

Gray Skies

9-10

Carl had awoken from his deep slumber. The amplified sounds of his alarm clock swarmed and echoed throughout his gloomy bedroom, traveling as if it made sure every single section of the room had ceased its silence. Although, the buzzing had no irritating effect on Carl, for he continued to lie in his bed, distracted in the deep sea of his thoughts. Carl just laid there, his deep blue-gray eyes staring off into space. He could've possibly pondered about the dream he just had. Maybe it wasn't so much as a dream, but more of a memory from the combat he faced back East.

After nearly five or so minutes of continuously lying down in his bed with a blank stare, Carl finally took notice of the alarm's noise. He reached out with his left hand and shut it off. Carl lifted himself up and stood straight from his bed with a firm stance. He then navigated his way around the bedroom, walking silently as to not make a single noise from his footsteps on the hard wood floors. He then stopped in one spot and scanned the room looking for something. Moments later, he found what he was searching for.

It was three different pairs of dog tags, each one in standard military style that had embossed lettering permanently pressed into them and a gleaming shine on it that was almost blinding, yet had scratches all over them. Each of the three necklaces had only one dog tag, unlike the usual two. Carl sent back the other ones to the families of those who the tag belonged to...for identification purposes.

Carl put all three dog tags around his neck, alongside with his own. The four plates of stainless steel that hanged on the nickel plated ballchain draped his chest along with his gray shirt. The reflective shine that gleamed off of each tagged plate gave his shaded appearance something unique that stood out.

After a moment or two, he walked swiftly out of his room and made his way to the living room of his apartment. His apartment was designed to have an interior similar to that of a loft. Basically, the whole place is open area; no hallways, no absolute separation between rooms, only thing that's closed off are bedrooms because of their bedroom. The kitchen and living room were

practically combined, with only a border of hardwood and tile flooring to separate them. Carl had a glass sliding door right next to the living room covered up with the blinds that revealed a balcony just outside it. The blinds gave the entire place a more depressing vibe, making the whole apartment look more like a shaded pencil drawing. Carl walked over to open the blinds lightly just to see how the weather outside was. Much like his apartment, outside was dull and colorless. Carl looked up to see dark storm clouds beginning to form, and these clouds seemed to no longer have a puffy shape anymore, but more like a sheet of smoke and ash that stretched across the entire sky for what looked like miles.

Carl looked away from the view outside and headed straight towards the kitchen. He wasn't interested at all about anything outside. He simply wanted to enjoy his day however he can. The first thing that came to mind was having a snack of some sort. Carl made his way into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. All he even had was a carton of milk, half a dozen eggs, a potato, a few slices of bread left, and a half-gallon bottle of water. It was only then when Carl realized that since his deployment, he hadn't bought any groceries in nearly three years, and even though he had plenty of time to the last couple days since his return, he just never got around to it.

"What can we eat today?" Carl whispered to himself. He used the word "we" to show that somebody besides him was in the room. He looked over his shoulder expecting someone to answer, and his face had the look of impatience for such answer.

"Good choice, Dylan," he said, this time in a relieved tone of voice. Carl closed the refrigerator and opened the pantry next to it. He extended his arms upward to reach the top shelf and then grabbed a bag of microwavable popcorn, still sealed in its plastic wrapping. He used his fingers with great precision and in two swift movements and no more than a millisecond later, tore off the plastic wrapping. He then walked over to the microwave and opened it to put the popcorn inside it. After closing the latch, he held up his fingers to the buttons ready to set a time for heating up the popcorn, but froze on the spot. A long, antagonizing moment passed and yet his fingers still hadn't pressed anything. Soon, they began to twitch in small, trembling movements.

"Dammit, Paul, I know what I'm doing so stay off my ass," Carl yelled as he looked back over his shoulder once again to warn off. Nobody was there still, only the room of no color like a black and white TV show from back in the 1920s. But thoughts still kept racing from the front to

the back of Carl's mind. Some as simple as which button should he press, to others that question which wire should he cut. His fingers were now violently shaking in desperation for an end to his dilemma. After much consideration, Carl was able to regain control of his hand again and used all the focus he could conjure up into pressing the "Popcorn" button instead of setting up his own preferred time. The light bulb within the microwave lit up and the spinning plate at the center began to twirl the bag in a clockwise motion.

Carl took a breath of relief and looked back over his shoulder.

"I told you I knew what I was doing. Now would you stop doubting me for once," he spoke out. The void space behind him stared back at him.

"Oh c'mon, man, that was a long time ago, how was I supposed to know that that bomb had a second timer? Me and Jimmy were the only ones who worked that mission, and that was because you and Dylan were relieved for the holidays and you two returned home for six months, if my memory serves me right. Jimmy had two weeks of service before—"

The popcorn had begun popping, but the sounds had a startling effect on Carl. His ear began to ring at a high pitched frequency and all the other noises in the room were drowned out and dulled down. He swayed back and forth slowly as his perception of reality spun off. His eyes widened to extreme proportions and his teeth clenched tightly to a jaw busting grip. The confines of his conscious mind had evaporated, and now, memory after memory, the flashbacks came back to haunt him. Slowly and unstably lowering himself towards the floor, Carl began to vividly see scenes of his experiences back East.

As each individual seed of the popcorn made its miniscule bursting sounds, Carl's ringing hearing had amplified even the tiniest noises to an immeasurable degree, and he mistook them for the sound of gun shots and explosions. This sent his mind into a flashback of the cool, chill air of Afghanistan, the night of his first failed mission when he couldn't deactivate an explosive held at a major intersection. After 30 minutes of using his precision tools and his steady fingers, Carl managed to deactivate the first timer, only to have miscounted a second timer. Him and his Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team were in charge of such cases, but that night, only he and his teammate, Jimmy, were tasked for that case. Once they were finished deactivating the first timer, they decided to head back to their army base for regrouping with the rest of their

group who had been relieved for six months. That is, until Jimmy forgot about his tools back where the bomb site was at. Carl had decided to wait, and as he looked on to see Jimmy running back to get his tools without wearing his explosion protection suit, a silent moment of the late night passed by. The next second, the bomb had been set off and the flames had spread throughout the vast intersection. Rock and gravel propelled in all directions, and the explosion caused a few nearby cars to burst into flames as well. In total, nearly 28 civilian casualties occurred, 17 of them being fatal, including Jimmy.

Carl collapsed on the floor and was lying on his side with his hands covering his ears, becoming drowned by the sounds of imaginary gun fire, violent explosions, and the screams of innocent civilians. Another scene came into his mind about the day Paul was killed. It was nowhere close to Jimmy's fate, however. Carl entered the memory of a hot afternoon, three or so months after Jimmy's tragic death. Paul, Dylan, and Carl were disarming a wired bomb which was placed underneath a parked car that "supposedly" had no owner, trying to get into the interior of the device without accidentally setting it off. They were located along a single lane road and the dust and sand all around had a light orange scenery to it, like something from the old west movies. The beads of sweat flowed down their foreheads for hours, and as they finally managed to take apart the bomb's outer shell, it had revealed to be a remote controlled device. The heat had wasted them of their energy and they felt like a stroke was about to hit them.

The moment they discovered the true mechanism of the bomb, a man who was parked across the street came out of his rusty car. The area had been cleared for civilians, and only a few other soldiers were in the area besides us. The soldiers spotted him as he walked casually towards them with both arms raised high and his hands closed in a balled fist, although his left hand showed some sign of an object within its grasp. The soldiers pointed their guns at him and asked him to step away and go home, but he continued to walk forward. Then, the man opened his left hand to reveal a cell phone, with a number already dialed in and his thumb right on the phone button ready to make the call. The soldiers warned them to get out from underneath the car, but with all three of them crammed underneath, it was a struggle to squirm out from there. Luckily, Carl and Dylan managed to make it out. But just as Paul finally managed to slide from underneath the vehicle, the soldiers shot down the man with the phone, and just before he fell to the ground, the call was made. The cell phone signal had set off the explosive device and Paul

was caught right in its blast range. Dylan took heavy shrapnel towards his leg, but recovered in six months

“I’m so sorry,” Carl silently cried to himself, “I wish I could have acted sooner.” The ringing in his ears increasing in pitch, and the frequency of it began to cause massive amounts of pain to his left ear. Carl was drifting in and out of consciousness, causing more and more flashbacks. But these memories were only snippets of time which he quickly had to suffered through. It was only up to his final flashback that it became the eye of the storm.

Dylan and Carl were the last two members of the EOD, and had nearly six months of duty left before they finally leave home. After almost three months of recovery, Dylan finally managed to walk again. Him and Carl had to do another mission near downtown Baghdad, where a parking lot full of cars was in critical danger.

A bomb was attached to the bottom of a car seat that someone sat on. The Arab woman who sat here had noticed something wrong with the seat and called a distress message to the police. It was discovered that the bomb under her seat was not only a timed one, but was also suspension activated, and now that the woman sat down, she cannot stand up from her seat or it will detonate. When Carl and Dylan arrived with the Humvee into the full parking lot, they could immediately see a crowd of people surrounding the car. The place was way too public for even the Afghani police to restrict all of the people.

After a considerable amount of time working in the crowded car space that they did, and with their best effort constantly being applied and invested into disarming the device, it was no use. The bomb was way too wired up to know where to cut, and the limited car space made it impossible to disarm it in time. With less than a minute to go, Carl had ordered all of the Afghani civilians to evacuate the area, but everyone stood there waiting. As Carl panicked, the woman cried and begged us to stay and help her. She and Dylan locked eyes in that instant, and the connection between the two flourished and evolved to a whole new degree.

“C’mon, man, we gotta leave now,” Carl said in a stressed manner. Dylan still kept eye contact with the Arab woman.

“No, you go ahead, but I’ll stay here. I know I can disarm it, just give me some time,” he replied back in a calm tone.

“For Christ’s sake, do you not see the time clock? WE DON’T HAVE ANY TIME! There’s a less than 45 seconds left, alright? We need to leave now!”

“Just go, man, I’ll be right there. I just need 30 seconds.” After a quick consideration, Carl agreed to Dylan’s plea.

“Hurry up, then. Don’t take any risks.” Carl raced back to the Humvee. Seconds passed by, and as civilians were beginning to retreat from the parking lot, Carl pondered about going back into bomb area to bring back Dylan by force. With ten seconds left, Carl had made his decision and raced towards the parking lot to retrieve Dylan from the blast radius.

Suddenly, the explosion went off without warning. The detonation had caused, not just the woman’s car, but all the other cars in the parking lot. Carl’s feet shook off balance as the ground trembled and the sky above him was filled with flames and smoke. He fell down to the ground and felt a ringing sensation in his left ear along with deafness in his right. He watched civilians burned as they were in flames, running around for help. The other civilians there that didn’t burn had died on the spot due to the heavy shrapnel or direct contact with the explosion. As Carl nearly passed out from the head trauma of the explosion, a thought occurred to him that there was no way all the other cars could’ve exploded the way they did from one car’s detonation. It had to be that all the cars were wired up with bombs, and that they were all timed up so that way even if one of them were to be disarmed, the others would still finish the job.

There was nothing Carl could do to save Dylan.

The microwave had finally finished heating up the popcorn. The popping noises had ceased finally, and Carl still lied on the ground, frozen in a petrified state. He had finally faced his demons that he had hidden away from all this time. The ringing in his ears stopped, and his flashbacks were over. He continued to lie on the floor with the blankest expression on his face, taking no notice to the fact that his snack has now been fully microwaved and ready to eat. While he was on the floor, the dog tags that were once draped around his neck now laid adjacent to him right in front of his face. His blue-gray eyes beamed towards them in agony as the rest of his face

showed no emotion whatsoever. On them had the embossed lettering of four different names; Jimmy Riordan, Paul Riley, Dylan Smith, and Carl Sanborn.

The skies outside were still gray, and the storm was still coming. But in time, it will eventually pass, and the dark, ominous clouds will cease their reign.