

# Yellowstone Sabotage

C. R. Fulton

THE CAMPGROUND KIDS

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*Yellowstone Sabotage* by C. R. Fulton  
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# - 1 -

“Dad, why are you swerving?” my little sister Sadie asks, her brown eyes worried.

Leaning forward, I see Dad gripping the wheel so hard it might break.

“I’m not, Honey. I think we just blew a tire.”

“Oh, no!” Mom looks down at the map in her lap. Two full days of driving have gotten us to the middle of Nowhere, USA.

A loud *thwap, thwap, thwap* makes Ethan shout, “*What is happening?*”

As Dad wrestles the lurching truck to the side of the highway, I grip the seat ahead of me to keep my head from hitting the window. We bump to a stop, and I need a minute to breathe normally again.

“Okay, it could be worse,” comments Ethan, who is built like a string bean. He shifts in the middle seat next to me. “We could have caused a ten-car pileup and taken out the guardrail!”

“Thanks for the doom-and-gloom report,” I say dryly.

“Anytime...anytime.” He runs a hand through his shaggy hair.

“Isaiah,” Dad says, his eyes on mine in the rear-view mirror. “Let’s get the spare put on.”

I nod, but my body is frozen, and my heart is pounding. The truck rocks from the wind of a semi zooming by.

“Greg, can’t we get off the road a little farther?” Mom asks, her face pale.

By the time Dad has eased the truck into the grass, I’ve convinced my legs to move, breaking the statue-like grip of fear over my body.

“Wait for it...” Dad says, watching the traffic zipping past. “Now!”

He gets out of the truck, and I do the same, managing not to fall because of my rubbery muscles. We head to the passenger side around the truck

bed full of our camping gear, and I groan when I see the damage.

The tire is shredded with steel and rubber cords exposed at odd angles. The steel belts of the ruined tire had damaged the wheel well and cracked the fender. I saw places where the glossy black paint had been scratched.

“Oh, Dad, the fender is ruined!”

His wide hand grips my shoulder. “I’m just thankful we are all right. The parts are replaceable; my family is not.”

“But... But...” I sputter, my heart sinking as I study the damage.

Ethan hops out. “Where is the spare?”

Dad crouches, peering beneath the truck bed. “Under here.”

I look out over the dry, scrubby plains of Nebraska that seem to go on forever. I shiver in the warm sun, thinking of how far we are from anywhere. Dad pops the hood and unhooks the jack.

“Can I get the spare down?” I ask, longing to do something important like he does.

“You can try. It might be tough to break loose.”

“Yes!” I grab the wrench he hands me and crawl underneath the truck bed. Gravel pokes my back as I fit the tool to the metal nut holding up the spare tire. I push as hard as I can, but it won’t budge. Grimacing, I lock my knee against the truck frame and groan as I try again. “Come on!”

My muscles are now screaming but trying hard gains me nothing.

“Got it?” Dad asks as he cranks the jack.

“No,” I sigh. *Why can’t I ever do big things? I’m tired of being just a kid. I wish I was older.*

“Here, let me crack it loose.” He eases under the truck next to me, takes the wrench, and strains until the nut gives way. “There, son! Now you can finish the job.”

My arms are still burning, but I force them to turn the wrench, frowning as the tire lowers. The frustration I’ve felt for months about my shortcomings won’t quit eating at me. *I feel worthless.*

“Hand me the tire iron, Ethan.” Dad’s voice reaches me.

“You mean the quarter-inch crooked *toe bend-*



er?” he squeaks, hopping on one foot after dropping the tool on the other.

The spare tire slowly lowers, then falls the last few inches on my thick chest. *Good thing I'm not any bigger boned or I might be stuck under here.* Another semi speeds past, and the blast of air blows grit into my eyes.

By the time we've got the spare on, Sadie has stuck her head out the door at least five times to ask, “Are you done yet?” *I guess that's what ten-year-olds do.*

“Yes, we're done now,” Dad responds to her question. “Let's find somewhere to take a break.”

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*“Eeehhhaa!”* Ethan’s long legs churn as he plunges toward a cliff of pure sand. He disappears over the edge, his arms flailing as he tries to maintain his balance.

Grinning, I catapult after him. The hot sand shifts under my bare feet as I rush for the steep drop-off. Hollering as I half fall, half run down the shifting bank of sand, I see Sadie rolling down the last part far below me. Her long brown hair is packed with sand.

Ethan trips, flopping face first, but a massive sand avalanche following him won’t let him stop, and he somersaults the rest of the way, bending backward in ways that look painful.

Dad stands at the bottom, smiling at us. “You got it, Isaiah!”

He had been the first to try running down the sand dunes. My legs are tired now, and as gravity forces me to move faster, keeping my balance is harder than I had thought it would be. Somehow, I reach the bottom, still upright.

“What a cool place!” Sadie yells, throwing sand in the air.

“Morrill Sand Pits, Nebraska—the perfect final stop before we reach Yellowstone National Park,” Dad says. “Come on, Honey!” he shouts to Mom who is watching near the top.

“I think I’ll stay here.” She crosses her arms.

“Mom...” Sadie pleads, “We’ve been in the car for two days! You need to stretch your legs!”

She copies exactly what Mom has been saying during the long drive to the oldest national park on earth.

Ethan rolls to a stop beside me, his shirt twisted tight around his thin frame. His face is plastered on one side with sand. “Yeah, Aunt Ruth. It’s a blast!” He croaks on the last word, coughing out

sand. Then he shakes his body like a dog. “I’m doing it again!”

He rushes for the dune, but the shifting sand slows him down.

“Me, too!” Sadie cries, having a much better time because she’s so much lighter.

We finally reach the top, puffing hard. Dad takes Mom’s hand. “It’s really fun! Come slide with me, Ruth.”

Ethan, Sadie, and I whoop with joy as we leap over the edge. This time I miss the first step and fall on my rear. I pick up speed, sliding snakelike down the steep incline, sand flowing over my arms and legs. “Wahoo!”

Behind me I hear Mom shriek, and without looking, I know Dad “helped” her start down.

Ethan repeats his face flop performance, and I regain my feet at the bottom, turning to see Mom clutching Dad’s strong arm, screeching and laughing as they slip and slide down the hill together.

Watching her reminds me of our first camping trip to Grand Teton. I grin at the remembrance... stampedes, stolen horses, and Mom’s coming down

a cliff in much the same way she is descending this sand dune right now.

*What awaits us in Yellowstone?* This is our first trip into the backcountry. We won't be at the big campgrounds but hiking into the wilds, carrying all our gear in backpacks. Knowing that I have everything I need is a great feeling. Well, at least I *hope* I do. Visiting this park is a dream come true!

"Ugh!" I grunt as a wad of sand hits me square in the back.

Sadie giggles and then takes off.

"I'll get you for that!" I scoop up a handful of sand and chase her till we're exhausted and collapse in laughter.

"Water," Ethan says. "I'd give anything for some water." My tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth, and I've never felt so dry.

"Me too," Mom says. "Let's load up and get to Yellowstone!"

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Sand spills from my jeans as we line up in front of the Yellowstone National Park welcome sign. My feet are on the ground only 29 miles from where Kota, the black wolf, stalks the forest at the Grand Tetons! I've been longing for this place. I strain to hear the howl of the Yellowstone pack, but Mom squeezes my shoulder. "Smile!"

With a cheesy grin, Ethan throws up his arms. His hand covers my face as the camera clicks.

"Mom, do it again; Ethan blocked it."

"Oh, honey, there's such a long line," Mom says. Right then, a car horn blares, and somebody yells as if to prove her point. I sigh. *Never, ever, can I get a good serious picture!* We shuffle through the

crowd back to the truck, leaving trails of sand. The traffic moves at a snail's pace as we head toward the Old Faithful Visitor and Education Center.

"I wanted to see animals at Yellowstone—not people!" Sadie grumbles; her nose is pressed against the window. Driving from the East Entrance to Old Faithful was supposed to take 1 hour and 17 minutes, but the drive takes us 4 hours. Apparently, a bear sighting miles ahead has caused a major traffic jam, so we sit and wait, listening to Ethan sing.

By the time we pull into the parking lot, I'm ready to burst. The only spot Dad can find is the farthest one from the famous geyser. I dive for my gear, but Ethan stretches, moaning in delight, blocking my way. I push past him, only to find my pack is stuck. "Ethan, help me out here."

"In a minute," he says, staring at a man working on a giant antenna in the back of a truck bed.

"I don't have a minute," I force out the words as I struggle to free my pack. I can't risk ripping the strap at the start of what I know will be the most epic adventure of my life.

“Okay.” He turns, unhooking the strap and then looks back suspiciously toward the truck. “Where did *he* go?”

I heft my pack, excitement tingling. “Who cares, Ethan? Let’s go!”

But for Mom and Dad to be ready to leave seems to take an age.

“Come on!” I urge, but the tone of my voice earns me a correction. Finally, I’m set free to explore Yellowstone.

The weather is colder than I had expected, and the mountains still wear a cloak of bright snow on their sides. A cloud overshadows us, and I study the darkening sky. The park stretches for miles in each direction with sites to see including geysers, mudpots, and hot springs, as well as bears, buffalo, and elk. *The place is perfect—rain or shine!*

“The weather report is calling for heavy showers this afternoon, so let’s try to get our first camp set up by then.” Dad points to the Lone Star Geyser Trail, leading us into the hills.

“But, Dad, Old Faithful is right there!” Sadie points dramatically across the vast parking lot at



the wide, steaming plain coated in an odd-looking white crust.

“We just missed an eruption,” Dad says. “The next one could be 120 minutes from now, and it’s getting late.”

I groan, longing to see water shoot 150 feet into the air. “We’ll wait...”

When Dad pins me with a sharp look, I say, “Sorry,” not really meaning it. *I sure wanted to see Old Faithful first.*

“The first rule of backpacking is safety. We’ll have all week to catch Old Faithful in action.”

Ethan struggles to get his backpack on. He circles as he reaches and searches for the drooping strap. Then he trips, and the heavy pack pulls him over. He looks like a turtle on its back. He scrambles, arms and legs flailing, but still misses the dangling strap. I finally grab it, holding it high for him, and in the end, he slips his arm through the shoulder strap.

“Thanks, Isaiah,” Ethan says.

Itching for adventure, I turn, waiting for the others to start down the trail.

“Umm...best cousin in the entire world, could you help me up?”

Shaking my head, I turn back and haul him to his feet. “I’ll remember that ‘best-cousin-in-the-entire-world’ bit,” I say, smiling.

Our feet crunch on the gravelly trail, and soon we come to a stream. “This is Myriad Creek,” Dad says as he sits down to pull off his hiking boots. There’s no bridge, so I do the same as Dad so we can keep our boots dry. Ethan, however, is already in the knee-deep water, stomping around the creek. The water is icy cold, and I suck in a sharp breath as the current tugs at me.

Ethan is eating a power bar by the time the rest of us have our boots back on. He squishes down the trail ahead, his shoes bubbling with every step.

“Look!” Sadie says excitedly. “We are now witnessing our first mudpot. I shall name it *Ethanera Mudpoticus*.”

Ethan dances around as he declares, “I’m finally famous!”

“You know, I read that Yellowstone has over half the world’s geothermal features,” Mom says. I no-

tice her hiking sticks are keeping rhythm with her stride.

“That’s what we planned; but with that sky being so black, I think we should get right to site OA2.” Dad sticks to his decision, and deep down, I know he’s right. We’ve got to respect the environment here. It’s not like our neighborhood in Kentucky. “I’m already regretting setting such a long hike for day one after such a late start,” Dad adds.

“You can’t predict the weather or the traffic jams arranged by bears! Besides, we will have lots of days to see all the geysers in this section of the park,” Mom soothes.

“Exactly how far of a hike are we talking about?” Ethan asks suspiciously.

“Three and a half miles,” Dad says easily.

“Three? I’m not sure I signed up for this!” Ethan wails.

“You didn’t have to,” Sadie responds sweetly. “You’re family, so you don’t have a choice!”

“Aw, thanks. When you put it that way, let’s go!”

A winding dirt trail hedged in by knee-deep grass winds into the distance. Ethan is still in the

lead, and I bunch up close to him, wishing I was first. If I could set the pace, we might have a shot at setting up camp before nightfall.

“Freeze!” He stops so suddenly I crash into his pack.

“Ethan!” I rub my nose, annoyed. But he doesn’t respond as he stares at the path ahead.

“Is it a snake?” Mom’s voice cracks as she says the words.

“No,” Ethan whispers.

I pull down on his arm, which is still spread wide, and peer around him. Then I gasp, frozen just like he is.

“What?” Sadie cries, pushing up under his other arm.

“Oh, my...” she whispers.