

RiseWithTech.blog Presents: Scars and Stripes

What We Bring Home Is Never Just Gear

Description – *Scars and Stripes*

He made it home. But not all of him came back.

Scars and Stripes is not your typical war story. It’s not about medals or missions. It’s about what happens after — when the bullets stop flying but the echoes stay loud.

Told through the eyes of Sgt. Elijah King, a veteran trying to make peace with peace, this novel walks the quiet, gritty line between survival and healing. From panic attacks in grocery stores to unanswered texts from battle brothers, from flinches in the night to soft moments of love he almost pushes away — Elijah’s story is raw, real, and unforgettable.

It’s not about being perfect.

It’s about showing up.

It’s about staying.

Even when it hurts.

For anyone who's ever loved a soldier, been one, or tried to piece themselves back together after everything fell apart — *Scars and Stripes* will break your heart open... and leave you stronger for it. "I'm not healed. But I'm here. And that counts for something."

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Chapter 1: *The First Shot Ain't Always From a Gun*

The first time Elijah Ward got shot at, he didn't flinch.

He ducked, he moved, he breathed in like he'd done it a thousand times. Because by then, he had. Not on some battlefield — but at home, where words came faster than fists, and silence hit harder than both.

Kandahar heat pressed against his back like a second rucksack as he crouched behind a rusted-out Toyota, rifle tight to his shoulder. Dust spiraled through the air like spirits not yet ready to leave. His comm crackled with static and breath — half his unit was pinned down on the far end of the alley, and the sound of AKs rattling off the walls didn't help his focus.

But Elijah was calm. Calculated.

He always was when things got loud. Because when things got quiet, that's when the war inside started.

"Ward, move!" Corporal Reyes shouted from two cars down. "Cover right! We're pushing on three!"

Elijah didn't respond with words — just a subtle nod, like this wasn't his first rodeo. It wasn't. He swept right and laid down rounds like rhythm — not panic, not rage. Rhythm.

One, two, sweep. Breathe. Adjust. Fire. Repeat.

Reyes sprinted past him, boots slapping hard against broken concrete, and the rest of the squad followed like ghosts in formation.

Minutes passed like seconds. And when the shooting stopped, it didn't feel like relief — it felt like rehearsal.

That night, back at the forward operating base, Elijah sat alone outside the tent, helmet off, cigarette lit, sleeves rolled up. The stars out here always looked too sharp, like they didn't belong above the blood.

Reyes walked over, sweat-stained and limping, and collapsed into the dirt beside him.

"You good?" he asked, spitting into the sand.

Elijah flicked ash and shrugged. "Yeah."

Reyes shook his head. "You're too good at this shit."

Elijah didn't answer. Because the truth was, he'd been training for chaos long before he signed any contract.

Back in Georgia, long before Afghanistan, the real firefights were in the living room.

His old man was a church deacon with iron hands and a short temper. Smiled at strangers, shouted at his family. The belt never missed. Neither did the silence after.

Elijah had learned young: don't cry, don't talk, don't move unless you're told. And even then? Keep your eyes on the exits.

So yeah — bullets didn't scare him. Not the way *people* did.

Later that night, he got an email. Not from his family — they didn't write much. But from her.

Leah.

The girl he left behind, half-on-purpose. The one who wore his dog tag like it meant forever.

The subject line was simple:

Hey, I had a dream about you.

He opened it.

You were standing in the middle of a grocery store, wearing your gear. Like full vest, boots, helmet — everything. But nobody noticed. Everyone was shopping like you weren't there.

You looked tired. Like... tired in your soul. You weren't bleeding, but I swear you were hurt. And I couldn't reach you.

Elijah stared at the screen for a long time before closing his laptop.

The first shot ain't always from a gun.

Sometimes it's from a sentence that sounds too much like the truth.

Sometimes it's from a dream that exposes what you won't say out loud.

And sometimes it's from a woman back home who sees the wounds you won't show your brothers.

Elijah lit another cigarette and watched it burn.

The war had only just begun — and most of it was still inside him.

Chapter 2: *Hurry Up and Wait (And Heal)*

There are two things the Army teaches every soldier:

1. How to kill with precision.
2. How to wait with absolutely no answers.

It was day seventeen of what Command called a "tactical pause," which really just meant: *Sit down.*

Shut up. Don't ask. The mission window had closed, something about "intel discrepancies," and the squad was benched inside the walls of FOB Keating with nothing but heat, flies, and rumors.

Elijah sat on an overturned ammo crate in the motor pool, legs stretched out, boots off, tank top drenched in salt and sand. He was working on a half-broken radio nobody cared about — mostly to keep his hands busy. Not his mind.

Corporal Jace Delaney wandered over, sweaty, sunburned, and holding a bowl of half-melted peanut butter from the MRE packs.

"You ever notice how this place smell like a wet sock filled with secrets?"

Elijah smirked. "You get poetic when you're constipated."

"I'm serious, bro. This ain't waiting — this is psychological warfare. Hurry up and wait. Then wait longer. They should give us medals for surviving the boredom."

"You wouldn't wear yours right," Elijah said. "You'd try to put it on a chain."

Delaney chuckled, then sat next to him. "You talk to that girl? The dream one?"

Elijah paused. That email from Leah had been sitting in his head like an open wound.

"No," he said. "Ain't respond."

Delaney scoffed. "Bro, you're out here dodging bullets but can't open your heart? What's that about?"

Elijah didn't answer right away. He just tightened the screws on the radio.

"You ever try to fix something," he finally said, "and realize halfway through you're just pretending you know how?"

Delaney blinked. "Like this radio?"

"Like myself."

Later that night, Elijah walked the perimeter alone. No rifle. Just his fists and his thoughts.

He hated this part — the stillness. The *slowness*. In a firefight, everything made sense: the noise, the clarity, the commands. But this? This was where the cracks crept in.

He thought about Leah again. About how she once told him, "You don't know how to be still with me. You always *prepare for loss*, even when you're loved."

He didn't respond then, either.

Back in the barracks, the lights were out, the room filled with that half-awake buzz — snoring, shifting, whispered jokes from beds lined up like coffins.

Elijah lay flat on his cot, eyes open.

"You asleep?" came a low voice.

It was Reyes.

"Nope."

"You ever think maybe the hardest thing ain't what we go through out there... it's that we don't give ourselves time to feel it?"

Elijah didn't move. But his hand, still resting on his chest, curled into a fist.

"We survive," Reyes said, "but we don't really heal. Because healing takes stillness. And we never sit still."

The next morning, Elijah woke up before dawn.

Instead of going to the gym, he went to the chapel tent — empty except for a few mismatched chairs and a cracked crucifix on the wall.

He sat down.

Said nothing.

Just... sat. For once.

The world didn't end. The war didn't call. Nobody shot at him.

He sat with his own thoughts — the ones he usually outran with weights, orders, or women he knew wouldn't stay.

And somewhere in that silence, he didn't find peace... but he found *presence*.

Which, for now, was enough.

Chapter 3: *Battle Buddies and Broken Homes*

The gym tent smelled like sweat, rubber, and unfinished stories.

Elijah was on his third set of deadlifts, sweat darkening his gray Army shirt, when **Drew Ramirez** dropped a 45-lb plate onto the floor like he was mad at it.

"You good?" Elijah asked, breath steady.

Ramirez nodded, then shook his head. "Nah."

That was their language. Say yes, mean no. Keep moving. Lift heavier.

Later, outside under a tarp strung between two connex boxes, they sat on crates and passed a

lukewarm bottle of Gatorade between them.

The desert heat had dropped, but only by a couple degrees — still hot enough to remind them they were a long way from home.

"You ever think," Ramirez said, staring into the dirt, "that we all joined just to get the hell away from something?"

Elijah didn't answer. He didn't have to.

"For me it was the noise," Ramirez continued. "Mom screaming at Dad. Dad drunk again. I used to go outside and just lay on the concrete. Pretend I was on a different planet."

Elijah nodded, slow. "My old man never yelled. Didn't have to. One look, and you knew what was coming."

"Belt?"

"Bible."

They both chuckled, not because it was funny — but because it was real.

"I told myself I'd be different," Ramirez said. "I swore I'd break the cycle. But last month, on the phone with my wife, I snapped at her. Loud. My kid heard it."

He rubbed the back of his neck.

"And now I'm scared I brought the war home before I ever left it."

That line hit Elijah in the ribs.

Because the truth was, a lot of them were walking around with medals they never asked for and habits they didn't recognize.

He'd always thought the Army was his way *out* — out of his neighborhood, out of his past, out of the version of himself that flinched too easily and trusted too little.

But maybe he didn't leave.

Maybe he just learned how to *hide it better*.

"You ever call your mom?" Ramirez asked.

Elijah took a long breath.

"No."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "She still blames herself. For not stopping him. For letting it happen. I don't have it in me to tell her she's right."

Silence settled between them. Not awkward. Just honest.

"We ever make it outta this," Ramirez said, "I'm getting help. Real help. Counseling, therapy, something."

"You think it'll work?"

"I don't know," Ramirez said. "But I wanna look at my kid one day and not see my father looking

back."

The Gatorade was gone. The heat hadn't moved.

But something had shifted between them — not just brothers in arms, but **men carrying the same weight with different names**.

They stood up, no handshakes, no chest bumps. Just a nod.

Respect. Recognition. Reflection.

That night, Elijah sat on his bunk and stared at the ceiling.

He wasn't sure what healing looked like.

But for the first time in a long time, he didn't feel alone in the question.

Chapter 4: *She Asked If I Ever Killed Someone*

Elijah hated that question.

It never came from the people who understood what it meant.

Never from the guys who'd seen the whites of someone's eyes fade out.

Never from the ones who heard the sounds bodies make when the movies go quiet.

No — it always came from the ones who still thought war was a movie.

This time, it came from **Ari**.

A nurse.

Smart. Soft-spoken. Had a smile that made Elijah second-guess all his exit strategies.

They'd been on three dates.

This one was quiet — a walk, takeout in the park, low stakes. Real conversation.

She talked about her brother. His art. Her fear of frogs.

He talked about nothing. He was good at that.

Then the silence came.

And with it, the question.

"Can I ask you something... real?"

He nodded.

"Have you ever... I mean, did you ever have to... kill someone?"

He didn't flinch.

He didn't even blink.

He just stared at her for a beat too long.

"Sorry," she said, quick. "You don't have to answer that. I just — I've always wondered how that changes a person."

Elijah sat with the words for a moment.

Then said:

"Imagine seeing someone you don't know... someone you've never met... lift their rifle and aim it at your friend's chest. And in that second, it's you or them."

He paused.

"A lotta folks think the killing is the hard part. But it's not. The hard part is that it makes sense when you're in it. You don't question it until later. And by then... it's too late to feel clean."

She was quiet.

Not scared.

Just still.

"I wasn't trying to make it weird," she whispered.

"You didn't."

"You don't look like someone who—"

"Don't finish that."

She nodded.

They sat in silence, watching the wind move through the trees like it was trying not to be noticed.

Finally, Elijah spoke again.

"I've taken lives. Yeah. Not proud of it. Not ashamed either. Proud of the ones I saved. The ones I got home."

"But it changes you.

You start seeing faces in your dreams you never knew when you were awake.

You hear their voices in the static.

And sometimes... when things get too quiet...

you wonder if they hear yours too."

She reached for his hand.

Not to comfort.

Just to connect.

He didn't pull away.

That night, he didn't stay over.

He told her he had to be up early. It was a lie. He just wasn't ready to let someone see him sleep.

Because sleep was when the masks slipped.

And not all of his ghosts wore uniforms.

Chapter 5: *If I Flinch in My Sleep, Don't Wake Me*

The room was dim.

A single lamp in the corner, a candle flickering low on the dresser, soft lo-fi playing off someone's phone speaker. The air smelled like lavender and comfort. The kind of space designed for softness. But Elijah didn't soften.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed, elbows on knees, still half-dressed — boots off, but shirt still on, like leaving it would somehow keep the dreams out.

Ari leaned against the doorframe.

"You always this quiet before bed?"

He gave a small shrug.

"Just don't like the part where I have to close my eyes."

She didn't laugh. She didn't try to turn it into something light.

Instead, she stepped closer and sat beside him.

"What happens when you do?"

He didn't answer right away.

She didn't rush him.

"Sometimes I'm back there. In the dirt. Hearing mortar rounds. My boys screaming. Sometimes I'm in my old house. My dad yelling. My mom crying through the wall. Sometimes I'm just falling — like there's no floor coming."

Ari was silent.

Then:

"Do you want me to stay?"

"I want you to know what you're staying with."

They lay down, eventually. Not tangled. Not romantic. Just *next to*.

The kind of closeness that wasn't about sex or tension — just *witnessing*.

At 2:47 a.m., Elijah flinched.

Not a little twitch — a full-body jolt, like he'd been yanked from underwater.

He sat up, breathing hard, eyes scanning the dark like it was hostile.

Ari didn't touch him.

She just spoke, soft.

"You're safe. You're not there."

His hands were shaking.

"It's not about being there," he whispered. "It's about *bringing it back with me*."

By morning, he was already dressed before the sun came up.

She was still curled under the blanket, eyes half-open.

"You okay?" she asked.

Elijah paused at the door.

"Don't wake me when I flinch. That's just my body fighting ghosts I never beat. If you want to help... just be there when I come back."

She nodded.

He left.

Not because he didn't care — but because **staying** still felt more dangerous than any war he'd survived.

Chapter 6: *The Dust Never Settles*

They called it a "light day."

No patrol. No transport. No reports due. Just gear maintenance, tent sweeping, hydration checks, and killing time with whatever bits of sanity hadn't dried out in the Afghan heat.

Elijah sat under a tarp stretched between two connexes, shirt off, boots unlaced, flicking the dust out of his rifle bolt with a toothbrush.

"You ever notice how the dust don't move?" Delaney asked, flopped out on a beat-up camp chair with a deck of cards in his lap.

"What do you mean?" Elijah replied without looking up.

"You wipe it, sweep it, blow it out, and two minutes later, it's back. Like the whole country's tryin' to cover us up."

Ramirez chimed in from the cooler box, sipping Gatorade like it was whiskey.

"Deep, bro. You write that in your little field journal?"

"Nah," Delaney said. "Saving it for my TED Talk. Gonna call it 'Sand and the Meaning of Life.'"

They laughed. Not loud — just enough to feel human.

Ari walked past their little corner on her way back from the clinic, her scrubs tied at the waist, the top half hanging loose like a jacket over a black tank.

She gave Elijah a nod — subtle, but understood.

Delaney caught it.

"Ayyyyyy, so that's why you been shaving every other day. I thought maybe you found some new religion."

Elijah smirked, didn't answer.

Ramirez tossed a bottle cap at him.

"You ain't slick, E. You walk different when she's around. All serious. Back straight. Mr. Trauma & Tension."

"Y'all need hobbies," Elijah said.

"You are our hobby," Delaney grinned.

They played spades on a plastic table someone swore was once part of a chow line in Iraq. Talked about nothing — movies, sports, childhood food they missed.

"You ever eat hot fries with nacho cheese from the gas station?" Ramirez asked.

"Bruh, yes," Delaney said. "I used to go to school high off caffeine and melted cheese. That was my breakfast."

They all laughed again. Louder this time.

Not because it was hilarious — but because **laughter was a release valve**. A reminder they were still people, not just uniforms and rifles.

Later that night, Elijah walked back to his tent, boots in one hand, rifle slung low.

The moon sat heavy over the base. Quiet. Almost still.

He looked at the dust around his feet.

Delaney was right.

It always came back.

But maybe that was the point.

Some things don't need to be cleaned.

Just *understood*.

Chapter 7: *The Medal Doesn't Mean What You Think It Does*

The award ceremony was short.

It always was.

A few names called, hands shaken, photos taken. Some claps. Some smirks. Some barely-stifled jokes about how fast the Army could hand you trauma and a certificate for surviving it.

Elijah stood in formation, jaw locked, boots polished, ribbon pinned to his chest like it weighed more than his ruck ever did.

Army Commendation Medal with "V" device — Valor. For actions taken under fire. For returning rounds. For pulling a wounded soldier to cover.
For not dying.

The new lieutenant clapped him on the shoulder afterward.

"Proud of you, Sergeant King."

Elijah gave a nod.

That was the end of it.

No speech. No flashback. No celebration.

Because **nobody claps for the memory**.

That night, Ramirez found him sitting behind the barracks near a generator hum that masked awkward silences.

"You'd think they'd let you at least drink a beer after something like that."

Elijah didn't look up.

"They don't hand out beers. Just medals."

"You ever think about why that moment sticks with you?"

"I do."

"And?"

Elijah held up the ribbon between two fingers, like it might stain.

"Because every time I look at it, I remember who didn't get one. And I remember who didn't come home."

He wasn't trying to be poetic. He was just tired.

"People back home," he added, "they think this stuff means something. Like it's proof you were brave. But all it really proves is you were *there*. And you lived long enough to be remembered for it."

Ramirez nodded, eyes fixed on nothing.

"Still," he said, "I'm glad you're here."

Later, back in his room, Elijah unpinned the medal and laid it flat inside the drawer where he kept his socks and shaving cream.

Then he opened his email.

There was one from his mom.

Just the subject line:

I saw the photo. I'm proud of you. Call me when you're ready.

He stared at it for a long time.

Then closed the laptop.

The ribbon stayed in the drawer.

Because **it didn't need to be on display to be felt.**

Chapter 8: *Sometimes I Think About Going Back*

The plane ride home was louder than he expected.

Kids crying. Soldiers laughing too hard at old jokes. Boots tapping on the floor like the rhythm might hold them together.

Elijah sat by the window, earphones in, but nothing playing.

His mind buzzed with static.

Not fear.
Not relief.
Just... weight.

He'd been home for six weeks now.
His apartment was clean.
Bills paid.
Therapy scheduled.
Routine intact.

And still — every few days — the thought would show up like an uninvited guest in the back of his skull:
"I could go back."

He never said it out loud. Not to Ari. Not to Ramirez. Not even to his therapist.
Because he knew what they'd say.
"You're just adjusting."
"That's normal."
"It'll pass."
But it wasn't about **missing** the war.
It was about how war **made sense**.

In combat, everything had a rule:

- You stay alive.
- You watch your brothers' six.
- You clear your sector.
- You follow the mission.

Out here?

It was coffee dates, bills, silence between texts, people saying "thank you for your service" like it patched anything.

He sat on his balcony one night, hoodie on, cigarette burning low, and texted Ramirez.
"You ever think about going back?"

A pause.

Then the response:

"Yeah. But then I remember it's not the war I miss. It's the version of me that knew what to do every day."

Elijah stared at the screen.

Nodded.

He didn't want the bullets.

He didn't want the sand or the weight of a rifle pressed into his chest.

But he missed waking up with **clarity**.

He missed **purpose that didn't require translation**.

He missed knowing that **every second mattered** — because people could die if it didn't.

Out here, everything felt optional.

Even him.

Ari called later that night.

He didn't answer.

Not because he didn't want to.

But because he knew she'd ask,

"What's wrong?"

And he didn't have the language yet to explain that **peace was harder to survive than war**.

Chapter 9: I Never Meant to Be Distant — I Just Didn't Know What Safe Felt Like

Ari sat across from him at the diner.

Late night. Vinyl booths. Pancakes at 1 a.m.

It felt like the kind of place you'd tell the truth just because there were no expectations.

Elijah stirred his coffee more than he drank it.

"You've been quiet," she said.

"I'm always quiet."

"Not like this."

He wanted to say it wasn't her.

That it wasn't anything.

That he was just tired.

But that would've been a lie.

So he sat back, hands on the table like they were surrendering.

"I've been distant."

She didn't answer.

"And not because I don't care. I do. But every time I get too close to someone, my body goes into alert mode. Like I'm waiting for something to go wrong."

"Because that's how it's always gone?"

He nodded. "Exactly."

"You ever been in a place where you had to sleep with your boots on?" he asked suddenly.

She blinked. "No."

"I have. Night missions. Sirens. People dying in their sleep. You don't relax. You don't fully lie down. You stay half-awake just in case."

He looked up.

"That's how I love people too."

She didn't respond right away.

Didn't reach across the table.

Didn't smile sympathetically.

She just *listened*.

That was her magic.

"I know it's not fair to you," he said. "And I'm not asking for a pass. I just... I need you to know I'm not pushing you away. I'm just not used to places that feel safe."

"So when it does feel safe," she asked, "what do you do?"

Elijah looked at her.

"I flinch."

They paid the bill.

Walked outside.

The air was cold and quiet — not the kind of cold that bites, but the kind that wakes you up.

"I don't need you to be loud," she said as they reached her car. "I just need you to be *here*. When you can."

He nodded.

"And if you disappear again," she added, "text me first. Let me know it's not me."

"I can do that."

"And next time," she said, grinning slightly, "drink your coffee."

That made him laugh. Small. Honest.

He kissed her cheek and watched her drive off, tail lights red against the dark.

Elijah stood there for a minute, alone in the parking lot.

Still flinching.

But starting to untie his boots.

Chapter 10: *When You Don't Know Who You Are Without the Uniform*

The uniform was folded on the edge of his bed.
Stiff. Pressed. Like it still held the shape of him, even after two months off duty.
It was his last day of terminal leave.
Tomorrow, he'd be officially out.
No longer Sergeant King.
Just Elijah.

He stared at the name tape for a long time.
He remembered sewing it on. Remembered how it felt the first time he wore it.
Like armor. Like purpose. Like proof.
Now it felt... thin.

He walked to the bathroom, stared at himself in the mirror.
No shave. Civilian tee. Dog tags still on under the shirt — out of habit more than anything else.
He looked familiar and foreign at the same time.
"You ever look at yourself and feel like you're meeting someone new?" he asked Ari that night.
They were on her couch, pizza box open, movie playing low in the background.
"Yeah," she said. "When I left nursing school, I felt it. Like I was floating."
"Floating sounds peaceful," he muttered.
"Not when you don't know where the shore is."

He rubbed his face.
"I miss the clarity.
Not the war.
Not the rules.
Just... knowing who I was.
Knowing I was needed.
Every day. Every hour."
Ari didn't try to fix it.
Didn't offer a five-step plan or a quote from a podcast.
She just leaned into him.

"You're still needed," she whispered. "Just not in the same way.
And you don't lose your identity when the title changes — you just uncover the rest of it."

He nodded, but it didn't land.
Not yet.

Later that night, he opened a blank document on his laptop.

Typed one sentence:

"Today I woke up and I wasn't a soldier. But I still made my bed."

He sat with it.

It didn't feel profound.

But it felt *real*.

And that was something.

Chapter 11: *Why I Don't Tell My Story All at Once*

There was a moment in the coffee shop — nothing big — where Ari asked something small.

"What was your favorite MRE?"

Elijah chuckled. "Chili mac. No contest."

She smiled. "That good?"

He shrugged. "That bad."

They both laughed.

Then she tried again.

"What was your worst day over there?"

He didn't answer.

He just looked down at his cup and stirred it like the silence might dissolve in the foam.

Later, walking back to the car, she apologized.

"You don't have to answer questions like that. I wasn't trying to make you relive anything."

"I know," he said. "You weren't wrong to ask."

"Then why didn't you answer?"

He didn't respond until they stopped at her car. Door still closed. Engine off.

"Because I've learned not to give people the whole story at once."

She tilted her head.

"Why?"

"Because most people only want the pain until it makes them uncomfortable.

They like the highlight reel of the healing, not the parts where I don't sleep for three days. Or the guilt. Or the numbness."

He leaned against the door, arms crossed.

"I've had women say I was too much.

Therapists who blinked too fast when I opened up.

Friends who changed the subject.

Family who said 'that's in the past' like that makes it disappear."

"So now," he continued, "I give it out in doses. One truth at a time. One bruise at a time. And only if they've shown they can hold it."

Ari didn't flinch.

Didn't promise she'd be different.

She just nodded.

"Okay. When you're ready, I'll be here."

They hugged before she left.

No heat. No urgency.

Just two people who understood that sometimes presence meant more than answers.

That night, Elijah wrote in his journal:

"I'm not closed off.

I'm just careful.

Some stories are stitched into me.

And when I tell them too fast,

the seams tear."

Chapter 12: *Why I Stopped Explaining Myself to People Who Never Went*

It happened at a birthday party.

Nothing big. A friend of a friend. Loud music, cheap beer, too many conversations happening at once.

Someone brought up the military.

Then someone else said:

"I could never do what you did. But like... don't you think the war was kinda pointless?"

Elijah didn't answer right away.

Didn't want to make a scene.

Didn't want to be *that guy* — the "triggered vet," the one who kills the vibe.

So he just smiled. Took a sip of water. And walked away.

Later, a girl in a denim jacket — someone's cousin — followed him out onto the porch.

"That guy was rude. You okay?"

"Yeah," Elijah said. "I've just learned not to hand my experiences to people who only want them for target practice."

He lit a cigarette he didn't really want.

"You know how it feels to open up, and someone picks apart the timeline like it's a debate? Like you're trying to win something instead of just... share?"

She nodded.

He exhaled slow.

"That's why I don't explain myself anymore.

If you weren't there — if you've never sat in dirt praying a radio worked, or zipped up someone who didn't make it, or stared at a sky wondering if the next sound would be your last — then maybe don't tell me what it all *meant*."

"It meant we survived. That's all I know.

And sometimes that survival looked ugly. Sometimes it looked numb.

But it was real. And it cost something."

He looked at her. Not with anger. With exhaustion.

"People think soldiers are fragile because of what we saw.

But most of us are just tired of pretending it didn't happen."

She didn't say anything poetic.

Didn't offer some quote about trauma or peace or forgiveness.

She just asked:

"Want me to sit out here with you?"

He nodded.

And they did.

In silence.

Not because there was nothing to say.

But because for once —

he didn't need to explain himself to be understood.

Chapter 13: *I'm Not Angry, I'm Grieving*

Ari once told him:

"You come off like you don't care.

Like the world could fall apart and you'd just step over the rubble."

Elijah didn't argue.

He just nodded.

But that wasn't the truth.

The truth came later, after one of those nights where sleep didn't come until sunrise — and when it did, it dragged a nightmare with it.

He was in the kitchen, elbows on the counter, staring into a half-full glass of water like it might give him a reason.

Ari walked in.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You're not."

He turned, slow.

"You ever grieve someone who's still breathing?" he asked.

She blinked.

"What do you mean?"

He looked down at his hands — scarred, steady, foreign.

"I lost a version of me over there. A version I liked. A version that laughed easier.

One that didn't double-check exits or freeze when a car backfires.

That guy didn't come home. I did. And I'm still trying to figure out how to live with that."

She stepped closer.

"You're not angry at the world," she said quietly.

"No. I'm grieving. But nobody teaches you how to grieve yourself."

He sat on the couch, eyes distant.

"It's not just the things I saw. It's the things I had to become.

The switch I had to flip to make it back alive.

And now, in peace, I'm stuck on the wrong setting.

People think I'm cold — I'm just *stuck*."

Ari didn't try to fix it.

She did what she always did: showed up without demanding more than he could give.

She wrapped her arms around him from behind, rested her chin on his shoulder, and said:

"Then we'll unstick it. Slowly. Together."

That night, Elijah slept deeper than he had in weeks.

Still flinched once.

But this time, when he came back from the dark, there was someone there — holding on, not pulling away.

Chapter 14: *The Things I Miss, I'll Never Admit Out Loud*

He never said it out loud.
Not to his therapist.
Not to Ari.
Not even to Ramirez — and they'd bled together.
But some nights, when the world got too quiet, Elijah found himself **missing the war**.
Not the death.
Not the loss.
Not the dirt in his lungs or the weight of a rifle that never left his shoulder.
But the clarity.

Out there, life was simple.
Not easy — *never easy* — but simple.
You woke up, stayed alive, kept your people alive, and went to sleep praying you didn't get hit before morning.
No social media.
No pretending.
No texts left on read, no ghosting, no wondering if your silence made you less of a man.
Out there, **everything mattered**, even the small things.
A shared cigarette.
A dumb joke at midnight.
A letter from home that smelled like dryer sheets and normalcy.

He missed that version of love — the kind you don't have to say.
Just someone handing you the last protein bar without asking.
Someone dragging your body behind cover and saying "You good?" when both of you were bleeding.
That kind of loyalty doesn't exist in civilian life.
Out here, everyone's loyal until they get uncomfortable.

He sat on the floor of his apartment that night, journal open, pen tapping against his knee.
Wrote:
"I miss being needed without having to explain myself.
I miss knowing my pain wasn't unique — because everyone carried the same weight.
I miss laughing in danger more than I do laughing in peace."
Then scratched that line out.
Too dramatic.
Wrote again:
"I miss it.

But I won't say that out loud.

Because nobody understands that you can grieve the worst days of your life...
and still long for the way they made you feel alive."

Later, Ari called.

He let it ring once. Twice.

Then picked up.

"Hey," he said.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Just thinking."

"Want company?"

He paused.

Then:

"Yeah. But not to talk. Just... to sit."

She came over.

Didn't ask what was wrong.

Didn't try to fill the silence.

She just sat beside him, back against the wall, the way soldiers sit when they're waiting for orders or pretending they don't hear the sirens.

And for a little while, Elijah didn't miss the war.

Because he wasn't alone in the quiet.

Chapter 15: *What We Lost Wasn't Just People*

Most people think about war and count coffins.

Elijah did too, for a while.

Until he realized the dead weren't the only ones missing.

Some things vanished in slower ways. Softer. Without a flag or funeral.

Like his ability to fall asleep with music playing.

Or the ease in his voice when someone asked where he was from.

Or the way he used to daydream without guilt.

One night, after walking out of a movie early because the sound design got too close to real, he sat in his car for almost an hour.

Just breathing.

Not crying. Not panicking. Just... processing.

Ari had texted:

Everything okay?

He stared at the screen for five minutes before replying:

Yeah. Just remembering things I never signed up to carry.

Later, at home, she asked him what he meant.

And for once, he answered:

"I lost more than people.

I lost the parts of me that believed things were simple.

That hugs meant safety. That silence meant peace.

That I could walk through life without scanning doorways and memorizing exits."

He looked at her.

"I miss trusting people without running background checks in my head.

I miss songs that didn't take me back.

I miss moments I used to rush through — like waiting in line, or getting caught in the rain, or someone calling my name from behind."

She reached for his hand.

He let her hold it.

"You still have good parts left," she said.

"I know," he replied. "But some parts are *gone-gone*. They're not hiding. They're buried."

He didn't mean it with sadness.

He meant it with acceptance.

There's a kind of peace in naming what's never coming back — it makes room for what still can.

That night, he stood in front of the mirror, shirt off, a small scar above his left collarbone catching the light.

He touched it with two fingers.

Then whispered:

"You didn't take all of me."

Chapter 16: *Some Days I Still Expect to Wake Up Over There*

Elijah woke up before sunrise.

Not because of a nightmare. Not because of noise. Just... instinct.

The sky outside his apartment window was still a deep blue, touched with the first gray of morning.

And for a split second — before he stretched, before he blinked —

he expected to smell **sand**.

Expected to hear **rotor blades**.

Expected to feel the stiffness of a cot, the dig of his rifle next to his leg.

But it was just sheets.

Clean, soft, unfamiliar in the worst way.

He sat up, rubbed his eyes, checked the corners of the room.

Still a habit.

Still something his body did before his brain caught up.

He looked at the clock: 0500.

Old rhythms die slow.

He padded to the kitchen in socked feet, started the coffee.

No rush. No formation. No radio check. No briefing.

Just a calendar full of open space.

And that — more than the missions, more than the chaos —

was what scared him now.

Ari had noticed it too.

"You're so calm in chaos," she said once.

"But when things are peaceful, it's like you're holding your breath."

He didn't deny it.

Didn't know how to.

Later that day, at the grocery store, someone dropped a jar two aisles over.

Glass shattered.

Elijah hit the floor before he could stop himself.

People stared.

One woman gasped.

The kid next to her asked, "Is he okay?"

He stood slowly.

Wiped his palms on his jeans.

Forced a laugh.

"Old habit."

He got home and went straight to the balcony.

Lit a cigarette.

Not because he needed it — but because it gave his hands something to do while his body climbed

back down from the alert.

Some days, it felt like his spirit had jet lag.

Like part of him was still thirteen hours ahead and twelve months behind.

He didn't want to go back.

But his body did.

Every time a door slammed.

Every time the lights flickered.

Every time the world got too quiet.

He texted Ari:

"I'm okay. Just got spun up."

She replied instantly:

"Want me to come sit with you?"

He looked at the message for a long time.

Then wrote back:

"Not yet. Just knowing you asked is enough."

The next morning, he woke up again at 0500.

But this time, he stayed in bed.

Didn't scan.

Didn't brace.

He just... lay there.

Breathing.

Letting the silence feel like something other than a trap.

Chapter 17: *Ramirez Hasn't Called in Three Days*

Three days.

No text. No call. No DM.

Not even a meme.

That's how Elijah knew something was wrong.

Because Ramirez wasn't just *a friend*.

He was *the thread* — the only one who'd seen the same sand, pulled the same weight, cracked the same jokes under fire.

And he never went silent.

Elijah sent a text.

"You good?"

No response.

Tried again six hours later.

Still nothing.

Ari found him in the living room, pacing.

"What's going on?"

"Ramirez hasn't called."

"Okay," she said, calm. "That's not necessarily—"

"No," Elijah cut her off gently. "You don't get it.

He *always* calls. Especially when he's low.

This isn't him ghosting. This is... something else."

He wasn't spiraling.

He was calculating.

- Last message: Saturday.
- Said he'd had a nightmare, but was laughing it off.
- Mentioned his VA appointment Monday.
- Should've called after.

Always did.

Elijah opened Instagram.

Nothing new.

Opened the chat.

Last seen: Saturday night.

He stared at the time stamp like it owed him an answer.

Later that night, he sat on his porch, hoodie on, thumb hovering over the call button.

"I should've checked on him harder," he whispered.

Ari sat beside him, quiet.

"You don't know what's happened yet."

"That's the problem," he said. "It's always the *not knowing* that makes it worse.

In war, it's the same.

You don't panic when the shooting starts — you panic when the radio goes quiet."

He finally hit call.

Voicemail.

"Yo, this is Ram. You know what to do. Don't make it weird."

Beep.

Elijah exhaled hard.

"I'm here. Whatever it is, I got you. Just... let me know you're breathing."

He stayed up that night.

Didn't try to sleep.

Didn't flinch. Didn't cry.

He just sat still, staring at the wall, listening for a phone that wouldn't ring.

Because when you've survived loss,
the sound of nothing is louder than a bomb.

Chapter 18: *I'm Learning How to Stay*

Ramirez called.

Three days and twenty-two hours later.

Elijah was mid-run, sweat on his brow, lungs burning in the cold morning air when his phone buzzed.

He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, heart thumping for two reasons now.

"Yo," he answered.

Ramirez's voice came through, scratchy and tired.

"Sorry, bro. I was down bad. Checked myself into the VA for a few nights."

Elijah exhaled like he'd been holding his breath for a year.

"You're good?"

"Getting there."

"You should've told me."

"I didn't want to explain," Ramirez said. "I just wanted to make it through the night."

Elijah didn't press.

Didn't guilt him.

Didn't fix it.

Just said:

"Next time, don't make it through alone."

That evening, Elijah did something new.

He cooked.

Real food. Not frozen. Not delivered. **Cooked.**

Ari walked in and smelled garlic before she saw him.

"Who are you and what did you do with the guy who thinks eggs count as dinner?"

"I'm evolving," he said, half-smiling.

They ate on the floor, plates balanced on knees, a movie muted in the background.
He looked over at her — sweatshirt on, hair messy, face tired from work.
And something inside him stilled.
Not quieted.
Stilled.

Like the storm was still there, but he wasn't being thrown around by it anymore.

"I've never stayed," he said suddenly.

She looked at him.

"What do you mean?"

"Every time something felt real — I found a reason to go. Deployments, missions, new units. Even when I was home, I wasn't really home.

I was... bracing. For the next goodbye."

He looked down at his plate.

"But with you... I want to stay. And that scares the hell out of me."

Ari reached out, touched his wrist.

"Then be scared.

But stay anyway."

That night, he slept through the entire night.

No flinch.

No 0500 wakeup.

Just breath — slow, steady, present.

Healing doesn't announce itself.

Sometimes it's just garlic in the air,

a full belly,

and the decision to call tomorrow what it is:

a day worth showing up for.

Here's **Chapter 19 of *Scars and Stripes***, titled:

Chapter 19: *The Uniform Still Hangs in My Closet*

It was tucked behind a jacket he never wore anymore.

Pressed. Clean. Still carrying the faint scent of desert dust and sweat.

The uniform.

Name tape intact.

Patches faded but visible.

Folded sleeves just the way he used to wear them — tight at the elbows, ready to move.

Elijah stared at it like it might speak.

He wasn't avoiding it.

Not really.

But he also hadn't touched it since discharge.

Didn't throw it away.

Didn't box it up.

Didn't need to.

Because some things... you don't need to wear to remember.

Ari walked into the room and saw him standing there.

"You thinking of putting it on?"

He shook his head.

"No. Just... remembering what it felt like."

"Heavy?"

"Familiar."

He turned to her.

"That uniform held me together for a long time.

It gave me rules. Identity. A reason to get out of bed.

But it also covered a lot I hadn't faced.

Pain. Numbness. Rage I didn't have words for."

He stepped closer to the hanger.

Ran a hand across the sleeve.

"I used to think this defined me.

That without it, I'd disappear.

Turns out, I'm still here."

Ari leaned against the doorframe.

"You could frame it. Make a shadow box. Or fold it military-style and keep it in a trunk."

"Nah," Elijah said. "It's fine right here."

"Why?"

He smiled.

"Because I don't need to hide it...

But I don't need to wear it either."

That night, he dreamed in color — not flashbacks, not sand, not sirens.

Just faces.

Smiling.

Ramirez. Ari. His mom.

Even himself, in a mirror, laughing like he used to when he was seventeen and hadn't seen a war yet.

In the morning, he opened the closet again.

Still there.

But this time, he didn't stare.

He reached for a hoodie instead.

And went downstairs to make pancakes.

Chapter 20: *I'm Not Healed — But I'm Here*

The invitation sat unopened on the counter for three days.

A small white envelope, handwritten address, gold-trimmed lettering that read:

"Veterans Day Ceremony — Guest of Honor: Sgt. Elijah King (Ret.)"

He'd been dodging it since it arrived.

Ramirez had texted:

"They're asking for you, brother. Just speak from the heart."

He had half a dozen reasons to say no.

Too public. Too emotional. Too... exposed.

But Ari caught him staring at it again one morning.

She didn't say anything.

Just walked over, opened the envelope, and read it quietly.

"They want your story."

"They want the version that fits in ten minutes and ends with applause."

"Then give them the real one."

That night, Elijah sat with his journal open.

Pages filled with quotes, fragments, and confessions over the last few months.

He flipped back to the beginning.

"Today I woke up and I wasn't a soldier. But I still made my bed."

He smiled.

That line used to sound hollow.

Now? It felt like the start of something honest.

The day of the event, he wore a black button-up shirt and clean jeans. Simple. Civilian. His dog tags

stayed tucked beneath the collar.

Ari drove. Neither of them said much on the way.

At the auditorium, the crowd was bigger than expected. Some in dress blues. Others in leather vests. College students. Families. Politicians.

And in the front row — Ramirez, arms crossed, grin wide. Still breathing.

When they called his name, Elijah stepped to the podium.

The microphone squealed, then steadied.

He took a breath.

No speech in his hand.

No script.

Just memory.

"I don't have the story you think I have," he began.

"There's no movie montage. No epic battlefield. Just a lot of nights that felt too long, a lot of people I still see in dreams, and a lot of learning how to live again without camo or a mission."

He paused. Looked out at the crowd. Found Ari.

She didn't smile — she nodded.

"People ask me how I'm doing. I used to say 'fine.'

Now I say:

'I'm not healed. But I'm here.'"

"And that counts for something."

"Healing isn't this clean arc.

It's sitting through panic attacks and still showing up for breakfast.

It's walking into a grocery store even if your back clenches when someone moves too fast behind you.

It's telling the person you love that you need a minute — not because they did something wrong, but because you're relearning what safety feels like."

"And it's hard.

God, it's hard."

"But the point isn't to be perfect.

It's to stay.

To stay in the world.

To stay with your people.

To stay... with yourself."

He exhaled slowly.

"There are mornings I still wake up with clenched fists.

And there are nights I flinch in my sleep.

But I don't hide it anymore.

Because that's part of the deal — you don't get to bring everything home, but you do get to decide what you build with what's left."

"So no... I'm not healed."

"But I'm not disappearing either."

"I'm here.

And I'm staying."

The room was quiet when he stepped down.

Not because they didn't care.

But because everyone **heard him**.

Not just the words. The weight.

Ramirez met him with a hug that didn't need explanation.

Ari kissed him outside the building and whispered:

"That was the bravest thing I've ever seen you do."

He didn't deflect.

Didn't shrug.

Just nodded, softly:

"Yeah. It felt like it."

That night, back home, they curled up on the couch.

The uniform still hung in the closet.

The dog tags stayed under his shirt.

The scars were still there.

But so was he.

And for the first time in a long time,

that was enough.

Epilogue: *Thank You for Making It Back With Me*

If you're reading this...

If you made it through the firefights, the flashbacks, the fallouts, and the silence...

Then thank you.

Thank you for making it back — even if you did it on shaking legs.

Even if you had to fake a smile for five years before it became real again.

Even if your version of “coming home” didn’t include a welcome party, just a stiff drink and a locked jaw.

I see you.

They told us the hardest part would be over there.

But they didn’t tell us that coming home would mean **relearning how to breathe without a radio**, how to feel without armor, how to walk through Target without scanning for exits.

They didn’t prepare us for how loud peace would be.

Or how lonely.

This story wasn’t about medals. Or heroism. Or picture-perfect closure.

It was about scars that don’t show up on x-rays.

It was about remembering that just because you’re “safe” doesn’t mean you feel it.

And that **healing isn’t loud — it’s showing up anyway**.

Even on the days when “showing up” just means getting out of bed.

If you’ve lost people — I honor you.

If you’ve lost *yourself* — I understand you.

If you’ve found your way back — I’m proud of you.

And if you’re still figuring it out — I’m with you.

This book ends here,
but your story doesn’t.

Write your next chapter how you need to.

No pressure to be poetic.

No deadline for the pain.

No need to be “okay” all the time.

Just promise me one thing:

Don’t disappear.

You’re not a burden.

You’re not broken.

You’re not too much.

You’re alive.

And that makes you **a damn miracle** in my book.

Thank you for making it back with me.

We stay.

Together.

— Elijah

What *Scars and Stripes* Teaches Us About Survival, Love, and Staying

We don't talk enough about the weight people carry after the war ends — or after any personal battle ends.

That's where *Scars and Stripes* shines.

This isn't just a military novel. It's a mirror. A reminder that trauma doesn't always wear a uniform, and healing doesn't always announce itself.

Whether you've served or simply survived something you never told anyone about — Elijah King's story leaves fingerprints on your soul. And it leaves you with lessons worth holding onto.

1. Healing Isn't Linear — But It's Possible

Elijah doesn't walk a straight path. He stumbles. He isolates. He laughs too loud at the wrong times. But the novel shows us that healing isn't about erasing the past — it's about making space for something new to grow beside it.

"I'm not healed. But I'm here. And that counts for something."

2. The Strongest People Aren't the Loudest

This book strips away the stereotype of what strength looks like. Elijah's strength isn't in his silence — it's in his **decision to speak**, even when his voice shakes. It's in calling a friend. Making pancakes. Choosing to stay.

The novel reminds us:

Vulnerability is a form of bravery. And it's one we should respect.

3. Loyalty Can Save a Life

From his bond with Ramirez to the steady presence of Ari, Elijah's survival doesn't happen in a vacuum.

Sometimes, all it takes is one person staying — texting, showing up, sitting beside you in silence. *Scars and Stripes* makes it clear: **you don't need to be a hero to be someone's anchor. You just need to show up.**

4. You Can Grieve Things No One Can See

Some of the most gut-wrenching chapters aren't about combat. They're about things Elijah can't

name — the soft, invisible things war took from him.

Trust in strangers.

Comfort in silence.

The part of him that laughed without checking the room first.

The novel says what many feel but rarely express: **you can miss the version of yourself that never made it home.** And that grief is valid.

5. Staying Is the Bravest Thing You Can Do

In a world that praises hustle, escape, and pushing through — *Scars and Stripes* suggests something radical:

Stay.

Stay in the room.

Stay with your people.

Stay in your story — even if it's not neat or polished.

Because the act of **staying** — in love, in healing, in life — is where the quiet, courageous work happens.

Final Thoughts

Scars and Stripes isn't a war story. It's a human story.

It's about anyone who's ever flinched at kindness, braced for silence, or doubted whether they deserved to be here.

And at its core, it leaves you with one quiet truth:

You're not broken. You're still becoming.

And you're not alone.