

A Ranger's Way

written by

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FADE IN:

INT. CHEAP HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

ELI GOODSMAN, 33, stands in his US ARMY DRESS UNIFORM, swaying on his feet as he stares at himself in the mirror. A near-empty bottle of whiskey is clutched in one hand.

His gaze shifts to the collection of EMPTY PILL BOTTLES on the nightstand. He offers himself a shaky salute.

ELI
Rangers lead the way, buddy.

He takes the last few pills in his hand, tosses them in his mouth, and takes a swig from the bottle. A nod to himself to seal his fate. A pained grimace crosses his face as he smacks himself on the head.

Eli stumbles in the dimly lit room to the desk. He sits and powers up a laptop.

ON THE DESKTOP: a video program is open, showing Eli taking another swig from the bottle. In the bottom right, there's a notification for "3 Missed Video Calls."

Eli clicks to dismiss the notifications. He looks into the LAPTOP CAMERA, shakes his head in disbelief, clears his throat, and clicks the red RECORD BUTTON. A TIMER starts.

ELI (CONT'D)
Everything has just been a blur
lately. Doesn't really make sense.

Eli looks up again.

ELI (CONT'D)
I'm sorry. I just can't... I don't
want to...

Suddenly a video call comes in -- UNKNOWN CALLER. He answers, revealing the ghastly visage of a seemingly dead college-age METALHEAD, riffing on his bass guitar.

METALHEAD
A little blurriness is okay, dude.

Eli is confused.

METALHEAD (CONT'D)
Hey, that's some rough stuff you're
drinking.
(MORE)

METALHEAD (CONT'D)

Have ya tried butterscotch
schnapps? It's really good.

ELI

You're...

METALHEAD

Far out, right?

Eli looks back to the pill bottles, trying to piece things
together.

ELI

I'm seeing things.

METALHEAD

What's wrong with that?

ELI

I didn't want to end up like you. I
wanted my life to mean something.

METALHEAD

Don't buy into that, kemosabe. It's
all a big party.

ELI

Easy for you to say. All you ever
cared about was getting high. Look
how that turned out for you.

METALHEAD

Oh, of course the heir to the
throne can afford to be so
righteous! Don't worry, you'll love
oblivion. Pretty sure Mom does.

At the mention of "Mom" Eli twists his forearm to reveal a
tattoo of eyes -- one blue, one green.

ELI

You don't get to talk about her.

He sits up and knife-hands.

No... No, you don't know what she
was like after you...

METALHEAD

Hey, chill out!
(plays guitar)
Just enjoy your jam, bro.

Eli looks up to see the metalhead gone and the video recording timer still ticking away. He can feel his pulse pounding in his temples as he tries to make sense of the bizarre encounter. He takes a deep breath.

ELI

Focus, Eli. Focus on what's important.

Eli addresses the camera once more.

ELI (CONT'D)

A suicide bomber... out of fuckin' nowhere. For whatever reason, no one else made it. Why me? I keep thinking about what I could have done differently, and it just... hurts.

A VIDEO CALL ALERT pops up and he reflexively answers. A new window displays a dead woman with a harsh gaze in desert fatigues and a matching hat. She has one blue eye and one green.

Eli flinches in recognition and inhales sharply.

ARMY NURSE

"Hurts" you said? A little pain never hurt nobody, soldier. Now, you gonna tell me what this is about?

ELI

We... my unit, we didn't see him until it was too late. They all died.

ARMY NURSE

Yeah, shit happens sometimes, didn't you ever hear that? But those boys knew what they were signing up for. They don't need your sorry ass to join them.

Eli slams his hand on his desk in anger.

ELI

You don't get it.

ARMY NURSE

What, you think I don't understand loss?

Eli breaks down and tears flow.

ELI

When you didn't come home, at least
it meant something. You saved
lives! I just... got lucky. I let
down the ones who counted on me.

ARMY NURSE

And now you're letting everyone
else down by going AWOL.

ELI

I tried! But their faces...

He closes his eyes. FLASHES of the faces of his fellow
soldiers, bloodied and dead, appearing in his mind's eye.

Eli's tone frosts over.

ELI (CONT'D)

You had it easy.

The Army nurse's eyes meet Eli's, and as her resolve fades,
Eli eyes slowly blink. Only the video recorder window
remains, the timer still running.

ELI (CONT'D)

Come on... you need to finish this.

Eli takes another swig from his bottle, his words
increasingly slurred.

ELI (CONT'D)

Ashley -- I'm sorry for how I've
been lately. My mind... I just keep
seeing it happen over and over. You
don't deserve all this. You deserve
better.

Another call notification pops up and Eli clicks on it. A
window opens showing an empty kitchen, with half-prepared
plates of food on the counter. Ashley, 33, rushes past the
frame.

ASHLEY (O.S.)

Ellie, put those toys away! It's
time for dinner.

Eli squints and tries to look around the edge of the frame.

ELI

Ashley?

No response.

ELI (CONT'D)

Ash?

Ashley rushes to her seat.

ASHLEY

(still distracted)

Oh, Eli, I've been trying you and
wasn't expecting you to be still
awake. Where are...

Ashley's eyes square with her camera and she leans in as Eli
is finishing a yawn.

ELI

Hi Ash, I'm...

ASHLEY

Eli! Are you okay? Talk to me!

ELI

I'm here Ashley. It's good to see
you.

ASHLEY

Eli! Eli! Wake up!

ELI

What? I'm awake. Is Ellie with you?

Ashley inhales sharply and calls 911 on her phone

ASHLEY

Yes, I need help! It's my husband.
Hello?

Ashley glances into her camera then gets up, her tone
increasingly frantic and fearful.

ASHLEY (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Can you hear me? No, I don't know.
He's in some hotel room. Can you
track his computer or something?
It's urgent!

Ashley's voice fades into echoes.

ELI

Ashley! Everything will be fine.

In the call window, an 8 year old girl's head peeks out from
the corner, with a soldier action figure in her hand.

ELLIE
Daddy, look what Mommy got me!

Eli's eyes spring open and he leans forward.

ELI
Ellie! Hi baby girl.

ELLIE
Are you coming home soon?

Eli averts his eyes. Ellie plays with the soldier, making it march in front of her.

ELLIE (CONT'D)
Hup, two, three, four...

ELI
Sweetheart. I just wanted to tell
you...

His eyes return, and he smiles warmly.

ELI (CONT'D)
I love y--

Ellie's skin turns paler, speckled with ridges, as she continues to play.

ELLIE
Hup, two, three, four...

Eli's mood drops as he watches with alarm.

Ellie's eyes droop as her lips tighten. Her veins darken. Eli now stands in darkness, in front of Ellie, as the soldier continues to march.

ELLIE (CONT'D)
Hup, two, three, four...

ELI
Ellie! No!

Eli's breath quivers as he stands and claws at his scalp. The deathly visage of Ellie, now wearing a scarred military helmet, considers the toy soldier.

ELLIE
You were supposed to protect me.

Eli pleads to his dead daughter.

ELI
It... It was for you.

Ellie puts the toy down and looks up.

ELLIE
I reminded Mommy of you.

Eli, at a loss for words, tries to reach out, his hand passing through Ellie. He crumples with tears streaming.

ELLIE (CONT'D)
I wanted to be with you, Daddy.

ELI
(stuttering)
I... I'm... s...s...sorry.

Eli covers his face and sobs, letting it all out. Eli's vision fades to black.

ASHLEY (O.S.)
Eli? Are you there?

ELLIE (O.S.)
Daddy, wake up!

ASHLEY (O.S.)
Eli! Eli!

Eli's arms shake and strain as he pushes himself back up, his eyelids fighting consciousness. The call window shows Ashley and Ellie, both very much alive and frightened.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Tell us where you are! Eli, can you hear me? Where are you?

ELI
Motel 66... Victory Drive...

Eli's head thumps back to his arm.

ASHLEY (O.S.)
He's at the Motel 66 on Victory Drive, probably near Fort Benning. Please, hurry...

FADE OUT.