, Crais returns to his signature character, Los Angeles private investigator Elvis Cole, in a masterful page-turner that probes the meaning of family and the burdens of the past.Elvis Cole's relationship with attorney Lucy Chenier is strained. When she moved from Louisiana to join Elvis in Los Angeles, she never dreamed that violence would so easily touch her life -- but then the unthinkable happens. While Lucy is away on business and her ten-year-old son, Ben,

is staying with Elvis, Ben disappears without a trace. Desperate to believe that the boy has run away, evidence soon mounts to suggest a much darker scenario. Joining forces with his enigmatic partner, Joe Pike, Elvis frantically searches for Ben with the help of LAPD Detective Carol Starkey, as Lucy's wealthy, oil-industry ex-husband attempts to wrest control of the investigation. Amid the maelstrom of personal conflicts, Elvis and Joe are forced to consider a more troubling lead -- one indicating that Ben's disappearance is connected to a terrible, long-held secret from Elvis Cole's past. Venturing deep inside a complex psyche, Crais explores Elvis's need for family - the military that embraced him during a troubled adolescence, his rock-solid partnership with Pike, and his floundering relationship with Lucy - as they race the clock in their search for Ben. The Last Detective is Robert Crais' richest, most intense tale of suspense yet. From the Hardcover edition.

Don't start reading The Last Detective with much on your calendar. This tense, satisfying thriller will glue you to your chair, as private eye Elvis Cole--the star of eight previous Robert Crais novels, prior to the Cole-less Demolition Angel and Hostage--faces his toughest case: the abduction of his girlfriend's son, 10-year-old Ben Chenier, who was staying with Elvis when he was snatched. Panic at Ben's disappearance turns to terror when the kidnapper phones to reveal his apparent motive, a dark secret from Elvis's past. But the plot thickens and twists, and then twists again, as Elvis and his longtime buddy, tough guy Joe Pike, race the clock against a group of villains as sinister as they are capable. The author mixes Elvis's first-person narration with third-person sections that describe other points of view--a risky technique, but Crais makes it work. He also does a fine job resurrecting the wisecracking Elvis of earlier books while imbuing him with a new depth and darkness. This dazzlingly plotted, crisply told story is threaded with real detection (what a rarity!) and peopled by characters you can't help but care about--including Carol Starkey, the haunted bomb-squad cop from Demolition Angel, who's now a juvenile-abduction detective. Crais has long been getting better with each book, and The Last Detective continues the pattern.

--Nicholas H. Allison

Chapter 1A

A silence filled the canyon below my house that fall; no hawks floated overhead, the coyotes did not sing, the owl that lived in the tall pine outside my door no longer asked my name. A smarter person would have taken these things as a warning, but the air was chill and clear in that magnified way it can be in the winter, letting me see beyond the houses sprinkled on the hillsides below and out into the great basin city of Los Angeles. On days like those when you can see so far, you often forget to look at what is right in front of you, what is next to you, what is so close that it is part of you. I should have seen the silence as a warning, but I did not. How many people has she killed? Grunts, curses, and the snap of punches came from the next room. Ben Chenier shouted, What? How many people has she killed? We were twenty feet apart, me in the kitchen and Ben in the living room, shouting at the tops of our lungs; Ben Chenier, also known as my girlfriend's ten-year-old son, and me, also known as Elvis Cole, the World's Greatest Detective and Ben's caretaker while his mother, Lucy Chenier, was away on business. This was our fifth and final day together. I went to the door. Is there a volume control on that thing? Ben was so involved with something called a Game Freak that he did not look up. You held the Game Freak like a pistol with one hand and worked the controls with the other while the action unfolded on a built-in computer screen. The salesman told me that it was a hot seller with boys ages ten to fourteen. He hadn't told me that it was louder than a shoot-out at rush hour. Ben had been playing the game since I had given it to him the day before, but I knew he wasn't enjoying himself, and that bothered me. He had hiked with me in the hills and let me teach him some of the things I knew about martial arts and had come with me to my office because he thought private investigators did more than phone deadbeat clients and clean pigeon crap off balcony rails. I had brought him to school in the mornings and home in the afternoons, and between those times we had cooked Thai food, watched Bruce Willis movies, and laughed a lot together. But now he used the game to hide from me with an absolute lack of joy. I knew why, and seeing him like that left me feeling badly, not only for him, but for my part in it. Fighting it out with Yakuza spree killers was easier than talking to boys. I went over and dropped onto the couch next to him. We could go for a hike up on Mulholland. He ignored me. You want to work out? I could show you another tae kwon do kata before your mom gets home. Uh-uh. I said, You want to talk about me and your mom? I am a private investigator. My work brings me into contact with dangerous people, and early last summer that danger rolled over my shores when a murderer named Laurence Sobek threatened Lucy and Ben. Lucy was having a tough time with that, and Ben had heard our words. Lucy and Ben's father had divorced when Ben was six, and now he worried that it was happening again. We had tried to talk to him, Lucy and I, but boyslike men find it hard to open their hearts. Instead of answering me, Ben thumbed the game harder and nodded toward the action on the screen. Check it out. This is the Queen of Blame. Perfect. A young Asian woman with spiky hair, breasts the size of casaba melons, and

an angry snarl jumped over a Dumpster to face three musclebound steroid-juicers in what appeared to be a devastated urban landscape. A tiny halter barely covered her breasts, sprayed-on shorts showed her butt cheeks, and her voice growled electronically from the Game Freaks little speaker. You're my toilet! She let loose with a martial arts sidekick that spun the first attacker into the air. I said, Some woman. Uh-huh. A bad guy named Modus sold her sister into slavery, and now the Queen is going to make him pay the ultimate price. The Queen of Blame punched a man three times her size with left and rights so fast that her hands blurred. Blood and teeth flew everywhere. Eat fist, scum! I spotted a pause button on the controls, and stopped the game. Adults always wonder what to say and how to say it when they're talking with a child. You want to be wise, but all you are is a child yourself in a larger body. Nothing is ever what it seems. The things that you think you know are never certain. I know that, now. I wish that I didn't, but I do. I said, I know that what's going on between me and your mom is scary. I just want you to know that we're going to get through this. Your mom and I love each other. We're going to be fine. I know. She loves you. I love you, too. Ben stared at the frozen screen for a little while longer, and then he looked up at me. His little-boy face was smooth and thoughtful. He wasn't stupid; his mom and dad loved him, too, but that hadn't stopped them from getting divorced. Elvis? What? I had a really good time staying with you. I wish I didn't have to leave. Me, too, pal. I'm glad you were here. Ben smiled, and I smiled back. Funny, how a moment like that could fill a man with hope. I patted his leg. Here's the plan: Mom's going to get back soon. We should clean the place so she doesn't think we're pigs, then we should get the grill ready so we're good to go with dinner when she gets home. Burgers okay? Can I finish the game first? The Queen of Blame is about to find Modus. Sure. How about you take her out onto the deck? She's pretty loud. Okay. I went back into the kitchen, and Ben took the Queen and her breasts outside. Even that far away, I heard her clearly. Your face is pizza! Then her victim shrieked in pain. I should have heard more. I should have listened even harder. Less than three minutes later, Lucy called from her car. It was twenty-two minutes after four. I had just taken the hamburger meat from my refrigerator. I said, Hey. Where are you? Long Beach. Traffic's good, so I'm making great time. How are you guys holding up? Lucy Chenier was a legal commentator for a local television station. Before that, she had practiced civil law in Baton Rouge, which is what she was doing when we met. Her voice still held the hint of a French-Louisiana accent, but you had to listen closely to hear it. She had been in San Diego covering a trial. We're good. I'm getting hamburgers together for when you get here. How's Ben? He was feeling low today, but we talked. He's better now. He misses you. We fell into a silence that lasted too long. Lucy had phoned every night, and we laughed well enough, but our exchanges felt incomplete though we tried to pretend they weren't. It wasn't easy being hooked up with the World's Greatest Detective. Finally, I said, I missed you. I missed you, too. It's been a long week. Hamburgers sound really good. Cheeseburgers. With lots of pickles. She sounded tired. But she also sounded as if she was smiling. I think we can manage that. I got your pickle for ya right here. Lucy laughed. I'm the World's Funniest Detective, too. She said, How can I pass up an offer like that? You want to speak with Ben? He just went outside. That's all right. Tell him that I'm on my way and that I love him, and then you can tell yourself that I love you, too. We hung up and I went out onto the deck to pass along the good word, but the deck was empty. I went to the rail. Ben liked to play on the slope below my house and climb in the black walnut trees that grow further down the hill. More houses were nestled beyond the trees on the streets that web along the hillsides. The deepest cuts in the canyon were just beginning to purple, but the light was still good. I didn't see him. Ben? He didn't answer. Hey, buddy! Mom called! He still didn't answer. I checked the side of the house, then went back inside and called him again, thinking maybe he had gone to the guest room where he sleeps or the bathroom. Yo, Ben! Where are you? Nothing. I looked in the guest room and the downstairs bathroom, then went out the front door into the street. I live on a narrow private road that winds along the top of the canyon. Cars rarely pass except when my neighbors go to and from work, so it's a safe street, and great for skateboarding. Ben? I didn't see him. I went back inside the house. Ben! That was Mom on the phone! I thought that might get an answer. The Mom Threat. If you're hiding, this is a problem. It's not funny. I went upstairs to my loft, but didn't find him. I went downstairs again to the deck. BEN! My nearest neighbor had two little boys, but Ben never went over without first telling me. He never went down the slope or out into the street or even into the carport without first letting me know, either. It wasn't his way. It also wasn't his way to pull a David Copperfield and disappear. I went back inside and phoned next door. I could see Grace Gonzales's house from my kitchen window. Grace? It's Elvis next door. Like there might be another Elvis further up the block. Hey, bud. How's it going? Grace calls me bud. She used to be a stuntwoman until she married a stuntman she met falling off a twelve-story building and retired to have two boys. Is Ben over

there?Nope. Was he supposed to be?He was here a few minutes ago, but now hes not. I thought he might have gone to see the boys.Grace hesitated, and her voice lost its easygoing familiarity for something more concerned.Let me ask Andrew. They could have gone downstairs without me seeing.Andrew was her oldest, who was eight. His younger brother, Clark, was six. Ben told me that Clark liked to eat his own snot.I checked the time again. Lucy had called at four twenty-two; it was now four thirty-eight. I brought the phone out onto my deck, hoping to see Ben trudging up the hill, but the hill was empty.Grace came back on the line.Elvis?Im here.My guys havent seen him. Let me look out front. Maybe hes in the street.Thanks, Grace.Her voice carried clearly across the bend in the canyon that separated our homes when she called him, and then she came back on the line.I can see pretty far both ways, but I dont see him. You want me to come over there and help you look?Youve got your hands full with Andrew and Clark. If he shows up, will you keep him there and call me?Right away.I turned off the phone, and stared down into the canyon. The slope was not steep, but he could have taken a tumble or fallen from a tree. I left the phone on the deck and worked my way down the slope. My feet sank into the loose soil, and footing was poor.Ben! Where in hell are you?Walnut trees twisted from the hillside like gnarled fingers, their trunks gray and rough. A lone yucca tree grew in a corkscrew among the walnuts with spiky leaves like green-black starbursts. The rusted remains of a chain-link fence were partially buried by years of soil movement. The largest walnut tree pushed out of the ground beyond the fence with five heavy trunks that spread like an opening hand. I had twice climbed in the tree with Ben, and we had talked about building a tree house between the spreading trunks.Ben!I listened hard. I took a deep breath, exhaled, then held my breath. I heard a faraway voice.BEN!I imagined him further down the slope with a broken leg. Or worse.Im coming.I hurried.I followed the voice through the trees and around a bulge in the finger, certain that I would find him, but as I went over the hump I heard the voice more clearly and knew that it wasnt his. The Game Freak was waiting for me in a nest of stringy autumn grass. Ben was gone.I called as loudly as I could.BEN!!!No answer came except for the sound of my own thundering heart and the Queens tinny voice. She had finally found Modus, a great fat giant of a man with a bullet head and pencil-point eyes. She launched kick after kick, punch after punch, screaming her vow of vengeance as the two of them fought in an endless loop through a blood-drenched room.Now you die! Now you die! Now you die!I held the Queen of Blame close, and hurried back up the hill.2time missing: 00 hours, 21 minutesThe sun was dropping. Shadows pooled in the deep cuts between the ridges as if the canyon was filling with ink. I left a note in the middle of the kitchen floor: STAY HEREIM LOOKING FOR U, then drove down through the canyon, trying to find him.If Ben had sprained an ankle or twisted a knee, he might have hobbled downhill instead of making the steep climb back to my house; he might have knocked on someones door for help; he might be limping home on his own. I told myself, sure, that had to be it. Ten-year-old boys dont simply vanish.When I reached the street that follows the drainage below my house, I parked and got out. The light was fading faster and the murk made it difficult to see. I called for him.Ben?If Ben had come downhill, he would have passed beside one of three houses. No one was home at the first two, but a housekeeper answered at the third. She let me look in their backyard, but watched me from the windows as if I might steal the pool toys. Nothing. I boosted myself to see over a cinder-block wall into the neighboring yards, but he wasnt there, either. I called him again.Ben!I went back to my car. It was all too easy and way too likely that we would miss each other; as I drove along one street, Ben might turn down another. By the time I was on that street, he could reappear behind me, but I didnt know what else to do.Twice I waved down passing security patrols to ask if they had seen a boy matching Bens description. Neither had, but they took my name and number, and offered to call if they found him.I drove faster, trying to cover as much ground as possible before the sunset. I crossed and recrossed the same streets, winding through the canyon as if it was me who was lost and not Ben. The streets were brighter the higher I climbed, but a chill haunted the shadows. Ben was wearing a sweatshirt over jeans. It didnt seem enough.When I reached home, I called out again as I let myself in, but still got no answer. The note that I left was untouched, and the message counter read zero.I phoned the dispatch offices of the private security firms that service the canyon, including the company that owned the two cars I had already spoken to. Their cars prowled the canyons every day around the clock, and the companies signs were posted as a warning to burglars in front of almost every house. Welcome to life in the city. I explained that a child was missing in the area and gave them Bens description. Even though I wasnt a subscriber, they were happy to help.When I put down the phone, I heard the front door open and felt a spike of relief so sharp that it was painful.Ben!Its me.Lucy came into the living room. She was wearing a black business suit over a cream top, but she was carrying the suit jacket; her pants were wrinkled from so long in the car. She was

clearly tired, but she made a weak smile. Hey. I dont smell hamburgers. It was two minutes after six. Ben had been missing for exactly one hundred minutes. It had taken Lucy exactly one hundred minutes to get home after we last spoke. It had taken me one hundred minutes to lose her son. Lucy saw the fear in my face. Her smile dropped. Whats wrong? Bens missing. She glanced around as if Ben might be hiding behind the couch, giggling at the joke. She knew it wasnt a joke. She could see that I was serious. What do you mean, missing? Explaining felt lame, as if I was making excuses. He went outside around the time you called, and now I cant find him. I called, but he didnt answer. I drove all over the canyon, looking for him, but I didnt see him. He isnt next door. I dont where he is. She shook her head as if I had made a frustrating mistake, and was getting the story wrong. He just left? I showed her the Game Freak as if it was evidence. I dont know. He was playing with this when he went out. I found it on the slope. Lucy stalked past me and went outside onto the deck. Ben! Benjamin, you answer me! Ben! Luce, Ive been calling him. She stalked back into the house and disappeared down the hall. Ben! Hes not here. I called the security patrols. I was just going to call the police. She came back and went right back onto the deck. Damn it, Ben, youd better answer me! I stepped out behind her and took her arms. She was shaking. She turned into me, and we held each other. Her voice was small and guilty against my chest. Do you think he ran away? No. No, he was fine, Luce. He was okay after we talked. He was laughing at this stupid game. I told her that I thought he had probably hurt himself when he was playing on the slope, then gotten lost trying to find his way back. Those streets are confusing down there, the way they snake and twist. He probably just got turned around, and now hes too scared to ask someone for help; hes been warned about strangers enough. If he got on the wrong street and kept walking, he probably got farther away, and more lost. Hes probably so scared right now that he hides whenever a car passes, but well find him. We should call the police. Lucy nodded against me, wanting to believe, and then she looked at the canyon. Lights from the houses were beginning to sparkle. She said, Its getting dark. That single word: Dark. It summoned every parents greatest dread. I said, Lets call. The cops will light up every house in the canyon until we find him. As Lucy and I stepped back into the house, the phone rang. Lucy jumped even more than me. Thats Ben. I answered the phone, but the voice on the other end didnt belong to Ben or Grace Gonzalez or the security patrols. A man said, Is this Elvis Cole? Yes. Whos this? The voice was cold and low. He said, Five-two. Who is this? Five-two, motherfucker. You remember five-two? Lucy plucked my arm, hoping that it was about Ben. I shook my head, telling her I didnt understand, but the sharp fear of bad memories was already cutting deep. I gripped the phone with both hands. I needed both to hang on. Who is this? What are you talking about? This is payback, you bastard. This is for what you did. I held the phone even tighter, and heard myself shout. What did I do? What are you talking about? You know what you did. I have the boy. The line went dead. Lucy plucked harder. Who was it? What did they say? I didnt feel her. I barely heard her. I was caught in a yellowed photo album from my own past, flipping through bright green pictures of another me, a much different me, and of young men with painted faces, hollow eyes, and the damp sour smell of fear. Lucy pulled harder. Stop it! Youre scaring me. It was a man, I dont know who. He says he took Ben. Lucy grabbed my arm with both hands. Ben was stolen? He was kidnapped? What did the man say? What does he want? My mouth was dry. My neck cramped with painful knots. He wants to punish me. For something that happened a long time ago. From the Hardcover edition.