

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 his left hand.

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

ELI
Rangers lead the way, buddy.

He takes the bottle of pills in his empty hand and tosses them back, washing them down with booze. A nod to himself to seal his fate.

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. 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.
(MORE)

ELI (CONT'D)
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!

Darkness surrounds Eli as his eyes grow soft.

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's gonna be okay.

After a moment of silence, an 8 year old girl's head peeks
out from the corner of the call window. She soon presents her
toy soldier.

ELLIE

Daddy, look what Mommy got me!

Eli's eyes spring open and he leans forward.

ELI

Ellie! Hi baby girl.

Ellie's attention fixes upon her soldier.

ELLIE

Are you coming home soon?

Eli averts his eyes. Ellie, now also surrounded by darkness, 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 leans in, pleading to his dead daughter.

ELI
It... It was for you.

Ellie drops the toy 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 to his knees, 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 urgently motions for Ellie to quiet down.

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.