

Never Too Young – A Vignette

“Why are you two going on this little jaunt?” Oliver, 17, asked Shayla and Slim, both 16.

“Not really any of your business, now is it?” replied Slim. He bit off a tiny piece of one of the Slim Jim snack sticks he never seemed to be without, tucked the wrapper around the end and slipped it back into one of the pockets of his brown leather jacket.

“Don’t mind him, Oliver,” said Shayla. “We both are thinking about going to the college, too, when we graduate. Miss Blake said we could both go this year.” Her head lifted and she turned her nose up slightly as she looked at Slim. “Though I don’t know why he plans to go. He’ll never get in.”

Slim was used to Shayla’s attitude toward him, but it still stung when she, or one of her friends, denigrated his intelligence. But he shrugged it off as he always did, and to Oliver, he said, “Turn about being fair play, why are you joining us on this trip? You’ve already got your spot set in Annapolis, hot shot. You’re grandfather made sure of that.”

“I’m going because Louise asked me. And watch your mouth, tough guy, before I pound you.”

“Any time, dude. Any time you want.” Despite Oliver standing tall and doing a bit of posturing, Slim continued to lean with his hip against the walkway railing. His eyes met Oliver’s coolly, which seemed to make Oliver more angry than he already was.

“I am going to pound you!”

Shayla looked on eagerly, but before Oliver made a move the school bus drove up. “Aw, man! It’s Cavanaugh!” Oliver looked really disgusted now.

The other two groaned. Jack Cavanaugh was the least liked bus driver in the school system. He treated the kids like prisoners on his bus. Since they’d been going to the new DeSoto High School, they’d not been exposed to his authoritarian supervision. He drove for the middle school.

“Must be the only driver willing to take us,” Slim said. “But there’s Miss Baker. Maybe she’ll keep him in line.”

“You wish,” Shayla said. “He hates you.”

“Because I would stand up to him. I don’t like being pushed around.”

“You’re just mean.”

“Think what you want, Shayla.”

“You too should kiss and make up,” Oliver said with a laugh and then made kissing noises.

“Stick it, Oliver,” was Slim’s only response. He walked over to where Olivia Baker was parking in the teacher’s lot, near the school bus. Two other vehicles drove up and parked nearby.

Out of the lime green New Bug hopped Louise Sinclair. She waved at Miss Baker and ran to Oliver. He grabbed her and gave her a kiss. She danced away when he wanted to continue.

From the other vehicle, an old, highly modified 1967 Chevy pickup truck, came Shane Davies. He joined the others as they walked over to where Miss Baker stood by the open bus door.

In the next few minutes a dozen other students showed up, most being dropped off by a parent.

The last of the group going on the trip showed up the way he almost always came to school. On his mountain bike. Rain or shine, even snow, and Dwayne Buscombe showed up on his bike. Only in the very worst weather did he opt for alternate transportation. A hand-built, by Dwayne, small electric four-wheel drive car, truck, van combo.

Dwayne parked at the nearest solid post he could lock up the bike and got off it. He moved his backpack from the rear carrier on the bicycle and shrugged into the harness. After he locked the bike to the pole, he walked over to the others, exchanging hellos.

“Hello, Geek,” Oliver greeted Dwayne. Miss Baker cut Oliver a look and he fell silent. Oliver and Dwayne didn’t like one another. No one but them knew why.

“That’s ‘Mister Geek’ to you, Dwayne whispered back.

Slim leaned between them from behind and said, “You’re not a Geek, Dwayne. You’re a nerd. Neo-Nerd, actually.”

“What are you talking about?” Oliver asked, totally confused.

Dwayne laughed. “I like it, Slim Jim. Neo Nerd.”

Olivia spoke up as the teens made a sort of a line, Shayla in front. “Okay, ladies and gentlemen, permission slips.”

Shayla handed hers to Miss Baker, and then, with a glance at Slim, leaned over and whispered, “Slim forged his, Miss Baker. I saw him do it in study hall yesterday. I thought you should know.”

“Thank you, Shayla. You go ahead and board the bus and let me worry about the others.”

“Yes, Miss Baker,” Shayla replied cheerily, her duty, as she saw it, done.

Slim hung back, as he usually did, and was the last of the students to board the bus. He handed Miss Baker his slip and watched her carefully. She looked at the slip, lifted her eyes to meet his gaze. “You do good work. We’ll discuss this later. Get on the bus.”

“Yes, Miss Baker. Thank you.”

Olivia followed Slim onto the bus and stood in the front, facing the students as they settled into their seats. “Settle down. It’s a long drive. I expect appropriate behavior from those of your age, particularly considering you are going to a college that may or might not let you attend, based partly on your actions today. Understood?”

There were plenty of “Yes, Miss Bakers,” as well as a few catcalls. She ignored them, noting that Slim, whom she’d been warned by several teachers could be a handful, was one of the ‘Yes, Miss Bakers’ and not one of the other group. She turned around and sat down in the seat across the aisle from the seat behind the driver.

“Time to go, Mr. Cavanaugh.”

“Uh-huh. Don’t need a time keeper. Got a watch right here on my wrist.” Jack put the bus in gear and headed for the county road half a mile down the high school driveway.

Olivia’s lips were a hard line when Jack spoke to her. She’d been warned about him, too. She opened her Day Timer and made a note to speak to Slim about his forged permission slip. From his reputation, he could have done it just on a whim. Olivia wondered if perhaps there was more to it.

She had checked his grades when he signed up to go on the trip and found, that while not a straight A student, he could be. He often had his grade reduced due to attitude. Things began to quiet down and Olivia took a look down the bus.

Naturally, Oliver was sitting with Louise. She’d almost refused him permission to go on the trip, since he wasn’t going to be going to the college, but Louise talked her into letting him go. Olivia would need to keep an eye on them.

Dwayne was sitting behind the love birds, already using his e-book reader for no telling what book. He consumed books the way most of his classmate consumed water. Sitting beside him, reading a regular book, was Shane Davies. Olivia had been told she could count on the two of them to help keep things on an even keel. They were a stabilizing influence on the others.

Shayla was the middle of attention of the female occupants of the five seats around and adjacent to her. Olivia shook her head. Shayla was something else. Always ready to lend a hand, or tattle on someone, the way she had with Slim. Decent grades, and always the center of attention, when she could arrange it.

And Slim, as expected, was sitting alone on one of the rear seats, no one within three seats of him. He was sitting on the seat sideways, a Slim Jim in his mouth like a cigar, looking out the back window from time to time. The rest of the time he was reading a paperback book he’d taken from his leather jacket pocket.

The other students were grouped two or three together, taking up most of the rest of the seats. There was nothing outstanding about any of them. Just good students hoping to get into a decent collage.

Olivia turned around and took a book out of her own backpack and began to read a psychology text.

An hour into the trip, and half a dozen students were asking for a bathroom stop. Olivia leaned forward and said to Jack, "Find a good place to stop."

"Let them wait till the lunch break," Jack growled in return.

"Find a spot now, Mr. Cavanaugh. No arguments."

Jack said something under his breath that Olivia heard, but chose to ignore. He pulled off the next exit from the Interstate and parked at a fast food franchise. Everyone got off the bus, including Jack. He didn't go into the restaurant, but stepped to the other side of the bus and lit up a cigarette.

Again Olivia chose to ignore his actions. Smoking was prohibited on these trips, even outside the bus.

Though only mid-morning, several of the students got something to eat and/or drink. As they began to board the bus, Jack growled out, "You know the rules. You spill it, you clean it. I'm not picking up after a bunch of slobs."

A sharp glance from Olivia halted the catcalls and the group settled down again as Jack drove the bus out of the parking lot. Another two hours, an hour from the college, he was pulling into another parking lot, this time for the lunch break.

Several of the students had brought lunches, but most went into the burger joint and came out carrying eat-in trays to sit in the outside dining area. Olivia got a lunch salad and sat down by herself. In moments Shayla and three of her friends joined her, without asking. They asked question after question that were better asked at the college when they got there, but Olivia did her best to answer those she could.

He eyes cut to one of the tables that was in full sunlight. Dwayne and Shane were sharing the table, with Slim leaning against the railing around the outside dining area nearby. All three were eating food they'd brought with them. In Slim's case, another Slim Jim. She was a bit surprised that when Dwayne offered Slim a half sandwich and an apple, that Slim took them without an argument.

It was the same when Shane handed Slim what looked like homemade trail mix in a zip-lock bag. Slim ate the half sandwich, but put the apple and the trail mix away in his jacket.

Olivia let the students continue for a few more minutes after Jack tried to get them to dump what was left of their lunches and get back on the bus. His attitude was really grating on Olivia's nerves. But she didn't let the situation last for long and finally called for the group to get back on the bus.

A few hastily downed the rest of their lunch, having spent more time talking than eating, before going to the bus. Olivia expected Slim to be the last one to board, and he was. There was some regrouping in the seating arrangements, but not much.

A few minutes back on the road and she was almost ready to say something to Oliver about his attentions to Louise, but Olivia was pleased to note that Louise put a stop to it before Olivia had to intervene.

She suddenly noticed that Slim was relaxing a bit now, too. He'd been cutting looks at the couple since they'd sat down. "Hum..." she said softly. There were undercurrents in the interactions of the students she didn't get to see very often.

Another hour and they were at the college, being met by three of the college new student counselors. With admonishments to be back to the bus by six that evening, Olivia headed for the admissions office with the paperwork for each of the applicants that had come to see the college.

Most of the group had returned well before six. But it was now six o five and Slim wasn't anywhere in sight. Olivia was beginning to regret allowing him to come along, considering his reputation and the fact that he'd forged the permission slip.

Jack was lambasting her about getting on the road, minus one trouble maker all the better.

But she sighed in relief when she saw Slim running toward the bus. Jack urged her to get on the bus before Slim got there so they could leave without him, but Olivia just gave Jack a hard look and waited at the open door of the bus.

"Sorry," was all Slim said. But he handed her a manila envelope before he went up the steps into the bus.

"Always making trouble, boy," Jack told him. "Be better if you'd been drowned at birth."

"That's enough, Mr. Cavanaugh! You just tend to the driving and let me deal with discipline."

Slim was about to take his accustomed place at the rear of the bus, but Olivia, looking sternly at him, said, "Up here, Chester. You'll ride right here behind me."

Olivia regretted her use of Slim's given name. There was an outpouring of catcalls, the loudest from Oliver and Shayla. It was easier for Olivia to note who hadn't joined in, than it was to try and remember who had.

Stony faced, Slim came up the aisle and slid into the seat behind Olivia's. "You'll be reporting for detention every day next week, Chester," Olivia said, her voice low. "You shouldn't have made the rest of us wait for you like that. That is inconsiderate and rude, and a personal affront to me."

"Yes, Miss Baker." Slim hunched deeper into his coat, leaned against the side of the bus, and stared out the window.

It was several minutes later that Olivia remembered the envelope Slim had handed to her before boarding the bus. She undid the clasp and took out several sheets of paper. She began to

read, and already feeling bad about calling Slim Chester, felt even worse when she concluded reading the contents of the envelope.

She turned in her seat and looked at Slim's face. He continued to look out the window. Quietly she asked, "Why didn't you tell me you were delayed by the counselor?"

Slim looked at her, but only shrugged and turned back to the window.

"Well, you won't need to do the detention..." Olivia was saying, but Slim cut her off.

"Have to, now. Got a rep to maintain, you know." Slim was looking at her evenly now. "And I'd rather no one knows about what's in that envelope."

"You mean other than your father. He has to agree to this accelerated college prep curriculum."

"Not a problem. I'll have him do a permission slip this weekend when he gets in from the road." Slim suddenly winced, realizing his mistake.

"Are you saying your father is away from home? Isn't he a single parent?"

"No big deal. He's a truck driver. I'm doing okay taking care of myself when he's gone."

"You know I can't let this go, Slim," Olivia said, her voice dropping any lower. "You're barely sixteen. You need a supervised home life."

"I'm doing okay."

"Well... This is neither the time nor place to discuss this. I expect you in my office during your study hall period on Monday. And in the meantime... Well... I won't turn it over to the juvenal authorities until I speak with your father, but I expect him to be there, too."

"Yes, Miss Blake." Slim turned to look out the window again.

They stopped shortly afterward at a chain steak house for dinner. While lunch had been the students' responsibility, their dinner was being paid for by the scholarship committee. Within reason, Olivia pointed out. Over a certain limit and the student had to pay the balance.

They took a full hour, although almost everyone was finished by then. It was Jack Cavanaugh that insisted on his full one-hour break for dinner. Olivia settled up the check and went back to the bus. Dwayne, Shane, and Slim were already aboard, at the back of the bus. To her surprise, they were discussing the current world situation.

She tried to tune them out and read. Though the conversation was low, Olivia picked up much of it. It seemed that all three had some doubts about ever making it to the college they'd just visited. Not because of grades or finances, but due to a major breakdown in society. Olivia couldn't stand to hear them talk about perhaps not having a future. She got up and walked to the back of the bus.

“I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation,” she said. “It is sad to think you think you won’t have a future in this world. I know things look uncertain, but I’m sure things will turn out much better than you three seem to think.”

“Actually,” Dwayne said, “The discussion was less about not having a future, as to the future we all think is likely. It just very well might not include finishing college.”

“He’s right, Miss Blake,” Shane said. “Times are going to be bad, but there are ways to deal with the situation.”

“Just have to be tough and look at things realistically,” Slim added.

“Being tough isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” Olivia said. She was leaning against one of the seats.

“Sure, it has its disadvantages,” Slim said, surprising Olivia once again. “But it can be very helpful in dealing with certain situations.”

“Okay. I’ll give you that one. But to lead a life built on that isn’t realistic.”

“Neither is the assumption that the government will always be there to bail out someone that made a bad decision on how much mortgage they could afford.” That came from Dwayne.

Shane added to the idea. “Or that the FDIC will give you your money in a reasonable timeframe, that they’ve guaranteed to protect if a bank fails.”

“You don’t trust the government?” Olivia asked.

“Do you?” Slim asked back. “About everything?”

It shook Olivia a bit to have to admit it. “Well. Perhaps not about everything. But I have faith in our government.”

The three young men looked at one another. “I’d rather have faith in myself than in the government,” Slim said. The others nodded their agreement.

Before Olivia could come up with an answer to that, the other students began to board the bus and she went back forward to do the head count to make sure no one got left behind. No word was said about Slim staying in one of the back seats of the bus as Dwayne and Shane found seats a bit further forward.

Olivia was thinking about how she should handle the three boys’ beliefs as a counselor. She’d have to read up on it. But it was too dark to read, except for Dwayne’s e-book reader, which had a back light feature. “How does he keep batteries in that thing?” Olivia wondered just before she dozed off. The warmth of the bus, the way Jack was setting the heater controls, and the nice meal she’d had, lulled her to sleep.

She woke up when the Jack took the exit off the interstate and headed through the city to get to the high school on the far side town, in the as yet undeveloped area of the city. The city was growing, and the new high school had been built with that in mind three years previously.

The others in the bus were waking up and stretching, hiding yawns behind hands. Even Dwayne had given up reading and fallen asleep sometime during the ride, Olivia noticed. She got her things ready and was the first off the bus when it stopped in the same parking spot from which they had left.

There were several cars waiting, with a parent inside, to pick up those that had been dropped off. Those that had transportation at the school were slower to head for it, still shaking the sleep out of their eyes, before they got behind the wheel. Or in the case of Dwayne, handlebars. The thought of him riding all the way back home that late of night bothered her. So did the thought of how Slim was getting home. She didn't know how he'd arrived at the school that morning.

Olivia was about to ask Shane if he could drop Slim off when the parking lot suddenly was visible in a light brighter than the sun. She whirled around when she heard Jack Cavanaugh scream. He was facing toward the source of the fading light, his hands over his eyes.

She started toward him, but she fell to the ground, half covered by whoever had tackled her.

“Down! Stay down!” It was Slim.

Dwayne and Shane, both on their knees, were also yelling for the others to get down. Olivia felt the weight leave her body and looked around, staying on the ground. Slim was running toward Shayla.

“Down, Shayla! Get down!”

Shayla, Olivia saw, was staring at the glowing, growing mushroom cloud, her mouth open, frozen in place. That is, until Slim got to her. She screamed when he grabbed her and tried to get her to lie down on the pavement.

Olivia saw Slim sucker punch the girl, and guide her down to the pavement gently, then cover her body with his, the way he had with her. A glance to the right and Olivia saw Oliver and Louise both kneeling down first, and then lying down on the grass.

The ground moved beneath her, similar to earthquakes she'd experienced. She started to get up, as did Oliver and Louise. Shayla was now screaming for Slim to get off her back. Slim continued to hold her down and Dwayne and Shane remained flat and yelled at Oliver and Louise to do the same. When the two covered their heads, Olivia did the same thing.

She was glad she did when the blast wave hit her. It shoved her down the pavement a full forty feet, before it flipped her and she started to roll. She heard more screams, and finally realized one of them was her own voice. The pressure wave stopped and reversed, sliding her a few feet back the way she'd come from. She stopped screaming and tried to get up.

Her ears were only one of the parts of her body that were hurting. She felt like she'd been pummeled by a prize fighter. It was a struggle, and she made sure to check for what Dwayne, Shane, and Slim were doing. They'd known what to do initially. They were getting up, too, checking themselves and then each other for injuries.

Slim tried to help Shayla up, but she slapped his hand away, crying, and tried to get up on her own. But all she could do was roll over and sit up.

Olivia looked at Oliver and Louise. They too, had been scooted some distance and their clothes looked a bit the worse for wear. She looked down at herself and decided she did, too. Then her attention was drawn to Jack Cavanaugh. Slim, Dwayne, and Shane were approaching him from different directions. Olivia went over to join them.

All three of the boys stopped a few feet away from Jack and turned around. Olivia saw the disturbed looks on their faces, and then knew she had one herself. Jack Cavanaugh was dead. There was no doubt about it. He'd still been standing when the blast wave arrived and it had thrown him further even than it had Olivia. He'd landed badly and his head was down on his shoulder, his ruined eyes open. His neck was broken.

"We need to get inside," Slim said, rather calmly, Olivia thought.

"No," Olivia said. "I need to get you each to your homes. I'll drive those of you that don't have vehicles..."

"We're better off here," Slim said.

"What do you know, punk?" Oliver asked. He was massaging his right elbow with his left hand. He'd knocked it against the pavement during his and Louise's slide across the pavement. "I'm taking Louise home and then going home myself. My father..."

"Is probably dead," Dwayne said, just as calm as Slim.

"Don't say that!" screamed Oliver. He threw an awkward punch at Dwayne, but missed, his coordination still off from the pain.

"Knock it off, you two," Olivia said. She was amazed at how calm she sounded. Having Slim, Dwayne, Shane, and Louise staying calm helped her stay calm. But it was difficult with Oliver's antics and Shayla's continued sobbing and lamenting in a wordless fashion as she rocked back and forth on the pavement.

"Dwayne is right, Miss Blake," Slim said. "They live on the far side of the city, closest of any of us to the air base. They would have had it much worse than we did here. Even if some of our families survived, we have to take shelter. We can't go looking now. I know there is good shelter in the school. There isn't any other good fallout shelter nearby."

"I second that, Miss Blake," Shane said. "Because of the tornado a few years ago, this new school was built with both tornado and earthquake resistance in mind."

“The lowest level, where most of the mechanics for the building are will be good shelter.” This from Dwayne.

“How do you know? How could you know any of that?” demanded Oliver.

“A little research and reading, outside the politically correct stuff they feed us in school.” Slim’s voice was rising. “I’ve tried to help. You don’t want to be helped, fine with me. I’m going inside. The rest of you can do what you want.”

“You can’t get in, smart guy! The doors are kept locked, you idiot!” Oliver was yelling at the top of his voice.

Before Olivia could chastise Oliver for the unacceptable language, or Slim could do anything, Louise spoke up. “Guys, what about me and my family. We’re close to Oliver...”

There were tears in her eyes. Shane, Dwayne, and Slim, who had stopped, ready to pound Oliver for his remarks, shook their heads. Rather gently, Olivia thought, Slim said, “There’s always a chance. Just like with Oliver’s family. I, for one, will go with you to check on them. But after the fallout fades away. We’re north of the base, so we won’t get as much as those east and southeast of the city, but we will get some.”

Slim pointed up at the broadening mushroom cloud. It was getting bigger, growing over their heads, even as the internal light of it dimmed. “We’ll have fallout in just a few minutes, if not sooner.”

Louise straightened up slightly from the protected hunched over stance she’d been in. “I’m staying here.” She turned to look at Oliver. “Do what you want. I think you should stay here, too. We’ll all go looking for our families. After. Okay?”

It was obvious Oliver wanted to go immediately, and while he didn’t particularly like Shane either, opposed to his active dislike of Dwayne and Slim, he trusted him. “Okay. But as soon as we can, we go look for my family first.”

There was going to be an argument, Olivia was sure, but Slim, instead of saying anything, headed for Shayla. It sparked the others to move, too. Shayla shied away from Slim’s helping hand, but Dwayne and Shane were able to get her to stand up and walk toward the school with them, still crying and not making any sense in her rambling chatter.

“I can get in,” Slim said, looking over at Olivia. “But it’d be easier if you used your card key. The locks are on batteries, so the key should work.”

Olivia really wanted to know how Slim thought he could get in. The school security was state of the art for high schools. But now wasn’t the time. She swiped her key and sure enough, the door unlocked. She ushered the others in, except for Slim.

Slim said, “You guys first. Follow Shane. He’s headed for the mechanicals room.”

“What about you?” Olivia asked.

“Food and water.”

“I’m with you,” Dwayne said.

“But...” was the only objection Olivia got out. The two teens took off running, their backpacks bouncing on their backs. She turned around and saw the others waiting, Shane in the lead. She headed that way and Shane took off at a slow trot down the hall. Olivia was glad Shane was leading the way. She would have been lost in moments.

Oh, she knew the public areas of the school, but not the nooks and crannies that a multi-story building, built into a hill to ‘green’ standards, had in several places. So she just followed the others. Shayla was in front of her, and Olivia had to encourage the girl to hurry. Olivia was getting worried about Shayla. She was showing all the symptoms of both physical and psychological shock.

Shane held a door open finally, and ushered the others inside a room with equipment and pipes seemingly everywhere. “There are some things I want to go get,” he said as Olivia went inside.

“What? And how do we still have lights?”

“That’s the emergency lights for evacuation. They won’t last long. Find some good spots to bed down. I’ll be back as quick as I can.” With that, Shane ran off the way he’d come.

Olivia shook her head and joined Oliver, Louise, and Shayla. Louise was holding Shayla to her, patting her back, trying to reassure her, despite her own fears.

Oliver was pacing back and forth, punching the wall or a piece of equipment every time he came close to one.

“Oliver, stop that, please. Look around for good places for us to sit down. And sleep.”

Oliver hesitated, but did as Olivia asked. She was doing the same thing, leaving Louise to deal with Shayla for a few more minutes. She wasn’t sure how much time passed, but Shane, Dwayne, and Slim came in, their arms and backpacks filled to capacity with Olivia knew not what, other than the water bottles she saw.

Before she could ask what they had, they dumped everything, and ran back out, with now empty backpacks. Olivia wanted to go through the things, being a very organizing type person. But Shayla took precedence. She was sobbing even louder than before, and getting rather physical, trying to pound Louise on the chest with her fists, even as Louise continued to try to comfort her.

“Shayla! Shayla!” Olivia said, going over to the two girls and putting her hand on Shayla’s shoulder. “Come with me! We need you to calm down.” It was something of a struggle, but Shayla finally edged away from Louise, with Olivia guiding her to a small, quiet place in amongst some of the machinery. There was a large pipe the right height for sitting and Olivia guided Shayla to it and sat down beside her.

Shayla buried her face in Olivia's shoulder and continued to cry, but at a marginally lessened volume. Using as much motherly instincts that she didn't know she had, than her psychological training, Olivia talked quietly to the girl, gradually getting her calmed down. Finally, Shayla stopped crying and suddenly dug into her bright pink backpack. She pulled out a bottle of water and took a sip.

"That's good," Olivia said. "Can you sit here for a few moments and sip your water while I go check on the others?"

Shayla nodded and Olivia hurried out of the cubbyhole and headed for the door to the large room. She found Oliver standing nose to nose with Dwayne. Louise was urging Oliver to calm down and back up. Rather to her surprise, Shane, and even Slim, was urging Dwayne to do the same thing. She'd half expected that Slim would be egging the confrontation on, but he wasn't.

"What's going on?" Olivia asked.

They all turned to her and Oliver shouted out, "I'm trying to divvy everything out, but Dwayne here objects to a fair share for some of us."

"Dwayne?" Olivia asked.

Dwayne backed up a step, and then another. He looked at Olivia. "He thinks because he slightly larger build than the rest of us he should get a double share. When we're working, a little extra is justified. But not double, and not now."

"That sounds logical, Oliver," Olivia said quietly. "It's something we can discuss in the next few days."

Oliver frowned, and started to object, but Louise shushed him and pulled him away from the others to talk quietly to him.

Looking back at the other three, Olivia said, "Thank you for bringing down this food and water. And what ever else that is you've brought. How long will we need to stay down here? Do you have any idea?"

Dwayne held up a piece of electronic equipment. "Stopped in the Science lab. Geiger counter. We'll be able to track the radiation and determine when we can get out of here."

"You know how to use it?" Olivia asked.

Dwayne, Shane, and Slim all nodded. "Very well," Olivia said. "You three are in charge of keeping the rest of us informed of when we can leave."

Shayla came out of the cubby hole Olivia had left her in and went over to Olivia. She whispered in Olivia's ear, "I have to go to the bathroom. Bad..."

"Uh, gentleman," Olivia said, turning to the three boys again. "Sanitation?"

“I think, for this first run, we can use the closest bathrooms,” Shane said. He looked at the other two and they nodded.

Slim asked, “Bucket toilets?”

Dwayne and Shane nodded, and Dwayne said, “We’ll get what’s needed for bucket toilets to use down here in the future, if you’ll get the others to the bathrooms and back.”

Olivia nodded. “Are you sure it’s safe for you?”

Again the three exchanged glances. “Safe enough,” Slim said. “And bring back all the toilet paper you can find in the bathrooms.” The three turned as one and left the room at a trot.

Olivia turned too, and called to Louise and Oliver to join her and Shayla. “We’re going to make a bathroom run. Dwayne and the others say it’s safe for the moment. But we need to hurry. They’re making arrangements for sanitation here for the future.”

Oliver looked as sour as Shayla at the news. Louise just looked intrigued. “Let’s go. And stay together and note the way. I don’t want us to get lost going there and back.”

Olivia and her group were back long before Shane, Dwayne, and Slim. Olivia was beginning to get concerned. Not for the same reason Oliver was. He was saying the three had taken off without them. Olivia was more concerned about them dying from radiation. She wanted as detailed of an explanation the three could give to her about radiation sickness as soon as they got back.

After another five minutes of worry, the door into the room opened and the three boys entered, carrying and dragging a tremendous amount of gear. “Found some other stuff, too,” Slim said.

Before she could speak, Dwayne and Slim ran back out. Dwayne still had the Geiger counter. Olivia could only watch, somewhat in awe, as Shane used some of the materials and tools they’d brought in to make two bucket toilets, with seats taken from one of the bathrooms, the buckets from the school kitchen.

When he was finished he looked around at the door and frowned. “I’m going to go see what’s taking them so long.”

“No,” Olivia insisted. “I don’t want any more risks taken.”

“But...”

“No,” Olivia said.

Shane obviously didn’t like it, but he was used to conforming to authority. For the most part.

Both Shane and Olivia breathed sighs of relief when the Dwayne and Slim came back into the room, each one carrying two buckets overflowing with something that Olivia wasn't sure of.

"Mulch, from around the landscaping," explained Slim, seeing Olivia's confusion. "For the bucket toilets.

"We got a couple of holes dug close by the building to dump the toilets in when they get full," Dwayne said, explaining the length of time it took them to get back. "We may have to dump before the radiation is down."

"Oh, no. No one goes out until the radiation is safe," Olivia said.

"That's a relative term," Dwayne said. At Olivia's encouragement, Dwayne, Shane, and Slim told Olivia and Louise, who had walked over, what they knew about fallout and radiation. A few minutes later and Olivia and Louise both looked somewhat relieved.

"So, we can live with some exposure, if it is limited and spread out over time?" Olivia asked.

"That about sums it up," Slim said. "You don't want any more than absolutely necessary, but some exposures are worth the risks."

"Speaking of which," Dwayne said, "The fallout has started. The radiation level is still low, so we need to go get a few more things we thought of on our last trip, but couldn't get."

"From what you said, we need to spread out the exposures to radiation," Louise said. "I'm going with you. It'll be faster."

All three of the boys protested. "She's right. We all will have to spread the risk," Olivia said.

Louise called over to Oliver and said, "Come on, Ollie. We need some help getting some more stuff. There will only be a little exposure."

"Screw that! I'm not leaving this room until it is one-hundred-percent safe!"

Olivia didn't feel like she could make those under her care do something dangerous, so she kept her mouth shut as Louise went over to talk to Oliver quietly.

It was obvious from Oliver's stance, and the dejection on Louise's face, that Oliver wasn't going.

"Shayla?" asked Olivia. "Can you help us?"

Panic in her eyes, Shayla said, "No. Please! Please don't make me!"

"All right, Shayla," Olivia said gently. "No one is going to make you do anything."

With that, she turned and followed the other four out of the mechanicals room. Already amazed at the knowledge base of Shane, Dwayne, and Slim, Olivia could only shake her head in admiration, and thanks, as the three directed her and Louise to gather up several exercise pads and take them back to the room they were using for shelter. They would be beds for the group.

It took the two three trips to move enough of the pads to make beds for everyone. The pads were thick and slick and they could only carry a couple each, on two trips. The third trip was to bring all the towels from the girl's locker room. They had larger towels than the boys were issued and would make better blankets.

Again Olivia had to wait and worry before Dwayne, Shane, and Slim were finished with their self-assigned tasks, Louise having gone with them on their last trip. But finally Slim said, "That's it for the moment. Can't think of anything else right now."

Dwayne and Shane nodded. They turned around and saw Shayla already asleep on the stack of exercise pads.

"I guess the only thing to do now is get some sleep," Olivia said, going over to wake Shayla so the pads could be distributed for everyone.

"Let's get the curtains up for the toilets," Slim said. "It'll be better if someone has to go during the rest of the night."

One of the items brought, or more accurately, dragged, to the room was one of the gym floor protective tarps. Olivia was looking right at Slim when suddenly something appeared in his hand. Then, with a flick of his wrist, Olivia could see that it was a knife. One of those seen in the movies sometimes. A butterfly knife.

"Chester," Olivia said sternly, "Have you been carrying that around all the time?"

Slim grinned over at her. "Caught. Special compartment I sewed into my jacket. Kinda handy now, to have it, wouldn't you say?"

Olivia didn't say anything and Slim, with Dwayne's and Shane's help, cut the tarp and used some rope they'd found to tie up curtains in front of two cubby holes in the equipment well back in the room. A bucket toilet, and a bucket of mulch went into each cubby hole.

The exercise pads distributed where there was room, the group grabbed a couple of towels each, and picked a pad. The emergency lights had been fading for some time and finally went dark, throwing the room into darkness.

Dwayne and Shane both reached into their backpacks and came out with flashlights. They cranked them up and turned them on. Shane set his wind up flashlight where everyone could get to it and turned it off. Dwayne turned his off. Slim, who had pulled out his own flashlight turned it on to check and then turned his off, too.

It was pitch black in the windowless room. Shayla uttered little scream, and then the others heard her start crying quietly. But she was tired and her crying didn't keep the others awake for very long as she soon fell asleep and things got very quiet.

Slim woke Olivia when he turned on his windup LED light and went to the bathroom. She checked her watch. It was almost seven in the morning. The events of the day before came rushing back to her and she found herself fighting back panic and tears. But lying there, watching Slim quietly start organizing some of the things they'd gathered up, she found herself reassured.

It was only a couple minutes later that Dwayne, and then Shane, got up and disappeared deeper into the room. As each came back, they joined Slim. Talking very quietly, they discussed their options, and the supplies and equipment they had.

When Louise got up five minutes later, it seemed to be the official start of the day. Olivia rose, then Shayla, and finally Oliver. Quietly, after their turn in the expedient bathrooms, and a thorough hand washing in the stainless steel mixing bowl that had been brought from the kitchen, the group gathered around the food, which Slim had organized for easy distribution.

"You ate some already, haven't you?" Oliver accused Slim. "I'll pound you so hard..."

"Stop it, Oliver!" Olivia said. "Slim hasn't eaten any of the food. Look. He's even included his Slim Jims to the pantry." The zip-lock of trail mix and the apple he'd been given were also there. Realizing the quantity of the snack sticks, she had to ask, "Do you carry all those with you all the time?"

Slim grinned. "No. I cleaned out my locker. I keep a couple of boxes there. You know. For snack emergencies."

It garnered a slight round of laughter, but Oliver continued to scowl at Slim.

"Is this going to be enough for all of us for the entire time?" Louise asked.

"It really depends. When we get a couple of radiation readings today, we should be able to tell how long we need to stay here. We cleaned out the kitchen and all the vending machines in the lunch room. No matter how long we stay, this is going to need to get us through."

"What?" Oliver asked. "How'd you three chumps have enough money to clean out the vending machines?"

"Duh!" Dwayne said. "The power was out and they wouldn't work, anyway. We busted into them."

"That's going to get you in big trouble," Shayla said, looking over at Olivia. "Isn't it?"

"Extreme circumstances," Olivia replied. "If I'd thought of it, I would have told them to do it. And, speaking of vending machines, did you get the things from the teachers' lounge?"

Dwayne, Shane, and Slim exchanged glances, each one shaking their head in the negative. Slim spoke up. "Nope. Good thinking though, Miss Blake. We should probably leave it for later. The room has an outside window, so it will be getting radiation. Too dangerous to go now."

“But won’t the radiation ruin the food?” Shayla asked.

Slim shook his head. “No. Just the perishable things will go bad, naturally. I hate to lose those items, but the radiation dose would be just too high now to get them.”

“I’ll double check,” Dwayne said, “Just in case.” He picked up the Geiger counter and left the room. He was back in just a few seconds. “We’d better stay where we are for the mean time. I checked just outside the door at the end of the hallway and it’s showing too hot to go out.”

“That settles that,” Olivia said. “We’ll just have to make this food and water last as long as we can.”

“We’re not too bad on water,” Shane said. “The water heaters for this section of the school are in here. Between them there should be plenty of water, if we don’t waste it, for the duration.”

“That’s good,” Olivia said. “I hadn’t thought about the water in the water heaters.”

“Should use it up first,” Dwayne said. “And save the bottled water for later.” He was looking at Oliver, who had already picked up one of the bottles of water brought from the vending machines.

“Stick it, dweeb!” Oliver said and took a long drink from the bottle.

“Oliver!” Olivia said in admonishment. “We are all going to have to get along during this time of trouble.”

“You stick it too, Counselor! This is the end of the world. Don’t even know why we’re trying. We’re all dead anyway.”

“This is survivable,” Slim said softly. “For those that want to survive and have the means. I want to, and we have the means.”

Oliver looked at Slim and the others angrily, but didn’t say anything else.

“I guess you should distribute the food, Miss Blake,” Shane said. “We’ll draw some water from the pipes into the containers we got from the kitchen. We brought cups and plates and silverware, too.”

“Very well,” Olivia said. “Oh,” she said, looking at the neatly stacked food. There were several cans, both large and small. “A can opener?”

Shane brought one out with a flourish. “Brought two. Keeping one back as a spare.”

Olivia smiled, and then set about distributing their first meal in the shelter.

After three days of regular radiation readings, Dwayne was able to calculate the estimated time they needed to stay in the shelter using the seven ten rule. “Unless I made a mistake, or there are additional attacks...”

There were several gasps at the statement about additional attacks. Dwayne hurriedly continued. “Not likely now, this long after the first one. Anyway, my calculations indicate we can start venturing out into the rest of the building in a week, outside for an hour or two after two weeks, still spending most of our time here in the shelter. In a month we should be able to leave the shelter for good.”

“Are you sure?” Olivia asked.

Dwayne looked at Shane and then Slim. Shane said, “We got the same results. We’re out of here for good in four weeks.”

Slim added, “We got really lucky we are on the west side of the base. Those down wind may need to stay in shelter for two or three months.”

“I don’t feel very lucky,” Oliver grouched. “When can we eat again? I’m getting hungry.”

“Oh, Oliver,” Olivia chided, “It’s another two hours before lunch.”

Oliver turned away angrily and went to the corner of the room he’d made his own. Shayla had done essentially the same thing, dragging her bedding to a spot as far away from the bucket toilets she could get.

When the time came they could venture into the rest of the building again, quick runs were made to get some fresher air, and a look outside through the windows. Everything looked tranquil, but the Geiger counter indicated it still wasn’t safe to go outside.

Several of the teens brought back armloads of books to read to kill the time in the shelter. Olivia went to her office and gathered up several items, including the journal she’d started just before the war.

When Olivia returned to the shelter, she found Oliver and Dwayne face to face just outside the mechanicals room door. Shane and Slim were standing nearby. “You big slug!” Dwayne said as Olivia walked up.

“That’s enough, Dwayne!” she said. “What is going on here?”

“Shane, Slim, and I went to recover the food in the teachers’ lounge. It’s all gone! Oliver here took it during the last few days!”

“Oliver! Is that true?” asked Olivia.

Oliver turned red, but glared at all of them, as Louise and Shayla came up. “I was hungry! I’m bigger than all of you and I need more food! It’s only right I got the extra!”

“Oh, Ollie!” Louise whispered.

“You said you would give me some when you got it if I slept with you!” Shayla screamed. “You told me you hadn’t got any of the food yet!” She ran forward and tried to hit Oliver in the chest with her fists. Slim and Shane grabbed her.

Louise eyes were opened wide in shock. “Ollie! You didn’t! How could you?”

“You wouldn’t do it,” Oliver shouted back. “I didn’t want to die a virgin! So what! We’re still all going to die!” Suddenly Oliver gave Dwayne a hard shove and ran down the hall.

It was obvious Dwayne was going to go after him, but Slim stepped in front of him. “Let him go. He just signed his own death warrant, if he doesn’t find good shelter.”

Louise and Shayla were both crying, looking at one another angrily. Olivia, after a moment’s hesitation, guided Shayla into the mechanicals room, giving Shane, Dwayne, and Slim a pleading look to see to Louise.

“Come on, Louise,” Slim said softly. “You’re better off without him. He is a slug, just like Dwayne said.”

“But he was my slug,” Louise said through her tears. “We’ve been going together since junior high. I can’t believe he wouldn’t wait. He was always pressuring me, but kept saying it was okay to wait when I wouldn’t go along.”

“Come on inside,” Dwayne said. “We shouldn’t stay out here any longer.”

Slowly, sadly, Louise let herself be led inside. She muttered her thanks, went to her sleeping pad, and lay down. The boys could hear her start crying again, but had no clue to what they could do.

A few minutes later Olivia joined them in what was the common area of the shelter. “Is there something we can do to help them?” Slim asked forlornly. “I don’t have a clue what to do.”

Dwayne and Shane muttered similar statements. Olivia gave them a wan smile. “I think letting them just cry it out is the only thing we can do. I think Louise will snap out of it after a good cry. It’s Shayla I’m worried about. I know she can be a pain, but be just as gentle with her as you can.”

“Yes, Miss Blake,” Shane said. Dwayne and Slim followed suit. The three found their own niches and began to read to take their minds off the recent happenings. Olivia sat down and began to record the events of the last few weeks into her journal.

Shayla kept to herself the rest of the time in she shelter, speaking seldom, and then only to Olivia. Louise resolutely put the past behind her and joined with Dwayne, Shane, and Slim in planning what they were going to do when it was safe to go looking for their families.

The day finally came when they could spend a little time outdoors. Dwayne surveyed the entire school yard with the Geiger counter and declared it safe for an hour or so stay that first

day. The only thing they did that first day was bury the contents of the bucket toilets, and then the remains of Jack Cavanaugh. There wasn't that much to bury. Dogs had been at the body. Fortunately there were plenty of filter masks in the shop room. They made it just bearable to be around the decomposing body to get it moved to the shallow grave.

Shayla continued to stay inside, but the others spent the time outdoors enjoying what watery sunlight there was. Attempts to start Louise's New Bug were fruitless. Ditto Olivia's hybrid. The bus diesel engine turned over, but wouldn't run for more than a couple of minutes before dying. Finally it wouldn't even try to start.

Shane's old Chevy pickup started right up and ran fine. It was pulled close to the building and parked. He had three-quarters of a 20-gallon tank of gasoline, but the other 20-gallon tank was empty. The group siphoned fuel from Louise's and Olivia's cars and filled up Shane's tanks.

Slim disappeared for a few minutes, and then showed up astride an old Indian motorcycle. "Where'd that come from?" Shane asked him when he drove over and parked by the pickup truck.

Slim shrugged and said, "I'm not supposed to drive it. I hide it down in the bushes off the driveway so no one will see it. My dad would kill me if he knew I used it when he was out of town."

"Oh, Slim!" Olivia said. "You shouldn't do things like that."

"Well, it gives us a little more transportation," Dwayne said. He'd brought his mountain bike up to the pickup and motorcycle. "Looks like this is it for when we go exploring."

Louise asked, "Don't you think there will be people out looking for us soon?"

"Possibly," Dwayne said. "But... I'm more worried about what sort of people might be out and about this early."

"You mean desperate people," Slim said. "Dangerous people."

Dwayne nodded and Shane said, "I agree." He looked at Olivia and Louise. "Shayla isn't coming out, but the two of you might want to be kind of careful being out here. A lot of not very nice men are going to be looking for women... At least, that's what is in much of the post apocalyptic world literature."

Louise and Olivia looked at one another. Both paled. "Surely there won't be that kind of trouble, after what everyone has gone through." Olivia said.

"I hope not. But I think the two of you should be extra careful not to get too far from the building without one of us handy."

Somewhat unsettled, Louise and Olivia went in earlier than they really had to. Shane, Dwayne, and Slim stood and talked for a while about possibilities, and then Shane and Dwayne went back down to the mechanicals room to join Olivia, Louise, and Shayla. Slim went inside the building, but began to roam, checking all the doors to make sure they were still locked.

The three young men had decided to keep a round the clock watch until they left the school in search of their families. Just in case.

Nothing untoward happened in the time they waited to leave the school grounds. With Slim on the Indian, Dwayne in the back of Shane's pickup with his bike and Louise, and Shayla and Olivia in the cab with Shane, the group set out thirty-six days after the attack. They'd barely made it down the long driveway of the school when they had to stop to let a National Guard convoy pass them.

One of the vehicles stopped and a man wearing a Major's Oak Leaf got out. "Where did you all come from?"

"The school," Olivia said. "We took shelter in the school when we got back from a road trip the night of the attack."

"We'll I'll be! Well, join the convoy. We have a relief base set up on the edge of the city. Lots of survivors. Maybe you can find your families." He started to turn away, but turned back. "Say. Was there another kid with you? Name of Oliver or something like that?"

"You found him? Is he okay? He ran off while there was still a lot of radiation." Olivia looked hopeful.

"Sorry, Ma'am. When we found him he was about dead. Could only drink a little water and say his name and something about a school before he died."

Louise turned away and cried softly. But she didn't cry for long. She turned back around, stood tall and squared her shoulders. Her crying for Oliver was done.

Slim looked at the Major for a moment. "We're not going to be interred, are we? At this camp?"

The Major laughed. "You probably have a tin-foil hat, don't you? No, son. Not an interment camp. Just a camp full of survivors fighting their way back to some semblance of civilization. You'll be free to come and go as you please."

Slim looked at the others and said, "I guess I'm in, then." Slim fell into place at the end of the convoy, Shane and the pickup behind him. It was only a short drive to the camp. Not more than an hour after they signed in and were assigned quarters, Shayla's parents showed up. They'd been checking the list of newcomers three times a day since they'd arrived themselves.

It was a few more days before Shane found his mother and sister in the camp. His father hadn't made it. It was the opposite for Louise. Her father, though injured, had survived. Her mother hadn't. Shane's home had survived the attack, being on the west side of town, not that far from the school. They invited Louise and her father to stay with them for the duration.

Dwayne, after a month of looking, gave up and set up a camp with Slim, outside the regular facility, neither quite trusting things not to go bad. Slim had not had any hope of his

father surviving. He'd been in Washington, D. C. the day of the attack. Dwayne's family had been at home within the severe damaged area near the air base.

Olivia was kept busy counseling those that needed it in the survivors' camp. She checked on each of her former charges from time to time, but found that they were doing as well or better than many of their elders. She decided that when she had children of her own, sometime in the future, they would learn how to take care of themselves early. A person was never too young to start learning self-reliance.

End *****

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