

Christmas Chaos

C. R. Fulton



THE CAMPGROUND KIDS

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Christmas Chaos by C. R. Fulton

First Edition

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*To everyone who is filled with wonder
at the beauty of the Christmas season.
Carry it with you always.*

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My four-wheeler surges down the path, and I can't help but grin as the wind buffets me. I squeeze the throttle and lean into a turn as massive trees flash past. The woods of Kentucky are my sacred place where I escape from school, chores—everything. Here, inhaling the deep mossy scent of the wilderness, I'm free.

Grinning, I see the huge puddle in the middle of the trail is bigger than ever. Thunder still rumbles in the distance as I duck behind the handlebars, and a wave of murky water sprays everywhere. It's harder to stay on the seat now that I'm soaked, but the drenching was worth it.

I pull up at Panther Point, a massive rock that overlooks Fishing Creek Valley. Shivering in the chilly November breeze, I shut off the machine and then lean back for a break in my favorite spot. I survey the wilderness, happy to be the only person for miles.

After saving for years, buying the four-wheeler was a great achievement. Every opportunity that I can, I ride over to see Grammy and Poppa. Their land is the starting point of my four-wheeling adventures, but I'm miles from there now. I'm just a thirteen-year-old boy in paradise.

Mom asked me this morning what I wanted for Christmas; there were too many camping gadgets to get out in one breath, but her question got me thinking about my favorite holiday. There are a lot of beautiful pine trees nearby, so I talked to my parents, and they said they would get a permit for a Christmas tree. All that's left is for me to pick out the tree.

Sitting perfectly still, I wait as the birds begin

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chirping again, and soon a gray squirrel leaps into the tree next to me. Last week a twelve-point buck didn't spot me until he was only ten feet away. I breathe in the peace—that deep-green *growing* sensation.

Scanning the mountainside in front of me I see several good looking Christmas trees. But a crackling sound intrudes above the birds' songs. I should know that sound . . . Squinting, I focus on it, and the hair on my arms stands on end. *Fire!*

Scrambling to my feet, a wisp of pine smoke floating by makes my blood run cold. I run toward the noise. Fear grips me as I see orange flames lick up a broken tree trunk. The blackened section tells the story—lightning! I flinch as a hot ember lands on my arm and quickly brush it off. I can only watch as another ember drifts toward more pine trees.

“No!” I whisper, watching as it sizzles. Heartbeats pass as the sound fades. “Whew.”

Then, with a hiss, the branch ignites, and small

flames grow in the fitful breeze. I spin, eyeing the canopy. The trees are so dense the flames will spread fast. I sprint for my four-wheeler, desperate to get help.

I leap on and crank the key. The engine sputters . . . then dies.

“Come on!” I force the key again. The four-wheeler coughs instead of purring as usual. The next time it cranks even slower. As I glance over my shoulder, a new reality hits me: The flames are racing toward me!

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Desperate, I tear off the seat and see that the transmission and a small plastic box are dripping mud. Maybe hitting that puddle at full speed was a bad idea! Ashes float around me as I stare at the guts of my machine. Pulling out my multi-tool, I unclip the cover and yank it off. The air filter is clogged with muck. I pull off the foam, knowing it's useless now. The crackle is getting louder, and I can't find a creek to wash it.

"Think, Isaiah!" I shout. I rip off my wet boot, strip off my sock, and jam my bare foot back in. "You're going to have to work!" I yell at my sock, forcing it over the air intake. I cough as a haze

of smoke settles over me. Frantic, I clip the four-wheeler back together and close my eyes. “Please start!”

I turn the key, my jaw clenched. It fires up. “Yes!”

Wrenching the handlebars, I head toward Poppa’s house, my heart slamming. I navigate around the puddle and push through thorns that cut me. I only have one sock left and I dare not ruin it.

I race through the forest, knowing the flames are growing with every passing second. I can’t let our Christmas tree burn! Finally, my grandparents’ house comes into view. I aim for the barn, knowing Poppa will be tinkering with his tractor engine.

“Poppa! Call the fire department!” I scream, leaping off the four-wheeler.

He stands up straight, his long white beard giving him a distinct Santa-like look. “Why?”

I point at the growing funnel of black smoke in the distance. “Lightning! Fire!”

Everything turns into a crazed race against

time. First responders flood down the steep narrow road after Poppa calls them. I lead the long train of pickup trucks and four-wheelers toward Panther Point. Only one fire truck can make it that deep into the woods.

Thick smoke stops us before we even reach the puddle. Men rev chainsaws, fanning out to encircle and remove potential fuel for the fire as the trucks blast water at the blaze.

Sweat pours as we beat back the forest fire, and soot builds up on our skin. Even Poppa's white beard turns black.

The flames finally dwindle under the constant onslaught of water. I collapse on my four-wheeler, my eyes burning from the smoke.

A man's wide hand clamps on my shoulder. "I'm the Lincoln County fire chief. I understand you spotted the blaze. Our entire community owes you a big thanks."

Exhausted, I blink at him and shrug. "Sure thing."

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“Come on, Isaiah,” Poppa says. “You were supposed to be home hours ago. The woods are in good hands now.”

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I lie spread-eagled on the kitchen floor, completely exhausted, one foot bare.

“So, I get the soot, but what happened to your sock?” my ten-year-old sister Sadie asks, crouching next to me.

“It’s on my four-wheeler.” My voice is raspy from the smoke.

She squints at me, pulling her long brown ponytail over one shoulder. “I think the smoke messed with your brain cells. You’re telling me your four-wheeler wears socks?”

I laugh, which makes me cough. “Yeah, and my brain is just fine.”

She jumps up, rushes toward the kitchen, and then returns with a letter. “I almost forgot. Mom wouldn’t let me open this until you got home.”

She hands me an envelope addressed to “The Campground Kids—Isaiah, Sadie, and Ethan Rawlings.”

A shiver runs down my spine when I see that the return address says “National Park Service.”

“Are we in trouble?” I ask.

“Open it!” she insists.

“Should we wait for Ethan?” Our older cousin lives over an hour away, but he always comes camping with us.

“No way!” She scowls at me. “I’ve already waited hours for *you* to get home!”

I shrug and then peel open the envelope, leaving sooty fingerprints. With a groan, I sit up, and Sadie leans in behind me. We both read the letter, worried we’ve done something wrong. After all, we’ve had plenty of adventures in national parks.

CHRISTMAS CHAOS

Dear Isaiah, Sadie, and Ethan,

As the director of the National Park Service, it is my privilege to select an exceptional young person to light the “People’s Tree” each Christmas. This tree is set on the west lawn of the Capitol Building in Washington, DC. Of the nominations that have poured in, three names have become quite familiar to me. Park rangers from all over the country have dubbed you three “The Campground Kids.” This year we want to invite all of you to light the People’s Tree on November 29.

If you accept, we would like for you to help select the tree from Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina.

Sadie rips the letter out of my hand, her socks slipping on the floor as she races away. “Mom!”

I sit in a daze. After fighting the forest fire, choosing a tree sounds like a walk in the park.

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A dusty old museum... I stare at the huge white building in Washington, DC. All I want is the wilderness. Cities aren't my thing. I turn, gazing around at the immense buildings, beautiful lawns, and pools all set against the brilliant blue sky. Washington has many historic sites, and one of them is definitely the Capitol Building.

I didn't expect the Capitol to be so huge! The building's brilliant white marble showcases a beautiful American flag at the center. It also features a massive dome crowned by the Statue of Freedom.

"This is where the House of Representatives and the Senate meet." I sense the awe in Mom's voice.

“This is where decisions that shape our country are made,” she says.

Ethan rubs his chest. “Yup. I’ll probably work here someday.”

“Senator Ethan Rawlings,” Sadie says, unable to hold back a giggle. “I can’t see that!”

“I was thinking more like head janitor,” he quips with a cheeky grin.

I shake my head as we climb the wide steps. A deep sense of respect fills me as we enter the enormous domed building and I have to rethink how I feel about cities. The air might not be as fresh, but you don’t see sights quite like this in the wilderness.

“Welcome!” A well-dressed woman smiles as she approaches us. “I’m Mrs. Kenny, the director of Christmas at the Capitol Building. You must be our junior tree lighters! Please enter National Statuary Hall, and we’ll bring you up to speed on our plans.”

I elbow Ethan as we survey the room, which is filled with marble statues. “You’re not the janitor yet, so make sure you don’t break anything.”

“Right. Everything feels... um, rather expensive.”

The calm air seems to absorb our voices. As we approach a group of people, I notice a boy about my age in a wheelchair, a laptop resting on his knees. His deep-brown eyes squint as he works on it.

“Ah, come in. We’re all here now,” a tall man says. We walk over and stand next to the boy in the wheelchair.

I scan the crowd. One person wearing a well-fitted red-and-white suit stands out. He has a candy cane tie and some dog hair where he can’t see it on his bright-red suit. *I guess they are really serious about Christmas around here. He looks like the most modern Santa I’ve ever seen. His white beard rivals Poppa’s.*

The man in the Santa suit speaks up. “Hello, everyone! I’m Clause Kringel. This year we must create the most spectacular Christmas event ever! As the Father of Christmas in Washington, DC, I’m

determined to bring happiness and joy to people everywhere. Let's all make sure we're on our A-game."

I glance at the boy's screen, and I don't hear much of anything else that's said because I'm enthralled as I watch him work. He's clicking through pages faster than I can keep up.

"...But that depends on the weather," Mrs. Kenny wraps up just as I manage to tear my gaze away from the boy's computer screen.

The boy in the wheelchair raises one finger. "It should be seventy-two degrees and slightly cloudy, a little warm for this time of year."

"Thanks, Dan!" Mrs. Kenny replies.

The meeting breaks up, and Mrs. Kenny gestures to the boy in the wheelchair. "This is my son, Dan. He could show you around the Capitol Building."

We introduce ourselves and then Dan directs his wheelchair toward the door. "Come on! I'll take you to my favorite spot. It's called the Crypt."

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Sadie, Ethan, and I follow Dan down a long hallway.

“Do elves live here?” Sadie asks, giggling as she studies a series of tiny arched doors in the walls. “They must only be two feet tall!”

Dan laughs. “No. After a fire years ago, a water system was installed. Those doors hide a water pipe.”

He leads us so far that I become disoriented. Columns and arches fill the room, stretching into the distance. Dan wheels around them, stops, then looks up. I notice a white star on the ceiling.

“That star marks the exact center of Washington, DC,” Dan explains. “The four quadrants of the city meet at this very point.”

“Wow!” Sadie whispers.

“Plus, 8.9 million pounds of marble and stone comprise the dome above us. These arches are all that hold it up!”

Ethan shivers. “No wonder they call it the Crypt!”

Dan nods. “I like to come here to think and, well . . . to run from myself. It’s harder for me since I can’t run *at all*.”

I try to figure out how to respond to Dan’s comment. Then I notice a mischievous glint in his eyes. “I know everybody thinks they need to treat me special because of this chair,” he says as he pats it, “but I’ve been in a wheelchair my whole life. For me, it’s normal. But you all are heading off on an adventure.”

His words hang there, and somehow I feel bad about being able to go.

“Anything special we should know?” Ethan asks.

“Squirrels,” Dan replies, resting his chin on one fist.

Ethan looks around. “Excuse me? Do we need to call an exterminator?”

Dan laughs. “Only two types of Christmas trees grow in Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina—the red spruce and the Fraser fir. The Northern flying squirrel inhabits both. Plus, it’s an endangered species. So, I’m guessing the squirrels will be your biggest issue.”

“Yes!” Sadie cries. “I *love* squirrels.”

“I have a proposition for the three of you,” Dan says, “seeing as I’ll be stuck here.” His eyes grow dark for a second, and I realize being physically challenged is hard for him no matter what he says. “I like to produce films, especially documentaries,” he continues. He reaches into a pouch on the side of his chair. “Since you will be involved in the entire process, from selecting the tree to lighting it, would you consider filming from the beginning

to the end for me?” He holds out three phones. “These have tons of storage, they’re completely waterproof, and we’ll be able to talk to each other while you’re in North Carolina.”

I grin at Ethan and Sadie. “I love it! Doing a documentary sounds like a great plan!”

They agree with me, so Dan continues. “You can upload all your videos straight to me. I’ll track your location, which will be good for the documentary. Here’s an awesome feature: if you press these two buttons, the phones work like walkie-talkies, which will allow us all to talk together.”

“Dan, you’re the GOAT!” Ethan says, beginning to film the room.

“I want footage of everything—even the ordinary stuff that you might consider unimportant,” Dan continues. “That will give me lots of B-roll footage for the film.”

“Well, Dan, I hope we can get you enough,” I say. “This project should be pretty simple. I doubt there will be much excitement.”