

# Grand Teton Stampede

C. R. Fulton

THE CAMPGROUND KIDS

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*Grand Teton Stampede* by C. R. Fulton  
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*To Isaiah and Raina,  
I look forward to all the adventures ahead!*

## THE CAMPGROUND KIDS

No. 1

*Grand Teton Stampede*

No. 2

*Smoky Mountain Survival*

No. 3

*Zion Gold Rush*

No. 4

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I ease toward a dead log, knowing everything hinges on complete silence. Creeping through the forest on my hands and knees, shifting forward, I peer over the steep drop-off. The cougar will pass below me on the ridge any second...I just know it.

I'd heard its eerie scream, and since then I've been determined to see it. I hold my breath. *Was that a whisper of sound?*

Cocking my head, I focus hard, my nerves tingling. *He's close*—not on the narrow trail far below like I'd thought, but right here. I clutch the knife Poppa gave me, sliding open its blade.

*Maybe I should have brought a bigger weapon...*

It's a struggle to keep my breath from coming too loud in the stillness. If I could make it to the broad oak tree to my left, I could protect my back. There's another slim whisper of movement.

The longing to see him and the desire to run are at war in my mind. Nearby a crow caws; the sound jolts me into motion, and before I know it, the rough bark of the oak is gritting against my back. Searching wildly for the cougar, my foot tangles in a root. As I snatch at the tree, the knife slips from my grasp, and I suck in a harsh breath, goosebumps spreading.

*He's behind the tree; he'll get my arm if I reach for the knife.* Something grabs my shoulder, sending shock waves through my chest. I whirl away, thrashing at branches, shouting at the top of my lungs.

My little sister stands there with her hands on her hips. She's nine and as silent as an owl on the wing when she wants to be. "Isaiah, are you out here looking for a cougar?" she questions, with a look of disbelief.

I call her the queen of funny faces, and she's sure making one now.

"Yes, Sadie...until you showed up," I say, trying to sound normal, while my heart still slams into my ribs.

"Mr. Jenkins says there aren't any cougars in Kentucky, and there hasn't been for 50 years."

"Well, there's one now. I heard it scream."

Her eyes widen. "When?"

I look back down at the path, pick up the knife, knowing every chance of seeing him is ruined now. "When I took out the garbage for Grammy last week."

Grammy and Poppa live just down in a holler not a half a mile from our house. I wish we had land like them instead of living in a neighborhood with perfect little yards and only this tiny patch of woods to escape to.

She shrugs, the news making her eyes bright. "Mom told me to come and get you."

That message makes me grin. "Really?"

“Race you!” she says, then takes off through the woods.

“That’s not fair!” I run after her, emerging from the small patch of woods, heading toward our house.

Even though I’m tall for a twelve-year-old, I’m big- boned like Dad, and I know I’ll never beat her at a foot race when she has a head start. Still, I give it my best shot. Mom’s calling us in early can only mean one thing: she and Dad have decided where we’re heading for the last week of vacation before school starts.

“Please, God,” I pant, “not to Washington, D.C.” All I’ve wanted to do this year is go camping. But sleeping in the backyard of our subdivision hasn’t scratched that itch by a long shot. “Please not the city and dusty museums.”

The thought of returning to school after vacation in less than two weeks sends a shiver of fear into my heart. Max Smith will be there, waiting for me. He hates my guts, and he never misses a chance to make fun of me.



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I push away the awful thought and burst into the house. Mom is smiling widely. She loves museums. *Oh, no.* Sadie is jumping up and down, her hands over her mouth.

“Tell us!” she shouts through them.

I cringe; Dad’s arms are folded across his chest. He’s on my side, wanting an outdoor adventure. *This doesn’t look good.* I clench my hands at my sides as Mom takes a deep breath to speak.

“Well...”

Sadie squeals. She’ll be thrilled with whatever they’ve decided. *Come on, Mom.*

“Your dad and I have spent a lot of time on this decision. And I know there were many ideas for this vacation.”

“Mom! Where are we going?” I can’t keep the desperate tone out of my voice.

Her smile grows. “We are going to the Grand Teton National Park for a week of tent camping!”

A roar explodes from my mouth! My every dream has just come true! Sadie grabs me with her

surprisingly strong bear hug. I can't help shouting again. "Yes!"

"All right, all right!" Dad is smiling now too. "We've got to gear up and make it to Wyoming in just three days."

"Wyoming! We're going to see bears, elk, moose, and pronghorn too! Aw, Mom!" I grab her around the waist, knowing she chose this destination just for me. "Thanks."

Arms around me, she looks down with an apprehensive expression. "Think I'm going to make it?"

"I'll make sure you do, Mom! I've read everything about camping, and you'll love it!"

Mom eyes Sadie and me. "The Grand Teton National Park is no joke though, okay? I need you both to use your smarts, pay attention to the rules, and most of all, stay safe."

"We will, Mom," we declared in unison.

"There's more," Dad says. "Your cousin Ethan is coming too, so you boys will have your own tent, and Sadie will stay with Mom and me."

“Aw.” Sadie frowns at not having her own tent.

“What?! Ethan is coming?” I run around the room, leaping high and pumping my fist. Ethan is 14 and getting to spend a week in the wilds of Wyoming with him is more than I can handle. “Waaa-hooo!”

We load into Dad’s truck and head for the sporting goods store. Mom hands Sadie and me a print-out of our camping budget.

“Mom, what’s a ‘budge’?” Sadie asks.

“*Budget*, honey. It’s the amount of money we’re going to spend on this trip. See the red numbers at the top? Those are the things we can’t change, like the gas to get there and back, the fees we must pay to get into the park and paying for the campsite and food. I want you both to list items that are most important for us to have while camping.”

For the first time, knowing math makes sense to me. I write, my pen barely able to keep up with my mind.

Waterproof tents

- Sleeping bags
- Folding chairs
- Utensils for cooking
- Bug spray

We're going to Wyoming, so I add a few more items:

- Bear spray
- Hats and gloves
- Rope
- Pocketknife
- Hatchet
- Flashlights
- Fire-starting kit

I notice Sadie is tapping her chin with her pen.

“Let me see your list.” As I reach for it, she quickly swoops it away.

“Only if I can see yours.”

“Fine.” We trade papers. I study Sadie's short list.

- Marshmallows
- Jar for catching bugs
- Fishing pole
- Pillow
- Teddy

One side of my mouth pulls back as I hold in a snort of laughter. Mom's been all over me lately to use kind words. So all I say is, "The fishing poles are a great idea."

We trade back as we pull into the parking lot. After looking both ways, I rush forward to hold the door open for everyone.

Mom mutters as she steps into the store, "Oh, boy, I'm in way over my head."

*It's okay. She'll see. Camping is going to be awesome. I'll work double time to make sure she's comfortable.* Dad and I compare tent features for so long that Mom and Sadie finally wander off. I pull the box off the shelf and think I might burst. *This is my tent.*

“Let’s go find the girls,” Dad says.

They’re in the sleeping bag section, and Sadie has a pink and purple one with a unicorn horn clutched in her arms.

“We need to get Mom a good bedroll too,” I mutter. *Her comfort is at the top of my list.*

Her brows go up. “I like the sound of that.”

Later when I double-check my list, Mom makes me add up our items. “And...we’re over our budget by \$25.”

I frown at the huge pile of gear in our cart, unwilling to put anything back, except for the unicorn sleeping bag.

“What if I were to use my chore money to cover the rest?”

Dad looks at me. “Seriously? You sure? You’ve been saving for a four-wheeler all summer.”

“And I’m not even close to having enough for one. Besides, I’ve been dreaming of camping for years. I’m far more committed to this.” I push all of Dad’s buttons that I can, waving my hand over the pile.

Dad checks his watch. “All right, then. We’ve got to get home and pack. We’ll hit the road at 4:30 a.m. tomorrow. We’ve got to get Ethan by 5 a.m. if we hope to make it to Grand Teton by Friday.”

The name of the park sends a shiver down my spine. *A wilderness where anything could happen.* Dad and I repack his Ford F-250 three times before we fit everything under the cover on the back and snap it down to the bed. I don’t sleep a wink that night. I keep running over the items that I packed in my backpack.

- Knife from Poppa
- Coil of rope
- Flashlight
- Small wire saw
- Water bottle
- Power bars
- Hatchet

A folding shovel is the biggest item I have in my

backpack. I click on the flashlight and flip open my wilderness survival guide. “Ugh.” I had nearly forgotten my compass. I add it to my pack, plus my winter hat. Then I tuck my field guide on top.

I chase sleep around all night without catching it even once. I hear Dad coming long before he reaches my bed.

“Is it time to go?” I ask.

He laughs. “Guess you didn’t sleep much. I didn’t either. I haven’t gone camping in years.”

We settle into the truck and, wired, I lean on my backpack on my lap. Sadie curls on her side and throws a blanket over her head. *How can she possibly sleep at a time like this?*

When we pull into Ethan’s town, Dad’s eyes catch mine in the rearview. “Isaiah, I want you to understand something. Ethan may not be his usual self. Aunt Sylvia and Uncle Jim said they have been having some trouble with him.”

“*What?*” Sadie whips the blanket off her head. I guess she wasn’t quite asleep after all.



“What kind of trouble, Dad?”

He frowns. “Well, I guess he’s got some friends who aren’t doing him any good. He’s got a lot on his mind right now, and that’s part of the reason he’s coming—to give them a break and get him out of his usual routine.”

Sadie bites her lip, and I inch my pack closer to my chest.

“So,” Mom adds, “we’re going to love him this week and be patient if he isn’t quite the cousin you remember from last summer.”

We pull into his driveway, and I stare wide-eyed as he hugs Aunt Sylvia. He’s a little taller than she is! He trudges toward the truck with his gear. Sadie slides into the middle seat as Ethan hops in. But he’s grinning, and his hand is out for a fist bump. Suddenly, everything is normal again.

“Tetons, watch out! The Rawlings are coming!” he says as I hit his fist. All my nerves drain away. *He seems fine—the same fun-loving, sometimes too daring, oldest cousin in our family.*

Aunt Sylvia rushes from the porch and opens Ethan's door to hug him one last time, her eyes full of tears. "Greg," she says to Dad, "don't let him eat any pickles."

She turns to Ethan. "Be safe."

We settle in for two solid days of driving. The miles seem to stretch on forever. *Past forever*. I've re-read my field guide three times, and my shoulder is sore from playing punch bug with Sadie and Ethan. But the landscape outside the window has changed, and now wide, open plains with little sagebrush plants stick up everywhere in the mountains. In the distance, they are sharp and snowcapped. We're seeing more and more wild animals too. Pronghorn race at almost sixty miles an hour next to the truck, and the occasional bugles of majestic elk with huge antlers echo off the mountains.

Sadie sighs, then draws a big breath. I cut in and say, "If you're going to ask if we're there yet, we're not."

When we finally see the huge wooden posts of

a sign that says, “Welcome to Wyoming, Forever West,” we all shout.

Dad pulls over so we can take a picture under the sign. Ethan puts two fingers up behind my head, so I tackle him. We quickly make a discovery. Sharp, tiny balls of thorns are scattered all over the ground.

“All right,” Mom calls. “Load up.”

I pick the nasty little thorns off my shirt as I turn, gazing across the vast expanse of flatland. The great Teton Mountains point skyward like the jagged teeth of a dinosaur. *What adventures await us there?*

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“Look! Jackson Hole! We’re here!” Sadie shouts in my ear.

“Not really,” I grump. “We’re not in the park yet.”

“Close enough! Oh, a rodeo? Can we go?” She’s pointing to a billboard with a man clinging to the back of a bucking bull. I read the details as Sadie leans over me, trying to see as we pass under the sign.

“Ouch, Sadie, you’re elbowing my spleen!”

“Ugh!” she says, “I was just trying to see.”

“Listen,” Mom says, “we’ve all been in the car for a long time.” She cringes, rubbing her thighs.

“A *really* long time. Let’s hold it together for a bit longer. The rodeo starts our last day here; I think it sounds like a great way to end our trip.”

“Yeah!” Sadie throws her hands in the air, knocking my bottle of water from the holder and down over my legs.

I stare straight ahead, clenching my teeth. A thousand reactions race through my mind. I cut them off before they jump from my mouth.

“Sorry,” Sadie whispers.

“Maybe I could get a paper towel?” I say through my clenched teeth, feeling red creep up my neck. Mom hands them back to me with a look of pride in her eyes.

Ethan says, “At least you didn’t freak out because there’s no way you’d make it through the week in the Tetons if that got to you.”

His words make me let go of the anger. “Right. We’re tough guys now!”

“What do you say, Isaiah? Should we try a swim in the icy-cold Jenny Lake?”

“I’m game if you are,” I boast, determined not to be outdone by my older cousin.

“There it is!” Mom points at the huge sign that reads Grand Teton National Park. I’m not sure if she’s really excited at being here, or just that we’re almost done driving.

“Let’s get a picture, Greg. Pull over, Honey.”

Everything is glistening wet; we must have just missed a storm. We pile out of the truck, and Sadie and I race around the sign. She beats me as usual; and Ethan catches my arm, trying to get me in a headlock. We wrestle until Mom’s got the camera positioned just so on the hood of the car.

“Okay! Line up; five seconds till it goes off.” She hurries forward as we squeeze together, arms around each other.

“Smile,” Mom says through her teeth. I look up at the camera but don’t consider breaking my rule about never smiling for a picture. Then everything else fades away. There, not 40 yards in front of me, a massive black wolf stares right at me from the

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shelter of the forest. His golden eyes seem to look right into my soul. I gasp, my finger pointing of its own accord. The flash of the camera goes off.



“Did...” I blink, and he’s gone. “Did you see it?” I shriek.

“See what?” Dad asks.

“Wolf! Right there in the trees.”

“Where?” Sadie is searching desperately. But he’s like a shadow of the forest—somehow meant for my eyes only.

“Must be seeing things,” Ethan says, swiping my hair the wrong way.

“No, he was there!” I protest, mashing my hair flat again.

“How do you know this ‘wolf’ wasn’t a she?” Ethan makes quotes with his fingers around the word *wolf*.

Mom scans the tree line with a frown. “Let’s get into the park and get settled.”

Still, I press my nose against the cold window, searching for those mesmerizing golden eyes.

Dad slows at the admission gate. Before the attendant lets us through, she asks, “Did you bring a bear canister?”



“A what?” Dad asks.

The lady smiles, pointing at the map of the park. “You’ll need to go straight to the Jenny Lake Store. All campers are required to use bear canisters for their food. We have plenty of both brown and black bears in the park and keeping your food out of their way is very important.”

“All right, thanks,” Dad replies.

The awe of seeing the wolf still grips me. Before we’ve gone a mile down the winding road, I’ve spotted twelve elk, a bald eagle, seven turkeys, and what Sadie insists was a brown bear but was actually a reddish-colored boulder.

The drive to the store takes nearly 45 minutes, but the time flies by as I stare at the incredible snowcapped peaks. They’re so narrow and sharp at the tip it seems like you could prick your finger on the summit—if you could get that high.

I keep catching glimpses of a black streak racing through the pines. I tell myself it’s just my imagination. *Maybe*. I groan as I get out of the truck at

the lodge, my legs cramping from the long days in the car.

The store and visitors' center are built of log and set in front of a crystal-clear lake that perfectly reflects the mountains and pine trees. While Mom and Dad decide what size bear canister we need to purchase, Ethan, Sadie, and I walk around through the aisles.

Ethan picks up a multi-tool. "These are the best brand! My dad has one." A shadow passes over his face. Sadie and I look at each other, wondering how to help him.

"Oh, look! It also has a fire starter built in." I point to the package, hoping to distract him. But he's already hanging it up with the rest. We follow him around the next turn.

A group of four teenage boys huddle near the cooler section. They're all wearing cowboy hats and belts with huge buckles. Their height reminds me of Max at school. I suppress a shiver of dread, pushing him out of my mind.

I catch the tallest one's harsh voice as he snarls, "Well, she won't win this year. I'll make sure of it."

The other boys snicker and nod. The one who'd spoken scowls at us, and the rest of the group does the same. I'm already shifting to turn down the closest aisle, but Ethan saunters up to them, his chest out. He's nearly as tall as they are, and he points to the cooler behind them. "Excuse me, I need to get a drink."

Sadie inches behind me; she's shy sometimes, and the look the boys are leveling at Ethan is far from friendly. The stare down lasts a few more seconds that seem longer than the drive to Wyoming. Finally, the boys move off.

"Tourist." The tallest one spits the word.

"What did you say?" Ethan asks.

"You heard me," the boy says over his shoulder as he leads the group out of the store.

"Ethan!" Sadie hisses, while he grabs a soda. "Why did you mess with those guys? They give me the creeps."

Ethan shrugs. "They don't own the place."

*He's grown a lot more than just taller.* I wish I could face Max with the same confidence that Ethan has.

Sadie elbows me. "Can we get sodas?"

"Sadie, you know you and sugar are dangerous together," I say with a straight face, but remembering the trouble she got into last time she ate a candy bar makes me smile. I taunt her, "Two broken dishes, plus Mom's vase. I don't think Grand Teton is quite ready for how crazy you get on sugar."

"Isaiah..." she whines my name for bringing up that incident, her face red.

"Come on, y'all!" Mom calls, "Let's get to site A-68! Oh, do you think we should grab some firewood?"

As Ethan heads toward the cashier to pay for his soda, Dad responds, "No. We're allowed to pick up wood at the campsite."