

Arches Legend

C. R. Fulton

THE CAMPGROUND KIDS

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Arches Legend by C. R. Fulton
First Edition
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Disclaimer: Some of the characters in this book, though historical figures, find fresh adventures here that are purely works of fiction. Any involvement of Butch Cassidy and Colonel Percy Fawcett with Arches National Park is also fictional.

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You are my best friend
and my very best sounding board for ideas,
plots, and stories. I'm looking forward
to the next 80 years with you.*

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Camping gear. Considering all the times it's saved my life, I do my best to take care of it. I run my fingers over the claw marks on the front of my backpack, smiling at the memory of Cranky Bear protecting her cubs at the Smokies. But I've never camped in the desert before, so Arches National Park will be a new experience. My bed is covered in rope, fire starters, survival blankets and a book on desert camp craft.

My 14-year-old cousin Ethan sticks his head into my room. "Does that dog always bark so much?"

I look out my bedroom window at the border

collie circling wildly next door. The dog barks repeatedly, and the sound grates on my nerves. “Yep. Max loves to yip and bark.”

“Mom!” my ten-year-old sister Sadie yells from her room. “Can I bring my metal detector?”

“No, sweetheart, it’s too big to fit on the plane!” Mom’s voice floats up from the kitchen. I hear her phone ring as I carefully stash items in my bag. A moment later, she takes Ethan’s place in the doorway.

“It’s for you.”

I scowl when I answer the phone. “Hello?” A gravelly voice makes me stand up a little straighter. “Uncle Elliot!” We hardly ever hear from our great-uncle since we met him at Yosemite.

“Do you *still* have the compass?” The insistence I hear in his voice makes me grip the phone tighter.

“Of course I do.” I pull the instrument from my pocket.

“I told you it was special but recent... Well, certain events have made it *invaluable*.” I turn over

the heavy brass compass in my hand. The way he says that word *invaluable* makes me wince. For an eccentric treasure hunter like him, saying that something I have is valuable beyond estimation is almost overwhelming.

“In a place like Arches, it might reveal...” He sighs, then adds, “more than I’m willing to say over the phone.”

The compass is shaped like a hockey puck with a thick glass top. I press the invisible button on its side and grin as it slides open into three layers.

“I’ve sent you a package that should arrive within three minutes,” Uncle Elliot continues. “I’ve been tracking the shipment closely as it contains some very important information. You kids impressed me at Yosemite with your perceptive skills. Consider this a test of sorts that I hope you pass.” The phone goes silent.

I look at it, wondering, *what on earth could he mean?* Outside, Max’s barking reaches a new pitch. Pulling back the curtain, I see an unfamiliar white

vehicle stop in front of our house. Dropping the phone, I sprint for the stairs.

“Where’s the fire?” Ethan jokes as I zoom past.

“Elliot!” is the only word I say as I leap the last few stairs. I skid through the front door, nearly ripping off the screen door with my wide shoulders.

A tall man stepping out of the car is holding a large envelope and a clipboard. He holds up a photo as I approach, checking my face against it. “Isaiah Rawlings? Please sign here.”

I take the clipboard, eyeing the envelope still in his hand. I see that one end of it bulges, and I can’t wait to see what’s inside. I scribble my signature on the line.

“Okay, Express Delivery promises every sender a photo verification upon delivery, so if you don’t mind...”

He holds up his phone, and I take the package as Ethan and Sadie arrive behind me. I think of smiling too late. Then Sadie snatches the envelope out of my hand.

“HEY!” I protest, but a flash of fur makes me spin. *It wasn't Sadie!*

“Max, NO!” Sadie shouts as the dog jets down the road, the brown envelope dangling.

“After him!” I yell, watching him turn left.

Ethan and Sadie are faster runners than I am, but I put my brain to good use, cutting through the Smiths' backyard, dodging kids' toys.

Max zips past on the sidewalk, and I nearly catch him! His silky fur slips through my fingers as he whips around, eyes bright, ready to play.

“Oh, you think this is a game, huh?” I bite my lip. *I must get that package!* Sadie and Ethan arrive, breathless.

“I'll go left,” Ethan whispers, easing across the quiet neighborhood street. Sadie takes a small step forward, but Max immediately jets to one side. Ethan leaps for the dog, who rushes my way, still eyeing Ethan. I leap, stretching long...my fingers close on the envelope! Skidding near the street, I growl, yanking with all my might. The package

tears, but Max only makes off with a small strip of cardboard!

The hum of an engine makes me roll as a black SUV cruises slowly past. I can barely make out a passenger watching me through the dark tint of the window. A shiver of dread rushes across my chest as I tuck the package under my arm. Black glasses are perched on the man's huge nose. I watch the car until it disappears down the road, noting that its plate is from Missouri, not Kentucky.

Panting hard, I look at the now somewhat soggy package.

"Why..." Sadie is holding her side, "is that package so important?"

The thrill of another adventure makes me shiver. "Uncle Elliot said it's a test of sorts."

"What happens if we pass?"

I grin. "I have no idea."

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Back in my room, I clear a space on my desk, then hesitate. “Uncle Elliot hinted at things he couldn’t say over the phone.” I look suspiciously at the window, and Sadie rushes to shut the curtain.


I turn over the envelope and empty it onto the desk. A book called *Bandit Invincible: The Story of Butch Cassidy* lands amid a pile of old newspaper clippings, copies of letters, and a few pictures.

“What, exactly, are we supposed to figure out?” Sadie asks, her nose crinkling on one side.

“I wish I knew.” My stomach clenches. *It’s entirely possible we’ll fail Uncle Elliot’s test.*

Ethan picks up the book. “Cassidy was a famous

thief in the Old West. Historians say he stole over \$10 million during his lifetime in the 1900s.”

I’m glad Ethan is familiar with the story. The photo, featuring an odd shape like a backward E, a  a white box, then another E, grabs my attention. Behind it, I see a black-and-white photo of a serious man with a square jaw and serious eyes.

“Look! Here’s a note from Uncle Elliot!” Sadie picks it up and starts to read. “Isaiah, Sadie, and Ethan...”

“Why does he always mention me last?” Ethan interrupts.

“Somebody had to be last. Go on, Sadie,” I add.

“I’ve been on the trail of a certain artifact my entire life. I’m not the only one interested in this item, and years of careful searching have now led me to believe Arches National Park is its final resting place. You are now in possession of all my research. Guard it well. Take special note of the articles from July 1906 and 1923. The letter from Percy Fawcett

is of *utmost* importance. Put the clues together, as I dare not say more lest this package should fall into the wrong hands. Remember, *great things come in small packages that last for centuries.*”

I sift through the various clippings, finding one from 1906.

THE WYOMING TIMES

3 July 1906

Cheyenne, Wyoming

Page 1

NOTICE!

The Pinkerton Detective Agency has released the following information to the public: the infamous criminal, Butch Cassidy, also known as LeRoy Parker, Jim Lowe, George Cassidy, and Santiago Maxwell is no longer in North America. He and his notorious partner, the Sundance Kid, have fled to South America. The West can breathe easy again without his terrorizing presence.

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“Yeah, weren’t he and the Sundance Kid killed in a shoot-out in Bolivia?” Ethan asks as he lifts another article and reads the contents to us.



The British Gazette



Published by His Majesty’s Stationery Office.

No. 9

9 September 1923

05¢

Seventh Amazon Exploration in Search of “Z”

Colonel Percy Fawcett begins his seventh Amazon exploration in search of what he calls the lost city of Z. Colonel Fawcett and a team of explorers are pursuing a legend based deep in the Amazon jungle. When questioned about the possibility of encountering hostile native tribes, he replied, “Not only is it a possibility, but a surety. One only needs to know how to deal effectively with them.”

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“And this must be the letter from Col. Fawcett!” Sadie gingerly flattens out an ancient sheet of paper. “It looks like it’s original.” We all lean in to read together.



— Commanding Officer —

10 December 1908

My dearest Nina,

I pray you and the children are well. This expedition has proven the most difficult yet. Not only have we faced unseasonable rains, treacherous landscapes, and a sickness that plagues the crew, I have lost my most valuable possession. The Navigem could have led me straight to the lost city. Three nights ago, near the junction of the Amazon River and a tributary called Madeira, we were taken

at spearpoint by natives. None of the usual peacemaking gestures were effective.

We were coming from a set of ruins previously unknown to explorers, where I had found the Navigem. Carved from a Ceylon sapphire, the gem fit perfectly in the palm of my hand. On its beautiful blue surface were etched symbols, which I believe are the map to the lost city.

The natives must have known that I had taken it. Another war party returned with two American prisoners. We were tied together at the wrists. The American called himself Santiago Maxwell, though I do not know the second man's name. Before the natives could torture us, I admitted to him of having found the Navigem. Maxwell convinced me he had an accomplice waiting for the right moment to break him and his partner free. My utmost concern was for the Navigem. In desperation, I handed it to him, and he assured

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me he would return it to a peaceful village upstream two days from thence. Gunfire suddenly echoed through the jungles, and Maxwell and his partner escaped.

I barely made it out alive; however, most of my crew did not. I found the village and waited for Maxwell to appear. I waited one full week before it became painfully obvious that I had been duped. My darling, I must find the American and the Navigem. The British crown will hear nothing of such an expedition, and I fear I must go alone. It may be a long while until you hear from me again.

My deepest love and affection,

Percy

“Hang on a minute! *Santiago Maxwell* was one of the names Cassidy used as an alibi!” Ethan says, leaning over the letter. He flips open the book. “Just as I thought...historians claim Cassidy and

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the Sundance Kid were killed in a shoot-out in Bolivia on November 7, 1908!”

We look at each other, “Maybe he didn’t die. The real question is, where did he take the Navigem?”

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As our plane lands in Utah, I look out the window; the bleak desert stretches as far as I can see. One thing is for sure, Butch Cassidy was familiar with the desert. He was born less than 200 miles from the park. After studying everything Elliot had sent, I believe it's *possible* that he had a hideout in Arches.

“Look at that!” Sadie points out my window. Towers of red sandstone puncture the flatlands.

The heat hits me like a fist as we leave the airport, the dry air is equally powerful. I can feel both draining me of energy as we settle into a rental truck for the eleven-mile trip to the park.

“If you’re going to the desert, make sure you pack a *thirst aid* kit,” Ethan says, emptying a pack of bright blue powder in his water. The drink turns his lips the same color, and a grin overtakes me. With Ethan, Sadie, and a national park, *anything* could happen!

We stop for our traditional picture at the welcome sign. Ethan leans against the deep brown wood.

“Ouch!” After leaping forward, he rubs his shoulder. “You could fry an egg on that sign!”

I reach out; my fingertips nearly sizzle when I touch it. Scanning the surrounding cliffs, I release a deep breath, already feeling the pressure of passing Uncle Elliot’s “test.”

By the time we reach the north end of the park, Ethan has told 24 more jokes.

“What kind of lion never roars?” He’s completely unconcerned with the fact that none of us answer. “A *dandelion!*”

We pass a sign, and I scowl. “Devils Garden? That’s what our campground is named?”

“Actually, this entire section of the park is called Devils Garden,” Dad says as we turn off the highway. “And this happens to be the only campground in Arches National Park.”

A heavy feeling settles over me. *What if we can't find the Navigem?* We pull into site 003, and once again, I step into the intense heat of the desert. I don't believe we've ever faced a more hostile environment or a more difficult challenge.

“So,” Ethan says, studying the slick rock towers all around. “All we have to do is find one small gem hidden by a master thief over 100 years ago.” He wipes the sweat from his brow. “Butch Cassidy was brilliant at what he did, and most of what he took was never found.”

“Thanks, Ethan,” I say, rolling my eyes.

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“Let’s hike the Broken Arch Trail,” Mom suggests, as I finish setting a stone on each corner of my tent. It’s a certainty that the solid rock under our tent won’t allow me to anchor the corners with the usual tent pegs.

“So, are we going to see all 2000 arches on this trip?” Ethan asks through purple lips stained by his flavored water.

“Not if we hope to find Cassidy’s hideout,” I say, feeling the pressure as mere seconds tick past. *Failing Uncle Elliot’s test seems a certainty.*

Sadie studies the landscape of red rocks, towers of sandstone, and sparse desert scrub set against

the brilliant blue sky. “Can you imagine riding a horse through here like Butch Cassidy did? With no roads or water?” She shivers. “How did people survive back then?”

“They respected the power of the desert, and they planned for it as best they could,” Dad comments as he straps on his hiking pack.

We walk down the Devils Garden Loop and come to the Broken Arch Trailhead. Slowly, I head toward the trail, feeling like I’m stepping onto an alien planet where heat and the scarcity of water rule the universe.

“If you’re on a hike and find a fork in the road, what do you do?” Ethan asks.

Before we can answer his riddle, he says, “You stop for lunch!”

“We just ate lunch,” Sadie says, shaking her head.

“Hey,” Ethan continues, “Look at that!” He points at a tall slab of rock with an enormous boulder perched on top. “Can we go see it?”

Dad squats down, pointing at the sand. “Kids,

come look at this. See this crust on top of the sand? It's called *cyanobacteria*, and it takes hundreds of years to form. Its job is to retain moisture and create nutrients through photosynthesis. Never step off the trail into a sandy area. Even one footprint will ruin years of growth."

"So, I take that instruction as a no..." Ethan pops some candy into his mouth.

Soon, we come to a sign with arrows indicating what direction to go:

← Tapestry Arch — 300 yards

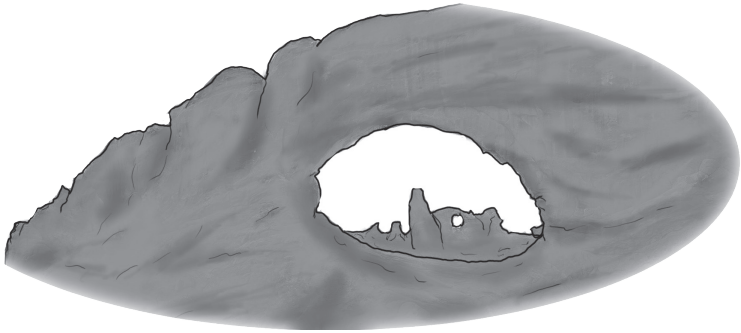
→ Broken Arch — 830 yards

"Let's go left," I say, catching a flash of motion far ahead on the trail to the Tapestry Arch.

We scramble up onto a section of solid rock. In the distance, a thin slab of stone has been hollowed out into a beautiful arch. I see a smaller arch on each side of the big one.

"Let's get closer!" Ethan's already striding in that direction.

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We spread out since we don't see any cyanobacteria on the solid rock, but we do notice small piles of rocks along the way. From the way they're stacked, clearly a human put them there.

“What are these for?” Sadie asks.

“Those are called *cairns*, and they mark trails through the desert,” Mom answers.

Soon the massive Tapestry Arch is stretching above us.

“Wow!” I gaze up at the thousands of pounds of rock suspended above my head. *I sure hope it will stay put!*

“Hey! Listen to this!” Ethan is knocking on the wall behind the arch.

I cock my head, listening hard. “Did someone scream?”

“No, silly, listen to how hollow it sounds right here. I bet there’s a cave behind here!”

A streak of familiar energy races across my chest as I scan the valley. “No, I promise, I heard *something*.”