

# Rocky Mountain Challenge

C. R. Fulton

THE CAMPGROUND KIDS

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*Rocky Mountain Challenge* by C. R. Fulton  
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*To every adventurer,  
whether in body or mind,  
always run toward the light  
and leave the shadows behind you!*

## THE CAMPGROUND KIDS

No. 1

*Grand Teton Stampede*

No. 2

*Smoky Mountain Survival*

No. 3

*Zion Gold Rush*

No. 4

*Rocky Mountain Challenge*

No. 5

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## MONDAY

I fold my arms, holding them close to my chest, as I prepare to fall backward into thin air. *I can do this. Just let go, then everyone will catch me.* That's what a "trust fall" is—knowing everyone else is there. Except, I'm the first one doing it, so I'm not even positive this team-building exercise will really work.

I roll my shoulders; all the pushups and lifting weights have added muscle to my sturdy, almost 13-year-old frame. But muscle is not an asset—not when I might crash through everyone's arms and into the ground.

“Isaiah Rawlings, keep your body straight and fall back,” encourages Jim, my wilderness survival training week counselor.

Opening my eyes, I look over my shoulder. Two rows of kids face each other, their arms outstretched, making a bed of sorts. I shouldn’t have looked. Climbing high on the huge stump hadn’t bothered me at all, but now sweat breaks out on my upper lip.

Sadie, my sister, is there waiting. She just turned ten, and we’ve been on a lot of adventures together. I wish the entire group were made up of Sadie repeats. The thought makes me smile. *What if all 12 Sadie clones ate sugar at once?* The world surely couldn’t handle that much raw energy!

I shift my foot back, teetering as my heel slides off the edge. I bite my lip. My 14-year-old cousin Ethan is there too. I remember his shouting for help as the river in the Grand Tetons had sucked him away. *He’ll be there to help catch me.*

Jim clears his throat. Standing here thinking is

only making the exercise worse. This is why we applied for this six-day camp tucked right along the border of the Rocky Mountain National Park—to train and then employ what we learn. I’ve been longing for this Monday to come!

I release a slow breath. *Three...Two...One...* I fall backward stiffly, my mind empty, with only the whoosh of air in my ears. A heartbeat passes, then another, and I land safely in the cradle-like embrace of 12 sets of arms.

My eyes snap open, and Jim yells a whoop of congratulations. I feel almost weightless as I’m lowered to my feet. I can’t wipe the grin off my face, with everyone’s clapping and cheering.

Jim nods when Sadie cries, “Me next!” I take her place below the tall stump, and we hold out our arms. Sadie’s slim figure barely hesitates before she falls backward, her long, brown ponytail whipping straight up, and I’m shocked at how easy it is to catch her. I guess I didn’t need to worry about being too heavy. When the load is spread out, it’s easy.

Soon, the other boys from my cabin have completed the trust fall. There's Aaron, his dark skin glistening in the heat. Then redheaded Dan, whose freckles look like sand sprinkled over his nose.

Aaron's sister, Zenya, goes next. Even though we only arrived at camp two hours ago, she and Sadie are already best friends. Then Miguel, with his straight black hair and wide smile, shouts as he falls. Finally, it's Ethan's turn. He stands atop the stump, staring down at us. He looks even taller up there, with his long thin arms, his trim hips, and his shaggy hair waving in the breeze.

"Um...Ethan? You're supposed to turn around," I say flatly.

He shakes his head. "Nope," he declares.

"Uh, yes, you are," Sadie adds.

Ethan climbs off the stump, and Jim walks over from another group also doing trust falls.

"Ethan, hang on now. Let's give it a minute! You know how easy it was to catch everyone else; you can do this." Jim is tall and well-built, a confident



20 year old. I guess he's just about what every boy here wishes he could be someday.

“*Au contraire*, sir,” Ethan replies. “You do not know my luck.”

“That’s true, but I do know about survival; and in 99 out of 100 situations, teamwork is what helps you survive. That’s why we kick off this camp with the trust fall.”

Ethan wrinkles one side of his nose. “I don’t mind teamwork, but I do mind...well, I’m just not going to do it.”

Jim nods. “Okay, but remember, every activity counts toward your final score at the awards ceremony on Saturday.”

I can hardly believe we’re here—with six days of intense training and fun ahead of us. When we applied, it seemed as if we would never hear that our applications had been accepted. Sadie, Ethan, and I had barely enough camping hours to meet the minimum requirement to attend.

“All right, you’ve got 15 minutes of break time

to get settled in your assigned cabins. Then we will meet under the bell,” Jim says loud enough for the entire group of 24 kids to hear.

“So, what’s the bell for?” I ask.

Jim shrugs. “In all my years at Camp Wilderness, I’ve only heard that emergency bell ring once.”

I nod and run to catch up with Ethan, Aaron, Dan, and Miguel.

“Yeah, it ought to go like...Cabin 3 will bring them to their knees...” Aaron pumps his arms in the air as he chants, “The competition’s done because the Cabin 3 boys won!”

Dan’s red hair glints in the sunlight.

Ethan repeats the chant altogether, beatboxing between the sentences, and I must admit, it sounds cool.

“This year we’re going to be the high-point cabin,” Miguel says with quiet confidence.

“Stop!” My sudden, harsh whisper makes our entire group freeze.

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I point ahead of us toward the trees in front of Cabin 3. “See?” There’s a brief blur of movement low to the ground.

“It’s a cougar!” Aaron leaps behind me.

I shake my head, unsure. Whatever the creature was, it seems to have disappeared into thin air.

“It was huge!” Aaron declares.

“Things are almost never as big as you remember. Maybe we can find the tracks!” I rush forward, searching among the pine needles and aspen leaves.

“Here!” Ethan is kneeling next to a sandy spot. We gather around and study a clear print.

“I don’t see any claw marks, and the heel pad is large. It must have been some sort of cat!” I say, recalling my well-studied tracking book.

“Told you!” Aaron’s bright white teeth stand out against his skin.

“Well, I, for one, am heading in for a snack.” Ethan is the tallest kid at camp, and it seems like he never stops eating.

“Did you bring any cookies?” I ask, recalling the depth of his affection for them at Zion National Park this summer.

“Nope, I thought Twizzlers would be harder for creatures to steal.”

We clump up the wooden steps to the cabin, and I pull out a piece of the deer jerky that Aunt Sylvia had given me.

“Oohh! Can I have some?” Ethan asks.

“Didn’t your mom give you a pound of it too?” I’ve been carefully planning the rationing of this high-protein snack to last all week.

“I ate it already.”

“On the drive here?” I look at him in disbelief. It had taken Mom two days to drive us here. *That’s half a pound a day!* Ethan only belches in reply as he settles a coonskin cap on his head. I pick out a small piece of jerky and hand it to him.

“Look at this,” Aaron says.

We all gather around to see his watch with a built-in compass. “My sister has one too, but she doesn’t know how to use it.” He slaps his leg, laughing.

“That compass will come in handy on Wednesday—maps and tracking day.” I pull more supplies from my pack and slip them into my pocket. *You can never be too prepared.*

*I can’t believe I’m finally here!* Mom’s writing conference is two towns to the east, and that’s how she found out about the special camping week. Dad will be here for Saturday, the big competition and awards day.

“Come on, let’s get back to the bell. I wouldn’t want to miss out on our first chance to beat Cabin 5,” Aaron calls.

We rush out the door.

I study the trees, but there's no flash of tan fur this time. "Isn't that the girls' cabin?"

"Yeah! I can beat my sister any day. But you heard Jim say since there are only four girls total at camp, Cabin 5 will have a handicap—you know, extra free points since they don't have a fifth person. I think giving them points stinks."

"Well, they have fewer people, so it only seems fair to me. Unless you want to compete on their team!" I add, simply because I don't like how eager he is to beat everyone.

"*Waugh!*" Aaron falls to the ground. "I would rather die!" He's on his feet again in a flash. "Come on, hurry!"

We run the rest of the way to the bell and arrive out of breath.

"All right, survivalists! Listen up. Every cabin is a team. Every activity your cabin completes this week will receive a score, and this first set of games will help us counselors see and become ac-

customed to your capabilities. This camp will be an intense six days with plenty of opportunities for injury. So, we need to know each of your strengths and weaknesses.” Jim blows a whistle. “Line up between the flags by the main lodge.”

We rush over, and I’m glad to see Sadie’s counselor is a slim, sweet-faced blonde. Sadie had been worried about spending so many nights away from Mom and Dad; but she’s smiling now, obviously telling her counselor a story.

I slip into the middle of our group, where my slower running won’t lose the relay race for us. I’m built for strength, not speed, and I’m okay with that weak point. Aaron steps to the back of the line, bouncing eagerly on his toes.

I study the four teams of guys. The Cabin 2 guys look like they will bring us some pretty stiff competition.

Jim hands out a red baton to each team. Ethan drops to one knee, digging the toe of his shoe into the grass as my heart begins to pound.

“Ready, set, go!” Jim shouts, and the runners take off for the flag at the far end of the field. Ethan’s shirt is plastered to his slim form as his long legs eat up the distance. Midway, his coonskin cap flies off. The girls must wait until the first two runners get back to start their race.

“Run!” I shout, caught up in the excitement.

Ethan slaps the baton into Miguel’s outstretched hand and falls to the ground. All he can do is gasp for breath. All too soon Miguel is back, and I tuck my head and run for all I’m worth. The Cabin 2 runner passes me.

I skid around the flag and stretch my stride as far as it will go, my legs feeling like lead. I pass the baton and watch Dan’s lightning speed recover first place. He comes in just ahead of the Cabin 2 guy, and the team runner for the girls’ cabin is right with him.

It seems as if Aaron has been shot from a cannon, but Sadie is the last runner for Cabin 5; I see she’s not going to give him a break. The two of them



outpace the Cabin 2 runner, and I'm shouting like crazy, jumping up and down. Neck and neck, Sadie and Aaron take the far turn. Then Aaron finds another gear, and he pulls ahead for the win! We jump, shaking each other and cheering.

"You girls didn't stand a chance!" Aaron shouts.

Zenya's hair is tightly braided. As she shifts her head to one side, her attitude is easy to see. "Whatever! You better watch out next time," she fires back at him.

Sadie is breathing too hard to say anything, and I wish I could tell her what an excellent job she did. However, the counselors direct us toward an obstacle course. On the way, Ethan scoops up his cap. We study the walls and pits ahead of us.

"We got this! We had a great start. Let's keep it up, Cabin 3!" *Aaron might be a bit too competitive.*

"First thing to know about this course is...your entire team must cross the goal line to finish at all. Remember, in survival situations, your life might depend on the people you're with and how well you

can work together. Not everything is as it seems on this course, so put on your thinking caps and do not leave a teammate behind!”

Jim counts down again, and we rush forward to the first wooden wall. It’s about as high as my chest, and I enjoy the ease of my muscles taking me over it. The walls we must scale gradually get higher. When we reach the third one, try as he might, even Ethan’s height can’t conquer it.

“Guys!” I exclaim. They finally turn to me from their futile efforts. “Remember? Jim said we would need to work as a team.” I link my fingers together like a step. “Ethan, up and over!”

His shoe bites into the skin of my hands, and I grimace as I heft him up to the top. Finally, he gets an elbow over, and his weight lifts off my hands.

Aaron is trying to boost Dan over without success. Ethan is hanging over the top, helping Miguel climb up. I take a quick glance at the other teams. The Cabin 2 team is still throwing themselves at the wall, trying to get up on their own.

Zenya is the tallest girl, and I notice her bent-over position with her hands gripping her knees. The others from her cabin are using her back as a step!

Soon, I'm the only one on my team left on this side of the wall, and my stomach muscles are burning like crazy from the strain. The other boys must be holding Ethan's legs because he is dangling over the wall, reaching far down for me. I leap for his hands and groan as I struggle upward, my grip slipping till I finally land on top of the wall and slide over.

"What's next?" I pant. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of the girls pulling Zenya over the top of their wall.

"Simple! Monkey bars!" Aaron takes off for our cabin's set of bars, leaping high. He swings easily; but as soon as the third rung takes his weight, it pops loose, and he crashes to the ground.

"Hey!" His pride is battered more than anything else. "This thing must be as old as the hills!"

Beside us, Zenya does a repeat of Aaron's performance, except she lands on her feet, holding the third rung in her hands.

Jim grins wide. "No feet on the ground, teams! You must make it across without touching the ground. Think it through. These monkey bars are not old—just tricky."

I study the outside bars farther down. "Wait! There aren't any rungs at all toward the middle!"

Jim crosses his arms, nodding. "Surviving isn't always clear-cut; life can throw curveballs at you."

"Let me see that," I say, studying the rung that had let loose on Aaron. "There aren't any screw holes in this rung! It didn't break; it wasn't ever connected in the first place!"

The first team member from Cabin 2 swings onto the third bar, and we watch him fall to the ground. Chewing the inside of my lip, I formulate a plan. "Who's the best at balancing?"

Dan steps forward and says, "I am." I do not detect any pride in his claim.

“Okay, you need to get on top and hold down the loose rungs. Then you need to move the loose rungs forward to fill the empty spaces so the rest of us can cross.”

Dan struggles up the slick post, so I give him a boost, handing up the rung once he balances on top of the bars.

“Miguel, you first,” Dan says, settling the bar into its spot.

He holds it until Miguel is safely past. Then he slides forward on the wide horizontal beams to the empty spot Miguel is now dangling in front of.

“Hurry!” Miguel’s voice sounds pinched as his fingers begin to slip.

Dan sets the bar into the new spot. “Go!”

I feel relieved when Miguel lands solidly on the far side. Jim nods at me. “Nice idea, Rawlings.”

“Thanks,” I reply, but a glance at the girls reveals they’ve copied my idea, and they’re getting ahead of our team.

“Come on, Isaiah,” Dan urges.

I leap for the first bar. Being big-boned and heavier than most boys my age makes traversing the monkey bars the most difficult playground equipment for me to master. Right now, with my fingers slipping as I wait for Dan to move the bar, I growl, determined not to fall.

He slams the bar into place. I swing my legs, fingers barely reaching it, then I hit the ground on the far side. The entire girls' team is already racing toward the last obstacle.

“What? No fair! They all crossed over the top!” Ethan cries, dangling by one hand from the bars right behind me.

Jim shrugs. “The only rule was not to touch the ground. Survival in the wild means you must think creatively—outside the box.”

The girls' counselor is clapping as they race forward.

With a groan of frustration, Aaron shimmies up the post and crosses over the top; in seconds, he and Dan are with us.

We break forward with the Cabin 2 team only steps behind. A quick glance over my shoulder reveals the other teams are also closing in. They didn't have to stop to figure out a strategy; they simply copied ours! I swallow down the frustration, nearly plowing into Ethan.

“What?” I ask.

# - 3 -

My team is staring open-mouthed at the last obstacle. A deep ditch looks freshly dug with an excavator. The finish sign is posted on the other side of the ditch!





“This ditch is half a mile deep,” Jim announces through a megaphone.

“No, it isn’t,” Zenya contradicts him. As usual, her one hand rests on her hip.

“For the purpose of this exercise, young lady, it is! Anyone who falls in must restart the obstacle. I repeat, no one may touch the ditch. Now go!”

A strange assortment of items has been piled in front of each team. I see a log with a two-inch hole drilled through it, a long metal pole, and a hammer. The Cabin 2 team jumps into action, pushing their log forward, trying to force it to span the wide ditch. The heavy wood promptly dives into the canyon, digging into the rich brown dirt at an angle.

“Oh, no!” their team counselor groans. “The penalty for losing your bridge is harsh!” He and Jim wrestle the log out of the ditch and push it even farther away than it had been the first time. The Cabin 2 guys moan.

“Okay, so, the log is how we’re supposed to cross the ditch. He called it a *bridge*,” I say.

“Right, but how do we do it?” Aaron’s face has turned a reddish hue, his competitive spirit is pushing him hard.

“Why don’t we try rolling it really fast?” Ethan suggests.

“No way! The log will just roll down into the canyon really fast.” The Cabin 4 team proves my point as they try that exact suggestion. Their bridge ends up at the bottom, and the counselors struggle to drag it back. The boys of Cabin 2 are red-faced as they struggle to push their bridge closer to the chasm once again.

I pluck at my lip, thinking hard. I notice the hole in the log is just the right size for the pole to fit through. And now that I take a careful look, I see the hole in the log isn’t in the center of its length; it’s fairly close to one end. A quick check confirms my suspicion; each log is drilled the same way.

“Wait!” I snap my fingers. “The log is designed to be a pivot!”

“A *what?*” Dan and Ethan ask at the same time.

“Come on!” I motion everyone to come closer and lower my voice. “If we put the pipe through the hole, hammer the pole into the ground, we could push the opposite end of the log and pivot it over the open space to the other side.”

“Now, why didn’t I think of that?” Ethan says.

Dan’s red hair glints in the sun. “We’ll need weight on this end of the log while we swing it, or the weight of the log will pull out the stake.”

“Okay, we must work fast! Everyone else will catch on quick,” I say.

Aaron puts his fist in the center of our huddle, and we set ours on top. “Cabin 3!” he shouts, and we mime an explosion with our hands as we spin into action.

Ethan scoops up the pipe, and Aaron guides it into the hole in the log. The hammer is in my hand even though I don’t remember picking it up. Dan and Miguel shove the log close to the edge of the ditch, then hold it steady as I climb on and lift the hammer high.

The loud ping of metal-on-metal rings loud, and I grimace. The rocky ground resists my blows to pound the pipe deep into the earth. Sweat is rolling between my shoulder blades as I hop down.

“Let’s spin it!” I drop the hammer and start to push the log.

“Wait!” Dan shouts, as the long end of the log slowly eases over the chasm. “It’s tipping!” He leaps onto the short end near the pipe—the same end that I’m pushing on.

“How are we supposed to move it with you on it?” Aaron’s voice is pinched as we hear each of the other teams pounding their pipe with their hammer. “They’re right behind us! They stole our idea, so we have to win!”

“We’ll work together. Everybody, watch the log and keep it level. We will add more weight as we swing the bridge over the gully,” says Ethan.

*Ethan is right. The only way to make this exercise successful is to work together as a team.*

Ignoring the urge to look at the others, we focus

on inching the log bridge out over the chasm. Once again the log starts to dip downward.

“We need more weight!” Miguel shouts as the log starts to dip down. Grunting and sweating, we make what seems like a thousand adjustments, and the bridge finally settles on the other side!

“Yes!” Aaron’s fist beats the air as he leaps onto the log and scurries across. Dan and Miguel join him, and then Ethan darts forward. Halfway there, a bumblebee’s erratic flight connects hard with the back of Ethan’s head.

He screams, smacking at his shaggy hair, and his feet tangle up. As he goes down, his stomach catches the log, and he desperately wraps his long arms around it.

“Help!” he screeches. “I’m going to fall!”

I roll my eyes as he kicks his long legs wildly. “Ethan!” I shout. “Just fall and get it over with.”

“Nooooo!” he shouts dramatically as his grip finally fails. He drops about six inches to the ground. He pats himself down and quips, “Oh, I survived!”

I shake my head at him and help him out of the ditch. “You weren’t supposed to fall.”

“A kamikaze bumblebee assaulted me. His attack was unprovoked, mind you!”

“Sure,” I agree, following him across the log. Aaron, Dan, Miguel, and Ethan rush over the finish line. A few steps from it, I turn to see Cabin 4 had tried our plan without pounding the spike deep enough into the ground. Currently, the counselors are once again hauling out their log.

The other teams aren’t faring any better. Cabin 2 is trying to force the log across without the spike since they couldn’t get it driven into the hard ground. The log crashes into the canyon again.

Sadie is pounding as hard as she can, but she hands off the hammer to the next girl. Then she shakes out her wrists as if they hurt. *Now that I think about it, using that hammer did sting my hand when the metal connected.*

“Come on, Isaiah!” Aaron is freaking out, pointing at the finish line.

“I’ll be right back,” I say.

Aaron falls to the ground, clutching his head, but I jet across our sturdy bridge and over to the girls.

“Here...” I hold out my hand for the hammer that Zenya is holding.

“Why would *you* help us?” she asks, her head weaving from side to side.

“What are you doing, Rawlings?” Dan shouts, but I ignore him.

I look at Zenya and reply, “Because my sister gave this course her best effort, she deserves to cross the finish line too.”

Sadie smiles at me. Zenya casts a confused look between Sadie and me as she hands me the tool. On my first hammer stroke, I discover that they had hit a rock. Grimacing, I wind up with everything I have, stomach clenched tight, and slam down the hammer. I feel the concussion all the way to my shoulders, but the pole inches downward. *It must have broken through!* After that first strike, the rod drives in more easily.

“Thanks, Bud,” Sadie says as I hop off the log.

I wave at her, then spread my arms for balance as I cross our bridge again. Jim is waiting under the finish line with a look of pleased surprise on his face. I think he’s the only one who’s happy to see me.

“How could you do that to our team?” asks Aaron with a disapproving tone as I step over the line.

“The other teams are way behind; we were guaranteed to win.”