

Grace and Grit

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*For the ones who show up,
even when it's hard.
Who carry what they cannot name,
but still keep walking.
Remember,
grace and grit go hand in hand.*

One



The last thing McKenna Carter needed was one of her brother's Rally Point pep talks. Her heart drummed faster whenever he slipped into that circle-the-troops bravado of his. She didn't need more excitement. Or more nervousness. What she needed was a cup of comfort and Nash sitting on go, not drifting into his light-hearted, last-minute habits. After all, she still had to double-check the retreat supplies, run through the itinerary, and—thanks to a last-minute client crisis—pack her gear.

Stepping into Rally Point Roasters with her backpack strapped snugly and a second, brand-new pack looped over her arm, McKenna's shoulders loosened. Blues guitar poured from hidden speakers, each note edged with grit and aching vibrato. When her brother first pitched the concept, she pictured disaster. A coffee roaster that felt like a cabin, a field tent, and a quaint hardware store gave birth to a coffee-loving baby. Surely it was destined to collapse under its quirkiness.

Yet, it worked. Rich cedar beams framed sleek lines. Topographic maps shared wall space with black-and-white deployment photos and framed knots. Mason jar vases stuffed with slender tools and wildflowers stood on each table. Against

her doubts, he'd crafted a grounded breathing space, masculine and soulful, warm and inviting, intimate and secure, yet not steeped in sentimentality.

A shelf beside the door, lined with field guides and survival books, displayed a brass sign. *Leave one, borrow one.* Across from it, a bulletin board overflowed with pinned notices for community hikes, veteran meetups, and wilderness survival courses. Under a flyer for the back-to-school backpack drive, a box sat half-filled with bright, kid-sized backpacks. McKenna slipped the new one from her arm and added it to the pile.

The real treasures on the community board were the handwritten quotes offering pocket-sized wisdom. She set down her backpack, dug out a sticky note, and pinned it in place.

In the midst of difficulty lies opportunity.

—Albert Einstein (or John Wheeler. You decide)

“K.K.” The man behind the counter twirled a bottle of lavender syrup. “What’s doing?”

“Boone Whitaker.” McKenna slung her backpack over her shoulder as she approached the counter. She leaned in, plucking a green fleck from his beard. “Straight off the mountain, huh? You’ve still got moss in there.”

“As the sign says, ‘Brew bold. Return better.’” He chuckled. “Can’t go wrong with a month off-trail, steeping pine needles for tea.”

“And here you are with lavender.” She arched a brow. “Wouldn’t have guessed.”

“You know my coffee rules. If it’s not black, it’s dessert.” A grin broke through his curtain of auburn beard as he slid a cup toward her. “Custom brew. Special for you.”

McKenna cradled the large mug and inhaled. “Lavender. Blackberry.” She took a sip. “Is that rosemary in the background?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you’ve found your calling.” She closed her eyes, the

berry-bright, herbal aroma filling her lungs. “Now, where’s my brother? What are you prepping me for?”

“Who says I’m prepping you for anything, K.K.?”

“Where is he?”

A crash in the kitchen answered for him. Nash limped out on crutches.

“Nash.” Her backpack slid to the floor. “What happened?”

A roll of duct tape dangled from his pinky as his other fingers hooked around the crutch handle. With a tilt of his head, he directed her toward a couch by the wall. She scooped up her pack and followed, coffee in hand. Dropping onto the cushions, she folded one leg beneath her and took a long sip.

“I sprained my ankle.” Nash patted his shin. “Can’t be your survival skills guy for the retreat.”

“Are you okay? How did it happen?”

“Breakfast rush. I took the trash out, and this crazy bird shot out of the dumpster—straight at my face.”

“A bird? In the dumpster?” She set down her cup with a light thud. “Nash, if you didn’t want to go, you should have said so up front. I wouldn’t have been upset.”

“Honestly, K.K. Ask Boone.” Nash raised his hands, palms up.

She faced Boone with a grimace.

“Bird had a wingspan like a fighter jet,” he reported in the same no-nonsense tone he used for wildfire protocol.

“What am I supposed to do now?” She massaged her temple, trying to ease the pressure behind her eyes. *Lord, if You’re still in this, I could use a nudge.* “I’ve already postponed twice. This time, I’ll have to cancel and refund the money.”

“Not gonna happen, lil’ sis.” Nash wagged a finger. “I’ve got a guy.”

Groaning, she pressed her palm to her forehead. “Not *I’ve got a guy.* That never goes well. Never.”

“Come on. You don’t need me out there, K.K. You’ve got instincts, heart, and a better compass than half the guys I served

with. All you need is some duct tape, and you'll be fine." He passed her the roll.

"Hey, now." Boone slapped the counter, but Nash waved him off.

"I've got a backup with a jaw like a hatchet and the emotional range of a pocketknife." Nash smirked. "Should be fun."

She shoved the duct tape back at him. "You're killing me, Nash."

The corners of his eyes crinkled with mischief.

"What?" McKenna tilted her head.

Nash poked her knee. "You put up the Einstein quote today, didn't you?"

"Wheeler." She groaned.

"Eh. Einstein. Wheeler." Nash shrugged, shoving the duct tape toward her. "In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity."

"When do I meet him?"

"He'll be here any minute." He patted her knee. "You're gonna love him. He needs this."

"Needs it? Fantastic." She dragged her palms down her face. "I don't need a survival instructor who's there for a mental health retreat. That's not helpful."

"Not *needs* it." His head rocked side to side. "Just, you know, needs it."

The electronic door chime trilled, and McKenna turned. Her stomach did a little free fall the second her gaze landed on the muscular form coming through the door. Nash's hatchet-jawed backup, no doubt. Only time would tell whether he was good news or bad.

He stepped inside like the trail still clung to him. A sun-faded plaid shirt, sleeves rolled. Well-worn utility shorts, weathered like an old tent. Boots built for miles. Backpack locked and loaded. It didn't give. Neither did his expression. His hair needed a trim or a hand raked through it, or both. Not that she noticed. Had he spent the past month on the mountain with Boone?

She blew out a breath.

“Naturally,” she whispered. “Tall, unreadable, probably allergic to eye contact.”

He scanned the coffeehouse as if memorizing the exits. “Sticks.” His voice carried like tumbling river rocks. He propped himself on the counter, drumming his fingers against the wood. “Where’s Lucky?”

Boone raised a hand, pointing toward the couch with his eyes still on the grinder.

Nash grinned and waved the guy over.

The man nodded at Nash’s crutches. “Your luck finally ran out, huh?”

“McKenna, meet Rough Scott.”

Great. Rough. Not a name that screamed emotionally safe space. She shook his hand, torn between trusting him and issuing him a list of triggers and boundaries.

“Why is it you guys never use your real names?”

Nash smirked. “Real names are for emergencies and official paperwork.”

“And therapy.” Boone wiped the counter without glancing up.

“Five days on the trail with a man who doesn’t even have a real name.” McKenna shook her head. “What could go wrong?”