

BURIED

Bill Carver

I winked at the lady who was being pulled by two German Shepherds past the rubble of the fallen school and gave her a smile. She blew her bangs out of her eyes and she gave me a weary smile as she passed. I sighed, smiled to myself and looked over the fallen school.

It was a 7.7 quake on the Richter scale that hit on Monday and it creamed this neighborhood. Some substandard building fell like dominos. There were apartments, stores and this grade school that began the neighborhood four days ago. Now there were just piles of rubble and the refuse of people's lives that filled the streets along with the bodies that had been pulled out today.

Hundreds were dead and injured. The Red Cross was putting the lists of everyone together in the proper categories. They let us know who was missing and putting names to the bodies that we had dug out.

The temperature had crested past triple digits again today and survivors being pulled out had dropped drastically. Everyone working on the site was fading fast from the heat and the pressure to find people before it was too late for them. I felt sorry for the search dogs who were panting from the heat, had bruised and bloody paws and looked a little depressed to me. But dogs were a mystery to me so maybe I was wrong about that last part.

I had arrived with a crew of construction workers and some of our equipment. We happened to be digging out a creek bed to build supports for a bridge was going to be installed next summer. We moved and dug out where they directed us and for two days we had found pockets of survivors in the remains. There is no feeling like finding people who expected to die and freeing them from death. But starting yesterday afternoon, we found more bodies of those who could not hold out. Being trapped in the rubble bubbles with the high temperature was too much for those trapped there. Today was even worse. So far only bodies were being found.

The earthquake struck in the middle of the afternoon. Kids were in school and old folks were in their air-conditioned apartments when their world came crashing down. These people were least likely to survive long in these conditions.

So I was standing in search zone 5 waiting, with three more members of the crew, for something to do. I said, "Vic, what do you think? Pack it in?"

"I think so. The boss only has so much compassion in his black, little soul. Volunteering is foreign to him."

I smiled, "You got that right. I don't think I want to be around for much more. I especially don't want to be here when they move deeper into the school and have to remove kids."

"I don't think that we're going to be here much longer anyway. I heard the dog people say that the Army Corps of Engineers has men and equipment coming in for that part. Suppose to be here Sunday. I think the locals can handle the rest of the search without us."

"Shall we start wrapping it up here?"

"Yeah. I'm going to the center and give them the word about us pulling out. Dave, the coordinator, hinted this morning that they were going to start getting the volunteers out of here and let the pros finish up the searching. So I'll talk with him."

"Good."

"I'm taking Randy and Felipe with me. Then we'll head to zone whatever?"

"Seven."

"Right. Seven. And I'll get the rest of the guys to start putting our equipment together and pulling out from there. You stick here for while and catch any of our guys you might see walking around and send them over to me where we're set up. You have your cell?"

"Battery died."

"Okay. Hang for a couple of hours, then head for home. We'll pick up the work back at the creek on Monday."

"Sounds like a plan to me. I'll look around here and then walk around zone two where we did a lot of work and see if we left any tools there."

"Good idea. See ya later. Come on guys, let's go."

The other guys mumbled goodbye to me and they wearily headed across zone 5.

I spent an hour in zone 5 checking out the work being done. I watched bodies placed in body bags and carried to the holding area awaiting identification. Once I heard some cheering and I wandered over to watch two people being aided as they walked down the rubble to the street helped by the searchers. The cheer for the two survivors was muted as three body bags were carried up to the hole where they had exited. I shook my head.

I walked down the street, watching my steps so that I did not break an ankle or twist a knee stepping on some piece of brick or any of the other stuff laying in the street. The search pattern was broken into zones. Fifteen zones were set up around the four blocks that consisted of this area. We had done most of our work in zone 2, which centered around the main entrance to the school. I walked through zones 4 and 3 without seeing many people. The bulk of the work now was in the higher numbered zones containing the multistoried apartments where the lead searchers determined that there were less likely survivors in those areas because of the complete collapse of those buildings. Making the choice of life or death was something that I was relieved not to have to make.

I entered zone 2 and walked up and down the street looking for any equipment that we might have left laying around. We put our company name on any tool that we brought, so I figured that would keep me from getting shot as a looter if I picked up anything. I touched my ID badge as I thought about getting shot.

I stopped in the middle of the street and figured that my time was up here.

“Excuse me.” I turned toward the voice that had come from behind me. I raised an eyebrow at the man who walked up to me.

He smiled, “Can you help me out? Should take an hour.”

“You’re one of the dog men.”

“Guilty as charged. I’ve seen you around, with your crew. We found the dozen kids that other day. You guys moved that rubble around like it was nothing.”

“Well, your dogs found them. That was impressive to me.” I hesitated and said, “Anyway, what’s up?”

“Of course. These past two days have been hard on the dogs. You may not know it, but the dogs are very dedicated and sensitive to their jobs. They react to us, the signals that we give and they react to our moods. As I said these two days have been hard on them and they are getting depressed.”

“Depressed?”

“Yes. They get depressed when they can’t find anyone doing their job, it’s what they’re trained to do. They react to us a little bit, but they know what they are trained to do and if they can’t find anyone it affects them.”

I shrugged, “Okay. And that affects me how?”

He smiled, “We need them to find someone alive. They need to get their spirits up and they do that by finding someone. I saw you standing there by yourself and I wanted to set up a site in zone one for my dogs to find someone. Are you doing anything now?”

“Actually our crew is heading out and I was just doing a last check if we left any of our equipment in the street here.”

“Look. It’ll take about an hour. I’ll cover you over in a shallow pit and then in a half hour, we come by and lead the dogs to you. They find you. We dig you out. You hug the dogs. We hug the dogs. They get their spirits up for the weekend that they’ll work and you go home. We do it all the time for this type of assignment. What do you say?”

I thought a moment and then shrugged. “Sure. I’ll help out.”

“Great. Come with me.”

He started walking toward zone 1 and I followed him.

Twenty minutes later I was laying in a rubble pit. It was seven feet long, three feet wide and four feet deep. It was a collapsed basement.

“Are you claustrophobic?”

“No.”

“Afraid of the dark?”

“No.”

“Bedwetter?”

“No. Huh?”

“Just kidding. Okay. Let me finish by putting this slab over you.”

“The dogs won’t have trouble finding my scent with the slab covering me?”

“No. They’re good. That’s what they do. Finding those who’re buried.”

He disappeared from my sight and I heard him grunt as he pushed with the iron bar the slab he was going to place over my pit. The slab was concrete three inches thick and much wider and longer than the dimensions of the pit. We had maneuvered it so that he could slide it across the top opening of the pit by himself, also so it would not fall into the pit and crush poor me.

I watched slab move and daylight disappear as it covered the pit until I was laying in total darkness. I heard the dog man tap twice on the slab with the metal bar. I did not respond because I doubted he could hear me through the concrete. I settled down to wait for rescue.

“Glenn! Glenn!”

Glenn turned around and saw his wife with their two rescue dogs. The dogs were excited and he knelt down on one knee to get to them. They came into his arms and he gave each of them a big hug. They licked his face and their tails were wagging a mile a minute. He caressed each dog with a hand and stood up and asked “No problems?”

“None at all. I led them to the zone and it took about ten minutes for me to narrow the search down for them to find the man. A couple of guys working there in zone two helped me move the slab. Our boys here were ecstatic at finding the guy. The guy was a good sport. He hugged the dogs and got into the spirit of the thing.”

“So it went well.”

“Yeah. It did. Ready to go.”

“Yes.”

Glenn looked over his shoulder toward zone 1.

Nobody winks and flirts with my wife!

The End