

“The sea exploded in front of them. White water fell from the sky, backlit by orange flame. A split second later, Mike and Josh saw a missile leap into the air, traveling fast.”

Comments from readers about the Mike Danford series:



“I wish I was half as cool as Mike and his friends when I was 17! Love how traditional family values are threaded throughout the story, and Mike and his friends act extremely respectful to the adults and truly care for each other.”

(Amazon review)



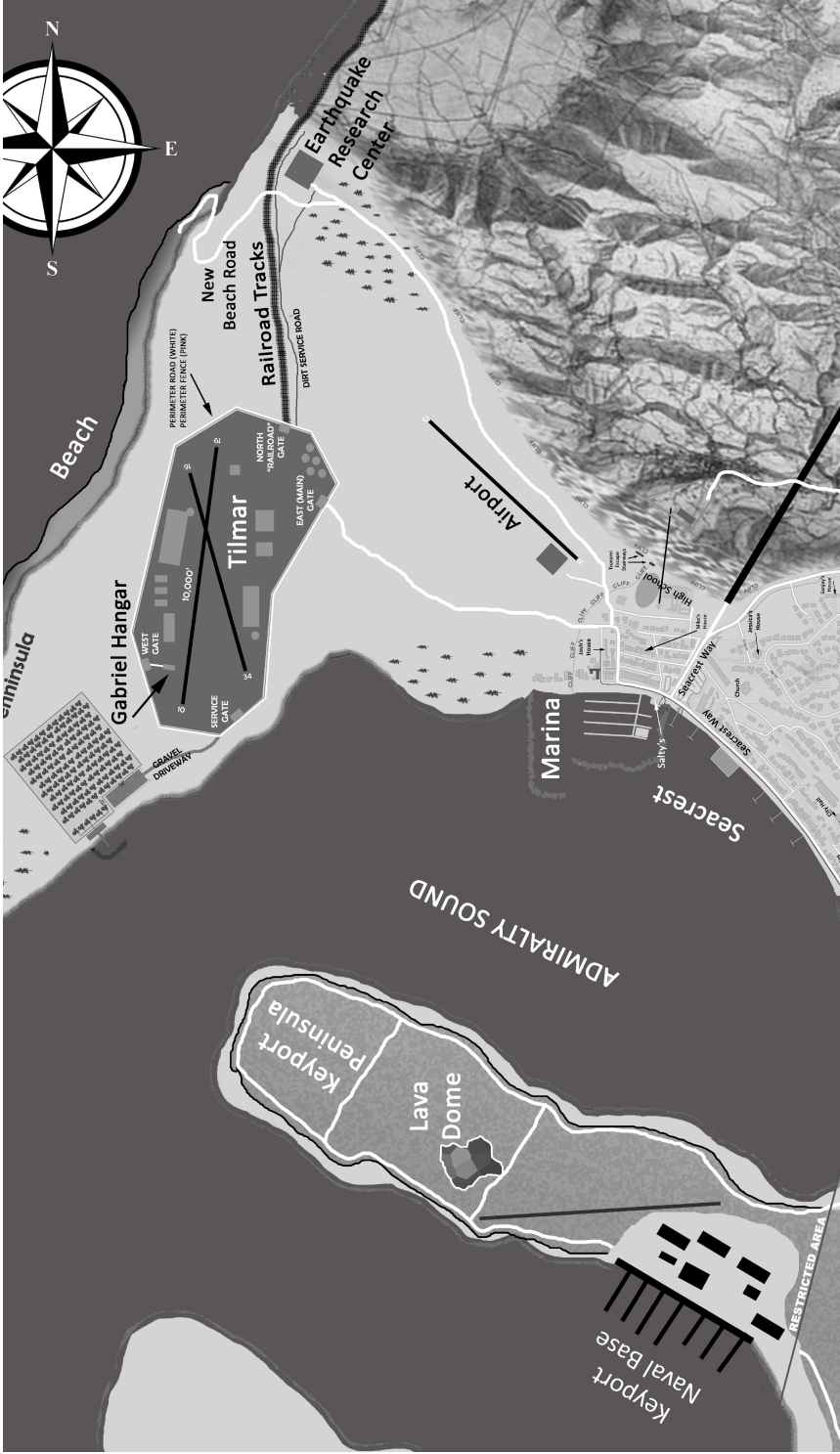
“My son loved the whole series.
He read it all in less than a month (he is 10).”

(Amazon review)



“My son loves these books and not only reads them, he re-reads them which I think speaks to the quality of writing. We have all the books in the series and will purchase more if he writes more!”

(Amazon review)



Mike Danford Adventure Series #9

**ANGEL
EXPRESS**

ARNOLD YTREEIDE

Jericho Quill Press

ANGEL EXPRESS

by Arnold Ytreeide

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Chapter One

Soft Open

It was simple jealousy, he knew. He shouldn't be having such feelings, but it was tough not to when the cause of it was standing right in front of him. He'd been jealous before, when he was little and his older sisters got to do things he didn't. But this was different.

Seventeen-year-old Mike Danford sighed deeply and looked out at the water. He was on the ocean beach next to his hometown of Seacrest. In front of him, the water stretched for thousands of miles before it hit land again. Waves continuously crashed onto the sandy shore.

Behind him was two hundred feet of dry sand rising up to the base of a cliff, and more than a hundred people sunning themselves, playing volleyball, flying kites, and eating hotdogs. Above the beach was the thirty-five-foot cliff that rose straight up to the Utreedy Peninsula, where the Tilmar Aerospace Company, Seacrest Animal Sanctuary, Earthquake Research Center, and Seacrest Airport all sat. On the other side of the peninsula lived the town of Seacrest itself, and Mike's home.

Above all that and to the left rose another seven-hundred foot cliff. Carved out of the forest on top were two meadows that the town used for evacuating residents in an emergency. In each of the meadows was a brand-new lodge with a hundred guest rooms each. This weekend was the "soft opening" of the two lodges – a test run to make sure everything and everyone was working correctly before they opened for real. Between that cliff and Mike stood the cause of his jealousy.

Mike looked over at him again. His name was Ryder Lee. He was the same age as Mike, had blonde hair, a lot more muscles, was two inches taller, and was an international surfing champion. Worst of all, he was from Australia and had that cool accent that everyone in Seacrest seemed to love.

Especially Jessica.

Ever since Ryder had arrived at their church the night before, Mike felt completely ignored by Jessica. Mike and she had been dating for quite a while, and everyone except Mike knew it was fairly serious. But the church they attended had put up flyers at the new lodge inviting

guests to church on Sunday, and Wednesday night youth group, and last night Ryder had showed up. Muscles and all.

“Mate, you should see your face.” The voice had come from beside Mike, and belonged to his best friend, Josh Roberts. Josh didn’t normally talk that way, but ever since Ryder had shown up, Mike noticed, everyone including Mike’s dad was saying, “mate” a lot.

Mike turned to Josh. “What about my face?”

Josh grinned. “It’s like your eyes are shooting laser rays at Ryder while deciding where to bury his body after you’ve killed him.”

Mike took a deep breath, then let it out. “Sorry. I’ve just never . . .”

Josh patted his friend on the back. “I know. But the best way to beat ‘em is to join ‘em.”

They walked over to where Ryder was teaching Jessica the basics of surfing. Mike had already been through the “class,” but he didn’t remember Ryder holding *him* by the shoulders for quite so long.

Ryder looked up at Mike. “Aye, mate! Almost done ‘ere. You ready to try it for real?”

Mike forced himself to smile. “Ready and anxious.”

“Ace! One more minute ‘ere and I’ll be with ya. Why don’t ya go get suited up?”

Mike snapped a casual salute at his teacher, then headed over to where six surf boards were standing vertical against a Jeep.

The new resort had paved an old dirt road that ran next to the railroad tracks climbing the hill, and created the first ever Seacrest Invitational surfing tournament to attract attention. A dozen cars were parked near the top of the beach where the sand was most solid. Local businesses put up booths selling food and beverages, and paramedics manned a first aid tent.

Ryder had called the boards at the Jeep *longboards*, and they were almost nine feet tall. Mike pulled on a wetsuit – a thin, rubbery suit to protect him from the cold water – grabbed a red and white board and a leash, then walked to the edge of the ocean. Most of their friends were also on the beach, and several now waved at Mike and yelled encouragement.

Mike stood where the waves lapped up over his feet. He wrapped the cuff of the leash around his ankle, then clipped the other end to the board. Now the eight-foot leash would keep the board close without Mike holding onto it with his hand.

Ryder walked up, already in a suit, and carrying a seven-foot board, which was harder to ride than the nine-footers. He checked out Mike's equipment. "Good onya! Looks like yer ready ta go." He continued talking as he looked up and scanned the water. "First thing is always safety, mate. Ya don't want any sneaker waves sneakin' up on ya, and you've got to know what the bottom is like under those waves."

Mike watched, impressed with how intently Ryder studied the ocean. "What are you looking for?"

Ryder pointed. "You see that darker strip of water between the two breaking waves?" Mike nodded. "That's a rip current – like an express train leading straight out into the ocean. It's too strong to swim against, so you just have to let yourself be carried out a ways, then swim parallel to the shore until you're free." He looked Mike in the eyes. "But it's best to just stay away from it."

Mike nodded again, dazed by all the information.

Ryder turned back to the ocean. "Other than that, I'm lookin' for logs floating in the water, rocks near the beach, and I'm timing the waves."

"So you'll know how fast to swim out?"

"No. So I'll know if there's likely to be a sneaker wave." Ryder took a quick breath and turned to Mike, as if he hadn't been planning to teach this but would since Mike asked. "I told ya earlier we're lookin' for nice, gentle swells – waves that kinda roll into the shore, breaking just before they get here. Those are good to start with."

"Yeah, I remember."

"Well, sometimes you can get a big 'sneaker' wave – a really big dude that'll pound ya into the bottom if you're not ready. Those are usually generated by big storms way out at sea. But before they get here, the other, smaller swells in front of them tend to spread out. So if the swells start comin' in, like, twenty seconds apart, we get outta the water. Fast."

Mike felt a bit numb. "I had no idea surfing could be so dangerous."

Ryder scanned the waves again. "I'm also lookin' for fins. Shark fins. Ya got some Great Whites around here, ya know."

Mike gulped. He'd seen a few sharks while cruising in his submarine *Jonah*, but didn't like the idea of being *in* the water with them.

Ryder stepped out into the surf. "Right. Let's go catch some waves."

Mike followed behind. A dozen feet out, Ryder laid flat on his board, with his head and shoulders up, and started paddling with his

hands. Mike copied his moves, and was surprised at how fast they could glide, and how soon they were a hundred feet out. Ryder stopped paddling and sat up on his board. Mike did the same, but was nervous about his legs hanging down into the water as shark bait.

Another surfer was just headed into a roller a little farther out, and Ryder explained what she was doing. “Right, see how she’s paddling toward that roller? When she decides it’s the one she wants to ride, she’ll turn and paddle away from it, back toward shore. Then she’ll wait until it starts to go under her . . . and then she paddles fast. There! Did you see how she waited ‘till the wave caught up, then got up on her knees, then to her feet, and caught the wave? I’ll be stuffed. She’s ace!”

Mike watched as the young woman cut across the wave, just below the peak, riding along as it broke and rolled over directly behind her. “Wow!” He looked at Ryder. “You think *I* can do that?”

Ryder laughed. “Buckley’s chance,” he laughed. Then he realized Mike didn’t understand, so interpreted. “Not a chance. She’s almost a pro, you’re a beginner. But you’ve gotta start somewhere, so pick a wave and go catch it.”

Mike laid out on his board and started paddling. Every nerve in his body was nervous, but then he thought, *For Pete’s sake! I’ve petted a silverback gorilla, been almost encased in molten lava, was encased by a 3D printer, and been shot at by an alien. I should be able to handle a little wave.*

But then he got a little farther out and decided the waves weren’t so little. They were only three feet high, but from his position, lying flat on the board, they seemed to tower over him. He kept watching, and when he saw a nice roller that didn’t seem too aggressive, he turned and started paddling away from it, toward shore. The wave caught up to him and pushed the board upward. Mike knew he was supposed to get to his feet, but the board was twisting around and he couldn’t get his balance.

By now the wave was starting to lose energy as it neared shore. Mike decided to give it one more try. He lowered his head to push himself up with his arms, but that drove the nose of the board down into the water. The nose caught on the sandy bottom and the board flipped up, end-over-end. Mike flew through the air as the water receded below him. He crashed down hard onto the bare, wet sand with a loud, “OOOF.”

Seconds later he realized he couldn’t suck in a breath. His body began to shake uncontrollably and his ears were filled with a loud

ringing.

Mike saw the crest of the wave that would drown him towering above his head. Down on the sand past his feet he saw something strange. The wave pounded into him, then everything went black.

When Mike awoke, he was looking up at the faces of two young women. They were frowning at him. He felt himself lifted up into the air, then realized the two young women weren't frowning, they were lifting him. Slowly, the whole picture came together: he was on a stretcher, the two young women were paramedics, and they were lifting him into their aid car.

"Wait!" Mike mumbled. He tried to lift his hand in a *STOP!* gesture, but his arms were strapped down next to his sides.

"We're taking you to the emergency room, Mike," one of the women said.

"I don't need to go to —"

"Sorry," the other one said as they slid the stretcher into the aid car. "We have orders."

Mike looked back and forth between the two women. "Orders from *who?*" he croaked.

One of the two hopped in and sat next to Mike as the other closed the doors. "Doctor Ganguly."

Mike groaned, closed his eyes, and laid his head back. "In that case, I guess neither of us have much of a choice. What happened to me?"

The paramedic checked Mike's pupils for the third time since he'd woken up. "I can't say for sure, but I believe you have a condition known as 'vasovagal syncope'. I think when you took that header, you slammed into the sand and it knocked the wind out of you. That may have caused your vagus nerve to be hyper-stimulated so you blacked out. Your muscles were kind of twitching when I got there, which is one of the signs. Do you feel like you're gonna puke?"

Mike nodded. "Yeah, I do."

"That's another sign. How else do you feel?"

Mike did a mental check of his body. "My ears are ringing. And I'm really thirsty."

The paramedic wrote this down. "Those are also both signs. Did you poop your pants?"

Mike's eyes shot wide open. He felt totally embarrassed, and wanted

to pull the blanket up over his face. “Uh, no, I don’t think so.”

She nodded. “Good. Sometimes that happens. But at least your face is all red now instead of pale.”

Mike looked away from the paramedic and changed the subject.

“How long was I out?”

“Only a couple minutes. We were right there already, you know. That’s how we got to you so fast.”

“Wait a second. If it’s only been a few minutes since all this happened, how did you have time to talk to Dr. Ganguly?”

“I *didn’t* talk to her.”

“But you said . . .”

“We have standing orders. On our bulletin board back at the station. A big note that says, ‘Anyone responding to a call where Mike Danford is unconscious is hereby ordered to take him directly to the ER and notify me.’ It’s signed Dr. Ganguly.”

They arrived at the hospital and Mike was unloaded. Doctor Ganguly was waiting. She walked next to the stretcher as they moved into the Emergency Room. “You have been a very naughty boy, Michael. I thought I gave you strict orders – no more head injuries.”

Mike shrugged under the white sheet. “I think my head is fine. It’s my chest that hurts this time.”

“We shall see. But the paramedic said you were unconscious when they got to you, so we take no chances with you, correct?”

Mike sighed. “Yes, Dr. Ganguly.”

“Good boy.”

Mike’s mom and dad arrived and said that Josh, Jessica, and Ryder were out in the waiting room. After several scans and x-rays, and a severe lecture from his friend and paramedic Ricky Two-Arrows, Mike was moved to a regular room for a night of observation. All the rest of his friends eventually showed up, and the night nurse finally quit trying to keep people out. Together, the group told Mike that they got him a “Get Well” present, and handed him a giant bag of Jolly Ranchers.

“So what did I do wrong?” he asked Ryder when the group finally ran out of jokes.

“Ya tried to catch a wave too late, mate. Then ya put yer head down, which drove the nose of yer board down, and it caught on the sand. Next thing, you was flyin’ through the air.”

Mike frowned and lowered his eyes. “In other words, I did exactly

everything you told me *not* to do.”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

Everyone laughed, and Mike took it all good naturedly. “Lesson learned.”

“Listen, mate, don’t feel too bad. Everyone buys it once in a while.”

From the back of the room, Espen – Mike’s foreign-exchange brother from Norway – spoke up. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand. What did Mike buy?”

The group laughed, and Mike answered. “To ‘buy it’ means to crash. Or in some cases, to die. Like, sometimes we’ll say, ‘He bought the farm’ to mean ‘He crashed and died.’”

Espen shook his head. “English is so strange. Remind me not to buy any farms while I am here.”

Later, when everyone else had gone home, Josh sat next to Mike. “Okay, let’s hear it. What did you see?”

Mike frowned. “You know that doesn’t have to happen every single time, right?”

“Uh huh. So what did you see?”

Mike shook his head. “Nothing, really. Just a rock I never knew was there before.”

“A *rock*? What’s so suspicious about a rock?”

“That’s what I just said, there was nothing suspicious this time.”

Josh leaned back, looking disappointed. “I think you’re losing your touch.”

Mike was released the next morning after another exam and lecture by Doctor Ganguly, and after she gave Ricky Two-Arrows instructions on what to watch for. Ricky had been hired to be a standby paramedic at the surfing tournament. Mike asked him if he needed a place to stay.

“Naw, the tournament organizers arranged for me to have a room to myself up at the resort. And when that’s over, I’ve gotta stay for a continuing education class – I’m up for re-certification next month, and I’ve got to get my training hours in.”

As always, Mike’s dad and Josh had spent the night at the hospital guarding him, and this time Espen stayed as well. Now they drove Mike home. When they turned onto his street, Mike saw a large gathering on the front lawn of his house, waving and cheering.

“Hey, Sanjay’s home!” Espen said from the back seat.

Josh leaned forward to look out the windshield. “You’re right.”

At the front of the crowd, Mike saw their friend Sanjay, who had been away with his parents for a few weeks. Jessica stood next to him, and Mike felt like he could finally breathe easier after seeing her.

Always looking for an excuse to have a party, Mike and his friends enjoyed the summer sun in his back yard, where his mom grilled hamburgers and hot dogs for lunch. After that, everyone headed for the beach. “A lot more surfers arrived this morning,” Jessica explained, “so we’re going down to watch them practice.”

For a moment, Mike wondered if there was one particular surfer she was interested in watching, but all he said was, “Great. Let’s go.”

Ricky Two-Arrows was standing nearby. “Yeah, great. Let’s go. Let’s all go. Except for you and me, Mike.”

Mike spun around to look at his paramedic friend. When he did so, he spun too fast and started to fall to his right. Ricky caught him, and Josh jumped in to help keep him standing upright.

“You and I aren’t going anywhere, Mike,” Ricky said. “You heard Dr. Ganguly – bed rest for twenty-four hours. I only let you stay down for lunch because everyone was so excited to see you.”

Mike looked at Jessica. “Sorry. I seem to have a warden, a head nurse, and a mother all rolled into one,” he said with a look at Ricky.

Jessica smiled. “No problem. I’ll stay and keep you company.”

“Actually,” Ricky interrupted their conversation, “bed rest means rest. No visitors, phone, reading . . .”

Mike sighed and looked at Jessica. “You go ahead. Someone has to take care of Josh.”

Jessica was clearly disappointed. Cindy, the girl Josh had been seeing for quite a while, was already at the beach, working as a photographer for the organizers of the surfing competition, so Jessica said, “Come on, Josh, let’s go. It’s nap time for the pre-schoolers.”

Mike gave Jessica a scowl, then she took Josh by the arm and headed out the front door. Mike turned to Ricky. “A nap? Really?”

“Yes, really. And bed rest no matter what for the rest of the day.”

“I don’t think I can sleep knowing you’re sitting down here waiting for me to sleep.”

“Good, then, because I’m *not* going to be sitting down here waiting for you to sleep. I’m on duty in fifteen minutes. You’re on your own.”

The organizers of the competition had hired several paramedics from other towns to supplement the Seacrest fire department, including

Ricky from the town of Coyote on the other side of the mountains.

“Good,” Mike said as he climbed the stairs toward his room. “I really don’t need a babysitter.”

Ricky laughed loudly. “Are you serious? Of all the people I know, you’re the one who *most* needs a babysitter!”

Mike stopped, became serious, and looked back at Ricky. “Thank you, Ricky. You really are a great friend.”

Ricky grinned. “I know.”

Mike actually did sleep, but only for about twenty minutes. After that he tossed and turned restlessly. Just after four o’clock he texted Josh to come over. A few minutes later, Mike heard the front door slam open and footsteps running up the stairs. Josh burst into the room. “What’s wrong? Should I call Ricky?”

“No!” Mike yelled, then held his head from the pain of it. “I’m just bored. I wanna go down to the beach for a few minutes.”

Josh collapsed onto Espen’s bed on the other side of the room. “Are you kidding me? I thought you were dying or something.”

Mike shrugged. “Not dying or something, just bored.” He pushed himself up and stood, wobbling, to slide his feet into his sandals.

“I think this is a bad idea, Mike.”

“It’s no big deal. Just a little ride over to the peninsula and back. We don’t even need to go down to the beach, just park at the top of the cliff for a few minutes.”

Josh stood, shaking his head. “Okay, if you say so. But you know, there’s nothing wrong—”

“I know I know. But this isn’t wrong *or* right. It’s just something I need to do.”

Josh wasn’t convinced, but helped Mike down the stairs. He drove slowly up Seacrest Way to “The Bench” – the short cliff of the peninsula above Seacrest – and across to the other side. He parked at the top of the new road, where a parking lot had been built for people to watch the ocean. “All right, we’re here. Now let’s go home.”

Mike opened his door and stepped out. “Not yet. Let me get a few breaths of salt air first.”

Josh sighed, knowing that the smell of sea air was just about Mike’s favorite thing in the world. He followed Mike over to the railing, overlooking the beach below.

Mike scanned the hundreds of people below. There were a couple

dozen surfers in the water, testing out the waves, and three times more booths below selling food and souvenirs. His mother was down there somewhere, he knew, helping out at one of those booths.

A moment later, every muscle in Mike's body jerked tight. He sucked in a breath and held it. His chest ached in excruciating pain. His heart felt like it would pound right out of his chest. And he clamped his jaws so tightly together that they would end up aching for days.

Because down on the beach, just below where he stood, he saw Ryder, standing right next to Jessica, holding her close to him, with his arm around her waist.