

How to Survive the Wild

It's not a setback, it's a step in a new direction.

~ Kip Turner ~

“A little-known fact about turtles,” Neal began, pausing to survey the room of fourth graders. Some stared at the ceiling. Others played with threads in the carpet. And a few watched the southern painted turtle on the floor who was lunging at the watermelon he’d placed by her. Not one student appeared interested. Patrick, head librarian and Neal’s boss, stood in the back corner of the room, the expression on his face as bored as the ten-year-olds sprawled out on the floor.

“A little-known fact,” Neal repeated, “is that despite lacking an ear opening, turtles aren’t actually deaf.”

He glanced around the library room again and was met with silence. One kid leaned back, loudly whispering if it was time to go home. The teacher shushed him. The room felt like it was getting smaller, and Neal regretted the cardigan he wore over his long-sleeved shirt, and the pit stains he knew he’d need to pre-treat at the end of the day.

“Can we pet the turtle?” The kid who blurted out the question had one hand raised, his other preoccupied while his finger dug inside his nose. Neal shook his head, suppressing a shudder thinking of that dirty finger on any of his turtles.

“Not today,” he said. “There are so many of you, and only five of them, and I’m afraid it might be overwhelming. But how about another fact?”

The kid dropped his hand and leaned his head back, mouth hanging open. Somewhere in the cross-legged group of kids, someone groaned. Neal was losing them. It was time to bring out the big guns.

“Turtles can breathe out of their nostrils and mouths just like you and me,” he said, then, with a grin, “they also breathe out of their butts.”

“We learned that in *Frozen!*” a girl in the back yelled out.

“Clara!” The teacher rose, but Neal smiled and waved her back down, even as his face flushed.

“Interesting show,” Patrick said as he opened the refrigerator door in the break room, pulling out a bottled water. “Want one?”

Neal shook his head, and Patrick shrugged before taking a swig of his water. “Before you go, can you dust the bookshelves? Don’t forget your nametag, either. I noticed you weren’t wearing it again.”

“It puts holes in my sweater,” Neal said, looking down at the various pin marks littering the upper right chest area of his mustard yellow cardigan. “Can’t we get the magnetic kind?”

“Budget cuts, remember?” Patrick said. “Just put the nametag on so people know you work here instead of as some kind of turtle guy.”

“Turtle *trainer*,” Neal muttered after his boss left the room. He slipped the nametag out of his pocket: *Neal Collins, Facilities Supervisor*. It was a fancy way of saying “custodian.” He tried to pierce the same holes in his cardigan but missed.

As facilities supervisor, Neal oversaw the library’s upkeep. He performed his job with pride, not just because he appreciated cleanliness and order, but because books were his passion. While turtles were his first love, books were a near second. He loved the smell of books, the stories within the pages, the different images of art that graced the covers, the shape of the font,

plus the intriguing author names. A name like Neal Collins didn't turn heads. But names like Paulo Coelho, Barbara Kingsolver, Stephen King... Those were some names!

But his favorite author name of all was Kip Turner. Yes, *that* Kip Turner—the host of TV show *Wild Adventures* who slept a whole night inside the carcass of a dead camel to protect himself from the cold. Neal loved the show, but even more, he loved Kip Turner's book, *How to Survive the Wild*. Neal, who had never left his hometown, would get lost in the stories of Kip Turner's quests, imagining what it would be like to travel the world and experience true adventures. At the beginning of every chapter, Kip Turner would offer a quote that related to the adventure he was going to take. But really, these were quotes about life.

“It's not a setback, it's a step in a new direction,” Neal read now, the book lying open in one hand, his dust rag in the other. This chapter shared about the time Kip Turner slipped down a ravine, headed for impending death before catching himself, only to discover a cave carved into the cliff. Neal read this story at least a dozen times already, and he would have read it again if he hadn't heard Patrick clearing his throat nearby. Neal shoved the book back in place, looking around as he applied his rag to the shelf.

“Who's buying rounds tonight?” Patrick asked, unseen by Neal on the other side of the row he was dusting.

“I did it last time, and Shane did it the time before. I think it's your turn,” Mary Ellen said. “Should we invite Neal? I mean, he saved us with that last minute class visit.”

“Neal? I don't even think he knows what beer is.” Patrick laughed at his own joke. “Besides, he bored those kids to death. Think our night will be any different if he tags along?”

Neal rested his hand on the shelf, his ears growing hot. He didn't want to eavesdrop, but he also didn't know how to leave without giving away his position.

“I just feel bad. We go out every week, and he's never included.”

“And let's keep it that way,” Patrick said.

“That's harsh.”

Neal held his breath as Patrick let his out in a loud sigh.

“Look I'm not trying to be cruel. Neal does a great job, but he's just so awkward. He's always talking about turtles or saying strange things about Mick Turner.”

“Kip Turner.”

“Whatever. And his hair, have you seen how greasy it is?”

Neal combed his fingers through his hair, noting the slick feel near his roots. He didn't want to hear anymore. Taking a deep breath, he tried to muster the courage to leave his spot, hoping they wouldn't notice.

“It's not a setback, it's a step in a new direction,” he whispered, wishing he were discovering a cave in a ravine instead of trying to escape his discomfort.

“Hey, can I get a little help here?”

Neal startled at the interruption, turning his head as he searched for the source of the voice.

“Down here,” the voice directed. Neal looked to the carpet, then yelped at the face staring back at him from a crudely cut hole in the floor, hidden partially by the bookshelf. But it wasn't just any face...

“Kip Turner?” Neal peered closer, his eyes widening as he recognized his hero’s grin through a layer of dirt and grime.

“You know me,” Kip said, as if no one would recognize his signature ruggedness and uniquely crooked nose – the result of a tussle in the outback with a territorial kangaroo. “And you are?”

“Neal. Neal Collins.” He leaned forward to extend his hand, but then drew it back as he realized the hole was too small for anything other than Kip’s face.

“Nice to meet you, Neal” Kip said. “I could really use some assistance. Would you be able to help me?”

“Anything,” Neal promised. “What do you need?”

Between his grunts as he’d heaved the bookshelf away from the hole and the effort it took to make the gap in the floor larger, it was a wonder no one had heard them, including his boss and colleagues in the next aisle over. But there he was now, running beside Kip in a darkened underpass under the library, the only light from Kip’s bouncing headlamp. And the noise? Deafening. While the air in the tunnel was still, a roaring sound thundered outside the walls as they continued to run toward seemingly nothing.

“Where are we going? Unh!” Neal hit solid wall and was thrown back.

“Sorry, chap. Here.” Kip extended a hand and pulled Neal to his feet. Then he ran his hands over the wall surface, pausing when his fingers found what he was looking for. He began digging until a beam of natural light cut through the darkness.

“Ah, there’s the door,” the adventurer said with a laugh. “Brace yourself.”

Kip pulled the mysterious door and brilliant light poured in, temporarily blinding Neal. But it was nothing compared to the cold. In his thin cardigan, Neal quaked at the icy blast of air, leaning forward as it threatened to blow him all the way back to the library.

The library. When he’d woken this morning, it was a beautiful spring day. But this? It was the damn Arctic! It didn’t even snow in Neal’s town, but as his eyes adjusted to the scene outside the tunnel, he was met by miles of gleaming white ice under an angry grey sky and wind flurries that stirred up small cyclones of frozen vapor. By Neal’s estimate, they’d run about a mile through that tunnel. Yet, it appeared they were thousands of miles from his hometown.

Before Neal could attempt to work out the logistics, Kip thrust a duffel bag at him.

“You’re going to need warmer clothes,” Kip instructed, nodding at the bag. Neal unzipped it, finding a jacket and snow pants, gloves, and sturdy hiking boots, which he rushed to put on.

Despite the protective layers, Neal was not prepared for how cold it was. He peered through frozen eyelashes, exhaling cloudy tufts as they trudged through the snow. Even Kip’s breathing was labored. Neither of them spoke, saving their efforts for each arduous step.

“We’re here,” Kip wheezed after a while, dropping to his knees as he pulled a rope from his pack. He tied it around his waist, then handed the other end to Neal. “Hold on to this, and don’t lose it,” he instructed. “When I say so, pull with everything you have.” With that, Kip began digging into the snow, eventually disappearing as he funneled deeper into the cavern he created.

Neal hung limply to the rope, unsure what his role was supposed to be. Just stand there and wait? He was about to ask when a sudden movement to his right caught his attention. He

turned to see a white polar bear, barely visible against the blinding terrain, barreling toward him at top speed.

“Kip!”

“Almost there,” Kip called, his voice muffled within the icy chamber.

“Kip, we have a problem!”

The bear growled as it got closer, its throaty roar reverberating across the snow.

“Kip!” Neal’s heart thundered as the bear snarled and snuffed, its paws a blur in its approach.

“Now!”

Neal mustered every ounce of strength within his wiry body, gritting his teeth as he propelled his full weight forward, muscles straining as he gripped the rope. Behind him, he could hear a different kind of growl, mechanical in its howl, followed by a slight give in his efforts. Neal took a step forward, still pulling. Then another.

The bear leapt across a chasm in the ice, skidding a few dozen yards away. It was only a matter of seconds before he’d reach Neal and tear him to shreds, but Neal didn’t give up. Not until he heard the whirring sound of a machine in the open air. Neal fell forward as Kip slid beside him on a snowmobile, the rope now tied to the bumper. In one swift movement, Kip pulled Neal behind him, inches away from the polar bear’s extended claws as they made their escape.

“Thanks, Neal,” Kip yelled over the rushing wind as they raced across the snow.

“All I did was hold a rope.” Neal clung to Kip’s jacket as they hit a bank in the snow, catching air before returning to the icy surface.

“I couldn’t risk digging the snowmobile out by myself, or I’d be buried alive. You saved my life.”

“I guess.”

The snowmobile slowed to a stop, and Kip turned so he could face Neal.

“What you did out there was courageous,” he said. “You braved extreme elements and faced down a polar bear, never wavering in the face of death. How many people would do that for a perfect stranger?”

Neal scrunched his nose, recalling the people in his life. Would Patrick? Probably not.

“But you’re Kip Turner,” Neal argued. “You’re not a stranger, you’re—”

He never got to finish the sentence. A sudden crack in the icy surface shook Neal from the snowmobile. When he looked up, the crack was now a wide ravine, separating him from Kip and the motor sled on the other side.

“You’ll have to get back on your own,” Kip called across the gorge.

“But how? Where?”

“That way,” Kip shouted, pointing beyond Neal. “You’re almost there, you got this!”

Neal looked over his shoulder. All he saw was a wall of white, the wind picking up the snow around him so that he was almost blind. When he looked back toward Kip, the same snowy fog hid the adventurer from sight.

“It’s not a setback,” Neal murmured, turning to where Kip had indicated. “It’s a step in a new direction.” Doubt covered him like a blanket of snow, but he kept trudging on. Even when he couldn’t see his own hand in front of him, he stayed the course. The wind whipped at him,

stinging his frostbitten cheeks. His eyes struggled to stay open, his lashes so heavy with ice he eventually left them closed. “It’s not a setback…” he repeated.

“Neal?”

Neal opened his eyes. The snow was gone. The ice, the stinging wind, the debilitating ache in his bones – all gone. And in front of him stood his boss, staring at him with an embarrassed expression.

“Uh, did you hear anything we said?” Patrick asked.

Neal looked at the carpet, searching for the hole in the floor that opened to an underground tunnel to the arctic. Instead of Kip’s tunnel, Neal found *How to Survive the Wild* lying face down. Snippets of Patrick’s words came back to him as he picked up the book. *So awkward. Always talking about turtles. Greasy Hair.* Neal turned the book over, his eyes focusing on one meaningful sentence.

“It’s not a setback, it’s a step in a new direction,” he whispered.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing.” Neal retrieved his dust rag from the bookshelf and moved around Patrick.

“Look, a bunch of us are going out tonight for drinks.” Patrick rubbed at the back of his neck, avoiding Neal’s gaze. “Did you want to join us? My treat.”

Neal glanced at him, mulling it over. If he went, would his boss like him more? Probably not. After all, Neal could only be himself. But even if Patrick wasn’t a fan, it didn’t mean he needed to change.

“Maybe next time,” he said. “The turtles and I are having an adventure.”

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“How to Survive the Wild”
by Crissi Langwell

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