

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 looking at himself in the mirror. A near-empty bottle of whiskey in one hand.

He's drunk and barely standing on his own two feet. He looks at the collection of EMPTY PILL BOTTLES on a 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. His eyes widen, followed by a pained grimace while smacking himself on the head.

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

ON THE DESKTOP: a video program shows Eli taking another swig. The bottom right shows a notification "3 Missed Video Calls."

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

ELI (CONT'D)

Everything has just been a fog or something. 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 high school-age rocker, strumming his bass guitar.

ROCKER

A little fogginess is okay, dude.

Eli is confused.

ROCKER (CONT'D)

Hey, that's some nasty stuff you're drinking. Have ya tried butterscotch schnapps? It's really good.

ELI

You're...

ROCKER

Far out, right?

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

ELI

I'm seeing things.

ROCKER

What's wrong with that?

ELI

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

ROCKER

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.

ROCKER

Oh, of course the heir to the throne can afford to be so righteous! Don't worry, you'll like 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...

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

Eli ruminates, then looks up to see the rocker gone and the video recording timer still ticking away.

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 Eli reflexively answers. A new window displaying a dead woman appears. She wears desert fatigues, a matching helmet, and a harsh gaze. She has one blue eye and one green.

Eli flinches and inhales sharply.

SOLDIER
"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.

SOLDIER
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.

SOLDIER

What, you think I don't understand
loss?

Eli breaks apart, 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.

SOLDIER

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, dead.

Eli's tone frosts over.

ELI (CONT'D)

You had it easy.

The soldier'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 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.